EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN PHARMACOLOGY AND INDIA TRADE AS A BACKGROUND FOR YEMENI MEDIEVAL MEDICINAL PLANTS¹

Efraim Lev

There is still a lot to be learned about medicinal substances of vegetal origin that were used in medieval Yemen. The aim of this chapter is to enlarge our knowledge by employing as yet unexploited historical sources. The focus is on extracting data from two main groups of documents: firstly, the reconstructed inventory of medicinal substances from the eastern Mediterranean (based on practical medical fragments found in the Cairo Genizah); and secondly various documents (traders’ letters and documents dealing with tax) that relate to the sea trade that passed (mostly) through the Red Sea between India and Egypt. In addition, a number of literary sources will be evaluated.

The chapter opens with a short introduction to the Genizah and its importance to the history of medicine and pharmacology. This is followed by the classification of documents and their significance to the research. The contribution of each group of Genizah fragments to the knowledge relating to the use of medicinal plants and the reconstruction of the inventory of practical medicinal plants is dealt with later. The main part of the work presents some of the research studies regarding trade in the Red Sea and Yemeni ports. These sources shed light on medicinal plants that were traded in the sea routes through Yemen. Examination of certain historical sources related to agriculture in medieval Yemen provides evidence of the kinds of medicinal plants that were cultivated there as well as information regarding the local Yemeni names of medicinal plants in that period (I presume that non-indigenous plants would have had a Yemeni Arabic name especially if they had local applications).

¹ The chapter is partly based on Lev, ‘Drugs’. This research would not have taken place without a generous grant from St. John’s College, Cambridge, which hosted the author as an Overseas Visiting Scholar (2003–4). The author would like to express his deepest thanks to Prof. Zohar Amar, Bar-Ilan University, Israel for his helpful remarks. Special thanks go to my colleagues at the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit at the Cambridge University Library who shared with me their vast knowledge and experience and supported me with helpful comments: Dr. Ben Outhwaite (head), Prof. Stefan Reif (former head), and Dr. Avihai Shvi tiel.
The chapter ends by presenting a table that collates all the collected data, followed by a short discussion. This will enable the reader to make a comparison between the plants that were used in medicine in the medieval Mediterranean and those that were recorded for the purpose of trade (and, I will suggest, therefore made use of) in Yemen.

My first assumption is that medicinal plants and their different parts and products that were traded in the sea routes and passed through Yemeni seaports were used medicinally by the Yemeni population, especially in the port cities and their vicinity. The second assumption is that the reconstructed inventory of practical medicinal plants of the medieval eastern Mediterranean—as recorded in the practical medical Genizah fragments—is comparable to the Yemeni one of the same period. According to previous research that included the study of inventories of traditional medicine around the Middle East, the core of any historical or present day inventory of medicinal substances is similar. However, the wild species that augment it differ according to the local climate, geography, and phytogeographical zones of the country. Therefore, the differences between the medieval eastern Mediterranean and the Yemeni inventories of medicinal plants are mainly the local wild plants, in addition to locally cultivated species; the wild plants were not traded and were thus not recorded in regular commercial documents. In this context I should mention the important work done recently by Daniel Martin Varisco on medieval Yemeni agriculture that supplies us with data regarding locally cultivated plants, including those that had medicinal applications.

1. The Cairo Genizah and Its Contribution

European scholars have known since the early nineteenth century of the hoard of documents that was found in the Genizah of the Ben Ezra synagogue of the Palestinian Jews of al-Fuṣṭāṭ (Old Cairo). The extraordinary circumstance of its preservation for such a long period, from about the tenth to the nineteenth century, against the ravages of time and decay was due to the exceptionally dry climate of Egypt. By the end of the nineteenth century the ‘spell was broken,’ and these manuscripts were bought from

---

3 Mainly Varisco, ‘Agriculture in al-Hamdānī’s Yemen’; id., Almanac, 165–202. In the future I hope to establish a research group in order to study medieval medical literary (Arabic as well as Hebrew) sources that mention wild and cultivated medicinal plants in Yemen in order to improve our knowledge and help us reconstruct this inventory.