What does Hippocrates mean? The Historiographical Construction of the Greek physician as the ‘Father of Medicine’

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Abstract: Hidden behind the authorship of this work and the huge symbol he represents, the actual life and actions of Hippocrates remain largely unknown. We have very little information about him in ancient sources, and the view we have of him is distorted by twenty-five centuries of commentaries and use of his paternal image as a reference in medicine. Since the 1990s scholars such as Jody Rubin Pinault, Jacques Jouanna, Eric D. Nelson have studied ancient sources evoking this character. The aim of this article is to help historians of medicine who often have to deal with the Hippocratic Collection as the first treatises evoking their topic: for instance humours, diseases, mental illness, health, diet, drugs, etc. How did this quite unknown character manage to become the ‘Father of Medicine’, as he is often called in both modern popular discourse and by historians of medicine? How has ‘Hippocrates’ become a synonym for ‘Medicine’? Is he really representative of physicians of his time? To answer these questions I will try to determine what can be known about the actual existence of Hippocrates in sources. Then I will show how the symbolical figure of the ‘Father of medicine’ has been constructed over the past centuries until today. Finally, I will try to see if the Hippocratic figure is representative of ancient Greek physicians.

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