

excellent discussion on abortion and the law, concluding that the reason behind the Severus–Caracalla rescript declaring abortion illegal (but not a capital offence) was not due to a shift in biological or ethical thinking but a matter of demography. There was a perception that the Roman way of life was under assault from the alien cultures within and the barbarians without. Increasing the number of Romans became a priority. Chapter 7 offers a judicious conclusion, reminding us that “in practice abortion has been an act that has little to do with high principles, and much to do with compelling circumstance” (p. 199). Konstantinos Kapparis has provided an excellent treatment of an important subject, and has shown clearly how the views of Antiquity both define and continue to influence contemporary debate. To anyone with even the slightest interest about this subject, this book is strongly recommended.

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M S Valiathan, *The legacy of Caraka*, Hyderabad, Orient Longman, 2003, pp. lxxxvi, 634, Rs 550.00 (hardback 81-250-2505-7). Distributed in UK by Sangam Books Ltd, 57 London Fruit Exchange, Brushfield Street, London E1 6EP.

The legacy of Caraka is an ambitious “retelling” of the *Caraka-saṃhitā*, the earliest extant Sanskrit medical manual dating from the early to mid-second century CE. M S Valiathan, a western-trained cardiologist, provides us with a reorganized version of the text in which he has rearranged and condensed the material found in all eight *sthānas* (“sections”) of the Sanskrit original. He has organized the material according to theme. In his introduction, Valiathan properly highlights the philosophical and religious eclecticism of the *Caraka-saṃhitā*, emphasizing its non-dogmatic nature. The text’s author, Caraka, most likely a physician at the court of Devaputra Kaniṣka, a second-century king of the Kushan empire, was, as Valiathan writes, not a “passive borrower

of ideas, and in this case whatever was borrowed, underwent a transformation in his mind” (p. ii).

Though generally a very useful book, the introduction is marred by moralizing fabulations (pp. xv–xvi). Valiathan also strains to establish a continuity of tradition from the much older *Atharva-veda*, which delineates a medicine that is largely based on the deployment of *mantras* and the bestowing of amulets, up through Caraka’s text. He writes of *Atharvan* “echoes” in the *Caraka-saṃhitā*, but “echoes” by nature are interpretively suggestive. Valiathan also states that the *Atharva-veda* “anticipates” the *tridoṣa* (or “trihumoral”) system of Caraka, but does not provide us with any textual evidence or “proof” to enforce this point of view. But that said, Valiathan includes in his introduction a most useful discussion of diseases, and by systematically plotting the recurrence of the names of disorders in Caraka’s text, he attempts to reconstruct the “epidemiologic scene . . . in Caraka’s period through the mist of twenty centuries” (p. xlvi). Fever, of course, wins.

The book is strewn with many observations—some of them quite insightful—that speculate on major *āyurvedic* theories (particularly on *tridoṣa* and *vega*, or “urge”) and how they may be thought about in terms of western medical science. As long as we remain solidly in the realm of analogy and do not wander into the problematic realm of correspondence, such speculations are useful, and can serve to deepen a reader’s understanding of how these theories “work” in a physiological sense.

Valiathan’s section on *rasas* (“tastes”) is particularly good, and the tables that he provides are of great value (e.g. Table 16.1, pp. 107–8, which lists food incompatibilities). He has also chosen to condense the more unwieldy and elaborate portions of the *Caraka-saṃhitā*, but he never does so without alerting readers to the fact. His “digests” are made with great care—Valiathan never sacrifices the underlying logics and principles prevailing in these portions; in fact, they shine through a bit more clearly than in the original text precisely *because* of his condensations. The words of modern science and medicine do creep in now and then—“ova”, for instance—and translators as well as the new

redactors of Caraka such as Valiathan would do well to avoid making such equations whenever possible (but this is admittedly hard to avoid). Valiathan's decision to provide digests for the lengthier chapters works especially well in his treatments of the *Kalpa* and *Siddhi-sthānas* (the sections on "pharmacology" and "cures" respectively), where literally hundreds of formulas for emetics and purgatives are listed.

The legacy of Caraka will prove useful as a reference book, and I can imagine assigning sections of it for use in general introductory courses on South Asian cultures and civilizations as well as in more specialized courses on medical anthropology and the history of medicine. Valiathan concludes his book with a list of botanical terms and an excellent glossary. Reading the entire book will help to attune the reader's own intuitions and expectations about how the systems of *āyurveda* work.

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Medicinal plants in folk tradition: an ethnobotany of Britain and Ireland, Portland, OR, and Cambridge, Timber Press, 2004, pp. 431, illus., £22.50 (hardback 0-88192-638-8).

Anyone wanting to know the folkloric uses of a British plant would probably consult one of the standard herbals: John Gerard's *Herball or Generall historie of plantes* (1597), John Parkinson's *Theatrum botanicum* (1640), Nicholas Culpeper's *Complete herbal and English physician enlarged* (1681), William Salmon's *Botanologia: the English herbal* (1710), Elizabeth Blackwell's *Curious herbal* (1737), William Withering's *Botanical arrangement of British plants* (1787–92), or Mrs M Grieve's *Modern herbal* (1931), my favourite. But they might be misled, for those herbalists generally derived their information from Greek and Latin herbals, such as those of Dioscorides and Apuleius Platonius, ignoring information relevant to the British Isles; about a half of the plants included by

Gerard, for example, are not native to Britain.

For the last seventeen years David Allen has been following a different path altogether, seeking out information about the uses of herbs in Britain and Ireland from purely local sources. And at last, with the help of Gabrielle Hatfield, he has produced the work of scholarship that his many years of labour promised.

The results confirm two views that I have long held: that folkloric medicinal uses of herbs do not reflect their true pharmacological properties, except occasionally by chance, and that the more indications a plant is said to have the less likely it is that any of them is actually beneficial. This does not bode well for ethnopharmacologists interested in finding new therapeutic uses for plants. For example, we find here ten remedies for gout, including *Bryonia dioica* (white bryony), *Sambucus nigra* (elder), *Tanacetum vulgare* (tansy), and *Verbena officinalis* (vervain), none of which is efficacious, to my knowledge. But *Colchicum autumnale*, the source of colchicine, is listed for measles, jaundice, and the procurement of abortion, not gout. Herbs used to treat cancers include *Chelidonium majus* (greater celandine), *Conium maculatum* (hemlock), *Rumex acetosa* (sorrel), and *Taraxacum officinale* (dandelion), but not *Vinca major*, which contains powerful anti-cancer drugs. *Vinca* is listed, however, as being useful for cuts and bruises, nosebleeds and toothache, hysteria and nightmares, colic and cramp. Don't try it at home, is my advice.

Now a pharmacologist, disappointed with the effects of these remedies, might not be tempted to investigate the list of nearly thirty plants supposedly useful for asthma, including *Allium ursinum* (ramson), *Inula helenium* (elecampane), and *Verbascum thapsus* (great mullein). But if so he would miss a gem. For the list includes *Datura stramonium* (thorn apple), the source of an anticholinergic drug that is beneficial in asthma. The remedies with real effects often stand out in having only one major recognized use. Consider *Claviceps purpurea* (ergot), the rye-infecting fungus that causes smooth muscle contraction. It has only one credited action, a tonic effect on the uterus,