Dioscorides was probably an older contemporary of Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE). He is often stated to have been a military physician, though there is no conclusive evidence for this; but if so he may well have served on Roman campaigns in Syria and Egypt. His text, which, unlike so many biological and astronomical works of the 1st century CE, is in prose, not verse, was a compilation, with critical commentaries on Theophrastus, Hippocrates and other doctors or botanists, and owed a considerable amount to two earlier illustrated herbals, by Crateses (1st century BCE) and by a Roman predecessor of the previous generation, Sextus Niger. His work also contains paraphrases of two works of the later 2nd century BCE attributed to Nikander, the Theriaka and the Alexipharmaka; the Halieutika of Oppian, a treatise on fish and fishing; and the Ornithiaka of Dionysius of Philadelpia on birds. Though the relevance of these last two works to Materia Medica is not self-evident, in the Julian Anicia codex in Vienna, the most famous of all illustrated Dioscorides manuscripts, the illustrations are highly realistic1 (Figs. 1–3). This also contains a polyglot lexikon of plant names, a wise precaution, in view of the danger of misidentification of the plants in question, based on a botanical lexikon of c. 50 BCE by the Alexandriam, Pamphilos. It had been re-arranged in alphabetical order at some later date prior to Oribasius (325–403 CE), the personal physician of the emperor Julian the Apostate. To the five indisputably genuine books of the De Materia Medica, De venenis and De venenatis animalibus are sometimes added, but they did not disguise the primary importance of the main text, which describes the material in such detail that even now the great majority of the plants described by Dioscorides can be identified with near certainty.

In this paper I shall limit myself to the role of Dioscorides’ work as one of the founders of the herbalistic tradition in Islam. In the Greek Dioscorides text the actual appearance of the plants takes second

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1 Mazal 1981. Emilie Savage-Smith has remarked to me the curious fact that although by the Islamic Middle Ages the Dioscorides text had been rendered more or less obsolete by the works of herbalists like Ibn al-Baytār and al-Ghāfīqī it continued to attract the lion’s share of illustration. This may have been, of course, for non-scientific reasons.
place to the gathering and preparation of drugs and potions, and Otto Mazal considers it probable that the original text was not illustrated. Contemporary illustrated herbaria were known, however, for Pliny (Nat. Hist. 25) states that not only Kratævas but Dioscorides and Metrodorus depicted plants attractively, with the description of their properties below, though the depictions were, in his view, unreliable because of their vivid polychromy, which made it difficult to guarantee their accuracy and was an obstacle to other copyists (who, he evidently assumed, would not have had access to herbarium specimens). The Vienna Dioscorides made as an offering to the church of the Virgin in Peræ/Honorata) is the first surviving copy in which the herbal and the pharmacological traditions are combined. The illustrations, however, instead of supplementing the text, here take first place, the text being incomplete and alphabetically re-worked so that the entries are little more than labels for the pictures. The variety of subject is such that the possibility that they were all drawn from life is to be excluded: this shows that, in spite of Pliny’s objection, there was a reliable tradition of herbalists, though their relevance to the actual text of Dioscorides is far from clear.

To state a truism, there is no single relation between a text and its illustrations, even when texts may belong to a single literary genre, here specifically the manual or handbook. This is particularly the case with the Materia Medica of Dioscorides, which is not merely a composite text but was also intended for use by a broad spectrum of professionals, including physicians, apothecaries, plant-collectors, dieticians and students of natural (or unnatural) history (Fig. 4). This is true, to a greater or lesser extent, of herbals in general, which include lists of medicinal drugs of plant-, animal- or mineral origin and descriptions of their properties and uses, together with descriptions of plants and their habitats and the portions of the plant which are most physiologically active or most efficacious for a particular complaint (Figs. 5–10).

It is clear from this definition that different preoccupations at different times in the history of the text and the varying interests of commentators might be expected to have influenced the character, or even the presence, of its illustrations. As Stickelberger pertinently remarks in his masterly survey of the scientific manual in Antiquity, the gulf between textual historians and historians of illustrative traditions remains very largely unbridged, even when text and illustrations are integrally related. My particular interest in illustrations to Dioscorides was first aroused by the striking accuracy of illustrated herbals in Islam, despite the susceptibility of both text and illustrations to corruption through mindless or inexpert copying, rendering either or both useless, if not downright harmful. In one sense, this is historically unproblematic: for such manuals there was a tradition of learned copying, by scribes familiar with the subject-matter and for a readership which was also familiar with it, and, through fieldtrips, physic-gardens and possibly even herbaria, thereby expected to have in mind.

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2 This tendency to resort to anecdote doubtless explains the anecdotal element in the later illustrated Arabic copies. The majority of the figurative illustrations seem to be pointless, or, at least, their heuristic role, either in expatiating the text or in otherwise enlightening the reader, is obscure. The illustration of these anecdotal elements was, in Weitzmann’s view, a product of the post-iconoclastic period.

3 An essential adjunct to this is a Dioscorides manuscript in Padua, Seminario Vescovile, cod. 194, which was transcribed in Constantinople c. 1350 by the monk Neophytus from the Julianan Anicia codex and contains miniatures after original illustrations to that manuscript which are now lost. Cf. Stannard 1971, pp. 168–87.


5 Stannard 1980, p. 358: In herbals the descriptions have commonly been regarded as serving the identification and recognition of therapeutically useful plants such that they can be collected and used appropriately. To what extent the physician, apothecary or herbalist actually relied on written description in order to recognize the plants sought is somewhat unclear. An equally good case may be made for the well-known fact that herbalists, to this day, possess a fund of empirical information on the basis of which they recognize and hence collect the desired plant. The herbal, thus, served other purposes as well, for the description of the plant was only propaedeutic (i.e.) to the preparation and administration of medicaments, the composition of which actually included substances of plant origin. Regardless of which way the descriptions be interpreted, it is clear that Albertus Magnus was not describing plants solely for the purpose of recognizing potentially useful plants for a therapeutic end.