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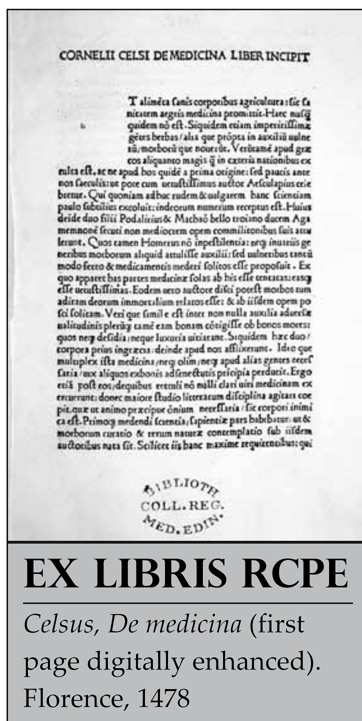
Celsus: De medicina, Florence 1478. Part 1

The Sibbald Library holds some 38 editions of the *De medicina* of Celsus, not counting those in which his works are included in collections by several authors. These include two French, one Italian and two English translations of the Latin text from the 18th and 19th centuries. From the 20th century there are two editions of the three volume Loeb edition with an English translation. But, useful as these are, of much more interest are our two editions from the 15th century: one is a Venetian edition of 1497, the other is the *editio princeps* – the first printed text of the work – published in Florence in 1478,[1] which I shall consider here. This book is the first complete textbook of medicine to be printed and has some claim to be the oldest extant text on the whole of medicine; certainly it is the first complete account of medicine that was originally written in Latin for all that much of its material comes from earlier Greek sources. It is also the earliest surviving encyclopaedic Latin medical text by a single author. The number of editions – there were 49 printed editions between 1478 and 1841[2] – is one indication of the importance attached to the work, as is the number of times that Celsus's opinions are quoted by later authors. In this first part, I shall consider Celsus and the text of the first edition leaving description of our copy of the book to the second part.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Celsus, De medicina (first page digitally enhanced). Florence, 1478

The author

De A. Cornelii Celsi gente patria uita nihil traditum esse apud ueteres notum est.[3]
'Nothing about the race, nationality or life of Aulus Cornelius Celsus was recorded to be passed down by the ancient writers.'[3] Thus begins Marx's account of what remains of the single surviving work of Celsus, his eight books on medicine which came to be known under the title of *De medicina*.

For an author whose sole surviving text became so well-known, Celsus remains an elusive figure. Even his first name has been uncertain: he was known as A. Cornelius Celsus and his *praenomen* was read as Aurelius for several centuries. More modern scholars have argued, persuasively, that A. probably represents Aulus since Aurelius was not a *praenomen*, so Aulus Cornelius Celsus he has become. Certainly he was a Roman gentleman, probably a rich one, certainly he was alive during the first half of the 1st century AD but, though his dates are often given as *ca.* 25 BC–50 AD, in fact we cannot even be confident of this amount of detail. Nutton[4] discusses the meagre evidence available, points out that his writings were known to Columella, Quintilian and to Pliny the Elder writing not later than the 70s AD – Pliny died during the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD – and concludes that Celsus was active during the reign (14–37 AD) of the Emperor Tiberius. Quintilian, though he mentions Celsus several times and praises his prose style, refers only to his writings on agriculture and military affairs, common interests of Roman gentlemen. These works have not survived and none of the classical authors who mention Celsus refers in any detail to any of his writing on medicine; his contemporary fame seems to have been based principally on approval of his literary style. He does indeed write a pure, Golden Age classical Latin with many Ciceronian cadences – a Latin very far removed from that of mediæval, and of most renaissance medical authors.

Grieve,[5] in his introduction to his English translation of the *De medicina* of 1756, (probably the first English translation of the work) believed that it was self-evident from his text that Celsus practised medicine: he says 'I might have urged many passages in this book to prove that he was a physician, if I had not reason to think the present age is already satisfied in that point'. More recently, Spencer[6] (who later translated Celsus for the Loeb Classics series) reported that the more modern view denied that Celsus actually practised. He says: 'Writers on the history of medicine have convinced themselves that the author was not himself a practitioner by considerations external to the text of the work' but Spencer takes quite the opposite view: 'In more than one hundred places, scattered throughout his work, the writer used the first person singular or plural. I propose to quote some of these passages, along with their immediate contexts, to show that the observations are derived from an actual experience of medical practice.' Spencer then quotes the passages. In fact, it was not just medical historians who did not accept Celsus as a practitioner. In the long and detailed preface to his monumental critical edition of Celsus's text, on which all subsequent editions have been based, Marx[3] argued from references to Celsus by contemporary – that is, 1st century AD – writers that

he was an encyclopædist who had composed a large treatise of which the chapters on medicine were simply the second part, the others being on agriculture, military arts, rhetoric, philosophy and jurisprudence. Spencer[2] persisted in his opinion that Celsus actually practised medicine; he appended to WHS Jones's Introduction to Spencer's translation a useful list of the passages on which he based this view.

It now seems likely from the work of modern scholars that Celsus was certainly not a professional doctor but that he may have had some practical experience in caring for his immediate family, dependents and slaves as many of those who owned estates did. This, of course, he might have done based simply on his extensive reading of medical texts by earlier authors.

More recently, Nutton[4], commenting on Schulze's conclusion in 1999 that Celsus was a medical practitioner, and noting that he uses the first person 240 times in *De medicina* as well as apparently sometimes putting theory into practice, concludes: 'But while this might entitle him to be called a medicus by moderns, Celsus' own silence and the flexible boundary between healer and layman argue against him being so called by his contemporaries.' Perhaps a reasonable comment on a question that is unlikely ever to be resolved is that of a reviewer of the first two volumes of Spencer's translation: 'Whether Celsus was a medical practitioner or a layman having extensive knowledge of medicine in his time, *De medicina* can be read with profit and interest today by both physician and non-professional for its historical value.'[7] There were, of course, 'professional' medical practitioners in early imperial Rome, almost all were Greeks, some were slaves, but medicine was emphatically no occupation for a classical gentleman in late republican and early imperial Rome. It is important to remember that Galen, probably still today the type-species of post-Hippocratic ancient medical practitioner and author, was a provincial Greek and wrote in Greek, though he practised for many years in imperial Rome. Galen was not born until the 2nd century AD, long after Celsus was dead. Indeed, the modern importance of Celsus's *De medicina* is principally that it represents the major text among the very meagre surviving material on medical practice in classical Rome before Galen and is thus the main source of our rather small knowledge of medical writing after the antique Greek authors and before Galen.

Celsus had decided views on the practice of medicine. He remarks upon the unsatisfactory nature of medical practice in exchange for money – that is, medical practice as a means of earning a living – saying that this precludes giving the amount of individual attention and time to patients that their care demands. On this, Nutton[4] comments pertinently 'More than once Celsus draws a distinction between medicine in a *valetudinarium* or a big city practice, and the activity of the true doctor, able to diagnose and to prescribe for the ills of each patient. He acknowledges that, faced with many sufferers at one time, attention to general common features may be all that the doctor can offer, but, equally, he makes it clear that this is not the course that he himself would choose. Better, he thinks, to pay more attention to fewer patients, and have a potentially lower income, than to treat all and sundry with a therapy that might not be targeted precisely'. More than a millennium and a half later, Van Helmont made similar remarks about the baseness of medical practice for money.[8] Cynically, one might point out, that since neither Celsus nor Helmont needed to earn a living they could maintain this high moral stance; sadly, though for different reasons than doctors' income, Celsus's strictures also seem depressingly apposite to contemporary medical practice. As to his domicile, it has been claimed traditionally that Celsus lived in Gallia Narbonensis, part of modern southern France, but this claim is perhaps not to be taken too seriously since it seems to depend solely upon his mentioning a variety of grape that Pliny says was native to that part of Gaul!

The history of the text

It seems that the text of *De medicina* was lost or forgotten in mediæval Europe, only re-emerging in the 15th century. Thus, the full text of the book was not widely available in manuscript before the 15th century and only became so after the appearance of printed editions, beginning with the *editio princeps* printed in Florence in 1478. The printed text begins with a single page – unfortunately missing in our copy – in the form of a letter by the editor, Bartholomeo Fonzio (Bartholomeus Fontius, 1446?–1513), to Francesco Sassetti (Franciscus Saxettus, 1421–1490). Sassetti,[9] a Florentine of good family, became an apprentice in the Geneva branch of the Medici bank and rapidly rose to manage the branch from 1447–8. In 1459 he returned to Florence and, after the death of Giovanni di Cosimo de' Medici, became the bank's general manager. He became very rich and was able to indulge his passion for book collecting, acquiring both old – sometimes ancient – manuscripts and also commissioning scribes to make new copies of old texts for him. Fonzio was a humanist scholar who was closely associated with Sassetti and helped him collect a considerable library of manuscripts, and his brother, Niccolò Fonzio, was a scribe who copied several manuscripts for Sassetti. One of these was a manuscript of Celsus's medical text which Niccolò Fonzio transcribed from a contemporary (i.e. 15th century) copy by Niccolò Niccoli of a very old manuscript. Bartholomeo Fonzio then corrected and annotated Niccolò Fonzio's manuscript copy using a *vetus exemplum* (an ancient source) – a manuscript from the 9th or 10th century. Bartolomeo Fonzio then used this corrected version as the text for the first

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printed edition of Celsus, printed in Florence in 1478 by Nicolaus Laurentii. Marx illustrated his view of the interrelations of the manuscripts in his introduction to his critical edition. It seems that later Latin editions of the text – by many editors over the years – derive principally from that copied by Niccolò Fonzio. Spencer's modern English translation uses the Latin text established by Marx in 1915.

In his dedicatory letter to Sassetti, Fonzio speaks of the labours of scholars in finding and 'making' (presumably copying and editing) the texts of ancient writers and 'finally, those who print them are not to be forgotten'. By their work on 'ancient and new writers they present them to eternity'. Among these scholars he counts himself: he has 'undertaken to bring to print the grave and eloquent books of Cornelius Celsus upon medicine'. This he has done 'with such care and devotion that the shade of Celsus will be grateful to me' since his books were previously 'in many places mutilated and turned upside down' by the ages. He then thanks Sassetti for his work in acquiring ancient copies *e gallia conquistis* – a phrase which has puzzled scholars. It would seem to mean something along the lines of 'brought home in triumph from Gaul' the juxtaposition of Gaul and *conquistis* seems irresistibly to look back to the Roman conquests of that province. But there is no evidence that any of the Celsus manuscripts were acquired in France though Sassetti had certainly travelled there. However, the general sense of Fonzio's indebtedness to Sassetti for providing access to the manuscripts is clear since 'Celsus, previously squalid and deformed is now renewed and returned almost to his pristine looks and for this I give you the greatest credit.' Thus, ironically, we know more about the acquisition and editing of Celsus's text in the 15th century than we do about its author.

Context of the printing of the first edition

Printing from movable type was invented by Johannes Gutenberg in Mainz, but it took more than a decade to develop the process to a stage at which Gutenberg and his associates were able to print a whole book as a commercial venture. Thus, effectively, the beginning of printing may be considered to be marked by the appearance of the Gutenberg bibles between 1452 and 1454. The processes of printing ceased to remain secret – as had been Gutenberg's original intention – soon after the appearance of these bibles. The exodus of the few trained in the art from Mainz following its fall to Archbishop Adolf von Nassau in 1462 resulted in the spread of the new technique at first within Germany, but very soon and with increasingly explosive speed each year across countries, so that by 1500 there were about a thousand printing presses widely distributed across Europe. The techniques, brought at first to Italy by emigrant German craftsmen, had already undergone significant technical changes by the 1470s. For the modern reader, perhaps the most striking of these was the progressive displacement after 1470 of the 'gothic' Germanic style of the printed letters by what came to be called 'roman' type. The design of roman typefaces was based upon a particular script in which many classical texts had been copied during the Carolingian revival of learning in the 8th–9th centuries and so became known as Carolingian minuscule. To this were added bold capitals based upon the antique inscriptions so common on the Roman antiquities which abound in Italy, to form what became called roman typefaces. The Times New Roman face, which has now become the most common typeface used in modern printing, is a direct descendent of the faces first employed by the Italian printers of the last quarter of the 15th century.

The *editio princeps* of Celsus was printed in roman type in Florence, just a quarter of a century after the appearance of the first printed books, in what was then a style of type less than a decade old. The type of the 1478 Celsus is easily legible more than 500 years after the sheets left the press for all that, in some aspects of its design and execution, it shows both the youth of its type design and the execution of its printing by a printer who – though manifestly entirely competent – was not, perhaps, among the very best practitioners of his age.

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