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Historical Notes and Departments



New Light on *Circa instans**

by Frank J. Anderson**

THE *Circa instans* is a 12th century product of the School of Salerno, and the first major attempt of Western pharmacy to go beyond the earlier work of the Greeks and Arabs with an original contribution of its own.¹ The rarity of the work,² either in print or in manuscript, has seriously impeded comparative studies of its contents, and hindered clarification of the many problems concerning its text. Discussion of the *Circa instans*, accordingly, has been sporadic and, at times, confused, doing little to lift the obscurity that has so long surrounded it. That situation can now be relieved through use of facsimiles, photocopies, and more wide-spread diffusion of knowledge about the work itself.

Recently the New York Botanical Garden came into possession of two early manuscripts of the *Circa instans* which were thus joined to the first edition copy, Venice, 1497, already in that institution's collection. A brief description of the manuscripts and the *editio princeps* follows. All items came, originally, from the library of the late Dr. Emil Starkenstein, Professor of Pharmacology at the German University in Prague prior to World War II.

Manuscript A, the earliest, is estimated to be from about A.D. 1190 and contains 69 leaves of vellum upon which the script of at least four, possibly five, scribes presents the text written in pre-Gothic miniscules. Overall dimensions of the volume are $4\frac{3}{4} \times 6\frac{1}{2}$ inches, and 258 items of *materia medica* arranged in alphabetical order are discussed. Rubricated initials, in either red or blue, lead off the separate chapters, and the text of Ms. A is generally shorter than that of Ms. B or of the first edition of A.D. 1497.

Ms. B, assigned to the first quarter of the 13th century, consists of 37 leaves of vellum, $6\frac{3}{4} \times 10\frac{1}{4}$ inches, and contains 261 alphabetically arranged chapters. It is in a late Carolingian style of script that appears to be North Italian in origin, and also the work of a single well trained scribe, probably a monk.

The *editio princeps* is small folio in size, holds 273 alphabetically ordered

*Delivered at the AIHP meeting, New York, May, 1977.

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chapters printed on 27 leaves, and was printed at Venice in 1497 by Bonetus Locatellus for Octavianus Scotus in combination with the works of Serapion, the *Opera medicinalia*.

Ms. A offers internal evidence of having been produced at Montpellier since its script is possessed of pre-Gothic characteristics appropriate to Southern France at the end of the 12th century.⁴ Another indication of its origin is the free use of Arabic numerals which were not introduced into Europe until A.D. 1201, and took another two centuries to gain wide acceptance.⁵ In a 12th century work on pharmacy and medicine they are a particular anomaly, for their earliest use was generally connected with mathematics or astronomy. But since the medical school at Montpellier had been founded by Jews and Arabs knowledge and use of Arabic numerals was natural there,⁶ and utilized for a variety of purposes other than purely mathematical ones.

Another interesting feature of Ms. A is to be found in its statement concerning ambergris which declares that a black color indicates the best* sort. "Et si inveniatur nigra coloris melior indicatur." This contradicts the wording found in Ms. B which says that gray ambergris is best, "Et inventatur grysei coloris melior est." In the 1497 *editio princeps* this remains much the same, but adds to the statement by saying that black ambergris is good for nothing, "Et si inveniatur grisei coloris melior est. Nigra nihil valvet."⁷ Incidentally the word *ambra* is a medieval adaptation of the Arabic *anbar*, and came into use in Europe sometime prior to 1200, the first date recorded for it in the British Academy's *Revised Medieval Word List*.⁸ *Grisei* was not joined to it until the 17th century, although that term was used as early as the 12th century to indicate gray.⁹

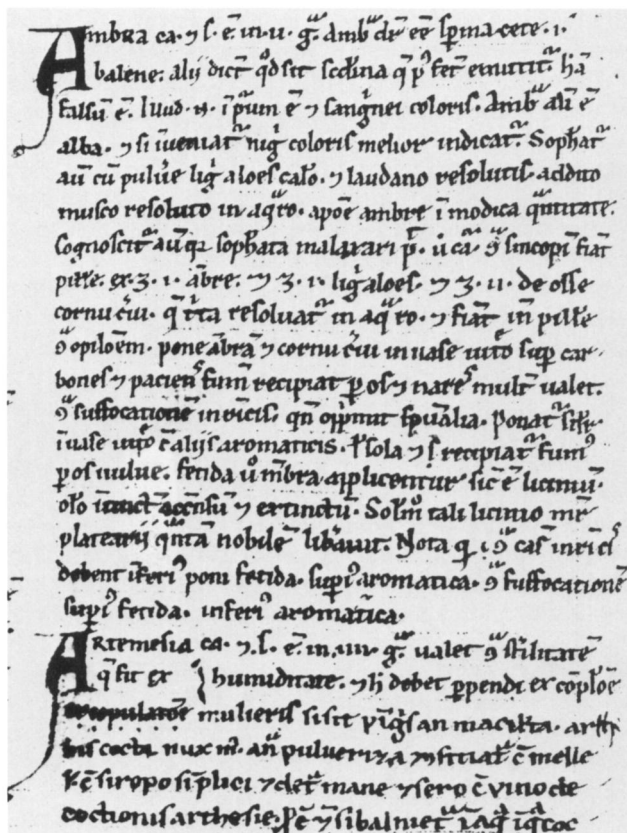
In connection with this discrepancy between texts the remarks of Naves and Mazuyer in their *Natural Perfume Materials*, a 20th century work, are of interest. They found the black ambergris to be the genuine substance, and possessed of different qualities from those found in other kinds, such as gray or yellowish gray.¹⁰ This agrees with the statements of the Salernitans who could be expected to have some familiarity with whales and their physiological products, since they did inhabit a seaport, and their mariners had contact with the Orient from whence the true ambergris of the sperm whale came.

Why, then, do later versions of the *Circa instans* differ from the Ms. A of the 12th century? One plausible explanation is that their remarks about ambergris are later interpolations. It must be remembered that in the year 1194 the Hohenstaufen Emperor, Henry VI, captured and sacked Salerno, with disastrous results for its inhabitants, their culture, and for the School of Salerno. All 12th century Salernitan manuscripts are demonstrably rare, and the probability is that many of them had to be reconstituted from copies made by former students of the medical school and still held in their possession.¹¹ Since Salerno required its students to copy the texts of their masters such manuscripts were in ample supply.

But a new element had been interjected into the medical literature of Europe with the translation of Avicenna's *Canon* by Gerard of Cremona during the latter part of the 12th century. His *Canon* rapidly advanced to a pre-eminent position, and his remarks on *materia medica*, especially about

*Strictly speaking "melior" means "better," but since the other comparatives are not present the word "best" suits the context more accurately.

The passage on Ambra (ambergris) from Manuscript A, circa instans, c. 1190 A.D. (Photograph courtesy of the Library of the New York Botanical Garden.)



items introduced by the Arabs (such as ambergris), were given the full weight of authority. Avicenna's statement about ambergris, that the gray sort was best, and the black was often bad and improper, "Melior est grissia... et deterior est nigra male mala multotiens",¹² was accepted at face value by Europeans who read it, and was probably interpolated as an improvement on the original text when the *Circa instans* was restored and recirculated.

Ms. B, it will be noted, praises gray ambergris but does not, in any way, denigrate the black. In any case Avicenna's evaluation, despite the ready acceptance it found, was based on second-hand information. He lived in an inland situation, and was reliant for the facts upon whatever specimens of ambergris he came upon in the bazaars. The black sort that he decried may have been contaminated because of its travels, or perhaps it may have been a different substance from that discussed in Ms. A.

Another variance occurs in the chapter on Ginger. In Ms. A it is said to be the root of a plant that grows overseas and also in the mountains, "... est radix herbe crescentis in transmarinis partibus et etiam in montosis." Ms. B repeats this verbatim but adds another specific location, Sclavonia (Northern Yugoslavia), "... et in montanis Sclavonie." The 1497 *editio princeps* agrees, stating "... et in montibus sclavonie."¹³ Both Ms. A and the *editio princeps* are

in accord as to its color, a yellowish brown "Caropos est coloris,"¹⁴ but Ms. B restricts that coloration to wild ginger, "Silvestre caropos coloris est."

Among other textual differences Ms. A issues no warning about the lethal effects of *Apium risus*, but the 1497 *editio princeps* clearly says that if taken it is a cause of death, "... et si accipiatur est causa mortis."¹⁵ Ms. B, on the other hand, after noting the fatal qualities of *Apium risus* adds a personal remark by Platearius, "Et hoc vidisse me testificor ego Platearius," that is, "And this I, Platearius, will testify to have seen." Neither the *editio princeps* nor Ms. A carry that direct indication of authorship.

Ms. A, since it seems connected with Montpellier and is of the appropriate period, may well be based on the copy with which Gilles de Corbeil returned from Salerno to introduce Salernitan learning at Montpellier.¹⁶ At Salerno Gilles studied under Matthaeus Platearius before the latter's death in A.D. 1161, copied the *Circa instans*, as was required of Matthaeus' students,¹⁷ and regarded him as a favorite teacher. It follows that he would have been at pains to copy his master's text as faithfully as possible, and therefore that Ms. A, if indeed an early recopying of Gilles' manuscript, probably represents a close approximation to the original text from Platearius' own hand.

At this time nothing can be put forward with assurance and certainty, for medieval manuscripts have a way of chastening theories and theorizers. But the possession of Mss. A and B, together with the presence of the *editio princeps* at the library of the New York Botanical Garden, may clarify some of the more vexatious problems that the *Circa instans* has presented over the years. It is, indeed, to make their availability for study and further examination known that this paper has been presented to the interested scientific community.

NOTES

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- 3 Platearius, *De simplicia medicina* in Serapion's *Opera medicinalia* (Klebs 911.2), Venice, 1497.
- 4 Thomson, S. Harrison, *Latin Bookhands of the Later Middle Ages, 1100-1500*, plates 4 and 6, Cambridge, 1969.
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- 6 *ibid.*, p. 352.
- 7 Platearius, *De simplicia medicina*, fol. 189r, Cap. A XXIII (Klebs 911.2), Venice, 1497.
- 8 *Revised Medieval Latin Word-List*, p. 17, London, 1965.
- 9 *ibid.*, p. 17, p. 216.
- 10 Naves, Dr. Y. R., and G. Mazuyer, *Natural Perfume Materials*, p. 295, New York, 1947.
- 11 Bayon, H. P., *The Masters of Salerno... in Science, Medicine, and History*, Vol. I, p. 211, Oxford, 1953.
- 12 Avicenna, *The Canon*, Liber II, Tractatus II, Cap. LXIII (Klebs 131.11) Venice, 1490.
- 13 Platearius, *De simplicia medicina* fol. 211r., Cap. Z I, (Klebs 911.2), Venic, 1497.
- 14 *ibid.*
- 15 *ibid.*, fol. 188v., Cap. A VIII.
- 16 Burgess, Edward Sanford, *Memoirs of the Torrey Botanical Club, Vol. X, History of Pre-Clusian Botany in its Relation to Aster*, p. 251, Lancaster, Pa., 1902.
- 17 Bayon, H. P., *The Masters of Salerno... p. 217.*