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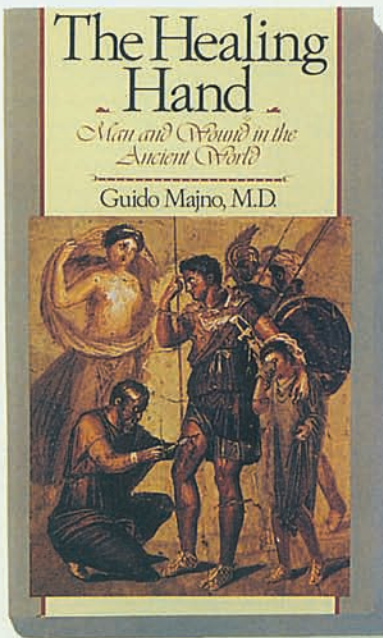
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BOOKS



MAN AND WOUND IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

Harvard University Press have issued the magnificent book *The Healing Hand: Man and Wound in the Ancient World* in paperback for the first time, unrevised since its original hardback publication in 1975. The paper is high quality, there is a full colour plates section, and the lavish illustrations throughout are of the highest possible standard, making the paperback edition a wonderful acquisition for anyone interested in the history of medicine. One of the consequences of the long delay in the publication of the paperback is that some information is outdated, particularly that on Chinese and Indian medicine. The Chinese section, for example, is seriously deficient. The last medical work of Joseph Needham referred to dates from 1969, so that the account given is a quarter of a century out of date. Similarly, things have moved on in Indian studies.

However, as long as readers are aware that the

material in Majno's book needs to be supplemented, there is nothing else one can say about it which does not amount to high praise. It is a gigantic achievement.

Assisted by what appears to have been a small army of research assistants, subsidised by many foundation grants, Majno has accomplished a task of such magnitude in scope and profundity that this is one of the greatest books of the history of medicine ever written. It is only encompassed within one volume because it is meant to be specifically the history of the wound. But in the process of discussing wounds from the earliest times up through the time of Galen (2nd century AD), there is naturally much occasion for discussion of a variety of interesting things along the way, such as the Arabian spice trade and the importance of perfumes in history.

Some of Majno's more impressive contributions are to have carried out or commissioned actual physical experiments into ancient remedies and treatments, on which he not only reports but gives extensive photographic evidence. For instance, in order to check out the contentions by the ancient Egyptians that a substance called *wadj* was an antiseptic for wounds, and knowing that this material was what was later called verdigris, or "scraped copper rust" in Greek, Majno decided to test the substance. So he prepared it according to the directions preserved by the Greek herbalist Dioscorides (1st century AD), hanging strips of copper plate over vinegar in a tall closed jar. Scraping these the next day to obtain copper acetate,

Majno put it into a dish of bacteria and proved it to be a powerful bactericide, completely killing all the organisms near it, as the published photograph demonstrates. Majno did a number of ingenious things of this kind, making his book essential reading for the reports on his experiments alone.

Majno's book is a true treasure trove of fascinating and recondite lore. In it you will learn for instance that there are 147 wounds mentioned in the Iliad, 31 to the head, and that the overall mortality rate from wounds in that ancient Epic was 77.6 per cent. And if you have ever wondered about the details of how the Egyptians mummified their dead, you will be surprised to learn that onions were placed over the eyes and in the ears, and that the embalming was done dry, mostly with natron, a mixture of sodium carbonate and bicarbonate.

Majno's book is one to enjoy leisurely over a long period, and to return to for reference purposes. It is a classic of medical literature, accessible to all readers and requiring no specialist

knowledge of any kind. If only there were more like it! ■

Guido Majno. *The Healing Hand: Man and Wound in the Ancient World*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1991. ISBN 0 674 38331 1 (1975 cloth edition, ISBN 0 674 38330 3)

In many primitive societies, ants were used to hold the edges of wounds together (Illustration taken from the book)



BY ROBERT TEMPLE