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Brill's Companion to the Reception of Galen edited by Petros Bouras-Vallianatos and Barbara Zipser

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With 31 chapters and over nearly 700 densely written pages, this bulky volume manages the difficult task of giving a comprehensive account of the afterlife of the Greek physician Galen (129–216 AD). Over the past few decades, his work has aroused much interest to the point that such a book has become increasingly desirable, if not necessary. Apart from the always useful synthesis of O. Temkin [1973] to which the editors refer in their introduction—one could also mention V. Nutton, [1982] and V. Boudon-Millot [2007, xci–ccxxviii]—it was indeed until now very difficult to find information about the multiple facets of the evolution of Galen's corpus and ideas in one place. The book covers all historical periods, with a strong focus on the medieval reception. It brings together a wide range of renowned international experts in various linguistic areas (Greek, Latin, and Arabic, but also Syriac, Hebrew, Armenian, and even Chinese, Tibetan, Persian, and Urdu) who demonstrate an impressive command of the sources and make them accessible to all readers alike.

The volume follows a roughly chronological order that does not challenge the received views on the Western medical tradition. Less well-known subjects not included in the standard picture, such as Galen's Armenian or Asian reception, are gathered in the last part, not without surprise, since the Hebrew scientific writings also appear in it apart from the chapters on the Islamic tradition which do include a contribution on Maimonides. In any event, chapters in the collection need not be read in sequence, and the editors do propose an alternative order with three main thematic units:

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- textual transmission and dissemination (by far the most substantial unit),
- the impact of Galenic thought and medical practice,
- and the way Galen has been portrayed in non-medical contexts.

Each paper also includes an up-to-date bibliography which allows selective reading and comes in handy for using the book as a reference work. This *Companion* is indeed intended for scholars but also students and non-specialist readers. However, it is doubtful that all the papers reach such a large general audience: while there are some remarkable synthetical chapters (e.g., by Nutton, M. Green, P. Bouras-Vallianatos or A. Pietrobelli) on well-studied subjects, other chapters (e.g., by S. Bhayro, R. Alessi, and B. Zipser, or by A. Orengo and I. Tinti) on much more specialized topics present preliminary results of ongoing research. However, it is also one of the most appealing features of the book to give readers an overview of our *current* understanding of the reception of Galen so that they can navigate through a rapidly evolving field of research.

The first part covers the reception of Galen in late antiquity and Byzantium. Pietrobelli [ch. 1] considers the “Galenic question” anew: paradoxically, the earliest reports on Galen (second and third centuries AD) portray him less as a physician than as a philosopher and exegete. Pietrobelli explores the testimonies of Pollux and Athenaeus of Naucratis, Alexander of Aphrodisias, and Eusebius of Caesarea (on the Christian Theodotian sect), as well as the possible use of Galen by Clement of Alexandria and Origen.

However, by the late sixth century, Galenism had already become a foremost medical doctrine. The next two chapters show how this was achieved. Bouras-Vallianatos [ch. 2] studies the use of Galen by Greek and Latin medical compilers between the fourth and seventh centuries (Oribasius, Aetius of Amida, Paul of Aegina, Alexander of Tralles, Theodore Priscianus, and Cassius Felix). He stresses that the project of transmitting, promoting, and abbreviating the medical knowledge of the time was open to a plurality of views and geared towards practical purposes. I. Garofalo [ch. 3] presents the constitution of the Alexandrian canon of Galen’s works (late fifth to sixth centuries) and describes how his texts were selected, abbreviated, and organized, but also how they were commented on and used in teaching. Apart from a few innovations in anatomy, the aim was essentially that of preservation.

The next four chapters are centered on the Byzantine tradition. Bouras-Vallianatos [ch. 4] begins with medical writings in which Galen stands out as

an authoritative figure. As in late antique textbooks, his teachings were systematized but also adapted to the Christian context and sometimes complemented (in sphymology and uroscopy). Bouras-Vallianatos also highlights the irreverence of Symeon Seth, the originality of John Aktouarios, and the Italian connections of John Argyropoulos.

Zipser [ch. 5] goes on to discuss *iatrosophia*, an ill-defined genre of text with a practical potential (still in use in 20th-century Crete), ranging from collections of excerpts to medical codices. In them, Galen figures as an important source even if he is one among others and not necessarily a direct one.

P. Degni [ch. 6] focuses on the textual tradition and shows that it is not based on the Alexandrian canon and that it preserves Galen alongside other medical authors. Among the key manuscripts presented are those from Ioannikios and his colleague (12th century) or from the circle of John Argyropoulos (15th century).

D. Stathakopoulos [ch. 7] investigates non-medical texts in which Galen is pictured as a celebrity with unchallenged authority. But apart from the brief and critical survey of Photius (ninth century), active engagement with Galen's (essentially medical) texts begins only with Michael Psellus (11th century) and peaks in the 12th century in Anna Komnene's circle.

The second part is devoted to the medieval Islamic world. Bhayro [ch. 8] first turns to the Syriac textual tradition that has come under intense scrutiny in recent years. His study of the translations of Sergius of Resh 'Aina (sixth century), those of Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq (ninth century), and the so-called Syriac Renaissance (12th century) challenges received ideas of the Syriac tradition and shows its intrinsic interest.

The next chapters almost all focus on individual authors. G. Cooper [ch. 9] presents a key moment of the *translatio studiorum*: Galen's Arabic translations by Ḥunayn (ninth century). As Cooper explains, however powerful Galen's supporters were in Baghdad, this lifelong undertaking does not belong to an official program. Ḥunayn's reader-centered translation techniques are described as involving expansion, explanation, and semantic shifting.

P. Koetschet [ch. 10] concentrates on al-Rāzi (9th–10th century), who had a good first-hand knowledge of Galen's work. The medical and philosophical criticisms that al-Rāzi addressed to Galen (on topics such as matter, teleology, or optics) are tied to his reaction to Mu'tazilite doctrines and form part of his personal scientific project—an important milestone in the Arabic reception of Galen from the 10th century onwards, as shown, for example, by al-Fārābī or Ibn Riḍwān.

G. Strohmaier [ch. 11] explains how Ibn Sīnā (10th century) relied heavily on Galen in his *Canon*, but contrasts Galen's authority with that of Aristotle, and challenges some of Galen's central assumptions, especially about the heart, in psychology, embryology, and physiology.

M. Forcada [ch. 12] gives numerous examples of direct engagement with Galen in a medical landscape dominated by Ibn Sīnā's *Canon* with Galenic commentaries written in such diverse settings as the 11th-century Aristotelian school of Baghdad (Ibn al-Ṭayyib) and Fatimid Egypt (Ibn Riḍwān) or 12th-century al-Andalus (Ibn Bājja and his students).

Y. T. Langermann [ch. 13] explains that Maimonides (12th century) had a very good knowledge of Galen, which he studied closely, summarized, and annotated. But while Maimonides accepted Galen's medical authority, he criticized, sometimes harshly, Galen's tendency to take a stand on every subject, as he does on Aristotelian logic or the Mosaic doctrine of miracle and creation.

N. Fancy [ch. 14] shows that although Ibn al-Nafīs [13th century] relied heavily on Galen and his anatomy, he felt free to criticize and correct him based on his own theories (especially in cardiovascular physiology). In his comments to Hippocrates as well, Ibn al-Nafīs dissociated himself from Galenic interpretations.

Alessi [ch. 15] looks at Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a's biographical encyclopedia and what it says about the vitality of Galenic scholarship in Damascus and Cairo at the end of the Ayyūbid period. Alessi also shows how important the encyclopedia is for the textual tradition since it contains not only a list of the treatises then available but also many firsthand fragments.

L. Chipman [ch. 16] focuses on pharmacology: Muslim theorists (such as Sābūr or al-Kindī) sought to specify and quantify the degrees of faculties to enhance the understanding of compound drugs. But these developments were without any real effect on pharmacological practice (as exemplified by the findings of the Cairo Genizah), which is mainly characterized by the integration of new *materia medica* coming from the East.

The third part is about the medieval West. With a strong emphasis on the long 12th century, the first three chapters, which describe Galen's return to Latinate Europe, both overlap and complement each other. Green [ch. 17] explains that until the 11th century the Latin Galen is mostly in bits and pieces and without much influence. She shows that the revitalization of his *oeuvre* was a slow process that unfolded quietly throughout the 12th century. It is marked by the work of Constantine the African at Monte Cassino (who

is largely responsible for Galen's high repute in Europe) and by the great translation programs carried out in Toledo and Pisa (which ensured the availability of the texts).

Next, B. Long [ch. 18] introduces the Arabic-Latin translations. Coming from a tradition of Galenic synthesis, Constantine's works laid the terminological foundations for the time to come. But while Constantine passed over his Arabic sources (a tendency criticized by Stephen of Antioch), translators in Toledo such as Gerard of Cremona and Mark of Toledo, both working with the support of the church, no longer did so, thus conferring a normative status on the Arabic-Latin translations.

A. M. Urso [ch. 19] in turn presents the Greek-Latin translations. She shows the role of Burgundio of Pisa (12th century), whose translations, often based on manuscripts copied by Ioannikios, competed with those of Gerard of Cremona. She evokes the hazy figure of Stephen of Messina and the well-known William of Moerbeke (13th century), as well as the mediocre translations by Peter of Abano, and those of Niccolò da Reggio (14th century), which were numerous and reliable but too far removed from the Arabized Latin by then used in the universities to be successful.

After that, M. McVaugh [ch. 20] discusses how Galen's writings find their way into the curriculum of the universities in Paris, Montpellier, and Bologna (13th–14th centuries). Making a useful distinction between the existence of texts and translations and their actual accessibility and use, McVaugh presents the slow process of assimilation and selection of the texts translated at the end of the 12th century (the so-called "New Galen").

I. Ventura [ch. 21] gives a thorough account of the textual tradition of *On the Capacities of Simple Drugs*, which sums up all of Galenic pharmacology in the western Middle Ages. She identifies its various vectors of transmission, both indirect (the Arabic sources of Constantine's *Pantegni*, the doctrinal summaries in Ibn Sīnā or John of Saint-Amand, and the Arabic encyclopedias adapted into Latin) and direct (its Latin translations by Gerard of Cremona for the first section and by Niccolò da Reggio in its entirety).

The fourth part outlines the transformations of Galenism in Europe from the early modern period onwards. S. Fortuna [ch. 22] describes the rapidly evolving textual tradition of Galen in the first half of the 16th century. She notes that the first humanist translations (by Leonicensio, Kopp, and Linacre) did not immediately replace the medieval Arabic-Latin translations. Although not a bestseller, the very expensive Aldine edition published in 1525 and 1526

turned the tide: the availability of the Greek text led to many new translations that gradually improved and enriched Galen's complete works in Latin, and especially the Juntine edition published in Venice under Gadaldini's supervision.

C. Savino [ch. 23] examines the commentaries brilliantly forged in the 1560–1570s by Rasario, a prolific translator of Galen, which made their way into the Galenic corpus until they were exposed by philologists of the *Corpus Medicorum Graecorum*. She presents the techniques that he used to create a text in Latin which was later retroverted into Greek, from ancient commentaries and compilations.

Nutton [ch. 24] questions the supposed decline of Galenism at the end of the early modern period (1540–1640). Rather than describe medicine as emancipating itself from Galen, Nutton shows that the new medical ideas that emerged (in the work of Fracastoro, Vesalius, and Harvey, or even in Paracelsianism) aimed at a compromise within a general framework that long remained Galenic.

M. P. Donato [ch. 25] draws a picture of a Galenism disputed, refuted, and made obsolete, but whose influence persisted in the age of chemistry and mechanics (1650–1820). Galen was still edited (e.g., by Chartier) and especially commented on. But at the end of the 1740s Galenism as science was dead. However, Galen continued to act as a counter-model (as in physiology for Malpighi) and retained a certain authority in therapy, hygiene, and ethics.

P. Tassinari † [ch. 26] focuses on the great editorial projects of the 19th and 20th centuries, from Kühn to Daremberg to Diels. He shows a change not only in readership but also within academia: the study of Galen ceased to be the dominion of learned physicians and became pivotal in establishing philology as a major tool for the sciences of antiquity.

The fifth and last part is meant to bring together “chapters with diverse cultural settings” viewed over somewhat longer time-scales. C. Caballero-Navas [ch. 27] presents Galen's reception in medieval Hebrew science, which is fully in keeping with the Islamic tradition. She describes two aspects of the transmission of his *oeuvre*: the Hebrew translations from Arabic and Latin in northern Spain and southern France (12th–15th century), and the many quotations provided by the writings of Jewish scholars working from Arabic sources, such as Maimonides (12th century) or Falaquera (13th century).

Orengo and Tinti [ch. 28] discuss the Armenian tradition (5th–17th century). Despite a still fragmentary knowledge of the manuscripts and printed

books, they note a certain number of references to Galen both in the original Armenian texts and in literature translated mostly from Arabic.

M. Martelli [ch. 29] outlines the relationship between alchemy and (Galenic) medicine in the late antique and medieval traditions in the Greek, Syriac, and Arabic languages. He shows that alchemists were well acquainted with medical thought and its tools (especially pharmacology) and that they sometimes drew inspiration and borrowed from Galen (as in a Syriac text of ps.-Zosimos or Jābir ibn Ḥayyān).

R. Yoeli-Tlalim [ch. 30] discusses the dissemination of Galenism to Tibet, India, and China, mainly through the mediation of Islamic medicine (or Jesuit doctors in the case of Ming China). As it remains of marginal influence, the reference to Galen is to be contextualized: his legendary role in the formation of Tibetan medicine in the seventh and eighth centuries shows the influence of Indian medicine in the 17th century, and the emphasis put on the Greek lineage of Unani medicine in India is best understood as a reaction to colonial medicine.

S. Lazaris [ch. 31] goes through the known medieval (mainly Byzantine) portraits of Galen in the manuscripts and frescoes in monasteries and churches. He emphasizes what their presence in a religious context says of the subordination of science to theology, and points out that, apart from a constant characterization as a respectable scholar, there was no iconography specific to Galen.

Overall, the contributions are all very knowledgeable and often excel at clarifying complicated or relatively unknown subjects. The volume covers a remarkable amount of ground and provides a fairly complete picture of how Galen was read, translated, received, transformed, or criticized in different times and contexts. However, some topics might have deserved better exposition or a more detailed treatment, such as the significance of Ravenna, the figure of al-Fārābī or that of al-Mājūsi, or the ancient forgeries of Galenic texts [see [Petit, Swain, and Fischer 2020](#)]. Moreover, the book does not avoid certain redundancies, such as between chapters 2 and 6, or 3 and 7, or in the central chapters (17 to 21). But again, this is not troublesome and allows for flexible reading. The most recent research is also considered. Galenic pharmacology is thus given due attention and, in particular, the treatise *Simple Drugs*, now being edited in Greek, Syriac, and Arabic.¹

¹ See the contributions of Bhayro, Martelli, Ventura, and Chipman.

The volume highlights one of the strengths of Galenism, which accounts for its durability, i.e., its adaptability and ability to integrate new knowledge in different places and times, as with Christian anthropology [103], the Mesopotamian medical system [172], Mogul pharmacology [312], and even Vesalius' anatomical discoveries [475]. This raises the question of differentiating between cases in which the Galenic system undergoes mutations and adaptations and those in which hardly anything more than Galen's name is taken up or criticized—as is evident, for example, in an Armenian print [573], with certain Arab pharmacists [310], or the Arabic legend of Galen the alchemist [588] and that of his expatriation in Tibet [595]. It is also important to distinguish between fidelity to the letter of Galen's texts and adoption of great principles attached to his name or even unconscious integration of his ideas.² A more substantial introduction would indeed have been welcome to take stock of the theoretical bases of reception studies and to identify the different scenarios at issue in Galen's case better.

On many points, the individual chapters echo each other and offer exciting avenues. Criticism of Galen is well represented [cf. also [Pietrobelli 2020](#)], and it is interesting to note, for instance, that in quite a few cases Galen himself is used, or his own scientific attitude is emulated, to oppose Galenism—as with Alexander of Tralles [49], al-Rāzi [197], Ibn al-Nafīs [270], Vesalius [475], and Malpighi [496]. Although the book probably does not bring about a renewal of our understanding of Galen, it gives a good impression of how our perception of him was formed. For example, it is clear that the loss of Galenic philosophy, still accessible to Alexander of Aphrodisias [21] and already disappeared in Greek by the time of Metochites [154], is also a result of deciding to read Galen primarily as a physician, with which not everyone concurs [see, e.g., Falaquera [543]].

On the whole, the editors have done a very fine job; misprints are rare (e.g., “Pluto” [617 and 623], “Foes” [464]) and the indices are useful. The provided table of titles [xiii–xvii] would have been much more useful if alternative titles (especially the Arabic and medieval ones) had been included. Similarly, non-harmonization of proper names between papers (Averroes/Ibn Rushd; Giuntine/Juntine) and in the *index nominum* (translated names, in full form or not) may perplex readers unfamiliar with the sources. These remarks in no way detract from the numerous qualities of the book which is certainly going to become a reference work in Galenic studies and provide a valuable basis for further research.

² See Nutton's observations on pages 473 and 481.

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