

Zeitschrift: Acta Tropica
Herausgeber: Schweizerisches Tropeninstitut (Basel)
Band: 26 (1969)
Heft: (10): Parasitic diseases in Africa and the Western Hemisphere : early documentation and transmission by the slave trade

Artikel: Parasitic diseases in Africa and the Western Hemisphere : early documentation and transmission by the slave trade
Autor: Hoeppli, R.
Kapitel: Introduction
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-311630>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 24.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

INTRODUCTION

Parasitic diseases discussed in the following are diseases caused by *Protozoa*, *Borrelia*, *Treponemes*, *Helminths*, and *Arthropods*.

In Europe and Asia they have been recorded from antiquity by numerous writers. Hippocrates (c. 460–375 B.C.) for example discussed in detail the various forms of malaria; the Sushruta Samhita (present text about first centuries A.D.) describes elephantiasis; in China Ch'ao Yuan-fang (fl. c. A.D. 610) mentioned small 'worms' (itch-mites) in scabies; among Persian-Arabic authors Rhazes, Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Zakarīya al-Rāzī (died 923–924) and Avicenna, Abū 'Alī, al-Husayn ibn 'Abdallāh ibn Sīnā (980 to 1037) dealt with the Guinea worm, *Dracunculus medinensis*, mentioned already by Greek writers. Besides the few mentioned authors, there are others who throughout the centuries up to modern times provided by their works a rich documentation of parasitic diseases and parasites in Europe and Asia. (See also MOULÉ, 1908, 1911.)

In Africa the situation was different. Except ancient Egypt with records of diseases in papyri and the mediterranean coast which was under Roman rule and was referred to by Roman writers, there are no written records up to the Islamic conquest in the seventh century.

The *Rihla* of IBN BATTŪTA; Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh (1304 to ca. 1369) and the *History of North Africa* by IBN KHALDŪN, Abu Zaid 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406) as well as the writings of some other authors from Islamic Spain and North Africa have been studied by writers with a knowledge of Arabic; it is, however, probable that there exist still some more Arabic texts which mention parasitic diseases in Africa and which at present are known to Arabic scholars only. Hasan ibn Muḥammad al-Waz-zān al Zayyātī, better known as LEO AFRICANUS (ca. 1485 to ca. 1554), born in Granada of Moorish parents, wrote at the time of the Renaissance his valuable *Descrittione dell'Africa*, published by RAMUSIO in the second half of the sixteenth century¹.

Beginning with the fifteenth century, the exploration of the African West Coast, the discovery of the New World and the

¹ The transcription of Arabic names and the use of accents in Spanish names are not following strict rules.

Spanish conquest in America provided new information regarding parasitic diseases.

The slave trade is in this connection of special importance. It drew increased attention to some diseases which were frequent among the slaves, such as dysentery, yaws, scabies, hookworm-anemia and Guinea-worm infection. It also demonstrated the transmission of certain diseases, among them parasitic infections, from Africa to the New World. On the other hand, some diseases which were at first believed to have been imported by the slave trade were found to be autochthonous in the New World (Carate, Mal del Pinto). Furthermore, transmission of a parasitic infection in a reverse sense, from America to Africa and Europe, was discovered (*Tunga penetrans* infection). These various problems are closely connected.

In the first part of the present study the different kinds of 'Early Documentation' are pointed out and a brief outline of the 'Slave Trade' is given.

The second part deals with the main subject: The early documentation of parasitic diseases in Africa and the New World and their transmission by the slave trade. Considered are only early known parasitic diseases and parasites which were reported from Africa and the New World. They obviously only form a very small part of those which are known to-day.

In the third part diseases and mortality of foreigners on the Guinea coast at the time of the slave trade are recorded for comparison. In a final chapter the representation of parasitic diseases and parasites in early African and pre-Columbian art is briefly described, and a conclusion of the whole work is given. This is followed by a subject index, an index of names and illustrations on twenty-three plates.

References

- BATTŪTA, IBN, (1853-1859). Voyages. Trad. Defrémery et Sanguinetti. Paris.
- KHALDŪN, IBN. (1925-1927). Histoire des Berbères et des Dynasties musulmanes de l'Afrique Septentrionale. Traduit de l'Arabe par le Baron de Slane. Nouv. Edit. 2 vols. Paris.
- LEO AFRICANUS. (1896). History and Description of Africa. Hakluyt Society, 3 vols. London. Descrittione dell'Africa. (First published 1550 by Ramusio as vol. I of his Navigationi).
- MOULÉ, L. (1908). La Parasitologie dans la littérature antique I. — Arch. Parasit. (Paris) 13, 251-264.
- MOULÉ, L. (1911). La Parasitologie dans la littérature antique II. Les Parasites du tube digestif. — Arch. Parasit. (Paris) 14, 353-383.
- MOULÉ, L. (1911). La Parasitologie dans la littérature antique III. Parasites de la peau et des tissus sous-jacents. — Arch. Parasit. (Paris) 15, 543-595.
- RAMUSIO, G. B. (1550-1559). Navigationi e Viaggi. 3 vols. Venice.