

Medieval medical cultures in Sweden – practices and ideas mirrored in materiality

Medicine during the Middle Ages was very heterogeneous. We can discern several different parallel medical cultures within society – healing as a craft, as magic, as learned theory; medicine in monastic milieus and more indigenous practices and ideas in the surrounding society.

First Half of the Middle Ages

During the first half of the Middle Ages (ca. 1050-1300 AC) medical healing was practiced by both men and women who were thought to be specially gifted with soft healing hands. This gift was believed to be inheritable, but might, from a modern perspective, rather be interpreted as a socio-cultural inheritance within a family or other tight social constellation.



Medieval scalpels
from Hovgården at
Adelsö and Sigtuna,
Sweden.



Medieval scalpels from Nya Lödöse and Lund,
Sweden.

The cause of disease was often sought in magic explanations. But remedies were found in long time experience of herbal medicine, of practical wound tending and minor surgery. Archaeological findings are eg. scalpels.

Later half of the Middle Ages

From the end of the 13th C the provincial laws of Sweden speak of knowledge demands on doctors, on specified payment for their services. Through the rest of the Middle Ages a slow but clear tendency towards professionalization can be discerned. This seems to have increasingly discriminated against women practitioners, favouring the male practitioner.



Change of the form of medical vessels ca 1400-1650. The first form inspired by the form of the poppy seedcase, the last by the Arabic albarello, which borrowed its shape from the bamboo.

Simultaneously an increasing element of scholastic and traditionally classical medicine can be discerned. Phlebotomy is used more widely, as well as other humoral pathological treatments.

The medical vessels are taking on an increasingly more professional form, recognizable from the classical Mediterranean area, inspired by the poppy seedcase. Names of diseases are increasingly derived from observed symptoms and signs, rather than observed or believed causes.

The Black Death as Peripety

The middle of the 14th C is obscure in the source materials, but much change seems to have their peripeties around then. It is probable that in a largely illiterate society, where all medical knowledge was personal, not written down, and more

than half the population died in a very short while, much knowledge was lost in one swoop. As a result there was both room and need for another medical cultural heritage to influence. That is what we see in medical and surgical equipment, in vessels, and in the names of diseases from the later middle ages.



A physicus and a barber surgeon in *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* by Olaus Magnus, 16th C

Monastic Medical Cultures

The monastic milieus differed from the surrounding society. Their contacts with their mother institutions, their access to the learned medical literature of their time resulted in a more humoral pathological understanding of the body, which was also formed by the religious attitudes towards the body and its diseases.

What is fascinating is that it did not actually spread outside their institutions, not until the late Middle Ages – and even then it was probably through other channels. This gives cause to question the old belief that it was the monasteries that brought the art of healing to the North.

Reference: Bergqvist, J. 2013. *Läkare och läkande. Läkekonsstens professionalisering under Medeltid och renässans*. Doctoral thesis defended at Lund University. ISBN 978-91-89578-52-4

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