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Epicurus' death

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Abstract The aim is to present how an eminent philosopher perceived, reported and faced his progressing and ultimately fatal uropathy, 23 centuries ago. All available ancient Greek sources about Epicurus' life and death were used and urinary tract-related medical knowledge in this era was reviewed. Epicurus died at the age of 71 from urinary calculus after having bravely suffered for a long time. Although he is often cited for his teachings against the fear of pain and death, his own way to death has been overlooked. His exceptional description of his own symptoms provides an unusual insight, given that our knowledge on diseases in older times is mainly based on surviving texts written by the then medical practitioners. Epicurus reported on his terminal symptoms, being entirely aware of the fatal outcome of a disease incurable at that time. Very soon after, Ammonius the Lithotomus in Alexandria was to improve the surgical procedures for urinary calculi. In an era when urinary tract surgery was considered to be an extraordinary means of treatment, Epicurus peacefully passed away, firm to his own teachings about tolerance to disease and pain, and leaving to us both an unusual medical record and a courageous attitude towards suffering and death.

Keywords Ancient Greek medicine · Epicurus · History of urology · Lithiasis · Palliative treatment

Kidney and urinary tract diseases had been well described long before the urinary tract itself was defined.

Our knowledge on uropathies in older times is based on surviving texts written by the then medical practitioners. A different insight is provided by the unusual description of a famous patient's own symptoms 23 centuries ago. Being entirely aware of the fatal outcome, he reported on his suffering from a deteriorating uropathy.

The case report

The 71-year-old man presented with acute abdominal pain, dysentery, dysuria and progressive oliguria. Day after day his symptoms were deteriorating and he was suffering from severe pain. "*As I write this, it is the seventh day that I have been unable to urinate and have pains of the kind which lead to death*" [12]. He had devoted his life to teaching people how they could make their own life free from the fears of pain and death. "*The greatest pains could not last for long, either they go away together with life or their magnitude decreases...*" [21].

Not much is known about his medical history. As a youth he had successfully carried out the compulsory 2 years of military training. Most probably he had led a rather ascetic life with a diet based on plain bread and water and an occasional serving of weak wine. He was said to be "*prepared to compete with Zeus in happiness, as long as he had a barley cake and some water*" [10] and to have once written to a friend "*send me a little pot of cheese, so that, when I want to have a feast, I shall be able to do so*" [3]. However, his rivals accused him of leading a pleasure-loving and voluptuous life-style and of sponsoring secret orgies and parties in his school. He had once been reported as vomiting twice in a day "*from over-indulgence*" [3]. Both his disciples and rivals seemed to agree that he was in poor health for quite a long time, unable even to rise from his chair. A dedicated disciple had even written a book referring to the master's illness. As only the title of this book has survived, the exact nature of this obviously prolonged disease is missing [3]. The surviving statues and busts often focus on the fragile health of the lean-shaped master (Fig. 1). Despite all

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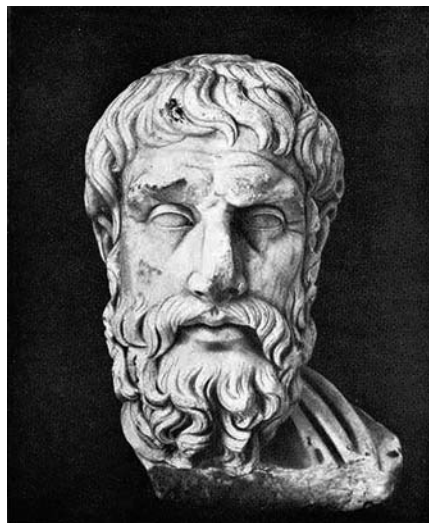


Fig. 1 Epicurus (341–270 BC)

these ailments, the philosopher had reached 71 as a distinguished citizen, an active teacher and a voluminous writer, who “eclipsed all before him in the number of his writings” [3].

Little is also known on his family history. He had survived his three brothers, who had probably all succumbed to dropsy [3]. The philosopher-patient had taught that good health is not a prerequisite for wisdom and happiness [3]. Doctors were not very highly regarded by him “*In my illness, my talk was not of any bodily feelings...Nor did I let the physicians ride the high horse as if they were doing grand things, but my life went on well and happily...*” [15]. Nevertheless, the medical profession at the time was unable to help much, just capable of offering some palliative care.

Clearly, he was not afraid of the coming end. “*When we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not*” [3]. On the last day of a painful fortnight, he wrote to a friend “*On this blissful day, which is also the last of my life, I write this to you. My continual sufferings from strangury and dysentery are so great that nothing could augment them; but over against them all I set gladness of mind at the remembrance of our past conversations...*” [3]. He entered a bronze bathtub filled with lukewarm water, and asked for unmixed wine [3]. His last words to friends were “*the truths I taught hold fast*”. Death was come, the philosopher was not anymore.

The philosopher-patient

Epicurus (341–270 BC), son of Neocles, was born on the Aegean island of Samos [4, 11, 18]. His parents were Athenian citizens who had emigrated there as military settlers. Epicurus had grown up in a stormy era, when Alexander the Great was conquering the world and was himself on his 2-year military service with the Athenian army, when Alexander died. He had studied philosophy since his childhood and had been especially attracted by

the teachings of Democritus. After having developed his philosophical outlook, he taught philosophy in Mitylene, founded a school in Lampsacus, Asia Minor, and finally ended up again in Athens. The house with a garden that he bought there was soon to become a famous school of philosophy, known as *The Garden* (*Ho Képos*) [4, 11, 18]. Philosophy in Athens was at that time dominated by the Academy of Plato and the Lyceum of Aristotle, however the reputation of *The Garden* soon increased and spread through the hellenistic world. Women and household servants were not excluded and even the courtesan Leontion and Epicurus’ slave Mus have been known to be active members. *The Garden* way of living was followed by committed disciples who lived in communities that lasted for hundreds of years, avoiding politics and public life and keeping in pace with the famous Epicurean dictum *lâthe biôsas*, “*live your life without attracting attention*” [3]. Epicurus himself never left *the Garden*. He had never reared a family of his own, as he firmly believed that the wise man should neither marry nor rear children [3]. From his rivals we know that he “had spent his life caring for his beloved on disease or mourning their death” [19].

Although Epicurus taught and wrote on logic and epistemology, physics and theology, he is mainly known for his ethics. He believed in a mortal soul, taught happiness as the supreme goal and had simple recipes for each one’s individual circumstances. The four major ethical principles of epicurean philosophy, the golden simple remedy against the obstacles of happiness were mentioned as “*the tetraphármakos*”, the four-part cure: “*don’t fear god; don’t worry about death; what is good is easy to get; and what is terrible is easy to endure*” [13]. Although he left behind over 300 “books” i.e., papyrus rolls, only fragments have survived and his thought reconstruction relies on subsequent, not always objective sources. Quite unusually for philosophical teachings, a summary of the Epicurean creed was preserved through the centuries in a lengthy stone inscription, erected by a wealthy disciple in south-western Asia Minor around 200 AD [21] and uncovered by archaeologists in the year 1884 (Fig. 2).

Epicurus’ fatal disease

It is of interest that Epicurus’s own clinical description of his fatal disease has not been stressed by the historians of medicine and although he is often mentioned for his beliefs against the fear of death [6, 17], his own way to death has rather been overlooked. The clinical presentation with abdominal pain, painful urination, diminished urine output and finally anuria and dysentery, allows a differential diagnosis indicating either an acute disease with both gastrointestinal and renal involvement or a chronic uropathy with an acute deterioration due to gastrointestinal infection. According to his chief biographer, the third century AD compiler Diogenes Laertius, Epicurus died of urinary calculus.

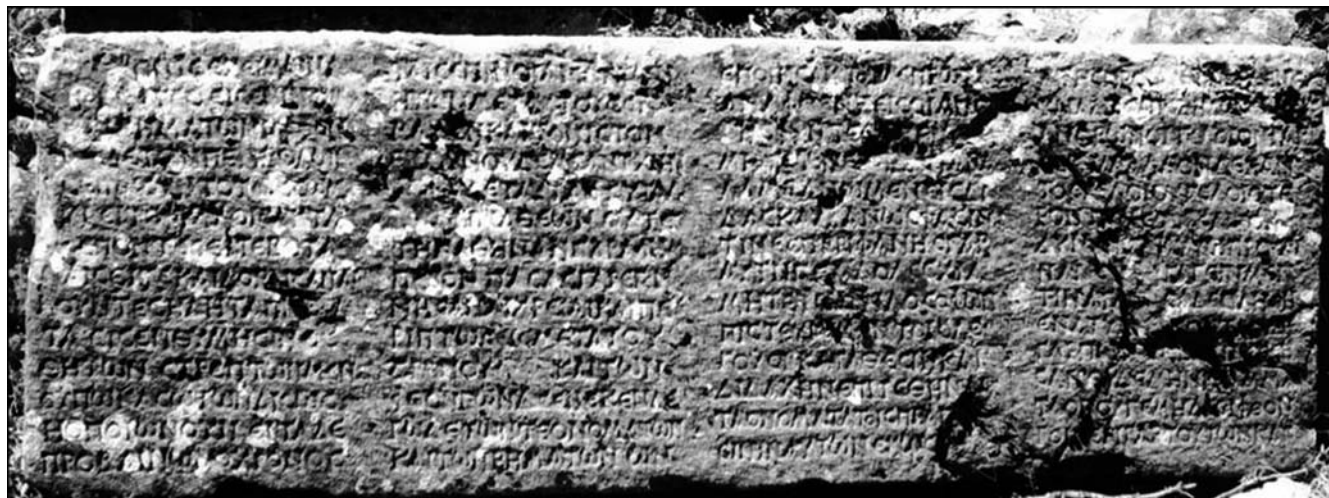


Fig. 2 A fragment of the stone inscription with Epicurean teachings in Oenoanda, Asia Minor, around 200 AD

Laertius relied on the letters of Hermarchus, who was one of Epicurus's best friends and his successor as head of *The Garden* [3]. Diogenes Laertius also mentioned that Epicurus's dedicated friend Metrodorus had written the nowadays lost book entitled "*About Epicurus' disease*" [3]. Interestingly, Metrodorus died 7 years before his master.

The diagnosis of urolithiasis alone does not explain the dysentery. Haemolytic uraemic syndrome explains both gastrointestinal and renal symptoms leading to death, however this syndrome is almost exclusively a childhood disease, inconsistent with the clinical picture, and particularly with *strangury*, which indicates obstruction. Apart from lithiasis, causes of urinary obstruction in an elderly person of 71 years could include infection, hypertrophy or malignancy of the prostate, bladder tumour or disseminated abdominal malignancy. The philosopher's amazing productivity until his very last days points against a diagnosis of a serious and debilitating chronic disease such as disseminated malignancy. Interestingly, physicians at these times appeared to have been unaware of the existence of the prostate [5]. The diagnosis of a prostatic disease might thus have been easily missed as symptoms could easily have been attributed to lithiasis. All his three brothers had succumbed to *hydrops* [3], a term used to define generalised oedema, mostly secondary to heart failure, but also suggestive of chronic renal or liver disease. All the fragments of evidence indicate that Epicurus had for a prolonged period of years had a balanced urinary tract lithiasis or, less possibly, prostatic hypertrophy and this underlying condition was acutely deteriorated during a gastrointestinal infection.

Epicurus died in a bath with warm water after having a glass of unmixed wine. Warm baths were a common therapeutic regimen for uropathies at the time, especially recommended for exacerbations of pain [7]. Wine, mixed with water, was of vital significance in the ancient Greek diet, culture and medicine. Consuming unmixed wine

was believed to be a barbaric custom, disastrous for the mental health, and usually restricted to medical purposes, as an analgesic [5]. Epicurus obviously followed these palliative measures in his final-stage disease. Surgery could have been a more appropriate management. Surgical interventions in urinary tract diseases were not unknown at the time [7], but most probably they couldn't help in this specific case. On the other hand, the philosopher himself did not seem eager to accept any extraordinary medical intervention: "*nor did I let the physicians ride the high horse as if they were doing grand things*" [15].

Epicurus had firmly taught that quality and not the length of life was important, and that death was meaningless. These principles raised the suggestion that the master might have committed suicide [9]. However, Epicurus had clearly taught that "*the wise man neither rejects life nor fears for living*" [3] and his ancient biographies did not provide any suspicion for such a self-killing. Consistent with his own teachings about tolerance to disease, he peacefully and cheerfully passed away, giving way to a future that was not his.

Knowledge of urinary tract diseases in Epicurus' times

References on renal diseases are found back to the 3rd millennium BC, on texts from Mesopotamia and Egypt [20] with detailed description of nowadays recognizable renal diseases and prescriptions of medications and invasive procedures, such as urethral catheterisation [5].

According to the Hippocratic tradition (5th century BC onwards) no other system or organ provides so much information by its excretion than does the urinary tract [16] and uroscopy was a basic diagnostic tool for centuries to follow. Several urinary diseases were described in the Hippocratic collection, including bladder and renal calculi, infections, ulcerations and tumours, and the term "*strangury*" was used for dysuria and retention [2, 20]. Hippocratic physicians had well realised the role of the kidneys as a sieve for harmful

substances in the blood, although they were not thoroughly aware of the physiology of urine production [7]. Management of renal diseases was based on appropriate diet, hydration, herbal extracts, hot water, steam baths and sexual abstinence [2]. Invasive procedures were generally discouraged [1]. The exact meaning of the famous admonition against lithotomy in the oath: "*I will not use the knife, not even, verily, on sufferers from stone...*" [1, 8] has been strongly debated and most possibly represents an interpolation that was added much later.

Aristotle, who was still alive when Epicurus was born, further described bladder calculus disease. Although better understanding the role of kidneys in the production of urine, he still believed that the kidneys were not vital organs, insisting on having observed their absence in certain animals [14]. Soon after, Alexandria was to gradually become the medical centre of the Mediterranean world. It was there that Erasistratus (3rd century BC) carried out the first experiments on metabolic homeostasis in animals and Ammonius was the first to suggest crushing the bladder stone to facilitate its removal and to take the nickname "Lithotomus" [20]. Interestingly, Ammonius the Lithotomus was born in 276 BC, at a time Epicurus was suffering from his own lithiasis. Despite Ammonius' contribution, surgery for urinary calculi was to remain a controversial, extraordinary therapeutic means for many centuries to follow.

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