

Aegyptus et Pannonia VIII.



Acta Symposií anno 2021

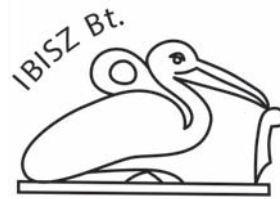
BUDAPEST

Aegyptus et Pannonia VIII.

Acta Symposii anno 2021

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“Plants for Health from Ancient Egypt to Present Day” Conference and the HEFS AEC

DR. HEDVIG GYŐRY PHD
HEFT AEC president

After the realization of the 2019 mummy conference, the need arose to discuss the new trends, methodologies and achievements in ancient materia medica from a phytotherapeutic point of view and to disseminate the results achieved by our in-depth research. With this conference, we also wanted to explore how many different ways there are to approach ancient plants and medicine, also from historical, cultural, religious, ethnographic and pharmacological points of view, and to compare it with other related fields. We also wanted to draw attention to other areas of research into plants that maintain and improve health. In this way, contemporary and historical treatments were juxtaposed, Egyptian, Hittite, Greek, Roman and later European herbal medicine, to mention only the most important regions studied in these proceedings. The conference was held in two languages, English and Hungarian, but all the articles in the proceedings are English. We hope that this way we can bring these issues to the attention of as many people as possible.

This time we have chosen to discuss the plants used for health problems. A significant proportion of the substances in ancient Egyptian prescriptions are of plant origin. Reviewing and studying their effects and data can also provide new opportunities for the current pharmacopoeia. Our group of doctors thought that there was a lot of new knowledge to be gained in this area worldwide, and that the knowledge of plants is becoming increasingly important, if we only think of the research into pathogens, many of which have adapted to synthetic drugs. We need thus new materials to use to eliminate them, and earlier medical practices may lead to the discovery of new active substances that are important for people today. Knowledge of these active ingredients makes it possible to apply these drugs as new medicines in a consistent quantity and quality. On the other hand, there are also many places where conditions do not allow the use of drugs produced by modern technology, but nature can help patients with its often hidden treasures. In addition to pharmacological research, folk remedies studied by ethnomedicine

and historical medical research play an essential role in getting to know them.

The HEFS AEC partly organizes its activities in cooperation with other organizations – the above-mentioned international workshop of the Nephthys project in 2022 was co-organized by the Hungarian Natural History Museum, while this very conference took place in partnership with the HNM Semmelweis Museum of Medical History, whose members gave several lectures on historical medicine and modern ethnomedicine, and where a special chamber exhibition would have welcomed the participants in honour of the conference, if the COVID had not prevented the organization of a face-to-face meeting. Nevertheless, we were able to offer the possibility of discussions and consultations in special virtual chambers, allowing the exchange of professional experiences.

The HEFS AEC has published these new proceedings, this time in two volumes (Aegyptus et Pannonia VII-VIII), containing more than half of the papers presented at the conference: “Plants for Health from Ancient Egypt to Present Day”. As we focused on our main research topic in the Medical Research Group of the HEFC Ancient Egyptian Committee, we wondered what the scientific community thought about the ancient Egyptian use of plants in various fields of human and natural sciences, the continuity of related knowledge, and the implications and possibilities of these ancient practices for people today. We also wanted to present the ideas we had developed and the results we had achieved in the professional field, and to provide an opportunity for specialists to discuss different topics. In terms of the structure of the proceedings, we have returned to the previous method of the series, so that the articles are once again listed in alphabetical order of authors, rather than by subjects

THE HEFS ANCIENT EGYPTIAN COMMITTEE AND THE MEDICAL HISTORY

The HEFS, which has been operating since 1995, carries out several activities in the tradition of its earlier activities: the general programs focus on the last five thousand years, selecting interesting and important topics, while the work of the AEC is mainly directed in three directions. An important objective is (1) the cultural transmission and dissemination of knowledge about ancient Egyptian culture through lectures and public meetings for interested adults, also in the framework of the Hungexpo. We also organise (2) artistic and handicraft activities, workshops accompanied by discussions on various topics with children, launching every year a fine arts competition (drawing/painting), the results of which will be exhibited for the third time in January 2023 in the Deák 17 Children’s and Youth Art Gallery of the Budapest History Museum; and (3) following scientific and scholarly research into the use of ancient objects, human and animal remains – including an international event of the Nephthys Project in 2022 – and medical history, concentrated on phytotherapy and surgery.

As far as our material at the conference is concerned, we present here as a starting point our research focused primarily on the use of plants in surgery, if only because several members of the group are doctors from the Department of Surgical Research and Techniques at the Faculty of Medicine in Semmelweis University, Budapest. The first scientific results of this new direction are published of today's surgical tools and materials. Thus our conference papers focus on the ancient Egyptian surgery from the point of view of the application of plants in these volumes, but research is also being carried out in other areas. Firstly we present research in the direction that is mainly focused on comparative analysis, directed towards the ancestors surgical kit, the plant materials used for wound care and the general knowledge of ancient Egyptian surgeons, with a view to the surgical culture of other peoples and periods or the use of pharmacognostic knowledge. We have also considered it essential to investigate into possible reasons for the use of plants, which may allow us to consider modern phytotherapeutic applications.

Two other areas of our phytotherapy research are also represented in these volumes. The origin and treatment of various diseases throughout the world, and especially in ancient Egypt, is also an interesting topic. In this direction, we have chosen to focus one disease in particular. Diabetes is one of the most widespread diseases of our time, and we have chosen to study its ancient treatment methods. In this case, as in the case of surgery, we have compared several cultures to find out the ancient knowledge and problem-solving methods, and have pointed out herbs that are officially used in the world, or in Hungary.

Another problem of our time, seemingly far removed from the history of medicine, is the conservation and preservation of biodiversity, which is affected not only by climate change and other natural factors, but also by human activity. This phenomenon can be traced back even to ancient Egypt, although the process has accelerated in the last hundred years. One of our topics in this respect is presented here, showing how an ancient curiosity herb has become a plant of large-scale production in the 21st century, and saving this way the species from extinction.

A new direction of the group is the study of the history of Hungarian phytotherapy in partnership with the Semmelweis Museum for Medical History. We have just taken the first steps in this direction, but we can already say that the classical Roman authors, and the ancient Egyptian knowledge they transmitted also played an important role in official medical practice and influenced folk medicine in our country. It seems that the herbaria published in Hungarian language played a key role in this process.

The interweaving of contemporary and historical issues characterizes many of the articles in the volumes. At the same time, mutual influences, shifts of emphasis and reinterpretations within the ancient world, or elements of later historical periods that reach into the past or present, play a prominent role. In this field, it is essential to collect and examine the sources from a new perspective in order to obtain a clearer picture of certain details of the past. Historical, artistic, literary, religious, economic, museological, pharmaceutical, phytotherapeutic, ethnobotanical or even chemical points of view appear in individual articles. It has been proven that the ingredients listed in many of the ancient Egyptian recipes studied so far can still be used as effective medicines today.

This volume contains 16 contributions on the role of drug use in different periods. There are chapters on the reconstruction of some ancient Egyptian remedies, on the ancient method prescribed for the preparation of antjw ointment, or on the preparation and action of kyphi, and pelargonium, traced through biochemical and experimental research; Others are devoted to the materia medica used in Hungary over the centuries, or to the comparison of contemporary Egyptian folk medicine and pharaonic materia medica in the field of gynaecology; another is devoted to studies on the possible identification of magical Egyptian plant names with a dominant connection to the moon, or to the ritual and non-ritual use of some plant substances with religious names in Egypt. Others relate to the popular treatment of diseases such as tuberculosis and cholera in Hungary, or which edible plants have been identified in Coptic medical therapies. Sedative plants are also featured in the current volume, and a plant closely associated with a butterfly is discussed. Another article focuses on the pomegranate, with its many meanings as a symbol of fertility and female power. Yet another focuses on the worldwide surgical use of plants, while others discuss the balance between practical and religious beliefs in the use of medicinal plants. The pop-up exhibition for the conference is briefly introduced, hinting at the museological aspect of medical history.

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“YOU CANNOT JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS COVER”. CONSIDERATIONS ON SOME PLANTS IN THE PHARAONIC MEDICAL LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Egyptian pharmacopoeia consists of many ingredients still unclear, especially the vegetal components. Albeit scholars do not know exactly the species of many plants, the application of some of them can be recognised as ritual. Generally, two clues suggest a correlation with magic: 1) in formulas reporting mythological events, the ingredients quoted in the myth are recalled in the final *rubrum*; 2) the presence of vegetal species directly linked to gods: plants are used in replacement of the deity connected to them. Moving along these two general clues, this paper aims at analysing individual case studies to discuss the actual use of these ingredients, to better understand how the ancient Egyptians took advantage of magic in the medical practice.

KEY WORDS: plant, medical practice, magic, *rubrum*, ritual, *bbd.w-k3*, *snw*, *šw.t-nmti*, emic perspective

INTRODUCTION

Because of the many extant problems related to the correct identification of illnesses and ingredients, our modern comprehension of this feature of the ancient Egyptian culture is still partial. In particular, the large use of vegetal components named with several nomenclatures, including specific parts of the plant, does not permit an accurate identification of the correspondences between the ancient Egyptian terms and modern denominations of plants. Even though some studies crossing Egyptian philology, modern medicine, and pharmacy have been conducted,¹ there is still no clear evidence allowing us to

¹ See e.g. BARDINET 1988, 3-36; BARDINET 1999a, 11-23; BARDINET 1999b, 23-41; POMMERENING 2010b, 153-174; POMMERENING 2010c, 132-137; POMMERENING 2016, 82-111.

eradicate our many doubts. Moreover, despite the great amount of religious, cultural, and magical references, there are thus far no studies concerning the ritual aspects of pharaonic medicine.² To fill this gap in the research, I wrote a PhD dissertation entitled *To Fight the Supernatural, between Medicine and Ritual Practice: A New Approach to the Understanding of the New Kingdom Medical Papyri*, focusing on the analysis of the New Kingdom medical papyri under an emic and ritual perspective, in order to investigate all the magical and religious elements quoted therein. Furthermore, this study was also extended to better understand the use of drugs in spells and remedies against supernatural beings. Some components, normally employed therapeutically, in some particular cases acquired also a ritual value.³ This paper offers the chance to focus the attention on some specific plants whose names are related to deities, examining texts from the Middle Kingdom to the Roman Period, thus extending the time span of the analysis I have pursued in my PhD dissertation.

HOW TO RECOGNISE A PLANT USED FOR RITUAL PURPOSES?

The Egyptian pharmacopoeia consists of many ingredients, especially the vegetal ones. Depending on the occasion, these components can be used for both medical or ritual purposes.⁴

The first hint to this latter use can be found when an ingredient, quoted in a magical formula telling a mythological event, is repeated in the final *rubrum* explaining the correct posology.⁵ This repetition can be detected in two parallel texts of the Ebers Papyrus (no. 811) and the Louvre Papyrus E32847 (rt. x+10,6-11), about a conjuration relating to a breast illness.⁶ Here, Isis uses four plants to cast a spell chasing away the malignant influence of

2 Only brief studies on specific remedies and spells have been published, e.g. GOEDICKE 1984, 91-105; GYÖRY 2002, 47-56; GYÖRY 2005, 134-139; GYÖRY 2011, 151-166; GYÖRY 2013, 1-16; POMMERENING 2015, 2083-2095; POMMERENING 2017, 519-526.

3 For an overview, see URZÌ 2022, 89-115.

4 For this topic, see DEINES – GRAPOW 1959.

5 The term indicates red writing at the beginning of a recipe or a magic formula consisting in an explanation of the purposes of the remedy. It can be found also in the middle part of the recipe to describe the diagnosis or to underline the quantity of the ingredients to be used (posology); again, the *rubrum* can occur also in the end of a formula, especially in conjurations, where the scribe illustrates how to use the ingredients after the invocation has been recited.

6 A similar structure can be found in a mythological tale about the so-called "*Canaanite illness*": in the formula, there are references about something black and then, in the final *rubrum*, a blackish substance is used (pHearst no. 170). As for the invocations, there is one against the increase of water into the eyes: malachite is quoted in the spell and then in the final *rubrum* (pEbers no. 385 = pLouvre E 32847, vso. 22,5-7); the same structure is attested in a formula against the *rš-cold* where the milk of a woman (who gave birth to a male) and gum resin appear (pEbers no. 763).

the dead: *īr*, *snb*, *sw.t*, and *ib.t*. The repetition of the names of these plants in the final *rubrum* could indicate the will of reproducing in the therapeutic action the mythological event where Isis performs an incantation. Further, is it possible to gain information regarding these herbs, beyond their ritual use? Since these plants have a few attestations in the medical *corpus*, their uses are therefore limited. As for the *īr*-plant, a link between its name and the Egyptian Afterlife (the “*Iaru Fields*”) is very likely;⁷ beyond this particular spell, there is unfortunately no other evidence of such a ritual use.⁸ The *snb*-plant (literary “*health*”), quoted only in these two parallel passages, is connected to the sanctuaries of Buto and Khemmis, and is said to be opposite to the *sw.t*-plant;⁹ further data are irretrievable. Similarly, there is no further information about the *ib.t*-plant.

The second clue for a supposed ritual use of plants can be noticed when the ingredients are applied in replacement of the deity they are related to: a good example is the *bbd.w-k3*-plant, connected to Seth’s testicles when he turns into a bull, as written in the Jumilhac Papyrus.¹⁰ Thus, it is reasonable to think that the ingredient recalls the action of Seth as the lord of demons, summoned to chase away any malignant entity. In another remedy to be ingested to chase away a *nsy.t*-demon (pBerlin 3038 no. 111) this plant is applied with a clear reference to Seth. What about other uses? The *bbd.w-k3*-plant is quoted 14 other times: unfortunately, none of these remedies seems to have a link with the ritual sphere. More in detail, this plant is mentioned once in a remedy taken rectally to *dr t3.w hr ph.wyt hr špty.t*, “*to chase away the heat in the rectum (and) in the bladder*” (pEbers no. 139); twice in two different passages about bandages used to *dr šn^c m r3-ib*, “*to chase away an obstruction in the opening of the digestive tract*” (pEbers no. 208; pEbers no. 213);¹¹ once in a formula describing a bandage intended to *sgnn šw.t n.t mt.w*, “*to weaken the šw.t-swelling(?) of the mt.w-vessels*” (pEbers no. 660);¹² once in another recipe

7 CHARPENTIER 1981, 46, no. 71.

8 The ingredient is used in an ointment to heal a skin disease called *wh3.w* (pEbers no. 109), in a bandage to treat a wound on the breast (pEbers no. 494 = pLondon 10059 no. 50, according to the numeration of Leitz 1999), and in a remedy with a single ingredient to treat the consequences of a blow (pHearst no. 91).

9 CHARPENTIER 1981, 592, no. 960. As for the other links between the *snb*-plant, the religious sphere, and Khemmis, see KOEMOTH 1992, 33-43.

10 WESTENDORF 1999, 498; POMMERENING 2015, 2092. As for a philological comment about the name of the plant, see POMMERENING 2010a, 40-54.

11 As for the interpretation of the term *r3-ib*, see Dr. Lutz Popko: *Papyrus Ebers*. In: *Science in Ancient Egypt*. URL: <https://sae.saw-leipzig.de/de/dokumente/papyrus-ebers#section-7> (in particular footnote 1, last access 10/10/2022).

12 As for the interpretation of the term *šw.t* in pEbers no. 659 and, consequently, in pEbers no. 660,

about a bandage to *gnn mt.w*, “to soften the *mt.w*-vessels” (pEbers no. 663); twice in other bandages to heal the *st.t* causing pain in the arms and trembles to the fingers (pEbers no. 856f; pBerlin 3038 no. 163f); once to heal a *ḥnhn.t*-tumour (pEbers no. 858c); once in a bandage to *snḏm mt.w n s3ḥ*, “to revive the *mt.w*-vessels of the toe” (pHearst no. 117); again in a bandage to *dr sd3.w m db3.w*, “to drive away the tremble of the fingers” (pHearst no. 205); once in an ointment to *dr šmm.t*, “to drive away the *šmm.t*-rush” (pBerlin 3038 no. 83); interestingly, also twice in two pregnant tests (pBerlin 3038 no. 193; pBerlin 3038 no. 194), and once in a remedy without a specific therapeutic indication (Ram. IV, Fragment C, Col. C1-C12, Case 13). These data are noteworthy, since we can draw from them two preliminary conclusions helping us to better understand the Egyptian *modus operandi* in medicine: 1) the ancient Egyptians used these ingredients for both medical and magical purposes; 2) a plant usually attested in rituals could have been also considered useful to other goals, besides the proper ritual sphere.

The third hint to the sacredness of some plants is given when we find myths related to them. Among these plants, we can list the *snw*, identified by Thierry Bardinnet as the *Vitex agnus-castus* L., along with its seeds, earlier called *srw* and later *ḥnh-ḥm.y*.¹³ Bardinnet, in his edition of the Louvre Papyrus E32847, divides the mythological tale into five chapters, according to the *rubrum* opening each section. The first part (rt. x+13,1-11) is about the origin of the plant in a land called *Hḥt* (thus, outside Egypt), and its description. The text explains the mythological origin of the herb and the connection between its black seeds and the eye of Horus through which Osiris is able to see. The second paragraph (rt. x+13,12-14,8) lists the properties of the *snw*-plant; it is also noteworthy that we can find in this section the first attestation of a kind of botanomancy in Egypt;¹⁴ then, the text provides other details about the link between the plant and Osiris. The third paragraph (rt. x+14,8-21) is incomplete, but there is surely a mention to incantations where this plant is used as an ingredient. The fourth paragraph (rt. x+14,21-15,10) offers a further geographical information about the origin of the *snw*-plant and another prescription, in a very lacunose passage. Unfortunately, also the last paragraph (rt. x+15,10-16,9) has many *lacunae* and the whole context results unintelligible. However, at the end of these paragraphs, called by Bardinnet “Préambule du livre des tumeurs de Khonsu”, there are a remedy and an incantation, where the *ḥnh-ḥm.y* seems to be blessed.¹⁵ Besides this text,

see Dr. Lutz Popko: *Papyrus Ebers*. In: *Science in Ancient Egypt*. URL: <https://sae.saw-leipzig.de/de/dokumente/papyrus-ebers?version=172> (last access 27/12/2021).

13 BARDINET 2013, 33-78. See also AUFRÈRE 1987, 31-35. As for the *ḥnh-ḥm.y*, Sydney Aufrère identifies it as the white lotus, see AUFRÈRE 1999, 128.

14 rt. x+13,17.

15 The custom to bless ingredients is not unusual; in Ebers, Hearst, and Louvre papyri four

what about other references to the *ḥn-īm.y* in different sources? How was this plant used? We have only four further attestations: a bandage to *ḥm bz.w*, “to remove(?) a swelling” (pBerlin 3038 no. 53); a remedy to be ingested, without any further specification (pBerlin 3038 no. 204); two ointments to safeguard the house (pCairo 58027 IV A 5; B 4). Although the *bbd.w-k3*-plant and the *snw* (along with its seeds *ḥn-īm.y*) are reported in mythological tales, while for the former a specific ritual use is attested, for the latter this evidence of a ritual purpose lacks. We could eventually suppose (by analysing the name of the plant’s seed, meaning “the life which is in”) a similar use also for the two ointments described before (pCairo 58027 IV A 5; B 4), but data are unluckily not sufficient to confirm this hypothesis.

PLANTS WITH NAMES LINKED TO THE DIVINE SPHERE

Among the several vegetal ingredients,¹⁶ only three plants’ names explicitly recall the divine sphere. The first of these herbs, called *ntr*, “god”, is quoted only three times in medical recipes: once in a remedy where the plant is eaten to *srwh šnb.t*, “to treat the breast” (pEbers no. 184), and twice in bandages for the *psh n rmt*, “human bite” (pEbers 434; pLouvre E 32847, rt. x+7,21-8,1). Unfortunately, a specific ritual use of this plant cannot be recognised in any of these cases.

The second plant, called *s3-3s.t*, “Isis’s protection”, is attested only twice in medical-magical texts: once after an incantation to give favour to a man towards a woman and vice versa (pLondon-Leiden XII, 21-31): in this case, it is not possible to understand if the name refers to an amulet with the image of the goddess or to a plant; the second attestation concerns an ointment to safeguard the house (pCairo 58027, IV A 5): because of the scantiness of evidence, it is not clear if the plant, whose name could recall the purpose of the ingredient, was used for ritual or medical aims.

The last plant is the *šw.t-nmti*, “the Nemti’s feather”,¹⁷ attested nine times for sheer medical goals: once in a remedy to be ingested to *ḥdb pnd*, “to kill an intestinal worm” (pEbers no. 79); once in a remedy to be eaten by a *z mn=f ḥnt m tp=f, st.t m nḥb.t=f*, “a man who is ill: (there is) a *ḥnt*-cold in his head and (there is) a *st.t* in his neck” (pEbers no. 299); once in another remedy ingested to *srwh mt.(w) m gs i3b*, “to treat the *mt.w*-vessels in the left part (of the body)” (pEbers no. 631); once in a bandage to *wh^c snḥt.w m^c.t nb.t*, “to loose the rigidities in any part of the body” (pEbers no. 669); once in a remedy chewed

blessing formulae for very common ingredients exist: on malachite (pEbers no. 385 = pLouvre E 32847, vso. 22,5–7); on oil/fat (pHearst no. 214); on honey (pHearst no. 215); on *dsr.t*-beer (pHearst no. 216).

16 The total amount of terms relating to plants or parts of them is 193.

17 As for the correct reading of the name, see GRAEFE 1975, 15-20.

and then spit out to *srwḥ ibḥ.w*, “to treat the teeth” (pEbers no. 745); once in a bandage to *srwḥ gs imn.y m rwy.t*, “to treat the right part (of the body which has) a *rwy.t*-illness” (pEbers no. 758); once in a remedy to be ingested for a *sš n ḥb t3.w*, “a nest of motion (of the) heat” (pBerlin 3038 no. 155); twice in remedies to be ingested to *sin s3.y=f wdnw ḥ.t r=f*, “to hasten his fullness, the belly is weighed down because of it” (pBerlin 3038 no. 157; pBerlin 3038 no. 160).

Considering all these data, we can conclude that these plants (despite their name) retained no ritual value and they possibly just acquired a nomenclature referred to a deity.

CONCLUSIONS

On the one hand, we can conclude that some plants were clearly used for ritual purposes; on the other hand, other vegetal ingredients (connected to the divine sphere because of their name) were not always used with ritual purposes; moreover, the lack of definitive information in this respect does not allow us to get into further details. Nevertheless, it seems that the names of plants linked to deities do not determinate automatically their affinity to the magical-ritual sphere. Eventually, we could even assume that popular names for plants (maybe inspired from their specific shapes or features) were used by the ancient Egyptians, as today for the “Madonna lily” (*Lilium candidum* L.), the “St. James-wort” (*Jacobaea vulgaris* Gaertn., 1791), or the “Christ’s thorn” (*Paliurus spina-christi* Mill., 1775 and *Ziziphus spina-Christi* (L.) Desf.). Unfortunately, and this is indeed the most serious problem to deal with, the lacking in data and the unclearness of some terms make it very difficult to understand which vegetal species these herbs actually belonged to.

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