THE EARLY BOTANICAL EXPLORATION OF GREECE

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Abstract

An account is given of botanical exploration and explorers of Greece in its present-day boundaries, from antiquity to the end of the 19th Century. Our admittedly fragmentary knowledge of the herb lore and botanical skills of the ancients (Theophrastos, Dioskourides) shows Greece to be the cradle of modern botanical science. For early European botanists, visiting Greece became a pilgrimage to the pristine sources of their science. Modern investigation, starting in the 16th Century, concentrated almost exclusively on the few areas still under Venetian control, in particular Crete. When Crete fell to the Turks, exploration came to a halt. Few travellers ventured into the Ottoman Empire, including its Greek parts: the French Tournefort (1700-1702), Olivier and Bruguière (1792-1798), and Dumont d’Ursille (1819) who, at the end of the Greek liberation war, were followed by Bory (1829); and the Englishman Sibthorp (1786-1787, 1794-1795). After 1832, the independent Greek Kingdom was wide open to visiting botanists, often of German origin, and hosted resident ones among whom Heldreich is prominent alongside with the first modern Greek plant scientist, Orphanides. Meanwhile some islands and northern Greece (Epirus, Macedonia, and Thrace), still under the Turkish yoke and therefore of difficult access, were being explored by botanical pioneers such as Grisebach (1839), Formánek (1889-1899), and a few others. To close the period, Halácsy between 1900 and 1904 published the first Greek national Flora, just about to be relayed by Phitos & al.’s incipient Flora hellenica.

Classical antiquity: the fathers of scientific botany

Greece is well known as the cradle of scientific botany, fathered by the Greek nature philosophers of classical antiquity. Not for nothing the word “botany”, a comparative neologism, is Greek in origin. It is particularly timely to consider the roots and early days of botanical exploration of this country at a meeting held in the Greek city of Thessaloniki.

This paper must by needs begin with Theophrastos, born in Eresos on the island of Lesbos 372 years before Jesus Christ and who ended his long and fruitful life in Athens at the venerable age of 85. He may not have been the first
human to look at plants with a scientific eye, but he is certainly the first whose botanical writings \textit{(De historia plantarum, or Περὶ φυτῶν ἱστορίας)} have, through the copying zeal of ancient scholars and erudite monks, survived to the present day. As a pupil of the famous Aristotle he was, so to say, on collegial terms with that other famous pupil of the same master, the Great Alexander of Macedonia.

Theophrastus knew best the plants of his home island and of the Troad peninsula facing it, of which he must have climbed Mt Ida (Kazdağ) repeatedly. The plants of Mt Ida play a choice role in his writings, and since he rarely if ever took care to explicit which Mt Ida he was referring to, he was to induce later itinerant botanists such as Tournefort into a vain search of some plants on the even more famous Mt Ida of Crete where they never grew, such as \textit{"Vaccinium vitis-idaea"} (Theophrastus’s ιδαίον αμμέλος, which in reality must rather be \textit{V. arctostaphylos}), or the raspberry, named ιδαίος βατος by Theophrastus and even nowadays known as \textit{Rubus idaeus}.

In the Renaissance, when the learning of Antiquity was rediscovered, interpreting the old writings became a crucial problem. Most famous among the ancient physicians knowledgeable of herb lore and healing powers was the Cilician Dioskourides, who lived in the 1st century of our era. He is known to have built on a rich and manifold tradition stemming from his peers and predecessors, such as Krataivas, the physician of Mithridates in Pontus, whose writings were however lost, so that Dioskourides is the only one whose memory has survived. Of his \textit{“Materia medica”} (Περὶ υλῆς ιατρικῆς) illustrated handwritten copies exist, which apparently integrate a pictured herbal of Krataivas and draw on contemporary sources. The most ancient and most valuable of them, the \textit{Codex Aniciae Julianae}, made about the year 512 for presentation to a noble lady of Constantinople, is now in the National Library in Vienna, having been acquired in 1576 for 100 Louisdor on behalf of Emperor Maximilian II (see Mazal 1981). This codex, also known as \textit{Codex Vindobonensis}, includes colour representations of almost 400 plant species, painted on parchment, many of which can be identified reliably while others are highly stylised and hardy recognisable with any degree of confidence.

**Renaissance: Venice and Italian botanists**

Adepts of the plant sciences, perhaps rather herb sciences, as they developed forcefully in the mid 16th century of Europe, were hard put to interpret correctly what they could glean out of the writings of old. They tried to match as best they could the imperfect and partly corrupted texts, copied and recopied by generations of monastic scribes, and the few, often rudimentary images that had survived, with the plants they found on their own door-sills. It was then unheard of that plants differ in different regions, and that floras change when you travel,