

EGYPT AND THE LIMITS OF HELLENISM

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APPENDIX II

Translation of the Madrid manuscript of Thessalos, De virtutibus herbarum (Codex Matritensis Bibl. Nat. 4631)

(1) † Harpokration to Caesar Augustus, greetings.

Since many in their lives have tried, august Caesar, to hand down many marvelous things, but none have been able to bring their promises to completion, owing to the darkness of fate pressing upon their thoughts, I think that I alone among the men of all time have accomplished something marvelous <and known to few>. (2) For having set my hand to matters which transcend the limits of mortal nature, I have, through many trials and dangers, brought to these matters the proper completion. (3) After I had practiced letters in the regions of Asia and had become better than everyone there, I determined to have profit from the knowledge for a time. (4) And having sailed to much-desired Alexandria with a great deal of money, I went around to the most accomplished of the scholars and because of my industry and quick wit I was praised by all. (5) But I also went continually to the lectures of the dialectical physicians, for I greatly desired this knowledge. (6) When it was time to return home, and as my medical studies were already duly progressing, I went around to the libraries searching out <the necessary material>. I found a book by Nechepso containing twenty-four remedies for the entire body and every disease, according to the zodiac, by means of stones and plants, and I was amazed at the wonders it promised. But it was, as it seems, the empty delusion of royal folly. (7) For having prepared the “solar pill,” much admired by him, and the rest of the medicines, I failed in all the treatments of illness.

(8) Supposing my failure to be harsher than death, I was consumed by grief. And what’s more, having trusted rather precipitously in the treatise,

This translation is based on the text of Codex Matritensis Bibl. Nat. 4631 according to the edition of Friedrich 1968. I have included his critical signs in order to alert the reader to problematic passages. For ease of reference in the technical sections of the treatise devoted to medicinal preparations, I have included in parentheses the transliterations of Greek names of plants and some other ingredients after the standard translations found in *LSJ*.

I even wrote to my parents concerning their power as though I had already tested them, and announced that I was returning. (9) Now I could not stay in Alexandria because of the laughter of my colleagues, for even fine things are privately begrudged. (10) And I had no desire to go back home again, having been found rather less than my promises; so I went around Egypt, driven by the goading of my soul, and seeking to accomplish something of my rash promise, or – if I did not achieve this – to give up the rest of my life to death. (11) †My soul ever prophesying that I would consort with the gods, I continually stretched out my hands to heaven, and besought the gods to show me some such favor through the image of a dream, or by the spirit of a god, through which I would be able to return, exultant and happy, to Alexandria and to my native land.

(12) And so having arrived in Diospolis – the oldest city of Egypt <I declare>, and containing many temples – I spent some time there. For there were scholarly high priests there and <elders> adorned with subtle learning. (13) As time went on and my friendship with them grew, I inquired if some magical operation was still preserved. And I despised the majority of them for making professions equal to my own rashness, (14) but I was not shaken from the friendship of one of them who could be trusted because of the impressiveness of his character and the measure of his age. This man professed to have the power to effect a direct divine vision by means of a vessel. (15) So I entreated him to walk with me in the most deserted parts of the city, having revealed nothing of what I desired.

(16) We went away, then, into a sacred precinct surrounded by the deepest silence, and I suddenly fell upon my face, weeping and clinging to the high priest's feet. (17) Surprised by the unexpectedness of this sight, he asked why I did this, and I told him that power over my soul lay with him, for a compulsion to converse with a god possessed me, and if I fall short of this desire, I shall bid adieu to life. (18) Having raised me up from the ground and having consoled me with most gentle words, he promised that he would gladly do these things, and he bade <me> keep pure for three days. (19) My soul relaxed at the promises of the high priest, and I clasped his right hand and thanked him, my tears flowing like a spring, for by nature unexpected joy calls up more tears than grief. (20) After we returned from the sacred place, we devoted ourselves to purity, the days for me counting down like years because of my anticipation. (21) When the third day came, I went before dawn and <humbly> greeted the high priest.

A pure chamber had been prepared by him, along with the rest of the things for the inquiry. And I, owing to the foresight of my soul, and

unknown to the priest, had papyrus and ink to mark down what was said, if necessary. (22) When the high priest asked me whether I would like to speak with a soul of some dead man, or with a god, I said “with Asclepius,” and that it would be the perfection of his kindness if he would entrust me to speak one on one. (23) He would, though not happily – for the features of his face revealed this – but he had promised. So he enclosed me in the chamber, and ordered me to sit opposite the throne on which the god would sit. After summoning the god through his ineffable names and exiting, he closed the door.

(24) As I was sitting and my body and soul became faint at the wonder of the vision (for human speech could not describe the features of the countenance, or the beauty of the surrounding adornment), he stretched out his right hand and began to speak: (25) “O blessed Thessalos, who has gained honor in the presence of a god, as time goes on and your successes become known, men will worship you as a god. Ask, then, <without fear> about what you wish, for I shall gladly provide everything.” (26) But I scarcely heard – for I was struck and overwhelmed in my mind as I looked at the form of the god – but nevertheless, I inquired as to the reason I failed in the remedies of Nechepso. To which the god said: (27) “King Nechepso, a man of most sound mind and adorned with every virtue, did not obtain from a divine voice anything which you seek to learn; having made use of a noble nature, he observed the sympathies of stones and plants, but the times and places in which it is necessary to pick the plants, he did not know. (28) For according to the seasons, everything waxes and wanes with the emanation of the stars; and that divine, most refined spirit which exists throughout all substance especially pervades those places where the emanations of the stars were in the time of the cosmic nativity. I shall present this from one example as a proof for the others.

(29) “Now there is a plant called hemlock (*kōneion*). This plant seems to have arisen from the emanation of Mars, and at the cosmic nativity [Mars] happened to cast its rays in Scorpio. <And so it struck the hemlock in the regions of Italy;> for the *klima* of Italy belongs to Scorpio. (30) This plant, therefore, having drawn in more of the divine emanation, were it eaten by a four-legged beast or a human, would be instantly lethal. (31) Some even, through ignorance of the plant, have lain down beside it in the wilderness and fallen asleep, and in sniffing the power in its exhalations they have died. (32) Similarly Crete <.....> in aspect. (33) In Crete, therefore, men eat the very same hemlock plant, and it is the most pleasant of garden herbs. (34) To such a degree do the emanations of the gods have power by time and place.

(35) "It is clear, then, that the king of all the stars is the sun; when this star is in Aries it attains its exaltation, and receives an exceedingly great power in this sign of the zodiac. (36) Plants, therefore, are most powerful at that time, not only because of the sun, but because this sign is common to all the gods who cause changes; (37) for, as I said previously, it is the exaltation of the sun, but (also) the depression of Saturn, the house of Mars, and the triangle of Jupiter. Such great powers does the aforementioned sign possess. (38) When the sun is in this (sign), take the plants to be mentioned, and extract the juices without boiling, for the quality is altered by fire. And quickly squeeze out the juice, and putting it in a dish or cup, mix the juice with honey. (39) When you have done this, put it in a glass vessel and set it aside for [...] days. . . . {if you want raw juices, decoct it.} After that, prepare according to each remedy.

<The plant of Aries: sage (*elelispakos*)>

Aries, the first zodiac sign: concerning sage.

(1) From Phamenoth 22, that is Dystros 18, according to the Romans from the 15th day before the Kalends of April: the first plant is sage. (2) This has the greatest powers for bringing up blood and for consumptives, those with wasting disease, and splenetics, and for hysteric conditions. (3) For bringing up blood, to 3 *kyathoi*¹ of juice are added 1 *uncia*² of Attic honey and the mixture is given to drink on an empty stomach, and the rising of blood is immediately cured. (4) For those with wasting disease, little pills are prepared as follows: mix up 5 drachms³ of Corycian saffron (*crokos kōrukios*), 4 drachms of ginger (*zingiberis*), 9 drachms of base horehound (*stachus*), 14 drachms of the seed of the sage, parched and sifted, and 2 drachms of pepper (*peperis*) with the juice and make half-drachm pills and give them on an empty stomach early in the morning and at bedtime. Let it be swallowed together with 2 *kyathoi* of pure water. (5) For splenetics, a pill is also made for them as follows: 12 drachms of the root of the caper-plant (*kapparis*), ground and sifted, 9 drachms of the fruit of black ivy (*kissos melas*), 4 drachms of white myrtle (*myrtos leukos*), 6 drachms of ginger (*zingiberis*); having ground them fine, mix with the juice and make little pills, 1 drachm each, and give one early in the morning and one at bedtime. (6) For hysteric conditions, such as indurations, discharges, and persistent pains, an application is prepared as follows: 14 drachms of Tyrrhenian beeswax (*kēros turrēnikos*), 8 drachms of stag's marrow (*muelos*

¹ A *kyathos* is a liquid measure equal to ca. 46 ml or 1.6 fl. oz.

² The *uncia* is a unit of weight equal to ca. 27.3 g or 0.96 oz.

³ The drachm is a unit of weight equal to ca. 4.3 g or 0.15 oz.

elapheios), 4 drachms of dried roses (*rhoda*), ground, 4 *kyathoi* of the juice of the plant. Put the solubles into the dry ingredients and the juice and boil until the fourth part is boiled down, and then reserve in a tin vessel; use by anointing the womb. If the condition is severe, boil the plant with the roots and use in a sitz-bath. (7) A most effective emollient for those with nephritis and sciatica is made from the root as follows: 8 drachms of beeswax, 16 drachms of gum ammoniac (*ammōniakon*), 9 drachms of galbanum (*chalbanē*), 8 drachms of Syrian cedar oil (*kedria*), 14 drachms of bull's suet (*stear taureion*), 32 drachms of the root, ground and sifted. Use by mixing the dry and the wet ingredients. The above-mentioned application is also beneficial for such conditions.

<The plant of Taurus: vervain (*peristereōn orthos* = *verbena officinalis*)>

(1) Taurus, the second zodiac sign: concerning vervain. From 23 Pharmouthi, or rather 18 Xanthikos, according to the Romans, from the 14th day before the Kalends of May; the second plant is vervain. (2) The effects of this cannot even be believed. For it removes hopeless ophthalmic conditions in three days by the quality of the preparation. (3) For ophthalmia and tumors and swelling of the eye, and every kind of epiphora use this sort of salve: 14 drachms of saffron (*crokos*), 12 drachms of starch, 6 drachms of horned poppy juice (*glaukion*), the whites of 3 eggs, 2 drachms of tragacanth (*tragakantha*); having ground these things up, mix with the juice and use by making salves. (4) For every discharge, boil down the plant with the roots and use as a wash, for it stops it immediately. (5) For blindness from glaucoma and cataracts and desperate conditions a wet preparation of this kind is made: 2 drachms of the gum of Hercules' woundwort (*opopanax*), 4 drachms of haematite (*lithos haimatitēs*), 4 drachms of saffron (*crokos*), finely ground dyer's buckthorn (*lukion*) amounting to 2 drachms, 6 drachms of horned poppy juice (*glaukion*), 2 drachms of tragacanth (*tragakantha*), 4 drachms of Attic honey, 2 drams of white pepper (*peperi leukos*), 2 drachms of balsam (*opobalsamon*), 6 drachms of the root of the vervain (*peristereōn orthos*) ground and sifted, 3 drachms goat bile, 2 *kyathoi* of the juice; mix up the dry and wet ingredients and use. This remedy will remove the conditions written above in three days, but pterygia, sycosis on the eyelids, sties and things similar to these in one day. (6) It is not possible to tell the praise of divine power, but it is possible to tell the praise of each remedy; for trial will demonstrate its force.

<The plant of Gemini: holy vervain (*peristereōn huptios* = *verbena supina*)>

(1) Gemini, the third zodiac sign. From 25 Pachōn, which is 20 Artemisios, according to the Romans, from the 13th day before the kalends of

June; the third plant is holy vervain. (2) The juice of this plant is made up in the same way, then a most effective medicine is prepared for cancers, lumps and so-called “figs”; it is prepared in this way: 12 drachms of saffron (*krokos*), 7 drachms dried roses (*rhoda*), 14 drachms of pontic melilot (*melilotos pontikos*), 7 drachms of friable alum; having ground these things, mix evenly, also pouring in 4 *sextarii*⁴ of the juice, and boil in a new pot until it attains the consistency of honey, and use. It also heals everything in the body.

<The plant of Cancer: comfrey (*symphytum bulbosum*)>

(2) <F>rom 25 Pauni, which is 19 Daisios, according to the Romans, from the 13th day before the Kalends of July; the fourth plant is comfrey. (3) The juice and the root of this plant have many powers. From the root, in fact, a plaster is prepared which joins together wounds and severed tendons: 60 drachms of beeswax, 12 drachms of stag’s marrow (*muelos elapheios*), 22 drachms of frankincense powder (*manna libanou*), 32 drachms of the root ground and sifted, 26 drachms of Attic honey, 24 drachms of rose oil (*elaion rhodinon*); mix up the dry and the wet ingredients and use. (4) For ruptures in the chest, such as of the arteries . . .

[At this point the Madrid manuscript breaks off.]

⁴ A *sextarius* is a measure equal to ca. 546 ml or 19.2 fl. oz.