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An Early Parallel to the Hippocratic Oath

In: Gesnerus, 8 - 1950 + p. 177 - 180

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⁵⁴ SINGER CH., *An early parallel to the Hippocratic oath* [qui serait un document pythagoricien] ; cf. Hippocraticum Corpus.

SINGER CH., *An early parallel to the Hippocratic oath* : Gesnerus VIII 1951 177-180. | Le texte de l'inscription SEG, 3^e éd., N° 985, des environs de 100 av. J.C., provenant de Philadelphia de Lydie et ayant trait au culte de la déesse-mère Agdistis, présente de nombreux parallèles avec celui du serment hippocratique et vient appuyer la thèse de H. E. Sigerist selon qui ce serment n'aurait rien de chrétien, mais serait un document pythagoricien remontant au v^e siècle av. J.C.

PHILOLOGIQUE 1954.

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An Early Parallel to the Hippocratic Oath

By CHARLES SINGER, Par (Cornwall)

In all Greek medical literature no document has been more discussed than the so-called *Oath*. Among the most debated elements in it are the ethical clauses. These forbid (1) inducing abortion; (2) giving poison on the patient's request; (3) the unequal treatment of bond or free, male or female; (4) unchastity; (5) revelation of matters observed or heard during professional attendance.

(1) In the Graeco-Roman world abortion had no criminal implication. How could it have in a society which exposed its unwanted infants? Moreover a method of inducing abortion is in fact described in the *Hippocratic Collection*.

(2) The taking of poison, under medical guidance by those hopelessly sick, was recognised in antiquity. It was a regular and advised practice, specially among the Stoics. Suicide did not involve in antiquity the moral disapproval and legal obstacles that are attached to it in modern society.

The difference in the ancient attitude to (3) and (4) from that of a modern society of historic ally Christian origin extends to the ethical bases of the two societies. Discussion of these bases is not necessary here and would not further our enquiry.

For reasons such as these some, and I among them, have sometimes thought there may be some Christian influence in that form of the *Oath* that has come down to us. No pre-Christian writer refers to these clauses. GALEN, who died in 201 A.D., never mentions the *Oath* at all. Since his writings cover every aspect of medical activity, it might reasonably be conjectured that the *Oath* was an ancient formula which was disregarded in GALEN's time, and that it was revived, modified, and came into new popularity, when given a Christian tinge, with the rise of Christian influence in the third century of our era.

This view had difficulties of its own. Notably the invocation to ASCLEPIOS had to be explained. How could this survive Christian influence? To that certain considerations might be rejoined. Firstly it was not suggested that it was a fully Christian formula but one the asperities of which had been softened under pervasive but indirect Christian influence. Secondly that of all the pagan deities ASCLEPIOS was the least unacceptable to Christian thought. So much was this so that he had at times been identified with one

of the Christian sacred figures. His name is often used in Latin Christian documents and there are conventional representations in which the person of CHRIST has merely replaced that of ASCLEPIOS. It was for such reasons these that I myself felt that the *Oath*, in the form in which it has survived had been to some degree Christianised.

This view became improbable, and perhaps untenable, with the publication by Professor LUDWIG EDELSTEIN of his important work on the *Oath* issued, very appropriately, as the first 'Supplement' of the 'Bulletin of the History of Medicine' under the editorship of HENRY E. SIEGELIST. EDELSTEIN's careful investigation showed that the *Oath* is probably through a Pythagorean document and that it may well be of as early as the fifth century B. C. It still remains, however, an almost unique document with very few parallels in ancient literature. To one such parallel, which remained unnoticed in this connection, I would now draw attention.

It is needless to consider here the very familiar text of the *Oath* itself is enough to recall that it divides naturally into four parts, each of which presents its own problems. I do not propose here to discuss these problems but merely to remind the reader of a few of them.

I. *Invocation.* This involves in effect only ASCLEPIOS for the two other named deities, HYGEIA and PANACEIA, have hardly any existence independent of him. With rare exceptions they are little more than his 'attendants'. After the family of ASCLEPIOS "all the gods and goddesses" are thrown in, as a matter of courtesy. It is evident that the mind of the invocant is occupied by ASCLEPIOS. This formula of naming a specific god and adding "all the gods and goddesses" is a regular convention for incantations, especially in the later pre-Christian centuries. In the mind of many educated Greeks "the gods" thus became more or less interchangeable.

II. *Duty of the Physician to his Teachers.* My parallel has little reference to this section. It suffices to recall that the *Oath* here involves some sort of closed association. This is not limited by any rite, as often in such societies but merely by common agreement—something like Society, with a capital S—in fact 'a gentleman's agreement' but nevertheless making very great demands on the invocant. The society is limited however by a written document, a *syngraphe* or contract, usually rather weakly translated into English as *covenant*.

III. *Duty of the Physician to his Patients.* In this section there is a series of undertakings. Those relevant here are:

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(a) Undertaking to give no deadly drug, even if asked, nor to take any share in such counsel.

(b) Undertaking not to give an abortifacient.

(c) Undertaking to have no sexual relations with any member of a household where the physician is called.

(d) Special inclusion under (c) of bond and free, male and female.

(e) Pledge of silence on all things in the lives of those seen in the course of treatment "which ought not to be blabbed abroad".

IV. *Penalty.* This is purely moral and involves only 'loss of face'.

Toward the end of the second century B. C. or perhaps at the beginning of the first—say about 100 B. C.—a private shrine to the goddess ACDISTIS was built at Philadelphia in Lydia. That city had been founded only about fifty years earlier and was part of the Attalid Empire based on Pergamum as capital. It shared the Pergamenean culture as a remote provincial town. ACDISTIS was a mother-goddess whose cult was widely spread in Anatolia, Egypt, and even in Attica, from the third century B. C. onward. Such a mother-goddess, under various titles, is characteristic of the numerous Anatolian cults of the time. She is often associated with a male deity, sometimes as ASCLEPIOS, but more often under other names. Generally her consort is subordinate but sometimes ACDISTIS is associated with ZEUS. On her shrine at Philadelphia is the following inscription:

'Let men and women, slave and free, when coming into this shrine swear by all the gods that they will not deliberately plan any evil guile, or baneful poison against any man or woman; that they will neither know nor use harmful spells; that they will neither turn to nor recommend to others nor have a hand in love-charms, abortives, contraceptives, or doing robbery or murder; that they will steal nothing but will be well-disposed to this house, and if any man does or purposes any of these things they will not keep silence but will reveal it and avenge. A man is not to have relations with the wife of another, whether a free woman or a married slave, or with a boy, or with a virgin, or to counsel this to another . . . Let not woman or man who do the aforementioned acts come into this shrine; for in it are enthroned mighty deities, and they observe such offences, and will not tolerate those who transgress their commands . . . These commands were set up by the rule of ACDISTIS, the most holy guardian and mistress of this shrine. May she put good intentions in men and women, free and slave alike, that they may abide by what is here inscribed; and may all men and women who are confident of their uprightness touch this

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