

Ralph M. Rosen  
University of Pennsylvania

“Towards a Hippocratic Anthropology?  
On Ancient Medicine and the Origins of Humans”

Greek thinkers took an interest in what we would call cultural anthropology at least as early as the fifth century BCE. Presocratic philosophers, such as Empedocles, Protagoras, and Democritus, all weighed in on the question of what humans must have been like in a hypothetical primordial state. Questions about human origins took on a more urgent tone among contemporary medical writers, however, whose evolving theories of disease and therapeutics had obvious practical ramifications. The early chapters of the Hippocratic *On Ancient Medicine* (*VM*) offer in particular a striking attempt to explain medicine as a *techne* by tracing its origins to the physical deficiencies of the earliest humans. Scholars have often situated such theorizing within the context of contemporary presocratic and sophistic *Kulturgeschichte*, while noting *VM*'s distinctive emphasis on the role of diet and cooking in improving the human condition. But can we also say that there is anything specifically “Hippocratic” about *VM*'s notions of human *physis* in its originary form? This paper will suggest that we can, and will argue that *VM* reflects a broader Hippocratic interest in human origins, characterized by a clinical agenda and distinct from other contemporary approaches to the topic, which tended to be more speculative and less rigorously formulated. Moreover, whether or not we can confidently consider *VM*'s notions of humans in a primitive ‘state of nature’ as idiosyncratically Hippocratic in the Classical period, I will argue that it certainly seemed so to Galen. Galen is not traditionally considered to have shown much interest in *VM*, but I will suggest that when he writes about gymnastics, dietetics, the definition of medicine, and humans in various ‘natural states’ (e.g., in *Usefulness of Parts* and *Thrasylbulus*) his thinking was informed in various ways by the fundamental polemics of *VM*, which had, for Galen at least, become canonically Hippocratic.