Celsus, Aulus Cornelius

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Celsus, Aulus Cornelius

(fl. Rome. ca. a.d. 25),

collection of knowledge.

Celsus lived in Rome in the time of Emperor Tiberius. His presence there is attested to by the records for the year a.d. 25/26. Since he belonged to the gens Cornelia, he was undoubtedly a member of Rome’s leading circles. He compiled an encyclopedia entitled Ars and ranks, along with his predecessor Varro, as Rome’s most important master of this literary form. Columella, Quintilian, and Pliny the Elder, all of whom lived in the first century, cite Celsus with considerable praise. Nothing more of Celsus’s life or personality is known.

We have no clear idea of the contents or arrangement of the Ars. It is certain that besides eight extant books on medicine, there were five books on agriculture and also sections of unknown length on military science and on rhetoric. Whether there were also books on philosophy and jurisprudence remains as uncertain as the division and arrangement of the material.

Concerning the character of De medicina octo libri (book I, historical review and general dietetics; book II, pathology and general therapy; books III and IV, special therapy; books V and VI, pharmacology; book VII, surgery; book VIII, bone diseases), an intense, almost disproportionately great, scholarly quarrel developed. Was Celsus himself a doctor? This question has from the first generally been answered (correctly, in my opinion) in the negative, although many details of the text could be interpreted to support the opposite position. It has been pointed out that in the time of Celsus, medical knowledge was regarded as an important part of general education. In ancient times, as in the Middle Ages, it certainly was not unusual for someone who was not a doctor to write about medicine. Moreover, if Celsus had been a doctor, then Pliny the Elder surely would have referred to him as medicus and would not have placed him among the auctores.

Now, however, another question arises. Celsus’ De medicina is undoubtedly written in good, very clear, and at times even brilliant Latin; the ancient authorities generally attested that Celsus had this ability, and modern philologists have confirmed that this is especially true in the medical writings. Yet, in content and presentation De medicina also ranks high and has been called “brilliant,” even a “masterpiece” (Wellmann). Could a purely literary man be capable of independently producing a medical work so excellent in both style and content, as Celsus did?

On this point Wellmann, more than anyone else, has been an energetic advocate of the thesis that Celsus merely translated a certain Greek text into Latin. His argument is, to be sure, open to serious criticism on many points. None of the men (e.g., Cassius Dionysius and Tiberius Claudius Menocrates) that Wellmann has proposed as author of the presumed Greek text is convincing; we know hardly anything about any of them, and certainly nothing that would justify the idea of an important medical work. Friedrich Marx, likewise a supporter of the one-source theory, has gotten no further with similar proposals.

More likely is the theory that Celsus compiled his book from several sources, an idea first advocated by Wellmann and later primarily by J. Ilberg. It is plausible because in other, nonmedical parts of the
Artes, Celsus sometimes obviously employed several sources. Nevertheless, another question remains: Assuming Celsus employed several sources, was he a compiler who simply translated the relevant excerpts? Or did he possess judgment, critical appreciation, and possibly even his own medical point of view?

Meinecke in particular has stressed that in Celsus’ style “not the slightest vestige of a translation” can be discovered. We should accept this and finally abandon the idea that Celsus simply translated from the Greek. The concept of “compilation” then ought to lose its pejorative overtones, thus leaving more room for the intellectual achievement of Celsus the “compiler.” I agree completely with Temkin that this intellectual achievement, which lies in the working up of the sources according to Celsus’ own point of view, should be considered very important and that one can go so far as to speak of Celsus’ “intrinsic originality.”

Finally, if one asks what, precisely, was the medical outlook of the nonphysician Celsus, it seems inadvisable to pin him too firmly to any one medical position (empiricism or methodology). Whether Celsus really was, as Temkin holds, especially committed to methodism, will not be examined; but I do agree with Temkin that in any case Celsus drew upon many different sources. To this extent he was a genuine eclectic—an attitude that in the first century was typical in medicine as well as in other sciences. More-over, Celsus’ strong Hippocratism is striking. How-ever, this was typical of medicine in the imperial period; long before Galen, the pneumatic physicians (with whom Celsus was not closely connected, since he did not mention them at all) in particular had inaugurated a kind of second Hippocratic renaissance (after the Hellenistic).

Celsus, therefore, even as a nonphysician—whether one classifies him, following Luigi Castiglioni, as a “scholar” or, following Meinecke, as an “artifex medicinae”—fits very well into the medical world of imperial Rome: an aristocratic, Greek-educated Roman who, within the framework of a general education, was very strongly interested in medicine and who held a completely individual point of view that was nevertheless typical of the time; one might call him a Hippocratic eclectic.

NOTES

4. The essential earlier literature has been compiled by (X Temkin in “Celsus ‘On Medicine’…”
5. See W. G. Spencer, ed., Celsus De medicina, I, xi f.
6. See Meinecke, loe. Cit.
7. See Baader, pp. 217 f.
Aulus Cornelius Celsus (ca. 25 B.C.-A.D. 45) was the Roman author of the first systematic treatise on medicine. It is the most important historical source for present-day knowledge of Alexandrian and Roman medicine.

Of Celsus the man little is known. It is surmised that he was born at Narbonne in the south of France. He was active during the time of the emperor Tiberius (reigned A.D. 14-37) and, judging by his style, may have been writing as late as the early years of Claudius (reigned A.D. 41-54). There is great dispute as to whether he was even a physician.

W. G. Spencer, the most recent translator of his works, supports an older, minority view that the details of medical procedure, the experienced judgment shown in the selection of treatment, and the not infrequent use of the first person reveal an author with an intimate acquaintance of clinical medicine who must have been himself a practitioner. The majority opinion holds that Celsus was a compiler who, like Cato the Elder and M. Terentius Varro, wrote his work on medicine as part of a general encyclopedia. His near contemporaries Columella and Quintillian record that Celsus wrote works on philosophy, rhetoric, military strategy, jurisprudence, and agriculture as well as medicine—a group of works apparently intended, says Alexander of Padua, to constitute a whole entitled The Arts. Although mentioned by Pliny the Elder, Celsus is not placed among the physicians. Indeed, neither any physician of antiquity, whether writing in Latin or Greek, nor his near contemporaries Galen and Caelius Aurelianus, nor the later compilers Aetius, Oribasius, and Paul of Aegina mention him. The weight of evidence is with the majority view.
There is even uncertainty about Celsus’ name. Traditionally he is called Aurelius, but Aurelius is a clan name, not a prenomen; hence Aulus, a common first name among the Cornelii, has been suggested and has manuscript support.

The fame of Celsus rests entirely upon his De medicina, in eight books. Because of its clarity and elegant Latinity, its author has been called the "Cicero of medicine"—not a good sobriquet since Celsus, like Livy and Suetonius, followed the older and more direct, rather than the periodic, style. De medicina was among the first medical books to be printed (Florence, 1478), and more than 50 editions have appeared; it was required reading in most medical schools to the present century. It is the principal historical authority for the doctrinal medical teachings of Roman antiquity. The surgical section, which even Joseph Lister studied in the 19th century, is perhaps the best part of the treatise.

Further Reading

Two excellent English translations of Celsus' De medicina are by Alexander Lee (2 vols., 1831-1836) and by W. G. Spencer (3 vols., 1935-1938). The former edition contains a translation of J. Rhodius's Life, which expresses the 17th-century view of Celsus. There are no full-length works on Celsus in English. Good discussions of him are in Sir T. Clifford Allbutt, Greek Medicine in Rome (1921), and in Benjamin Lee Gordon, Medicine throughout Antiquity (1949). See also Arturo Castiglioni, A History of Medicine (1927; 2d ed. 1947), which contains a chapter on Celsus; George Sarton, Introduction to the History of Science (2 vols., 1927); and Cecilia C. Mettler, History of Medicine (1947). □