

Preface

This volume is the result of a most satisfying ongoing research project undertaken by a classicist and a physician over the past six years. Most of the articles are review works which bring together existing knowledge, placing the medical findings of the time in a broad historical context in order to give a better understanding of ancient medical views. One of the rewarding aspects of research of this kind is that thanks to modern information systems it is theoretically possible to gather virtually all the extant fragments of information on a specific subject — such as medicine — from the written sources of antiquity. Archaeology and modern science then often supplement the written information to ensure an optimal overview.

The authors are well aware of the hazards involved in retrospective diagnosis. Care must indeed be taken not to read too much into terse Hippocratic aphorisms, or the clinical observations of a historian such as Procopius, or even the descriptions of diseases by great doctors like Celsus and Galen. We also know that disease patterns have changed over the millennia, and that even the most objective ancient observer would probably have described a disease according to his culture, education and knowledge of medical matters such as pathogenesis and the current humoural theory. However, there can be no doubt that careful assessment of the texts relating to the diseases of antiquity, be they by physicians or laymen, priests or philosophers or statesmen, will tell us more about the socio-cultural background of the time and help us understand the history of humankind more clearly.

The articles have been reproduced as originally published, except that those written in Afrikaans have now been translated into English by Margaret Raftery, to whom we would like to express our gratitude. The format thus varies from article to article, depending on the requirements of the original journal publication, and as the articles were not written with a specific order in mind, there may be a degree of overlap between them. We acknowledge the significant contributions of our co-authors, Dr. J.F.G. Cilliers in two articles, and Dr. S.J.P.K. Riekert in one. Elaine van der Westhuizen typed all the articles in their original format — we appreciate her patience and meticulousness.

Finally, we are most grateful for Prof. Francois Tolmie's unstinting support. Without his enthusiastic encouragement this publication would not have come into being.

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