EXPLORING GREEK MANUSCRIPTS IN THE LIBRARY AT WELLCOME COLLECTION IN LONDON

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Routledge
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Wellcomensis MS.MSL.14 as a therapeutic handbook

Barbara Zipser

At first sight, MS.MSL.14 seems rather inconspicuous. It is a very small pocket-sized book which has obviously been handled and perused extensively. A number of pages at the end of the volume were added at a later time. The book was also exposed to water, which deleted text around the edges, but, in most cases, only over an area of just about one square centimetre. Many of the pages are torn, and sometimes held together by rough, thick thread, or simply missing. But it is precisely this fact that makes the book of particular interest. It is not a scholarly copy that was preserved in a pristine state in an ivory tower such as a major national library. Rather, it was a book that had been used in medical practice.

The book was all but forgotten in the centuries that followed, but over recent years been the subject of several studies. It was catalogued by Petros Bouras-Vallianatos and its provenance has been described by Vivian Nutton and myself. Later on, I also analysed its thematic structure and edited some annotations in invisible ink. The manuscript was also a key witness for my first edition of John Archiatros’ Iatrosophion. Yet, there is a middle section of the book that still needs further scholarly attention, which is the topic of this paper.

Here is a very rough summary of the contents of the main part of MS. MSL.14, omitting the sheets of paper that were added later at the end of the book (i.e. pp. 272–317):


1 Some of the material used for this paper was compiled during my postdoctoral fellowship at the Wellcome Trust Centre at UCL (072287).
3 Nutton and Zipser (2010).
4 Zipser (2013)
5 Zipser (2009).
6 For further bibliography, see Nutton and Zipser (2010) and Bouras-Vallianatos (2015: 286).
4. Brief text on conception, p. 17, l. 1–p. 18, l. 16.
5. Collection of remedies, p. 18, l. 17–p. 34, l. 17.

The manuscript has a clearly defined structure, with items one to seven on the first 46 pages presenting introductory material, including a substantial proportion of Pseudo-Hippocratic content. This section was probably copied in its entirety from another source. It is followed by 225 pages of therapeutic content with a substantial part of the content consisting of recipes. Such a structure would make sense, as it creates a book that contains all the basics, albeit very briefly, and then concentrates on the subject of treating patients.

However, the internal structure of the first, introductory part and the second, therapeutic one could not be more different, as the latter is rather poorly structured: some text appears twice and at least one block of text does not seem to have a coherent structure. Moreover, item number 11 on the list is written in the Greek vernacular, which is not commonly used in writing.

At first sight, it seems somewhat puzzling that a scribe would go through the very considerable effort of including the same content twice while aiming to produce a book that is intent on being concise and comprehensive at the same time. After all, there is no logical reason why someone would produce a codex this small, which is very inconvenient to read, other than portability. Or to put it another way, if someone wanted to compile a book that a physician or a traveller could carry with them with ease, in order to include all the relevant content one might need, would he not ensure that the available space was managed more efficiently?

The obvious answer would be that this duplication was a mistake – i.e. a scribe not noticing that he was essentially copying the same text twice. This would also make sense given that the shorter item, i.e. item nine, comes first. By the time the scribe reached the longer version of the text in their model, they would already have copied the shorter one, and there

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7 This item also includes a brief collection of remedies, pp. 41–4.
8 Nutton and Zipser (2010).
would be no way to undo this. Moreover, it would be useful to include all the additional content that could be found in the longer one.

But perhaps the answer is even more straightforward than that. It is actually quite common for manuscripts to contain two or more texts covering very similar content. An example from Wellcome Collection would be MS. MSL.60, which preserves a number of texts on urine diagnosis.\(^9\) There is also a whole genre of medical manuscripts attributed to Byzantine \textit{xenons}, in which one can find similar developments.\(^10\)

Thus, even though room was scarce and book production expensive, there was a genre of literature that was thematic, in the same way as other volumes might contain works by a specific author. Having several texts on the same topic was apparently seen as better than having just one.

This appears to be the more likely explanation, even though MS.MSL.14 is just a small handbook. Here, literary convention was more important than practical use. The person who produced this handbook did not reinvent the way it was structured; he applied existing standards and just shrank everything to size. The advantage of such a practice would, of course, have been that the general structure of the volume would have made sense to anyone who might use it.

The next question to be addressed is whether the second, therapeutic half of the book appears in other witnesses. It is not recorded anywhere, but, given the current state of cataloguing, it is certainly possible that a previously unknown manuscript might emerge at some later date. However, some content from item nine appears independently in a number of other manuscripts, as it is very closely related to one of the so-called \textit{xenonika}.\(^11\) This could be a possible link, since the transmission of item 11 also seems to be somehow associated with the transmission of the \textit{xenonika}.\(^12\)

Here is a slightly standardised edition of the text.\(^13\) Where the text has been edited by me, the manuscript reading can be found in brackets with the sigla L (=MS.MSL.14).

\begin{quote}
[p. 76] εἰς ζέσιν κεφαλῆς, \(^{14}\) ῥοδέλαιον (το δέλαιον L) βάλε καὶ ὄξυδην (ὀξύδην L) καὶ χλίανέ τα. ἐπά ἄλειφε τὴν κεφαλὴν τοῦ ὀλην.
\end{quote}

On an overheated head. Take rose oil and vinegar and make it smooth. Then rub it on his entire head.

\(^{10}\) See, for example, Bennett (2003: 243).
\(^{11}\) Bennett (2003: 406ff).
\(^{12}\) See n. 10.
\(^{13}\) As far as the spelling is concerned, I have followed the same principles as in my edition of John Archiatros. See Zipser (2009: 20ff).
When the eyes itch. Take the peel of a sour pomegranate and dry it in the sun and grind it up and also add wine and mix and apply it.

When blood flows from the nose. Burn the shell of an egg and grind it nicely and put it into a reed and blow it <into the nostril>. Grind mustard seeds and some walnuts one after the other and egg white and put it on the forehead.

When <someone> spits blood. Grind up mint and mix its juice with a little bit of vinegar and let him drink it.

For pain in the tongue. Chew olive-tree leaves and hold them on the tongue for a long time.

For blocked ears. Put broth in an egg shell and put it on coals and let it get warm. Then put it into the ear. Grind cinnamon then take an astringent substance and add egg yolk, and also <add> ground cinnamon on top of the egg and apply it.

When blood flows <from the ears>. Put drops of leek juice into the ear. Grind up the sediment of wine, mix it with warm wine and <drip it> into the ear.

For bleeding gums. Boil the leaves of an olive tree with water and keep the decoction of it in the mouth for a long time. Put the shoots of myrtle and rose and make them like kisses, and apply to the mouth. Chew base horehound in the morning. Burn dried roses and apply on the teeth.

When the mouth has a bad odour. Boil base horehound with wine and apply to the mouth. Chew base horehound in the morning. Burn dried roses and make them like flour and rub on the teeth.

οὔταν ἰδέωςιν αἴμα. 20 πράσων ζωμόν ἕνστατε εἰς τὸ ὠτίον. τρυγέαν (τριγέαν L) οἴνου τρύψων σμίξαν με τὸ κρασίν τὸ χλιόν καὶ στα … [p. 78] εἰς τὸ ὠτίον.

When blood flows <from the ears>. Put drops of leek juice into the ear. Grind up the sediment of wine, mix it with warm wine and <drip it> into the ear.

πρὸς αἴμα ὦταν ῥέει ἀπὸ τῆς οὐλῆς, 21 τὰ φύλλα (φύλα L) τῆς ἐλάιας βράσας με τὸ νερόν καὶ τὸν ζωμὸν ἐκείνον κράτει εἰς τὸ στόμα πολλήν (πολύν L) ὀραν. τῆς μυρσίνης (μυρσίνης L) τὰς κρουφάς καὶ τριανταφύλλων (τριανταφύλλων L) ἄνθος βάλον καὶ ὀξίς καὶ κρασίν ἀς βράσουν. καὶ τὸν ζωμὸν κράτει εἰς τὸ στόμα.

For bleeding gums. Boil the leaves of an olive tree with water and keep the decoction of it in the mouth for a long time. Put the shoots of myrtle and rose and make them like kisses, and apply to the mouth. Chew base horehound in the morning. Burn dried roses and apply on the teeth.

When the mouth has a bad odour. Boil base horehound with wine and apply to the mouth. Chew base horehound in the morning. Burn dried roses and make them like flour and rub on the teeth.

When <the patient> spits blood. Bleed them from the feet and hands and anoint with old olive oil. Soak unwashed hair in warm vinegar and rose oil and apply as a vapour bath to the chest. Grind bramble leaves and mix the juice with ground earth and let him drink. Put the plaster that is called ‘from willows’ on <the patient’s> chest.

When someone vomits whatever he eats. Grind aloe, mastic, storax, ladanum, frankincense, wormwood and boil it a little <by which I mean> very little. Make a plaster from clean bread flour and vine flower and a little wine and put it on his chest.

Figure 3.1 Londiniensis Wellcomensis MS.MSL.14, pp. 77–8. Photograph by Petros Bouras-Vallianatos.

perí δυσεντερίας.  

26 λημναίαν (λυμνέαν L) σφραγίδα ἃς τῆν πῖνει τριμένην (τριμένην L) με τὸ νερὸν τὸ χλίον. ποιήσας ἐμπλαστρον καὶ βάλε ἀλώην στὴ β’ λίβανον στὴ β’ καὶ ἐψήμαν.

On dysentery. Let him drink Lemnian earth, ground up with warm water. Make a plaster and add two stagia of aloe, two stagia of frankincense, and broth.

ότου κατουροῦσι αἶμα. 27 φλεβοτόμει τοῦτος (τοῦτος L) ἀπ’ ἀγκόνος καθόλου φλέβα (φλε…. L) [p. 80] ἱπτόσων πότισον μετ’ ὀξείδιν (ὀξύδην L) καὶ μέλι ὀλίγον. λαγωοῦ πυτίαν πότισον μετὰ ὀξείδιν (ὀξύδην L) καὶ μέλι ὀλίγον.

When they are urinating blood. Bleed them from the main vein on the elbow … seed let him drink with vinegar and a little honey. Drink hare’s rennet with vinegar and a little honey.

πρὸς σπραγγούριαν. 28 σπραγγούρια (ραγγούρια L) δὲ ἕνι ὧταν κατουρεῖ καὶ στάζει ὀλιγούτζικον μετὰ πόνου καὶ ἀνάγκης καὶ βίας. φλεβοτόμει δὲ τὴν καθόλου φλέβα. ἔπαρον τοῦ ἔχινου τὸ δέρμα ἦτοι τὸ λεγόμενον σκαν-ζόχυρον καὶ θές τὸ εἰς τὰ καρβουνία τὰ ζοντανά. καὶ κάπνιζε τὸν εἰς τὰ αἴδοια, ὅπου οὐ δύναται κατουρήσειν. ἢ δὲ τροφὴ ἄυτοῦ ἃς ἔνι εὐχύμος ἦτοι κούβιδια λιθριάρια ἄστακοι (στακοί L) καλαμάρια καβόρους ποταμίως καὶ πέστρουβας. θρύμβον παλαιόν ἐψήσον με τὸ κρασίν τὸ παλαιόν. εἰς ἄυτοῦ δὲ πότισον κοχλάρια δ’. ῥεπάνα κοπάνισε χωρὶς τὰ φύλλα (φύλα L) τοὺς. εἶτα βάλε τὸν ζωμὸν τοὺς εἰς ζουκάλιαν καὶ κρασίν καὶ ἃς βράσουν. εἶτα σακέλλισον αὐτὰ [p. 81] δυνατὰ καὶ πότισον ἄυτον ἡμέρας γ’ καὶ κολοκόνθην (.οκίνθην L) ἐξην κοπάνισον ὀἴον τὸ ἀλέωριν ἰσα ἕνα κοχλάριον καὶ πότιζε μετὰ κρύου (.ου L) νεροῦ. δενδρολίβανον ἃς βράσῃ (βράσα L) με τὸ κρασίν καὶ πότισον αὐτὸν καθ’ ἐκάστην ἡμέραν χλίον ἐως ἡμέρας τ’.  

On strangury. Strangury is when someone urinates and only drips a tiny amount with pain, urgency, and much effort. Bleed him from the main vein. Take the skin of a hedgehog, that is the so-called skanzoxoiros and put it on hot coals. And apply the vapour to the groin, where he cannot urinate. Let his diet be balanced, that is bullhead fish, common pandora, lobster, squid, freshwater crabs and trout. Boil old summer savoury with old wine. Let him drink four spoonfuls of it. Grind radishes without their leaves. Then pour the juice into a pot with wine and let it boil. Then pound them forcibly and let him drink it for three days. And grind one spoonful of dry pumpkin like flour and let him drink it with cold water. Boil rosemary with wine and let him drink it warm every day for ten days.

ὅπου κατουρεῖ τὰ ῥοῦχα. 29 πετεινοῦ γούργουρου καῦσε τὸν καὶ ποίησον ὀίνον τὸ ἄλευριν καὶ πότισον αὐτὸν τὸ πρῶτο νήστιν μετὰ κρύου (κρίου L) ὕδατος. λαγωοῦ ὀρχίδια ξύσε τα με τὸ μαχαίριν (μαχέριν L) καὶ τὸ ψιλότερον πότισον με τὸν ὀίνον τὸν χλίον. χοίρου φούσκαν ὅπου ἔχει τὸ κατούρημαν ταύτην καῦσε (καῦσι L) εἰτα κόψε αὐτήν ὡς ἄλευριν καὶ πότισον με τὸ κρασίν τὸ χλίον κατὰ πρωί.

When someone urinates in his clothes. Burn the throat of a cock and make it like flour and let him drink it with cold water in the morning having fasted. Scrape the testicles of a hare with a knife and let him drink the fine particles with warm wine. Burn the bladder of a pig – where it keeps the urine – and then pound it like flour and let him drink it with warm wine.

πρὸς φλεγμόνην ἡπατος τὸ λεγόμενον συκότιν (συκότην L). 30 οὕτως (…τος) δὲ θέλεις νοῆσειν

On inflammation of the liver, the so-called sykotin. You may recognise it like this.

As can easily be seen from the references in the footnotes, this text coincides in part with the vernacular version of John Archiatros, but it is much shorter. It does not contain any significant content that would not have been included in John’s text. Some paragraphs also occur in a text associated with the xenons, as edited by David Bennett, however, the wording is not always exactly the same. Overall, it appears that the situation is comparable to that of the synoptic gospels: we know that there once was a common source which is today lost and then several intermediate stages of the transmission, but we do not have the evidence to reconstruct the exact dependencies.

For the second part of my paper, I would like to take a closer look at item ten on my list, which has not previously received any scholarly attention at all. The text starts and ends abruptly with pages missing or misplaced, so that we cannot be sure that this was indeed its original position in the codex.

These are the headings within the text in transcription:

ἐτερον πρὸς τὸ ἐξουρίσαι λίθον (another recipe on passing a kidney stone), p. 84;
περὶ τοῦ γνῶναι θάνατον (signs of <imminently> death), p. 84;
περὶ φθείρας (on lice), p. 85;
περὶ ψυλλ.ς (on fleas), p. 85;
πρὸς φεύσοντα (on a fugitive), p. 85;

From this point onward, there are fewer clearly defined headings, as the focus shifts towards medication.

Even a brief look at the above list reveals that it is entirely chaotic. Only in four instances are paragraphs arranged in a thematic sequence: right at the start of the fragment, where ‘another’ remedy for kidney stones is mentioned, then the passages on external and internal haemorrhoids and finally two paragraphs on insects near the beginning and the end. Moreover, three chapters have no medical content: on a fugitive, on how to recognise a thief...
and a treatment for fruit trees. One chapter deals with veterinary medicine, which is not usually covered in standard medical collections. The content of the chapters is sometimes similar in scope and vocabulary to John Archiatros’ text or the text of the collection described above. However, a significant proportion is completely different, in that it is largely related to magic. On the whole, it is quite similar to the sheets of paper that were subsequently added to the codex, and also to some iatrosophia of the more disorganised type.31

As mentioned above, because of the damage to the codex we cannot be sure where these pages originally belonged. Generally speaking, there appears to have been a tendency for rough drafts or badly organised collections such as this to be added to the end of a therapeutic text.32 Indeed this may have been the case here, as the end of John Archiatros’ text is likewise missing from the codex.

To illustrate the content, style and scope of the text, see, for instance, this extract from page 85 of the codex:

περὶ φθείρας. πήγανον κοπανίσας μετὰ ἐλαίου ἀλειφε.

On lice. Grind rue with oil and apply.

περὶ ψύλλης (ψύλλ., L). αὕμα μαυροῦ τράγου χρύσον τὸ φιλοκάλιν καὶ θές τούτου μέσον τοῦ οἴκου καὶ συνάγονται ὁμοί. καὶ τὸ προὶ μὴ φονεύσεις ἀλλὰ ρίψων αὐτοὺς κατ’ ἰδίαν.

On fleas. Apply the blood of a black he-goat on a broom and put it in the middle of the house and they will congregate there. And in the morning you should not kill them but throw them out individually.

πρὸς φεύγοντα. γράψων οὗτος. γεννηθήτω ἡ ὁδός αὐτοῦ σκότος καὶ ὀλίσθημα (λίσθημα L). καὶ ἀγγελὸς κυρίου εκδίκον αὐτὸν μιχαὴλ δίνῃ σε ράφαηλ διώκει σε ἰσαὰκ δεσμεῖ σε (σ. L) ταχῦ ταχῦ ταχῦ.

On a fugitive. Write thus: Let his way be darkness and stumbling and may the angel of the Lord pursue him. May Michael strike you, Raphael hound you <and> Isaac bind you quickly, quickly, quickly.

The first paragraph contains a simple pharmaceutical treatment for a condition that is often mentioned in medical texts. It is rather brief, which makes it appear slightly out of place in a work by a late antique encyclopaedist

32 See, for instance, the original version of John Archiatros, Iatrosophion, 8, 184ff, ed. Zipser (2009) 156ff or in the transmission of Alexander of Tralles’ Therapeutics in Florentinus Laurentianus gr. plut. 74.10 (fourteenth century), ff. 330r–344v. The same phenomenon can also be observed in other texts.
such as Paul of Aegina, but it would be perfectly consistent with the work of John Archiatros. That said, John’s text does not mention this specific recipe for the treatment of head lice.

The next paragraph also covers a medical topic, describing a trap for fleas which uses blood as a bait and which seems quite sensible. However, the instruction to use blood from a black he-goat is clearly rooted in magic, and there is no mention of any more complex pharmacological treatment. The third paragraph is entirely of a magical nature, as it describes an amulet, including a curse. Moreover, it is clearly not a medical matter.

The remainder of the text is of a very similar nature, and one is left wondering how and why it was included in the codex at all. Given the length of the collection of paragraphs, it does not appear likely that these were originally notes made by previous owners that were added on some blank space in the manuscript and then copied by mistake. Someone must have made a conscious decision to copy the text and include it in a book. It is, however, quite possible that the text was originally noted down by a user on a quire of spare pages, which were then inserted into a volume that was subsequently used as a master copy, just as the final pages were later on inserted into MS.MSL.14.

But, in any case, the professional scribe who would later go on to produce MS.MSL.14, or the person who commissioned the book, decided to keep the collection as it stood, despite its obvious shortcomings. On the whole, this created a corpus of therapeutic texts of rather diverse scope. Of these, text eight would be by far the most sophisticated and polished. It contains recipes such as this one on p. 49 (in a slightly edited form, with the original manuscript readings in brackets):

Σκευασία (Σ......... L) διά καλαμίνθης. πεπέρωσς κοινοδ. ούγγιας ς´ καλαμίνθης ούγγιαν α΄ γλίχωνος (γλίχωνος L) ούγγιαν α σ´ πετροσελίνου ούγγιαν α σ´ σελίνου σπέρματος στη γ´ λιβιστικο. ούγγιας ς´ σιέλεως μασαλεώτικης ούγγιαν α σ´ θύμου στη γ´ μέλιτος το (τοι L) ἀρκοῦν.

Recipe <for medication made> from mint: common pepper six ounces, mint one ounce, pennyroyal one and a half ounces, parsley one and a half ounces, celery seed three stagia, lovage two ounces, Massilian hartwort one and a half ounces, thyme three stagia, <and> a sufficient quantity of honey.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, text ten is clearly the least accomplished. Texts nine and eleven would be somewhere in between but closer to text eight in scope and content.

Overall, the therapeutic section of this manuscript caters for diverse audiences, ranging from those who would not necessarily have any medical training (see, for instance, the amulets and the content relating to magic) to skilled doctors, or pharmacists for that matter. Throughout the volume, the materia medica described is generally of a simpler nature than for instance in Galen or
Paul of Aegina, but still quite varied; the samples translated above are representative in that respect. What is most striking is that only very few imported goods such as cinnamon are mentioned. All of this gives a very coherent picture of the intended audience of the volume. The fact that the book had suffered serious wear and tear is entirely consistent with these findings.

Bibliography


