

A prescription from 1795 and the corresponding formulas in the Nordic Pharmacopoeias of that time

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The Pharmacy Museum in the Norwegian Folk Museum in Oslo has a large collection of 20 000 registered items. Among the objects is a typical prescription from 1795 that is now exhibited. It consists of three medications. We have transcribed the prescription and found the corresponding formulations in the Danish-Norwegian Pharmacopoeia from 1772 and the Swedish Pharmacopoeia from 1784. These medicines are also described in many European Pharmacopoeias and German Dispensaries. The first medication is “Emplastrum Vesicatorium”, a strong local irritant with Spanish fly. The second is “Unguentum Basilicum”, a very old remedy containing resin with many indications. The third is a cataplasm, a solution with lead acetate, wine and water. Medical treatment in the late 1700 was still influenced by the theories of the ancient Greeks: Disease was believed to be caused by an imbalance of the body fluids. To draw out excess of fluid, a remedy causing blisters, like Spanish fly could be used. A medical textbook from 1842 states that if you want to keep the artificial wound open, unguentum basilicum containing resin, could be used. When you want the wound to heal, a cataplasm with an astringent like a soluble lead salt, was applied.

The physicians name was a mystery, as we could not find a suitable candidate in the Norwegian or Danish lists. But there was a Swedish physician at that time with the name of Svante Björklund that seemed a very likely candidate. At the end of the prescription is written “Siergeant Sórbye” with a different handwriting. It can be the name of the patient, or it can be the name of a courier, the person who was to pick up and bring the medicine.

We have not been able to find written records of a siergeant Sórbye, so we will probably never know if these medications were beneficial to the patient.