

Holy Wafers in Pharmacy: Who Was Curé Arnal?

Georg A. Petroianu

College of Medicine & Health Sciences, Khalifa University, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

Email: georg.petroianu@ku.ac.ae

How to cite this paper: Petroianu, G. A. (2022). Holy Wafers in Pharmacy: Who Was Curé Arnal? *Advances in Historical Studies*, 11, 27-32.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/ahs.2022.111003>

Received: February 7, 2022

Accepted: March 27, 2022

Published: March 30, 2022

Copyright © 2022 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

Historically, most medicines were associated with a horrible taste (*goût repoussant*). Sulphate of quinine, widely used at the beginning of the XIXth century as remedy for malarial intermittent fever, certainly fits the description. Southwestern littoral France, was an area of endemic malaria and the population widely exposed to the medicine. French pharmacist Stanislas Limousin (1831-1887) is credited with the introduction of *cachets* enclosing medicine and thus greatly facilitating their administration. In fact, such *cachets* were developed and used much earlier by the parish priest of the village of Pérols (*curé of Pérols*), Joseph Lambert Arnal (1798-1867). The present contribution attempts to correct the erroneous perception about the paternity of the invention and to answer the question of who was Arnal.

Keywords

Cachets a Pain, Hosties, Oblaten, Arnal, Joseph Lambert, Limousin, Stanislas

1. Introduction

The Eucharist (Greek for thanksgiving) is a central act of Christian worship. Sacramental bread called holly wafers or hostia (Latin for sacrificial victim), along with sacramental wine are the two elements of the ritual commemoration of Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples (**Figure 1**).

Wafers (holy or not) played also a role in medicine and pharmacy. In a paper on the topic, Hymen Saye (1907-1993) states that “*In countries professing the Roman Catholic faith, great curative powers were attributed to the communion wafer. In the same measure that it could drive out sin when given to the communicant by the priest uttering the proper words, so ought it to expel the physical ills of the body, when blessed by the priest (Saye, 1935).*”



Figure 1. Holly wafers or hostia (Latin for sacrificial victim) along with sacramental wine are the two elements of the ritual commemoration of Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples.

Pierre Chirac (1648-1732), first physician to French King Louis XV (Louis le Bien-Aimé), in a work dealing with disease affecting the crew of vessels (*les maladies des équipages des vaisseaux*) recommends among other remedies for scorbout, the daily use of “pain à chanter”, the French word for holy wafers (Dulieu, 1984; Ciurana & Julien, 1981).

Possibly expanding on the intrinsic therapeutic properties of the wafers, curé Arnal, the parish priest of the village of Pérols (now part of the city of Montpellier), together with St. Affrique (Aveyron) pharmacist Marcelin Vernhet pere († 1863) and Montpellier goldsmith Etienne Dartis (1784-1848) was involved in marketing a cure for malarial intermittent fever. Sulphate of quinine in cachets under the name of *hosties du curé de Pérols* or *febrifuge Arnal* were sold on a large scale. The innovation consisted in hiding the bitter test of quinine: he inserted the drug between two wafers sweetened with some *confiture*. His activities were apparently quite successful and wide spread; on a single occasion, the priest and his companions purchased some forty-thousand tablets of quinine from the Montpellier depot. Such activities irked the Montpellier pharmacists who saw their income and authority threatened and so they sued the clergymen and his associates.

Amédée Estor¹ was the lawyer representing the Montpellier pharmacists, while public prosecutor Honore Argence², a gifted orator, was reminding the priest in court that the House of God was not meant to be *spelunca latronum* (den of robbers)³.

Despite a vigorous defense provided by attorney Etienne Daudé de Lavalette⁴, the Montpellier Criminal Court (*Tribunal Correctionnel de Montpellier*) found

¹Amédée Estor (1805-1858), *avocat* (lawyer), 1849 Acting Mayor of Montpellier.

²Honore Laurent Argence (1804-1851), *avocat* from Beziers, 1830 prosecutor in Montpellier, later judge in Montpellier, than in Reims and finally in Algeria. 1843 the press declares him dead after an attack by a Bedouin, but he actually survives (retires in 1850).

³Jeremias 7: 11: Numquid ergo spelunca latronum facta est domus ista, in qua invocatum est nomen meum in oculis vestris? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! Declares the Lord.

⁴Etienne Daudé de Lavalette, vicomte d'Alzon (1805-1855), *avocat* in Montpellier, originally from Saint-Jean-du-Bruel (Aveyron), some 100 km from Montpellier. History book author: *Research on Hannibal's Crossing from Spain to Italy through Gaule* (1838). Inducted 1847 into the Montpellier Academy (*Academie des Sciences et Lettres*).

1836 the priest and his business partners guilty of illegally practicing pharmacy; heavy fines were issued and the remaining cachets confiscated (Anonymous, 1837) (Figure 2).

While the guilty verdict protected the interests of Montpellier pharmacists and possibly avoided some cases of quinine toxicity, the decision also suppressed the innovative method of delivery used, making best possible use of the religious wafers.

The Editor of *Le Courrier Médical*⁵ stated 1873 that the trade went on for some thirty years. This is certainly a massive exaggeration; the more likely time-frame is mid-1820s to 1836 (Limousin, 1879). Our priest was still running his parish by the end of the 1850*ies* as the Departmental Archives of Hérault contain a number of documents regarding his unsatisfactory behavior (unexcused absences; *absences injustifiées*) (communication by Sylvie Desachy; Departmental Archives of Hérault).

A similar approach in drug administration is followed some twenty years later (1853) by Lyon pharmacist André-Alexandre Guillermond (1812-1890). He is credited with re-introducing under the name *Enazyme* (*En cachet de pain azyme*) the holy wafer packaging, but he fails to apply for a patent and does not try to exploit it economically (Pierre, 1993; Limousin, 1879). The distinguished Guillermond dynasty of pharmacists is described by (Guitard, 1958) (Figure 3).

Limousin, Stanislas (1831-1887), well known Parisian pharmacist at 2^{bis} Rue Blanche and his partner Charles Gustave Toiray (1835-1908), are responsible for making medicated wafers truly popular and widely available (Bury & Théodoridès, 1981; Petroianu, 2020). They are however not the ones to have originally developed the method; this honor belongs to curé Arnal (Limousin, 1879) (Figure 4).

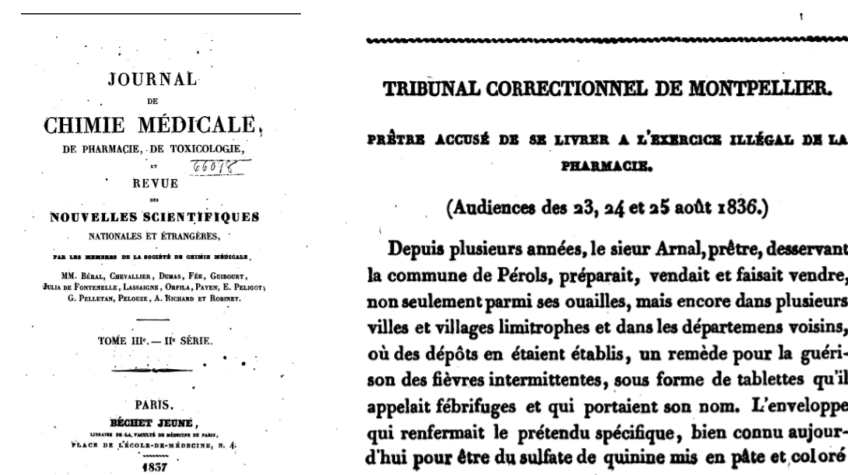


Figure 2. Ample description of the activities of the trio (Arnal-Vernhet-Dartis) in the press of the time (Anonymous, 1837).

⁵Dr. Mary-Durand († 1893), physician at the *Hôtel des Invalides* in Paris. Editor of *Le Courrier Médical* and author of contributions for the general public on alkaloids (*Memento des Alcaloïdes*), perfumes (*La parfumerie*) and the role of women in caring for the wounded (*La femme hospitalière*). Some involvement in local politics as Councilor for Sauxillanges (Puy-de-Dôme). Legion d'Honneur. Obituary in *Journal d'Hygiène*, January 11, 1894.



Figure 3. Guillermond, André-Alexandre (1812-1890) 1841 President of the Pharmaceutical Society of Lyon. From: Anciens président de la Société de Pharmacie de Lyon, fondée en 1806. Photograph 1908. Collection BIU Santé Pharmacie.



Figure 4. Advertisement circa 1880: Medicinische Oblate, Capsulae amyloaceae, Medicated Wafers, Cachets Medicamenteux Limousin. The explanation at the bottom of the ad reads: *These cachets consist of round concave pieces of azyme bread, meant to enclose the medicinal powder.*

2. Who Was the Curé Arnal?

The surname Arnal is quite common in southern France and elsewhere, with many homonymic Arnals overlapping chronologically, professionally and geographically. Considering the publicity generated by the aforementioned judicial case, we assumed however that identifying the proper Arnal would not be too difficult; we were proven wrong.

Despite generous help from Madame Sylvie Desachy (*Conservatrice générale du Patrimoine, Directrice des Archives départementales*) no reference to the judicial case could be found either in the Archives of the Tribunal in Montpellier nor in the Departmental Archives of Hérault. Equally fruitless were enquiries at Perols (Montpellier) church where no memories of the ancient curé survived.

The key to the mystery was found in a eulogy to Auguste-Antoine-Hippolyte Arnal (1829-1881), a distinguished lawyer and state prosecutor in Montpellier, appointed to the French Légion d'honneur on the 1880 celebration of the anni-

versary of the storming of the Bastille (*Anonymus*, 1880). Among the details provided, one finds the sentence “*In addition to Monseigneur Affre, two of his uncles were priests: the curé of Pérols and the curé of Montclarat*”. The mentioned priests and the father of the honored were brothers.

The database Leonore, containing information about the members of the Légion, allowed identification of the parents of Auguste-Antoine-Hippolyte and then completion of the family tree. The father of Auguste-Antoine-Hippolyte) was Antoine-Hippolyte ARNAL, lawyer in Le Truel, related to the Archbishop Affre by marriage with his sister, Marie Louise AFFRE (**Figure 5**).

Historically, the majority of the Arnals were staunchly conservative catholic public servants, notaries, lawyers, and prosecutors. The family connected by marriage mainly with the Affres, Boyers and Thomas families.

Especially Christine BOYER (1768-1819), the sister of Denis BOYER (1766-1842), French philosopher and Superior of the Catholic Seminary at Saint-Suplice infused fresh religious fervor into the larger family. Her son Denys Auguste AFFRE (1793-1848) became the 126th Archbishop of Paris; as mentioned, her daughter married Antoine-Hippolyte ARNAL, one of the sons of Joseph Bernard ARNAL (1757-1830).

Two other sons, Benoît Augustin and Joseph Lambert became priests: Benoît Augustin ARNAL (1793-1873) curé in Montclarat (Saint-Rome-de-Cernon, Aveyron) while Joseph Lambert (1798-1867) curé in Perols (now a suburb of Montpellier) and later honorary canon of the Montpellier Cathedral.

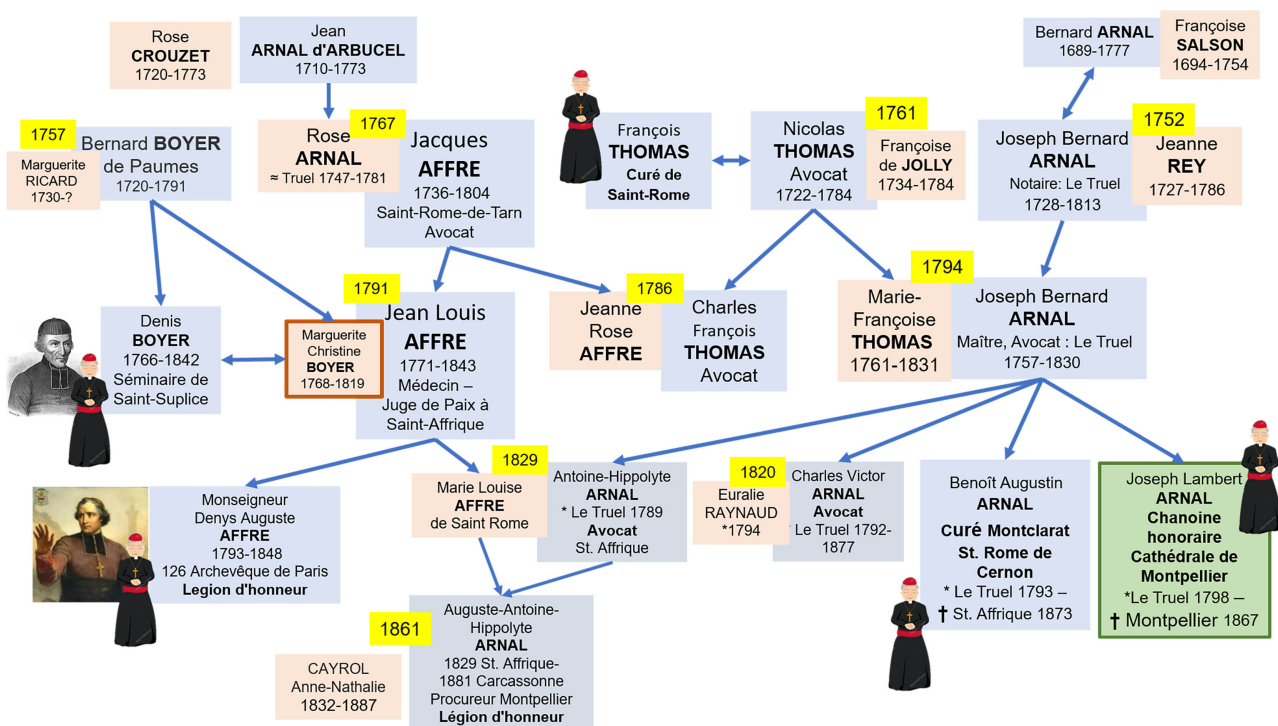


Figure 5. Joseph Lambert ARNAL, curé in Perols and later honorary canon of the Montpellier Cathedral was the son of Joseph Bernard ARNAL lawyer from Le Truel (Aveyron) (1757-1830) and his wife Marie-Françoise THOMAS (1761-1831).

3. Conclusion

The introduction of cachets made of wafers to conceal the unpleasant taste of the active ingredient is the merit of a clergyman [Joseph Lambert Arnal (1798-1867), curé in Perols, Aveyron]. Familiar with both holy wafers and the suffering of the population not only from malaria but also from its horribly bitter treatment, he identified a business opportunity. While his activities were most likely motivated by greed, the conviction for illegal activities delayed the general acceptance of an innovative administration method by about half a century.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Anonymous (1837). Tribunal Correctionnel de Montpellier: prêtre accusé de se livrer à l'exercice illégal de la Pharmacie. *Journal de Chimie médicale, de Pharmacie et de Toxicologie*, 3, 44-47.
- Anonymous (1880). *L'Univers* (p. 3).
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k703461x/f3.image.r=arnal%20perols?rk=708158;0>
- Bury, R., & Théodoridès, J. (1981). Question CXCIX, Pain à chanter. *Revue d'Histoire de la Pharmacie Année*, 249, 148 p.
https://www.persee.fr/doc/pharm_0035-2349_1981_num_69_249_2759
- Ciurana, A., & Julien, P. (1981). Question CXCIX, Pain à chanter. *Revue d'Histoire de la Pharmacie*, 248, 75-76.
https://www.persee.fr/doc/pharm_0035-2349_1981_num_69_248_3960
- Dulieu, L. (1984). Pierre Chirac et les maladies des équipages des vaisseaux. *Revue d'histoire des sciences*, 37, 65-70.
- Guitard, E.-H. (1958). La dynastie pharmaceutique des Guillermond (René Deroudille, Une dynastie). *Revue d'Histoire de la Pharmacie*, 56, 262 p.
https://www.persee.fr/doc/pharm_0035-2349_1958_num_46_156_9509_t1_0262_0000_2
- Limousin, S. (1879). *Contributions à la pharmacie et à la thérapeutique*. Hachette Livre—BNF.
- Petroianu, G. A. (2020). Singultus, Paper-Bag Ventilation, and hypercapnia. *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences*, 29, 286-298.
- Pierre, J. (1993). De l'officine au laboratoire de fabrication: le Lyonnais A.-A. Guillermond: Catherine Arnaud avec la collab d'O Faure, Un pharmacien lyonnais au XIXe siècle, André-Alexandre Guillermond in Cahiers d'Histoire (Presses Universitaires de Lyon). *Revue d'Histoire de la Pharmacie Année*, 299, 499-500.
- Saye, H. (1935). Holy Wafers In Medicine. *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine*, 3, 165-167. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44437894>