



BĀMĪA I. THE PLANT

i. The Plant

A native of Africa, okra has long been naturalized and extensively cultivated in some countries neighboring Iran, especially in Turkey, Iraq, and the Indian subcontinent; but, as stated by J. L. Schlimmer, *Terminologie*, p. 7, it was introduced into the culinary art of Persians by Arabs from Baghdad in the 19th century. The mucilaginous, bland okra pods do not seem to have ever been very popular in Iran; the same author, writing in a.d. 1874, *ibid.*, already points out this relative unpopularity, saying that “the fruits of *Abelmoschus esculenta* [*sic*; i.e., *A. esculentus* = *Hibiscus esculentus*] are sought for as a vegetable only by [resident] Europeans and by Arabs settled in Persia.” Even nowadays it is grown and eaten mostly in Iranian Azarbaijan (both East and West) and in Kurdistan, although its cultivation has been extended in recent times to other regions such as Isfahan and Mašhad.

In Afghanistan, it grows precociously in abundance in warm regions such as Qandahār and Nangrahār.

The earliest, and unique, mention of okra as a medicinal vegetable in Arabic sources on materia medica in the Islamic era is found in Ebn al-Bayṭār (d. 646/1248), I, p. 81, who quotes his teacher the Sevillian botanist Abu'l-‘Abbās Aḥmad surnamed Ebn al-Rūmīya (561-637/1165-1239) as having written, in addition to a description of the whole plant: “*Bāmīa* is [found] in Egypt [. . .] and Egyptians eat it with meat, that is, the capsules of the fruits while they are tender [. . .].” As to its pharmacological properties, Ebn al-Bayṭār quotes



“somebody else”: “By nature it is “cold” and “moist”,—the “moistest” of all vegetables. The blood produced from it is bad. It is of little nutritive value. It is said to agree with people with a hot temperament. Its harmful effects are averted if it be eaten with a lot of hot spices.” Ebn al-Bayṭār’s quotations first reappeared (in translation) in Persian medico-pharmacological works in ‘Aqīlī Ḳorāsānī’s *Maḵzan al-adwīa*, p. 107, compiled in 1183/1769-70, and thence down to modern works in Persian, e.g., A. Nafīsī, *Ḳawāṣṣ-e ḵvordanīhā*, pp. 165-66.

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