

TRIBUNE

THE STUDY OF MEDIEVAL HOSPITALS: AN ONGOING HISTORY

Antoni ConejoInstitut de Recerca en Cultures Medievales (IRCVM)
Universitat de Barcelonae-mail: aconejo@ub.edu

doi: 10.1344/Svmma2013.2.11

On 17 April 1401, the bishop of Barcelona, the canons of the cathedral, the town councilmen and the Aragonese royal family, headed by King Martin, the Humane, took part in the founding ceremony of the Hospital de la Santa Creu. All of them joined in a solemn procession, full of symbolism, which carried the first four stones from the cathedral to a plot of land in the Raval quarter where the new building was to be erected. The presence of the representatives of the main territorial and urban authorities indicated their commitment to the brand-new institution, conceived to provide assistance to the poor, the sick and most of the marginalized who crowded the streets and roads of Barcelona, and the rest of the Catalan-Aragonese commonwealth; at least according to the first regulations, passed in 1417, which explicitly noted that ‘poor men and women, disabled, crippled, insane and wounded people, and those suffering from several other human miseries, were admitted, received, maintained and fed in great numbers’.¹ The same text praises the hospital and likens it to the most noble public spaces of the city, describing it as ‘light, nobility, ornament, praise, glory and wealth’ of the city.²

The example of this centuries-old hospital is but one among many which were born during the long Middle Ages throughout the European West. Some of them have survived to the present with more or less difficulties, as in the case at hand. The study of these establishments has drawn the attention of historians and scholars since the second half of the 19th century, but only recently has historiography advanced with greater determination. The large number of new and exciting publications testify to that. These works have debunked several stubborn stereotypes and have contributed to the opening of new research lines, and the assertion of the crucial importance of hospitals in the field of medievalism. However, this editorial activity is not the only proof of the healthy state of research on this topic. In parallel, the number of scientific meetings devoted to it is growing, which encourages even more the discussion and the exchange of individual and/or collective work; monographic exhibitions have been organized; several extant buildings that were

¹ ‘acullits, reebuts, sostenguts e alimentats en gran nombre, hòmens e dones pobres, afollats, contrets, orats, nafrats e havents altres diverses misèries humanes’.

² ‘lum, noblesa, ornament, laor, glòria e amplitud’.

in a precarious condition, some of them near to ruins, have also raised the awareness of public and private entities, which have provided for their restoration; and finally, it is also worth mentioning that several architectural ensembles have been turned into museums and cultural centres, so that now they play a leading role in cultural dissemination. The fact that these initiatives are shared by several countries is doubtlessly the best guarantee that the study of hospitals is not a passing or local trend. At the risk of missing someone, we would like to refer especially to Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Portugal and, of course, our own country.

The main reason behind this ‘awakening’ is manifold. First, the historical study of hospitals per se deserves a discipline of its own, as Peregrine Horden claimed a few years ago. Second, the topics to be dealt with are so many and so varied that, paraphrasing J. R. Guy, we will hardly be able to stop writing the history of hospitals. Such history is not limited to religiosity or welfare policies, since it also involves art history, archaeology, anthropology, cultural heritage, health care, demography and many other fields. This wide range of perspectives has made essential contributions to the understanding of the unquestionably multi-faceted reality of hospitals over time and, in particular regarding the Middle Ages, in order to situate them in their human and institutional landscape. Therefore, it is only logical that interdisciplinary approaches become widespread, since, for instance, it would be very hard to understand the architecture and constructive evolution of a hospital while neglecting the tasks performed therein, paying no attention to the responsibilities of its staff or ignoring the analysis of its accounts and the historical circumstances it went through. In the same way, multi-geographical approaches are also advisable; if we are able to project beyond our immediate borders, we will be in a position to notice both the individual features and the commonalities between contemporary establishments all over the continent. Working across disciplines is not really an option here, but rather a must.

Nowadays, many researchers have chosen the study of hospitals as one of their usual fields of study. The same could be argued about several institutions, which have progressively emerged in order to work in that direction. That was the case of the pioneering *Centro Italiano di Storia Ospitaliera* (CISO), which fostered the celebration of several conferences between 1950 and 1960 as well as the publication of their proceedings. Although it ceased its activities a couple of decades ago, several regional associations of northern Italy have followed in its steps. Another relevant example is the *Centro Interdepartimentale per lo Studio dell’Ospedale di Santa Maria della Scala* (now refounded as *Centro di Studi sugli Ospedali Storici*), founded in 1984 at the Università degli Studi of Siena formed by historians, art and architecture historians and archaeologists. Its goal is the multi-perspective in-depth study of the universe of the hospital of *Santa Maria*, the fascinating building -so difficult to understand-, proudly standing in front of the *scala* of the Sienese cathedral. Despite economic difficulties, it has yielded many results: seminars, a book series and consultancy work during the slow process of restoring the monument and turning it into a museum. Equally important is the *Centro di Documentazione per la Storia*

dell'Assistenza e della Sanità Fiorentina, born in 1998 from a collaboration agreement between the university, the city hall, the province of Florence and other local entities, whose purpose is the dissemination, preservation and valorization of the heritage of the historical welfare and hospital institutions of the Tuscan capital. Currently, the *Centro* hosts a specialized archive and library and, at the same time, has been able to publish several volumes of the series *Biblioteca di Medicina e Storia* as well as the journal *Medicina & Storia*. Outside Italy, it stands out the *Société Française d'Histoire des Hôpitaux* (SFHH) founded in 1958 by Jean Imbert. Since then, it has contributed to the better knowledge of French hospitals, watching over their preservation, encouraging new monographs and funding research. Furthermore, it has held several scientific meetings and publishes its own quarterly journal with brief specialized articles that span from the Middle Ages to the present. Finally, we cannot leave out the *International Network for the History of Hospitals* (INHH), supported by the *European Association for the History of Medicine and Health*, and created in 1998. One of its main activities is the organization of a biennial international conference that has produced several quite renowned volumes.

As for our country, we should mention several landmarks. For instance, in 2007, an agreement was signed by the CSIC, the Library of Catalonia and the Foundation of the Hospital de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau, whose main objective was the elaboration of a complete inventory of all the documents preserved in the Old Hospital de la Santa Creu in Barcelona, which, in the first quarter of the 20th century, had been split up between the latter two institutions. There is no doubt that this initiative was crucial, not only because it finally provided archival coherence to holdings that should not have been divided in the first place, but also because it has facilitated the task of researchers who search for and consult documents thanks to the fact that all the information is accessible online. However, the work is far from done; the catalogue is still open and new entries are added on a daily basis making public new sets of unpublished documents, parchments and bundles with still unexplored data, which help solving the complex puzzle posed by this establishment. Moreover, the aforementioned tripartite agreement was also the spark that led to the celebration of a conference on urban hospitals held in Lleida in 2009, which benefitted from the invaluable participation of the *Institut d'Estudis Ilerdencs*. Many of the works presented there have been compiled into a new book that is fresh off the press.

But that is not all. The *Institut de Recerca en Cultures Medievales* of the Universitat de Barcelona has recently joined the centres, associations and European networks we have just mentioned. Since 2011, the IRCVM has established the historical study of hospitals as one of its main research lines, bringing together scholars from different disciplines and with different affiliations; its goal is to create a meeting point so that foreign scientists gain first-hand knowledge of our scientific system, its potential and infrastructures, and the wealth of the cultural, documentary, movable and immovable heritage of the hospitals in our immediate environment. Since 2012, the IRCVM has organized *Els Abrils de l'Hospital* with that purpose. This scientific meeting is conceived

as a discussion forum, a place to present ongoing research projects and exchange information. April was not chosen by chance, on the contrary, it pays homage and historical recognition to the solemn founding ceremony of the Hospital de la Santa Creu with which we started this tribune.

Léon Le Grand, in his interesting article from 1930, discussed the ideal methodology to trace the history of a hospital. Although it is not our purpose to sum up his ideas –some of which were entirely questionable–, in our opinion it is interesting to recall that Le Grand repeatedly insisted on the need of consulting, reading and understanding the original documentary sources. After all, he himself led by example publishing a crucial compilation of hospital regulations. Although this declaration of intent seems rather obvious, it is unquestionable that primary sources, when extant, provide the most relevant data as to the functioning and peculiarities of any historical institution or building. For that reason, the second edition of *Els Abrils de l'Hospital*, held in Barcelona and l'Hospitalet de l'Infant on 17-19 April 2013, was an international symposium entitled *Documentary and Visual Sources for the Historical Study of Hospitals (13th-18th c.)*. The present issue of *SVMMA* includes four of the papers presented there. Thus, professor Gabriella Piccinni introduces us to the hospital of *Santa Maria della Scala* in Siena, through a multi-disciplinary discourse focused on documents, but also on economy, credit, politics and society. On the other hand, Sylvie le Clech, on the basis of her long professional career in archives and her profound knowledge of Burgundian hospitals, reflects upon the movable and immovable heritage of these institutions and insists on the consequences of the changes they have experienced over time; such consequences have motivated restorations, the cataloguing of documentary holdings, the inventory of pieces of artistic, medical and/or anthropological value and their exhibition in museums. In turn, Reis Fontanals devotes her article, which should have been written a long time ago, to the so-called books of admission of the Old Hospital de la Santa Creu in Barcelona, an exceptional series that, despite several gaps, allows us to learn about the identity and many other data of thousands of patients who were admitted in the centre from mid-15th century up to the 18th century. And finally, Teresa Vinyoles also delves into the holdings of the same archive in order to track down the stark and bitter stories of the poor, the sick and the marginalized.

All in all, the second issue of *SVMMA*, if only as a token gesture, aims to continue advocating for the relevance of the historical study of hospitals, bring to the fore the need to make public unpublished documents that provide new insight to the topic, and contribute to the valorization of the patrimony of these absolutely fascinating spaces.