The Hippocratic Oath
An Early Text

The excavations carried out by B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt at Oxyrhynchus (the modern Behna) in Middle Egypt from 1896 to 1907 under the auspices of the Egypt Exploration Society* have made the site famous as the most productive single source of papyri written in Greek. The majority of these are documents of every sort, public and private, which give us detailed insight into the administration of Egypt and the everyday life of its people during the thousand years in which Greek was spoken and written there. Of even greater general interest is the great store of literary texts from the site, which are usually fragmentary but always precious. Some come from works long lost; others, like the subject of the present article, which represent works already known, are none the less valuable for the contribution they make to the history and interpretation of their text. So great was the quantity of material originally found that even now, when the Society is about to produce its thirtieth volume of papyri from Oxyrhynchus, the work of sorting and examination is by no means over, and fresh discoveries remain to be made.

When looking through the contents of one of the many boxes into which the smaller fragments were put by their discoverers I was fortunate enough to identify a scrap which may be thought to possess importance out of proportion to its size—a small part of one of the most significant writings in medical history, the Oath attributed to Hippocrates of Cos. The fragment, which is to be published in Vol. xxxi of the Oxyrhynchus Papyri, measures 5.2 cm. in width by 10.5 cm. high; it contains the right halves of 15 lines of writing from a passage near the beginning of the Oath, in a clear but rather laboured hand, on the back of some agricultural accounts, now almost illegible. (The fact that the Oath is written across the fibres of the papyrus indicates that the other side was written first.) The writing is seen by comparison with more firmly dated hands to belong to the third century A.D. Whether we believe the Oath to be the work of Hippocrates himself or accept the hypothesis of L. Edelstein of its later origin in Pythagorean circles, probably in the fourth century B.C., the copy is some centuries later than the composition of the original. However, the fact that the earliest manuscript of the Oath previously known is of eleventh-century date is itself interesting, and even more significant is the difference of this copy from any text which has come down in the manuscript tradition—a divergence so wide that barely half of its lines can be restored with confidence.

The text of the mediaeval manuscripts of the Hippocratic corpus in general shows many minor variations; this is a common tendency in ancient medical works, since they were regarded by those who copied and used them less as literary treasures to be preserved from corruption at all costs than as handbooks whose main purpose was to convey the writer's meaning. There is one manuscript, however, which presents such an eccentric text of the Oath that it has generally been left out of account by scholars; this is the fourteenth century Milan MS. Ambrosianus Gr. B 113 sup. (cited here as Am); W. H. S. Jones prints it separately in The Doctor's Oath.2 (It is to be noted that the same manuscript also contains the much-altered and abridged adaptation of the Doctor's Oath made in later antiquity for use by Christian physicians.) Our text (cited here as Oxy) is by no means identical with Am, but it shows several correspondences with it which cannot be coincidental. Where the majority of manuscripts have διατίμησιν τῆς χρήματος “I will use treatments (for the benefit of patients),” Oxy agrees with Am in adding πίσιν “all after διατίμησιν: “all treatments.” This is followed in the majority of manuscripts by a passage whose obscurity is probably due to an old and deep-seated corruption; it contains the phrase κατὰ δύναμιν καὶ χρῆσιν ἔχων “according to my ability and judgment.” Am has a different word order, and substitutes for this phrase κατὰ γνώμην ἔχων “according to my opinion”; Oxy, using again a different word order, also has κατὰ γνώμην δύναμιν. Before this Oxy has παρέχω ἐπί τινι προδοσίᾳ “he has ventured to commit an apostasy to a woman,” however, is used by Am alone a little later where the majority have ὅλα δὲ δόθων “neither will I give . . .”; the text of Oxy is lost here. The correspondences of such an early version of the Oath as Oxy with the eccentric Am are likely to cause scholars to revise their opinion of the latter's importance (though not, as we shall see, of its authenticity), and seem to confirm Jones'1 judgment about the fluidity of the Hippocratic text in antiquity, and the probability that the textus receptus represents only one form of it whose triumph over others was due to mere accident.

But this is not all. It may also be relevant to ask a question: Is the Oath administered to doctors in classical antiquity? This has often been assumed, but never proved, and is sometimes doubted. I believe that Oxy at least suggests a confirmation of this assumption on two grounds. First, in spite of its comparatively early date, there are indications that its language has been modified to serve a practical end. Hippocrates (and any who would imitate him) wrote in Ionic, one of the dialects of Greek which by the time our oyster was written had long been superseded throughout the Greek-speaking world by a common standard form of the language (koinè). Manuscripts of literary works originally written in one of the local dialects do not rewrite them in koinè; this applies to extant manuscripts of the Hippocratic corpus. But as we have seen, the practical application of medical works makes them especially subject to textual interference. Our text of the Oath preserves Ionic forms where there is no danger that they will impair its intelligibility. But there is one place at least where a rare word which might not be generally familiar in koinè has plainly been replaced by one which, though poetic, will have been understood by all; this is where, in the promise to give treatments for the benefit of patients and not for their hurt, the unfamiliar word for “hurt” used in the majority of manuscripts, διάρθρας, has been replaced by διάρρηκτον, which every one knew. The words παρέχω and γνώμην (mentioned above) are also probably substitutions to clarify the sense. Adaptations like these would be natural enough in a text used for the practical purpose of swearing in a new member of the medical profession—a member perhaps of a guild. This suspicion is increased by the general appearance of the piece. It is, as we have seen, written on the back of a document, from which it was probably torn by the person who wrote it in a reasonably educated but unpractised hand. A couple of minor spelling errors heighten the impression that it is not part of a library copy of the Hippocratic works made by a professional literary scribe, but a writing, perhaps from memory, meant to serve the need of a specific occasion.

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References
3 Ibid., p. 22.
5 Ibid., p. 39.

* The owners of the papyrus discussed here, by whose permission this article is written. Further excavations were subsequently made there at intervals by an Italian society.