THE ARABIC TRANSLATION OF DIOSCORIDES’ *DE MATERIA MEDICA* BY MIHRÂN B. MANŞÛR IN COMPARISON WITH THE OLDER TRANSLATION BY STEFANOS AND ḤUNAYN B. ISHĀQ

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The dominant influence of the botanico-pharmacological work, *Peri hiles iatrixes*, of the famous Greek physician and herbalist Pedanios Dioscorides (1st century C.E.) on the pharmacology and medicinal botany of the scholar-physicians (*hukamā*) 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. Basil) at the *Bayt al-Ḥikma* established by the caliph al-Maʿmūn in Baghdad in 214/830. The well-known medical historian Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’a has related the story of this translation (‘Ūyūn 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 Ḥunayn, 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 Ḥulgul (332–77/994–87)1 and Ahmad

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1 Cf. his *Tafsir*, which seems to be lost, but of which quotations are found in some later authors.
al-Ghafiqi (fl. 1st half of the 6th/12th century)², both from Córdoba; the Moroccan prince-scholar aš-Šarif al-Idrisi (d. in Sicily in 560/1160)³, and Ibn al-Baytār from Malaga (d. 646/1248).

Stephanos’ and Hunayn’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 Tabaristān (now Māzandarān), al-Husayn b. Ibrāhīm at-Tabarī, better known as Abū ‘Abdallāh an-Nātīlī (with whom Avicenna studied logic, geometry, astronomy and philosophy at Buhārā), endeavoured — as he states in his preambule⁴ — to set right “the great confusion and muddle” (aṭṭirāb wa-tawāsūs) 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 ‘Ali Muḥammad as-Simghūrī (from the powerful Simghūrī family under the Sāmānids), who was the sipah-salâr (army commander) of Hūrasān. 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-Ghafiqi, al-Idrisi, and Ibn al-Baytār 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, Mīhrān b. Mašūr b. Mīhrān, who is otherwise known for his translation of some of Aristotle’s works, e.g. De celo et mundi (Fi s-samā‘ wa-l- ālam). By order of the Artuqid sultan of Diyār Bakr, Nağm 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 Hunayn b. Ishāq for Būlt Yūsūf b. Gibrā’il, head physician of the caliph al-Mutawakkil. In his preface, Mīhrān explains the circumstances of this translation: The sultan, having received a copy of the Syriac version of Dioscorides’ Kitāb al-ḥaṭā‘is (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 Sālim al-Malāṭî who was introduced to the sultan for this job, produced a translation. Abū Sālim, having left a more eloquent, perspicuous, and reliable text than that he (= Mīhrān) had translated previously, but contrary to the latter’s instruction, did not annotate it, which was a point nor to omit for Mīhrān’s meaning.

Mīhrān refers only to a “revision” that he and his pupils had done to Stephanos nor of any of the previous works to better his: “We travel by their guidance, without doubt... [is Mīhrān’s text] the command of both Artemidorus and Dioscorides.” The text is far from being both form and content, being more elegant and fluent in scientific works as any translator is always, whereas the translation is bound to resemble its model, the latter was directly translated “treason” whereas this text, which is not so, is an inevitable by-product of scientific, factual content, on its scientific conjecture. Further, the translation of Stephanos’ and Hunayn’s texts, unlike those of Dioscorides to be sure, is that, while Mīhrān’s text may have been more dependable and

² His Adwīya containing only the articles under the first 11 letters of the alphabet (abjad).
³ A copy of the last half of his treatise on simple drugs exists in Fāṭīḥ Library (Istanbul), no. 3610.
⁴ Kitāb Dīyāsīrīdīs was composed in 380/990. The Leiden ms. was copied in 510/1116.
job, produced a translation that did not please him, because, in Mîhrân’s opinion, Abû Sâlim, 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. Mîhrân claims that then he (= Mîhrân) was commissioned to undertake this job, and that consequently he did his best to avoid the defects of Abû Sâlim’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.

Mîhrân refers only to Hunayn’s Syriac translation. This would give us the impression that he and his patron knew neither of the Arabic translation of Hunayn and Stephanos nor of an-’Nâtilî’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 ave’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 Mîhrân’s work as follows: “In my opinion, the best Arabic translation without a doubt... [is Mîhrân’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 Mîhrân’s work to both form and content. Literally 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 Mîhrân’s translation is bound to be twice as unfaithful as Stephanos’ and Hunayn’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 Mîhrân did benefit from Stephanos’ and Hunayn’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 Mîhrân’s version is literally 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 Šafawīd king ʿAbbās I, it was completed in 1038/1629. It is far superior to the Mašhad ms. of Mihrān’s translation.

Iris

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

5 Iris germanica or Iris florentina; zanhaq in Persan.
flowers on the stalk, are bended in, one over against another, & divers, 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 heavenly rainbow. 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 linen thread put through them) to be layed up. But ye best is that of Illrya & Macedonia, & of these the best is that which hath a thick root, 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 nastiness, & moving to sneezing 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 have 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 dragsm they are also causeurs of sleep & proukers of tears & heale the tormentes of the belly...

(English tr., 1655 A.D. pp. 5-6)
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 heyer’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 epilepticall. But they being eaten, as also ye ficedulæ, are a medicine for causing sharp sighet; & the ashes of them & of their dammes being burnt in an earthen pott, & anointed on with hony doth cause sharpenes of sight. It is good also, being anointed on, for such as haue ye squinancie, & for the inflammations of ye uvae, & ye tonsillæ. But they themselves, & their young ones being dried & dranck, ye weight of one dragme with water, doe help such as haue ye squinancie.

(ibid., 105)

6 Moeum athamanticum Jacq.
The Arabic Translation of Dioscorides' De Materia Medica

That Meum, which is called Athamanticum, doth grow abundantly in Macedonia & Spain, is like in the stalk & leaves to Anethum, but thicker than Anethum, somme tyne rising up to two cubits, underscattered with thinne, winding, & straigh, 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)

REFERENCES

A. Primary sources


B. Secondary sources