

The *Tacuinum Sanitatis* of the B.IN.G.

The book of life

Nature has always been a source of life and remedies for illness.

There has always been a very strong connection between medicine and nature and between medicine and horticulture.

In the past pharmacopeia was mainly based on the use of vegetable and animal products simply combined together, or even with the addition of minerals, in order to provide medicines consumed in the form of food or drinks. The cultivation of a kitchen garden, quite common in medieval times, had separate practical applications, whether the products were used only as food or with medicinal purposes. Medicine was an intrinsic part of daily life with all the basic needs that this entails, such as eating and drinking, sleeping and waking, coupling, breathing, evacuating, feeling passion and emotions, and for this reason great therapeutic value was given to food, with belief in the equation: health = food. Food was viewed as an instrument of health.

The secret of the preservation of health was in the proper balance of all these elements, in a nutritional control that enhanced the virtues of each food, their warmth/coolness and dryness/humidity according to the prescriptions of classic antique medical texts and the precepts of the School of Salerno. A bad balance could cause the illness.

Starting from the XI century these precepts harmoniously merged with the dictates of Arab empiricism, creating a new approach to medicine. The *Regimen Sanitatis* or *Flos medicinae* remain the most noble and antique expression of clinical practice, but on the other hand the *Tacuina* or *Theatra Sanitatis*, vulgarising and applying it to daily life, have substantially maintained intact its vitality, even after the introduction of printing.

The *Tacuinum Sanitatis* belongs to an practical literature .

It's about the right uses and effects of food and drinks, the correct use of elimination and retention of humors, the regulating of the person by moderating joy, anger, fear and distress.

It is an illustrated medical encyclopaedia which had a wide diffusion in Medieval times and in the early Renaissance period, first as a manuscript and then in a printed version.

Originating from herbal, bestial and lapidary literature, it represents a category of its own because herbal literature regards only "natural things", elements that are used as nature provides them, without being manipulated by man.

The origin of the written text can be found in the Arab medicine.

The *Tacuinum Sanitatis* is in fact based on the Latin translation of an Arab work composed by a Christian doctor from Baghdad, Ibn Butlan, who lived in the XI century. A great traveller (he stayed in Aleppo, Antiochia, Laodicea, Jaffa, Cairo and Constantinople), he became a monk and died in Antiochia around 1068.

The Arab term *Taqwim*, which means disposition, organisation, table, already suggests that it is a synthesis which lays down rules of hygiene, taken from more vast texts, in schematic tables.

The iconography is used to get easier the comprehension of the text by means of illustrations.

The work is a synoptic presentation of the so-called “unnatural things”.

For each food, or other *res non naturales*, the text indicates its nature, that is to say its main qualities, category, choice, use, harmful effects, possibilities of correcting them, the moods produced, its effects on the body, followed by recommendations regarding the temperament, age, season or country of the consumer.

At the end, the teachings are completed by a text which briefly summarizes the positions of the various authorities, the temperaments to which they are most suited, the season in which they are best consumed, the recommended age at which to use them, the region of production.

The *Tacuinum* is therefore a systematic work, which does not only cover food but also deals with culinary preparations and cooking methods, mentioning flowers and other “unnatural” components too.

About the date of the Latin translation there are different theories.

Gerardo da Cremona and also the Judean, Farag Ben Salem, have been suggested as authors.

The latter, known more commonly by the name Faragut, translated at the court of Carlo d'Angiò of Naples, as well as *Continens di Rhayes* and *Chirurgie di Mesu*, the *Tacuinum Aegritudinum* of Ibn Jazlan – a text often confused and copied in a single manuscript with the *Tacuinum* of Baghdad.

The XV century Venetian manuscript in the Marciana Library (Z.315), advocates, for example, the possibility that the *Tacuinum* was translated from Arab into Latin in the second half of the XIII century, probably at the court of Manfredi of Sicily.

The *Tacuinum Santitatis* was enriched with illustrations only at the end of the XIV century, in Lombardy, with the addition of a drawing for each prescription. The illustrated manuscripts however are much rarer than the manuscripts without illustrations.

Considering the general cultural condition at that time, it is indicative that the atmosphere in the Italian courts determined the request for works that could be the compendium of everything one needed to know in order to live well. Obviously, it was important they were not too difficult to consult, but easy to understand.

There are several manuscript *Tacuina* until the *editio princeps* in 1531 (the B.IN.G. Foundation holds an important illustrated version and the original edition).

The Latin text presents different versions, depending on whether the codex was an ordinary or luxury manuscript. If in the prior case the version is close to the original, in the latter the text is generally reduced. Some ingredients have been added according to the evolution of medieval nutrition, such as pork, lamprey or dry cheese. In the luxury manuscripts the miniatures connected to the information are the main element.

All the *Tacuina*, manuscripts and printed version, Arab and Latin translations, all show the tables divided into compartments which indicate vegetable and animal foods, emotional states and weather factors. The *Tacuina* with miniatures are based on the subjects shown in these tables.

The brief indications which are in the boxes on the tables are the source of the information written

for each drawing in the illuminated manuscripts, to explain the properties of the herbs or the foods represented and the effects of the seasons or the mood on the daily life.

The *Tacuina* with miniatures are, therefore, a summary of the text of Ibn Butlan.

Around 1470 the *Tacuinum Sanitatis* was translated into Italian and it was preceded by a herbal book, also in the Italian language.

There are 4 manuscripts which belong to this typology, all on paper, all with the same structure, all compiled around 1475, probably all by the same author: Paris, B.N., Ital. 1108 (242 miniatures); New York, Public Library, Spencer 65 (412 miniatures); Wien, O.N.B., cod. 52.64 (464 miniatures); Lugano, The B.IN.G. Foundation, ms.15, that we are going to analyse hereafter.

In all these manuscripts, each page shows two illustrations with the relative prescriptions, whereas the Latin manuscripts only contained one illustration.

The copies in New York and in The B.IN.G. Foundation present the most analogies.

Two of the four manuscripts mentioned declare the author to be Giovanni Cademosto of Lodi.

The manuscript in Paris, dated exactly *ante* 1471, is entitled *Libro de componere herbe e fructi* and it was commissioned by Borso d'Este, Duke of Ferrara. At the beginning of the dissertation, the author in person writes "... *ho facto io ... novo proposito per conservatione et augumento su cui ha inserito modifiche, o piuttosto aggiunte*". The manuscript also presents a clear dedication to Borso d'Este (fol.7r) which explains that the author "Maestro Giohanne Cademosto de la Cità di Lode" has studied plants and foods of all types in order to discover their virtues and properties with the intent of improving and maintaining the health of the Duke.

Borso D'Este received the work as a gift on the 9th of February 1471.

In fol. 4v of the manuscript in Vienna it's written that the work is a summary of all the knowledge on plants and foods, "le quale parendo ad mi Joanne cadamosto sparse in tanti volume non con pocha fatica, vigilie et affanni le ho reducte insema".

Not much is known about Giovanni Cademosto. He might be the Master Giovanni mentioned in a contract for the construction of a new hospital in Lodi in 1497, and he is probably the Giovanni Antonio Cademosto of Lodi who taught in Bologna from 1489 and became Rector of the school of Art and Medicine in 1495.

Neither The B.IN.G. Foundation's manuscript, nor the New York manuscript mention the name of the author, but the similarities of these codes make Giovanni Cademosto the probable author of all four manuscripts.

The B.IN.G. Foundation's manuscript consists of a herbal book and a *Tacuinum*, the text of which is written in Italian. It is probably the most recent copy among those known.

It can be dated around the last years of the XV century and presents strong Nordic characters which allow it to be situated in Northern Italy, and in particular in the subalpine regions.

It contains 391 miniatures (almost double compared to the first *Tacuina*) drawn with sepia ink and

painted with polychrome colours with a prevalence of various shades of green, red, purple, orange, blue, okra-yellow.

The illustrations are divided into four distinct series.

The first series goes from *fol. 1r* to *fol. 53v*, the second series from *fol. 55r* to *fol. 62v*, the third series from *fol. 64r* to *fol. 76v*, the fourth series from *fol. 78r* to *fol. 87v*.

In the first section (*fol. 1r – 53v*) the herbal book is presented with very accurate botanically drawings and brief captions describing the vices and virtues of the herbs, according to a complicated classification of that period (cold, damp, warm, dry, in first, second and third degree), in alphabetical order according to the botanical tradition of Dioscoride's *De re materia*.

The miniatures are set out in chequered pattern, two per page, 212 in all.

This section is followed by a series on fruit trees (*fol. 55r – 62v*) which includes, four per page, a total of 64 trees.

The illustrations in the third and fourth series are much more elaborate than the prior series.

They represent everyday life scenes, populated with one or more characters, describing all the stages of food: the cultivation, the harvesting, the sale or the purchase of the product, its preparation in the kitchen and finally its consumption; traders selling their products in shops; kitchen gardeners and farmers cultivating the fields; harvesting and selling the vegetables; producers and consumers of bread; butchers; hunters; cheese makers; people at the table; scenes from kitchens; harvesting grapes.

A concrete description of many aspects of practical life in that period with important information on the habits, the food and the utensils in use.

For this reason the *Tacuinum santatis*, originally a text concerned mainly with hygiene and maintaining health, becomes, thanks to the illustrations, a testimonial of daily life in all different social settings and is therefore very different from books on medicine and treatises on herbs.

These last two series consist of 96 miniatures in all, laid out in a chequered pattern, on a quarter of a page (20 x 13.8cm).

They are developed in the following manner: activities connected to the sale of fish, the production and sale of cheese, the harvesting of vegetables, the cultivation of cereals. This is followed by a series connected to the hunting and butchering of meat and the series scanned by two drawings on half a page and 12 drawings on $\frac{1}{4}$ of a page, laid out in a chequered pattern without textual comments. In the end, another 22 drawings of herbs, declared to be of a later date than the production of the corpus of the *Tacuinum*.

In the rest of the work, the drawings seem to have been produced at the same time, maybe by more than one set of hands.

The current composition of the series and the general structure of the *Tacuinum* seem to date back to at least the XVI century (with exception of *fol. 81* and *82* which were lost), as indicated by an ink handwritten pagination of the 15th century. Again towards the end of the XVI century, the manuscript seemed to be more or less in the geographic area of production: Northern Italy, perhaps Lombardy, a geographic area with a great production of this kind of *Tacuina*, in the XIV – XV centuries. This is witnessed by a subscription, moreover damaged and rather unclear, that recites

[...] to *Baldassar Gallielina/ [debi]tore de soldis in Meda (?)/[g] ramtical/1568 adi 29 Novembre.*

The virtues of herbs, fruits, plants, meats, the “diet”, the correct use of food and drinks, but also “the six unnatural things” necessary to psycho-physical equilibrium are all amply documented in this copy too.

However the iconography prevails over the text and the miniatures still shine with the same vivid colours that were used, in all probability, in the third quarter of the XV century.

A note from an antiquarian’s collation, suggests that the miniatures are a combination of the flair of sophisticated Italian humanism mixed with the primitive German taste for illustrated books.

And this confirms the rich production of drawings in the Northern and subalpine area of Italy at the time, especially in Lombardy.

The comments to the *Tacuinum* are written in humanistic script, not entirely accurate; some words have been written over by pen in a later period and there are blank spaces for capital letters never completed.

The text explaining the drawings stops at *fol. 87v*.

The most important characteristic of this copy, apart from its Nordic aspect and at times grotesque of some characters, is the search for depth of field in the very populated scenes, where not much nude paper appears. It’s important to take note of the ever-present sky, painted in shades of blue with brush strokes that imitate clouds. Furthermore, among the several similarities which connect the first generation of *Tacuina* to those belonging to this second group, the main one is the fact that all the indoor scenes are enclosed in an architectural frame, inside which the scene develops with great attention to perspective.

No representation of that time described so efficiently the small universe of daily life like the papers of the *Tacuina Sanitatis*, transmitting thereby a vivid memory of a “natural” period now long gone.