

MARC BLOCH'S *ROIS THAUMATURGES* AND CONSENSUS BUILDING IN THE MIDDLE AGES: AT THE ROOTS OF THE LEGITIMACY OF POWER

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Abstract

In his work written in 1924 *Les rois thaumaturges*, Marc Bloch highlighted an important issue that contributes to our understanding of power and royalty in the Middle Ages. Scholars have been deepening research in the field since then, looking for the reasons behind the “royal touch” and for an eventual quest for legitimacy for those kings who strive to see their authority recognized. Should we reduce the touch to a mere strategy to gain consensus? Or should we look for deeper reasons by “questioning” the kings and their hypothetical belief in touch, along with the trust in their healing powers? It must be acknowledged that subjects were loyal to the body of the king first, and the body was the very center of the political realm throughout the Middle Ages. In this paper we are going to try to look for a different path analyzing Bloch's findings and proposing research questions that should be taken into consideration in both studies on royalty in the Middle Ages, and on the origins of the legitimization of power.

Keywords: Royal Touch, Body, Marc Bloch, Scrofula, Legitimacy.

1. A practice lasting seven centuries, and even more

Tuberculous cervical lymphadenitis, commonly known for centuries as *scrofula*, was a major issue for people living in the countryside. It provided a marker for tuberculosis due to its visible manifestation: «unilateral enlargement of rubbery cervical lymph nodes, with and without accompanying ulceration and sinus tract formation». Frequent especially in children, the disease was recognizable by the «abnormalities anywhere in the neck or of the nearby skin and, sometimes, more

distant sites»¹. Early studies on scrofula can be traced back to Hippocrates (460 – 377 a. C.) and Galen (129 – 201) but it took almost a millennium before it became the most important disease in the political realm². All of a sudden, it became the sickness every king was willing to cure by just touching the body part hit by the abscesses, the neck. In medieval Europe, the disease was known as the *Royal Disease* or *King's Disease*, or, in French-speaking Europe, as the *Mal du Roi*.

A recent study on the history of the scrofula as a “royal disease” was a paper written by Barlow in the ‘80s where he exposed the origin of the definition *morbus regius* linking it to the Greek *ikteros* (jaundice) «a morbid condition caused by retention of bile, and recognizable by the yellowness of the skin and eyes», hence «jaundice, was given several others name by Roman writers: *aurigo/aurugo*, *morbus arquatus*, and *morbus regius*»³. Isidor of Seville (560 – 636) distinguished in his *Etymologiae* jaundice from other forms of «skin diseases» like leprosy, without mentioning glandular or neck diseases. Nevertheless, by the 4th century in ecclesiastical Latin *morbus regius* became the term used to describe leprosy, the «study of the Jewish history was probably responsible». «It was natural for Jerome and some of his contemporaries to call the malady which affected the Herod family, kings of Juda, the royal diseases». The confusion continued for the next few centuries and in 751 for Pope Zachary, as well as for Archbishop Boniface, *morbus regius* «was a wasting disease with offensive symptoms»⁴. In the late Middle Ages, when legends of healer kings started to circulate, English monastic students of medicine «had both the classical (jaundice) and the patristic (leprosy) interpretations of *morbus regius* available to them as well as intermediate positions and confusion»⁵. After the Norman Conquest, Patristics prevailed over literary production in Latin:

although the monastic writers were presumably aware of the original meaning of the term, they found no difficulty in applying it not only to leprosy and other wasting and scabious diseases but also to swellings, such as carbuncles and other eruptions,

¹ J. F. Murray, H. L. Rieder, A. Finley-Crosswhite, *The King's Evil and the Royal Touch: the medical history of scrofula*, «The International Journal of Tuberculosis and Lung Disease», 20 (6), 2016: 713 – 716, p. 714.

² For a brief overview see B. Dang, *The Royal Touch* in W. A. Whitelaw (edited by) *The Proceedings of the 10th Annual History of Medicine Days, Faculty of Medicine – University of Calgary*, 2001, p. 229.

³ F. Barlow, *The King's Evil*, «English Historical Review», XCV, CCCLXIV, 1980: 3 – 27, p. 4.

⁴ Ivi, p. 5.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

wherever they might occur on the body⁶ [...] To the best of our knowledge no writer before the middle of the twelfth century had identified the royal sickness with anything but jaundice or leprosy and associated maladies. It is not until the middle of the thirteenth century that we find *morbis regius* construed as scrofulas or strumas⁷.

Tuberculosis claimed millions of lives especially among farmers and poor people, until it was identified as a distinct disease in the early XIX century, thanks to both the findings and conceptualizations of physicians like René Laennec (1781 – 1826), the inventor of the stethoscope, and Johann Lukas Schönlein (1793 – 1864) who first used the word *tuberkulose* in a publication in 1832. Those were the first steps of research that made Robert Koch's work possible (1843 – 1910), Koch was the founding father of modern bacteriology, he discovered the specific causative agents of the disease and was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1905 for his findings, fundamental for modern medicine. A 1995 paper published in the prestigious journal *Lancet* opened with a few lines introducing the readers to the development of medical research on cervical tuberculosis/scrofula:

In his book *A Handbook of Geographical and Historical Pathology*, August Hirsch provided a picture of scrofula as it was understood until the discovery in 1882 of the tubercle bacillus by Robert Koch. The term scrofula, he stated, “denotes an inflammatory kind of tumour, more particularly in the neck”. The word is a diminutive of the Latin word *scrofa*, a breeding sow supposedly prone to the disease, which was recorded by Aristotle. The word corresponds etymologically to the Greek for pig, but Hirsch questioned whether it should not be taken in the figurative sense meaning a stone, reflecting the scirrhus hardness of the lymph glands when inflamed, as described by Galen. The word scrofula is first encountered in medical writings of the school of Salerno, Italy, in the early 16th century, but it first became a “technical term”, as Hirsch puts it, in the Hippocratic period in Greece when the condition was especially common in children and its protracted course and “cold and mucous nature” were

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ Ivi, p. 7.

identified. The lack of knowledge about its microbial cause hampered final confirmation of its unity with other forms of tuberculosis until the end of the 19th century. Despite Koch's demonstration of tubercle bacilli in scrofulous lymph nodes, some writers remained unconvinced, either on epidemiological grounds or on the basis of human inoculation experiments, that scrofula was transmissible; this led them to deny a link with tuberculosis and thus to reject the unity of scrofula and pulmonary tuberculosis. Even William Osler, convinced as he was by the work of Koch, wrote "It is not yet definitely settled whether the virus which produced the chronic adenitis or scrofula differs from that which produced tuberculosis in other parts⁸.

The causes of scrofula are to be found in low hygienic standards that even reached the point of living side by side with animals, possible vehicles for the transmission of pathogens. The main method of transmission was airborne but, given the lifestyle of the Middle Ages, ingestion of raw milk was considered one of the major causes of transmission⁹. Pasteurization was invented only in the second half of the 19th century by the physician Louis Pasteur (1822 – 1895); farmers of medieval Europe did not have the knowledge or education to address the issue in their unhealthy way of living and eating. The Medieval mindset and, most importantly, the state of the art of medicine, were far from even making rational considerations about the disease. The first, and last, step in deepening the knowledge of the disease was to enforce the connection between scrofula and the *regius*, represented by the king. This connection lasted for centuries, and it became a fundamental political tool that the Crown used to make its power stable and enduring. It was during the Middle Ages that the ritual of the touch, the *royal touch*, was built up by repeating the healing gesture, and refining every aspect, which involved the touch, without focusing on medical research. Medicine and medical research became central only once the political power got rid of the touch and scrofula became a subject for medical experts only.

Between the 11th and the 19th century, people scattered all over the French and English kingdoms, and even abroad, used to travel to the capital on dates scheduled by the crown, to meet the king and

⁸ S. Grzybowksi, E. A. Allen, *History and Importance of Scrofula*, «The Lancet», 346, 1995: 1472 – 1474, p. 1472.

⁹ See J. F. Murray, H. L. Rieder, A. Finley-Crosswhite, *The King's Evil and the Royal Touch: the medical history of scrofula*, cit., p. 715.

to be touched by him on the neck, where the plague started. The patients had the opportunity to meet their king to be cured, and for many of them it was the only possibility in their lifetime to see him. After the touch, the ritual contemplated the donation of a few coins to fund the long and hard journey the farmers had arranged to meet the king: a form of welfare involving public healthcare and redistribution. The ritual was shrouded in mystery for centuries. In the first decades of the 20th century two studies analyzed the theme: the 1911 books by Raymond Crawfurd, published by Clarendon Press in Oxford with the title *The king's evil* and, after the WWI, the legendary Marc Bloch's *Le Rois thaumaturges*¹⁰, published by Istra in Paris in 1924. The second book is definitively better known, and it will be the core of the speculation of this paper. This book offered a retrospective on this phenomenon trying to give a rational explanation to the collective belief of the touch; working according to the criteria of the newborn *histoire des mentalités*, Bloch used wisely psychological, sociological, and historical tools to write what became a masterpiece.

Marc Bloch had experienced WWI as a volunteer who was promoted to sergeant for actions in the field. What he saw during the war – the qualitative leap in mass scale violence, exasperating nationalism, the germs of antisemitism and racism, fake news, the *rally around the flag* hysteria, which spread fear and paranoia – made him believe in a form of *medievalization* of contemporary Europe¹¹ that would end up in a bloodbath, as it happened in WWII. This, and other features, make this work very important for political theorists looking for legitimacy of power throughout the ages, and for the devices used by the power to gain and maintain their legitimacy.

2. A reign gravitating around the King's flesh and blood

The body is a central concept in Bloch's speculation because it is considered the center of the whole reign. The king *is* his body first: his flesh and his blood, along with bones, organs, and skin. Every organ composing his person was relevant in all possible considerations about the king as a ruling

¹⁰ We will be using the 1983 edition: M. Bloch, *Les rois thaumaturges: étude sur le caractère surnaturel attribué à la puissance royale particulièrement en France et en Angleterre*, Paris, Gallimard, 1983.

¹¹ «How Jacques Le Goff says (recovering a Carlo Ginzburg's insight) Bloch's book takes inspiration from 1914-18 war, to whom he participated in the first place: "Marc Bloch saw in it the building of a quasi-medieval society, the regression to a "barbarian and irrational" mentality, also and above all thanks to the frequent spread of fake news; and, Le Goff keeps going, "thus, the war offers to the historian an unexpected tool to observe directly the medieval past» in P. Lago, *I Re taumaturghi: per un'archeologia della storia della mentalità*, «Jura Gentium», VI, 2, 2009: 7 – 17, p. 8 (my translation).

governor. Although the king was “divided in two parts” (the king’s two bodies¹²) in Modern times, it was still the body that mattered, since both the *political* and the *natural* body kept being united in the same person, as long as that person wore the crown.

Although he [the king] has, or takes, the land in his natural Body, yet to this natural Body is conjoined his Body politic, which contains his royal Estate and Dignity; and the Body politic includes the Body natural, but the Body natural is the lesser, and with this the Body politic is consolidated. So that he has a Body natural, adorned and invested with the Estate and Dignity royal; and he has not a Body natural distinct and divided by itself from the Office and Dignity royal, but a Body natural and a Body politic together indivisible; and these two Bodies are incorporated in one Person, and make one Body and not divers, that is the Body corporate in the Body natural, et e contra the Body natural in the Body corporate. So that the Body natural, by this conjunction of the Body politic to it, (which Body politic contains the Office, Government, and Majesty royal) is magnified, and by the said Consolidation hath in it the Body politic¹³.

In 1571 Sir Edmund Plowden with his *Reports* tried to resolve a dispute over monarchical authority under the rule of Queen Elizabeth I (queen of England from 1558 to 1603). Kantorowicz discovered this document during his research on kings and royalty and formulated a comprehensive theory on the modern idea according to which the king, every *legitimate* king, had two bodies. Still, the body has been at the core of every speculation on political power throughout the centuries, until the crown, and the person in charge of the regal duties, were the sole center of the government. The king was, *de jure*, the sole governor throughout the medieval centuries – the king’s power was strongly limited by the feudal counterpowers, by the pope’s permission to govern on a territory (papal *auctoritas* over sovereign *potestas*) and by both customary law and the factual impossibility to make laws for those in charge of the *gubernaculum*, the divine laws preserved by the Roman church were sufficient to

¹² See the 1957 fundamental work *The King’s Two Bodies* by Ernest Kantorowicz (the version used in this paper is *ib.*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016).

¹³ E. Plowden, *Reports*, 213 reported in *ivi*, p. 9.

govern the people and the territories – while he became the sole ruler *de facto* only in modern times; the absolutism born by the ashes of religious war, and the slow decay of *respublica christiana*, had only one goal: give back *all* the prerogatives of power to the king.

Kantorowicz pointed out an important issue in that sense: *dominus*' body is the ultimate entity to which the subjects devoted their allegiance. In feudal or inter-kingdom warfare or in the fight to defend Christianity, the soldiers were fighting for their lord in the first place: a physical person, which was supposed to embody their identity as French/German/English, Christians, or simple inhabitants of a feud or a land. «Those warriors offered themselves up *pro domino*, not *pro patria*», while the jurists were trying to shift the focus on *patria* rather than *dominus* pointing out¹⁴ «“that the duty to defend the *patria* was higher than the feudal obligations of vassal to lord”»¹⁵. Europe was considered a unique country in the Middle Ages, but it was formally divided into feuds, and ideally united under the ecumenic idea of a Christian Reign, the *Respublica Christiana*. It was when the kings turned the land into *fatherland* by giving a national identity to the territories, and to the people living within their borders (blood and soil / *blut und boden*), that the seeds for contemporary nationalism were laid.

William of Nogaret [French jurist, 1260 – 1313] asserted more than once that he was ready to die *pro rege et patria*. He was, on one occasion, even more specific when he said that “by his oath of fealty he was astricted to defend his Lord the King . . . as well as his *patria* the kingdom of France.” What Nogaret meant is obvious: as a *miles*, a knight, he was bound to defend his feudal lord, and as a member of the body politic of France he, like every other Frenchman, was obliged to defend this very body, the *patria*¹⁶.

Bloch never believed in a nationalist myth of the only people living in France. In 1913 he held a conference where he supported the idea of a mixed community of «Ligurians, Iberians, Celts, Romans, Burgundians, Goths, Franks, Bretons, Normans and Jews» and claimed that «the modern

¹⁴ See E. H. Kantorowicz, *Pro Patria Mori in Medieval Political Thought*, «American Historical Review», 56, 3, 1951: 472 – 492.

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 234.

¹⁶ Ivi, p. 259.

French nation and state began to form in the tenth century from this mélange through the merging of different civilizations and the development of loyalty to the monarchy»¹⁷. At the end of the day, it was the king, representing the monarchy and, the “country”, the only bond that made different people, with different cultures, from different parts of France, feel part of a single political community – they kept being part of the religious community of the *corpus mysticum*, when they were not Jews – headed by a single man. The French language, along with the French culture, were the language and the culture of the king, French became the official language only in 1530 under Francis I (king from 1515 to 1547). The king, his flesh and blood, *embodied* France.

The overlapping between the kingdom and the royal body was the result of a long process of sacralization of that body. The King’s body was believed to be sacred, and everything that sacred body touched was touched by holiness itself. A monk called Etienne de Conty wrote in a treatise published under the government of Charles VI (king of France from 1380 to 1422) that the king «après avoir touché, se lave», and the water he used to wash his hands could cure the sick: «ils en boivent, durant neuf jours, à jeun et dévotement; après quoi ils sont guéris, «sans autre médecine»»¹⁸. This was the case of all the objects held in the kings’ hands, even the coin given by the English kings to the sick to pay for the journey was supposed to be miraculous: «le fluide guérisseur étant, dans un cas comme dans l’autre, censé se transporter de la main royale à une chose que cette main avait effleurée». The historian’s “verdict” is clear: «autour du noyau primitive, formé par le riote official, tout un folklore ne pouvait manquer de pulluler»¹⁹. Something more interesting happened in Britain where the kingdom – in what was interpreted by the historians has a mere dispute²⁰ over the “copyright” of the ritual – invented an innovative instrument for healing epilepsy: the *cramp-rings*²¹. Everything that flourished from the king’s mind, mostly from his counsellors, could easily gain the belief of the subjects just because the king had touched it with his bare, and sacred, hands.

¹⁷ C. Fink, *Marc Bloch: a life in history*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 47.

¹⁸ M. Bloch, *Les rois thaumaturges*, cit., pp. 91 – 92.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 92.

²⁰ Bloch dedicated a paragraph on the rivalry between the two kingdoms of the *Manche* (*English Channel*) France and England: see *Le toucher des écouilles et les rivalités nationales; tentatives d’imitation* in ivi, pp. 146 – 157.

²¹ See the chapter II *Le second miracle de la royauté anglaise: les anneaux médicaux*, in ivi, pp. 159 – 183.

The body of the king had to be *everywhere* in the reign, not only in a metaphorical sense: Bertelli in an enlightening 1990 study, *Il corpo del re*, showed evidence of the distribution of the parts of kings' corpses once they were dead. When the first emperor of the renewed Empire Otto the Great (emperor from 962 to 973) died his body was eviscerated, the intestines were buried in Memblen and the rest was brought to Magdeburg. Frederick Barbarossa's body (holy roman emperor from 1155 to 1190) was boiled and deboned, and the bones were sent to Tyre, now part of Lebanon, where he was supposed to go on a pilgrimage. Robert the Bruce (king of Scotland from 1306 to 1329) demanded his heart to be buried in Jerusalem. Richard I (Richard Lionheart, king of England from 1189 to 1199) wanted his heart to be buried in Rouen, close to his father's grave (Henry II, king from 1154 to 1189) while his brain, blood and guts had to be carried to Charroux, and the rest of the body in Fontevrault, where his mother and sister were already buried²². The subjects invented a technique to carry the bodies, to accomplish the requests of the kings. Dealing with dead kings became very important in the Middle Ages²³.

It is the legend of Romulus narrated by Plutarch to tell us about the partition of a sacred body to facilitate the spread of sovereignty linked to that body over the whole territory. Indeed, we should reverse our point of view: by distributing their body, the kings were anticipating a demand coming from the bottom; they were giving, rather than asking²⁴.

The king “distributed” his body even when he was still alive: Bertelli noticed that the feudal investiture²⁵ included a kiss between the king and the vassal, after the act of submission (*homage*) and the pledge of loyalty. With the kiss the king placed some drips of saliva into the mouth of the vassal to donate him some of his body fluid, representing sovereignty, to take it back to the feud²⁶. The persuasion that the body and its fluids were sacred resulted in the collective belief of healing powers

²² See S. Bertelli, *Il corpo del re*, Firenze, Ponte alle Grazie, 1990, p. 31.

²³ See J. Hartnell, *Medieval Bodies*, London, Profile Books, 2018, pp. 115 – 116.

²⁴ S. Bertelli, *Il corpo del re*, cit., p. 33 (my translation).

²⁵ To further deepen the feudal investiture, I suggest the chapter *L'hommage vassalique* in M. Bloch, *La Société féodale*, Paris, Edition Albin Michel, 1968, pp. 209 – 231 and, for a general perspective on political issues in the Middle Ages, W. Ullmann, *Principle of Governments and Politics in the Middle Ages*, London, Routledge, 2010.

²⁶ See *Ibidem*.

of those same organs and fluids. The blood appeared to be the vehicle of transmission of the miraculous gift, according to the idea that the kings inherited the ability from their father, a strong element to enhance the principle of the *House law*, needed by the crown to ensure government stability. The blood became object of worship among peasants and superstitions on blood lasted for centuries. Bertelli says that when Charles I (king of England from 1625 to 1649) and Louis XVI (king of France from 1774 to 1792) were beheaded in a public square – respectively on January the 30th, 1649 and on January 21st, 1793 – the same people cheering for the regicide later soaked a handkerchief in the blood spilled from the gallows, to save it as a relic²⁷. The power could also lie in the saliva: Francis I was seen «humectant son pouce de salive; c’est dans le salive des Capétiens que résiderait leur puissance curative, sans doute comme une qualité physiologique propre à leur race»²⁸. All elements of the so-called *religio regis*.

Another relevant issue that explains the importance of the physical body was his presence on the stage. The *παρουσία* (*parusia*) is the word used to describe the *second coming* of Christ on earth, an essential element of Christian eschatology and part of Messianism on which Christian theological speculation has been based since Patristics. The word is used by scholars to describe the “manifestation” of the king, as a form of lay epiphany: subjects in the Middle Ages could spend their entire life without knowing what their king looked like. Still, they were loyal to him and gradually turned to be loyal to their governor as much as they were to the pope or even to Christ. Those were the aftermaths of the cultural operation, carried out by the sovereigns during the early Middle Ages, useful to make a comparison between the king and Jesus Christ, the *christomimesis*²⁹. The *parusia* is an event «limited to particular ceremonies», although the king’s body was a public body, a “mystical body” in which «every community of subjects could recognize itself»³⁰. The body was so special to the illiterate peasants that just staying in front of it was a mystical experience to someone ready to believe anything the king said, and to do whatever the king has ordered.

²⁷ See *ivi*, p. 248.

²⁸ M. Bloch, *Les rois thaumaturges*, cit., pp. 415.

²⁹ I refer to the chapter *Christ-centered Kingship* in E. H. Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies*, cit., pp. 42 – 86.

³⁰ S. Bertelli, *Il corpo del re*, cit., p. 28 (my translation).

3. Anointed body, Sacred body, Legitimate body

We might say that the timeless clash between the church and the political power – the pope and the sovereign – is the key to grasp the phenomena studied by Bloch in his book. Evidence allows to sustain that the Late Middle Ages was politically marked by this clash; the king struggled to see his power free from the interferences of the church, and to be free to enact laws for his people and for his territory. The core of this struggle was the fight for the authority to be fully recognized, in a trade-off movement where the pope could not just give ground to the king if he did not want to lose his prerogatives. One of these prerogatives was the privilege to legitimize the sovereign, giving his consent to his government and blessing it with a ritual of recognition that included coronation and anointment. The “royal unction” has a long tradition, its origins stem from a legend; Figgis dedicated several pages to the issue in his book on the divine right of the kings³¹. The legend of the French anointment has more than fifteen centuries of history, and it was first administered by Saint Remigius (Bishop of Reims from 459 to 533) to the first French king converted to Christianity, Clovis I (king of Frankish from 481 to 511) when the priest baptized him. Bloch reported a document which explained the legend behind it:

Dans la sainte église de l'illustre cite de Reims, Clovis, alors roi de France, entendit la prédication du très glorieux confesseur le bienheureux Remi, évêque de cette ville fameuse; là, comme celui-ci baptisait ledit roi avec son peuple, le Saint Esprit, ou bien un ange, apparut sous la forme d'une colombe, descendant du Ciel et apportant une fiole pleine de la liqueur du saint chrême; c'est de ce chrême que ce roi lui-même, et après lui tous les rois de France nos prédécesseurs et moi-même à mon tour, aux jours de la consécration et du couronnement, Dieu étant propice, nous reçûmes l'onction, par laquelle, sous l'influence dans les rois de France que, par le seul contact de leurs mains, ils défendent les maladies du mal des écrouelles: chose que démontre clairement l'évidence des faits, éprouvée sur des personnes innombrables³².

³¹ J. N. Figgis, *The Divine Right of Kings*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1914; I suggest to see also F. Kern, *Kingship and Laws in the Middle Ages*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1939.

³² M. Bloch, *Les rois thaumaturges*, cit., p. 135.

From that time every successor to the French throne had to be coronated and anointed by a priest. That included the silent acceptance of the spiritual and moral superiority of the priest giving the title to the king receiving the sacred oil³³: «Royal Unction confers no grace, but declares a just title only»³⁴. Nevertheless, many kings expected their nature to be changed after the anointment, as they had been participating the grace of God since the first drops had hit their heads. The debate over their sincere conviction that they were partially divine is still open. It is not wise to reduce the whole issue to a propaganda strategy. Some kings were moved by such an intimate and profound faith (like Louis IX, known also as *Louis the Saint*, king of France from 1226 to 1270) that it is reasonable to think that they, in the first place, believed in the gift of the touch.

As Brogan reminds us in a recent book, there is no evidence that French or English kings ever contracted scrofula, which «must have added to the mystique of royalty»³⁵. The scientific explanation was higher hygiene standards, and a big attention to avoid contagion during the ritual, but at that time it was easy to link this feature to a supernatural power; as Ladner has put it in a 1979 paper: «the symbolic world of view of the Middle Ages cannot be understood without reference to a sacred history which was conceived as a coherent sequence of divinely planned happenings, from creation through the events of the Old and New Testaments and the salvation-oriented progression of mankind»³⁶. So, even in the medical field «a great leveller [...] was religion», «whoever the patient and wherever they were being attended to, almost everyone in the Middle Ages would have upheld a strong belief that their physical health was directly related to their spiritual well-being»³⁷. It was an easy step for kings themselves to reconduct their qualities to superior powers. Even if after Christ nobody can be both king and priest, *rex et sacerdos*³⁸. That judgment limited the kings' spirituality, confining it to the vast community of the sheep led by the pastors. Hincmar (arcibishop of Reims from 845 to 882) repeated

³³ «Au cours de la cérémonie, l'officiant qui donnait l'onction paraissait pour un moment supérieur au monarque qui, dévotement, la recevait; il fallait désormais, pouvait-on penser, un prêtre pour faire un roi: signe évident de la prééminence du spirituel sur le temporel» in *ivi*, p. 71.

³⁴ J. N. Figgis, *The Divine Right of Kings*, cit., p. 10.

³⁵ S. Brogan, *The Royal Touch in Early Modern England*, Woodbridge, Boydell & Brewer, 2015, p. 18.

³⁶ G. B. Ladner, *Medieval and Modern Understanding of Symbolism: a Comparison*, «Speculum: a Journal of Medieval Studies», LIV, 1979: 223 – 256, pp. 230 – 231.

³⁷ J. Hartnell, *Medieval Bodies*, cit., p. 22.

³⁸ «Il [Hincmar] ne se lassa point de répéter qu'aucun homme, depuis le venue de Christ, ne saurait être à la fois prêtre et roi» in M. Bloch, *Les rois thaumaturges*, cit., p. 72.

that «la dignité des pontifes est supérieure à celle des rois: car les rois sont sacrés rois par les pontifes, tandis que les pontifes ne peuvent être consacrés par les rois»³⁹; that issue caused some problems to the kings who did not want to wait for the pope's permission to rule. Frederick II (holy Roman emperor from 1220 to 1250) was one of these cases.

Who is the legitimate king? The one who heals. Does the king heal thanks to the oil? If it was so the Church should have admitted that anointment changed the nature of the king and gave him the gift of the touch. The thorny issue fueled the conflicts between the two institutions, but those were just philosophical disputes over a power that on several occasions was in charge without ecclesiastical recognition. Frederick II stubbornness in governing despite the limits and the prohibitions was an example of what a sovereign could have done if their government had been legitimized by the fact that they were in charge, and they were actually able to govern a territory and the people living in it. Things were far more complicated in the medieval political order: those who thought that full exercise of power was sufficient to rule over people were considered tyrants. The power was limited, all the power came from God, *non est potestas nisi a Deo*⁴⁰, and it was delivered to the Church⁴¹, keeper of the *auctoritas*, that delegated the temporal power by conceding it the *potestas*: governing thanks the consent of the people. The limits imposed to the sovereign guaranteed that the subjects would not be ruled with terror and violence by a man fearless of God and against the will of his deputy on earth, the pope. The gradual process of secularization started when the *respublica* collapsed and was accelerated by the religious wars of the 16th and 17th century, the slow *disenchantment* described by Weber⁴² (*Entzauberung der Welt*) produced the secular power, along with the modern State, and the modern process of legitimation. We can, however, trace the first steps toward the rationalization of power in the efforts made by the Crown to try to disengage its authority from the pope and the Church.

³⁹ Ivi, p. 71; the point was addressed again in 1939 in the paragraph *Traditions et nature du pouvoir royal* in M. Bloch, *La Société féodale*, cit., pp. 523 – 529.

⁴⁰ «Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God» *Romans* 13:1.

⁴¹ «And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven» *Matthew* 16:18 – 19.

⁴² See M. Weber, *Science as a Vocation*, London, Routledge, 2009.

The kings had been curing scrofula, which was mistaken for leprosy for centuries; is this a «Christ-like aspect of the thaumaturgic sovereigns»⁴³? Leprosy was more contagious than scrofula and definitively more severe, considering its high lethality, but that is one of the aspects of the *christomimesis* in the end, kings imitated Christ as much as it was granted to a humble sinner. What looks interesting here is the shift in perspective, with the kings risking their lives to go down to the level of nurses and healers (set on the humblest level of medieval society) for healing their subjects. Not just that, Hartnell reports that the kings used to wash the feet of the poorest like Christ did:

Several European kings annually tried to recreate a Christological model of humility by following the Gospels' description of Christ washing the feet of the Apostles as the Last Supper. In a ritual not dissimilar to their miraculous curing of the scrofulous sick through the touch of their royal hands, on the Thursday of Holy Week these sovereigns could take it upon themselves to wash the feet of beggars⁴⁴.

Arcangeli in a series of lectures on Bloch shows how the thaumaturgical ritual, as much as other rituals with the king dedicating himself to his subjects, created an *individual relationship* between the king and each peasant who rushed to court. The king took charge of *every single case* and did not limit himself to the whole community with a general blessing⁴⁵. This is the core aspect that makes the medieval king different from the first kings of primitive societies, where magic rituals were performed to propitiate gods to bless the community. There was no scapegoat in medieval France or England if things did not go the right way: «Le Roi te touche, Dieu te guérit»⁴⁶, the king was there to create a

⁴³ S. Brogan, *The Royal Touch in Early Modern England*, cit., p. 18.

⁴⁴ See J. Hartnell, *Medieval Bodies*, cit., p. 271.

⁴⁵ «What resulted in Bloch reconstruction was the deep diversity of sacred medieval royalty in the respect of primitive conceptions [...] A similar belief was absent in primitive tribes, where kings' powers appeared to be addressed to the wealth of the group as a whole and seldom to the single subjects. The faith in thaumaturgic power reveals to be a specific characteristic of the society «in where religion forbade to attribute to the kings an influence on massive cosmic phenomena, determining life of the nations», and appeared to be strictly tied to specific forms of medieval religiosity, to the belief in the healing powers of objects and sacred tools, like the oil» in B. Arcangeli, *La storia come scienza sociale*, Napoli, Guida, 2001, p. 146 (my translation).

⁴⁶ M. Bloch, *Les rois thaumaturges*, cit., p. 93.

connection between God and every subject. He was trying to cure touching him, or her, with his miraculous, anointed, hands. The king was there *for* his people, not the other way round⁴⁷.

People with scrofula approached the sovereign hoping to be cured, but also seeking psychological consolation from being in close proximity to God's representative on earth, which allowed them the opportunity to act out in public their humility and obedience to the crown. The hope surely was that this would please God, who might alleviate their condition. Even a small incremental improvement in someone's condition soon after the ceremony signified the effectiveness of the royal touch⁴⁸.

We could identify in this encounter between rulers and the ruled those psychological elements that led to the modern idea of government by consent: can we identify it as the first step in the making of the modern relationship between the government and citizens (once they became individuals with their specific personal identity)? Is this a groundbreaking attempt to create a universal healthcare addressed to every citizen as a unique person, not just as an indistinct community? Affirmative answers to these and other questions would make the touch a hint of political modernity in the heart of the Middle Ages and would, mostly, make sense of the quest for legitimacy of power. The king was trying to gain consensus over his subjects by interacting with each of them. The more he needed his people to rally around his body, the more he touched them: Charles II (king of England from 1660 to 1685) touched over 96 thousand people⁴⁹ in a delicate phase of the English history, between the Long Parliament, along with English Civil War, and the Glorious Revolution of 1689. The king needed his people to back him more than the English people needed the protection of the king; this type of relationship is exquisitely modern.

⁴⁷ Brogan has shown that in the 13th century, mostly during the long reign of Henry III of England (1216 – 1272) the king used to touch the sick people alone, without anyone in the surrounding, «this is because the ceremony had not yet been given liturgical expression». This image gives the idea of the special relationship created in those few minutes between the king and every subject: «the depiction provides a sense of intimacy between the people in it, noticeably by touch and eye contact between king and supplicant» in S. Brogan, *The Royal Touch in Early Modern England*, cit., p. 22.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 1.

4. Matter over mind: at the roots of legitimacy of power

In both cases, epilepsy and scrofula, the touch seemed to work because the symptoms could disappear in a few days (like scrofula) just by changing lifestyle, or because of an upgrade of the immunity system, or maybe because the disease did not manifest itself for a while (as it is still today for epilepsy). This resulted in success for the kings who could prove the efficiency of the touch in front of the people who were unable to follow the basics of the cause-effect principle. However, as we mentioned before, it cannot be excluded that the kings believed in the healing power of the touch like their subjects. As Barlow wisely recalls, the touch did not disappear when the people stopped believing in it but, rather, because kings no longer believed in their healing power: «what is really surprising is not that the custom should have been given stable institutional form as late as the second half of the thirteenth century, but that in England it was suddenly and irrevocably abandoned in 1714»; this «venerable custom» was abandoned, in England, «not by the scepticism [sic.] of the people but by the rationalism of the Hanoverian kings and their advisers». «There were still men in 1825 eager to be touched by Charles X of France». Even today, «many people like to shake hands with royalty»⁵⁰. That makes us believe that English kings, at least some of them, believed, or maybe were led to think, that their touch was miraculous. The fight with the Church for the details of the touch – the Church always specified that the king could not touch thanks to his divine nature and, most importantly, that the the Church kept being the monopolist in spiritual issues – this could be read as not only the fight over authority, with the touch as nothing more than a leverage for bargaining power, but like a fight between two forces truly convinced of their supernatural power on both souls and bodies. «Les hommes du moyen âge ne se résignèrent jamais à voir dans leurs souverains de simples laïques et de simple hommes»⁵¹; maybe not even the kings saw themselves as simple men. The Kings faced some “competitors” throughout the centuries, like the seventh son in an only male succession of children who were taught to have such power to cure scrofula exactly like the king

⁵⁰ F. Barlow, *The King's Evil*, cit., p. 27; to my advice, it is important to notice that the kings became more and more “visible” during the century, the vision of the king could not be seen as an “epiphany” (*parusia*) because kings like Louis XIV (king of France from 1643 to 1715) were very easy to meet for everyone who went to Versailles, or even waited for his king to visit his hometown during one of the many trips around France he made during his long reign. I suggest reading N. Elias, *The Court Society*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1983.

⁵¹ M. Bloch, *Les rois thaumaturges*, cit., p. 259.

himself⁵². Or, in Ireland, the charismatic figure of Valentine Greatrakes (1628 – 1682) a faith healer who competed with the Stuarts, the kings in power at that time, in the exercise of the touch⁵³. The king expected to be considered the only authentic healer, even because his soul was purer, and his nature was superior to those of humble origins. The king had to set an example for the subjects and could not indulge in sins and mistakes, his credibility depended on his honesty: «Philip I [king of France from 1060 to 1108] was said to have lost his thaumaturgic powers as a result of committing adultery and being excommunicated»⁵⁴. Edward the Confessor (king of England from 1042 to 1066) is considered the mythical inventor of the royal touch in Britain, his «miraculous power being presented to various ends, including [...] the promotion of saintly power as a particular model of royal authority»⁵⁵. He was believed to have also cured barrenness and eye problems. The English royal touch at the very beginning might have been, according to Huntington and his long work on some documents of the time, a strategy to «legitimate a new style of English royal authority»⁵⁶, but there are still some doubts, because Edward cured in a particular way which would never be used again by English kings for the following centuries; even the diseases were different. Bloch, as well, found different evidence on the beginning of the English ritual: the long tradition of the royal touch of the scrofulous necks as we know it began with Henry II. Huntington's research is still interesting because «Edward's specialization in curing the blind and his access to prophecy and clairvoyancy stem from his purity»⁵⁷. His virginity gave him the gift to cure the blinds – quite curious for a king who is, still today, supposed to give the kingdom an heir⁵⁸ – but it is interesting to consider in a scenario where the king imitated Christ to fit the role of a leader who ruled backed by popular consent – a virgin man with pure soul curing the blind – who expected his authority to be recognized by his

⁵² I recommend the paragraph *Les septièmes fils, les rois de France et Saint Marcoul* in *ivi*, pp. 293 – 308.

⁵³ I suggest the study A. B. Laver, *Miracles no Wonder! The Mesmeric Phenomena and Organic Cures of Valentine Greatrakes*, «Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences», XXXIII, 1, 1978: 35 – 46.

⁵⁴ S. Brogan, *The Royal Touch in Early Modern England*, *cit.*, p. 28.

⁵⁵ J. Huntington, *Saintly Power as a Model of Royal Authority: the 'Royal Touch' and other Miracles in the Early Vitae of Edward the Confessor* in B. M. Bolton, C. E. Meek (edited by) *Aspects of Power and Authority in the Middle Ages*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2007, p. 327.

⁵⁶ *Ivi*, p. 335.

⁵⁷ *Ivi*, p. 339.

⁵⁸ «It is this which renders it possible to make sense of the apparently confusing implications of a text which lauds virginity being presented as a model to a king, whose job description should surely entail procreation» in *ivi*, p. 340.

people because of that. The roots of legitimacy were growing, the seeds of political modernity had already been laid in the heart of the Middle Ages.



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