

Title: The Substances of Desire: A Pharmaco-Historical Perspective on Turkish Aphrodisiacs

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Abstract:

Background: Named after Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty, aphrodisiacs are substances that are capable of enhancing sexual potency, stimulation, and pleasure. Currently, there is a growing interest in traditionally used medicinal plants and formulations with aphrodisiac potentials.

Purpose: This study seeks to present a pharmaco-historical perspective on Turkish aphrodisiacs that were used long before the emergence of generic drugs of modern times to treat erectile dysfunction.

Methods: We investigated Turkish medical manuscripts and bāhnāmes (books of sexual desire), written between the 14th and 18th centuries, for gathering information about medicinal plants and formulations with aphrodisiac potentials; and compared our results with current literature.

Results: We found that a voluminous list of medicinal plants and spices (i.e., cardamom, cinnamon, clove, cubeb, cumin, ginger, long pepper, parsnip, purslane); foods (i.e., chicken, goose, sheep or sparrow meat, honey, nut, pigeon egg, sugar, yogurt); and even animal-derived substances (i.e., blood of a bee-stung newborn sparrow, brain of a sparrow, deer musk) were recommended as aphrodisiacs.

Conclusion: Theriacs and electuaries were among the most popular remedies known for their aphrodisiac properties. This is particularly the case for mesir macunu (mesir paste), better known as the electuary of sultans, which has been distributed to the public during the festivals celebrated on the first day of spring, called nevrüz (literally, “new day”) in Manisa, Turkey, for almost five centuries.