

Practical Prescriptions

Prescriptions are very rarely preserved because they lose their importance as soon as the pharmacist uses them to prepare the recipe/drug. In general they were written by physicians after examining the patient; the recipe (formula) would be made up by pharmacists. Recipes or formulae are found in medical books, or pharmacopoeias, and are general and theoretical suggestions for the treatment of a given disease; prescriptions are the individualised forms of recipes, specific instructions for the treatment of a particular patient.

Finding such documents in the Genizah can be described as the survival of ephemeral documents; it is a rare opportunity for historians of medicine to actually read and analyse records of the immediate interaction between physicians, who wrote out the prescriptions, and their patients, who presumably took the prescriptions to apothecaries for the purchase or preparation of the formula.

Three groups are connected to each other through our prescriptions: physicians, patients and pharmacists. In most cases they were all members of the same community and more or less of the same socio-economic level, sharing a religious identity as Jews. The prescriptions as such do not teach us a great deal about any of these groups, but they help fill in details missing from other sources of information.

Prescriptions written in Judaeo-Arabic are clear-cut evidence for, and a reflection of, the practical medicine within the Jewish community of Cairo. Muslim or Christian physicians would not have used this language. Medical treatment was a private and intimate activity conducted within the limits of the various communities, so a substantial number of prescriptions were written in Judaeo-Arabic. A Judaeo-Arabic prescription would have been written when at least two, or more especially three, of the agents involved (patient, physician, pharmacist) were Jewish. We presume that a Jewish physician would not have written a prescription in Judaeo-Arabic for a Muslim or Christian patient, to avoid suspicion. Nor would a Jewish physician have done so if the pharmacist were Muslim or Christian (he would write in Arabic).

The prescriptions found in the Genizah are in fact autographs from the prescribing physicians themselves. They come about as close to the ipsissima verba of medieval physicians as we are likely to get. They are a reflection of the medical reality that actually existed, which at times corresponds with that found in books.

Prescriptions can teach us about the prevailing diseases – and the symptoms – that members of the community actually suffered from. Although in most cases neither the symptoms nor the patient's name appear on the prescription – we find that eye diseases were the most prevalent ailments. Other common ailments were skin diseases, headaches, fevers, internal diseases (liver), intestinal problems, and hemorrhoids, and to a lesser extent (apparently), urinary trouble, ulcers, swellings, cough, and gynecological illnesses.



Family prescription - includes recipes for 12 patients related to each other

