



Searching for Syphilis

What was the Great Pox?

Simon Mays:

Well, this is clearly an individual that's lived with her disease for a long time, she was a chronically ill individual. Looking at the lesions on the bones themselves there'd clearly be chronic bone pain. These sorts of bone changes would have been accompanied by soft tissue changes particularly in the skin, possibly with ulceration, and so this would have been a very unwell and infirm individual, and this at a time of course when there was no effective treatment for infectious disease.

Narrator:

This woman would not have understood why she suffered so terribly. In her lifetime, her disease was almost unknown. But it was to become one of the greatest scourges of mankind. It still infects 12 million new people world-wide every year.

The question of where it came from has fuels one of the longest running arguments in medical history. Now, science is shedding fresh light on her bones and on the origins of an old enemy.

IN SEARCH OF SYPHILIS

Narrator:

At the very end of the 15th Century a terrifying new epidemic raged across Europe.

Voice-over (Quote):

I have seen scourges, horrible sicknesses and many infirmities affect mankind from all corners of the earth. Amongst them has crept in, from the western shores of Gaul, a disease, which is so cruel, so distressing, so appalling that until now nothing so horrifying, nothing more terrible or disgusting, has ever been known on this Earth.

Narrator:

Europe had suffered plagues before but this disease was different. It wasn't long before people realised the epidemic was being sexually transmitted. It became known as the Great Pox - eventually it would be re-christened syphilis. But where had it come from?

Prof Don Brothwell, Archaeologist, University of York:

Well clearly the Great Pox had a major impact in Europe. They saw it only as one disease although it's very debatable whether it was a number of diseases. They obviously began to blame their neighbours - French Pox and all the rest of it, but eventually of course it became obvious to them that it might be associated with the early discoveries in the New World, of the New World, and it was very convenient then to put the blame, as it were, onto contact with the New World.

Narrator:

In 1493, only two years before the Great Pox struck Europe, Christopher Columbus had returned in triumph from the Americas.

His discovery of the New World proved to be a major event in the history of human disease. In his wake, Europeans carried measles, polio and smallpox. Overwhelming indigenous populations with little or no resistance to the new plagues.

To later historians it seemed perfectly reasonable that Columbus and his crew should have conveyed the Great Pox, and therefore syphilis, home to Europe. But now many scientists are questioning whether the disease known as the Great Pox really was syphilis.

Dr Sheila Lukehart

Research Professor Medicine, University of Washington

I think if you had a few sailors coming back with Columbus who were infected it would have been impossible to have spread this disease throughout Europe in a matter of a year or two by sexual transmission, I just don't think that makes sense from a time point of view. The other thing is that the disease that was described in Europe was a very, very severe disease in which people died during the secondary stage, or the period of time during which they had a rash.

Don Brothwell:

Well I suppose there were three main factors which they described. Rashes, now that could have been a syphilitic rash, but it could have been measles or various other epidemic conditions. Ulcerations, again could have been syphilitic but there are other reasons for ulcerations. The interesting thing about the ulcerations they describe is that they progressed into a sort of fungating stinking condition which also turned into a sort of greenish mess. I mean doesn't sound anything like the pathology of syphilis quite honestly. And then they described fevers, high fevers which fairly rapidly killed some of them off. So altogether it sounds like a fairly sort of disgusting condition which rapidly killed people. But syphilitic diseases don't rapidly kill people. And some of these descriptions simply do not fit the syphilitic condition.

Dr Simon Mays

Osteoarchaeologist English Heritage

It's very difficult to evaluate these historical sources. It's very difficult to be certain there talking about the disease we now call syphilis. Medieval documents are notoriously vague when it comes to describing diseases. So really it's difficult to place too much emphasis I think on historical evidence. I would much rather go with the scientific skeletal evidence I think.

Piers Mitchell:

Orthopaedic Surgeon & Medical Historian

Certainly the medieval mind was very different to the modern mind.

A lot of the evidence and opinions in those days were based on what was passed down through the generations. They didn't have evidence-based medicine to a large degree, and so a lot of it was convention rather than proven to be true. And so we can't merely read these texts and take a diagnosis from that text as being definite and say this person must have had this condition because some physician in the 15th century wrote this particular text which we now translate as this condition.