Although Galen of Pergamon (129-ca 216) never left enough personal information to constitute a biography in the modern sense, he was a figure famous enough in his native city, with its Great Altar of Zeus (reconstructed in modern Berlin), as well as in the imperial capital Rome, for his passage to have been remarked on. While he may not have written much about himself he was a prolific author, with a corpus totalling over one-eighth of all the classical Greek literature that survives. So famous was he as a physician that he was associated in Arab legends with that other charismatic healer, Jesus of Nazareth.

Galen has already written about the role of the physician in second-century Graeco-Roman society in Galen and the Rhetoric of Healing. His text book examines the character of the man who was to be the last word in medicine for over a millennium. A rather mysterious, driven, arrogant, and vengeful figure emerges. Galen himself suffered from a recurrent abdominal illness in his twenties and recovered from it completely aged 27, a cure he attributed to the intervention of the god Asclepius. He then declared himself Asclepius’s servant. A son of a wealthy aristocrat, Galen had received a comprehensive Hellenic education and inherited assets substantial enough to allow him to devote his life entirely to his professional interests.

Remarkably in view of the profession’s subsequent scandalous popularity, Galen’s professionalism did not include working for money. His life was one of intensely competitive, masculine relationships with friends and rivals; he made his name by bickering and cheating. These rivals naturally included fellow doctors, and one of the skills that made Galen famous in his lifetime was his daring and accurate as an anatomist. The Roman populace liked to see exotic wild beasts — tigers, rhinoceroses, crocodiles, and hippopotami — being slaughtered in the arena; and medicine offered a kind of grandiose entertainment too. Galen challenged fellow practitioners to public contests, laying open live pigs, monkeys, and dogs in front of an audience and performing a recurrent laryngeal nerve without damaging the neighbouring structures. (The nerve would then be ligated or cut, thus effectively silencing the howls of the violently animal and amazing his audience). Good doctor Galen was a cold fish. Matters写作: ‘We have one physician only.’

While Galen’s case studies are almost invariably success stories, often retold over several manuscripts, it must be said that some are frankly impossible in the light of a modern understanding of the body; much like the biblical restoration of sight by the application of spittle (not to mention the resurrection of the dead).

Even when he held a boating macaque heart in his hand, or observed the lungs quivering in the pleural cavity, Galen didn’t know what he was seeing. He had an inkling of organ function but didn’t grasp that the heart acted as a pump, or that the lungs served a purpose other than as regulators of the former’s ‘inanimate heat’ (which declined with age). He believed the liver was the source of venous blood, and he promoted the Hippocratic practice of bloodletting. It was ironic that his reputation peaked in the humanistic Renaissance: Vesalius, a young Flemish anatomist, went to Italy to undertake his studies in the 1530s and proved in several human dissections, by applying the same sceptical methods Galen had once used, that Galen had got things wrong.

A few years after Vesalius’ proof by demonstration, Montaigne could write in his Essays: ‘We ask whether Galen said this or that; we never ask whether he said anything valid.’

The CBT PANACEA

Thrive: The Power of Evidence-Based Psychological Therapies
Richard Layard and David M Clark

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Richard Layard is a Labour peer and a distinguished economist and David Clark is Professor of Psychology at Oxford. They are both key figures in the NHS IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies) programme. Their book was published not long after another of the same title by Konradin Hoffst. Both deal in different ways with the purpose of happiness. Layard’s road to happiness is his life at the service of the ill. For his passage (reconstructed in modern Berlin), as well as in the imperial capital Rome, for his passage to have been remarked on. While he may not have written much about himself he was a prolific author, with a corpus totalling over one-eighth of all the classical Greek literature that survives. So famous was he as a physician that he was associated in Arab legends with that other charismatic healer, Jesus of Nazareth.

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