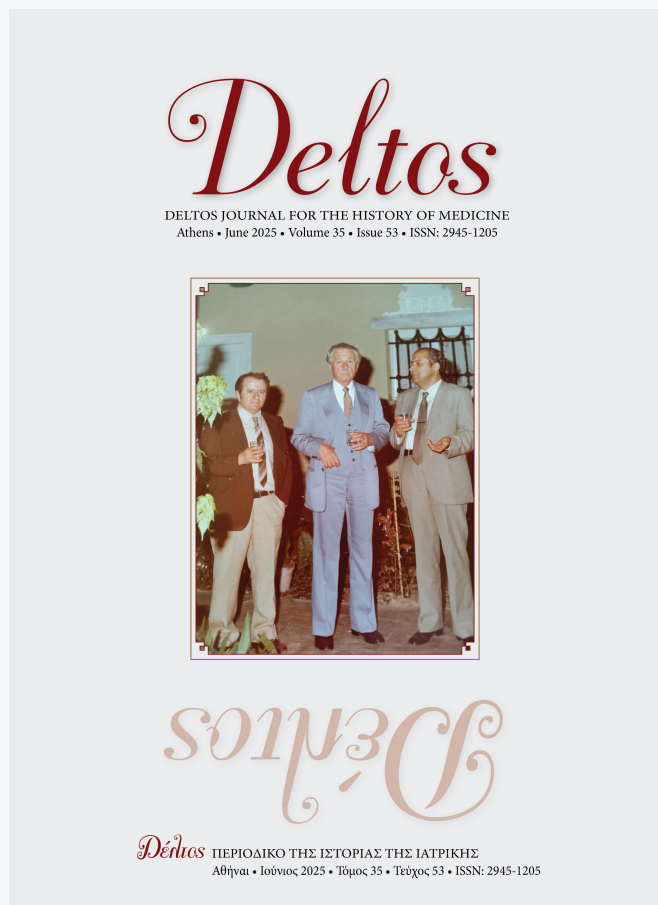


DELΤOS

Vol 35, No 53 (2025)



Petros Bouras-Vallianatos and Dionysios Stathakopoulos (2024), eds., Drugs in the Medieval Mediterranean. Transmission and Circulation of Pharmacological Knowledge, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Helios Poros

doi: [10.12681/dj.42280](https://doi.org/10.12681/dj.42280)

Copyright © 2025, Helios Poros



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Poros, H. (2025). Petros Bouras-Vallianatos and Dionysios Stathakopoulos (2024), eds., Drugs in the Medieval Mediterranean. Transmission and Circulation of Pharmacological Knowledge, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. *DELΤOS*, 35(53), 102–105. <https://doi.org/10.12681/dj.42280>

Petros Bouras-Vallianatos and Dionysios Stathakopoulos (2024), eds., *Drugs in the Medieval Mediterranean Transmission and Circulation of Pharmacological Knowledge*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Helios Poros¹

Abstract

This collective volume outlines the history of medieval medicine as a cross-cultural phenomenon in the Mediterranean region. The contributors adopt an interdisciplinary approach, drawing upon archaeological findings in the study, editing, and comparison of texts. The volume highlights the cultural interaction among Byzantine, Jewish, Islamicate, and Latin medical traditions. Situated within diverse contexts, *Drugs in the Medieval Mediterranean* reveals how pharmacy and medicine intersected with philosophy, magic, cuisine, religion, alchemy, and politics. By focusing equal attention on the linguistic and medical traditions of the texts, the authors trace and analyse the transmission of scientific knowledge and the trade in medicinal substances across the full breadth of the medieval Mediterranean.

Key Words: *Medieval pharmacology, mediterranean medicine, intercultural exchange, magic and medicine*

Drugs in the Medieval Mediterranean presents an innovative approach to history of medical literature, encompassing the major Mediterranean medical traditions of the Middle Ages. The volume explores medieval medicine through its interactions with material, communal, political, spiritual and philosophical understandings and practices. Petros Bouras-Vallianatos introduces the topics through two sections. The first section focuses on the transmission and reception of pharmacological texts; the second explores notions of medicine in magical, alchemical, superstitious, diplomatic, and self-treatment contexts. His introduction fulfils several functions - providing a measured entry into this holistic approach to the field, guiding researchers toward chapters of interest, and capturing the interest of specialists while remaining accessible to general readers.

Bouras-Vallianatos introduces a ‘Mediterranean-wide view for understanding more general medieval phenomena’ (p. 3). He outlines an interdisciplinary

understanding of medieval Mediterranean medicine across the various medical traditions, approaching them in an egalitarian manner. The book’s contributors avoid definitional reductionism by carefully setting the contextual scope for understanding ‘Byzantine’, ‘Greek’, ‘Latin’, ‘Islamicate’ and ‘Jewish’ witnesses, people and practices. In the first part of the introduction, the editor briefly summarises the reception of classical medical knowledge, for instance the works of Dioscorides and Galen. In the second part, he outlines how new knowledge was adopted from the Islamicate world. Introducing the first part of the volume, Bouras-Vallianatos expresses an ‘urgent need for editions of unpublished and unexplored texts, as well as the importance of studying previously neglected versions/redactions of certain treatises’ (p. 12). The following subsection of the introduction begins by examining surviving copies of *Ephodia tou apodēmountos* and Paul of Aegina’s *Epitome*. The reader is surprised by the loss of textual and paratextual information when

¹National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

studying critical editions, such as the number of hands, the manuscript's commissioner, personal alterations/additions, and the educational context.

The introduction follows by proposing a classification of pharmacological texts, based on 'trends that marked the period under examination' (p. 14). The first class of works consists of lists of recipes and pharmacopoeias, noting *Antidotarium magnum*, the *Dynameron*, *Ricettario Fiorentino* and *al-Jāmi' li-mufradāt al-adwiyah wa-l-aghdhiyah* (*Collector of Simple Drugs and Foodstuffs*). The second class contains an emerging type of practical manuals listing basic recipes for medical specialists in their respective places of healing (hospitals, apothecaries), noting *iatrosophia* and *xenōnika*, and the Arabic *aqrābādhinat*. The third class contains bilingual and multilingual glossaries and translations of Arabic pharmacological works to the other prominent languages in the region. Works in this final class are full of multilingual synonyms and transliterations, thus demonstrating an intercultural transmission in medieval Mediterranean medicine. This holistic approach is furthered by arguing for the examination of archaeological evidence.

Palynological and paleopathological studies, combined with a contextual approach of pharmacological manuscripts, bear testimony to intercontinental trade of medicinal ingredients and recipes. *Boundaries of Pharmacology* introduces medieval medicine's 'entanglement with magic, religion, philosophy, cooking, alchemy, and diplomacy' (p. 21), as explored in the volume's second part. Individual recipes, and in some cases entire chapters on compound drugs and amulets, invoke planetary powers and address both supernatural afflictions - such as possession and the evil eye - and naturally occurring ailments. Byzantine healing recipes often replaced conventional treatments with Christian prayers, astrological formulas, magical symbols, and (para)religious imagery, particularly in cases such as epilepsy. The subsection of the introduction explains the empirical approach to the treatment of disease with amulets, attempting rational and magical explanations alike.

Bouras-Vallianatos proceeds to explore the use of amulets in Islamicate and Jewish literature. He showcases aspects of alchemical recipes, intertwined with medical and culinary recipes, illustrating the broader societal and cultural understanding of medicine in Byzantium. He concludes by emphasising the need for 'careful interdisciplinary research, a true dialogue of equals among specialists' (p. 26), pointing out the epistemological benefits of an egalitarian approach to the interactions of cultures and practices. To this end,

he urges publishing unedited medicinal texts, paying attention to detail, as well as revisiting and reediting published work in a holistic research approach.

- Fabian Käs opens the first part of the book by investigating the works of Ibn al-Tilmīdh, a leading physician and key figure in the Nestorian community of eleventh- and twelfth-century Baghdad, having served 'several Abbasid caliphs as their personal physician'. The author dispels the widespread misconception that two surviving witnesses represent entirely separate texts, offering a comparative analysis of their differences. Through exemplary textual research, Käs explores possible explanations for these divergences and provides two helpful multilingual tables.
- In the second chapter, Doolittle undertakes an interdisciplinary study of the evolution of stomatological literature with reference to paleopathological studies. He traces how medical recipe collections evolved from treating simple ailments to addressing more complex conditions, reflecting greater medicalisation and diverse reception. This evidence indicates an increase in trade and scholarly involvement of physicians. Doolittle aptly documents his argument with the use of eight tables, qualitatively and quantitatively comparing references to Pliny's work. The author concludes with a clear, extensive appendix designed to facilitate further research.
- Chapter three delves into *De sexaginta animalibus* (*On Sixty Animals*), a zoological approach to medicine and magic. Walker-Meikle argues that while entries on animals bear semblance to those of other contemporary works, there is 'no resemblance in regard to content, transmission, or tradition' (p. 105). She notes the frequent use of Arabic transliterations and examines several manuscript variants, including an illustrated version. Exploring questions of authorship, she attributes the text to Ubaydallāh ibn Bukhtīshū. The chapter concludes with a comparative analysis of elephant entries across recensions, followed by a detailed index of animal references that serves as a valuable resource for researchers.
- In the following chapter, Mavroudi introduces the reader to the study of Byzantine scientific globalisation. She highlights the scarcity of pre-thirteenth-century technical manuscripts, and observes that most manuscripts were 'excerpted, paraphrased, or otherwise organised in order to be taught and practiced' (p. 132) in the late Byzantine period. The author studies the cultural "cross-contamination" (p. 135) of medical traditions through three surviving illustrated copies of Dioscorides herbal, dated between the sixth and ninth centuries. Mavroudi

thus argues for an understanding of a self-conscious, autonomous Byzantine science. The chapter includes five pictures of manuscript pages, indicative of the medical multilingualism under examination.

- Chapter five explores theriac, entertaining the compound drug's origin and the transmission of recipes in Latin and Arabic medical literature in medieval al-Shām. The authors follow the production and trade of different kinds of theriac in the cities of Jerusalem, Ashkelon and in Ayyubid Egypt. They explore cultural connotations of theriac as mentioned in Jewish religious tradition and laws, in relation to Jews in the *Land of Israel*. We encounter the term 'Muslim' twice, attributed to historical figures indirectly related to medicine. There are no mentions of the terms 'Islamicate', 'Arab(s)' or 'Islam'. Readers are left to decide whether the chapter manages to 'move past prejudices...which often valued one (medical) tradition over another' (p. 4).
- The sixth chapter, by Sivan Gottlieb, focuses on 'the Hebrew herbal', a partially edited translation from Latin into Hebrew from the enchanting 'corpus of illuminated Hebrew medical manuscripts' (p. 204). The corpus includes both original Jewish pharmacological works and translations from Latin and Arabic works. The entries demonstrate a symmetrical 'geometric, zoomorphic, or anthropomorphised' (p. 208) depiction of plant roots and uses, specific parts of each plant, methods of application and recipe instructions. Gottlieb provides statistical data on the manuscript entries, noting medicinal, magical, rational, and superstitious elements and contexts. Entries include contemporary empirical elements, with some also indicating later additions of user findings, noting 'tested and proven' (p. 215). The author provides ten pictures and a detailed multilingual index.
- Introducing the second part of the volume, Richard Greenfield demonstrates the methodological pluralism of Byzantine medicine, in which 'magic, (medical) science, and orthodox Christianity...lie at opposite ends of the same continuous spectrum' (p. 251). Magic is defined as non-Christian supernatural powers, rituals and occult assumptions of nature. Using asphodel as an example, the chapter explores the many contexts in which the plant was used for medical purposes. Competing and intertwined, rational medicine, Christianised magic, Christian *materia* and symbols are applied with by ingestion, fumigation and contagion – in the form of amulets. Greenfield delves deeper into an immense variation of the combined practices' expected benefits by use of the same *materia*: socio-magical; spiritual; mental; sexual healing and protection, both by natural and supernatural means.
- Chapter eight focuses on Maimonides, a Jewish philosopher, Rabbi and physician who distinguished between contemporary perceptions of science and magic. Lieberman explores Maimonides' method, showing how he combined the Rabbinic tradition (which offered rational medical exceptions to the religious prohibition of magic) with Galenic empiricism, 'even if not prescribed by reason' (p. 282). The chapter draws attention to parallels between Jewish and Graeco-Roman medical thought, particularly via the figure of Pliny, whom Maimonides never read directly.
- Chapter nine examines the emergence of Islamicate self-treatment manuals, showcasing the multifaceted medical approaches of two books, resulting from their respective combinations of elements of medical tradition. Lewicka examines these compilations in their intercultural context of Mediterranean and Indo-Persian 'medico-pharmacological and medico-dietary' (p. 293) literature. In *Ghunyat al-labīb (I)*, Ibn al-Akfānī, dwells on dietary and self-treatment medicine from a Galenic approach, combined with with occult-magical practices rooted in empirical claims. The text fuses Quranic elements with symbols, spells, theriac and a diverse array of simple *materia*. For *Ghunyat al-labīb (II)*, Lewicka explores textual variations as a compilation of obscure sources. The author challenges our understanding of rationality in Graeco-Roman medicine by incorporating hadiths and closing prescriptions with the phrase "God willing".
- In Chapter ten, Chipman draws parallels between culinary and medical recipes in Fatimid and Mamluk Egypt. She compares 'soft' medicinal recipes to digestive snacks designed to accompany recreational alcohol consumption and finds few meaningful distinctions between the two. She identifies groups of similar recipes for 'fake' meat, suitable for fasting or medicinal use. The chapter concludes by indicating an explanation for unexpected variations in recipes between otherwise similar books.
- In the next chapter, Mateo Martelli attempts to bridge the modern and Byzantine understandings of 'Metallurgy, Pharmacology, and Cuisine'. The chapter explores overlapping 'tradition and innovation' (p. 353) in medical and alchemical recipes, sometimes attributed to biblical figures like Moses, with manuscripts indexed according to the 'shelfmark' system. Textual elements hint at the recipes' origins across medical traditions, with the author exploring alchemical, medical, astrological, and magical mate-

rial and even a recipe for *glykisma* (cake). Martelli's work on folia 274r–278v, a previously unedited 'independent codicological unit' (p. 341) serves as the finishing touch to the chapter. The full edition and English translation of this material appear here for the first time, published in the chapter's appendix.

- Chapter 12 focuses on the epistemology of medicine through the work of Albertus Magnus. Athanasios Rinotas distinguishes between practical and theoretical knowledge in Magnus' natural philosophy. Studying Ibn Sīnā drawing on Aristotelian physics and indirectly informed by of Galen, the Dominican master composed his two works *On Minerals*. Rinotas follows Magnus' pursuit to refine medical theory, combining physics with 'necromancy, astrology, and magic' (p. 374). In Magnus' understanding, celestial bodies influenced a sigil carved stone's primary qualities, thus enhancing its expression of material cause as powers having humoral effects.
- The final chapter weaves together the thematic strands of the volume by examining drug and book trade, looting, war tribute and (diplomatic)

gift exchange. Durak documents the practices, de facto revolving around the Islamic world and its neighbours in Asia, Africa and Europe. The chapter focuses on *materia* such as sugar, saffron, cinnamon, theriac, the rare mineral *mūmiyā* and other (unidentified) mineral substances. Exploring their various refinements and medicinal, culinary and diplomatic contexts, readers are holistically presented with a picture of medicinal and world history.

- *Drugs in the Medieval Mediterranean* pays attention to detail by comparing different editions, transmissions and paratextual elements, framed by a fresh and egalitarian approach to Mediterranean medical traditions. The volume also introduces readers to para-medical contexts and practices, where recipes and *materia* blended religious and magical epistemologies with science. The book's interdisciplinary and intercultural approach both widens the scope and deepens the insight of contemporary research. Reaching diverse audiences, *Drugs in the Medieval Mediterranean* succeeds in inspiring expert researchers while remaining accessible to the casual reader.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Βιβλιοκριτική: Petros Bouras-Vallianatos and Dionysios Stathakopoulos (2024), eds., *Drugs in the Medieval Mediterranean Transmission and Circulation of Pharmacological Knowledge*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Ἡλιος Πόρος

Ο συλλογικός αυτός τόμος σκιαγραφεί την ιστορία του μεσαιωνικού φαρμάκου ως διαπολιτισμικό φαινόμενο στην περιοχή της Μεσογείου. Οι συντελεστές προσφέρουν μια διεπιστημονική προσέγγιση, αξιοποιώντας αρχαιολογικά ευρήματα στη μελέτη, στην επιμέλεια και στη σύγκριση κειμένων. Ο τόμος αναδεικνύει την πολιτισμική αλληλεπίδραση μεταξύ της Βυζαντινής, της Εβραϊκής, της Ισλαμοποιημένης και της Λατινικής ιατρικής παράδοσης. Εντός διαφορετικών συγκειμένων, το *Drugs in the Medieval Mediterranean* βρίσκει τη φαρμακευτική και την ιατρική να αλληλοεπικαλύπτονται με τη φιλοσοφία, τη μαγεία, τη μαγειρική, τη θρησκεία, την αλχημεία και την πολιτική. Αντιμετωπίζοντας ισότιμα τις γλωσσικές και τις ιατρικές παραδόσεις των κειμένων, οι συγγραφείς εντοπίζουν και μελετούν τη μετάδοση επιστημονικής γνώσης και το εμπόριο φαρμακευτικών ουσιών στο πλήρες εύρος της μεσαιωνικής Μεσογείου.

Λέξεις Κλειδιά: Μεσαιωνική φαρμακολογία, μεσογειακή ιατρική, διαπολιτισμική ανταλλαγή, μαγεία και ιατρική

Corresponding author:

Helios Poros

Student, Department of History and Philosophy of Science, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, University Campus, Ano Ilisia, 15771, Athens, Greece, e-mail: athanasios_poros@yahoo.com