

Languages and Literature Text Seminar, Hilary Term 2025

Healing Gods: Medicine and the Divine in Early Greece

Thursdays, 5-6.30pm, Ioannou Centre, First Floor Seminar Room

Organised by Alex Johnston and Bill Allan

Throughout the archaic, classical and Hellenistic periods (and beyond), the Greeks attributed disease and healing to divine intervention, and turned to the gods for help with all manner of ailments and natural processes such as childbirth. Divine healing was often associated with specific cults and temples, such as those of Asclepius and Eilethuyia, and with practices such as prayer and incubation. These practices, and the beliefs and ideas underlying them, related in complex, ambiguous ways with other, competing forms of healing, notably Hippocratic medicine. This seminar sets out to investigate the relationship between medicine and the divine in early Greece by focusing on a wide array of texts – from epic and drama to medical treatises, philosophy and healing inscriptions. These texts shed fascinating light into how the early Greeks conceptualised their bodies and minds and how they related to the world around them – as well as offering rare insights into the lives of individual men and women.

We will focus on a set of thematically related texts each week. Except for the introductory session in Week 1 (and Week 7, when there will be no seminar), there will be two slots per session for 20-25-minute presentations, followed by discussion. The seminar is open to all. We hope to see you there. Wine and other refreshments will be served after the papers.

alexandre.johnston@classics.ox.ac.uk and william.allan@univ.ox.ac.uk

Schedule

Week 1 – Disease, Healing and the Gods in Early Greek Epic

- Introduction to the seminar
- Encounters with the Plague in Early Greek Epic [**Pantelis Michelakis**]

Week 2 – Fifth-century plagues and diseases

- Thucydides 2.47-54 [**Simona Thompson**]
- Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, esp. 1-275; *Philoctetes*, esp. 730-832, 1314-47, 1409-44. (cf. Hippocratic *Breaths* 5-6 and *Nature of Man* 9) [**Maggie Tighe**]

Week 3 – The ‘Sacred Disease’ and the Diseases of Virgins

- Hippocratic *Sacred Disease*, esp. 1-7, 14-21 (cf. Plato, *Timaeus* 85-6) [**Evangelos Skoupas**]
- Hippocratic *Diseases of Girls*; Bacchylides 11; Plutarch, *Virtue of Women* 11 (= 249b-d); (cf. *Sacred Disease*, e.g. 10, 17; *Diseases of Women* 1.1-3). [**Cara Nicol**]

Week 4 – Temple Healing

- Epidaurian healing inscriptions (*IG* IV².951, 952, 953); inscriptions from the Amphiareion at Oropos (esp. *IG* VII.235 [= *SIG*3 1004]). [**Lidia Ozarowska**]
- Aristophanes, *Wealth*, esp. 400-14, 619-748 [**Megan Bowler**]

Week 5 – Childbirth and fertility

- Childbirth and the gods (*Homeric Hymn to Apollo* 89-125, *Iliad* 11.267-72; Epidaurian healing inscriptions A1, A2, B11, B14, B19, B22 LiDonnici; compare Hippocratic *Diseases of Women* 1.1, *Nature of the Child* 19. [**Momoko Howell**]
- The Scythians (Herodotus 1.105, 4.67; Hippocratic *Airs, Waters, Places* 21-22; *Generation* 2; cf. *Sacred Disease* 21). [**Will Desmond, Maynooth University**]

Week 6 – Philosophy and medicine

- Empedocles (DK 31, B 111, 112, 96, 98, 84, A 78 = D4, 43, 192, 190, 215, 189 Laks/Most; cf. Plato, *Timaeus* 81e-82e on the four element theory) [**Michael MacNulty**]
- Alcmaeon, the Hippocratics, and empirical medicine (Alcmaeon DK 24 B1, A5-10 = D4, D11-19 Laks/Most; Hippocratic *Ancient Medicine* 1-2, 9, 12, 20; *Epidemics* III (*passim*, but e.g. case 16)). [**Belle Rockett**]

Week 7 – NO SEMINAR (Cawkwell Memorial Lecture by Professor Paul Cartledge [Cambridge] at 5pm in the Ioannou Lecture Theatre).

Week 8 – Comparative perspectives and later developments

- Asclepius and Adapa [**Bernardo Ballesteros Petrella, University of Vienna**]
- A Thousand Futures: Galen on Prediction and Prognosis [**Claire Hall, Bristol University**]

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General

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Week 2

- Allan, W. (2014) 'The Body in Mind: Medical Imagery in Sophocles', *Hermes* 142.3, 259-78.
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Week 3

- Dean-Jones, L. A. (1995) 'Autopsia, Historia and What Women Know: The Authority of Women in Hippocratic Gynaecology', in D. G. Bates (ed.), *Knowledge and the Scholarly Medical Traditions*, Cambridge, 41-59.
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Week 4

Barrenechea, F. (2018) *Comedy and Religion in Classical Athens: Narratives of Religious Experiences in Aristophanes' Wealth*, Cambridge [ch. 3].

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Week 5

Chiasson, C. (2003) 'Scythian Androgyny and Environmental Determinism in Herodotus and the Hippocratic *περὶ ἀέρων ὑδάτων τόπων*', *Syllecta Classica* 12, 33-73.

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Week 6

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