‘As Trainers for the Healthy’: Physical Therapists, Anointers, and Healing in the Late Latin West

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“As Trainers for the Healthy”: Massage Therapists, Anointers, and Healing in the Late Latin West

This article asserts that cultural distinctions in the use of oil and the esteem of athletics initially allowed for a higher status for massage therapists, athletic trainers, and anointers in Greek as opposed to Roman culture. Over the course of the Empire, however, these dissimilarities waned due to cultural, medical, and—ultimately—religious shifts. These professionals are, in a sense, trace elements that allow us to track transformation in attitudes towards the body and the power of touch to heal from the high Empire into Late Antiquity. They also allow us to discern the implications of the Church’s claim to arbitrate healing of both the soul and the body.

Pope Felix IV (526–530) had the basilica of SS. Cosmas and Damian built in Rome in a rather intimate space that originally served as one of the halls connected to Vespasian’s Temple of Peace.¹ The converted temple was the first known basilica within the Forum Romanum. Its conversion was an emblematic papal move that communicated the fusion of Romanitas with Christianitas spatially. Felix dedicated the new basilica to the popular twin physicians, who were Cilician healers martyred under Diocletian and members of the group of saints known as ἀνάργυροι—physicians that refused to take fees for their services.² A number of churches dedicated to these brothers had begun to proliferate in the East particularly from the fifth and sixth centuries, drawing

Thanks are given for the superb suggestions made by this volume’s editors, as well as the remarks of Jinyu Liu.

¹ “SS. Cosmas et Damianus, basilica,” in LTUR I, 324–25. The Temple of Romulus became the entrance to the basilica from the Forum. Originally, this hall may have housed one of the Temple of Peace’s libraries, which preserved a number of medical texts and literary works.

² The title distinguished the Christian healer-saints from the non-Christian physicians who received payment for their services. There are multiple accounts of the brothers’ martyrdom, but Gregory of Tours (Glor. mart. 97) notably remarks on their ability to heal through innate power and prayer.
pilgrims seeking rehabilitation in much the same manner that Asklepieia did.\(^3\) An apse mosaic with Christ at the center with Pope Felix, Saint Cosmas, and Saint Paul on the left, and Saint Peter, Saint Damian, and Saint Theodore on his right, welcomed guests to the basilica, as did an inscription underneath the mosaic, which proclaimed that the physician martyrs bestowed the *spes certa salutis* (certain hope of health) upon them.

A millennium after the basilica’s consecration, the Italian humanist Aldus Manutius (1547–1597) recorded a second century ce inscription on display in the church. The inscription venerated a freedman *iatralipta* of the *familia Caesaris* named Publius Aelius Epaphroditus:

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To the departed spirits. For Publius Aelius Epaphroditus, freedman of Augustus, head *iatralipta* of the slaves of the imperial household, who died at the age of 30, a husband. Nicopolis, of the imperial household, and Soter, his son, made this for his well deserving father and for themselves and for their freedmen, freedwomen, and descendants.\(^4\)
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Prima facie, it might seem odd for a basilica to exhibit the epitaph of a non-Christian within it, but the remembrance of the *iatralipta* (medical massage therapist) makes sense if the space’s connection with medicine and healing are considered.\(^5\) As an *iatralipta*, Epaphroditus’ epitaph complemented the basilica’s continuous association with medicine. Its display may also speak to a development in terms of the prestige of the massage therapist from the early imperial period into Late Antiquity. While sometimes demeaned as sensual or luxurious by Roman elites in the Republic and early Empire, the *iatralipta*’s practice of using touch and oil to heal patients was increasingly associated with healing—physical, as well as spiritual—in the later empire. This article argues that the early Christian belief in the potency of touch and the application of oil may have allowed the conventional Roman aristocratic disdain for anointers and massage therapists to wane further, in favor of a more elevated view of such therapists.

\(^3\) See van Esbroeck 1981; Wittmann 1967; Crislip 2005a, 123.

\(^4\) *CIL* 6: 8981: D(is) M(anibus)/ P(ublio) Aelio Aug(usti) lib(erto) Epaphroditol magistro iatraliptae puerorum/ eminentium Caesaris n(ostri)/ qui vix(it) annis XXX coniugi/ Nicopolis Caesaris n(ostri) et/ Soter filius patri bene merenti/ fecerunt et sibi et suis lib(ertos)/ libertabus posterisque eorum = Henzen 1856, 6326. Although apparently now missing, the inscription was originally recorded in the church in the sixteenth century by Manutius (Manutius Vatic. 3241 f.244, 5253 f. 366) and subsequently transmitted by Giovanni Battista Doni (1731, 279, no.1). The manuscripts were then consulted by the editors of the *CIL* 6, who noted: *tabula humi affixa aede Divorum Cosmae et Damiani*, Manut. 5253. Elizabeth Robinson and I undertook numerous trips to the church in order to find the inscription, but to no avail.

\(^5\) Schulze 2005, 42 remarks that the inscription was reused within the church of Cosmas and Damian for unknown reasons.
A myriad of specialists offered anointing and massage services during the late Republic and early Roman Empire, each with a status that reflected Roman socio-cultural attitudes towards touch, pollution, and pleasure. Occupying the lowest stratum were the *pollinctores*, who rubbed and anointed corpses in preparation for burial. Due in part to frequent physical contact with corpses, they became polluted persons and were kept separate from the general populace in some Italian communities. Fulgentius went so far as to define the *pollinctor* as being an *uctor pollutorum* (anointer of the polluted). Above mortuary professionals were massage therapists and anointers called by a number of titles. In the Latin West, lower level male massage therapists were generally referred to as an *unctor*, *tractor*, or *alipta*, while female massage therapists were sometimes referred to as an *unctrix* or *tractatrix*. In the Greek East, massage therapists could be referred to as a τριβεύς (literally a “rubber”), whereas an ἀλείπτης referred to an anointer or an athletic trainer.

In the West, many of these massage therapists came from a servile background and attended to their individual domini in the household or at the baths by applying oils and unguents, and then using instruments such as the *strigil* to scrape them clean. Bathing establishments also employed such professionals to provide these services. Further up the social ladder were the παιδοτρίβαι (athletic trainers) who often used massage and oils to maintain the physical prowess of their clients: gladiators, charioteers, wrestlers, athletes, and—increasingly—Roman elites. At the top of this hierarchy of occupational touch were iatraliptae. This was the specialty of the aforementioned libertus Epaphroditus, who, as a *magister*, may have instructed on the benefits of massage and the application of oils as medicinal treatments. As many medical practitioners and massage therapists of the time were, his name suggests (but does not guarantee) that he was Greek. Cultural distinctions in the use of oil...
and the esteem of athletics allowed for a higher status for massage therapists, athletic trainers, and anointers in Greek as opposed to Roman culture during the Republic and Early Empire. These professionals are, in a sense, trace elements that allow us to track the variation in attitudes towards the body and the power of touch from the Empire into Late Antiquity. They also allow us to discern the implications of the Church’s claim to arbitrate healing of both the soul and the body.

Before progressing to an analysis of these shifts, a few notes about my approach and methodology. This study serves as a supplement to other analyses on the status of physicians in Roman society, such as Kudlien’s seminal work. Moreover, I have here chosen to focus on the status of professionals that utilized oils, perfumes, and unguents, rather than analyzing the substances themselves. Groundbreaking work by scholars such as Harvey paved the way for the emerging field of sensory studies in antiquity and looked at both the oils and smells that played an important role both in Roman culture and early Christian worship. I focus rather on the fact that modifications to the sensorium and to healing approaches had broader, socio-economic implications for certain professionals. In addition to Harvey’s work, this study is indebted to that of Samellas, who coined the term “tactile revolution” to articulate the dissipation of notions of death pollution within early Christianity. I suggest that this revolution occurred on multiple fronts: as new attitudes towards contact with corpses proliferated within early Christian writing, so too did new attitudes towards the healing of the sick through touch and unction. In what follows, I trace this trajectory by describing in greater detail masseuses employed by households or the baths to those whose tasks align with athletic trainers and medical professionals as a prelude to my analysis of the significance of touch and oil in early Christianity. Through these individuals, we can perhaps view the personnel linked to the success of oil, unguents, and touch for healing in many early churches. Furthermore, we can distinguish how low-status or marginalized professionals often reflect elite apprehensions.

**Oil, Touch, and the Domestic Masseur**

In the wake of Rome’s conquest of Greece in the second century BCE, there was a growing presence of Greeks employed and enslaved in Roman Italy, including anointers and massage therapists. Even as late as the first or early

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12 Kudlien 1986, 10, 181, however, did not regard the *iatraliptae* to be physicians.

13 Harvey 2006.

second century CE, Juvenal could indict immigrant Greeks for stealing jobs from Romans and satirized the transformation of Rome into a Greek city employing grammarians, orators, geometricians, painters, *aliptai*, augurs, tightrope walkers, doctors, and astrologers. In addition to the stigma of being Greek, other Roman prejudices influenced the status of massage therapists and anointers in Roman society, first among them being attitudes toward gain and manual labor. Underscoring the *quaestus* (profit) associated with medicine generally, Pliny the Elder snidely remarked that a physician and disciple of Hippocrates named Prodicus (likely he means here the early fifth century BCE Herodicus) founded the branch of medicine called *iatraliptice* (Gr. ἰατραλειπτική), a field that in Pliny’s view functioned to “provide a *vectigal* (revenue) for *unctores*” and the “*medicorum ac mediastinis*” (menial slaves of physicians). Similarly, Martial casts the *unctor* as a profiteer, claiming: “the sordid *unctor* snatches their money undeservedly.”

To many elite writers, those that performed any manual work for the sake of profit were unseemly, a view which would accordingly include masseurs and anointers. Such tradesmen depended on others for their livelihood, rather than deriving income from the Roman ideal: property. In his *De Officiis*, Cicero provided evidence for an additional source of ignominy surrounding masseurs and anointers: sensuality and luxury. The orator noted that trades that catered to *voluptas* (pleasure) were in fact the most base—namely fishmongers, butchers, cooks, poultry salesmen, fishermen, dancers, and *unguentarii*. Although masseurs are not mentioned directly by Cicero in this passage, they bear close resemblance to the *unguentarii*, sellers of unguents or perfumes in general. In fact, those associated with these oils, unguents, and perfumes became vulnerable to accusations of luxury and moral deprivation in Roman literature. The association of massage and anointing with pleasure easily turned into an association with sexual deviance. Juvenal noted an *aliptes* brought to the baths was also practiced at massaging the clitoris of his *domina*.

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16 Plin. *NH* 29.2. The Selymbrian Herodicus is mentioned numerous times in Plato (*Prt.* 316e; *Phdr.* 227d; *Resp.* 3.406a). He was the founder of dietetics and an athletic trainer who imposed a notoriously strict regime on his patients. See Nails 2002, 164 Her.
17 Mart. 7.32.4–6.
18 Cic. *De Off.* 1.150.
19 Cic. *De Off.* 1.150. While still unseemly occupations, Cicero did grant doctors and architects a higher degree of status due to their skill.
20 Cf. Marcus Antonius’s accusation that Octavian’s great grandfather was of African descent and had once run a perfume shop and, later, a bakery (Suet. *Aug.* 4.2).
21 Juv. 6.422–23. Note that *femur* may here be used as a synonym for her genitalia (Watson and Watson 2014, 215).
Even still, the wealthy often hired others to perform the application of oil, because it was a mark of status to have an attendant perform such menial tasks for you. Moreover, a trained massage therapist could do a more professional job of applying therapeutic oils than an unaided individual himself. Massage therapists appear to have become a trendy addition to the Roman *familia* from the second century BCE, then further promoted and taken to new skill levels by the imperial house in the early Empire. Like luxury items, masseurs could also serve as human accessories. In Plautus’s *Trinummus*, written at the beginning of the second century BCE, the character Lysiteles, considering the battle between love and profit, describes the way in which women use and abuse their lovers: asking for money, requiring presents, and moving into their houses with a large and expensive entourage of slaves: “the whole household is taken along: the wardrobe attendant, unctor, overseer of gold, fan-bearers, sandal-carriers, singers, treasurers, message carriers, and message receivers.”22 The playwright points to the fact that by the beginning of the second century BCE, Roman men and women regularly had others lather their bodies with perfumed unguents and oils, and legal evidence also points to the trend.23

While Plautus exemplifies the fact that many of our textual references to domestic massage therapists are manipulated in literature as a means to a moralizing end, we must turn instead to their inscriptions for better insight into the personal identities, opportunities, and associations formed by these professionals. Inscriptional evidence suggests that by the first century CE, *unctores* were being touted as medical attendants within the household. A columbarium stele found on the Via Latina in Rome (dating to the middle of the first century CE) commemorates the slaves of Gaius Sulpicius Galba, a member of the Roman elite who was likely related to the emperor Galba. The stele contains four inscriptions detailing the financing, patron, and inhabitants of the columbarium: An *unctus* of Gaius Sulpicius Galba named Arphocras, who financed the burial plot and ossuary for himself and his comrade, and Corinthus, likely also a slave within Galba’s domestic retinue.24 On the architrave at the front of the niche Arphocras proudly announces himself as an *unctus* within Galba’s house, betraying no indication that he was ashamed of a job others might have considered menial; moreover, the inscription serves to support the legal evidence for the bourgeoning popularity of household

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23 We see evidence of massage therapists as servile commonplace in Justinian’s *Digest*, which preserves a ruling from the first-century BCE jurist Alfenus Varus (*Dig.* 50.16.203). In it, he notes that the law concerning the harbor tax in Sicily did not apply to domestic slaves that looked after the body of the *dominus*: such as masseurs, cooks, bedroom attendants, and personal attendants. It should likely be *unctores* for *iunctores*, as Watson 1985, 465.
masseurs in Roman Italy. This is certainly the case with the domestic staff of the second-century CE consul Marcus Servilius Fabianus Maximus. Three inscriptions point to Fabianus’s employment of a medical staff that consisted of an *unctor* named Naicus, a *medicus* named Phoebianus, a *libertus* named Trophimus, and an *ἰατρός* named Sergio.

Their popularity also extended to the imperial household. Between the first and second centuries CE, a special training school for male slaves of the imperial house called the *paedagogium Caesaris* was even set up in Rome on the Caelian Hill. While many were schooled in the city of Rome, it appears that some traveled with the imperial retinue or lived elsewhere while still employed by the imperial house, practicing as *unctores* after finishing their extensive training. A former *tractor* of the imperial house named Julius Xanthus served both Tiberius and Claudius, and became a *subpraefectus* of the Alexandrine fleet. He is no doubt an anomaly rather than the standard, but his situation does show the more regularized employment of such professionals among the *servi caesaris*.

**Massage Therapists and Anointers in the Baths**

One first-century Roman epitaph broadcast the role of the baths in daily life quite eloquently: “Baths, wine, and women corrupt our bodies, but baths, wine, and sex make up life.” In contrast to this sensual proclamation, the stoic Seneca, disgruntled at living overtop a bathhouse, remarked that he avoided masseurs, the bath, or any other medicine to relieve his weariness—he instead derived pleasure from waiting out the pain. It is within this context

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26 *CIL* 5: 868 = *Inscr. Ag* 489: Naico / ser(vo) / unctori / Fabianus / co(n)s(ularis); *CIL* V, 869 = *InscrAg* 490: Ph[oebiano] / ser(vo) / medico / Fabianus / co(n)s(ularis); *CIL* V, 870 = *Inscr. Ag* 492: ‘Trophimo., / lib(erto), / Fabianus/ co(n)s(ularis)’; CIG 6752 = *IG* 14: 2343 = *Inscr. Ag* 491 = Lettich 2003, no. 289: Θ(εοῖς) ∙ Κ(αταχθονίοις) / Σεργίῳ / Ἑστιάιῳ / Σερωνιλίῳ / Φαβιανῳ / ἰατρῷ καὶ / Ὀστιλίᾳ / ἐποίησεν.

27 A funerary altar from the third century CE indicates that, at least with regard to the imperial household, *unctores* received rigorous training: *CIL* 5: 1039 = *ILS* 1826 = *Inscr. Ag* 473. See Lettich 2003, no. 79; Maurice 2013, 123.


29 See *CIL* 6: 32775 = *CIL* 6: 33131 = *ILS* 2816. Heliodorus, an *unctor* who had graduated from the school, set up this epitaph for a fellow alumnus of the academy, Philagrypnus, a slave who himself had been born in the imperial house, but whose occupation is unknown. For the extensive evidence for imperial slaves and freedmen in Aquileia, see *InscrAg* 463–475, 2301. Also note an *unctor* in *InscrAg* 731.

30 *CIL* 6: 32775 = *CIL* 6: 33131 = *ILS* 2816.


32 Sen. *Ep.* 123.4. I must here note that living directly overtop a bath might sour us all on the institution.
of perceived sensuality and pleasure that we must attempt to understand the status of the massage therapists and anointers who worked within the baths.\textsuperscript{33} Much like the sexual pollution that tainted the prostitutes that worked in brothels, this stigma was sometimes attached to bath employees as well. The association of some bath workers with social deviance can help us to understand better the reasons for the lower status of bath masseurs, and also the social position of the upper management of the baths who, under Roman law, could have been prosecuted as pimps. Both prostitutes and pimps incurred the stigma of \textit{infamia} for their consistent transgression of sexual boundaries, and massage therapists and anointers that engaged in similar favors would have been likewise susceptible to such a status.

Roman baths, which often had \textit{palaestrae} attached, were akin to the Greek gymnasium in that most had workout facilities. Furthermore, Roman baths employed their own staffs, which were mostly servile, and a room especially for anointment called the \textit{alipiterium} or \textit{unctorium}.\textsuperscript{34} Masseurs and anointers were perhaps not always called by specific terms such as \textit{aliptes} or \textit{unctor}, but were at times referred to generically as a \textit{baliscus}, \textit{lotor}, or \textit{balneator}. In the \textit{Satyricon}, Seleucus warns that he does not go to the bath daily due to the rigor of the massages given by a \textit{baliscus}.\textsuperscript{35} When bathers entered the bath, bath attendants immediately anointed them with oil before ushering them on to activities that worked up a sweat. Attendants later used \textit{strigiles} to remove the oil, sweat, and impurities, and masseurs and perfumers were on hand if a patron wished a massage or dousing with perfumes. As we know from satirical portrayal, attendants sometimes crossed over the line of propriety and provided sexual favors to guests. As Clarke has indicated, in bathhouse decorations, bath attendants were often portrayed sexually, with their phalli in these images even being used to direct people how to proceed correctly through the baths. A mosaic from the entrance to the \textit{caldarium} in the House of Menander at Pompeii portrays an \textit{unctor} who is likely a slave given that he is carrying oil jugs, with his erect penis hanging out from under his towel.\textsuperscript{36}

Voluntary associations helped to staff many Roman baths, but patrons could also bring their domestic \textit{unctores} to the \textit{thermae}. On the one hand they

\textsuperscript{33} For the social experience of bathing: Fagan 1999, especially 10–39.
\textsuperscript{34} Many inscriptions simply and ambiguously note an \textit{unctor}, without making it clear where they practiced their trade. See Bruun 1993.
\textsuperscript{35} Petr. \textit{Sat.} 42: \textit{baliscus enim fullo est}. The bath attendant is compared to a textile fuller who beat and softened wool. As Petronius exemplifies, any investigation into these bathing attendants must take into account that terms for bath workers are often general, and may not fully illustrate their expected duties within the baths.
\textsuperscript{36} Clarke 1979, 25–26, fig. 13. Compare with the bath attendant Buticosus in Room B in the Baths of Buticosus at Ostia, a figure whose erect penis directs patrons into Room C (fig. 30). Also see Clarke 1998, 212–42.
served a utilitarian function in anointing and massaging their master, and on the other hand, they served to advertise the wealth of their _dominus_ to the rest of the bathers. Juvenal roundly mocked the slave entourages employed by some bathers—he chides a woman who baths at night and is accompanied by her _aliptes_.

Massage therapists might not only have been tools to publicize one’s wealth, but were also seen as essential to one’s medical treatment. As Garrett Fagan has shown, the growth in the popularity of the baths strongly parallels the growth in popularity of the medical school of Asclepiades of Bithynia, a physician who touted the usefulness of baths, massage, and oils over more invasive techniques. A scene in Petronius’ _Satyricon_ describes how, after sweating in the _caldarium_, the nouveau-riche freedman Trimalchio and his entourage passed into the cold room, the _frigidarium_, where he was anointed with ointment while three _iatraliptae_ sat drinking wine. When they spilled it, Trimalchio remarked they were toasting to his health. Petronius is indubitably satirizing the elite penchant for bringing attendants to the baths, but Trimalchio’s choice of _iatraliptae_ rather than _unctores_ may signal a trend of employing more medically educated massage therapists. Certainly by the late first century, it appears that such professionals had become more common in the West. Moreover, the social status and regard granted to the massage therapists varied in the Empire—some were regarded as professionals with skills akin to those of doctors; others were thought of in sexualized and demeaning terms. Rather than a more monolithic portrayal, sources took a more varied one. Although the profession as a whole had not been elevated, massage therapy did now offer some an avenue to social prestige.

### Athletic Trainers in Roman Society

Oil was essential in the gymnasium in order to keep the skin supple, reduce friction, and to close the pores to prevent excessive sweat. Within the complex, three types of skilled attendants catered to Greek athletes: a _παιδοτρίβης_ (literally a ‘boy-rubber,’) who was an athletic coach or trainer); an _ἀλείπτης_ and the _γυμναστής_ who both rubbed down athletes and trained them for competition (although both were respected employees within the gymnasium, the former appears to have been of lower status than the latter). All three types

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37 Juv. 6.418–47. For the use of slave entourages to accompany and serve patrons at the baths, see Fagan 1999, 199–200.
38 Fagan 1999, 93–103.
39 Petr. _Sat._ 28.
40 Aristotle notes that new citizens were sent to a _παιδοτρίβης_ ( _Const. Ath._ 42.3). We know from Pausanias that the _γυμναστής_ was male and that trainers had their own enclosure within which
of trainers were closely allied with their athletes and used massage and oil on them from early in the Hellenistic world. In his Nemean Odes, Pindar even referred to the γυμναστής Melesias as a “charioteer of hands and strength.” The esteem of athletic masseur-trainers and the institution of athletics itself in the Greek world likely draws in part from the fact that few slaves were employed by gymnasia or even permitted to exercise in athletic sites, and the servile were largely (though not completely) absent from sports competition.

Although Greeks may have embraced athletic trainers, Plutarch reports that the Romans were initially “very suspicious of the of rubbing down with oil, and even today they believe that nothing has been so much to blame for the enslavement and effeminacy of the Greeks as their gymnasia and wrestling-schools.” In addition to connecting oil, effeminacy, and the gymnasium with Greekness and foreign immorality, Roman moralists such as Seneca also complained that the problem with athletic training lay in having to take orders from vile slaves who alternated between the oil flask and the wine flagon. Beyond the objections to the use of effeminate oils and Greek slaves to apply them, critics of the gymnasium additionally objected to the institution as pulling Roman youth from pursuits more worthy military activities. However, despite elite protests to the institution, athletics became progressively popular within the Latin West in the early Empire, and in fact promoted a Greek way of thinking about athletic training, namely that it served a medical purpose.

In the letter of Mark Antony about his “friend and ἀλείπτης” Marcus Antonius Artemidorus, we can best track the transference of athletic training from the Greek to the Roman world. Around 41 BCE, Marcus Antonius wrote a letter to the Assembly of Greeks in Asia (interestingly preserved on the verso of a medical papyrus) asking for privileges for the guild of his ἀλείπτης and freedman Artemidorus. Specifically, Antonius asked them to grant Artemidorus’s guild of athletes freedom from military service, immunity from public

to watch athletic competitions in Olympia (5.6.7–8). Respect in the Greek East extended into the imperial period, as seen in two decrees from Delphi giving trainers an honorary place in the boule and Delphic citizenship: F. Delphes 3. 1: 200, 220.

41 Also see Paus. 6.2.9 regarding a παιδοτρίβης named Mycon.
44 Sen. Ep. 15.3: ‘homines inter oleum et vinum occupati’.
45 See Luc. 7.270–72, in which the love of the wrestling floor is blamed for the difficulty young Romans have with weapons.
46 For the early imperial growth of Greek athletics in Roman society, see Newby 2005, 45.
duties, exemption from quartering troops, a truce during the duration of the festival, and the ability to wear purple. As Augustus alleged, the triumvir had gone over to the Greek side, and in his philhellenism abandoned a Roman identity.

With the value of hindsight, we can look back and see that Antony was onto a trend in Rome: the Greek personal trainer. Athletes were given great regard in the Greek world, and, in turn, their trainers—who had both a medical and technical skill—shared in their victories.

The use of athletic trainers in Roman society continued to some degree in both the imperial retinues of the early Empire and among the populace. We know of an imperial ἀλείπτης named Tiberius Claudius Nikophon, through a dedication he erected to Apollo Didymeus and the Sebastoi (32/100 CE). Moreover, a fragment of a letter from Marcus Aurelius to Fronto references an alipta gripping the emperor by his jaws. Even in the Price Edict of Diocletian (301 CE), the emperor felt compelled to set the rate for a so-called cero-matita (also known as a ceromaticus or, in the Greek world, κηρωματικός) at 50 denarii. These professionals applied a wax-based κήρωμα or κηρωτή salve, placing it on broken limbs, and also used massage to heal. The gymnasium often employed these professionals, and the term came to be considered as equivalent to παιδοτρίβης. What may help to explain the growing popularity of such trainers is the emergent acceptance that such trainers helped to maintain physical strength, but also served a medical purpose.

Sometimes associations of athletics and medicine merged. The best evidence of the perception of trainers as medical workers of the best evidence for the perception of trainers as medical workers in the Roman Empire comes from Publius Aelius Aristides, who, although a Greek from Mysia in Asia Minor, travelled extensively to Rome, Athens, Pergamum, and other parts of the Empire. The second century orator was constantly sick and spent an extensive amount of time seeking out cures for his chronic ailments, even spending two years as an incubant in the Asklepieion of Pergamum. His remarks on his battles with disease indicate that he trusted not

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48 See Potter 2012, 165, who notes the right to wear purple was a “striking” request because of its association with royalty.
50 IDid 108=Didyma 135.
52 This was the same amount allotted to pedagogues and magistri. See Lauffer 1971, 7.64: paedagogus (7.65), magister (7.66), calculator (7.67), notarius (7.68), grammaticus (7.70).
53 Sch. Ar. Eq. 492: παιδοτρίβαι γάρ καλοῦνται οἱ ἀλείπται καὶ κηρωμαρτίσται; Cf. SEG 38: 176; Pl. Prot. 312b.
only physicians and temple attendants to help him in combat them, but also
gymnastic trainers. Aristides reveals the large number of medical providers
one could consult, and the physician Galen offers further proof that athletic
trainers had become real competition for physicians. He rails against boor-
ish athletic trainers in his *Thrasyboulos* in part because they are stealing
patients away from physicians.55

**Toward a Medical Use of Oil and Massage in the Latin West**

When asked how to live a salubrious life, the pre-Socratic philosopher Dem-
ocritus reportedly responded, “If one’s body is moistened inside with honey
and outside with oil.”56 That this view on a salubrious life was long-lived is
evident in Pliny the Elder’s report that when the emperor Augustus asked the
still-vigorous centenarian how he had kept so healthful, he replied, ‘*Intus
mulso, foris oleo*’—‘By honeyed wine on the inside, by oil on the outside.’57
Elsewhere, Pliny noted that, after the formation of the Hippocratic school,
the nascent field of medicine quickly became highly profitable, particularly
in the area of *iatraliptics*.58 While Pliny the Elder documented the growth of
this subfield, it was his nephew, Pliny the Younger, who enjoyed its benefits
first-hand. Between 98 and 99 CE, while serving on the northern frontier,
Pliny sent three letters to the emperor Trajan asking for citizenship for his
*iatralipta*, Harpocras, for curing him of a serious affliction.59 Here we find
a clear example of an *iatralipta* who functions in a medical capacity and who is
esteemed for this sort of work.

As Pliny’s uncle had already noted with more than a little invective, there
were numerous Egyptian doctors in Rome in the late Republic and early
Empire, and the city of Alexandria in particular was renowned for its educa-
tion of medical professionals.60 Harpocras likely came from a medical school
in Egypt that taught him *iatraliptics* while he was still a slave, before traveling
to Rome with his patroness.61 His passage to Rome was possibly in the wake

54 Aristid. Or. 24. 306 (ed. Dindorf) notes the consulting of *οἵ τε ιατροὶ καὶ γυμνασταί*. See
56 Ath. *Deipn.* 2.46F: εἰ τὰ μὲν ἐντὸς μέλιτι βρέχοι, τὰ δ` ἐκτὸς ἐλαίῳ.
61 Harpocras was a freedman of a *peregrina* named Thermuthis, the wife of Theon, herself an
Egyptian—though without Roman citizenship. Harpocras was itself a common Egyptian name
that likely derived from the Greco-Roman name for the Egyptian god Horus.
of an outbreak of mentagra, a skin disease that, according to the elder Pliny, originated in Egypt, but was brought from Asia during the middle of the reign of Tiberius, and subsequently ravaging the nobility of Rome. The outbreak compelled many members of the elite to hire personal physicians to attempt to cure the skin diseases and to apply unguents and healing balms to the open sores, perhaps hastening a trend already taking root in the West.

With this in mind, it seems likely that some depreciation of athletic trainers by physicians were in part born from professional competition within the medical marketplace. For instance, Galen may have purposefully distinguished medical massages from more lascivious kinds, in order to dredge up the sexual stigma attached to the field of massage and, by extension, delegitimize unctores. The physician, who earlier in his career had trained gladiators that belonged to Pergamon’s high priest and depended on the use of massage and oils to attend to them, differentiated between the sexual and medical uses of massage in order to champion—and sell—his own use of the therapy. Throughout his career, Galen continued to use massage therapy on his patients, including his famed treatment of the wife of the former consul Flavius Boethus who he treated with a mixture of massage, diuretics, purges, and honey ointments. Other medical writers appear to critique the fashionable employment of such specialists by healthy men. The first century physician Aulus Cornelius Celsus, for instance, began his treatise on medicine by warning readers against the unnecessary use of medical professionals: “A healthy man, who is both vigorous and functioning on his own volition, should be under no obligatory rules, and have no need, either for a medicus or for an iatrolipta.” Notably, the medicus and the iatrolipta are cast as more or less equivalent.

The epigraphic and textual evidence suggests that the use of specially educated trainers and massage therapists had become more regularized in both public and private spheres in the early imperial West, despite continued criticisms from Roman moralists decrying them as sensual luxuries and from their competitors in the medical field. Even as their popularity and legitimacy increased, the professionals that practiced massage and the use of oil for healing still occupied a lower status within the Latin West than in the Greek East.

62 Plin. NH. 26.1–3. Pliny dates the outbreak: primum Ti. Claudi Caesaris principatu medio (26.3). Although many editors have assumed this implied the reign of Claudius, Ronald Syme argues—successfully in my opinion—for a dating in the reign of Tiberius. It is in this context that Tiberius’s edict on kissing makes sense. See Syme 1981, 126; 1982, 75, n. 55.
64 Gal., Praen. 8 (Kuhn 14.641–647).
65 Cel. De Med. 1.1.
It is within this context that we should situate the success of the use of oil and touch by Christian presbyters, bishops, monastic healers, and physicians from the third century CE onward. Christianity valorized oil and conferred additional legitimacy on its tactile healers as mediators between the divine and the people. The Church offered not only physical but also spiritual unguents to cleanse the body, and in so doing, further broadened the acceptance of touch and oils for healing within Roman society.

The “Tactile Revolution” in Early Christianity

The import of oil in the East and particularly within the context of Judaism is important to decoding attitudes towards the use of oil and touch in early Christian communities. Near Eastern ideas of sacred anointment and the ritual use of oil to seal kings, prophets, and religious leaders became embedded in the very nomenclature of early Christians, and have their antecedents in Jewish belief and ritual. The word “Messiah” derives from the Hebrew word “mashah” (anoint), a term translated into Greek using the adjective “χρίστος” (smeared or anointed), which served as the basis for the epithet “Christ.” This title specifically had royal connotations, and referred to the anointment that occurred during the inauguration ceremony for the kings of Israel. The Hebrew Bible also indicates the significant role played by anointing. In Exodus, God ordered Moses to create an anointing oil made from olive oil, myrrh, cinnamon, calamus, and cassia, with which he could then anoint and consecrate the Tabernacle.67 The notion that oil was “sacramental”—i.e. that it had a religious or sacred function above and beyond its therapeutic function—influenced Christianity; however, just as in Greco-Roman culture, there were a number of secular uses for oil as well. For example, the Mishnah Yoma forbade indulging in pleasures such as sex, bathing, sandals, and the application of oil during the fast Yom Kippur.68

In addition to its religious and pleasurable applications, oil could also be used for healing. It is here interesting to note that extant Jewish literature indicates little association between priests and healing, although there was a closer correlation between Jewish prophets and the healing of the sick.69 In Leviticus, it is commanded that a priest use oil to purify and make atonement for a leper patient, but it is not a part of the healing of the afflicted individual.70

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67 Exod 30.22–25, 40.9; Lev 8.10.  
68 M. Yoma 8.1.  
69 Bauckham 2010, 411–12. Eve 2002, 253–55 notes that while prophets such as Moses, Elijah, Elisha, and Isaiah perform some healing miracles, only a small amount of Second Temple Literature discusses miraculous healing.  
70 Lev 14.12, 15–18, 21, 24, 26–29.
Thus the focus on the manual application of oil by early Christian clerics as a means of affecting healing is a complex late antique development that reveals the influence of a number of cultural attitudes towards oil and touch. In order to track the medical use of oil in early Christianity, then, we must first turn to the New Testament.

The book of James notes, “Is any one among you sick? Let him call forth the elders of the church and let them pray over him, ἀλείψαντες (anointing) him with oil in the name of the Lord.” 71 Despite its apparent directness, the purposes of the oil cited in James are still debated: was it for a metaphoric, spiritual, or physical healing? Recent work on the passage argues convincingly that anointing in the New Testament epistles are largely metaphoric, and that the first reference of Christian unction explicitly for healing purposes does not appear until the early third century. 72 It is then that Tertullian reports about a Christian named Proculus Torpacion who healed the emperor Septimius Severus using oil. 73 At first, the χάρισμα (divine favor) of healing could be visited on laypersons; the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus allows for anyone to claim reception of such a divine gift. 74 Into the third and particularly fourth centuries, there was an increased focus on the clerical and then monastic use of oil and touch in particular in order to effect healing in many Christian communities, with the James passage regularly invoked. Additionally, Origen and John Chrysostom connect oil and the imposition of hands with the forgiveness of sins. 75 To early Christians, the use of oil and touch went beyond solely cleansing the body of impurity or physical ailments; they could also cleanse the spiritual body.

In the third century, bishops and presbyters increasingly ministered to the sick through oil and touch alongside many other charismatic healers. 76 Early Christians ascribed sickness to both natural and demonic origins, with clerics becoming crucial in attending to both. 77 This amplified application of oil and touch for spiritual cleansing also extended to ritual. The Apostolic Tradition cites the use of the oleum exorcismi (oil of exorcism) and the imposing of

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72 Ferngren 2009, 67.
73 Tert. Ad Scap. 4.5: qui eum per oleum aliquando curaverat. PIR P 747. Lampe 2003, 337–38. Tertullian notes that Torpacion was a procurator to a wealthy woman named Euhodia. He may or may not be the Montanist Proculus. It is probable though not certain he was from servile origins, as procuratores in the later Empire frequently were. See Harper 2011, 121.
74 Hippol. ApTrad. 15.
77 See Ferngren 2009, 42–62, who rejects early Christian belief in demons as the source of all disease.
As Trainers for the Healthy

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By the time of the late fourth century Apostolic Constitutions, there was an explicit focus on clerics receiving healing powers in their ordination. Simultaneously, monastics also began to gain renown for their healing touch and their use of both oil and water. In the fifth century, Cyril of Alexandria quoted the directive in James to instruct laypeople with a bodily ailment to call on their presbyters rather than seeking out “magical” remedies. Similarly, Caesarius of Arles also encouraged the use of consecrated oil of the Church, rather than “magical” oils. As such, Cyril and Caesarius position and emphasize clerics as the legitimate mediators of the Lord, empowered to broker healing through the use of oil—in opposition to the remedies peddled by magicians and charlatans. This rhetoric recalls Galen’s dismissal of rival massage therapists.

As a consequence of these new attitudes towards disease and healing, the Church and monastic establishments became central places to go if one was suffering from illness. Although physicians, magicians, and other healers still existed as viable health care options, churches could also supply official mediators—e.g. bishops, presbyters, and exorcists—in order to heal the sick, particularly of spiritual afflictions such as demons. In much the same manner as patients had previously hired iatraliptae to provide physical therapies, Christians could now appeal to their ecclesiastical intermediaries for similar treatment, though with a key difference: a license from God. As Wendy Mayer has noted, there was at this time a widespread “commonsensical view” of the interconnected nature of the body, the soul, and health. The examples provided by Caesarius of Arles are particularly illustrative of this point. He encouraged his congregation to “run to church and receive the body and blood of Christ, and be anointed with Holy Oil by the priests and ask the priests and deacons to pray over them in Christ’s name.” We can perhaps view this as part of the Church’s attempt to claim, in Harvey’s words, “the physical world as a realm of positive spiritual encounter through the engagement of physical experience.”

In underscoring the emphasis placed by the Church on administering healing through touch and oil, I do not mean to suggest that other types of

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79 Apos. Con. 8.3.
80 Crislip 2005, 23–24.
83 Adamson 1976, 204.
84 Mayer 2015b, 14.
85 Serm. 19.5 (trans. Klingshirn), emphasis mine.
86 Harvey 2006, 58.
massage therapists or anointers died out or that the old anxieties regarding these methods disappeared completely. For instance, in the third century, Tertullian certainly still viewed female *frictrices* (rubbers) as sexual deviants: “Look at the whores, the market-places of popular lusts, those *frictices* too, and even if you had better turn your eyes away from such infamies of publicly slaughtered chastity, nevertheless look from above and you will see they are matrons!”87 Similarly, the well-read Clement of Alexandria interwove the old tropes of Greco-Roman comics such as Antiphanes and Menander with Christian attitudes toward modesty; decrying makeup, perfumed oils, sensual baths, and women receiving massages from slaves.88 Rather than suggest complete abandonment of elite cultural attitudes, I mean only to suggest that there was increased acceptance of these therapies as valid medical and spiritual treatments in the later Empire, particularly among Christians. Yet a hierarchy of anointment and touch remained, with familiar invective invoked in order to differentiate clerical from non-clerical healing. Not all touch was equal, and the Church certainly leveraged the added spiritual potency of their medical services. Consequently, Christianity assimilated and promoted many attitudes and trends that already existed in eastern medicine and perhaps made them even more palatable to a western audience, but additionally cast themselves as the ultimate purveyors of healing that catered to the soul and the body.

While the use of anointment and tactile therapies by clerics and monastics may have promoted such approaches, non-clerical (but still Christian) massage therapists also continued to practice independently and provide their services to clients. One example comes from Aphrodisias, where a plain white pillar was erected between the fourth and sixth century CE to commemorate a κηροματίτης named Theodore.

87 Tert. *De pall.* 4.9.5. For the strong sexual language here used by Tertullian, and the possible relationships between *fellatrix* (a woman who gives fellatio), *frico* (masturbation), and the odd word *frictrices*, see Adams 1982, 184.

88 Clem. *Paed.* 3.2; 3.5 (*PG* 8: 564, 602).


Here lies Theodore, *ceromatis*, brother of Zoetus.
While experts in the use of healing salves, these professionals were also highly trained in massage and physical therapy for injuries. As Reynolds and Roueché point out, it is for this reason that the term is often translated simply as “surgeon.” It has been argued convincingly that late references indicate that skill of the ceromattiti continued even after the use of gymnasia stopped—in other words, their use was not purely athletic. Indeed, the medical writer Cassius Felix wrote in his mid-fifth century De Medicina, about the esteemed medical use of ceromattiti. Other stories of physical healing also indicate a more prominent perception of massage therapy in the later Empire. In Apollonius of Tyre, Apollonius goes into the city of Pentapolis and impresses King Archistrates with his athletic skill and his massage technique. Even the iatraliptae are still referred to in the seventh century work of the Byzantine physician Paul of Aegina. Clearly, there was room for a number of professionals—clerical and non-clerical—that engaged in anointing and massage therapy to heal.

**Conclusion**

In 376, in the midst of the struggle to combat Arianism in the East and just a few years after he opened his hospital in the Caesarea suburbs (the so-called Basileias), Basil wrote a letter to western bishops asking for aid. He concluded it by beseeching the bishops to be “the physicians of our wounded members and the trainers of our healthy (ones)” (τραυματῶν ἱατροὶ τῶν δὲ ὑγιαινόντων παιδοτρίβαι). His letter exemplifies the medical lexicon that was by then regularly used by early Christian theologians in order to conceptualize “Christ’s salvific activity.” Basil referred to acting as ἱατροὶ to those spiritually wounded and becoming παιδοτρίβαι to those already spiritually healthy. In his writings, the bishop spoke from the perspective of an inhabitant of a Greek city of the eastern Empire, where, as I have argued, παιδοτρίβαι had long been accepted and often revered for their services. By the fourth century, it appears that the West had also largely shifted its attitudes towards the use of massage therapy, although a professional hierarchy still remained. Christianity in fact helped to disseminate, regularize, and imbed many eastern cultural practices and institutions in the West, including the hospital, which was to

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90 Reynolds and Roueché 1989, 214.
93 Paul. Aeg. De Re Med. 3.47.
95 Crislip 2013, 50.
arrive in Rome c. 390, almost two decades after Basil’s Caesarean paradigm. While Christianity did not open the way for the acceptance of massage or oils into the sphere of the acceptable, early Christian writings gave another reason for its acceptance by valorizing the use of oil and massage as therapeutic methods with psycho-spiritual potency. This belief shaped the role of clerics, monastics, and holy men, but it had socio-economic repercussions for secular professionals that continued to provide these services as well.

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