



The ROYAL  
SOCIETY of  
MEDICINE



**Exhibition**  
on  
**Medicine and the  
Olympic Games of  
Antiquity**

**Library of the  
Royal Society of Medicine  
London**

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**Under the auspices of the  
Hellenic Medical Society - UK**



## Introduction

The unique ethical, philosophical and clinical profile of Ancient Hellenic Medicine emerged in a society that indulged in nature, excelled in competitive sport, cultivated reason and respected the individual. It can be argued that it is the direct consequence of these cultural characteristics.

The preoccupation of the ancient Hellene is excellence on earth through the harmonious development of body and mind. This is cultivated in the *gymnasia* of the polis, the most famous of which were Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum in Athens. Excellence is ultimately glorified at the Pan-Hellenic athletic festivals at Olympia, as well as, at the Pythian (Delphi), Nemean and Isthmian (Corinth) games. Medicine develops in parallel and in the service of these activities.

In the Greek tradition the association of medicine and sport is traced to Apollo the Olympian god of harmony and healing. Apollo commanded King Iphitus, to organise athletic competitions at Olympia in honour of his father Zeus.

Asclepius, the revered god of medicine, is the son of Apollo from his union with princess Koronis of Thessaly.

The exhibition opens with a drinking vessel in clay from around 480 B.C. that shows Apollo in a representative form. It then visits the *palaistra* (wrestling ring) and the *stadion* (race course) through the works of Hippocrates, Aretaeus, Galen and others, who write about physical exercise, gymnastics and sport that were an intricate part of the upbringing and daily life of the ancient Hellene.

The words Olympia or Olympic Victor are mentioned by Aretaeus and repeatedly in the treatises of Galen. The exhibition concludes with a warning to athletes for the ETTINIKEIA - the victory celebrations - and the risk of excesses to health.

Most artefacts are exact copies of originals from the collections of Greek Museums.

The principal sources of the medical texts on display are largely from the 17<sup>th</sup> century Parisian edition of René Chartier's compilation of the works of Hippocrates and Galen and from the standard edition of C.G. Kühn's *Corpus Medicorum Graecorum* published in Leipzig (1821-1833).

This exhibition celebrates the 2012 London Olympiad.

**Robert Greenwood**  
Curator

**Spyros Retsas MD FRCP**  
Life-Fellow & Guest Curator

## CATALOGUE OF EXHIBITS

### Cabinet 1.



#### **Drinking vessel in clay from around 480 B.C.**

Copy of exhibit 8140 from the Museum of Delphi.

This Attic white ground kylix depicts Apollo in a very representative form.

The god wears a white sleeveless chiton, which is fastened with pins at the shoulders, and a red himation wrapped around the lower part of his body. He sits on a cross-legged stool. A myrtle wreath garnishes his carelessly bound hair. He performs a libation by pouring wine out of a bowl with his right hand, while holding in his left hand a seven-stringed lyre, with a sound-box made of a turtle-shell. A raven looks on. This scene could allude to the myth of the birth of Asclepius, the popular healing God of the Greeks.

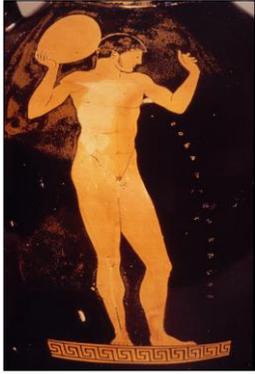
Asclepius was born from the union of Apollo and Koronis (her name in Greek means raven) who met a violent death before giving birth. As she was dying Hermes, the swift messenger of the Gods, rescued the child. Asclepius was born and was entrusted for his upbringing to the mythical centaur Chiron who taught him the art of healing.

Accounts of this myth are given by Pausanias, a traveller and writer of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, who was probably a Doctor.

**Free-standing RSM sculpture of Asclepius** (Ἀσκληπιός in Greek) was not only curing the sick but transgressed the natural order and started resurrecting the dead. For this he was punished by Zeus and was transformed upon his death to the constellation of *Serpentarius* or *Ophiuchus* (ὄφιοῦχος in Greek). The serpent remains to this day as a symbol of medicine.

In Ancient Greece Physicians trained in the art of Medicine were called Asclepiads. The parents of Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), Nicomachos and Phaesias, were both descendants from a line of Asclepiads. In modern Greece the term Asclepiad is more commonly applied to medical students.

There were numerous temples (Ἀσκληπιεῖα) throughout the Greek world dedicated to the god, the most famous of which were at Epidaurus, Pergamum and the island of Cos.



Homer (οὐδ' ἄθλητήρι ἕοικας) The first ever appearance of the word "*athlete*" in western literature is found in **Odyssey 8:160**. Odysseus (Ulysses) exhausted from his sea voyage declines the invitation of prince Euryalus to join the athletic games of the Phaeacians. Euryalus rebukes Odysseus with the (liberally translated) words "*Sir, You are no athlete; your mind is on profit.*" Insulted Odysseus leaps to his feet picks up the largest discus of all - a huge weight - and throws it overshooting all other marks.

***Hippocratis Coi, et Galenus Pergameni archiatruw Opera.***

René Chartier's compilation of the works of Hippocrates and Galen. Parisian, 1639 edition.

High resolution digital copy of ***Oxyrhynchus BM1185 verso Papyrus fragment. List of Olympian Victors*** (18x9.5 cm). This fragment from a list of Olympian Victors, now in the British Library, includes the names of athletes and the events in which they won from the 75<sup>th</sup> to the 78<sup>th</sup> (480 B.C. - 468 B.C.) and from the 81<sup>st</sup> to 83<sup>rd</sup> (456 B.C. - 448 B.C.) Olympiads.

On the right column, the fifth name from the bottom, reads ΔΑΜΑΓΗΤΟΣ (DAMAGETOS). This is the Rhodian athlete who won the pancration in the year 448 B.C., the son of the famous boxer Diagoras. (See also the statuette representing Diagoras' legendary death).

The events listed are: -

στάδιον	stadion (192.27 m. Sprint)
δίαυλος	2 stadia
δόλιχος	dolichos (2000 m)
πένταθλον	pentathlon
πάλη	wrestling
πύξ	boxing
παγκράτιον	pancratation (combined wrestling & boxing)
παίδων στάδιον	Boys' stadion
παίδων πάλη	Boys' wrestling
παίδων πύξ	Boys' boxing
ὀπλίτης	hoplite (race in armour)
τέθριππον	four horse chariot race
κέλης	courser, horse-riding

**Reference**

*The Oxyrhynchus Papyri, Part II, Bernard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt (London, 1899), published by The Egypt Exploration Society.*

Hippocratis De Locis in homine Liber (ΠΕΡΙ ΤΟΠΩΝ ΤΩΝ ΚΑΤΑ ΑΝΘΡΩΠΟΝ)

KUHN Vol II: 138. - Chart VII: 371-2

In his treatise *On the Places of Man* Hippocrates distinguishes between gymnastics and medicine:

*Gymnastics and medicine - he writes - are by their nature opposite, for gymnastics has no need to cause changes [in the human body] but medicine has; because changes are not required in the state of a healthy individual, but this is necessary in the patient.*

Hippocratis Liber de salubri victus ratione (ΠΕΡΙ ΔΙΑΙΤΗΣ ΥΓΙΕΙΝΗΣ)

KUHN Vol I: 622 Chart VI: 232-234 (advice on diet and physical exercise during the seasons).

*During the winter those who exercise should wrestle and run; Wrestling and running is best avoided during the summer. In cold weather it is best to walk.*

Hippocratis de Articulis Liber (ΠΕΡΙ ΑΡΘΡΩΝ)

KUHN Vol III:135, 139-140. - Chart XII: 269, 298-99. (In this treatise on joints Hippocrates discusses dislocation at the shoulder and a simple method of reduction useful in the wrestling ring - the palaistra)

*In the shoulder joint I have known only one type of dislocation towards the axilla; I have never known it to happen upwards or outwards. ...and this method of reduction is useful in the wrestling ring.*

Galenus ad Thrasybulum liber, utrum medicinae sit an gymnasticae hygieine ? (ΓΑΛΗΝΟΥ ΠΡΟΣ ΘΡΑΣΥΒΟΥΛΟΝ ΒΙΒΛΙΟΝ, ΠΟΤΕΡΟΝ ΙΑΤΡΙΚΗΣ Η ΓΥΜΝΑΣΤΙΚΗΣ ΕΣΤΙ ΤΟ ΥΓΙΕΙΝΟΝ)

KUHN Vol V:806;811;813 Chart VI: 8-9

*If one is asked - he writes - what is medicine? one could answer it is an art, therapeutic for the sick and preventative for the healthy; .....and as for gymnastics it is the art of preserving well-being*

And elsewhere (894)

*The most unfortunate of athletes who never won a victory suddenly decide to call themselves trainers (gymnastai) and even worse some of them attempt to write about massage and diets and health and gymnastics*

Galeni Paraphrastae Menodoti Adhortatio des artes addiscendas (ΓΑΛΗΝΟΥ ΠΑΡΑΦΡΑΣΤΟΥ ΤΟΥ ΜΗΝΟΔΟΤΟΥ ΠΡΟΤΡΕΠΤΙΚΟΣ ΛΟΓΟΣ ΠΕΡΙ ΤΑΣ ΤΕΧΝΑΣ)

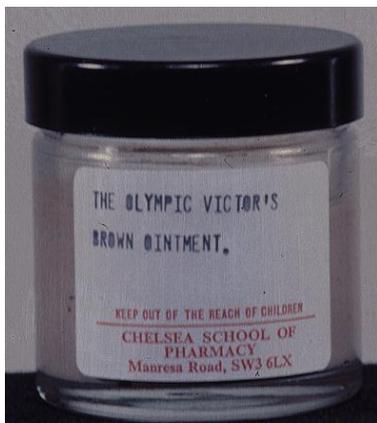
KUHN Vol I: 22-23 - Chart II:10

In the treatise "Protrepticos" (An exhortation of the art) Galen addresses the question, does the athlete's life benefit himself or the State? He makes a case against the Athletes and he cites Euripides: -

*Listen now - he writes - what Euripides thinks of the Athletes:  
"Myriad of ills have befallen Greece, but none worse than  
the Athletes' lot!"*

Galen is not an impartial witness. He castigates the athletes mainly because he objects to their coaches interfering in matters medical that should remain in the remit of physicians.

Galeni adversus eos qui de typis scripserunt vel de circuitibus liber (ΓΑΛΗΝΟΥ ΠΡΟΣ ΤΟΥΣ ΠΕΡΙ ΤΥΠΩΝ ΓΡΑΨΑΝΤΑΣ Η ΠΕΡΙ ΠΕΡΙΟΔΩΝ ΒΙΒΛΙΟΝ)  
KUHN Vol VII:475-76 Chart VII: 156. In this treatise Galen discusses paroxysms of diseases and the definition of period in chronological terms; as examples he refers to the "Olympic" and "Pythian" quadrennial periods.



Galeni de compositione medicamentorum secundum locos liber IV KUHN Vol XII:753 Olympionico Inscriptum Char XIII:440 (ΓΑΛΗΝΟΥ ΠΕΡΙ ΣΥΝΘΕΣΕΩΣ ΦΑΡΜΑΚΩΝ). *On the Composition of Medicines Book IV. THE OLYMPIC VICTOR'S BROWN OINTMENT. Galen's ointment of the "Olympic Victor" was resurrected at the Chelsea School of Pharmacy in the 1980's. The components are detailed in the treatise*

**Aretaeus of Cappadocia is thought to have ranked second only to Hippocrates in the application of keen observation and ethics to the art. He is credited with the first clinical description of Diabetes. In his treatise on arthritides he describes the clinical signs of gout, its recurring nature and provides the example of a sufferer who in remission easily won the foot race at Olympia!**

Aretaei Cappadocis de Causis et Signis Diuturnorum Morborum Liber Secundus. Cap. XII [De arthritide et ischiade] (ΑΡΕΤΑΙΟΥ ΚΑΠΠΑΔΟΚΟΥ ΧΡΟΝΙΩΝ ΠΑΘΩΝ ΣΗΜΕΙΩΤΙΚΟΝ ΒΙΒΛΙΟΝ Β. Κεφ. ιβ´)[Περὶ ἀρθρίτιδος καὶ ἰσχιᾶδος]. Καὶ Ὀλυμπίᾳ ἐνίκησε ποδαγρός ἐπ' ἀνέσει δρόμον.

A liberal but accurate translation by John Moffat M.D. reads:

*A continued gout of the feet does not easily take place, as the intermissions sometimes are for a considerable space of time, and it is confidently asserted, that a person afflicted with the gout carried away the prize at the Olympic games during an intermission of the fit.*

On display four books with the works of Aretaeus:

Parisian edition of Aretaeus M.D.LIIII, Ex Bibliotheca Regia

Kuhn Medici Vol XXIV Lipsiae 1828

English translation by John Moffat M.D of eight books of Aretaeus Printed in London at the Logographic Press by J. Walter Printing-House-Square Black Friars; For W. Richardson, under the Royal Exchange.

Franciscus Zacharias Ermerins, Medicinae Doctor, 1847.

**Pausanias (ΠΑΥΣΑΝΙΑΣ) was a physician, traveller and writer of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. He wrote a detailed account of every city and sanctuary he visited in mainland Greece, including Olympia.**

Pausanias, Description of Greece **Ἡλιακῶν Α: 5.14**

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Paus.+5.14&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0160>

Heat, dust, a limited supply of water, rudimentary sanitation and insects made life difficult for the athletes and spectators at Olympia. Here Pausanias describes the problem with insects: -

*There is a story that when Heracles the son of Alcmena was sacrificing at Olympia he was much worried by the flies. So either on his own initiative or at somebody's suggestion he sacrificed to Zeus Averter of Flies, and thus the flies were diverted to the other side of the Alpheius. It is said that in the same way the Eleans too sacrifice to Zeus Averter of Flies, to drive the flies out of Olympia.*

Pausanias, Description of Greece Ἡλιακῶν A: 5.26

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Paus.+5.26&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0160>

Pausanias describes the offerings of a certain Mikythus to Asclepios and Hygeia:

*According to the inscriptions Mikythus dedicated the offerings at Olympia in fulfilment of a vow made for the recovery of a son, who fell ill of a wasting disease.*

Pausanias, Description of Greece Ἡλιακῶν A: 5.27.10

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0160%3Abook%3D5%3Achapter%3D27>

Pausanias describes the accidental head injury of a small child playing under the statue of a bronze ox, offering of the people of Corfu:

*Sitting under this ox a little boy was playing with his head bent towards the ground. Suddenly lifting his head he broke it against the bronze, and died a few days later from the wound.*

Pausanias, Description of Greece Ἡλιακῶν A:6.3

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0160%3Abook%3D6%3Achapter%3D3>

Pausanias describes the case of an Olympic victor called Hysmon who as a child suffered a neurologic disorder which he overcame with hard exercise in the pentathlon.

*Hysmon of Elis, competed successfully in the pentathlon both at Olympia and at Nemea; it is said that when Hysmon was still a boy he was attacked by a flux in his muscles, and it was in order that by hard exercise he might be a healthy man free from disease that he practised the pentathlon. So his training was also to make him win famous victories in the games.*

**Note by SR** the abridged translation above by Jones and Ormerod at the Perseus digital library is not strictly accurate. The Greek text «κατασκῆψαι ῥεῦμα ἐς τὰ νεῦρα», implies a neurological rather than muscular disorder.

The English Translation of Pausanias by W.H.S. Jones, H.A. Ormerod is from the Perseus Digital Library.



Marble head of the goddess Hygeia - *Asclepius' daughter* - from the Cycladic island of Amorgos, 4<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. (Exact copy of Inv No 327, National Archaeological Museum, Athens).



After centuries of divorce the age of enlightenment brought medicine and gymnastics together again, as shown on this photograph of a brass name-plate of the Westminster Medical School and Hospital. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was located on 12 Caxton Street, as a School of **MASSAGE, MEDICAL GYMNASTICS AND ELECTRICITY**.



The death of Diagoras: bronze statuette by the sculptor Theodore Papagiannis, Professor of the Athens School of Fine Arts (from the private collection of Spyros Retsas). The same theme is depicted in a 19<sup>th</sup> c. painting by Rogier.



Figurine of Nike (Victory). Archaeological Museum of Pella. Early 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. The original (Inv. No 81/229) in clay. Authentic copy in plaster, 16.5 cm.



The medical consequences of binge drinking. Inscribed grave stele at the Chalkis Museum of Evia, Greece. The inscription reads: *I, Asclepiades, son of Anaxippos from Ephesus, having quaffed a vast amount of undiluted wine in one breath, (αἷμ' ἀνάγων ἔθανον) vomited blood and died.*

Reference: Miller S.G. Drinking Uncut-Wine ...to Death. Unpublished Greek Epigram for a Youth from Ephesus. *The Ancient World* 2 (1979) 29-30.

## **Acknowledgements**

We thank Andrea Clarke of the British Library for help and advice with the Oxyrhynchus Papyrus (copy) on display.

## **Note**

On the cover page the picture on the left is a scene from a physician's surgery painted on a small Athenian vase (Aryballos 480-470 B.C.) now in the Museum of Louvre. The patient is standing while the physician (seated) is performing a phlebotomy (blood-letting).

The picture on the right was taken at an Exhibition of the National Archaeological Museum of Athens during the 2004 Olympiad. It shows the victory crowns awarded to athletes at the Pan-Hellenic athletic Festivals; of wild olive at Olympia; of laurel at the Pythian games at Delphi; of pine and of celery at the Isthmian games near Corinth; and of myrtle at Nemea.

Unless otherwise stated translations into English of the original Greek texts are by Spyros Retsas; artefacts are from his private collection.