



## CAMPHOR

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**CAMPHOR** (NPers. *kāfūr*; Mid. Pers. *kāpūr*, perhaps directly from Malay *kāpūr*; but cf. Sogd. *kpwr* “camphor” < Prakrit *kappūra-*, Sims-Williams, p. 137, suggesting the parallel Middle Pers. derivation *kappūr* > *kāpūr*; cf. Skt. *karpūra*; cf. Mayrhofer, *Dictionary* I, p. 175), a strong-smelling volatile white solid essential oil obtained from two genera of the camphor tree and used from ancient times in Persia as an aromatic with antiseptic and insect-repelling properties. The medicinal virtues of camphor were discovered later in the Islamic period.

*Camphor in early Persian sources.* The earliest mention of camphor in Persia is in the Pahlavi texts: the *Bundahišn* (TD<sub>2</sub>, p. 118.5-7; tr. Anklesaria, chap. 16.21, pp. 150-51) mentions *kāpūr* in a category of fragrant plants that also includes sandalwood, frankincense, cardamom, and *wādrangbōy* (*Melissa officinalis* L.), and the author of the *Ķosrow ī kawādān ud rēdag-ē* (no. 76, pp. 32), comparing different scents with categories of people, says that “the scent of *kāpūr* is just like that of *dastūr*-ship [Zoroastrian clergy].”

However, it is the *Šāh-nāma* that is our most important source of information about camphor in pre-Islamic Persia. Camphor was believed to have been brought by Jamšīd along with other aromatics, such as ben (*bān*), musk, aloes wood, ambergris, and rosewater (*Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, I, p. 41 vv. 41-42), and the use of camphor is mentioned several times, for instance in VII, p. 370 v. 1150, and V, p. 22 v. 240, where Manīža, Afrāsīāb’s daughter, scatters camphor on the bed she is preparing for her sweetheart Bīžan and sprinkles rosewater around the bed. Camphor was a rare, precious exotic substance and was



therefore valued as a gift worthy of sovereigns; as such it figures among the gifts sent by the emperor (*fağfūr*) of China to Alexander (VII, p. 95 v. 1625), among the presents given by the king of India to the companions of Barām V Gōr (VII, p. 429 v. 2191), and among those sent by the *rāy* (raja) of India to Ḳosrow I Anōšīravān (VIII, p. 215 vv. 2782-83; cf. Bīrūnī's historical account, below).

According to the *Šāh-nāma*, camphor and the other exotic aromatics (aloes wood, ambergris, and musk) were also employed to embalm the corpses of heroes and royal personages—a practice apparently in flagrant violation of the strict Zoroastrian rite of exposing the corpses to vultures and scavenging beasts (see Boyce, pp. 14-15, 120-21). According to the *Šāh-nāma*, the privileged corpses were superficially embalmed with camphor, etc., crowned with musk, wrapped in *dībā* (a kind of colored satin or silk brocade), then coffined and placed in protected *daḳmas* (death chambers). This kind of funerary embalmment (probably in imitation of the practices of the neighboring Sumerians and Babylonians; see *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., 1985, IV, s.v. Embalming) seems to have had the advantage of both observing the dignity of the dead and respecting the sanctity of the earth (for numerous instances in the *Šāh-nāma* see Wulff, s.v. *kāfūr*). It is not improbable that the use of camphor in both the Islamic ablution of the dead (*ḡosl al-mayyet*) and the Imami *honūṭ* or *tahnīṭ* (see below) was influenced by Sasanian funerary practices (q.v.).

The Persian sovereigns' desire to possess large quantities of camphor is confirmed by Bīrūnī (1936, p. 71), who relates from “the chronicles of the Persians” (*akbār al-fors*) that the rich offerings of the king of India to Anōšīravān included “one thousand *mans* of aloes wood” and “ten *mans* of camphor [shaped] like pistachio nuts or larger” (also in Mas'ūdī, *Morūj*, ed. Pellat, I, p. 308 par. 623); he also relates (pp. 71-72) that the goods in the treasure house (named Bahār-e Ḳorram) of Ḳosrow II (Parvēz) at Ctesiphon included one hundred baskets, each containing one thousand musk bags and one hundred sacks of camphor. When the Arabs entered Madā'en (Ctesiphon) in 16/637, they found a lot of camphor, which they took for salt until they used it in bread and discovered its bitterness (Ṭabarī, I, p. 2445; see also Balāḍorī, *Fotūh*, p. 264; Baḷ'amī, I, p. 466; Ebn al-Aṭīr, Beirut ed., II, p. 515).

In classical Persian poetry *kāfūr* has often been used as a symbol of whiteness, especially in similes involving white hair as a sign of old age (for literary quotations, see Dehḳodā, *Loḡat-nāma*, s.v. *kāfūr*). In the past, when black



slaves were kept, males were sometimes given the ironic forename Kāfūr; hence the still current proverb, *bar 'aks nehānd nām-e zangī Kāfūr*, “a negro is contrarily named Camphor.”

*Funerary uses of camphor in Islamic times.* Camphor is mentioned in the Qur'ān (76:5) as a mixer (*mezāj*) in a cup from which the righteous (*abrār*) shall drink in Paradise, and in Islam camphor plays an important part in the funerary ritual. The earliest mention of the use of camphor in the ablution of the dead is in a *ḥadīth* attributed to the Prophet regarding the funeral ablution of his daughter Zaynab (d. 8/629-30). He instructed that she should be washed three or five times (or more, should it be deemed necessary) with water and *sedr* (leaves of the lotus tree) with a little camphor added to the last wash (for this *ḥadīth*, see Wensinck et al., VI, p. 40, s.v. *kāfūr*; Boḳārī, VII, pp. 61-62, tr., I, pp. 405-09; Qaṣṭalānī, II, p. 384; Mālek, Eng. tr., p. 105 no. 514, where *sedr* is erroneously rendered as “pear leaves”). The Prophet's recommendation regarding camphor and *sedr* is still observed by Sunni Muslims (cf., e.g., the Shafē'ite precept apud Šayḳ-al-Eslām, I, pp. 63, 361: “Triple washing and perfuming of the corpse with *sedr* and camphor is recommendable [although not obligatory] (*mostaḥabb*)”; for the variants of this precept according to the other schools of *feqh*, see Jazīrī, I, pp. 510-13). In Imami *feqh*, however, washing the corpse with camphorated water is one of the three obligatory (*wājeb*) ablutions (Borūjerdī, p. 88 no. 556, says it is obligatory to wash the dead person three times: with water mixed with *sedr*, with water mixed with camphor, and with pure water). The Imami authority for this use of camphor, however, goes back only to the sixth imam, Ja'far al-Šādeq (d. 148/765; see the precepts about the funeral ablution with camphor reported from him by Kolaynī [d. 329/941], III, pp. 138-42, and by Ḥorr 'Āmelī [d. 1104/1692], I/2, pp. 680-85).

The Imami *ḥonūt* or *taḥnīt* of the dead consists in the obligatory practice of rubbing camphor on seven parts of the corpse (the forehead, the palms, the knees and the two big toes) after the above-mentioned ablutions.

Further, it is recommended that the tip of the corpse's nose be rubbed with it. The camphor for *taḥnīt* must be pulverized and fresh; old, scentless camphor is unacceptable (see Borūjerdī, p. 92, no. 591). It is recommended to start by rubbing camphor on the forehead (*ibid.*, no. 592). Caution is obligatory not to scent the corpse with musk, ambergris, aloes wood, and the like; nor should any of these aromatics be mixed with the camphor (*ibid.*, p. 93 no. 596; however, it is recommended that a little soil of the grave (*torbat*) of Imam



Ḥosayn be mixed with the camphor (ibid., p. 93 no. 597). However, *ḥonūt* is not permitted in the case of a Mecca pilgrim already in the state of ritual consecration (*eḥrām*, q.v.) for *ḥajj* or *ʿomra* who dies before performing the *ṭawāf* (ritual of circumambulating of the Kaʿba; ibid., p. 92, no. 594). Jaʿfar al-Šādeq is again the ultimate authority for the precepts of *ḥonūt* (see Kolaynī, pp. 143-46; Ḥorr ʿĀmelī, pp. 730f., 744-48). Ḥorr ʿĀmelī (p. 731 no. 9) reports other details as well, including the following transmitted from the Prophet’s daughter Fāṭema concerning the right amount of camphor for each *ḥonūt*: “When the Messenger of Allāh was on his deathbed, Gabriel brought him from Paradise forty dirhams of camphor, which he [the Prophet] divided into three portions: one-third for his own [*ḥonūt*], one-third for ʿAlī, and one-third for me.” It is also customary among the Imamīs to sprinkle camphor and *darīra* (i.e., any fragrant powder, but particularly that of *Calamus aromaticus*, brought from India) on the different pieces of the shroud of the dead and on their faces—a *mostaḥabb* practice which is not mentioned in modern compendia (*resālas*) of Imami *feqh*, but which is also reported from Jaʿfar al-Šādeq (see Kolaynī, p. 143 no. 3; Ḥorr ʿĀmelī, pp. 745 no. 4, 746 no. 1).

*The sources of camphor.* The stories of royal gifts in the *Šāh-nāma* imply that camphor came from China and India in ancient times. In fact, these two geographical terms, in their vague medieval definition, represent the two principal camphor-producing areas in Asia: an eastern area including Japan, Formosa, and China, where camphor is obtained from the tree *Laurus camphora* L. (= *Cinnamomum camphora* Nees) of the Lauraceae family; and a southeastern area including Indo-China, Borneo, and Sumatra and which medieval seafarers and geographers usually referred to simply as Hind (India), where camphor is obtained from the tree *Dryobalanops aromatica* Gärtn. (= *D. camphora* Colebr.) of the Dipterocarpaceae family (see, e.g., Balfour, I, pp. 559-60; Dymock et al., I, pp. 197-201, III, pp. 199-203; Zargarī, I, pp. 343-45). Thus camphor was not produced in India proper, though this misconception persisted throughout the first centuries of the Islamic period. One of the earliest authors to discuss camphor, Yūḥannā b. Māsūya/Māsawayh (d. 243/857), considered camphor as one of the five principal “simple aromatic substances” (along with musk, ambergris, aloes wood, and saffron) and mentioned six varieties of camphor (the best of which, called *rabāḥī*, is “the white one resembling salt”) plus a sublimate (*moṣaʿad*) obtained from all the varieties, but he believed they all came from Persia and from Sofāla in India (pp. 9, 14-15). From the 3rd/9th century onward, however, with increasing land and sea travel to southeastern and eastern Asia, more and more



information is found in Arabic and Persian sources about camphor, its real places of origin, varieties, and medicinal uses. One of the earliest geographers of this period, Ebn ẖordādbēh (3rd/9th century) mentions some of the places where Southeast Asian camphor was found: the mountains of Zābaj (Ar. text, p. 65), the island of Bālūs (i.e., Barus on the eastern coast of Sumatra, producing excellent camphor; p. 66) and the island of Tīūma (i.e., Timoan, p. 68). Mas'ūdī (4th/10th cent.) names the country of Fanṣūr in the archipelago of Southeast Asia, whence *fanṣūrī* camphor was imported (I, par. 371, p. 180), and a number of mountainous islands in the sea of Kandoranj (Gulf of Siam), where both *kāfūr* and *mā' al-kāfūr* (see below) were found (p. 182 par. 375). Probably the earliest detailed description of camphor varieties is that of Eṣḥāq b. 'Emrān, a physician-pharmacologist from Baghdad (d. ca. 292/901; apud Ebn al-Bayṭār, II, pt. 4, p. 43): Camphor is imported from Sofāla, the country of Kalāh, Zābaj, and especially from Harīj (Lesser China). It is a lustrous red resin found in the hollows in the core of an indigenous tree; the best camphor, called *rabāḥī* after the name of a certain king Rabāḥ, yields the white camphor by sublimation. The choicest and most expensive *rabāḥī* camphor is found in Fanṣūr. There are three varieties of inferior quality, which must be refined to obtain white camphor; the *rabāḥī* is *maḵlūq* (naturally produced), the others are *ma'mūl* (processed).

The differentiation of various camphors according to quality and/or place of origin, probably deriving from mercantile interests, continued into the 4th/10th century and resulted in increased confusion in terminology and geographical identification. The author of the *Ḥodūd al-'ālam* (comp. 372/982-83; ed. Sotūda, pp. 19f.; tr. Minorsky, p. 57, comm. pp. 187-88) mentions the following places in Southeast Asia where camphor was found: the island of Ṣarīḥ (Zābaj?); the island of Bālūs, two parasangs west of Jāba; and the island of Haranj (?; see *Ḥodūd al-'ālam*, tr. Minorsky, p. 188) near Sandān. The physician-pharmacologist Ebn Sa'īd Tamīmī (4th/10th cent.) seems to have distinguished numerous varieties of camphor, of which Demašqī (654-727/1256-1327) quotes, without naming his source, the *rabāḥī* as the superior kind, and the *fanṣūrī* as the best *rabāḥī*, plus eight varieties of the *rabāḥī* (Ar. text, pp. 104-05, Fr. tr., p. 128). Nowayrī (XI, pp. 293-95) lists the same varieties, giving his source as Tamīmī's *Jayb al-'arūs*, from whom he quotes the remark that they are all used only as ingredients in medicines, except the *rabāḥī* from Fanṣūr which, in view of its excellence, should be used only in perfumes. Kāšānī (pp. 260-61) mentions five varieties of camphor, and Jorjānī (p. 156) names seven.



The *fanṣūrī* and *rabāḥī* (var. *rīāḥī*) camphor varieties both probably originated from Sumatra. The former is named after the town Fanṣūr on the western coast of Sumatra (*Hodūd al-ālam*, it. Minorsky, pp. 240-41), the latter after Rabāḥ/Rebāḥ, which is best explained as an orthographic corruption of Zābaj (Leclerc reads *zābajī* for *rīāḥī* in Ebn al-Bayṭār's text), though it has also been proposed to derive it from Arabic *rīāḥ* (plur. of *rīḥ* "wind"), for instance, by Anṭākī (I, p. 230), who, distinguishing three kinds of camphor, the subtlest of which, the *rīāḥī*, "evaporates out of the wood" of the camphor tree, says that "it is so called because it volatilizes with the *rīḥ* (see also Renaud and Colin, eds., *Toḥfat al-aḥbāb*, p. 95 no. 212). In the earliest sources (Ebn Ḳordāḍbeh) Zābaj (and variants), designates Java (see Ferrand, 1913-14, I, pp. iii, v, and 13; and 1934, p. 1182). However, *Dryobalanops aromatica* is not known to occur in Java proper, and the medieval authors who report that the best camphor was found in the island of Zābaj/Jāba/Jāwa (including the town or district of Fanṣūr) use the name to designate the island of Sumatra (see Ferrand, op. cit., index, s.vv. Zābag and Djāwaga, esp. pp. 8, 23, 204, 208; and idem, "Zābaj," in *EI*<sup>1</sup> IV; see also "Java," in *EI*<sup>1</sup> IV, p. 575).

*Medicinal uses of camphor.* Camphor was added to the pharmacopoeia of Galenic medicine by the physicians of the Islamic period. They discovered many beneficial uses for it, as well as a few harmful effects. Generally recognized as being "cold" and "dry" in the third degree (second in Jorjānī, p. 156), it was therefore considered useful in all "hot" ailments and conditions, including the following: Inhaling the scent of camphor (undiluted or mixed with rosewater, etc.) is beneficial to people with "hot" temperaments or suffering from headache of biliary origin, but continuing to inhale it and, *a fortiori*, taking it internally suppress sexual desire. Snuffing daily two grains of camphor with lettuce juice removes headache and cerebral heat, stops epitaxis, and induces sleep (Eṣḥāq b. 'Emrān, loc. cit.). It is useful against "hot" tumors (*awrām*) everywhere in the body and against insomnia (but excess in inhaling it or in internal use causes sleeplessness). Excessive internal use of camphor "chills" the kidneys, the bladder, and the testicles; "freezes" the sperm and attracts "cold" ailments to these organs. It is antidiarrhetic and accelerates canities (Rāzī, apud Ebn al-Bayṭār, loc. cit.). A little camphor with a lot of spice stops diarrhea of biliary origin (Baṣrī [?], loc. cit.). Ebn Sīnā (I, bk. 2, pp. 336-37) adds mainly that camphor is used in cardiac medicines and in those for "hot" ophthalmia and that its internal use generates renal and vesical calculi. Anṭākī (loc. cit.) has the lengthiest inventory of the medicinal uses of camphor, including the following additional ones: it is hemostatic, antipyretic,



useful against pulmonary ulcers, tuberculosis, hepatitis, urethritis, pleurisy, aphtes, *ta'akkol al-asnān* (caries?), arthralgia; it counteracts “hot” poisons. He, too, believes camphor to be an anaphrodisiac, but he adds that, “there is a rumor of its *rabāḥī* variety being aphrodisiac” (cf. Dymock, et al., I, p. 198, reporting that contrary to the opinion or the Muslim writers Hindu physicians consider Borneo camphor to be “hot,” “dry,” and aphrodisiac). Antākī was probably the first to have drawn attention to the insect-repelling virtue of camphor: the kings of India had *tokūt* (plur. of *takt*, bed, throne, couch) made from boards of camphor trees, because insects such as lice and mosquitoes would shun them.

*Production of camphor, trade, etc.* A good deal of information, accurate or fictitious, has been reported by authors of the Islamic period regarding the Southeast Asian camphor tree, its habitat, exploitation, camphor extraction, etc. Ebn Ḳordāḍbeh (p. 65, tr., p. 45) mentions the large size of the camphor tree, which can overshadow about a hundred people. Mas'ūdī (loc. cit., and II, p. 135, par. 892), reports that the annual yield of *fanṣūrī* camphor increases with the frequency of earthquakes, thunderstorms, and other atmospheric disturbances during the year. Demašqī (from an unnamed source; p. 104, Fr. tr., p. 128; quoted by Nowayrī, op. cit., p. 293) ascribes the rarity of camphor to the abundance of snakes (Nowayrī has *bobūr* “tigers”) in the forests where the trees grow. The trees can be exploited only during a one-month period of the year, when sexual excitement makes the snakes sick and they leave the forests to recover in sea water. According to Ṭūsī (597-672/1200-73; p. 256) the snakes coil themselves around the camphor trees in summer for coolness, making the trees unapproachable. Therefore the camphor-collectors shoot arrows at the trees from a distance to mark them as their property and then return in winter to collect the camphor (see also Kāšānī, p. 263; Jorjānī, p. 156). Moḥammad-Rabī' (pp. 152-53), the scribe to the embassy sent to Siam by the Safavid Shah Solaymān I in the latter part of the 11th/17th century, reported that it was explained to him in Siam that, contrary to common belief, camphor is not a fruit that grows on a camphor tree, but through a process that only takes place in Makassar (in the Indonesian island of Celebes) and in Java, the drops of the spring rains penetrate into the hollows of the folded leaves of a tree called *mūz* (probably the banana tree, *Musa* L.), where they turn into camphor.

There were various procedures for collecting camphor. The following is reported by Abu'l Qāsem Sīrāfī (apud Demašqī, p. 20; tr., pp. 127-28): from a



cut made in the tree trunk with a large axe at a certain time of the year liquid camphor gushes [*sic*] forth and collects in a large vessel placed in a pit dug at the foot of the tree; when cooled the camphor is put into containers; afterwards the tree is felled and left to dry, then split into pieces where (according to others) small and large fragments of solid camphor are found between the bast and the wood. The camphor that flows out when the tree is incised is called *mā'dohn al-kāfūr* “camphor water/oil” (see, e.g., Ebn Boṭlān Baḡdādī, d. 458/1066, apud Ebn al-Bayṭār, II, pt. 4, s.v. *mā' al-kāfūr*, and 'Aqīlī Ḳorāsānī, s.v. *kāfūr*, p. 723). Ebn Ḳordādbēh reports another method practiced in the mountains of Zābaj (p. 65, Fr. tr., p. 45): from a hole made in the upper part of the tree enough *mā' al-kāfūr* flows to fill a number of jars; then from a deep hole bored in the middle of the trunk fragments of the resinous camphor emerge; afterwards the drained tree becomes useless and dries up. According to Kāšānī (pp. 260, 263), the *fanṣūrī* camphor is the one taken directly from the tree, and the term *rabāḥī* is applied to the small fragments (*ḳorda*) of *fanṣūrī* (see also Jorjānī, p. 156).

In addition to its use in funerary washing and embalming, camphor entered into the composition of “all perfumes except the *ḡālīa*, q.v.) with ambergris and musky powders (*darā'er momassaka*)” (Eshāq b. 'Emrān, apud Ebn al-Bayṭār, II, pt. 4, p. 43). Bīrūnī (1358, II, p. 575), speaking of the perfumes (*šammāmāt*) containing camphor, reports that a group of coastal inhabitants, such as the residents of 'Ommān and Makrān, were engaged in the making of these perfumes. Danīsārī (7th/13th cent.), who likens the camphor in compound perfumes to the salt in meals, describes five compounds with camphor (pp. 304-06).

The numerous funerary and medicinal uses of camphor and the relative scarcity of first-grade Malayan camphor explain its high price and its consequent adulteration in the past. Ṭūsī (p. 257) and Kāšānī (p. 262) report that the *rīāḥī* and *fayṣūrī* (var. *fanṣūrī*) types of camphor sold for 300 dinars per *man*, whereas one *man* of the *ma'mūl* (processed) type could be had for 5 dinars. They also warned against the prevalence of fraud in camphor trade. The purity of the camphor was tested by melting a specimen in a heated glass bottle or in the sun; if all the camphor melted it was pure; if any residue remained it was revealed to be adulterated (Ṭūsī, loc. cit., Kāšānī, loc. cit.; Jorjānī, p. 156). According to Kāšānī (p. 261), the impurity found in camphor came mostly from a rock that looked like camphor and could only be distinguished from it by heating (*ātaš*). This rock was found in Malūbīn



(Bālūs?), where camphor was also found. Anṭākī (loc. cit.) reports the following formula for fake camphor: 2 dirhams of wax is melted with 1/2 dirham of violet oil; 10 dirhams of pulverized white marble are added to the above, then the whole compound is flattened and cut into pieces. Bīrūnī (1358, II, p. 575) indicates that the resin of the coconut palm was the best *qāṭer* [?], i.e., “any of the various resins mixed with camphor and sold at the price of camphor.” According to Moḥammad-Rabī‘ (p. 153), the camphor described by him was known as *jawdāna* (see below), which he interprets as “camphor of eternity” (confusing *jawdāna* with *jāv[ī]dāna* “eternal”) and was extremely white, of fine quality, and very concentrated, but also very expensive, so that one *man* was never sold for less than sixteen royal tomans, whereas the camphor of lesser quality from China and Japan was not very high-priced.

Ṭūsī (pp. 257-58) and Kāšānī (p. 262) remark that camphor must be preserved from air and wind in bottles or in hermetic containers and that some barley (*jow*) should be put in lest the camphor should disintegrate and volatilize in contact with air. This use of barley grains as a preservative or siccative with pure fine camphor explains the appellation *jow-dāna* (barley grain) for this kind of camphor in some Persian sources: Ṣafīpūrī (II, p. 1104), mentions it as an epithet for both the *rabāḥī* and the *qaysūrī* kinds, and in the *Borhān-e qāṭe’* (ed. Mo‘īn, s.v. *kāfūr*) only two kinds of camphor are distinguished, the *jow-dāna*, yielded by the tree itself, and the *‘amalī* (processed) that is obtained by boiling the wood of the camphor tree. References to this role of *jow* (Ar. *ša‘īr*) as a relatively inexpensive preserver of something valuable, such as camphor, are found in Persian and Arabic literatures (for examples see Dehḳodā, *Loḡat-nāma*, s.v. *kāfūr*, and *Amṭāl o ḥekam* I, p. 254; III, p. 1185, where the obsolete proverb *kāfūr dar ḥemāyat-e jow bāšad* “camphor is under the protection of barley” is recorded).

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