

BOOK REVIEW

Ancient Medicine From Mesopotamia to Rome. By LAURA M. ZUCCONI. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019. Pp. xxii + 432. Hardback, \$110. ISBN 978-0-8028-6983-8.

Ancient *Medicine from Mesopotamia to Rome* makes a significant intervention in the field of ancient medicine by decentering Greco-Roman sources and casting its geographical and cultural frame to focus on Mesopotamia, Egypt and the Levant. Through this approach, Zucconi is able to avoid the standard account of ancient medicine as naturalistic by definition, a perspective that is all but inevitable when taking the Hippocratic Corpus as a starting-point, as is usually the case.

The book comprises nine richly documented chapters, each focusing on healing practices in specific regions or cultures of the ancient Near East and Mediterranean: Mesopotamia, pre-Ptolemaic Egypt, Canaan (including Phoenicians and Israelites), the Hittites, Classical and Hellenistic Greece, Ptolemaic Egypt, Italy (Etruscan and Roman), Second Temple Judaism and Persia. Each chapter, with the exception of Chapter 7, on Hellenistic medicine, follows an identical structure that encompasses general context (e.g. geography, politics), healing practices (e.g. diagnostic tools) and technical knowledge (physiology, anatomy, nosology). This approach reflects Zucconi's explicit incorporation of a medical anthropological paradigm, which treats medicine as a cultural practice that can therefore be best understood within its social and cultural contexts. It also enables Zucconi to successfully demonstrate a central argument of the book, which is that each of the chapters "represents a local manifestation of a wider ancient medical culture" (1). That is, healing practices vary across the cultures and regions of the ancient Mediterranean, but all of them share core principles and ideas. One important implication of this argument is that Hippocratic medicine is just one local manifestation of a widespread and varied medical culture, and should no longer be treated as a kind of unique or miraculous predecessor to modern biomedicine.

A distinctive strength of *Ancient Medicine* is that Zucconi offers a guide to archaeological and textual evidence for medicine in each of the cultures that it

examines. Zucconi provides useful bibliographical information (for example, the different series of tablets that provide the basis for our understanding of Mesopotamian healing practices) and also critiques historical and existing practices of organizing and interpreting these sources. This both opens up a set of scholarly resources and establishes a basis for Zucconi to critically examine how expectations about what counts as ancient medicine have influenced the organization and interpretation of sources. The critique centers especially around scholarly projection of the modern categories “magical” and “scientific” onto ancient texts. As Zucconi demonstrates repeatedly, ancient healing practices incorporated natural and supernatural elements. A clear example that she provides is the analysis of the “scientific” prescription of drugs through the lens of healing ritual: an oral rite, a physical rite, a charged substance. As Zucconi shows, drugs may operate as charged substances within the ancient context, but be interpreted in scientific terms as pharmacological substances by modern scholars. Zucconi amply demonstrates that distinctions between science, magic and religion, are unhelpful for the study of medicine in the ancient Near East.

Zucconi’s reframing of ancient medical cultures is in part a strategy of names and renaming: Chapter 4, for example, details in large part with ancient Israelites and the Hebrew scriptures, but is titled “Canaanite Medicine,” and therefore both includes the Phoenicians and points the reader’s attention to all of the other Canaanite communities for which we have little evidence. Chapter 9, titled “Etruscan and Roman Medicine,” inevitably focuses on Latin texts, since Etruscan material is limited. The chapter on Ptolemaic Egypt, following closely after chapters on Classical Greek and Hellenistic medicine, deals similarly with the legacy of the Greek medical tradition, albeit within the Egyptian context. This difficulty in actually dislodging the centrality of Greece, Rome and Israel reflects the imbalance of extant sources. Yet, Zucconi’s strategy is successful in drawing the reader’s attention to the many, varied medical cultures that are obscured by the traditional lens. It also establishes groundwork for broadening the study of ancient medicine to include cultures for which we have less documentation.

Accessibly written and carefully detailed, *Ancient Medicine* serves as an invaluable scholarly guide and survey, as well as a textbook and teaching tool. Zucconi’s intervention is therefore twofold: in addition to the insights that her reframing of ancient medicine offers with regard to the relationships and distinctions between so-called “magical,” “religious” and “medical” approaches to sickness and healing, her work also promises to reorient the field from the ground up, providing the

tools for students and scholars alike to approach ancient medicine through a wider lens.

JESSICA WRIGHT

The University of Texas at San Antonio, jessicalouise.wright@utsa.edu