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At the Intersection of Functionality and Beauty: *A Study of the Carrara Herbal*

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ABSTRACT

The *Carrara Herbal* is a manuscript that sits at the cusp between medieval and early Renaissance work in Padua, Italy. With medical “simples,” or singular ingredients to be combined, as its primary focus, the *Herbal* is heavily illustrated and illuminated (the process of decorating a manuscript with color and even precious metals like gold), demonstrating the commissioner’s intentions and establishing him as a leader in the field of botanical medical knowledge. However, the intent and practical use seem to be at odds in the case of the *Carrara Herbal*. As six centuries passed, the manuscript was actively used and revised as a reference guide for students and practitioners alike. These readers unknowingly created a practical-pedagogical community that modernized medical knowledge as it was learned. This is evidenced by the variety of marginalia left by generations of readers in a plethora of handwritings. Using these notes as clues, historians and manuscript scholars can chronicle the life of this relatively unstudied illustrated herbal, reveal critical information about its users, and discover new information about medieval Italian medical practices.

Introduction

Books and manuscripts have long since been used as status signals for prominent world leaders looking to establish themselves as respectable, educated, and trustworthy. Seeking to showcase themselves as worthy of their constituents' credence, leaders commissioned and collected a variety of books for their collections. Francesco Novello, the last lord of the Italian province of Padua, commissioned the *Carrara Herbal* as a way to prove himself as a “physician prince” or the overseer of a physically and morally healthy court. The *Herbal* is a Renaissance work that focuses on medical simples” or plants that are combined to elicit healing properties. It contains heavy illustrations and illumination of the simples to serve as a practical reference book for readers. Despite this manuscript being created as a way to demonstrate Novello’s determination to heal his dilapidated court, the *Carrara Herbal* took on a life of its own as generations of readers unknowingly kindled a trans-historical community that revises expert medical knowledge over time as the manuscript touched the lives of hundreds of readers. As a delicately illustrated early Renaissance herbal manuscript, the *Carrara Herbal* is a perfect exhibition of the intersection between function and beauty.

History

The *Carrara Herbal* is a late 14th-century illustrated herbal manuscript (*Egerton MS 2020*, n.d.). It was transcribed in a Paduan dialect of Italian from another manuscript written in Latin, which had been translated from an original Arabic exemplar (*Egerton MS 2020*, n.d.). The book describes characteristics of plants and other natural elements, called medical simples, that could be used as medicinals, followed by an illustration of each simple. This illustrated and illuminated manuscript focuses on delineating the primary function of each natural element and providing opportunities for readers to discern the plants described in the Herbal. One way to trace the history of this manuscript is the substantial amount of marginalia left by generations of readers and scribes. These notes exist in a variety of different handwriting, or book hands, signaling that they were left by a myriad of people across the life of the manuscript. As indicated by a note at the end of the manuscript with the entry of “Frat Jacobus Phyllipus de Pađ ordīs hēr scripsit,” the scribe of the Herbal was Brother Jacob Phillip, an Augustinian monk (Kyle, 2010). As the scribe, Phillip followed *The Simple Book of Medicaments*, the original Arabic exemplar from which the *Carrara Herbal* was transcribed, written by Serapion the Younger to create this new Paduan work (*Egerton MS 2020*, n.d.; Kyle, 2016). Very little information is confirmed about the life of Serapion the Younger. All historians definitively know is that the suffix “the Younger” distinguished him from Serapion the Elder, an earlier medical writer of the era with whom he was often confused (Anderson, 1999). While Serapion the Younger’s work has been transcribed countless times since its original incantation and provided aid to what is assumed to be thousands of people, there is no official documentation of Serapion the Younger’s life in any medieval Arabic writings (Greer, 2012). In a similar vein, the *Carrara Herbal* does not contain any information about the author outside of a short note in the text with his name. This exclusion of information alludes to the values of this era, which prioritized the information of the owner or commissioner of a manuscript rather than the original author. With a new court to rule over, Francesco Novello ruled over the Italian province of Padua and commissioned Brother Jacob Phillip to create the *Carrara Herbal* to establish himself as a “physician prince” who ruled over a literal and metaphorical healthy court (Kyle, 2010). The whereabouts of the manuscript after the execution of Francesco are unknown; however, it seems that the next owner of the Herbal was Ulisse Aldrovandi, a collector of books focused on the natural world and an academic at the University of Bologna as noted in a pasted piece of parchment on folio 3v (*Egerton MS 2020*, n.d.; Kyle, 2010). Again, after the death of Aldrovandi, the manuscript’s whereabouts were a mystery until it was purchased in 1866 by the British Museum from bookseller J.T. Payne using the Bridgewater fund (*Egerton MS 2020*, n.d.). Dr. Sarah Kyle, the principal researcher of the *Carrara Herbal*, suggests that the manuscript could have resided in Russia between Aldrovandi’s ownership and acquisition by the British Museum, where it currently resides. Her original research suggests evidence of an eighteenth-century rebinding campaign (Kyle, 2010). The *Carrara Herbal* was likely rebound in the eighteenth century as an effort to standardize the manuscript for a collection (Kyle, 2010). It is difficult to know what the original binding of the manuscript was made of, but heavy wear and retouching of the illumination during the eighteenth century suggest that it went without a covering at some point in its life (Kyle, 2010). After it was acquired by the British Museum in 1866, it was rebound in 1965 when the

folios were mounted on guards for the protection of the parchment, and calf covering was added (Egerton MS 2020, n.d.). This preservation effort, although important for the life of the book, fundamentally changes the way that modern readers see the manuscript. This act distances the manuscript further from how it would have been used as a reference book and personifies it more as a time capsule for the past, which may, for some readers, overshadow the book's use as a resource.

Paduan Court

Analyzing and comprehending Francesco Novello's and the Paduan Court's state of affairs is essential to fully grasp the history and context of the manuscript. Coming from a time when the Carrara Dynasty was nearly in shambles, Novello aimed to reclaim his family name and act in a way that revitalized life in Padua. As his court was reeling due to an occupation from 1388 to 1390 that left his family's esteemed book collection decimated, Novello commissioned the *Herbal* and started the entire library as a way of reinstating his court's identity as intellectual leaders in the world (Kyle, 2016). Books similar to the *Carrara Herbal* were also a part of this crusade to rebuild his library because of Novello's close relationship with and admiration of Paduan University's medical schools (Kyle, 2016). These acts not only reflected Novello's mission to reconstruct his familial identity after devastating losses but also aimed to differentiate him as his ancestor's more progressive counterpart, signaling the beginning of a new era in court (Kyle, 2016).

More than showing the dynasty's "continuity and generative power," Novello bespoke the *Herbal* as a method of securing his identity as a "physician prince" who ruled over a physically and metaphorically healthy court (Kyle, 2010, 2016). The *Herbal* served the dual purpose of providing his court with practical medical knowledge and serving their intellectual health. According to Kyle (2010), "the body of the ruler" was also a metaphor for his people. Following this logic meant that if Novello did not actively protect his health, it would affect his territories and their ability to be productive. Understanding this, it is easy to see why the *Carrara Herbal* was such a pivotal addition to the court's library and had so many resources allocated to its creation.

The *Carrara Herbal's* illustrated aspects are prime examples of the types and amounts of resources Novello dedicated to this important manuscript. Immediately upon opening the manuscript, readers are greeted by an impressive illuminated page with an inhabited initial that shows an image of someone holding a book at court, presumably Francesco Novello (Egerton MS 2020, n.d.). This first page of the manuscript not only has an illustration of Novello, but it also has the "family's heraldic arms, individual crests, and personal badges" showcasing the strength of the Carrara dynasty from the beginning (Kyle, 2014, p. 231). This frontispiece, especially, shows the way the purpose of commission and the purpose of practical use blend in the manuscript (Graham and Clemens, 2007). Novello's initials in the top left and right corners, the family coat of arms appearing, and the handful of images at the bottom of the page that allude to aspects of courtly society all further emphasize that Novello was using it to promote his self-image rather than simply adding the book to his library (Kyle, 2010). Illustrations like these serve the primary purpose of connecting the work of Francesco Novello to the good works of his ancestors while still delineating him as their more progressive counterpart. They also serve a secondary purpose of creating a sense of connectedness between all the manuscripts in Novello's collection. At this time, Novello had his family's heraldry illustrated in every manuscript he created as a way to have consistency across this collection and as a way to repair the identity of the Carrara dynasty (Kyle, 2014).

The *Herbal* is situated in a rather unique position as the original exemplar was written in the 12th century, and it was constructed during the 14th century, yet it seems to align with ideals typically attributed to the Renaissance (Egerton MS 2020, n.d.; Touwaide, 2008). Since the last lord of Padua commissioned the *Herbal* as a way to establish himself as the keeper of the physical and moral health of the court, it seems key that a book he picked in completing that task was The *Herbal*- a manuscript completely focused on the natural world rather than the Divine (Kyle, 2016). As the Renaissance marks the shift that prioritizes secularism, this idea seems to lead the narrative of the *Herbal* more towards one that aligns with an early shape of the Renaissance rather than medieval ideals (Monfasani, 2015).

While the Renaissance is generally not considered to have begun in Italy until the fifteenth century, how can a period of rich artistic and intellectual thought be contained to a start and end date? Is it possible that these motifs of the Renaissance simply appeared overnight? It is critical to analyze works that tread that border between

the two periods as they can be effective tools in understanding the lifespan of medieval and Renaissance values. In this case, the *Carrara Herbal* serves as a great case study in the debate of whether to categorize it as medieval illustrated herbal or renaissance illustrated herbal.

Renaissance herbals shifted away from relying on existing manuscripts to inspire illustrations and instead their illustrations were based on physically looking at the medicinal plant, or simple, itself (Elliott, 2011). Understanding this information, the *Carrara Herbal* becomes much more interesting, as it seems to be situated in between both methods of illustration. Comparing images of the manuscript to photos of the plants they represent, it seems as if the illustrations are a product of looking at older manuscripts and supplementing objectively correct aspects of the simples when possible. Regardless of whether scholars classify the *Herbal* as a renaissance herbal or not, what is important to consider here is the importance of transition periods. Categorizing the *Herbal* as either a medieval or renaissance work allows scholars to learn more about the values of Novello's court while also gaining a larger perspective about when and who was leading that shift towards the Renaissance. Without the *Herbal* and the curiosity it invokes, it is possible that early signs of the Renaissance in Italy may not exist.

Function

Francesco Novello's purpose for commissioning the *Herbal* may not align with what this manuscript's function became. While it is probable that the original purpose of this manuscript as a signal for Novello's progressive ideas and generative power was accomplished, the function of the manuscript eventually became more pragmatic and took on a life of its own by serving as a medieval textbook or reference book. The *Herbal* functioned as a gathering place for all types of readers to add and expand existing knowledge about medical simples.

One aspect of the manuscript that alludes to the function is the choice of script. The *Carrara Herbal* is written in a Gothic style and based on the treatment of the minims, the short vertical stroke that comprises most letters, this is mostly like a *prescissa* form of Gothic scripts (Egerton MS 2020, n.d., Graham and Clemens, 2007). *Prescissa* forms of Gothic Textura book hands are very formal and identified based on the lack of feet on the bases of letters. The choice to use this script reflects both the nature of commission and function. Based on Novello's desire to establish himself as commander in a new era of Paduan court, the choice of Gothic Textura Precisa reflects the formality and nobility he wanted to be affixed to the *Herbal*. More than this, readers have an easier time reading the main text of the *Herbal* because of Gothic Textura's even and spacious aspect; thus, the book can better serve its purpose as a functional reference book for medical knowledge. The combination of these two ideas demonstrates the intersection of function and beauty that makes the *Herbal* a unique time capsule of shifting values.

Illustration and illumination are both facets of the *Carrara Herbal* that are also indicators of the purpose of the manuscript. The amount of illustrations appearing throughout the manuscript adds to the elaborate nature of the manuscript and, frequently, signals topic change or a break in the text when more distinct illustrations like an illuminated initial appear. Additionally, illustrations often take up more than half of a page (or were intended to take up that amount) which physically showcases the most important characteristic of the text: the opportunity to accurately visualize medicinal simples. When compared to the alternative—more text than illustration—the emphasis on illustration reinforces that this manuscript exists at the intersection of functions that work together to create a unique reading experience for readers across generations. Without illustrations like inhabited initials and plant drawings, it would be more burdensome to grasp the depth of the manuscript both as a reference book and as a treasured book that established Francesco Novello's status in court (Kyle, 2010).

Similarly to the script and illustrations, the size of the manuscript speaks volumes about the practicality of the book as a reference source. The *Herbal* measures 350 x 240 millimeters (13.8 x 9.4 inches), which is comparable to a Macbook Pro that measures 13 x 9 inches (Egerton MS 2020, n.d.). Comparing it to contemporary reference material, such as computers, aids in the modern comprehension of the function of the *Herbal*. The manuscript was likely made with the idea of medieval herbalists carrying the *Carrara Herbal* around as they traveled from room to room or even city to city. More than this, the size is comfortable enough to have the book open and available for immediate reference when someone was physically using simples. While the size is practical, it is not small enough to fit in a pocket or small bag. So, the size reflects the line between functionality as a use and beauty as a purpose, just as many other aspects of the manuscript confirm.

Understanding this, the manuscript may have been constructed with similar intentions as other portable

educational reference materials of its era, including extant wax tablets and books such as Aesop's Fables or Cato's Distichs. Classic medieval literature such as that of Aesop and Cato became so canonized they were included in the *Auctores Octo*, a collection of stories by eight renowned authors including Theodulus and Alain de Lille (Wheatly, 1994). Although there are over one hundred existent manuscripts of the *Auctores Octo*, there seem to be a number of them that are sized similarly to the *Carrara Herbal* (Wheatley, 1994). However, one manuscript created in 1494 is only slightly smaller than the *Herbal* at 310 x 215 millimeters, or 12.2 x 8.4 inches (*Auctores Octo*, n.d.). On another note, extant wax tablets from this era ranged widely in size and could be upwards of 300 x 200 millimeters, or about 12 x 8 inches (Brown, 1994). However, many of these tablets were much smaller than the *Herbal* and the *Auctores Octo*, typically around the 4 x 6 inches size (Brown, 1994). Wax tablets, unlike manuscripts, were consumables and completely utilitarian rather than sitting at the crossroads of beauty and function. Comparing all three of these objects, it seems as though reference materials were explicitly designed with the experience of the user involved, and the size of a manuscript can directly promote comprehension of the book's function as a reference book.

A further aspect that aids the cognizance of the *Carrara Herbal's* function is damage to the manuscript that has accrued over the six centuries since its creation. Damage done to manuscripts is, in its own right, a form of storytelling for modern readers. By inspecting the damage to a book, the physical actions during the use of and surrounding the manuscript are revealed. For example, researchers can chronicle the life of a book based on pest damage that could only happen in specific regions of the world (Graham & Clemens, 2007). The *Herbal* has clear signs of liquid spills along the edges of the manuscript that bleed onto many of the pages. These stains vary in size, color, and noticeability, which might be attributed to the manuscript's function as a practical reference book to be used while making medicinals. Additionally, the ink used to write the main text has degraded over time, leaving some sections of text extremely faded while others have remained staunchly dark in pigment. These damages clue modern readers to the trans-historical community that the *Herbal* was able to create. Spills and fading ink evidence that notes in the margins were left by readers who know the simples described based on authentic experiences. Damage in the *Carrara Herbal* is one of the first pieces of evidence in this manuscript that demonstrate the ongoing practical-pedagogical community that aids in each other's learning.

Trans-Historic Document

One of the most compelling traits of the *Carrara Herbal* is the frequency of marginalia and glossing outside of the primary text, which explicitly demonstrates the function of the manuscript as a practical medieval reference textbook. These notes are plentiful, and nearly every page of the manuscript has two or three notes, clearly left by a variety of readers. This idea is evidenced by the number of annotations written in a variety of different scripts, book hands, and handwritings. Despite the language barrier, it is clear that these notes not only respond to the main text but also respond to other pieces of marginalia. These types of glossing allow readers the opportunity to build and share practical knowledge as they gain it themselves. When scribes or readers added information alongside the main text, they were effectively establishing the *Herbal* not only as a reference book for practical use but also as a forum where practitioners revise medicinal knowledge. Because of this, it also became a trans-historical gathering place for readers to share their knowledge, which they likely gained in practice, with future readers. Even though the *Herbal* may only physically exist as one text, it serves and has previously served a variety of purposes and functions, which only adds to the complexity of the manuscript.

The addition of these notes gives modern scholars evidence of the manuscript's history and provides details about the book. The *Herbal* contains upwards of six distinctive book hands, which possibly showcases the evolution of handwriting and script for manuscript scholars. Some glossing in the *Herbal* ascribes more to distinctive book hands, such as folio f.12 v, which depicts Mugwort and uses a book hand similar to the main text (*Egerton MS 2020*, n.d.). Conversely, there are instances of annotations that look more akin to the handwriting of the modern era where each individual possesses an idiosyncratic style of writing. One example of this is on folio f.50 v, which is about basil and has a few notes in the margin that look like updates to specific parts of the text (*Egerton MS 2020*, n.d.). This establishes grounds for a compelling argument that could chronicle the life of the *Herbal* and confirm it has been in the hands of active readers for generations across the globe.

Taking notice of the differences in marginalia writing styles could also lead to another hypothesis revealing critical information about the readers of the *Carrara Herbal*. It is plausible different book hands divulge previously unknown information about its users and their purpose for coming to the manuscript. If a scribe came to the *Herbal* intending to update the manuscript with observations to add in the margins, they may have been more likely to use a uniform book hand that more closely resembles the original Gothic Precisa hand. However, a more informal reader actively using the manuscript as a reference book may have favored jotting a quick note in the margins in their own handwriting for reevaluation later. By comparing the distinctive handwriting in the book with common book hands throughout time, scholars could potentially try to place each writer and their notes on a timeline that might fill in gaps about the manuscript's whereabouts at various times in history (Graham & Clemens, 2007). While handwriting might not be a surefire way to place a manuscript in a specific place at a specific time, it can aid readers and scholars in their efforts to contextualize the manuscript and aid their understanding of the practical-pedagogical community the *Herbal* creates.

One aspect of the manuscript's history that can help historians answer these questions about reader usage is how closely connected Francesco Novello was to Paduan University and their medical schools. Because the *Carrara Herbal* was a practical reference book similar to modern textbooks, it is possible that students at the nearby university were using the *Herbal* as a way to actively engage in their education and field of study. As students read and likely experimented with the medicinal simples, they could have left notes in their handwriting or perhaps collectively told a local scribe what they had found and to make note of it in the margins. Even the commission of the *Carrara Herbal* demonstrates how the manuscript creates practical-pedagogical communities of learning at every turn.

While the types of handwriting and book hands are the most physically compelling evidence of multiple marginalia writers, the types of annotations also serve as points of inquiry in determining how many readers became annotators of the text. One of the most common types of annotation in the *Herbal* is matching signs which use a symbol in the margin and mark the same symbol in the line of text where the note applies (Graham & Clemens, 2007). These notes exist in multiple types of handwriting and book hands which could justify the idea that scribes entered information over a period of centuries (Graham & Clemens, 2007). *Nota bene*, a small sign emphasizing the primary text, is also a prevalent form of marginalia, as seen in folio f.5r, where it seems someone wanted to signify to either themselves or future readers the importance of the information on that page (Graham & Clemens, 2007, *Egerton MS 2020*, n.d.). Lastly, lexical glosses are present throughout the manuscript as a way to add synonyms or supplement difficult vocabulary for bilingual readers (Graham & Clemens, 2007). These types of lexical glosses are particularly useful for a manuscript like the *Carrara Herbal* because it was transcribed from a Latin version of an original Arabic exemplar.

It seems clear these notes were completed by a wide variety of people across periods, since the notes have been left in all different types of book hands. Studying the variety of marginalia and their purposes may indicate the opportunity to learn more about the trans-historical community created by the *Herbal*. These notes, in combination with the other key elements, make the *Herbal* what it is: a manuscript that sits at the intersection between function and beauty. The *Carrara Herbal* has preserved some of the earliest medical knowledge while also being a time capsule for the treatment and status of books across periods.

Conclusion

The *Carrara Herbal* was commissioned to establish Francesco Novello's status as a "physician prince" and demonstrate the manuscript's importance as a vessel for medieval medicine. Although Novello commissioned the *Herbal* to be an elaborate way to revitalize his collapsing family identity, the intended purpose and practical function are not always the same. It is a physical representation of the idea that textual mediums can be a powerful place for sharing knowledge. The *Carrara Herbal* was both commissioned for and a creator of practical-pedagogical communities that ascended beyond the confines of time. This trans-historical community is primarily evidenced by the variety of handwriting in the margins of the manuscript but is also seen in the size of and damage to the book. Between the elaborate illustrations and captivating marginalia, the *Carrara Herbal* sits at the intersection of function and beauty, creating a maze of intrigue for modern readers and scholars alike.

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