Review Article

2400 BC, Egypt: Iry, The First Identified Eye Doctor by Stele Interpretation

Abstract

Purpose: The first eye doctor known to have existed seems to be Iry, a Royal Oculist who lived during the 6th Egyptian Dynasty (ca. 2400 BC). This article will briefly reflect the information available about Iry and his achievements.

Methods: Selective literature research of books and journal articles via PubMed, Google and Scholar.

Results: Not only were there many physicians in the Pyramid Age, but there were also very specialized ones. The 6th-dynasty court physician and high priest Iry, was not only “doctor to the king’s belly”, “shepherd of the king’s anus” but also “the king’s eye doctor” which was specifically mentioned. His stele was discovered in a tomb near the Great Pyramid of Cheops. Iry described several eye diseases, but did not offer remedies. Interestingly to note: “irty” was the ancient word for “eyes” or “to see”.

Conclusion: Doctors who specialized in ophthalmology were regarded extremely high in Egyptian society and were the pride of many Pharaohs. Today, very little is known about Iry, the first eye doctor. Many of scientific traditions of the Greeks were probably derived from the cultures of Egypt and Mesopotamia, much has been attributed to Greek scientists because they were the first who left records of their achievements.

Keywords

Egypt; First Eye Doctor; History of Ophthalmology; Iry; Oculist

Introduction

The first eye doctor known to have existed seems to be Iry (also Iri, Irj), a Royal Oculist who lived during the 6th Egyptian Dynasty (ca. 2400 BC) [1-8]. Not only there were many physicians in the Pyramid Age, but there were also very specialized ones. The 6th dynasty court physician and high priest Iry was not only “doctor to the king’s belly”, “shepherd of the king’s anus” but also “the king’s eye doctor”, which was specifically mentioned by previous studies [1-8]. Iry’s stele is very impressive: by size (1.45m x 0.90m), by its good state of preservation and by mentioning various medical activities, which were common at that time [2] (Figure 1).

Iry’s stele - The site

When Cheops started to build his tomb in the region of Giza it seemed to
be quite clear that he planned also graves for his family and his servants. Today we recognize two large graveyards east and westwards to the Cheops pyramid as big areas with quite a complex number of tombs. Both graveyards have long history of building and allocation that is still quite elusive.

Iry’s stele was found in January 23rd 1926 by the German archaeologist Hermann Junker (1877-1962) in a grave field westwards to the Cheops pyramid [2,3] (Figures 2 and 3).

German priest and Egyptologist Hermann Junker (1877 Bendorf (D) - 1962 Vienna (A)) was the first to interpret these hieroglyphs [2,3]. German MD Rembert Antonius Watermann was the first who transferred the drawings and transcribed the hieroglyphics of the stele [2].

Watermann’s sketch of the stele shows Iry sitting on a stool in front of a ritual table (Figure 1). In front of Iry’s head hieroglyphs stating: “Iry, doctor at the royal court”. These hieroglyphs are also shown on the ledger above the false door. On the jamb right to the door it’s mentioned: “Per-ää Sunu-ir-tj”, eye doctor at Pharaoh’s court, below it the name Iry, then below a man with scepter and rod. This is probably not a guard, it seems to be Iry. Left to the false door hieroglyphs mention “scholar”, followed by the name Iry and, similar to the right side, a man approaching the door. On the left as well as on the right outer part also two men with scepter and rod are approaching the door. These are most probably also Iry as his name is mentioned close by. On the wide ledger directly below the seat hieroglyphs mention “doctor at the court”, “leader of Serket (Scorpion God), followed by hieroglyphs “inspector of doctors at Pharaoh’s court”, followed by “Iry”. On the right outer jamb it’s mentioned: “Pharaoh’s doctor of the belly” including eye doctor, then “shepherd of the king’s anus”, again “Pharaoh’s doctor” and finally the name “Iry”. It also mentions “magician”, “superior doctor at Pharaoh’s court” and “shepherd of the king’s anus”. The narrow horizontal stripe far above the decorative frieze on the right shows “doctor at the royal court” followed by a flower and a combination of hieroglyphs which can be interpreted as phyto-therapeutical means. Another hieroglyph was interpreted by Junker as “expert of the body”. His most commonly used name “Iry” seems to be enlarged sometimes to the “beautiful” name “Pepy-ni-ench” (for Pepy’s life). The ornate frame shows the Pharaoh’s name, Pepy (also Pipi) from 6th dynasty. By this it seems to be proven that this stele was made during or shortly after Pepy’s reign [2] (Figures 4 and 5).
Discussion

Already Babylonian cuneiform texts left prove about ancient Oriental, especially Babylonian and Mesopotamian ophthalmology. The code of Hammurabi mentioned regulations for eye surgery already in 1800 BC: The Babylonian or Assyrian doctor should receive a reward of 10 shekels for a successful operation, whereas in case of failure (by ophthalmological malpractice) both hands should be chopped off [11,12].

Egyptian medicine (from 2500 to 500 BC) knew already specialized doctors for eye treatments. Some papyri from that time show instructions for ophthalmic therapy (such as the Papyrus Ebers or the Papyrus Carlsberg) [13]. Legend has it that Egyptian medicine was founded by the high priest, Imhotep (around 2700 BC), who also introduced Egyptian writing. A cult developed over time and numerous temples were built to study medicine and to which the sick made pilgrimages. In Alexandria, the capital of Ptolemy’s empire, Egyptian medicine reached its climax. Alexandria became a center of education for physicians. In Ebers’ papyrus we find descriptions of diseases and therapeutic suggestions from all different medical disciplines including ophthalmology [14] in column 336 to 431 [15].

In this timeframe (6th Egyptian Dynasty, ca. 2400 BC) Iry can be found. He was the first eye doctor known by name [1-8].

Around 500 BC Indian physician Sushruta authored important ophthalmological texts as well. The Golden Age of Arabian ophthalmology took place between 280 BC and 200 AC. Alexandria (Egypt) was regarded as the medical center of the Upper Egyptian, Greek, Indian and Near Eastern world at that time, prescriptions and formulations used in ophthalmology had been developed at that time [16].

Conclusion

Egypt may be considered the oldest of the early advanced civilizations. Egyptian medicine was well respected. Ophthalmology was certainly one of the most important specialties in Egyptian medicine. Doctors who specialized in ophthalmology were regarded as extremely high in Egyptian society and were the pride of many Pharaohs [17]. Today very little is known about Iry, the first eye doctor. Many of scientific traditions of the Greeks may probably be derived from the cultures of Egypt and Mesopotamia, much has been attributed to Greek scientists because they were the first, who left records of their achievements.
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