

Do no harm: Early Herbals from the National Museum of Wales

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This talk will trace some of the major developments in spreading the knowledge of plants to medical healing. The study of plants has been approached from the philosophical /medicinal and utilitarian positions.

In the western world, botany, as a branch of natural philosophy may be said to have owed its origin to the Classical period of Greek culture. From Plato to Aristotle, to Theophrastus and Dioscorides, to Hippocrates, the nature and life of plants were brought within the scope of research and speculation. The most influential and significant of the Classical treatises on plants was "De Materia Medica" by Dioscorides, a Greek doctor and contemporary of Pliny. The foremost of the manuscript copies was the "Codex Vindobonensis", made in Constantinople around AD512. For over 1,000 years it was the final authority on the medicinal properties of plants.

Advances in printing techniques from the fifteenth century onwards meant that greater numbers of herbals could be produced.

The development of the microscope in the seventeenth century, revealed cell structure and plant anatomy. Detailed dissections of flower parts could now be observed, drawn and recorded, essential for the new classification system devised by Linnaeus. Several fine examples of the early herbals are housed in the rare books section of the Library in the National Museum Wales.

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