Hahnemann in Sibiu: possible influence of the ideas of Baron d'Holbach

Silvia Waisse Priven (MD PhD)¹; Gheorghe Jurj (MD DSc)²

¹Centro Simão Mathias de Estudos em História da Ciência, Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil;

² Catedra de Filosofie și Științe ale Comunicării, Facultatea de Științe Politice, Filosofie și Științe ale Comunicării, Universitatea de Vest din Timișoara, Timișoara, Romania

ABSTRACT

The present paper discusses the possible influence that the 1777-79 stay in Sibiu, at Baron of Brukenthal's palace, might have had on Samuel Hahnemann's early training. In this context, an analysis of the contents of Baron of Brukenthal's Library as depicted in a catalog to which Hahnemann contributed was performed. Data suggest that Hahnemann was particularly interested in the ideas of Baron d'Holbach. The Appendix describes all the works related to Medicine and Natural Philosophy listed in the catalog.

Keywords: Homeopathy; History; Early influences of Hahnemann; Sibiu/Hermannstadt; Holbach

Introduction

The sojourn between 1777 and 1779 of Samuel Hahnemann at the palace of Baron of Brukenthal in Sibiu (Hermannstadt), Transylvania, present-day Romania, has been the subject of continuous interest to scholars. Many traditional studies on the history of Hahnemann and homeopathy sought to establish a (scientific) biography of Hahnemann as accurate as possible; to this tradition belong works presently considered classic, including T.L. Bradford's, R. Haehl's and R. Tischner's [1,2,3]. However, none of these authors consulted the Archive and Library at Brukenthal Palace – currently Brukenthal Museum – the contents of which survived the turbulent events of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Only very recently, thanks to careful archive work, Romanian scholar, M. Ordeanu, was able to establish some positive facts concerning Hahnemann's stay in Sibiu, which until now had been the focus of intense speculation for historians and homeopaths alike. For this reason, they are worthy to be overviewed here [4].

First, the tasks Hahnemann performed at Brukenthal's palace were restricted to cataloging the Baron's coin collection. (Fig.1) Concerning the

Library catalog, it had already been made by administrative employees Henning and Johann Theodor Hermann and the Baron's nephew, Johann Michael Soterius; Hahnemann contributed only with a revision. (Fig.2)

Further, according to current legislation, Hahnemann was not allowed to practice Medicine; on the other hand, the physician in charge of the Brukenthal family's health as well as medical matters in the area was Michael Neustädter. The latter seems to have been an important influence to Hahnemann, probably intermediating his access to both the local Freemason lodge and the medical school of Erlangen university.

Speaking of Freemasonry, Hahnemann indeed was affiliated in Sibiu, yet records register this one only inaugural participation. This suggests that any later influence of Freemasonry, if any, in Hahnemann's life has to be sought for in a setting other than Sibiu's.

Ordeanu paints a colorful but unexpected picture of the relationship between the Baron and Hahnemann, ranging from complete indifference of the former to the latter to a still unclear episode that could be related to the departure of Hahnemann from Sibiu, which is very discretely

just hinted at by Ordeanu, who preferred to focus on the meager economic retribution as the reason for Hahnemann's leave. Hahnemann received one only payment of 50 Gulden, insufficient to continue his medical studies, as can be inferred from T. Broman's study on the costs of medical education in Germany at the end of the 18th century [5]. Hahnemann's own account must be considered with care, as his tendency to distort data in his biography has already been documented [6].

Finally, as Medicine is not her field of research, Ordeanu merely highlights some medical works listed in the catalog – currently Bibliotecii Muzeului Brukenthal (BMB) Ms 87 [7] - according to their importance to late 18th century medicine, and states the origin of the virtually unknown ones – donations by physicians and local medical students upon graduation.

This, shortly, was the state of scholarship concerning Hahnemann's stay in Sibiu. Yet, two important questions still remained to be addressed. First, what might have been the influence of this journey on Hahnemann's medical training, if any, and eventually on the later development of Homeopathy? Second, R. Ruiz, in his doctoral work, argued that homeopathic notions and procedures on "dynamization" have strong roots in medieval Arabic Alchemy [8]. However, he was not able to establish where Hahnemann could have had access to such sources, as they were not openly available in European libraries.

Medieval Alchemy scholar A. Alfonso - Goldfarb suggested the authors, in a personal communication, that the geographical location of Transylvania, at the intersection of the Western and Oriental worlds, might have favored the presence of Arabic influences and works in local libraries.

These were, shortly, the two questions the authors of the present paper sought to answer by conducting research at Brukenthal Library. The latter was the easiest: there are absolutely neither works in Arabic nor by Arabic authors in the catalog of books extant in Hahnemann's time. On the other hand, the catalog mentions several works related to Alchemy and Hermeticism.

Although there are no sources available allowing to establish with certainty that Hahnemann actually consulted them, a previous study by one of the authors identified themes of both fields in Hahnemann's later thought [9]. On the other hand, as it is well known, many of these works mention

Arabic authors, thus, it is highly possible that Hahnemann learned of them in Sibiu.

As a commentary, we would like to add that, involuntary, more of homeopathic lore could be ascertained, concerning the possible languages Hahnemann learned in Sibiu. Hebrew has been previously discussed [9,10]. Concerning Chaldaic, upon ocular testimony of actual works, we could establish it is, in fact, Aramaic. (Fig.3)

The attribution of the name "Chaldaic" to Aramaic was made by Sebastian Münster, one of the most important Christian Hebraists in the 16th century and became common ever since. Indeed, Münster's *Dictionarium Chaldaicum* (edition of Basileae, 1527) is listed in BMB Ms 87.

The question concerning the probable influence of Hahnemann's time in Sibiu on his later activities is not easy to establish. Ms 87 – an inventory of books existing at the Baron's Library and not a real catalog – consists of 287 folia in quarts, listing approximately 5000 works. Our first task was to list all works relevant to Medicine and Natural Philosophy. The full list is presented in the Appendix. Other interests of the Baron, as an Enlightenment ruler were Law, Politics, History, Theology, Literature, Languages/Philology, Geography/Travels. Commerce, Military studies, Numismatics, Economy, Fine Arts and Agriculture.

It is immediately evident the eclectic nature of this collection, including classical works – Hippocrates, Galen, Dioscorides -, some of the latest medical authors of the time – Boerhaave, Friedrich Hoffmann, Haller -, rare books of value to a collector, monographs by unknown authors, among Renaissance and early Modern science canonical works. From the catalog alone, it is impossible to establish what could have interested Hahnemann.

However, an important hint was supplied by R. Tischner [11]. upon finding a letter addressed by Hahnemann to an unnamed editor, dated April 12th, 1779 asking to publish his German translation of Mirabaud's *Système de la Nature*.

Mirabaud was a pseudonym used by Paul-Henri Thiry, baron d'Holbach (1723-1789), the most radical materialist and atheist of his time. *Système de la Nature* was published in 1770 in London (but actually in Amsterdam), to avoid persecution. The possible contribution of Diderot is a subject of debate among scholars [12,13,14].

Fig. 1 Page of numismatic catalog composed by Hahnemann.

Fig.2 A page of the Catalog, showing Hahnemann's revision. Hahnemann's handwriting can be seen in the lines mentioning Altting, Ampelius, etc.

Fig.3 Cover page of Latin translation of the Zohar, Kabbalistic work, stating it was translated from Hebrew and "Chaldaic".

The date of Hahnemann's letter suggests that this translation was made during his stay in Sibiu. Moreover, the original is a large work, two volumes of approximately 400 pages each one; a hand-made

translation with feather quill pen under candle-light must have consumed a significant amount of time, which was available to Hahnemann in Sibiu.

Finally, the oral tradition at Brukenthal Museum – merely hinted at by Ordeanu, as mentioned above – has that Hahnemann had to leave Sibiu due to an episode involving “a book or a coin”, implying a disappearance. Our study allows to suggest that it is highly probable that the motive was indeed “a book”, but not due to its disappearance – although at some moment impossible to establish, it actually vanished from the Library-, but to the interest of Hahnemann on it to the point of making a translation and pushing for its diffusion. A book that probably offended the Baron of Brukenthal’s religious sensitiveness.

As it must be reminded, the publication of *Système de la Nature* provoked immediate intense reaction, including the condemnation by the Paris Parliament to be publicly burned by the official executioner, and many refutations, including Voltaire’s [12].

It might surprise this interest of young Hahnemann in the most radical materialistic and atheistic work written in the 18th century. Yet, it is explainable. Until that moment, Hahnemann had moved exclusively within highly pious and conservative milieus, from Meissen to Leipzig to Vienna to Sibiu. It is highly improbable that he might have had previous occasions to enter into contact with views radically opposing the established ones. To a young and inquisitive mind, Holbach’s formulation might have seemed challenging and perhaps pointing to a sound path for the development of science.

Holbach was no strident author but a highly learned product of Enlightenment, his Paris salon was one of the centers for discussion of the latest trends in science. Besides contributing with many articles to the *Encyclopédie*, he was the translator of chemical works of Georg E. Stahl into French [15]. His influence helped to draw the map of 18th century – and even 19th century – science.

In *Système de la Nature*, Holbach, indeed, proposes a daring interpretation of nature as a whole, grounded on the notions of matter and motion, soundly articulated on current ideas concerning Newtonian conceptions and natural laws. In this framework, the human being – in its double “physique” and “morale” aspect – was to be considered a strict product of nature; thus, the study of the human being ought to follow the path of the physical sciences and the path of direct, sense-mediated experience [16].

Accordingly, he would conclude that no kind of supernatural agencies needed to be invoked – from gods to *sui generis* forces – to explain any aspect of the workings of nature. It is evident that the mature Hahnemann would not partake of this position, but nothing can be established concerning his first years, especially those devoted to chemical studies, which suggest an actual interest in the sciences of matter.

Consistent with his ontological grounds, Holbach develops a methodology of study built around the notion of immediate experience of nature. Here his notions and even his tone are immediately evocative of Hahnemann’s own:

Men will always be wrong when they abandon experience to follow systems created by imagination. Let man stop searching away from the world he inhabits (...) let him study this nature, learn its laws, contemplate its energy and the immutable way how it works; (...) let him accept to ignore the causes enveloped by impenetrable veils (...) Nature acts through simple, uniform, invariable laws that experience itself leads us to know. It is through our senses that we are linked to universal nature, it is through our senses that we can make it a subject of experience and reveal its secrets; the moment we leave experience, we fall in the void, where our imagination takes us. Men are never wrong when they follow nature, when they abide by its rules, when they call experience to assist them. It is thus that the lack of experience leads to imperfect ideas... delusions. They had ignored nature, ignored its laws... all their systems, their conjectures, reasoning, where experience had been banished, were nothing but a long tissue of mistakes and absurd.

It is only to this rejection of experience that Medicine owes its lack of progress. Scientists had preferred the

... delirium of their imagination and their groundless conjectures to the toil of experience, the only one able to extract from nature its secrets. By lameness or by fear, men have renounced to the evidence supplied by their senses, had only been guided in all their actions and enterprises by imagination, enthusiasm, habit, preconception and especially, by authorities, who knew how to make profit of their ignorance to delude them. Imaginary systems took the place of experience, reflection and reason.

Hahnemann’s conception of scientific methodology, including the possibilities and limits of experience would be developed in the course of time and would include other sources. Nevertheless, it is highly possible that this early interest on Holbach contributed to shape his epistemological views. In any case, it cannot be contested that he assumed for himself Holbach’s challenge:

Let us free ourselves from an imagination without rules, let us take experience as our guide; let us consult nature; let us extract from it true ideas concerning the objects it contains; let us go back to our senses, which we have falsely considered suspicious; let us interrogate reason, which we have shamefully calumniated and degraded; let us contemplate attentively the visible world and let us see if it is not enough for us to make inferences concerning the unknown lands of the intellectual

world; perhaps we will find out that there is no reason to distinguish between them and that there is no reason to separate in two empires what equally belongs to the realm of nature.

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APPENDIX:

WORKS ON MEDICINE AND NATURAL PHILOSOPHY IN BMB MS 87

[] Illegible

AELIANI. De natura animalium LL XVIII graece et lat cur gronov Tomi II vol I. Londini, 1744.

AESCLEPIADEI. Liber de conservatione sanitatis. Neustadeii, 1747.

AGRICOLA, Georgi. De re metallica Libri XII. Basileae, 1657.

AGRIPPA, Henr. Corn., ab Nettesheim. Opera. Tom I-II. Lugd.Batav., 1667.

_____ De incertitudine et vanitate scientia. Francofurt, 1522.

_____ De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum declamatio Stem Joh. Indaginis. Introductio in Astrol [].

_____ De occulta Philosophia Libri III. 1533.

ALBERTI MAGNI. De secreti mulierum adlig Aristotelis problematibus.

ALBERTO. Avium. Königsberg, 1646.

ALEXANDRI, Joh. Synopsis algebraica opus posthumum. Londini, 1693.

ALIDII, Car. Ant. Somnia medica. 1720.

ANDREAE. Questionum physicae controversiae tractatus. Francof. 1591 adlig Scoti tractatus de generatione.

AMMIANUS, Marcellinus. Rerum gestarum Libri XVII cum observationibus Valesii Lindenbroch. Paris, 1681.

BARBENIUS. De hemorroidibus vesicae urinariae dissertatio. 1777.

BARTHOLINI, Casp. Astrologia. 1624.

Basilicon sinensis.

BASSI, Cassiani. De re mistica libri XX graece et latine. Cantabrigiae, 1704.

- BASSIANI. Iatrologia adlig Cornar. Basileae, 1543.
- BASSINELLER, Gebh. Chr. De medico ex volutati aegroti perpera curante. Vittleberg, 1719.
- BAUHINI, Joh. Historia plantarum universalis T III. Ebroduni, 1650.
- BAYERI. Lux mentium universalis [] 1663.
 _____ Avium naturae. 1662.
- BAYLE, Franc. Institutiones physicae. T. III. Francof., 1703.
- BECKERES, Heinr. Microscopium [] 1756.
 _____ [] der Microscopii. Augsburg, 1754.
- BERKERI, Dan. Historia morbi academici. Regiomonti, 1649.
- BERNHARDI, Gregorii. Florilegium illustrium a selectorum questionum. Lipsiae 1619.
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 _____ Anatomia. Amstelodami, 1685.
- BOERHAAVE. Methodus studii medici Tom II [] 1751 cum Indice. Lugd. Bat., 1759.
 _____ Epistola anatomica de glandulis. Amstel., 1733.
 _____ Prelectiones academicae [] Halleri T IV. Gottingae, 1740-1743.
 _____ Historia plantae in horto academic[] Lugd. Bat. [] Londini 1731.
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- BOHNII, Joh. Casus aegri somnambulantis, 1717, adlig Schenchzer.
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Correspondence author: Silvia Waisse Priven; silvia.priven@gmail.com

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