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Children’s Medicine in the Roman Empire

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Academic studies of Roman medicine tend to focus on adults, and those that do mention children often confine their comments to the care of small babies in accordance with the recommendations of Soranus of Ephesus. Older children are generally less well represented. This, perhaps, reflects the relative paucity of corresponding data in extant texts and an overriding pre-occupation of ancient practitioners with the survival of vulnerable babies in the face of high infant mortality. Until the last two decades scholars have neglected to engage in wider issues relating to Roman children’s medicine, but a small number have recently begun to initiate discourses in some additional aspects of this subject.¹ There is general agreement that ‘paediatric’ medicine was not recognised as a specialty in antiquity, but this doctoral study aims to investigate whether children’s medicine possessed distinctive features of its own in the Early Empire. It will also attempt to address a broad range of questions that have not yet been tackled by other scholars.

The chief sources used in this research are the medical, non-medical and pharmacological writings of Pliny the Elder, Aulus Cornelius Celsus, Rufus and

¹ The following authors stimulate consideration about wider questions concerning medicine for Roman children: Bertier 1996; Bonet 1998; Mudry 2004; Bradley 2005; Baker 2010.
Soranus of Ephesus, Aretaeus of Cappadocia, Galen and Dioscorides. These and other texts are scrutinised with two main research questions in mind, namely whether Romans considered that diseases affecting children differed from those of adults, and whether or not children were treated in the same way. Since no single treatise dedicated solely to the treatment of children has survived from the Graeco-Roman world, information is extracted from a variety of extant writings from the early imperial period, together with fragments from the works of later medical writers. Galen was the most prolific of the authors from this period, and it is fortunate that he provides detailed accounts of his version of humoral theory and explanations for physiological processes occurring in children in sickness and in health. The texts used in this research are available in many academic libraries, most notably the Wellcome Library at Euston in London, or are accessible through online sources. Additional, supporting evidence is provided in the form of medical equipment recovered from archaeological sites and the skeletal remains of Roman children themselves.

Three major areas are explored in relation to children’s medicine. The first concerns the physical differences between children and adults and explores whether juveniles were considered to be miniature adults or formed a distinct biological group. The study will investigate how Roman authors interpreted the anatomical and physiological characteristics of children from early embryonic life through to infancy, childhood and adolescence. It will be demonstrated that there were disagreements amongst the adherents of various medical sects in this matter, especially with regard to the beliefs of the Methodist, Soranus, and of Rufus and Galen who subscribed to the theory of four humours. Humoral concepts, in particular, had key implications for the understanding of the nature

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2 Pliny, *Historia naturalis*; Celsus, *De medicina*; the works of Rufus of Ephesus and Aretaeus; Soranus, *Gynaecology*; Galen, *De sanitate tuenda* and other treatises; Dioscorides, *De materia medica*.

3 For example, surviving fragments of Rufus’ lost work, *De infantium curatione*, are preserved in the writings of the fourth century AD complier, Oribasius, (*Coll.Med: Liber.inc.* 42, 43, 38). For those recorded by the tenth-century-AD Islamic physician, al-Baladi, see Ullmann (1975).

4 For example, online from the website of Paris Bibliothèque Interuniversitaire de Médecine et d’Ontologie (via [www.bium.univ-paris5.fr/](http://www.bium.univ-paris5.fr/)).
of many of the diseases that affected children and underpinned the rationale of treatments for the various ailments and illnesses encountered in Roman children. Although scholars agree that humoralism emerged as the predominant doctrine across the Empire, there is disagreement about the extent of its uptake through all sections of society.

The second area for research concerns the search for evidence of differences between diseases occurring in children and adults. Although some scholars have claimed that some specific conditions constituted ‘the true diseases of childhood,’ there is disagreement amongst them as to their identity. A corresponding lack of consensus is also evident in the ancient sources. Some Roman authors not only recognised that certain afflictions occurred more frequently in children, but also observed that patterns of disease characterised particular stages of the life cycle. Celsus records a list of conditions occurring in persons of different ages that bears striking similarities to that of Hippocrates, and these both roughly equate to the diseases most frequently mentioned by Dioscorides. Further questions that require clarification include whether diseases struck boys and girls equally, or whether there were thought to be differences in the severity, manifestation and prognosis of illnesses of children of different ages and gender as well as between children and adults. While it would be tempting to try to attach definitive diagnostic labels to the conditions described in ancient texts, in this study it is intended to identify diseases or symptom complexes according to the nomenclature that was employed in the source material.

The main research question relating to therapy for diseases in Roman children is whether or not they were treated in the same way as adults. Celsus tells us that children should not be treated thus. Whether other medical writers and practitioners were of the same opinion bears further scrutiny. For the purposes of

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6 Celsus, Med. 2.1; Hippocrates, Aphorisms 3.24-27; Dioscorides, MM.
7 Celsus, Med. 3.7.1, Et ex toto non sic pueri et uiri curare debent.
this study, feeding practices and the general care of infants are included within
the field of therapeutics since they were understood to have a major impact on
the health of Roman children. Soranus and Galen stress the importance of
correct moulding, swaddling and handling of newborns and older infants in order
to prevent deformation of the spine and limbs.\textsuperscript{8} Therapeutic modalities included
dietetics, pharmacology, surgery, magic and religious ritual. Although these will
be examined separately, they would have been regarded as components of a
continuous and fluid therapeutic spectrum in antiquity. The medical texts will be
analysed in order to determine whether particular modalities were deemed more
suitable than others for use in children.

Other questions arise regarding concessions that may or may not have been
made for the chronological age or developmental status of the child, its general
condition or constitution, physical size or gender. Were different formulations of
medication applied to children as distinct from adults, and were they varied to suit
individuals in the different stages of childhood? Were drugs diluted in some way
or the dosage modified? Were certain routes of administration preferred, and
were medicines administered to newborns in the same way as older children?
Was the gender of the child taken into account?

Some treatments or procedures were considered too dangerous to be
administered to children, and great caution was advised for the use of many
others. Evidence will be sought to ascertain whether there was universal
agreement amongst authors in this matter and to identify the reasons given for
omitting or adapting such therapies. Finally, an attempt will be made to establish
whether certain treatments were thought to have different prognostic implications
for children and adults, or for children of varying ages and different gender.

\textsuperscript{8} Soranus, \textit{Gyn.} 2.9, 10, 16, 20; Galen, \textit{San.tu.} 1.7, 8.
Bibliography


