

Mediaeval Advice on the Avoidance and Treatment of Sea-sickness

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Le médecin Gilbertus Anglicus, que Chaucer mentionne dans sa description du «Doctour of Phisik», a rédigé Compendium Medicine dans la seconde moitié du treizième siècle. Il avait voyagé en mer pour se rendre en terre sainte en 1240, et s'était certainement inspiré de cette expérience maritime pour inclure dans son recueil des conseils destinés aux gens qui prenaient le large. Dans cette note de recherche, Robin Ward offre une traduction des conseils de Gilbertus et les commente.

The well physician Gilbertus Anglicus, mentioned by Chaucer in his description of the Doctour of Phisik,¹ wrote his *Compendium Medicine* in the second half of the thirteenth century.² Gilbert had travelled to the Holy Land by sea in 1240 and no doubt drew on this maritime experience to include in his *Compendium* advice for those travelling by sea. It is included in a chapter (*Liber septimus*) which, curiously, also covers the reproductive system, diseases of women, how to light fires, and antidotes to poisons. This chapter is omitted from the Middle English translations of the original Latin,³ perhaps because of the irrelevance of the contents to the land-bound, celibate, male monks in whose libraries the *Compendia* were kept. Using a sixteenth century copy of the original Latin MS printed in Lyons, Gilbert's advice has been here transcribed and translated.⁴

In the transcription, abbreviations have been silently expanded; punctuation has been left unaltered but paragraphing has been introduced for clarity. The letters *b* and *h*, printed identically, and *u* and *v*, used indiscriminately, have been differentiated by context; the letters */* and *j* have been left as printed. Two compositor's errors have been corrected: para. 1 line 2, inversion of *et* and *rectificatione* and para. 2 line 7, *sedimen* for *sedinem*. In the translation, person, tense, voice and mood have been modernised and made consistent. The third person singular has been used throughout in reference to the patient although the plural occurs in places. Paragraphs have been maintained as in the transcription, with

¹ *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, F.N. Robinson, (ed.), (Oxford, 1979); *The Canterbury Tales*, General Prologue, line 434.

² *Compendium medicine Gilberti anglici tarn morborum universalium quam particularium nondum medicis sed etcyurgicis utilissimum*, The earliest known MS is TK3 in Bruges, Bibliothèque Publique MS 469, dated 1271. A later copy exists in the British Library, MS Sloane 272, *Laurea Anglicana*.

³ For example, F. M. Getz, *Healing and Society in Medieval England, A Middle English Translation of the Pharmaceutical Writings of Gilbertus Anglicus*, (Madison, Wisconsin, 1991).

⁴ *Compendium medicine Gilberti anglici tarn morborum universalium quam particularium nondum medicis sed etcyurgicis utilissimum*, ed. Michael de Capella, (Lyons, 1510), 7, 362 - 3. The writer is grateful to the librarian of the Royal Society of Medicine, whose copy of the Capella edition was used, and to Dr Tony Hunt of St Peter's College, Oxford and Professor Ross Kilpatrick of Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, who so helpfully corrected this translation.

punctuation added.

Liber septimus [f. ccclxij r. right hand column, from line 23 to end].

De regimine transfretantium.

Regimen transfretantium mare principaliter in quattuor consistit scilicet in prohibitione nausée et sedatione vomitus in rectificatione fetoris marini in sedatione sitis et rectificatione aque. Prohibitio nausée completur per usum fructuum acetosorum in ieiunio. ut citoniorum. malorum granatorum acetosorum et citrangulorum limonorum. et per potationem seminis apij. vel cerfolij. decoctionis in aqua que decoctio bibatur a ieiuno. Sedeat autem capite erecto et teneat firmiter ad trabem et non respiciat hac aut iliac: et non moveatur caput nisi motu navis. Sugat autem dulcia aut comedat semina eructuativa.

Post vero vomitum si acciderit accipiat mala granata acria et dulcia et ficus et penides et non comedat quousque stomachus vel vomitus omnino sedetur. et accidentia quiescant. tunc accipiat stomatichon aut dyanthos aut aliud confortatium. comedat autem cibaria digestibilia. Et quia necesse est comedere salsa et legumina comedat ea bene coda et non quotidie, et sint salsa coda in tribus aquis vel quattuor: et macerentur prius in aqua dulci quamvis dicant quidam aquam salsam sal sedimen extrahere. Sit autem vinum bonum oderiferum: et quotidie mane accipiat de eleduarijs bonis odoriferis.

Redificatur autem fetor maris per usum eleduariorum aromaticorum confortantium cor et cerebrum et stomachum ut faciant residentiam fortem. sicut est pliris muscatum. dyanthos cum musco. dyamargariton. post cibum masticentur gariof. muscari. ambrati. et teneantur in ore. et nux muscata et huiusmodi. teneatur lapdanum in manu aut pomum ambre, aut aliud odoriferum. Eligatur locus a sentina remotus et a canalibus quibus aque fetentes projiciuntur. Caveant in quantum possunt ab oppressione hominum et membrorum. et déambulent sepius super summitates navis ad eventandum et mundificent vestimenta a spurcicijs pulvicum et pediculorum. et mutant vestes et rénovent prout sepius poterunt ut inde natura exhilaretur Sedatur autem sitis per frigida et humida quorum confectiones satis patent superius.

Redificatur autem aqua per eventationem et excolationem et agitationem et motum aut per excodionem et post per imittatur residere. et fex abijeatur aut coletur per arenam limpidam recentem. aut si fieri potest sublimetur per duplicia vasa scilicet per alembicum ad nobiles sic enim fit aqua salsa dulcis. Et dicit Avicenna quod aqua mala aceto redificatur. ponatur ergo in aqua parum de aceto. aut limones

Assumantur autem in nave uve passe, cepe. cucumeres. mala et pira. dyadragagantum. et cum dyadragaganto distemperetur aqua aut dyanthos. et assuescat semen feniculi. et portulace masticate, destruit enim sitim.

Caveat autem in meridie a colore in node a frigore a nimia constipatione et solutione. et statim nocumentis supervenientibus occurrat.

Dominus autem omnia dirigat in tranquilate. Amen.

Imprimatur [f. ccclxij v., foot of right hand column]

Explicit compendium medicine Gilberti Anglici corredum et bene emendatum per dominum Michaelem de Capella artium et medicine dodorem: ac Lugduni Impressum per Jacobus Saccon: expensis Vincentijde Portonarijs. Anno Domini .M.D.x. die vero vigesima

mensis Nouembris.

Deo Gratias

Book Seven: "Instruction for those making a sea passage"

The instruction for travel by sea consists principally of four parts; namely, in the prevention of nausea and reduction of vomiting, in the rectification of marine stench, in the assuaging of thirst and in the purification of water. The prevention of nausea is achieved by the use, while fasting, of bitter fruit such as quinces, bitter pomegranates and oranges and, as a drink, a decoction of anise or chervil, the mixture to be drunk on an empty stomach. Also, he [the patient] should sit with the head erect and hold firmly to the beams [of the ship] and not look this way or that and the head should not move except with the motion of the ship. He should suck beforehand sweetmeats or eat seeds which produce belching.

If vomiting has occurred he should afterwards take bitter pomegranate, sweetmeats, figs and a thread of sugar and should not eat until the stomach or vomiting has completely settled down and the symptoms subside. Then let him take a stomach preparation of either extract of rosemary or another strengthening agent and let him eat digestible food. And because it is necessary to eat salted foods and vegetables, he should eat them well cooked, but not every day; the salted food should be cooked in three or four washings and soaked first in fresh water, although some say salt water, to remove the salt sediment. Also, he may take a well flavoured wine and, daily, in the morning, sweet smelling pastilles.

The smell of the sea may also be reduced by the use of aromatic pastilles so that by strengthening the heart, brain and stomach they may counter weakness; for example, musk pastilles, extract of rosemary with musk [and] medicinal pearl powder. After meals he should chew cloves and musk in ambergris, hold in the mouth nutmeg and anything of that kind and hold in the hand, labdanum or a pomander or some other fragrant substance. A place should be chosen remote from the bilge and the drains through which the fetid waters run. He should avoid whenever possible close quarters with men and their smelly limbs and, as a rule, should walk about on the highest parts of the ship to air and cleanse his garments of filthy fleas and lice and change and renew them as often as he can. Also thirst may be assuaged by cold fluids whose preparations are given above.

Furthermore, water may be purified by the process of aerating, settling out, shaking and movement or by boiling and afterwards being allowed to settle and the sediment may be thrown away or filtered through fresh, clean sand. Or, if it is possible to distill it in a double vessel, that is, an alembic, as it is known, then salt water can be made fresh. And Avicenna says that water may be purified by sour wine, so put in just a little vinegar or lemon.

The ship should carry raisins, onions, cucumbers, apples and pears, medicament of tragacanth and with the tragacanth medicament should be mixed water or extract of rosemary and, as is customary, fennel seed and shredded portulac because that destroys thirst.

Furthermore, let him avoid the heat of midday or the cold of the night, and excessive constipation and diarrhoea, and deal at once with symptoms when they occur.

Otherwise, may God direct all things in tranquillity. Amen.

Imprimatur

Here ends Gilbertus Anglicus' *Compendium Medicine*, corrected and properly emended by Master Michael de Capella, Doctor of Arts and Medicine; printed by Jacob Saccon in Lyons; at the expense of Vincent de Portonarius, A.D. 1510, the 20th of November.

By the Grace of God

Gilbert's prophylactic advice to fast, avoid moving the head and keep away from nasty smells is self-evident. Chervil, fennel, nutmeg, onions and rosemary were routinely prescribed for stomach ailments but the omission of ginger is curious as that, too, was widely used for the treatment of gastric discomfort. His suggested treatment for the patient who has succumbed is palliative, consisting essentially of sweet, strong tasting items to mask the bad taste. The ambergris would have been used as the mastic to make a clove and musk chewing gum but the incorporation of powdered pearls in the pastilles would have done no more than increase the cost of medication. Although labdanum gum was normally used as a base for pastilles, it here appears to be used alone in the hand; it may have been Gilbert's intention to incorporate the cloves and musk in the gum to make a pleasant smelling pomander.

Gilbert's suggestion for the on-board purification and desalination of water by distillation, aeration and filtration is remarkably prescient; it was five centuries later before the British Admiralty authorised water stills on naval ships.⁵ From his advocacy of citrus fruits, it is tempting also to attribute to Gilbert a recognition of the value of anti-scorbutics, but thirteenth century sea voyages did not last long enough for scurvy to present; the fruit is included in his pharmacopaeia only as a remedy for nausea.

The recommendation to change one's clothes regularly, with no mention of washing clothes or self, demonstrates a certain egocentricity with the advice to do so as high on the ship as possible to avoid the lice of others falling on fresh (if not clean) garments.

The final sentence, *Dominus autem omnia dirigit in tranquilate*, might perhaps be freely translated as "if all else fails, keep calm" - advice which offers little comfort to those suffering the agonies of *malde mer*, and is as valid today as it was then.

⁵ Although the distillation of water was known to Indian and Egyptian scholars in classical times, most of Europe did not recognise the need for, or perhaps the possibility of, purification, until the end of the Middle Ages. In 1762 James Lind read a paper to the Royal Society, published with the authority of the Admiralty, and in 1771 a successful trial at Spithead of Dr. Irving's apparatus led to its being taken on Cook's expedition of 1772.