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Medical Dreams in the Hippocratic Corpus:
How innovative was the author of *De Victu* really?

“And I have discovered these things, and also *prodiagnosis*, established before a man falls ill due to excess, concerning the way in which it may develop. (...) Thus I have discovered what people suffer before health is mastered by disease, and how one should change these things into a state of health.”

(*Vict*.I.2; 124,28-126,3 Joly; 6.472 L.)

The purpose of this paper is to show that on the topic of dreams, there is more consensus among the various Hippocratic authors than has hitherto been thought. Until now, the use of a patient's dream contents for diagnostic/prognostic purposes were believed to be confined to the fourth book of *On Regimen*, whose author has, at least in part, of course inspired this belief himself with claims of originality: statements like the above quote – in which he is referring to the practice of medical dream interpretation – illustrate his intention to place himself and his theories outside, no, even ahead of the contemporary medical community. However, as this paper will demonstrate, *On Regimen* occupies a less isolated position within the Hippocratic Corpus than has previously been assumed, and his approach to dreams was more ‘Hippocratic’ than it may seem.

At first sight, mention of dreams in other texts of the Hippocratic Corpus seem to give the impression that dreams were regarded merely as a part of medical anamnesis – usually alongside or within the enveloping framework of sleep – and that their contents were thought to be of little consequence. The focus of diagnosis lay on establishing *if* troubling dream experiences and anomalies in sleep behaviour occurred, and, when this was the case, on determining which underlying ailment might have caused them – without consulting the *contents* of such dreams. The treatise *De Victu* IV is an obvious exception to this way of thinking, as it combines the physiological and the hermeneutic approach to the dream event, merging the practical and the interpretive, and giving importance not only to the phenomenon itself, but also to its contents. As the author of the treatise remarks, dreams thus used are a valuable aid to medical diagnosis. Why, then, do other Hippocratic treatises in the Corpus seem to disregard the *interpretation* of dreams in the process of medical diagnosis? Did their authors disagree with the author of *De Victu* IV, and was he an exception, an irregularity, among his peers?

In the Hippocratic Corpus, there are, besides *On Regimen*, 10 treatises in which dreams are mentioned in a more than cursory fashion. In four of these (*On Humours* 4; *Prorrhetic* I.5; *On Ancient Medicine* 10-11; *Epidemics* I.10), there is no mention of *specific* dream content, although this does not mean that the

contents were indeed deemed unimportant or left out of consideration altogether. Four others are of a more explanatory nature (*Epid.VI.8.9-10*; *Morb.Sac.14-15*; *Flat.14*; *Semin.1*), but only the *Epidemics VI* passage bears a direct resemblance to *On Regimen*. The last two passages (*Morb.II.72*; *Int.48*) are specifically concerned with images that are seen by the patient, and for that reason are of great interest. In my paper, the focus will be on the last three passages: *Epidemics VI.8.9-10*, *Diseases II.72* and *Internal Affections 48*. A close reading of these will make clear that the author of *On Regimen* was not alone in his approach to dreams. *Epidemics VI.8.9-10* have always puzzled interpreters; even Galen, in his commentary on the treatise, speaks of ‘dunkle und rätselhafte Worte’. A new interpretation of the passages in question, postulated from a new point of view, i.e. that of medical dream interpretation, will bring clarity and reveal a striking likeness to the ideas put forward in *On Regimen IV*. Discussion of this passage will be followed by a comparison between *Diseases II.72*, *Internal Affections 48*, and *On Regimen 92-93*, in which I will show that the similarity in imagery used in these passages is remarkable. The likenesses between the abovementioned chapters from *Diseases II*, *Internal Affections* and *On Regimen* have been noted before (e.g. in the texteditions by Littré, Joly, and Jouanna), but the three treatises have never been brought together in this way. Although similarity provides no grounds for assuming that the authors’ views and underlying theories were of a kind, it does seem to indicate that certain ideas had a broader reach, which ultimately helps to embed the treatise *On Regimen* more securely in the context of the Hippocratic Corpus.