

Claudia Stein. *Die Behandlung der Franzosenkrankheit in der Frühen Neuzeit am Beispiel Augsburgs.* Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2003. 293 pp. EUR 48.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-515-08032-3.



Reviewed by Mitchell Lewis Hammond (Department of History, University of Victoria)

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Few events of the later Middle Ages caused greater consternation among city dwellers than the emergence of the so-called French disease which, in 1495, struck numerous German communities as Henry VIII's troops returned home from their Italian campaign. Also known as the "wild warts," or simply "the pox," the disease caused high fever, severe joint pain, and burning pustules and ulcers that covered the entire body. The works that discussed its nature and causes constituted one of Europe's earliest debates in print, and, in the following decades, dozens of German communities set aside houses for segregation and treatment of the infected. This substantial urban response in the German lands receives cursory treatment in the excellent survey *The Great Pox* (1997), by Jon Arrizabalaga et al., and so Claudia Stein's examination of the imperial city of Augsburg is a welcome contribution to the social history of early modern medicine. Her topic matches the available sources admirably, for Augsburg was endowed with not one but three houses that treated the disease, one sponsored by the city and two by the wealthy Fugger family. Together these facilities treated thousands of people in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and were certainly among the largest of their kind. Hence, Stein's case study investigates an exceptionally full range of activities rather than the more modest isolation and treatment measures undertaken elsewhere.

In the first of three large sections, Stein analyzes accounts of the disease's causes and diagnosis in a sampling of ten vernacular texts published between 1495, when the city founded the first facility, and 1620. Here she incorporates the recent work of Ian Maclean and Roger French concerning bodily signs and their equivocal relationship to causes of disease in Galenic theory. The logic of this elastic framework dictated that a wide range of environmental and individual factors, such as excessive or inadequate food, weakness of an internal organ, or contact with poisonous material, might account for the imbalance of humors that caused the disease. Perhaps Stein's most contentious claim concerns the popular association of the disease with sinful sexuality. The disease's connection with prostitution was proverbial—even Martin Luther warned his students away from "French [i.e., infected] whores"—but intercourse was not viewed as the chief means of transmission, nor did the disease contribute in any meaningful way to crackdowns on prostitution (pp. 176-77). Writers such as the humanist Ulrich von Hutten also debated the merits of the two most prevalent treatments: the painful application of a mercury salve or steam bath, or drinks derived from guaiac, a tropical wood brought back by voyagers to the Americas.

Stein then turns to the specific institutions in Augs-

burg and the local circumstances that influenced their financing and administration. Following the lead of Robert Jütte's research on poor relief, Stein positions the history of pox houses within the broader history of *Kommunalisierung*, which included the widespread transfer of responsibility for poor relief from ecclesiastical to civic authority. Although this shift was well advanced before the sixteenth century, Stein offers a nuanced description of the influence of confessional politics, of special significance here since Augsburg acknowledged both Lutherans and Catholics after 1555. The municipal pox house received funds from the endowments of several cloisters that were closed during periods of reform. This facility was ostensibly neutral from a confessional standpoint in its operations. In contrast, the Fugger family assisted only Catholic pox sufferers as part of a charitable program intended to counter reform influences. However, this Fugger "woodhouse," so named for the guaiac wood, also employed a Lutheran physician well into the 1570s, and in other respects differed relatively little from the municipal facility. In this case, confessional competition led to duplication, as Augsburg's Lutherans and Catholics slowly developed the parallel societies described by Etienne François in *Die unsichtbare Grenze*.

The third large section addresses efforts in the pox houses to treat the disease, which often involved residence in one of the houses for months at a time. Alongside attention to their diets, patients underwent regimens of bloodletting and other forms of bodily evacuation. Responsible officials faced concerns that will be familiar to researchers of the history of poor relief or other aspects of urban history. While city officers attempted to assess the eligibility of the supplicants and enforce standards among its employees, academically trained physicians strove to exert greater influence over other practitioners, including barber-surgeons and unofficial healers with whom they competed. In one of the book's most interesting sections, Stein describes the range of concerns

that the disease evoked for the families of the afflicted. Some faced the return of unhealed and potentially contagious relatives, while others negotiated lengthy separations from children during treatment. Consequently, the results of a physician's examination, similar to the *Schau* long conducted for those suspected of leprosy, weighed substantially upon future prospects for those who were involved.

For the most part, Stein hews closely to her administrative sources, offering a thorough portrayal of an extraordinary configuration of early health care facilities. The thick texture of her description comes somewhat at the expense of material that would frame events in a wider perspective or engage significant theoretical issues. External factors that might have encouraged the measures in Augsburg, such as its ties to Italian or German cities with similar facilities, remain largely undefined. Stein's discussion of Galenic and modern perceptions of disease also raises the important question of how views of the French disease shifted during the sixteenth century itself. Indeed, contemporary observers widely noted its declining virulence over the years, even suggesting that it might eventually wane to be indistinguishable from more minor disorders.[1] The varied assessments of the disease illustrate the endless malleability of Galenic medical theory, but it is hard to say how transformations in theoretical accounts affected practitioners or patients more generally.

This exceptionally detailed local study will interest scholars of early modern medicine and urban historians, as well as anyone researching the history of sexually transmitted diseases.

Note

[1]. Jon Arrizabalaga, et al., *The Great Pox. The French Disease in Renaissance Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 268.

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