Leprosy in the Middle Ages

Institution Affiliation

Name

Course Title

Today leprosy is not very common as it was before in the Middle Ages. Leprosy, some call it Hansen's disease, was seen to cause skin lesions that damage the skin and sometimes damage permanently. Although it does not lead to somebody's parts falling off, it exposes one to secondary infections. For a long time, there has been a misunderstanding about leprosy since most believed that it was a curse from God while others had a strong belief that it was hereditary; this was before the biological cause was determined. The most unfortunate bit was that people suffering from this disease were stigmatized and thus were affected greatly.

According to the apostles' people should honor the weak in society. However, ecclesiastics decided to abandon the teaching of Jesus Christ and ignored the lepers such that they never allowed them to interact with other people, even in churches. The highly feared the disease with the belief that it was a curse from God. Besides, they felt if they shared and worshiped in the same churches, they would get harmed. They were allowed to establish their churches and be served by their own priests. Also, they were not compelled to pay tithes not because it was unnecessary but the ecclesiastics highly feared the interaction with the lepers[[1]](#footnote-1).

The stigma attached to the disease made it hard for people to come out whenever they were affected[[2]](#footnote-2). Whenever one developed a physical challenge that seemed close to leprosy, they tried to seek help as fast as possible before others realized it. It was traumatizing enough, especially when one visualized how the members would treat them of the society. When Sadid al-Mulk developed a white patch on his skin, his father was very concerned that it would turn to be leprosy[[3]](#footnote-3). He had to summon Bultan to examine and determine whether Sadid was suffering from leprosy for being so anxious. The father was willing to pay anything amount as long as his son would get cured. He knew and understood very well that if it were found to be leprosy, then his son's life would change greatly from then. It took the mercy of God to get healed. Healthy people looked down upon those that were sick.

People believed that the sick turned evil and became insane; they would do great harm to the rest of the population. They were to be secluded to private places away from people to avoid contracting the disease. In 1321, in the kingdom of France, lepers were accused of having evil plans to infect the healthy in the kingdom[[4]](#footnote-4). They were said to have planned to infect water in the rivers and fountain with poison with the intention that when the healthy used the water, they would contract the disease and become lepers like them. Obviously, this would lead to an increased number of lepers and decrease the number of healthy persons. It was due to such reasons that the sick was sent away from where other people lived. Some of the place's horrible acts were done to the lepers; some were closed up in their houses and set on fire without being subjected to any form of trial.

Those who survived the horrible act, plus those found not guilty, were enclosed in places where they would never interact with anyone healthy. This was meant to keep them away from the rest of the population since they were seen to be a threat. The enclosed women were separated from men. The reason for separation is to suffer trauma, no love, and finally, die and wither away. This made most people fear the disease such that they would not dare get closer to the sick. Some rules were set for the sick to follow, which were different from the healthy ones. Anyone who had the interest in going out had to ask for permission from the master, which was not a guarantee. Any sick person who complained of little food or denial of some privileges then they were rebuked. They were to abstain unless it was on a festive season.

The sick had a different dressing that would differentiate them from the rest and make it easy for them to be identified from far. This was meant for the purpose of healthy keeping safe and not contract the disease from the lepers. Failure to abide by the rules set in place, one was to be compelled away from the community and live as an outcast.

In some other places like Gadara, there were hot springs that were referred to as the baths of Elijah. The lepers were cleansed in those springs, and they would eat at the public expense. When the baths were full, the gate used to be closed, and the sick sat in the tanks for a night; the one who was lucky to get a cure had a vision that night, and on telling the vision to the springs that never flowed for a week he was cleansed. Close to the salt sea was another spring that had very sweet water, and upon one drinking as cathartic, they got healed. It was by the will of God that lepers were healed[[5]](#footnote-5).

**Bibliography**

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Excerpted from the Decrees of the Third Lateran Council, as translated in Norman P. Tanner,

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The Chronicle of the Inquisitor Bernard Gui, excerpted from and translated by MalcolmBarber, "Lepers, Jews, and Moslems: The Plot to Overthrow Christendom in 1321", History 66: 216 (1981), 1-17.

1. *"Travel account of an anonymous pilgrim from Piacenza." Excerpted from John Wilkinson, Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades (Warminster, 1977), 81-82.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Statutes of the leprosarium of St. Mary Magdalene, Dudstone, England. Excerpted from E.J. Kealey, Medieval Medicine: A Social History of Anglo-Norman Medicine (John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1981), 200-201.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Excerpted from the Decrees of the Third Lateran Council, as translated in Norman P. Tanner,* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Excerpted from Usama ibn Munqidh, The Book of Contemplation, trans. Paul Cobb (Penguin Classics: New York, 2008), 197.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *The Chronicle of the Inquisitor Bernard Gui, excerpted from and translated by MalcolmBarber, "Lepers, Jews, and Moslems: The Plot to Overthrow Christendom in 1321", History 66: 216 (1981), 1-17.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)