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## BALD AS AN EGG

### (Baldness Remedies Through the Ages)

**Abstract:** The paper discusses medical prescriptions against baldness in a wide period from antiquity to the 19th century. Attention is first paid to the remedies that Pliny the Elder proposed in the 1st century in his work *Naturalis Historia*. Then, the data from a Byzantine medical treatise dating from the middle of the 11th to the second half of the 14th century are summarized. Finally, the recipes were presented from The Hodoch Code, a Serbian therapeutic anthology from the end of the 14th or beginning of the 15th century. Medications, which sometimes are accompanied by superstitions recommended by Serbian folk medicine, are also included.

**Key words MeSH:** Baldness, drugs, recipes

**Non MeSH:** Pliny the Elder, Byzantine medical treatise, The Hodoch Code, Serbian folk medicine

“Transient or permanent lack of hair, facial or corporeal hairs on a limited or entire surface of the overgrown skin... In the case of acquired baldness, the lost hair is not replaced at all or not sufficiently with equally valuable new hair.” [1 p 777] This is the beginning of a definition of baldness from a general medical encyclopedia. It is a phenomenon that is far more common in men than in women, and besides the medical one, it also has an aesthetic dimension, among others. In other words, bald people can be the subject of hilarious quips, such as those who are too short or too tall, those who are clumsy or those who have a big nose.

During the coronation of the Byzantine emperor Alexios III Angelos (1195–1203) in 1195, an unusual event occurred, written about by the historian Niketas Choniates. This Byzantine historian records that in the procession behind the emperor, among the dignitaries, his uncle Sebastokrator John Angelos was also riding. This old man had an

unexpected accident during the ceremonial walk. Although no one touched the horse he was riding on, John Angelos's crown suddenly fell from his head. All the present observers screamed in surprise and then burst into laughter when, like a full moon, the Sebastokrator's bald head flashed before their eyes. John Angelos, who was hard to sway, kept his composure and accepted the trouble that happened to him with dignified calmness. At that moment, he took the roaring laughter of the crowd of the capital's life as a good-natured joke. He also managed to smile a little without showing the slightest sign of any discomfort. [2 pp 1-31; 3 pp 107-108]

### In antiquity

Hippocrates, the "father of medicine", had some interesting remarks about baldness. He points out the following in one place: "Bald people are not susceptible to large varicose veins." However, when bald people's veins become dilated, they get hair again". [4 p 104; 5 p 79] In the second place, the famous doctor emphasizes that eunuchs do not suffer from bone pain and do not become bald. [43 p 103; 5 p 78]

The famous scholar Pliny the Elder, who lived in the 1st century, in his voluminous masterpiece, the magnificent encyclopedia *Natural History* (*Naturalis Historia*), talks about unusual tribes and peoples. He emphasizes that on the territory of Albania, in the Eastern Caucasus (today's Azerbaijan and part of southern Dagestan), "people with grey-green eyes and very sharp vision are born; they are bald from childhood and see better at night than during the day". [7 p 145] Elsewhere he writes: "Of all animals, man has most hair on the head: indeed this is the case indiscriminately with males and females, at all events with the races that do not cut the hair... Man is the only species in which baldness occurs, except in cases of animals born without hair, and only with human beings and horses does the hair turn grey, in the former case always starting at the forehead and only afterwards at the back of the head." [7 pp 512-515]

After these assessments, Pliny the Elder also brings a cure for baldness to light. The ingenious scholar writes the following: "Bear's grease mixed with ladanum and adiantum prevents the hair from falling out, and cures mange, and scanty eyebrows if mixed with the lamp-black from lamp wicks and the soot that collects in their nozzles. Mixed with wine, it cures dandruff." [8 pp 112-113] *Labdanum* or *ladanum* is the sticky resin of the *Cistus Ladanifer* and *Cistus creticus* bushes. It has been used since ancient times as an ingredient in herbal medicine.

### In Byzantium

A text composed in the late Byzantine period represents a convincing testimony about the scope of Byzantine medicine, especially the part concerning pharmacology and pharmacopoeia, i.e., the preparation of drugs. It is an anonymous medical treatise, a medical compendium for practical use, a kind of encyclopedia that is partly a compilation and an original text. It was compiled by an obviously experienced doctor who did not hesitate to include his knowledge gained through many years of practice in the text. The medical treatise is dated to a wide period from the middle of the 11th

to the second half of the 14th century, and based on the current knowledge, it is impossible to narrow down this extensive period. The treatise is more oriented towards practical advice than remarks of broader theoretical importance. The section dedicated to pharmacology occupies the largest part of it. In Byzantium, pharmacology did not exist as an independent scientific branch. That means that Byzantine doctors were at the same time apothecaries and pharmacists who themselves collected medicinal herbs and made medicines from them.

The anonymous compiler of the treatise remembered that part of the Byzantine population - the male part - had problems with a lack of hair. As we have seen from the episode of the coronation of Emperor Alexios III Angelos, it could not be said that in the Byzantine epoch, baldness was a premium.

A Byzantine medical treatise, however, encouraged those who suffered from a lack of hairiness. It is written that if the hair falls from the head, it is necessary to smear it with a specific grease. Here is the recipe for preparing this ointment: take one litre of fresh myrtle and fresh leaves of schoenus (*σχοίνος*) each. [9 p 133] Here, a litre is a measure of weight, which is 327 grams. [10 pp 58-59, 71-74, 82-84; 9 p 43] After it has been chopped, the myrtle and the sieve should be boiled in five litres of water on low heat. The leaves should be squeezed and thrown out when half of the liquid evaporates. One litre of rose oil should be added to the rest of the liquid and cooked again on low heat until the liquid evaporates and remains oil only. In the following part of the recipe, as if everything had conspired against the bald people, there is a problem with the translation of the Greek word *σουκὺ* (or *σοῦκον?*), which most likely denotes some fragrant plant. It is said that incense and *σουκὺ* should be added to the obtained oil - one ounce or ungia each, which is a measure of weight and equals 27,3 grams. *Σουκὺ* is called *kalgan* - a kind of dill or resinous hair oil. [10 pp 58-59, 71-74, 82-84; 9 p 44] Then the head should be well rubbed with the mixture prepared this way. [9 pp 43-44]

If someone wants their hair to be black or cover up grey hair, they need to smear it with the juice of an anemone, i.e. windflower (*ἀνεμώνη*) and wash it with warm water on the third day. [9 p 44] If someone wants their hair to be black forever, they need to cut caper leaves, put them in a crock pot, pour donkey's milk, and boil the mixture. The solution should be applied to the head when it thickens and reduces to one-third. [9 p 111] In the following, the treatise's author emphasizes that it is a trustworthy recipe. [9 p 111] On the other hand, there is information that the Byzantines smeared their hair and beards with raven's eggs to dye them black. [11 p 44; 12 pp 60,63]

If someone wants their hair to be blonde, they should take the crushed residue of boiled wine and add the resin of pine cones in the proportion of half of the residue. Dissolve it all in rose oil, spread it on the hair, and wash it on the third day. [9 p 45]

For those with dandruff in their hair, the following treatment is suggested: remove dandruff by grinding the glass to a state where it becomes very soft and looks like dust on the road. Then, beetroot juice should be poured into the powder obtained this way, and the head should be carefully washed with this mixture. [9 p 44]

Baldness is mentioned interestingly in a Byzantine riddle: "A hairy woman gives birth to a bald child, a bald child, again, gives birth to a hairy child." /Solution: a bird and an egg/. [13 p 44]

## In Serbia

Considering the medicine among the Serbs in the Middle Ages, it should be emphasized that at least three separate streams can be distinguished, which confronted, intertwined, and complemented each other. The first stream consisted of the medicine that the Serbs brought from their ancestral homeland, which is rudimentary Slavic medicine. Numerous old names for individual body parts and essential organs indicate a relatively good knowledge of anatomy among the Slavs. In medieval Serbia, the knowledge of medicine developed not only based on old Slavic medicine but also under powerful influences from Byzantium. Of course, it is well known that the Serbian medieval culture to the greatest extent arose from the aegis of the refined and superior Byzantine civilization. And finally, the third stream in the creation of what we can label as Serbian medieval medicine is the influence that came from Italy and other Western countries through the coastal cities on the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea, Kotor and Dubrovnik. The influences from the Apennine Peninsula became stronger as the Middle Ages drew to a close. [14 pp 394-399]

One of the most important compilations of Serbian medieval medicine is the so-called Hodoch Code. [15 pp 3-23] It is a therapeutic collection from the end of the 14th or the beginning of the 15th century, which contains mixed medical material. [16 pp 123-131] Two recipes against hair loss are also preserved in The Hodoch Code. In the first one, the following is recommended: “Beat the cabbage leaves well, then mix it with strong red wine and apply it to the place where the hair fell out”. [15 p 16] In another recipe, it is written: “Mix aloe vera with strong red wine and apply it to the place where the hair fell out.” [15 p 16]

Various preserved recipes that existed in Serbian folk medicine are the best evidence of care for bald people whose hair is falling out. In one of them, it is said: “With pounded walnut (*Myristica Moschata*) in fat, the head is smeared against baldness.” [17 p 186] Comfrey, a plant known as ox tongue (*Symphytum officinale*, Wallwurz), is used against baldness. [17 p 74]

Among the Serbian folk sayings, there are also “Bald as an egg”, which we took as the title of our article, and “A bald one is easy to shave”. [18 p 359]

Several recommendations are offered for those with hair loss on how to eliminate this unpleasant ailment: “Those who have hair loss should wash their heads with water in which sour cherry, cherry, strawberry and violet leaves have been boiled.” [17 pp 67, 170, 232]

The compiler of The Code advises that grated radish (*Raphanus sativus*) with honey should be applied to burns and used against hair loss. [17 p 207]

Serbian folk medicine teaches us and offers several recipes for hair to grow better. In the first one, it is emphasized that hair growth is stimulated by valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*). [1 pp 180-181] In the second, the precious importance of lovage (*Ligusticum Levisticum*) is emphasized, which helps hair growth. It is also added that women spread on their hair olive oil that has been left overnight in lovage before St. George’s Day or wash their hair in water in which lovage has been left overnight with black poplar leaves. [17 p 213] In the third one, it is recommended to rinse with water in

which the horse heal, i.e. elfdock (*Inula helenium*) has been submerged. [17 p 182] In the fourth, it is pointed out that grape juice particularly affects hair growth, the juice the vine releases in the spring when it is pruned is the so-called “Tear of the vine”. Mainly is effective juice obtained on the eve of St. George’s Day. Moreover, raindrops that have remained on the vines also have a beneficial effect, so girls and women also smear their hair with it to make it grow. [17 p 65]

A certain amount of superstition can be found in some of the prescriptions of the pharmacies supported by Serbian folk medicine. So, for example, nettle is also used against hair loss: “One should leave cut children’s hair in the rpska, so it will grow quickly.” [17 p 138] It is a piece of unusual advice that on Saint George’s Day “before the sun rises, girls comb their hair on a willow tree, and then their hair grows like a willow tree.” [17 p 73] There is also a recommendation that a woman with thick hair should cut a child’s hair in hemp on Sunday, before the sun rises, and bury the cut hair under the hemp, and then the child will never go bald. [17 p 134] And, finally, folk experience accumulated over a long time promptly points to the fact that charlock mustard seeds (*Sinapsis arvensis*) with parsley and juniper (*Juniperus communis*) remove not only dandruff but also scabs on the head. [17 p 81]

Summarizing the data on anti-baldness medicines that are listed in the available sources (*Naturalis Historia of Pliny the Elder*, a *Byzantine medical treatise*, *The Hodocho Code*, recipes of Serbian folk medicine), it should first be emphasized that, geographically speaking, they primarily refer to the Mediterranean area (Roman Empire, Byzantium) and the Balkan Peninsula (Serbia). Chronologically speaking, it covers a wide period from antiquity to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When discussing the medicines listed in them that were used against baldness, it should immediately be emphasized that the largest number are made from natural ingredients. Either of plant origin, as many as thirty-two medicines, or of animal origin, four medicines. The remaining two of the mentioned remedies were based on glass and soot ingredients. In the eras that preceded modern pharmacy and modern pharmacopoeia, such a relationship between the components of medicines could be completely natural and expected. However, it is difficult to express any specific, reliable and precise conclusion when it comes to the effectiveness and success of the mentioned cures.

## Rezime

U radu se raspravlja o lekarskim receptima protiv ćelavosti, počev od lekarija koje je u I veku u svom delu *Naturalis historia* predložio Plinije Stariji, preko vizantijskog medicinskog traktata koji se datuje u širok vremenski period od sredine XI do druge polovine XIV veka, i tzv. *Hodoškog zbornika*, srpskog terapijskog zbornika s kraja XIV ili početka XV veka, zaključno sa medikamentima, uz koje u pojedinim slučajevima idu i naslage sujeverja, koje preporučuje srpska narodna medicina. Kada se govori o u njima pobrojanim lekovima koji su korišćeni protiv ćelavosti, treba naglasiti činjenicu da je najveći broj spravljan od prirodnih sastojaka bilo biljnog porekla, čak trideset dva medikamenta, ili životinjskog porekla, četiri medikamenta. Preostala dva od pomenutih lekova zasnivala su se na sastojcima koji su činili staklo i čađ. U epohama koje su prethodile savremenom apotekarstvu i modernoj farmakopeji, za takav odnos među sastojci-

ma medikamenata moglo bi se reći da je sasvim prirodan i očekivan. Kada je reč o delotvornosti i uspešnosti navedenih lekarija, međutim, teško je izreći nekakav određen, pouzdan i precizan zaključak.

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