AfarinNameh
Essays on the Archaeology of Iran in Honour of Mehdi Rahbar
Edited by: YOUSEF MORADI
With the assistance of Susan Cantan, Edward J. Keall and Rasoul Boroujeni

Tehran
The Research Institute of
Cultural Heritage and Tourism
(RICHT)
2019
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The Elymaeans *bratus*: A Contribution to the Phytohistory of Arsacid Iran

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Abstract: This paper examines the enigmatic bratus tree of Elymais, attested in Pliny’s *Natural History*. The history of its identification since the Renaissance is surveyed and its characteristics are used to suggest an identification in light of modern botanical classification. The use of bratus is reviewed, as are problems arising from the geographical distribution of the tree as given by Pliny.

Keywords: bratus, Elymais, Pliny, juniper, Arsacids, Parthians, phytogeography.

Introduction

So much data on ancient Iran is contained in Pliny’s *Natural History* that even today, more than five centuries after early modern scholarship began tackling the contents of this astonishing work, many questions remain unanswered. Given the enormous time depth of Plinian scholarship, it is only right that, in discussing any particular point, the contributions of scholars who lived long ago and never visited Iran must be considered. Moreover, their work is compelling evidence for the fact that ancient Iran has exercised the minds of some of the greatest thinkers of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the 19th/20th centuries. The following observations, however inconclusive, are dedicated with greatest respect to Mehdi Rahbar, a scholar who has contributed so much to the elucidation of the Seleucid, Arsacid and Sasanian periods in Iran.

*Nat. Hist.* 12.38

The Greek term ἄππαξ λεγόμενον, better known in its transliterated form *hapax legomenon*, denotes ‘(something) being said (only) once.’ The elucidation of terms that appear only once in the literature of any given period or region has provided enterprising scholars with hours, days, decades, even centuries of work, often without reaching a firm conclusion. Pliny’s *Natural History* provides us with one such term associated with the Elymaeans and the Parthians. Struck by what he considered a surprising fact, namely that, despite the availability of frankincense and myrrh in Arabia (i.e. from Yemen or Dhofar), the ancient Arabians still imported aromatics, Pliny wrote (*Nat. Hist.* 12.38): “Also in Arabia there is a surprising demand for foreign scents, which are imported from abroad: so tired do mortals get of things that are their own, and so covetous are they of what belongs to other people.” He continued, “Consequently they send to the Elymaei for the wood of the *bratus*, a tree resembling a spreading cypress, with very white branches, and giving an agreeable scent when burnt.” It is praised in the Histories of Claudius Caesar as having a marvelous property: he states that the Parthians sprinkle its leaves into their drinks, and that it has a scent very like cedar, and its smoke is an antidote against the effects of other woods. It grows beyond the Pasitigris on Mount Scanchrus in the territory of the city of Sostrata” (*Nat. Hist.* 12.39).

Pliny’s *Natural History* was composed in the 70s
of the first century CE (the preface may be securely dated to 77 CE thanks to a reference to the Emperor Titus. Pliny died on August 24th 79 CE from fumes inhaled after an eruption of Mt. Vesuvius). At least some of the information in the account of *bratus* derives from Claudius (10 BCE-54 CE) who, as is well-known, was a serious student of history and a prolific writer. According to Suétionius (Suet. 42.2), who was born around 67-72 and was still active in 122 (Baldwin 1975: 61, 70), a twenty-volume history on the Etruscans and an eight volume history of Carthage still survived in his lifetime. Claudius also composed a more controversial history of Rome, from the reign of Julius Caesar (44/43 BCE) into the early first century (Levick 1978: 80-81). The information on *bratus* is likely, therefore, to date from the later first century BC and/or early first century CE.

In what follows three points in this passage will be examined: 1. the nature of *bratus* and its properties; 2. the significance of the dual reference to the Elymaeans and the Parthians; and 3. the identification of Mount Scanchrus.

**Bratus**

Shortly after the first printed edition of Pliny’s work appeared in 1469 (Gudger 1924: 269), the first true commentary, by Nicolò Perotto, was published just a few years later, between 1470 and 1473 (Nauert 1979: 77). We thus have roughly 545 years of Pliny commentary to contend with. Needless to say, it is not the intention here to catalogue each and every comment on the identification of *bratus*. Nevertheless some of the earlier scholarship should be noted.

In his *De Materia Medica* (§83, ‘De Herba Sabina’), Dioscorides (c. 40-90 CE), who was active just a few years after Claudius wrote his *Histories*, had already made the identification of Greek βράϑυϛ (baryton, baron, barathron; Cornarius 1557: 492) with Latin *sabina*. This appears in Galen’s (130-210 CE) *De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis ac facultatibus* 6.15 as well, where we find ‘De Brathy sabina’ (Kühn 1826: 492) with Latin *sabina*. This is reflected both in early Greek lexica (Étienne 1830 [1572]: 394, s.v. βράϑυ[to, ‘Herba quæ Sabina s. Savina dicitur Lat....Herba Sabina, Brathy appellata a Gr., duorum generum est: altera tamarici similis folio, altera cupresso’) and in the works of Renaissance and early Enlightenment botanists (Belon 1553: 13; Dodoens 1557: 538; Matthioli 1559: 102; Holy-Oke 1640, s.v. *Brathys*; Gouldman 1664: s.v. *Bruta*).

Of particular interest in the present context is the fact that, as early as 1560, the French scholar Benoît Le Court ([Benedicto Curtio Symphoriano](d. 1559), knight of the church of Lyon [equite in Ecclesia Lugdunensi], assimilated the *hapax bratus* with Greek βράϑυϛβράϑυϛ and Latin *sabina* in a paragraph devoted to Pliny’s text (“Claudii Caesaris historij, mirum in modum predicatur arbor bruta vocata, ut Plinius memorize mandauit. Apud Elimeos autem petit, Assyriæ gentem, Susianæ Persæ conterminam: nascitur; ultra Pasitigrim, finibus oppidi Sittanae, monte Zagro. Cupressus suse similis est. Sun qui dicant modò apud nos nasci: existimanteque; alterum esse sabinæ genus, argumentum fumentes à nomine, immutatis aliquot literis. Nam sabina Graecē brathys. Ex albidis ramis, accensa, iucundi odoris est. Parthi in suis potionibus eius foliis utuntur;” Le Court 1560: 436, Cap. XX, De bruta). This was followed in 1629 by the French humanist Claude Saumaise (“Bratus illa siue Brathys, est Græcorum βράϑυϛ, qui Dioscorides describit...Latinis herbam sabinam...altera Tamarici folium simile habebat, altera cupresso;” Saumaise 1629: 357-358) and in 1644 by the young Dutch medical doctor and botanist Johannes Boadaeus van Stapel (1602-1636) whose posthumously published edition of Theophrastus’ *Historia Plantarum* has a long discussion of *bratus* and Pliny’s passage more generally (van Stapel 1644: 374-375). Yet, even as the question of nomenclature seemed to be reaching a consensus, and the assimilation of *bratus* with βράϑυϛ and *sabina* gained acceptance, disagreements persisted regarding the identification of these names at the genus and species level. Discussing *Brutus arbor*, John Parkinson (1566-1650), *Botanicus Regius Primarius* under Charles I, noted “Dodonæus [Flemish scholar Rembert Dodoens (1517-1586)] seemeth to allude unto the Greeke name where he saith that *Pliny* in his 12. Booke and 19 Chapter mentioneth *Brutus arbor*, and thinketh as divers others did, that *Bruta* was taken from *Brathys* by the transposition of a letter, and is *Pliny* his *Savinæ altera*, which he saith was called *Cupressus Cretica*: but *Lugdunensis*
[Benoît Le Court (d. 1559)] deny that Bruta arbor Pliny can be Thuja prima Masiliensis, the Oxycedrus or Cedrus Lycia of Beloniius, or Cedrus Phenica altea of Pliny and Theophrastus according to Lobel [Flemish botanist Mathias de l’Obel (1538-1616)], and the Sabina major Montpelieium... Bellonius [Pierre Belon (1517-1564)]...is...to be blamed as he saith also, for making the said Juniper tree to be the Bruta arbor Pliny.” (Parkinson 1640: 1028-1029) Despite Belon’s identification of bruta as a type of juniper (Weber 1745: 187; Matthiae & Gesneri 1761: 186, ‘Brathes...Bratus...Brathy...Brathys...Satten-Baum, Seven-Baum’) many scholars continued to identify it as cypress (e.g. Tachard 1687: 176, s.v. Bratus, ‘Arbre semblable au Cyprèz, dont l’odeur quand on le brûle approche de celle du Cèdre, Il n’est connu qu’en Orient’).

In the early nineteenth century the prolific Biblical scholar Ernst Friedrich Karl Rosenmüller proposed that Hebrew b(ǝ)βϱάϑυϛ was cognate with Greek βράϑυϛ βράϑυϛ and Latin bratus (Rosenmüller 1840: 257-260; Madden 1850: 269). He argued, however, that the Biblical term was applied to three very different species: Cupressus sempervirens, Thuja articulata, and Juniperus Sabina. A new element was introduced into the debate in 1924 when the great Hungarian scholar Ernst Friedrich Karl Rosenmüller proposed another approach to those of the Cédre, Il n’est connu qu’en Orient).

In light of this history of interpretation, it is surprising that, in 1976, John Hansman, citing the Encyclopaedia judaica, proposed, “The biblical βϱάϑυϛ has been identified by modern botanists with Juniperus excelsa...the identification of burāšu as juniper and particularly with f. excelsa had been suggested by Löw many years ago on etymological grounds... Few coniferous trees grow in the southern Zagros at the present time. The most widely distributed species and that which has the greatest value as a building timber is J. excelsa.” (Hansman 1976: 28-29) In fact, as noted above, Löw identified borōs and its cognates with Juniperus sp., while acknowledging the Greek form referred to J. sabina L. and neither Hansman nor Biblical scholars active when Hansman was writing (Boadt 1978: 494) seem to have seen Löw’s actual text for nowhere did he identify the Hebrew or any other form with f. excelsa. Moreover, currently active Biblical scholars are far from convinced that Hebrew b(ǝ)βϱάϑυϛ, which occurs twenty times in the Hebrew Bible, was confined to any one type of tree, arguing that the term “may in fact be wider than a single species, being a type of pine, or ‘juniper,’ or ‘fir’ ” (Lawrence 2004: 107). A similar point was made over a century ago by von Oefele who noted that a single ancient Greek name could refer to different plants in the works of different authors, or even multiple plants in the works of a single author. He concluded therefore that, “The precision of Linnean nomenclature could not be assumed for any ancient languages when referring to the works of Nature (von Oefele 1900: 110, ‘Die Schärfe der LINNÆschen Nomenclatur darf in keiner alten Sprache für Naturobjekte angenommen werden’). This pessimistic view, however, is belied by more recent advances in the study of ancient (e.g. cuneiform) names for flora, fauna, minerals, etc. (Postgate 1997; Veldhuis 2004).

Having said that, modern research on the range of J. excelsa and J. sabina in Iran demonstrates conclusively that only J. excelsa can be considered a candidate for identification with Pliny’s bratus. J. The species of sabina in Iran is confined to the Alborz mountains (Fig. 1). The only varieties currently attested in southern Iran, near Fasa, are J. excelsa var. turcomanica and, possibly, J. excelsa var. polycarpos, but not J. excelsa var. excelsa (Fig. 2)(Adams 2014). Pliny’s
characterization of the *bratus* as “a tree resembling a spreading cypress, with very white branches” is completely unlike *J. sabina*, which is a spreading horizontal or growing into a small shrub (Fig. 3), whereas *J. excelsa* has a pyramidal form (Fig. 4), such as the spreading *Cupressus sempervirens* displays (Fig. 5), and with which Pliny would have been familiar. The allusion to white branches is cryptic, although *J. ashei*, which grows in the United States, may display a white fungus on its branches (but note that this has never been documented on *J. excelsa*). In Iran *J. excelsa* “lives in altitude ranges from 1000 m a.s.l. (Ashkhaneh in Kopet-dagh mountains) to 3500 m a.s.l. (Dena in the Zagros Chain)….It forms the tree-limit in several mountain ranges and grows mainly on stony, rocky calcareous or non-calcareous slopes with an annual precipitation between 500-1000 mm” (Pirani *et al.* 2011: 336; Ravanbaksh *et al.* 2015: 1).

As for the functional aspects of the *bratus*, as mentioned earlier Plinys says that “the Parthians
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sprinkle its leaves into their drinks, and that it has a scent very like cedar, and its smoke is an antidote against the effects of other woods.” He does not say why the Parthians sprinkled its leaves in their drinks, but interestingly some Mesopotamian rituals against witchcraft mention *burāšu* and *burāšu* seed as one of many “drugs for undoing witchcraft…He drinks (it) either in beer or in wine, then he will recover”, or in oil (Abusch & Schwemer 2011: 234, 240). Studies have shown that the essential oils in juniper leaves “reached their highest concentrations” in the autumn which is consequently the best time for harvesting juniper foliage and ‘berries’ (Shanjani *et al.* 2010: 86; berry “is a misnomer as the ‘berry’ is actually a seed cone”).

It is unclear what ‘other woods” were meant when Pliny wrote that *bratus* smoke was an antidote against them, but this clearly points to the use of the *bratus* in fumigation. It is well known that juniper was used for fumigation by Zoroastrians. According to the testimony of al-Biruni, “The last five days of this month [Ābān-Māh], the first of which is Ashtādh, are called Farwardajân [Fravardīgān]. During this time people put food in the halls of the dead and drink on the roofs of the houses, believing that the spirits of their dead during these days come out from the places of their reward or their punishment, that they go to the dishes laid out for them, imbibe their strength and suck their taste. They fumigate their houses with juniper, that the dead may enjoy its smell” (Sachau 1879: 210; Russell 1987: 388).

In the more recent past, juniper leaf smoke has been “used to treat parasites” in Isfahan province and the “smoke of [juniper] wood, leaves and gum are used as an anti-bacterial, anti-parasite and to repel evil and diseases” in Mazandaran. In eighteenth century England and France, too, juniper was burned for fumigation during outbreaks of cattle plague, and it was used in fumigation against anthrax in France...
in 1805 (Blancou 1995: 36). In the modern era, moreover, “Local people of Isfahan province expose their cattle to the smoke of Juniper leaves to kill parasites of their skins and wool” (Pirani et al. 2011: 340). Juniper leaves have also been used as incense in Kohgiluyé va Boyer-Ahmad districts of the Zagros, usually mixed with other aromatic plant leaves such as *Peganum harmala* L. or wild rue (Pirani et al. 2011: 339). The leaves of *J. excelsa* Bieb. were also ‘used as incense in Khorasan’ (Hooper 1937: 132).

**Elymaeans and Parthians**

Pliny tells us that the Arabians sent to the Elymaeans for *bratus* wood, while the Parthians used its leaves in their drinks. Considering the chronological parameters of Pliny’s source Claudius, does this reference provide us with any insights into the relationship between the two peoples? Surveying the complex history of relations between Elymais and the Arsacid empire (Potts 2016: 379-404) it becomes apparent that the indigenous Elymaeans in the mountainous zone to the east of Susa first became a political rival of the Seleucids c. 146/5 BCE, when a king named Kamniskires began minting coins at Susa. Within a few years, the Elymaeans found themselves opposing the Arsacids under Mithridates I. Elymaean and Arsacid forces clashed in Babylonia in 141/0 BCE and the Elymaeans remained a potent rival in this area until the early summer of 138 BCE. But an astronomical diary from August, 138 BCE, reports famine at Susa and other cities in Elymais and by the end of the decade the Arsacids had conquered Susa after which, according to some scholars (Nöldeke 1874: 192), Elymais became an Arsacid vassal.

Between c. 127 BCE and 51 CE no fewer than fifteen Arsacid kings (Artabanus I to Gotarzes II) issued coins at Susa (Potts 2016: 389), a clear demonstration of the fact that the city was not controlled by the Elymaeans. The situation further north and east, however, is another matter. Sites like Bard-e Nechandeh and Masjid-e Soleiman, as well as numerous rock reliefs, although difficult to date, suggest that the highlands were controlled by the indigenous Elymaeans. Moreover, after the reign of Gotarzes II (c. 40-51 CE), the last Arsacid king to mint coins at Susa, Elymaean control may have been reasserted in the lowlands, as the large number of Elymaean issues suggests.

Although these elusive signposts of shifts in political power in southwestern Iran in the last century BCE and early first century CE do not ‘explain’ the co-occurrence of the Elymaeans and Parthians in Pliny’s paragraph on the *bratus*, they at least make it clear that the two contenders for hegemony in the region were near neighbors and, so far as we can tell, fierce adversaries in the period when Claudius composed his *Histories* and Pliny excerpted them in his *Natural History*. For ‘Parthians,’ of course, we must understand ‘Arsacids,’ in the sense that ethnic Parthians, of whom Pliny was well aware, were native to the region east of the Caspian, whereas the empire they founded, which, intermittently at least, controlled Susa and attempted to bring the adjacent highlands to the east under their sway, is more properly called ‘Arsacid’ after the throne name ‘Arsaces’ adopted by many of its rulers and routinely employed in, for example, the Babylonian astronomical diaries.

**Mount Scanchrus**

According to Pliny, the *bratus* “grows beyond the Pasitigris on Mount Scanchrus in the territory of the city of Sostrata.” From a Roman perspective, “beyond the Pasitigris” suggests a location east of that river. One of the foremost historians of Alexander (Quintus Curtius) noted that the Pasitigris “rises in the mountains of the Uxii and for fifty stadia rolls on rapidly amid rocks and with wooded banks. Then plains receive it, through which it passes in a gentler course, now fit for boats. There are 600 stadia of smoother ground through which in a quiet stretch of water it makes its way into the Persian Sea” (Quintus Curtius, *Hist. Alex.* 5.3.1-2). It has long been recognized that the Pasitigris (‘little Tigris’) can only be the Karun River, the Arabic name of which (*ad-Duğait*) is also the diminutive of ‘Tigris’ (*Dğıla*) (Eilers 1982: 32).

The city of Sostrata (Σῶστρα τε according to Marquart 1901: 65), of course, can be identified with Šōštar/Šuštar, or Tustar as it became known. The city appears (as Šōštā, Šōstān oder Šōštē) in many Late Antique sources, including the Šahnameh-ē Erānshihr, and was, from 410 CE, the site of a Nestorian bishopric (Marquart 1901: 144, n. 8; Markwart [Marquart] 1931: 97).

What then of Mount Scanchrus? This, too, is a *hapax legomenon* and has not been analyzed as an Iranian toponym, for example, in the exhaustive works of either Eilers or Marquart. The reason for ignoring this apparently unique name is probably that it has been considered, by many scholars, a phantom, i.e. nothing but a corruption of Zagros (Rosenmüller 1840: 257-260; Mone 1855: 99). In the 1909
Teubner edition of Pliny's *Natural History*, moreover, the variants *(in monte) scanchro, schanthro and sanchro*, attested in different manuscripts of the work, are understood as corruptions of *Zagros* (Mayhoff 1875: 403). Elsewhere, of course, Pliny wrote about the *Zagrus mons*, noting, “Mount Zagrus reaches as far as this district [Chalonitis, i.e. the area around Sar-e Pol-e Zohab], and extends from Armenia between the Medi and the Adiabeni, above Parætacene and Persis” (*Nat. Hist. 6.31.131*). In contrast to the modern, very broad application of the term *Zagros* for the entire mountain chain extending from northwestern through southern Iran, the more restricted, northerly definition of the *Zagros* given by Pliny is typical of the ancient sources and could provide an argument in favor of retaining Scanchrus, Schanthus or Scanthus as a genuine oronym associated, in this case, with the mountainous region “beyond the Pasitigris...in the territory of the city of Sosstrata.”

**Conclusion**

This exploration of one paragraph in Pliny’s multi-volume *Natural History*, and of one *hapax legomenon* in that paragraph, has hopefully demonstrated just how much material in the ancient sources on Iran remains to be fully explored and explained. Like their Renaissance and Enlightenment predecessors, modern scholars have a wide range of tools at their disposal in attempting to make sense of what, at times, seems like opaque, even esoteric knowledge that defies modern comprehension. In the present case, modern botanical research can help eliminate possible identifications that have puzzled scholars for centuries. It cannot, perhaps, prove definitively what species was meant by a given name in an ancient source, but it can certainly help to better define the parameters of likelihood. Regardless of whether or not the *bratus*, which may be linked linguistically with cognate forms in Akkadian, Hebrew and Syriac, denoted the same species as those known in these languages, Pliny’s vignette about its use in fumigation and mixing in drinks by the ‘Parthians’ offers a unique window on a people whose lives remain poorly known; whose political history is, of necessity, based on external, mainly Greek and Latin sources; and whose chronology is best with numerous problems exacerbated by a complex numismatic record. Last but not least, it is salutary to consider that the *Elymæae* *bratus* was “praised in the Histories of Claudius Caesar as having a marvelous property.” Surely this should make it worthy of further study.

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The Elymaean bratus: A Contribution to the Phytography of Arsacid Iran


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