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<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111680569-014>

**Elma Brenner, François-Olivier Touati (Eds.): Leprosy and identity in the Middle Ages. From England to the Mediterranean.**

(Social Histories of Medicine). Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021; 400 S., ISBN 978-1-5261-2741-9

The volume edited by Elma Brenner and François-Olivier Touati goes back to an international conference held in April 2011 at King's College, Cambridge. It is divided into five chapters and comprises a total of twelve contributions. In the jacket text the editors emphasize that „for the first time, *Leprosy and identity in the Middle Ages* explores the identities of people affected by leprosy, especially the sufferers but also the caregivers and broader social networks“.

This makes curious, because research on identity in relation to leprosy in the Middle Ages seems to be an exciting new approach. In fact, there has been a lot of research on identity and the construction of identities, especially regarding different groups of people in various historical contexts in recent decades. One would therefore expect that the terms „identity“ and „identities“, which are central to the volume, would first be clearly defined in the introduction. In fact, the editors devote themselves to the topic of „identities“ (pp. 7–11): „The question of identity, in terms of how the sick and disabled were viewed by themselves and others in the Middle Ages, and how they and others identified their physical and mental condition, is also highly relevant to leprosy.“ Thus, they understand „identities“ only in general terms as aspects of self-attribution and attribution by others. A more precise definition of „identity“ is not given and no reference is made to the methods and concepts that have been developed by recent identity research.<sup>1</sup> Instead, the term „identity“ is used in the further course of the volume more as a non-specific phrase and moreover in an inflationary manner, without it being clear what exactly is meant in each case: identities of medieval people, individual and collective identities, shared identities, new identity, strong identity, Christian identity etc.

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<sup>1</sup> On the methods and concepts of identity research, compare, for example, the basic standard works by Margaret Wetherell, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (Ed.): *The Sage Handbook of Identities*. Los Angeles 2010, and by Anthony Elliott (Ed.): *Routledge Handbook of Identity Studies*. New York 2021.

At this rather general level of self-perception and perception by others of persons with leprosy in the Middle Ages, however, scientific work is not taking place, as already cited, „for the first time“. These topics have already been addressed in recent research, for example in German-speaking countries, but also in the Benelux region as well as in Scandinavia and Central/Eastern Europe. However, with a few exceptions, this remains largely absent within the volume. Against this background, the spatial reference to „medieval Europe“, which is emphasised very often in the introduction, seems somewhat exaggerated. The subtitle of the volume „From England to the Mediterranean“ describes the actual spatial reference of the volume (predominantly France and England) more accurately.

In Part I, „Approaching leprosy and identity“, the archaeologist Charlotte Roberts focuses on „Reflections on the bioarchaeology of leprosy and identity, past and present“. She traces a path from the classical palaeopathology of leprosy with the analysis of bone changes typical of the disease to the latest possibilities of DNA analysis. The sequencing of the ancient leprosy genome, which was carried out for the first time in 2013, opens up new possibilities for diagnosing leprosy even in skeletons that do not show any bone changes. Based on several examples from England, Roberts show that there were often burials of people with leprosy on parish church cemeteries. Even when leprosarium cemeteries existed in the area. At the same time, there is also evidence for the reverse case, i.e., the burial of persons not suffering from leprosy at the cemetery of a leprosarium. Against this background, Roberts suggests further excavations in order to be able to better research the causes on a larger data basis.

François-Olivier Touati examines spatial aspects of the early historiography of leprosy: „Lepers and leprosy: connections between East and West in the Middle Ages“. Based on a rich corpus of textual sources, beginning in antiquity but mainly from the early Middle Ages, from the Christian and Arab regions, he shows that „ideas, attitudes and practices relating to lepers and leprosy“ circulated on the trade and pilgrimage routes around the Mediterranean. He points out that this is where the origin of leprosariums can be found. For it was not the fear of infection that was decisive for their formation. Instead, he sees their origins as a result of a „complex cultural exchange“. Accordingly, the increase of leper houses in the West was mainly due to the intensified relations with the Middle East since the 11th century.

Damien Jeanne examines prejudices against lepers in his contribution: „The disease and the sacred: the leper as a scapegoat in England and Normandy (eleventh-twelfth centuries).“ He focuses on the question of why lepers in the early and high Middle Ages were regarded as God’s chosen ones and transgressors of religious rules at the same time. In a case study, he

analyses miracle stories attributed to Thomas Becket, collected and written down in the 1170s by Benedict of Peterborough and William of Canterbury, reporting about the healing of lepers. In addition, he includes statements on the dichotomy surrounding leprosy from contemporaries of the 11th to 13th centuries into his analysis. He states that the warning of Christian „thinkers against sin and wanton desire, which they connected to leprosy“, which was still prevalent in the early Middle Ages, receded into the background at the moment when the care of the sick was secured in leprosariums and they no longer had to beg as vagrants. Within the leper house, the leper became an „intermediary between God and those seeking their future salvation“. Therefore, they could no longer be „considered an authentic scapegoat“.

In part II, „Within the leprosy hospital: between segregation and integration“, the institution of the leprosarium is examined. Carole Rawcliffe analyses in her chapter particularly the special spiritual role of the residents of English leprosariums as intercessors for their benefactors: „A mighty force in the ranks of Christ’s army: intercession and integration in the medieval English leper hospital“. Through a variety of examples, she shows that their important social function was based on the provision of spiritual services, which were considered particularly effective, and on their monastic way of life, characterised by religious rules similar to those of monks and nuns. Even when the number of leprosariums decreased significantly in the 14th century due to various crises, their intercessory activities continued to be accepted and sought after by their benefactors as a „notable act of Christian compassion“.

Simon Roffey, on the other hand, concentrates in his chapter on a single leprosarium and presents the recent research results of the excavations of 2008 and 2015: „Saint Mary Magdalen, Winchester: the archaeology and history of an English *leprosarium* and almshouse“. Since there are still far too few excavations of leprosariums in the European context, this multidisciplinary case study is of particular importance. Especially because it is one of the first wide-scaled-excavations of a leprosarium with its cemetery, which provides profound insights into the origins and development of an early leper house. It showed that the institution had already existed since the late 11th and early 12th century as a small religious establishment with chapel, cemetery and simple accommodation. It was already a place of communal worship and commemoration and not a secluded place of „outcasts“ in this early period, even before the institution later appeared in the written sources and was further enlarged.

Elma Brenner deals with „Diet as a marker of identity in the leprosy hospitals of medieval northern France“. Even though medical texts of the Middle Ages often deal with the correlation between illness and diet, Brenner points out that the nutrition in the *leprosaria* she studied corresponded less to these theoretical considerations than to a basic sustenance. She emphasises the importance of shared meals for the inhabitants of *leprosaria*: „eating and drinking had great religious and social significance“. However, she also proves that there were qualitative differences depending on the status of the residents „distinguishing the leprous from the non-leprous religious and staff, and different *leprosi* from each other“. Unlike the vagrant lepers, who mostly relied on begging for their sustenance, the residents of leprosariums were usually well supplied. The frequently documented donations of food to the institutions underline that they „remain integrated with wider society“.

In Part III „Beyond the leprosy hospital: the language of poverty and charity“, two chapters focus on groups of leprosy sufferers outside the institutional setting. First, Lucy Barnhouse studies sources relating to the *leprosaria* in Mainz, Worms and Speyer. However, these are located in Rheinhessen and the Palatinate, but not in the Rhineland (the border is near Bingen on the Rhine). The term „Rhineland“ used in the title and in the article is misleading in this respect, as it refers to a different historical cultural landscape. Another criticism is that Barnhouse includes almost no research in German on leprosy in the western part of the Reich. Most of the publications cited are only those by researchers who have published in English. The overwhelming number of relevant contributions to the topic she deals with are therefore left out. This leads to misinterpretations of the sources. For example, the „group“ of „„Kocheimer“ or „Kochener“ kinden“ cited by Barnhouse is of course not an „association with a cook or cooking pot“, because the adjective „kochem“ means „gerissen/durchtrieben“, particularly in her region of investigation. The term originates from Rotwelsch, a special sociolect of marginalised social groups, with Yiddish influences (Rotwelsch was also known as ‚Kochemer Loschen‘). This can easily be looked up in the relevant literature and in dictionaries for the region.<sup>2</sup> Thus, we are dealing with a fraudulent group of vagrant lepers, as they are mentioned quite frequently in the late medieval and early modern sources in the western part of the empire. It remains unclear to what extent they were actually suffering from leprosy or whether they only pretended to be lepers in order to benefit from their privileged status when begging. The group of closely regulated and settled „informal leper communities“

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. <https://woerterbuchnetz.de> (accessed 3 August 2023). The search word „kochem“ provides the appropriate results for „Südhessisches Wörterbuch“, „Pfälzisches Wörterbuch“ and „Rheinisches Wörterbuch“. Cf. on the meaning of „kochem“ Hans-Peter Althaus, Chuzpe Schmus & Tacheles. *Jiddische Wortgeschichten*. München 2020, p. 103.

constructed by Barnhouse through „examination of vocabulary“ is also unconvincing. These were most likely settlements of the so called „Feldsiechen“. In research, this term derived from the sources refers to simple and individual dwellings of lepers who had not found admission in an institutionalised leprosarium. These were generally not intended for permanent use beyond the death of the respective inhabitants. Finally, the attempt to classify the various names of lepers documented in the sources into two groups defined by the author – „lepers within hospitals“ and „informal communities“ – does not seem convincing. The number of documents in the sources analysed by Barnhouse is too small for this, and possible regional linguistic preferences have not been taken into account.

Luke Demaitre analyses the instrument of the clapper on the basis of an extensive database of „images of *leprosi*“ and indicates new ways of interpreting its material and symbolic significance: „The clapper as ‚vox miselli‘: new perspectives on iconography“. Since pictorial representations of body marks of the *leprosus* are mostly uncertain, he emphasises the importance of „additional markers of *leprosis*“. Therefore, he concentrates on the clapper as a characteristic attribute of *leprosi*. Since medieval depictions from England often show a bell as a warning instrument in addition to the clapper, he concentrates his analysis of clapper depictions spatially on the ‚Continent‘. Demaitre emphasises that there is „no doubt about the primary significance of the clapper in iconography, as calling for compassion rather than threatening with danger“. This is also supported by the fact that depictions of people with leprosy were not meant to cause fear, as they were usually shown together with Jesus or saints as supplicants and not as a threat. The thematic context therefore lay in the emphasis on inclusion, not exclusion and rejection, and the clapper served to increase attention, not primarily as a warning.

In Part IV, different aspects of „religious and social identities“ are discussed in three chapters. In this context, Courtney A. Krolikoski studies the following topic: „Kissing lepers: Saint Francis and the treatment of lepers in the central Middle Ages“. She first emphasises that in the 13th century there was a shift from „viewing leprosy as an illness of a person’s character to seeing it as an illness miraculously granted by God“. And in this context, she examines the role of Francis of Assisi as a popular and very influential saint. Unlike Saint Martin of Tours, who is said to have healed a leper from his physical deformities, Saint Francis’ kiss demonstrated, as Krolikoski points out, his perceptions of the leper as linked directly to Christ. In the period of upheaval in the 13th century, when equally positive and negative views of leprosy coexisted in society, the emphasis on the special status of lepers as a group

chosen by God, documented many times in the various traditions of St. Francis' hagiography, was particularly influential. Through his widely documented care and support of lepers, he became a model for other saints such as Elizabeth of Hungary and Hedwig of Silesia. As Krolikoski points out, the special significance of Saint Francis lay in reviving the idea of living in *imitatio Christi*. And the symbolic kiss of the leper moved the sufferers into a more central position within religion and society.

Rafaël Hyacinthe focuses in his chapter on the brothers of the Order of Saint Lazarus, who were both leprous and non-leprous: „From pilgrim to knight, from monk to bishop: the distorted identities of leprosy within the Order of Saint Lazarus“. Hyacinthe states that the Order began as a hospitaller convent, caring for the leprosy sufferers. After the conquest of Jerusalem in 1187 and the destruction of their first convent, the order entered a second phase. From now on, similar to the other orders in the Holy Land, they concentrated their actions and resources on warfare, adjusting and reorientating the initial crusading ideal. Thus, knights with leprosy could also fight in the Christian army. But the „experiment of leper knights“ ended, as Hyacinthe points out, after almost a decade. Then, in the Order of Saint Lazarus, it was „healthy knights caring for the sick“, as in the other military and hospitaller orders. Due to the spatial relocation to Acre after 1187, the Order had received less support and had to adapt to the changed circumstances. Hyacinthe emphasises that despite the particularly prominent position of the people with leprosy compared to *leprosaria* in the West, due to the spiritual aura in the holy city of Jerusalem and their „pre-sanctified“ status, they were not able to remain in society. But due to the special religious and military situation in the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem, it was possible to „retain a degree of inclusion and integration“, so that they were – if only for a short time – even tolerated on the battlefield.

In a case study, Anna M. Peterson examines the meaning of the word ‚leper‘ and its derivatives in Latin and Occitan for different groups of lepers: „Connotation and denotation: the construction of the leper in Narbonne and Siena before the plague“. The rationale for choosing the two cities, which are located several hundred kilometres apart in different linguistic and cultural regions, is not really convincing: They „offer a compelling comparison“ and are situated „in regions that are understudied vis-à-vis leprosy“, which is equally true for many other cities and regions. Just like the fact that both cities „developed strong municipal authorities during the first half of the thirteenth century“. However, by evaluating a number of interesting sources, Peterson is able to convincingly elaborate the character of the leprosariums in both cases as municipal institutions. She shows that both

institutions were administered and supervised by the city. This made it possible for the respective urban community to protect and care for its citizens suffering from leprosy and, moreover, to maintain a positively connoted status for them. In contrast to their privileged situation, she emphasises the difference to the vagrant ‚wild‘ lepers who moved around begging in groups and could not enjoy the benefits of community life such as access to religious facilities and care. This is an exciting topic that should receive more research attention in the future.

In the final Part V ‚Post-medieval perspectives‘, the chapter by Kathleen Vongsathorn and Magnus Vollset examines how the notions of medieval leprosy were invented in the modern world and why this topic became a matter of interest and relevance: ‚Our loathsome ancestors‘: reinventing medieval leprosy for the modern world, 1850–1950“. Here they emphasise in particular the reference to European colonial history. In the second half of the 19th century, the dominant view among practitioners was that the disappearance of leprosy in Europe had been achieved by ‚increased civilization“ and by the segregation of people with leprosy practised in the Middle Ages. These views served as a reason to ‚justify the colonial endeavour, which offered care to leprosy sufferers and, it was believed, would ultimately eradicate the disease by ‚civilising‘ the colonised“. At the same time, for many European missionaries – the most prominent of whom was Father Damien, who died of leprosy in 1889 – the example of medieval saints was an inspiring motive to devote their lives to leprosy work in order ‚to follow in Christ’s footsteps“. However, as the authors emphasise, this turning to lepers must also be seen and interpreted in the context of colonial history.

Despite the points of criticism mentioned, the volume provides a number of remarkable new insights into current research on the history of medieval leprosy, especially for the English and French regions. The different chapters offer interesting points of reference for comparison with current research on this topic in other European regions. This makes ‚Leprosy and Identity in the Middle Ages“ a recommendable publication, with important impulses for future research in the field.

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