

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 25.4.8-25.6.16

IV.[8] Besides these the subject has been treated by Greek writers, whom we have mentioned in their proper places; of these, Crateuas, Dionysius and Metrodorus adopted a most attractive method, though one which makes clear little else except the difficulty of employing it. For they painted likenesses of the plants and then wrote under them their properties. But not only is a picture misleading when the colours are so many, particularly as the aim is to copy Nature, but besides this, much imperfection arises from the manifold hazards in the accuracy of copyists. In addition, it is not enough for each plant to be painted at one period only of its life, since it alters its appearance with the fourfold changes of the year. V.[9] For this reason the other writers have given verbal accounts only; some have not even given the shape of the plants, and for the most part have been content with bare names, since they thought it sufficient to point out the properties and nature of a plant to those willing to look for it. To gain this knowledge is no difficult matter; I at least have enjoyed the good fortune to examine all but a very few plants through the devotion to science of Antonius Castor, the highest botanical authority of our time; I used to visit his special [literally “little”] garden, in which he would rear a great number of specimens even when he passed his hundredth year, having suffered no bodily ailment and, in spite of his age, no loss of memory or physical vigour. Nothing else will be found that aroused greater wonder among the ancients than botany. [10] Long ago was discovered a method of predicting eclipses of the sun and moon—not the day or night merely but the very hour. Yet there still exists among a great number of the common people an established conviction that these phenomena are due to the compelling power of charms and magic herbs, and that the science of them is the one outstanding province of women. At any rate tales everywhere are widely current about Medea of Colchis and other sorceresses, especially Circe of Italy, who has even been enrolled as a divinity. [11] This is the reason, I think, why Aeschylus, one of the earliest poets, declared that Italy abounds in potent herbs, and many have said the same of Circeii, where she lived. Strong confirmatory evidence exists even today in the fact that the Marsi, a tribe descended from Circe’s son, are well-known snake-charmers. Homer indeed, the first ancestor of ancient learning, while expressing in several passages great admiration for Circe, gives the prize for herbs to Egypt, even though at that time the irrigated Egypt of today did not yet exist, for it was formed afterwards by the alluvial mud of the river. [12] At any rate he says¹ that Egyptian herbs in great number were given by the wife of the king to the Helen of his tale, including that celebrated *nepenthes*, which brought forgetfulness and remission of sorrow, to be administered especially by Helen to all mortals. But the first of all those known to tradition to publish anything about botany carefully was Orpheus; after him Musaeus and Hesiod, as we have said,² expressed great admiration for the plant called *polium*;³ Orpheus and Hesiod recommended fumigations. Homer mentions by name other plants also, which I shall speak of in their appropriate places. [13] After him the celebrated philosopher Pythagoras was the first to compose a book on the properties of plants, assigning their original discovery to Apollo, Aesculapius and the immortal gods generally; Democritus also composed a similar work. Both of them visited the Magi of Persia, Arabia, Ethiopia and Egypt, and so amazed were the ancients at these books that they positively asserted even unbelievable statements. [14] Xanthus, who wrote books on history, relates in the first of them that a young snake, which had been killed, was restored to life by his father, who used a plant called by Xanthus *balis*, and that the same plant brought back to life one Tylo, whom the snake had killed. Juba too records that a man in Arabia was restored to life by means of a plant.

¹ *Odyssey*, IV. 219-234.

² Pliny *N.H.* 21.21.44 and 21.84.145

³ Elsewhere translated as hulwort.

Democritus said, and Theophrastus believed him, that there was a plant which, carried by the bird I have mentioned,⁴ forced out by its touch a wedge driven into a tree by shepherds. Although these tales are incredible, yet they fill us with wonder, and force us to admit that there is still much truth in them. [15] Hence too I find that most authorities hold that there is nothing which cannot be achieved by the power of plants, but that the properties of most are still unknown. Among these thinkers was Herophilus, famous in medicine, who is reported to have said that certain plants are perhaps beneficial even when merely trodden on. It has been observed at any rate that wounds and diseases get worse⁵ on the arrival of people who have made a journey on foot.

VI.[16] Such was the condition of medicine in the old days, all of it finding its way into the dialects of Greece. But the reason why more herbs are not familiar is because experience of them is confined to illiterate country-folk, who form the only class living among them; moreover nobody cares to look for them when crowds of medical men are to be met everywhere. Many simples also, though their properties have been discovered, still lack names, for instance, the plant I mentioned when dealing with the cultivation of crops,⁶ which we know keeps all birds away if buried at the corners of the cornfield. The most disgraceful reason for this scanty knowledge is that even those who possess it refuse to teach it, just as though they would themselves lose what they have imparted to others. To this must be added that there is no sure method of discovery; for even of those we already know chance has sometimes been the finder; at other times, to speak the truth, the discoverer was a god.

Translated W.H.S. Jones, 1964, Loeb Classical Library.

⁴ Pliny *N.H.* 10.20.40.

⁵ Arguments have been made suggesting either the sentence doesn't belong, it has been incorrectly copied, or Pliny's logic is messed up.

⁶ See Pliny *N.H.* 18.45.160