

Aegyptus et Pannonia VIII.



Acta Symposií anno 2021

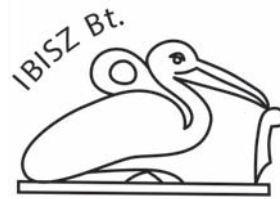
BUDAPEST

Aegyptus et Pannonia VIII.

Acta Symposii anno 2021

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CONTENTS

Plants for Health from Ancient Egypt to Present Day” Conference and the HEFS AEC by Hedvig Gyóry.....	1
Maravelia, Alicia – Faviou, Elsa – Filianos, Markos Medicinal and Pharmaceutical Properties of the Kyphi (and of the Orthodox Holy Chrism): A Microbiological Approach.....	7
Munguía Girón, Francisco José Myth and Facts on Calotropis Procera: an Overview	43
Petrovics, Alica – Ferencz, Andrea – Fehér, Daniella – Blázovics, Anna – Gyóry, Hedvig Medical Activity in Ancient Egypt: Effectiveness and Magical Aspect.....	63
Sawy, Mona Hassan Ahmed The Edible Plants for Healing in Coptic Documents.....	109
Scheffer, Krisztina “Let every man keep ready at home “ Excerpts from the Possibilities of Curing Cholera during the First Epidemic, 1831	127
Skesters, Andrejs – Kustovs, Dmitrijs – Lece, Anna Impact of Pelargonium Sidoides on Periodontal Inflammation and Improvement of Oral Health.....	143
Sridi, Yasmine “Remedy Preparation” Skills of Egyptian Physicians: Plants Transformations, Vehicles and Galenics	157
Szabó, Katalin “The Wound of the Lung is Healing very Difficult ...” Herbal Experiments for the Treatment of TB and Alleviating its Symptoms	175

Szima, Viktória Materia Medica in the 18 th Century. Medicinal Ingredients and Complex Medicines in Historical Hungary.....	187
Szabóné, Erzsébet Révész Herbs in Wound Care from Ancient Times to the Present Day	201
Unger, Juliane Plants for Healing in Papyrus Brooklyn 47.218.75+.86	223
Urzi, Elena “You Cannot Judge a Book by Its Cover”. Considerations on Some Plants in the Pharaonic Medical Literature.....	239
Vadas, Réka The Making of antjw-myrrh Ointment in Ancient Egyptian Temples. A (Not So) Practical Guide.....	247
Vámos, Gabriella Herbarium and Pop-up Exhibition.....	255
Venice Ibrahim Shehatta Attia Some Sedative Plants in Ancient Egypt: Egyptian Blue Lotus, Hemp, Mandrake & Opium Poppy.....	259
Vymazalová, Hana The Treatment of Women in Egypt: Ancient and Modern Herbal Approaches.....	299
Webb, Virginia E. S. Pomegranates: What a Varied Voyage They Took	311

“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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The editors of these volumes would like to thank again all the organizations and individuals who made the conference and the publication of these volumes possible, as well as the speakers, the members of the Organizing and Scientific Committees, the secretary of the conference, and the technical assistance, i.e. all those who contributed to the realization of the conference and who have contributed with their knowledge to these volumes. Special thanks are also due to the authors of the papers for their work and cooperation.

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HERBARIUM AND POP-UP EXHIBITION

GABRIELLA VÁMOS

HNM Semmelweis Museum for Medical History

At the HNM Semmelweis Museum for Medical History, preparations began in May 2021 for the creation of a herb garden that well represents the rich collection of plants also used in Hungarian (folk) medicine. As a result, a Herbarium was completed by October 2021, in which interested people could meet hyssop (*Hyssopus officinalis*), purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*), several varieties of mint (*Menta sp.*), spear plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*), medicinal sage (*Salvia officinalis*), common comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*), swallowwort (*Chelidonium majus*), white wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*) and sneezewort yarrow (*Achillea ptarmica*).



For the opening of the Herbarium, when the “Plant for Health” conference started, a showcase pop-up exhibition was prepared as part of the permanent exhibition, within the framework of which visitors could learn about several tools used to process medicinal herbs, plant-based medicines, and beauty products. During the preparation of the exhibition, it quickly became

clear that several collections of the museum are extremely rich in objects related to medicinal plants. From the varied material, we have selected those that have not, or have rarely, been exposed to an interested public. Now, I will present these objects.

The preparation of medicinal herbs requires precision and expertise in both traditional and pharmaceutical practices. A mortar produced around 1830 was connected to this process; it was suitable for breaking plant parts. There is also an herb drying cabinet among our rarely seen items that pharmacists used in officine to prepare the plants they wanted to apply. The practical view of the folk practice is revealed by the camomile comb (*Matricaria chamomilla*), which was used to pick the plant more easily in the 19th and 20th centuries, but is still popular today.



Among the medicinal plants that have been known for centuries, we could see the dried deadly nightshade (*Atropa bella-donna*) leaf, called literally “beautiful woman”, from which in the 16th century the medicine was prepared, which also made the eyes of Venetian women shine. The dried poppy (*Papaver somniferum*) capsule had to be handled with care, as it has a high opium content in its green form, thus the scald of the product was also used in folk medicine to calm children. Oak (*Quercus* sp.) bark was again known in folk practice, as its tea was used internally for stomach problems and hepatitis, while externally for the treatment of stings and bites. A commonly used drug was also the male-fern (*Dryopteris filix-mas*), the vernacular name of which

is wormfern which reflects the anthelmintic property of the constituents of the rhizomes. The common horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*) has remained in the public consciousness as a folk medicinal herb to treat coughs and respiratory inflammations or against loss of appetite and minor indigestion. No doubt, however, that it was the candy of pharmacist Béla Réthy (1862–1935) that made it known and still popular.

Collecting medicinal herbs requires thorough professional knowledge and plant-lore. Moreover, many stories about poisonings and therapies gone awry remained. We tried to convey the reason with the depictions of the spotted hemlock (*Cicuta maculata*) and the common anise (*Pimpinella anisum*). The two plants are easily confused, and while anise can be used as a digestive and carminative, spotted hemlock is highly poisonous.

We did not forget the beauty care products containing medicinal herbs either. For presenting them, we have selected objects from the demanding holders, boxes and porcelain jars of soaps containing lily of the valley (*Convallaria majalis*) and lavender (*Levandula sp.*), which plants are popular because of their fragrant flowers. The powder box containing the American lily (*Lilium sp.*) was included in the showcase not only because of its aesthetic value, but also because with it, we wanted to draw attention to the fact that the healing effect of lilies has been known since ancient times. Lavender was also used as an air freshener, as evidenced by the bottle of a product that survived from the beginning of the 20th century. Among the oils made from herbs, the essential oil produced by distillation from rose (*Rosa damascene* or *R. centifolia*) petals was one of the most expensive wound healing and anti-inflammatory agents. We presented two of the containers used for rose-oil storage.



The collection of knowledge concerning plants can be observed since ancient times, and we tried to draw attention to this by presenting the work of the physician József Szádler (1791–1849) “*A collection of dried Hungarian plants*”, 1824. The pill Digalen made from red foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*), which appeared on the pharmaceutical market in 1904 for the treatment of heart failure, was connected to this theme.

Medicinal plants also appear on the pieces of numismatic collections, which we also wanted to present. This is why two commemorative medals made by Kálmán Kövesházi and Mária Osváth resp. are displayed, as well as two other commemorative medals made for the 1803 exhibition of the Paris School of Pharmacy and the 1921 exhibition of the Medicinal and Industrial Plant Trade Office.

Brief we can say, that the pop-up exhibition wanted to present a selection that draws attention to the fact that the use of medicinal plants has played an important role in both lay and officially recognized healing practices for centuries.



