

**REVIEW OF:
Miller, Timothy S.
and John W. Nesbitt. 2014.**

Book Review

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Walking Corpses: Leprosy in Byzantium and the Medieval West. London: Ithaca. pp. xiv, 243.

THE UNDEAD AND THE MONSTROUS HAVE BEEN capturing popular attention for more than two centuries now. From Mary Shelley's memorable *Frankenstein*, through bone-chilling Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to a widely-watched Frank Darabont's current TV series, *The Walking Dead*, public fascination with the dreadful does not seem to diminish. In *The Walking Corpses* two renowned medieval historians, Timothy Miller and John Nesbitt, have decided to enrich the associated subject with an astute scholarly perspective. Their mutual cooperation has resulted in a swiping and innovative analysis of the discourse of leprosy in the medieval East and West.

The argument put forward in the book is clear and convincing, and, perhaps more importantly, not convoluted in too technical a language. This is undeniably one of the many merits of the work, which might attract not only the specialists from within the field but also more general readers. Since the very beginning of *The Walking Corpses*, the authors profess the aim to shed new light on social as well as religious perspectives on leprosy in medieval European societies. To be sure, as one approaches the end of the work, it becomes hard to deny that they have fully managed to achieve the declared goal.

The book is clearly organized and divided into two parts. The chapters one to four are focused on the history of leprosy in the Byzantine world, while the subsequent chapters (five to seven) concentrate more on the Latin west. However, the comparative method is maintained consistently throughout the work and the evidence from the East is always compared with the examples from the West and

vice versa. This helps to paint a more general picture of leprosy in the entire medieval Europe.

Chapter one opens with an analysis of physiological works written by Greek medical practitioners, as well as other literary sources. The authors expound two traditions in aetiology of the disease – Galenic humoral theory (which became preeminent in Byzantium) and Aretaios’ “pneumatic” framework (which emphasizes contagiousness). A succinct explanation of history the terms such as *lepra*, *elephantiasis*, or Hebrew *tsa’rath* prepares the reader for the discussion that follows. The section is concluded by an explanation of the rise of Christian philanthropy in the 4th century AD when the first leprosaria were founded in Constantinople.

The second chapter traces the history of leprosy in the Byzantine Empire and shows how it gradually started to be perceived as a “Holy Disease”. The authors convincingly present the impact of the Eastern Church fathers on shaping the eastern discourse of leprosy which accentuated rather the need to assist the lepers than to exclude or persecute them. The final and most interesting part of the chapter discusses Byzantine perception of leprosy as an act of God’s grace, rather than a mark of God’s retribution for a sin.

Chapter three goes through the material of Greek medical sources related to the aetiology and treatment of leprosy. The authors clearly expound how Galenic humoral explanation of leprosy gained firm ground in the Eastern Empire and acknowledge the immense influence of Gregory of Nazianzos’ *Oratio XIV* on that process. The argument shows further that the contagion theory did not hold against the strong Christian ideal to practice *philantropia* towards the poor and the sick. Chapter four shows how these outlooks shaped the technical details of the functioning of Byzantine leprosaria.

The fifth chapter discusses differences in the social perceptions of leprosy in the east and the west. Due to the limited influence of Gregory of Nazianzos, the western sources emphasize the contagious nature of leprosy. The authors show how this led to a total isolation of the lepers from the society and how the western physicians devised careful diagnostic methods for identifying those afflicted with leprosy. This, however, as can be gleaned from the chapter six, did not bear decisive influence on the working of leprosaria in the West, which functioned similarly to their counterpart in the East (with minor differences).

132 The last chapter focuses on an exclusively Western phenomenon – the order of monk-knights of St. Lazarus, their origins, function, and spread in west-

ern Europe during the Middle Ages. Careful analysis of the spread of the order's monasteries leads to a reconsideration of the 14th-century riots against the lepers in France. The section is followed by three appendices, which contain clear and well-prepared translations of three important early Greek sources on leprosy: Aretaios' of Cappadocia treatise *On Acute and Chronic Diseases*, Gregory of Nyssa's speech *De pauperibus amandis II* and *The Funeral Oration in Praise of Saint John Chrysostom*.

Discussion

In *The Walking Corpses* Timothy Miller and John Nesbitt present an innovative, scholarly credible and, what is perhaps even more important, a synoptic view of leprosy in Middle Ages in Europe. Since Byzantium, to use Averil Cameron's words, is sadly still an absence in popular memory, the book is a small yet significant contribution to reincorporation of the Byzantine Empire into the history of Medieval Europe. At the very same time, Miller and Nesbitt's work offers a warm welcome to byzantinists and western medievalists to step outside their focal point in order gain more general perspective on the world of Medieval Europe.

Without a doubt, one of the strongest advantages of *The Walking Corpses* is the extensive use of diverse original sources, at times rare and hardly reachable. By referring to a vast array of ancient and medieval texts from the field of medicine, saints' lives, historical accounts, legal documents as well as various other literary works, the authors managed to paint a lively and vivid historical narrative. Nesbitt and Miller do not limit themselves to Latin and Greek sources from the period, but also refer to many important Arabic medical and Hebrew documents which enrich and round the propounded argument. All of these factors certainly contribute to the fact that *The Walking Corpses* is definitely not a dry scholarly study of leprosy, but a captivating story of one of the scariest diseases known to humanity. A minor objection might be voiced here: it would be useful if translations of excerpts from the sources were accompanied by the original passages.

Nesbitt and Miller exhibit moreover a profound knowledge of the subject, which helps them oppose some of the stereotypes associated with leprosy and its history. The reference to modern scientific studies of the disease produces an unexpected conclusion that connecting leprosy with increased sexual lust was not unfounded. Furthermore, careful and meticulous historical analysis allows the au-

thors to resolve the riddle of the sudden outburst of leprosy in 12th-century West which resulted not only from the crusaders' encounter with the lepers in the East but also, paradoxically, from growing economy, urbanization and exchange within the Mediterranean basin.

In sum, *The Walking Corpses* is a scholarly work of first-rate quality. Going against the tendency of atomization, it produces comprehensive, yet not too overwhelming analysis of leprosy in medieval Europe. The value of the book lies not only in its clear methodological approach, its learnedness but also in fighting off deeply inculcated social stereotypes which still surround leprosy.

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