

Book Reviews

J. WORTH ESTES, *The medical skills of ancient Egypt*, Canton, Mass., Science History Publications USA, 1989, 8vo, pp. xii, 196, illus., \$16.95, \$10.95 (paperback).

LISE MANNICHE, *An ancient Egyptian herbal*, Austin, University of Texas Press in co-operation with British Museum Publications, 1989, 8vo, pp. 176, illus., \$19.95 (paperback).

Fascination with Egyptian medicine continues unabated. As Professor of Pharmacology at Boston University School of Medicine, J. Worth Estes's main interest lies in why and how ancient physicians used drugs to combat their patients' ailments. He considers the role of the physician in ancient Egypt, from Imhotep (deified by later generations as an Egyptian god of medicine) to the general practitioners. The two main sources of evidence for medicine in ancient Egypt are the medical papyri and the archaeological information supplied by mummified human remains. Here, there is a brief summary of the contribution made by modern examinations of mummies (including x-rays, CT-scans, and autopsies) to current knowledge of disease in ancient Egypt.

The Egyptians believed that some diseases were caused by a visible agent: a "rational" treatment (including surgery) was then advocated, and the extent and efficacy of these methods are considered. However, some diseases were attributed to an invisible force (such as a demon or the ill-wishes of an enemy) and then magical intervention or treatment with drugs was recommended. In the author's opinion, most of the drugs would have been incapable of providing definitive cures in either "magical" or "rational" cases, and most were probably selected because of early magical associations. The book provides a glossary of the drug substances used in "rational" remedies, mainly based on the famous Ebers Papyrus.

Estes also traces the passage of Egyptian medical thought through the ancient trade routes and the research centre at Alexandria into Greek culture and also down into Hebrew and Arabic medical lore. Some remedies can still be found in Europe and America; household treatments in modern Egyptian villages also preserve some of the ancient ideas. The book provides an informative account for a general readership, and an extensive bibliography that will enable Egyptologists, palaeopathologists, and historians of medicine to pursue more specialist references.

Although no complete ancient Egyptian herbal has yet been discovered, Lise Manniche's book has been able to draw on texts written by the Egyptians and their neighbours, on Classical and Coptic works, and on the evidence of flowers and seeds that have survived in tombs and ancient rubbish heaps, and the mural depictions of flowers and plants in tombs and temples. This Herbal provides a list of 94 species of plants and trees that the Egyptians used in the pharaonic and Coptic periods. Each plant is named in Latin and English, and, where the equivalents are known, in ancient Egyptian, Greek, and modern Arabic. Their special properties are noted, together with an indication of their use. A substantial Introduction deals generally with the wide usage of "herbs" in ancient Egypt (covering a variety of plant forms and parts). The Egyptians cultivated gardens attached to their temples and houses and, regarding flowers as sacred symbols with magical properties, they made bouquets and wreaths for their gods and for the dead. Flowers and plants decorated the rooms of houses and also warded off vermin and insects, herbs were used in food and cooking, and plant-dyes were employed to colour linen and matting. A flourishing cosmetic industry incorporated plant ingredients in deodorants, skin cleansers, breath fresheners, and hair preparations, as well as in perfumes that were famed throughout the ancient world. Plant ingredients were also used in medicines, although problems persist in translating their names and identifying individual ingredients.

The book provides a useful and easily digested introduction to a neglected area of Egyptian studies. Not every entry is illustrated, but photographs and line-drawings throughout the text indicate the range of source material that is available. Classical sources and specialist references are supplied in the bibliography for those readers who wish to pursue further studies.

A. R. David, The Manchester Museum, University of Manchester