

Diseases of the Ancient Egyptians – by Donna Thomas

This article will explore some of the diseases which were prevalent within Ancient Egypt. We will also explore how these diseases and other ailments interacted with the environment, particularly the Nile and surrounding area. Using sources from several different papyri will also enable us to look at some of the treatments that were adopted by the Ancient Egyptians.

Whilst the Nile was the main source of water for drinking, cooking, and washing, it also harboured parasites and other creatures that were less beneficial to health.¹ One of these parasites was the guinea worm which could be ingested through drinking water. The female guinea worm would travel to its preferred site, usually the host's legs, and lay her eggs.² Some of the earliest known evidence of guinea worm disease comes from the Ebers Papyrus, an ancient Egyptian compilation of medical texts dated to about 1550 BCE. The texts described the process of extracting the worm from the body by winding it around a stick.³ It is worth noting that even as recently as the mid-1980s there were still approximately 3.5 million cases of infection a year. This has now dropped to just 15 during 2021.⁴

Ancient Egyptians suffered with other infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, kidney stones, snake or scorpion bites and poliomyelitis.

There is evidence of tuberculosis being present in ancient Egypt at least 5500 years ago, as mummified remains dated to 3400 BCE have been discovered which clearly show evidence of tuberculosis lesions. In addition to the mummified remains there is also evidence of tuberculosis being illustrated on tomb paintings and sculptures.⁵

Dr Granville was the first person to conduct a scientific autopsy on a mummy. He carried out this procedure on the mummified remains of a woman called Irtyersenu, who had lived and died at Thebes in approximately 600 BCE. It was estimated that she was about 50 years of age at the time of her death. From the autopsy performed, Granville concluded that Irtyersenu had died from ovarian cancer. It should be mentioned however that this conclusion has also been questioned since the autopsy took place.⁶

The Ancient Egyptians also suffered with kidney stones. Interestingly though, the Egyptologist Elliot Smith, who studied approximately 9000 mummies, found evidence of

¹ Filer, J., *Disease Egyptian bookshelf*, University of Texas, 1986, p11.

² Filer, J. *Disease Egyptian bookshelf*, University of Texas, 1986, p11

³ Rogers Kay, "Guinea Worm Disease", in *Brittania.com* Guinea worm disease, {Accessed 15 October 2022}

⁴ Centers for Disease, Control and Prevention, *Parasites - Guinea Worm*, [Accessed 20 November 2022]

<https://www.cdc.gov/parasites/guineaworm/index.html>.

⁵ Museum of Health care, *Tuberculosis through the ages*, {Accessed 15 October 2022}

<https://www.museumofhealthcare.ca/explore/exhibits/breath/tuberculosis-through-the-ages.html#:~:text=Ancient%20Egypt%3A%20We%20know%20that,Egyptians%20suffered%20from%20Pott's%20disease>

⁶ L Geddes 'DNA test on mummy showed TB killed ancient Egyptian' *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*, DOI: 10.1098/rspb.2009.1484. {Accessed 15 October 2022}

only two bladder stones. It is quite possible therefore that kidney diseases, whilst common in the general population at large, was not so common within the wealthy or more elite members of the population whose bodies were preserved through mummification as opposed to the lower classes who could not afford such procedures. Therefore, contemporary evidence or conjecture can only be drawn from the remains which have been preserved. The oldest stone found was in the remains of the pelvic bones of a teenage boy buried around 4800 BCE. No evidence survives of surgical treatment for bladder stones in Ancient Egypt.⁷

Snake and scorpion bites were also quite common occurrences during Ancient Egypt and in general terms there were two kinds of treatment to cure and alleviate the symptoms of bites. Magical treatment as outlined on the Metternich stela (Chapter five) detailed how the Ancient Egyptians recognised that a toxic substance (*metut*) presented indicators such as abdominal pain, difficulty in breathing as well as other excruciating symptoms. One of the two methods applied was casting the poison onto the floor through magical practices, whilst the other was by applying a knife to the wound and cutting the venom out.⁸

Poliomyelitis, now referred to as Polio, is a disabling and life-threatening disease caused by the poliovirus. The virus spreads from person to person, it is highly infectious, and is transmitted either through faecal-oral transmission⁹ or by ingestion of food or water contaminated by human faeces, or via the oral-oral route.¹⁰ The infection can infect the person's spinal cord and results in paralysis.¹¹

Research has revealed that the Ancient Egyptians would have been aware of this disease, its symptoms, and the unfortunate effects it would have presented. A stela dated from 1500BCE has been discovered that depicts a priest called Ruma as having one leg shorter than the other and having to use a stick for mobility.¹²

The mummified remains of Pharaoh Siptah (circa 1205BCE to 1187BCE) has revealed that his left foot was severely deformed and the leg itself was shorter than the right leg. Similar results can also be seen from the mummified remains of Khnumu Nekht (2500BCE).¹³

⁷ The British Association of Urological Surgeons, *Ancient Egypt Bilharzia & stones*, [Accessed 18 October 2022]. https://www.baus.org.uk/museum/76/ancient_egypt

⁸ Nunn, J, *Ancient Egyptian Medicine*: British Museum Press, London, 1997, p.59.

⁹ Centers for Disease, Control and Prevention, *what is Polio*, [Accessed 20 November 2022]

¹⁰ Estivariz, Concepcion F.; Link-Gelles, Ruth; Shimabukuro, Tom (2021). "Chapter 18: Poliomyelitis". In Hall, Elisha; Wodi, A. Patricia; Hamborsky, Jennifer; Morelli, Valerie; Schillie, Sarah (eds.). *Epidemiology and Prevention of Vaccine-Preventable Diseases (The Pink Book)* (14th ed.). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, US). Archived from the original on 17 March 2022.

¹¹ Centre For Disease Control, *what is polio? Review*. August 2022, [Accessed 18th October 2022] <https://www.cdc.gov/polio/what-is-polio/index.htm>

¹² Ganassi, F 'Poliomyelitis in Ancient Egypt' *Institute of Evolutionary Medicine*, University of Zurich, Winterthurerstrasse 190, 8057 Zurich, Switzerland. Review 18th September 2016 [Accessed 18th October 2022] https://www.academia.edu/29009648/Poliomyelitis_in_Ancient_Egypt

¹³ Ganassi, F 'Poliomyelitis in Ancient Egypt' *Institute of Evolutionary Medicine*, University of Zurich, Winterthurerstrasse 190, 8057 Zurich, Switzerland. Review 18th September 2016 [Accessed 18th October 2022] https://www.academia.edu/29009648/Poliomyelitis_in_Ancient_Egypt