

ACTA CLASSICA UNIV. SCIENT. DEBRECEN.	LVII.	2021.	pp. 129–142.
--	-------	-------	--------------

**THE CARMEN DE VIRIBUS HERBARUM (GDRK 64):  
BETWEEN MAGICAL PHARMACOLOGY AND HOMERIC  
DIDACTIC**

BY FLORIS OVERDUIN  
Radboud Institute for Culture and History  
Radboud University Nijmegen  
f.overduin@let.ru.nl

*Abstract:* This paper aims to assess the nature of magic and medicine in the extant fragment of the little-known *Carmen de viribus herbarum* (fr. 64 Heitsch), an anonymous didactic poem of considerable length (216 hexameters have been transmitted) from the third century CE. The *Carmen*, a poem concerned with the curative powers of some fifteen different plants, is an evident descendant of the didactic pharmacological verse tradition of Nicander of Colophon and the like, yet its method of composition, reusing large chunks of Homeric lines, is remarkable. What sets the *Carmen* apart from the tradition of didactic pharmacology, moreover, is its fascination with magic, a factor virtually absent from the Nicandrian legacy. Next to pharmacological knowledge it repeatedly discusses effective plants against ghosts, apparitions, and witches.

*Keywords:* Carmen de viribus, magic, pharmacology, baskania, witch.

## 1. Introduction

The *Carmen de viribus herbarum* does not enjoy a reputation of great fame, to say the least. It sits poorly studied among the fragments of later Greek poetry in the second volume of Ernst Heitsch' *Griechischen Dichterfragmente der römischen Kaiserzeit*.<sup>1</sup> Yet of this anonymous poem, which is dated to somewhere between 200 and 300 CE, a substantial fragment of 216 hexameters is preserved, embodying a rather unique synthesis of quite variegated components.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Heitsch 1964, 23–38. The fragment is referred to by LSJ as a product of the *Poeta de herbis* (Poet. de herb.), and by BNP as *Anonymus de herbis*, whereas Hermann (1805) talks about the author as the *Poeta de viribus herbarum*. To add to the confusion, Lehrs (1867) included it as the *Anonymi carmen de herbis*, followed by Wellmann in 1894 and 1933 (*Carm. de h.*). For some additional details see Keyser/Irby-Massie 2008, 274 (s.v. *De herbis/De viribus herbarum*) and Luccioni 2006.

<sup>2</sup> According to Heitsch (1963, 48) *De herb.* 146–147 may well be based on Androm. 172–173, which gives us a *terminus post quem*. On Andromachus being the court physician of Nero; see Cassia 2012. According to Hermann (1805, 717), based on his analysis of the poem's metrical

First of all, it is a didactic epic poem, in the tradition of pharmacological hexameter poems of which the epics of Nicander constitute the earliest substantial specimens. As such it is also part of the wider Greek tradition of didactic epic, going back to Hesiod's *Works and Days*. It is, moreover, a valuable testimony of the development of Greek didactic epic in the Imperial period. Second, this poem consists for a significant part of Homeric phrases, to such an extent that occasionally it gives the impression of a ὀμηροκέντρον, a *cento* poem made up as a patchwork of set phrases from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.<sup>3</sup> Although the reuse of Homeric language by a later hexameter poet may not seem so remarkable, the use and reuse of this material by the *Carmen*'s author is quite different from the practices of the Hellenistic poets, or of contemporary didactic epic poets. Third, and most importantly in the light of this volume, the *Carmen de viribus herbarum* repeatedly alludes to magic and ostensibly aims to provide aids against magical practices, or to fend off evil, a quality that is all but absent from earlier pharmacological or didactic poems. In this chapter, after briefly introducing the poem, its status as a didactic poem and as a Homeric *cento*, I will therefore focus on the magical dimension of its language, its instructions and its details.

## 2. The *Carmen de viribus herbarum*: a didactic poem?

In the fragment as we have it the speaker, posing as a teacher, treats the medicinal properties of fifteen different roots or plants.<sup>4</sup> That we are dealing with a fragment is obvious from the first lines of the text as transmitted (1–6):

Τοὺς δὲ πυρέσσοντας τὸ χαμαίμηλον θεραπεύει  
 σὺν ῥοδίῳ λείον τετριμμένον, ὠφέλιμον δὲ  
 τοῖς μετριάζουσιν τὸ φυτόν. φύεται δ' ἐπὶ θινῶν  
 τὸ βραχὺ καὶ κάλλιστον, ὃ βαστάζουσιν ἰητροὶ  
 ἀρχομένου θέρους, μέγας Ἥλιος ἠνίχ' ὀδεύη  
 ἑβδομον ἰπεύσας τετράζυγον ἄντυγα πῶλων. 5

qualities (viz. syllable length before the caesura), it must be *Manethone recensius*; Wellmann (1894, 2327) concludes it must predate Nonnus. See Effe (1977, 198–199) for a brief summary of relevant details. References to this poem otherwise appear to be absent from modern studies on magic, as e.g. Frankfurter 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Used later as a technical term for the poetry of a.o. Eudocia, the word was originally found as the title of a *cento* epigram in *AP* 9, 381; see Usher 1998, 9–17.

<sup>4</sup> 1–6: chamaemelum; 7–23: rhamnus; 24–39: artemisia; 40–54: pentadactylus; 55–73: vervain; 74–91: dictamnus; 92–104: lelisphakos; 105–113: cyparissus; 114–127: centaury; 128–139: buphthalmus; 140–172: peony; 173–178: polium; 179–91: moly; 192–211: sea-oak; 212–216: chrysanthemum. Identifications of these plants are proposed by Pérez-Santana 2014; for details of the more prominent plants see Hardy/Totelin 2016.

Those suffering from fever chamomile heals, rubbed down smoothly with rose (oil?); this plant is also useful for those who do not feel too well. On sandy soil it grows, short and most beautifully, which healers pick at the beginning of summer, when the great Helios goes for the seventh time(?), having steered his four-yoked chariot of steeds.<sup>5</sup>

An absolute lack of any sign of opening, such as a proem, identification of the speaker, or a programmatic statement clearly shows this to be a fragment; the fragment's last lines, in addition, do not show any signs of closure either. Moreover, the particle δέ in the first line must have been preceded by Greek μέν, confirming this assessment.

That we are dealing with a didactic voice — and by extension to a didactic poem — becomes clear if the fragment is studied with regard to some of the basic parameters of the didactic genre.<sup>6</sup> Among these didactic markers are the emphatic positioning of the narrator as teacher, confirming his knowledgeability,<sup>7</sup> emphatic and repeated addresses to a pupil in the vocative,<sup>8</sup> the use of continuous directives in the second person singular,<sup>9</sup> with extension of the lessons from a pointed addressee to the use of a more general addressee,<sup>10</sup> *et cetera*, all of which parameters can be found, in varying degrees, in earlier (and later) didactic poetry.

In addition to such 'technical' didactic markers, the text also provides the addressee with numerous instructions that point at a practical sort of didactic text. The teacher's knowledgeability is therefore not only a pose, but it is corroborated by his inside know-how of when and where to obtain certain roots. Rather than providing us with a mere listing of plants, the poet gives additional instructions

---

<sup>5</sup> All translations are my own. The only integral translation otherwise available is the one in Latin by Lehrs from 1867, which is based, however, on a significantly different text. A few brief passages can be found in a French translation in Ducourthial 2003.

<sup>6</sup> A more detailed assessment of the didactic nature of the *Carmen de viribus herbarum* is the subject of another paper, in which the didactic parameters are studied more thoroughly; on this, see Overduin (forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> As in 114 (νῦν δ' ἦτοι ἐρ<έ>ω οὐδέ σε κεύσω: 'now I will tell you and I will not hide from you'), 124 (κέλομαι: 'I command'), 160 (σε φράζεσθαι ἄνωγα: 'I tell you to pay attention').

<sup>8</sup> As in 74 and 140 (κοῦρε: 'lad'), 129 (ἀγλαέ κοῦρε: '[you,] bright lad'), 157 (κοῦρε δαίφρον: '[my] bright lad').

<sup>9</sup> As in 24 (αἶρε: 'pick [a herb]'); cf. 40, 91, 157), 34 (μῖξον: 'mix', cf. μίσηε in 198), 35 (σύγχριε: 'anoint'), 52 (λάββανε: 'take [an ingredient]'); cf. 196), 105 (φράζσο: 'mind'), 140 (δίξσο: 'seek'), 204 (ἔχε: 'carry [a root]'), 214 (φῶρει καὶ ἔχ': 'carry and hold on to [a plant]'), *et cetera*. Sometimes the poet alternatively uses cupitive optatives as indirect instructions, as in 44 (ἀλθήσαιο: 'may you heal'), 45 (ἐρητύσειας: 'may you check'), 90 (ἀκέσαιο: 'may you cure'), 190 (ἐξακέσαιο: 'may you cure completely').

<sup>10</sup> Commonly qualified as a 'general you' or 'allgemeines Du'. Quite exceptional is the use of a 'general τις' as a third person alternative to the second person form, which occurs in 136–138: τῆς βοτάνης τὴν ρίζαν, ὅταν ἀλγῆ τις ὀδόντα, | λαμβανέτω ... | ἀποπτυσάτω: 'when someone has a toothache, let him take the root of this plant' ... | 'let him spit it out').

for rootcutters (commonly known as *rhizotomoi* – though not in the *Carmen*) as to the precise appearance of these plants, their medicinal powers and several conditions for finding them. This becomes clear repeatedly, as in *De herb.* 2–4, cited above, but also in 9–11 (cited below) and 24–25 (Ἄρτεμιδος βοτάνην δὲ συνώνυμον αἶρ’ ἐπιφώσκειν | Ἡελίου μέλλοντος ἐπὶ χθόνα φέγγος ἐρυθρόν, ‘when Helius is rising to shine forth its red glow over the land, pick the plant with the same name as Artemis’), 91 (εἶαρι δ’ αἶρε πόην καὶ καύματι καὶ φθινοπώρῳ, ‘take this root in spring, summer and autumn’), or 140–143 (Πασάων βοτανῶν βασιληίδα δίζεο, κοῦρε | Σειρίου ἀντέλλοντος, ὅτε σκυλακόδρομος ὄρη | νυκτιφαῆς τ’ ἄστροισι θεὰ πλήθουσα Σελήνη | δέρκηται ἴτ’ ὅτε δ’ ἠελίῳ μέλλουσα συνάπτειν† (‘son, search for the queen of all plants when Sirius is rising, at the time of the dog-days, when the goddess Selene, waxing, shining by night among the stars, looks down; then, when she is about to touch the sun’).

In addition to the poet’s emphatic stance as a teacher, and to his practical instructions, it is relevant to point out that we are dealing with a technical, teachable subject matter, a subject matter that is, moreover, not an uncommon one within the tradition of didactic dactylic poetry. Starting with Numenius in the third century BCE (whose hexameter fragments are collected in *SH* 589–595), the teaching of the curative powers of plants is followed by Nicander’s *Theriaca* and *Alexipharmaca*, and remains current in the pieces we have of Eudemus (*Theriaca*, *SH* 412A, in distichs) and Marcellus (*De piscibus*, *GDRK* 63, in hexameters), both of whom show signs of influence by their Hellenistic source. Moreover, practising an evidently literary variety of medical poetry is also found in the elegiac pharmacological riddle poems of Aglaias of Byzantium (‘Against cataracts’, *SH* 18) and Philo of Tarsus (‘Against colic’, *SH* 690).<sup>11</sup> As such, the *Carmen* fits the pattern of the development of this particular branch or subgenre of didactic poetry from the Hellenistic era on, well into the Imperial age. This also means that, compared to the contemporary didactic epic works of Dionysius of Alexandria (whose geographic *Oecumenes Periegesis* is from the time of Hadrian) and the Oppians (whose *Haliutica* and *Cynegetica* are from the second and third century), the *Carmen de viribus* provides us with a very different type of didactic epic, the existence of which is generally overlooked.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> For Marcellus, Philo, Aglaias and Andromachus, see Overduin 2018a, 2018b and 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Minimal treatment within the context of *Lehrgedichte* is offered, however, by Effe (1977, 194–204).

### 3. The *Carmen de viribus herbarum*: a homeric poem?

The ‘use of Homer’ by later Greek poets takes many shapes and forms, from the viewpoint of the use of mythology, the poetic program, the use of metre, methods of composition, literary qualities *et cetera*. A prominent feature of the Homeric legacy is the poet’s diction, rooted in a long oral development, and littered with epithets, patronymics, compounds, and dialectal forms. That this language had a profound impact on later Greek poetry is an understatement. When assessing the status of Homer’s influence on Greek literature, however, it is noticeable that this linguistic prominence often plays a part on the level of single words, or perhaps combinations. Larger units, such as hemistichs, or even entire lines are hardly found in the poetry of the Alexandrians, whose deep philological concern with Homer did not lead to a too overt imitation of his style.<sup>13</sup>

It is therefore striking that the anonymous poet of the *Carmen de viribus* makes use of the Homeric material to such a large extent. Rather than giving his text a Homeric tinge or an oblique epic touch, he uses the Homeric source material as building blocks for his own poetry, an approach strongly reminiscent of the tradition of formulaic composition. Of course, this use of formulas has little — if anything — to do with oral composition, nor do I think these repetitions are there for mnemonic purposes. It should rather be considered a means of engaging with epic style, while still staying close to the subject matter of magic and pharmacology. A few brief examples should give an indication of two of his main techniques.<sup>14</sup>

On the one hand we find reuse of Homeric material, either literally, or with slight adaptations. These may be shorter (e.g. κρατερῆφι βῆφι in *De herb.* 16; ὄρη ἐν εἰαρινῇ in *De herb.* in 126; διάκτορος Ἀργειφόντης in *De herb.* 186), or longer (καὶ τότε σοι συνέριθος ἄμ’ ἔψεται in *De herb.* 200, ἀθάνατοί τε θεοὶ θνητοὶ τε Γίγαντες in *De herb.* 17, the two final words replacing Homer’s τ’ ἄνθρωποι from *Od.* XXIV 64).<sup>15</sup> On the other hand the poet repeatedly uses formulaic lines not found in earlier epic, which may be either original creations, or

---

<sup>13</sup> In fact, many poets were preoccupied with *not* being just like Homer, or at any rate not using standard Homeric phrasing, being more keen on exceptions and Homeric rarities; on this, cf. Giangrande 1970. Even Apollonius Rhodius, whose *Argonautica* could be considered a direct heir to the heroic epic tradition of Homer, generally refrains from a too obvious use of formulaic patterns; on this, cf. Fantuzzi 2011, 228–241. Within the tradition of pharmacological poetry in particular, repetition of Homeric phrases is virtually absent.

<sup>14</sup> A more elaborate discussion of the various techniques the poet employs, which includes hybrid combinations or combined adaptations, is to be found in Overduin (forthcoming).

<sup>15</sup> Effe (1977, 198) stresses the conventionality of the *Carmen*’s epic language, yet within the didactic tradition, the frequency of longer Homeric combinations is remarkable rather than ordinary.

borrowings from sources lost. Although the line πρὶν μέγαν Ἥλιον τὸν ἀτέρμονα κύκλον ὀδεύειν (158) is not known from other sources, it does have a clear epic quality to it. When it is repeated in 213 we get a sense of epic imitation, even if the poet himself is both epicist and imitator. These imitations may contain slight variations, as is the case in the following pair (*De herb.* 12–13), which is repeated twice: κρημαμένη δύναται γὰρ ἀποστρέψαι κακότητος | φαρμακίδων τε κακῶν καὶ βάσκανα φύλ’ ἀνθρώπων. In 165 φοβερῶν is substituted for κακῶν, and in 216 we have ἀλόχων instead, while the rest of these two lines are perfect copies, formulas to be copied and pasted within the poet’s technical approach, an otherwise rare phenomenon in post-classical hexameter poetry. Although this is not the place to go into details about the poet’s various techniques, it should be clear that the *Carmen de viribus* is quite an exceptional specimen of neo-Homeric didactic, combining formulaic composition with the didactic pharmacological tradition.

There is, moreover, another connection between Homer and the *Carmen* that is worth pointing out. It concerns the use of Homeric lines, or particular combinations of lines, for the purpose of magic.<sup>16</sup> This practice is yet quite different: the poet of the *Carmen* does not use Homeric material as such for magical invocation, as it is still the herbs that are claimed to contain power. Moreover, the Homeric lines make perfect sense in their new context, which is more or less a tenet of composing *cento* poetry. The use of Homer for magical purposes is reminiscent of the bibliomantic practice known as the *Sortes Homericae* in which Iliadic lines were used for divination. In both cases the use of Homer per se is thought to have magical powers, which is still quite different from what we find in the *Carmen*. Yet the technique of combining selected lines from Homer is striking, as it does not belong to the didactic or pharmacological tradition. Perhaps we can see some ‘cross-fertilization’ here within the triangle of (Homeric/didactic) epic, magic, and pharmacology that characterizes the hybrid *Carmen*.

#### 4. Magic in the *Carmen de viribus herbarum*

After this elementary assessment of the nature of the *Carmen*, my focus will shift to the prominence of magic in this poem, a phenomenon that is, as stated before, very rare in Greek didactic poetry.<sup>17</sup> I would like to focus here on some passages

<sup>16</sup> For such a so-called *Homeromanteion* see e.g. Maltomini 1995 and Collins 2008, 104–131.

<sup>17</sup> The main exception being the pseudo-Orphic *Lithica*, a didactic hexameter poem on the curative and magical powers of stones, probably composed around 100–150 CE. See Keyser/Irby-Massie 2008, 598. Although the didactic epic of Hesiod and Nicander shows some minor elements

concerned with the combination of botany, pharmacology, and *baskania*, which is the term most commonly used for magic in the *Carmen de viribus*, although by no means the only one.<sup>18</sup> In addition to βάσκανος (sorcerer), we find ἐπιπομπή (magic charm), φαρμακίς (witch), and the tantalizing φάσματα δεινά (ghosts?). The terms δαίμων and ἐφιάλειον, although generally not limited to a context of magic, are considered to be powers (demons, nightmares) that too need to be warded off within the context of the *Carmen de viribus herbarum*.

A first passage that points to the use of magic is *De herb.* 7–13, which praises the virtues of *rhamnus*:

Ῥάμνος ἔχει πανάκεια<ν> ἐν οἴκοισιν παναρίστην  
 φυομένη φραγμοῖσιν ἀκανθῆεν πετάλειον.  
 ὄρου δ' ἐστὶ φυτόν. τὸ δὲ σύμφορόν ἐστι βροτοῖσιν  
 βαστάζειν τότε ῥάμνον, ὅταν φθίνουσα Σελήνη  
 δέρκηται πάντεσσι βροτοῖς κατὰ μακρὸν Ὀλυμπον. 10  
 κρημναμένη δύναται γὰρ ἀποστρέψαι κακότητος  
 φαρμακίδων τε κακῶν καὶ βάσκανα φύλ' ἀνθρώπων.

*Rhamnus contains the very best panacea at home(?), growing a thorny petal among its shrubs. It is a night (?) plant. It is advantageous for men to carry this root when the waning Selene looks down on all men from Olympus. Hanging it can ward off the evils of both evil witches and the malicious tribes of men.*

Although the poem is partly concerned with more elaborate preparations of plants, repeatedly the addressee is merely told that a certain plant only needs to be ‘hung’ (κρημναμένη, 12, 164, 215) to be effective. This could refer to some sort of necklace,<sup>19</sup> but as elsewhere in the poem the addressee is told more specifically that he needs to carry a certain plant on his body, it is also possible that κρημναμένη refers to hanging the plant on a doorpost or window.<sup>20</sup> ‘Hanging’ the *rhamnus* plant is described here in particular, but it turns out *peony* (140–172) and *chrysanthemum* (212–216) have the same powerful effect. This use is

---

of superstition, this is still very remote from actually addressing matters of magic in its own terms; see Jacques 2002, lviii–lx.

<sup>18</sup> The presence of magic in this fragment was signalled by Wellmann (1933) and Heitsch (1963, 48), but not treated in any detail.

<sup>19</sup> The idea of hanging a protective plant around one’s neck is also suggested by Σ ad 215 (ἐκ τοῦ τραχήλου ἀποκρημνῆς); Heitsch 1964, 37.

<sup>20</sup> Dioscorides Pedanius describes such use of *rhamnus* against τὰς τῶν φαρμάκων κακουργίας in *Mat. med.* I 90, although his instructions regard ‘attaching’ rather than ‘hanging’ (θύραις ἢ θυρίσι προστεθέντας). Σ Nic. *Ther.* 861, however, mentions the use of *rhamnus* against ghosts ὅθεν καὶ πρὸ τῶν θυρῶν ἐν τοῖς ἐναγίσμασι κρεμῶσιν αὐτήν (‘which is why they also hang it outside their doors among the offerings to the dead’). Perhaps this explains Hermann’s emendation from σῶμα to δῶμα in 206, accepted by Lehrs (*quae etiam aedes custodit*, 1867, 178), though not by Heitsch.

therefore different from other situations, as elsewhere the pupil is told that he should hold a certain plant in his hands (30–31: ὅς κ' ἐνὶ χερσίν | τὴν μονόκλωνον ἔχῃ, 'he who holds the single stalk [of Artemisia] in his hands ... ') or — more frequently — to carry the plant on his body (204: ὑπὸ γαστρὶ φορηθέν, 'carried under you belly'; 214: καὶ περὶ σῶμα φόρει καὶ ἔχ' ἔντοσθ' εἵματος αἴρων, 'wear it around your body and hold it down by putting it inside you clothes'; 63: ἀμματίσας περὶ σῶμα/80: περὶ σῶμα προσάψας, 'having tied [this plant] to your body'; see also 44 and 173, 182 and 191).

The effectivity of *rhamnus* against evil-doers is, moreover, divided in two particular categories: witches (φαρμακίδες) and the sorcerous tribes of men (βάσκανα φύλα). The masculine form of sorcerer (φαρμακεύς) is not used in this context, which may point at a gender-oriented association of witchcraft with women, a view that is confirmed by examples from the literary tradition, such as Homer's Circe, Medea (as depicted by a.o. Euripides and Apollonius), the exorcizing women in Sophron's mimes, or Simaetha, who casts a spell to bind her lover in Theocritus' second *Idyll*.

The second category, the βάσκανα φύλα (sorcerous 'tribes', or 'race') is associated, evidently, not with individual sorcerers, but with entire groups. Within the context of Greek poetry, what comes to mind here are for instance the Telchines, a race of sorcerers known from literary sources, that lived on Rhodes, and were said to be spiteful wizards who possessed the evil eye. The *locus classicus* is Callimachus' prologue to the *Aetia* (fr. 1 Pf./Harder), where an oblique suggestion is made with regard to their negative presence, although their name is used metonymically, and their possession of the evil eye is not actually mentioned. Ovid's allusion is more to the point (*Met.* VII 365–366: *Telchinas | quorum oculos ipso vitiantes omnia visu ...* 'Telchines, whose eyes, lighting all things by their very glance'), and their status as evil sorcerers is corroborated by other passages (cf. A.R. IV 1679, Plut., *Quaest. Conv.* V 7). There are, to be sure, various sources who discuss other tribes, besides the Telchines, as possessing the evil eye, such as the Thibii from Pontus (Phylarchus *ad* Plut.), the Bitii in Scythia, the Triballii, the Illyrians, and various African tribes (Plin., *Nat.* VII 16; his use of *familias* there seems equivalent to the Greek φύλα, as used in the *Carmen*). The relative ubiquity of βασκανία need therefore not be connected to the Telchines directly. The Hellenistic poet Euphorion tells the story of Eutelidas, a young man who cast the evil eye upon himself, when looking in the mirroring water of a stream (αὐτὸν βάσκαῖεν ἰδὼν ὀλοφώτιος ἀνήρ | δίνῃ ἐνὶ ποταμοῦ, fr. 189 Lightfoot = CA fr. 175, Plut., *Mor.* 682B–C). Here too there is no reference

to the Telchines, yet it is clear that βασκανία is closely related to the act of looking or casting glances, with dreadful result.<sup>21</sup> This close connection between looking and βασκανία is corroborated by the Greek proverb (perhaps originating from New Comedy, cf. *CAF* 160) δυσμενής καὶ βάσκανος ὁ τῶν γειτόνων ὀφθαλμός ('ill-natured and envious is the eye of your neighbour', mentioned as a παροιμία in Alciphr. I 17; cf. *CPG* 4, 31). There βάσκανος may only be a sublimated adjective, merely expressing jealousy, yet its connection to the eye is evident. In most cases, the term βασκανία and cognate forms (occurring no less than eight times in the fragment's 216 lines) thus appear to be used to point at the evil eye in particular, rather than the use of general witchcraft.<sup>22</sup>

After these lines (*De herb.* 7–13) on the apotropaic powers of the *rhamnus* root, the poet continues with an aetiological background story, typical within the tradition of digressions or panels in didactic epic, in which he tells us that Pallas Athena was the first to use it after the war between the Titans and the Olympians.<sup>23</sup> In her role as the goddess Nemesis she then cleansed the temples and statues using *rhamnus*. The passage ends with lines 21–23:

θρέμματά τε νέποδάς τε καλὸν φυτὸν ἔστι φορῆναι  
πρὸς τε πόνον κεφαλῆς καὶ δαίμονας ἢ δ' ἐπιτομπάς·  
πάντα γὰρ ἴησαιτο βροτοφθόρα φάρμακα λυγρά

*It is good for creatures and children(?) to carry this plant against headache and demons and charms: for may it heal all baneful man-destroying poisons.*

The herb *rhamnus* is now said not only to stave off witches and evil sorcerers, but also headaches, demons, and charms: a somewhat incongruous juxtaposition, which seems to show that little (if any) distinction was made between actual bodily illness, such as headache, and magically induced conditions. The noun ἐπιτομπή (also used in 166 and 176) clearly comes from the world of magic and folklore, not being attested anywhere in poetry, apart from magical papyri (*PGM* IV 2159 and 2726) and an anonymous hymn — unsurprisingly — to Hecate.<sup>24</sup> Within the *Carmen de viribus herbarum*, however, it plays a prominent role, occurring three times. Δαίμονες, moreover, here sided by ἐπιτομπάς, make their appearance six times in the *Carmen*. What precisely is meant is not easy to assess,

<sup>21</sup> For ancient testimonia of *baskania* one can also compare Theocritus (*Id.* V 12–13, *Id.* VI 39) and Vergil (*Ecl.* III 103). According to Pliny (*Nat.* VII 18) women who were able to cast the evil eye had two pupils per eye, a belief that is echoed in Ovid (*Am.* I 8); see Tupet 1976, 390–394.

<sup>22</sup> Although *baskania* is primarily concerned with the glancing eye, according to Plutarch (*Quaest. Conv.* V 7, 1 = 680DE) it could extend to speech and breath as well (καὶ γὰρ τὸ βλέμμα καὶ τὴν ἀναπνοὴν καὶ τὴν διάλεκτον αὐτῶν παραδεχομένους τήκεσθαι καὶ νοσεῖν).

<sup>23</sup> For the typical use of such panels, see e.g. Toohey 1996, 2–5 *et alib*.

<sup>24</sup> Heitsch 1961, 197 (*GDRK* 59, 13, 11).



the poet tells us that this plant is also effective against *φάσματα δεινά* in line 32, ‘terrible apparitions’ or ‘dreadful phantoms’. It is fascinating that the poet of the *Carmen* can so easily align visible dangers, such as snakes, with phantoms or ghosts, which says much about the presumed reality of phantoms and their visibility. It is, however, also another example of the general idea that many plants are useful against many ailments, perils, or broader categories of danger, rather than one single plant countering one single problem.

The same approach speaks from *De herb.* 162–166, a passage devoted to the plant peony already mentioned, also known as *pentorobos* (148), *glykyside* (152), *aglaophotis* (155), *cynospastus* (162), and *ephialteion* (163):

οὔνεκα δὴ καλέουσι Κυνόσπαστον κατ’ Ὀλυμπον  
 ἀθάνατοι μάκαρες Ἐφιάλτειόν τε βοῶσιν.  
 κρηναμένη δύναιται γὰρ ἀποστρέψαι κακότητος  
 φαρμακίδων φοβερῶν καὶ βάσκανα φύλ’ ἀνθρώπων  
 πρὸς τε φόβους δυνατὴ καὶ δαίμονας ἡδ’ ἐπιπομπάς

165

*Which is why the blessed immortals on Olympus call it cynospastus and ephialteion. For when you hang it down it can ward off the evil of evil witches and the sorcerous tribes of men, and it is effective against fears and demons and charms.*

This is in fact a small excerpt from a longer passage on the qualities of the herb *peony*. Here again we find a mixture of different sorts of evil against which this plant is said to have apotropaic powers. Witches (*pharmakides*), and sorcerers (*baskana phyla*), are mentioned separately, as well as demons (*daimones*) and charms (*epipompai*). Moreover, the pupil learns that one of the names this plant goes by is *ephialteion*. Even though the Greek does not explicitly tell us what to make of this, the plant’s name must point at the noun *ἐφιάλτης*, the Greek word for ‘nightmare’, most likely coined on the name of the wicked Giant that attacked Mount Olympus together with his brother Otus. And indeed, although the *Carmen* does not point at nightmares in particular, it does tell us the plant is useful against fears in 166 (πρὸς τε φόβους δυνατὴ).

So far we have seen a range of supernatural entities against which practical medicine or pharmacology can be effective: sorcerers (working the evil eye), witches and demons, in addition to supernatural occurrences such as spells or charms, fears and nightmares. Their instances may be surprising within the traditional structure of Homeric or didactic epic poetry, yet their position is often related to their metrical *sedes* and the place they take within formulaic diction, which may explain the repetitive character of these references to magic. Towards the end of the fragment, however, we encounter a clear departure from this structure. The reference to magic here is not part of a system of formulaic building blocks, but comes as a personal cry of the poet (*De herb.* 209–211):

ταύτη<v> παμμήτωρ φύσις εὔρε<το> μηκέτι ταούς  
πτηνοῦς ἄνθρωποι θαυμάζετε· καὶ γὰρ ἐκεῖνοι  
βασκοσύνης ἔνεκεν δόλιχα πτερὰ μῆκύνονται.

210

*Nature, mother of all, found it. No longer admire the winged peacocks, people: for they too have long feathers due to sorcery!*

It is quite exceptional to find an address in the second person plural here, an address not directed to the pupil, earlier addressed as κοῦρε ('boy'), but literally to 'you, people' in general. Although it is obvious that peacocks do have long feathers to show off, the poet's outcry is a surprising warning, clearly suggesting pre-existing folklore — if such a qualification is applicable — about peacocks and their connection to magic. The evidence is, however, scanty, for although there are sources pointing at such a connection, their focus is quite different. As Aelianus remarks (*HA XI 81*):

ὁ ταῶς ὑπὲρ τοῦ μὴ βασκανθῆναι λίνου ρίζαν οἰονεὶ περίαπτόν τι φυσικὸν ἀναζητήσας,  
ὑπὸ τῆ ἑτέρα πτέρυγι βύσας περιφέρει.

*The peacock, in order to escape the influence of the evil eye, seeks out a root of flax as a kind of natural amulet and carries it about packed under one wing.*

The procedure is familiar enough ('carry a certain plant on your body to avert the evil eye'), described repeatedly in the *Carmen* itself, but this hardly gives us a clue about the significance of the remark about the peacock in *De herb.* 209–211. In Aelian's paradoxographical remark we read that peacocks fear for the evil eye, and even take safeguards against it, whereas the poet of the *Carmen* suggests that the peacocks are pleased with the result of their magically lengthened feathers. This is the more tantalizing when one thinks of the very presence of 'eyes' on the peacock's wings, which could be both a source of envy and a source of βασκανία, a connection that is, however, difficult to make based on the Greek.

## 5. Conclusion

The *Carmen de viribus herbarum* is an extraordinary text, which, to my knowledge, has no direct family in the world of didactic or literary epic. Among the literary texts we know, magic is either absent, or treated as folklore, which seems to be the status of magic in e.g. the poetry of Theocritus and Herodas, mimes in which the reader can look from outside to the practice of magic as performed by the protagonists inside the poem, rather than being drawn in, as is the case in the *Carmen de viribus*. One solution to the problem of fitting this poem into the literary tradition would be to condemn the *Carmen* to the world of

subliterary practice, a world in which superstition and magic were more common, remote from the upper class of Hellenistic or Imperial epic. Yet the *Carmen* shows ample awareness of the epic tradition, quoting Nicander and Andromachus, reworking the formulaic language of Homer, and building on the tradition of Hesiod's treatment of mythical times. It can therefore not be relegated to the level of inferior poetry so easily.

What the *Carmen de viribus* has to offer, then, is at least a very different context for magic and medicine, close to the art of epic literature, yet containing references to a wide range of objects that are to be countered by the magical powers of curative plants: for those looking for charms, witches, ghosts, demons, nightmares and their cures, in addition to love-charms and plants giving beautiful and prophetic dreams the *Carmen* is a testimonium to take into account.

## Bibliography

- Cassia 2012 = Cassia, M.: *Andromaco di Creta. Medicina e potere nella Roma neroniana*. Roma.
- Collins 2008 = Collins, D.: *Magic in the Ancient Greek World*. Malden, MA.
- Ducourthial 2003 = Ducourthial, G.: *Flore magique et astrologique de l'antiquité*. Paris.
- Effe 1977 = Effe, B.: *Dichtung und Lehre. Untersuchungen zur Typologie des antiken Lehrgedichts*. München.
- Fantuzzi 2011 = Fantuzzi, M.: "Homeric" formulaicity in the Argonautica of Apollonius of Rhodes. In: Papanghelis, Th.D./Rengakos, A. (edd.): *Brill's Companion to Apollonius Rhodius*. Second, Revised Edition. Leiden/Boston, 221–241.
- Frankfurter 2019 = Frankfurter, D. (ed.): *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic*. Leiden/Boston.
- Giangrande 1970 = Giangrande, G.: Hellenistic Poetry and Homer. *AC* 39, 46–77.
- Hardy/Totelin 2016 = Hardy, G./Totelin, L.: *Ancient Botany*. Oxford/New York.
- Heitsch 1961 = Heitsch, E.: *Die griechischen Dichterfragmente der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Band 1). Göttingen.
- 1963 = Heitsch, E.: *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu Andromachos, Markellos von Side und zum Carmen de viribus herbarum*. Göttingen.
- 1964 = Heitsch, E.: *Die griechischen Dichterfragmente der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Band 2). Göttingen.
- Hermann 1805 = Hermann, G.: *Orphica*. Leipzig.
- Jacques 2002 = Jacques, J.M.: *Nicandre. Oeuvres. Les Thériaques* (tome II). Paris.
- Kaibel 1890 = Kaibel, G.: Sententiarum. Liber quintus. *Hermes* 25, 103–109.
- Keyser/Irby-Massie 2008 = Keyser, P.T./Irby-Massie G.L. (edd.): *The Encyclopedia of Ancient Natural Scientists. The Greek Tradition and its Many Heirs*. London/New York.
- Lehrs 1867 = Lehrs, F.S.: Anonymi Carmen de herbis. In: Ameis, C./Lehrs, F.S./Dübner, F. (edd.): *Poetae bucolici et didactici*. Paris, 173–178.
- Luccioni 2006 = Luccioni, P.: Ce qui dit le poète a propos des fleurs. In: Cusset, Chr. (ed.): *Musa Docta. Recherches sur la poésie scientifique dans l'Antiquité*. Paris, 259–274.
- Maltomini 1995 = Maltomini, F.: P.Lond. 121 (= PGM VII), 1–221: Homeromanteion. *ZPE* 106, 107–122.

- Overduin 2018a = Overduin, F.: The Didactic Aesthetics of Marcellus' *De piscibus* (GDRK 63). *AJPh* 139.1, 31–57.
- 2018b = Overduin, F.: A Riddling Recipe? Philo of Tarsus' Against colic (SH 690). *Mnemosyne* 71, 593–615.
- 2019 = Overduin, F.: Elegiac pharmacology: the didactic heirs of Nicander? In: O'Rourke, D./Canevaro, L.G. (edd.): *Didactic Poetry from Homer and Hesiod Onwards: Knowledge, Power, Tradition*. Swansea, 97–122.
- (forthcoming) = Overduin, F.: Medicine, myth and magic: Some observations on the genre of *De viribus herbarum* (GDRK 64).
- Pérez-Santana 2014 = Pérez-Santana, A.: La tradición botánica griega y los nombres de las plantas del Carmen de herbis. *Estudios Clásicos* 2, 89–100.
- Toohey 1996 = Toohey, P.: *Epic Lessons. An Introduction to Ancient Didactic Poetry*. London/New York.
- Tupet 1976 = Tupet, A.M.: *La Magie dans la Poésie Latine*. Diss. Lille.
- Usher 1998 = Usher, M.D.: *Homeric Stitchings. The Homeric Centos of the Empress Eudocia*. Lanham, MD/Oxford.
- Wellmann 1894 = Wellmann, M.: Anonymi carmen graecum de herbis, *RE* 1, col. 2327.
- 1933 = Wellmann, M.: Beiträge zu Quellenanalyse des älteren Plinius. II. Teil. *Hermes* 68, 93–105.
- West 1978 = West, M.L.: *Hesiod. Works and Days*. Oxford.

**DOI 10.22315/ACD/2021/8**  
**ISSN 0418-453X (print)**  
**ISSN 2732-3390 (online)**  
**Creative Commons BY-NC 4.0**