

Roman surgical spoon-probes and their ancient names (μήλη, μηλωτίς/μηλωτρίς, *specillum*)

Lawrence J. Bliquez



Fig. 1. A selection of types of spoon-probes from the Vesuvian cities, now in the Naples Museum (photo courtesy Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum Mainz, L 1035/11).

Greco-Roman surgical *instrumentaria* frequently include a particular type of scoop or spoon mounted on a long shaft (c.11-17 cm overall length) (see fig. 1).¹ Its bowl may be ovular or like an elongated triangle; in section it may be round or angular, and it varies in depth. Its shaft is quite often striated lengthwise and almost always decorated with rings arranged in different ways at the point where the shaft passes into the bowl. Sometimes the shaft is threaded and inlaid with a spiral silver wire. The shaft ends in the familiar enlargement called πυρήν. The item was in common use domestically as well as professionally, but this essay will deal only with its medical applications.

J. S. Milne, the authority on nomenclature, did not associate the item with any ancient name but gave it one of his own: 'cyathisco-mele',² which is still used today (or, in translation, as 'spoon probe' or Löffelsonde').

I will argue that this item did have an ancient name — in fact, several: that the chief name used by Greek authorities writing under Rome was μήλη (the general term for 'probe'), and that the names μηλωτίς and μηλωτρίς were sometimes applied. I will consider its Latin terminology as well.

- * The editions used for ancient medical writers are as follows: Celsus (Marx); Soranus (Ilberg); Galen (Kühn); Oribasius (Raeder); Alexander (Puschmann); Aetius (Olivieri); Paul (Heiberg).
- 1 E.g., E. Künzl with F. J. Hassel and S. Künzl, *Medizinische Instrumente aus Sepulkralfunden der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Bonn 1983) 47, 72, 89, 90, 91, 94, 104-6, 113, 115; R. Jackson, "A set of Roman medical instruments from Italy," *Britannia* 17 (1986) 128-29 (no. 30). It is also present at public baths where surgery was practiced: E. Künzl, "Operationsräume in römischen Thermen," *BjB* 186 (1986) 497 (Weissenburg). For a variety of its decor and shapes, see L. J. Bliquez, with catalogue by R. Jackson, *Roman surgical instruments and other minor objects in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples* (Mainz 1994) 145-54.
- 2 J. S. Milne, *Surgical instruments in Greek and Roman times* (Oxford 1907; repr. New York 1970) 61-63.