

*Christ's Poor: Contrasting Views on Leprosy in Eastern and Western Christendom*

Tabitha Shaw

*Mycobacterium leprae*, more commonly known as Leprosy in the past or Hansen's Disease today, is a disease that has been recorded since Antiquity.<sup>1</sup> During the Middle Ages, the disease developed a reputation in the Western Christendom for being caused by sin and disobedience against God. However, ideals began to change over time throughout the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries as the Eastern Christian ideals about Leprosy began to spread into the west. This paper will outline the idea of the Sinful Leper in the west, the Holy Leper in the east and how these ideas began to gradually shift and fluctuate throughout time.

Until the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, Western Christian society saw Leprosy almost exclusively as a mark of sin.<sup>2</sup> Leprosy was a systematic, infectious disease which primarily affected the peripheral nervous system and the skin.<sup>3</sup> Due to the fact that individuals with poor immune systems were more susceptible to the disease, it usually affected the poor, due to malnutrition, overcrowding of cities, and unhygienic practices.<sup>4</sup> The disease caused skin lesions, rough and cracked skin, deformation of the skull, and loss of sensation in limbs.<sup>5</sup> This caused the sufferer's body to appear as if it were rotting<sup>6</sup> and produced a smell similar to that of a dead body.<sup>7</sup>

The disease was uncommon until the 12<sup>th</sup> century<sup>8</sup> and this only furthered the shock that healthy individuals experienced when met with a person suffering from Leprosy. These two

---

<sup>1</sup> Luigi Santacroce et al., "Mycobacterium Leprae: A Historical Study on the Origins of Leprosy and Its Social Stigma," *Infezioni in Medicina* 29, no. 4 (December 10, 2021): 623–32, 623.

<sup>2</sup> Peter L. Allen, *The Wages of Sin: Sex and Disease, Past and Present* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 37.

<sup>3</sup> Erin Connelly and Stefanie Künzel, *New Approaches to Disease, Disability and Medicine in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2018), 62.

<sup>4</sup> Andrzej Grzybowski et al., "Leprosy: Social Implications from Antiquity to the Present," *Clinics in Dermatology* 34, no. 1 (January 2016): 8–10, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy S. Miller and John W. Nesbitt, *Walking Corpses: Leprosy in Byzantium and the Medieval West* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023), 1-2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Allen, *The Wages of Sin: Sex and Disease, Past and Present*, 26.

<sup>8</sup> Miller and Nesbitt, *Walking Corpses: Leprosy in Byzantium and the Medieval West*, 2.

factors served as primary reasons for which Leprosy was so highly stigmatized in the past, due to a fear of the individual's physical appearance and lack of knowledge of the disease spread and cause of the disease.<sup>9</sup> In the Christian West, sufferers of Leprosy were forced into physical and social isolation.<sup>10</sup> The ceremony of expulsion of the sufferer was created by the Catholic Church in the 10<sup>th</sup> century at the Third Lateran Council. The Council not only outlined a ceremony of ritual death of the sufferer to the community, but also set out rules by which the sufferer must adhere to in order to prevent the contamination of the healthy.<sup>11</sup> Infected individuals were barred from entering not only Churches, but also a number of other areas which were known to house large numbers of people.<sup>12</sup> This served as a dual purpose for prevention of spiritual and physical contagion. Sufferers of Leprosy were made to wear a certain costume to make themselves both visible and heard by the healthy population in order to prevent interaction between the sick and the healthy.<sup>13</sup> The infected were forced into seclusion in Leprosaria and were separated from their families and communities.<sup>14</sup>

The driving force of this stigmatization was the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>15</sup> Due to its grotesque appearance, Leprosy was seen as a physical marker of sin and a punishment for those who did not listen to God.<sup>16</sup> People with Leprosy were expelled from society not only due to a fear of physical contagion, but also spiritual contagion, as the Church believed that people with Leprosy would lead good Christians into sin.<sup>17</sup> Individuals suffering from Leprosy were often

---

<sup>9</sup> Connelly and Künzel, *New Approaches to Disease, Disability and Medicine in Medieval Europe*, 62.

<sup>10</sup> Grzybowski et al., "Leprosy: Social Implications from Antiquity to the Present," 8.

<sup>11</sup> Susan Zimmerman, "Leprosy in the Medieval Imaginary," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38, no. 3 (September 1, 2008): 559–87, 560.

<sup>12</sup> Allen, *The Wages of Sin: Sex and Disease, Past and Present*, 36.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Zimmerman, "Leprosy in the Medieval Imaginary," 560.

<sup>16</sup> Carole Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2009), 112.

<sup>17</sup> Zimmerman, "Leprosy in the Medieval Imaginary," 568.

associated with women and Jews.<sup>18</sup> The causation, in particular, was often attributed to women, particularly menstrual blood.<sup>19</sup> Women's menstrual cycles were often stigmatized as monstrous, sinful, and contaminating.<sup>20</sup> Theorists about the causation of Leprosy warned that men should not have sex with a menstruating woman as the sinful, contaminated nature of the blood would infect the man with Leprosy.<sup>21</sup> People with Leprosy were persecuted in Western Christendom as the society held the belief that people with Leprosy were attempting to kill or infect healthy Christians, accusing people with Leprosy of working alongside Jews to achieve this goal.<sup>22</sup>

Unlike Western Christendom, the Christian East held an entirely different view of Leprosy within both social and religious contexts. Leprosy was much more common in the East and a significant increase of cases in the fourth century had largely normalized the disease.<sup>23</sup> The people of Byzantium regarded sufferers with sympathy; many people with Leprosy in Byzantium took to begging, putting their disfigurement, singing, and dancing on public display to the healthy population.<sup>24</sup> As a result, many religious scholars in Byzantium advocated for the Christian duty to protect and aid people with Leprosy,<sup>25</sup> an idea supported by the Old Testament.<sup>26</sup> Christians in the East viewed Leprosy as a mark of God's favor, and that people with Leprosy were suffering purgatory on Earth and therefore would go straight to Heaven.<sup>27</sup> Religious leaders spread sermons advocating that the community should love and care for people

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 559.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 563.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 564.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 563.

<sup>22</sup> Miller and Nesbitt, *Walking Corpses: Leprosy in Byzantium and the Medieval West*, 97.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 29-31.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>26</sup> Connelly and Künzel, *New Approaches to Disease, Disability and Medicine in Medieval Europe*, 62.

<sup>27</sup> Wendy Jo Turner and Tory Vandeventer Pearman, *The Treatment of Disabled Persons in Medieval Europe: Examining Disability in the Historical, Legal, Literary, Medical, and Religious Discourses of the Middle Ages* (Lewiston: N.Y., 2010), 173.

with Leprosy, supporting the holy nature of the sufferer, and exemplified these values through their own personal behavior towards people with Leprosy.<sup>28</sup> Even in the third and fourth centuries, religious leaders in the Holy Lands kissed the hands of people with Leprosy and provided care to sufferers, this trend continued in the Holy Lands in the centuries after.<sup>29</sup> After the first Crusade, many crusaders from the Christian West began living in the Holy Lands permanently. Due to the endemic nature of the disease in the East, many of these settlers contracted Leprosy.<sup>30</sup> This meant that many good Christians who had fought in the Crusade and were considered nobles contracted Leprosy.<sup>31</sup> This aided Latin settlers to conform to the ideas that Leprosy was a gift from God rather than a condemnation.<sup>32</sup>

The most notable of these Eastern Christian people with Leprosy was the 12<sup>th</sup> century King of Jerusalem, Baldwin IV.<sup>33</sup> Baldwin IV contracted Leprosy in his childhood, although he was not officially diagnosed until after he became king.<sup>34</sup> Throughout his reign, King Baldwin IV's followers were compassionate about his Leprosy.<sup>35</sup> When Pope Alexander III claimed that King Baldwin was incapable of ruling due to his sickness and claimed it was a judgment of his sins against God, the people of Jerusalem fiercely defended his piety.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a Holy Order of fighting monks, both Lepers and healthy, was formed with the goal of protecting the Holy Lands and caring for people with Leprosy.<sup>37</sup> This was the Order of Saint

---

<sup>28</sup> Miller and Nesbitt, *Walking Corpses: Leprosy in Byzantium and the Medieval West*, 43.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 43.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 141-142.

<sup>31</sup> Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England*, 54.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>35</sup> Willaim of Tyre, *A History of Deeds Done beyond the Sea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), 398.

<sup>36</sup> Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England*, 54.

<sup>37</sup> Miller and Nesbitt, *Walking Corpses: Leprosy in Byzantium and the Medieval West*, 139.

Lazarus, named after the patron saint of Lepers and the virtuous poor<sup>38</sup> who suffered from Leprosy throughout his life.<sup>39</sup> Although there was not a requirement for members of the Order of Saint Lazarus to suffer from Leprosy, it was a requirement for the master of the Order to have Leprosy. This requirement was later reformed by the Pope in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, allowing a non-Leper to serve as master.<sup>40</sup> The acceptance of the Crusader States of the holy nature of Leprosy was largely due to the influence of Byzantium on the Holy Lands through the sharing of culture and ideological values<sup>41</sup> and due to the reputations of those who contracted Leprosy as good pious Christians.<sup>42</sup>

The 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries saw a large outbreak of Leprosy in Western Christendom.<sup>43</sup> This was likely due to the fact that Crusaders were returning to the west from the Holy Lands in this period.<sup>44</sup> But the Crusaders did not only bring disease home, many of the ideas about Leprosy as a holy disease that began in the Eastern world were brought back to Western Christendom by the Crusaders as well.<sup>45</sup> Although this shift in ideas was not universally accepted by all and the views of Leprosy shifted back and forth from holy to sinful depending on the individual that was suffering,<sup>46</sup> this was still a great stride from the earlier view of Western Christendom which condemned all people with Leprosy as sinful.<sup>47</sup> Crusaders that contracted Leprosy were believed to be invested with a unique holiness with their dual nature as warriors

---

<sup>38</sup> Connelly and Künzel, *New Approaches to Disease, Disability and Medicine in Medieval Europe*, 62.

<sup>39</sup> Larissa Tracy and Kelly DeVries, *Wounds and Wound Repair in Medieval Culture* (The Netherlands: Brill, 2015), 404.

<sup>40</sup> Bernard Hamilton, *The Leper King and His Heirs* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 29.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 64.

<sup>42</sup> Miller and Nesbitt, *Walking Corpses: Leprosy in Byzantium and the Medieval West*, 142.

<sup>43</sup> Allen, *The Wages of Sin: Sex and Disease, Past and Present*, 28.

<sup>44</sup> Miller and Nesbitt, *Walking Corpses: Leprosy in Byzantium and the Medieval West*, 142.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 142.

<sup>46</sup> Connelly and Künzel, *New Approaches to Disease, Disability and Medicine in Medieval Europe*, 62.

<sup>47</sup> Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England*, 112.

for Christ and Leper.<sup>48</sup> By the 12<sup>th</sup> century many rulers had taken to the Eastern ideas of Leprosy as a holy disease and bathing the sores of people with Leprosy and kissing their hands publicly.<sup>49</sup> Religious leaders began following this trend in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, most famously Francis of Assisi.<sup>50</sup> One of the more notable examples of a holy person with Leprosy in Western Christendom is Alice of Schaerbeek,<sup>51</sup> a 13<sup>th</sup> century holy woman.<sup>52</sup> Alice portrayed her disease as a gift from God and a means for spiritual elevation.<sup>53</sup> Despite Alice's perception as a holy person with Leprosy, she was still isolated from her community out of fear of physical contamination.<sup>54</sup> The idea of Purgatory on Earth also transferred to holy people with Leprosy in Western Christendom, this is exemplified in how others speak of Alice of Schaerbeek's condition and the torment she experienced from the disease washing the sin from her without a need for purgatory.<sup>55</sup> Care for people with Leprosy became a universal Christian obligation, not just an Eastern Christian obligation,<sup>56</sup> and, although fear of the physical contagion still led people with Leprosy to be secluded from society, the seclusion was respectful and Holy Masses were held to celebrate people with Leprosy.<sup>57</sup> Stories in the Christian West began to spread of Jesus Christ appearing to the pious in visions as a person with Leprosy<sup>58</sup> and people with Leprosy became known as Christ's poor in the West.<sup>59</sup> Although many barriers for physical contagion remained

---

<sup>48</sup> Grzybowski et al., "Leprosy: Social Implications from Antiquity to the Present," 9.

<sup>49</sup> Allen, , 37.

<sup>50</sup> Miller and Nesbitt, *Walking Corpses: Leprosy in Byzantium and the Medieval West*, 44.

<sup>51</sup> Tracy and DeVries, *Wounds and Wound Repair in Medieval Culture*, 390.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 389.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 390.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 398.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 397.

<sup>56</sup> Grzybowski et al., "Leprosy: Social Implications from Antiquity to the Present," 9.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>58</sup> Tracy and DeVries, *Wounds and Wound Repair in Medieval Culture*, 404.

<sup>59</sup> Grzybowski et al., "Leprosy: Social Implications from Antiquity to the Present," 9.

Western Christendom, the Crusades and sharing of ideas between the West and the East aided in providing the West with a new perception of Leprosy.<sup>60</sup>

Although Leprosy was initially perceived as the physical expression of sin in the west, the cultural mixing that the Crusades facilitated caused ideas of Leprosy to shift as Crusaders returned from the East. This paper has discussed how Leprosy was preserved in from the West to the East and how the polarising ideas of the person with Leprosy began shifting. The perception of disease was fluid in the Middle Ages. The driving force for the perception of people with Leprosy was the actions and words of religious leaders. The identity of the sufferer, the type of disease, time period, and where they lived had a large effect on how religious leaders acted towards people with Leprosy in the Middle Ages.

---

<sup>60</sup> Tracy and DeVries, *Wounds and Wound Repair in Medieval Culture*, 389.

## Bibliography

- Allen, Peter L. *The Wages of Sin: Sex and disease, past and present*. Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- Connelly, Erin. *New approaches to disease, disability and medicine in Medieval Europe*. EBSCOhost. Oxford: Archaeopress Publishing Ltd, 2018.  
<https://login.proxy.hil.unb.ca/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=2935350&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- Grzybowski, Andrzej, Jarosław Sak, Jakub Pawlikowski, and Małgorzata Nita. "Leprosy: Social Implications from Antiquity to the Present." *Clinics in Dermatology* 34, no. 1 (January 2016): 8–10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clindermatol.2015.10.009>.
- Hamilton, Bernard. *The Leper King and His Heirs*. Internet Archive. Cambridge university press. 2000  
[https://archive.org/details/hamilton-the-leper-king-and-his-heirs\\_202106/page/n5/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/hamilton-the-leper-king-and-his-heirs_202106/page/n5/mode/2up)
- Miller, Timothy S., and John W. Nesbitt. *Walking corpses: Leprosy in Byzantium and the Medieval West*. EBSCOhost. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023.  
<https://login.proxy.hil.unb.ca/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=671300&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- Rawcliffe, Carole. *Leprosy in medieval England*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2009.
- Santacroce, Luigi, Raffaele Del Prete, Ioannis Alexandros Charitos, and Lucrezia Bottalico. "Mycobacterium Leprae: A Historical Study on the Origins of Leprosy and Its Social Stigma." *Infezioni in Medicina* 29, no. 4 (December 10, 2021): 623–32.  
<https://doi.org/10.53854/liim-2904-18>.
- Tracy, Larissa, and Kelly DeVries. *Wounds and wound repair in medieval culture*. EBSCOhost. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2015.  
<https://login.proxy.hil.unb.ca/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1079861&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- Turner, Wendy Jo, and Tory Vandeventer Pearman. *The treatment of disabled persons in medieval Europe: Examining disability in the historical, legal, literary, medical, and religious discourses of the Middle Ages*. Lewiston: N.Y., 2010.
- Willaim of Tyre. *A history of deeds done beyond the sea*. Translated by Emily Atwater Babcock and A. C. Krey. Internet Archive. Book 21, Vol. 2. Morningside Heights, New York: Columbia University Press, 1943.  
<https://archive.org/details/williamoftyrehistory/mode/1up>.
- Zimmerman, Susan. "Leprosy in Medieval Imaginary." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38, no. 3 (September 1, 2008): 559–87.  
<https://doi.org/10.1215/10829636-2008-007>.