

THE ARABIC TRANSLATION OF DIOSCORIDES' *DE MATERIA MEDICA*  
BY MIHRĀN B. MANŞŪR IN COMPARISON WITH THE OLDER  
TRANSLATION BY STEPHANOS AND HUNAYN B. ISHĀQ

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The dominant influence of the botanico-pharmacological work, *Peri hilēs iatrixēs*, of the famous Greek physician and herbalist Pedanios Dioscorides (1st century C.E.) on the pharmacology and medicinal botany of the scholar-physicians (*ḥukamā'*) of the Islamic period is a well established and well known fact.

In the Islamic world, Dioscorides' masterpiece was first known during the reign of the 'Abbāsid caliph al-Mutawakkil (232-47/847-61) thanks to the Arabic translation by the erudite Hunayn b. Ishāq (194-260/809-83) and his student and assistant Stephanos son of Basileos (Iṣṭifān b. Basīl) at the *Bayt al-Ḥikma* established by the caliph al-Ma'mūn in Baghdad in 214/830. The well-known medical historian Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a has related the story of this translation ('*Uyūn al-anbā'* II, 46-48). It seems that Stephanos first translated Dioscorides directly from Greek. Anyway, the arduous task of translating the Greek names of outlandish materials proved above his abilities; therefore he contented himself with transcribing (that is, arabicizing) the terms whose Arabic (or Arabo-Persian) equivalents he ignored, and sometimes with literally translating the Greek terms having a lucid composition. Humbly he expressed the hope that after him God would send someone knowledgeable who could make up for the defects or inadequacies in his translation. Although Hunayn, who had previously produced a Syriac version of Dioscorides (see below), reportedly checked, corrected and "approved" his pupil's work, many place names and pharmacological items (specially plants) remained unidentified and, consequently, without Arabic or arabicized Persian equivalents. One can imagine the disappointment of the physicians-pharmacologists who had to depend on this text.

Because of the intrinsic scientific value of Dioscorides' contribution, which aroused the admiration of the Islamic period scholars, earnest efforts were later made by some herbalists-physicians (mainly from Andalus/Iberian Peninsula whose flora had much in common with those of the eastern countries of the Mediterranean basin that Dioscorides had explored) in order to identify the unknown or uncertain species and varieties mentioned by the latter, and to find common vernacular names for them (Andalusian, Berber, dialectal Arabic, etc.). In this connection are to be mentioned here the meritorious studies by Ibn Ḡulḡul (332-77/994-87)<sup>1</sup> and Aḥmad

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. his *Tafsīr*, which seems to be lost, but of which quotations are found in some later authors.

al-Ġāfiqī (fl. 1st half of the 6th/12th century)<sup>2</sup>, both from Cordoba; the Moroccan prince-scholar aš-Šarīf al-Idrīsī (d. in Sicily in 560/1160)<sup>3</sup>, and Ibn al-Bayṭār from Malaga (d. 646/1248).

Stephanos' and Ḥunayn's translation, with the botanical and terminological contributions of these later scholars, remained for a long time (about three centuries) the only Arabic version available in the Islamic world. Meanwhile, an Iranian scholar from Ṭabaristān (now Māzandarān), al-Ḥusayn b. Ibrāhīm aṭ-Ṭabarī, better known as Abū ʿAbdallāh an-Nātīlī (with whom Avicenna studied logic, geometry, astronomy and philosophy at Buḥārā), endeavoured — as he states in his preamble<sup>4</sup> — to set right “the great confusion and muddle” (*idṭirāb wa-tašwiš*) having crept into the numerous existing copies of the Arabic text of Dioscorides through the ignorance and/or negligence of successive copyists. an-Nātīlī's laudable enterprise which, contrary to what some people think, is not a fresh translation of Dioscorides, was completed in 380/990 and offered (probably at Samarqand) to Abū ʿAlī Muḥammad as-Simḡūrī (from the powerful Simḡūrī family under the Sāmānids), who was the *sipah-sālār* (army commander) of Ḥurāsān. Although at least four mss. of an-Nātīlī's “revision” exist in various libraries (Sezgin 1970: III, 315), it has not yet been critically studied by modern scholars.

It should be noted here that, in addition to numerous independent mss. of the Arabic Dioscorides, the greater part of it was also quoted in full or in an abridged form by al-Ġāfidī, al-Idrīsī, and Ibn al-Bayṭār in their compendiums of *materia medica*. It was not until the 1970s that a critical edition thereof was published thanks to two Spanish scholars, Dubler and Terés.

The second extant Arabic translation of Dioscorides is due to another Iranian scholar, Mihrān b. Maṣṣūr b. Mihrān, who is otherwise known for his translation of some of Aristotle's works, e.g. *De celo et mundi* (*Fī s-samā' wa-l-ʿālam*). By order of the Artuqid sultan of Diyār Bakr, Naḡm ad-Dīn Alpī (r. 547-72/1152-76), he produced ca. 515/1122 a supposedly new translation, not from the Greek original, but from the old Syriac translation made by Ḥunayn b. Ishāq for Buḥt Yīšūʿ b. Ġibrāʿīl, head physician of the caliph al-Mutawakkil. In his preface, Mihrān explains the circumstances of this translation: The sultan, having received a copy of the Syriac version of Dioscorides' *Kitāb al-ḥašāʾiš* (literally, “Book of herbs/plants” — a common but inaccurate title by which Dioscorides' work came to be known in the Islamic world), and having been informed of the great medical importance thereof, he looked for somebody well versed in Syriac and Arabic to translate it into Arabic for him. A certain Abū Sālīm al-Malaṭī who was introduced to the sultan for this

<sup>2</sup> His *Adwiya* containing only the articles under the first 11 letters of the alphabet (*abġad*).

<sup>3</sup> A copy of the 1st half of his treatise on simple drugs exists in Fātiḥ Library (Istanbul), no. 3610.

<sup>4</sup> *Kitāb Dīāsqrūdūs* was composed in 380/990. The Leiden ms. was copied in 510/1116.

job, produced a translation that did not please him, because, in Mihrān's opinion, Abū Sālīm, having learned Arabic at an advanced age, did not succeed in producing an eloquent, perspicuous, accurate translation pleasant to read; nor was he successful in transliterating the technical Syriac words into Arabic characters. Mihrān claims that then he (= Mihrān) was commissioned to undertake this job, and that consequently he did his best to avoid the defects of Abū Sālīm's work, being careful, contrary to the latter's procedure, not to add anything that could not help elucidate a point nor to omit whatever would prevent a correct rendition of the original meaning.

Mihrān refers only to Ḥunayn's Syriac translation. This would give us the impression that he and his patron knew neither of the Arabic translation of Ḥunayn and Stephanos nor of an-Nātili's "revision", and, indirectly, that he had not used those previous works to better carry out his own task. However, at the end of his preface, he vaguely acknowledges "the precedence of *awā'il* (the first ones, the pioneers), saying: "We travel by night thanks to their leading the way... and we seek enlightenment by their guidance". Anyway, Mr. M. M. Sadek, a contemporary specialist in Dioscoridean manuscripts and Arabic translations (*Arabic Materia Medica*, 13) evaluates Mihrān's work as follows: "In my opinion, the best Arabic translation without a doubt... [is Mihrān's]. The language shows that the translator... has a better command of both Arabic and Syriac than is shown in the other manuscripts [sic]. The text is far from being a literal translation, being expressed with grace and simplicity. The writer displays an assured grasp of the idiosyncrasies of Arabic grammar, an extensive vocabulary and a knowledge of all the idiomatic variations."

Personally, I have doubts about the absolute superiority of Mihrān's work as to both form and content. Literarily and stylistically, his translation may be deemed more elegant and fluent. But what about the contents, which are much more important in scientific works? Considering the truthful Italian adage, "*Traduttore traditore*" (= any translator is a traitor), we may pass the *a priori* judgement that Mihrān's translation is bound to be twice as unfaithful as Stephanos' and Ḥunayn's, because the latter was directly executed from the Greek original (whence an inevitable first "treason") whereas the former was made from a Syriac version of the original (whence an inevitable double distortion). Actually, a comparison, albeit partial, of the scientific, factual contents of the two versions with the Greek text confirms the said conjecture. Further, there is ample textual evidence that Mihrān *did* benefit from Stephanos' and Ḥunayn's pioneering work. To substantiate my suppositions, I submit here the texts of four articles chosen at random from both versions, with the corresponding texts of an old, relatively very faithful, almost literal Anglo-Latin translation of Dioscorides to serve as a valid basis for verification. My general conclusion is that, while Mihrān's version is literarily more remarkable on the whole, the older translation from Greek, far from being linguistically objectionable, is scientifically more dependable and informative.

Incidentally, my quotations from Mihrān's text are reproduced from a magnificent ms. (both as to copying precision, calligraphy, and 4-colour paintings) kept in the library of the former royal palace Gulistān in Teheran. Commissioned for the private physician of the Šafawid king 'Abbās I, it was completed in 1038/1629. It is far superior to the Mašhad ms. of Mihrān's translation.

## ايرسا

حنين: ايرسا هو السوسن الاسمانجوني... قال ديسقوريدس: "هو السوسن المعروف بالايرسا وهو نوع من السوسن وورقه يشبه ورق كسيفين، غير انه أعظم وأعرض وألرح. وله ساق عليه زهر منحن فيه ألوان يوازى بعضها بعضا، وهى مختلفة فيها بياض وصفرة وفرفيرية ولون السماء. ومن أجل اختلاف ألوان فيه شبه بالايرس وهو قوس قزح. وله أصول صلبة ذات عقد، طيبة الرائحة وينبضى، إذا قلعت أن تحفظ فى ظل وتنظم فى خيط كتان وتخزن. وأجور هذا النوع من السوسن ما كان من بلاد التى يقال لها اللوريفن [sic] والذى من بلاد... ماقدونيا، والجيد من هذا ما كان أصله كيفا فكان صغيرا، عسر الرض ولونه مائل إلى الحمرة، طيب الرائحة جدا، لا تشوبه رائحة الندى ويحذو اللسان ويحرك الحطاس إذا دق. أما ما كان من هذا النوع من نينوى [sic] فانه أبيض وقوته دون قوة السوسن الذى ذكرناه. وإذا عتق السوسن المعروف فالايرس تسوس وتثقب غير انه يكون حينئذ أطيب رائحة منه قبل ذلك. وقوته مسخنة ملطفة ويصلح للسعال ويلطف ما عسر نفثه من الرطوبات التى فى الصدور. وإذا سقى منه وزن سبع درخميات بماء العسل، أسهل كيموسا غليظا بلغميا ومرة صفراء ويجلب النوم ويجلب الدموع ويبرى من المخص. وإذا شرب بالخل نفع من نهش الهوام والمطحولين والذين بهم تشنج بالحصب وينفع من البرد والنافض..."

مهران: "ايرسا أصل حشيشة وورقها شبيه بورق السوسن البرى الا انه أعظم منه وأعرض. فاما زهرها فيشبه زهر السوسن البرى وهو اسمانجوني اللون أى لونه لون قوس قزح. فاما لون السوسن البرى فهو متفرق ألوان فمنه أبيض وأصفر وفرفيريون [sic]. واما الايرسا وهو أصل السوسن الأسمانجوني فأجوده ما كان مدمجا صلدا لا خلل فيه، ذا عقد ورايحة ذكية كالذى يكب من ماقدونيا وايللوريقى، فانه ملزس صلب الجرم عسر التفرك والتشظى ويختار منه مع هذه الصفة المائل بلونه إلى الحمرة والنصاعة الزكى الرائحة المحذى للسان عند مذاقه والمحرك للعطاس بقوة عند دقه وانسحاقه لايشوبه نداوة ولا بلل. ومنه نوع يطب من لينوى/ليوى [sic]، أبيض اللون، مر الطعم، مختلف القوة، ذكى الرائحة، يعرض له بثقب إذا عتق وتسوس. الطبع: سائر ألوانه مسخنة ملطفة. الفعل: نافع للسعال، ملطف ومنضج للرطوبة الغليظة العسرة التحليل، نافع للأخلاق الغليظة والموارية إذا شرب منه سبع درخميات مع ماء العسل، جالب للنوم، محدر للدموع، مشفى للأمخاس، الجمود والنافض والبرد..."

Iris<sup>5</sup>

Iris is soe named from the resemblance of the rainbow in heaven, but it beares leaves like unto a little sword but greater and broader & fatter (or thicker): the

<sup>5</sup> *Iris germanica* or *Iris florentina*; *zanbaq* in Persan.

flowers on the stalke, are bended in, one ouer against another, & diuers, for they are either soon white or pale or black or purple or azure. Whence for the varietie of colours it is likened to the heauenly rainebow. The under are knotty, strong (or sound), of a sweet savour, which after the cutting ought to be dried in the shade, & soe (with a linnen thread put through them) to be layed up. But ye best is that of Illyria & Macedonia, & of these the best is that which hath a thick roote, stumped, & hard to breake, & in color of a faint yellow, & exceeding well-scentting, & very bitter to the taste, of a sound smell, & not enclining to nastinesse, & moving to sneeing in ye beating. The second is that of Lybia, white according to the colour, bitter according to the tast, next in strength (to the former), but when they grow old they will be worm-eaten, yet then they smell the sweeter. But all of them haue a warming, extenuating facultie, fitting against coughs, & extenuating grosse humors hard to get up. They purge thick humors & choler, being dranck in hydromel to the quantity of seven dragms they are also causers of sleep & prouokers of tears & heale the torments of the belly...

(English tr., 1655 A.D. pp. 5-6)

#### عنكبوت

حنين: ديسقوريدوس في ٢: العنكبوت اذا خلط بالمراهم ولطخ على خرقة وصير [؟] على الجبهة أو على الصدغين أبراً من الحمى حمى الغب. ونسجه اذا وضع وحده على موضع ليسيل منه دم قطعه واذا وضع على القروح التي لا عمق لها منع منه الورم. ومن العنكبوت صنف يكون نسجه أبيض كثيفا وهو على ما زعم قوم اذا شد في جلد و علق على العضد منع من حمى الربيع واذا طبخ بدهن الورد وقطر في الأذن نفع من وجعها. مهران: عنكبوت: يسميه بعض الناس اولقوس أي الناسج المتعلق وآخرون لوقوس أي دنب [sic = دنب]. اذا سحق وخلط مع القيروطى وضمدت به الجبهة والصدغ وللدوار ثلاثة أيام أبراً منه. ونسيجة العنكبوت اذا ضمد بها منعت انبعاث الدم وحفظ قروح الابرية لثلا يتصلب. ومن العنكبوت نوع آخر ينسج مثل الحجاب الأبيض النقى. وقيل أن هذا النوع اذا عمل في جلد وعلق في الذراع أربعة أيام أبراً من الدوار وكذلك اذا طبخ في دهن ورد وقطر في الأذن ابرا من وجعها.

#### Arachne

The spider, that creature which somme call Holcos, or Lycos (that is, Raptor, vel Lupus), being wrought into one masse with a plaister, and spread vpon linnen, & soe layed to ye forehead or temples, doth cure the periodical circuits of tertian aguees. The cobweb of it being leyd on doth stanch bloud, and keeps such vlcers as breake out at ye top of the skinne from inflammation. There is another kinds of spider, which spins a white web, thinne, and thick, of which it is sayd that being put into a purse of leather & hanged about the arme, it doth cure the courses of quartane agues. Being sod together with rosaceum, & soe poured in, it doth help the paine of the eares.

(*ibid.*, 107)

## خطاف/خطاطيف

حنين: خطاف. ديسقوريدوس في الثالثة: "إذا أخذ فرعه في زيادة القمر وكان أول ما أفرع وشق وأخذ من الحما [sic] الموجود في جوفه حصاتان أحدهما ذات لون واحد والأخرى مختلفة اللون وشدتا في جلع من جلد الأيل والخجل قبل أن يصيبهما تراب، وربطتا على عضد من به صرع أو [على] رقبته انتفع كثيرا ما فعل ذلك. فأبرأ من به صرع براء تاما. وإذا أخذت كما يؤخذ الطير المسمى سقلندس [sic] وجففت واكتحل به أحدثك البصر. فإذا أحرقت الأم مع فراخها في قدر وأخذ رمادها وخلط بعسل وأكتحل به أحد البصر. وإذا يحنك برمادها نفع من الخناق وورم اللهاة، وإذا طبخت وجففت وشرب منها مقدار درخمين بماء نفع من الخناق أيضا."

مهران: خطاطيف. إذا شققت أجواف فراخ الخطاف أول بطن تجد في أجوافها حجارة. خذ منها إثنتين أحكهما ملونة والأخرى ذات لون واحد وصرهما في جلد عجل أو أيل وعلقهما في نراع المضروع. فانه يبرء. وإذا أكلت الخطاطيف كالحمام والفراخ فانها تحد البصر. فأما رماذ فراخ الخطاطيف مع رماذ أمهاتها اذا خلط بالعسل واكتحل به حد البصر وينفع أيضا لأصحاب الخوانيق اذا لطح به الحنك والحنجرة واللهاة والتعانع [؟]"

## Chelidon

Cutting asunder at ye increase of ye moone young swallowes which are of the first hatching, you shall finde stones in their bellyes, of which taking two, (you shall haue) one of diuers colours, & the other cleare (& of one colour). Putting these in an heyfer's or hart's skinne, before they touch the grond, & tying them to ye arme or neck, you shall hereby ease, & many tymes wholly recouer ye epileptically. But they being eaten, as also ye ficedulae, are a medicine for causing sharp sight; & the ashes of them & of their dammes being burnt in an earthen pott, & anointed on with hony doth cause sharpnesse of sight. It is good also, being anointed on, for such as haue ye squinancie, & for the inflammations of ye uvae, & ye tonsillae. But they themselues, & their young ones being dryed & dranck, ye weight of one dragme with water, doe help such as haue ye squinancie.

(*ibid.*, 105)

مو<sup>6</sup>

حنين: مو. ديسقوريدوس في الأولى: اما منطوقون [sic] وهو المو. قد يكون كثيرا بالبلاد التي يقال لها مقدونيا وهي الاسكندرية. والمقدونس منسوب اليها. والبلاد التي يقال لها اسبانيا ايضا وهي الاندلس. وقد يسمى لنا المرمنطيقن [sic]. وساقه يشبه ساق الشبث وورقه شبيه بورقه غير أنه أغلظ من ساق الشبث وله إكليل كإكليله. فيه برز يشبه الكمون، عطر رائحة. يعلو نحواً من ذراعين، متفرق الأصول وأصوله دقاق لبعضها معوجة وبعضها مستقيمة، طوال، طيبة الرائحة، يحذ واللسان. وإذا أغليت بالماء أو لم تخل وشربت مسحوقة سكنت الوجع العارض من اختناق الفضول في المثانة والكلى. وهي صالحة لعسر البول. وإذا سحقت وحلقت بعسل ولحقت نفعت من الريح العارضة في فم

<sup>6</sup> *Meum athamanticum* Jacq.

المعدة والمغص وأوجاع الأرحام والمفاصل والصدر الذي تنصب اليه المواد. وإذا سلقته وجلس النساء في مائها أدرت الطمث. وإذا ضمدها بها عانة الصبي أدرت البول. وإذا أخذ منه أكثر من المقدار الكافي صدع.

مهرا: أما منطيقون وهو المو. أكثر ما ينبت المو بماقازونيا وبلاد الهند ويشبه في نباته وزهره وورقه الشيت. وارتفاع شجرته ذراعين. وأصوله متشعبة دقاق ومنها منحنية ومنها منتصبة النبات، لذيدة الرائحة، يحذو اللسان عند المذاق. الطبع: مسخن. الفعل: إذا شرب الماء المطبوخ فيه المو أو الشراب سكن أوجاع الكلى والمثانة وأزال عسر البول، وحلل النفخ الحادثة في المعدة وسكن الأمغاس وأراح من أوجاع الرحم ومن ضربان المفاصل. وإذا سحق [المو؟] وأدير في العسل وأخذ كالحساء [لطف المواد النازلة إلى الصدر. وإذا جلس النساء في الماء المطبوخ فيه أهدرت دم الطمث بقوة. وإذا اتخذ من المو ضماد العانة من الأطفال (؟) أدربولهم. وإذا استحمل بافراط جلب وجع الرأس.

### Meon

That Meum, which is called Athamanticum, doth grow abundantly in Macedonia & Spain, is like in the stalke & leaues to Anethum, but thicker than Anethum, somme tyme rising up to two cubits, underscattered with thinne, winding, & streight, long rootes, sweet-smelling, warming the tongue. Which being sod with water, or being beaten smooth (or small) without seething, & soe dranck, doe assuage the paines caused by stoppage about ye vesica and the Renes; & they are good for the vrinae difficultas, & for the Inflatio stomachi, & for the Tormen, & for diseases of the matrix, & ye paine of the joints. Being beaten small with hony, & taken in manner of an Eclegma, they helpe a rheumatick thorax; being boiled for an Insessus, they draw ye bloud by ye menstrua; bewing layed on pleyster-wise to ye lower part of children's bellies, they move the vrina. But being dranck more than is fitting, it causeth the Dolor capitis.

(*ibid.*, 7-8)

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