



## HONEY

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**HONEY** (*ʿasal*, Ar. term now the most common name for honey in Persia; archaic Pers. *angobin* < Mid. Pers. *angubēn*, with the variants *angup/mēn* recorded in *Frahang ī Pahlavīk*, ed. M. J. Maškur, Tehran, 1968, pp. 68, 144), the well-known substance made by honeybees (Ar. *naḥl*; Pers. *zanbur-e ʿasal* [lit. “honey wasp”]; Mid. Pers. *magas ī angubēn* [lit. “honey fly”]; arch. Pers. *mong*) in their nests in the wild or in man-made beehives (Pers. *kandu*); the obsolete *angobin* still survives as *anja/ebin* in the compounds *sek-anjebin* “oxymel” (q.v.; arch. *sek* “vinegar”) and *tar-anjebin*, lit. “fresh/moist honey,” a kind of medicinal manna.

*In pre-Islamic lore and traditions.* From pre-Islamic (Sasanian) times we have a few references to honey and honeybees. In the *Bundahišn* (q.v.) the *magas ī angubēn* and two other kinds of “fly” constitute a separate *sardag* (“sort, kind”) within the large category of *xrafstar* (“noxious animals”) created by Ahriman (q.v.), the Evil Spirit (tr. Anklesaria, 22, pp. 184-85; tr. Bahār, p. 98); however, it is stated later (tr. Anklesaria, pp. 188-89; tr. Bahār, p. 99) that Ohrmazd in his omniscience diverts these noxious animals to the benefit of his creatures. In the anonymous *Draxt ī āsūrīg* (q.v.), the date-palm, when enumerating its benefits and uses, boasts (ed. and Pers. tr. Māhyār Nawwābi, couplet 19, p. 29): “I am *šīr* [“milk”] for *war-zīgarān* [“cultivators, peasants”], *angubēn* [for] *āzād-mardān* [“noblemen”]. (The meaning of this couplet is not quite clear; the “milk” may refer to the crude sap of the date-palm, and the “honey” to the rich nectar of its blossoms; cf. Ar. *šahd*, which in Persian means both “flower nectar” and, by extension, “honey”).



In the summary version of the Pahlavi story *Xusro ī Kavātān ut rēdak* (“Kosrow, son of Kavāt, and [his] page”), quoted by the historian Ṭa‘ālebi (*Ġorar*, ed. and Fr. tr. Zotenberg, p. 707), the knowledgeable noble boy, when answering the monarch’s query about the *aṭyab al-ḥalāwā* (“the finest sweetmeats”), mentions a kind of *fāludaj* (< Mid. Pers. *pāludag* > New Pers. *p/fāluda*, a term which does not designate now the sweetmeat in question, which is said to be made of sugar and honey. In the Pahlavi text of the story, *pālūtak* [sic] is translated “fruit gelée” by Unvala (par. 41, p. 23), and rendered by Monchi-Zadeh (par. 41, p. 72) as “*pālūtak* which is prepared from the juice of the small white apple.” Only fruit is mentioned, not honey.

Again in the Iranian lore, according to the *Nowruz-nāma* (attributed to ‘Omar Kayyām, p. 16), Hušang (q.v.), the second king of the mythical Pišdādiān dynasty, among other innovations, first “brought out honey from *zanbur* (“wasp”) and silk from the cocoon,” but the historian Gardizi (q.v.; p. 31) credits the demons (*dīws*; see *DĒW*) with the creation of the honeybee and the silk worm in the time of Hušang’s son and successor Ṭ/Tahmureṭ. According to the latter author, Ṭahmureṭ ruthlessly fought the demons, who finally begged him for mercy, but the king replied that he would continue to subdue them “till the time when dried-up wood . . . would be rejuvenated . . . and the [mulberry] tree would produce material [for] kings’ garment [i.e. silk] . . . and when I [could] eat a delicious foodstuff not [originally] sown by oxen and not cooked by fire.” The crafty demons “brought [him] the silkworm that wove silk on a tree, saying: ‘Here is a tree [presumably a mulberry tree] that bears [the material for] kings’ garments; and they brought forth the ‘honey wasp’, declaring: “Here is [the producer of] a delicious food[stuff] obtainable without oxen’s toil and without cooking by fire.” Cf. also Abu Rayḥān Biruni’s quotation of a marvelous phenomenon (*Āṭār*, p. 353) from the Samanid vizier Abu ‘Abd-Allāh Aḥmad b. Moḥammad Jayhāni: “in the Indian Ocean there is a kind of tree whose branches spread over the pebbles on the coast. Its leaves gradually decay, [and] turn into honeybees [which] fly away . . . The generation of honeybees from beef, and of the genus *zanbur* (wasp) from horse flesh, is known to naturalists” [!].

*Later Mazdeans’ doubts about the licitness of honey.* After the Arab conquest of Persia and the flight of a number of endangered Zoroastrians to India (where they are still known as “Parsees”), and because of the Muslim rulers’ fondness for honey (see below) and for silk garments, there gradually arose doubts (among those Mazdeans remaining in Persia) as to the licitness of using these



two materials, notwithstanding the exception made for the honeybee and the silkworm and their products. This uncertainty is well reflected in *The Persian Rivayats of Hormazyar Framarz and others* (a collection of religious questions asked by some common Zoroastrians in Persia and of the answers given by some Parsee authorities of the time; ed. and Engl. tr. B. N. Dhabhar [q.v.], 1932, pp. 265-66). Here is the gist of the issues concerning honey. The following points should be observed by Zoroastrians: (1) Honey “extracted” by a *jud-dēn* (lit., “of a different religion, non-Mazdean”) or by a *darvand* (sic; < Pahl. *druwand* “evil, unrighteous person”) should not be taken as a medicament; (2) honey should be extracted from a previously cleaned beehive by a *hūrbud* [sic; < Pahl. *hērbed* “teacher-priest”) or by a *behdin* (< Pahl. *wehdēn* “Maz-dean”) for other Mazdeans; and (3) before extracting the honey, the said *hērbed* or *wehdēn* should wash his hands.

*The Islamic period.* Some of the earlier Arab or Persian geographers have casually indicated the localities in the geographically vague Jebāl region (= ‘Erāq-e ‘Ajām) in Persia, where (wild) honey was obtained (for these unimportant references, see Schwarz, *Iran I*, index, s.v. *Honig*).

To Muslims everywhere ‘*asal* acquired a special significance because of its mention in the Qur’ān: first in the sura *al-Naḥl* (16:68-69) and, more importantly, in a description of the Islamic paradise (47:15), where *anhār* (“streams”) of *kaṃr* (“wine, alcoholic beverage”), of ‘*asal nuṣaffā* (“clarified honey,” i.e., separated from the wax), and of “milk whose taste does not change” (i.e., non-putrescible). The relevant verses of the sura *al-Naḥl* read as follows (we have adopted M. M. Pickthall’s popular translation): “And thy Lord inspired the bee [in these terms]: ‘Choose thou habitations in the hills [sic; *jebāl*, “mountains”] and in the trees, and in that which they [i.e., people] thatch [meaning of “*min-mā ya’riššun*” unclear]; and eat of all kinds of fruits [sic] and follow the ways of thy Lord, made smooth (for thee).’” The following verse 69 is not directly addressed to the bee: “There comes forth from their [= the bees’] bellies a drink diverse of hues, wherein is healing for mankind. Lo! Herein is indeed a portent for people who reflect.”

As expected, these few Koranic verses have given rise to a great deal of *rewāyāt* and commentaries, of which we shall quote some. In his Persian ‘*Ajāyeb al-maḳluqāt* (“The marvels of creation,” comp. between 1160 and 1177; pp. 622-23), Moḥammad b. Maḥmud Ṭusi explains away some basic problems that seem to have occurred to “people who reflect”: (1) To the question, “How did the creator [without the intermediary of the Arabic-speaking Gabriel, the



angel communicating Allah’s revelations] reveal these facts to the bee?” Ṭusi explains that here *wahy* (“revelation”) means *elhām* (“inspiration”). (2) Ṭusi dispels doubts about the licitness of using honey by imagining a fantastic origin for honey: “Some argue: ‘If honey comes out through the bee’s mouth, juridically it should be considered a *vomit*; if coming out through its rear end, it should be considered a *ḥadaṭ* (excrement)’ “; in either case it is *najes* (virtually unclean) and illicit. Ṭusi’s explanation: “No, it is neither. It is subtle *ṭall* (dew) hidden in the air” [!], “which *ṭall* the bee [gathers] and transfers to the *kanduj* (hive).” ‘Ali b. Abi Ṭāleb states that honey comes out from under the bee’s wings. Then, in confirmation of his opinion, he cites this saying of the Prophet: “The *mo’men* (Muslim believer) is comparable to the honeybee that does not eat but *ṭib* (good pleasant things) and does not produce but *ṭib*.”

Concerning the marvelous features of bees, Ṭusi includes the following. Firstly, their sagacity: “They build some [sic] houses [= cells] hexagonally [because] in the Euclidean geometry there is no *modawwar* (sic, “rounded figure”) fitting another one without [forming] an angle, except a hexagon [with equal sides and angles]. (For a clearer, more plausible explanation, of this hexagonal structure, see Damiri, vol. II, pp. 340-41.) They make the [cell] walls thin and smooth like paper; and, after filling each cell with honey, they cover it with *mum* (wax). Secondly, “like cranes, they have a chief and *mehtar* (“superior”) that keeps watch at the entrance [of the hive] and smells the incoming bees. If the latter have eaten [sic] pure honey, they are allowed in; if they have eaten both pure and unclean honey, the chief drives them away by buzzing, and keeps them out; if they have eaten [only] something unclean, the chief stings them, cutting them into two, and throws out their corpses.” Thirdly, according to Ṭusi, honey, being non-putrescible, serves to conserve fresh meat and pounded drugs, just like salt, vinegar, and tar. He mentions the case of Qābus; when he died, his corpse was put in a glass coffin filled with honey. Fourthly, concerning the bees’ chief (*emir*), the other bees conceal him under their wings. The chief appears only in fine weather, when he soars in the air with “an army” of bees; then he returns to the hive and is swarmed by other bees. (This obviously refers to the “queen bee” in modern parlance.) Then the chief plucks its sting in order not to hurt any other bee. Should a bee sting a person, it “falls down,” standing on end until it dies. Fifthly, active, honey-producing bees are all females; the males do nothing; all of them, except the chief, are chased away. (Of course, these imaginary data do not entirely correspond with modern scientific information about honeybees.)



*The curative virtues of honey.* The Koranic praise of honey as “a cure for mankind” is too vague, so that honey may be interpreted as a kind of general tonic or even as a sort of panacea. However, in the Shi‘ite tradition (*hadith*) literature several specific virtues are quoted from the Prophet and some Imams for honey alone or along with some incongruent things; but these traditions are often recorded with variations and additions that make one doubt their authenticity and/or veracity of their transmitters. We quote a number of them, omitting the chain of transmitters. (A comprehensive collection of these traditions is to be found in Majlesi’s *Behār al-anwār* [q.v.], vol. LXIII, pp. 288-97; for the relevant Sunni traditions see Maines and his sources, pp. 445-47.) “The Prophet was delighted by honey. You must seek two cures: from honey and from [reading] the Qur’ān” (attributed to Imam Ja‘far Ṣādeq; recorded by the famous Shi‘ite theologian and traditionist Ḥasan b. Faḏl Ṭabarsi [d. 547/1153], p. 188). “Licking [sic] honey is a cure for all ailments” (attributed to the same; *ibid.*). “Whoever wishes [to strengthen] his memory should eat honey.” Further the Prophet has said that honey “protects” the heart and cures “the coldness” in the chest (attributed to the Prophet by the same; Ṭabarsi, pp. 188-89). An earlier Shi‘ite traditionist, Aḥmad b. Moḥammad Barqī Qommi (probably d. 887), who was a friend of the Eighth Imam, related a story (p. 500) ending in the prescription of a curious compound remedy including honey: A devout woman donated, through a pilgrim to Mecca, some yarn to be used to mend the Ka’ba’s cover. When the intermediary reached Medina, he met Imam Moḥammad Bāqer and consulted the Imam about the appropriateness of that donation. The latter recommended this substitute: “Sell the yarn, and with its price buy some honey and saffron. Obtain some soil of [Imam] Ḥosayn’s tomb (*ṭin qabr al-Ḥosayn*), and knead all these with rainwater into a paste, and then distribute this mixture to Shi‘ites in order that they [may] cure their patients with it.” (Some wonderful virtues are ascribed by some Shi‘ite authorities to the soil of the tomb of the third Imam, Ḥosayn b. ‘Ali, in Karbalā, including that of curing all ailments, just like honey; see, e.g., Ṭabarsi, pp. 190-97.)

*Persian literature.* Innumerable references to *‘asal* and *šahd* are found in Persian poetry, not only as a delicious sweet substance like *šekar* (sugar), but also figuratively, often in contrast to *šarang* (Ar. *ḥanḏal*), i.e., the very bitter colocynth (numerous quotations in Dehḵodā, *Loḡat-nāma*, s.vv.).



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