

HISTORY AND SCIENCE



CARE OF THE BODY AND COSMETICS IN NORMAN SALERNO

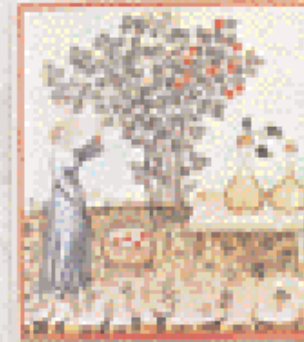
The beautiful position of this city, its relations with nearby Sicily, its intense relations – not only commercial due to the maritime expansion of the Republic of Amalfi – with even the most distant Orient, offered it the possibility of assimilating various currents of thought and being transformed into a real centre of organization of culture which, particularly in the field of health, appeared with the creation of the famous Medical School of Salerno.

**Ernesto Riva*

The most widespread legend on the origin of the Medical School of Salerno relates that four pilgrims – a Latin, a Greek, a Jew and an Arab – met by chance in Salerno in the 9th century. They were all well-versed in medicine and decided to pool their knowledge, creating an association to give rise to a school. This is indicative of how Salerno was at that time the only city in Italy that had been able to keep Greek-Latin culture alive but without rejecting the more recent acquisitions due to the influence of Arab learning. The beautiful position of this city, its relations with nearby Sicily, the intense relations – not only commercial due to the maritime expansion of the Republic of Amalfi – with even the most distant Orient, offered it the possibility of assimilating various schools of thought and being transformed into a real centre of organization of culture which, in particular in the field of health, became evident with the creation of the famous Medical School of Salerno.

It is not exactly known when the School came into being, but it is certain that it was the oldest institution in Western Europe for the teaching of medicine and related arts and, very importantly for the future of European science, it was the first example of syncretism between Western scientific thought of Greek-Latin origin and Oriental scientific thought.

The medical doctrine of Salerno, initially with a Greek-Latin approach, was soon integrated with the



Hygienic cosmetics, made from natural ingredients, were kept alive for much of the Middle Ages by the so-called Tacuina sanitatis.

Page from the Regimen Sanitatis (14th century Ms. National Library, Naples).



Arab knowledge introduced from the 11th century by Constantine the African who, having spent a good part of his life in the Orient and certainly being familiar with the works of Masawaiyh, Serapion and his contemporary Avicenna, introduced his Latin translations of these writers to the West.

It was in the period of greatest splendour of the School, now famous throughout Europe, and which attracted not only scholars, but also illustrious rulers – such as King Edward III of England, for example – to seek a cure for their ailments, that the so-called Regimen Sanitatis Salernitanum (A Salernitan Regimen of Health) came into being. This was a popular poem written in Leonine verse containing rules of hygiene and advice

for the prevention of disease. It is a collection of aphorisms and precepts of a predominantly hygienic nature, probably dictated by the various doctors who practised at the School.

"In the morning, upon rising, wash your hands and face with cold water," states the Regimen in Chapter Two, "Move around awhile and stretch your limbs; comb your hair and brush your teeth. These things relax your brain."

There is nothing simpler than this manual which, more than indicating treatment, lays down precepts of hygiene of an ancient conception which give us an idea of the importance that was given at that time to maintaining physical integrity and the decorum of the body.

"If you want to be healthy, wash

¹The modern English translation is by Patricia Willett Cummins, *A Critical Edition of Le Regime Tresutile et Tresproffitabile pour Conserver et Garder la Santé du Corps Humain*, Chapel Hill: North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures, 1976.

www.natural1.it

The leading magazine in scientific research into natural products

HISTORY AND SCIENCE



The medical doctrine of Salerno, initially with a Greek-Latin approach, was soon integrated with the Arab knowledge introduced from the 11th century by Constantine the African who, having spent a good part of his life in the Orient, and having been familiar with the works of Masawaiyh, Serapio and his contemporary Avicenna, introduced his Latin translations into Europe.

It was in the period of greatest splendour of the School, now famous throughout Europe, and which attracted not only scholars, but also illustrious rulers – such as King Edward III of England, for example – to seek a cure for their ailments, that the so-called Regimen Sanitatis Salernitanum (A Salernitan Regimen of Health) came into being. This was a popular poem written in Leonine verse containing rules of hygiene and advice for the prevention of disease.

your hands often. Washing after a meal gives you two benefits; it cleans your hands and makes your eyes keen" the Regimen Sanitatis says in Chapter XXIII and then goes on to describe with great sobriety and brevity the hygienic-cosmetic functions of various remedies.

Of whey, for example, it says that it "cuts through and washes, penetrates and purifies" (XXXVI), but of onions it says that "By frequently rubbing your bald spots with ground onions, you may restore your head of hair" (LXII). of hyssop that "it restores a healthy colouring to your face" (LXVIII), of nasturtium that its "juice spread over the head is said to stop hair from falling out; it also cures toothache, and the juice mixed with honey cures scales" (LXXII), whilst of willow it says that its "bark cooked in vinegar cures warts" (LXXIV).

While the Regimen Sanitatis, due to the evident simplicity of its approach, did not venture into the world of complex preparations, whether therapeutic or cosmetic, there were some in the School of Salerno who dealt with this subject with particular interest, especially regarding women.

There was the famous Trotula di Ruggero, a sort of female physician who lived in around the year 1000, whose teachings are collected in two books entitled De Mulierum Passionibus and De Morbis Mulierum et eorum cura.

Little is known about her except that she was the mother of another famous Salerno physician, Platearius the Elder, and that her writings were greatly appreciated for centuries. Moreover, her work was destroyed over the centuries, but fragments remained and were transcribed, presented and commented upon in the various Collectio of Salerno present in libraries. These writings, taken as a whole, reveal that Trotula was most probably an obstetrician with a rather empirical but rational approach.

Her works were very popular in medieval Europe and she is thought to have inspired more than a hundred manuscripts which, from the 13th century, were part of the popular tradition. Several times in the course of their history, these manuscripts underwent many modifications, especially in the attribution of their authorship. They were often attributed to a male author called "Trottus" as there was a tendency to deny that a woman could have written such an important work and above all have been part of such a prestigious school as the School of Salerno.

Women were at least admitted at least into the world of "midwives", guardians of a practical and medical knowledge handed down from mother to daughter and circumscribed to a purely domestic context. They were not admitted to any sort of official medical practice. This is what led the Authors to think that Trotula was something more than a "midwife", as she held the fairly high social role of "Mulier salernitana" and she possibly frequented Salerno academic circles in the capacity of a sort of "magistra", exercising medical arts with a certain skill, as emerged from her writings as well.

The gynaecological subjects she deals with quote sources from Hippocrates and Galen and provide extraordinarily modern advice on hygiene, diet and aesthetics for women that is extraneous from any suggestions of a magical or astrological nature.

The discussion of the subjects is also extraordinary because it is a woman, and a woman of the 11th century, who is speaking explicitly about subjects related to sex.

Her interest in female problems appears immediately in her writings which dedicate, for example, an entire chapter to De virginittatis restituenta sophistice. "If due to furious rapture," she writes, "a girl has lost her virginity or a bride does not have it, this can be remedied by

In this sense the Salerno School gave a boost to a certain kind of cosmetics, those tending essentially towards personal cleanliness.

astringent vaginal douches with alum mixed in egg white and dissolved in rainwater in which pennyroyal and calamint have been decocted; repeat the douche three or four times before coitus with a man": this was obviously a very common practice in the time of Trotula who relied on the certain and immediate astringent effect of aluminium salts, but if this was not sufficient or for some reason the preparation could not be easily found, the author suggested that the unlucky patient simply introduce into her vagina, just before coitus, some crushed black grapes and animal blood.

Clearly, the fear of a foreseeable male mistrust led the author to have recourse to systems that were perhaps more credible, but not any the less repugnant, such as that of applying to the vulva, pridie quam nubet or just before the wedding, nothing less than a leech: "don't let it go too far in!", adds the author, and then she explains that the reason is to cause a "small crust" which, on coitus, would have broken, letting blood out of the vulva. Another convincing practice proposed by Trotula was that, decidedly atrocious and cruel, of introducing powdered glass into the vagina in order to make the "vulva bloody" at the time of coitus and reducing the virile organ sic voluerat exoriatum in order to make the complete success of defloration evident.

The subjects of a purely cosmetic nature dealt with by Trotula mainly address the ladies of her rank, the "Mulieres Salernitanae", with the author teaching them how to preserve and improve their beauty with a series of instructions and advice.

For example, she gives recipes on how to treat bad breath and whiten the teeth. The cleanliness of the mouth and the pleasantness of breath was at that time a fundamental prerogative of personal care as well and Trotula advises rubbing the teeth with a latex containing white marble powder, salt, red pumice and cuttlebone to avoid bad breath caused by the teeth and gums. "Rub the



There was the famous Trotula di Ruggero, a sort of lady doctor who lived in around the year 1000 and whose teachings are collected in two books entitled De Mulierum Passionibus and De Morbis Mulierum et eorum cura.

teeth morning and evening," she says, "until the teeth look lucentes et nitidi and then rinse the mouth with wine, after each meal, and clean the teeth with a linen cloth"; perhaps a real deodorant and antiseptic action is missing but the abrasive and cleaning effect needed for correct oral hygiene is assured, almost like one of today's toothpastes.

As well as teaching make-up for the face and lips, the "lady physician" suggested how to eliminate wrinkles, how to reduce facial puffiness and bags under the eyes, how to remove superfluous hair, how to whiten the skin, hide freckles and impurities and how to dye the hair. She also gives useful tips on how to improve the physical condition with baths and massages.

From the pages of the Regimen Sanitatis and the works of Trotula, it can be deduced that cosmetics were characterized by extreme sobriety and a – typically medieval – revulsion for any inclination for the superfluous. Cosmetics were evidently considered above all from the hygienic point of view as the Western civilization of the Middle Ages, for various contingent reasons, not only forgot about the fundamental principles for the care and appearance of the person but also neglected personal cleanliness.

In this sense the Salerno School gave a boost to a certain kind of cosmetics, those tending essentially towards personal cleanliness. These hygienic cosmetics were then kept alive for a good part of the Middle Ages by the monastic schools.

Natural1 will give you monthly scientific and commercial information on natural products News all over the world

natural 1

The leading magazine in scientific research marketing survey into natural products

about **GV** group

6 Via Salaria - Milano 1
 20144 Milano - Italia
 Tel. +39 02 489 50587
 Fax +39 02 4790 02
 E-mail: info@natural1.it

² Florence, Laurentian Library, Cod. 73/37.