

## The Medical Knowledge of the Ancient Egyptians.

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Before turning to the internal evidence afforded by papyri, a few words as to the drugs employed by the Egyptians and mentioned by ancient writers are necessary. They possessed a very extensive pharmacopœia, and many of the plants used are still known to the Arabs. The prophet Jeremiah alludes to their wealth in medicines when he says, "Go up into Gilead and take balm, O virgin daughter of Egypt; in vain dost thou use many medicines; there is no healing for thee." Wilkinson gives a very complete list of the medicinal plants they cultivated, among them being the Pomegranate (*Punica Granatum*), Cotton, Castor Oil (called by them "Ki-ki Oil"), *Solanum Dulcamara* and *S. Nigrum*, *Cathamus Tinctorius* (much extolled as a remedy against the bites of scorpions and reptiles), Colocynth, Nux Vomica, and Myosotis (of which Pliny says, "The Egyptians believe that if, on the 27th day of Thoth, which answers nearly to our August, anyone anoints himself with its juice before he speaks in the morning he will be free from weakness of the eyes for all that year"). Opium they knew, Homer mentioning it as *Nepenthe*, which caused "oblivion of sorrow." Products of the animal and mineral kingdoms were also called into service, as will be seen later.

Their "official preparations" consisted of drinks, plasters, fumigations, pills, and clysters, in such vehicles as water, beer, wine, oil, or milk. They used honey as a sweetening agent, and there were two varieties of pills, one with honey for women and children, one without for men.

But despite the fact that they were far in front of their contemporaries, their positive knowledge cannot have been very considerable. Dissection being regarded with abhorrence, their anatomical attainments were indifferent, their physiology absurd, and their treatment empirical. Moreover, they could not keep free from magic, or see a patient without singing litanies at his bedside; charms and mystic sentences were worn, inscribed on papyrus, as safeguards against disease; and cases of supposed evil possession were subjected to exorcism. As in many Roman Catholic countries of to-day, models of diseased parts restored to health were hung in the temples as votive offerings. Yet their medical writings were not without value, as a study of the following extracts and remarks will show.

The study of medicine was said by Pliny to be an Egyptian invention; certainly its origin is lost in antiquity. The Egyptians themselves believed that Athothis (successor of Menes, the first Pharaoh) wrote upon the subject, his book being chiefly

devoted to anatomy. He lived, it has been computed, some 2,300 years before Christ. Another king, Necho, the grandfather of Psammetichus, wrote on astrology and physic, while Petosiris, a Psammetic priest, wrote, with Necho, on the art of retaining health. The introduction of medicine, however, was generally ascribed to Thoth, and that god was always regarded as the guardian deity of physicians and learned men.

There are now no less than five Egyptian medical works extant, all more or less perfect. These are—the papyrus Ebers, a papyrus at Berlin, one in the British Museum, one at Leyden, and one in private hands. They are all composed on similar lines, being probably copies of the six Hermetic books of medicine mentioned by Clement of Alexandria. They treat of numerous diseases, gynecology included. The anatomical doctrines they contain are erroneous, all nervous action, as well as that of the blood, being referred to thirty-two vessels said to be situated in the head, and the heart is looked upon as the seat of all the passions, of mind, and of reason. It is both curious and interesting to note how early in the ages the heart was looked upon as the seat of the passions, and how the same view has survived until to-day. One can only suppose that the prompt response of that organ to nervous stimuli, and the ease with which its disturbances become apparent to its owner, have given it a place and reputation among the other organs wholly undeserved, yet almost hallowed by time and custom.

As illustrations of the matter contained in these papyri, short descriptions of their contents will be most serviceable. To avoid repetition, however, the two most perfect and most studied have been selected, and these will afford a very good idea of the remaining four. These two papyri are the papyrus Ebers and that at Berlin, a translation of which was made into French by Dr. Brugsch and published in 1863.

The Ebers manuscript was discovered by Dr. George Ebers in 1872 between the bones of a mummy in the Theban Necropolis. It measures 20·23 metres in length by 3 metres in width, and consists of 110 numbered pages. It is written in Hieratic characters (which stand in about the same relation to hieroglyphics as does our writing to printed text) in red and black ink, the former being used in the expression of weights and measures and at the heads of sections. Its date has been computed as about 1552 B.C., and among its chapters are sections on the following subjects:—

Of the preparation of medicines, of the preparation of a salve for removing the ubau, the various uses of the te-quem tree, medicine for curing diseases of the abdomen, the book of the eyes, medicaments for preventing the hair turning grey, and for the treatment and forcing of the hair, salves

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