

Syllabus: The Archaeology of Health and Disease

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People of the past generally lived shorter lives than we do today due to malnutrition, disease, trauma, and lack of modern medical care. What does archaeology reveal about health and disease from buried bodies and ancient medicine bottles? How do ancient texts inform us about early medical theory and treatments? Which diseases of the past reappear in the present? This four-week class explores the world of ancient health and disease using archaeology, paleopathology, and chemistry. Topics include diet and nutrition, remedies from cough syrups to insect repellents, dental and heart diseases, public health, and medical devices from probes to crutches.

Themes:

- 1) In much of the ancient Mediterranean world, texts on clay tablets and papyri are significant material remains, more extensive than artifacts such as medicine bottles or physicians' tools.
- 2) The archaeological record is woefully incomplete, but other disciplines (chemical residue analysis, paleopathology, medical imaging) can supplement our understanding of health and disease.
- 3) Ancient healers and other kinds of practitioners had more knowledge of plant remedies than they did human anatomy and physiology, in part because human dissection was rarely permitted.
- 4) Polytheistic religions had a huge impact on how people viewed their own organs, why they got sick, and how they were cured.

Class organization: The four lectures will be presented in chronological and geographical order with the major focus on the ancient Mediterranean and Middle East. Sidebars or digressions will be offered on certain topics such as paleopathology of mummies, organic residue analysis of containers, diet, and dental care.

Week 1 Introduction. Types of evidence for early medicine. Paleolithic period. Mesopotamia. Egypt, Part I.

Week 2 Egypt, Part II. Paleopathology and Mummies (evidence of heart disease, amputation, surgery, etc.). *Ancient dental care*.

Week 3 Greek medicine. *Organic Residue Analysis*. Plagues, Part I. *Diet and Nutrition*.

Week 4 Roman medicine. Public Health. *Lead poisoning*. Plagues, Part II. Course summary.

Annotated Bibliography

*York, W.H. Health and Wellness in Antiquity through the Middle Ages (Greenwood 2012). *Excellent, available on Amazon.*

*Zucconi, Laura. “Ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean Medicine”
<https://bibleinterp.arizona.edu/articles/ancient-near-eastern-and-mediterranean-medicine>

Excerpted from longer book by same author: *Ancient Medicine from Mesopotamia to Rome* (Eerdmans 2019). *Excellent, very detailed. Available on Amazon.*

*Demand, Nancy, “Medicine in Ancient Mesopotamia.”
<https://syriacstudies.com/2017/11/17/the-asclepion-prof-nancy-demand-2/>

Aufderheide, A. The Scientific Study of Mummies (Cambridge University Press 2003). *Detailed paleopathology.*

Fox, Robin L., The Invention of Medicine: From Homer to Hippocrates (Basic Books 2020). *Detailed textual analysis and classical history.*

Roberts, C. and Manchester, K. The Archaeology of Disease, 3rd Edition (Cornell University Press 2005) *Detailed physical anthropology and paleopathology.*

Karabatos, I. Tsagkaris, C. and K. Kalachanis, “All roads lead to Rome: Aspects of public health in ancient Rome” NIH, PubMed Central, National library of Medicine
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8805493/>

Zipser, B. “How Ancient Greeks, Romans Controlled the Spread of Disease,” (The Greek Reporter, May 11, 2022)
<https://greekreporter.com/2022/05/11/how-ancient-greeks-romans-controlled-the-spread-of-disease/>