



BĀRHANG

BĀRHANG (also *bārtang*), plantain, is a general, imprecise name for about 27 species of *Plantago* L. (family Plantaginaceae; see Parsa, IV, pp. 240-67) in Iran, particularly *P. major* L., the greater plantain, *P. lanceolata* L. (= *P. minor* L.), the lesser plantain, *P. ovata* Forsk., and *P. psyllium* L., fleawort.

Unmistakably, the rich pharmacognosy of *Plantago* was incorporated into Islamic medicine from Greek sources: Medical-botanical authors of the Islamic era (e.g., Ebn Sīnā, II, p. 203, Heravī, pp. 299-300) repeat more or less fully the descriptions and therapeutic indications found in Galen and, more especially, in Dioscorides, with some minor additions or modifications; even the commonest Arabic name for the plantain (also the standard name in Persian sources), *lesān al-ḥamal* (lit. “lamb tongue”), is a calque of its Greek name *arnóglōsson* (two other, uncommon, Arabic synonyms, *dū sab‘at azlā’* and *kaṭīr al-azlā’*, are translations of Dioscorides’ *heptapleuron* “seven-ribbed” and *polupleuron* “many-ribbed,” respectively, the reference being to the number of veins in each leaf blade of *P. major*). One of the common Arabic names for *P. psyllium*, *ḥašīṣat al-barāḡīt* (lit. “fleas’ herb”), is an adaptation of Dioscorides’ *psullion* (lit. “flea-like”), alluding to the resemblance in shape and color of its seeds to fleas.

The Iranian names for *Plantago*, however, do not show any trace of the Greek terminology. In addition to *bārhāng/bārtāng* for the (greater) plantain, we have *esparza/esfarza* (in current use in Iran, perhaps originally a dialectal Isfahani term), *ḳargūšak* (lit. “the little donkey ear,” mentioned by Bīrūnī, p. 331 of the Ar. text), and the now obsolete (dialectal?) Persian *asb-/esba-ḡūl/ḡol*



(or *asp-/espa-*, lit. “horse ear,” this name, or variants thereof, however, seems to be still in use in Indian *bāzārs*; see Dymock et al., III, pp. 126-27) for *P. psyllium*. (For some other names of the plantain—Arabic, Persian, etc.—see Dehḳodā, *Loḡat-nāma*, s.vv. *bārtang* and *bārhang*, and Parsa, VIII, pp. 144-45.)

Galen mentions a few and Dioscorides about thirty medicinal properties and uses of *Plantago*. As to its “active nature,” Galen (as quoted by Ebn al-Bayṭār, pt. 4, p. 107; tr. pp. 435f.) states that the plantain embodies both “cold moistness” and astringency. Of the various uses recommended by Dioscorides (as quoted by Ebn al-Bayṭār, *ibid.*, pp. 107-08) the following may be mentioned here: Eating cooked plantain with vinegar and salt helps against intestinal ulcers and chronic diarrhea; (in a poultice) it is good for suppurative wounds, deep wounds, scrofula in the neck, tonsillitis, burns, etc.; eating cooked plantain helps cure epilepsy and asthma; the expressed juice of the leaves is good for oral inflammations, earache, hemoptysis and some other pulmonary ailments; chewing the cooked roots soothes toothache; eating its cooked roots and leaves is a remedy against pains in the kidneys and the bladder (for the cumulative traditional Greek, Arab, Persian, and Indian pharmacognosy of the *lesān al-ḥamal*, see ‘Aqīlī Ḳorāsānī, pp. 381-82).

There has been some confusion about the provenance of *esbaḡūl/esfarza* seeds. For instance, some authorities (e.g., Dymock et al., *op. cit.*; Chopra, 1930) have identified them as those of *P. ovata* Forsk, while the majority of the authors consider them to be those of *P. psyllium* L. The confusion is mainly due to the resemblance (in shape and some medical properties) of the various seeds involved. However, the synonymy of Gk. *psullion* = Ar. *ḥašīṣat al-barāḡīt* = Syr./Ar. *bazr gaṭūnā/bezr qoṭūnā* = Pers. *esbaḡūl/esfarza*, found in some classical sources, seems to corroborate the latter view. According to Dioscorides (4.69), *psullion* is good for arthritis, headache, edema, tumors, erysipelas, and for clearing ulcers and running ears. These properties are reflected in Islamic sources (Arabic and Persian) under the standard heading *bezrqaṭūnā* (arabicized from Syriac).

Nowadays it seems that the therapeutic utilization of the common plantain and the fleawort in Iran and some neighboring countries is limited to the use of the dried ripe seeds in a few cases, especially against diarrhea and dysentery (in India, Iran, Iraq). This is probably the oldest recognized main use of the plantain, since Pliny already states that both the greater and the lesser plantains are very effective against “rheumatismi” (25.39) or “intestinal complaints” (26.47; cf. Dymock et al., *op. cit.*, p. 128). In Iran, plantain seeds in



an infusion with the mucilaginous seeds of three other plants—*Sisymbrium alliaria* Scop., quince, and *Cordia mixa* L.—are used as a demulcent and expectorant in some pulmonary ailments, this popular traditional compound is called *č(ah)ār-toḳm(a)*, lit. “the four seeds.” The *esbaḡūl/esfarza* seeds are used in the treatment of chronic dysentery (in the Indian subcontinent), as a coolant (*mobarred*), (in a poultice) against erysipelas (*bād-e sork*), and to speed up the maturation of boils and abscesses (in Iran).

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