

Herbal medicine and herbal magic in Pliny's time

Both medicine and magic are considerably older than Rome and, as might be expected, they were inextricably bound up with religious beliefs and rituals¹. The interrelations between medicine and magic are especially evident in traditional Roman folk medicine, that is, the kind of medicine practiced, often if not usually within a domestic context, prior to the widespread adoption of the more sophisticated Greek medicine with its pronounced philosophic bases². Though it cannot be summarized in a few words without gross over-simplification, a large part of the old Roman folk medicine is entailed by Pliny's phrase, *ars herbaria*³. This meant, essentially two things: (i) the use of *simplicia*, primarily but not exclusively of plant origin, for a wide range of therapeutic and preventive purposes and (ii) the healing properties of the *simplicia* were often enhanced by or subjected to various ritual and magical practices⁴.

In view of the deep-seated Roman suspicion of Eastern cults and practices —characterized, for example, by Pliny's scornful remarks about the Magi— it is not always easy to distinguish herbal medicine from herbal magic. But probably the majority of Romans themselves did not make a sharp distinction between them either; for while they

1 Cf. Eugene Tavenner, *Studies in Magic from Latin Literature* (New York 1916) pp. 61-123 and Xavier François Wolters, *Notes on Antique Folklore. Proefschrift* (Amsterdam 1935).

2 Jerry Stannard, 'Medicinal Plants and Folk Remedies in Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*', in *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 4 (1982) 3-23.

3 *NH* 7, 196. All references to Pliny are to the edition of H. Rackham et al., 10 volumes (London 1938 ss., Loeb Classical Library).

4 The Marsi, noticed by Pliny, *NH* 28, 19 and Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 16, 11, 1 ss., were infamous for such practices; cf. Concezio Alicandri-Ciuffelli, 'La Medicina nei Marsi e Peligni', *Abruzzo* 9 (1971) 165-88.