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Thoughts On A Visit To The Grave Of Orfila

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Ever since hearing about the first book written on toxicology, I had became intrigued about the person who first saw this writing as something that needed to be done. And after finally obtaining a first edition of his pioneering work, I became even more fascinated about the author. The author's name was **Mathieu Joseph Bonoventure Orfila**, who was born in 1787 and was the leading medico-legal expert of his time. He was born in Minorca, studied at Valencia, Barcelona and Paris, and was one of the founders of the *Academie de Medecine*. He held the chair of Legal Medicine at the *Sorbonne* in Paris. Orfila was a popular teacher, and is particularly remembered for his writings on toxicology. In 1814, he published his first work, ***Traité des poisons***, in which he divided poisons into six classifications: corrosives, astringents, acrids, stupefying or narcotics, narcotico acids, and septica or putreficants.

John H. Trestrail, III, RPh, FAACT, DABAT at Orfila's grave



It is interesting to study Orfila's classification of poisons in some detail. Here are his six categories and some representative examples from each.

Corrosive Poisons: Mercurial salts, Arsenic, Antimony, Copper, Tin, Zinc, Silver, Gold, Bismuth, concentrated acids, caustic alkalis, caustic alkaline earths, Phosphorus, glass & enamel in powder and cantharides

Astringent Poisons: Compounds of Lead

Acrid Poisons: Multiple plants, Potassium nitrate

Narcotic Poisons: Opium, Henbane, Prussic acid, Azotic gas,

Narcotico-acrid Poisons: Belladonna, Hemlock, Tobacco, Oleander, Nux Vomica, fungi, etc.

Septic or Putrefying Poisons: Hydro-sulphuric acid gas, venomous animals

Editions of his work appeared in the following years: 1st (1814), 2nd (1818), 3rd (1826), 4th (1843), & 5th (1852). An English translation of his work first appeared in 1816, and American editions were published in 1817, and 1826. Orfila played an important role in the *"LaFarge Case"* in Paris, in 1840, by adopting the new *"Marsh Test"* for arsenic. At the age of 67 years, Orfila died in 1853.

During a trip to France in 2001, I finally had the opportunity to search for, and hopefully to find, the grave of the *"Father of Toxicology"*, who was buried March 16, 1853, somewhere in France. Determining the location of his grave presented problems, but I was finally informed by a toxicologist colleague in Luxembourg, that Orfila was buried in Paris, in the *Cimetiere du Montparnasse*. The location within this 3rd largest cemetery in Paris, consisting of some 1,600 acres, was unknown to us, and so I just determined to visit the cemetery and try my best.

Entering the cemetery through one of the gates, I was taken aback by the daunting task that lay there before me. Thousands and thousands of monuments as far as the eye could see! Where was I to begin? Fortunately there was a security guard, and I asked him in my mediocre French, if he knew of the location of the monument of Mathieu Orfila. He said he did not, but disappeared into his small office, and returned with a photocopied page of a map of the cemetery with the location of graves of some of the famous interred residents. And there it was! A line was drawn on the map to the location of my goal, in the 4th Division, just East of the *Avenue Principale*.

Within five minutes walk to the monument, which stood on a lovely circular drive, I was finally standing on the final resting place, of the one who had really started it all for us toxicologists. I wonder how Orfila would have felt, if he had known how far toxicology have developed in the 150 years since his demise. There were no flowers or attributes evident, as could be seen on some of the other tombs nearby.

If you have a chance to visit Paris, take the time to pay Orfila's grave a visit, and place some flowers in remembrance of his great contributions to our passion of toxicology.

For the historically minded, I have provided some pictures of Orfila and his books along with this piece. You may want to see them by clicking the button below.

Visit Orfila's slideviewer by clicking here
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