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# Greek medecine in its relation to religion and magic

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GREEK MEDICINE IN ITS RELATION TO  
RELIGION AND MAGIC\*

**I**n the historiography of Greek medicine religious and magical healing, in general, are dealt with only occasionally and very briefly. No one will deny that, throughout antiquity, incubations played an important rôle, nor will it be disputed that incantations, at least in later centuries, were of great importance. But since these are factors abhorrent to modern science, they are not interesting to the modern historian either.

The neglect of religious and magical medicine seems the more justifiable because, according to the prevailing opinion, Greek medical art itself dispensed with religion and magic. Traces of these, if they are to be found in any period at all, soon became "rather of the drapery than of the body of medicine."<sup>1</sup> Religious cures, "the half-world"<sup>2</sup> of scientific medicine, and magical rites, its superstitious caricature—so to speak—are said to have been rejected by the Greek physicians themselves. The abrogation of religious and magical thought is therefore considered even as characteristic of the Greek attitude and as significant for the difference between it and the Roman mode of thinking.<sup>3</sup> There is no need for more than a perfunctory consideration of those unscientific conceptions.

It is true, religion and magic are very seldom, almost never, mentioned in Greek medical treatises; if they occur, they are usually discussed in a negative sense. At first glance it seems, therefore, safe to conclude that they were of no importance, at least up to the time of Galen. Later, while Galen's rational medicine was still preserved in the

\* *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine*, 1937, vol. 5, pp. 201-46.

I wish to express my gratitude to Mrs. H. Cherniss for revising my English.

<sup>1</sup> T. Clifford Allbutt, *Greek Medicine in Rome*, London, 1921, p. 31: "In Greece the theurgic invocations of Apollo Paean, of Chiron, of Aesculapius, seem soon to have become, as in the Oath, rather of the drapery than of the body of medicine."

<sup>2</sup> W. W. Tarn, *Hellenistic Civilization*, London, 1930, p. 272.

<sup>3</sup> T. Clifford Allbutt, l. c.: "In Rome, and not during the Republic only, theurgic, or hierurgic, or magical craft 'and those who used curious arts' were of the body of it; drugs and operations were but auxiliaries."

