HISTORY OF DERMATOLOGY

GIOVAN COSIMO BONOMI AND THE "BACARELLI"

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During the period 1685-1687, a young medical officer, Giovan Cosimo Bonomo, and the apothecary and naturalist Diacinto Cestoni, made a careful description of the morphology and biology of Sarcoptes scabiei. In those years they were studying a group of individuals held into the penal colony of Livorno that were complaining of chronic itching lesions of the skin. Using a primordial microscope, they observed some little worms or "bacarelli" they had pulled out from crushing the vescicles of the skin. In their report, integrated with interesting drawnings, they described not only the adult mites but also their eggs. The presence of eggs conducted them to hypothesize a "marriage" between the mites, so establishing the first original approach to a parassitologic origin of the disease, and the possible transmission of these bacarelli from one person to another. Besides, they accurately described the mechanism of "nibbling and digging" used by the bacarelli in disseminating and transmitting the mites and the lesions.
The Authors reported these observations to Francesco Redi, the famous scientist and physician of "de Medici" 's family, in a "letter dated 1687. The Redi considered this letter scientifically not important, and published it simply as a contribute to the naturalistic investigation performed by Bonomi. However, the brochure came to Lancisi, the physician of Pope Innocent XI and supporter of the galenic doctrine of humoral origin of scabies, who strongly criticized the content of the paper. In the following years, the debate about the origin of the scabies continued between these two theories, respectively humoralist and sperimentalist. The confirm of the acaric doctrine of scabies took place only in 1834. In this year, in the summer session held from prof Alibert at the St. Louis's Hospital in Paris, a medical student coming from Corsica, Francesco Renucci, demonstrated the possibility to extract, by breaking the vescicles, the "bacarelli", based on a popular practice by him observed in his country (Renucci JD. Thèse inaugurale sur la decouverte de l'insecte qui produit la contagion de la gale, du prurigo et du phlyzacia. Paris:1835).