Books and libraries in a newly-discovered treatise of Galen

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From Galen himself, as well as from Arabic and Hebrew sources, it was known that Galen wrote a work On not feeling grief (πειρὶ ἀλματικῆς) after the great fire of Rome that destroyed many of his books and other possessions in A.D. 192. The treatise had been thought irretrievably lost, but V. Boudon-Millot has identified it in a 15th-c. manuscript now preserved in Thessalonica and rediscovered only in 2005, the Vlatadon 14. Despite the difficulties of the manuscript, which besides being defective in many places was not only accessible in microfilm, it has now provided a text, translation and commentary. Such an extraordinary discovery will doubtless elicit many further contributions. Here I will discuss two passages, both of which concern the precious manuscripts lost by Galen and others in the fire, and the reasons why he cannot repair the losses.¹

The work takes the form of a letter, written to a person (unnamed) who has asked Galen how it is that he does not exhibit signs of grief after the losses he has sustained in the fire of 192. The inquirer seems to be a real and not an imagined person. He was ‘educated along with Galen, perhaps in Pergamon (s. 57); he had observed Galen’s lack of grief during ’a certain attack of the long-drawn-out Plague when I lost practically all the servants I had in Rome’ (s. 1); he had suffered under Commodus (s. 57). At the time of writing, presumably in the reign of Septimius Severus, he is not in Rome, but it is not stated where he is.²

As the title implies, the work is concerned with resisting grief or regret, and with rising above circumstances to bear losses with equanimity. It can be divided up as follows:

1-38 In response to his questioner, Galen enumerates the losses of equipment, books, and so on, that he has suffered because of the fire;

39-46 examples of past philosophers who have borne with losses;

47-68 the inability to bear loss is due to the inability to be satisfied with enough, i.e., to insatiability (ἀπλέσσα): Galen’s own self-discipline is due to the training given him by his father and by others;

69-84 Galen’s αἰλουρία not the same as ἀπαθεία; he is not indifferent to suffering, and would never ask the gods to test him by sending it; he only hopes by proper self-care to avoid the worst that they can send.

My concern here is with two passages from the first section, one about manuscripts made precious by being edited or corrected by experts; the other about manuscripts of especially rare works that have perished in the fire, and cannot be re-copied for other reasons.

Galen has just explained to his addressee that the lost books cannot now be replaced, since ‘all the libraries on the Palatine were burned up on that day’ (s. 12) I give the text of the following section as reconstituted by Boudon-Millot, indicating the manuscript readings where she diverges from them, and thereafter an English translation:


2 On the personality of the inquirer, Boudon-Millot 2007 (supra n.1) 80-81.