

Medicine in Roman and Byzantine Egypt (from 30 BC to AD 641)

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Ptolemaic rule of Egypt ended with the death of Queen Cleopatra VII and the defeat of Mark Antony from his opponent Octavian, who became the future emperor Augustus, and thus Egypt (Aegyptus) began its new era as a Roman province in the Roman Empire starting from 30 BC [1].

During the Roman era, the role of Alexandria as a scientific and educational center declined and there was a shortage of professors. Therefore, regional education grew and students were only studying the medical books of senior Hellenistic doctors and trained by a local doctor within the region. According to papyrus documentation, medical profession was permissible for all inhabitants of Egypt whether Greeks, Romans, or Egyptians and there were no restrictions imposed on its exercise.

It is also noted that doctors during this period were qualified to practice medicine by both paying attention to their theoretical education, and ensuring that they practiced medicine. There were government doctors and private doctors, in addition to medical practitioners who were at temple complexes in order to provide medical care to those who needed it. Because of the combination of votive offerings, medical literature, and medical equipment recovered from these sites, we knew that there were doctors in temple complexes, but it is unclear whether or not priests were practicing medicine at such temples. Doctors in general enjoyed excellent social status during this era [2,3].

During the reign of Emperor Diocletian (284–305), the partition of the Roman Empire into eastern and western segments began. Emperor Constantine I (324–337) established his capital at Byzantium, which he renamed Constantinople (present-day Istanbul) in the year 330, and the Byzantine rule of Egypt began to be governed from Constantinople as a part of the Byzantine Empire. In 313, Constantine established Christianity as the official

religion of the empire, and by the middle of the fourth century, Egypt was largely a Christian country [4].

For the birth of the hospital, documents from Egypt reveal how widespread they were at this time. These Egyptian testimonials record a multitude of hospitals founded by private individuals and independent of ecclesiastical institutions. The origin of the hospital as an independent institution for the care and treatment of the sick can be dated to the third-quarter of the fourth century. Perhaps the infirmary of what is usually considered the first monastery, established by Pachomius at Tabennesi (north of Thebes in Egypt), should count as the first Christian hospital. If so, the institution dates from around 325 [5].

Alexandria maintained its fame in the field of medicine and surgery at least until the end of the fourth century, but since the third century the era of scientific disclosure has passed in this pioneer city and conditions were no longer suitable for scientific research [6].

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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