

Venanzio Lupacchini (1730-1775). An Italian small-town doctor and literary man of the Enlightenment Age

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Abstract. Venanzio Lupacchini was an eighteenth-century doctor and literary man from L'Aquila, central Italy. He studied Medicine in Naples, and went back to his hometown to practice medical profession. His historical figure has been handed down by largely celebratory biographies. A survey of coeval textual sources helped us to highlight his historical profile as a physician between the close-minded milieu of the city and his deep knowledge of contemporary therapies.

Key words: enlightenment, iatrochemistry, Venanzio Lupacchini, Antonio Ludovico Antinori

Venanzio Lupacchini was an eighteenth-century doctor and literary man from Aquila (today, L'Aquila, central Italy). He was born in Collimento di Lucoli (L'Aquila) on May 19th 1730 to Valentino and Caterina Masciocchi, a family of wealthy owners of the herd industry (1, 2). Despite his father's plans, wanting him to become a professional shepherd, he decided to pursue higher studies in Aquila at the Jesuit College (2, 3). He showed equal interest in classical and scientific disciplines (Fig. 1). Under the guidance of Father Vito Maria Giovenazzi (1727-1805), who later became his friend, he studied Grammar and Rhetoric, also learning Geometry, Physics, and Philosophy (2, 4). He moved to Naples to study Medicine with Francesco Serao and Ancient Greek with Giacomo Martorelli (3). He brilliantly trained during the highest cultural period of the Neapolitan Kingdom, when the Enlightenment ideas were already deeply rooted in the Capital's cultural centers. Nevertheless, in 1757 he went back to Aquila to practice the medical profession (1, 2). He used to take care of everyone with particular attention to the poor whom he used to receive free of charge at his home. The latter was celebrated "*like the temple of Esculapius, where sick, poor, or derelict people used to convey, in order to benefit from his advice, and his talking enjoyed everybody*" (5).

The cultural context in Aquila was quite different from the one in Naples. Almost all knowledge centers were connected to ecclesiastical erudition. Together with his friend Giacinto Dragonetti (1738-1818), Lupacchini was the only follower of the Enlightenment from Aquila. A clear diversity between them: Dragonetti, after completing his studies, remained in Naples freely expressing his thoughts as a jurist and statesman, whereas the doctor from Lucoli had to deal with a conservative milieu, extremely reluctant towards new ideas (6).

His historical figure derives from nineteenth-century biographies, largely celebratory, with knowledge that reverberates from one text to another (sometimes with inaccuracies), while he has not been sufficiently investigated from a medical perspective. Aim of this study is to highlight some traces of Lupacchini's profile as a physician through the opinions of his patients, friends and their relatives, as reported by published biographies and private letters.

In a letter addressed to his son Giacinto, the Marquise Lucia Dragonetti (1709-1788), was at first respectful of the fame preceding the doctor, but changed her mind when Lupacchini was called to the bedside of her two grandchildren affected by smallpox. In her opinion, the doctor "*helped them to die soon*" by



Figure 1. Portrait of the young Lupacchini from the Codex “Rettorica (drawing by unknown author).

administrating spirit of vitriol and more than once spirit of hartshorn with amber (6), both iatrochemical devices *de facto* recommended in coeval medical texts: the first one to be administered for severe cutaneous rash even in the case of very young patients (7); the second one in particular against spasms (prescribed even in pediatric medicine) (8). Her harsh criticism attributed to Lupacchini the death of the little patients as well as the guilt of being an Enlightenment man. She wrote to her other son Giambattista (1736–1819):

“I am pleased that you have not written to Lupacchini. The less you write to him the more I am pleased, and if you were here I would forbid you from dealing with him. This for certain wrong maxims leaked out of his mouth, denying the Pope’s authority and miracles. This poor young man is ruined or might have been ruined by reading books, because he wants to be a virtuoso in fashion, or in those few months he has been here, he might have been in contact with contaminated people from this cursed pride and plague. (6)

Giambattista Dragonetti did not heed his mother’s admonishment, and continued to be his friend until his death. Ten years later, Lupacchini sent his advice to Giambattista, probably suffering from hemorrhoids:

If by any chance you felt tingling or weight in the veins of your rear, it would be useful to get eight or ten ounces of blood from them without the fear of frequent bleeding coming from that way, as happened to other family members. You (...) have drawn blood from your arm in large quantities. If you are reluctant to do it again, and you should not do it so often, you could take a bath of lukewarm water twice a day, placing your feet just over the heels. (...) Careful with wine. (9)

Despite the small-town mentality, Lupacchini soon became the first doctor of the Province, receiving the favor of distinguished Italian and foreign colleagues, such as Giovanni Battista Morgagni (10, 11) and Anton De Haen (3, 9). In 1767, he wrote to Giambattista Dragonetti about a friar affected by tertiary syphilis, highlighting the adverse effects of mercury treatment in such cases.

“Petitti writes annoyed, and I pity him. It is his life, nothing else matters. I was in this case. When venereal syphilis caries the bones, mercury is an unsafe remedy according to Astruc, and I will demonstrate it. In such cases, Boerhaave does not trust to mercury as well, and he uses only Holy wood decoctions, of which Petitti took a barrel. I observed two fatal cases of a similar disease, one in Lucoli (...) in the most handsome young man ever seen, and the other at Aquila Hospital (...). The breath ways are distressed by the swelling of inflamed parts: mercury fills them to overflow. So, no wonder if I were a little prudent. When we met, I always recommended leaving this country, an actual disaster for the Friars, knowing that elsewhere some expedient would be attempted with more freedom. What would you say if I had let a Friar die of unktion? Long live a thousand years Petitti, but I would not have had the courage to quiver for him so much.” (9)

Lupacchini seems very cautious in order to avoid local blame for a possible death of the friar that could occur with an aggressive therapy such as treatment by mercury. He preferred the use of the holy wood (guaiac, sudorific wood from the “new world”) (12), even if ineffective in this case. Moreover, in referring to a passage from the Astruc’s treatise, he seems to adapt the statement to his convenience. Actually, Jean Astruc (1684–1766) was very favorable to the use of mercury and

critical on guaiac therapy. Quoting in his text the experience of the physician and botanist Herman Boerhaave (1668-1738) of a successful cure to a patient with the wood, as mentioned by Lupacchini, he concluded that the patient suffered of a particular case of “scrofulous syphilis” and the guaiac was useful only for “scrofula” (13). Lupacchini’s knowledge of contemporary treatments against syphilis (14) may be related to his expertise on Botany, as well as in natural sciences (15).

He also continued to deal with Humanities. Between 1767 and 1769, in the Royal College of Aquila he was awarded the Chairs of Philosophy and Geometry, Greek and Literature, and Rhetoric, and was finally chosen as Rector (3). Moreover, since the Neapolitan period he showed great interest in the philological study of Cornelius Celsus’ works. Lupacchini resumed this difficult and important work before Leonardo Targa from Verona and in 1766 he moved to Rome in order to examine the seven Celsian editions kept in the Vatican Library, the Bianconi’s Celsian collection, and all the existing variants (16). In Rome, the Edinburgh Academicians Ramsay and Symonds offered him to print his own edition, but the project remained unfinished when he finally returned to Aquila (2, 3).

Lupacchini became friend with the main writers and notables of the city (3, 4). Among others, he was friend and personal doctor of Antonio Ludovico Antinori, the major historian of Abruzzo region. In 1774, Lupacchini wrote a medical description of him, handing down signs and symptoms that enabled us to retrospectively diagnose polymyalgia rheumatica (PMR). Antinori died four years later, and his medical history revealed at least seven criteria (74-year-old man, arms asthenia, hemifacial spasm, loss of vision, amnesia, aphasia, and apoplexy) related to PMR or giant cell arteritis (17). Three of these criteria (ophthalmia, arms palsy, and cephalalgia) had been reported in the medical description by Lupacchini (10).

We only have information about Lupacchini’s death from biographers who wrote in the nineteenth-century (1, 2, 5, 18). They agree that on August, 1774 he was bitten on the hand and the left ankle by his small and beloved dog, but he did not give any importance to that. In July of the following year, the symptoms of the disease that would have led him to death began to appear relentlessly. A slight numbness of the left side was followed months later by an

extraordinary restlessness and a slight difficulty in swallowing drinks. Reluctant to recognize himself as hydrophobic, he deliberately underwent several tests convincing him he had contracted rabies. Neither rubbing the healed wounds with mercurial ointment (an advised treatment against this disease) (19), nor an attempted and aborted pilgrimage to a sanctuary spared him a tragic end (18). We note how this reference to the attempted pilgrimage is in contrast to the Lupacchini’s alleged lack of trust in the miraculous healing indicated by Lucia Dragonetti in her letter. Perhaps this is an invention of the biographer Bianconi, in order to balance his image as a progressive doctor, far from the Faith, and unsuitable for the small-minded situation in which he was inserted. Venanzio Lupacchini died in terrible and undeserved suffering on October 8th, 1775 (5), mourned by the whole cultural world of that time (Fig. 2). His body underwent autopsy and was buried in the church of San Giovanni in Aquila (20). Unfortunately, this church was demolished at the end of the following century, and his grave no longer exists.

In conclusion, Lupacchini combined a profound erudition on ancient texts with deep knowledge of contemporary works and up-to-date therapies, even

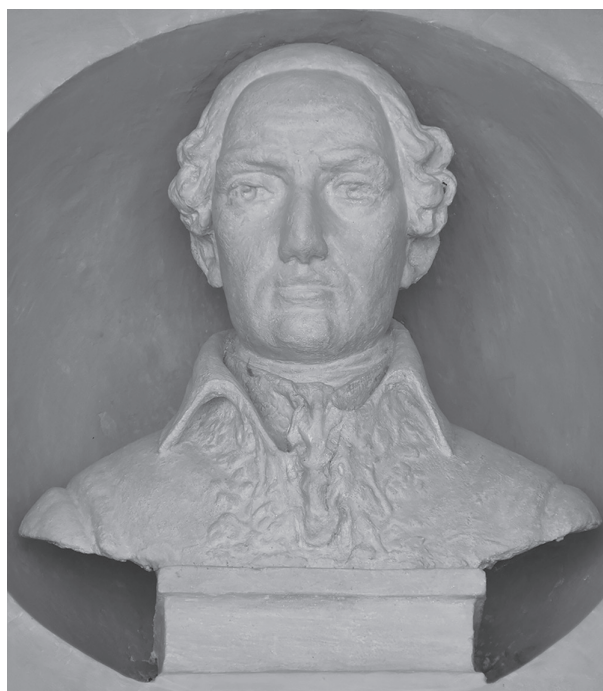


Figure 2. The alleged plaster bust of Venanzio Lupacchini in the Exhibition Palace of L’Aquila, by Tommaso Gentile (1888).

if the close-minded, conservative environment seems to have forced him to be cautious in his work. An accurate investigation of his writings can only highlight aspects of his actions and his character that have necessarily escaped a previous encomiastic historiography. For all these reasons, we believe that further research needs to be undertaken into Venanzio Lupacchini as a doctor, literary man, botanist, and naturalist.

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