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Medicine and Religion in Ancient Egypt

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Abstract

Seminal works on ancient Egyptian medicine tend to treat the field as distinct from religious practices, often fixating on the medical papyri as exemplifying either rational or magical treatments. Refocusing the study towards the ancient Egyptian conceptions of physiology and disease etiology shows that their medical practices integrated religious concepts such as *maat* (balance) and *heka* (power). Therapeutic measures and titles for healers, *swnw*, *wab* priest, and *sau*, further underscored the physical interchange between the mortal and divine worlds for the ancient Egyptians.

Scholarship on medicine in ancient Egypt tends to separate the medical practices from the culture's religious life despite the overlap between Egyptian healers and the priesthood as well as the frequent use of incantations and imagery drawn from the stories of Horus and Seth (Dawson 1967; Nunn 1996). This dichotomy stems from the conceptualization of the two fields. Medicine, typically, is viewed as scientific, that is rational and empirical, whereas religion is thought of in terms of faith and not subject to an empirical method. Therefore, many works on Egyptian medicine begin with an overview of the medical papyri as if the ancient Egyptians divided the topics and wrote manuals aimed solely at a medical audience. Once the medical texts are established, these works then move on to describing the practices of the *swnw*, commonly translated as "physician." Other titles for healers and the religious influences on their practices then become an adjunct or even a corruption described in terms of magic (Breasted 1930) rather than an integral part of ancient Egypt's foundational concepts of physiology and disease etiology. More recent scholarship looks to amend this position by seeing the ancient "Egyptian doctor" as "mediating between the ideal and real worlds of health. . . . and his many divine patrons" (Ritner 2001, p. 353).

Given the tendency to divide the fields of medicine and religion, scholars have traditionally categorized only eleven papyri as medical (in chronological order): the Kahun, Ramesseum, Edwin Smith, Ebers, Berlin, Hearst, London (BM 10059), Chester Beatty, Carlsberg, Brooklyn, and the London-Leiden Papyrus (BM 10070). The earliest papyrus, Kahun, dates to the 12th dynasty (1963–1786 BCE), while the latest, London-Leiden, roughly dates to the late 2nd or early 3rd century CE. The most comprehensive translation and

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analysis of the eleven medical papyri plus relevant ostraca can be found in the German series *Grundiss der Medizin der alten Ägypter* (Grapow, von Deines & Westendorf 1958). The Ebers and Edwin Smith Papyri receive the greatest attention. Most of the medical papyri contain duplicates of cases found in the Ebers Papyrus that treat a range of ailments from diarrhea to graying hair and even mold on the walls of a house. The Ebers Papyrus also contains passages that come closest to explaining ancient Egyptian concepts of physiology. Ebers 854–856, known as *The Book of Vessels*, describes how a system of *mtw* (vessels) run throughout the body carrying various substances. The Edwin Smith Papyrus owes its popularity to the types of cases treated, trauma, and the approach to therapeutics. With one exception, the forty-eight trauma cases in the Smith Papyrus use only physical manipulations, bandages, and sutures for treatment rather than incantations; hence it acquired the appellation the Surgical Papyrus. This gives it a character far more akin to modern medical texts than the other papyri. The London-Leiden Papyrus, by contrast, is often omitted from the list of medical papyri because the therapies are almost exclusively magical in nature even though the types of cases it addresses, such as dog bites, eye problems, and fever, can be found in the other papyri. Although consensus centers on these eleven papyri, there is a bit of leeway as to what exactly constitutes a medical papyrus. The researcher may focus on a range of criteria from the types of ailments addressed to the assessment of therapies as either empirical or magical.

Ancient Egyptians, though, did not see a strict dichotomy between medicine and religion. For them, health and illness were manifestations of a person's relationship with the universe around him, a universe that included not just people and animals but spirits and gods as well. Although they did perceive a distinction between the mundane/mortal and supernatural/divine worlds, an interchange between these worlds was fairly frequent.

The idea of *maat* (balance, order, justice) governed the relationships in and between these worlds. The goddess Maat personified this harmony and the divine order of the universe. The gods ordained the rising and setting sun, regular inundation of the Nile, and the role of the king, all which fall under the control of Maat. She governed not just natural phenomena but social relationships. From king to peasant, one should follow *maat* through their honesty, justice, clemency, and respectfulness. But, according to the *Instructions of Merikare*, it was especially the king's ability to govern properly, a sign of *maat*, that had a direct effect on the welfare of Egypt by ensuring the continued presence of the gods (Simpson 2003). Just as the religious principle of *maat* explained the political order, it also guided their explanation as to how the body functioned, why a person became ill, and what constituted effective healing strategies.

The system of *mtw*-vessels most readily exhibited the role of *maat* in human physiology. According to the Ebers Papyrus, the body contains twenty-two *mtw*-vessels that link up at critical junctures such as the heart

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and the anus. The soul of a person was seated in the heart and during the Judgment of the Dead one's heart was weighed against the Feather of Maat. The anus functioned as one of the natural points where the *mtw*-vessels opened to the outside world allowing for the passage of substances into and out of the body. A quick survey of treatment measures shows that a number of medications were either applied as enemas or at least caused an evacuation of the bowels. Other natural openings included the eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. Wounds also permitted matter, usually toxic, to enter or exit. The *mtw*-vessels acted essentially as canals through which various substances regularly flowed and irrigated the body. Egyptian healers often felt the pulse to determine if the *mtw*-vessels were clear. Health depended on the balance (*maat*) of this movement just like Egypt itself depended on the regularity and order of the Nile flooding and irrigating the crops.

The idea of purity also effected how the Egyptians understood the body to function, especially in relation to the rest of the universe. The need to be pure (*wab*) was especially important for those coming into contact with the divine such as priests. The process of purification centered on the body which, for males, consisted of washing, shaving all hair, circumcision, and sexual abstinence while working at a temple; some districts even instituted dietary restrictions (Sauneron 2000). The lowest level of temple officials would have the title *wab* priest indicating that they met the minimum requirements for service. This purity ensured the perfection of all the rituals performed at the temple. Any lapse in the integrity of the rituals could offend the gods and cause them to abandon Egypt. The body itself influenced the attitudes of the divine toward the mortal world; purity, as expressed through the body, maintained *maat*.

The use of religion in physiological concepts was not limited to *maat*, the *mtw*-vessels, and purity. Symbolic anatomy also played a role in the maintenance of health and life. Canopic jars reflect the link Egyptians made between organs and deities. During mummification, the liver, lungs, stomach, and intestines were placed under the protection of the four sons of Horus, Imsety, Hapy, Duamutef, and Qebehsenuef, respectively. By the Middle Kingdom (2106–1786 BCE) the four goddesses Isis, Nepthys, Neith, and Serqet joined in guarding the organs for the afterlife. Symbolic anatomy also found expression in the *Book of Going Forth by Day*, otherwise known as the *Book of the Dead*, where body parts and deities were matched in protective spells. For the Egyptians, speech had the power to create so to utter, "my eyes are Hathor, my ears are Wepwawet . . . my lips are Anubis, my molars are Selket . . ." (Faulkner & Andrews 1985, p. 62) causes Hathor or Anubis to embody the eyes or lips. Similar pairings also are found in Spell 3 of the Metternich Stela, "O cat, your eyes are the eyes of the Lord of the Glorious Eye . . . O cat, your nose is the nose of Thot . . ." (Scott 1951, p. 206). At this point, the worlds of the mundane and the supernatural intersect, a mortal body and the actions of a god became integral. Health meant a balance either within the body itself or with entities outside of the body.

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Illness signaled that something disrupted *maat*. This could easily happen if substances clogged the *mtw*-vessels. An improper diet often resulted in either a slowing or quickening of digestion, which then manifested as constipation, diarrhea, or difficulty in urination. Even Herodotus reported that the Egyptians regularly engaged in a clearing out of their systems: "They purge themselves for three consecutive days of every month; they make emetics and douches their means of pursuing health . . ." (II, 77). Foreign, noxious substances such as *wekhedu* can block the *mtw*-vessels as well. These can enter through wounds or the natural openings, thus causing symptoms like pus and fever. Trauma itself can also break the flow in the *mtw*-vessels. Case 31 in the Smith Papyrus describes paralysis from a spinal injury: "A man having a dislocation in a vertebra of his neck, should you find him unconscious of his two arms and his two legs on account of it . . ." (Breasted 1930, p. 324). Egyptians apparently used *mtw* to refer to any long thin structure that carried substances, whether it was intestines, blood vessels, or nerves. The balance of matter in the *mtw*-vessels sounds predictable and empirical, rather than subject to the variances of relationships between the human and divine worlds.

Substances blocking the *mtw*-vessels, throwing off the natural balance, may be a result of a disruption of *maat* caused by something other than just the mechanics of human physiology. Most medical papyri refer to disease etiology in a brief and oblique manner with the most frequent phrase, "caused by a god or a dead man." Ebers 131 indicates that *wekhedu* can originate with the gods or the deceased (Ebbell 1937; Grapow, von Deines & Westendorf 1958) and not simply a result of putrid substances in the digestive track (Steuer 1948). Keeping to a proper diet and regular purges did not guarantee health; the supernatural world may still cause illness. One of the more common illnesses in the medical papyri is the *aaa*-disease. Ebers 62 links the *aaa*-disease to a specific type of worm leading many modern scholars to believe it was hematuria (Ebbell 1937; Jonckheere 1944; Lefebvre 1956). But passages in the Egyptian medical papyri, such as Ebers 225 and Hearst 83, indicate that, for the Egyptians, a supernatural connection also existed with the *aaa*-disease. According to the *Grundiss der Medizin* series, the source of the *aaa*-disease was an incubus based on the term *aaa*, which typically means "to discharge semen" (von Deines & Westendorf 1961). Once violated by an incubus, the semen or toxic substance then spread throughout the body via the *mtw*-vessels. The *wekhedu* and *aaa*-diseases show that a natural–supernatural dichotomy did not constrain the Egyptian concept of disease causation but, rather, that an episode of illness can straddle both categories. The supernatural aspect to disease etiology could function as a form of punishment from the gods, a reminder of one's social obligation or an outright attack by a malicious or capricious entity.

Although the Edwin Smith Papyrus treats trauma cases, it does not mention how the trauma occurred. To gain a better understanding for the causes of trauma, we must look at Egyptian literature such as the tale of

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Reddedet's maidservant from *King Cheops and the Magicians* (Simpson 2003). Reddedet, the wife of a *wab* (pure) priest, is having a difficult delivery; the goddesses of childbirth appear and act as her midwives. Reddedet gives birth to three sons. Knowing the boys will eventually become kings of Egypt, the goddesses secretly fashion three crowns, hide them in the house, and depart. While preparing for the fourteen days of purification that normally follows a birth, Reddedet and her maidservant discover the crowns in a grain storage bin. The maidservant swears to her mistress she will not reveal the secret of the crowns. But all is not well in the household. After a few days, the maidservant argues with Reddedet and receives a beating. In retaliation, the maidservant threatens to tell King Khufu about the three crowns and runs from the house. She finds her brother and, in a crying fit, explains everything to him. When she is done he starts to beat her for disobedience and betrayal of her mistress. The maidservant then flees from her brother. Worn out from all the beatings, she stops along the banks of the Nile to refresh and recuperate. A crocodile suddenly jumps from the waters snatching the maidservant and dragging her below. The story acts as a cautionary tale teaching one to know their place and keep their promises. Both beatings and the animal attack are punishments for the maidservant's ethical transgressions. Episodes of trauma can have supernatural origins in that a person's actions work against *maat*; therefore, the attack or accident functions as a punishment for the unjust deed.

Battle injuries and work-related accidents also have a supernatural etiology. In *The Capture of Joppa*, the Rebel of Joppa tries to negotiate with the king's representative, Djehuty, for a cessation of hostility. The Rebel of Joppa offers Djehuty a beautiful woman in exchange for the baton of the king, a symbol of royal power. Djehuty appears to agree to these terms and brings the baton to the Rebel of Joppa. But when he brings out the baton, Djehuty exclaims, "Look at me, O Rebel [of Joppa! Here is] King Menkheperre, l.p.h., the fierce lion, Sakhmet's son, to whom Amon has given his [strength. And he] lifted his hand and smote upon the Rebel of Joppa's temple so that he fell/ [sprawling] before him" (Simpson 2003, p. 73). According to Djehuty's speech, the baton is more than just a symbol of the king, it actually embodies the king, "here is King Menkheperre" (Thutmose III). Simultaneously, the baton also embodies the god Amun. Djehuty reports to Thutmose III, "Amon, your good father, has delivered to you the Rebel of Joppa" (Simpson 2003, p. 74). Djehuty does not claim he killed the Rebel, but rather a god killed the Rebel.

The act of creating an object, whether the baton of the king or a farming implement, has the same effect as speech or writing; the object can become infused with a life-force or spirit. This belief in animism would explain to the Egyptians the source of an injury. The spirit within the object acted to readjust *maat*. In the case of the Rebel of Joppa, the blow from the baton was punishment for the rebellious behavior, the leader of Joppa should have remained a faithful vassal of Thutmose III. But an injury could just as easily

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come from the capricious nature of the spirit. A relief at Deir el-Medina of the tomb worker Ipwy shows a variety of injuries that could befall the necropolis workers. For example, a man chiseling away on the top of a structure causes debris to fall into the eyes of a second man who, in his temporary blindness, drops a mallet on his own foot. The humorous tone of the scene underscores the whimsical nature of spirits to cause grief for humans.

Besides entities from the supernatural world like spirits or gods, others with access to *heka* (magic power) could manipulate the natural and supernatural worlds to cause illness. Like *maat*, *heka* is both a concept and a personification, the god Heka. According to the Coffin Texts Spell 261, Heka existed even before creation and it was his power that infused and protected not only the act of creation but nature itself. *Heka*, though, is not necessarily good or bad but can be used by anyone with the skill to do so. The tale of the chief lector priest Webaoner from *King Cheops and the Magicians* illustrates how *heka* can work in the case of trauma (Simpson 2003). Webaoner's wife repeatedly rendezvous with a townsman at her greenhouse. The gardener reports the wife's drinking and carousing to Webaoner who creates a wax crocodile, awakens its spirit by reading magical words and then deposits it in the lake near the greenhouse. After one of the trysts, the townsman jumps into the lake to bathe and is promptly devoured by the crocodile. Webaoner uses *heka* to create and animate the crocodile while the animal attack restores the *maat* disrupted by the behavior of his wife and the townsman.

The accessing of *heka*, or use of magic, has three basic components: speech, charged substances, and physical rite (Ritner 2001). The speech portion of *heka* consists of reciting incantations. These typically are written, as in the case of Webaoner who read the magical words, but not necessarily so. Reliefs in tombs dating as early as the Old Kingdom show that illiterate shepherds and farmers could recite spells to protect herds and crops. But a substantial body of sacred manuals, kept at the temples, developed for transmitting the incantations as well as the particulars for the rituals, including ingredients. Within this collection of sacred manuals are the medical papyri. There is a tendency to divide the manuals into three distinct categories: *seshaw* as magical ritual or collection of knowledge, *pekhret* as medical prescriptions, and *rw* as religious texts (Shaw & Nicholson 1995; Nunn 1996). This modern classification system developed from the variation in the opening lines for each case in the manuals. Some begin with *seshaw*, the Egyptian word for instruction; others open with either *pekhret* (remedy) or *rw* (spell or speech). A medical papyrus is not limited in the type of phrase used to introduce its cases, but rather has the initial words for instruction, remedy and spell peppered throughout the manual. Also, a case may begin with a term such as *seshaw* yet have the treatment consist of *rw* as in case no. 9 in the Edwin Smith Papyrus. The ancient Egyptian healer apparently did not finely distinguish the categories of spell, ritual, and prescription but blended them in the process of using *heka*.

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Four basic devices can make up an incantation: a description, a command, a call for protection, and/or a recounting of myths, especially those involving Osiris, Horus, Seth, and Isis. Ebers 61 exemplifies a descriptive spell which specifies the actions that will occur during the healing process, "the burdens are relaxed, and the weakness departs that is located in my belly. . . ." In this case, the illness is the focus of the spell. Although the incantation uses the phrase "my belly," its recitation is not restricted to just the patient. A healer may say the spell on behalf of the patient, or even a god, spirit, or the illness itself. A command spell simply consists of directions and frequently appears alongside recipes for instrumental treatments, "Come remedy, come who removes (bad) things in this my heart and in the parts of my body" (Ebers 3). Protection spells call upon the gods on behalf of the patient: "I am under the protection of Isis; my rescue is the son of Osiris" (Edwin Smith 9). Any god may be invoked to provide protection but the mythic cycle of Horus was a popular motif: "Do you recall that Horus and Seth were brought to the great palace at Heliopolis when the testicles of Seth were negotiated with Horus . . . and he was new like one who is on earth" (Ebers 3). Seth's frequent attacks on Horus make for a handy parallel to the plight of the patient while the helpful actions of Isis compare with the healing effect of the treatment measures. Essentially, the spell draws upon a divine precedent. Justice reigns when Horus is helped in his struggle against Seth. If the patient equates to Horus then he, too, should be healed as a matter of justice. Some spells are directed at a specific type of ailment such as a scorpion bite or a difficult pregnancy. In these, goddesses such as Serqet or Taweret are more commonly invoked.

The incantations can focus on the illness, the remedy, the patient, or the gods in a variety of combinations. Additionally, spells can apply generally to healing rather than to a specific therapy. The Ebers Papyrus begins with three general spells: one for bandaging, one for drinking, and one for any remedy, all of which can be used in conjunction with any of the hundreds of treatments found throughout the manuscript. Spells charged either people or items with *heka*, infusing them with therapeutic power. A bandage or drink may not heal based solely on its ingredients. The second aspect of *heka*, charged substances, was intimately linked to the speech component.

Typically, charged substances take the form of amulets or talismans. One such amulet found in a 12th dynasty tomb is a figurine of a man carrying a calf. This figure is to help protect the shepherd and animal while fording a river (Ritner 2001). By the Late Period, *cippi* stelae became popular. These depict the child Horus standing on a crocodile, holding snakes or scorpions and inscribed with spells. Rarely, though, were the spells read. Instead, the afflicted drank water that had been poured over the stela; the spells charged the water with *heka* as it flowed over the image and words. The beneficial effects of Egyptian therapeutics were not limited to humans; the verso of Kahun Papyrus from the reign of Amenemhat III (1843–1797 BCE) contains a veterinary text. The cases in the Kahun Veterinary Papyrus treat eye

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ailments in dogs and cattle with similar techniques used with humans such as incantations and the application of medicinal materials.

In the medical papyri, several of the recipes have accompanying spells that charge the substances used in the remedy. Ebers 385 gives the incantation for the ingredients used to heal an illness causing a "build up of water" in the eyes:

> Come green eye make-up (malachite), come green eye make-up, come green one; come discharge from the Horus eye, come excretion from the eye of Atum, come fluid that came from Osiris. It came, it removed the water, the pus, the blood, the weak-sightedness, the *bjdj*-eye disease, the blindness, the veil, the influence of a god, a dead man, a dead woman, a masculine pain-matter, a feminine pain-matter, any evil thing that is in both eyes. Recite over green eye make-up pounded with fermented honey, pounded with *gjw* (nut), applied to the eyes.

Frequently, though, recipes in the medical papyri do not give a specific spell, rather they simply state the ingredients such as "another for the removal of the *what*-disease in both eyes: black eye make-up, red ochre, ochre, red natron; apply to the outside of both eyes" (Ebers 346). Only a few of the cases describe a complete examination before giving the recipe; most simply have a title listing the main symptom and the recipe, like Ebers 346. Since cases were commonly written in this truncated form, it is not entirely clear the extent to which incantations were used with these recipes.

Spells not only charge substances but can also impart power to actions, that is, the ritual component of accessing *heka*. The Harris Magical Papyrus suggests that a shepherd gestured as part of the physical rite in conjunction with the duties of a magical specialist (Ritner 2001). The general spell in Ebers 2, "speech for loosening any bandage," gives power to the final act of healing, a critical time when the determination would be made as to whether or not the patient recovered. Rituals commonly involved actions such as making knots, breaking pottery (execration texts), or drawing a protective circle with an ivory wand. Just as many of the medical cases lack an obvious incantation, there is little in the way of directions for an obvious ritual such as in the London-Leiden Papyrus, "another talisman for the foot of the gouty man: you write these names on a strip of silver or tin; you put it on a deer-skin; you bind it to the foot . . . 'Let N. son N. recover from every pain which is in his feet and two legs.' You do it when the moon is in the constellation of Leo" (Griffith & Thompson 1974, p. 183). But the conjunction of incantations and charged substance in the medical treatments indicates that the therapeutic acts like mixing, bandaging, or drinking a remedy in themselves may constitute the ritual performance. Therefore, even the truncated case formula of just a title, recipe, and directions for application still contains the ritual component of accessing *heka*.

The use of *heka* in effecting a cure basically reversed the process by which someone contracted an illness, and hopefully reestablished the natural order, *maat*. Whether a person, spirit, or god, all would use this magical power. The

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healer then must also have had access to *heka*. This situation influenced who was considered a healer in ancient Egyptian society. Although non-literate Egyptians could access *heka* through spells, talismans, and other charged substances (Pinch 1994), the titles for healers indicate they possessed some level of literacy. The titles appearing in the medical papyri are *swnw* (physician), *wab* (pure) priest, and *sau* (magician). Attempts have been made to see the *swnw* as not just a physician but a surgeon treating mostly trauma cases (Breasted 1930), while the *wab* priest and *sau* focus on the more mysterious internal disorders and as a result relied on magical practices (Nunn 1996). But the strict use of "physician" for *swnw* and "magician" for *wab* priest and *sau* only reinforces the artificial dichotomy of medicine and religion as distinct activities among the Egyptians rather than seeing health care as a part of their religious practices. The three types of healers frequently resorted to the same treatments in addition to having strong connections to the religious structures in ancient Egypt.

The first case in the Edwin Smith Papyrus states, "now if *wab* (pure) priests of Sekhmet or a *swnw* places his two hands . . ." indicating that both types of healers equally used the prescriptions from the papyrus. The treatment of trauma cases was not limited to just the *swnw*-healer. Similarly, the Ebers Papyrus claims, "If any *swnw*, any *wab* priest of Sekhmet, any *sau* give both his hands . . ." also showing the overlap of practices among the three healers in treating internal disorders (Ebers 854a). In light of the use of spells in the Ebers Papyrus and its reference to the *swnw*-healer, Breasted's dismissal of the spell in the Edwin Smith Papyrus case no. 9 (Breasted 1930) in explaining that the *swnw* was a surgeon who would not normally employ incantations becomes untenable. The *swnw*, just like the *wab* priest and *sau*, accessed *heka* in order to provide a cure to his patients.

The *wab* priest and *sau* have an obvious connection to the religious life of Egypt. As previously mentioned, the title *wab* (pure) can refer to even the most novice member of a temple's personnel. In a medical context, the title frequently appears as "the *wab* priest of Sekhmet." The leonine goddess Sekhmet represented both a destructive and a healing aspect. Plagues were often referred to as "messengers of Sekhmet." Her priests performed rituals called "appeasing Sekhmet" in order to ward off seasonal epidemics. Although described as the goddess of healing, healing activity could also be carried out by priests serving other deities.

A second title appearing in the texts, *sau*, derived from *sa*, the Egyptian word for "amulet" or "protection." Because of this, the translation of *sau* as "magician" has come under question. More recent suggestions for a translation are "protector" or "amulet-man." The term "amulet-man" may not be accurate as it implies the *sau* only worked with amulets rather than the other types of therapies outlined in the medical papyri. The title *sau* typically appears in conjunction with Serqet, the scorpion goddess. Like Sekhmet, Serqet embodied both the dangerous aspect of the scorpion as well as the ability to heal the scorpion's sting. The protective role of Serqet

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is attested as early as the Old Kingdom in the Pyramid texts (PT 1375). By the Middle Kingdom, her protective role expanded to include guarding the canopic jar holding the intestines of the deceased. Perhaps it is best to translate *sau* as "protector," highlighting the healer as an extension of Serqet's protective role without limiting his therapeutic strategies.

The title *swnw* appears approximately 150 times in tomb biographies, stelae, graffiti, and various other papyri dating from the 4th (2649–2513 BCE) to the 27th dynasties (525–405 BCE). Debate surrounds the origin of the title. The hieroglyph for *swnw* uses an arrow and a pot, but this should not be taken as an indication that the *swnw*-healer dealt exclusively with instrumental treatments and was reflected in his title (Grapow 1956). The title is linguistically similar to the Egyptian words for pain (*swny.t*) and affliction (*swn*) and may indicate that the title *swnw* developed as a designation for someone who treats these (Jonckheere 1951).

Gods themselves can hold the title *swnw*; Amun is called the "*swnw* who removes trouble and suffering" (Amonshymn Leiden Papyrus), Horus is called the "great *swnw*" (Totb. Spruch 17; Papyrus Turin), and Min is the "good *swnw*" (Urk. II 65). The *swnw* derived his knowledge from the gods, "he (Thot) gives to the *swnw* . . . skill to cure" (Ebers 1). Among humans holding the title, there is considerable overlap with other titles denoting a religious function. In the tombs of Sabu, Ptahshepses, and Ptahhetep, a *wab swnw* inspects and oversees sacrificial cattle (Ghalioungui 1983). It is also common to combine the titles *swnw* and scribe (*sesh*) as attested in the tomb of Khnumhetep (Ghalioungui 1983).

Although mostly affiliated with the royal court and administration of Egypt, scribal activity also occurred at a place associated with the temple, the House of Life (*per ankh*). Apart from keeping records for the temple, the scribes also recorded medical knowledge. The association of the House of Life and medicine stems from an inscription on a statue of Udjahorresnet that claims, "His Majesty King Darius commanded me to return to Egypt . . . in order to restore the department(s) of the House(s) of Life concerned with medicine . . . This His Majesty did because he knew the virtue of this art to revive all that are sick . . ." (Gardiner 1938, pp. 157–158). The reconstruction and translation for the key phrases, though, are not certain. The House of Life functioned as a scriptorium (perhaps with a component of scribal education) and not specifically as a medical school. The medical papyri, containing powerful and sacred knowledge, would naturally belong to the temples or at least those who could be trusted with such knowledge, the scribes. One of the medical texts, the Chester Beatty Papyrus, belonged to the scribe Qenherkhepeshef who did not hold the title *swnw*. Possession of a medical text by someone not specifically connected to one of the three titles for healers indicates that a healer may be anyone educated enough to understand the texts and access *heka* (power) to restore *maat* (balance).

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The presence of three distinct titles for healers and their association with the religious structure of ancient Egypt brings up the question as to what, if any, difference existed between the *swnw*, *wab* priest, and *sau*. Perhaps the difference does not lie in the separate categories of religion and medicine, but rather in how each type of healer used the two in combination to help the patient. Illness as a form of communication from the divine can be approached in two ways. One can focus on the divine aspect, what problems does a god see or why is the god communicating. The other focus can be on the mortal aspect of the communication, that is, the physical manifestation in the form of symptoms. The *wab* priest and *sau* who typically acted on behalf or as an extension of the gods appear to have focused on the divine aspect of the illness. In contrast, the *swnw* who oversaw the mortal, physical world in activities such as the inspection of sacrificial cattle may also have concentrated on the physical manifestation or symptoms. The *swnw*, *wab* priest and *sau* regularly employed the religious ideology of ancient Egypt in order to help the afflicted. This ideology explained that illness ultimately was a message from an entity with access to *heka*, symptoms arose through a disruption of *maat* and could be restored by *heka*.

Short Biography

Laura Zucconi's research compares the relationship between medicine and religion in the cultures of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Israel. Her analyses combine the fields of medical anthropology, history of medicine, and biblical studies on topics including body image, purity regulations, and group identity. Her current book project investigates the presence of medical pluralism within an ancient society as an expression of varying religious approaches to physical symptoms. Zucconi teaches at Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. She holds a BA and PhD in history from the University of California, San Diego.

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