Background

My project explored the multiple social and intellectual roles of the illustrations in medieval surgical manuscripts. I used the framework of Peter Murray Jones, who has recently offered us a set of questions and issues to be addressed in analyzing any medieval medical image, to interrogate images in surgical manuscripts. Unlike today, the author of a text was only sometimes involved in the illustrative process; some texts only acquired illustrations in manuscripts made long after their author was dead. More specifically, I examined the illustrations in the manuscripts attributed to the “learned surgeons” of the 13th &14th centuries (Theodoric Borgognoni, Bruno Longobucco, Guglielmo da Saliceto, Lanfranc of Milan and Henri de Mondeville), whose Michael McVaugh has argued, created a new ideal of surgery as a university-based body of knowledge. I compared them with those of Roger Frugard and Roland de Parma, who worked a century earlier, creating a new role for surgeons distinct from physicians. I address basic questions about the multiple functions of illustrations in these manuscripts. Do illustrations function as “how-to” images, mnemonic aids, decorative additions and/or models of social behavior?

2. ILLUSTRATIONS USED AS INTRODUCTIONS TO TEXTS

[Images of illustrations from medieval surgical manuscripts]

3. PICTURES AS MNEMONICS

[Images of illustrations used as mnemonics]

4. MONDEVILLE’S ANATOMY

[Images of illustrations from Henri de Mondeville’s work]

Methods

I researched the history of medieval surgery, as well as that of medieval manuscripts. I read French, Latin & English published translations of the extant medieval surgical manuscripts. I located digital copies of the illustrations in the medieval surgical manuscripts and I analyzed the images through questions such as: what kind of social relations are depicted between doctor and patient, doctor and other doctors, and doctors and students/assistants? How is the role of the surgeon modeled? What are the functions of the illustrations in these manuscripts? Do they provide detailed how-to instruction? In doing so, I explored larger questions regarding the origin of the illustrations, their purpose and their content.

Results/Conclusions

After careful analysis of the images in the manuscripts mentioned above, it became clear that illustrations played multiple roles in medieval surgical manuscripts. Many of them provided visual instructions on how to perform a procedure. Some even provided sequential “how-to” images, detailing for a surgeon a step-by-step approach to a procedure. Some illustrations took the place of words, for example, showing exact locations on the body for cautery, details that would have been more difficult to put into words than to demonstrate visually. The 14th-century surgeon Henri de Mondeville used images to demonstrate human anatomy, the first such use in a surgical manuscript. Other illustrations functioned in ways particular to the reading culture of medieval manuscripts. Such manuscripts lacked the paratexts that we take for granted in printed books: chapter headings, tables of contents, and other means to navigate the text, and were often committed to memory because of their scarcity. So some manuscripts have but a single illustration, placed at the beginning of the manuscript, designed so that a reader can quickly identify the subject of the particular manuscript (often medieval books contained a number of separate manuscripts bound together). Other illustrations served as finding aids, showing a reader where in the text a particular topic was addressed. Some images were used as mnemonic aids for memorizing the text, with distinctive colors and backgrounds to aid memorization. Finally, all these images taken together give us a rare glimpse into what and who a surgeon was at the very beginning of surgery as a distinct profession.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Mary Fissell for her guidance. Ms. Christine Ruggere for her assistance in locating resources and the Office of Student Affairs for the financial support for the project.