

What Fruits and Nuts to Eat in Ancient Persia?*

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for Houšang A'lam



“If we knew as much about the culture of ancient Iran as about ancient Egypt or Babylonia, or even as much as about India or China, our notions of cultural development in Asia would probably be widely different from what they are at present.”
(B. Laufer, *Sino-Iranica*, 1919, p. 185).

If you are Persian there is a 99.9% chance that at least once or probably many times you have heard these sayings

میوه بخور
خیار پوست بکنم
پسته بخور

* This is a less specialized paper to be published. I would like to thank M. Naraghi and I. Madadi for providing me with information on fruits in the Persian world; F. Pakzad for his transcription of the *Bundahišn*; and W. Soward for reading the manuscript and making constructive remarks.

Even the Immigration officers at the Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) know the Persian word for pistachio and ask you if you have any. And even though there are plenty of pistachios available at the Persian markets in Westwood, you still are obliged to carry them from Tehran and maybe pay for your overweight luggage because of them. My mother tells me that when her grandfather (my great grandfather) use to go to Tehran, two or three days a week to do his business he would buy 50 to 100 cucumbers from the Sabze Meydun, and by the time he had come home to Dezashib (Shemiran), his driver had to clean up the back seat as he had eaten some 40 of the cucumbers without salt!

My friend Mateo (Muhammad) eats cucumbers and lettuce religiously. When I stay with him, I have to go through the obligatory cucumber and lettuce eating ceremony in the afternoon and at midnight. Otherwise, I just hear him eating it over the phone while we are discussing world politics and Middle East Studies. My other friend, Reza is well-known to eat every piece fruit that he can find when he visits anyone's home. We have had major bouts of melon eating ceremonies in Tehran and Los Angeles. His craving knows not bounds, as one day during our graduate days we ventured to Westwood Persian market to buy grapes in the windy and cold weather and were astounded when we realized that we just had paid \$11.00 for a bag of grapes. We assumed they must be designer grapes and looked forward to eating them.

This is a Persian habit which our parents have taught us. There is a lot of talk about Persian or Iranian identity, and I would suggest that a characteristic of this would be such a habit. Interestingly, this appears to be part of the Persian culture which seems to have a long history and it is not limited to modern period. In this brief essay I would like

to go back in time and see what fruits were eaten in ancient Persia and look at the way in which the Persians looked at fruits and how they classified them in antiquity. I believe these matters often are neglected in Persian Studies and need to be elucidated from the fragmentary evidence that exists for the period to better shed light on the culture of Persia.

Persian taste for the good things in life was well-known to the Greeks and the Romans. When it came to gastronomy Herodotus that mentions the Persians could become very fussy about eating (7.119). The order of seating and the eating etiquette is amply mentioned by both foreign authors and the Persians themselves. This taste for the finer things in life is best evidenced in a Middle Persian text, *Xusrō ud Rēdag* (Xusrō and the Page), where the best kinds of meats, deserts, wines and fruits are mentioned. It is this last group, namely the fruits, that I would like to discuss here in dedication to the Persian savant, Houšang A‘lam whose work on flora and fauna is of immense importance for the Persian world.



The Greeks and the Romans knew that certain fruits that had entered the Mediterranean world were Persian in origin or came via Persia. The most famous of these was the peach, known to the Romans as *Amygdalus persica*, and its tree was known as

Melea persike or simply *Persike* (Pliny xv.44).¹ In fact, most European languages associate the peach with Persia. And not only did the Mediterranean world associate the peach with Persia, but so did the Chinese. Golden peaches sent to China from Samarkand was considered the proxies of all exotic goods in medieval China.²

But one fruit/nut, namely the pistachio has been identified with the Persians from antiquity to present. In the sixth century BCE when Cyrus the Great was about to defeat the Median forces, the last Median ruler, Astyages, looked over the vast Persian force and exclaimed:

“Woe, how brave are these pistachio-eating Persians”³

According to Strabo, Persian boys had to go through rigorous training and had to be able to withstand hardship, and so they had to learn to live on wild fruits such as pistachio, acorns and wild pears (Strabo xv.iii.18). This was a fruit that the king always expected to be served on his table (Polyaenus, *Strategica*, iv.iii.32). In the text of *Xusrō ud Rēdag* there exists lists of best fruits and nuts to be eaten at night which as follows (50-52):

¹ O. Kurz, “Cultural Relations between Parthia and Rome,” *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3(1), ed. E. Yarshater, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 565.

² E.H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, California University Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1963, P. 117.

³ As mentioned by Nocolaus of Damascus.



anārgīl ka abāg šagar xwarēnd pad hindūg anārgīl xwānēnd ud pad pārsīg gōz ī hindūg xwānand (ud) bistag ī gurgānīg ka pad sōrāpag brēzēnd ud naxōd ū tarun ka pad ābkāmag brišt xwarēnd (ud) xormā ī hēratīg kē pad gōz āgand ēstēd ud bistag ī tarun ut šiftālūg ī armanīg ud balūt ī šāh-balūt abāg šagar ī tavarzatag

“The coconut when with sugar they eat it, in Indian they call it anārgīl and in Persian gōz ī hindūg (Indian nut), and the Hyrcanian pistachio nut, when in saltwater they roast it, and tender chickpeas, when they eat them roasted in ābkāmag (and) the date of Hīra which is stuffed with walnut, fresh pistachio nuts and the Armenian peach and chestnuts with solid sugar.”⁴

But these are only a few items of the fruity world of the Persians. The earliest comprehensive list of fruits appears during the Sasanian period (224-651 CE), in which a distinctive botanical classification emerged which was based on the Zoroastrian worldview. In this worldview the plants and fruits in their ideal and primeval state were without skin or a protective layer, or thorn and were sweet. But the evil spirit, Ahreman, had attacked the world and contaminated the sweet and tasty fruits. This is the reason that some of the plants or fruits have poison and cause death now, as all that Ohrmazd has created is good and beneficent and can not cause harm to anyone. These matters can be

⁴ Monchi-Zadeh, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

understood by looking at the great Zoroastrian encyclopedic work, the *Bundahišn* which dedicates its sixteenth chapter to plants and fruits.

The classification of the fruits is very interesting in that they are divided in such a way that “there are 30 kinds of principal fruits” *mēwag (ī) mādagwar sīh ēwēnag*. The thirty kinds of fruits then are divided into three categories, where “10 kinds of which the inside and outside are edible” *dah ēwēnag andarōn ud bērōn šāyēd xwardan*; “10 are edible outside but not edible inside” *dah bērōn šāyēd xwardan ud andarōn nē šāyēd xwardan*; and “10 are edible inside and not edible outside” *dah ān ī andarōn šāyēd xwardan ud bērōn nē šāyēd xwardan* (XVI.26). This division has been pointed out by J.P. Asmussen to derive from the *Hexaëmeron* of Jacob of Edessa who lived in the late seventh century CE.⁵ This division may well be indicated by Jacob of Edessa, but I believe that of the classification is much older than the seventh century CE. The Persians had already codified these matters well before the fall of the Sasanians, and as Jacob of Edessa was living in a time of great turmoil in Persia (640-708 CE), they could not have worked on these matters then.

While the 30 kinds of fruit classification may be a late antique tradition, all such classifications go back to much earlier period. It is Aristotle who classifies fruits as “some (fruits) have rind outside and flesh inside, other flesh outside and seed inside; in other ones comes immediately upon the seed with the envelope which encloses.”⁶

Aristotle’s pupil, Theophrastus, worked further on botany, publishing *De historia*

⁵ J.P. Asmussen, “The List of Fruits in the Bundahišn,” *Henning Memorial Volume*, London, 1970, p. 15, quoting A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literature*, Bonn, 1922, p. 255.

⁶ For the text see J. Bussemaker, *Aristotelis Opera Omnia*, vol. iv, Firmin-Didot, Paris, 1878 and translation by E.S. Forster, revised translation by J. Barnes, *The Complete Works of Aristotle, The Revised Oxford Translation*, vol. 2, Bollingen Series lxxi.2.

plantarum (History of Plants) and *De causis plantarum* (The Reasons of Plant Growth). We know very little of the cultural and scientific contacts between Greece and Persia in the Hellenic age, but it is for certain that works in Greek were commissioned by the Arsacids (247 BCE-224 CE). We should not forget that another great botanist, Dioskoride had written an illustrated work on botany which could have reached Persia.

The streaming of Greek knowledge into Persia in late antiquity is well attested by the Zoroastrian tradition itself where works on astronomy (*star-ōšmārišn*),⁷ geometry (*zamīg paymānīh*), physics (*čīhr-šnāsīh*),⁸ philosophy (*fīlāsōfīh*),⁹ and probably botanical sciences (**urwar-šnāsīh*) were influenced by Greek, Indian and Chinese works.¹⁰ Where there are discrepancies between Greek and Zoroastrian doctrines in Middle Persian texts, Zoroastrian logic and science always prevailed. This is due to the fact that Zoroastrianism demanded respect for religion first and foremost about all other matters, something found in other religious traditions as well.¹¹ What is impressive is that the Zoroastrians were able to somehow bring a *modus vivendi* among such topics as philosophy, science and religion, while in other religious traditions of the Late Antiquity and the Medieval period this effort unraveled.

⁷ W.B. Henning, "An Astronomical Chapter of the Bundahishn," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1942, pp. 229-248; and D.N. MacKenzie, "Zoroastrian Astrology in the Bundahishn," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3, 1964, pp. 511-529.

⁸ H.W. Bailey, *Zoroastrian Problems in the ninth century texts*, Oxford, 1971, pp. 82, 88.

⁹ M. Shaki, "Some Basic Tenets of the Eclectic Metaphysics of the Dēnkard," *Archiv Orientalní*, vol. 38, 1970, pp. 277-312.

¹⁰ J.K. Choksy, "Incorporation of Medieval Science into Zoroastrian Scripture and Exegesis: Some Evidence from Dēnkard Book 4," *Mēnōg ī Xrad: The Spirit of Wisdom, Essays in Memory of Ahmad Tafazzoli*, ed. T. Daryaee and M. Omidshar, Mazda Publishers, 2004, pp. 58-63.

¹¹ M. Shaki, "Some Basic Tenets of the Eclectic Metaphysics of the Dēnkard," *Archiv Orientalní*, vol. 38, 1970, p. 300.

The botanical section of the *Bundahišn* may be part of this influence from the East and the West, but it is a more difficult matter to tackle. Below, the section on fruits will be transcribed and translated, followed by notes to clarify this part of the great Zoroastrian encyclopedic work. This section of the *Bundahišn* is found in both the Iranian (TD1 fols. 48r-v; TD2 fols. 61r-v; DH fols 191r-v) and the *Indian Bundahišn* (66r) which was the sixteenth chapter of Anklesaria's translation,¹² followed by J.P. Asmussen's English,¹³ M. Bahar¹⁴ and R. Behzādī's Persian translations:¹⁵

*mēwag (ī) mādagwar sīh ēwēnag aziš dah ēwēnag andarōn ud
bērōn šāyēd xwardan čiyōn anjūr¹⁶ ud sēb ud bēh¹⁷ ud wādrang¹⁸
ud angūr¹⁹ ud tūt-bun²⁰ ud urmōd²¹ ud nūn any dah bērōn šāyēd
xwardan ud andarōn nē šāyēd xwardan čiyōn xormā²² ud
šiftālūg²³ ud zardālūg (ī) spēd ī sīnak ud kunār²⁴ ud ālūg²⁵ ud sāl
ud dah ān ī andarōn šāyēd xwardan ud bērōn nē šāyēd xwardan*

¹² B.T. Anklesaria, *Zand-Ākāsīh, Iranian or Greater Bundahišn*, Bombay, 1956, pp. 150-151.

¹³ Asmussen, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-17.

¹⁴ M. Bahār, *Bundahiš-e Farnbag-e Dādīg*, Tus Publishers, Tehran, 1369, p. 88;

¹⁵ R. Behzādī, *Bundahiš-e Hindī*, Tehran, 1368, pp. 59-60, 112.

¹⁶ *Ficus carica*; Laufer has conjectured that the Chinese *a-ži* and **ā-žir* is derived from an Iranian word, compare Kurdish *hezīr* (without *n*). Strabo (II.1.14) mentions of the large yielding Hyracanian fig tree which gave one bushel and a half, see B. Laufer, *Sino-Iranica, Chinese Contributions to the History of Civilization in Ancient Iran with Special Reference to the History of Cultivated Plants and Products*, Ch'eng-Wen Publishing Company, Taipei, 1919 (reprint 1967), pp. 410-412.

¹⁷ *Cydonia vulgaris*

¹⁸ *Citrus Medica*

¹⁹ *Vitis*

²⁰ *Morus alba*, here literally meaning “mulberry tree,” compare with Persian *xormā-bun* “palm tree.”

²¹ Also Persian *armūd*, *amrūd*

²² *Phoenix dactylifera*; The Chinese were introduced to dates via the Sasanians known as *ts'ien nien tsao* “jubes of thousand years,” and also known as *Po-se tsao* “Persian jube.” The Persian word for date is also adopted in Greek *χορμῶς*; Albanian *korme*, but also eastward, Javanese *kurma*, Malayan, Dayak and Sunda *korma*, Laufer, *op. cit.*, pp. 385-386.

²³ A Persian dictionary composed in China in the seventeenth century mentions *šaftrang* where its various colors (here white) are noticed, H. Vafā'ī, *Farhang ī fārsī, Being an Old Persian Dictionary Compiled during the early 16th century in China*, ed. T. Huizhu, Tehran, 1374, p. 134.

²⁴ *Ziziphus*

²⁵ *Prunus domestica*;

čiyōn gōz²⁶ ud wādām²⁷ ud anār²⁸ ud anārgēl²⁹ ud pondik³⁰ ud šāhbalūt³¹ ud wan³² ī gurgānīg kē pistag³³-iz xwānēnd

“There are 30 kinds of principal fruits, ten kinds of which the inside and outside are edible: fig and apple and quince and *Citrus medica* and grapes and mulberry and pear and now other 10 are edible outside but not edible inside: date and peach and white Chinese apricot and lote and plum and wild plum and 10 are edible inside and not outside: walnut and almond and pomegranate and coconut and hazelnut and chestnut and the Hyrcanian tree which is also called pistachio.

Commentary on Three of the Fruits

wādrang

This fruit was identified by Theophrastus in the fourth-third millennium BCE as *Citrus medica* “Median apple” and also as *mēlon persikon* “Persian apple,” and by Pliny in his *Historia naturalis* as *malus mēdica*. In Persian the fruit is also known as *bāzrang* / *bādrang*, *wārang*, *bālang*, and *tōrang*, but the fruit appears to have come from India (compare Sanskrit *mātuluḥga*). It is from Persian *torang* that it has found its way into Arabic as *toranj*, *otranj*, and in certain works is it called *toffah ma’ī* which is a mistake based on Greek *mēlon medikon*, taking the region of Media as *ma’ī* and so imagined as “watery apple.”³⁴ This fallacious idea has provided interesting traditions in the larger Iranian world, where for the Persian New Year celebration *beh* was placed in a water bowl and consequently called *sēb ī ābī*.

²⁶ Juglans; another form of this fruit is known as *Juglans regia* “Royal walnut,” i.e., Persian walnut.

²⁷ *Amygdalus communis*;

²⁸ Asmussen has forgotten to transcribe the word and only mentions it in the translation and this is because it appears in the *Indian Bundahišn* and Pazand version, see Behzādī, *op. cit.*, p. 189, note 83.

²⁹ Cocos; In Middle Persian it is also known as *gōz ī hindūg* “Indian walnut/nut,” see *Xusrō ud Rēdag* (50), Monchi-zadeh, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

³⁰ Hazelnut; Persian “fundugh” has its origins in the West, probably from the Pontic region, hence Middle Persian *pondik* (Greek *ποντικόν*, Kurz, *op. cit.*, p. 566.

³¹ *Castanea*; as opposed to *Castanea sativa* which is the European chestnut.

³² From *van-*, Persian *biun-*, Sogdian *wnh* and more interesting in this context Balōčī *gwan* “wild pistachio,” H.W. Bailey, “Plant Names,” *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. I. Gershevitch, vol. 2, 1985, p. 870.

³³ *Pistaca*

³⁴ H. A’lam, *Jostārḥāyī dar tāriḥ-e ulūm dar dore-ye islāmī*, Tehran, 1381, pp. 33-38.

-zardālūg ī spēd ī sīnīg

Asmussen has read the second word as srijad/sinjad “jube” which is possible, and Persians have been known to suck on this fruit *sinjid mekidan!* *Zardālūg* is certainly known as “apricot” (Arabic) *mešmeš*.³⁵ The *Indian Bundahišn* provides *spēd*³⁶ and Asmussen believes that it may be a corrupt spelling of *sinjad*.³⁷ The problem is what to do with the next word *sywk / synk*? Anklesaria has read the fruit as *zardālūg ī spēd sīnīg* “the small apricot of white-breast.”³⁸ I would like to follow Anklesaria’s suggestion in another manner. It is not uncommon in Middle Persian literature to identify a specific plant or fruit with a region to distinguish it from a similar fruit. For example “Chinese ginger” *sinjiwēl ī čīnīk* (46);³⁹ and “Indian nut” *gōz ī hindūg* which refers to *anārgīl* (50).⁴⁰ In Iran there is a fruit known as *zard alū-ye mančūrī* (*prunus mandshurica koehne*) “Manchurian apricot/peach,” which gives us further evidence for the fruit being mentioned.⁴¹ This matter brings to mind E.H. Schafer’s important work entitled *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, which mentions the that golden peaches sent to China (*sēn / sīn / čīn*) from Samarkand were considered the proxies of all exotic goods in medieval China.⁴²

³⁵ H. A’lam, “Persian Medical Terminology of the *Agrāz al-Ṭebbīya* by Sayyed Esmā’il Jorjānī,” *Tafazzoli Memorial Volume*, ed. A.-A. Sadeghi, Tehran, 2001, p. 7.

³⁶ Behzādī, *op. cit.*, p. 189, note 81.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16, 19f.

³⁸ Anklesaria, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

³⁹ Monchi-zadeh, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

⁴⁰ Monchi-zadeh, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

⁴¹ V.-A. Mozaḥfārīān, *Farhang-e nāmā-ye gīyāhān-e irān*, Tehran, 1375, p. 400.

⁴² E.H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, California University Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1963, P. 117.

Classical Persian *hūlū* is a kind of (Middle Persian) *šaftālūg* (Persian) *šaftālū* which is also known as *šaftālū-ye ārdī*.⁴³ Here *ārdī* refers to the color “white” of the peach. It is interesting that before our fruit in question, which may very well be the famous Golden Peaches, *šaftālūg* is mentioned which may support my suggestion. Another, more remote, possibility has to do with the region of Persia known as *sīnak* where its fruit is cherished, hence *šaftālū-ye sīnak / sīnakī*.

-*sāl*

This is particularly difficult to interpret. Asmussen suggests that the word *ddar* could simply be a mistake for *adar*, i.e., *xyār* “cucumber.”⁴⁴ It is unlikely that cucumber, which should really be classified as a vegetable is making its appearance here. If we look at the list we are dealing with plums, peaches and apricots. If we read the word as *s’l / sāl* it may be connected with the fruit known today as *zāl-zālak* (reduplicated *sāl*?) which is a kind of wild plum known as “hawthorn” or *crataegus oxyacantha* and sometimes categorized as an apple or plum⁴⁵ which fits the context here in our passage.

⁴³ *Borāh-e Qate’*, ed. By M. Mo’īn, Tehran, 1361, P. 2360.

⁴⁴ Asmussen, *op. cit.*, p. 16, f.22.

⁴⁵ M. Mo’īn, *Farhang-e fārsī*, vol. 2, Tehran, 1371, p. 1713.



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