

BALMS AND PERFUMES AT THE COURT OF BYZANTIUM

by Ernesto Riva



The taste for elegance and ornamentation declined and disappeared with the fall of the Roman Empire, perhaps not as suddenly as may be thought, but it is certain that the population, under the threat of continuous invasions by barbarians had many other things to think about rather than decorating and ornamenting their bodies. Nevertheless, the rich heritage of cosmetic art was able to be saved thanks above all to the Eastern Roman Empire which continued to prosper, with the contribution of Oriental peoples as well, and to exercise its cultural influence on the West which had been overrun by the continual barbarian raids and the rapid succession of precarious Roman-barbarian kingdoms.

Whilst Rome was declining in importance and in terms of population, Constantinople was growing enormously; it was the new Rome which replaced the ancient political centre of the Empire and which continued the ancient classic traditions.

This did not prevent a renewal of the culture and of all the arts due, on the one hand to essentially Christian inspiration, and on the other to new cultural interests determined by a continuous flow of ideas and traditions from the nearby Orient.

At the court of Byzantium, in the period of Justinian and Theodora, the most ostentatious elegance reigned and it was in this period that Metrodora compiled her recipe book.

Metrodora, although the little we know of her was deduced from her only work that is known to us, is certainly to be counted amongst the doctors of that period or at least

amongst the students of a certain empirical school inspired by the principles of Hippocrates.

It is certain that Metrodora, although this name sounds rather like a pseudonym that should have meant something, was also a woman, probably a midwife, whose work was mainly oriented towards healing women's illnesses and maintaining their beauty.

She lived during a period of major transformation of the Byzantine Empire, but which was still very pagan, and her medical practice, which was empirical but anything but unrefined, was permeated by a decidedly pagan spirit which relied on her personal experience and on the efficacy of those family remedies which were fairly common and mainly Greek in origin and to a lesser extent of Oriental origin.

All that is left to us today of Metrodora is a manuscript in Greek, probably compiled around the 12th century, which then reached Florence at the height of humanism where it is known that many Byzantine works which escaped devastation by the Turks found refuge. The codex, which had belonged to Lorenzo dei Medici, is now kept in the Laurentian Library in Florence.

The codex, entitled "Feminine maladies", consists of 108 chapters which deal with medicamentous recipes, most of which are gynaecological in nature but a lot of space is also dedicated to cosmetics, perfumery and the aesthetics of the bust, listing at least some thirty recipes.

The strongly empirical approach of the authoress also clearly transpires from the cosmetic recipes and she manifestly trusted only the experi-

mented efficacy of a number of ingredients such as milk, vinegar, alum and wheat flour.

Her cosmetic recipes are absolutely normal and in no way are they permeated with mysticism or naturism of any sort; it is very rare that she uses ingredients with magical and symbolic powers - which was very frequent in this type of practices.

For example, this is how Metrodora suggests removing wrinkles from the facial skin and treating chapped hands and feet: "take earth of Cimolia 1 libra, earth of Chio 2 librae, iris root 6 librae, saponaria root, dry root of starchwort 2 unciae, cyclamen root 6 unciae; chop, sieve and reserve; to use, take the amount needed and spread it with odorous wine and when it becomes dry, wash with water and dry with a clean cloth". The recipe is simple and perhaps of a certain efficacy as it relies on the resolving and astringent effect of the argillaceous earths from the islands in the Aegean Sea, on the emollient effect of the polysaccharides in the tubers of iris and starchwort (Arum sp.), as well as on the vessel-toning effect of the saponins in cyclamen and saponaria (Saponaria officinalis L.). It is all naturally concocted in the form of a facial mask for extemporary use, as was commonly prescribed for the topical use of drugs with a high content of saponins which are undoubtedly effective but in the long term seriously irritating for the skin.

Alum, nitre and litharge, drugs with ancient therapeutic uses, are also undoubtedly efficacious and which have the task of making the face "white, shining and bright": "mix white alum with water and wet the face late in the evening and in the morning," says the authoress or

"mix earth of Chio or nitre or litharge with vinegar in equal parts and apply in the evening and in the morning"; the highly astringent effect of alum (aluminium and potassium sulphate) was certain, as was also the "bleaching" action of litharge (protoxide of lead) or that of nitre (potassium nitrate). The use of vinegar was also very appropriate with the function of exalting the action of the salts transforming them into acetates.

A "shining face" could however be obtained in a less forced way: "starch, black vetches, superfine wheat flour with the white of an egg, apply it", or, "wheat syrup, barley syrup together with honey, apply it"; two treatments with a definite emollient action and that certainly meet the characteristics of gentleness and innocuousness required from a cosmetic product. The use of perfumes, suggested by the multiple aromatic substances that exist in nature, certainly dates back to the dawn of civilisation and was widespread in the Mediterranean area where the people excelled in the production of odorous substances exploiting the rich flora of their lands and their constant commercial dealings in spices with the nearby East. Used at first perhaps for propitiatory and sacred rites of fumigations, perfumes (per fumum) were later introduced into environmental hygiene to fight and prevent contagion and then to care for and sprinkle over the body. Metrodora's perfumes were also fairly simple and were obtained from the commonest drugs such as rose, myrrh, iris, nardus, galingale, incense and storax with the pure and simple use of their fumes from their combustion on burning coals; they were also prepared in a fairly rudimentary way such as the unguent used to "spread a good odour over the body": "Dry and dried roses 40 drachms, pure myrrh 20 drachms, iris root 10 drachms, mix with perfumed wine and make tablets; to use them, soak them in odorous wine and then apply immediately after the bath". There was an infinite quantity of odorous raw materials to make perfumes and they were obtained from all the aromatic herbs and spices available on the market. The most commonly used were the resins of storax obtained from styrax officinalis, so-called "aloe wood", which in actual fact was the aromatic wood of Aquilaria agolocha, sandalwood, incense, mace, nutmeg, carnation flowers/cloves, the rhizomes of iris and jasmine and lavender flowers.

The most valuable were musk, amber, castoreum and civet. There were two types of musk, the one from the oak, obtained from some lichens belonging to the family of the usneaceae which grow on the branches and trunks of conifers, and "animal musk" which was obtained from the glandular secretions situated between the genital organs and the umbilicus of a ruminant that lives in the Himalayas, belonging to the family of the Ungulata, called Moschus moschiferus. Amber was obtained from the intestinal calculi of the sperm whale (Physeter macrocephalus), castoreum was obtained from the glands situated between the anus and the genital organs, of Siberian beavers (Castor fiber), whilst the civet was a product of the glandular secretions of some African animals of the Viverrae genus. In actual fact, very small quantities of these important and precious animal drugs, which are moreover highly appreciated by modern perfumery as well, were mixed with large quantities of aromatic herbs and spices more easily found on the market. In short, the criterion of characterizing perfumes in the past was not very far from that of today, and today perfumes also present the characteristic that they can be classified more with organoleptic characteristics than with chemical and physical criteria. It is true that when it comes to tests, modern techniques have recourse to sophisticated gas chromatographic analyses, testing the chemical-physical constants, determining some known chemical constituents of reference (citronellol for essence of roses or linalyl ethanoate for the essence of bergamot), but the final decision is always the organoleptic examination: today, as in the past, the "nose" plays its part.

Much attention is also devoted to the care and beauty of the bust: "if you want shining and beautiful breasts," the authoress says, "put black vetches into perfumed wine and wet them, wet them with a decoction of fenugreek and wine as well, or with linen seed mixed with barley juice". If the simple emollient action of these herbs was not sufficient, there was always alum, white lead and litharge, which had the function of making the breasts "small and erect".

Metrodora turns her "aesthetic" attentions to men as well, naturally only as far as their relations with women were concerned, and she suggests some recipes suitable - she

says - for provoking an erection in men. Nothing extraordinary and miraculous, but only a massive internal and external use of herbs with a stimulating and revulsant action such as pepper, ginger, euphorbia and cress. Here is one recipe: "euphorbia, seed of rocket, pepper, green-winged orchid 6 scruples, juice of laurel balm 4 ana drachms; apply to the hips, on the belly and on the thighs", the use of the revulsants is clear here. with the sole exception of the "green-winged orchid" namely the tubers of Orchis Morio L., on the prodigious effect of which the authoress counted with great conviction. It is known that orchids, due to their characteristic of having two tubers with a vague resemblance to human testicles, have always been considered remedies suitable to "provoke the seed and to prepare for conception".

The erection of the male organ was fundamental and worthy of any care and attention but the "integrity" of the female was just as important and it is for this reason that Metrodora lastly offers a recipe for whom who have been "deflowered but want to remain hidden": "take 1 drachm of vitriol, 1 drachm of alum, mix with grape juice, let it thicken and put it in place for one hour before coitus. The man will not recognise you as being deflowered". The effect was certain, if only for the highly constrictive effect of aluminium sulphate (alum) and copper sulphate (vitriol of Cyprus).

Metrodora's book is a chapter, although brief, in the history of Byzantine cosmetics which represents an aspect of clearly classically inspired medical culture resulting from direct and personal experience by a doctor who followed and was a convinced advocate of the most traditional empiricism; this was something rather remarkable in a world characterised by faith in medicines pervaded by occultism and superstition, a faith that was typically oriental which prevailed over the real therapeutic action of the medicines themselves. It is certain, however, that the Byzantine contribution to Western medical culture consisted mainly of acknowledging, perhaps improving and above all circulating knowledge with the transmission of Greek works and with the teaching of the principles from personal observation; exactly as the famous Byzantine doctor Alexander of Tralles said: "A good doctor must be able to use everything".