

2-1-1955

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### Recommended Citation

Curley, Francis X. (1955) "Materia Medica ... 1155 A.D.," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 22 : No. 1 , Article 3.  
Available at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/lmq/vol22/iss1/3>

# Materia Medica . . . 1155 A. D.

by FRANCIS X. CURLEY, S.J.

SOME eight hundred years ago, when the study of the natural sciences, including medicine, began to flourish in the West, one of the centers of dispersal was the monastery of Chartres. There one William of Conches, (d. 1154), a student of Saint Bernard's, headed a small band of monks in the task of disseminating the "new" learning. They themselves obtained it by studying earlier and contemporary latin translations of the medical and astronomical writings of the Near East, especially Arabia. The physical and physiological lore of the Arabs was known to the ancient world, but for centuries western Europe had been sealed off from this culture and learning.

Salerno, on the Gulf of Naples, was a medical center of sorts from the ninth century, the physicians there drawing on a smattering of Greek medical knowledge which had been preserved in Sicily. Gradually there trickled in from Toledo a series of Jewish savants who brought with them the wisdom of their Arab conquerors. This was laboriously translated by the monks into latin, and thus came into being the great body of Salernitan *materia medica*, full of semanticisms which have prevailed up to our own day. (It is interesting to note in our "enlightened" age when women have equal rights, that during the "dark" eleventh century women practised medicine

and lectured at Salerno.)

Such work of translating and codifying occupied William and the monks of Chartres. But they were not mere copyists; much that they wrote is their own. Their medical data is deeply dependent on Hippocrates' concept of humours which for so many centuries was the premise for explaining all corporeal activity. While we can smile today at their credulity, the monks displayed that vital inquisitiveness which is the mark of a research scientist. It is noteworthy how facile they were in developing hypotheses, how airily they explained away whatever created difficulties. (See below how William, after telling how beards grow, explains their lack in youngsters.) They were the pioneers of western science whom one with the hindsight of almost a millenium can scoff at, but they accomplished a great work. Europe was to discover, through their introduction and enthusiasm, the realms of the physical, after long preoccupation with the metaphysical. The impetus to scientific research was given by these obscure monks of the twelfth century who reintroduced the East to the West.

In his book *On the Philosophy of the World*, William of Conches has a brief essay "About the Head" which illustrates the sort of work that was done at Chartres. He and his companions were trans-

lators and popularizers; to what extent they believed all that they wrote it is difficult to say, but they must be judged in the light of their times. After all, many a medical absurdity has been uttered since the turn of *this* century. There is unconscious humor in his essay, not a little interest, and a vast deal of ingenuity. With no more ado, William of Conches:<sup>1</sup>

## ABOUT THE HEAD

"The head is a sort of spherical substance, about two finger lengths from front to rear. It is round, in order that the brain may the more freely move about within it, and lest, if it were rectangular, the humours might stagnate in the corners and induce corruption. Nerve centers have their seat of operations both in the front and the back; the former govern sense activity, while the latter control voluntary motor activity.

"On the outside is the cranium, to whose skin hair adheres. This is formed by the humours which escape through the pores. Because a dry warm vapor contracts when it comes in contact with the cold outer air, it is changed into a corporeal substance. But other vapors, trying to escape behind it, push it out; then they in turn harden, and

thus hair 'grows.' But since it is the nature of heavy objects to fall, the hair curls and tumbles about. At no time in life is there a cessation of this growth of hair because at no time is there a lack of superfluities trying to escape the body. (Fingernails grow in much the same manner; superfluities leave the region of the heart via the fingertips, and there they chill and harden.)

"It is true that beards and chest hair do not appear until a certain age. It is also true that females do not usually have heavy facial hair. This latter curiosity is explained by the fact that men generate a two-fold heat in their bodies, by reason of their hearts and their generative organs, giving rise to beards. But women are too frigid (like the outer air) for much hair to form, (though some, as an exception to nature, are very warm-blooded and hence hairy.) For the same reason *castrati* are beardless. In childhood such a lack can be readily explained by the constriction of the pores, except those on the cranium. Finally, hair differs in color because of the various natural complexions of the pores through which the vapors escape. So much for the head."

## WHAT'S YOUR DIAGNOSIS, DOCTOR?

About the year William was born, the great Saint Anselm wrote a letter which contains a very neat little problem for diagnosticians. It will not help the poor patient any now, but what would your answer have been? At the time Anselm was Abbot of the monastery of Bec. A short while before

<sup>1</sup> The writer offers his own translations. William's writings are to be found in Migne's *Patrologia Latina*, CLXXII. Though listed among the works of Honorius of Autun, the *De Philosophia Mundi* is now unanimously attributed to William. (Cf. *Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique*, 1922, s.v. Honorius; *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, 1951, s.v. Guglielmo di Conches.) For William's acquaintance with Arabic medical learning, cf. Haskins' *Studies in the History of Medieval Science* (Harvard U. Press, 1927, 2nd ed., pp. 91-92.)

he had received into his community a most promising subject, the devout and learned nephew of Lanfranc, Archbishop of Canterbury. Now he must write a delicate and difficult letter to the young man's uncle, reporting that Brother Maurice is in very poor health, so much so that he can scarcely go on in his vocation unless a remedy is forthcoming.<sup>2</sup> Anselm expresses his pleasure at Maurice's holiness, good will, humility, and spirit of prayer; but . . . . .

"... for some months now Divine Providence has seen fit to visit him with the great affliction of daily and severe headaches, so much so that he has been shut off from all common-life of the house and has been absolutely forbidden the least bit of study or the briefest meditation."

In the hope that the Archbishop can suggest a remedy, or find a physician who is able to come up with a cure, Anselm then describes the symptoms in detail. "He is almost constantly tormented by a pain that goes in waves through his temples, with a sense of a dull weight behind his forehead (especially if he leans forward at all). Any light or sound is bothersome to him in direct proportion to its strength. Often, especially after he has eaten, his whole face becomes noticeably flushed, and at the same time both head and face grow feverish."

Anselm then notes that it seems to be growing progressively worse. Indeed, during some recent attacks there has been fear for his very life. "A chill seizes his head first,

<sup>2</sup> Migne, *P. L.*, CLVIII, 1102-03.

then his breast and whole body, markedly affecting him. Soon his heart labors with excessive palpitation. Together with this all strength leaves his members, and his senses grow faint like those of a man who has lost a vast deal of blood. After he revives somewhat from this state, immediately his whole body becomes hot and ruddy, as if he had been ill of the fever. The headache then increases, accompanied by a strong inclination to vomit, though without the ability. And often, especially if he is chanting in choir, his head is so affected that the whole chapel seems to spin about him."

So much for poor Maurice. Lanfranc and Anselm decide to send him off to the country for a long rest. Some months later there is a sprightly exchange of notes between the two, rejoicing over the young man's recovery; so the story has a happy ending. But no further details of either the malady or the remedy are given. What, eight hundred years later, would you diagnose?

#### MENDEL TRANSMOGRIFIED

To return to William and some notions taken at random from his treatise, notions that will convey a picture of the generally held beliefs of his time. Women are ungallantly, and with superb masculine aplomb, cited as the single cause of sterility whenever it occurs. When conception does take place, the sex of the future child is wholly determined by the geography of the womb. Because the liver is on the right of the womb, and is an organ replete with richer and warmer blood, the sperm finding its way to

the right section will be better nourished and become a man. But if it is so unfortunate as to go to the left, to the cold section of the womb, then the child will be a girl. (In his thorough way, William adds that if it is in the center, a slight bit to one side or the other, the result, depending on the bias, will be a robust female or a delicate male.) He follows this up with a lengthy bit on the part that the four humours play in the formation of the human embryo, making the whole operation sound rather like a typhoon.

In his essay on digestion (a revolting little gem), William discusses the nature of the stomach and strikes out on his own. "It is asked whether the stomach is of a warm nature." Most say that it is, because otherwise the food that has been eaten could not be "cooked" there and prepared for distribution throughout the body. "We declare, however, that the stomach is by nature cold, and only by accident warm." He argues that its contractive and expansive powers mark it as a "nervous organ," and everyone knows that *they* are cold. But whence comes the heat when it is required? Well, he says, the stomach rests on top of the liver, indeed pretty much

wraps around it; on its right is the gall-bladder, and on its left the heart, all of them fashioned of warm dry humours. Wherefore the stomach, cold by nature, is placed in the body much like an iron pot over a fire, and in this way fulfills its function.

Somewhat of a surprise is in store for one who reads what he has to say about dreams, if the reader expects to find the sheerest superstition in the beliefs of this monk of the "dark" ages. "Dreams come from traces of thoughts left in the head, from food and drink, from the weather, from one's state of health, from one's sleeping posture — and have no significance whatsoever."

Let us say farewell to William by quoting a sentence from the preface to his book; it is good advice any time, and especially so in reading the older authors on scientific questions. Reductively it is a call to common charity. "If anything erroneous be found in this book, set it down to human weakness, and do not on that account scorn the rest; neither find fault with what is good on account of the error, nor praise what is wrong because of what is well said."