



“Cinchona,” by L. F. J. Hoquart. Private Collection / The Bridgeman Art Library International (Bridgeman Image STC 148914). Reproduced with permission.

Clin Infect Dis. 2009 Jun 1;48(11).

The Source of Quinine

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This 1821 engraving is from *Phytographie Medica*, a French illustrated guide to the medicinal properties of plants that was written by the Montpellier-trained botanist Joseph Roques (1772–1850). Knowledge of the healing properties of plants was an essential part of the education of European physicians during the 18th and early 19th centuries, and the use of illustrated compendia such as *Phytographie Medica* complemented the study of plants in the botanical gardens of the leading medical schools. Cinchona bark, the source of quinine, was recognized by the Incas during the mid 1400s as a remedy for the fevers that later would be associated with malaria. Administered as a cinnamon-colored tea, the remedy was slow to gain European recognition as an effective medicinal. It likely entered the Western medical pharmacopoeia during the 1630s, after the Countess of Chinchon, wife of the Spanish Viceroy to Peru, became ill with malaria. With his wife near death, the Viceroy, at the recommendation of a Jesuit priest, turned to the local Incas for help; after the administration of a slurry that the Incas called “*quina*” bark, the Countess experienced a remarkable recovery. Samples of the bark were sent to Linnaeus in Europe, who named the plant “*Cinchona officialis*” (mistakenly omitting, from the genus name, the first “h” in “Chinchon”). Although the bark at first was thought to be a general cure-all, research conducted by the Jesuits led to it being used primarily in the treatment of the periodic fevers of malaria. By the 1640s, “Jesuits bark,” as it was often termed, gained popularity among physicians in Europe—although not in Britain, where anti-Catholic prejudice was so strong that many Protestants, including Oliver Cromwell, who died of malaria in 1658, refused to use it. By 1820, French pharmacists had isolated the active alkaloid in the bark and had named it “quinine,” a term derived from “*quina*,” its traditional Inca name.