

Doctoral (PhD) theses

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**THE ALEXIPHARMACA OF NICANDER OF COLOPHON**

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## **I. Research history, research topic**

The modern reception of Nicander of Colophon and of his two didactic poems, the *Theriaca* and the *Alexipharmaca* does not represent the Hellenistic poet as a popular author. We can conclude the common opinion about Nicander as follows. Nicander, as a member of the second generation of Hellenistic poets, follows somewhat automatically the aesthetical ideas of the first generation. Pursuant to them, he looked for strange and bizarre themes, about which he had acquired his knowledge from prosaic technical books. The toxicological topic of his poems turns to be only a means of arousing the attention of the audience, the poet himself is not interested in it. His motivation for writing these poems is the experimentation with formal rules and literary norms. He plays upon the contradiction between hexametric form and medical topic, and he adds to these an obscure phrasing and a grotesque style. These characteristics reveal the pseudo-didactic nature of Nicander's poems, which is discernible also from their scanty instructions and incoherent structure. Though these notions on Nicander's *oeuvre* could be simple critical observations, the formulation of these remarks by scholars implies a repulsive attitude to the poems. The scholarly interest in the *Theriaca* and the *Alexipharmaca* is due to their cultural values and not to the delights they give to their readers.

In the first part of the dissertation, the causes of this condemnation have been examined, since the notions on the Nicandrian *oeuvre* often seem to cover unrealistic and anachronistic expectations. Having thus disproved some opinions which doubt the didactic credibility of the Nicandrian poems, in the second part of the dissertation, it is asserted that the medical topic and the poetic form can create a harmony rather than a contradiction. The last part of the dissertation exhibits Nicander's world view due to an analysis of the *Alexipharmaca*.

## **II. Methodology**

The presentation of the literature on Nicander follows a chronological order, thus, the influence of the earlier theories on the sequent ones can be traced. This historical approach helps us to find – with a philological method, i. e. concentrating on the way the theories are told – the latent motives behind the notes on Nicander's dislikeable poems. The disinclination of the philologists towards the Nicandrian *oeuvre* has been sorted to five elements, according to which part of the poems is the subject of their critiques. The toxicological topic, the genre, the language, the didactic credibility and the author's world view – these are the five elements which are commented on by readers, often in a quite personal way which is not realized even by themselves.

In the next part of the dissertation (*Apology*), a more detailed discussion of these elements and motives follows. Meanwhile, with quotations from the *Alexipharmaca*, I try to modulate or contradict the rejective notes on Nicander poems. For this, I resort to some aspects which are seldom considered by researchers, such as the comparison between the Hellenistic medical literature and the Nicandrian didactic poems, or as the emphasis on the lyric form in the cultural history of the era.

In the course of the research, I have kept the fiction of the *ideal reader* in mind. This fictive person considers the two poems as enjoyable ones. Thus, having acknowledged the reasons of the modern repulsion towards the poems, we need to set aside those modern ideas or personal conceptions, which are not relevant in the time of Nicander. Another important point of view, which has been neglected before, is the separation of the two didactic poems from each other, especially when we are talking about the world view which the author exhibit through them. Nature appears quite differently in the *Theriaca* and in the *Alexipharmaca*. While in the former the venenations are caused by active and aggressive animals, in the latter the role of the nature in the toxic cases is

rather inactive, and venenations happen because of the nescience of humans. Nature seems to be a more savage field in the *Theriaca* than in the *Alexipharmaca*, hence the atmosphere and the world view conveyed by them can be also considerably diverse. This difference becomes significant when we notice that scholars tend to read first the *Theriaca*, and then they project their notions on this poem to the *Alexipharmaca*, too.

For the second and third parts of the dissertation, I read through and analysed the chapters of the *Alexipharmaca*, while focusing on the literary devices (structural features, list, variation, etymology, adjectives, sensational affects, *enargeia*, scientific information, geography, mythology and aetiology) on the first hand; and on certain aspects which may indicate an authorial world view (devices with which the poet modulates the atmosphere of the poems, death view, the picture of nature, signs of religiosity, and signs of personal values), on the second hand.

### III. Research results

1. As a result of the analyzation of the literature on Nicander, I have found five motives behind the displeasure of modern philologists who have dealt with the *Alexipharmaca* and the *Theriaca*. The toxicological topic of the poems appears to be repulsive for many scholars (1). The genre of didactic poetry is perceived by modern readers as a strange amalgam of artistic and scientific (2). Nicander's language is obscure and difficult (3). The credibility of the author's didactic purpose is asserted to be insincere, thus the medical content shows itself inaccurate and overshadowed by the formal features of the poems (4). The macabre atmosphere of Nicander's works demonstrate the poet's dark, pessimistic world view (5). Having acknowledged these motives, the picture of Nicander drawn by modern scholars seems to be frequently biased by their anachronistic preconceptions or by their subjective approach. The consideration of the cultural background of the poems – in this case, the medical literature of the period, and the contemporary attitudes towards poetry and science –, however, helps us to read Nicander's poems through the eyes of their erstwhile readers. The odd and repelling characteristics of the Nicandean *ouvre* may, in this way, seem more reasonable and natural. Thus, the above introduced five motives become disputably in the following ways.

1.1. The toxicological topic of the poems, which is often thought to be sensational and at the same time marginal (from a medical point of view), turns to be quite rational when we think of the division of medical sciences in Hellenistic times. This period has seen the rise of the fields of pharmacology, medical botany and, especially, toxicology. Besides this development, the danger of venenations, which was greater in Nicander's time than in ours, and hence the fear of ordinary people from it gives one more reason to an author of the Hellenistic era for writing a book on such a topic.

1.2. Verse and prose had not been seen such diverse forms for ancient readers as we may think from our modern point of view. Texts written in verse were often used both during the study of writing and reading, as well as in the later studies of grammar and rhetoric. This fact explains the approval of didactic poems in ancient times. Examining the problem from another angle we may ask why this genre is so unpopular for modern readers. Dalzell points out that the idea of poetry as a vehicle for displaying the poet's personal and emotional reactions (which are incompatible with learning and scientific contents), is a heritage from Romanticism; the projection of this idea to ancient didactic poetry, therefore, results in a misconception of the genre. Presumably, the poet wished an audience for his poems who would appreciate both the playfulness of the verse form and the sincerity of the medical information – but at least, who would not see them antagonistic.

1.3. It is frequently asserted in the literature that Nicandean texts are obscure and difficult. The mix of Homeric words and neologism, enigmatic epithets and scanty mythological hints make the poems irksome. Nevertheless, philologists who had carefully dealt with the two didactic poems remark that Nicandean neologism is driven by analogy and by parallelism with Homeric vocabulary. Since ancient readers of the didactic poems had most probably studied reading on epic texts, neither of the Homeric vocabulary, nor the poetic phrasing of the *Alexipharmaca* and *Theriaca* could cause difficulties to them. If we assume, moreover, that these poems were written for a medical audience, than the use of specific terms cannot surprise us either.

1.4. There are several arguments against the credibility of Nicander's didactic purpose and medical competence. These arguments are grouped in the next categories in my dissertation. The poetic solutions are at the expense of the scientific content (a); deficiencies (b); unpractical in urgent cases (c); the structure is not logical (d); strange remedies, odd ingredients (e); the designation of the addressee is indistinct (f); non-scientific parts (g); the sources of the medical information can be questioned (h). However, a careful analysis of the text of the *Alexipharmaca* and the comparison of it with the contemporary medical writings lead us to the next conclusions against the above listed arguments.

a) Though Nicander expects his readers to be open-eyed and to have some knowledge both about *belles-lettres* and medical *termini*, his poetic phrasing does not impede the communication of the scientific content, moreover, it often rather helps it.

b) The most expressed argument against the practical usefulness of the Nicandean medical poems is the lack of exact details, especially of the dose of the drugs. Totelin, however, denotes that in Hippocratic pharmacological texts, the doses of medications are seldom appointed, with regard to the individual medical cases, where the doctor had to decide about the dose of the medication according to the actual circumstances of the patient. The scholar's conclusion, i. e. the details which are not present in Hippocratic texts are supposed to known by the readers of the texts, can be applied to the Nicandean verses, too.

c) Another feature of the poems which indicates their unusefulness is their complicate language. The approach, however which tries to circumscribe the authorial expectations about the readers on the grounds of the text, may be useful in this case, too. Thus, the characteristics, which show the poems as unpractical in urgent cases, leads us to conclude that these texts were not whipped out in such urgent cases. Nicander's toxicological poems, alike Hippocratic texts, are meant to be read carefully and several times before one could use the information conveyed by them– this is the only way the reader can profit from them, even in urgent cases.

d) The next argument against the credibility of Nicander considers the structure of the poems. It is hard to be found any system in the list of the poisonous creatures, and the structure seems to be driven by poetic aims rather than by scientific ones. Within the chapters of the poems, however, we have observed more systematic aspects. The chapters are built as a trichotomy: the introduction of the poison is followed by the symptoms and the therapies. Furthermore, the symptoms are listed in a way, through which the reader can follow up the effects of the venom from mouth to intestines. The Nicandean therapies and medicaments, on the other hand, provides several options for the cure, which reveals the author mindfulness regarding that some ingredients could be acquired more easily than others.

e) The strange ingredients of Nicander cures turn out frequently to be useful according to modern medicine. Furthermore, the recommendation of uncommon, exotic and extravagant materials in both the

Hippocratic cures and the Nicandean poems is explainable by the extended demand for luxury products in the era and by the consideration of different possibilities and situations of different doctors and cases.

f) The audience of the didactic poems is, by most scholars, found exclusively in readers who can appreciate the erudite literary playfulness. This notion is based on the formal characteristics of the Nicandean texts. Nevertheless, other features of the poems, from which several are true for the contemporary medical writings as well, require an audience for whom not only the epic verses are familiar, but who is adept enough also in the field of pharmacology to fill the 'gaps' of information. The careful, thorough and multiple reading of the poems is needed both for the exploitation of aesthetic delights (to find all fine details) and for the medical usage of the texts (to memorize all information).

g) The examination of mythological and paradoxological *excursi* reveals that these are not present in the poems only for literary entertainment. A careful eye may find hidden references to scientific data in some of them, while most of them helps the reader memorize the information with which they are connected. Besides this, the theory accepted by many scholars that the usage of poetic devices itself shows the authorial negligence towards the scientific topic, does *a priori* question the relevance of the union of scientific topic and poetic form, viz. the credibility of the genre of didactic poetry in general. Another contradiction in the literature is that researchers consider both the imitation and the rejection of the literary tradition (or the variation of it) as the sign of the priority of poetic form at the dispense of the scientific message.

h) Totelin stresses several times that the conception of expert, on the field of ancient medicine and, especially pharmacology, is quite wide. The different types of healers – midwives, root cutters, drug sellers and the priests of several healing gods – were all accepted as experts and were all consulted by Hippocratic writers. The knowledge that was expected from the readers of handbooks on medicine was obtainable from different sources: the information gained from books, the oral education by masters and the autodidact learning went hand in hand. Since such institutional education was not organised in those days as in ours, the definition of expert remained ductile. The projection of our conception of expertise to ancient medicine is, therefore, irrelevant, as well as the judgement of the credibility of the didactic poems by ideas that were not proper in the time of Nicander.

1.5. According to most philologists, insincerity is a prior characteristic of the didactic poems. Nicander's playfulness is interpreted by many researchers as negligence of scientism and of didactic purpose. Thus, his playfulness turns to be bitter irony, which, in the end, reveals his passive and pessimistic world view. Behind this notion, the common starting point of the scholars is the assertion of incredibility, which excludes the examination of the poems from a medical point of view. The latter, however, helps us to appreciate, for instance, the detailed lists of symptoms not only from an aesthetic approach, considering them grotesque and sensational, but from a medical approach as well, as they serve as an aid for the doctor who makes the diagnosis.

The *ideal reader* of the Nicandean *oeuvre*, whose features can be found on the base of the texts, is seldom approached by scholars. Instead of that, researchers tend to value the cures listed by Nicander as unpractical according their preconceptions of the *ideal handbook*. Nevertheless, the ideal reader of Nicander does supposedly appreciate all poetic and scientific parts of the didactic poems. For this, he needs to be interested in and open towards the topic, the genre, the formal plays and the poetic phrasing. If we assume that he could find delights in all of these, then the repulsive modern reception reveals itself as *not* ideal.

2. In the next part of the dissertation, I discuss the interlacement of the three layers – the scientific, the poetic and the educational – of the *Alexipharmaca*. Elements of the poem, which are usually seen merely as poetic

devices, often convey medical message and hidden authorial values, too. Our analysis of these devices leads us to the following conclusions.

2.1. The structure of the poem is motivated by aesthetical-poetical goals, by scientific ideas, and by the purpose of educating the readers about the world around them. Besides the strict medical rules that only those venoms are included which affect internally the victim, and that they are dealt in an order of introduction-symptoms-cure list, the patterns of association and variation can be also found in the poem.

2.2. Lists are present in the *Alexipharmaca* both for aesthetic delights and for the communication of knowledge. Furthermore, by them Nicander can offer several chances in cures, and, therefore he assures the readers about the different possibilities of healing, which gives the poem a hopeful atmosphere.

2.3. Variation and the application of synonyms join again more than one aims: besides their aesthetical function, medical advices and authorial opinions can also be connected to them.

2.4. The etymological notes in the *Alexipharmaca* serve originally as entertaining inserts. These might be considered, however, as *aitia* which, while explaining the names of different plants and animals, often convey botanical or biological information as well.

2.5. Adjectives are the best means for shaping the atmosphere of the poem. Nevertheless, Nicander does not use them only for making a dark and unpleasant setting, but due to the stricter topic of the actual parts (symptoms or cures), he often changes the serious and frightening mood to a hopeful and delightful one. Adjectives, moreover, can also function as informative elements.

2.6. From a scientific point of view, the detailed symptom lists seem reasonable, if we take the demand for autopsy in consideration. For the doctor needs to know the case and to remark all the symptoms for the diagnosis in such a thorough way as Nicander circumscribe them. The sensual effects used in the introduction of the venomous creatures are also explainable by the scientific topics of the didactic poem. Venoms are often compared to some everyday materials on the base of their similar taste or smell.

2.7. *Enargeia* has originally an ornamental function in the didactic poem, but, in the same time, it helps the reader to imagine the actual symptoms, and, through its everyday images, it also may dissolve the frustration of the reader caused by the severe medical topic.

2.8. The *excursi* of scientific topic are the best examples of how the author can convey technical information through a poetical device. For if they are put in the poem as mere ornaments, the interest towards them is still expected by the readers. These inserts reveal the manifold interests of Nicander.

2.9 The author's private adherence to his hometown, Claros, can be caught in some of the topographical references of the poem. Besides this, through the mythological topography inserted in the *Alexipharmaca*, Nicander create a connection with his audience. The self-confidence felt by the Greek who live in a defined topographical space, who share the same mythological past, and who know and enjoy the boons of the same Greek culture, can be touched upon in the topographical inserts of the poem.

2.10. The Nicandean presentation of myths often refer to the moral or to the useful results of even the most terrible stories. Heroes, gods or semi gods of the common Greek myths are present in fifteen *excursi* of the *Alexipharmaca*, which, as they are ordered to certain motives, hint at a quite serious but in the same time serene authorial world view. For gods and semi gods are introduced in these stories as the defeaters of the monsters threatening the human world. These monsters, therefore, are not parts of the present of the author, they were only personae of the mythical past, thus giving a distant reason for the origin of certain plants and animals.

3. In the last part of the dissertation, the discussion of the Nicandrian world view is based on the hypothesis that in the course of an analysis of the *Alexipharmaca* the poet's ideas and opinions about nature, humans, and the world in general can be seized through the dispersed references in the poems. The results of my examination are listed below.

3.1. The promise of successful healing is present throughout the poem. The basic message of the *Alexipharmaca* is that every problem can be solved with the needed knowledge and with activity. Nicander often explicitly assures his reader that, if he applies the advised cures, he will be able to heal the patient who suffers from the discussed kinds of venenations.

3.2. Nicander holds back from the portrayal of death in the *Alexipharmaca*. Symptom lists seldom end with the presentation of death, which can be explained by the evident fact that the possibility of healing is relevant only before the patient dies. Death, therefore, is not worth and is neither needed to be mentioned in a book which aims at healing. Nicander's complex views on death, however, can be grasped even from the few references. Death is widely seen through an eye of a doctor: besides the encouragement for the successful struggling with death, the stimulation for the acceptance of the unavoidable death is also present in the poem.

3.3. We have found again a complex set of Nicandrian views on nature and on the relation between humans and nature. Nature, in the poet's presentation, is not simply dangerous and hostile for humans. Examples of the image of beautiful, useful and even careful nature can be abundantly listed from the *Alexipharmaca*. The constant (even if latent) presence of gods in nature serves also good results for humans, whose most important task is to gain knowledge about nature and about the acts of gods. In this way, they are able to use the gifts of nature on the one hand, and they get to know their own places in the world, on the other hand. Humans, in Nicander, are not necessarily in fight with nature, as it is often asserted by scholars, but if they had gained enough information about nature, about their harmful and useful parts, then they are able to live in and with it.

3.4. The poet's religiosity appears in more layers of the *Alexipharmaca*. Though the mythical panels seem for the first sight merely as aesthetical ornaments, the presentation of Olympic gods often hides philosophic messages, too. Besides the severe image of authorising gods, their role as supporters of human civilization is also stressed in the poem. Furthermore, during their activities, they create, even without consciousness, blessed materials which are useful for humans. Amongst the gods and goddesses pictured in the *Alexipharmaca*, Apollo appears to be the most important one. Whether Nicander was a priest of Apollo or not, it remains a question, but the last line of the introduction of the poem betrays his private connection to and his religious feelings for Apollo. In the light of this line, the word  $\rho\epsilon\iota\alpha$  which, according to more scholars, signs the arrogance of the poet, can be interpreted in another way. Although at the beginning of the poem, we do not find the traditional invocation of any gods, Nicander refers here to the help of Apollo, with which he can *easily* write his opus. The self-conscious behaviour of the poet, thus, does not originate in the pride he feels because of his own abilities, but in his assured possession of the help of his god.

3.5. In Nicander, madness means either the lack of knowledge, when it is the antecedent of the venenations, or as the result of them, a special state which manifests in insecure movements, troubled eyes, and in animal-like, savage behaviour. Furthermore, Nicander does make a difference between the sick's madness and the ecstasy caused by religious rites. The former is the consequence of the constant lack of self-consciousness and knowledge and it leads to unrestraint, intemperance and greediness which are not shamed even in public. The

latter, however, happens to persons who possess knowledge both about the world and about themselves, but it is a temporary state legalized by the sacredness of the specific religious rite.

3.6. In the *Alexipharmaca*, knowledge is appraised not only for its own sake: although the poet remarkably finds delights in the observation and in the poetic portrayal of certain parts of nature, knowledge, in his poem, is the pledge for humans to make their own way in the world. According to Nicander, one contrast of knowledge is the disallowance of honouring the gods, the *hybris*; it's another contrast is unwisdom which manifests itself in greediness. Knowledge, in this way, means the cognition of boundaries, the ability of dividing the guise from reality, the harmful from useful. With knowledge, furthermore, one has the skill of recognizing in all kind of situation what is needed to be done. To act in a conscious and purposive way, is, therefore, another value in Nicander. On the base of this prominence of knowledge and of the promising atmosphere of the poem, Nicander's world view, in the end, appears to be rather optimistic.

#### IV. Publications on the issue

„Amennyiben valaki inna a koriander vészes és nehezen gyógyítható italából...” Egy nikandrosi részlet elemzése.

(= 'If somebody drinks the dangerous and hardly curable juice of coriander...' An analysis of a Nicandrian passage.) In: Gellérfi Gergő – Hajdú Attila (eds.): *ENAPTEIA. A Collegium Hungaricum Societatis Europae Studiosorum Philologiae Classicae VII. Országos Konferenciáján (Szeged, 2012. május 22-23.) elhangzott előadások*. Szeged, 2013, 72–77.

Orvos volt-e a mérgezések költője? (= Was the poet of poisons a doctor?) In: Balázs József - Bojtos Anita - Paár Tamás - Tompa Zsófia - Turi Gergő - Vadász Noémi (eds.): *Studia Varia. Tanulmánykötet*. Budapest, 2016, 213–225.

A tanköltemény az ókori gyógyászatban: Kolophóni Nikandros *Alexipharmakája* és *Thériakája* az ókori orvosképzésben. (= Didactic poetry in ancient medicine. Nicander of Colophon's *Alexipharmaca* and *Theriaca* in ancient medical education.) In: Munding Márta – Szovák Kornél – Takács László (szerk.): *Techné. A szakképzés módszerei az ókorban és a középkorban*. Piliscsaba, 2018, 243–268.

Könyvszemle. (= Book review.) [Floris Overduin: Nicander of Colophon's *Theriaca*: A Literary Commentary (Mnemosyne Supplements 374). Leiden, Brill Academic Publishers, 2015.], *Antik Tanulmányok* LXII (2018), 111–115.

Some notes on the literature on ancient didactic poetry. *Acta Classica Universitatis Scientiarum Debreceniensis* LV (2019), 261–280.