Historical Note

Guy de Chauliac (1300-1370): The “Father of Surgery”

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Guy de Chauliac, rightly considered the “father of surgery,” was educated and taught in Montpellier, France. Montpellier, a highly cultured town in the Middle Ages, was at that time a melting pot of surgeons from all over the world. The study of medicine in Montpellier began in the 11th century. Its practice is as old as the city, whose name first appears in 985. The oldest “medical” text dates back to 1137 when Aldebert II, archbishop of Mayence, came to study medicine in Montpellier. The edict of William VII, lord of Montpellier, dating from January 1180, proclaims the right to teach medicine freely. “All, whoever they be, from whatever country they come, may, without being troubled, teach medicine.”

Montpellier’s high reputation in the Middle Ages stemmed largely from its privileged position as a seaport that traded with countries around the Mediterranean and beyond. In 1173, according to a chronicler, one met “Christians, Saracens, Arabs, Jews, Lombards, Romans, Egyptians, Greeks, Genovese, Spaniards, and even Englishmen.” Ideas from both shores of the Mediterranean, from Byzantium to Toledo, came together here. The city was also on several pilgrim routes and sometimes was even a refuge for exiles. So much so that there were physicians from a great many countries: Christians, Jews, and Arabs, all taught and contributed their knowledge without hindrance. They taught the medicine of Rhazes, Haly-Abbas, Avicenne, Albucassis, and Averroes as well as that of Maimonide, Hippocrates, and Galien. Thus the two main currents of thought, Graeco-Roman and Judaeo-Arab, both contributed to the origins of medicine in Montpellier.

After a century of free competitive teaching the Articles of Association for a formal School of Medicine were drawn up by Cardinal Conrad, the papal legate, on August 17, 1220. These articles laid down how the teaching would be done, the program, the final examinations, and the school hierarchy (dean, chancellor, and the teaching masters). This makes Montpellier’s the oldest faculty of medicine in the world still in practice. Salerno, which was the oldest, although their articles only date from 1240, was closed in 1811.

Anatomy rates special mention in the history of medicine in Montpellier. Blind belief in the writings of Galien was contested from 1302 onward, when the first dissections in Bologna took place. The earliest known dissections in Montpellier date from 1340 and were made official in 1376 by an Order to the Officers of Justice to hand over to the faculty once a year the corpse of an executed criminal.

Surgery in the Middle Ages began with Roger de Parme in Salerno and subsequently spread to Bologna through Theodoric and Lanfranc, to Paris through Henri de Mondeville, and then to Montpellier, where the latter taught. But the surgeon who dominated the period and who left a considerable body of writing and was considered the authority on the subject for the next four centuries was Guy de Chauliac.

Born into a poor peasant family between 1290 and 1300 in Chauliac in the Department of Lozère, he undertook his medical studies in Montpellier. Around 1325 he became a Master of Medicine and Surgery. Having thus become a scholar he went on to Bologna in Italy to perfect his knowledge under the
Fig. 1. The town of Montpellier in the Middle Ages.

Fig. 2. The old medical school of Montpellier and the Saint Peter Cathedral.