

Capturing Medical Tradition: Caelius Aurelianus' *On Acute Diseases*

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The translations of Caelius Aurelianus serve as an important historical link in the transmission of Greek medical practice and thought throughout the later Roman Empire and Middle Ages. Notably, Caelius' Latin translation *Celerum vel Acutarum Passionum*,¹ "On Swift or Acute Diseases," from the work of Soranus of Ephesus, codifies many Methodist tenets and treatments for transmittance to the Latin-speaking West. As such, the historical text figures prominently into the tradition of medical development from the perspective of modern scholarship, particularly in considering the transferal of Greek medical learning. In addition to this, the text self-consciously engages in the medical conversations of its time. Caelius' consideration and refutation of other therapies and philosophies of disease provide clues as to how the Methodists defined themselves and their practice in light of contemporary sectarianism in medicine.

Soranus of Ephesus, among the most famous physicians of the Methodist sect, practiced medicine during the time of Trajan and Hadrian, according to the Byzantine Suda.² Tradition holds that he was educated in Alexandria, which, as Vivian Nutton notes, would have been appropriate for

a young man from Asia Minor and would indeed have accounted for his anatomical knowledge.³ Soranus of Ephesus was arguably the third leading Methodist after Themison of Laodicea and Thessalus of Tralles. Themison first posited the theory of κοινότητες, “general states,” or “communities” based on the principals of his Asclepiades, who taught that the body was composed of atoms moving through pores.⁴ According to Themison, the diseased body is one where this movement is too tense and restricted (what Caelius translates as *strictura*), too relaxed and fluid (*solutio*), or some combination of both (*complexio*).

Thessalus succeeded Themison, practicing medicine in Rome under Nero. He is credited with developing the system of restorative and metasyncretic treatments used according to intervals of time.⁵ Soranus followed Thessalus, although his system was less radical than that of Thessalus. Methodism itself rose as a reaction to the competing sects of Dogmatism and Epiricism in medicine, but Soranus’ writings indicate broad historical, philosophical, and medical interests, plus a great familiarity with other schools of medical thought. While Soranus in *On Acute Diseases* does emphasize aspects of practice and theory that are specifically Methodist, for example, the sharp distinction between acute and chronic disease, the relative unimportance of anatomy, and a holistic view of disease, he is not averse to entertaining other theories and explaining them.

What little scholars know about the circumstances of Caelius Aurelianus’ life comes largely from the information he divulges in his writing. Indeed, scholars do not even know his correct dates, but situate him in the fifth century AD based on linguistic and stylistic comparison with Cassius

Felix,⁶ a mid-fifth century Latin translator of Greek medical texts.⁷ Caelius Aurelianus calls himself *methodici Siccensis*, “methodist of Sicca,” a Roman colony in Numidia. Beyond this, however, no details of his life are known.

Caelius has left four extant texts, two of which are the translations *On Acute Diseases* and *On Chronic Diseases* from works of the same name by Soranus of Ephesus. His third extant work is fragments of a Latin translation of Soranus’ *Gynaecia* and fourth is his own original treatise entitled *Medicinales responsiones*.⁸

The question of translation practices complicates any analysis of *On Acute Diseases*. Indeed, Caelius’ name seems often to overshadow that of Soranus in scholarship of the text—an odd phenomenon considering that we ourselves would never claim to be reading a translator when what we are in fact reading is the author’s translated text.⁹ Caelius himself frequently reminds us that he is merely the translator and Soranus, the author. An example of this attestation occurs as Caelius ends the section *Quomodo Curandi sunt Cardiaci*, “the way to care for cardiac disease,” by writing, *haec est secundum Soranum cardiacorum methodica curatio* (“this ends Soranus’ treatment of cardiac disease according to the Methodists.”)¹⁰

Yet the relationship of translator to text is more complicated and less transparent than Caelius claims. Examination of the textual history does lead us to believe that Caelius is, as he states, truly just humbly seeking to translate Soranus’ work into Latin.¹¹ However subtle manipulations of tone and presentation of information cause him to sound more distinctly authorial. This too, though, must be reconciled with an Antique view of transla-

tion and textual transmission very different from modern standards.

No manuscript copies of *On Acute Diseases* or *On Chronic Diseases* are extant and critical analysis of these Caelian texts must rest upon the earliest printed editions of the sixteenth century. *On Chronic Diseases* was first published in 1529 by Johannes Sichart for Heinrich Petri in Basle and *On Acute Diseases* was first published four years later by Winter von Ardernach for Simon de Colinis in Paris. The manuscript or manuscripts these printed editions are based upon disappeared shortly later.¹² Scholars are able to compare these editions with the fragments of Soranus' extant *Gynaecia* and fragments of Caelius' Latin translation of the work, along with Caelius' extant *Medicinales responsiones*, as well as other Latin translations of Greek medical texts to ascertain that Caelius most likely rendered Soranus' original faithfully.¹³ However, it is impossible to know what sort of omissions he may have made. Other scholars tend to agree that Caelius' translation is a redaction and they allow for "certain degree of independent thought."¹⁴ Vivian Nutton writes that "Caelius was avowedly drawing on a large work of the same name by Soranus [*On Acute and Chronic Diseases*], for he cites him frequently and in a manner that shows that he was consulting him in the Greek original."¹⁵ This paper does not seek to engage in the controversy regarding how closely Caelius Aurelianus followed Soranus' work in the *Celerum Passionum*. Instead, as Caelius considered himself the translator, so shall we consider him. Though we do not know all the specific editorial decisions that Caelius made, we do see Caelius the translator manipulating the text with authorial intent in the way he presents Soranus and his views.

Caelius Aurelianus chooses to insert references to Soranus at very

curious and telling times throughout the text. The text itself includes frequent debates regarding the causes of diseases and particularly, proper therapies. At these times, Caelius is most likely to assert Soranus' authority in a way that changes him from being the author of the text to being one of "characters" in the medical argument. In the reply *Ad Asclepiadem et Themisonem et Herclidem Tarentum*, Caelius rejects Themison's method of treating lethargy patients by forcing liquids on them by claiming that Soranus would have said that this potion is harmful.¹⁶ Caelius' displaces Soranus as author of the text at this moment by bringing Soranus into his own text and setting him within the debate. In instances such as this, Caelius actually takes authorial predominance away from Soranus instead constructing an authorial persona for himself. While we do not know how authorial Caelius truly was in editing or adapting Soranus' work, this example complicates Caelius' claim to being merely Soranus' translator.

These sorts of frequent medical debates are common throughout the text, reflecting not only Soranus' distinct historical and philosophical interests, but also the inclinations of his readership. As I.E. Drabkin writes, "Soranus' broad philosophical and historical interests...serve to distinguish his treatises on acute and chronic diseases from mere handbooks of medical practice."¹⁷ Soranus clearly had a historical interest in medical tradition and its implications for contemporary medicine. As mentioned previously, he describes the ideas and treatments of other physicians and medical traditions, occasionally even tracing the history of a disease back to its references in Homer.¹⁸

From this, we may surmise that his readership was a coterie of

learned doctors and intellectuals. It is highly likely that even doctors of different sects would have read Caelius' translation; we know for certain, at least, that Galen was familiar with Soranus' work (likely in its original Greek) because he praised Soranus even though he could not stand Methodists in general.¹⁹ In his article on Caelius Aurelianus' contemporary Cassius Felix, G. Sabbah contrasts the readerships of the two writers. The Latin translations prepared by Cassius Felix would have been destined

non pas à un public cultivé... comme celui de Celse, voire celui de Caelius, mais à un public de professionnels, de praticiens, le contenu et la méthode d'un cours professoral.²⁰

The works of Cassius Felix have more of a practical application than do the works of Caelius Aurelianus, intended instead for a "cultivated" readership. Indeed, *Celerum Passionum* does contain methods of therapy, but the author's interest is largely concentrated in discussing the ideas behind and history of the practical treatments.

The consistent format which the author uses to describe each disease also reflects the interest in historicism. The text discusses the acute diseases *a capite ad calcem* using an entry format that begins with the etymology of the word, followed by the definition of the diseases, its symptoms, the method of discerning the particular disease from other ones similar in appearance, the disease's treatment according to the Methodist, and finally a discussion and refutation of the disease's treatment according to other physicians.²¹ Caelius' description of hydrophobia (or rabies) nicely illustrates all

the entry components.

First, Caelius relates the origins of the word hydrophobia, *nam Graeci timorem phobon vocant, aquam hydor appellant*, “for the Greeks call ‘fear’ *phobon*,’ and call ‘water,’ *hydor*.”²² He continues to outline different names which the disease has been called, *hygrophobia*, *phobodipsos*, *cynolyssos*. Next he gives the *antecedens causa* as the bite of a mad dog, although he admits that other animals may transfer the diseases, and also that the diseases may arise spontaneously when the body is in an extreme state of *strictura* as a result of poison.²³ Here, Caelius begins to subtly introduce the cause of the disease according to the Methodists.

In his next section, he lists an irrational fear of water as the symptom of hydrophobia and mentions other physical ailments which will accompany the disease, including anxiety, irascibility, and heaviness in the esophagus, among others. His account is not only clinical as he punctuates his description of the symptoms with a variety of anecdotes, for example, the baby with hydrophobia who was terrified by its mother’s milk.²⁴ The great care and attention he pays to this section of the entry indicates the great importance of symptoms to the Methodist system of medicine. J. Pigeaud notes that “*dans cette description des symptômes, toute l’attention que le médecin prête au malade... l’essentiel pour le médecin méthodiste, comme le dit Caelius lui-même, devrait être la maladie.*”²⁵ For the Methodists, defining the disease is second to understanding its array of symptoms. Following this, he details the physiological causes of hydrophobia: inflammation and lack of moisture which cause a state of stricture in the sufferer.²⁶

In the section on distinguishing hydrophobia from similar diseases, the author supplies a distinction based on anatomy—a contrast to his usual feeling of disdain towards physicians who are overly concerned with anatomy. He writes that mania and phrenitis, the diseases most closely resembling hydrophobia, are different in that they affect the head principally while hydrophobia affects the esophagus.²⁷

In the next section on which part of the body is affected by hydrophobia, Caelius has a much more customarily Methodist statement to make. He describes various other physicians' theories about what part of the body hydrophobia actually affects, but concludes by saying that the disease affects the entire body.²⁸ This is a traditionally Methodist idea that Caelius sets up against other sects' views many times, as we shall see.

Lastly, in his section on therapeutics, Caelius posits his treatment according to the Methodist system, and then details treatments from other medical traditions. In comparisons such as these (which Caelius makes for all of the diseases he discusses), we may observe how the Methodists define their medical practice against the other medical sects and we may determine what is uniquely Methodist about many of the practices he describes.

The Methodist therapies Caelius describes involve attempting to loosen the state of stricture by having the patient's body massaged, covered with a gentle heat (warmed olive oil prepared without the patient's being able to see it), and above all attempting to get the patient to drink voluntarily.²⁹ The Methodist theory of stricture and relaxation is demonstrated in a contrast Caelius makes with another method of treatment from Artorius. According to him, doctors should force their patients to drink by putting them

in sacks or vessels filled with cold water. According to Methodist thought, however, this is not only ineffectual but dangerous as the patient becoming cold would make the body even tighter, more restricted, and liable to have seizures.³⁰ Caelius criticizes doctors who provide treatments such as evacuation, venesection, cupping, and other treatments the Methodists would consider metasyncretic, or designed to disrupt the disease and shock the body into health, because again, these measurements do not procure relaxation in the body, which is the ultimate cure for hydrophobia's state of stricture. Thus does the particular style and focus of the disease entries in *Celerum Passionum* reflect some of the concerns and theories of Methodist practice, with its large concentration on analysis of symptoms and in the telling refutations of other physicians' treatments.

Elsewhere in the text, Caelius Aurelianus describes other preoccupations that are particularly Methodist, such as in the example of the importance of symptoms. One peculiarity of Methodism that Caelius relates is the interest in anatomy, but the ultimate rejection that diseases lie in parts rather than in the body as a whole. Although there may be debates regarding specific terminology of the Methodist philosophy (Nutton gives the example of 'fluid,' writing, "did it refer to the fluid state of the whole body or of a part?"),³¹ Caelius remarks in the text that Soranus considered the whole body to be affected by disease, rather than just a part. In the section regarding the part affected in attacks of phrenitis, the author writes, *nos autem sive locorum sive vicinitatis eorum cause generalem curationem non mutamus. Non est enim sub eodem genere iacens locorum necessaria differentia.*³² This quote disparages leaders of other sects who, as Caelius claims, need to

discover which part is affected by the disease in order to apply their treatments. The superior method practiced by Methodists does not require an alteration of treatment because of a more holistic view of the body and disease. For the Methodists, the “commonality of symptoms”³³ dictates the treatment, not the nature of the individual part. On the other hand, the interpretation of symptoms operates within this framework of the body as atoms and pores liable to too much opening or closing, if the reliance on symptoms does not approach the Empiricist sort of conception.

The definition of disease is less important for the Methodists, according to Soranus, precisely because the symptoms of disease are the basis of treatment. At the very beginning of the section on defining pneumonia, Caelius warns that *diffinire Methodici iuxta Sorani iudicium declinant*, “Methodists, in the manner of Soranus, turn away from judgement [definition].”³⁴ Categorization is not of the utmost concern for Methodists because again, treatment is not based upon it.

As one of the only extant documents on Methodism, Caelius Aurelianus’ *On Acute Diseases* is crucial for reconstructing the transmission of Greek medicine learning to the Latin West. It provides modern scholars with a great deal of information on earlier doctor’s theories and treatments preserved in the refutation of methods apart from the ones advocated by Soranus. In this way, the text has a unique internal and external historicity. The contemporary medical debates that Caelius records from Soranus also illuminate Methodist thought and application, including such particularities as the opinion and usage of anatomy, the importance of the symptom, and the resistance to defining and categorizing disease, through the way it de-

fines itself against others.

Endnotes

¹ I use the common abbreviation of the Latin title, *Celerum Passionum*, interchangeably with the modern translation of the title *On Acute Diseases*.

² Vivian Nutton, *Ancient Medicine* (New York, 2004) 195.

³ Nutton 195.

⁴ I.E. Drabkin, "Introduction" to *On Acute Diseases and On Chronic Diseases*, ed. and trans. I.E. Drabkin (Chicago, 1950) xvii.

⁵ Drabkin (1950) vxiii.

⁶ G. Sabbah, "Noms et descriptions de maladies chez Cassius Felix," in *Maladie et maladies dans les textes latins antiques et médiévaux*, Actes du Ve Colloque international 'Textes médicaux latins,' 295-312, ed. Carl Deroux (Bruxelles, 1998).

⁷ Drabkin (1950) xiv.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ For the purposes of this paper, I will generally use "Caelius" and "the author" interchangeably while using "Soranus" at points when it seems appropriate to assume Caelius is accurately reflecting Soranus' text.

¹⁰ Cael. Aur. *Acut.* XXXVII: 217. All quotes from *Celerum Passionum* are taken from the edition *On Acute Diseases and On Chronic Diseases*, ed. and trans. I.E. Drabkin (Chicago 1950). English translations in the text are my own.

¹¹ Cael. Aur. *Acut.* X: 65: *Soranus vero cuius haec sunt quae nostra mediocritas latinizanda existimavit*, "Soranus, whose very work is here translated into our Latin."

¹² Drabkin (1950) xiii.

¹³ I.E. Drabkin, "Notes on the Text of Caelius Aurelianus," *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, vol. 76 (1945) 299.

¹⁴ Nutton 195.

¹⁵ Nutton 195.

¹⁶ Cael. Aur. *Acut.* IX: 46, *Soranus vero, qui normarum regulis methodum restituit, noxiam esse inquit istius modi potionem*, "Soranus who restituted Methodism by rules of standards,

claims a potion of this measure to be poisonous.”

¹⁷ Drabkin (1950) xviii.

¹⁸ Cael. Aur. *Acut.* XV: 122. In discussing whether or not hydrophobia existed during former times, the author writes, *passionis etenim causam prompte Homerus memoravit*, “for truly, Homer clearly recounted the cause of the disease.”

¹⁹ Nutton 195; Drabkin (1950) xviii.

²⁰ Sabbah 303 (“not to a cultivated public... like that of Celsus, or even that of Caelius, but to a public of professionals, of practitioners [as] the content and the method of a professional course.”)

²¹ Drabkin (1950) xii.

²² Cael. Aur. *Acut.* IX: 98.

²³ Cael. Aur. *Acut.* IX: 99.

² Cael. Aur. *Acut.* X: 102.

² J. Pigeaud, “La ‘phrénitis’ dans l’oeuvre de Caelius Aurélien,” in *Maladie et maladies dans les textes latins antiques et médiévaux*, Actes du Ve Colloque international ‘Textes médicaux latins,’ 330-341, ed. Carl Deroux (Bruxelles 1998) 335. (“In this description of the symptoms, all the attention that the doctor readies for the patient... the essence should be, for the Methodist doctor, like Caelius himself says, the disease.”)

²⁶ Cael. Aur. *Acut.* XI: 106.

²⁷ Cael. Aur. *Acut.* XII: 107.

²⁸ Cael. Aur. *Acut.* XIV: 117.

²⁹ Cael. Aur. *Acut.* XVI: 126-133.

³⁰ Cael. Aur. *Acut.* XVI: 133.

³¹ Nutton 192.

³² Cael. Aur. *Acut.* VIII: 53. “We [the Methodists], however, do not alter our general therapy on the basis of these places or the regions about them. For in a given general type of disease a difference in the parts affected is not an essential difference.” Trans. I.E. Drabkin.

³³ Nutton 193.

³⁴ Cael. Aur. *Acut.* I.XXVI: 142.

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