

KOHL ALONG HISTORY IN MEDICINE AND COSMETICS

The word « kohl » is Arabic in origin. It has its derivatives as verbs, adjectives and nouns. Actually the Arabic oculist is called « kahal ». Kohl became a loan word in many oriental and occidental languages. The black powder was called « msdmt » in ancient Egyptian, « cthm » or « cohmm » in Coptic and « stimmi » in Greek.

The use of kohl in Egypt dates back to prehistoric times. Kohl material was discovered in archaeological excavations, and its chemical composition was identified by competent investigations. The substance was found to be either malachite green, which is a copper ore from Sinai and the Eastern Desert, or galena, which is a greyish lead ore from Aswan and the Red Sea zone. The idea that kohl is predominantly made of antimony is fallacious. Kohl was found in the form of small masses or as powder inside different kinds of containers made of linen, leather, shells or plant leaves. Sometimes it was found as paste produced by the addition of water or resin.

Frequently, kohl is obtained by burning an aromatic resin, a species of frankincense, and shells of almonds. These are put on a piece of cotton soaked in olive oil. The soot is received on a plate covering the vessel and is subsequently scraped to be kept in containers of various materials and shapes. They may be made of ivory, alabaster, wood, faience, glass, reed, terracotta, or even bone. Tubes may be single or there may be two to five hollows sunk in a jar made of alabaster, stone, steatite, granite or porphyry. The cover rests firmly on the rim with a witty device. The jars may rest on square stands supported on four legs. They are frequently ornamented with figures of apes or uraei and are inscribed with suitable texts.

The kohl stick is made of wood, bronze, glass or other substances. It is either dipped in the powder tube or put in a special cavity.

Since time immemorial, kohl received great attention for its medical and cosmetic benefits. It was brought from Asia and Africa as a gift to sovereigns together with perfumes, incense, ebony and other precious materials. Mention of kohl for treating eye diseases is encountered in many recipes in medical papyri, particularly in Ebers papyrus where both black and green kohl were prescribed for blepharitis, trachoma, chalazion, pterygium, cataract, conjunctivitis, ectropion, as well as for prevention of recurrence of trichiasis and for improvement of vision. Also it is recommended for headache and common cold. Kohl is prepared with other ingredients in the form of fine powder, ointment or paste.

Arabic literature abounds with valuable information concerning different kohl materials and their uses in medicine and cosmetics, and it is noticeable that the word « kahal », which means « oculist » is derived from the word « kohl ».

In the Old Testament, kohl is mentioned as a cosmetic for the eyes in several texts (Kings II, 9:30 ; Jeremieh 4:30 ; Ezekiel 23:40). Thus, it is evident that literature, secular and religious, past and present, handles the subject of kohl from various aspects : physical, chemical, archaeological, medical and cosmetic.

At present, kohl is still widely used in Egypt by all classes of society, both as a cosmetic and as a medical agent. Ladies use it for eye make-up but with different materials and techniques. The subject is shrouded with secrecy and its mysteries are transmitted from one generation to the other with additions depending on personal experience.

Nowadays, kohl is used by the laity for inflamed lids and weak eyelashes. The powder is either home-made or is obtained from apothecary shops which are abundant all over the country. Kohl is deemed of high quality when it causes burning sensation on application. In this case, it is mixed with other constituents such as Ipecacuanha, mahleb, aloes, myrrh, nutmeg and crystalline cane sugar. On the seventh day after birth, kohl is applied by using a kohl stick which is first pierced into an onion bulb, then dipped in kohl powder. It is claimed by the laity that this procedure has a beneficial effect on the eyelids and eyelashes even in later years. Strangely enough, on the same day, kohl is also applied for the umbilicus to help healing. Like circumcision, the process acquired a semiritual significance.

As a cosmetic, kohl make-up is universal, the eyes being the key to expression. Consequently, all possible means are adopted to enhance this power of expression. The question gains significance owing to the failure of spoken language to cope with the desired meanings, a problem which man solved from the dawn of history by using devices, simple or elaborate, to widen the range of expression. Kohl in aesthetics is a fascinating topic. It is the cornerstone of eye make-up. It imparts to the eyes features required for attraction. Different shades and hues are responsible for the charm emanating from the eyes which speak without utterance, unmask hidden feelings, confess lurking passions and reveal secrets otherwise untold.