

Introduction

The Middle English Gilbertus Anglicus

In the second half of the fourteenth century, there was an urge for scientific and practical writings in English, which had its main impulse in clerical and aristocratic spheres and gave rise to the creation of a wide corpus of works. English versions were rendered out of Latin or French originals, mainly in religious houses. Thus, the remarkable adaptation of Gilbertus Anglicus' *Compendium medicinae* (ca. 1240) seems to be a monastic production (Keiser 1998a: 3595). In monastic scriptoria and academic circles, it was usual for books of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to circulate as working copies. Mediaeval scholarship ensured the durability of texts and their utility was more important to their owners than the age or material aspect of the manuscript containing them (Harris 1989: 173). This is particularly true of the text under consideration, of which numerous copies were produced and whose medical content bears witness to its practical usage.

A large part of GUL MS Hunter 509 (hereafter *H509*) is based on the Middle English Gilbertus Anglicus, an adaptation written in prose around 1400 of the above-mentioned *Compendium medicinae*. This is amongst the major works of early mediaeval medicine, representing the oldest complete treatise on general medicine written by an English author which has survived to the present day. It also attests the state of medical science at that particular time in England. Although little is known of Gilbertus' life, he was unquestionably one of the most famous physicians of the time as

well as the first important medical author of the country (Handerson 1918 [2005]: 17). He is mentioned as one of the authorities of Chaucer's *Doctour of Phisik* (Benson 1987: 30):

‘Wel knew he the olde Esculapius
And Deyscorides, and eek Rufus,
Olde Ypocras, Haly, and Galyen,
Serapion, Razis, and Avycen,
Averrois, Damascien, and Constantyn,
Bernard, and Gatesden, and Gilbertyn.’

Gilbertus is frequently quoted with respect by medical writers of later times and the *Compendium*, printed for the first time in 1510, enjoyed the honour of a second edition as late as the seventeenth century (Handerson 1918 [2005]: 17). It was one of the established references for physicians until that century; in fact, the *Compendium medicinae* was alongside *De proprietatibus rerum* of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, the *Thesaurus pauperum* of Petrus Hispanus, or the *Lilium medicinae* of Bernard Gordon, the standard academic or encyclopaedic text, and all these authors were recognised as academic authorities. These texts were frequently the source for collections of recipes (Jones 1998: 156). In the library of the Faculty of Medicine in the University of Paris between 1395 and 1516, for instance, there were 26 books including the works of Alexander of Tralles, Aristotle, Averroes, Avicenna, Constantin Africanus, Galen, Gilbertus Anglicus, Hippocrates, Rhazes, and Simon of Genoa (Calman 2007: 79).

The works of Gilbertus were also popular both in Latin and in translation, and were widely copied and adapted; Getz (1991: lvi) argues that they had ‘a popular appeal’, rather than pertaining to part of a popular tradition. Gilbertus holds the seventh position in the list of the fifteen authors or attributed authors appearing most

often with Middle English scientific and medical texts, just after Macer and before Albertus Magnus, Galen, or Guy de Chauliac (Voigts 1995: 189).

Amongst the authorities named by Gilbertus, the following are found: Pythagoras, Hippocrates, Plato, Aristotle, Galen, Rufus, Macrobius, Boethius, Alexander of Tralles, Theodorus Priscianus, Theophilus Philaretus, Stephanon, the Arabians Haly Abbas, Rhazes, Isaac Judaeus, Joannitius, Janus Damascenus, Jacobus Alucindi, Avicenna and Averroes, the Salernitan writers, especially Constantin Africanus, Nicholas Praepositus, Romoaldus Ricardus and Maurus, and two unknown authors, Terror and Funcius, labelled by Gilbertus as “antiqui”. This list suggests a fine medical library for a thirteenth-century practitioner (Handerson 1918 [2005]: 25).

Gottfried (1986: 197–198) establishes the possibility that the *Compendium* might have been written by a doctor who had never seen a patient, as Gilbertus accepts without questioning the opinion of earlier authorities, and provides cures through exposition and syllogism. The career of Gilbertus is obscure. The same author remarks that it is unlikely that he ever practised medicine, and certain that he was not a surgeon. From documents, it may be inferred that he was a cleric in major orders and physician to the king by 1207. It can also be gathered that he was educated abroad, since English universities were unable at that time to completely educate a medical doctor (Getz 1991: lv). Talbot (1967: 73) suggests the possibility of him being ‘a product of Salerno and Montpellier’.

As for the main manuscripts containing the *Compendium*, Getz (1991: liii–liv) provides the following list: TK² 3: Bruges, Bibliothèque Publique, MS 469, 244 ff. (dated 1271); Cambridge, Pembroke College, MS 169, ff. 1–233v (13th/14th c.); Cambridge,

- 2 L. Thorndike and P. Kibre. *A Catalogue of Incipits of Mediaeval Scientific Writings in Latin*. New York: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1963.

Peterhouse, MS 52, ff. 1–92v (13th/14th c.); London, British Library, MS Sloane 272 (named *Laurea anglicana*), 262 ff. (14th/15th c.); TK 380: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 720 (SC 2634), ff. 1–156v (early 14th c.); Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, MS 731, ff. 1–231v (14th c.); TK 881: Cambrai, Bibliothèque Publique, MS 906, 247 ff. (14th c.); Vienna, National-Bibliothek, MS 2279, ff. 1–239v (14th c.); TK 1115: Rouen, Bibliothèque de la Ville, MS 984, 225 ff. (14th c.); Oxford, Merton College, MS N. 3. 9. (MS Coxe 226), ff. 207 (14th c.), begins like the 1510 printed edition with the incipit *Incipit liber morborum*.

In Beaujouan (1972: 185), there are references to two manuscripts in Spain: Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional, MS 1199 and Madrid, Biblioteca Universitaria, MS 120. This reference is correct with regard to MS 1199, which is held at the Biblioteca Nacional de España with the title *Incipit liber morborum tam uniuersalium tam particularium a inagistro gileberto editus ab omnibus auctoribus practicis magistrorum exceptus que compendium medicine intitlatur...* It dates from the fifteenth century and it contains 175 folios. MS 120, however, is housed at the Biblioteca Histórica of the Universidad Complutense de Madrid with the signature BH MSS 120 and the title *Liber morborum tam uniuersalium quam particularium*. Its dates from the thirteenth century and it consists of 172 folios.³

There seems to be another manuscript containing the Latin Gilbertus Anglicus (or a part of it), which is not listed in TK and is not mentioned by Getz: Cambridge, Pembroke College, MS 228. This manuscript belonged to the scribe who copied *H509* (discussed below), whose name appears at the end (“T. Westhagh”). The manuscript is named *Medica* in the Catalogue of the Library of Pembroke College, and also contains other medical texts, such as *Aphorisms* by Hippocrates, as well as flyleaves from a music book.

3 This follows the modern foliation of the manuscript.