

Ricarda Gäbel: *Aetius of Amida on Diseases of the Brain. Translation and Commentary of Libri medicinales 6.1–10 with Introduction*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2022 (Science, Technology, and Medicine in Ancient Cultures 13). XIII, 608 p. € 134.95 / £ 120.00 / \$ 151.99. ISBN: 978-3-11-079436-6.

Cross-disciplinary interest in late antique medicine has thrived over the past decade, not only from the perspective of history of medicine, but also within religious studies, as historians and theologians have begun to explore the connections between medicine and religion. However, the field is stymied by a paucity of translated sources and modern commentaries: traditionally, late antique medical texts have been devalued as unoriginal compilations and syntheses, useful chiefly as resources for reconstructing the ‘fragments’ of earlier texts. The consequence of this is that research into late antique cultures of sickness and healing tends to rely on a narrow range of evidence, often from hundreds of years prior (for example, the works of Galen, Soranus, Aretaeus). Ricarda Gäbel’s volume, “Aetius of Amida on Diseases of the Brain. Translation and Commentary of *Libri medicinales* 6.1–10 with Introduction,” makes a valuable contribution to the body of source material available and represents the shift in thinking within history of medicine that seeks to situate such texts in terms of their own environments and aims.

Gäbel translates ten chapters from Book 6 of the *Libri medicinales* (“Medical Books”) of Aetius of Amida, a medical author from the sixth century CE (pp. 71–131). Alongside this translation, Gäbel offers an in-depth commentary that combines an overview of the key ideas that Aetius discusses with line-by-line analysis of the text itself and its connections to other sources (pp. 132–491). The whole is preceded by an introduction that lays out three key topics (pp. 1–70): late antique medicine (or, more specifically, the four main authors of extant Greek medical texts from Late Antiquity – Oribasius of Pergamon, Alexander of Tralleis, Paul of Aegina, and Aetius of Amida); scholarship on Aetius of Amida, including discussion of his sources and his compilation techniques; the concept of “mental illness” and the challenges and potential of importing this concept into the study of ancient medical sources, together with a brief historical survey of “mental illness” in ancient medical texts from the fifth century BCE to the sixth century CE.

In keeping with scholarly trends, Gäbel challenges the characterisation of late antique medical texts as unoriginal, highlighting instead the techniques

that Aetius uses to adapt and interweave his sources. As Gäbel emphasises, it is difficult to trace these techniques in full, especially since Aetius often does not identify (or misidentifies) his sources, and because in any case much of the material that Aetius drew upon is not available to us. Gäbel nonetheless makes good use of two case studies, where parallel texts survive sufficiently to compare how different authors address the same material. The questions that Gäbel's case studies raise are perhaps as important as the possible answers: How, exactly, did 'compilers' move between one source and another? Why did they cite their source in some instances but not in others? When the author of a 'compilation' deviates from the presumed 'original,' is the deviation their own work, or are they copying an intermediary? Or did they perhaps have access both to the text that they cite and to subsequent summaries and versions?

These questions are important on a number of levels. They inch us closer to understanding how medical authors worked and how medical texts and ideas circulated in Late Antiquity, so contributing to our grasp of how people (both experts and lay readers) gained and valued and talked about medicine. They also open up 'compilers' and 'compilations' to rhetorical analysis. As Philip van der Eijk observes in a passage that Gäbel quotes at length, compilers needed to develop skills in the key areas of ancient rhetoric: εὕρησις ("finding and selecting the material"), τᾶξις and λέξις ("arranging and presenting it"), and μνήμη ("remembering it well enough to keep control over it").¹

Gäbel's discussion of how Aetius handles his material illustrates this point through close analysis of understudied material; through case studies, Gäbel focuses attention on both how the text was constructed and what its construction might teach us about the development and circulation of learned medical knowledge. Especially useful in this regard are the connections to other sources that Gäbel observes in the line-by-line commentary, enabling readers to situate not only the text as a whole but specific passages, ideas, and vocabulary within the weave of late antique medical writings. This is valuable in a volume that will doubtless become important as a point of access not merely into late antique medical writings, but in particular into late

1 P. van der Eijk: Principles and Practices of Compilation and Abbreviation in the Medical 'Encyclopaedias' of Late Antiquity. In: M. Horster/C. Reitz (eds.): Condensing Texts – Condensed Texts. Stuttgart 2010 (Palingenesia 98), pp. 519–554, p. 521, quoted on p. 28.

antique ideas about “diseases of the brain” and – as becomes clear through the introduction – “mental illness.”

Gäbel uses “diseases of the brain” in the subtitle to the volume, but it becomes clear that “mental illness” was a lens operative in the selection of material for presentation. This is highlighted by the fact that the introduction concludes with a section titled “Diseases of the brain and mental illness” (pp. 39–70) that in fact deals wholly with “mental illness.” As Gäbel observes, “mental illness” is a modern concept, and its application to ancient material is anachronistic; at the same time, ancient medical authors clearly thought that some diseases of the brain resulted in symptoms affecting mental function, and some went further to suggest that these diseases affected the “mind” (γνώμη, διάνοια) or even the “soul” (ψυχή). There is currently much interest in this topic, especially as it plays out at the intersection of medical, philosophical, and theological thought in the early Christian period.²

While it is true that late antique doctors generally seem to have regarded diseases of the brain as distinctive in their effect on mental activity, however, it is misleading to conflate “diseases of the brain” and “mental illness,” as Gäbel’s introduction seems to do. Other diseases also disrupted mental processes, and not all diseases affecting the brain necessarily caused symptoms of mental disorder (as is illustrated by the very first chapter that Gäbel translates, on τὸ ὑδροκέφαλον πάθος, the build-up of fluid on or in the brain). Besides, given the complexity of applying the concept of “mental illness” to ancient medical material, identifying “diseases of the brain” with “mental illness” risks importing more of modern psychiatry than I think Gäbel really intends. Rather than situating this selection of chapters within the (constructed) tradition of medical texts dealing with “mental illness,” it might have been more effective to establish as a frame the medical tradition dealing with illnesses of the brain and to have discussed as one important aspect of that tradition the development of ideas about how such diseases might peculiarly affect behaviour, speech, and experience.

Despite this caveat, Gäbel’s contribution is a valuable addition to the body of work emerging on late antique medical texts. The introduction is straightforward and well structured, outlining the field and its main actors in a way that makes the volume especially useful for new readers – both those late

2 See, e.g., C. Thumiger/P. N. Singer (eds.): *Mental Illness in Ancient Medicine. From Celsus to Paul of Aegina*. Leiden/Boston 2018 (*Studies in Ancient Medicine* 50).

antique historians and theologians who are interested in how ancient medicine informs their subjects and sources and those historians of ancient or medieval medicine who want a better grasp of the work that took place in the little-known period in between. The commentary, too, is both rich and usable: it is divided by chapter of the original work, and each chapter is structured to include an introduction to the illness being described (including other contemporaneous accounts of it and carefully qualified observations on possible retrospective diagnosis), a summary of the chapter, a “rationale of the chapter” (that is, an account of what, in Gäbel’s interpretation, Aetius is trying to achieve and why he selects and organises material in the way that he does), and a detailed line-by-line commentary that offers interpretation, explanation, and contextualisation.

Gäbel’s translation is largely very good, although there are a few points where the English is technically correct but potentially misleading. For example, the translation of τὸ μὲν γὰρ ψυχρὸν πυκνοῖ πόρους as “[f]or the cold blocks the pores” is unfortunately reminiscent of the modern notion of ‘blocked’ or ‘clogged’ pores; πυκνοῖ would be more accurately translated as “tightens” or “contracts” and πόρους less suggestively as “openings” or “ducts” (p. 78). The consistent translation of ὑπνωτικός as “hypnotic,” similarly cleaves to the original in etymological terms but does not quite catch its nuance, implying a process of hypnosis; “soporific” or “narcotic” would be more suitable in reference to drugs (p. 81).

These word choices do not significantly impair the readability or accuracy of the translation, however, and in many ways they are the exceptions that prove the rule. Gäbel’s translation demonstrates thorough knowledge of the text, the contemporaneous material, and the scholarship. As such, it makes a valuable contribution to an important but still fairly new field of cross-disciplinary scholarship and deserves to become a standard point of reference for scholars looking to engage with Aetius and late antique medical literature more broadly.

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