

ON THE CAUSES OF THE DEATHS OF BURGESSES AND NOBLEMEN IN THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD IN UPPER HUNGARY

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Abstract

The present study intends to highlight the hitherto underused sources concerning the history of medicine. These are archival materials of various kinds, but also artefacts of a funerary nature known as sepulchral monuments. In his research activities aimed at the study, analysis and translation of medieval and early modern Latin texts, the author of this paper has also examined a wide variety of writings containing references to the causes of death of individuals from the ranks of the nobility as well as the common bourgeoisie. The narrative quality of these historical sources has varied. Only extensive archival research will make it possible to draw conclusions about the greater or lesser usefulness of medieval and early post-medieval archival material for the history of medicine, specifically in uncovering the causes of death of individuals in our territory during this period. For the purposes of the present study, we proceeded to a selective choice of those written sources in which the presumption of new discoveries was most probable. From the territorial point of view, we focused on the region of present-day eastern Slovakia due to the preservation of numerous relevant archival and other documentary sources.

Keywords: causes of death, archival sources, inscriptions, Upper Hungary, early modern age

INTRODUCTION

There is a wide variety of writings containing references to the causes of death of individuals from the ranks of the nobility as well as the common bourgeoisie. Due to the preservation of numerous relevant archival and other documentary sources, the paper focuses on the region of today's eastern Slovakia. For example, the Bardejov registry of the dead is the oldest preserved in our territory. The first records date back to 1586. The content of the registers of the deceased from the early modern period is varied and often depends on the recorder. The latter usually records only the information about the death itself with the exact date. At other times, however, we learn interesting details about the circumstances of a particular person's death. The uniqueness of this kind of source is that it brings us closer to such circumstances even about members of the lowest social groups. Another source of information for us are the town's official registers. Although the general designation of these documents does not make them look interesting in terms of our subject, we also find in them the causes of death, in this case of the urban elite. For in these books are regularly, every year, lists of the elected representatives of the free royal towns. Specifically, these are the *richtári* (mayors), the town council members or senators, and the broader town council, whose members used to be referred to as *centumviri*. In the case of their deaths, their names used to be accompanied by a cross and the cause of their death was often various illnesses. The last type of written sources we wish to highlight in this paper are sepulchral inscriptional artefacts. These are monuments of a funerary nature, such as tombstones, epitaphs or mortuaries.

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Causes of death

General designations of death

The vast majority of references to the death of individuals are limited to a dry statement of death. The latter is often expressed only by a simple cross. Verbally, it is mostly the simple Latin expression "*mortuus*" or "*mortuus est*" by the name of the deceased. This group also includes traditional Christian formulas such as "*pie et placide in Christo*", i.e. he died piously and peacefully in Christ, as in the case of Martin Wenczel, a burgher and nobleman from Košice in 1600 (1). Very often we find in written records the formula "*obdormivit in Christo*", i.e. he rested in Christ. This is true both for archival documents and inscriptions on grave-stones. Of course, the more detailed information about an individual's death is much more interesting to us.

Specific causes

Before we come to matters of interest in the history of medicine, let us at least briefly mention some of the facts which are usually given as causes of death. Also in view of the turbulent period of the 16th and 17th centuries in our territory, marked by numerous anti-Habsburg uprisings, religious frictions and anti-Turkish wars, violent deaths are not at all unusual. The cause of death in the case of Jan Wolf of Bardejov in 1629 is given as homicide or murder ('*occisus*') (2). He was murdered by bandits in the service of the town near the village of Duplín. The same fate also befell the Košice inhabitant Pavel Kelemeši in 1656 (3). We also include information about death by execution in this category. It is quite rare for this to happen in the case of a prominent city official. This was the case of Stanislav Sismund, a member of the wider city council in Prešov, who was executed by beheading in 1538 – "*detruncatus*" (4). Equally interesting are the details of the accidental situations leading to the killing. From the Bardejov registry of the dead we learn that in 1586 a boy died after falling from a tree. Interestingly, the original entry combines German with Latin, which was not unusual in those days: '*ein Knab vom Baum gefallen et mortuus*' (5). From the same source comes a text that describes not only the death but literally the last weeks of the boy in 1590. Again, this is an anonymous individual about whom we know only that he was a student at the local town school: '*Scholasticus in schola decubuit aeger per 16 hebdomadas ex montanis quem currus pertransivit et fame penuriaque periit*'. The boy thus suffered a severe injury after being run over by a chariot or wagon, and was then confined to bed for 16 weeks, before finally dying of hunger and misery.

The plague – Pestis

We come to the specific diseases that were causing the deaths. In the records we have looked at, plague is clearly the most frequently cited disease in this respect. In the period we are looking at, in the 16th and 17th centuries, several major plague epidemics struck the territory of the north-eastern provinces. Already in 1577 we can trace this fact on the epitaph of Juraj Jezernický, a nobleman and representative of the Spiš Chamber in Košice, where it is directly stated that he died as a result of the plague – '*extinctus peste*' (6). Devastating plague waves hit the area several times in the 17th century. In 1600, between June and October, more than 800 people died in the free royal town of Sabinov. The Sabinov Chronicle lists the individual personalities who succumbed to the plague, and it is clear from this calculation that the plague did not spare the elite of the town – "*magna Ecclesiae et Rei publicae lumina e vivis sublata est*" – including senators, nobles, a pastor and the rector of the school (7).

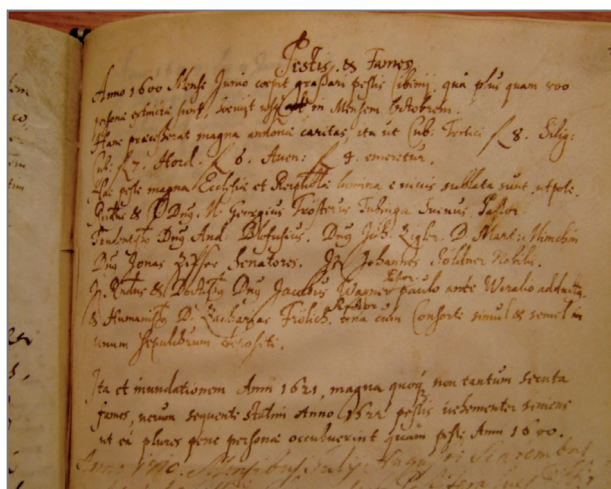


Fig. 1 Record of a plague epidemic in Sabinov during the years 1600 and 1622.

In 1622 an even stronger plague wave hit a large area of Upper Hungary. It was fuelled by the floods of the previous year, the resulting crop failure and the unavailability of grain and other foodstuffs. In Bardejov alone more than 2000 people died in 1622, in Prešov 1337, while the year before only 192 people died (8). As of 1663, we have preserved a brief description of such a sick individual. It was the Bardejov cantor Juraj Roth, whose condition before his death is described in the town book with the words "*initio pestis mortuus in gravi et contagioso Apostemate*", i.e. his death was caused by a serious and contagious abscess (9).

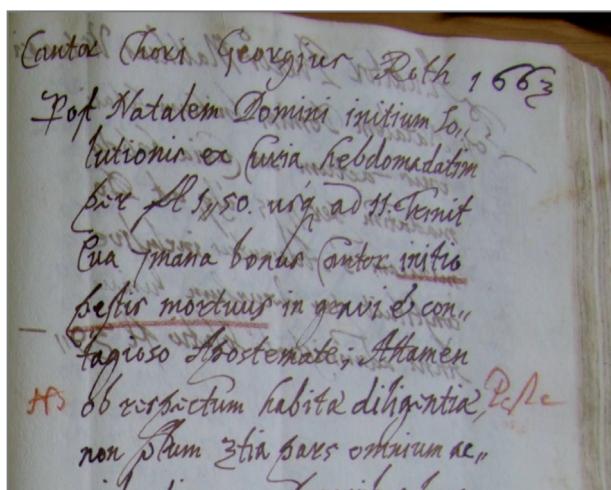


Fig. 2 A record of the death of Bardejov cantor Juraj Roth in 1663 during a plague epidemic. ("*initio pestis mortuus in gravi et contagioso Apostemate*").

We believe that the Latin noun *prunum*, or *plum*, is also related to the term *apostema* in contemporary sources. This is specifically the phrase "*in assatorio prunor(um) morbo*". It is such a disease that is mentioned as the cause of the death of the senator of Bardejov, Andrej Janoffský, in 1628. However, this is an isolated connection, which we have not yet encountered elsewhere and will require further research (10). Treating plague was a huge challenge for doctors at the time. Among the many different methods that were preferred in the Upper Hungary in the period we are looking at, let us mention the treatment as recorded by Daniel Klesch, a native of Spišská Nová Ves, a graduate of the University of Wittenberg

and a priest. He himself was infected with the plague in 1638 during his stay in Rožňava. He was treated by his host, the physician Ján Barbely, who let him swim in the Slaná River until he was completely exhausted. Finally, he pulled him out of the water, "opened the ulcer on the toe of his right foot with a prepared instrument, and simply squeezed out the festering mass flowing in large quantities. He ordered me to sweat on my return home, applied rabbit fat to the ulcer, and in three days I recovered" (11).

Difficult childbirth, miscarriage, puerperium – Partus difficilis, abortus, puerperium

Birth-related matters were mentioned as the most common cause of death after the plague. Either the mother or the child, or both. This was also the case of the wife of Andreas Kraus from Bardejov, who died together with her son in 1587 during a difficult childbirth – "*starb dem Andreas Kraus uxor pregnans in difficili partu una cum puero*". A similar case is represented by the death of the daughter of Mikuláš Jankoš, who died with her two twin children in 1592. The record shows that it was probably a premature birth: "*Nykel Jankos tochter in partu abortuo mit sampt 2 kyndern*" (12). A large number of the deceased are children, including those who died in abortions. They are sometimes distinguished in the civil registry according to whether or not they were baptized. The harshness of the times and the plight of women is represented by the record of the abortion of Peter Kusnyrs' wife, who miscarried in 1590. It was a boy who was already half decomposed – "*Petro Kusnyrs puer abortuus halb verfault*". Fortunately, the mother seems to have survived.

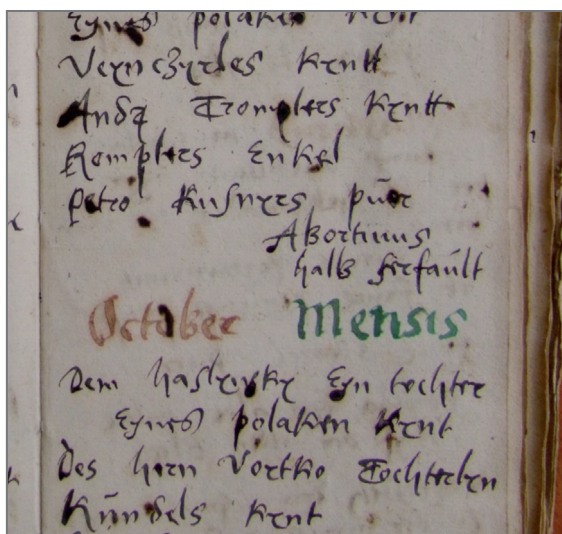


Fig. 3 A record of the abortion of Petr Kušník's wife, who miscarried in 1590. It was a boy who was already half decomposed ("Petro Kusnyrs puer abortuus halb verfault").

The risk to the parent did not end with the birth itself. There is a wealth of data on the deaths of women in the six-week period. In the same year, 1590, in Bardejov, Thomas Scholcz's wife died in this way: "*Thomas Scholcz uxor in puerperio...*". However, we must be careful with the term puerperium, as it was also used to refer to the actual birth (12).

Tuberculosis – Phtysis

Among other diseases mentioned in historical sources, let us first mention tuberculosis. Quite often it occurs as a cause of death among the most prominent representatives of cities. As early as 1566, such a reference is made to the name of the senator of Bardejov, Simon Gergelius: "*morbo phtisico consumptus*" (13). Similarly, in 1642, the scholar and colleague of Bardejov's famous school Christopher Dresser died: "*Viam universae Carnis ingressus bonus hic senator, vir litteratus olim Collega scholae Patriae, correptus phtysi*" (10).

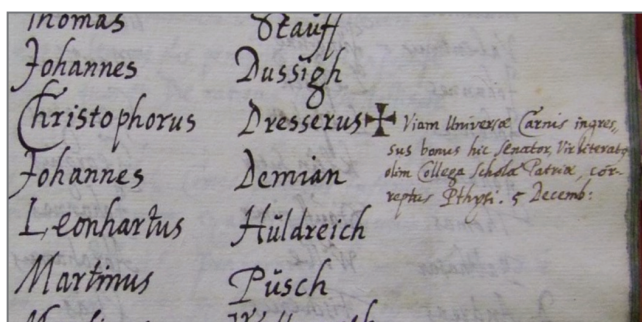


Fig. 4 A record from 1642 that Christopher Dresserus died of tuberculosis ("Viam universae carnis ingressus bonus hic senator, vir litteratus olim Collega scholae Patriae, correptus phytisi").

The Slovak priest Ján Ochrlan (Ocherlan) from Brezno, who died in Bardejov in 1626, was also described as a "Phytisicus", i.e. one who suffered from tuberculosis, and at the end of the same century, in 1697, the Bardejov churchman and bell-ringer Štefan Halčík also died: "tabe et phytisi... in domino placide obdormivit" (14).

In connection with tuberculosis and the territory of Upper Hungary, we must mention an important native of the region of Turiec, the scholar and physician Matúš Palumbini. He also had direct experience of the aforementioned free royal towns during his studies and work in Bardejov and later in Levoča. In his work *De Phthisi* (On Tuberculosis), which was published in Jena in 1679, he mentions several times the facts relating to the localities of eastern Slovakia. He refers to Košice as a place which, because of its unhealthy atmosphere, seems to be a perfect place for the spread of tuberculosis, with an unusually high number of tuberculosis patients among members of noble families. In Bardejov, where Palumbini studied at the local lyceum, he again notes the excessive use of acid springs, which, according to him, were misunderstood as a means to health. On the contrary, he considered them to be an accelerator of tuberculosis in the organism of his sick classmates (15).

Other diseases causing death

Among the other causes of death in the 16th and 17th centuries, let us first mention stroke, known in contemporary sources as 'apoplexia'. Literally overcome by a stroke was the important senator of Košice Štefan Almassy in 1626. The stroke repeatedly manifested itself several times during the Senate session, which finally led to his death on the afternoon of 3 September: '3. septembris apoplexia obrutus eodem die in frequenter Senatu, post meridiem obijt'. Similarly, this was the end of Laurentius Aurifaber, the mayor of Košice, in 1588, when he was suddenly stricken by a stroke in the evening of 24 May and died at two o'clock the following night (1).

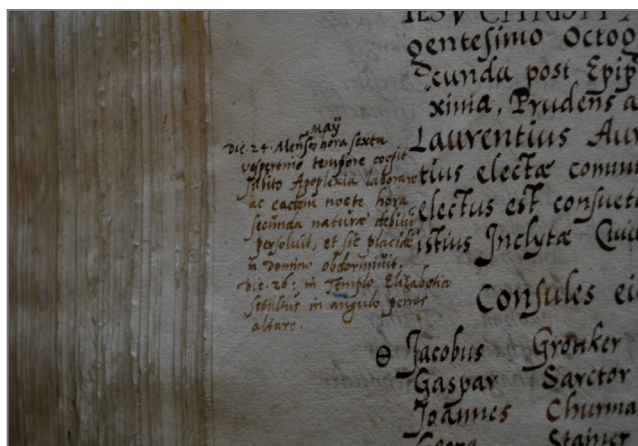


Fig. 5 A record from 1588 that the mayor Laurentius Aurifaber died of a stroke ("Die 24. Mensis May sexta vespertino tempore coepit subito Apoplexia laborare ac eadem nocte hora secunda naturae debitum persoluit...").

In Bardejov, especially at the end of the 16th century, "dissenteria", i.e. dysentery, occurs in the civil registers. In 1589 a young man died in this way: 'eyn Junger gefell dissenteria', and in the same month of August we record other cases. One of these is the death of John Henczely's daughter, Magdalena (5).

Other diseases appear sporadically in the writings. One of them is epilepsy. It was the cause of the death of Juraj Blimberg, a Bardejov mayor, in 1625 (16). The other is 'podagra', i.e. gout, which also affected the Bardejov mayor, this time Valentin Berger, who died in 1631 at the advanced age of 70, and the above description of his condition expresses the torment the disease caused him throughout his body: 'Podagra interiori laborans et aliis corporis sui tormentis correptus. Aetatis 70" (10). We also record several cases of death following a problem with kidney stones. This was also the case of the Bardejov cantor Adam Vogler in 1620: "moritur calculo" (14).

CONCLUSION

It is interesting to know how a person at the end of the 16th century perceived the irreversible process of dying. In the Bardejov registry, directly among the entries on the dead for the year 1590, there is the following text: "Contra vim mortis, Nulla herba crescat in hortis. Statutum est omnibus hominibus semel mori. Et mortuus est." Translated, Against the power of death, no medicinal plant grows in the garden. It is a given that every man must one day die. And so he dies (5).

The results presented here confirm the validity of research into the causes of death for the history of medicine, and we will therefore continue in the coming years with intensive field and archival research in the territory of present-day Slovakia.

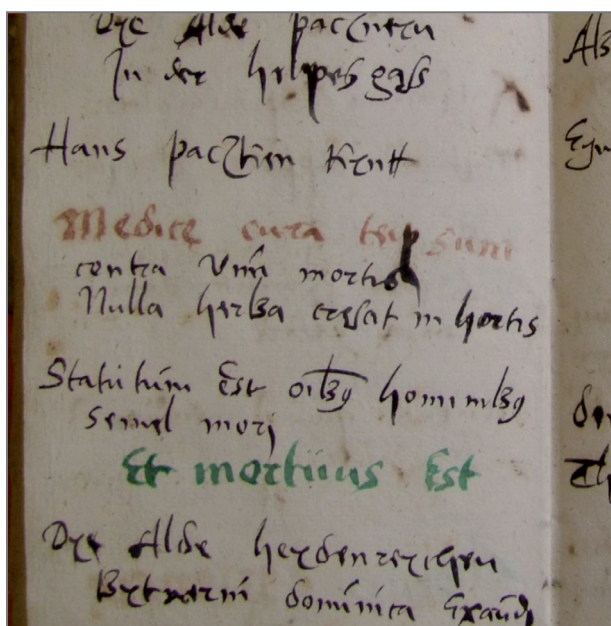


Fig. 6 A record from 1590 in the Bardejov registry of the deceased expressing the inevitability of death. ("Medice, cura te ipsum. Contra vim mortis, Nulla herba crescat in hortis. Statutum est omnibus hominibus semel mori. Et mortuus est.").

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