

Cities of the Delta, Part II: Mendes: Preliminary Report on the 1979 and 1980 Seasons (Reports)

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REVIEW ARTICLE - RMD IN HISTORY

No rheumatoid arthritis in ancient Egypt: a reappraisal

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Abstract Antiquity of rheumatoid arthritis (RA) remains controversial, and its origins in Americas or in the Old World are disputed. Proponents of the latter frequently refer to RA in ancient Egypt, but validity of those claims has never been examined. Review of all reported RA cases from ancient Egypt revealed that none of them represent real RA, instead being either examples of changing naming conventions or of imprecise diagnostic criteria. Most cases represented osteoarthritis or spondyloarthropathies. Also review of preserved ancient Egyptian medical writings revealed many descriptions of musculoskeletal disorders, but none of them resembled RA. This suggests that RA was absent in ancient Egypt and supports the hypothesis of the New World origin of RA and its subsequent global spread in the last several centuries.

Keywords Rheumatoid arthritis · History · Ancient Egypt · Osteoarthritis · Spondyloarthropathy

Introduction

Investigating history of diseases provides valuable epidemiological data, shedding light on disease etiology and

predicting their future evolution [1–3]. Such studies of ancient maladies usually rely heavily on archeological remains. Unfortunately, many rheumatologic conditions are relatively rare in population and therefore hard to find in the remains. According to estimations, examination of almost a thousand bodies might be needed to exclude an erosive arthropathy in an ancient population with a risk of a type II error of 10 % [4]. In this respect, ancient Egypt provides unparalleled research opportunities. With thousands of remains in museums worldwide, ongoing intensive archeological excavations and original ancient medical texts and illustrations available, ancient Egypt is a very appropriate civilization for investigating antiquity of diseases. It is no surprise that many rheumatologic conditions (such as giant-cell arteritis, reactive arthritis and other forms of spondyloarthropathy) have been identified in ancient Egyptian materials [5–8].

The antiquity of rheumatoid arthritis (RA) remains controversial, and a consensus on its historical epidemiology has not been reached [2, 9–11]. While some hypotheses suggest that RA initially appeared in the pre-Columbian Americas, only later spreading to other continents, others claim that RA has been ever present in the Old World. The latter hypothesis is frequently supported by references to reports of RA in ancient Egypt, but the validity of those reports has never been subjected to evidence-based analysis.

In this work, we re-examined all available data on RA in ancient Egypt, both reports of pathology in human remains and those in ancient medical texts. We restricted our analysis strictly to the ancient period of Egypt. Possible RA cases from more recent periods of Egyptian history and from other parts of the Old World have been reviewed elsewhere [10, 11]. In the analyzed ancient Egyptian materials, we found no proof for RA being present at that time in that area.

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