
MEN AND MEDICINE

ARETAEUS

62 | Aretaeus who lived in Cappadocia in the second century A.D. is generally ranked second only to Hippocrates among the clinicians of antiquity. His clinical observations were so accurately and graphically recorded that they continued to be studied for hundreds of years. Thus Aetius who lived approximately 400 years after Aretaeus wrote descriptions of clinical situations that closely resembled those of his predecessor. Even as late as the eighteenth century Boerhaave, the outstanding clinical teacher of his era, considered the works of Aretaeus so important that he prepared a new edition of them.

As is true of almost all clinicians, much of what Aretaeus wrote was not entirely original. He absorbed a large amount of clinical information from his predecessor, Archigenes of Apamen in Syria. However, he modified, embellished, and extended this material in accordance with his own experience, and his writings were a synthesis of what was then old with what was then new. He described pneumonia, pleurisy with empyema, diabetes, tetanus, elephantiasis, and epidemic diphtheria (called *ulcera Syri-*

aca). He added the description of epileptic auras to what was previously known about epilepsy and distinguished paralyzes due to brain disease from those due to spinal-cord disease.

Aretaeus was apparently the first to describe manic-depressive psychosis; although both melancholia and mania were recognized long before his time he apparently recorded the connection between the two conditions before anyone else did. He wrote, "In my opinion melancholia is without any doubt the beginning and even part of the disorder called mania. The melancholic cases tend towards depression and anxiety only. . . . If, however, respite from this condition of anxiety occurs, gaiety and hilarity in the majority of cases follows, and this finally ends in mania." He clearly indicated not only the relation between depression and mania but also recorded the occurrence of anxiety in association with depression, and noted the development of a hypomanic state at the end of a period of depression. In another place he warned not to be deceived into believing that a lucid period in a manic-depressive patient would necessarily last.

Aretaeus was an extremely careful

observer and hence it is not surprising to find that he recognized different varieties of the manic-depressive syndrome. In addition to the cyclic form of the disease, with its lucid periods and its high remission rate, Aretaeus also described an incurable form that was distinguished by its association with paralyzes and seizures. Some modern historians believe that this latter syndrome was actually general paresis, and that therefore Aretaeus was also the discoverer of that condition. However, other historians, who believe that tertiary lues was unknown in Europe until it was introduced there after the discovery of America, hold the view that Aretaeus could not have been describing a luetic disorder; they believe that his description referred to the manic-depressive syndromes that occur in patients with multiple sclerosis, or with degenerative brain diseases.

The writings of Aretaeus were not only full of accurate clinical findings but they also were expressed in remarkably clear, precise, and fluid language. His literary style was the admiration of Greek scholars for years. The combination of sound observation and felicitous expression made his works influential for centuries. ■