to find this elusive retrovirus, if it exists; Perron et al 15 16 may have found a candidate. PETER RUDGE

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Neurological stamp

Girolamo Fracastoro 1484–1553

The origins of syphilis remain doubtful but it is generally believed that when Columbus returned to Spain in March 1493 his crew carried the infection with them. In 1494 Charles VIII of France attacked Naples. Spanish troops (possibly fighting on both sides) brought with them not only their weapons but a disease. A large scale epidemic broke out during the siege of Naples and was originally known as “Mal de Naples”. Its most common early name was “Morbos Gallicus”. In Germany it was spread by the French army it was known as “The French Disease”. The French called it “The Italian Disease” and the Italians “The French Disease”. It spread through Germany to Poland where it was called “Deutsche Krankheit”, and from there to Russia where it became known as the “Polish Plague”.

In 1527 a Frenchman, Jacques De Béthencourt proposed that as the disease arose from illicit love it be named “Morbos Veneræus” or venereal disease.

In 1530 a Veronese doctor, Girolamo Fracastoro, described it mythologically in a poem Syphilis Sive Morbus Gallicus. The hero of the poem was a Greek shepherd, Syphilis. One day tormented by the heat he abused the sun god. As punishment he was struck with a loathsome and contagious disease which in future bore the name Syphilis. The shepherd’s name soon became the adopted name of the disease. Fracastoro achieved more fame for this than his more important scientific writings. As well as being a physician he was renowned as a poet, physiciot and geographer. He gave the first accurate clinical account of syphilis, contributed greatly to the knowledge of infectious and contagious diseases and came close to suggesting the germ theory of infection.

A statue of Fracastoro can be found in Verona near the place where Romeo and Juliet met. Italy issued a stamp with his portrait to commemorate the 1953 International Medical Conference at Verona. (Stanley Gibbons 915, Scott 695.)

LF HAAS

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