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Articoli/Articles

THE ANCIENT NAME OF ROSE

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SUMMARY

The article is a survey of plants foods and drugs that Greeks and Romans thought to be aphrodisiac and to have a specific effect on the male libido. The article is a useful support to study the sexual therapy in ancient world.

Introduction

This is a survey of plant foods and drugs that were considered in ancient Greece and Rome to have an aphrodisiac effect. With very few exceptions, the available information bears on substances that were supposed to have an effect on the *male* libido. I hope the paper will assist in understanding the approach to sexual therapy of ancient physicians and others and of the people whom they advised. To this end, the survey will be followed by some questions and answers.

First, an outline of the sources of information. Medical writings are useful, but they do not come first in point of time: I will begin, therefore, with general literature.

Already by 430 BC references were being made in the Athenian comic drama to supposed aphrodisiacs. These references continued from time to time through the hundred and fifty years during which Athenian comedy was a living genre; they are mostly brief and humorous asides. Those quoted in the following pages are from plays by Aristophanes, Plato Comicus, Alexis and Xenarchus. Some of Aristophanes' plays survive complete. Those of other authors survive only as brief excerpts, and most of these are to be found in a later Greek work on food and dining, the *Deipnosophists* by Athenaeus, a scholarly author of

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about AD 220. The earliest Latin text that will be cited below dates from about 50 BC (Varro).

The first landmark of scientific literature on this subject is a survey of plant substances that were believed to have effects on human reproduction, compiled by the Aristotelian philosopher Theophrastus, about 310 BC, as part of his *Study of Plants* (9.18.3-11). Relevant extracts are quoted below. The whole section is omitted from the current standard edition and English translation of Theophrastus's work¹. I have published elsewhere a translation of the text with annotations²; this offers a few corrections to the previous translation by Anthony Preus³. Theophrastus' information is reworked by Pliny in his encyclopaedic compilation *Natural History* (26.95-99, cf. 27.65) and was also referred to briefly by Athenaeus (*Epitome of Athenaeus* 18d).

The second landmark is the extensive survey of materia medica compiled by Dioscorides in the mid first century AD. Dioscorides lists the aphrodisiac and other sexual effects of the substances he deals with. A second, shorter work by Dioscorides, *Euporista* or *Common Medicines*, may be regarded as an abridgement of the same material, this time conveniently arranged under medical and physiological effects. The relevant section from *Euporista* (2.101) is quoted in full below. Dioscorides, a physician working with the Roman Army, wrote in scientific Greek. Pliny's work, just mentioned, was compiled in Latin at about the same date. Pliny and Dioscorides have some information in common; it is usually concluded that neither used the work of the other, but that both drew for this information on the same, now lost, source.

The third scientific landmark is formed by the writings of Galen, an eminent physician working in Rome around AD 180. There are many references to substances with aphrodisiac effects in Galen's writings, and some of these are cited below. He drew on earlier medical writers and herbalists; Dioscorides was among these, but many of Galen's source texts are now lost. Galen was in his turn quoted and excerpted wholesale by later writers on foods and medicinal substances, notably by Oribasius in the fourth century. Aetius, a medical writer of the sixth century, drew on the same tradition. Aetius is the latest author quot-

ed in this article except for two Byzantine Greek anonymous texts: a collection of medical and magical prescriptions, *Cyranides*, and a compilation on farming (based on sources from the Roman Empire), *Geoponica*.

Lists of aphrodisiacs vary, naturally enough, but many of the same items recur from beginning to end of the classical period. The information that we are gathering in this way was only partly transmitted through written texts: some of it was general knowledge (hence the potential for gaining a laugh by referring to well-known aphrodisiacs on the comic stage); some of it was, at least in origin, privileged knowledge of herbalists or physicians.

To conclude this introductory section I will quote several quite different lists of reputed aphrodisiacs in order to give a general view of the source material and of the information that it offers.

First, a couple of lines from an Athenian comedy of around 360 BC:

"To a man in love, Cteson, what could be more useful that what I have brought with me? Trumpet-shells, scallops, bolboi [grape-hyacinth bulbs, Muscari comosum], a big octopus, and fish in its prime!" (Alexis fragment 170 Kock quoted by Athenaeus 356e).

This is all we have – the play itself does not survive. From a general knowledge of comedy plots we may guess that the speaker is Cteson's best friend; also that his concerns are out of place and will only embarrass our hero, who is young, vigorous, high-minded and deeply in love (they always are). The first four items on the prospective menu are among the appropriate starters for any Athenian dinner. But all four have aphrodisiac or erotic connotations⁴, and the third and fourth (bulbs and octopus) are practically always included in comedy lists of aphrodisiacs. By juxtaposing these two, the speaker ensures that the idea of *aphrodisiacs* will by now be implanted in the minds of the audience. Fish is a strengthening food rather than an aphrodisiac⁵, but the unexpected adjective *hadros* which I have here translated *in its prime* gives a concluding hint that Cteson, like the fish, is expected to be at the peak of his performance after this meal.

The same author, Alexis, gives a similar list of aphrodisiacs in this fragmentary extract from what was clearly a very similar piece of dialogue:

"Pinnae, crayfish, grape-hyacinth bulbs, snails, trumpet-shells, eggs, trotters and all the rest. If anyone in love with a girl knows of any pharmaka [drugs] more useful than these ..." (Alexis fragment 279 Kock quoted in the *Epitome of Athenaeus* 63e).

A less-known comedy writer, Xenarchus, confirms the special fame of *bolboi* and octopus. In a passage of mock-tragedy – spoken, one might guess, by a household slave – these two aphrodisiacs take centre stage:

"Lost is the house whose master's luck has wilted. Overthrown by the avenger of the children of Pelops, that house is flaccid! Even the bung-necked companion of divine Deo, earth-born bulb, so helpful to its friends when boiled, has no power to revive it; even the passion-enhancing octopus, nourished in the blue whirlpools of the sea, extracted thence in the meshed constraints of a net, fills the bosomy bulge of the cooking pot (daughter of the potter's wheel) to no effect!" (Xenarchus quoted in the *Epitome of Athenaeus* 63f)⁶.

And now a general list, of serious intent, from the *Euporista* ('*Common Medicines*') by Dioscorides. The same word *hadros*, just discussed, is used of the 'stronger' root of corn-flag in this text.

"The seed of horminos [clary or Joseph sage, *Salvia* spp.] provokes libido and produces erections. The stronger, upper root of xiphion [corn-flag, *Gladiolus segetum*] provokes libido, when drunk in wine; the weaker root, by contrast, relaxes libido. The larger bulb of orkhis [salep, *Orchis mascula*], drunk in milk, produces erection; the smaller, drunk in water, relaxes it. Wild nettle seed drunk in wine; anise in wine; the root of aron [arum or Aaron's rod, *Arum italicum*] boiled and eaten; mint, likewise; cress and cress seed, drunk; a little coriander seed with water – a larger quantity produces drowsiness; kostos [putchuk, *Saussurea lappa*] in wine or in honeyed wine; saffron likewise; linseed in honeyed wine with pepper, taken as a sweetmeat; fennel sap; leek seed eaten, and the water from cooking leeks, drunk; the seed of satyrion *Erythraikon* [an orchid,

Orchis sp.] – it resembles the seed of pears or apples, but is shinier and is oilier when chewed; the Indian skink, drunk – erections are stopped by drinking a decoction of chickpeas; the seed of staphylinos agrios [a 'wild carrot', perhaps *Daucus* sp.]; terebinth fruit, eaten." (Dioscorides, *Euporista* 2.101.)

Each of the substances listed by Dioscorides in this passage is intended as a potential aphrodisiac (except the 'decoction of chickpeas', which is inserted at that point because it is a specific antidote). But were they expected to act singly? The answer is made clear both by the already-quoted comedy lists and by the texts that follow; we should know the answer in any case from other information on the way that Greek physicians advised and prescribed. Foods were combined in order to produce any desired effect. One advised on a regimen, or, let us say, on a menu; one did not rely on prescribing a single food or drug.

The next text to be examined is from the ancient Roman cookery book known as *Apicius*, which was put together some time in the second, third or fourth centuries. It is a bare compilation of recipes, practically devoid of comment. Uniquely, as an addendum to the recipes offered for *bulbi* (Greek *bolboi*: grape-hyacinth bulbs) the nameless compiler inserts a quotation from a lost work by Varro, an uxorious author of the first century BC, making it clear that Romans, like Greeks, counted *bulbi* among the quintessential aphrodisiacs. The translation given here includes the recipe text as well as the quotation from Varro:

"Grape-hyacinth bulbs. Serve in oil, fish sauce, vinegar, with a little cumin sprinkled over. – Or, mash and boil in water, then fry in oil. Make a sauce thus: thyme, pennyroyal, pepper, oregano, honey, a little vinegar and, if liked, a little fish sauce. Sprinkle pepper over and serve. – Or, boil and squeeze into a pan, adding thyme, oregano, honey, vinegar, concentrated must, caryota date, fish sauce and a little oil. Sprinkle pepper over and serve. Varro says: What of bulbs? Boil them in water, I said, if you fancy knocking at Venus's door, and then serve them at dinner, as people do at proper weddings. Or you may add pine kernels, or pounded rocket and pepper. – Another way: serve fried bulbs in wine and fish sauce" (*Apicius* 7.12)⁷.

My reason for quoting these various brief recipes in full at this point is to support and emphasise the point that has just

been made. Even bulbs, in spite of their almost universal fame, were not usually expected to serve their aphrodisiac purpose *in vacuo*. Several of these recipes for bulbs include other recognised aphrodisiacs, such as pine kernels and rocket. You could, indeed, as Varro says, simply 'boil them in water and then serve them at dinner, as people do at proper weddings', but both the recipes offered by Apicius for boiled bulbs include pepper, another of the recognised aphrodisiacs. What is more, a wedding dinner would surely include some of the other foods generally regarded as aphrodisiacs (wine, of course, among them).

The last text to be quoted here is the opening part of the section of Aetius's medical manual that deals with sexual medicine.

"On men who are unable to have intercourse. Those who want to have intercourse and whose sexual parts are incapable of it should exercise their lower bodies, specifically loins and thighs, massaging with pepper, sodium carbonate, spurge with olive oil, and ointments compounded with these and similar substances: we give some specimen recipes in the following section. They should sleep on soft beds, read erotic literature, and watch erotic performances. Their foods and drugs should be heating and windy, for example chickpeas, broad beans, emmer groats, leeks, grape-hyacinth bulbs, carrot root and seed in moderation, pine kernels, boiled arum root, baked taro and drakontion root, nettle seed, turnip seed, rocket leaves and seed especially the wild kind, putchuk, pepper in honeyed wine, salep, sesame, clary, almond in moderation, anise, octopuses and all shellfish. Also helpful is the animal called gecko, eaten. Partridge eggs arouse sexual desire. Cock's testicles [as food] produce copious sperm, as do all foods rich in humours. Cock's testicles, dried, a small spoonful taken in drink, provoke erection without danger and without fail. The substance surrounding the kidneys of the skink is drunk as an aphrodisiac. The larger bulb of the salep orchid, drunk in milk, provokes erection; the smaller bulb, drunk in water, relaxes the erection" (Aetius, Medicine 11.35).

The 'following section' in which Aetius suggests numerous compound medicines and ointments is too long for translation here: to summarise, each compound tends to include several of the substances listed here along with numerous exotic and expensive spices.

It will be seen that Aetius owes a good deal to Dioscorides, or, at least, to the medical tradition represented earlier by

Dioscorides. Aetius includes some prescriptions for which he clearly does not vouch, but it is noticeable that he begins by outlining a general approach to the treatment of sexual dysfunction. This is not a new departure – in fact the first two sentences are largely based on a work by Oribasius (*Select Prescriptions* 66). In the area of sexual dysfunction this development forms a welcome change from the earlier focus on dietary aphrodisiacs; it helps, if I may put it like this, to 'take away the taste' of the unsavoury animal substances with which this particular quotation closes.

At the end of the main alphabetical survey which now follows are two briefer listings: the first, of plants that are only very occasionally characterised as aphrodisiac; the second, of the most important plant substances that were regarded as antaphrodisiac.

Survey of better-known plant aphrodisiacs

In this survey, references to ancient sources are limited to those that speak specifically of aphrodisiac uses. Under each plant name, these references are given in approximate chronological order beginning with the earliest. Supporting references for the historical information added here will be found in my forthcoming *Food in antiquity A to Z*.

Ancient names cannot always be precisely equated with single plant species recognised by modern botanists. A scientific name has been supplied in each case below, but it should often be regarded as one among several possible identifications.

- Anise

Greek *anison*, *anesson*, *glykanison*; Latin *anisum*. *Pimpinella Anisum* L.

Dioscorides, *Euporista* 2.101; Aetius, *Medicine* 11.35.

Anise, an ancient cultivated plant of the eastern Aegean, was and is regarded as warming and digestive. It was included at appropriate seasons in the Roman and Greek spiced wine called *conditum*, and was the chief added ingredient in the wine called *annesaton*. Anise seeds were placed in *sacci*, bouquets, according to Pliny, to impart their flavour and medicinal properties to wine as it was served.

Aetius lists anise among aphrodisiacs; Dioscorides says specifically that for this purpose it should be taken 'in wine'.

Both are quoted above. Anise could in fact be taken in wine using the method described by Pliny, or else in the flavoured wine *annesaton* for which Oribasius supplies a recipe. This *annesaton* may be regarded as the ancestor of the various Mediterranean anise spirits including ouzo and pastis. Its association, as a digestive, with the feeling of well-being that follows a good evening meal, may have been sufficient to justify the reputation of anise as an aphrodisiac.

- *Arum*

Greek *aron*; Latin *arum*, *veta leporina*. *Arum italicum* Miller. Dioscorides, *Euporista* 2.101; Aetius, *Medicine* 11.35.

The plant genus includes English cuckoo-pint or lords-and-ladies; it is related to taro. The fleshy root is poisonous until thoroughly slaked, but it can then be useful food. It was probably *Arum italicum* (Aaron's rod or Italian arum) that saved Caesar's troops from famine when besieging Pompey at Dyrrachium in 48 BC.

Both Dioscorides and Aetius carefully specify that arum root should be boiled before use, evidently since it would otherwise be poisonous. The phallic appearance of the flower in this genus is the reason for some common names in European languages, including Latin *veta leporina* and English *cuckoo-pint*. It is reasonable to suggest that this also is the reason why it was thought to be aphrodisiac.

- *Bulbs*

Greek *bolboi*; Latin *bulbi*, *bulbi Megarici*. *Muscari comosum* (L.) Miller.

Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazusae* 1091-1092; Plato Comicus fragment 173 quoted in the *Epitome of Athenaeus* 5b; Alexis fragment 170 Kock quoted by Athenaeus 356e⁸; Alexis fragment 279 Kock quoted in the *Epitome of Athenaeus* 63e; Xenarchus quoted in the *Epitome of Athenaeus* 63f; Diphilus of Siphnos quoted in the *Epitome of Athenaeus* 64b; Lynceus, *Anecdotes* quoted by Athenaeus 584d; Heracleides of Tarentum quoted in the *Epitome of Athenaeus* 64a; Columella, *On Agriculture* 10.105-6; Petronius, *Satyricon* 130; Apicius 7.12 quoting Varro; Oribasius, *Select Prescriptions* 66; Aetius, *Medicine* 11.35.

The bulbs of the grape hyacinth, also sometimes called 'purse-tassels' and 'tassel hyacinth' in English. These bulbs have

been eaten in Greece ever since classical times as an appetiser or relish and were scarcely less popular in ancient Italy. They are known in modern Greek as *volví*, in Italian as *lampascioni* or *lampasciuoli*. They require long baking and generous seasoning, as explained here in a fourth century BC comedy by Philemon:

"Look, if you please, at how highly the bulb is regarded for its extravagance: it demands cheese, honey, sesame, olive oil, onion, vinegar, silphium. All on its own it is mean and sour" (Philemon fragment 122 Kock quoted in the *Epitome of Athenaeus* 64e).

This expenditure of effort was possibly redeemed by the lasting fame of bulbs among aphrodisiacs.

The city of Megara was the traditional producer for the Athenian market. "Bring from Megara the fertilising seeds of the bulb, which arouse men and arm them for intercourse with women!" wrote the Latin agricultural poet Columella.

Galen, in his survey *The Properties of Foods*, suggests a variety of cooking methods, as does Apicius in the passage quoted above. The flavour of bulbs, though somewhat bitter even at the end of the cooking process, was sufficiently attractive that bulbs were often combined with other foods, for example in *bolbophake* 'bulb and lentil soup' – which was served at a courtesan's establishment, for reasons we may be able to guess, in a Greek anecdote retold by Lynceus. In that particular combination bulbs were found to confer a general feeling of warmth. "Bulb-and-lentil soup is like ambrosia when the cold weather bites" said an ancient proverb.

The first appearance of bulbs as aphrodisiacs in Greek literature is in the plays of Aristophanes – for example in an exchange between a young man and two prostitutes in *Ecclesiazusae*, 'Assemblywomen': "How am I going to pull you both?" – "Easy, once you've eaten a jar of bulbs." Soon afterwards, in a fictional cookbook quoted in a lost play by Plato Comicus (about 390 BC), a suitable recipe is given: "Of bulbs—conquered with ashes, drenched in sauce—eat up all you can, for this erects a man's flesh;" in other words, they are to be baked under hot ashes. Other sources, however, including Xenarchus and Varro (both quoted

above), indicate that to give their full aphrodisiac effect bulbs should be prepared by boiling.

One of the earliest statements by a medical writer concerning the aphrodisiac properties of bulbs comes from Diphilus of Siphnos in the early third century BC: "Bulbs are indigestible but nourishing and palatable; they are also purgative, they dull the eyesight, and they arouse sexual desire."

In the concluding section of this paper the Greek author Heraclides of Tarentum is quoted for his explanation of why bulbs were considered aphrodisiac – "not because they are nourishing" but because the physical properties of their juice are analogous to those of semen. In general, modern authors who have discussed this question have tended to give a third and fairly obvious reason: because of a resemblance to the testicles. However, the reputation of bulbs was so general and so long-lasting (it is said that *lampascioni* are still regarded as aphrodisiac in parts of Italy) that it must be seriously asked whether it was in some way justified.

- Carrot

Greek *staphylinos agrios*; Latin *pastinaca erratica*. A wild carrot species, probably *Daucus* sp.

Dioscorides, *Euporista* 2.101; Pliny, *Natural History* 20.30-32 citing 'Orpheus'; Galen, *On the Properties of Simples* 11.862; Aetius, *Medicine* 11.35.

Garden carrots of the modern species *Daucus Carota* (Greek *karo*; Latin *carota*) are little seen in ancient texts. Their wild relatives were more familiar. They had edible leaves and thin, strong-tasting, white roots which were prescribed for various medicinal purposes. One wild kind was an aphrodisiac according to Dioscorides and Pliny. Galen and Aetius refer more vaguely to carrots as aphrodisiac. One might guess that the shape of the root has something to do with this, although the fleshy, red roots of the modern carrot, said to be a hybrid cultivar, were as yet unknown.

- Clary

Greek *horminon*; Latin *horminum*. *Salvia Sclarea* L. and *Salvia viridis* L.

Dioscorides, *Euporista* 2.101; Oribasius, *Select Prescriptions* 66; Aetius, *Medicine* 11.35.

The precise identification of the plant named *horminon* is uncertain, but it was certainly a sage, a member of the genus *Salvia*. In a collection of compound aphrodisiac prescriptions, Aetius writes as follows:

"Another, which I have used myself. Clary seed, sesame, pepper, rocket seed, mustard, pine kernels, tail of skink, salep, flower of ginger-grass, storax, leek seed, grape seed, all in equal quantities, and sufficient honey [to blend]".

Horminos is prominent here and in other medical sources as a possible aphrodisiac. It is worth noting that the Greek word *horme* 'impulse, onrush, onset' may refer, in context, to the sexual act, as may the associated verb *parormo* 'stimulate'. It is not impossible that etymological speculation resulted in the choice of *horminon* as a stimulant.

- Corn-flag

Greek *phasganon*, *xiphion*; Latin *gladiolus*. *Gladiolus italicus* Miller.

Dioscorides, *Euporista* 2.101; *PDM* 61.58-62⁹.

According to Dioscorides, "the stronger, upper root of corn-flag provokes libido, when drunk in wine; the weaker root, by contrast, relaxes libido." This closely resembles the usual information concerning salep. Corn-flag is otherwise not mentioned as an aphrodisiac, except that (if this identification is correct) it is included in an aphrodisiac ointment prescribed in one of the Demotic magical papyri: "corn flag grows in the oasis in abundance; it is both female and male. Boil these in a pot and grind them up in wine with pepper; smear it on your genitals"¹⁰.

- Cress

Greek *kardamon*; Latin *nasturcium*. *Lepidium sativum*.

Dioscorides, *Euporista* 2.101; Pliny, *Natural History* 20.127; Florentinus quoted in the *Geoponica* 12.27.3; Aetius, *Medicine* 11.35.

Garden cress and its seed, taken in a drink, are both regarded as aphrodisiac by Dioscorides and Aetius. However, cress is described as antaphrodisiac by Pliny and Florentinus.

- Elecampane

Greek *helenion*; Latin *helenium*, *inula Campana*. *Inula Helenium* L.

Dioscorides, *Materia Medica* 1.28-29; Pliny, *Natural History* 14.108, 19.91-92, 21.59, 21.159.

Elecampane is a bitter root which was said to have sprung from the tears of Helen. Now rather obscure, it was in ancient times sufficiently important as a herb to be grown in gardens. Elecampane was regarded as a tonic and a means of enhancing beauty and sex-appeal; it is the only one of the substances listed in this survey that was customarily taken by women. It was eaten in combination with honey, grape syrup, raisins or some other sweet flavour, and was said to have been taken daily as a food supplement, with pepper or thyme, by Augustus' daughter Julia. Whether or not this is true, and whether or not her father's anger was justified, Julia was eventually exiled by Augustus for her scandalous sexual behaviour.

- *Fennel*

Greek *marathon*; Latin *foeniculum*. *Foeniculum vulgare* Miller.

Dioscorides, *Euporista* 2.101; Aetius, *Medicine* 11.35.

Fennel, an ancient aromatic of the eastern Mediterranean, was grown in the classical world for its aromatic stems, leaves and seeds. Fennel is listed among aphrodisiacs by Dioscorides and Aetius; possibly, like anise in modern Europe and fennel seed itself in modern India, it served as a digestive; if so its association with the feeling of well-being that follows an evening meal may have been sufficient to justify its reputation as an aphrodisiac.

- *Leek*

Greek *prason*; Latin *porrum*. *Allium Porrum* L.

Dioscorides, *Euporista* 2.101; Oribasius, *Select Prescriptions* 66; Aetius, *Medicine* 11.35.

Leek was a typical garden vegetable of ancient Greece and Rome. It was popularly supposed to add brilliance to the voice, which is why the emperor Nero, ambitious for success as a singer, ate leeks – and nothing else – on certain prescribed days each month. Dioscorides lists both leek seed and the water from cooking leeks as aphrodisiacs. One could suggest the uncompromisingly strong and vertical appearance of the growing plant as a reason for its choice as an aphrodisiac.

- *Mint*

Greek *hedyosmon*, *minthe*; Latin *menta*. *Mentha spicata* L.

Hippocrates, *Regimen* 54; Dioscorides, *Euporista* 2.101; Galen, *On the Properties of Simples* 11.882-883; Florentinus quoted in the *Geoponica* 12.24.2.

Dioscorides and Galen list mint among aphrodisiacs, Galen specifying cultivated mint. According to the general view in the ancient world, however, mint was an antaphrodisiac. This is already stated in the Hippocratic treatise *Regimen*, to be dated around 400 BC: "if eaten often it melts the seed and makes it runny, preventing erections and weakening the body". It is restated in the Roman period by Florentinus.

- *Nettle*

Greek *akalephe*, *knide*; Latin *urtica*. *Urtica* spp.

Dioscorides, *Euporista* 2.101; Oribasius, *Select Prescriptions* 66; Aetius, *Medicine* 11.35.

Nettle was commonly used as a potherb in the ancient world. Wild nettle seed, taken in wine, is listed as an aphrodisiac by Dioscorides and Aetius.

- *Pepper*

Greek *peperi*; Latin *piper*. *Piper longum* L. and *Piper nigrum* L.

Apicius 7.12 quoting Varro; Oribasius, *Select Prescriptions* 66; PGM 7.183-186¹¹; Aetius, *Medicine* 11.35; *Cyranides* 1.18.

Pepper grew only in India and was an expensive import to the ancient Mediterranean world, first recorded at the beginning of the fourth century BC. Pepper is seldom explicitly listed as an aphrodisiac, but from the early Roman empire onwards it occurs over and over again, both in medical sources and elsewhere, in recipes and prescriptions in combination with other reputed aphrodisiacs. This may partly be explained by its ubiquity in recipes more generally (in *Apicius*, for example, it is present on every page); it may partly be explained by its high price, since physicians certainly did prescribe exotic and costly medicines to rich patients. Also significant, I think, is the real diuretic effect of pepper, an effect that ancient medical science had certainly noted.

- *Pine kernel*

Greek *strobilos*, *konos*; Latin *nux pinea*. *Pinus pinea* L.

Varro quoted in Apicius 7.12; Oribasius, *Select Prescriptions* 66; *P. Lit. Lond.* 171; Aetius, *Medicine* 11.35.

Pine kernels, a significant culinary ingredient in the ancient world, recur several times in the texts in combination with well known aphrodisiacs; they are themselves listed as aphrodisiac by Aetius. A prescription on papyrus (*P. Lit. Lond.* 171) recommends rocket seed ground with pine kernels in wine. As with terebinth fruits (below) the oiliness of pine kernels will have suggested that their 'humours' were similar to those of semen.

- *Putchuk*

Greek *kostos*; Latin *costus*. *Saussurea Lappa* C.B. Clarke.

Dioscorides, *Euporista* 2.101; Galen, *On the Properties of Simples* 12.41; Aetius, *Medicine* 11.35; *Cyranides* 1.18.

Putchuk (as it is known in the English of India) is an aromatic root that grows in Kashmir. To classical scholars putchuk is often known by its Latin name, *costus*: some translators wrongly call it costmary, which is actually the name of a garden herb (*Tanacetum Balsamina*) unknown in ancient times.

Putchuk was imported in significant quantity to the ancient Mediterranean world, where it was used in expensive unguents and cosmetics. Its festive associations led to its use not only in aphrodisiac ointments (as in *Cyranides*) but also as an aphrodisiac drink. Dioscorides recommends putchuk in wine or honeyed wine (Greek *oinomeli*, Latin *mulsum*) and Galen concurs.

- *Rocket*

Greek *euzomon*; Latin *eruca*. *Eruca sativa* and *Eruca vesicaria*.

Varro quoted in Apicius 7.12; Dioscorides, *Materia Medica* 2.140; Pliny, *Natural History* 19.155, 20.19, 20.126; Oribasius, *Select Prescriptions* 66; *P. Lit. Lond.* 171; Aetius, *Medicine* 11.35; *Cyranides* 1.5.

Rocket is a salad vegetable as familiar in the ancient Mediterranean as in modern Europe. It had a firm aphrodisiac reputation throughout the period of the Roman Empire; so much so that on everyday occasions, when no special exertions lay ahead, rocket used to be served at meals together with the antaphrodisiac lettuce, Pliny tells us, so that their qualities would neutralise one another. Varro (quoted above, by way of Apicius) sug-

gests serving rocket with two other frequently used aphrodisiacs, bulbs and pepper, to make sure of the desired effect.

Dioscorides' succinct outline of the medicinal uses of rocket is worth quoting here:

"Rocket, eaten in rather large quantity, stimulates to intercourse; its seed has the same effect. It is diuretic, digestive and good for the bowel. They also use the seed as a flavouring in cooked dishes".

A passage from Pliny's *Natural History* shows that this author is ready to accept one or two of the superstitions concerning herbs and their uses that his contemporary Dioscorides had eschewed:

"If three leaves of wild rocket, picked with the left hand, are pounded and drunk in honey water, they serve as aphrodisiac" (*Natural History* 20.126).

Writing in the Byzantine period, the author of the collection of prescriptions known as *Cyranides* differs from earlier sources in asserting that 'green rocket' (fresh rocket leaf) is antaphrodisiac, and may be eaten (like chaste tree fruits, see below) by those who wish to abstain from sexual intercourse in order to maintain ritual purity.

- *Saffron*

Greek *krokos*; Latin *crocus*. *Crocus sativus* L.

Dioscorides, *Euporista* 2.101; Aetius, *Medicine* 11.35; *Cyranides* 1.18.

Then as now, saffron was an expensive aromatic. It produces a yellow to red dye (depending on its age) and gives a yellow colour and distinctive aroma to food. It is an ancient Mediterranean commodity: Pliny observes that it is one of the flowers named in the *Iliad*, while Minoan frescoes of the mid second millennium BC, from Knossos and Akrotiri, show the picking of saffron (by monkeys and by beautiful women respectively). In Roman times the best saffron grew in southern Anatolia at the Corycian cavern, a vast cauldron-like limestone depression.

By Romans saffron was burnt in sacrifice. It was also mixed with sweet wine and the resulting sticky yellow mixture was sprayed liberally into the air at theatres and circuses.

It will surely have been its festive associations – not to mention its high price – that suggested to physicians the medicinal use of saffron. It is prescribed by Dioscorides and Aetius, to be taken in wine or in honeyed wine. It also occurs in an aphrodisiac ointment recommended in the Byzantine collection *Cyranides*.

- Salep

Greek *orkhis*, *satyrion*, *satyridion*; Latin *satureum*, *herba priapiscus*. *Orchis mascula* L.

Strattis fragment 71 Kock quoted in the *Epitome of Athenaeus* 69a¹²; Theophrastus, *Study of Plants* 9.18.3–4¹³; Ovid, *Art of Love* 2.415; Dioscorides, *Materia Medica* 3.126–128, *Euporista* 2.101; Petronius, *Satyricon* 8, 20; Pliny, *Natural History* 26.95–99, 27.65; Martial, *Epigrams* 3.75.4; Galen, *On the Properties of Simples* 12.92–93; Oribasius, *Select Prescriptions* 66; Pseudo-Apuleius, *Herbarius* 15.3; Aetius, *Medicine* 11.35; *Cyranides* 1.18.

The twin bulbs of the orchids of genus *Orchis* are surely fated by their testicular appearance to be identified as potential aphrodisiacs. Whether for that reason or another, their reputation has lasted a long time.

Salep, as it is now called, is the powdered bulb of *Orchis mascula* and of certain related species. I am assured by those familiar with the byways of life in Albania and Turkey that salep is still in demand there and is still popularly regarded as a tonic and aphrodisiac, whether taken in the form of an invigorating hot drink (stirred into milk) or a uniquely glutinous ice cream.

The report on salep by Theophrastus, at the beginning of his short survey of sexual drugs, is worth quoting in full:

“Back to the human body. Besides affecting health, disease and death, people say that some plants have other specific effects, physical and mental. Firstly the physical effects, by which I mean favouring or inhibiting procreation.

There is at least one plant said to have both powers. This is the so-called orchis ‘salep’, which has a double bulb, one large and one small. The larger, given in the milk of a mountain goat, produces more vigour in sexual intercourse, while the smaller inhibits and forestalls. Its leaf is like squill but smoother and smaller, its stem very like spurge or thistle. It is odd, certainly, that both powers should be found in the same plant: but that a

plant should have one or other power need not surprise us at all. We may remember that Aristophilus, the druggist of Piraeus, used to say that he had drugs for exactly these purposes, one to improve sexual powers, one to inhibit; and that the impotence produced by the latter is general and lasts for a limited time, say two or three months, so that it can be used on slaves who require to be restrained and corrected”.

Dioscorides takes up a few of these details and adds that salep is drunk ‘in milk’, the earliest evidence of that fact. Galen observes that the orchid bulbs are sweetish to the taste and ‘are also eaten baked, like grape hyacinth bulbs’. Oribasius recommends “draughts [*propotismoi*] including salep, pepper, rocket seed and safflower”.

There are several allusions to *satureum* ‘salep’ in Latin literature, although some of these have been misunderstood by translators and commentators as referring to the garden herb savory (*Satureja hortensis*). It may be useful to quote the relevant section of the late Latin herbal attributed to Apuleius, with a further prescription:

“If unable to go with a woman. Grind one larger, right-hand root or testicle of herba priapiscus. Mix with 47 grains of pepper and 4 ounces of honey into the best wine. Take 9 scruples of this daily for three days”.

- Terebinth

Greek *terminthos*; Latin *terebinthus*. *Pistacia atlantica* Desf. Dioscorides, *Euporista* 2.101; Aetius, *Medicine* 11.35.

Terebinth fruits, alongside cress (see above), were reputed among Greeks to have been the staple diet of the early Persians. They are seldom mentioned as food among other peoples, though they had been in use in prehistoric times in human settlements all around the Mediterranean. The fruits are mentioned as an aphrodisiac by Dioscorides. They are notably oily – they can be pressed for oil – so it is possibly the viscosity of their ‘humours’ that suggested their aphrodisiac use. Aetius lists terebinth resin as aphrodisiac. This substance gave an aroma and flavour familiar to Greeks and Romans, since it could be used to seal wine-jars and could also be used as chewing gum to clean the teeth, in place of the better but more expensive mastic of

Chios. In this case the pleasant associations of the flavour might possibly suggest its aphrodisiac use.

- Turnip

Greek *gongylis*; Latin *rapa*. *Brassica campestris* L.

Pliny, *Natural History* 20.19; Galen, *On the Properties of Simples* 11.861; Aetius, *Medicine* 11.35.

A quotation from Pliny's *Natural History* explains the presence of turnip in the list of ancient aphrodisiacs.

"Democritus totally rejected turnip as a food because it caused flatulence. Diocles, however, praised it highly, asserting that it is a sexual stimulant. Dionysius says the same, and that the effect is stronger if it is conserved with rocket".

Pliny's tireless note-taking draws at this point on a Greek author on farming, an early Greek medical writer, and an unnamed work by the translator (Cassius Dionysius of Utica) of the great Carthaginian manual of agriculture by Mago. The combination of two aphrodisiacs, turnip and rocket, is typical of Greek and Roman dietary thinking.

- Wine

Greek *oinos*; Latin *vinum*.

Ancient medical texts do not list wine among aphrodisiacs, though it falls into the correct humoral category, being heating and drying. Excessive wine was of course well known to cause impotence. It is to be noted, however, that many of the aphrodisiac substances recommended by ancient physicians are to be 'drunk in wine'; in some cases, such as that of anise, wine flavoured with the substance in question was made according to a regular recipe and was in common use. Since ancient regimens and prescriptions worked in combination, the choice of wine as a vehicle is not without significance. Hence we are not at all surprised when Encolpius, the narrator of Petronius's *Satyricon* (130, quoted more fully below), says that in preparation for an erotic adventure he ate some bulbs and snails, two of the usual food aphrodisiacs, and 'swallowed a little neat wine'.

The fictional Encolpius – given his fictional history of sexual dysfunction – did exactly the right thing. His confidence would be boosted by the extremely high aphrodisiac reputation of

bulbs and snails, resulting in a powerful placebo effect; his inhibitions would be removed by a modest intake of wine.

A few less-known aphrodisiacs

Cardamom, an uncommon and expensive spice in the ancient Mediterranean world, occurs in several compound aphrodisiacs aimed at rich patients (Oribasius, *Select Prescriptions* 66; Aetius, *Medicine* 11.35). Celery (*Apium graveolens*) is said to "make women more inclined to sex. For this reason women who are nursing should not be encouraged to eat celery, and particularly because it may stop the milk" (Florentinus quoted in the *Geoponica* 12.23.3). Wild chervil (*Scandix Pecten-Veneris*), according to Pliny, was a tonic and an aphrodisiac especially useful to older men (Pliny, *Natural History* 22.80-81). Chickpea (*Cicer arietinum*) is listed as aphrodisiac by Aetius (*Medicine* 11.35), while the water from boiling chickpeas is an antaphrodisiac according to Dioscorides (*Euporista* 2.101), both quoted above. Dioscorides also recommends "a little coriander seed with water – a larger quantity produces drowsiness" (ib.). Ginger (*Zingiber officinale*), alongside salep and other better-known aphrodisiacs, is a principal constituent of an aphrodisiac compound medicine, *Satyriake*, prescribed by Oribasius (*Select Prescriptions* 66). "Linseed [*Linum usitatissimum*] in honeyed wine with pepper, taken as a sweetmeat," is recommended by Dioscorides (*Euporista* 2.101). Mustard (*Sinapis alba*) is prominent in the compound aphrodisiacs prescribed by Oribasius (*Select Prescriptions* 66) and Aetius (*Medicine* 11.35). Myrrh (*Commiphora Myrrha*) was a ubiquitous aroma in later Greek and Roman festivity; it would not be surprising if myrrh was thought aphrodisiac, but the only direct statement is that of Fulgentius, *Mythologies* 3.8 citing Petronius. Myrrh was also a constituent of at least one aphrodisiac ointment (*Cyranides* 1.18). Radish (*Raphanus sativus*) was considered aphrodisiac by Florentinus, quoted in the *Geoponica* 12.22.4.

The better-known antaphrodisiacs

- Cannabis

Greek *kannabis*; Latin *cannabis*. *Cannabis sativa* L.

Pliny, *Natural History* 20.259; Galen, *On the Properties of Foods* 6.549-6.550.

Cannabis seeds are indigestible, cause headache, are heating and narcotic, according to Galen. However, they were recognised in ancient times as an antaphrodisiac, and for this reason cannabis figured among the *tragemata* 'desserts' chewed after dinner, alongside wine, by those who wished to observe ritual purity by abstaining from sex.

- Chaste tree

Greek *agnos*, *lygos*; Latin *vitex*. *Vitex Agnus-castus* L.

Dioscorides, *Euporista* 2.103; Pliny, *Natural History* 24.62; Galen, *On the Properties of Foods* 6.550, *On the Properties of Simples* 11.807-810; *Cyranides* 1.5.

The fruits of the chaste tree had little food value, according to Galen. Like cannabis seeds, they were recognised as an antaphrodisiac, and figured among after-dinner desserts, chewed, alongside wine, by those who wished to abstain from sex. The leaves of the tree were prescribed to combat nocturnal emission. The reason for the choice of this species is generally said to be the superficial resemblance of its Greek name to the common adjective *hagnos* 'pure, chaste'.

- Lettuce

Greek *thridax*, *thridakine*; Latin *lactuca*. *Lactuca sativa* L. and *Lactuca serriola* L.

Dioscorides, *Euporista* 2.102-103; Pliny, *Natural History* 19.155; Florentinus quoted in the *Geoponica* 12.13.4.

Lettuce was commonly regarded as antaphrodisiac, and for this reason was served as a salad vegetable alongside rocket, which was believed to be aphrodisiac. Physicians prescribed the seeds of both wild and cultivated lettuce as antaphrodisiac and to combat nocturnal emission.

- Rue

Greek *peganon*; Latin *ruta*. *Ruta graveolens* L.

Dioscorides, *Euporista* 2.102; Galen *SF* 12.100-101; *Cyranides* 1.5.

Rue was a well-known herb in ancient times, much used in cookery. Its unique bitter-sweet aroma is now less familiar. It was regarded as an antaphrodisiac and was prescribed to prevent nocturnal emission.

- Water-lily

Greek *side*; Latin *nymphaea*. *Nymphaea alba* L.

Dioscorides, *Materia Medica* 3.132, *Euporista* 2.103; Pliny *NH* 25.75, 26.94.

Water-lily root was prescribed to combat premature ejaculation and nocturnal emission; it was also said to produce impotence and sterility lasting twelve days. Its antaphrodisiac properties were explained thus by Pliny: "Nymphaea was born from a nymph who died of jealousy over Hercules".

Questions and answers

1. A question of definition should be got out of the way first. Was there a clear distinction between aphrodisiacs, aiming to produce sexual arousal, and love potions, aiming to ensure that feelings of love and desire are directed at a particular person?

This raises no difficulty because ancient texts are quite clear on the distinction. Love potions were known as *philtera* in Greek. Their preparation was widely believed (among men) to be a skill practised by women, and practised generally enough that Plutarch thinks it worth counselling against the use of love potions in a youthful work of advice addressed to an educated and intelligent married couple: "If you use pharmaka to catch fish, you will catch them easily and gather them quickly, but they will be unpalatable and unfit to eat. Just so, women who use particular philtera and spells on their husbands, and enthrall them with pleasure, are living with mindless, worthless zombies" (Plutarch, *Advice on Marriage* 139a). The supposed use of love potions was a popular explanation for obsessive love, and in appropriate circumstances the real causes of sexual obsession could be characterised metaphorically as *philtera* or *pharmaka*:

"His wife told everybody that I had used pharmaka to drive him mad. In fact, jealousy was the pharmakon that I used" (Lucian, *Dialogues of Courtesans* 8.3, cf. Plutarch, *Advice on Marriage* 141c).

Thessalian women were supposed to be particularly adept at this as at other magical practices (Plutarch, *Virtues of Women* 256a-c; Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 3.16-20 and *passim*).

2. Are the aphrodisiacs of this study foods or drugs?

In ancient terms, we are talking about foods. Most of the substances in this survey are discussed – for example – by Galen not in his manual *On the Properties of Simple Medicines* but in *On the Properties of Foods*, and Galen is followed in this by later medical authors. One should also note that the line between foods and drugs, so far as a line existed at all, was drawn by Greek and Latin writers quite differently from, say, modern writers in English.

The modern pharmacopoeia consists largely of powerful drugs which are only recommended to those suffering from specific illnesses or displaying specific symptoms. Most of these drugs are synthetic. The modern pharmacopoeia includes only a few substances that form part of a normal human diet. By contrast, ancient lists of substances prescribed by physicians consist very largely of foods. The ancient position is logical enough, since it is a matter of observation that food intake has a powerful effect on the human system and that different foods have different effects. In prescribing selected foods to achieve the effects that they desired, whether in maintaining health or in treating illness, ancient physicians behaved rationally. Incidentally, they probably did less harm than by experimenting with more powerful techniques.

There was indeed in Greek a word *pharmakon* and that word may sometimes be translated 'drug'. But most of the substances prescribed by ancient physicians are not described by them as *pharmaka*. In fact that term covers a number of quite different entities, notably including poisons, prepared and used as such; dangerous and highly narcotic substances used medicinally in small quantities; also magical preparations with accompanying ritual, often involving the collection and use of plant or animal substances and not always resulting in a concoction that someone is supposed to eat or drink; in its masculine form *pharmakos* the word meant a scapegoat, human or animal. Love potions, referred to above, were habitually characterised as *pharmaka*. As a demonstration of the dangerous and poisonous connotations of the word *pharmakon*, it was almost axiomatic in ancient criminological thinking that a woman might murder a man uninten-

tionally by giving him a *pharmakon*, her intention in administering it having been to secure his love (Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 575-587; Antiphon, *Against the Stepmother*; Aristotle, *Magna Moralia* 1188b29-38).

Essentially a *pharmakon* was a means of producing a desired effect by manipulating supernatural powers. Poisons and dangerous drugs may be regarded as supernatural because, although they may be taken orally like food or drink, their effect is vastly more powerful than that of normal foods and wines. Many physicians in the Hippocratic tradition were rather disinclined to meddle with *pharmaka*: their prescriptions and their 'regimens' were intended to manipulate the human system by natural and logical means, notably through the application of humoral theory.

3. Was the aim of identifying aphrodisiac and antaphrodisiac foods a foolish one?

We must accept a certain underlying logic in ancient physicians' approach to food and regimen. We must also admit the justice of Theophrastus's preliminary point regarding claimed aphrodisiac and antaphrodisiac effects: "that a plant should have one or other of these powers need not surprise us" (*History of Plants* 9.18.4). His argument in essence was that some plant foods clearly do have specific physical and psychological effects on human beings; he saw no reason why human libido or sexual arousal should be exempt from such effects. This is correct, of course, and it means that the aim of identifying aphrodisiac foods was not a foolish one.

4. Was the search for aphrodisiac and antaphrodisiac foods predestined to fail?

Theophrastus, after listing the plants which had been claimed to have sexual effects, summed up as follows: "our conclusion must be that such aphrodisiac substances do exist" (*ib.* 9.18.10). Curiously enough, since his focus was on plants, he was led to this conclusion mainly by claims about the aphrodisiac effect of medicines whose plant origin is not specified – claims by the druggist Aristophilus of Plataea and by the unnamed 'Indian'. From our own perspective, we can now argue in exactly the same way as Theophrastus. The aphrodisiac effect of Viagra, an

artificial substance, has been thoroughly demonstrated in recent years: therefore our conclusion, too, "*must be that such aphrodisiac substances do exist*".

5. Was there a sound theoretical underpinning for the search for aphrodisiac and antaphrodisiac foods?

No. Ancient investigators were unfortunate in their scientific theories. In particular, by the time of the Roman Empire humoral theory reigned almost unchallenged among physicians. In its developed form, as set out for example by Galen, humoral theory permitted an evaluation of each food item on scales of heat and coldness, dryness and wetness, deriving from this a prediction as to the suitability of each food as part of the regimen for an individual, depending on the seasons and one's own constitution and state of health. Humoral theory is still widely accepted in the Islamic world, but it finds no support in modern scientific medicine. If any foods were identified by ancient physicians as aphrodisiac or antaphrodisiac *only because of* their supposed humoral properties they ought, in modern science, not to have the claimed effect. If any foods identified in the ancient world as aphrodisiac or antaphrodisiac really do have any such effect, another reason for it, beyond humoral theory, must be sought.

In a more superficial way than under the developed humoral theory, ancient opinion often relied on resemblances of one kind or another between foodstuffs and their therapeutic targets. Hence the view of Heracleides of Tarentum:

"Bulb, snail, egg and the like are supposed to be productive of semen, not because they are nourishing, but because their natural powers are analogous to those of semen" (quoted in the *Epitome of Athenaeus 64a*),

meaning simply that their fluids have physical properties resembling those of semen. Such bases for the identification of potentially useful drugs would be wholly rejected by modern science: to the extent that they were believed, we would now consider that they led ancient investigators astray.

It has been argued that grape hyacinth bulbs and orchid roots were classed as aphrodisiac simply because they resemble the testicles. There is no doubt, incidentally, that the orchid (Greek

orkhis) was so called precisely because its double bulb is likened to the testicles (Greek *orkhides*). The same reason of resemblance might be given for the prescribing of squill bulb as an aphrodisiac for horses (Varro, *On Farming* 2.7.8), squill bulb being larger than grape hyacinth and orchid bulbs, just as horse testicles are larger than human ones. Any post-Freudian will understand and be ready to accept this idea, but no ancient testimony supports it explicitly.

However, there is clearly something of what might now be called '*sympathetic magic*' in the idea that of a twin-bulbed plant, whether salep or corn-flag, the larger or stronger bulb is aphrodisiac while the smaller or weaker bulb is antaphrodisiac. Writing of salep, the rationalist Theophrastus characterised this detail of the report as *atopos*¹⁴.

On the other hand, the more direct and perhaps more justifiable viewpoint, that foods were aphrodisiac in so far as they were generally nourishing, was not without adherents. It is clearly a view that Heracleides of Tarentum, just quoted, took into account though he himself did not support it: "... *not because they are nourishing ...*" are his words. It was also perhaps the view of Encolpius, fictional narrator of Petronius's novel of Roman low life:

"Then I took some relatively strengthening foods, I mean, bulbs and snails' necks served without sauce, and I swallowed a little neat wine" (Petronius, *Satyricon* 130).

6. Did the search for aphrodisiac and antaphrodisiac foods take account of observed results?

We know nothing of the drugs supplied by Aristophilus of Plataea for use "*on slaves who require to be restrained and corrected*". We know nothing of the ointment "*that the Indian had*" (Theophrastus, *History of Plants* 9.18.4, 9.18.9). The claims made by Aristophilus and '*the Indian*' were apparently considered by Theophrastus worthy of credit, but those prescriptions were evidently secret. Nothing more is heard of them. Theophrastus can help us no further, since he has nothing to say of the efficacy of the other sexual drugs that he mentions. No scientifically-minded ancient author undertook (so far as is

known from any surviving text) to test the various claims made for aphrodisiac and antaphrodisiac foods. All we can say is that the very consistency with which, century after century, certain time-honoured aphrodisiacs were recommended by cooks, physicians and others, suggests that the result achieved by using them must have been no worse than the result achieved by not using them.

7. Were the expectations of prescribers and users realistic?

It is worth quoting at this point an ancient proverb: "*The bolbos won't help you if you lack the nerve*" (*Epitome of Athenaeus* 63e-64b). This *neuron* or 'nerve' means, quite specifically, the ability to attain erection. Alongside this we re-read the mock-tragic passage from the Athenian comedy by Xenarchus: "*Lost is the house whose master's luck has wilted ...*" This lament, quoted in full earlier in this paper, focuses explicitly on the household-er's despair and his resulting inability to attain erection. The speaker asserts that to this psychological problem the usual aphrodisiacs can offer no answer. A reasonable viewpoint: even Viagra might well be ineffective in a similar case.

8. Were the aphrodisiac and antaphrodisiac properties that were identified by ancient physicians and others illusory?

We are left to consider in the light of our own knowledge the likely effect of the aphrodisiacs and antaphrodisiacs that were favoured in the ancient world.

Not one of them, almost certainly, was as effective individually as was the method in use among farmers to encourage a stallion to mate by using the sexual aroma of the mare (Varro, *On Farming* 2.7.8). However, these human aphrodisiacs were expected to work not individually but in combination. With luck and good judgement, the ancient physician was able to select, using the range of supposed aphrodisiac substances in the accepted lists, a combination that might really have some slight beneficial result. There might be one that would tend to reduce inhibitions, such as wine. There might be one that would have a mild irritant effect on the urinary system, such as pepper. There might be one or two that were so well-reputed as to impart confidence and exert a significant placebo effect: such might be

grape-hyacinth bulbs or salep. And, who knows? In spite of the lack of confirmation so far from modern investigations, one or other of these ancient aphrodisiacs might yet be shown to have a real effect on the libido. Stranger things have happened.

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1. HORT sir A. (ed. and tr.) *Theophrastus, Enquiry into plants*. London, Heinemann, 1916-26.
2. DALBY A., *The Name of the Rose again, or, what happened to Theophrastus on aphrodisiacs?* *Petits propos culinaires* 2000; 64: 9-15.
3. PREUS A., *Drugs and psychic states in Theophrastus Historia Plantarum 9.8-20'*. In: FORTENBAUGH W. W. (ed.) *Theophrastean studies*. New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 1988, pp. 76-99.
4. *Kteis* 'scallop' is not elsewhere listed as an aphrodisiac, though shellfish in general were so regarded. *Kteis* was however one of the many alternate terms for the female sexual parts: one way or another, sexual innuendo continues. See HENDERSON J., *The maculate muse*. 2nd ed. New York, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 132 note 130.
5. Note, additionally, the mention of fish in the thirteenth century travel narrative of Ibn Batuta: "*All these foods made from coconut, along with the fish that they eat, gives them remarkable and unique vigour in the sexual act. The people who live in the Maldive Islands can do remarkable things in this regard. I myself had four legitimate wives, as well as a number of concubines, during the time that I was there. I had a general bout with them every day, and I passed the night with each of them in her turn. That was my mode of life for eighteen months*" (Ibn Batuta, *Travels* [vol. 3 pp. 222-225 in the version of Stéphane Yerasimos]). Yerasimos notes that Ibn Batuta exaggerates the time that he spent in the Maldives, only about nine months in total. Whether he exaggerates his sexual activities is unclear ...
6. Deo is Demeter, goddess of cereal fertility.
7. This translation was previously published in DALBY A., *Empire of pleasures: a geography of Roman luxury*. London, Routledge, 2000, p. 145. Editors of *Apicius* generally regard the quotation as interpolated (though for no good reason) and translators therefore generally omit it.

8. ARNOTT W. G., *Alexis: the fragments. A commentary*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996.
9. BETZ H.D. (ed.), *The Greek magical papyri in translation including the Demotic spells*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp. 287-8
10. Based on the translation by R. Kotansky, who gives woad and corn-flag as alternative identifications. The two roots of Dioscorides might correspond to the male and female of the magical papyrus.
11. BETZ H.D. (ed.), ref. 9, p. 120
12. See DALBY A., *Siren feasts: a history of food and gastronomy in Greece*. London, Routledge, 1996., p. 237
13. See DALBY A., *The Name of the Rose again, or, what happened to Theophrastus on aphrodisiacs?* *Petits propos culinaires* 2000; 64: 9-15.
14. PREUS A., ref. 3, translates this word as 'absurd': I prefer 'odd' or maybe 'counter-intuitive', because I think it is clear that Theophrastus does not intend to dismiss the report out of hand.

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Articoli/Articles

L'ANDROLOGIA CELSIANA
ED IL SUO CONTESTO

INNOCENZO MAZZINI

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SUMMARY

ANDROLOGY IN CELSUS

The article presents the principal topoi of Celsus' De medicina in which andrological problems are discussed. Comparing them with other testimonies of ancient medicine, the author clarifies their peculiarity and explains them in the summary of the cultural and socio-economical conditions of ancient Rome.

Con il presente articolo mi riprometto i seguenti obiettivi.

1. Presentare un quadro delle tematiche celsiane che, in qualche misura, potrebbero rientrare nell'ambito della moderna andrologia¹;
2. Confrontare la quantità e la natura delle problematiche celsiane con quelle affrontate precedentemente e successivamente, onde evidenziarne la continuità o la novità e comunque la tipicità, nel quadro della storia della medicina antica;
3. Collocare e spiegare i caratteri tipici dell'andrologia celsiana nel quadro delle generali condizioni socio-economiche e culturali dell'epoca.

Allo scopo articolo il presente contributo nei seguenti punti:

1. Sessualità ed organi genitali maschili nell'ambito della medicina celsiana;

Key words: Andrology – Celsus – Roman medicine