

THE CAREER AND WORK OF SCRIBONIUS LARGUS

Even amongst classicists, Scribonius Largus is hardly a household name, an unshining hour not improved by his omission from *The Cambridge History of Latin Literature*. A pity, for the engaging medley that makes up the *Compositiones* gives a congenial read and casts many a beam of light on to the Romans and their lives.

Although known and named by Galen, and although much of his work was appropriated by Marcellus Empiricus in the 5th century, showing that he had some scientific *Nachleben*, there is no external evidence for Largus himself. His names are uncommon (no Scribonius Largus features in MRR or PLRE, and neither PIR nor PW exhibit a homonym), nor has any other Roman left a book entitled *Compositiones*. He is not mentioned in Pliny's contemptuous survey of Greek-styled medicine at Rome (NH 29. 8. 15–28). However, the old man's animadversions upon the absurd number of ingredients in snakebite remedies (*theriace*) and the Mithridatic antidote (NH 29. 24) exactly suit Largus (165–70). Since Celsus also has the items, this is not conclusive proof that Pliny had read Largus, but he fits better in terms of the multi-ingredient recipes.

There can be no doubt that Largus brought out his book in the reign of Claudius, and I cannot fathom why such a normally good historian of ancient medicine as Vivian Nutton¹) should recently assign him to c. AD 60. One item seems to refine the date. A recipe for toothpowder (60) comes recommended with the claim *nam Messalina dei nostri Caesaris hoc utitur*. The present tense looks unequivocal, thus putting the work before Messalina's death in October 48. I seem alone in being a touch disconcerted by the previous sentence *Augustam constat hoc usam*, and other references to plain Augusta that all involve past tenses (70, *habuit*; 175, *habuit*; 268, *utebatur*; 271, *usae sunt*, with Antonia). And Messalina is nowhere thus styled. *Augusta* is flexibly used of royal

1) From Galen to Alexander: Aspects of Medicine and Medical Practice in Late Antiquity. DOP 38 (1984) 8.

ladies, and it could here mean Livia, since Tacitus so denotes her in the *Annals*²) and like Largus (271) Suetonius (Claud. 3. 3) couples Antonia with Augusta meaning Livia. That way would augment our knowledge of the dowager. The alternative would be to see Augusta as Messalina herself, the past tenses implying that she had previously used the remedies and was cured by them. This would not work with the present item, though taking *Augusta* as a generalising “the empress” would. Finally, it is hard to see such a blatant place-seeker as Largus venturing to invoke the name of Messalina after her disgrace and death.

Largus must have written under Claudius since he, though not mentioned by name, is the Caesar who goes to Britain (163) as well as being the one linked with Messalina and Callistus (ep. ded. 13), always described as *deus noster Caesar*. *A propos* this eye-catching flattery of a living emperor, Camille Jullian³) was long ago tempted to emend *deus* to *dominus*, thinking *deus* a wrong scribal expansion of the letter *d.*, albeit restrained by Largus’ phrase *divinis manibus* in the imperial context, also noting *divinae domus* of the royal palace in Phaedrus (5. 7. 8). Either way, Largus is interesting as evidence for the early growth of the imperial cult and for the flatteries indulged in by freedmen and lower levels. The way to the panegyric excesses of late Roman and Byzantine imperial encomiasts is more clearly and earlier paved than commentators appreciate. The language is indicative of the status of Largus who otherwise would not have flattered a freedman so grossly and publicly as he does Callistus. The general tone had been set by Vitruvius (pref. 1. 1.) with his apostrophising of Augustus’ *divina mens tua*. Tacitus’ sarcasms (Ann. 15. 23; 16. 6) on the divinised dead infant daughter of Nero make a nice counterpoint. Suetonius (Dom. 13. 2) is being a trifle disingenuous when he upbraids Domitian for the *dominus ac deus* innovation and for calling his bed a *pulvinar*. In Claudius’ own case, the biographer (Claud. 12. 1) commends him for refusing excessive honours. Possibly Largus went in for *deus noster* because of the Greek habits of Callistus (for Greek applications of θεός to living emperors, see Philostratus, VS 607, and possibly⁴) Lucian, Alex. 48). Another possibility is to connect *deus noster Caesar* with the temple to Claudius

2) See the notes of Furneaux and Goodyear on Ann. 1. 8.

3) *Deus Noster Caesar: A Propos de Scribonius Largus*, Rev. Phil. 17 (1893) 129–31.

4) The chronology is uncertain; cf. H. J. Mason, *Greek Terms for Roman Institutions* (Toronto 1974), 53.

erected in his lifetime at Colchester. Seneca, or whoever penned the *Apocolocyntosis*, ridicules the cult of the living Claudius (Apoc. 8. 3) and his aspirations to become a *deus*. Largus had been to Britain with Claudius and at the time of writing the dedicatory letter was abroad again, though he does not say where.

One further connection between doctor and emperor might be established. Suetonius (Claud. 16. 4) quotes an imperial edict on yew tree juice as a cure for snakebite. His precise remedy is not in Largus, but his phrase *ad viperæ morsum* is, in the lemma of 167, the text of which is lost. Might this imply that Claudius had actually read the *Compositiones*?

Largus dedicates his book to Caius Julius Callistus. We know from Dio (60. 33. 3a) that the freedman was dead in or by 51, hence another chronological pointer. Callistus, the only one of the libertine troika not to make the index of Syme's *Tacitus*, is the most fascinating. Seneca (Ep. 47. 9) adduces him as the paradigm of a low slave, sold by his own master as worthless, later refusing in his new grandeur that ex-master an audience. He stood high in Caligula's favour, even rebuking him on one occasion, but was part of the plot in 41 (Dio 59. 29. 1; Josephus, Ant. 19. 1. 10). To the elder Pliny, describing the 30 onyx pillars in his dining room (NH 36. 60), the freedman was *potentia notus*.

More cross connections are possible here. We do not know how old Callistus was when he died, but he predeceased his *confrères* Pallas and Narcissus. Was it ill-health or valetudinarian attitudes that made him a ready patron and promoter of Largus? Recipe 151 for stone and its treatment comports the only vocative naming of Callistus outside the introductory letter (13) and the formal conclusion. Can we infer that Callistus was especially interested in this remedy as a sufferer himself? Largus describes insects found in stone quarries that are serviceable in treating stone in humans, and Pliny noted in his account of the freedman's onyx columns that this material was good for *emplastra* – could this be why Callistus went in for it in a big way, as an emergency source (when burnt) for plasters, and for insects?

One doctor acknowledged (ind. 91) as a praeceptor was Valens, perhaps the Vettius Valens executed for adultery with Messalina and, if so, another chronological clue. Tacitus (Ann. 11. 35) does not call Valens a doctor; Pliny (NH 29. 20) makes the connection. No such gossip about Largus! Perhaps Valens was checking the efficacy of the imperial dentrifice. Messalina did not monopolise the whiter-than-white image of royal women – Octavia,

Augustus' sister, is also used by Largus to advertise his dental preparations. Largus, here, of course, inaugurates the modern tv practice of big-name endorsement! But Messalina with her hectic social life would not want jungle mouth, a complaint prevalent enough in the Roman world to warrant a mention in Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*⁵) and to provide an entire set of quips in the ancient jokebook *Philogelos* (cf. nos. 231–242). Incidentally, a modern re-creation and sampling of Largus' recipe⁶) found it to work about as well as a 1950's toothpaste, though it had no foaming agent and was both abrasive and nasty-tasting.

Buecheler⁷) thought Largus might be from Sicily, on the basis of his knowledge of Sicilian hunters' precautions against snakebite (163) and Sicilian drugs (163), and of the prevalence of mad dogs on that island (171). This conjecture has proved tempting to some (e. g. PIR and the *Tusculum Lexicon*). But one could just as readily deduce Africa from Largus' interest in a woman doctor and her remedies from that continent (122), as well as from an allusion to African snakes (164). Buecheler also pointed to the Sicilian origins (from the town of Centuripae) of another of Largus' medical teachers, Apuleius Celsus, but that proves nothing either. I have no theories that require Largus not to come from Sicily, being simply concerned to keep guesswork in its place.

Largus was a practising doctor, no mere theoretician. Indeed, he gives us some fascinating glimpses into his dossiers and records. He cured several people of earache (40), healed a number of patients who were *non ignotos* of colic (122), and most dramatically (118) saved the life of a perfume-seller's slave who was vomiting excrement. Largus was obviously an accomplished General Practitioner, and the social range of his patients is striking. Whether he prospered at Claudius' court is unclear. He might have gone with the emperor to Britain in a professional capacity, though does not himself say so (163), and we know from an inscription⁸) that Claudius did take C. Stertinius Xenophon there with him.

Largus thanks Callistus (ep. ded. 13) for bringing to Claudius' attention his *scripta Latina*. Some infer from this that he also

5) 5. 28, recommending the not very satisfactory counter of philosophic understanding.

6) A. & M. Singer, *An Ancient Dentifrice*, *Class. Weekly* 43 (1950) 217–8; cf. J. S. Hamilton, *A further note on the dental aspects of the Compositions of Scribonius Largus*, *Bulletin of the history of Dentistry* 35 (1987) 62–3.

7) *Coniectanea*, *Rh. Mus.* 37 (1882) 321.

8) *SIG* 3. 804; cf. R. Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford 1958) 508.

produced things in Greek. That could be, but the emphasis is unsurprising in a Greek freedman's context, and may be left at that. Largus goes on to say that he is currently abroad (*sumus peregre*, ep. ded. 14), with only a few basic books at his disposal; he will write more when better placed. Whether he ever did is unknown.

We must judge him by the *Compositiones*, a collection of 271 remedies, the texts of which are not always complete, with an index of recipes prefixed, and embellished by dedicatory letter⁹) and formal finale, both addressed by name to Callistus. Neither format nor title is that of Celsus' *De medicina*; the latter, however, was a rhetorician and versatile author¹⁰). Largus' arrangement is most comparable to the cookbook of Apicius, specific sections and sub-headings, with itemised individual prescriptions.

Largus' horizons are both Greek and Roman. He invokes the great Hellenic doctors, from Hippocrates (*conditor nostrae professionis*, ep. ded. 5) to the controversial Asclepiades of Bithynia (hailed, ep. ded. 7, as *maximus auctor medicinae*) on whose pharmacology he is pronounced by Elizabeth Rawson¹¹) to be more reliable than Celsus or Pliny. Rawson, incidentally, is a bit hard on Celsus who rightly takes Asclepiades to task (e.g. 1. 3. 7, on cold drinks after a hot bath; 1. 3. 17, on purging) for his all-or-nothing dogmatism, a trait that is admirable in politics but hardly so in the unchartable waters of ancient medicine! He is more inclined to adduce Roman doctors by name than Celsus who cites only Cassius Felix, and for some reason is specially concerned to identify individual *chirurgi* along with their pet remedies. In the case of two, Euelpistus and Mege, his cool brevity may reproach Celsus' enthusiastic billings, above all (7 pref. 3) Mege, *horum eruditissimus*. One would like to know more about this underbelly of Roman medical life, especially Ambrosius, a doctor from Puteoli lightly rebuked (152) for his superstitious insistence that you should not wear an iron ring when mixing remedies for the stone.

Largus is also far more inclined than Celsus to invoke big Roman names in advertising material¹²). Apart from the aforementioned royal women, Augustus is twice invoked, albeit not dubbed

9) See F. Römer, *Zum Vorwort des Scribonius Largus: Literarischer Schmuck einer Rezeptsammlung*, Wien. Stud. 100 (1987) 125–32.

10) Cf. Quintilian 12. 11. 23.

11) The life and death of Asclepiades of Bithynia, *CQ* 32 (1982) 358–70.

12) For easy instance, Celsus (5. 27. 3b) on the Psylli does not mention

divus (31, 177), in connection with eye-salves and antidotes against poison; we know from Suetonius (Aug. 79. 2) that in old age his left eye went dim. Tiberius features in three anecdotes (97, 120, 162) about medicine, books, and cures, but always in a subsidiary role.

A recognisable medical philosophy shines through. Doctors must help even enemies to the best of their ability (ep. ded. 4), the phrase *ne hostibus quidem malum medicamentum dabit* suggesting a statement of war morality; one recalls Florus (1. 35) on the abhorrence of gods and men from Perpena's poisoning of the enemy's drinking water in a late Republican war. There is nothing, however, in Largus to rival Celsus' unique disquisition (7. 5) on the treatment of wounds incurred on the battlefield, including a reference to the use of poisoned weapons. New remedies for, e. g., earaches are tried out by Largus on himself first before giving them to patients (40). A good doctor does his own research, and Largus has taken *paucas, sed valde pocas* on trust from his friends (271, finale). He does not blindly follow trends – Largus had heard about hyena skins as a remedy for rabies (172), and has even bought one, but at the time of writing had not actually tried this supposed cure. It is the mark of the conscientious physician to take all possible hygienic precautions, such as washing your hands after handling drugs and ingredients (80).

Largus rightly deprecates dangerous amateurs (ep. ded. 1, and elsewhere), and is credited by Nutton (loc cit.) with coining the conceptual phrase “falling outside the profession.” Since this has to do with the rejecting of dead gladiator's blood as a cure for epilepsy (17), Largus looks to be on the side of science and the angels, especially as both Celsus (3. 23. 7) and Pliny (NH 28. 4) promote this cure, the latter calling it “man seeking aid out of himself”. Unfortunately, Largus elsewhere (13) seems to credit this same remedy, possibly a sign of careless or unrevised compilation.

He is always interested in unknowns who hit the headlines with unorthodox methods, citing the cases of an *honestam matronam* who cured epileptics at Rome (16) and an African *muliercula* whose native potions helped victims of colic. In this case, Largus bought her recipe, humorously observing *per magnam curam compositionem accepimus, id est pretio magno* (a joke repeated at

Cleopatra or Octavian in context, as do Suetonius, Aug. 17, and Galen 14. 235 Kühn.

172, of the hyena skin purchase). But he equally takes care never to name these persons.

Likewise, he does not deign to name the victims of his professional in-fighting, preferring to issue a long diatribe (84) against *plerique medicorum ignorantes* (re the treatment of haemorrhaging), complete with an unusual oath, the interjection *o bone deus!*¹³ In the letter to Callistus, he twice (11, 12) ejaculates, *medius fidius!* All of this combines most eye-catchingly in his assault (199) on the folly of *execratissimi pharmacopolae*, a class of person (one recalls) that came off badly in the belligerent opening of Horace, Serm. 1. 2.

The *Compositiones* abounds in anecdotes, reminiscence, and asides that give some precious glimpses into Roman history and Roman lives. We have already considered the imperial items. Largus' reference to the port of Luna (163), whence he embarked with Claudius to Britain, adds a specific detail to the more general accounts of Suetonius (Claud. 17. 2) and Dio (60. 21. 3) of the imperial itinerary. But most cherishable are such things as the specific treatments (101) for wounded gladiators, people who fall from trees or off ladders, or who are badly injured (*excussis*) by sedan-chairs and chariots – these traffic accidents give added point to Juvenal 3. We also get remedies against snakebite in the country for visiting city slickers (163), special recipes for hunters bitten by their own dogs (213), and how to repair the damage caused *cum ad dentem pervenit pugnus* (214), which makes us think both of Juvenal's lament that poor men lose their teeth to Roman muggers and Martial's injunction (14. 68. 1) to slave owners, *peccantis famuli pugno ne percute dentes*. Other items that may serve to link life with literature include the prescription (111) of ten Cydonean apples for intestinal troubles, which may suggest that Virgil (Ecl. 3. 71) had a reason beyond Theocritean imitation for including ten such fruit as a lover's gift.

Largus' first collection of remedies, against headaches, nicely focuses his characteristic medleys. One prescription (10) essentially invents that former standby of English gentlemen, snuff. Another (5) is a most elaborate concoction, with 9 separate ingredients named and measured. In another (9), the verb *excastratum* is uniquely used in a transferred sense (re mustard). Then we are brought down to earth by the recommendation (complete with

13) Not elsewhere recorded in the dictionaries, and not in E. C. Echols, *The Art of Classical Swearing*, CJ 46 (1951) 291–9.

fake *torpedo-torpor* etymology) to place on the aching spot a black living sting-ray, a remedy later (162) advocated for the gout.

Largus can write with verve and panache. There are choice items for words fanciers¹⁴). I don't mean abstruse terms for drugs or Latinisations of Greek pharmaceutical terms, but novelties such as *devirginatio* (18) or *deiectiuncula* (52), along with uncommon words like *desudatio* (243), *ocularius* as a noun (37), *oppilatio* (47), *quatilarii* (230), and *tinctorium* (13). As we might expect from such a writer with such topics, innovation comes in nouns and adjectives rather than verbs. Regarding *devirginatio*, did Largus coin it in response to Celsus' statement (6. 18. 1) that Greek words for genital items have won acceptance in textbooks over *verba apud nos foediora* (the cognate verb is infrequent, albeit in Varro and Petronius)?

Largus operates at more than one level of style. A good deal is unavoidably technical and reiterated. Even educated Roman laymen no doubt blinked at such sentences as *git fricti X p. II, pyrethri X p. I, sagapeni victoriati pondus* (69). But the same Largus adorns a prescription (66) with the poetic *interdum febriculis non sine horrore intercurrentibus*, and with (184) *praeterea nauseant, reiciunt potō medicamento, caligant, magis magisque vertigine quadam urgentur*, unworthy neither of Cicero nor Tacitus. Talking of Cicero, did his *bon mot* on Pompeius Strabo, *hominem dis ac nobilitati perinvisum*¹⁵), help to engender Largus' *omnibus diis et hominibus invisi*, which he liked enough to use twice (ep. ded. 2, 199)? Another Ciceronian flourish, the imagery of which neatly suits a medical textbook, seems to be *quasi claudicat et vacillat hic liber* (200), based on De nat. deor. 1. 107, *tota res vacillat et claudicat*. Finally, a denunciation of inept physicians (84) includes the line *tanto magis sunt custodiendi qui pollicentur salutis custodiam unius cuiusque se facturos*, almost a "sound-bite" and strikingly in tune with Juvenal's *quis custodiet . . . ?* (sat. 6.347).

In brief finale, the *Compositiones* may be thought a case of *multum in Largo*. The author is not just fodder for historians of ancient medicine. He has been underused by historians and the collectors of Roman *Realien*, and would be of considerable value for anyone who attempts to write a book on Roman popular

14) S. Sconocchia in his Teubner (Leipzig 1983) might have done something in his Index verborum to alert readers to this. The deficiency may be remedied in his forthcoming Concordance to the *Compositiones*.

15) Asconius 70 = Clark, p. 79.

morality comparable to the *Greek Popular Morality* of K. D. Dover. His limitations and sillier side are blatant, but there is much more to him than that. No Hippocrates, to be sure; but also, no Hippocratic oaf!

Calgary

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PARISINUS A AND THE TITLE OF PLATO'S REPUBLIC

In a note in ICS 6 (1981) 112–115, L. G. Westerink studies the evidence for the title of Plato's *Republic*. He argues that up to the beginning of the sixth century A. D. the work is constantly referred to as Πολιτεία, in the singular. On pp. 112–113 Westerink discusses two apparent earlier occurrences of the plural title Πολιτεῖαι (namely Arist., Pol. IV 7, 1293a42–b1 and Proclus, In Timaeum II 227,2–4 Diehl), thus suggesting that these are the only instances of the plural before ca. A. D. 500, which in fact is untrue¹). The plural Πολιτεῖαι appears with considerable frequency in

1) I have found the following instances of the plural in authors before ca. 500 A.D. The Antiatticista Bekkeri (*Anecdota Bekkeri* I 100,20), s.v. ιδίωσις, refers to Plato τετάρτῃ Πολιτικῶν: I suppose that Πολιτικῶν is a corruption of Πολιτειῶν (this corruption is also found in the anonymous *Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* 27,9 [recorded by Westerink 114]). At p. 110,19, s.v. οἰκοδομεῖν, the Antiatticista refers to Πλάτων Πολιτείας. In the numerous remaining places the Antiatticista has the title in the singular. Further, the plural occurs twice in Moeris: p. 110 Pierson-Koch, s.v. διαγράφειν: Πλάτων Πολιτικῶν γ (the same corruption as in An. B. I 100,20); p. 190, s.v. κομψούς: Πλάτων (...) Πολιτειῶν γ. On p. 176, s.v. ἔκτατος, Moeris has Πλάτων Πολιτεῖα. Both the Antiatticista and Moeris belong to the second half of the second century A.D. One should realize that the lexicographical MSS employ many compendia, so that it is possible that in some cases the plural is due to a scribal error. In the other lexicographers before 500 A.D. (Pausanias, Aelius Dionysius, Didymus, Harpocration, Timaeus, Philoxenus, Pollux) I have found either the singular or no indication of the title at all. In later lexicographers such as Photius and *Suda*, too, the title is usually found in the singular; I have checked all the references in *Suda*; the only instances of the plural are found at π 2126 (IV 181,28 Adler), and possibly at τ 1061 (IV 597,10 A.), where