
Throughout history and different cultures and religions, the dead have spoken to us, appearing in visions and dreams, as revenants, apparitions, ghosts and vampires. Western Judeo-Christian traditions have made place for this voice, as a manifestation of the boundaries between the living and the dead, the spiritual and the material world, but also between the natural and the supernatural. A Body of Evidence offers an original collection of articles that explore how the cadaver became an epistemic object in medicine in early modern Europe. A collection of signs to be observed, scrutinized, read and interpreted, a witness to its own demise, the cadaver becomes not only a window onto the individual reality of the dead under the medical gaze (in the case of forensic medicine), but also a source of medical knowledge (for didactic purposes in medical education). In the religious context of the early modern period, too, the medical examination of bodies begins to play an important role in discerning natural signs from the supernatural ones, namely in the canonization processes. Faced with this “speaking” body, the medical expert takes on a new active, investigative role that, since the late Middle Ages, and even more so since the 16th century, is progressively systematized as a medical and judicial practice, codified in laws, and ultimately institutionalized as a medical discipline.

The originality of this collective volume, composed of eleven chapters, lies in its focus on the process by which the body itself, and the cadaver more specifically, became an object of science. Thereby, this focus allows for a different perspective on the development of medical and scientific knowledge, and that of forensic medicine as a discipline in particular. The three chapters in Part I (From Divination to Autopsy) show the relations between the medical and the religious perspectives on the dead body, with their different but not always mutually exclusive objectives. In his exploration of the “forensic” practice of cruentation, F. P. de Ceglia underscores in his contribution the porous relationship between the natural order and the miraculous, and particularly the differences in the interpretation of this practice in the Catholic and Protestant traditions. He analyzes how the interpretation of the body’s ability to speak postmortem shifts from the religious to the medical sphere. C. Ferragud’s chapter on the identification of corpses in late medieval Valencia shows that the experts’ ability to examine various material aspects of the corpse and other evidence played a primary role in determining the type of burial that the deceased would receive. T. Duranti examines how medical expertise became an integral part of legal theory and practice in Bologna, particularly since the 13th century, transforming the knowledge of the dead body into a veritable science.

The four chapters of Part II (The Uncertainties of the Anatomical Gaze) focus on the important role that autopsies play in the development of new forensic techniques and of forensic medicine as a practice. A. Shotwell analyzes the numerous treatises on anatomy and dissection of the 16th century and the increasing interest placed on dissection techniques and the explanation of methods. A. Bates, on the other hand, shows that autopsies can also serve to materially expose medical dogma. Focusing on the rare cases of anatomical dissections of monsters, Bates examines how these cases
serve as an opportunity for debate on larger questions, such as the location of the soul and the definition of an individual. K. Siena’s chapter on contagion discusses the risks that medical experts recognized in the practice of autopsies and in the contact with a putrefying body, particularly in cases of plague. He concludes his study with the important epidemiological role played by the “searchers of dead”, a function that in early modern London was exclusively relegated to poor elderly women. M. Galtarrossa examines the increasing acceptance of dissections by authorities as a practice in judicial, medical and religious contexts, especially since the 16th century. Despite this acknowledgement and increased access to cadavers for didactic purposes, a certain resistance to dissection remained from a religious perspective in Italy well into the 18th century.

Three chapters of Part III (Corpses and Evidences) present case studies of specific causes of death: suicide, infanticide and drowning. The fourth article, by D. Carnevale, is a comparative study of forensic procedures in Naples and France during the 17th and 18th centuries. Carnevale analyzes the process by which expert examination of the cadaver transforms into a written text, a medical report as an official document that objectifies the expert’s knowledge and practice. In his chapter on suicide, A. Kästner examines how the function of the dead body of a suicide victim shifts from an object of punishment for an act, that was considered a crime, to an object of medical observation and knowledge. However, as he shows, moral conduct of the diseased, gleaned from witness accounts of family and acquaintances, provided more authoritative evidence, similar to what suicidologists today call “psychological autopsies”. In her article on infanticide in Germany, M. B. Lewis shows the limits of forensic evidence acquired from the corpse, leading experts to supplant it with other information acquired though the interrogation and torture of the suspect. As she shows, during the 17th and 18th centuries, abortion and infanticide were among the most popular subjects of forensic treatises. L. de Frenza and C. Tisci conclude this volume with a study on the signs of death, specifically in cases of drowning. They explore the 18th-century medical debates in France about the certitude of death.

As the title suggests, the chapters of this collective volume examine how, in early modern Europe, signs found on and in the body transform into scientific and forensic evidence. The authors explore the plurality of debates on what constitutes evidence, on its uses, functions, legitimacy and efficacy in forensic investigations, and ultimately on how the dead body becomes a rich source of scientific knowledge. This volume raises stimulating questions and opens new debates about the active, performative role of the body, as that which speaks, accuses, reveals and acts.

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