

Web Review

The Institute for the Preservation of Medical Traditions, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<http://medicaltraditions.org/institute>



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Last summer I found this website by accident, as my filters for internet content on ancient plants and ancient medicine produced a form from the Smithsonian regarding some new videos on YouTube asking users to give opinions about the website. The videos were aimed at the visitors of the museum, which I am not yet, but one thing leads to another, and I saw some reference to this institute's newsletter, to which I subscribed. Not much later I got the newsletter on my email and another email from Dr. Appetiti regarding my field of research, which focuses now on plants associated with the god Osiris in ancient Egypt. And so on and so forth... Being an Egyptologist and focusing my research on medicine of ancient Egypt, I have to dwell among the world of medical knowledge, both ancient and contemporary. As plants were the basic ingredients for medicines, along with minerals, animal and human substances, the study of plants in Antiquity is crucial. The profusion of information online, while searching for out-of-print, early and rare books now digitized online, led me to search deeper into this website's menus, and this made me find real jewels for researchers.

An introduction to the website in question must be written, as it is of an innovative vision, both from the researcher's viewpoint, and the

institute's own work. The capacity to store information from ancient times, now enabled by technology, is a powerful tool. Put in good use, as we can see when we browse this website, may be of significant role in the world of medical and historical research. The idea of one person may be the completion of a dream for many. I am thinking of hundreds of researchers all over the world, who search continuously for ancient sources, and find it difficult to have the time and funds to approach them. In this institute's website researchers and students of History of Medicine, ancient pharmacology, plants in Antiquity, Botanists, Historians in general, researchers for ancient civilizations' patterns of daily life, and so many other subjects, can find organized media to develop their work. Otherwise inaccessible sources might be easy to find here, as the specialists working in this institute do their best to upload and update the various menus and sub-menus of the website.

Last September, 2010, some news appeared about a shipwreck identified as the Relitto del Pozzino, which sank off the coast of Gela, Sicilia, in 130 BC, the wreckage being found some 20 years ago. After all this time and after different people studying different parts of the cargo, archaeobotanists from the institute were able to examine and analyse pills that were prepared by the physicians of ancient Greece, that were found in a doctor's box, this one found in 1989 among the wreckage (news):

<http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn19436-2000yearold-pills-found-in-greek-shipwreck.html>.

The medicine was completely dried and DNA analyses show that each millennia-old tablet is a mixture of more than 10 different plant extracts. «For the first time, we have physical evidence of what we have in writing from the ancient Greek physicians Dioscorides and Galen» says Dr. Alain Touwaide from the institute (video):

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-13190376>

The title *Institute for the Preservation of Medical Traditions* with the underlined Preservation reflects not only the care for the manuscripts and other materials, but also the service provided to human culture as this knowledge will be available for more time than if left to its own circumstances of natural preservation. Preservation here must be understood as the “making these sources eternal”, either we speak about textual information or visual images from Antiquity. The medical traditions in question, theoretically started with Greek and Roman, will be extended to more different traditions; more in quantity and different in their geographical and timeline presence. A detailed description of the menus follows this introduction.

At the home page, clicking “The Institute”, you are confronted with the Institute’s mission, as well as a donation button, as all research needs funding and this is no exception, although it is housed in a facility under the “wing” of the famous and wealthy Smithsonian in Washington, D. C.

The souls behind this Institute are Drs. Alain Touwaide and Emanuela Appetiti (<http://medicaltraditions.org/story>), who started this and continue to develop the scope of the research and the activities held. It is a pleasure to read the life path of Dr. Touwaide’s story, as I find myself wondering about my own goals and troubles along the way of my research career. No doubt you need to invest in yourself when choosing a research career, and you need to be able and willing to travel, a lot, if not, all the time.

You have also a “Reading Room” button, showing the latest achievements of the Institute, from the more recent to the oldest.

There is always a beautiful image, and then “Resource Links”. All we need. When you click “Show All” in Resource Links, another page opens and you have “Resource Links” and “Libraries”. When you click “Resource Links”, you have several links to important Societies and Institutes, also excellent repositories of information, mainly concerned with Medicine, Pharmacy and Plants.

If you choose “Libraries” you have also a list of sites with information on the same subjects. Clicking “Research” at the home page, you have a descriptive text about the contextual information, the personnel involved in the research, both inside the institute itself and out and about in another place, but still connected. You also have information about the focus of research being, for now, on the Mediterranean tradition, but open to future focuses stretching up to other traditions, who knows, maybe the Native Americans’ and the Chinese’s.

Clicking “Collections at the home page, you get “Library”, “Images”, “Digital Texts” and “Databases”. This is the result of collecting sources of information and this is done by all the researchers involved with the Institute. When you click “Library”, The *Historia Plantarum* Collection is explained. A botany collection, from Antiquity to the Renaissance, opens to researchers the possibility of finding rare sources at the institute. A sub-menu includes “Holdings”, paper and non-paper sources are housed in the Department of Botany and a digital catalogue of it is a work-in-progress. Going back to the sub-menu, and choosing “Special Collections”, you can see how donations are sometimes more valuable than money, as some people have donated their personal libraries, being themselves specialists, and this way they have contributed to enrich the institute’s assets. You can contribute yourself by clicking “donating books”. Going back and clicking “Microfilm Collections”, you can see how this institute has a diversified access to information. Going back and choosing “Consultation”, you have all the rules for browsing the collection; not to be “loaned”, and we can understand why. Books keeps disappearing from libraries every day, students and researchers simply don’t return them; move to another location, and the book is forever lost. This cannot happen with such an extraordinary collection. Going back and reading about “Handling of items of the Collections”, you can see why pens are not allowed and this is not a surprise as rare books are prone to be “highlighted” and “underlined” just as new editions, as we see when we retrieve a copy from a library that a not-so-concerned person has used before... Also, the rules about copies and “leave-it-for-tomorrow” are stated clearly. Going back, you still have “Policy”,

and “Location and Contacts”. For those who are really curious, here it is: Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of Natural History, Department of Botany, 10th Street and Constitution Avenue NW, Washington, D.C., 20560, U.S.A., collections@medicaltraditions.org, +1-202-633-0967.

In the main menu you have a “Support Us” button telling you how can you help the institute by donating financially or in book-form, as to contribute to a bigger and valuable collection for posterity.

Also in the main menu you have a “Contacts” button with an email form to fill in, in case you want to get in touch. Next to it, on the main menu, you have another button “Our Story”, that goes back to Drs. Touwaide and Appetiti and their passion for the subject, and how they imagined this institute, along with their path in professional, sometimes personal, lives.

A “Membership” button is also found at the main menu, and, from as little as 20 American Dollars you can be a member yourself. Being a member of societies or institutes, who are dedicated to research and the collection of rare and valuable materials like these, who deal with medicine in Antiquity, is a gift in itself.

Options on the right side of the page are distributed in main themes such as science, medicine, and humanities, as we all remember that, in Antiquity, learning was not divided into compartments, giving us the image of a train with different cabins... Ancient civilizations believed that knowledge was a whole; everything was intertwined. Magic, religion and medicine were in the same field of action. Nothing was prescribed without a religious background, a magic setting and the practitioner was gifted with natural and supernatural powers, for those believing. As an example of this concept we can say that in ancient Egypt there was no word for medicine, but there was one for magic, *heka*, and another for health, *seneb*. You can sign up to receive information and I assure you this is very useful if your field of research touches, even slightly, the themes developed by this institute.

Clicking on “Science plants and people”, you have “Programs” “Publications” and “Services”. The “Science Programs” are: “Flora of

Antiquity” where plant remains are tested, and complemented with textual evidence; a kind of theory and practice put together. Lucky those who have plant remains for their research, from excavation sites (like me), which are pertinent to their theme, and are able to be tested in a laboratory. Next you find “Peoples of the Mediterranean”, a source of all data on Mediterranean peoples, their food habits, agriculture and so forth. Next you have “Plants and Peoples”, where the dynamics between these peoples and plants are studied. In the same menu “Science”, you have “Publications”, where the publications done by researchers at the institute are listed. In “Science” you also have “Services”, where you can ask for a specific group of data. The knowledgeable researchers at the institute will gather the information for your project according to your specifications and budget.

Changing to another menu: ‘Medicine’, you have two sub-menus, “Medicine Programs” and “Medicine Publications”. In “Medicine Programs” you find “Diseases of the ancient World”, where the institute relates to other institutions regarding the collection of data assessing the diseases affecting ancient populations. You also find “Epidemiology of Antiquity”, where the contribution focuses on the establishment of patterns of disease across the globe in ancient times, giving the researcher the ability to map a disease or a group of diseases in a specific or larger period of time. In “Medicine” you have also “Publications” where all the publications of researchers from this institute are listed once again.

In the “Humanities” menu you find “Humanities Programs” and “Humanities Publications”. Under “Humanities Programs” there are three options: “Ancient Medical Library”, “Art of Healing Collection”, and “*Materia Medica* Database”. In the first, a virtual library is created online, having handwritten and early printed books available. The virtual library link opens into an “Images” page where the texts are condensed into a “Digital Texts list. Here you find “Byzantium”, “Early Middle Ages”, “Post Salernitan Middle Ages”, and “Renaissance”. This is still a work in progress, as so many texts need to be digitized and uploaded. The ‘Digital Texts’ sub-menu opens several pdf documents containing some famous books, mostly in Latin. An “Antiquity” list is in

order, as most of my favourite are all there: Hippocrates, Dioscorides, Galen, and Theophrastus.

Next to “Digital Texts” you have also “Databases” on the therapeutic uses of plants; you find “Greek Medical Manuscripts”, “Printed Herbals”, and “Medicinal Plants of Antiquity”. The database lists all the codices mentioned in Diels’ catalogue reproduced and searchable by author, work, city, or library, according to the website. The “Printed Herbals” links you again to the digital images of the texts. The “Medicinal Plants of Antiquity” deals with therapeutic uses of natural substances and stores them in sets of computerized tables. This is again linked to the “Digital Texts”.

As a reference to the above cited menus and sub-menus, I may add that Greeks were not the fathers of medicine, as already published my dear colleague and friend Dr. Campbell (<http://www.manchester.ac.uk/aboutus/news/archive/list/item/?id=2777&year=2007&month=05>), although the institute’s collection has not got any Egyptian Medical texts yet, the Egyptians were in fact the pioneers of medicine. As we remember, the Library of Alexandria was destroyed in the fire caused by Romans, so, many of the medical knowledge from Antiquity in the Mediterranean world is lost forever. But besides Egyptian texts, which have survived from different sources in Egypt, we may also think that Arab practitioners of medicine in Antiquity, even before Islam, were already proficient in these sciences of healing. Many of the Arab knowledge transpired to Egyptian and Jewish doctors who studied abroad, in Persian and other Middle Eastern schools. Most of Greek and Roman physicians have for sure acquired some parts of Jewish and Arab skills. Melting this with ancient Egyptian influences on Greek and Roman cultures, both present as dominant authorities in Egypt from the fourth century BC to the fourth century AD, in a roughly way, we have a Mediterranean “world of knowledge” than transpired into the Iberian Peninsula, through Arabs and Jews who lived there for centuries. Also the North African countries occupied by Arabs and later by the Arabs and Jews expelled from the catholic kingdoms of Portugal and Spain, have inherited this Mediterranean knowledge.

The quest for rare manuscripts and the collection of early printed materials and special editions is indeed a task that fulfils the dreams of people like me, passionate about Antiquity and the origins of all medical knowledge. The contribution of the specialists working for this institute to world information is priceless. Many would not be aware of this website, but I hope that, after this article, many of you out there, who search for originals, ancient and specific prescriptions, and more details about plants, can feel fortunate to have found this website. Many other institutions in different languages are available online, but I find this to be excellent both in its contents, and the easily “browsable” menus, giving us the feeling of light anxiety while waiting for more sources to be uploaded. The mastering of ancient languages is essential but, as different specialists specializes (passing on the pleonasm) in different subjects, there is always a colleague available to help you with the translation, and then you are free to use your own interpretation and proceed with your work. Again, the need to have Arabic and Jewish items in this collection is a must, as well as Egyptian materials, but I am sure Dr. Touwaide has this on his priorities’ list, and of course, knowing that the funds available for the institute to function are limited. We can just hope that, in the near future, governments have the intelligence to vehicle material funds, spaces and people for research, especially in the field of the History of Medicine and its thousands of sub-subjects... An example can be found in Germany:

<http://www.asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de/en/news-events/news/detail/m/interview-with-leibniz-price-awardee-joachim-quack.html>

Prof. Dr. Joachim Friedrich Quack, the Director of the Institute of Egyptology at Heidelberg University has been awarded the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Prize 2011 – the highest scholarly award in Germany. The funds will be used in the research projects C1 “Medical Systems”. The struggle for ignorance and the open mind are two characteristics of a good researcher, so, if you are not bound by the fear of learning how to work online, use a computer, and you are sufficiently aware

of different perspectives in life, either by religious differences or geographical conditions, you are destined to have a safe and enjoyable trip browsing this website, and your fate is to find beautiful things like Howard Carter in 1922, when peeping through the hole of the door at Tutankhamun's tomb.