

ASAFŒTIDA

22. The riddles of asafœtida begin with the very name: there is no adequate explanation of our word *asa* or *assa*. The new Oxford English Dictionary ventures to derive it from Persian *āzā* or *aza*. This word, however, means nothing but "mastic," a product entirely different from what we understand by asafœtida (p. 252). In no Oriental language is there a word of the type *asa* or *aza* with reference to this product, so it could not have been handed on to Europe by an Oriental nation. KAEMPFER, who in 1687 studied the plant in Laristan, and was fairly familiar with Persian, said that he was ignorant of the origin of the European name.¹ LITTRÉ, the renowned author of the Dictionnaire français, admits that the origin of *asa* is unknown, and wisely abstains from any theory.² The supposition has been advanced that *asa* was developed from the *laser* or *laserpitium* of Pliny (XIX, 5), the latter having thus been mutilated by the druggists of the middle ages. This etymology, first given by GARCIA DA ORTA,³ has been indorsed by E. BORSZCZOW,⁴ a Polish botanist, to whom we owe an excellent investigation of the asa-furnishing plants. Although this explanation remains as yet unsatisfactory, as the alleged development from *laser* to *asa* is merely inferred, but cannot actually be proved from mediæval documents,⁵ it is better, at any rate, than the derivation from the Persian.

Asafœtida is a vegetable product consisting of resin, gum, and essential oil in varying proportions, the resin generally amounting to more than one-half, derived from different umbelliferous plants, as *Ferula narthex*, *alliacea*, *fœtida*, *persica*, and *scorodosma* (or *Scorodosma*

¹ Amoenitates exoticæ, p. 539.

² The suggestion has also been made that *asa* may be derived from Greek *asi* (?) ("disgust") or from Persian *anguza* ("asafœtida"); thus at least it is said by F. STUHLMANN (Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte Ostafrikas, p. 609). Neither is convincing. The former moves on the same high level as Li Ši-čen's explanation of *a-wei* ("The barbarians call out *a*, expressing by this exclamation their horror at the abominable odor of this resin").

³ C. MARKHAM, Colloquies, p. 41. JOHN PARKINSON (Theatrum botanicum, p. 1569, London, 1640) says, "There is none of the ancient Authours either Greeke, Latine, or Arabian, that hath made any mention of *Asa*, either *dulcis* or *fœtida*, but was first depraved by the Druggists and Apothecaries in forraigne parts, that in stead of *Laser* said *Asa*, from whence ever since the name of *Asa* hath continued."

⁴ Mémoires de l'Acad. de St. Pétersbourg, Vol. III, No. 8, 1860, p. 4.

⁵ DUCANGE does not even list the word "asafœtida."