

WHO/WHAT IS “TROTULA”?

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Note, 06 June 2015: I am updating this brief summary on the Salernitan healer Trota and the texts called the *Trotula*, with some information on medieval copies of the texts that have now been digitized and made freely available on the Internet.

In only a few seconds, any of the major Web browsers will bring you hundreds of “hits” for a search with the keyword “Trotula.” The vast majority of these websites will tell you that “Trotula” was an eleventh- (or twelfth-) century physician (or midwife) in the southern Italian town of Salerno who did (or did not) write the most important medieval text on women’s medicine and who did (or did not) teach at the medical school of the university of Salerno, perhaps even holding a professorial chair. She had (maybe) a husband and sons with whom she collaborated and even wrote a medical encyclopedia (or not). You will find that there is a street in Salerno named after her and a women’s clinic in Vienna. You will even find a website showing where on the planet Venus the “Corona Trotula” is located. (This is a great site, by the way: all the major geographical features on Venus are named after Earth women, both historical and legendary.)

The subtle (and sometimes outright contradictory) variations in these stories should be the first tip-off that something is seriously amiss with this scholarship. For most of these stories depend on generations of unsubstantiated inference and garbled data, culled together by amateur historians with modern axes to grind. This intrusion of modern politics into the construction of history is not unique to the story of “Trotula”—indeed, it is normative in history. Legends die very slowly and are surprisingly resistant to scholarly challenge. Nevertheless, modern investigations of the medieval evidence have produced a better understanding of the “Trotula” legend and how it came about. For those interested in the new versions of the “Trotula” story, here is a quick summary:

1) There was no historical woman named “Trotula.” Rather, there were numerous women in 12th-century Salerno with the name Trota (or, as it would have been spelled locally, Trocta). One of these was a healer and medical writer. More about her later.

2) “Trotula,” while not the name of a woman, is the documented name of a group of texts on women’s medicine that came out of 12th-century southern Italy, most probably Salerno. “Trotula,” therefore, should be understood as a title which refers to the three texts in this group:

- i. *Book on the Conditions of Women (Liber de sinthomatibus mulierum)*
- ii. *Treatments for Women (De curis mulierum)*
- iii. *Women’s Cosmetics (De ornatu mulierum)*

3) Who wrote the three Trotula texts? For the first and third, the works are anonymous though probably written by male authors. As for the second, it is attributed even in the earliest manuscripts to the healer Trota. Rather than having written it directly, however, Trota may have dictated parts of the work or somehow supervised its production.

4) What do we know about Trota? Virtually nothing. Claims about who her husband or children were are completely unsubstantiated. We can infer that she lived sometime in the early decades of the 12th century, but that’s as close as we can get. We do know, however, that besides her association with the *De curis mulierum*, she also wrote a *Practica* (Book of Practical Medicine) that collects her cures on a whole host of medical problems. Aside from surgery (which she does not mention), she seems to have

been a general practitioner and was not confined strictly to gynecology or obstetrics.

5) Was Trota the only woman healer in Salerno? Not at all. We have over five dozen references in 12th- and early 13th-century sources to “the women of Salerno” (*mulieres Salernitane*) as medical practitioners. None besides Trota is credited with writing a medical book and none, certainly, held a “chair” at the university. (The simplest way to remember why this is wrong is to note that, in the early 12th century, there were no “professors” of either gender since the University of Salerno did not yet exist!)

6) How did the legend of “Trotula” as the “first female professor of medicine” come about? It’s a complicated story arising from a confluence of factors, including medieval misogyny (fictions about a female authority “Trotula” were used to tout negative depictions of women in the 14th and 15th centuries, hence Chaucer’s inclusion of “her” in his “Book of Wicked Wives”), Renaissance philological emendations, early modern nationalistic pride, and 19th- and early 20th-century feminism. Here is an image of “Trotula” from a 14th-century French encyclopedia; the caption reads “How the woman teaches the clerk the secrets of nature.”¹



Rennes, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 593, an. 1303, f. 532r.

¹ For further information on the image, see M. H. Green, *Making Women’s Medicine Masculine* (2008), pp. 223-225. This image is a screen capture of the digital reproduction posted on the Bibliothèque virtuelle des manuscrits médiévaux (BVMM) website, with this licensing agreement: “Sauf mentions contraires, les reproductions numériques sont couvertes, conformément à la décision du Comité scientifique de pilotage de la BVMM, par une licence CC BY NC 3.0, autorisant la reproduction des données sous condition de citation et uniquement pour des opérations non commerciales.”

For further information:

editions:

Piero Cantalupo, "L'inedito opuscolo di pratica terapeutica della medichessa salernitana Trota. *La Practica secundum Trotam*: Testo, traduzione, appendici e glossario," *Bollettino storico di Salerno e Principato Citra* 13, nos. 1-2 (1995), 1-104.

Monica H. Green, ed. and trans., *The 'Trotula': A Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001). This is also available in a paperback edition, without the Latin text, under the title *The 'Trotula': An English Translation of the Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002). It was translated into Italian as: *Trotula. Un compendio medievale di medicina delle donne*, A cura di Monica H. Green. Traduzione italiana di Valentina Brancone, Edizione Nazionale La Scuola Medica Salernitana, 4 (Florence: SISMEL/Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2009).

studies on Trota and the genesis of the legend of "Trotula":

Short encyclopedia entries can be found in Monica H. Green, "Trota of Salerno (and the Trotula)," *Dictionary of Medical Biography*, ed. William F. Bynum and Helen Bynum, 5 vols. (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2006), vol. 5, pp. 1235-1237; and Green, "Trota of Salerno," in *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Margaret Schaus (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 800-801. For fuller details, see Monica H. Green, "In Search of an 'Authentic' Women's Medicine: The Strange Fates of Trota of Salerno and Hildegard of Bingen," *Dynamis: Acta Hispanica ad Medicinae Scientiarumque Historiam Illustrandam* 19 (1999), 25-54; Green, "Reconstructing the Oeuvre of Trota of Salerno," in *La Scuola medica Salernitana: Gli autori e i testi*, ed. Danielle Jacquart and Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, Edizione Nazionale 'La Scuola medica Salernitana', 1 (Florence: SISMEL/Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2007), 183-233; and Green, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine: The Rise of Male Authority in Premodern Gynaecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), esp. chapters 1 and 5-6.

studies on the textual development of the Trotula ensemble and the medieval vernacular

translations: see the bibliography in Green, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine*. Important studies published since 2008 include: Orlanda Lie, "What Every Midwife Needs to Know: The *Trotula*. Translation, Flanders, second half of the fifteenth century," chapter 8 in *Women's Writing in the Low Countries 1200-1875. A Bilingual Anthology*, ed. L. van Gemert, et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), pp. 138-43 (a partial translation of the 3rd redaction of the 3rd Dutch translation); Monica H. Green, "Making Motherhood in Medieval England: The Evidence from Medicine," and Tony Hunt, "Obstacles to Motherhood," in *Motherhood, Religion, and Society in Medieval Europe, 400-1400: Essays Presented to Henrietta Leyser*, ed. C. Leyser and L. Smith (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 173-203 and 205-212 (on the 13th-century Anglo-Norman translation and its Latin source); Juulia Kirsikka Ahvensalmi, "Reading the Manuscript Page: The Use of Supra-textual Devices in the Middle English *Trotula* Manuscripts," PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 2013; Elizabeth Dearnley, "'Women of oure tunge cunne bettir reede and vnderstonde this langage': Women and Vernacular Translation in Later Medieval England," in *Multilingualism in Medieval Britain (c. 1066-1520): Sources and Analysis*, ed. J. Jefferson and A. Putter (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), pp. 259-72.

Digitized Manuscripts of the Trotula – The availability of digitized photographs of medieval manuscripts is radically expanding the kind of work that can be done. I will be adding to this list as new materials become available. I employ here the formula for identifying the different manuscripts and

different versions of the texts that I laid out in my three main studies on the manuscript tradition of the *Trotula*:²

- Monica H. Green, “The Development of the *Trotula*,” *Revue d’Histoire des Textes* 26 (1996), 119-203
- Monica H. Green, “A Handlist of the Latin and Vernacular Manuscripts of the So-Called *Trotula* Texts. Part I: The Latin Manuscripts,” *Scriptorium* 50 (1996), 137-175
- Monica H. Green, “A Handlist of the Latin and Vernacular Manuscripts of the So-Called *Trotula* Texts. Part II: The Vernacular Texts and Latin Re-Writings,” *Scriptorium* 51 (1997), 80-104

Latin Manuscripts

Lat16: Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.14.30 (903), ff. 187r-204v (new foliation, 74r-91v) (s. xiii ex., France): proto-ensemble (incomplete),

http://sites.trin.cam.ac.uk/manuscripts/R_14_30/manuscript.php?fullpage=1

Lat49: Wellcome Library, MS 544, Miscellanea Medica XVIII, pp. 65a-72b, 63a-64b, 75a-84a (s. xiv in., France): intermediate ensemble,

<http://wellcomelibrary.org/player/b19745588#?asi=0&ai=86&z=0.1815%2C0.5167%2C0.2003%2C0.1258&r=0>

Vernacular Manuscripts

French

Fren1a: Cambridge, Trinity College, MS O.1.20 (1044), ff. 21rb-23rb (s. xiii², England): *Les secrez de femmes*, ed. in Hunt 2011 (cited above),

http://sites.trin.cam.ac.uk/manuscripts/O_1_20/manuscript.php?fullpage=1 (see also Fren3 below)

Fren2IIa: Kassel, Murhardsche Bibliothek der Stadt und Landesbibliothek, 4^o MS med. 1, ff. 16v-20v (ca. 1430-75), <http://orka.bibliothek.uni-kassel.de/viewer/image/1297331763218/35/>

Fren 3a: Cambridge, Trinity College, MS O.1.20 (1044), ff. 216r–235v, s. xiii² (England), ed. in Hunt, *Anglo-Norman Medicine*, II (1997), 76–107,

http://sites.trin.cam.ac.uk/manuscripts/O_1_20/manuscript.php?fullpage=1

Irish

Ir1b: Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1436 (E.4.1), pp. 101-107 and 359b-360b (s. xv):

<http://www.isos.dias.ie/english/index.html>. Search under the Library and then the individual shelfmark.

² All three studies are available for free download on my Academia.edu page.