

FEATURED SOURCE

DIAGNOSIS OF A “PLAGUE” IMAGE: A DIGITAL CAUTIONARY TALE

MONICA H. GREEN, KATHLEEN WALKER-MEIKLE,
and WOLFGANG P. MÜLLER

A PARTICULAR OBJECTIVE of this special issue of *The Medieval Globe*, “Pandemic Disease in the Medieval World: Rethinking the Black Death,” is to interrogate how scientific and humanistic approaches to plague’s histories can enrich and expand one another. Science, we have argued, has developed methods to reconstruct the deep histories of pathogenic organisms in addition to studying them as they exist in the present-day world. At the same time, the humanistic disciplines retain their power to reconstruct human activities that may have contributed to *Yersinia pestis*’s amplification throughout the world and to describe and explain how humans responded to that threat. All disciplines involved in the analysis of the past have rigorous standards of what constitutes evidence and what kinds of interpretations are valid. Multidisciplinary work demands due respect for those traditions.

This short essay offers a lesson in caution. It is a story of error, but also an opportunity to be reminded of the care needed to properly contextualize all our evidence—to be reminded, as L. P. Hartley famously said, that “the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.” To negotiate this country successfully, we need to learn its language.

The image on the following page (**Plate 3**) has been reproduced in the past decade in a variety of popular media: *Wikipedia*, pamphlets for sale at tourist sites, the cover of an encyclopedia devoted to the Black Death, an exhibit on the Black Death at the Museum of London in 2012, a *NOVA* documentary, and an essay in one of the world’s leading science journals. It even appeared in one of our own publications, inserted by an editor without con-

Our thanks to Lucy Freeman Sandler for her wise counsel on the correct “reading” of the *Omne bonum* images; to Peter Murray Jones, for help transcribing the manuscript; and to the members of the 2012 National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar, “Health and Disease in the Middle Ages,” for help spotting popular uses of the “plague” image. Monica H. Green’s contribution to this study was written, in part, during a leave supported by the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Willis F. Doney Membership Endowment. Any views, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this essay do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.



Plate 3. James le Palmer, *Omne bonum*. London, British Library, MS Royal 6 E VI, vol. 2, fol. 301rb (detail). Reproduced in accordance with the British Library's guidelines for the reproduction of images in the public domain.

sultation (Green 2011). It is accompanied by captions such as "monks, disfigured by the plague, being blessed by a priest" or "Plague victims blessed by priest."¹ Perhaps its most significant use was in Callaway 2011, which was an interpretive essay in *Nature* accompanying the announcement of the complete sequencing of the *Yersinia pestis* genome retrieved from the mid-fourteenth-century London Black Death Cemetery, the first pathogen fully sequenced from historic remains (Bos et al. 2011). There, it bore the caption "Historical descriptions of the Black Death have helped link *Yersinia pestis* with the disease." One could say it has become the iconic representation of the Black Death. Available for download on the British Library's website since at least 2007, it is ubiquitous, and people have accepted it as a representation of "plague" because they have been told that it is.

There is certainly reason to connect the image to the Black Death, at least on chronological grounds. The medieval manuscript from which it comes has been securely dated to a couple of decades after the arrival of plague in England late in 1348. Moreover, the fact that all the "victims" are represented with similar lesions would suggest, from our biomedical perspective, that this is indeed an infectious disease.

But connecting it specifically with plague is wrong. The modern captions attached to the image offer several misreadings. First, medieval iconographic conventions indicate that the "priest" is not a priest but a bishop, shown with the distinctive bishop's mitre. Second, his hand gesture tells us that he is not "blessing" the individuals in front of him but giving them instruction on the performance of their duties. The "plague victims" are all tonsured, indicating their clerical status, a fact one caption reflected by identifying them as "monks." But clerics of various statuses were tonsured, so "monks" is too precise.

So how should the image be "read?" It is an illuminated initial in a manuscript (specifically, the letter "C"), meaning that we know precisely the context for which it was made. The image (which measures 7.2 cm × 7.6 cm in the original manuscript) illustrates a passage in a two-volume encyclopedia of knowledge called *Omne bonum*, "All That Is Good," an unfinished opus by a London clerk, James le Palmer (b. before 1327, d. 1375), who was employed in the royal Court of the Exchequer (Sandler 1996).²

¹ The quotations come, respectively, from the British Library's *Images Online* page (first accessed May 3, 2011) and the *Wikipedia* entry for "The Black Death" (first accessed February 12, 2007; most recently accessed April 24, 2014, where the reference to the "priest" is now gone). On the British Library site, see below.

² London, British Library, MSS Royal 6 E VI (letters A–D) and 6 E VII (E–Z), together comprising almost 1100 folios, more than 1350 entries, with more than 750 historiated initials. All the images in the two manuscripts can be consulted free of charge at the

The topic of the chapter which it illustrates (transcribed and translated below) asks whether clerics should lose their benefices on account of (chronic) infirmity or sickness. The general answer (which varies depending on the cleric's rank) is that if the debility is *leprosy* clerics below the rank of bishop should be removed from office, but a bishop should be given an assistant who receives part of the prelate's income.

If we look back at the image now—with a full understanding of its accompanying text—we see it anew. We notice, first, that the “victims” are standing, not lying prostrate as we would expect were they afflicted with a quickly lethal disease like plague. We see no buboes so characteristic of the bubonic form of that disease. While that is not a decisive indicator (after all, neither the quickly lethal pneumonic nor the septicemic plague would necessarily have produced visible buboes), the prominent, widely dispersed spots on these “victims” are a telling trait. Petechiae and ecchymoses (skin hemorrhages of varying sizes) are known to be an occasional complication in severe cases of plague (Carniel 2008, 118–19). However, that is not what spotted skin meant in medieval iconographic traditions. Depicting skin as spotted was the traditional way of representing leprosy in medieval European painted art (Boeckl 2011). Indeed, this conventional iconography is found elsewhere in this same manuscript, used to depict the Emperor Constantine (d. 330 CE), who is alleged to have been cured of his leprosy when he converted to Christianity (MS Royal 6 E VI, vol. 1, fol. 394r). In other words, a correct “diagnosis” of the depicted condition—“correct” in terms of medieval Europe's own categories of analysis (an *emic* approach; see Green 2014, in this issue)—is that this image shows victims of leprosy, not plague.

At what point, then, did this image become a depiction of “plague”? Medical historians have long referenced the *Omne bonum*'s useful images of anatomy, bathing, circumcision, dentistry, and surgery (MacKinney 1965; Jones 1984 and 1998); but none associated its illustrations with either leprosy or plague. In 1996, art historian Lucy Freeman Sandler's masterful two-volume study of Le Palmer's work correctly identified this image as a reference to leprosy (Sandler 1996, 2: 110).³

That correct association with leprosy seems to have broken down, however, in two stages. In 2007, the British Library's online *Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts*, though drawing broadly on Sandler's work, described the image on fol. 301rb of the *Omne bonum* without any diag-

British Library's *Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts* site: <<http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/welcome.htm>> [accessed April 24, 2014].

3 On le Palmer's medical interests, which “fall into the category of the endemic rather than the epidemic,” see Sandler 1996, 1:120–21.

nostic specificity: "Detail of a historiated initial "C"(lericus) of a bishop blessing four clerics with faces covered with spots."⁴ That diagnostic void in interpreting the "spots" was then filled in the British Library's *Images Online* webpage (where high quality images are sold for a fee), when a photo of the historiated initial, posted around the same time, was newly interpreted with the caption "Plague victims blessed by priest."⁵ The caption is still there, at the time of this writing.

Thus, the widespread error in "reading" the *Omne bonum* image as if it depicted plague is not an example of the dangers of retrospective diagnosis: the taking of modern diagnostic categories and projecting them into the past (an *etic* approach; see Green 2014, in this issue). Sandler had in fact "diagnosed" it correctly as "leprosy," a "reading" of the image supported by both the surrounding text and medieval iconographic traditions. The confusion surrounding the *Omne bonum* image had its genesis rather in mundane, very modern phenomena: the mislabeling of the image in the act of separating it from its textual home in the British Library's *Images Online* database, and then the willingness of users of that database to accept the label rather than attempt to recontextualize the image in its original manuscript or historical context. Moved to an online venue, stripped of its textual surroundings, the image acquired a free-association connection to plague. And from there it went (if you'll pardon the phrase) viral. Had proper rules of analysis been applied when labeling the image, no error would have been generated. But given the nature of the Internet, it will now have an extended life under that mistaken rubric.

This error is instructive in reminding us how important context is to the evaluation of the often meager evidence that survives from the medieval past, whether that be fragments of microbial DNA or chance references to illness in chronicles. In the case of the *Omne bonum*, which gathered together all sorts of information that contemporary clerics might need, leprosy—a disease prevalent throughout Europe since the early Middle Ages and a topic of concern in canon law since the twelfth century—was the more pressing concern, as its slowly debilitating effects impinged on clergy members' ability to perform their tasks. The issue took on new urgency in fourteenth-century England, since a few decades before the *Omne bonum* was assembled the abbot of St. Albans and noted astronomer Richard Wallingford (d. 1336) had had a contentious period of rule,

⁴ British Library, *Illuminated Manuscripts Online*, <<http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&IllID=40313>> [accessed April 24, 2014].

⁵ British Library, *Images Online*, <imagesonline.bl.uk/> [accessed April 24, 2014], image #062047.

marked in part by claims that his leprosy disqualified him from office. Both the pope and the king became involved in the controversy. Notably, Richard Wallingford is depicted with spots on his face in the two known likenesses of him.⁶

The error in “diagnosis” that prompted this investigation is also instructive in raising the question: “Should we expect visual depiction of a catastrophe of such scope as the Black Death?” James le Palmer, who died in 1375, must certainly have witnessed plague strike England in 1348–50, when he was a young adult, and again in 1361–63, when he had already started work on the *Omne bonum*. But *what images* did he *himself* have of that experience? We cannot know. The crowded cemetery he depicts in the *Omne bonum* (fol. 267v) may have had no more personal resonance for him than the images of (to take other examples from the letter “C”) *coruscacio* (lightning), *corvus* (raven), or *crocus* (the flower crocus). In contrast, the Belgian chronicler and abbot Gilles le Muisit (d. 1353), who was himself nearly blind at the time of the Black Death (Chareyron 1996), paid an artist handsomely to include illustrations in his *Chronicle* (d’Haenens 1969). These included three images that rightly remain emblematic of the social disruptions of the Black Death: a depiction of the burning of a community of Jews, a procession of flagellants, and a mass burial.⁷ Gilles’s project was, to be sure, unusual as an illustrated monastic chronicle (Vanderputten 2005), and it would not be until the fifteenth century that most of the images we associate with the experience of plague and a macabre outlook on life take hold in Western European culture (Boeckl 2000 and Gertsman 2010).

No images that seem to depict plague are known from the late medieval Islamic world, and none have yet been noted in Chinese sources.⁸ In neither case does that absence of visual evidence constitute evidence of absence of the disease. But it may reflect differing understandings of art or death or the functions of symbolism (Jones 2007). And that is the “foreign country” whose languages we must continually attempt to learn.

6 North 2004; cf. Rawcliffe 2006: 253–54 and 266–67. The likenesses are London, British Library, MS Cotton Nero D.vii, fol. 20r; and MS Cotton Claudius E.iv, pt 1, fol. 201r. On medieval leprosy generally, see Rawcliffe 2006 and Demaitre 2007. On the rich canon law tradition of discourse about leprosy among the clergy, see Fowler 1972. On bioarcheological and genetics work on the form of leprosy caused by *Mycobacterium leprae*, see Mendum et al. 2014.

7 Brussels, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, MS 13076–77 (1349–52), fol. 12v, Jews being burned alive on a bonfire; fol. 16v, procession of Flagellants; and fol. 24v, plague (mass burial) in Tournai in 1349.

8 We thank Stuart Borsch, Justin Stearns, and Emilie Savage-Smith for their counsel on this matter.

APPENDIX I

**TEXT OF OMNE BONUM,
“DE CLERICO DEBILITATO
MINISTRANTE SEQUITUR VIDERE”**

THE FOLLOWING PORTION of *Omne bonum* was transcribed from the manuscript London, British Library, Royal 6 E. VI, vol. 2, fols. 301rb–302ra. Its author, James le Palmer, originally pieced this passage together from two sets of sources.

Lines 2–63 (lines 2–64 of the English translation in Appendix 2, below) constitute an extensive excerpt from Hostiensis (d. 1271), *Summa aurea* X 3.6, a text which survives in numerous late medieval manuscripts, incunabula, and early modern printed editions (including Basle: apud Thomam Guarinum, 1573, cols. 702–03, digitally available through the website of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich, Germany). Lines 64–109 (in the English translation: lines 65–112) are a miscellany of notes derived from the *Glossae ordinariae* on the *Liber extra* (lines 64–82; English: 65–83) and the *Decretum Gratiani* (lines 105–109; English: 107–112), plus an extensive quotation (lines 83–96; English: 84–98) from a statute of Pope Boniface VIII, inserted under the same title (*De clerico debilitato*) in his *Liber sextus* VI 3.5.1 (compiled 1298), along with portions of its *Glossa ordinaria* by Johannes Monachus (lines 97–104; English: 99–106). The Ordinary Glosses can be consulted in any edition of the *Corpus iuris canonici* published before the 1620s.

The spelling of the text follows the Latin original, except for consonantal ‘u’ and ‘i’, which have been regularized to ‘v’ and ‘j’; both the capitalization of words and the punctuation have been modernized. Textual emendations are shown in pointed brackets (<...>). The shortened legal references (in round brackets) are given in full in Appendix 2.

[fol. 301rb] Clericus debilitatus ministrans.

Clericus debilitatus per infirmitatem ministrans, quid juris? Et primo sciendum est quid sit infirmitas sive morbus. Aput Sabinum sic diffinitus invenitur: Morbus est habitus cuiuscunque corporis contra naturam qui usum eius ad id facit deteriore[m] cuius causa natura nobis eius sanitatem corporis dedit. Vel autem id in toto corpore accidit ut febris, alias in parte

ut cecitas. Balbus autem magis viscosus dicitur quam morbus.¹ Videtur autem morbus sonticus id est dampnosus scilicet recidivus qui incidit in hominem postquam sanatus est. Sontes enim nocentes dicuntur.

- 10 An propter infirmitatem sive morbum amittat clericus beneficium suum distingue utrum sit prelatus. Et is etiam propter lepram non [fol. 301va] removetur, sed datur ei coadjutor cui porcio competens reddituum episcopatus assignatur. Sic intelligas e<odem> titulo, De rectoribus (X 3.6.3). An sit sacerdos parochialis vel minister inferior et talis propter
15 lepram removetur, e<odem> titulo, Tua nos (X 3.6.4). Alia distinctio loquitur utrum morbus provenerit² a natura: et sic loquitur capitulum, De rectoribus (X 3.6.3); aut divino iudicio, et sic loquitur capitulum, Tua nos (X 3.6.4). Cuius cognitionem, determinationem et discrecionem physicis³ relinquo. Et potest esse divino iudicio quia cognovit mulierem
20 immediate post leprosum⁴, vii q. ii c. Nuper (C.7 q.2 c.2). Hec tamen solutio reprobat vii q. i <Cum> percussio (C.7 q.1 c.2). Vincentius dixit quod quamdiu potest quis in collegio remanere non removetur. Sed ex quo non potest removetur, sicut iudex mutatur si non posset iudicio operam dare.

- Et si queras quid fiet si servire non potest, respondeo: si est prelatus
25 dabitur ei coadjutor ut in dicto capitulo, De rectoribus (X 3.6.3). Si vero fuerit inferior sive simplex dabitur ei vicarius secundum Goffredum qui exponit illam decretalem, Tua (X 3.6.4) sicut Laurentius scilicet quod ibi removetur scilicet non a titulo, sed ab executione officii sue administracionis. Thomas⁵ notavit idem excepto morbo lepre, propter
30 quem removetur indistincte quicumque ipsum incurrerit sive sit prelatus sive alius. Et hoc conprobatur in antiqua compilacione, De concessione prebende et ecclesie non vacantis, capitulo Ex transmissa (2 Comp. 3.7.1); que hodie tamquam iniquitatem continens remota est secundum Goffredum. Bazianus distinctit utrum morbus esset curabilis et sic
35 loquitur capitulum, De rectoribus (X 3.6.3), vel incurabilis et sic loquitur Tua (X 3.6.4). Prior intellectus magis placet et ipsum magis approbo, eodem titulo, Ex parte (X 3.6.5).

¹ A marginal entry to the right of this line reads: *Nota hic plene et ex alia parte folii quando clericus amittit beneficium suum propter morbum et quando non videas* (Note here in detail and also check on the next page of the folium when a cleric loses his benefice because of disease and when he does not).

² MS: *prevenerit*. The likely formal source of *Omne bonum*, the *Summa aurea* of Hostiensis, has *provenerit*.

³ MS: *prohibitis*; Hostiensis: *physicis*.

⁴ Cf. the commentary in Appendix 2 below, note 2.

⁵ MS: *Thomas*; Hostiensis correctly has: *T<ancredus>*.

Sed que est ratio quod speciale sit in episcopis quod propter lepram non removeantur, inferiores vero removentur? Hoc est quod difficulter removetur episcopus, ut extra, De translatione, capitulo Quanto (X 1.7.3). Quamvis enim metropolitanus et episcopi possint cognoscere de crimine super quo accusatur episcopus non tamen possunt episcopum deponere sine legitima proprietate, iii q. vi Quamvis (C.3 q.6 c.7) et capitulo Dudum (ibid., c.9). Timendum enim est, ne concussis columpnis corruat edificium. Sed minores ex levioribus causis removentur. Sed propter alias infirmitates quam propter lepram non sunt clerici privandi beneficiis suis, sed potius dandus est coadjutor etiam si paraliticus sit is de quo agitur, ne terreantur volentes Deo militare, ut e<odem> titulo, Percussio (X 3.6.1), quia non est addenda afflicto afflictio ut ibidem. Idem est si factus sit impotens non ex culpa sua, e<odem> titulo, capitulo ii (X 3.6.2). Secus si culpa sua, ut notatur infra ubi agitur de corpore viciato. Alii distinguunt inter morbum perpetuum et temporalem, sed reprobat e<odem> titulo, capitulo penultimo et ultimo (X 3.6.5-6).⁶

Unum tamen non omitto quod si clericus leviter pateretur vel haberet veterem **[fol. 301vb]** quartanam que merito sperni posset et esset intentus circa negocia propria, nichil percipiet nisi serviret. Supradicta vero non de ficta infirmitate sed vera et gravi intelliguntur, <ff.>, De re iudicata, <l.> Quesitum⁷, et si clericus infirmus potest officium suum exercere, nisi vexetur a demonio vel epileptico morbo et caderet assidue vel emissionem vocis confuse et jactatione spume, vii q. ultima (C.7 q.2) per totum. Si vero raro caderet cum annua expectatione posset celebrare, xxxiii di. Communiter (D.33 c.3), ita tamen quod habeat vicini solaminis adiutorem, vii q. i Illud (C.7 q.1 c.15).

Item abbates facti inutiles penitus removentur, e<odem> titulo, Tua nos (X 3.6.4), secundum glossam et secundum Innocentium.

Quid si ecclesia non potest sufficere utrique, scilicet leproso et substituto? Dic quod ille qui servit habebit redditus et leproso providebit episcopus, ut in dicto capitulo, De rectoribus (X 3.6.3), secundum glossam.

Et coadjutor datus egrotanti habet generalem et liberalem administrationem et invito dandus est coadjutor, vii q. i Scripsit (C.7 q.1 c.1), secundum glossam.

An presbiter qui amisit digitos cum medietate palme poterit missam celebrare? Dic quod non quia nec secure propter debilitatem, nec sine

⁶ A finger pointer appears here in the left margin of the ms.

⁷ MS: *extra, de re iudicata, c. Omnium*, is a garbled, non-existent allegation, probably reflecting a lack of familiarity with Roman legal references. The text here properly cites the passage from Justinian's *Digesta* as given by Hostiensis.

scandalo propter⁸ deformitatem, sed ceteris officiis sacerdotalibus fungi potest, e<odem> titulo, Presbiterum (X 3.6.2).

Item nec potest infirmus ex certa sciencia vel ex affectata ignorantia sumere cibum sive potum ad debilitandum corpus suum quia faceret contra caritatem quia debet corpus suum diligere ut in eo deserviat Deo, extra, De homicidio, capitulo Tua nos (X 5.12.19).

80 An archidiacono percusso morbo paralitico sit dandus coadjutor? Dic quod sic. Et idem est dicendum si amiserit officium oculorum, extra, e<odem> titulo, capitulo ultimo (X 3.6.6), secundum glossam.

Item episcopus senio aut infirmitate gravatus ut suum officium nequeat exercere potest auctoritate apostolica duos coadjutores secum
85 assumere ad dictum officium exeguendum et si episcopus factus fuerit demens et coadjutorem habere noluerit, tunc eius capitulum vel due partes auctoritate apostolica debent assumere unum vel duos curatores sive coadjutores ad dictum officium exeguendum. Sed si episcopus senio vel incurabili morbo gravatus noluerit habere coadjutorem tunc nichil
90 innovabit capitulum, sed capitulum intimabit pape statum et conditionem episcopi et ecclesie et facti circumstantias et tunc fiet quod per papam fuerit ordinatum et coadjutores isti habebunt sumptus moderatos de proventibus episcoporum in quorum auxilium assumuntur. Sed bona prelatorum non alienabunt et reddituri sunt rationem episcopo si postea
95 fuerit sane mentis eidem seu successori episcopi, extra, e<odem> titulo, capitulo Pastoralis, libro sexto (VI 3.5.1).

Nec isti coadjutores possunt conferre beneficia vacancia quia in generali commissione non continetur beneficiorum collacio, e<odem> capitulo (VI 3.5.1), secundum Johannem [fol. 302ra] Monachum et Guidonem.

100 Item nec per metropolitanum est dandus coadjutor, sed per sedem apostolicam vel auctoritate eiusdem, ut in dicto capitulo, Pastoralis (VI 3.5.1), nec mirum quia solum potest metropolitanus in sua provincia sibi decreta quod a jure reperitur concessum vel ex prisca consuetudine introductum, ut in dicto capitulo (X 3.5.1) secundum Johannem Monachum.

105 An sacerdos leprosus posset licite missam celebrare? Dic quod populo non debet celebrare propter scandalum. Si autem velit celebrare privatim non est prohibendus dum tamen non sit nimis debilis vel deformis. Et dicit Hugo quod cessabit a ministerio suo quoad sanos, sed leprosis poterit cantare et ministrare divina, xlix di. Hinc etenim⁹ (D.49 c.1).

⁸ At this point, the word *debilitatem* is first added and then deleted by the scribe.

⁹ MS: *Sed hec entenim*; corrected after Hostiensis.

APPENDIX 2

OMNE BONUM, “ON MINISTRATION BY A DISABLED CLERIC”

THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION of this passage contains numerous references to the textbooks of late medieval jurisprudence which, in accordance with current scholarly convention, have been abbreviated as follows:

- 2 Comp. 0.00.00 *Compilatio secunda*, book 0, title 00, chapter 00, ed. Emil Friedberg, *Quinque compilationes antiquae necnon Collectio canonum Lipsiensis* (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1882).
- C.00 q.00 c.00 *Decretum Gratiani*, part II: Causa 00, quaestio 00, capitulum 00, ed. Emil Friedberg, *Corpus iuris canonici* 1 (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1879).
- D.00 c.00 *Decretum Gratiani*, part I: Distinctio 00, chapter 00, ed. Friedberg, *Corpus iuris canonici* 1 (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1879).
- Dig. 00.00.00 *Digesta Iustiniani*, book 00, title, 00, lex 00, ed. Paul Krüger and Theodor Mommsen, in: *Corpus iuris civilis*, 1: *Institutiones, Digesta* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1895).
- VI 0.00.00 *Liber sextus decretalium*, book 0, title 00, chapter 00, ed. Friedberg, *Corpus iuris canonici* 2 (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1881).
- X 0.00.00 *Decretales Gregorii IX (Liber extra)*, book 0, title 00, chapter 00, ed. Friedberg, *Corpus iuris canonici* 2 (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1881).

For further information on the legal references and most of the juristic authors quoted (indirectly) in the subsequent section of *Omne bonum*, see Brundage 1995: 190–232.

On Ministration by a Disabled Cleric

What is the law regarding ministration by a cleric who is disabled by illness? First, it has to be known what an illness or disease is. This definition is found in Sabinus¹: A disease is an unnatural condition of a body which weakens its use for the purpose that Nature assigned when it gave health to our bodies. This happens either to the whole body, as with a fever; or to one part as with blindness. Stuttering, however, is more of an impairment than a disease. A disease appears to be *sonticus*, that is harmful and causing a relapse, when it inflicts a person after she or he has recovered. For *sontes* means “harmful ones.”

[The next question is] whether on account of infirmity or disease a clerk should lose his benefice. It depends on whether he is a prelate. Then he is not removed even because of leprosy, but he is given a coadjutor to whom a suitable portion of the bishopric’s revenue is assigned. This is how you should understand X 3.6.3. Or he is a parish priest or lesser minister and someone like that is removed because of leprosy, as in X 3.6.4. Another distinction asks whether the disease happens naturally, and this is discussed in X 3.6.3, or [whether it happens] by divine judgment, as is said in X 3.6.3. The recognition, assessment, and differential diagnosis of this I leave to the physicians; and it may be by divine judgment, because he had sex with a woman immediately after (she has had sex with) a leper², C.7 q.2 c.2. This solution, however, is rejected in C.7 q.1 c.2. Vincentius³ said that as long as someone is able to stay in his clerical community, he is not removed. But if he is unable to remain, he is removed, just as a judge is changed if he is not able to render judgment.

And if you ask what will be done if he is not able to serve, the answer is that if he is a prelate, a coadjutor will be given to him as explained in X 3.6.3. But if he is of a lower order or a simple priest, a vicar will be

1 The ensuing definition of illness (lines 4–8) is attributed to Sabinus, an ancient Roman lawyer, in Dig. 21.1.1.7.

2 This passage is problematic in its extreme brevity. Nevertheless, our rendering accords with certain medical understandings about the transmission of leprosy. For example, a *quaestio* from the “Prose Salernitan Questions” ([c. 1200]/1979: 9) reads: “Queritur si leprosus accedit ad mulierem mulier non leditur, qui vero post illum prius ad eam accedit quare leprosus efficitur?” (It is asked: Why if a leper has relations with a woman, the woman is not harmed, but if another man comes to her later, the latter man is affected?) The answer explains that the “corruption” of the leper remains in the woman’s womb, which is then sucked out by the penis of the next man with whom she has sex.

3 Vincentius Hispanus (d. 1248); cf. Brundage, *Medieval Canon Law* 228.

given to him according to Goffredus⁴ who explains this decretal, X 3.6.4, just as Laurentius⁵ does, that is to say, that he is removed there not from the entitlement to his office but from the execution of the office under his administration. Thomas⁶ has noted the same except for the disease of leprosy, because of which everyone who incurs it is removed without distinction, be he a prelate or another, and this is proved in the ancient compilation, 2 Comp. 3.7.1, according to Goffredus.

Bazianus⁷ distinguished whether the disease was curable, as in X 3.6.3, or incurable, as in X 3.6.4. The prior interpretation is more convincing and I rather approve of it, X 3.6.5. But what is the reason for the special treatment of bishops in that they are not removed from office on account of leprosy, whereas those in lower orders are removed? This is because it is difficult to remove a bishop as in X 1.7.3. For although a metropolitan and [his] bishops are able to investigate a crime of which a bishop is accused, they cannot depose a bishop without legitimate due process, C.3 q.6 c.7 and c.9. Because it is to be feared that by smashing the columns the whole edifice [of the Church] will collapse. But those in minor orders are removed for lighter reasons. But clerics must not be removed from their benefices for other diseases than leprosy. Rather, a coadjutor must be given even if he who is concerned is paralyzed lest those wishing to be God's soldiers be scared away, as in X 3.6.1, because an affliction must not be added to those afflicted, as is explained there.

Likewise, if he happens to become debilitated through no fault of his own, as in X 3.6.2. It is different if the fault is his, as is noted below⁸ where the defective body is considered. Others distinguish between a chronic disease and one that comes and goes, but this is rejected in X 3.6.5-6.

One topic I do not omit is what to do if a cleric suffers lightly or has an inveterate fever that recurs every fourth day and can simply be ignored, and who is willing to do his work? He will receive nothing unless he

⁴ Goffredus de Trano (d. 1245); cf. Brundage, *Medieval Canon Law* 211–12.

⁵ Laurentius Hispanus (fl. 1215); Brundage, *Medieval Canon Law* 216.

⁶ "Thomas [Aquinas]" is a misreading in *Omne bonum* for "T(ancredus)" in the *Summa aurea* (ed. Basle, 1573), col. 702. It was uncommon for canonistic commentators like Hostiensis to cite theologians. On Tancred (fl. 1220), see Brundage, *Medieval Canon Law* 227–228.

⁷ Bazianus (fl. 1180–90) was a canonist not to be confused with the contemporary Roman lawyer, Johannes Bassianus; cf. Donahue 2003.

⁸ MS: *infra, ubi agitur de corpora viciato*; Hostiensis, *Summa aurea* (ed. Basle, 1573), col. 703, reads: *supra, de corpore viciato* (above, on the defective body), a legal reference to X 2.20.

serves. What is said above, though, needs to be understood in the case not of an imagined illness, but a real and serious one, as in Dig. 42.1.60. And if the sick cleric is able to perform his duties, unless he is vexed by a demon or the falling sickness and falls frequently or with confused speech and foaming at the mouth, as in C.7 q.2 throughout. But if he rarely falls, he can celebrate Mass if he has no incident for a year⁹, D.33 c.3, but in such a way that he has a coadjutor ready to help out, C.7 q.1 c.15.

Likewise abbots who have become useless are removed entirely, as in X 3.6.4, according to the Ordinary Gloss and Innocent¹⁰.

What if a church is not able to support both a leprous cleric and his substitute? Say that he who serves will keep the revenue and the bishop will provide for the leper as in X 3.6.3, according to the Ordinary Gloss. And the coadjutor given to the sick man has general and free administration, and the coadjutor is given even against the sick man's will, C.7 q.1, according to the Ordinary Gloss.

[If asked] whether a priest who is missing his fingers with half of his palm is able to celebrate Mass, say that he cannot because he cannot do it safely due to the debility nor without scandal due to the deformity, but he can serve in the other priestly functions, as in X 3.6.2.

Similarly, a sick person cannot take food or drink to weaken his body either out of certain knowledge or feigned ignorance, for he would do so against charity because he ought to take good care of his body so he may serve God in it, X 5.12.19.

[It is asked] whether an archdeacon struck by a paralytic disease must be given a coadjutor? Say that he must be, and the same must be said if he loses the use of his eyes, X 3.6.6, according to the Ordinary Gloss.

Likewise an aging bishop, or one aggrieved by illness so that he cannot perform his duties, can by apostolic authority assume two coadjutors to help him perform his office, and if the bishop has become demented and does not wish to have a coadjutor, then his chapter or two thirds of it must assume by apostolic authority one or two curators or coadjutors in order to perform the said office.

But what if a bishop who is senile or burdened with an incurable disease does not want to have a coadjutor? Then the chapter will not undertake anything, but the chapter will inform the pope about the state

⁹ MS: *cum annua expectatione*; cf. the alleged D. 33 c.3: *quousque unius anni spatio [...] inveniantur ab incursu demonum liberati* (provided they are found to be free of demonic possession for a year).

¹⁰ Pope Innocent IV (Sinibaldo dei Fieschi, d. 1254), a famous canonist; Brundage, *Medieval Canon Law* 225–26.

and condition of the bishop and the actual circumstances of the church. And then that will be done which is mandated by the pope, and these coadjutors will have their moderate expenses covered by the bishops' income in whose aid they are assumed. But they will not alienate the prelates' goods and must render account to the bishop if afterward he returns to his sound mind or to the successor of the bishop, VI 3.5.1. 95

Nor are these coadjutors able to confer vacant benefices because in their general commission the collation of benefices is not contained, as in VI 3.5.1 according to Johannes Monachus¹¹ and Guido.¹² 100

Likewise the coadjutor must not be given by the metropolitan, but by the Apostolic See or through its authority, as in VI 3.5.1. And this is not surprising because the metropolitan can only do in his assigned province what is found permitted by law or introduced by ancient custom, as in VI 3.5.1, according to Johannes Monachus. 105

[It is asked] whether a leprous priest is licitly able to celebrate the Mass? Say that he must not celebrate before his flock on account of scandal. But if he wishes to celebrate it privately he must not be prohibited, at least as long as he is not too disabled or deformed. And Hugo¹³ says that he should cease his ministry among the healthy, but he may sing and minister the divine office to lepers, D.49 c.1. 110

¹¹ Johannes Monachus, author of the Ordinary Gloss (of 1302) on the *Liber sextus*; see Brundage, *Medieval Canon Law* 218.

¹² Guido de Baysio (fl. 1300), who composed another gloss apparatus on the *Liber sextus*; Brundage, *Medieval Canon Law* 212–13.

¹³ Huguccio (fl. 1188–90); Brundage, *Medieval Canon Law* 214.

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Monica H. Green (Monica.Green@asu.edu) is a historian of medieval European medicine and global health. In 2009 and 2012, she ran a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar in London on "Health and Disease in the Middle Ages," which had as its central goal the exploration of ways that the scientific and humanistic disciplines could engage in productive dialogue about the history of disease and health-seeking behaviors. During this same period, she has also argued for the development of a new field, "Global History of Health," which explores the evolution of the major pathogens that have afflicted the human species since its origin up to the present day, and the ways that human cultural changes have facilitated or hindered those pathogens' trajectories. In addition to many works on the cultural history of medieval medicine, she is the author of "The Value of Historical Perspective," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to the Globalization of Health*, ed. Ted Schrecker (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 17–37; and "The Globalisations of Disease," which will be published in 2015.

Kathleen Walker-Meikle (kathleen.walker-meikle@york.ac.uk) is currently a research assistant on the Tradamus project (Saint Louis University) and is co-authoring, with Monica Green, a digital edition of the *Antidotarium magnum*: a large and influential late eleventh-century pharmaceutical text. Her own research focuses on the role of animals in medical texts and the interaction between natural history and medicine in the Middle Ages. She is currently completing a study on learned medical treatment of animal bites in the Middle Ages, a project funded by the Wellcome Trust. Other recent work examines animal substances in experimental literature. She holds a PhD from University College London.

Wolfgang P. Müller (wmueller@fordham.edu) is Professor of History at Fordham University in New York City. His main research area is the legal history of Western Europe and especially medieval jurisprudence, which through its insistence on forensic fact-finding was instrumental in fostering demand for medical professionals and science at the time. His most recent monograph, *The Criminalization of Abortion in the West: Its Origins in Medieval Law* (2012), includes a chapter on "Abortion Experts and Expertise"; writing it sparked an abiding appreciation for inquiries into the history of medicine.

Abstract This brief study examines the genesis of the “misdiagnosis” of a fourteenth-century image that has become a frequently used representation of the Black Death on the Internet and in popular publications. The image in fact depicts another common disease in medieval Europe, leprosy, but was misinterpreted as “plague” because of a labeling error. The error was then magnified because of digital dissemination. This mistake is a reminder that interpretation of cultural products continues to demand the skills and expertise of humanists. Included is a full transcription and translation of the text which the image was originally meant to illustrate: James le Palmer, *Omne bonum*, cap. “De clerico debilitato ministrante sequitur videre” (On Ministration by a Disabled Cleric), London, British Library, Royal 6 E. VI, vol. 2, fols. 301rb–302ra.

Keywords *Omne bonum*; James le Palmer; Gilles le Muisit; art history; plague imagery; leprosy; canon law; Black Death, disability history.
