

THE THERAPEUTICAL VALUE OF THE MEDICINAL PLANTS IN THE RESPIRATORY DISEASES*

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Abstract: The present study, based on the information supplied by the performers from Oltenia, obtained after the personal field research, focuses on the traditional remedies and treatments, in order to underline the efficiency of the herbs and wild plants, in the prophylaxis and the treatment of different diseases, especially the respiratory ones.

In the first part of it, there was analysed the role of the ancient healer, accentuating the identification of what caused the disease, with the purpose of finding the appropriate cure. There was evidenced, as well, the protective role owned by the amulets and talismans, along with the magical valences that they were given. The traditional remedies, the therapeutical virtues of the medicinal plants have been known and appreciated since ancient times.

In the second part, the one of the investigation, there was reproduced, based on our field research, a rich recipe recording, which proves and confirms the variety of the cures used for treating the respiratory conditions. These plant-based remedies are simple or consisting of mixture cures. For instance, some mixtures for treating the respiratory diseases include medicinal plants, alcohol and products of the beehive. The properties of the medicinal plants, the beneficial effects for the health of the human body, determined the dwellers of Oltenia to become aware of their necessity and the importance of their consumption, even nowadays.

Keywords: remedies, healer, pulmonary conditions, healing, Oltenia.

Since ancient times, health and sickness have represented a major preoccupation of the humankind. It ought to be considered the fact that the art of healing with the help of the traditional medical remedies has an old and rich tradition. The man, along the times, has been aware of the therapeutical qualities of the plants and the extractive solutions obtained from them, the beehive products¹,

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¹ See Loredana-Maria Ilin-Grozoiu, *The contribution of hive products in the prophylaxis and treatment of diseases*, in “The Journal of Romanian Literary Studies”, editor Iulian Boldea, no. 21, Published by: “Arhipelag XXI” Press, Tîrgu Mureș, pp. 1211–1218.

the qualities of the wine and the vineyard products², of the vinegar and other “spirited products”, of vegetables, fruits and grains, of the animal resulted products, of the mineral and thermal water, and, furthermore, of the salt. Amongst the therapeutical methods used since ancient times, the disenchantments ought to be mentioned, along the magic charms and the spells, which are cultural forms, based on magic. Moreover, the amulets and talismans were given apotropaic and magical valences as well.

The ancient healer was not preoccupied with the name of the disease, but the circumstances that contributed to its occurring. After identifying the agent that had caused the sickness, the healer would find the appropriate cure. There was a tight connection between the man and the nature. Thus, the healer had to consider: the influence of the seasons, the winds and the waters. These observations would contribute to offering some indications referring to the recovery of the sick person³. On addressing the collective mentality, the experience of the healer or the sorcerer-doctor was the primordial condition for the ill to have a chance to heal.

Since the oldest times, the man has found cures and treatments for different diseases in the nature around them. Due to the abundance and accessibility to plants, the vegetal products obtained from them have been used in the prophylaxis and the treatment of diverse diseases. Using the plants as food, the man observed that, besides the consumption qualities, it also had healing virtues. Thus, after consumption, the people realised that each plant had a specific role for the human body, and, when needing, for the healing of injuries and the comforting of pain caused by them, therefore using the plant as remedy. Known and used as medicines, the medicinal and aromatic plants that are found in nature have efficient therapeutic valences for digestive, cardiovascular, respiratory, blood, hepato-biliary, nervous-system etc. conditions⁴.

The oldest proofs that refer to the traditional therapy that use plants, and to the belief of the people in superstitions related to the herbs and wild-growing plants healing come from the Sumerians and the Assyrians. Valuable information on the healthcare, the curative effect of the plants originated from Mesopotamia, Egypt and China. The plant treatment for the sicknesses was oftentimes associated with invocations addressed to the divinity, magical practices and charms. In the Egyptian papyrus discovered at Ebers, from 1550 BCE, there were found approximately 200 species of plants used for healing the diseases and there were recorded remedies that combined three types of plants.

In the ancient Greek and Roman world, amongst those who referred to the naturist medicine of the time, there can be mentioned: Theophrastus, Dioscorides,

² See Idem, *Acknowledged traditional remedies and treatments with medicinal wine*, in “Anuarul Institutului de Cercetări Socio-Umane “C.S. Nicolăescu-Ploșor”, no. XXI/2020, pp. 63–70.

³ Pamfil Bilțiu, *Contribuții la cercetarea etnoiatriei în Maramureș*, in “Memoria Ethnologica”, no. 58–59, 2016, p. 52.

⁴ See Loredana-Maria Ilin-Grozoiu, *Contribuții la cercetarea medicinei populare din Oltenia*, in “Arhivele Olteniei”, New Series, nr. 35/2020, pp. 293–304.

Plinius Secundus, Hippocrates of Kos, etc. The latter one mentioned asserted that the aliments represent remedies for being healthy, and the remedies are the aliments themselves. Hippocrates, coryphaeus of the ancient medicine, was mentioning, in the work called *Corpus Hippocraticum*, the beneficial effects, for the human body, of the medicinal plants used as teas, powder, cataplasm, tinctures, decocts, and, similarly, macerate products. The focus of his analysis is represented by the healing power of the nature, recommending, for instance, the honey and the bee venom in treating certain internal and external diseases. Moreover, the Ancient Greek physician was naming the vinegar as remedy for the respiratory system diseases.

In the Romanian cultural space, information on the natural remedies used for healing originate from the Antiquity. Herodotus, Pomponius Mela, Clemens of Alexandria, Iordanes, Plato etc. inform us on the fact that the Dacians were familiarized with the healing powers of the plants⁵. The Greek physician, Pedanios Dioscorides from Anazarba, in his work called *De materia medica* (1st Century CE), mentioned the Dacian names used for the medicinal plants commercialised in the cities of Callitis and Tomis. Moreover, Dioscorides, in his work, *On healing means*, published in 77, described 600 species of medicinal plants, among which 40 species were specific for the territory of Dacia: 27 plants had Dacian-Thracian names, 8 were Latin and 5 were Greek⁶.

In the next century, Pseudo-Apuleius, in his work called *De medica minibus herbarum* offered information on other 37 plants that had beneficial effects on the human body, used by the Dacians⁷. The botanist brought forward the medicinal plants with Dacian names, commercialised in the cities of Callatis and Tomis.

The Getae-Dacians were using, in the treatment of the diseases, products obtained from the organs of some animals. Solinus (3rd century CE), mentioned that certain organs of the otter were “looked for, in order to be used as medicine”⁸. Consequently, the Getae-Dacians, in healing diseases, had advanced knowledge not only in phytotherapy, but also in organo-therapy that are based on the principle *similia similibus curantur*: if the sickness is caused by an animal, the treatment is prepared using animal parts. In Dacia, there was a sacerdotal medicine, practiced by priest-doctors, and a laic medicine, having a significant empirical character. The priest-doctors were divided into two categories: the ones who were living among the commoners and were providing them with medical assistance, and, the second category, those who would live in forests or in the mountainous areas, the hermits. The Getae-Dacians used to practice the disenchantment as well, a proof of that being the Thracian tablets, on which there was written Orpheus’ words, kept in sanctuaries from the mountains of Rhodope and Haemus. Furthermore, the Dacians

⁵ See Petre Barău, *Autorii antici despre cunoștințele asupra naturii ale geto-dacilor*, in “Buridava. Studii și materiale”, 3, 1979, pp. 18–21.

⁶ G. C. Mazăre, *Plantele medicinale în spațiul carpato-danubiano-pontic*, in “Bucovina Forestieră”, no. 19/2019, p. 47.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ Petre Barău, *art. cit.*, p. 20.

believed in the efficiency of the evil-eye spell. Against it, it was requested the help of the snake, or there were used amulets having the shape of an animal. Goddess Bendis was a healing powers divinity, mistress of the spells and remedies⁹.

In the centuries that followed, the Romanian medicine was the Romanian traditional medicine. In the Middle Ages, there appeared the first documents written in Romanian that attest the usage of the remedies in curing most varied diseases, both internal and external: *Psaltirea Scheiană* (1515), *Sanitatis studium* (1551), *Herbarium* (1578), *Lexicul slkavo-român* (sec. XVII), *Pravila lui Matei Basarab* (1652).

In the Middle Ages, there are found recommendations on the empirical medicine in the miscellany manuscripts from the 16th century, considered the oldest text of medical folklore from the Romanian space. This traditional medicine text, whose content is especially rich and varied, is based on the work of Dioscorides, called *De materia medica*. They have therapeutic indications against: stomach ache, tooth ache, ear ache, fever, dog bites, cough, heart or spleen diseases etc. The main purpose of this fragment of traditional medicine writing is that to help and protect the man against sickness, this medical information offering evidence on the medical habits and the spiritual culture of the Romanian traditional community from the Middle Ages.

Particularly interesting, there are also the traditional medicine fragments from *The Manuscript from Hodoș* (the 4th and the 5th century) and *The Medical Manuscript from Variuș* (the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century)¹⁰.

For describing traditional practices of prevention, combating and healing of the illnesses, we are to consider the ethnographic space from Oltenia, basing the information resulted from our recent field research. The questions from the survey on the popular medicine offer especially interesting evidence referring to the beliefs and superstitions used for preventing sickness, empirical procedures for treating the diseases, the specificity of the traditional medicine from Oltenia, and, not last, it helps in understanding the mentality and it can bring contributions to the knowledge of our national identity.

In Oltenia, as in the entire Romanian space, phytotherapy has been an important means for treating the respiratory diseases. Based on the field research carried out in Oltenia, and the analysis of the specialised literature, there have been evidenced quite a lot of medicinal plants used most frequently in the prophylaxis and the treatment of the respiratory conditions.

In the empirical phytotherapy, from the researched area, the paddock-pipe decoction is used for pulmonary tuberculosis: "I know from my mother-in-law that,

⁹ Referring to the Getae-Dacian medicine, see: Gabriel: Barbu, Gheorghe Brătescu, Vasile Manoliu: *Aspects du passé de la médecine dans la République Populaire Roumaine*, Bucharest, 1957; Nicolae Vătămanu, Gheorghe Brătescu, *O istorie a medicinei*, Bucharest Albatros Press, 1975; Nicolae Vătămanu, *Originile medicinei românești*, Bucharest, Medicală Publishing, 1979.

¹⁰ See Dușița Ristin, *Fragmentele de medicină populară din manuscrisele slavone din Banat*, in "Romaoslavica", vol. XLVI, no. 3, 2010, pp. 103–112.

in pulmonary tuberculosis, it is drunk paddock-pipe decoction. A spoonful of the dried plant is boiled for ten minutes, it is strained, and, twice a day, after meals, there are drunk two mugs of it. The cure takes three weeks, and then, after a break, it is consumed again. This tea is also good if one has kidney problems or stomach ulcer¹¹; “Against pulmonary tuberculosis, there is prepared a paddock-pipe macerate produce: in one litter of water, there are added six spoonsful of dried paddock-pipe, finely chopped, and it is left until the next morning, when it is filtered. The remained plant is boiled in a litter of water, for five minutes, and it is then strained. The two preparations are mixed together, and drunk as three mugs a day, after meals. The produce is also good against infections and heart diseases¹²; “In pulmonary infections, the paddock-pipe powder is efficient. The plant is grinded and a spoonful of the produce is consumed three times a day, on an empty stomach. A cure lasts for two weeks. It is also good for bones and teeth¹³. Moreover, multiple uses come from the dried stalks of paddock-pipe, elder flowers and juniper fruit: “There are used equal quantities of dried stalk paddock-pipe, elder flowers and juniper fruit and it is made a decoction, from which there are drunk three mugs a day, against pneumonia and kidney sand. It is made a break after two weeks¹⁴.

At Izimșea, Mehedinți County, for pulmonary insufficiency, it is recommended the macerate produce and decoction of burdock root¹⁵; at Lunca, Gorj County, the burdock root powder prevents and fights against pulmonary infections, and it is used in hepatic conditions, fever, arthritis and epilepsy¹⁶.

Using a produce based on a macerate produce made of dwarf elder roots, the dwellers from Stoicești, Dolj County treat pulmonary diseases: “Against respiratory problems, it is efficient if one drinks a cold macerate product made of dwarf elder roots: in a mug with water, there is added a tea-spoonful of chopped dwarf elder root. It is strained through a thick gauze cloth, and it is drunk on an empty stomach. It is also good for the stomach and in renal infections. The dwarf elder root powder is also consumed. A tea-spoonful, twice a day¹⁷; “In a litter of high-alcohol brandy, made by me in my alembic, there are macerated, for five days, two spoonsful of fresh dwarf elder root. It is filtered then, and it is consumed as two spoonsful before each meal. The cure lasts for two weeks, and then it is made a break of one week. This macerate ruins your appetite, and it is also good if you have pains in your bones or teeth¹⁸.

Natural remedies in treating pulmonary conditions are also the preparations based on fir-tree buds: “In two litters of water, there is boiled a kilo of fresh fir-tree

¹¹ Informer Constanța Tulbea, 65 years old, locality of Greci, Olt County, 2021.

¹² Informer Elena Barnea, 80 years old, locality of Gârlești, Dolj County, 2020.

¹³ Informer Doina Dinu, 74 years old, locality of Ploșoru, Gorj County, 2021.

¹⁴ Informer Elena Toma, 87 years old, locality of Silea, Vâlcea County, 2020.

¹⁵ Informer Hermina Sârbu, 73 years old, locality of Izimșea, Mehedinți County, 2020.

¹⁶ Informer Viorica Sârbu, 82 years old, locality of Lunca, Gorj County, 2020.

¹⁷ Informer Maria Luță, 90 years old, locality of Stoicești, Dolj County, 2021.

¹⁸ Informer Ana Ungureanu, 71 years old, locality of Gubandru, Olt County, 2020.

buds. When it is chilled, there is added a kilo of honey. It is boiled for other ten minutes, it is strained and the syrup is preserved in corked bottles, in a chilly place. Before every meal, there are consumed three spoonful of syrup. It can also be added in water or tea. The cure lasts for two weeks. This syrup is also good for stomach aches¹⁹; “In lung diseases, the tincture of fir-tree buds is efficient: in a glass jar, there are macerated, for ten days, twenty spoonful of finely chopped fir-tree buds, three spoonful of fir-tree resin and 200ml of alcohol. Ten days after this procedure, the produce is strained and it is consumed as a tea-spoonful mixed with some water, before each meal. It is a three-week cure, and then it is made a break. This tincture can also be used for gargling, especially in the morning and in the evening²⁰; “In 500ml of alcohol, there are macerated, for two weeks, 50g of finely chopped fresh fir-tree needles. It is strained and it is consumed as a tea-spoonful diluted in some water²¹.

In the investigated space, in the chronic pulmonary conditions, in the chronic pulmonary emphysema, it is used the colt's foot: “It is prepared a juice out of fresh colt's foot leaves. It is consumed, without interruption, for a month, a spoonful three times a day. A tea made of colt's foot leaves is drunk three times a day, a mug of tea each time. The cure lasts for three months²²; “It is made a colt's foot syrup for the people having lung problems: in a jar, there are added fresh colt's foot leaves, alternating with honey. The jar is fastened tightly and the produce is macerated for a week. It is consumed a spoonful three times a day²³; “The dried leaves of colt's foot are rolled-up, lit on fire and then blown-out. The smoke must be inhaled. This should happen four times a day. This smoke is also good against toothache²⁴; “In half of liter of milk, there are boiled three leaves of colt's foot. It is added some goose fat. The mixture is drunk while lukewarm, 50ml each morning and evening²⁵; “Two spoonful of colt's foot leaves, two of camomile flowers, a spoonful of birch and one of common marjoram are mixed together. They are macerated, in a cool place, for six hours. The mixture is strained and drunk, lukewarm, a glass of it after each meal²⁶; “There are mixed 50g of colt's foot leaves, with pine-tree buds and plantain. They are macerated for few hours in a cup, with three spoonful of cold water. It is boiled for few more minutes, it is strained and drunk after meals²⁷.

In the treatment of respiratory affections, sage is used as well: “Sage powder is good for lungs. It is consumed a tea-spoon, three times a day, on an empty

¹⁹ Informer Porumbița Popescu, 92 years old, locality of Bulzești, Dolj County, 2020.

²⁰ Informer Elena Nițu, 68 years old, locality of Prundeni, Vâlcea County, 2020.

²¹ Informer Ana Ungureanu, 71 years old, locality of Gubandru, Olt County, 2020.

²² Informer Nicolîța Ghiorghe, 84 years old, locality of Frățila, Dolj County, 2021.

²³ Informer Maria Rădulescu, 72 years old, locality of Bălcești, Vâlcea County, 2021.

²⁴ Informer Gabriela Florescu, 72 years old, locality of Crasna, Gorj County, 2021.

²⁵ Informer Rozica Ristea, 81 years old, locality of Bechet, Dolj County, 2020.

²⁶ Informer Viorica Moise, 69 years old, locality of Ciocănești, Vâlcea County, 2020.

²⁷ Informer Elena Nițu, 68 years old, locality of Prundeni, Vâlcea County, 2020.

stomach. The cure lasts for a month. Sage tincture is also good: a tea-spoon, diluted in water, is consumed three times a day, after meals²⁸; “In a litter of white wine, there are added twenty spoons of sage powder, and everything is macerated for three weeks. There are consumed three spoonsful of it after each meal. It is also good against asthma²⁹”; “Two spoonsful of chopped sage leaves are macerated in a litter of vinegar. After two weeks, everything is filtered and there are consumed two spoons of it after meals. The cure lasts for three weeks³⁰”.

Mint has had important therapeutic qualities since ancient times: “Mint infusion, tincture and oil treat pulmonary diseases. There can be made inhalations with mint oil. Sometimes, mint is mixed with thyme. Mint is also good in stomach and urinary infections³¹”; “There is mixed mint, wild pansy and basil, and the tea is drunk twice a day, a mug each time. A tea cure lasts for three months³²”.

In the inflammatory conditions of the respiratory tract the mullein: “The mullein tincture is administrated as a tea-spoonful twice a day, the infusion is drunk twice a day, a mug each time, the powder is consumed as a tea-spoon twice a day, mixed with sour milk, and the wine made of the mullein is drunk as a spoonful twice a day, for lungs³³”; “It is made tea out of two tea-spoonsful of mullein leaves, a litter and a half of water, a tea-spoonful of dried mint and honey, according to one’s taste. It is left aside for a quarter of an hour and it is then filtered. It is good against the cough and the bronchitis³⁴”; “From equal quantities of mullein, basil, primrose and eryngo, there is brewed tea, from which one should drink three mugs a day. The cure lasts for three months³⁵”.

In the treatment of pulmonary congestion, there is used the infusion made of plantain leaves: “A mug of hot water is poured over four spoonsful of dried leaves. After a quarter of an hour, it is strained and drunk. It is good against cough as well³⁶”; “For the lungs, it is made camomile, milfoil and plantain tea and there should be drunk three mugs a day, after the meals. The cure lasts for four months³⁷”.

The elecampane belongs to the ethnoiatry recipe recorder, being used in the pulmonary conditions: “Four spoonsful of dried elecampane root are mixed with water in a mug, and left from the evening to dawn. It is mixed and then administrated as three spoonsful each day³⁸”; “Equal parts of elecampane and

²⁸ Informer Aurica Ionescu, 69 years old, locality of Cămpeni, Dolj County, 2020.

²⁹ Informer Angela Dodița, 74 years old, locality of Corlate, Dolj County, 2020.

³⁰ Informer Marin Boboc, 75 years old, locality of Drăgoești, Vâlcea County, 2021.

³¹ Informer Elena Gusatu, 74 years old, locality of Cezieni, Ol County t, 2021.

³² Informer Gheorghe Diaconu, 82 years old, locality of Bocea, Vâlcea County, 2020.

³³ Informer Emilia Pătrână, 62 years old, locality of Gângiova, Dolj County, 2020.

³⁴ Informer Silvia Iancu, 80 years old, locality of Greci, Olt County, 2021.

³⁵ Informer Constanța Tulbea, 65 years old, locality of Greci, Olt County, 2021.

³⁶ Informer Emilia Pătrână, 62 years old, locality of Gângiova, Dolj County, 2020.

³⁷ Informer Elena Mihai, 75 years old, locality of Nedeia, Dolj County, 2020.

³⁸ Informer Dan Miscoci, 68 years old, locality of Prundeni, Vâlcea County, 2020.

mallow root are mixed together. They are left aside for few hours, they are strained, and the produce is administrated three times a day”³⁹.

The information above that refers to the empirical and traditional medicine offers us data for an ample knowledge on the preoccupation for the sicknesses and the remedies, and they are relevant for a better understanding of the spiritual culture, the medical habits from the furthest times. It is obvious that, in the space between the Carpathians, the Danube and the Black Sea, the medicinal plants enjoyed a vast usage since the ancient times. The curing herbs, along other traditional medical remedies were, for centuries in a row, the only accessible medicines, offered by nature, for the people who would resort to them for healing their sufferance.

According to our field research, in the ethnographic space of Oltenia, phytotherapy, the base for the traditional medicine, continued to represent a significant means of treatment. The properties of some plants used in the traditional medicine are acknowledged by the dwellers from Oltenia. The treatment with healing plants is based on an empirical tradition and on the faith in the healing process. The means for treating the respiratory conditions, through cures based on plants, are currently used too, owing to the fact that it is considered their age, their complex effect and efficiency.

³⁹ Informer Petria Sandu, 90 years old, locality of Stoicești, Dolj County, 2021.