



## Review

# Stigmatization of obesity in medieval times: Asia and Europe

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**OBJECTIVE:** To describe the stigmatization of obesity in medieval times in Asia and in Europe.

**DESIGN:** Literature review.

**RESULTS:** Obesity was stigmatized in medieval Japan in part, at least, because it was viewed as the karmic consequence of a moral failing in a Buddhist context. The stigma in Europe was based on the Christian deadly sin of gluttony.

**CONCLUSION:** Stigmatization of obesity is not new. It was foreshadowed centuries ago by attitudes deriving from then extant theories of the origins of obesity.

**Keywords:** disparagement of obesity; medieval Japan; medieval Europe; gluttony; overeating; deadly sins

## Introduction

Prejudice and discrimination plague the lives of the obese. Early in life, children say that they would prefer as friends children depicted with missing legs or eyes, with any disability, rather than obesity.<sup>1–4</sup> As adults, obese individuals say that they themselves would prefer to be blind or deaf, or have any disability, rather than that of their obesity.<sup>5</sup>

Where does the stigma come from? It is common to blame the current cult of thinness. Dissatisfaction with one's body weight today is so common among women as to constitute a 'normative discontent'.<sup>6</sup> This dissatisfaction extends to all of the developed world, and even the traditional approbation of corpulence in the developing world is eroding. Do these attitudes result from some deep-seated social disapproval of obesity and obese persons? Examples from other times and cultures, far from the cult of thinness, may be instructive.<sup>7</sup>

## Asia

The first example is derived from medieval Japan, at a time when there was great interest in the classification of disease and in the portrayal of specific symptoms. This interest is richly documented in a scroll dating

from the 12th century, which originally portrayed 22 such diseases, accompanied by a few sentences of explanatory text. The scroll, usually referred to as *yamai-zōshi* (picture-scroll of illnesses), is a superbly crafted work, that is considered a treasure of realism within Japanese art history. At some time after its production, it was cut into a number of separate frames. One frame (Figure 1), housed in the Art Museum of the city of Fukuoka, depicts 'an obese woman' (*himan no onna*). The text that accompanies the illustration states:<sup>8</sup>

'Recently in the Shichijō (section of Kyoto) there was a woman money-lender who became exceedingly wealthy. Because she ate all kinds of rich foodstuffs, her body became fat and her flesh too abundant. She could not walk easily and when doing so she needed the help of her servant-girls. Even with that assistance, however, she perspired profusely, gasped for breath and suffered without let-up.'

The description of the woman as a money-lender is important in understanding her plight. In ways that parallel the castigation of usury in medieval Europe, religious authorities in medieval Japan viewed the lending of money at high interest as a moral fault and one which they vigorously criticized. To them it represented selfishness and greed, and was viewed negatively in most of the Buddhist-influenced tale-literature of the period.<sup>9</sup> This woman's greediness was seen as leading to wealth and that wealth, in turn, giving her access to the rich foods that were her downfall—a downward trajectory of moral failures. The authorities of the age assumed that there was a karmic price for this behavior and the physical

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**Figure 1** The obese woman is shown being supported by two servant girls as she walks. Another servant accompanies them and carries something wrapped in cloth. In the background is a woman nursing a naked child. To the far right of the frame are two partially hidden men. One smirks while the other's wide-open mouth and hand-to-the-head gesture, indicates that he is laughing uproariously at the sight of the obese woman struggling to walk.

condition of the obese woman was seen as such retribution. The text, shaped by this view of karmic cause-and-effect, concludes by referring to her 'suffering without let-up'.

Other frames of the scroll depict other illnesses in the same way, as karmic consequences of moral failings. Depictions of Parkinson's disease, halitosis and hermaphroditism also show persons guffawing at the plight of the afflicted. Thus, obesity was not singled out for special negative attention, but the negative attention was clearly present nine centuries ago in a culture not afflicted by the cult of thinness.

Another aspect of the obese-woman text, is that her obesity was viewed as the result of over-eating, an association that was recognized at the time. The *Kokon-chomonjū*, compiled in 1254 by Tachibana No Narisue, tells of a nobleman who was known as a gourmand. Having become so fat that he was uncomfortable in the summertime, he summoned a physician, who recommended that he eat rice gruel.<sup>10</sup>

'Then one day the physician went to see how his patient was doing. He watched him eat. In no time at all the man consumed all the rice gruel that had been piled up in two silver bowls that were 46 centimeters wide, plus between 50 and 60 pieces of sushi topped with *ayu* fish. Seeing this, the physician exclaimed, 'I get the picture' and dashed off.'

## Europe

It has been proposed that today's harsh judgements of obese persons in the West are a modern development and that, in an earlier, more enlightened era, corpulence was highly regarded. The paintings of fleshy women by artists such as Rubens and Renoir are often cited in support of this view. But the products of these



**Figure 2** The central figure of the picture is an obese man devouring the last bit of meat from a bone with one hand, while the other hand clasps a jug. He is seated before a table with a partially eaten piece of meat, while a servant enters bearing a cooked chicken and another man is consuming the contents of a large bottle. Reflecting the preoccupation with gluttony, a child, probably also obese, approaches the glutton with outstretched hands, apparently reaching for his food.

artists may tell us more about the interests of their patrons than about popular attitudes. When we turn to these attitudes, a different and less flattering picture emerges, with gluttony as a key feature. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul excoriated, 'the enemies of the cross of Christ whose end is destruction, whose god is in their belly'.<sup>11</sup> This message that served as a basis for the classic definition of gluttony which has achieved signal importance in Christian thought.<sup>12</sup> Tertullian in the third century, ascribed Adam's eating of the apple to gluttony, which he accorded as important a role, in the Fall, as the currently more familiar sin of pride.<sup>13</sup> Both Augustine in the fifth century and Gregory I in the seventh century, incorporated gluttony into their developing definition of the Seven Deadly Sins.<sup>14</sup> Reflecting the rarity of obesity, gluttony was not associated with it during this period, but the stage was set for such linkage when enough food became available.

By the 15th century, sufficient food was available for Hieronymus Bosch to link gluttony and obesity in his portrait of *The Seven Deadly Sins*,<sup>15</sup> a graphic parallel to the Japanese *Scroll of Illness*. The picture is in the form of a large circle with seven panels radiating out from a small circle representing the eye of God, from which no sin is hidden. Each panel is devoted to one of the Seven Deadly Sins, concretely depicted in scenes of daily life. Representation of the sins in the same work of art reflects the view that they were transgressions that easily led from one to another, a Western view of the downward trajectory of moral failure embodied in the story of the Japanese fat woman.

The secular literature of the time continued the theological concern with gluttony and in both Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*<sup>16</sup> and Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*,<sup>17</sup>

it continued to be viewed as the basis of Adam's sin. But it was Shakespeare who most clearly linked gluttony, obesity and stigma.

'Falstaff: You make fat rascals, Mistress Doll.

Doll: I make them! Gluttony and disease make them'.<sup>18</sup>

Shakespeare was more than articulate on the subject of stigma, with Falstaff vilified as a '... fat-kidneyed rascal. ... fat guts. ... horseback breaker. ... huge hill of fat. ... swollen parcel of dropsies. ... stuffed cloak-bag of guts. ... roasted ox with the pudding in its belly. ...'.<sup>19</sup>

## Discussion

Obesity was stigmatized centuries ago in both Buddhist and Christian cultures, but for different reasons. In the Buddhist culture, stigma was ascribed to popular views of karma, which saw in suffering the inevitable retribution for moral failure in this or previous lives. In a Christian culture, by contrast, the stigma was ascribed to transgressions against the authority of an omnipotent god. In each culture, obese persons were seen as perpetrators. Our current, more valid theories, which see obese persons more as victims (of their heredity and environment), may help us to approach them with more compassion than they have been accorded in the past.

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