ARCHAGATHUS

History’s first wound expert

Considered a failure in medicine, attacked by his political rivals, and eventually expelled from Rome, Archagathus’s competence and professionalism has been historically denied; however, evidence shows that he might be considered the first medical expert of wounds.

Archagathus, a surgeon of Greek origin, was born in the Peloponnesse, in Sparta, but his precise birthdate is unknown. He was said to have fled the wars in Greece to advance his profession in Rome. Thanks to the efforts of Caesar in helping the Greek medical class by favouring its establishment in Rome, Archagathus was granted Roman citizenship in 219 B.C. as one of the first doctors from abroad.

Archagathus was considered an expert in wounds, given the title of Vulnarius or “wound curer” and was granted a “Medical Taberna” acquired with the Acilio task (public funds collected at the Acilia crossroads, where he worked to cure public illnesses). This was essentially the first public operating room and public medical clinic described in history.

A negative legacy in history

However, Plinius the Elder, author of one of largest single works to survive from the Roman Empire, Naturalis Historia, wrote about Archagathus’s reputation some 150 years later: “…He obtained Roman citizenship and was extraordinarily popular on his arrival, but very soon, gained the nickname of the “executioner” [“Carnifax” in Latin] because of his savage use of the scalpel and cautery and generated aversion towards his profession and towards other doctors...” (Nat. Hist. XXIX, 12-13).

This narrative was derived from another historian, Cassio Emina, a 2nd-century B.C. Roman annalist of noted xenophobic sentiment. The immediate negative legacy of Archagathus may originate from the ongoing dispute between him and Cato (234–149 B.C.), the Roman statesman often referred to as Censorius (the Censor), known for his conservatism and opposition to Hellenization. This dispute demonstrates how difficult it can be for pioneers of emerging sciences to achieve acceptance by their contemporaries. Archagathus appears to have introduced sophisticated operating techniques to Rome, previously unknown to the Romans of that time, evoking fear and repulsion of his talents. His biography provides some interesting insights into the society in which he lived.

The medical profession in 3rd-century B.C. Rome was mainly performed by servile foreigners and commoners, and successively by independent doctors, hardly any of whom were of Roman origin. It is unclear if this was because the medicinal arts, which did not fall under the “liberal arts,” did not respond to “Roman gravitas,” or because Greek doctors, no longer considered unreliable, opportunistic, unprejudiced, or venal charlatans (as in the past) affirmed themselves in Rome due to their renewed knowledge, the critical review of more ancient medicine, and an ethical and moral re-equilibrium.

Cato argued that for 600 years, the Romans had managed without doctors but not without medicine. Despite not being a medic himself, he wrote a great deal on medical topics such as domestic medicine, raising the credibility of empirical medicine. In this conception, even health was in the hands of the Paterfamilias, the head of the Roman family, the absolute and final sovereign. The household father passed down the essential indications of cures to his own sons and set aside a room in his home to cure family illnesses. Cato therefore did not disregard magic rituals and the obsessive recourse to cabbages, which was almost a panacea suitable for curing any illness.

1 See G. Penso, La medicina romana. L’arte di Esculapio nell’antica Roma, Saronno 1985, pages 82-84.
Adding insult to injury
Archagathus, who definitely did not pass through the school of philosophers and operated technically and mentally with the aim and hope of achieving tangible results, seems to have had the opposite opinion. At that time, he could not easily go against public opinion and disagree with the prejudice of famous men, whose opinions were listened to and valued by virtue of their inclination to writing. In addition, Archagathus did not undertake the most prudent internal medicine, leaving that specialty, with all good peace, to Cato and to the spells and amulets suggested by the oracles.

Cato’s opposition to Archagathus also reveals the concept of dignity among the Romans, who were themselves viewed as barbarians by the Greeks. His views on the medical profession are explained by Plinius as follows: “The ancients did not condemn medicine per se, but as a career; they especially did not accept the idea of the benefit of compensation obtained on human life…” (Nat. Hist. XXIX, 8, 16). The attitude toward a Greek doctor among Romans, especially one who had been granted citizenship and allowed to work in a taberna acquired with public money, probably paid by the state in full autonomy, would have been very poor. We can imagine with how much haughty self-satisfaction Archagathus’s detractors learned of his carefree use of the scalpel and cautery, from which failures were inevitable (and in the eyes of the public, too numerous). Eventually, this was used as a justification for Archagathus’s expulsion from Rome.

Reputation re-established after 2000 years
Archagathus’s sharp fall is difficult to understand, as he must have worked in Rome for several years. Was he a failure or were his methods cruel? Perhaps not. Like today, the most formidable wound complication is infection, and in antiquity, without antibiotics, infection probably meant certain death. To combat infection, Archagathus’s aggressive interventions were frequent and focused toward saving human lives. According to current mainstream opinion, this is fully justifiable. Perhaps in antiquity, the treatment was less well-received and seemed too destructive.

Nonetheless, Archagathus’s knowledge and methods lived on despite the lack of appreciation among the Roman establishment. In a Greek papyrus restored from the Egyptian sands, cicatrizants (amongst other things) linked to the name of Archagathus cast a different light on this doctor who has been maltreated by history: he was a conscientious professional who was clearly also interested in post-operational events. Even 250 years after Archagathus’s arrival in Rome, his remedies were being prescribed by doctors during the Imperial Period. In addition, Aulus Cornelius Celso, an influential author in the medical field, praises Archagathus in his book De Medicina, indicating that even 1st-century B.C., Celso continued to prescribe “Archagathus’s plaster”, made of red lead, burned branches, white lead, turpentine, and litharge (a mineral form of lead oxide), for curing wounds, which suggests a definitive knowledge of empirical medicine.

Archagathus was probably not the first surgeon to arrive in Rome, but today he is considered the Roman public health surgeon par excellence based on the historical evidence. He was a capable surgeon and a doctor of undisputed quality. Archagathus even became a point of reference for his innovation in dedicating himself to curing wounds as a Vulnarius. Not until 200 years later did people begin to refer explicitly to the specialty of curing wounds and skin ulcers.