Discovering the pharmacy of the pharaohs

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Scientists at The University of Manchester have teamed up with colleagues in Egypt in a bid to discover what medicines were used by the ancient Egyptians.

The KNH Centre for Biomedical Egyptology in the Faculty of Life Sciences and the Egyptian Medicinal Plant Conservation Project in St Katherine's, Sinai, have formed a partnership to research Egyptian pharmacy in the times of the pharaohs.

The 'Pharmacy in Ancient Egypt' collaboration, which is funded by a grant from the Leverhulme Trust, will compare modern plant species common to the Sinai region with the remains of ancient plants found in tombs.

Researcher Ryan Metcalf said: "We know that the ancient Egyptians had extensive trade routes and it is entirely possible that both medicinal plants and the knowledge to use them effectively were traded between regions and countries.

"By comparing the prescriptions in the medical papyri to the medicinal plant use of the indigenous Bedouin people we hope to determine the origins of Pharaonic medicine."

The Medicinal Plant Conservation Project, headed by Professor Mohamed Al-Demerdash, is helping to preserve the biodiversity of the region through close cooperation with the local Bedouin.

Fellow researcher Dr Jenefer Cockitt added: "Many of the plants are endemic to the Sinai and extremely valuable to the Bedouin, whether as fodder, cash crops, building materials or as pharmaceuticals.

"St Katherine's will be able to supply us with seeds and information that covers the entire Sinai peninsula, which will be an invaluable resource for our work."

Source: University of Manchester