

## BOOK REVIEWS

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*Pharmacy and Drug Lore in Antiquity: Greece, Rome, Byzantium.* John Scarborough. Variorum Collected Studies Series. Burlington, VT, Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009, xxviii + 354 pp, ISBN 978-0-7546-5954-9, \$165.

In his preface to this erudite and engaging collection of essays John Scarborough laments the divide that grew up between classicists, on the one side, and scientists and medical doctors, on the other, as the classics receded as a component of liberal education in the twentieth century. One of the consequences of this divergence, he points out, was loss of attention to the place of medicine, and of drugs in particular, in ancient life and literature.

Scarborough's own scholarship represents a historian's response to this challenge. The fourteen articles and chapters here included span more than a millennium of Greek, Roman, and Byzantine history, and range in subject from the pharmacology of sacred plants, roots, and herbs, through drugs in Pliny's *Natural History*, to herbs of the field and garden in Byzantine medicinal pharmacy.

At first sight the chronological scope and variety of topics in this collection suggest a lack of unity and coherence. Reading quickly dispels this impression, however, as several general themes and issues emerge from the detailed and focused individual studies.

One of these has to do with the relations between empirical and magico-religious elements in Greek and Roman perceptions of the causes of the properties of drugs. Scarborough makes clear that these elements were

often fused in popular beliefs and practices from the time of Homer on. This fusion is reflected, for example, in the writings of Theophrastus, who drew extensively on the lore of "root-cutters" and other popular sources for his knowledge of the uses of plants.

Closely related to this theme is Scarborough's insistence on the insufficiency of trying to understand ancient drug ideas and practices in terms of modern ideas of drug action and efficacy. In some cases he provides much modern botanical and chemical-pharmacological information about plants and drugs, as in his analysis of Theophrastus. Although some ancient drugs, or their constituents, survive in modern medicine, Scarborough shows that even in these cases it is not always possible to establish a one-to-one correlation between ancient and modern use. He rightly emphasizes, and shows with many examples, that we do not understand ancient drug practices simply by applying criteria of modern pharmacology, because there are many magical or religious meanings and rituals associated with drugs that we cannot now reconstruct. Such a finding points to the need for an anthropological model, or models, of the place of drugs in the beliefs and practices of ancient societies. While acknowledging the need, Scarborough does not claim to supply these models, and we are left with tantalizing glimpses of particulars for which they might provide interpretation.

Juxtaposed with this anthropological tendency, and somewhat in tension with it, is Scarborough's insistence that ancient knowledge and practice involving

drugs changed significantly over time. Change could take the form of the evolution of medical doctrines, as in the Hippocratic writings from the fifth century BC to the first century AD. It could also take the form of incremental accumulation of empirical formulas derived from observation and trial and error, and ultimately sifted and organized by writers such as Dioscorides in the first century AD or Paul of Aegina in the seventh century. In some passages this comes across as a kind of progress, although as the case of the second century BC poet Nicander indicates, at least in its written embodiments drug knowledge could undergo degradation as well as improvement.

Writers on drugs provide most of our sources for ideas and practices in antiquity, and Scarborough proceeds on the view that the written record represents the place of drugs in Greco-Roman and Byzantine medicine in general. Popular beliefs and usages are visible, at least in partial ways, through the medium of the major writings. Dioscorides' *Materia Medica*, for example, is the basis of Scarborough's analysis of the place of the opium poppy in Hellenistic and Roman medicine. Scarborough shows that in the chapters of Theophrastus' *Inquiry into Plants* in which he discusses drugs, he relies on knowledge of root-cutters and drug venders, which he treats in a critical way. Pliny's *Natural History* shows familiarity with Greek writings on drugs, but also

incorporates widespread popular practical knowledge of drugs and an associated folkloric tradition in Roman Italy. The examples of two kinds of incense found in a collection of Greek and Coptic papyri illustrate connections between expert and popular drug knowledge in Roman and Byzantine Egypt.

The popular sources of drug lore as refracted through medical writings on occasion suggest the social location of drug practices. Galen's commentary on Hippocratic writings on drugs, for example, suggests that the richest information in this literature came from midwifery, not formal medicine. Elsewhere Scarborough points out that a significant number of ancient drugs were used as contraceptives or abortifacients, suggesting use by prostitutes as well as by other women wishing to avoid pregnancy.

Taken together, these essays document an extensive, variegated, and evolving knowledge of drugs in both the medical writings and the popular beliefs and practices of Greek, Roman, and Byzantine antiquity. Scholars will find in them a valuable resource, enhanced by an index that enables study of single topics across the separately paginated chapters. They should also appeal to anyone with a serious interest in the long and multifaceted human experience with drugs.

*John E. Lesch, University of California, Berkeley, and Rutgers University*

## Errata

Two captions of two figures are incorrect in James J. Bohning, "History of HIST. II. On Probation," **2010**, 35(2), 66-80. The correct captions follow:

**Figure 4.** *Lyman C. Newell, Boston University, first Secretary of HIST. Edgar Fahs Smith Collection, University of Pennsylvania Libraries.*

**Figure 5.** *Charles A. Browne, first Chair of HIST, with his wife Louise and daughter Caroline, Christmas 1937. Edgar Fahs Smith Collection, University of Pennsylvania Libraries.*