Dermatology in Ancient Rome: Medical ingredients in Ovid's "Remedies for female faces"

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Abstract

Background: In Roman medicine, face packs, plasters, unguents, and peelings were part of the therapy of dermatological diseases, but also served cosmetic purposes. Ancient medical textbooks inform us about the ingredients for these applications. Beyond medical literature, other genres contain information about dermatological applications. The Roman poet Ovid (43 BC–17 AD) wrote a didactic poem recording five recipes for topical applications for female faces (Medicamina faciei feminae). Researchers debate the relation of Ovid's poem to Roman medicine: Does the poem contain therapeutical or cosmetical information, or is it mere belles lettres?

Aims: The objective of the paper is to conduct a medico-historical classification of Ovid's poem by determining whether the ingredients of Ovid's recipes were thought to be effective by the authors of Roman medical textbooks.

Methods: First, translation and identification of the ingredients were carried out. Second, comparison of the ingredients' functions regarding the therapy of dermatological diseases in two important Roman medical textbooks was realized. For this purpose, several commentaries on the text of Ovid were used and a keyword search in Roman medical textbooks was performed.

Results: Ovid's five recipes contain 23 ingredients. All ingredients can be found in medical textbooks. We find that 14 of these ingredients serve cosmetic purposes, 17 serve the therapy of dermatological diseases, and 13 serve both.

Conclusion: Ovid's recipes contain drugs that were considered effective by the authors of Roman medical textbooks. These drugs were recommended both for therapeutic and cosmetic purposes by the same authors. Therefore, Ovid's didactic poem is not mere belles lettres, but contains serious medical and cosmetical information. As far as we know, it is the first Roman text that contains dermatological recipes.

KEYWORDS

aesthetic dermatology, ancient medicine, Celsus, history of medicine, Ovid, Pliny the Elder

1 INTRODUCTION

The Medicamina faciei feminae ("Remedies for female faces," abbreviated med.) by the Roman poet Ovid (43 BC–17 AD, abbreviated Ov.) has received little attention by dermatologists, although the title promises specific recipes that might help in skin disorders. The question raised by research is whether the presentation of these formulae by Ovid is a mere literary game, or ancient contemporaries...
believed that the ingredients have had an effect on facial skin.\textsuperscript{1} This paper attempts to deliver new arguments for classifying Ovid’s poem as a medical text, because it contains medical information. Up to date, the medico-historical classification of this treatise is controversial due to the meaning of the term \textit{medicamen}. Research identified five meanings of \textit{medicamen} in Latin literature: remedy or toxin, artificial means of improving something, cosmetic, and a mixture applied on the face.\textsuperscript{2}

Ovid wrote about his \textit{Medicamina} in his \textit{Art of Love} that, although it is a small piece of poetry, it was written with great care (Ov. ars III 205–6).\textsuperscript{3} That indicates that Ovid knew medical and botanical literature in order to offer a medical and not only poetic treatise. Indeed, research ascertained that Ovid used medical and pharmaceutical texts as sources.\textsuperscript{4} However, previous research lacks an examination of all 23 ingredients of Ovid’s recipes, was interested mostly in the cosmetic purposes rather than the medical, and has only cursorily indicated the therapeutic purposes in ancient medical textbooks.\textsuperscript{1,2,5}

On the one hand, research argues that his text belongs to ancient cosmetic literature, because Ovid’s poem contains four recipes and one that is only fragmentarily preserved, which serve aesthetic improvements of the facial skin. On the other hand, if the ingredients of the recipes were thought to have therapeutic properties for dermatological diseases, Ovid’s \textit{Medicamina} have to be classified as a medical text. We argue that the crucial criteria for a decision in this debate are (a) whether we can find his ingredients in contemporary medical textbooks and (b) whether they are considered to have a therapeutic effect on skin diseases. Our hypothesis is as follows: If the ingredients of the \textit{Medicamina} can be found in contemporary medical textbooks with a therapeutic purpose, then Ovid’s text can be classified as a medical text containing pharmaceutical and dermatological knowledge of ancient times. Thereby, it would be the first Latin text of this kind.

Our objective is the medico-historical classification of Ovid’s ingredients in order to determine whether these were recommended in ancient medical textbooks for topical application in case of dermatological diseases. As a first step, we translate and identify the ingredients of the five recipes of Ovid’s \textit{Medicamina}. As a second step, we search for the ingredients in several medical textbooks of Ovid’s time. In doing so, we are aware that the theoretical knowledge of medical textbooks provides little information about medical practice of Antiquity.

2 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

For the text of the \textit{Medicamina}, we used the recent edition and two translations (German, English).\textsuperscript{3,6,7} There are no original articles or commentaries on Ovid’s ingredients of the \textit{Medicamina} in PubMed (keywords: “medicamina faciei”; “poet” AND “Ovid”; “Ovid” NOT “Medline”; “Ovid” AND “medicam*”), except a short summary of the content and mere mention of ingredients.\textsuperscript{8,9} Concerning the identification of the ingredients, we had to rely on historical and philosophical commentaries, and the standard reference study on ancient plants.\textsuperscript{1,3,5,6,10–12} These commentaries point to other ancient texts whereby the purpose of the drugs can be concluded either as cosmetic or therapeutic.

Ancient medicine can only be understood against the background of ancient concepts and not modern ones. According to an ancient concept, we define cosmetics as body care and personal hygiene.\textsuperscript{13} In Roman antiquity, cosmetics (\textit{kosmētikē technē}) were considered a part of medicine. Galen of Pergamum (129–ca. 210 AD, abbreviated Gal.) distinguished the \textit{kommotikē technē} as the art of artificial beautification and cosmetics that preserve natural beauty (\textit{kata phusin kallos}, Gal. 12.434 K.).\textsuperscript{14} For these purposes, Galen used herbal, mineral, and animal based drugs. This does not differ from a contemporary statement: “Cosmetics that treat or prevent diseases are also drugs.”\textsuperscript{15} If one ingredient is connected with a word relating to preservation of natural beauty (wrinkles, cicatrices, etc) by the authors of ancient medical textbooks, we classified this ingredient as cosmetic.

Therapy also has to be defined. According to the first Roman encyclopedia on medicine by Aulus Cornelius Celsus (ca. 25 BC–50 AD, abbreviated Cels.), therapy was divided into three areas: dietetics, pharmacy, and surgery served the cure of diseases (Cels. preface 9).\textsuperscript{16} Thereby, Celsus placed himself in the tradition of Greek medicine as it was formulated in the \textit{Corpus Hippocraticum} in the 5th century BC. If one ingredient is connected with a word relating to diseases (scabies, vitiligo, etc) by the authors of ancient medical textbooks, we classified this ingredient as therapeutic.

We restricted our text corpus to the frame of Roman medicine, especially to two well-known and influential medical textbooks of Ovid’s time. These textbooks are the \textit{De medicina} (abbreviated med.) of Celsus, and the \textit{Naturalis Historia} (abbreviated NH) of Pliny the Elder (23/24–69 AD, abbreviated Plin.). These texts mark the beginning of medical writing in Latin language. Celsus was probably not a physician, but in book five of his encyclopedia he wrote extensively on topically applicable drugs and skin diseases. Pliny also was not a physician, but the books about remedies in his encyclopedia constitute the biggest Roman drug lore, which is preserved. It was widely used afterward by other authors of medical textbooks.

Not all researchers comment on all ingredients. In addition to the commentaries on Ovid’s \textit{Medicamina}, we searched the works of the two aforementioned authors for all of the 23 ingredients mentioned by Ovid. For this purpose, we used the indices of the text editions to give a complete account.\textsuperscript{17,18} We converted the weights used by Ovid into modern weight units using the standard reference work.\textsuperscript{19}

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Identification of Ovid’s ingredients and the purposes of the recipes

The identifications of the ingredients of Ovid’s four recipes are presented in Tables 1-4. The tables contain information about the Latin
name, scientific name (if possible in case of plants), the translation into English, and the quantity of the ingredient. The fifth recipe only contains *papaver*, which might be identified as a variety of poppy.

Ovid states that the face pleases when the character commends:
A good character may never change, although the complexion can
deteriorate (Ov. med. 43‐50). If there is a deterioration, the general
purpose of the recipes is to create a bright and fair complexion (Ov.
med. 52). The specific purposes of each recipe are as follows:

1. The first recipe serves as a medicamen with the result that
the complexion of the face will shine smoother than a mirror
image (Ov. med. 51‐68).
2. The second recipe is said to make *maculae* of the facial skin disap‐
pear. *Macula* meant spot, blemish, freckle, cicatrices, and exan‐
thera in Latin language (Ov. med. 69‐82).
3. According to Ovid, if the third medicamen is adhered to the facial
skin briefly, then it will remove the whole color (toto nullus in ore
color, Ov. med. 98).
4. The fourth recipe is another variety of the third recipe with the
same purpose to remove the whole color.

3.2 | Therapeutic purposes of Ovid’s ingredients as
recommended in Roman medical textbooks

In the following section, we present the results for every of the 23
of Ovid’s ingredients in alphabetic order. In Table 5, these results
are presented according to the purposes of Ovid’s ingredients in the
works of Celsus and Pliny the Elder. It is indicated whether they were
considered therapeutic, cosmetic, both therapeutic and cosmetic, or
they were not used for external application (Table 5).

Alcyoneum (*alcyoneum*): Pliny distinguishes four types of *alcy‐
oneum*, which are used cosmetically and therapeutically (Plin. NH
32,86). According to Pliny, it removes ulcers, leprous sores, lichens,
and freckles. Celsus transmits a similar recipe like Ovid, where he
recommends *alcyoneum*, soda, cumin, dried fig leaves in equal quan‐
tities, pounded up with vinegar added. Its purpose is the treatment
of a dermatological disease he calls *vitiligo* (Cels. med. 5,28,19). This
ancient *vitiligo* is not identical with today’s vitiligo, which is known
as a dermatological disease that removes the color of the skin to
white.

Antler of a stag (*cornu cervinum*): Celsus used the incinerated
stag-antler as a wound cleanser (Cels. med. 5,5,2). Pliny knows stag‐
antlers, but does not recommend it for external application.

Barley (*hordeum*): Barley flour was recommended by Pliny as a
versatile remedy, but he did not specify its use (Plin. NH 18,78). Pliny
found that boiled barley, however, improves the appearance of ugly
scars and spots, fills cavities caused by ulcers, and softens tumors
if applied as a plaster (Plin. NH 33,110). Celsus reports on a disease
he calls *vitiligo melas* and cures it with a liniment made of *alcyoneum*,
frankincense, barley, and faba beans (Cels. med. 5,28,19d).

| Ingredient (Latin) | Translation (English) | Quantity |
|-------------------|-----------------------|----------|
| *lupinus*         | Lupine (*Lupinus spp.*) | 1964.7 g |
| *faba*            | Faba bean (*Vicia faba*) | 1964.7 g |
| *cerussa*         | White lead            | 8.3 g    |
| *spuma nitri rubentis* | Scum of red natron | 8.3 g    |
| *iris nitri rubentis* | Orrisroot from *Iris germanica* or *Iris pallida* | 8.3 g    |
| *alcyoneum*       | Alcyonium              | 12.5 g   |
| *mel*             | Honey                 | Unspecified |

| Ingredient (Latin) | Translation (English) | Quantity |
|-------------------|-----------------------|----------|
| *tus*             | Incense               | 109.15 g |
| *nitrum*          | Natron                | 109.15 g |
| *gummi*           | Gum                   | 245.59 g |
| *murra*           | Myrrh                 | 1 cube   |
| *mel*             | Honey                 | Unspecified |

| Ingredient (Latin) | Translation (English) | Quantity |
|-------------------|-----------------------|----------|
| *marathrus*       | Fennel                | 5.69 g   |
| *murra*           | Myrrh                 | 10.23 g  |
| *rosa*            | Rose petals           | 1 handful |
| *tus*             | Frankincense          | Weight equal to 1 handful of rose petals |
| *sal Ammoniacum*  | Salt from the Libyan desert | Weight equal to 1 handful of rose petals |
| *cremor hordei*   | Muclilage of barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) | Unspecified |

In Table 1, we present ancient recipes for whitening the facial skin
by Ovid, which were also recommended in Roman medical textbooks.

| Ingredient (Latin) | Translation (English) | Quantity |
|-------------------|-----------------------|----------|
| *hordeum*         | Barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) | 654.9 g |
| *ervum*           | Vetch (*Vicia ervilia*) | 654.9 g |
| *ovum*            | Egg                   | 10 pieces |
| *cornu cervinum*  | Antler of a stag      | 55 g     |
| *bulbus narcissi* | Bulb of narcissus     | 12 pieces |
| *gummi*           | Gum (from *Acacia arabica*) | 27.3 g |
| *semen Tusco*     | Spelt/dinkel wheat (*Triticum spelta*) | 27.3 g |
| *mel*             | Honey                 | 491.4 g  |
Bulb of narcissus (*bulbus narcissi*): The juice of the narcissus root is said to remove the pain of erodents and discutients and was therefore mixed with them in Celsus’s classification and enumeration of superficial applicable drugs.18 Pliny writes that narcissus bulbs are said to be good for removing blemishes and softening hardnesses of the skin (Plin. NH 21,75). He also states that narcissi with honey are applied topically when burns, wounds, and dislocations occur (Plin. NH 21,129). Celsus classifies the root of narcissi as an erodent that exfoliates the skin (Cels. med. 5,6,2).

Egg (*ovum*): Sores from a burn are treated with the white of an egg, roasted barley, and pig’s lard (Plin. NH 29,40). Scabies and irritations of the skin are removed by a mixture of oil, cedar resin, and eggs (Plin. NH 29,46). These formulae are made of farmyard hen’s eggs (Plin. NH 29,51). Celsus uses both white egg and the yolk for superficial treatment of several dermatological diseases (Cels. med. 5,19).

Faba bean (*faba*): Celsus recommends rubbing the body with alcyoneum, frankincense, barley, and faba beans against a disease he calls *vitiligo melas* (Cels. med. 5,28,19). Faba beans as a flour (lat. *loementum*) boiled down in vinegar cure tumors and heal contusions as well as burns (Plin. NH 22,141).

Fennel (*marathrus*): Celsus writes that fennel seeds are used externally as a repressant and refrigerant (Cels. med. 2,33,2). Fennel seeds are also mentioned by Pliny, but not in the context of cosmetics or dermatological diseases (Plin. NH 20,254).

Frankincense (*tus*): Pliny extensively reports on production, transport, prizes, and use of frankincense (Plin. NH 12,51–65). However, he mentions no cosmetic or therapeutic purpose of it. Celsus classifies frankincense as a cleanser, erodent, and caustic (Cels. 5,5).

Gum arabic (*gummi*): Gum arabic was widely recommended in medicinal recipes for plasters by Celsus (Cels. med. 5,19). Gum arabic was said to eradicate wrinkles (Plin. NH 24,106). In Celsus, it agglutinates wounds and softens any rough part on the skin (Cels. med. 5,2; 5,9,13).

Honey (*mel*): Honey is very often a part of formulae with both cosmetic and therapeutic purposes. Pliny recommends honey for diseases he calls *lichen*, *lepra*, *psora*, and *vitiligo* (Plin. NH 28,183-188; 30,28-30; 32,83-87). Honey was considered an emollient and used for removing pimples (Plin. NH 22,107-109; 30,2). Celsus recommends honey in several formulae against pimples, freckles, and moles (Cels. med. 6,5).
Mucilage of barley (cremor hordei): Pliny states that Hippocrates devoted a whole book to the use of mucilage of barley (lat. tisana or ptisane, Plin. NH 18,75), but he limits its use to internal application as a drink or oyster. Celsus classifies it as an emollient when applied externally (Cels. med. 5,22,9).

Myrrh (murra): Pliny wants to cure sores on the head or face with a tisane of myrrh and water (Plin. NH 24,154). Celsus classifies it as an erodent and states that it removes cicatrices (Cels. 5,6; 5,18,7,9).

Natron (nitrum): According to Celsus, Natron cleanses the skin and is used in heating poultices (Cels. med. 2,33,5; 5,16). Natron or salt, mixed with oil furthers sweating (Cels. 3,6,16; Plin. NH 31,115). Natron is useful for scabies on animals (Plin. NH 31,109). Sores are healed very quickly, and ulcers, pimples, and blisters are cleared away (Plin. NH 31,115f.). Applied in sunshine with vinegar and an equal amount of Cimolian earth (a clay), it cures a disease called vitiligo alba (Plin. NH 31,118).

Orrisroot/Iris (iris): Orrisroot from Iris germanica or Iris pallida was used for cosmetic purposes in ointments (Plin. NH 13,14; 21,19; 21,40). Iris cures skin complaints and freckles (Plin. NH 21,143; 23,63; 26,143; 28,188). In addition, Celsus classifies it as a cleanser (Cels. med. 5,16).

Poppy (papaver): Pliny recommends a not specified part of poppy against exanthema (Plin. NH 20,206). Celsus classifies poppy tears (lacrima papaveris) as an emollient (Cels. med. 5,15). Cicatrices after ulceration are treated with a salve containing poppy tears (Cels. med. 6,25a), and also if the eyes are xerotic (oculi scabri) at their angles (Cels. med. 7,31b).

Rose petals (rosa): Pliny states that burned rose petals are an ingredient for eyebrow makeup (Plin. NH 21,123). In Celsus, rose is classified as a repressant and refrigerant if applied externally (Cels. med. 2,33,3).

Salt (sal Ammoniacum): Celsus uses this special salt in preparations against abscesses and as an emollient (Cels. med. 5,18,7b; 5,18,14b). Pliny only states that this salt is used in medicine (Plin. NH 31,79).

Scum of red natron (spuma nitri rubentis): Pliny extensively discusses the scum of red natron, which is also called aphronitrum (Plin. NH 31,106-122). This aphronitrum removes wrinkles and freckles (Plin. NH 31,111-113). He does not comment on effects on the skin behind the freckles. Against exanthema in the face, a mix of natron, honey, and cow milk helps (Plin. NH 31,120). Celsus used spuma nitri as an erodent and in a poultice for abscesses and inflamed joints (Cels. med. 5,6,2; 5,18,7; 35).

Spelt/dinkel wheat (semen Tusco): Spelt is neither applied externally in Pliny nor in Celsus.

Vetch (ervum): Pliny transmits a recipe for a face cream, which consists of seeds from wild beet, and the flour from vetch, barley, wheat, and lupine (Plin. NH 20,20). Pliny also recommends flour from vetch against exanthema (Plin. NH 22,151). Barley and vetch were thought to clear the complexion and remove pimples (Plin. NH 22,122; 161; 24,63; 28,183; 30,75). Celsus described applications of vetch as a meal poultice (Cels. med. 2,33,5). Clean fistulas should be treated with honey wine, honey, and a decoction of vetch (Cels. med. 5,28,12m). Vetch is classified as a skin cleaner (Cels. 5,16).

White lead (cerussa): Pliny transmits six recipes for therapeutics like adhesive plasters for treatment of ulcers (Plin. NH 34,176). Pliny also knows that women used white lead as a makeup primer, but it is fatal if ingested. Cerussa is an ingredient in six plaster recipes of Celsus (Cels. med. 5,19). These plasters serve therapeutic purposes in skin diseases.

4 | DISCUSSION

4.1 | Identification of Ovid’s ingredients and the purposes of the recipes

The fundamental principle to achieve the recipes’ purposes of a smooth and fair facial skin can be interpreted as a proactive approach: First, there has to be a good manner considered as inner beauty, and second, outer beauty follows. In Ovid’s concept of preserving beauty, the third step is to apply his recipes.

Most of their ingredients are easy to identify. Some ingredients, however, are discussed controversially in research. These ingredients are alcyoneum, gum arabic, natrum, sal Ammoniacum, spuma nitri rubentis, and white lead. We will focus on these ingredients in our discussion of the identification of Ovid’s ingredients. We will proceed in alphabetical order according to the ingredient’s names.

Alcyoneum (alcyoneum): According to a myth Ovid transmits himself, alcyoneum was thought to be the birds nest of the kingfisher (Alcedo atthis), which hatch on floating nests on the water of the Mediterranean Sea (Ov. met. 11,410-748). Pliny distinguishes four types of alcyoneum (Plin. NH 32,86). He gives three explanations of its origin: it might be the nests of alcyonium (kingfisher), clotted sea-foam, or slime of the sea. Research points to the explanation of the pharmacist Dioscorides, who says that alcyonem is a sponge-like substance, which one finds at the shore of the Mediterranean (a zoophyte, Diosc. 5,118).6-20 Dioscorides further writes that this alcyoneum is used by women to cover moles and lichens and to cure leprosy, dull-white leprosy, black spots, and other spots in the face and on the whole body. Research suggests that alcyoneum either is a coral, maybe a leather coral,18,21 or it is an uncertain maritime sponge that floats on the water.6 Other suggestions, that alcyoneum is actually a kingfisher’s nest,6 are absurd, because the kingfisher breeds in holes in river embankments and not in the sea.

Gum arabic (gummi): Research states that gummi, which one also finds in the texts as cummi, is a gum mucilage and its source is not specified. In antiquity, gum arabic was imported from Egypt, where it was obtained by cutting the bark of Acacia arabica (Plin. NH 13,63; 65-66).

Lupine (lupinus): Pliny recommends lupines against pruritus, freckles, cicatrices, and pustules (Plin. NH 18,133-136; 22,154). Celsus uses lupines externally in a heating poultice (Cels. med. 2,33,5).
Natron (nitrum): Natron consists of sodium carbonate decahydrate and sodium bicarbonate. It has detergent properties, increases the pH in combination with water, and was used already in Old Egypt for mummification. Some editors read and interpret the text of line 85 in the Medicamina in another way: They identify the natrum not as the relatively harmless "soda", but as "silver nitrate" or as saltpeter. Evidence says that common warts can be reduced by daily application of silver nitrate, which leads to a chemical cauterisation. The fact that silver nitrate leaves the skin black due to oxidation contradicts the broad superficial application of silver nitrate as a means of removing color from the face.

Salt (sal Ammoniacum): Although it is called sal Ammoniacum by Ovid it is not "sal ammoniac" (chloride of ammonium), but the salt found in the desert of Libya near the Siwa Oasis where the ancient sanctuary of Zeus Ammon is situated. Pliny calls it Hammoniaco (Plin. NH 31,79).

Scum of red natron (spuma nitri rubentis): Researchers are discussing controversially what substance spuma nitri rubentis is: soda, soda with salt, or potassium nitrate. It should probably be identified with carbonates, nitrates of soda and potash colored by copper, and iron oxides. The iron oxides explain the red color (rubens).

White lead (cerussa): Lead carbonate occurs naturally as hydrocerussite. In antiquity, it was artificially produced by adding lead in a jar above twigs with vinegar sprinkled on them, as the ancient author Vitruv explained the manufacturing of colors (Vitr. de arch. 7,12,1). White lead can cause lead poisoning and is therefore no longer used for therapeutic purposes since the 1950s.

4.2 Therapeutic purposes of Ovid's ingredients as recommended in Roman medical textbooks

We will discuss the evidence concerning the purpose of Ovid's ingredients as they are mentioned for topical use on the skin in the medical textbooks of Celsus and Pliny the Elder. Our objective was to determine whether Ovid's ingredients were considered cosmetic or therapeutic in case of dermatological diseases or both. Research states that the ingredients, according to ancient sources, had been considered effective skin cleansers. This limits their purpose to cosmetics. Indeed, some of Ovid's ingredients were intended for cosmetic purposes in case of cicatrices, wrinkles, freckles, blemishes, pimples, blisters, and spots.

However, as our results show, most of the ingredients were also considered effective remedies in case of dermatological diseases in two important Roman medical textbooks. Ovid's ingredients were intended for therapeutic purposes in case of ulcers, leprous sores, lichen, lepra, psora, vitiligo alba and vitiligo melas and vitiligo alba, scabies, xerotic eye angles, xanthema, burns, wounds, abscesses, and fistulae. Research warns that we are not able to match the ancient drug names to the International Statistical Classification of Diseases (ICD-10). This is due to the observance of retrospective diagnosis. Because ancient symptomatic concepts of diseases do not match with recent aetiological concepts, the diseases are not identical although the terminology is identical.

Research classifies the ingredients according to their function in the recipes as cleaners, emollients, and emulsifiers. Cleansers are narcissus bulbs, soda, iris, alcynome, frankincense, natron, fennel, and salt. Emollients are barley, vetch, stag-antler, Tuscan seed, lupine, faba beans, honey, myrrh, and rose. Emulsifiers are eggs, gum arabic, white lead, mucilage of barley, and honey. We may add that the ingredients were intended as wound cleansers, erodents, caustics, refrigerants, and emollients, in heating poultices, adhesive plasters, and ointments.

5 Conclusion

The Medicamina faciei femineae by the Roman poet Ovid is the first Latin text that transmits drugs for aesthetic dermatology. Ovid's five recipes contain 23 ingredients that have been identified. 14 ingredients are derived from plants, four from animals, and four from minerals. As an auxiliary finding, we observed that the difference between pharmaceuticals and substances used as cosmetics was not as strong in Antiquity as it is today.

The research question was, whether contemporaneous medical textbooks classified the ingredients either as a cosmetic or as a therapeutic drug. To answer this question, the intended use of the ingredients was looked up in several medical textbooks of Ovid's time. All ingredients can be found in these medical textbooks. In the medical textbooks of Celsus and Pliny, 13 ingredients serve both cosmetic and therapeutic purposes, 14 ingredients serve cosmetic purposes, and 17 ingredients serve the therapy of dermatological diseases. It can be inferred that also Ovid believed in their therapeutic and cosmetic efficacy. Otherwise, he would not have written down the recipes, their functions, and specific quantities of the ingredients.

Seventeen ingredients were intended for therapeutic purposes in case of ulcers, leprous sores, lichen, lepra, psora, vitiligo alba, and vitiligo melas and vitiligo alba, scabies, xerotic eye angles, xanthema, burns, wounds, abscesses, and fistulae in Roman medicine. Fourteen of Ovid's ingredients were intended for cosmetic purposes in case of cicatrices, wrinkles, freckles, blemishes, pimples, blisters, and spots. The ingredients were used as wound cleansers, erodents, caustics, refrigerants, emollients, in heating poultices, adhesive plasters, savels, and peelings.

Previous research concentrated on the Greek speaking sources of Ovid, discussed not all of the ingredients, and focused nearly completely on the cosmetic purposes of his recipes. In contrast to that, we focused on medical textbooks written in Latin, discussed all ingredients and also the therapeutic purposes of them. Therefore, we can conclude that Ovid's didactic poem Medicamina faciei femineae is not mere belles lettres, but contains serious medical and cosmetic information for ancient women. Further active ingredient research may check whether the ingredients have a measurable effect on the skin in terms of aesthetic improvement or therapy of dermatological diseases. The text is also a statement for a proactive approach to preserving facial beauty and may encourage today's women and men to limit sun exposure and thus limit its photoaging effects.
CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We have no conflict of interest.

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