

The social role of medical manuscripts in Greek society during Ottoman Rule

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study was to investigate the social role of medical manuscripts in Greek society during the two centuries (16th-17th) of Ottoman Rule. For this purpose, research was carried out based on a review of the literature as well as on Manuscript No. 218 of the Iviron Monastery of Mount Athos as a case study. Via an analysis of this manuscript we discovered the following: a) the necessity of studying the social dimension of medical manuscripts is great given the fact that it contributes to the understanding of social life of the under study period b) in the society under examination, the practical medicine which was presented in manuscripts offered medical support to the population at a time when scientific medicine was non-existent c) the role played by the religious-metaphysical aspects of this manuscript was primarily social d) from the study of the specific medical manuscripts, information is also derived about the various classifications of medicine e) in the manuscript under examination, the social character of numerous therapeutic preparations is obvious as well as the social role of diagnosis, prognosis and anatomy f) the role and the utility of the above-mentioned manuscript are social and diachronic

Keywords: Medical manuscript, medicine and society, therapeutic preparations, social utility

INTRODUCTION

The centuries that followed the Fall of the Byzantine Empire constituted a period of deep mental reflection for the Greeks. It was also a time when not only medical education but also officially institutionalized medicine, organized healthcare and sufficient medical personnel were grossly deficient primarily due to the fact that many doctors had emigrated to the West in order to study. Thus, handwritten medical manuscripts were the main sources for both the study and the practice of medicine in the Greek lands of this era.^{1,2}

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The old medical manuscripts in question are documents containing valuable practical medical information that included the description of diseases accompanied by therapeutic methods, prescriptions and instructions.^{3,4}

These handwritten sources provided invaluable material from which practicing doctors with no theoretical background drew their medical knowledge, along with practical instructions regarding herbs and other therapeutic means, and were recommended for the improvement and the achievement of therapy.⁵ The geographical area in which these manuscripts were utilized was comprised of the Greek lands that included the largest part of the Ottoman Empire in Europe, the coastal areas of Asia Minor and of the Aegean islands along with Crete and Cyprus.⁶

These books, written by men possessing the accumulated wisdom of many centuries, contained integrated medical knowledge categorized according to disease of the human body parts as well as to therapeutic means and methods concerning a great number of diseases. Their contribution to the occupied Greek nation's need to deal with diseases, trauma and even death was thus invaluable.

During the Middle Ages, when superstitions were dominant in the East as well as in the

West, a great number of these handwritten manuscripts, which additionally contained magical sayings, exorcisms, charms and sympathetic drugs, were passed down and used from generation to generation. In these handwritten manuscripts, the researcher is able to read observations about therapeutic means gathered from medical writings of both ancient times and the Byzantine period along with traditional popular prescriptions employing a wide variety of natural products, among which herbs have a special part. Some of the medical manuscripts are written in the codex of the monasteries.⁷ Their contents may be divided into two parts: a) a direct translation of Byzantine texts and b) the additional texts inserted with the passing of the years.⁸

The remedies contained within these medical manuscripts were laboriously compiled down through the centuries either by copiers or by the owners of the documents -doctors or monks- with various comments referring to popular and sympathetic drugs, acts of superstition, newly devised methods of treatment, exorcisms and magical means of healing.⁹

The remedies in question were recorded in a special tome which was kept in the libraries of large monastery complexes