

EPILOGUE

IT IS FITTING to end this book with an image of a shepherd exiting the picture field. Folios 47v and 48r of the illustrated copy of Nicander's *Theriaka* show precisely such a scenario (Figures 38–39). The *Theriaka* is a treatise dating from the second century CE that proffers antidotes against the bites and stings of poisonous animals. The manuscript is now located in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) and therefore known as the Paris Nicander (Paris, BnF, MS suppl. gr. 247).¹ It was made in the tenth century CE, probably during the reign of Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos, and it resonates well with the bucolic tenor already evident in some of that epoch's key works and with the emperor's personal interest in recovering aspects of the classical past (see Chapter 3).

The treatise begins by claiming to advance remedies to “the toiling ploughman, the herdsman, and the woodcutter, whenever in the forest or at the plough,” on which occasions, presumably, they are most vulnerable to the injuries inflicted by venomous creatures. What follows is an excursus of those injuries and elaborate recipes for their prevention or cure. As Floris Overduin notes, the work is unusual in deploying a consciously literary language and verse to present technical knowledge, thus generating a poetic text on an incongruous subject.² Might this odd choice of literary mode for such a topic (essentially a catalogue of snakes and other similar beings) nonetheless be considered as bucolic? If so, it would merit that label by emphatically reversing the mode's normative criteria and by dragging its otherwise obliquely rendered flip side to the forefront: the herdsman's world (and the ploughman's and woodcutter's) as being beset by dangers rather than rendered as an idyll. And by intentionally using verse and incorporating dimensions of mythology, aetiology, and even etymology into his material, Nicander certainly inscribes his work into the bucolic lineage in at least two ways: first, by adopting a distinct literary voice and tenor for a subject that does not usually attract such a voice, and secondly, by writing about

1 See Lazaris, “Scientific, Medical and Technical Manuscripts,” 100–103, for a detailed discussion of the manuscript layout and details.

2 See the thorough study by Overduin, *Nicander of Colophon's Theriaka*.

the ecologies inhabited by shepherds and a host of other beings—albeit in conflict, not harmony, with them.

Pictorially, however, across folios 47v and 48r we find little hint of the agon delineated in Nicander's poem between man and beast (Figures 38–39). Instead, we are shown a pleasing vista of sky and ground with loosely grouped, tall grasses, reeds, and plants, some seeming to sway in a breeze. A beautiful pale blue wash covers the upper reaches of both folios, but with parts of the parchment's surface visible nonetheless. This is not a diffusive or many-shaded blue of the kind we saw in the opening folio of the Paris Psalter in the previous chapter. Both folios in the Nicander MS have firmly etched groundlines. On 47v three people trudge across the parchment. The figure on the left (probably a woman?) carries a bag over her shoulder and points to the figure in front of her. This centrally placed being, also identified as a woman, kneels with arms outstretched towards the man on the right of the triad. This person is forcefully angled toward the physical edge of the folio, even as his head turns back toward the companions behind him. Dressed as a shepherd, he occupies the greater part of the folio's surface with his right leg pushing into the space of the figure who kneels at the centre. The horizontal support of the stick he holds grazes the spine of the manuscript as though he were straining against that limit. This shepherd is clearly the most active and dominant figure in the trio. Meanwhile, unfolding on the folio across (48r) is a vista replete with more vegetation in the form of trees, both dark and wispy, and clumps of grass. Amidst these, a shepherd strides off toward the right with a crook in hand. Although he has been identified as Pan Nomios, the god of the shepherds in a sacred grove, his identity is, strictly speaking, unknown, given the lack of inscriptions.³ What is clear, however, is the fact that he alone, among the humans (or the other beings who are superficially human), is shown erect in stance and striding confidently—as opposed to kneeling, or straining his body and head in two opposite directions, as his counterparts on the previous folio do.⁴ Could this insouciance be an effect of the venomous creatures having been banished from the scene? Note that a lone viper winds its way from right to left on the previous folio, above the heads of the three figures. The closing folio thus might well depict a shepherd relieved and replete with confidence, now that the surrounding landscape is free of the perils occasioned by those reptiles and their kind.

3 Weitzman, *Age of Spirituality*: “Codex of the Theriaka and Alexipharmaka of Nicander,” 248–49.

4 Weitzman, *Age of Spirituality*: “Codex of the Theriaka and Alexipharmaka of Nicander,” 249, states that this figure stands in a dancing pose.

Although I used the adverb “meanwhile” to describe folio 48r, suggesting that the shepherd’s unhesitating stride occurs at the same time as the curious poses of the figures on 47v, this synchronic relation is far from obvious. The straining shepherd on folio 47v certainly seems to point attention to 48r, but the latter image could just as plausibly be the aftermath of the previous folio. The period viewer would have appreciated the ambiguity in this pictorial rendition of Nicander’s narrative since it is built into the very mode at hand. Per the author’s directives, bucolic landscapes could be emptied of lurking threats by recourse to the methods suggested (and the lone snake seems to reflect this by scuttling off in the opposite direction). However, as Nicander would have well known, the very value of his work resides in its capacity for application (it was, after all, copied in an illustrated manuscript in the tenth century well after its original date of composition)—and bucolic ecologies can never be entirely “cleansed” of the spiders, reptiles, and vipers that dwell in them. True to the visual dimensions of the mode, the bucolic tenor of the final image—and the hints of it on folio 47v—deny any absolute conclusion to the narrative. Our happy shepherd may be walking his way into more dangers against which he needs Nicander’s fortifying advice, for all one knows!

With this image—open-ended, ostensibly idyllic, and without any definite resolution—we may close this short excursus into the bucolic mode in Byzantium. The shepherd’s journey outward is—one hopes—an invitation to build on the ideas delineated here, and to lead to further contemplations of the bucolic and its myriad possibilities in the Byzantine world.

