

## Obituary

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MICHAEL WALTER DOLS (1942–1989)

On 1 December 1989 Professor Michael W. Dols died in the United States after a long and difficult illness. With his passing, medical history lost one of its foremost Arabist representatives.

A native of Baltimore, Michael Dols received his BA in History from Trinity College (Hartford) in 1964 and an MA from the University of North Carolina in 1967. Drawn to the study of the Middle East at a time when the region was receiving increased attention in American academic circles, he went to Princeton in 1967 to begin Ph.D. work in Near Eastern Studies. There he came into contact with an active circle of scholars pursuing the social and economic history of medieval Islam (in particular A. L. Udovitch, his dissertation advisor) and concentrated on Mamlûk Egypt and Syria. Taking up a suggestion from Udovitch, he wrote his dissertation on the Black Death in the Middle East and received his doctorate in 1971.

This introduction to medical history was decisive, for all of Dols's subsequent research was to turn on the social history of medicine in medieval Islam. Perhaps the most striking features of his work were its extremely broad scope, its sensitivity to what medieval Muslims thought about and considered important, and its exploration of ways in which medical practice and medical problems fit into broader social contexts. In sharp contrast to the more traditional work of that time, Dols was but little interested in Carlylean great figures, still less in great texts, and his research often pursued important but neglected problems for which little, if any, of even the most basic groundwork was in place.

His dissertation, published as *The Black Death in the Middle East* (1977) is a striking example of this. Though of unquestioned importance, the topic had not previously received the attention it deserved. It is not difficult to see why. The medieval Arabic plague treatises—crucial to any discussion—were (and remain) almost all unpublished, scattered throughout the Middle East and the West and often miscatalogued under such rubrics as “prayer” or “mysticism”. The issues the medieval material raised were, furthermore, often ones that did not rank high on the usual agenda of modern Western scholars, e.g. prayers, incantations, and remedies involving magic squares and talismans; and even the basic comprehension of these discussions confronted the researcher with the thorny problem of an obscure and erratic technical vocabulary. The subject was indeed, as the late Richard Ettinghausen once told Dols, “a great undertaking”.

Dols's study was a work of fundamental importance. The fixing of the chronology and distribution of the Black Death in the Middle East marked a major advance in itself, and it was for this that the book was so well received and for which it continues to be best known. But in fact Dols devoted far greater attention to other issues: medical observations; popular and medical terminology; interpretations of the disease in terms of medicine, religion, and magic; demographic issues; urban communal behaviour during the epidemic; its impact on prices, labour, land use, and commerce; later recurrences of the plague; and the unpublished Arabic plague treatises available for study. Almost none of this had been covered in any detail in previous scholarship, and much of it had been unknown. The appearance of *The Black Death in the Middle East* thus marked one of those felicitous occasions when a profoundly obscure subject is suddenly elucidated in fine detail and the paths for future research clearly marked.

Dols promoted the knowledge of numerous other topics with insightful articles on such subjects as leprosy, malaria, and insanity, and with useful translations and discussions of medieval works. Most notable among these latter is his *Medieval Islamic Medicine: Ibn Ridwân's Treatise “On the Prevention of Bodily Ills in Egypt”* (1984). Though it posed certain difficulties (largely beyond his control), this work published an important essay by an eleventh-century Egyptian physician and allowed Dols, as he once wrote to me, “to go beyond dehumanized stereotypes and recreate the world of the Muslim physician in terms of a genuine living personality . . .”.

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Dols' last years were mostly dedicated to another "great undertaking", the history of the hospital in medieval Islam. Here again he pursued research involving a complex range of issues and problems. At an early stage, he once told me, he realized that the vast material on the madman made it difficult to discuss insanity in medieval Islamic society solely within the context of the hospital. His solution was to deal with madness separately, in a book to be entitled *Majnûn: The Madman in Islamic Society*. This work was to consider such matters as attitudes toward the insane, the madman as a familial, communal, and legal problem, and medical, religious, and institutional aspects of madness.

Here again he would be obliged to lay much of the groundwork himself and cope with a vast variety of source materials: medicine, history, biography, law, theology, literature, and official documents. Time for such work had been difficult for Dols to find, for his career at the California State University (Hayward) involved a heavy teaching load in medieval history, European as well as Islamic, and energetic involvement in other university affairs. All this did not pass unrecognized (he was promoted to full professor in 1981 and received the university's Exceptional Merit Service Award in 1984), but new opportunities for research brought him to England in 1985 to take up a position as a Visiting Scholar at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, and a Visiting Research Fellow at the Oxford Wellcome Unit. Dols seemed to thrive in the academic milieu of Oxford and the company of his British and continental colleagues, and, most importantly, was able to devote his time and energy to *Majnûn*. Once this was completed he intended, as he liked to say, to return immediately to the hospital, from which the madman had temporarily distracted him.

The diversion was unfortunately not to be a temporary one. Failing health after 1987 made work increasingly difficult and finally impossible, though he often reassured alarmed colleagues and friends and, even as late as the summer of 1989, was still discussing new ideas and future plans. In the end, it proved possible for him only to finish *Majnûn*, now in the hands of the Oxford University Press.

The death of an esteemed colleague is always an occasion for profound regret, the premature passing of one just as he was reaching the most promising years of an already fruitful career especially so. Michael Dols leaves behind, however, a legacy of scholarship of enduring importance, a field better understood where he had sown, and memories among friends of a gentle and amiable man whose quiet demeanour belied the intensity of his dedication to his work.

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