

ALFALFA

1. The earliest extant literary allusion to alfalfa¹ (*Medicago sativa*) is made in 424 B.C. in the Equites ("The Knights") of Aristophanes, who says (V, 606):

"Ἡσθιον δὲ τοὺς παγούρους ἀντὶ πόας μηδικῆς.

"The horses ate the crabs of Corinth as a substitute for the Medic."

The term "Mēdikē" is derived from the name of the country Media. In his description of Media, Strabo² states that the plant constituting the chief food of the horses is called by the Greeks "Mēdikē" from its growing in Media in great abundance. He also mentions as a product of Media *silphion*, from which is obtained the Medic juice.³ Pliny⁴ intimates that "Medica" is by nature foreign to Greece, and that it was first introduced there from Media in consequence of the Persian wars under King Darius. Dioscorides⁵ describes the plant without referring to a locality, and adds that it is used as forage by the cattle-breeders. In Italy, the plant was disseminated from the middle of the second century B.C. to the middle of the first century A.D.,⁶—almost coeval with its propagation to China. The Assyriologists claim that *aspasti* or *aspastu*, the Iranian designation of alfalfa, is mentioned in a Babylonian text of ca. 700 B.C.;⁷ and it would not be impossible that its favorite fodder followed the horse at the time of its introduction from Iran into Mesopotamia. A. DE CANDOLLE⁸ states that *Medicago*

¹ I use this term (not lucerne) in accordance with the practice of the U. S. Department of Agriculture; it is also the term generally used and understood by the people of the United States. The word is of Arabic origin, and was adopted by the Spaniards, who introduced it with the plant into Mexico and South America in the sixteenth century. In 1854 it was taken to San Francisco from Chile (J. M. WESTGATE, *Alfalfa*, p. 5, Washington, 1908).

² XI. XIII, 7.

³ Theophrastus (*Hist. plant.*, VIII. VII, 7) mentions alfalfa but casually by saying that it is destroyed by the dung and urine of sheep. Regarding *silphion* see p. 355.

⁴ XIII, 43.

⁵ II, 176.

⁶ HEHN, *Kulturpflanzen*, 8th ed., p. 412.

⁷ SCHRADER in Hehn, p. 416; C. JORET (*Plantes dans l'antiquité*, Vol. II, p. 68) states after J. Halévy that *aspasti* figures in the list drawn up by the gardener of the Babylonian king Mardukbalidin (Merodach-Baladan), a contemporary of Ezechias King of Juda.

⁸ *Origin of Cultivated Plants*, p. 103.