NORTHERN ITALY · 15TH–16TH CENTURY

The Alchemists' Secret Herbal

Magic Plants, Recipes and the Secrets of Gold

105 PLANTS · THE MANUSCRIPT IN COLOUR



HEALING · LOVE · GOLD FROM QUICKSILVER

BLUSABOOKS

BOOKS OF WISDOM

The Alchemists' Secret Herbal

Magic Plants, Recipes and the Secrets of Gold

The "Alchemical Herbal" of northern Italy: 105 plants with the manuscript pages in colour, their healing virtues, times of gathering and charms, and more than two hundred "very good secrets": distillations, drinkable gold, the congealing of quicksilver and the elixir of life. The complete translation with the original text, notes and a commentary on every plant: what it treats, and what it doesn't.

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Translation, transcription, notes, foreword, the commentary "What it treats — and what it doesn't" and indexes © 2026 SIA "Blusa Entertainment".
Images of the manuscripts: London, Wellcome Collection, MS.261 "Ebrario, Un et altri buonissimi secreti" (northern Italy, mid-sixteenth century), Public Domain Mark; University of Pennsylvania, Kislak Center, LJS 419 "Erbario" (northern Italy, c. 1400), public domain. The text of 23 plants is translated from the Latin of Florence, University Botanical Library, MS 106 (public domain); no images of that manuscript are reproduced. Illustrations, reconstructions and cover are modern work.

A historical source, not medical advice. The recipes are not meant to be tried; many of the substances and plants are poisonous.

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CONTENTS

Important: please read first 6

Foreword 7

The Herbal 12

Plants from the Florence Manuscript 175

The Secrets: Recipes and Alchemy 216

Indexes 456

IMPORTANT: PLEASE READ FIRST

This book is a HISTORICAL SOURCE, not a book of medicine. Its recipes were written down almost five hundred years ago, when illness was explained by the four humours of the body, the days of the Moon and words of power. We translate them completely and faithfully, as they are, because that is where the value of this book lies.

NONE OF THESE RECIPES SHOULD BE TRIED. Many of the plants and substances in these pages are poisonous: mandrake, monkshood (aconite), sea squill, cyclamen, greater celandine, rue, opium. The alchemical recipes call for mercury, sublimate (mercuric chloride), lead and arsenic, which can kill or ruin health for life. Such places are marked in this book with the sign ⚠.

Every plant and every recipe is followed by a section headed "**WHAT IT TREATS — AND WHAT IT DOESN'T**". It explains what the manuscript promised, what the plant might be in modern botany, and what modern science knows about it, where it knows anything. Where a plant cannot be identified with confidence, we say so. If you have a health problem, please see a doctor or pharmacist.

FOREWORD



An Italian apothecary's shop around 1450 (illustration)

THE BOOK THEY CALLED THE ALCHEMISTS' HERBAL

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries a strange book circulated among the apothecaries and physicians of northern Italy. It looked like an ordinary herbal: on every page a plant with its roots, leaves and flowers, and beneath it a short text on what the plant heals, where it grows and when to gather it. But the plants were not ordinary. Their roots coiled like serpents or ended in the heads of birds and the faces of men; their leaves were arranged like stars, their flowers looked like suns. The names were strange too: *Bortines*, *Torogas*, *Boxiles*, *Angalles*, *Tilles*. Most of them appear in no other herbal.

Torogas



London, Wellcome Collection, MS.261

In the manuscript: *Herba torogas* · in the Latin version: *Torogas* · a later reader wrote: *scrofolaria*, *toras*

The herb *Torogas*. To close every mortal wound, take its leaves and its seed, pound these two things together and lay them as a plaster upon the wound: it closes as quickly as one may walk a mile,[1] be the wound of whatever kind it may. And if you carry upon you some of the leaf or of the seed, you could never die

1 The Italian mile (*miglio*) was about one and a half kilometres long; "the time to walk a mile" was an old measure of time, roughly a quarter of an hour.

without penance.[1] And when you pull it up, say these words: *"Herba toregas, veni a mi da parte de Iesu Christo figliolo de Dio vivo."*[2] And it grows on the harshest mountains, in hidden places.



The same plant in the Pennsylvania manuscript LJS 419 (c. 1400)

THE ORIGINAL · ITALIAN

Herba torogas. Da saldar ogni ferita mortale, tole le foglie e la sua semenza e pista insembre queste due cose et impiastra su la ferita: salda tosto per spatio di andar uno miare, e sia la ferita de che rason se voglia. E si tu portasti sopra di te de la foia overo de la semenza, non potresti mai morire senza penitenzia. E quando tu la chavi, di' queste parole: «Herba toregas, veni a mi da parte de Iesu Christo figliolo de Dio vivo». E nasce in montagne asperissime, in lochi occulti.

WHAT IT TREATS — AND WHAT IT DOESN'T

- **What the manuscript promised:** that the herb heals a mortal wound within a quarter of an hour, and that whoever carries it will not die without repentance.
- **What it might be:** *Scrophularia nodosa*, common figwort; **likely**. A later reader wrote "scrofolaria" beside the drawing, and the researcher Vera Segre Rutz proposes the same plant.
- **What is known today:** There is no verified evidence that it heals wounds.
- **Belief and magic:** the words spoken while uprooting the herb, and the promise that its bearer will not die unconfessed, are belief, not treatment. (Segre Rutz 2000)

1 That is, never die suddenly, without confession and the last sacrament, which the Middle Ages held to be the greatest of misfortunes.
2 "Herb toregas, come to me in the name of Jesus Christ, Son of the living God."

Nigras



London, Wellcome Collection, MS.261

In the manuscript: *Herba nigras* · in the Latin version: *Nigras* · a later reader wrote: *ranocelo*

The herb *Nigras*. For a person bitten by a mad dog, let him take this herb and pound the leaves with strong vinegar, and then lay it as a plaster on the bite, and he is healed at once. If you would keep your body sound, take the seed of this herb and carry it about you, and you shall always be sound in your body; and this is a proven thing.[1] And it grows on cold mountains.

1 *Cosa provada*, "a proven thing": a customary note in medieval receipts that the remedy had been tried.



The same plant in the Pennsylvania manuscript LJS 419 (c. 1400)

THE ORIGINAL · ITALIAN

Herba nigras. A persona che fosse morduta da can rabioso, toga de questa herba e pista le foie cum asedo forte, et poi lo impiastra su la morsura, e si guarisce subbito. A voler star sano la soa persona, toga la semenza de questa herba e portala adosso cum tego, e serà sempre sano de la to persona; e sie cosa provada. E nasce in montagne fredde.

WHAT IT TREATS — AND WHAT IT DOESN'T

- **What the manuscript promised:** that the herb with vinegar heals the bite of a mad dog, and that its seeds, carried on the body, keep one healthy.
- **What it might be: possibly** *Genista tinctoria*, dyer's greenweed, as Segre Rutz proposes. A later reader wrote a different word beside the drawing, readable as "ranocelo", so the identification is not secure.
- **Belief and magic:** seeds as an amulet for health are a belief. (Segre Rutz 2000)

Betonga



London, Wellcome Collection, MS.261

In the manuscript: *Herba betonga* · in the Latin version: *Betonega*

The herb *Betonga*. For pain of the side: take ten ounces[1] of this herb and boil it in red wine, and then lay it as a plaster on the side; within ten days he is cured. For the mother's ailment:[2] take the leaf of this herb and eat it as one eats a salad; within ten days she is cured. And if you cannot have it green, make a powder of the leaves and use it in drink with good warm wine: it cures within thirty days,

1 The ounce, an apothecaries' weight of about 30 grams.

2 "The mother's ailment": disorders of the womb; the Middle Ages also blamed on it choking fits and hysteria, explained by a womb wandering through the body.