Pain: Aspects and treatment in Greek antiquity
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Abstract
Background: The purpose of this study is to describe the aspects of pain and his treatment as they were stated in Ancient Greece.
Material and Methods: The methodology of historical research was used. Publications and articles considering the subject was used.
Results: In ancient Greece understanding pain had the same value as treatment, and occupied many historians, tragedians and philosophers. The pain in the beginning it was treated by combination of religious rituals (incantations) and herbs. Asclepius and his family (wife and children) were the first recorded therapeutic group. From the Hippocratic period, and then we see the religious element begins to fade and scientific practices in pain management are in use. Herbs, plants, substances, special diets and healing techniques such as hydrotherapy are now to the forefront.
Conclusions: Basics in pain management in ancient Greece were plants and herbs and their derivatives in either beverage or pad etc. Indicative in ancient Greek literature there are reports nominative nepenthe, willow, mandrake, anise, etc that have to bring the capacity to soothe their pains. Some of the techniques and instruments we rescued to date average of folklore.

Introduction
Pain is an ancient symptom that accompanies mankind since the beginning of time unbrokenably bonded to it. It is a common experience for most people regardless socio-economic status. By pain man is abounding the warmth and security of maternal life for the continuous struggle for living. We experience pain from our cradle to our death. Pain is a warning mechanism developed by our body so it can alert us if we are in danger in order to take the necessary measures to protect our wellbeing. On the other hand according to ancient Greek philosophers, pain sometimes can be an opportunity for expanding our wisdom and reveal ones’ heroism. A lot have been said and written, over centuries in the process of understanding pain by both physicians and philosophers in order to understand pain so it can be treated.

The word pain comes from the verb Paino / penomai, meaning 'plod', in ancient Greek there are several words meaning pain such as algos, pathos (for describing psychological pain and suffering), odyni and pain.
Hippocrates used the word pain for the first time as a medical condition to describe a symptom of disease and it is likely the first symptom that mankind experienced.

In 1931, the French medical missionary Dr. Albert Schweitzer wrote, "Pain is a more terrible lord of mankind than even death itself." Todd claims that a life without pain would be a levelling complacency and the human race would have not survived.

Many have been also those who attempted to define pain. An extensive literature review accumulated a variety of theoretical and functional definitions for the concept of pain suggesting the difficulty of defining this complex phenomenon. The most prevalent definition is the one of The International Association for Study of Pain (IASP) that defines pain as “an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage or described in terms of such damage." Bressler (1986) suggests that pain is an entirely subjective symptom for the one that experiences it and has a variety of biological, psychological and social problems.

The propose of this historical study is to present views and perceptions that prevailed in ancient Greek culture regarding the origins and etiology of pain through ages as well as the therapeutic techniques used by ancient Greeks to relief people that were in pain as these have been recorded and preserved up to nowadays through ancient Greek literature.

The methodology of historical research was used. Data were retrieved by various Athenian libraries and from relevant publications on this subject such as articles, studies, documents. For the archiving of the material, data were classified according to source, alphabetical and chronological order.

Pain in the mythological era in ancient Greece

Stories of Greek myths are all that remain of an ancient religion. Gods and goddesses represent the metaphors that ancient Greeks used to make sense of the world around them and of life in general. Greek mythology is full of myths and legends about Gods, semi gods and heroes but also about divine punishment, unearthly, enormous and hideous creatures and monsters. In an effort to explain pain and negative effects that had in their life ancient Greek people linked to several mythological creatures. Pain as viewed by ancient Greeks is known nowadays through their myths as documented by their Great epic poets Homer and Hesiod. None the less Greek philosophers such as Epicurus, Pythagoras, Aristotle, Plato were also preoccupied by pain, its nature and etiology. Great tragic writers such as Sophocles or even the comedy writer Aristophanes explored pain through their writings.

Homer is considered to be the greater epic poet of ancient Greece. Born around 8th - 9th century B.C. he was said to be a court singer and a story teller. Even if these details about Homer are available, not much is known about him. His two epic poems are Iliad and Odyssey. The first depicts the seige of the city of Ilion or Troy during the Trojan War and the second, recites Odysseus’ ten year return journey from Troy to Ithaca after the fall of Troy. In his poems Homer has refers to pain as a state of mind, as a physical symptom symptom and emotional suffering. ‘Pain’ is used as a synonym to algos and odyni, used to point the torture of man as a result of war, injury throughout the long way journey of returning. In Homeric medicine, pain and disease was send to mankind as a divine punishment. The extensive use of herbs used by practitioners to heal pain and wounds included narcotics to relieve both physical and emotional suffering and for the soul to be alleviated.
Hesiod the other significant epic poet, lived in the area of Voioitia in Greece around 700 or 800 b.c. And it was the poet that adjusted mythology to everyday life thus made poetry accessible to all people. Although many poems are attribute to him only three of them are saved until today. His poems are the first recorded attempts to a lyric writing, iambic and elegiac In his great poem theogony, that is consisting of 1,022 verses, is referring the beginning of the world and to gods. This poem is the main source of information on Greek mythology and it is divided into five parts which are: Prooimio (introduction), Kosmogonia - Theogony, Titans, Second phase of "Theogony" and The birth of the heroes. According to this PONOS (pain) was the essence of hard labour and toil. A translation of this poem would be: "But abhorred Eris bare painful Ponos, and Lethe and Limos, and the Algea (Pains), full of weeping, the Hysminai and the Machai the Phonoi and the Androktasai ,the Neikea, the Pseudo-Logoi, the Amphillogiai, and Dysnomia and Ruins, who share one another's natures, and Horkos." As mentioned pain was the brother of other mythical creatures called starvation, battles, Lawlessness, Ruins, Lies, murders and others. Ancient Greeks seem to attribute pain all negative results that had in their lives and compare them to those of starvation, murder and war.

In neighboring Rome, through centuries of interaction among these two civilizations same perceptions regarding the origin of pain were formed. Cicero (Marcus Tullius, 106–43 BCE), that was a Roman lawyer, orator, politician and philosopher. In his philosophical dialogue (De Natura Deorum) regarding the nature of gods claim that ponos (pain) was the son of Nyx (night) and Erevos (a creature that representing the endless and silent night), attributing him the same negative aspects.

The Philosophical aspects of Pain

Pain used to be a fundamental question for ancient Greek philosophers, several of them had been preoccupied by it, his origins and nature. What is pain; Why man is in pain; What is the center of pain; What is the utility of pain; These and many other questions can be found in the philosophical dialogues in ancient Greece.

In 500 B.C Antifon the Athenian, a sophist philosopher, stated that humans must act in ways that allowed him to live in great pleasure and in order to achieve it pain should be eliminated. Thus he developed a method that was healing the pain of soul and he named Alypia. He also claimed that he could give relief to tormented souls through speech and conversation therefore considered to be the precursor of modern psychotherapy.

Pythagoras of Samos 570 - 495 BC was an Ionian Greek philosopher, mathematician, and founder of the religious movement called Pythagoreanism. Pythagoras believes and teaches that pain, anger and pleasure have the potential to disrupt the harmony of soul. He argues that pleasure is something that a man pursues while pain is something involuntary. Alkmaion of Croton a Pythagorean philosopher that lived 5th century BC, was the first to dwell on the internal causes of illnesses. Alkmaion also placed the centre of pain and sensations in the brain and it was he who first suggested that health was a state of equilibrium between opposing humors and that illnesses are caused by environmental, nutritional and lifestyle related factors.

Aristotle the Greek philosopher (384-322 B.C) and teacher of Alexander the Great, claimed that pain is an emotion that was caused by evil spirits and Gods and entered the body via an injury. Brain was not believed to have any direct influence. According to the Aristotelian perception of pain the center of him is in the heart and pain upsets and destroys the nature of the person who feels it. Plato (428-348 B.C.) was Aristotle teacher and the founder of the Academy in Athens, the first institution
of higher learning in the Western world. His perceptions for pain changed through years. At first he considered pain as lacks and the replacement are pleasures. According to his subsequent views on pleasures and pains, they are mental states which lack determinate being.

Epicurus a Greek Philosopher that lived in Samos and in Athens, Greece in 341-270 b.c founded his own philosophical school, named the Garden of Epicurus, which was considered to be the most well-known schools of Greek philosophy. According Epicurus teaching, that is a complete and interdependent system, the goal of mankind is to find the causes of human suffering and false beliefs that cause this suffering, such as superstition, in order to lead a happy life, and for accomplishing this Epicurus offered several philosophical advices. The concept of pleasant life for Epicurus can be achieved by absence of physical pain, mental disturbance and fear and experiencing a self-sufficient life surrounded by friends. For Epicurus we can say the mankind is wavered in a bipolar of pleasure and pain.

Pain in Ancient Greek tragedy and literature

In ancient times Greeks had clearly understood the basic necessity of free expression of emotions for which they did not feel ashamed to express. Ancient Greek dramas are full of emotions that reflected tragic heroes. Athenian tragic drama had not merely a political background, as a passive backdrop to the city of Athens. It could be argued that tragedy was an active component of the political foreground, and appeared daily in the conscious world of the Athenian citizen, or even the night in his dreams. Pain is part of the daily life of people in ancient Greece due appearance in Ancient tragedies is frequent. Pain and emotional suffering is often attributed by the writers to their heroes. From one hand side we can see the tragic figure of Antigone in mental anguish of losing his mother and brothers and on the other hand the tragic figure of Philoctetes of Sophocles. And from the divine punishment of Orestis after murdering his mother to the burden of Ajax shame Ancient Greek tragedy is full of psychological and physical pain.

In the tragedy of Sophocles' Philoctetes "the tragic hero suffers unbearable leg pain due to a wound that did not heal for nine years. In despair because of the excrutiating leg pain begs for death as his only salvation from the unbearable pain he experienced. The wound that bares those pains was caused by a snakebite and the pain was chronic with exacerbations and remissions. Also in tragedies there is reference to a magical herb, as the only relief of pain. Neoptolemus promises that he will carry him to Troy "in order to save him from pain. Indeed Philoctetes was cured by Machaonas."
It worths mentioning that ancient Greeks expressed a critical view on the religious therapeutic approaches. Aristophanes comedy “Wealth” that performed in Athens in 388 BC doubts the therapeutic methods of Asclepieions. In his comedy Karionas, a slave of Chremylus, monks a night visit to the patients by the priest of the temple and all tricks and superstitions that were used in these treatments.

**Pain treatments in Greek antiquity**

A review of ancient Greek literature shows the complexity and variability that characterizes the meaning of pain, it may indicate a tyranny for the soul and body to a mythical daemon. Therefore, treatment practices were always associated to the chronological period and the social and scientific background of each era. The etiology of pain was defining the therapeutic methods that were used in different eras. It was thought that Gods punished men through pain and diseases but they could also relieve them. Apollo is the God that was attributed the gift of healing and manufacturing painkillers as well as the use of herbs to treat pain.

![Fig. 2 Apollo as healer.](image)

The son of Apollo, Asclepius, "the healer", as said by Homer (Iliad D 194), was raised in Pelion by the centaur Chiron, who possessed the knowledge of healing with herbs and roots. Furthermore, Chiron taught Greek heroes hunting and healing art as well as Asclepius to heal any disease and any wound with prayers but mostly using painkillers and emollient herbs even surgery as necessary. Asclepius is considered an existing person who later on was worshiped like God. His wife Ipioni healed pain, his daughter Hygeia was the protector of preventive medicine, his daughter of Panacea led treatment, while Akeso and Iaso assist him in the healing process.

![Fig. 3 Apollo delivers Asclepius to Chiron to teach him the art of healing](image)
In the distant past medicine was practiced by empirical doctors who manufactured their medication by themselves. They also had assistants who gathered herbs and materials and often they cultivated plants that were necessary. The oldest written information on practicing medicine and pain relief are given by Homer in his epic poems. As mentioned in those poems they used the “nepenthe” for emotional pain relief. In epic poetry ancient Greek heroes were not only trained in battle but also in medicine practices even more they used to pray to gods for healing and salvation.\textsuperscript{31-33}

Minoan Crete was mutually benefited in dealing with pain by its constant interactions with other civilizations such as Egyptians. Although Cretans were more religious regarding their therapies, they seem to use a lot of plants in their effort to overcome pain. One of those was opium that it was said to be used as primitive anesthetic or analgesic since 1250 B.C and also used in infants for dealing teething pains by rubbing it on their gums\textsuperscript{34}. In addition, mandrake was commonly used in ancient Greece and had an important role in rituals as well as a painkiller especially through surgical procedures alone or in a combination with wine\textsuperscript{20}.

Hippocrates (460 - 370.CH) lived in the golden age of Greek civilization. He was the world's first doctor that separated diseases by religion, and searched the physical causes of them. According Hippocrates perceptions of human health, the human body had an equilibrium of four bile’s (blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile) any interruption on this caused illness and pain. Thus, for the treatment of pain gave great deal to the restoration of all functions and had a holistic approach to the human body that he considered as an unity. In recommending treatments gave great importance not only to medicines (plant, animal or mineral), and baths, diet, exercise, the phlebotomist, the cautery, etc. The same perceptions had his descendants, Galen and Dioscorides. In the works of "Hippocratic Corpus" a collection of 236 plants is referred, including the hellebores that is causing repression, the luxuriance Belladonna, the henbane, the mandrake, the poppy, the extracts of willow bark, etc \textsuperscript{35-37}.

Conclusions

Man, from the moment it comes into the world feels pain: born pain; conquering this temporary life in pain and he leaves this world by his death in pain. For sure Pain is the oldest medical problem. Pain and efforts to heal and relief him is well document in historical humanity. As in every civilization that has written history so in Greece pain and his treatment have a special chapter on it. Perceptions about the origin of pain and healing techniques changed and had been evaluated and had been reformed in the course of evolution of the science to many times. The initial metaphysical vision of the phenomenon of pain as result of demonic influences or punishment by gods, gave it place to the empirical - logical interpretations. In the battle against pain used in during different stages of human history, a variety of therapeutic methods. From prayers and remedies in theocratic and mythological era to psychotherapeutic interventions and philosophical approaches, and to herbs, baths and dietary during the scientifically era in the ages of Classical Greece.

Epilogue

Over the years, despite the definitions and approaches the fragile topic of pain, never ceased to be a subjective and personal experience for each one that suffers from it. Pains intensity and proportional has distinct effects for each one, in biological, psychological and social level. The treatment was, is and will be crucial task that health professionals are called to perform. Health professionals are
requested to support, accompanied and relieve from pain humans that are treated, showing respect to personality and patients personal beliefs within the subjectivity of pain.

References

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