

A medieval contribution to the history of legal medicine: the first European Necroscopic Registry

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Up to now, scanty information on mortality and cause of death of past populations has come mainly from church registries or coroners' archives [1].

The authors here introduce the medical/necroscopic¹ registry of deaths established in Milan in 1452, the very first of its kind in Europe. The exceptional qualities of this registry, similar to modern ones, consist in the intention of the public authority to register all deaths (both natural and suspicious) with a specific medical report. This registry, presently preserved at the Archivio di Stato of Milano, reflects the will of the Duke of Milano, Francesco Sforza, to check population mortality and morbidity and suspicious or violent deaths in one of the most important cities in Europe at the time, with a population of over 100,000 [2, 3]. The Registry requested the annotation of all deaths, with name, age (calculated in years or months, days, and even hours for infants), city district and parish, and cause of death,

complete with previous symptoms and signs, diagnosed by a qualified doctor or by personnel with medical training (e.g., *Catelano*), with clear references to scientific bibliography of the period [4] (Fig. 1).

A preliminary study of the first 4 years (6,200 deaths) showed surprising medical and medicolegal prowess. For natural deaths, both sexes are equally represented, as are most age ranges (some individuals reached 100 years), with a peak for infants. Some examples of medical reports are: “*a febre continua ac dolore matricis ex ritentione eorum quae post partum expurgari debuerint*” (“continuous fever and pain to the uterus due the retention of that which should be naturally expelled postpartum”); “*appopleisia forti apostemata posterioris partis celebri*” (“accidental apoplexy due to abscess in the posterior part of the brain/cranium”); “*ex febre continua cum dolore laterale et sicha tussi et cum inflammatione brachii dexteri*” (“continuous fever due to pleurisy [5] and dry cough with inflammation of the right arm”); “*a cancro in mammila sinistra*” (“cancer to the left breast”); “*ex sincopi causata ex sanguinis coagulatione in stomaco et intestinis*” (“syncope due to blood coagulation in the stomach and intestines”). Violent deaths (accidents, homicide, and suicide) mainly concerned men and are equally well described: “*ab offensa circha posteriorem partem cerebi et cervicem ex precipiti casu super dorsum*” (“damage around the posterior part of brain/cranium and neck due to an accidental fall on the back”).

This preliminary note illustrates the historical origin of modern necroscopic practice and the social and medical advances of a historical period undeservedly classed as “dark”.

¹ The term necroscopic is to be intended as referring to the examination of a dead body with the purpose of certifying death and establishing its causes, eventually through autopsy.

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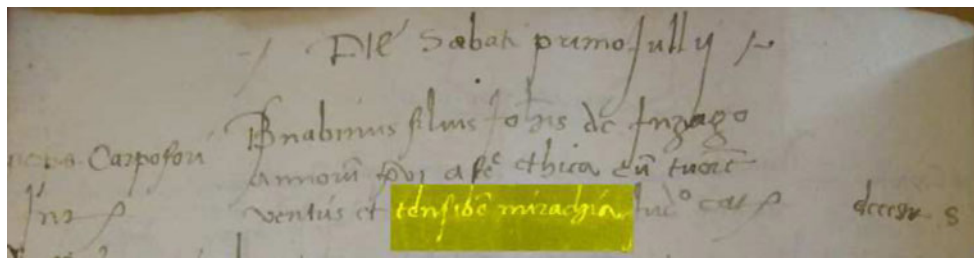


Fig. 1 Example of a case from the Registry, year 1475. “*Die sabati primo Julii, Porta Comasina, parochia Sancti Carpofoi intus. Bernabinus filius Johannis de Inzago, annorum XVI, a febre ethica cum tumore ventris et tensione mirachia, iudicato Catelano, decessit. S-solvit*” (“On Saturday, July 1st, in Porta Comasina, in the Parish of St. Carpophorus, Bernabinus, son of Johannes from Inzago, of

16 years of age, died of fever with tumor of the abdomen and tension of mirac. Judged by Catelano. Paid”). The word *mirac* is introduced in the medical vocabulary in a reknown medical textbook of the period (4) and is described as “*paniculus ex carne et pinguedine mixtus*”, i.e., “mixed stratum of flesh and fat” in the abdominal area

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