

## CITATION

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## A Closer Look at the Zodiac and Phlebotomy Men in Wellcome MS 8004

by Sarah Öberg Strådal

Wellcome MS 8004 is a lavish codex without marginal annotations, with gilded initials and expensive pigments. It opens with a calendar and closes with a pilgrimage tract, in between are numerous texts on medical practice and astrological calculations. Wellcome 8004 also contains depictions of the Zodiac Man and the Phlebotomy Man. The two diagrams have been placed several quires apart, the Phlebotomy Man on folio 18r and the Zodiac Man on folio 40r. These depictions are unusual: the male bodies at the centre are more animated, seemingly in motion. In this article, I will position the two figures within a larger medical context and investigate how the iconographical idiosyncrasies correspond to their medical functions. It is first, however, necessary to look more broadly at the use of Zodiac and Phlebotomy Man diagrams.

The Zodiac Man, also known as the Man of Signs (*homo signorum*), is the most ubiquitous medieval medical image. The diagram functions as a visual description of the relationship between the macrocosm of the universe and the microcosm of the individual human body. It is a representation of *melothesia*, the belief that the stars, the moon and the planets directly affected the human body. The schema was often reproduced in different contexts, such as medical texts, folding almanacs or even psalters. The appearance of the figure changed radically during the medieval period, depending on the different contexts, audiences, or patrons. However, certain characteristics were universal: the signs or names of the star signs were always superimposed on or beside the male body. The position of the star signs correlated to the parts of the body that the sign was thought to exert influence over. Aries, the ram, was connected to the head, Taurus, the bull, with the shoulders and Gemini, the twins, with the arms. Carole Rawcliffe argues that although the figures are often arresting and beautiful, ‘their purpose was essentially didactic.’<sup>1</sup> According to her, the diagram was a tool

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1 Rawcliffe, Carole, *Medicine and Society in Later Medieval England* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1995),

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used when calculating auspicious times for medical treatments, such as bloodletting, purges, or collection of herbs.<sup>2</sup>

The Phlebotomy Man is iconographically and intellectually linked to the Zodiac Man. The structure and appearance of the two diagrams are often very similar and they are expressions of related medical practices. The Phlebotomy Man diagrams represent one facet of contemporary medical theory; the idea that illness could be treated through careful adjustment of the humoral balance within the body and that health should be maintained by blood-letting throughout the year.<sup>3</sup> The schema shows where on the human body to bleed to cure specific ailments. The male body in the Phlebotomy Man diagram is usually shown naked in a frontal position. The image is often linked to the Zodiac Man through its appearance, placement on the page and the content of the text surrounding it.

The Zodiac Man diagrams belong to a long intellectual and iconographic tradition that has been traced by Charles Clark. It was a representation of *melothesia*, a theory best known through the many commentaries on Plato's *Timaeus* (c.360 BC).<sup>4</sup> Clark further differentiates between the medical and non-medical uses of the figure, throughout the medieval period. He argues that at its conception the figure had several different simultaneous purposes and meanings. He claims that although the medical functions were known in the early medieval period, that 'it may be fair to characterize the most ancient references to the *homo signorum* as specific instances of the macrocosmic-microcosmic analogy.'<sup>5</sup> The Phlebotomy Man

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86. See also: Clark, Charles, 'The Zodiac Man in Medieval Astrology,' *Journal of Rocky Mountain Association* 3 (1982), 13-38. Clark, Charles, *The Zodiac Man in Medieval Medical Astrology* (PhD thesis, Department of History, University of Colorado, 1979).
- 2 Ibid., 87.
- 3 On the medieval practice of phlebotomy see: Gil-Sotres, Petro, 'Derivation and Revulsion: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Phlebotomy,' in *Practical Medicine from Salerno to the Black Death*, ed. by Luis Garcia-Ballester, Roger French, Jon Arrizbalaga and Andrew Cunningham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 110-155; Voigts, Linda and Michael McVaugh, 'A Latin Technical Phlebotomy and its Middle English Translation,' *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 74 (1984), 1-73.
- 4 Clark, Charles, 'The Zodiac Man in Medieval Astrology,' *Journal of Rocky Mountain Association* 3 (1982), 15-16.
- 5 Ibid., 20. See also: Clark, *The Zodiac Man in Medieval Medical Astrology* (1979). Clark also discusses the iconographical development of the signs superimposed on the body. He argues

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diagrams have not been as extensively studied as the Zodiac Man figures. Nevertheless, they are often understood as connected to these cosmological schemas and fruitfully discussed in relationship to them. Clark believes that the inclusion of the Phlebotomy Man, as a complimentary diagram to the Zodiac Man was perhaps to reassure prospective patients of the practitioners' medical competency.<sup>6</sup> Another example of how this image might have functioned in a social context can be found in France, where, in 1427, Charles VII ordered all barbers to display an image of the Zodiac Man in their shops, to guide practitioners in their medical practice and to protect the sanctity of the human body.<sup>7</sup> The order reveals additional contemporary audiences and purposes of the diagrams.

In Wellcome 8004, the Phlebotomy Man diagram is drawn within a small contained landscape. His arms are raised and red lines connect specific points on the body with possible treatments, listed around the figure.<sup>8</sup> The male body is drawn between two green valleys and surrounded by a blue sky.<sup>9</sup> The geographical features of the landscape surrounding the male figure in this schema mirror the movement of the red lines connecting the adjacent texts with the body. Similarly, the Zodiac Man diagram has the symbols of the star signs drawn over the male form, accompanied by legends indicating the names of the zodiac signs. This figure is, as opposed to the Phlebotomy Man, not situated within a landscape, but rather drawn against a red and gilded background. The Zodiac Man is standing with his arms stretched out and his hands reaching outside of the frame of the illustration, he is breaking free of the confines of the borders on the page.

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that some of the connections between sign and body part have a long history independent of the Zodiac Man. One such example is the correspondence between Scorpio and the genitals. For more on this see page 378.

6 Clark, *The Zodiac Man in Medieval Medical Astrology* (1979), 358-360.

7 Camille, Michael, 'The Image and the Self: Unwriting Late Medieval Bodies,' in *Framing Medieval Bodies* ed. by Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), 62-99.

8 For example, on the top left corner of the diagram, in Wellcome MS 8004, f. 18 v: 'The vein in the outer part of the nose opened, helps the brain and cleanses the mind.' *The veyn in the utturst part of the nose opynd helpis þ<sup>e</sup> brayne & clense þ<sup>e</sup> mynde.*

9 Another striking visual difference that sets the two figures apart is the demarcated ribs of the Phlebotomy Man, which might hint towards the practical uses of this diagram, as the inclusion of the ribs may have provided further guidance when locating specific veins.

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The iconographical choices made in both of these depictions are indicative of their medical functions. The Phlebotomy Man is contained within the blocks of texts surrounding him, in a manner analogous to understanding phlebotomy as an adjustment of the internal balance. Similarly, the red lines connecting places used for venesection with text surrounding the body mirror the geographical features in the surrounding landscape, in the same way as the humoral balances fluctuated with changes in the seasons. Meanwhile, the Zodiac Man is a larger figure than the comparable Phlebotomy Man. The Zodiac Man is not contained by blocks of texts, but dominates the page. The figure is a representation of the cosmic influences on the human body, the effects of the macrocosm on the microcosm, and as such breaks free of the borders and the *mise-en-page* of the codex. A professional artist, not a medical professional, produced these diagrams yet the stylistic choices indicate a clear understanding of the purposes and intellectual content of the schemas. Further, when considering the manner in which the Zodiac Man's hands are drawn, it is clear that there is still work to be undertaken on the possible use of religious or devotional images as models for medical depictions, and the potential relationship between this particular diagram and the pilgrimage tract that follow some twenty folios after.

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## IMAGES



Zodiac Man, *The Physician's Handbook: English medical and astrological compendium* 1454. Credit: London, Wellcome Library, MS 8004, fol. 40r. License: [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

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Wellcome Images

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