

# Tertullian's Way of Approaching to Medicine and the Health of Human Soul

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In a growing body of scholarship on the ancient history of medicine, Tertullian of Carthage has been considered as one who attacked pagan physicians. He urged his fellows to regard disease as a test from God. Some scholars boldly claim that Tertullian had scant respect for medical science and rejected it. Other scholars, on the other hand, direct attention to some passages from the corpus of his writings and suggest that Tertullian had a deep knowledge of medicine and favoured it. A further point to note is that his discourse closely linked with his creativity with medical metaphor. In this paper, I shall draw out how the concern for medicine is producing a holistic view of Tertullian's perception of the role of medico-religious conception. In the process, I shall focus on his later (207–211) and final (211–c. 220) works. In the case-study which follows I have confined myself to works like those against the Gnostics and Marcionites and *On the Soul*, both of which would reveal his way of dealing with medicine that would be consistent with his theological investigation.

## *Tertullian's works against the Gnostics and Marcionites*

In contrast to his knowledge of medicine in the early (197–200) and middle (200–207) works, in his later works (207–211) Tertullian appears to display more profound knowledge of medical science and creativity with medical metaphors, in particular in both his refutations of the Marcionites and Gnostics, and *On the Soul*. Perhaps his further concern for the medical scholarship derives from the reading experience of Soranus' four books *Περὶ Ψυχῆς* and certain ideas held by Soranus, which he employed when he wrote *On the Soul*.

Tertullian's *Against the Valentinians* (207 or 208–212) is dedicated to the refutation of a Gnostic theology derived from Pythagorean cosmology, and this treatise is much depended on Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*. While he closely paraphrases the work of Irenaeus, Tertullian achieves a remarkable expansion of the medical motif found in *Against Heresies*. For instance, as for Wisdom [Sophia] who is the last and youngest of the aeons in the Valentinian cosmology,

Irenaeus maintains that Wisdom ‘fell into extreme agony’<sup>1</sup> when she tries to gain the knowledge of the Father.<sup>2</sup> But, Tertullian extends the metaphor: ‘she contracts a sort of disease which was epidemic among Nus’ associates’; and ‘diseases contracted somewhere in the body’.<sup>3</sup> Her disease is attended with ‘paleness, thinness, and neglect’ by her ‘fruitless’ search for the Father.<sup>4</sup> Another point to note is that, avoiding the mistake made by Irenaeus when he refers to the origin of fresh waters, Tertullian does not hold that Sophia’s perspiration contains no salt.<sup>5</sup> Tertullian is also able to put his knowledge of medicine, in comparison with Irenaeus, when he states that the ‘abortive creatures (like their mother Achamoth)’ blew the soul into Adam through the windpipe.<sup>6</sup>

When we turn to Tertullian’s *Scorpiace* (c. 211) that also attempts to oppose the Gnostics, and particularly the Valentinians because of their attitude towards martyrdom, there is even more explicit interest in medicine. Tertullian starts with a medical metaphor: in his view, the behaviour of both the Gnostics and the Valentinians during the time of persecution can be compared with the activity of a small scorpion in summer. He draws from Pliny’s accounts of the dangers of scorpions’ sting that is ‘a pipe with a narrow aperture and where it pierces it pours forth poison into the wound.’<sup>7</sup> He adds the details of the symptoms: ‘all the normal senses become sluggish, the blood of the soul freezes, the flesh of the spirit decays’<sup>8</sup> and results in the loss of the Christian faith. Thus, he likens the efficiency and necessity of the proper remedy for stings to the promise of God, lest the Christians should be seduced into superstitious practices, a danger of which Tertullian is very conscious. When we turn more attention to his medical metaphor, it is clear that Tertullian’s attitude towards medicine is subsidiary to his theological consideration. Contrary to the argument that martyrdom was an evil thing, he contends that because of its pain and anguish this does not make martyrdom any less good.<sup>9</sup> As mentioned previously in *De Patientia* (c. 203), he shows God as the doctor and Adam and the humanity as the patient. By referring to the ‘severity of medical science owing to the scalpel, the hot iron and the fire of the mustard’,<sup>10</sup> he focuses on a positive value attached to the pain and anguish: ‘the

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1 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.2.2; ACW 55, 25.

2 Eric Osborn, *Tertullian: First Theologian of the West*, Cambridge, 1997, 203.

3 Tert. *Adu. Val.* 9.2; trans. Riley (1971) 86–87.

4 Tert. *Adu. Val.* 10.1; Riley, 87–88. See further Heyne, 18 n. 104.

5 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.4.4; ACW 55, 32; Tert. *Adu. Val.* 15.3; Riley, 95–96.

6 Tert. *Adu. Val.* 14.1, 25.2, 30.1.

7 Pliny, *The Natural History*, 2.88; Tert. *Scorpiace* 1.2; trans. Dunn (2004) 107.

8 Tert. *Scorpiace* 1.10; Dunn, 109.

9 Tert. *Scorpiace* 5.1–6.11.

10 Tert. *Scorpiace* 5.6; Dunn, 115.

benefit excuses the horror of this work.’<sup>11</sup> The vivid description of these desperate cures leads to the paradoxes of human salvation in torture and the ‘eternal life through fires and swords and anything sharp’,<sup>12</sup> that is, martyrdom. It is admitted that his emphasis is placed not on the efficiency of medical prescriptions, but rather on the theological significance of martyrdom, thereby defending divine goodness and showing the foolishness of the criticism by Valentinians.

His *Against Marcion* (207–212) is the longest extant work in his corpus, in which he deploys the medical motif to argue against the position that Marcion’s saviour god is neither creator nor redeemer. He uses the ‘Deus medicus’, ‘Christus medicus’ metaphor from the first part of this work. Tertullian compares the malice of Marcion’s god with the avaricious and cruel physicians in his time. He describes the god as having nothing to do with human salvation: ‘What would your opinion be of a physician who by delaying treatment should strengthen the disease [...] so that his services might command a larger fee [...] The same judgement will have to be pronounced upon Marcion’s god [...]’.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, despite the allusion to the greedy physicians in his time, he shows high respect for physicians that has been implied in his early works. His discussion of divine justice also begins by using a juridical metaphor and turns to reveal a surgical one.

[S]uppose you allow that the surgeon [*medicum*] has the right to exist, yet lodge a complaint against his instruments because they dissect and cauterize and amputate and constrict—although he can be no surgeon without the tools of his trade. Complain, if you like, when he dissects badly, amputates at the wrong time, cauterizes without need: [...]<sup>14</sup>

Tertullian has already referred to the physician’s instruments and treated them with proper respect in *To the Heathens* (his earliest surviving work written in 197).<sup>15</sup> Here he provides more details of surgical procedures and their side effects. In contrast to the optimistic attitude of his opponent, Tertullian acknowledges the reality of divine justice: it would be likened to surgery that is a painful but unavoidable cure. The metaphor serves as a basis for the coexistence of divine justice and goodness.

His neologism *remediator* and *medicator* are found in the discussion which follows the defence of Christ’s tangibility against the docetism of Marcion.<sup>16</sup> He attempts to show how

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<sup>11</sup> Tert. *Scorpiace* 5.7; Dunn, 115.

<sup>12</sup> Tert. *Scorpiace* 5.7; Dunn, 115.

<sup>13</sup> Tert. *Adu. Marc.* 1.22.9; Evans (1972) 60.

<sup>14</sup> Tert. *Adu. Marc.* 2.16.1–2; Evans, 131.

<sup>15</sup> Tert. *To the Heathens* 2.5.10; ANF, trans. Holmes.

<sup>16</sup> See Tert. *Adu. Marc.* 3.17.5, 4.8.4, and 4.8–35.

Christ has healed the sick and to see itself as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy: ‘he is the Christ of Isaiah, a healer of sicknesses: *He himself*, he says, *takes away our weaknesses and carries our sicknesses* (Isa. 53:4).’<sup>17</sup> His emphasis is also on the physical sicknesses and disabilities.<sup>18</sup> It is more probable and therefore interesting to observe that Tertullian has read some parts of Soranus’ work Περὶ Ψυχῆς, thus coming to be familiar with gynaecological knowledge. In book 4, he criticises Marcionite notion of the phantasmal Christ:

[T]hat Christ of yours, [...] was not conceived [*conculatus*] in a womb [*vulva*]—not even a virgin’s, though a virgin is a woman, and even though there were no male seed [*semine*], yet by the law of corporal substance <he would have been formed> from a woman’s blood [*humore feminae*]—he was never reckoned to be flesh before he was formed [*ante formam*], nor was he called a foetus after his shape was complete [*pecus post figuram*]; he was not set free after ten months’ torment, nor was he spilt upon the ground through the sewer of a body [*corporis cloacam*], with a sudden attack of pains along with the uncleanness of all those months, nor did he greet the daylight with tears or suffer his first wound [*uulnere*] at the severing of his cord: he was not washed with balm, nor treated with salt and honey [*sale ac melle*], nor did swaddling-clothes become his first winding-sheet: no question thereafter of his wallowing in uncleanness in a mother’s lap, of his nuzzling at her breasts, of a long infancy, a tardy boyhood, of waiting for manhood: no, he was brought to birth out of heaven, [...]<sup>19</sup>

Here Tertullian intends to display his knowledge of medicine to mock the foolishness of Marcion. Concerning the use of salt and honey, Soranus suggests that mixing the salt with honey, olive oil, or the juice of barley, so the granules are less likely to abrade the baby’s skin, while Pliny’s remedies include wine but not salt and honey.<sup>20</sup> It is, therefore, most probably either that Tertullian here follows the medication prescribed by Soranus, or that the cleansing with salt and honey became relatively common for Carthaginians in his time (for which there is indeed no evidence). It is very likely that his explanation of the phenomena of embryological development (flesh *ante formam* but foetus *post figuram*) is taken from Soranus’ work.<sup>21</sup> But he is not always dependent on Soranus. For instance, Tertullian shares the widespread (perhaps Aristotelian) account of conception. He shows no preference for the view of Soranus in which,

<sup>17</sup> Tert. *Adu. Marc.* 4.8.4; Evans, 285.

<sup>18</sup> See Tert. *Adu. Marc.* 4.35.5.

<sup>19</sup> Tert. *Adu. Marc.* 4.21.10–11; Evans, 375.

<sup>20</sup> Soranus, *Gynecology*, 2.8.12–13; Pliny, *The Natural History*, 30.43.125.

<sup>21</sup> Muscio, *Gynecology* 2.13.47 (lost in Soranus’ original, written probably in North Africa in the fifth or sixth century, which included a series of images of the *fetus in utero*.)

without the woman's blood, the seed comes to be the embryo on its own,<sup>22</sup> and which would seem unhelpful to support his argument because he thought there was no semen for Christ to come from. Accordingly, he shows a detailed knowledge of medicine (reflecting the work of Soranus), yet he attempts to quote an authority when it meets the case to expose the ridiculousness of Marcion's position.

### *Tertullian's later work: On the Soul*

His treatise *De anima* (*On the Soul*, c. 208–211) is the most theoretical within the corpus of his writings, despite the theological argument and accusations against pagans and heretics involved. We find him articulating clearly his indebtedness to the writings of Soranus' Περὶ Ψυχῆς, Pliny's *Natural History* and the dream-book of Hermippus of Berytus' five-volume book entitled Ὀνειροκριτικά (*Interpretations of dreams*). Holding to Soranus and the Stoic metaphysics, Tertullian conceived of the human person as the one consisted of both the flesh and soul intimately and inextricably bound to one another. For him, the soul is corporeal, incorruptible, and indivisible, seen as the enduring and immortal aspect. Thus while contradicting the Epicurean view of immortality and the Gnostic belief in a divine *pneuma* extricable from the body, he shows a deep knowledge of medicine throughout this treatise.

Tertullian begins by comparing philosophers to medical doctors, the former of which, he claims, rarely and accidentally finding the few truths. On the other hand, medicine 'claims to know more [the doctrine on the soul] because it deals with the habitation of the soul'.<sup>23</sup> In particular, he refers to Soranus as 'a learned medical authority' and as an author of 'four volumes of exhaustive commentary on the soul'.<sup>24</sup> His praise of the deep philosophical scholarship of Soranus leads to his regard for physicians 'who are competent to judge the incidents which cause death and of the various states of the human body'.<sup>25</sup> His appreciation of the value of medicine, however, does not deny the authority of scriptures. When he directs his attention to the unity of soul and its activity, at first, he introduces the ideas of philosophers and doctors (including Soranus). He then replaces them by the divine authority without hesitation: 'God is the searcher and examiner of hearts'.<sup>26</sup> Another point to note is that he draws from Pliny's account of the soul when he defines the unified and corporeal soul. When he attempts to show that the breath (*spiritus*) is inseparable from the soul (*anima*), he rejects the view that many animals (as is evident from § 5, insects) that 'have no lungs (*organa spiritus*) or

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22 Soranus, *Gynecology*, 1.10.38–39.

23 Tert. *De anima* 2.6; CCSL 2, 784; FC 10 (1950), trans. Edwin A. Quain, 184.

24 Tert. *De anima* 6.6; CCSL 2, 789; FC 10, 191.

25 Tert. *De anima* 53.1; CCSL 2, 859; FC 10, 294.

26 Tert. *De anima* 15.4; CCSL 2, 801; FC 10, 210.

windpipes, the instruments of breathing' do not breathe (*spirare*).<sup>27</sup> Tertullian makes an objection by borrowing details from Pliny: many entomic organs are invisible, yet insects see, chew, digest and buzz.<sup>28</sup> It is very likely that his use of the words, 'bellows of the lungs' (*fistulis arteriarum*) and 'digest [...] without stomachs' (*digestu sine alueis*) also derives from those of Pliny.<sup>29</sup> To show the stupidity of metempsychosis, he draws on the animal physiology inherited by Pliny's treatise.<sup>30</sup> As has been shown in *Against the Valentinians*, he also relies on Pliny to ridicule the Gnostic view of immortalising waters and indicates that nothing is known that 'has the power of making us so wonderfully secure and immune from death.'<sup>31</sup>

Accordingly, his knowledge of Pliny may have been more profound than before in his early works, while the precise degree of Tertullian's indebtedness to Soranus' Περί Ψυχῆς remains a problem though. It is very likely that he has borrowed a great deal from Soranus, along with the occasional inaccuracy of details. Soranus is indeed the source for the notion that 'material food also benefits the soul',<sup>32</sup> and the source for the use of pathological terms which designate the diseases preventing sleep: *phreneticus atque cardiacus* (pains in the head and the stomach) and *lethargus* (lethargy).<sup>33</sup> Perhaps the interesting discussion of dreams in which, he supposes, sleeping on the right side or twisted follows the 'pressure on the liver [that] may effect the mind'<sup>34</sup> appears to be dependent on Soranus' treatise. Among his arguments as reflecting those of Soranus, the most impressive statement of the soul is to be found in the proof that the soul is conceived in the womb. He begins with saying that 'I call on you, mothers'<sup>35</sup> and proceeds to provide an account of pregnancy: 'Tell us: Do you feel any stirring of life within you in the fetus? Does your groin tremble, your sides shake, your whole stomach throb as the burden you carry changes its position? [...] Should his restlessness subside, would you not be immediately concerned for him?'<sup>36</sup> Tertullian then provides the detailed description of embryotomy, its surgical procedure and some of the instruments used.

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27 Tert. *De anima* 10.2; CCSL 2, 794; FC 10, 199.

28 Pliny, *The Natural History* 11.5–6.

29 Pliny, *The Natural History* 11.2 and 11.175. See J. H. Waszink, *Tertulliani De Anima*. Amsterdam, 1933: 188 and 190.

30 Tert. *De anima* 32.1–3; CCSL 2, 829–830; FC 10, 252–254.

31 Tert. *De anima* 50.1; CCSL 2, 856; FC 10, 289–290.

32 Tert. *De anima* 6.6; CCSL 2, 789; FC 10, 191.

33 Tert. *De anima* 43.8; CCSL 2, 847; FC 10, 277. See Soranus, *Gynecology* 3.1; Waszink, *Tertulliani De Anima*, 467.

34 Tert. *De anima* 48.2; CCSL 2, 854; FC 10, 286. See Waszink, *Tertulliani De anima*, 509–511.

35 Tert. *De anima* 25.3; CCSL 2, 819; FC 10, 237.

36 Tert. *De anima* 25.3; CCSL 2, 819; FC 10, 237–238.

Sometimes, unfortunately, a child is killed while still in the womb, because he is in such a position that delivery is impossible without causing the death of his mother. Hence, among their instruments, physicians have one, curved in structure, which is used to hold the womb (*secreta*) wide open; to this is fitted a kind of circular knife (*anuloculdro*) by which the limbs are all to carefully amputated; finally, there is a blunt hook, which is used to extract the victim in a violent delivery. Another deadly instrument is a brazen needle which performs the murder within the womb and is fittingly called the 'childkiller (*ἐμβρουοσφάκτην*).' Such instrument were used by Hippocrates, Asclepiades and Erasistratus; Herophilus, who practiced dissection of adults, also had them, as did even the kindly Soranus. And all of them were convinced that a living thing (*animal*) had been conceived since they all feel pity for the poor child who must be killed in the womb to escape torture outside of it.<sup>37</sup>

Here Tertullian confirms the necessity of horrific but unavoidable surgery performed by the physician. His detailed knowledge of this procedure would be indeed impressive and perhaps unprecedented to the reader. While the details are scarcely described in medical texts, Soranus' *Gynecology* follows a similar process: using a speculum (*διόπτρ*) and hooks (*ἐμβρουολκός*); if necessary, a leaf-shaped polyps knife (*ἐμβρουοτόμος*) is utilised for the opening and emptying of a hydrocephalous fetal skull.<sup>38</sup> Since Celsus refers only to the use of hooks, including some with sharp points,<sup>39</sup> it is admitted that Tertullian does not draw from him.

The inaccuracy of his knowledge of medicine is found in his occasional errors, in particular when Tertullian would instead employ more difficult terms. In attempting to prove how the external conditions of bodily health can affect the mind, he seems not to understand what tuberculosis (*phthisis*) is: 'the mind wastes away in paralysis (*paralysis*), while consumption sharpens it.'<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Soranus and Pliny, both of who uses the term *paralysis* or the rare term *phthisis*, do not suggest that the one prostrates the mind while the other preserves it.<sup>41</sup> Also when he deals with death as a separation of the soul from the body, he refers to two examples of rapid death: decapitation (*ceruicum messis*) and apoplexy (*apoplexis*).<sup>42</sup> Celsus and Soranus, who are the only authors to discuss about apoplexy, both compare it to a sudden stroke of paralysis or epilepsy. Yet, they do not regard it as fatal. Although Tertullian might notice that an apoplectic attack was often fatal, it is more likely that he is confused with the term. Tertullian's

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37 Tert. *De anima* 25.4–5; CCSL 2, 819–820; FC 10, 238–239.

38 Soranus, *Gynecology* 4.10–11.

39 See Celsus, *De medicina* 7.29.

40 Tert. *De anima* 20.4; CCSL 2, 812; FC 10, 227.

41 See, for instance, Pliny, *The Natural History* 20.59 and 26.21.

42 Tert. *De anima* 53.4; CCSL 2, 860; FC 10, 295.

knowledge of and the interest in medicine is noteworthy, when we draw attention to the list of physicians he cites, which includes Hippocrates, Asclepiades, Erasistratus, Diocles, Andreas, Herophilus, Hicesius and Strato, despite it derives from Soranus' work rather than personal knowledge. It is noteworthy that the application of medicine is fundamentally depends on the theological and/or rhetorical context. It is therefore unnecessary for him to confine himself with the medical knowledge of these authors: in the case of necessity, he utilised his own knowledge, observations and personal experiences.

His treatise *De anima* is the most medical work within his corpus, which draws principally from Soranus and Pliny in order to show that the souls is the immortal and corporeal life-breath intimately and inextricably bound to one another, from conception to death, but it makes clear the fact that Tertullian was not a physician but a servant to the only one Physician.

### *Concluding observations*

The examination conducted so far does not yield valid conclusions in clear terms, not least because the lack of preparation prevents me from presenting the detailed analysis of his corpus. Nonetheless, results have been attained which may be considered as an indicative both of his attitude to medicine and medical treatment, and of his use of the medical metaphors to discuss the matter in question. As I have seen, along with his considerable knowledge of nature and animals, he probably learned anatomy from Pliny the Elder. Concerning his pathological and surgical knowledge, it becomes more profound than before in his early and middle works. He seems to draw from Pliny and Soranus of Ephesus. It is noteworthy that he may have added his own observations and experiences, for example, about scorpion stings and fatal apoplexy. With a few misunderstandings, his knowledge and application of medical terms are consistent with generally accepted ones before Galen's influence became pervasive. Another characteristic of his indebtedness is that Tertullian is the most diligent student and expositor of Soranus' gynaecological texts, including pregnancy symptoms, abortion procedures, post-natal washing and swaddling. Interestingly, he would have read Soranus' *Περὶ Ψυχῆς* around the period when he wrote the later works (207–211) and found this treatise and other parts of Soranus helpful to attack Marcionite and Gnostic idea about the human body and Christ. In his later works, that is, against the Gnostics and Marcionites and *On the Soul*, Tertullian did not focus on medicine for its own sake. His use of medical metaphor and medical knowledge does reveal not only the interest in the relation between the medical treatment and physical health but also the various ways for the theological investigation. He adopted the tradition of metaphors from his predecessors and used them to give expression to his view of the Christian way of life, theological rhetoric and argument against heretics. Viewed in this light, medicine helps him make an appropriate approach to the points that are difficult to detect and manage.