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BETWEEN LITERARY TRADITION AND CULTURAL CHANGE

THE POETIC AND DOCUMENTARY PRODUCTION OF DIOSCORUS OF APHRODITE

Jean-Luc Fournet

Dioscorus of Aphrodite is a well-known figure in the field of papyrological studies, but at the same time he is hardly ever mentioned in histories of Greek literature and culture. Dioscorus became a familiar name among scholars of papyri from the discovery of a jar filled with papyri in the village of Kûm Ishqâw, ancient Aphrodite, Middle Egypt, in 1905. This jar contained classic literary works by Homer and Menander, documentary material and, even more remarkably, occasional poems contemporary with this documentary archive. Papyrologists soon realised that the key figure to this collection was a certain Dioscorus, the writer of part of the documentary texts, the owner and reader of the books, and the author of the occasional poems. The study of this archive provides us with the opportunity to reconstruct the family of Dioscorus, his career and his background. Born c. 525 into a Coptic family which was so influential in Aphrodite that it practically held a monopoly over the village, Dioscorus conducted his affairs as a landowner as well as those of his village. Therefore, the papyri of this archive shed a most brilliant light upon sixth-century Egypt in all its different aspects.¹

Papyrologists have generally recognised the great value of the documentary texts of Dioscorus's archive as a source for their historical knowledge. However, these scholars are more reserved, and even sceptical, in their evaluation of his poetic production. This poetic œuvre encompasses fifty-one compositions at present,² the majority of which are written in dactylic hexameter, while some are in iambic trimeter. With the exception of some poems on mythological subjects, these poetical writings primarily

¹ For further details on Dioscorus and his background, see the excellent studies by Maspero, 'Un dernier poète grec' and by Bell, 'An Egyptian Village'. The most recent synthesis is by MacCoull, *Dioscorus of Aphrodite*.

² See Fournet, *Hellénisme* (=P. *Aphrod. Lit.* IV).

belong to the genre of the *enkômion*, or eulogy: the poems are addressed to prominent persons on the occasion of, for instance, their installation in a public function or their birthdays; some of these writings are epithalamia. The poems have only survived in the form of rough copies in the poet's handwriting on sheets of papyrus which had often been re-used. Since their discovery and their partial publication by Jean Maspero, these poems have been subject to the mockery of the academic world. It was not until the 1980s that they began to be judged less negatively and even became regarded as objects of interest. Nevertheless, Dioscorus has remained merely a footnote in histories of literature, and he has most often been ignored by Hellenists not concerned with the study of papyri.

I believe, however, that Dioscorus's papyri may well illustrate the issues of knowledge, learning and cultural change that are central to this volume. In the first place, Dioscorus's work signifies a perfect paradigm of a rural elite culture in a hellenised province of the Late Roman empire; a culture which can be understood and reconstructed in a quasi-archeological way thanks to this papyrological find. Furthermore, the scope and variety of this ensemble make it possible to understand the processes of acquiring knowledge and learning: the books of Dioscorus's library shed light on the development of the pupil or the reader; the drafts of the poems very concretely show how this acquired culture was subsequently employed for the production of new materials; the documentary archive illustrates the use of literary culture for practical and pragmatic ends. Finally, being embedded in particular traditions, his writing testifies to changes that affected the Greek culture in that period. As will be demonstrated, Dioscorus well exemplifies the tension between tradition and change, tension which brings forth a new culture of writing.

Traditions in poetry and rhetoric

An examination of the poetry of Dioscorus reveals first and foremost that his poetic writings fitted in with the traditions marking the Greek culture of Late Antiquity. For one thing, Dioscorus chose to express himself in verse, and particularly in dactylic hexameter. Thus, he was related to, and was the last representative of, a poetic movement current in third- and fourth-century Upper Egypt: what can be called the poetic school of the Thebaid, as brilliantly analysed by Alan Cameron.³ After all, did Eunapius not state in his *Life of Sophists*, 493, that the Egyptians were absolutely mad about poetry: ἔθνος ἐπὶ ποιητικῇ μὲν σφόδρα μαίνονται? In fact, it was Upper Egypt that provided late Hellenism with its last great poets. I only mention

³ Cameron, 'Wandering Poets'.

those who were most important or rather whose works have been partly preserved: Triphiodorus (by 300), author of *The Taking of Ilios*; Cyrus of Panopolis (fifth century), writer of epigrams surviving through *The Palatine Anthology*; Pamprepius of Panopolis (fifth century), author of several lost poems and of an *Ekphrasis* preserved in a Vienna papyrus; Colluthus of Lycopolis (fifth/sixth century), writer of *The Rape of Helen*; Christodorus of Coptos (491/518), author of an *Ekphrasis* (*Palatine Anthology II*); Musaeus, who is named Θηβαῖος in manuscripts (sixth century), author of the delightful *Hero and Leander*; and especially Nonnus of Panopolis (fifth century), to whom we owe a *Paraphrase of the Gospel According to John* in hexameters as well as a lengthy epic poem consisting of forty-eight books, *The Dionysiaca*. Over the past few decades many contributions have been made to a re-evaluation of this epic poetry from Late Antique Egypt and of its strong influence on Greek poetry from the rest of the Empire. There is no need to dwell on it here.

The writings of Dioscorus not only add to the corpus by Theban poets, but they also are intrinsically influenced by some of them. Apart from Homer, the person who had the greatest impact on Dioscorus was Nonnus of Panopolis (fifth century), the greatest representative of the Theban poetic movement. There are numerous quotations of words, word groups and even nearly complete lines from *The Paraphrase of the Gospel According to John* and from *The Dionysiaca*.⁴ After Nonnus, the work which had the strongest influence on Dioscorus is (less unexpectedly) the *Paraphrase of the Psalms* by Pseudo-Apollinarius of Laodicea,⁵ who is strongly suspected to be an Egyptian.⁶ Musaeus and Pamprepius were also read by Dioscorus, since their texts are cited sporadically by him.⁷ Thus, Dioscorus appears to have been quite familiar with the Theban poetic tradition, from which he consciously sought inspiration, and which he perpetuated in his own way.

The other tradition that Dioscorus's poetry thrives on is encomiastic rhetoric, the quasi-obligatory mould for all literary production in that age. His work is in accordance with this tradition on every level: occasion, content and ornament.

First of all, the occasion, or, to use the terminology of ancient rhetoricians, the *hypothesis*. Dioscorus follows the prescriptions outlined by treatises of epideictic rhetoric, in that he composes his poems on the occasion of events that traditionally constitute the *impetus* for a public speaker and that are connected with power, i.e., at a provincial level, the *adventus*, mar-

⁴ Cf. *P.Aphrod. Lit.*, p. 678, note 51.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 679, note 54.

⁶ Cf. Golega, *Der homerische Psalter*, p. 171; Cameron, 'The Empress', p. 239.

⁷ Cf. *P.Aphrod. Lit.*, p. 680, note 56.

riage or birthday of the governor. Thus, half of the poems of Dioscorus are *enkômia* of *adventus*,⁸ *enkômia* of birthdays,⁹ and epithalamia.¹⁰ The other half belongs to another category: the petition-like poems which I shall discuss below.¹¹ But in fact, some of these pieces, while being petitions, celebrate at the same time the *adventus* of the emperor or governor to whom they are dedicated (*P.Aphrod.Lit.* IV 10; 11), thus showing Dioscorus's intention of utilising the major occasions for encomiastic rhetoric. Dioscorus reproduces the same scheme even for inferior officials taking up their posts (*P.Aphrod.Lit.* IV 16).

The content of the poems is entirely reliant upon the conventions outlined by theorists of rhetoric (Menander Rhetor and Pseudo-Dionysius of Halicarnassus, author of the *Tekhnê peri tôn panêgurikôn*). One finds the same *topoi* in the poetry of Dioscorus, dealt with in a very similar way, although in a rather chaotic order.

Even in his ornamentation of discourse, Dioscorus relies upon the rhetorical conventions of the eulogy: particular enumerations of comparisons (*synkriseis*) or mythical *exempla* used by the poet can be traced back to the handbooks of rhetoric, and reveal that Dioscorus applied these conventions quasi-automatically.¹²

As is indicated by a passage from his writing, Dioscorus had probably read the works of Menander Rhetor.¹³ It is possible that he even owned his treatises. In any case, thanks to the information given in a papyrus in Berlin, it is known that the work of this rhetorician circulated throughout Byzantine Egypt.¹⁴ Dioscorus, however, may have known this author only through *compendia*, perhaps studied at school. It needs to be noted that the two traditions of poetry and rhetoric, which I have just mentioned, were part of the system of learning: poetry and rhetoric were core subjects taught at the last two levels of classical schools, and consequently they became the established modes of expression for any author; two modes of expression that became intertwined as in the work of Dioscorus, and that determined the entire cultural production of the period.

⁸ *P.Aphrod.Lit.* IV 17-20; see also 39 and 40.

⁹ *P. Aphrod.Lit.* IV 21-24; 31(?).

¹⁰ *P.Aphrod.Lit.* IV 32-36; 37(?), 50.

¹¹ pp. 110-111.

¹² See, for example, the annotations to *P.Aphrod.Lit.* IV 5, 11-12; 7, 16-17; 33, 11-20.

¹³ See the annotations to *P.Aphrod.Lit.* IV 5-7.

¹⁴ Cf. Maehler, 'Menander Rhetor and Alexander Claudius'.

I shall not further elaborate upon these two aspects of the poetry of Dioscorus, for they are generally known. In my view it is more interesting to discuss the transformations or the subversions to which these traditions are subject based upon Dioscorus's poems and which, since they may not be particular to Dioscorus, must be considered as illustrations of a change in sensibility and the cultural modes of the period.

The first transformation has to do with the appearance and development of Christian themes. It is not appropriate to speak of innovation in this respect. Since the fourth century, poetry had dealt with Christian subjects, as is clear from the poems in the *Codex des Visions* of the Bodmer Foundation,¹⁵ or as can be gathered from the fact that Apollinarius of Laodicea and his son translated the Old and New Testament in verse.¹⁶ Moreover, the two metaphrases by Nonnus and Pseudo-Apollinarius challenge the presumption that using Christian themes in Homerising poetry was an anomaly. However, in any case, these works illustrate a pagan setting – or rather a classical setting – of Christian content. The work of Dioscorus gives us the opportunity to become aware of a most remarkable phenomenon: a hybrid form of Christian and classical elements that seem to me characteristic of Protobyzantine art. Thus, in the eulogy for the chancellor of the praetorium prefect (*P.Aphrod.Lit.* IV 7), a quotation from the Psalms, adapted to the requirements of metre, precedes a comparison with Orpheus, Nestor and Achilles:

τοῖον ἔπος κατάλεξον ἕως παρεμύθετο θυμός·
5 ὅτι τέττιγξ πολύυμνος ἔχει δέμας ὀπλότ[ατον],
νυκταδίη μελεδῶνι Θεὸν κατ' ὄρεσφι λιγαί[ν]ει.
Κλυτὸς εὐκλείης βασιλεὺς Θεὸς [ύ]μνον ἀκούει.
...
15 Ὀρφέα Καλλιόπης ἐνίκησας ἐτητυμί[ησιν].
Μῦθον ἐπ' ἐννεσίησι τεὸν ποθέουσ[ιν] ἔπαρχοι.
Νέστωρ οὐ λάθην ἄλλος, [Ἀχιλλε]ῦς ἄμμ[ι]ν ἐτύχθης
ἰστάμενος προβολ [..]. [.....] ἔπλεο τοῖσδε
νόσφιν ἀλιφροσύν[ης]

¹⁵ See *Vision de Dorotheos*, papyrus Bodmer XXIX (ed. Hurst, Reverdin and Rudhardt) and *Codex des Visions*, Papyri Bodmer XXX-XXXVII. For further details see Fournet, 'Une éthopée'.

¹⁶ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, V 18; Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, III 16.

(If people told me that I was too audacious in praising you), here is what I would say while my heart encourages me: 'The cicada, despite its prolific sound, has a very tiny body. However, watching by night in the mountains, it sings of God. And God, the illustrious king of fame [cf. Ps. 23. 7-10¹⁷] listens to its hymn ...'. Verily, you have surpassed Orpheus, the son of Calliope. The prefects look for advice from your speeches. You could pass for a new Nestor. You are actually our Achilles, raising up as a rampart ...without his vanity ...

In another epithalamium (*P. Aphrod. Lit.* IV 34), the Christian God appears next to Dionysus and the divinised Nile:

Ἀκλινέως κατέμαρψαν εἰκότε Βελλεροφόντη.
Μήνιν ἀμφιέπουσιν ἀγαλλομένην ὑμεναίοις,
10 [π]υροφόρου χαρίεντας ἐπ' ἄνθεσιν αὔλακας αἴης,
ῥηιδίως Διόνυσον ἐνὶ στεφέεσσι κ(αὶ) Νεῖλον.
Ῥυσάμενος πολύτεκνον αἰεὶ Θεὸς ἐγγυαλίξοι
οὐλομένης ἀπάνευθεν γάμον προφερέστατον ἄλλω(ν).

They had no trouble finding one another, similar to Bellerophon.¹⁸ They benefit from the favours bestowed by the Moon, who rejoices in their marriage, from the favours bestowed by the furrows of the wheat-bearing earth which adorn themselves with graceful flowers, by the diligent Dionysos with his crowned head and by the Nile. Offering protection against a fatal misfortune, may God grant them an eternal marriage that surpasses all others and from which numerous children will be born.

A reversal of the phenomenon occurs in Dioscorus's prose petitions, the prosaic form and the elocutionary situation not necessarily implying a recourse to pagan stereotypes – quite the contrary. For instance, in one of these petitions (*P. Cair. Masp.* I 67020, 5-6), Dioscorus refers to Zeus shortly after having evoked God:

... μετὰ τὸν δέσ[π]οτ(α) Θεόν, εὐεργέτα καὶ τὸν (...) προστάτα
πάσης τῆς ἐπαρχείας, ὡς ἀπὸ Διὸς γένους λελάχατε αἶμα τῷ ἀληθ
εἶ.

¹⁷ Pseudo-Apollinarius uses the same biblical expression in his *Paraphrase of the Psalms* XIII 17,22.

¹⁸ For more information on the figure of Bellerophon, originally classical but transformed by Christianity, see Fournet, 'Un nouvel épithalame', pp. 77-78.

(... You are...) after God our master, our benefactor and patron of the whole eparchy, because, truly, you are of a blood which springs from the race of Zeus.

This phenomenon of hybridisation even takes place on a lexical level: the best example is the subversion created by Dioscorus assigning a Christian significance to the Homeric expression οὐ κατὰ κόσμον which normally has an almost contrary meaning. In a poem in which he celebrates the installation of the new governor, the duke of Thebaid (*P.Aphrod.Lit.* IV 26), Dioscorus writes in line 8:

Ἦλυθες οὐ κατὰ κόσμον αἰεὶ σκέψαι ναετῆρας

You have come to protect the inhabitants for eternity οὐ κατὰ κόσμον.

Giving this expression the Homeric meaning ('in a disorganised, indecent manner') would result in absurdity. Given the context, οὐ κατὰ κόσμον can only have positive connotations. Yet, in the Christian era the word κόσμος ('order') could signify 'the world as opposed to God's order'. The duke thus seems to have come to protect the inhabitants according to principles that do not correspond to the order here below.

Even if this hybridisation of motifs belonging to two cultural worlds so far apart may seem remarkable, it is not surprising: paganism is tolerated as long as it is cultural and not religious.

However, a Christian sensibility lies behind this classical form which implicitly questions the role of this 'antiquarian' paganism. This is revealed by the subversion on the part of Dioscorus of one of the essential figures of rhetorical discourse: the comparison. Any comparison with grand figures from classical mythology is thus modified by an emphasis on the inferiority of the classical figures in relation to the person praised in the poem. For example, in *P.Aphrod.Lit.* IV 33 one can read:

- Εὐρώπην σὺ φέρεις εἰς οἰκίον, οὐκ ἐπὶ πό[ντω],
15. Λήδης λ[έκτρα φέρεις, ἀλλ]λ' οὐ πτερύγεσσι κομ[ίζεις].
Νυμφίε, μὴ .ττεσ..ονυ. καὶ γὰρ Ἀπόλλω[ν]
ἠδυβόλων πολύυμνος ἐδέξατο κέντρον Ἐρώ[των].
Δάφνην γὰρ δι' ἔρωτας αἰεὶ Δαφναῖος Ἀπόλλων.
Δάφνην καὶ σὺ φέρεις, ἀλλ' οὐ φεύγουσαν, ἀκοίτην.
20 Μύρια Φοῖβος ἔτευξε καὶ οὐκ ἐτύχησεν ἐρώτω(ν).

ⁿ ^h It is *α* Europa that you lead to your house, and not over the sea; it is a Leda that you marry, without transporting her on wings. O fiancé, do not [...], for the beautifully singing Apollo himself has also felt the sting of sweet-darting Loves: because of his love for Daphne, Apollo is forever 'the Daphnean'. You as well, you take as your wife a Daphne, who will not flee.¹⁹ The works of Phoebus have been numerous without his knowing the workings of love.

This modification of the *synkr̥dis̥dis* could certainly be considered proof of a change in sensibility caused by the triumph of Christianity. Even more illuminating is *P.Aphrod.Lit.* IV 34, 4:

Κύπριδος οὐκ ἐνόησεν ἀεικέα δ' ἔργα τελέσσαι

(Isaac and his wife) have never envisaged accomplishing the indecent works of Cypris.

Breaking with the conventions of rhetoricians (Menander Rhetor, 400, 5; 402; 6; 404, 25; 407, 7; 11; 409, 7; 411, 13), Dioscorus does not represent Aphrodite in the positive role of the divinity of marriage, but as the incarnation of wanton desire. It is in this line that one may best detect the changes in the traditional rhetorical models brought about by Christianity.

Nevertheless, classical Greek culture continued to be the referential framework for men of quality. The new Christian culture was not considered as oppositional, but complementary to pagan culture. One can therefore speak of a bicultural world, or, more precisely, of a Christian culture which integrated the classical heritage, which appropriated classical models and authorised explicit references to ancient paganism, inasmuch as it was not given a religious meaning, but was considered as a sign of culture. This tolerance points to the irreversible triumph of Christianity, and at the same time to a 'patrimonial' respect for the ancient Hellenic culture.

The other process of transformation that is manifested by the work of Dioscorus has to do with the strongly private nature of his poems. Put differently, Dioscorus subverts the encomiastic poetic tradition by appropriating this tradition for personal ends. He has done so in two ways:

1. There is a clear subversion of the tradition of Theban historical *enkōmia*. This genre of *enkōmia* constituted one of the most characteristic features of the Theban poetic school, as has been discussed above and as has been

¹⁹ The sentence can also be constructed as follows: Δάφνην καὶ σὺ φέρεις, ἀλλ' οὐ φεύγουσαν ἀκοίτην 'You take a Daphne who will not flee her husband'.

enunciated by T. Viljamaa.²⁰ These *enkōmia* are epic poems depicting Thebaid as subject to barbarian attacks (principally by the Blemmyes), but finally as being saved by a general whose achievements in war are celebrated. Dioscorus takes over this conventional scheme, but transfers it to his own personal misfortune. To give some examples:

a) The Thebans greet their saviour. This theme can be found in two historical *enkōmia*:

Heitsch Suppl. 10.9:

Θ[ήβ]η μὴ τρομέοις, οὐκ ὄρχαμος ἄλλος ἀμ[είνων]

Thebes, do not tremble any longer, there is no better leader.

Heitsch XXXVI r^oa, 16-17:

ἐνναέται Θήβης σταχυωδέο[ς] ὑμνεῖουσιν
[.... τειρ]ομένοισιν ἀλεξίκακόν σε φανέντα

The inhabitants of Thebes' wheatland celebrate you who appear ending the sufferings of those who are hard-pressed by [...]

Compare these passages with *P.Aphrod.Lit.* IV 10, 21-24, which describes the Thebaid greeting the new duke, Athanasius.

Δέχνησο, πότνια Θήβη, [ὄν ο]ὐκ ἐδάμ[ασ]σαν α.[
ν[α]ῖ τὸν Ἀθανάσιον, κρ[α]τερὸν ῥυτῆ[ρα] πολ[ήων].
οὐ γὰρ ἔτι Βλεμύων γένος ὄψεαι, οὐ Σαρακηνῶ(ν),
οὐ τρόμον ἀνδροφόνου ληίστορος ὄμμασι λεύσης.

Receive, august Thebes, him who has not been tamed by the [...] yes! Athanasius, the most forceful saviour of cities. For you will no longer see the tribes of the Blemmyes nor of the Saracens. You will no longer witness the fear caused by the murderous looter.

However, Dioscorus's intention becomes clear at the end of the same poem (line 45):

χεῖραν ἐμοὶ ἀτάνυsson ἐμὴν πενίην διαλύειν

²⁰ See Viljamaa, *Studies*, pp. 45-54.

Stretch out your hand to me to end my poverty.

b) Dioscorus alludes to the Blemmyes in a eulogy for a duke of Thebaid (*P.Aphrod.Lit.* IV 11, 81-82):

Τοῦνε[κα γ]ουνάζομαί [σ]ε πανάλκιμον Ἡρακλῆα,
πήμ[ατ'] ἀποπτύειν [Β]λεμύων γένο[υ]ς ἦτοι βοηθῶν,

That is why I beg you, almighty Heracles, to banish the evil caused by this tribe of ~~the~~ Blemmyes, I mean the adjutores.

The poet compares the *adjutores* ('assistants'), who plunder his fields, with the Blemmyes, who once terrorised the Thebaid. Thus, one can speak of a transference of a theme characteristic of the historical *enkōmia* to the present circumstances of the poet.

What takes place is a narrowing down of perspective, from the collective to the individual. The arrival of the general saviour of the Theban people that occurs in the *enkōmia* has been transformed into the *adventus* of the duke to whom Dioscorus appeals for help; the call for help from the Thebaid has turned into the request for assistance that Dioscorus makes to the authorities; the plundering Blemmyes have changed into extorting local officials. Dioscorus thus preserves the schematic framework of the Theban *enkōmia*, but fills this framework with a content marked by personal interest.

2. This subversion for personal ends goes even further as it affects the genre of Dioscorus's poetry. In spite of belonging to the tradition of encomiastic poetry, his poems are less concerned with praise than with the assertion of self-interest. A major part of these poems are similar to petitions. Take, for example, *P.Aphrod.Lit.* IV 1:

1 ὦ πολίαρχε μέγιστε βοηθόε πᾶσιν ἀνάγκης,
κλῦθι πονιομένου Παφίης χθονὸς ἐνναετῆρος,
δέξεο ἡμῆς γενιῆς τὰ δυσίμερα δάκρυα μόχθων·
πολλά μοι ἐν γραφίδεσσι χαράγματα οἴκοθεν ἦχθη,
5 ὅττι καὶ Γαβριήλις χερεῖονα τῶν πρὶν ἔερξεν
Πενταπολίτης Θεόδωρος ἀτάσθαλα ἔργα καὶ αὐτός
ἡμετέρων σφετέρισσεν ἄλωων καρπὸν ἀπούρας.
Χῶρον ἅπαντα θέριζε μελισταγέων σταφυλάων.
Θρέμματα ἡδὲ βόας πόρεν Ἄρσᾶ κτήματα πάντα,
10 οὔνεκεν ἐνδεκάτης Θεοδόσσιος ὧν λάβε χρυσῶν,

[ἡμετ]έρης γενιῆς βιοτήσιον. Νῦν δὲ φαεινῶν
[σοῦ πρ]οκυλ[ι]νδόμενος πόδας ἰχνῶν, ὕψος ἄρειον

O greatest ruler of the city, general assistance against distress, listen to an inhabitant of the land of the Paphian (=Aphrodite) in his suffering. Receive the sad tears of pain from my family. I have brought from home many documents testifying that Gabriellus has committed worse crimes than the acts of violence formerly accomplished by Theodorus of Pentapolis: he himself stole and appropriated the fruit from our threshing floors; he reaped entirely the honey-dripping grapes of our vineyard. Flocks, cattle, our entire property he gave to Arsas, because of the sums of gold due for the eleventh indiction, which Theodosius had stolen from us, the resources of our family. And at present, knelt at your radiant feet, O martial highness, ... (the ending has not been written).

I have proposed elsewhere to consider these petition-like poems as pieces which accompanied the petitions in prose delivered to the authorities.²¹ If Dioscorus is by far the best representative of petitions in verse, a parallel in Latin, poem XIII by Sidonius Apollinaris, seems to demonstrate that the genre was more widely used than we could have thought on the basis of the extant literary sources and papyri. In any case, this genre shows how the encomiastic poetic tradition may have been taken over and employed to assert the claims and to voice the needs of a citizen. The poetry thus seems to have shifted from its earlier function to a concern with a subject matter traditionally reserved for the document. This phenomenon, as illustrated mainly by the work of Dioscorus, reveals the way in which knowledge, in a poetical-rhetorical form, became invested with a practical significance and in which a culture of erudition, mingled with archaism and artifice, changed into a mode of acting engaged in the present.

The emergence of a new culture of writing

These changes mark the emergence of a new culture. One of its characteristics is the primacy of writing. Encomiastic poetry and rhetoric had been essentially oral mediums of expression and part of a communal system: the *enkômia* were traditionally declaimed in front of a community assembled for important events. Dioscorus shows us that encomiastic poetry could be delivered in a written form and be addressed to a single individual: the compositional structure and function of his poems give us strong reasons to believe that they were not recited in public, but sent or presented as written

²¹ Cf. *P.Aphrod.Lit.*, p. 263.

texts in order to make personal requests.²² This shift from a political function to the private domain is accompanied by a passage from oral to written expression. Poetry and rhetoric, enlarging their sphere of activity and invading the area of writing, had from now on a deeper impact which is illustrated, for instance, by the language used in documents, even the most common ones, such as letters.

An examination of the work of Dioscorus reveals that the other characteristic of this new culture was the interaction of literature and the document, to take up two concepts used by papyrologists.²³ One could actually speak of a 'documentarisation' of literature. As has been seen with the petition-like poems by Dioscorus, poetry came to serve the writing of documents, and even became a sort of document itself. More generally, the most renowned authors, such as Homer and Menander, obtained a practical role: their writings became as it were handbooks used to compose all sorts of written deeds.

A reverse, but actually complementary, development also took place: the 'literarisation' of the document. The generic boundaries between documentary and literary texts became more and more blurred. Quotations and paraphrases from works by famous authors invaded the documentary genre, and vocabulary derived from poetry was increasingly adopted. Even in daily life one tried to assert one's culture: in writing a letter, a petition or a contract, people attempted to style their texts as works of literature. This phenomenon shows to what extent the society of Late Antiquity was imbued with culture. As a result, the literary quality of documents increased greatly, even if they sometimes fell into a convoluted sophistication. The corpus of Dioscorus, consisting of both literary and documentary texts, exemplifies this phenomenon. Even when he drafts a document, Dioscorus continues to be a poet. That is the case with the majority of his petitions. The petition, a text in which a subject notifies the authorities of a crime of which he has been the victim, and for which he demands justice, often begins at this period with a very elaborate introduction praising the virtues of the official who is addressed. This introductory part resembles an *enkômion* influenced by Greek rhetorical conventions. However, the influence of literature is not restricted to this. It can be observed throughout the text, be it in the quotations or in the vocabulary. I cite only one example, *SB XIV 11856* (= *P.Berl.Brash.* 19). This is a petition sent by a *colonus* to his patron, probably dictated by Dioscorus or recopied based upon a model written by him.²⁴

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²² Cf. *P.Aphrod.Lit.*, p. 269, note 10.

²³ Cf. *P.Aphrod.Lit.*, pp. 684-687.

²⁴ Cf. Fournet, 'À propos de *SB XIV 11856*'. From this earlier publication I have taken over the text and the remarks with regard to idiom.

† Τῶ ἐμῶ] ἀγαθῶ δεσπότη καὶ φιλανθρωπευεργέτ[η
]..ον φιλ[ο]πτωχωτάταν μεγαλοπρ[επ
] Δωροθέῳ ἐμῷ γεούχῳ [
]κος.. λαμπροῦ ὑμῶ[ν
 5]σοιω φυλάττοι τὴν ὑμ[ε]τέρα[ν]..[
 λ]αμπροτάτων καὶ τριποθή[τ]ων α.[]..ησ[
 ‘μ]έλιτος γλυκίων ῥέεν αὐδὴ’ ἐπὶ μήκι[στον χρόνον
]αν ἀναθάλλουσαν τυχεῖν ὅσων ἐρᾶτε α[
 τ]ρόποις καὶ καιροῖς· εἰς τί μὴν οὖν, δέσπο[τα,
 10]μενον καὶ παναγαθοσύνης ἔργον τῆς η[
]ου μεγάλης τοῦ δεσπότη Θεοῦ καὶ παμβα[σιλέως
]..χεῖραν ὀρέξαι μοι δικαιοσύνης καὶ εὐλ[αβείας
 τυγχ]άνω κακούμενος μετὰ τῶν δούλων ὑ[μῶν υἱῶν μου
]ων ἀνακείμενος τυγχάνω δυσεντερικὰ σπ[άσματα
 15 ἀ]λγηδόνας ἀσηχῆς· διόλου ὑπάρχων μαλι[
 ‘μετὰ] τῶν νηπίων τέκνων ἐφ’ ὅτι ἄπρακ[τος
]..ικὸς ἐκ χειρῶν ἀπραγείας ἵνα ὁ Θεὸς ἀντ[
 ν^ο εὐχαρι]στήσω ὑμῖν διὰ παντός, ἐν πολλοῖς δὲ κα[ιροῖς
]ου †

One discovers:

- a quotation from Homer's *Iliad*, I 249 (l. 7) and a fragment of iambic trimeter (l. 8. τύχειν ὅσων ἐρᾶτε) that can also be found in a poem by Dioscorus;²⁵
- poetic or, more generally, literary expressions: χεῖραν ὀρέξαι μοι δικαιοσύνης καὶ εὐλ[αβείας] (l. 12) which combines the Homeric phrase χεῖρα ὀρέξαι (cf. *Il.* XXIV 73, and subsequently Euripides, *Phoenissae*, 103) with a qualitative genitive (an artistic device often used in poetry from Late Antiquity); χειρῶν ἀπραγείας (l. 17), another qualitative genitive with particular connotations;
- poetic vocabulary: the epic adjective ἀσηχῆς (written ἀσηχῆς), similarly used by Homer to express pain, *Il.* XV 25; the Homeric expression νηπίων τέκνων (*Il.* IV 238, VI 95, 276, 310, XI 113, XVII 223, XXII 63, XXIV 730; *Od.* XII 42, XIV 264, XVII 433);
- rare words with literary connotations: φιλανθρωπευεργέτης (l. 1),²⁶ παναγαθοσύνη (l. 10).

²⁵ *P.Aphrod.Lit.*, IV, 27,2 (Dioscorus).

²⁶ A word that one only finds in another petition by Dioscorus, *P.Lond.* V 1677, 2.

The interaction between literature and document reveals several phenomena: the importance accorded to literature and book knowledge, and to poetry in particular, in Late Antiquity; and, most importantly, the fact that in Late Antiquity society came to conceive of writing as unitary: a literary text was no longer necessarily viewed as the opposite of the document, since both forms were subject to the same rules of writing and composition inspired by poetry and rhetoric. This development of a unitary concept of writing, which is so different from our twenty-first-century notions, had enormous consequences: the Byzantines did not distinguish technical learning from literary culture, as is indicated by the fact that the highest posts of administration might not be given to experts in law or civil administration, but to men of letters, and to poets in particular. Thus poets such as Cyrus, Olympiodorus, Claudian or Pamprepus – all descending from Egypt and the Thebaid in particular – became very high officials of the Empire. At a provincial level Dioscorus himself was living proof of this custom: his poetic skills, although elementary, very likely helped him to obtain the post of notary during his stay in the ducal capital of the Thebaid, Antinoopolis. Furthermore, the title of *scholastikos* assigned to Dioscorus (*P.Cair.Masp.* I 67064) is significant in that it implies both literary and legal studies. Such an ambivalence typifies at best this tendency towards non-specialisation, and the confidence placed in literary knowledge by the society of Late Antiquity.²⁷

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BETWEEN LITERARY TRADITION AND CULTURAL
CHANGE:
THE POETIC AND DOCUMENTARY PRODUCTION OF
DIOSCORUS OF APHRODITO

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