

## RICINUS

40. In regard to *Ricinus communis* (family *Euphorbiaceae*) the accounts of the Chinese are strikingly deficient and unsatisfactory. There can be no doubt that it is an introduced plant in China, as it occurs there only in the cultivated state, and is not mentioned earlier than the T'ang period (618-906) with an allusion to the Hu.<sup>1</sup> Su Kuñ states in the *T'an pen ts'ao*, "The leaves of this plant which is cultivated by man resemble those of the hemp (*Cannabis sativa*), being very large. The seeds look like cattle-ticks (*niu pei* 牛蜱).<sup>2</sup> The stems of that kind which at present comes from the Hu<sup>3</sup> are red and over ten feet high. They are of the size of a *tsao kia* 皂莢 (*Gleditschia sinensis*). The kernels are the part used, and they are excellent." It would seem from this report that two kinds of *Ricinus* are assumed, one presumably the white-stemmed variety known prior to Su Kuñ's time, and the red-stemmed variety introduced in his age. Unfortunately we receive no information as to the exact date and provenience of the introduction.

The earliest mention of the plant is made by Herodotus,<sup>4</sup> who ascribes it to the Egyptians who live in the marshes and use the oil pressed from the seeds for anointing their bodies. He calls the plant *sillikyprion*,<sup>5</sup> and gives the Egyptian name as *kiki*.<sup>6</sup> In Hellas it grows spontaneously (*αὐτόματα φύεται*), but the Egyptians cultivate it along the banks of the rivers and by the sides of the lakes, where it produces fruit in abundance, which, however, is malodorous. This fruit is

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<sup>1</sup> *Pen ts'ao kan mu*, Ch. 17 A, p. 11. BRETSCHNEIDER (*Chinese Recorder*, 1871, p. 242) says that it cannot be decided from Chinese books whether *Ricinus* is indigenous to China or not, and that the plant is not mentioned before the T'ang. The allusion to the Hu escaped him.

<sup>2</sup> Hence the name 蓖 or 蓖麻 *pei ma* (only in the written language) for the plant (Peking colloquial *ta ma*, "great hemp"). This etymology has already been advanced by Su Sun of the Sung and confirmed by Li Ši-čen, who explains the insect as the "louse of cattle." This interpretation appears to be correct, for it represents a counterpart to Latin *ricinus*, which means a "tick": *Nostri eam ricinum vocant a similitudine seminis* (Pliny, xv, 7, § 25). The Chinese may have hit upon this simile independently, or, what is even more likely, received it with the plant from the West.

<sup>3</sup> This appears to be the foundation for STUART's statement (*Chinese Materia Medica*, p. 378) that the plant was introduced from "Tartary."

<sup>4</sup> II, 94.

<sup>5</sup> The common name was *κρότων* (Theophrastus, *Hist. plant.*, I. x, 1), Latin *croton*.

<sup>6</sup> This word has not yet been traced in the hieroglyphic texts, but in Coptic. In the demotic documents *Ricinus* is *degam* (V. LORET, *Flore pharaonique*, p. 49).