Barbara Zipser

Simon Online, an Alternative Approach to Research and Publishing

The idea to create *Simon Online* was born many years ago when I was a doctoral student at the University of Heidelberg. Having obtained a photocopy of the *Clavis sanationis*, a vast Latin-Greek-Arabic medical dictionary from the late thirteenth-century papal court, it quickly became clear that this was an extremely important work and needed to be looked at in more detail, and that it would not be possible to do so in any of the conventional scenarios.

Such a project would require a wide and flexible collaboration between highly specialized scholars, and in addition, would run over a long period of time. Moreover, it would be necessary to establish patterns in the text before embarking on an edition; we would need to search the material in a very efficient way, for instance to identify spelling conventions or the way primary sources were selected.

Some years later, a project draft for *Simon Online* was accepted as part of a Wellcome Trust University Award.[1] The idea was to make raw material – in this case a transcription and photographs of primary sources – available online, and open the project up for scholars to edit the text and add commentaries and translations to entries they are particularly interested in.

The first, very easy step, was to set up the database and upload a transcription of the text based on an early modern printing, which had been completed by Thomas Smith. I then added templates, an index, and help pages, wrote a few sample entries and announced the project. After a few weeks, others joined in and more and more entries appeared. Currently, 839 entries have been edited.[2]

These entries are then being copy-edited to even out the formatting. In a final step, keywords in these entries are added to various indices; the most important of these is the index rerum,[3] which list the topics discussed. These are two snippets from the index to the letter *A*:

'Aconitum, Acorn, Active, Agnus castus…'

'Anise, Ant, Antelope, Antichrist,[4] Aphrodisiac, Apple, Aquamarine, Arsenic, Artemisia…'

Most of the entries in the *Clavis* cover medicinal plants. Some describe diseases, surgical instruments (for instance transurethral catheters), or other medical terminology.

Simon Online also provides other indices, for instance a list of scientific plant names, place names, and authors quoted. The latter category can also be used to reconstruct sources, e.g. a mysterious *Liber de doctrina graeca* or *Book on Greek study* that cannot be identified with any known text and that has been all but forgotten by academia.

Perhaps more unusual are the index categories 'Interviews' and 'Known Unknowns'; these pages list entries, in which Simon asks native speakers for advice if he is unsure about the meaning of a word, and in which he states that the evidence is inconclusive. These entries are invaluable for both linguists – as they give us a first hand account of the pronunciation of a given word – and medical historians and pharmacologists – as they allow us to identify medicinal plants used at the time.

His interviewees are no less of interest. Simon consulted, for instance, at least two native speakers of Arabic, whom he describes as 'an Arabic woman from Aleppo,[5] who had sufficient experience with herbs' and 'another woman from a different region'.[6] Unfortunately, he does not tell us where he met these women, but his account still gives a glimpse of the world in which Simon lived and worked. Arabic was not a dead language to

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4 This word appears in the entry *D littera*, Simon's explanation of how the letter 'd' could be pronounced in various languages. Of all Greek words starting with *anti-* he chose 'antichrist' to illustrate that 't' could under certain circumstances sound like 'd'.

5 This woman is described in two entries, *Achavē* and *Handacocha,* as […] *saracena de alef* […]' a Saracen woman from Alef'. The town name is also transmitted as Haleph in B in the entry *Achavē*. Both Siam Bhayro and Werner Arnold confirm that this could indeed be Aleppo, and I am very grateful for their professional expertize in the matter. Arnold also suggests that the name could refer to Tell Halaf near Edessa. The town name Alef or Haleph is as such not attested, but it could according to Bhayro be explained via a Hebrew intermediary, or according to Arnold via a Syriac form. Syriac was at this point still widely spoken in rural areas. According to Arnold, the dialect of the woman from Alef is consistent with the urban dialect of Aleppo. I obtained a copy of Yann Dahhaoui *L'atelier de Simon de Genes. Vers une edition de la Clavis sanationis.* (MA thesis, Lausanne, 2001), after this article had been submitted. On p. 128, he also discusses the Arabic women, and identifies the town name as Aleppo.

6 She is mentioned in the entry *Achavē*. Intriguingly, when asked how a specific plant is called, she gave three synonyms, one of which would according to Werner Arnold would be consistent with the rural dialect of Syria.

him, and he did not solely rely on books.[7] He was also approachable and communicative.[8]

These are just two gems one finds when digging deep enough in the database. Simon also describes other curious findings: he saw papyrus scrolls held by monastery libraries in Rome, which appear to be written in cursive handwriting.[9] He is also the only person to have described a sole surviving manuscript of a Herophilean text on eye diseases.[10]

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From the start, the main aim of the project was to provide a resource for Classicists who may not read Arabic (and vice versa), and to make the material accessible to scientists who may not be fluent in Latin, the main language of the *Clavis*. This last group may in fact have an interest in this type of material, even though its content may appear outdated at first sight: traditional herbal medications can be screened for active ingredients.

However, the process of identifying a plant can be very complicated indeed in Medieval texts. At the time the *Clavis* was composed, the medical literature available could be written in at least three languages: Latin, Greek, and Arabic. Of these writings, the Latin and Greek evidence could have been composed several centuries ago. Moreover, Latin texts did not necessarily have their origins in a romance language country, as it was widely used as a language of scholarly discourse. And even if a Latin text was in fact written in Italy, the vegetation may have changed since the composition of the text, which could in turn lead to wrong conclusions. To complicate matters, many Medieval Latin sources

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7 Simon was indeed able to understand Arabic, as is clear from the entry *Corrat Alhayn*, where he overhears Arabic speakers making compliments to women. He seems to have had, however, only limited reading skills when it came to Arabic script. For instance, in the entry *Usnen* he seems to believe that the Arabic *alif* was always pronounced as 'a' (see also *Asnen*). Simon was also able to converse with members of other linguistic groups. In the entry *Mahaleb*, he talks to Spanish people (who speak Spanish, rather than Arabic).

8 See for instance the entry *Iris*, where an Arabic soldier asks him for help in identifying a presumably Latin word called *irse*. Simon identifies it correctly as a misspelled *iris* when he sees it in Arabic letters.

9 See *Kirtas:* [...] *et ego vidi Rome in gazofilatiis antiquorum monasteriorum libros et privilegia ex hac materia scripta ex litteris apud nos non intelligibilibus, nam figure nec ex toto grece nec ex toto latine erant.* '[...] and I saw in Rome in the treasure chambers of the old monasteries books and documents that were made of this material (sc. papyrus) with letters that are not intelligible to us, for the characters were neither entirely Greek nor entirely Latin.' The script Simon is referring to could be found in both books and *privilegia*, most likely papal documents.

10 For an in depth analysis see: Heinrich von Staden, *Herophilus. The Art of Medicine in Early Alexandria*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 570 ff.

are translations of Greek or Arabic texts, or a Latin translation of an Arabic intermediary of a lost Greek source. Evidently, such scenarios involved many different geographical areas, and are bound to lead to misunderstandings.

Such a situation can also arise in the descriptions of very common medicinal herbs, for instance *pulegium*, which is commonly identified as pennyroyal. This plant is mentioned in twenty-nine entries of the *Clavis*, discussing its name in various languages, and other plants it could potentially be confused with. This last point was crucial, as it could, according to the sources, look like certain types of basil or mint. Pennyroyal had become somewhat of a running gag in Classical Greek comedy as it was amongst others used to induce abortions, and it is frequently mentioned in medicinal texts.[11]

The uncertainty about the external appearance of these plants probably has its roots in the rate of mutation, as Wilf Gunther, one of the authors on *Simon Online*, writes in the entry on *mentastrum*, a plant that was also called 'wild *pulegium*': '...The ability of most mints to escape from cultivation and to hybridise makes the botanical identification of *mentastrum* difficult.'

In addition, the written tradition, and in particular the translation to and from the Arabic had managed to cause considerable confusion, and having discussed the evidence extensively, Simon decided to double-check. In the entry *Gliconium* he writes: '...Similarly it says in the old *Book on simple medicines* that the Greeks call pennyroyal *gliconos*. I asked a Greek person, and he says it was called *vliconos*, and this is also what it says in the *Book on Greek study*.' He later continues: 'Little wonder the Arabs make mistakes with these plants that have a similar appearance and power.'[12]

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11 For an overview, see John M. Riddle, "Oral Contraceptives and Early-Term Abortifacients during Classical Antiquity and the Middle Ages." *Past and Present* 132 (August 1991): 18-32.

12 *Vliconos* is, in any spelling, not attested. The *Clavis* also contains several more Greek words that are not attested in other sources. Perhaps the most striking are *Vatrachi kampite* (entry edited by Dionysios Stathakopoulos) and *Miosos* (edited by Barbara Zipser), both types of frogs. If these entries reflect vocabulary Simon overheard in everyday life, then he must have seen the frogs in question, as both entries are very detailed. Alternatively, they could be quoted from a dictionary. This is less likely for two reasons: firstly, Simon usually adds a reference to his quotes. Second, his word for 'field-frog' is clearly a medieval vernacular term. This idiom was very rarely used in writing, and to my knowledge there are no zoological books or dictionaries extant from this time. The word is not attested in Ioannes archiatrus, as edited in Barbara Zipser, *John the Physician's Therapeutics: A Medical Handbook in Vernacular Greek*. (Leiden: Brill, 2009). It is very possible that some of these words originate from an old women from Crete, who is mentioned in the final section of paragraph 4 of the Preface, see f. 5v in print A and the corresponding passage in print B. Simon says that she taught him how to recognize plants and that she explained to him the properties of plants according to Dioscorides. This oral commentary tradition could also be behind other passages that do not explicitly cite a written source.

Certainly, Simon's critical first-hand accounts and assessments could be of help in identifying the actual plant, rather than risking tracking down a phantom that has been distorted in the many translations. However, for obvious reasons, we cannot tell the motives for accessing the website. Only some statistical data on the audience of *Simon Online* can be collected. Over the past year and a half, the project has attracted 662,756 page views (excluding bots) from 55,335 unique visitors in seventy-nine countries. The majority of these users access the site via the start page, presumably because they had bookmarked it at some point. Most likely, these users are in one way or another affiliated with medieval studies or the history of medicine, or following the e-mail lists associated with the field. Another, larger group, accesses lexicon entries through search engine requests, mainly via Google or Yandex, its Russian counterpart. Typically, these users would search for a medicinal plant or a product thereof.

At this point our analysis must, however, come to an end, as we do not know the motives of the readers. It can be said, however, that the website serves as a dictionary to the Latin, Greek, and Arabic medical and pharmaceutical terminology of the Middle Ages. In fact, even though it dates to the late thirteenth century, it is still the most comprehensive resource available. Most likely many readers have an interest in the history of medicine, or in lexicography. On the other hand, many of the words in the *Clavis* are still in use today, particularly plant names. It could well be the case that these Internet searches are motivated by an interest in contemporary herbal treatment.

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It was clear from the outset that a project such as *Simon Online* would also need some form of intellectual property protection for the editors working on the website. The MediaWiki software we use is particularly suitable to track who wrote which part of the content displayed on the website: all contributions appear in the name of the respective author, including smaller edits; for instance: additions to the index. These data are displayed on the page itself and also on the user profiles. Moreover, we create an independent record that these pages in fact exist: all edited entries are being archived regularly on www.webcitation.org, a free service provided by the University of Toronto, that is suitable for dynamically changing content. The content on *Simon Online* is published under a Creative Commons license that excludes commercial exploitation and requires source attribution.[13]

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13 http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/

Since the authorship of the entries can be tracked, it is also possible for the content to be listed on a CV. However, from my conversations with authors, there appears to be little interest in using contributions to *Simon Online* for career related purposes; for instance, by quoting them as a public engagement activity in research assessment exercises or grant applications. Rather, the main incentive for the authors appears to be the intellectual challenge, and providing information to the general public in an easily accessible way.

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Altogether, the website is an open access research and publishing platform where progress can be viewed in real time. Currently, all of our authors have at least some background in Classics (although two now work as physicians), but we would also be interested in contributions from an entirely medical or pharmaceutical side, which could be done in collaboration with a philologist.

We now have reached a sufficient amount of edited entries, and have set up two gateways to the edition: one for Latin speakers, which brings up all entries including raw, unedited material; and one for those who prefer to read the text in English translation with a commentary. Users mainly navigate the website by clicking on menus and links, but it is also possible to type keywords such as 'bibliography', 'dictionaries', or 'index' in the search box in the right hand corner, followed by the enter key. This fast and easy method can also be used to browse for entries. For instance, typing the letter 'B' in the search box followed by the enter key brings up all available entries starting with this letter.

Many features of *Simon Online* can be used creatively; for instance, the index rerum is, in effect, also a reverse dictionary for English to Medieval Latin, Greek, or Arabic.

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Looking back over the one and half years since its launch, *Simon Online* has certainly demonstrated that there is indeed a large readership for topics such as Medieval medicine, and that it is possible to introduce new ways of conducting research, namely in collaboration organized into a flowing system.

The decision to open *Simon Online* to the public has been made because the topic was not compatible with the conventional way of editing. The fact that the content would also appear Open Access was an additional bonus. When looking at the academic publishing landscape as it presents today, it is felt that other, more conventional forms of research output could also benefit from an open access format, and here in particular books and collected essay volumes. Publishing the equivalent of an academic book series online is trivial from a technical point of view, and it would involve negligible costs. The most

important parts of the work (research, writing, formatting, quality control, and, in many cases, editing) are already being carried out by academics. It would only be a very small step to set up branding, advertising, the IT framework, and a preservation plan. Powerful tools, such as search engines, index content free of charge and very quickly. A move towards online publication would not only make our work available straight away, it would also reach all those who are unable to access the (very few) well-funded research libraries available.

Bibliography

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