

A Lexical Analysis Of An Obscure Pharmaceutical Term From A Fifteenth Century Spanish Apothecaries' Manual: *Secaniabin*

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Abstract

The *Compendio delos boticarios* is an apothecaries' manual that was translated into Spanish by Alonso Rodriguez de Tudela in 1515 from Saladino d'Ascoli's original Latin. It contains many words that no longer exist in the Spanish lexicon, and I recently created a glossary of those words in order to aid modern readers in its comprehension. Composing the glossary led to the location of several terms that are deserving of further recognition and analysis, and the purpose of analysing and researching the term discussed in this paper is to determine - using lexicology as a vehicle - what evidence the text holds of the exchange of scientific knowledge that was taking place among the diverse cultures of the sixteenth-century Mediterranean. One such word is *secaniabin* – a term which lacks documentation in any well-known Spanish dictionary or text. It is defined, however, in Joannis Mesue's *In Antidotarium* - one of medieval Europe's most well-known pharmaceutical treatises and a source heavily relied upon by Saladino d'Ascoli in the *Aromatariorum compendium* (the Latin version of the *Compendio delos boticarios*). *Secaniabin* refers to a syrup made with vinegar, honey, and often water (among various other substances) that was used by the apothecaries of the day primarily due to its resolutive and subtiliative effects. Its presence in the *Compendio delos boticarios* highlights the sharing of knowledge, culture, and thus (to an extent) language that characterized the Mediterranean of the early sixteenth century. Surprisingly, the Persian reflex *sekanjabin* is also used in modern-day Iran to refer to a drink made with honey, vinegar, and often mint and cucumber - consumed for refreshment but also for the medicinal and healing properties that many believe it to have. The word *secaniabin* represents only one of the many opportunities for lexical and etymological analysis found in the *Compendio delos boticarios*. The document is rich with loan-words from Latin, Italian, Greek, and Arabic, and the contributions of physicians, philosophers, and apothecaries from diverse areas of the Mediterranean are frequently cited. These facts - as evidence for the aforementioned intellectual exchange - are underscored and given specific detail by the lexical analysis proposed in this study.

Keywords: Secaniabin, Medieval, Spanish

1. Introduction

We may know it today as a place of conflict and violence, but the Medieval Mediterranean was a region characterized by the vibrant exchange of science, ideas, knowledge, and therefore language among its various inhabitants – Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike. This fact is exemplified by many of the writings produced by Mediterranean authors during this time period, one of which is the *Compendio delos boticarios* – a textbook for aspiring apothecaries. Originally penned in Latin during the fifteenth century by Saladino d'Ascoli – a Jewish doctor from Italy – it was translated into Castilian by Alonso Rodriguez de Tudela in 1515. And while it is not well-known or especially relevant to the pharmaceutical world by today's standards, the *Compendio* is nonetheless an important document. Not only does it contain numerous opportunities for the historical linguist to analyze certain words from semantic,

morphological, and etymological perspectives - but it also provides for all of its readers a glimpse into the world of the Medieval Mediterranean.

Loanwords from Italian, Latin, Greek, and Arabic – for example – are not hard to come by in this document, and the contributions of apothecaries, physicians, and philosophers from diverse ethnic backgrounds and areas of the region are relied upon – heavily at times. The term that will be discussed here illustrates this fact, and the questions that it raises provide valuable insight into the climate of intellectual and cultural exchange that permeated the Medieval Mediterranean.

Secaniabin is the term in question, and it appears in the *Compendio* three times. It is a noun, derived originally from the Arabic *al-sakan y abin* - which is derived in turn from two Neo-Persian morphemes: *sik* (meaning “vinegar”) and *anguben* (meaning “honey”).¹ It appears in its most basic state to refer to a mixture of vinegar, honey or sugar, and often water that was known for its resolutive and sublimative effects; that is, it was designed to soften or thin viscous bodily substances such as melancholy and phlegm. Other potential ingredients, however, included calaminth (*Calamintha nepeta*), laserwort (*Laserpitium siler*), certain unidentified roots, quince (*Cydonia oblonga*), seeds, salt, wine, and scammony (*Convolvulus scammonia*). In addition, *secaniabin* was likely used as a medicinal accompaniment to ingredients such as unspecified herbs and the juice of unspecified leaves and roots. This lack of concurrence regarding its components and potential supplements is cause to question what exactly *secaniabin* consisted of: was it merely the equivalent of *oximiel* – a mixture of vinegar and honey (and derived from the Greek *ὄξύμηλι*, meaning “bitter honey”) – or was it considered a separate entity due to the various ingredients that it was claimed by some to contain or accompany?

2. References Found In Specific Texts

2.1. References By Modern Day Authors And Editors

In an attempt to answer this question, one must consult the specific texts in which *secaniabin* is treated. It is not documented in any of the major dictionaries or lexical resources of the field – a group that includes María Teresa Herrera’s *Diccionario español de textos médicos antiguos*, Kasten and Nitti’s *Diccionario de la prosa castellana*, Terreros y Pando’s *Diccionario castellano*, and the *Nuevo tesoro lexicográfico de la lengua española* – an online compilation of multiple dictionaries dating back to the 1400’s. Among the few lexicographers who have treated this word, however, are Concepción Vázquez de Benito and María Teresa Herrera – authors of *Los arabismos de los textos médicos latinos y castellanos* – Gerrit Bos – editor of *On Poisons and the Protection Against Lethal Drugs* – and Federico Corriente – author of the *Dictionary of Arabic and Allied Loanwords*. According to Corriente, *secaniabin* is merely a synonym of “oximiel” – or “vinegar honey”.² Bos’ interpretation of Moses Maimonides’ famous treatise concurs, designating *secaniabin* as consisting of “vinagre y miel” – or “vinegar and honey”.³ Later in the same text, however, one finds the sentence, “deinde bibat secaniabin cum succo foliorum radicum et evomat.”⁴ This translates roughly as, “then, have him drink secaniabin with juice of the leaves and roots and then have him vomit,” and it provides intriguing evidence for *secaniabin*’s potential properties as a supplement or accompaniment to certain medicinal simples. And finally, Herrera and Vázquez refer to several different spelling variants of the word *secaniabin* – defining each variant separately according to its original source.⁵ While some of the spellings given (“schingibin”, “scangibin o sajingibin”, “squingerin”, “squngebi”) are predictably defined as “oximiel” or “jarabe azetoso” – meaning “acidic syrup” – one in particular (“squincibin”) stands out, defined as “jarabe azetoso de membrillos [quince].”⁶ This clear lack of total concurrence even among contemporary authors and editors necessitates the examination of references to *secaniabin* in texts that were written during the same time period as the *Compendio*.

2.2. References In Antiquated Texts

2.2.1. definitions equivalent to oximiel

The *Compendio* itself defines *secaniabin* as “los xaraues acetosos simples y compuestos” – meaning, “simple and compound acidic syrups”.⁷ It is defined later in the same document simply as “xaraue acetoso,” and “syrupus acetosus” is the equivalent phrase found in the *Aromatariorum compendium* – the Latin source of the *Compendio delos boticarios*.⁸ An example of a comparable definition – one that simply equates *secaniabin* with *oximiel* or “acidic syrup”, or defines it as a mixture of vinegar, honey, and at times water – is found in Herrera’s 1973 edition of Alonso

de Chirino's sixteenth century *Menor daño de la medicina*, which includes the line, "miel y vinagre que es sacaniabin," or, "honey and vinegar, which is *sacaniabin*."⁹ The 1522 edition of Galen's *Impressio quinta* reads, "cum sit sermo eius adhuc in secaniabin parue acetositatis narrat maius iuuamentum pp quod administratur in infirmitatibus pectoris & pulmonis. Maius autem iuuamentum quod fit ex vsu eius e pp conmixtionem aq cum aceto et melle in eo per equalitatem quod est: qz ille cui dispon est hec dispon ex secaniabin," meaning, "as is stated in his [likely referring to Mesue] discussion on *secaniabin*, a small amount of acidity is of great help when administered for illnesses of the chest and lungs. Of great benefit likewise is that obtained from its use when it is mixed with equal parts of vinegar and honey."¹⁰ The 1527 edition of Bernardino de Laredo's *Modus faciendi cum ordine medicandi* likewise lists "melis" (honey) and "aceti" (vinegar) as the ingredients of *secaniabin*, and the 2001 edition of Nebrija's *Dictionarium medicum* defines *secaniabin* as, "oximel que se haze con miel y vinagre," or "oximel that is made with honey and vinegar."¹¹ It is at this point worth noting that, despite the fact that they may well have had their differences, one should not be surprised by the similarity of the foundational elements common to both *oximiel* and *secaniabin* – those elements being vinegar and honey. Both are rich in beneficial compounds whose medicinal properties have been known to humans throughout history, and their status as the basic ingredients of both *secaniabin* and *oximiel* (whether or not these two words referred to separate substances) should not be unanticipated.

2.2.2. references to calamint, laserwort, and roots

A variety of other texts from the same time period and one written in the nineteenth century about that time period reference the three ingredients most commonly associated with *secaniabin* apart from vinegar, honey, and water. These are calamint, laserwort, and unidentified roots, and they are mentioned as possible components of or additions to *secaniabin* in Luis Comenge's 1896 *La farmacia en el siglo XIV*, which includes "secaniabin de raíces, id. de calamento" in a list of remedies that were used for fever, "secaniabin con raíces" as a remedy for excess phlegm and other phlegm-related complaints, and "secaniabin de calamento" as a remedy for various ailments of the liver.¹² Roots and calamint, in other words, are associated with all three references to *secaniabin*. The 1535 edition of Ioannis Manardi's *Epistolarum medicinalium* similarly lists "secaniabin de radicibus" ("secaniabin of roots") and "secaniabin de calamento" as possible varieties of *secaniabin*; however, "secaniabin de cheisin" ("secaniabin of laserwort") is also included as a category.¹³ The 1543 edition of Mesue the Younger's *In antidotarium* and the 1525 edition of Mesue the Elder's *Canones universales* contain additional and nearly identical references to "secaniabin de cheisim", "secaniabin de calamento", and "secaniabin de radicibus."¹⁴

2.2.3. other references

Furthermore, the 1973 edition of Alonso de Chirino's *Menor daño de la medicina* references *secaniabin* in the phrase, "comer destas yeruas con secaniabín mascándolas tragando el çumo e echando lo otro."¹⁵ This translates basically as, "eat the herbs with *secaniabin* – chewing them, swallowing the juice, and spitting out the rest." It provides evidence for the possible use of *secaniabin* as an accompaniment or complement to other medicinal substances, such as the aforementioned herbs.

Additional evidence that *secaniabin* was considered by many to be a separate entity as opposed to merely a synonym for *oximiel* is found in the 1556 edition of the *Liber canonis*: a thorough overview of Galenic practice written by both Benedetto Rinio and the famous Persian doctor Avicenna. In this volume, one finds a clearly-drawn distinction between "oximel squiliticum" – "oximel with squill [*Urginea scilla*]" – and "secaniabin... cum scamonea" – "secaniabin with scammony."¹⁶ This pair of references begs the question: Why differentiate between *secaniabin* and *oximiel* if they did not indeed have some degree of status as separate entities?

And finally, yet another intriguing take on the use of the word *secaniabin* can be found in both Manardi's *Epistolarum Medicinalium* and Giuseppe Donzelli's 1704 *Teatro farmaceutico dogmatico e spagirico*. Both texts claim that *secaniabin* was simply the Arabic word for a substance – composed in its most basic state of honey, vinegar, and water – that was also called "acetum mulsum" (or "honeyed vinegar") in Latin and some variant of *oximiel* in Greek.¹⁷ Although it is not supported by all or even the majority of period texts, this possibility represents yet another viewpoint regarding the existence of the word *secaniabin* and its use by the inhabitants of the Medieval Mediterranean.

Regardless of its specific meaning, however, the vitality of the word *secaniabin* – at least in the time period in which it was used – is clearly evidenced by its relative frequency in the pharmacological works of that era. Not only does it appear in multiple texts, but it is also used with authority by writers who appear to have assumed that their readers would possess some prior knowledge of its meaning – a fact that illustrates that *secaniabin* and similar words are significant and deserving of documentation.

3. Medicinal Uses And Applications

Despite the presence of different opinions as to *secaniabin*'s components and as to whether or not it constituted an entity separate from *oximiel*, its medicinal uses and applications are agreed upon to a greater extent. This aspect of the existence of *secaniabin* warrants discussion, as it made the drug important to begin with. Judging from period texts, its primary qualities were resolutive and subtiliative; in other words, it was believed to thin or soften viscous bodily humors and fluids – as well as tumor-like masses.

“Modus secaniabin solutione educens phlegma,” begins a passage in Mesue the Elder’s *Canones universales*; it is followed by a section beginning, “modus secaniabin solutione educens melancholiam.”¹⁸ Both citations refer to the perceived ability of *secaniabin* to dissipate excess melancholy and phlegm. A similar reference can be found in de Laredo’s *Modus faciendi cum ordine medicandi*, in which *secaniabin* is described as being used, “contra materias gruesas estantes enel estomago y higado,” or, “against ‘thick’ masses or substances in the stomach and liver.”¹⁹ Later on in the same text, it is also stated that, “con abilidad las sutiliza y las resuelue,” meaning that *secaniabin* was useful in helping to dissolve or soften said substances or masses.²⁰

Secaniabin's healing and medicinal properties – although they may be viewed today as of questionable scientific merit at best – allowed for its importance in Medieval Mediterranean medicine and pharmacy. And furthermore, the health-giving benefits of ingredients such as honey and vinegar in modern holistic practice are reminiscent of the role played by those ingredients in antiquated remedies such as *secaniabin*.

4. Expression Of Various Degrees Of Assimilation

Although *secaniabin* once occupied an established place in the Spanish lexicon, its use does appear to have died out after a few hundred years. It is because of this fact, coupled with *secaniabin*'s original status as an Arabic word derived from Neo-Persian, that it was never fully assimilated into the Spanish language. It can be spelled, however, in several individual ways, with each spelling expressing a different degree of assimilation.

Words in Spanish most typically follow an alternating pattern of consonants and vowels, and the first three syllables of the form /se.ka.nja.'bin/ – the most commonly-found and most assimilated variation – show this exact pattern. The pattern changes slightly in the last two syllables, but a consonant-vowel-consonant arrangement – as can be found in the letters b-i-n – is also a relatively common occurrence in the Spanish phonological system. Although it still maintains the basic form of its Arabic predecessor, therefore, the *secaniabin* variant also shows a pattern of vowels and consonants similar to that found in many Spanish words.

Variants such as *schingibin*, *scangibin*, *sajngibin*, *squingerin*, *squincibin*, *squngebi*, and *squizibin*, however – all of which can also be found in Castilian texts – have a great deal more in common with the original Arabic than does the *secaniabin* spelling.²¹ *Sechaniabin*, *sacaniabin*, *scaniabin*, and *socaniabin* are four additional documented forms that appear to have been assimilated to better fit the Spanish phonological system.

Additionally, the reality of the various levels of assimilation expressed by *secaniabin* and its many different forms is underscored by Donzelli’s 1704 *Teatro farmaceutico dogmatico e spagirico* – which states, “quod etiam Oximel, multi corruptē Secaniabin scribunt.”²² This translates as, “that which is also called *oximel*, is corruptly written by many as *secaniabin*,” and it serves as further proof of the various transformations undergone by *al-sakan y abin* as it was at least partially assimilated from Arabic into Castilian – clearly varied enough from its original state by the date of publication of this text to be considered a corruption by the authors. It was, in other words, believed by Donzelli that the Spanish-like orthography of the word *secaniabin* was the result of an error in transliteration from a non-Latin based writing system – Arabic – to a Latin-based one – Castilian or Italian (in which *secaniabin* and variants thereof can also be found). This alone provides substantial evidence for the status of this word as an established component of the Medieval Spanish lexicon – a term that was used with relative frequency and authority by members of the pharmacological community. The phonological changes that *secaniabin* underwent in transitioning from an Arabic word to a word that more closely resembles its Spanish counterparts proves that it was used frequently enough to warrant those changes in written – and presumably spoken – Castilian.

5. Conclusion

Even today, however, the Persian reflex *sekanjabin* attests to the continued relevance of this term and to the usefulness of its ingredients; it is used in Iran to refer to a drink made with honey, vinegar, and often mint and cucumber - consumed for refreshment but also for the medicinal and healing properties that many believe it to have. This fact - coupled with the previously-mentioned appearances of the Arabic borrowing *secaniabin* in Latin, Castilian, and Italian texts over a period of several hundred years - is proof that this word is deserving of greater recognition, documentation, and a solidified place in the canon of late Medieval Spanish technical and medical terminology. Its inclusion in the glossary of similar terms from the *Compendio* will be helpful in giving both it and those additional terms the recognition that they merit as evidence for the lively exchange of ideas, science, knowledge, and language that characterized the Medieval Mediterranean.

6. Acknowledgements

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8. Endnotes

¹Herrera and Vázquez, *Los arabismos de los textos médicos latinos y castellanos de la Edad Media y de la Modernidad*, 257; Corriente, *Dictionary of Arabic and Allied Loanwords*, 432.

² Corriente, *Dictionary of Arabic and Allied Loanwords*, 432.

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- 3 Maimonides, *On Poisons and the Protection Against Lethal Drugs*, 181.
 - 4 Maimonides, *On Poisons and the Protection Against Lethal Drugs*, 181.
 - 5 Herrera and Vázquez, *Los arabismos de los textos médicos latinos y castellanos de la Edad Media y de la Modernidad*, 256-257.
 - 6 Herrera and Vázquez, *Los arabismos de los textos médicos latinos y castellanos de la Edad Media y de la Modernidad*, 256-257.
 - 7 d'Ascoli, *El compendio delos boticarios*, fol. 5r.
 - 8 d'Ascoli, *El compendio delos boticarios*, fol. 8v; d'Ascoli, *Aromatariorum compendium*, 8.
 - 9 de Chirino, *Menor daño de la medicina*, 298.
 - 10 Galen, *Impressio quinta*, fol. 33r.
 - 11 de Laredo, *Modus faciendi cum ordine medicandi*, fol. 91r; de Nebrija, *Dictionarium medicum*, 132.
 - 12 Luis Comenge, "La farmacia en el siglo XIV," *El siglo médico* 43 (1896): 516.
 - 13 Manardi, *Epistolarum medicinalium*, 449.
 - 14 Mesue, *In antidotarium*, 185, 205; Ibn-Māsawaih, *Canones universales*, 13-14.
 - 15 de Chirino, *Menor daño de la medicina*, 171.
 - 16 Avicenna & Rinio, *Liber canonis*, 345.
 - 17 Manardi, *Epistolarum medicinalium*, 449; Donzelli, *Teatro farmaceutico dogmatico e spagirico*, 435.
 - 18 Ibn-Māsawaih, *Canones universales*, fol. 13l.
 - 19 de Laredo, *Modus faciendi cum ordine medicandi*, fol. 91r.
 - 20 de Laredo, *Modus faciendi cum ordine medicandi*, fol. 91r.
 - 21 Herrera and Vázquez, *Los arabismos de los textos médicos latinos y castellanos de la Edad Media y de la Modernidad*, 256-257; Corriente, *Dictionary of Arabic and Allied Loanwords*, 432.
 - 22 Donzelli, *Teatro farmaceutico dogmatico e spagirico*, 435.