Clinical Infectious Diseases


This woodcut, “The French Disease,” is dated 1496 and attributed to the German artist Albrecht Durer (1471–1528). Syphilis became widespread in Europe in the late 15th century. The chronic granulomatous lesions of syphilis were widely recognized as afflicting people of all social classes. The signs of the zodiac and “1484” in this woodcut refer to a belief that syphilis resulted from a conjunction of Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars during this year. Syphilis was called “the French disease” in Italy because an epidemic occurred in Naples after the city was conquered by the French king Charles VIII in the 1490s. Durer was a contemporary of Girolamo Fracastoro (1478–1553), an Italian physician who wrote Syphilis, sive morbus Gallicus (“Syphilis, or the French Disease”), published in 1530. This Latin poem is about a shepherd named Syphilis, who is described as the first person to develop the disease. Although some considered syphilis to have come from the New World (see the cover art for the 15 September 2001 issue [volume 33, issue 6]), Fracastoro rejects this theory: “Nor could the infection from the Western Clime, Seize distant nations at the self same time, / Nor can the infection first be charged on Spain, / That sought new worlds beyond the Western main. / Since from Pyrene’s foot, to Italy, / It shed its bane on France, while Spain was free.” In 1546, Fracastoro wrote a medical treatise, De Contagione, in which he introduced “syphilis” as a diagnostic term. The woodcut belongs to the Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany. (Ann Arvin, Cover Art Editor)

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