

QUEDLINBURG, WORLD HERITAGE AND HOME TOWN OF DOROTHEA ERXLEBEN, THE FIRST GRADUATED LADY DOCTOR

QUEDLINBURG, GRAD SVJETSKOG NASLIJEĐA I DOM DOROTHEJE ERXLEBEN, PRVE DIPLOMIRANE LIJEČNICE U NJEMAČKOJ

Alexander Kast*

SUMMARY

In Quedlinburg, which was founded in 922 by the Saxon King Henry I, there was a convent for unmarried daughters of the European highest nobility. This Imperial Ladies' Convent (936-1802) helped many a girl to build self-confidence. It is no wonder then that the first German lady physician, Dorothea Erxleben (1715-62) was a Quedlinburgian. After being granted the right to take medical examinations by Frederick II, King of Prussia, on 12 June 1754, Dorothea Erxleben received a medical degree from Halle University as the first woman to do that in Germany, long before 1899 when women were first admitted to medical state exams.

Keywords: *History of medicine, 18th century, Dorothea Erxleben, Germany, lady physician, Quedlinburg, Imperial Ladies' Convent*

Since 1972 and the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, UNESCO has kept a list of the World Heritage which today includes 754 protected and preserved objects of international interest. By 14 August 2003, this list included altogether 27 loca-

* Head Institute of Exp. Pathology/Nippon Boehringer Ingelheim Co. Ltd. in Kawanishi, Japan (1968-88), Priv. Doz. Univ. Gießen, Hessen (1989-93).
Adresse: Priv. Doz. Dr. Alexander Kast, Dr. Gebauer Str. 38, D-55411-Bingen am Rhein,
E-mail: PDDRAKAST@t-online.de



Figure1 Castle with the buildings of the Ladies' Convent and the Romanic Collegiate Church of St. Servatius (1129). (Photo: A. Kast)

Slika 1. Dvorac sa zgradama Carskog samostana za dame i pripadajuće romaničke crkve Sv. Servatiusa (1129.) (fotografija: A. Kast)

tions in Germany, one of which is the Collegiate Church, Castle, and Old Town of Quedlinburg (since 1994). It covers the widest area of all World Heritage monuments in Germany, that is about 80 ha of winding, narrow lanes with very ancient pavement and 1,100 timber-framed houses (16-17th century). The Collegiate Church of St. Servatius is considered a supreme feat of Romanesque architecture (Fig. 1). The former Imperial Ladies' Convent (constructed in the 16-17th century) now houses the convent's museum. The treasure of the cathedral, formerly owned by the convent, consists of valuable reliquaries, evangeliars (book covers) and other items from the turn of the second millennium of the Common Era.

In May 919 AD, Henry I (875-936) was elected the King of Germany. He founded the first German empire, the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, making Quedlinburg the capital of the Western World for a brief spell in history. In 922, he ordered that a splendid castle be erected on a hill. After he was buried in the castle's chapel, queen dowager St. Mathilde (894-968) commissioned a convent for ladies and was its mother superior until she died. In 994, Emperor Otto III (980-1002) invested the abbess with the privileges to hold a market, to mint her own

coinage and to collect customs as the means of revenue of a sovereign. The Imperial Ladies' Convent for the unmarried daughters of the European highest nobility continued until the time of Napoleon. It was secularised and dissolved in 1802.

As a pre-eminent spiritual and cultural centre of the German Empire, the Ladies' Convent of Quedlinburg played an important role in the Middle Ages and contributed to the development of the self-confidence of women. It is no wonder then that the first German lady physician, Dr Dorothea Christian Erxleben (13 November 1715 to 13 June 1762) was a Quedlinburgian (Fig. 2). Women of the time were not allowed to study medicine at Halle University. Following a petition, however, Frederick II, the King of Prussia, granted her the right to take medical exams in 1741. Despite hostilities of licensed physicians, on 12 June 1754 she received a medical degree as the first woman in German history.

Dorothea was born to an advanced physician, Dr Christian P. Leporin (1689-1747) and to his wife Anna, a daughter of a consistorial counsellor Meineken, pastor at St. Nicholas and inspector of the local grammar

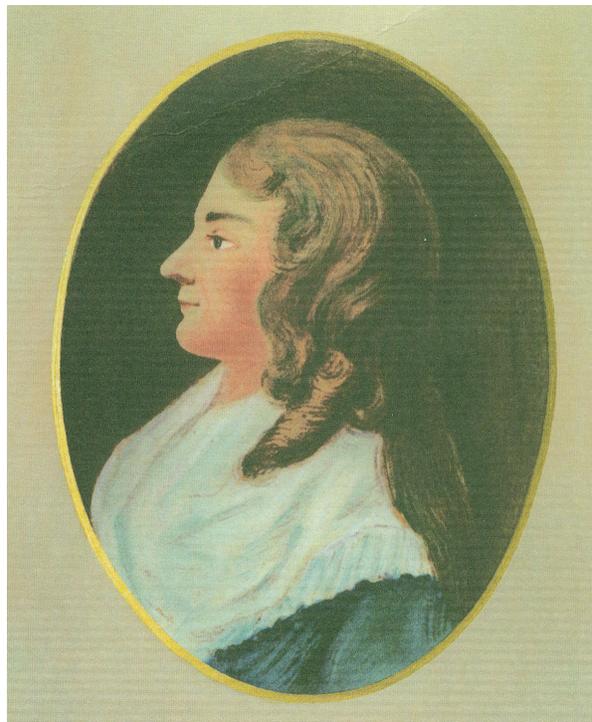


Figure 2 / Slika 2.
Dorothea Christine
Erxleben

school. As Dorothea wrote in her curriculum vitae, her respected father was an excellent medical practitioner who composed an elaborate guide to improve the quality of medical education. Dorothea grew up in her father's idealistic world. Unfortunately, Dr Leporin was not shrewd with money. Repeatedly his family suffered financial difficulties and depended on the help from the convent (Stiftshauptmann Freiherr von Plotho). Dorothea received medical training together with her elder brother. She would accompany her father and her brother in nearly all house calls. Eventually, she decided that nothing should keep her off from the study of medicine.

When her father prepared his eldest son for the study of medicine at Halle University, on 26 November 1740, she wrote a petition to the Prussian King. She wanted to reach two goals; the first was to have her brother exempted from military service and the second to receive permission to study medicine, which was an unprecedented request in Prussia at



Figure 3 The Convent lane with St. Nicholas' Church at which Dorothea's grandfather, pastor Erxleben preached

Slika 3. Samostanska šetnica i crkva Sv. Nikole u kojoj je propovijedao Dorothein djed, pastor Erxleben (fotografija: A. Kast)

the time. The exemption of her brother failed due to the outbreak of the Seven-Year's War, but Frederick the Great granted her the right to study medicine. Her graduation was delayed by the marriage with pastor Christian Erxleben, a widower and a father of five children (Fig.3). The family Erxleben lived in a parsonage on Kaplanei Gasse 10. In 1742, Dorothea published an article in Berlin: "An Investigation of the Reasons Which Prohibit Women to Study". As the wife of a pastor, she supported her father in his medical practice. When her father, ideal and mentor, died on 29 November 1747, he left behind a debt of 126 Reichsthaler.

Dorothea continued to visit and treat poor patients. When jealous colleagues accused her of charlatanism, the convent (Stiftshauptmann Freiherr von Schellersheim) ordered her to bring her thesis to the medical faculty of Halle University. She submitted her thesis under the title "Academic Article on the Quick and Comfortable, but Uncertain Treatment of Diseases" written in Latin. On 6 May 1754, she passed a two-



Figure 4. Memorial tablet and portrait of Dr Dorothea Erxleben in 10 Kaplanei Alley 10 (or better Kaplanei Gasse 10). (Photo: A. Kast)

Slika 4. Spomen-ploča i portret dr. Dorothee Erxleben na adresi Kaplanei Gasse 10

hour-exam also conducted in Latin. On 18 May, Frederick II signed a decree granting her graduation from Halle University, which was considered as “a casus novissimus bey den teutschen Universitäten”. Thereafter, Dr Erxleben was a recognised practitioner and her patients were mostly women and children. Appointed as a physician in ordinary to abbess Elizabeth, Princess of Holstein, she cured her from smallpox (Fig.4). Two of her sons obtained professorship, Johann Christian (1744-77) in physics in Göttingen and Heinrich (1753-1811) in law in Marburg. On 13 June 1762, Dorothea died from pulmonary haemorrhage, probably because of tuberculosis. Her burial place is unknown. In an obituary, the *Berlinische privilegierte Zeitung* praised her merits and knowledge of French and Latin.

In Germany, the men argue with an assumed greater bashfulness of women as a hindrance for their practical training in medicine. Actually, not until 20 April 1899 had the women been admitted to medical or pharmaceutical state examination, considerably lagging behind other countries: New York (since 1849), Zürich (1867), UK, Sweden, Holland and Russia (1870-80) and Japan (1885).

REFERENCES

1. Böhm H (1985) Dorothea Ch. Erxleben, Leben und Wirken. Städtische Museen Quedlinburg
2. Kast A (2001) The First Graduated Lady Doctor (in Japanese). *Japn. Med.J.* 4015, 49-51

SAŽETAK

Quedlinburg, koji je 922. utemeljio saksonski kralj Henrik I., imao je samostan za djevojke koje su pripadale vrhu europskog plemstva. Taj je tzv. Carski samostan za dame (936. – 1802.) pomogao mnogim djevojkama da izgrade samopouzdanje. Nije stoga slučajno što je prva njemačka liječnica, dr. Dorothea Erxleben (1715. – 1762.) rođena Quedlinburžanka. Dana 12. lipnja 1754., odobrenjem pruskoga kralja Fridrika, Dorothea Erxleben dobila je diplomu iz medicine na Sveučilištu Halle, dakle puno prije 1899. kada je Njemcima prvi put omogućen pristup državnim liječničkim ispitima.

Ključne riječi: povijest medicine, XVIII. stoljeće, Dorothea Erxleben, Njemačka, liječnica, Quedlinburg, Carski samostan za dame