Encyclopædia Iranica

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Published: July 20, 2002
Last Updated: November 2, 2016

BASIL

BASIL, *Ocimum L.* ssp. (fam. Labiatae), now commonly called *rayḥān* in Persian, an aromatic plant. The word *basil* goes back ultimately to Gk. *basilikón*, lit. "royal," with *okimon* understood, thus "royal [*okimon*]," which, according to Laufer (pp. 586-87), is a Greek calque of the Pers. *šāh-separam/-esfaram*, "the basil, [lit.] fragrant leaf of the king." *Separam/ esfarham* (also *esparam*, etc.) are, according to dictionaries (e.g., *Borhān-e qāṭeʿ*, s.vv.), shortened forms of *esparḡam/esparham separḡam/separham*, etc. (from a Mid. Pers. word written variously as *sparm/sparḡm*, *sparhm*, or *spahrm*; see Unvala, pp. 31, 76, who translates it as "plant, flower"), which is a generic term in Classical Persian literature for (plants with) fragrant leaves and/or flowers, and, occasionally, aromatic fruits; thus it partly corresponds to the original meaning of the Arabic *rayḥān* (pl. *rayāḥin*, "aromatic plant"), which is also used in Classical Persian in this generic sense (cf. *Bundahišn* xvi 12, where *sparam* is said to indicate only "everything with fragrant leaves, manually sown/planted by men, and perennial/hardy," thus excluding the rose, the violet, the narcissus, etc., which form a separate group, ibid., 13).

In combination with *šāh* (lit. "king," but also denoting, in compounds, the largest or most prominent species or variety of something), i.e., *šāh-esparam/esparḡam*, etc., lit. "the kingly/royal herb," it denotes in Classical Persian the *Ocimum basilicum L.*, the so-called sweet basil or basil royal (cf. also the Arabic calque *al-rayḥān al-maleki* "the kingly/ royal herb," as a synonym for *šāhsefaram*, e.g., in Anṭāki, I, p. 150). Also pertinent is the story narrated at some length in *Borhān-e qāṭeʿ* about the genesis of the *šāh-*

esparḡam (s.v.), which "reportedly did not exist before [king] Anōširavān's time": A large snake, grateful to Anōširavān for his having spared its life one day, rewarded him a year later by ejecting from its mouth some black seeds which, when planted by order of the king, yielded later the "king's herb," by smelling and eating [which], he who constantly had a cold (*zokām*) got over his cold [forever]." Laufer (p. 586) says: "There is good reason to assume that at least one species, if not several, [of basil] is a native of Persia and was diffused from there to India and China and probably also to the West. This is *Ocimum basilicum*, the sweet or common basil." Concerning the westward spread of sweet basil, he says (p. 587): "There is much in favor of Sickenberger's supposition that its introduction into Europe may be due to the returning crusaders, while the Arabic name adopted in Spain and Portugal suggests a Moorish transplantation into Western Europe." In fact, the sweet basil has long been a favorite garden herb in Iran. It is mentioned in pre-Islamic Zoroastrian literature, e.g., in the *Bundahišn*, where it is said to "belong" to [Amešāspand] Šahrivar (tr. Anklesaria, xvi A. 1), and in *King Husrav and his boy* (Unvala, p. 33), where it is stated that "the scent of the basil [*šāhsparhm*] is just like the scent of [people] of high position [*grāmīkān*]."

The sweet basil has been called by other names, too: in Arabic and Persian, *rayḥān* ("the aromatic herb [par excellence]"); in Arabic *bāḏaruj*, equated by Maimonides(no. 48) with *al-rayḥān* = *ḥawk* = *ḥomāḥem* = *ḥabaq nabaṭi* (i.e., "the Nabatean *ḥabaq*," *ḥabaq* being a generic term for various basils and closely related aromatic labiates such as mint and thyme; see Meyerhof, in Maimonides, p. 26) = Gk. *bāsiliq* [i.e. *basilikón*] (this synonymy is not totally accurate; see below); *ḥabaq ṣaʿtari* "the *ḥabaq* [smelling] like savory," and *ḥabaq kermāni* "the *ḥabaq* from Kermān" (Ebn al-Bayṭār, II, p. 6, III, p. 50, quoting Solaymān b. Ḥassan, and Anṭāki, I, p. 100); *żaymorān* (e.g., in Zamaḵšāri, I, p. 86); in Persian, *vanjanak* (= *šāh-esfarham/ -esfarḡam*, Asadi Ṭusi, *Loḡat-e fors*, ed. Dabirsiāqi, p. 103), *nāz-bu* (e.g., in ʿAqili, *Maḵzan al-adwia*, p. 539).

The genus *Ocimum* includes a great many species and varieties (M. Ṭabāṭabāʾi, I, pp. 741-43, states that "there are sixty species and varieties of the genus *rayḥān*, [i.e., *Ocimum*]"). Some scholars have attempted to identify some of these with various *aḥbāq* (pl. of *ḥabaq*), *rayāḥin* or *esparams*, but with generally inconclusive results. Anṭāki (I, p. 58, s.v. *bād(a)rūj* states: "[It] is a Nabatean word [corresponding with] the Greek *oqimon* [i.e., *okimon*] and the Hebrew *ḥawk*. It designates an herb (*baqla*) which women cultivate at home.

Here [i.e., in Egypt] it is called *al-rayḥān al-aḥmar* ['the red herb'] for it was taken by the jinn to [King] Solomon, who used it to cure *riḥ aḥmar* ['the red wind': erysipelas?]." Elsewhere (I, pp. 95, 150) he equates *al-rayḥān al-solaymāni* with *jamesfaram/ jamefram* ("the herb of Jam," the legendary Iranian king, later popularly identified with Solomon; the Arabic expression is thus an adaptation of the Iranian designation; cf. Ebn al-Bayṭār, I, p. 168: "[The word] *jamesfaram* is said to mean *rayḥān Solaymān* [Solomon's herb] in Persian"). *Bād(a)ruj/bāḏ(a)ruj* (not a Nabatean word, but a Persian one; see Maimonides, no. 48), with its variant *bādrug/ bādruz/ bādru,* etc., has been otherwise identified as a variety of *rayḥān*, called *rayḥān-e kuhi* ["mountain *rayḥān*"], with tiny leaves, a square ramose stalk, less fragrant than the *rayḥān* [i.e., sweet basil], with reddish blossoms, occurring both wild and *bostāni* (garden-grown), growing in the fall and not in the spring, and apparently yielding the seeds called *toḵm-e šarbati* ["seeds for sherbet"], which are brought from Shiraz, and taken in sugar sorbet" (Tonokāboni, p. 137, s.v. *bādruj*). Schlimmer (pp. 408-09) states that the "*Ocymum* [sic] *album* [is called] white basil in English, weisses Königskraut in German, *bādruj-e abyaż* ['white *bādruj*'] and *rayḥān-e kūhi* [in Persian]," and adds: "Its seeds are known as *toḵm-e šarbati*. It is the province of Shiraz that provides almost all Persia with the esteemed seeds, which constitute an indispensable ingredient of ice sorbets" (then he describes how these seeds are prepared in order to make the fragrant refreshment).

Under *šāhšobrom/ šāhšefram*, Maimonides (no. 360) speaks of "a kind of *ḥabaq* with tenuous leaves known as *al-ḥabaq al-kermāni*." Meyerhof (Maimonides, p. 180) claims that these words, also Arabic alterations of *šāh-esfaram*, which originally applied to the "grand basilic" (lit. 'largest basil'), *O. basilicum*, have come – through semantic narrowing – "to designate among Arabs probably and especially the *O. minimum L.*, the 'petit basilic' ('small basil'), which is also named *żawmarān* or *żaymarān*" (cf. Anṭāki and Ebn al-Bayṭār above, who give *ḥabaq kermāni* for the large-leaved *O. basilicum*).

Another labiate to be identified probably as a basil is *faranjmošk* (with numerous variants in Persian and Arabic, e.g., *efranjmošk*, *falanj(a)-mošk/ -mešk/ -mesk, baranjmošk*), an old item in the pharmacopoeia of the Islamic period. It is already mentioned as a prominent aromatic plant in Zoroastrian Pahlavi texts, e.g., in *King Husrav* (Unvala, p. 33, transliterated as *palangmošk*, and inaccurately translated as "the musk-flower"), and in the *Bundahišn* (tr. Anklesaria, xvi A. 1; 21, where it is transliterated as *faranj-mošk* and wrongly

translated as “the sweet basil,” and xvi A. 1, where it is said to “belong” to [Amešāspand] Spandārmaḏ). Ebn al-Bayṭār (III, p. 161), mentioning *al-ḥabaq al-qaranfoli* (“the clove-smelling herb/basil”) as a synonym of *faranjmošk*, has taken it to correspond with Dioscorides’ *akinos*: “*Aqinos* [misprinted as *afnis* in the Bulāq edition] is a *ʿošb* [green grass/herb] having tenuous stalks used in wreaths, looking like *bāḏruj* [see above], fragrant, as if covered with down. Some people grow it in gardens. It astringes the belly and stops the menstrual flow. If taken internally or applied externally it cures erysipelas.” Then Ebn al-Bayṭār adds: “According to some of our scholars, *faranjmošk* is of two kinds: *bostāni* [’garden-grown’], called *al-hendi* [’Indian’], and *barri* [’wild’], called ‘Chinese’. The former has square branches, leaves like those of the *bāḏruj*, green to yellow, and smells like clove. The Chinese [variety] grows in rocks, has tenuous leaves like those of the wild *nammām* [= several labiates, especially the wild thyme, but also the peppermint; see Maimonides, no. 255], and is more pungent than the *bostāni* variety.” Ebn Sinā (*Qānūn* II, Pers. tr., p. 274, Lat. tr., p. 233, s.v. *falamamiski*, identified by the translator as *ocimo gariophyllato* and, in the margin, as *basilicon gariophyllatum*, [“clove-smelling basil”]) deals only with its medicinal properties, and that very briefly: “It is believed to be more nutritious and drier than marjoram and sysimbrium. Eating or smelling it, or applying it externally, unclogs occlusions in the brain. Eating it soothes cardiac palpitation caused by phlegm and black bile. Eating it, or applying it on hemorrhoids, helps cure these.” Maimonides (no. 47, s.v. *baranjmašk* [sic]), too, has equated it with *habaq qaranfoli*. The word *faranjmošk* and its variants all go back to Persian or MPers. *palang-mošk* “leopard-musk,” so called in allusion to its spotted leaves, evoking the coat of a leopard, and to its fragrance (cf. the justification by the author of *Borhān-e qāṭeʿ*, s.v. *palangmešk*: “its blossoms look like the spots on a leopard’s back, and they smell like musk”). The etymology proposed by some, e.g., J. A. Vullers (*Lexicon Perso-Latinum Etymologicum*, Bonnae ad Rhenum, I, 1855, p. 110), and repeated by Dozy (*Supplément* II, p. 262), that *afranj-mošk* means “the musk of the Franks” is invalid. Other synonyms recorded for *faranjmošk* are: Arabic *al-qaranfol al-bostāni*, “garden clove” (Ṣahārboḵt, quoted by Biruni, Arab text, p. 294), and *aṣābeʿ al-fatayāt*, “maidens’ fingers” (Abu Ḥanifa Dinavari, quoted ibid.), Hindi *tulsi* (Kāsāni, I, p. 527), and Persian *balangu-ye ṣaḥrāʾi* “wild *balangu*” [= *Melissa officinalis L.* or *Dracocephalum royleani*?] (*Borhān-e qāṭeʿ*, s.v. *faranjmošk*) or (in Shiraz) *b.-ye ḵod-rū*, “wild *b.*” (s.v. *efranjmošk*). According to Dymock et al. (III, p. 90), *qaranfol-e bostāni* and Abū Ḥanifa’s *aṣābeʿ al-fatayāt* are the labiate “Calamintha clinopodium Benth., the Wild Basil.” The Hindi *tulsi* (more correctly, *tūl(a)sī*) is, according to Dymock (III, p.

86), the "*Ocimum sanctum L.*, the Holy Basil, a plant venerated in India by the Hindus," but Tonokāboni (p. 215) equates it with *jam-esfaram* (see above). They state further (III, p. 90): "Under the name Faranjmishk or Biranjmishk, Arabic forms of the Persian name Palangmishk, the nutlets of an unidentified labiate plant are imported from Persia [into India]." ʿAqili (p. 652), knowledgeable as he is about Indian simples and their vernacular names, equates *faranjmošk* with the Hindi *rām-tul(a)si*, which, according to Dymock et al. (III, p. 85) is the *Ocimum gratissimum*. Schlimmer (p. 366) identifies it as "Common Calamint, *Melissa calamintha*, [whose] leaves are considered by the natives [of Iran] a cordial and carminative, [and whose] seeds are supposedly aphrodisiac." However, he reports (p. 203, on the authority of the botanist Buhse of Riga) that in Māzandarān the word *palanmešk* is applied to the labiate *Dracocephalum kotchyi* Boiss., which is called *ʿalaf-e māst*, "yogurt grass' by the villagers in upper Šemirān. Laufer (p. 589), unaware of the great confusion about the identification of *palangmošk*, endeavors to justify the "leopard-musk" etymology botanically, and has succeeded in finding a basil with spotted leaves in the work of John Parkinson (*Paradisi in sole paradisus terrestris*, London, 1629, p. 450), who, when discussing the various basils, states: "[Another basil] is called *Ocimum minimum*, or *gariophyllatum*, Clove Basil, or Bush Basil. The last [species], eyther of his place, or form of his leaves, being spotted and curled, or all, is called *Ocimum Indicum maculatum, latifolium* and *crispum*. In English according to the Latine, Indian, broade leafed, spotted or curled Basil, which you please." These descriptions, however, do not resolve the conflict, because the two epithets *gariophyllatum* (= *qaranfoli*) and *maculatum* ("spotted") occur in two different species of Parkinson's ocimums, whereas they are supposedly combined in *palangmošk* – unless one supposes a subspecies or variety of the latter. (For the variety of *rayḥān* called *bālangu* specifically, see e.g., Tonokāboni, p. 137, s.v., and pp. 135-36, s.v. *bādranjbuya*.)

Medicinal Properties. Ebn al-Bayṭār (III, p. 50) cites the following virtues and uses of *šāh-esfaram*: "It is useful against (fever) heat (*ḥarāra*), (internal bodily) combustion (*eḥterāq*), and headache; it induces sleep. One *meṯqāl* of its seeds, taken internally with cold water, stops the diarrhea caused by *ḥarāra* and *ḥorqa/ ḥarqa* (a fit of *eḥterāq*)" (Māsarjuya). "One *meṯqāl* of its roasted seeds taken internally with water of quince juice stops chronic diarrhea" (Ebn ʿEmrān). "It is fragrant, [Galenically speaking] hot in the first degree and dry in the second" [cf. Ṭabari, *Ferdaws al-ḥekma*, p. 396, who states that it is "cold"]. "Smelling the *šāh-esfaram* after sprinkling it with cold water is beneficial to

hot-tempered (*maḥrūr*) persons. . . There is a mild astringency in its leaves. . .” (al-Meṣri). “Sprinkled with cold water, it acts as a coolant (*mobarred*), and induces sleep” (Rāzi). Among the earlier Persian physicians, Majusi (pp. 103, 111) has provided these further details: “The best *šāh-esfaram* is imported from *belād al-Rūm* (Anatolia). In [Galenic] nature and force it is similar to the absinth, but more astringent, and therefore strengthens the stomach and the liver. . . The best *sāh-esfaram* seeds are the black, heavy, small, fragrant ones. They are moderate as to heat and cold.”

Those authors who consider *bādruj* to be different from the common basil have recorded different virtues and uses for it; e.g., Jorjāni (p. 588): “It is hot and dry in the first degree, and [however], has an inherent superfluous moisture (*roṭūbat-e fozūni*). Difficult to digest and fast putrescent, it harms the stomach. It increases the milk [of nursing women]. It is beneficial to atrabilious persons. Sniffing it or instilling its juice (especially with a little vinegar and camphor) into the nostril stops nosebleeds. [Chewing it] eliminates [the feeling of] dental ‘bluntness’ (*kondi*). Eating it weakens/dims the eyesight, [but] using its juice as a collyrium strengthens the eyesight as well as the heart. Its juice eliminates bad breath and stops throat bleeding. . .” The *toḵm-e šarbati* (see above), believed by some to be the seeds of the *bādruj*, is said to be “a remedy for black bile and dysuria” (Ebn Sinā, pp. 96-97, s.v. *bādruj*). In addition to these two uses, Tonokāboni (pp. 137-38, s.v. *bādruj*) states that the seeds are good for curing flatulence, and (in a poultice on breasts) for increasing the milk (of nursing women).

To the *faranjmošk* – whatever its real botanical identity – have been attributed many properties, a rather comprehensive account of which is presented by Tonokāboni (p. 639; for further details and explanations, see ʿAqili, p. 625). The following is an outline of the main properties and uses (see also the above-mentioned statements of Dioscorides, Ebn Sinā and Schlimmer): Hot and dry to the extreme in the second degree; cerebral de-obstruent; invigorates the heart, the liver, and the “cold” stomach; good for phlegmatic and atrabilious *waswās* (melancholy), for *ḵafaqān* (abnormal cardiac palpitation), and splenitis; digester of tough (*ḡaliẓ*) food; appetizer; it scents the breath, eases gripes and “cold” headache. The seeds: very dry and desiccative; they desiccate the sperm; *monʿeẓ* (approx., sexual stimulant); stomachic; added to wine, vinegar, grape juice, etc., they prevent its spoiling.

Culinary Uses. Historically, basil (*rayḥān*) is attested in the cuisine of the Safavid court: Nur-Allāh Nāmi, chef to Shah ʿAbbās I (1587-1629), gives a recipe

for a broth (*āš*) of basil, celery and onion chives (Afšār, p. 242). It also featured during the Qajar period: Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's chef records several recipes involving basil and a detailed inventory of other herbs (Āšpazbāši, pp. 6, 14, 38, 61). Nowadays, under the common name of *rayḥān* (colloquially, /reyhun/), sweet basil is widely consumed in Iran as a vegetable eaten fresh and raw (*sabzi-ḵordan*). In popular *kabābis* (kabob shops), the *kabāb-e kūbida* (made of ground meat) is usually served on *sangak* bread with onion, roasted tomatoes, and *rayḥān-e sabz* ("green basil") when in season. Therefore it is cultivated on a large scale throughout the country (M. Ṭabāṭabāʾi, op. cit.). It occurs in two varieties: one with green leaves, which is commoner by far, and another with dark red or purplish leaves (called *rayḥān-e qermez* "red basil").

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