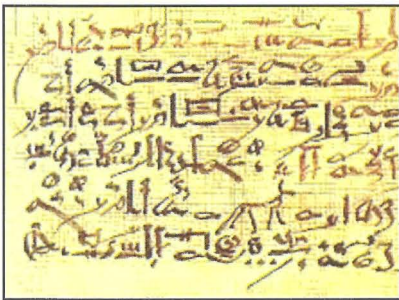


Ancient Egyptian Medicine

Part IV [1] – Medical Papyri

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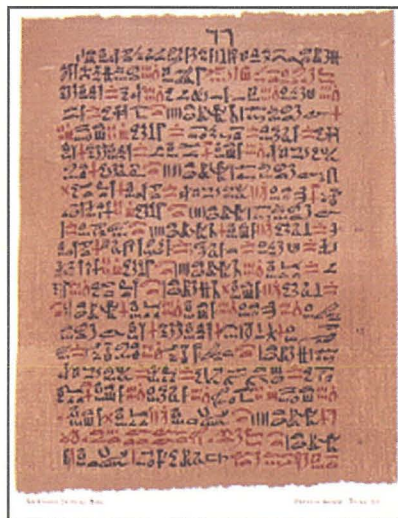
Much of the detailed information about the extent of the practice of medicine of the Ancient Egyptians comes from the rich source of textual material that has been found over the years. The main textual material comes from several Ancient Egyptian papyri which have a medical content. Most of these documents relate to diseases, remedies and the structure of the body as well as incantations and magic spells used as treatments in many cases. Most of these were discovered in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and no doubt these are only the tip of the iceberg. Many tracts must have been destroyed down through the years by natural phenomenon as well as by human intervention such as tomb robbers, military invasions and such like.



The Edwin Smith Papyrus is, without a doubt, one of the most important documents pertaining to medicine in the ancient Nile Valley. It was purchased by Edwin Smith in the 1862 after it was offered for sale by Mustafa Agha. It is now housed in the New York Academy of Sciences after being donated by his daughter in 1906. This papyrus is said to date from 1550 BC and was taken from the tomb of a physician. The papyrus includes 17 pages with 377 lines on the recto (front) and 5 pages with 92 lines on the verso (back) written with the same hand in a style of Middle Egyptian dating. It was translated by James Henry Breasted, director of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago, in 1930. This papyrus, in contrast to the other medical papyri, gives a unique view of Ancient Egyptian medicine since it illustrates the doctor's approach to patient examination to decide on a diagnosis and prognosis before giving the proposed treatment. It is mainly a work which deals with traumatic disorders and it is difficult to identify whether this was a typical general manual for the practitioner aimed at the treatment of daily injuries or whether

it was a manual to manage injuries sustained in warfare. Unlike most of the other papyri this one is relatively free of magic and spells. [The transcribed text can be seen at <http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/timelines/topics/smithpapyrus.htm>].

This mainly traumatic surgery-oriented treatise is systematically organized in an arrangement of cases, which begin with injuries of the head and proceed downward through the body. The treatment of these injuries is rational and chiefly surgical; there is resort to magic in only one case out of the forty-eight cases preserved. Each case is classified by one of three different verdicts: (1) favorable, (2) uncertain or (3) unfavorable. The third verdict, expressed in the words, "an ailment not to be treated" is found in no other Egyptian medical treatise. The Edwin Smith Papyrus opens with eight texts concerning head wounds, followed by nineteen treatments of wounds to the face (forehead, eyebrows, nose, cheeks, temples, mouth and chin), six descriptions of how to deal with injuries to throat and neck, five dealing with collar-bones and arms, and seven for chest complaints.



The Ebers Papyrus was also purchased in Luxor by Edwin Smith in 1862. It was said to have come from a tomb on the West Bank, possibly the same tomb as the Edwin Smith Papyrus. It was said to have been found between the legs of a mummy in the Assassif district of the Theben necropolis. It was subsequently purchased by Georg Ebers in 1872 and eventually found its way to the University

Library in Leipzig. In 1875, Ebers published the text in a facsimile with an English-Latin vocabulary and introduction. The papyrus is composed of 110 pages with some further text on the reverse side. It is dated by a passage on the verso to the 9th year of the reign of Amenhotep I (c. 1534 BC). However, Paragraph 856a states that: "the book of driving wekhedu from all the limbs of a man was found in writings under the two feet of Anubis in Letopolis and was brought to the majesty of the king of Upper and Lower Egypt Den." The reference to the Lower Egyptian Den is a historic anachronism which suggests an origin closer to the First Dynasty (c. 3000 BC). The text is generally difficult to follow suggesting that it was a compilation from various sources with the scribe not entering remedies and ailments in the correct order. The structure of the papyrus is organized by paragraph, each of which is arranged into blocks addressing specific medical ailments. It deals with remedies of the skin, abdomen and other parts of the body; while the final part deals with surgical procedures, ulcers and tumours. [The transcribed text at <http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/timelines/topics/eberspapyrus.htm>].

Paragraphs 1-3 contain magical spells designed to protect from supernatural intervention on diagnosis and treatment. They are immediately followed by a large section on diseases of the stomach (*khet*), with a concentration on intestinal parasites in paragraphs 50-85. Skin diseases, with the remedies prescribed placed in the three categories of irritative, exfoliative, and ulcerative, are featured in paragraphs 90-95 and 104-118. Diseases of the anus, included in a section of the digestive section, are covered in paragraphs 132-164. Up to paragraph 187, the papyrus follows a relatively standardized format of listing prescriptions which are to relieve medical ailments. However, the diseases themselves are often more difficult to translate. Sometimes they take the form of recognizable symptoms such as an obstruction, but often a specific disease term such as *wekhedu* or *aaa* could be found, the meaning of which remain quite obscure. Paragraphs 188-207 comprise "the book of the stomach" and show a marked change in style to something which is closer to the Edwin Smith Papyrus.

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Only paragraph 188 has a title, though all of the paragraphs include the phrase: “*if you examine a man with a ...*” a characteristic which denotes its similarity to the Edwin Smith Papyrus. From this point, a declaration of the diagnosis, but no prognosis can be found. After paragraph 207, the text reverts to its original style, with a short treatise on the heart (Paragraphs 208-241). Paragraphs 242-247 contain remedies which are reputed to have been made and used personally by various gods. Only in paragraph 247, contained within the above mentioned section and relating to Isis’ creation of a remedy for an illness in Ra’s head, is a specific diagnosis mentioned. The following section continues with diseases of the head, but without reference to the use of remedies by the gods. Paragraph 250 contains a famous passage concerning the treatment of migraines. The sequence is interrupted in paragraph 251 with the focus placed on a drug rather than an illness. Most likely an extract from pharmacopoeia, the paragraph begins: “*Knowledge of what is made from degem (most likely a ricinus*

plant yielding a form of castor oil), as something found in ancient writings and as something useful to man.” Paragraphs 261-283 are concerned with the regular flow of urine and are followed by remedies “*to cause the heart to receive bread.*” Paragraphs 305-335 contain remedies for various forms of coughs as well as the *genew* disease. The remainder of the text goes on to discuss medical conditions concerning hair (paragraphs 437-476), traumatic injuries such as burns and flesh wounds (paragraphs 482-529), and diseases of the extremities such as toes, fingers and legs. Paragraphs 627-696 are concerned with the relaxation or strengthening of the *metu*. The exact meaning of *metu* is confusing and could be alternatively translated as either meaning hollow vessels or muscles tissue. The papyrus continues by featuring diseases of the tongue (paragraphs 697-704), dermatological conditions (paragraphs 708-721), dental conditions (paragraphs 739-750), diseases of the ear, nose, and throat (paragraphs 761-781), and gynecological conditions (paragraphs 783-839). ☐