THE *ACHARISTUM* IN A MANUSCRIPT FROM THE LIBRARY OF NICHOLAS OF CUES*

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Collecting mediaeval manuscripts is not what one might call a cardinal sin, unless the collector himself happens to be a cardinal. The cardinal in question would have been one of my closer neighbours, had I lived in the early 15th century. Born in 1401, Nicolaus Cusanus would also have been a close neighbour of Hildegard of Bingen, had she been born three hundred years later. The Cusanus part in Nicholas' name tells us where he came from, the village of Cues (now part of Bernkastel-Kues) on the Moselle river, praised by Ausonius in the 4th century in a Latin poem.

Nicholas spent his life between the Rhine valley and Italy, studying first theology in Heidelberg then law in Padua, and finally in Cologne. From 1432 onwards he was one of the representatives of the Archbishop of Trier at the council of Basle, and some believe that it was there that he acquired the manuscript I am going to discuss.[1] Unlike most of Nicholas Cusanus' collection of medieval manuscripts, which can still be encountered housed in the old hospital at Kues that he founded and where his heart was buried after his death (the body itself remained in Italy in Rome's San Pietro in Vincoli), it did not remain there, but travelled further afield ending up in the British Library in London.

Our manuscript, at present Harley 5792, was written in Italy in the 8th century. It was perhaps the oldest manuscript in Nicholas' collection and must certainly be considered one of the finest. This makes it, not surprisingly, the oldest MS with medical content in the Harley collection. Some eighty years ago it was studied by a young Swiss doctor, Henry E.

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[1] Cf. Sabbadini 1914:16-26, especially 26.

Sigerist (1891-1957), who, much like Nicholas before him, travelled widely.[2] Sigerist's interest in medieval medicine, evidenced here for the first time, was instigated by that of his mentor and predecessor on the Leipzig University's Chair of the History of Medicine, Karl Sudhoff (1853-1938). (This chair, the first to be dedicated to the history of medicine in Germany, had been established in 1905 with an endowment left by the widow of Theodor Puschmann (1844-1899),[3] who had gained his habilitation in medical history at Leipzig in 1878 with his edition of Alexander of Tralles,[4] and from 1879 was professor of medical history in Vienna.) Sigerist had, while still in Zurich, contacted Sudhoff as the leading medical historian of the time, and Sudhoff had directed the budding medical historian towards the study of early medieval recipe collections, because they must be seen as a prelude to the *Antidotarium Nicolai*. The *Antidotarium Nicolai* was elaborated in Salerno in the second quarter of the 12th century and soon became the canonical pharmacopoea that was to dominate pharmaceutical practice until the mid-16th century, leaving traces even in 19th-century European pharmacopoeas.[5]

The fruit of Sigerist's researches into recipes in early medieval MSS was a book entitled *Studien und Texte zur frühmittelalterlichen Rezeptliteratur*, and this was presented, in 1921, as his habilitation thesis at the University of Zurich, Switzerland. In it Sigerist published six distinct collections of recipes, preserved in MSS in libraries both on the continent of Europe and in the British Isles, ranging from the Harley MS, the earliest, to the famous Canterbury classbook, written partly in the mid-11th century and partly somewhat later around 1100 (University Library, Cambridge, England, Gg. 5.35). Two years later, in 1923, Sigerist's habilitation thesis appeared in print as vol. 13 of *Studien zur Geschichte der Medizin*, herausgegeben von der Puschmann-Stiftung an der Universität Leipzig, Redakteur: Karl Sudhoff.[6]

This was Sigerist's first book, followed a few years later by his edition of the herbal of Pseudo-Apuleius and other treatises[7] transmitted in conjunc-

[2] Fee & Brown 1997.
[3] Cf. Locher, Puschmann & Theodor 2004:13-14.
[4] Not replaced to this very day.
[5] See Goltz 1976.
[6] It was reprinted in Vaduz, Liechtenstein, in 1977.
[7] *Antonii Musae de herba uettonica liber; Pseudoapulei herbarius; Anonymi de taxone liber; Sexti Placiti liber medicinae ex animalibus etc.* ediderunt Ernestus Howald et Henricus E. Sigerist, Lipsiae et Berolini 1927 (*Corpus Medicorum Latinorum* editum consilio et auctoritate Instituti Puschmanniani Lipsiensis. IV). It was the last volume in the series that was published before the end of the Second World War; then, the Berlin

tion with it; Sigerist's co-author was the Swiss classicist Ernst Howald (1887-1967), professor of Classics at Zurich from 1918 until 1952. Sigerist's plan of a comprehensive survey of medieval medical manuscripts in Swiss libraries was never even begun in earnest, let alone finished, but Sigerist retained his interest in medieval medicine even after he had taken up a second professorship in the United States, travelling to libraries in France during the summer months in order to catalogue MSS; and the very last work from his pen, published posthumously, happened to address again the medical literature of the early Middle Ages.[8]

So much for biographical detail. Now back to Harley 5792 and the one page of medical interest in it which Sigerist did not publish. It is quite literally a single page, because Sigerist's edition, mentioned earlier, starts on the very *verso* of *fol.* 273, which (one must admit to be fair) begins with a fresh heading. I would venture to suggest that it had been the heading on top of *fol.* 273r that misled Sigerist, and many others with him, by suggesting that the text that follows and which we will study, formed part of a work called *Dynamidia.*

A further digression on recipe collections, or: what are *Dynamidia* and *Antidotaria*?

'Dynamidia' is an entry that one would search for in vain in the *Lexikon des Mittelalters.* Thus a few words on recipe collections in general and the meaning of *dynamidia* in particular will not be amiss.

There is an abundance of works or texts called *dynamidia*, not just the multiple explicits that Loren C. MacKinney alluded to in the title of one of

Academy, where the *Corpus Medicorum Graecorum* had been established in the early years of the 20th century, took over the editorship of the Latin series as well. But it took almost twenty years from the end of the war for the first volumes to appear, second editions (this time with German translations) of E. Liechtenhan's *Anthimus* (*Corpus Medicorum Latinorum* VIII 1) and M. Niedermann's *Marcellus* (*CML* V), to be followed in 1964 by the first 'new' text, Alf Önnerfors' *Plinii Secundi Iunioris qui feruntur De Medicina libri tres* (*CML* III; it lacks a German translation) and in 1990 and 1993 by the two volumes of Gerhard Bendz's edition of the two larger works by Caelius Aurelianus (*CML* VI 1). It will be noted that there was not one German scholar among the editors of these texts.

[8] 'The Latin medical literature of the Early Middle Ages.' *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 13 (1958) 127-46 (being the James Bryce Memorial Lecture delivered at Somerville College, Oxford, on 1 June 1950).

his studies.[9] Especially two among these works are more frequently referred to as *Dynamidia*; one of these is ascribed to Hippocrates, and the other (as one might well have guessed) to Galen. Any experienced medievalist would suspect that these names were invented by unknown and unnamed redactors, or compilers if you wish. Thus, we have the pseudo-Hippocratic *Dynamidia* on the one hand and the pseudo-Galenic *Dynamidia* on the other. Both works seem to have been sufficiently popular and are well attested in medieval MSS, and both still await the attentions of an editor in the true sense of the word. One version of the pseudo-Hippocratic *Dynamidia*, or rather portions of it, was printed by Johannes Schott in Straßburg in 1533, this time under the title of *Oribasii Medici De Simplicibus Libri Quinque.* It is just one item among a number of medieval and late-antique medical texts in the huge tome in question that also comprises the *Physica S. Hildegardis*, the *Theodori Physici Dieta* and Esculapius' book on chronic diseases. The rapid development of the art of medicine in the 16th and 17th centuries must be blamed for the fact that three hundred years were to pass before a part of the *Dynamidia* was printed once more, and then for the benefit of philology and not of medicine, by the second cardinal in our story, Angelo Mai. A generation after him, in 1870 to be precise, Valentin Rose published further parts of the *Dynamidia* from MSS in St Gall and Berlin; and after that, to this very day, no more editions of this text or parts of it have appeared.

Let us now turn our attention to the pseudo-Galenic *Dynamidia* for a moment. This text did not even get an entry in the *Bibliographie des Textes Médicaux Latins* (Saint-Étienne 1986), an oversight which is partly my responsibility. My ignorance can, perhaps, be excused, because the pseudo-Galenic *Dynamidia* was last printed in volume 10 of René Chartier's edition of the works of Hippocrates and Galen, with the imprint of Paris, 1679. The pseudo-Galenic *Dynamidia* comprises two books, of which the first is fragmentary, filling just one large folio page in Chartier's edition, whereas Book 2 runs to 33 pages (vol. 10.670-702), and these are large folio pages with two columns. This pseudo-Galenic *Dynamidia* is a hodgepodge of recipes and of excerpts of complete or incomplete shorter works on medicine from Late Antiquity, somewhat resembling, in this respect, the pseudo-Soranic *Isagoge.* I am not aware of any – and I stress any – secondary literature on the pseudo-Galenic *Dynamidia.*

Some confusion may have been caused by the fact that *dynamidia* are mentioned in both medical and veterinary works and that this was taken as a

[9] MacKinney 1952:195-205.

reference to the *Dynamidia*, meaning a specific work with that title. If so, scholars were mistaken in their identification. *Dynamidia* are mentioned in the writings of Esculapius, in the *Mulomedicina Chironis* and likewise in the pseudo-Galenic *Liber Tertius*; from there, the reference to *dynamidia* passed to the *Passionarius Galieni*, also known as Gariopontus (the alleged author or compiler). I would argue that in all these instances, *dynamidia* refers to a collection of recipes included as an annex to the work in question. Whereas the main body of the medical work was devoted to a discussion of the symptoms and signs and to the therapy of a particular disease, excluding full references to recipes, that appendix contained a collection of recipes mentioned earlier on just by their name. A modern parallel can be found in the 4th edition of the *Merck Veterinary Manual*, Part 7: Prescriptions.

The unambiguous instances of this practice in antiquity are Celsus' work on medicine, parts of Books 5 and 6 and, once more, veterinary texts, the *Mulomedicina Chironis*, Vegetius' *Digesta Artis Mulomedicinalis* and the *Hippiatrica Berolinensia*. Further evidence comes from Oribasius' *Synopsis*, where Book 3 is formed by a series of 220 recipes, and from Paul of Aegina, Book 7, chapters 4-24.[10]

While we know that the pseudo-Galenic *Liber Tertius* in its present form is incomplete and that its recipe section could be missing for that very reason, Esculapius' account of chronic diseases based on Soranus seems to be more or less completely preserved. In this case, I deem it possible that the section on recipes was either never translated into Latin, or that it was lost during a very early stage in the transmission.

Nevertheless, it remains true that collections of recipes were also transmitted as independent works in their own right albeit under different titles, not usually, as far as we know, called *Dynamidia*. Scribonius Largus, the doctor who had accompanied the Roman emperor Claudius on his British campaign in 43 CE, called his manual *Compositiones*, 'recipes'; Marcellus at the beginning of the 5th century chose the title *De Medicamentis*, 'On remedies'; the compilation in three books from Pliny's *Natural History* bears the generic title *De Medicina*; and the poetic work with a similar ancestry, composed by an otherwise unknown Quintus Serenus, is likewise a *Liber Medicinalis*.

Occasionally, the Greeks seem to have used more fanciful titles, like *Narthex*, 'Medicine box', but apart from Galen's two very comprehensive collections, *Medicines Arranged by Kinds* and *Medicines According to Parts of the Body*, only Dioscorides' (or Pseudo-Dioscorides') *Peri euporiston*, 'Easily procured remedies' has come down to us.[11]

[10] I have not personally counted the number of recipes.

All the works I have mentioned so far listed medicaments made up from a combination of various ingredients, *syntheta* or, with their Latin name, *composita*, 'compound drugs'. We must not overlook another kind of recipe book that was perhaps of greater practical importance for the majority of people unable to afford or procure many of the exotic drugs, namely, books listing recipes based on single ingredients ('simples' or *simplicia*), usually plants, but sometimes parts of animals. The foremost representative of this kind of recipe book is the collection of treatises associated with the herbal of Pseudo-Apuleius (see note 6), and, if I am not mistaken, the Greeks had nothing to match it. (The status of a herbal on papyrus from which a splendid illustration has been preserved is not clear.)

I have introduced this distinction between books giving compound drugs and those listing remedies based on simples, whether they be vegetable or animal, because *dynamidia* is indeed attested as a title of recipe books in Late Antiquity or the early Middle Ages. Our witness is Isidore of Seville – not a cardinal, because cardinals of the church in the latter sense had not been invented, but at least a bishop, and a saint. In his *Etymologies* Isidore has a brief section on medical books with an entry on *dynamidia: Dinamidia, potestas herbarum, id est uis et possibilitas. Nam in herbarum cura uis ipsa* δύναμις *dicitur; unde et dinamidia nuncupatur, ubi eorum medicinae scribuntur* ('Dynamidia, the might of the herbs, that is the power and potency, because in herbal cures, this power itself is called *dynamis*'). Therefore, *dynamidia* is the name of a book where the medicines derived from herbs are listed. Isidore's definition may apply to both kinds of recipe books, that is, those listing simple and compound drugs.

We might have expected to find in Isidore another name that medievalists are familiar with, *antidotarium*, literally 'a collection of antidotes'. The original meaning of antidote still current today is 'something given to counteract a poison, either administered by a personal enemy or from the bite of a poisonous snake or spider', also called theriac. Thus, antidotes are very potent drugs and they usually derive their power from an impressive list of ingredients, sometimes as many as one hundred (one version of the *Mithridaticum*). Not surprisingly, antidotes achieved great popularity (at least in pharmaceutical literature), with lists of indications even exceeding in length those of ingredients. But none of the texts edited by Sigerist is, as a matter of fact, called 'Antidotarium' in his manuscript sources. Rather, the

[11] A recent addition is Daria Crismani, *Elio Promoto Alessandrino*, Manuale della salute, Alessandria 2002 (Hellenica. 9).

earliest evidence for *antidotarium*, 'recipe book' comes from the heading of a large collection of recipes preserved in a MS from the abbey of Montecassino (225), dated the second half of the 11th century, just when Constantine the African was active there.

Reading the Harley recipe step by step

Having explored the meanings of *dynamidia* and *antidotarium*, we return to *folio* 273r of our Harley MS.[12] The introduction that precedes the single recipe that follows, before the new heading on *fol.* 273r and the text edited by Sigerist, indicates that it must have started out as the beginning of a collection of recipes, even if it breaks off after the first one, our *acharistum*: *confectionis diuersa antidotis epitemarum uel uniuersarum medicaminum* ('sundry compositions, antidotes, epithems and universal remedies'). The imperfect grammar of the quotation makes it impossible to understand, or translate, these lines with the necessary rigour. The authors named are the top class of ancient physicians, Hippocrates, Galen and Soranus. Soranus is a name we may not have expected to find. This doctor from the late 1st and early 2nd century, and the leading exponent of Methodism, was respected even by Galen who in general cannot be called a friend of methodist doctors and doctrine; and the fact that Soranus figures side by side with Hippocrates and Galen shows us that his renown in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages must have been considerable. Like Hippocrates and Galen, he had works attributed to him that were anonymous compilations, e.g. the *Quaestiones medicinales*, an exposition of medicine in question-and-answer form for beginners, or a treatise on pulses.

What is the meaning of *acharistum*?

The recipe on *fol.* 273r has a name, *acharistum*. Antique compound drugs in fact quite often do have a name. This may be a combination of a generic designation, like 'a poultice', 'an eyesalve', followed for instance by the name of the inventor. Other names of drugs refer to their composition, like *tetrapharmakon*, 'with four ingredients', or *di' oon*, 'with eggs'. Not infrequent are qualifications that emphasize the efficacy of a drug, and as we will discover, it is in this category that the Harley *acharistum* belongs. Our recipe comes with an additional story: a famous doctor (whose name is distorted beyond

[12] An English translation can be found in the Appendix.

recognition) handed it over on his deathbed, as a special gift.

Now, how should we translate *acharistum*? If we consult the standard Greek-English dictionary of Liddell-Scott-Jones, all we learn is that the name was applied to an antidote – correct, but that had been our starting-point – and that it was also used of an eyesalve. The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* agrees: *acharistum* is an eyesalve, quoting Celsus. There are indeed a number of *kollyria* or ophthalmic preparations bearing that name, a name which is of course related to Greek *charis*, meaning 'grace' or 'thanks'; if preceded by a negative prefix its meaning would be something like 'graceless', 'ungracious'. The American papyrologist Louise C. Youtie came up with the translation 'thankless', explaining: 'any salve applied to the eyes would have been uncomfortable and unappreciated, no matter how beneficial.' Is there anybody who would not agree?

The problem of the meaning of *acharistum* is indeed a case of oversight. The correct interpretation can be found in Marcellus (*De Medicamentis* 20.92): 'When administering this remedy, take whatever fee you can get, because many patients who were cured [by it] in no time at all did prove ungrateful, which is why this antidote is called *acharistum*, which means 'no thanks'. Jean de Gorris (Johannes Gorraeus) quotes this passage from Marcellus in the relevant entry in his *Definitiones Medicae* of 1564, as do, at the beginning of the 19th century, the editors of the revised edition of Stephanus' *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*:

> *Acharistós, Antidotus sic dicta propter celerem quam fert opem. Qui enim cito curatur, ingratum se exhibet erga medicum, adeoque se minus periculose laborasse ob repentinam salutem existimat.*
>
> 'an antidote, called thus because it brings speedy relief. Because who is cured quickly, shows ingratitude towards the physician, judging he was less seriously ill on account of his quick recovery.'

It is exhilarating to see that one of the most common medical dictionaries in early modern times, that by Bartholomew Castelli, sides with the patient rather than with the doctor, when it explains:

> *Acharistum*, 'Αχάριστον, *dicitur confectio contra catarrhos ... ita vocata, quod sit gratis & sine munere danda, cujus descriptio extat in* Antidotario *Nicolai* ...
>
> 'a compound for catarrh, called thus because it has to be administered gratis and without fee, whose composition is given in the *Antidotarium*

Nicolai ...'

This error was caused by the fact that the compiler of the *Antidotarium Nicolai*, while translating *acharistum* correctly as *sine munere*, did not elaborate any further.

The indications

Having dealt with the first two paragraphs of the recipe, we now turn to the next section, which gives the indications or conditions the drug was supposed to cure. It emerges that this *acharistum* is not for catarrh (as the entry in Castelli stated), underlining the fact that *acharistum* is really a general term, not the name of a particular remedy with a fixed composition. The Latin text in the Harley MS is here so badly disfigured that we are grateful for the help that Marcellus (Marcell. *Med.* 20.92) provides yet again, and for the parallel versions in two MSS roughly one hundred years younger than our Harley MS, *Par. lat.* 11218 and *Bamb. Med.* 1. *Bamb. Med.* 1 is also known by now as *Lorscher Arzneibuch*, named after an important monastery in the Rhine valley near Worms of Nibelungen fame, where it was written, or rather copied, in the first quarter of the 9th century.[13]

'It is appropriate for those who
(1) do not digest their food and keep repeating in an unpleasant way,
(2) for stomach-ache,
(3) for pain in the side,
(4) for sciatica,
(5) for troubles of bladder and kidneys and
(6) for spasms in one's insides,
(7) for patients spitting blood and
(8) coughs,
(9) for consumption and
(10) asthma,
(11) dysentery and
(12) sprue, that is flux from the bowel,
(13) for a sick liver and
(14) for twisting of the bowel;

[13] Edition and translation by Ulrich Stoll, *Das 'Lorscher Arzneibuch'*. Ein medizinisches Kompendium des 8. Jahrhunderts (*Codex Bambergensis Medicinalis* 1. Text, Übersetzung, Fachglossar, Stuttgart 1992 (Sudhoffs Archiv. Beiheft 28).

(15) for conditions of the womb in women and
(16) for snakebite and
(17) the bite of venemous spiders and
(18) to get rid of all poisons and
(19) all that is around the chest and
(20) that is vomited.'

The composition (section 6) is comparatively simple – there are just twelve ingredients – and I feel that this may point to the recipe being rather old. It is also remarkable for the fact that the identification of the ingredients, for once, poses no particular problem. Difficulties of supply are alluded to when it is stated that if cinnamon cannot be had, twice the amount of cassia (wild cinnamon) should be used, or if honey from Attica is not at hand, the very best honey that has had its froth removed should be employed.

It is not all that often that we are given particulars of the preparation of the compound; such knowledge is as a rule tacitly assumed. Directions for storage, however, are given more frequently, as is the case here: the preparation should be stored in a container either made of glass or of *stagnum* / *stannum* (an alloy of silver and lead).

Lastly, administration. The standard amount, or at least a standard amount, was a piece the size of an (Egyptian) bean or a hazelnut, washed down with some liquid. Ancient recipes usually recommend wine for afebrile patients and hot or tepid water for those that are feverish. Our recipe specifies a liquid that I did not recall from any other prescription I had read. Its name is *potio apullodie* or *apolodii*, and I may be forgiven if I took the second word for a distorted form of some personal name, 'the draught of Apullodius'. In a rather serendipitous way, I found the solution, because the draught is also mentioned in one of Sigerist's recipes. It turns out to be a drink made from an infusion of bran, *liquidissimum potionis genus*, as it is called by Paulus Diaconus in his epitome of Festus.

There is another rare and even curious request in the administration of this *acharistum*. The potion should contain twelve drops of vinegar, and this vinegar should drip from the pinkie (whether of the right or the left hand, we are not told). This smacks of superstition, but we must admit that this reservation is just based on our modern conception of how to prepare drugs. Since phytotherapy has once more become very fashionable, I wonder if there may be someone among my readers quite keen on experimenting with this 'ungrateful' recipe. But if it does not have the desired effect, it might be an idea to try the other pinkie next time.

Appendix

1. Here beginneth the *Dynamidia* of Hippocrates, Galen and Soranus, where they reflected upon the human life and body, and medicinal preparations which they personally used and knew and passed on to others, sundry preparations, epithems and all kinds of medicines. **2.** Thus they invented the preparation of this antidote called *acharistum*, left to you by the famous doctor †broto† on his deathbed. **3.** It is appropriate for those who do not digest their food and keep repeating in an unpleasant way, for stomach-ache, for pain in the side, for sciatica, for troubles of bladder and kidneys and for spasms in one's insides, **4.** for patients spitting blood and coughs, for consumption and asthma, dysentery and sprue, that is flux from the bowel, for a sick liver and for twisting of the bowel; **5.** for conditions of the womb in women and for snakebite and the bite of venemous spiders and to get rid of all poisons and all that is around the chest and that is vomited.

6. Its preparation is as follows: cinnamon, 1 dram; if there is no cinnamon, bark of wild cinnamon, 2 drams; Troglodytic myrrh, 3 drams; saffron, 4 drams; common pepper, 1 oz.; long pepper, 4 drams; castoreum, 1 oz.; costmary, 1 oz.; galbanum, 1 oz.; opium from Thebes [in Egypt], 1 oz.; best quality storax, 1 oz.; spikenard, 1 oz.; honey from Attica, 1 oz. (if it cannot be had, the best quality carefully cleared of its froth). **7.** Boil the honey in the galbanum on a slow fire, not a strong fire; boil the honey down further. Grind it with care for a very long time in a mortar and combine all drugs in a small (glass) container or a container made from *stagnum*. **8.** When you wish to administer it, give the size of a bean or a hazelnut as a potion, and three days before a woman gives birth, administer it with 12 drops of vinegar running down from your pinkie, making sure to administer it in a potion made from an infusion of bran. Feverish patients should take it in hot water with the amounts of vinegar and honey specified above; patients with no fever take it in wine as specified above.

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