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# THE MEDICAL HISTORY OF MARTIN LUTHER

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Martin Luther was 'a prodigious man in a prodigious age, a hero in a time of heroes'.[1] It is not surprising, therefore, that the details and significance of his life and work have given rise to a vast literature over the five centuries which have elapsed since his birth. Very little of this literature, however, has been concerned with his medical history.

*The sources*

Luther himself had promised his friends that he would write an autobiography but poor health and overwork prevented him from providing more than the short autobiographical fragment of nine pages which introduced the 1545 Latin edition of his works.[2] His father too had planned to write a biographical memoir of his famous son, but died before he could do so.[3] The first formal biography was written in Latin in 1546 by his close friend and colleague Philip Melanchthon but it occupies only eight pages.[4] Several other biographies appeared later but these too were short and provided few details of his medical history.[5]

Fortunately we have two other sources of information. One consists of the numerous letters he wrote to his wife, his friends and a large number of other correspondents. Many of these letters were not preserved, but some 2600 have survived, written in German or Latin. The originals of many of these letters have not survived and we cannot always be certain of what he wrote. There are even conflicting copies of particular letters. Fortunately, in those letters which have been preserved, there are numerous references to his state of health.

The other source is the famous *Table Talk* (*Tischreden* or *Colloquia Mensalia*) of Luther. This consists of Luther's informal dinner-table comments and reminiscences which were made to the students and others who shared his mealtimes. These comments were recorded in shorthand during each meal or written up afterwards by a succession of twelve of Luther's students who, in accordance with the custom followed at the University of Wittenberg, were boarders in the home of their professor. These records were begun in 1531 and continued until 1546, the year of his death. However, they must be treated with some caution as they are second-hand and their reliability depends on the accuracy of Luther's recollection of what in some cases were long-past events, together with the care with which they were recorded and edited.

## FAMILY HISTORY

The ancestors of Martin Luther were small landowners who had lived for generations in the small village of Möhra in Thuringian Saxony in eastern Germany. The village housed only sixty or seventy families. Here Luther's grandfather owned considerable property and all the Luther families during Martin's lifetime lived there in relatively comfortable circumstances, owning the

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fields they tilled and the houses in which they lived.[6] Martin's father, Hans Luther, was the eldest of four sons and when their father Heine died, Hans had to set out to make his own fortune in the world in accordance with the local Thuringian law governing family inheritance. This law did not recognise the principle of primogeniture nor the alternative practice of dividing the family farm between all the sons. According to the law it was the youngest son who inherited the house and farm and the others had to move out to allow him to do so.

Before he left Möhra, Hans married Margaret (Hanna) Lindemann who was a member of a well-established middle-class burgher family in the town of Eisenach which lay about fifteen miles to the north of Möhra and was one of the principal towns of Thuringia. The date and details of the marriage ceremony are unknown. The status of his wife's family is illustrated by the fact that several members of it became university graduates and prominent members of their professions and of society. Her nephew Johannes Lindemann was professor of law at Leipzig University. His brother Kaspar studied medicine at Leipzig, Frankfurt-on-Oder and Bologna and became personal physician to the Elector of Saxony. He treated Martin Luther on several occasions and for the last four years of his life (1532–1536) he was professor of medicine at Wittenberg University.[7]

After his marriage, Hans moved with his wife from Möhra to the small town of Eisleben, a distance of about eighty miles, where her eldest brother was already settled. Eisleben was in the county of Mansfeld and had a population of about four thousand people. The Eisleben–Mansfeld area of the Harz Mountains had recently become one of the important copper-mining centres of Germany and so from being a farmer, Hans became a copper-miner.

Between 11 p.m. and midnight on Monday, November 10th 1483, Margaret Luther was delivered of her firstborn child—a son.[8] She told Melanchthon many years later how she heard the clock strike twelve midnight as she lay in bed after the delivery was over.[9] Next day he was baptised in the local parish church of St Peter which was then in the process of construction. Since that day was the feast of St Martin of Tours, he was called Martin. Martin was the eldest of seven children who were born to the Luthers. He had three brothers and three sisters, of whom only one brother (called Jacob or James) and three sisters reached adulthood. His other two brothers died of plague in 1505.

About six months after Martin was born, the family moved from Eisleben to the county town of Mansfeld about six miles away. This town, about the same size as Eisleben, was more in the centre of the copper-mining region. At first Hans and his family found themselves in more modest circumstances than those to which they were accustomed. Soon, however, Hans prospered and was able to lease three copper-smelting furnaces from their owners, the Counts of Mansfeld. In 1491 he became one of the four community representatives elected to the Mansfeld town council. The substantial two-storey stone house which the family eventually purchased and occupied stood at the lower end of the main street, but is not maintained in its original form today.[10]

We know little of the medical history of the Luther parents. Martin's father died on May 29th 1530 after an illness which had lasted about four months, whose nature is unknown. His mother died on June 30th in the following year. Luther was not able to attend the death-bed or funeral of either because his life was then in too much danger. In a letter written when he heard the news of his father's death, he refers to him as 'that dear and gentle old man whose name I bear'.[11]



## EDUCATION

Hans Luther had received no formal education for there was no school in Möhra. However, he was determined that Martin should receive what he had lacked.

When he was seven years old, Martin entered the local Latin school in Mansfeld.[12] This was a *Trivialschule* in which the curriculum was the medieval *Trivium* of grammar, logic and rhetoric which was considered as essential for all pupils who were seeking an advanced education. There were few books for paper was expensive and so the pupils learned what was written on the classroom blackboard by the teacher. This they then copied on to their slates and learned by constant repetition.[13] School discipline was severe and pupils were often punished when they failed to repeat their grammatical lessons correctly. On one occasion, Luther tells us that he was thrashed fifteen times during the same morning in the Latin lesson for failing to decline and conjugate nouns and verbs although he had not yet been taught how to do either of these exercises.[14] Under this brutal regime, school-life became a martyrdom,[15] and examinations resembled trials for murder.[16]

About Easter 1497 when he was thirteen years old, Luther went to Magdeburg in accordance with the contemporary custom of 'the wandering scholar' who moved from school to school in search of instruction.[17] Magdeburg was on the River Elbe about forty miles north of Mansfeld. It was here that Luther attended the secondary school attached to the cathedral which was run by the Brethren of the Common Life.[18] Luther also sang in the cathedral choir at Magdeburg for he was very musical and had a fine tenor voice. However, after a year he went on to the old and famous parish high school of St George in Eisenach where he stayed for four happy years and would later refer to as 'my dear city (*meiner leiben Stadt*)'.[19] Here he was able to enjoy contact with the relatives and friends of both his parents.[20] During his stay in Eisenach he lodged with the family of Heinrich Schalbe who was mayor of Eisenach in 1495 and again in 1499.

In May 1501, when he was not yet eighteen, Luther matriculated for the summer term at the University of Erfurt. Founded in 1392, this institution attracted about two thousand students in Luther's day. In the matriculation register his name appears as *Martinus Ludher ex Mansfeld*. This is the first mention of him in any still-extant document.[21] After three terms of study of the liberal arts based on the system of Aristotle and the new Nominalism, he graduated Bachelor of Arts on Michaelmas day in September 1502, being placed thirtieth in a class of fifty-seven. Early in 1505 he obtained his Master of Arts degree and this time he was second in a list of seventeen candidates.[22]

In obedience to his father's wish, Luther began the study of law at Erfurt University in May 1505. However, on Wednesday, July 2nd of that year he was caught in a severe thunderstorm near the village of Stotternheim as he returned to Erfurt from visiting his parents at Mansfeld. A thunderbolt struck the ground beside him and he fell down trembling with fear, and underwent a deep emotional and spiritual experience in the course of which he vowed to become a monk.[23]

Fifteen days later, in accordance with this vow and at the age of twenty-two,

Luther knocked on the door of the monastery of the Augustinian Eremites in Erfurt and asked the prior to admit him to the novitiate of that Order.[24] With this apparently inauspicious step he entered upon the career that was to make him one of the outstanding figures in the history of modern Europe.

He was to spend about five years in the monastery at Erfurt and then be transferred by the Order in 1511 to the new University of Wittenberg (which had been founded only in 1502), where he would spend the rest of his life as professor of biblical theology, apart from a few rare visits to the world outside. As events turned out, he died in Eisleben his birthplace, but his body was brought back to Wittenberg for burial.

## MARITAL HISTORY

On Tuesday, June 13th 1525, Luther married Katharine von Bora in the monastery at Wittenberg at a service conducted by the town pastor and the minister of the Castle Church. Katherine was the daughter of a nobleman, Hans von Bora, and had been a nun of the Cistercian Order in the convent at Nimbschen near Leipzig. She had renounced her religious vows and left the convent along with eleven other young nuns during the night of April 4th 1523 and had come to Wittenberg where she met Luther. At the time of their marriage she was twenty-six years old and Luther was forty-two.

The marriage was a very happy one for the couple were very devoted to each other. Katharine was a woman of enormous energy and from her habit of early rising, her husband called her 'the morning star of Wittenberg'.[25] On June 7th 1526 she was delivered of their firstborn, a son who was named Johannes (Hans). Luther reported to his relatives that the boy was healthy and without birth defects, and was 'a good eater and drinker (*homo vorax ac bibax*)'.[26] Altogether they had six children, three boys and three girls. Two of the girls died very young, Elizabeth at eight months and Magdalena at thirteen years. Hans became a lawyer and served in the state legal department, while another of the boys, Paul, studied medicine and eventually became physician to the Elector of Brandenburg.[27]

In general, Katie (as her husband called her) seems to have enjoyed good health. The only serious illness recorded of her was in the winter of 1539–40 following a miscarriage. She was prostrate for weeks and only slowly regained her strength.[28]

## FACTORS RELATING TO LUTHER'S HEALTH

There are a number of possible factors which are relevant to any discussion of Luther's health. Poverty was probably not a significant factor, although some of Luther's biographers have suggested that he grew up in 'grinding, squalid poverty'.[29] It is now realised that Luther's parents both came from families which possessed property and never lacked the necessities of life.[30] Also, long before Martin left home his father's hard work and thrift had improved their social and economic status and before their son was through high school at Eisenach they had been able to purchase a substantial house in the most desirable part of Mansfeld. There is no suggestion that the health of their children was affected by poverty. So far as Martin himself is concerned we have a contemporary account of his parents as small and short while he far surpassed them in build and height which does not suggest that he was brought up in poverty.[31]



The second factor is that of Luther's asceticism as a monk. During his time at Erfurt (1505–11), he gained a reputation for ascetic piety far beyond the walls of the monastery. He fasted for days at a time and night after night he went without sleep in his search for spiritual peace. In a letter written in 1518 describing this period of his life, Luther admits, 'I almost met my death by my fasting, abstinence and austerity in labour and clothing; by all this my body was terribly weakened and exhausted'.[32] He lost so much weight that even in 1519 when he attended the Leipzig disputation after he had been eight years at Wittenberg (and already had begun to put on weight) he was described by Peter Mosellanus, one of the participants in the disputation, as 'of middle height with a slender body worn out both by study and care, so that you can almost count his bones through his skin'.[33]

The third factor was the stress to which he was exposed once he had emerged as a leader in the events of the Reformation. All the forces which could be brought to bear on him by the Roman Church and its secular protector Emperor Charles V sought to make him recant his opinions. At his famous appearance before the Imperial Diet at Worms in April 1521 he refused to recant and ended his speech of refusal with the immortal words, 'Here I stand; I can do no other. So help me God. Amen'.[34] The result of his refusal was that he was excommunicated by the Roman Church and outlawed by the Holy Roman Empire.

The fourth factor was the huge workload he had to bear. In Wittenberg he was professor, preacher and pastor to the university and the community. These duties alone constituted a full-time occupation. In addition he was leader and adviser to the whole Reformation movement in Germany and abroad. He wrote much of its theological and polemical literature and conducted a voluminous correspondence. Nevertheless he regarded his lifelong full-time calling to be that of the exposition of the Bible to his students at Wittenberg, and as one author has put it, 'in between lectures, so to speak, he began the Protestant Reformation'.[35] The tremendous double workload which resulted from all this activity could not but affect his physical and mental health.

The fifth factor was his own strong physical and mental constitution combined with his robust Christian faith. He was a strong personality but this does not mean that he did not have periods of spiritual depression nor on occasions have bouts of strong passion or anger.[36] However, this is not to say that he suffered from a manic-depressive psychosis as some authors have suggested. In recent years attempts have been made by psychologists interested in history to explain 'the Luther phenomenon' in psychological terms, but these attempts are not well-founded for the basic data are almost entirely lacking. Luther's most recent biographer comments on these attempts as follows: 'Little is known about the relationship of the young Luther with his father, and even less about that with his mother. Yet repeated attempts have been made, principally from the side of the psychological disciplines, to explain Luther's personality and its development on the basis of these relationships'.[37]

### *General picture*

For the first forty years of his life Luther enjoyed surprisingly good health and we have few references to any illnesses during these years.[38] It was only as he became a public figure after he had posted his ninety-five theses on the oaken

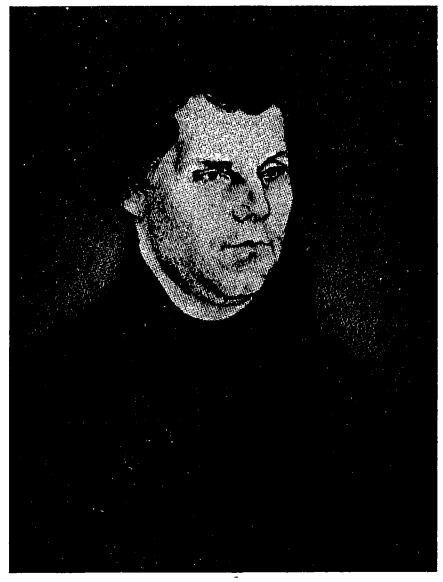

Title page of Luther's first complete Bible in 1534.

door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg on October 31st 1517, that he began to have significant episodes of ill-health.

The only injury of which we have any knowledge was sustained by Luther when he was a student at Erfurt. He was travelling home at Easter 1503 with a friend and when he broke into a run at one point of his journey, his dagger slipped out of its sheath and gashed his left thigh. The dagger punctured the femoral artery which bled profusely. He applied digital pressure to control the bleeding while his companion went into Erfurt, half a mile away, and brought a surgeon to attend to his wound and stop the bleeding.[39] It was during his convalescence from this injury that he taught himself to play the lute, an accomplishment which became a frequent means of relaxation in later times.[40]

A number of authentic portraits of Luther exist, all by Lucas Cranach the elder except the death-bed sketch and etching made by Lucas Fortnagel of Halle. Cranach who lived in Wittenberg from 1505 to 1550 was the leading painter of Saxony in the sixteenth century and produced a woodcut and three etchings of





Martin Luther. By Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1526.

Luther in 1520 and 1521. These were followed by six oil paintings of him by Cranach in 1521, 1525, 1526, 1528, 1532, and 1537. These portraits show him first with dark brown hair which by 1528 is beginning to turn grey. From a medical point of view, the interesting feature is the increasing fullness of his face which becomes markedly obese by the time of his death as appears from the death-bed sketch. Goethe made Luther's obesity proverbial with his phrase 'as fat as Martin Luther'.[41].

Luther was not uncritical of his doctors and the treatment they gave him. He accepted that the physician is God's mender of the body as the theologian is the mender of the soul.[42] Nevertheless when he recalled his illness in Schmalkalden (which is referred to later) when he was much worked on by his physicians, he described as wretched that man who relies on the help of physicians. However, he felt at that time he had to obey his physicians or they would think that he did not take care of his body.[43] On another occasion after he had been prescribed a rigid diet he said that to live medically was to live wretchedly and he would eat what he liked and die when God willed.[44] Nevertheless, once when he was asked by the burgomaster of Wittenberg whether it was permissible to make use of medicine, he replied, 'Do you eat when you are hungry? If you do, you may also use medicine, which is God's creation as truly as food or drink and whatever else we need for sustaining life'.[45]

*Fevers and infections*

The earliest reference to an illness dates from his schooldays at Magdeburg when Luther (then aged 14) fell ill with a fever. He became very thirsty and was refused anything to drink by his physician. However, when the people with whom he was lodging had gone off to Church and left him alone, he crawled to the kitchen and drank the contents of a large jug of water. When he returned to his bed he fell into a deep sleep from which he awoke to find his fever gone. In

view of his later history of heart disease it has been suggested that this illness was rheumatic fever, but this seems to be very unlikely.[46]

There are several references in Luther's letters and *Table Talk* to his not feeling well and sometimes it is mentioned that he has a fever. The nature of these fevers is not mentioned. On one occasion he mentions that his friend Melanchthon has fallen ill with a 'tertian fever'.[47] This may have been malaria, but he never describes his own fevers in this way, nor does he use the term ague.[48]

On one occasion in 1523 he mentions that he 'caught a fever from a bath (*febris e balneo contraxi*)'. Unfortunately this does not help us to identify the fever. However, this febrile illness is important historically because an ambiguous medical report which was written about it gave rise to the completely unfounded rumour that Luther was suffering from syphilis.[49]

From time to time we read of Luther suffering from an upper respiratory infection and episodes of coughing, even occasionally of his losing his voice and being unable to lecture to his students. On one occasion in March 1541 he suffered an upper respiratory infection which was complicated by an acute infection of the left middle ear. This caused him severe giddiness, tinnitus, deafness and acute pain which was only relieved when the ear drum perforated and a discharge appeared which became purulent and foul-smelling (*immundus fluxu auris*) and persisted until the beginning of May when his hearing returned to normal but the tinnitus continued.[50]

In a letter dated July 31st 1529, Luther tells of the appearance of an epidemic of the Sweating Sickness which was then sweeping Germany and had reached Wittenberg.[51] Because this disease first appeared in England in 1485 it was commonly called the English Sweat (*Sudor Anglicus*).[52] On August 26th, Luther wakened up bathed in sweat, and with the other symptoms of this disease. However, he did not believe that this condition was a physical disease but was hysterical in origin, and so he got up and shrugged it off as he had advised his colleagues to do when he had driven them from their beds.[53]

Another epidemic disease which from time to time made its appearance at Wittenberg was bubonic plague. The most serious outbreak was in 1527 with the result that the university staff and students moved to Jena to escape the infection. Luther and two of his colleagues, however, felt it was their duty to remain in Wittenberg. Although his own house was transformed into a hospital, he and his family escaped the infection but several of their friends died.[54] The university staff and students did not return to Wittenberg until January 1536.[55] In response to a request for advice on a question which was of universal interest at this time, Luther wrote a pamphlet entitled *Whether One may Flee from a Deadly Plague*. He felt that people might justifiably do so, but those with official professional or pastoral responsibilities should not do so.[56]

From time to time Luther appears to have had infective intestinal conditions which might have been accompanied by fever, but fever is not mentioned. In October 1518 on his way on foot to the Diet of Augsburg he developed an intestinal infection and became very weak and had to complete his journey by carriage, but again there is no mention of fever on this occasion.[57] Once in August 1535 when he was at home he had an acute attack of what was probably bacillary dysentery and passed fifteen stools in two days.[58] On Sunday July 9th 1538 he was unable to preach because he had diarrhoea and when his physician



saw him next day he gave him an enema and prescribed coriander seeds (*Coriandrum sativum*). This reminded Luther of the story of the man who had also been prescribed coriander, and thought that his physician had said 'calendars'. The patient duly bought four calendars, cut them up and swallowed the fragments in four doses.[59]

*'A cathedral chapter'*

On one occasion he said that his head was like 'a cathedral chapter', the noisy routine business meeting of the staff of a cathedral.[60] This was his description of what his constant headaches, tinnitus, dizziness and giddiness felt like. We have already mentioned one acute cause of these symptoms, but he suffered from them chronically. Their combination might suggest that he suffered from Ménière's syndrome although there is no mention of any progressive deafness. A sufficient cause for some of these symptoms can be found in the the circumstances of stress, anxiety and overwork, with which he lived.

His headaches could be very severe and interfere with his study and writing. Occasionally he describes them as 'throbbing' as though they may have been vascular in origin, although his description does not suggest they were migrainous in nature.[61] The tinnitus which first affected him in his left ear in July 1527, appeared periodically afterwards and troubled him greatly. When it affected him he often could not work and had to give up reading or writing and lie down.[62]

We know that Luther needed to wear spectacles for reading at least from the year 1530. In a letter to his wife in July 1530 from the Castle of Coburg where he was staying to be on hand for the Diet of Augsburg, he complains that the spectacles made for him by Christian Düring, the Wittenberg goldsmith, were not satisfactory.[63] With regard to his eyes, many observers were struck by their deep brown-black colour and their penetrating gaze. They were compared to the eyes of lions, eagles and falcons because they had a fiery, burning sparkle about them.[64] When he preached from the pulpit it seemed to the congregation that he could look right through them and see everything that they had done during the previous week. Later his sight began to deteriorate especially in his left eye, so that in a letter of January 1546 he says he is now 'one-eyed'.[65]

## AFTER THE DIET OF WORMS

Luther's courageous stand at the Diet of Worms in April 1521 put his life into greater danger than before. Although he had come to Worms under a safe-conduct provided by the emperor, that could be revoked at any time as one had been revoked in the case of Jan Hus, the Bohemian Reformer, who had then been burned at the stake in Constance over a century earlier. Because of this danger Luther was kidnapped on May 4th by his friends on his homeward journey to Wittenberg and taken to the Wartburg, a large and ancient castle standing on a steep hill about a mile south of Eisenach. He spent most of the next year there, so effectively hidden that many regarded him as dead. He grew a beard and assumed the dress and identity of a country squire under the alias of 'Junker Georg', constantly wearing a cap to disguise his tonsure until his hair grew again.

In his unaccustomed quiet solitude in the Wartburg, Luther translated the New Testament into German in less than eleven weeks using the Greek text

which had been published by Erasmus in 1519. This translation became for the Modern High German language and German literature what the Authorised Version almost a century later became for the English language and literature. In addition to his work on this translation, Luther's pen was busy writing Sunday sermons and homilies for Lutheran pastors and the congregation at Wittenberg, great numbers of letters to his friends and colleagues, and numerous pamphlets and treatises on a variety of subjects. One of these treatises was *On Monastic Vows* in which Luther maintained that the current monastic vows could not be justified from Scripture and therefore were not binding. It was this view which led to his setting aside his cowl after almost twenty years as a monk and to his marriage to Katherine von Bora to which we have already referred.

## 'MY VEXATIOUS HANDICAP'

Luther's stand at the Diet of Worms was a watershed in the history of Europe and in many aspects of his own life too. His confinement in the Wartburg meant a change in his life style, which had at least one important medical result. He began to suffer from severe constipation. His regular and ample meals began to fill out his gaunt physical frame, but were more than his digestive system could cope with after the simple fare he had been accustomed to as a monk. His enforced lack of exercise, apart from a walk in the castle grounds or a ride in the woods did nothing to aid his digestion. In a letter to Melanchthon he describes his constipation as his 'vexatious handicap (*molestia vexatus*)'.[66]

In order to keep in touch with his friends outside, Luther wrote regular monthly letters to them, and all the letters written between May and October 1521 contain vivid references to 'my constipation' and its results.[67] In July he obtains purgative medicine from his friend Spalatin and finds elimination easier.[68] Nevertheless, he still has a stool only every fourth or fifth day even with medicine.[69] The constipation had other effects too. It produced an anal fissure which caused him pain and soreness and was kept open by the continued passage of hard stools. The straining also produced internal haemorrhoids which prolapsed as a fleshy mass when his bowels opened.[70] However, by October he can write to Spalatin and say:

> At last my behind and my bowels have reconciled themselves to me. Therefore I need no further medicine and am completely healthy as before.[71]

Luther, of course, suffered from constipation at other times but no later experience was quite so severe as that which he had during his stay in the Wartburg.

## 'MY TORTURER THE STONE'

It was in March 1526, when he was forty-two years old, that Luther first mentioned that he was having attacks of renal colic and it was not until the following June that he reported some relief from them.[72]

More attacks occurred in 1536. They began in April of that year and were so severe that he wanted to die rather than endure them. At the beginning of June he passed several small stones with a great deal of pain. This appears to be the first time that he had actually passed stones.[73]

However, worse was to come. Some eleven years later, on February 7th 1537, Luther arrived in Schmalkalden, a town in Hesse, to attend a meeting of the Protestant princes and theologians. The next day he passed a small stone and



some blood *per urethram* with very little pain, but on the 11th and 18th he had severe pain although he passed no stones. On the 19th he had urinary retention which lasted for eight days.[74]

There was no dearth of physicians in Schmalkalden for each prince was attended by his own personal physician. In addition, on the 20th, Luther asked that his friend Dr Georg Sturz of Erfurt should be sent for too. Then on the 24th a surgeon was called in from Waltershausen. They all failed to relieve his pain and his urinary retention, but it was not for want of trying. After his severe attack of pain on the 18th, Luther was given an enema by the personal physician of the Landgrave of Hesse, the host of the meeting at Schmalkalden. This failed to relieve the pain and only produced a persistent diarrhoea which made the patient feel even weaker.

Once the urinary retention occurred, several methods of treatment were tried. First, the physicians increased Luther's fluid intake. He said afterwards that they gave him as much to drink as if he had been 'a big ox'.[75] Then they prepared a broth made from almonds which he drank. They applied hot cloths to his abdomen to soothe the pain. They massaged his perineum and urethra until these were numb and lifeless. Eventually they summoned the surgeon who considered suprapubic cystotomy, but decided against it. He also produced a gold bougie but was not able to dislodge the obstructing stone. Even his wife Katie contributed to his treatment by sending him a medicine made of cloves of garlic boiled with fresh horse droppings (*allium et stercus equinum*) prepared according to a prescription from the *Dreckapotheke* (faecal pharmacy).[76] Later Luther told her that the medicine was disgusting to swallow and had been of no help.[77]

After a week of intense suffering, the early signs of uraemia appeared as Luther began to vomit and to become euphoric.[78] On the 25th he insisted on being taken back to Wittenberg, saying that if he was going to die (as he thought he was) he preferred to die at home. He set off the next day in the Elector's private carriage accompanied by Dr Sturtz and several colleagues. Two men walked beside the carriage in order to try to minimise the jolting caused by the rough roads which caused Luther such excruciating pain. After travelling for about ten miles they stopped at an inn at Tambach. Here the jolting of the journey accomplished what the doctors had failed to accomplish, for during the night he began to pass urine. As he put it in a letter to Melanchthon, written early on the morning of the 27th, his 'silver stream' (as he called it) had been restored. He told his wife that once he was able to pass urine again, he had passed about one *Stübig* or three to four litres in the space of two hours.[79]

Next day they arrived at Gotha where Luther had another severe attack of pain with the result that on March 1st he passed six stones, one as large as a bean (*faba*). Even though the crisis was past, Luther still believed that he was going to die and at Gotha he dictated a farewell document and commended his soul to God.[80] However, after this he began to improve. Over the next two weeks Luther and his friends continued their slow journey until they finally arrived in Wittenberg on March 14th. It was not a pleasant journey as he continued to pass more small stones until he arrived home suffering from weakness, abdominal pain, vomiting and insomnia. It was some time before he had fully recovered his strength.

Although there are references in Luther's letters to attacks of stone in the years 1538, 1539, 1543 and 1545, he never again experienced so severe and

prolonged an attack as he did at Schmalkalden in 1537 in which his life was really in danger. They did, however, often prevent him from riding a horse because of the pain that this caused. The last attacks of pain appear to have been in the summer of 1545 and they were so severe that he said he would prefer 'death to such a tyrant'. It was on this occasion that he spoke in a letter to von Amsdorf of 'my torturer the stone (*carnifex meus calculus*)'.[81] In February 1546 he writes to his wife from Eisleben to say that the stone no longer bothers him.[82]

The cause of the renal stones from which Luther suffered appears to have been gout which on one occasion he observed was an English disease while the stone was peculiar to Germany.[83] Clinical experience has not upheld the truth of this observation, but there is no doubt that urinary calculi were very common in Germany in the Middle Ages and later. Luther showed other classical features of gout with attacks of acute pain in the small joints of the feet which are specifically mentioned in the years 1533 and 1538. In 1538 he began to use a walking stick because of the pain caused by the gout.[84] The plaster casts of his hands made after his death show the typical deformities of gouty arthritis.[85]

## 'MYSELF IN A COFFIN'

On January 23rd 1546, Luther set out from Wittenberg to Eisleben (a distance of some eighty miles) on what was to be his last journey. He had been called upon to mediate in a dispute between the Counts of Mansfeld about certain rights and revenues, especially involving Church patronage.[86] He had already paid two visits to Eisleben in this connection which had not been successful in ending the dispute, and now was called upon for a third time. Although in his sixty-third year and weary and worn, nevertheless he felt it was his duty to go, as Mansfeld was where he had been brought up. His friend Melanchthon had accompanied him on the two previous visits, but this time he was unable to go with him as he too was suffering from the stone and constipation.

On the way to Eisleben Luther felt unwell. In a letter to Melanchthon dated February 1st 1546, he describes how on January 28th he fainted in the extreme cold as he walked on his journey and had an attack of what he said Melanchthon would call 'palpitations (*humor ventriculi*)'. He perspired, became short of breath, felt coldness and stiffness of his left arm and tightness around the heart. He continued his journey in a carriage, but the pain in his chest persisted. These symptoms eventually passed off and he completed his journey.[87]

He arrived in Eisleben on the same day (January 28th) and was accommodated in the comfortable house of the town clerk. By February 16th the dispute had been settled and according to the record of his *Table Talk* for that day Luther said,

> I will now no longer tarry, but set myself to go to Wittenberg and there lay myself in a coffin and give the worms a fat doctor to feed upon.[88]

But this was not to be. The next day he did not feel well and after supper went upstairs to his sitting-room where he had his customary evening prayer at the open window. Shortly after he began to experience pain and tightness in his chest and lay down on the sofa. One of his colleagues obtained a concoction of grated unicorn horn and gave it to him after which he went to sleep.[89] He slept until about ten o'clock and then walked through to his bedroom and lay down on his bed and slept again. About one o'clock he wakened with another attack of



pain, and his companions sought to warm him with hot towels and massage to his chest. They then summoned their hosts, the town clerk and his wife, who in turn called in the two town physicians and finally Count Albrecht of Mansfeld-Hinterort and his wife Anna who was familiar with medicines. The pain and anguish continued and when he began to perspire Luther realised he was dying and recited the words of the text John 3.16 three times and then said, 'I am going, and shall render up my spirit'. He then commended his soul to God three times in the words of Psalm 31.5: 'Into thine hand I commit my spirit: thou hast redeemed me, O Lord God of Truth'. Countess Anna tried to revive him by rubbing him with rose water and aqua vitae but to no avail.

In a final word he confirmed to the assembled company that he died trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ and in the doctrine he had himself taught. He then turned on to his right side and fell asleep again. Fifteen minutes later, at about a quarter-to-three in the morning of Thursday, February 18th 1546, Doctor Martin Luther took a deep breath and gave up his spirit.[90] Just after he had died, the physicians summoned Johann Landau, the town apothecary, to administer an enema in an attempt to revive him, but this attempt was unsuccessful.[91]

Although Luther had died at Eisleben where he had been born, the Elector John Frederick of Saxony insisted that he should be buried at Wittenberg. Consequently his body was laid in a pewter coffin and then taken to Wittenberg, where on February 22nd it was buried in the Castle Church in a grave which had been prepared beneath the floor of the Church and directly in front of the pulpit from which he had preached so often.[92] The funeral sermon was preached by Johann Bugenhagen, the pastor of the Castle Church, and the eulogy was delivered by Luther's friend and colleague of many years, Philip Melanchthon.[93]

## APOPLEXY OR HEART ATTACK?

The two physicians who examined Luther's body on the day after his death disagreed about the cause of his death. One diagnosed apoplexy because he thought that one side of his mouth was drawn down and the whole of the right side of his body was discoloured (*visa enim est tortura oris et dexterum latus totum infuscatum*).[94] The other physician thought he had died from heart disease as he could not conceive that so holy a man as Luther could have been struck down by the hand of God, i.e., that he could have had 'a stroke' which is the literal meaning of apoplexy. Melanchthon accepted the diagnosis of heart disease, and most of the standard biographies of Luther have followed him.[95]

We have, of course, no detailed clinical description of the physical signs which Luther might have shown during the two days or so before he died. However, if he had suffered from an apoplectic attack we would have expected him to lose consciousness, to show signs of muscular weakness or paralysis and perhaps to have difficulty in speaking if he had remained conscious. None of these features appear to have been present, Luther did not lapse into unconsciousness until a short time before he died. He showed no signs of hemiplegia or muscular paralysis and was able to walk between his bedroom and his sitting-room without any difficulty until less than two hours before his death. He was able to change his position in bed, and fifteen minutes before he died he turned over on to his right side and fell asleep. He had no difficulty in speaking, for in his last hours he recited passages of Scripture and commended his soul to God in the hearing of his friends. A few minutes before he died he was able to assure

them that he died trusting in Christ and in the doctrine which he had preached. We conclude, therefore, that it seems unlikely that apoplexy was the cause of Luther's death.

What has often been lost sight of in the consideration of the cause of Luther's death is that he had a long history of cardiac symptoms similar to those which occurred in the twenty-four hours or so before he died.

Their first appearance was early in January 1527 when he was seized with pain and a tightness in his chest. He said that it felt like a sudden clotting of the blood around the precordial area. He was able to treat this attack with a folk remedy which consisted of the watery extract of the blessed thistle (*Aqua Cardui benedicti*) and this alleviated the pain.[96] Then in July of the same year he had a severe fainting spell and was treated with hot compresses to his chest, although there is no mention of any local cardiac symptoms on this occasion.[97]

He had another attack of 'extraordinary faintness in his heart' at 4 am on January 22nd 1532 accompanied by a ringing in his ears. After inspecting his urine, the physicians said that he had been close to apoplexy, but would recover from this attack of illness.[98]

During the year 1535, Luther had several episodes of illness including upper respiratory infections and diarrhoea which interfered with his teaching and preaching. Finally on December 19th of that year he appears to have suffered a heart attack which was so severe that it was feared that he was going to die, but he recovered although he was left very weak.[99] During the attack of dysentery in July 1538 which lasted for over a week, Luther mentions in his *Table Talk* that he had an irregular pulse (*pulsus variationem*). No details of the character of the irregularity are given, although Luther does say that he was reassured by his physician that it was not serious.[100]

There would appear also to be no doubt that Luther suffered a heart attack or the severe wintry weather of January 28th 1546 as he completed his last journey to Eisleben which we have already described.

His final attack of chest pain came on February 17th and in the early morning of the following day he died. In view of his clinical history, it seems not unreasonable to suggest that the cause of Luther's death was a heart attack or myocardial infarction and not apoplexy.

## WAS LUTHER HYPERTENSIVE?

Whichever diagnosis we accept of the cause of Luther's death, the underlying cause was cardiovascular in nature. Since a common cause of both apoplexy and heart attacks, at least in modern experience, is high blood pressure or hypertension, it seems appropriate to consider the question of whether Luther suffered from high blood pressure.

Two factors are present in Luther's case which modern cardiologists regard as significant contributors to high blood pressure. These are the mental and spiritual stress and the obesity both of which we have already mentioned.

One of the recognised methods of lowering blood pressure is by reducing the volume of circulating blood. In earlier times blood-letting or phlebotomy was practised on a quite empirical basis because the physiology and pathology of blood pressure were not understood. All that was known was that some patients benefited by having blood taken off. Perhaps among these were individuals with high blood pressure.



The only mention of blood-letting or phlebotomy on Luther was after he fell ill at Eisenach on his way to the Diet of Worms in April 1521. No details are available of the nature of this illness but it appears to have been very severe and left him very weak for he writes to Spalatin from Frankfurt-on-Main that he continued to be very ill 'in a way which has previously been unknown to me'. Nevertheless in spite of his weak condition he was determined to reach Worms and he did.[101]

Blood-letting was also achieved by means of a *fontanella*. Meaning literally 'a little fountain', this refers to a wound or ulcer artificially produced by incision, cautery or the application of some caustic substance to the skin. This wound or ulcer was then kept open to permit chronic blood-letting by oozing. This was believed to counteract faintness and dizziness.

We know that from at least the summer of 1543 Luther had such a *fontanella* in his left calf on the recommendation of Dr Ratzeberger and that this was kept open by the periodic application of a stone of some caustic material (*lapillium corrosivum*).[102] Dorothy, the Countess of Mansfeld did not agree with Dr Ratzeberger's recommendation and sent Luther a long letter of advice. In her view Luther should allow the *fontanella* to heal. He should take more exercise and use sneezing powder. His fainting attacks should be treated with white aquavit and his cardiac and digestive symptoms with yellow aquavit.[103]

However, Luther preferred to keep his *fontanella* open and was dismayed to find that it had almost healed when he arrived in Eisleben from Wittenberg in January 1546. He wrote to Melanchthon in Wittenberg to ask him to send a messenger to Eisleben with a caustic stone in order that he might keep the wound open.[104] After Luther's death, Dr Ratzeberger expressed the opinion that the healing of the *fontanella* could very well have contributed to his death.There were of course no means of measuring human blood pressure in Luther's day and so we cannot answer the question at the head of this section with any certainty. It does not seem unreasonable, however, to believe that Luther did suffer from high blood pressure and that his death was due to one of the recognised complications of such a condition, namely, myocardial infarction.[105].

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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

*Key to abbreviations*

CR = Corpus Reformatorum, Philippi Melanchthon Opera. Bretschneider CG, Bindseil HE eds. Halle: C A Schwetschke 1834–1860. 28 vols.

LW = Luther's Works (American edition) Pelikan J, Lehmann HT eds. St Louis and Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1955–1986. 55 vols.

WA = D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Weimar: Verlag Hermann Bolhaus Nachfolger 1883–1983. 60 vols.

WA Br = D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Briefwechsel. Weimar: Verlag Hermann Bolhaus Nachfolger 1930–1978. 15 vols. These volumes contain 4,335 letters written by or to Luther.

WA TR = D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Tischreden. Weimar: Verlag Hermann Bolhaus Nachfolger 1912–1921. 6 vols. These volumes contain 7,075 of Luther's comments made to his guests at meals. These comments have each been given a serial reference number by the editors.

Bainton = Bainton R. Here I Stand: A life of Martin Luther. London: Hodder & Stoughton 1951.
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Rupp & Drewery = Rupp EG, Drewery B eds. Martin Luther. London: Edward Arnold 1970.
Siggins = Siggins IDK, ed. Luther. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd 1972.
Smith = Smith P. The Life and Letters of Martin Luther. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1911.
Schwiebert = Schwiebert EG. Luther and his Times. St Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House 1950.

[1] Siggins 1.

[2] Schwiebert 100. Cp Schmidt H, ed. Martini Lutheri Opera Latina. Frankfurt-on-Main & Erlangen 1865. 1.15–24. Extracts from the autobiography are given in translation in Rupp & Drewery 5 & 173–175.

[3] Siggins 31.

[4] Melanchthon's biography of Luther is to be found in CR 6. 156–170. Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560) was the professor of Greek at Wittenberg University and a close friend and colleague of Martin Luther with whose views he was in full sympathy.

[5] One of these short biographical accounts is by Dr Matthaeus Ratzeberger, the court physician of the Counts of Mansfeld, who attended Luther medically on numerous occasions. However, this biography is not regarded as altogether reliable for Ratzeberger is believed to have added numerous embellishments to his account. For instance, it was probably he who invented the story of Luther's throwing an inkpot at the Devil who was tormenting him in his study at the Wartburg during his stay there in 1521. Although an ink-stain on the wall behind the stove in the north-east corner of the room is regularly shown to tourists, the traditional story of its origin is apocryphal (Schweibert 100–101 & 518–519). A similar ink-stain used to be shown in the room at the Castle of Coburg where Luther stayed in 1530 (See Köstlin 213).

[6] Brecht 1.3–6. Cp Kuiper 16.

[7] In the standard modern biographies the maiden names of Luther's mother and grandmother are commonly given as those of Ziegler and Lindemann respectively, but it has now been established that Luther's mother was a Lindemann and his grandmother a Zeigler. See Siggins IDK. Luther's mother Margarethe. *Harvard Theological Review* **71** (1978), 125–150, especially the genealogical table on page 140.

[8] It is possible that Martin Luther had an older brother who had already died before Martin was born, but Luther's reference to this possibility in WA TR 5.95 no. 5362 is unclear. Cp Brecht 1.2.

[9] CR 6.156. Cp Lindsay TM. Luther and the German Reformation. Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1900. 13.

[10] Brecht 1.10.

[11] Smith 190. Cp WA Br 5.349 (Luther to Wenzel Link, June 5th 1530).

[12] Luther could have been as young as $4\frac{1}{2}$ years when he entered school at Mansfeld, although the customary age for entrance was 7 years. See Schwiebert 111.

[13] Brendler 26.

[14] WA TR 5.235 no.5571 = LW 54.457 no.5571.

[15] Mackinnon 1.11.



[16] Kuiper 25.

[17] Mackinnon 1.13.

[18] The Brethren of the Common Life were a religious community within the Roman Catholic Church founded in the Netherlands in the late fourteenth century. They set up schools or supplied teachers for existing schools (as in the case of Magdeburg) throughout the Netherlands, Germany and Switzerland, and did much to raise the standard of education and piety in these countries before the Reformation.

[19] WA 30.576 = LW 46.250.

[20] WA Br 1.610 = LW 48.145 (Luther to Spalatin, January 14th 1520). Cp WA TR 5.76 no.5347. George Spalatin (1484–1545) was chaplain and librarian at the court of Frederick the Wise, the Elector of Saxony. He was a great friend and supporter of Luther who maintained a voluminous correspondence with him.

[21] The family name was variously spelled Lauther, Leuder, Leuther, Lüder, Ludher, and Lutter. However, about the year 1518 the Reformer began to sign his name as 'Luther' and this spelling was then adopted by all members of the other Luther families. The name is said to be derived from the old German name Chlotar or Lothar, a forename meaning 'one who is renowned in battle' (Köstlin 2. Cp Oberman 86 and Schwiebert 102).

[22] Brecht 1.33–34. Cp Kuiper 65.

[23] Brecht 1.48. Cp WA TR 4.440 no.4707.

[24] The mendicant Order of the Augustinian Eremites (or Austin Friars) was known for its severe discipline and the rigid enforcement of its Rule. It was named after St Augustine (354–430) but its Rule was not drawn up by him. The Order was formed in the thirteenth century and by the fifteenth century it had over two thousand monasteries in Europe. (Brecht 1.52–55. Cp Kuiper 148–150).

[25] Smith 179. With his marriage to Katharine in 1525, Luther effectively ceased to be a monk since one of the vows he took when he became a monk was that of celibacy.

[26] Oberman 278.

[27] Smith 355.

[28] Smith 181. Cp WA TR 4.568 no.5493 = LW 54.429 no.5493 note 6.

[29] Smith 2.

[30] Kuiper 31.

[31] Kuiper 17. Kuiper quotes the description by Johann Kessler, the Swiss Reformer from the latter's book *Sabbata* published in 1522 as a chronicle of the persons and events of his time. Kessler had been a student of Luther's at Wittenberg.

[32] WA 1.525–527 = LW 48.69 (Luther to Staupitz, May 30th 1518) note 26. Johann von Staupitz (1468–1524) was the first dean of the theological faculty at Wittenberg and Luther's predecessor in the chair of biblical theology. He later became the vicar-general of the Augustinian Eremites.

[33] Oberman 326. Cp Letter of Peter Mosellanus to Julius Pflug of December 7th 1519 in Rupp & Drewery 35.

[34] The earliest printed version of the speech Luther made before the Diet of Worms contains the words 'Here I stand. I can do no other', but these do not appear in the official record made at the time. However, they may well be genuine because those listening to the speech were so moved by it that they did not record all the words Luther said. See Bainton 185 and Brendler 206. Cp. WA 7.838.

[35] See Encyclopaedia Britannica. Fifteenth edition, 1988. 7.527, art. 'Luther'. Cp Rupp RG. Luther's Progress to the Diet of Worms. London: SCM Press 1951, 24. Luther's great devotion to biblical study and exposition is illustrated by his remark about the epistle of Paul to the Galatians when he said, 'This is my own dear epistle, to which I am married. It is my Katie von Bora'. (WA TR 1.69 no.146 = LW 54.20 no.146). It was, of course, out of his study and exposition of the Bible that the inspiration arose which produced the Reformation.

[36] The word which Luther uses to describe these episodes of spiritual crisis is the word *anfechtung*, a word which is usually left untranslated in the modern biographies as there is no equivalent in English (Bainton 42). These *anfechtungen* have been defined as 'powerful assaults on our spirit which threaten to engulf us in despair, whether they come from enemies without or conscience from within'. Fischer RH in Brooks PN (ed). Seven-headed Luther. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1983. Chapter 4, 'Ecclesiastes', 85.

[37] Brecht 1.6. The most influential book on this subject was Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History, written by the American psychoanalyst Erik H Erickson (London:

Faber & Faber 1958). Bainton writes of this book as follows: 'My critique here is threefold. The first is that the evidence is scant, late and flimsy; the second, that the projections from childhood to adolescence and maturity are sometimes false, sometimes unnecessary, and sometimes implausible. The third is that the motives attributed to Luther are invalid.' Bainton points out that the evidence on which Erickson largely builds his case consists of three sayings taken from Luther's *Table Talk* which includes over seven thousand such sayings. As we have already seen, these sayings need to be treated with caution. See Bainton RH in Johnson RA (ed). Psychohistory and Religion: The Case of the Young Man Luther. Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1977. Chapter 2, 'Psychiatry and History'. 23.

[38] Brecht 2.204.

[39] WA TR 1.46 no.119=LW 54.14 no.119, Cp Panel 108.

[40] Köstlin 31.

[41] Schwiebert 571–573. See Manns *passim* for colour reproductions of the portraits of the years 1520, 1521 and 1528. The phrase from Goethe is quoted in Panel 108.

[42] WA TR 1.150 no.360=LW 54.53 no.360.

[43] WA TR 3.578 no.3733=LW 54.266 no.3733.

[44] WA TR 3.627 no.3801=LW 54.277 no.3801.

[45] WA TR 1.150 no.360=LW 54.53 no.360. Cp McGiffert AC. Martin Luther. The Man and His Work. London: Fisher Unwin 1911, 370.

[48] Köstlin 12. This incident is recorded by Dr Ratzeberger in his biography of Luther. For the suggestion that the illness was rheumatic fever see Panel 108.

[47] Smith 379.

[48] For a brief discussion of fever in the sixteenth century see Wilkinson J. The Medical History of John Calvin. *Proc R Coll Physicians Edinb* 1992; **22:** 375–379.

[49] WA Br 4.137 (Luther to Spalatin, April 25th 1523). For the details of the medical report and its misinterpretation see Grisar 2.161–164.

[50] WA Br 9.376 (Luther to Melanchthon, April 4th 1541). Cp Brecht 3, 231.

[51] WA Br 5.125 (Luther to Brismann, July 31st 1529). He calls the sickness 'that English plague (*pestis illa Anglica*)'.

[52] The English Sweat or Sweating Sickness was a communicable disease which ravaged England in five separate epidemics during the period 1485 to 1551 and then disappeared, never to return. It was a short-term fever of high and rapid mortality. The worst epidemic occurred in 1528 and in the following year the infection spread by ship to Hamburg and then rapidly through Germany and other countries. Its precise nature has never been determined. The absence of respiratory symptoms would seem to exclude influenza which has been a popular identification in the past. The most recent suggestion identifies it as an acute encephalitis due to an arbovirus carried by insects from small mammals (voles and mice) which formed the primary hosts. See Wylie JAH & Collier LH. The English Sweating Sickness (*Sudor Anglicus*): A Reappraisal. *J Hist Med* 1981; **36:** 425–445.

[53] Köstlin 330. Cp Brecht 2.210.

[54] Smith 188.

[55] WA Br 7.348=LW 50.126 (Luther to Caspar Müller, January 19th 1536). Cp LW 50.108 note 11 and Smith 328.

[56] Brecht 2.207–208. Cp WA TR 5.193 no.5503=LW 54.434 no.5503.

[57] WA Br 2.298=LW 48.197 (Luther to Spalatin, April 14th 1521). Cp Rupp & Drewery 30 and WA Br 1.209 (Luther to Spalatin, October 10th 1518).

[58] WA Br 7.245=LW 50.87 (Luther to Melanchthon, August 29th 1535). Cp Brecht 3.23.

[59] WA TR 3.6 no.3912=LW 54.293 no.3912.

[60] Manns 115.

[61] WA Br 5.544=LW 49.400 (Luther to his wife, August 14th 1530).

[62] WA Br 4.221 (Luther to Spalatin, July 10th 1527) note 3. Cp WA TR 3.138 no.3006a=LW 54.189 no.3006a. For the suggestion that Luther suffered from Ménière's syndrome see also Panel 107.

[63] WA Br 11.269=LW 50.284 (Luther to his wife, January 25th 1546). Cp. Brecht 2.374.

[64] Schwiebert 576.

[65] WA Br 11.263 (Luther to James Propst, January 17th 1546). Luther's reference to being 'one-eyed (*monoculus*)' suggests he was now suffering from cataract in one eye (Panel 109). Mackinnon, however, suggests he had an acute eye infection at this time but gives no evidence for this suggestion (Mackinnon 4.209 note 16). The eye affected appears to have been the left one according to the additional material collected in WA Br 13.351. Cp LW 50.274–285 notes 1 & 2.



[66] WA Br 2.356 (Luther to Melanchthon, July 13th 1521). Cp Rupp & Drewery 73 note 1.

[67] See, for instance, WA Br 2.334=LW 48.218 (Luther to von Amsdorf, May 12th 1521).

[68] WA Br 2.368=LW 48.276 (Luther to Spalatin, July 31st 1521).

[69] WA Br 2.378=LW 49.291 (Luther to Spalatin, August 6th 1521).

[70] WA Br 2.365=LW 48.268 (Luther to Spalatin, July 15th 1521).

[71] WA Br 2.395=LW 48.316 (Luther to Spalatin, October 7th 1521).

[72] CR 1.801. (Melanchthon to John Lang, June 24th 1526).

[73] Brecht 3.23. The occurrence of renal colic followed by the passage of several small stones suggests that these were uric acid or urate stones which had originated in the kidney (See Panel 111).

[74] Brecht 3.185 and Köstlin 407. Luther said that as the people of old stoned Stephen (See Acts 7.58) so now he was being 'stoned' by his stone!

[75] WA TR 3.578 no.3733=LW 54.266 no.3733.

[76] WA TR 5.96 no.5368. Cp Brecht 3.185.

[77] WA Br 8.50=LW 50.167 (Luther to his wife, February 27th 1537).

[78] Brecht 3.185.

[79] Brecht 3.187. Cp WA Br 8.51=LW 50.167 (Luther to his wife, February 27th 1537). Note 4 to the German original of this letter gives the metric equivalent of one *Stübig* as three to four litres, but note 16 to the English version suggests that one litre is a more probable equivalent.

[80] WA Br 8.54. (Melanchthon to Luther, February 27th 1537) note 3. Cp LW 50.168 note 22. See also CR 3.270 (Melanchthon to Justus Jonas, February 23rd 1537) and Smith, 312–313. This farewell document is addressed to his family and friends and is commonly called his first will. He drew up his second and more formal will in 1542. Unfortunately, because of his dislike of lawyers, Luther did this without the help of a notary as required by law, and after his death his will was declared invalid (Smith 370–371).

[81] WA Br 11.131=LW 50.265 (Luther to von Amsdorf, July 9th 1545). Luther had previously spoken of 'my enemy, the stone (*hostis meus calculus*)' in WA Br 8.219=LW 50.179 (Luther to Edward Fox on May 12th 1538). Fox, who was the Bishop of Hereford in England, had apparently given Luther some helpful advice about the treatment of the attacks of his stone during a visit to Wittenberg in 1536. Luther received a lot of advice about the treatment of his stone and some of his friends sent him supplies of their favourite remedies. Thus the Protestant Duke Albrecht of Prussia sent him a supply of white amber which Luther used in a mixture made up with specially powdered fish bones (Brecht 3.232).

[82] WA Br 11.300=LW 50.312 (Luther to his wife, February 2nd 1546).

[83] WA TR 4.334 no.4479=LW 54.346 no.4479.

[84] Brecht 3.230.

[85] Brecht 3. Plate III is a photograph of these plaster casts now on display in the *Staatliche Lutherhalle* in Wittenberg.

[86] For details of the dispute see LW 50.281–283. Cp Brecht 3.369–370.

[87] WA Br 11.277=LW 50.294 (Luther to Melanchthon, February 1st 1546). The phrase *humor ventriculi* describes a sensation resembling the movement of fluid within the heart chambers and is appropriately translated as 'palpitations' in modern clinical terms. See LW 50.294 note 14.

[88] Köstlin 489.

[89] The horn of the traditional unicorn was in reality the spiral tusk of the narwhal or sea-unicorn (*Monodon monoceros*). This is an Arctic toothed whale characterised in the male by a long horn-like tusk which is the whale's left upper tooth and may project forwards for some nine feet from the upper jaw. Gratings from this tusk taken in wine were believed to be an effective antidote against poison and a certain cure for plague and malignant fevers. See Wootton AC. Chronicles of Pharmacy. London: Macmillan 1910, 1.29.

[90] Köstlin 490–491.

[91] Brecht 3.375–376. Cp Köstlin 489–491. It is said that more details are known of the death of Martin Luther than of any other event in history (Schwiebert 747). Fourteen eye-witnesses were present at his bedside when he died and afterwards they prepared a certified document which was printed and published a few months later. Also a number of those present published their own individual account of his death in the form of letters, sermons or reports. The most reliable

of these accounts was prepared by Luther's colleagues Justus Jonas and Michael Coelius and included also the details of his burial (See WA 54.487–496). For the bibliographical details of these accounts see Mackinnon 4.210 note 20 and Schwiebert 876 note 20.

[92] It was later alleged that the troops of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V had desecrated Luther's grave and scattered its contents when they sacked Wittenberg in March 1547. However, when the Castle Church was restored in 1892 the grave was opened and the coffin found to be well-preserved with its contents intact (Schwiebert 752 & 878 note 66).

[93] CR 11.726–734 (Melanchthon's eulogy at the funeral of Luther at Wittenberg on February 22nd 1546). Cp CR 6.80 (Melanchthon to Joachim Camerarius, March 21st 1546) and Brecht 3.378–380.

[94] Grisar 6.380. The report from which Grisar quotes was written by Johann Landau, the town apothecary of Eisleben who, as we have seen, was called immediately after Luther had died to give him an enema. This report is not regarded as very trustworthy for it does not always agree with the testimony of the eye-witnesses of his death (Schwiebert 876 note 20). The significance of his observation that the whole of the right side of Luther's body was dusky and discoloured (*infuscatus*) is not clear. The physician who thought that Luther had died from apoplexy appears to have regarded this discoloration as supporting his diagnosis. If this were so, it would mean that Luther had sustained a left-sided cerebrovascular accident which could also have affected his speech. On the other hand, such discoloration is not recognised today as a manifestation of apoplexy or hemiplegia. Also, the observation was made only a very short time after death when it was unlikely that postmortem discoloration would have begun to appear. It appears that we must leave the significance of the observation unexplained clinically.

[95] CR 6.58. (Melanchthon's announcement to Luther's students on February 19th of his death the previous day).

[96] WA Br 4.160 (Luther to Spalatin, January 13th 1527). Cp Brecht 2.205–207. The plant *Carduus benedictus* ('The blessed thistle') got its name because it was believed to possess extraordinary medicinal virtues in cases of plague, malignant fevers, poisoning and even cancer. This reputation was quite unjustified and extracts of the leaves or seeds of the plant eventually came to be used in pharmacy as a simple bitter. See Woodville W. Medical Botany. London: James Phillips, Printer 1790, 1.119–121.

[97] WA Br 4.222=LW 49.169 (Luther to Nicholas Hausmann, July 13th 1527) note 10. Cp Köstlin 303–304.

[98] WA TR 1.74 no.157=LW 54.23 no.157. The reference to urinoscopy should be noted.

[99] WA TR 2.119 no.1510. Cp Brecht 3.23.

[100] WA TR 4.8 no.3916=LW 54.294 no.3916.

[101] WA Br 2.298=LW 48.198 (Luther to Spalatin, April 14th 1521) note 2. Cp Köstlin 198.

[102] WA Br 11.291 (Luther to his wife, February 10th 1546) note 10.

[103] WA Br 10.374 (Dorothy, Countess of Mansfeld to Luther, August 26th 1543) Cp LW 50.305 note 14 and Brecht 3.231.

[104] WA Br 11.301=LW 50.314 (Luther to Melanchthon, February 14th 1546).

[105] This was also the diagnosis of the Chicago medical panel (See Panel 116).

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# THALES TO GALEN: A BRIEF JOURNEY THROUGH RATIONAL MEDICAL PHILOSOPHY IN ANCIENT GREECE

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## Part I: Pre-Hippocratic Medicine

### PRE-RATIONAL GREEK MEDICINE

Ancient Egyptian and Sumero-Akkadian medicine played an important part in the development of rational medicine in ancient Greece. Scholars are apt to dismiss the importance of these periods. Hippocratic medicine rejected superstition and supernatural causation, but the ancient Egyptian physicians regarded evil spirits and the anger of the gods as causes of disease. Cults and magico-ritualistic practices played an extended role in Egyptian medicine, but there was progress towards rationality; its surviving historical legacy is contained in a number of medical papyri (Table 1). From these, Sigerist found in ancient Egyptian medicine 'the beginning of medical science, a science... which endeavoured to explain the phenomena of life and death, rationally without having recourse to the gods', Sigerist also believed that, 'the Egyptians anticipated views and methods of the pre-Socratic philosophers in Greece'.[2] The Greeks owed much of their pharmacopoeia, and some of their gynaecological and surgical practices to the Egyptians, to whom they seldom gave credit.[3–5]

From this ancient and venerable past pre-rational Greek medical thought first became identifiable in the Homeric epics, the Iliad[6] and the Odyssey.[7] Although many of Homer's medical references are based on deistic supremacy and the use of magic, rational medicine is described. For example Odysseus, wounded in a boar hunt, is bandaged with great medical skill,[8] although in a previous description of a haemorrhaging arrow wound it was Apollo who applied treatment.[9] The identification of the healing art with divine influence was to generate the Greek pantheon of medical gods. Paeon appears as the first physician god in the Homeric epics,[10] but is later superseded by Apollo.[11,12] In turn Apollo's status becomes eclipsed by that of his son, Asclepius.[13] Asclepius' role in stopping the plague of Rome in 292 BC was described by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*.[14] There is little doubt that these deities originated from the Egyptian tutelary pantheon. In particular their origins may be identified within Imhotep, vizier, astronomer, and physician of the pharaoh Djoser (IIIrd Dynasty 2647–2628 BC), who was subsequently deified as the Egyptian god of medicine.[15,16] Of the Greek demi-gods, the seer Melampus is credited with the cure of the daughters of the King of Argos, who had gone mad.[17,18] As Melampus is associated with the beginnings of psychotherapy, so Chiron the centaur is credited with the discovery of the medicinal properties of herbs,[19] especially in the treatment of chronic ulcers; old ulcers that had become difficult to heal were termed *chironiac*.

These divine aspects of irrational medicine became identified with the medical school of Cos,[20] but its subsequent importance in the rise of rational medicine is

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