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Ido Israelowich,
*Patients and Healers in the High Roman Empire.*


The social history of medicine is a topic exciting interest from a wide audience these days, and the question of how medicine functioned as a system in antiquity is very much in need of our attention. Ido Israelowich’s *Patients and Healers in the High Roman Empire* sets out to do just that, viewing the world of healing in antiquity as a structure whose many disparate parts together created a single healthcare system. It is an ambitious goal, but one long overdue for a monograph’s attention. There is a tendency among modern people to view the organization of medicine in the Roman Empire as unregulated chaos and little else. Israelowich’s book best succeeds in clearly and methodically drawing out the structure of a medical world in which many of the basic tenets of medicine were still being debated, and in including in his discussion all of the healing institutions that functioned together in the Roman world, be they religious, traditional, or philosophical. This approach is not without its issues, but it provides a useful starting point for future work.

The book consists of a series of chapters discussing loci for medical care, first human actors, then institutions. These include physicians (chapter 1), patients (chapter 2), reproductive medicine in the *domus* (chapter 3), the Roman army (chapter 4), and medical tourism (chapter 5). The text is easily accessible to a reader unfamiliar with Roman medicine and medical literature, and includes an impressive range of source materials, including epigraphy and papyri. The text flows naturally from topic to topic in logical order to support the argument that the medical care of the Roman world constituted a serviceable network of knowledge, techniques, and facilities. For instance, the argument is made throughout that the cult sites of Asklepios functioned in conjunction with the care of Greek-educated physicians and civic baths to provide medical treatment and education. Likewise, Israelowich connects the legal infrastructure of Roman medical practice to the developing needs of the Roman legions, thereby explaining the way that military need drove legal remedies, and vice versa.

The first two chapters are best treated as a matched pair, dealing as they do with two sides of the physician/patient relationship. They include the historical background that led to the dominance of Greek-derived and Greek-language medicine in the medical marketplace of Imperial Rome as well as the roots of the relation-
ship between the rise of temple medicine and Greek rationalizing medicine. Each chapter ends with an example that ties the abstract firmly to the concrete. Psasnis, a physician whose legal troubles are preserved among the Oxyrhynchus papyri, ends the first chapter, and the sophist Aelius Aristides’ *Sacred Tales* represents the voice of one elite patient at the end of the second.

The last three chapters focus on places of interest (rather than people) to the healthcare networks in the Roman world: *domus* (childbearing and gynecology), army, and popular destinations for medical tourism. Of these, the chapter on the legion is the strongest and most exciting as it contextualizes a great deal about how the needs of Rome’s military and the preference of its leaders for Greek-style medicine drove developments in Roman medical law. It is also an area where the author’s use of *tabulae*, papyri, and epigraphy are put to good use in discussing more literary sources like Vegetius and Dioscorides. The *domus* proves more elusive, unsurprisingly, being as it is a locus for the practice of medicine for and by (primarily) women, a group whose knowledge and experiences are difficult to reconstruct from the surviving male-written sources. Here, the chapter accomplishes much in a short space, treating the *domus* as a locus of not only healthcare, but of medical outreach and education – an exciting and interesting way to reconsider the topic and formulate new approaches for future study. Likewise, the final chapter on medical tourism does much to re-frame such sites as loci for the exchange and, to an extent, standardization of knowledge among patients and professionals.

That said, there are a few issues with the text that bear comment. First, the book is plagued by puzzling errors and omissions that should have been caught before print and ought to be addressed in subsequent editions. For instance, on page 72 the author claims that no professional physicians wrote in Latin, despite the existence of Scribonius Largus (whom he discussed in the first chapter). He then goes on to list Dioscorides as a “Latin” author at the bottom of the same page. Likewise, on page 112 he says that, “The work of Pausanias is of a more limited scope and centered on the province of Asia,” probably having meant to say Achaia (as he does in the next sentence).

Second, the author mentions a few times that caesarian section was practiced in antiquity, but never includes the key detail that it was not a procedure that the mother would survive (see especially pg. 83). Although not a detail essential to the argument of the book, it is something that often comes as a surprise to modern readers used to a world in which caesarian saves the lives of both mother and child. In addition, reference to Maud Gleason’s and Heinrich von Staden’s work on Galen’s anatomical demonstrations in the context of the Second Sophistic would have
been frequently relevant, especially on page 132 where anatomical demonstrations are discussed (Gleason, “Shock and Awe: The Performance Dimension of Galen’s Anatomy Demonstrations,” in Galen and the World of Knowledge, edited by Christopher Gill, Tim Whitmarsh, and John Wilkins [Cambridge 2009]: 85–114; Von Staden, “Anatomy as Rhetoric: Galen on Dissection and Persuasion,” Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences 50.1 [1995]: 47–66). Moreover, snakebite is given as Kleopatra VII’s cause of death on page 35, even though scholarship for well over half a century has preferred the more likely alternative of a comb in which she had hidden poison, as Plutarch relates in the Life of Antonius 86.3 and Dio at 51.14.2 (Duane W. Roller, Cleopatra: A Biography [Oxford 2010]:148–9). And, finally, the bibliography lists nothing published after 2012.

As a whole, though, the book accomplishes its goals as it takes the reader on a tour of the institutions and players who made up the system by which the Roman World understood and managed health and illness. Particularly impressive is the range of primary sources, including many inscriptions and papyri that were new to this reviewer. It is reasonably priced and full of useful information accessibly presented to a wide range of readers, and its approach and argument present many starting points for future work in the social history of medicine. Above all, it is a long overdue corrective to the tendency of modern observers to look at the world of medicine in antiquity and see only what is not there, rather than what is.

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