

On Roman philonium

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Abstract

The Roman philonium (*Philonium Romanum*) is an example of pharmacological poetry. This opiate was conceived by Philo of Tarsus, who was active during the first century of the Common Era. His antidote was written in elegiac couplets. The conservation of these couplets is owed to Galen, who reproduced them in the ninth book of *On the Composition of Medicines according to the Places*. Most of this Galenic treatise has not been translated into Spanish. For the first time, we offer this prescription in our language from a French version of the *fin de siècle*. Additionally, we attempt an exegesis of Philo's poem. (Gac Med Mex. 2016;152:749-53)

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KEY WORDS: Ancient history. Galen. Pharmacy. Therapeutics. Translation.

On doit toujours le citer en latin parce qu'il écrivait en grec.

Flaubert¹

At best, the word "philonium" reminds us today of Torquemada's last *Colloquium* shepherd². However, such character is not the subject of this enquiry. In the second volume of his *Diccionario castellano* (1787), Terreros y Pando tracks this term down to the Latin word *philonium* and succinctly defines it as follows: "Certain opiate"³; this, according to the *Diccionario de autoridades* (1737), is a "beverage composed of opium and other ingredients, to bring to sleep"⁴. Terreros y Pando lists later different types of philoniums, for example, Roman and Persian; and explains that this opiate's name is derived from Philo, an "illustrious Physician"

(sic), about whom Juan de la Cueva, in the third book of *Los cuatro libros de los inventores de las cosas* (1607), versified: "Philo of Tarsus found the admirable / herb Philonium, which restores sleep"^{3,5}. Hurtado de Mendoza and Martínez Caballero, in the second volume of the *Suplemento al diccionario de medicina y cirugía* (1821), indicate that Philo was also a philosopher and, in the same passage, specify that the amount of opium contained in Roman philonium (Fig. 1) is double than that found in theriac, another "pharmaceutical concoction used in ancient times"^{6,7}. We ignore almost everything about Philo; Galen of Pergamon and Aretaeus of Cappadocia mention him⁸. Apparently, he was native to Tarsus of Cilicia and was active on the first century of our era^{9,10}. Escotado¹¹, without adequate support, claims that Philo was head of Caesar

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Date of modified version reception: 25-04-2015

Date of acceptance: 02-08-2015

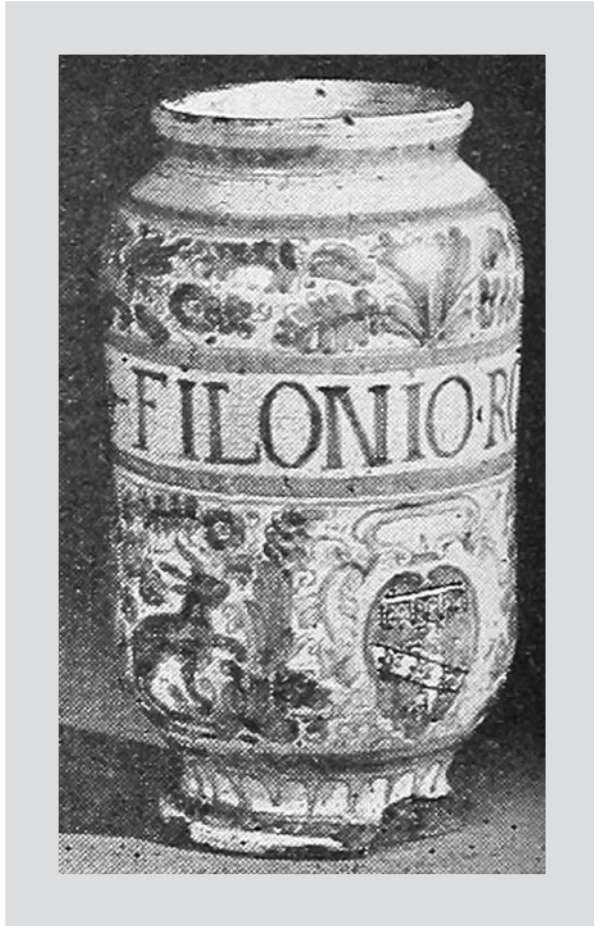


Fig 1. Nine-inch tall Italian albarello, dated in 1679. It carries the inscription "FILONIO ROMANO". The hazy blue color predominates over the grayish background. The decoration includes two animals, out of which one is a dog and the other seems to be a goat. It also carries the initials G.B. with a coat of arms below⁴⁶.

Augustus physicians. Codorniu and De la Rubia¹², in their *Compendio* (1839) have confused him with Herennius; and Chiarlone and Mallaina replicate this imprecision in their *Ensayo* (1847)^{13,14}.

The search for this philonium in our clinical pharmacology books is pointless^{15,16}. Nevertheless, this fact is not unexpected. Already in 1818, the *Codex medicamentarius* excluded it from its pages; Nachet attributes this omission to theriac's popularity⁹. On the other hand, the Roman philonium does appear in the *Farmacopea Mexicana* published by the Pharmaceutical Academy in 1846¹⁷. Philo captured his opiate in elegiac couplets, and it is thanks to Galen that we preserve it¹⁸⁻²². La Wall²³ claims that the Tarsian physician did not poeticize to obtain an esthetic effect, but to facilitate the learning of his antidote. Hautala^{21,22} disbelieves this claim and considers the opposite: here, the verses are a vehicle to preserve and transmit this knowledge only among the learned.

The treatise "On the Composition of Medicines according to the Places" (*Peri synthéseōs pharmákōn tōn katá tōpous*) is comprised by ten books, out of which only the second has been translated into Spanish²⁴⁻²⁷. The Galenic translation of the philonium appears in the fourth chapter of the ninth of these books^{24,25}. Pieter de Honing published in 1896 a French translation of the chapter by Rhazes on kidney and bladder stones. The final part of this book encloses a series of notes; in the first one (entitled *Note A*), Dutchman Koenraad Kuiper (1854-1922) translated Philo's poem into the French language²⁰. This translation had already been noticed by Llaveró-Ruiz²⁸.

Je suis une invention de Philon, médecin de Tarse, importante pour les mortels contre beaucoup de douleurs causées par toute sorte de maladies: soit qu'on ait mal au colon, administrée une fois, soit au foie, soit qu'on souffre de la dysurie ou d'un calcul. Je guéris aussi la rate et l'orthopnée pénible, je guéris la phthisie, les convulsions imminentes et la pleurésie insidieuse. Celui qui crache ou vomit du sang me trouvera l'adversaire de la mort. Je fais cesser toutes les douleurs qui affectent les viscères, la toux, la suffocation, le hoquet et le catarrhe. Je ai été écrit pour les intelligents; pour celui qui a compris je ne serai pas un don insignifiant, mais je ne desire pas penetrer jusqu'aux stupides.

Prenez des cheveux blonds odorants de Crocus, qui ressemble à un dieu, dont le sang brille dans les prés d'Hermes, le poids des sens de l'homme; ce n'est pourtant pas obscur. Prenez aussi une drachme de Nauplius d'Eubée et une drachme du troisième des Troyens, meurtrier du fils de Ménèce, que l'on conserve dans l'estomac des brebis. Prenez vingt drachmes de la substance ardente blanche, vingt drachmes aussi de la fève de la bête sauvage d'Arcadie, et une drachme de ce qui est faussement appelé racine, que produit la terre qui a enfanté le Zeus Piséen. Après avoir écrit pion, ajoutez-y d'abord l'article masculine singulier et pesez-en deux fois cinq drachmes. [Prenez] le liquide des filles des taureaux, allié aux Cécropides, comme aussi ceux de Tricca l'appellent.

Based on this French version, we venture an attempt at a translation into Spanish, the first of its kind:

Yo soy una invención de Filón, médico de Tarso, importante para los mortales contra muchos de los dolores causados por toda suerte de enfermedades: sea que se tenga mal del colon, administrado una vez, sea el hígado, sea que se sufra de la disuria o de un cálculo. Yo curo también el bazo y la ortopnea penosa, yo curo la tisis, las convulsiones imminentes y la pleurésia insidiosa. Aquel que escupe o vomite sangre me

encontrará el adversario de la muerte. Yo hago cesar todos los dolores que afectan las vísceras, la tos, la sofocación, el hipo y el catarro. He sido escrito para los inteligentes; para quien ha comprendido, no será un regalo insignificante, pero no quiero penetrar hasta los estúpidos.

Toma los fragantes cabellos rubios de Croco, que se parece a un dios, cuya sangre brilla en los prados de Hermes, el peso de los sentidos del hombre; esto no es sin embargo oscuro. Toma también una dracma de Nauplio de Eubea y una dracma del tercero de los Troyanos, asesino del hijo de Menetio, que se ha conservado en el estómago de las ovejas. Toma veinte dracmas de la blanca sustancia ardiente, veinte dracmas también del haba de la bestia salvaje de Arcadia, y una dracma de esa que es falsamente llamada raíz, que produce la tierra que vio nacer a Zeus Pisano. Después de haber escrito pion, agrega primero el artículo masculino singular y pésalo en el doble de cinco dracmas. [Toma] el líquido de las hijas de los toros, aliados a los Cecrópidas, como también aquellos de Tricca las llaman.

(I am a great invention of the physician Philo of Tarsus for mortals, against numerous pains provoked by illnesses. If someone is suffering in colon, one single time given (I cure), also the liver, or difficulties in urinating, as well as stones. I cure also the spleen and the orthopnea which strikes men. Besides, I cure phthisis that strikes with the spasms and the dangerous pleuritis. Whoever spits out blood or throws it up will have me as adversary to his death. All the pains that are placed in the bowels I make to cease, cough and suffocation, hiccup and catarrh. I am written to the wise; a man of no little knowledge will have me as a gift. In the unlearned I do not want to enter²¹.

Put the blond fragrant hairs of one equal to the gods, whose blood is shining in the fields of Hermes. Put of Crocos so many drams as there are the senses of a man; as a matter of fact, it is not obscure. Put as well one dram of Naupius of Euboea and one dram of the third of the Trojans who murdered Menoetius' son, which has been preserved in the stomach of sheep. Put twenty drams of the white burning substance, twenty drams also of the fava bean of the wild beast of Arcadia, and one dram of that which is falsely called a root, produced by the soil that saw the birth of Pisan Zeus. After having written pion, add first the singular masculine article and weigh it in the double of five drams. [Put] the liquid of the daughters of oxen, allies to the Cecropides, as those from Tricca also call them²¹.)

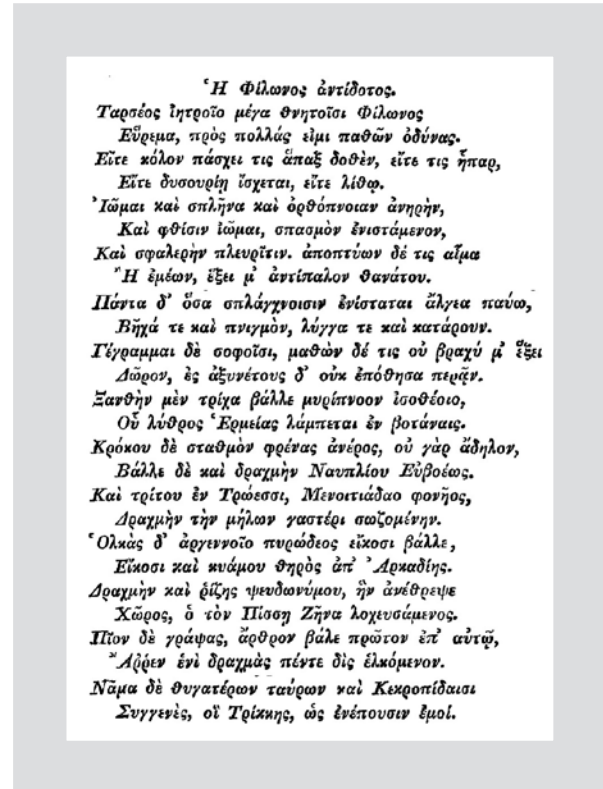


Figure 2. The 13 couplets of Philo's antidote (Roman philonium), just as they appear in Karl Gottlob Kühn (1754-1840) edition²⁴.

On its original language, Philo's poem is composed of thirteen couplets (Fig. 2)²⁴. This structure is not preserved in subsequent translations, not even in the Latin translation by Janus Cornarius (1549) (Fig. 3)²⁵. The first six couplets contain the name of the remedy (*prographē*) and its therapeutic indications (*epangelia*), and correspond to Kuiper's version first paragraph. The seven remaining couplets contain the ingredients and their amounts (*synthesis*), and correspond to the second paragraph of the French translation. The mode of preparation and administration (*skeuasias*) are not part of these couplets^{21,29}.

Happily, Galen assumes the role of exegete as soon as Philo's couplets are concluded. The "blond fragrant hairs" are saffron's stigmata (*Crocus sativus*). *Crocus auricomans* was a young man who was killed by accident by Hermes while they were practicing the discus-throw. The saffron germinated from the blood of this young man^{20,21,30}. This episode exaggerates and debilitates another episode of the *Metamorphoses'* tenth book (Fig. 4)³²; apparently, this same chapter by Galen is the earliest reference to Crocus as the origin of saffron³⁰. "... so many drams as there are the senses (*phrenes*) of a man", according to Galen's explanation

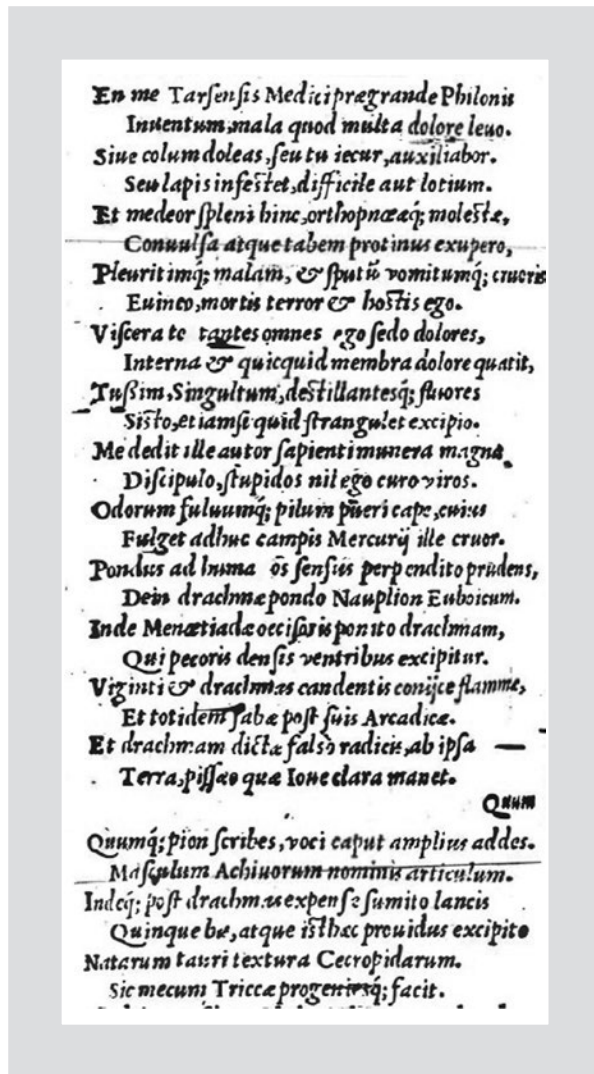


Figure 3. Philo's poem in the Latin translation (1549) by Janus Cornarius (c. 1500-1558)²⁵.

of corresponds to five, since five are the senses^{20,21}, about which Aulus Gellius pointed out: "Sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell, which the Greeks call *αἰσθήσεις* [*aisthíseis*]"³². When Philo states that what reads in previous verses is "as a matter of fact... not obscure", Hautala perceives encouragement or derision²².

Nauplius of Euboea represents pyrethrum (or pellitory)²⁰, the name of which alludes to fire because it causes irritation when in contact with the skin³³. With regard to this allusion, Frazer's Apollodorus wrote: "But afterwards, when he [Nauplius] learned that the Greeks were on their way home to their native countries, he kindled the beacon fire on Mount Caphereus, which is now called Xylophagus; and there the Greeks, standing in shore in the belief that it was a harbor, were cast away"³⁴. The wordplay here is between pyrethrum



Figure 4. Pieter Paul Rubens (1577-1640). *The Death of Hyacinth*, 1636-7. Oil on panel, 14.5 x 13.6 cm. Del Prado Museum, Madrid.

(*πύρεθρον*) and the bonfires (*πυράς*) lit by Nauplius on the Caphereus; the connection is the composing particle *πυρ-*, which means "fire"⁷.

Menoetius' son is Patroclus^{20,35}, who at the end of rhapsody XVI blurted out to Hector: "But destructive fate (*μοῖρα*), and the son of Latona, have slain me, and of men, Euphorbus; whilst thou, the third, dost despoil me slain"³⁶. In the Patroclea, only two spears injured Menoetius' son. Euphorbus (*Εὐφορβος*), son of Panthous, was the first one; Hector, the second³⁶. Panthous' son is then a symbol for spurge (*εὐφόρβιον*), "which has been preserved in the stomach of sheep". The "white burning substance" is simply white pepper²⁰. "The wild beast of Arcadia" is the Erymanthian boar, the one involved in Hercules' fourth labor^{20,37}. Its fava bean is henbane (*Hyoscamus*), since in Greek it is called *ὑοσκύαμος* (*hyoskýamos*), which means "boar fava bean"^{18,33}.

Spikenard (*Nardostachys jatamansi*) is that "which is falsely called a root"^{20,30}, and Rhea gave birth to Chronos son in Crete³⁷. "Pisan" is one of Chronos' son epithets and refers to Pisa of Elis, in the Peloponnese. According to the priest Sabatier de Castres, poets use the adjective "Pisan" for "Olimpic"³⁸. However, Cretan nard is not only another variety of common nard (*Nardostachys jatamansi*) but a different plant: *Valeriana phu* or *Valeriana dioscoridis*³⁹.

In Greek language, when placing the masculine singular article (ο) before the word "pion" (*πίον*), we obtain "opion" (*οπίον*), that is, opium^{19,21}. "The daughters of

oxen” are the economic bees, and their fluid is, naturally, honey. The first revelation is from Virgil, who sang it in his fourth *Georgic*^{20,40}. Athenians are sometimes called Cecropides, since they are Cecrops’ descendants⁴¹; the alliance in the verse suggests that this fluid is specifically Attic honey. “Those from Tricca” are Asclepius followers, since (as stated by Strabo) the oldest and more famous Asclepeion is found in this Thessalian city^{20,21,42}. This allusion to Asclepius has the purpose to assure philonium’s divine authority, a common motive in pharmacological poetry²¹.

Although this is Philo’s poem first translation into Spanish, in an anonymous review of *Les médecins grecs à Rome* (1894), by Maurice Albert, these verses had already been referred; for example, that of “Men-oetius’ son murderer” (*sic*)⁴³. Although only in fragments, Hautala^{21,22} recently translated this poem into English. Hers is not the only version in that language, since we know of the existence of one published by Wintringham (1726)⁴⁴, one by Montegre (1817)¹⁸, one that was anonymously published in the *London Medical Gazette* (1836)¹⁹, one appearing in Withington’s book (1894)⁴⁵, *et cetera*.

In conclusion, the Roman philonium is composed of eight ingredients: five drams of saffron, i.e., 17.95 g, since one dram is approximately equal to 3.5 g¹⁷; one dram of pyrethrum and the same amount of euphorbia; 70 g of white pepper and the same amount of henbane; one dram of Cretan nard; 35 g of opium; and Attica honey, the amount of which is not detailed. Based in these precisions, the Roman philonium described in the *Farmacopea Mexicana* (1846) is clearly inaccurate, since its ingredients and measurements are different¹⁷. This lack of adherence to Philo’s couplets is probably the result of mutations suffered by this opiate over time, for example, the modification by Nicholas Myrepsus¹⁰.

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