

***Cura Corporis*, Care of the Bodies**

The principal element of *cura corporis* was blood-letting. This was considered to be a beneficial and preventative act, connected to the medieval medical theory of humours; the theory being that health was dependent on the balance of four humours - blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. Blood-letting was also believed to cleanse the body of impurities.

All choir monks and lay brothers underwent compulsory blood-letting four times a year in February, April, September and prior to the feast of St John the Baptist; on days that would cause the least disruption to the abbey, and specifically not during harvest or the high feast days of the Nativity, Easter and Pentecost. Whilst considered beneficial, with up to four pints being removed from an individual, blood-letting came with the risk of haemorrhage and infection. Consequently, the General Chapter of 1180 issued a statute that blood-letting was only to be performed by a competent practitioner (*minuator*).

Choir monks had their blood-letting in the warming room, whilst lay-brothers had their blood-letting in their refectory (unless permitted by the abbot for this to also take place in the warming room). Blood-letting was carried out between the canonical offices of *terce* and *sext* on ordinary days and between *sext* and *nones* on fast days. Choir monks and lay brothers recovered from blood-letting in their respective infirmaries for four days. They continued to take meals in their respective refectories where, in addition to the normal diet, they receive a pound of white bread (in winter only) and a pittance of egg or fish, and received mixt - even on a fast day. For the first two days after blood-letting, choir monks attended the day offices only in the retro-choir with the other infirm monks, on the third day they returned their allotted stall in the choir for day offices only (standing) and sat for two psalms of the little hours. On the fourth day they resumed full observances of both day and night offices. Lay brothers similarly only attended day offices (that the lay brothers were required to attend), with the other lay brethren in the west choir, for the three days after blood-letting, and attended all required day and night offices from the fourth day. Choir monks and lay brothers did not carry out any manual labour for the three days after being bled and on the fourth day only carried out light work.

Sickness was believed to be sent by god as both a punishment and purification of sin. The suffering of ailments was viewed as a manifestation of holiness and purification in preparedness for entry into heaven. If a monk was sick and did not need the infirmary, but could not attend choir, he informed the community during chapter and the abbot decided what regime the monk was to follow; whether he was to work or not, if he was to sit in the infirm choir or not, whether received mixt or not. Similarly, if a lay brother was sick but did not need the infirmary, but could not work, he informed the cellarer who determined what regime the lay brother was to follow. If the illness was uncertain or lasted for several days, the monk or lay brother would be admitted into their respective infirmary.

When a monk or lay brother is sick and needs to be treated in their respective infirmary, he takes his meals there and receives mixt. He may only speak with the infirmarian, and only then quietly about necessities, and must not do so during mealtimes or when office is being said in the Church. It was believed that recovery was a result of liturgical intervention as much as medical treatment. Being able to see the elevation of the host was also considered to be helpful to recovery, as well as easing the passing to paradise for the dying. Those in the infirmary who can get up from bed are to say as much of the office together as they can; those who are able to, can go to church (where they take their seat in the allotted place within the choir) during day hours, and for professions. Visitors to the abbey who became ill were cared for in the guest house under the care of the guest-master; and those who were able to get up from bed would pray in either the gatehouse chapel or the galilee porch at the west door of the nave.

Referenced Documents

Jamroziak, E. 2013. *The Cistercian Order in Medieval Europe 1090-1500*. Abingdon: Routledge

Merton, T. 2015. *Charter, Customs, and Constitutions of the Cistercians: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 7*. Athens, Ohio: Liturgical Press.