

Plants from Alexander's Empire in Theophrastus' Botany

For the Greeks, India had long been the eastern end of the known world, and its exoticism played a dominant role in how Greeks thought about it during the archaic and classical periods (Kartunnen 1989). A key feature in the Greek perception of India was its extreme fertility, noted even by the early explorer Skylax of Karyanda (*FrGH* 709 F 3). Reports from this fertile land began reaching the Aegean soon after Alexander's expedition reached the Indus, and, despite arguments against Alexander's scientific patronage (Romm 1989), many authors (e.g. Aristobulus, Onesicritus, and Nearchus) included scientific observations in their works. Thus, when Theophrastus in his *Historia Plantarum* discusses the plants indigenous to various regions of the known world, proceeding in book 4 from Egypt to Libya to Asia to the regions πρὸς ἄρκτον, he makes use of this new scholarship about Indian plants. In fact, there is evidence that he added information about India to the *HP* as he revised the text. To understand how his knowledge of India evolved, I propose to compare his treatment of plants from India with those from Egypt, another newly conquered land, but one with which the Greeks had longstanding contact.

Though the precise extent of the relationship between pre-classical Greece and Egypt is a matter of dispute (Burstein 1996), it is clear that at least by the seventh and sixth centuries BCE commercial contact between Greece and Egypt was thriving, particularly via the trading port of Naukratis (Möller 1999). From this city, grain, linen, and papyrus were exported to Greece, while Greek wine was imported (Braun 1982, Lloyd 1975-88). Because of this kind of mercantile contact, the land and flora of Egypt were more familiar to the Greeks. On the other side of the *oikumene*, the Indus valley had only recently entered the Greek sphere, and first-hand reports were a novelty, since Herodotus and Ctesias relied on hearsay from traders and travelers

(Lenfant 2004). This contrast between the two regions can be seen in the way Theophrastus discusses the plants native to these two regions.

Two major differences appear in his treatment of Egyptian and Indian plants. First, Egyptian plants frequently are referred to by name, whether a native Egyptian term or a Greek coinage (e.g., οὔγγον, περσέα, and κουκιοφόρον). Indian plants, for the most part, are either assimilated to certain familiar Greek plants (Ἰνδική σύκη for the banyan tree), or left altogether unnamed. For instance, in 4.4.5, Theophrastus briefly mentions four plants (identified as jackfruit, banana, mango, and jujube) but refers to them merely as ἕτερον δένδρον, ἕτερον, ἄλλο, and ἕτερον, respectively. He then goes on to say: καὶ ἕτερα δὲ πλείω καὶ διαφέροντα τῶν ἐν τοῖς Ἕλλησιν ἀλλ' ἀνόνομα: “there are also many more that are different from those among the Greeks, but they are without names.”

Second, Egyptian plants and Egyptian varieties of common crops are mentioned throughout the *HP*, often in lists of examples, whereas Indian plants have a much smaller part to play. For instance, οὔγγον (taro) is mentioned in 1.1.7 and 1.6.11 as a plant cultivated for its edible root, and κουκιοφόρον (dour palm) is included at 2.6.10 in a survey of types of palms. These references indicate Theophrastus' relative familiarity with the Egyptian plants. Indian plants, on the other hand, are mostly confined to book 4. An exception to this segregation of the Indian plants is the Ἰνδική σύκη (banyan), which is mentioned in *HP* 1.7.3 apropos of its method of propagation by adventitious roots, though it is also included among the Indian flora at 4.4.4.

Since the *HP* took its current shape over decades (Amigues 1988-2006), mentions of Indian plants outside of their “home” in book 4 are likely revisions and additions Theophrastus made between ca. 315 and his death in 288-287 or 287-286. And although at the time of the final edition, Theophrastus was still more familiar with Egyptian plants than with Indian, he was

certainly benefiting from the results of scientific inquiry taking place in the East. Thus, we can track knowledge about eastern flora as it arrived in Greece and was incorporated into the *HP*.

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