

The Isenheim Altar in Colmar Depicts *Syphilis maligna*

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Abstract: The Isenheim altarpiece was painted for the Isenheim monastery in 1512-16 by the German artist Mathis Grünewald (1475-1528). In the frontal part of the altar, the Crucifixion is illustrated. In the second part, the Annunciation with Virgin Mary's meeting with the Archangel Gabriel is depicted. The back part of the altar has a large golden stature of Saint Anthony. The right sidepanel has created debate about the disease of the shabby monk with widespread sores. Traditionally, he is believed to suffer from ergotism, but there are no signs of gangrene. Most likely he had *Syphilis maligna*, called "Böse blattern" or *Variola major*, which at Grünewald's time plagued all Europe. Today, knowledge of malignant syphilis is practically non-existing. Textbooks about a hundred years ago described the characteristic bullous and pox-like, sometimes ulcerative lesions like those of the monk. In the Crucifixion Jesus Christ's body is covered with multiple sores resembling woodcuts of petitions and of a young man with "the French disease" attributed to Albrecht Dürer. Woodcuts of flyleaves and Albrecht Dürer's reproduction may have inspired Grünewald to depict syphilis as a warning and remembrance of the plague.

Keywords: "Böse Blattern", Gangraenous Ergotism, Isenheim Altar, Mathis Grünewald, Saint Anthony, *Syphilis maligna*

1. Introduction

The city of Colmar in Alsace is situated about 800 km from Copenhagen and can be reached in one day by car, or which is preferable by flight to Strasbourg and the remaining 50 km by a rented car. Alsace is known for its beautiful surroundings, extensive vineyards and villages with half-timbered whitewashed town houses, and furthermore for its white wines and tasteful dishes.

There is specific reason why you should visit the area, the Isenheim altarpiece located in the Musée Unterlinden in Colmar. It was painted in 1512-16 by the German artist Mathis Grünewald (1475-1528) in early netherlandish Renaissance style. It is regarded as one of greatest pieces of art of the time [1, 2].

2. The Isenheim Altar

The altar measures 3 X 6 meters and contains three separate presentations of motives from the New Testament, and a single non-biblical painting which is of medical-historical interest because it shows signs of *Syphilis maligna*. At the time syphilis was a new pestilence denounced "Böse

blattern", meaning foul blistering or pox-like disease [3].

The front of the altar depicts the Crucifixion with realistic drama and empathy (Figure 1). Jesus wears a giant crown of thorns which is sliding away, his fingers are stretched and his breast risen with his last respirations. The iron nails through his hands and feet are painted dramatically large. At Jesus' left side Johan the Baptist is pointing at him with an overdimensioned index finger. He was dead long before the Crucifixion, so his presence symbolizes the Resurrection. On the other side of the cross Johan the Evangelist is seen closely embracing Maria. At the foot of the cross a sorrowful Maria Magdalena is kneeling wringing her hands. At her side a small pot is placed by which she had anointed Jesus' feet. A lamb is shedding its blood into a chalice, symbolizing the offer of Jesus Christ and the Holy Sacrament. In the left side-panel Saint Sebastian is standing right up, ignoring the arrows of the Mauretan archers which failed to execute him. His fate is a parallel to the Passion, and the arrows symbolize the agony which is conquered by the true faith. The paintings are held in black and dark tones to underline the tragic events.



Figure 1. The Isenheim altarpiece in Musée Unterlinden, Colmar. The frontal altar depicts the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The Virgin is comforted by Johan the Evangelist. Johan the Baptist is pointing at Jesus with a long finger. At the left Saint Sebastian and at the right Saint Anthony are standing. In the predella the Entombment of Jesus is witnessed by Johan the Evangelist, the Virgin and Maria Magdalena (photo: Angela Rogers).

In the *predella*, the foot piece of the altar, the Entombment is depicted. The Virgin hides her tears behind a veil, and a weeping red-eyed Maria Magdalene witnesses the event.

The second altarpiece is seen when the doors of the frontal altar are opened. It depicts important events in Maria's and Jesu lives [1]. The colours are brighter than in the Crucifixion scene. Maria is sitting reading in the profetery of Esaia when the Archangel Gabriel comes rushing in proclaiming the Annunciaton. Maria has a fresh appearance with rosy cheeks, quite different from her gusty look at the Crucifixion. In the middle part of the altar Maria is taking care of her well-grown Infant. A bath tub and a small chamber pot under the bed remind us of the triviality of earthly life. In the right sidepanel Mathis Grünewald depicts the Resurrection. A smiling Jesus is ascending surrounded by a giant luminous halo. The widespread sores present at the Crucifixion are gone, only scars after the iron nails are visible.

The third and back part of the altar is dedicated to Saint Anthony, the founder of the monastic order bearing his name. The middle part is dominated by his large golden wood Figure created by the contemporary arist Nikolaus Hagenauer (1445-1538). At the foot of the throne two small persons are kneeling symbolising the difference between the saint and earthbound humans.

The painting of the right side-panel is a non-biblical motive showing Saint Anthony's temptation in the desert. Once he was assaulted by demons in the desert, they tormented and beat him, so he nearly died. He was saved by the interference of Jesus, but Saint Anthony was annoyed by his late appearance. On a piece of paper seen in the right lower corner he has written, *Ubi eras, Iesu bone, ubi eras quare non affuisti ut sanares ulcera mea* ("Where were you, oh good Jesus, why did you not come to help me and heal my sores") [1].

In the right sidepanel a cast-off anthonite munk is pictured (Figure 2). He is naked showing widespread sores and boils and a swallowed bellow, indicating ascites and obesity due to a luxurious lifestyle. Of unknown reasons he has large web feet.

In the *predella* the Last supper is shown, the twelve

apostels sitting at a table, Jesus in the middle as the largest. He holds a *globus cruciger*, a globe with a cross, the sign of Savior of the world [1].



Figure 2. In the right side-panel of the back alter a shabby detronised anthonite monk is sitting. He has sores and boils suggestive of "böse Blattern", malignant syphilis, and a swollen belly (Angelica Rogers).

3. Discussion

Syphilis appeared in Europa during the early 1490s. Probably Christopher Columbus' crew had attracted the disease during the first expedition to the New World in 1492-93. Spanish mercenaries were the first to get infected, and they carried syphilis with them during the many war expeditions at the time. It was spread further by popular brothels and public baths. Within a few years all Europe was struck by the pestilence [3].

The anthonite monastery was known for taking care of sick people with ergotism. It was caused by cereals infected with the ergot fungal *Claviceps purpurea*, which produces ergotamin. It is a strong vasoconstrictive agent causing gangraene of distal parts of the body, first of all hands and feet [4, 5]. The condition was called "Saint Anthony's fire" or "Holy fire". Thousands died from gangreanous ergotism, and at Mathis Grünewald's time it was so common that it was designated an epidemic. The monks of the monastery took care of the sick but apart from nursing them they could do little to save them. Amputation by sawing, *serratura*, of angraenous limbs was performed by doctors of the monastery without use of anaesthesia or hygienic measures as a desperate way out to save the patients' lives. It was often unsuccessfull due to loss of blood and complicating septicaemia [1, 6].

When syphilis reached Germany in 1495, the monastery received patients with the new disease. They were severely ill with sores and boils all over the body and with a high fever. The mortality rate of the pestilence was high and it was feared as much as "the Black death". The disease was officially termed *Variola major* (great pox), later on *Syphilis maligna*. Among its many names was "The Spanish disease", "The Italian pestilence" and "The French disease". Another popular name was "Galopping syphilis" due to the rapid course of the disease [6].

Until a hundred years ago malignant syphilis was regularly seen among prostitutes in the big cities, and described in detail in the contemporary medical litterature with the symptoms as mentioned here (Figure 3) [7, 8]. Today, this

form of the original syphilitic disease is extremely seldom. But in the 1980s it reappeared in AIDS-patients with severely depressed immunity [9]. Modern textbooks of venereology usually do not include *Syphilis maligna*, they seldom mention it, perhaps with a few words [10, 11]. So knowledge of the disease which is quite different from today's syphilis, is lost and practically gone. This explains why the altar picture of the monk has been recognised not as syphilis, but erroneously gangraenous ergotism, referring to the monastery's interest in the disease. The scabby monk in Figure 2 suffers from a pox-like bullous disease which looks like "Böse Blattern", not ergotism [3, 6, 12].

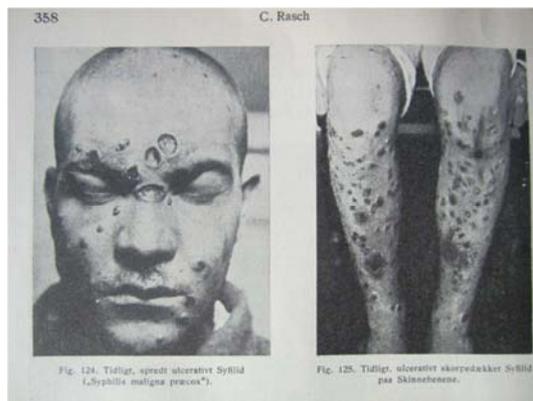


Figure 3. *Syphilis maligna* in a male patient about 1900. The Department of Dermatology and Venereology, The Municipal Hospital, Copenhagen (8).

From the very beginning syphilis was associated with prostitution and bauchery and regarded as a shameful disease. Ergotism was believed to be caused by the devil and not connected with an amoral lifestyle.

At the end of the 1490s the Catholic church began to distribute petition flyleaves which promised to protect against syphilis, illustrated by woodcuts of sick people with signs of the disease [6, 13-15]. The petitions included a warning against the pestilence written in latin which the common man was unable to read. So the message much relied on the illustrations. An example of a petition with Saint Minus as protector against syphilis says, "Dear almighty God! Take care of us with your eyes of grace and help us by means of Saint Minus' many deeds and good prayers so we can have graceful protection by Jesus Christ against the terrible blister disease. Amen!" In Joseph Grünpeck's treatise on syphilis from 1496, the first of its kind, Jesus Christ covers the front page holding a mighty *globus cruciger* in his right hand, demonstrating that he was the saviour of the syphilitics [6].

Mathis Grünewald painted Jesus on the cross and in the *predella* with multiple sores regarded to be caused by flagellation (Figure 1). The skin lesions are not linear and without blood, which should be expected. The distribution and size of the lesions look like petition woodcuts, and the scabby monks lesions are similar the famous coloured work from 1496 of a young man with "the French disease", attributed to Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) (Figure 4) [2]. He worked closely together with Mathis Grünewald in the years

of 1509-11 so he was undoubtedly familiar with the realistic representation of *Syphilis maligna*. The petitions and Albrecht Dürer's man with "The French disease" might have inspired Mathis Grünewald to depict syphilis in the Isenheim altar.

The right panel of the back part of the altar depicts Saint Anthony's temptation in the desert. It is inspired by a woodcut from 1511 by Hans Baldung Grien (1484-1545) entitled "The seven deadly sins". It shows devils each representing one of the mortal sins. The pauvre monk sitting in the corner (Figure 2) is placed just as the devil representing gluttony ("fressery") [6] (Figure 5).



Figure 4. A young man with syphilis dressed in elegant French clothes referring to "The French disease". His pants are down to show the "Böse blattern". It is the first known realistic picture of syphilis in its original malignant form. The woodcut is attributed to Albrecht Dürer and dates from 1496 (Wellcome Collection).



Figure 5. "The seven deadly sins" by Hans Baldung Grien, showing a demon representing gluttony placed in the corner just as the deploring anthonite monk of Figure 2. (Akg-Images/Ritzau Scanpix).

The monk probably is a glutton who, in fairness of the time, is punished by deadly “böse Blattern” for his profligate way of living. This explains the situation of the diseased person.

Nobody knows what Mathis Grünewald had in his mind when he painted the Isenheim altar tables. He did not leave notes or contracts with the prior of the monastery who sponsored the work [1]. Possibly, Mathis Grünewald wanted to leave a message about the pestilence of the time, “Böse Blattern”.

4. Conclusion

The Isenheim altar in Colmar dating from 1512-16 is one of the most important examples of early netherlandish Renaissance painting. It is of interest that it contains depictions of skin changes which closely resemble *Syphilis maligna* and not ergotism which today is the general belief. Malignant syphilis at that time was a deadly pestilence that haunted Europe and quite different from today’s milder form.

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