

Embodied

Bronwen L. Wickkiser

The 42nd Annual Lafollette Lecture
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EXCERPT

Today my theme will be bodies. As a classicist I have long been interested in the embodied experience of the ancient past, particularly in areas of religion and healthcare, and often at points where these two areas intersect, such as at healing sanctuaries where people sought cures from the gods. Today I will be talking about a recent direction in my research on ancient medicine. To do so, I will talk also about the bodies of data—the corpora of evidence—that I draw upon to make sense of the ancient past. And along the way, you'll hear a little bit about my own background and education.

The LaFollette Lecture Series was established by the Wabash College Board of Trustees to honor Charles D. LaFollette, their longtime colleague on the Board. The lecture is given each year by a Wabash College Faculty member who is charged to address the relation of his or her special discipline to the humanities broadly conceived.

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Embodied

42nd Annual Lafollette Lecture

Bronwen L. Wickkiser, Professor of Classics

Good afternoon, Wabash! Good afternoon, friends of Wabash College!

I want to extend special thanks to the Lafollette family for making this lecture possible, and I want to do so in ancient Greek: ὑμῶν χάριν ἀποδίδωμι. ὑμῶν is the pronoun ‘y’all,’ and sounds a lot like the word human which is a nice coincidence given today’s endeavor, where we are thinking about the humanities. The word χάριν means ‘thanks’ and is directly related to a verb that means rejoice (it is embedded in our word ‘eucharist,’ a good rejoicing). The verb is ἀποδίδωμι, a compound of ‘I give’ (δίδωμι) and the preposition ‘back’ (ἀπό). This short Greek statement then suggests a collective sense of reciprocity and rejoicing, which seems especially appropriate for the Lafollette Lectures, an occasion when we come together as a community to share our work and celebrate the humanities and what it means to be human. To the Lafollette family, I say again: ὑμῶν χάριν ἀποδίδωμι.

I am deeply honored that I was invited by Dr. Cheryl Hughes to give this lecture. When she invited me a year ago, I was flabbergasted and humbled, especially when she added that this might be the last invitation she would extend for the Lafollette Lecture because she was planning to retire. There was no way I could refuse that invitation. Thank you, Cheryl, for the invitation, which means so much to me, especially coming from you.

I also want to thank all of you for coming out today to spend time hearing about my work.

Today my theme will be bodies. As a classicist I have long been interested in the embodied experience of the ancient past, particularly in areas of religion and healthcare, and often at points where these two areas intersect, such as at healing sanctuaries where people sought cures from the gods. Today I will be talking about a recent direction in my research on ancient medicine. To do so, I will talk also about the bodies of data—the corpora of evidence—that I draw upon to make sense of the ancient past. And along the way, you’ll hear a little bit about my own background and education.

Now, I do feel the need to begin by clarifying what classics as an academic discipline is. I am guessing that there is at least one person in this audience who is not entirely sure, which is no shortcoming of theirs. Let’s face it: ‘classics’ is an enigmatic term. Classic what? Classical music? Classic cars? Loosely put, classics as an academic discipline is the study of Greek and Roman antiquity. This encompasses study of two of the languages widely spoken in the ancient Mediterranean (Greek and Latin), the literatures that were produced in these languages, the material remains of the Greeks and Romans, what they did and how they lived. That’s a lot under one umbrella. Which leads me back to the term classics. It has lingered in part because of its economy. It is a shorthand of sorts meant to indicate what all it is that we classics scholars do. Yet it also true that the term implies a value judgment, that what we study is somehow essential or more important than other fields. Indeed, the word is an artifact of a time when knowledge of Greek and Latin language and literature was thought

to be essential to an educated person (here we should understand ‘person’ to mean: white, male, of a certain pedigree and level of wealth). The good news is that classics as a discipline now encompasses much more than the study of language and of literature produced by elites, and we who are classics scholars—and I feel confident that I speak for my colleagues in classics here at Wabash—believe fervently that there is much in the Greek and Roman past that is valuable for all of us today. I say this as a woman who is in a field that is still very male dominated; this is the second time in my academic career that I am the only woman in my department.¹ And other than in graduate school, I have never had an immediate colleague in classics who is a person of color. This is a photograph of my seventh-grade homeroom class. From kindergarten through high school, I attended Baltimore City public schools, and it aggrieves me that the greatest diversity I have experienced in my life was in my childhood, before I left for college.



Fig. 1

One of the major challenges of understanding antiquity is the limits of the evidence. I sometimes begin courses with an image like this, a fragmentary statue of a human figure.²



Fig. 2

I intend this as a metaphor to get at the very incomplete nature of what remains from the ancient past—only a small fraction of all the data of antiquity survives and has been recovered. There is a very real possibility as we work to reconstruct the past—that is, to restore, say, the arm of this statue or the color of her skin, that we will get some things wrong.



Fig. 3

Greek and Roman statues would have been bright with color; we know this because traces

of paint survive on some of them that suggest that every detail—hair, clothing, jewelry, skin—was painted. Yet for a long time, scholars perpetuated the idea that marble statues and architecture were left unpainted, contributing to a myth of whiteness.³ This is a good reminder that as we interpret the past, we need to be careful about imposing our own value judgments about aesthetics and race on ancient data, about recreating antiquity as we think it ought to have looked.

This leads me to humility. Humility, I assert, is useful in any academic discipline, certainly so in classics for the reasons I have just mentioned. I foreground the need for humility with my students, and I do this especially in my course on ancient medicine, where there is a concern about misinterpreting the ancient data as well as the risk of looking at the past smugly from a vantage point informed by millennia of scientific discovery. Those Greeks and Romans! How silly they were. How naïve. How wrong. Yet there is still today so much that we do not understand about the human body.

Let's test ourselves, shall we? I realize this is a room full of humanists, and this is meant to be a rhetorical exercise above all, but let's try.

1. What causes epilepsy? The Greeks too debated the cause of epilepsy, and scientists today still do not fully understand its causes.
2. How does this epilepsy drug work: gabapentin? My thanks to Mark Elrod, who used to work in a pharmacy and shared his knowledge of epilepsy drugs with me. There is no shame if you can't tell me how this drug works. What floors me is that neither can the pharmaceutical company that developed it. They know it works, but they cannot explain how it works.⁴

Humility! Genetics, DNA...these are ways that we interpret the body currently, but in one hundred years, perhaps these too will sound quaint.

My course on ancient medicine has become one of my favorite courses to teach. What I enjoy about the history of medicine is seeing the connections—the continuities and discontinuities—over thousands of years about an aspect of human life that is universal: all of us at one time or another get sick, no matter when or where we live, regardless of status, politics, religion.

Sickness and health (some combination thereof) is essential to the human condition. And the Greeks and Romans knew this well. Homer's *Iliad*, our earliest surviving work of Greek literature, begins with the god Apollo shooting arrows of plague upon the Greek army. As I like to say, Greek literature begins with a disease, and the dis-ease, the unease, that accompanies it: the suffering, the anxiety, the search for causes and solutions. The Greeks and Romans would continue to reflect for centuries on the health of bodies and the body politic in all sorts of literature: works of tragedy, philosophy, histories, and medical texts.

Yet I suspect that if all we had to look at from the ancient past were texts, as brilliant as they are, as inspired and inspiring as they can be, I would not be a classicist. When I went to graduate school, there were two tracks in classics: one in philology (focusing on languages and literature) and the other in archaeology (where the focus is on material remains). I chose philology: I really do love Greek and Latin. I've been studying Greek on and off since my senior year of high school. I will remind you that I attended a public high school in Baltimore; moreover, it was and remains to this day all-female. I got an education there that I will be forever grateful for, in part because it allowed me to see females in positions of power. It was also where I began to be enamored with classics. My teacher for ancient Greek was passionate and fun: he told us one day that he was in a band, and they called themselves Ajax and the Comets. Now this may not sound funny if you don't know your kitchen cleansers, but I did, and I thought it was hilarious.

Fast-forward to graduate school where, as I say, I chose philology as my track, but there was no way anyone could convince me to sit around a library every single summer. Indeed, I took many opportunities to join in archaeological fieldwork, whether in Greece, where I excavated Byzantine remains in Corinth, or in Italy where I took part in an archaeological survey of an ancient synagogue in Ostia, the port of Rome, and worked on pottery analysis for a Greek sanctuary in Metaponto, which is in the insole of the boot of Italy. I also spent two of the most remarkable summers of my life in Ukraine, in Crimea, an area that is now under Russian annexation. The first summer, we were excavating a Greek farmhouse of the fourth century before the common era just outside of Sevastopol. The second summer we were a bit farther east, in Balaklava, where we excavated a fort and surveyed a necropolis.



Fig. 4

Figure 3. Classics graduate student Bronwen Wickkiser operates the Total Station, on the necropolis near Bezymyannaya, which was surveyed using the Ground Penetrating Radar and the Quantum Magnetometer.



I saw no Greek or even Roman remains that second summer; we were busy digging through upper Byzantine layers but also found buttons worn by soldiers in the Crimean War of

the 19th century. Those summers in Ukraine were magical: teams of Russians, Ukrainians and Americans working side by side just five years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the independence of Ukraine. We lived in dachas in an archaeological park, amid ancient ruins, right on the shore of the Black Sea.

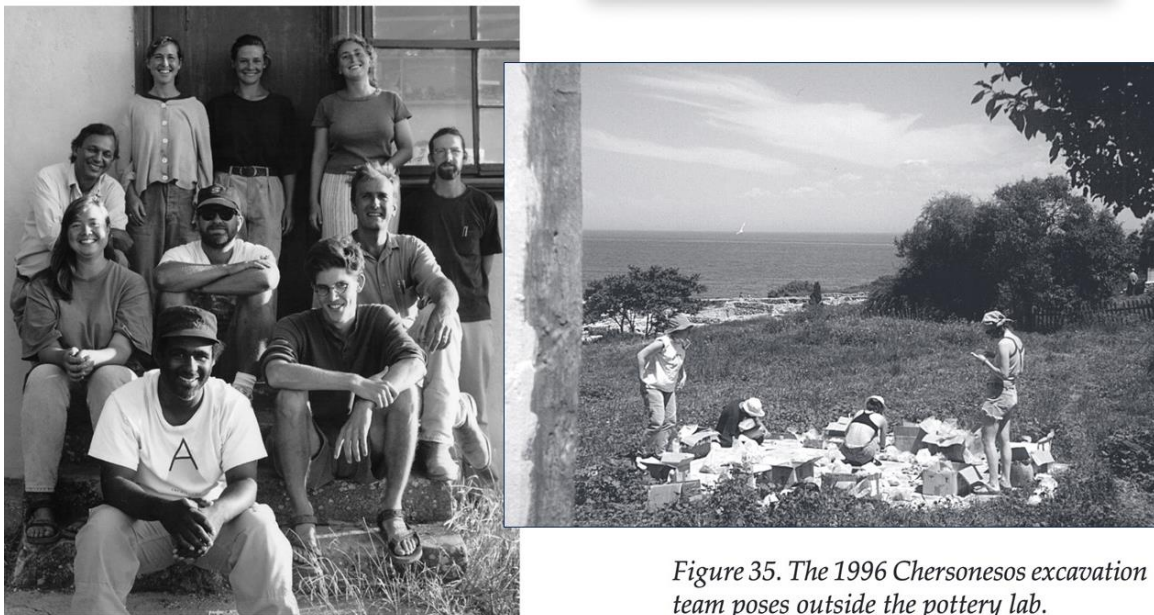


Figure 35. The 1996 Chersonesos excavation team poses outside the pottery lab.

Fig. 5



Figure 36. The 1998 University of Texas team at Chersonesos.
Front row (left to right): Paul Lehman, Mindy Spearman, Jessica Trelogan;
middle row: Olenka Pevny, Jane Rempel, Maya Milanytch, Jason Lucas
back row: Joe Carter, Phil Freeman, Bronwen Wickkiser, Sophia Petrovich

Fig. 6

Given the current war in Ukraine, I am so grateful to have had these experiences. More generally, all of this archaeological work was a joy: the physical labor of it, the teamwork, immersion in other cultures—training my tongue to form words in new languages,

encountering new foods (the redolent smell of fresh dill that flavored many of our meals still to this day takes me right back to the shore of the Black Sea)—all of this puts one’s life into perspective. And if you have the chance to work on an excavation, no matter where there are few thrills greater than recovering data that has been waiting underground for hundreds, or in the case of antiquity, thousands of years. Even if you do not excavate, just coming into direct physical contact with objects produced in antiquity can be a thrill. I always tell my students, “Hug a column.”

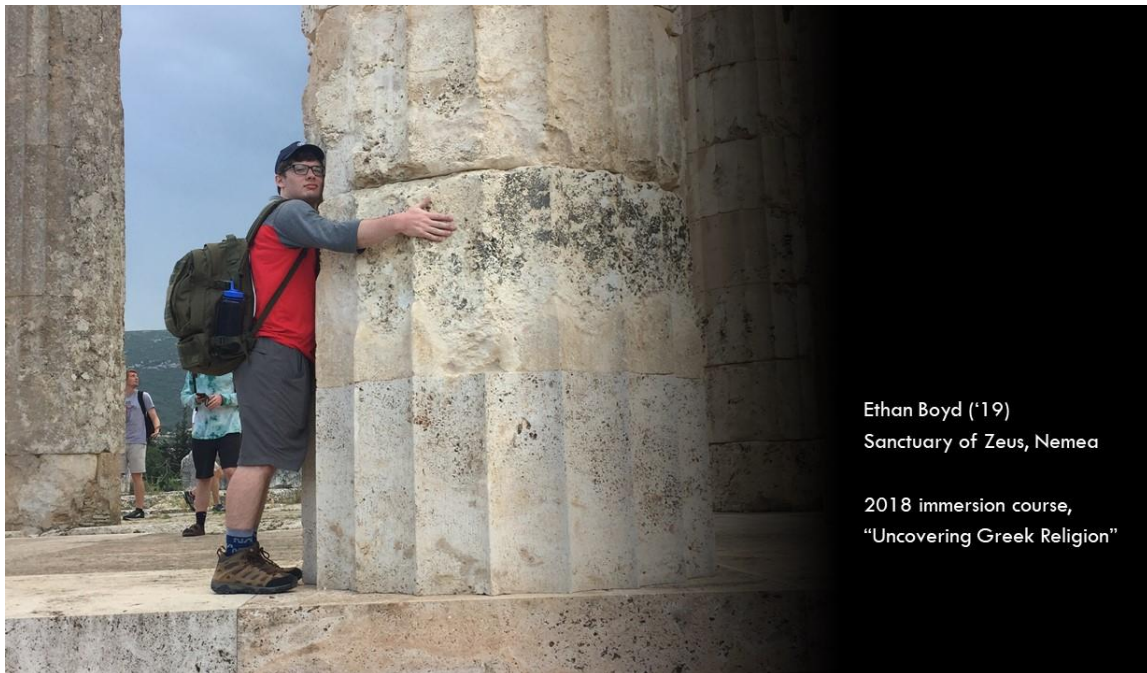


Fig. 7

Let’s face it, my days of recovering artifacts from the earth are probably over, yet in my research I very much enjoy putting texts, where my primary training lies, into conversation with objects and spaces from the past. My interest in healing gods is driven in part by the materiality of much of the data. Here are some examples:



corpora / bodies of data

Fig. 8

I study narratives inscribed on large stone blocks that stood in the center of sanctuaries and describe how the gods healed certain individuals; I study body parts sculpted from clay, stone, and metal that were given by the sick as thank offerings for their cures; I examine bronze medical instruments dedicated by physicians to their patron god; and I explore elaborate architecture designed for healing... These I put into conversation with texts like medical treatises, but also courtroom speeches, hymns, comedies, even a series of short Greek poems about healing that were recovered in Egypt from, I kid you not, mummy cartonnage. The poems had been written on papyrus that was (re)used to cover the chest of a mummy. Poems about healing recovered from mummy cartonnage: talk about embodied!

The physician Galen

Until very recently, in all my work on healing sanctuaries I had been dodging the elephant in the room, an enormous corpus of data that I had drawn upon selectively but had not gotten to know very well. That corpus is the writings of a single individual: the Greek physician Galen, who lived in the second century of the common era and healed, among others, Roman emperors.

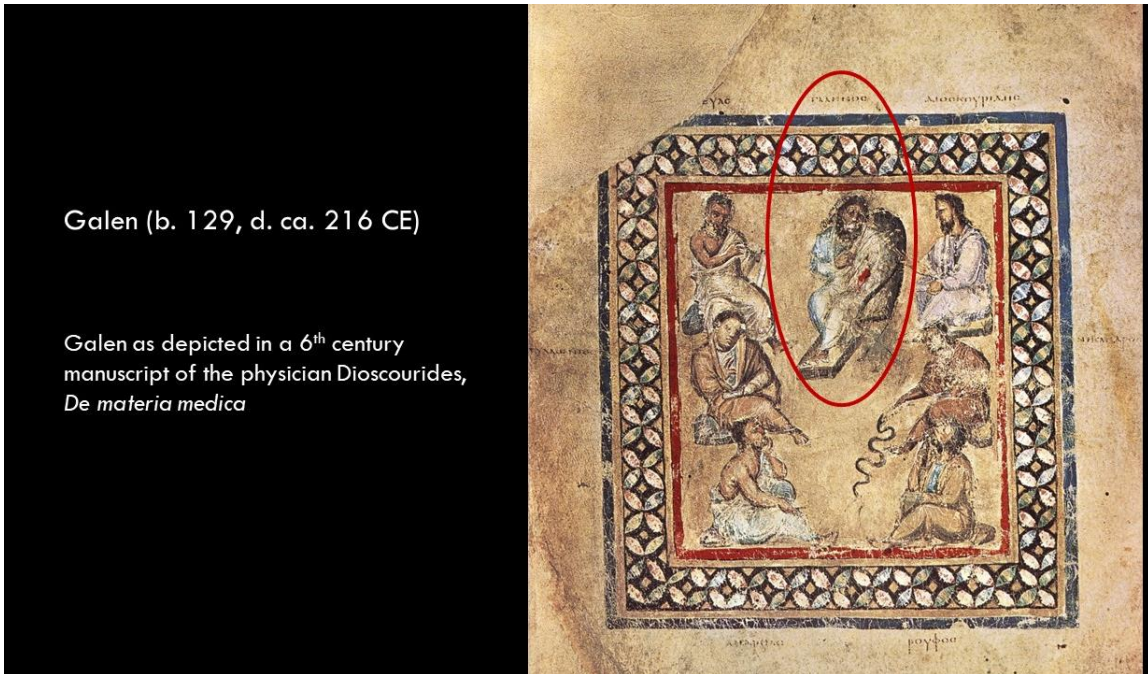


Fig. 9

He also wrote a lot, well over one hundred medical texts, and many of these survive to this day. Indeed, his writings alone comprise one-tenth of all surviving Greek literature from Homer through the end of the second century. One-tenth!

Still, many classicists do not read Galen. Part of the reason is that Galen's writings are medical texts, not "literature." For a long time, the focus within classics on certain kinds of texts (poetry, polished historical narratives, and the like) afforded little space for thinking about medical literature, much less for thinking about the bodies of most inhabitants of the Greco-Roman world. The study of ancient medicine is a recent subfield of classics.

So why do we have so much of Galen's literary output, more so than of any other Greek or Roman author? Part of the reason is that scientists, physicians, and philosophers, among others, have long been interested in what Galen has to say about anatomy and physiology, about pharmacology, about logic and empiricism. These scholars would read Galen and hand his texts on, having them recopied to circulate not only in Greek—the language in which Galen wrote—but also in Latin, Hebrew, Syriac, and Arabic. Some of his treatises survive only in Arabic, and there is a huge tradition of Islamic scholars from the Middle Ages onward who studied and commented on Galen's writings, like Ḥunayn Ibn Ishāq (d. 873) and Ibn Sina (d.1037).

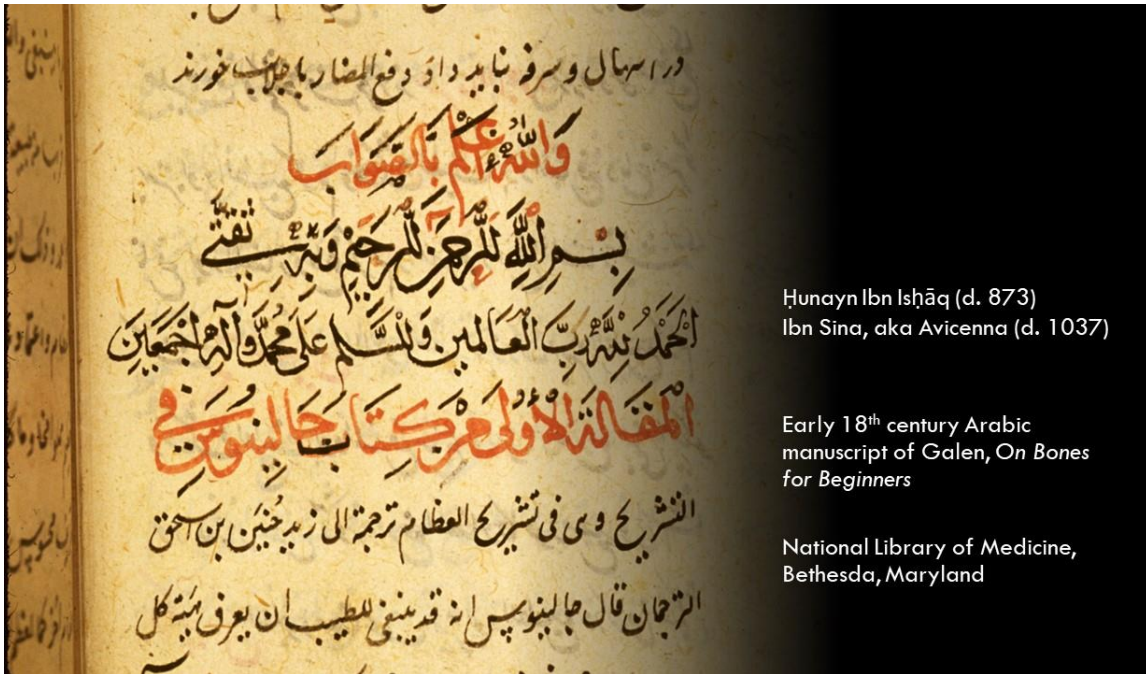


Fig. 10

Galen's work exerted a deep and far-reaching influence on medical practice well into the 19th century even here in the United States, particularly his view of the body's mixtures, which is an expansion and elaboration of Hippocratic humoral theory. I wish I had time to talk about that today.

But I think you can see from what I have said already that Galen is a major figure from Greco-Roman antiquity, and in the time that remains, I want to give you a brief overview of Galen's fascinating life and talk a bit about one of his texts in particular.

Galen's Life



Fig. 11

Galen was raised in Pergamon, a large, wealthy, culturally diverse city in the Roman province of Asia. He was from a well-to-do family who set Galen on a path of rigorous training in both philosophy and medicine that began in Pergamon and continued with teachers in Ephesus, Smyrna, and Alexandria, among other places. This is roughly equivalent to going off to college and medical school. He then returned to Pergamon to begin his own medical practice.⁵

I am struck by the impact that the city of Pergamon itself exerted on Galen. First, Pergamon had one of the largest and most popular sanctuaries of the healing god Asklepios.



Fig. 12

Galen would have been aware of this sanctuary and its many displays of the human body. Moreover, he himself was healed by Asklepios.

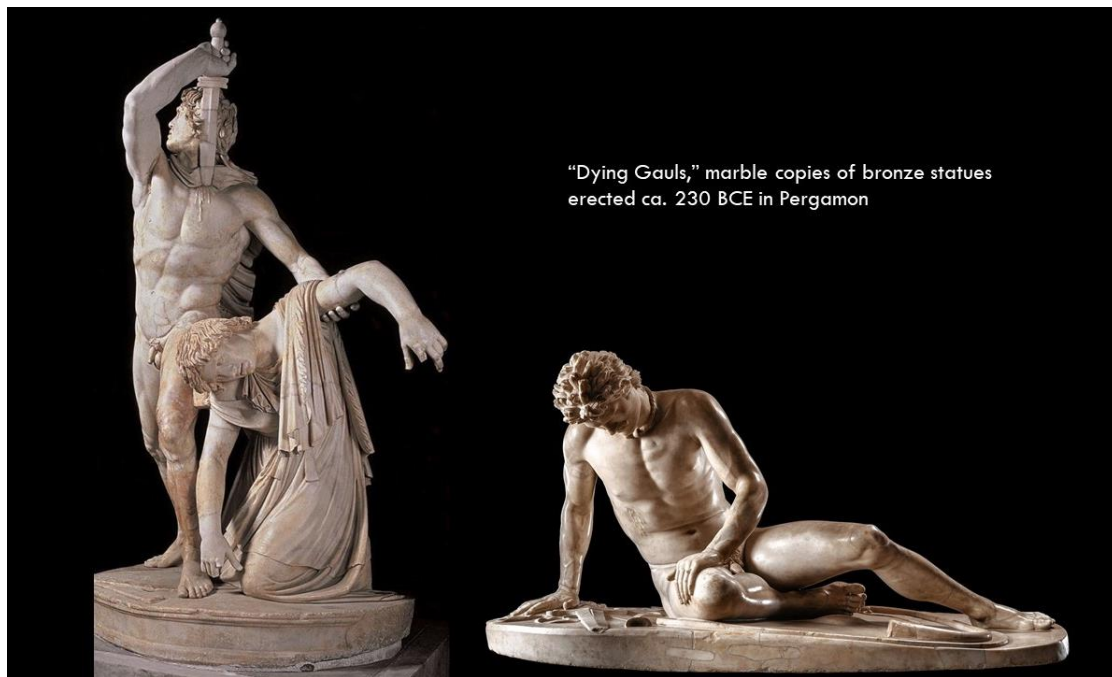
Galen was also intimately aware of gladiatorial combat, having been appointed physician to the gladiatorial school at Pergamon.



Fig. 13

He served in this role for at least four years, coming into contact again and again with human anatomy in ways that most physicians would never have seen: there were taboos against dissecting human corpses, and so direct knowledge of human anatomy came mostly from chance encounters with bodies opened through violence: battles, gladiatorial combat, and the like. Indirect knowledge of human anatomy came from dissections and even vivisections of animals, like monkeys and pigs. Indeed, Galen won his position of physician to the gladiators based upon an anatomical demonstration in which he disemboweled a live monkey, pulling out its intestines, while the monkey is writhing and screeching, and in this moment challenged other physicians in the audience to come forward, replace the intestines, and secure them within the abdominal cavity. No one accepted the challenge, but Galen assures us that he successfully completed the procedure.

Galen would also have seen bodies on display across the Acropolis of Pergamon, such as a series of statues known as “The Dying Gauls” installed in the third century before the common era by King Attalus I to celebrate a military victory.



“Dying Gauls,” marble copies of bronze statues erected ca. 230 BCE in Pergamon

Fig. 14

These too would have been painted and thus the blood pooling around their wounds would have stood out starkly. He would also have seen an enormous altar to Zeus on the Acropolis, around which runs a frieze of gods battling giants.



Fig. 15

This frieze is a tour de force of Hellenistic sculptural style: the figures are larger than life size, the bodies moving, twisting, writhing, the emotions expressed on the faces amplified.

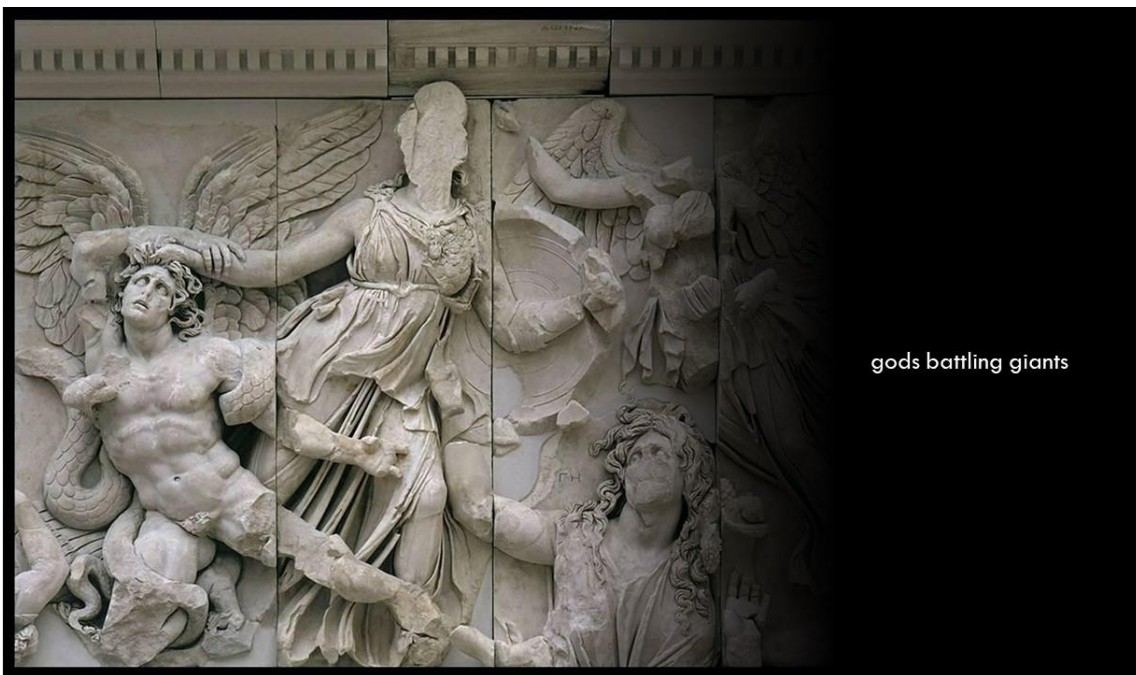


Fig. 16



Fig. 17

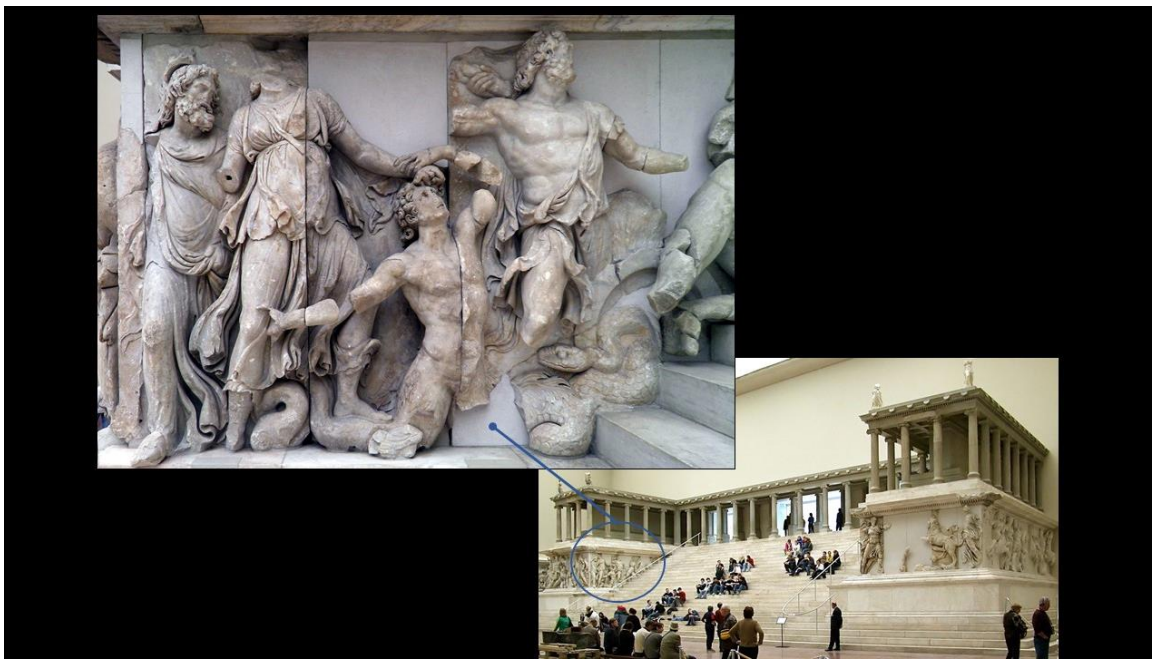


Fig. 18



Fig. 19

Worshippers were meant to come face to face with these figures. Notice how some of the figures crawl up the very stairs that worshippers would have ascended.



Fig. 20

This modern observer is Charlie Chaplin, by the way.

Galen grew up around this art, around these rituals of gladiatorial combat and divine healing, that put the human body front and center. But Galen grew restless in Pergamon and at the age of 32, he arrived in Rome, a city where he would spend most of the rest of his life, a city of about one million inhabitants where for most people average life

expectancy was under the age of...25.⁶



Fig. 21

Wabash students, welcome to middle age! One medical historian has remarked that “in squalor and lethality Rome far exceeded any modern city,” and she goes on to add, “Galen practiced medicine for decades in one of human history’s most unhealthy environments.”⁷

Here in unhealthy Rome Galen treated very many people, from the enslaved to elites, conducting more bloody, noisy anatomical demonstrations and debating rival physicians on the streets of the city, quickly building a reputation as a highly skilled healer. His reputation would reach the emperor, Marcus Aurelius, who summoned Galen to Aquileia in northern Italy where the Romans were fighting the Marcomanni, a Germanic tribe.



Fig. 22

Galen was put in charge of treating sick and wounded soldiers there. Within a year, Galen returned to Rome, only to be appointed personal physician to the son of Marcus Aurelius: a youth named Commodus. Meanwhile, Galen wrote a lot, as we have heard.

Peri alupias, or How to Avoid Distress

Let's turn now, at last, to one particular text of Galen's. The title in Greek is *Περὶ ἀλυπίας* (*Peri alupias*), which we might translate as *How to Avoid Distress*.⁸ It's a bit of a memoir, a bit of a self-help book. Now if I were giving this talk twenty years ago, which I realize is a lifetime to you, Wabash students, but it's beginning to feel to me like a nanosecond in an academic career... As I was saying, if I were giving this talk twenty short years ago, I would not be speaking about this text, the reason being that twenty years ago we did not know that it still existed.

Here's what happened: scholars had known the title of this text because Galen mentions it elsewhere, and quotations from it had been excerpted in Arabic and Hebrew. But the full text was recovered only in 2005 by chance: a scholar from France came across it when conducting research in the library of a monastery in northern Greece, in Thessalonike. There it was, a copy of a text originally produced some 1800 years earlier, believed to have been lost for good. The copy that was found in the monastery, by the way, was made in the 15th century. Obviously, it is not just from the ground that we recover data from the ancient past.

What does this newly recovered text have to say? It is essentially a response to a lifelong friend of Galen's who has asked Galen how it is that he seems not to be suffering distress despite having lost very much property in a recent fire. From other sources we know that a major fire ravaged Rome in the year 192 CE, when Galen was in his early 60s. Galen describes this fire in the treatise *Peri alupias*.

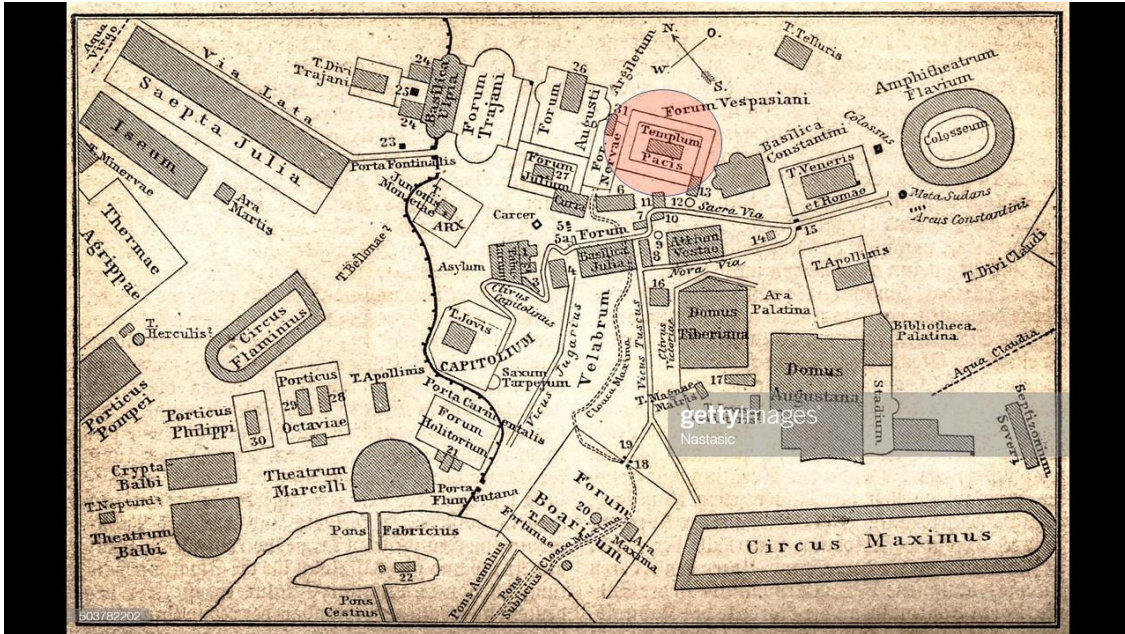


Fig. 23

The Great Fire, as he calls it, tore through the center of Rome, beginning at the Temple of Peace, moving through buildings along the Via Sacra, and climbing the Palatine Hill, where not only the imperial palaces were located but also the Palatine Libraries.

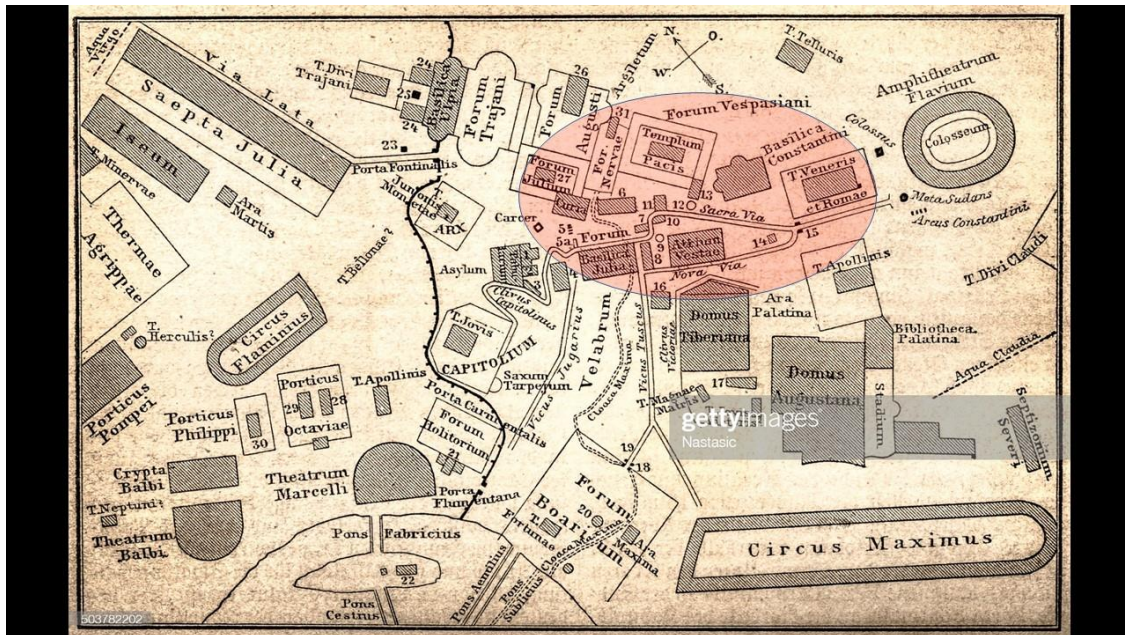


Fig. 24

Galen does not say whether the palaces were damaged—I do not think he cares much about them—but he writes at length about extensive damage to the library collections.

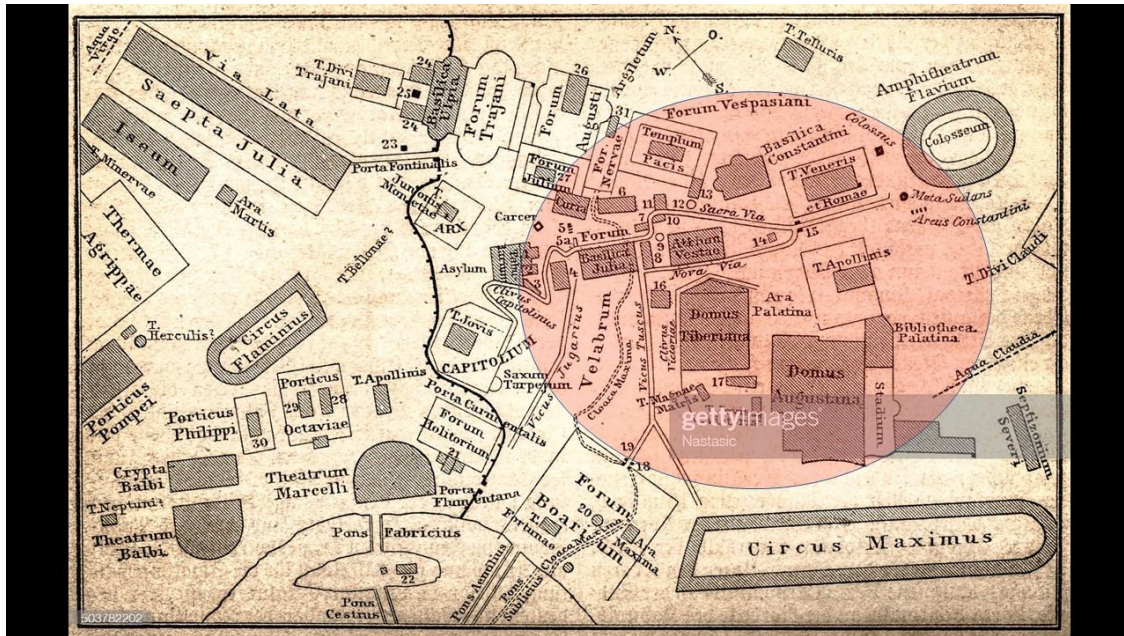


Fig. 25

According to Galen, the fire destroyed important works of philosophy by Plato, Aristotle, and Theophrastus, critical editions of Homer by Alexandrian scholars, along with noted works by orators, doctors, and grammarians. Some of these books existed only at this library; Galen tells us there were no copies. This was a great loss to Galen who used the Palatine libraries for research and to make copies of some books for his own use.

Many of those copies that Galen made were also lost in the fire. Galen had been renting storage space in a warehouse along the Via Sacra. Perhaps you thought that storage units were a recent American invention? Not so. The Romans had them and they lined their roads with them, too. Galen had been storing many books and other materials related to his medical practice in one of these warehouses. He thought that the particular warehouse where he had rented space was fireproof: he remarks that the doors were the only wooden components. Still the fire burned, destroying Galen's collections not only of books but of medical recipes; also wax molds for casting instruments, some of his own design; spices like Cinnamon imported all the way from India, a key ingredient in a compound drug known as theriac, a sort of panacea or cure-all; and he lost other drugs, including perhaps his collection of prized tablets of medicinal earth from the Greek island of Lemnos.

It is information like this that excites me. Here Galen lifts the curtain on the social history of healthcare in a way that few other sources do. I am working now on a project on medical tourism in antiquity. I'm curious about the movement not only of patients (where and why they travelled for healing), but of practitioners (many of whom were itinerant in antiquity, moving from town to town to dispense healthcare), as well as *materia medica* (drugs, instruments, recipes, and the like). This particular text of Galen's shines a bright light on the topic.

I would like to engage in an aside for a moment about Lemnian earth. Greeks and Romans used earth from Lemnos for all sorts of medical conditions: eye complaints, ulcers, snake

bites, plague, as well as a host of other ailments. They even used it as an aphrodisiac. Sometimes it was ingested, other times applied topically. Galen himself sailed to Lemnos to learn more about how the tablets of Lemnian earth were produced.⁹ Here is what he learned by watching the process: a priestess of Artemis harvested the soil when it was wet with spring water, she formed it into tablets, stamping each of them with an image of a goat, and laid them out in the sun to dry. After this the tablets were ready for distribution. Galen believed so strongly in their therapeutic benefit that he shipped 20,000 tablets of Lemnian earth back to Rome. We might be thinking, what the heck? They used earth as a cure? We still do something like this today. Maybe you have heard of Terramycin?



Fig. 26

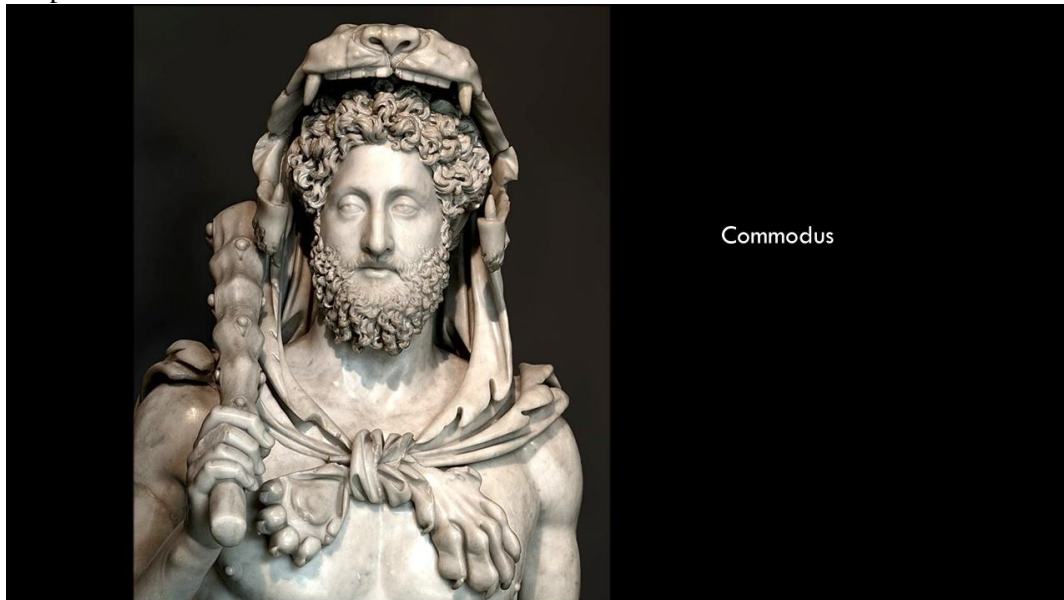
In the 1940s the pharmaceutical company Pfizer discovered that soil near one of its laboratories contained antibiotic compounds. They

marketed this as Terramycin as early as 1950. The terra of Terramycin means earth, but not just any earth. Pfizer discovered the antibiotic compounds in earth located in Terre Haute, Indiana. That is why it is called Terramycin.¹⁰ So there you have it: a close link between Indiana and a small Greek island, between ancient and modern medical practice. And Terramycin is still used for eye conditions. Oh, humility!

Back to the fire: Galen goes through his inventory of things he has lost in the fire and says, let's also keep in mind, dear friend, a couple of other recent phenomena that have caused many people distress.

The first of these additional phenomena was a pandemic: the so-called Antonine plague, which may have been smallpox. It caused the death of "very many people," as Galen puts it; perhaps twenty-five percent of the population of the Roman Empire died (that would be roughly 15 million people). Galen was on the front lines of treatment, almost literally: remember that he was with the Roman troops at the battlefield in northern Italy. The year was 165 CE, the same year that the plague hit. He spent the first winter of the disease with the army and observes that during winter the disease was worse, which might sound familiar from our experience with COVID.¹¹ This plague also had recurring outbreaks for more than two decades. Here I want to remind us again about humility: we are still learning about COVID. It is hard for scientists even in the 21st century to keep up with a rapidly evolving virus.

The second additional source of distress was a narcissistic, unpredictable head of state: the emperor Commodus.



Commodus became sole emperor when he was 19 years old and ruled until he was assassinated at the age of 31, in the year 192 CE, the same year as the Great Fire. Commodus was quite a character. He thought he was a new Hercules, often dressing the part. As emperor, he spent a lot of time in gladiatorial arenas where he himself fought both men and animals.



The Emperor Commodus Leaving the Arena at the Head of the Gladiators, Edwin Blashfield , ca. 1870
Hermitage Museum and Gardens, Norfolk, VA

As to narcissism, he wanted to rename Rome 'Commodiana,' after his own name, and he replaced the head of a giant statue of Nero outside the Colosseum with his own likeness. It is hard to one-up Nero in terms of vanity, but Commodus may have outdone him. Moreover, Commodus was so defensive and anxious about his position as emperor that he ordered either the execution, or exile to distant lands, of almost anyone he perceived as a threat to his authority. No one was safe, certainly none of the elites with close ties to the imperial court, like Galen.

How did Galen manage all of this? Surely, he felt distress. All of us know what's it's like to deal with a pandemic that threatens lives and lingers. Moreover, some of us may be wondering about the health of our own body politic, especially in the wake of the assault on the United States Capitol in January 2021. Furthermore, some of us, especially women, might be concerned about the fact that we have less autonomy over our reproductive health here in the state of Indiana than we did just one week ago.¹² There were no laws against abortion in Greco-Roman antiquity, certainly not through the time of Galen. It is sobering to me to think that women in Greek and Roman antiquity had more legal autonomy over their bodies with respect to abortion than we have today in parts of the United States. As to large-scale fires, along with floods and other natural disasters, we hear about these frequently in the news as the result of climate change.

Despite all of this—the fire, the plague, Commodus—Galen's response to his friend is, "I do not feel distress," which ushers in the self-help portion of his text. I am not going to discuss his recommendations about avoiding distress in detail. I am not sure we want to follow his advice; I'll leave solutions for avoiding distress to your own mental healthcare professionals. But I am struck by the fact that Galen's preventative measures have him leaning into his training in what we call the liberal arts: in philosophy and literature, above all. Friend, he says, you know as well as I—we studied philosophy together in Pergamon—that desire often begets more desire.

"Who, unlike most people, is not distressed? Those with only a moderate attachment to esteem, wealth, reputation, and political power." (§ 81)

In other words, it is okay that I have lost a lot of property, even irreplaceable items. I have enough food, shelter; I have my family and friends.

What does concern Galen is the very real possibility that he will lose his family and friends:

"What will distress me is the destruction of my homeland, a friend being punished by a tyrant, and other things like this, and I pray to the gods that none of this should ever happen to me." (§ 72)

Pray though he might, Galen does not leave the aversion of disaster entirely in the hands of the gods. He trains his body and mind daily to prepare for misfortune. In addition to regular

physical exercise, he engages in a kind of proto cognitive therapy by reminding himself— reciting to himself—a passage from a now-lost tragedy by the poet Euripides. One of the characters in this tragedy says:

“As I once learned from a wise man,
I fell to considering disasters constantly,
Adding for myself exile from my native land,
Untimely deaths and other ways of
misfortune,
So that, should I ever suffer any of what I was imagining,
It might not gnaw at my soul because it was a new arrival.” (§§ 52 and 77)

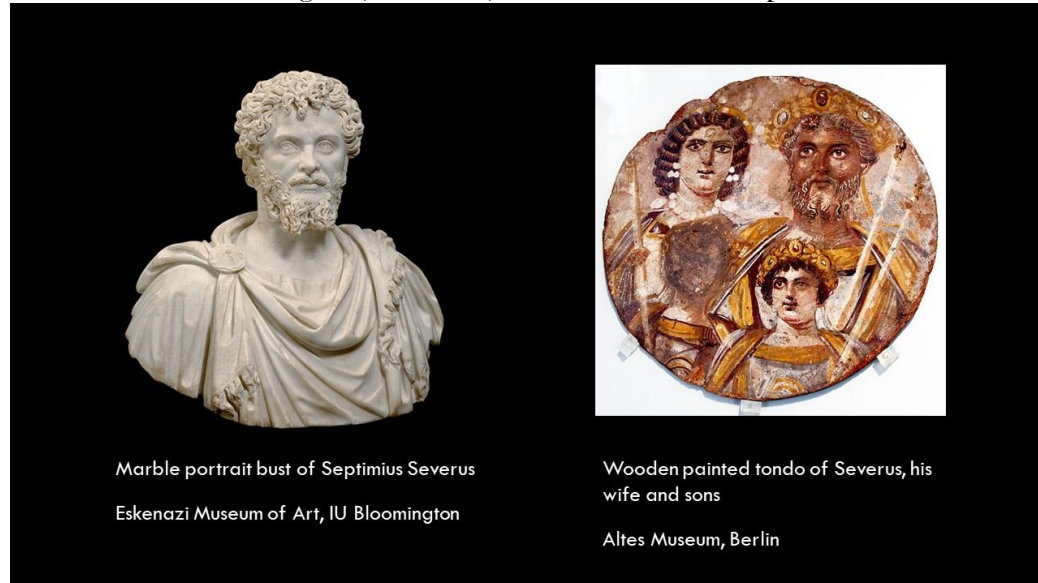
Galen seems to believe that he can avoid distress by envisioning misfortunes in detail before they occur, training his mind to anticipate the suffering they would cause. He even repeats this passage twice over the course of *Peri alupias*; it rings like a kind of mantra.

Galen does acknowledge here and in other texts how very fortunate he is to have been born into a family with resources and exposed to a great education. He knows he is privileged. He also remarks how hard he has worked to master the discipline of medicine: he studied and practiced almost compulsively. For this reason, he disdains many other elites and even says that he never wanted to serve the imperial court: he hates the posturing, the faux intellectualism of privileged men who have not worked hard to learn anything *deeply*. Galen can spot such people a mile away and eviscerates them intellectually, much as he did the monkey.

Perhaps Galen’s therapies worked: he would outlive Commodus by about twenty years and would serve yet another emperor, Septimius Severus. Commodus had left no heir, by the way, and in a single year Rome went through four would-be emperors until one stuck: Septimius Severus, from northern Africa.



I mention this in part because there is a beautiful portrait bust of him at the Eskenazi Museum in Bloomington, Indiana, on which traces of paint have been found.



Marble portrait bust of Septimius Severus
Eskenazi Museum of Art, IU Bloomington

Wooden painted tondo of Severus, his
wife and sons
Altes Museum, Berlin

We cannot see that paint anymore with the naked eye, but this wooden tondo gives us an idea of how colorful the portrait bust must have been.

As to Galen, he died finally in the early third century at the age of about 87, which just goes to show what a good diet, exercise, and access to excellent healthcare can do for you!

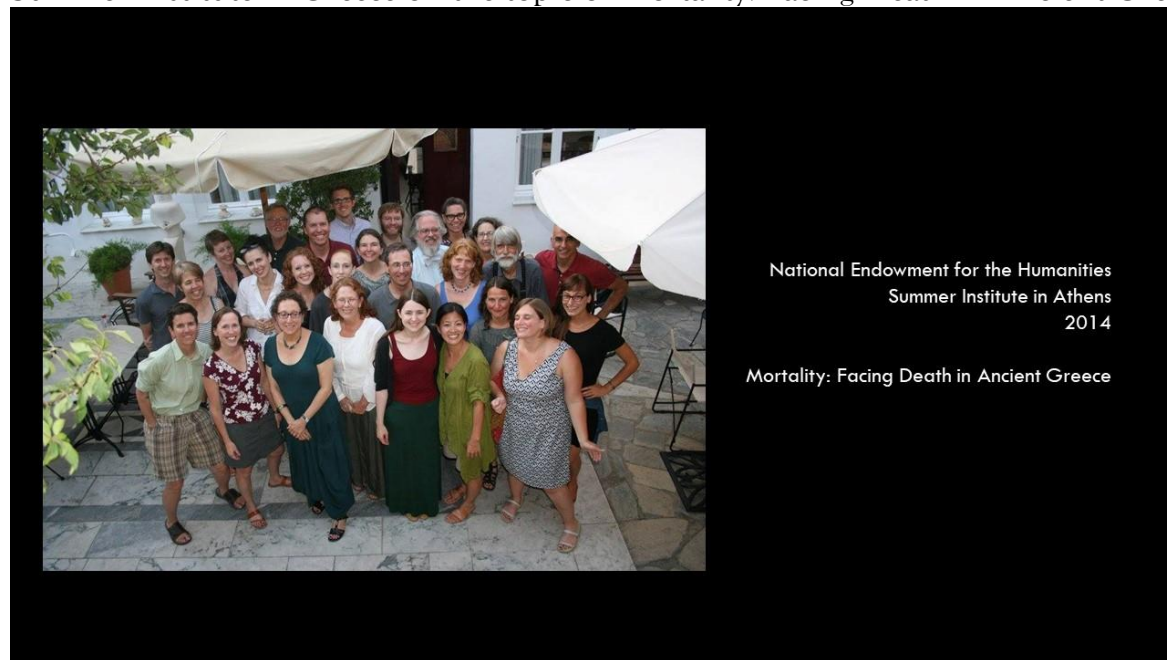
So that's a little about the elephant in the room: Galen. It's a little about one text with relevance to us in the 21st century, a text that puts me in Rome, on the Via Sacra, that puts me in touch, even indirectly, with the stuff of the practice of Greco-Roman medicine. Moreover,

it's a text that I hope demonstrates how the study of healthcare makes for an intimate connection to the distant past.

Hanging Threads

Over the years listening to LaFollette lectures, I have marveled how so many of my colleagues have brought their talks to a beautiful conclusion, tying up all the loose threads in an elegant way. I am going to resist the temptation to do that today. Instead, I'm going to leave hanging some of the threads that I've pulled upon. The word solution means to loosen, not to tie up, and I am going to leave you with some uncertainty that I hope will lead to conversation.

Bodies are often a place where justice and injustice play out, as the threats posed by Commodus illustrate well, or the sculptures of the dying Gauls or of gods battling giants. In 2014, I had the good fortune to take part in a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute in Greece on the topic of Mortality: Facing Death in Ancient Greece.



That institute brought together scholars from various disciplines: political science, history, art, philosophy, religion, comparative literature, anthropology, and classics. The conversations were incredibly rich, informed as they were by a variety of perspectives.

We explored in person many ancient artifacts like this one: the so-called Dipylon vase.



Dipylon Vase, ca. 750 BCE
National Archaeological Museum, Athens

It's tall for a vase, about my height (I'm just over 5 feet tall). It stood in a cemetery in Athens where it served as a grave marker, like a tombstone. On it we see the depiction of a death ritual: the body of the deceased lying out for the community to mourn. Most of the figures are pulling at their hair as an act of grief, even those under the handles of the vase.

At the conclusion of the institute, all of us participants gave presentations about our work, including Dr. Wendy Wright, a professor of Political, Legal and Urban Studies.



Dr. Wendy Wright
William Patterson University
Professor of Political, Legal and Urban Studies

She began with a slide of the Dipylon vase, focusing our attention on the figures in mourning, and then she projected next to it a slide like this, of a black man being arrested.



The bodily gestures are very similar; there is a sort of visual echo. There was an audible gasp from the audience that day in 2014, perhaps most of all from us classicists who had viewed this vase dozens of times (it is a very famous work of Greek art) but we had never seen it through this lens.

Yes, of course, these two items—the arrest of a black man and this ancient vase—are not directly connected. But the juxtaposition—the coincidental similarity of gestures and even skin color—is striking. I have not been able to look at this vase the same way since. How does the

image of this man, kneeling before police with his arms on his head, inform our understanding of Greek antiquity? How does the image on the ancient vase inform my understanding of justice in our world day? I do not have easy answers. But I feel that there is something powerful here that might lead to conversation, and I believe strongly that some distress, some discomfort, is not a bad thing—it can be productive as we look for ways to make our world better for all of humanity.

The humanities when practiced well have us wrestling with difficult topics and engaging in challenging discussion informed by a variety of viewpoints, including a view towards the past. As a classicist and, yes, as a rower, I am trained to look carefully at the past while navigating into the future.

Thank you all!

ὕμῶν χάριν ἀποδίδωμι!

¹ 38% of tenured faculty in classics are women, according to the latest data published by the Society for Classical Studies.

² <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/251476>

³ M. Talbot, “The Myth of Whiteness in Classical Sculpture,” *The New Yorker*, October 29, 2018.

⁴ <https://labeling.pfizer.com/ShowLabeling.aspx?id=630>, §12.1, “Mechanism of Action.”

⁵ Two great introductions to Galen’s life and times are V. Nutton, *Galen: A Thinking Doctor in Imperial Rome* (Routledge 2020), and S.P. Mattern, *Galen: The Prince of Medicine* (Oxford 2013).

⁶ S.P. Mattern, *Galen: The Prince of Medicine* (Oxford 2013) 125.

⁷ S.P. Mattern, *Galen: The Prince of Medicine* (Oxford 2013) 112-13.

⁸ Translated by V. Nutton, with an introduction, in *Galen: Psychological Writings*, edited by P.N. Singer (Cambridge 2013) 45-106.

⁹ Galen, *On simple drugs*, 9.2.

¹⁰ P. Radden Keefe, *Empire of Pain: The Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty* (Doubleday 2021) 35.

¹¹ Galen, *My own books*, 18.

¹² A new law restricting access to abortion went into effect on September 15, 2022. On September 22, 2022, the day of the LaFollette Lecture, a judge issued a preliminary injunction against the law.