

## BOOK REVIEW

*Patients and Healers in the High Roman Empire*. By IDO ISRAELOWICH. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015. Pp. xi + 191. Hardcover, \$59.95. ISBN 978-1-4214-1628-1.

“Felix Asinianus, public slave of the priests, has fulfilled his vow to Bona Dea Agrestis Felicula willingly and heartily by sacrificing a white heifer, thanking her for the restoration of his eyesight after he had been abandoned by doctors (*derelictus a medicis*) after ten months thanks to the good service of the goddess, cured by the remedies administered through her.” (CIL VI 68 = ILS 3513). To be healed, patients in the Roman Empire approached doctors and goddesses alike. Ido Israelowich who has studied *Society, Medicine and Religion in the Sacred Tales of Aelius Aristides* (Mnemosyne Suppl. 341, Leiden 2012), and “Physicians as figures of authority in the Roman courts and the attitude towards mental diseases in the Roman courts during the high empire” (*Historia* 63, 2014, 445–462), now advances the field by also “doing medical history from below”, as a famous article by Roy Porter (“The Patient’s View”, *Theory and Society* 14, 1985, 175–198) had urged historians to do.

In this book, Israelowich presents a study of the Roman medicine from the points of view of both healers and patients, and convincingly argues that co-existing forms of health care in the Roman Empire shared a common belief-system and language. A survey of the identity of physicians during the High Roman Empire with the establishment of medicine as a profession, and a “medical market place”, is enhanced by a case study on Ptasnis (P. Oxy. I 40) in the first chapter, while patients’ understanding of health and illness is addressed next, including the so-called “temple medicine” and the experiences of Aelius Aristides. The further chapters study three special areas of healing: childbirth (presenting the experiences of physicians and midwives as well as of mothers), health care in the Roman army (with a survey of the establishment and responsibilities of a medical corps, and of the role of army physicians for soldiers and the local populations alike), and “medical tourism” to temples, spas and cities.

The book is written in an accessible style, with the evidence presented in the original language plus translation, or sometimes in translation only. Annoyingly,

however, the author has not been well served by the typesetter, with too many errors in the Greek quotations. Indeed, the book is, as it were, only a start, albeit a flying one, and will, or it is to be hoped, encourage further studies of “doing medical history from below” for the Roman world. These might then not only include works like the *Medicina Plinii*, which presents more than one thousand recipes to heal illnesses from head to toe without having to approach any healer at all, since the *medici* were more dangerous than the ailment (*saevioresque ipsis morbis*), or the *Herbarius* of Ps.-Apuleius, who describes more than a hundred herbs with multiple healing powers which allow the patient to avoid “the verbose stupidity of the professionals” (*stupiditatem verbosam professionis*).

They might also include tales like that of Aurelia Deccia, mourned by her husband as her death “happened in my absence through the guilt of the healers” (*cuius mortem dolens per absentiam mei contigisse per culpam curantium*, CIL III 3355), or of the freedman Euhelpestus, who “lived for 27 years, 4 months and 11 days; from the flowering age a sudden death raped the most innocent soul, as the doctors operated and killed him (*medici secarunt et occiderunt*; CIL VI 37337 = ILS 9441). Even when, as Israelowich shows so well, there was no “widespread dichotomy between the services provided by scientific medicine and its agents and those provided by the gods and their priests” (137), not every patient found the right healer.

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