Mos Historicus: A Critical Review of European History
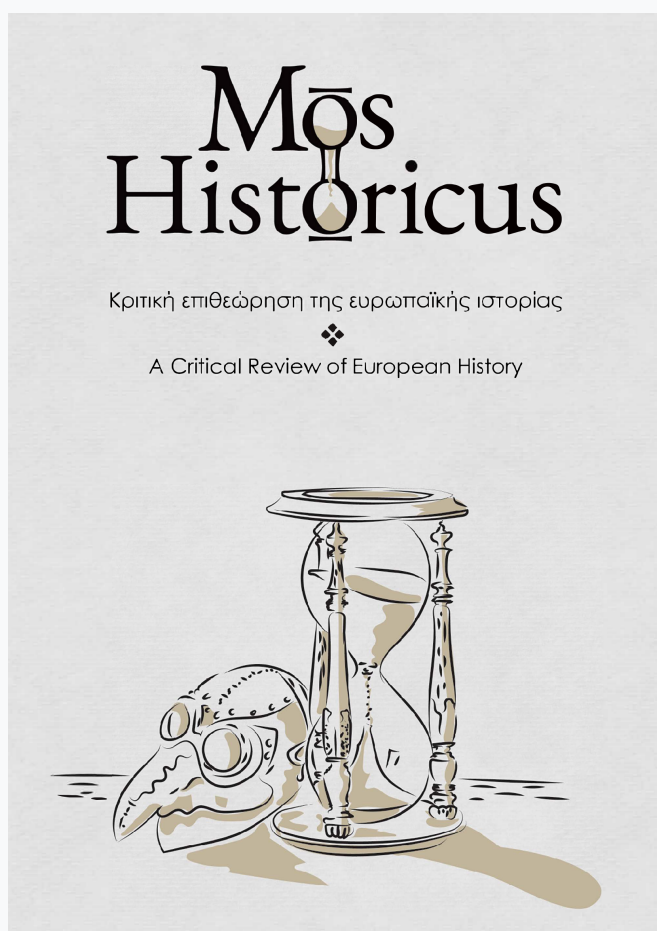
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Mos Historicus: An Introduction

Manos Chatziathanasiou, Maria Konstantinidou, Athena Spanidou

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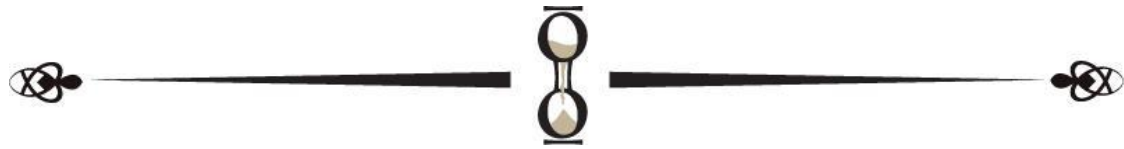
The third decade of the 21st century, which coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, was discouraging for the development of further academic initiatives that were already conceptualized by a group of postgraduate and doctoral students of European History at the University of Athens. However, despite these unfortunate circumstances, the intention to publish an academic journal of European History persisted due to the long-terming lack of similar projects within the Greek academic community. *Mos Historicus: A Critical Review of European History* is the outcome of this initiative, and it aims to foster the work of European History researchers and to affirm the NKUA's willingness for academic extroversion.

The name, *Mos Historicus*, thoroughly expresses both the scientific identity of the journal and its European focus, inspired by terms such as *mos maiorum*, *mos gallicus*, *mos italicus*. Taking into account these traditional concepts of approaching legal documents, which European linguists and scholars of the Middle-Ages used in order to rationalize the common law, we seek to promote the *ethos (mos) of history* based on the critical evaluation of the past and of European historiography.

The consequences of COVID-19 and the lived experience of the corresponding general health crisis led to the subject selection of the first issue that deals with matters of health and disease throughout history. Terms such as crisis, famine, pandemics, and plagues have persisted in the contemporary medical historiography, defined by their contemporary socio-cultural context. From the Hippocratic scientific notion of crisis to the general crisis as the turning point in the 17th century Europe in turmoil, from the Homeric plague in Achaean military camps to the plague-ridden urban communities of Jack de Vitry during the Middle-Ages, from the sick and feverish England of Thomas Carlyle during the first half of the 19th century to the Spanish Influenza pandemic at the start of the 20th century, the continuous existence of epidemics during the evolution of

human societies is capable of bringing forth great demographic, political, social, and economic changes[1].

Moreover, aiming at something more than the analysis of catastrophic pandemics that hit Europe and their consequences with the aforementioned indicative results, the term "crisis" was chosen as the topic of our first issue. Its potential as an analytical tool has been a subject for the scholarly community on numerous occasions, as it is presented critically by J. B. Shank in his article "Crisis: A Useful Category of Post-Social Scientific Historical Analysis?"[2]. The present topic, with its multitude of perception, evident while analyzing societies in peril, demonstrates the social implications unraveled at the moment when the established morals, regarding sickness, the cure, the healer, the patient, as well as the way of managing and controlling the situation, are disputed. Additionally, the shift that resulted in a change in the way of writing the History of Medicine, following the historiographical crisis since the 1970s onwards, altered the way it was conceived transforming it from a history of micro-organisms and germ theory to a social history, according to which "the importance of medicine is that it has co-configured the concept of society"[3].

This shift was accompanied by the introduction of new methodologies and the utilization of multiple theoretical tools. As a result, new interdisciplinary studies were produced.[4] New terms, such as "medicalization," were used to highlight the pivotal impact of the scientific medicinal discourse in the social structure, as well as the cure and the treatment of the diseased, which gradually fell under the jurisdiction of physicians. Furthermore, the relationship between physician and patient was studied by historical researchers, as such a relationship was coloured by the parameters of each examined period. Similarly, terms such as "illness" and "cure," "physician" and

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[1] Jo N. Hays, "Historians and Epidemics: Simple Questions, Complex Answers", in Lester K. Little (edit.), *Plague and the End of Antiquity. The Pandemic of 541-750*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, pp. 33-56, 38.

[2] John B. Shank, "Crisis: A Useful Category of Post-Social Scientific Historical Analysis?", *The American Historical Review*, 113:4 (10/2008), p. 1090-1099.

[3] Sevasti Troumpeta (trnsl.), "Κοινωνική ιστορία της ιατρικής: θεωρητικές και προσεγγίσεις και προκλήσεις" in Leda Papastefanaki, Manolis Tzanakis and Sevasti Troumpeta (eds.), *Διερευνώντας τις κοινωνικές σχέσεις με όρους υγείας και ασθένειας. Η κοινωνική ιστορία της ιατρικής ως ερευνητικό πεδίο*, ΠΕΚ, 1st ed., December 2013, Rethymno, p. 17.

[4] For the historiography and the aforementioned issues see Allan M. Brandt, "Emerging Themes in the History of Medicine", *The Milbank Quarterly,* 69:2 (1991), p. 199-214; Mark Jackson, "Introduction", in Mark Jackson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Medicine,* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011, p. 23-44; Charles Rosenberg, *Explaining epidemics and other studies in the history of medicine*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, p. 293-318; Samuel Cohn, *Epidemics: Hate and Compassion from the Plague of Athens to AIDS*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018.

"patient" adopted nuanced definitions. In this context, the historians started to seek the reasons for the propagation of disease outside the narrow boundaries of their biological causality. These historiographical shifts can be observed in the articles of the first issue, as the writers tackle themes, corresponding to current historiographical questions, in relation to the cultural and social aspects of health crisis, through the examination of primary sources.

Vasilis Kitos, in his article, studies the contribution of a healing practice, known as the "King's Touch," in the validation of the authority of French and English monarchs, during the Late Middle Ages. The attribution of this thaumaturgical healing ability to the monarchs gave them sacrosanctity and veiled them with a shroud of mystery and religious reverence, while at the same time it ensured a metaphysical aura for their authority, in a world which was explained metaphysically. The author presents this process through an extensive study of chronicles, ecclesiastical writings, and state archives of both kingdoms, highlighting the institutionalization process of this religious practice and tracing the political gain beyond it, so as to critically assess its considerable significance and its contribution to the reinforcement of the monarchical and dynastic authority of the two kingdoms.

Maria Kavadia's article deals with the production of a new intellectual discourse developed as a consequence of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation in Early Modern Europe which, despite its theological background, constituted a large-scale scientific terminal point. The author explores the case of the humanist doctor Girolamo Mercuriale (1530-1606) of Forlì whose study takes place during the reconstruction process of the contemporary medical theories in Western Europe. Influenced by the policies effectuated after the Council of Trent, as well as the need to disengage from Galen's theory and its insufficient healing practices, it promoted a new scientific medical culture. In Mercuriale's work, the effort to incorporate the new moralistic concept regarding the corporal discipline in humanist thought is depicted by the writer. The aforementioned effort demonstrates the dominant medical discourse which formed both the "medicalization" of the body and its social representation.

Maritina Leontitsini's article about the "plague of melancholy" in Early Modern Europe, treats, through a case study, the way that melancholy was socially perceived as a contagious disease and the way that the already established treatments were

challenged. The cultural conceptions that deemed melancholy as an epidemic, which mainly struck young male aristocratic milieu, are clearly unraveled. Consequently, the resulting confusion the article displays, which derives from the unprecedented recommendation for the socialization of the afflicted with the opposite sex, instead of the previous typical suggestion for isolation. The newly-formed treatment with its expansion of the patient's social circle and the subsequent practice of their social skills, created the need for a moral code of behavior, oriented towards social delimitation and balance. The author, by scrutinizing the work of Stefano Guazzo *The Civil Conversation (La Civile Conversazione)* unveils a new perception of melancholy, dictating the structure of a new moral communicational code, capable of eliminating the "evils of the mind" and the pleasures of the flesh.

In his article, Panagiotis Georgakakis examines the content of newspapers, mainly of those printed in the Kingdom of France and the Low Countries, in the aftermath of the devastating plague pandemics in Western Europe during the 17th century. By citing selected news publications on public health as well as advertisements by French Huguenot physicians, the author highlights the contemporary medical knowledge surrounding the prevailing methods of disease prevention and containment. Furthermore, he traces the early efforts to establish a healthcare system, revealing the growing involvement of the medical community in the political agenda of state authorities. The writer's thorough inspection for the instrumentalization of the health crisis brings the deeper political aims, which exceed the ambition of physicians and pharmacists to demonstrate the value of their profession, on the surface, as they appear to elaborately serve the French Crown expansionist policy.

Stella Chatzopoulou, in her article, re-examines the well-known case of plague stricken Eyam, in 17th century England, as a case study of an epidemic, offering a new approach to an already rich historiographical discourse. The author aims mainly to deconstruct the predominant narratives that composed the heroic past of Eyam and its fight against the Plague, as well as to critically interpret its historical memory through which its past is recreated. By taking into account the recent historical studies, later accounts of the episode, as well as primary sources, such as diaries, parish and tax records, demographic data and letters, she approaches historical but also current issues, such as quarantine, individual and collective responsibility as methods of pandemic prevention and control. The author perceives the aforementioned issues as common

experiences of afflicted communities, permitting the construction of a common English past. The case of Eyam, though demythologized, continues to be exploited for touristic purposes.

Last but not least, Svitlana Hey's article discusses the role of a politically and governmentally controlled healthcare system in the prevention and the fight against diseases. More specifically, the article traces the organization process of a healthcare system in Ukraine under the German occupation during the Second World War (1941-1944), in order to explore the reasons for the health policies and biopolitical strategies followed by the Nazi regime. The author bases her research on a significant number of archival documents, such as contemporary magazines and newspapers that reveal the Nazi ideology on which the policies were based. This ideology cultivated the idea of an inferior Slavic race and led to the formation of a healthcare system that catered to the needs of the German army at the expense of the local population. As a result, the hospitals became understaffed, and the medicinal care was often insufficient. Above all, the article analyses how the already critical situation of the war sparked off a severe health crisis.

At this point, this brief introduction to the current issue is concluded so that the reader can proceed to a thorough reading of the articles and follow the historians' conversation on issues of health and disease. Each article follows a different approach to its subject using different methodological tools, based on a wide variety of primary sources, in order for the writers to situate themselves within the terrain of modern historiography challenges. Ergo, the researchers' analyses adhere to the purpose of *Mos Historicus*, which aims to ignite further discussion, and to enrich the discourse as well as the themes of European historiography through a fruitful dialogue among the academic community members.

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