

THE POPULAR BLOOD LETTING MAN A SURVIVAL OF A MEDIEVAL TRADITION

Among the recent records at the Department and Museum for Medical History at the University of Helsinki there is a rare copy of a so called « blood letting man » written in finnish and dating back to the end of the 19th century — it is namely translated into finnish in 1876.

This record is a handwritten booklet of 18 pages with instructions for bleeding including a simple picture of a man with an amount of numbers indicating suitable spots for bleeding on the human body. And you are of course allowed, with justice to ask me why such a booklet like this is worth to be presented, and above all, why it could be called, as I state in the title of this paper « a survival of a medieval tradition ». And I would even like to go a little bit further, when I call it one of the last links of the medieval school medical knowledge, that has survived until our days.

Description of the instructions

This copy, which I would call a « popular blood letting man » consists of, as it is said « Bleeding instructions » written by professor, doctor Won Hoorn from the town of Pitea in Sweden. A translation into finnish 1876. The size of the booklet is 11 by 17 cm. And the copy derives from the parish of Taivassalo in the south-west of Finland and it was also completed by a bleeding iron and a so called « stasis » and formed a complete equipment for blood letting (1).

But I just want to present the « popular blood letting man », because there are several of these bleeding irons in the collections, but instructions like this one are very rare, only a few of them have been saved until our days.

- The instructions in the booklet are divided into three parts :
- the text which consists of 42 different instructions about which part of the human body, that at the different diseases should be opened
 - an explanation of the marks of the blood to identify different diseases
 - an alphabetic index of all diseases that could be cured with blood letting.

From these 42 different instructions, numbered so that each number corresponds with the number on the picture I will just pick out a few of them (2).

So you have to open :

1. The vein at the little toe when you are suffering from epilepsy and agina pectoris.
2. The vein at the big toe by every kind of headache.
14. The vein between the thumb and the forefinger by headache and a cold.
19. The vein at the chin by toothache and pains in the breast.

- 34. The vein inside the thigh by diseases in the testicles and by urinating diseases.
- 36. The vein at the calf against pains in the back and diseases in the uterus.
- 38. The vein behind the heel against pains in the back and by toothache.

The second part of these instructions consist of the index of different distinctive features of the blood after that the vein has been opened and by which you can identify some diseases, as for example :

- clear blood is a disease in the breast
- blue blood from the toe is a sign of bad heart troubles
- red blood with a little bit of water means a good health.

And at the end of the instructions there is an index of different diseases set up in an alphabetic order with a reference to that part of the body which you should bleed in the different cases.

For example. — If you are suffering from toothache it is recommended to bleed at different spots of the human body (3, 19, 20, 38) as shown on the picture in the booklet. Two of the spots are near the teeth and in two cases you should bleed from the foot.

— By headache there are almost ten different spots (2, 3, 7, 14, 16, 23, 24, 26, 28, 31) of the human body, pointed out for bleeding. Headache is, by the way the disease or symptome, that has the most spots mentioned from which you should bleed.

— By pains in the back there are five different spots (10, 11, 35, 36, 38) and by eye diseases it is good to bleed from seven different spots (16, 24, 25, 26, 31, 32, 42).

Finally the index is completed by a good advice : if the ears are buzzing it is good to bleed two veins inside the ears, then the buzzing is ceasing and it also gives you a good memory.

The examples above are only a few examples picked out from these instructions which show you the number of diseases that could be cured by bleeding and the specific bleeding spots.

As you know according to one of the antique bleeding theories, you should bleed as near as possible of the disease or the wounded part of the body. But also, according to the other theory, the bleeding spots should be as far as possible from the disease or the wounded part of the body.

In these instructions that have been mentioned here these two theories are mixed together, as for example, you can bleed either from the cheek or from the heel against toothache.

Similar instructions

This copy of a « popular blood letting man » is a rare one, but it is not the only one that is known from Finland. But it differs from the few other known copies. Because on this one there are numbers on the human body pointing out the bleeding spots.

On the other known copies you will find the diseases and the bleeding spots explained in small boxes with a line drawn from the box to that special spot of the body, as for instance it is seen on a saved blood letting man dating back to 1831. But the bleeding spots and the diseases are the same (3).

It could also be mentioned that similar bloodletting pictures have been made for horses, which were bled in the same way as the man (4).

A medieval tradition

These instructions mentioned here above are of course copied from earlier and contemporary medical books.

Similar blood letting men you will already find in the medieval medical manuscripts written in different languages and which are kept in the archives and collections here in Europe (5).

There is also the so called zodiacal man which shows you the different parts of the body which stood under influence of different zodiacal signs, which by the astrological way explains the curing of diseases by bleeding.

The last link

This popular blood letting man as I call these instructions here, I would like to state as the last link of a medieval tradition of the school medical knowledge.

Namely exactly similar rules you will also find in the early medieval manuscripts with or without the picture of a blood letting man.

As for instance in the medical manuscripts written by Henrik Harpestraeng from Denmark in the 13th century (6) and in which it is said for example about blood letting : if you suffer from headache or the loosing of the sense, you should bleed from the vein at the forehead, or if you suffer from headache in the forehead you should bleed from the vein at the back of the head and by toothache and an oppressive head you should bleed from the vein under the tongue.

These same bleeding rules were taken from the manuscripts and put into the printed books as for example the first swedish Doctor's Book written by Benedictus Olai and printed in 1578 (7).

Here you will for instance find following rules for bleeding :

— If you suffer from headache in the back of the head, you should bleed the vein at the forehead, and if the throat is swollen, angina, you should bleed the vein under the tongue.

A Doctor's Book like this could not of course reach the public at that time and therefore in order to inform the common people about the medical rules they were put into the calendars, which since the end of the 16th century have been published in Scandinavia and since 1608 in Finland. The specific recommended days for bleeding were for instance pointed out by a small sign in the calendar, but even medical rules in a simple and informative way were published in these calendars (8). As for instance in a calendar for 1676 published by Antonius Eenhorn you will find the following bleeding rules : if you suffer from headache in the forehead, you should bleed from the thumb, and if you suffer from headache in the back of the head you should bleed behind the ears, and against toothache you should bleed under the tongue. The bleeding instructions which here have been described are almost the same and they are as I told you copied from other medical books and in this way they show us how the medieval school knowledge has walked down to the popular medicine and also how the medieval medicine was practised in Finland as late as at the end of the 19th century.

The handwritten rules described here, give us a vivid picture of the way and under what circumstances bleeding ought to be performed at this time. It can of course be said, that these are only written rules, not a description of how the bleeding in fact was performed. But the collected records in the archives, tell us about how the bleeding in fact was practised in Finland between 1870 and 1920. And in these records you will for instance find that : if you suffer from headache

you should bleed from the temple, or from the centre of the forehead, or from the neck, or from the bend of the arm. And if you suffer from toothache you should bleed from the neck or from the chin or under the tongue, or from the arm, or from the top of the thumb.

So this copy of a simple « popular blood letting man » shows in connection with other collected records about bleeding how the medical knowledge from the medieval manuscripts has walked through the literature down to the popular medicine and which has been practised until our days in a country far away from the european medical centres.

REFERENCES

1. The Archive at the Department and Museum for Medical History at the University of Helsinki. The diary 20.3.1980.
2. Suonen avas ohjeita. (Bleeding instructions) A manuscript. p. 3. (Department and Museum for Medical History, University of Helsinki).
3. Finnish Literature Society. The Archive for Folklore.
4. Strandberg, Hindrik : Aderlass bei Pferden — volkstümliche Veterinärmedizin. 17th International Symposium on the History of Veterinary Medicine. 5-8.6.1981. Helsinki. Abstracts of the lectures.
5. Sudhoff, Karl : Beiträge zur Geschichte der Chirurgie im Mittelalter. Graphische und textliche Untersuchungen in mittelalterlichen Handschriften. I. Studien zur Geschichte der Medizin. 10. Leipzig 1914.
6. Harpestraeng, Henrik : Gamle danske urtebog, stenbog og kogeboek. Utgivne for Universitets — Jubilæets danske Samfund ved Marius Kristensen. København 1908-1920, pp. 93-95.
7. Olai, Benedictus : Een Nyttigh Läkere Book ther uthinnen man finner radh/hielp och Läkedom til allehanda menniskiornes siwksdomar både inwertes och uthwertes. Stockholm 1578. Pp. CXIX - CLXXXI.
8. Strandberg, Hindrik : Sanitary regulations in calendars in public use to indicate the attitude to the preventive health care in Finland in the 17th and 18th centuries. XXVII Congreso Internacional de Historia de la Medicina. 1980. Actas — Barcelona 1981. Pp. 621-25.