

Medieval Poultices by Abulcasis for the Treatment of Alopecia

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Abstract

The renowned Andalusian physician and surgeon Abulcasis Al-Zahrāwī (c. 936–c. 1013) is the author of *the Kitāb al-Taṣrīf li-man ‘ajiza ‘an al-ta’līf* (The Book of Medical Arrangement), an encyclopedic work divided into thirty treatises that significantly influenced Renaissance Europe. The twenty-third treatise, segmented into nine chapters and further subdivided into several sections, deals with bandages, poultices, and plasters effective for the treatment of diverse ailments and diseases. This paper offers an approach to this specific treatise, providing the English translation of selected fragments featuring recipes and remedies beneficial for treating both alopecia and general hair loss, based on the Arabic Manuscript 5772nd of the National Library in Paris (BnF). These prescriptions hold substantial pharmacological and historical value for the history of science

Keywords: Abulcasis Al-Zahrāwī, Kitāb al-Taṣrīf, Medieval Arabic Medicine, Medieval Arabic Pharmacology, Medieval Arabic Dermatology, Alopecia.

Introduction

The well-known physician and surgeon from Al-Andalus Abulcasis Al-Zahrāwī (c.936-c.1013) is the author of the *Kitāb al-Taṣrīf li-man ‘ajiza ‘an al-ta’līf* (Book of medical arrangement) an encyclopedic book divided into thirty treatises that significantly influenced Renaissance Europe, especially the thirtieth treatise on surgery [1-3].

The twenty-third of these, which is segmented into nine chapters and these are splitted in several sections, deals with bandages and dressings effective for the treatment of diverse ailments and diseases. The prescriptions described in it have a great pharmacological value, since Abulcasis, besides an influential and relevant surgeon, was a very representative figure in this scientific field due to his important achievements.

These pages reveal the beauty standards of the Arabs in the Middle Ages, and then, as now, alopecia and hair loss were topics of both aesthetic and medical interest.

In the *Kitāb al-Taṣrīf*, Abulcasis follows basically the theories

proposed by Hippocrates [4] and developed later by Galen [5]. And, in addition to his own findings, he incorporated the knowledge acquired by subsequent Arab authors who enriched medieval medicine and pharmacopoeia [6]—such as Ibn Al-Jazzār [7], Ibn Māsawayh [8], Al-Rāzī [9], Ibn Juljul [10] and Ishāq Ibn ‘Imrān [11], among others—as well as prominent writers from the classical tradition, including Dioscorides [12], Paul of Aegina [13], and Al-Masīh [14], etc. Abulcasis's work is replete with quotes from other authors and treatises, which demonstrates his extensive scientific erudition.

Below is the English translation of selected texts featuring ten recipes with remedies—such as poultices and topical applications—beneficial for treating both alopecia and general hair loss, according to the 5772nd Arabic manuscript of the National Library in Paris (F.140v-F141r) [15].

Recipes of some remedies beneficial for alopecia

- Rue poultice beneficial for long-standing alopecia: Take rue bark, crush it very well, and apply it over the alopecia. And if the ailment is long-standing, take only its juice, mix it with wax, and apply it over the affected area; and let it not be treated with any other remedy until it is cured.
- Another [poultice] beneficial for alopecia: Burn asphodel, take its ashes, mix them with the water of the asphodel

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itself, and apply some of it over the alopecia.

- Another topical application beneficial for hair loss: Aloe leaves are crushed with syrup and applied over the hair. It is certainly beneficial.
- Another poultice beneficial for alopecia: Frankincense is crushed with mouse droppings and cooked with vinegar and honey until they mix and thicken. Then, it is applied over the affected area. This will cure it and stimulate hair growth.
- Another remedy to prevent hair loss: Myrrh is crushed together with ladanum, wine, and myrtle oil, and applied to the hair; or it is crushed alone with a little syrup and used. It is certainly good.
- Another topical application beneficial for alopecia, pruritus, lice, and non-ulcerated, mild scabies: Stavesacre is crushed with vinegar and oil and applied in the bath over the area affected by pruritus and scabies. It is certainly beneficial.
- Another poultice beneficial for alopecia: White hellebore is taken, crushed with vinegar, and applied over the area of alopecia after shaving it. It is certainly beneficial. And the treatment with black hellebore is more potent and effective.
- Another plaster beneficial for chronic alopecia: Euphorbia and pellitory are crushed together with ox gall, and some of it is applied over the area of alopecia. And it is possible that euphorbia acts in the same manner by itself.
- Another: Red arsenic is crushed together with resin, and with this, a plaster is prepared to be applied over the alopecia.
- Arsenic and oil are crushed in the sun and applied over the alopecia. The application is repeated until it disappears.

Conclusion

Abulcasis Al-Zahrāwī is, without question, one of the most distinguished medieval physicians, whose influence extended across both the Islamic world and the West into Renaissance Europe. His magnum opus, the *Kitāb al-Taṣrīf* (The Book of Medical Arrangement), holds a high position within the history of surgery, medicine, and pharmacology in Al-Andalus and the Muslim world. Furthermore, this work exemplifies the sophisticated level achieved by Arabic scientific knowledge during the Middle Ages; consequently, the study of its pages remains essential to disseminate this legacy across other academic fields—an endeavor to which this article directly contributes. The texts translated and analyzed in this study demonstrate the medieval interest in dermatological and aesthetic disorders, highlighting the advancements made in this field by Arab physicians. Ultimately, these findings underscore the relevance of this eminent author within the history of Islamic science, as well as his prominent standing in the history of universal science.

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