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Balsam



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Related Topics

Medicine · Alchemy · Pharmacology

Synonyms

[Balsamum](#); [Opobalsamum](#)

Definition

Balsam traditionally refers to a natural gum with healing properties, obtained from a Middle Eastern tree (*Commiphora opobalsamum*) and often combined with other resins such as myrrh and turpentine. In early modern medicine, Paracelsus and his disciples gave it a metaphorical sense indicating either the physiological humor of life or an oily distillate.

Heritage and Rupture with the Tradition

In ancient natural history and pharmacology, balsam designates a tree from Syria and Judea, whose natural gum has fragrant and curative virtues. Early descriptions can be found in Theophrastus's *Enquiry into Plants* 9.6, Pliny's *Natural History*

12.54, and Dioscorides's *Materia medica* 1.19. Accordingly, balsam juice (*opobalsamum*) was extracted for medicinal purposes (Dioscorides 2005). As a rare and expensive product imported from the Middle East, it was often adulterated with ointments. The wood (*xylobalsamum*) and fruit (*carpobalsamum*) of the balsam tree were also valued, though considered as less efficient than its juice.

Balsam juice and wood were mentioned in Galen's pharmacological works. His *On Antidotes* relates the provenance of balsam tree to Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, while his *On the Properties of Simple Drugs* states the desiccating and heating virtues of balsam juice (Galen 1821–1823; Idem 1821–1823). Besides, balsam-based recipes are disseminated in Galen's treatise *On the Composition of Drugs According to Places*.

Along the lines of Dioscorides and Galen, Avicenna systematically expounded the nature and properties of balsam “oil” to cure a wide range of sicknesses (Avicenna 1555). He also provided numerous recipes with balsam in the fifth book of his *Canon of Medicine*. His account would be further discussed in medieval Latin–Arabic treatises on pharmacology and surgery, e.g., by Matthaëus Platearius and Guy de Chauliac.

Renaissance pharmacology transmitted the traditional account of balsam along with recipes of “artificial balsam” to compensate for the scarcity of genuine *opobalsamum*. For instance, Leonhart Fuchs (1501–1566) offered several medieval

recipes of “the surgeons’ artificial balsam” to heal wounds (Fuchs 1555). Pier Andrea Mattioli (1501–1578) proposed a recipe of balsam water and oil resulting from the distillation of turpentine, pine resin, and frankincense, among other ingredients (Mattioli 1554). Moreover, balsam was at times considered as one of the components of medicinal “mummy” (*mumia*), the alleged Egyptian embalming material based on myrrh, aloe, and cadaveric natural humor (Dannenfeld 1985).

Paracelsus (1493–1541) introduced a major redefinition of the term “balsam,” though without providing any systematic theory (Paracelsus 1589–1591; Idem 1605). On the one hand, he maintained the Renaissance account of balsam as a wound-healing distillate related to the notion of *mumia*. In his view, “natural balsam” is distilled from turpentine, and “artificial balsam” from plants like centaury and dill. On the other hand, Paracelsus brought additional acceptations to the term “balsam.” For its preservative and coagulating properties, it was related to the principle of salt while being also associated with the principle of sulfur, as the finest oil distilled from metals and plants. Within the body, this oily substance corresponds to the innate life principle, close to the Galenic concept of radical moisture. In all cases, balsam was exalted for its strong medicinal powers, cicatrizing wounds, protecting from putrefaction, and even prolonging life.

In turn, Paracelsian physicians retained the idea of a twofold balsam: “external,” as a pure oily distillate, and “internal,” corresponding to the innate humor of life (Toxites 1574). Petrus Severinus (c.1540–1602) propagated the latter meaning as a Paracelsian counterpart to the radical moisture, protecting the body from decay (Bianchi 1982; Hirai 2005). Joseph du Chesne (c.1544–1609) promoted a “balsamic” medicine seeking to improve Galenic pharmacology with alchemical preparations (Hirai 2005). Recipes of balsamic compounds became widespread in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century pharmacological treatises. At that time, the actual *balsamum* designated either the gum imported from the

Middle East or a resinous substance from the New World, in particular Peru and Tolu (Lémery 1698).

Cross-References

- ▶ [Chymistry \(Alchemy/Chemistry\)](#)
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- ▶ [Medicine in Early Modern Philosophy: An Introduction](#)
- ▶ [Paracelsus and Early Modern Paracelsianism](#)
- ▶ [Pharmacology](#)
- ▶ [Physiology](#)
- ▶ [Recipes](#)

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