Arnaldo Da Villanova medieval physician (1235-1311). A first approach

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Abstract

Arnaldo de Villanova, was a Catalan Physician, born in Villanova de Grau, a suburb of Valencia - Spain about 1235. He died off the coast of Genoa in 1311 during a sea voyage departing from Messina in Sicily, during a diplomatic mission by Pope Clement V in Avignon on orders by the King of Sicily. He was a so famous and clever scientist of the thirteenth century, to give his name to the Universitary Hospital of Montpellier - France.

His interests ranged from theology, to politics, medicine, and anymore alchemy. He was an adviser and physician of Kings of Aragon, like Peter III the Great (1276-1285) and James II the Right (1285-1327), of Robert of Angiò (1294-1303), Benedetto XI (1303-1304), Clemente V (1305-1314), of the King of Sicily Federico II of Aragon (1296-1337), of the Great (1276-1285) and James II the Right (1285-1327), of Robert of Angiò (1294-1303), Benedetto XI (1303-1304), Clemente V (1305-1314), of the King of Sicily Federico II of Aragon (1296-1337).

For the Pope Bonifacio VIII, suffering from renal colic due to “kidney stones”, he prescribed Hydrotherapy with “Fiuggi Thermal water”, that was specially transported for him from its source to Rome and Anagni, in “jars wrapped in coarse carpets or wool fabrics”, to better maintain the source temperature. In addition in July of 1301, he also produced an astrological seal (Talisman) made of gold “loaded of virtues”, obtained exposing the seal to the power of the Sun, in those days in the Leo Constellation. This seal was worn by the Pope in an hernial belt of leather to support the kidney, probably to improve his nephroptosis.

Arnaldo produced this seal according to what was described in the book “Picatrix - The goal of the wise” of the Arabic astronomer and alchemist Abū l-Qāsim Maslama b.- Ahmad al-Majriti”, known with the pseudonym “Ghayat al hakim” died in Cordova about 1008.

Ten years later, after his mysterious death at sea on a Sicilian royal ship, his body was not buried at sea, but was reported in Sicily and buried in the Federician Castle of Montalbano di Elicona at the end of Peloritans Mountains near Milazzo, about 90 km from Messina, where he loved to stay and to write.

Key words: Alchemy, Arnaldo da Villanova, Bonifacio VIII, Fiuggi thermal water, Ghayat al Hakim, Gold Seal, Montalbano di Elicona, Picatrix

Introduction

Why Arnaldo de Villanova.

This could be the first question to ask to the author of this paper, Sicilian of Messina, humbly working in the field of the History of Medicine, especially that of Nephrology, anymore if we are speaking of a Catalan Physician born in Villanova de Grau, a suburb of Valencia - Spain about 1235, so famous and clever to give his name to the University Hospital of Montpellier - France (Figure 1), about 600 km far from his birthplace. The answer is that the place of his burial is very remote either from Valencia or from Montpellier, but is placed in Sicily at a distance of about 90 km from Messina, in the Chapel of the Royal Castle of Montalbano di Elicona, an old little town at the west extremities of Peloritans Mountains.

The man and his life

Little is known about the exact date of his birth, that is considered to be about 1235 according to many sources.

He undertook his classical studies at Aix-en-Provence, then moved to Montpellier to study medicine. Ending his studies in Paris, where he graduated about 1270.

In Paris he had the opportunity to take courses of the German philosopher and theologian St. Albertus

Figure 1. Arnaldo da Villanova
Magnus, Dominican friar also called Doctor Universalis (ca1206-1280), from whose works came his interest in alchemy.

He then visited different schools and Italian universities, including Bologna, Florence, Perugia, Rome, Naples and the renowned medical school of Salerno, where he wrote a commentary on the "Regimen Sanitatis Salernitanum", the most consulted medical textbook of the Middle Ages (Figure 2).

Back in France, he practiced as a doctor in various locations, finally settling in Paris where he remained for several years. There he met Ramon Lullo (1233-1316), philosopher, writer, theologian, logician, mystical, Spanish missionary and future alchemist author of "Liber de secretis naturae seu de quinta essentia", who became his disciple.

He then visited the court of Peter the Great of Aragon, Barcelona, Valencia, Tarragona and Madrid and Toledo, a city that at the time was a popular meeting place between Hermeticists from all over Europe. In Barcelona he learned Arabic and Hebrew (his teacher of Hebrew was the Dominican friar Ramón Martí) and he broadened his studies, dealing more and more in religion and politics. In 1286 Arnaldo was already a teacher at the Studium in Barcelona where he wrote several works at eschatological background.

He then became physician and adviser to James II of Aragon, son of Peter the Great, exerting its influence in political decisions concerning the Crown of Aragon, France and Italy. In 1301 he was sent as ambassador by James II to King Philip IV of France, where he was arrested in Paris, for his statements deemed suspicious by French scholastic theologians.

He appealed to Philip IV and Pope Boniface VIII, whereupon he was released and allowed to leave France.

Boniface VIII, the same Pope that Dante Alighieri in his "Divina Commedia" placed in hell only for political reasons, was a great Pope of his time; among his many achievements was the institution of the first Jubilee (February 22-1300), the foundation of the University "La Sapienza" in Rome with the Bolla "In Suprema praeminentia dignitatis" of April 20-1300, the reorganization of Vatican Archive and Roman Curia, the Reform of Canonic Law. He was a man of about 70 years old with his burden of illness, notably renal colic due to kidney stones.

So he summoned to Rome one of the most famous Scientist of his time, Arnaldo, who left France, for Italy to become the personal physician of the Pope. The Pope admired his genius and was very tolerant with his philosophical and scientific ideas. It is said that in front of Boniface VIII, Arnaldo performed one of his first public transmutations, demonstrating his knowledge, in obtaining ingots of pure gold. Anyhow it is recorded and commonly known that the Pontiff improved "for the important therapeutic work of a "Catalan Physician"[1][2][3][4].

Arnaldo treated the Pope, starting with an hydroponic therapy with the water of "Termi di Fiuggi", therapy that the Pontiff did not used only "in loco", but continually delivered in Rome and Anagni were Bonifacio spent most of his pontificate. In the Secret Archive of Vatican are as many as 187 payment orders - in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century – referring to the weekly deliveries of "thermal water" from Fiuggi to the residence of the Pope. The water was transported with animals of burden like mules, while the jars containing water "were wrapped in coarse carpets or wool fabrics" to keep as far as possible itself the temperature of the fresh water, for use by the pope (2). Actually in Fiuggi there still exists a source named the "Fonte di Bonifacio"[5].

At the end of July of 1301 Arnaldo fabricated for the Pope an astrological seal (Talisman) made of gold, the noble metal par excellence, which was believed to contain all the secrets of the cosmos[4].

The seal was said to be loaded of virtues exposing the power of the Sun, that came in those days in the Leo Constellation. The golden seal was worn by the pope enclosed in a kind of Hernial belt of leather to support the kidney. It seems that the remedy was effective probably by improving what may have been a case of nephrophtosis[5].

Villanova produced the seal according to instructions of the Arabic astronomer and alchemist "Abū ʿIṣāq Maslama b.- Ahmad al-Majriti", known with the pseudonym of “Ghayat al ḥakim” author of the "Picatrix - The goal of the wise" and died in Cordova about 1008[5] (Figure 3). The Picatrix was translated into Latin in the 13th century, during the reign the King Alfonso X the Wise (1221-1284) a well-educated king who was open-minded to the cultural influences of Islam.

The text of Picatrix describing the seal states: "Take pure gold, make a seal, in which you will engrave the figure of the lion just when the Sun will be below its mark, in the first or second dea and in the
eastern or southern and when the Moon will not find in
its house and the lord of the ascendant not find it
diametrically opposed to Saturn and Mars, and not
turn away from these planets. **Wear this seal in the**
**upper part of your belt or in the kidneys.** I experi-
enced that the one who brought him on if, he never suffered as a result” [6][7][8][9].

Despite the sympathies and support of the Pope, Arnaldo was once again imprisoned in Rome and Pe-
rugia.

He sought refuge in Sicily, at the court of Freder-
rick II of Aragon, and often in the Federician Castle
of Montalbano of Elica close with Messina in Sicily,
he wrote the pamphlet “Cymbalis De Ecclesia”,
making a proclamation of faith and declaring obe-
dience to the Pope.

His relations with the Papacy improved with the
successor of Boniface VIII, Benedict XI, who was pope
from 1303 to 1304, and with the successor of this,
Clement V, elected in 1305 by the will of the King of
France.

Clement V favored medical studies and Oriental
languages, establishing university chairs and per-
sonally appreciated Arnaldo’s qualities as a doctor
and his alchemical works like Boniface VIII.

It is than that Arnaldo returned in France where
he reorganized the studies of the School of Mont-
pellier, where he became Professor and Rector.

The works of Arnaldo
The scientific productivity of Arnaldo was copious.
Among this:

* Flos Florum (Libro del Perfetto Magistero, Sear
1986)
* Epistola Super Alchimia (Lettera sull’Alchimia al Re
di Napoli, Sear 1986)
* Novum Lumen
* Il Rosario dei Filosofi
* Domande sull’Essenza e sull’Accidente
* Lo Specchio dell’Alchimia

**Carmen**

**Semita Semitae**

**Testamento**

**La Practica (Breviarium Librorum Alchemiae)**

**De Decotione**

**Thesaurus Pauperum in Sicilian**

Villanova was interested to all the procedures for
distillation and it is credited with creating water
flammable (alcohol 60°), and water vitae mercurial
(90° alcohol), with whom he claimed to be able to
transmute metals; and also he described the distil-
lation of wine and the use of aromatic wines as
tonics, and to wash wounds with his “agua ardentes /
water flammable”. Among others he discovered the
oil of Turpentine, and sulfuric, nitric and muriatic
acid [3] (Figure 4).

Among his many medical works we also remember:
the “Aphorismi de gradibus” similar to Hippocratic
and prepared, to provide assistance to the medical
practitioners for the treatment of certain diseases;
“De considerationibus operis medicinae sive de phle-
botomy”, commentaries on Galen, and the reworking
of that poem known precisely how “Regimen Sanii-
tatis Salernitani” earlier mentioned.

The Villanova was interested in the distillation of
wine, understood as burning water or Quintessence,
primordial substance, which was not part of the four
constituent elements of the universe - Water, Earth,
Air, Fire - but it was considered matrix of each of
them, with the ability to bring together different
quality, such as the igneous element to the liquid.

**Death**

Adviser and physician of Kings of Aragon like Peter
III the Great (1276-1285) and James II the Right
(1285-1327), of Robert of Angiò (1309-1343) of Naples
and Popes like Innocenzo V (1276), Bonifacio VIII
(1294-1303), Benedetto XI (1303-1304) e Clemente V
(1305-1314), and of the King of Sicily Federico II of
Aragon (1296-1337), Arnaldo was often travelling by
land and sea. It was during one of these sea voyages,
departing from Messina, that he died in mysterious
circumstances (according to some was poisoned), off
the coast of Genoa in 1311, while on a diplomatic
mission for Pope Clement V in Avignon and on orders
of the King of Sicily. Given international maritime

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**Figure 1.**
A modern reprint of Picatrix

**Figure 4.**
Nouveau Larousse illustré ed. 1905 Ricciardi’s Collection
laws that a death at sea on a royal ship, was the equivalent of a death in Sicily, the mortal remains of Villanova were not buried at sea, but returned in Sicily to be buried in the Federician Castle of Montalbano of Elicona at the end of Peloritans Mountains near Milazzo about 90 km from Messina, where he loved to stay and to write (Figure 5).

There he was buried in the chapel of the Castle in a simple sandstone sarcophagus (Figure 6, Figure 7), were the great Archaeologist and Dominican Friar Tommaso Fazello (Figure 8) who discovered Akrai, Selinunte, Eraclea Minoa, Zeus Olimpio’s Temple of Agrigento, and wrote in 1558 De Rebus Siculis decadae duae (Figure 9) only about 250 hundred later found out [10].
References

[1] Arnaldus of Villanueva, or Villeneuve Catholic Encyclopedia on line


[8] Ghayat al hakim Picatrix - The goal of the wise” Ouroboros Press. Seattle, WA
