

MESOPOTAMIAN MANUSCRIPTS OF DIOSCORIDES

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The Museum's recent exhibition of Iranian art included, as number 51 of the catalogue, the famous manuscript of Dioscorides's *Materia Medica* from the Mashhad Shrine, and thus gave the opportunity for comparing it with the Museum's page from a dated thirteenth-century Dioscorides. The Mashhad manuscript has generally been considered to be of the thirteenth century also, but the figure painting, the handwriting, and the wording of the text, not previously published, are not typical of that period. The Mashhad manuscript has no colophon, to give an exact date, but it was discovered that it has a four-page introduction by Mihran ibn Mansur ibn Mihran, who made this new Arabic translation for Najm ad-din Alpi, the Urtuqid prince, ruler from 1152 to 1176 (547-572 A.H.) of Mayyafariqin in upper Mesopotamia. For intrinsic reasons this manuscript may be accepted as the work of the third quarter of the twelfth century. Thus it provides the earliest known examples of the Mesopotamian School of painting, which is represented in the thirteenth century by the Museum's page.

Our miniature illustrates a recipe for a wine for catarrhs and other ailments. Whereas in the earlier manuscript the emphasis is on botanical illustration, the later one brings in the practical and human elements. In the Museum's page a pharmacist is busy making the wine. He wears contemporary Moslem dress and has an alert, thoughtful expression. The three steps in the preparation are shown simultaneously: the pounding of the ingredients, the straining, and, at the left, the storage jar in which the medicine is finally put. The painter was evidently not much interested in botany. The two rather conventionalized trees, with jointed trunks and indeterminate leaves and fruit, which carefully fill the rectangular space, are repeated over and over in other pages of the same manuscript. In other pages of Book v also the human and nar-

ABOVE: *The cultivated grapevine, used for making wine, and two varieties of myrrh, an ingredient in the recipe on page 277. Sap from the branches of the myrrh is being collected on the ground. From the Mashhad Dioscorides*

rative qualities are emphasized even more, with the plants used merely as a decorative background, or left out entirely. Some of the miniatures are merely scenes of daily life and have nothing to do with the subject matter of the text.

In the Mashhad manuscript there is no illustration for the recipe on the Museum's page, or any of the recipes in Book v, but for comparison we may turn to the painting of two men getting sap from a balsam tree, one out of only four figure paintings in the whole manuscript. The title at the left says that it is the third variety of balsam, and it is realistically drawn, including the roots. There is no ground, or suggestion of a frame; the whole scene is simply inserted in the text. The man standing at the right wears Moslem dress with tiraz bands on the sleeves; his dress and boots may be the local twelfth-century fashion, as they are unlike those of the thirteenth-century Mesopotamian paintings. The old man crouching barefoot at the left represents the old East Christian tradition, in startling contrast to the purely Moslem style of the other figure. His long curling hair, the humping of his shoulder with the head raised, the halo, and especially the fully modeled folds of his drapery, are inspired by paintings in earlier Syriac manuscripts. The center of the Syriac style, in both Christian and Moslem times, was upper Mesopotamia, extending both east and west of Mayyafariqin, where the Mashhad manuscript was written. There is also a Syriac title beside the Arabic one, at the left of the tree, in the Jacobite Estrangelo script, which also belongs to that region. The Syriac connections are even more strongly brought out in the introduction, in which Mihran ibn Mansur said that he made his new Arabic translation from the Syriac translation of the original Greek made by "the most learned Rabban Hunain." This is Hunain ibn Ishaq al-Ibadi, a member of the Arab Christian tribe of Hira, who spent his life collecting Greek scientific texts and translating them into Syriac, as the head of the "House of Wisdom" in Baghdad, under the caliph Mutawakkil (847-861).

Greek learning in Mesopotamia had its earliest center in the Syriac school of medicine at

Edessa, which was closed by the Byzantine Emperor Zeno in 489. This school was then moved about a hundred miles east to Nisibis. By the sixth century the center had shifted from upper to lower Mesopotamia, where it flourished at Gundeshapur in the last days of the Sasanian dynasty. Here were welcomed the Neoplatonists expelled from Athens in 529, and they gave a new impetus to Syriac study of Greek. In the eighth century the first Abbasids, Mansur, Harun ar-Rashid, and Ma'mun, brought members of this school to Baghdad, where, in the ninth century, Hunain continued their work. Finally, in the twelfth century, several princes of the Turkoman Urtuqids revived the Greek, Syriac, and Arabic tradition in its original home, in various cities between the upper Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in the Diyar Bakr district. In the thirteenth century we know that at least one book, based on the Greek Hippia-trics, was copied in Arabic in Baghdad; other dated manuscripts, whose place of origin is not known, may well have been produced in the north.

The text of the recipe given in chapter 55 of Book v, in the Mashhad manuscript is closer to the original Greek of Dioscorides than the same passage in the Museum's page. Mihran, who faithfully rendered the Syriac version of Hunain, the greatest Greek scholar of his day, even retained two Greek words used by Hunain, *drachma* and *kyathos*, which were not ordinarily used for Arabic weights and measures. The Mashhad recipe reads:

"Wine (nabidh) useful for catarrhs, congestion, coughs, indigestion, and for running and laxness of the stomach, is made in this way: Myrrh 2 drachmas, white pepper 1 drachma in weight, iris 6 drachmas, anise 3 drachmas. This is pounded, tied in a rag, and placed into (...?) qusts of grape juice. It is strained after three days and put into storage. It is to be drunk after exercise, taking 1 kyathos unmixed."

The thirteenth-century version, on the Museum's page, is as follows:

"The making of a drink (shirab) for catarrhs, coughs, swelling of the belly, and loosening of the stomach. Take myrrh $\frac{1}{4}$ uqiyya, roots of susan $\frac{1}{8}$ uqiyya, white pepper $\frac{1}{4}$ and (.....)



Painting from the famous XII century manuscript of Dioscorides's *Materia Medica* in the Mashhad Shrine in Persia. It shows two men getting sap from a balsam tree. The text says that this tree grows only in the land of Hud, that is, in South Arabia, and that it is to be tapped with iron nails in the ascendancy of Sirius, in the summer heat of the dog days.

$\frac{1}{8}$ uqiyya. Pound them together, tie it up in a rag, put into three qusts of good wine, and let stand three days. Then strain and put into a clean vessel. Drink after supper."

The translator of this later version put Dioscorides into a more familiar and colloquial Arabic, using the measure uqiyya, and the Semitic word *susan* instead of the Greek *iris*. And he varied the text a little, listing four in-

stead of five diseases and specifying that the wine must be good and the vessel clean. The phrase "drink after supper" is a copyist's mistake (*asha*, supper, instead of *masha*, walking). He also mixed up his quantities, giving too much pepper, not enough iris and wine, and omitting anise entirely. But his version is practical and personal, just as the painting emphasizes the human and practical factors in mixing

فأزبد العصير فضفه فهذا الشراب موافق لوجع الحلق والجنب والربس

والاسه والرافف وللمزج بلغم غليظ في حلقه يصفى اللون ويكثر النوم



وليس له غيلة موافق للمثانه والكلاب ع ع ع

صنعه شراب للزكام والسعال

وزر البطن واسترخا المعدن خذ ربع اوقيه واصول سوسن ثرا اوقيه

وفلفل ابيض ربع ومن اوقيه رقه جميعا واربطه خرقه واجعله في لبنه اقساط شراب

طيب وانك تلتنه ايام ثم صفه وارفعه في اناء نظيف اشرب منه بعد العشا

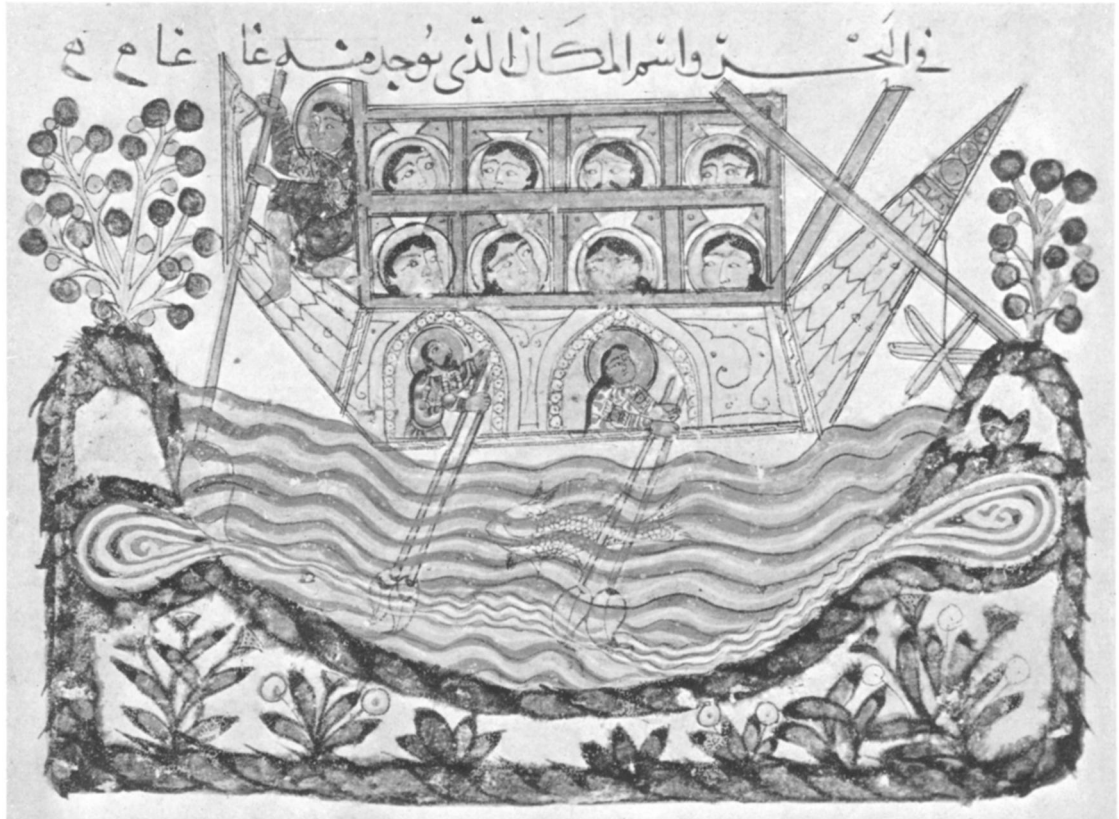
Page from a XIII century manuscript of Dioscorides's *Materia Medica*. A pharmacist is shown making a medicinal wine. The text, giving the recipe, is from Book v, 55; the manuscript was transcribed by Abdullah ibn al-Fadl in July/August 1224 (Rajab 621), as stated in the colophon, now in the Top Kapu Saray Library, Istanbul. Twenty-eight other pages from the same manuscript are scattered in other museums and private collections. Rogers Fund, 1913

the medicine, illustrating in a real way the point of view as well as the words of the text.

The meaning of the Semitic word "susan," originally Akkadian, has been much discussed, some saying it means lily, others iris. It was used in the Bible for the flowers carved on the capitals of Solomon's temple, which is not much help as the capitals do not exist. However, its

"The explanation of Greek words in Syriac."

Another of the ingredients of the Museum's recipe is illustrated in the Mashhad manuscript, "A picture of the cultivated vine, from whose grapes wine is pressed." The rough bark of the stems is well drawn, but without the title it would be hard to recognize either the leaves or the grapes. This plant is about the only one

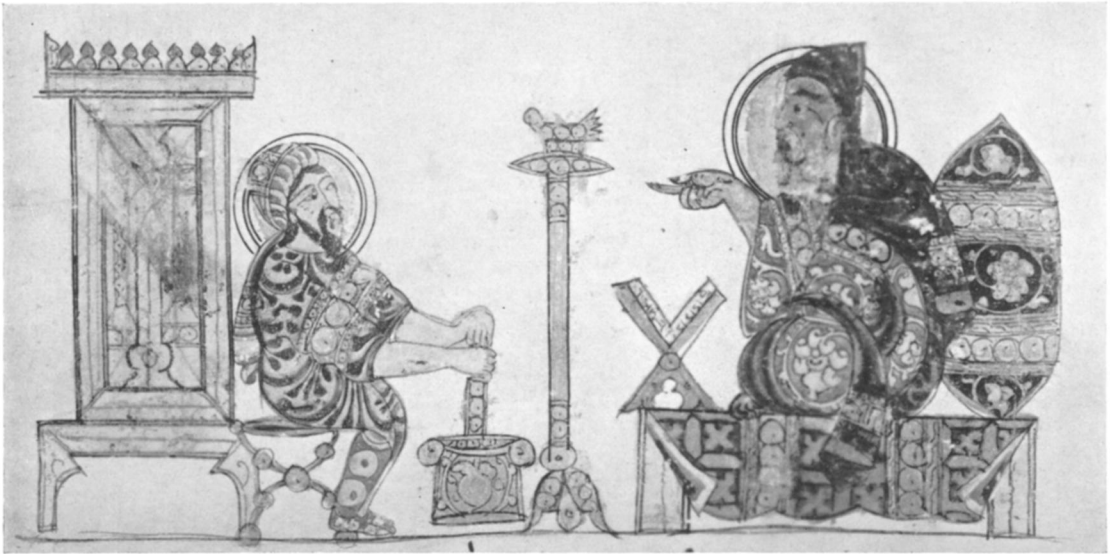


ON THESE TWO PAGES: *genre scenes from the XIII century Dioscorides. Above, a boat on a river, a scene to illustrate a certain mineral found near the River Gagos. The artist has drawn the boat in cross section in order to show all the people in it. A. Stoclet collection, Brussels*

meaning in the twelfth century is clear; for the picture of the iris in the Mashhad manuscript, Book I, 1, is defined in the Arabic title at the right: "The iris, that is, the blue susan." The word iris is spelled *irisa*. This is not a mistake; it is the Syriac spelling of the Greek word, as given in the Syriac title at the left. Since the translator worked from Hunain's Syriac text he may have followed Hunain's rules of spelling as given in his dictionary, which he called

which is actually followed with any similarity in the thirteenth-century manuscript.

The manuscript to which the Museum's page belongs was copied by Abdallah ibn al-Fadl. People have wondered whether he also made the pictures, or whether the painter was another person. But we do know that in the twelfth-century Mashhad manuscript the two were distinct, from a note added to the last two paragraphs of Book IV on the plants "little



ABOVE: *The treatment for people bitten by spiders shows no spiders at all but a learned doctor in his hood uttering words of wisdom, while his assistant pounds the medicine in a mortar. The doctor may be reading the recipe from the book open before him. BELOW: Two boys digging the famous "terra sigillata," a clay from the Island of Lemnos. The boy at the left has his gown tucked up for work. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, Freer Gallery of Art*

heliotrope" and "scorpioides." The two pictures are out of order, and the scribe, with pardonable annoyance, says, "This is the picture of the little heliotrope, and this is not its place, but the painter (al-musawwir) went ahead and put scorpioides where it should have been." It is

possible, then, that in the thirteenth century as well, the artist and the copyist were different people. The Moslems, who loved fine writing, evidently considered the artist not important enough to have his name given.

Writers on the Mesopotamian school of



painting of the thirteenth century have produced many theories about Byzantine versus Mesopotamian Jacobite influence, and about Baghdad, Mosul, or a presumed Syrian Hellenistic school, as centers. Certainly the Mashhad manuscript, written in Mayyafariqin before 1176, points to northern Mesopotamia and the old Syriac tradition. The comparison of the texts of only one paragraph and its illustration cannot be conclusive, but it suggests that the scribe writing in 1224 may have changed the text of Dioscorides in order to make it more up to date and more useful for the Arab reader, or that he may have used a different translation, made in some other center.

What is the reason for the great change in the figure style of the manuscripts of 1176 (or earlier) and of 1224? The thirteenth-century illustrator of Dioscorides had looked at the

plants in the first four books of an earlier manuscript, though with no serious idea of copying them accurately. But when he came to the recipes for wines in Book v, he found no illustrations there, nothing to copy. So he simply made up genre scenes to go with the recipes; and he took the idea, and the style, from the purely Moslem illustrations of contemporary literature in Arabic, such as fables, short stories, and poetry. This is as if a Dioscorides in Europe were illustrated with scenes designed for Chaucer or Boccaccio.

It is to be hoped that the authorities of the Mashhad Shrine will some day make a complete publication of their Dioscorides manuscript, because of its early date and its unusual beauty and in order to help clarify the origins of the thirteenth-century Mesopotamian school of painting.



The white susan, or akoran, a variety of lily, and the blue susan, or iris. From the Mashhad manuscript of Dioscorides