

Book Review

Miasmas and Disease. Public Health and the Environment in the pre-Industrial Age.
M. CIPOLLA. Pp. 82. Yale University Press, 1992. ISBN 0 300 04806 8.

Until the nineteenth century, miasmas were considered to be a pre-eminent mechanism for the transmission of disease. Public health activity, which aimed at limiting the spread of contagious disease, had to work within the understanding of this paradigm and contain such scourges as smallpox, diphtheria, typhus and, above all, plague. The Health Magistracy of Florence was permanently established after nearly two centuries of temporary existence to enable public health activities to take place, and it represented an early attempt to create an institutional approach to dealing with public health.

Professor Cipolla examines the documentary evidence relating to the role of the Preventive Health Magistracy in Florence during the first half of the seventeenth century. The book presents two examples of the type of activity undertaken at this time. The first part of the book presents examples of the response of local communities to a Public Health Ordinance issued by the Preventive Health Magistrates on 4 May 1622. The second part of the book consists largely of medical reports undertaken by doctors sent by Health Magistracy to examine and report on specific communities which were reported as having an excess mortality.

The book relies intentionally on the reports of the doctors and others in the handling of epidemics at this time and gives an interesting insight into the workings of seventeenth-century bureaucracy and the interpretations and understandings of public health paradigms. The book also brings home the fact that life was short and largely surrounded by offensive smells and a public which saw little reason to change its habits in the face of the health advice of the day.

In the introduction, the author suggests that chapter 3 may be tedious and that repetitive accounts by doctors of epidemics real or supposed might be avoided by reading chapter 4 after a few pages of chapter 3. I would go further and advise the reader to read chapter 1, which outlines the bureaucracy and the epidemiological concepts of the day, chapter 4 which explains the medical concepts and the different diseases prevalent at the time with a glossary of seventeenth-century medical expression, and then proceed to the remaining chapters. In this way, a greater understanding of the work being done in seventeenth-century Florence is achieved, and chapter 3 becomes a more enjoyable read.

The book is an entertaining and enlightening read for those with a bent for Public Health history, and can be read in an evening. I found the chapter order irritating, but came away informed and wondering how an academic in the twenty-third century will review our blundering public health efforts at dealing with ischaemic heart disease, and hoping that, like Professor Cipolla, we will be allowed to speak and inform and entertain our distant colleagues.

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