

BOOK REVIEW

WILHELMINA FEEMSTER JASHEMSKI. 1999. **A Pompeian Herbal: Ancient and Modern Medicinal Plants.** (ISBN 0-292-74060-3, pbk.). Univ. of Texas Press, P.O. Box 7819, Austin, TX 78713-7819, U.S.A. \$17.95, pbk., \$35.00, hbk. 123 pp., 15 color and 7 b&w photos, 36 b&w line drawings.

While excavating ruins at Pompeii, author Wilhelmina Jashemski noticed several workmen collecting a variety of plants for medicinal purposes. "As the days passed and my workmen continued to collect plants, I began to wonder if the plants they were collecting for medicine were the same ones the ancient Romans had used for cures." That question germinated into *A Pompeian Herbal*, a collection of 36 plants common to Pompeii juxtaposing contemporary medicinal uses with ancient ones. Not only does this book elucidate the continuity of life and environment in the Pompeian area, but it also serves as an example of exhaustive and thorough research. My initial skepticism of reading an herbal— not written by a botanist, was soon replaced with a sense of relief that we, as readers and researchers, are lucky enough for it be written by an archaeologist. For only an archaeologist, perhaps, would pose the question and have the fortunate circumstances to be doing archaeological excavations while simultaneously collecting ethnobotanical information from local Pompeians.

In the introduction the author explains her fieldwork and methodology and gives appropriate background information on Pompeii, local medicinal plants, and the ancient literature of Pliny the Elder, Dioscorides, Theophrastus and others. Gleaning data from a variety of sources is what makes the book both comprehensive and unique. Information on the contemporary uses of medicinal plants came from locals and workmen of the site— the people, often times bringing plants to the author and describing preparations and what ailments the plants treat (*fegato*, or liver problems—treated with *Verbanum sinuatum* L.—are common). For the ancient uses of the plants Jashemski consults ancient literature, discussing both mythological and medicinal citations. This information is strongly supported by the scant, yet important, archaeological evidence. Excavations on sites that were covered with the resulting pyroclastic flow of Mt. Vesuvius provided invaluable archaeo-botanic evidence normally unavailable in the climate of Pompeii. The lava provides enough heat to carbonize plant remains such as seeds, roots, fruits, and stems, however it's unfavorable to preservation of pollen, limiting identification to family names but not of genus and species. Archaeological evidence also revealed the planting patterns of ancient Pompeians— that as the workers revealed, were the same patterns they followed in their own gardens today. Most sites that have been excavated at Pompeii over the years have neglected the paleoethnobotanic dimension making this book all the more valuable as it provides insight into ancient Pompeian life that before now was obsolete.

Following the introduction comes the core of the book, the herbal. The design of the herbal is one of this book's major strong points. For each plant the author provides the scientific, English, and Italian names and a physical description of the plant and its habitat. Drawing on information from local villagers the author describes how the plant is prepared as a medicinal and what ailments it is used to treat. From there the author cites the ancient literature giving reference to the plant as a medicinal and its mythological connotations. Information on each plant is presented vis-à-vis a full-page black and white plant portrait giving the herbal an elegance any classicist is sure to appreciate. Completing the herbal is a bibliography of ancient literature and notes on citations, a bibliography of secondary sources, a list of illustrations, and general and Greek indices.

The potentially wide readership should stand testament to the book's worth. Being under 100 pages and less than \$20 makes it a bargain for the lay reader interested in alternative medicine, folklore, and Pompeii as well as the classicist, botanist, and archaeologist. The book is not designed for college courses, but should prove to be an invaluable reference for those researching Old World paleoethnobotany.—Kevin D. Janni.



Janni, Kevin D. 2000. "BOOK REVIEW." *SIDA, contributions to botany* 19, 114–114.

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