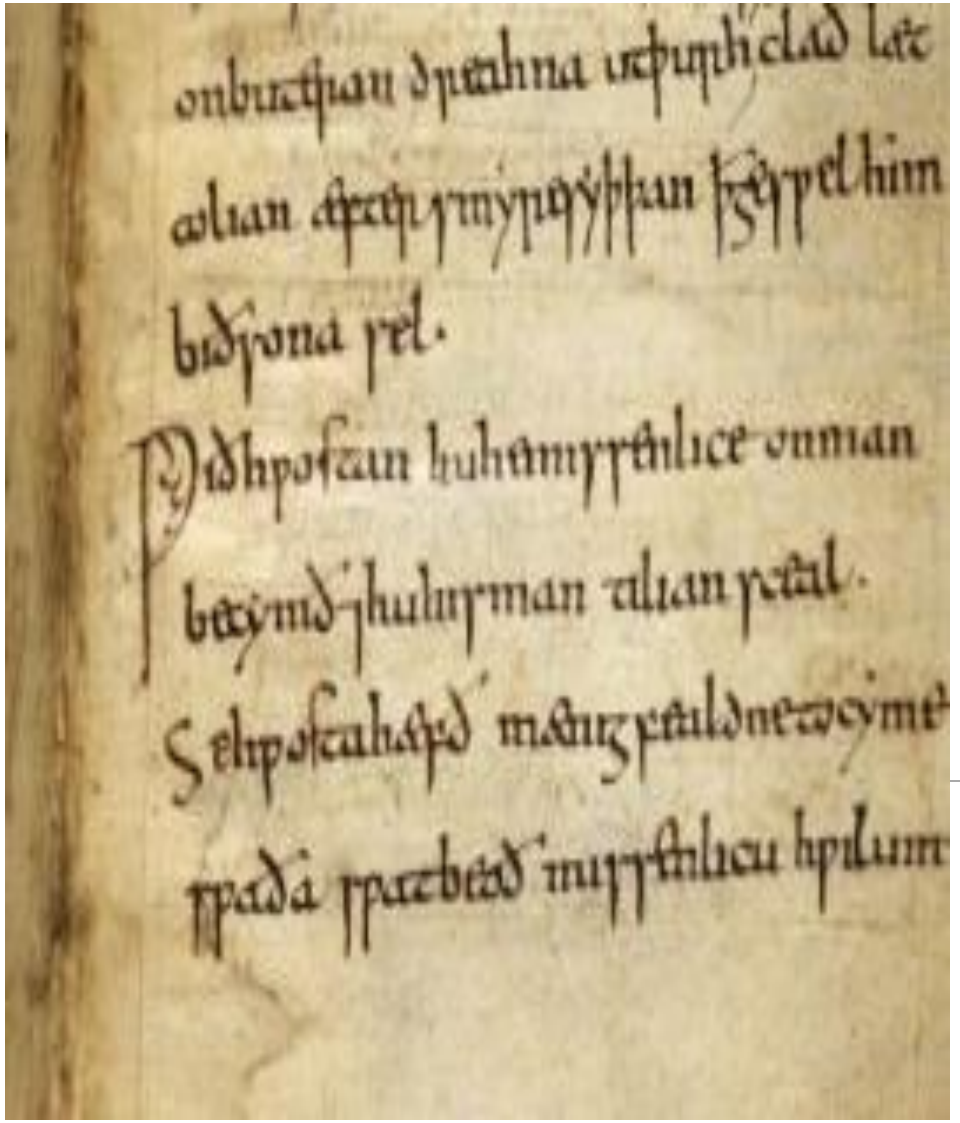


To drink or smoke? Herbal remedies for respiratory complaints

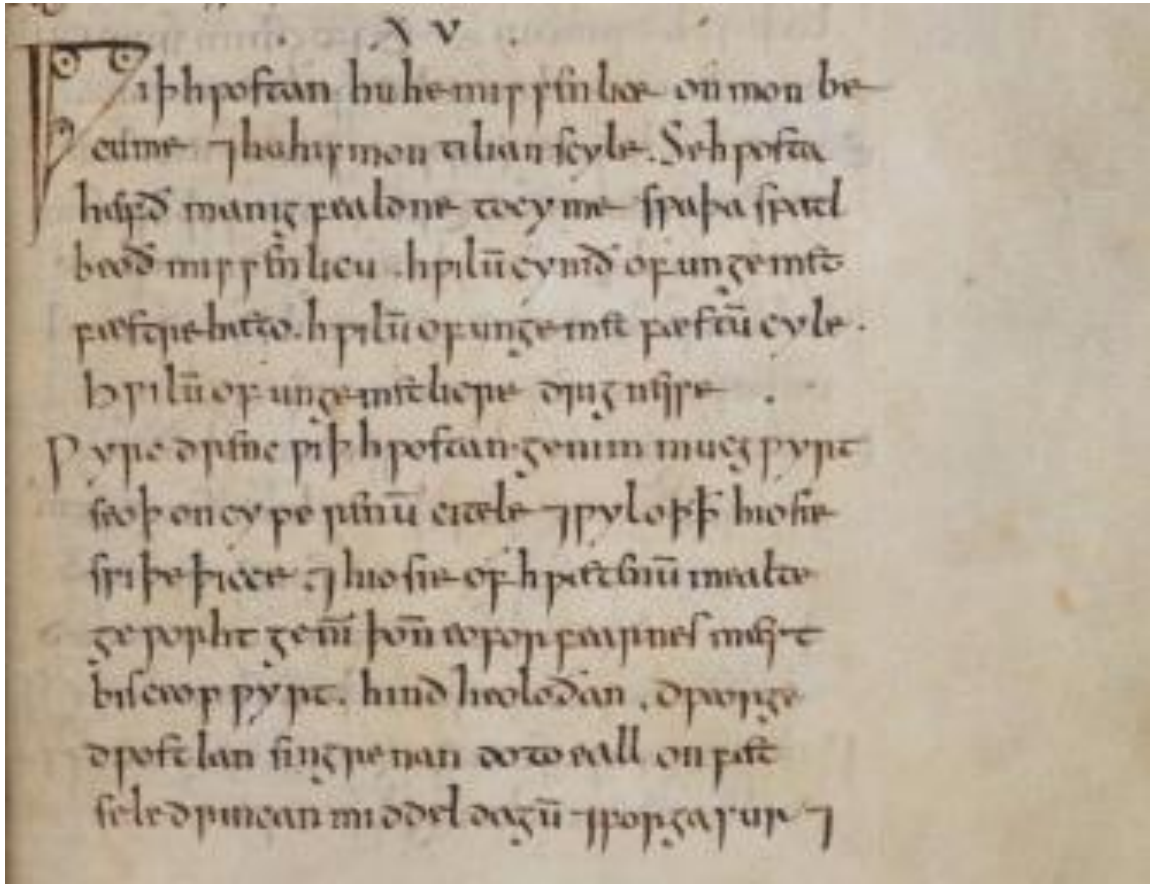
Frances Watkins PhD MCPP MNIMH

Early Medieval Remedies for Treating Cough and Lung Disease

Herbal History Research Network,12 May 2021

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Medicinal smoke

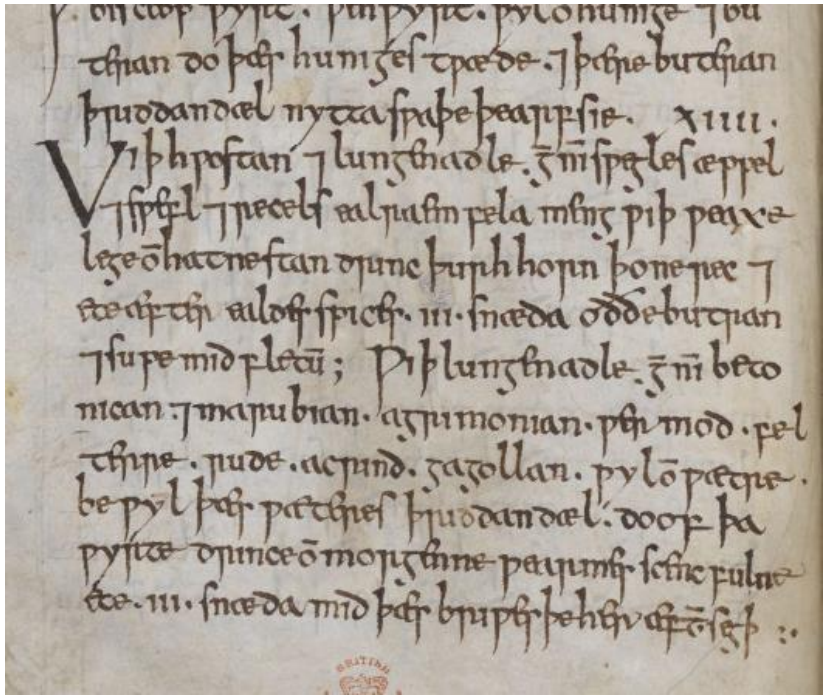


'Again, for tightness of the chest if one has a dry cough, take a thin slice of spikenard on a hot stone, scatter caraway on it, set a horn onto it and then drink in the smoke'

Bald's Leechbook I, chapter 15, remedy 10 (translation by Doyle (2017).

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For cough and lung disease

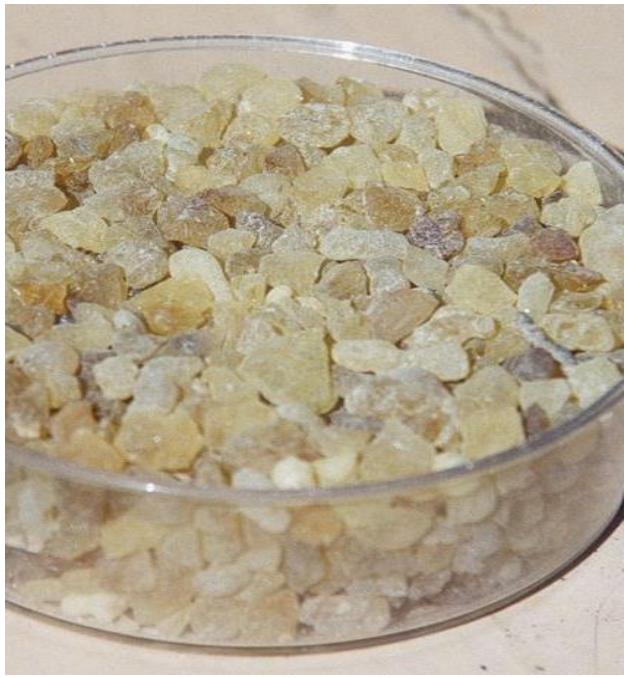


'For host, or cough, and lung disease; take swails apple, and brimstone and frankincense, all of equally much, mingle with wax, lay on a hot stone, let the man swallow the reek through a horn, and afterwards, eat three pieces of old lard or of butter, and sip this with cream…'

Bald's Leecbook III, (Cockayne, 1864-6, vol2, p.317)

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Medieval incense

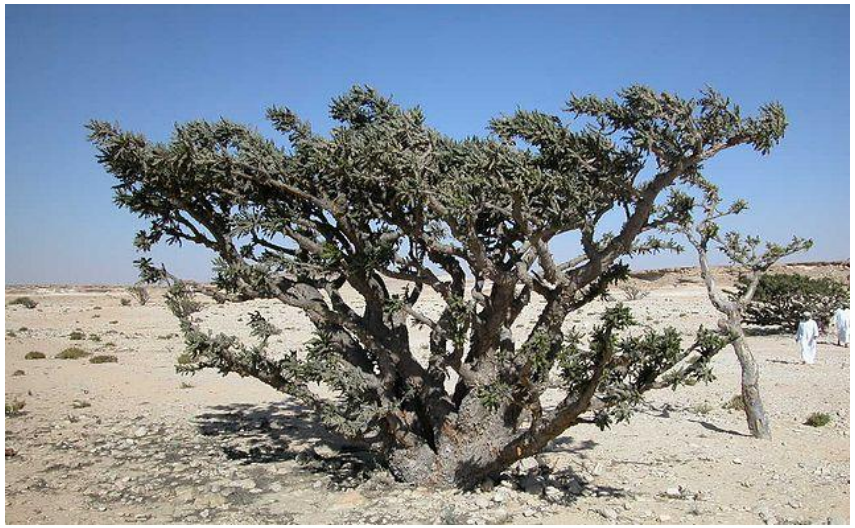


- Incense a term for a pre-made substance used in medical formulas (Burridge, 2020)
- ‘Cyphi’ an incense preparation that pleases the gods; the priests in Egypt use it lavishly. It is also mixed with antidotes, and it is given to asthmatics in drinks (Beck, 2011, p.22)

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Aromatic plants

- Spikenard*, Nardostachys jatamansi DC*
- Caraway, *Carum carvi* L.
- Frankincense, *Boswellia carterii* Birdw

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Scholarly translations



Translation reflective of the era in which it was compiled



Be aware of potential typos and incorrect translation and/or understanding



Use more than one source to verify meaning



Plant names and ingredients continue to be debated!

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Technological developments

Increasing number of digital manuscripts freely available online

Data mining medieval texts reveals patterns in ingredient choice

Transkribus

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For links to the main Old English digistised early medieval herbal manuscripts visit http://www.herbalhistory.org/home/?s=medieval+herbal+manuscripts

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