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Vegetable Seed Oil is Sesame Oil

In the course of discussing matters of diet in the introductory chapter of *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, I had occasion to remark (27-28, 30) on the difficulty of defining λάχανον, which seems sometimes to refer to fresh greens, at other times to goods sold by the artaba and capable of being stored for an extended period in dried form. What is particularly noteworthy is the occurrence of *lachanon*-seed (*lachanospermon*), the major source of vegetable oil in Roman and late antique Egypt. As a possible means of providing a unified explanation, I suggested that perhaps this oil was made from the seed of a variety of lettuce, a product known in modern times.

More recently, Jean Bingen has returned to this question in considering the vegetables mentioned in private correspondence from Mons Claudianus (*O.Claud.* II 279 introd.). In that correspondence, the generic *lachana* (in the plural) is used where particular vegetables are not specified, but at other points specific vegetables are named instead. Bingen argues that the references to *lachanon* as an oilbearing legume need not have the same reference as those to the plural *lachana*, denoting instead 'une espèce particulière de légumineuses, d'ailleurs mal définie.' This is of course a reasonable point.

An unrecognized clue to the solution is already present in my discussion of the absence from the Roman documents of the vegetable oils which are known from the Ptolemaic documents: "It is therefore baffling to find only one reference to sesame in our entire period, and that in a list of items for sacrifice from the late third century. Sesame in fact is represented by only a handful of references from the Roman period generally" (*Egypt in Late Antiquity*, 30). Since the same thing was observed of the other Ptolemaic oilseed crops, however, I had no basis to go beyond this observation.

By chance I came across recently a piece of direct evidence bearing on the matter. This is a remarkable inscription copied during the investigations carried out by the Society of Coptic Archaeology at the Monastery of Phoibammon, and published in the second volume of the report on this site⁽¹⁾. This inscription (no. 19) is a bilingual list of plants and vegetables,

(1) C. BACHATLY, *Le monastère de Phoebammon dans la Thébaïde II: Graffiti, inscriptions et ostraca* (Cairo 1965) 40-41, no. 19. The Coptic graffiti and inscriptions were copied

described in the edition as a 'Greek-Coptic vocabulary'. It includes the following (2):

Coptic	Greek as written	Greek normalized
ⲛⲔⲉ	πλασσα	πράσα
ⲱⲃ	τριτακιν	θριδάκιον
ⲣⲏϭⲥ	σερις	σέρις
ⲉⲓⲱⲧ	κρεαριν	κριθάριον
ⲉⲧⲣⲓⲙ	τριφυλλοχι	τριφυλλάκιον
ⲛⲥⲉⲙⲥⲙ	σπερμα λαχανου	σπέρμα λαχάνου
ⲱϭⲏⲛ	χοριδιν	σκόρδιον

With one exception, these equations offer few surprises or difficulties (3). The surprise, of course, is the equation of sesame with *lachanon*-seed. As far as I know, this equation does not appear anywhere else. All the same, it has the ring of truth. When one considers that there are hundreds of appearances of σήσαμον in the Ptolemaic papyri but hardly enough to occupy the fingers of a hand in the Roman period; and that, by contrast, there are no examples of λαχανόσπερμον before the Roman period (*P.Mich.* V 346, AD 13, is the earliest I have found), it becomes difficult to avoid the conclusion that the one word replaced the other with the coming of Roman rule.

It is at this point that Bingen's caution that not all appearances of λάχανον need refer to the same plant or foodstuff becomes important. Clearly not all of the *lachana* referred to in the Mons Claudianus ostraka, and in many other texts, are sesame. Many are indeed generic references to fresh green vegetables. But it seems like a plausible working hypothesis that occurrences of the word referring to monthly rations, to stored goods, and to oilmaking, particularly in the compound form λαχανόσπερμον, all refer to sesame, now called by this perhaps more genteel name. We know relatively little about the continued use of some of the other vegetable oils in Roman Egypt — that is, whether any real ambiguity would have arisen

by Yassâ 'abd al-Masîh and published with contributions and editorial work by Walter C. Till and O.H.E. Burmester.

(2) I have rearranged the words into more systematic display and have omitted the ⲡⲣⲡ of line 4, for which the editors offered no explanation (it does not figure in Till's index of words). The last item is spelled ⲱϭⲏϭ in the inscription, but this is simply a miswriting; the correct spelling occurs in no. 21, another such list.

(3) The equivalences are already known (albeit sometimes with the simple rather than diminutive Greek word) for ⲛⲔ (Crum, *Coptic Dictionary* 67b), ⲱⲃ (ⲱⲃ) (Crum 535b), ⲉⲓⲱⲧ (Crum 87a-b), ⲉⲧⲣⲓⲙ (Crum 430b, as ⲧⲣⲓⲙ), and ⲱϭⲏⲛ (Crum 615b). ⲣⲏϭⲥ seems to be a form of ϩⲣⲓ (Crum 701b, "endive (?)").

because of the use of a generic-sounding term like "vegetable-seed" to refer to sesame. At Phoibammon itself, there were remains of safflower, mustard, and radish, but all of these have other uses, and it is not at all clear that they were used there for oil (4).

What remains striking to me is the apparently rather quick replacement of one word with the other, almost precisely coinciding with the change from Ptolemaic to Roman. Given the hundreds of occurrences of the two words, their chronological disjunction is almost complete. This can already be seen from their entries in Preisigke's *Wörterbuch*, and the searches one can carry out today with the *Duke Data Bank of Documentary Papyri* only confirm the picture. Perhaps there are other such cases waiting to be identified. But the older word survived in the Egyptian vernacular, and long after the pompous λαχανόσπερμον had disappeared, sesame was, in the form *simsim*, still the word used in Coptic and then Arabic.

Roger S. BAGNALL

(4) See Bachatly (above, n. 1) III 1-38, "Botanical Identification of the Plants", by V. Täckholm. No remains of sesame were identified.