

Exploring Medical Papyri

By

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The story of medicine as registered in medical papyri is no less thrilling than the miraculous invention of writing, the latter being the means of rendering the former immortal and eternal. Manufacture of paper from Cyperus papyrus and the use of writing materials together with the elaborate system of putting signs for sounds and meanings are all agents for recording human achievements to be transmitted through successive generations. However we are concerned now with the subject matter therein, particularly medical themes which began two millenia before the Christian era. There is no direct reference to the author, the scribe or the audience, but there is ample evidence that it is an encycloædia of medicine with its origin in much earlier times. Analysis of these papyri is now done in Egypt and abroad. Members of the two Egyptian societies for the history of medicine and pharmacy are handling different items such as medical instruments, surgery, skin diseases, tumours and therapeutics. Study included Egyptian, Coptic and Arabic writings. Special attention is paid to the linguistic side of the problem because there are still many terms that await decipherment, while others are the subject of controversy among scholars in spite of attempts of scholars from Champollion to the present day to give clues to these

terms. Outstanding figures contributed to medical papyrology and to them goes the credit of solving great problems. It is interesting to trace the trend of thought along history in Egypt and in neighbouring countries, particularly in the Mediterranean area. If we delve deep in prehistoric times, we find ourselves digging into a fathomless pit shrouded in darkness and obscurity, for there is no writing of any sort and so human knowledge was handed to posterity by tradition. The art of healing persisted by transmitting personal experience from father to son. However scholars of physical anthropology and prehistory do not depend on writing to extract information in those early periods. They resort to human and plant remains and to drawings in caverns and on pottery. The skeleton recently discovered near Aswan dates back to about 2600 B.C. It was sent to Smithsonian Institution in Washington and was examined by Prof. Dale Stewart who sent a full report on the subject to the Egyptian Museum.

The onset of writing medicine on papyrus starts about 1900 B.C. with Kahun papyrus, followed by the rest of the famous papyri written in hieratic, extending to Coptic papyri in the eighth and ninth centuries of the Christian era. The medical legacy therein is colossal, informative and universal, carrying material to humanity in a peculiar way characteristic of the Egyptian method of integrity and perfection. Worth notice is that all medical papyri are anonymous, similar to masterpieces of art in painting and sculpture, although they

are meant to be immortal and eternal. A common feature in these papyri is the system of classification which is approximately adopted by modern textbooks, based on anatomy, pathology and symptomatology. There is strong evidence that medical knowledge existed in many cultural centres in Egypt, and their libraries were enriched with papyri.

Some texts contain identical data for recipes, pointing to the fact that exchange of knowledge took place through these writings.

The unique writing system of medical papyri in hieratic orthography is no less admirable than the subject matter itself. Scribes assumed an eminent status in ancient Egypt owing to their diligence in recording human thought in religious, medical and various other aspects.

Style bears an air of credibility and confidence giving emphasis so that the reader is obliged to believe in these texts. Several features exist in these papyri, leading us to respect and praise information offered therein. Incantations and invocations to deities play a role in recipes intended to allay anxiety in severe cases.

Further exploration in medical papyri reveals sound methodology since medical knowledge is based on experience and observation. Systematic examination is followed by

the verdict, prognosis and treatment. Future investigations will be carried out in this papyrology centre in collaboration with our colleagues in different departments of this university.

On previous occasions, we discussed medical papyri as regards manufacture, language and orthography. Later, we delved deep into the subject matter in itself, as well as in relation to the background of thought in the Nile Valley. The role of environment, society and religion cannot be underestimated. A new approach to medical papyri is achieved through investigation of their philosophy, methodology and history. This is not done regardless of the contents but in close connection with medical information therein. Any attempt to study science apart from these three items is futile since they are part and parcel of the material offered.

Intensive work was accomplished by eminent scholars who investigated the medical legacy in terms of philology, etymology, palaeography, medicine and paramedical sciences; however the story is far from being complete for it is an epic dating from antiquity and requires great effort to be fully analysed. Spotlights were focussed on specific medical subjects including anatomy, physiology, pathology, therapeutics and others. Recent research is now carried out locally and abroad, shedding light on ancient Egyptian medicine. Individual themes are handled at times from the medical viewpoint, at others on linguistic basis. Members of the Egyptian society for the history of Medicine and Medical

Sciences contribute to the decipherment of texts hitherto obscure, whether in hieratic or in coptic writing. Comparative study of medicine in different periods is dealt with to demonstrate the continuity of medical knowledge through successive generations.

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