



Skin Care for the Renaissance Person

HOW TO BE FABULOUS IN THE CURRENT MIDDLE AGES

Batu Sechen Tsagaan | Great Western War XIX | October 6 & 8, 2016

Course Objectives

- To have an understanding of skin care's history and foundations
- To identify practical and historically-based skin care practices for SCA events
- To learn why skin care was and is important
- To have a really fun time

Course Outline

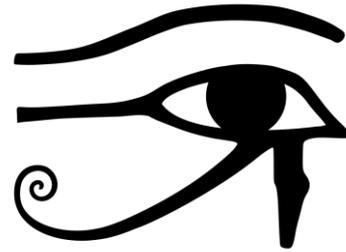
Just kidding! I suck at outlines! Instead, I am providing you an overview of this course. I've never taught this class before, and I apologize if I go too fast or I don't cover everything herein—that's why you have this handout! The very first thing we're going to do is boil some water to create the infusion you can take with you at the end of class. It's super simple and we'll talk about how infusions work, later, in the class. The only reason we're starting with this is so you can have it in your hands by the end of the class and use it throughout the event. We're also going to talk history. Like, really ancient history. We're going back to when the first amoeba crawled out of the water and said, "Crap! That's sun! And that burns!" Okay, maybe not that far. But, pretty far back. We're going to talk about cosmetics and apothecaries and the marketing of skin care and why everything is so weird with medieval stuff. We're also going to talk about basic skin care that you can do inexpensively that will improve your complexion (and I don't just mean acne). I have some products that I make and sell that you are more than welcome to sample. We'll also discuss how our current middle ages differ from the past middle ages and how we can protect ourselves based on our medical advancements, while still remaining true to our chosen time periods. There's a lot of stuff to cover. I may not get to everything, but, again, you have this handy dandy reportlette!

Ancient Peoples

There's not really a way to pinpoint when, exactly, skin care and cosmetics became the way of life; however, there is historical and cultural evidence that people were painting their faces for various reasons since Cro-Magnum Man (Dr. John & Dr. George, 2012a). People have been peering at themselves in mirrors for a very long time—the oldest mirrors, other than still dark water, were polished obsidian stones that were found in modern day Turkey (Anatolia) and dated to around 6000 BCE. Similar stones were also found in the Americas and dated to 2000 BCE; polished copper discs date to 4000 BCE, and the first *modern* mirror (metal-backed glass) is only 2000 years old (Dr. John & Dr. George, 2012a). We do know that people would paint their faces and use other types of facial decorations to gain attention or intimidate in battle, denote their social status or even gain advantage for mating (Dr. John & Dr. George, 2012a).

EGYPTIANS

It is the Ancient Egyptians, however, that we tend to think of as the forerunners of skin care and cosmetics. In Egyptian society, everyone wore makeup. From the humble field workers to the Pharaoh, men and women, alike, would paint their faces (Dr. John & Dr. George, 2012a; Dr. John & Dr. George, 2012b; BioElixia, 2013). The makeup they used served multiple functions, including repelling insects (Dr. John & Dr. George, 2012a). They used oils for perfumes, cleansers, and moisturizers; and the mineral-based makeup they used had the added bonus of protecting their skin from the harsh sun (Dr. John & Dr. George, 2012b). Nail stains were also a thing in ancient China (Dr. John & Dr. George, 2012b). The colors indicated social classes; for example, the royals of the Chou dynasty wore gold and silver; other royals wore black or red; and lower classes were forbidden to wear bright colors on their nails (Dr. John & Dr. George, 2012b). Many of the cosmetics from this time, and up until the 17th century, used lead or mercury as a skin whitener (Dr. John & Dr. George, 2012a; Dr. John & Dr. George, 2012b). Khol eyeliner was symbolic for the Ancient Egyptians because it represented the Eye of Horus (BioElixia, 2013). Despite lead being a primary and deadly component, scientific evidence exists that indicates the eyeliner, at the very least, actually helped to improve their immune systems, and prevent ocular infections from the bacteria in the Nile (BioElixia, 2013). Soot, as well, helped to reduce the effects of sun damage; and papyri and tomb walls reveal that the Ancient Egyptians had actual sunscreens made from salt, honey, rice bran, and jasmine (BioElixia, 2013).



GREEK & ROMANS



If ever there was a society fixated on the human form, it was the Greeks. The word *cosmetic* comes from Greek, in fact, the term being *kosmetikos*, meaning order, tranquility, and harmony (BioElixia, 2014b). I can certainly see how cosmetics can bring order, tranquility, and harmony to the face and body! Greek women, in particular, cleansed and moisturized their skin with olive oil (BioElixia, 2014b). I, personally, wash my face with rosemary olive oil that I make by allowing fresh rosemary to infuse in olive oil for 3 days. Rosemary has cleansing properties and some anti-bacterial properties, as well. Plus, it smells really nice. I will also attest to the fact that it has balanced my skin very well, taking it from oily and acne-prone to bright, soft, and less acne prone. I highly recommend switching your cleansers! The Greek men, particularly athletes, would bathe in olive oil and dust themselves with fine sand to help regulate their body temperature and prevent getting burnt by the sun (BioElixia, 2014b). Honey and beeswax were also used to moisturize the skin and a mixture of honey and olive oil could serve as a sunscreen (BioElixia, 2014b).

➔ Going without sunscreen is not a period thing. Whereas I do not recommend using honey and olive oil and hoping for the best, I do recommend using at least an SPF of 30, any time you are outside for an event. The facial moisturizers I make usually have an option for an SPF 15 (using zinc oxide powder). Skin cancer is very real and very preventable, thanks to modern chemistry! As I am a natural red head, I have super photosensitive skin. I use BullFrog SPF 45, Coppertone Sport SPF 45, or Neutrogena SPF 45. Reapply your sunscreen every 2 to 4 hours, based on packaging instructions. Sunscreens are expensive; your skin is priceless. ➔

If you **do** get an unfortunate sunburn (which can happen, even through sunblocks), using an infusion of tarragon in vinegar can help soothe a sunburn (BioElixia, 2014a). Aloe, as well, will help moisturize the skin, and lavender also has some healing properties for damaged skin.

Middle Ages

Finally, the part you've been looking forward to! Skin care in the middle ages! Romans, of course, were known for their bath houses. Bathing is a huge part of skin care, and it didn't cease to be a thing during the Middle Ages (BioElixia, 2014a). If you consider how long the Roman Empire maintained its land holdings, it's really no surprise that bathing was an important part of skin care and normal hygiene.⁵ Even the Vikings had heated bathhouses (BioElixia, 2014a). The Romans also invented indoor plumbing; but, since it was a taxable thing, only the very rich would have bathing areas in their houses, which is why there were so many public bathhouses.

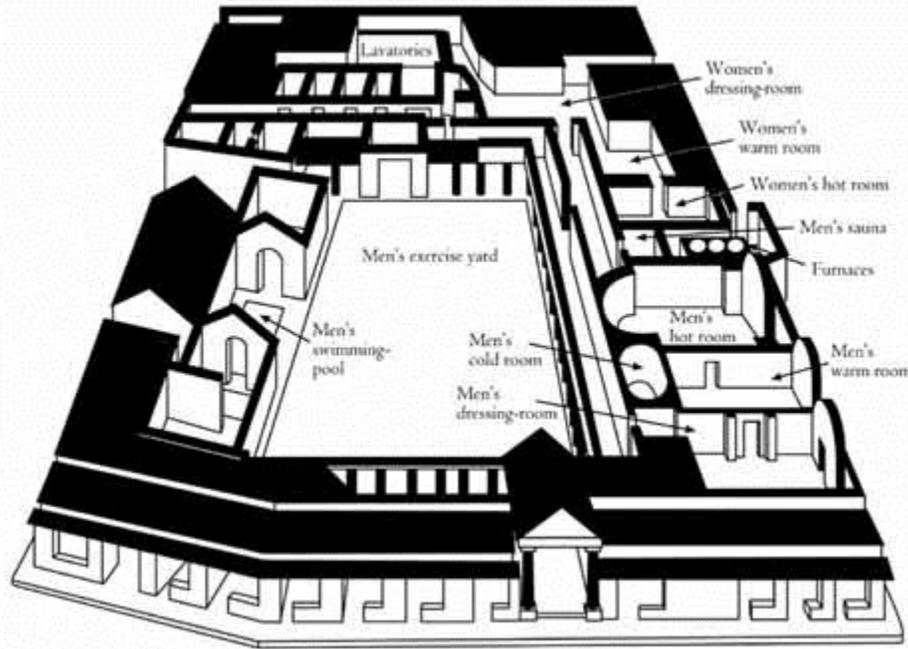
Like many rituals, other events affect the duration. In this case, I mean bathing rituals *did* eventually become a thing only the wealthy could afford (BioElixia, 2014c). But, I'm getting ahead of myself. To make this section more manageable, I'm going to break it down into Early Middle Ages (1st Century to 5th Century), Middle Middle Ages (5th Century to 11th Century), and Late Middle Ages, 11th Century to 17th Century). There's a lot of information, I know, but you now have some reading material for the rest of the event!

EARLY MIDDLE AGES (1-400 AD)

Barley flour and butter was an early treatment (c. 100AD) for acne, along with the advent of mud baths (A History of Cosmetics from Ancient Times, 2016). For most of this period, the Roman Empire was actively existing, growing, and expanding (Knowles, Ancient Rome: The Empire, 31BC-400, 2013a). One of the most prominent features of skin care during the Roman Empire was their bath houses. During the 12th century, the bath house in Bath, England was rediscovered, restored, and opened for royalty (Knowles, Ancient Rome: The Empire, 31BC-400, 2013a).

The Roman bath houses were more than just places to attend to cleaning. They were social events and those who frequented them had opportunity to make a day of it. Generally speaking, there were separate times for men and women to bathe (McManus, 2011). The image above shows the typical layout of a Roman bath house (Crystal, n.d.). Those looking to partake of the bath house would arrive and go to their designated changing areas and strip (McManus, 2011). Slaves would rub the person down with olive oil. This step served as a type of protection from the sun, as well as a cleanser, later (McManus, 2011; Crystal, n.d.). The men would make use of the field for working out (McManus, 2011; Trueman, 2015; Crystal, n.d.); however, pictorial evidence shows that women would *also* work out, despite there being relatively little recorded history supporting this (see McManus, 2011). Once the participant had finished his or her workout, it was time to get rid of the sweat and grime that accumulated on their skin. This would be done by a slave scraping the skin of the bather with a curved instrument called a *strigil*. If you're into watching short videos of modern people trying things out, I highly recommend watching BuzzFeed's Try Guys trying ancient Greek Olympics. The guys actually do strip naked, oil up, and participate in the sports, then have the oil

and grime scraped off their bodies with strigils. It's very entertaining, if not slightly gross. You can find it by doing a YouTube search for "The Try Guys try Greek Olympics."



Bath houses differed across the Empire in that some had a *sudatorium* (moist steam bath) and a *laconicum* (dry steam bath). All bath houses, however, featured a *tepidarium*, a *caldarium*, and a *frigidarium*. In order, the bather would pass, first through the tepidarium where he or she would partake in a warm, or tepid, bath (Crystal, n.d.; McManus, 2011; Trueman, 2015); then pass into the caldarium, which was located right next to the furnace, providing a hot bath (McManus, 2011; Trueman, 2015). Once the bather was finished in this room, he or she could return to the tepidarium and hang out with others (Trueman, 2015), go to a masseuse for a massage with scented oils (McManus, 2011), or simply move on to the frigidarium for a cold bath or swim (Crystal, n.d.). Once the bathing process was complete, bathers could purchase food from vendors, go to an on-site library, take in a show by one of the many street performers, or just sit and gossip with those who were there (McManus, 2011; Trueman, 2015).

Bath houses did charge for their use. In what seems to be an ancient tradition involving the Pink Tax¹, women were charged 1 copper and men were charged ½ copper. Equality, indeed.

The Romans, during this time, also traveled through the Middle East and towards India, learning about new herbs and spices. These spices would become foundational for many skin care remedies throughout the remainder of the Middle Ages, even into our modern times. For more information on Middle Eastern spices used for skin care, please see <http://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/200605/natural.remedies.of.arabia.htm>.

¹ Charging women more for products that are identical to men's; or charging more for products that women require, such as feminine hygiene products.

MIDDLE MIDDLE AGES (400-1000 AD)

After the fall of the Roman Empire, hygiene did not become a thing of the past (Knowles, 2013b). There was still a fee, which would, eventually, cause bathing to be a weekly thing rather than a daily thing, as it was under the Roman Empire (Knowles, 2013b). One of the things that began to become a ritual was that of washing the hands and face before meals and before bed (Knowles, 2013b). In the Late Middle Ages, there would be documented recipes for the types of waters available for washing hands, scenting clothes, and scenting the body. We'll get there; don't worry.

This portion of the Middle Ages, sadly, lacks documentation for the recipes used by the populace. I can hypothesize that much of the skin care of the previous portion of the SCA's time line would have lingered into the "Dark Ages." It is safe to assume that the populace went to the bath houses that remained from the Roman Empire; they built their own public bath houses (Knowles, 2013b), and they began developing new mixtures to combat the varying afflictions which would have included scars, acne, and other blemishes. It would have been during this time that remedies for lightening the skin would have started being developed and experimented with. Based on what we know of the Ancient Egyptians and the Tang Dynasty, lead and mercury were primary ingredients in the cosmetics of the time. We also know that people made infusions (or teas) to treat illnesses and other skin conditions; and we also know that they used some pretty unconventional ingredients too. Like dung.

We *do* know, however, that women were instructed by religious institutions to forego make up, starting in this time period. As monasteries moved into Europe, religious rules began to be handed down from the priests, indicating that make up was considered a vanity. In the late middle ages, there would be exceptions made for various rules which, of course, became the norm. If a woman wanted to keep her husband, then she was permitted to wear just enough make up to keep him from looking elsewhere; if she had blemishes, she was permitted to cover them with make up; if she was disfigured, she was able to use make up to enhance her beauty. The rules were weird.

LATE MIDDLE AGES (1000-1650 AD)

It was during the latter part of the middle ages where apothecaries and herbalists began documenting their crafts. The *Trotula* is, perhaps, one of the most well-known text of health care. In actuality, the *Trotula* is a group of three texts, specifically on women's medicine. These texts were published in the 12th century and were broken down thusly:

- *Liber de sinthomatibus mulierum* ("Book on the Conditions of Women")
- *De curis mulierum* ("On Treatments for Women")
- *De ornatu mulierum* ("On Women's Cosmetics")

These three texts would leave an impact for us in the modern age. Having circulated from the 12th through the 15th centuries, there are approximately 200 manuscripts that survived. Archeologists spectate that it is a small fragment of the number of copies that existed throughout Europe (Trotula, 2016).

What made the *Trotula* so important is it incorporated and relied upon skin care elements from Arab and Muslim countries—the very countries the Crusaders set out to convert during the late 11th century, early 12th century (Knowles, 2013c).

It was also during the beginnings of this part of the middle ages that superstition began weaving into the medicines and sciences of skin care. Apothecaries would sell the ingredients needed to make the recipes, or even the actual facial remedies themselves; many women, however, made their own products at home (Knowles, 2013c). This is also where we start seeing the application of vegetable dyes and powders to make up bases, giving new colors for the women to experiment with.

The Crusades introduced perfumes made with alcohol to Europe in 1200 AD (A History of Cosmetics from Ancient Times, 2016). These scented waters had many different uses and functions during the late middle ages, as well as our current middle ages. One such is the Queen of Hungary water from the 13th century; it started as a simple Rosemary water and, over the years, became quite the complex Victorian scent (Lady Heodez, 2014). If you'd like to make this recipe on your own, please let me know how it turns out! It will be quite the strong scent, so you will want to use a diffusing spray bottle. I use mine for a light perfume, as well as a fabric refresher—or even a room refresher! I sell these for around \$10 a bottle.

QUEEN OF HUNGARY WATER (RECIPE)

Dried rosemary
1 tsp cloves
½ tsp anise seed
1 tsp mace (or 1 whole nutmeg)
1 sprig fresh sage
1/8 oz rosewater
4oz vodka, brandy, whiskey, or everclear

You want to put all these things into a jar that can be sealed tightly, and cover them with the vodka. You will wait for two weeks, then strain out the solids using a cheesecloth. **It will be strong.**

Other waters were used for various things, including perfuming (rosewater and clove is one of my favorites), as well as washing the hands and face before dinner, and washing the face before bed. One such water for cleansing hands before dinner came from a 16th century herbal called *Le Menagier de Paris*, which stated, "To make water for washing hands at table: Boil sage, then strain the water and cool it until it is a little more than lukewarm. Or use chamomile, marjoram, or rosemary boiled with orange peel. Bay leaves are also good" (Heise, 2008). This one is simple and it's good for cleansing, since sage and rosemary, both, are known for their antibacterial properties.



Figure 1 Tansy, a flower used to ward off flies

Bugs are not a modern problem. Even during the middle ages, people had to combat moths, mosquitos, ticks, fleas, etc. Tansy was the go-to herb to repel flies, while lavender was beneficial against moths, camphor works against anything, and pennyroyal is particularly effective against fleas. The bug spray I made for Great Western War contains a good deal of citrus oils (lemon and orange),

as well as eucalyptus in a base of castile soap, and is effective at repelling spiders and fleas. At least, that is what I've tested it against, and it works well. From a late 15th century text, *Stere Hit Well*, a treatment for clothing to prevent moths consisted of boiling rue and wormwood in water, then brushing the water onto the clothes (Heise, *Scents of the Middle Ages*, 2004).

At this point in the history, bathing was not something the poor could afford to do, even on a weekly basis. As time between baths grew longer, the populace needed to do something to stave off the stench of body odor. It was during the 12th century that they first came up with the idea of deodorant—in fact, there are a few recipes in the *Trotula* for deodorant and antiperspirant (Lady Heodez, 2013).

I have to break here to talk about Lady Heodez. She is an SCA member (Middle Kingdom, Barony of Middle Marches, in Tirnewydd Shire), and has spent a good deal of time translating the *Gli Ornamente Delle Donna*, a 1562 treatise on women's health and beauty. I highly recommend looking at her website for inspiration for things to try. I have tried several of her translations and have had, mostly, good results. I swear by the medieval mouthwash—even my dentist thought it was fantastic. The cucumber and *lard* facial moisturizer is nothing short of amazing—and I made a minor addition of putting zinc oxide in it to give it an SPF of 15. The only thing I've tried that hasn't been altogether amazing has been the antiperspirant made with borax and camphor. I'm not sure if it's because it's been 9000-F in the shade, or if it just doesn't work with my body chemistry, but it left me feeling like I was quite ripe, though I have not heard any complaints from Geiri.² Still, I think I'll stick with my conventional antiperspirant until I can re-formulate it to work appropriately (and be way less messy). Make sure to check out her blog (which is listed in my references) and let me know if you try any of her recipes!

Summary

Most of the information we have available regarding skin care during the middle ages falls into either the late middle ages (post-Crusades), or the Roman Empire (through about 400AD). There is a several hundred-year period where information is scarce, either because it was never written down, or because it has been lost to time. Regardless, we can easily see that many of the remedies and recipes we do have are the base for many of our modern products. Cucumber was used for soothing skin; aloe was used for sunburns; and, until the 1950s, oil was the main ingredient in facial cleansers! From Roman baths to three volumes on women's health and beauty, the Middle Ages is anything but *Dark*.

Conclusion & Final Thoughts

I could go on for pages and hours regarding skin care. Prior to starting Ice & Fire Works as a business catering to re-enactors, I had a skin care business that one would probably call

² I noticed that the antiperspirant lasted about 12 hours on a really hot day. Naturally, it wore out quickly towards the end, but it wasn't bad while it lasted.

"crunchy." It was a lot of aromatherapy and natural ingredients, but I wasn't enjoying it very much. Learning how skin care started and has evolved over millennia has given me a new perspective on the history of beauty, skin care, aromatherapy, and more. Please ask me any questions you may have, either during the class, during Great Western, or even after. You can e-mail me at batu.sechen@gmail.com and I'll do my best to get back to you ASAP. This handout didn't even go into hair care or relaxation baths, exfoliation, or anything of the Eastern philosophies on skin care. I would be afraid I would bog you down with information! I hope you have a wonderful War and I hope our small-batch infusion will serve you well!

Ex igne glaci (Out of fire, ice)

Batu Sechen Tsagaan
Own/Sole-Proprietor
Ice & Fire Works
www.iceandfireworks.com
batu.sechen@gmail.com

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