

Short Article

GUSTAVE ALEXANDRE LIÉTARD, ORIENTALIST AND PHYSICIAN

by

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IN 1972 the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine acquired an important collection of letters, reprints, and manuscripts belonging to Dr. Liétard of Plombières. This collection gives an interesting insight to the thinking of medical historians interested in traditional oriental medicine during the closing decades of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, and gives some idea of the range of interest and knowledge of a remarkable French physician.

Gustave Alexandre Liétard was born at Domrémy-la-Pucelle on 4 April 1833. He studied medicine at Strasbourg and served as a resident medical student in a number of hospitals there. In 1858 he completed his medical studies with his thesis entitled *Essai sur l'histoire de la médecine chez les Hindous*.¹ This was a major work in its field, forming a sound basis for the later studies of Liétard and of others also working in this area. It dealt systematically with the major areas of medicine, discussing the mythology of Indian medicine, the Vedic and Brahmanic periods, traditional forms of instruction, and the literature relating to Ayurveda. The novelty of the subject earned for its author the annual thesis award of the Faculté de Strasbourg and a letter of congratulation and encouragement from the Minister of State Education.

Following this, Liétard established himself at Plombières-les-Bains as a hydropathic physician. This pleasant small town, situated in a deep valley in the southern part of the Département of the Vosges, allowed Liétard to continue his scholarly researches into oriental medical history and at the same time discharge with distinction his duties as a physician. He was medical inspector of the waters at Plombières, which were visited by many famous people including Voltaire and Napoleon III, who came eight times.² Liétard was also chief physician to the civil service and army in Plombières and president of the Association des Médecins des Vosges.³ Besides the esteem of his professional colleagues, Liétard enjoyed the regard of the community in which he lived and was elected Mayor of Plombières from 1879 till 1892; from 1871 until his death in 1904 he was a member of the General Council of the Vosges.

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¹This was published under the title *Lettres historiques sur la médecine chez les Indous*, Paris, Victor Masson, 1862, and was the first work on the subject to be published in France.

²Eugene L. Bottentuit, *The waters of Plombières (Vosges)*, London, Churchill, 1888.

³See, P. Tillaux 'Décès de M. Liétard, correspondant national', *Bull. Acad. Méd. (Paris)*, 1904, 51:122f.

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From the letters to Liétard written by many of the eminent orientalisists of the time, it is evident that his researches were held in high esteem. Julius Jolly,⁴ the noted Sanskritist, sought Liétard's advice on a number of issues while preparing his work *Medicin*⁵ which was to prove a major contribution in its sphere. The two men were in correspondence between 1892 and 1896 and Jolly was especially grateful for the numerous works sent to him by Liétard which were difficult to obtain in Germany.⁶ Jolly was much interested in discussing in his letters the problem of the obstructed foetus (*mūdhagarbha*), the problem of removing it, and the positioning of the foetus in the womb to ensure normal birth. He also took an interest in a problem that had long exercised Liétard's mind, the connexion of Greek medicine with Indian, and noted the similarity of the Hippocratic oath to the ceremony of initiation for Indian physicians.⁷ In Liétard's review of Jolly's *Medicin*,⁸ he described it as a concise but complete account of the history of Indian medicine benefiting from several modern works and numerous pamphlets, some doubtless his own, that had preceded it. He explained that the superiority of Jolly's work lay in his detailed study of numerous medical texts that were then becoming available. In fact, Jolly had postponed the completion of his work until Hoernle's introduction to the Bower manuscript had begun to appear.⁹ His selection of material, claimed Liétard, was judicious, and of special interest were the writings of the pilgrim Buddhist monk I-tsing, who left descriptions of medical science as it existed in India in the seventh century A.D. Liétard concluded his review by awarding Jolly the highest accolade of medical history, "Sa *Medicin* est grandement utile et justifie bien la qualification de Celse moderne qui a été récemment attribuée au savant professeur à qui nous la devons".

Through his scholarly interest in the history of Indian medicine Liétard came into close contact with Dr. Palmyr Cordier. Cordier was thirty-eight years younger than Liétard, this difference in age being quite obvious from their correspondence. Liétard took a paternal interest in the activities of the younger man. From time to time they stayed in each other's homes at Plombières and Besançon, and Cordier's mother also visited Liétard at Plombières when she went there to take the waters for her gout, a complaint she shared with Liétard.¹⁰ Cordier's father was also acquainted with

⁴Julius E. Jolly (1849–1932), Professor of Sanskrit and Comparative Philology at the University of Würzburg and honorary member of the Royal Asiatic Society. He wrote many important works relating to Indic studies especially law.

⁵J. E. Jolly, *Medicin* [Grundriss der indo-arischen Philologie und Altertumskunde (Encyclopedia of Indo-Aryan Research). III Band, 10 Heft], Strassbourg, Trübner, 1901.

⁶See letter from Jolly to Liétard dated 3 December 1896.

⁷See letter from Jolly to Liétard dated 17 December 1897, in which he stresses that too much importance cannot always be attached to such similarities and cites as an example the remarkable similarity between the Fourth Gospel and the *Bhagavadgītā*, "Freilich hat man auch frappante Coincidenzen dem Evangelium Johannis und der *Bhagavadgītā* entdeckt, ohne dass ein historisches Zusammenhang zwischen beiden Werken anzunehmen wäre."

⁸G. A. Liétard, "Dr. Julius Jolly, *Medicin* (Grundriss der indo-arischen Philologie und Altertumskunde. III Bd. 10 Heft)", *Janus*, 1903, 8: 90–94.

⁹A. F. R. Hoernle (editor), *The Bower Manuscript. Facsimile leaves Nagari transcript, romanised transliteration and English translation with notes*, Calcutta, Government Printer, 1893–1901.

¹⁰See letters from Cordier to Liétard dated 25 September 1896; 30 June 1897; 25 September 1897; 25 March 1901.

Liétard. Like Liétard, Cordier carried on his researches into traditional Indian medicine in conjunction with his professional duties. His work in the Service de Santé de la Marine took him to various parts of the world and the letters he wrote give much interesting information about them. While in Senegal, he endeavoured in vain to find some information on traditional medicine there,¹¹ and in two of his letters written from Madagascar,¹² Cordier describes the vegetation and the people, their language and its etymology, and also the current political situation. However, here again he could find little information relating to the traditional medicine of the place, many of the indigenous customs having been erased by European influence. His tour of duty at Chandernagor in India however, was much more fruitful and he was able to write to Liétard on 29 November 1898 “Dix fois par jour je vous ai souhaité à Chandernagor . . . et j’espère que vous vous demanderez un beau jour à faire le voyage.” He divided the medical system in India at that time into four sections consisting of European physicians licensed in Calcutta or Edinburgh, homoeopaths trained by physicians in Calcutta, Ayurvedic practitioners, and Hakims who followed the Yunani system of Graeco-Arabic medicine. He claimed that the basic texts followed by Ayurvedic practitioners were *Mādhava*, *Caraka*, and *Cakrapāṇ-idatta*, but *Suśruta* or any work relating to surgery was rarely read. During his sojourn in India Cordier was able to apply himself to detailed research on the medical literature of that country. This enabled him to elucidate many hitherto thorny questions relating to the texts and their authenticity, their chronology, and dates.¹³

Much of Cordier’s early work was undoubtedly the result of Liétard’s encouragement, and from his correspondence it is clear that through Liétard Cordier made contacts with many of the leading orientalists at the turn of the century. Due to his ill health, aggravated by long periods of service abroad in intemperate climates, Cordier only survived Liétard by ten years, dying in 1914 in his forty-fifth year, but already he had made his mark on the study of Indian medical history and also left an important collection of oriental manuscripts.¹⁴

Many other letters from eminent orientalists of Liétard’s time survive in the collection, including six written between 1892 and 1902 from Avinash Chandra Kaviratna of Calcutta who translated the *Caraka Saṃhitā* into English and until Liétard’s death sent him each fascicle as it was published.¹⁵ Liétard was put in touch with this pundit by Auguste Barth, an old colleague and friend whose correspondence also features in the collection.¹⁶ Barth, along with Sylvain Levi¹⁷ and many others,

¹¹See letter from Cordier to Liétard dated 9 January 1895,

¹²See letters from Cordier to Liétard dated 8 September 1896; 20 October 1896.

¹³See G. A. Liétard’s review of Cordier’s ‘Quelques données nouvelles à propos des traités médicaux sanscrits antérieurs au XIIIe siècle’, *Janus*, 1899, 44: 664f.

¹⁴In 1932 the Bibliothèque Nationale acquired medical and alchemical manuscripts belonging to Dr. Cordier. See, J. Filliozat, Bibliothèque Nationale, Département des Manuscrits ‘Liste des Manuscrits de la Collection Palmyr Cordier conservés à la Bibliothèque Nationale’, *J. Asiat.*, 1934, 224: 154–173.

¹⁵*Charaka-Saṃhitā: translated into English . . . by Avinash Chandra Kaviratna*, Calcutta, Dass & Parehnath Sarma Kavibhusan, [1885]–1912.

¹⁶Marie Etienne Auguste Barth (1834–1916) was professor of Rhetoric and Philosophy at the College at Bouxwiller from 1857 till 1861 when he retired to devote himself to Indian studies.

¹⁷Sylvain Levi (1863–1935) was appointed professor of Sanskrit at the “Ecole des Hautes Etudes” in 1886 and at the Collège de France in 1894. In 1897–8 he went on a scientific mission to India and Japan.

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comment in their correspondence with Liétard on Cordier's work. There is much about Greek medicine in Robert Fuchs'¹⁸ correspondence, while Baron Felix von Oefele of Neuenahr (Rhenish Prussia) reveals an antagonism to British scholarship in his letters.¹⁹ In addition to letters, the collection contains many of Liétard's own manuscript notes on various subjects of interest to the medical historian.

The wide-ranging subject matter of the correspondence with Liétard and his own handwritten notes is reflected in his publications relating to the medical history of many peoples. He was a pioneer in the study of Armenian medical history and his article 'Arménie' in Dechambre's encyclopaedia²⁰ deals at length with all aspects of the subject, including the language and culture of the Armenian people, the flora and fauna, the geology, climatology, and different courses of mineral water with which the high plateau of Armenia is richly endowed. Ethnography was another area in which Liétard was much interested and his publication entitled *La population des Vosges* (1902) was acclaimed as an important and scholarly study and was divided into an analytical examination of the ethnology of the Vosges followed by a study of the anthropology of the area.²¹ Later in life Liétard turned his attention to the medical geography of India, Arabia, the Caucasian regions, Ceylon, and parts of Europe and he even wrote a brief note on the curious phenomenon of the *Pierre de tête* and its extraction from the head of a patient depicted in a seventeenth-century drawing in his possession.²²

Although Liétard was a medical historian of much distinction, he did not forget that he was also a professional physician. He published a number of works on medical hydrotherapy with reference to Plombières and numerous works on child care and on the organization of the sanitary services of the Vosges region. This remarkable man enshrined all the qualities and skill of a successful physician and the genius and application of a gifted orientalist and scholar who merits a prominence in the annals of medical history which has hitherto escaped him.

SUMMARY

Gustave Liétard (1833–1904), the nineteenth-century French physician and orientalist, was in many respects a pioneer in the study of the history of Asian, especially Indian, medicine. Although now little known, he was regarded by his contemporaries in oriental scholarship as an authority on the medical history of these regions, as is evident from his papers now in the possession of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine. These consist of over seventy of his own manuscript notes and sixty-five reprints and letters. They provide an important but as yet unexplored source for the medical historian interested in oriental medical history and those concerned with it in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

¹⁸Robert Fuchs (1868–1934), noted historian of ancient Greek medicine.

¹⁹See especially letter from Oefele to Liétard dated 29 October 1901. Baron Felix von Oefele, born in 1861 – his exact date of death is unknown – was a medical historian and physician at the spa in Bad Neuenahr, cf. Gernot Rath 'Felix Freiherr von Oefele', in *Festschrift 100 Jahre Bad Neuenahr*, Ahrweiler, 1958, pp. 80–85.

²⁰Cf. *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences médicales*, directed by A. Dechambre [1864–1885] and L. Lereboullet [1866–1889], Paris, Asselin & Masson, 1864–1889, pp. 120–136.

²¹See P. Fabre's review of Liétard's 'La population des Vosges', *Janus*, 1902, 7: 648f.

²²See Liétard's letter to Dr. Peypers, director of Janus at Amsterdam, *Janus*, 1897–8, 2: 375.