

## Chapter X

### About an Arabic Dioskorides Manuscript\*

Three themes, each with its own set of questions, have traditionally dominated nearly all studies dealing with the numerous Greek, Latin and Arabic manuscripts of Dioskorides' *De materia medica*. The text itself, together with Galen's so-called *Theriaka*, was the most famous and most frequently utilized medieval source book for the making of drugs from plants and for healing snakebites. As it was usually known, at least in the part of the medieval world that wrote in Arabic (there is, to my knowledge, one early copy in Persian), Dioskorides' work consisted of five chapters dealing with plants and two with various cures for snakebites; the latter two chapters are now usually thought to have been written by someone else. The Greek version of the text also existed in an alphabetical edition with all plants listed by the first letter of their names, even though Dioskorides himself seems to have been opposed to this unscientific use of his work.

The first scholarly theme around Dioskorides has been, and to a certain extent still is, the establishment of the text, whether in Greek or in Arabic. This traditional philological occupation is complicated in this instance by the constant modifications introduced into the text as a result of new observations or new attitudes toward medicine and pharmacology, but reasonably accurate texts have been put together with the traditional establishment of families of related manuscripts.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For the most recent discussion of Dioskorides' place in history and for up-to-date bibliographies on Greek and Latin sources, see J. M. Riddle, *Dioscorides on Pharmacy and Medicine* (Austin, 1985); and "Dioscorides," in F. E. Kranz and P. O. Kristeller, eds, *Catalogus Translationum et Commentariorum*, vol. IV (Washington, DC, 1980), pp. 1–143. The classic study of families of manuscripts is by C. Singer, "The Herbal in Antiquity," *JHS*, 47 (1927), pp. 1–52. For the Arabic versions, see C. E. Dubler, *La "Materia Medica" de Dioscorides*, 6 vols (Barcelona, 1953–57), esp. vol. II, which has an established text, and vol. III, with a translation; and M. M. Sadek, *The Arabic Materia Medica of Dioscorides* (Quebec, 1983). For a summary introduction, see the article "Diyuskuridis," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd edn, vol. II, pp. 349–50; and, in a more elaborate way, M. Meyerhof, "Die Materia Medica," *Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte der Naturwissenschaften und der Medizin*, 3 (1933), pp. 72–84.

A second theme has dealt more specifically with the illustrations found in many Greek and Arabic manuscripts. Two concerns, other than the purely philological ones of the derivations and sources of individual cycles of images, have dominated the scholarship dealing with images in Dioskorides manuscripts. The first concern, formulated by Kurt Weitzmann many years ago and developed by him in a justly celebrated article dealing with the relationship of antique and medieval Arabic images in scientific manuscripts, was to see these illustrations as exemplars of images necessary to the proper understanding and use of a text and strictly regulated by an expectation of visual clarity. The hypotheses of this particular concern are that miniatures in Dioskorides reflect unique early and classical prototypes and that every manuscript cycle can be evaluated in terms of its relationship to earlier models. The second concern, developed by other historians of art, derived from the existence in the early thirteenth century of a small number of Arabic manuscripts with an expanded imagery that goes beyond the technical requirements of a text. In reassembling one of these manuscripts, Hugo Buchthal argued for the impact on it of a new contemporary taste for images, often at the expense of the original precision of the illustrations. In short, both the synchronic and the diachronic approaches to scholarship on visual matters have been applied to Dioskorides manuscripts and have provided reasonable answers and hypotheses for whatever issues are raised by the manuscripts, even if many specific problems still remain unresolved; for instance, the curious multiplication of fancy frontispieces in the thirteenth century, all of which are different from each other.<sup>2</sup> [362]

A third theme of scholarly interest is less clearly defined in the literature but emerges from occasional remarks by various writers and one or two studies that grapple with it but do not state it precisely. We can call this theme a functional one, since it involves the many ways in which a given manuscript was used as an object or as the carrier of a text – that is, as a socially active instrument – over the decades or centuries of its existence in various living contexts, before it became an item in a collection. The idea of

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<sup>2</sup> The standard interpretation of this type of scientific text is found among several places, in K. Weitzmann, *Illustrations in Roll and Codex* (Princeton, 1947), pp. 94 ff.; and idem, *Ancient Book Illumination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), pp. 15–30. See also K. Weitzmann, “The Greek Sources of Islamic Scientific Illustrations,” in *Archaeologica Orientalia in Memoriam Ernst Herzfeld*, ed. G. C. Miles (Locust Valley, NY, 1952), pp. 244–6, reprinted in *Studies in Classical and Byzantine Manuscript Illumination*, ed. H. Kessler (Chicago, 1971), no. II. See also the older study by P. Buberl, “Die antike Grundlagen der Miniaturen des Wiener Dioskurideskodex,” *JDAI*, 51 (1936), pp. 114–36. The reconstruction of a key manuscript originally in Istanbul was accomplished by H. Buchthal, “Early Islamic Miniatures from Baghdad,” *JWalt*, 5 (1942), pp. 18–39. The basic information on all Arabic illustrated manuscripts is found in E. Grube, “Materialen zum Dioskurides Arabicus,” in *Aus der Welt der Islamischen Kunst*, ed. R. Ettinghausen (Berlin, 1959), pp. 163–93; and a general view of the position of these manuscripts in art-historical thinking can be gathered from R. Ettinghausen, *Arab Painting* (Geneva, 1962), pp. 67–89.

transforming a coherent text into an elaborate, alphabetically organized index, as was so magnificently done with the luxurious Vienna manuscript of the early sixth century, implies a practical need to consult a codex rather than to learn about pharmacological groups. The addition to this particular manuscript of notes and translations of names of plants into Hebrew, Arabic, Latin, Turkish and Persian is another indicator of its use by a relatively large number of different people at different times. It has been shown for Greek versions of the text, and implied for the Arabic versions, that modifications were constantly introduced, that they reflected changing practices, and that they form a series of documents as interesting for the diachronic history of medicine as the original is for the first century. A manuscript in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (arabe 2849), which I will discuss further below, contains extensive marginal notes from a source (as it turns out, a Hispanic one) other than the original manuscript (which was probably copied in Mesopotamia), and these notes not only give original information for the history of medicine but are also written with medieval Spanish and vulgar Latin terms transliterated into Arabic. In short, almost every manuscript of Dioskorides' *De materia medica* is a document for an original text and for a host of other topics as wide and as numerous as the sleuthing capacities of scholars can make them out to be.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this note dedicated to the great twentieth-century master of manuscript illustrations is to make a small contribution to this third, functional aspect of Dioskorides studies, but, as I shall try to show, if my observations and the conclusions drawn from them are acceptable, they may have an impact on the second, more narrowly visual interpretation of the manuscripts.

The manuscript in Paris, arabe 2849 (anc. suppl. 1067), is a fine codex on paper of 143 folios containing the traditional five chapters on plants and two on poisons and animals. According to a simple colophon, it was completed in *ramadan* 616 AH, corresponding to November–December 1219. The sponsor of the book, or the one for whom it was initially copied, was an *isfahsalar*, a rather common title for military or civil officials. His name is Abu Ishaq

<sup>3</sup> Here are a few bibliographical leads into the functional extensions of the significance of Dioskorides manuscripts: E. Bonnet, "Étude sur les figures de plantes et d'animaux," *Janus*, 14 (1909), pp. 294–303; M. L. Leclerc, "De la traduction arabe de Dioscoride," *JA*, 6th ser., 9 (1867), pp. 167–77, 225–32; K. J. Basmadjian, "L'identification des noms de plantes," *JA*, 230 (1958), pp. 167–91; J. M. Riddle, "Byzantine Commentaries on Dioscorides," *DOP*, 38 (1984), pp. 95–103; M. M. Sadek, "Notes on the Introduction and Colophon of the Leiden Manuscript," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 10 (1979), pp. 345–54; J. Scarborough and V. Nuttin, "The Preface of Dioscorides' *Materia Medica*," *Transactions and Studies of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia*, 4 (1982), pp. 187–227; G. F. Hourani, "The Early Growth of the Secular Sciences in Andalusia," *Studia Islamica*, 32 (1970), pp. 143–56. These studies, as well as many remarks in works describing individual manuscripts, lead to philological, linguistic, historical, cultural and even visual issues.

Ibrahim ibn Musa ibn Ya‘qub al-Maliki al-Mu‘azzami and he is provided with a series of titles that have been badly damaged but which include that of *ra‘is* (or *zayn*) *al-Hajj wa al-Haramayn*, the leader of the pilgrimage to Mecca. A search of the more obvious secondary sources has failed to elicit the presence of this individual, probably an official at one of the many Ayyubid or, in general, Atabek courts of the Fertile Crescent and of Egypt. Sequences of names issued from the biblical prophetic tradition taken over by Islam were not unusual within this particular feudal world, although the combination of Isaac, Abraham, Moses and Jacob seems to be quite rare.

The originality and interest of this manuscript for the more general purposes of *Buchwesen* lie in the second half of the six very damaged lines with which the book begins. The first two lines identify the sponsor, or the recipient, of the codex. Line three provides the title of the book of Dioskorides. Line four, which is very damaged, begins: “All of this [i.e., of the book of Dioskorides] is included within a single volume (*kitab mufrid*) ... in order to facilitate [its use].” The first two words (or perhaps only one) of line five are not legible, but they (or it) are followed by: “... [with or by] a second book which has collected all the pictures (*suwar*) from this book of plants ... animals, and metals and there is a mention [line six] by each of its [presumably the book’s] images the name [of the item represented] and its requirements ....” The last few words are not entirely clear.

In a note attached to the manuscript, William De Slane, the first cataloger of the Arabic collection at the Bibliothèque Nationale, noted that there was meant to be a separate volume of plates accompanying this particular manuscript; in relatively more recent years, the point was picked up by Ernst Grube in a footnote of his invaluable survey of illustrated manuscripts.<sup>4</sup> But the implication of this passage seems to me to deserve more [363] than a passing reference in a footnote, for we may well have here the earliest medieval occurrence of a volume of plates separated from a volume of text, the last step, so to speak, in the “emancipation” of images connected with books which has occupied so much of Professor Weitzmann’s life work.

Whether or not formally expressed, the idea of separating images from their written source is, of course, not a new one. The celebrated Vienna Dioskorides of the early sixth century already has plants occupying a whole page and provided with a fancily written title. The text has been relegated to the page facing the image, at least in most places.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, the requirement of effective images dominated the making of this codex and it is possible

<sup>4</sup> Grube, “Materialen” (as in note 2), p. 170 n. 38A; see also n. 31 for other comments on the manuscript. See also Dubler, *Materia Medica* (as in note 1), vol. II, ix–x, who used the manuscript extensively for its commentaries made in Spain but who fails to record the dedicatory statement.

<sup>5</sup> H. Gerstinger, *Kommentarband zu der Faksimile-Ausgabe, Dioscorides, Med. Gr. 1* (Graz, 1970). Actually, the book is not consistent: on folios 64 ff. the descriptive text is on the back of the illustration.

that the very idea of making an alphabetical rather than thematic book came out of the pre-eminence given to images over the text. Comparable combinations of text and image, with the latter predominating, occur much later in sixteenth-century Iranian painting, as in the *Falname* spread between many collections, and in Mughal India with the *Hamzaname*, also scattered all over the world.<sup>6</sup> But, like its later parallels (and, with some exceptions, to be attributed to different times and different places), the Vienna codex is still a single object (or, in the case of the *Hamzaname*, a possible series of volumes) combining a text with images or, in these instances, images with a text. The 1219 Paris manuscript suggests the existence of books of pictures that were not model books for the making of other images, but separately bound visual companions to texts in a manner that became fairly common after the invention of printing. In fact, there are two Renaissance manuscripts of Dioskorides with pictures only; they were made in Italy and one of them seems indeed to have consisted only of plates, but they need to be studied more fully before we can fit them into any scheme of interpreting the history of relationships between texts and images.<sup>7</sup>

Two broader questions seem to me to be raised by this garbled message from a medieval manuscript copied somewhere in the Fertile Crescent in the early thirteenth century. One is whether, like a great deal in the art of that area and time, the type of book it suggests derived from antique or Late Antique prototypes,<sup>8</sup> or whether, again as befits an unusually creative period in the arts of western Asia, this was an original invention for some local and immanent purpose. The second question is not a new one but one that re-emerges every time we turn to the illustrated volumes of Dioskorides or Galen. Why were they prized so much that they became, at some times but not others, vehicles for representations that went beyond the immediate illustrative purpose of such images in technical texts? Answers to these questions require considerations that extend much beyond the limited purpose of a small contribution to that art of the book which has almost become second nature to all alumni of Kurt Weitzmann's seminars.

<sup>6</sup> The *Falname* is the subject of a doctoral thesis being completed by Julia Bailey at Harvard University. In the meantime, see the pages by S. C. Welch in *Trésors de l'Islam* (Geneva, 1985), pp. 94–9. The *Hamzaname* has been the subject of a doctoral thesis at Harvard University (1989) by Zohra Faridani. See pp. 144–5 of *Trésors de l'Islam* or any book on Mughal painting for examples of these huge pages.

<sup>7</sup> Riddle, "Dioscorides" (as in note 1), pp. 142–3; Weitzmann, *Ancient Book Illumination* (as in note 2), 11 ff.

<sup>8</sup> T. Allen, *A Classical Revival in Islamic Architecture* (Wiesbaden, 1986) is the latest contribution to a topic that needs further investigation.

