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The Prescription and Administration of Cedar Products in Ancient Mesopotamian Medicine

Eski Mezopotamya Tıbbında Sedir Ürünlerinin Reçetelendirilmesi ve Uygulanması

Cansu ALTUN YILDIRIM*

Abstract: The primary motivation for this research is the need for a comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted roles of cedar oil and other cedar products in medical practice, whose use in numerous fields, particularly medicine, is documented in cuneiform texts. This study examines the standard medical texts of the period, including the *AMT* and *BAM* series, together with relevant documents from the Mari archives. The research employed an analysis of the records contained in cuneiform medical texts, an evaluation of the obtained data in light of current medical and practical knowledge, and an examination of ancient therapeutic practices. The findings demonstrate that cedar products constituted a fundamental component in the treatment of skin diseases (such as *ekkētu* and *birdu*), eye disorders, and ear ailments treated by medicated ear packing or the application of ear drops. Furthermore, the findings indicate that Mesopotamian physicians did not use cedar products merely as part of a traditional practice; rather, they employed them systematically in combination with various ingredients to benefit from their antiseptic and soothing properties. This study demonstrates that Mesopotamian medicine, beyond supernatural explanations, was grounded in a pragmatic and solution-oriented body of knowledge that made effective use of natural resources in accordance with therapeutic needs.

Keywords: Mesopotamian Medicine • Cedar Oil • Treatment • Herbal Cure

Öz: Çivi yazılı metinlerde başta tıp olmak üzere pek çok alanda kullanıldığı belgelenen sedir yağı ve diğer sedir ürünlerinin tıp pratiğindeki çok yönlü rollerinin kapsamlı biçimde incelenmesi, bu araştırmanın temel hareket noktasını oluşturmaktadır. Çalışma, dönemin standart tıp metinleri arasında yer alan *AMT* ve *BAM* serileri ile Mari arşivlerindeki ilgili belgeleri incelemektedir. Araştırmada çivi yazılı tıp metinlerinde yer alan kayıtlar analiz edilmiş, elde edilen veriler güncel tıbbi ve pratik bilgiler ışığında değerlendirilmiş ve antikçağda uygulanan tedavi yöntemleri incelenmiştir. Bulgular, sedir ürünlerinin (*ekkētu* ve *birdu* gibi) deri hastalıklarının tedavisinde, göz rahatsızlıklarında ve ilaçlı kulak tamponu ya da damlası uygulaması gerektiren kulak hastalıklarında temel bir bileşen olarak kullanıldığını göstermektedir. Ayrıca araştırma bulguları, Mezopotamya hekimlerinin sedir ürünlerini yalnızca geleneksel bir uygulamanın parçası olarak değil, antiseptik ve yatıştırıcı özelliklerinden yararlanmak amacıyla çeşitli bileşenlerle birlikte sistematik biçimde kullandıklarını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu çalışma, Mezopotamya tıbbının doğaüstü açıklamaların ötesinde, doğal kaynaklardan etkin bir şekilde yararlanan, pragmatik ve çözüm odaklı bir bilgi birikimine dayandığını göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mezopotamya Tıbbı • Sedir Yağı • Tedavi • Bitkisel Kür

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Introduction

Cuneiform documents unearthed in Mesopotamia reveal that oil was not merely a dietary component; on the contrary, it was a necessity serving diverse purposes across all strata of society. The term for oil, expressed as Ì in Sumerian and *šamnu* in Akkadian, represents broad terminology encompassing both vegetable extracts and animal-sourced fats[1]. Furthermore, the use of Ì-GIŠ, which appears as the most common type of vegetable oil in administrative and commercial records and is generally defined as sesame oil[2], stands out due to its frequency in the texts. An examination of written sources indicates that oil served as a fundamental component in meeting daily needs, including anointing the body (*pašāšu*), protection against external elements, cleaning, and lighting, as well as enhancing the durability of materials such as wood and leather[3]. This functional characteristic of oil significantly contributed to the advanced cosmetic and ritualistic culture of Mesopotamia. Oils, blended with various aromatic additives, constituted the primary ingredient for perfumes[4] and particularly for soap-like[5] compounds used in the cleaning and ritual purification of divine statues. This diversity of usage indicates that oil was not only a mundane necessity but also an indispensable raw material for the maintenance of the sacred sphere. On the other hand, correspondence from the Mari period elevates the strategic and logistical role of oil beyond nutrition to a different dimension. These records emphasize that oil was of vital importance for maintaining the physical endurance of soldiers on campaign, particularly in cold weather conditions[6]. In light of these data, it is evident that oil was regarded in the Mesopotamian world not merely as a simple maintenance product but as a strategic and protective element developed against adverse environmental conditions in both civilian and military life.

Among the recorded oils with diverse fields of application, cedar oil is known as one of the most prestigious aromatic resources of the ancient Near East. Philologically, this tree species, represented by the Sumerian EREN and defined in Akkadian as *erēnu*, also appears in texts with variations such as *erin* and *urnu*[7]. These variations are generally attributed to dialectal diversity within Akkadian. The terms *šaman erēni* (Ì-GIŠ EREN) and *dām erēni*, which frequently appear in the terminology, have at times been considered interchangeable; however, their occurrence side by side within the same texts[8] demonstrates that they are in fact distinct substances, likely differing in formulation or methods of extraction. The distinction between these two primary products is explained in modern literature through the nature of the raw material. While *šaman erēni*, meaning "cedar oil," refers to the oil obtained from cut tree trunks, *dām erēni*, defined as "cedar blood," "balsam," or "resin," points to the sap exuded directly from the living tree[9]. Nevertheless, establishing the precise boundaries of botanical

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1 Sallaberger 2024, 173.

2 Durand 1983, 126; Akkuş-Mutlu & Naimioğlu 2024; Sallaberger 2024, 174.

3 Waetzoldt 1985, 83; Marti 2007, 42; Sallaberger 2024, 172.

4 Middeke-Conlin 2014, 3.

5 Sallaberger 2024, 172.

6 Durand 1988, 162: 29; Marti 2007, 42.

7 Streck 2017, 236.

8 Schwenzner 1932/33, 40.

9 *CAD* E, 279; Streck 2017, 239.

terminology in ancient languages poses a scientific challenge. It is still debated whether the term *erēnu* always refers to true cedar in a strict botanical sense or whether it can also denote similar trees such as pine or juniper[10]. Even so, its high prestige in the Mesopotamian world, its aromatic qualities, and textual evidence for its large-scale procurement suggest that the term is most often used to refer to cedar and its derivatives.

The usage of cedar oil in Mesopotamia exhibits multifaceted diversity. Textual records indicate that this oil was flammable; however, its functionality was not limited to this property. It also found a place in technical applications such as lubrication and in mummification processes alongside various other components[11]. This technical function can be seen centuries later in the Ottoman Navy, where cedar-derived products (known as the "tar tree") were used in caulking to make ships water-tight[12]. The tree was also used in different ways depending on its form as a raw material. While cedar wood and resin were preferred as incense due to the aromatic scent they emitted when burned[13], cedar oil played a significant role in both ritualistic ceremonies and medical treatments[14]. Within the context of practical usage, records exist documenting the use of cedar resin specifically for the lubrication of door components in structures[15]. The application of cedar oil in Mesopotamia was not restricted to human-centered uses. Evidence from Mari documents shows that cedar oil was procured for the purpose of anointing (oiling) sheep[16], which documents its role in veterinary activities likely for cleaning or protection against parasites. These Mesopotamian veterinary practices indicate a clear historical continuity in the use of cedar-derived tar across both folk medicine and animal husbandry, where it is referred to in Anatolian tradition as *kara hekim*. In the Ottoman period, this substance, known among the public as *kara hekim*, was used to treat human ailments such as asthma, respiratory infections, and ulcers, while in livestock it served as an essential remedy against external parasites and was also used in the treatment of foot-and-mouth disease, horn fractures, and hoof disorders[17]. This demonstrates that cedar was a vital natural resource at the center of medical practice. Furthermore, cedar oil, which has a highly aromatic structure, was mixed with various substances and used in formulations similar to the modern concept of perfume[18]. Mesopotamia had advanced chemical and technical production methods. The creation of a soap-like cleanser by combining oil and resin with other components, together with the use of cedar extract, probably produced by distillation, clearly illustrates this[19].

The extensive knowledge and technical sophistication of cedar in the Mesopotamian medical tradition are further highlighted by modern research in medicine and cosmetic

10 Jursa 2009, 159, fn. 55.
11 Schwenzner 1932/33, 40.
12 Taş 2020, 1227-1229.
13 Streck 2017, 238.
14 Charpin 1984, 94.
15 Streck 2017, 239.
16 Charpin 1984, 101: TH 82.61.
17 Taş 2020, 1227.
18 Waetzoldt 1985, 83; Middeke-Conlin 2014, 7.
19 Waetzoldt 1985, 83; Middeke-Conlin 2014, 7.

science. The protective and therapeutic effects observed in antiquity have been scientifically substantiated by current investigations into the dermatological and pharmacological activities of cedar oil[20]. Owing to its significant antimicrobial potential, this oil is widely used as an active ingredient in dermatological and cosmetic formulations. Furthermore, due to its ability to promote wound healing, cedar oil is incorporated into various therapeutic compounds, demonstrating versatile efficacy in both curative and preventive skincare applications[21]. Modern literature records valuable pharmacological findings, particularly regarding *Cedrus libani*, concerning its role in treating burns, fungal infections, rashes, and various inflammatory skin conditions, as well as alleviating symptoms of infection and cough[22]. Taken together, these studies provide strong support for the medicinal properties attributed to cedar oil in ancient cuneiform texts.

The primary objective of this study is to elucidate the functional and pharmacological roles of cedar oil (*šaman erēni*) and its derivatives within medical and veterinary practices in ancient Mesopotamia, transcending their established use as ritualistic incense. The central research problem focuses on identifying the specific pathological cases for which Mesopotamian physicians (*asû*) prioritized this oil and determining the observational foundations of these clinical choices. This study primarily draws on the standard medical corpora of the first millennium BCE, particularly the *AMT* (*Assyrian Medical Texts*) and *BAM* (*Die babylonisch-assyrische Medizin*) series. It aims to demonstrate the extent to which Mesopotamian medical knowledge, in the case of cedar oil, developed into a specific therapeutic practice.

Cedar Oil and Resin in Ancient Mesopotamian Medicine

In the Mesopotamian medical corpora, cedar oil appears not merely as an aromatic component in the pharmacological choices of physicians (*asû)* but as an active therapeutic agent whose function varies according to the physical demands of the pathology. The wound-healing properties of cedar oil and resin were regarded as a primary protective barrier, particularly in the treatment of traumatic injuries and infectious skin diseases. For instance, a mixture of honey, oil, ginger, and cedar resin recommended for a knife wound[23] clearly elucidates the rational and observational character of ancient surgery. In this prescription, cedar resin, combined with the antibacterial properties of honey and the anti-inflammatory effects of ginger, was possibly intended to form a hemostatic barrier. Within Mesopotamian dermatology, cedar oil was utilized either as a base to soften the primary active ingredient or as a medium to bind multi-component remedies, depending on the nature of the pathology. In cases of *ekkētu*[24]*,* which is philologically associated with "scabies" and causes intense itching and redness of the skin, instructions were given to mix sulfur (*kibrītu*[25]) with cedar oil and apply the mixture gently and repeatedly to the affected area[26]. Since sulfur has a long history of use in the treatment of scabies, it is likely that cedar oil was

[20] Gonçalves 2025, 2.
[21] Gonçalves 2025, 9.
[22] Duke 2002, 167.
[23] Scurlock & Anderson 2005, 62.
[24] *CAD* E, 69.
[25] *CAD* K, 333.
[26] Scurlock 2014, 430.

included in the formulation to counteract its drying and irritating effects on the skin. Furthermore, in the treatment of diseases such as *birdu*[27], *rīšûtu*[28], and *harāsu*[29], several ingredients were crushed within cedar oil to prepare a mixture, after which healing was expected[30]. Similarly, in cases of skin boils, cedar oil was enriched with various components to form the adopted treatment method[31].

Disorders and interventions concerning the sensory organs in Mesopotamian medicine encompass specific application techniques developed in accordance with the clinical course of diseases. In this context, cedar oil constitutes a vital pharmacological element, particularly in aural and ocular ailments. Regarding cases of purulent discharge in the ear region, indicative of external otitis (outer ear infections), two primary methods were employed. In the first method, cedar oil was blended with other medicinal components, and a tampon prepared from wool was inserted into the ear canal[32]. In the second method, a liquid mixture containing cedar oil was instilled directly into the ear[33]. These two methods, repeatedly documented for cases of purulent ear discharge, indicate a systematic technical approach and a level of specialized medical knowledge in therapeutic practice. Regarding ocular diseases, the use of cedar oil and its derivatives was conducted in combination with various components. In recurring cases described in the texts as "eyes full of overrunning flesh,"[34] both cedar oil and cedar resin were incorporated into the process, mixed with different ingredients, and applied to the lesion. Conversely, in more complex situations where a membrane appears to cover the surface of the pupil, suggestive of cataracts or severe corneal inflammation, the preparation of the medication becomes more multifaceted. In such cases, eleven different drugs were crushed and mixed with cedar oil, and the resulting compound was applied to the eye in anticipation of the patient's recovery[35]. These practices reveal that cedar oil provided a functional therapeutic foundation in antiquity; by maintaining the moisture balance of sensory tissues and utilizing its antiseptic and antifungal properties to minimize infection risk, it supported wound healing in superficial lesions and stabilized tissue integrity.

In Mesopotamian medicine, the application of cedar oil extended beyond external surfaces and sensory organs, reaching a highly sophisticated level in the treatment of internal pathologies. Particularly in chest-related ailments, cedar oil was utilized as a complementary element to physical interventions. In cases where the lungs and sternum were described as forming a consolidated mass, instructions were given to gently massage the patient’s chest with cedar oil following various preliminary treatments[36]. This application aimed to alleviate tension in the thoracic cavity and provide respiratory relief by utilizing the relaxing properties of the oil combined with

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27 *CAD* B, 246.
28 *CAD* R, 381.
29 *CAD* H, 92.
30 Geller 2010b, 51.
31 Wasserman 1996, 3-4.
32 Scurlock 2014, 383.
33 Scurlock 2014, 384.
34 Attia 2018, 46.
35 Geller & Panayotov 2020, 136.
36 Scurlock 2014, 483.

the mechanical effects of massage. Regarding digestive and gastrointestinal disorders, cedar oil played a significant role in internal interventions. In cases presenting interrelated symptoms such as intestinal colic, anal pruritus, gas retention, and chronic constipation, it was prescribed to formulate cedar oil with various medicinal ingredients into a suppository for rectal insertion. Regarding digestive and gastrointestinal disorders, cedar oil played a significant role in internal interventions. In cases presenting interrelated symptoms such as intestinal colic, anal pruritus, gas retention, and chronic constipation, it was prescribed to formulate cedar oil with various medicinal ingredients into a suppository for rectal insertion[37]. Similarly, in cases where persistent cramp-like contractions of the stomach occurred after nourishment, accompanied by internal bloating and constipation, cedar oil was prescribed as one of the primary components of the therapeutic formulation[38]. Furthermore, cedar oil was combined with different mixtures and administered directly into the rectum to alleviate severe gas pains, which the texts describe as sharp stabs causing the patient great distress[39]. These interventions further substantiate the sophisticated knowledge base of Mesopotamian medicine regarding not only external symptoms but also the treatment of internal organ disorders.

The application of cedar products in Mesopotamian medicine was not limited to the previously mentioned conditions but also occupied a significant place in the treatment of neurological and muscular complaints. In cases where numbness was observed in the muscles, instructions were given to apply cedar oil, mixed with other ingredients, to the affected area gently and repeatedly[40]. This emphasis on repetition demonstrates that Mesopotamian physicians attributed the success of a treatment not solely to the medication itself, but also to its administration with a specific regularity and continuity. Another striking example of this systematic approach is found in a urological intervention: the application of a mixture of cedar oil and vinegar via a copper tube, with the explicit instruction that the process be completed specifically on the third day[41], underscores the importance placed on regular dosage and a treatment procedure. The soothing properties of cedar oil were also utilized in febrile conditions categorized as *ṣētu*[42]. If this febrile state were accompanied by an uncontrollable nosebleed, a mixture prepared with cedar oil would be poured over the patient's head as an intervention[43]. In more severe cases, when fever caused continuous groaning, sleeplessness, and loss of appetite, the aim was to provide relief by massaging the body with cedar oil combined with various botanical extracts[44]. In more complex conditions, cedar was used not only in the form of oil but also as wood and resin, combined with various substances and applied in different ways. For instance, in cases where the patient's head was pulled forward upon standing and intense pain was felt in the neck, hips, and feet, cedar was crushed in beer along with several other ingredients to form a paste; this mixture was

37 Geller 2005, 151; 2010a, 1.
38 Johnson & Simkó 2024, 74.
39 Johnson & Simkó 2024, 136.
40 Scurlock 2014, 566.
41 Geller 2005, 37.
42 *CAD* Ṣ, 150.
43 Scurlock 2014, 227.
44 Scurlock 2014, 229-230.

then heated in an oven and applied directly to the body[45]. These practices demonstrate that the practitioners known as *asû* systematically incorporated cedar derivatives into the formulation of therapeutic remedies for various ailments, drawing on their accumulated experience.

The wide range of applications of cedar oil was not limited to human health but also extended to veterinary practices and ailments observed in animals. A record from the Mari archives referring to "cedar oil acquired for cattle suffering from *garābu*"[46] demonstrates that observational knowledge developed for the treatment of human skin diseases (*garābu*, a skin condition attested in both humans and animals)[47] was also successfully applied to animals.

In the Mesopotamian medical understanding, diseases were not perceived merely as physiological disruptions; they were often seen as the manifestations of supernatural forces or demonic influences. In this context, cedar products assumed a protective character that transcended their role as tangible pharmaceuticals. Indeed, cedar oil became a subject of divine discourse: Ea, the deity of wisdom, instructed Marduk to "take aromatic cedar oil and apply it to the victim's body" to facilitate healing[48]. The magico-religious significance of cedar is also reflected in the nomenclature of medicinal ingredients. In the texts, cedar resin is referred to as "Anzû's oil"[49] in reference to a mythological creature, which reflects the presence of this religious significance. A compound formulated with cedar resin is mentioned in the treatment process of an illness described as an affliction by a ghost. Anointing the patient's body with this mixture[50] reflects an approach aimed at both warding off demonic influences and alleviating the patient's painful complaints. Ultimately, while cedar was utilized as a medicinal component by the Mesopotamian physician, it also functioned as a spiritual force intended to cleanse the patient's spirit of negative influences.

Conclusion

This study has examined the therapeutic uses of cedar and its derivatives on the basis of evidence preserved in ancient Mesopotamian medical texts. The sources demonstrate that cedar oil and resin held an important place in medical practice not merely because of their pleasant aroma but also due to their physical and protective properties. In particular, their use in stopping bleeding in knife wounds, their application as tampons or drops in ear infections, and their employment in the treatment of delicate layers of the eye indicate that Mesopotamian medicine was not based on arbitrary tradition, but rather on a systematic structure grounded in observation and experience. The fact that physicians used cedar oil either on its own or as part of complex herbal mixtures, depending on the condition, further suggests that each case was approached as a distinct and individual requirement.

The evidence further suggests that Mesopotamian medicine incorporated a structured and systematic therapeutic approach. Instructions prescribing repeated

45 Johnson & Simkó 2024, 170.

46 Marti 2007, 42.

47 Altun – Yıldırım 2026, 140-142.

48 Gabbay 2018, 305.

49 Arbøll 2021, 177 fn. 59.

50 Arbøll 2021, 50.

applications, scheduled treatments extending over several days, and carefully prepared pharmaceutical combinations point to an understanding that successful treatment depended on consistency, observation, and practical experience. This medical knowledge was not confined to human healthcare but also extended to veterinary practice, as illustrated by the use of cedar products in the treatment of cattle documented in the Mari archives. Such evidence reflects the broad application of empirical therapeutic knowledge across different areas of healing.

Overall, the evidence indicates that cedar occupied a central place within Mesopotamian pharmacology as both a practical medicinal substance and a protective agent employed in treatments associated with supernatural afflictions. Its diverse applications—from wound care and dermatological disorders to internal ailments and veterinary medicine—demonstrate the ability of Mesopotamian practitioners to identify, adapt, and integrate natural resources into a coherent therapeutic system. Accordingly, the evidence presented here supports the view that, despite the coexistence of magical and religious elements, Mesopotamian medicine was characterized by a substantial degree of practical observation, therapeutic specialization, and systematic medical reasoning.

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