



THE FRENCH WARS IN EGYPT AND THE CARIBBEAN AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF COLONIAL MEDICINE

Roberto Zaugg *

* *Centre d'histoire de Sciences Po (Paris)*
roberto.zaugg@sciencespo.fr

Abstract

Examining the medical literature produced by health officers serving in the French campaigns in Egypt (1798-1801) and Saint-Domingue (1801-1803), the paper argues that the Wars of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period constituted a crucial moment in the emergence of modern colonial medicine. Largely unprepared to face diseases such as ophtalmia, the plague and yellow fever – whose pathogenic causes were still ignored by medical science – military physicians, surgeons and pharmacists struggled to find solutions to epidemic phenomena. Actually they largely failed to contain the latter: pathogenic factors were at least as important in determining the defeats of the French troops as the military action of their Ottoman, Mamluk, British and Afro-Caribbean enemies. However, the knowledge and organizational experience accumulated by a new generation of health officers provided a substantial basis for the institutionalized development of nineteenth-century colonial medicine. In many senses, the period constituted a phase of transition. While debates on aetiology and therapy were largely framed by neo-Hippocratic miasma theory, anti-contagionism and (to a lesser extent) by the Brunonian doctrine, at the same time a modern understanding of medicine and hygiene as tools of colonial government and as ideological components of the *mission civilisatrice* took shape. And while relations to colonial subjects were accompanied by a self-proclaimed racial superiority, daily interactions often went along with cross-cultural exchanges in the realm of (phyto-)therapeutic practices. Theoretical eclecticism, as well as a tendency to appropriate and re-frame non-European knowledge, emergence thus as central features of this pre-pathogenic medicine: a tropical medicine *ante litteram* whose development was substantially catalysed by the need to enable European troops to conduct military operations on overseas territories and to establish a politically effective and economically profitable rule over colonial societies.