

Student Activity for Cosmology, Magic and Divination, Week 5
Magic, Medicine, Religion and Divination in the Graeco-Roman World

Ars longa, vita brevis

The art is long, but life is short.

This famous Hippocratic aphorism, well known in both its Latin and English translation, is actually the beginning of a longer quotation:

Ho bios brachus, he de techne makre, ho de kairos oxus, he de peira sphalere, he de krisis chalepe

ὁ βίος βραχὺς, ἡ δὲ τέχνη μακρὴ, ὁ δὲ καιρὸς ὀξύς, ἡ δὲ πείρα σφαλερή, ἡ δὲ κρίσις χαλεπή.

Aphorisms I, 1, in Littré, Émile, ed. *Hippocrate. Oeuvres complètes*. 10 vols. Paris: J.-B. Baillière, 1839-1861. Reprint, 1962, here vol. 4, 458.

‘Life is short, but the art is great, the opportune moment fleeting, experimentation perilous, discernment difficult’ (trans. D. G. Greenbaum)

Note: ‘art’ translates the Greek *techne*, which can also mean ‘craft’ (and from which our word technology comes). The phrase ‘opportune moment’ translates the Greek *kairos*. ‘Discernment’ translates *krisis* (from the verb *krino*, judge, discern, distinguish, decide)

Think about this quotation in regard to divination and medicine. How do medicine, rituals and doing things at the right time relate to the practice of medicine in its physical and spiritual aspects? Is there a spiritual aspect to medicine, or is it purely the physical application of remedy and treatment? What do you think the writer of the aphorism intended?