Fragment of the Month: March 2022

Ripe apples with bread T-S Ar.43.225

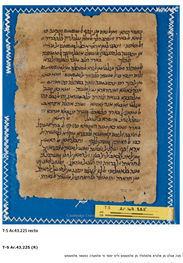
Ani Avetisyan

Diet and the therapeutic value of food played an important part in the Greco-Roman medical tradition. Since the 4th century B.C.E. Hippocrates (ca. 460 to ca. 370 B.C.E.)[1] and his disciples conceived of food and drink, like everything else, to consist of four elements; fire, earth, air, and water. Each element in turn is associated with two of the four "qualities" of dry or wet, hot or cold. Those elements also have their host equivalents called "humors": black bile (earth), phlegm (water), blood (air), and yellow bile (fire). Like the elements, so the humors are also associated with the four qualities. Thus, blood is hot and wet, yellow bile is hot and dry, phlegm is cold and wet, and black bile corresponding qualities and functions. [2] Good is what we find, and it nourishes the flesh, protects the humors, and maintains them throughout the body. It is prescribed for the liver more or less copiously according to age and season: (1) phlegm is cold and wet. It nourishes the flesh and the humors, and it is prescribed for old people in the winter and for those who are similar to this season. (2) Blood is hot and wet. It nourishes the flesh and the humors, and it is prescribed for young people in the spring and for those who are similar to this season. (3) Yellow bile is hot and dry. It nourishes the flesh and the humors, and it is prescribed for those humors in the body a person was considered to be a melancholic, phlegmatic, choleric, or sanguine (the four temperaments).[3]

Consequently, in Hippocratic medicine, the health was maintained by preserving a balance among the humors which make up the human constitution and diseases in turn were treated as the result of an imbalance of the humors.[4]

Later, we see this Hippocratic or classical Greek medical tradition forming the basis of Islamic Medicine. Ultra wrote then, that Ibn Sina's (Avicenna) Canon of Medicine, Ibn Rushd's (Averroes) Kulliyat fi al-Tibb, Ibn Zuhr's (Avenzoar) Kitab al-Taysir, and Ibn Baklish and his fellow Arab physicians of that time used Dioscorides's treatise as their most influential works, namely, Kitab al-Hashaish, Pharma, and Epidemics (mentioned in the fragment), and were the carriers of his naturalistic view of health and illness, which accepted only natural elements and forces and rejected the supernatural and spiritual.[5]

Because, as already mentioned, all foodstuffs possessed qualities - hot, cold, wet, dry, analogous to the humors in the body, so diet became a matter of primary importance in the Hippocratic tradition. Physicians were aware of the opposite behavior of excess in the human body. Fruits were part of this diet too. Moreover, in Islamic culture throughout the Middle Ages, fruits were popular for their many different benefits. For instance, most fruits such as pears, grapes, and peaches were considered to be nourishing.[6]



T-S Ar.43.225 recto

T-S Ar.43.225 (R)

אתרוג : נאה הוא לכלכלת מאכלות כגון שלק וחמיצה ובשר ודגים ויין ואוכלין אותו כנגד הרוח ומחזקין אותו ומועיל לכל הגוף ומשמח את הלב ומגרש את הרוח הרעה ומרחיק את הנחשים ומועיל לנשוכי נחשים ולנשוכי כלבים שוטים ומועיל לנשוכי עכבישים ולנשוכי צרעות ומועיל לנשוכי דבורים ומועיל לנשוכי עקרבים ומועיל לנשוכי שרפים ומועיל לנשוכי שאר חיות רעות ומועיל לנשוכי כלבים שוט