

Warren R. Dawson (1929): *Magician and Leech: A Study in the Beginnings of Medicine with Special Reference to Ancient Egypt*, Methuen and Co., London

In this highly readable study, Warren Dawson has explored the wellspring of medical thought that flowed through the Egyptian consciousness from the time of the Old Kingdoms to the time of the collapse of the New Kingdoms in the early years of the Christian era. Dawson describes how much of the power of early Egyptian priest-physicians resided in their ability to cast spells in order to literally command illnesses, or the powers that caused illnesses to leave the body of their patients. In addition, they often made use of manual rites such as the tying of knots into cords during the recitation of spells, and the incantation of spells over small clay objects that would then be placed over parts of the patient's body.

Yet in his rationalist interpretations and judgements of such methods, Dawson appears to have disregarded the fact that persuasional, ceremonial and shamanic approaches often have unexpectedly powerful healing consequences.

Dawson has closely studied the contents of the Ebers and the Edwin Smith papyri, the two principal medical papyri, and is also familiar with the Hearst Papyrus, the Berlin Medical Papyrus and the Kuhun Medical Papyrus, all of which have contributed to our understanding of Egyptian medicine. We come to learn how technical sophistication in the compounding of medicines and in the treatment of such injuries as fractures sat comfortably with a magical view that personified the disease, and sought to drive its causative demons out of the body.

Dawson reminds us how in ancient Egypt, the matter of birthing was left to midwives who were respected and venerated. Unlike present times, childbirth was not viewed as a medical condition, but as a time of welcome and of gentle co-presence.

Long after the collapse of the Egyptian civilisation, its medical practices exerted a sustained influence on both European and Arabic medicine for many centuries. Many of the ideas that were part of Egyptian medicine found their way into the medical texts that were used in European universities during the pre-Renaissance period. The power of invocation for the purposes of healing was strongly reiterated in those texts but not surprisingly, by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the names of the early Egyptian deities such as Isis or Imhotep had been replaced by the names of Jesus, Mary and a litany of saints.

Warren Dawson's fascinating text offers unusual insight into the nature of Egyptian medicine.

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The Egyptian papyri are the earliest medical documents that have survived, and they must necessarily form the starting point of all studies of the history of medicine. p. viii

The Egyptians believed that sickness and death were manifestations of perverse intention, be it divine or human. A common phrase recurring in the medical papyri details their understanding of the causes of human disease and suffering as: "the assaults of a god, the

assaults of a goddess, of a dead man or of a dead woman, of an enemy male or female, of an adversary male or female." p 11

It was out of this determination to thwart hostile powers that the roles of the magician, of the doctor, and to a large extent also of the priest, came into being. The magician with his spells, the doctor with his medicines and the priest with his prayers and ritual, have laboured for countless centuries to protect and prolong life, to confer vitality and to impede the powers that threaten existence. In the earliest times amulets were worn by the living and buried with the dead to accomplish these ends. p 15

There cannot be the slightest doubt that medicine had its origin in magic, and that for many centuries - almost to the present day in fact - magic has never completely lost its hold on medicine. The earliest doctors were accordingly magicians, and the earliest forms of medical treatment were magical rites. The intimate connection between magic and religion is clearly shown in the fact that the first magicians of which we have any record were priests, and throughout Egyptian history many of the functions of the priesthood were magical in character. pp 52-53

A number of remarkable feats of wonder-working are recorded in the Westcar Papyrus, housed in the Berlin Museum. One narrative describes a certain magician who fashioned a miniature crocodile from wax. He recited magical spells over it, whereupon it transformed into a fully grown crocodile and seized a guilty man. The same magician is reported to have parted the waters of a lake in order that a jewel which had been dropped from a boat could be recovered from the lake bed. King Cheops was entertained by the prodigies of the magus Dedi, who is said to have restored to wholeness a goose, an ox, and a duck whose heads had been cut off. The papyrus states: "The goose was put on the left side of the chamber, and its head on the right side of the chamber. And Dedi recited his magic spells, at which the goose arose and moved, and its head also. Now when the one had reached the other, the goose stood up and cackled." p 54

In these papyri the idea of possession is very evident, for diseases and illnesses are treated as if personified, and they are addressed and harangued by the magician. The simplest method of treatment was the recitation of a spell in which the demon was simply commanded to quit, or the poison to leave the patient's body. Such spells are usually full of references to the gods, and the defeat of the demon is generally attributed to their power, or rather to the mystic force inherent in their names. It was important also that the patient's name should be uttered in the spell. Accordingly in the written spells a place is always indicated at which the patient's name should be mentioned. p 55

The existence of numerous papyri, dating from Ptolemaic times and later, written in demotic Egyptian, Greek and Coptic, show that magical practices for the cure of disease were in active operation long after the influence of scientific medicine, that was mainly due to the Greeks, had made itself felt. Magic maintained full sway throughout the Dark Ages and the Middle Ages: it persisted into the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, and it is not yet wholly extinct. The magician, when he had become physician, was loth to part with the mysticism of

his craft, and he often disguised his more rational forms of treatment under a veneer of mystery.

p 65

The Ebers Papyrus opens with a series of spells (*ro*) intended to give efficacy to the numerous prescriptions (*pakhret*) that follow. The first of these is headed: "Beginning of the spells for placing the prescription upon any member of a man". This is evidently intended for external medicines. It ends with the formula: "Say the words when placing the prescription upon every member of the man that suffers". The second is also for external treatment, and the third is for a medicine that is swallowed. Its title is: "Spell for drinking a prescription". It then proceeds: "Welcome prescription! Welcome! that dost drive away that which is in this my heart and in these my limbs. *Hike* (the god of magic) is victorious in the prescription!" The text then proceeds with an allusion to the mythological combat between Horus and Seth. It ends with the formula: "Say the words when drinking the medicine: a true remedy a million times!"

p 71

The Edwin Smith Papyrus describes the treatment of wounds, but it also contains glosses or comments upon the nature of the wound and the organs affected by them, and consequently to this document must be accorded the honour of being the earliest known scientific book. It differs entirely from the other so-called medical papyri which do not, except in rare instances, deal with diagnosis or symptoms, and it discusses these features in a manner that shows that its compiler was attempting to record and classify systematic observations on the anatomy and physiology of the human body.

p 74

The *Ebers Papyrus* is the longest and most famous of these documents. It was found in a tomb at Thebes together with another medical text, the *Edwin Smith Papyrus*, about 1862, and was acquired by the Egyptologist whose name it bears.

The Ebers Papyrus was written about 1500 b.c. but there is abundant evidence on philological and other grounds that it was copied from a series of books many centuries older. It is stated in the papyrus itself that one passage dates from the First Dynasty (*circa* 3400 b.c.) and another extract is associated with a queen of the Sixth Dynasty.

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[The Ebers Papyrus] consists mainly of a large collection of prescriptions for a number of named ailments, specifying the names of the drugs, the quantities of each, and the method of administration. A few sections deal with diagnosis and symptoms, another passage is physiological in character and describes the action of the heart and its vessels, and the concluding portion is surgical, being concerned with the treatment of wounds and suppurating sores.

p 76

The Edwin Smith Papyrus deals with 48 cases of wounds and their treatment, and on the back of the document are extracts from two magical books. It is a little earlier in date than the Ebers Papyrus.

p 81

Whilst the Egyptians' terminology for the gross anatomy of the body is fairly accurate, they entirely failed to understand the nerves, arteries and veins. They had but one word to denote

all these structures: they appear to have regarded them all as various parts of a single system of branching and radiating channels forming a network over all parts of the body. p 91

Surgical instruments have been discovered in Egypt, amongst which are delicate scalpels, probes, forceps and knives. For fractured limbs, splints were used. In spite of oft-repeated statements to the contrary, there is no evidence whatever that tooth-stopping, or any other form of dental surgery, was practised by the Egyptians in Pharaonic times. p 101

Childbirth did not come within the scope of medical practice in Egypt. Egyptian women in childbirth crouched on a bed or birth-stool with their legs bent under them, their bodies being in a vertical position. The midwives who assisted were usually two in number. One placed herself behind the patient and clasped her around the body during the pains of labour, thus affording a firm support; the other knelt in front ready to receive the infant. Delivery was often assisted by massage. The new-born child was washed by the midwife, who also cut the umbilical cord. p 102

Amongst the mammals put to therapeutic uses are the ox, ass, goat, gazelle, deer, oryx, pig, hippopotamus, lion, mouse, bat and hedgehog; amongst the birds are ducks and geese of various kinds, the swallow, the vulture, the bee-eater, hoopoo and several other species of uncertain identity. Frogs, lizards, snakes, tortoises and several different kinds of fishes, together with a number of invertebrate animals also appear in the prescriptions. In the case of vegetable drugs, the number is very large, but it is not possible at present to identify with certainty more than a relatively small proportion of the very large number whose names appear in the prescriptions. Therapeutic use was made of the whole plant, or its leaves, pods, fruit, seeds, juice, rind, roots or resin. The same difficulties of identification arise in the case of the mineral drugs. pp 109-110

Hartshorn is a valuable medicine which was used by the Greeks, Syrians and Arabs in ancient times and is frequent in the medical works of Western Europe throughout medieval times to the present day. Although actual horns are no longer used, the name "hartshorn" has survived in modern pharmacy. "Spirits of hartshorn", a term now used to designate an aqueous solution of ammonia, was originally applied to the ammoniacal liquor obtained by distillation of horn shavings, and in modern preparations, calcium phosphate is added to represent that formed originally from calcined horns. p 112

In the Ebers Papyrus, we find the rind of the pomegranate beaten up and taken in water as a vermifuge, a use to which it was put for many centuries in many different countries. It was put to other uses that are closely paralleled in the Assyrian, Greek and Arabic medical texts. Dill, coriander, cumin, caraway, fenugreek and other herbs familiar in later times for their medicinal properties are amongst the many drugs employed by the Egyptians in therapeutics. Onions and figs also play an obtrusive part in the medical and magical texts. pp 112-113

List of the virtues of *Ricinis*. It was found in an ancient book concerning the things beneficial to mankind:

If its rind be brayed in water and applied to a head that suffers, it will be cured immediately as if it had never been affected.

If a few of its seeds be chewed with beer by a person who is constipated, it will expel the faeces from the body of that person.

The hair of woman will be made to grow by means of its seeds. Bray, mix, and apply with grease. Let the woman anoint her head with it.

Its oil is made from its seeds. For anointing sores that emit a foul discharge, anoint very early in the morning in order to drive them away. A true remedy. Proved millions of times.

p 116

According to Herodotus the Babylonians had no physicians, and they brought their sick into the market-places in order that passers-by might confer with them upon their symptoms, in the hope that the patient might elicit from someone who had been similarly afflicted advice as to how to proceed to effect a cure. Whether this be true or not, the Assyrians possessed considerable medical knowledge of which a mass of documentary evidence has come down to us.

p 126

The Egyptians had no special deity of medicine until late times, when a famous physician and sage who had lived in the time of the Third Dynasty (~2980 b.c.) was posthumously raised to semi-divine status, and ultimately, in the time of the Ptolemies, became the god of medicine. This was Imhotep, who was called by the Greeks *Imouthes*, and identified by them with Asklepios or Aesculapius, their own god of healing. Similar honours were paid posthumously to another famous sage who had been a minister under the Pharaoh Amenophis III, of the Eighteenth Dynasty. This sage, Amenophis, the son of Hapu, was not in his lifetime particularly associated with medicine, but in Ptolemaic times he appears side by side with Imhotep in the bas-reliefs that cover the walls of several of the temples built by the Ptolemies. In the last centuries of the pre-Christian era, these temples were resorted to by the sick who implored the boon of restoration to health from these two deified men who were then accounted as gods with special powers of healing.

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Many of the drugs and their properties that occur in the works of Dioscorides, Galen, Pliny and others were clearly borrowed from the Egyptians. These writers are the sources from which the compilers of herbals and books of popular remedies mainly drew for their information, and the works of classical authors are merely the stepping-stones by which much Egyptian medical lore reached Europe.

p 137

Many early medical manuscripts of the 13th and 14th centuries not only contain unmistakable Egyptian elements, but are drawn up in exactly the same manner as the ancient medical papyri. The remedies are headed by the name of the disease they were designed to cure, and each is followed by a long series of alternatives, each, as in Egypt, headed by the word "another". Charms and incantations are interspersed amongst the prescriptions, which are very similar to the spells in the Egyptian documents, although the names of Re, Horus, Isis and the lesser divinities invoked are replaced by those of Christ, the Virgin and the

Christian saints. At the end of the prescriptions such words are often added as "probatum", "tried and found perfect", etc., echoing in almost the same words the comments added to the remedies in the papyri, "a perfect remedy", "proved millions of times", etc. These general considerations, taken cumulatively, and in conjunction with the similar form and nature of the prescriptions, leave little doubt that the substance of the Egyptian medical books had penetrated Europe long before the more obvious modes of communication existed.

pp. 138-139