



Introduction

The idea behind this book was to make known a specific aspect of the history and culture of the city, filtered through our experience as teachers and researchers in the Faculty of Medical Surgery.

It goes without saying that the most important monuments and museums of Florence and the surrounding area are known and admired by art lovers, academics and a multitude of other people throughout the world. Nevertheless, there are aspects of the Florentine cultural tradition which are not so well-known, but which have made an extremely significant contribution to the history and role of the city within the context of mediaeval and Renaissance civilisation (figg. pp. 8-9).

The book is designed to trace the history of health care in Florence, an aspect of the life of the city which is not as well-known as the fame of certain monuments and institutions – such as the Hospitals of Santa Maria degli Innocenti, Santa Maria Nuova and San Giovanni di Dio – might lead us to believe.

Structures offering shelter and assistance developed with the spread of Christianity, and in particular with the growth of Benedictine monasticism, which fostered a true cult of hospitality, combined with care for the sick.

The Tuscan word «spedale» derives from the Latin *hospitalis* – hospitable and *hospitale* – inn or hostel, and indicates the concept of providing shelter for travellers and pilgrims tired from their journeys.

The first recorded places of shelter, simple refuges from the inclemency of the weather, providing refreshment for the poor and repose for travellers, were set up in the abbeys (Spedale della Badia Fiorentina, San Miniato al Ponte, San Paolo di Pinti) and the parish churches. After this, independent structures were built, in the city itself (San Giovanni Evangelista) and in the immediate vicinity of the city gates, along what are now Via Romana and Via San Gallo, in the roads leading to the city centre and along the Via Francigena (the Spedali of Santa Maria della Croce al Tempio, San Niccolò a Varlungo, Sant'Antonio in Lastra a Signa, San Giuliano a Montebuoni, San Miniato, the del Ceppo in Pistoia, the Misericordia e Dolce in Prato), catering for travellers and pilgrims on their way to Rome, often to attend the Jubilee celebrations.

These *spedali*, as an expression of the natural disposition of the Florentine people to take care of the poor and the sick, and of travellers and pilgrims, represented a network of assistance which was for the most part spontaneous, but also public. They were set up through the gener-



Andrea di Bonaiuto (c.1343- c.1377). Group of pilgrims: detail of the fresco *The Church Militant and Triumphant*, in the Spanish Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



Architrave showing the symbol of the Spedale di San Sebastiano de' Bini, in Via Romana.

osity of individual citizens, and by religious institutions, Compagnie and Guilds. Moreover, along with the foundation of the structures designed to provide aid to the poor and needy, there also arose the Congregazioni, which we can consider in a contemporary light as somehow equivalent to associations of doctors and nurses.

At a later date, the basic care was supplemented by study of the specific needs of the patients. The Florentines identified both the material and spiritual requirements, and observed the different states of disease as well as their varied nature and origin. Diversified and more appropriate forms of care were studied and applied, taking into consideration the different needs and pathologies of the patients. Special hospitals for lepers were established outside the city walls (San Sebastiano degli Ammorbati, San Jacopo a San Eusebio) and isolated areas for those suffering from what we would now call infectious diseases. The mentally ill were no longer imprisoned, but housed in special premises (San Dorothea and later San Salvi). Particular care was devoted to abandoned infants (Santa Maria della Scala and Santa Maria degli Innocenti), to single mothers (Ospizio di Orbatello) and to orphans (Spedale della Compagnia di Santa Maria del Bigallo).

The Florentine tradition combined care with aesthetics and functionality, and numerous hospitals were built. Some of these were modest (Spedale del Piccione, Santa Lucia de' Magnoli), others more elaborate, such as the Spedale di San Jacopo e San Filippo, also known as del Porcellana, frescoed by Cimabue but no longer in existence. In some cases famous architects were involved; Brunelleschi was commissioned to design the Spedale di Santa Maria degli Innocenti and Buontalenti to enlarge the Spedale di Santa Maria Nuova as a result of growing demand.

We should also like to draw attention to the fact that, even in a less well-known sphere, Florence offers an exceptional example of the integration of values of humane charity and care with those of art, science and civic culture.

What the authors of this book want to offer, to the visitor moving from one famous Florentine museum to the next, is a sort of cultural guide to help him or her to discover, within the city and the surrounding district, monuments which are of minor importance, but fascinatingly evocative of the different expressions of a past which lives on in the present. It is an itinerary which we are convinced will also be of interest to the present-day citizens of Florence, tracing the history of care inte-




grated with the artistic history of the city and the surrounding area, a history which we now experience as an acquired right, possibly without considering that it is the synthesis of numerous events which took place a long time ago.

We feel it is important to emphasise the fact that this publication is designed as a guide: that is, as an initial stimulus to further research, intended to reawaken the curiosity of discovering and expanding a page of history, in some respects minor, but which, like all Florentine histories, conceals a wealth of curious and touching anecdotes of everyday life, which are both entertaining and have something to teach us.

The history of medical and nursing care in general is mapped out, alongside that of the various specific hospitals. In Florence, the latter comprise both very important monuments (the Spedali of Santa Maria Nuova and Santa Maria degli Innocenti) and minor institutions (such as that of San Tommaso d'Aquino and the Ospizio of Orbatello), hospitals which over time have come to be used for different purposes, rendering them anonymous (Spedale di Bonifacio), and monuments which are now best known for their artistic and aesthetic value (Spedale di San Matteo, San Paolo dei Convalescenti) the true significance of which at the time of their construction being to some extent neglected.

The book also attempts to describe the natural evolution of Florentine medical and nursing care over the centuries, including the foundation of the «Studium Generale» in Florence, set up at the express desire of the Signoria and the Prince, subsequently transferred to Pisa «because the students generate confusion». Despite this, the lay hospital of Santa Maria Nuova was, from its very foundation, considered in the vanguard of hospital care and medical progress. Numerous other hospitals, both in Italy and abroad, took their inspiration from this example, and many famous experts and physicians practised within it.

In more recent times the School of Obstetrics was set up, and in 1924, following the inauguration of the University of Florence, the Faculty of Medical Surgery. In relation to nursing care, which can instead be traced back at least as far as Monna Tessa and the foundation of the Spedale of Santa Maria Nuova, this became institutionalised with the opening of the Professional Nursing School in 1930-32, which had its premises in Villa Pepi. In 1995 the University Diploma course in nursing was set up, now transformed into a Degree course. Such institutions can be seen as the adaptation of a millennial tradition to the times in which we live.



The long history of medical and nursing care, with its colourful events and personages, characterised by the evolution of medical science and by the history of the institutions assigned to the development of technical and scientific progress, has also become a crucial cultural element. In the receptive and sensitive environment of Florence, this has materialised in the setting up of the Centro di Documentazione per la Storia dell'Assistenza e della Sanità Fiorentina.

The Centre, founded through the contribution of the major civic institutions, has its premises in the former hospital of San Giovanni di Dio; it comprises a bibliographical consultation centre for subjects related to the history of medicine and health, both in Florence and in Tuscany in general.

I should like to conclude by expressing the desire that medical science and nursing care may continue to evolve and develop in Florence in step with the times, in the enriching knowledge and awareness of the quality and wealth of its tradition.

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