

Translating Medicine in the Pre-modern World

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PAPER ABSTRACTS

Urgent Communication: Early Printing on Epidemic Diseases

Elma Brenner, Wellcome Collections

From the earliest decades of printing, this new medium was used as an important means of communicating knowledge and information about the human body, health and disease. Among the works printed in the late fifteenth century were tracts discussing the causes, prevention and treatment of epidemic illnesses. These pamphlets were short and rapidly produced, reflecting the urgency with which physicians and other authors communicated with each other and with a wider readership about deadly threats to health. Tracts on the plague, outbreaks of which recurred from the mid-fourteenth century, and the pox or 'French disease', perceived by many to be a new phenomenon in the 1490s, were printed in Latin and quickly also appeared in vernacular languages, especially English, French and German. While the production of vernacular versions, which differed in important respects from the Latin texts, reflected the broader appetite for this material, extant copies of these printed texts reveal other processes of translation and transposition. A copy of the Latin Johannes Jacobi plague tract printed in Antwerp in the 1480s, for example, contains extensive English annotations, including marginal notes that translate key Latin terms into English. Furthermore, knowledge about pestilence was appropriated by authors grappling with newer epidemics. The structural model of the printed plague tract was transposed to serve as a model for short polemic works on the French disease, and plague tracts also featured in the practical response to the first outbreak of the sweating sickness in England in the 1480s. It is probably no coincidence that in London in the mid-1480s, at least three different printings were issued of an English-language version of the Johannes Jacobi plague tract. The written output of one physician, Thomas Le Forestier, who produced texts in Latin, English and French relating to pestilence and the sweating sickness, exemplifies how knowledge was pooled and transferred in order to combat the threat of epidemic illness.

Medieval Catalan Translations on Women's Health

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During the last three decades two different research programmes have changed the way we approach medieval medicine in the Latin West. On the one hand, thanks to the work of Monica Green on the texts that gave birth to the *Trotula* tradition – that strongly influenced medieval culture- we have a broad and precise landscape of how medicine dealt with the practical management of the female body. On the other, the so-called 'vernacularization of medicine' in the late middle ages has been thoroughly studied for a variety of linguistic traditions, leading to a view on how the healthcare Latin corpus that had developed from Salernitan medicine and the university medical centers of Western Europe was transformed by practices of translation that appropriated and adapted knowledge on the body for different audiences, professional and lay.

My project lies at the crossroads of both these research lines. This paper attempts to analyse the Catalan corpus of medical texts on women's health. Medieval Catalan translations of medical texts date from as early as 1310, when both laywomen and emerging new groups of medical practitioners showed an active interest to have at hand

medical books in Catalan, and a significant number of texts were commissioned and translated during the 14th and 15th centuries. Thanks to the online resource *Sciencia.cat* created by Lluís Cifuentes and his team it is possible to access to updated records of the Catalan texts and their extant manuscript witnesses, providing a general context where it is possible to assess the corpus on women's health. I will focus on the texts that are identified as extant since it is difficult to ascertain the language of the texts mentioned in inventory books because notaries tended to give their titles in Latin, whether or not the texts were written in that language. Particularly, I will focus on a mid-fifteenth century translation of the *De curis mulierum* that I have recently identified in an anonymous surgeon's handbook.

History of One Text? The House and Field Pharmacy between Latin, German and Russian

Clare Griffin, MPIWG

How is it that practical knowledge texts move between, and exist in, multiple languages? Does the act of translating a work make it fundamentally different? If so, why do historical actors - and the texts themselves - often refer to such works as if they are one text? This paper will focus on the House and Field Pharmacy. This work was printed in German in the late seventeenth century, then translated into Russian in several - all somewhat different - manuscripts across the 1690s-1710s, then printed again in Latin later in the eighteenth century. The German, Latin, and one of the Russian texts are aimed primarily at households and soldiers; one of the Russian manuscripts was for Tsar Peter the Great. Each of the texts is arranged somewhat differently. Yet they describe themselves, and have been described by both historical actors and historians, as the same text. This paper will use this case-study to address the issue of the equivalence of practical knowledge texts between different languages, different audiences, and different contexts.

Knowledge to Heal and to Harm: African-European Medical Exchanges in the 15th and 16th Centuries

Iona McCleery, University of Leeds

This paper is on North and West Africa as a series of contact zones that affected health during the early period of Portuguese expansion (1415-c.1540). Using a variety of chronicles and travel writings, the paper focuses on knowledge about wounds, especially the knowledge practices of military men rather than surgeons, and knowledge exchange between West Africans and Europeans, especially in the treatment of fever and wounds. Although greatly neglected in comparison with knowledge exchanges in India or Central America during the 16th century, knowledge practices in Africa can be traced back much further to at least the early 15th century. However, all such practices, including those of Africans, reflect pre-existing European concepts of health and harm. The paper seeks to question the extent to which health, injury and disease were perceived as 'other' in Africa.

Translating Manchu Bodies into Household Spaces

Carla Nappi, University of British Columbia

This paper will contribute to the “Translating Medicine” project by directly engaging with two of the motivating questions as articulated on the project [website](#): What roles did visual images and material objects play in the transfer and appropriation of health-related knowledge? What were the points of resistance and tension?

Focusing on a key eighteenth century Manchu anatomical text, the talk will explore the role of familiar objects in translating unfamiliar bodily concepts, especially at moments of tension and rupture in the course of translation. It will argue that the material ecology of the household (and other spaces and activities of daily life) created an exemplary base that helped translators render bodily phenomena unfamiliar to Manchu-language readers, with consequences for how both language and body were transformed in the encounter. Reading the text for these productive moments of tension allows today’s reader to re-read the text as an archive of likenesses, and ultimately use it to tell a story not just of medicine and its translations, but also of the history of practices of the making of sameness and kinds of relationality.

Medieval Merchant Companies and the Centralization of Secret Knowledge

Matthew Sargent, University of Southern California

As European merchants and naturalists encountered new drugs and botanical products as ventured into Asia, the expertise and experiential knowledge that they gained proved vexingly difficult to share. How, for example, would you describe cinnamon to someone who had never encountered it or explain how to identify the highest quality ginger? My paper uses medieval mercantile manuals such as *La Practical della Mercatura* (c1330) to reconstruct the struggle to explain the characteristics of foreign foods and drugs and uses these encounters as an entrypoint to explore the role of commercial organizations in the globalization of knowledge.

This paper is part of a larger research project that explores the ways in which the emergence of large commercial firms created both new demands and new possibilities for gathering and transporting knowledge. The small-scale trading partnerships that dominated European-Asian trade routes during the middle ages were notoriously secretive and were structured to minimize the need to record and communicate depersonalized technical knowledge. In contrast to this, the Florentine Bardi Company, founded in the late 13th century, was an organizational marvel. With more than 100 employees and trading projects that stretched from England to the Black Sea and beyond, the Bardi Company faced the challenge of coordinating a large and dispersed workforce that would continue operations long beyond the lives of any individual actors. Rather than embracing smothering secrecy, within the Company, knowledge sharing was a key element of their success. While no first hand merchants’ accounts of trade with Asia survived from the middle ages, this 300-page manuscript records the details of mercantile tradecraft. Moreover, because trade required ideas to be put into action, the knowledge that was recorded focused on communicating practices, techniques, and technical knowhow that stressed practical knowledge rather than classical learning. While this medieval example was only a first step, the new information economies that emerged within the Company were, I argue, an important dynamic in the globalization of medical knowledge.

Digital Tools for Mapping Material Practice, Drugs and Recipes

Michael Stanley-Baker and Hou Jeong Ho (Brent) (MPIWG)

In this paper we present a digital project, [Drugs Across Asia](#), to data-mine early Buddhist, Daoist and medical literature in answer to the question “Who knew what, when and where?” Historians of medicine in China have increasingly come to recognise the role of religious actors in providing healthcare, and acknowledge that they were much more accessible and widespread than classically trained doctors, particularly in the early imperial period. By studying the ways different communities aggregated sets or repertoires of practices, we can better understand how these repertoires shaped identity, structured relations with other care providers, and served as sites for negotiating difference between the religious and the medical. This toolset can visualise the distribution of therapeutic practices within textual corpuses, and across genre, space and time. This year’s pilot project focusses on materia medica in textual corpora from ca. 300 BCE to 589 CE, but can be used to study any set of practices, materials or terms, and can be scaled to encompass much larger textual sets. After the formal talk has concluded, we will have a hands-on demonstration for anyone interested.

Tactile Practices and the Transformation of Body Knowledge in Eighteenth-century Japan

Daniel Trambaiolo, The University of Hong Kong

Japanese understandings of human body structure underwent a radical transformation over the course of the eighteenth century. Historical accounts of this transformation have generally privileged its visual aspects, especially the new ways of looking at the body developed and popularized by scholars of “Dutch studies” (*rangaku*). However, the eighteenth century saw not only the emergence of new ways of looking at the body, but also new ways of touching and manipulating it: bone-setting methods derived from Chinese sources, techniques of physical manipulation for intervening in difficult births, and the conviction that disease could be more reliably diagnosed by palpation of the abdomen than by the pulse-taking techniques that had traditionally been privileged by Chinese style doctors. Although true mastery over these forms of tactile knowledge required direct personal experience, authors of manuscripts and printed books sought ways to convey their knowledge through images accompanying their texts, aiming to help viewers understand the connections between internal structures and the external appearances of intact living bodies. I argue that by paying close attention to the visual language of these images, we find unexpected connections among the different forms of tactile practice that flourished prior to and alongside the emergence of European-style anatomy, suggesting a new interpretation of the eighteenth-century transformation of Japanese ideas about body structure.

Transplanting Neem and Translating Meanings

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‘Neem’, the common name usually applied to the tree *Azadirachta indica*, does not elicit the instant recognition that cinnamon or tea. However, neem spread globally in the same period as these two more familiar trees, drastically changing some environments in the process. Neem was transplanted from South Asia throughout the Indian Ocean region, often apparently by migrant labourers. In South Asia, neem has multiple and long-recognised uses in agriculture and medicine and the wood is used for timber and carving. Similar uses are reported across the Indian Ocean region from the early nineteenth century, often associated with Indian migrants. The tree also entered local pharmacopeia,

including in East Africa where it is known in Swahili as *Mwarubaini*. While neem was used by colonial physicians, it never became a colonial commodity and it was widely discredited as an alternative to cinchona in the early twentieth century. Late twentieth century attempts by multinationals to patent agricultural products based on neem were resisted; a process that was important in framing ideas about biopiracy. Neem's modern status remains controversial: while advocates promote it as almost a universal panacea to health and environment issues, opponents warn of its potential toxicity or characterise it as an invasive species. In this paper, I will examine neem's early spread, drawing mainly on evidence from herbarium specimens and pharmacopeia. I will ask how neem's medical uses and ritual meanings were translated between some very different medical cultures, and why they failed to translate in other cases.