Le Infezioni nella Storia della Medicina

Infections in the History of Medicine

The Thasian epidemic of mumps during the 5th century BC

L'epidemia di parotite a Thasos nel V secolo a.C.

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Hippocrates lived a wandering and adventurous life, travelling mostly around the island of Cos, but also in the city of Athens and the island of Thasos [1]. He had described an outbreak of mumps on the island of Thasos, in the northern Aegean Sea, which remained until today a masterful quote for the description of the disease [2-4].

During that spring in the island of Thasos an epidemic outbreak of mumps burst with heavy impact among the population. Thasians, surprisingly, didn't ask for physicians' aid, as a result severe complications were caused, like orchitis and meningoencephalitis [3].

The epidemic started with the arrival of the autumnal equinox, when the cold north winds became scarcer, and the weather changed with cooler south winds.

Great numbers of sufferers appeared among the citizens with swollen parotid glands, some unilaterally but mainly bilaterally. Absence or light fever was noted, causing no heavy weakness though. The disease made its cycle, resolving without complications. Youngsters and gym athletes were the first victims, whereas the incidence among the female population was extremely lower.

Dry cough, with no expectoration and no sputum at all, hoarse voice with sporadic fever, rarely attended with mild nasal hemorrhage, were the first symptoms. Later on severe orchitis appeared, again one-sided or bilateral, with light or heavy fever. The majority suffered greatly from testicles inflammation [3]. Others experienced strong headaches, together with fever chills, diarrhea and finally comatose status. All these symptoms possibly match to meningoencephalitis [5]. The swellings had been large, soft, extensive, without inflammation and pain, while they disappeared after a while without scars and none became infected. Besides the existence of local physicians, Thasians had unexpectedly avoided to visit their health centers. Nevertheless Hippocrates stated that none died [3].

Thasos was a trading center with two harbors (Figure 1), and spring was the starting point for

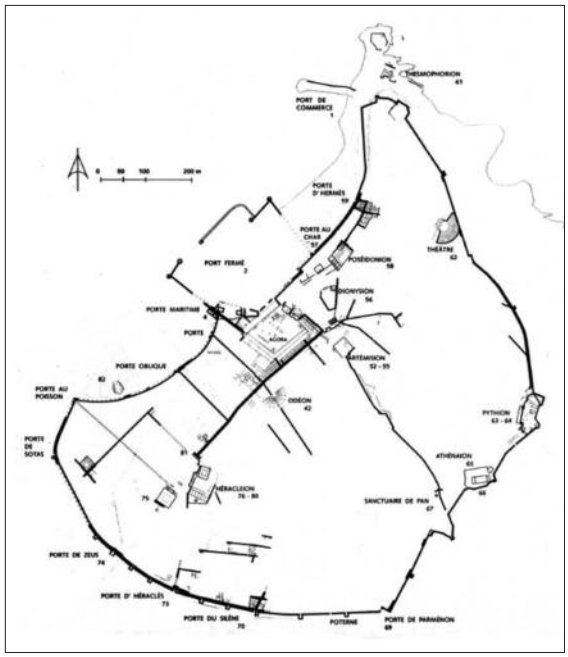

Figure 1 - Ancient Thasos, city map.

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commerce. Thasos' trading reputation due to wine and marbles made it a common root for the commercial ships of the time [6]. It is possible that harbors were the entrance gates for mumps virus.
In spite of their contradictions, all books of the *Corpus Hippocraticum* share some fundamental traits. Thus they put great emphasis on the value of observation, of the disease process mainly, on the practical rather than the theoretical point of view.
Hippocrates' observation on the Thasian mumps (epidemic parotitis), gave us the first written detailed description of the disease, which still constitutes a glorious illustration of the powers of Hippocrates' observation.

Keywords: Hippocrates, Thasos, mumps.

SUMMARY

This article briefly reminds the readers of the huge importance of Hippocrates's observation about the epidemic of mumps in Thasos during the 5th century BC. By putting great emphasis on the value of observation of the disease process, mainly from the practical point of view, the *Corpus Hippocraticum* gave us the first written detailed description of the disease.

RIASSUNTO

Questo breve articolo ricorda al lettore l'importanza delle osservazioni di Ippocrate in merito all'epidemia di parotite che si verificò a Thasos nel corso del V secolo a.C.. Il Corpus Hippocraticum, riservando grande attenzione soprattutto all'osservazione dell'andamento della malattia, in particolare da un punto di vista pratico, costituisce la prima descrizione scritta, dettagliata, della malattia.

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