

# “An ailment with which I will contend”: Diodorus Siculus and the physicians of Egypt

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## Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 1.82

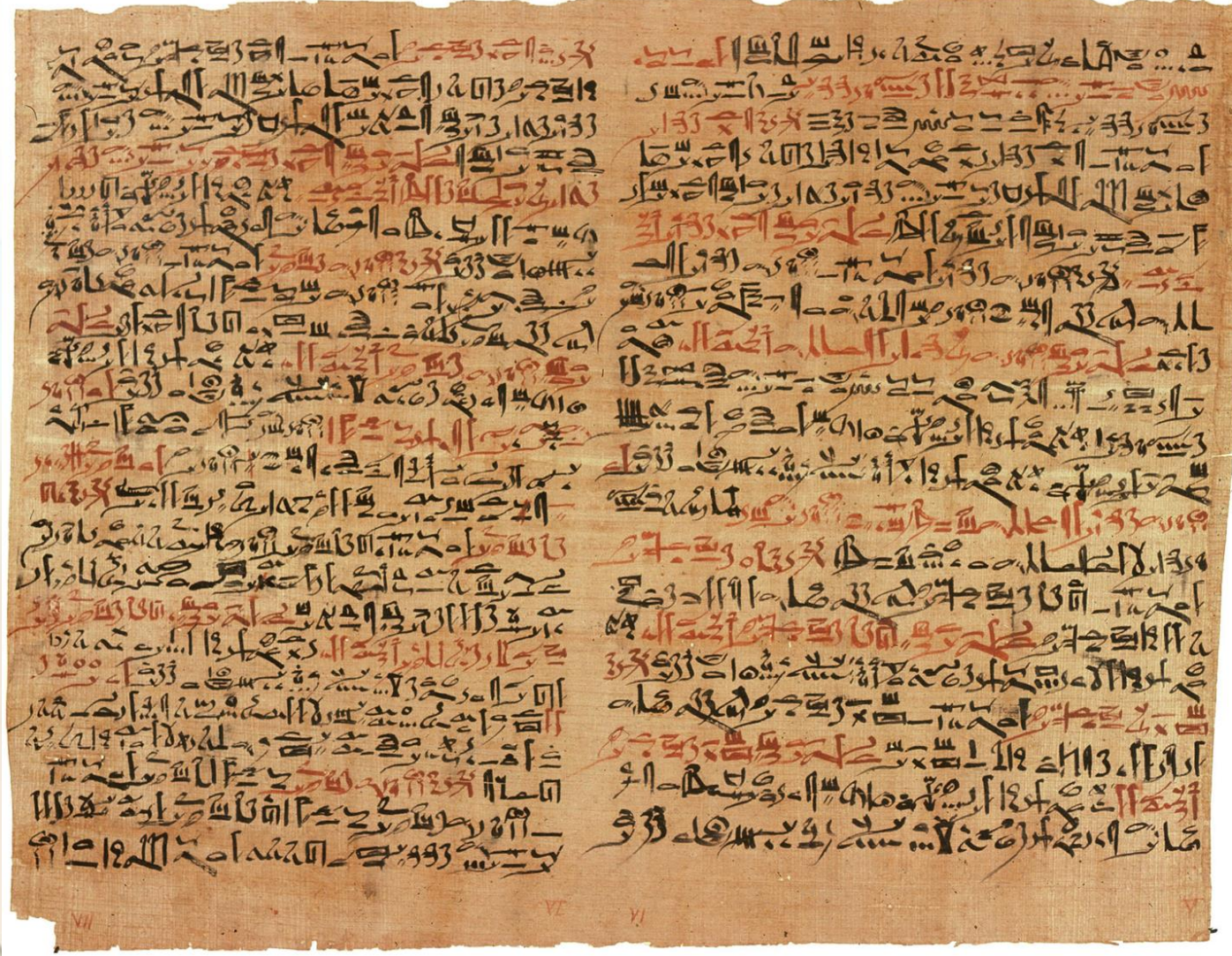
In order to prevent sicknesses they look after the health of their bodies by means of drenches, fastings, and emetics, sometimes every day and sometimes at intervals of three or four days. For they say that the larger part of the food taken into the body is superfluous and that it is from this superfluous part that diseases are engendered; consequently the treatment just mentioned, by removing the beginnings of disease, would be most likely to produce health. On their military campaigns and their journeys in the country they all receive treatment without the payment of any private fee; for the physicians draw their support from public funds and administer their treatments in accordance with a written law which was composed in ancient times by many famous physicians. If they follow the rules of this law as they read them in the sacred book and yet are unable to save their patient, they are absolved from any charge and go unpunished; but if they go contrary to the law's prescriptions in any respect, they must submit to a trial with death as the penalty, the lawgiver holding that but few physicians would ever show themselves wiser than the mode of treatment which had been closely followed for a long period and had been originally prescribed by the ablest practitioners.

# Timeline of Sources

- Edwin Smith Papyrus (c1600 BCE, probably from Thebes)
- Ebers Papyrus (c1550 BCE, probably from Thebes)
- Hecataeus (c500 BCE)
- Herodotus' *Histories* (fifth century BCE)
- Diodorus Siculus' *Library of History* (first century BCE)



# Egyptian Medical Papyri



Edwin Smith Papyrus  
Plates vi and vii,  
New York Academy of  
Medicine

## *Krises (from the Hippocratic Corpus, Epidemics 1.24)*

Some fevers are continuous, some have an access during the day and an intermission during the night, or an access during the night and an intermission during the day; there are semitertians, tertians, quartans, quintans, septans, nonans. The most acute diseases, the most severe, difficult and fatal, belong to the continuous fevers. The least fatal and least difficult of all, but the longest of all, is the quartan. Not only is it such in itself, but it also ends other, and serious, diseases. In the fever called semitertian, which is more fatal than any other, there occur also acute diseases, while it especially precedes the illness of consumptives, and of those who suffer from other and longer diseases. The nocturnal is not very fatal, but it is long. The diurnal is longer still, and to some it also brings a tendency to consumption. The septan is long but not fatal. The nonan is longer still but not fatal. The exact tertian has a speedy crisis and is not fatal. But the quintan is the worst of all. For if it comes on before consumption or during consumption the patient dies.



# *Archiatri* or ‘Public Doctors’



Inscription from  
Aphrodisias,  
c100 to 250 CE

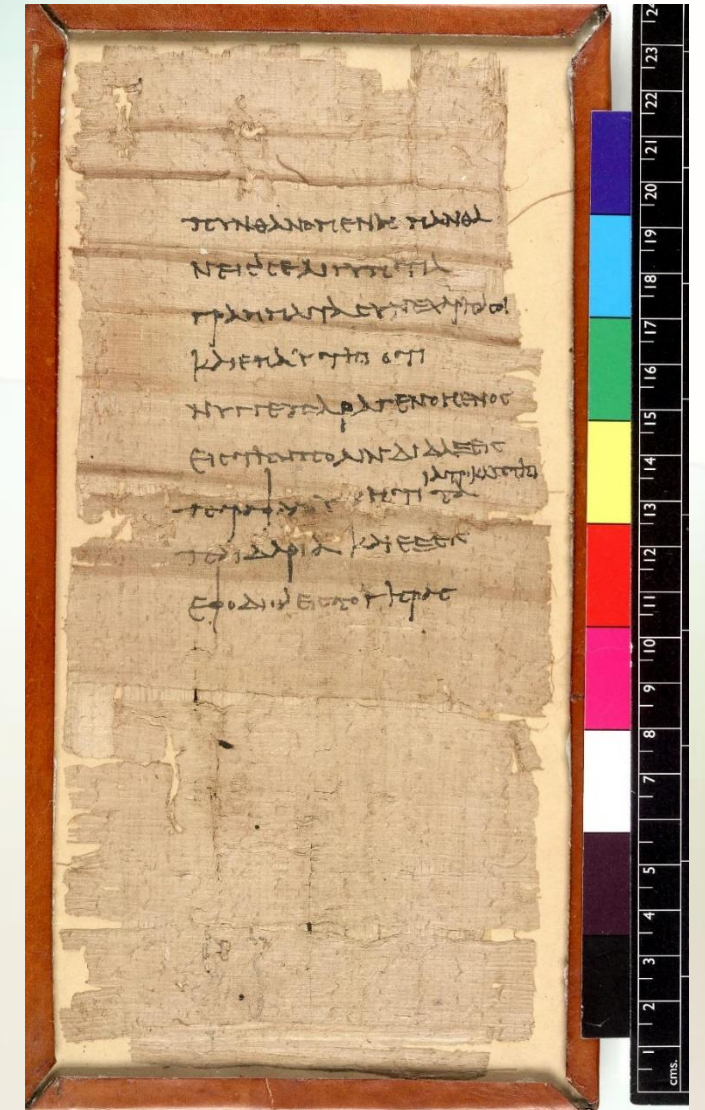
[Τίτος Φλάβιος Στα]  
βέριανος τὸν Ἀσ  
κλήπιον καὶ τὴν  
᾿Υγεῖαν σὺν τοῖς  
βώμοις ἐκ τῶν ἰ  
δίω ἀνέθηκε τῷ  
δήμῳ καθὼς  
Τίτος Φλάβιος  
Σταβέριανος ἀρ  
χιατρὸς πόλε  
ως ὁ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ  
ὑπέσχετο

Image and transliteration from Nutton (1977), “Archiatri and the medical profession in antiquity.”

# Interactions between medical models

Πυνθανομένη μανθά|νειν σε αἰγύπτια | γράμματα συνεχάρην σοι |  
καὶ ἐμαντῇι, ὅτι | νῦν γε παραγενόμενος | εἰς τὴν πόλιν διδάξεις |  
παρὰ Φαλου..ἦτι 'ἱατροκλύστη' τὰ | παιδάρια καὶ ἔξεις | ἐφόδιον  
εἰς τὸ γῆρας.

- Second century BCE
- “Discovering that you are learning Egyptian letters, I was delighted for you and for myself, because now when you come to the city you will teach the slave boys in the establishment of Phalou . . . the enema doctor, and you will have a means of support for old age.”
- **Implication: native Greek speakers learning Egyptian (Demotic) in order to learn a particularly ‘Egyptian’ medical trade, i.e., administering enemas (Rémondon, 1964)**



Bagnall, R.S., *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt, 300 BC – 800 AD* (2008)  
Figure Number A2.9; UPZ 1.148, recto

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