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Traditional healing with animals (zootherapy): medieval to present-day Levantine practice

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Abstract

Animals and products derived from different organs of their bodies have constituted part of the inventory of medicinal substances used in various cultures since ancient times. This article reviews the history of healing with animals in the Levant (the Land of Israel and parts of present-day Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, defined by the Muslims in the Middle Ages as Bilad al-Sham) throughout history.

Intensive research into the phenomenon of zootherapy in the Levant from early medieval to present-day traditional medicine yielded 99 substances of animal origin which were used medicinally during that long period. Fifty-two animal extracts and products were documented as being used from the early Muslim period (10th century) to the late Ottoman period (19th century). Seventy-seven were recorded as being used in the 20th century

Seven main animal sources have been exploited for medical uses throughout history: honey, wax, adder, beaver testicles, musk oil, coral, and ambergris. The first three are local and relatively easy to obtain; the last four are exotic, therefore, rare and expensive. The use of other materials of animal origin came to an end in the course of history because of change in the moral outlook of modern societies. Among the latter we note mummy, silkworm, stinkbug, scarabees, snail, scorpion, and triton.



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Keywords

Animals; Ethnozoology; History; Levant; Medicine; Pharmacology; Medieval medicine; Traditional medicine; Zotherapy

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