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„HERE BEGYNNYTH AND TELLYTH HOWE  
A MAN SCHAL MAKE HYS SALVES, OYNEMENTES  
AND VNGUENTYS”. TOWARDS STANDARD MEDICAL  
TERMINOLOGY IN MIDDLE ENGLISH

The examination of the vocabulary in medieval medical works reveals that Late Middle English laid solid foundations for the formation of English scientific vocabularies, at least in the sphere of medicine (cf. McConchie 1997; Norri 2004; Sylwanowicz 2009).

The aim of the present paper is to show how the medieval translators varied in their choice of medical terminology. In particular, what motivated them to use Latin/French forms instead of Anglo-Saxon items, and what methods or techniques were used to help the readers understand the terminology.

The analysis is based on the examination of the use of three terms (*salve*, *ointment*, *unguent*) in Middle English medical compilations.

#### SOURCES

The material for this study comes from the Middle English Medical Texts (MEMT) corpus which includes 83 texts (more than half a million words) that were published between 1375 and 1500. These texts were written by university-trained physicians and non-learned practitioners of medicine. The MEMT corpus divides the texts into three main categories: (1) Surgical texts, (2) Specialized texts and (3) Remedies and *materia medica* (Taavitsainen/Pahta/Mäkinen 2005).

The group of specialized texts are translations of ancient Latin medicine, Arabic writers, and medieval university masters. Surgical books, occupying the intermediate position between academic writings and remedy books, also belong to the academic tradition. Often illustrated, they usually include material on anatomy, remedies as well as some detailed instructions for surgical practices. Remedy books, with their long vernacular tradition, represent the older and the larger category with conventions of writing established in Old English, which makes them less dependent on foreign models. Most Middle English medical compilations from before the latter half of the 14th century fall into this category.

The MEMT corpus includes only fragments of texts, therefore the analysis is also based on the full versions of the following texts:

1. *A Middle English Translation of the Pharmaceutical Writings of Gilbertus Anglicus* (Getz 1991),
2. Guy de Chauliac's treatises on anatomy, wounds, ulcers and surgery (Wallner 1964, 1971, 1976).

#### MIDDLE ENGLISH TERMS DENOTING SALVES

The present study centres on Middle English terms denoting 'mixtures for external application, usually for healing wounds or soothing pain', i.e. members of the semantic field SALVES. A difficulty one encounters in such studies is the question of delimitation, i.e. which items could be included as potential members of the field? A line had to be drawn somewhere to eliminate items that could not be treated as representative of the relevant semantic field.

According to the Middle English Dictionary (MED) and the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the following terms were used with reference to 'externally applied mixtures/substances':

- (a) *annointment, balm, balsam, cream, emplastre, grese, liniment, ointment, ointure, paste, plastre, salve, smerl, uncture, unguent;*
- (b) *extractif, abstersif, constrictive, defensive, maturatif, mitigatif, mollificatif, mundificatif, preservative, putrefactive, regeneratif, repercussif, resolutif, sedative, strictorie.*

The first group (a) includes general terms denoting 'salve, salve-like mixtures', which only differed in the bases that were used in preparing them. Thus, *anointment, grease, liniment, ointment, ointure, salve, smerl, uncture* and *unguent* were made using greasy bases (e.g. lard, wool fat, goose grease), *cream, balm* and *balsam* were developed as less-greasy salves due to the incorporation of water. The last three, *emplaster, plaster* and *paste*, were semi-solid mixtures. *Paste* was a mixture of dough or bread and some liquid whereas *emplastre* and *plaster*, which should not be confused with modern wound dressings, consisted of medicinal ingredients mixed with resin or beeswax.

The second group (b) lists items that additionally specify the property of a given salve, e.g. *defensive* 'a salve/ointment that prevents spread of diseases or preserves corpses', *mundificatif* 'a cleansing ointment', *repercussif* 'a mixture (e.g. salve/ointment) that reduces swelling or inflammation'. These terms were often used with reference to other medicines than salves therefore they are excluded from the present study.

Thus, there were at least 15 general terms denoting 'salve, ointment'. Of these, only 2 reflect the Old English heritage (*salve* and *smerl*), whereas the

remaining 13 items are importations from Romance languages (*annointment, balm, balsam, cream, emplastre, grese, liniment, ointment, ointure, paste, plastre, uncture, unguent*). Additionally, a close reading of medical texts reveals that 3 items (*balsam, cream, smerl*) were not used in medical context, at least as general terms denoting ‘salve, ointments’. *Balsam* and *cream*, if found in medical compilations, are treated as ingredients of medical substances, whereas *smerl* seems to be restricted to non-medical texts.

The nouns *ointment, unguent* are the most frequently used terms in medical compilations (approx. 428 occurrences, see Fig. 1 below), the second most frequent items are *emplaster* and *plaster* (approx. 151 occurrences). The OE *salve* has only 22 occurrences and the remaining terms are marginally represented (altogether 33 occurrences).

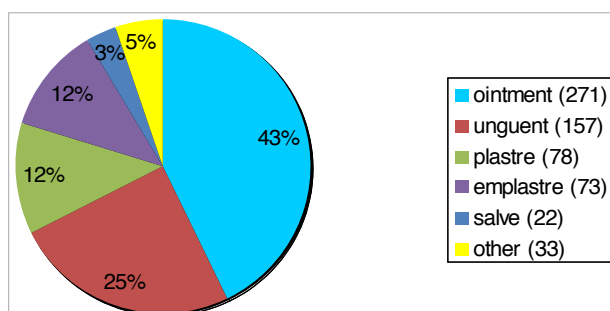


Figure 1. *Salve*-nouns in medical compilations.

If we take into account the occurrences of these five terms (*salve, ointment, unguent, plaster* and *emplaster*) in non-medical texts (*Middle English Dictionary* text corpus and *The Helsinki Corpus of English Texts*), it turns out that *ointment, unguent* and *salve* are the key members of the Middle English semantic field SALVES (cf. Table 1), therefore this study is limited to the discussion of these three items.

Table 1. *Emplaster, ointment, plaster, salve* and *unguent* in medical and non-medical works.

	medical texts	non-medical texts
emplaster	73	2
ointment	271	302
plaster	78	15
salve	22	204
unguent	157	17

## OINTMENT, UNGUENT OR SALVE?

Of the three nouns, *salve* is the only Germanic item (derived from West Germanic \**salbo-* ‘oily substance’, cf. Old Saxon *salba*, Middle Dutch *salve*, Dutch *zalf*, Old High German *salba*, and German *salbe* ‘ointment’) (OED, *salve*). According to the OED and MED, this item was originally used as a term denoting solely a medicinal mixture that was applied to wounds or sores. This sense was found in both, medical and non-medical context, cf.:

- (1)  
 a700 *Malagma*, **salb**. [Epinal Gloss, 635]  
 c1000 Genim þas yclan wyrte, wyrce to **salfe** [Sax. Leechd. I. 110]  
 c1150 Wiþ innopes stirunga, nim þeos wyrte, wyrce to **sealue**, le3e to þan innopes sare. [Hrl.HApuL.(Hrl 6258B)]  
 c1225 Ure lauertes sonde, þe bochte **salue**.. to healen hire tittes. [Ancrene Riwe (Cleo. C.vi) 272]

Although the term was employed with reference to bodily ailments, in time, i.e. as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> c., the noun developed a figurative meaning: ‘a spiritual or religious remedy’, e.g.:

- (2)  
 c1200 Iesumm, Mann kinne **sawle salfe**...Him hafe we nun fundenn. [Ormulum (Burchfield transcript) I. 13489]  
 c1225 (1200) **Prude Salue** is ed modnesse. [Ancrene Riwe (Cleo. C.vi) 202]

Later texts, i.e. 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century works, reveal that the noun is more commonly used with the second sense, also as an epithet of the Virgin Mary, e.g.: “Haile, swete **salue** for al maner sare.” (a 1500 *Heil be þou marie þe* (Dub 516). This implies that at some point the noun might have been confused with or treated as a derived form from a 14<sup>th</sup> c. verb *salue* (from Lat. *salutare* ‘to greet’ and *salus* ‘greeting, good health’), cf. *Salue Regina*, especially that both terms are recorded with the same spelling and, as the MED reveals, the Latin term is also found as a noun, e.g.: “Alle þat wylle.. þis **salue** singe ore say Wit deuocyon..þaire aduokete I þe make.” (a1400 *Monk Sees Virg.* (Eg 2810). Thus, *salve* ‘ointment’ might not have been treated as a scholarly term by Middle English medical compilers who, as the texts reveal, more often turned to foreign terms, i.e. *ointment* and *unguent* (cf. also Table 1 that lists the number of occurrences of the three nouns in medical and non-medical texts). This assumption can be supported by the fact that those 22 records of the noun *salve* are found only in texts that are classified by MEMT editors as Remedies, i.e. texts representing longer tradition of medical writing, dating back to Old English, but characterized as less scholarly, often incorporating non-learned medicine.

The next term, *ointment*, the most frequent Middle English SALVE noun, is a derivative of Anglo-Norman *oinement* plus its variant forms and Old French *uigne-*

*ment, ungement*, where the Old French form, according to the OED, shows “remodeling after classical Latin *unguere, ungerere* ‘unguent, ointment’”. As the examples from the OED show the Old French form occurs in texts dating back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. the time when a Latin derivative *unguent* entered the English lexicon, cf.:

- (3)  
 c1480 (1400) A bouste of precius **vngument** apone his hed.. owt scho 3et.  
     [St. MaryMagdalen 111 in W. M. Metcalfe *Legends Saints Sc. Dial.* (1896) I. 259]  
 c1485 (1456) Thou suld be anoyntit with **unguementis** ryalis, as balmis or otheris.  
     [G. HAY *Bk. Knychthede* (1914) 132]

This implies that at some point these two terms (*ointment* and *unguent*) might have been treated as one and some scribes might not have even realized that they were using forms of two different terms.

The noun *ointment* entered the English lexicon in the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century with a meaning ‘a cosmetic and medicinal preparation in the form of a soft, smooth paste, usually to be applied to the skin; a salve, unguent’, cf.:

- (4)  
 c1300 Nimeth here þis guode oygne<sup>ment</sup>.  
     [St. Nicholas (Laud) 171 in C. Horstmann *Early S.-Eng. Legendary* (1887) 245]  
 c1330 (1300) An **vne<sup>ment</sup>** purchast he þat made his visage out of ble.  
     [Guy of Warwick (Auch.) 6105]

The OED and MED records reveal that the noun was also used in a figurative sense ‘sacramental or ceremonial anointing; holy oil’.

The last term to be discussed is *unguent*, a derivative of Lat. *unguentum* ‘ointment’, which, as stated earlier is found in later texts, i.e. 15<sup>th</sup> century texts, both in medical and non-medical context.

- (5)  
 a1425 **Vnguent** is a þing vnctuous, not fluide, i. rynnyn<sup>g</sup>, bot abiding, And þai be made afte  
 common doctrine. [Chauliac (1) (NY 12) 167a/a]  
 c1440 Or madifie hit so in oil lauryne, Let drie hem, sowe hem, vp by oon assent They wol,  
 and haue odour like her **vnguent**. [Pallad. On Husb. IV. 147]

In most cases, as further discussion will reveal, this term is usually found in compound forms, being names for specific ointments (e.g. *vnguentum album*, *grene vnguent*, etc.).

On the account of the above it can be concluded that *ointment* and *unguent* started to replace OE *salve* in the medical context, that is at some point the Germanic noun stopped being treated as a scholarly term. This change can be also observed in the distribution of these three terms in medical compilations.

Table 2 clearly shows an increase in the number of occurrences of *ointment* and *unguent*. The higher number of these terms in the 15<sup>th</sup> century material only confirms the data provided by the OED and MED. Moreover, this higher frequency might be also explained by the increase in the number of medical compilations

Table 2. Number of occurrences of *ointment*, *salve* and *unguent* in medical texts.

	14 <sup>th</sup> c.	15 <sup>th</sup> c.
ointment	33	238
salve	13	9
unguent	9	151

(translated and non-translated). Singer (1919, as cited in Robbins 1970: 393), who first counted and catalogued medical manuscripts in the British Isles, estimated that in the 14<sup>th</sup> century there were 1948 Latin and 140 English texts, whilst the 15<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a significant rise in the number of these compilations, i.e. 3729 in Latin and 872 in English. The material also confirms the assumption that *salve* ceased to be treated as a medical term. Thus, at the time of the increased translation of medical works the position of the noun *ointment* in the English lexicon was stable enough to replace its Old English equivalent, at least in medical context.

The data presented in Table 2 requires also a short explanation concerning the distribution of the term *unguent*. In particular, its distribution in the 14<sup>th</sup> century texts. According to the OED and MED the term entered English lexicon in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. However, the texts under study reveal that early translators of medical texts very often inserted a Latin term (*v/unguentum*) which is preceded or followed by its more familiar equivalent, here *salve* or *ointment*. For instance, in one 14<sup>th</sup> century translation of a Latin text we find the following fragment: “Also it is good to an onyment þat is callyd vnguentum calidum” (Daniel, *Rosemary*, MEMT). The material collected for this study includes also those non-anglicised forms as they might have had some influence on medical compilers and their choices of terminology.

## TRANSLATIONS

Most Middle English scientific texts were translated from or derived from Latin or French treatises. As a result it is not unexpected to find a large number of foreign terms in vernacular writings.

The study of terms representing the lexical field of medicine, here names of salves, shows that although native terms are found in medical compilations copyists more often transferred Latin or French terms into English (cf. Sylwanowicz 2009: 358). As a result, the readers often encountered unfamiliar words or expressions.

The material in the MEMT corpus shows that *unguent*, usually recorded in its Latin form *unguentum*, was the only SALVE-noun that needed some explanation. The compilers used various techniques to facilitate the understanding of this foreign term.

Interpolations and explanations, especially of *that is clepid/callyd* type, were commonly used explicatory phrases, cf.:

- (6)  
 (a) &-lap hem in an *oynement*, **pat men callen** *vnguentum viride*, ...  
[Recipes 2, MEMT]  
 (b) (...) ley on an *oynement* **callyd** *vnguentum subtile*, ...  
[Benvenutus Grassus, MEMT]  
 (c) And thys *oynement* **ys callyd** *preciosum vnguentum alabastris*, the prescyous *oynement*  
*of alabaster* [Benvenutus Grassus, MEMT]  
 (d) (...) an *oyment* **pat is callyd** *vnguentum calidum* þe *hote oyment*...  
[Daniel, Rosemary, MEMT]  
 (e) Þe *oyment* **pat is clepyd** *vnguentum Magdale Marie Maudalynes oyment*...  
[Daniel, Rosemary, MEMT]

In such combinations usually a more familiar word precedes the foreign technical term. As seen in examples above, *ointment* is a general introductory term (indicating the type of medicine), whereas a Latin expression specifies the type of ointment. Sometimes, as in examples 6 (c, d, e) the translators extended the pattern by adding a literal translation after a foreign expression.

Another way of introducing a Latin expression was to incorporate it as a heading or subheading of a new recipe. In such cases the term is usually explained within the text, cf.:

- (7)  
 [To make vnguentum viridum]  
 Ffor to make a grene oynement. Take celendoyn,...  
[Wyse Book of Maystyr Peers of Salerne, MEMT]  
[Vnguentum pro ardetura ignis]  
 Also for to make a noyntment for brenyng...  
[Wyse Book of Maystyr Peers of Salerne, MEMT]

Sometimes, the compiler does not translate the Latin term but repeats it within the text. Such pattern is usually found in more learned texts (e.g. surgical) whose readers might have been assumed as those familiar with Latin terminology. In other text types, the lack of an explanatory term is due to the fact that the compiler starts a given section with introductory remarks, where he states that the following recipes deal with, e.g. ointments. Or, the term is explained earlier and hence there is no need for another clarification, cf.:

- (8)  
 Here begynnyth and tellyth howe a man schal make hys salves, playsterys, and oynementes aftyr the forme and byddyng of mayster peers of Salerne.  
[Wyse Book of Maystyr Peers of Salerne, MEMT]

Additionally, some compilers comment on the origin of the word, explaining its etymology, which is followed by instructions on how a given remedy should be made and administered, cf. (from *Antidotarium Nicholai*, MEMT):

(9)

[UNGUENTUM CITRINUM] Yt ys yclepud so for yt ys boyled yn a pomecitre.

[UNGUENTUM POPULYOUN] Yt ys yseyde for yt ys made of buryonus of popelorye.

[UNGUENTUM LAXATIUM] Yt ys yclepud so for yt makeþ þe wombe nessche.

[UNGUENTUM MARCEATOUN] Yt ys ycleped of þe leche þe wyche compownede.

## CONCLUSIONS

On the account of the discussion above the following tentative conclusions can be made:

(1) Middle English was not deficient in scientific terms and the period 1375-1500 laid solid foundations for the formation of English scientific vocabularies (cf. 15 items denoting 'salve' in general and another 15 items for specific salve-like mixtures);

(2) The material shows that the use of foreign forms (especially Latin) was not often necessary to fill in the gaps in the English medical lexicon, as there were terms in vernacular that had been used in medical context already in Old English and were well represented (both in medical and non-medical texts), cf. *salve*.

(3) The higher frequency of Fr. *ointment*, and its use as an explanatory term, instead of *salve*, can be explained by the fact that the French term might have been a fully assimilated term in the English lexicon long before medical compilations started to be translated into and written in English. Thus, the translators/compilers, had a choice between *ointment* and *salve*. As seen in the discussion above, *salve* might have been confused with another term (*salve*), often used in religious context and hence the compilers turned to a foreign item.

(4) Last, but not least, the compilers may have used a foreign item (here *ointment* and *unguent*) for reasons of style and prestige. To avoid problems with understanding terms that might have been unfamiliar, the compilers used various techniques to facilitate the comprehension of these terms.

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â€œCome here. We have a letter from our son, Saul.â€ Martha came out and looked at the letter. She was excited but she was also worried. â€œA letter from Saul,â€ she said. â€œIs he alive and well? Iâ€™m going to find the school teacher. He can read the letter.â€ We walked into his room. In the middle of the room was a large camera. â€œThis is the best camera in Darpur. This camera is very, very good,â€ the photographer said proudly. â€œIâ€™ve never seen a camera,â€ I said. â€œI donâ€™t know about cameras. Hurry up and take a photograph of me.â€ (Heym) 2. Pursuing his inquiries, Clennam found that the Gowan family were a very distant ramification of the Barnacles (Dickens) 3. His face was sick with pain and rage. (Maltz) 4. He drank coffee, letting the warmth go through his cold, tired body. (This is America) 5. But there is only one place I met with the brotherhood of man, and it was in the Communist Party. (This is America) 6. The mysteries of storm and the rain and tide were revealed. (Galsworthy) 7. Having set the tea, she stood by the table and said slowly: "Tea's ready, Father. I'm going to London." (Galsw (D) should be his friend Joel's. The original sentence makes an illogical comparison (comparing the car with Joel). What should be compared are Hal's sports car with Joel's sports car. NOTE Sports car is an exception to the rule calling for a singular adjective before a noun. 41. [Having lived] here [for] seven years, my friend is used to [speak] English with [all her] classmates. (C) should be speaking. Be used to 4- [verb 4- ing].