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# Medicine and markets in the Graeco-Roman world and beyond: essays on ancient medicine in honour of Vivian Nutton

Laurence M.V. Totelin, Rebecca Flemming, *Medicine and markets in the Graeco-Roman world and beyond: essays on ancient medicine in honour of Vivian Nutton*. Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2020. Pp. 250. ISBN 9781910589786 £58,00.

## Review by

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## Preview

[Authors and titles are listed at the end of the review.]

This volume is a collection of essays dealing with the economic aspects of ancient medicine and its presence in the ancient marketplace, offered in honour of Vivian Nutton and developing key themes from his pioneering scholarship in the history of medicine.

After an introduction devoted to the multifaceted contributions of the honorand and a brief summary of the book's contents, the pricing and circulation of medical products and skills are the themes of the first part of the volume, titled "Prices and Exchanges."

The general framework of the complex relationship between medicine and money in the Roman age is investigated by Véronique Boudon-Millot in the first essay ("The Cost of Health: Rich and Poor in Imperial Rome"). While Galen philosophically disdained wealth as the goal of high-quality medicine and promoted an aristocratic view of liberal medicine in his polemic against Thessalus, who was accused of practicing medicine in order to become wealthy and to rise socially, the actual costs of medicine for both the physicians and the patients were a key concern in everyday practice. Apart from the cost of years of training and of common articles that could be charged to the patients, competition among rival physicians in the race to acquire rare books, exotic and expensive ingredients or remedies, and refined instruments also drove up costs, as the author interestingly underlines. The expenses of the patients comprised the costs of the therapies and the physician's remuneration, which is discussed and defined as varying according to different situations—a salary, a gift, a tip, and so on.

The next contribution, by Laurence Totelin ("Healing Correspondence: Letters and Remedy Exchange in the Graeco-Roman World"), explores the papyrological attestations of the circulation of medicaments in everyday life. First, the sending of medical recipes by letter is examined in the most famous case of the exchange of remedies between Chairas and Dionysius (P.Merton I 12), who appear to be colleagues. The example is paralleled by literary cases described by Galen, although sometimes it is difficult to ascertain whether the recipe or the actual medicine (φάρμακον) was exchanged. The "relatively few sources attesting to the exchange of recipes by letter" (p. 21) may be integrated with (1) the statement that many summary recipes attested on papyrus (e.g., with the list of ingredients and quantities only) could have been accompanied by covering letters like that of Chairas, explaining the therapeutic scope and the usage of the medicament in more detail; (2) the witness of PSI IV 297 (Hermopolis, V century AD), a papyrus strip written on both sides with a patient's letter (recto) and a medical prescription (verso). The letter was written by a patient to his doctor to complain that the

physician had abandoned him with a plaster that prevented him from washing himself, which resulted in a bad smell. The recipe prescribed an aromatic lotion known as οἶον θάριον (Paul. VII 21, 2–3 = 392, 9–24 Heiberg) and can be regarded as the physician's response to the patient's complaint,<sup>[1]</sup> providing thus a further example of the exchange of medical prescriptions by letter. The second theme addressed by Totelin relates to letters accompanying, promising, or requesting specific drugs or ingredients, which sometimes attest to the commercial circulation of medicines. Totelin notes, however that, as is usual with the papyrological evidence, it is almost always difficult to extract general data from the very specific and personal letters.

A short contribution by John Scarborough (“Dioscorides on Beavers”) addresses one of the most notorious medical ingredients in antiquity, καστόρειον (beaver castor), integrating a recent study presented by Martin Devecka with a reference to Dioscorides, who instructs against counterfeited products and refutes the legendary tale about beavers self-castrating to escape their hunters.

The final contribution of the first part is a very thorough essay by Antonio Ricciardetto and Danielle Gourevitch investigating the economic aspects of wet-nursing in Roman Egypt through the papyrological sources (“The Cost of a Baby: How Much Did It Cost to Hire a Wet-Nurse in Roman Egypt?”). This chapter is remarkable not only for the extensive examination of the wet-nurse contracts attested on papyrus, but also for the wide apparatus of notes, which deal with many details about the texts and their historical, social, and legal context.

The second section of the volume, titled “Pluralism and Diversity,” features contributions dealing with the heterogeneous practices available in the ancient medical marketplace.

In the first essay (“A Return to Cases and the Pluralism of Ancient Medical Traditions”), G.E.R. Lloyd examines a range of different approaches to medical case history—in terms of style and purposes—as attested in different cultural contexts. Comparing ancient Egyptian (the Ebers papyrus), classical Chinese (Chunyu Yi's biography), and a variety of Greek texts (the healing inscriptions at the sanctuaries of Asclepius, the Hippocratic treatises, Galen's *Prognosis*) that enumerate and describe clinical cases, the author effectively distinguishes—in seemingly similar sources—different attitudes and goals, from the more ‘personal’ aims of defending or promoting the physician's (or the god's) own skills to the more ‘technical’ purposes of creating an objective and honest ‘database’ of medical knowledge.

In the next chapter (“Malaria, Childbirth and the Cult of Artemis”), Elizabeth Craik surveys the relationship between the cult of Artemis and pregnancy-associated malaria, with detailed introductions about the illness, its ancient incidence, and ‘rational’ treatments found in the Hippocratic treatises.

With Robert Arnott's contribution (“Medicine, Markets and Movement in the Bronze Age Mediterranean: a Mycenaean Healing Deity at Hattuša-Boğazköy”), we move from the Graeco-Roman context to an earlier world, exploring attestations and contexts of Bronze Age healers—both human and divine—and their ‘movement’ from one place to another in the Minoan and Mycenaean ‘marketplace.’

After stepping back to the Bronze Age, next, we leap forward to late Republican Rome in the next two contributions. Ann E. Hanson (“Antistius Medicus and the Ides of March”) argues that the visit paid by doctor Antistius to Julius Caesar's home some hours after his assassination in 44 BC is not a signal that Caesar retained a medical professional in his entourage according to the common aristocratic habit. Rather, Antistius' examination was intended for reference in court—due to the need for a juridical resolution of the crisis –, much as the inspections of dead or injured people by ‘public’ physicians that are attested in papyri from Roman Egypt.<sup>[2]</sup>

David Leith (“Notes on Three Asclepiadean Doctors”) discusses three members of the medical sect founded by Asclepiades of Bithynia, the physician who first brought Greek theoretical medicine to Rome in the late II century BC: Philonides of Dyrrachium, Marcus Artorius, an Lusius. Leith's valuable insight into their careers restores the importance of their medical

thought in the Roman medical marketplace.

Finally, a novel contribution by Helen King (“Hippocratic Whispers: Telling the Story of the Life of Hippocrates on the Internet”) explores how the legend of Hippocrates is recovered and updated with new imaginary details in contemporary digital media, where claims of authority are not necessary in order to create accepted facts.

The volume concludes with a general bibliography (somehow more difficult to handle than separate bibliographies appended to each chapter), a bibliography of Vivian Nutton’s publications, and a useful index of words and names. It is certainly a new valuable acquisition in the field of the history of ancient medicine, showing that it was not only a matter of scientific theories and of practical techniques, but also a living part of the society, its economy, and its culture.

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## Notes

[1] Cf. already M.L. De Courten, *Una lettera ad un medico e una ricetta in un papiro greco del V sec. d. C. (PSI 297)*, “Rendiconti dell’Istituto Lombardo di Lettere” (ser. II) 50 (1917), 212–219; pp. 218–219, and my new edition of the prescription in the forthcoming *Greek Medical Papyri III*, ed. by N. Reggiani, Florence 2022.

[2] Ann Hanson is kind enough to refer to a list of such medical reports compiled by myself, though she points to an older handout available on Academia.edu (from a conference dating back to 2014) rather than to more recent bibliography, which is perhaps worth noting here: N. Reggiani, *I papiri greci di medicina come fonti storiche: il caso dei rapporti dei medici pubblici nell’Egitto greco-romano*, “Aegyptus” 98 (2018), 107–130; N. Reggiani, *Ispezioni e perizie ufficiali nell’Egitto romano: il corpus dei rapporti professionali (prosphōnēseis)*, in *Lavoro, lavoratori e dinamiche sociali a Roma antica: persistenze e trasformazioni. Atti delle giornate di studio (Roma Tre, 25-26 maggio 2017)*, ed. A. Marcone, Rome 2018, 194–211; A. Ricciardetto, *La réponse du médecin: les rapports d’inspection médicale écrits en grec sur papyrus (Ier-IVe siècles)*, in *Ancient Greek Medicine in Questions and Answers. Diagnostics, Didactics, Dialectics*, ed. M. Meeusen, Leiden 2020, 133–153.