



CUMIN

CUMIN (Pers. *zīra*, Ar. *kammūn*; *Cuminum cyminum* L.), an umbelliferous plant of the Old World and its aromatic seeds. In Persia the word *zīra/žīra* (cf. Hindi/Urdu *jīrā* < Sk. *jīraka* “cumin seed”) also designates caraway seeds (Ar. *karāwīā*, with variants), *Carum carvi* L., another umbellifer. The two species are usually distinguished by the epithets *sīāh* (black) or *kermānī* (from Kermān) for caraway and *sabz* (green) for cumin. In early medico-pharmacological texts and in some dictionaries the (now obsolete) terms *zīra-ye rūmī* (Anatolian cumin), *šāh-zīra* (royal cumin), and *qoronbād* also refer to caraway (*Borhān-e qāteʿ*, ed. Moʿīn, s.vv.).

The modern scientific nomenclature of *zīras* and related umbelliferous seeds in Persia is not as simple as the above description may suggest. Confusion exists even among modern botanists. David Hooper and Henry Field, while retaining *zīra-ye sabz* for *Cuminum cyminum* (p. 109), defined *zīra-ye sīāh/kermānī* (*toḵm-e zīra* in Tehran [sic]) as the fruit of the umbelliferous *Carum bulbocastanum* Koch, “the spice called black caraway of Iran and northern India” (p. 95). On the other hand, Walī-Allāh Moẓaffariān has used the term *zīra-ye sīāh* for the seeds of both *Carum carvi* (p. j) and *Bunium* L. *persicum* (p. b) but has specified that “what is used as *zīra* in Persia and especially in Kermān and constitutes an export article [of Persia] is [obtained from] *Bunium persicum*.” Hooper and Field recorded *qoronbād* as the name of *Curcuma aromatica* Salisb. (fam. Zingiberaceae), apparently owing to lexical similarity with *zoronbād* “zedoary,” and reported further that what is called *qordomānā* (see below) in Tehran and “keruwiah” (*kerowīa*?) in Isfahan is the



fruit of *Chaerophyllum* sp. (for the nine species of this umbellifer found in Persia and some adjacent regions, see Moẓaffariān, pp. 68-72; only one is mentioned as “useful,” *Chaerophyllum bulbosum* L., “the root of which, cooked or fried, is eaten in some countries”; p. *b*). To add to the confusion, Hooper and Field reported, on the authority of the botanist Otto Stapf, that the “keruwiah from Chahar Mahāl (see [čahār maḥāll](#)) and sold for medicine in Isfahan is [from] an allied umbelliferous plant, *Grammosciadium macrodon* Boiss.” (for reports of the latter plant in Lorestān, the Baḳtiārī area, and Kurdistan, see Moẓaffariān, pp. 67-68).

This pervasive confusion about *zīra* can be traced back to the 9th-century Arabic translation of the works of Dioscorides (Dīosqūrīdes) and Galen (Jālīnūs). Dioscorides, in his *De Materia Medica*, described the following umbellifers, which have similar seeds and medicinal properties: *Kuminon emeron* (wild cumin; Ar. *kammūn barrī*), traditionally identified as *Cuminum cyminum* (cf. his mention of a kind of “wild cumin” with seeds like those of nigella, Pers. *sīāh-dāna*, *šūnīz*); *Kuminon agrion* (cultivated cumin; Ar. *kammūn*), traditionally identified as *Lagoecia cuminoides* L., with varieties described as Ethiopian (Ar. *kermānī* [sic], called “kingly” [Ar. *molūkī*] by Hippocrates), Egyptian (Ar. *meṣrī*), and so on; *Karos* (Ar. *karāwīā*, *qoronbād/qoronqār*), the caraway; *Ámmi*, which, according to him, is also called “the Ethiopian *ámmi*” and “kingly cumin” (*basilikon kuminon*), traditionally identified as *Ammi copticum* L. (= *Carum copticum* Benth. & Hook., etc.), bishop’s weed (tr. as Pers. *nānḳvāh*; Dioscorides, bk. 3, pp. 300-04 nos. 66, 68-70; cf. Ebn al-Bayṭār, II, pt. 4, pp. 64-65, 81-83, 173-74).

[Avicenna](#), though quoting Dioscorides’ description, declared (I, bk. 2, p. 341) that there are numerous varieties of *kammūn*, including the black *kermānī*, the yellow *fārsī*, the Syrian, and the Nabatean, each variety being either wild (*barrī*) or cultivated (*bostānī*). Under *karāwīā* (p. 342) he quoted from Dioscorides the description of a plant different from the caraway. The *qardamānā*, another plant mentioned as a species or kind of *zīra* in some medical texts of the early Islamic period, has been the subject of further misinterpretation and confusion. In Avicenna’s text *qardamānā* (p. 417) corresponds exactly to Dioscorides’ *kardámômom* (bk. 1, p. 8 no. 5), the [cardamom](#), but some medical authors of the Islamic period, probably misled by the similarity of the Syriac *qardamānā* and the arabicized form *qardamāmūn* to the *qīmīnūn aḡrīūn* (*kyminon agrion*) of Dioscorides, took *qardamānā* for *karāwīā* or a “wild” variety of it (Dymock et al., II, pp. 113-22;



Renaud and Colin, p. 148 no. 340; Meyerhof, in Ebn Maymūn, pp. 97 no. 195, 167-68 no. 334; Dietrich, Ar. text, p. 13 nos. 1/5, pp. 57-58, 90 3/55). Even the great botanist and pharmacologist [Ebn al-Bayṭār](#) uncritically listed under *qardamānā* (p. 7) the descriptions of three different plants by three different authors: his teacher Abu'l-'Abbās al-Nabātī's description of a kind of umbellifer abundant in Andalusia, where it was called "mountain caraway" (*karawīā jabalīya*) because of its resemblance to the caraway plant; Eshāq b. 'Emrān's description of a plant resembling the camomile (*bābūnaj*); and Dioscorides' description of the *kardámômom*. Similar confusion is found in Persian texts. Mowaffaq Heravī identified *qardamānā* with wild *karawīā* but included a separate article on each (pp. 259, 265). Aḳawaynī Bokārī (10th century) seems to have considered the *qardamānā* a kind of caraway; he referred to cardamom as *qāqola* (passim). Bīrūnī (p. 304; Pers. tr., I, pp. 543-44) also confused the two different plants designated as *qardamānā* (i.e., *karawīā rūmī* and Dioscorides' *kardámômom*). The synonymy continued to the time of Moḥammad-Mo'men Ḥosaynī Tonokābonī (pp. 664-73) and 'Aqīlī Korāsānī (18th century; pp. 680-81).

The numerous medicinal virtues and uses mentioned for the different kinds of *zīra* by medical writers of the Islamic period are substantially those described by Dioscorides and Galen, all derived from the "hot" nature (Galen) and calefacient, siccative, and astringent action (Dioscorides) attributed to cumin, caraway, and the like. *Zīras* were, and still are, prescribed, alone or in combination with the seeds of anise, fennel, bishop's weed, and the like, mainly for their carminative, stomachic, and astringent action. Among classical authors Aḳawaynī Bokārī, author of the earliest known Persian treatise on medicine, provided the greatest number of uses for the *zīra*, *karawīā*, and *qardamānā*, some of which seem to have been derived from his personal experience and practice. He also prescribed *zīra-bā* (an *āš*, flavored with *zīra*; cf. Ar. *zīrabāj*) as a special dietary dish for fifteen types of illness (index, s.v.). The recipe for this dietary *āš* given by Tonokābonī (p. 461) includes minced meat (or boned chicken) cooked with cinnamon, chickpeas, and sesame oil, then mixed with vinegar, rose water, almonds, dried coriander, saffron, *zīra*, and so on. The poet [Boshāq Aṭ'ema](#) lauded *zīra-bā* or *āš-e zīra* (p. 10) as a sour *āš*, euphoriant (*mofarreḥ*) for patients.

Zīra has also been used as a spice. It was mentioned several times as such by Boshāq, particularly in connection with a kind of *kolūča/kolīča* ([cookies](#)) on which it was sprinkled (pp. 23, 93), with a kind of meatball (pp. 56, 79), and



with one or two kinds of pilaf (pp. 79, 91). In the Safavid period *zīra* was used as a “hot” spice in several kinds of pilaf, in some *qalyas*, in a kind of *kūkū*, in *būrānī*, and so on (Bāvaṛčī, pp. 53, 103, 104, 106, 108, 112; Nūr-Allāh, pp. 209-10, 235, 238, 248; see [cooking iii](#)). In the Qajar period there was a sharp decline in the use of *zīra*, at least at court. Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah’s chef, Mīrzā ‘Alī-Akbar (pp. 10, 36), used it only as one of the spices in a kind of *morḡ palāv* (pilaf with fried chicken and barberries, still common) and in a thick soup called *šola-ye beryānī*. Nowadays whole *zīra-ye sīāh/kermānī* seeds are used in mixed fruit pickles, in a few pilafs like *zīra polow* (plain pilaf with *zīra*), *morḡ polow* (chicken pilaf), and *kabk polow* (partridge pilaf, now a rarity; *Dastūr-e ṭabbākī*, p. 61; Montazemī, pp. 658-59, 565, 571). In Kermān powdered *zīra* is one of the spices in several local pastries, for example, *kolomp/ba* and *komāč-e seh/yn* (usually served at funeral parties), and in a variety of *qāvūt* (Kermān: *qowwatū*, Shiraz: *qowtak*; pulverized roasted peas mixed with sugar and cardamom) usually served to mothers after childbirth and sometimes to their visitors (information provided by native informants).

Zīra seeds, in addition to their traditional reputation as carminative and astringent, yield a distillate (*‘araq*) commercially advertised as “antifatness, very demulcent, good against asthma, tonic, digestive, carminative, galactogogic,” and so on (from the promotional folder “*Araqīyāt-e sonnati*” [Traditional distillates] published by Īrān Targol company, Shiraz and Tehran).

The *zīra* is widely cultivated in most areas bordering on the central salt desert (Dašt-e kavīr) of Persia, including the regions of Sabzavār, southern Khorasan, Kāšān, Yazd, and especially Kermān, where reputedly the best variety (the black) grows (Ṭabāṭabā’ī, I, pp. 716-17); hence the proverbial expression *zīra be Kermān bordan* (lit., “to take *zīra* to Kermān,” i.e., “to carry coals to Newcastle”). Owing to the vast area under promiscuous cultivation of various *zīras* (which permits free cross pollination) and to other ecological factors, there are numerous cultivated and natural varieties of *zīra* (caraway, cumin, etc.), differing in seed coloration (black, dark brown, yellowish brown, greenish, etc.), size (4-10 mm long, 1-1.5 mm thick), aroma, taste, and so on (Ṭabāṭabā’ī, pp. 717, 719). Wild *zīras* are found not only in the areas mentioned but also elsewhere in Persia (see Parsa, II, pp. 733, 861; Zargarī, II, p. 514; Moẓaffariān, pp. 55, 59-60, 147). Information on the cultivation of *karāwīā* and *zīra* around Herat was provided by Abūnaṣrī Heravī in 921/1515-16 (p. 103).

The *zīra* is a minor export of Persia. According to the latest available data, from 1368 Š./1989-90, 40,700 kg of *zīra-ye sīāh*, valued at Rls. 151,302, were



exported to Dubai, and 10,823,356 kg of *zīra-ye sabz*, valued at Rls. 855,590,556, were exported to the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, Dubai, Qatar, and England, in decreasing order of importance (Gomrok-e Jomhūrī-e eslāmī-e Īrān, *Āmār-e bāzargānī-e kārejī*, 1368 Š./1989, p. 515).

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