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Bodily features in the Corpus Hippocraticum:
remarks about the method of classification of individuals into groups

My purpose is to comment on the method of classification exhibited by the Hippocratic physicians when they attempted to form “groups” of patients, trying to situate their remarks in the larger frame of physiognomical and other individual descriptions. This will lead us to bring together several treatises of the *Hippocratic Corpus* which otherwise may even present serious discrepancies between each other and to look into a common methodological approach which has been held as a specifically Hippocratic one in later antiquity.

In fact, we know that Galen considered Hippocrates to have been the inventor of the “physiognomical theory”.¹ Moreover, he considered Hippocrates to have been important enough on this topic to only give his reader, in the *Quod animi mores*, a general account of Aristotle’s *Physiognomonics* before commenting on several passages of Hippocrates’ *Airs, Waters and Places* which are to him of higher interest:

“Those are the statements that Aristoteles has written down in the first book of his *Historiae animalium*; he also has written a not small number of such statements in another book of physiognomical theory, which I could have drawn several quotations from, if I were not afraid to be considered verbose, nor to waste my time, while it is possible to call upon the man who first among all the physicians and the philosophers discovered this theory, to give his account, I mean the divine Hippocrates.” – (Marquardt et al., 1891, 4 797 15)

Although we can find several passages of physiognomical interest in the Hippocratic corpus, the Greek words *physiognōmoníē* and *physiognōmonikós* occur only in the *Epidemics 2*. In the first part of my paper, I will thus start by examining the authenticity and replacing in context these two words, which are in fact the title of the last two sections of *Epidemics 2*.

I will then try to examine, with the help of Galen’s commentaries, several passages of the *Epidemics* 1-3 and 2-4-6 where “groups” of individuals are formed according to bodily features. For instance, *Epid.* 6, 8, 26, which deals with the difficulty, even for the good physician who knows the method (*tàs hodoús*), to draw conclusions from the bodily features. Or *Epid.* 2, 1, 8, where the author establishes various categories into which he puts individuals according to their bodily features. Of particular interest will be the disagreements of the ancient

1 Of course, other ancient authors gave different opinions; for instance, Porphyrius, one century later, considered Pythagoras to have been the inventor of this theory. See Nauck (1886, 13.2); see also Vogt (1999, p. 108-119) for a comprehensive survey with bibliography.

commentators about what was actually “hippocratic” in the method of classification followed by the physician, and how it had to be interpreted. Finally, starting from the nucleus of the *Epidemics* treatises, I will try to bring out some commonalities of other passages of the Corpus where groups are constituted according to bodily features. This will give us the opportunity to bring together treatises which are known to present shared theories and practices, such as the *Epidemics* and *Airs, Water and Places*, as well as treatises which are based on radically opposed theories. For instance, the author of *The Ancient Medicine* never takes into consideration the influence of the environment on the course of the diseases, contrary to the authors of the *Epidemics*, *Air, Waters and Places*, *On Sacred Disease* or *On Nature of Man*; nevertheless, one can find in VM 23 (Jouanna, 1990, 152.18-153.6) a passage presenting physiognomical statements which are very close to those of the *Epidemics* treatises. Consequently, such a medical tradition, though very representative of the nucleus of the *Epidemics*, also goes beyond this group of treatises. It is to be situated in the larger frame of the couple *physis*-health/*nousos*-disease, as it is clearly explained by Galen about the so-called physiognomical statements of *Epidemics* 2: all these authors actually tried to find a trustworthy method of constituting groups of individuals according to bodily features by making subtle distinctions between features that can be found in good health from other ones that come from the disease.

References

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