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John G. Fitch, *On Simples, Attributed to Dioscorides: Introduction, Translations, Concordances*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2023. Pp. vi, 236. ISBN 9789004513716

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Preview

In this volume, John G. Fitch offers the first English translation of *On Simples*, a work attributed to the famous first-century CE pharmacologist Dioscorides, a false attribution according to the translator. This is not the first time that Fitch has tackled difficult technical texts, having previously offered a very useful translation of Palladius' *Work of Farming*.¹ While Fitch might have slightly overstated his case when suggesting, in the opening sentence, that '*On Simples* is the most intriguing pharmaceutical work to have survived from the classical world' (1), this is certainly an unjustly little-known text, rarely cited even by scholars of ancient pharmacology – this review's author included. It contains wonderful snippets of ancient pharmaceutical knowledge, which will now become better accessible through Fitch's lucid translation.

The relatively short introduction goes over much technical ground. Fitch first explains the structure of the work: the first book deals with 'external ailments' in head-to-toe order, that is, starting with the head and going down towards the feet. The second book deals with 'internal diseases', beginning with those affecting the belly and ending with poisoning and antidotes. This work, then, is one that organises its material by ailments rather than by pharmaceutical ingredients, the organisation that Dioscorides had chosen for his *Materials of Medicine*.² In outlook, *On Simples* is entirely practical, devoting almost no space to theory. Fitch argues that there is little that is magical in the treatise (3), a statement that some might contest. Indeed, amulets are not few here (e.g. 1.12: amulet for epilepsy; 1.146: amulets against glandular swelling; 2.25: amulets for tertian fevers; 2.99: contraceptive amulets).

The focus then turns to the title of the work, an important aspect of Fitch's analysis, as it helps better situate the work within the context of ancient pharmaceutical writings. The manuscripts agree in calling the work Περὶ ἀπλῶν φαρμάκων (*Peri haplōn pharmakōn*), on simple remedies. The author of the text indeed suggested in his preface that he was focusing on remedies that are made of single ingredients (the technical meaning of *haplos*, usually translated as 'simple', in ancient pharmacology) rather than on compound ones.³ He added that these remedies are 'readily understood' and 'readily available' (preface). Conrad Gesner, however, in the 1565 *editio princeps* changed the title to Εὐπόριστα (*Euporista*). He did so based on a statement of the fourth-century CE physician Oribasius, who was trying to justify why he had composed a work on *euporista*, on remedies easily procured: Galen's works on *euporista* are lost, and those of Dioscorides, Apollonius (first century BCE), and others are not fit for purpose (*Ad Eunapium* pref. 5, Raeder vol. 6, 317-318). Fitch suggests that Oribasius used the word *euporista* to characterise the contents of these treatises rather than as

¹ John G. Fitch, *Palladius: The Work of Farming (Opus Agriculturae)*. A New Translation from the Latin. 2013. Totnes: Prospect Books.

² For a translation of that work, see Lily Y. Beck, *Pedanius Dioscorides of Anazrbus*. De materia medica. 2017 (fourth edition). Hildesheim; Zurich; New York: Olms Weidmann.

³ On the history of compound remedies, see Paula de Vos, *Compound Remedies: Galenic Pharmacy from the Ancient Mediterranean to New Spain*. 2021. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

the title of the works. For according to Fitch, there is an important difference between ancient treatises titled *Euporista* and the present text: this treatise is not addressed to laypeople travelling in remote regions where access to a physician might be difficult. The translator, therefore, retains the title *On Simples*.

It is in the next section, on sources, that Fitch offers the most innovative aspect of his study. The argument is compressed, but one will find more information in a recent article.⁴ Fitch observes that in many chapters, pharmaceutical items are organised alphabetically: 'There are some 135 such sequences in the work, containing some 1590 entries' (3). These sequences, however, are almost always disrupted, and the compiler attempts at disguising the alphabetical ordering of materials. Fitch suggests that the compiler might have wished to avoid the criticism levelled by Dioscorides himself at those who organised their pharmacological material alphabetically. This compiler, then, used as his main source a work where drugs were organised alphabetically, perhaps the lost *Rhizotomikon* by Crateuas (second/first centuries BCE). The compiler then added further material from other sources, which served the dual purpose of enriching the treatise and concealing the alphabetical sequences.

Fitch's key observation of the alphabetical patterns in *On Simples* rules out Dioscorides himself as author, since the famous pharmacologist so despised alphabetical organisation, opting instead for a system that John Riddle called 'affinities'.⁵ Dioscorides and Pseudo-Dioscorides, however, might have drawn from common sources and might have been close in date. Fitch suggests that the author of *On Simples* was a medical practitioner and that he might have come from Asia Minor, before settling in Rome, where he would have met Andromachus, to whom the work is dedicated in the preface. There were two famous Andromachi, father and son, the first a physician to Nero, the second active at the end of the first century CE. If authentic, this preface would place the author in the late part of the first century CE.

Fitch then discusses previous scholarship and usefully outlines possible areas of future research: a detailed commentary on the text; a study of where this text overlaps with that of Pliny the Elder, perhaps using insights from modern pharmacy; a broader study of the pharmaceutical materials considered 'easily available' in antiquity; and a linguistic study to establish more firmly the date of the work.

Finally, Fitch explains some principles of translation, focusing on the very difficult issue of translating plant names from Greek into English. He suggests that for some 80% of the plants in *On Simples*, identification of species and often genus can be established. Where identifications are too uncertain, transliterations are used. Fitch stresses that his identifications are often different from those of Lily Beck in her translation of Dioscorides, which is too reliant on the Liddel-Scott-Jones dictionary, which is problematic. The hidden work that has gone into identifications is to be applauded. Fitch also provides a useful table of weights and volumes (24).

The translation, [based on Max Wellmann's definitive text](#), is accompanied by short notes. It is followed by thorough concordances of medications, first, English to Greek, divided into 'Plants and Plant Products' (147-168) and 'Animal and Human Products' (168-175); second, Greek to English (176-202). Then come three appendices: first, divergences from Wellmann's Greek text, which will prove very useful to anyone wishing to study the text in any detail

⁴ John G. Fitch. 'Not by Dioscorides: *On Simples*.' *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 142 (2022), 166-178.

⁵ John M. Riddle. 1985. *Dioscorides on Pharmacy and Medicine*. University of Texas Press: Austin, p. 94.

(203-204); second, a few textual notes (205-207); third, and most importantly, alphabetical sequences (208-212), which lists sequences of five or more alphabetically ordered items. Finally, one finds a bibliography, an index of ailments and body parts, an index of medications, and a general index. These numerous tools make this work extremely useful to anyone interested in studying ancient pharmacology.

As mentioned above, I found the translation lucid, and any disagreement is on minor points of detail. For instance, I would have preferred to see a translation for the word *kokhliarion*, a quantity often recommended for the administration of drugs (see e.g. p. 30). Translating this word as 'spoonful' renders the meaning clearer; a note could have explained why this remains an approximate translation.

In the remainder of this review, I would like to outline a few areas of current research where Fitch's translation could prove particularly useful. First, it could contribute to a better understanding of the different interpretations of the head-to-toe order. Indeed, whereas some ancient treatises, such as Galen's *On the Composition of Medicines according to Places*, start with the hair, followed by the head, ears, eyes, mouth and teeth, etc, *On Simples* begins with the head, including madness and epilepsy, then proceeds to the eyes, ears, mouth and teeth, followed by the hair. Such seemingly small differences may have much to say about ancient conceptions of the body, an important area of current research. One could note that while Galen only focused on the hair of the head, *On Simples* considers both facial and bodily hair, including ways to remove it and delay its growth in young boys – something which Galen despised (*Composition of Medicines according to Places* 1.3, 12.449 Kühn). For *On Simples*, as several treatises belonging to the *Euporista* genre, has no qualms in including cosmetic recipes. Cosmetic concerns apparently affected people of all ages and all genders: recipes to prevent the hair from falling out (1.90) are followed by recipes to make children's hair lovely and thick (1.91), dyes for lighter and darker hair (1.92-93), and a remedy to stop greying (1.94).

Relatedly, *On Simples* displays a strong interest in sexual and reproductive health, which will be of interest to historians of gender and sexuality. Thus, it includes several chapters on the health of the testicles (1.132-134), which follow directly after the chapters on the breasts and milk (1.126-132). Indeed, breasts and testicles were considered analogous in antiquity, as they both produced bodily fluids that were concocted blood. These chapters in Book 1, on external ailments, find their counterparts in Book 2, where various 'internal' gynaecological and sexual ailments are covered (2.71-105). Within this long section, the compiler also covers fertility, contraception, aphrodisiacs, abortion, and involuntary ejaculation, including wet dreams. The paragraphs on wet dreams (2.104-105) are then followed by one on bedwetting (2.106).

Bedwetting is an ailment that perhaps afflicts children most, a contingency not forgotten in *On Simples*, and one that has been the focus of recent research. One can read, somewhat between the lines, concerns for children's health, for instance in the chapters about curdled milk in the breasts, especially those of wet-nurses (1.128-129). Other ancient texts tell us that curdling of milk, which often occurred at the onset of lactation, could be dangerous to infants, as it clogged them up (Soranus, *Gynaecology* 2.18).

Those interested in the treatment of enslaved people will also find material of interest here. The recipes to remove tattoos (1.110) are not meant to erase self-decorating marks, but rather those inflicted as punishment to enslaved people. One also finds two references to a 'slave-dealers' pitch-plaster' used in the treatment of sciatica (1.233) and of inflamed lungs (2.37.5).

According to Pliny the Elder, this plaster was favoured by slave-dealers because it hid the fact that enslaved people were overly thin (*HN* 24.35).

Fitch has done a great service to the Classics community by translating this little-known text. I have already used his translation several times in teaching, thus familiarising students with passages that they would not have been able to access otherwise.