
PL-03 Archaeological evidence of the medicinal use of plants

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When ailments and sickness struck ancient human communities, they no doubt attempted to control them using the different resources offered by nature. More than a third of the plant species we identify in archaeological contexts have medicinal properties. The best edible wild vegetables are almost certainly what we consider to be "weeds" today. They have coexisted with farmers for thousands of years and invade their fields as soon as they turn their backs. That is why we find them surrounding inhabited areas and fields, alongside roads and paths, on barren land, etc. Many of these robust plants, which have extraordinary vitality and are endowed with highly efficient methods of dispersion, have been harvested or cultivated both for their nutritional qualities and their medicinal properties. On the other hand, a strong tradition of taking psychoactive substances survives among a large number of primitive peoples. For them, this practice plays a transcendental role in their culture and religious beliefs and there are ethnohistoric references that allude to similar phenomena among already extinct civilizations. These psychoactive substances come mainly from the vegetable kingdom and ingesting them allows spiritual help to be called on to establish a diagnosis and treatment during healing sessions.

Using the results of archaeobotanical studies, we analyze the presence of different species with medicinal-type virtues. On this basis we can infer, with certain reservations, some aspects of the pharmacopoeia of the period. A large number of these species, which are well known to modern man, were used in the past to treat or heal the ailments suffered by ancient peoples.

PL-04 Impact of historical texts on today's medicinal plant knowledge in the Mediterranean

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Background: Plant use has been the subject of many codices, documents and books and still is the subject of many scientific articles, trivial books and brochures. These texts, both historical and recent, exert a strong influence on local plant use.

Objectives and Methods: With a statistical analysis, suitable for non-experimental settings, we tested the hypothesis of a causal effect of historical texts upon contemporary medicinal plant use in southern Italy.

Results and conclusions: Quantitative approaches are as essential for the understanding of the evolution of plant use as they are for the understanding of present plant use. Present plant use is not only conditioned by historical texts but to what extent autochthonous orally transmitted knowledge, new adaptations and accidental discoveries are involved is difficult to assess. Considering the long-lasting effect of historical texts, more recent books, brochures, newspapers and commercials very likely also exert an influence.

Keywords: Statistical methods; De Materia Medica; History; Knowledge transmission; Pharmacognosy; Ethnobotany.
