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# Warm hoopoe's blood and cardamom: a Coptic medical text

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**Jennifer Cromwell** explores a Coptic papyrus, tracing the significance of its prescribed key ingredients – cardamom and the blood of the *kukapat* (*upupa epops*), the hoopoe – in the Egyptian *pharmacopoeia* and wider cultural imagination.

A small piece of parchment, tattered along two edges, in the John Rylands Library, Manchester, bears a faint text preserving a remedy for dry eyes, that is, when tears lose water and become too salty. Known by the papyrological designation P. Ryl. Copt. 108 and dated to the 11th century, this is one of several late Coptic medical texts.

*For eyes starting to cry salt: heated hoopoe's blood and a herb called 'cardamom', in Egyptian 'shife' (a tree that grows in mountain regions, like a pomegranate tree, its leaves being slightly long like a ..., its wood resembling that of the pomegranate tree).*

Only two ingredients are required, warm hoopoe's blood and cardamom. The exotic nature of the latter leads to a digression in which the writer describes the plant (part of the text is now covered by a modern sticker, see opposite page, top, but the text was obscure even to its original editor, Walter Crum). At the end of the description, a line confirms this is the end of the text, yet there is no information about how to apply this concoction, whether directly to the eyes, as a poultice, or whether it was to be ingested. Perhaps the writer was so taken with the digression that he forgot the rest of the text. At a later date, the text was crossed-out with two diagonal strokes and a vertical stroke, and the parchment was reused to practice writing the names of the months and numbers, a school exercise that continues onto the other

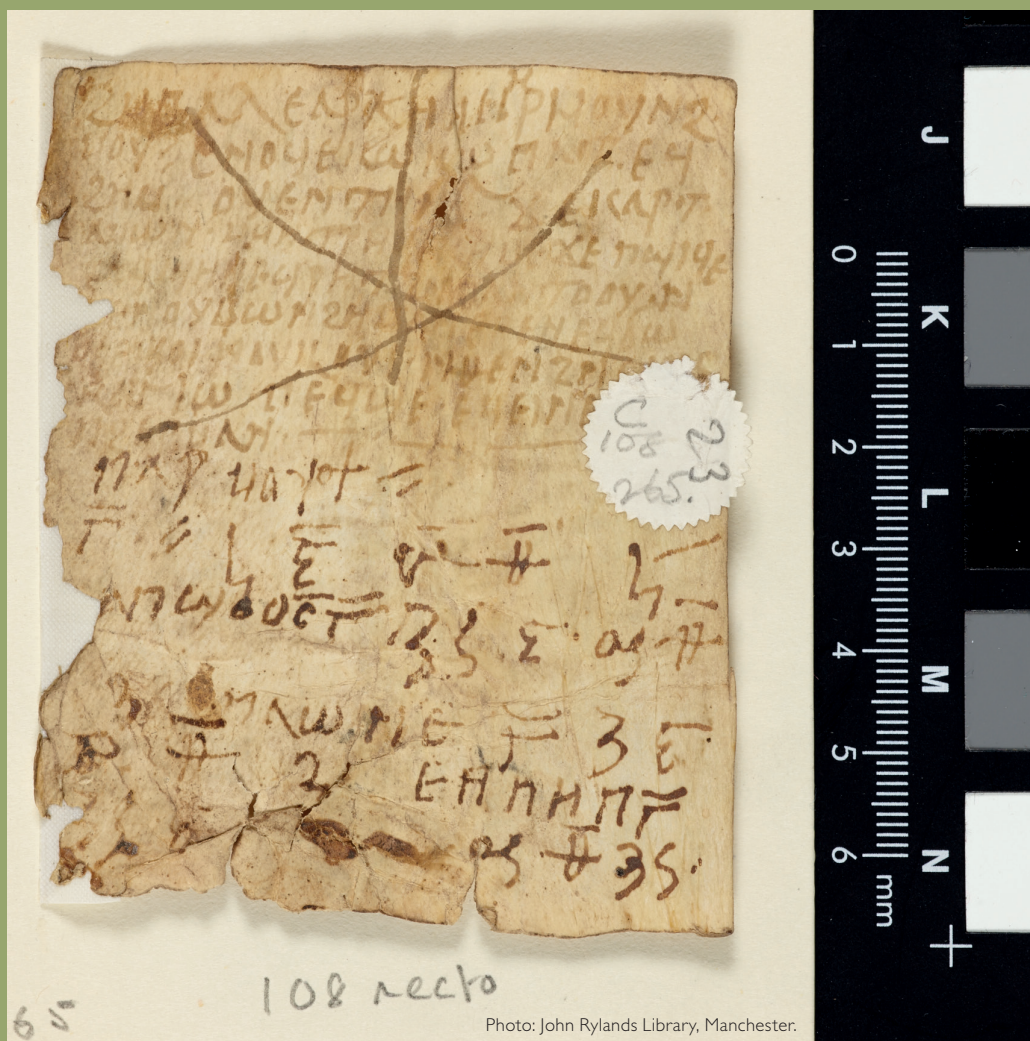
side. Why was the text struck through like this? The lack of application directions may have reduced its efficacy and so it was of no use, or maybe it was copied into a larger compendium. The description about cardamom does echo an earlier 5th/6th century Coptic medicinal plant book, Papyrus Carlsberg inv. 500, which includes descriptions of plants according to their habitat and external characteristics (opposite page, bottom). Either way, the piece was used as scrap.

While cardamom may have been a new and uncommon medical ingredient, the hoopoe had a much longer history in Egypt. A longer history of varied attestations, from the Old Kingdom to the Islamic period, in art and in texts, including as a hieroglyphic sign, as Gardiner's Sign List G22 . The hoopoe is (and remains) a common breeding resident throughout Egypt, meaning that the ancient Egyptians were very familiar with its physical attributes. It is a medium-sized bird (70–85 g, with a wingspan up to 50 cm), with a pinkish-brown body, boldly striped black and white wings, and its distinctive long, black-tipped crest, which it raises when excited.

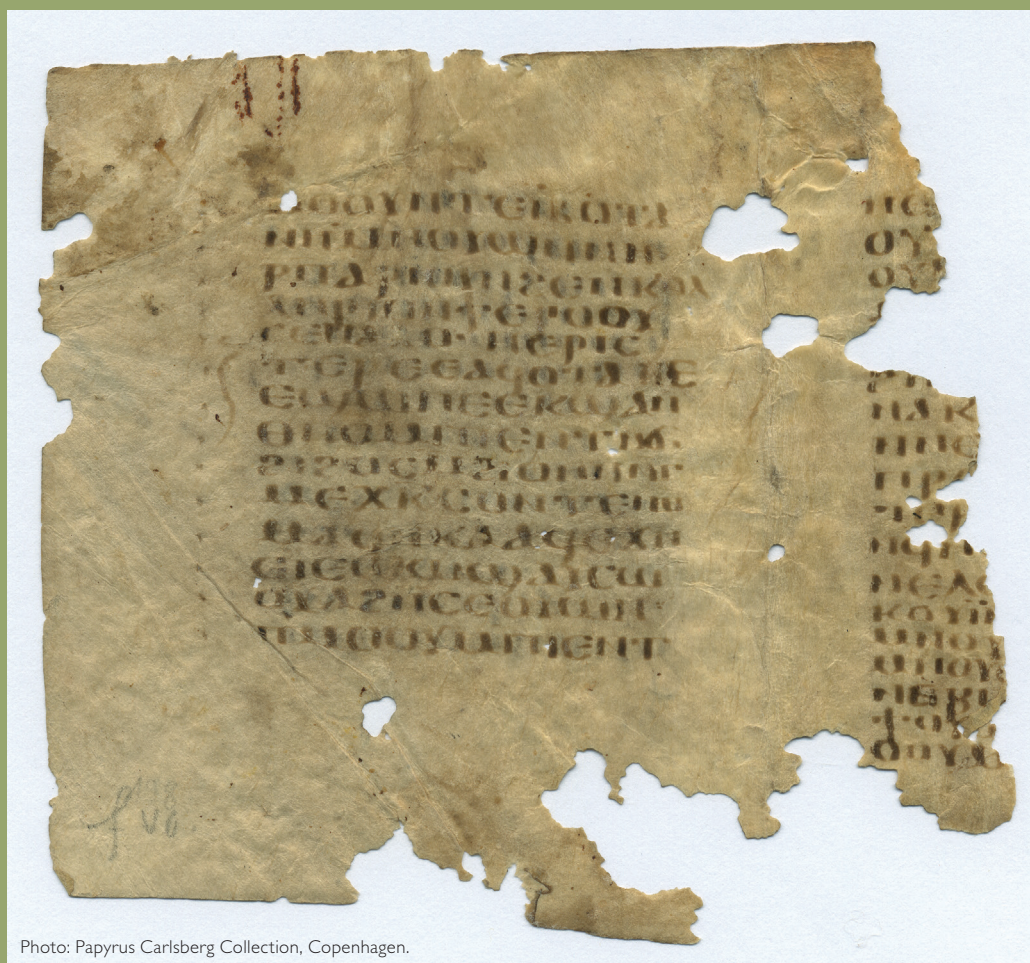
## The hoopoe in art

From the beginning of the Fourth Dynasty until the mid-Fifth Dynasty, the hoopoe appears in mastabas in association with children, almost exclusively boys, who hold the bird by its wings. As the youth depicted with the hoopoe is commonly the eldest son, the image assumes symbolic iconicity connected with succession. This filial aspect was recorded





Papyrus Ryland Copt. 108.



Page from Papyrus Carlsberg inv. 500.

Photo: Papyrus Carlsberg Collection, Copenhagen.



by later writers in the Classical period, notably Claudius Aelianus in *De natura animalium*, 10.16 (3rd century AD). In the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties, the bird is also shown in various swamp scenes, flying above papyrus thickets or nesting. One of the most famous images of the hoopoe is found in the Twelfth Dynasty tomb of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hasan, where it stands crest erect, perched on a tree. The figure opposite shows Howard Carter's painting of this scene, now in the Lucy Gura Archive of the Egypt Exploration Society. With its fiery, solar crest, the hoopoe's appearance in such tomb scenes may have deeper symbolism, combining its solar and filial associations, as caring for and protecting the tomb owner on his journey to rebirth.

Botanical drawing of a cardamom plant.



## The hoopoe in texts

Despite the hoopoe's regular appearance in tomb scenes, and its use as a determinative, there are no textual references of the bird before the demotic narrative, *The Myth of the Sun's Eye*. Before this time, the Egyptian name of the bird is tentatively proposed to be *db3w*, 'the crowned / crested one'. But in later texts it is the *kukupat*, both in demotic (*kḳwpt*) and Coptic (*κακοῦπατ*), an onomatopoeic name that mimics the bird's call. In *The Myth of the Sun's Eye*, the hoopoe has a fleeting appearance as a wet-nurse in a fable concerning the kite and the vulture. Turning to the world of magic and medicine, however, this is where the hoopoe makes its most significant mark in the written record. In the Theban magical text collections known as the *Demotic Magical Papyri* (PDM) and the *Greek Magical Papyri* (PGM), dating to the 3rd–4th centuries, hoopoe blood and hearts are used for a range of ailments. In one spell, a live hoopoe is required, which is then decapitated, its heart being removed through its right ribs.

After these Roman texts, the record is silent until the 10th and 11th centuries, the date of the Manchester parchment quoted at the beginning of this article. From this time, there are two other Coptic texts that mention the hoopoe. In a codex now in Cairo, CGC 42573, the blood of a hoopoe and the hair of a pig are mixed and thrown into a person's house, as what seems to be a measure against somebody's hatred (the spell is simply headed: 'a hatred'). In a more obscure text, written on a papyrus in Berlin (BKU I 26), the hoopoe's nest is connected with a magical stone. New research on this text, by Anne Grons at the Free University Berlin, has identified the original Arabic source, from which the Coptic was translated. And this discovery seems to provide the key to the hoopoe's sporadic appearance in Egyptian texts, whether demotic or Coptic: the Egyptians assigned no magical or medical function to the hoopoe, and its use in Egyptian is instead a foreign introduction.

In Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* 30.18 (1st century AD), the efficacy of the hoopoe's heart is noted for pains in the side and in the loins. In the Islamic tradition, the hoopoe (Arabic *hud-hud*) appears in connection with the Prophet Solomon (*Qur'an* 27.20–28), revealing to him things of which he had no knowledge. Later, the thirteenth-century





Image: Egypt Exploration Society.

physician Ibn al-Beithar discussed at length the medicinal virtues of the hoopoe and its various body parts. In the *Syriac Book of Medicines*, which draws upon Greek and Arabic traditions, the hoopoe is referred to as 'Solomon's bird'. The section dealing with it describes how to kill and process the bird and for what purposes the different parts can be used, for a range of ailments and other problems (as varied as hair removal to the extermination of ants from a house). In this light, the *PGM* and *PDM* occurrences reflect the use of the hoopoe in Greek medicine, while its inclusion in late Coptic recipes stems directly from translations of Arabic texts.

The use of the hoopoe – the *kukupat* – in Egyptian magical and medical texts of the Roman and Islamic periods are marked by their isolation and lack of parallels for the intervening centuries and the entirety of the pharaonic period. Their sudden appearance in this sphere

can only be accounted for by being an introduction from Greek and Arabic practices, for there is no evidence of an equivalent indigenous tradition. For the ancient Egyptians, the bird itself was a common sight and this is reflected in the artistic record, but their observations of the hoopoe did not imbue it with any healing properties.

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Painting of a hoopoe  
in the tomb of  
Khnumhotep II by  
Howard Carter  
(ART.211).

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