

New Approaches to Disease, Disability, and Medicine in Medieval Europe

Edited by

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Foreword

Christina Lee

Studies in Early Medicine is a peer-reviewed series designed to cover the growing discipline of the study of all aspects of disease, disability, health, medicine, and society in the ancient and early medieval world, from prehistory to the Middle Ages. Studies in Early Medicine is multidisciplinary as well as interdisciplinary and has welcomed papers from the fields of anthropology, archaeology, art, history, law, medicine and other studies related to medicine, health and society in the premodern past in diverse geographical areas.

Past volumes have arisen out of conferences and workshops devoted to specific themes. The present volume is devoted to the work of early career researchers and demonstrates how overarching themes of disability, disease, health, and medicine are relevant throughout premodern Europe from the Early Middle Ages up to the Renaissance.

Introduction

Erin Connelly and Stefanie Künzel

The majority of papers in this volume were originally presented at the eighth annual Disease, Disability, and Medicine in Medieval Europe conference (University of Nottingham, December 2014). The conference focused on infections, chronic illness, and the impact of infectious disease on medieval society, including infection as a disability in the case of visible conditions, such as infected wounds, leprosy, syphilis, and tuberculosis. Using an interdisciplinary approach, this conference emphasised the importance of collaborative projects, novel avenues of research for treating infectious disease, and the value of considering medieval questions from the perspective of multiple disciplines. Along those lines, colleagues from the field of microbiology presented papers on current work being done with quorum sensing, *Yersinia pestis*, climate and epidemics, and the efficacy of medieval medical recipes to treat modern infections. Essential to this discussion was a presentation of the results of a pilot study by Harrison *et al.* (mBio, 2015) on Bald's eyesalve (a 10th-century recipe contained in *Bald's Leechbook*, British Library Royal MS 12 D XVII). This work demonstrates the interdisciplinary applications of medieval medical questions and the great value of collaborative endeavours between the sciences and humanities.

The present volume aims to carry forward this interdisciplinary synergy by bringing together contributors from a variety of disciplines and from a diverse range of international institutions. Of note is the academic stage of the contributors in this volume. All of the contributors were PhD candidates at the time of the conference, and the majority have completed or are in the final stages of completing their programmes at the time of this publication. We hope the originality and calibre of research presented by these early career researchers demonstrates the promising future of the field, as well as the continued relevance of medieval studies for a wide range of disciplines and topics.

In addition to being diverse in discipline and location, the articles in this volume range from the beginning of the medieval period, with Anglo-Saxon and Merovingian topics, right up to the end of the 15th century. The articles are arranged chronologically.

The volume commences with 'Ðu miht wiþ þam laþan ðe geond lond færd: Conceptualisations of Disease in Anglo-Saxon Charms', by Stefanie Künzel, which highlights how metaphoric thinking influenced the Anglo-Saxon expression of

contagion in healing charms, particularly the ‘Nine Herbs Charm’. Künzel reflects that former analyses of Anglo-Saxon medical texts often have been limited by modern assumptions about premodern medical competencies and, thus, significant information about perceptions of disease has been missed.

Along those lines, Marit Ronen presents a balanced consideration of the agency of impaired individuals in Anglo-Saxon society. In an examination of 119 cases from Anglo-Saxon narrative sources, ‘A Still Sound Mind: Personal Agency of Impaired People in Anglo-Saxon Care and Cure Narratives’, explores what can be learned about Anglo-Saxon societal expectations for an impaired person. Based on the case studies extant in the narratives, the chapter presents evidence to answer such significant questions as who was in charge of an impaired body and how much control did impaired persons have over their daily existence in Anglo-Saxon society.

Cathrin Hähn’s chapter, ‘Mobility Limitations and Assistive Aids in the Merovingian Burial Record’, explores the significance of compensatory objects in Early Medieval burials in Germany and Switzerland. By comparing the numbers of relevant archaeological finds over the course of the medieval period as well as the materiality of the objects in question, Hähn comes to the conclusion that while objects such as prostheses and crutches are relatively rare in the burial record, the sophistication of their design suggests a development based on experience and usage.

In ‘Tearing the Face in Grief and Rape: Cheek Rending in Medieval Iberia, c. 1000–1300’, Rachel Welsh examines how the ritual of cheek rending used by women in medieval Iberia to mourn for the dead was also used as a legal requirement for proof of rape, according to the municipal lawcodes, *fueros*, of medieval Castile in the late 11th through the 13th centuries. In examining the practice of cheek rending as a bodily gesture with social, legal, and physical ramifications, this chapter analyses bodily mutilation as legal proof and considers the physical effects of cheek rending on the female body.

Using the *Decretals of Gregory IX*, canon laws, supplication letters, and papal dispensation letters, in ‘Clerical Leprosy and the Ecclesiastical Office: Dis/Ability and Canon Law’, Ninon Dubourg explores how the biblical label of ‘unclean’ was interpreted for 13th and 14th-century clerics who contracted leprosy. In light of this evidence, Dubourg considers the positive and negative social consequences for a medieval cleric diagnosed with leprosy.

Clara Jáuregui’s ‘Inside the *Leprosarium*: Illness in the Daily Life of 14th Century Barcelona’ presents the first analysis of the account books (1379–1395) of the medieval leprosarium of Barcelona. Within the books is a wealth of information concerning the economic, religious, medical, and social circumstances of the

leprosarium. This chapter brings attention and a new analysis to the operations and occupants of a hospital that has been largely forgotten in the historical record.

Lucy Barnhouse, in ‘Languages of Experience: Translating Medicine in MS Laud Misc 237’, explores a collection of eight medical texts which have not all been identified previously or examined as a group. Using clues found in the numerous marginal and interlinear notations, Barnhouse presents evidence to describe the 14th-century medical community that may have used these texts.

Cecilia Collins, in ‘*Heillög Bein, Brotin Bein*: Manifestations of Disease in Medieval Iceland’, considers evidence of disease contained in textual sources in conjunction with the pathological samples of skeletal remains from church cemeteries and from the only known monastic hospital in Iceland (1493–1554), excavated at Skriðuklaustur (2002–2012). These records in both text sources and bone remains provide valuable insight into the prevalence of certain types of disease in medieval Icelandic society, as well as how care was provided in the community.

Erin Connelly, in ‘A Case Study of *Plantago* in the Treatment of Infected Wounds in the Middle English Translation of Bernard of Gordon’s *Lilium medicinae*’, examines how medieval recipes used to treat infectious disease may inform modern antimicrobial research. Using medieval remedies from the 15th-century *Lylye of Medicynes*, Connelly explores the potential efficacy of *Plantago* spp. for wound healing and antimicrobial activity in light of present-day scientific studies.

To conclude the volume, Christoph Wieselhuber in ‘*Miserum spectaculum, horrendus fetor, aspectus horrendus*: “Syphilis” in Strasbourg at the Turn of the 16th Century’, considers the social response to sexually-transmitted illnesses (referred to as *blattern*, *pocken*, or *syphilis*) through the lens of Johannes Geiler von Kaysersberg (1445–1510), an influential citizen of Strasbourg, who was ‘the prince of the pulpit in the late 15th and early 16th centuries’.

The Institute for Medieval Research (University of Nottingham) and Universität Bremen were essential partners in the delivery of the Disease, Disability, and Medicine in Medieval Europe conference. A pre-conference postgraduate workshop was co-sponsored by the University of Nottingham and the Homo Debilis Creative Unit (Universität Bremen). The four sessions of the workshop led postgraduate students through the approaches (and problems) to researching medieval disease and disability from the perspectives of material culture, legal, historical, and literary positions. We would like to acknowledge Dr Christina Lee, University of Nottingham, who organised the conference and contributed the foreword as general editor. We extend special thanks to the University of Pennsylvania Libraries, Schoenberg Institute for Manuscript Studies for their support in the completion of this volume.