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The history of the narcotic element

SUMMARY

The notion of narcotic element functioned in science for less than a hundred years, so the history of the origin and development of the concept is but an episode in the many centuries of history of science. For that reason it may have escaped the attention of researchers. Just like other substances that were once called vegetable elements, the narcotic element occupies very little space in the historiography of chemistry and pharmacy. At the break of the 18th and 19th centuries, the concept constituted one of the hardest problems to solve in phytochemistry. Ample evidence for that is supplied by historical sources in the form of original scientific studies from the 18th century and the initial decades of the 19th century. Those studies were published as books, or as contributions to scientific journals in the field of chemistry and pharmacy, which began to appear in European countries at that time.

Attempts to isolate and identify the narcotic element constituted an important direction in the development of knowledge on the chemical components of plants, especially poisonous and intoxicating plants. Such attempts were the immediate and today almost altogether forgotten cause of the discovery of narcotine, morphine and other alkaloids. In the light of those discoveries, it became obvious that there was not one but many substances that had an intoxicating effect on human and animal organisms. The concept of a narcotic element thus ceased to be necessary. From the 1820s onwards, the concept began to appear in literature less and less frequently. Thus, the existence was coming to an end of an element which, just like the elements of Aristotle, or later, the *triada prima* of Paracelsus, was a carrier of a property. This element was the product and at the same time one of the last remaining vestiges of alchemy, which corroborates the opinion that, for many centuries, until the beginning of the 19th century, alchemy had constituted a very important chapter in the history of thought.

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