Rufus of Ephesus and his contribution to the development of anatomical nomenclature

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Abstract

Rufus of Ephesus, a famous ancient physician, lived about the years 80 - 150 CE. His theories stressed the importance of anatomy and he preferred pragmatic approach to diagnosis and treatment. In his work “On the Names of the Parts of the Human Body”, he put in pragmatic effort to make a lexicon of anatomy for his pupils. In the introduction, he described it as a manual for the students of medical art which relied on demonstration in teaching; visible (outer) parts of the body were shown on a demonstrator and invisible (inner) parts were shown on a dissected monkey. The brief explanation of the anatomical terms includes position, shape, and functions of organs, and this is what makes his work a pioneering effort to explain the anatomy clearly, systematically, and using consistent terminology. Rufus stressed the importance of exact nomenclature to prevent misunderstandings in medical practice. This anatomy manual had a major influence on the development of anatomical terminology. It is an important contribution to the history of teaching. The other essential contribution of Rufus’ lexicon (also known for its briefer title Onomastikon) is that the author recognised and critically reviewed the knowledge and views of his predecessors, physicians of the pre-Galenic period. No less important was his teaching to anatomists and physicians who followed, as they often cited or paraphrased Rufus in their own works (Galen, Oribasius). Many fragments of Rufus’ work have been preserved by medieval Arabic medical writers, especially by Rhazes.

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His teachings emphasized the importance of anatomy, and sought pragmatic approaches to diagnosis and treatment. Rufus of Ephesus. Born. Little is known about Rufus’s life. According to the Suda,[1] he lived in the time of Trajan (98-117), which is probably correct, as Rufus quotes Zeuxis[2] and Dioscorides,[3] and is himself quoted by Galen. He probably studied at Alexandria, for he makes personal comments about the citizenry’s general health and specific diseases. He then established himself at Ephesus, which was a center of the medical profession. The work contains valuable information about the state of anatomical science before the time of Galen. Rufus considered the spleen to be absolutely useless. For the original article on Rufus of Ephesus see DSB, vol. 11. Research over the last thirty years of the twentieth century has substantially altered historians’ understanding of Rufus of Ephesus in two ways. His other specific references to his patients or to what he saw all relate to the region around his home city of Ephesus (later in southwestern Turkey), and there is no evidence that he ever visited Rome, as did his contemporary, Soranus, or, later, Galen. His medical ideas place him firmly as a follower of Hippocrates and so a believer in the theory that health and disease were largely the result of a disturbance or imbalance in the four humors, or fluids, of the body—blood; bile; phlegm; and black bile, or melancholy—and that treatment should restore the individual’s balance. Medical Questions, written by Rufus of Ephesus during the second century C.E., is an ancient medical text devoted to instructing the ancient physician in proper clinical procedure. In this text Rufus records a case history involving a married couple suffering from hydrophobia. This particular case is significant because it allows us a 'back door&apo