

## DOCTORS IN ROMAN EGYPT

HIRT RAJ (M.) *Médecins et malades de l'Égypte romaine. Étude*

*sur les Médecins de la civilisation médicale et de la constitution de l'Égypte romaine*

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This book is the revised version of Marguerite Hirt Raj's doctoral thesis, submitted in 1996 at the University of Geneva. It is devoted to the status and practice of medicine in Roman Egypt, and encompasses a much longer chronological period than advertised in the title, from the first century B.C. to the fourth century A.D. (p. 8), or from the third century B.C. to the end of the seventh century A.D. in the tables at the end of the book. Based essentially on papyrological sources, and hence mainly on the region of the Fayum, the study is divided into five chapters which form, according to the author (p. 5), two parts of unequal importance.

Chapter 1 defines the geographical, cultural and political elements characterising Roman Egypt. The originality of the province is at different levels: beside a special fiscal and administrative status, there is the cultural contrast between the Egyptian *chôra* and hellenised towns like Alexandria, and the extraordinarily multicultural nature of the population (Egyptian, Greek, Jewish, Roman); the people keep their respective traditions but cohabit, assimilate, intermarry, as best witnessed by the use of double names, Greek and Egyptian. Onomastic is an important source of information for this process, allowing the social and ethnic origins of practitioners to be detected. The existence of a very ancient medical tradition, highly specialised according to Herodotus, is another significant feature. For H.R. the importance of religion and magic in ancient Egypt explains, in a kind of evolutionary perspective, what she calls the arrested progress or sclerosis of Egyptian medical knowledge since the New Kingdom (p. 4). The problem may be more largely associated with the doctor's 'right to be wrong' which promoted attempts and discoveries in Graeco-Roman medicine, as the author herself further notes (p. 256).

The main part of the book is composed of three chapters dealing with the social and legal status of the physician (2, 'Status, Education, Specialties, Income'; 3, 'Public and Private Activities'; 4, 'Privileges, Daily Life and Legal Status'). The second part consists of only the last chapter (5) dealing with the interactions between Greek and Egyptian traditions in medical practice, with a review of diseases mentioned in papyri and a discussion of the range of possible therapies, divided into popular, rational, sacred and magical.

These topics often overlap. More embarrassing is that the author does not achieve the in-depth analysis of medical practice and diseases in Roman Egypt that might be expected. She projects on to Egypt questions relating to Greek and Roman medicine in general, instead of exploring the complex cultural background of Roman Egypt; lengthy syntheses – accurate, but with no new material – introduce Egyptian documents which appear as mere illustrations of well-known situations in Rome and Italy. In the discussion of the responsibility of the physician (pp. 231–40), only a page and a half deal with two papyri, which are hardly contextualised and commented on by the author; similarly, Chapter 2.3 on specialisation ends oddly with a discussion of the extent of medical knowledge among the elite, developed in the last chapter with an anecdote reported by Aulus Gellius but with no relation to Roman Egypt (p. 251–2).

The Conclusion has reflections on the practice of the ordinary country (*chôra*) practitioner, who, according to H.R., does not differ from his Gallo-Roman or Italian colleagues (p. 305). Having learned his skill as an apprentice with a local craft master, possibly a family member, his practice is little influenced by Alexandrian theories and innovations. Far from 'scientific' medicine, his knowledge is based on collections of recipes and the reading of a few treatises. She also depicts the rise of Christianity as synonymous with recourse to divine healing and the decline of secular medicine (pp. 309–10), as if Byzantine physicians did not exist outside elite circles, a very debatable assertion in the light of Byzantine medical writers well studied by A. Lascaratos and others.

Five tables complete the book, listing archiatres (from the third century B.C. to the end of the fourth century A.D.), references to the *iatrikon*, to medical reports and expertises and to military doctors, and finally a chronological list of practitioners in Roman Egypt from the third century B.C. to the end of the seventh century A.D. An appendix presents the letter of Marcus to his mother Antonia and that of Serenus to Antonia with Greek transcriptions and French translations; another lists literary texts, inscriptions and papyri relating to medicine and archiatres. There is a general index and a selective index of sources.

H.R. has collected an enormous number of sources without defining clear chronological limits, which vary from one part of the book to another (title, content, tables). Her approach is not interdisciplinary but is centred on one type of evidence only, papyri, without using recent research in the field. Failing to include other sources of information, such as the human and archaeological remains which abound especially in this province, she is deprived of important complementary information which would have helped solve questions relating, for example, to the training level of the *chôra* practitioner, evidenced by human remains showing successful treatments. She thus fails to understand the characteristics of Roman Egypt which she does not explore. The question of sterility and contraception (pp. 274–5), for example, does not have the same resonance in Egyptian culture, where large families are a blessing, as in Greek or Roman societies, where the exposure of newborn babies is an accepted practice.

A number of misunderstandings derive from fragmentary sources and from a vision of the past influenced by modern prejudices. I will briefly give three examples. The importance of the preparation of drugs in Roman Egypt has been demonstrated by many scholars (cf. the impressive bibliography 'Pharmacopoea Aegyptia et Graeco-Aegyptia' on the CEDOPAL website, <http://www2.ulg.ac.be/facphl/services/cedopal/>, and the recent study by M.-H. Marganne, 'Etiquettes de médicaments, listes de drogues, prescriptions et réceptaires dans l'Égypte romaine et byzantine', in F. Collard and É. Samama (edd.), *Pharmacopoles et apothicaires. Les 'Pharmaciens' de l'Antiquité au Grand Siècle*, [Paris, 2006], pp. 59–73); this activity is here devalued as physicians' 'Nebenberufe' (pp. 188–9). The embarrassing notion of progress (p. 4) occurs repeatedly, as well as the opposition between rational, sacred and magical medicine (p. 306), which are not distinct activities in ancient thought. The presence of various amulets and phylacteries in doctors' equipment is well known since E. Künzl, *ANRW* II, 37.3 (1996), pp. 2433–2639. A discussion of Egyptian diseases and therapies without reference to palaeopathology, a well-explored field, can only lead to the erroneous conclusion that none of H.R.'s listed diseases is specific to Egypt (p. 278), misunderstanding *elephantiasis* as a skin disease when it is lepra (p. 276, n. 46).

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