



COCONUT

COCONUT (*nārgīl* < Mid. Pers. *anārgēl* < Skt. *nārīkel/ra*; cf. Hindi and Urdu *nāriyal* “coconut”), the fruit of the palm *Cocos nucifera* L., which grows in the East Indies, as well as in most other humid tropical regions. Copra (*maḡz-e nārgīl*, lit. “coconut kernel”) and in recent times coconut oil (*rowḡan-e nārgīl*) are the only products of the coconut palm that are used in Persia.

Mentions of the coconut are found in Pahlavi literature. In the classification of fruits in the *Bundahišn* (tr. Anklesaria, chap. 16, par. 26, pp. 150-51), the *anārgēl* is mentioned as one of ten fruits of which only the “inside” is edible; the author of the Pahlavi story *King Husrav and His Boy* (Unvala, par. 50, p. 25; Monchi-zadeh, par. 50, pp. 55, 74) praises it as one of the best *dārēnak* (Unvala: “shell fruits”; Monchi-zadeh: *šavēnak* “dried fruits eaten at night”; both readings and interpretations uncertain) when it is eaten with sugar, explaining that *anārgīl* was the Hindi name of this fruit, which was called *gōzī hindūg* (Indian nut) in Middle Persian (later Pers. *jowz-e hendī* [now obsolete] and current Ar. *al-jawz al-hendī* or *jawz al-Hend* “nut of India”).

There is evidence that, before 1498 c.e., when the Portuguese began to carry this fruit (dubbed *côco*, a word of uncertain origin) by sea from India to Europe, Europeans had referred to it by variants of (*a*)*nārgīl* or calques of *jowz-e hendī* (e.g., Cosmas Indicopleustes, who traveled as far as Ceylon and western India before ca. 547: “Argell, i.e. the great Indian nut”; Friar Jordanus [ca. 1328]: *nargil*; John Marignolli [ca. 1350]: *nargil* and “Indian nut”; for these and other instances, see Yule and Burnell, pp. 228-29).



The earliest nonmedicinal descriptions of the coconut (tree) from the Islamic period are those by Yūḥannā b. Māsūya (d. 243/857) of the famous Jondī-Šāpūr medical center (in Bīrūnī, Ar. text, pp. 359-60), and by his contemporary the Persian scholar Abū Ḥanīfa Dīnavarī (d. 282/895; II, no. 1053, pp. 288-89; cf. Ebn al-Bayṭār, II, pt. 4, p. 174; tr. III, pp. 356-57). Dīnavarī gave the synonyms *bāranj* (I, no. 79, p. 51) and *rānej* (I, no. 454, p. 199), which are probably disfigured variants of *nārjīl* (see Meyerhof's note in Ebn Maymūn, no. 257, p. 126). These two early descriptions, albeit obviously based on hearsay, are fairly accurate. Toddy (the sweet milky sap of the coconut palm) was called *aṭwāq*, an arabicized form of Malay *tū(w)aq* (Ferrand, I, p. 295 n. 3). According to Ebn Māsūya, a kind of spiky fish (sic) climbs up the palm to drink the *aṭwāq*.

As the classical authors (Theophrastus, Dioscorides, Galen, etc.) were silent on the coconut (see Dymock et al., III, pp. 514-15; Yule and Burnell, p. 228), the physicians-pharmacologists of the Islamic period had to find out its medicinal properties for themselves. The earliest mention of these properties in the sources is the succinct account by 'Alī b. Sahl Ṭabarī (comp. 236/850; p. 384): "*Al-jawz al-hendī* [i.e., its meat] is indigestible, astringent; it increases [the production of] the semen." In the next century Abū Maṣṣūr Mowaffaq Heravī (fl. ca. 370-80/980-90), author of the oldest known treatise on materia medica in Persian, added the following details to Ṭabarī's description (*nārjīl* and *gowz-e hendī*, p. 330; *gowz-e hendū*, p. 92): "The *nārjīl* is *narm* ["soft," probably a copyist's mistake for *garm* "hot"] and very nutritious; when aged, it becomes hotter, dry, and astringent. It kills intestinal worms, fattens the body, and increases the blood . . ." His contemporary Aḳawaynī Bokārī (d. probably ca. 373/983), author of the earliest extant medical treatise in Persian, referred to the *šarāb* (beverage) made with *gowz-e hendī* (p. 162) and to *gowz-e hendū* (p. 157) as spermatogenous food. (For a detailed account of accumulated knowledge about the coconut in traditional [post-Galenic] medicine, see 'Aqīlī Ḳorāsānī, [*Maḳzan al-adwīa*, comp. 1183/1769-70 in Persian in India], pp. 857-58). As late as 1291/1874 J. L. Schlimmer (p. 143) reported that Persian medical practitioners considered copra the best spermatogenous agent known; it was also believed to favor menstrual and hemorrhoidal flux, and coconut oil was supposed to stimulate the intellectual faculties. (For a modern attempt to revive reliance on the traditional properties and uses of the coconut, see Jazāyerī, II, pp. 179-80.)

At present shredded copra is sold in some Persian nut (*ājīl*) shops; fresh whole coconuts are also found. Grated or powdered copra is used in some pastries (in



particular, the so-called *nān-e nārgīlī*). The latest published statistics on the importation of all forms of coconut to Persia are for 1365 Š./1986-87: 8,900 kg from Sri Lanka for a total value of 915,693 rials (\$12,200; Edāra-ye Gomrok, 1366 Š./1987, p. 24); those for coconut oil are more recent: In 1368 Š./1989-90, 173,967 and 40,000 kg were imported from Singapore and the Netherlands respectively, at a total cost of 19,322,142 rials (\$276,000; Edāra-ye Gomrok, 1368 Š./1989-90, p. 25).

Beginning in the 17th century the tough, waterproof coconut shells (endocarps), from the inside of which the putrescible “meat” had been carefully removed, were used as bases for water pipes, which were thus called *nārgīla* (> Eng. narg(h)ile), a term now replaced by *qalyān* (or *ḡalyān*). The method of preparing the shells for this purpose has been described by ‘Aqīlī (p. 858).

The term *nārgīl* has also been applied to the curious huge two-lobed fruit of another palm, formerly considered a species of *Cocos* (i.e., *C. seychellarum*, etc.) but later reclassified as *Lodoicea seychellarum* Labill., which grows only in the Seychelles in the Indian Ocean. This fruit was called *nārgīl-e daryā’ī* (marine coconut) in Persian and “sea coconut” or “coco-de-mer” in English because, before the discovery of those islands in 1743, specimens were frequently found floating in the sea or were washed ashore. Along with extravagant speculations about their origin, fantastic medicinal virtues (aphrodisiac, alexipharmic, etc.) were attributed to them (see Tonokābonī, p. 836, s.v. *nārgīl-e baḥrī*; and especially ‘Aqīlī, pp. 858-59). The two navicular lobes, after being husked, cut apart, and emptied of their thick meat, were (and still are) used on the Indian subcontinent as water vessels and to make water bowls for fakirs and *kaškūls* (begging bowls) for dervishes. The latter consider water from their *kaškūls* as antidotes for poison, obviously a remnant of belief in the alexipharmic properties of the sea coconut.

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