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by Deering J. Roberts

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DEERING J. ROBERTS, M.D. EDITOR AND PROPRIETOR

VOL. XXX NASHVILLE, JANUARY, 1908 NO. 1

Original Communications.

HISTORY OF SYPHILIS.*

BY J. M. KING, M.D., NASHVILLE, TENN.

In presenting the history of syphilis, I shall divide the subject into two parts, the first dealing with the origin of the disease, the second with an historical review of the treatment.

Introduction.—The origin of syphilis is shrouded in mystery. Some authorities, after revising the entire literature pertaining to the subject, from the earliest records to the close of the 15th century, say that one is not justified in considering its existence verified during that period. While others, as Milton (1879),

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state that it was known to the ancients, and was common in Italy seventy-five years before its spread in Italy by the soldiers of Charles VIII of France. There are chances for error on both sides, but the mass of testimony is sufficient to bear some weight.

History.—Local venereal disease of contagious character and formidable symptoms was known to all the ancients of whom we have any record. Among the ancient writings of the Greeks, Romans and Arabians, the following troubles were described: eating sores of the prepuce and glands; puriform discharges from the urethra; cancer and gangrene of the penis; enlargement of the inguinal glands; tumefaction of the testicles; abscess, pustules, and gangrene of the vagina. It is cited in Thucydes that a raucous voice, flat nose, ulcerations of the legs and lesions on other parts were results of venereal diseases. Venereal disease offered no grounds for divorce among the Greeks and Spartans. If syphilis existed among the ancients, it is probable that it had not attained the virulent and formidable condition of later date. Although the ancients seemed to recognize that systemic consequences followed debauchery, they confused physiological functions with diseased conditions. Menstruation was confused with disease of the genital organs. They believed that the menstrual discharge was a combination of the most obnoxious impurities of the body, and intercourse with a woman who had lately menstruated was not permitted under the conviction that it was a source of leprosy and a number of other diseases, either of the skin or genital organs. They held at that time another very peculiar notion as to the cause of the genital lesions. It was believed that by abstinence from intercourse the semen became acrid and poisonous, and finally affected the whole economy. They also believed that genital and anal disturbances were due to the liver. The following opinions with reference to the cause of syphilis will support this last statement. John Almner (Basle, 1536) attributed the cause of Morbus Gallicus (syphilis) to a morbid condition of the humours, which, taking origin in the liver, is propagated to the genital organs. James Cataneo believed it to be caused by a general corruption of the blood produced by poison of the menses, and though he began to think that disease

of the genital organs was caused by intercourse, still he was of the opinion that these persons were especially predisposed, and that they had a dry and a warm liver, or a humid and cold brain. Even in 1635 John Johnston placed the seat of syphilis in the liver. When we consider the existence of such confusion on the subject of venereal diseases in the seventeenth century, we may despair of any type of definite aid or light on the subject from the ancients. Egyptian papyri, cuneiforms of Assyria and Babylon refer to a venereal disease. Among the Hebrews there is no reference in their sacred writings, in the commentary of Josephus, in the Talmudical books, which verifies the existence of syphilis, although in Egypt today the natives designate the disease by the expression "marred Ayoub," which means the disease of Job. The literature of India presents no positive proof of the ancient existence of syphilis, although references are made to a disease in India which might be identified as syphilis. Buret and other French writers state that the Japanese and Chinese described and treated it with mercury in their ancient literature. Milton (1879) says that Dr. Thomas Nelson stated before the commission on venereal diseases that syphilis had existed in China and Japan immemorially. Klein says it had been known for ages in the East under the name of "moecho wiadi." Some writers suggest its introduction into the western part of the Eastern hemisphere to the adventures of Marco Polo.

Prehistoric.—Not being satisfied with such an unsatisfactory investigation of the ancient literature on the subject, an attempt has been made to establish the pre-historic existence of syphilis through the study of human bones excavated in different places on the earth. In Salutre (France), Peru, Ecuador, Lima, Tennessee, Colorado and California, bones have been found exhibiting exostoses, the results of periostitis, osteitis, sclerosis, caries, and other morbid processes. Parrot, Broca, and other French writers interpret these lesions to be syphilitic, and they also state that the prehistoric skulls of children in the anthropological museum of France present evidences of bony lesions of syphilis. Hyde received from Colorado apparently a typical syphilitic bone, which he sent to Pruden for microscopic examination, but no positive proof was found.

With all this research and investigation, it seems impossible to establish positive proof of the existence of so important a disease as syphilis prior to 1420 A. D., when Milton says it was common in Italy.

SIEGE OF NAPLES.

The historical period of syphilis which has attracted most attention is the later part of the 15th century, beginning with 1494, the time of the invasion of Italy by Charles VIII of France. For some unexplainable reason there was an outbreak at this time of what writers have called an "epidemic of syphilis" in Europe, which lasted seven years, and gradually subsided.

The disease was considered by some to be a new one, but by others an old one. The outbreak was attributed to several causes: to the condition of the atmosphere; the relation of the stars and planets; to the eating of certain foods; and to other etiological factors equally absurd. At that time the disease was known as "morbus gallicus," for it was thought that the disease was brought from Galicia, Spain. Milton states that morbus gallicus was common in Italy seventy-five years before the invasion of Charles VIII; he also says that it is pretty certain that syphilis was prevalent in the army of Charles VIII. If it is true that syphilis was common in Italy before the invasion, the way the army became infected and the spread of the disease at Naples is clear, but if it is not true, the source of infection remains in mystery and darkness.

Many causes for the epidemic and the sources of infection were offered, but none seemed so plausible and as readily acceptable as the one that the disease came from America. The new world had just been discovered and Columbus had returned in March, 1493. The first to herald this means of introduction of syphilis was Leonard Schmauss, Professor at Salzburg in 1518. This view of the question was strengthened by the authority of Astruc, who published the details in his works. He relied upon the authority of Oviedo, the official chronicler of the Indies, and Ruy Diaz, a physician of Seville. They stated that syphilis was brought by the followers of Columbus to Barcelona where they gave it to the whole city, so frightening the people that "fasts,

religious devotions, and alms" were enjoined to propitiate the offended deity, who had thus chastised them. From Barcelona it was conveyed by the soldiers under Gonsalvo de Cordova to Naples in 1495, where the French soldiers caught it and conveyed it to France, particularly to Lyons.

Van Helmont stated that the disease, though a new one, was not derived from America, but had originated in Europe, appearing for the first time during the expedition of Charles VIII. The same opinion was held by others, while others state that it came from Africa to America through the slave trade. Beckett (1720, Phil. Transactions) states that the older writers do not mention or consider the origin of syphilis at Naples. Columbus does not record anything concerning such a disease in the new world.

Considering the foregoing statements we are forced to only one reasonable conclusion—that the origin of syphilis still remains shrouded in mystery.

It is remarkable that the definite history of so important a disease as syphilis should date no farther back than 1494. When we view the question of the origin of syphilis in the light of our present notions of the disease, keeping in mind the awakening of navigation at that period of the world, it is perfectly reasonable to think that it was introduced from America or some other country beyond or without the limits of the Eastern Hemisphere. The habitat of the spirochæta pallida, which is the probable cause, might have been confined to America or some other country, just as the germ of yellow fever, cholera, etc., is limited to certain areas on the earth and may be conveyed from place to place by the communication of peoples. The great epidemic following this period without positive proof of the previous existence of the disease in this part of the world—the most civilized, too—rather favors the belief that the disease came from abroad, and surely it would have reached Europe from Africa long before 1494 on account of the proximity of the countries.

Origin of the Name.—Syphilis has been called by many names, such as Mal Français, African Disease, American Disease, Morbus Gallicus, Marred Ayoub, and many others.

The present name comes from the celebrated poem (1530)

"Syphilidus," by Hieronymus Fracastorius, an Italian physician and poet. The story of the poem is that the shepherd Syphilus, having destroyed the altars of the sun for the purpose of erecting some in honor of the King Alcithous, his master, was punished by the god by inflicting on him this horrible disease.

*"Et a primo traxit cognominia morbus,
Syphilidemque ad eo labum dixere coloni,"*

is the passage from which the word comes. It means a swine-lover, and comes from the two Greek words, "Sus"—swine, and "phylos"—lover.

Advancement in Diagnosis and Etiology.—Syphilis and venereal diseases were for a long time inextricably confused, and up to 1854 the sole criterion of the syphilitic nature of any lesion was the influence of mercury upon it. Confused with astrology and charlatanism, it was studied by Paracelsus (1493-1541), who was the first to overthrow the doctrine of the "humours" as the cause of syphilis. He maintained that it was due to debauchery alone. Fernelius (1497-1558) adopted and extended the ideas of Paracelsus, and divided the symptoms into primary and secondary.

The French were the first great workers in the investigation of the disease. Ricord was the first to separate syphilis from gonorrhœa, but he thought syphilis came from glanders. He pointed out the three stages, primary, secondary, and tertiary. Basereau, another Frenchman, in 1852, established the distinction between chancre and chancroid, and this line of work was continued and fully completed by Rollet in 1854-62-69.

When this work had been done, the conception of syphilis became rather clear. Rollet was the first to suggest the specific nature of gonorrhœa; that secondary syphilitic lesions were infectious, and sexual intercourse was not the sole method of conveying the disease. The teachings of Ricord gave rise in France to two famous schools for the study of syphilis—the Antiquaille at Lyons, represented by Diday; and the St. Louis Hospital, Paris, represented by Fournier.

Some of the views of these two investigators were diametrically

opposed. Diday established the existence of hereditary syphilis. Chabaux (1897) made a careful study of hereditary syphilis and its manifestations. The study was resumed by A. Fournier and completely worked out by him in 1881. Fournier is the great master, to whom more honor and credit is due than to any one else for the classification of the extensive clinical phenomena we have of the disease at the present day.

The results of the bacteriological researches and inoculation methods are set forth in recent literature. Inoculation began in 1866, but was not perfected until 1903 by Roux and Metchnikoff. Many germs have been accredited with the cause of syphilis, but it seems now that Schandinn has given us the real cause in the *spirochaeta pallida*.

History of Treatment—Abortive.—In 1514, Jean de Vigo said that the ulcerated nodule on the penis should be destroyed without delay after contagion. Excision was practiced by J. L. Petit in 1774. Hunter, in 1810, advised excision; Ricord also in 1856, but said: "Even if we amputate the penis as soon as the chancre appeared, syphilis would none the less follow." On account of failure, excision was almost universally abandoned until 1877, when Auspitz of Hamburg, reported results of 33 cases, which again renewed the practice.

Medical Treatment.—The many, many remedies which have been used in the treatment of syphilis in the different ages form a curious history. The first treatment consisted of invocations to the holy saints, pilgrimages, and the application of fantastic recipes of empirics. This was so, because nothing was known of the disease, and it was stated that many physicians refused to treat it. It was the only course the patients could pursue. It might be interesting to some to mention a few of the remedies used. Guaiacum was used and praised by Ulrich de Hutton and Fracastorius, replacing mercury at one time during the sixteenth century. Sarsaparilla was extensively used. It occurred in many decoctions such as Fetz's, Zittman's, Vigarious', Pollini's (Zittman's Strong Decoction, viz.: Sarsaparilla, 375 grs.; boiling water, 24 litres; digest, 24 hours. Add in a linen bag, alum, 45; mercury, 15; cinnabar, 4 grs.; reduce to 8 litres. Add senna,