

AVISTA Studies in the History of Medieval Technology, Science and Art
Volume 10

The Sacred and the Secular in Medieval Healing

Sites, Objects, and Texts

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Medica: The Society for the Study of Healing in the Middle Ages

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

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Introduction

The Mandatory Matters of Sickness and Healing in the Middle Ages

Lindsay Jones

Even those most hesitant to posit cross-cultural universals must concede that health, broadly construed, and thus rituals of healing are central, indeed paramount, concerns in every religious tradition. Whether conceived as alleviation from physical or psychological suffering; restoration of bodily, social, or cosmic order; redress from illness and infirmity; facilitation of prosperity; expulsion of evil; redemption from condemnation; salvation from guilt and sin; or liberation from the trials of worldly existence, healing occupies a singularly prominent place in every cultural context and every religious orientation. If there are components of religion that are speculative and abstract, and to that extent elective concerns, perhaps the exclusive province of elite theoreticians or ecclesiastical authorities, health and wellness are, by contrast, inescapable challenges from which no one is exempt. No persons or historical contexts—certainly not medieval Europe—are afforded neutrality or indifference on medical matters. These are mandatory, not optional, concerns.

That ubiquity of relevance makes healing, as this volume well demonstrates, an ideal topic for widely interdisciplinary inquiry. The collection is largely drawn from a series of paper sessions held at the 46th International Congress on Medieval Studies entitled “The Sacred and the Secular in Medieval Healing,” sessions that were co-sponsored by *Medica* (Society for the Study of Healing in the Middle Ages) and *AVISTA* (Association Villard de Honnecourt for the Interdisciplinary Study of Medieval Technology, Science and Art). Engaging a topic of such import and reach evokes essays that are, to be sure, of great interest not only for all medievalists, but likewise for we scholars of religion with historical interests very far afield from medieval Europe.

The first of two sets of chapters, written by scholars from numerous different disciplinary frames, engages questions of sickness and healing in the Middle Ages via a reliance primarily on written sources, albeit of widely variant genres. Together these six essays demonstrate that while health and illness certainly do involve actual physiological conditions, and thus to that extent are objective realities, there are myriad—and always purposeful—ways of interpreting and representing those biological realities. Curative remedies and even more the causes of illness, so often camouflaged and confounding, are seldom self-evident; nearly always some hermeneutical labor on the part of sufferers and healers alike is

required to make sense both of why people are sick or how their conditions might be improved. In medieval Europe, not unlike other contexts, the origins, diagnoses, and choices of therapy for various maladies, along with the outcomes and aftereffects of sanative treatment, are always subject to interpretation. Accordingly, all of these essays are meta-interpretations insofar as they undertake twenty-first century interpretations of medieval interpretations of sickness and health.

Each essay in this first set reminds us, then, often in emphatic ways, that the discourses about sickness and healing that one finds in medieval texts provide imperfect matches to the empirical medical realities of the historical contexts from which they emerge. Consequently, each essay interrogates and contextualizes the relevant texts, most often by critically examining three interrelated components. First, with respect to authorship, some contributors address texts that were produced by well-known individuals and others analyze documents that were collectively or anonymously composed; but in every case it proves revealing to ascertain the social position, educational background, institutional affiliations, religious investments, and thus the working presuppositions of the author(s). Second, with respect to intended audiences, nearly every article benefits from explicit scrutiny of the anticipated readership of the respective texts, widely diverse audiences that, as we will see, range from the general public, to expert medical practitioners, to the lay faithful and church hierarchy. And third, each contributor, without exception, combines critical reflections about authors and audiences in order to undertake duly skeptical examinations of both the overt and surreptitious agendas that are at work in the various sources.

These essays thereby open the way to a kind of two-sided appreciation of healing in medieval Europe. In the spirit of a generous-minded “hermeneutic of retrieval,” they remind us, on the one hand, that the ways in which pre-modern authors think and write about disease and curing reflect genuine, meaning-seeking responses to the pain of illness and vexing contingency of health. The life-and-death seriousness of these topics makes them uniquely revealing of distinctively medieval priorities. Studies of healing in the Middle Ages are, then, aptly deprovincializing insofar as they challenge us to acknowledge the intriguingly “other” perspectives with respect to human bodies, supernatural agents, religious institutions, gender and family dynamics, and so on that were operating in these contexts. Repeatedly we are coaxed to appreciate what a couple contributors call “the medieval mind” or, as another terms it, “the cultural *mentalités* of medieval Europe,” which is more radically, arguably refreshingly different from our own thought processes, values, and beliefs than we might at first imagine.

Additionally, however, in the spirit of a more wary “hermeneutic of suspicion,” the same essays also force to attention the disquieting realization that medieval discourses on healing—and perhaps especially those that engage crises consequent of sickness, pestilence, and plague—are invariably, not unlike other religious, professional, and academic rhetoric, self-serving, deceptive, and in cases, blatantly propagandistic. All critical-minded, none of the contributors is willing to assume a perfect consonance between the purported and actual purposes of the texts they are investigating; each scholar thus requires us to appreciate the large

extent to which these writings are designed to manipulate the audiences to which they are directed. And in these respects, the mindsets of medieval authors may emerge as more familiar than exotic.

In any case, the first chapter, "Sacred and Secular Wrath in Medieval English Sources" by Virginia Langum, focuses on pastoral writing from this ambience as a means of reconsidering the oft-cited distinction between "the sacred," which is routinely correlated with "the medicine of souls," versus "the secular," which is ostensibly related to "the medicine of bodies." Simultaneously familiar and fraught categories—which are famously intertwined in the Middle Ages—the former steers us to explicitly religious, other-than-strictly temporal forces, explanations, and institutions, while the latter term insinuates attributes or explanations of healing that are more fully naturalistic, and thus presumably independent from sectarian and ecclesiastical influences. Surveying ample written depictions of wrath, anger, and ire, Langum observes that the medieval English conceptualization of this cluster of topics is decidedly "ambivalent" insofar as they are assessed variously as passions and/or vices; as destructive but also useful as treatments in certain contexts and even virtuous in some ethical contexts; and, moreover, as belonging to the province of either the explicitly religious and/or the worldly. Exposing the slippage or ambivalence associated with those terms allows her, then, to raise a more general concern that will resurface in nearly every one of the subsequent chapters: namely, a cautioning observation that while the timeworn sacred–secular distinction may have a measure of heuristic value, that binary division is notable in this medieval context primarily because it marks a boundary that is so often transgressed. Again and again we will be reminded that, in this pre-modern world, the sacred and the secular are by no means cleanly contradistinct spheres.

In Chapter 2, "Writing about Medicine *per viam experimenti*: Valesco de Taranta (fl. 1382–1426) and the Presentation of Empirical Medical Knowledge in the Later Middle Ages," William H. York reexamines the career and writings of a medieval doctor–author who is championed by later humanist physicians as uniquely forward-thinking in his reliance on insights about healing that are acquired, after the fashion of "experimental science," from practical experience rather than simply from the book-based learning of ancient authorities. Doubting this assessment, York urges greater attention to the social positions and ulterior investments of both the author, who had extensive in-the-field experience treating actual patients but lacked the credentials of a university medical master, and his targeted "upper class" audience. Those factors in mind, York challenges the characterization of Valesco as a "modern anomaly" in the Middle Ages, arguing instead that the distinctiveness of his writings derives primarily from his preoccupations with crafting the sort of self-legitimizing "professional identity" that depended as much, or even more, on his wealth of practical experience as on his textual learning. It is not, then, York argues, a unique reliance on empirical observations, but instead a special concern for "authorial presentation" and perhaps a kind of careerism that sets Valesco apart from his contemporaries. According to this iconoclastic view, instead of a "rogue outlier" who valued empirical learning more than his medieval

contemporaries, Valesco was simply one who, for his own deft professional reasons, chose to capitalize on and write about the observations he had made during years of practice—and that is what accounts for his special appeal to Renaissance readers.

Chapter 3, “Plague in Bede’s Prose *Life of Cuthbert*” by Michelle Ziegler, shifts attention from health and healing to medieval literary presentations of pestilence, suffering, and disease. She notes that, by contrast to earlier hagiographic accounts of this seventh-century Anglo-Saxon hermit and bishop, Bede’s prose version, published around 720 and designed to revive Cuthbert’s standing as both a saint and model bishop, affords considerably greater attention to the plague-induced tribulations and suffering of the protagonist and the community that he served. This shift in emphasis was, according to Ziegler, a deliberate and strategic decision insofar as accentuating Cuthbert’s seemingly unfortunate afflictions and prolonged death both enhanced his prestige as the ideal pastoral monk-bishop and supplied more suitable readings for the daily office during the Lenten season, thereby substantially reviving Cuthbert’s profile and reputation. Ziegler helps us to appreciate, in other words, pestilence and suffering, not simply as unfortunate trials, but rather, in this medieval context, as positive, even welcomed “signs of divine favor,” and consequently, as particularly fecund literary motifs.

The fourth chapter in this set, “Doctors and Preachers against the Plague: Attitudes toward Disease in Late Medieval Plague Tracts and Plague Sermons” by Ottó Gecser, continues the concern for the depiction of pestilence and epidemics, in this case via analysis of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century documents that arose as a response to the Black Death. Gecser particularly ponders the tensions between largely “naturalistic” explanations of pestilence and those “religious” explanations that depict plagues as instances of divine punishment or perhaps apocalyptic portents, that is to say, the supposed tensions between secular and sacred interpretations of ill health. Again we are advised that to sort out the issues requires critical attention to the agenda and social positions not only of the respective authors but, even more, the respective audiences to whom these various writings were directed. Gecser observes, for instance, that while plague tracts aimed to a specialized readership of healing practitioners presented state-of-the-art medical explanations, that is to say, largely “secular” explanations, sermons that were for the instruction of the general public, by contrast, invariably depicted plagues as instruments of God’s will. Additionally, Gecser’s efforts in the critical contextualization of these texts reveal a telling split wherein some clergy were steadfastly antagonistic to naturalistic accounts of plague, which might seem to undermine the teachings of the Church, while others worked to reconcile increasingly better-informed medical explanations of disease with religious ones.

Chapter 5, “Describing Death and Resurrection: Medicine and the Humors in Two Late Medieval Miracles” by Leigh Ann Craig likewise directs attention to the seeming clash between physiological versus churchly explanations of sickness and healing, though she admonishes us to question the pervasive assumption of a diametric opposition between ecclesiastical and medical authorities. Alternatively, concentrating on two similar but different English miracle stories, both of which

recount children who were accidentally crushed to death but then restored to life by their parents' prayers to saints, she argues that "learned medicine underpinned later medieval depictions of miraculous healing." Yet another who undertakes a critical appraisal of the pertinent authorships and agenda—most notably in these cases, the stories' strategic deployments in canonization proceedings—Craig notes substantial differences between the first story, which describes the restoration of an 18-month-old boy who was run over by a wagon, and the second, which reports the resurrection of a three-year-old girl who was squashed by a log. Yet, more importantly, both these miracle stories, in her view, display largely seamless appeals to natural bodily processes *and* supernatural intervention, that is to say, to both secular and sacred factors, thereby undermining again the familiar presumption of a blunt opposition between learned medicine and miraculous healing.

In Chapter 6, "Getting Enough to Eat: Famine as a Neglected Medieval Health Issue," Iona McCleery is less preoccupied with the analysis of specific texts than with proposing "a research agenda for the future" that can rectify what she sees as the insufficient attention that medical historians have afforded the study of famine, especially by contrast to that lavished on plagues. Her diagnosis of the key methodological problems and her recommendations for improvement, each of which speaks to both the challenges and virtues of interdisciplinary work, address three interrelated concerns. First, because medical historians have, to their detriment, largely avoided theories fashioned by economic historians, they would be well served to pay greater attention to the consequential connections between wealth, poverty, and famine. Second, though, for complex reasons, the topic of famine actually is underrepresented in medieval written sources, medical historians could nonetheless do a more thorough job of examining the language and imagery of famine that do appear in those documents. And third, providing an ideal segue to the next set of essays, McCleery urges medical historians—who have tended to rely overwhelmingly on documentary resources—to engage more fully the work of bioarchaeologists whose analyses of famine in the Middle Ages draw additionally on skeletal remains, ecological factors, and other sorts of non-literary evidence.

Be that as it may, the second set of essays shifts from a primary reliance on textual sources to sustained consideration of "Sacred and Secular Objects and Sites." Repeatedly we are cautioned that because medieval texts invariably present partial, often tendentious and idealized views that give voice to some sectors of society while leaving others silent, even the most critically astute reading of the written sources benefits from attention as well to material resources—or non-literary vehicles of intelligibility, if you will—such as art, architecture, and stained glass; jewelry, gems, and stones; and even features of the natural landscape. In every instance, though, the reliance on these sorts of non-alphabetic evidences is supplemented by attention to the relevant documentary sources. Texts, objects, and sites are construed as complementary avenues of inquiry.

Chapter 7, the first in this set, "Early Medieval Crystal Amulets: Secular Instruments of Protection and Healing" by Genevra Kornbluth, explores what rock crystals and gemstones, a disproportionate number of which have been recovered

from the graves of women, can teach us about medieval healing. She argues, on the one hand, that to make sense of the estimable appeal of amulets in the early Middle Ages, the well-worn dichotomy between sacred and secular is less useful than distinguishing between supernatural and natural. Yet, on the other hand, noting the similarly provisional status of that distinction, she likewise emphasizes the need to “step outside” our modern intellectual frames in order to appreciate that, where we may have the impression that the efficacy of amulets was attributed to their “supernatural” or perhaps “magical” properties, in fact, “in their own time these objects were generally thought to act naturally.” That is to say, gemstones were, in these pre-modern contexts, understood to have “apotropaic properties” that enabled them to ward off harm and evil influences—but in ways that were considered fully ordinary or “natural”; they were, in Kornbluth’s apt phrase, “secular instruments” of protection and healing. According to the natural science of that day, rock crystals, instead of relying on or channeling some sort of divine agency, simply participated in a sort of “lithic power” that was entirely in accord with the processes of nature; and thus they were utilized in “a number of practical ways, by pragmatic men and women without recourse to superstition, magic, or religion.” Only later, from more modern frames of reference, were the purportedly powerful properties of amulets classified as supernatural, preternatural, miraculous, or magical.

Chapter 8, “Loadstones are a Girl’s Best Friend: Lapidary Cures, Midwives, and Manuals of Popular Healing in Medieval and Early Modern England” by Nichola E. Harris, continues the examination of medieval lapidary medicine by focusing on eagle-stones and loadstones, both of which were commonly associated with successful conception, gestation, and childbirth. Integrating the study of these objects with the rigorous contextualization of written sources ranging from classical encyclopedias, to medieval medical treatises, and then to cheaply printed advice manuals that were popular in the early modern era—that is to say, vernacular sources on which literate lay people relied for practical guidance in treating themselves—Harris undertakes a history of ideas about lapidary-based cures used in women’s medicine. This historical approach enables the intriguing observation that where the medieval use of eagle-stones demonstrates a “surprising continuity” with medical ideas from the classical world, healing practices associated with loadstones greatly expanded in the latter half of the seventeenth century, particularly in regard to treating women. Be that as it may, tracking these gynecological ideas over time reaffirms once more other contributors’ observations about the blurring of sacred–secular boundaries insofar as Harris explains how medieval writers, on the one hand, inherited the “pagan” conception of these stones as “marvelous products of Nature” that could be usefully employed by humans (that is, secular objects), but also, on the other hand, asserted the more Christian notion that objects like eagle-stones and loadstones were “gifts from God,” which had been purposefully created for the benefit of humankind (that is, sacred objects). In short, once more we are advised that the sacred–secular distinction, if important to contemporary scholars, was largely inconsequential in pragmatic pre-modern approaches to women’s health.

In Chapter 9, “Performative Thaumaturgy: The State of Research on Curative and Spiritual Interaction at Medieval Pilgrimage Shrines,” James Bugslag, likewise pressing for a more suitably broad and less idealized conception of medieval religion, concedes that pilgrimage, a large portion of which was explicitly motivated by healing, was, of course, Catholic, but relied also on age-old practices that had been adapted to Christian use. He is emphatic in stressing that many pilgrims concerned with issues of health and the welfare of themselves and their families saw no contradiction between such healing practices and their Christian belief and were not content to submit passively to ecclesiastical control. To the contrary, medieval pilgrimage, Bugslag writes, “forms a remarkably varied site of intersection of ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ beliefs,” a therapeutic ambience wherein pragmatic pilgrims undertook an ingeniously wide range of interactive practices and “thaumaturgical interventions,” many of which show “remarkable continuities” with pre-Christian pagan practices and some of which were uncomfortably accommodated by the Church. Reliance on the orthodoxy-privileging written record provides a valuable but limited source for “what actually happened at pilgrimage shrines,” and thus has to be augmented by fuller attention to the non-literary evidence, most notably for Bugslag, the forms and furnishings of church architecture, including stained glass, but also proximate landscape features. Among the most surprising outcomes of that greater scrutiny of this neglected visual evidence is a corrective realization that curative practices involving the relics of saints, frequently cited as “the sole focus of pilgrimage activity,” were, albeit important, only one component in a remarkably varied ensemble of thaumaturgical strategies, which also invoked the reputed healing properties of images, statues, trees, wells, and springs.

In Chapter 10, “Life (and After-life) Insurance in the Medieval Period: Insights Offered by the Distribution of Pilgrim Badges Recorded by the Portable Antiquities Scheme in England,” Michael Lewis continues the focus on popular pilgrimage processes and reiterates the rewards of close attention to non-literary evidences. More specifically, he draws inspiration from British archaeologist Geoff Egan’s appreciation of the large significance of “small finds” to capitalize on the abundant and diverse, but under-studied souvenirs or “badges” that pilgrims carried home from their journeys. Synthesizing the archaeological and textual evidence, Lewis again challenges us to appreciate the distinctiveness of “the medieval mind” that supported tenacious beliefs in the healing power of saints, especially via direct physical contact with relics, which were prized not only as foci for prayer but also as repositories of “wonder-working power.” He explains how pilgrimage to numerous holy sites and shrines in and beyond England, Canterbury foremost among them, was conceived as both a principal means for improving the constitutions of the already-infirm and also as a means of “preventive healthcare” or “life insurance” against bad health. These pilgrimage badges provided proof of having visited a particular place and availed oneself of the curative powers of a particular saint. Widely circulated, these often crudely made mementos served as “touch-relics” that enabled the pilgrim to carry home and also to transfer to other persons a measure of the miraculous powers of the saints one had experienced at various pilgrimage destinations.

In sum, then, these investigations of the dynamics and curative rewards of medieval pilgrimage—especially by heightening our awareness as to the not-infrequently heterodox and always results-driven improvisations of pilgrims—attest yet again to the permeability of three interrelated tensions that reappear across this collection. First, with respect to supposed contradistinctions between “official” and “unofficial” approaches to healing, because few if any concerns have more broadly urgent relevance, it is, as we are repeatedly reminded in the first set of essays, entirely predictable that diagnoses and remedies for illness are featured topics both in ecclesiastical documents and in the medieval literature that engages doctrinal policies and practices. It is not surprising, as the second set of essays trained on non-literary evidences brings to the fore, that sickness and healing are among the issues about which even the most devout are least willing to accept passively official explanations and injunctions. If unorthodox healing practices, which bring to bear all avenues of aid, demonstrate efficacy, or at least inspire continued hope, they will, as the studies of medieval pilgrimage make especially clear, endure.

Second, with respect to an ostensible clash between “religious” and “naturalistic” approaches to illness and curing in medieval contexts, at points we may observe an irreconcilable antagonism between those rationales and recommendations that have as their priority full consistency with church doctrines versus more empirical interpretations of sickness and healing. Attributing pestilence and plague to divine retribution or apocalyptic forecasts, for instance, may, in some cases, be inexorably at odds with more medically forward-looking explanations. More frequently, however, as in the case of those pilgrims who offer their curative petitions not only to accredited saints and their relics but also to trees and springs, we observe pragmatically inclusive approaches wherein strategies appealing to God for healing are augmented—but not replaced—by additional appeals either to practices from pre-Christian Europe, or rituals inherited from ancient Greece and Rome, or to contemporary medical knowledge. Whether conjoined as the result of well-considered compromises or simply a means of “covering all bases,” in these contexts, miraculous and medical cures are more often seen as allies than mutually exclusive alternatives.

And finally, then, with respect to the admittedly artificial dichotomy from which this volume takes its title, the variously shrewd or sometimes slipshod improvisations of popular pilgrimage provide us with yet one more forewarning against leaning too heavily on the creaky old distinction between “the sacred” and “the secular.” As the editors of this volume are aware, this dichotomy, while heuristically useful, is still very debatable. Further, nearly every contributing author, irrespective of their wide diversity of disciplinary affiliations and special foci, would challenge this artificial division. In pre-modern contexts, these categories do not mark clear and inviolate boundaries. Together these authors provide us a well-advised warning against any longer accepting this contradistinction without qualification. And nevertheless, these scholars’ persistent complaints about the distortions and oversimplifications that the sacred–secular bifurcation engenders are invariably followed by conscientious and creative proposals that can respect

more fully the culturally specific nuances of “the medieval mind.” Indeed, even if the sacred–secular distinction is no longer the sturdy formulation that it was once considered to be, the well-worn rubric remains—as this rich collection of essays reaffirms—a highly provocative protocol under which to launch an interdisciplinary conversation about sickness and healing in the Middle Ages.