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978-0-521-76751-4 - Galen and the World of Knowledge

Edited by Christopher Gill, Tim Whitmarsh and John Wilkins

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction**Christopher Gill, Tim Whitmarsh and John Wilkins*

GALEN AS AN INTELLECTUAL IN HIS CULTURAL CONTEXT

The recent discovery of Galen's treatise *On the Avoidance of Grief* in a monastery in Thessaloniki provides a vivid picture of his intellectual life in Rome. Writing in the familiar ancient genre of the consolation, in the manner of Cicero, Seneca or Plutarch, Galen responds to the letters from an unnamed friend who admired his fortitude. Galen had managed to refrain from grief in the face of disaster, first an epidemic of plague among his slaves, and then the destruction of his books, drug supplies and medical instruments in the terrible fire that swept through the Temple of Peace and nearby buildings close to the Palatine hill in Rome in AD 192. With much topographical detail, Galen gives a clear description of the Temple of Peace district and the libraries and storehouses built around the Via Sacra, and his attempts to move valuable items he had at home into store for safe-keeping while he went on a trip to Campania. Disastrously, fire struck and he lost more cinnamon than the merchants could replace, a number of medical instruments, in particular wax moulds for special instruments he was about to commission from the metalworkers, and many books. The books included classic works by Theophrastus, Aristotle and Chrysippus, many of them annotated by Galen, with errors in punctuation and other anomalies removed. There were also copies of rare books, and a number of his own books that he was in the process of having copied for friends in Campania who wanted to have his works available in public collections. These details show that Galen had a collection of medicines second to none, that he had contributed to the design of medical instruments and that he had the ability to edit and copy manuscripts, both of famous earlier authors and of his own works.¹

Galen's role as an intellectual and scholar, which emerges vividly in the recently discovered treatise, is in one way well known and documented

¹ See Boudon-Millot 2007b.

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and in another only just emerging properly into view. This reflects the remarkable story of the reception of Galen, which in a way parallels that of the accumulation, loss and recovery of his books as described in *On the Avoidance of Grief*. From his death until the rise of modern medicine in early modern Europe, his works constituted an authoritative source of medical knowledge for European and Arabic culture. This outcome exceeded even his lofty ambitions and ensured the survival of an enormous body of writings. Then, his stock fell sharply as he became irrelevant to the emerging scientific approach to medicine while not forming part of the canon of Greek and Roman writers regarded as central to study of 'the Classics'. The neglect into which he fell is shown by the difficulty even of finding decent texts of his works. The standard edition of his works, that of Kühn, though published in the early nineteenth century, actually incorporates a good deal of material assembled centuries earlier, and is in any case not complete.² Editorial work since the late nineteenth century has gone some way towards improving this situation, especially through editions prepared for the *Corpus Medicorum Graecorum* and, more recently, the Budé collection.³ Even so, many of his surviving treatises lack modern editions, let alone detailed commentaries. What is more, whereas Jowett's authoritative translation of Plato and Ross's of Aristotle made these authors available for a wide range of nineteenth- and twentieth-century readers, translation of Galen's works into English, or indeed any modern language, has been very piecemeal and incomplete, though there are recent plans to improve the situation.⁴

In spite of substantial obstacles to knowledge of his writings, modern scholars have become increasingly aware of the huge potential of the Galenic corpus for the study of many aspects of Greek and Roman life, including philosophy and thought, social and material culture, as well as, of course, medical thought and practice. One of the results of this awareness has been the production of volumes of essays exploring aspects of his diverse legacy and seeking to make this body of evidence more available to readers outside the rather small circle of experts in ancient medicine. Of special note is a volume of the *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, largely

² See Nutton 2002: 1–7 on the limits of Kühn.

³ The first Budé volume of a planned series on Galen (Boudon-Millot 2007a) contains an extensive general introduction on Galen's life and on the transmission of his writings from late antiquity to the present day.

⁴ A series of translations into English with commentary is planned for publication by Cambridge University Press, under the general direction of Philip van der Eijk.

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devoted to key aspects of Galen's work and containing a bibliography of twentieth-century scholarship on Galen.⁵ There have also been collections on, for instance, Galen's works on healing or pharmacology,⁶ on philosophy and psychology,⁷ and his reception of the Hellenistic intellectual legacy.⁸ An important recent book is the *Cambridge Companion to Galen*,⁹ reviewing most of the salient areas to which Galen contributed. The present volume focuses on Galen's role as intellectual and scholar, located within his cultural context; the specific contribution of this volume to the current upsurge of scholarship on Galen is outlined shortly. First, we offer a broad review of Galen as intellectual and scholar to set the scene for the following outline of chapters and for the volume as a whole.

Even before the discovery of the manuscript of *On the Avoidance of Grief*, much was already known about Galen through his vast output and his habit of presenting himself at the forefront of the narrative in many of his treatises, especially in his bibliographical works on his own books and the order of those books. As is becoming ever clearer, Galen is one of the major authors of Classical antiquity, prolific in works on scholarship and the history of thought, on logic and ethics as much as on technical medical subjects such as anatomy, physiology and pharmacology. Above all, he constructed a systematic and coherent medical synthesis, unparalleled in antiquity in its scope, learning, intellectual aspirations and codification. Galen's medical synthesis was so successfully conceived that it seems to have outshone its rivals in antiquity and certainly survived for more than one thousand five hundred years. It persisted not only in Greek, but also in Syriac, Arabic, Hebrew and Latin translations, which transmitted Galen's knowledge widely throughout the Mediterranean and beyond into Europe and the near East. Galen assembled his system through argument with other medical traditions – in particular the Methodists and Empiricists – and did so with such success that he is the main source not only for his own medical approach, but also in many cases what we know of his opponents as well.¹⁰

⁵ Haase and Temporini 1994, including Kollesch and Nickel 1994. See also Nutton 1981 and López Férez 1991b.

⁶ Kudlien and Durling 1991; Debru 1997.

⁷ Manuli and Vegetti 1988; Barnes and Jouanna 2003.

⁸ Kollesch and Nickel 1993. ⁹ Hankinson 2008b.

¹⁰ Galen generally aligns himself with the Rationalist or Dogmatist approach to medicine, rather than the less theory-based Empiricist and Methodist approaches. However, he also presents himself as selecting the best aspects of Rationalist and Empiricist approaches, though he is consistently critical of Methodism. See further Frede 1985: xx–xxxiv, 1987a: 243–78; Hankinson 1991b: xxvi–xxxiii; on Methodism, see Tecusan 2004: 7–21.

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Galen went to extraordinary lengths to prevail over his medical and intellectual opposition, partly through logical demonstration used to organise data that he had gathered by his own researches and medical practice, and partly through sheer weight of scholarship. Validation of his claims was frequently made by reference to the great masters of the past, in particular Plato, Aristotle and Hippocrates, and by his interpretation of what he thought they really meant. Galen was able to achieve this intellectual success partly through his extraordinary education, partly through the intellectual climate of the Antonine and Severan period in which he lived and partly through powers of self-promotion that were second to none. Galen's father was an architect in Pergamum with a particularly enquiring mind. He had his son taught rhetoric, mathematics and the four leading philosophical approaches (Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism and Epicureanism), before suggesting that his son train in medicine. Galen was sent off to Smyrna and Egypt for further medical training, and served as physician to the Pergamene gladiatorial school before leaving for Rome in 162 AD.¹¹ This broad training in thought and medicine provided an excellent foundation for a man of untiring energy, curiosity and combative skills, about which we are well informed thanks to the fact that he placed himself at the centre of many of his discourses. It was crucial too that, in fact as well as in his writings, he should place himself at Rome, the centre of the imperial world, and also the centre of the contemporary intellectual world. It is no accident that Galen's extraordinary synthesis of medical knowledge was composed in a world that produced handbooks, encyclopedias and scholarly resources based on vast numbers of public and private libraries.¹² In *On the Avoidance of Grief*, *On My Own Books* and *On the Order of My Own Books*, we can see Galen organising and shaping his intellectual world, writing for varied audiences as well as for himself – general readers and patients, medical beginners, specialists and the powerful men of the day.

By his own account, Galen made a major impact when he first arrived in Rome. The imperial city, like other cities, was afflicted by

the materialism of the rich and powerful . . . who honour . . . pleasure above virtue, consider of no account those who possess some finer knowledge and can impart it to others. . . . But the respect they give to men of learning corresponds only to their practical need of them. They do not see the particular beauty of each study

¹¹ See further Nutton 1973, 2004; Boudon-Millet 2007a.

¹² On the encyclopedic and library culture of the first and second centuries AD in Rome, see König and Whitmarsh 2007b.

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and they cannot stand intellectuals. Geometry and arithmetic they need only in calculating expenses and in improving their mansions, astronomy and divination only in forecasting whose money they are going to inherit.¹³

Despite this allegedly adverse intellectual climate, Galen had powerful connections through his father's network and was able to diagnose malaria, love-sickness and other disorders among members of the philosophical and senatorial elite, to the consternation of rival physicians. From there, Galen became physician to the Antonine emperors and, like Seneca before him, was able to reflect philosophically on the failings of the Roman social world while making a very successful living within it.¹⁴

To say this is not to detract from Galen's intellectual achievement but to bring out his role as a successful member of the intellectual elite, well able to compete and prevail by intellectual means and to present an anatomical demonstration or rhetorical display that could match anything his rivals might throw at him. Galen put his excellence down to study, experience, experiment and observation, and a proper use of 'demonstration' in argument, that is, a system of proof that evaluates one phenomenon that a patient might present against another.¹⁵ These medical virtues, which Galen trumpets on many occasions, are supported by intellectual procedures drawn from philosophy and scholarship. He is an avid reader and student of Hippocrates. He matches Hippocrates against later doctors from the Hellenistic period, and then places that evaluation (based on his method of logical demonstration) against his own experiment and observation. The results might be presented in a treatise, such as *On the Natural Faculties*, which takes to task the Hellenistic doctor Erasistratus for his faulty work on the liver.¹⁶ It might be presented in a polemic against rival schools of thought. It might be presented in a commentary on a Hippocratic text – such commentaries make up about a fifth of his vast output. Or it might appear in a general work on a topic normally handled only by philosophers or on medicine considered as one of the arts.

Galen is always the doctor seeking to outshine his rivals; but he is also the master of scholarship, philology and lexicography, as likely to comment on the meaning of a word or its spelling as on its technical application. He aims to integrate philosophy and philology systematically within medical thought. This can be seen in *On the Function of the Parts*, a massive treatise

¹³ *On Prognosis* 1.72–74.2 Nutton, trans. Nutton XIV.604–5 K.

¹⁴ On Seneca's complex (or ambivalent) role as both politician and philosopher, the classic study is Griffin 1976 (1992).

¹⁵ See further Barnes 1991; Hankinson 1991b, 1998.

¹⁶ *Nat. Fac.* 1.16 (II.60–2 K) and, esp., 2.3–9 (II.80–142K).

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of seventeen books that presents Galen's anatomical knowledge within a teleological system based on Aristotle. It can be seen in *On the Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato*, in which his account of human physiology and psychology is grounded in a modified version of what the Hippocratic doctors and Plato had written and it can be seen in *On the Properties of Foodstuffs*, a dietary catalogue in which the identification of a plant by its name is often as important for Galen as its botanical properties.

Galenic medical knowledge is thus a highly elaborated version of what is found in earlier medical authors. The Hippocratic doctors had written in a varied, often polemical, style as they broke new ground in developing a scientific approach to medicine based on the assumption that humanity should be seen as a form of animal life placed within the natural order. Their science is firmly grounded on Presocratic philosophy and on the new systems of knowledge developed by the Sophists. Writing some five centuries later, Galen adopted and clarified Hippocratic methods. He did so very much in the intellectual style of his own period. He shares many of the characteristics of contemporary thinkers who were born in the Greek part of the Roman Empire and who established their position in the interface between the rich literary and philosophical heritage of the Greek cities and the wealthy and powerful Roman imperial elite who adopted this legacy. In this environment, a high valuation of the past, of authors such as Homer and Plato, is standard. So too is an empire-wide frame of reference with Rome at the centre. Galen, richly educated and widely travelled, easily adopted an international profile – for all his claims that he preferred to spend his time in his home city of Pergamum.¹⁷

Galen shares much with such authors as Plutarch, Favorinus, Lucian and Philostratus. Like them, he was a sophisticated master of prose, poetry and philosophy, knowledge of which he used to inform and enlarge the relatively restricted scope of the medical or technical treatise. The very vastness of his output is a further feature that, in contemporary terms, gave him authority, as, in different ways, did the writings of Plutarch and Athenaeus. Galen also provided formidable systems of reference that were useful to him as well as to his pupils and competitors. His intellectual and scholarly breadth is best seen in his bibliographical works, *On My Own Books* and *On the Order of My Own Books*. These writings distinguish between different categories of treatise; they reflect on the educational purposes of his writings; they present Galen's output as a minor publishing industry in itself; and in general they testify to his productivity in multiple

¹⁷ Plutarch makes comparable claims at *Demosthenes* 1.1–2. On the development of Hellenism as a pan-Mediterranean lingua franca see e.g. Swain 1996: 17–42.

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spheres, extending even to the vocabulary of the Greek comic poets. He explains how he has organised his bibliography, with vivid anecdotes on the availability of his works in the booksellers of Rome and the presence of unauthorised, pirate copies among the authentic volumes. When his library was burnt down he simply set about writing the treatises again. This systematising tendency extends to his view of his own corpus as a medium of instruction. In Galen's eleven-book treatise on simple medicines, the reader is told to read this work as part of a sequence that begins with *On the Elements according to Hippocrates* and progresses through *On the Natural Faculties* and *On Mixtures*. Having mastered simple medicines, the reader can proceed to the treatises that classify compound medicines according to location or genre, and thence to nine books on milder forms of treatment, namely diet and 'regime' or lifestyle.

Galen supports his medical advice with frequent discussions of authorities with which he agrees or disagrees. He does so in his polemics against the Methodists and Empiricists, or when he corrects the credulous lexicographer Pamphilus of Alexandria or comments on such authorities as Diocles of Carystus, Theophrastus or Dioscorides. In all these cases, Galen displays a state-of-the-art mastery of the relevant topic (including, for instance, knowledge of manuscript variants). He uses in this context many of the scholarly techniques that he has developed in his extensive commentaries on Hippocratic texts. For instance, he explains, and elaborates, the rather aphoristic and laconic Hippocratic writings, and tells us what Hippocrates (or a writer using his name) really meant. As a commentator, Galen uses techniques similar to contemporary commentators on Homer or Aristotle. In Galen's case, however, the point is to get the Hippocratic term or method clearly understood so that everyone grasps what is said and can give it practical application. This work as a commentator goes hand in hand with his systematisation of medicine. Here too he fills in gaps (in Hippocratic pharmacology, for example) and casts his material in different forms according to need and ease of reference, either for the beginner, the advanced practitioner or the layman. When we put together Galen's elaborations of Hippocratic and Platonic thought, his own discoveries in the light of Hellenistic medicine and his rhetorical and anatomical skills, his sheer prowess is dazzling.

THE FOCUS AND THEMES OF THIS VOLUME

The aim of this volume is to study Galen as an intellectual, exploring both his response to his context and inheritance, and his own remarkable medical-theoretical project. As outlined earlier, some aspects of this

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topic have been treated in other such volumes, notably his response to his Hellenistic inheritance and his engagement with philosophy.¹⁸ However, the topic is a vast and complex one, and one on which the general advance of scholarship on Galen enables a progressively deeper understanding of his thought.¹⁹ The present collection is innovative in its main theme (that of Galen and the world of knowledge), and in the breadth with which this theme is conceived, embracing cultural as well as medical and philosophical dimensions in a single perspective. The volume offers searching analyses and fresh insights on this theme, outlined shortly, which go beyond restatements of what is generally known or supposed about Galen's intellectual approaches. In particular, the volume shows how Galen both does and does not fit within his contemporary intellectual and literary culture – he is, in different ways, both typical and atypical of his thought-world. This paradox is brought out in different ways by all the contributors to this volume.

Our topic, then, is Galen as an intellectual, more precisely, his knowledge or, as we have put it, his *world* of knowledge. What does this phrase signify and how does the volume convey this idea? There are two main, interrelated, connotations. One is the world of knowledge that Galen inherits and responds to, and which forms a central part of the complex, sophisticated culture of Greek (or Hellenised) culture under the Roman Empire in the second century AD. A second connotation is the world of knowledge that Galen aims to create by his ambitious project of knowledge-based medicine and his many-sided intellectual activities and treatises. As indicated earlier, a distinctive feature of Galen's approach to medicine, in sharp contrast to some competing ancient views, is his conviction that the effective practice of medicine depends on possessing and applying a wide range of types of knowledge. The relevant types of knowledge, to which Galen aims to make new contributions and not merely to acquire and transmit, include anatomy, physiology, pharmacology and dietetics. However Galen also, exceptionally, regards medical knowledge as dependent on the application of logic and on an advanced understanding of the principles of methodology and classification. In both these senses, the idea of a *world* of knowledge suggests an aspiration – on Galen's part, and on his culture's – to inclusiveness, systematicity and universality. A further implication is that mastery of the world of knowledge, in its totality and interconnections, provides

¹⁸ Kollesch and Nickel 1993; Barnes and Jouanna 2003.

¹⁹ The discovery of the new treatise *On the Avoidance of Grief* (Boudon-Millot 2007b), of which Nutton takes account in his chapter, is just one, very clear, example of how the rapid advance of current scholarship on Galen is enabling a better understanding of his role as an intellectual.

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the key to knowledge – and mastery – of the world, as mapped or codified in this era.

The various contributions to this volume bring out in different ways both aspects of this theme and the interrelationship, and sometimes tension, between them. The simultaneous presence of both aspects leads to the paradox noted earlier: Galen is both typical and atypical of his culture; he both fits and does not fit in the world of knowledge of second-century Hellenised Roman civilisation. The interplay between these themes forms the basis for the structure and organisation of the volume. Although all the chapters, in different ways, bring out both sides of the story, some focus more on Galen's response to the contemporary intellectual world (and on ways in which he fits within this world), and others more on Galen's own construction of a distinctive synthesising world of knowledge (and on his correlated atypicality within his culture). We have placed the chapters stressing the first theme earlier in the volume and those underlining the second theme later in the volume. Thus, the collection as a whole progressively reveals Galen's exceptional role as an intellectual, while also showing how this is rooted in profound involvement with the Graeco-Roman intellectual milieu of his day.

Thus, the first four chapters accentuate different ways in which Galen assimilates his intellectual culture and is, to some degree, typical of it. The culture is a learned, sophisticated one, strongly informed by the role of rhetoric as a mode of public performance and a style of writing – in short, the culture associated with what some modern scholars call 'the Second Sophistic'.²⁰ Galen's life and career also reflect the relative stability and prosperity of Graeco-Roman socio-economic and political life in the second century AD. At the same time, these chapters also indicate the atypicality of Galen, which is stressed more fully later in the volume, especially his vast intellectual range and synthesising ambition, exceptional even in a culture that was itself fertile in technical and philosophical syntheses.²¹ These four chapters focus on Galen's library and range of reading (Nutton), on his cataloguing of knowledge, as displayed by his use of prefaces (König), on the 'imperial' scope of his learning and system of knowledge (Flemming) and on his showmanship and publicised mastery of technical medical skill (Gleason).

For someone in Galen's position, the personal library played a crucial role as the foundation of professional and intellectual knowledge, and as

²⁰ On the problems associated with this term see Whitmarsh 2005: 4–10.

²¹ Surveyed in König and Whitmarsh 2007b.

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an ever-growing collection of notes and writings. What did Galen's library contain? This question – fundamental to forming a view of the basic building-blocks of Galen's access to the world of knowledge in his day – is probed by Vivian Nutton. Providing the answer, however, is not easy. We know that most of his personal library was destroyed by fire in AD 192, and we can infer that his collection was both very extensive and diverse in its contents. However, to establish exactly what it contained we are reliant on the evidence of Galen's surviving writings. Nutton focuses on Galen's citation of Greek literature, which provides a picture we can correlate with Galen's response to Hippocratic medicine and philosophy. By contrast with his comments on medical writings (which give full coverage of Hellenistic and Imperial writings), Galen's literary allusions and quotations are almost wholly drawn from the Classical period. In fact, as becomes clear from Nutton's investigation, in his selection of prose and verse authors, and in his stylistic judgements, Galen emerges as a typical educated Greek of the first or second century AD, not dissimilar in this respect from Plutarch or Athenaeus, for instance.

Jason König also locates Galen in his contemporary literary culture, but as author rather than reader. He places Galen's authorship within the genre of compilatory or encyclopedic writing that is so marked a feature of the first three centuries AD. He examines the way that Galen presents his objectives in the preface of *On the Order of My Own Books* and *On the Therapeutic Method*, compared with prefaces of contemporary technical works, namely the *Encheiridion* (Introduction to Music) of Nicomachus Gerasenus and the *Orator's Education* by Quintilian. In these other works, the motif of writing at the insistence of friends is combined with an attitude of reluctance to write at all and with modesty about the quality or completeness of the book produced. Although these motifs also occur in Galen's writing, they are combined with other striking new themes. These include denunciation of the widespread lack of interest in the truth and poor understanding of medical and philosophical writing. Although presented as initially deterring Galen from writing at all, these factors also serve as motives for composition, to improve public attitudes – and to set the record straight about Galen's own authorship, since some of his writings were already circulating without his consent. So, by close correlation of Galen's practice with other writers of his age, König shows how Galen both does and does not fit within the writing conventions of his day, and shows what is distinctive – as well as ingenious and paradoxical – in Galen's allegedly reluctant authorship.