

THE EYE DISEASE OF FRANCIS OF ASSISI

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When **Proust's** well-known questionnaire was shown to **Axel Munthe**, the author of the "*History of San Michele*", asking him which of the personages in History he had admired the most, he replied without hesitation: **Francis of Assisi**. That opinion of the famous doctor and writer is shared by those who cannot but admire St. Francis' life, that source of reconciliation and fraternity in an epoch of fratricidal struggle in Italy and a model of self-abnegation and of sublime poetry. Francis of Assisi, through his influence in the society of his time, has been considered the truest representative of the history of the XIIIth century.

One evening, in 1205, on returning from an excursion on horseback in the countryside around **Assisi**, he saw a leper lying at the side of the road. Overcoming his repugnance, he gave all his money to the leper and placed a kiss of peace on the disfigured countenance of the poor wretch. It is not surprising, then, that his compassion led him on other occasions to approach without misgivings those afflicted with contagious diseases whom he encountered on his path, and among those diseases, trachoma must certainly have been present.

It is, indeed, Prof. **OVIO**'s ² opinion that **Francis of Assisi** suffered from trachoma, a disease which is known often to lead to blindness. In that affection, considerable pain may be caused by corneal complications, trichiasis, entropion and ulcers which can give rise to perforation of the cornea, as well as to other serious complications.

According to **OVIO**², in that period, corneal ulcers were treated by absurd and painful methods including incisions and cautery in the temporal region. Resections were practised in the vessels of the supraocular region below the ear and in other cephalic areas. Such resections were followed by intensive cauterisation by burning, called "*phlebotomia cum coctura*". Parmenio, Benvenuto, Ruggero, Petroncello and Coffone, all outstanding surgeons of the period, had a special predilection for such ridiculous therapies. On the least pretext, they considered it appropriate to keep such cauterised incisions open for a long time, by applications of grease, or elder or cabbage leaves.

Such were the tortures, according to various historians, to which the long-suffering Francis of Assisi seems to have been submitted. Strebel⁶ admitted the possibility of **Francis**' blindness having been due to an *iridocyclitis tuberculosa*, with secondary glaucoma and *cataracta accreta*. Nevertheless, in our opinion, the diagnosis of *cataracta calcarea* cannot be supported by any of the historical data to which we had access.

Iridocyclitis tuberculosa too, does not appear to have been a probable cause, because it is rarely bilateral, and in anyone suffering from *tuberculosis fibrosa*, as Francis of Assisi appears to have done, it is not often that it gives rise to total blindness, such as he experienced during the last months of his life. The so-called "*clinical antagonism*" is well-known, according to which ocular tuberculosis is slight and rare in the cases of patients whose lungs are seriously affected.

We believe that we must disregard *chronic glaucoma* as the cause of blindness. None of the known circumstances and symptoms of the eye disease of **Francis of Assisi** accord with those of glaucoma. What might be admitted is the existence of a *secondary glaucoma*, a complication that manifests itself in the terminal phases of *trachoma*. The perforation of the ulcerated cornea in the final phase of the disease may be accepted as having occurred at Siena, a few months before his death, when Francis of Assisi became completely blind, largely without suffering the unbearable pains of secondary glaucoma, which came to aggravate those which had previously been caused by the trachomatous condition.

As regards the disease of his eyes, therefore, we think that it should be considered as an insidious form, aggravated progressively until perforation of the corneas and complete blindness occurred.

Trachoma was not a rare disease in the region of Italy in which Francis lived. Here, appropriate means of hygiene were not readily available. The conditions of poverty and love of sacrifice proper to the personage that we are considering, very logically permit the hypothesis that he had contracted a relatively slight form of trachoma which was not to leave him until the end of his life in 1226, at the age of forty-five years.

It would, nevertheless, be less surprising to discover that, during his visit to Egypt, from whence he returned to Italy in 1220, he could have acquired a serious form of "*Egyptian ophthalmia*", as trachoma was also called. The disease was treated by unsuitable means that did not prevent a considerable impairment of the vision, pain, photophobia and persistent lacrimation. This increased lacrimation was interpreted by some, piously, as being due to motives of mystical exaltation, but, more rationally, it is attributable to entropion-trichiasis and probably to the occlusion of the excretory lacrimal ducts.

The physicians of Pope Honorius III tried unsuccessfully all their remedies on the "*poverello*". In an attempt to cure him, he was taken to Foligno, where according to some authors, he visited an "*oculist*" doctor, forgetting that the first to be called thus was Petrus Hispanus, later elevated to the papacy under the name of Paul, some years after the death of our patient.

The great Spanish writer, the Countess Emilia de Pardo-Bazán³ agrees with Professor Ovio² when mentioning an igneous cauterisation to which Francis was submitted and which supports the diagnosis of trachoma. According to her, when the doctor was preparing the cauterisation, probably to arrest the progression of the pannus and of the ulcers, it is related that a monk said to the founder of the Franciscan Order "*Father, pray to Christ that he treats you with much gentleness*". When the surgeon put the iron into the fire, Francis spoke to the fire as if to a friend:

"Fire, brother of mine, before all things, the Most Holy has created thee of extreme grace, powerful, magnificent and efficacious. Come to me in this hour, my hour, merciful and gentle. I pray to the Lord, who created thee, that thou restrainest thy ardour, so that I may support patiently that thou burnest me".

When he had finished speaking, he made the sign of the cross over the glowing iron and remained motionless while the burning instrument penetrated into his flesh and imprinted its mark from the ear to the eyebrow.

"*Brother doctor*", he said, "*if it has not burnt well, apply it once more*". The doctor, seeing in the debility of the flesh such spiritual strength, turned to him saying: "*I tell you, brother, that I have today seen wondrous things*".

At the end of his life, Francis was completely blind, as is evident from the accounts of his biographers (cf Schmucki⁵). Feeling his death to be near, he wished to be transported to the "*Porziunculla*". When his litter passed by a hill dominating the town of Assisi, he asked to be put facing his dear town,

although he was unable to see it; he then asked for his head and shoulders to be raised in order to direct a prayer toward his native town.

Shortly before his end, he sought to bless Brother Bernardo by placing his right hand on his head, but at that moment, it was Brother Egidio who was on his right. Not being able to see who it was because of his complete lack of vision, he touched him saying "*Hoc non est caput fratris Bernardi mei*".

It was precisely during his last days, overwhelmed by disease and blind, that he composed his "*Canto al Sol*", in the view of Renan, the most beautiful religious poetry that has ever been written, and which he had to dictate to an amanuensis. The "*Canto al Sol*" is considered the first poetic work in the then nascent Italian language.

Like many geniuses of poetry and of music, his misfortune did not destroy his spirit; on the contrary, it led him to elevate his work to the most sublime spheres of the Art.

Summary

St. Francis of Assisi became blind at the end of his life. The author discusses the cause of the ocular disease: either tuberculous iridocyclitis with secondary glaucoma and cataract, or trachoma. Most probably it was trachoma.

References:

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- ⁶STREBEL, J.: Diagnose des Augenleidens des hl. Franciscus von Assisi. Klin. Mbl. Augenheilk. 99, 252–260 (1937)

Casanovas, J. — La enfermedad ocular de San Francisco de Asis

Resumen

San Francisco de Asis quedo ciego al final de su vida. El autor discute la causa de la enfermedad ocular: se trataría de una iridociclitis tuberculosa con glaucoma secundario y catarata o bien de un tracoma. Este último diagnóstico es el más probable.

Casanovas, J. — La maladie oculaire de St. François d'Assise

Resumé

St. François d'Assise est devenu aveugle à la fin de sa vie. L'auteur discute la cause de la maladie oculaire. Il s'agissait soit d'une iridocyclite tuberculeuse avec glaucome secondaire et cataracte, soit d'un trachome. C'est ce dernier diagnostic qui est le plus probable.

Casanovas, J. — Die Augenerkrankung des Hl. Franziskus von Assisi

Zusammenfassung

Der Heilige Franziskus von Assisi ist am Ende seines Lebens erblindet. Der Autor diskutiert die möglichen Ursachen seiner Krankheit: eine tuberkulöse Iridozyklitis mit Sekundärglaukom und Katarakt oder ein Trachom. Die letzte dieser Diagnosen ist wahrscheinlich die richtige.

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