

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS ON MEDIEVAL DISCOURSES ON DISEASES

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In the past two decades, a growing body of research has been produced on the relationship between medicine and philosophy in the medieval world. Scholars have particularly examined the epistemic status of medicine alongside its relation to philosophical theories, the medical conceptions of prominent philosophers and theologians, and cross-disciplinary debates with medical relevance. They have also investigated the institutional settings and teaching practices shared by philosophers, theologians, and physicians, their personal interactions, and the traces these exchanges left in surviving manuscripts.¹ This volume aims to explore the complex relationships between medicine and philosophy in the Middle Ages with specific regard to theories of disease. The ten papers presented in the volume cover a period of one thousand years, from Late Antiquity to the Black Death. Most were delivered at a conference held in Trento in 2023 (*Prospettive mediche e filosofiche sulla malattia nel medioevo*), with additional contributions added later to provide a more comprehensive view of medieval ideas and theories on pathology. The papers address authors and works from three distinct cultural and linguistic contexts: the Latin West, the Islamic world, and the Jewish tradition. While

¹ See, for example, ZIEGLER 1999; REYNOLDS 1999; CHANDELIER 2011; CRISCIANI 2014; ZUCCOLIN 2017; ZUCCOLIN 2019; HIRVONEN 2018; VENTURA, FORLIVESI 2022; CHANDELIER, TABARRONI 2023; BENEDEUCE 2023; CERRITO 2023; RESNICK 2023; BIANCHI, CAMPI 2025.

numerous studies have already explored the topics of sickness and diseases in the Middle Ages from various perspectives,² the uniqueness of this volume lies in its portrayal of the diverse discourses on maladies developed by theologians, philosophers, and physicians across different times and contexts. The scenario that emerges is one where discussions on sickness transcended disciplinary boundaries, allowing concepts, doctrines, and methods to be shared and adapted by experts from different fields, and where theological, philosophical, and medical perspectives are intertwined, reinterpreted, and re-framed. Moreover, attention is given to the different terminologies used to describe pathological phenomena. Some contributions also investigate the processes of translation and transmission of medical theories and sources across linguistic contexts, such as from Arabic to Latin and from Latin to Hebrew. This variety of discourses on maladies is hardly surprising, as the pair health-sickness was not only central to medicine – both as a theoretical science and a ‘clinical’ practice – but also served as a cornerstone of Christian civilization. Salvation was regarded as healing from the malady of sin, achieved through the intercession of Christ the Saviour, the true doctor, and through the spiritual medicines of the sacraments.

The rich and complex intertwining of medicine and religion in the Latin world is the specific focus of the contributions by Giovanni Catapano and Chiara Crisciani. The former (“Il senso medico di *pestilentia* in Agostino”) surveys all occurrences of the term *pestilentia* throughout Augustine’s works, offering a detailed analysis of its usages. While in some of the loci examined Augustine leans towards a metaphorical and moral interpretation – viewing God as the cause of calamities such as pestilences – in other instances he employs the term in its medical sense. Although Augustine was not specifically

² A recent multidisciplinary contribution, though lacking a philosophical perspective, is JONES, VARLIK 2022.

interested in medicine from a technical point of view, he was nonetheless well-acquainted with the term *pestilentia*, understanding it as referring to a pandemic or epidemic, and was able to differentiate it from other words within the medical vocabulary of pathology, such as *morbus* and *aegritudo*.

According to Chiara Crisciani (“Medicina e ‘medicina spirituale’: alcuni casi (secoli XII–XV)”), while the use of medical metaphors in religious contexts was common throughout medieval culture due to its soteriological character, it was only from the 12th century onwards that a true ‘medicine of the soul’ or ‘spiritual medicine’ emerged. This was characterized by the systematic use of medical analogies for both exegetical and theological purposes. For example, basic medical notions (humors, complexions, diseases, etc.) were used to interpret moral deviations within the cloister (Hugh of Fouillois’s *De medicina animae*) and to analyze the sacrament of confession (Alain de Lille’s *Liber poenitentialis*). Medical *exempla* became part of the repertoire of images and anecdotes used by preachers to make their sermons more effective (Giovanni di Gimignano’s *Liber de exemplis*). We find spiritual medicine celebrated by Humbert of Romans (*Expositio regulae sancti Augustini*) and Jean Gerson (sermon *Pro licentiandis in medicina*). In the prologue to his *Sentences* commentary, Nicholas of Ockham draws on Avicenna’s *Canon* to define the *subiectum* of theology as the *genus humanum reparabile*. Accordingly, he understands theology as a supernatural medicine, thereby confirming an increasing tendency toward the medicalization of theology in the second half of the 13th century. On the other hand, some physicians (e.g., Giles of Corbeil, Arnau de Vilanova, and Galvano da Levanto) also demonstrated how medical knowledge could be transposed to a moral and spiritual level. Moral recommendations and pastoral reflections also found their way into some texts dealing with the plague (e.g., in the treatises by Bartolomeo da Ferrara and Michele

Savonarola). The interference of religious, theological, and moral implications is nowhere more evident than in discussions about leprosy. Theological and exegetical reflections, inspired by famous Biblical prescriptions and episodes, intermingled with medical analyses, granting leprosy the complex status of both a 'disease of the soul' and a physical pathology.³ Three contributions address leprosy, reflecting the diverse conceptual and disciplinary perspectives applied to this illness.

Amalia Cerrito's paper ("Leprosy and Inherited Diseases in 13th-Century Discussions on the Original Sin") reconstructs the theological debate on leprosy in the 13th century. By this time, Western medicine had already evolved into a true science, aided by a large body of sources made available through Latin translations in the 12th and 13th centuries, as well as by the institutionalization and consolidation of medical education within universities. Many theologians – e.g., William of Auvergne, Roland of Cremona, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, and Henry of Ghent – shaped their explanations of the transmission of original sin from parents to progeny after the model of inherited diseases, particularly leprosy. After bringing to the fore the main sources and traditions that sparked this debate (the juridical concept of *hereditas*, Biblical *loci* such as II Kings 5, Augustine's and Peter Lombard's reflection on the original sin, and the 'new' medical and philosophical sources on human generation and inherited diseases), Cerrito explores the aetiology of leprosy and other hereditary diseases, their ontological status, various models of transmission, and more. Marienza Benedetto ("A Divine Punishment? Leprosy in the Reflections of Moses Maimonides") focuses on Maimonides' views on biblical leprosy (*ṣāra'at*). A variety of approaches to this disease emerges from his corpus of works. In the *Mishneh Torah*, a 14-book work dealing with the

3 BRODY 1974; DEMAITRE 2007.

precepts of the *Torah*, Maimonides, drawing primarily on the Bible – notably the well-known passages in *Leviticus* (13-14) – describes leprosy in religious and moral terms as a divine punishment for those guilty of depravity, impurity, and corrupt language. *Ṣāraʿat* is also discussed in several loci of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, where a religious interpretation – leprosy as a ‘miracle’ inflicted upon the Jewish people as punishment for impurity – coexists with a medical explanation presented in Chapter 72 of Part I. Here, Maimonides explains leprosy, along with other diseases, in Galenic terms as resulting from an improper mixing of the elements. As one would expect, Maimonides endorses a medical explanation in the *Medical Aphorisms*, attributing *ṣāraʿat* to an excess of black bile, an explanation that some scholars interpret as referring to elephantiasis. However, in another medical treatise, *On Poisons and the Protection against Lethal Drugs*, he depicts elephantiasis as a form of poisoning caused by the menstrual blood of adulterous wives.⁴

Anna Gili (“Leprosy (*al-ğudām*) and Smallpox (*al-ğudarī*) in the *Kitāb al-Malakī* and its Two Latin Translations”) examines the chapters on leprosy (*al-ğudām*) and smallpox (*al-ğudarī*) in the medical encyclopedia *Kitāb al-Malakī* by ‘Alī ibn al-‘Abbas al-Mağūsī, along with its Latin translations by Constantine the African (*Pantegni*) and Stephen of Antioch (*Liber Regalis*). Al-Mağūsī provides a scientific explanation of leprosy that is free from any religious or theological connotations. Within his explanatory model, leprosy is associated with a humoral imbalance as the remote cause, while its transmission is explained both in terms of inter-generational inheritance through the father’s sperm and contagion caused by harmful vapors exhaled by the lepers’ bodies and inhaled by those in close proximity. Al-Mağūsī also presents a complex aetiology for smallpox (*al-ğudarī*), considering several

⁴ For the linguistic, historical, and medical implications of the distinction between leprosy and elephantiasis, see the penetrating reconstruction in GRMEK 1983, chapter 6.

factors (pestilential air, contagion through close proximity, and a bad regimen) along with heredity (in this case, through the mother's menstrual blood), which, as with leprosy, plays the primary role in the disease's appearance. Moreover, Gili accounts for the challenge that both Constantine the African and Stephen of Antioch faced in their efforts to translate al-Mağūsī's technical terminology into Latin. By adopting different strategies, they were able to adhere to the scientific approach of the original Arabic text – though with varying degrees of fidelity – while at the same time creating a new Latin lexicon for infectious diseases. The study furthermore presents three appendices, which provide an edition and an English translation of the sections of al-Mağūsī's encyclopedia that address leprosy and smallpox.

Unsurprisingly, another disease prominently featured in the volume is plague, with three papers addressing the 14th-century plague epidemic. Francesca Bonini's paper ("Prognostication and Medical Astrology in 14th-Century Italy: Three Case Studies") focuses on a late-medieval plague tractate by the Augustinian friar Augustine of Trento, which was notably written around 1340, before the outbreak of the mid-14th-century plague pandemic known as the Black Death. Therefore, Augustine's treatise predates the wave of *Pestschriften* that followed the Black Death. Bonini investigates Augustine's astrological approach to the prognostication, prevention, and treatment of the plague epidemic, and elucidates the intellectual environment that might have influenced him in composing his treatise. Moreover, to properly assess its original features, the text is compared with nearly contemporaneous works, including the *Compendium medicinalis astrologiae* by the Dominican Niccolò de Paganica and some of the *consilia* produced by the medical master Gentile da Foligno. One of Gentile's *consilia* on plague is also examined by Diana Di Segni, who contrasts it with an anonymous Hebrew translation ("Gentile da

Foligno's *Consilium contra pestilentiam* and its Hebrew Translation"). After surveying the manuscript tradition and early printed editions of all the *Pestschriften* traditionally ascribed to Gentile, Di Segni focuses on the *Consilium* addressed to the city of Pisa, analyzing its structure and content. The practical character of the *Consilium* – whose main purpose was to provide therapeutic, prophylactic, and hygienic prescriptions – aroused the interest of Jewish physicians. Since they were excluded from academic education and lacked proficiency in Latin, Jewish physicians were unable to access the advanced medical knowledge being produced at that time within European universities. This situation explains the increasing number of Latin-into-Hebrew translations of scientific and medical texts during the 14th and 15th centuries. The Hebrew translation of Gentile's *Consilium*, preserved in two manuscript versions – Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. hebr. 59 (ff. 224v-225v) and Jerusalem, The National Library of Israel, Ms. Fr. 81.2 – is part of a broader process of intercultural exchange. Di Segni closely examines the two versions from a linguistic perspective and demonstrates that they represent two different stages in the translation process. The paper concludes with an appendix containing the edition of Gentile's *Consilium* and its Hebrew translation.

The plague pandemic is also discussed in my contribution ("Health and Sickness in Henry of Herford's *Catena aurea entium*"), which focuses on the medical theories of Henry of Herford, a Dominican friar who served as a *lector* in German convents during the 14th century. Renowned both during his lifetime and posthumously as a historian, Henry left a vivid account of the cultural, social, and political consequences of the plague pandemic in his masterwork, the *Chronicon*, a universal chronicle spanning from creation to his own time. Though based on firsthand knowledge and reliable accounts

from his contemporaries, Henry's tragic depiction also draws heavily on Paul the Deacon's *Historia Langobardorum*, a source also used by Boccaccio. This intertextual connection likely accounts for similarities between the *Chronicon* and the *Decameron*. In his other major work, the *Catena aurea entium*, a ten-book encyclopedia, Henry frequently addresses health, sickness, and specific diseases. My paper provides an overview of these passages, highlighting Henry's surprisingly broad and diverse medical library as well as his emphasis on practical medicine, pharmacology, and the regimen. The paper concludes with an edition of select sections from the *Catena aurea entium* that discuss specific diseases.

Gabriella Zuccolin's paper ("Heat and Moisture. From the Classification of Fevers to the 'Truth of Human Nature'") focuses on the concept of 'radical moisture', a medical notion that played a significant role in medieval philosophical and scientific debates (e.g., the duration of life, fevers, and the theological issue of the numerical identity between the living body and the resurrected body). In Zuccolin's historical reconstruction, Aristotle was the first to address the interrelation between heat and moisture in his *Parva naturalia*, correlating aging with the consumption of moisture by heat. In Galen's works (*De marasmo*, *De methodo medendi*, *De differentiis febrium*), the relationship between heat and moisture is used to explain the formation of febrile pathologies. Fevers – in particular hectic fevers – are thought to produce an unnatural, non-temperate heat that consumes the body's own moisture. After exploring the historical intermediaries of the Galenic theory of fevers (Isaac Israeli's *Liber febrium* and Constantine the African's *Megategni*) and highlighting the innovations introduced by prominent medieval sources (such as Avicenna's *Canon* and Averroes' *Colliget*), Zuccolin illustrates how the medical discussion on the inherent consumption of radical moisture in living bod-

ies was reshaped by theological sources. She examines how Thomas Aquinas integrated these medical ideas into theological debates, particularly concerning resurrection. Specifically, with regard to the question of which part of the flesh is destined to be restored in the resurrection, Aquinas argues that the *veritas humanae naturae* (the truth of a human nature) encompasses not only the essential substratum of the human body, but also the food that has been assimilated into it.

Finally, Tommaso Alpina (“Healing the Soul by Transforming the Body: A New Way of Framing Avicenna’s Science of the Soul”) investigates the notion of pneuma, a medical concept that became central to medieval philosophical discourse, with particular emphasis on Avicenna’s work.⁵ Renowned for his medical expertise, which found an accomplished form in the *Canon of Medicine* – a work destined to have a tremendous impact on Latin medical science – Avicenna also incorporated medical concepts and theories into his philosophical writings, most notably in his masterwork *Kitāb al-Shifā’* (the *Book of Salvation*). Alpina examines how Avicenna employed and interpreted pneuma (*rūḥ*) in the psychological section of the *Shifa*, the *Kitāb al-Nafs* (known in Latin as the *Liber de Anima seu Sextus de naturalibus*). His analysis addresses three different topics: the ensoulment of the body, powers differentiation, and the role of emotions.

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5 For an accurate analysis of Albert the Great’s theories of *spiritus*, which are heavily indebted to Avicennian philosophy, see MERONI 2024.

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