



ESFAND

ESFAND (*seband, sepanj, espanj* < Proto-Ir. *svanta; Ar. *háarmal*, Lat. *Peganum harmala*; *wild rue*), a common weed found in Persia, Central Asia, and the adjacent areas (for the the plant's name in other Iranian languages see Flattery and Schwartz, p. 40).

Esfand was well known among the ancient Indo-Iranians. Dioscorides provides in the 1st century C.E. the earliest description of the plant, calling it *péganon agrion*. Later Greek authors refer to it as *persaia botane* (Flattery and Schwartz, pp. 35-42, 144-48).

Two varieties of the plant are mentioned in the early medical texts, the white rue and the more potent black rue. The plant is considered to be hot by nature, and can be used as a diuretic, a vomitive, and an agent to facilitate menstruation in cases of amenorrhea (Ebn Rabban, pp. 415, 469; Jamālī Yazdī, p. 173). Although the most important use of *esfand* in Persia involves magical practices, its various parts were used in cures for a variety of ailments (e.g., throat diseases; Ebn Rabban, p. 466; cf. Lazard, *Premiers poètes* II, p. 190). It was considered efficacious to cold swellings, and some classical physicians such as Kendī also used it in treating epilepsy and insanity (Jamālī Yazdī, p. 75; Samarqandī, p. 206).

Aphrodisiacal properties have been suggested for the plant. Crushed seeds of *esfand* may be used in the preparation of a fertility drug for women, while smoke from its burning roots can help determine whether or not the woman is barren (Ḥāseb Ṭabarī, p. 108; for other medical benefits of the plant see



Andalosī, pp. 311-16).

Folk medicine practices reflect a classical belief in the medical properties of *esfand*, while attributing a number of magico-medical properties to it. It is considered to be a divinely favored plant which can cure seventy-two varieties of ailments the least severe of which is leprosy (Majlesī, pp. 220-21; Qomī, I, p. 245). Furthermore, the smoke from its burning seeds is believed to ward off harm from persons or places that are exposed to its smoke. Thus *esfand* is burned at potentially harmful moments such as during circumcision ceremonies or for the protection of the woman in childbed (Šakūrzāda, pp. 152, 160, 610-11). The burning of the seeds is accompanied by the recitation of a magical formula. Purely curative uses of *esfand* are occasionally encountered in folk medicine. For example, the smoke from burning a combination of rue seeds, a bit of Bulgarian leather, and a piece of crab shell is used as a remedy for nosebleed. Another non-magical practice involves applying a concoction of roasted *esfand* seeds and other materials to the head and hair of a new mother to improve both her health and the condition of her hair (Šakūrzāde, pp. 147, 245).

The practice of burning *esfand* seeds to avert the evil eye is widely attested in early classical Persian literature (e.g., Lazard, *Premiers poètes* II, p. 12; *Šāhnāma*, ed. Khaleghi, I, p.337; Farroḳī, p. 106). This practice may have been influenced by the association of *esfand* with *haoma* (q.v.), the sacred beverage of Zoroastrian lore (for argument in favor of such identification see Flattery and Schwartz).

The continuity of Persian tradition has brought the ancient sacred plant into Islamic sources. A Shi'ite tradition states that there is an angel in each of the plant's leaves and seeds. Its root drives away sorrow and magic, and the devil stays a distance of seventy houses away from homes in which it is kept (Šakūrzāda, pp. 611, 629). Shi'ite sources tell of the benefits of ingesting *esfand* or its juice. For instance, drinking a bit of *esfand* juice every day for forty mornings brings about wisdom in addition to fortifying the imbiber against seventy varieties of diseases (Qomī, I, p. 245). The apotropaic value of *esfand* is reflected in its burning against evil presence. In a curious ceremony to counteract effects of evil upon a child, which is manifested in the condition called *bača-ye 'aważī* (changeling), burning of *esfand* is required (Šakūrzāda, p. 235). In some villages of Khorasan, a new mother will be given a concoction to clear her bowels on the third day after she has given birth. Then, forty pebbles, forty balls of sheep dung, forty raw chickpeas, and forty *esfand* seeds



are placed in a large bowl of water (*jām-e čehel kelīd*), dipped in the bowl forty times, and the water is ritually poured over a cloth, held above the woman's head. This ritual purges the woman from the effects of evil spirits and harmful entities (Šakūrzāda, p. 141). During the ceremony presenting a new child, *esfand* seeds are burned to avert the evil eye during the ceremony of presentation. Each of those present give a piece of thread from their clothing to be burned with the *esfand* seeds and other items, while a certain formula is recited (Hedāyat, pp. 43-44; for examples of the formula see also Horn, translator's note, p. 107; Flattery and Schwartz, pp. 49-50).

Evidently *esfand* seeds were also used to produce an invisible ink. The process involved pounding the seeds before soaking them in water for two days. The juice thereafter functioned as an invisible ink when written on paper. In order to read it, the paper is brought close to a flame and the heat make the writing visible (Ḥāseb Tabarī, p. 55).

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