

## REVIEWS • RESENSIES

Tessa A. Osbaldeston, *Dioscorides. De materia medica*. A new English translation, with Introductory Notes by R.P. Wood. IBIDIS, Johannesburg 2000, pp lxxviii, 927. Full leather edition (ISBN 0-620-23742-9): US\$750. Quarter leather edition (ISBN 0-620-23742-9): US\$ 500. Standard edition: US\$250 (ISBN 0-620-23435-0). Paperback edition, in 5 separate volumes (ISBN 0-620-26770-4, 26771-2, 26772-0, 26773-9, 26774-7): US\$100 per set (prices exclude courier/postage and insurance).

The earliest herbals, dealing with plants and their human use, originated from Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and China. Theophrastus of Lesbos, an associate of Aristotle, was the earliest systematic writer on botany in Europe, and probably drew on the work of a contemporary, Diocles of Carystus. Three centuries later, the Greek Dioscorides and the Roman encyclopaedist Pliny the Elder contributed significantly to the knowledge of botany. More contributions came from Cratevas, Sextius Niger, Nicander of Colophon, Nicolaus of Damascus, Galen and Oribasius, but when the great Carl Linnaeus, in the 18th century, reviewed the botanists of antiquity, he mentioned only Theophrastus (the first scientific botanist), Pliny (the systematic compiler of natural history), and Dioscorides (the first medical botanist).

Pedanius Dioscorides (40-90 AD) was a learned physician who served with the Roman army in various regions of the Empire. His famous *De materia medica* (the world's first pharmacopeia) was probably written between 64 and 77, and dedicated to his colleague Areius, who had encouraged him to tackle the task. Consisting of five books, it deals with more than 1,000 products of medical import, more than 600 being of plant and 70 of animal origin. He also took the trouble to describe the preparation of medicated oils and ointments, and included a number of amulets and mascots of purely superstitious value. This extraordinary work remained the standard authority on *materia medica* for more than 1,500 years. The original Greek manuscript was not illustrated, but illustrated versions soon followed. In the 19th century, an Arabic translation appeared, and later

Latin and Syriac versions. At approximately this time, Dioscorides' work was temporarily banned as heretical literature by the Christian church. The first printed copies appeared in the late 15th century in Latin and Greek, followed by German, Bohemian, French and Italian editions.

John Goodyer, a distinguished botanist from Petersfield, England, translated Dioscorides into English. It took him three years (1652-1655), and the 4,540 handwritten pages remained unpublished until quite recently. Robert Gunther based the first English publication of the *De materia medica* (Hafner Publishing Co., New York & London, 1933) on manuscripts in Magdalen College, Oxford, and the Royal College of Physicians, London. He retained Goodyer's medieval English text (without consulting the original Greek) and included 396 illustrations, mostly by unknown Byzantine artists of the 6th century (many of which were of inferior quality), as well as excellent illustrations by Cratevas (a Greek artist and botanist of the 1st century BC). In an Appendix, Dr Charles Daubney's 1857 re-evaluation of Dioscorides' plant identifications and Byzantine plant illustrations in available manuscripts were recorded - a third of the latter being considered bad or fictitious. A facsimile of the 1933 edition was published in 1959, but has long since been out of print.

Osbaldeston's new English translation of the *De materia medica* appeared in June 2000, and in the following review this publication will be compared (where relevant) with Gunther's book.

The new translation is an impressive tome. The review copy weighed in at 4,5 kg., with more than 1,000 pages. It is available as numbered copies in full-leather or quarter-leather (by Johannesburg master-binder, Peter Carstens), or in case-bound format.

Osbaldeston (the translator) and Wood (the researcher for all the additional information, except the re-translation of the Original Declaration) state clearly that, like Gunther, they did not consult the original Greek. Instead, they translated Goodyer's medieval English into very readable contemporary English, added a very informative introduction, made use of the best illustrations, and published it in a deluxe format, all of which will be greatly welcomed by the general public who are mainly interested in the information. It is, however, a pity that the original Greek was not consulted, since it has already been pointed out that 'Goodyer's translation ... suffers from a number of deficiencies, not the least of which is a crude quasi-transliteration of Greek

plant names.<sup>1</sup> For example, the title inscription on individual pages of the new translation reads 'The Herbal of Dioscorides the Greek', reminiscent of the title given by Goodyer, although a considerable component of the content is not plant-related. The title page, however, contains a corrected version: *Dioscorides. De materia medica. Being an herbal with many other medicinal materials* (the latter phrase being the translator's addition).

The editors have taken pains to ensure a high standard in the illustrations, and the result is impressive, ranging from small 19th century prints at the head and foot of sections or chapters, to full-page illustrations, reproduced from artists as far back as the 16th century. Unlike in the case of Gunther's 1933 edition, virtually all of these prints are true to life. There is an interesting introductory overview of the background of these illustrations, and an exhaustive list of close on 150 publications consulted during the compilation of the *De materia medica*. An index of geographical terms explains place-names mentioned in the text, and there is a chronological list of more than 300 herbals and of publications relating to Dioscorides since 1473. Like Gunther, the authors include Dioscorides' original dedication to his colleague Areius, and an excellent overview, more detailed than that by Gunther, of the origins and history of the *De materia medica* through the ages. In contrast to Gunther's rather outdated and limited subject-index, this book contains very useful separate indexes on Alternate Names, Illustrations, Latinized Greek Names, Medical Uses, Plant Materials and Poisons.

Dioscorides presented his *De materia medica* in five books. All substances mentioned are morphologically described (with region of origin where appropriate), after which their medical uses (or abuses) are enumerated. Gunther suggested a single modern scientific name for each material, while the new translation gives multiple possible botanical, zoological or geological names, as well as a popular English description for each substance.

*Book I.* In general, there is a close similarity right through the *De materia medica* on the scientific identification suggested by Gunther and Osbaldeston,

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<sup>1</sup> J. Scarborough & V. Nutton, 'The Preface of Dioscorides' *Materia Medica*: Introduction, Translation and Commentary', *Transactions and Studies of the College of Physicians in Philadelphia* 4 (1982) 187-227.

but on items 1.108, 109-113, 118, 119 and 123 the books differ completely. In the new translation, item 123 should read 1.125. In 1.34-1.36 it is suggested that grime scraped from old walls and images may be used as skin conditioner, and for painful joints!

*Book 2.* The medieval values of animal products are enumerated (animals big and small, marine, avian and terrestrial), including milk, as well as the medicinal virtues of wine and dung. Cockroach poultices for ear-ache (2.38) would presumably not be for the squeamish! Curative and toxic effects of honey, waxes, vegetables, cereals and flaxes are reviewed. The suggestion that *smilix*, a legume (2.176) could have been *Phaseolus vulgaris* (common haricot or runner-bean), cannot be accepted, as this bean was only introduced into Europe from America in the 16th century.

*Book 3.* This book deals with mushrooms and agaric, vegetables with prominent roots, a wide variety of herbs and spices, and glues obtained from the hides of bulls and skin of fish.

*Book 4.* A few remaining root-plants and herbs are described, as well as the medicinal value of barley, certain berries, common flowers and euphorbias. the identities of *klymenon* (4.13) and *idaia rhiza* (4.44) remain unknown. There is a detailed section on 'Old World' poisons, such as hemlock, henbane, hellebore, opium, aconite, deadly nightshade, taxus and mandragora.

*Book 5.* This deals with wild and domestic grapes, vines, the curative value of sea-water, and gives an extensive survey of the production, varieties and effects of wine - including medicinal wines, aromatic wines, wines fermented from plants and fruits, abortifacient wines, poison wines and narcotic wines. The mining, purification and effects of a wide variety of metals and their salts are reviewed. The identity of substances like *phrygios lithos* (5.141), *asios lithos* (5.142), *thrakios lithos* (5.147) and a number of others could not be determined. The book ends with the health-effects of items like sponges, coral, asbestos, emery, bitumen, marble and various semi-porous stones.

To summarise: the new English translation of Dioscorides' *De materia medica* can be recommended as a worthy contribution to the core of texts on ancient medical history. The fact that the original Greek was not consulted in its compilation may trouble purists, but as an eminently readable adaptation of Goodyer's scholarly translation from the 16th century, it should certainly fill a niche. In her Editorial Preface, Osbaldeston admits that there