

Malignant Syphilis and the Isenheim Altar

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The Isenheim altar was created in 1513–1515 by Mathias Grünewald (1470–1528), an outstanding artist of the time. It was originally placed in the St. Anthony monastery in Isenheim, Alsace, renowned for its care-taking of ergotism, lepra, pest and syphilis. Today the altar is placed in Musée d’Unterlinden in Colmar, Alsace.

In the open left altar wing illustrating the temptation of Saint Anthony, a suffering man, probably a demoralized monk, is seen (Fig. 1) (1). Art historians have meant that he suffers from ergotism. It was a disease among poor peasants who had rye inflicted with ergot containing scale alkaloid, which causes peripheral gangrene with loss of fingers and toes. The painting is symbolizing a sinful life.

The deplorable figure shows boils and sores which are not characteristic of ergotism. It is more plausible that Mathias Grünewald depicted a severe case of syphilis, “the French disease”, at the time also denounced “bösen blattern” and “the great pox” (Fig. 2) (2). Syphilis was brought to Europe with Columbus’ crew returning from the New World in 1493. In the years to follow it swept through Western Europe as a



Fig. 1. The left wing of the open Isenheim altar with Mathias Grünewald’s painting of the temptation of St. Anthony. The appealing shabby figure, probably a monk, shows boils and sores, most likely malignant syphilis (3).



Fig. 2. The first known illustration of syphilis dates from the 1490s, an informative coloured woodcut with text attributed to Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), a contemporary to Mathias Grünewald. The young person shows large syphilitic sores, malignant syphilis. He seems moody in his fashionable French clothes, an allusion to “the French disease” (for details, see ref. 2).

sexually transmitted plague, soon condemned a sinful disease. The St. Anthony monastery took care of the many victims.

The malignant form of syphilis, ulcerative syphilis, *syphilis maligna praecox*, is described in detail by Carl Rasch (1861–1938), professor of dermato-venereology, in “Textbook of Internal Medicine” from 1915 (Fig. 3) (1, 3). During the AIDS epidemic, malignant syphilis occurred in immune-depressed patients, today it is rarely seen.

The reason why ergotism is believed to be depicted on the altarpiece is not obvious. Ergotism does not fit with the skin lesions of the person and it seems inexplicable that victims of the disease should be condemned as sinners. The fallacy is dual, the choice of ergotism can be explained by an allusion to the monastery’s name and care-taking of ergotism, “St. Anthony’s fire” or “holy fire”, and due to ignorance of ma-

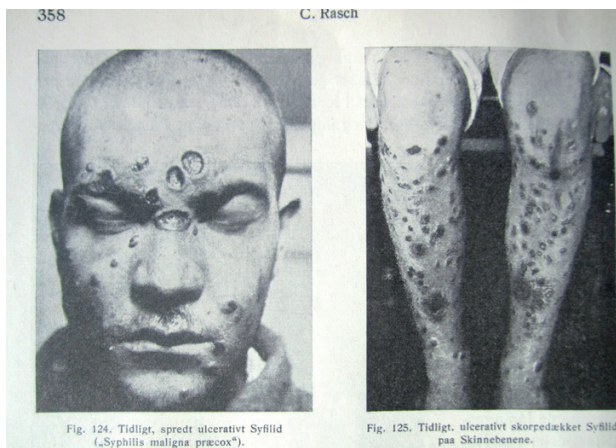


Fig. 3. Patients with *syphilis maligna praecox*, ulcerative syphilis. The Department of Dermato-venereology, Kommunehospitalet, Copenhagen, about 1900 (1, 3).



Fig. 4. Woodcut from 1496 with the Holy Virgin Mary and the child as protectors against syphilis. The dead person on the ground is covered with syphilitic skin lesions (for details, see ref.2).

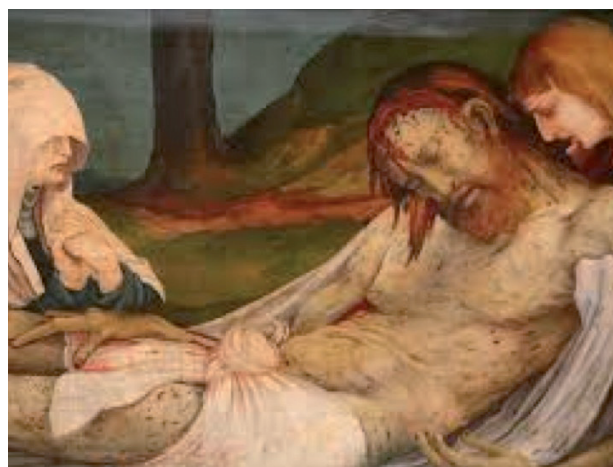


Fig. 5. The predella of the Isenheim with the lamentation of Jesus. His body is covered with sores suggestive of syphilis.

lignant syphilis as it looked at the time. The ergotism-syphilis debate is not new (1, 4).

The catholic church sold woodcut petitions to protect against syphilis. New patron saints such as Saint Job and Saint Minus were depicted with syphilis. Pictures of Virgin Mary with the child were popular and printed in books describing syphilis (Fig. 4) (2).

In the predella of the Isenheim altar Jesu lamentation is shown. The depiction with syphilis-like skin lesions expresses like the petitions divine solidarity with victims of the scourge (Fig. 5) (1, 2).

Albrecht Dürer and Mathias Grünewald were probably the first to depict cases of syphilis in a realistic way.

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