

L. Y. BECK (tr.), *Pedanius Dioscorides of Anazarbus, De materia medica* (Altertumswissenschaftliche Texte und Studien, vol. 38), Hildesheim-Zurich-New York: Olms-Weidmann, 2005, 540 + xxviii pp., ISBN 3-487-12881-0.

B.'s translation of Dioscorides' *De materia medica* is the third Dioscorides-related volume¹ to appear in Olms-Weidmann's series *Altertumswissenschaftliche Texte und Studien* in the space of five years, ending fifteen years of scholarly neglect after J. Riddle's ground-breaking monograph². The *De materia medica* had been translated into English – or rather paraphrased – by J. Goodyer³ in the 1650s, but B.'s is the first modern English translation and the first to be based on a reliable edition of the Greek text, namely that by Wellmann⁴. It may seem strange at first that it took until now for someone to translate this hugely influential work, but not only would it have been a daunting task, but until recently it was also the case that those likely to read Dioscorides would have had no difficulty reading him in the original Greek or at least in a Latin translation. With ever fewer students coming up to university with a working knowledge of either language, however, every translation of an ancient text will be a welcome addition to the books that get read and studied.

¹ Preceded by: M. Aufmesser, *Etymologische und wortgeschichtliche Erläuterungen zu De materia medica des Pedanius Dioscorides Anazarbeus* (Altertumswissenschaftliche Texte und Studien, vol. 34), Hildesheim 2000; M. Aufmesser, *Pedanius Dioscorides aus Anazarba. Fünf Bücher über die Heilkunde* (Altertumswissenschaftliche Texte und Studien, vol. 37), Hildesheim 2002.

² J. Riddle, *Dioscorides on Pharmacy and Medicine*, Austin 1985.

³ J. Goodyer, *The Greek Herbal of Dioscorides*, ed. R. T. Gunther, London/New York 1934 (repr. 1959). Goodyer's English was 'translated' into modern English by T. A. Osbaldeston in 2000.

⁴ M. Wellmann (ed.), *Pedanii Dioscuridis Anazarbei De materia medica libri quinque*, 3 vols, Berlin 1907-14 (repr. 1958 and 1999).

The *De materia medica*, written in the first century AD, is the most famous work on pharmacology to survive from antiquity. In its five books, Dioscorides explains the medicinal properties and characteristics of plants, animals and animal products, as well as minerals, describing also the ways of manufacturing and metallurgical procedures. Many entries contain entire recipes complete with measurements. Although Dioscorides' system of grouping drugs together by their properties did not catch on, and later writers favoured an alphabetical listing of plants and other substances, his work not only survived but it remained the authoritative text on the subject until Early Modern times. It was soon translated into Arabic and Latin and later into various European vernaculars.

B. does not provide a new edition of the text, but occasionally she follows variants from Wellmann's *apparatus criticus* rather than his main text. Unfortunately this is not indicated in the text, e.g. at 1.14.2, where she has chosen (the preferable) ἀμώμου over Wellmann's βρωμώδους. In B.'s translation one will not find the synonym lists with their alternative nomenclature in other languages found in books 1-4. These are not by Dioscorides but by later lexicographers such as Pamphilus, but they are nevertheless of interest for the reception of the work, and Wellmann had placed them between the text and the *apparatus criticus* with the designation *RV* (from the Viennese recension). It seems a pity to lose them.

The translation is very fluent, avoiding monstrous, Greek-style sentences by careful dividing-up and punctuation. It also appears to be accurate – although ἐπὶ ... ὀστράκου at 3.22⁵ surely is about roasting aloe on a potsherd rather than on a 'shell'. There is only a small amount of what one could call commentary in footnotes, but the Introduction by J. Scarborough promises a 'full commentary' in a separate volume, to appear soon. (It may well be that the matters raised in the previous paragraph will be explained there.) B.'s own Preface very briefly explains the idea of δυνάμεις, or properties, and the way in which Dioscorides arranges his material. She also lists a few of his mistakes and

⁵ B., p. 188.

inconsistencies as well as passages reporting superstitions (although it is not certain why these would be so problematic as to be singled out), and addresses a few problems of terminology and translation. Those not familiar with Dioscorides and with ancient medicine in general might have preferred to have more background information at this stage, but it will presumably be supplied in the commentary volume.

B. is very optimistic (perhaps too much so) when it comes to plant identification, for which, she says⁶, she relies mainly on André⁷, using also Liddell, Scott and Jones' *Greek-English Dictionary*. Another good, and perhaps better, source of information would have been the recently completed edition and translation of Theophrastus by S. Amigues⁸, who has succeeded in making some very trustworthy identifications of plants mentioned in that author. Modern names and Linnaean terminology can easily create a false sense of certainty. The list of weights and measures, between the Abbreviations and the Introduction, is based on Berendes⁹, whose calculations have come to be generally accepted as the standard values.

Many students and scholars will find the indices (coming after the translated text and the bibliography) particularly useful: The longest one lists all the plants and plant products alphabetically by their English name, followed by the Greek, the reference and – on the facing page – the botanical name. Unfortunately there is no alphabetical Greek index, which can, however, be found in Wellmann and may perhaps appear in the commentary volume. Indices of animals and animal products as well as of minerals and inorganic products follow, as well as a useful Medical Index. This lists various conditions and health problems (again, however, not in Greek) indicating the relevant passages in the text.

One thing that is decidedly odd is the system B. uses for transliterating Greek: κ is represented by 'c', while, e.g. endings

⁶ P. xxvii.

⁷ J. André, *Les noms des plantes dans la Rome antique*, Paris 1985.

⁸ S. Amigues, *Théophraste. Recherches sur les plantes*, 5 vols, Paris 1988-2006.

⁹ J. Berendes, *Des Pedanios Dioskurides aus Anazarbos Arzneimittellehre in fünf Büchern*, Stuttgart 1902.

in $-o\varsigma$ or the diphthong $\alpha\iota$ remain as ‘-os’ and ‘ai’ – for example ‘cyamos Aigyptios’. The result is therefore neither recognizably Greek nor fully Latinized.

All these are minor quibbles, though, and should not detract from the achievement of having rendered this important work accessible to a wider audience. The translation will be useful to students wishing to do research in the history of pharmacology and medicine as well as to historians of medicine, but also to social historians looking for details of everyday life. Even those able to read the original may want to use it as a crib.

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