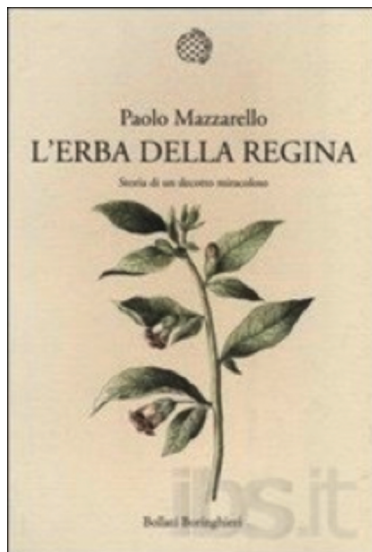


L'erba della Regina. Storia di un decotto miracoloso

Paolo Mazzarello
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Lethargic encephalitis is a mysterious infectious disease that appeared at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It exploded suddenly at the end of First World War, leading to a worldwide epidemic that, by 1940, had killed as many as 500,000 people.

Probably due to a viral infection, the causative agent of lethargic encephalitis remains unknown, even though many etiological theories have been advanced to explain its biological and clinical features. Austrian neurologist Constantin von Economo, described this disease, in its acute phase, as characterized mainly by prolonged somnolence and paralysis, particularly of the III cranial nerve. However, neurologists have subsequently described many other “types” of lethargic encephalitis: hemiplegic, cerebellar, cataleptic, thalamic, insomniac, and so on.

After the acute phase, the disease often evolved into chronic parkinsonism. Knowledge of the disease in this form reached a wide audience thanks to the book “Awakenings” by the British-American neurologist Oliver Sacks, who, in the late 1960s, described the effects of levodopa in the treatment of these patients, and, above all, thanks to the film based on this book, featuring Robert De Niro and Robin Williams. However, behind established knowledge of this disease there lies another forgotten story. This surprising hidden part of the events linked to the post-encephalitis epidemics is now nar-

rated in a fascinating book by Paolo Mazzarello, Full Professor of History of Medicine at the University of Pavia. Already known by neurologists for his books on Camillo Golgi and on the meeting between Cesare Lombroso and Lev Tolstoj, Mazzarello has now embarked on a fascinating journey through the history and geography of lethargic encephalitis, in particular its treatment with a vinous decoction of the poisonous plant *Atropa belladonna*. Ivan Raev, a folk healer who lived in Shipka, a small village in central Bulgaria, was the first to use this preparation to treat the disease.

Raev had an adventurous life before becoming famous for the invention of this treatment. Living in Istanbul to learn the healing power of herbs from a Muslim Imam, he became involved in the political uprising against fascism in his country. Through singular circumstances he had the intuition that the substances extracted in wine from the *belladonna* plant would have beneficial effects on the symptoms of post-encephalitic parkinsonism. And this brings us to another hidden story uncovered by Mazzarello, namely that of the role of the Queen Elena of Montenegro (Elena of Savoy) in the promotion and worldwide diffusion of this treatment. Mazzarello's journey was a journey in the real sense, since his research for this took him to Bulgaria and Montenegro.

This story, which lies between East and West, popular and official medicine, ordinary people and aristocrats, is not just a forgotten chapter of Italian neurology, but also a scientific tale that can be read like a novel.

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