

# DI SIMONI, LUIGI VINCENZO (NOVI, 1792 – RIO DE JANEIRO, 1881)

Scientia, vol. IV, n. 1 (giugno 2026)

DOI: 10.61010/2974-9433-202601-17

ISSN: 2974-9433

*Received 25/05/2025 | Accepted 15/05/2026 | Published 29/06/2026*

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**Parole chiave:** Brasile, secolo XIX; medicina e farmacia; istituzionalizzazione  
**Keywords:** Brazil, 19th century; medicine and pharmacy; institutionalisation

The physician Luigi Vincenzo Di Simoni<sup>1</sup> lived in the capital of the Empire of Brazil for over six decades. During this period, he worked in hospitals and private practice, served on public health medical commissions, authored scientific articles, was a founding member of the Sociedade de Medicina do Rio de Janeiro, and participated in various Brazilian medical-pharmaceutical associations, contributing significantly to the institutionalization of academic medicine during the imperial period.

Born on September 24, 1792, in Novi<sup>2</sup>, he was the son of Giovan Battista Di Simoni, a pharmacist, and Maria Cherubina de Gaspari. In his hometown, between 1798 and 1810, he completed his preparatory studies at the College of Saint George, run by the Regular Clerics of Somasca, an order founded by Saint Jerome Emiliani. Later, in 1815, he earned a doctoral degree from the University of Genoa and, in 1817, pursued further specialization at the University of Pavia. That same year, on July 14, he arrived in Rio de Janeiro, where he adopted the Portuguese form of his name: Luiz Vicente De Simoni.

Di Simoni's journey to Brazil, as he recounts in an autobiographical narrative published in the *Annaes Brasilienses de Medicina* (October and November 1851) [Di Simoni, 1851b; 1851c], resulted from an agreement with the Genoese merchant Paolo Luigi Sivori. Sivori was related to two ladies with whom Di Simoni had lodged during his studies in Genoa. The merchant was

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<sup>1</sup> This study was financed by the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP), Brazil. Process Number 2022/06767-0.

<sup>2</sup> Now the town of Novi Ligure.

preparing to launch his first commercial enterprise in Rio de Janeiro - capital of the Portuguese Empire since 1808 - but was reluctant to entrust his merchandise solely to the ship's captain. Believing his fortune would be more secure with a trustworthy representative, he found the newly graduated physician well-suited for the task: Di Simoni had long known Sivori's relatives, could assist the crew in case of illness, and harbored a strong desire to see the Americas - especially Brazil - a fascination nurtured since childhood.

Aboard the ship 'Isabella', Di Simoni departed from Genoa on March 3, 1817, passing through Salou (Catalonia), Gibraltar, and Pernambuco - where the vessel became the first foreign ship to dock following the Pernambuco Revolution (March to May, 1817) - before arriving in Rio de Janeiro. According to the agreement, he was to manage commercial dealings alongside the captain. The contract also guaranteed him free passage, half the profits from a significant shipment of drugs and other goods, a share of the general cargo, and letters of recommendation to the merchant's cousins should he decide to remain in the city.

For three months, Di Simoni lived aboard the ship and oversaw daily warehouse transactions. However, the business did not proceed as expected - especially regarding the drugs in which he had a particular interest - and, by late September 1817, just days before the ship's return, he decided to stay. He moved his belongings and a small library to the *Hospital da Santa Casa de Misericórdia*. According to his account, he requested a position as an in-house physician after being referred by Caetano José de Almeida, a ceramics merchant. His aim was to study local diseases and observe local medical practices before starting his own clinic. In exchange, he received lodging and meals.

However, contrary to his expectations, the position offered was that of assistant nurse. Di Simoni later admitted to having accepted it due to a misunderstanding, only realizing the nature of the work when he was presented with vesicants and the wounds he was expected to treat. As he recounted: «Faced with this, I was stunned, not knowing what to do, for I could not and would not return aboard, and my resources were very limited. I did not yet know the language, nor could I practice the profession without risk, given the strict regulations in place» [De Simoni, nov. 1851, p. 52]<sup>3</sup>. Encouraged by Dr. Leal - a hospital physician with some knowledge of Italian - Di Simoni accepted the role, hoping for a future promotion. A few days later, six abandoned patients were entrusted to him. «With all diligence», declared the

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<sup>3</sup> All quotations have been freely translated by us.

physician from Novi, he devoted himself to their care, and «they all improved greatly, and all but one recovered» [De Simoni, nov. 1851, p. 52]. As the positive outcomes of his therapeutic interventions continued to multiply, Di Simoni was increasingly sought after by patients. This recognition eventually led to his appointment as head of a hospital ward and his subsequent promotion to the position of assistant physician.

Nonetheless, working at the Santa Casa did not grant him the right to practice freely without authorization from the *Fiscatura-mor*, the body responsible for regulating healing professions. To be officially licensed, he underwent an examination before physicians José Maria Bomtempo – judge commissioner delegated by the *físico-mor* of the Kingdom –, Vicente Navarro de Andrade, and José Francisco de Paula. Upon receiving «full approval», Di Simoni was authorized by D. João VI, on June 12, 1819, to practice «medical science in the cities of Portugal and in any part of my kingdoms, lordships, and conquests» [De Simoni, nov. 1851, p. 50].

Four days later, Di Simoni was appointed *físico-mor* of Mozambique, a region then experiencing demographic growth, driven by the expansion of the transatlantic slave trade [Rodrigues, 2015, p. 618]. Authorization for the voyage was granted on June 28, 1819. In Mozambique, where he remained until September 1821, he oversaw the Royal Hospital, supervising curative practices, and ensured the supply of medicines from Brazil, Asia, and Europe.

During this period (1819–1821), he carefully recorded observations on local diseases, guided by the premise that illnesses varied according to environmental conditions. Di Simoni sought to contribute to the knowledge of local ailments and provide resources for future practitioners, thereby promoting a medical practice specifically adapted to the region's environmental and climatic conditions. This effort culminated in his *Tratado Médico sobre Clima e Enfermidades de Moçambique* [BNRJ, 1821], an unpublished manuscript preserved at the National Library of Rio de Janeiro. His mission, however, was cut short due<sup>4</sup> to the political upheaval of the Liberal Revolution in 1820. He returned to Rio de Janeiro in early 1822, amidst «popular unrest against the Portuguese troops», and remained there for the rest of his life [De Simoni, nov. 1851, p. 52].

Di Simoni's epidemiological concerns in both Mozambique and Brazil were deeply rooted in environmental theories of disease and miasmatic concepts prevalent in early 19th-century medicine. His focus on environmental

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<sup>4</sup> Regarding di Simoni's work in Mozambique, see Rodrigues [2005].

factors - such as climate, topography, and air quality - as primary determinants of disease reflected the contemporary scientific effort to map «medical topographies». By documenting local specificities, Di Simoni sought to integrate these territories into a broader framework of academic medicine, asserting that the physician's role was to decipher the relationship between the environment and the pathological manifestations in the human body.

Back in what would soon become the capital of the Empire of Brazil, Di Simoni resumed his duties at the Hospital da Santa Casa de Misericórdia. There, he twice replaced Dr. Amaro Baptista Pereira during the latter's travels with Emperor D. Pedro I. By 1827, Di Simoni had been appointed a permanent physician of the institution, taking charge of one of the clinical medicine wards; later, in 1852, he was named director of the hospital. His return to Rio de Janeiro also marked the opening of his first private practice. Period newspaper advertisements list several of his office addresses, including Rua do Ouvidor, no. 167; Rua da Carioca, no. 1-A; Rua dos Barbonos; and Rua da Princesa, no. 102.

Luigi Vincenzo Di Simoni was also actively engaged in vital public health initiatives. He was a founding member of the Sociedade de Medicina do Rio de Janeiro, established on June 30, 1829, alongside French physicians Joseph François Xavier Sigaud and Jean Maurice Faivre, and Brazilian José Martins da Cruz Jobim and Joaquim Cândido Soares de Meirelles. Inspired by the Académie de Médecine de Paris, the society's statutes declared its commitment «to concern itself with all matters that may contribute to the advancement of the various branches of the healing arts; to provide competent authorities with opinions on matters of public hygiene; to respond to governmental inquiries, particularly those relating to public health» [*Estatutos*, 1830, p. 5].

Within this association, Di Simoni served as secretary from the very first preparatory meeting on May 28, 1829, until 1872, and was responsible for meticulously recording all of the society's proceedings. On April 28, 1832, following the proposal of Octaviano Maria da Rosa, he was acclaimed perpetual secretary - a title officially confirmed by an imperial decree signed by Minister José Lino Coutinho on May 21, 1832. Much later, during the society's centennial in 1929, he was honored as the 'Chronicler of the Academy'. He authored all session minutes - including those of the inaugural session on April 24, 1830 - as well as the plan for a medical journal presented in October 1830, and every official report and opinion issued by the institution.

However, his contributions extended far beyond secretarial duties. As early as 1830, Di Simoni proposed organizing essay competitions on medical topics, specifically those aimed at improving public health in Rio de Janeiro,

with prizes awarded as gold medals. That same year, in collaboration with Sigaud and Jacinto Rodrigues Pereira Reis, he drafted the *Plano de organização das escolas medicas do Imperio, solicitado pela Augusta Camara dos Deputados* [De Simoni, 1831a]. Two years later, he presented *Reflexões sobre o estado atual da Higiene pública no Rio de Janeiro* [De Simoni, 1832d], seeking to alert authorities to health issues neglected by an administration focused primarily on political matters since Independence in 1822. In a similar vein, during an 1834 session, he addressed the alarmingly unregulated sale of poisonous substances in the capital.

Aligned with the goals of the Sociedade de Medicina do Rio de Janeiro (renamed the Academia Imperial de Medicina in 1835), a significant portion of Di Simoni's work focused on public health organization and clinical practice. Throughout the 19th century, he published numerous articles in burgeoning Brazilian scientific periodicals, demonstrating his deep involvement in disease observation and the development of treatments.

Between the 1830s and 1850s - the most productive period of his career - his notable works include reports on the 1828 epidemic in Magé and Macacu, a discourse on medical school enrollment [De Simoni, 1831a], and proposals for the creation of special establishments for the treatment of the insane. He also authored a description of the yellow fever that struck Rio de Janeiro [De Simoni, 1839] and a memoir on the adherence of the pericardium to the diaphragm [ANM, 183?]. By 1849, he had become the chief editor of the *Annaes Brasilienses de Medicina*, the Academy's official publication.

On February 5, 1850, Di Simoni joined the Central Commission of Public Hygiene (later the Public Hygiene Board), created during the yellow fever epidemic that devastated the court and coastal provinces like Pernambuco and Bahia. The commission was tasked with proposing «all necessary measures to remove so terrible a scourge» and acted as a primary consultant on the epidemic. This was a defining moment: for the first time, an academic body of specialized physicians was entrusted with organizing Brazil's sanitary framework. This allowed professionals like Di Simoni to not only advance public health but to assert the authority of academic medicine over popular healing practices<sup>5</sup>.

In addition to his academic leadership, Di Simoni was a member of various foreign medical societies, including the Sociedade das Sciencias Medicas

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<sup>5</sup> Regarding the medical-pharmaceutical societies of nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro and the processes of institutionalization of medicine and pharmacy, see: Ferreira [nov. 1997-fev. 1998] e Peruchi [2023].

de Lisboa, the Boston Medical Society, the Société Médicale de Louvain, as well as serving as secretary of the Academia Litteraria dei Concordi. Between 1844 and 1864, he served as a counselor to the Imperial Sociedade Amante da Instrução; he held the office of vice president in 1857 and again from 1865 to 1877, later being appointed vice president and honorary president for the 1879–1880 period. Founded on October 5, 1829, under the name Sociedade Jovial e Instrutiva, this institution was dedicated to the education of orphaned and impoverished children.

In 1855, shortly after becoming a naturalized Brazilian citizen, Emperor D. Pedro II appointed him professor of Italian language and literature at the Imperial Colégio Pedro II, where he also taught Latin. He served as a tutor to Princesses Isabel and Leopoldina and distinguished himself as a translator of numerous opera librettos and classical works into Portuguese. A supporter of national musical theatre alongside the Marquês de Abrantes, his efforts culminated in the founding of the Imperial Academia de Música e Ópera Nacional in 1857.

Luigi Vincenzo di Simoni resided in Rio de Janeiro for over sixty years. He died on September 10, 1881, at his home in Botafogo, from pneumonia and chronic cystitis. His obituary in the *Almanak Administrativo, Mercantil e Industrial do Rio de Janeiro* praised his «great erudition and a gift for poetry», noting his «serious demeanor and pleasant manner» [*Almanak*, 1882, p. 61]. He was survived by his wife, Maria Ursolina de Araújo Azambuja (married in 1833), and their fourteen children.

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<sup>6</sup> The list of works by the author included above is limited to his contributions in the fields of medicine and public health. Minutes and other reports produced within the *Academia Imperial de Medicina*, as well as his poetic writings, have not been included.

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