

# The XV Century Venetian Illuminated *Herbaria*

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According to what Pliny writes in the fourth chapter of the XXV book of his *Naturalis Historia*, in ancient Greece there existed illuminated herbaria drawn up by famous physicians and this practice gave rise to a school. Unfortunately today we have no evidence of Greek illuminated herbaria, in fact the first document - as you know - dates back to the beginning of the VI century. Its title is *Codex Vindobonensis*<sup>1</sup> which shows and describes the therapeutic properties of 400 herbs in line with Dioscorides' doctrine. The second document goes back to the VII century, comes from the same source and its title is *Codex Neapolitanus*<sup>2</sup>, now at the National Library of Naples. Also this herbarium illustrates and describes in Greek the properties of the herbs dealt with by Dioscorides in his *De Materia Medica*. Another document, now at Leida Library, was written in Latin maybe in Southern France about the VII century and comes certainly from a different source: its title is *Herbarium Apulei Platonici*<sup>3</sup> and is more or less about the same herbs. This work was largely widespread in Europe until the XIII century.

In spite of the broad diffusion of this literature, the problem about the lost original "*corpus*" written by Dioscorides was still open; in fact Dioscorides originally wrote six volumes concerning not only medicinal herbs, but also minerals and animal substances.

The oldest proof of the whole "*corpus*", now at Paris National Library, was compiled in Greek about the IX century and generated an unbelievable amount of Arabic versions that affected the European medical culture of the following centuries. The numerous well known *Circa Instans*, *Secreta Salernitana* and *Taquina Sanitatis* that followed represent a remarkable example of the Arabic cultural influ-

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<sup>1</sup> DIOSCORIDE, *De Materia Medica (Codex Vindobonensis)* Costantinopoli, 512 C. Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Med. Gr. 1, ill., cm 37x30, ff. 491.

<sup>2</sup> DIOSCORIDE, *De Materia Medica (Codex Neapolitanus)*, VII sec., Napoli, Biblioteca Nazionale, Ms. Gr. 1, ill., cm 29,4x24,9, ff. 172.

<sup>3</sup> APULEIO PLATONICO, *Herbarium*, VI sec., Leida, Bibliotheek der Rijksuniversiteit, Voss. Lat. Q9, cm27x20, ff. 104.

ence. The melting pot of these different cultures was the town of Salerno, birthplace - as we know - of the famous medical school that gave rise to a new generation of herbaria. These documents were easy to read, full of anecdotes and allegoric illustrations, but were often rather corrupted and very far from the scientific contents of the original medical works. In the meantime something new happened in the medieval medical culture: a group of students led by Pietro Abano founded Padua University, the incontestable heir of Salerno school. A very authoritative leader like Pietro Abano, who had lived a long time in Constantinople, where he had known the classic medieval works and had studied at the medical school of Paris, was able to impress a new trend to the medical knowledge: by recovering the classic science and its fusion with the Arabic culture, he made a sort of pre-humanistic revision of the ancient medieval works which had a strong influence on the future herbaria inspired by Dioscorides.

The oldest and the most notable work is a translation into vulgar Italian made by a Paduan monk of a medical botany treatise by Serapion the Younger; it is the *Liber Agregà*, now at the British Library (Egerton 2020), also called "Erbario Carrarese"<sup>4</sup>. It was strongly influenced by Padua University that, during the XIV century, showed particular interest in the Arabic culture: "Agregà" is meant to indicate a sort of synthesis between Dioscorides and Galen's teaching; in fact the original work by Serapion the Younger, who lived in Spain during XI century, was a sum of all the previous achievements of the medical science. The simples contained in the *Herbarium Agregà* are clearly illustrated and duly described on the basis of a deep pharmaceutical knowledge. It is a real herbarium with a scientific character and free from typical allegorical and symbolic medieval speculations and, even if poorly illustrated, it examines all the simples and seems to announce the future Pharmacopoeias. The second document of the same school is the so called *Codice Rinio*<sup>5</sup>, from the name of his owner Benedetto Rinio, actually written in the middle of the XV century by the physician Nicolò Rocabonella coming from Padua University. In this Herbarium, now at Biblioteca Marciana of Venice, over 400 herbs are illustrated with remarkable

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<sup>4</sup> *Liber Agregà* (Erbario Carrarese), Padova 1390, Londra, British Library, Ms. Egerton 2020, cm 34,9x23,8; ff. 289, ill.

<sup>5</sup> *Liber De Simplicibus*, 1419, Venezia, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Cod. Lat. VI 59; cm 28x20; ff. 483, ill.

precision in every morphological detail. Maybe it was a real handbook used by apothecaries in order to identify easily the herbs which were too often distorted in the large amount of approximated illuminated herbaria existing in that period. Another document, the so called *Herbarium* by *Antonius Guarnerinus de Padua*, now at Bergamo town Library, was compiled in 1441 in Feltre, a small town in Northern Italy<sup>6</sup>. It depicts about 150 herbs whose morphological characters are much more imprecise than in the above mentioned work; probably they were copied from pictures of other herbaria, therefore the drawings seem rather flat and with few details. On the contrary the text, in vulgar Italian, is a remarkable example of Paduan Medical School and introduces all the concepts of the classic and Arabic medical culture. It describes the medical properties of herbs with their popular but also scientific character and probably it was used by physicians as a current handbook. The latest document of the same school, up to now, is the so called *Codex Bellunensis* compiled in Belluno, a small town in Northern Italy, at the beginning of the XV century, now at the British Library<sup>7</sup>. This codex was undoubtedly drawn up in that town because in the texts about the numerous herbs, over 300 probably painted from life, we can find references to the mountains and the valleys near the town. Many of them are typical alpine plants such as the exceptional example represented by *Leontopodium Alpinum* drawn with a red shield in the background. The herbs described are among the best known in the pharmaceutical world and for each of them the anonymous author describes the properties and the medical uses often with many quotations from Dioscorides. Moreover for each of them he also records a lot of synonyms really useful in that time in order to identify plants without any exact index.

Without any doubt the *Gentiana Lutea* L. is the most significant medicinal plant in the Alps and our herbarium describes it with many details concerning in particular its root of which some curious properties are listed: « *Est ultima medicina puncturis scorpionibus* - writes the Author - or against rabid dog bite and if you drink it with red wine you'll get rid of fever». Also the so called *hermodattilon* is a typical herb of the mountains; « It shows its flowers in October » -

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<sup>7</sup> *Codex Bellunensis*, Belluno, XV sec., Londra, British Library, Add.Ms. 41623, cm 28,8x22,2; ff. 151, ill.

says the Author - and then he describes the properties of its bulb "*contra vulneribus antiquis*" confirming the well known anti-gout action of the famous *Colchicum autumnale* L. He also celebrates the anti-trembling property of the *Primula officinalis* , for such reason called "*herba paralis*".

The incontestable queen of the medicaments seems however the *Valeriana officinalis* L. whose marvellous effects are really praised by our Author; for example it is efficacious against every pain, against poisons and also "*contra maleficia et spiriti maligni*", in fact the root of valerian was used to cure epilepsy that - as we know - was considered a demoniac illness.

The usual part dealing with minerals is missing in the work, except for some isolated descriptions about the "*Argentum vivum*", the clay, and other land-powders together with their pharmaceutical properties. The herbarium also includes a "*bestiarium*" strictly connected to the drugs existing in those places where the document was compiled. Many animals are described such as hen, pig, beak, hare and tortoise; moreover, according to Dioscorides' tradition, the Author describes the properties of milk, cheese, cottage-cheese and bread. Of course he does not forget the snail, the salamander, and the scorpion, but he does not mention the viper and its well-known properties.

Finally a very curious and original part of the manuscript concerns the astrological *Materia Medica*; twelve chapters explain the influence of the stars over some herbs and seven ones are about the influence of the planets. The last seven chapters are surprisingly attributed to the Emperor Alexander The Great, but we should consider that, in that period, many fabulous tales were made up about the great emperor and his teacher Aristotle. In the Middle Ages, in fact, there were many medical works about astrological botany, attributed to Hermes Trimegistus, or to Salomon, or to Tolomaeus and Alexander The Great. According to our document the said seven chapters are to be ascribed to a translation from Greek into Latin made by *Magister Rainaldus clericus parisiensis* of a work written by Alexander The Great to which he gave the title of *Liber Mirandarum*: the title itself announces the marvels contained in the seven chapters. There are herbs that turn away devils, that cure miraculously the plague and that stimulate the sexual attraction, provided that they are picked under the influence of the planets; according to the astrologers this was

the only condition to obtain a successful therapy. On the contrary the identification of the herbs is very difficult or even impossible because their names are on purpose given at random to increase the mystery. Let us not forget that the so called Hermetic literature was addressed exclusively to followers. On the contrary the chapters describing the herbs under the influence of zodiac are easier to understand and all the 12 herbs are perfectly identifiable; for each of them the Author describes the empirical therapeutic properties and the correct period of picking according to the influence of zodiac signs, leaving aside any miraculous or wonderful effect. It seems clear that these chapters have a different origin than the seven ones ascribed to Alexander.

The herbarium ends with a list of recipes that seems to announce a new chapter, probably incomplete, of pharmaceutical preparations which confirms the medical-practical character of the work.

To conclude we can say that the four documents just examined constitute an useful instrument to assess the situation of the pharmaceutical science which developed in Padua after the foundation of the University.