
Pharmacy and Drug Lore in Antiquity: Greece, Rome, Byzantium by
John Scarborough

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Reviewed by
Laurence M. V. Totelin
Cardiff University
TotelinLM@cardiff.ac.uk

There are very few scholars who can do what John Scarborough does, namely, study ancient pharmacology in a historically sensitive manner whilst also understanding the principles of modern pharmacognosy. In fact, the only other name that springs to mind is that of John M. Riddle author of, among his other books, *Dioscorides on Pharmacy* [1985] and *Medicine and Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance* [1992]. Scarborough's dual interest in history and in pharmacology is the product of an unusual academic training and career path, which is outlined in the preface of the present volume.

There has recently been a surge in scholarly interest in ancient pharmacology, with, first, the re-edition of key texts such as the poems of Nicander [Jacques 2002, Jacques 2007], a Hellenistic poet who wrote on poisons and their antidotes, or the Hippocratic text *On the Nature of Woman* [Bourbon 2008], which includes much pharmacological material; second, new translations of key texts by scholars who are sensitive to the issue of identification of *materia medica*;¹ and third, historical studies of pharmacological material.² The present volume, a collection of 14 of Scarborough's articles originally published between 1977 and 2002, comes, therefore, at a perfect time and will certainly spark further interest in ancient pharmacology.

I had previously read most of the papers collected here but I found it particularly fruitful to examine them together, as certain

¹ See, e.g., Lily Beck's translation of Dioscorides [2005].

² See, e.g., the collection of essays on Galen's pharmacology edited by Armelle Debru [1997] or my own *Hippocratic Recipes* [Totelin 2009].

points became particularly clear. First, one has to stress the author's breath of knowledge. As already pointed out, Scarborough is fluent in the jargons of both classicists and pharmacologists. He also covers an immense historical period: from approximately the eighth century BC (when the Homeric poems were written down) to the seventh century AD (the time of Paul of Aegina). Scarborough discusses the writings of all major ancient pharmacologists: the Hippocratic writers [III], Theophrastus [IV], Nicander [V–VI], Pliny [IX], Soranus [X], Criton [XI], whose writings are excerpted by Galen, Galen [XII], and various Byzantine writers [XIII].

Second, Scarborough pays attention to all aspects of ancient pharmacology. The Greek word *φάρμακον*, wherefrom our word 'pharmacology' is derived, covers a range of modern concepts, from 'healing drug' to 'magic spell' and 'poison' [see Artelt 1968]. Scarborough does not neglect any of these concepts. Thus, whilst 'healing drugs' are the subject of most articles in the collection, magic is examined in 'The Pharmacology of Sacred Plants, Herbs and Roots' [I] and toxicology is studied in 'Nicander's Toxicology' [V–VI].

Third, Scarborough is wary of the use of modernisms in the study of ancient pharmacology. For instance, he argues that one should not use the word 'psychosomatic' in relation to the therapeutic effects which the ancients believed some plants to have [I.149]; and I did not see once the word 'placebo' used in this collection (and it certainly is not listed in the index). In view of this rejection of presentism, Scarborough's constant listing of the properties of ancient *materia medica* in modern terms—'analgesic', 'febrifuge', and so on—may seem contradictory. I believe that it is not: there are two aspects to Scarborough's work. On the one hand, he wants to explain how ancient pharmacological systems functioned, and for that he is keen to use what anthropologists would call 'actors' categories'. Much in these systems may appear completely alien to the modern reader but they should nevertheless be studied in their own rights. On the other hand, Scarborough wants to show that much of the knowledge that the ancients had acquired about *materia medica* is sound by modern standards—many of the plants and remedies which they used are as efficacious today as they were 2000 years ago. For instance, he writes:

Relying on powers of observation and willingness to experiment, the peoples of classical antiquity devised many remedies for burns. Certainly not all treatments were efficacious

but we must nonetheless look with admiration upon the accomplishments of those who worked almost twenty centuries ago. [II.608]

I find myself in agreement with this methodology whereby there would be reading of the ancient pharmacological writings on two levels, two different modes of ‘translation’.³ The first level of reading would concern itself with understanding the ways in which the ancients explained the efficacy of their remedies; the second would use modern pharmacological and ethno-pharmacological methods to assess the drugs used by the ancients. This dual methodology goes a long way towards explaining why most ancient pharmacologists used the same drugs but devised diverging theories to explain their efficacy.⁴ Scarborough notes in several places that the discovery of a remedy’s efficacy generally comes before any theoretical attempt at explaining it. For instance, he writes:

[I]t is certainly clear that Hippocratic medicine had incorporated a vast number of the venerated uses of herbs, minerals, and animal products that were known in Greek history long before the rise of ‘rational’ medicine. It is, one may say in conclusion, to the great credit of some of the Hippocratic writers that they recognized the value of many of these prescriptions, expunged of any superstitious content, a value that modern pharmaceutics has in some respects only begun to rediscover. [III.324–325]

In other words, many of the drugs listed by Hippocratic physicians had been used for centuries before being written down; and the ‘Hippocratic’ pharmacological theories, cast in the language of elements, qualities, and humors [ix], were neither universally accepted nor as coherent as one may think.

The fourth, and final, point that becomes clear when reading the essays collected in this volume is that Scarborough has relatively little respect for Galen’s pharmacological enterprise. Galen, the most prolific of all ancient medical writers, composed several long treatises

³ For other discussions of the efficacy of ancient drugs, see [King 1998](#), 132–156; [Demand 1999](#). For an anthropological approach to the topic, see [Etkin 1988](#).

⁴ See for instance III.314: ‘[T]here was no basic uniformity among the Hippocratic writers concerning assumed theories of pharmacology.’

on simple and compound remedies. Although historians are aware that these treatises are largely derivative in nature (being composed of extracts from earlier pharmacologists), they still consider them to be benchmarks in the history of pharmacology and to have influenced deeply the writings of Byzantine medical writers [see Debru 1997]. Scarborough, on the other hand, argues that Galen's pharmacological writings are 'confusing' and that they contain

a muddling of drug lore, only gradually corrected by later Byzantine pharmacologists, who did not generally take Galen as the ultimate blueprint for pharmacy. [XII.271]

Thus, in Scarborough's eyes, the pharmacological work of the Byzantine medical writers, Oribasius, Aetius, Alexander of Tralles, and Paul of Aegina, deserves to be studied in its own right and not simply as a compilatory enterprise.

As usual in such a collection of essays, not all pieces are of the same quality and there are repetitions. There are also many points of detail on which I disagree with Scarborough. To give only one example, I am far from certain that the Greek magical papyri from Egypt allow us 'a rare glimpse into the actual "medicine of the masses"' [XIII.230]. In fact, I am not sure what these 'masses' are. However, on the whole, I would say that Variorum Collected Studies Series has done historians of medicine a great service by publishing this collection of articles, some of which are rather difficult to find in most humanities libraries. The bibliographic updates offered in the 'addenda and corrigenda' as well as a thorough index listing many *materia medica* make the collection even more valuable.

Even though ancient historians and pharmacologists often appear to speak different languages, they have much to learn from each other. Unfortunately, there are very few people who can act as 'interpreters' or 'translators' able to bridge the gap between the two communities—John Scarborough is one of these rare scholars.

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