

Mandragora officinarum

A mandrake is the root of a plant, historically derived either from plants of the genus *Mandragora* found in the Mediterranean region, or from other species, such as *Bryonia alba*, the English mandrake, which have similar properties. The plants from which the root is obtained are also called "mandrakes". Mediterranean mandrakes are perennial herbaceous plants with ovate leaves arranged in a rosette, a thick upright root, often branched, and bell-shaped flowers followed by yellow or orange berries. They have been placed in different species by different authors. They are highly variable perennial herbaceous plants with long thick roots (often branched) and almost no stem. The leaves are borne in a basal rosette, and are variable in size and shape, with a maximum length of 45 cm (18 in). They are usually either elliptical in shape or wider towards the end (obovate), with varying degrees of hairiness.[1]

Because mandrakes contain deliriant hallucinogenic tropane alkaloids and the shape of their roots often resembles human figures, they have been associated with magic rituals throughout history, including present-day contemporary pagan traditions.[2]

The English name of the plant derives from Latin *mandragora* through French *main-de-gloire*. [3] In German, it is known as *alraune* ('all-rune' or 'elf-rune'), referring to the plant's folkloric ability to impart wisdom. [4] Certain sources cite the name *pisdifje* ('brain thief'), claiming the plant grows from the brains of dead thieves, or the droppings of those hung on the gallows. [5]

All species of *Mandragora* contain highly biologically active alkaloids, tropane alkaloids in particular. The alkaloids make the plant, in particular the root and leaves, poisonous, via anticholinergic, hallucinogenic, and hypnotic effects. Anticholinergic properties can lead to asphyxiation. Accidental poisoning is not uncommon. Ingesting mandrake root is likely to have other adverse effects such as vomiting and diarrhea. The alkaloid concentration varies between plant samples. Clinical reports of the effects of consumption of Mediterranean mandrake include severe symptoms similar to those of atropine poisoning, including blurred vision, dilation of the pupils (mydriasis), dryness of the mouth, difficulty in urinating, dizziness, headache, vomiting, blushing and a rapid heart rate (tachycardia). Hyperactivity and hallucinations occurred in the majority of patients. [6][7]

The root is hallucinogenic and narcotic. In sufficient quantities, it induces a state of unconsciousness and was used as an anaesthetic for surgery in ancient times. [8] In the past, juice from the finely grated root was applied externally to relieve rheumatic pains. [8] It was used internally to treat melancholy, convulsions, and mania. [8] When taken internally in large doses it was said to excite delirium and madness. [8]

In the past, mandrake was often made into amulets which were believed to bring good fortune, cure sterility, etc. In one superstition, people who pull up this root will be condemned to hell, and the mandrake root would scream and cry as it was pulled from the ground, killing anyone who heard it. [2] Therefore, in the past, people have tied the roots to the bodies of animals and then used these animals to pull the roots from the soil. [2] This folklore reference is integrated into part of the portrayal of the fictional mandrake described in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*.

The ancient Greeks burned mandrake as incense. [9]

Two references to דודאים (duda'im, plural; singular דודא duda)—literally meaning "love plants"—occur in the Jewish scriptures. The Septuagint translates דודאים as μανδραγόρας (mandragóras), and the Vulgate follows the Septuagint. A number of later translations into different languages follow Septuagint (and Vulgate) and use mandrake as the plant as the proper meaning in both the Book of Genesis 30:14–16 and Song of Songs 7:12-13. Others follow the example of the Luther Bible and provide a more literal translation.

In Genesis 30:14, Reuben, the eldest son of Jacob and Leah, finds mandrakes in a field. Rachel, Jacob's infertile second wife and Leah's sister, is desirous of the ■■■■■■ and barter with Leah for them. The trade offered by Rachel is for Leah to spend that night in Jacob's bed in exchange for Leah's ■■■■■■. Leah gives away the plants to her barren sister, but soon after this (Genesis 30:14–22), Leah, who had previously had four sons but had been infertile for a long while, became pregnant once more and in time gave birth to two more sons, Issachar and Zebulun, and a daughter, Dinah. Only years after this episode of her asking for the mandrakes did Rachel manage to become pregnant.

And Reuben went in the days of wheat harvest, and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them unto his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, Give me, I pray thee, of thy son's mandrakes. And she said unto her, Is it a small matter that thou hast taken my husband? and wouldest thou take away my son's mandrakes also? And Rachel said, Therefore he shall lie with thee to night for thy son's mandrakes. And Jacob came out of the field in the evening, and Leah went out to meet him, and said, Thou must come in unto me; for surely I have hired thee with my son's mandrakes. And he lay with her that night.

Sir Thomas Browne, in *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, however, suggests the *duda'im* of Genesis 30:14 refers only to the opium poppy (as a metaphor describing a woman's breasts.)

The final verses of Chapter 7 of Song of Songs (Song of Songs 7:12–13), mention the plant once again:

[illegible]

Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vine flourish, whether the tender grape appear, and the pomegranates bud forth: there will I give thee my loves.
The mandrakes give a smell, and at our gates are all manner of pleasant fruits, new and old, which I have laid up for thee, O my beloved.

According to the legend, when the root is dug up, it screams and kills all who hear it. Literature includes complex directions for harvesting a mandrake root in relative safety. For example, Josephus (circa 37–100 AD) of Jerusalem gives the following directions for pulling it up:

A furrow must be dug around the root until its lower part is exposed, then a dog is tied to it, after which the person tying the dog must get away. The dog then endeavours to follow him, and so easily pulls up the root, but dies suddenly instead of his master. After this, the root can be handled without fear.[12]

An excerpt from *Transcendental Magic: Its Doctrine and Ritual* by nineteenth-century occultist and ceremonial magician Eliphas Levi, suggests the plant might hint at mankind's "terrestrial origin:"

The natural mandragore is a filamentous root which, more or less, presents as a whole either the figure of a man, or that of the virile members. It is slightly narcotic, and an aphrodisiacal virtue was ascribed to it by the ancients, who represented it as being sought by Thessalian sorcerers for the composition of philtres. Is this root the umbilical vestige of our terrestrial origin? We dare not seriously affirm it, but all the same it is certain that man came out of the slime of the earth, and his first appearance must have been in the form of a rough sketch. The analogies of nature make this notion necessarily admissible, at least as a possibility. The first men were, in this case, a family of gigantic, sensitive mandragores, animated by the sun, who rooted themselves up from the earth; this assumption not only does not exclude, but, on the contrary, positively supposes, creative will and the providential co-operation of a first cause, which we have REASON to call GOD.

Some alchemists, impressed by this idea, speculated on the culture of the mandragore, and experimented in the artificial reproduction of a soil sufficiently fruitful and a sun sufficiently active to humanise the said root, and thus create men without the concurrence of the female. Others, who regarded humanity as the synthesis of animals, despaired about vitalising the mandragore, but they crossed monstrous pairs and projected human seed into animal earth, only for the production of shameful crimes and barren deformities.[13]

The following is taken from Jean-Baptiste Pitois' *The History and Practice of Magic*, and explains a ritual for creating a mandrake:

Would you like to make a Mandragora, as powerful as the homunculus (little man in a bottle) so praised by Paracelsus? Then find a root of the plant called bryony. Take it out of the ground on a Monday (the day of the moon), a little time after the vernal equinox. Cut off the ends of the root and bury it at night in some country churchyard in a dead man's grave. For 30 days, water it with cow's milk in which three bats have been drowned. When the 31st day arrives, take out the root in the middle of the night and dry it in an oven heated with branches of verbena; then wrap it up in a piece of a dead man's winding-sheet and carry it with you everywhere.[14]

In Medieval times, mandrake was considered a key ingredient in a multitude of witches' flying ointment recipes as well as a primary component of magical potions and brews.[15] These were entheogenic preparations used in European witchcraft for their mind-altering and hallucinogenic effects.[16] Starting in the Late Middle Ages and thereafter, some believed that witches applied these ointments or ingested these potions to help them fly to gatherings with other witches, meet with the Devil, or to experience bacchanalian carousal.[17][18]

Romani people use mandrake as a love amulet.[19]

