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978-0-521-19432-7 - The Archaeology of Medicine in the Greco-Roman World

Patricia A. Baker

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THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF MEDICINE IN THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

This book teaches students and scholars of Greco-Roman medical history how to use and critically assess archaeological materials. Ancient medicine is a subject dominated by textual sources, yet there is a wealth of archaeological remains that can be used to broaden our understanding of medicine in the past. In order to use the information properly, this book explains how to ask questions of an archaeological nature, how to access different types of archaeological materials, and how to overcome problems the researcher might face. It also acts as an introduction to the archaeology of medicine for archaeologists interested in this aspect of their subject. Although the focus is on the Greco-Roman period, the methods and theories explained within the text can be applied to other periods in history. The areas covered include text as material culture, images, artefacts, spaces of medicine, and science and archaeology.

Patricia A. Baker is Head of Classical and Archaeological Studies at the University of Kent. She was made a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 2006. She is an active field archaeologist and has participated in excavations in the United States, United Kingdom, and Italy. She is currently working on a project in Monte San Martino ai Campo, Trentino, Italy, a multi-period site dating from the Iron Age to the Middle Ages. She is author of *Medical Care for the Roman Army on the Rhine, Danube and British Frontiers in the First, Second and Early Third Centuries AD* and co-editor of *Medicine and Space: Body, Buildings and Borders in the Classical and Medieval Traditions*; *Practitioners, Practices and Patients: New Approaches to Medical Archaeology and Anthropology*; and *TRAC 98: The Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference Proceedings 1998*.

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For my parents

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The study of medical history in the Greco-Roman world has led to some fascinating insights into how philosophers and doctors conceived bodily functions, illnesses, and medical treatments. Yet, examinations of the scholarly medical texts alone do not provide a rounded approach to ancient medicine; it leaves us wondering what the patient and general public thought about medicine and doctors at this time. We can also ask if there were different practices and treatments from those described in the literature. Fortunately, there is a growing interest in broadening the scope of scholarship on medical history to include conceptions of medicine beyond the philosophical tradition. However, accessing these views is difficult because many people in the ancient world were illiterate, and if they could write, they did not always leave personal accounts that record their views on health care or their medical practices. Nonetheless, there is one way to access a broader voice and that is to consider the surviving archaeological remains.

An ample amount of material associated with ancient medicine exists in the archaeological record, consisting of archaeological sites, structures, medical tools, votive offerings, bodies, and botanical remains to name a few. Still, there are very few scholars working on the artefacts associated with medicine, particularly from a critically interpretative position. Yet, as someone who works with many of these materials, I have consistently encountered two problems. First, there is an underlying perception that little can be determined from the material remains by those who work with medical texts (Baker 2002a). This is an unfortunate position because a critical analysis of materials can tell us a great deal about social perceptions that have gone unrecorded in writing. Second, I have also found that there are attempts by some scholars who have no training in archaeology to incorporate material culture in their work. This is promising on one level because it indicates an interest and awareness that artefacts are a viable source of evidence. However, some

of the work demonstrates a poor understanding of critical methodological and theoretical approaches towards the remains.

Thus, two questions arise: why do such perceptions persist, and why are scholars unaware of the advances in the subject? I think a fundamental problem is that subjects are not made accessible to students and scholars in different disciplines. Therefore, this book is an attempt to do just that – to make archaeological methods and theories accessible to medical historians of the Greco-Roman period, from roughly the fifth century BC to the third century AD.

It was decided that a textbook that could be used along with general texts on medical history would be the best means of introducing archaeology to historians. This book will demonstrate the types of questions that can be addressed of material remains, and explains how the materials can be accessed and studied. It will also demonstrate that even texts – the main source of information used by historians – are a form of material culture. In so doing, it is hoped that students and scholars outside of the discipline of archaeology will be able to judge archaeological arguments critically and perhaps use artefacts in their own work, thereby enhancing our awareness of ancient medical practices and perceptions of the body and health in the past.

This book would not have been possible without the help and support of a number of people and institutions. To begin, some of the information provided about archaeological sites from Spain derives from a small project that was partially funded by a small grant from the British Academy. The staff at Cambridge University Press, in particular Luane Hutchinson and Isabella Vitti, was helpful and supportive, not to mention patient. There are a number of people I would like to thank for their support and encouragement: Professor Helen King; Professor Peregrine Horden; Lloyd Bosworth for his help with some of the drawings; Dr. Matt Edgeworth, Andy Hyam, and Gavin Speed, for their discussions about archaeology; my parents for their encouragement; Kate Tomas for seeing the possibility; and Dr. Sarah Francis for providing a good laugh.

I would also like to thank the two blind reviewers. Their insights and suggestions only made me more excited about the project and helped to enrich the content of the book. It goes without saying that any mistakes are my own.

Two people, however, deserve particular mention. The first is Dr. Neil Christie. It was through conversations with him that the idea for this book developed. He has been a supportive friend and mentor throughout my career and, in terms of this project, he read drafts of the chapters, gave me the

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gentle and not so gentle nudge to keep writing, and encouraged me with the "odd" cup of tea. *Grazie tante!*

Last, but most definitely not least, I want to thank my husband, Dr. Todd Mei, a continental philosopher, who has found himself with trowel in hand in an excavation trench wondering how he got there and what is the meaning of it all. Fortunately, he saw the philosophical side to archaeology. He, too, read this book and provided unlimited support, encouragement, and help, for which I am most grateful. One of the great lessons I have learned from him is that when "life gives you lemons (or lack of understanding of archaeology), make lemonade", or in his case, a dry Martini with a twist of lemon!