As early as the twelfth century, there were two leper houses in Narbonne, as well as two hospitals for the poor: Saint-Just in the Cité and Saint-Paul in the Bourg. These institutions were soon placed under the jurisdiction of the consuls, who in turn entrusted their management to a commander, who was himself assisted by friars and nuns on a daily basis.

As a result of the city’s prosperity, these hospitals grew in numbers through the mid-fourteenth century, at which point Narbonne boasted up to a dozen hospitals. Their mission was less to heal than it was to relieve pain and suffering: not until the very end of the fifteenth century would a medical doctor figure among the ranks of hospital personnel. These institutions disappeared at the very end of the Middle Ages, with the Saint-Just hospital closing its doors in the sixteenth century.

In the early seventeenth century, the Hôpital Saint-Paul was the only facility left for the care of indigent patients. The city then underwent a true revival in matters of hospitals, under the leadership of archbishops Claude Rebé (1628-1659) and François Fouquet (1659-1673).

The Hôpital de la Charité (on the banks of the current Robine) opened its doors in 1635, and then was turned into a general hospital in 1678. In 1646, the Archbishop also established a sisterhood of fifty ladies of Charity. Their Oeuvre de la Miséricorde provided effective assistance to the destitute during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The internal service of the hospitals was entrusted to the nuns of St. Vincent de Paul in 1659. Assigned to the hospitals of Saint-Paul, Charité and Miséricorde, the nuns cared for the sick and managed the apothecaries.

The apothecary was responsible for the preparation of remedies: he chose and weighed the ingredients, ground them into powder with a mortar, mixed them together and sometimes heated them in order to make the syrups, pills and plasters ordered by his customers.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, major pharmacopoeias were published (Nicolas Lemery, Moyse Charas), listing the formulas and describing their effects. The drugs, meaning all the various components, were of natural origin (of mineral, vegetable and animal origins).

Most of them have since been abandoned, due to the development of synthetic drugs in the twentieth century. The inscriptions on the apothecary containers make it possible to keep the memory of them alive.
Apothecary containers were designed to serve different purposes: to improve the preservation of the remedies, to protect them effectively against alteration, and to ensure their storage and transport.

The different materials used for such purposes date back to ancient times: horn, brass, wood, tin, silver, and especially terracotta.

Beginning in the sixteenth century, the use of earthenware marked the advent of actual pharmaceutical ceramics: terracotta covered with enamel provided a hermetic seal, and color application made the indelible inscription of concoction names and ingredients possible. From then on, the various containers were lined up on the shelves of the apothecaries, in close range of both hand and eye, like ceremonial objects. They became the symbol and the identifying sign of the pharmaceutical profession.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when hospitals became organized, the production of pharmaceutical earthenware was significant and represented a sizeable market for the best manufacturers, such as Nevers, Rouen, Moustiers and Montpellier.

In 1697, Nicolas Lemery, in Pharmacopée Universelle (Universal Pharmacopoeia), recommended the use of earthenware "because of its beauty and neatness". But in the second half of the eighteenth century, the growing use of porcelain and glass heralded the decline of earthenware as a medical material.

The Albarello
Imported from Persia and Syria, its name comes from the Persian term ‘el barani’, which means vase for receiving a cure. The albarello is the oldest and most common form of medicinal jar in the West. It has a curved shape to allow for a better grip. It was used for concoctions with paste-like textures: balms, ointments, cold creams (wax-based ointments), or electuaries (paste-type remedies).

The Chevrette
This jug on a pedestal is called chevrette (roe deer), because the flow from its spout resembles the deer's horn. The use of this pot was strictly reserved for apothecaries and prohibited for other professions, such as grocers or surgeons. The chevrette was used for liquid remedies: syrups, oils, viscous liquids and distillates.

The Apothecary Vase
These pots were among the largest and were given a place of honor in apothecaries. They were ceremonial vases reserved for so-called sovereign remedies such as treacle and hyacinth, as well as a few other popular concoctions such as Salomon opiate (universal remedy).

The Pot-canon
Derived from the albarello, the pot-canon can be mounted on a pedestal or not. It takes its name from its cylindrical shape (from the Italian word ‘cannone’, tube). It is also intended for ointments and pastes.

The Pitcher
Used by both apothecaries and grocers, the medicinal pitcher was designed to hold soft oils and distillates. In hospitals, it was also used for syrups commonly prescribed by doctors.