
With *Leprosy and Charity in Medieval Rouen*, Elma Brenner makes a stunning contribution to twenty-first century scholarship on the history of leprosy in the Middle Ages. As the first comprehensive study of the leprosaria in Rouen during the central to later Middle Ages, this monograph highlights the diverse and often complex responses to and understandings of leprosy and lepers in this period. Expanding on the recent groundbreaking, and indeed field-changing, work of François-Olivier Touati,1 Carole Rawcliffe,2 and Luke Demaitre,3 Brenner’s study explores the relationship between leprosy, charity, and society in “one of the leading cities” (1) of the medieval west and serves as a yet another counterpoint to an outdated narrative of exclusion.

Divided into five chapters, this book examines how Rouen’s leprosaria were influenced by and, in turn, helped to shape the city’s social, economic, medical, and religious landscape. Chapter one introduces Mont-aux-Malades, Rouen’s largest leper house and one of the “most distinguished and wealthy leprosaria in medieval France” (17). This leprosarium was an elite religious community that housed not only male and female lepers, but also priors, Augustinian canons, and

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non-leprous laymen and laywomen who chose to live with, care for, and serve the sick. Beginning with an analysis of its twelfth-century origins, this chapter examines how the institution’s foundation and development were aided by the patronage of high-status urban and ecclesiastical figures, most notably members of the Anglo-Norman royal family including Henry II (d. 1189), King of England and Duke of Normandy, who became one of the institution’s most prolific benefactors. In chapter two, Brenner then follows the evolution of Mont-aux-Malades after Normandy was annexed to the French crown in 1204. Though Christian charity reached its peak in this period, it nevertheless “remained an important tool” wielded by the elite to “create bonds and enhance prestige” (56). As providing for the needs of lepers was considered to be an especially charitable act, Mont-aux-Malades “remained a focus for high-status patronage” (38) and amassed an extensive patrimony that made them a prominent landowners. Brenner explains that, even though the lepers themselves were not directly engaged in handling the institution’s patrimony, their exchanges with the citizens of Rouen likely forged an ever-growing connection between their community at Mont-aux-Malades and lay society.

A novel and, indeed, important facet of Brenner’s analysis of leprosy in medieval Rouen is her discussion in chapter three of the intersection between leprosy and gender. The historiography of gender and, more specifically, women in the Middle Ages has, much like the history of leprosy, shifted and grown considerably in the last twenty-five years. With its diverse body of extant documentation, Brenner’s analysis of the Salle-aux-Puelles as an institution dedicated exclusively to the care of women with leprosy, allows for an “exploration of female religiosity and piety in the context of leprosy” (58) that is largely unavailable elsewhere. Meant perhaps, as Brenner suggests, as a safeguard against longstanding ideas about “a woman’s ability to pass on leprosy”
and the “anxieties about the moral and sexual conduct of leprous females” (61), the role of a women’s only lepersarium provides for both an interesting medical and social discussion of the disease. Further, those who were permitted entrance into the Salle-aux-Puelles were “women of aristocratic birth only” (59), thus also adding a socio-economic dimension to the discussion.

Indeed, the majority of lepers belonging to Mont-aux-Malades and Salle-aux-Puelles in the central and later Middle Ages came from the upper echelons of society, making their experience at the lepersarium markedly different from the city’s poor or itinerant lepers. In light of this, Brenner also traces the subtle, but important, theme of socio-economic status within Rouen’s lepersaria. Though the Mont-aux-Malades and the Salle-aux-Puelles were large, high status institutions, Rouen was also home to six other small, modest foundations that served distinct local communities. Together, Rouen’s lepersaria served a variety of functions, from diagnosis to bodily care and hospitality to spiritual services. While an analysis of the “diverse services offered” at these institutions sheds a much needed light on the “multiple social statues of sufferers” (58), it also reveals the city’s responsibility to care for the lepers from its villages and suburban areas.

The care provided in the lepersaria of medieval Rouen shifted alongside ideas and responses to the disease itself and, as such, reinforced the idea that they were the ideal locations for lepers to receive both physical and spiritual care. Though addressed throughout her work, in chapter four Brenner takes an in-depth look into the often misunderstood relationship between leprosy and contagion. While the “almost universal location” (99) of lepersaria outside medieval towns and cities is often used to point out early fears of contagion, Brenner emphasizes that concerns only begin appearing in extant sources in Rouen during the thirteenth century, a consistent finding with other scholarship on the
topic. In light of this, she highlights the important role played by Rouen’s leprosaria in the “realms of medical care, diagnosis and public health provision in this period” (108). Further, by situating the leprosaria within the broader context of the city’s medical practices and practitioners she is able to trace the impact of these issues within contemporary society. Medical responses to leprosy in Rouen were therefore, as Brenner clearly shows, diverse and ever-changing.

In a similar vein, chapter five analyzes the relationship between Rouen’s main leprosaria and its religious culture. Through an analysis of the extant architectural and material remains, Brenner highlights the “multiple spiritual functions” (109) of both Mont-aux-Malades and Salle-aux-Puelles. These institutions operated much like the monastic houses of this period, where religious practice was central to daily life and helped to provide structure and regulate behavior. While this reflects the medieval medical notion that caring for the soul was related to caring for the physical body, the daily life of the leprosaria also reflected a “preoccupation with the soul’s fate after death” (131) that influenced all medieval pious practices. The spiritual rewards promised by the prayers and masses said by the leprous were considered to be particularly efficacious and, as such, provided great incentive for potential benefactors. Foundations, then, were likely motivated as much by pious devotion as they were by the spiritual rewards a benefactor expected to receive.

Brenner’s Leprosy and Charity in Medieval Rouen is a much needed, accessible, and nuanced addition to scholarship on the history of leprosy in the Middle Ages. By bringing attention to a number of previously unexplored sources, documented in an appendix which contains 116 charters and related documents (142-181), Brenner has opened a variety of avenues for continued exploration of an ever-growing and increasingly optimistic narrative. While she acknowledges that by the fourteenth century we...
begin to see “less positive responses to the leprous” (3) as well as an increasing fear of contagion, Brenner emphasizes the complexity of attitudes towards the lepers of Rouen in the Middle Ages. Finally, with her exploration of the hitherto largely ignored ties between leprosy, gender, and socio-economic status, Brenner adds another layer to our understanding of contemporary attitudes towards leprosy and, indeed, highlights “the need for a more fundamental appreciation of the complex dynamics of medieval society” (134).

Courtney A. Krolkoski
McGill University
United Kingdom