

Mt. Menoikeion Seminar  
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My research for this seminar will be on the relationship between the conceptions of health and wellbeing held by the sisters at the monastery and the environment that they live in, specifically in their production and use of herbal medicine. I decided to pursue this topic of research upon hearing about an alchemist's shop available at the monastery, where the sisters use local vegetation to produce various oils and concoctions to maintain wellbeing. Seeing the ways in which the sisters harness the materials available in the environment they inhabit in the form of herbal medicine will be an interesting lens through which to study their conceptions of wellbeing and the transmission of traditional knowledge.

The specific aim of this paper is to identify some herbs and vegetation that may be available near the Mt. Menoikeion monastery to get a sense of the types of herbal medicine and treatments available. I will also attempt to contextualize the tradition of herbal medicine by referring to "De Materia Medica" by Dioscorides and to modern-day government reports and articles that reflect the debate between allopathy, or 'formal' medicine, and 'alternative' medical traditions such as herbal medications and homeopathy. My research will continue at the monastery, observing and talking with sisters about what wellbeing means to them and how the herbs and homemade medicine that they use helps them maintain wellbeing. Another focus of my research at the monastery would reflect the modern-day debate between allopathy and traditional medicine, where I would talk to the sisters about how knowledge of allopathic medicine has changed, if at all, their conception of wellbeing and their approaches to maintaining it.

This paper will first contextualize the tradition of herbal medicine by referring to literature on the divide between medicine and food and within medicine, between allopathic and traditional medicine. Totelin in a 2015 study argues that the divide between medicine and food is not always clear because "'Food' is something that is unlike 'drug', and a drug is something that is rather strong and can therefore effect change" (p. 31). Totelin (2015) uses garlic as an example of a food heavily used in cooking but also a form of "'traditional' remedy for hypertension and high cholesterol" (p. 32) and used as a pregnancy test and form of contraception in antiquity. Totelin (2015) concludes that the divide between medicine and food is not clear-cut because both require observations of how using the substance will affect the body and that substances in food are oftentimes later used in medicine. This is an interesting argument in the context of the monastery, where the sisters prepare their own food and medicine and may rely on herbs for health in both medicine and diet, both while they are ill and healthy. It leads to additional questions that can be explored such as the differences in herbs used and the preparation of those herbs when a person is ill versus when they are healthy and would like to maintain wellbeing.

Another notable conclusion drawn by Totelin (2015) was that although the divide between medicine and food was not explicitly clear for Hippocratic writers, there was a divide in “attitude” (p. 35) toward the medicinal aspects of food where people treated it more professionally, eventually leading to the development of the “prestigious branch of medicine in the ancient world” (p. 35). The rift between food and medicine began to develop, which contextualizes the modern-day rift between ‘formal’ allopathic medicine and traditional medicine.

Skepticism toward traditional medicine and homeopathy is seen in reports such as the “Evidence Check 2: Homeopathy” report by the House of Commons of the UK (2010). The report was ordered to inform licensing and funding for homeopathy and to find evidence on the physical effects of homeopathy, and strictly defines homeopathy in the report as separate from herbal remedies but are “extremely diluted and administered according to specific principles” (House of Commons: Science and Technology Committee, 2010). It concluded that “the Government should not endorse the use of placebo treatments, including homeopathy” (House of Commons: Science and Technology Committee, 2010). This report shows the official stance against forms of alternative medicine such as homeopathy, and this attitude may extend toward other types of non-allopathic medicine such as herbal medicine. An area for further research would be contrasting the governmental stance on traditional medicine to that of the sisters at the monastery.

In contrast to this critical view on alternative medicine, an article in the New York Times titled “Labels Like ‘Alternative Medicine’ Don’t Matter. The Science Does.” by Aaron E. Carroll (2015) argues that the rift between alternative and conventional medicine is not as wide as some make it out to be, with doctors trained at medical schools telling patients to take vitamins and to make good lifestyle choices such as exercise and diet because “both of these things have proved to be important for health.” He argues that “all the therapies I mention here aren’t considered complementary therapies — they’re often just considered therapies,” where in other words ‘alternative medicine’ is simply ‘medicine’ in the sense that it works in treating certain conditions (Carroll, 2015). At the monastery, I plan on speaking with the sisters about whether they view their herbal concoctions and products as ‘medicine’ or simply a substance that enables them to maintain wellbeing.

In searching for herbs and vegetation used in herbal medicine produced at the Mt. Menoikeion monastery, I focused my search on herbal medicine used in the nearby city of Thessaloniki and found a study by Hanlidou et al. (2004) that surveyed Thessaloniki herbal markets. In the study, Hanlidou et al. (2004) found that of the 172 taxa that they found available, 133 taxa are native and 93 taxa are identified in Dioscorides' writings. Based on the local origin of the many species of herbs sold in the Thessaloniki market and the finding that the plants identified by Dioscorides are still prepared as instructed by his writings, Hanlidou et al. (2004) concluded that the ancient text and traditional knowledge is still relevant today. An interesting set of questions to ask at the monastery would be on how the traditional knowledge was transferred to the sisters, whether orally or through texts or both, the ways in which they plan on passing the knowledge on in the future, and the factors that determine which types of knowledge are selectively passed on.

Using Hanlidou et al.'s (2004) conclusion about the relevance of traditional knowledge today, I next looked to Dioscorides' "De Materia Medica Book I- Aromatics" and "De Materia Medica Book III- Roots," specifically at the electronic copies available on <http://panaceavera.com/demateriaindex.html> and translated by T. A. Osbaldeston in 2000. Dioscorides, a doctor, first wrote "De Materia Medica" in the first century, which was translated to Arabic, Spanish, and Latin, and the work was modified until it reached its modern form (Library of Congress, 2017). To identify vegetation used for herbal medicine at the monastery, I scanned through the "De Materia Medica Book I- Aromatics" and "Book III- Roots" to find a few herbs and nuts that are mentioned and are said to be available in northern Greece. This method of identification is sound because as Hanlidou et al.'s (2004) study on the abundance of species of herbs sold in Thessaloniki today showed that modern herbs overlap with Dioscorides' descriptions of herbs and their preparation, the herbs identified by Dioscorides to grow in northern Greece are likely to be available at the monastery.

One such herb is iris, mentioned in "Section 1-1. Iris" of the translated version of "De Materia Medica Book I- Aromatics" studied for this paper (p. 1-2). I predict that it is available near the monastery based on Dioscorides' description of the best of its kind being from Macedonia and having a "thick stumpy root, hard to break, of a faint yellow colour with an especially good scent and very bitter to the taste" (Section 1-1, "De Materia Medica"). Dioscorides recommends preparing the roots by cutting and drying them, and the method of use allows one to treat various symptoms. For example, "seven teaspoonfuls of a decoction (taken as a drink in honey water) purge thick mucus and bile," whereas drinking it with vinegar treats poisonous bites and the chills (Section 1-1, "De Materia Medica").

Another herb described in “Section 3-41. Eduosmos emeros” in “De Materia Medica Book III-Roots” is mints including the common mint, spearmint, and peppermint, found on page 411 of the electronic version referenced in this paper. Its juice mixed with vinegar treats roundworms and acts as an aphrodisiac, its juice mixed with pomegranate alleviates hiccups, and when mixed with honey water it treats earaches (Section 3-41, “De Materia Medica”). When it is applied rather than drunk it is said to soothe headaches, act as a form of contraception, and smoothens the tongue (Section 3-41, “De Materia Medica”).

Another substance mentioned is almond oil, and its medical uses are described in “Section 1-39. Elaion Amygdalinon” in p. 38 of the translated version of “De Materia Medica” referenced in this paper. It instructs the reader on how to create the oil, describing the drying process, pulping with a mortar and pestle, and extracting the oil by mixing the pulp with hot water (Section 1-39, “De Materia Medica”). It is said to be “effective against womb pains, constriction, the womb turning around... as well as headaches, ear problems, resonance, and tinnitus” among other ailments such as kidney and skin problems when applied with honey and other herbs (Section 1-39, “De Materia Medica”). Once at the monastery I plan on seeing if the herbs and oils I found referenced in “De Materia Medica” are available and if so, whether they are prepared and used in similar ways.

*I pledge my honor that I have not violated the Honor Code in writing this paper.*  
*Ashley Stone June 1, 2017*

## **References**

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