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The Hippocratic Oath with the Latin text on the left and the Greek text on the right. The first letter of the first word in each language is drawn in an elaborately decorated box, known as a historiated letter.

Hippocrates
(c. 460–c. 377 BC) was born on the Isle of Cos, just off the western coast of Turkey. There he raised his family of two sons and a daughter and taught medicine to young students in what loosely might be termed a medical school. In a library on Cos, medical scrolls were collected, including some presumably written by Hippocrates. He is believed to have lived for a short time in Athens and later to have practiced in Thessaly (central Greece), where legend says that he died in the town of Larissa.

Around 300 BC, some 80 years after Hippocrates' death, a collection of medical scrolls at Cos was taken to the new city of Alexandria by Ptolemy I, one of the successors to Alexander the Great and the new king of Egypt. During the two-decade long struggle over Alexander's empire after his death in 323 BC, Ptolemy had kept his wife and son safe from danger on the Isle of Cos. Thus he was familiar with the medical school and its scrolls there.

Both Ptolemy and his successor son, Ptolemy II, sought to realize Alexander's dream of making Alexandria the intellectual center of the Mediterranean world. To that end they established a "museum" and a library. The former (the Home of the Muses) was a modern-day think tank where Euclid and other scholars studied and taught. The museum
also included teachers of medicine who performed human dissections. The library housed a medical section that began with the scrolls carried from Cos. These were designated the Hippocratic collection (Corpus Hippocraticum).

Modern scholars now believe that only a few (if any) of the scrolls were written by Hippocrates and that most were penned by physicians before and after his lifetime. Be that as it may, the collection was preserved and translated into Syrian, Arabic, and later Latin. Up through the late Renaissance, the Corpus was regarded by European and Middle Eastern medical students as one of the five standard sources of written medical knowledge. The other such medical texts included the works of Galen, Avicenna and Rhazes (both Persian physicians), and Dioscorides (a Greek botanist).

Galen (c.129–c.199 AD) was born and raised in the Greek city of Pergamon (a coastal city of Turkey). He was educated broadly and studied for a time at the medical school of Alexandria. He began practicing medicine around 164 AD in Rome, which had become the intellectual center of the Western world. He became physician to six Roman emperors, including Marcus Aurelius. Galen also performed anatomical experiments in the tradition of the early School of Alexandria and discovered in pigs and apes basic functions of the nervous system.

Galen's prolific pen was a remarkable aspect of his career. He composed over 400 treatises on various medical matters, dictating to a rotating pool of 12 Greek slaves. Only about 118 of his works have survived—a mere 2.5 million words.

Galen championed the medical teachings of Hippocrates, which stress the whole patient rather than specific diseases. He included numerous works from the Corpus in his own writings, adding wordy commentaries. This is why medicine of the 2nd century AD could fill the 7,800 pages of this treasure—the premier medical work in the Special Collections of Transylvania University.

Charles T. Ambrose is a professor in the department of microbiology, immunology, and molecular genetics at the University of Kentucky College of Medicine. His library of medical texts from the 16th and 17th centuries has formed the basis for numerous publications and presentations on medical history. Ambrose is a graduate of Johns Hopkins Medical School and was a research immunologist at Harvard Medical School and in Paris before coming to Kentucky.