Some Aspects of Herbal Medical Treatment on the Example of Medieval Reval

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Discussions about medieval medicine were usually held on the basis of manuscripts written by well known and authorized scholars. Indeed we have to accept that the very basis of the above-named profession based on the theoretical literature gathered in the universities. Unfortunately, the role of academic science has a secondary effect if we are dealing with the physician's everyday practice. Town physicians who were treating patients on the one hand selected their academic knowledge stressing the most valuable information needed in their working environment but on the other hand they were probably adapting that information to the local conditions. The role of popular science and native methods of healing were also important. It is, however, a hard task to recognize how important the local influence in medieval medicine was.

If we are aiming to find out the connections between medical science and the local practices we have to be very careful with the sources we use. It is quite obvious that the information in this case can be obtained from written sources and in some cases from archaeological excavations. These sources must be very specific by their nature. It means that they have to be strictly concerned with the process of healing. This kind of information can be gathered from all sort of handbooks, recipe books and inventories (containing lists of drugs).

Usually the above-named writings contain antidotes which means that the treatment was based mainly on drugs. Drugs were usually mixed from different herbs because they were thought to contain important healing powers. On the basis of the recipe books of Reval,[1] medieval drugs contain about 98% herbs.

By analysing different plants used for medicaments in medieval Reval we can decide whether these plants were gathered in the local region or imported. Usually the most commonly known plant names are a result of their local cultivation as herbs. They are mainly

[1] Tallinna Linnaarhiiv (Tallinn City Archives; abbr. TLA), CM 18: includes also "*Rezeptbuch 16. Jahrhundert*." TLA, A.f. 15: "*Schuldbuch des Gotke van Telchten 1481–1506*" includes also "*Rezeptbuch 15. Jahrhundert*"; J. W. Dehio, "Berichtigungen und Nachträge zu den Mittheilungen über die Medicinalverhältnisse Alt-Revals." In: *Beiträge zur Kunde Ehst-, Liv- und Kurlands*. Bd. 4. Reval, 1887. p. 448.

of German origin and in some cases there are doubts as to whether they are Middle Low German plant names adapted to Estonian.[2]

Probably one of the earliest medico-botanical manuscripts in Estonia was the so called *Herbarius-Codex*. It belonged to St. Catherine's Dominican monastery. Unfortunately, we know very little about this manuscript as it disappeared at the beginning of this century from the Tallinn City Archives. Only brief references to it have been made by the Baltic German historians Friedrich Koehler and Friedrich Amelung.[3] It was dated to the beginning of the thirteenth century and was probably a copy of the well-known *Dioscurides* manuscripts.[4] It was a Latin scientific manuscript where besides the botanical descriptions of plants it was shown how to use them against various diseases. We can assume that it was mainly used by monks inside the monastery for educational purposes.

It is somewhat doubtful if these extensive manuscripts were used by town physicians because they were not easily portable in everyday practice. Self-made handbooks were much more useful. Handbooks were a kind of shortcut to all the knowledge obtained by a physician during his practice. Unfortunately very few of them have survived through the centuries.

A Manuscript medicinischen Inhalts,[5] as it was called in the Library of the Estonian Literary Society, became the property of the Estonian Museum of History after the Second World War. This Manuscript has leather covers with prescriptions for priests in Latin. These prescriptions can be dated to the beginning of the thirteenth century. It was quite common that some of the early writings on parchment were used as a binding material. The manuscript itself contains five fragments from different periods bound in one. It includes also a drawing which represents a human figure with marked places to bleed. This human figure on parchment can be dated to somewhat between the end of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth century.

The first part of this manuscript is especially interesting. Twenty pages contain specific instructions on how to use different plants for various medical purposes. The manuscript is written in Middle High German. It is a hard task to identify the real age of this fragment but judging by the watermarks it is quite possible that it dates back to between the end of the fourteenth century and the beginning of the fifteenth century. These dates are very close to a similar book written by Konrad Megenberg in 1350.[6] Megenberg's "Book of Nature" ("*Buch der Natur*") is thought to be the oldest so called "*Kräuterbuch*" (Book of Herbs) written in the German language. It means that in the case of the "*Reval Kräuterbuch*" we are dealing with one of the oldest manuscripts of this kind in the natural sciences of the German speaking world (Fig. 1). The above named fragment contains only 36 plant names. Most of these plants are common in Estonian nature or can be cultivated in our climate:

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[2] Fr. Amelung, "Der Herbarius-Codex des Revaler Stadt-Archivs und ein Blick auf die ehstländischen Klostergärten im Mittelalter." In: *Beiträge zur Kunde Ehst-, Liv- und Kurlands*. Bd. 5. Reval. 1900. p. 71.

[3] Fr. Koehler, *Ehstländische Klosterlektüre*. Reval. 1892. pp. 120-121.

[4] H. Fischer, *Mittelalterliche Pflanzenkunde*. München, 1949. S. 114; H. Schipperges. *Der Garten der Gesundheit*. München. 1990. pp. 133.

[5] B. Schamardin. "Andmeid Vana- Liivimaa meditsiinilise kirjanduse ajaloost feodaalse killustatuse ajajärgul."[Historical data on medical literature of Old Livonia during the feudal period]. In: *Nõukogude Eesti Tervishoid*. 1966. nr.4. Lk. 67; Eesti Ajaloomuuseum (Estonian History Museum), f 237. n 1, s 207: *Manuskript medicinischen Inhalts*.

[6] Arnold Pfister, "Die Pflanze und das Buch." T.1. In: *Librarium* 6. 1963. P. 9.

Eberysth – *Artemisia abrotanum* – abrotan
Absintheum – *Artemisia absinthum* – wormwood
Urtica – *Urtica dioica* – nettle
Allium – *Allium sativum* – garlic
Plantagio – *Plantagio sp.; Plantagio major* – plantain
Apium – *Apium vulgare* – celery
Porrum – Allium porrum – leek
Ruta – *Ruta graveolens* – rue
Bienemice – *Melissa officinalis* – melis
Poley – *Mentha pulegium* – poley
Veniculum – *Foeniculum vulgare* – sanicle
Lactuca – *Lactuca sativa* – lettuce
Rosa – *Rosa canina* – dog-rose
Lilien – *Lilium album* – lily
Violen – *Viola sp.* – violet
Satureia – *Satureia hortensis* – savory
Salvia – *Salvia officinalis* – sage
Enula – *Inula helenium* – elecampane
Isop – *Hyssopus officinalis* – hyssop
Lapacium – *Rumex acetosa; Tussilago farfar* – common sorrel; colts foot
Nygella – *Nigella sativa* – nigel
Cycuta – *Cicuta virosa; Conium maculatum* – cowbane, hemlock
Menta – *Mentha piperita* – peppermint
Synape – *Sinapis alba; Brassica nigra* – white mustard; black mustard
Pastinaca – *Pastinaca sativa* – wild parsnip
Serpillum – *Thymus serpillum* – wild thyme
Cerifolium – *Chaerophyllum aromaticum* – chervil
Coriander – *Coriandrum sativum* – coriander
Papaver – *Papaver sp.* – poppy
Swertele – *Iris germanica* – garden iris
Kamomilla – *Chamomilla officinalis* – chamomile
Kendula – *Calendula officinalis* – garden marigold
Levisticum – *Levisticum officinalis* – lovage
Struccon – *Nasturtsium aquaticum* – water cress
Nasturtsium – *Lepidium sp.*

The lack of exotic plants in the list suggests that those plants were separated from the whole text, because they were the most common and sought-after plants in this region. The idea that the above named plants were already cultivated in Reval is supported by the fifteenth century book of recipes[7] where some drugs require the use of fresh plants. The earliest evidences regarding the herb gardens in Reval is from 1452 when a garden was owned by the chemist Claus Schulte.[8]

[7] TLA. A.f 15: *Rezeptbuch 15. Jahrhundert.*
[8] E. v. Nottbeck. *Das drittälteste Erbebuch der Stadt Reval (1383-1458).* Reval, 1892. p. 62.

The results of archaeological excavations of medieval fecalpits from the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth centuries in Dorpat[9] showed that the fecalpits were used mainly by the town elite.[10] Nevertheless, the archaeobotanical analyses showed that exotic plant remnants were almost missing. However, this doesn't mean that the exotic plants were unknown to the physicians. The manuscript also contains a glossary for medieval Latin and Middle Low German herb names and lists 356 different plant names also including plants not common to Europe and the nordic climate. This glossary is probably copied from a larger medical manuscript, possibly from one which was quite similar to another Dominican manuscript "*Compendium medicum*"[11] found in Tallinn City Archives. The above named copy was made especially for the "field work".

All the plants used in medicine were supposed to contain a certain amount of healing power. At the end of the eleventh century Constantin African, inspired by the work of Galen "*De natura rerum simplicum*", classified in his tractate "*De gradibus simplicium*" all the well-known herbs by their nature according to the degrees of heat, dryness, cold and moisture they contain.[12] In the above mentioned piece, plants with a certain amount of heat and dryness were preferred. 19 plants out of 30 were hot and dry. There is also an explanation which presumes that the nature of plants was always connected to the lack of nature in the human body. In that case the most common diseases at the time in which this manuscript was in use were caused by the superfluous amount of cold and moisture inside the body. Some kind of proof for this speculation can be found in the second part of the manuscript which encapsulates brief descriptions of human organs and their connection to the four elements and the nature associated with them. Prescriptions regarding the lack of elements is mainly based on Constantin African's work "*Pantegni*". The text itself belongs to the same period as the previous one, and it is quite obvious that this particular physician was accustomed to this method of healing and used it in his everyday practice. This manuscript suggests that these malfunctions can be connected with kidneys, glandular, auditory and respiratory organs. Even the prescriptions made by the Town Council of Reval c. 1454 for avoiding plague are followed by the same principles.[13] The translation of a chronicle made by Eugen v. Nottbeck shows it plainly:

> "*You have to avoid the Southern wind which brings unhealthy warmth. Open the windows to North and avoid everything which stinks and comes from the stable and kitchen....*"

By the theory of nature the southern wind has a hot nature and preconditions for pestilence.

The third and the fourth part of this manuscript are written in Latin and contain seasonal and astrological prescriptions for physicians.

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[9] M. Tammet. "On results of the carpological analysis of the medieval cesspits in Tartu." In: *Scientific methods in Estonian archaeology*. Tallinn. 1988 (Summary). p. 102.

[10] A. Mäesalu. "Unikale Glasfunde aus Tartu." In: *ENSV TA Toimetised. Ühiskonnateadused*. 1986, nr. 4. p. 400-402.

[11] TLA. CM 15: *Compendium Medicum*.

[12] Arnoldi de Villanova. *Regimen Sanitatis Salernitanum*. Herausgegeben von J.F.Schulz: V.N. Ternovsky. 1978. p. 47.

[13] E. v. Nottbeck. "Fragment einer Revaler Chronik." In: *Beiträge zur Kunde Ehst-, Liv- und Kurlands* Bd. 4. Reval. 1894. p. 451. Cfr. TLA. A a. 10.

At the end of the fifteenth century and at the beginning of the sixteenth century we can notice an increase in healing activities among burghers of Reval. They are explained by the fact that printed popular scientific writings became available for everyone who was rich enough to pay. In the sixteenth century inventories featured lists of popular books, and even books named *"Kreuterbuch"* were listed. In some cases burghers even had their home pharmacies. For example, in 1550 the burgher Caspar Engelen had about 400 different drugs at his house and several printed books about medical treatment.[14] These books included the famous *"Kreuterbuch"* by Hieronymus Bock printed in 1539 and the *"New Kreuterbuch"* by Leonhard Fuchs printed in 1543.[15] This means that the common burghers were not so far from the authorized medical treatment. Even non-burghers like Zwedreus Bynynck were interested in recipes, and he found a preacher named Bartelomeus who initiated him into the secrets of healing and probably inspired him to write a recipe book at about 1470.[16]

A recipe book dating from the beginning of the sixteenth century has survived completely intact and gives us an even better picture of when and how the plants were used.[17] It contains 300 recipes used against different diseases. We can assume that this recipe book was the property of a burgher because the recipes were written in an extremely vulgar Middle Low German. However, about 120 different plants were used in recipes for different illnesses. The following piece extracted from this recipe book shows how numerous the quantity of herbs used in one recipe could be:[18]

> *"...you have to take 1 half ounce*[19] *muscadine flowers, 2 half ounce ginger, 1 half ounce zedoar, 1 half ounce nutmeg, 1 half ounce cinnamon, 1 half ounce clary leaves, 1 half ounce rue seeds, 1 half ounce parsley seeds, 1 half ounce siler, 1 half ounce fennel seeds, 1 half ounce flax seeds, 1 half ounce* Trigonella foenum graecum L. *(?), 1 half ounce rhubarb, 1 drahm liquorice, 1 half ounce galang, ...half ounce sugar, 1 half ounce clover (?) (*Trifolium sp.*) leaves.*
>
> *Then have this all boiled slightly, then filter it through a piece of broadcloth and leave it to subside. This powder is good for falling sickness and is also good for driving stones out and for the stomach and breast and is also good against red spots in eyes and relieves skin sicknesses."*

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[14] TLA, A.e. 2 Bl. 315-353.

[15] Werner Gaude. *Die alte Apotheke*. Leipzig, 1979. p. 49.

[16] TLA, A.f. 15: *Rezeptbuch 15. Jahrhundert.*

[17]. TLA. CM 18: *Rezeptbuch 16. Jahrhundert.* J. W. Dehio, "Berichtigungen und Nachträge zu den Mittheilungen über die Medicinalverhältnisse Alt-Revals." In: *Beiträge zur Kunde Ehst-, Liv- und Kurlands* Bd. 4. Reval. 1887. p. 448.

[18]. TLA. CM 18: Rezeptbuch 16. Jahrhundert. p.8: *...item heyt tho schalm nemen j lodtt mossatten blomen item jj lodtt engefer.item i lodt seddefer /item i lodtt mossatte /item i lodtt kannel/item i lodtt salfeygen blader item i lodtt weyn rwden sadtt /item i lodtt fennekol sadtt /item i lodtt petterselleygen sadtt /item i lodtt seyler mantana item i lodtt leyn sadtt /item i lodtt obdecondesenw fenwm item j lodtt rabarbara /item j kweyntteyn lackrvscz /item j lodtt galleygan /item...lodt hodtt swcker /item i lodtt dreygolt blader*
item dwdtt modtt allescz klen gesthodtt seyn vnd dorch eyn len harren sef geseythtteyt dwt pwlwer jsset gwdtt vor hemmeleychge kranchkeyt de eynnem menschen an kwn jsset ock gwdtt vor den sten dryfdtt wdt der magen vnd der brost vnd jsset ock gwdt wor de rode placken jn den ogen vor therret de wedage der ledder /...

[19]. J. D. Intelmann. *Arithmetischer Wegweiser oder nach Ehst-und Liefländischer Handlung gründlich eingerichtetes Erstes Revalsches Rechenbuch.* Magdeburg, 1736. p. 9: ounce = 29,86 g; half ounce = 14,93 g; drahm = 3.73 g.

In the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, everyday medical practice was probably mainly based on natural philosophy and even the choice of herbs in different mixtures was first made by estimating the lack of some nature in the human body. The role of different mixtures in recipes was not as high as it became by the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century.

How accustomed was the Estonian peasantry to the medicaments and herbs used in different drugs? In this case, we can find little help from written sources. Information can only be gained by the etymological analyses of the most common plant names. This work was already started by Friedrich Amelung at the end of nineteenth century when he placed the Estonian word for flower - *lill* - among the words borrowed from the Middle Low German.[20] And the white lily (*Lilium candidum*) was indeed one of the most common garden flowers in the Middle Ages.

Estonian prelinnéan plant names can be divided into two main groups: 1) plant names translated from German names and 2) names with Middle Low German stems. There is a possibility that the translation of German plant names started after the Reformation in the sixteenth century when there were serious attempts to enlighten Estonian peasantry. In this case, words with Middle Low German stems can originate from a much earlier period, from the fourteenth and fifteenth century. It seems that even names with no direct connection to medicine or agriculture carry stems of Middle Low German origin. One of these plants is certainly fat hen *Chenopodium album* - Estonian *malts* - Middle Low German *melte*.[21] August Wilhelm Hupel points out in his *"Topographische Nachrichten"* that many names of plants common to Estonian nature in the Estonian and Latvian language have been derived from Middle Low German, although these plants should have been well known to the Livonian peasants in the medieval period.[22] This leads to a conclusion that peasants could have learned about these plants primarily through the dispersion of recipes.

The difference between the mentality of an average German-speaking citizen and a non-German town inhabitant or a peasant from the near surroundings of the town may not have been too great. The diffusion could easily have been carried out by mendicants, who used to know the local language and whose direct aim was to interact with common people as much as possible.

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[20] Fr. Amelung, "Der Herbarius-Codex des Revaler Stadt-Archivs und ein Blick auf die ehstländischen Klostergärten im Mittelalter." p. 74.

[21] Gustav Vilbaste, *Nomina Vernacula Plantarum Estoniae*. Tallinn, 1993. p. 249.

[22] A.W. Hupel, *Topographische Nachrichten von Lief- und Ehstland*, II Band Riga, 1777. pp. 486-525.

Fig. 1: A page from the medical manuscript in the Estonian Museum of History

QUOTIDIANUM ESTONICUM

MEDIUM AEVUM QUOTIDIANUM

HERAUSGEGEBEN VON GERHARD JARITZ

SONDERBAND V

QUOTIDIANUM ESTONICUM

ASPECTS OF DAILY LIFE IN MEDIEVAL ESTONIA

EDITED BY

JÜRI KIVIMÄE

AND

JUHAN KREEM

KREMS 1996

GEDRUCKT MIT UNTERSTÜTZUNG DER
KULTURABTEILUNG DES AMTES
DER NIEDERÖSTERREICHISCHEN LANDESREGIERUNG

Cover Illustration: Compilation from sketches in the margins of account books of the Town Magistrate of Reval (TLA. Ad. 26 and 32)

- ISBN 3 901094 08 3

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Körnermarkt 13, A - 3500 Krems. Austria - Printed by Kopitu Ges.m.b.H.,
Wiedner Hauptstraße 8-10. A-1050 Wien

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Preface

The idea to publish a special Estonian or Baltic issue of *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* has been discussed already for a couple of years with Gerhard Jaritz and Christian Krötzl. Initially the idea was based on the first experience of studying medieval everyday life and mentalities in a small seminar-group at Tartu University. This optimistic curiosity of discovering a new history or actually a history forgotten long ago, has been carried on. The research topics of Katrin Kukke, Inna Põltsam and Erik Somelar originate from this seminar. However, all contributions of *Quotidianum Estonicum* were written especially for this issue.

Besides that, this collection of articles needs some comments. First, it must be admitted that the selection of aspects of everyday life published here is casual and represents only marginally the modern situation of historical research and history-writing in Estonia. The older Baltic German and Estonian national scholarship has occasionally referred to the aspects of everyday life. Yet the ideology of '*histoire nouvelle*' has won popularity among the younger generation of Estonian historians only in recent years. These ideas are uniting a small informal circle of historians and archivists around Tallinn City Archives, represented not only by the above mentioned authors but also by the contributions of Tiina Kala, Juhan Kreem, Marek Tamm and Mihkel Tammet. Secondly, we must confess the disputable aspects of the title *Quotidianum Estonicum*. Medieval Europe knew Livonia but not Estonia and Latvia which territories it covered over 350 years. There may be even reproaches towards the actual contents that it is too much centralised on Tallinn/Reval, but it can be explained with the rich late medieval collections available at Tallinn City Archives.

We wish above all to thank Eva Toulouse, Monique von Wistinghausen, Hugo de Chassiron, Tarmo Kotilaine and Urmas Oolup for the editorial assistance. Our greatest debt of gratitude is to Gerhard Jaritz, without whose encouragement and support this issue could not have been completed.

Jüri Kivimäe, Juhan Kreem, editors