

ANCIENT MEDICAL WORK.

THE DISCOVERY OF A BOOK 7000 YEARS OLD.

Full Translation Just Completed of the Papyrus Ebers, an Egyptian Book Devoted to Diseases of Man and Their Cure—Astonishing Knowledge of Materia Medica Disclosed.

For 2300 years Hippocrates of Kos has been known to the world as the "Father of Medicine." This distinction, however, has been wrested from the ancient Greek by the discovery and translation of an early Egyptian papyrus treating of the subject of medicine, with date so remote as almost to place Hippocrates within the ranks of modern physicians.

English medical literature is about to be enriched by the translation of this papyrus, generally admitted by Egyptologists to be the oldest book devoted to the science of medicine extant. The work is known to scientists as the Papyrus Ebers, and is supposed to have been written during the reign of Bicheres, a King of the fourth dynasty, 4688 to 4666 B.C. Thus the original document is nearly 7000 years old and it contains the written genesis of the art of healing.

The document is carefully preserved in the library of the University of Leipzig, and the English translation of Papyrus Ebers, a volume of several hundred pages will soon be ready for the press.

Page 98 of the Papyrus Ebers is devoted almost entirely to remedies for household ills. Its contents clearly indicate that the ancient Egyptian housewife was beset with cares similar to those of the modern housekeeper. It reveals likewise the fact that woman early made use of cosmetics. The remedy given for the falling out of the hair is ascribed to the mother of King Teta of the first dynasty.

To Egyptologists the story of the finding of Papyrus Ebers possesses all the characteristics of a romance. In the winter of 1872-73 Georg Ebers, of Leipzig, and his friend, Ludwig Stern, spent several months at Thebes in quest of rare documents. For a time the two scientists made their dwelling place in one of the tombs of Abdel-Gurnah, and associated dilly with the Arabs of Luxor. A wealthy citizen of Luxor showed to Ebers the antiquities which he, little by little, had obtained from the fellah on the other side of the Nile, and at length revealed to him the fact that he was the possessor of a papyrus obtained from the same source.

Upon close inspection of the papyrus Ebers made the startling discovery that it was a document of great value and in an unusual condition of preservation. He longed to possess the document himself, but had not means to meet the demands of the owner, who was not altogether aware of its full value. However, receiving the financial assistance of Max Gunther, a wealthy Englishman, Ebers purchased the treasured papyrus and conveyed it to his home in Leipzig, there to study its contents at leisure. It was finally turned over to the library of the University of Leipzig for safe keeping. In order to better preserve the valuable antiquity, it was cut into twenty-nine pieces and each piece placed under a glass.

According to the statement of the Egyptian possessor, Papyrus Ebers was found in a tomb in the so-called II Assasit, a part of the Necropolis of Thebes, reposing between the legs of a mummy. Since the finder of the papyrus was dead, it was impossible to refer to the exact tomb which formerly contained the treasure.

When Ebers came into possession of the papyrus, it consisted of a single, tightly rolled piece of the finest yellow-brown papyrus. The width of the document was thirty centimeters, and the length of the written part 20.23 meters. No other papyrus known to Egyptologists is better preserved, and not a single letter of the document is missing.

The text of this perfect ancient record is divided into pages, each of which is numbered. The page numbers are placed over the first line in the middle of each page and run from 1 to 110. Singularly, the numbers 28 and 29 are missing, although the text continues uninterrupted. The omission is explained on the ground that the Egyptians considered 110 to be a perfect number, and by this means the writer was enabled to complete his book with the required number of pages.

Each page of the papyrus contains either twenty-one or twenty-two lines. With the exception of pages 3 to 21, which are considerably smaller, the pages are twenty-two centimeters in width. The script in which the papyrus is written, is extraordinarily

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regular, and is partly in black and partly in red ink. This form of writing is known as the hieratic, and is one of the three forms used by the ancient Egyptians. The others are the epistolographic and the hieroglyphic.

The exact date of the writing of the book of which Papyrus Ebers is a copy is not known, but it is believed that it dates back to 4666 B. C. The document itself refers to the eighteenth dynasty in the sixteenth century B. C., but when the papyrus was unrolled, a calendar was discovered containing the following inscription: "In the ninth year of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt. . . of the everlasting."

Before the last epithet is the framed name of a king whose identity is still in doubt. Dumichen, a recognized authority on Egyptology, believes that the author of the calendar did not insert the name of the reigning King, but that of Bicheres, of the fourth dynasty, who reigned 1460 years earlier. Dr. von Klein is of the opinion that the calendar calls attention to the date of transcription and that the original was written much earlier.

Egyptologists agree that between the twenty-eighth and sixteenth centuries B.C., the practice of medicine was in the hands of witchcraft. During this period the law was so stringent that a person advancing a theory for the treatment of disease other than that established by the priests was put to death. Consequently the work, which bears the marks of the period of witchcraft, if written at all prior to the date named in the calendar, must have been written at least 1200 years before. This makes it highly probable that the original book was written during the reign of Bicheres, or at least 4666 B.C. At all events, the copy of the papyrus is itself the oldest medical work extant and contains the historical genesis of medicine.

A large proportion of the diseases known to modern medical science are carefully classified and their symptoms minutely described by Papyrus Ebers. The prescriptions recommended are in many cases exactly the same as those given at the present time. The work mentions 700 different substances, the greater part of which are taken from the vegetable kingdom. Some metals and a considerable number of animal extractions were also used. Of the salts only natron, saltpeter, common salt and sea salt are mentioned. The use of such ingredients as lizard's blood and pig's teeth are in some cases recommended.

The discovery of Papyrus Ebers demonstrated that the Egyptians as early as 3000 or 4000 years before Christ possessed an astonishing knowledge of a great variety of remedies, and that their learned men could make observation of disease, combine complicated recipes and use them with judgment. According to this early writer there were three different classes of medical practitioners in Egypt at the date of the manuscript,—namely: The real physician, the surgeon and the conjurers. The relative standing of the several classes is not known.

The origin of medicine is certainly to be looked for in the Valley of the Nile and the Papyrus Ebers opens a wide era for the students of the history of medicine and pharmacology. The Egyptian physicians were well advanced in ophthalmology. The collection of Hippocrates edited 4000 years later, did not contain more eye diseases, although more clearly and more agreeably described. The number of diseases mentioned in the Papyrus Ebers, as well as the profusion of medicines prescribed, is a source of wonder to modern physicians. The ancient Egyptian physicians must have been experienced diagnosticians, who commanded a knowledge of prophylactic and cosmetic remedies.

The Egyptian oculist was renowned. In the third book of Herodotus is the following passage: "Cyrus sent to Amasis, B.C., 569, and bade him for an oculist,—the best in the whole land of Egypt." Darius also sent thither for a body physician, and in the time of Tiberius and Nero Egyptian physicians regularly came to Rome, usually to heal skin diseases. Herodotus tells us that the Egyptian physicians were accustomed to practice specialties and that the country was full of physicians. Some, confined their attention to diseases of the eye or head,

others to the teeth, stomach and intestines.

Greece, long supposed to be the birthplace of medicine, is now known to have derived its knowledge from the Egyptians Praxagoras, although from Kos, the town where Hippocrates was born and where the temple of Esculapius was built, lived in Egypt. He was the greatest symptomologist and diagnostician of this age. Hippocrates also went to Egypt for his medical training, and on his return established a school of Greek physicians. Although the founder of the present system of pathology, his right to the title of "Father of Medicine," has been dissipated by the revelations contained in the Papyrus Ebers.

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