

**ALCHEMY, MAGIC AND MIRACLES
IN THE NAPOLITAN MEDICAL CULTURE
IN THE ARAGONISE AGE (1442-1502)**

When after several decades of struggles and conflicts, Alfonse of Aragona conquered in 1442 the kingdom of Neaples, it seemed that a new age of peace and prosperity would appear for Southern Italy.

Alfonse the Magnanimous and Ferrante opened their splendid Court to painters, architects, decorators, goldsmiths, droppers, cabinet makers, miniaturists, together with poets, minstrels, physicians, astrologers, from every corner of the Reign, but also from different towns of Italy and other countries of Europe.

Therefore Culture reached a particular development, with progress in arts, philosophy and sciences.

The study-center of Neaples and Salerne, which had enjoyed international prestige during the swabian Reign and the early Angevin age had become decadent during the dark period of War of Secession.

In the Northern Universities, such as Bologna, Ferrara and Padua, the most brilliant minds found stimulus and gratification for a more qualified professional activity.

With the flourishing Aragonese life, University halls filled up with student and teachers revived a new debate concerning the great themes of the current scientific life ; so it was established to exchange knowledge other Centers, particularly with Padua, leading the vanguard, in the last decades, of the 1400 s. and beginning of 1500 s. of the new school of rationalised Aristotelism which, on the one hand, opposed to Scotism of middle age savours, and on the other to the marky tendencies of Neoplatenism.

In the wake of a critical review of Aristotele's works, and a re-reading of Averroism, studies of Medicine were launched again, with a « logic » understanding of problems of nature, effectively supported by Padua's Study-Center, where southern teachers used to teach such as Francis Secure from Salente, and the surgeon Agostino Nife from Suessa.

The latter keen commentator of Aristotel and Averroee, professor of philosophy in the Padua Study-Center, where he made acquaintance with Pico della Mirandela and Peter Pomponazzi, moved to Naples in the year 1499.

At that time more than 300 professors lived in the capital teaching mostly theology and knowledge of scriptures, many of them philosophy, others medical sciences, many civil law, some astrology, geometry and others mathematical sciences, a great part of them rhetoric, poetic art and grammar.

That's what Angelo Catone, surgeon and astrologer from Beneventum wrote in

the preface to *Liber cibalis et medicinalis pandectarum* by Matteo Silvatico, printed in Naples in 1474.

As a matter of fact, theological disputes continued to move the ecclesiastic circles with the incessant exchange of witty remarks between the S. Lorenzo Monastery Franciscan friars, believed by Boccaccio and Petrarca and the S. Lorenzo Dominican monks, the last ones well famous in the past, when S. Thomas Aquinas, the Angelic doctor had lived and taught.

Famous preachers such as the Bishop Roberto Caracciolo and the friar Anthony from Bitonto Minor Observants, would exalt crowds with their message of Church's revival, much in the same way as in other parts of Italy Bernardine from Siena, John from Capistrano and Gerolamo Savonarola did.

We must also include the dominican Bartolomeo Sibilla, teacher of theology and also astrologer, the author of a curious *Speculum peregrinarum* question in which he argued about the soul, angels, demons, attempting a nearly psychoanalytic interpretation of dreams.

The debate on rhetoric and poetic art was kept alive in several private schools, thanks to *ludi litteratii professores* such as Giuniano Maio, the musefilo, Aureli Bienato, Francis Pucci from Florence, administrator of the Royal Library (which by the way was pawned by Ferrante to the other financial difficulties during the Otranto war) and in later years, Lucio, Giovanni Scoppa. But the most important center, according to the habits at that time was the Court. Around the Sovereigns gathered famous poets, surgeons, new philosophers, bound to Humanistic culture.

We quote among them, the Panormita, tender latin poet, John Pontano a humanist and refined writer, the king's Chancellor, animator of the Academy called Pontanian after him ; Anthony de Ferraris called the Galateo, chief surgeon of the Court ; Jacopo Sannazzaro, who, with Arcadia, started a new and successful literary model, the Cariteo ; Ermolao Barbaro who translated the Paraphrase of Temistio, the administrator of Plinio's works, in Naples from 1474 to 1476.

And many other such as Crisostomo Colonna princes' tutor, Lorenz Bonincentro from Florence who dedicated to Ferrante his *Rerum naturalium et divinarum libri*, the jurist Anthony d'Alessandro, Girolamo Carbone, Gabrielle Attilio a skilful poet, and subsequently bishop of Policastro.

John Philip from Lignanime, the king's biographer, the abovementioned Angel Catane surgeon and astrologer who profound investigations on the comet, who was in France at Louis the XI's court and followed Charles the VIII to Italy, John Marco from Parma called the cynic, the Greeks George from Trebisonda who translated and commented *Ptolomeo's Almagesto*, and Michael Marullo, exquisit singer of nature.

Thus, this was an environment very rich in movement and suggestions of great intellectual value.

As far as Medicine is concerned many different *schools* arose in this climate. One of the tendencies which we might define « practical » went back to Hippocrates and Galen without neglecting the contribution of experiment and direct investigation of natural phenomena ; it was represented by Galateo, by Tuccio de Scalzenibus from Matera, a formed surgeon of Bisignano's Prince and afterwards at Ferrante's court : and also by Marcel Cumano military surgeon who described, along with a surgery treatise written by Peter from Argelata, the first fire-arms wounds observed during the Fornovo battle and the very first *symptoms of syphilis*, which in that period was raging among the French Army.

The Galateo was a very skilful surgeon interested in mineral waters and with

so called Pozzuoli baths, re-evaluating a medical treatment which in that period began to acquire a scientific foundation wrote a small treatise on gout. The same with the *Design Japigiae*, *Desitu elementorum*, and *Demari et aquis et fluviorum origine* gave proper examples of a geography based on the exact analysis, knowledge and description of places and physical environment (above all one must quote the attempt to explain the « mirages » free of all irrational and metaphysical explanation).

The other opposite tendency was the one of the philosophers, summarizing the works of Aristotele, Averroes and Avicenna and Marcantonio Zimara, member of importance at the beginning of the new century, professor in Salerno and later reader of metaphysics in the Study-Center of S. Lorenzo in Naples. Zimara, called the Otrantino from his place of birth, graduated in Medicine at Padua University, and in that city he taught natural philosophy.

He was Pampenazzy's pupil, and he received knowledge of natural magic, which he transferred in the posthumous and perhaps apocryphal *Antrum magico-medicum*. Magic under any form will find in the 1400 s ; in Naples, along with astrology a fruitful ground of application.

During the entire Middle Ages, Toledo and Naples were the most favorable cities for magician experience.

A strange legend about Virgilio, poet and magician flourished in Naples towards the end of the Middle Ages.

Observing a miscellany from the XIV-XV century, the *History of Partenope*, written in a particular southern vernacular, Virgilio was described as the keeper protector of the city with his « magices artes ».

The high « officer » was performed by a series of experiences and institution the fly made of bronze to ward off insects, the golden leech to purge waters, the copper cicada to shut out trouble some noises, the statue of an angel with a copper trumpet to turn away opposing winds, the « seal », the other statue which neutralized snakes poison, the Nelana Gate marble figures which possessed prophetic ability, the poet-magician bones which taken from grave, gave rise to tremendous storms, the « arms notoria » book, enshrined in the depth of his tomb.

Moreover, the big garden to grow medical herbs, the prodigious waters and the Bahia and Pozzuoli baths which healed many diseases, the Old Market slaughter house capable of preserving meat for long periods of time.

But the most significant part of the legend was the consecration of the egg (the magic sacred egg, « the philosophers egg » of middle ages tradition) and its preservation, image of the city in a narrow-necked bottle (the *vas hermeticum*) and this one in an iron cage, and furthermore the same one in the very protect Sea-Castle, the mystic fortress against witchcraft.

We are now in the midst of ceremonial magic with all its practical and symbol ingredients.

Besides that, in the South of Italy some of the indiscussed places of demonological magic were there located, such as the Benevento walnut, where magicians and witches convened and the well-known Norcia-cave, where magicians met to exchange experience and learning of art, « *conventus strigarum* », and « *discipulatum artium magicarum* », as related by Silvio Piccolomini, appointed Pope as Pio XII from 1458 to 1464, in a letter to his brother. The wide spread disbelief regarding these practices of magic was evident in Piccolomini's letter along with the refusal of daemonology and imagination by humanists and learned people ; scepticism and irony were to be found in the description of the Gaeta witch in the dialogue *Antonius* by John Pontano ; a domestic sorceress : humbly dressed, whose

performances were confined to the most common prophetic practice and to the low ceremonial magic.

The pontanian quotation takes us back to the educated and refined climate of Aragonese Naples, to the debates on magic in scientific circles, and also on astrology and alchemic arts.

In Naples the cultural tradition of S. *Thomas Aquinas* was still alive with regards to the philosopher's stone and the transmutation of metals, and the memory of Raimondo Lullo perhaps the greatest alchemist that ever lived, who devoted the *treatise of Quinta essenza* to king Robert.

In Naples, as opposed to Rome and Venice, alchemy was not forbidden by sovereigns, but we do not find any valid representatives owing to the rather sceptical climate of the court.

There developed, on the contrary, with Pontano's works, a debate on natural magic and astrology; a discussion which involved thinkers, philosophers, theologians, artists and scientists of all Europe such as Erasmo of Rotterdam, Leonardo da Vinci, Giovanni della Mirandola, up to the contradictory but particularly incisive work of Henry Cornelio Agrippa from Nettesheim outlining a clear distinction between the rational element appearing in these disciplines bound to observation and argument, and on the other hand, the irrational mystic and esoteric element.

The important debate which arose at the end of the XVth century on the meaning and value of astrology pledged people such as Gian Francesco Pico, the great humanist's nephew, keen follower of the antiastrological ideas professed by Savonarola, and the professional astrologer Lucio Bellanti, who claimed the scientific foundation of stars gazing.

The debate was already documented in written works of the Middle Ages which distinguished « partim naturalis, partim superstitiosa » of magic, separating astrology from astronomy, a particular harsh quarrel in Ruggiero Bacone opinions. However in the neapolitan humanistic environment this quarrel was not too bitter. Pontano tried to find a point of moderation between the fanciful element and the rational one which was common practice among many thinkers of his age. In the work *De Fortuna*: « big is the streight of stars, from them come seasons, fruits of things; life and death of living beings ».

In the *Aegidius*: « it is useless to argue about the influence of stars ». On the edge of this doubt, and unease, in the middle of a will to believe in the signs or a more correct interpretation, rises the need to affirm that every premonition is vain: so began the profound analysis of *De Rerum Celestibus*. In a less literary ambit is to be placed Cristiano Balvano's work, who was to count Policastro Antonello de Petrucciis son's, the king's Secretary, involved in 1484 in the barons' plot.

The author of « Astrology » wanted to spread the practice of astrology and astronomy over more vast limits besides the initiated, this way continuing a tradition dating back to Alano to Matera, active at the end of XIIIth century in his town, and later professor in the Study-Center of Naples and Paris.

Also at the Sorbonne, in the first half of '500 there taught an astronomer and astrologer from Potenza, named Marcello Saia Noia who, with *Ragionamenti sopra la Celesta Sfera* (Arguments about the celestial sphere) put himself in this field of studies, along with other more famous thinkers and southern scientists such as Telesio, Giordano Bruno, Campanello, John Battista della Porta. In this context of friends « oroscopa » and « judicia » were successful, by which one could reckon with mathematical exactness the stars influences on men's lives. Under these circumstances judicial astrology, originated, rising to scientific significance and

value of which, in the beginning of the XVIth century, authoritative representatives will be Luca Gaurico from Salerno, skilful mathematician, Copernico's teacher from the Study-Center in Padua, and Matteo Tafuri surgeon from Salento, called the magician from Soletto.

This was after all, the last attempt to put the stars and the underground of nature forces, the occult world, to the service of man.

Sapiens dominabitur astris was the cross-shaped epigraph a symbol of the times adopted by Lodovico il Moro, prince of Milano, as a warning for himself and a lesson for others.

The wise man, the magician, the individual summarizing the capacity of percept and synthesis faculty of investigation and dominion of planty was the typical character of the Renaissance.

Then historical events, social and political conditions, cultural guide lines, the relentless party of science towards investigation and technology, have exploited from the baggage of human experience such a reality, confining it by discrimination and by oppression, to marginal areas, like popular culture and allotting it defined limits, like religion.

In fact religion in the Reigns of Naples and in Calabria was particularly tormented by disagreements and by natural calamity and lived all the same period of particular elevation thanks to the thaumaturgical work, carried out by S. Francis from Paola. His aim was to help poor people, the oppressed, with compensations mechanisms such as use of powder, medical herbs, particular instruments, like those used in magic.

The fame of this countless miracles, blind people who obtained sight, open sore which healed, the crippled who started to walk again, spread out over the furthest parts of the Reign and reached the Kind of France.

Louis the XIth, hopelessly sick in the Plessis Castle, asked for him through Ferrante of Aragona.

Francis unwillingly left, accompanied by an honour guard, and with the fine neapolitan poet name Francis Galeota to fulfill his mission of faith and off the French Court.

The kind did not recover !

But the prejudiced courtiers were struck and excited by the behaviour of that mild friar from Calabria !

The historian Commynes so wrote about him : « ne pense jamais avoir vu homme vivant de si siente vie », and also : « sembloit qu'il fust inspiré de Dieu de choses qu'il disoit et remorestroit », although he was illiterate and without formal studies.

He never came back home !

It is said that he had been one of the organizers and instigators in the enterprise undertaken by Charles the VIIIth against « his reign of Naples ». But they are unrounded rumours not confirmed by any evidence. Perhaps he was betrayed his naivete and good faith, that pushed him express prophetic suspices, poetically hazardous, on the universal destiny of the French Monarchy, on her peaceful and reforming mission, in the perspective of a new big crusade against the Turks. Which inflamed the souls of the young king and his court of desirous knights.

I end this description pointing out that it was out of necessity a very short and concise analysis of a particular aspect of neapolitan intellectual life an epoch in the Middle Ages like ragone one, full of lights and shadow that shall be remembered for a long time like happy time.

It was in fact a particular aspect of scientific culture in a particular moment. Indeed between the last half of XVIth there occurred a net separation between ceremonial magic and natural magic, between speculative astrology and prophetic astrology, between chemical alchemy and mystical alchemy, dividing the substantiality of science which had been the peculiarity for the previous ages. In the midst of this fermenting cultural era the new science which set the development of the modern world, in motion, was born.

REMARKS

1. For the quoted news and, for further informations see M. FUIANO *Teaching and culture in Naples during Renaissance*. Napoli/ 19/3, and from the same author — *Teachers of Medicine and Philosophy in the '400*; Napoli 19/3.
2. Besides the works of general character, first of all the ones E. GARIN see, the fundamental work from an historical point of view. E. PONTIERI. — *Ferrante from Aragona the king of Naples*, Napoli 1969.
3. The Galeato was object, of high-level studies, both in the past century and in recent times (very important are the proceedings of Galateane Days. 1969 — *Studies on Anthony De Ferraris Galeato*. Galatone 19/0 wich investigated all the aspects of his life and works. There are many ancient and modern issues and translations of there works, but no critical editions, with the exception the one of *Epistole* by A. Altamura, Lecce 1959, badly printed.
4. A. ANTONACI. — *Researches on the aristotelism during Renaissance*. Marcanto Zimara, I — Lecce 19/1, II Bari 19/8.
5. M. ANDRIANI. — *Magic Italy. Magic in Italian tradition* Roma 19/0.
6. Virgilio's legend was cleverly illustrated in D. Comparetti, *Virgilio in the middle-Ages* Leghorn 18/2, with several later issues, also recent ones. *The Cronica*, to be found in the Comparetti appendix, was published in the *Cronache de la cinclita cita de Napole* by B. Capasso, Napoli 1502.
7. E. S. PICCOLIMINI. — *Epistolae*, London - Leghorn 19/9, I, 46.
8. G. PONTANO. — *Opera Omnia*, Florence 1514, III *Antonius*, pag. 63.
9. The epistolae dedicated to king Robert will be found in the Colonia — issue (by John Rickmann, 1567) of *Trattato*.
10. PONTANO. *Opéra omnia*, quotation II, De Fortuna, pag. 128; III Argidius, pag. 182.
11. The work - Title is *Astrology, seu opusculus de totius orbis divisione, sphaera, de planetarium theoria, de distantibus orbium a centro terrae*, Napoli (by Enrico Aldyng), 14/7: two copies of the precious document law in National Library of Naples. Another one in that of Paris.
12. Vast is the number of references concerning S. Francis from Paola; going from the simple agiography to the highly qualified historical studies: of particular importance with the aim of our study, the miracles, is the *checking of original codes for canonization of S. Francis from Paola* — Roma 1964.