

## Book Reviews

argument and conclusion to frame his fundamentally nostalgic tone: a world lost to all but those who care to reify it.

Unlike the scientist, the prose-poet carries the reader into his orbit of realism and nostalgia by creating a narrative world in which language, especially a limpid prose style, lies at the forefront of his imagination. The subject here—the primacy of food in the early modern world—cannot usurp style's prominent place. Camporesi has been writing a book a year for over a decade, all now translated into English by the Polity Press in England and dealing with quasi-medical topics, if medicine is construed in the post-modern habit as broadly implicating the body: the body in its sacred and profane states, cold and sick, fed and hungry, robust and emaciated (the *corpo secco* of the artists), gyrating and levitating, dreaming and hallucinating, beatified and apostatized, rotting and fermenting, palpitating before God and bleeding on the cross. These subjects remain his themes.

Within these bodily transformations Camporesi's preoccupation remains primarily with food: bread, sugar, drink, meat, fish, soups; the basic perishables sustaining the lives of his pre-Bakhtinian sinners and saints and the protean fluids to which these foodstuffs are symbolically related: blood, water, urine; the detrius of other substances and their erotic and excremental connotations. These foods and fluids obviously had religious connotations in Christian countries. And to the degree that Camporesi connects food substances to symbolic actions and historical events he remains a modern Christian prose-poet (as well as social anthropologist of food) dealing with the most essential ingredients in the Catholic mixture that renders things Italian into forms they have come to represent in the post-Renaissance imagination.

His new book, a study of hunger and plenty in the pre-1700 Mediterranean world, builds on *The anatomy of the senses* and includes topics he has so wistfully described before: feast and famine within the sciences of the belly, the myth of plenty leading to the banquets in Cockaigne,

the haves and have-nots. He demonstrates what bread meant in that blemished world where poverty was the norm, not the deviation, and the degree to which malingerers connived for it. The difference in this book is that he also documents the plenitude.

This feast may appear less than medico-historical but it is an illusion. Poverty and wealth, haves and have-nots, always alter food stuffs: collecting as well as imbibing them. Every medical historian knows that as countries grew richer their diseases proliferated, as the poor were increasingly deprived of the meagre soil that at least kept them simple and healthy. Medical historians of the early modern period will therefore find this approach to hunger illuminating for its medical applications. The conjunction of food and health remains among the most puzzling of conjunctions, and the least explored. Myths of plenty and their opposites have not been viewed in relation to illness in any scholarly treatment, though the pathology of food is primal in the human imagination. Nothing has ever been able to dislodge it, not even the ethic that I am healthy, provided I eat. What is the history of the idea that life is a meal, and when did the pathology of food become preeminent? Recent studies of patients demonstrate their almost automatic conflation of food and sickness: doctor, I don't know what I ate last night that has brought me here . . . The *secular* history of the idea remains unexplored and is one in which medicine must be implicated.

G S Rousseau, Aberdeen

**Thomas Bartholin**, *On diseases in the Bible: a medical miscellany, 1672*, trans. James Willis, eds Johan Schioldann-Nielsen and Kurt Sorensen, Acta Historica Scientiarum Naturalium et Medicinalium, vol. 41, Copenhagen, The Danish National Library of Science and Medicine, 1994, pp. 147, DKK 200.00 (87-16-15099-6). Distributed by Munksgaard, 35 Nørre Søgade, DK-1016 Copenhagen K, Denmark (Fax: +45 3312 9387).

## Book Reviews

Thomas Bartholin's *De morbis biblicis*, first published in 1672, proved an immediate success and went through four editions during the next twenty-five years. It contains no less than twenty-seven short chapters on diseases and "supernatural" events taken not only from the Old and New Testaments, but also from the Talmud. Bartholin's work is here made available for the first time in English in a thorough edition which includes a table of transliterations from Hebrew texts and, perhaps more significantly, a bio-bibliographical index, an important tool for unlocking the many references to contemporary scholars and texts.

Bartholin was far from being a newcomer to biblical medicine when he published *De morbis biblicis*. He had already indicated his interest in biblical topics in his correspondence with his uncle Ole Worm during his residence in Padua in 1642–43 and three years later he published his tract on the abdominal wound of Christ. Between 1645 and 1653 he further documented this interest by publishing a number of works on paralytics in the New Testament.

Systematic study of biblical medicine appears to have taken off at the beginning of the seventeenth century with the works of J Grossius, *Compendium medicinae ex scriptura sacra depromptum*, and G Arder, *Enarrationes de aegrotis, et morbis in euangelico*, both published in 1620. Unfortunately the introduction to this text offers no explanation as to why biblical medicine became a major concern in this period. Apart from stating that Bartholin was the "first physician of great distinction" to be interested in this topic, the editors make no attempt to explain how and where his work fits into this type of scholarship. We are told that Bartholin's approach to the diseases mentioned in the Bible was simple, namely that the Bible represents the truth and that therefore, from the symptoms described, physicians should be able to determine what type of disease was indicated, but not why Bartholin should have undertaken this enterprise. For a Lutheran natural philosopher and physician like Bartholin this interest appears to me to have

been a way of fusing his search for God through his natural philosophy, and enquiries into the natural world, with his faith and the supernatural as presented in Scripture—an area where natural philosophy and theology could possibly unite in their common purpose to reach a better understanding of God and his creation.

**Ole Peter Grell,**  
Cambridge Wellcome Unit

**Edward A Eckert**, *The structure of plagues and pestilences in early modern Europe. Central Europe 1560–1640*, Basel and London, Karger, 1996, pp. x, 180, SFR 180.00 (3–8055–6267–5).

In the words of the author, this study, if viewed in the light of a general history of epidemics in early modern Europe, "is the most intensive analysis of plague in any area based on quantitative data" (p. 10). A data-base of some 800 parish registers, supplemented by quantitative and descriptive archival and printed sources, translates into a convincing case. The work is a detailed analysis of the spatial and temporal distribution of eight waves of plague which expanded and contracted during the eighty-year period from 1560 to 1640. The principal goal is to demonstrate that the recurrent waves of epidemic plague constitute a system.

The basic unit of this system is not the single community or a defined region but rather the *cluster* of outbreaks. The historical clusters are illustrated in a series of maps showing the location of affected towns and parishes. The development of a cluster is critically important to the proposed system because it becomes a stimulus to the dissemination of plague, which can be transferred from multiple infective foci within the cluster to multiple vulnerable locales in the general area by a variety of alternative routes. In brief, the system of plague unfolded in the following pattern: the development of one or more clusters of limited regional epidemics,