

# Correspondence

## THE PESTILENCE CALLED 'SCAMACH'

SIR WILLIAM MACARTHUR writes :

Since my article on 'The identification of some pestilences recorded in the Irish Annals' appeared (above, vi. 169-88, Mar. 1949), I have been asked for my opinion on the nature of the *scamach*, as mentioned in the Annals of Ulster, at 785 A.D. : 'the pestilence which is called *scamach*'

Hennessy, who edited the relevant volume of the printed text of A.U., points out in a footnote that *scamach* in MS Clar. 49 is explained by 'scabes', but suggests that the word may be connected with *scaman* 'which in the "Lorica of Gildas" . . . appears to signify lungs'.\* Hennessy's successor in the editorship, however, seems to have reverted to the scabies idea, for in the index *scamach* is explained as a cutaneous disease.

The identification of *scamach* as scabies (presumably suggested by derivatives of the word *scamh* with the meaning 'peeling off') is quite unacceptable. The annalists were not writing medical tracts; they were recording great events, and only an extensive and fatal epidemic would be classed as a pestilence and qualify for mention in chronicles of general history. Neglected scabies might be a nuisance, but people do not die of it, nor in any circumstances could it constitute a pestilence. Moreover, in those days scabies need not have been neglected on any great scale, for the specific curative power of sulphur in this infection had been recognized centuries earlier. Scabies was then included in the comprehensive group of diseases assembled under the name 'leprosy', and old writers, like Pliny, in advocating sulphur as a cure for 'leprosy', no doubt had in mind the disease now called scabies, for in true leprosy sulphur is without effect.

Hennessy's suggestion that the word *scamach* might here have some connection with *scaman*, lungs, seems to me to be correct. It is strange, however, that he appears not to have known the word *scamach*, 'lung-disease', for after it fell out of use as applied to human beings (as I believe), it survived in the modern form *scamhach* as the term for infectious pleuro-pneumonia of cattle, an infection which broke out in many districts of Ireland during the great famine, destroying much stock, and adding to the miseries of that terrible time.

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\* In Donegal to-day the common term for 'pneumonia' is *aicid na scamhán*; *scamhach*, for pneumonia of animals, is not wholly obsolete.

There are only two infections of man capable of giving rise to a pestilence of such a nature as to be described as a disease of the lungs—pneumonic plague, and influenzal pneumonia. Pneumonic plague needs to be mentioned only to be dismissed. It is the form of plague which constitutes the deadly epidemics in Manchuria, and, unlike the bubonic variety, it is transmitted from person to person without the intermediate agency of rodents and fleas. Because of climatic or other reasons, pneumonic plague never appeared in Europe as a continuing epidemic, and although pneumonic cases might develop, the main tide of pestilence always flowed on as bubonic in type.

Influenzal pneumonia, as in the great pandemic of 1918, would provide all the requirements of the annalist's entry. The chest pain, the racking cough, and bloody expectoration—as much as a pint in twenty-four hours—would centre attention on the lungs and suggest the descriptive name *scamach*, while the rapid spread of infection and the numerous fatalities would raise it to the annalistic status of a pestilence. It seems a reasonable deduction, therefore, that the *scamach* was a widespread and virulent epidemic of influenza of which pneumonia was an outstanding feature, and particularly striking as being a common and obvious cause of death.

We must remember that some impressive signs or symptoms may colour the popular picture of a disease, and lead to the adoption of a descriptive name based on the characteristics in question, even though these may not be present in every case. Thus, the term 'spotted fever' (rightly belonging to typhus by the priority of centuries) has now become attached to cerebro-spinal meningitis, and an outbreak of the disease may be popularly called 'spotted fever', although, from first to last, a rash was exhibited by only a minority of patients.