Inventory of the Practical *materia medica*


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The Cairo Genizah affords a unique opportunity to study the medical knowledge of a medieval Mediterranean Jewish community. We have established a methodology distinguishing between theoretical and practical medical knowledge and propose that the data obtained from ancient prescriptions is comparable to ethno-pharmacological surveys. One of the main goals of the study of the medical issues in the Genizah was to learn about the practical medicinal uses of various substances made by the member of the Jewish community of Cairo. This could have happened only thanks to the special habit of this community to gather all written documents and keep them in the ethic of their synagogue. This unique custom, enables us to trace 140 prescriptions and remnants of 70 lists of ***materia medica*** most of which were content records of pharmacies done for the sake of creating or dismantling partnerships, commercial orders and for tax purposes as well. In-depth study of the prescriptions and lists at our disposal has brought to light evidence of the medical use of about 278 different medicinal substances. The great majority of the substances, 223 in number (80.2%), are of plant origin, 31 (11.2%) are of inorganic origin, and 24 (8.6%) are of animal origin.

Top ten medicinal substances most frequently used by members of the Jewish community of old Cairo according to the Genizah fragments

No.	English Name	Scientific Name	No. of mentions
1.	Myrobalan	*Terminalia sp.*	79
2.	Rose	*Rosa sp.*	71
3.	Almond	*Amygdalus communis*	41
4.	Pepper	*Piper nigrum*	34
5.	Endive (Chicory)	*Cichorium intybus*	34
6	Saffron	*Crocus sativus*	34
7.	Galingale (Galanga)	*Alpinia galanga*	34
8.	Spikenard (Nard)	*Nardostachys jatamansi*	32
9.	Liquorice	*Glycyrrhiza glabra*	32
10.	Sugar cane	*Saccharum officinarum*	31

Moreover, the reconstructed lists of practical (278) and theoretical (414) drugs allow us to recognize and quantify the gap between them in medieval times (136). With the wealth of information meticulously assembled from these time capsules we expect to make a significant contribution to contemporary efforts at locating modern drugs in ancient roots and gauging their feasibility.