



SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA



© Author(s)
E-ISSN 2531-7288
ISSN 0394/9001



Introduction Medieval Medicine in Medieval Society

Tommaso Duranti

Alma Mater Studiorum - University of Bologna

MEDICINA NEI SECOLI

Journal of History of Medicine
and Medical Humanities

36/1 (2024) 5-8

Received: 11.10.2023

Accepted: 15.12.2023

DOI: 10.13133/2531-7288/2883

Corresponding Author:

tommaso.duranti@unibo.it

This issue focuses on the history of medieval medicine in Western and Latin Europe, but the ensemble may appear lacking on several topics. In fact, none of the authors directly addresses diseases and therapies, nor do they, in some way, center their studies on the medical thinking produced by the great authorities of the past.

This absence is the result of a conscious effort to broaden our perspectives, moving away from rigid schemes of a teleological history of medicine – a history of the discipline constructed, willingly or not, as a progressive path towards modern biomedicine. This process is often perceived as a civilizing journey from darkness to light, from primitive to modern, depicted with almost ethnographic colours, and sometimes used to reassure ourselves about our modern medical experience. At other times, these details are uncritically exploited to create controversies about biomedicine and its practitioners (controversies often devoid of any knowledge of the past in the public discourse). In this perspective, the Middle Ages generally occupied – and continues to do so – a ‘negative’ place par excellence, a gap between Greco-Roman Antiquity – understood in this context as the dawn of civilization¹ – and the Modern Era, which supposedly introduced the scientific method and, therefore, modernity, considering everything that came before it as childish, obscure, and superstitious.

The history of medicine, as conceived between the end of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries, focused

on inquiries aimed at reconstructing its own past: namely, the past of an academic discipline profoundly transformed in this period by technical and scientific progress, giving rise to what we now define as biomedicine. Influenced by the strength of positivism in historiography, this approach created a ‘strong’ paradigm that somehow transposed an ‘absolute’ model of the hard sciences into the investigation of the past. The second half of the 20th century radically challenged this perspective: contributions from the social sciences and increasingly from medical anthropology shattered this understanding, highlighting the kaleidoscope of theories and medical practices, as well as the social and natural roots of ideas about health and disease, power struggles, beliefs, coping strategies, and so on.

Today, we are aware that in order to understand a certain aspect of the past – especially if it dates back to the Middle Ages – it is necessary to immerse ourselves in that context. This requires the challenging and inherently partial effort of setting aside our modern knowledge and our individual and collective ‘beliefs’. In short, it is necessary to try to understand the medieval medicine that men and women of the Middle Ages theorized, knew, and practised: a period so vast and varied in its chronological changes that offering a *reductio ad unum* to a single perspective is extremely difficult. The inequality in the state of sources from different parts of the period amplifies this difficulty, necessitating diverse approaches and methodologies for the Early, High and Late Middle Ages.

There is now a consensus that health and disease are also cultural concepts– challenging to define² – but the same cannot be said about the concept of medicine. Not everyone fully acknowledges that medicine is also a cultural construct, subject to changes over time and space, and as such, it should and must be examined³. From a historical perspective, medicine cannot be understood solely by identifying those ‘pieces’ that sometimes only appear to recall previous phases of the modern discipline. In short, it is more accurate to consider all ‘forms’ of medicine, not necessarily understood as harbingers of modernity, regardless of the history of a university discipline that gave rise to biomedicine.

At this point, specialized historiography focusing on medicine, health, and disease⁴ already shares this perspective but still struggles to eliminate commonplaces, especially concerning the ‘Dark’ Middle Ages, in popular and even non-specialized historiography.

Undoubtedly, one of the main contributions of the history of medieval medicine produced in recent decades is shedding light on the existence of a dynamic medieval thought. A way of thinking, certainly developed by healers and intellectuals, but also shaped in the encounter/conflict with other fields of intellectual knowledge (theology, law) and other practices related to health and disease, yet quite foreign to this environment⁵. Another contribution of this more recent historiography is the

insistence on the clear necessity of inquiries not based on the duality of body/soul, a completely anachronistic division for the Middle Ages⁶.

Both medical thought, on one hand, and practices related to disease and health, on the other, should be understood as expressions of a particular society, in which numerous actors – individual or collective – played a role. Therefore, both should be examined with broader, specialised but not compartmentalised approaches to understand how societies constructed the idea (or rather, ideas) of medicine (and of health, disease, recovery, pain....) and also how these ideas influenced these societies themselves. Using historiographical categories, one could say this involves applying the methodology of social and cultural history to the history of medicine, bearing in mind, however, that these are historiographical tools and the object of inquiry is much more complex and intricate⁷.

Therefore, as mentioned earlier, it is an issue in which disease, treatments, and the medical thought (at least as traditionally and rigidly understood) are absent. Certainly, it is only an apparent absence, as these elements underlie and emerge from the topics studied by the different authors. The perspective offered by this issue, however, is broader, providing a concise and naturally partial image of how the history of medieval medicine is predominantly understood and written by specialized historiography today. The essays delve into cultural aspects in the technical and broader sense of the term. For instance, they explore the vibrant relationship between religion and medicine, a topic studied in detail by Chiara Crisciani. They also examine actors and practices that go beyond our rigid and typical modern classification of medical treatments, as highlighted in the contributions of Guy Geltner, Francesco Bianchi and Tommaso Duranti. Additionally, there are inquiries into sources not exclusively related to the medical context, as discussed by Alessandra Foscati, and reflections on the relationship between the reception of written production and the development of practices and cultures as analysed by Marilyn Nicoud and Lluís Cifuentes i Comamala. Thanks to these contributions, a deeper understanding can be gained of what that civilization considered as disease, recovery, and health. The historical perspective shifts again from the Middle Ages to the present in Francesca Roversi Monaco's article on medieval medicine through the lens of medievalism, a field that investigates the continuous 're-creation' of the medieval era in contemporary society.

It is our hope that this issue will offer readers a more insightful perspective on the complexity of the topics investigated in the history of medicine, especially concerning a period of European history that continues to suffer from simplistic readings and instrumental uses.

On behalf of the other authors, I would like to thank Valentina Gazzaniga for providing a space in the journal *Medicina nei Secoli* dedicated to the perspectives and contributions of medieval historiography to the history of medicine.

Bibliography and notes

Websites

Society for the Social History of Medicine: <https://sshm.org>

The History of Medicine in Context:

<https://www.routledge.com/The-History-of-Medicine-in-Context/book-series/HMC>

Harvard Medical School: <https://ghsm.hms.harvard.edu/research/history-medicine>

Printed primary sources & Studies

Amoretti MC, *Filosofia e medicina. Pensare la salute e la malattia*. Roma: Carocci; 2015.

Corbellini G, *Storia e teorie della salute e della malattia*. Roma: Carocci; 2014.

Green MH, *Integrative Medicine: Incorporating Medicine and Health into the Canon of Medieval European History*. *Hist Compass* 2009;7(4):1218-45.

Grmek MD (ed.), *Storia del pensiero medico occidentale. Antichità e Medioevo*. Roma-Bari: Laterza; 1993.

Jacquart D, *Cinquante ans de recherches sur la médecine des XIII^e-XV^e siècles: les contours d'un nouvel objet pour l'historien*. In: *La medicina nel Basso Medioevo. Tradizioni e conflitti*, Atti del LV Convegno storico internazionale, Todi, 14-16 ottobre 2018. Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo; 2019. pp. 1-24.

McKay RA, *Why Do We Do What We Do? The Values of the Social History of Medicine*. *Soc Hist Med* 2019;33(1):3-17.

1. Cf. Green MH, *Integrative Medicine: Incorporating Medicine and Health into the Canon of Medieval European History*. *Hist Compass* 2009;7(4):1218-45, pp. 1223-4.
2. Corbellini G, *Storia e teorie della salute e della malattia*. Roma: Carocci; 2014; Amoretti MC, *Filosofia e medicina. Pensare la salute e la malattia*. Roma: Carocci; 2015.
3. Besides being one of the most relevant outcomes of the medical anthropology, this topic is widely shared in historiography: see, for example, Corbellini G, ref. 2, and what proposes the Harvard Medical School: <https://ghsm.hms.harvard.edu/research/history-medicine>. Also see the recent debate promoted by the Society for the Social History of Medicine: McKay RA, *Why Do We Do What We Do? The Values of the Social History of Medicine*. *Soc Hist Med* 2019;33(1):3-17.
4. Especially in the British and English-speaking context: among the most persistent experiences in this regard, one can mention the Society for the Social History of Medicine (<https://sshm.org>), which published a journal of the same name, and the book series *The History of Medicine in Context* edited by Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell (<https://www.routledge.com/The-History-of-Medicine-in-Context/book-series/HMC>). In Italy, however, in comparison with the European context, the history of medicine (especially of medieval medicine) struggles to find space as an autonomous specialised field of historiography.
5. Grmek MD (ed.), *Storia del pensiero medico occidentale. Antichità e Medioevo*. Roma-Bari: Laterza; 1993. Jacquart D, *Cinquante ans de recherches sur la médecine des XIII^e-XV^e siècles: les contours d'un nouvel objet pour l'historien*. In: *La medicina nel Basso Medioevo. Tradizioni e conflitti*. Atti del LV Convegno storico internazionale, Todi, 14-16 ottobre 2018. Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo; 2019. pp. 1-24.
6. For this reason, "on doit parler de dualité et non de dualism" (Jacquart D, ref. 6, p. 20); Besides, even in biomedicine today the rigidly somatic perspective that influenced the middle of the 20th century, influenced by the technological enthusiasm, is outdated.
7. See Green MH, ref. 1.