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Paul Ghalioungui

Ancient Egyptian Remedies and Mediaeval Arabic Writers.

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ANCIENT EGYPTIAN REMEDIES
AND
MEDIAEVAL ARABIC WRITERS

BY

P. GHALIOUNGUI

The confrontation of ancient texts with relatively recent writings, especially when they both belong to the same ethnic area, has repeatedly proved its value in the clarification of linguistic obscurities and the identification of names of plants and animals. Like many others before us, we matched, in several previous publications (1, 2, 3), some medical prescriptions found in the Egyptian ' medical ' papyri with their homologues in Greek and Arab sources. We are restricting ourselves, here, to a comparison between the style and contents of the papyri and two mediaeval Arab compilations, the ' Wonders of Creatures and Curiosities of Beings ' of Qazwiny (600-682 H.) (4), and the ' Great Book of Animals ' of Al-Demiry (742-808 H.) (5), of whom the second freely and avowedly copied the first. The correspondences are shown in the accompanying table.

COMMENTS

1. A frequent prescription in the Arab works in the application of bile to the eyes or lids, claimed to cure leucoma, cataract, amblyopia, and hemeralopia. The parallels in the p. Ebers are obvious. Lefebvre (6) has already drawn attention to their similarity to the medication prescribed by the Angel to Tobit (Tobit, 6, 8 and 11, 12). Even if Tobit's book be apocryphal, it dates back to

Abbreviations used in this paper : *D,* Al-Demiry ; *Q,* Qazwiny ; the Roman numerals indicate the volume, the Arabic numerals, the pages. *Bln,* the Berlin papyrus ; *Eb,* the Ebers papyrus with the Wreszinski numeration ; *K,* the Kahoun papyrus ; *L,* the London papyrus ; *L. and L,* the London-Leyden papyrus.

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the 3rd or 4th century B.C. (7), a period when ancient Egyptian traditions and customs were still alive, and offers a link between the two traditions.

2. Bat's blood for trichiasis was also used by the Copts (8). In order to explain its action, Lefebvre (9) with Loret rationalized that when blood coagulates it contracts, and thereby maintains rigidly the previously drawn out eyelashes. Against this hypothesis that is, in any case, difficult to admit, there is evidence in both Qazwiny and Al-Demiry that blood of several animals was supposed to arrest growth of hair generally, and not only after epilation, or on the lids, e.g., in the axilla after epilation (Q. 248 and D. I, 378), and in the pubic region of prepubertal boys (D. I, 378). That the principle underlying both actions was thought to be the same is evident from Q. 233 : ' if bear's blood is applied, hair does not grow, nor does hair in the eye '.

3. The Copts used bat's urine for «obscurity» of vision (10) and the Chinese used bat dung for night blindness. Nevertheless, we doubt whether the assertion quoted by Lefebvre, that bat's excreta are richer than cod liver oil in vitamin A (11), has any basis in fact. The known abundance of this vitamin in liver might have imparted to the latter some virtue in the treatment of night-blindness, although neither the Egyptians nor the Arabs could have known anything about vitamins or retinal physiology. It is, however, remarkable that even more commonly than liver, its nearest alternative, bile, was said by the Arabs to serve the same purpose.

4. The animals mentioned in the p. Ebers have not yet been identified, but even if they are not beetles, as in «The Great Book of Animals», the underlying idea is identical, viz., the use of the interior of animals.

5. Here too, a similar custom is disclosed, viz., cutting off the heads and wings of insects prior to their use, although the therapeutic indications are different, a beetle in Eb. 733 for bewitchment, locusts in D. I, 241 for hydropisy, and flies in D. I, 454 to relieve wasp stings. Prior mutilation could, in terms of magic, prevent any harm insects could inflict.

7. The animal is different, but again the principle is identical, a rite of «transfer» drawing away the illness from the affected part to its homologue in another creature.

8. Menstrual blood has always been credited with wonders, in particular in the genital sphere, and is still used in the popular medicine of many countries (12).

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Demiry grants it a full section (I, 51). Here, in both cases, the first blood of the flow is specified : «Let her menstruation come in its beginning, and her belly and thighs are rubbed therewith, her breast does not fall» (Eb. 808) (13), and : «If you wish to keep a girl's breast upright, not falling down, take her menstrual blood at the beginning of her period and anoint her nipples therewith ; they will not fall, and will remain upright. This is a marvellous and tried secret» (D. I, 51).

9. Among an array of applications to extract thorns, nest of *bꜣbꜣjw* bird, snake slough, ass's dung, *mtwt* (?) of an innocent boy or girl (Eb. 726 to 731), is the *ʿpnnt* animal, an unidentified animal that could be or not a lizard, as advised by D. II, 379.

10. Is this an example of «sympathy»? A glabrous animal like a worm or a leech could convey its quality to the scalp.

11. Some part of a swift animal like a deer is said to impart its agility to the animal to which it is applied. Demiry explains that the *baber*'s female, a lionness like animal is fertilized by the wind and that, as a result, its offspring is as quick as the wind and cannot be caught. If its heel be bound to the forearm, its bearer never tires of walking ; in the case of the lizard ضب , if its heel is bound to a mare's head, the latter cannot be overtaken by any horse.

13. To assess the fertility of a woman, Hippocrates also recommended smelling the breath after introducing garlic into her vagina (Aphorisms, 5, LIX). Both the Kahoun papyrus and Al-Demiry enjoin waiting some time before scenting the tell-tale odour. The first advises to smell the breath next day ; the second, after seven hours : «If you wish to know whether a woman is sterile or not, order her to apply garlic on cotton wool in a vaginal pessary, and to keep it there seven hours. If its smell then appears in her mouth, treat her and she will bear a child with God's help ; otherwise she will not. Rhazes says that this is tried and God knows better ».

14. The medical papyri are full of comments or glosses reporting the author's experience. In many places, Al-Demiry uses similar expressions.

The route or routes through which Ancient Egyptian ideas and practices reached the Arabs, whether through the mediation of the Greeks or by the persistence of local traditions, have been amply discussed by many authors elsewhere (14, 15, 16),

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but it is remarkable that such a rich harvest of concordance be found between what amounts to be a single author, considering Demiry's debt to Qazwiny, and the scant Egyptian texts that reached us, despite the obscurity that still enshrouds much of the latter, and our voluntary restriction to the animal kingdom.

SUBJECT	MATERIAL	ARAB SOURCES	ANCIENT EGYPTIAN SOURCES
1. Leucoma ? trachoma	Bile	Rabbit (D. I, 28) male gazelle (D. II, 7) crocodile (D. I, 207) hedgehog (D. II, 209) human (D. I, 50) sheep (Q. 225) rooster (Q. 249) vulture (Q. 250) zummug * (Q. 250).	Tortoise (Eb. 347,350) human (Eb. 392).
2. To prevent trichiasis after epilation	Blood	Rabbit (D. I, 28) cameleon (D. I, 294) bear (D. I, 416, Q. 233) frog (D. I, 582) hedgehog (D. II, 209) gerboa (D. II, 393) he-goat (D. II, 287) rat (Q. 273).	Lizard, bat (Eb. 424) ox, ass, pig, hound, goat (Eb. 425) bat (Eb. 428).
3. Night-blindness	Liver Bile	Crow (D.II,100) kid (Q.226) Cow (D. I, 191) gerboa (D. I, 294) wild ass (D. I, 324) bear (D. I, 416, Q. 233) wolf (D. I, 465) crow (D. I, 476) zummug * (D. I, 483, Q. 250) cat (D. I, 516) hyena (D. I, 577, Q. 236) hedgehog (D. II, 209) ram (D. II, 287) gazelle male (Q. 227) dog (Q. 241) all birds of prey (Q. 244) pigeon (Q. 247) rooster (Q. 249) lion (Q. 250) eagle (Q. 258) snake (Q. 261).	Ox (Eb. 351, L. 35).

* *zummug*, an unidentified light bird of prey used in the hunt زمج.

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SUBJECT	MATERIAL	ARAB SOURCES	ANCIENT EGYPTIAN SOURCES
4. To improve eyesight	Interior of animals	Beetle (D. I, 391).	*k3djt* (Eb. 339) *ksbt* (Eb. 342) *wd'jt* (Eb. 343) all unidentified.
5. Various	Amputated insects	Locusts (D. I, 241) flies (D. I, 454).	Beetle (Eb. 733).
6. Alopecia areata	Dung Lizard	Rat (Q. 273) Blood of gecko (D. I, 487).	Male gazelle (Eb. 471). Black lizard (Eb. 469).
7. Hemicrania	Head	Rat (D. II, 125), vulture (D. I, 471), rat (Q. 272) hung on affected part.	Silurus fish (Eb. 250), lates fish (Eb. 248) rubbed on affected site.
8. To keep breasts upright	First blood of menstrual flow	D. I, 51.	Eb. 808.
9. To extract thorns		Fat of lizard (D. II, 379) **.	*'pnnt* (water salamander).
10. To cause baldness	Worms	Powdered leeches (D. II, 66).	*anaret* worm (?chaetopod) (Eb. 474).
11. To improve mobility		Heel of baber (D. I, 147) ***, of lizard (D. I, 574) ****, leg. of frog (D. I, 582).	Deer skin (L. and L, XXXII, vs. 10).
12. Uterine disease	Excrement	Dove (D. I, 540) *****.	Human (Eb. 793, 794) and many other sources (Eb. 728, Bln. 64, 68, 69, 70, 195 K. 21).
13. To free the placenta	Excrement	Cat (D. I, 519).	Flies (Eb. 802) to hasten delivery.

** ورل *warl,* two species are known by that name, ورل البحر lacerta nilotica, and ورل الأرض l. scincus.

*** بَبر *baber,* an unidentified beast of prey related to the felidae, and said to be antagonistic to lions, tigers, and leopards.

**** ضب *dabb,* lacerta caudiverbera.

***** شفنين *shefnin,* according to Demiry, possibly a dove.

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