

Garden Center Treasures

By

Katherine M. Baker

Recently, I was at the Tulsa Garden Center as a participant in the ONPS annual indoor outing. Upon entering the lecture hall, I was delighted to see reproduced pages from a manuscript that I am currently studying. Perhaps you have seen them as well? Upon sharing my enthusiasm with Garden Center staff members, I was asked if I would submit a piece about the images for the newsletter. Therefore, the following is my humble submission of scholarship. It is my hope that this brief article inspires interest, and that it will be recalled the next time you happen to stand in front of these truly remarkable images.

The *Anicia Juliana Codex*, also known as the *Vienna Dioscorides*, is an early Byzantine illuminated manuscript that is also the first bound version of an herbal. The codex, completed in 512-513 CE in Constantinople, contains a collection of works on Greek pharmacology, toxicology, and fishing, as well as the first known book of ornithology. Among the scientific treatises contained in the codex, Dioscorides' *De Materia Medica* is the largest, spanning over 380 out of the 485 pages. Also included in the codex is *The Song of the Power of the Herbs* by Ruphos of Ephesus, Nicander's *Venomous Beasts* and *On Poisons and their Antidotes*, and a compendium of birds presumably written by Dionysios of Philadelphia.

The codex was commissioned by the Byzantine princess Anicia Juliana (462 – 527/528 CE) in honor of her financial support to build a church in the Constantinople suburb of Honoratae. Anicia Juliana was a Classically learned woman, raised in the imperial household, who considered herself to be a continuation of the Roman imperial line in the “new Christian Rome” of Constantinople. Her patronage of the codex suggests that she was personally interested in the preservation of Classical knowledge, and considered this preservation of knowledge as equal of her attention as the building of new churches.

As an imperial princess, Anicia Juliana would have employed the most skilled of illustrators and scribes to make her codex. Its classification as an herbal suggests that the codex was the object of much study and use, while its imperial commission guaranteed that it would be an object of supreme beauty. Testament to this is the presence of gold leaf on several pages, as well as at least twelve distinct pigments of varying hues suggesting an extensive - and expensive - palette. To this day, the codex is considered one of the most beautiful herbals, and Byzantine manuscripts, in existence.

It is worth mentioning that the botanical illustrations of the codex would set the standard for all other botanical drawings until the 15th century. As can be seen in the illustration of the *Rose* (folio 282, pictured) the artist has

chosen to display all parts of the plant from flowering tip to roots, the stages of bloom, as well as the inclusion of varying perspectives from which the viewer may identify the plant.



Not only this, but the plant is shown in various stages of growth, and is in essence more “realistic”, while still being stylized. In general, all of the plants depicted in the codex have been shown as if they were laid out to the viewer on an examination table, with all parts of the plant shown from root to tip. And this method of illustration would, and still does, aid in the identification of plants.

Today, the codex resides in the Viennese National Library. It has survived several translations and transliterations, religious purges, the Ottoman Conquest of Constantinople, and both World Wars. It is considered one of the greatest codices of art and science ever compiled, and a legacy of Classical knowledge. To have even a selection of these magnificent folios on display at the Garden Center is exceptionally fortunate for the people of Tulsa. I do so

hope that you stop in and visit them soon.

Katherine M. Baker is a graduate student of Medieval and Byzantine art history at the University of Oklahoma. Her thesis, *The Anicia Juliana Codex: A Product of Cultural Inheritance and Appropriation in 6th century Byzantium*, will be published in May 2013.