

# The Bridge from West to East: Paulus Aegineta (625-690 A.D)

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With the western world falling into the dark ages in the 7th Century AD, the medical knowledge of Hippocrates, Aristotle, Soranus and Galen were saved from vanishing and transferred to the east by the effort and work of a small number of Greek physicians. (Fig.1, Fig.2)



Fig.1- Aristotle (384 BC-322 BC)

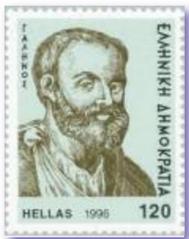


Fig.2- Galen (129-199 AD)

Paulus Aegineta (625-690 AD) was the last and greatest of these clinicians.

Very little is known about his life. He was born in the island of Aegina, Greece, practiced medicine at Alexandria and travelled widely<sup>1</sup>. (Fig.3)



Fig.3- Island of Aegina, Greece

He wrote many books but his principle contribution was an encyclopaedia of medicine in seven books which was widely known and appreciated by his eastern successors. In these texts he recorded thoroughly the sum of western medical knowledge<sup>1</sup>. Paulus Aegineta was also a skilful surgeon and gynaecologist. He is considered to be one of the originators of plastic surgery and his advice was highly appreciated by Arabian midwives<sup>1,2</sup>. (Fig.4)



Fig.4- Paulus Aegineta (625-690 AD)

The fourth book ( of his Encyclopaedia of Medicine in Seven Books) is dedicated to skin disorders in which he describes the clinical presentation, aetiology, and management of various dermatological conditions quoting the earlier Greek physicians<sup>3</sup> (Fig.5). We propose that this was the first Western Dermatology Text book.

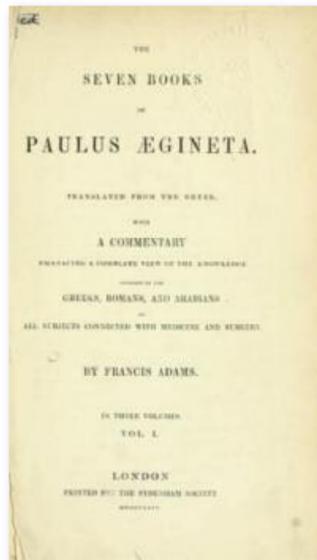


Fig.5- The seven books were translated from the Greek, with a commentary, by Francis Adams in 19th century

Paulus Aegineta's encyclopaedia bridged the west with the east. Many of the greatest Arabian doctors including El Razes, Haly Abbas, Albcucasis and Avicenna were influenced to a great extent by his work (Fig.6). They adopted many of the earlier methods of treatment for many skin disorders that were carefully described in his 4th book. For instance, with regards to "erysipelase" management, venesection (Fig.7), "cooling and repellent applications" and "cholagogues" were used by succeeding Arabian physicians in the 10th century<sup>3</sup>.



Fig.6- Avicenna (980-1037 A.D)



Fig.7- Illustrating Venesection

Paulus' work was a launching point for the eastern physicians. They developed this inherited knowledge further. A good example is leprosy. This was described in detail by Paulus Aegineta but the clinical differences between lepromatous leprosy and tuberculoid leprosy were only recognised later by Haly Abbas (died 980 A.D)<sup>4</sup>, while the neurological symptoms were first described by Albcucasis (died 1009 A.D)<sup>5</sup>. However, leprosy treatments did not greatly differ from those of earlier times. (Fig.8)



Fig.8- A mediaeval Arabic consultation

Another example is the treatment of "Foul ulcers". Paulus recommended the application of both honey and turpentine (Fig.9, Fig.10). The same preparations were used later by Haly Abbas and Avicenna but further contribution to ulcer management was made by Alshaharavius. He made the remarkable observation of paying particular attention to the edges of the ulcer, suggesting cutting them off if they were hard. This is well known to us now as debridement<sup>3</sup>.



Fig.9- Honey; current reports demonstrate good wound healing outcomes when applied topically<sup>6</sup>



Fig.10-Turpentine obtained from pine trees; it is known to have antiseptic properties

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Paulus Aegineta contributed the first Western Dermatology Textbook in the dying days of the Roman Empire. His work preserved the precious medical knowledge of the Romans and Greeks for later generations and was built upon by the great eastern physicians who followed.

## References

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