

Original scientific article

UDC: 616.98:579.842.1/.2(495.02)''10/13''

615.322:582.639

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.3733177

Radivoj Radić

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade

Čika Ljubina 18-20, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia

E-mail: rradic@f.bg.ac.rs

FIGS AS A CURE (From a Byzantine medical treatise)

Abstract: The paper discusses medical recipes against a variety of diseases whose important constituent is fig, whether it is the fruit, the tree or the root of this subtropical fruit. These are data from the Byzantine medical treatise dated into a rather wide time frame, from the middle of the 11th to the second half of the 14th century. The fig was also used in making balms and in cosmetics.

Keywords: fig, Byzantium, medicine, recipes, diseases

Non MeSH: remedy, treatise

The fig (*Ficus carica*) is a deciduous subtropical fruit, tree or shrub from the *Moraceae* family that reaches a height of twelve to fifteen meters. Its round leaves, which are located on long petioles, are arranged in a pear-shaped goblet. The fig fruit is green or brown in color, very tasty and rich in sugar (about 50%) and, especially important, it is suitable for processing. The fig is thought to originate from the region Caria in the Asia Minor. This plant thrives in Mediterranean areas and it is eaten both raw and dry. In folk medicine, the fig is used for cleansing and is also given to patients with lung conditions. [1 p159, 2 p80]

Along with olive and vine, fig is one of the trees that symbolizes abundance. According to Roman belief, Romulus and Remus were born under the fig tree. We find fig tree in the Scripture, both in the Old and New Testaments. For example, the Book of Genesis, i.e. the First Book of Moses, states that Adam and Eve “realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.” (Genesis 3: 7). The fig is a distinctive symbol in many religions and cultures of many peoples. [3 p611-2] Serbian people believe that in cases where a tempest threatens a city, a branch of the wild fig tree that was blessed on *Bela Subota* (White Saturday)

should be lit and cross sign made in the direction of the tempestuous cloud to disperse it. In addition, figs must not be eaten before the Transfiguration, while on the day of Transfiguration of Jesus people take them as communion. [4 p220]

The fig has been used as a medicine since the ancient times. Thus, Pliny the Elder wrote in the 1st century: “When the mighty King Mithridates was defeated, Gnaeus Pompey found recipe for antidotes written in king’s own handwriting: crush and mix 2 dried nuts. 2 figs and 20 leaves of the common rue with a pinch of salt. Anyone who takes this mixture on an empty stomach will be immune to every poison throughout the day”. [5 p324]

In Byzantine medicine, there are a number of recipes for medicines have fig as an important ingredient. A convincing testimony of the reach of Byzantine medicine, and especially its pharmacology and pharmacopoeia, i.e. the preparation of medicines, is one text dating from the late Byzantine period. It is a medical treatise written in Greek, kept in the rich manuscript collection of the *Lorenzo Medici* Library in Florence under the codename Cod. Cork. VII, 19. This is a medical corpus which apparently served for practical use. It was composed by an experienced doctor who included his personal experience and knowledge gained through years of practice. The manuscript, which is very difficult to read, was destroyed in the flood that struck the *Lorenzo Medici* Library, but Russian byzantologist Genadiy Litavrin read the Greek text on from a pre-made microfilm, translated it into Russian, provided an excellent commentary and published it in twice. [6 p249-301, 7 p31-146]

The medical treatise is dated into a rather wide time frame, from the middle of the 11th to the second half of the 14th century and, given the present scholarly knowledge, it is not possible to narrow it down. *Terminus post quem* can be more accurately determined, and it is the death of Empress Zoe, in 1050, who is mentioned in the tract. On the other hand, the *terminus ante quem* is defined by the time of the writing of the manuscripts contained in the corpus. According to most researchers this is the second half of the 14th century. [7 p28, 8 p330] Particularly challenging for translating is the variety of the Greek botanical terms for all kinds of plants that inhabit the islands and coasts of the vast Mediterranean basin which have no paragon in Russian, or more broadly speaking, in the Slavic languages.

The treatise is more oriented to practical advice than to remarks of broader theoretical importance. As said, it is actually a kind of medical encyclopedia in which the section on pharmacology occupies the largest part. It is necessary to emphasize that in Byzantium, pharmacology did not exist as an independent scientific branch. At the same time, Byzantine physicians were also pharmacists who collected and harvested medicinal herbs themselves. [8 p326] In general, a large variety of medical recipes can be found in Byzantine manuscripts. [9 p309]

In case of spleen disease, the author of the medical treatise recommends the following remedy: willow and linden should be cooked in old wine with the root of the black fig and giveto the sick to drink. [7 p128]

When there is a problem with the excretion of urine, the treatise offers a remedy: first mash the root of *calistrutia*, which is either fig or quince. [7 p133,n433] The mashed mass is then mixed with wine and honey and given to the sick to drink. [7 p132-3]

An anonymous treatise' editor writes an anti-hair loss cure: 12 drachmas of restharrow (Lat. *Ononis antiquorum*), 4 drachmas of water, 8 drachmas of lime, two tablespoons of fig tree rot, 1 tablespoon of vinegar. All this should be turned into a mixture and cooked in an earthen pot, and then applied to hair. [7, p105] Drachma is a measure of weight here and it is equivalent to 3.4 grams. [10 p184, 7 p42, n39]

The fig is mentioned in an interesting medical piece on arthritis. The author first outlines what those with this unpleasant illness should refrain from. The list is quite long and includes sexual activities, meat (especially pork and salted meat), brine, beetroot, carrots, wild mint, boiled tuna, melon, fish heads, molluscs and crustaceans, all the legumes, anything that has fatty juices, red wine (but also wine in general) in larger quantities. As a recommendation, arthritis sufferers should take baths daily, do gymnastics and walk. They should be abstained from non-succulent beef, goat meat, mutton, eggs, fried dishes, aged cheese, mushrooms, Fenugreek (*Trigonella Foenum graecum*), lentils, oats, and dried millet. When it comes to fish, non recommended are Greater weever, piper (lat. *Tucla Cuculus*), scorpionfish (Greek scorpions, Lat. *Scorpaena scrofa*), large sea bass, red mullet, fish that feed on crustaceans and those that are large in size. All arthritis sufferers are prohibited from eating any kind of fruit, such are figs and grapes, which are somewhat juicier than some others. [7 p 89-90]

One of the recipes in the treatise states that consuming henbane either by eating or drinking can cause a feeling of intoxication. To combat this condition, it is advisable to drink honey in large quantities, with the addition of milk, especially donkey's; if not, then goat's and cow's milk can be used as a substitute with the addition of boiled fig juice. Also included are chicory (*Cichorium intybus*), mustard, cardamom, radish, onion and garlic. Each of these ingredients should be taken with wine. [7 p82]

For those who have difficulty breathing or who have bowel problems, mushrooms are recommended as a remedy, but also large quantities of sage or fig boiled juice, or oregano or some honey drink. At the same time, the patient should not be given anything that may cause vomiting and, finally, a warm bath should be prepared as a final measure of treatment. [7 p80]

The treatise provides a recipe for making fig oil, which can then be used for various purposes. It is necessary to take 2 ounces of dried wild fig root and place it in 10 sextarii of vegetable oil and then boil it. [7 p64] Sextarius (Greek xestis, Latin Sextarius) is a measure for liquid and bulk materials and amounts to 0.547 liters or 178.869 grams. [10 p115, 7 p63,n120]

Particularly interesting is the fact that the fig was an ingredient of Zoe Porphyrogenita's ointment. She was the daughter of the Byzantine emperor Constantine

VIII Palaiologos (1025–1028), and she was known for worshipping fragrances and cosmetics that were procured for her from distant lands of Ethiopia and India. In the women's ward of the imperial palace, where Zoe spent most of her time, fires raged all year long where her servants were making pomades and perfumes for her. Thus *gyneconitis*, the women's ward of the imperial palace, looked more like a chemistry lab than like the emperor's court. [11 p187-220]

The recipe for Empress Zoe's ointment prescribed a crushed date, a juicy plum, soft raisins and soft dried figs. A lily bulb should be cooked with honey, then mashed and mixed with all the above. Mince it all evenly and add frankincense and the ointment is ready to use. [7 p33]

At the very end of the treatise, there is a comprehensive list of "substitutes", i.e. the medicines that can serve as substitutions. The author emphasizes that he took these "substitutions" from Galen (*antivallomena tou Galinou*). [7 p137-46] In addition to the "father of medicine" of Hippocrates, Galen was one of the greatest ancient physicians. One comparison is useful: the place Plato and Aristotle had in ancient philosophy, Hippocrates and Galen had in ancient medicine. Among the many "substitutions", it is mentioned that in the lieu of the Cyrene juice (Silphium), the juice obtained from the fig tree may be used; in the lieu of the fig tree juice the juice obtained from *morion* (a kind of mandragora) could be used; in the lieu of the willow tree juice, the juice of the black fig tree, could be used, and vice versa. [7 p144]

The above recipes show that a fig - its fruit, root or tree, anyway - can serve as a cure for a variety of diseases: spleen diseases, disorders of urinary tract, hair loss, henbane "poisoning", breathing problems, bowel problems. In these recipes, fig is used most often with other herbs (willow, lilac, chicory, licorice, cardamom, radish, onions, mushrooms, oregano), much less with ingredients of animal origin (donkey's, goat's and cow's milk, honey) and, finally, with vinegar, wine and lime. In addition, the fig is also used as an ingredient in the preparation of certain cosmetics, such as the ointment of the Empress Zoe Porphyrogenita.

Rezime

Smokva je listopadna suptropska voćka, drvo ili šib koja se kao lek može koristiti u medicini. U vizantijskom medicinskom traktatu, koji se datuje u širok vremenski period od sredine XI do druge polovine XIV veka, nalazi se nekoliko recepata za lekarije čiji je sastojak smokva. Iz pobrojanih recepata vidi se da smokva – njen plod, koren ili drvo, svejedno – može poslužiti kao lek protiv raznolikih bolesti: oboljenja slezine, poremećaja u izlučivanju mokraćne, opadanja kose, „trovanja“ bunikom, problema sa disanjem, nevolja sa crevima. U tim lekovima smokva se najčešće upotrebljava sa drugim biljkama (vrba, lijander, cikorija, slačica, kardamon, rotkva, crni i beli luk, gljive, origano), znatno manje sa sastojcima životinjskog porekla (magareće, kozje i kravlje mleko, med) i, naposljetku, sa sirćetom, vinom i krečom. Uz to, smokva

se upotrebljava i kao sastojak u pripremanju pojedinih kozmetičkih sredstava kao što je bila masti „gospođe Zoje-carice“.

References:

1. Введенский БА, editor. Большая советская энциклопедия [The great Soviet encyclopedia]. Vol. 18. Москва: Государственное научное издательство „Большая советская энциклопедия“; 1953.
2. Enciklopedija Leksikografskog zavoda [Encyclopedia of the Lexicographic Institute]. Vol. 7 (Sindikalizam – Žvane), Zagreb: Leksikografski zavod; 1964.
3. Chevalier J, Gheerbrant A. Rječnik simbola. Mitovi, sni, običaji, geste, oblici, likovi, boje, brojevi [Myths, dreams, customs, gestures, forms, characters, colors, numbers]. Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Matice hrvatske; 1983.
4. Чажкановић В. Речник српских народних веровања о биљкама [Dictionary of Serbian folk beliefs about plants]. Ђурић В, editor. Београд: Српска књижевна задруга – Српска академија наука и уметности; 1985.
5. Плиније Старији. Историја природе: избор [Pliny the Elder, Nature History: selection]. Hilly JF, English translator, Мрђеновић Н, Serbian translator. Београд: Досије студио; 2015.
6. Литаврин ГГ. Византијски медицински трактат XI–XIV вв. (по рукописи Cod. Plut. VII, 19 Библиотеки Лоренцо Медичи во Флоренцији) [Byzantine medical tractate 11th – 14th century (by manuscripts Cod. Plut. VII, 19 of the Lorenzo Medici Library in Florence)]. Византијски временник 1971 31:249–301.
7. Литаврин ГГ. Византијски медицински трактат XI–XIV вв. [Byzantine medical tractate 11th – 14th century]. Санкт-Петербург: Алетејя ; 1997.
8. Култура Византији. II (Втора половина VII–XII в.) [The Byzantine culture. II (Second half of 7th – 12th century)]. Москва: Наука. Академија Наук СССР; 1989.
9. Hunger H. Die Hochsprachliche Profane Literatur der Byzantiner. II. Munich; 1978.
10. Schilbach E. Byzantinische Metrologie. Munich: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung; 1970.
11. Дил Ш. Византијске слике [Byzantine portraits]. Косановић О, translator. Београд: Српска књижевна задруга; 1991.

Received: 14/11/2019

Reviewed: 28/11/2019

Accepted: 09/12/2019