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GREECE XV. ANCIENT GREEK BORROWINGS OF PERSIAN HERBS AND PLANTS OF MEDICINAL VALUE
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It is well attested that the ancient Greek city-states (*poleis*) and the Persian Empire had continuous commercial contact which influenced the ordinary life of both parties. In addition, it is quite probable that these contacts also concerned medical goods, such as herbs and plants, not to mention the travels or immigration of the Greek physicians that moved to Persia (Burn, pp. 137-38).

However, it is rare to find cases of practitioners who directly inform us of the Persian origin of a plant: e.g., according to Galen, the famous court physician of the Roman emperors Marcus Aurelius, Commodus, and Septimius Severus (Galen, XII, p. 118), the *sarkokylla*, a vegetal gum whose juice was reputed to heal wounds and to dry them without irritating, and was also used in ophthalmology (Dioscorides, III, p. 85), derived from an unspecified “Persian

tree." The botanist Dioscorides of Anazarbus, who had the opportunity to travel all over the Roman and Greek world as a surgeon in the army of the emperor Nero, explicitly told us that *sagápenon*, which had, as stated by most ancient physicians, important cathartic properties, was the juice of a narcotic herb which grew in Persia and was similar to silphium because of its perfume (Dioscorides, III, p. 81).

Even when it is not fully stated that the origin of these products was Persian, it is possible to infer this fact from linguistic considerations. For example, the Greeks sometimes transliterated the Persian names of plants: such is the case of pepper, *péperi* in Greek, which can be compared with the Sanskrit *pippalī* 'grain of pepper' (Chantraine, p. 883), and which was known to be Persian since Hippocratic time (Galen, XIX, p. 141). Besides this, Dioscorides mentioned a type of shepherd's purse which was named *Persikòn sínepi* 'Persian mustard' (this term can be put beside the Sanskrit *sarşápa* 'mustard'), and which seemed to be useful against sciatica (DioscoridesII, p. 156; cf. Hehn, p. 211; André, p. 44; Chantraine, p. 735).

More interesting is the case of a mysterious plant to which Galen referred to in different treatises and which was, obviously, of Persian origin: in *De semine* (IV, p. 603) he called it *Persaion futón* 'Persaion plant,' in *De alimentorum facultatibus* (IV, p. 617) *Pérsion* 'Persion', in *De symptomatum causis* (VII, pp. 227-28) *Persikòn futón* 'Persicon plant.' In *De compositione medicamentorum* (XII, p. 569) the same physician mentioned it as *Persaia* 'Persaia,' but attested that other botanists named it *Pérsion* 'Persion;' in addition, he remarked that it had been imported into Egypt, where he had seen it in Alexandria. There it had changed its characteristics, its fruit (which was said to be as big as apples) becoming edible, while, when it was still in Persia, it was toxic; and it was used in a collyrium, together with agnocastus, myrrh, and Egyptian oil (Chantraine, p. 889). Another plant called "Persaia," which had the same medical qualities, was identified by Dioscorides (I, p. 129) with the plant imported into Thebais.

Equally mysterious is the identity of the so-called *Persiké*, which was, again, certainly a Persian plant, used in a cataplasm against the disorders of the spleen (Galen, XIV, p. 460), and of the multifunctional *medion*, whose name seems to assure its Oriental origin (Dioscorides, II, p. 147; Oribasius, XI m, p. 10; cf. Strцmberg, p. 122, n. 1; Chantraine, p. 693), and whose roots were said by Galen to be able to block the fluxes, while its seeds had some cathartic properties (Galen, XII, p. 72). Other plants which were thought to have almost magical powers and were connected also with Egypt, which the Greeks

believed to be the most “pharmaceutical” land of the world, that is, the place where all plants produced by nature were the most healthy, bore similar names: the semi-mythical *helénion* ‘elecampane’ was named either “Persiké” or “Mediké,” which are pure synonyms (Dioscorides, I, p. 28), and also the poisonous Strychnos (nux vomica), whose quality of inducing a sort of hypnotic state was attested, was also named “Perseion” (Dioscorides, IV, p. 73). As a matter of fact, one must conclude that the number of plants and herbs imported into ancient Greece from Persia was much higher than one would expect.

In a fairly consistent number of cases, Greek pharmacological sources attested the existence of a Persian variety of a plant that was already known, but perhaps not cultivated, in Europe. Dioscorides, again, mentioned some types of nuts which were called either “royal” or “Persian,” and listed a large number of their medical uses (Dioscorides, I, p. 125). The same source attested that there was a Persian type of cardamon, which was thought to be stronger, which meant either that its perfume was more intense or its curative qualities were more intense (Dioscorides, I, p. 15), and a Persian variety of silphium, which instead was weaker (Dioscorides, III, p. 80). Sometimes certain fruits, curiously, were called “Persian” or “Mede” by ancient Greeks: for example, peaches and lemons were thought to be different varieties of apples (Galen, 1898, p. 77). It is almost sure that they both came from abroad and owed their denominations to their similarity to another known fruit (Dioscorides, I, p. 115). However, Galen’s observation in *De alimentorum facultatibus* 6, 558 that “Persian apples” become mature in a short time suggests that this type of fruit had been brought to Greece (Galen, VI, pp. 585, 592-93, 785, 792, 811; Dioscorides, I, p. 115). As a matter of fact, the Greek adjectives that signify “Persian” (i.e., *Persikós* and *Medikós*), were quite often substantivated and ended by meaning a given plant; for example, the fruit which was named “Persian apple,” according to Galen (Galen, VI, pp. 466, 569, 585 …), was also simply called “Persikón”; and, analogously, the tree which produced this fruit, or *Meléa Persiké*, was more simply named “Persiké” (Galen, XII, p. 76).

In conclusion, it is quite probable that ancient Greeks imported, at least from the time of Cyrus the Great, many Iranian medical goods (Mallowan; Starr, pp. 39-99; Burn, pp. 30-32, 117), along with their uses in medicine and perhaps in other fields. It seems likely that the Persians themselves made use of their native plants for medicinal purposes (Burn, p. 387), while the Greeks might have found different and new uses for some of the same plants. Finally, it is to

be believed that the Persians played an important role as mediators between the Greek Mediterranean area and the Near East, especially Egypt, and the Far East, in particular India, both by land and sea (Whitehouse and Williamson). For example, the Galenic recipe of *De compositione medicamentorum* (XII, p. 569), where "Persaia" is used together with other Oriental ingredients, came from that milieu (Burn, pp. 109, 117). The *sarkokólla* was sometimes used in connection with ingredients that were certainly Oriental, such as the Indian *ləkion* (Galen, XII, pp. 747-748) or the Indian aloe (Galen, XIII, p. 806) or the so-called "Indian rubber" (Galen, XIV, p. 526). Obviously, it is not by chance that a collyrium made above all of *sarkokólla*, this time mixed with saffron, among other ingredients, was called "Persian medicine" in some medical traditions attested by Oribasius, the late Greek medical writer and personal physician of the emperor Julian the Apostate (Oribasius, III, p. 128).

See also BOTANICAL STUDIES ON IRAN i. THE GRECO-ISLAMIC TRADITION.

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