

November 1961

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Catholic Physicians' Guilds

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Recommended Citation

Catholic Physicians' Guilds (1961) "That Inspiring Cup of Dark, Delicious Coffee was Prized as a Medicine in Ancient Times," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 28 : No. 4 , Article 3.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol28/iss4/3>

THAT INSPIRING CUP OF DARK,
DELICIOUS COFFEE WAS PRIZED
AS A MEDICINE IN ANCIENT TIMES . . .



Early in the eleventh century, a Mohammedan physician named Avicenna wrote the praises of a strange new potable. "It fortifies the members," quoth he. "It cleans the skin and dries up the humidities that are under it, and gives an excellent smell to all the body." He called the beverage *bunchum*. We call it coffee.

Avicenna was not the first to write of *bunchum*. Around 900 A.D., another Mohammedan physician, Rhazes by name, proclaimed that it was "hot and dry and very good for the stomach." His was faint praise compared to Avicenna's later comments. Rhazes' words, however, were especially important because they were entered in the first medical encyclopedia.

Rhazes and Avicenna may well have been the first to publicize the beverage. Nevertheless, the man who did most for coffee's early medical fame was a religious leader, not a medical man. In 1454, Sheik Gemaleddin Abou Muhammad Bensaid, mufti of Aden, became acquainted with coffee while visiting in Abyssinia. Upon his return to Aden, Gemaleddin became ill and immediately called for some of the coffee he had tasted.

Whatever the great man's illness was, it disappeared as soon as he took to drinking coffee. The brew was given full credit for his recovery. Gemaleddin was also so impressed by coffee's stimulating effect that he suggested the dervishes "might spend the night in prayers or other religious exercises with more attention and presence of mind" if they had cups of hot coffee to warm their insides. Such a ringing endorsement from this learned man gave coffee-drinking new vogue.

Coffee's alleged medicinal "miracles" were to accompany it for a long time to come. A later Arabian physician asserted that coffee "allays the ebullition of the blood, is good against the small poxe and measles."

COFFEE'S FAME REACHES EUROPE

News of this marvelous bean arrived in Europe during the 1500's. By coincidence, it was a German physician, Leonhard Rauwolf, who returned from a visit to the Levant in 1576 and was the first European to tell of the new beverage. Within ten years, coffee beans were part of the cargo Venetian traders brought to western Europe from their eastern trading jaunts.

As the taste for coffee spread, European doctors perpetuated the medical claims of Mohammedan physicians. Coffee's "virtues" were soon incorporated into Europe's *materia medica*. The German botanist, Johan Vesling, wrote: "The first step it [coffee] made from the cabinets of the curious, as an exotic seed, was into the apothecaries' shops as a drug."

When coffee reached Marseilles, it ran into its first real opposition from the medical profession. Not only did the good doctors dislike coffee's complete acceptance, they went to the opposite extreme and called it poison!

To support their contention, in 1679 they invited a young medical student to recite a thesis as to whether or not coffee was harmful. Since the young man was eager to be admitted to the College of Physicians, it is hardly necessary to state his position. He launched a scathing attack upon the beverage.

The effect of the speech was *not* what the doctors ordered. People had already developed a great fondness for the pleasant new beverage. Moreover, they were unimpressed by the unfounded charges against it. Instead of curtailing coffee's use, the publicity sent coffee consumption soaring. For the first time in history, merchants imported coffee by the shipload.

While the French physicians of Marseilles were condemning coffee, English physicians were prescribing it for a long list of ailments. The consensus of opinion in England seems to have been that coffee was good for the brain, heart and digestion. It was also prescribed for such illnesses as dropsy, consumption and the King's Evil.

Until the 1700's, most English physicians regarded coffee mainly as a medicine. But there was an earlier British doctor who foresaw coffee's future, not in the medical kit, but on the dining table. William Harvey, who discovered the circulation of the blood, left a legacy of enlightenment when he died in 1657. With the statement, "This little bean is the source of happiness and wit!", he bequeathed fifty-six pounds of coffee to the London College of Physicians, directing that his friends should gather once a month to drink coffee in his memory.

Nowadays, we rarely consider coffee's medical past. The medical claims gradually subsided as doctors learned what the man in the street discovered centuries ago. That is, simply, that coffee has a place in the scheme of things because it pleases our palates and lifts our spirits.

Anyone for a cup — black or with cream?

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We include this story of coffee's medical past with the kind permission of *Coffee Newsletter*, August, 1961 issue, published by the Pan-American Coffee Bureau, New York. Sources for the material gathered by Dorothy Hopkins, Publicity Assistant of the Consumer Services Dept., are *All About Coffee*, by William H. Ukers, and *The Saga of Coffee* by Heinrich Eduard Jacob.