

# Public health problems in the medieval statutes of Vinodol, Vrbnik and Senj (West Croatia)

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## ABSTRACT

**Background** The ancient Croatian statutes were written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The aim of this study was to seek out regulations concerning public health in the oldest medieval statutes of the towns on the northern Adriatic coast (W Croatia).

**Methods** All translated text editions of the statutes of the three towns were examined. The statutes were written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

**Results** The research of the materials revealed the examples of direct and indirect ways of protecting public health. Regulations on keeping towns clean and the rules for dealing with animal products were found. Additionally, witches and fortunetellers were found to be treated as a negative force and defined as the embodiment of evil: they were thus considered to be heavily connected to illness and misfortune.

**Conclusion** The aforementioned rules are not only important from the historical point of view, but also as a reflection of people's awareness of public health as a condition of survival and the progress of the community as a whole. Furthermore, since those statutes were created from people's customs that were to eventually become a law, they show substantial progress in medical history for that particular part of Croatia.

**Keywords** Croatia, history of medicine, medieval history, public health, statutes and laws

The oldest regulations concerning public health in western Croatia are preserved within the statutes of Vinodol, Vrbnik and Senj, written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.<sup>1,2</sup> We examined translated text editions of these three statutes and analysed regulations concerning public health.

The statutes of Vinodol and Vrbnik were written in Croatian language using the Glagolitic script, mostly based on the traditional Croatian customary law, which had not been written down previously. The Senj statute has successfully incorporated elements of local customs, although it was written in Latin language in the Romance legal spirit by jurists educated in Italy.<sup>3–6</sup>

The Senj statute contains an order to keep the streets clean, bans throwing dirty water on the people in the street and forbids butchers keeping animal skins outside the shop. This reflects a clear wish to keep the public places clean and out of dirt. In the Vrbnik statute, only the general duty of keeping cleanness is stated.

The only rule concerning food and grocery quality has been found in the Vrbnik statute: a strict rule with financial

penalty for those who trade with wine and meat of poor quality. This is an obvious example of general concern about health that is also preserved by consuming healthy and fresh food. Furthermore, Vrbnik statute also encourages killing handicapped animals. This can be understood as a wish to stop fertilization and propagation of those creatures whose offspring would not be a reliable working force in the woods and fields and a good source of meat.

The Vinodol statute is the only one mentioning medical treatment. If a person was injured by someone, the offender had to pay for medical treatment besides the usual financial penalty. In addition, the Vinodol statute punishes the crippling

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of persons. These rules protect the physical health of individuals and, where possible, secure the appropriate treatment. The community has interest in avoiding unnecessary disabling of persons and diminishing the town's working potential.

Finally, witches and fortunetellers are particularly denounced in the statutes, recognized as the embodiment of the evil and the incomprehensible forces of the dark, related to illness and misfortune. The financial penalties were high, and if the offender was not able to pay, he/she was burned at stake.

Our research reveals specific orders on maintaining the minimum hygienic level in public life of medieval towns of West Croatia. These findings enable us a different perspective on medieval way of everyday life. Since medieval statutes were brief and concise, they had been regulating only the most important aspects of community life of those times. Therefore, the number of articles covering public health issues indicates somewhat unexpected awareness of medieval community about public health problems.

Without entering the problem of harshness of particular regulations (reflecting general medieval attitudes), modern

medicine can justify the majority of those public health precepts revealing a significant and gradual development of awareness about the necessity of preserving public health as a pre-condition of survival and progress.

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