

**HISTORY OF MEDICINE.
IN TWO VOLUMES,
VOL. II, PART I**

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History of Medicine. In Two Volumes, Vol. II, Part I by Dr. Max Neuburger & Ernest Playfair

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DR. MAX NEUBURGER & ERNEST PLAYFAIR

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HISTORY OF MEDICINE

History of Medicine

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

THE Publisher regrets that it is not yet possible to complete the English edition of Neuburger's *History of Medicine*. He has, however, in view of repeated enquiries for the book, thought it well to issue the present instalment without further delay. The remaining parts will follow as and when the German original is published.

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HISTORY OF MEDICINE

MEDICINE IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

VIEWED from the standpoint of evolution as a whole the goal which mediæval medicine sought to attain was the collation and elaboration of ancient tradition. Owing to unfavourable influences the West required far longer time for the attainment of this end than did Byzantium or the Islamic nations.

Occidental medical art, which had shown signs of deterioration and decadence even in the later centuries of Imperial Rome, dragged out its existence through more than five hundred years of the Middle Ages before manifesting any tendency towards emancipation from the bondage of this intellectual stagnation; it attained to the dignity of a science only at that later epoch when the pre-eminence of the Arabs had begun to fail.

Western medicine in the early Middle Ages is, strictly speaking, hardly a subject for the historian of science who would present a coherent picture of progressive events—at the utmost side-lights can be thrown upon medical conditions and literature, in as far as the very scanty information at our disposal makes this possible. Inadequacy of scientific principles, total stagnation of investigation, practice devoid of any lofty outlook, stereotyped and primitive, these are the characteristics of this era's healing art, an art which in its manifestations is almost reminiscent of the earliest stages of medical evolution. Gloomy as is the impression left upon the mind, the close connection of medicine with civilisation as a whole and its historic destiny come unmistakably to the fore, and its fate in this mournful period is bound up more intimately than usual with the spirit of the times.

In order to bring the degradation of medical art into relationship with the character of the epoch, no comprehensive description of the historical background is necessary, it will suffice briefly to indicate the most salient events of general importance.

The foundation of the Germanic states upon the ruins of the *orbis Romanus*, which played so important a part in the rejuvenescence of the nations of Europe, was associated with the sacrifice of countless lives, with the destruction of treasures of art and letters, with the devastation of wide

areas and the sack of many towns, with the annihilation of property, with the decay of the higher social and economic life. The decline of the Western Roman Empire, ushered in by a process of disintegration extending over centuries, was remotely, if not immediately, responsible for the collapse of a long moribund but yet considerable culture. The assimilation of this civilisation by the conquering Germanic nations was at first hindered by their heterogeneous impulses, tendencies and traditions, by the dissimilarities in speech and the lack of that more refined sensibility which can only follow upon the labours of many generations. It was, too, only after a long transition period filled with strife, with the confusion of racial intermingling, of political distraction, of social dislocation, that a sufficiently stable condition of affairs was re-established in the Germano-Roman world to make a renaissance of civilisation possible. In the barren centuries, when antiquity threatened completely to decay, whilst it was as yet uncertain what the future might bring forth, the Church alone, unshaken by all changes, stood as a bulwark against the flowing tide of racial migration and preserved a link with the past. She planted her banner upon the rampart of antiquity and rescued the arts of peace from total annihilation. Monasticism, in particular, has eternally to its credit that it afforded to culture a sanctuary in the midst of barbarism and with far-reaching results sowed the seeds of civilisation simultaneously with those of the healing art where the Roman legions had never penetrated. *Ite et docete omnes gentes* was translated into action. The elements of culture, mostly inherited from later Roman times, were, however, scanty, and their further development served only formal ends and was along such lines as the trammels of belief permitted. The scientific life of the early Middle Ages, of which the dim religious light of the Church and the study-lamp of the poring monk were almost the sole illumination, was on the whole a colourless one, not rising beyond mere reproduction, bringing forth no luscious fruit, for it is only where bounteous springs flow and where it is nurtured for its own sake that genuine science can flourish.

Taking the point of view that we have here to deal with a new beginning, with the cultural development of fresh nationalities which, after an evolution extending over centuries, for the first time found themselves capable of assimilating the achievement of the Græco-Oriental intellect, many phenomena appear in a clearer light, not only poetic and artistic impulses, but also leanings toward science. If, on the other hand, we trace, as we are doing, the course of civilisation as a whole, a comparison forces itself upon us, if not with antiquity, yet with contemporary Oriental conditions, creating the impression of a retrogressive metamorphosis.

In a comparison of the conditions obtaining in the West during the early Middle Ages with those in the East after the victorious campaigns of the Arabs, a number of factors have to be taken into consideration which exercised a considerable influence in determining the crude differences between the cultural development of East and West, the following amongst others.

The Western Roman countries which, from the third century onwards, lost more and more the borrowed brilliance of Hellenism, even before their subjection to the dominion of the Germanic races, hardly stood at the same high level as Syria, Persia and Egypt at the time of the Arab conquest; their devastation by depopulating wars and pestilence was more terrible than the later despoiling of the East. Whereas in the latter many large towns sprang up, and therewith centres of learning, trade and industry came into being, whose products were distributed by a commerce embracing three continents, in the West numerous cities were given up to destruction or sank into insignificance.

In place of the established and highly developed financial system of the East, with its influence upon civilisation, the Germanic conquest brought in its train a degraded and primitive system of exchange, life took on a more bucolic character, the predilection in favour of agriculture, the stagnation in trade, the decline of industry, the unprofitable traffic, the increase of poverty, all reacted unfavourably upon the more refined modes of life. Just as the original political unity of the Califate and its proximity to Byzantium favoured civilisation, so did the division of the Germanic dominion into numerous separate entities with resultant isolation long constitute an obstacle to progress, although the way was thereby actually paved for later fruitful competition amongst the European nations.

The rapid rise and astonishingly wide dissemination of scientific activity under the "Arabs" is, apart from the above-mentioned predisposing causes, chiefly traceable to the fact that Greek literature was early and freely translated into the living language of the Koran, which was that of government and daily life, and thus to their great advantage was made accessible by means of libraries and schools to large numbers of the active-minded middle class. In the world of Islam it was the conquerors who impressed upon the conquered the stamp of Arabic nationality through their own language and religion, and who exercised a controlling influence upon the assimilated civilisation as well as upon that which had been self-evolved in freedom. In the Christian West, on the contrary, the Germanic conquerors, not having been originally united in the bonds of national sentiment and religion, were compelled to submit to a foreign civilisation, the Latin-Christian, which was almost exclusively in the hands of the clergy. This body occupied quite a special position in the State, was long recruited from the Roman populace, and was the means of ensuring to the Latin language, on account of its hallowed association with ecclesiastical literature and the influence of the cult upon national unity, ascendancy over the vernacular tongue as the method of expression of all higher intellectual activity. The treasures of knowledge existing in the Latin language, although only a very restricted portion of ancient culture, could not be directly conveyed in that medium to the Germanic races—whose need and capacity for education may be admitted. Civic impulses failing, all the vital energy preserved by ancient civilisation was concentrated upon the Church. An originally inadequate groundwork, not incomparable with that of the Arabs, enclosed within the rigid bounds of a dead tongue, checked in its free development by an irrevocable predestination, receiving no extraneous traditions or quickening ferment—how were vital creations to arise from this?

Medicine also, more and more hampered by the unfavourable external conditions obtaining in its educational establishments, threatened even in its very existence as a profession by the ominous change in economic conditions and modes of life, came increasingly under the sway of the Church—although it had long been a sphere of action for religious zeal and active Christian philanthropy. Priests and ascetics became physicians rather than philosophers and men of the world. The epoch is spoken of as one of monastic medicine—a description which, as will be shown, requires considerable qualification. Medical science as such naturally played under this guidance only a subordinate part, not only in contrast with ecclesiastical,