

Ido Israelowich, *Patients and Healers in the High Roman Empire*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015. Pp. ix, 191. 2 illustrations. ISBN 9781421416281.

Israelowich (henceforth I.) has written a concise and learned book on the history of medical care in the Roman Empire, succeeding not only in writing a history of civic institutions, social practices, cultural beliefs and practical aspects of medical care, but to offer his readers a panoramic on the developing history of the professional figure of the doctor in the ancient Greco-Roman world. The extreme clarity of the narrative is matched by the richness and precision of the evidence used: not only literary and medical, but also documentary sources (epigraphic and papyrological) are duly summoned to reconstruct the official and unofficial developments of medicine in the late-antique period.

The Introduction sets the methodological principles of the book: the importance, and the pitfalls of using interdisciplinary sets of sources; the central contribution given to history of medicine by the perspective of patients alongside the discourses of power and knowledge put forth by official doctors; the weight of social structures in reconstructing 'health systems', with Kleinman (*Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture*, Berkeley 1980); the anthropological notions of 'explanatory model' and 'semantic network' to illumine as much as possible the knowledge systems created by different structures of medical interaction. These numerous critical instruments seem appropriate to the composite object of inquiry in the book; I. succeeds in remaining light on theoretical principles and scholarly jargon, offering a sophisticated methodological introduction at the same time.

Chapter 1 introduces the topic of 'the identity of the physicians during the High Roman Empire'. This piece offer in fact a much broader scope than it advertises: it opens with a survey of the figure of the physician from the Greek world to the Roman imperial era, interrogating important practical aspects such as fees, residency, social status, fiscal exemptions, public acknowledgement, and role with the development of forms of public health care. I. begins with the world of Hippocrates and then focuses on the Hellenistic courts, Republican Rome, and finally the world of imperial provinces as well as the city of Rome itself, and how they treated and rewarded the figure of the physician, in terms of financial retribution as well as social prestige. His focus is not only on the authority of the doctor, but also on socially diffuse dynamics and political-military factors, rather in search for 'the medical market place' as a system. His use of documentary sources and his detailed analysis of information about taxation and administrative measures adds important material to the picture and has much to teach to the more philologically driven scholars of *ancient* medicine. As the summary at pp. 43–4 illustrates with great clarity, the conclusions are that the status of the physician in the late-antique Roman world is shaped by the needs of the military; the influence of the traditional Greek model of a public physician; and the characteristics of the institutions of the High Roman Empire.

Chapter 2 moves to ‘patients’ understanding of health and illness’. This chapter is very receptive of current trends and methodologies in history of medicine and social history, and sets out to uncover a perspective ‘from below’ on the medical encounter. I. looks at ‘popular’ sources such as votives and epigraphs, and explores their commissioning and use through antiquity –nuancing sensibly the dichotomy between temple medicine and secular medicine in various stages in the history of ancient medical practices; dreams and their interpretation; the status of the physician in competition, or cooperation with the god Asclepius. The chapter ends with a concise but illustrative discussion of Aelius Aristides, whose exceptional *Sacred Tales* are the only case of patient autobiography (or ‘auto-pathography’) preserved from antiquity and of the exceptional source this represents for a reconstruction of the medical exchange from the point of view of its receiver; not a passive, incompetent sufferer but an informed and discerning subject of the medical proceedings.

With Chapters 3, 4 and 5 the book changes focus: from a contextual and broader historical portrayal to three thematically circumscribed discussions, three ‘loci’ of medical care: the *domus*, the Roman army, and the Empire as a whole as theatre of movement and travel. To these three *loci* correspond different chosen themes: ‘reproduction’ and gynecological matters take Chapter three, and the sphere of domestic medical care. I. surveys the background of Greek gynecology and then moves to explore the social role played by the midwives and doctors who had access to female patients; finally, he concentrates on ‘mothers’ experiences’ (84–85). It is somehow a shame to see only a page on this latter aspect, however comparatively scarce the evidence on this might be, as this promised to be the heart of the innovative approach of this book. I. succeeds on the other hand to offer a wide background to the topic of women in ancient medical care.

Chapter 4 and 5 move from the inside of the private home and of the enclosed world of female patients to the exterior locus of the Roman army, with its travels and its composite humanity; and to the itineraries of medical tourism respectively. Chapter 4 describes the pivotal role played by the Imperial military organization, as well as by the Empire’s political and administrative structure in the fashioning of a form of ‘official’ medical authority – the army’s physician – and in the institutionalization of Greek medicine within Roman culture, effectively contributing to the formation of a first ‘health care system’ and hospital organization. I. not only analyses the position of the doctor within the army’s and its internal life and regulations, but also his interaction with the larger society and with local communities. Chapter 4 surveys the phenomenon of ‘medical tourism’, the visits to sanctuaries, water sites and specific cities by patients in search for medical care and religious healing. This phenomenon, known from as early as the Classical period, experienced great increase in the imperial era, as expected, sustained by greater ease of travel and by the interconnections between provinces; I. discusses also key examples, most notably Aelius Aristides, and emphasizes once again the lack of a sharp dichotomy between ‘temple medicine’ and an ‘official’, scientific doctrine.

On the whole, this is a very informative and discursive account of the reality of healing and medical care in the Roman Empire, but also has the ambition to offer a perspective onto Greco-Roman antiquity as a whole. It is rich in details and examples, and incorporates documentary evidence that is usually excluded from the discussions in history of ancient medicine. Its organization is extremely neat and user friendly, with excellent pinpointing of fundamental topics and summaries at the end of each chapter. As such, it will constitute a commendable reading for those interested in the material aspects and socio-economics of ancient medical care, and as introductory background for students of Roman society and culture. If the desire to provide an overview spanning many centuries caused sometimes more generalization than needed, especially when discussing doctrinal points or earlier phases in history of medicine (e.g, at pp. 52–3 on Hippocratic medicine, and again at 89 on the ‘tradition’ of physiognomy in Greek medicine), where one felt the lack of a direct engagement with the sources in favour of a reliance on classic secondary literature, such as Nutton’s *Ancient Medicine* (London 2004), the goal of providing a synthetic account of the social reality of medical activities in the High Roman Empire is certainly achieved by I., whose work delimits the territory with clarity and indicates the areas of inquiry still to be expanded in this field of ancient history.

CHIARA THUMIGER
HUMBOLDT UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN