Cultures of Healing: Medieval and After is a compilation of previously published and new articles and chapters by Peregrine Horden, professor of medieval history at Royal Holloway, University of London. It focuses on the history of charity, healing, and medicine from late antiquity through the Middle Ages. Horden places his work under the category of social history and thus includes the histories of folk healers, magicians, alchemists, and the “auto-therapy of ordinary people” alongside that of professional providers, such as physicians and priests (p. ix).

This volume is part of Routledge’s long-running Variorum Collected Studies series. Each title in the series aims to bring together, for the first time, a selection of essays by a leading authority on a particular subject. Cultures of Healing is “both sequel and complement” to Horden’s 2008 volume titled Hospitals and Healing from Antiquity to the Later Middle Ages, also part of the Variorum series (p. i).

The hospital, as a locus of charity and healing in the Middle Ages, is a primary feature of the collection. Seven of the nineteen texts included are about the early history of hospitals, and they discuss topics ranging from the close unity between Christianity and medicine at the time, to asylums for the mentally ill and hospital formularies. Other recurring topics include music therapy, various religions including Islam and Judaism, and medical books. Still, there are a few additional outlier essays addressing such topics as the prehistory of infant sexuality or demons as they related to illness over the “long” Middle Ages. The primary geographical focus of the collection is western Eurasia.

In the opening essay, “The World of the Hospital: Comparisons and Continuities,” Horden and his co-writers, John Henderson and Alessandro Pastore, wager that “for the first millennium of its history, indeed for longer than that, the modal hospital—the commonest form of hospital—was charitable, funded for the poor and offering the therapy of religion, a regulated environment, and a proper diet, rather than the attentions of secular physicians. That first millennium must be viewed in its own light, rather than that cast by the period since 1900” (p. 15). This historiographical lens provides readers with an argumentative thread that weaves through the many seemingly disparate texts included in the volume. Through including such topics as music therapy and by injecting the recurring themes of charity and welfare, Horden is, perhaps, exercising the method of viewing pre-medicalized hospitals in their own light, rather than a retroactive one.

The brief preface provides key information about the organizational and argumentative logic
of the book. The texts are organized chronologically by time period covered. Where appropriate, postscripts to essays provide a discussion of literature that has been published on a topic since the original article’s or chapter’s publication. Horden has also added additional, more recent, references throughout many of the texts in square brackets. A modest index is included.

Scholars and researchers interested in health and medicine during the medieval era, the history of hospitals in western Eurasia, and/or the history of charity and welfare will find a welcome companion in this volume.

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