

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

Egypt, for Diodorus Siculus, is the beginning. Locating the first gods and men in the fertile floodplains of Egypt, Diodorus designates as the initial book of his ambitious *Library of History* a description of the history, geography, and customs of this remarkable land. From a description of powerful gods and great kings in the first half of Book 1, Diodorus shifts his focus in the second half to the customs of Egypt. Diodorus deems Egyptians’ approach to medical treatment worthy of particular mention. He identifies several features of Egyptian medicine that he considers exceptional (Diod. Sic. 1.82): 1) ideas about health and disease center on the digestive tract, and diseases are treated by digestive regimens, 2) soldiers receive medical care at public expense, and 3) doctors who rely on standard, long-accepted medical theories and procedures in their treatment are not held accountable should the patient grow worse or die, whereas those physicians not relying on such standard theories and procedures could be subject to capital punishment.

Diodorus’ description of and reflection upon Egyptian medicine places him in a long tradition of Greek writers who saw Egypt as a source of both medicament and medical knowledge. What are we to make of Diodorus’ description of these customs, as paraphrased above? To what extent do his words record traditional, indigenous Egyptian ideas about physicians, disease etiology, and methods of treatment, and to what extent do his words reflect Greek ideas of the same (such as those mentioned in the works of Hippocrates and Galen)? Diodorus’ discussion of Egyptians’ focus on the role of the digestive tract in health and disease finds support in Egyptian papyri that antedate and are roughly contemporaneous with the period in which Diodorus was writing (Bagnall 2006, Murray 1970, Sacks 1994, von Staden 1989). Diodorus’ emphasis upon the time course of treatment (“every third or fourth day”), however,

seems to be more Greek in its regard for particular repeated treatment patterns (Nutton 2013). References to government-funded medical care for physicians could align with evidence regarding the provision of an Egyptian physician, or *swmw*, for the workers at Deir el-Medina in the pharaonic period, or with the Greco-Roman custom, beginning in the Hellenistic period, of towns appointing what have been termed “public doctors” (Nutton 1977). Finally, Diodorus’ reference to a requirement that Egyptian physicians follow standard and long-established procedures in the treatment of their patients could be validated by the structure of the Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus, which provides an ‘algorithmic’, triage-based approach to the treatment of illness (i.e., “An ailment with which I will contend”). This ‘algorithmic’ approach of the diagnostic methods and treatments described in the Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus is unlike the diagnostic and treatment approaches encountered in Hippocratic and later Greek medical texts (Ghalioungui 1973, Grajetzski 2010, Lehner 2010, Sanchez 2010, Schiefsky 2005).

While scholarship about Diodorus’ sources is divided, the above evidence suggests that whatever sources, literary or living, he may have used in the composition of his history, the information provided by these sources does reflect knowledge of traditional indigenous Egyptian medical practice. The plausible veracity of Diodorus’ descriptions of Egyptian medical practice does not mean, however, that his account of the medical customs and traditions of the Egyptians lacks Greek elements. Indeed, Diodorus might be presenting these observations of indigenous Egyptian medical practice through the lens of his own Greek worldview, as he does with many other aspects of Egyptian society.

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