

Representations of Lancet or Phlebotome in Serbian Medieval Art

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SUMMARY

The topic of this study are representations of lancet or phlebotome in frescoes and icons of Serbian medieval art. The very presence of this medical instrument in Serbian medieval art indicates its usage in Serbian medical practices of the time. Phlebotomy is one of the oldest forms of therapy, widely spread in medieval times. It is also mentioned in Serbian medical texts, such as *Chilandar Medical Codex No. 517* and *Hodoch code*, i.e. translations from Latin texts originating from Salerno–Montpellier school. Lancet or phlebotome is identified based on archaeological finds from the Roman period, while finds from the Middle Ages and especially from Byzantium have been scarce. Analyses of preserved frescoes and icons has shown that, in comparison to other medical instruments, lancet is indeed predominant in Serbian medieval art, and that it makes for over 80% of all the representations, while other instruments have been depicted to a far lesser degree. Examination of written records and art points to the conclusion that Serbian medieval medicine, both in theory and in practice, belonged entirely to European traditions of the period.

Keywords: medieval medicine; medical instruments; holy physicians; history of medicine; Serbian medicine

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between art and medicine is as rich as it is dynamic and it offers a plenitude of opportunities for study in terms of topics as well as in terms of approach and methodology of research. Visual representations of various illnesses and related treatments, medical instruments and equipment constitute a distinct segment within these studies. Having been elaborated as a theme since ancient times [1], medical science and practice remained relevant in art throughout the Middle Ages [2]. Medical motifs appear in Serbian medieval painting as well, although they have only recently begun to draw attention of scholars [3, 4].

Serbian medieval art prospered together with the Serbian state, from the late 12th century until 1459, when it was discontinued after the Turkish conquest. In its history, Serbia went through a number of phases of development and its borders kept changing. Today, cultural monuments that serve as tokens of history are found in various countries in the Balkans. The degree to which they have been preserved is unequal, ranging from those relatively well kept, to monuments whose condition allows for no precise conclusions. This has had an effect on the way they have been treated, on scientific research and it has influenced relevant studies.

The primary goal of this study is to indicate the presence of medical instruments – mainly phlebotome or lancet used by physicians in Medieval Serbia – in frescoes and icons.

SERBIAN MEDIEVAL MEDICINE

Relying on heritage of the ancient world in matters of diagnostics, methods and ways of treatment, medieval medicine developed under the strong influence of Christianity [5-8], in terms of both interpretation of symptoms and therapies. Christian medicine can indeed be canonical, based on sacred mysteries and prayers for health, and apocryphal, which consists of magic rituals [7, 8, 9]. Apart from religious aspects, medieval medicine also had its secular (official, scientific) component [7, 8, 9]. In practice, religious and scientific medicine were inseparable – prayers for health were not only read while drugs were administered, but they were also considered to be a critical factor of every therapy, and were therefore given priority over the medical procedures.

From the point of view of contemporary science, Serbian medieval medicine was a combination of folk medicine and one practiced in Byzantium and in Western Europe [8, 9]. The oldest written fonts of Serbian medieval medicine date back to the late 12th and the early 13th century in relation to St. Sava [7, 9-12] who was the founder of first hospitals at monasteries Chilandar (ca. 1199) and Studenica (after 1206/07). He structured their work based on typica of these holy places [13]. Building of hospitals and xenodocheions was considered one of the more significant undertakings of medieval rulers. Based on written sources, around 19 hospitals were identified to have existed in Medieval Serbia [12]. Majority of

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