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is translated as

Even for the knowledgeable, the tasks get vitiated by the blemishes of fate or the gods, or the human nature.

It is not impossible to divine what is meant here, but how much more idiomatically it could have been done:

Things go wrong, even for the wise, because of the iniquities of fate and of men.

The bibliographical control of source works is almost non-existent, although this is not always as disadvantageous as it might seem, since the citations are often from well-known Sanskrit texts which exist in standard vulgate editions. But to cite two lines of Sanskrit as being from the *Mahābhārata*, without giving any further indication of where the text appears in that vast epic is unhelpful in the extreme (see p. 4). Similar cases abound (e.g., the unlocated citation from the *Rāmāyaṇa* on p. 244). This laxness undoes whatever usefulness the book might have had as a bibliographical aid.

So what remains? *A source book of Indian medicine* is a very mixed bag. Browsing through the sections inevitably throws up some interesting and useful material. There are many provocative gobbits of Sanskrit medical lore to be found here. Where chapter and verse are given, this can actually contribute to scholarship. In many cases, however, the texts have to remain interesting curios, referable only to the present book.

The roman text in the work is poorly printed in a sans serif typeface throughout, which makes it very hard on the eye.

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ALBERT DIETRICH (ed.), *Die Dioskurides-Erklärung des Ibn al-Baiṭār*, Göttingen, Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991, pp. 388, illus., DM 216 (3–525–82478–5).

In 1955 a previously unreported manuscript of an unknown commentary to Dioscorides was found in Mekka and bears the title: *Tafsīr Kitāb Diyusquridūs*. Dietrich provides the Arabic text, sample plates of the manuscript, a German translation, full notes, and indices in the Greek alphabet, Latin scientific names of plants, and Arabic transliterated plant names together with transliterations of Greek and other language names. His introduction is thorough. Each of Ibn al-Baiṭār's (Bayṭār in the *DSB*) entries are referenced to sixteen sources, including Galen, Ibn Ḡulḡul, and Dietrich's previous text, translation and notes to an anonymous Arabic commentary on Dioscorides produced in the late twelfth century (*Dioscurides triumphans*, Göttingen, 1988). Ibn al-Baiṭār travelled extensively from the city of his birth, Málaga, in 1204 ACE (according to Dietrich) and died in Damascus in 1248, having travelled throughout North Africa and parts of Asia Minor. Throughout his commentary, Ibn al-Baiṭār wrote of habitats that he had seen and of nomenclature from various regions. At times, however, he referred to "Indian" words that Dietrich identifies as being Persian.

Dietrich believes that Ibn al-Baiṭār researched these notes to Dioscorides before writing the larger work on simple medicines, the famous *Kitāb al-Ġāmi*, because the latter has some corrections to the *Tafsīr*. Besides eighteen chapters in the first three books there are marginal notes in a different hand. For example, there is an added note to Book I, chapter 1, to the effect that both Galen and Dioscorides knew of a white lily in addition to the blue Florentine lily. Dietrich believes that "probably" the manuscript is an autograph (p. 20).

Ibn al-Baiṭār was a critical observer. For example, in his commentary to *lugyūn* (transliteration of Greek *lukion*, I. 102, pp. 73–4), he explains that the tree is *ḥuḍaḍ* (in Arabic) and that one of two kinds in Dioscorides was known "to us at home in Spain". After delivering more details, he said this can be known to "one who was studied Dioscorides' text, has seen the tree in its habitat, and observed how the juice is extracted through cooking the root's inner

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bark". Dietrich provides eleven notes to Ibn al-Baiṭār's commentary and, as he does in all entries, attempts to identify the plant in modern nomenclature. In this instance, however, Dietrich says, "The plant's identification is very doubtful, perhaps impossible to know". And, he references his discussion of the plant in his *Dioscurides triumphans*. The reverse happens as well. As an illustration, the plant, *lūqāganīā* (Greek: *lenkakantha*, III. 19, p. 158), Ibn al-Baiṭār glossed, "A thorny plant that I do not know." In his note, Dietrich says that it is "vielleicht" *Cirsium tuberosum* L. and may be other related species of the Composite family. At times, Dietrich is more precise than the evidence should allow. For example, he says that *qināmūmun* or cinnamon (I. 14, p. 43) is *Cinnamomum ceylanicum* Nees, but neither he nor Ibn al-Baiṭār could have known the exact species. Various cinnamon species were routinely interchanged and, besides, the plants were not known as a whole. Its bark, often ground, was an import item.

Although botany was the focus of Ibn al-Baiṭār's research, occasionally he related data on therapeutics. The reason is apparently because the plant usage could help with identification. For example, the white peony (III. 135, p. 208) is the kind employed against epilepsy. The chaste tree (*aḡnus*, I. 104, p. 75) causes one to sleep, thereby interrupting sexual desire. On this Ibn al-Baiṭār may have been a greater linguist than pharmacist because he knew that *agnos* in Greek meant "fruitless". He may have surmised that it repressed sexual desire whereas its effect was as an anti-fertility agent, not a soporific.

The question arises as to why the commentary deals only with Books 1–4 of Dioscorides' *De materia medica*. Is the manuscript incomplete or did Ibn al-Baiṭār intentionally omit Book Five? Dietrich believes the latter because the book contained medicines with wine. Ibn al-Baiṭār's Islamic scruples caused the omission. This reviewer doubts the hypothesis, because his larger work, *Kitāb al-Ġāmi*, contained mineral drugs that are discussed in Dioscorides' Book Five (and more prominently than wine-based drugs). Second, there are compelling medical reasons not to exclude alcohol-based medicines. Some plants have their active ingredients soluble only in alcohol, a fact that some physicians of the time knew empirically. Third, Ibn al-Baiṭār is called a botanist in the prefatory prayer to his work. Dietrich may be correct about the intentional exclusion of a commentary on Book Five, but his suggested reason that it is to suppress information on wine, may be wrong.

In producing the translation and scholarly notes, Dietrich acknowledges the assistance he received from a number of specialists. Because of his devotion to detail and meticulous scholarship in tracking down the nuances of a technical work, Dietrich deserves high praise. This is a work useful to us and to generations to come. Ibn al-Baiṭār *Tafsīr* is an important achievement in the science of botany; Albert Dietrich's *Ibn al-Baiṭār* is a substantial achievement in the history of botany.

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ADAM GACEK, *Arabic manuscripts in the libraries of McGill University: Union Catalogue*, Fontanus Monograph series, Montreal, McGill University Libraries, 1991, pp. xviii, 291, illus., \$56.00 (0-7717-0211-6).

The various library collections at McGill University hold over 650 Islamic manuscripts, and Adam Gacek's union catalogue of the Arabic texts now provides researchers with detailed information on 265 different compositions, the McGill copies of which have long been neglected by scholars due to the inadequate or flawed data previously available. Almost all of the traditional Islamic disciplines are represented, but the catalogue is of special importance to historians of medicine for the materials it covers from the Osler Library.¹

Sir William Osler (1849–1919) was an avid collector of rare medical books and manuscripts and built up his collection in the days when it was still possible to do so at a rapid pace and at modest prices (few of his purchases cost more than £4.00). The Osler collection today contains 79

¹See Charlotte Gray, 'The Osler Library: a collection that represents the mind of the collector', *CMA Journal*, 1978, 119: 1442–5.