

Cabinet de lecture

Review of: Volkert Haas (with the assistance of Daliah Bawanypeck), *Materia Magica et Medica Hethitica*, 2 vols., Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003, pp. xx + 922, ISBN 3-11-017749-8.

Martin Worthington

Two years ago, a letter to the editors of this journal (*JMC* 2 (2003):14-5) enquired in passing whether Cuneiform medical texts make therapeutic use of saliva. This is precisely the sort of question which one would often like to ask, but is difficult to answer, for the Mesopotamian medical corpus is still largely unedited (though several forthcoming works promise to improve the situation), and even if it were edited, trawling through myriad different books and journals in search of occurrences of e.g. saliva would be quite a chore. The dictionaries help, of course, but not completely. What one would like to be able to turn to is an encyclopaedic compendium of *materia medica*. The good news is that one such work now exists: *Materia Magica et Medica Hethitica* (*MMMMH*) furnishes a catalogue of all the substances used in healing by the Hittites.

The project was first thought of in 1969, when Volkert Haas was working on the botanical series *Uruanna* under the direction of the late Franz Köcher, and has been brought to fruition by collaboration between Haas himself, Daliah Bawanypeck, and a team of assistants. The book is a massive, pioneering yet authoritative reference work which deserves to be widely acclaimed. Haas is an acknowledged master of the field, and his work maintains the highest standards of philological accuracy in Hittite and Hurrian while also achieving comprehensiveness. It will be indispensable to anybody working on Near Eastern magic, medicine, psychology, or the early history of pharmacology, even if its price is likely to confine it in the main to institutional libraries.

The book's main sources are healing rituals from Hattuša, of which there exists a substantial corpus. The rituals often lasted several days, and contain descriptions and instructions of some complexity and detail. Means of therapy were varied, involving both ritual actions with objects as diverse as shovels (pp. 712 ff), silver spoons (p. 623), wax statuettes (p. 582), and the administration of drugs. Haas's book includes *all* such magical accoutrements and pharmaceutical substances, even if they are attested only once.

Sensibly enough, the decision was taken not to list substances in alphabetical order, but rather to group them by type: cosmic elements; mineral substances; plant substances; animal substances; human substances; ritual scenarios and statuettes; clothes and cloths; threads and sim.; parts of the house; tools; amulets and phylacteries; hieroglyphs. Each of these groups is further sub-divided, even several times, producing an arrangement which is complex at first sight but eminently consultable in the longer term. Within this scheme, individual substances are numbered consecutively. Together they total 488, of which 43 are mineral substances, 170 are plants, and 65 are animals and parts thereof. There are comprehensive indexes of words in the ancient languages (Hittite, Luwian, Hurrian, Hattic, Sumerian and Akkadian), an index of substances in German, an index of names, and a general index, occupying in their totality thirty-six pages.

Of capital importance in the book's achievement are the excellent substance-by-substance lists of references to secondary literature. The cumulative bibliography in volume 2 stands at over thirty pages. Impressive enough for any subject, in a field as specialised as this it testifies to the absolute determination to be as comprehensive as possible, and the enormous care and attention to detail invested in the enterprise.

It is one of the great merits of Haas' work that it not only lists and attempts to identify the substances, but also illustrates the uses to which they were put, with extensive citation of ancient sources in the original language and in translation. This frequently leads him to discuss the logic and symbolism behind ritual actions, e.g. the significance of colours (pp. 638-44). This characteristic in itself would make the book a major contribution to the study of Hittite healing rituals over and above its nature as a catalogue of the substances used, but the work attains even greater heights in the introduction.

At 139 pages, the introduction is a book-length study in its own right, and is the best and fullest treatment of Hittite healing currently available, with all imaginable aspects covered. The majority of the rituals are designed to solve problems of psychological origin, such as fear of witchcraft, curses, and the evil eye, and it is one of the central, and most important messages of the book that the rituals should be considered as having had a psychotherapeutic effect (see especially pp. 67 f.), and the conscious intention of producing a strong psychological effect on the patient, attempting to shock and confuse him, so as to magnify his belief in the power of the ritual. One good example of this is when the patient's ears are plugged, so that the mystery of the experience is increased by his not being able to hear anything said (p. 67). The opposite technique is used in a ritual in which the patient's body parts are identified with those of an animal substitute: the therapist recites a long litany of the form "its liver corresponds to his liver, its lungs correspond to his lungs ...", and the rhythmic flood of words dissolves the patient's disbelief in semi-hypnotic fashion (pp. 71f). Haas's concern for the psychological effect of ritual words and actions, is well accompanied by a discussion of the effectiveness of pharmacological treatments.¹ Though he admits that the placebo effect must often have played a part, the picture which emerges is quite impressive. For instance (pp. 115f): wine, must, garlic, silver, and honey, which are used as disinfectants, do have bactericidal properties; caraway reduces swellings; oils prevent wounds from drying. Further, there is at least one good piece of evidence (in the myth of Hedammu) that a narcotic drug could be prepared (pp. 121f).

One significant side effect of the publication of so magisterial a work as *MMMH* in Hittite studies is to throw into relief the deeply unsatisfactory state of scholarship on pharmacology in neighbouring Mesopotamia. The only book-length treatments of Mesopotamian pharmacology currently available are those of Reginald Campbell Thompson, who produced an *Assyrian Herbal* (1924), a *Dictionary of Assyrian Chemistry and Geology* (1936) and a *Dictionary of Assyrian Botany* (posthumous, 1949). These extremely erudite works were rightly recognised as seminal when first published, and important they remain. On the other hand, it would have been impossible for them to survive the passage of time unscathed, and they now need to be used with caution. For one thing, they were based on a much smaller corpus of texts than has since become available in *BAM*. Thus, for instance, a statement to the effect that the plant *pilû* is only attested in lexical lists and not in therapeutic texts (*DAB*, p. 331) no longer holds true (cf. *BAM* 143:2). Perhaps more seriously, Thompson's attempts at identifying plants were, as much scholarship in the last half-century has shown, often overly sanguine. Even the identification of plants used extremely frequently, such as *sahlû* and *kasû*, has been controversial, and Thompson's works can no longer be recommended without reserve, even though they have not been replaced.

There are, it is true, several recent Assyriological volumes dealing with magico-medical matters which are rich in discussions of pharmacopoeia,² and one can often find precious information in them. Also, since many healing practices in Hatti derived from Mesopotamian ones, *MMMH* itself includes much on Mesopotamia, and its substance-by-substance bibliographies often refer to Assyriological literature. However, none of these works is a treatment of Mesopotamian pharmacopoeia *per se*, and there are huge gaps to fill. In the first instance, and before a work such as Haas's own can be produced for Mesopotamia, there is the absolute necessity of speedy publication of the series *Uruanna* and related texts. One can confidently expect that this will be followed by discoveries and clarifications in numerous areas. In due course, work on Mesopotamian pharmacopoeia is bound to feed its way back into Hittite studies, but for the time being Haas' book is a monument of industry and an inspiration, and will so remain for decades to come.

¹ For Mesopotamia this question has repeatedly been addressed by Martha Haussperger, see the references in Haas's bibliography.

² Special mention is owed to: Marten Stol's *Epilepsy* (=CM 2, 1993), Stefan Maul's *Zukunftsbewältigung* (=Baghdader Forschungen 18, 1994), Sally Butler's *Dreams and Dream Rituals* (= AOAT 258), Marten Stol's *Birth* (=CM 14, 2000), and Christopher Walker and Michael Dick's *Induction of the Cult Image* (=SAALT 1, 2001). See also JoAnn Scurlock's *Ghost-Induced Illnesses* (=AMD 3) and Mark Geller's *Renal and Rectal Disease Texts* (=BAM VII), both forthcoming.