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The Gynaecological Papyrus Kahun

Helena Trindade Lopes and Ronaldo G. Gurgel Pereira

Abstract

The Papyrus Kahun is oldest known Egyptian medical document addressing issues of midwifery, dating back to the second Millennium BC. Here it follows a study of the papyrus, featuring hieroglyphic text and its transliteration and translation versions. This work also features commentaries regarding the papyrus’ medical substances and some linguistic evidences on the intimacy between spiritual and physical spheres in the Egyptian therapeutics. After the papyrus text, there is an Egyptian-English glossary.

Keywords: History of Medicine, Papyrology, Kahun, Ancient Egypt, Gynaecology

1. Introduction

The Gynaecological Papyrus Kahun, the oldest known medical papyrus, was discovered by W. M. Flinders Petrie in 1889, in a place near the modern city of Lahun, in Fayum [1]. The papyrus was in a very bad state of preservation, therefore it had to be carefully restored, in 1890, by Francis Griffith so he could, finally, be able to make the first hieroglyphic transcription of the hieratic text and its publication still in 1898 [2]. Nowadays it is conserved in the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, University College London (UC 32057), in London, United Kingdom.

The papyrus Kahun, dated from the kingdom of Amenemhat III, circa 1825 BCE (Middle Kingdom, dynasty XII), is one of the biggest papyri of that period, with about 1 m long for 32 cm high, and features the oldest known treaty of gynaecology and obstetrics, which addresses issues such as fertility, pregnancy, contraception, and gynaecological diseases.

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1 The term Kahun was the name given by Petrie to the site of the city of Lahun, which, under the reign of Amenemhat III and his successors, would have been a very prosperous city.
2 Nunn, 1996, p. 34.
3 The texts were published in facsimile, with hieroglyphic transcription and translation into English by Griffith. CF. Griffith, F. Ll. (1898). The Petrie Papyri: Hieratic Papyri from Kahun and Gurob. London: Bernard Quaritch, p. 5-11 and pl. V-VI.
4 A note on the reverse of the gynaecological papyrus is dated to the year 29 of Amenemhat III, Ibidem.
The work comprises three pages, divided into 34 horizontal columns, oriented from the right to the left, that have a common format: begin with a brief report of the symptoms; then, the doctor is advised on how to approach the patient to present his diagnosis and, finally, treatment is suggested. However, no mention is made of the likely prognosis. This process of symptoms, diagnosis, report and treatment described makes up the various sections. Naturally, as in other medical works, Papyrus Kahun refers to an enchantment.

The suggested treatments are diverse and include fumigations, massages, and medications introduced into the body as pessaries or as a liquid to be drunk or rubbed on the skin. Donkey milk and perfumed oils are part of the medical material to be used in these procedures.

The text does not refer to any proposed surgery. The final paragraphs of the text are dedicated to pregnancy, presenting teachings related to conception which include the use of incense, fresh oil, dates, and beer, to contraception, suggesting the use of crocodile manure and also honey and natron and, again, gynaecological treatments.

After the publication of the Papyrus Kahun by Griffith [2] at the end of the XIX century, only in the second half of the XX century, the text is again the subject of study and publication within the scope of the most important investigation of medical papyri coordinated by H. Grapow [4], between 1954 and 1973. A hieroglyphic transcription of the papyrus Kahun is done in volume V and the translation and commentary of the text is presented in Volume IV.

In 1975, J. Stevens [5], presented an English translation of the text, and in 1995, Th. Bardinet, also presented his translation of the papyrus [6] and some comments on the text.


Finally, in 2017, Didier Fournier introduced us to [9], where he performs the hieroglyphic transcription, transliteration, and translation of the papyrus as well as medical comments and lexical, syntactic and semantic considerations to the text. The work also reproduces the text in hieratic from facsimiles proposed by Griffith in 1898.

In addition to the publication and translation of the papyrus, the studies dedicated to the gynaecological treatise presented in Papyrus Kahun are also very small. In 1952, C. D. Leake makes the first references in [10]. In 1992, C. Reeves in a small essay [11] also dedicates two pages to it. Four years later, J. F. Nunn in [1] introduces the papyrus and makes some comments on the text. Finally, in 2011, Lesley Smith published the latest article on the gynaecological papyrus Kahun [12]. Other references, in general works, although very reduced, happen in Strouhal, E., Vachala; B., Vymazalová [13], dated from 2014.

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5 In paragraph 30. The works on medicine in Ancient Egypt refer to the belief in a holistic dimension of life, in which the disease is understood, naturally, as a disturbance of an inner order that is reflected, a posteriori, physically [3]. Hence, the use of magical practices that could help harmonizes the patient.
There are multiple semantic definitions and explanations for cure. Some of them are also based on mythical systems. In fact, this work assumes that cure is a double-folded concept. On one hand, the semantic meaning of cure manages to assert a cultural identity and a gender delimitation: Healthy vs. Diseased; Favoured by the gods vs. Abandoned by the gods, etc.

This approach of the Papyrus focuses on the so-called supernatural elements that, by any means are being mentioned in the therapeutics. We understand the separation between magic and medicine was unknown in Ancient Egypt, as they are the product of modern Egyptology problematization. The Egyptian medicine coordinates natural and supernatural elements in their therapeutics. Thus, we shall investigate the ontological specificities of the ancient Egyptian cure process. From the diagnosis to the therapeutics.
2. Commentaries

2.1 On the papyrus

The papyrus was composed in Hieratic, using a simple and direct language. It was probably compiled from some personal notes or a vade mecum.

There are 34 cases, along 3 columns of horizontal text, written from right to the left. Its first column (Figure 1) has 33.5 cm of height and starts the gynaecological tractate. This section has 29 short lines of text in good conditions.

The second column (Figures 1 and 2) has 38.5 cm of height and presents heavy damage on the central area of the page, between lines 26 and 59. So, only 7 lines out of its original 30 are complete. The second column also presents longer lines of text than the first one.

The third column (Figure 2) measures 33 cm of height and is also heavily damaged. Its 28 lines of text are the longest of the tractate. However, only one line is complete, from the beginning to the end. This column is divided into fragments A and B. Fragment B is just a small scrap with 4 incomplete illegible lines. Therefore, this work will deal with column 3 - fragment B only.

Another point of interest concerning column 3 is the transition to a totally different style of heading and organization of the treatments. That suggests column 1 and 2 have the same origin, while column 3 was copied from a different source.

For didactical matters, we decided to revert the text direction when we established the hieroglyphic matrix of this version. We also decided to present the

Figure 1.
Plate VI.1 (columns 1–2).
source in a format case-by-case for reasons of practicality. The present version of the text was originally built in Portuguese [14], and then, translated into English.

2.2 On the therapeutics

The 34 cases described in the papyrus are normally divided into mini-sections with the support of red ink. First, the disease is described. After making the diagnosis directly to the patient, a treatment is given.

The treatment presents the ingredients and, occasionally, the precise dosage of each element. Interestingly, this papyrus gives preference to generic measures, such as “spoon” or “jar”. Then, the method of preparing the ingredients is concluded by the way the medicine must be applied to the patient.

Medicines are always taken orally, inserted into the vagina, or applied on the skin using massages or bandages. Fumigation seems to be the most common therapy, always incorporating various ointments with incense. There is great concern about therapy with the patient’s uterus. Virtually all the diseases described are somehow linked to an origin in the uterus, and it is through the uterus that they seek to treat them [15].

The translation of this document took care to compare hieroglyphic versions established by British authors with Griffith’s (1898) slides of hieratic text. It is interesting to note that all the translations previously cited reproduce the text in hieratic from facsimiles proposed by Griffith.
Hence, we found that the present version promoted “corrections” in the vocabulary proposed by previous works. The reader will find two diagnoses of incurable diseases (cases V and XIII), that are normally left aside by English translations. There is a short discussion on the spiritual dimension on Egyptian medicine (2.4). Further contributions are the identification of ingredients in the *materia prima* section (2.5), and of the procedure of verifying the patient’s arterial pulse *mnmj3* (cases XXIX and XXXII).

### 2.3 P.Kahun as an educational text

From its 34 cases, there are 18 occurrences (1–17 & 25) where the papyrus actually can be used as a didactic textbook. In those texts, there is an approach aiming to guide the reader across each step of the therapeutic process. Such texts adopt the sequential $\text{sqm.}\text{ḥr} = f$ (“then, he should listen”) providing the reader with the “what follow next” for each section. It is possible to summarize this pattern as the following:

- A heading to identify each new case (e.g. “A treatment for a woman who suffers A, B, C, etc.”). A diagnostic is proposed to the reader. Then, the text concludes the first section with the recommendation: “then you should say to her” and announce the treatment.
- The diagnosis is described via a nominal identification sentence: “Disease-D” *pw* (this is a disease-D);
- Finally, the papyrus proceeds with the next step with the sayings: “then you must prepare for her” (here translated as “(then,) you should treat her), followed by the prescription of ingredients for each case and the right way of its application.

The didactic structure of this papyrus fits with the features of typology 4a, as proposed by [15], from which the table below is based on (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I. Heading</th>
<th>šs$\text{w t ḥr mn A, B, C etc.}$</th>
<th>“Treatment/Experiences on a woman who suffers from A, B, C, etc.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>II. Investigation</td>
<td><em>not present in typology 4a</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Outcome</td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>introduction</td>
<td>$\text{ḥd.ḥr} = \text{k r s}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b = d</td>
<td>diagnosis = <em>causa</em></td>
<td>“D” $\text{pw}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>reasoning</td>
<td><em>not present in typology 4a</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Treatment</td>
<td>$\text{jṭḥr} = \text{k r s}$</td>
<td>“Then/consequently, you should do for her (or even: ‘then, you should do against it’)”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adaptation from Pommerening, 2014, p. 32.

Table 1.
Text structure of typology 4a.
2.4 Regarding incurable diseases and spiritual influences

The Egyptian believed that both physical and the spiritual spheres of being were closely linked. The whole physical existence was understood as part of an eternal struggle between the cosmic forces of chaos and order. Simply put, a disease was nothing more than the physical manifestation of spiritual causes.

That said, a disease that was known to be intractable had its existence ascribed to some harmful spiritual force. These forces had several names, which traditionally Egyptologists translate as “demon”, although that word does not have a direct equivalent in the Egyptian language.

In this papyrus we find only two therapies mentioning irreversible conditions. The term used to describe them is “btw” that is, a malefactor, according to lemma 10241 in [16]. The determinative (1 14) suggests a spiritual origin for that evildoer, meaning “demon”.

That hieroglyph also is used as determinative of several minor spiritual powers [17], like – for instance - 3kryw (chthonic gods or demons) in the Coffin Texts (II, 112e – Spell 105, S1C). However, it must be remarked the word btw is also synonymous with “incurable disease”.

Due to a strong tendency to hide or diminish the importance of the spiritual in Egyptian medicine, the anglophone authors consulted translate btw as “worm” [7, 8] and “colic” [2], which is simply impossible, given the importance of the term at the conclusion of those cases.

Another connection between the physical and spiritual spheres in the Egyptian therapeutics is the usage of the verb dr. The word means equally “to expel” (case VIII: residuals from the body), “to drive away” (cases XXVIII and XXXIII: “pain”) and is synonym with “to exorcize” (demons and disease demons) in the dictionary, lemma 39117 [16].

Generally speaking [3, 17, 18], a disease whose origin is ascribed to a spiritual origin sometimes can also/only be treated through magic formulas and prayers. Those incantations, or “heka” are normally dedicated to gods or minor spiritual entities, which would also be translated as “demons”, but which are not necessarily evil forces. In this document, there is only a single case of enchantment, in the form of a prayer to Horus (case XXX), but the text is too damaged to let one understand exactly the possible usage of that magic formula.

2.5 On the medical materia prima

The prescriptions of this papyrus normally combine ingredients of vegetal, animal and mineral origin in their different estates (solid, liquid, etc). Ingredients of mineral origin occur in less variety and those of animal origin are even rarer. There are multiple ways of preparation: fumigation, ingestion, etc.

The term materia medica was first used by Dioscorides in De Materia Medica (1st century CE) and used ever since. However, since the Kahun papyrus predates Dioscorides, this work was encouraged to present another term for describing pharmaceutics, standing for the therapeutic features of any material used for treatment.

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It is possible to divide the medical materia prima in two greater groups, by distinguishing ingredients of anthropic nature (it needs to be manipulated and transformed by man) versus ingredients that can be found in its natural milieu [18]. Thus, the Egyptian pharmacopeia is composed by hundreds of products collected and/or transformed from local flora and fauna.

In fact, Egyptian vegetal ingredients are mostly related to endemic specimens, However, our lack of knowledge about the Egyptian vegetal world posits a great obstacle to connect Egyptian names to actual plants. Therefore, traditional works by Egyptologists keep the Egyptian names untranslated [1, 18, 19].

A small lexicon follows, which complements the glossary at the end of this work.

Vegetal

- Vitex (*vitex agnus castus*). Case XIII - Its leaves, flowers, seeds and roots can be consumed with food or as an elixir. There is clinical evidence that it works to treat premenstrual tension [20].

- White Mullbery (*Morus alba*). Cases X, XII e XVI - Its extract has several medicinal properties. Here we highlight its effect with antibacterial, and in the treatment of hyperuricemia [21].

- Onion. Case XXVIII

- Beer. Case VI (to avoid it)

- Sweet beer. Cases XX e XXIV

- Fermented/ardent beer. Case X – Normally that term is translated as “djadjat-beer”. It is a beer, fermented in some specific way. As the term djadjat is synonymous with “ardent”, it can be a particularly strong beer.

- Cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata*). Case XXXIII

- Ripe figs. Case XVI

- Fruit (any). Cases III e XVII

- Fruit of the Onenu-tree. Case XX – Thus far an unidentified tree.

- Fruit of Egyptian balm (*Balanites aegyptiaca*). Case XVI - It was necessary to resort to the Hieratic text to propose the replacement of the unknown term for the sacred “ished” is a mythical tree referred to in the Book of the Dead spell 335. That passage mentions that it grows in the domain of the gods. A possible translation of “ished” is pistachio (*Pistacia vera*). However, the Egyptian balm is still used in Africa as a medicinal plant. It is employed to fight parasitic infection, headaches and liver disorders. Plus, its fruit is also indicated for stimulating lactation, while the bark of the tree is a natural abortive [22, 23].

- Fat/oil/unguent. Cases V e XVI

- Incense. Cases I, V, XX
- Watery porridge. Case VI
- Vegetal mucus of fermented mucilage. Case XIV
- Vegetal mucus of mixed mucilage. Case XIV
- Fermented vegetal mucus. Cases XX, XXI e XXIII
- Pulp of date (for syrups). Case XXIV
- Dregs of sweet beer. Cases XVII e XXVII
- Myrrh resin. Case XII
- Chufa (Cyperus esculentus). Cases III, X, XIII
- Oil/unguent (new). Cases I, IV e XX
- Grapes. Case XVI
- Date syrup. Cases XVII, XX e XXVII

Animal
- Cow milk. Cases III e XV
- Donkey/ass liver (fresh). Case I
- Honey. Case XXII
- Lard/fat of goose’s leg. Case I
- Milk. Case XVIII

Mineral
- Donkey/ass urine. Case V
- Fermented beer. Case X
- Malachite powder. Case XV - This is a magical ingredient [18]. The mineral was used as a pigment for the green colour. In Egyptian, the same word can be used for naming “vigor”, “vitality” and “freshness”. Thus, by consuming the green pigment, one also acquired the properties that the magic pun (rebus) [24] provided in via “sympatheia”.
- Mud. Case VII
- Natron. Case XXIII
- Spring water. Case XXV
Unidentified origin

• Emetic. Case XI (Its ingredients are not described)

• Fresh fat rancid oil. Case XII (It is not clear whether the fat is animal or vegetal).

2.6 Index of cases

COLUMN 1:
I – Pain in the eyes and throat; vision problems (lines 1–5);
II – Pain in the uterus (lines 5–8);
III – Pain in the lower limbs (lines 8–12);
IV – Abdominal and genital pain (lines 12–15);
V – Pain in the teeth and neck (lines 15–20);
VI – Pain in the limbs and eye sockets (lines 20–22);
VII – Pain in the feet and legs when walking (lines 23–25);
VIII – Pain in the throat, ears and groin; hearing problems (lines 25–27);
IX – Pain in the limbs, vulva and entire body (lines 27–29);

COLUMN 2:
X – Urinary problems (lines 30–34);
XI – A woman who cannot get out of her bed (lines 34–36);
XII – Pain in the legs (lines 36–40);
XIII – Pain in the legs and on the side of (a) ... (lines 40–47);
XIV – Thirsty for ... (lines 47–49);
XV – Swelling in the groin (lines 49–50);
XVI – Pain in the limbs and in the eye sockets (lines 51–54);
XVII – Hemorrhage ... (lines 54–59);

COLUMN 3:
XVIII – Sexual stimulant (line 1);
XIX – Pregnancy diagnosis (lines 2–3);
XX – Intoxication due to pregnancy medication (lines 3–6);
XXI – Prevention of ... (line 6);
XXII – Contraceptive (line 7);
XXIII – Treatment for ... (lines 7–8);
XXIV – Muscle cramp (trismus) of the uterus (lines 8–9);
XXV – Fever (lines 9–11);
XXVI – Pregnancy diagnosis (lines 12–14);
XXVII – Pregnancy diagnosis (lines 15–17);
XXVIII – Pregnancy diagnosis (lines 17–19);
XXIX – Pregnancy diagnosis (lines 19–20);
XXX – Pregnancy diagnosis (lines 20–23);
XXXI – Pregnancy diagnosis (lines 23–24);
XXXII – Pregnancy diagnosis (lines 24–26);
XXXIII – Prevent trismus during childbirth (lines 25–26);
XXXIV – Urinary problem (lines 27–28).
3. Hieroglyphic text, transliteration and translation

COLUMN 1

No. I

1 šs3w s.t jr.tj=sj mr n(j) m33.n=s hr mn nb.b.t=s [ ... ]
2 dd.hr=k r=s ḫ3w pw n jd.t m jr.tj=sj jr(j).hr=k r=s [ ... ]
3 k3 p sj hr sntr hr mrb.t-m3w.t k3p
4 k3.t=s hr=s k3p jr.tj=sj hr jns.wt n.t gnnw
5 rdj.hr=k wnm=s mjs.t n.t 3 w3d

Translation

1 Treatment of a woman whose eyes are aching till she cannot see, on top of aches in her neck: 2 you should say to her: “it is discharges of the womb in your eyes!”.
You should treat her: 3 fumigate her with incense and fresh oil, fumigating 4 her vulva with it, and fumigating her eyes with goose leg fat. 5 Then, you should give her to eat a fresh donkey liver.

No. II

5 šs3w s.t mr n(j) 6 jd.t=s m ḫp(j) dd.hr=k r=s ptr ssn.t(=t) jr dd=s n=k jw=j 7 hr ssn.t 3 šr dd.hr=k r=s nmsw pw n jd.t jr(j).hr=k r=s 8 k3p sj hr ssn.t=s nb.t m 3 šr

Translation

5 Treatment of a woman in pain. Her 6 womb does not deliver (its period). You should say to her: “What do you smell?” If she says to you: “I 7 smell some roasting.”
Then you should say to her: “This is some effusion of the womb!”. You should treat her: 8 fumigate her with anything it smells like roast.

No. III
8 ḏšṣw s.t hr ṭmn ph(.wj)=sj kns=s ṭmn.ṭj=sj

Translation

8 Treatment of a woman aching in her hear, groin and perineum. You should say to her: “These are discharges of the womb!”.

Then, you should treat her: 1 qd of chufa (cyperus esculentus), 1 qd of fruit, 1 hin of cow milk. Boil, let it cool down, drink on 4 mornings.

No. IV

Translation

12 Examination of a woman: regarding her groin, vulva and the circuit of her vulva, between her buttocks. You should say to her: “Big dilatation of birth!”.

Then, you should treat her: 1 hin of fresh oil. Pour on her vulva and her...
Translation

15 Treatment of a woman aching in her teeth and throat to the point that she cannot bite or [ ... ] her mouth. You should say to her: “It is a trismus of the womb!”.

Then, you should treat her: after fumigating her with incense in a djadjaw-pot, pour on her the urine of a donkey that has “created its second” the day after it was fed. If her pain is situated from the bellybutton to her buttocks, it is a demon (untreatable).

No. VI

Treatment of a woman aching in her limbs and eye-sockets. You should say to her: “It is some deprivation of the womb! No beer-drinking shall grant a healthy birth!”.

Then, you should treat her: 1 hsb of watery porridge. Drink it on 1 [+ x] mornings.

Translation

20 Treatment of a woman aching her limbs and eye-sockets. You should say to her: “It is some deprivation of the womb! No beer-drinking shall grant a healthy birth!”.

Then, you should treat her: 1 hsb of watery porridge. Drink it on 1 [+ x] mornings.
Then, you should treat her: rub her feet and legs with mud until she is well.

No. VIII

Translation

25 Treatment of a woman aching her throat, groin and (so much) her ears that she does not hear what is said. You should say to her: “This is a tremor of the womb”.

Then, you should treat her with the same prescription for expelling residuals from the womb.

No. IX

Translation

27 Treatment of a woman aching in her vulva and all her limbs, as if she had been beaten. Then, you should say to her: “It is [...] of the womb”.

Then, you should treat her: eating fat (a fat diet) until she is well.
COLUMN 2

No. X

30 šs3w s.t [ḥr] mn mwy.t mj [...] mwy.t ḫdy.t

Translation

30 Treatment of a woman aching when urinating, as if [...] burning/fermented.

You should say to her: “This is 31 discharges of the womb!”.

Then, you should treat her: beans of white mulberry (morus alba) and chufa (cyperus esculentus). 32 Grind it and dilute in 1 hin of fermented beer. Boil and drink on 4 mornings. May she 35 spend the day fasting on her bed after drinking 1 hin of the same. May she spend the day 35 fasting until the moment of washing her mouth.

No. XI

Translation

34 Treatment of a woman bed-bound, without standing or 35 moving. You should say to her: “This is a weakness of the womb!”.

Then, you should treat her: let her drink 2 hin of 36 emetic and have her to throw it up at once!
No. XII

36 šš3w s.t hr mn w*r.tj=sj rdj hr=k r=s 37 stpw n h3tjw

38 thb m ‘ntjw [...] st [...] ndm m jr(j).n=s

39 hr nb.t snb pw jr jjwj [...] pw n jd.t jr(j).hr=k r=s mhj

40 n mr[hr.t] m3.t jwh [...] s rdj ‘ntjw

41 m [...] s r-s3 jr.j.t nn

Translation

36 Treatment of a woman aching in her legs. You should give to her 37 bandages soaked in resin of myrrh [...] it [...] . [If ... ] 38 sweet, after she has done all that, it means health. If what leaves is [...] "This is [...] of the womb!"

Then, you should treat her: 39 fresh rancid oil. Pour over her [...] . Place resin of myrrh on her [...] after doing this.

No. XIII

40 šš3w s.t [...] w*r.tj=sj 41 w3.t=s w*r.t [...] w=s

42 dd.hr=k r=s q’hw [...] pr.t- 43 śnj s=3m mw.t

44 n.t gyw [...] w3.t mn.t=s st hr=s [rdj sdr]=s hr=s jr

45 phr r [...] 2 wš=s s [...] ḥṣb 2 psš m

46 [...] s 45 jr wš=s [...] m jr(j).n=s ḥ,t nb.t [...] s

47 šfw.t 46 rdj.hr=k ḏb3=k hr=[s r gm]m=k st rwd.(t) [...] hr

jd.t [...] 47 btw pw
Translation

40. Treatment of a woman [ ... ] her legs and on one side of her [ ... ]. You should say to her: “(This is a) bulge [ ... ]”.

[Then you should treat her:] beans of white mulberry (morus alba), chaste-tree (vitex agnus castus), and chufa (cyperus esculentus) [ ... ] on the side she aches, and let her lay down on her side. If circulates 2, divided in her [ ... ]. If she itches it means she did all things a swollen, then you should place your finger on it until you find it firm on the womb, it is a demon (untreatable).

No. XIV

47. Treatment of a woman thirsting [ ... ].

Then, you should treat her: vegetal mucus of a mixed mucilage and vegetal mucus of a fermented mucilage completely.

No. XV

49. Treatment of a woman with a swollen groin [ ... ].

Then, you should treat her: (1) qd of malachite powder. Grind, refine and boil in 1 jar of cow milk 3 (+ x).
jwḥ pr. t-šnj [... ] nḏ sn

54 ps swrj hrw 3

Translation

51 Treatment of a woman aching all her limbs and eye-sockets [... ] her a disease. Then you should say to her: “This is a disease of the womb!”

52 Then, you should treat her: oil, fruit of Egyptian balm (balanites aegyptiaca), grapes, ripe figs and beans of white mulberry (morus alba) [... ]. Grind, refine and boil. Drink for 3 days.

No. XVII

54 ḫw pr. t-šnj [... ] nḏ sn

55 ps swrj hrw 3

Translation

54 Treatment of a woman bleeding [... ] mother of persons, aching in her head, mouth and wrists. You should say to her: [... ].

Then, you should treat her: prepare for her a spot on the ground and place on it the dregs of sweet beer. [... ]. If nothing leak out from her, you should place date syrup over the top of that as a nest [... ]. Let her seat on it [... ]. If nothing leak out from her, you should cook [... ] let it cool. Make her drink it. If, however, blood or residuals leak from her, [... ].
No. XVIII

k.t r šḥj s.t m ḫḥj gs n bḥd.t n.t jṛt.t [ms ...]

bḥd.t [ ...]² smn jwh ṵ kṣ.t=s

Translation

Another one, for unveiling a woman while copulating. Half of a scoop of milk [... scoop [ ...]² let it stabilize. Pour it in her womb.

No. XIX

sj³ ms.tj=sj m jd.t n.t s.t jr ‘nn ḫbd ‘q [ ...]³ [ ...] nw

sbn.t [ ...]

Translation

Noticing a child inside the womb of a woman. If month ends and month starts [... of nursing [...]³[ ...].

No. XX

jr hw(j).t m ṭhr t.n.t sjwj hr-sj fdq ‘nnw.t [p ...]

nḏ sn’w sjkhk]w m [h]bṣw hr hṣj-wy.t

jwh m hṣyw [...].³ snṭr mṛḥ.t [bnj]w

ḥnq.t nḏm.t rdj m-hnw šdj m tkšw kṣp.ḥʾr [=k ...]

Translation

If a woman was stricken by some prescription for pregnancy. After severing the fruit of an Ṣṅnw-tree, [...].⁴ Grind and refine, by filtering with a clothing with fermented vegetal mucus. Bath with waves [...].⁴ Incense, new oil, date syrup and sweet beer. Give it to a burning vessel. Then, you should burn [...]⁶ as a sweetener of the mouth.
No. XXI

6 tm [ ... ] hs msh ḫrg ṣwy.t

Translation

6 For preventing [ ... ]. Crocodile dung. Pound it with fermented vegetal mucus, immersed (in) [ ... ].

No. XXII

7 k.t phr.t hnw [n] bj.t jw [m] ḫ

Translation

7 Another prescription: (1) hin of honey. Pour it into her vulva. This is to be done together with a natron contraceptive.

No. XXIII

8 ḫ [ ... ] ṣwy.t ḫ

Translation

8 Another one [ ... ]. 8 with fermented vegetal mucus. Sprinkle inside her vulva.

No. XXIV

8 dr tj3w pw n jd.t ṭw n bnjw ḫ [ ... ] ṣqn

Translation

8 This is for removing muscular pains of the womb. Date palm pulp with [ ... ]. 9 Crush it and reduce it in sweet beer. Let her sit on it with her legs apart.

No. XXV

9 ṣṣ3w s.t tjw [ ... ] ḫ ḫr-wr ḫ
Translation

9 Treatment of a woman burning (with fever) [...], 10 her eyes are harmed. Wild carrot. Spread on the left side of the “msta” (birth brick?) with spring water. Sprinkle and sever [...] 11 4 mornings. Then, you should let her sitting on the water of [...] spring water. Give [...].

No. XXVI

12 sj3 ntt r jwj r ntt nn jwr [jr(j)].hr=k mrh.t m3.t hr [...] 13 [...] hr=k sj jr gm(j) mjtjw n q3b.t=s ḫr=k sj jr gm(j) t pw

Translation

12 Determining a woman who shall conceive from one who shall not. You should prepare: new fat and [...]. 13 Then, you should [...]. If the muscles of her breasts are showing some bulging, you should say to her: “This is pregnancy!” 14 If you find it in a normal state, you should say that she will give birth late. However, if you find her something like [...].

No. XXVII

15 ky-sp rdj.hr=k hms=s hr stw shr m t3h.t n.t hnh.t nqm.t rdj dq3 [...] bnjw [...] 16 qis jw=s r ms(j).t jr

Translation

17 [jr] gr.t tm=s qjs nn ms(j)=s r nhḥ
Translation

15 Another time. You should let her sitting on the ground prepared with dregs of sweet beer. Put some fruit [...] date syrup [...]. 16 vomits, she will give birth. Indeed, every time some vomit leaves her mouth it means a birth. 17 However, if there is no vomit at all she will never give birth.

No. XXVIII

\[\begin{align*}
17 &\text{ ky-sp rdj hr=k t3 n htw r(3) m h.t [ ... ]=f jm [ ... ]} \\
18 &\text{ sf [ ... ] gmy=k sw jm=f dd.hr=k r=s jw=s r ms(j).t} \\
&\text{ jr tm=k gm(y=k) [ ... ] ḫn.t=s [ ... ]} \\
19 &\text{ nn ms(j)=s r nhḥ}
\end{align*}\]

Translation

17 Another time. You should give an onion bulb on the mouth (entrance) of her belly [...] it [...] there. 18 [...] (If) you find in it, then you should say to her that she will give birth. If you do not find [...] her face [...] 19 she will never give birth.

No. XXIX

\[\begin{align*}
19 &\text{ ky-sp nhr hr=k r=s hsp=s Ḫn.t-db=k hr-hṛjw mnj3=s [ ... ] (n)ḥq [ ... ]} \\
20 &\text{ jr tm nhq nn ms(j)=s r nhḥ}
\end{align*}\]

Translation

19 Another time. You should press her hand with the tip of your finger on her point of pressure. [...] Pain [...]. 20 If [...] there is no pain, she will never give birth.

No. XXX

\[\begin{align*}
20 &\text{ ky-sp bhs pwy n Ḫr [ ... ]} \\
21 &\text{ Ḫr ṭḥ-phr(w) h3(j)=k r bw n [ ... ]=k jm ḫḥ.tw r(3) [ ... ]} \\
&\text{ h3(j) m šr.t=s jw=s r ms(j).t jr h3(j) m k3.t=s jw=s r ms(j).t jr} \\
&\text{ gr.t [ ... ]} \\
23 &\text{ s r nhḥ}
\end{align*}\]
Translation

20 Another time. Oh that calf of Horus! [...] 21 that I am with [...] Horus and vice-versa. Go down to the place which you [...] The formula to be said is: [...] 22 [...] If it comes down from her nostril, she will give birth. However, if it comes down from her vulva, so [...] 23 [...] she will never (give birth).

No. XXXI

23 ky-sp jr m33=k hr=s w3d m w3d swt gmy=k ḫ.t hr=s mj [...] 24 [...] 24 [...] =j jr gr.t m3.n=k ḫ.t hr jr.tj=sj nn ms(j)=s r nhḥ

Translation

23 Another time. If you see her face fresh with brilliance, but find something on her like [...] 24 [...] If you find anything on her eyes, she will never give birth

No. XXXII

24 sjj ntt jw(y.t) [...] 25 [...] mjtt pf3 db hr mnj3

Translation

24 Determining the one who will conceive [...] 25 [...] like that of the finger on the pressure point.

No. XXXIII

25 tm rdj tj3 s.t [...] jw.y.t nd m [...] 26 [...] [...]=s r nhd.t=sj hrw n ms(j)=s dr tj3w [pw]

Translation

25 Preventing contractions in the chewing muscles of a woman. [...] Cowpea (vigna unguiculata). Grind it with [...] 26 [...] for her teeth the day she gives birth will drive away the pain on her chewing muscles. This is something really good, (tested) a million (times).
No. XXXIV

27 [ ... ] s.t mwy.t m s.t qsn.t jr jw(j).t mwy(.t) ][ ... ] 28 [ ... ].ḥr

sj3=s sj wnn=s m mtt r nnn

Translation

27 [ ... ] a woman with local difficulty while urinating. If the urine comes out [ ... ]

28 [ ... ] she observes it, she will be that way for ever.
4. Some final remarks

The ancient Egyptian medical papyri are an important source to understand the Egyptian approach to health treatment. Ancient Egyptian therapeutics were as equally familiar with pharmacy as they were with medicine and incantations. Thanks to the medical papyri, we know details about many of their treatments and prescriptions for diseases. They call for the treatment of many disorders and the use of a variety of substances, plant, animal and mineral.

However, the essential nature of Egyptian healing is deep-seated on religious notions. Hence, magical practices are wholly integrated with empiric-rational approaches to form an integrated but multi-faceted medical therapy.

Traditionally, Egyptology reproduces ideological prejudices regarding the ancient Egyptian medicine empiricism. All supernatural elements are normally treated as mere superstition or, in the best cases, a tool for some placebo effect. On the other hand, though a neurolinguistic approach it becomes clear how intimate was the relation between physical health and spiritual order (in opposition to the cosmic forces of chaos).

One of the main problems on dealing with medical papyri is that they usually do not check or advance with the study of the provided vocabulary. An interesting point for the benefit of Egyptology would be the review of all medical papyri in search of better information about their technical vocabulary, pharmacopoeia, medical substances, and the like.

Such study also considers the proposition of an ontology and semantic analysis. Per definition, ontology, describes the concepts of medical terminologies, practices, and the relation between them, thus, enabling the sharing of medical knowledge. Ontology-based analyses are associated with a tool to represent medical knowledge, thus relying more on the computer science-based understanding of medical terms. This approach is useful for a data entry system, in which the users merely need to browse the hierarchy and select relevant terms.

The language (logos) is the key for a culture’s mentality (nous). Thus, it is impossible to deal with language without analysing the thought it’s portraying. A Semantic approach aims for the real-world scenario of dealing with grammatically complex terms, which are documented in the ancient Egyptian native language.

The essential nature of Egyptian healing links religious notions and so-called magical practices wholly integrated with empiric-rational approaches to form an integrated but multi-faceted therapeutic.

There are three points to be debated by our source’ analysis. Firstly, the usage of a noun, usually translated as “demon”, as a synonym for incurable diseases. In case the word is taken literally, then the treatment would be incomplete. Since a “demon” could have been identified and/or exorcized, the therapeutics rather closed the case and move on. Thus, it is most likely the term is here employed as a “harmless” technical term for an untreatable condition.

Secondly, there is a verb, which is synonym with “exorcizing” (evil spirits), although it is here employed in the technical sense of dismissing pain and the expelling of any material residuals from the patient’s uterus. By the second time,
the term assumes a non-magical usage as a technical jargon. Then, the *materia prima* identifies a magical ingredient: malachite powder. This ingredient would act via the principle of *sympatheia*, as it would restore one’s health, thanks to a magical pun (*rebus*) relating malachite, the green colour, and the Egyptian word for “vigor” and “freshness”.

Finally, another case shows a fragment of a prayer to Horus in its therapeutics; listed as part of the recommended treatment.

During the preparation of this conclusion, our first impulse was to reduce the words “demon” and “to exorcize” as metaphors, embedded by something as an Ancient Egyptian medical terminology. Then, oppose them to the hymn to Horus and the malachite powder as “magical” elements. However, that would just replicate our prejudice against Egyptian medicine, as we would reproduce the labels of “natural” and “supernatural” as necessary and antagonist categories.

The lack of exorcisms, indexes of demons and magical ingredients (such as amulets) does not “purge” the papyrus from its divine, mythical and magical aspects. The concept of cure is different from the semantic field of the word cure. The cure also performs a transcendent effect, for it changes the patient’s destiny. Such effect presupposes some previous formal divine consent.

Therefore, the therapeutics consists of attempts to change the individual destiny. Thus, the transcendent world was unequivocally behind the success or failure of any medical treatment.

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Further reading


The Gynaecological Papyrus Kahun
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Glossary

Numerals

\[ \text{w\textsubscript{r}.t} - \text{one (feminine)} \]
\[ \text{snw} - \text{second} \]
\[ 1 \]
\[ 2 \]
\[ 3 \]
\[ 4 \]
\[ \text{hb} - \text{a million} \]

Fractions

\[ \text{gs ½ (half)} \]

Measures

\[ \text{hsb} - \text{hesb (20, later, 16 hekat)} \]
\[ \text{qd} - \left( \frac{1}{4} \right) \text{de hekat} = \frac{1}{64} \text{hekat} \]
\[ \text{hnw} - \text{hin (1/10 hekat)} \]

Generic measurements

\[ \text{b\ⳍd.t} - \text{spoon} \]
\[ \text{mh[r]} - \text{jar} \]

\[ 3\ⳍd \]
\[ \text{3bb} - \text{month} \]
\[ \text{3mmw} - \text{anemia} \]
\[ \text{3h} - \text{porridge} \]
\[ \text{3sr} - \text{roast} \]

\[ \text{j} - \]
\[ \text{suffix pronoun: I, my} \]
\[ \text{j\ⳍb} - \text{left hand/side} \]
\[ \text{j\ⳍr.t} - \text{grape} \]
\[ \text{j\ⳍ} - \text{to wash; to clean} \]
\[ \text{jjw} - \text{to leave} \]
\[ \text{jw} - \text{Subordination marker} \]
\[ \text{jw(j).t} - \text{to come} \]
\[ \text{jwh} - \text{to hydrate, to wet} \]
jwr(j) – to conceive, to be impregnated
jwry.t – beans, cowpea (*vigna unguiculata*)
jwbw – fruit
jhb.w – teeth
jb.t – to be thirsty
jm – there
jmj – together with
jmj.tj – in between (of two referential objects)
jn – sequential verbal affix: “after x”
jns.t – tight
jr – if, when, in case of
jrj – on that regard, about that, that
jr(j) – to do, to deal, to treat
mrjw.w.t – to make a sole masse (to mix, to homogenize)
jr.tj – eyes (dual)
jrj.t – (cow) milk
jḥd – Egyptian balm (*balanites aegyptiaca*)
jḏ.t – womb

j – donkey, ass
wt – arms, members, limbs
wy.t – fermented mucilage
m’m – to lubricate, to rub
m’t – mud
nn – to leave
mnw.t – fruit of the Onenu-tree
ntjw – resin of myrrh
q – to enter

W –
w3bw n mn.tj=sj – the root of her tights (perineum?)
w3.t – lateral; side
w3ḏ – green, fresh, vigor, vitality, freshness
w3ḏw – malachite powder
w3r.tj – legs
wḥ – chufa (*cyperus esculentus*)
wpw – to separate
wm – to eat, to consume
wnn – to exist
wrš – to spend the day
wš – to scratch
š – to chew
šw – to feed, to devour (for animals)
wgp – to smash, to triturate
š – pulp of dates
š – to hesitate, to be late

B –

bw – local
bnjw – date syrup
bhs – calf
btw – evil doer (demon); untreatable disease

P –
pw – demonstrative pronoun: this (is); copula particle
pwy – demonstrative pronoun: this (is) vocative
pf – that
pr(.) – (to) exit
pr[.] – white mulberry (morus alba)
ph – tail, back, back side
pfr – circular
phrt – prescription, medication
ps – to heat, to boil, to cook
psš – to divide
ptr – what (is)

F –
šf – suffix pronoun: he, his
fdq – to sever

M –
m – in, with, as, like, from
m-ḥ. – after
m-ḥnw – inside
m-gs-hr(j) – upside
m33 – to see
m3w.t – new, recent
mj – like, as
mjt, mtt – the same way, similar, likewise, just like that, the same
as
mjs.t – liver
mw – water
mwy.t – urine, to urinate
mwy.t m s.t qsn.t – to urinate with local pain or
diculty
mw.t – mother
mw.t-rmṣ – mother of persons (twins?)
mw.t – tuberculum
mn – pain, aching, suffering
mn – to situate
mnj3 – point of pulse
mr – pain
mr.t – to be in love with a bed (to be bedridden)
mrh.t – oil, fat, ointment, unguent
mrh.t-m3w.t – new oil
mhwj – rancid oil
mn.t(j) – upper tights
msh – crocodile
ms(j).t – to give birth
ms(j).t(j)=sj – the birth of two children (dual)
ms(j)-t3 – birth-earth (?)
mtjw – tendon, muscle
mdw.t – what is said

N –
n – of (masculine or common); .n – verbal affix (indirect conjugation)
n-mjtt – according to, the same as, like
n(j) – negative particle
n.t – of (feminine)
w – of (plural)
w – time, moment
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<nb>– substantive: lord, owner; adjective: all, entire, each, any</nb>

<nb.t>– substantive: lady, owner; adjective: all, entire, each, any</nmb>

<nmsw>– effusion</nmsw>

<nn>– this, those, these</nn>

<n>– negative particle</n>

<nrw>– tremor; convulsion</n>

<nhq>– pain</n>

<nhb.t>– throat, neck</n>

<nbd.t>– tooth</n>

<nq.wt>– ripe figs</n>

<ndm-r(3)>– sweetener of the mouth (breath candy)</ndm-r(3)>

<ntj>– which, that, who (masculine)</ntj>

<ntt>– which, that, who (feminine)</ntt>

<nd>– to grind</nd>

<ndm>– sweet</ndm>

<ndr>– to press, to force</ndr>

<r>– for, to, than</r>

<r-nhb>– forever, eternally (in negative sentences, never)</r-nhb>

<r-s(3)>– after</r-s(3)>

<r(3)>– mouth</r(3)>

<r-wj>– feet</r-wj>

<h3(j)>– to go down, to move, to come</h3(j)>

<h3j>– to copulate</h3j>

<h3w>– to go out</h3w>

<h3yw>– waves</h3yw>

<hrw>– day (24 hours)</hrw>

<h3jw>– bandages</h3jw>

<hw(j).t>– to be beaten</hw(j).t>
[h]bsw – tissue  bms – to sit  bnq.t – beer  bnq.t n ḫṯḥ.t – fermented beer  bnq.t-nḏm.t - sweet beer  hnt-end, extremity, edge  hnt-dby - finger point  ḫr – Horus  ḫr – on, over, about, that, which, whose  ḫr-.wj – immediately  ḫr-qd – completely  ḫr-s – after  bqr.t – fasting  hs – excrement  ḫs3 - vegetal mucus  hḫ3-wy.t – fermented vegetal mucus  hsmn – natron

Ḫ –

bḥw – excretion  bḥwj – emetic  bḥṯḥ – bulging  bp(j) – to deliver, to menstruate  bpr – to manifest  ḫpr-wr – wild carrot (daucus carota)  ḫnd.w(j) – buttocks  ḫr – verbal sequential affix: “and then x”  ḫ.t – something, thing.  ḫ.t nb.t – anything, everything  ḫtjw – mass

Ḫ –

bḥ – to pulverize  bḥ[b]w – bellybutton  bḥ.t – belly, body
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S –
| s – suffix pronoun: she, her |
| sj – suffix pronoun: she, her (dual) |
| st – it, this, that |
| sw – he, him |
| sttw – ground, floor |
| sj – to distinguish, to notice |
| sjw – pregnancy |
| swr – to drink |
| stw – in fact, really, after, then |
| s3 – to dilate |
| s3m – vitex (vitex agnus castus) |
| sbn – to nurse, breastfeeding |
| sn[w] – to reduce, to dilute |
| snb – health |
| snb – to be healthy |
| smn – to stabilize |
| smnh – to reduce |
| snf – blood |
| snr – incense |
| srf – to heat, to warm |
| sbj – to reveal, to expose |
| sbzw – residual(s) |
| shm – contraceptive |
| sb[tk]w – to filter |
| sbr – to clean, to prepare |
| ssn – to cause an odor |
| ss – nest |
| sqbb – to cool down |
| st – woman |
| sttw – woman with fever |
| st – local |
| stqsn – local difficulty |
| stpw – bandage |
| [sd]t – to move |
| sdm – ears
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sdm – to hear, to listen
sdř.t – to be laying down
ISTRY
š –
ISTRY
š – fountain
isy – šbb – mixed mucilage
šm.t – to walk, to stroll
šfw.t – swollen
šr.t – nostrill, šs-m3 – something really good (effective)
šs3w – treatment, diagnostic, examine
šsp – palm of hand
šdj – vessel, container
šdj m tk3w – burning vessel (brasier, ashtray, incensory)
Q –
quiry – vomit
qḥw – arching
qmq3y – to engender, to create
qsn.t – ill-feeling; difficulty (symptomatic)
qd – to assure; to grant
K –
k3p – to fumigate
k3.t – vulva
km.t – illness, disease
knkn – normality, normal estate
kns – groin
ky – (an)other (masculine)
ky-sp – another time
k.t – (an)other (feminine)
G –
g3.t – privation, deficiency, lacking
gyw – chufa (cyperus esculentus)
gm(j) – to find
 gmnnw – fat from the leg of a goose
grt – in fact, really

T –
t3 – land
 t3w – to heat
 tḫb.t – residual, dregs
 t3w – painful muscular contractions, trismus,
tf3 – that
tm – negative verb (to prevent, not to do)
 thb – wet, soggy

T -
t3 – bulb
 t3 n hdw – onion bulb
 t3nw – each (each time x happens ... then each time y results)
ts-pbr(w) – vice-versa (circular link)

D –
dw.t – early morning
dwn – to stand
dr – to keep away, to exorcise, to expel
dq3 (= dqr) – fruit
d.t – hand

D -
dy(t) – wound
ddy.t – fermented/burning beer
ddyw – special pot to prepare medicines
ddy3t – around
db – finger
ddy3 – top, head
d – to say, to tell
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