

Dermatology: the Stock-In-Trade in Ancient Rome

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Summary

Some fundamental instruments are described in this work. They are utilized in a dermatologic and cosmetic ambit and date back to the Classical and Imperial Age. These instruments were employed up until the advent of Arab Medicine (IX century).

Riassunto

Si tratta di alcuni strumenti ad uso medico chirurgico per piccolo interventi in periodo Classico e di età Imperiale, avanti la medicina araba. In particolare l'utilizzo di certi strumenti è specifico per la dermatologia.

INTRODUCTION

The instruments used in modern dermatology have remote origins. They date back to the VI-IV century B.C. Many of these tools had multi-use functions.

Small sticks, spatulas and brushes formed the kits of beauty treatments which were very popular among upper-class women in ancient Egypt, up until the first Dynasties. These devices were employed to spread oils, cosmetics, poultices, colours, and powders. The custom of human beings to decorate their faces and bodies dates back to the Prehistoric Age. They began to adorn their skin in order to distinguish themselves for their authority, membership to a specific group, to remark a conquest, or for an apotropaic or religious purpose, or to recall their attachments to a human being, dead or alive. In the course of time, the ornaments on the skin were used more and more with an aesthetic purpose, achieving sublime moments in the Roman Period (from the III century B.C. to the III century A.D.) when women put cosmetology into practice. In fact, on one hand we have evidence of these kind of utensils in portrait paintings, and on the other hand we can assume that the same kind of tools were used by physicians, as well. For example, pincers, bistouries and cauteries (of the most various sizes and shapes, with plate or ogival extremities) were essentially used to remove small excrescences from the skin.

Ancient medical and surgical instruments represent a subject that is not often discussed. Among these tools there are those that were used to remove the excrescences on the skin. There is a lot of archaeological evidence that proves that our ancestors were interested in and paid a lot of attention to the cure of the skin. There are iron and bronze instruments (2), or ceramic, clay, wood, leather and glass containers for ointments, creams and powders. There are also stones of a particular composition and shape, such as the

pumice stone used to abrade calluses, or round basalt stone employed to massage the back by means of a roller.

The physician bag can vary greatly, in fact it can be a classical cylindrical shoulder bag, or just a classical briefcase with small drawers and compartments. And it may contain, in addition to the usual and indispensable instruments, also medication, the sheet of stone to prepare impastos, small flacons and unguentaria in glass, clay or ivory (1).

Strigil

This device was very diffused in ancient Rome. It was known and utilized in Greece during the VII Century. The strigil is similar to a small boomerang, with a grooved and quite sharp side on the margins which served to remove the unguents from the skin, by grazing on the surface of the body. In fact, in a paradoxical way, during the era in which soap was not yet known, they used to clean the skin by spreading ointments over their bodies. According to (4) they used to spread oil mixed with a very fine pumice stone powder and they utilized strigils to eliminate this compound from the surface of the cutis. Afterwards they sluiced abundantly. The strigil was used by gladiators and in a sportive ambit. It was always present in the athletes' equipment. In fact, when we find a strigil or an alabastron near skeletal remains, there is a good possibility that we are dealing with an athlete or a gladiator (3).

Spatula

This tool could be simplex or lanceolated and was used in a similar way already by the ancient Greeks. These bronze *spathulae* had an average length of 10-15 cm. and were utilized also to smear oils, perfumes, make-up, face powders and whitening on the skin of the face and breast

(5). On the other hand, they were also utilized during the preparation of little impastos and medications, such as tablets and ointments, the latter were smeared on the wounds by using the lanceolated spatulas, as well.

Auricular syringe or oricularius clyste

This object has been documented since the IV century. It was utilized for the washing of the auditory canal, both for therapeutic use and for hygienic reasons. The auricular syringe that we employ nowadays is essentially unchanged from the viewpoint of its physical principle (1).

Bistoury

This tool dates back to the Stone Age. In fact, some stone sharp blades with stone handles were found in Italian sites which date back to the Paleolithic Age. The device is generally composed by an iron blade and a bronze handle. It was employed for a culinary, defensive and medical use. For example, it was employed to eliminate the little excrescences on the epidermis by cutting the base of the growth that was previously stretched upwards with the bistoury. If the wound bled, they placed thick impastos mixed with vegetal essences. In addition, the bistoury was utilized with a scarifying function (2).

Pincers

This instrument, *Vulsella*, had different utilizations, as in the case of the bistoury. Its shape did not vary from our modern medical pincers. In fact, we have Roman simplex clockwork pincers, and pincers with a double handle, or more complex pincers which present curved extremities, or internal knurled edge, as well as little pincers for the extraction of spines or little extraneous bodies, or very robust pincers utilized for

the extraction of teeth, or of arrows from the cutaneous surface.

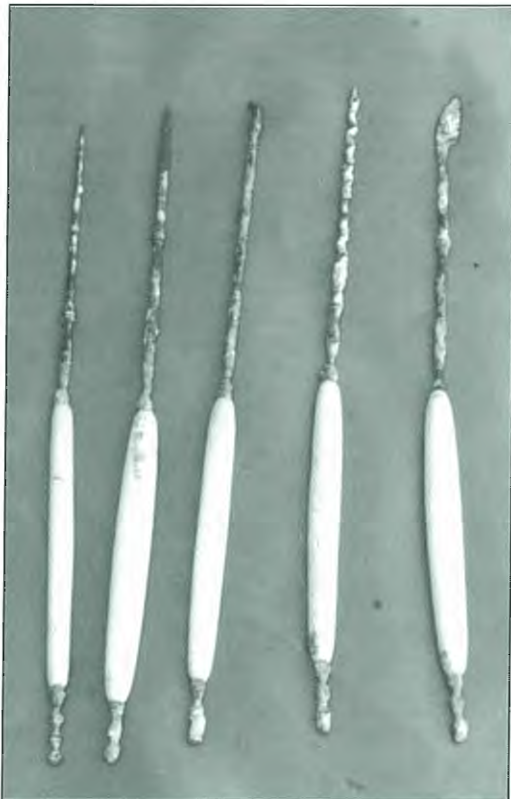


Fig. 1 Instruments with ivory handles (Middle Ages).

Cautery, or ferramentum candens

We can find this instrument in bronze and in various sizes. Some of these cauteries had a simple plate on a single axis on their extremities, while others have a well-defined plate on a curved axis on the extremities of the instrument to allow for more pressure. The flat side of this tool was heated, making it incandescent. This part was placed over the side to be treated. In this way excrescences, papillomas, fibromas were burnt, or better cauterized. Cautery was also utilized to make markings similar to tattoos (1).

Little drill or *terebrum*

This instrument has an average length of 17.00 cm., including the handle which measures about 9.00 cm. It is similar to a probe, but it has a spirali-form shape, and it was used to extract filarias from the lakes and sinuses of the varicose veins (2).



Fig. 2 Bronze tools, we can recognize probes, sounds, and a small cautery.

Cucurbit or cupping glass

This bronze device was employed in the treatment of inflammations of several areas of the cutis. The cupping glass was heated up and moistened with oils before been adhered at pressure on the surface of the moistened skin. It was then promptly removed, producing the suction of the subcutaneous inflammatory liquid (1, 5).

Fistula fittili

It is a cautery which passes through a tube in order to directly reach the area to cauterize, avoiding the risk of burning other sides of the body (2).

Specillum or sound

There are different kinds of this tool depending on its use. The *asperatum* was utilized to take away the external granulations of the palpebrae; the *auricularium* to remove cerumen and extraneous bodies from the ear; the *capitulatum*, *tenue*, *utriunq.ue tenius*, *cum nucleo*, *concauum* were used as an explorative sound in depth. An interesting kind of sound has hooked extremities, useful to quickly extract extraneous bodies from superficial wounds or from the auditory canal. These instruments greatly differ in their dimensions, varying in their diameter (from 1 mm. to some centimeters) and length (from 10 to 30 cm.) (1, 5).

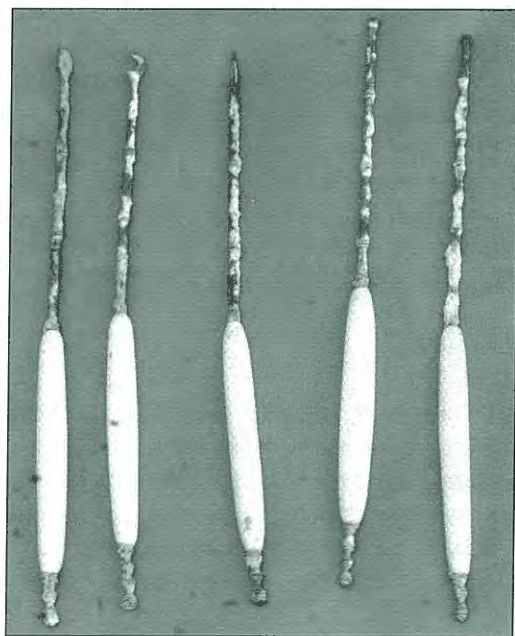


Fig. 3 Instruments utilized in microsurgery and medical dermatology.



Fig. 4 Bronze cucurbits employed in the therapy of cutis inflammation (Museum of History of Medical Art, Rome).

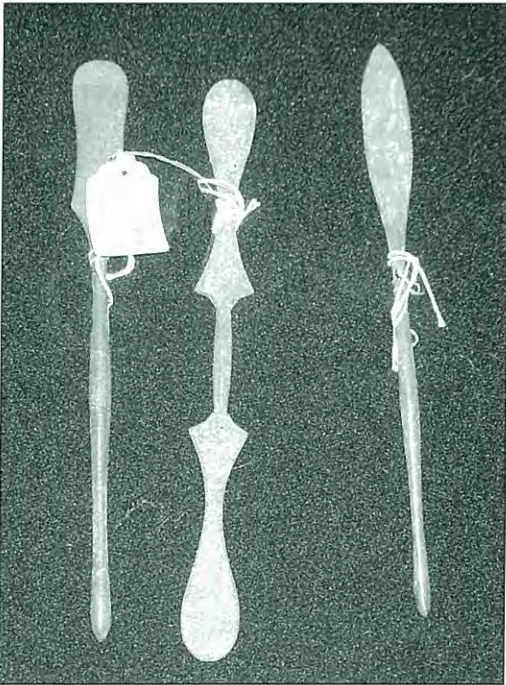


Fig. 5 Three different kinds of spatula employed since the III- IV century B.C. and throughout all the Medieval Age (Museum of History of Medical Art, Rome).

CONCLUSION

This report highlights the use of some important dermatological and cosmetic instruments in ancient period in a few words.

The handles of some of these tools were produced in ivory to emphasize the importance of beauty treatment which aimed toward enhancing the beauty of women.