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Neurological stamp

Mandragora

Mandragora (Mandrake) was used as a pain killer in ancient times. It is a herb of the nightshade (*Solanaceae*). The scent of the mandrake fruit was reputed to alleviate headaches and insomnia. Hippocrates noted that a small dose would relieve anxiety and the deepest depression. If drunk its hypnotic properties allowed amputation or cauterisation. It was also used as an aphrodisiac and cure for sterility.

The roots bore a resemblance to the human figure. Gathering the mandrake was not without danger as the plant when uprooted uttered a shriek which caused death or insanity in those who heard it. One way to collect the herb was to dig around the roots leaving only a small portion. A hungry dog was then tied to it. Food placed beyond the length of the rope encouraged the dog to strain at the leash and uproot the mandrake. The dog died following the shriek of the plant which was now harmless.

A stamp commemorating the Seventh European Congress of Anaesthesiology in 1986 reproduced a medieval illustration from the Austrian National Library. This shows the mandrake plant with its human like roots about to be uprooted. A worried man is departing hurriedly before the fatal shriek is emitted. (Stanley Gibbons 2103, Scott 1360).

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