

## **The medicine and surgery of Homer / by Henry Dunbar.**

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frame? History is silent on this subject; but that they all must have had some knowledge of the internal economy of man's material substance cannot but be conceded by every one. That the knowledge of medicine and surgery in Homer's time must have been in a very infantile and rude state does not admit of doubt. No mention is made of amputation (*ἀπόκοψις*); no setting of fractures, though broken bones were plentiful; no tying of arteries, which vessels were not known to exist in Homer's time, though *φλέψ* (phlebs), a vein, occurs in *Iliad*, Book xiii, 546; more probably, however, according to the scholiast's interpretation, who calls it a "hollow or empty vein", *κοίλην φλέβα* (*koilên phleba*), it is either the trachea or the thoracic duct of our nomenclature that is meant by Homer; no mention of gout, *ποδάγρα* (*podagra*), or headache, *κεφαλαλγία* (*cephalalgia*), brought on by a disordered liver, or from being *Bacchi plenus*, occurs in Homer's poems, though his heroes, and the immortal gods themselves, "who inhabit wide Olympus", quaffed the wine-cup without stint, as we read of in the last lines of the first book of the *Iliad*, where *Ἡφαιστος* (*Vulcan*) is pouring out, from left to right (of the seated gods), nectar from a goblet, and when inextinguishable laughter arose among his immortal *confrères*, when they saw him, the lame (*ἀμφιγυήεις*) *Hephaistos*, hobbling about, wine-cup in hand. These *Dii Majores* feasted and drank the entire day till the sun set, when the Olympian Thunderer Jove arose, went to his couch and lay down to sleep, and

—“*παρὰ δὲ χρυσόθρονος Ἡρη.*”

None of the ills to which flesh is heir troubled Homer's heroes; they came to the Troad, and sat down before Troy, sound in wind and limb; no asking to go home "on sick leave" or "on private affairs" ever came into their heads, though Agamemnon himself (*ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν*), when matters were looking black for the Greeks, once or twice counselled a going home to Argos.

Medicine and surgery, such as they were in Homer's time, were conjoined; the earliest traditions of these arts were derived from the ancient Greeks, and by these again from the Egyptians. Apollo was the original god of physic among the early Greeks; but he appears to have resigned in favour of his son *Æsculapius*, in whose temples, especially in the one at *Epidauros*, was deposited all that was known of medicine and surgery.

*Podalirius* and *Machaon*, the two sons of *Æsculapius*, are the first physicians and surgeons of whom we read as being "in practice" (always, with reverence, excepting "Luke, the beloved physician"); and they have been immortalised by Homer, who held members of the healing art in due regard, and they were justly looked upon as a superior body of men. But *Podalirius* and *Machaon*, *λητῆρ' ἀγαθῶ*, able physicians both, besides acting as physicians and surgeons-general to the Greeks and their allies at the siege of Troy, themselves conjointly commanded a division conveyed in thirty ships to the Troad, as we read in *Iliad*, Book ii, 731. *Machaon*, according to *Virgil*, *Æneid*, Book ii, 343, was one of the Greek chiefs shut up in the wooden horse in Troy.

Of the two *λητῆρες*, *Machaon* seems to have been the most distinguished as a surgeon; but *Podalirius* was reputed to have been the first of phlebotomists, having opened a vein in both arms of the King of *Caria*'s daughter, who had been severely injured by a fall from a house-top. The hand of this princess, and the *Chersonese* as her dowry, were the rewards of his skill. Would any humble *Æsculapius* in our day be thus rewarded? Are any of us ever ennobled by saving the life of, say, a Lord's anointed; alas! no. It was no great marriage after all for *Podalirius*; for, although a physician, he could boast of having a god (*Apollo*) for his grandfather; but, like many members of the healing art in ancient and modern times, he might have been afflicted with

the *res angustæ domi*, a state of affairs that obtains much more as the rule than the exception among that august body of men. Be it hoped, however, that Podalirius' prospects and practice were improved by having received such a dowry, and that the princess was to him a *placens uxor* as well as, mayhap, in body and mind, the belle and beauty of the Chersonese.

At the very commencement of the *Iliad*, Homer passes over his physicians and surgeons general entirely; for, when the plague or pestilence broke out in the Grecian camp, brought about by Apollo, at the entreaty of Chryses, whom Agamemnon had grievously ill-used and insulted, Homer applies at once to Apollo. After the pestilence had run havoc for nine days throughout the camp, Chryses, being appeased and his daughter restored to him, prays to Apollo with uplifted hands (*χείρας ἀνασχών*) that he would avert the woful pestilence; him Apollo heard, and stayed the plague. Homer evidently was of opinion that the skill of his medical officers could not attain to the grappling with such a pestilence as was then raging in their midst; so, without "consulting them", as is the etiquette of modern times, he "calls in" the aid of the god of physic himself, knowing full well that, to stay the ravages of the *ἴον* and *βέλος* (sudden death) discharged by Apollo, nothing would avail but prayers and supplications to the god himself, imploring him to allay his wrath and withdraw his destroying hand.

The surgical attainments of our two *λητῆρες* seem to have extended no farther than to the simple extraction of arrow-heads, spear-heads, and other offensive weapons; the checking of hæmorrhage by pressure or styptics; and the application of soothing remedies or unguents (*ἥπια φάρμακα*). In extreme cases, such as fracture of the bones, Homer had recourse to the same expedient as he followed during the pestilence, to wit, invoking the aid of the gods.

We do not read of any of Homer's heroes, when wounded, dying of secondary hæmorrhage, gangrene, or the like. After a time, they recover and come up again to the fight, being met with in subsequent combats, still to the front, fighting on during, and to the end of, the siege, or falling, like Patroclus, before Troy itself fell.

When Machaon was himself wounded (*Iliad*, Book xi, 507) in the right shoulder by a three-barbed arrow discharged by Paris, and carried by Nestor in his chariot (no ambulances in those days) to his tent, did he call in his brother practitioner and brother Podalirius to dress his wound, or did he do it himself? What dressing, what *ἥπια φάρμακα* did he apply? Cold water, perhaps. Machaon's wound and recovery interest the whole army: Idomeneus exhorts Nestor, the *μέγα κῦδος Ἀχαιῶν*, to whose care Machaon is entrusted, to strenuous exertions in his behalf, "for a leech who, like him, knows how to cut out darts, and relieve the smarting of wounds by soothing unguents, is to armies more in value than many other heroes"; and Achilles, seeing Nestor and his charge approach, sends Patroclus to inquire after "the wounded offspring of the healing god". Would that, in this our day, Her Majesty's powers that be would take Idomeneus' words to heart, and promote the deserving and heroic Podalirii and Machaons of the British naval, military, and civil services to positions to which some of them most truly and emphatically are entitled!

Patroclus speeds to the tent of Nestor; arrived there, he stands at the door, "a godlike hero", and sees for himself that it is indeed Machaon that is wounded, sitting on a couch, whilst a maiden, the beautifully curled Hecamedè (*εὐπλόκαμος Ἐκαμήδη*) is mixing for the two heroes a cup of Pramnian wine. Here I would remark, that all Homer's heroes, at least all of any note, carried with them on their campaigns a fair maiden, generally a captive, as a part of their Lares

and Penates. What was the occupation of these damsels in these stirring times? Besides making up their lords' and masters' couches, and "redding up" their tent or tents, did they wash their linen, O Homer, for thou sayest nothing about it? No, for thou wouldst not descend from the sublime to the ridiculous; and this brings me to remark again, that the washing of linen or clothes occurs only once in the *Iliad* (Book xxii, 155):

—“ ὄθι εἴματα σιγαλθέντα

πλύνεσκον Τρώων ἄλοχοι καλαί τε θύγατρες—”

“where the wives and handsome daughters of the Trojans were wont to wash their splendid garments”; and once in the *Odyssey* (Book vi, 31), where Minerva appears to Nausicaa in a dream, and desires her to go with her attendants to the river to wash her clothes preparatory to her marriage, she (Minerva) following as her assistant: “Let us go,” says Minerva, to wash them together with the morning's dawn.”

“ ἄλλ' ἴομεν πλυνέουσαι ἅμ' ἠοῖ φαινομένηφιν.”

Πλύνω, to wash clean (clothes), is the opposite of λούω, to wash the body, mid. λούομαι, to wash one's self; which verb occurs repeatedly both in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and to νίζω, to wash the hands, which is found three times in the *Iliad* and four times in the *Odyssey*. But, Nestor, what was a man at thy time of life doing with a fair maiden in thy tent? Fie on 't! O Pylian sage! Was thine old lady, the once fair Eurydicè, then far away in Pylos, aware of the fact? Possibly so, for it seems to have been an universal custom among the Greek chiefs to take a captive maiden in their train. Horace sings that

“ Serva Briseïs niveo colore

Movit Achillem :

Movit Ajacem Telamone natum

Forma captivæ dominum Tecmessæ.”

All these damsels were of attractive beauty; and Homer himself had a keen eye for female and manly comeliness, for all the men and women, more especially in the *Iliad*, mentioned by him, were fair to see, except Thersites, the “inordinate babbler” (ἀκρετὸς μῦθος), who “was the ugliest man who came to Ilion”.

But Patroclus is standing at the door of Nestor's tent all this time. He is invited by Nestor to come in and sit down. “No seat for me,” replies Patroclus. Whereupon, possibly to punish him, Nestor, with the garrulity of old age, gives him a long description of valiant deeds done by him in his earlier years, keeping him standing all the while, and no doubt chafing, yet afraid to interrupt the old man, who winds up with a message of exhortation to be carried by him to Achilles.

Patroclus hies him away to the ship of Achilles; but, on his way, he falls in with his friend Eurypylus, wounded by an arrow in the thigh, limping to the rear; Patroclus, like a true-hearted comrade, at his friend's entreaty, carries him tenderly to his (Eurypylus') tent, and does a little surgery on his own account. He cuts out the arrow from his friend's thigh with some haphazard bistoury; he washes away the black blood with warm water; then he applies a bitter pain-assuaging root, rubbing it in his hands, which eases all Eurypylus' pangs; the wound is dried up, and the hæmorrhage ceases. Having completed this little bit of surgery, no doubt to his own and his wounded friend's satisfaction, Patroclus hurries away, eager to deliver his message to his heaven-born chief Achilles.

With regard to the pestilence which was committing such havoc in the Grecian camp, as mentioned in *Iliad*, Book i, 51, we have no means of knowing what kind of disease it was. The ἴδν and βέλος discharged by Apollo meant, metaphorically translated, sudden death; \*if so, it might be likened, though in a far less degree as to the ravages

committed, to the wholesale destruction of Sennacherib's host so beautifully described by Lord Byron; partial extermination in the one, complete in the other.

"The Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,  
And breathed on the face of the foe as he past,  
And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill,  
And their bosoms once heaved, and for ever grew still."

So it might have been in the camp of the Greeks. They were encamped in a position in no way detrimental to health, on the seashore, a shelving beach, exposed to the healthy influence of the sea-breeze; they had, or could have had, abundant supplies, for they had command of the sea, and there was no stint of water, at least nothing that would lead us to suppose so is mentioned by Homer, as the rivers Simois and Scamander were in the vicinity; malarial influences, therefore, were not there to predispose to any deviation from health; but who or what could withstand, with impunity, the anger of the gods?

In the first and second books of the *Iliad*, there was no fighting, no slain, no wounds to dress. In the third book, we come to the duel between Menelaus and Paris, where no blood is drawn, but where Paris is wellnigh choked by the strap of his helmet, which is held in the firm grip of Menelaus, but which gives way, and Paris is removed, concealed in a thick mist, by Venus.

In the fourth book, the first blood is drawn from the person of Menelaus, who is hit somewhere in the upper part of the abdomen, superficially, by an arrow discharged by Pandarus. Menelaus' wound, however, is not in a vital spot (*ἐν καρδίᾳ*); and here Machaon, as a surgeon, first comes to the front, his first patient being Menelaus. Agamemnon, much concerned about his brother's wound, resolves to send for the "physician, who shall probe the wound and apply remedies, which may ease thee of thy acute pains", and forthwith he orders Thalthybius to call in Machaon. The son of immaculate Æsculapius straightway appears, extracts the arrow, breaking the sharp barbs while doing so (there is no mention of his enlarging the wound); then he lays bare the wound, sucks the blood, and skilfully applies soothing remedies, "which benevolent Chiron had formerly given to his father". In this close-waged fight, many were slain outright, Menelaus being the only chief mentioned as having had his wound attended to.

In the fifth book, the exploits of dashing, daring Diomed, the Murat of the Greeks, come into play. Pandarus, seeing the onslaught of Diomed, who was driving all before him, tries to check his career by wounding him on the right shoulder by an arrow; but Diomed, nothing daunted, requests his charioteer Sthenelus to come down from the chariot and draw out the keen shaft; Sthenelus does so, the blood spurting up through the twisted mail as the arrow is withdrawn. Diomed, notwithstanding, presses on, irritated by his wound to reckless daring. After first killing Pandarus, and all but slaying Æneas, he rushes on Venus and wounds her on the hand; the goddess, distracted with pain, is conveyed by Iris, in the chariot of Mars, to Olympus, to the feet of her mother Dionè, who wipes off the ichor from her daughter's hand, soothing her the while, and forthwith the pain is mitigated and the hand is healed.

Diomed, in his impetuous career, next, aided by Minerva, encounters Mars, and wounds him in the lowest flank (*νείατον ἐς κενέωνα*). The god of war, bellowing like ten thousand men, ascends to Olympus, as did Venus, and complains to Jove, "showing him the immaculate ichor flowing down from the wound". The son of Saturn, sternly regarding him, tells him that he has been rightly served; but, being his offspring, he orders Pæon to heal him. Pæon does so, applying to his wound pain-assuaging remedies (*ὀδυνήφατα φάρμακα πάσσων*). Pæon was a

celebrated physician of Egyptian origin, who was considered in fable to have cured the wounds and diseases of the gods. Pope, in his translation, makes Pæon Apollo.

In the eleventh book, Agamemnon and Diomed are both wounded; but there is no mention of their being attended to by either Machaon or Podalirius. Machaon was unable to look after any one, for in this book, as mentioned above, he is himself wounded, and is attended to by Nestor. But I come to the treatment of Eurypylus' wound by Patroclus, and would inquire what the "bitter pain-assuaging root" (*ρίζαν—όδυνήφατον*) could be which Patroclus, after rubbing (to express the juice, no doubt), applied to the wound. *Ρίζα*, according to lexicographers, is simply a root; most probably it was either the *ρίζα ῥοδία* of Dioscorides and Galen, or the *Rhodiola rosea*, *Anglicè*, the rose-root of Sprengel or a species of geranium, a strong bitter astringent. Query, Was the root, whatever it was, at hand in Eurypylus' tent? Did Patroclus carry it about with him? or was it to be found growing plentifully in the immediate neighbourhood?

Nestor was left, at the close of the eleventh book, undertaking the cure and care of Machaon, the surgeon-in-chief; at the commencement of the fourteenth, he leaves his patient under the care of the fair Hecamedè, who is instructed to warm tepid baths (*θερμὰ λοετρὰ*), to wash away the blood oozing from the wound, and to give her charge a tonic occasionally in the shape of wine, while he (Nestor) was going to gain information as to how the day was going.

There is no more mention of Machaon in the *Iliad*, except in Book xiii, 213, where Idomeneus, after having given directions to the surgeons (*λήτροις ἐπιτελῆς*) to look after a comrade who was borne to his tent wounded in the ham (*κατ' ἰγνύην*), goes to the front to participate in the fight.

Machaon seems to have held a more conspicuous place among the Greeks and their allies than his brother Podalirius, for he is mentioned eleven times in the *Iliad*, while Podalirius appears only twice, he being evidently the physician, and Machaon the surgeon, to the forces. Neither is to be found in the *Odyssey*. After the fall of Troy, they are said to have established themselves in the island of Cos, where, let us hope, they had an extensive and lucrative practice. Cos was sacred to Venus and Æsculapius, and became, in after years, famous as the birth-place of Hippocrates, the great father of physic as he was called, and the founder of the Coan medical school.

That Homer must have had some knowledge, to a greater or less extent, of the parts of the body on which wounds inflicted might prove mortal, is evident from one or two passages in the *Iliad*. In Book iv, 183, Menelaus, when wounded, reassures his brother Agamemnon by stating that the arrow "has not stuck in a vital part" (*ἐν καιρίῳ*); again, in Book viii, 326, where Teucer is struck by a stone thrown by Hector "near the shoulder, where the collar-bone separates the neck and breast, and it is a particularly fatal spot" (*μάλιστα δὲ καιρίον ἐστί*); and again, in Book xi, 381, where Paris, after having wounded Diomed on the upper surface of the right foot, exclaims, "Would that, striking thee in the lower part of the groin, I had deprived thee of life!" and once more, in the same book, v. 435, where Odysseus, having been wounded by Socus, perceives that the weapon has not touched him mortally (*κατακαίριον*).

To Homer also may be ascribed, without any cavil, a knowledge of some drugs and medicinal plants. In the first book of the *Odyssey*, Minerva tells Telemachus that his father, *δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς*, went to Ephyre at one time in a swift ship to seek for a man-destroying drug (*φάρμακον ἀνδροφόνον*), that he might anoint his brazen-tipped arrows; and here I may remark, that in the *Iliad*, *φάρμακον* is invariably translated as a

remedy, an unguent, ἤπια φάρμακα, soothing applications; while in the *Odyssey* it signifies a drug or medicinal plant, poisonous and non-poisonous, or an antidote or countercharm.

In *Odyssey*, Book iv, 220, Helen casts a drug into the wine of Pisis-tratus and Telemachus, the guests of her husband Menelaus, a drug "which frees men from grief and from anger, and causes oblivion of all ills". This φάρμακον νεπενθές is supposed to have been opium, or the juice of the *Papaver somniferum*; some have conjectured that it was brandy, as the ancient Egyptians were acquainted with that liquor, for the whole process of distillation is, or was, to be seen figured at Thebes. Homer tells us that Helen possessed cunning and excellent drugs, "which Polydamna, the wife of Thonè, an Egyptian, gave her, where the bounteous land (Egypt) produces very many drugs, many excellent when mingled, and many fatal (poisonous); and each physician, *i. e.*, the physicians of Egypt, is skilled above all men, for truly they are of the race of Pæon". We also read in *Iliad*, Book xi, 740, of Agamedè, daughter of Augeas, "who well understood (the virtues of) as many drugs as the wide earth nourishes".

In the tenth book of the *Odyssey*, we have mention of a drug and its antidote or countercharm; we have the poisonous drug of Circe, which Mercury tells Odysseus she will put into his food, to counteract which, Mercury gives him another drug or herb (v. 286) as an antidote. "The Argos-slayer", says Odysseus (v. 302), "gave me an antidote, pulling it out of the earth, and he showed me its essential quality (φύσιν). It was black in the root, and its blossom was like unto milk, and the gods call it moly." Μῶλυ was believed to have been a species of garlic, to which Linnæus, Stackhouse, and Sprengel give the name of *Allium moly*; others believed it to be the wild rue, which was supposed to be an antidote against drunkenness; Dierbach maintains that the magic plant must have been the mandrake (*Atropa mandragora*), a herb that was much used in incantations.

The poet must also have been acquainted with the custom of making a lustration in, or the purification of, a house in which slaughter or murder had been committed; for in *Odyssey*, Book xxii, 481, 482, we find Odysseus, after killing the suitors, calling upon his old nurse Eurycleia to bring him sulphur and fire, that he might fumigate the palace.

οἷσε θέειον, γρήν, κακῶν ἄκος, οἷσε δέ μοι τῦρ  
ῶφρα θέειωσω μέγαρον, —

"Bring me, O old woman, sulphur the remedy for impurities, and bring me fire, that I may fumigate the palace."

To sum up, I will give a *résumé*, in alphabetical order, of the names of some of the more prominent parts of the human body mentioned by Homer on which wounds were inflicted, and the mortality resulting.

αἰδοίων (aidoion), the pudenda; once in *Iliad*, xiii, 568; mortal.

ἀνθερέων (anthereon), the chin; four times in *Iliad*; twice mortally.

ἀστράγαλος (astragalos), a vertebra; once in *Iliad*, twice in *Odyssey*; dislocation of the neck; mortal.

γαστήρ (gaster), the belly; twelve times in *Iliad*, eighteen times in *Odyssey*; mortal in *Iliad*. In *Odyssey* the word relates to hunger or greed.

γλήνη (glenē), the pupil of the eye; once in *Iliad*, mortal; once in *Odyssey*.

γλουτός (glutos), the hip; twice in *Iliad*, mortal; once in *Odyssey*.

γναθμός (gnathmos), the jaw-bone; four times in *Iliad*, mortal; once in *Odyssey*.

ἐγκέφαλος (enkephalos), the brain; seven times in *Iliad*, three times in *Odyssey*; seven times mortal.



ἥπαρ (hepar), the liver; six times in *Iliad*, three times in *Odyssey*; five times mortal.

ἰγνύη (ignuë), the ham (Lat. *porci*); once in *Iliad*.

κραδίη (cradie) (Lat. *cor*), the heart; many times in *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; once mortal in *Iliad*, Book xiii, 442; the only instance in which the heart was pierced.

κύστις (cystis), the bladder; twice in *Iliad*, mortal.

λαιμὸς (laimos), the throat; three times in *Iliad*, once in *Odyssey*; mortal.

μαζὸς (mazos), the mamma; fourteen times in *Iliad*, three times in *Odyssey*; thirteen times mortal.

μέτωπον (metōpon), the space between the eyes; twelve times in *Iliad*, four times in *Odyssey*; seven times mortal.

μυελὸς (myelos), marrow (Lat. *medulla spinalis*); twice in *Iliad*, twice in *Odyssey*; once mortal.

ὀμφαλὸς (omphalos) (Lat. *umbilicus*), the navel; three times in *Iliad*, not in *Odyssey*; three times mortal.

οὔα (ouas) (Lat. *auris*), the ear; twelve times in *Iliad*, eight times in *Odyssey*; seven times mortal.

ὀφθαλμὸς (ophthalmos), the eye; occurs repeatedly both in *Iliad* and in *Odyssey*; but as wounded five times; all mortal.

πνεύμων (pneumōn), the lung; once in *Iliad*; mortal.

πραπίδες (prapides), the diaphragm; four times in *Iliad*; twice mortal.

στέρνον (sternum), the breast; sixteen times in *Iliad*, three times in *Odyssey*; three times mortal.

τένων (tenōn), a tendon; seven times in *Iliad*, once in *Odyssey*; four times mortal.

φλέψ (phlebs), a vein; once in *Iliad* (Book xiii, 546); mortal.

χολάδες (cholades), the intestines; twice in *Iliad*; mortal.

To these are added—

σφενδόνη (sphenдонë), a sling bandage; once in *Iliad* (Book xiii, 600).

φάρμακον (pharmakon), a remedy or application, unguent, in *Iliad* nine times; a drug or medicinal herb in *Odyssey* twenty times.

It will be remarked that, in mentioning the blood that flows from the wounds of mortal men, Homer applies the word αἷμα (*hæma*); blood from the immortal gods has the word ἰχώρ applied to it; this last is translated by some lexicographers as "the fluid that flows in the veins of the gods"; by others, as "the fluid which distilled from the wounds of the gods, ichor".

I cannot do better, in bringing these remarks to a close, than give a quotation from the *Observations on Homer's Battles*, by the Rev. T. S. Watson, which will be found at the end of the fourth book of his edition of Pope's *Iliad*.

"Another cause of this *variety* is the difference of wounds that are given in the *Iliad*; they are by no means like the wounds described by most other poets which are commonly made in the self-same obvious places; the heart and head serve for all those in general who understand no anatomy; and sometimes, for variety, they kill even by wounds which are nowhere mortal but in their poems. As the whole human body is the subject of these, so nothing is more necessary to him who would describe them well than a thorough knowledge of its structure, even though the poet is not professedly to write of them as an anatomist; in the same manner as an exact skill in anatomy is necessary to those painters who would excel in drawing the naked body, though they are not to make every muscle as visible as in a book of chirurgery. It appears from so many passages in Homer that he was perfectly master of this science, that it would be needless to cite any in particular."