

Galen: A Thinking Doctor in Imperial Rome by Vivian Nutton

Aileen R. Das

Volume 2, Number 1, 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087185ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/aestimatio.v2i1.37740>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Institute for Research in Classical Philosophy and Science

ISSN

1549-4470 (print)

1549-4497 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Das, A. (2021). Review of [Galen: A Thinking Doctor in Imperial Rome by Vivian Nutton]. *Aestimatio*, 2(1), 245–248.

<https://doi.org/10.33137/aestimatio.v2i1.37740>

© Aileen R. Das, 2021



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Galen: A Thinking Doctor in Imperial Rome by Vivian Nutton

Routledge Ancient Biographies. London, UK/New York: Routledge, 2020.
Pp. xiv + 208. ISBN 978-0-429-34138-0. ebook US\$31.96

Reviewed by
Aileen R. Das*
University of Michigan
ardas@umich.edu

The popularity that ancient medicine and Galenic studies in particular now enjoy in anglophone scholarship is owing in no small part to the author of the monograph under review. Through his textual critical and analytic work over the past 50 years, Nutton has made the life, writings, and thought of the second-century AD Greek doctor Galen of Pergamum (d. ca 216) more accessible to generations of students and scholars. As Nutton admits in the introduction [1], the present book has the apologetic aim of defending his career-long interest in Galen against critics who might view Galen's obsolete medical theories and practices as evidence of a lack of intellectual worth. Nutton's biography of Galen claims to differ from past surveys in English of Galen's life and literary output, such as Mattern's highly readable *The Prince of Medicine: Galen in the Roman Empire* [2013], by "put[ting] Galen into context as medical practitioner in the Roman Empire" [3]. It emerges from the book that "context" means the resources, obstacles, and opportunities which doctors, especially from elite backgrounds such as Galen's, encountered in Rome, including indigenous and imported drugs available in the city's markets; a large, diverse patient pool exposed to poor sanitation and occupational hazards; and sectarian rivalries between doctors and philosophers for authority over matters of health.

The biography is divided into six chapters, with an introduction and conclusion. The first two chapters, "Galen the Greek" and "Galen the Roman", trace chronologically Galen's upbringing in Asia Minor, his travels around the Mediterranean to study with famous practitioners and to collect rare *materia medica*, and his success with the intelligentsia and aristocracy in Rome. This couple of chapters clearly communicates that Galen's considerable personal wealth, which allowed him the freedom to pursue an unusually lengthy

* AILEEN R. DAS is an associate professor in classical and Middle Eastern studies at the University of Michigan. Her research foregrounds medieval Islamicate thinkers' creative reinterpretation of Galenic medicine and Greco-Roman philosophy.

education after his father's untimely death, is behind his exceptional command of past and contemporary medical and philosophical theory as well as his technical proficiency. The next three chapters of the book—"Galen the Observer", "Galen the Thinker", and "Galen the Doctor"—are structured around key traits of Galen that help to explain his long-lived impact on learned medicine in the Middle East and Europe. For example, Nutton connects Galen's prognostic skills, which earned him the reputation as a "wonder-worker" in Rome [98], with his observation of minute details of his patients' sickrooms, such as the color of their sputum and food leftovers, that can be read as signs about the course of their disease.

As a researcher and teacher of Galen and his thought, I am unsure after reading Nutton's biography who his target readership is. While the synoptic overview of Galen's work as a healer and theorist suggests a novice reader, similar to the user of Nutton's other survey and now standard university textbook *Ancient Medicine* [2004, 2012], its abundant details, which derive from the author's almost unparalleled familiarity with the Galenic Corpus, may overwhelm a neophyte to the field. For example, an undergraduate student who is assigned Nutton's biography of Galen for a course on pre-modern medical history may struggle to discern the takeaway of the list of the various printings of the Aldine Galen [143]. These details, however, are a treat to the more seasoned student of Galen who is already conversant with Nutton's general and specialized explanations of the Pergamene doctor. From his extensive and close reading of the writings attributed to Galen (genuine and pseudonymous), Nutton is able to extract interesting asides, such as Galen's description of the waters around his hometown Pergamum [55], missed theoretical opportunities, such as Galen's use and then abandonment of the metaphor of "seeds of a disease" [90], and inconsistencies, such as Galen's confusion of the sex of a patient whom he treated for love sickness when retelling the story in a later work [122]. Many of these remarks invite further research, and Nutton's generous footnotes with full citations to the primary sources provide a starting point.

Nutton's approach to explicating Galen's context primarily consists in letting Galen speak for himself through quotations, summaries, and paraphrases of his writings. Occasional reference is made to contemporary medical figures, such as the author of the pseudo-Galenic pharmacological tract *Properties of Centaury* [35], to provide a point of comparison to Galen's theories or methods. Nonetheless, a broader engagement with contemporary Latin and Greek authors outside of medicine and philosophy would have provided richer texture to Nutton's narration of Galen's navigation of the political

and social realities of life in the imperial capital. Furthermore, the undue influence of Galen's own rhetoric may underlie unhelpful speculations about, for instance, Galen's "always angry and emotional mother" driving him to move away from Pergamum for most of his medical education [69].

The book is undeniably well researched, as it is based on Nutton's command of Galen's original Greek versions and their Latin translations as well as past and current secondary scholarship on the corpus as a whole. The weakest section of the biography is the summary of Galen's *nachleben* in the pre-modern Middle East. Although this reviewer is sympathetic to the difficult task of making Galen's reception accessible to a mixed-level readership, the material in this part of the book tends to be oversimplistic. For example, *pace* Nutton [138], with regard to the translation of the Galenic Corpus into Arabic, Gutas [1998, 143] has demonstrated that there was no straightforward progression from a literal (*verbum a verbo*) to freer (*ad sensum*) style of translation during the "Greco-Arabic" translation movement (8th to 10th centuries). Moreover, Nutton gives the impression that the famous translator of Galen, Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq (d. 873/7), an Arab Christian from Iraq, rendered almost all of Galen into Syriac and Arabic with the assistance of only two family members [138], when his workshop of translators consisted of several other bilingual Christians and even pagan individuals. Minor errors include the attribution of a tract *On the Eye* to Ḥunayn—he wrote, in fact, two ophthalmological compositions, *Ten Treatises on the Eye* and *Questions Concerning the Eye*—and mistakes and frequent inconsistencies in the transcription of Arabic titles and person names: for example, «Kitāb al-Ḥāwī» instead of the correct «al-Kitāb al-Ḥāwī» by al-Rāzī [135], which is sometimes spelled without the diacritics (i.e., «al-Razi» [138]).

To reiterate, this learned biography offers newcomers to ancient medicine an elaborate, if at times dense, sketch of what made Galen an enduring presence in medicine for almost two millennia. On the other hand, it offers the professional Galenist a fascinating *potpourri* of side stories and elusive details. The addition of an appendix with the standard abbreviations, Latin, and English titles, and editions and translations of the Galenic corpus serves to facilitate research into a field which has long benefited from the contributions of the author under review.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Gutas, D. 1998. *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbāsīd Society*. London/New York.
- Mattern, S. 2013. *The Prince of Medicine: Galen in the Roman Empire*. New York.
- Nutton, V. 2004. *Ancient Medicine*. 1st edn. London/New York.
- ____ 2012. *Ancient Medicine*. 2nd edn. London/New York.