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The first leg transplant for the treatment of a cancer by Saints Cosmas and Damian

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Summary

The most renowned of all medically inclined saints must have been St. Cosmas and St. Damian. They became the special patrons of surgery, due to their miraculous operations. On one occasion, they amputated a cancerous leg and replaced it with another, taken from a Moor who had just died. This dramatic cure was meat and drink for artists, and has been portrayed many times.

Key words: cancer of leg, leg transplant, patrons of surgery, Saints Cosmas and Damian

Introduction

The first saints whose intercession was sought almost exclusively for relief from disease were the twins Cosmas and Damian. Born in Cilicia (Southern Asia Minor) in the third century AD, they were physicians who in the hope of gaining converts to Christianity provided their services without fee. They suffered a grotesque martyrdom in the year 278 during the reign of Diocletian but soon gained a following, at first in the East and later in the West, for numerous miraculous cures both in life and after death [1]. Furthermore, under the patronage of Emperor Justinian (483-565), the church of their name in Constantinople, modelled on the temples of Asclepios, was open day and night for the cure of the sick by "incubation" [2]. Their most famous miracle occurred at a church named after them in a formerly pagan temple at the edge of the Forum in Rome, where they appeared posthumously to replace the cancerous leg of the church's sacristan with the leg of a Negro who had died of old age [3]. Their popularity in the West expanded quickly, and they soon gained importance iconographically not only for physicians and surgeons but also for closely related apothecaries and barbers [4].

1st version (Anonymous - Deubner, Ed)

Original text

Θαύμα των αγίων και ενδόξων Αναργύρων Κοσμά και Δαμιανού

Πάσης αινέσεως και σοφίας υπέρκειται ο λόγος των σοφών και ενδόξων ιατρών, και πάσιν ρώσιν παρέχοντες. Του γαρ υψίστου χάριν λαβόντες αοράτως την ρώσιν δωρούνται πάσιν, όθεν καμοί διηγήσεως χάριν. Αυτοί γαρ οι ένδοξοι Ανάργυροι Κοσμάς και Δαμιανός εν χώρα ήσαν της Νικομήδειας, ιατρεύοντες τους πάντας εις το όνομα του Πατρός και του Υιού και του Αγίου Πνεύματος. Και δώρον ουκ ελάμβανον, αλλά τους πάντας ιάτρευον. Τυφλοίς το φως εδωρήσαντο, λεπρούς εκαθάριζον, χωλούς υγίαινον, τα δαιμόνια εξ ανθρώπων εξέβαλλον πολλά γαρ θαύματα εποίουν οι Άγιοι Ανάργυροι. Μετά δε τα θαύματα των αγίων ηκούσθησαν πανταχού. Ήν δε τις άνθρωπος εν τη χώρα τη Σεβαστιανή έχων σκόλοπα εν τω δεξιώ αυτού ποδί, και πάντα του τα υπάρχοντα οι ιατροί κατηνάλωσαν και ουδέν ωφέλησαν αυτώ, αλλά μάλλον εις το χειρότερον προάγει... [5]

Translation

Miracle of the holy and glorious fee-less (Anargyroi) Cosmas and Damian

The good report of the wise and glorious doctors, who give health to all, surpasses all possible praise and all talent. For they invisibly give strength to everyone, having themselves received this favor from the Most High, and consequently they also give me strength for this story.

Those glorious "Anargyroi" Cosmas and Damian lived in the region of Nicomedia, treating medically everybody in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They did not take offerings but treated everyone. They gave sight to the blind, they cleansed the lepers, cured the lame, cast demons out of men;

for numerous indeed were the miracles which the holy "Anargyroi" performed. After the miracles of the saints, they were heard of everywhere. Now, there was in the Sebastian country a man who had a splinter in his right leg. And the physicians had used up all his possessions and had not benefited him at all, but rather his condition worsened. He, too, heard of the miracles of the glorious "Anargyroi" Cosmas and Damian. And after going to their church, he said to the saints: I beg that you, saints, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ take pity also on me, the sinner, that you may give me a cure of my right leg. On going out, the saints covered their noses, for he was already stinking because his bone was close to being corrupted. The saints said to him: We cannot, ourselves, treat you for this wound, but our Lord Jesus Christ will give you the favor of a cure; but he said tearfully: Take pity, saints, also on me the sinner. Then the saints said to him: Go to our church and rest and address your God in prayer with longing in your heart. We, too, will ask a favor of God, and the Lord will show us what we should do for you. And, asking a favor of God, they went away. Now, at the sixth hour of the night, the angel Raphael came and said to them: Go to the church of the holy martyr abbot. There is a dead man there. And go to his tomb, for he has been dead for four days. Take his right leg and put it on the man who has the splinter as your medical treatment for him. And on the day of the resurrection, let each one take his limb, because they came to you with great faith in God. For the Lord, indeed, wishes also to glorify his saints.

During that time, the man having the splinter saw that certain ones were cutting off his right leg, and that they were cutting off a walking right leg of a man nearby; and he did see this in a dream. Damian said to Cosmas: Brother Cosmas, I fear that the Devil is deceiving us so that we may cause this man to die. Cosmas said to him: No, hold your tongue, because it was an angel of the Lord. And after these things, the angel of the Lord came back and said: Do as I told you. They went and cut off the right leg of the dead man. They also cut off at the knee the right leg of the man who had the splinter and they placed the leg of the dead man the stump of the sick man (Photo 1) in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. No sooner had they invoked the Holy Trinity than the man was found to be sound. And perceiving this, the saints praised God. And having gone, they put the leg of the man who had the splinter onto the stump of the dead man in the name of the Holy Trinity. And so was this leg found to adhere just as his leg had been formerly.

The saints said to the man: Did you see, brother? Who favored you with his surgical skill? - To the saints he responded: I saw in a dream that men came and cut off my leg, and I was joined to the leg of another man. And now I see also that my leg is sound. And the only thing that terrifies me is the contour of the leg. They said to him: Go brother. The mighty works of God have been accomplished because your faith has saved you.



Photo 1. The miracle of the leg transplant by Sts Cosmas and Damian. Painting by Fernardo del Rinçon (1455-1517). The Prado, Madrid.

Then he returned to his home with great joy. Then his neighbors and acquaintances did not believe that his leg had been cut off until they had gone to the tomb and seen the leg. And they believed to be true what he had told them, and all praised God who gives such a cure to those who have hope in God.

Discussion

This Greek version exists only in MS F 16 of the Biblioteca Vallicelliana, in Rome. Both Deubner [6] and Festugière [7] assign the manuscript to the 15th century, but there seems to be some doubt about its age, for Deubner remarks also that its date is undeterminable,

although its content must surely have been established rather early. This is the oldest version that exists.

We are not certain that the two hagiographers are right in their opinion that the miracle concerns an event that occurred while the Saints were still alive. The story is told in the present tense. This could be for vividness and is a common literary device, not necessarily indicating contemporary action. Support of this possibility is found in the sick man's remarks near the end of the account, where he says that he saw in a dream the occurrences recounted in the story. If the Saints had been alive during the performance of their miracle, it seems to us that it was unnecessary to have their actions and conversation made known to the sick man by means of a dream. Their involvement as mediators in the performance of the individual miracles was often divulged to the recipient of the miracle in a dream. In the case where the miracle was performed when the religious man (who later was canonized) was alive, as in the St. Attala legend, the action and events of the story are presented directly, not in a dream.

2nd version (Cicinnio)

Miracles of Saints Cosmas and Damian in Acta Sanctorum, 27, Vol. 7, col. 432, B-C.

Original text

Felix Papa, atavus S. Gregorii, in honorem sanctorum Cosmae et Damiani nobilem ecclesiam Romae construxit in via, quae Via sacra antiquitus dicebatur. In hac ecclesia quidam vir sanctus dictis Martyribus serviebat, cui jam crus totum consumpserat cancer unum... [8]

Translation

Pope Felix, great-great-great-grandfather of Saint Gregory, in honor of Saints Cosmas and Damian built a noble church in Rome on the road which in ancient times was called the Via Sacra. In this church, a certain holy man was serving the said Martyrs, and a cancer had already wholly consumed one of his legs. And, beholds, as he was sleeping, Saints Cosmas and Damian appeared, bearing with them ointments and iron surgical instruments. And one of them spoke to the other thus: Whence shall we get flesh, that, having cut away the rotten flesh, we may fill up the empty place? Then the other said: In the cemetery of St. Peter-in-Chains there was buried just today an Ethiopian; from him, therefore, bring something that we may supply this man. And, beholds, he hastened to that cemetery and brought the leg of the Moor; and cutting off the leg of the sick man, they put in its place the leg of the Moor (Photo 2). And carefully anointing the wound, they brought the leg of the sick man to the body of the dead Moor. And waking up, when he felt himself without pain, he placed his hand on his leg, and found no lesion. Putting, then a candle nearby, when he saw nothing wrong in the leg, he thought that he was not who he was, but was someone else. But returning to himself, he leaped out of bed for joy; and he narrated to all what he had seen in sleep and how he had been cured. And they were excited and sent to the grave of the Moor and found the leg of the said man placed instead of his in the grave.

Discussion

This version is a 12th century Latin translation from Greek sources of one of three miracles. The translation is attributed to a certain Cicinnio of the diocese of Naples, and is contained in a manuscript of the Biblioteca Vallicelliana in Rome.



Photo 2. The transplantation of the leg. Painting by the Schwäbische Master of the Schnaiter Alter. Württembergisches Landesmuseum, Stuttgart.

3rd version (Jacobus de Voragine)

Original text

Felix Papa, atavus S. Gregorii, in honorem sanctorum Cosmae et Damiani nobilem ecclesiam Romae construxit in via... In hac ecclesia quidam vir sanctus dictis Martyribus serviebat, cui jam crus totum consumpserat cancer unum... [9]

Translation

Pope Felix, great-great-great-grandfather of Saint Gregory, in honor of Saints Cosmas and Damian built a noble church in Rome... In this church, a certain holy man was serving the said Martyrs, and a cancer had already wholly consumed one of his legs... (Photo 3)

Discussion

The only significant difference between this version and the 2nd version, is the omission of the specific location of the church: "which in ancient times was called the Via Sacra".

4th version (John Barbour)

Legends of the saints in Barbour's des schottischen National-dichters Legendensammlung...

Original text

The pape Philep in Rome gert ma
A kirk in honoure of thire twa.
Quhene a mane thaime seruice mad
For his heile, that (the) cancre had,
That sa consumyt had his the... [10]

Translation

The Pope Philip in Rome made a great
Church in honor of these two (Cosmas and Damian).
When a man served them
For his health, who had a cancer
That had so consumed his thigh
That a beggar and cripple was he.
Therefore, he prayed to the two
Saints to help him then so
That by them he might get his health,
And to them he should be a servant loyal.
Soon he happened one night to lie
Because of sorrow all weary:
And saw these saints come to him
To help him in good will,
And brought with them fresh ointments
And sharp irons to cut dead flesh.



Photo 3. Sts Cosmas and Damian are preparing to transplant the leg of an Islamic Moor onto a recent amputee. Painting by Ambrosius Francken. Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Plaatsnijderstraat 2B-2000, Adwerpen.

Then said one, "Where shall we
Get flesh to fill up this void?"
Then his brother said to him,
"In the churchyard yesterday was laid
An Ethiopian, and yet his flesh
Is cool enough and also fresh"...
The cancerous flesh they cut away
And next anointed it will skill,
And slid one out of his sight (Photo 4).
With that the sick man awoke immediately
And found himself healed and was right pleased,
Doubting yet that it was he
Who was made whole in such degree.
Therefore he cried loudly
To divers men who were nearby
And prayed them to love God without delay
That this miracle had made known.
Then, to prove this great wonder
To the said grave they sent in haste
And found it done in truth
As was here recorded before.
Also verily they help us to depart
From this life without debt and deadly sin.

Discussion

Barbour is considered the father of the Scottish poetry. When he was Archdeacon of Aberdeen and about forty years of age, John Barbour (1316-1395) went to Oxford to study; about ten years later he went to Paris to study at the University. At age 60, he composed his best known poem. It is a long Scottish poem (over 33.000 lines) concerning legends of the saints, i.e. the present work. The poem was written in what its author called the "ynglis townge." The work is an example of the Lowland Scottish dialect spoken north of the Forth around the year 1400 A.D. The various legends were based on the Legenda aurea of Jacobus de Voragine and other legendaries. The poem exists in a single manuscript: Cambridge University Library MS Gg Π, 6, written in the 15th century.



Photo 4. The transplantation of the leg. Painting by Z. Strozzi. Art Museum, Zurich.

5th version (Arnoldus Leodiensis)

An alphabet of tales

Original text

They waz som tyme a man that had a spesiall decuocion vhto Saynt Cosme & Damyan, & the canker happend into the the of hym & had wastid it nerehand away. And on a tyme as he was slepand, hym thought thies ij saynttis come vnto hym, & thai broght with thaim oyntementtis & playsters. And the tone of thain said vnto the toder; "Whar sall we take vs flesh, that we may fill the hole with again when we hafe cut oute the rotyn flesh? And the toder ansswerd again & sayd; «In the kurk garth of Saynt Petur Aduincula, for this day was ther a man of Ynde new berid; and therfor go feche vs of that, at we may fill the hole with» & this man of Ynd hight Maurus; & thai went & fechid his bodi, and thai cut of the the of the whik man & than of the dede man, & putt the dead mans the vnto the whilk mans, & anoyntid the wownd diligentlie; & thai tuke the seke man the & put it with the bodie of this Maurus, and layd hym again ther he was. And than this seke man wakened, and felid at hym aylid no sore, & putt down his hand vnto his hambe, & he felid no hurte; & he garte light a candyll, & lukid, and his the aylid nothing. And then he was fayn & rase oute of his bed; and he told vnto euer-ilk man what he had sene in his sleep, & how he was helid. And thai at he told it vnto, went vnto this Maurus grafe, & lukid; & thai fand his legg away, & and the whilk mans leg layd ther in-stede theroff in the grafe with the dead mans bodie... [11].

Translation

There was some time a man that had a special devotion onto Saint Cosme and Damian, and the cancer happened onto his thigh and had wasted it near hand away. And on a time as he was asleep, the saints came to him and brought with them ointments and plasters. And the one of them said to the other: Where shall we take flesh, that we may fill the hole with again when we have cut out the rotten flesh? And the other answered again and said: In the church yard of Saint Peter ad Vincula, for this day there was a Indian man newly buried; and therefore go fetch of that, and we may fill the hole with this man; and they went and fetched

his body and cut off the thigh of the sick man and that of the dead man and put the dead man's into the sick man's and anointed the wound diligently; and they took the sick man's thigh and put it with the body of the black man and laid him again where he was. And then this sick man woke up and felt at him ailing no sore and put down his hand into his thigh leg and felt no hurt; and he got light and candle and looked and his thigh. And then he joyed and rose out of his bed; and he told to every man what he had seen in his sleep and how he was healed. And they at he told it onto, went to this black man's grave and looked and they found his leg away and the wick man's leg laid there instead of in the grave with the dead man's body... [11].

Discussion

The original text, written in early English, is attributed to an author named Arnoldus Leodiensis and comes from a Latin Alphabet of Tales, which represents accurately the original Latin version. The translation, given above, is into a Middle Age English dialect.

6th version (Anonymous - Aguilo y Fuster, Ed)

Recull de eximplis

Original text

Miracle e eximpli de sent Cosme e de sent Damian de J. hom qui hauia la cama perduda per malaltia de cancer, segons se recompta en la Ligenda lombardica... [12].

Translation

Miracle and example of St. Cosmas and St. Damian of a young man who lost a leg through a malady of cancer, as recounted in the Lombardy Legend (i.e. The Golden Legend).

A man, who had great devotion to St. Cosmas and St. Damian, was said to have a malady of cancer in his leg, and he feared he would lose it to that disease. Since the man was in danger, one night those saints appeared to him and saved his leg. One said to the other: Where could we get some flesh to fill the hole in this leg which has been eaten away by cancer? The other saint answered: Today they buried a Moor; let us take the flesh from the Moor and fill the hole in the leg. And then having brought there the thigh of the Moor, they cut from it a piece of flesh and put it in the spreading sore on the man's leg (Photo 5); and then the man woke up fully cured. And realizing he was cured, he gave thanks to God, and there came to him the memory of the vision, that he had seen those saints and then he told his friends about it and they went where the Moor had been buried and they found that the Moor had in his leg the disease that the devout man had had in his and the spreading sore was as fresh in the Moor's leg as if he were alive and had had the sore for a long time.

Discussion

This version of the Cosmas and Damian legend is the most interesting of the 7 versions because of the following points: 1) the story does not concern a case of heterogeneous limb transplantation because although the dead Moor's thigh was cut off, only some flesh was cut from it by the Saints to fill the hole in the sick man's leg that had been made by the cancer and the man's leg was not amputated and replaced by the Moor's leg; 2) after the cure, people found that the buried Moor had in his leg the other man's cancer, the sore being as fresh as if the Moor –not his leg– were alive; 3) and yet, there was no mention that the Moor (or his leg) had been reburied or that there was any sign that his leg had been amputated.

The Catalan story, moreover, represents a type of transplantation that was performed much more often than limb transplantation conceivably could have been; we are referring to the ancient and widespread folk medical practice of transferring a disease from a person usually to an inanimate object such as a tree-plug or sometimes to a subhuman species such as a puppy or a freshly killed chicken [13]. Thus, it seems to us that this Catalan version was authored by an individual who was acquainted with popular medical practices and was both creatively imaginative and realistic. Still, the author did rely on some other version of the story since there are present in the Catalan version certain elements that are clearly derivative.



Photo 5. The miracle of the leg transplant by Sts Cosmas and Damian. Painting by Sano di Pietro (XV c.). National Picture Gallery, Sienna.

On the basis of a comparative analysis of the versions of the Sts. Cosmas and Damian legend, we doubt that this Catalan version is a translation of "great fidelity" of an original in Latin, for it is unlike any of the Latin versions we have seen [14].

7th version (William Caxton)

The golden legende. (Colophon: Westmestre, By me Wyllyam Caxton, 1483 (Goff J-148): Fol. CCCIIJ verso (The lyf of saynt Cosme and Damyan).

Original text

Felyx the eyght pope after saynt Gregory dyd doo make a noble chirche at Rome of the sayntes Cosme and Damyan / And ther was a man / whiche serued deuotely the hooly martyrs in that chirche / whome a Cancre had consumed al his thye / And as he slepte / the hooly martirs Cosme and Damyan apperyd to hym theyr deuoute seruaunt / bryngynge with them an instrumente and oynemente / of whome that one sayd to that other / where shal we haue flesshe whan we hanne (i.e. haue) cutte aweye the rotten fleshe to fylle the voyde place / Thenne that other sayd to him Ther is an ethyopyen that this day is buryed in the chircheyerd of saynt peter ad vyncula / whiche is yet fresshe / late us bere this thyder / and take we oute of that moryans flesshe / and fyll this place with all / And soo they fette the thye of this dede man / and cutte of the thye of the seke man / And soo changed that one for that other / (Photo 6) *and when the seke man a woke / and felte no payne / he put for the his honde / and felte his legge withoute hurte / And thenne tooke a Candel / and sawe wel that it was not his thye / but that hit was a nother / And when he was wel come to hym self / he sprange oute of his bedde for joye / and recounted to all the peple how hit was happed to hym and that whiche he had sene in his sleepe / And hou he was heled / and they sente hastely unto the Tombe of the deede man / And fonde the thye of him cutte of / and that other thye in the tombe instead of his / thenne late us praye unto these hooly martirs to be our socoure & helpe in al oure hurtes blechures and sores / And that by theyr merytes after this lyf we may come to euerlastynge blysse in heuen / Amen/.*

Translation

Felix, the eighth pope after Saint Gregory, did make a noble church at Rome of the saints Cosmas and Damian, and there was a man which served devoutly the holy martyrs in that church, who a cancer had consumed all his thigh. And as he slept, the holy martyrs Cosmas and Damian appeared to him, their devout servant, bringing with them an instrument and ointment of whom that one said to that other: Where shall we have flesh when we have cut away the rotten flesh to fill the void place? Then that other said to him: There is an Ethiopian that this day is buried in the churchyard of Saint Peter ad Vincula, which is yet fresh, let us bear this thither, and take we out of that Moor's flesh and fill this place withal. And so they fetched the thigh of the sick man and so changed that one for that other. And when the sick man awoke and felt no pain, he put forth his hand and felt his leg without hurt, and then took a candle and saw well that it was not his thigh, but that it was recounted another's. And when he was well come to himself, he sprang out of his bed for joy, and to all the people how it was happened to him, and which he had seen in his sleep, and how he was healed. And they sent hastily to the tomb of the dead man, and found his thigh cut off, and saw another thigh in the tomb instead of his. Then let us pray unto these holy martyrs to be our succour and help in all our hurts, wounds and sores, and that by their merits after this life we may come to everlasting bliss in heaven. Amen.



Photo 6. The transplantation of the leg. Painting by Francesco Pesellino (XV c.). Museum of Louvre.

Discussion

This version, attributed to a certain William Caxton is assimilated to the version of Cicinnio cited above [15].

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