

Philanthropy and Places of Care (*xenodochia*) in the Late Roman Empire, 350-600 CE

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**Abstract**

Hospitals and places of care in general are topics that have received little attention from historians of Late Antiquity. The scarcity of detailed studies, although explained by a proportional scarcity of primary sources, written or archaeological, seems unjustified. The study of places of care can be a good tool to assess changes in power relations in the Later Roman Empire, as well as a way of comprehending important features of the Late Antique landscape that affected the general population in a myriad of ways. Our research chiefly intends to learn how Byzantine places of care related to the social surroundings from the fourth to the sixth centuries of the Common Era, while also aiming to understand internal aspects of these institutions, ranging from its healthcaring practices to the objectives of their members.

**Key words:**

Late Roman Empire, ancient healthcare, social history.

**Introduction**

The study of ancient hospitals and other places of care is important to elucidate some aspects of the social interactions that permeated the Late Roman world. BROWN (2002) argues that the emergence of hospitals in the relevant time frame is an effect of widespread ideological changes in the Roman Empire, which included a modification of the Roman culture of *evergetism* due to the rise of Christianity. These ideological changes turned philanthropy, and especially the care of the sick and the poor, into a social value, of which even emperors were not exempt. (CONSTANTELOS, 1968)

Our research objective can be broken down into five main components. 1) to comprehend general aspects of medicinal practice in the period covered by our work; 2) to determine social roles peculiar to Late Roman medical practitioners during that time; 3) to assess the relationship between philanthropy as a cultural value and the creation of these hospitals; 4) to broadly characterize a model of the internal functioning of these health institutions; 5) to uncover what responses the *xenodochia* provided to plagues, such as the Justinian Plague in the sixth century.

**Results and Discussion**

Although still in its preliminary stage, our research has already yielded some results. We comment them following the above order of research objectives. While medical writers of Late Antiquity are rarer to come by than writings from previous centuries, the extant works suffice to show that medical knowledge in this period consciously owed much to the writings of Galen (130-210 CE). Also, while the medical profession was open for everyone, this period saw a growth in its hierarchy and the social prominence of some practitioners, which were sent from the court of Byzantium to the Persian Empire's court and vice versa. (NUTTON, 1984)

The relation of philanthropy as a social value and the creation of hospitals and other places of care is shown by letters from Jerome (347-420 CE) which describe the life of persons that not only donated all their riches to monasteries but also funded the construction of these places of care. Another example is Procopius' (500-554 CE) description of the building achievements of

emperor Justinian (r. 527-565 CE), which included the construction of hospitals and houses for travelers.

Even though there are descriptions of hospitals with doctors such as surgeons and ophthalmologists, our research has still to elucidate how these institutions were organized internally, and how they affected the general population. Joshua the Stylite, in his description of a famine, followed by a pest, which afflicted the Mesopotamian city of Edessa in 501-502, tells us that people from *xenodochia* acted by helping the general population, be it by creating sick rooms in the church of Edessa or by collecting corpses from the streets.

**Conclusions**

The relation between philanthropy as a social value and institutions of care seems well established. These institutions were an important aspect of the Late Roman landscape, although our research has still to assess what practices were involved in their contact with their societies, and what was its daily influence in these communities.

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