

## ‘EAR-HERB’ (SEMPERVIVUM TECTORUM L.) IN HUNGARIAN ETHNOMEDICINE

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**Abstract:** The leaflets of *Sempervivum tectorum* L. ‘ear-herb’ are used in Hungarian ethnomedicine curing otological disturbances. The vernacular names of the herb reflect its use which in written sources could be traced back to the middle of 16th c. As it is used in a similar manner in the eastern and southern Hungarian enclaves, its name and use may be much earlier. Among the neighbour German and Slav peoples such name and use – with a few exceptions – are unknown, meanwhile the Romanian data are abundant and similar. Maps indicate the knowledge and use of the herb in the Hungarian language area.

**Keywords:** ethnomedicine, ethnobotany, *Sempervivum*, ear diseases, ‘ear-herb’, ear drops

### THE PLANT AND ITS USE IN WRITTEN, HISTORICAL SOURCES

From the middle of 16th century many written sources mention the plant name and its therapeutical use, too, such as:

- 1555 X. 7. in a letter of Casparus Fraxinus (“fülfű, amely a házak tetején mindig megerem és megél”)<sup>1</sup>
- 1578 Peter Melius: *Herbarium* (“az fülfű házakon is terem, kövér”)<sup>2</sup>
- 1583 Carolus Clusius-(Stephanus Beythe): *Stirpium nomenclator panonicus* (“*Sedum maius vulgare* – filbe erezte fiu”)<sup>3</sup>
- 1590 Blasius Szikszai-Fabricius: *Dictionarium* (“Aizoon – Fül fű; *Sedum maius vulgare* – Fül fű; *Semper viua* – fül fű”)<sup>4</sup>
- 16th c. FuchsiusGl (“Fwl fw; File Faios elen Fű. Hazakon terem is kűsiklan”)<sup>5</sup>
- 16th c. Georg Lencsés: *Ars medica* (“...Fwlfwnek kű fachÿart leweth”)<sup>6</sup>
- end of 16th c. DorsteniusGl (“Aizoon, Barba Jovis – fywlbe erezthe fyw”)<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> VIDA, GRYNAEUS 1988, 128 (92. letter)

<sup>2</sup> MELIUS 1578.

<sup>3</sup> [L.] Németujvár, 1583.

<sup>4</sup> Debrecen, 1590.

<sup>5</sup> IVÁNYI 1935:174. HOLUBY found early Hungarian plant names (second half of 16. c.) in another example of L. Fuchsius’ work (ed. 1545, Basel): “fuol fuö, ful fu”. Published in *Term. Tud. Közl.* 4, 400, 1872.

<sup>6</sup> VARJAS 1943: 89–90. (medicament against deafness and hardness of hearing).

<sup>7</sup> TOLDY 1871.

- end of 16th c. De Herbis ("fülfű")<sup>8</sup>  
 1603 Medicinae variae: ("fű füvet")<sup>9</sup>  
 1610 Herbolarium d.) Gl. ("Semperviva – Filben ereztheo fw, Ful fu")<sup>10</sup>  
 1643 Comenius A. Janua linguae ("bárány tsöts avagy fülfű")  
 1677 Stephan Ujhelyi: Orvosságos könyv ("Az kinek az file csorog. egy bokor fülfüvet... etc.")<sup>11</sup>  
 1683 Martin Pettyéni Borbély ("Semper virum – sic! – Fűlfű")<sup>12</sup>  
 1690 Franciscus Páriz-Pápai: Pax corporis ("fülfűnek levével")<sup>13</sup>  
 1698 Georg Becskereki Váradi Szabó: Medicusi és borbélyi mesterség ("...fülfüvet, annak is az levét")<sup>14</sup>  
 1700 körül Teodor Corbea, Latin-Romanian dictionary (manuscript): (fülfű)<sup>15</sup>  
 1718 Anne Zay: Herbarium (manuscript) ("régí rothatt sebekbenn a' férgeket megöli: Fű füvet törj meg" etc.)<sup>16</sup>  
 1793 Jean Földy: Rövid kritika... ("fülbeeresztő fű, fűlbetsafaró")<sup>17</sup>  
 1807 Samuel Diószegi, Michael Fazekas: Magyar fűvész könyv ("Sempervivum – Fűlfű")<sup>18</sup>

That is, we may find this traditional name continually in the written sources from the middle of the 16th century. It is noteworthy that at least it was accepted by the compilers – otherwise hypercritical of such vernacular names – of the first Hungarian Herbarium, according to Linné's system (S. Diószegi, M. Fazekas).

## RECENT ETHNOMEDICINAL-ETHNOBOTANICAL KNOWLEDGE

The linguistic and ethnomedicinal field works of the 19th and 20th centuries proved this name all over the Hungarian language area<sup>19</sup> (Map 1). The same plant name(s) and use were known in the isolated, very archaic southern and eastern Hungarian enclaves (Szerémség; Moldva, Bukovina: here only the name 'stone-rose') proving that the name *was known much earlier than the first written documents*.

<sup>8</sup> RMGI.

<sup>9</sup> HOFFMANN, G. 1989: A 13.

<sup>10</sup> RMGI.

<sup>11</sup> HOFFMANN, G. 1989: I. 178.

<sup>12</sup> SZLÁTKY 1983: 199.

<sup>13</sup> Pax corporis. First book, first part. Under heading: Headache.

<sup>14</sup> HOFFMANN, G. 1989: K 16.

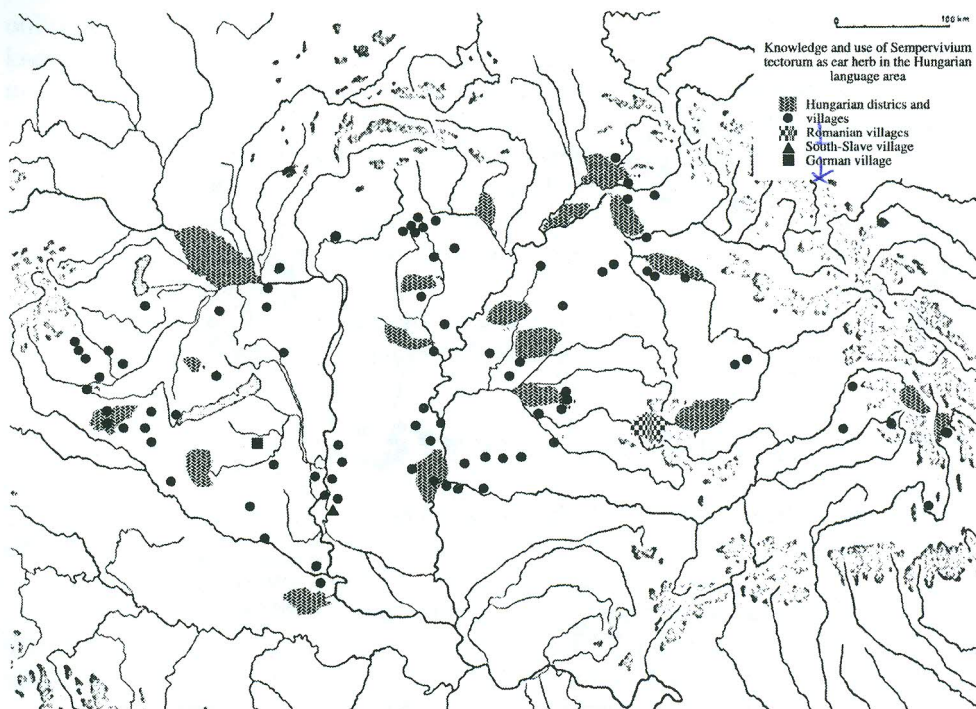
<sup>15</sup> cit. BORZA, 1968 at key-word 'Sempervivum tectorum'.

<sup>16</sup> ZAY, A. 1979: 94; no. 328; SZABÓ, A., TÓTH, M. Sz. 1982: 89–104.

<sup>17</sup> FÖLDY, Bécs, 1793.

<sup>18</sup> Debrecen, 1807: 287.

<sup>19</sup> BEKE 1935: 3–20.

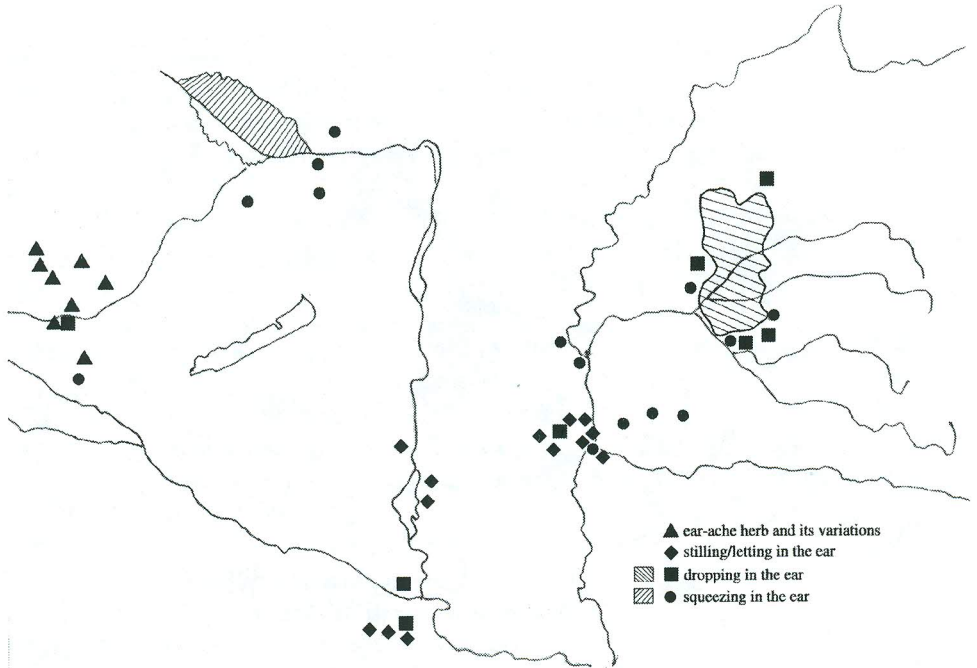


Map 1. Knowledge and use of *Sempervivum tectorum* as ear-herb in the Hungarian language area

## VERNACULAR PLANT NAMES

Some vernacular plant names indicate their therapeutic use. Among others (e.g. sülyfű, pokolvarfű, köszvényfű, vér-állató fű, torokgyík fű, tályogyökér, sömörvirág, ótvarfű, etc.) this is the ear-herb's case, too. Most of its ethnobotanical names (and their variations in different dialects) allude on its traditional medicinal use:

Vernacular name (and its variations)		Region of Hungarian language area
fülfű	ear-herb	all over
fülvirág	ear-flower	
fülrózsa	ear-rose	
fülfájó fű	ear-ache herb	W-Hungary
fülbecsavaró, -csavarító	squeezing in the ear	NW and SE-Hungary
fülbecseppentő	dropping in the ear	East-, and sporadically S, W-Hungary
fülbeeresztő	stilling/letting in the ear	S-Hungary
kőrózsa	stone-rose	all over
kővirág	stone-flower	
moharózsa	moss-rose	
Boldogasszony rózs(áj)a	Holy Virgin's rose	



Map 2. Geographical distribution of some vernacular plant names in the Carpathian basin

The knowledge and distribution of these vernacular plant names is somehow curious: *ear-herb (and its variations)* resp. *stone-rose (and its variations)* are known all over the Hungarian language area. Meanwhile others are restricted to smaller or greater geographical areas (Map 2).

## COMPARATIVE REMARKS

On the other hand, a similar name and use of this plant are unknown in the German language area (Austria, Germany) and – with two exceptions<sup>20</sup> – in the German minorities of Hungary, too.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, of the 6 traditional Slovakian names

<sup>20</sup> WLISLOCKI 1893: 100: puts a leaflet of *Sempervivum* in the aching ear, saying: "Christus fuhr über das Meer / Da kam der Sturm daher / Dich, Kraut, steckte er ins Ohr / Und war unversehrt! Im Namen... u.s.w. (Saxon, Transylvania). Somogydöröcske (com. Somogy) own collection, used still in the 1940s.

<sup>21</sup> MARZELL 1923: 164–5. BÄCHTOLD-STÄUBLI, HOFFMANN-KRAYER 1927–1942; GRÉB 1943: 203, neither in chapter "Volksheilpflanzen". KRAUSS 1943: 530; ANTONI 1974: 174–183; MAÁR 1956: 193–201; 289–301; SCHNEIDER 1974: 249; BRONDEGAARD 1985; VOLÁK, STODOLA, SEVERA 1983. The use of *Sempervivum* is not mentioned in modern German fitotherapeutical handbooks either (e.g. R. HÄNSEL, H. HAAS 1984 Therapie mit Phytopharmaka, Berlin, Springer; R. F. WEISS 1985 Lehrbuch der Phytotherapie [VI.] Stuttgart, Hippokrates; G. VOGEL, M. GAISBAUER, W. WINKLER 1990 Phytotherapie in der Praxis, Köln, Deutscher Ärzte-Verlag).

only one (hlucha ruža = 'deaf rose') indicates this traditional-otological use.<sup>22</sup> Of the known 20 Southern Slav traditional names<sup>23</sup> only 2 refer to an analogous use (uhelnyik, uhovnik; uho = ear). In contrast to these in the Romanian ethnomedicine a lot of names reveal this ethnomedicinal use<sup>24</sup> (urehița, iarba de urechi, etc.; ureche = ear) confirmed by the ethnographical descriptions as well.<sup>25</sup> Here we may suppose a borrowing between the Hungarian-Romanian popular culture. Polish vernacular plant names (rójnik murowy, skoczki) do not reveal such an ethnomedicinal use of *Sempervivum*. MANNINEN did not find the use of this species among the Northern Finno-Ugrian peoples.<sup>26</sup>

The opinion of B. GUNDA and U. PAP is somehow different from our statements,<sup>27</sup> but they approach the question from a quite different view-point.

## CULTIVATION AND USE OF THE 'EAR-HERB' AT PRESENT

In Hungary nowadays the plant is growing on roofs and on the top of fences (Figs 1–4).

Traditional use of the plant:<sup>28</sup>

a. the expressed sap of a leaf is instilled drop by drop into the aching ear. This sap is sometimes warmed above a lamp or a (blessed) candle and mixed with some oil, or the crude leaf – fixed by a thread – is put directly in the external acoustic meatus (Fig. 5);

b. the expressed sap is instilled in case of conjunctivitis;

c. the crushed crude leaf is put on wounds or insect-bites;

d. tea is made of the drug in case of gastritis;

e. children enjoy the crude leaves as a dessert (it has a sour flavor).<sup>29</sup> The uses under b.–e. are exceptional, rare.

## PHARMACOLOGICAL AND CLINICAL EXPERIMENTS, ACTIVE COMPOUNDS

Artificial croton oil–otitis experiments<sup>30</sup> proved that the plant's active compounds have a significant antiphlogistic (antiinflammatory) effect. The clinical evaluation of the plant is in progress at the Otorhino-laryngological Department of

<sup>22</sup> PANKL (II.), 1793; BUFFA 1972: 265 ff.; M. ZSILÁK, personal communication.

<sup>23</sup> SIMONOVIĆ 1959: 431; KRISTIĆ 1967: 351; JANKÓ 1896: 34–64; 132–165 (*Sempervivum* = 'csuvar-kutya'); FEHÉR 1975: 143/1308; GRYNÆUS 1974: 230 (*Sempervivum* = 'debelkosza').

<sup>24</sup> BORZA 1968: 159; BOCȘE, GIURCĂ, MAROSSY 1970: 22; ZSEMLYEI 1979.

<sup>25</sup> BUTURĂ 1979: 242.

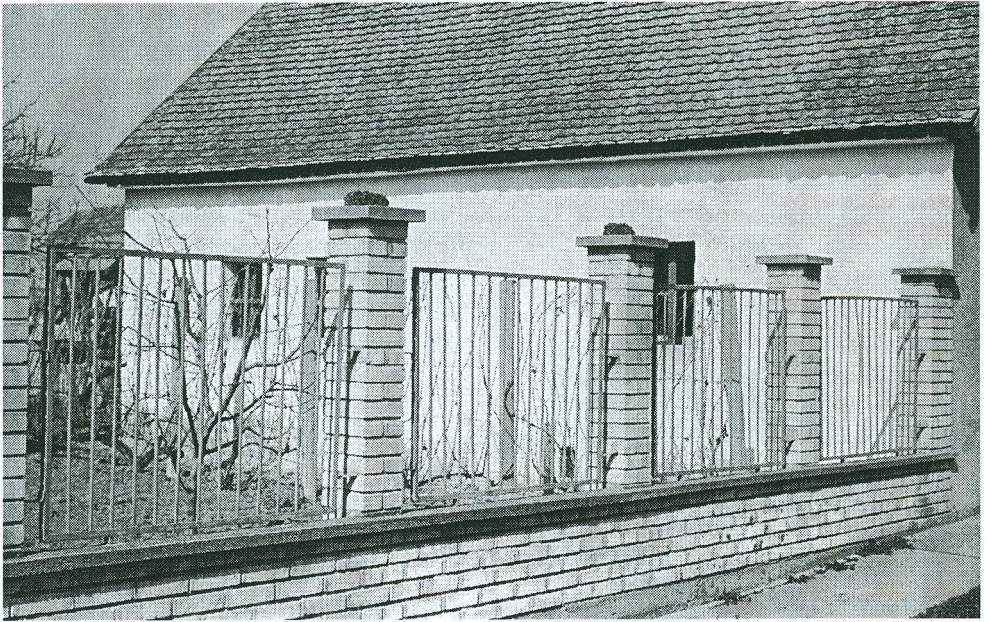
<sup>26</sup> MANNINEN 1931: 30–48.

<sup>27</sup> B. GUNDA, J. PAP 1993: 81–90.

<sup>28</sup> cf. GUNDA, PAP op. cit.

<sup>29</sup> DÁVOD (South-Hungary), own collection (cf. with vegetable foods in famine times).

<sup>30</sup> SÁTORY, PETRI, KÉRY, BLAZSICS 1988: 486 (148).



Figs 1-2. *Sempervivum* on the top of quite modern concrete fence pillars and on an old one (Village Dávod, S-Hungary)



Fig. 3. *Sempervivum* on the roof of a farm-house (Domaszék, S-Hungary)



Fig. 4. Flowering *Sempervivum* on the roof of a poultry-house (Domaszék, S-Hungary)

