REVIEWS OF BOOKS

Near East

THE PAPYRUS EBERS. By B. EBBELL. The Greatest Egyptian Medical Document. 10½ x 7¼, pp. 135. London: Humphrey Milford, 1937. 15s.

Another translation of the Papyrus Ebers, and this time by a qualified medical man who has made use of the latest advances in Egyptology, is an event which rejoices the heart of all medical historians. For as Dr. Ebbell, the translator, himself says: "Egypt, not Greece, must be considered the original home of the medical art" (introduction, page 26).

The stage that medicine has reached at any period of a nation's history can be judged from more than one indication. In the first place the position that magic holds in orthodox, as opposed to popular, therapeutics is an excellent test. Does the Papyrus Ebers show that the Egyptian doctors of 1550 B.C. believed that disease and cure were due to supernatural agencies or did they believe that man's folly or misfortune caused disease and that nature, assisted by their own efforts, brought about the cure?

Unfortunately there is no index to the work under review, the only feature, I may add, which mars an otherwise excellent little work. However, on reading through the text the answer will be found on pages 18, 29, 35, 42, 70, 73, 103, 105, 110, 126. The position may be summed up in the translator's own words: "Incantations are prescribed in very few cases chiefly against diseases where ordinary remedies fail, and where it may thus be good to have a psychically active aid to refer to 'ut aliquid fiat'."

Descending to details, a second indication of the stage of advancement of medical knowledge is to be found in the recognition of disease as an entity rather than as a syndrome. In this respect Egyptian medicine was not very far advanced.
Professor Breasted spoke disparagingly of the papyrus for this very reason (see pages 13, 50 note 1). In diseases of the eyes, as readers of Herodotus might expect, the papyrus shows the Egyptians at their best.

Thirdly, empiricism must have shown to a people, however primitive, that certain drugs are more or less specific for certain diseased conditions. The number of drugs thus recognized is some indication of the stage of that people’s knowledge. The pharmacopoeia of the Egyptians was large (see page 59).

And finally, although this points to a very highly developed civilization and specialized knowledge, the realm of surgical, as opposed to medical, treatment offers a criterion by which a nation’s medical attainments can be judged. By 500 B.C. Egyptian surgery was inferior to that of Greece, for Darius nearly lost the use of his leg through the bungling of his Egyptian doctor and regained it thanks to the skill of Democedes, a Greek captive. The Papyrus here translated gives no indication that surgery was ever much practised in Egypt; yet we know that it was, because the Edwin Smith Papyrus, written about 2800 B.C., is almost entirely surgical. Herodotus says that specialization was carried to the extreme limit among the ancient Egyptians. Probably, therefore, the absence of any description in the Ebers Papyrus is due not to the lack of knowledge, but because this papyrus represents a textbook for specialists in internal medicine and the Edwin Smith Papyrus one for specialists in surgery (see pages 12, 14).

In short this translation is a useful addition to our knowledge of medicine at the beginning of historical times. The printing is good, it is free from misprints, and although written by (I believe) a Norwegian, the English is faultless. Not the least valuable part of the book is a very excellent introduction.

A. 831.

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