

Letter to the Editor

Quibus cor palpitet: Hyena cor.

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Abstract

The search for a genuine thought in ancient times makes medical archeology part of our contemporary knowledge, not to say a patrimony to be harbored. A Roman encyclopedia is a compilation of the prevailing knowledge of scientific and medical matters at the time. In this paper an original Roman prescription for a specific cardiac complaint is analyzed for its activity and efficaciousness. Further investigation of the effect of Selenium administration is warranted.

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1. Introduction

In so called “matters of the heart” general advice is as old as Methusalem. Nevertheless medical prescriptions too go back a long time and ancient civilisations like Egypt and Sumeria could rely on some sort of pharmacopoeia. Knowledge however was scattered and also depended on the regional dispersion of herbs available.

When Rome conquered Greece (completed about 150BC), a clash between the Greek philosophical and spiritual attitude and roman practical efficaciousness followed and as a result Greek cultural and medical superiority was more firmly established, mainly because Rome at that time lacked the institutions to absorb this centuries old heritage, lavished upon them. As a logical and practical consequence an influx of Greek scholars and physicians got going, stimulated and facilitated by imperial measures on one hand but on the other strongly opposed by the conservative part of the senate who abhorred these developments in fear of loss of identity. More or less automatically this particular form of xenophobia resulted in a flow of publications. Encyclopedias (and pharmacopoeia) were not only written to implement existing knowledge in daily practice but to take the wind out of the Greek sails as

well. Therefore encyclopedias were not intended to promote new ideas or new techniques but presented what could be called the first attempt in history to develop a new concept of mass knowledge industry (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Roman mosaic dedicated to natural science.

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2. Pliny the elder and his encyclopedia

Gaius Plinius Cecilius Secundus, better known as Pliny the elder was born in Comum (ancient Como) and perished in the eruption of the Vesuvius in AD 79. During a distinguished career in the military and later in the legal profession this “encyclopedic nationalist” served three emperors and at the same time managed to write enormous amounts of material. The Natural History is a massive compilation in thirty-seven books of the prevailing knowledge of social, religious, political, scientific and medical matters (Fig. 2).

In his work Pliny the elder gives ample evidence that, from the first century AD, the Roman world had a full knowledge of medicinal drugs. In this respect, Pliny could be regarded as one of the founders of our modern pharmacology. His work is regarded to be of paramount importance in the history of sciences and is an invaluable source for general information of the time.

3. Analysis of an original prescription for a specific cardiac complaint

Only once was a specific clinical cardiac condition mentioned in the pharmacopoeia of Pliny, together with a therapeutic advice, grotesque and rather uncommon at first glance:

“tremulis, spasticis, exilientibus et quibus cor palpitet, aliquid ex corde coctum mandendum ita, ut

reliqua partis cinis cum cerebro hyaenae inlinatur.”
Or: *in trembling, spasticity, exaltation and in whom the heart palpitate, should eat from an hyena's heart, cooked and rubbed with brain tissue for that matter.*

Why is a hyena's heart preferred? Perhaps it has something to do with the superstitious belief, even to be found in relative modern times in the slave coast of West Africa, that the hyena is the animal in which human souls are commonly re-born. Its half human laugh may perhaps account for this longstanding belief that could well be Roman too, because of other striking resemblance in funeral rituals. So using a hyena's heart in a way and to some extent may express the gravity of the situation encountered [1] (Fig. 3).

On closer examination too, the only prescription found in a voluminous pharmacopoeia to alleviate a specific cardiac symptom, seems rather bizarre not to say primitive. But then again, just forgetting the greasy part and the stuff and nonsense that comes with a belief that specific organs exerts additional powers, we should be able to find some clues for an effective activity of such a concoction. Looking at the nutrient content of a cooked and simmered heart, the outline of a cocktail with minerals becomes visible (Table 1).

Henceforth one may speculate about pathophysiology using contemporary knowledge and methods. When analyzing this peculiar prescription in detail we end up with a number of (trace) minerals as adjuvants therapy embedded in a high



Fig. 2. Manuscript of Pliny's Natural History.

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