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## The social status of physicians in Ancient Egypt

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The culture of Ancient Egypt had a crucial role in the shaping of classical Greek and Roman culture and science (including medicine) as well as in the historical evolution of ancient society. There were some specific characteristics in the position of the art of healing and the healer, i.e. the physician, in the society of Ancient Egypt. The ‘event of death’ evoked in the hearts of ancient Egyptians neither asceticism nor philosophical pessimism, but a strong and overwhelming ‘joie de vivre’, for they were people of action struggling against death. This paradox imprinted every sphere of human activity in ancient Egyptian society, including medicine. This article makes a multi-sourced attempt to analyze the place and status of the physician in the society of Ancient Egypt, as well as the ‘moral code of doctors’, deeply rooted in the pivotal Egyptian myth of Osiris, which considers both stability of the universe and the favorable answer at the Judgment of Osiris given to the individual (including a physician) to be the result of Horus’ victory over Seth, i.e. the truth over the chaos of evil. The hierarchical place of the ‘swnw’ physician in the highly sophisticated bureaucratic system of Ancient Egypt is also discussed here. There is an attempt made to elucidate ambiguous and often contradictive titles of the hierarchical positions of ‘swnw’ and their specialties both at the pharaoh’s court and in Egyptian noms. Portrayals are given of several physicians from the historical perspective of all periods of the history of Ancient Egypt, including both members of the elite and commoners. The range of opinions concerning “The House of Life” and its role in ancient Egyptian medical education are thoroughly discussed.

**Keywords:** *Ancient Egypt, physicians, status, hierarchy, medical specialties, “The House of Life”*

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Healing is a complex event. It reveals both the worldview of the healing person and the worldview of the cultural environment one belongs to. Healing and medicine cannot exist without understanding the world, without the physician distinguishing ‘the thing which reveals itself as real, powerful and overwhelming and that one which doesn’t [1].

Ancient Egypt was one of the greatest civilizations of the ancient world and one of the most significant centers of its culture. Although the ancient Egyptian culture didn’t develop a systemic approach to medicine [2, p. 12], it had an important influence on the ancient Greek and Roman culture, including their medicine.

An ancient Egyptian, according to S. Morenz, a prominent Egyptologist of 20<sup>th</sup> century, was first and foremost *Homo religiosus*;

the religion of ancient Egypt was the soil for amazing achievements in arts, sciences and crafts [3, p. 159]. This nation was optimistic indeed; however, the modern researcher is often puzzled by their hyper-attention to death. But, in a paradoxical way, remembering death didn’t prohibit the Egyptians from creating most wonderful *chez-de-oeuvres* in the arts, literature and architecture, and to have the most famous physicians in the ancient world even before Homer. The Egyptians were not a meditative people, as S. Morenz argues, they were ready to act and to contend with death itself. This paradoxical combination affected every area of their activities, including medicine – an area where life and death are sometimes very close.

The medical treatment and prayer or magic that a fellow Egyptian gave to his or her neighbor were in their worldview “the Eye of Horus”, the life-giving source of healing. The

god Horus<sup>1</sup> avenged his father Osiris<sup>2</sup> who was assassinated. Horus won but was badly mutilated, having lost his Eye, which actually was the Eye of the god-creator. When, after a fair judgment, the Eye was given back to him, it became the symbol of sincere help to anyone in need or in sickness, in other words, to anyone who experienced in themselves the chaotic power of the god Seth<sup>3</sup> taking over the cosmic order. For the sufferer, the helper and healer was Horus, who revealed the cosmic order, ‘maat’, the principle that according to the ancient Egyptians kept the world safe, sound and well-organized.

**Our sources** about Egyptian physicians include not only medical papyri (Ebers and Smith mostly). If these were the only documents we had, the ancient doctors from Egypt would be portrayed as a highly skilled and educated, as well as absolutely anonymous, as an Egyptologist W. Westendorf says [4, p. 473]. Inscriptions in private and family tombs, mentioning in tombs of other people (high officials who were in charge of some doctors), inscriptions on the statues, sarcophaguses, funerary stelae, “false doors” of tombs, mentioning in non-medical papyri are also sources of our information. Some mummies of doctors were found; the last one is the mummy of a priest Qa’at, who was “the head physician of mysteries of the palace” during V Dynasty (2513–2374 BC). Thanks to these findings ‘an anonymous doctor from papyri get his name appearing as a man, official, head of a family, owner of the tomb’ (W. Westendorf). However, any depictions of doctors at work are quite rare. Surviving statues and bas-reliefs of doctors are more or less identical to those of other Egyptian aristocrats. No special physicians’ insignia can be

<sup>1</sup> Horus (‘heights’ or ‘sky’) a god of the sky and the sunlight, the savior of Osiris, son of Isis, depicted as a falcon, a falcon-headed man or as a child suckling his finger, with the ‘side-loch of youth’ seated on his mother’s Isis lap or trampling down snakes, scorpions and crocodiles.

<sup>2</sup> Osiris (Egypt. ‘Usire’) the main deity of Hereafter cult, the Judge of the dead and the deity of fertility and fecundity. The myth of Osiris, killed by his brother Seth and resurrected by his son Horus, was crucial for Egyptian mentality.

<sup>3</sup> Seth, a patron deity of the king (together with Horus in Early Dynastic Period and in the Old Kingdom) was also the personification of the war, chaos, sand storms and other disasters. The enemy and the counterpart of Osiris, assassinated by him.

found, only titles. Thanks to these artifacts, one could assume that there were several groups of ‘healing’ people.

Ancient Egypt is well known for its well-developed hierarchical bureaucratic system, which included priest, scribes and other officials, with the king (‘pharaoh’) at the top.

However, due to scarce evidence and difficulties with its interpretation, many aspects still remain obscure to us, e.g. the professional specialties of doctors. Like other groups of professionals, physicians in Ancient Egypt were a part of state system with a hierarchy of its own. Positions such as “senior doctor”, “inspector”, “overseer”, “master of doctors” and, last but not least, “Chief of the physicians of the South and the North” are mentioned [5, p. 243].

Among bureaucrats of every sort were scribes. This was an official position which demanded long training. Some doctors were also scribes, having titles such as “physician and scribe”, “physician of the king and chief of physicians”. This highlights the fact that the profession of scribe and physician were highly prestigious. Although it is unknown whether all physicians were scribes, a strong cohesion between these professions must have existed; the same could be said about priests and physicians. There wasn’t a gap between the religious and the profane as the society was deeply rooted in religious rituals. Priests were the king’s officials and an official could be a priest. So, the same person could be “a priest of Sekhmet”<sup>4</sup>, “a priest of Serket”<sup>5</sup>, ‘a priest of Heka’<sup>6</sup>, “a lector-priest”

<sup>4</sup> Sekhmet (the Mighty One), a goddess of the Memphite Triad, the daughter and consort of Ptah, mother of Nefertum, a deity of vegetation, a goddess of war and burning rays of the sun, the protectress of the gods Re and Osiris, and also the king. She could strike a person by an illness and drive it away; patron of healers. Her sacral animal was a lioness.

<sup>5</sup> Serket or Selket, a goddess venerated all over the country but especially in the Lower Egypt. Together with Isis, she was the protectress of the dead and also protected the living from scorpion’s sting. Her sacral animal was a scorpion, therefore she was usually depicted as a woman with a scorpion on her head or as a scorpion with a sun-disk between its horns. Her name (‘the giver of breath’) might indicate muscle spasms caused by a scorpion’s sting.

<sup>6</sup> Heka, a deity of magic, i.e. the divine, world-creating power.

etc. In the Middle Kingdom<sup>7</sup> and onwards, we find physicians not only at the king's court only but also in the temples, as priests of Amun, Ptah, Khnum and Neit.

The top positions among the healers was 'sunu' ('swnw')<sup>8</sup>. This word is always translated as 'physician', unlike other terms for priests and magicians. The high court title 'sunu' could also refer to officials who didn't deal with patients. 'Sunu' are mentioned in a great number of papyri. The most notable example can be found in the Papyrus Leyden (I, 371; 13<sup>th</sup> BC): "And when you have fallen ill (...) I will search for the chief 'swnw' and he will prepare a remedy"; Papyrus Chester Beatty (VI,8, 1300 BC): 'Manual of a collection of remedies of the 'swnw'; Papyrus Ebers (188): "... you should then prepare a secret remedy which the 'swnw' make..."; Papyrus Berlin (163a, c. 1200 BC): "sealed by the scribe of the god's words, chief of the skillful 'swnw' Netjer-hetepu" [6, p. 115, 116, 189]. The tomb inscription of Weshptah, the vizier of pharaoh Neferirkara, tells of an illness that was the cause of the death of this high official, mentioning that as he was struck by the illness in the presence of the king,<sup>9</sup> " his Majesty ordered the royal children, the companions, the lector priests and the chief 'swnw' to go there".

The hieroglyph for 'swnw' is a "the seated man" and also an arrow and vessel; for a woman doctor it was "the loaf of bread", which was read as 't' ('swnwt' – 'sunut', "a woman doctor"). The full hieroglyphic form was rarely used, more frequently it was just an arrow (on the wooden

stela of the physician Hesi-ra (Old Kingdom), two arrows (the physicians Seni and Gua, Middle Kingdom), or arrows and a vessel. It is interesting that 'arrow' is the trilateral phonetic for 'sw'n' and 'vessel' (a pot or a bowl) is very common biliteral phonetic 'nw'. This is a perfect example of the complexity of hieroglyphics. The vessel may well be the pot for remedies, and arrows may be interpreted as connected to the difficult job of a military surgeon. After the 27<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (525–405 BC), when Egypt lost its independence and fell under Persian rule, the word 'swnw' changed its meaning and came to mean "embalmer" as well as "doctor".

The patron god of 'swnw' was Thoth<sup>10</sup> "the master of sacred words": "the god Thoth gives people of science the strength to act, and to doctors who accompany him, in order to set free those whom the god wants to set free, in order to bring them back to life" (Ebers, 1) [4, p. 547]. For ancient Egyptian, Thoth was not only the patron god of scribes, watching them with his "eye of a baboon" to see if they were keeping the true and honest way of life (that is, 'maat'), but was also an embodiment of every Egyptian cultural achievement, including medicine.

Because 'swnw' has a gamut of meanings, a scheme for a hierarchy of their understanding was proposed by T. Bardinnet, an Egyptologist [7]. The bottom 'swnw' didn't have any titles; when promoted, they became "inspector physicians" ('senedj swnw') lead by the 'head physician' or the 'great physician'; 'wer swnw' who was assigned by the king himself and was in charge of several administrative units – noms.

In the Old Kingdom the main medical center was located in the king's court. The doctors who worked here were selected from the most outstanding specialists in the country and treated not just the king and his family, but his courtiers and servants. There was a strict hierarch among the court physicians: the common 'swnw' of the king were subject to an inspector, 'shedj swnw per aa' (14 names of whom we know) and

<sup>7</sup> As the chronology of Ancient Egypt is still disputable, we are following the one from The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt, ed. Donald B. Redford in 3 Vol. Oxford University Press, 2001): Predynastic Period – 5500–3100 BC; Early Dynastic Period – 3050–2687 BC; Old Kingdom (3–6<sup>th</sup> Dynasties: 2687–2191 BC; 1st Intermediate Period (7–11<sup>th</sup> Dynasties: 2190–2061 BC; Middle Kingdom (11–14<sup>th</sup> Dynasties; 2061–1665 BC; 2nd Intermediate Period (15–17<sup>th</sup> Dynasties; 1664–1569 BC.; New Kingdom (18–20<sup>th</sup> Dynasties; 1569–1081 BC; 3rd (21–23<sup>rd</sup> Dynasties) 1081–711 BC; Late Period (24–31<sup>st</sup> Dynasties; 724–333 BC; Greek and Roman Period (332 BC – 642 AD).

<sup>8</sup> Or 'sinu' as the renowned Egyptologists Westendorf and Jonkheere read as it is closer to Copvic 'saein' (Nunn, 115). Coptic is the heir of Egyptian, knowledge of Coptic helped the genius philologist and Egyptologist Champollion (1790–1832) to decipher hieroglyphs.

<sup>9</sup> It was a kind of sudden hearing loss as the pharaoh, while encouraging Weshptah, noticed that he didn't hear him.

<sup>10</sup> Thoth (Dhoti) a deity of wisdom. Egyptians believed that he revealed to the humankind the hieroglyphs, taught them medicine, astronomy, mathematics etc. Thoth was the personified wisdom of the creator, given to the humankind in order to keep harmony and justice in the world. He was usually depicted or ibis-headed man with a reed of a scribe in his hand or as a baboon.

the “overseer” (‘wer swnw per aa’); the head physician was the king’s personal doctor who enjoyed the title “Chief of the physicians of the South and the North” (‘wer swnw mehu shena’), and was the *de facto* top physician of the country. He was in charge both of physicians and other officials. Once “that who is in control of ‘swnw’” or ‘head swnw’ (‘herep swnw’) Medu-nefer, a court ophthalmologist of Old Kingdom, is mentioned. The words ‘per aa’ (‘great house’) meant ‘king’ (the word ‘pharaoh’ is derived from it) as the name “king” was a taboo. The personal physician of the queen, the main spouse of the pharaoh, had the title “physician of the house of the queen” (‘swnw per hemet nesut’).

Promotions were quite possible; according to their tomb inscriptions, some court physicians, Iry, Nesemnaw, Nyankh-ra, Khnum-anch had distinguished careers. Their first step was ‘swnw per aa’, followed by ‘sehedj swnw per aa’ and ‘wer swnw per aa’. In the Old Kingdom a mysterious court title existed – ‘physician known to the king’ (‘swnw rech nesu’); there is no evidence of his duties. The hierarchies differed inside and outside the court.

In the Middle Kingdom, some changes in hierarchy occurred. The “inspectors” (‘sehedj swnw’) disappeared; common ‘swnw’ were now under the ‘overseer’ (‘imy-r swnw’), but this did not mean they were like slaves, as the same word was used in relation to teacher hierarchy and reflected the highly developed bureaucratic system. The ‘wer swnw’ was the supervisor of the “overseer”; the determinative of this word was “the stooping man leaning on the stick” or “the swallow” hieroglyph.

In the New Kingdom quite a frequent position was “physician of the king” (‘swnw n nesw’), and the highest position was ‘the head of the physicians of Two Lands’ (‘wer swnw n neb tawy’). A name of one of those high officials survived, Iuty. Often can be found a title “one with authority over physicians” (‘hery swnw’).

The most widely used term in all periods of Egyptian history was ‘wer swnw’. The names of approximately 52 of these men are known; additionally, we find such titles as “physician of Lower Egypt”, “physician of Upper Egypt”, “physician of Upper and Lower Egypt”. It is, however, unclear, if those doctors were clinical practitioners or administrators having nothing

to do with any clinical activities. For example the doctor Pu-ra e.g. had a very impressive if not ominous title; he was ‘wer swnw’ in the Place of Truth, a necropolis. He could possibly be a ‘doctor-on-call’ for workers at the necropolis.

According to the renowned Egyptologist and a physician, J.F. Nunn, we cannot make any reliable conclusions about the hierarchical and administrative relationships among Egyptian physicians [6, p. 116].

In the Old Kingdom there were many specialists: “physician of the eyes” (‘swnw irty’ – as ophthalmia was quite common in Egypt), “physician of the abdomen” (‘swnw khet’), “physicians of secret organs of the body” (i.e. internal, hidden from the eye kind of ‘internist’), “shepherd of the anus” (‘neru pehuyut’). Dentists in the Old Kingdom had a different title ‘ibeh’, some of them also enjoyed the titles of ‘swnw’ and scribe, which is an indicator of their high social status. In the physicians hierarchy there were titles such as “head dentist” (‘wer ibeh’) and “head of the doctors dentists” (‘wer swnw ibeh’). The doctor Hesira (3<sup>rd</sup> Dynasty, 2687–2649 BC) was both the first ‘swnw’ and the first dentist whose name we know. Many court physicians were also specialists (“physician of the eyes of the king”, “physician of the abdomen of the king”, “physician of the teeth”).

There were also physicians with specialties that are unclear. For example, the name of doctors “distinguishing liquids in the ‘netnetet’” (‘aaa mu m-khenu netnetet’) is undecipherable precisely because the word ‘netnetet’ cannot at present be translated. It has been suggested that this is a doctor specializing in bladder diseases, because the word netnetet meant an organ similar to a sack [8, p. 14].

There is no data about specialization of physicians in the Middle or in the New Kingdom. The Greek historian Herodotus (c. 484–426 BC) reports about this medical specialization phenomenon only after having visited Egypt approximately 430 BC: “The practice of medicine they split up into separate parts, each doctor being responsible for the treatment of only one disease. There are, in consequence, innumerable doctors, some specializing in diseases of the eyes, other of the head, other of the teeth, other of the stomach and so on” (Herodotus, *Historics*, 2:84) [9]. Egyptologists still didn’t evaluate a definite

conclusion about medical specialties in different periods of Ancient Egypt history.

One example of a non-specialized doctor-polymath is Ir-en-nachty. He lived in the First Intermediate Period and enjoyed a rather high position at court; his tomb was discovered in Giza in 1928. On the false door of his tomb, the following titles can be read: “the court physician”, “the inspector of the court physicians”, “the court physician of the belly”, “the shepherd of the anus” and also the disputable specialty of “netnetet expert” mentioned above. All this is rather puzzling and incredible for one person to be. On the other hand, if we consider the inscription to be a true one, we have to consider ‘the infinite variety’ of medical specialties outside the royal court to be rather a doubtful phenomenon. P. Ghalioungui, a prominent Egyptologist, argued that tomb inscription did not always represent the specialty of the deceased doctor [10, p. 43]. H. Grapow, another expert in Egyptian medicine had an opposite opinion, considering the gamut of specialties to be a type of list of good practitioner skills [11].

Papyrus Ebers tells us that “The beginning of the wisdom of a physician is the knowledge of the movement of the heart and the knowledge of the heart (itself). From it, there are vessels to all the limbs. As to these: if any doctor (‘swnw’), any ‘wab’ priest of Sekhmet or any magician (‘sau’) places his two hands or his fingers on the head, on the back of the head, on the hands, on the place of the heart, on the two arms or on each of the two legs, he measures (or ‘examines’) the heart because of its vessels to all his limbs. It speaks from the vessels of all the limbs” (Ebers 854a) [4, p. 3]. The term ‘placing the hand’ on a sick person is very frequent in medical texts. It may have pointed not only at skills like checking the pulse, palpation, percussion but also implied the art of healing as such meaning diagnostics and cure.

The mentioned above Ir-en-nachty had two titles one of ‘swnw’ and another of ‘wab’. There were, as it seems, no defined border between ‘swnw’, ‘wab’-priests of Sekhmet and magicians. It is quite possible that priests (‘wab’) of Sekhmet also practiced as ‘swnw’. Also ‘swnw’ could have a title of a Sekhmet priest and had titles of magicians (‘sau’) dealing with magical incantations (‘hekau’) or “an inspector of magicians” (‘hekaw’).

It has been suggested that ‘wab’ of Sekhmet was a kind of surgeon. F. Jonckheere, an expert in Ancient Egyptian medicine, argued that ‘sa hemem’ (‘man of the cautery’) referred to in Ebers (fr. 857–877) concerning the treatment of tumors (treat it like that in a man who has come to a man of the cautery) is the equivalent of a specialty surgeon. J.F. Nunn hypothesis is that ‘sa hemem’ is not a medical profession but a medical manipulation (we must emphasize that, as of yet, there is not an exact translation of this word); F. Jonckheere and P. Ghalioungui insist that it is a special tool for cautery [12].

Nevertheless, we have enough data to assume that the social status of the priests and magicians of Sekhmet was lower than that of the ‘swnw’ doctors. Among them were veterinary surgeons called “those who know oxen” (‘rekh kau’); they may have taken care of sacrificial animals.

Among the doctors were the (‘kherep’) priests of the goddess Selket (also Serket), who treated the bites of poisonous snakes, insects and other animal (e.g. crocodile’s). A stela found in Deir el-Medina leads to the assumption that the local priest of the goddess Selket was a doctor supervised by a ‘swnw’. Data from the Papyrus Bruklin (300 BC) indicates that this group of healers was widely using pragmatic approaches and rational remedies such as knife incisions, a cataplasm of herbs and natron,<sup>11</sup> and magic was not the main approach to healing. According to J.F. Nunn, the Papyrus Bruklin has drastically changed our belief that Selket priests were magicians only and allows for them to be considered among the doctor-specialists of this subject.

There were probably also pharmacists, since some prescriptions were written: “order to prepare for him (the patient) some medicine according to the recipe given.” On the ostraca, used for writing, can be found several inscriptions with a narrative about Pa-hery-pedjet and his comrades could not prepare the medicines prescribed for them<sup>12</sup>. If it was so, Pa-hery-pedjet may be considered the first Egyptian pharmacist whose name we know (Amarna period, Echnaton’s (Achetaten) reign, 1353–1335 BC).

<sup>11</sup> Natron is a naturally occurring mixture of sodium carbonate decahydrate and sodium bicarbonate; was also used to dry the tissues of a mummy.

<sup>12</sup> Ostrakon 5634 (New Kingdom), British Museum

Quite wide-spread were such specialties as physiotherapist or chiropractor. A well-known example of them is Harpocrates, who almost miraculously healed Pliny the Younger<sup>13</sup>. The grateful patrician not only freed his Egyptian slave but also petitioned the emperor Trajan to grant Harpocrates Roman citizenship. And thus, the Egyptian slave became a Roman citizen based on his abilities in rehabilitative medicine. There were also ‘hair, nail and beauty’ specialists for those who could afford it.

The god Anubis<sup>14</sup> was also devoted to healing, driving away ‘wekhedu’, “the corruption” from the patient’s body, and as a deity of mummification helping him to achieve life and the resurrection in the Land of the West.

In addition to those mentioned, we know the names of about 120 physicians of Ancient Egypt. Because ‘swnw’ had a prominent position, we mostly have the information about this group of healers; some data is presented below.

### Legendary physicians of Ancient Egypt

**Athotis, the Pharaoh.** Although the Egyptian historian from the Ptolemaic era, Manetho<sup>15</sup> of Sebennytos, (end of the 6<sup>th</sup>–beginning of the 3<sup>th</sup> BC), indicated that king Athothis wrote a treaties on anatomy and was a physician, it is historically unsupported. Athothis also known as Djer (‘Hr Dr., i. e. “Horus the Protector”) reigned during Early Kingdom about 3000 BC, and his tomb is found in Abydos.

**Imhotep.** He is legendary, divine and the most famous physician of Egypt (‘Ij-m-htp’) [13], his name meaning “coming in peace”. He was thought to be an entirely legendary person mentioned by Manetho and other ancient authors as ‘Imouthes’ until 1920, when two inscriptions were discovered verifying his historical significance and Renaissance-like titanic genius; one

<sup>13</sup> Pliny the Younger (Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, 61 or 62–113 AD) – a Roman writer and politician.

<sup>14</sup> Anubis (Inpu) was a deity-patron of the dead, the guide the dead to the Hereafter; was depicted as a black dog (jackal) or a dog-headed man, often embalming the mummy.

<sup>15</sup> Manetho (flourished c. 300 BC), Egyptian priest from Sebennytos (ancient Egyptian: Tjebnutjer) who wrote a history of Egypt in Greek (“Aigyptiaka” in 3 volumes), probably commissioned by Ptolemy II Philadelphus. In these books the history of Egypt was for first time systemized and divided in three Kingdoms – the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms.

was on the statue of the king Djoser, the other on Sehemhet’s unfinished pyramid. Imhotep was the high priest of Heliopolis and the head architect. Active during the reign of Khasekhemwy (Cheneris), Nejerikhet and (Djoser), surrounded by fame and respect, he died during the reign of Huni (Aches; end of the Third Dynasty, c. 2649 BC). He may have invented the construction of the four-step pyramid, having put three more extra steps on the ancient mastaba; his innovations may also have included using stone blocks in pyramid building. The Pyramid of Djoser (3<sup>d</sup> Dynasty, 2687–2668 BC), constructed by Imhotep is the oldest extant hewn stone building known to the world survived. He also projected the pyramid of Nejerikhet (Djoser, 3<sup>d</sup>, 2687–2668 BC) but had died before the last (the eighth) step was erected. Both those pyramids are at Saqqara, near Memphis; the tomb of Imhotep (still to be found) is also located there. However, there isn’t enough evidence that the title of ‘swnw’ was also borne by this polymath of great distinction. W. Osler, a renowned physician and historian of medicine in 1923 called Imhotep “the first figure of a physician to stand out clearly from the mists of antiquity” [14, p. 12]. Being highly honored during his life, he was venerated even higher after his death as a divine-inspired wise physician in connection with Thoth, a deity of scribes and physicians. Imhotep was fully deified after 2000 years since he died – a rare exception in Ancient Egypt where it was the prerogative of kings only. This cult of Imhotep as a god started in the 27<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (525–404 BC)<sup>16</sup> in Memphis with special priests and a temple. The cultic image of Imhotep as a religious pure priest of Ptah (a demiurge-god, patron of crafts and knowledge) and also as “the son of Ptah” stems from that period; a shaven-headed seated man with a scroll of papyrus in his lap. These very popular statuettes can be found in many museums in the world, e.g. British Museum (one of 27<sup>th</sup> Dynasty), Wellcome Collection (UK) owns 48 statuettes of Imhotep; the State Hermitage (Russia) owns 9 bronze and 1 made of delftware ones; the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts owns 1 bronze statuette.

A text of a statue of an Egyptian lady Pashenrentaikhet (30<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, 280–343 BC)

<sup>16</sup> The Persian king and pharaoh of Egypt Darius I is the most renowned monarch of this foreign 27th Dynasty.

survived from this period that says to Imhotep: “Oh Thou who comes to anyone crying unto Thee in order to cast away the illness and heal the body” [15].

However, the cult reached its peak in the Ptolomaic period (304–30 BC) when Imhotep (Greek: Imouthes – Ἰμούθης) was identified with Greek healing god Asclepius whose cult was spreading speedily across the *oikoumene*. Asclepius-Imouthes was considered to be a disciple of the mysterious Hermes Trismegistus or Egyptian god Thoth, the purported author of Hellenistic “Corpus Hermeticum”. The temple of Imhotep in Memphis was located near the Serapeum, that one of Sarapis, another healing deity. The Roman historian Africanus<sup>17</sup> quoting Manetho’s work, said that the healing fame of Imhotep among Egyptians is equal to the fame of Asclepius<sup>18</sup> among Greeks; the same opinion had the first Church historian, Eusebius (c. 263–340).

The cult of Imhotep was worshipped in all religious centres of the country – Heliopolis, Dendera, Alexandria, Esna, Tell Edfu, also in Fauym (Xois, Mendes, Nehna) and on the borderline (in Ptolemaida and Bahria). In 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC Ptolemy VIII (Euergetes II) erected a shrine of Imhotep in a huge temple of Hatshepsut,<sup>19</sup> in Luxor area. This shrine became a pilgrimage destination for sick people, barren women or parents with sick children. Unlike Memphis, in Thebes Imhotep was worshipped completely as a deity without his ‘human past’ or historicity. He became a divine saviour for common people who re-told again and again miracle stories of his help, “healing all those who come to him like god Re”.

**Amenhotep-son-of-Hapu** – another divine physician who wasn’t a professional ‘swnw’ in his earthly life. He was a very renowned scribe and architect of the king Amenhotep III (1410–1372 BC). Amenhotep-son-of-Hapu was a symbol of

a perfect man having high spirituality and artistic creativity. After his death the king established the permanent funeral cult of Amenhotep-son-of-Hapu; during the 26<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (664–525 BC) he was deified. His story reminds us how little we understand the mentality of ancient Egyptians: a non-‘swnw’ became a divine ‘swnw’ after his death.

Both Imhotep and Amenhotep are depicted on a relief in Karnak, on the eastern (back) wall of the temple of Ptah. Both divine physicians have peculiar iconography and can be easily recognized. Imhotep wearing a long robe is walking accompanied by Amenhotep, both holding ‘ankhs’ (symbols of divine life) in their left hands, papyrus scrolls in the right ones.

A prayer of the daughter of the Psamtik I (26<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, 664–610 BC) on the statue she erected, says: “Oh Amenhotep, son of the king, son of Hapu, the righteous one! Come, o good physician! See, I am suffering from a disease of the eyes! Heal me quickly for I am erecting this statue to you!” Imhotep and Amenhotep were worshipped together as “brothers” [6, p. 125].

**Netjer-hotep** is mentioned 3 times in Papyrus Berlin as ‘swnw’ and its author. However, it may be pure symbolism, as ‘hetep’ means ‘soothing’ and ‘netjer’ means ‘god’ and such doctor did not exist.

### Physicians of the Old Kingdom

**Hesyr-ra** (3<sup>rd</sup> Dynasty, 2687–2649 BC) was “Chief of all physicians” (‘wer ibeh swnw’) the first doctor whose life data we know – c. 2650 BC. He may well be Imhotep’s contemporary; his tomb is north of the stepped pyramid of Djoser in Saqqara.

**Peseshet** (5<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, 2465–2323 BC) a woman doctor known to us from her own stela in the tomb of Akhet-hotep, probably her son, in Giza. In three places on the stela one can see hieroglyphs signed ‘imy-r swnw’. Controversial treatises were written as to whether Peseshet really held the title of “‘chief lady overseer of ladies doctors’”? [10, p. 92]. In any event, Egypt had women-priests who held high posts and Peseshet also held the title “the lady overseer of the funerary priests”. If the medical title of Peseshet is read and interpreted correctly, we can infer that in Ancient Egypt there were court institutions of female-doctors who may

<sup>17</sup> Africanus (Sextus Julius Africanus) (c. 160 – c. 240) was an early Christian Church author, writing in Greek; one of the first Christian historians

<sup>18</sup> Asclepius, a legendary king of Trikka, the son of the god Apollo and a mortal woman Coronis, the healing god. His cult was spread as in Greece as also later all over the Roman Empire.

<sup>19</sup> Hatshepsut (1490/1489–1468 BC, 1479–1458 BC or 1504–1482 BC) was the female pharaoh of the 18th dynasty (New Kingdom)



have treated women and children [4, p. 473]. However, there may have been a scribal error and her title was “lady overseer of the doctors”. She may well be either the first woman-doctor or the wife of the ‘overseer of the doctor’, as the wife shared her husband’s title [16, p. 28]. As of yet, there is no definitive answer. However, before Ptolemaic period, we find no mention of female-doctors; a woman-doctor Ta-wy is mentioned from 300 BC.

**Mereruka** (6<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, 2323–2150 BC) – both the vizier and son-in-law of king Teti, is buried next to the king’s pyramid. His title “overseers of the two sides of the boat of the doctors of the great house (i.e. pharaoh)”, is reminiscent of the ritual of the solar bark of the sun god Re, associated with life triumphant over death in netherworld. It is difficult to believe that a son-in-law of the king was a practicing doctor, but he could well have been a high official, “an overseer of the doctors” as he also had the high lector-priest title (khery-hebet).

**Ankh** (4<sup>rd</sup> Dynasty; 2323–2150 BC), a court physician whose depiction was found in the tomb of his friend, Ankh-ma-hor with some medical procedures (circumcision, hydrocele, manipulations of fingers and toes, depiction of a man suffering from obesity, another man with gynaecomastia, and also craftsmen at work.

### Physicians of the Middle Kingdom

**Hery-sheft-nakht** (12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty; 1991–1783 BC) was the chief of the king’s physicians, according to depictions of him; he was also a ‘wab’ priest of Sekhmet and ‘overseer of magicians(‘imy-r hekau’). His subordinate colleagues are depicted smaller than him. “(He) reads the papyrus rolls daily... when one is sick, he places his hand on the man knowingly [i.e. in illness], is skilled in examining strongly” – here it is not clear, if the difficult passage means “strong examination” or “examining strongly by hand”. “Reading rolls” might mean reciting incantations.

**Aha-nakht**, his contemporary, was a ‘wab’ priest of Sekhmet, perhaps a veterinarian (“knowing the oxen” – ‘rekh kau’). His inscription is next to the one of Hery-shef-nacht; according to this, he was also skilled in placing his hands. As a Hery-sheft-nacht subordinate, he was depicted smaller than his boss.

### Physicians of the Late Period

**Wedja-hor-resnet** (27<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (Persian Dynasty of Cambusis; 525–404 BC) was ‘the great swnw’ (“head of physician”)<sup>20</sup>.

#### Training of the doctors in Ancient Egypt.

The official positions in Egypt, especially in the Old Kingdom, were usually hereditary but confirmed by the king [17, p. 154]. The fact that the sons of Egypt followed in the footsteps of their fathers is evidenced by the many stelae with inscriptions. This is also confirmed by Diodorus Siculus<sup>21</sup>: “From youth, they (Egyptians) are instructed by their fathers or relatives in the proper practices of future occupations... they are the only people where all craftsmen are forbidden to follow any other occupation... than those... handed down to them from their parents” (I.74; I.81).

Medicine, along with other sciences, was taught to scribes in special schools of scribes. These organizations helped to increase the need for literate people. As shown, the ability to write opened the path to higher opportunities. A scribe could become an official or priest, who practiced medicine. However, the teaching was rather theoretical. The practical part, as in other crafts, was learnt by the newer generation from the father at home. Papyrus Ebers provides circumstantial evidence of this (Ebers 206): “You shall prepare medicine for them (patients) in secret from others, subordinate to you, except for your own daughter” (it is unclear, why daughter rather than son is specified; however, we can see transmission of some secret knowledge within family generations).

Nevertheless, evidence of such medical dynasties is extremely scarce (unlike dynasties of scribes, officials or craftsmen). There is some information about two non-related families with 2 doctors in the first one and 3 doctors in the second one. Some authors reported 4 such families.

The Ashmolean stela in the city of Iunu (Heliopolis) depicts three figures: Huy, “the head of doctors” (‘wer swnw’) and ‘lector priest’ with both his sons. The first of them. Khay is said to

<sup>20</sup> See further in connection with the House of Life.

<sup>21</sup> Diodorus Siculus (Diódoros Sikeliotes; c. 90, Sicily, – 21 BC.), ancient Greek historian, author of *Bibliotheca historica* in three books, much of which survived.

be the cause “that the name of Huy lives”<sup>22</sup>, the second son, Kha-em-waset is offering incense to his deceased father physician (19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, 1307–1196 BC).

In course of time, the transmission of knowledge became unrestricted to the family circle. Any young man of sufficient education could be accepted as a trainee at the home of a teacher (i.e. physician). Probably, the practical training started with children of about 7–10 years old, then they worked under their father supervision. It is widely accepted that from the time of the Middle Kingdom on, training was accomplished not at home but at schools or temples [18].

*The House of Life* (‘per anch’) was an ancient Egyptian institution where books connected with religion and science were compiled. Additionally, there were rituals for preserving life in the world were performed (for ancient Egyptians “universe”, “world” were identical with Egypt itself. It is no wonder that these institutions were located in temples. The exception is the House of Life in Amarna (the city of Achethaten built by heretic-king Echnaton (or Amenhotep IV 1372–1355 BC). Priests, scientists (mathematicians, astronomers, physicians) artists, architects and craftsmen worked in the Houses of Life [19]. The heads of these institutions were called “the master of the secrets of the House of Life”. The Houses of Life called ‘Per Bastet’ (New Kingdom) were found in Abydos and Sais (Late Period).

Egyptologists do not have a clear understanding of whether the House of Life was a scriptorium, an alternative educative institution or a kind of university. Sir A.N. Gardiner, a famous Egyptologist, concluded that ‘per ankh’ was an educative institution; he based this opinion on the translation (in 1938) [20] of an inscription on the statue of “the head doctor” Wedja-hor-resnet (or *Udjahorresne*) in the Vatican Museum (so-called ‘Sais inscription’ 6<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> BC). Wedja-hor-resnet is depicted in a green basalt osirical naophorus statue about 70 cm in height. The head, arms and shoulders differ from Egyptian canons and were restored, probably in Roman times. The text gives a most important biographical account of the establishment of the Persian rule in Egypt. It provides that Wedja-hor-resnet came from Sais

<sup>22</sup> Khay as the eldest son was responsible for the regular funerary rites of his father.

and was the son of a priest of the goddess Neit. He made a career in royal navy, and was the commander of the whole royal navy in the reign of pharaohs Amasis (569–526 BC) and Psamtik III (526–525 BC). Although he undoubtedly battled against the Persians at sea, after they won, he became a vizier and court physician to the Persian king Cambyses II (525–522 BC). He was “head doctor” (‘wer swnw’), and emphasized this by mentioning this title 10 times in his stela. He often mentioned such important titles as “royal seal bearer”, “sole companion of the king”, “administrator of the palace” and commander of the ‘navy’. As can be seen, the title ‘wer swnw’ was, in his and other people’s eyes, the highest without comparison. In course of time he became an official of king Darius and lived at his Persian court in Susa. Charitable contributions made in his own city are also mentioned. The text goes on to inform how Darius sent Wedja-hor-resnet to Egypt to restore the Houses of Life: “The Majesty of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Darius, ever-living, commanded me to return to Egypt – in order to restore the establishment of the House of Life... after it has decayed. The foreigners carried me from country to country. They delivered me to Egypt as commanded by the Lord of the Two Lands.

I did as his majesty commanded me. I furnished them all staff consisting of the wellborn, there were no lowborn among them. I placed them in the charge of learned men [in order to] teach them all a craft. His majesty had commanded to give them every good thing, so that that they might conduct their crafts. I supplied them with everything useful to them, with all their equipment on record, as they had been before. His majesty did this because he knew the worth of this guild live providing health to all that are sick (‘h3j.t’), in making endure forever the names of all the gods, their temples, their offerings, and the conduct of their festivals” [21].

According to J.F. Nunn, “the House of Life” was more of a medieval scriptorium than a medical school. W. Westendorf strongly disagrees with this opinion, putting a special accent on the word ‘h3j.t’, which he believes crucial to understanding the “art” or “craft” mentioned in the inscription, i.e. art (craft) of medicine. This word also is very often mentioned in Ebers papyrus (“Book of Stomach” and “Book of Vessels”) and the begin-

ning of Ebers papyrus, which provides: “Thoth gives the strength to act to wise men, to doctors that accompany him, in order to set free those whom the god wish to be set free, in order to bring them back to life” (Ebers, 1) [4, p. 473]. The Ebers also mentions Sais, the city where after more than a millennium the House of Life was restored by Wedja-hor-resnet. Therefore, according to W. Westendorf, the House of Life was a medical school. Egyptologists E. Strouhal and C. Reeves expressed the view that doctors received their training in the House of Life [22, p. 28].

Physicians from the House of Life could visit their patients at home. For example, when one of his female relatives (the eldest sister of the princess Nefrura) was ill, Ramses II sent her a physicians from the House of Life. It is also possible that surgeons, priests of Sekhmet from Bubastis, also worked in the House of Life. Therefore, instruments mentioned in the inscription of Wedja-hor-resnet are not only of the scribe but also of a physician [23].

Therefore, the House of Life was the place where doctors trained; however, the training could also be received in a house of a skilled physician. The House of Life could be a prototype of the Musaeum founded by Ptolemy I Soter (323–283 BC). Some researchers (e.g. J.F. Nunn) believe that ‘houses of life’ could also have played the role of a “clinic”.

Medical papyri were more like manuals or pharmaceutical handbooks, as it is doubtful that doctors had such retentive memories. The original of papyri were kept in the House of Life and with families, including non-medical ones. For example, a scribe named Qen-her-khepeshef (29<sup>th</sup> Dynasty; 1307–1196 BC) had a medical papyrus; he married a girl Niut-nakht who widowed, re-married and passed this papyrus to one of her sons, who was not a doctor. The papyrus in question is the Chester Beatty Papyrus (c. 1300 BC).

Medical treatment was available at home or at temples. The will of gods could be revealed through special ‘oracles’ as such: “We shall keep her free from any disease about which is written in the books that has no remedy and any illness for which a lector-priest comes” [4, p. 473]. Additional evidence is provided by the sad letter (a type of so called “Letters to the Dead”) of a widowed husband: “when you became ill,

I called in the head doctor and he was treating you”. The answer of the deceased wife is as following: “When the head doctors came to me, my heart was not glad with their remedies; also the lector-priests could not help me; my illness is unknown” [24]. The medical treatment for the king, his officials and servants could take place in the palace.

In temples there was curative incubation<sup>23</sup>; and the patient drank the holy water from the sacred statue. An inscription made of a man called Qen-her-khepeshef<sup>24</sup> (19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty; 1307–1196 BC; British Museum) provides: “I spend a night in the precinct of the temple...I drank some water... my body rested in the glow of Thy face” (goddess Hathor is meant) [25]. Medical baths were used; the temple of Hathor in Dendera, re-built in Hellenistic and Roman period had a special lake and a building with bathrooms and corridors for sacral sleep. The sanatorium in Dendera looked like the famous Asclepions of Greece of later times, where also incubations were in use.

**Remuneration of the doctor.** Money was not introduced till the Late Period (30<sup>th</sup> Dynasty; 380–343 BC). Doctors were remunerated for their service like others through a barter system (wheat, barley, bread, beer, oil, milk, vegetables, meat, fish etc). An ostrakon (20<sup>th</sup> dynasty; 931–725 BC) says that a doctor was paid a one-quarter of a ‘khar’ of wheat and barley but a worker was paid 3 ‘khar’ of wheat and 4 ‘khar’ of barley. According to this, doctors were definitely underpaid, unless there were an additional payment. The Papyrus Turin (New Kingdom) also provides that doctors were underpaid: “2 ‘khar’ of grain for 2 scribes, 3 ‘khar’ of grain for a porter, 1 ‘khar’ for a doctor”. The Vatican Papyrus (19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty; 1315–1201 BC) provides that a widower Usihe paid his wife’s (Menetofre) doctor every month and also made gifts (of copper and natron). A doctor living in the New Kingdom (1569–1081 BC) Nebamun is depicted handing in a remedy to the Syrian prince and his wife. The numerous gifts carried by servants are also depicted [5, p. 244].

According to F. Jonckheere, most doctors were land-owner and belonged to the middle

<sup>23</sup> Incubation is a healing ritual when sick people lay down to sleep in the dormitory of a temple, and were visited in their dreams by a healing god.

<sup>24</sup> Although he was not a doctor, Chester Beatty Papyrus was found in his tomb.

class; court physicians belonged to the upper classes. The pharaoh gave precious gifts to court doctors (a depiction in the tomb of Pentju, the doctor of the court physician during the reign of Echnaton 1372–1355 BC); the pharaoh's gifts included highly valued ones by the Egyptians such as tombs and funerary stelae. We know 19 private and 9 family tombs for physicians. In conclusion, payment was based on a varied on scale and was dependent on status.

The fact that doctors on administrative service could be sent to accompany the army, navy or important works (mines and pyramids) is supported by plentiful evidence.

Diodorus Siculus (I,82) wrote: "On the military campaign and their journeys in the country they all receive treatment without the payment of any private fee, for the physicians draw their support from public funds and administer the treatment in accordance with a written law which was composed in ancient times by many famous physicians. If they follow the rules of this law as they read them in their sacred book, and yet are unable to save their patient, they are absolved from any charge and go unpunished; but if they go contrary to the law's prescriptions in any respect, they must submit to a trial with death as the penalty, the lawgiver holding that but few physicians would ever show themselves wiser than the mode of treatment which had been closely followed for a long period and had been originally prescribed by the ablest practitioners"[26].

It is not clear, however, if commoners were treated by physicians of the House of Life who treated parishioners or if they were treated by others; maybe the rest of the population was serviced by magician healers.

***Egyptian physicians and the ancient world.*** Egypt enjoyed particular fame in the ancient world and her physicians were considered the most skilled far beyond the borders of the land of the pharaohs. Foreign rulers had Egyptian physician at their courts. An interesting letter from Ramses II to Hattusili, the king of Hatti, survives; the Hatti king asks the pharaoh to send a skilled doctor for his barren sister. Ramses II writes back to "his brother, the king of Hatti": "Now see [here] as for... my brother's sister, the king your brother knows her. Fifty is she? Never! She is sixty for sure!... No one can produce medicine for her to have children". The king Hattusili persisted.

His had faith in the wisdom of Egyptian physicians and sends another letter asking for 'a remedy to make her bear a child but, of course, such things didn't exist even in Egypt [4, p. 473]. As skeptical as he was about this, the Pharaoh sent a priest to perform a rite<sup>25</sup>. He sent a doctor whose name is preserved in the Akkadian tradition as Pariamakhu to be a court physician of the Hatti king. The doctor Nebamun (see above) treated the prince of Syriam.

A passage concerning Egyptian medicine is found in the *Odyssey*, where Polydamna, the Egyptian daughter of Thon gave the beautiful Helen a miraculous remedy to drive away pain and grief. According to Herodotus (*History*, III, 1), the Persian king Cyrus II, who conquered Babylon in 539 BC and was the father of Cambyses, the Persian pharaoh-to-be (27th Dynasty), asked Egyptian king Amasis (Ahmose II 569–526 BC) even before the conquest of Egypt to send to him the best ophthalmologists.

Nevertheless, according to the narrative of Herodotus himself, Egyptian doctors were not always successful. Also, in spite of their famous national superiority, Egyptians allowed some foreign physicians to practice in their country during the New Kingdom i.e. four Babylonian 'asu'. It is remarkable that Herodotus believed that in Babylonia there were no doctors at all, praising the doctors of the Ancient Egypt.

Ancient Egyptians were quite compassionate to suffering people. It was considered a moral duty, following the 'maat', the 'truth' or 'justice'. Maat was the criterion for a positive verdict at the Last Judgement of Osiris in the Hereafter. This sense of morality did not disappear when Egypt lost its independency and fell under Persian rule. The famous Sais inscription (above) ends in this way: "O great gods who are in Sais! Remember all the benefactions by the chief physician Wedja-hor-resnet! And may you do for him all benefactions! May you make his good name endure in this land forever!" The god Thoth closely watched not only scribes, but physicians, protecting and demanding the truth. Following strict morals rules, the physician was not blamed even if he failed to cure the disease; however, he forfeited his name

<sup>25</sup>Egyptians could, possibly, not understand the stubbornness of female Hatti king relative as barren Egyptian women (and their husbands) used to adopt children; the person reluctant to do so was usually frowned upon by community.

and even life because of the death penalty if he violated the latter rules [27, p. 80].

In short, a professional group of physicians existed in Egypt of the pharos and they enjoyed a relatively high social status. However, defining the status of physicians in the highly complex bureaucratic system of Ancient Egypt is a rather difficult task, as doctors' titles are not only complex but also contradictory. Nevertheless, physicians in Ancient Egypt were definitely on the top of the social hierarchy. According to contemporary Egyptology, "physician" believed to be the equivalent of 'swnw', an educated person who treated patients. But this statement is also ambiguous, as a 'swnw' could have started his career from a reasonably low social position, being promoted and gaining additional titles. A physician, theoretically, could reach the level of 'physician of the king' or 'physician of the queen'.

On the other hand, the title 'swnw' was borne by high officials as an honorary one. They may not have been involved in clinical practice. As there were no definite borderlines between religious and temporal spheres of Egyptian life, the position of a 'swnw' in priesthood can't be strictly localized. A physician could have the title of a priest (high or not too high) and that of 'swnw', or not be involved in priesthood at all. Healing in Ancient Egypt was not just the dominion of 'swnw' but also of priests of goddesses Sekhmet, Selket and all types of magicians. Whether the social status of these healers was equal or lower than that of 'swnw' remains disputable. The same is true of medical specialties in different periods of Egyptian history. The complexity of the physician's hierarchy seems obscure; nevertheless, it is shaped by the unique culture of Ancient Egypt and its multilayered logic, which remain surprising over millennia.

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