

Book Reviews

Goldberg is a first-rate historian and it is good to have this 1989 volume on Prague Jewry in English, especially in Carol Cosman's literate and fluid translation. Goldberg surveys notions of illness, death, dying, and burial among the Jews of Prague from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Using communal records and ancillary sources, she provides detailed (and often extensive) quotations from the Hebrew Rabbinic and secular literature of the period. And like much of Annales school work she assumes that the textual evidence is equivalent to practice—which it may or may not be.

As with all Annales school social histories there is a love of minutiae, but there are questions which this level of detail does not articulate. How do Jewish and non-Jewish communities interact on the level of health and illness? Can one even speak of a "Jewish" tradition unshaped by the experience of the Diaspora? What is the role of the non-Jewish context(s) in forming "Jewish" attitudes, especially in terms of the meaning assigned to notions of "cure"? How "typical" or atypical is Prague? It is clear that the Prague chancellery is a central institution for the Empire. Its cultural significance during this period has been well noted. But as Hillel Kieval has argued, one must speak of Pragues rather than of Prague. For there are competing intellectual, social, cultural, as well as (most evidently) linguistic communities during this period. They develop and contest the very meaning of a "Prague" culture. Is the "non-Jew" in the discourse of the periods examined understood as "static" by the "Jews" (much as the Jews are by the non-Jews) even though or especially because they were so radically changing. Here the need for a complex, comparative study of the fantasies of each group of the other and how these fantasies shaped the presuppositions concerning health and illness.

Goldberg's book is a major addition to any study of Jews and their bodies. I was struck by the sophisticated manner in which she used concepts of marginality in shaping her own discourse in this book. My desire in the reception of such studies in the English-

speaking world is that one reflect also on their origin, on the role that such studies have in the development of French historiography. This is as relevant as their role in the writing of a new Jewish cultural study of the body.

Sander L. Gilman,
The University of Chicago

Bart K Holland (ed.), *Prospecting for drugs in ancient and medieval European texts: a scientific approach*, Amsterdam, Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996, pp. ix, 105, £39.00, \$65.00 (3-7186-5928-X).

In his introduction, adapted from a commentary in *Nature* published in 1994, Bart Holland argues for an interdisciplinary approach to the identification of active therapeutic agents in the early medical literature. The desired outcome is for classicists, historians and pharmacologists to produce a list of candidate substances for further investigation. As in ethnopharmacology, much will rely upon the correct interpretation of the data. The translation of medical terms, the identity of substances used, and the purpose for which they were prescribed are all matters which one expects to be addressed in this book.

John Riddle has written the chapter on Greco-Roman antiquity as a source of new drugs and takes as examples the use of garlic for circulatory problems, autumn crocus for treatment of gout, nettles as diuretics and the plant remedies used for cancer. Riddle points out that nettle (*Urtica dioica*) was recommended by Dioscorides to bring on urination. Its continued use for this purpose in folk medicine has led to pharmacological investigations revealing the presence of a phyto-agent having an action similar to the synthetic intracellular enzyme finasteride, patented by the Merck company and prescribed to treat benign enlargement of the prostate gland.

In his final paragraph the author comments that this is an example of how the ancients

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treated enlargement of the prostate. He also claims he has shown how they treated atherosclerosis based on the evidence of the discovery of ajoene and alliinase in fresh garlic. It appears from this that he is reaching conclusions on specific therapies of early physicians by means of the discoveries of modern pharmacology. Some notice should be taken of the evidence suggesting that drugs were not used as specifics but as palliatives, treating symptoms common to a number of illnesses.

The challenges to modern research on ancient pharmaceuticals are briefly discussed in the chapter on the medieval and Renaissance periods making the obvious point that much depends upon the exactness of the translation of the text. The author, Ann van Arsdall of the Department of English, University of New Mexico, complains of modern bias in the assessment of past remedies and observes that no one appears to have studied whether there is any scientific basis for the long life of *Theriaca* (Venetian Treacle, Mithridatum, etc.). The suggestion that pharmacologists should investigate messy polypharmaceutical concoctions of this kind is carrying Holland's proposal to an extreme.

Elizabeth R Macgill gives a twelve-page extract of her edition of *This booke of soveraigne medicines* (c. 1570) for the benefit of the scientist who "has not had an opportunity to read primary sources in this area". Regrettably it does very little towards the elucidation of the underlying problems involved in the investigation of early medical texts. By way of contrast, James Reveal's chapter 'What's in a name: identifying plants in pre-Linnaean botanical literature' is a thorough and fully documented study of the first requirement of a pharmacological investigation, the identification of the medicinal plant. The chapter surveys the primary and secondary botanical literature, the location of herbaria and modern aids to identification.

The book ends with two chapters for the information of historians. The first deals with research and development under the title 'From

plant lore to pharmacy' and the second refers to clinical trials. Reading these two very brief expositions confirms the opinion that, with the exception of Reveal's chapter, the contents of the book do not do justice to the proposal put forward in the introduction.

M P Earles, Eltham, London

Ann Jeffers, *Magic and divination in ancient Palestine and Syria*, Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East, vol. 8, Leiden and New York, E J Brill, 1996, pp. xviii, 277, Nlg 146.00, \$94.50 (90-04-10513-1).

This study of magic and divination in the ancient Near East focuses upon the communities of northwest Syria and is based primarily upon Old Testament, Ugaritic, Phoenician, and other Semitic sources, dating from the seventeenth to the eighth century BC. For medical historians, the magical and divinatory practices are avenues by which we can learn of early approaches to the maintenance of health and the reaction to disease and calamity, and it can be argued that in late antique and medieval society a larger proportion of the population probably used divination and magic than more "rational" Greek humoral medicine. In earlier centuries there were few options available for someone wishing to learn the prognosis and diagnosis of mental and physical illnesses, or to determine the well-being of someone who was absent, or to assure themselves of protection and good health. Divination was closely associated with medical prognosis, and makers of talismans were approached with problems ranging from illness to famine. The boundary between mantic practitioners, with associated magical practices, and doctors healing through food and drugs was very indistinct.

There have been numerous attempts by various historians and ethnographers to define what is meant by magic and divination, none of them entirely satisfactory or universally accepted. In general terms, however, divination