

Plinii Secundi: Historia Naturalis

Andreas Portilia - Parma 1481

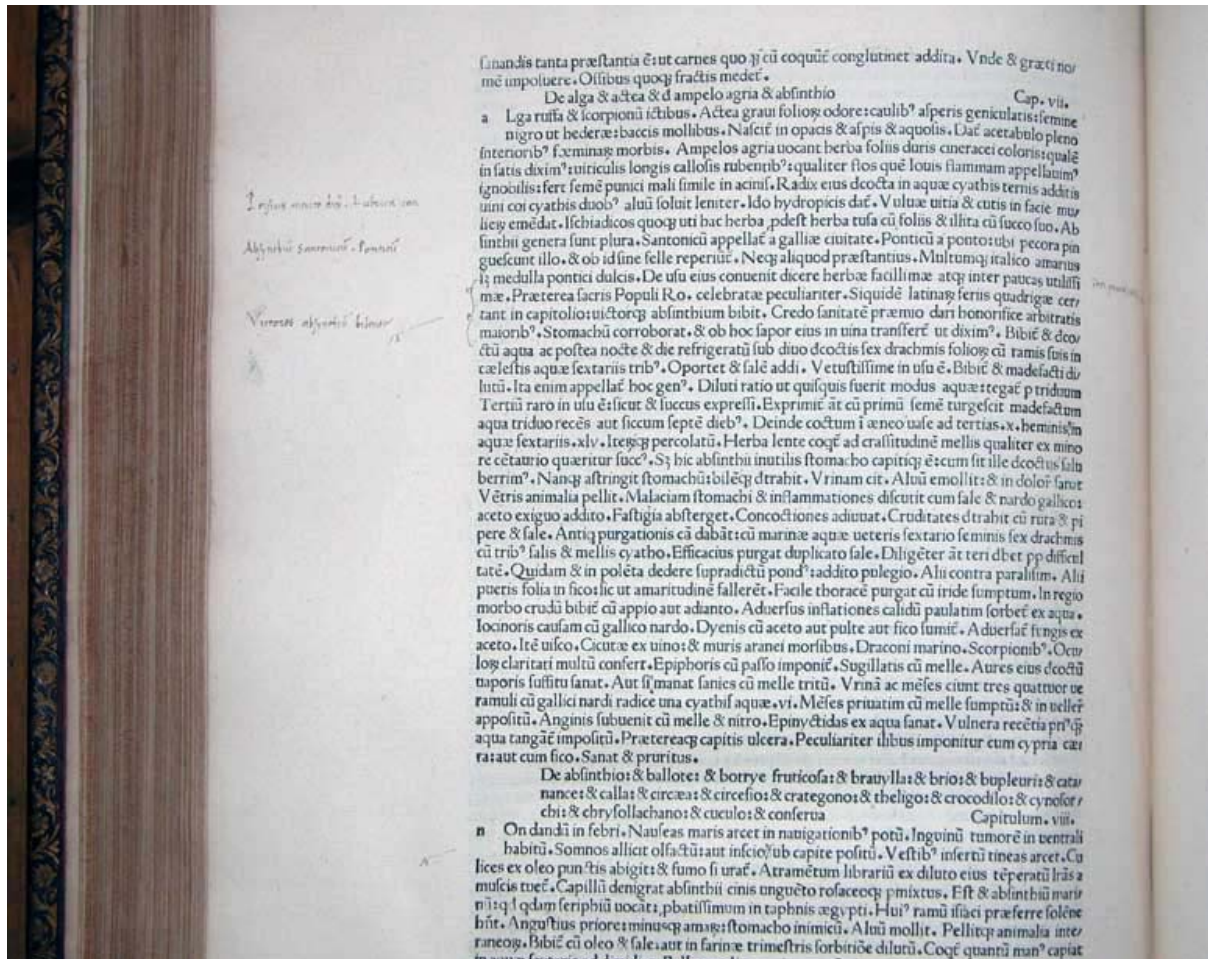
The First Detailed Reference in Print to Absinthe

Although absinthe is briefly mentioned several times in the Bible (perhaps most notably in Revelation of St. John, Chapter 8 Verse 11), the first detailed description of its use and therapeutic properties is in Pliny the Elder's great compendium of the knowledge of the ancient world, "Historia Naturalis".

The *editio princeps* was printed by Johannes de Spira in Venice, in 1469. This copy was printed 12 years later in 1481, by Andreas Portilia, the second printer in Parma, and is closely modelled on the typography of the great Venetian printer Nicolaus Jenson, who produced several editions in the 1470's.



Absinthe is mentioned several times peripherally in the text, but there is an in depth description in Book XXVII, devoted to medicinal herbs. This was first cited by Edmond Couleru in his seminal 1908 "Au Pays de l'Absinthe", but he incorrectly identified the passage as coming from Book XXXVII. Subsequent authors tend to repeat Couleru's mistake.



Liber
 XXVII
 xxviii

45 Absinthii genera plura sunt: Santonicum appellatur e Galliae civitate, Ponticum e Ponto, ubi pecora pinguescunt illo et ob id sine felle reperiuntur, neque aliud praestantius, multoque Italicum amarium, sed medulla Pontici dulcis. de usu eius convenit, herbae facillimae atque inter paucas utilissimae, praeterea sacris populi Romani celebratae peculiariter, siquidem Latinarum feriis quadrigae certant in Capitolio victorque absinthium bibit, credo, sanitatem praemio dari honorifice arbitratis maioribus.

There are several kinds of absinthe: that called Santonic from a city of Gaul, the Pontic from Pontus, where cattle grow fat on it and because of it are found without gall; there is none finer than this: the Italian is far more bitter, while the pith of the Pontic is sweet. About its use all agree, for it is a plant very easy to find and among the most useful; moreover it

is honoured uniquely in the rites of the Roman people in that at the Latin festival when four-horsed chariots race on the Capitol the victor drinks absinthe, because, I believe, our ancestors thought that it was an honourable reward to be given health.

46 stomachum corroborat, et ob hoc sapor eius in vina transfertur, ut diximus. bibitur et decoctum aqua ac postea nocte et die refrigeratum sub diu; decoci VI drachmis foliorum cum ramis suis in caelestis aquae sextariis III oportet, nec non salem addi vetustissimi usus est. bibitur et madefacti dilutum; ita enim appelletur hoc genus. diluti ratio ut, quisquis fuerit modus aquae, tegatur per triduum.

It strengthens the stomach and for this reason its flavour is added to wine, as I have said. It is also drunk boiled in water and once it has been cooled in the open for a day and a night. Six drachmas of the leaves with their roots should be boiled down in three sextarii of rain water, and to add salt is a very old usage. It is also drunk as an infusion in water, for so this type should be called. A principle of the infusion is that, whatever the quantity of water, it should be covered for three days.

47 tritum raro in usu est, sicut et sucus expressi. exprimitur autem, cum primum semen turgescit, madefactum aqua triduo recens aut siccum VII diebus, dein coctum in aëneo vaso ad tertias X heminis in aquae sextariis XLV iterumque percolatum, herba electa, coquitur ad crassitudinem mellis, qualiter ex minore centaury capitiq̄ue est, cum sit ille decoctus saluberrimus.

Pounded absinthe is used rarely, as is juice of the pressed absinthe. It is extracted, though, as soon as the seed begins to swell; the plant is soaked in water for three days if fresh and for seven days if dry, then it is boiled down in a bronze vessel to one third, ten heminae to forty-five sextarii of water; once it has been strained, and the bits taken out, it is boiled down again to the thickness of honey, just as juice is obtained from the lesser Centaury. <This juice damages the stomach and head> although the decoction is very beneficial.

48 namque adstringit stomachum bilemque detrahit, urinam ciet, alvum emollit et in dolore sanat, ventris animalia pellit, malaciam stomachi et inflationes discutit cum sile et nardo Gallico, aceti exiguo addito, fastidia absterget, concoctiones adiuvat, cruditates detrahit cum ruta et pipere et sale. antiqui purgationis causa dabant cum marinae aquae veteris sextario seminis VI drachmas cum III salis, mellis cyatho; efficacius purgat duplicat sale.

For it is astringent to the stomach and removes bile, promotes urine, eases the bowels and cures them when in pain, drives worms from the belly, dissipates nausea of the stomach and bloating, when combined with sil, Gallic nard and a little vinegar. It removes distaste for food, aids digestion, takes away undigested food with rue, pepper and salt. The ancients used to give as a purgative six drachmas of the seed, three of salt and a cyathus of honey in a sextarius of old sea water. The purge

is more effective if the salt is doubled.

- 49 diligenter autem teri debet propter difficultatem. quidam et in polenta dedere supra dictum pondus, addito puleio, alii pueris [folia] in fico sicca, ut amaritudinem fallerent. thoracem purgat cum iride sumptum. in regio morbo crudum bibitur cum apio aut adianto. adversus inflationes calidum paulatim sorbetur ex aqua, iocineris causa cum Gallico nardo, lienis cum aceto aut pulte aut fico sumitur.

However the pounding must be done carefully because of the difficulty involved. Some have also given the above-mentioned weight in peeled barley, with pennyroyal added. Other give the leaves to children in a dried fig to disguise the bitterness. Taken with iris it purges the chest. In jaundice it is drunk raw with celery or adiantum. To counter flatulence it is sipped slowly while hot; for the liver it is taken with Gallic nard, for the spleen with vinegar with meal of figs.

- 50 adversatur fungis ex aceto, item visco, cicutae ex vino et muris aranei morsibus, draconi marino, scorpionibus. oculorum claritati multum confert, epiphoris cum passo inponitur, suggillatis cum melle. aures decocti eius vapor suffitu sanat aut, si manent sanie, cum melle tritum. urinam ac menses cient III IIIIve ramuli cum Gallici nardi radice una, cyathis aquae VI, menses privatim cum melle sumptum et in vellere adpositum.

In vinegar it is an antidote to poisonous mushrooms, and also to mistletoe; in wine to hemlock and to bites of the shrew-mouse, the sea-dragon and scorpions. It is of much aid to clear eyes; to eye fluxions it is applied with raisin-wine, and to bruises with honey. Steam of the decoction cures ears by fumigation, or, if they flow with pus, absinthe ground with honey. Three or four small branches with one root of Gallic nard and six cyathi of water will generate urine and menstruation; for the latter it is taken with honey and applied on wool.

- 51 anginae subvenit cum melle et nitro. epinyctidas ex aqua sant, volnera recentia prius quam aqua tangantur inpositum, praeterea capitis ulcera. peculiariter ilibus inponitur cum Cypria cera aut cum fico. sanat et pruritus. non est dandum in febris.

With honey and soda it aids angina; in water it cures night-rashes and it cures wounds, if it is applied before they are touched by water; moreover it cures ulcerations of the head. In particular it is applied to the flanks with Cyprian wax or with fig. It also cures itching. It is not to be given during a fever.

- 52 nausiam maris arcet in navigationibus potum, inguinum tumorem in ventrali habitum. somnos adlicit olfactum aut insco sub capite positum. vestibus insertum tineas arcet. culices ex oleo perunctis abigit et fumo, si uratur. atramentum librarium ex diluto eius temperatum litteras a musculis tuetur. capillum denigrat absinthii cinis unguento rosaceoque

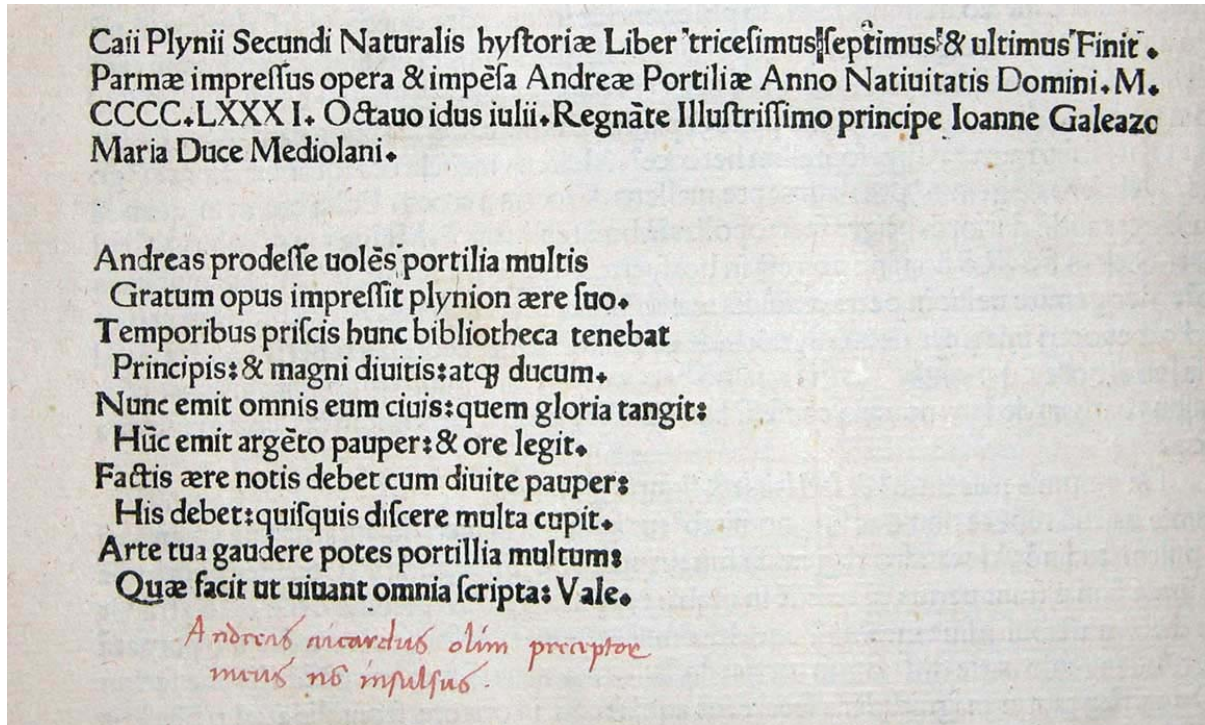
permixtus. —

When drunk during sea voyages it prevents sickness, and when held in a belly-belt it prevents swellings of the groin. When inhaled or placed beneath head, unbeknown to the patient, it induces sleep. Inserted into clothes it wards off moths. It drives away gnats from those who have rubbed themselves over with it in oil, or by smoke, if it is burned. Writing ink mixed with an infusion of absinthe protects writing from mice. The ash of absinthe mixed with perfume and rose-oil dyes hair black.

- xxix** 53 Est et absinthium marinum, quod quidam seriphum vocant, probatissimum in Taposiri Aegypti. huius ramum Isiaci praeferre sollemne habent. angustius priore minusque amarum, stomacho inimicum, alvum mollit pellitque animalia interaneorum. bibitur cum oleo et sale aut in farinae trimestris sorbitione dilutum. coquitur quantum manus capiat in aquae sextario ad dimidias.

There is also a sea absinthe, which some call Seriphum; the most valued grows at Taposiris in Egypt. Devotees of Isis carry a branch of it before them in their rites. Narrower than the former and less bitter, harmful to the stomach, it softens the bowels and drives out intestinal worms. It is drunk with oil and salt, or infused in a broth of three-month wheat. A handful is boiled down to half in a sextarius of water.

Following on from the tradition of bound manuscripts, mid-15th century printed books generally do not have a title page: rather there is a colophon right at the end, where the details of the edition and printing are given.



The end of the thirty-seventh and final book of the Natural History of C. Plinius Secundus. Printed at Parma by the agency and at the expense of Andreas Portilia in the year of our Lord 1481; 8th July; during the reign of the most illustrious Prince John Galeazo Maria Duke of Milan.

Andreas Portilia, wishing to benefit many, has printed his deserving work, Pliny, with his own money. In former times the library of a prince, or a man of great wealth or dukes would have held him (i.e. Pliny); now every citizen, whom glory touches, buys it. The poor man buys it with his own money and reads it aloud. The poor man along with the rich is in debt to these marks made in bronze (i.e. the type)); whoever desires to learn much is in debt to these. Portilia, you can delight much in your art, which makes all writings live. Farewell.

Andreas < ricardus?> my one-time teacher, an influence on me.

Finis.