

Semantic and Linguistic Transformations of Disease and Epidemic Terminology: From Divine Wrath to Corrupted Air in Ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman Traditions

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Abstract

This paper examines the semantic evolution of terms denoting disease and epidemic as a reflection of changing religious and medical conceptions in Ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman civilizations. It argues that the development of terminology was not merely a linguistic phenomenon but also reflected broader changes in the interpretation of disease and its causes.

Adopting a comparative linguistic approach, the study analyzes literary, medical, and religious texts, including the Homeric epics, Greek tragedy, the Hippocratic Corpus, Ancient Egyptian medical texts, and Roman sources. Particular attention is paid to the semantic development of ????? (miasma), which evolved from the notion of ritual pollution associated with crime and divine punishment to the Hippocratic concept of contamination or corrupted air as a cause of disease. This concept is compared with the Ancient Egyptian w?dw, denoting internal corruption or putrefaction within the body, and the Roman pestilentia, associated with polluted air and epidemic outbreaks.

The paper also traces the evolution of Greek terminology, showing that Homer used ????? for disease and ????? for collective devastation, whereas ????? emerged in Classical literature and the Hippocratic Corpus as the standard term for epidemic disease.

The study concludes that differences in terminology reflect distinct conceptualizations of disease rather than differences in the historical occurrence of epidemics. The absence of an Ancient Egyptian equivalent to ????? therefore indicates a different system of medical classification, emphasizing individual illness and its internal causes rather than the scale of disease transmission.

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