

[Sewell-Lasater on Zucconi, 'Ancient Medicine: From Mesopotamia to Rome'](#)

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Laura M. Zucconi. *Ancient Medicine: From Mesopotamia to Rome*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019. 400 pp. \$110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8028-6983-8.

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Commissioned by Gemma Masson (University of Birmingham)

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As both the foreword and introduction of *Ancient Medicine: From Mesopotamia to Rome* mention, the study of ancient medicine has previously been dominated by scholarship specifically related to Greek and Roman medicine, or figures such as Hippocrates, who is often called the “Father of Medicine,” and Galen.[1] This is a legacy of ancient historians and classicists, who saw only the Greeks and Romans as the influencers of the modern world and dismissed anything prior to these lauded civilizations as “barbarous” or “superstitious.” This is an issue many current ancient historians are fighting against, across subgenres, by finding ways to demonstrate that the ancient world was so much more than just Greece and Rome. For the study of medicine, as the foreword additionally observes, this prior focus on Greece and Rome was also an issue of linguistics. Greek and Latin texts are plentiful, as are the historians who can read them, whereas medical texts or sources for areas like Egypt and Mesopotamia are fewer and in more difficult languages, and analysis of them must be supplemented by archaeological research. And while studies on the medicinal practices of individual areas of the ancient world exist, they “treat each area in isolation rather than showing how a given area represents a local manifestation of a wider ancient medical culture” (p. 1).[2] Studies of ancient medicine outside of Greece and Rome were previously the purview of niche specialists who did not talk to each other, and thus comparative analysis of ancient medicine has been lacking.

Accordingly, Laura M. Zucconi has two main purposes. First, she proposes to broaden the horizons of ancient medicine, examining the medical cultures of Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Levant, the Anatolian peninsula, and the Iranian plateau, along with Greece and Rome. She has also written this work to act as an introductory textbook on the topic, emphasizing the similarities and dissimilarities in medicinal beliefs and practices across ancient civilizations, while also making a difficult topic understandable to a student or nonspecialist readership. She further strives to examine the medicinal practices of each area as a whole, not just those practices that would impact or carry into modern medicine. She unquestionably achieves these goals.

The standout feature of this book is its excellent and clear organization. The introduction begins by explaining medical terminology and concepts, especially those that are used throughout the work, such as “disease etiology” (p. 4), in a way that is accessible to a nonexpert. Zucconi also identifies stereotypes that have previously impacted the study of ancient medicine, such as the delineation between “professional healers” and “folk healers,” which is an anachronism that survives from the colonial era (p. 7). The introduction concludes by briefly summarizing each geographic area covered

in the work and providing examples for the medical significance of each. The succeeding chapters thus follow a geographic and chronological order, covering Mesopotamia (chapter 2), Egypt (chapter 3), Canaan (chapter 4), the Hittites (chapter 5), classical Greece (chapter 6), the Hellenistic period (chapter 7), Ptolemaic Egypt (chapter 8), the Etruscans and Rome (chapter 9), the Second Temple and early rabbinic period (chapter 10), and the Persians (chapter 11). In selecting these specific areas and time periods, Zucconi is examining regions with a rich scholastic history, such as Greece and Egypt, while also including previously neglected areas and peoples, such as Canaan and the Etruscans as the predecessors to Roman medicine. She also builds on comparative aspects as each chapter progresses. The chapter on Canaan, for instance, presents a good example of the interplay between the early Hebraic and Egyptian traditions.

Each chapter, with the exception of chapter 7, which provides a more historical overview of the religious and philosophical changes brought by the Hellenistic period, is split into six subtopics: location and history, religion and culture, sources, cultural concepts, illness, and healers. Zucconi first provides a brief political history of each area, so that the medical analysis can be placed within the context of each society. In the Mesopotamia chapter, for example, she explains that what we now call Mesopotamia was comprised of several kingdoms, including Sumer, Babylonia, and Assyria, that shared a common culture, but also a multiculturalism that would define the area and its medicine. She then highlights the cosmological and supernatural aspects of each area's culture that were most pertinent to the development of their medicinal practices. In the chapter on Egypt, she succinctly explains the Egyptian concept of *Maat*, and outlines several of the deities the Egyptians associated with healing, including both the well-known (Sekhmet, Isis) and lesser-known deities (Taweret, Bes). Next, she provides a summary of the sources that can be used to study the medical history of each area, including medical texts, literature, governmental documents, artistic representations, artifacts, and archaeological sites. She highlights the difficulty in delineating between medical texts and religious texts, since many diagnoses or treatments during the ancient period included incantations or prayers, and she provides succinct summaries of sources often previously unavailable to those who do not read ancient languages, including cuneiform tablets, Egyptian papyri, and Hebrew, Elamite, and Arabic texts. Her overviews of archaeological sources that relate to medicinal practice is also thorough in each chapter and demonstrates the necessity of interdisciplinary study to this topic.

The second half of each chapter focuses on the development and implementations of medicinal practices, including concepts of anatomy, disease, health, trauma, disabilities, and those who did the healing. Another thing the book does well, especially since it is meant to be a textbook, is to emphasize that much of ancient medicine had religious associations. In our modern fixation with science and the scientific method, it is easy to forget that, for the ancients, illness and disease were believed to have both natural and supernatural causations, but Zucconi analyzes both the beliefs surrounding what might cause illness and disease in each area and the methods that were used to cure them. Her examination of disabilities in the ancient world for each geographic area is also informative and unique, as studies of medicine usually focus on illnesses and disease that can be cured. These sections, and others on pregnancy and gynecology, could inform effective classroom discussions on modern attitudes towards ableism and reproductive health.

The organization of the book, which one might expect to lead to repetitiveness from chapter to chapter, has the overall effect of making a difficult topic more comprehensible for an introductory audience. Although the chapters are outlined in the same way, each section presents new

information, which can then be compared to previously presented information to explain change over time and satisfy the author's goal of presenting a comparative history. Furthermore, the author explains the medicinal cultures of these societies, some of which covered time periods of several thousand years, without glossing over important changes or overwhelming readers with technical details. Zucconi does a good job of simplifying the topics where possible, while also emphasizing specific details where needed for clarification.

The only critique that might be offered is that to fully cover all "Ancient Medicine," as the book title would indicate, a chapter on Eastern medicine, perhaps from India or China, should have been included for comparative purposes. By not including Eastern medicine, Zucconi somewhat falls into the same snare she claims to be fighting against: whereas previous studies of ancient medicine mostly focused on Greece and Rome, previous studies of ancient history also mostly focused on the Mediterranean and the West. She may be striving to subtly fight against this by including the chapter on Persia, but a truly Eastern-focused chapter would have both rounded out the work nicely and fully emphasized her comparative goal. On the other hand, however, the work is such a large and unprecedented undertaking as it is, that it is understandable why she left out an additional chapter.

Overall, there are only good things to be said about this book. Zucconi thoroughly researched her topic and her prose is clear, succinct, and instructive. It is an eminently useable and user-friendly textbook, which is sadly rare for specialized topics. She has taken a subject that can be unwieldy and not only simplified it enough to make it understandable for an undergraduate audience, but also created a good starting point for those wishing to study it in more depth. Each chapter offers a good introduction to the medicinal history of a specific area, and the bibliography provides a map for more thorough research.

Notes

[1]. Good examples of these types of works are Roy Porter, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind: A Medical History of Humanity* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999); William Bynum, *A History of Medicine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008); and Paul Strathern, *A Brief History of Medicine* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005), all of which Zucconi cites in her introduction.

[2]. See, for example, Barbara Böck, *The Healing Goddess Gula: Towards an Understanding of Ancient Babylonian Medicine* (Boston: Brill, 2014); J. Worth Estes, *The Medical Skills of Ancient Egypt* (Canton, MA: Science History, 1993); and R. Campbell Thompson, *Assyrian Medical Texts* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923). Many additional examples are available in Zucconi's thorough bibliography.

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