

Medicine in Ptolemaic Egypt

Nevine Abd El-Gawad Ali Hasan

Tourist Guidance Department, Alexandria University, Damanhour, el-Behaira

Correspondence to Nevine Abd El-Gawad Ali Hasan, PhD, MA, BSc, Tourist Guidance Department, Alexandria University, 5 abd El-Kareem Street, Damanhour, el-Behaira; Tel. 01005289623/045-3323258; e-mail: nourvine1991@hotmail.com

Egypt J Intern Med 29:91–92
© 2017 The Egyptian Journal of Internal Medicine
1110-7782

Received 1 April 2017

Accepted 1 May 2017

The Egyptian Journal of Internal Medicine
2017, 29:91–92

During the period between 332 and 30 BCE, known as the Hellenistic period, Egypt was ruled by the Greek family of the Ptolemies. Since the reign of Ptolemy I Soter, or the Savior (323–283/2 BC), the Mouseion of Alexandria has been founded to be the home of music and poetry, a philosophical school, a storehouse of texts, and it also included the famous library of Alexandria dating back to the time of Ptolemy II Philadelphus. The Mouseion of Alexandria became famous in medicine and surgery and for its famous doctors. It even outperformed the Greek Hippocrates School – from which it derived its initial knowledge – and anatomy was raised in it because the Egyptians were fond of embalming and mummification [1–3] (Fig. 1).

Owing to the Library's fame and unprecedented royal support, the medical school at Alexandria grew quickly to become the medical center of the Hellenic Age. Among its pioneer surgeons were Herophilus

and Erasistratus, who conducted ground-breaking investigations into internal human anatomy. Their research was important because it corrected many ancient misconceptions about the body, and because they reached their conclusions by dissecting human corpses, a practice outlawed in the Ancient World. In fact, both physicians are known to have written several books, but no complete work by either author survives. Our knowledge of the two physicians therefore comes from references and quotes by later writers.

Herophilus (c335–c280 BC) who was from Chalcedon, a town near modern-day Istanbul, was the founder of the school of anatomy of Alexandria, and was among the first physicians to conduct anatomical dissections in public. He made extraordinary anatomical discoveries and developed standards for measuring the flow of blood from the heart through the arteries. Herophilus also concluded that the brain was therefore the controlling organ in Man, through which 'all bodily actions are accomplished'. This discovery went against Aristotle's assertion that the heart was the source of human intellect and reason, which would have been the commonly held belief at the time. Erasistratus (c310–c250 BC) was born on the island of Ceos, and before traveling to Alexandria, he is reported to have served as the royal physician at the court of Seleucus I in Mesopotamia. He was a disciple and collaborator of Herophilus. He made important contributions in the study and teaching of human anatomy and carried out research at the Museum of Alexandria (Mouseion). One

Figure 1



Statue of Ptolemy II (Philadelphus) in the Plaza of Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Alexandria, Egypt

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 License, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work noncommercially, as long as the author is credited and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.

of his most important works focused on the veins and the arteries and he appears to have been very close to discovering the circulation of blood, a feat eventually achieved by English physician William Harvey in 1628 CE [4].

It is noteworthy that there may have been limited interest in Greek medicine on the part of the Egyptian temples, but that overall Greeks reacted and adapted the Egyptian institutions and practices. In Ptolemaic Egypt healing was not simply part of two cultures (Greek and Egyptian), but a means by which they interacted, and medicine was an arena of competitive cultural and individual expression [5].

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

References

- 1 Draycott JL. Approaches to healing in Roman [PhD thesis]. Egypt: University of Nottingham; 2011. p. 9.
- 2 Noshay I. Studies in the history of Egypt during the Ptolemaic era. Cairo: Anglo Bookshop; 1959. p. 215.
- 3 El-Abbady M. Egypt from Alexander the Great to the Arab conquest. Cairo: Anglo Bookshop; 1992. pp. 143–145.
- 4 El Maalouf E I. History of medicine in ancient and modern nations. Cairo: Hindawy Co; 2014. 27–29.
- 5 Lang P. Medicine and society in Ptolemaic Egypt. Leiden: Brill; 2013. p. xiii.