

REMEDIES FOR THE PLAGUE IN A WORK BY THE RENAISSANCE DOCTOR FERNANDO ALVAREZ BARCA

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Illustrious medical figures emerged during the Spanish Renaissance and the universities in Salamanca and Valladolid disseminated this newfound knowledge throughout Europe and the Spanish speaking world.

One of these figures was Fernando Álvarez Abarca (*circa* 1456-1526). Kown as “the third doctor of the Queen”, he incorporated this appellative into his surname and came to be known as Fernando Álvarez de la Reina (Fernando Álvarez of the Queen) (1).

He belonged to a family of doctors in Salamanca: both his father, Fernan Álvarez Malla, first doctor of the Queen, as well as his brother Gabriel, second doctor of the Queen, in addition to himself, were all doctors of the Court, which in his time was an itinerant court. They also taught medicine at the highest levels: which is to say, as professors, in Salamanca University’s School of Medicine. Although all three were accomplished doctors, among the three, Fernando alone was designated “the great doctor of the Queen”.

In 1497, the Catholic Monarchs appointed him their “physician” with a maximum salary of ninety thousands maravedies, authorizing him to take leave of his pedagogical duties while he served the Royal Family (2). In 1507 he was named doctor to Queen Juana and was granted the title Protomédico, which involved sitting on the Royal medical board, which was a consulting body and examining board that granted medical licenses. He held this position until the death of the Fernando Catholic Monarch in 1516 (3).

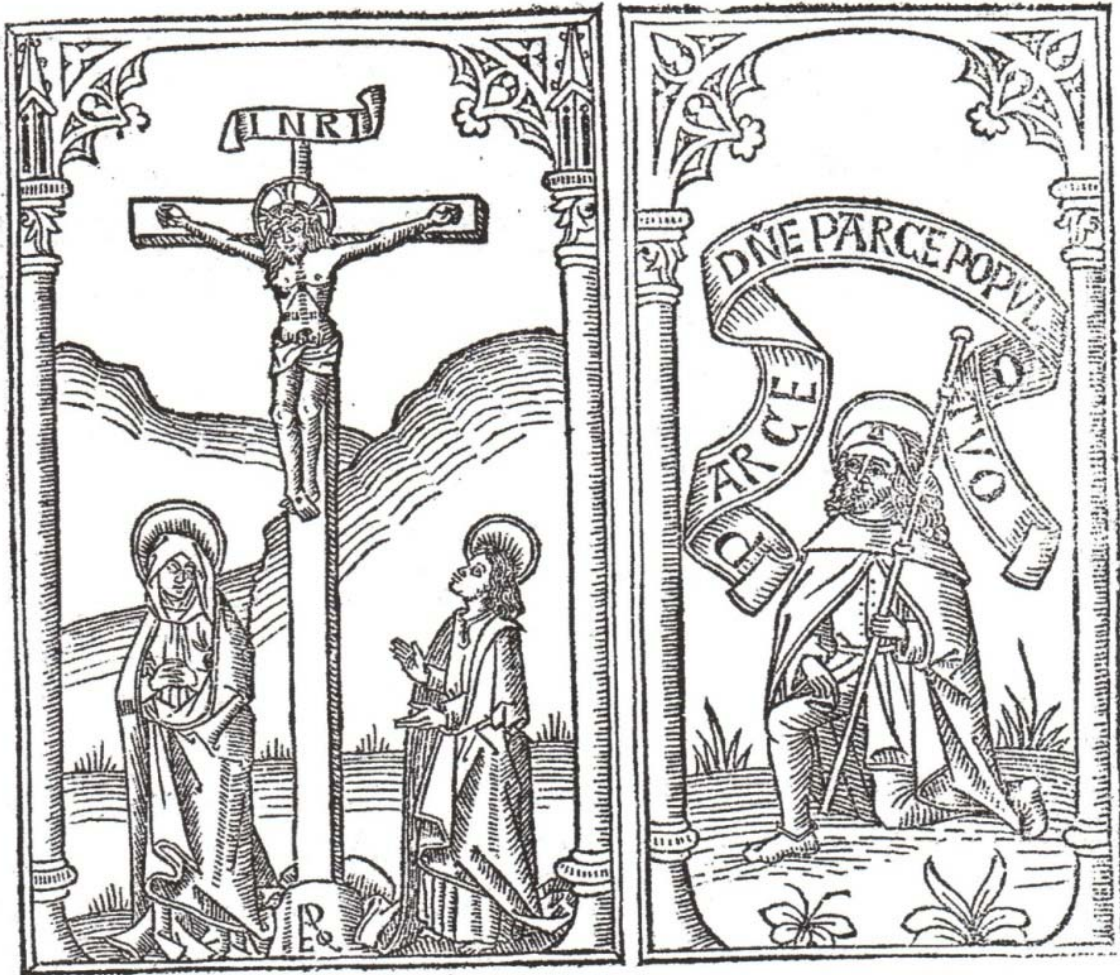
He later became mayor of his native city, Salamanca, where the family dwelling, “the House of the Doctors” has been preserved; since 1947 it has housed the Province’s Museum of Fine Arts.

1. THE WORK “PRECEPTS AGAINST THE PLAGUE”

It is a short treatise printed in Spanish, a rare exemplar, which is considered the oldest of those edited in Spanish concerning the plague and whose title indicates the distant influence of “*Medieval regimina*” (4).

In all likelihood, Fernando Álvarez wrote the treatise in 1501 and he compiled advice and prescriptions to prevent and cure plagues and epidemics. The book has no definite or precise structure in that the author’s recommendations are presented in a somewhat disorderly fashion, always insisting that the doctor treating the patient should have the last word. Álvarez writes that all treatments should be prescribed by “a wise doctor, who God, in his infinite mercy, gave the prudence and science necessary”.

There are four known exemplars of this work: one, the first edition, was edited in Salamanca by Juan Gysser, *circa* 1500-1507, proceeding from the Borbon-Lorenzana library (5), was preserved in the Castilla-La Mancha at Toledo Library, INC 332 (II). It is the only one cited by Palau (6); and copies of the same, according to Lorenzo Ruíz Hidalgo, exist in the National Libraries of Lisbon (Portugal) and Paris (France) (7). It is a treatise, folio size, printed in gothic lettering and illustrated with various woodcuts, two of which precede the title page and another at the end of the text. These woodcuts show us the spiritual ideology of the author as they have profound religious significance, which on the other hand was habitual in that period. There are two woodcuts on the cover: the first portrays the crucifixion of Christ at whose feet the Virgin Mary and Saint John are depicted, which signifies that God permitted the sacrifice of his child so that mankind could reach eternal salvation; the second woodcut features Saint Roch, protector from the plague, with his pilgrim staff and is surrounded by the inscription: “*Parce Domine parce populo tuo*”, which is translated as, “*Pardon us Lord, pardon your people*”, an entreaty of the author before the supposed punishment of the plague (Fig. 1).



**Regimiẽto contra la peste. Fecho
 por el insigne doctor Fernand alua-
 rez: medico de sus altezas. Cathe-
 dratico d̄ prima en medicina en esta
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Fig. 1. "Regimiento contra la peste" Fernando Alvarez Abarca. Biblioteca de Castilla la Mancha (Toledo). INC 332 (II).

The small woodcut, which serves as the colophon of the work, represents the martyr Saint Sebastian, protector from the plague, through whom Christians pled for divine intervention in the hopes of a cure for their illness. The saint is depicted tied by the feet and hands to a tree while two archers pierce him arrows and a spectator contemplates the scene (Fig. 2).

encima caliente z la coneja: z mas rezió es miel con mostaza molida z es muy prouado tomar higos passos cozidos z otro tanto d miel todo majado añadan a diez higos dos yemas de bueuos z dos onças de olio de lirio z otro tãto de ysope humedo.

Es bueno los palominos pelado lo bago z pollos z puesto por alli enel lugar de dõde se torna pñostico si los palominos o pollos se mueren que es mala señal: los causticos alaban algunos z en casos desesperados suelẽ aprouechar: en los otros las mas vezes augmẽtan la enfermedad.

La camara este regada cõ vinagre z agua: aya en la camara mēbri llos: duraznos: peras: melones z agua rosada: z tenga pucsta sobre la cama vn lienço mojado en agua ocho partes vinagre vna parte bolarmenico media pre: z si el agua fuere rosada sera mejor.

Es bueno a los sanos traer jacintos: esineraldas: agua rosada z vinagre: vn pañizuelo mojado lauar las manos cõ ello.

Los ajos son buenos para preservar los sanos que los tienen acostumbzados.

Acostumbra tomar de mañana onça z media de almiuar d azedo de cidras o de limones con otro tanto de agua de escaniosa cozida con la escaniosa es maravillosa a chicos z a grandes en preservaciõ z cura dela enfermedad.

En todo me remitto al fisico que estouiere presente: al qual conuiene moderar segun la edad complexion z costumbre del subjecto q se la encomendare.

Finis.



Fig. 2. "Regimiento contra la peste" Fernando Alvarez Abarca. Biblioteca de Castilla la Mancha (Toledo). INC 332 (II).

The second edition, published in quarto with gothic lettering, was published in Seville by Jacob Cromberger, circa 1516-1520, according to Clive Griffin (8). Two exemplars can be found in the

National Library of Madrid, I/2182 (2), I/2213 (2), and the other, proceeding from the San Carlos Royal College of Surgery of Madrid, and preserved in the Historical Library of the Complutense University of Madrid, BH MED 1996 (Fig. 3).



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Fig. 3. "Regimiento contra la peste" Fernando Alvarez Abarca. Biblioteca histórica UCM. BH MED 1996.

It is illustrated with only one woodcut preceding the title page which makes reference to the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian. The woodcut shows the arrow pierced saint, with his arms raised and hands tied to the trunk of a tree.

This work is a typical example of "Spanish humanism" and has a globalizing cultural effect due to the fact that it was published by two important German printers residing in two of the most flourishing Spanish cities during the sixteenth century: Juan Gysser in Salamanca (1500-1509) and Jacob Cromberger in Seville (1504-1528), large cities which had a growing middle class (9).

The interest awakened by this work merited his text a facsimile edition in Salamanca in 1979, under Luis Sánchez Granjel (1) and a revised edition of the text in Spanish, carried out in Madrid by María Nieves Sánchez (10). In none of these cases were the woodcuts mentioned reproduced.

2. TREATMENTS FOR THE PLAGUE

The work appears to be a treatise destined for a cultured, Spanish-speaking public, and provides some simple rules to follow in the fight against the plague and its fevers, treatments "which can be used and cannot harm" but which only doctors can recommend.

Fernando Álvarez, in accordance with the beliefs of his contemporaries, considered the origins of the plague to be astrological, due to corrupt air, or through contact with those suffering from the illness, their clothing or their food. The treatments he prescribed were based in the prevention and cure of the illness.

2.1. Preventative Remedies

Fernando Álvarez recommended a style of life consisting of little exercise, a moderate sex life, little sleep and a reduced diet, always taking age into account.

2.1.1. Hygienic Remedies

Fernando Álvarez recommended adopting public hygiene measures such as street cleaning, household hygiene, based on cleaning and disinfecting floors using vinegar as well as placing aromatic fruits such as melons, quinces and pears on top of the tables. He also advocated personal hygiene such as moistening a handkerchief with vinegar to wash one's hands, carrying perfume boxes of labdanum and amber prepared principally with camphor although they could also be made with musk and gum from the storax tree—all of which are aromatic substances which also contain antidotal powers. He likewise recommended carrying emeralds and hyacinths as amulets for their magical attributes as a protection against the plague.

2.1.2. Simple medicinal products

Fernando Álvarez recommended using some simple medicinal products alone, burnt, or as ingredients for preventative medicines such as garlic (chewed), anis, saffron, Armenian bole, dill (gum), gum from the storax tree, grain, fennel, bay leaves, aloe, rosemary, rue and thyme.

2.1.3. Medicines

Fernando Álvarez cites field scabious water, oxtongue's water, rose water, white vinegar, citron juice, lemon juice, the "dietary pills" (aloe pills) and Theriaca although he was skeptical of its usefulness; he says: "(The effectiveness of) Using theriaca to preserve is uncertain, even though it is universally praised, because so many conditions are required to assure its correct usage".

2.2. Curative Remedies

Fernando Álvarez based his therapy on enemas, purging and bleeding. He recommended applying fomentations, suction pads and suction pads with scarification. The medications he most highly recommends are oils, waters, decoctions, epithems, potions, powders and juices.

2.2.1. Simple medicinal products

Fernando Álvarez recommends either alone or as medicinal ingredients: poppies, canafistula flowers, white flaxinella, field scabious (herbs), grain (powder), figs, grease collected from washed wool, chamomile (flowers), mustard, mistletoe, rhubarb, roses, tamarind, tormentil. Moreover, he cites bone of the heart of deer and unicorn, which he claimed were excellent antidotes and pearl, amber and salpeter.

2.2.2. Medicines

Fernando Álvarez recommends waters and concoctions of the four “cordial flowers”: borage, oxtongues, roses and violets as well as “water of the Queen’s doctor” prepared by his brother Gabriel, which seems to concern some type of secret remedy. He likewise cites the “Powder of the Queen’s doctor”, prepared by himself, which he characterizes as a “marvellous” remedy and a “exceptional medicine for children and those up to 20 years of age” which he made using white flaxinella, tormentil, mistletoe, bone of the heart of deer, pearl and unicorn.

Among other curative medicines he names, either by themselves or as a part of other prescriptions: iris oil, rose oil, poppy oil, orange or lemon blossom water, endive water, field scabious water, strawberry water, rose water, sage water, acetous syrup, diarrodon powder, Theriaca, mallow ointment, white wine, citron juice, field scabious juice, buckthorn plantain juice, oxtongues juice, lemon juice and aromatic apple juice.

2.3. Dietary Advice

This type of advice was necessary, as the author indicates both detrimental and beneficial foods.

Among the former, the author includes any type of thick fish (tuna, barbell, etc...), milk and its derivatives, diverse pork products and some fruits clarifying as appropriate beef, lamb, poultry, eggs, lettuce and fruit.

2.4. Epílogo

As always, the author stresses the doctor present as the ultimate authority, above any of his recommendations or advice.

In this way the prestigious doctor Fernando Álvarez Abarca makes clear his gracious and respectful mien.

We cannot finish without mentioning Fernando Álvarez, which showed his fear at the health risk that a plague would entail and the doctor’s difficulty in fighting against it. He notes ironically that many people were saved from the plague and did not follow these recommendations of the others that “died having tried such remedies few have returned to this century to complain”.

CONCLUSIONS

Fernando Álvarez was a prestigious doctor, professor of the Medical School of the University of Salamanca, one of the most important universities in Spain at this time, in addition to being son and brother of doctors in the service of the Spanish Court, and his reputation merited his being named doctor to the Catholic Monarchs. In the work which we are studying and which was published in Salamanca and Seville, and edited by the most important German publishers of the period, Álvarez chooses recommendations amid the various options of the period to fight off the plague:

1st. To follow the traditional Hippocratic diet and hygienic style of life

2nd. The use of precious stones as amulets

3rd. He recommends utilizing vegetable based medicines over those which are animal and mineral based as preventative and curative remedies

4th. He recommends the use of easily prepared medicines such as: waters, decoctions and juices

5th. He attributes great therapeutical value to Theriaca, although not as a preventative remedy contrary to the traditional medical belief

6th. The formula of the “Medicinal powder”, of his own creation, contained three excellent antidotes according to traditional beliefs, which considered them infallible: bone of deer’s heart, pearl and unicorn

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