The Circulation of the Pharmaceutical Recipes in Antiquity as a Kind of Folklore

Hautala Svetlana, PhD

University of Siena, via Roma 47, 53100 Siena, Italy

svhautala@gmail.com

The participation of society in the pharmacological process was more decisive in times before the beginning of the era of pharmaceutical patents. The amass of the pharmaceutical prescriptions transmitted to us in the ancient literature permits us to state that anyone, not only a physician or a *pharmacopôlês* (a drug-seller), could intervene in the process of creating medicines.

For instance in the pharmaceutical works of Galen (more than 2500 pages in the Kuhn edition) we can find the recipes of – so to say – unprofessional authorship: Galen quotes Celer the Centurion, Euschemus the Eunuch, Flavius the Boxer, Orion the Hairdresser, Comon the philosopher and Aristocratos the grammarian:

Celer the Centurion	A remedy for sciatica, arthritis, tremors, convulsions, etc.	Gal., XIII 1031 K
Euschemus the Eunuch	A recipe against colic	Gal., XIII 287 K
Flavius the Boxer	Against dysentery	Gal., XIII 294 K
Orion the Hairdresser	*Acopon* (=application for relief of pain)	Gal., XIII 1038 K
Philoxenos the Grammarian (schoolmaster)	Another *acopon*	Gal., XIII 1036 K
Aristocratos the Grammarian	Against toothache	Gal., XII 879 K
Paris the Actor	A recipe of a hair remover	Gal., XII 454 K
A Bythinian barber	A prescription for sciatica	Gal., XIII 260 K
Amarantos the Grammarian	An unguent for gout	Gal., XIV 208 K
Comon the Philosopher	Against catarrh	Gal., XIII 56 K

Another striking feature of the ancient pharmacology is the instability of every recipe: one o several ingredients always could be changed by someone on whom opinion these changes supposed to improve the original version of a remedy. In fact, the concept of the "original version" dissolves in its many variants and sometimes only the name of a medicine could still bear some traces of its metamorphoses. We can see it better in the example of the variants of so called "Aegyptian plaster" as transmitted by Galen: the prescription changes the ingredient according to each author, quoted by Galen, but is called still "Aegyptian plaster":

Plaster of Serapion, also called "Aegyptian" and "Venus" (Gal., XIII 883 – 884)	**Aegyptian plaster of Claudius Philoxenus the surgeon (Gal., XIII 645)**	**Aegyptian plasters of Andromachos, as Asclepiades has described (Gal., XIII 643)**	**Aegyptian plaster of Andromachos described by Damocrates (Gal., XIII 919 – 920)**	**Another "Aegyptian plaster" described by Damocrates (Gal. XIII 922)**
Litharge, lead monoxide	Litharge, lead monoxide	Litharge, lead monoxide	Litharge, lead monoxide	Litharge, lead monoxide
wax	wax	wax	wax	wax
Gum-ammoniacum	Gum-ammoniacum	Gum-ammoniacum	Gum-ammoniacum	Gum-ammoniacum
	Terebinth	Terebinth	Terebinth	Terebinth
	Copper flakes	Copper flakes	Copper flakes	Copper flakes
	Incense	Incense	Incense	Incense
	Grease extracted from sheep's	Grease extracted from sheep's wool	Grease extracted from sheep's wool	

	wool			
	Flakes of iron	Flakes of iron	Flakes of iron	
			Oil of kiki-tree	Oil of kiki-tree
	Dry resin of the pine	Dry resin of the pine		
Violet				
Myrrh				
old oil				
Resinous juice of *Ferula galbaniflua*				
Pine-resin				
	Castor-oil			
	Bee-glue			
	Opoponax			
		Aristolochia		

While now it would be unthinkable such a medicine as – let's say – "Aspirin of Smith" or "Aspirin of Johnson the Boxer" etc., in the Antiquity all the prescriptions entered in the circulation being always opened to changes.

Yet we cannot say that in antiquity there was not exist a notion on the authorship of the remedies: on the contrary it was very present and the drug-sellers used the special stamps to seal the pharmaceutical preparations in order to establish the name of its creator (which could serve as a pharmaceutical publicity) and to protect them from the forgery. These stamps could seal the containers of medicines or very often the dry and solid preparations were compressed with the special seals which leave the inscriptions on the surface. The inscription could contain the name of the manufacturer, the name of the remedy and some image: Galen for example mentions an eye-salve called "the saffron lion cub" (1) because this image was impressed on the *collyrium* of the colour of saffron.

This opposition between two main lines of manufacture of medicines in antiquity – author's inventions on the one hand and their versions changed by intervention of virtually anyone on whom opinion it was necessary on the other – could be described better by using the concept of folklore. In fact in the domain of literature the concept of folklore presumes a series of similar opposition: the folklore, and therefore, the tradition, and innovation and an individual author's works, oral circulation when every performance presupposes variations made by a performer and literacy when a text is fixed and the content is shielded against any distortion, and so on.

However we are more interesting in the collectors of this ancient pharmacological folklore, since as it seems to write a pharmacological treatise in antiquity always meant to insert the oral knowledge: in fact the expression "*fêsin*" (they said) referring to the oral tradition is very frequent in the works of Theophrastos, Dioscorides or Galen. Nevertheless ancient pharmacological treatises only include folklore elements, but do not consist of them entirely – this is a difference between ancient authors and later collectors of folklore who made compilations of popular tradition for its own sake.

As is known it is in the Classical Antiquity that the foundation (also the theoretical ones) of the pharmaceutical science were set up. As Galen writes constantly the possibility to lose the books with recipes written down in them is very great – for example he tells the story of two physicians, both of them have lost the records of pharmacies and one has died of a grief and the second has changed his trade (2) – but (the moral of this story) everyone who owns a method can make without effort (and without books) compound medicines thanks to a theory which cannot be lost.

One can ask: if the method is the basis of the pharmacological knowledge, why Galen himself quotes the recipes of nonprofessionals (of boxers, grammarians and schoolteachers)? The answer would be as follow: because, in the eyes of Galen, they represented the precious testimonies of the empirically proven medicines. An effective cure can be discovered by chance, the most important thing is to be tested by many in quite long period of time to become thus a proven remedy. Plutarchos made it clear when wrote:

“In the very ancient times the sick themselves were submitted to public inspection, and everyone who knew of anything serviceable, having been a sufferer himself or tended one, informed the man who needed help; and in this way, it is said, a great art arose, assembled from the experience of many different people.” (3)

Certainly nowadays the social factor is extremely important as well in modern pharmacology when the public opinion can operate process of creation of new medicines. The difference which I wished to emphasize in these brief notes is too obvious: in antiquity anybody could create a compound medicine or change already existing recipe and to put it into practice. Let's note that not all nonprofessional authors of the recipes quoted by Galen were his contemporaries, many lived before him, but their inventions have been kept by pharmacological treatises or fame, as legendary, in other words proven and reliable. Then, probably, these products too were exposed to usual changes and interventions, as a full parallel to the folklore.

(1) Gal., *De comp. med. sec. loc.*, IV (K XII 773).
(2) Gal., *De comp. med. per gen.*, II 1 (K XIII 459).
(3) Plut., “Is ‘live unknown’ a wise precept?” II =Mor., 1128 e, (Loeb translation).