

---

*Medicine and Society in Ptolemaic Egypt* by Philippa Lang

Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2013. Studies in Ancient Medicine 41. Pp. xiv + 318.  
ISBN 978-90-04-21858-1. Cloth \$151.00

---

*Reviewed by*  
Bronwen L. Wickkiser  
Wabash College  
wickkisb@wabash.edu

*Medicine and Society in Ptolemaic Egypt* investigates the ways that Greek and Egyptian modes of healing interacted and influenced one another as large numbers of Greeks, from the ruling class to soldiers and merchants, took up residence in Egypt in the wake of Alexander's conquest. Drawing upon textual and material remains, Lang sets Greek and Egyptian perspectives in dialogue; the resulting exploration is rich, detailed, and as judicious in its use of varied data as it is in its conclusions.

Lang positions her work in contrast to prior studies of Egyptian medicine that have focused on Egyptian theories and therapies across time or on Greek medicine of the Alexandrian elite during the Hellenistic period. *Medicine and Society* seeks to understand how healthcare as practiced and consumed by locals changed with the influx of a heterogeneous Greek population, and how Greek practices within Egypt were shaped by diverse local traditions. Lang is interested in the perspectives of both practitioners and consumers, from elites to the lowest classes, and aims to give voice even to 'those silenced by the absence of any evidence at all' [xi], a task that Lang admits can yield only tentative conclusions. Lang excludes from her analysis forms of healthcare other than Greek and Egyptian, such as Jewish traditions, 'for simplicity's sake' [xi].

Chapter 1, 'Greeks and Egyptians', offers a wide-ranging overview of the physical environment, demographics, diet, and major health challenges of both the indigenous Egyptian populations and the Greek transplants. Lang is interested also in how sociocultural identity was negotiated through healthcare choices—a central concern of her book—and she considers here how power was negotiated and maintained in the wake of Greco-Macedonian conquest. She concludes that for the most part ethnic identity in the period was perceived neither in strict binary categories of Greek and Egyptian, nor

was it fixed and imposed from the top down. This leaves open the distinct likelihood that some medical traditions were adopted and adapted by both immigrants and the host population alike.

Chapter 2, ‘Medicine and the Gods’, discusses temple medicine, a widespread form of healing within Egypt. Because many Egyptians understood illness to be caused by divine forces, they petitioned the gods for cures, especially Imhotep, Isis, and Sarapis. Lang cautions against the assumption that a particular mode of healing characteristic of some Greek temple medicine—encountering the god in a dream and being healed therein or given a regimen for cure—was widespread in Egypt. Other key differences include the organization and function of the physical space of sanctuaries (e.g., in Egyptian tradition, the public was confined to the outer courts of the sanctuary complex) and the centrality of texts to the healing experience (e.g., Egyptian sanctuaries included a *scriptorium* of medical texts and some sanctuaries featured *cippi*, monuments inscribed with texts whose potency was transferred to worshippers by bathing in the water in which the *cippi* also stood). Dreams, too, were part of the healing experience within Egyptian tradition but these dreams offered prognosis rather than advice or cure and had to be interpreted by cult personnel. Greeks in Egypt took part in some of these same traditions, as the presence of Greek-speaking dream interpreters in Egypt, for instance, attests.<sup>1</sup>

Chapter 3, ‘Theoretical Perspectives’, compares concepts of illness, causation, and treatment by Egyptian and Greek professionals. In Egyptian medicine, illness was often perceived as an invasion of the body by a malign or chaotic physical agent; the result was blockage of the *mtw* (vessels in the body) by a putrefying substance; purgatives were prescribed. Some Greeks also believed that food residues caused disease, though rarely did they think that illness was caused by an external agent entering the body. Lang concludes that Egyptian and Greek medicine developed independently before the Ptolemaic period. Lang also points to key differences in the rhetoric of medical texts: Greek texts, produced by a culture that embraced competition, were composed in the first person and designed to persuade; Egyptian texts derived from divine authorship and depended on the practitioner’s ability ‘to read and reproduce the power of the word’ [132]. So what of the Ptolemaic

---

<sup>1</sup> One might add to the bibliography on Asclepieia in Egypt the catalogue of Riethmüller 2005, 2.399–405.

period? In Lang's view, Egyptian and Greek medical theories seem to have been represented and received as distinct, though both cultures incorporated material from the other, as is evident in, e.g., the appearance for the first time of Egyptian ingredients in Greek healing recipes and the presence of Greek medical texts in Egyptian temple *scriptoria*.

In chapter 4, 'Responses to Illness', Lang analyzes diagnosis, prognosis, and especially therapeutics. Egyptian practitioners (and presumably consumers) had greater interest in oral incantations, amulets, protective statuettes, polypharmacy, and quantification of drugs, and avoided certain surgical procedures more prevalent in Greek traditions (invasive surgery and phlebotomy are unattested in Egyptian practice; cauterization is rare). Greek therapies in the Ptolemaic period would expand to include compound drugs and precise quantification, all possibly under the influence of Egyptian practices. In short, though little cultural transfer took place in the area of medical theory in Ptolemaic Egypt, in the area of therapeutics (and to a lesser extent diagnostics), influence is apparent, primarily in the adoption of ingredients for healing recipes and in greater reliance on the gods (as Lang states most succinctly on page 217).

Chapter 5, 'Identifying Medical Practitioners', comes to the unsurprising conclusion that most Egyptian physicians were male, elite, and concentrated in urban areas. Little evidence exists for specialists of any sort or for female practitioners. The first recourse for many Egyptians seems to have been self-diagnosis, self-treatment, and the gods. Greek physicians were mainly high-status members of the Alexandrian court and practiced a 'naturalistic' (as opposed to 'magical') form of healing. Greek practitioners borrowed ingredients from Egyptian medicine but resisted 'magical' procedures, nor did Hellenocentric methodologies extend far beyond the court. Lang explores also how choices of medical treatment could function as expressions of aspirational identity: if you want to be perceived as Greek, you may well choose a Greek practitioner and / or therapy. To this end, she investigates a medical tax (ἰατρικόν) paid by a wealthy sector of the Greek-dominated population that seems to have guaranteed medical services for a fee. Given that this tax is a phenomenon of the early Ptolemaic period, Lang suggests that the earliest Greek settlers may have been intent to display their Greek identity; the disappearance of the tax, in turn, may indicate greater fluidity of identity and more interactive cultural synthesis over time.

The final chapter, ‘Medicine in Alexandria’, brings us to the Ptolemaic capital. Lang draws attention to a contrast between the many ways Greco-Macedonian elites embraced elements of Egyptian culture in order to make themselves more acceptable to local populations and the exclusive nature of Greek medicine at Alexandria, at least at the level of elite practice. Lang borrows and expands upon Heinrich von Staden’s description of Alexandria as a ‘frontier’ society to explore why this city in particular was conducive to medical innovation (e.g., the practice of vivisection is attested only at Alexandria and only in the third century) and suggests that the reason may have less to do with differences in social norms and religious observance than the political interests of rulers like Soter.

By investigating a wide variety of data, from medical treatises to laws, and from papyri to *ostraka* and bones, Lang’s ambitious book takes the study of Greek and Egyptian medicine into new territory. We get a sense of how non-elites as well as elites, both Egyptian and Greek, navigated the choices that multiplied with the influx of new populations and ideas. The fact that the data available is uneven by region and across socioeconomic, cultural, and gender divides, means that the discussion, too, can feel at times uneven as tentative conclusions sit uneasily on loose and thin conglomerations of evidence. Nonetheless, Lang lays a strong foundation for further investigation as more data becomes available, especially through burgeoning fields like bioarchaeology. Lang’s book complements a current trend in classical scholarship on identity studies and opens the door to future projects: How, for instance, do traditions other than Greek and Egyptian fit into this picture of Ptolemaic medicine? Lang’s analysis also reinforces the significance of healthcare choices *per se* as a determinant of identity in the ancient Mediterranean. Lang’s prose is clear and engaging, and she includes four useful indices (on subjects, proper names, places, and citations) that are a model for academic publication.

I suspect that the primary audience of this book will be specialists in the subfields of Egyptian and Greek medicine. Lang’s book could be more user-friendly, even for a specialist audience, and my comments here are directed as much at the publisher as the author. First, an overview of the order in which Lang will lead the reader through the material is sorely missed. Second, the map of Ptolemaic Egypt (Figure 1) is inadequate: the text mentions locations that do not appear on the map; moreover, I went looking for ‘Map

2', as printed on Figure 1 but it is nowhere to be found in the book. The illustration of a *cippus* (Figure 2; also the cover art) goes unreferenced in the text nor is the label, 'Cippus of Horus', very informative; and I would have appreciated a plan of an Egyptian sanctuary since arguments in chapter 2 rely heavily on spatial analysis. Finally, since Brill is charging \$150, consumers have a right to expect clean copy: in addition to several errors in the body of the work (e.g., I suspect 'bowls of water' rather than 'bowels' was meant on page 49), it is especially dismaying to see a typographical error on the back cover.

These few shortcomings notwithstanding, Lang's book is a must-read for any scholar interested in Greek and Egyptian medicine, particularly of the Hellenistic period.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Riethmüller, J. W. 2005. *Asklepios. Heiligtümer und Kulte*. 2 vols. Heidelberg.