

On Galen of Pergamum: The Greek Physician and Philosopher of Late Antiquity in the Roman Empire

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Abstract: A great figure of the ancient world gaining reputation as both a physician and a philosopher, Aelius Galenus or Claudius Galenus, well known worldwide as Galen, keeps the interest alive over centuries. And the inquiry is usually beginning with the question of the time for the year of his birth, stirring up different comments that are largely due even to the writings of Galen. In this article I focus on the chronological dispute – maintained so far - concerning the date of Galen’s birth. At the same time, I aim to highlight part of the value of Galenic philosophy, which is much less known comparing with the high-entitled appreciation given to his work in medicine that continues to register developments.

Keywords: Galen, Galen’s birth, medicine, philosophy

INTRODUCTORY COMMENT ON GALEN’S BIOGRAPHY

The basic sources for Galen’s biography are the autobiographical information poured out in the *Galenic corpus*¹. Nevertheless the ancient interest for the mundane autobiographical detail is minimal. Fortunately, Galen is one of the first ancients who offer glimpses about their own biography. But the philosophical work of Galen, potentially more intimately correlated to the scholar’s biography, is almost entirely lost. Therefore most of Galen’s autobiographical sites can be read in his medical books.

The Galenic corpus comprises by no means a chronology for Galen’s life. If Galen mentions, for example, his upbringing, his goal is not to compose an autobiography, but to offer a useful example to the

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¹ See the interesting remark of John Scarborough (2006): “What we know about Galen emerges from Galen himself, so that all biographical items are actually *autobiographical*, with the probable exceptions of some data in later Arabic texts (but these carry the odor of pseudo-facts, a kind of mythography familiar to students of the Hippocratic *Letters*)”.

readers who want to know the best way to educate a young man. As far as chronology is concerned, there are just a few dates which can be used as guiding marks. Most of the chronological information given by Galen is unrelated to the official chronologies of the Antiquity. Thereafter, the reader can scarcely uncover an exhaustive and chronologically well-ordered account of Galen's life. Additionally, the difficult task of displaying this scattered material concerning his life in a chronological order is amplified by the lack of the internal consistency of these autobiographical evidences².

As another source for Galenic biography could be considered some ancient references about the medic's life. Unfortunately, there are just a few hints about Galen's biography in ancient and medieval sources, the only relevant work being Suda's Lexicon³. Despite of the fact that Galen was a praised and cited writer in Late Antiquity and in medieval times⁴, the interest focused on his medical expertise, not on his biography.

As far as Galenic biography is concerned, an additional difficulty emerges from the *status quaestionis*, as it is formulated now: the interest on Galen is recent⁵. There was no comprehensive book on his

² In order to explain the inconsistency of the Galenic autobiographical notes, the modern scholars set forth various explanations, such as the scribe/copyist fault, which affected some manuscripts, the ageing memory of Galen. See Joseph Walsh (1929); Vivian Nutton (1973).

³ See the exclusive information of Suidas (s.v. Galenus). The age Galen died was fiercely contested when using the hints given by the medieval Arabic bibliography; therefore the current research generally considers that Galen died after 200 AD, the date suggested by the *Suidae Lexicon*. See Johannes Ilberg (1905, 298); Vivian Nutton (2004, 226-227).

⁴ Useful secondary information has to do with, e.g., the respect shown to Galen soon after his death by a sort of heretical Christians who were dissatisfied with the God-inspired books and Christian teaching (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 5.28.14).

⁵ Of course, the ancient and medieval writers mention Galen, praising his medical skills, but the biographical information given by them is minimal, if any. Athenaeus, in *Deipnosophistae*, considers that Galen wrote extensively on philosophy and medicine, surpassing the ancient authors (1.2.33-1.2.34), informing us in this way about the large number of his works, extant and lost. Alexander Medicus repeatedly calls him "The most divine Galen" (*De febribus*, passim, *Therapeutica*, passim). But Galen is considered a cultured mind, too: Simplicius reminds us of "Galen the philologist" (*In Aristotelis physicorum libros commentaria*, 10.1039.13), Michael of Ephesus mentions "the polymath Galen" (*In parva naturalia commentaria*, 135.28). More, the philosophers invoke Galen as a witness of their everlasting debate; John (Ioannes) Philoponus, discussing about the relation between indestructible and

biography till 2012⁶. A rationale for the partial explanation concerning that poor situation is given by the unsatisfactory situation of Galen's work: the last exhaustive edition of Galen, the Kühn's edition⁷, is still in use for the most of Galen's works. Therefore, in the modern scholarship it is hard to find two theorists expressing the same opinion on the subtleties of Galen's biography. The most difficult task is to find a general accepted chronological scheme for the events of Galen's life contained in his own books.

In such disparaged mass of information, with a consistent shortage of information related to Galen's life, the biographical account can be no exhaustive or undisputed. In the following, the chronology proposed by Vivian Nutton gives the general marks for Galen's biography⁸.

ABOUT GALEN'S BIRTH: THE CHRONOLOGICAL DISPUTE

The critical testimonies that settle in chronological order the events of Galen's life, including his birth, are the dates of his first residence in Rome: as an ambitious intellectual and doctor, he tried to conquer the capital of the Empire, Rome. These are the only dates which can be firmly connected to historical events well known (being part of the political history of the Roman Empire) and are correlated to the early biography of Galen.

uncreated, as attributes, claims that Galen can be a good witness (*De aeternitate mundi*, 599.23-600.1). The "orthodox" Christians, on the other hand, praise the scientific competence of Galen. So, Nemesius of Emesa exclaims "Galen, the amazing physician" (*De natura hominis*, 2.664-2.665). Theophilus Protospatharius starts his work *De urinis* reminding us about "Galen, the amazing physician".

⁶ In 2012, Véronique Boudon-Millot has published the book *Galien de Pergame. Un médecin grec à Rome*. Mainly based on the Galen's autobiographical fragments, the author offers an overview of his life.

⁷ See Karol Gottlob Kühn (ed.), *Claudii Galeni Opera Omnia* (1821-1833). Leipzig: C. Knobloch.

⁸ I follow Vivian Nutton's studies: *Galen and Medical Autobiography* (1972), *Sextus or Commodus?* (1973a), *The Chronology of Galen's Early Career* (1973b), *The Life and the Career of Galen*, in *Ancient Medicine*, pp. 216-229. As we can find, Galen's early biography is as following: August/September 129 AD the birth, August 162 AD arrival in Rome, early/mid 163 the debate with Alexander, before August 166 AD return in Asia, between September 166 and 177 AD arrival to Pergamum (Nutton 1973b, 161).

The most important evidence is to be found in his *De prenotatione* (14.647.16 – 14.649.3)⁹: Galen left Rome before the return of Lucius from the Parthian war. From historical sources, we know the emperor's triumph was celebrated in October 166 AD¹⁰. Consequently, Galen's departure from Rome can be placed in September, August, earliest in July or June 166 AD. Thus, Galen left Rome in the summer of 166 AD¹¹. On the other side, Galen refers that, after the first public demonstrations of his medical skills (he cured Eudemus, a native of Pergamum, well connected to Rome's intellectual circles), he stayed in Rome for another three years¹². As he first made a display of his skills in the winter, soon after his arrival to Rome, one assumes that his arrival to Rome can be placed in 162 AD (probably in the second part of the year, if we credit V. Nutton's argument which insists on the acquaintance of Galen and Eudemus, natives of the same eastern city of the Empire).

The period of Galen's residence in Rome is well defined by the sources; therefore, we can approximately define the year of Galen's birth. Galen's writings give two (contradictory) indications about the date of his birth. In the *De libris propriis* (19.15.4 – 19.15.5), Galen refers that his medical expertise was contested in Rome soon after Eudemus was cured, in the winter of 162/163, when he was 34 years old. This remark is not sufficient for ascertaining the age of Galen: he could be 34, as the usual meaning of the Greek indicates, or 33¹³. On

⁹ In general, Galen is referred to by volume and page number of the Kuehn's edition, even if better editions exist (for the Galenic editions, see the References). This is the followed manner of citation in the present paper.

¹⁰ See *Historia Augusta*, "Verus", 7, 9; "M. Antoninus", 12, 7-8. For the chronology, see Des Vergers, *Essai sur Marc-Aurèle* (1860, 39), Dove, *Marcus Aurelius: His Life and Times* (1930, 120), and Birley, *Septimius Severus: The African Emperor* (1999, 44).

¹¹ A later Galenic book, *De libris propriis*, 19.15.16 - 19.15.18, gives another rationale for Galen's departure, the danger of the plague (introduced by the return of Lucius' army). This reason was disputed in the Galenic bibliography: it is not reasonable to consider that the only motive for Galen's departure from Rome was his fear of the plague as long as he returned to his native province, in East, a place where the epidemy first broke out (see Nutton 2004, 224-225).

¹² See Galen, *De libris propriis*, 19.15.16.

¹³ There are many mentions about the exactitude of the Greek reckoning, expressed in days, months and years. For the Hellenistic period see Nico Kruit, "Age reckoning in Hellenistic Egypt" (1998). But there was a difficulty when the age was mentioned only in years: one started to count at birth with "one year old". The cause of the

the other side, Galen ambiguously declares, in *De humero iis modis prolapso quos Hippocrates non vidit* (18a.353.15 – 18a.353.17) that he came to Rome when he was 32 or he lived there when he was 31. Taking into account the information given by Galen, we can assume that he arrived to Rome at the time he was 32. Consequently, he had the first quarrel with Rome's medical practitioners at 33. Therefore, the birth year of Galen could be placed on 129/130 AD. Additional information concerning the date of the Galen's birth can be read in *De compositione medicamentorum per genera* (13.599.10 - 13.600.12): he was appointed as the physician of gladiators in his native town, Pergamum, when he was just entering his 29th year, and the appointment was made when the high priest was elected, i.e. at the autumn equinox¹⁴.

Therefore we can assume that Galen was born on August (or September) 129. This date adjusts better to the circumstantial information concerning Galen's biography: he arrived to Rome when he was in his 32 (June, July or August 162) and found himself in dispute with Rome's physicians after the winter 162/163, when he was 33. We can make further assumptions, in order to assign Galen's month of birth: it is interesting (or just trivial, for a prolific writer like Galen) that he tests about a lexical equivalence concerning one month of the year (it is the only one equivalence in Galen's works, as we can see): the month September is called by the inhabitants of Pergamum "Hyperberetaios", the same month being called by Athenians "Mysteria"¹⁵.

Assuming as the date of his birth September 129, we have to examine the place of his birth, Pergamum. The name of his native place is proudly mentioned by Galen many times; for a polyhistor like Galen, his birthplace could be an additional argument in his disputes. The main reason for Galen's insistence on his place of birth could be the fact that Pergamum had the ambition to compete Alexandria *ad Ægyptum* as the best learning center in the East. The city of Pergamum has been the center of an independent kingdom for a couple of

peculiar reckoning system seems to be the difficulty to conceive and express the "zero" (there is no symbol for "zero" in ancient Greek).

¹⁴ Vivian Nutton (1973b, 159) has a different reading of the Greek text, concluding "he was just entering his twenty-eighth year when the high priest took office at the autumnal equinox".

¹⁵ See Galen, *De sanitate tuenda*, 6.287.1 - 6.287.3.

centuries, after the death of Alexander the Great, under the Attalides kings¹⁶.

As part of the Alexander's Hellenistic heritage, the kingdom of Pergamum had the ambition to be in charge of the Hellenized cultural centers of the East. The fierce cultural competition between Pergamum and Alexandria is attested by Galen himself, when he narrates that, before the two cities started collecting books for their libraries (well known and celebrated in Antiquity), all the writings in use were genuine. The forgery, as profitable practice in the cultural area, appeared when Alexandria and Pergamum began to collect the famous books of the ancient writers, paying for each "new uncovered" book of a famous ancient (see *In Hippocratis de natura hominis librum commentarii*, 15.105.2 – 15.105.5). It is well known that the library of Pergamum, like that of Alexandria, possessed a large lecture hall, with librarians specialized in cataloguing and copying the manuscripts.

But Pergamum of Attalides is not the same with Galen's Pergamum. By 133 BC the last Attalid, the third, disposed his kingdom with a will to the Roman Empire. Unfortunately, the significant collection of Pergamum's library (200.000 volumes) was given by Cesar to Cleopatra of Egypt, as a consolation for the almost complete destruction of the Alexandrian Library¹⁷. The Roman dominance over Pergamum was beneficial, as the city was protected by the powerful army of the Empire, but its prestige as a learning center of Pergamum was diminishing, in contrast to Alexandria.

However, under the Roman rule, Pergamum maintained certain autonomy (with a city-council, a Senate freely elected by the citizens, with *ius gladii* in some judicial cases). Pergamum was a prosperous city-capital of the Roman province of Asia¹⁸. It was one of the first

¹⁶ About Pergamum see Esther Violet Hansen, *The Attalides of Pergamum* (1947), M.M. Austin, *The Hellenistic World from Alexander to the Roman Conquest* (1981), Chapter "The Attalides of Pergamum", pp. 317-339 (a commented compilation of ancient texts concerning Pergamum).

¹⁷ Although Pergamum's Library never recovered after this episode, Galen indicates that, in his times, the extant books in Pergamum were as diverse as valuable. These conclusions can be drawn reading a fragment where he discusses the support of the ancient writings. He mentions, referring to the ancient Hippocratic writings. See Galen, *In Hippocratis librum de officina medici commentarii*, 18b.636.1 - 18b.636.5.

¹⁸ Galen himself indicates, proudly sometimes, that Pergamum had excellent standards of living, offering the best nutritional solutions: the quality of potable water is the same with Rome's (*In Hippocratis librum vi epidemiarum commentarii*, 17b.159.2 - 17b.159.7; see Aelius Aristeides, with *Laudatio Pergamicae aquae*,

cities that applied city zones (Alexandria, the rival city, used another system of city zoning, adequate to its geographical location¹⁹). The city was built on a hill (c. 300 m height); the poorest people were located at the foot of the hill, the middle part of the hill housed shops and the upper part of the hill was occupied by the rich people. The public buildings and the temples were located on the very top of the hill²⁰. Urban topography offered a hint of the city's social stratification.

The fame of the city attracted scholars. The physicians Quintus and Satyrus (the late was first Galen's professor of anatomical subjects), the sophist Polemo (cited by Galen, see note 14; it is suggestive that Galen quotes a compatriot when he eulogizes Rome, the capital of the Empire), the consul Cuspius Rufinus, the historian Claudius Charax, the orator Aelius Aristides (who dedicated some rhetorical works to Pergamum) frequented Pergamum's Asclepeion²¹. This cultic center, located on the plain surrounding the ancient city, was firstly intended to supply religious assistance to the people searching a cure from Asclepius. Later, it became a multidisciplinary cultural center, continuing to supply religious assistance to those in need. One can draw parallels between the history of Pergamum's Asclepeion and the Alexandrian Serapeion²². The dual function of Pergamum's

which gratifies Asclepius for the excellent water of Pergamum). The wine of the region has indubitable curative qualities (see Galen, *De rebus boni malique suci*, 6.800.8 - 6.800.11; *In Hippocratis de victu acutorum commentaria*, 15.645.7 - 15.645.10). When the physician has to indicate the best cheese in a diet, the best option is the local cheese, Pergamum's cheese. Its eulogy is impressive (see Galen, *De alimentorum facultatibus*, 6.697.9 - 6.697.14; see also Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis ac facultatibus* 12.272.1 - 12.272.7, about the curative faculties of this kind of cheese).

¹⁹ For Alexandria ad Aegyptum' city zoning plan, see Eleanor G. Huzar, *Alexandria ad Aegyptum in the Julio-Claudian Age* (1988, 620-625).

²⁰ The most renowned was the altar of Zeus: the frieze of the altar can be seen today in Berlin, at Pergamon Museum.

²¹ The Asclepeia were spread everywhere in the Hellenistic world and attracted thousands of worshippers, who believed Asclepius could heal them. Usually, a postulant could stay for weeks or months (or even years) in the special rooms located in the sanctuary, waiting for a dream which would heal him (or instruct him in order to get rid of his illness). Thereby the apex of this religious experience would be the god appearance in a healing dream. For a discussion about Pergamum's Asclepeion, based upon a writing of Aelius Aristides, a contemporary of Galen. See H.F.J. Horstmanshoff (2004, 325-341).

²² Or Serapidion. See the discussion in the anonymous' *De locutionum pravitatibus. Anecdota Graeca e codd. manuscriptis bibliothecarum Oxoniensium*, Vol. 3. 1836: the similarity discussed there is not only phonetic.

Asclepeion was evident for the first two centuries AD, as long as the ritual and the cultural activities were symbiotic.

PHILOSOPHY IN A PHYSICIAN'S LIFE

As it is expected, Galen's life was mainly dedicated to the medical practice. Although his early education intended to create a philosophical oriented thinker, Galen lived, starting 146 CE, like a doctor: lessons on medicine in Pergamum, Smyrna, a long stay in the 'capital of the medicine', Alexandria, then a long career as physician, with private and public demonstrations on anatomical questions, in front of students and colleagues. Therefore the main part of his life was dedicated to the medicine.

But Galen understood medicine in a peculiar way: disappointed by the incessant quarrels between the "authorities" of medicine, between his professors, between different medical sects, between the books he read, he tried to settle all these disputes making appeal to the only science he thought self-evident and consistent: mathematics.

The young Galen had to adhere to one of the numerous medical sects existing in Antiquity, unlike the modern students at medicine. In order to accomplish this task, he proposed to observe the theoretical presupposition of each medical sect. So, his choice was greatly indebted to the sole science which deserves its name: mathematics. Indeed, the mathematical type of demonstration gave a model for medicine as long as the certitude of mathematics is unchallenged. Medicine should be a "science", a demonstrative discourse, not a rhetorical, opinion-based discourse (see *De animi cuiuslibet peccatorum dignotione et curatione*, 5.63.6 – 5.63.8).

If the mathematical model of discourse is proposed as paradigm for the medical knowledge, the same solution is to be found concerning any other science or systematic knowledge. Philosophy, also, has a long history of contradictory and self-contradictory doctrines²³. Galen considers that any philosophy should utilize the advantages of mathematical method of proof. His eulogy dedicated to Posidonius is

²³ See Galen, *De libris propriis*, 19.40.15 - 19.41.8. The information given by Galen is important for the history of logic: usually, the logical doctrines from "Cicero to Boethius" are seen as an incessant quarrel between the "Aristotelians" and "Chrysippians", with some "islands" of concord; see, e.g., the pages dedicated to Galen by Kneale and Kneale (1962, pp. 182-185). The scarcity of information concerning the logic of this period could explain the modern oversimplified scheme of reading.

primarily based on the Stoic peculiar knowledge of geometry, very rare amongst the Stoics (see *De placitis Hippocratis et Platonis*, 4.4.38.1 - 4.4.38.8).

In fact, the model for a science is the hypothetical-deductive scheme of the geometry: trying to obtain through science true consequences starting from true axioms²⁴. The proximity between mathematics and logic, both of them appreciated for the type of evidence used, will convince Galen that a doctor, for example, should be a trained logician. Without logical exercise, Galen says - following the Stoics - nobody can acquire certainty in knowledge, which is the goal of the science.

Taking into account, as Galen did, that logic or dialectic is a part of philosophical training, we have to recognize that a medic should be a philosopher. The view of the organic liaison between medicine and philosophy is not, of course, a Galenic invention: many physicians meticulously trained in logical philosophy relied on philosophical sentences, at least implicitly. This is the reason Galen considered that only a philosopher could be an efficient doctor²⁵.

The consequences of the quest for a new paradigm of knowledge are multiple. For instance, Galen tried to persuade his readers that the hypothetical-deductive method of the science matches with any type of knowledge. Of course, the personal training did not allow Galen to overcome the limits of his competence. He will try to use the mathematical paradigm in the fields of medicine and philosophy. Even so, the effort is important, for Galen tries to apply the mathematical paradigm to each sector of medicine and philosophy.

At the same time, in a competitive market of ideas, as that of Late Antiquity, the thinker should convince the fellows that his epistemic proposal is reasonable and more intellectually profitable than others. So, Galen engaged in fierce battle with his opponents using various means: anatomical expositions, medical demonstrations, books utilized as proofs of his theory, etc.

²⁴ See Galen, *De curandi ratione per venae sectionem*, 11.256.2 - 11.256.9. The influence of the hypothetical-deductive structure of geometry, as it is revealed by Euclid, is evident.

²⁵ About Galen's respect of philosophy, see Barnes et al., (2003, 49), Donni (1992, 3484-3504), Hankinson (1992, 3505-3522), Hülser (1992, 3523-3554), Cambiano (1999).

Moreover, his explanations tried to accommodate every spectator, auditor or reader²⁶. As his books are concerned, his education in centers renowned for their libraries, Pergamum and Alexandria, convinced him about the importance of the written word. It is worth remembering that the loss of his books in the fire of Ara Pacis led Galen, a man in his sixties, to rewrite many of his books: not only the perennial status of the book, but even its importance in an intellectual dispute gave a motive to Galen to spend his valuable time in such an enterprise.

The success of Galen's strategy was overwhelming. His battle with the medical authorities finished with an evident victory: the books written by his medical opponents almost disappeared, so one is in pain to reconstruct the doctrines of the leading physicians in Late Antiquity. Above all, the Galenism was the official doctrine in medicine starting 600 AD, and for the next millennium Galen was the sole authority in medical matters. Therefore it is not surprising that, as a result of this strategy, the Greek extant works of Galen represent today an eighth part of the whole Greek literature we can read today from Homer till the end of the second century AD. Quantitatively, it seems that his works surpassed any other antiquity's author. The Kühn edition, the last exhaustive edition of Galen's work, comprises 21 volumes (plus an index volume), equivalent of 20.000 pages in bilingual edition (Greek-Latin). In order to complete such a task, Galen seemingly used skilled scribes²⁷. Despite his success, it is necessary to observe that many of Galen's works were lost in the long history of manuscript transmission. The incident of Ara Pacis fire, described by Galen himself, tells a lot about the risky fate of the books in Late Antiquity. Besides, more works of Galen were dedicated to friends, colleagues or pupils, the sole exemplar of the writing being frequently lost. On the other side,

²⁶ Many of Galen's writings were initially destined for special readers, not for general use, i.e. for the general public. For the reader's type addressed by Galen, see the dedications (to a friend, to a powerful person in the Imperial administration, to a fellow otherwise unknown).

²⁷ The practice was quite common in the Late Antiquity, the single problem being the financial one: the skilled tachygraphers were expensive. Only the wealthy (or well connected) authors could afford the price for hiring scribes. About the practices (and the entire 'industry of the book'), see Eusebius of Caesarea (*Historia Ecclesiastica*, 6.23.2), who describes the situation for the first half of the third century. A Christian writer of the third century AD, Origen, describing the misfortune of an exile from Alexandria, made specific complaints about the loss of the tachygraphers (*Commentaria in Evangelium Ioannis*, 6.2.9).

spurious works were attributed to Galen, even in his life time (see *De libris propriis*, 19.8.3 – 19.9.5) – a fact that gives evidence of his eminent reputation as a doctor.

In the next centuries, the manuscript transmission of Galen's works resulted in a complicated situation. Fortunately, Galen's works seemed useful to the medieval world and many of them were duly copied. Galen was the master of the medicine for the Mediterranean area, for Greeks, Latins, Arabs, and Jews. The losses caused by the accidental disappearance of some works, in the selection made by the librarians who tried to avoid the apparent Galen's redundancies on medical subject, were inevitable; but most of the medical works of Galen survived. However there is no complete critical edition of Galen's medical works till today.

Mainly, Galen's writings attracted the interest of the specialized doctors. Most of the philosophical and philological work of Galen disappeared soon from libraries: the medieval criteria in selecting Galen's "useful" works for copying were exclusively medical. Somehow, in the philosophical field, Galen lost his battle. The success of Neoplatonism made useless the previous doctrines of Platonism, so that the middle Platonists works, with few exceptions, are lost.

The dominant doctrine (Galenism in medicine, Neoplatonism in Philosophy) condemned the previous doctrines to oblivion: Galen the doctor succeeded, Galen the philosopher failed to convince the posterity. By consequence, the "philosopher" Galen was neglected by the Greek copyists and Latin translators with the unfortunate consequence that today we can read only an insignificant part from Galen's philosophical work. Emphasizing the value of philosophy within the whole 'Galenic Operas' remains a work in progress.

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