

Celsus in Context

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It is a great personal pleasure to be included in this volume honouring Takahashi-san. Although I am a complete Hellenist, on this occasion I have become (almost) a Latinist: not enough to address the literary texts so familiar to our honorand, but enough to offer a brief appreciation of the medical writer Celsus and to suggest that his contribution to and influence on a long tradition have been underestimated, or perhaps rather overlooked.

It is here remarked that Celsus stands out among doctors writing in the early empire not only in the nature and content of his work, which comprises a full and judicious medical compendium, but also in its remarkably lucid and elegant expression and style. It is noted that extensive parallels may be drawn between the work of Celsus and that of the considerably later Paul of Aegina.

The most accessible text and translation of Celsus is the Loeb of W. G. Spencer (1935).

For Paul see the Greek text of J. L. Heiberg CMG IX. 1-2 and the English translation of Francis Adams (1844, 1846, 1847).

The *editio princeps* of Celsus' *De Medicina* appeared in 1478 AD: it was the first ancient medical work to be published in renaissance Europe. The first Hippocratic edition appeared only in 1525. At that time, Latin was more studied than Greek; but even so the priority of Celsus over the great Hippocrates, traditionally 'father of medicine', is worthy of remark.

It seems that Celsus' work on medicine was originally just one part of an extensive encyclopaedic oeuvre, embracing such different fields as agriculture (which is mentioned in an analogy with medicine at the beginning of the proem to *de medicina*), military matters, rhetoric and philosophy. The disparaging judgment of Quintilian (Quintil. 12. 11. 24) that Celsus was of mediocre ability (*vir mediocri ingenio*) seems to be based on awareness of the wide and disparate range of subjects he professed and the assumption that he could not be competent in all, if indeed in any. This assessment of Quintilian has been very influential. Much too is made of the fact that Pliny the Elder grouped Celsus with literary not with medical writers (*auctores*, rather than *medici*). In consequence, it has very commonly been argued and perhaps even more commonly simply asserted, that Celsus was not really a doctor.

The fact that the medical component which alone has survived is very substantial has been

generally disregarded. It is supposed that, since doctors were of low social status while Celsus, a prolific writer, was clearly a Roman aristocrat, he could not possibly have been getting his hands dirty as a servile medical practitioner. Perhaps we ought to remark at the outset that such arguments and assertions are anachronistic. In antiquity there was no formal medical training, no course to be followed to win appropriate credentials. Medicine might be practised by anyone who had learned enough to set up in business. Furthermore, medical knowledge could be acquired from judicious reading and medical proficiency from assiduous practice.

We are hampered by lack of information about Celsus' life. On grounds of the familiarity apparent in the allusions of Quintilian and Pliny, his *floruit* is generally placed around 40 AD. If, as it seems, he lived then, in the first century, he was a contemporary of the reigning emperor Tiberius. By this time, Greek ideas, including scientific ideas, were widely adopted in Rome and Roman lands, though medicine had as yet received comparatively little attention. In the first century AD there was a flurry of medical writing, most of it in Greek, as it was intellectually fashionable to write in Greek rather than in Latin. In Greek, Dioscorides on botany and pharmacology and Rufus on a range of topics, including anatomy, were (and still are) very familiar. In Latin, the contribution of Scribonius Largus, a pharmacologist whose work may have been originally written in Greek, then translated for Roman readers has been by comparison quite neglected. The great Galen paid scant attention to any writing in Latin and never cites Celsus at all.

Celsus is quite different from his contemporaries and immediate successors who write on selected aspects of medical subjects. The range of Celsus is formidable, similar in its aim and scope to that of later compilers. The writing of medical compilations, as indeed of compilations generally, became a fashionable industry long after Celsus' lifetime. It may be conjectured that Celsus was in fact the very earliest medical encyclopaedist. There is no known antecedent for writing of this sort, no apparent model. Such compilers are to some extent derivative in their retrospective reiteration of factual content, drawn primarily from the Hippocratic and Galenic texts which had come to be viewed as canonical. Oribasius in the fourth century and Aetius in the sixth both amassed a prodigious quantity of information, with their sources at times replicated almost verbatim, but neither can rival Celsus in authority and range. Moreover, neither writes in a gracious style. Medical writing, in common with scientific discourse generally, tends to aim at conformity in lucid and plain expression rather than at originality and distinctive impact in presentation.

It is in the great physician Paul of Aegina, writing in the seventh century, that we find some close parallels with Celsus. Paul, like Celsus, presents his scientific work in an elegant educated manner. Both writers display virtues of clarity and careful organisation in their writing, though Celsus is somewhat more leisurely and elaborate in literary style. Both authors preface their works as a whole with a carefully executed proem; and both make subsequent use of this introductory

device to introduce sections of their argument. Both demonstrate familiarity with the entire preceding medical tradition. In introducing his own work, Celsus proceeds from figures believed to have preceded Hippocrates, such as Pythagoras and Democritus, to the contemporary beliefs of Empirics, Methodists and others. All are mentioned with an impressive impartiality and there is authoritative reference to the existence and controversial character of this multiplicity of sources. Similarly, Paul's proem is a clear statement of motivation and rationale: to supply a compact account of essentials for doctors wherever they may be situated; to write a concise yet comprehensive medical handbook that will improve on previous works, the deficiencies of which are summarised in a few trenchant phrases.

Both authors write with a strong personal slant, using first person pronouns quite freely. From the pronoun *nobis* (Proem 11) it is clear that Celsus sees himself as a doctor, and there are, as in Paul, many references to personal experience of the treatment or progress of disease. The ordering of topics is the same: how to act in health; matters of diseases; matters of treatment (essentially by diet, by medication or by surgery). The layout of Celsus' treatise, a lengthy compendium organised in eight books, is very similar to that followed by Paul in his seven (of which the last is long and may originally have been subdivided into two parts, seventh and eighth). In particular, the ordering and emphasis of topics in surgery is markedly parallel. Both writers pay particular attention to eye affections and take a sophisticated approach to their treatment of these. The citations of Hippocratic surgical treatises are closely coincident.

I suggest that Celsus was not only a doctor, but a doctor of distinction who is an unsuspected *éminence grise* behind the great Paul of Aegina. The choice of *de medicina* for early publication in the fifteenth century was visionary.