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# A Brief Account of the Emerald and its Magico-Medical and Symbolic-Religious Qualities against the Black Death



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When the Black Death started to spread throughout Europe following its arrival in 1347, the medical responses, looking for answers to the death and desolation that fell upon the people, were rapid. One of the first medical treatises written on the plague in this period was the *Compendium on the epidemic by the college of the Faculty of Parisian Physicians* (*Compendium de epidemia per collegium Facultatis Medicorum Parisius*). It was produced in October 1348, at the request of King Philip VI (1293 – 1350), by physicians from the University of Paris as a collective work explaining the etiology of the disease and proposing prevention and cure regimens, which were largely composed of the consumption of medicines.<sup>1</sup>

One of the ‘antidotes’<sup>2</sup> for the plague proposed by the *Compendium* was an electuary for the heart that protected the patient from poisonous air (bearing in mind

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Patrick Byrne, *The Black Death* (Westport; London: Greenwood Press, 2004), p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Of the antidotes which are to be described, some to be shaped in the manner of a pill, some in the manner of a troche; others to be prepared in the manner of an apple and of an electuary’. L.-A. Joseph Michon, *Documents inédits sur la peste de 1348 (consultation de la Faculte de Paris, consultation d’un praticien de montpellier description de guillaume de machaut)* (Paris: J.-B. Baillière et fils, 1860), p. 65. Translations from Latin into present-day English are my own unless otherwise indicated.

that the Black Death was explained by the miasmatic theory),<sup>3</sup> from fever, and from pestilential abscesses:

**R**: *cinnamomi, alit ℥j, et semis, ligni aloes indi, florum, anthos, cubebae, piperis longi al., an scr. ij, nucis moschatae, gariophyllor., galangae, been, utriusque deronicae, cardamomi maj., ana ℥ss., spicae nardi, fol. zedoar., croci orient., sem. basiliconis, melissae, menthae siccae, ana scr. ij., omnium margaritarum, hyacinthorum, smaragdi, coralli rubri, carabi, ana scr. S.; rosarum rubrarum electarum, omnium sandalorum, ossis et cornu cervi, spodii, limaturae eboris, ana ℥ S.; seminis acedulae, quatuor seminum frigidorum et majorum, medull., seminis citoniorum, ana scr. j.; serici tincti, in kermes minutim incisi, scr j; ambrae grisiae, ℥ss.; musci, scr. j; camphurae, g. vj; pinearum, modice epistorum? passularum enucleatorum, ana ℥j, et semis, conserva citri minutim incisa, ℥ ij; sacchari, camphorae, ana lib. ij, conficiantur cum aqua rosarum et buglossi, et cooperiatur (cooperatur) tota massa cum foliis auri puri.<sup>4</sup>*

This mixture is broadly based on recipes from ancient antidotaries, with the addition of some new ingredients. John of Burgundy, a physician from Liège who wrote a well-known tractate on the plague in 1365, would have considered such additions to be contributions from *magistri moderni*, or 'modern masters', his contemporary fellow physicians who were supposedly 'more experienced in epidemic pestilential disease than all the doctors and authors of the art of medicine from Hippocrates to the later ones.'<sup>5</sup> Some precious stones were among these new ingredients.

<sup>3</sup> The miasmatic theory states that certain diseases would be caused by putrid vapours in the air or by the air itself corrupted by such vapours. Jon Arrizabalaga, 'Facing the Black Death: perceptions and reactions of university medical practitioners', in *Practical medicine from Salerno to the Black Death*, ed. by Luis García-Ballester et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 237–288 (p. 246).

<sup>4</sup> Because scholars are unsure of the precise correspondence of many medieval ingredients with modern labels medieval recipes are often left untranslated. For the medical recipe, I have chosen to maintain the Latin original names, following scholars such as M. L. Duran-Reynals, C-E. A. Winslow, John M. Riddle, etc. By doing so, scholars hope to avoid errors in using supposedly English equivalents, especially for the herbs. Michon, *Documents inédits sur la peste*, pp. 69–70.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Sudhoff, 'Pestschriften aus den ersten 150 Jahren nach der Epidemie des "schwarzen Todes" 1348, III. Aus Niederdeutschland, Frankreich und England', *Archiv für Geschichte der Medizin*, 5.1/2 (1911), 36–87 (pp. 68–9).

In this brief paper, I will discuss one of the precious stones mentioned in the *Compendium* recipe, probably the most recurrent gem in medical treatises for preventing and curing the Black Death symptoms and action on the body, i.e., the emerald (*smaragdus*). It's worth mentioning that other precious stones, minerals, and non-mineral gems were also frequently mentioned, such as pearl, jacinth, coral (usually the red type, *corallus rubrus*), sapphire, the carbuncle (*carbunculus*), ruby, bezoar and, in a broader sense, amber, ivory and the bone from a deer's heart (*ossis de corde cervi*), although the later stones are not usually found in lapidaries.

Traditional historiography has considered the use of gemstones in medieval medicine to be random. As an example, we may observe George Frederick Kunz's statement that, 'Indeed, many of the most highly recommended electuaries contained all kinds of stones, as though the effect to be produced did not depend upon the qualities of any single stone, or class of stones, but rather upon the quantity used.'<sup>6</sup> On the contrary, there was a logic behind the use of each gemstone against particular diseases, including the Black Death, and this logic was based on the versatility and polysemy of gems. This polysemy came from the magico-medical and symbolic-religious qualities of the stones, and the correlations between these qualities: The gems, with their forms, their materials, their functions, their legends, their relationships with lapidaries, and with their uses provide an infinity of different references, all carrying allusive meanings. In other words, each gemstone contained a variety of qualities and multiple potential meanings. Therefore, their use by physicians was not a random; rather, it was very well-grounded knowledge that was related to different spheres, such as religion, magic, astrology, and medicine, and was part of lapidary, encyclopedic, exegetical, and biblical literature, in addition to iconography. The emerald is an excellent example of this complexity.

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<sup>6</sup> George Frederick Kunz, *The Curious Lore of Precious Stones* (Nova Iorque: Halcyon House, 1913), p. 372.

The magico-medical qualities of gemstones as remedies or protection against the Black Death were primarily based on their cold and dry characteristics, in relation to the qualities of humoral theory as well as the theory of complexions. The pestilence was known to be hot and humid matter, like a vapor, which would be mixed with blood, also hot and humid. From there it would reach the organs and cause putrefaction, characterized mainly by excess heat and humidity. The theory of complexions, as well as the humoral theory, dictated that it was necessary to balance the primary qualities (hot, cold, humid, and dry), or the humors, through opposing forces; that is, applying cold to hot, hot to cold, wet to dry, and dry to wet. From this it is understood that it was necessary to counterbalance the hot and wet qualities of plague and putrefying blood with something dry and cold.<sup>7</sup>

In this sense, the use of gemstones would be a way of bringing balance to the body and, above all, a way of fighting the corruption of matter caused by the pestilence. This explanation appears in the 11th century work of the Egyptian scholar 'Alī ibn Riḍwān (998–1068 AD), who was influenced by Galenic medicine. Ibn Riḍwān shows the relationship between curing pestilence and the use of precious stones — including the emerald — in his treatise *On the Prevention of Bodily Diseases in Egypt* (*Kitāb Daf' Maḍārr Al-Abdān bi-arḍ Miṣr*):

If the air becomes polluted — and this is more frequently what produces epidemic disease [...] the wearing of gems is advantageous, such as sapphire, emerald, pearl, gold, silver, high quality carnelian and all the precious stones. In general, all things that bring happiness are beneficial; the best of them are the cold and constrictive ones.

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<sup>7</sup> Hippocrates, 'On Ancient Medicine', in *Hippocratic Writings; On the Natural Faculties by Galen*, ed. by Hutchins Robert Maynard, trans. by Francis Adams, Great Books of the Western World, vol. 10 (Chicago; London; Toronto: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), pp. 1–9 (p. 4); Galen, 'On the Natural Faculties', in *Hippocratic Writings; On the Natural Faculties by Galen*, ed. by Hutchins Robert Maynard, trans. by Arthur John Brock, Great Books of the Western World, vol. 10 (Chicago; London; Toronto: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), pp. 167–215 (p. 192 and 196).

Coldness and constriction act against the state of corruption, which is from the heat and excessive moisture of decaying things.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from this elementary quality, precious stones also had magico-medical properties that were found in lapidaries and encyclopedic literature, which were consulted by physicians. These properties help us explain the use of the emerald – and of other gems – in plague recipes.

According to these materials, emeralds had properties that could heal fevers,<sup>9</sup> which would be helpful against a pestilential fever. The green stone also had power against poisons and poisonous matter, like the plague. The antidote property of the emerald is also mentioned in the *Compendium* of the University of Paris: ‘*Smaragdus* is also a notorious medicine against all poisons.’<sup>10</sup> This property must have been introduced to the Latin West by two texts from the Arab world: the *Book of General Principles* (*Kitab al-Kulliyat*) by Averrois and the *Book to Facilitate Therapeutics and Regimen* (*Kitab al-Taysir fi mudawat wa-l-tadbir*) by Avenzoar. Both texts were translated into Latin in the 13th century, and were widely copied thereafter.<sup>11</sup>

There is yet another quality that could explain the use of *smaragdus* in medical treatises. According to Thomas of Cantimpré (c. 1186–c. 1276), in his *Book on the Nature of Things* (*Liber de Natura Rerum*), from the 13th century, ‘if carried reverently, [the emerald] avoids deadly diseases.’<sup>12</sup> This apotropaic power would be useful against a

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Alī ibn Riḍwān, *Medieval Islamic Medicine. ibn Riḍwān’s Treatise ‘On the Prevention of Bodily Ills in Egypt’*, trans. by Adil S. Gamal and Michael W. Dols (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1984), p.140–1.

<sup>9</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Book of Minerals*, trans. by Dorothy Wyckoff (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 120; Marbode of Rennes, *De lapidibus; considered as a medical treatise*, trans. by C. W. King and John M. Riddle (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1977), pp. 44–5.

<sup>10</sup> ‘*Smaragdus est etiam insignis medecine contra omne venenum*’. Michon, *Documents inédits sur la peste*, p. 62.

<sup>11</sup> Henry A. Azar, *The Sage of Seville: Ibn Zuhr, His Time, and His Medical Legacy* (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo, 2008), pp. 36–8; Giuliano Tamani, ‘The Generalities of the Averroes Medicine’, *Medicina nei Secoli* 6.2 (1994), pp. 407–23.

<sup>12</sup> ‘*Si reverenter portetur, fugat caducum morbum*’. Thomas of Cantimpré, *Liber de Natura Rerum: Text*, ed. by Walter de Gruyter (Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 1973), p. 368.

lethal plague like the Black Death, even when the emerald was ingested as part of electuaries,<sup>13</sup> if we think of them as amulet-remedies.

Beyond magico-medical properties, precious stones carried also symbolic-religious qualities by being associated with religious figures and motifs, through which they would channel protective and healing powers. The memory of the person or place evoked by the gem, whether it be Christ, the Virgin Mary, the Celestial Jerusalem, or another reference, contributed to the effect they would have. In this sense, the physician was manipulating the symbolism that linked a material thing to the beliefs that surrounded it. In that regard, the magico-medical effectiveness of gems depended on these symbolic links as much as on the medical properties mentioned above.

The emerald was one of the gemstones mentioned by the English monk Bede in the third book of his work *Explanation of the Apocalypse* (*Explanatio Apocalypsis*), written between 710 and 716. Bede creates an exegesis to the symbology of the precious stones on the wall of heavenly Jerusalem, in which the emerald is the representation of the Christian faith, of the divine word and of virtue. Another symbolic aspect that Bede attributes to the emerald is the representation of the Four Evangelists, who, according to the religious explanation, were responsible for making the faith known to the world through the Gospel.<sup>14</sup> This plurality of symbolism points to another quality of the emerald, which is an aura of divinity and faith, very important in a moment of misfortune and despair like the one brought by the pestilence, considered a punishment from God upon mankind.

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<sup>13</sup> The electuary was traditionally a pasty medicine, in contrast to solid troches or liquid potions. It was made from powdered ingredients joined, usually, with fat, honey or, after appropriation by Arab medicine, sugar, psyllium, etc. Other sticking substances were also used by the Greeks, such as gum-resins produced in trees (e.g., myrrh) and maritime scilla. The origin of this compound dates to Mesopotamian medicines consumed by licking, reaching the Hippocratic Corpus with the same function. In the Middle Ages, however, electuaries gained broader meanings, encompassing various remedies. On the history of the electuaries, see Liliane Plouvier, 'L'electuaire, un médicament plusieurs fois millénaire', *Scientiarum Historia*, 19.2 (1993), 97–112.

<sup>14</sup> The Venerable Bede, *The explanation of the Apocalypse*, trans. by Rev. Edw. Marshall (Oxford; London: James Parker and Co., 1878), p. 153.

In conclusion, the emerald, ingested as a component of remedies, or carried close to the body, had healing, strengthening, apotropaic and divine qualities derived from its material and its symbology that would explain its use against the Black Death. Furthermore, this brief analysis has sought to demonstrate how the use of a specific gemstone in the prevention and cure regimes of the Black Death treaties followed a well-structured logic, which was based on the knowledge and beliefs current in the late Middle Ages. Considering gemstones as conscious choices made by doctors at the time, and not as arbitrary selections based on a supposed ignorance, allows us to critically reassess the image of 14<sup>th</sup>-century medicine presented within more traditional historiographical currents. By moving away from these judgments, we are able to re-interpret the use of gemstones in medieval medicine, a rich source of new knowledge both *per se* and in its relationship with other areas of medieval life and learning. As representatives of this, the gems, to which the emerald was used an example here, contain fruitful associations, meanings, symbolisms, virtues, and powers that ascribe them magico-medical and symbolic-religious qualities: this is the path forward for understanding the possible logic of the use of gemstones in medieval medicine.