

EINSTEIN CENTER CHRONOI

Time and Awareness of Time in Antiquity

Workshop “Kairos, Krisis, Rhythmos:
Time and Time Awareness in Ancient Medicine”

Perceiving and Measuring the Pulse in Ancient Greece and Rome

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The identification of the pulse (Greek *sphygmos*) as the constant beating of the heart and arteries was a turning point in the history of medical theory and clinical practice. The identification occurred in the late fourth or early third centuries BCE, when the physician Praxagoras of Cos observed that the heart and arteries beat naturally and continuously throughout one's life. Praxagoras and later physicians laid down detailed physiological and pathological theories concerning the pulse as well as elaborate classifications of different types and characteristics of pulse. These classifications became an essential part of diagnostic practice from the third century onwards and were the basis for pulse examination throughout history.

In my talk I will present the key anatomical and physiological ideas underlying the ancients' pulse theories and show how these shaped their clinical diagnostic practice. I will then discuss the classification of the pulse according to the physician Archigenes of Apamea (first and second centuries CE), which was the basis for Galen's influential pulse theory. I will show how Archigenes used direct tactile observation as well as metaphors and other linguistic means in order to overcome the challenge of perceiving, measuring and describing the minute and numerous changes in the pulse in the absence of tools and technologies available in modern times.