Christian Physicians in the Roman Empire

Benevolence and Sacrifice in Proclaiming the Gospels

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popular pagan healers rested with popular healing saints. We have seen in general, and in the cases of some saints in particular, that the pervasive preoccupation with healing in late Roman society made the *anargyroi* prime candidates for such substitutions.
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INTRODUCTION

The topics of medicine and magic are deeply interwoven in Late Antiquity studies; healing serves as their prominent common thread. By the fourth-century A.D. Roman society witnessed a transition from a magical to a science based healing. In this context we find excellent examples of the interaction of faith and reason, and of religion and science—manifesting both complements and tensions.

Although this transition to science based healing was by no means complete in the fourth century, it was nonetheless the sign of a new dispensation. Among the scientific ranks were numerous physicians known for their ethic and benevolence, many of whom became canonized Christian saints of healing—the Christian anargyroi. The name literally means “without silver.” That is, they practiced their craft for free to assist those in need during the first four centuries of Christianity.

The cult of the anargyroi developed during the fourth century. It continues today in the churches of Haghioi Anargyroi in Greece, and modern shrines to select anargyroi are found throughout the world, including a few cities in the United States. During their lives anargyroi served as Hippocratic physicians. Posthumously they were venerated for their supernatural feats.

The rise and popularity of the anargyric shrines resulted not only from their subjects endorsement of Christianity, as propagated by hagiographers, but for numerous other reasons. This study demonstrates the key role of a persistent Hippocratic ethic in the cult’s rise, and also rejects the theme among hagiographers that science and the Early Church were in opposition. This hagiographic topos is counterintuitive—the saints canonized were Hippocratic healers—and ignores other historic evidence. Pagans and Christians alike applauded benevolent rational healers who were more concerned for their profession than with profit. The anargyroi’s rise in popularity may be ironic, that is, canonized doctors were now celebrated for their supernatural powers, but it does not substantiate a Christian rejection of Hippocratic healing. This study also shows the lasting appeal of the anargyroi, and the influence of those experiencing martyrdom.

The Hippocratic ethic permeated Roman society with physicians from various backgrounds serving all levels of society. Charges of avarice lodged by pagans and Christians highlighted an assumed ethic standard among physicians. Christian physicians found little difficulty embracing this professional ethic while advocating their...
personal religion. While the Church established anargyrion shrines, it highlighted not only the careers of its physicians, but of its endorsement of the Hippocratic ethic as well. For the Church, however, the key issue was the placement of credit for healing, not the endorsement or indictment of Hippocratism.

A Closer Look at the anargyrion and their Profession

Christian writers nearly always employed the term anargyrion in reference to benevolent physicians who were martyred for their Christian beliefs and posthumously canonized by the Christian Church. As noted above, the term anargyros (singular) was derived from the Greek phrase “without silver,” and was employed in reference to physicians who performed medical service gratis. New Testament writers used anargyrion for denoting silver,4 and anargyra as one of the words for money.5 The fifth section of the Book of Painters from Mt. Athos6 contains a select list of anargyrion, which includes: Kyros and Ionomanes (Cyrus and John), Panteleimon and Hermasios, Sampson and Diomedes, Photos and Antikeitos, and Thallalleais and Tryphon.7 Alternate lists survive, and some anargyrion though well documented in ancient sources, including church records, escape most lists, e.g., St. Callistus of Egypt.8 Similar to the Menouthis scenario (described below), Late Antiquity witnessed a pervasive interest in healing. Numerous healing cults established centers that often served as the fulcrum of activity for their local communities. Nearly every region hosted an Asklepiad, Serapeum, or one of a myriad of other pagan shrines. By the late-third century society was ripe for the founding of healing cults. Nearly every region hosted an Asklepiad, Serapeum, or one of a myriad of other pagan shrines. By the late-third century society was ripe for the founding of healing cults.

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The events at the anargyrion center were well known in the patriarchal see. Monks from Canopus and Philoponoi from Menouthis dismembered the idols, shouting "their gods have no surgeons!”9 A fitting epitaph exclaimed by the victor in a war between healing cults.

The story of Paralus played out many times at various locations. While religious differences between pagan and Christian healing centers existed and ultimately ended the pagan institutions, the cultural acceptance and familiarity lingered. Following Oweis Temkini’s lead, the rise of anargyrion is best understood by identifying the common concerns of patients and their praises of physicians that persisted from the era of the benevolent physician to that of his anargyrion cult.10 Elements found in pagan healing centers which can be identified and categorized not only persisted well into the Christian era but were manifest in the anargyrion cult itself.

Benevolence and scientific healing were appraised and inextricably linked and informed cultural expectations. In Paralus’ conversion, we find a societal disdain for fraudulence among healers, regardless of scientific endorsements by those particular healers. G. E. R. Lloyd remarks, “It must be recognized that but for the ancients’ assumptions of its value—ladesness—and of its value as contributing to the good life—the state would hardly have been any science then at all.” Comanconently the veneration of saints, the preoccupation with healing, the resurgence of magic, incurable diseases, and strong remnants of pagan healing cults were dynamics also facilitating the rise of the anargyrion shrines in Late Antiquity.

CONCLUSION

The Multifaceted Appeal

The anargyrion attracted large followings for numerous reasons. The hagiographers erroneously credit their supernatural powers as their reason for popularity, while also miscasting the Church in opposition to Hippocratism. There was also no rampant competition between science and Christianity, as Nutton contends.

This study has shown several historical dynamics that shed light on understanding the anargyrion’s appeal. 1) We only know of anargyrion because they were Hippocratic physicians, making it counterintuitive to contend the Early Church’s disdain for science. As reputable physicians, the anargyrion commanded respect for their skills during their lifetimes. 2) While the Hippocratic physician was committed to being fair in representing his trade, and to keep the patient’s needs as the key concern, he was not expected to do this gratis, and few did. The very term “anargyros” reveals the ancient’s recognition that they were indeed a subset of the profession. 3) The paucity of physicians created a high demand that could have exacted considerable fees. As compassionate physicians, their patrons respected their ethic. 4) As famous local physicians, they earned respect as celebrities. 5) A substantial case has been made that a wide assortment of clients venerated these physician—saints in large part because they respected physicians in general. The wide assortment of patrons, and the Church as benefactor, institutionalized healing centers, that among other things, openly endorsed the medical profession. 6) Though not addressed in detail due to its trite place in medical history, it is clear that the candid and open criticism of dishonest physicians implied a standard for the profession. 7) We saw that Christian and pagan physicians interacted even after the legalization of Christianity, a dynamic detailed in our discussion of Menouthis.

We find here a persistence of scientific healing in Christendom. The same hagiographic accounts condemning secular medicine ironically reveal the Church’s endorsement of it. Stories of gratis giving were believable in large

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4 Akin to argos ("shining"); Matthew 10:9; Acts 17:29; James 5:3, Revelation 18:12.

5 Although it is used to denote money (Matthew 25:18; 27; 28:15, Mark 14:11, Luke 9:3, 19-15, 23, 22:5, Acts 8:20), anargyrion is also used more literally to denote a piece of silver (e.g., Acts 3:6), and a silver coin (e.g., Matthew 26:15).

6 Athos was home to several early monastic sects, including the Iveron monastery associated with Athanasios I (1230-35).


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Nonetheless, even after the translation of the anargyroi, the cult of Isis managed to survive in Menouthis until the time of Paralius. While the relics of anargyroi were being translated, the surviving patrons of Isis seem to have transformed the crypt of an old temple into their secretive headquarters. Although the details are lacking, the general proximity can at least be ascertained: the Isis cult and that of the anargyroi were both in Menouthis and interacted with each other.

As the decades passed and as the Isis worship regained quasi-acceptance, disciples from both camps studied at least grammar together. Paralius and Severus had mingled freely with members from wealthy Asia Minor families, both pagans and Christians. In Menouthis, Paralius studied paganism while interacting with Christians. Perhaps he learned under descendants of Antonius; it is certain that he sat under the grammarian Horapollo (who admired "demons and magic"). It is less certain how often both Christians and pagans had enrolled with Horapollo, but both groups were well aware of the others’ daily affairs.

We need to keep in mind that Menouthis had become the host of the anargyric healing center, the “Church of the Evangelists,” the Church of Sts. Cyrus and John. While a core of pagans had maintained a last stronghold in this resort area, the same Menouthis phenomenon of the past centuries had persisted and had done so literally since the founding of Alexandria. That is, Menouthis had kept its magnetic appeal to the religious, but now the pagans were nearly all Christians rather than pagans. This phenomenon continued until the shrine was moved to Constantinople in the seventh century, after the Arab conquest of Egypt. Ironically, a century after the “cleaning” of the pagan temples and after St. Cyril’s translation of the anargyric relics to Menouthis, one of Egypt’s biggest collections of idols and strongest chapters of the Isis (Serapis) healing cult remained next door to one of Egypt’s most renowned Christian healing centers.

Zacharias recalls his youth in an attempt to acquit his teacher Severus’ testimony of pagan leanings. As a result, we have the details of the Menouthis incident as it involved Paralius, Severus’ colleague. Paralius frequented the fugitive Isis sanctuary, a building covered with hieroglyphics and whose patronage also included pagan professors and students. Like the patres over in the Church of the Evangelists, Paralius exhibited confidence in incubatory revelation; he slept in the sanctuary of Isis in order to benefit from dreams. Both the anargyroi and the makrodrift Serapeum had incubatory sanctuaries similar to those of other anargyric centers like that of St. Colluthus in Antinoe. In one instance at the anargyric shrine, a patron from Damascus was only “fully” cured after dreaming that the patron saint of his hometown assisted in the miracle.

After revealing a fraudulent “fertility” miracle bestowed upon an impotent couple from his own hometown and following contradictory advice from the priestess of Isis while supposedly dreaming, Paralius turned against the cult. The Christian students in Menouthis rescued him from the ensuing scuffle and near-fatal blows from pagan classmates. An anti-pagan conflagration ensued. This clash resulted in the razing of the Isis center, which uncovered secret treasury of idols, including several that had been salvaged from the Iseum in Memphis. The Christians roused the pagans and then carted twelve camel loads of idols to the Alexandrian public square for a ritual burning.

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Among the physician martyrologies, one of the more reliable historic accounts is that of St. Colluthus from Egypt, commonly known as Abu Colta. Like many of the Christian physicians, he also died under Emperor Diocletian (A.D. 304). Jennifer Hevelone-Harper (Gordon College, MA), translator of select Coptic sources associated with St. Colluthus, embraces the historical accuracy of his martyrology. “The narrative has several internal ingredients which seem to indicate that the text is an eyewitness account. There is no hint of stock legendary material. This account may have been obtained by birthing an official or from a private transcription of the public trial.”

of these physicians’ roles in their society and profession. Such authors include Apollonius of Tyana, Aretaeus, Aristides, Basil, Cassiodorus, Celsius, Ciceron, Eusebius, Galen, Hippolytus of Rome, Isidore of Pelusium, Jerome, John Chrysostrom, Josephus, Largus, Libanius, Macarius the Egyptian, Palladius, Procopious of Caesarea, Scribonius Gelasius, Seneca, Socrates, Sophronius, Soranus of Cos, Tatian, Theodoret of Cyryhus, Theodore of Sykeon, and Valentine. An important and interesting aspect of this ancient dialogue is the evaluation of the medical profession and the religious healing centers (some of which employed medicine, or at least systematic treatment). Weighing the physicians’ self-evaluation against that lodged by their contemporaries provides a critique of fourth- and fifth-century medicine. A clear distinction can be made between the physician and pagan healing priest, and the benevolent physician and his later anargyric status.

The Christian physician emerged in a world in which science and ethics had already been fused. The economic chasm between the masses of Romans and the elite was ever increasing, and the need for health services for the poor was never more pronounced. Christian apologists, along with some pagan factions, were continually evaluating the moral and ideological basis of Roman society—and usually finding it wanting. Roman institutions, even buttressed by imperial decrees, were failing to provide basic public services, including health programs. State-funded doctors were only a token expression of concern from eugenicists politicians. Euergerism was an unofficial political arrangement between patron and client. The benefactor (euergetes) funded projects not in a spirit of benevolence, but for the sake of public recognition. The title of euergetes “did not simply state a fact but conferred a status, indicating that the person on whom it was conferred was in credit, as it were, in respect of the balance of friendly acts.”

Medicine, with its Hippocratic ethic, at least gave the average citizen hope for treatment. While some physicians threw ethics to the wind and pursued money, most Hippocratic physicians, like devoted Christians, operated under a mandate to assist the poor, or at least not to ignore them. With the physician-patient ratio, any reputable physician could devote himself or herself to wealthy clients. For most physicians, Christian and pagan, generosity to the poor involved taking time to serve them and then accepting whatever remuneration followed. It is little wonder that when practitioners of an art in such demand dedicated themselves to helping the poor, and that when the anargyros did so freely, that they gained Rome’s attention. It is one thing not to ignore the poor, yet quite another to devote a life serving them. If Edward Gibbon is correct, the latter devotion was a major factor in the eventual triumph of Christianity over paganism. On a somewhat different note, if I am correct, the former attitude was manifest in the average Roman physician and Asclepiada priests, which made the commitment of the anargyros a logical extension of their profession and religion, a commitment which could thus be appreciated by both pagans and Christians. Veneration of the anargyros reflected praise from equally diverse factions of society.

The Case of St. Colluthus, or Abu Colta

Among the physician martyrologies, one of the more reliable historic accounts is that of St. Colluthus from Egypt, commonly known as Abu Colta. Like many of the Christian physicians, he also died under Emperor Diocletian (A.D. 304). Jennifer Hevelone-Harper (Gordon College, MA), translator of select Coptic sources associated with St. Colluthus, embraces the historical accuracy of his martyrology. “The narrative has several internal ingredients which seem to indicate that the text is an eyewitness account. There is no hint of stock legendary material. This account may have been obtained by birthing an official or from a private transcription of the public trial.”


17 W. E. Crum, “Colluthus, the Martyr and His Name,” Byzantinische Zeitschrift 30 (1936): 323-327.


Julius of Aqfahs allegedly positioned assistant scribes (or biographers) at numerous sites in Egypt to capture the details of martyrdoms, one of which included Colluthus. Another reason for recognition of the account’s historicity is the controversy which stemmed from the would-be martyrs. Two apostate bishops had stood with St. Colluthus—Apollonius and Plutarch. Both leaders recanted their Christian beliefs, and had the dubious distinction of being labeled lapsi.18

Hevelone correctly notes the difference between Julius of Aqfahs’ account, and the more laudatory and dramatized later tradition. The latter exhibits the common hagiographic topos of decapitation. “Because this tradition would insure the preservation of relics, unlike death by burning,”20 when Colluthus’ brother-in-law, Governor Arianus, failed to convince him to fall in line with the apostate bishops, he lost his patience with the stubborn physician:

> It is the governor who is pleading with you and advising you! The governorship has humbled itself for you…. There was a man here on a charge of murder. This man wants to live; but as for you, Colluthus, something evil possesses you, to make you destroy yourself with murderers.21

Arianus had him burned at the stake. Two encomia attest to St. Colluthus’ martyrdom. The earliest is by Phoebammon, an early-sixth-century bishop of Panopolis, and the later one Isaac, Bishop of Antinoe (ca. 861). Another attestation of Colluthus’ legacy came during a research project at Gordon College, under the auspices of the former Scriptorium: Center for Christian Antiquities (co-directed at the time by the author and Scott Carroll). Imagining these students’ excitement when from a pile of fragments they successfully pieced together a full page of a fourth-century Coptic text, reconstructing for the first time in nearly 1600 years a fourth-century vellum page of Luke’s gospel (beginning with Luke 15:23). However, the excitement grew as the infrared light brought to the front a marginal note, “To be read during the feast day of Abu Colta [or Abba Keitha, commonly understood as Father Colluthus].” This is the very passage by Luke “the physician” that talks about the difficulty of entering Heaven (“through the narrow door”) and which references “the last who will be first, and the first who will be last.”

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It was fitting that two or three generations after Colluthus’ martyrdom, an Egyptian community likely from the same area wanted to venerate him with this passage—a saint, an anargyros, who paid the ultimate sacrifice, while others with him did not.

This community thrived until the seventh-century Muslim invasions. Palladius of Galatia informs us that the area had 12 “monasteries of women” and over 1,000 monks, including many anchorites who lived in the rock caves (A.D. 419-420, Lausiac History 58:1; 59:1). This area was in the region of Oxyrynchus, the site of the famous papyri dump that produced most our earliest Christian papyri.

Rather, they would invoke the more deserving and powerful personage of the martyr St. Cyrus (Karos).22 In A.D. 414, he translated the last sanctuary of Isis into their reliquary.23

St. Cyrus’ local heritage undoubtedly factored significantly in the sudden popularity of this healing cult. He was a physician of renown in Alexandria before his conversion and was martyred near Alexandria in A.D. 303 after offering his medical services to Christian women facing martyrdom in Canopus. Along with St. John, another physician who joined him on his medical mission, he was initially buried at St. Mark’s Church in Alexandria. These anargyroi had already developed a significant following before their translation to Menouthis. The legendary accounts of St. Cyrus boast that St. Cyrus “healed not only the bodies of the sick but also precious souls from whatever diseases had befallen them.”

The Alexandrian doctor Gesius challenged the miraculous status of cures credited to Sts. Cyrus and John only to suffer an embarrassing prognosis himself. Gesius charged that these cures were all natural and were actually found in the Hippocratic corpus (thus discrediting divine intervention). But then an unknown incurable disease reportedly struck him, forcing his request of the saints’ healing power. His pain was public. Wearing a bell around his neck, and with a pack saddle on his back and a horse’s bit in this mouth, he circled the church, exclaiming, “I am a fool!”

We see in the historic and legendary accounts of St. Cyrus the interplay between faith and reason. During his lifetime, his reputation as a Hippocratic practitioner preceded his reputation as a Christian and his missionary zeal. After translation, we find his popularity on the rise, with his historical Hippocratic reputation now inextricably linked with his supernatural healing powers. Whether supernatural healing took place at his shrine is an issue beyond the scope of this discussion, but the societal belief in such occurrences, like earlier with Asclepius and Isis centers, reflects the endorsement of “magical” healing. In the case of Cyrus the physician, a respected scientist and a vibrant Christian faith are manifest in the same person. The exclamation point for his personal alignment is found in his willingness to practice both openly and paying the ultimate sacrifice. There was no conflict for Cyrus in how he practiced, but in why he practiced.

At the same location we learn of a relative peace between students of both the pagan and Christian healing shrines—that is, before the explosive story of Paralius.

The details of a battle between the last remnant of the pagan healing cult at Menouthis and the patrons of the anargyroi come to us through the conversion experience of Paralius, recorded by Zacharias Scholasticus in his Life of Severus, circa A.D. 518, “The Life of Ioudas” by Damascius also corroborates portions of this account.24 Menouthis was located in the resort area of Canopus, where thousands of Alexandrians and other Egyptians traveled annually for both religion and relaxation. Numerous pagan temples dotted the landscape of this city known for its Canopic funeral vases.

Over a century earlier, one of Alexandria’s last great pagan teachers, Antoninus, had taken refuge in Canopus and immediately attracted throngs of pagans. In turn, this was a significant factor in the ensuing wrath of St. Cyril.

> 18 Sh. 138 R 27 R., Raymond and Barnes, Four Martyrdoms, 129:8-10.
> 19 Recanting of one’s beliefs was considered a lapse in one’s faith, unlike retreating during persecution, cf. Harnack, The Mission and Expansion of Christianity, pp. 193-199, note the discussion of Bishop Cyprian.
> 20 Hevelone-Harper, “Colluthus,” p. 14. However, decapitation was widely used during the persecutions, e.g., Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 8.8, “others [Christians under attack in Egypt] voluntarily offering their own heads to the executioners…”
> 21 Raymond and Barnes, Four Martyrdoms, p. 146.
> 22 Dr. Scott Carroll was a history professor at Gordon College prior to founding the Scriptorium in Grand Haven, Michigan, joined by Jerry Pattengale who directed the academic initiatives. After their departure, the Scriptorium moved to Orlando, Florida. Jennifer Hevdone-Harper was one of the students working on the Coptic project, which Dr. Carroll began while still a professor.
> 23 Dr. Dirk Obbink, Lecturer in Papyrology and Greek Literature at Oxford University (Christ Church) and head of the Oxyrhynchus Papyri Project, also serves as the GSI Senior Scholar for the Papyri and the Codex Climaci Rescriptus.
> 28 These are beautifully crafted jars (for containing viscera), usually with animal heads such as the one found in King Tut’s tomb.
the power associated with martyrdom. In this city, the prolific bishop Theodoret certainly offered cooperation between scientific and faith healing, not as an opposition.42

Nutton concedes that "a compromise" between religion and medicine was reached by the fourth century onward "by most Christian writers."43 However, evidence is found among the Patristic fathers that doesn't suggest a need for such a compromise. They showed a marked difference of attitude from that of hagiographers toward physicians. It was the Church Fathers who were "foremost in the effort "to keep alight the torch of Greek science" and "who became the guardians of the medical tradition."44

Church Fathers integrated science in their presentation and defense of biblical truths, with at least one major representation in every century of Late Antiquity: Tertullian (ca. 160-230) and in a qualified sense, Clement of Alexandria (ca. 200) in the second century;45 Origen (185-254) in the next century,46 an era which was less favorable to scientific integration,47 but nonetheless also witnessed the practical application ("pastoral medicine") of Cyprian (d. 258) during an African epidemic;48 Lactantius49 and Methodius of Olympia (ca. 311) in the fourth century,50 followed by Jerome (ca. 347-420),51 Ambrose,52 and Augustine.53 In the works of Isidore of Seville, we find a collection of many early Christian manuscripts in his science-faith integration.54

The Case of Menouthis: The Conflicts between St. Cyrus and Gesius and the Conversion of Paralibus

Before proceeding with a discussion of the Hippocratic persistence among Christian physicians and the interplay between faith and science, let us consider first the healing centers near Alexandria. In the case of St. Cyrus and Gesius, both were rational (Hippocratic) physicians from the same area, but by Gesius's time, Cyrus had anarigmatic status. And in the case of Paralibus (ca. 485-487), his conversion affords a look at the interplay between the pagan and Christian incubatory sites. Near Canopus, only twelve miles east of the fallen Alexandrian temples, was an academy of sorts for both Christian and pagans.55 This small town of Menouthis was very much involved with the events both in Canopus and Alexandria and would later host the anarigmatic shrine of Saints Cyrus and John.56 Bishop Cyril of Alexandria informed the Menouthis residents that they would no longer be invoking the name of "the lady," the Kūra, i.e., Isis.57

The Financial Practices of Healers in Late Antiquity

Were the anarigroi similar to many other physicians? Were their actions unique to themselves or merely reflections of the medical ideal? Ludwig Edelstein contends:

For in regard to every craft it is necessary to distinguish between its common characteristics and those which belong to the individual (or small group) practicing it. Failure to make this distinction is bad logic, irreconcilable with the tenets of Plato and Hippocrates alike.23

The anarigroi were not preceded by a rich medical heritage in Rome. Tradition holds that in 219 B.C., Arcagathus, the first doctor (medicus), arrived in an appreciative city. However, he was soon rejected because of his ill-fated surgeries. As Pliny notes, he was branded as carnifex, or "executioner," and driven from the city.24 The next physician in Rome was also Greek (Asclepiades, ca. 100 B.C.), as were many of their successors through the end of Roman Antiquity. Epigraphical and literary sources attest to the Greek dominance of the profession. During the first three centuries A.D., over ninety percent of the doctors in Rome were Greek (or Greek pretenders). For the same period, around seventy percent of the doctors from the rest of Italy, Spain, and Provence were Greek.25 When Julius Caesar banned foreigners from Rome, he exempted physicians.

The influx of Greek physicians undoubtedly propagated the Hippocratic ideal. Hippocratic doctrines accompanied the migration to Rome, and subsequently, the Roman medical world known to the anarigroi was dominated by Hippocratism. Although several sects of Hippocratism surfaced alongside non-humorlistic schools, in the late second century, Galen developed Roman medicine into a unified science.26 Adaptations of the Hippocratic humorism and the Hippocratic medical ethic found a new defender and propagator in Galen and likewise became part of the medical curriculum of Stephanus of Athens in the sixth century. Thereby, a form of Hippocratism persisted in medical training throughout the Middle Ages. Stephanus claimed to be a practitioner and also branded all non-Hippocratic physicians as lacking professional knowledge (literally, "idiotar").27

Classifying physicians by their means of subsistence may be of the most assistance in clarifying the profile of Roman medical personnel in which the anarigroi surfaced. Four general types of Roman physicians were in the mainstream of society: the public physicians, those attached to the emperor's retinue, those serving wealthy families, and the independent practitioners. The priest-physician served a different role from the rational physician (medicus); nonetheless, he or she was commonplace in most Roman cities, i.e., on the outskirts of the city. A vast network of military, sports and gladiator medical personnel also existed. But these physicians, however important, were usually inaccessible for service to laypersons, and are therefore excluded from this study.

The first three categories may be classified as "dependent physicians," setting them apart from the independents, the vast majority of practitioners. Legitimate doctors may be defined as those who were perceived as being trained in rational medicine and who conducted themselves in accordance with the Hippocratic ethic. A definition more


45 In a qualified sense, this integration can be found in some hygienic treatises of a contemporary unknown to Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, along with select statements from the latter's colleagues at the Alexandrian Christian college (the Didascalon).

46 Origen declares that there is "no doubt" about the use of rational medicine, and what better example of "knowledge from God" could exist than that pertaining to health? (Origen, Wilhelms, 1959), pp. 8-24; Frings' dissertation thesis is that the Patristic Fathers embraced Hippocratic medicine.

47 Jerome, Adversus loinianum (thesis on Job) 6.6-12.48 St. Ambrose, Hexaem 8.9 (Migne, Patr. Lat. XIV, cols. 264-271).

49 St. Augustine, Sermones 243.6-7; 249. A. The Animal 2.4.

50 St. Isidore of Seville [Bishop of Seville not son and disciple of the Gnostic Basiliades], Etymologiae 4, 10.2.


52 C. F. Rice, "De episcopo Dioeci Dei." (in Porter) p. 49.


57 Stephanus of Athens, Commentary on Hippocrates' Aphorisms 1.27, Corpus Medicorum Graecorum XI 1, 2.
stringent than what the Romans themselves employed is both unnecessary and undesirable. Unless the inscriber qualified the “physician” as a quack, we can only assume that the medicus in question was “legitimate,” according to the foregoing definition.

The need for independent physicians was apparent enough; the public physicians simply could not pretend to care for all of their city’s inhabitants. The patient-to-archiatros ratio can be estimated at higher than thirty thousand to one! For example, according to the decree issued by Valentinian I (A.D. 366), Rome assigned an archiatros to each of its fourteen districts. At that time 500,000 people lived in the city, which amounts to a 35,000-patient load. The same load may be true of Constantinople, though the evidence only substantiates that civic physicians did exist.20 We can conclude that a Hippocratic-Galenic medical ethic pervaded Late Antiquity, transcending socioeconomic barriers, even within the profession of medicine. During the selection of the archiatros, ethics were as crucial as skill. Both imperial and personal physicians were esteemed only if their successful treatments were complemented by trustworthiness and philanthropia. Independent physicians took great measures to establish a good reputation, often serving gratis.

It is important to note that when people turned to Asclepius priest-physicians, they had usually looked earlier to a physician, whether a public, household or independent practitioner. While the method of Asclepiotic healing changed with the progression of technology, the remuneration practices did not. Patients gave according to their ability, and those healers associated with Asclepieia expressed concern first for the patients, not the purse. Imperial decrees rarely matched reality, but at the very least, attention to the medical needs of the poor was addressed at the highest level. Although no objectives were put into place to make such medical care a reality, the intention was still known to the body politic. The provisions for archiatros to treat the poor—alongside but not the exclusion of the rich—reflected the spirit of Hippocratism, a preoccupation also among Christians and their physicians.

The anargyroi surfaced in a society sorely needing medical help—aware of the benefits of medicine but short of physicians. These saints saw both the affluent and dependent embrace rational medicine. The former paid their practitioners’ bills, and the latter afforded them the opportunity to acquire the reputation for character that attracted such patrons. Anargyroi, their medical colleagues, and even their pagan-priest counterparts were part of professions that embraced the notion of assisting the poor.

The Early Church’s Reaction to Physicians

The same hagiographical texts venerating the anargyroi present a rather negative view of secular physicians. “The despair of doctors, in cases where the saint eventually triumphs, becomes a topos of hagiographical invective.”21

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With less support, he conjectures that:

...from its inception Christianity offered itself as a direct competitor to secular healing. In Christ, God incarnate, it had the saviour on earth, the great physician, whose help was available to all believers, and at no monetary cost.22

This logic is faulty. The existence of (and/or strong faith in) supernatural healing is not mutually exclusive with confidence in secular (or rational) medicine.23 Were priests at the Asclepiea in direct competition with Hippocratic physicians? No.24 Following this rationale, the Tiber Asclepieion would have been competition with the Roman physicians, which, as we have already observed, simply was not the case. Incurable patrons commonly sought Asclepius on Tiber Island as a last resort.

Nutton cites as a proof text Mark 5:6: “The woman with the issue of blood had spent all her savings on doctors and drugs, yet she was not cured by them, but by merely touching the hem of Christ’s robe.”25 Nutton fails to cite the variation of the Marcan passage, which is found in the synoptic account of Luke 8:43. The latter records that the woman “could not be healed by anyone,” i.e., “all sectors of the health care system.”26 In this case, no competition with physicians took place, nor with the entire array of healers. The woman simply had an incurable illness, that is, outside of miraculous intervention.

Most of Christ’s cures were for otherwise incurable ills, which is another obstacle in accepting Nutton’s thesis of competition. The pivotal role of “miracle cures” in Christian proselytizing is a familiar assessment, long established by Edward Gibbon, “perhaps the only English writer [at least through 1845] who has any claim to be considered an ecclesiastical historian.”27 Healing miracles were one of the key contributing factors in the rapid expansion of Christianity,28 but the stampe to the new religion was not an exodus from Hippocratic healing. Gibbon, himself an “unbeliever” and rationalist, finds it puzzling nonetheless that such a display of supernatural healings did not evoke more of a response from the philosophers. Gibbon claims they remained indifferent, a far cry from Nutton’s “competitor” status.29

Nutton also cites the lives of anargyroi Cosmas, Damian and Artemius in support of third-century laypersons choosing Christianity over secular physicians.30 This is a false opposition. With these anargyroi, they were choosing both, not either-or. The later legends predictably lament miraculous cures of desperate cases, but along with the earliest sources, they also note the (“secular”) profession of anargyroi. The bishop of Cyrrhus, protector of one of the chief healing shrines for Cosmas and Damian, recruited numerous physicians to his city while openly embracing...