

Scholars and medicine in Sicily between the 18th and 19th centuries. Medical knowledge and universal history

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Abstract. Inspired by the Enlightenment-era ideal of reconstructing a history of universal knowledge, the 18th and 19th centuries also saw the emergence of universal literary histories in Italy that were dedicated to the totality of humanistic and scientific knowledge. Two scholars – a Sicilian and a Spaniard who had lived a long time in Italy – contributed with monumental works, of which a large part was reserved for Sicilian medicine and the progress thereof. This interest shows the island’s intellectual ebullience and “openness” at the end of the 18th century, not only towards philosophical ideas from beyond the Alps, but also of European medical conceptions which, in many instances – on the island – were reinterpreted and “adapted” to the local culture and needs.

Key words: scholars, history of medicine, Sicily, 18th and 19th century

Introduction

Amongst the sources regarding the history of medicine in modern Italy, a particularly important position should be given to those works whose titles allude to “literary” histories or perspectives of “all” literature. These titles must not be deceptive in any way as the works themselves do not merely concern Italian (or foreign) literature and the history thereof but are, in fact, of much broader scope. Respecting an exquisitely enlightened encyclopaedic approach and within the concept of “literature”, even in 18th- to 19th-century Italy works were published that embraced the *universal history* of the various fields of knowledge and scientific progress, following a vision inspired by the collective ideal of 18th-century culture. The history of “each” piece of literature in fact covered all “arts and sciences, sacred and profane, ancient and modern, general and particular [...]”; a philosophical outline of the progress it has made from its foundation to the present day... in each of its branches”. This was the project as declared by the scholars – the authors of monumental

works – who were mainly church-going men. Their works are therefore established within the concept of comparative conception which aimed to construct a “philosophical history”, the objective of which was that to describe and explain the artistic and scientific progress of all humankind (1). It was obvious that the history of natural sciences would also cover the history of medicine, including that in Italy, which was reserved a prestigious position within the ambit of European medicine.

In this essay, I would like to consider the works of two humanists in particular, champions of the late Enlightenment culture, who were amongst the greatest forefathers of the distribution of knowledge (including that of the history of medicine). While in exile in Italy (Ferrara and Mantua, before reaching Naples) the Jesuit-humanist of Catalan origin Juan Andrés y Morell, dedicated his work *Dell’origine, progressi e stato attuale di ogni letteratura*, in seven volumes in its first edition of 1782-1799, and then reprinted with various updates – (and similarly updated compendiums) – (2) with integrations written by the author himself) to “all

the disciplines”. It is well known that the Jesuit order prohibited the practice of medicine. But this canon-dictated prohibition did not mean that the treatise on medicine had to be excluded from the all-encompassing study of the organisation of knowledge, and this ideal inspired Andrés’ work which was linked to the Mediterranean culture and the fate of the Kingdom of Naples (where he was Prefect of the Royal Library). In the late Enlightenment age, Andrés was the founder of the so-called “Spanish Universalist School”, the core principle of which was the spreading of the *totality* of knowledge within the framework of a universal *humanism*, which already between the 18th and 19th centuries stood out for its global vision of the world, culture and history.

While writing his literary work, Andrés indicated he was following in the footsteps of another great Sicilian scholar, who will be studied in this essay: Domenico Scinà, physicist and historian (and abbot) from Palermo whose work proposed to shed light on Sicily’s important role in the progress of *all* sciences, including medicine.

Scinà and the history of medicine in Sicily

Having trained at the former Jesuit seminary in Palermo, Domenico Scinà was above all a scientist, the author of many different works of “general and specific” physics as well as a royal scribe upon appointment by Ferdinand of Bourbon. He taught mathematics in the Academy of Studies in Palermo and was part of the Commission of Public Education and Training in Sicily. His *Prospetto della storia letteraria di Sicilia nel secolo decimottavo* (1827) aimed, among other things, to illustrate the means “of public education and culture” (3). This prospectus legitimately covered all schools, no less medicine schools, apropos which – Scinà commented – the Catania school was left *unhonoured*. Founded in 1661, expanded in 1649 and restored in 1696, it was actually the Academy of Medicine in Palermo, which at the time was destined to “not prosper” as lacking both clinic and anatomical theatre. In the Academy of Modica, on the other hand, “one was kept busy by many medical issues”, especially following a syphilis epidemic that slaughtered the city

in the early 18th century. In order to eradicate it, local doctors – inspired by the ideas of the Cartesian philosopher and doctor Tommaso Campailla – catalogued a series of remedies deriving from the chemistry of the period. Campailla did all he could to cure syphilis, not merely limiting himself to the theoretical. In 1698 he introduced the fumigation stove known as the *botte*, within which patients were suffumigated with cinabar and incense which were inhaled and absorbed by the sick. Through this practice, but also thanks to the success of some works on fevers and a treatise on physiology of a iatromechanical and Borellian nature (4), Campailla brought the Modica school to the forefront. This school also promoted the study of medicine, bringing it to other Sicilian cities as Catania was once again emerging following its calamitous earthquake. Within this context, around the middle of the century, Catania-born Agostino Giuffrida and the priest and doctor from Palermo, Giuseppe di Gregorio e Russo, fought to oppose the application of astrology in medicine. Like Campailla and many other scholars of the time, Giuffrida was also a man of letters; he composed a tragedy, held a chair in metaphysics (from which he was then relieved) and opposed Boerhaave’s iatromechanics. As well as opposing the popular superstition that the moon somehow influenced health, Di Gregorio e Russo was also a broad connoisseur of the Newtonian viewpoint and keenly studied mineral waters. Specifically, he described the presumed curative properties of the spring of Acquisanta in Palermo, which seemed to contain cathartic salt, which had similar effects to those of Epsom salt.

At the time, there was no shortage of studies on mineral waters, on ferments (it was the season of van Helmont’s “iatrochemistry”: “everything in medicine was ferment, and everything fermentation”, Scinà observed), on the purity of the air and cold water remedies for all diseases, and codes of pharmacopeia and public health were published (especially during the Messina plague in 1743). Another branch of studies – thanks to the work by the archpriest of Palma, then canon of the cathedral, Francesco E. Cangiamila – looked at promoting Caesarean sections in childbirth. This practice was sanctioned in the four volumes of the *L’embriologia sacra*, so-called as it concerned miscarriage and Caesarean sections, during which mothers and new-borns

died and their souls had to be saved (5). This work included an “enlightenment” to instruct “zealous Pastors” how to act in such critical circumstances. Cangiamila was also the author of *Medicina sacra*, published posthumously in two volumes (1802) (6), through which he resolved to demonstrate that moderate penitence and Christian mortification led to a healthy body and long life. In Monreale and Palma, he promoted the procedure of Caesarean sections in order to impart sacrament to the mother and foetus, so as to baptise it before death and therefore save its soul. This book was a work on obstetrics by a religious man who probably had no official title as doctor but did have up-to-date scientific and technical knowledge in the field.

Surgery – which had progressed in the 16th century thanks to Filippo Ingrassia – developed significantly thanks to Gioacchino Parisi from Calatafimi, who was one of the first in Sicily to practice lithotomy operations (in just a few years he performed over 100). His method was published in 1728 and throughout the first half of the century prompted and maintained the discussion on the formation of gallstones and on the operations and instruments (canal dilator, conductor, lithotome, bistoury chaché, etc.) to be used to dilate and/or cut the bladder and the urethra and remove the stone (7). Huge steps forwards in urological techniques were also made with the perineum incision described in *Iscuria legittima* in 1752 (8), in which Parisi compared his technique for removing stones with that described in 1743 by the famous Parisian surgeon, the academic Pierre Foubert, in the *Nouvelle Méthode de tirer la pierre de la vessie*, with both of them using the *troicart*. In his reconstruction, Scinà mentioned all the illustrious foreign doctors who thought extremely highly of Parisi to demonstrate that his lauding of his fellow countryman and his progress in surgery had not been due to imagination or excessive patriotism, and to show that Sicily “could compete with even the most cultured nations in the field of lithotomy”.

With the institution of new colleges, observatories and scientific offices, the reign of Ferdinand I of Bourbon saw great progress not only in medicine but in all natural sciences and in the medical ambit, theoretical systems started being “considered with disdain” as they did not rely on observations. However, the mechanistic position still dominated, as Scinà

described with an ironic tone: “in our medical congresses between 1750 to 1760 you would hear nothing but triangles and parallelograms, there was no talk of disease and treatments other than with levers and counter-levers and doctors added geometry and statics to the affliction of the sick”. This provoked a reaction by the Medical Academy of Palermo headed by Giuffrida, which quickly extended throughout Sicily from Partanna to Trapani. Within this context, the Modica school once again made a name for itself with very highly regarded doctors, including Michele Gallo and Gaspare Cannata, who was invited to Palermo in 1763 to fight an infection which then spread throughout the island. The number of anatomists increased under Giuseppe Mastiani, and anatomical dissections were undertaken and anatomical models of the eye, ear and skeleton were constructed.

In 1779, the Academy of Studies in Palermo – which was basically a university with teachings in law, theology and medicine and surgery – was reorganised and an anatomical theatre, wax anatomical museum and chemistry study were also created. The practice of anatomy was expanded, theoretical medicine was divided into physiology and pathology, and the veterinary chair was instituted. In academic year 1779/1780 lecturers were appointed for the two medicines – theoretical and practical – capped by teachings in Chemistry and Pharmaceutics, Surgery and Obstetrics, Anatomical Dissections and Practical Surgery and Anatomy (9). Considering, however, that medical students were first obligated to attend courses in Catania (because courses in the capital had no validity as credit towards degrees), very few students enrolled in Palermo and only in December 1871 did the king finally recognised the validity of teachings in Medicine (and Law).

Towards the end of the century, literary journals started being issued that contained articles on medicine, with discussions of electrology applied to the human body, in particular on effluvia and medicinal tubes with electrical properties. Despite the long-lasting influx of metaphysics and a primarily theoretical position in natural sciences, after 1780 things changed and, thanks to the two schools of Catania and Palermo, a more experimental attitude spread throughout the island. From this progress in natural sciences, medicine

was the first to benefit: even if some doctors were still keen on Brownism both for the way of philosophising as well as for its apparent simplicity, there were also plenty of opponents. In Sicily, Jenner's discovery of the smallpox vaccine led to the writing of various doctrines describing infections and comparing smallpox with the plague, syphilis, shingles and other purulent diseases, reconstructing the history of the infection, the presumed origin thereof in Ethiopia and how to eradicate it. Thanks to his works on smallpox, Giuffrida's pupil, Francesco Maria Scuderi from Viagrande in Catania (10-11) was appointed the chair of practical medicine in Catania by King Ferdinand, generating rivalry and polemic, and even accusations of plagiarism. Scuderi became a true celebrity in Catania, where he continued to publish works inspired by the Hippocratic doctrine (12-13). Apropos of his understanding of fevers and contagion, it was said he had been directly influenced by Hippocrates and Empedocles, while in actual fact – Scinà observed – it was impossible that the notions present in that text came from the ancients – especially not Empedocles who was unaware of blood circulation. Concepts such as antagonistic force, innate heat, life force, etc., according to Scuderi came “from insects”, which were the cause of life, health and disease, while Hippocrates believed that all illness came from the air.

The numerous works by authors of the Catania and Modica schools (including Eugenio Mollè-Mallo di Chiaramonte, Salvatore Fallica and Santoro Papa) indicated the *change* that was occurring in medicine, where “modesty and discretion” were replaced by increasing amounts of the most varied doctrines proposing to eradicate fever and epidemics – especially that of Catania in 1792-93, another that lasted three years in Cefalù, and finally one in Siracusa and Girgenti in 1793. Doctors of opposing thoughts provoked infinite polemics and refutations against each other in order for each to be “right”. There were contradictory opinions between Brownians and anti-Brownians (first amongst them Giuseppe Mirone who, as well as teaching Chemistry in Catania, was a propagator of Brown's principles), showing not only that *political* medicine was gaining popularity, but also that the matter of medicine had improved; the first obvious effect of this was improved cleanliness in cities, with new provisions that prohibited burials within the city limits and

proposed the planting of trees to dry up swamp areas. Hygiene laws and regulations were disposed regulating the maceration of hemp, rice and linen and the making of bread; the use of ventilators was introduced in hospitals; roads were cobbled; acid drinks were recommended to fight putrefaction.

Rosario Scuderi, nephew of the Scuderi smallpox scholar, wrote *Introduzione alla storia della medicina* (1794) (14), in which he proposed to bring order to the confusion of “facts”, organising them in “separate groups” based on the dominating principles of each class. Through this formulation, the history of medicine became a succession of cameos, from which three frameworks in particular emerge: under the figures of Hippocrates, Asclepiades and Galen. Of no lesser interest are the frameworks dedicated to van Helmont, Boerhaave, Bordeu, Cullen and the vitalists. Thanks to Rosario Scuderi, the history of medicine became the “philosophy of the history of medicine”, a philosophy in which elements of the doctrine of movement and contraction mixed with the influence of Bichat who considered pathologies the result of irritation or alteration in the vital action. This was therefore followed by therapy (*Programma di un sistema di medicina teorica*, 1804) (15) to restore vital action from disorder to its natural state.

There were not, on the other hand, so many publications regarding the field of surgery as this was limited to the merely practical – perhaps as dissections were still rather unrefined. Scinà observed that “the knife of anatomy was taken from the hands of the young” and there was no “growth and splendour in surgery, because there was no anatomy”. On the other hand, manuals on obstetrics and the “treatment of cancers” abounded thanks, above all, to the work of Gaetano Merulla from Messina (16-17), who dictated his principles of obstetrics right up to his death in 1816. Extremely efficient in practice, these instructions were divulged as a sort of catechism for midwives all over Sicily. In his first volume, Merulla discussed the gifts and qualities of obstetricians, gave instructions and explained the principles of gynaecology; in the second book, he explained the mechanism of childbirth, the causes of miscarriage, the possible difficulties in difficult labours and the first treatment to be prescribed to new-borns.

Andrés and the book of anatomy and medicine

Having distinguished between literature and science – while keeping sight of a supposedly “universal knowledge” – the Jesuit Juan Andrés also dedicated a significant chapter to the discussion of “medicine and anatomy”, the history of which was reconstructed from the past to the present day giving readers an idea of “journey of science”. Andrés confessed to having written the chapter on anatomy with “trembling hand” and declared that in writing it he had appealed to two doctors who, however, had limited themselves to reading his text without adding anything (18). It is interesting how Andrés included news and notions of the history of medicine in almost every one of his volumes dedicated to the various disciplines that make up the whole of “each” literature – from physics to theology – even if the largest part devoted to medicine can be found in volume VII, *Scienze razionali e morali, politiche e mediche* (from hereon in I will quote from the 1840 edition, annotated by Alessio Narbone, Palermo, Stamperia Giovanni Pedone), where the IV chapter is dedicated to anatomy and the history thereof from ancient times to the early 19th century, in Italy and abroad. In this context, particular focus was placed on the history of Sicilian anatomy and surgery that Andrés aimed to complete following contributions by Antonio Mongitore (19), Scinà and other historiographers. Amongst the most important 19th-century Sicilian doctors was Giovanni Gorgone, founder of the clinical school of Palermo and author of memoirs and manuals for courses in descriptive and pathological anatomy; Gorgone also had the idea of building an anatomical theatre, gallery and library in the University.

The aspect that emerges most often from Andrés’ historical reconstruction is the meticulous, even capillary, work in listing the various contributions – both of works and surgical operations, even the most curious. His encyclopaedism not only embraced the names of the great doctors and the various Sicilian and European schools – divided by current and including comparative and even veterinary anatomy – but also explored the details of works by little-known authors, even embalmers. Similarly for medicine, discussed in chapter V of the VII volume, in which schools and doctors (including foreigners, with the French in first

place) are analysed considering the various sectors of medicine, from clinical to physiological, from pathology to “medical police”, from hygiene to diet, from semiology to nosological classification, from therapeutics to practical medicine, without forgetting systems (homeopathic, cathartic, etc.) or pharmaceuticals and the medical matter with its list of medicinal substances and the processes through which they are obtained. No less analytical was the part dedicated to medical encyclopaedias, dictionaries, journals and societies, also divided by nation and school. Within the Sicilian medical environment, Andrés observed that medical matters were usually discussed in essays on physics, literature, arts and science as well as in encyclopaedic journals and in scientific *Effemeridi*; but between the 18th and 19th centuries specific periodicals were established: for example the “Medical Journal” of Palermo followed by many other clinical “papers” and those dealing with medical-practical observations which, however, generally did not last long. This was followed by the list of biographies, lauds, memoirs and stories of Sicilian medicine, which usually fell within – as we have seen – the perspective of literary history, not least that in 1837 by Vincenzo Mortillaro, a former pupil of Scinà (20). Sicilian medicine appeared grandiose from its very beginnings, as testified in the *Dissertazioni dell’Accademia palermitana del Buon gusto*, published in Palermo from 1755. Andrés’ objective was no exception, and it meant building up a vast collection of data and cognitions, aimed not only at completing an erudite work but a truly multidisciplinary one covering the inexhaustible list of observations regarding epidemics, classification of fevers and the broadest range of syndromes (a special place was reserved for syphilis), and the therapeutic procedures and public hygiene practices to remedy them.

Relying primarily upon Scinà’s *Prospetto*, Andrés mentioned a large part of the authors quoted by him, with particular reference to the two Scuderis (uncle and nephew), in the universities of Palermo and Catania. He also mentioned the names of Gaetano Di Leo and Michele Foderà and other illustrious doctors who had trained abroad, particularly in France, to then return to the island bringing with them a precious luggage of knowledge and experience. Foderà, in particular, was a pupil of Magendie in Paris and gained

notable acknowledgement beyond the Alps (21). Having obtained the chair at Palermo in 1841, his liberal ideas soon forced him to abandon it and return to France. Returning to Palermo in 1848, he participated in revolutionary uprisings and died soon afterwards. French frequentation explained the great interest in the doctrine of François Broussais, who had also made a name for himself in Sicily but around whom many doctors had now taken on a rather critical approach, questioning his doctrine on inflammation as it ignored other diseases, in particular those caused by miasmas. Among the wide range of epidemics on the island, one that had roused the most concern was scarlet fever; first recorded in Palermo in 1816 it was believed to have been caused by the “altered atmosphere” and was treated with laxatives, vomitives and antimony-based desolamatives. But above all there was a real problem with *cholera*; in an attempt to eradicate it, two doctors were sent to Paris to then return to Naples and Palermo and publish, respectively, *Riflessioni* and *Istruzione popolare* explaining how to recognise it, avoid the spreading thereof, avoid contagion and treat it (22-24). The conclusive report on this epidemic is said to have been drafted by the Academy of Palermo and presented to the government in 1837 (25). It contained a *summa* with the statistics, medications, and treatments that were mainly anti-inflammatory but also stimulating and purgative.

Andrés commented that, if colleges taught the theory, “*spedali*” offered a chance for practice and so hospitals were the best places to heal. In Palermo, the city hospital had been founded in the 15th century and boasted a number of different clinics. This was followed by the number of specialities and confrontation with the *status* of Neapolitan hospitals. Special importance was given to health regulations, prevention, the management of public hygiene, particularly focussing on the building of cemeteries, bathrooms, mineral water springs and waste produce facilities. No less important observations were held for places reserved for “asphytics”, that is to say violent or apparent deaths: such as the “observation chambers” in which a body was checked to ensure death. This had proved a real problem for medicine of the time. As well as treating the body, mental illnesses were also treated. Andrés followed the fate of the first “mad houses” in the

18th century: unhappy places in which lunatics were placed indiscriminately with the scabious, cankerous and consumptive, but which then became more decent and humane in the 19th century, thanks to philanthropist Pietro Pisani, renowned and lauded both in Italy and abroad (26). Finally, the matter of vaccinations: when Jenner’s discovery was introduced in the English dominions, the two doctors who had practiced vaccinations in nearby Malta were called to Sicily to teach their Sicilian colleagues so that they could propagate it to uneducated people who had reacted badly to the idea of being vaccinated.

If regarding theory it was Broussais’ doctrine that was put to the test (almost always to refute it), regarding practice it was Brownism that was judged, having been imposed for its simplicity. There was, in fact, no shortage of discussions imbued with the eclecticism that pervaded the island. In Palermo this diatribe did not spare the academies: the Academy of Good Taste founded in 1718 (reformed with the name of Academy of Sciences and Literature), the Academy of Anatomy, which was even older (1621) and dedicated to Iatrophysics (then Royal Academy for Medical Sciences, which was given the task to draft a *Topografia medica* of the city to provide an outline of the state of health and take provisions for public health) (27) and finally the Academy dei Chiari in Catania, as old as its counterpart in Palermo. Debates were also held in the medical schools that were established within the island’s three universities, where the first chairs in legal medicine and medical policing were also founded. Less successful, however, was apparently the proposal of a “homoeopathic” Company inspired by Samuel Hahnemann’s doctrine which had started to gain proselytes on the island from the first decades of the 19th century, following first the Austrian troops and then the work by Jules-Benoît Mure, who had arrived in Palermo in 1834 and published an essay on the homoeopathic treatment of cholera (28). The new transalpine approach was spread through the printing of annals and the establishment of dispensaries, in particular a *Dispensatorio omiopatico* in Palermo (29).

Concluding his panoramic treatise on the *status* and history of medicine in Sicily, Andrés formulated a *captatio benevolentiae*: if he had discussed anatomy and medicine, disciplines that were not strictly subjects in

which he was an expert, and if he had forgotten some aspect of the immense matter taken in consideration, the reader was to remember that he, in fact, was “neither barber-surgeon nor anatomist”, but that his intent was to stimulate the reader to study further, looking up the *sources* he quoted. His work aimed towards the “systematic recapitulation of everything”, but with a very attentive focus on the present, and was pervaded by a great sense of progress by humanity. Though the path of history may be tortuous and subject to deviations, he was absolutely certain that in the end progress would triumph. This profession of intent also shows the great open-mindedness and sensitivity of humanist intellectuals in dealing with a “total” vision of knowledge, including medicine and the history thereof, but above all testifies the permeation (and popularity) of transalpine ideas in Sicily, not only on the social and political plain but also on that of science and history.

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