

## Healing in the Changes of Time - Opodeldoc

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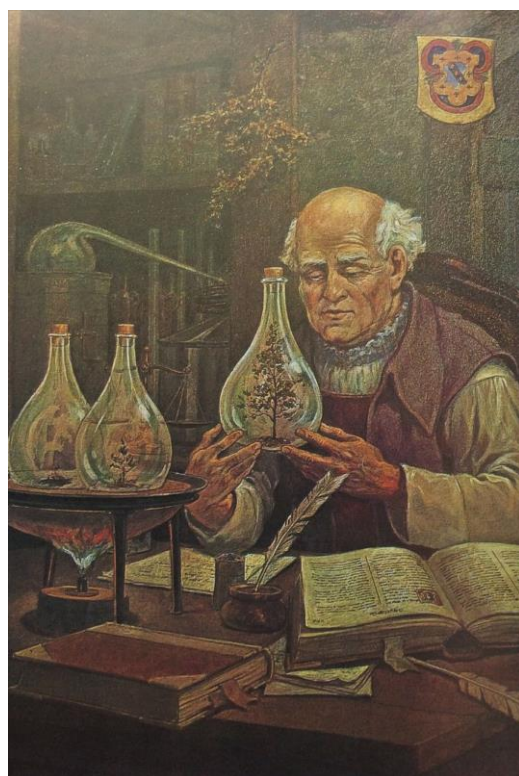
East Slovak Museum in Košice

The roots of the miracle medicine called **Opodeldoc** go back to the Middle Ages. Opodeldoc was a highly effective medicinal ointment made from alcohol, camphor, and other ingredients. Its inventor was a famous Swiss physician, philosopher, scientist, astrologer, and alchemist Paracelsus. Allegedly, he coined the name of the drug from the abbreviation of the medieval Latin names of the plants used: “*Opopanax*” – “*Bdellinum*” – “*Aristolochia*”. Opopanax (from the lat. *Opos* – resin, *Panax* – panacea) is the plant *Opopanax chromium* known as a sweet myrrh, its usable resin is used to treat seizures, chronic infections, asthma, hysteria, and hypochondria.



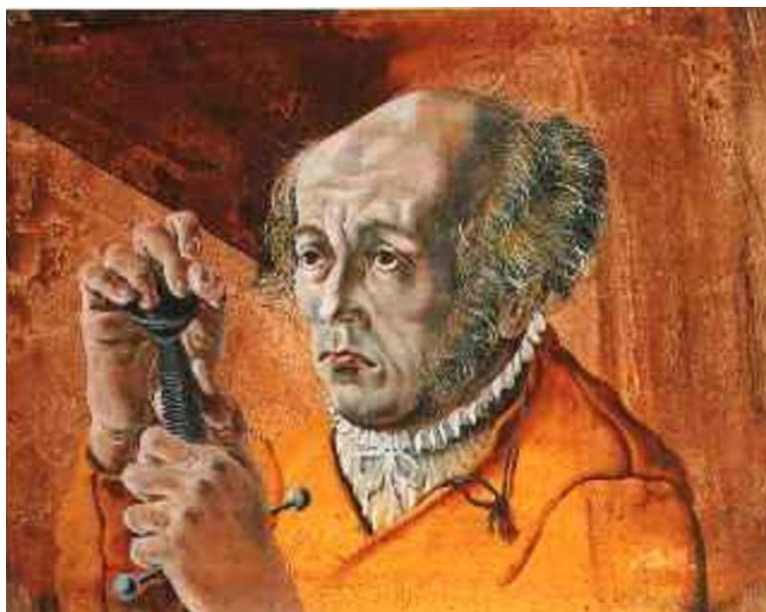
*Figures 1a and 1b: Vials for the miraculous Opodeldoc. Popular camphor ointment Opodeldoc consisted of three medicinal ingredients – Opopanax, bdellium, and Aristolochia.*

Bdellium, or bdellion, is a fragrant resin known since ancient times. It was used to stimulate the body and digestion, against colds and asthma, helped the body get rid of parasites, and had healing effects. *Aristolochia*, also known as birthwort, pipevine, or Dutchman’s pipe, is an aromatic medicinal plant used in ancient medicine, especially in childbirth and wound healing. The original Paracelsus’ ointment from the 16<sup>th</sup> century was made from a mixture of soap, alcohol, and several herbal essences; it became the basis for the preparation of different variants of the drug. The most common ingredients were rosemary oil, lavender oil, camphor, and ammonia.



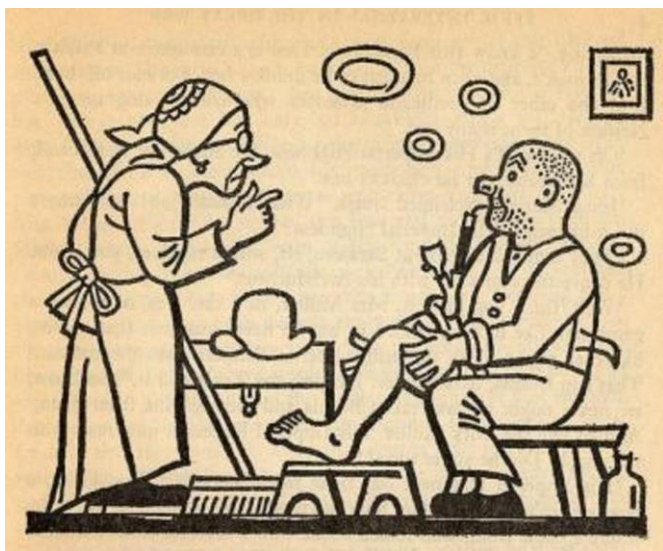
*Figures 2a and 2b: Paracelsus argued that the basis of all scientific knowledge is experiential knowledge. That is why he believed that the university would not teach everything, and the doctor should look for and learn from experienced old women, gypsies, nomads, wizards, robbers, outcasts.*

Opodeldoc (lat. *Linimentum saponato camphoratum*) was a soap solution prepared in hot alcohol, to which camphor, lavender, and rosemary silica, and ammonia were added. When the mixture cooled, it thickened to gelatin, but dissolved and thinned with the warmth of the hands. It was used for external use. In pharmacies, they filled it hot into small wide-necked glass ampoules with a wide cap. Later, green medical glass vials were made, which also included the name of the drug. Opodeldoc was a very popular and effective remedy especially for joint pain, swelling, sprains, so doctors often recommended it for use. *The Times*, published in the United Kingdom, wrote the following passage about Opodeldoc in 1970: “The effectiveness of this medicine on rheumatism, low back pain, bruising, sprains, and cramps is widely acknowledged. It is equally beneficial in numbness, stiffness, and weakness in the joints and in restoring proper circulation in the limbs during paralysis. It's also great for burns and scalds, as well as stinging poisonous insects.” Opodeldoc is also known from Jaroslav Hašek’s novel *The Good Soldier Švejk* where Švejk applies it to his rheumatic knees. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the drug appeared in the Austrian pharmacopoeia in the form of patches (emplastrum) called Opodeldoch. Later its name was changed to Opodeldoc and it had a different composition. It consisted of a soap solution, alcohol and was turned into an essential oil.



*Figures 3a and 3b: The famous physician and alchemist Paracelsus.*

Paracelsus (1493 - 1541), full name: Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim. He discovered the chemical nature of vital functions. He was known for acknowledging natural healing and believing in natural magic. He claimed that the mind and the body affect each other. Paracelsus was immodest, conflicting, explosive in nature, self-assured, and sharp.



*Figures 4a and 4b: Hašek, Jaroslav: The Good Soldier Švejk. "So they've killed our Ferdinand," said the maid to Mr. Švejk, who had left military service when he was finally certified by an army medical board as an imbecile, made a living by selling dogs, ugly, mongrel monstrosities whose pedigrees he forged. In addition to this job, he was afflicted with rheumatism and just rubbed his knees with Opodeldoc.*

**Sources of illustrations**

<https://www.etsy.com/listing/496483974/fantastic-1830s-1850s-liquid-opodeldoc>

<https://sk.pinterest.com/pin/407083253793284005/?lp=true>

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*English translation by: Mgr. Veronika Végsőová*