

Whatever may be thought of the origin of Greek medicine, there can be no doubt that it quickly and immeasurably surpassed that of the other races of antiquity. And the cardinal feature of Greek medicine, the one thing which differentiates it from that of the surrounding nations, the sole principle that has proved true and lasting, the spirit of scientific enquiry, originated with the Greeks. Medicine, then, like all else, they made peculiarly their own and impressed it with their own particular genius.

The age before the siege of Troy may be termed the Prehistoric Period. We have seen reason for thinking that even at this remote time the Greeks were not entirely devoid of medical knowledge. Gradually it would come about, at a time when writing was unknown, that this knowledge would be handed from one person to another, usually members of certain families, and eventually these families would enjoy considerable repute. Later tradition pointed out certain individuals who were thought to have attained more than ordinary eminence in the practice of their profession. Melampus, a shepherd, was probably the first to distinguish himself by the extraordinary cures that he wrought.

The daughters of Prætes, King of Argos, had taken vows of celibacy, and as a consequence, developed strange nervous manifestations with delusions. They imagined themselves transformed into cows and roamed the forests and fields instead of palatial halls. Their example proved contagious and many other women became possessed of the same monomania. Melampus, having noted the purgative effect of white hellebore, when eaten by goats, gave to the young women milk in which this plant had been steeped, thereby quickly effecting a cure. All this seems strangely familiar. History repeats itself, as some sage, lost to history, has remarked. It seems to me that not long ago I read of the theory being advanced that hysteria and neurasthenia are really manifestations of a gastrointestinal intoxication. The imitative disorders, also, to which neurotic persons are liable were well known in later times. In the Middle Ages, indeed, they assumed extreme and even grotesque forms.

Of greater renown was Chiron, the centaur, a prince of Thessaly, who appears to have flourished about the thirteenth century before Christ. He was distinguished for his preeminence in all the gentler arts of life, and his skill as a horseman probably led to the fable of his dual form. He excelled, also, in medicine and music, and it was at his feet that Asklepios, or Æsculapius, imbibed that knowledge of the art of healing which made him renowned among the ancients. This is, perhaps, the first example of the apprenticeship system in history, it may be remarked.