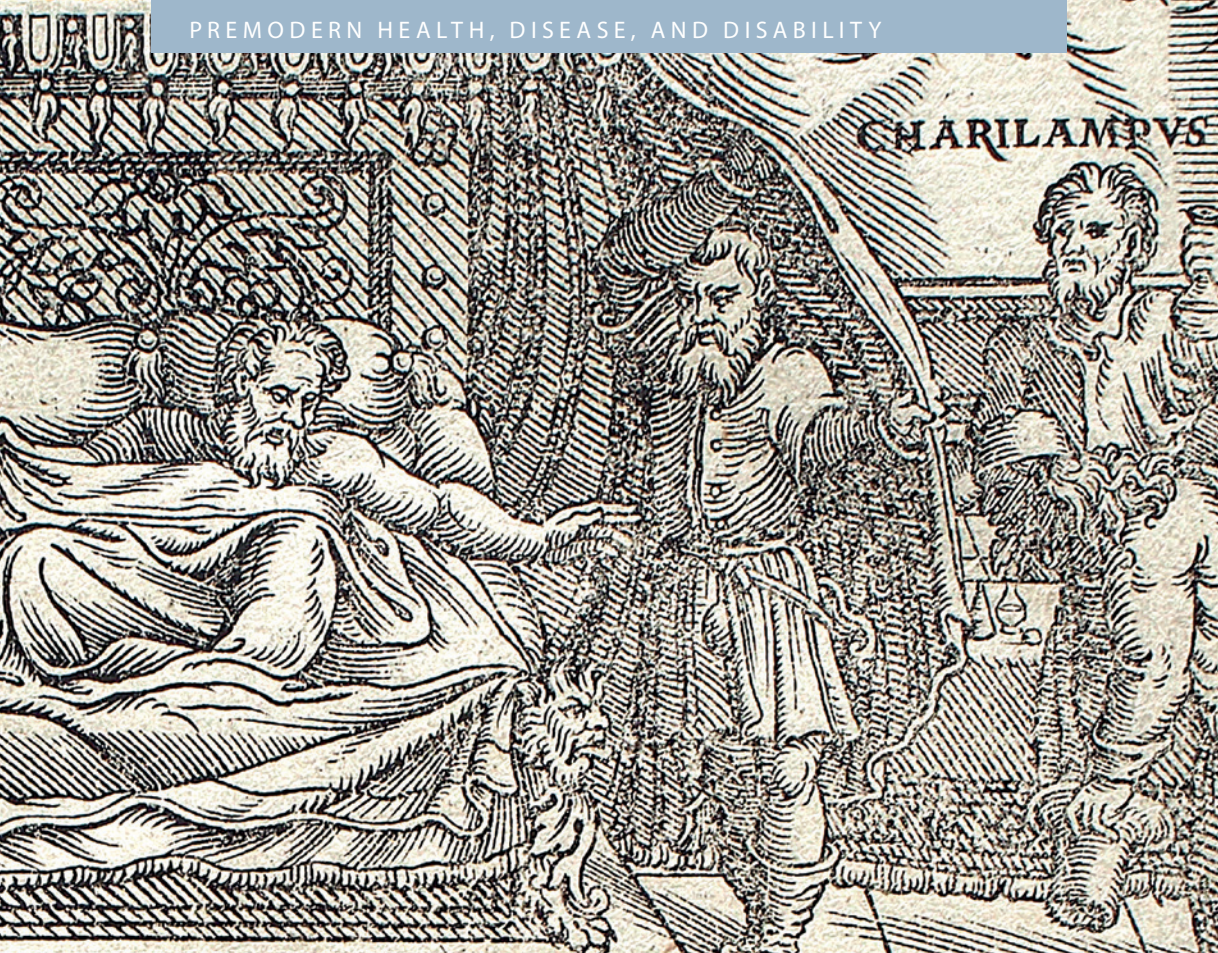


PREMODERN HEALTH, DISEASE, AND DISABILITY



ON FEB

Bohdana Divišová

# Medical Case Studies (Consilia medica) of the Early Modern Period

## Great Pox Documented

Amsterdam  
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# Premodern Health, Disease, and Disability

Premodern Health, Disease, and Disability is an interdisciplinary series devoted to all topics concerning health from all parts of the globe and including all premodern time periods: Antiquity, the Middle Ages and Early Modern. The series is global, including but not limited to Europe, the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and Asia. We encourage submissions examining medical care, such as health practitioners, hospitals and infirmaries, medicines and herbal remedies, medical theories and texts, care givers and therapies. Other topics pertinent to the scope of the series include research into premodern disability studies such as injury, impairment, chronic illness, pain, and all experiences of bodily and/or mental difference. Studies of diseases and how they were perceived and treated are also of interest. Furthermore, we are looking for works on medicinal plants and gardens; ecclesiastical and legal approaches to medical issues; archaeological and scientific findings concerning premodern health; and any other studies related to health and health care prior to 1800.

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*Great Pox Documented*

*Bohdana Divišová*

*Translated by Frank A. Schultz*

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Press

Cover illustration: Physicians surrounding a patient (from title page of Latin translation of Galen's works published by Frobenius in 1561)

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# 1 Introduction

## Abstract

The reader is introduced to the term “consilium,” a written account of one specific case of a disease with advice regarding medical treatment. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, consilia literature was a common component in the practices of many eminent physicians, and often served as a substitute for the “epistolae medicinales” genre. Today, consilia are unjustifiably neglected as a source of the history of medicine, even though they contain a lot of interesting information about the practices of elite physicians, their mutual communication, and patients. This has been documented through the study of consilia collections created by 15 physicians. Special attention has been paid to consilia written for patients suffering from the French disease or syphilis.

**Keywords:** syphilis, 16<sup>th</sup> century, medicine, consilia

“A glorious case!” This enthusiastic shout escaped the mouth of the founder of clinical education, Professor Giovanni Battista da Monte, at the bedside of a man with a decomposing face, afflicted by uncontrollable tremors and covered with horrifying ulcers.<sup>1</sup> This occurred in Padua in the year 1543 and was witnessed by medical students at the beginning of one of eight instruction sessions on the topic of the “French disease” at the municipal Hospital of St. Francis. Of course, we are not informed in detail regarding some of the circumstances surrounding this event, but the scene described is not entirely fictitious. The professor’s commentary was captured by one of the medical students present, who evidently later provided this together with other commentaries to his colleague Johann Crato, who published them under the common Latin title “Consultationum medicarum opus” as a compilation of medical consultations. However, the individual cases

<sup>1</sup> „Pulcherrimus casus!” Montanus, *Consultationum medicarum opus*, 867. Cons. CCCLXIII. Cura post morbum gallicum.



captured in this anthology do not bear the designation “consultatio” but are instead called “consilium.” As will be demonstrated below, physicians during the early modern period viewed these terms as synonyms. In order to meet the objectives of this work however, it is necessary to differentiate these terms. Therefore, the genre of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century will be called “consultation literature,” while “consilia literature” will be reserved for the analogous genre of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Da Monte’s lecture at the bedside of the syphilis patient is not a typical consilium, neither in the way we perceive it today, nor in what this word meant in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. At that time, a consilium above all represented a written account of one specific case of a disease with advice regarding medical treatment. This advice was usually requested by a physician, who had doubts regarding the treatment of a particular patient. The responding counsellor, usually a famous expert, usually never even saw his colleague’s patient in person, which did not matter much considering the diagnostic capabilities of the times. This approach was still common in the early modern period and consilia literature, together with other analogous medical genres, became very popular.

In the course of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the French disease also became very “popular.”<sup>2</sup> It spread to all social classes of the population, including of course the highest classes from which the recipients of consilia usually came. Gaspar Torella (1452-1520), the personal physician of Pope Alexander VI. (the infamous Rodrigo Borgia), named the new disease “morbus curialis” due to its spreading at all courts of both the secular and ecclesiastical nobility, which was also done by other physicians.<sup>3</sup> As a disease with a chronic course and an unbelievable number of different symptoms and medical problems, lues was destined to become an ideal topic of a large number of consilia. During the peak of humanism, many erudite physicians created consilia some of which were gathered into collections and spread via printing. Although the popularity of this literature continued for at least the subsequent two centuries, the expert public knows relatively little about it.

We can only guess the reasons why consilia undeservedly remain outside the realm of expert interest. It is possible that consilia only aroused interest during the period of their development and establishment which occurred in about the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries. As a widespread and entirely common genre, they are no longer so interesting. Lesser interest may also be attributed to

2 For historical reasons, which will be explained below, the terms French disease or the great pox will be used exclusively to designate this disease.

3 For details see Kümmel, “De morbis Aulicis,” 18-9.

the current orientation of historians of medicine on “Patientengeschichte,” which puts consilia at a disadvantage since the communication they capture usually takes place at the physician-to-physician level.

Another one of the reasons may be an antiquated methodological perspective of the history of medicine. Until relatively recent times, researchers in this area, often physicians themselves, exclusively focused on mapping the development of the achievements and scientific approaches of the “greatest benefaction of humanity” which have led to the current level of Western medicine.<sup>4</sup> The works of the top physicians connected with the creation of consilia were only studied for traces of the ideas that enabled the rapid development of European medicine in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For understandable reasons, one cannot expect that practically oriented consilia would capture discussions about modern medical theories or descriptions of revolutionary anatomical discoveries.

However, this perspective of the history of medicine has been revised in the last half century. Researchers have stopped tracking “progressive” and condemning “backward” medical opinions and theories. Instead, they have started to show greater interest in the capture of the discourse for each particular level of the development of medicine and individual diseases.<sup>5</sup> This shift has turned the interest of historians of the early modern period towards expert genres based on autopsies and practical experience which were emphasized by the Humanists – “observationes, casus, consultationes, historiae, epistolae medicales.”<sup>6</sup> Especially here, we find information about the professional activities of a physician, his “bread and butter” as well as extraordinary cases.<sup>7</sup>

The gathering of consilia into collections documents the growing interest about individual cases with individual patients. The fashion of consilia and their compilation was doubtlessly influenced by a range of factors, for example: the fame of the physician, the prominent status of the patient, the adeptness with which the physician was able to demonstrate when selecting an interpretation of the disease, and the range of medical authorities that he was able to cite and apply. The application of these skills was then

4 For an explanation of the origin of this connection see Porter, *The Greatest Benefit*, 4.

5 For details about the development and historiography of the history of medicine e.g. Eckart and Jütte, *Medizingeschichte* or Černý, *Mor 1480-1730*, 13-26.

6 For details about these related forms of medical literature see chapter 3.2 of this work.

7 The latest and most complete work dealing with almost all areas of medicine is the work of the distinguished historian of medicine M. Stolberg. Unfortunately, it was not possible to use the results of his research for this study. The new findings would certainly significantly enrich this work. See Stolberg, *Gelehrte Medizin und ärztlicher Alltag*.

reciprocally beneficial to the physician's career and his self-promotion. However, the main reason for the popularity of collections of consilia was the fact that they could supply their readers, either beginning physicians or more often medical students, with a large number of examples of how eminent experts handled the most problematic part of Galenic medicine: the selection of the right medications for a patient with a specific physical constitution and suffering from a particular disease.

Consilia were intended exclusively for the small financially secure classes of society: members of the secular and ecclesiastical nobility, wealthy municipal officials, merchants, lawyers and to a lesser extent, the wives and children of these social classes. With a certain amount of methodological circumspection, one can obtain interesting information about the diseases from which they suffered, their dietary habits and lifestyles. When studying them however, one must keep in mind the main pitfall that could significantly affect any potential research and its findings. Above all with respect to retrospective diagnosis, one must not forget that the described symptoms were classified and interpreted in accordance with the level of medical science of the given period. Even today, this fact is often ignored and the details obtained tend to be identified with current diseases. The results can then be misleading because as the current work of historians of medicine shows, the capabilities of retrospective diagnosis are limited to a certain extent.<sup>8</sup> If we briefly focus on the diseases captured in the consilia, we find that wealthy groups of the population seem most of all to have suffered from the chronic symptoms of various diseases: headaches, overall weakness, problems with digestion, fevers, swelling, etc. This fact can however be explained by the character of the consilia as letters and capabilities, specifically the speed of communication at that time.<sup>9</sup>

Even when a consilium was addressed to a patient, there is no doubt that its deciphering and practical application were in the hands of a physician. Since the genre originated, the vast majority of consilia were written in Latin and could also contain bibliographic references or such detailed instructions that they would be incomprehensible to even an educated layman. And it is just these formulations and other indications or even random references, which the consulted physician used, that make it possible to determine a whole range

8 For details about the problems and capabilities of retrospective diagnosis see e.g. Arizabalaga, "Problematizing Retrospective Diagnosis," 51-70; or Karenberg, "Retrospective Diagnosis," 140-45.

9 In early modern period consilia literature, the number of consilia concerning acute cases increased in number. However, these are mostly supplementary records and thus not "real" consilia.

of facts not only about the physician himself, but also reveal the complexity of the professional hierarchy, social dynamics and relationships between individual and even groups of physicians – representatives of one faculty, one “collegium medicorum” (physicians’ guild) or one specific city. Consilia also include references to representatives of other professions involved in the therapeutic process – surgeons, midwives, pharmacists, but most of all hacks against whom the patient was often warned in consilia. Thanks to this, we can also learn about the social and professional diversity of people involved in the treatment of the patient. Precisely the last-named group, which physicians usually disparagingly called “*empirici, medicastri, agyrtae*,” actively expanded its activities in the initial stage of the French disease.

The outbreak of the French “plague” (*lues*) caused a range of controversies, debates and of course even fear among contemporaries. The first reactions consisted of a mix of practical, speculative and moral explanations of the disease referring to both natural processes as well as moral failure and the potential violation of various societal taboos. In the first years following the outbreak of the epidemic, this new disease attracted the attention of a large part of the scientific medical community. From the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when it changed from an epidemic to an endemic disease, it somewhat lost its touch of novelty and the reactions of physicians became more stable. How did the approach of physicians to syphilis patients change between the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century? What was the attitude of the top university-educated medical experts towards the treatment of a disease that was viewed as treatable and (not only) sexually transmittable? Did the often-proclaimed approach to this disease as a stigma already manifest itself during this period? Although a large number of theoretical medical monographs and treatises were written about the French disease in the course of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, consilia offer the best opportunity to capture how elite physicians reacted to this disease in practice at a time when it had become a fixture in early modern society. On the selection, one can document both the contributions of their study to the enrichment of our knowledge as well as the limitations of their utilization, which historians must take into account when studying consilia literature.

One of the most important limitations is the small numbers of the target groups of patients. Only the upper classes of society could afford consilia. Moreover, the authors of consilia, university-educated physicians, represented a minority within the entire range of established health-care practitioners up until the 20<sup>th</sup> century and thus the least important sector of medical care. Despite this, their practical activities, which by means of consilia document the extent of their mutual contacts and the level and

capabilities of treatment of the elite classes of the population at that time, should not escape our attention. Using consilia for syphilis patients, it is possible to demonstrate how consilia can be useful for gaining an idea about the general discourse, learning details about the lives of graduated physicians and their (wealthy) patients and demonstrating the variability of this genre and the opportunity to obtain information useful for the enrichment of our knowledge concerning the history of medicine and related fields.

I will therefore attempt to interconnect two medical phenomena of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, consilia literature and the French disease. Somewhat paradoxically, attention will be primarily focused on the neglected and little-known phenomenon, while on the other hand, the phenomenon that has attracted attention since it first originated and has been relatively well studied will have a complementary role. Because of the low level of awareness about consilia works, it is essential to start with the clarification of the definition, main characteristics, and structure of consilia together with the delimitation of this genre with respect to related forms of literature. I will further mention the previous stages of development and expound upon the continuity of medieval consilia with those of the early modern period, which will be presented in an analysis of consilia collections and anthologies of fifteen selected physicians of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The consilia contained in these collections and anthologies form the basis of the study. They were written by physicians in the course of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and most were published during that period, but several of the cited titles only appeared after a lengthier period of time had passed. Their authors were representatives of famous faculties of medicine and the personal physicians of the members of ruling families. However, for the sake of comparison, several representatives of less renowned, yet not insignificant, municipal physicians were also included. Italian faculties of medicine and their representatives represented the pinnacle of 16<sup>th</sup> century European university medicine. Here, exactly where consilia literature originated in the Middle Ages and spread north across the Alps to the rest of Europe, it was unthinkable not to select at least a few famous names from among the ranks of their professors. The need to include representatives of German medicine in this probe does not require lengthy deliberation. Just like the “*epistolae medicales* genre,” consilia found fertile ground for its enthusiastic perception and extensive development in Central Europe. Representatives of French consilia literature were then also included because of the fact that only in France can we find universities that could compete with the Italian institutions with respect to their fame and attendance. It is just this comparison with Italian “rivals” that promises interesting findings.

On the basis of the probe into the consilia collections penned by 15 physicians, it is possible to obtain enough evidence for the definition of the main characteristics of this genre, its differentiation from other forms of expert literature, determination of possible nuances and differences from the approaches of the authors of medieval consilia. One chapter will also focus on specific aspects of the consilia-literature of the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The information obtained will help to paint a picture of the practices of elite physicians, their mutual communication, and indirectly describe the world and sufferings of their patients.

Although consilia usually only provide very basic information about the patient, even the mapping of the usually mentioned social status of patients and sporadically mentioned names, especially regarding well-known figures from political history, can deliver interesting results.

With regards to physicians, it will be most interesting to study the way in which the experts involved communicate with one another, information regarding collaboration and on the contrary even any potential conflicts and discrepancies in treatment. A more detailed perspective about the collections and anthologies is provided by new findings concerning how they were compiled, the publication process itself and interventions of editors, while the study of other paratext materials, such as dedication letters, is also not without interesting discoveries. Individual subsections and an overall summary, which will compare the conclusions from the analyses of Italian, German and French consilia literature, will be dedicated to these and the other points.

The main topic of the second part of the book will be the consilia for patients suffering from the French disease written by physicians, whose collections and anthologies will be expounded upon in the first thematic part. This would not be possible without the concise placement of this disease into its historical context and at least a brief comment about its ontology, which significantly differs from the older understanding of the disease due to the influence of new methodological trends. Without a historical excursion into the history of humoral physiology and pathology, it would not be possible to understand a whole range of information and opinions that appear in the course of researching individual consilia for the treatment of the pox. It will certainly be demonstrated that the detailed study of 16<sup>th</sup> century consilia literature is enriching and interesting and that even consilia can reflect new trends and directions, the influence of new discoveries and ideas – simply everything that formed and influenced medical discourse. We certainly cannot claim that we know about all the aspects of the history of medicine of that period or even everything about the French disease.

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