

The precursors of monastic medicine at the beginning of the Middle Ages

Prekursorzy medycyny klasztornej w początkach średniowiecza

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Summary

The fall of ancient civilization was cataclysmic. Its consequences affected all areas of life. The institution that avoided historical annihilation was the Roman Church. Therefore, the ones who significantly contributed to the preservation of the remnants of the former world, including ancient manuscripts, and the development of new science based on an ancient knowledge, including medicine, were the members of the clergy, mainly monks.

Słowa kluczowe: religious orders, monasteries, monastic medicine, science in the early Middle Ages

The concept of the Middle Ages appeared in European languages and literature during the Renaissance, when the Greek and Roman antiquity were widely perceived as a cultural ideal. In the 17th century, the word „the Middle Ages” was introduced into contemporary historiography, promoting the division of human history into the Ancient Times, Middle Ages and Early Modern Period. To this day, scholars argue about setting the boundaries of the Middle Ages. In Polish historiography, the beginning is assumed to be 476, when the Germanic Chief Odoaker dethroned the last, underage Roman emperor. While, the determination of the final boundary of this era is still controversial, associated by some with the discovery of print by Jan Gutenberg in 1455, and by others with the fall of Constantinople in 1453 or with Columbus’s journey and reaching America in 1492. I would personally incline to the view that despite the above tendencies to clear divisions, the Middle Ages lasted much longer, and its culmination was the cultural and civilizational achievements of the Renaissance, which eminent representatives of were the direct heirs of the Middle Ages. The Renaissance must be regarded as a continuation of the Middle Ages, but in rapidly changing conditions that determined a new vision of the world. My thesis is supported by the opinions claiming the beginning of the Renaissance in Italy in the 13th century, in France and Germany in the 15th century, and in Poland only as late as in the 16th century [1].

After the fall of the Roman Empire, there was a dramatic cultural and scientific regression in Western Europe caused by the magnitude of this historical catastrophe. *In fact*, the ancient

world ceased to exist in almost all areas of contemporary life. The only institution that survived the historical tsunami was the Roman Church; Germanic barbarians destroying the remains of ancient civilization spared church structures because they were Christians themselves converted by the Arian sect. Thus, in the first centuries of the Middle Ages, when in Western Europe the natural economy associated with cultivation of land dominated, when the old urban centers collapsed, schools ceased to exist, trade collapsed and production ceased, and the primitive and uneducated population sought only the possibility of existential survival, the entire burden of saving the remnants of ancient culture and science from destruction, including ancient writings and the tedious forming of a new order, rested on the shoulders of the clergy. Religious orders played a huge role in this godly work of civilization restoration. Their precursors were monks (the name „monk” comes from the Greek word *monos*, meaning alone), who individually excluded themselves from present life, staying alone in caves or in the desert. The purpose of these hermits’ behavior was determined by a great desire to improve the soul. However, the form of mortification of individual monks could not build *caritas*, considered as the queen of all Christian virtues. Therefore, from the religious East, the tendencies for monks to organize into monastic congregations, led by an abbot or superior, reigning on the basis of religious laws began to penetrate Western Europe. The earliest regulations of this type were the rules established in North Africa by Basil, Bishop of Caesarea (died in 379). Following their example, other rules were es-

established in the Middle Ages [2]. The first medieval monastery was created by St. Benedict of Nursia in 529 on Monte Cassino. The rule of the Benedictine Order developed by the founder emphasized that the members of the congregation should maintain health by observing the specific lifestyle of the monks: proper order of eating meals and healthy dishes; rational talk time and silence; work and rest; food and fasting; full of sleep and restraining passion. Chapter 36 of the rules imposed an absolute obligation on monks to care for the poor and the sick: „Looking after the sick is above all other responsibilities. You should serve them like Christ did.” Abbot like a father, teacher, shepherd and doctor, the abbot was to make sure that the sick person was not neglected in any way. The sick should also remember that God himself serves them through monks. The introduced provisions also applied to bedridden, who in their function as physicians looked after the room for sick and servitors, i.e. nurses supervising the diet and bathing of patients [3].

Active participation in the creation of the Benedictine Monastery should also be attributed to Cassiodorus (c. 490 – c. 583). In the first half of his life, he loyally served the King of Ostrogoth, Theodoric, serving as the chancellor alongside the ruler. As part of his reigning, he tried to adapt Christian teaching to new historical conditions. In 540, he settled in a family estate near Vivarium, where he founded a monastery (c. 555). Thanks to Cassiodorus' efforts, a school was established in the monastery to match the level of education of the monks. A similar desire was manifested in the works of the clergyman, as evidenced by his treatise *On the Spelling*, reminding copyists and speakers of the basic principles of correct spelling. Cassiodorus instructed the monks to search and collect ancient manuscripts, and to transcribe individual works. An introduction to the education back then was found in the main work of Cassiodorus entitled *Institutiones divinarum et humanarum lectionum*, known in short *Indications*. The first book of the work was devoted to reading religious texts, the second one to so-called liberal arts. He believed that the combination of these two fields of knowledge was necessary to understand the holy books and achieve the art of correct transcription. The idea of a Christian Latin culture, capable of compromises and evolution, as well as praise of the copyist's office appears for the first time in Cassiodorus' work: „Blessed is work and glorious zeal of proclaiming the Word to people by hand, communicating with fingers, making the gift of salvation dead by being silent and fighting devilish temptations with pen and ink.” In the opinion of Cassiodorus, medicine was a science necessary to make shaky human health more stable, while it obliged doctors to use all its knowledge in confrontation with sick people. To facilitate therapy for the medics, the scientist made a list of various therapeutic agents from Greek writings, and by emphasizing the healing effects of nature, he gave the names of medicinal herbs. Thanks to the efforts of Cassiodorus many of the Ancient Latin works survived. In historiography, it became known as the „founder of the Middle

Ages” because by ordering the translation of Greek writings and transcription of Latin ones, he initiated the creation of monastery libraries that became enclaves of science and culture in the primitive world of that time [4].

Monasteries played a leading role in the development of medieval culture, science and art. The monks borrowed a scientific and educational program from the rhetorician of Carthage, Martianus Capella, author of seven liberal arts, which he identified at the beginning of the 5th century. The work of Cassiodorus, who was the first to set up an education plan in the early Middle Ages, was continued by Bishop Isidore of Seville (570–636), who lived in the Spanish kingdom of the Visigoths. Isidore is the author of a great work on the origin of words, called in short *Etymology*. Volume IV of the book contained a list of medical terms, and the creator called medicine the „second philosophy”, concerning both the human soul and the human body as well as related to other disciplines of knowledge [5].

Despite various false views regarding the medical knowledge of monks, the overwhelming majority of monasteries underwent the evolutionary development of medical science as well as progress in the care of the sick. The scientific activity of Bede the Venerable (673–736) is the proof of this, the author of the first history of the populaces of England, as well as an encyclopedia containing religious and secular information, including medicine as well; by the way, Bede was a supporter of bloodletting. Living in the 7th century Vindician combined his medical knowledge with the Hippocratic school. He wrote several medical compendia, including *Ars medicinae (Medical Art)* and *Sapientia artis medicae (Wisdom of Medical Art)*. In his descriptions he gave the names of many medicinal plants, including black henbane, ivy juice, spurge root and others. He also mentioned the names of the surgical instruments used at that time. Living at the turn of the 8th and 9th centuries the abbot of the monastery in Fulda, Rabanus Maurus, who later became the archbishop of Mainz, wrote an extensive encyclopedic work *De universo* and based on glossary in biblical texts, he popularized allegorical terms referring to fragments of the human body, e.g. teeth („church teachers”), tongue („language of the infested”), etc. [6].

The range of knowledge of medical issues in the first centuries of the Middle Ages was very narrow and limited only to religious communities, which, in addition to providing practical help to the sick, learned the theoretical knowledge of ancient doctors, transcribing their surviving works.

It was not until the 5th century of the Middle Ages that the first medical school was established in Salerno near Naples. Its beginnings are determined at the turn of the 9th and 10th centuries. Teaching medicine in Salerno was based on ancient authorities: Hippocrates and Galenus. Regardless of theoretical knowledge going back to ancient times, attempts were made to rationally observe and treat disease, and many Salernian lecturers were scholars of great format, e.g. Constantine the African (1054-1087), author of a 22-volume work largely devoted to

medicine. Women were able to study at the school in Salerno, and some of them, e.g. Trota of Salerno or Rebecca, became academics at the university [7, 8].

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Summary

Upadek cywilizacji antycznej miał charakter kataklizmu. Jego następstwa dotyczyły wszystkich dziedzin życia. Instytucją, która uniknęła dziejowej zagłady był Kościół rzymski. Toteż w zachowaniu ocalałych resztek dawnego świata, m.in. starożytnych rękopisów, oraz rozwijaniu w oparciu o nie nowej nauki, w tym również medycyny, ogromne zasługi były udziałem osób duchownych, głównie mnichów.

Słowa kluczowe: zakony, klasztory, medycyna klasztorna, nauka wczesnego średniowiecza
