

LECTURE TWO – MEDICINE BEFORE SCIENCE

Our love affair with prehistoric medicine

- Since the nineteenth century, modern medicine and pharmacy has sought to associate itself with antiquity
- 'Antiquity' guarantees 'reliability' in medicine and health?
- This shapes how we interpret prehistoric and early historical evidence
- Physical / archaeological evidence does not necessarily indicate 'medicine' as we know it
- Influence of ideas about beauty, religion, commerce, politics?
- 'Medicine' as we understand it is a modern construct, based on the scientific method
- The 'scientific method' consists of organised efforts to come up with explanations of nature, always modifying and correcting these through systematic observations
- 'Healing practices' belonging to the pre-scientific era are not 'medicine as we know it'
- Earlier practices were not based on the scientific method
- The scientific method did not flower until the early Middle Ages (12th c AD)
- If we want to carry out reliable comparisons with modern medicine, we must go to recorded history
- Early recorded history is very fragmented – entire millennia are missing in some cases
- Only the broadest generalisations are possible about early civilisations and medical practice
- We are still guessing/hypothesising in some cases
- Recorded history may only apply to the literate/noble class of that society

Ancient Egypt (c3000 BC – 300BC)

- Earliest 'medical' tradition relates to Imhotep (Later became a god)
- Imhotep's historicity is confirmed by two inscriptions made during his lifetime on the base of one of Pharaoh Djoser's statues

A. Ancient Egyptian beliefs about drug therapy

- The Ebers Papyrus
- Contains herbal and magical remedies for common complaints
- Asthma: herbal smoke
- To force bowel movements: milk and grains cooked with honey
- Medicinal use of ochre clays: various intestinal and eye complaints
- Yellow ochre is also described as a remedy for urological complaints
- Seventy-four prescriptions for hair washes, dyes, oils and depilatories
- Recipes for contraceptives and abortifacients
- Recipes for household products for cleaning and protection of clothing against pests
- Series of spells for all kinds of health problems
- Most 'medical' treatments are based on purging: body contains toxins that cause illness, which need to be expelled from the body
- 'Spell against Pain' - Clear indication of religious / magical causes of pain and other disorders

B. Shamanism

- Ancient Egyptian medicine fits the pattern of shamanism

- Amulets, sacrifice, augury/prophecy, divination, cursing, advice, teaching, trances, communication with animals or the dead
- Common global practice
- Combined role of spiritual and physical healer
- Could be male or female
- Bridge between spirit world and physical world

C. Fertile Crescent civilisations

- Sumerians, Babylonians, Persians, Semites
- Fertile Crescent cultures and medical knowledge
 - Clay tablets from Assurbanipal's collection in Nineveh, (reigned 668-627BC) includes many medical codices
 - Diseases are often blamed on pre-existing spirits: gods, ghosts, evil forces
 - Two types of healer:
 1. **'Ashipu'** - diagnosed illness by determining what god or spirit was causing it, or if it was caused by error or sin on the individual's part
 2. **'Asu'** - dealt in herbal remedies, and carried out washing, bandaging, and making plasters

Identifying ancient drugs

- Drugs were compounded from plants (herbs, spices – leaves, flowers, bulbs), resins (gums from plants) and minerals (soil, ground stones)
- Identifying ancient drugs is fraught with difficulty
- Some drugs had poetic or allegorical names, like 'lion fat' (which could also have been actual lion fat)
- Some plants have been identified: liquorice, mustard, myrrh, and opium
- Liquorice: gastric disorders
- Opium and myrrh: pain relief, sleep
- Easy to credit a culture with 'advanced' knowledge of medicine through chance use of particular drugs

Aegean culture - Greece, Macedon, Crete, 'Asia'

A. Greece –

- Hippocrates of Cos (c.406-370 BC) is referred to as 'the father of modern medicine'
- This is not true
- We know almost nothing of Hippocrates' life from actual historical sources
- Plato mentions him in passing in two dialogues
- We don't know who wrote the Corpus Hippocraticum

B. Greek medical thinking – Cos versus Cnidos

- Two schools of medical thought in classical Greece: Cos and Cnidos [places]