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Roman doctors and their instruments: recent research into ancient practice

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Introduction

To historians and archaeologists, ancient perceptions of disease and the means employed to prevent and treat illness have, or should have, a special significance, for diseases have afflicted, to some degree, all people at every level of society throughout the past. Until quite recently sickness was an ever-present threat, poised to disrupt, devastate or destroy life, and the constant fear and worry that it engendered was a powerful negative force, the full impact of which is all too easily forgotten or overlooked today (on attitudes to illness see esp. R. Porter [ed.]1986).

While the suffering of our predecessors can sometimes strike a chord with our own health problems both at a personal and a communal level, most apparent similarities are illusory. Modern medicine and Roman medicine are almost literally worlds apart. Individual techniques or aspects may seem to have changed little, but the broader theories of disease and medicine and the whole cultural background are profoundly different. The often disconcerting blend of familiar and alien concepts has led some to regard as 'good' or 'right' those parts of ancient medicine that seem to coincide with, or approximate to, current ideas and practice, and to ignore or comment adversely upon those that do not. Such direct comparison, measuring Roman achievements in terms of our own, imposes present values on past cultures in a way that is no longer considered acceptable. We have to recognise Roman medicine for what it was, not for what we would like it to have been.

The clear rejection of the "ancients as moderns" approach (as Professor John Scarborough has expressed it) is in part due to an increased awareness of the transitory nature of medical theory and practice. Within the present century there have been substantial and dramatic changes — sometimes a complete reversal of medical ideas — so that what appears familiar in Roman medicine varies according to current medical trends. In larger part the rejection is a product of the great increase in research into classical medicine that has occurred over the last decade. The two most useful newsletters on classical medicine were started in this period, the *Newsletter* of the Society of Ancient Medicine and Pharmacy in 1978 and the *Informations* of the Centre Jean Palerne, Université St. Etienne, in 1982. Both have grown considerably in size since their inception. A further indicator of the amount of new scholarship is given by comparing Scarborough's 1979 survey of recently published works on classical medicine with his updated version written 10 years later (Scarborough 1979, 1989).

The fruit of this work is a deeper understanding of ancient medicine as, for example, in the recognition of the extent of influence of magic and superstition. As all-pervading, powerful forces they permeated scientific medicine and were occasionally accepted as valid even by the more rational Graeco-Roman medical writers (see esp. Lloyd 1979; 1983). There is also, now, a keener appreciation of the need to set medicine in its broad social and cultural as well as historical context. Although the numerous surviving ancient medical texts constitute a rich vein of information — indeed the most important single source — the texts alone cannot provide a balanced picture of ancient medicine. To achieve a fuller understanding the results of both historical and archaeological research must be integrated.

My aim here is not to discuss the large number of newly-edited texts and translations, above all of Galen, which increasingly give a more secure base to the study of Roman medical theory, but to survey important recent work by medical historians, classicists and archaeologists on the medical equipment used by doctors in the Roman empire. I have also compiled a select bibliography of the more notable works relating to the Roman medical profession to have appeared during the last decade. Thirdly, as there is at present no published work which includes a comprehensive drawn typology, I have illustrated all the major classes of known Roman medical instruments (figs.1-9); all are of copper alloy unless stated.