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THE MEDICAL ASPECT OF ANCIENT EGYPTIAN  
HISTORY.<sup>1</sup>

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Prof. Virchow, in discoursing not long ago to a learned body at Berlin, said that medicine was the only science that had a continuous history for three thousand years; but I shall endeavor now to show you that we have a more or less continuous history of medicine for nearly six thousand years.

The Egyptian god Thoth, who corresponds to the Greek god of letters, Hermes, and the Roman messenger of the gods, Mercurius, is represented as being the author of the forty-two sacred books of the ancient Egyptians. Six of these books were medical, and by them the Pastophor, or embalmer, was guided in his anatomical manipulations on the dead body in process of

EMBALMING.

It has been said that the real reason with the ancient Egyptians for embalming the dead body was their belief that the soul would eventually return to it; but I am inclined to think that there was a sanitary object as well, for the embalming was not confined to the human body merely, but to the lower animals, such as bulls, crocodiles, cats, rams, hawks, ibises, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> Abstract of a lecture delivered in the Albany Medical College, Saturday, October 1887.

They were wonderfully cunning people, the ancient Egyptians, and more especially the priests, who monopolized the highest grade schools, and plied their knowledge to make the common people work with a will.

There were three ways of embalming practiced by the Egyptians.

The first and most expensive way was effected as follows: The brain was carefully and effectually extracted by breaking into the skull through the nose, and in this way the brain was spooned out, and some antiseptic put in its place, generally tar. An oblique opening was made five or six inches in length on the left side of the abdomen, a little above the crest of the ilium, and the cadaver was eviscerated by this opening, and the cavity filled with a composition of myrrh, cassia, etc. The intestines and other internal organs were washed in antiseptics and packed into canopic vases, with aromatics and antiseptic spices. These vases were four in number, and their lids were carved in the shape of the head of a jackal, a monkey, a human head, and a hawk's head. These were the four genii of the dead, who guarded these special parts of the body put in these vases. The cadaver was now steeped in natron for seventy days, then washed and swathed in bandages, and was thus handed over to the family. Upwards of \$2,500 were paid for this process.

The second process was cheaper, and may be described as follows: A substance called the oil of cedar was forced into the interior of the body through small openings in the the thorax and abdomen. This was said to have dissolved, or, rather, desiccated the internal organs, so that they could be removed without mutilating the body. The body was then steeped in a solution of natron (native carbonate of soda) till the body shrivelled up, when it was taken out, washed and swathed in bandages.

The third process was inexpensive. The whole body was simply salted for seventy days, and then given back to the friends.

#### PREScriptions.

Manethe, the Egyptian priest and historian, during the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus, 250 B. C., writes that it was in medicine that ancient Egypt attained any real scientific eminence. According to this author, King Teta, the second king of the first dynasty, 4000 B. C., wrote treatises on anatomy and surgery, and performed surgical operations with flint flakes.

About 3000 B. C., during the reign of Cheops, the builder of the great Pyramid, a medical papyrus was found by a priest in a temple, and one of the prescriptions in it was as follows: "Sing a religious hymn, then say a magical text," in order to drive away a disease or evil spirit.

When medicine was taken to cure a disease, then an incantation or formula was said at the time of taking it, that the drug might do its work swiftly and well.

This medical work is mentioned in the Berlin Papyrus as having been first composed in the reign of Sent, a king of the second dynasty, 3,300 years before Christ.

The oldest medical papyrus we now possess does not go back beyond the eighteenth dynasty, 1600 B. C. By that time medicine was already in as advanced a state as in the time of Galenus Claudius, at the end of the second century of our era.

The various diseases known were carefully classified, and their symptoms minutely described, as well as their treatment. The prescriptions recommended in each case are made out in precisely the same way as the prescriptions of modern doctors. One of these was derived from a famous Semitic oculist of Byblos, near Mount Lebanon; but the greater part belonged to earlier Egyptian medical men who flourished under the first dynasties.

The preparations used were of four kinds: Draughts, blisters, powders and clysters, minerals as well as vegetables being employed in their composition.

According to this papyrus, which is called Eber's Papyrus, there were more than twenty different kinds of eye diseases.

In the latter days of Egyptian history, magical formulæ and exorcisms began to take the place of the older prescriptions. Diseases were referred to the malignity of evil spirits, and the priest and sorcerer superseded the physician. A Demotic papyrus at Leyden is almost wholly occupied with charms, especially with love philters.

Progress in medical knowledge was checked in the time of the middle empire, on account of the rule that new medicines and treatment were adopted by the doctor at the risk of being put to death if the patient died.

In the writings of Moses (1500 B. C.) the priests were the physicians, and their treatment mainly aimed at promoting cleanliness and preventing contagion.

## GYNECOLOGY.

In his time we read of Pharaoh having a personal interview with two Hebrew midwives, who must have been very celebrated in their day to account for their names having been handed down to us in Holy Writ; and if I were to ask Prof. Sayre, of New York, why these Hebrew midwives had become so distinguished, I have no doubt he would admit that they received their instruction originally from the Egyptian midwives, who, long ere the Hebrews knew their A, B, C's, were not only proficient in what we call in a popular way "midwifery," but who were specialists in its various departments.

Now, it may be perfectly true, as Prof. Sayre stated at the late meeting of the Gynecological Society at New York, that America had given birth to gynecology, but I may be permitted to say with the darky, that in Egypt gynecology "grewed," and has existed there as many years as it has hours in America.

As far as the Egypt of the present day, however, is concerned, I must confess that its gynecology has not advanced in proficiency with its advanced years, but a laudable attempt is now being made to infuse European, not to say American, gynecological knowledge into the native Hakimat (doctoresses), and we hope in time to reflect back on the Occident a brighter light than we have derived from it. In the meantime, we ask for the moral support and encouragement of the medical profession in our work out there, where official and political obstacles are thrown in the way of every attempt made to advance the medical department.

## MASSAGE AND FAITH CURE.

In the twentieth dynasty, about 1400 B. C., when Rameses XII. was in Mesopotamia, a country that had been conquered by Egypt, the chief of the land of Bakhtan brought to His Majesty his beautiful daughter, with whom Rameses was charmed so that he married her, and called her Ra Noferoo (the most gracious of Ra). The name thus given her indicated how he was enamored of her.

After Rameses returned to Thebes in Egypt, and had been there some time, ambassadors came from Bakhtan to beg Rameses to send some one to heal Bint Rash, the little sister of Ra Neferoo, who had an evil movement in her legs.

Rameses ordered all those learned in mysteries to appear before him, and he chose from amongst them Tahuti-em-heb, a

royal scribe, who was intelligent and skilled with his fingers (massage); and so this doctor was sent to Mesopotamia to the chief of Bakhtan to heal his daughter. When he reached his patient, he found her under the influence of evil spirits that his massage and medicine could not control, so he sent word back to Egypt to have a god sent to exorcise the devils. Rameses sent an image of the god Khonsu (the war god of the Egyptians), which was received with great pomp in Bakhtan. The cure was immediate (faith cure or mind cure), and the god Khonsu was installed in the city of Bakhtan. How many further cures he effected is not related, but I can imagine that pilgrimages from far and wide would trudge frequently to Bakhtan to experience the healing power of this image.

We now come to the

#### GREEK HISTORICAL PERIOD,

dating from about 900 B. C. Hesoid and Homer appear on the scene. Herodotus, who wrote about 450 B. C., tells us that Hesoid preceded Homer, and these celebrities both manifest a considerable knowledge of Egyptian learning, and the medical terms used by Homer became classical words in the history of medicine.

Hecatæus, the son of Hegesander, who flourished about 560 B. C., dwelt a long time in Egypt as a student; but how much these Greeks learned in Egypt we can only guess, as they were great plagiarists, and therefore wished to palm off on the Greek world Egyptian learning as if it were their own.

Herodotus, however, is so far honest, as to tell us that he had a high opinion of the Egyptians. He says that not only were things better managed in Egypt than in Greece, but Greece had even to go there for its theology, and he might have added for its medicine also.

Following up the medical line, we now come to speak of Hippocrates, who is considered to be the father of medicine. He flourished about 480 B. C. He also owed much to Egyptian medicine, and his system of the practice of medicine was said to have been expectant, and would correspond to the Homœopathic creed of the present day. He was very strict on diet and regimen, but was often blamed for letting his patients die through doing nothing to keep them alive. He recommended trephining the skull in injuries of the head, and through his mentioning

succussion in connection with fluid in the thorax, our modern auscultation was discovered by Laenneo.

The history of medicine after this is more or less Greek, Roman and Arab, which need not be touched on here. I may, however, say that after having acquired a general knowledge of medicine and surgery, the ancient Egyptian medical men took up specialties. Cyrus and Darius, kings of Persia, about 500 B. C., sent to Egypt for physicians. The former was afflicted with a nasal polypus, the latter with ophthalmia. So a rhinologist was sent in the one case and an oculist in the other.

#### CIRCUMCISION

was common amongst the Egyptians in the fourth dynasty, 3300 B. C., and probably existed amongst them much earlier. Herodotus considered that the Egyptians were the originators of this rite, and that it spread from them to other places. I believe myself that it originated among primitive people independently of each other, and more as a sanitary precaution than for any religious purpose. The prepuce seems to me to be an unnecessary and even dangerous appendage when cleanliness is neglected. I have seen some frightful conditions produced by a neglected prepuce. Its only use seems to me to serve as an analogue, and can therefore be very easily and, in many cases, very advantageously dispensed with. Circumcision can be traced from China to the Cape of Good Hope. It is practiced in the South Sea Islands, in the West Indies and in Mexico; also among some of the tribes in South America. Herodotus asserts that the Hebrews and Phœnicians, the Ethiopians, the Kolkhians, the Makronians and Hittites, to which Josephus adds the Arabs, learned the rite of circumcision from the Egyptians. Amongst the Jews this rite is performed on the child when he is eight days old, and if the eighth day happens to be Sabbath, it has to give place for this rite to be performed, which shows what an important place it has in the Jewish religion. Amongst the Arabs, on the other hand, it is generally performed on the child when thirteen years of age, this having been the age of Ishmael, their progenitor, when he was circumcised. The Kaffirs perform this rite still later in life. Circumcision is also practiced among the Christian Copts and Abyssinians, and that, strange to say, both in the male and female. The Egyptians considered the Greeks unclean, not merely because they killed the cow, but because they ate swine's flesh, and did not practice circumcision.

Having thus introduced you to the medical aspect of ancient Egyptian history, I shall now direct your attention to these antiques which lie before you, the description of which will give you some idea of the ancient Egyptian mythology.