

ILLUSTRATING THE SEMIOLOGY OF SEIZURES IN DEPICTIONS OF PATRON SAINTS OF EPILEPSY IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC, RUSSIAN ORTHODOX AND GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH OVER THE COURSE OF SEVEN CENTURIES

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INTRODUCTION

- Since the 15th century, Christian art has portrayed people who suffer from epilepsy as attributes in illustrations of Patron Saints of Epilepsy (PSE)
- Out of more than 40 named 'Epilepsy Saints', St. Valentine, St. Trifon and St. Pantelemeion were the most well known in the Catholic, Russian Orthodox and Greek Orthodox Churches, respectively

PURPOSE

- To interpret a collection of portrayals of PSE that was as comprehensive as possible in works of art from a modern epileptological perspective, especially regarding St. Valentine

METHODS

- The people who may have epilepsy depicted as attributes were analysed by age, gender, social status and possible seizure semiology
- The depictions of "epilepsy demons" were also assessed
- 370 illustrations of St. Valentine from Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Scotland, Slovakia, Switzerland and USA were systematically analysed
- 50 illustrations of St. Trifon and St. Pantelemeion from Russia and Greece were also analysed

RESULTS

- Irrespective of the age of the work of art, the 165 pictures of people possibly suffering from epilepsy portrayed more males than females from various levels of society
- Regarding seizure semiology, infantile spasms (Figure 1), atonic seizure (Figure 2), tonic seizure (Figures 3, 4 and 5), absences (Figure 6), psychogenic seizures (Figures 7-9) and postictal or non-definable states (Figure 10) were differentiated in a subjective assessment
- "Epilepsy demons" were depicted in all three Christian Churches as:
 - monkey (Figure 3)
 - crab (Figure 5)
 - pigs (Figures 10 and 11)
 - dragons (Figure 6)
 - devils (Figures 1, 2, 7, 8 and 11)
- People often had bandages on their heads (Figures 1, 3 and 5). Whether this is because they often fall down during a seizure or the head injury is the reason for their epilepsy is unclear



Figure 1: Bamberg, Unterleiterbach, Germany; ceiling painting, 1740; St. Valentine. Detail: child with possible infantile spasm; devils

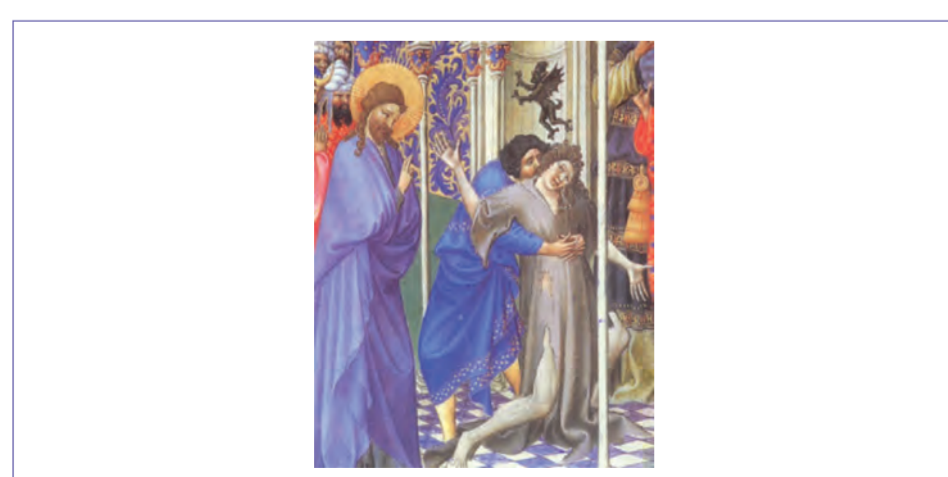


Figure 2: Bible of the Duc du Berry; Jesus Christ; woman who possibly has epilepsy (drop attack? possibly psychogenic seizure?); held by another person; devil



Figure 3: Washington, USA; National Gallery of Art; St. Gilles. Detail: man with possible tonic-clonic seizure; monkey



Figure 4: Eppertshausen, Germany; 18th century; St. Valentine; adult with a possible tonic seizure



Figure 5: USA, National Gallery of Art; John Freidman; St. Valentine (crab out of the mouth)

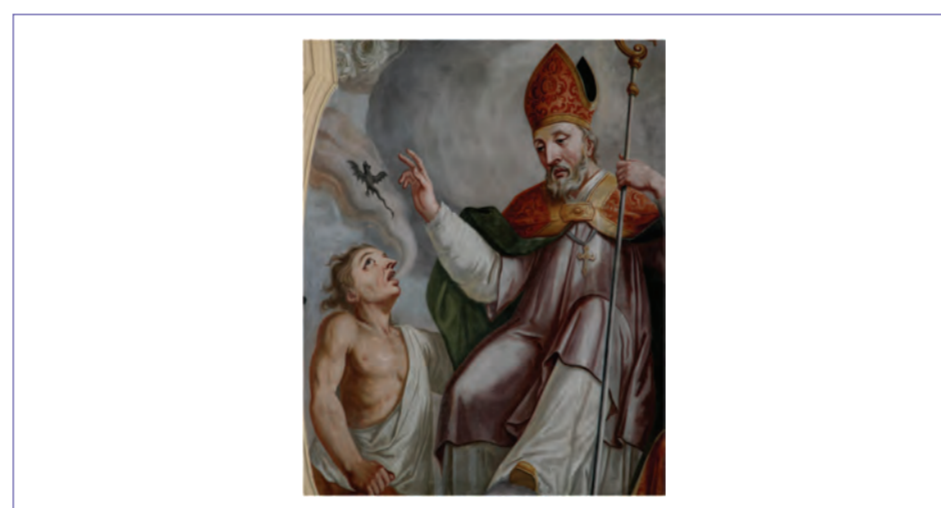


Figure 6: Aschau, Germany; 18th century; St. Valentine; person with a possible absence (see the position of the eyes); dragon



Figure 7: Russia, St. Matrena; perhaps non-epileptic/psychogenic seizure; devil with wings



Figure 8: South Tyrol; fresco at a stairway in a restaurant; St. Valentine; woman with a possible non-epileptic/psychogenic seizure; devil



Figure 9: Trier, Oberwesel; 15th century; black rooster as sacrifice (it turned white when the ill person recuperated); St. Valentine; non-epileptic/psychogenic seizure (eyes closed)



Figure 10: Rufach, Elsass; St. Valentine; postictal/non-definable state; woman bringing a rooster as sacrifice; pig



Figure 11: Greece, Monastery Philanthropinon, Ioannina; 1540; Jesus Christ; "Healing of the demoniac of Gadara"; devils; pigs as surrogates

CONCLUSIONS

- We found similar impressive depictions of the "epilepsy demon" exorcised by the different saints in all three Christian Churches.
- Despite the fact that from a modern perspective, the 15th to 20th centuries in Europe seemed to be dominated by a rather superstitious attitude towards epilepsy, the detail of the semiology is strikingly accurate in many of the historic portrayals, and a well-founded knowledge of epilepsy is apparent.

Reference

1. Kluger G, Kudernatsch V. St. Valentine - patron saint of epilepsy: illustrating the semiology of seizures over the course of six centuries. *Epilepsy Behav* 2009;14:219-225.

Acknowledgements

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