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ON THE CAMELS OF THE AORSI: DIOSCORIDES AND THE MEDICINE TRADE OF THE BOSPORAN KINGDOM

Part I. THE “SOLDIER’S LIFE” OF DIOSCORIDES

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We know only a little about the life of Dioscorides, a medical botanist who wrote in the first century AD or so. His reference to his “soldier’s life” has been important in reconstructions of his activities, often linked with campaigns in Armenia under Nero. However, a “soldier’s life” was a common enough metaphor in the first century AD for a life of hard work, which need have no connection at all to military service. His work shows scant knowledge of the Caucasus. The evidence for his dates makes it likely that he wrote after AD 77, when Pliny the Elder completed his *Natural History*, in which Dioscorides’ important work is not mentioned. Therefore, his remarks on the Bosporan Kingdom were made after AD 77.

Keywords: Dioscorides, ancient pharmacology, ancient botany, medicine, Corbulo, Ephesus, Laecanius

НА ВЕРБЛЮДАХ АОРСОВ: ДИОСКОРИД И ТОРГОВЛЯ ЛЕКАРСТВЕННЫМИ СРЕДСТВАМИ В БОСПОРСКОМ ЦАРСТВЕ

Часть I. «СОЛДАТСКАЯ ЖИЗНЬ» ДИОСКОРИДА

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Очень немногое известно о Диоскореиде, медике и ботанике, писавшем в I в. н.э. Упоминание о его «солдатской жизни» всегда было важной деталью для реконструкции его деятельности, часто связываемой с армянскими кампаниями Нерона, однако на самом деле метафора «солдатской жизни» была широко распространена в I в. для описания жизни, полной тяжелого труда, не обязательно связанной с воинской службой. Само сочинение Диоскорида — «О лекарственных веществах» — демонстрирует лишь скудные знания о Кавказе. Существующие данные о жизни Диоскорида, а также тот факт, что его важный труд не упоминается в «Естественной истории» Плиния, завершённой к 77 г.н.э., говорят в пользу того, что сочинение было написано после этой даты и замечания Диоскорида о Боспорском царстве тоже относятся ко времени после 77 г.

Ключевые слова: Диоскорид, античная фармакология, античная ботаника, медицина, Корбулон, Эфес, Леканий

Among the most influential creations of the ancient world is Dioscorides' book on plants and minerals useful in medicine (written in Greek, but usually known by its Latinized name, *De materia medica*). For obvious reasons it has been studied almost exclusively by scholars concerned with ancient medicine. In the present discussion I have two principal concerns: both have been rather marginal to a great deal of that medical scholarship, but they seem to me to be of prime importance to the history of the Black Sea region. My first concern here is the biography of Dioscorides himself, about which we know little that is not in his own book. This matters for many reasons, but my principal interest is to get a better sense of the research methods and contexts of our author, not least with regard to the Black Sea and Caucasus. I shall seek also to refine his dates: while there is general agreement that he wrote in the first century AD, I argue that a date towards the end of that century is to be considered and preferred. My second concern, to be pursued on that basis in the second part of this article, will be to examine his comments on the Bosphoran kingdom, in particular, and more generally on the northern Black Sea region as a source of medical materials, both from local sources and from as far afield as the Caspian Sea and even India. For Dioscorides shows us that there was a "spice trade"¹ in the Bosphorus, involving goods brought across the steppe that stretches between the Black and Caspian Seas north of the main range of the Caucasus. This neglected aspect of Bosphoran trade demonstrates that grain was by no means the only export from the kingdom, while it also suggests that "spices" probably played a part in the Bosphorans' dealings with their non-Greek neighbours.

Dioscorides addresses his work to a certain Arius. We know Arius as a pharmacological specialist of Tarsus; our author evidently expects his readers to know the great man². Arius moved in the highest circles, for he was connected with an important family in his world. In his *Preface* Dioscorides holds forth on the close relationship of mutual friendship between Arius and a Laecanius Bassus: thanks to Galen we know that Arius had his Roman citizenship through the Laecanii, so that in Roman terms he was (C.?) Laecanius Arius³. The Laecanius Bassus mentioned by Dioscorides is usually identified as the consul

¹ I retain the familiar term: here, as usual, it embraces much more than food flavourings, as we shall see.

² Scarborough 2008.

³ Galen gives the *nomen* (*De comp. med. gen.* 13. 840 K).

ordinarius of AD 64, the momentous year of the great fire in Neronian Rome (Tac. *Ann.* 15. 33. 1). Fortunately, the identification is of only marginal interest for the present discussion, since it is hardly as secure as often imagined. Among other possibilities there was the father of that consul, with the same name, who himself held consular office in AD 40 (*ILS* 6102). The family remained at the top under the Flavians, where we know of another Laecanius Bassus. This was C. Laecanius Bassus Caecina Paetus, who had been adopted by the consul of 64. He became proconsul of Asia and left his mark at Ephesus in AD 80/81, where he apparently constructed an enormous nymphaeum, with abundant sculpture to adorn it⁴. Ephesus was one of the great cities of the Roman world, with many attractions for doctors and other men of culture⁵. In any event, Arius had a powerful associate, though we need not take all Dioscorides' words at face value. For, while the patron-client relationship was usually couched in the language of mutual friendship, in this particular relationship the complete superiority of his Laecanius Bassus was beyond doubt⁶.

The same may be said of Dioscorides' relationship with Arius, who is often (and possibly rightly)⁷ understood to be Dioscorides' teacher at Tarsus. The fact that our author dedicates his book to Arius confirms their bond, while his treatment of Arius makes it clear enough that Dioscorides had benefited from Arius' support and, in some sense, patronage. Of particular interest is Dioscorides' mention of the time he spent in the company of Arius and Laecanius Bassus, where he claims to have observed their mutual friendship (which might entail their residence together, perhaps at the house of Bassus, whether in Rome, Ephesus or elsewhere). Of course, such an observation was very much to the benefit of Arius, and so very welcome to the dedicatee, while at the same time our author shows himself among the exalted. For we have here a chain of patronage, which we may express in a fashion that ancient manners would have tended to avoid: this was a hierarchy of patronage, with Dioscorides as client of Arius, and Arius as client of Bassus. While Dioscorides locates himself in the extended circle of mighty Bassus, he makes no claim to any direct connection with the great man: his association is through Arius, at least as far as the *Preface* of his book is concerned. We can only guess where the three had been together, for how long and under what circumstances, most likely in Rome or Asia Minor. After all, Dioscorides claims to have travelled extensively in his quest for a knowledge that came from autopsy and experience, not only from the written word and received wisdom. Clearly, our travelling author did not stay in his native Cilicia, neither at Anazarbus his birthplace nor at Tarsus, probably his place of education in medicine.

Interestingly the only location that Dioscorides claims for himself in his entire work (very much a claim in passing) is in Italy. There, in the Abruzzi, high among the

⁴ On the many Laecanii, who came from Pola (Istria), where their amphora production has received close attention, see Tassaux 1982; cf. Eck 1982 on C. Laecanius Bassus Caecina Paetus, a Flavian proconsul of Asia, with Thomas 2014, 75–77 on his great fountain at Ephesus; cf. Rathmayr 2011 on its sculptures. Earlier, the elder Pliny twice mentions a consular Laecanius Bassus died in a way that suggests a lack of medical support (*NH* 26. 5, with 36. 203), but we do not know which one: the consul of AD 64 is usually imagined (e.g. Scarborough 2008, 129), possibly correctly. Galba's possible killer is a still more elusive Laecanius: Plut. *Galba* 27. 2.

⁵ For doctors and medicine there, see Nutton 2008, 140–143; Zimonyi 2014.

⁶ Cf. Saller 1982.

⁷ One might have wished for some clear indication of Arius as teacher in the *Preface*.

mountains of the Vestini, he had observed the effect of certain kinds of pasture upon the milk produced from it (Diosc. 2. 70). If he had journeyed in these mountains, he must surely have also visited Rome, which was no great distance away. There, too, any *materia medica* was likely to find its way, while Galen shows how much a doctor might learn from experience in Rome's markets and among specialists who came there⁸. And at Rome, as we have seen, he might find powerful support. We may reasonably suppose that it was from the capital that he had made his journey into these mountains. The milk-products of the Vestini enjoyed some fame in contemporary Rome⁹. Most likely he made use of the road built by Claudius in AD 47, which passed through the town of one of the most renowned men of the region, Cn. Domitius Corbulo, Nero's victor in Armenia¹⁰. That association might seem to offer support for the modern suggestion that Dioscorides had served with the Roman army in Armenia. However, we shall see that his work in fact has very little to say about Armenia, and shows no experience there. More importantly, we must look much harder at the whole notion of his soldiering, which arises from his remarks in the *Preface* (4), where he contrasts his approach to medicinal plants and minerals with that of unsatisfactory predecessors:

I, on the other hand, having had from a very young age, so to speak, an abiding interest in *materia medica* and having covered much territory – for you know that I have led a military life – have collected at your encouragement my findings in five books. It is to you that I dedicate this collection in gratitude for your kindness towards me¹¹.

Dioscorides' allusion to a "military life" – perhaps better, "a soldierly life", a στρατιωτικὸς βίος – has caused considerable discussion. By and large, scholars have taken him to say here that he has served in the Roman military¹². However, his focus on the *materia medica* of the east and concomitant neglect of the west, have given rise to the (rather mild) objection that he seems not, in that case, to have been based on the northern frontiers. There seems to have emerged now an orthodoxy that his military career was a short one – a fine compromise. But none of this will do. If his military career was short, why does he adduce it at all, and in connection with his claim to extensive travels? The uncomfortable fact is that he gives no account of a military career, and, more importantly, says nothing in his five books to link any such career with a single item, place or practice that he discusses. Accordingly, we should consider a very different approach to the interpretation of our author's claim to a soldierly life. For it is most probably a metaphor, adduced to encapsulate not simply the extensive travels that he claims to have made, but more generally his commitment and labour in pursuing the first-hand studies which he stresses in his *Preface* and embodies in his work as a whole. Such metaphorical

⁸ There was pepper by Augustus' day, at least: further, De Romanis 2020, esp. 49 on Hor. *Epist.* 1. 2. 269–270 and related texts and archaeology. On Galen's research in Rome, see Houston 2003, 50; cf. Holleran 2012, 71–72. Also Nutton 1985, 138–139 on Galen's dealings with the snake-expert Marsi in Rome.

⁹ Plin. *NH* 11. 97 (cheese); cf. Martial 13. 31. Further, Bourdin, D'Ercole 2014 for sundry papers on the area.

¹⁰ On the road and the Corbulones, see Syme 1970. Occasional modern claims that Dioscorides served with Corbulo in Armenia are therefore of some interest, though they lack all evidence.

¹¹ I use the valuable translation of Lily Beck, here and elsewhere in this discussion: Beck 2005.

¹² See e.g. Bader 2014, 54; Hardy, Totelin 2016, 15, with bibliography.

use of the discourse of soldiering is variously deployed by authors under the Principate and earlier¹³. Seneca, with his broadly Stoic outlook, is particularly fond of soldiering as a metaphor for life, and especially as a means to express the travails of the would-be wise man. The fact that he was a (older) contemporary of Dioscorides makes his metaphorical habit all the more relevant. Indeed, he was part of the same elite in Rome as the Laecanii and the Pedanii of his day. It would be no surprise at all if he knew also Arius, and he may have known Dioscorides himself. Meanwhile, we must be clear that the military metaphor might also be used in contexts that were not particularly philosophical, let alone Stoic¹⁴.

It is not hard to collect passages which use such military metaphors in describing life's journey¹⁵. We should note, however, that the imagery of soldiering seems to have become popular among philosophers, especially Stoics, in the imperial period, so that some see here the influence of Roman attitudes in the development of Stoicism, better disposed to the military than was usual in the Hellenistic world¹⁶. At the same time, however, this apparent shift in discourse was by no means revolutionary. For it was no doubt facilitated and validated by the fact that the sainted Socrates had himself served as a soldier several times¹⁷. Among imperial writers, Seneca asserts, for example, that the philosopher has the versatility and range of abilities required to be an outstanding soldier¹⁸. Of course, the soldier might be far from philosophical: the dark side of soldierly ways remained familiar in the imperial centuries, in theory and in practice. Plutarch explores these darker themes in his *Life of Antony*, for example, but with a substantial measure of sympathy and understanding¹⁹. He also sets out more positive features of the soldier in his *Life of Philopoemen*, albeit not unalloyed²⁰. Endurance, versatility and obedience²¹ are among the soldierly virtues for Plutarch, while they are also particularly indicated by Epictetus (3. 24.31), starting from the concept of life as a military campaign:

...Everyone's life is a warfare, a long and varied one. You must carry out [sc. as a man of philosophy] the duty of a soldier, and perform everything at the nod of your general, and even, if possible, anticipate what he would have done.

Rather as Seneca had it, the philosopher will be the best of soldiers on life's campaign. As Seneca observes (*Epist.* 96. 5; cf. *de Prov.* 5.1), expanding on his view of life as a military campaign:

Ask yourself, if some god gave you control over whether you chose to live in a market or in a military camp. To live, Lucilius, is to serve as a soldier. And so, those who are thrown about and travel heights, up and down, and undergo the most dangerous missions are brave men, and

¹³ Hellenistic thinkers tend to stress soldiering as a counterpoint to the pursuit of philosophy: Schofield 1999, 50–56; cf. 36–38 on earlier notions.

¹⁴ See McKeown 1995 on Ovid's use of the metaphor, philosophical only in a general way.

¹⁵ See further Lavery 1980 on imagery of the philosopher as soldier and traveller through life; also Montiglio 2006.

¹⁶ See Fantham *et al.* 2014, 180.

¹⁷ Monoson 2016 explores the theme; cf. Brouwer 2014 on Stoic Socrates.

¹⁸ Max. Tyr. 1. 3, with Trapp 1997, xl and 119, n. 10 for further passages of Maximus and others.

¹⁹ Further, Pelling 1988; 1989; Duff 2004.

²⁰ Plut. *Phil.* 3, with *Arat.* 24; cf. also *Mor.* 77c. Further, Pelling 1995; Duff 1999, esp. 67–68.

²¹ Cf. Dio Chrys. 4. 3; cf. 3. 66.

the leaders of the camp, Those, whom rotten idleness softly detains, while others toil, are little pigeons, safe and a cause for disgust²².

And again (Sen. *Epist.* 120. 12):

This perfect and virtuous man [sc. the wise man] never cursed fortune, was never sad about what happened, regarded himself as a citizen and soldier of the cosmos, and so endured all his labours as though he were under orders. Whatever happened, he did not scorn it as inflicted upon him by chance, but took it as a job assigned to him.

The wise man would choose a life of hardship, endurance and danger, rejecting idleness. Like Dioscorides, Seneca deploys this metaphor of soldiering together with imagery of travel, the journey of life and, more particularly, the journey of the would-be wise man, who sets out (a *proficiscens*, “one setting out”)²³ on a kind of travel that will demand a soldierly mentality²⁴. The fact that the two metaphors (of journeying and of soldiering) are interwoven in this fashion offers further confirmation that it is in metaphorical terms that we should understand Dioscorides’ talk of military service and travel together. Indeed, we also have here some explanation of why our author uses the metaphor of soldiering at all. For it has been argued that there is a risk of inconsistency in Seneca’s attitude to travel: a great deal depends on the kind of travel entailed (as also with good, bad and indifferent soldiering), which can be the kind of philosophical journeying that he approves or the opposite, that is travelling in a spirit of idleness or deceitful quackery²⁵. Indeed, an itinerant physician (as Dioscorides might be described by critics) was vulnerable to particular forms of such criticism, which Dioscorides seeks to forestall²⁶. Nor is Seneca alone in the key distinction²⁷. The need for clarity about the nature of the travel that Dioscorides had undertaken, helps to explain why he breaks off after his assertion that he has travelled widely, to assert also the kind of travel involved. Of course, he would expect Arius already to know that (and invokes his approbation), but there was a need also to assure his readers on the matter. All the more so, since Dioscorides was being soldierly in the further sense that his whole stance in his preface is polemical. He offers a criticism of the methods and mistakes of others. He could expect to receive criticism in turn.

Dioscorides calls upon Arius’ knowledge to testify to the truth of his claim to have travelled extensively in a philosophical mode, not as a creature of idle wanderings. He wishes his readers to be clear that he is a man of philosophy and learning. He does not explain the cause of his (rather unusual) interest in *materia medica* from a very early age, and does

²² Ipse te interroga, si quis potestatem tibi deus faciat, utrum velis vivere in macello an in castris. Atqui vivere, Lucili, militare est. Itaque hi qui iactantur et per operosa atque ardua sursum ac deorsum eunt et expeditiones periculosissimas obeunt fortes viri sunt primoresque castrorum; isti quos putida quies aliis laborantibus molliter habet turturillae sunt, tuti contumeliae causa. Vale.

²³ See e.g. Sen. *Epist.* 75 with Reckford 2009, 66–67.

²⁴ Cf. Montiglio 2000.

²⁵ On this (potential) conflict, see Montiglio 2006. For travel and quackery, see Phaedr. 1. 14 with Zimonyi 2017.

²⁶ See, for example, Lucian, *Dial. deor.* 15 on the spat between Heracles and Asclepius on their respective travels; cf. Dio Chrys. 33. 6 with Kokkinia 2007.

²⁷ See Hor. *Epist.* 1. 11. 27 on idle travel, with Gowers 2011. In general, Montiglio 2000.

not even attribute it to his teachers (whether Arius or others). In result, there is a sense of fate about this boyhood calling of Dioscorides. He accepts his calling, without complaint, like the good Stoic. In Senecan terms (or more broadly in the Stoic terms of his day) Dioscorides is indeed a soldier, who has had his role – his station on the battlefield or in the camp – allotted to him by his commander, who might here be characterised as fate or as god. He has duly been on his extensive journeying, in quest of wisdom, leading a soldier's life. Dioscorides' brief imagery is very consistent with the Stoic metaphors we have surveyed, though this is also claimed as the reality of Dioscorides' life and research. While we need not (and, I suggest, should not) take literally his claim to a soldier's life, of which there is otherwise no hint in the whole work, there are no grounds to doubt the travails of the personal and intellectual journey that he has made, with his patron's (and at least by extension his patron's patron's, that is Laecanius') support and encouragement. The sustained importance of the work itself across many centuries thereafter tends to validate the author's claim to have pursued his research with the energy, endurance, versatility and discipline of a fine soldier²⁸. Meanwhile, we should be clear that Dioscorides' presentation of himself, as a philosopher as well as a medic, entailed no evident hyperbole from his reader's viewpoint. For the proximity of medicine and philosophy was generally agreed among Hellenistic and Roman thinkers, as well as medical men like Arius, Dioscorides and Galen²⁹. Accordingly, Dioscorides' campaign in a life of medical pursuits might readily be couched in the more expansive discourse of philosophy.

This metaphor apart, much about Dioscorides' life remains obscure. The general view among medical scholars that he worked in the middle and/or late first century AD is not to be challenged. However, we may make some progress towards a closer date, not for Dioscorides' life perhaps, but for the appearance of his *De materia medica*. There is no need to imagine his participation in Neronian campaigning in Armenia, once we have perceived the metaphor³⁰. The influential notion was always difficult to sustain in the face of the fact that our author has almost nothing to say about Armenia and its botany. The region is mentioned only rarely and with no great prominence. If our author had indeed spent time amid the extraordinary botany of the southern Caucasus and its minerals, this would have been a very poor return for his trouble. Implausibly so, given Dioscorides' abilities and commitment. To be more specific: we find Armenia in a list of places where laserwort (*Ferula tingitana* L.) grows ("Syria, Armenia, Media, and Libya", Diosc. 3. 80). Similarly, Armenia recurs in another such list, concerned with the kermes oak (*Quercus coccifera* L.) and quality ("the best is the Galatian and the Armenian, then the Asian and the Cilician, and worst of all is the Spanish", Diosc. 4. 80). As for the mineral *chrysocolla* (gold-solder) "the best is the Armenian, being intensely green in colour; second best is the Macedonian, then the Cypriot" (Diosc. 5. 89. 1). A very few further occurrences of something linked to Armenia can be added: alum, found there and in many other places (5. 106); a kind of apple (1. 115. 5); and cardamoms, on which more below. There is little or nothing here that he could not have discovered in his native

²⁸ Further, Denham, Whitelegg 2014; Denham 2018; cf. Toby *et al.* 2011.

²⁹ See Nussbaum 1994, 13–14 on Galen in this context; cf. Touwaide 1999.

³⁰ As notably do Scarborough, Nutton 1982, 216, followed by many others.

Cilicia, or indeed in Rome or in Ephesus, at the end of the great road from the east³¹. We may also observe that, despite his special interest in mountain plants as strong medicinal matter³², he says not a word about the Caucasus, and very little either about the rich botany of Colchis, Armenia's neighbour³³. The absence of Colchis from his information on liquorice is particularly striking in view of its history there³⁴. Even Caucasian Iberia is absent from his account, which was intimately bound up with Armenia and Roman involvements therein, as Tacitus' *Annals* repeatedly illustrate.

In any case, Dioscorides' idiosyncratic comments on "mad honey" (2. 82. 4) would be particularly odd, if he had spent time in and around the Armenian theatre of war. For Xenophon's famous account of the substance is set firmly in the southeastern Black Sea, near Trapezus, whereas Dioscorides associates it instead with Heraclea Pontica, far away in the southwestern Black Sea. His idiosyncratic location of this honey may be taken to attest to his preference for personal experience over written tradition, as he affirms it in the *Preface*, for Xenophon's story was certainly famous among imperial Greeks, as Strabo attests³⁵. However, a principal line of communication and supply for the Armenian front came by way of Trapezus, as Tacitus inform us (*Ann.* 11. 33). It is of course possible that Dioscorides wrote in this way about mad honey, despite experience of Armenia (with or without the Roman army), but to do so without further comment would seem especially odd. Meanwhile, we should also observe that Dioscorides shows no interest at all in the nexus of myth that links to the poisonous plants of Heraclea, which is centred upon Heracles' forcible extraction of Cerberus from the underworld there. For the omission is part of his broader unconcern with myth throughout his work. The *Preface* says nothing about myth, and in so doing expresses that lack of interest and very different focus. We may also wonder whether the fame of this myth may have been further encouragement to its omission³⁶.

Amid the various considerations that surround the uncertain date of Dioscorides' work, there is only one point of complete clarity: neither he nor his work are mentioned in the *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder. That work dates itself to AD 77, while we know that its author perished in the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79. Of course, Pliny's silence might

³¹ On which, see Syme 1995, 3–23.

³² In detail, *Pref.* 6.

³³ From Colchis, we have little more than the *bolbos*, also rightly said to be widespread in Messenia: 4. 83. 2; cf. 1. 2. 1. Here our author distinguishes between the edible (blue-flowered) *bolbos*, still gathered and sold as food, and other similar bulbs (white- or yellow-flowered), which are otherwise very similar, though found at a more shallow depth. The latter are not to be eaten: they are still gathered for use in medical preparations, as I am informed by country-folk in Messenia (my particular thanks to G. Baibou of Messenia and her family).

³⁴ Diosc. 3. 5 mentions only its abundance in Cappadocia and Pontus, which might be the Black Sea region (or even Pontus Polemoniacus) and so include Colchis, but that is the perspective of one who does not know the region, as also its alternative name *Skythion*, which indicates the northern cast of the Pontus. Colchis is named elsewhere: see previous note. Further, Akhalkatsi 2019, with bibliography.

³⁵ Cf. e.g. Rood 2011.

³⁶ Compare Theophr. *Caus. plant.* 9. 6, with Fortenbaugh, Sharples 1988, 84–85 on Aristotle. Later, Dionys. *Perieg.* 787–792. Further, Ogden 2001, 29–42. Honey need form no part of the myth, but it might do so: cf. Virg. *Aen.* 6. 420.

be explained in various ways, but it seems hard to suppose that Pliny, who lists so many medical men, would have omitted Dioscorides. The point is not only that Dioscorides' work "became the bible of medical botany for a millennium and a half"³⁷, nor that other authors were soon citing him, as we have seen, but that Dioscorides moved in the same circles as the elder Pliny himself. For we have seen that Dioscorides had come to Italy, and was probably in touch with members of the Roman elite who had property in its environs, as perhaps the Domitii in the mountains of the Vestini. We do not know how long he spent in Rome, where he must have gone, nor whether he made contact there with the Laecanii (whose known lands were far off, in the northern Adriatic). However, we do know that Pliny twice refers to the unfortunate death of a consular Laecanius Bassus, close to the patron of Laecanius Arius (if not the very man), to whom Dioscorides dedicated his work. Nothing in all this demands that Pliny mention Dioscorides, but, taken together, we have a set of considerations that tend to suggest that he would have done so. If that is right, Dioscorides' work will have appeared close to or after AD 77, by which time a consular Laecanius was prematurely dead, usually taken to be the consul of 64, though the consul of 40 remains possible.

If we date the appearance of Dioscorides' work after AD 77, the Laecanius Bassus of his *Preface*, who is still alive, it seems, is most likely the proconsul who erected the nymphaeum at Ephesus in 78/79. Dioscorides' term for him, *κράτιστος*, was appropriate enough to the position. We may imagine Arius meeting him there, perhaps as his doctor, and witnessed by Dioscorides. If Arius had already been the family doctor when the earlier Laecanius managed to kill himself by lancing a carbuncle, he is unlikely to have been particularly welcome, so that a new relationship seems rather more likely. On that surmise, it would have been the proconsul who bestowed the citizenship on Arius. Of course, much remains speculation. How Dioscorides had acquired the citizenship also remains beyond our knowledge, though scholars usually suggest a link with the urban prefect L. Pedanius Secundus, murdered by a slave in AD 61, the first of the Pedanii to reach the consulship (in 43). And that may be right. However, there are other possibilities besides. Under Nero we also have a consul of AD 61, a certain Cn. Pedanius (Fuscus?) Salinator (*ILS* 1987). Perhaps more relevant, if we are dating Dioscorides rather later than usual, we have his son, a consul of c. 84, who later went on to be proconsul of Asia and more besides, Cn. Pedanius Fuscus Salinator³⁸. Much depends on the age at which Dioscorides gained the citizenship, if he had not had it from his father.

Dioscorides' book was soon cited and quoted by others, as repeatedly by Galen, who refers to him both as Dioscorides of Anazarbus and also as (by virtue of his education, no doubt, and perhaps his later base too) Dioscorides of Tarsus³⁹. However, it is earlier mentions that provide a *terminus ante quem* for our author. It has been claimed that Dioscorides was quoted and cited very soon after his work first appeared, which is probably right. However, that need not be as early as some have maintained: the close dates for the relevant works are largely uncertain, though various dates are mooted nonetheless. We should be clear too that surviving papyri of Dioscorides' work do not require that it was

³⁷ Nutton 2008, 141.

³⁸ Further, Eck 1983. Pliny's letters offer glimpses of their social and cultural circle: 7. 9; 9. 36 and 40.

³⁹ Nutton 2013.

current before the second century⁴⁰. Erotian cites Dioscorides, but the date of his work depends on the longevity and identification of its dedicatee, the “arch-doctor” Andromachus, of whom the younger may well have lived deep into the second century. The elder might also have lived on long after his work for Nero, even into the reign of Trajan⁴¹. There is also Rufus of Ephesus. Again, two possibilities are available (and Rufus is a common name), but his usual location under Trajan must be right, especially as *Suda Lexicon* says as much: “Rufus, Ephesian, doctor, active under Trajan with Crito” (p. 241 Adler). Possibly he had accompanied Trajan and the doctor Statilius Crito to the Dacian wars, though the association between the medical men need not have been so adventurous⁴².

A lot of unfathomables, therefore. However, our review of the issues surrounding the dates of Dioscorides indicates that the most plausible date for the appearance of his work sits around AD 80 or so. His (otherwise unlikely) omission by the elder Pliny places it after c. AD 77, while the various citations of its contents indicate that it was already achieving some fame by c. AD 100 or so. More importantly, we have seen that this was a man with significant contacts in the Roman elite, through Arius and possibly in his own right too. We have seen some small reason to suspect that he had spent time in the great and doctor-friendly city of Ephesus, and we have observed him specifically in the uplands of Italy outside Rome. Dioscorides had started in Cilicia, but it is entirely possible that he spent considerable time in the imperial capital, where all manner of *materia medica* were to be observed, including such materials as he discusses from the western empire. Of course, his presence in Italy also confirms his travel there from Cilicia, which in turn

⁴⁰ Scarborough, Fernandes 2011, 7 date Erotian’s *Hippocratic terminologies* to AD 70, without explanation (also Scarborough 2020, 38; cf. Jouanna 2012, 262 linking Erotian with Nero), perhaps over-interpreting his dedication to a “chief-doctor” named Andromachus. The family (including Nero’s doctor and his medical son of the same name) flourished after AD 70: cf. Nutton 2013, 377, n. 41 and below; also Scarborough 2006, 9, dating Erotian to the Flavian period. In adducing the oldest papyrus evidence for Dioscorides in support of their sense of the immediate impact of his work, they might have clarified that the main fragment is far too late to support their case, hardly earlier than AD 150 and possibly as much as forty years later: Bonner 1922; Verhoogt 2017, 99–100 (with colour image). Of the two smaller fragments, one is dated to the second century, and the other to the first or second century, so they too are unhelpful: Flemming, Hanson 2001, 21. Finally, their appeal to Pamphilus cannot be conclusive, since it depends on the arguments of Wellmann (1898; cf. 1916). In any case Pamphilus’ dates are unclear, so that Scarborough elsewhere (2012, 250, n. 17) places him around AD 100, rather as did Wellman (1898, 369), while Nutton 2013, 150 has his *floruit* in AD60, and together Scarborough, Nutton 1982, 189 (treating Wellmann’s arguments) placed him around AD 130.

We may note too a younger Pamphilus, still more crepuscular: Keyser 2008, 607.

⁴¹ “Chief-doctors” are not rare: see e.g. Zimonyi 2014. Nutton 1977 remains fundamental. On Andromachus, father and son, see Nutton 2013, 177–178, seemingly less certain about which one Erotian meant than in 1977, 196, where he also notes how early is Erotian’s use of the term.

⁴² For a balanced statement of the issues around Rufus’ dates, see Nutton 2008, 140–141; Swain 2008, 114 seems conclusive on the later date, also urging that Rufus went to the wars with Crito. Cf. Aparaschivei 2010, including local medical practitioners; Cassia 2018 on Ser-vilius Damocrates and the elder Pliny. An earlier dating for Rufus, out of scholarly favour in any case, would be impossible on the present arguments for Dioscorides’ dates. Rufus’ citation of Dioscorides is preserved by Oribasius (*Coll. Med.* 5. 12. 3), who himself refers to Dioscorides often enough, though there is no particular reason to suspect contamination.

helps to substantiate his claim to extensive journeying in the *Preface*. It remains noteworthy that he says so little about his travels when holding forth on each of the materials he discusses, but that is not reason enough to cause us to imagine that he was untruthful on the issue, especially in view of the fact that he is addressing his patron Arius, who would seem to know the reality. Indeed, his treatment of plants from the mountains of the Vestimi demonstrates a method that seems deliberately to avoid biographical interjections. For example, when he lists places where hazelwort (*Asarum europaeum* L.) is found in quantity, he concludes (after listing the Pontus, Phrygia, and Illyria) with the lands of the Vestini: clearly, he had seen it there, but he gives no hint of the fact (Diosc. 1. 10. 2). Again, with wolfsbane (*Aconitum napellus* L.), he informs his readers that the plant is found in quantity in the lands of the Vestini, but he gives no hint that he has been there and seen it (Diosc. 4. 77). His exceptional mention of himself at 2. 70. 2 probably arises from the fact that he there provides specific new knowledge – testimony for the effect of certain pasture-plants on milk – rather than (as in the other instances, where he does not introduce himself) a set of information about where plants grow, which is less likely to be a matter of contestation. It is worth noting too in that regard, that milk was a key concern of medical men, so that (for example) Rufus of Ephesus is known to have devoted a special work to milk⁴³. Even so, the exception is startling, and we may suspect some further reason for it. Evidently, this is an author who prefers to remain in personal obscurity. For while his *Preface* is key to our knowledge of him, he says very little about himself even there. His name does not appear there, nor his city of birth, nor any indication of his family, status or intellectual affiliations, beyond the little that we can infer or guess at. As we have seen, the contents that follow are still more reticent. We might have benefited, for example, from some show of special knowledge about the *materia medica* of his native Cilicia, but he offers nothing of that kind. Instead, without allusion to his origins, he often mentions Cilica, and (if we are alert to the possibility) we may discern special local knowledge (and perhaps a hint of local pride). For example, “Cre-tan alexanders, which in Cilicia they call *petroselinon*” (3. 68. 1); “it (tree germander) grows extensively in Cilicia around that part which is near what is called Selentis and Cetis” (3. 97); “wall barley, (dog’s-tooth grass that grows in Cilicia,) which they call locally *cinna*, if eaten damp, often distends cattle” (4. 32); “in Cilicia, there is also something that grows on oaks, similar to a little snail; the women there harvest it with a steel blade and call it gall” (4. 48)⁴⁴; “wine flavoured with hyssop from Cilicia is very good; it is prepared the same way as wine flavoured with wormwood” (5. 40. 1). Our author’s expertise in Cilicia is clear, but he keeps himself out of the picture entirely. Possibly he hoped that experts, at least, would recognise the knowledge that he had gathered on his travels. His treatment of the honey of Heraclea Pontica is without parallel, which may well mean that Dioscorides himself had brought this into science. The fact that he mentions the city elsewhere, more than most cities, tends to encourage the suspicion that he had visited the place, whose reputation for poisonous nature would be a strong incitement for a Dioscorides to make the journey. Accordingly, when he writes “The people in

⁴³ *Suda*, p. 241 Adler, where we find also his work on another complex foodstuff and medical substance, honey: see above on mad honey in Dioscorides.

⁴⁴ Our author stresses the importance of proper collection: *Pref.* 6.

Pontic Heraclea use it as antidote and give its decoction to drink for hemlock” (3. 158. 2, on the ground pine), we may well have information that he has gathered on his travels. Of course, his elevation of autopsy over book-learning in the creation of his work (esp. *Pref.* 5)⁴⁵ not only removes the need for much reference to earlier writers (who sometimes appear, even so), but also tends to imply a claim to convey such knowledge that he has himself collected on his travels. He says that he has included the statements of others only where they are widely agreed, and accepted by persons local to the materials in question (*Pref.* 5). The value he places on local expertise here is striking, and of course consonant with his emphasis on direct experience.

For Dioscorides is certainly polemical (explicitly so in the *Preface*), but not as a personality. Instead, he makes Arius and Laecanius Bassus the stars of the show. He presents himself as an experienced soldier and philosopher in pursuit of a specific kind of wisdom, under their command and the generalship of the divine. His polemic is largely about the need for hard work and a striving for personal experience of his subject, as well as the best way to order the knowledge he has acquired by such means (that is, not alphabetically). Dioscorides is explicit that his pursuit of material across his world was the work of a lifetime, even if his actual journeys were more limited or condensed than his talk of journeying might seem to imply. His own reticence makes that impossible to judge. By and large, the *Preface* can easily feel like the words of an older man, looking back over his life from its early years onwards, which would (if his work appeared in the 80s) suggest that he was born in the reign of Tiberius (AD 14–37) or thereabouts. However, the sense of age conveyed in the *Preface* may be an unreliable guide, while we must also reckon with the uncertain biography of Arius, usually supposed to be his teacher. However, with some caution we may conclude that Dioscorides’ work appeared under the Flavians, and more specifically around the beginning of the reign of Domitian. That will have some bearing on the second part of this paper⁴⁶.

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⁴⁵ On his statements of method and concern, see Hardy, Totelin 2016, 2–4.

⁴⁶ I thank Rebecca Flemming, John Wilkins, and Sue Willetts for their help in obtaining modern literature. They bear no responsibility for the views expressed.

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