

Book Reviews

Mirko D Grmek, Danielle Gourevitch, *Les maladies dans l'art antique*, Collection Penser la Médecine, Paris, Fayard, 1998, pp. 518, illus., FFr 180.00.

Considering its richness, Greek and Roman art remains distinctly under-utilized in medical-historical studies of the period. It poses, of course, substantial methodological problems, as Grmek and Gourevitch outline in the introductory sections of their welcome overview of the pathological side of this subject. There is a realist strand in ancient art (particularly marked in the Roman era, with its rugged, “warts and all” portraiture), and in discussing why viewers admire representations of ugliness, illness, deformity and immorality, classical commentators stressed that it was the accuracy of the act of representation itself, art’s precise imitation of nature, that was admirable, even beautiful, not the objects or scenes portrayed; however, many other artistic styles and practices are also apparent in antiquity. Stereotypes and caricatures abound, mythological depictions outnumber the quotidian, and artefacts come from a range of cultural contexts, such as the religious, which may further complicate their interpretation. Then there are the matters of forgery and damage; after all the number of armless classical statues is not to be taken as indicative of ancient amputation-rates! None the less, Grmek and Gourevitch are optimistic that, approached with care, scrutinized alongside the literary evidence (medical and otherwise), with due regard to historical context and productive genre, classical images can be made to reveal valuable information about their world, and about its diseases, their prevalence and meaning. It is both possible and rewarding to practise a cautious “icono-diagnosis” of the past.

They have, therefore, scoured the artistic remains of Greece and Rome, most

especially its sculptures, terracottas, and vase-paintings, but also, for instance, its frescoes, bronzes, engraved mirrors and mosaics, trying to identify those which might be considered to be proper representations of disease, images from which a realistic retrospective diagnosis can be made, as distinct from those which portray pathology in a much more broad and unspecific sense. That is, for example, which of the ubiquitous “grotesque” figures are simply compounds of recognized grotesque attributes—such as large and distorted facial features, misshapen bodies and overgrown genitals—and which depict identifiable conditions, such as hunchback caused by tuberculosis of the spine, or rickets; which portraits of individual kings and emperors, for instance, demonstrate congenital hormonal disorders, and which just the conventions of monarchic imagery; whether the upward tilt of the head which so strongly characterizes portrayals of Alexander the Great derives from a medical condition or cultural aspirations and aesthetics. The material is organized, after the initial chapter on portraiture, largely by disease type, though disease is here construed very broadly. The discussion ranges, sometimes very generally, sometimes in considerable detail, from wounds to Down’s syndrome, and covers affections of almost every part of the body in between. It is helpfully accompanied by many illustrations, though the quality of reproduction occasionally leaves something to be desired, and dates are rarely given with any precision.

I remain, in the end, less optimistic about “icono-diagnosis” from ancient art than Grmek and Gourevitch, and, ultimately, more interested in many of the aspects of classical artistic endeavour that, in a sense, serve to confound retrospective diagnostic accuracy. That is the wider cultural context within which any efforts at, or practices of,

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“realistic” representation occurred and had meaning. None the less, in bringing all this material together and to the attention of medical historians, in offering a rigorous discussion of the opportunities and problems it represents, and careful analysis of many individual items, the authors have certainly done all those interested in health and disease in the classical world a considerable service.

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Marie-Hélène Marganne, *La Chirurgie dans l’Égypte gréco-romaine d’après les papyrus littéraires grecs*, Studies in Ancient Medicine, No. 17, Leiden, Brill, 1998, pp. xxxi, 192, Nlg 138.00, \$81.00 (90-04-11134-4).

Marie-Hélène Marganne, a leading authority on Greek medical papyri, has already shown us what a very rich vein those papyri are to follow, with a long succession of publications, including her previous book in the Brill Studies in Ancient Medicine series, *L’Ophtalmologie dans l’Égypte gréco-romaine d’après les papyrus littéraires grecs*. Embedded in the conclusions of the present work is Marganne’s succinct appraisal of the principal importance of the medical papyri: unlike medical texts, which have survived only as later copies, the papyri, though invariably fragmentary, are essentially first-hand documents which have survived as a random selection of chance finds. They therefore provide primary, invaluable, often unique evidence for ancient surgery, surgeons and the practice and teaching of surgery in Greco-Roman Egypt. Above all, they shed light on the fascinating subjects of praxis, surgical instruments and the day-to-day usage of medical texts. Their value is further enhanced because they mainly date

to a period of brilliance in the history of ancient surgery, Alexandrian and post-Alexandrian Egypt, from which no complete surgical text of importance has survived. It is just a pity that so few of the papyri have a known provenance (two from Fayoum, five unprovenanced), let alone a secure archaeological context.

Clearly written, stimulating and packed with information and references, the book is a real joy to read. Seven principal surgical papyri, which span a date range between 100 BC and the late third century AD, are the generous filling of a sandwich comprising an introductory essay and a short conclusion. The background to the papyri is provided in the sprightly introduction. This combines a fine review of the written sources which inform us about Greek and Roman surgery, with a brief summary of Greco-Roman Egypt and an introduction to the peculiarities, strengths and weaknesses of the Greek medical and surgical papyri as well as to the apparatus of their study. There are useful and appropriate illustrations to clarify the surgical procedures described in the papyri, but this reviewer would also have liked to have seen photographs of the papyri themselves.

The presentation of each of the seven papyri consists of a critical edition with (French) translation and commentary, and it is in the commentaries that the historian of ancient medicine finds the heart of the book. For, as well as analysing and commenting on the individual texts, Marganne has also used them as an opportunity to examine both specific and general issues of Greco-Roman surgery, so that the commentaries are, in fact, a series of valuable essays on aspects of ancient surgery. These range from discussions of plastic surgery (the earliest record of an operation for a specific congenital facial mutilation—*coloboma*) and the reduction of dislocated jaw and shoulder to critiques on the teaching of surgical practice and theory and a study of the use of surgical equipment and tools such as the trepan and