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Perfume and Perfume Manufacturing in Ancient Iran

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Cultivation of sweet smelling plants and flowers, and preparing perfumes, oils, creams, 'qalieh' (musk and ambergris) and incenses were widespread in ancient Iran. Hence, it would be a pity for Iran not to be among the main producers of the best perfumes in the world.

Plants and flowers, perfumes and aromas have always attracted the attention of Iranians since ancient times.

According to stone inscriptions of Achaemenian periods at Persepolis as well as Greek, Roman and Pahlavi sources, clear indications can be found about Iranians' attention to, and interest in, various kinds of perfumes and sweet aromas.

In stone images of Persepolis, Darius is shown sitting on a chair with two scent bottles or incense burners in front of him, and Xerxes standing behind him with flowers in his left hand. These flowers are probably lily of the valley or narcissus which were abundant in Fars province, and which are mentioned in Islamic sources.

Other images show the Iranian monarch holding a flower in his left hand or an Iranian lady with a flower in front of her face. Without any doubt, these flowers had beautiful colors and aroma which attracted the attention of Iranian men and women.

In addition, there is a wealth of sources and documentary evidence in support of Iranians' deep attachment to various kinds of plants, sweet smelling flowers, preparations of perfumes, fragrant materials and a variety of incenses.

According to Will Durant and western sources, Iranians were the first manufacturers of various kinds of perfumes, discoverers of cosmetic powders.

The invention of sweet smelling essences or cosmetic creams is also attributed to Iranians.

The cultivation of many perfumed flowers and plants, which was prevalent in ancient times, continued after the advent of Islam.

The equipment and installations for obtaining rosewater and perfumes were abundant in many towns and villages, and their sweet smelling products were exported to remote corners of the world.

Today some of these traditional methods for obtaining perfumes from flowers still prevail, as they have been handed down generations.

In Fars province, for instance, various kinds of sweet smelling flowers and plants were grown. Iranian and Muslim geographers of 4th century have mentioned that a variety of



flower species were grown by gardeners in ancient times. The author of "Hodood-ul-Alam" (Boundaries of the World) mentions a flower in Shiraz called "esporghami" which is more popularly known as narcissus.



Moqaddasi, the author, adds that the flower has a rose-leaf like petal and an interior like that of narcissus eye.

Abu Reihan Birouni has described this beautiful and sweet-smelling Iranian flower in the same way. In the writer's opinion, this flower is probably the same as that held by Darius and Xerxes.



During the Achaemenian period, in addition to perfume and sweet smelling cosmetics, some materials and incenses were also prepared to give a pleasant odor to the atmosphere.

According to Herodotus, when Xerxes wanted to pass through Dardanel Strait, his troops burned various kinds of sweet smelling materials and scattered branches of myrtle.

Darius' infantry was 10,000 strong, all of whom were crowned by sweet smelling flowers and myrtle leaves, which were called 'tiar' by Iranians.

While describing Xerxes' battles, Herodotus refers to the arrival of his courier in Susa and writes: "Arches made of myrtle leaves were built on the road, and perfumes and aloes wood were burnt to give a good aroma to the atmosphere."



During the Sassanid period, preparation of various kinds of perfumes and water extracted from flowers (like rosewater, sweetbrier or eglantine water) was prevalent.

According to Jahaz (160-255 AH), the Sassanid kings were selective in their use of perfumes, aromas and incenses, such that their companions and relatives were not allowed to use the same perfumes and aromatic materials used by kings. Jahaz adds that when Ardeshir Babakan put crowns on his head, Iranians were not entitled to decorate their caps and hats by means of flowers, because the cap would look like a crown.

According to the writings of the sage of Toos, recognition of flowers and sweet smelling plants, and preparation of perfume are among the works of Jamshid, the Pishdadi king.



Tabari says Jamshid was the original maker of perfumes. He gathered many things, including aromatic materials, from seas, mountains and deserts. "After getting hold of these amazing things, people observed the Norouz festivities."

Bal'ami also says it was Jamshid who used sweet smelling plants and aromas. In Norouz-Nameh, Khayyam reminds us that Jamshid got hold of musk, ambergris, myrrh, camphor, saffron and other sweet smelling plants.

Salabi Neishabouri ibn Balkhi ibn Mobarakshah also attributed the discovery of perfume and the art of perfumery to Jamshid.

In the year 520, an Iranian historian attributed the discovery of perfumes and aromatic materials to Manouchehr, another Pishdadi king, and has quoted the derivation of the word



Boustan (park, garden) in the following words: “Manouchehr brought many blossoms, flowers and basils from mountains and deserts to towns and cities. He ordered a well to be built. When it blossomed forth and exuded good smell, he called it Boustan.”

Khosrow Parviz had issued orders that his letters should be written on pieces of paper perfumed with rosewater and saffron. His palaces were also scented by means of perfumes suitable for festivities.

Iranian orators and writers of the post-Islamic period have described the spraying of perfumes in royal receptions and festivities. Daqiqi Tousi, when describing the triumphal return of Goshtasb to Balkh (the capital of Iran during Satiric period) quotes Goshtasb as ordering that fires should be lighted and myrrh and ambergris be ignited.

When describing Esfandiar's ascension to the throne, Daqiqi says: “In front of him, myrrh was burnt. It looked as if fire was lit.”

The sage of Tous also mentions the spraying of perfume. In those days, saffron like myrrh and ambergris was burnt to aromatize the space. For example, in accordance with Ferdowsi's epic poems, when Fereydoun triumphed over Zahhak, he put the crown on his head and ordered that fire should be set alight with ambergris and saffron.

According to the history of Qom, bestowal of coins and saffron was widespread in Qom during the 1st century AH. Esfandiari Kateb writes that in the 6th century, the king of Mazandaran, following the ancient tradition, organized a magnificent reception and decorators threw tons of sweet basil, flowers, violets and venture while a servant burnt myrrh, ambergris and saffron in a golden censer.

Beihaqi, describing the reception of Mahmoud Ghaznavi, refers to the scattering of flowers by pretty girls. “One day it happened that when the Emir was in Firouzi Garden (in Ghaznain), so many flowers were showered that they could not be counted.”

There are many documentary evidences about the cultivation of flowers, preparation of various perfumes, scents and incenses, aromatizing spaces and presentation of flowers in ancient Iran and during the post-Islamic period.

References have also been found about Iranians using names of persons and places for flowers. For example, Gardizi says in 433 AH, the forefather of Ahmad bin Soheil, an Iranian, hailed from a village of Marv known as Kamkar. Gradually this name was given to a variety of flower which is quite red.”

An Ardebili draper narrates the story of flower picking by Sheikh Safiaddin Ardebili and its presentation to Sheikh Zahed Gilani in 7th century. He says: “He stepped forward and gave a bunch of flowers to Sheikh Zahed.”

Presentation of flowers or sweet smelling fruits has been widespread since ancient times.

