REVIEW


This small book collects seven essays on diseases, therapies, medicaments, and healers in ancient Egypt. Six of these essays are reworked versions of papers delivered at a colloquium organized in celebration of the exhibit of the magnificent Medical Papyrus Ebers in the Library of the University of Leipzig in 2002. Measuring originally almost 19 meters in length, Papyrus Ebers is one of the longest papyrus manuscripts preserved from ancient Egypt. Even if 28 of the 102 text columns were lost during World War II, Papyrus Ebers remains the gem of the large corpus of medical papyri from ancient Egypt. It includes four separate compilations on medications, the cardiovascular system, the *wekhedj* (a pathogenic substance that was believed to cause disease), and swellings, parts of which are paralleled in other medical papyri. Its hieratic calligraphy, datable to the early New Kingdom (ca. 1550 BCE), and handsome layout are also rightly famous. The first article of the volume, written by Gundolf Keil, a well-known historian of ancient medicine, presents an excellent overview of the nature and structure of the manuscript, guiding the reader from beginning to end through the extensive manuscript while tracing the history of scholarship along the way. It is required reading for philologists and students of intellectual history alike.

Papyrus Ebers used to be cited frequently as evidence for the by now defunct view that Egyptian healing methods were originally quite rational—or even scientific—in nature, but, starting with the New Kingdom, became more and more contaminated with illogical and superstitious methods. Today most scholars would agree that healing in ancient Egypt was always a combination of empirical and occult knowledge and therapies. The rigid distinction between medicine and magic, valuing the former over the latter, is now usually dismissed as a modern construct that is at odds with ancient Egyptian thought and professional realities. The editor of
the volume is sensitive to this important shift in scholarly perspectives. It is commendable that he chose the word *Heilkunde* (healing) over *Medizin* (medicine) in the title of the book, thus acknowledging the importance of studying Egyptian healing methods in and on the terms of the Egyptian scribes, healers and patients themselves. Yet, reading the contributions, one realizes that this new perspective is not yet common-place, as the notions and assumptions of the medicine-versus-magic perspective still simmer through in certain contributions. This is in my view an important lesson to draw from this book.

Of the seven articles, three will be of particular interest to the readers of this journal. Christian Leitz’s contribution on the role of religion and empirical observation in the selection of medicaments in Papyrus Ebers is an instructive example of how to overcome the rigid distinction between medicine and magic in the study of Egyptian healing practices. Starting from the famous passage “Heka is efficacious in combination with the medicament as much as the medicament is efficacious in combination with heka” (*Ebers* 3; *nḥt ḫkꜥ ḫr ḫ prt ṯḥ ḫḥ), Leitz does not only ask in his analysis for the pharmacological properties of the prescribed ingredients and medicaments (which he equates with ḫḥ), but also for their possible analogical relations with the incantation (simply equated with ḫkꜥ in his analysis), as for example through the laws of similarity (sympathetic magic) and contact (contagious magic) or the mythological precedent. He concludes that a rational approach to the problem at hand did not exclude the application of persuasive analogy in the therapy adopted. These two mental attitudes and therapeutic methods were not mutually exclusive, but complementary in battling disease. His observations are insightful and deserve further study. At the same time, the article exposes how little we actually know about metaphors and associative thinking in ancient Egypt. The methodology adopted is provocative and fruitful, but the conclusions are, at this stage of our knowledge, precarious at best.

The article by Joachim F. Quack deals with the principles and rules of social exclusion and prohibitions of entry into a temple as described in the still unpublished *Book of the Temple*, an Egyptian treatise on the ideal temple preserved in many copies of the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. This contribution is important for two reasons. First, it discusses intriguing passages concerned with the rules of access to a temple. These passages explicate that persons
with abnormal physique, those displaying neurotic and maladjusted behavior, and those who suffer from a skin disease were forbidden entry. Their deformities, behavior and ailments were considered outward signs of divine discontent. In addition to this important new information, these passages allow for correcting the translation of $\textit{hmwt-st}$, a singular word first attested in Papyrus Ebers (recipe 733 = Hearst 159). For no good reason, the word has always been translated as “witchcraft.” Quack now demonstrates convincingly that the word refers in fact to a skin disease. Instead of treating a victim of private binding rituals, the Ebers recipe is concerned with alleviating the symptoms of a skin disease (and, if Quack’s emendation is accepted, also with causing a skin disease).

Hans Werner Fischer-Elfert presents a provocative reading of the three incantations that open Papyrus Ebers, the only incantations inscribed on this lengthy papyrus roll. According to their titles, the incantations were to be recited whenever the healer applied a medicament, removed a bandage, and gave the patient a medication to drink respectively. Scholars have always worked on the assumption that these are essentially three unrelated incantations that happen to be grouped together in Papyrus Ebers and, secondly, that it was the patient who recited them. This view is also upheld in Keil’s overview of Papyrus Ebers in this volume (see above). Fischer-Elfert, however, is of the opinion that the spells form a thematic unit that ought to be read in sequence and, furthermore, that it was in fact the healer who recited them. By means of a close reading of the incantations, he develops the argument that the statements and mythological allusions are best understood as references to distinctive stages in a rite of initiation into the profession of healer. The incantations are thus the words that the aspirant healer had to recite during the rite of initiation, and that he subsequently repeated whenever he treated a patient. In Fischer-Elfert’s view, this ritual would have proceeded from a display of the proper credentials and knowledge in combination with a ritual immunization against disease (first incantation), to some sort of trial by water and fire (second incantation), to a transformation into a new state of being, i.e. a member of the select group of professional healers (third incantation).

The other three contributions deal with the issue of the codification and transmission of medical knowledge in ancient Egypt and its possible influence on ancient Greece, with skeletal evidence of rare pathologies from the New Kingdom necropolis of Memphis,
and with the biochemical properties of copper, iron and lead, which elements occur in many ingredients prescribed in Papyrus Ebers for curing various ailments.

Jacco Dieleman
UCLA
Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden 2005. 
Hans Werner Fischer-Elfert presents a provocative reading of the three incantations that open Papyrus Ebers, the only incantations inscribed on this lengthy papyrus roll. According to their titles, the incantations were to be recited whenever the healer applied a medicament, removed a bandage, and gave the patient a medication to drink respectively. Scholars have always worked on the assumption that these are essentially three unrelated incantations that happen to be grouped together in Papyrus Ebers and, secondly, that it was the patient who recited them.