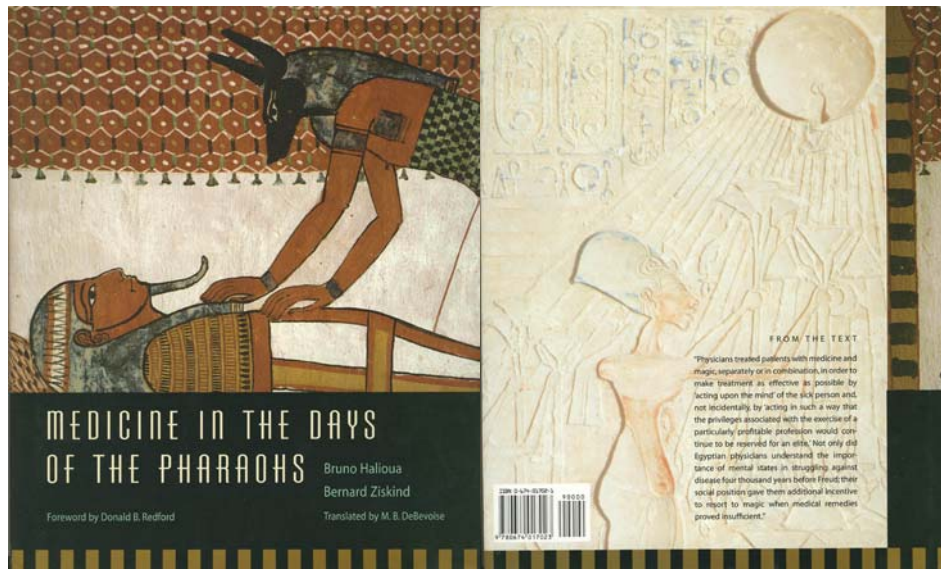


Halioua B. & B. Ziskind. 2005. Medicine in the days of the pharaohs. – Harvard, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press

Book review by S. Ikram



The ancient Egyptians have long thought to have been the proud possessors of great medical knowledge; indeed some of the most celebrated doctors of the ancient world studied in Egypt or practiced medicine as developed by the ancient Egyptian physicians. Thus, it is no wonder that several books have been written about this subject, with the latest offering being ‘Medicine in the days of the pharaohs’ by Bruno Halioua and Bernard Ziskind, both physicians.

The book starts with an introduction, and then is divided into four parts, with an epilogue that considers the transmission of Egyptian medical knowledge, and copious end matter, including an interpretation of the Ten Plagues of Egypt. Although illustrations are limited, they are in colour, which adds to the charm of the book.

Part I covers the world of the physician, and is divided into two portions, one detailing the medical profession, and the other expounding on the training of doctors and the practice of medicine. The first chapter struggles with the knotty problem of priest, physician, and magician, and makes good use of quotations from the Egyptians. The topic of specialists is explored, as well as the rights and duties of physicians. An interesting section in this chapter is the discussion on fees. The second chapter relates to medical training and practices and is a useful synthesis of previous work carried out on the subject. The organisation of this chapter might have been improved if a clear section on *materia medica* had been added, instead of spotty references to these. Also, the reader might wish that a clearer delineation between what is clearly an Egyptian practice be separated from what is Greek, or some sort of statement made that both cultures shared certain therapies (dream and water) prior to excessive contact.

The second part of the book focuses on palaeopathology, with the first chapter in the section dealing with mummification, and the second with the modern study of mummies. The mummification chapter is the most disappointing in this book. The section of the origins of mummification ignores the evidence for Predynastic mummification from Adaima and Hierakonpolis, and would be improved with its inclusion. This section also relies too much on Herodotus, with little attention paid to modern experimental work on mummification. The old chestnut of the natron bath is rather unfortunately resurrected (p. 52), a subject that had largely been put to rest by the work of the Manchester team and experimental work carried out by Brier, Wade (all cited in the bibliography), and Ikram. Chapter 4, detailing the modern study of mummies, is more rewarding, and outlines the different types of techniques and technologies that can be used on mummies to find out about the health and diet of the ancient Egyptians.

Part III of the volume turns to the diseases and their cures as encountered and detailed by the Egyptians themselves. It is entitled ‘From cradle to grave’, and is divided into three chapters that follow the human life-span. The first concentrates on mothers and children, followed by one on childhood and adolescence, and concluding with old age and deformities. Throughout these chapters the authors make good use of quotations from the ancient Egyptian sources. As one might expect, the topics covered include pregnancy, birth, and the diseases and care of newborns, breastfeeding, teething, ENT disorders, circumcision, menstruation, coughs and colds, dermatological complaints, rheumatism and failing eye sight, cardiovascular disorders, as well as the less

usual topic of bedwetting, Parkinson's and Senile Dementia. Inexplicable diseases brought about by malevolent substances and demons are also covered (surprisingly, the idea of *wekhedu* is not mentioned here, but in the book's epilogue), and quite enchantingly, heartache and lovesickness are also given their due in the section on adolescence, together with youthful excess, which deals primarily with alcohol. The section on the handicapped is interesting, and, in terms of societal views on handicapped people, rather inconclusive.

The fourth part of the book varies from other works of this sort as it deals with specific diseases associated with specific professions, and is a novel way of organising and presenting the different diseases from which the Egyptians suffered. However, for the most part these diseases are not sufficiently trade-specific and might have effected several different social and professional groups. Fishermen with their problems with bilharzia are remarked upon, as well as the dangers of the crocodile to those who worked in, on, or near the Nile. Pests, such as mosquitoes and other insects that plagued farmers (and others) are also discussed, as well as the possible presence of rabies. Within the fishermen and farmer chapter the possible presence of plague is also mentioned, as well as famine, leprosy (relevant to all, not just farmers and fishermen, in this reviewer's opinion), and guinea worm.

The chapter on construction workers, miners, and soldiers is more successful in providing profession specific diseases, cures, and medical personnel. Curiously, the work at the Giza plateau on workmen and overseer's tombs is ignored here. Again, the inclusion of diarrhoea in this chapter is curious as it must have been a common affliction. The last chapter incorporates an eclectic and curious band of trades: bakers, priests, scribes, embalmers and prostitutes. Again, the diseases are not really profession specific, but more widespread. The conceit of dividing up diseases by trade, although interesting, is of limited success, especially for allergies, burns, dental attrition (widespread, as we know from mummies, and not restricted to bakers), cardiovascular risks, dental problems, constipation, abdominal problems, parasitic diseases, skin ailments, more eye diseases, and once again, female issues, such as contraception, menstrual problems, and sexually transmitted diseases.

The epilogue describes the views that other ancient cultures had concerning ancient Egyptian medical knowledge, and a brief section on the dissemination of this knowledge. The end matter that follows provides sources for Egyptian medicine: different papyri, *ostraca*, rock carvings, the Amarna Letters, and two- and three-dimensional representations. It then continues with an interpretation of the Biblical Ten Plagues of Egypt. These are quite interesting and provide scientific explanations for the phenomena described in the Bible, and is useful as biblical queries concerning ancient Egypt are so common.

All in all, this book is interesting and enjoyable to read. It seems to benefit from a sensitive translation and adaptation from French, and provides a basic synthesis of ancient Egyptian medicine, with some lacunae (e.g. discussions of *materia medica*). One might wish that the authors had spent more time analysing the medical papyri and trying to correlate diseases and cures with those known to them, and perhaps they will proceed with that in a future volume.

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