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The King’s Evil: scrofula, physicians and the Royal Touch

J. Tainmont
Winston Churchill Avenue 172, P.O. Box 9, 1180 Brussels, Belgium

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Abstract. The King’s Evil: scrofula, physicians and the Royal Touch. The King’s evil, or scrofula, were the terms used in the past to designate what we now call tuberculous adenitis of the neck. Royalty, including the kings of France, possessed the gift of curing this malady by “Royal Touch”. What was the attitude of the physicians towards this miraculous power? There was at least official collusion between the physician and the magical powers of the sovereign. Both sides were well advised to show consideration for one another (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Etching by Pierre Fierens from the work by André du Laurens A. Laurentis de strumis earum causis et curae (Paris, 1609). Henri IV is shown touching the scrofula. The king, his first physician and the kneeling patients are surrounded by a veritable small army.
An overview of the French monarchy

The French monarchy consisted of a succession of houses, namely the Merovingians, the Carolingians, the Capetians, the Valois and the Bourbons in that order.

The Merovingians. Clovis, who died in 511, was the grandson of Mérovée, the eponymous sovereign of the first dynasty of the kings of France: the Merovingians. Gregory of Tours is the source of what we know about him.

The Carolingians. In 751, Pippin the Short, the Mayor of the Palace of the last Merovingian King Childeric III, deposed the king and founded the Carolingian dynasty.

The Capetians. In 987, Hugues Capet succeeded the last Carolingian, founding the Capetian dynasty.

Robert II the Pious (~972-1031) was a Capetian, as were Louis IX or St Louis (1214-1270) and Philip IV the Fair (1268-1314).

The Valois. In 1328, the last Capetian died without any male descendants, heralding the emergence of the dynasty of the Valois, a collateral branch of the Capetians.

The Valois brought us Louis XI (1423-1483), Francis I, Henry II, Francis II, Charles IX and Henry III.

The Bourbons. In 1529, Henry III was murdered without leaving any children. The succession passed to the Bourbons.

The Bourbons included Henry IV (1553-1610), the husband of Marie de Médicis and father of Louis XIII (1601-1643); Louis XIV (1638-1715); Louis XV (1710-1774) Louis XVI (1754-1793), Louis XVIII (1755-1824) and Charles X (1757-1836). The latter, the last of the Bourbons, was consecrated in Reims in 1825.

The sacred vial (Figure 2)

Everything started with a miracle that tradition situates at the time of the baptism of Clovis in Reims. A dove came out of nowhere, bringing a vial containing an oil of unknown origin. Some of the contents of the vial were used to anoint the recently baptised Clovis, making him immediately the anointed of the Lord, literally a “Christ”. The vial was piously preserved and tradition has it that it was used to anoint the successors of Clovis (whose name was changed to Louis). On 7 October 1793, citizen Rühl thought that it would be useful and patriotic to shatter that “blasted bauble of idiots and that dangerous instrument” at the foot of the statue of Louis XV in order to bring to an end “everything that kept alive the fanaticism of the people for their oppressors, by making them believe that heaven had chosen mortals more fortunate than them to put them in irons”.

Today, the shards are a part of the treasure of the cathedral of Reims.

What must we make of this miraculous vial? The first person to mention it was Hincmar, the Archbishop of Reims in his Vie de Saint Remi. This was in the 9th century, in other words about three centuries after the alleged events. The Archbishop may have drawn on a representation of Christ’s baptism, like the one shown in the church of Saint Remy from the seventh century onwards, with a dove holding in its beak a vial of holy oil above the figure. It is also possible that the idea of “reconstituting the adventure” came to the prelate in 852, when Hincmar discovered a vial (a perfume bottle) during the opening of St Remy’s tomb in the
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For about a thousand years, the French monarchy accorded itself a divine right: that of being able to cure disease, and in particular scrofula. During his consecration, the king was anointed with an oil that is considered to be divine in origin. This was a part of the ceremony for the first time during the coronation of Pippin the Short in 751, with the oil being used to anoint the king for the last time during the coronation of Charles X in 1830. However, the dates remain a matter of dispute since some authors see the tradition as originating at the time of Clovis’ baptism by St Remy in the fifth century. Gregory of Tours claims that Gontran was the first Frankish healer king in the sixth century, at the time of the Merovingians. Others wait patiently for Robert the Pious (970-1031), a king of France who touched lepers. Finally, Jacques Le Goff, a leading mediaeval specialist, asserts that there is no credible testimony relating to the specific Royal Touch for scrofula before Louis IX, in other words St Louis. At the other end of the chain of tradition, we must not forget that Napoleon touched plague victims during his invasion of Egypt as part of political propaganda continuing the royal tradition.

In spite of the consistency of the rite, some variations have been noticed during the course of history. Louis IX touched scrofula victims almost every day; Louis XI did so once a week and it is thought that he was the person who began to distribute alms on that occasion. Under Philip the Fair, the physicians granted scientific approval to the operation, but the church was reticent. The rite also became a weapon against the Pope and, on his death bed, the king described the details of the ceremony to his son. Under Francis I, it was an enormous success: at least 1326 scrofula victims attended one of the sessions during his reign. Louis XIV established the record at 2500 patients in one day. A story about one ceremony involving him has come down to us: the background was the long vaulted rooms of the ground floor of the Louvre, which is now the location for the Antiquities section of the museum. Curiously, this ceremony did not involve any religious component; on the contrary, it had a military character. It was accompanied by the noisy rolling of the drums of the Swiss Guard below the bare and sonorous vaulted ceiling of the long galleries.

However, the Protestants discredited the “miracle” and, in the 18th century, the philosopher Montesquieu referred to a “magician king”. He was probably referring to Louis XV. In October 1723, this king, who had been placed symbolically on the throne at the age of five, was consecrated in Reims at the age of thirteen. At that point, he was required to accomplish the rite, even if there were some hesitancy about subjecting him to the ceremony because of his age.

Charles X probably did not believe in his miraculous gift and he was afraid of the mockery of the Liberal party. On 31 May 1825, on the day of his coronation, he hesitated before deciding to touch the scrofula victims. Finally, he accomplished the rite and left, making a comment that acquires its full dramatic impact if one bears in mind the antiquity of the gesture and its supreme power in the past: “Dear friends, I have brought you some words of consolation: I hope sincerely that you will be cured”. The surgeon Dupuytren, who accompanied the king, counted the patients: of a total of 121 patients, only five,
whose names were recorded for posterity, were cured. There was a wait of five months to make sure that there were no recurrences. Another sign of the times was that the ceremony took place in the chapel of the St Marcoul hospice. It was almost a hospital ...

∞ The Royal Touch under Henry IV (Figures 6,7)

We shall take the time of Henri IV as representative for the ceremony of the Royal Touch and the behaviour of the medical world, drawing on the treatise by André du Laurens, Henri IV’s physician, as a basis for our description.

André du Laurens was a doctor in medicine who graduated from Montpellier University. He was introduced to the court of Henri IV less because of his personal merits than because of a recommendation from one of his female patients who frequented the court of Marie de Médicis, the king’s wife. In 1609, he wrote a work about scrofula; it was written in Latin and its title alone evokes immediately the importance of the royal gesture: *De mirabilis stru-mas sanandi vi solis Galliae Regibus divinitus concessa liber unus, et de strumarum natura, differentiis, causis curatione quae fit arte medica liber alter*. Some years later, it was translated into French as: “Book I. About the admirable power of curing scrofula solely by touch, which has been granted by God only to the very Christian Kings of France. Book II. The nature of scrofula, differences, causes, symptoms and cure made by the art and industry of Medicine”. This is a court physician, as proven by the arguments used to justify the divine nature of the Royal Touch, and the amount of text devoted to the same topic. His *Discours des écrouelles* contains 53 pages devoted to argumentation about the Royal Touch and 32 pages on the medical side.

✓ The ceremony

In the first chapter, du Laurens gives us a rather precise description of the ceremony itself as conducted under Henri IV. The text paints a fascinating historical picture, if only for a film-maker!

‘The very Christian King is accustomed to touch the diseased persons on the occasion of the four solemn feasts of the year, in other words at Easter, Whit Sunday, All Saints’ Day and Christmas... large numbers of people rush in from all directions, whether they be Frenchmen or foreigners, to recover their health... There are numerous Spaniards, Flemish, Germans, Italians, inhabitants of Lorraine and, for reasons of convenience, Frenchmen...The day before the ceremony is celebrated, the King begins by attending Vespers and sometimes he attends prayers before dawn. The next day, after confessing religiously and with humility, he attends mass and he arms himself with the Celestial and Eucharistic bread... This being done, he enters a large, spacious place that has been prepared to receive the diseased people conveniently. Indeed, it happened frequently that we counted more than 1500 people... Now, in order to ensure that the required
decorum on that occasion is more magnificently resplendent and that the alms destined for the people suffering from the scrofula should not be misappropriated by beggars pretending to suffer from scrofula, all the diseased persons, as numerous as they are, are examined according to the principles of the art by the First Physician and by the other physicians and Surgeons of the King. And after their Report, any not suffering from scrofula are dismissed to the almshouses destined for the people.

The First Physician stands cross, he approaches the diseased and, after making the sign of the Cross at the same time and he performs the same gesture on all the others in succession. He dismisses the diseased people as soon as they have been touched and received their alms... The extremely sharp pains suffered by some people diminish or disappear immediately. In others, the ulcers dry out, and the tumours of others become smaller, so that in a few days (it is a marvellous thing to say), more than 500 patients in 1000 are entirely cured.”

✓ The argument

The argument is also interesting because it provides us with an insight into how physicians thought at the end of the 16th century in France. The titles of the next nine chapters alone are evocative:

1. When did the Very Christian Kings of France begin to cure scrofula [a very long time ago: the time of Clovis]
2. To know whether it is only by a royal privilege that the Very Christian King of France cures the King’s Evil; where the cures of some diseases made by Vespasian, Hadrian, Pyrrhus and some other kings commonly considered as miracles are examined and refuted [The royal dignity is necessary but not sufficient.]
3. To know, considering the fact that the faculty of curing and of charms is said to be innate and natural to some families and individuals, whether the same is true for the gift of curing scrofula conceded to the Very Christian Kings of France by a privilege proper to their race and common to all the descendants thereof or by a property innate and born with them [The answer is that the gift of curing is not innate.]
4. To know whether the touch of the Very Christian King, for he touches the patients, is useful in curing scrofula; dealing at length and honestly with phenomena acting by touch and with the notes that are hung on some parts of the body [Without denying that saints, for instance, can also cure diseased persons, this is in any case the result of a supernatural — i.e. divine — power: touching alone is not sufficient.]
5. To know if the words pronounced by the Very Christian King have in themselves any power to cure; with a discussion about the power of the words [The words in themselves do not have the power to cure; there must also be a gift that surpasses nature, in other words a divine gift.]
6. To know whether the imagination may have a role to play in this admirable cure of scrofula; with a lengthy discussion about the power of imagination [The answer is No.]
7. To know whether Spaniards and foreigners suffering from scrofula recover their health not because they are touched by the Very Christian King, but because they have a change of air, country and way of life; a refutation of some slanderers [The answer is No.]
8. That the admirable power of curing scrofula granted to the Kings of France comes from any superior cause which is
above Nature and does not come from the Devil; with a discussion of several matters relating to demons and a demonstration of the different ways they can cause diseases and cure them. [The King does not cure by trickery but by a divine gift that is essentially good.]

9. That the admirable virtue of curing scrofula granted to the Kings of France alone has been granted freely by the grace of God [This faculty shines out and is particularly resplendent in the case of Henry IV, as demonstrated by the large number of cured patients.]

✓ The medical and therapeutic discussion of scrofula

The author first notes that “the glands” are among the weakest parts of the body and the scrofula are frequently located here. They are tenacious because irons or medicines do not provide a definitive solution. The abscesses reappear and proliferate, even in the scars. Drinking contaminated or spoilt water, particularly by the Spaniards, leads to scrofula and that is why they come to France to be touched by the King.

The scrofula consists of thick and viscous phlegm that is produced in the brain and that is expelled only with difficulty because of the physical nature of this type of phlegm. This phlegm can also be found in the blood.

Scrofulas can be cured only with great difficulty because they contain a very viscous humour and are surrounded by a thick covering.

1. General Therapy

First the author considers living conditions. It is necessary to breath pure air in the direction of the sunrise. If this is not possible, the air must be corrected with perfumes that can dry the anterior ventricles of the brain with their fragrance. Sometimes, the patient should fast because hunger can have a salutary effect on people with humid flesh who are extremely phlegmatic. Some prescriptions also relate to bread, meat, fish, and fruit. Patients should drink little water, and more wine, decoctions of China tea, and of the mastic tree. They should never sleep after a meal but engage in exercise. The excrement of the brain should be removed through the throat using a feather soaked in oxymel (a mixture of water, vinegar and honey), and also through the ears and the nose by washing them.

It is also necessary to provoke sneezing. The brain should be fortified by vigorous massaging of the head every morning. The phlegm can also be expelled using emetics or, preferably, purgatives (aloes, saleparrilla [from the Spanish zarza, “bramble” and parrilla, “vine”: a sort of liliaceous plant, of which the roots are used]), as well as sudorifics, diuretics or bleeding.

2. Local Therapy

The approach varies depending on the type of scrofula. In the early stages, when they are surrounded by a thin membrane, they are rubbed with the hand so that they overheat and turn soft; next they are beaten with a wooden platter until they disappear or they are compressed with a strip of lead. Large scrofulas are treated by applying resolvents or astringents. If the scrofula has started suppurating, opening should be completed by lancing or cauterising. Hard and sclerotic forms require a powder of pumice stone mixed with vinegar in the hope of dissolving the scrofula.
The surgical method proper consists of removal, during which care should be taken to preserve the major carotid or jugular vessels, which have to be tied off with a thread of silk or the string of a lute; if the bleeding is more diffuse, some caustics should be applied, such as vitriol or burnt cotton plugs together with a powder containing gypsum or aluminium in particular. To prevent recurrence, it is necessary to ensure that the scrofula has been completely removed and, in case of doubt, a corrosive medicine must be left in situ to “consume gradually what remained”.

The scrofula can also be removed by cutting into it with a branding iron and inserting corrosive medicines (oil of vitriol, quicklime with soap), or if there is a thin pedicle, by gradually tying it off, day by day, with a horse hair or with the bristle of a pig until the scrofula comes off of its own accord. Some physicians soaked these threads in a watery solution of arsenic to heighten their corrosive properties.

**Conclusion**

At the time, no scientific assertions could be made about the curative value of the Royal Touch. Follow-up was certainly not prolonged (a period of many months would have been necessary). Today, we know that spontaneous cures could occur and medical certificates to oblige a patient have always existed... In addition, the Royal Touch did not preclude medical care and there was therefore a genuine collusion between physicians and the magical powers of the King, even though the physician’s hand did not usually know what the King’s hand was doing. One physician stated, in a report about a cure after the Royal Touch that “only the usual treatment was used for the cure”, implying that medical treatment had been given in addition to the sovereign’s intervention...

Another sign of collusion was that the physicians attended the ceremony: they selected the authentic patients, they dismissed the beggars and the fakers, they held the patients’ heads as the King touched them, they ensured some follow-up, albeit limited, after the King’s intervention, and they ensured that the king disinfected his hands after the ceremony:

“In the meantime, the first butler or the butler of the day holds a towel soaked with wine and water to be given to the king for washing his hand after so many dirty contacts. After which the King goes to dinner and generally dines poorly because he is disgusted by the smell and the view of these wounds and these stinking glands. But Christian charity conquers all.” (Theodore Godefroy: Le Cérémonial François ou description des cérémonies, rangs et séances observés en France en divers Actes et Assemblées solennelles, Cramoisy, Paris, 1659).

Finally, André du Laurens’ treatise, by bringing together in the same work the justification for, and the description of, the Royal Touch, as well as a detailed description of medical and surgical treatment, provides us with convincing proof of this collusion, at least at the official level. In an equally cautious approach, Giovanni de Vigo advised the Royal Touch in the difficult cases where medicine was powerless. A more sincere physician, Paré, came under suspicion for a while as a Huguenot, and after failing to devote a single word to the Royal Touch in his work devoted to “tumours in general”. Although this did not conform to the official doctrine, it was undoubtedly what physicians thought and said privately.

However, for the sincere believers of the age at least, the psychological impact of the Royal Touch must certainly have had a clear effect upon their feeling of well-being. Which is a start. These days, in hospitals, psychologists are at work also and who better than the victims of AIDS can appreciate Princess Diana coming to shake their hands not so very long ago?

**General References**