

APPENDIX IV

THE BASIL

I propose to treat here briefly of the history of a genus of plants which has not yet been discussed by historians,—*Ocimum*, an extensive genus of the order *Labiatae*. I do not share the common opinion of most commentators of Theophrastus and Pliny, that their ὄκιμον or *ocimum* is identical with the *Ocimum basilicum* of Linné. Theophrastus touches on *okimon* in several passages; but what he describes is a shrub, not an herb, nor does he emphasize any of the characteristic properties of *Ocimum basilicum*. FÉE justly comments on Pliny (xx, 48) that this species is not understood by him, it being originally from India (or rather, as will be seen, from Iran), and never found in a wild state. From what Varro says, he infers that Pliny's *ocimum* must be sought among the leguminous plants, the genus *Hedysarum*, *Lathyrus*, or *Medicago*.¹ Positive evidence of this conclusion comes from Ibn al-Baiṭār, whose vast compilation is principally based on the work of Dioscorides, with the addition of annotations of Arabic authors. Ibn al-Baiṭār, in his discussion of the plant which we call *Ocimum*, does not fall back on the *okimon* of Dioscorides (II, 171), and, in fact, does not cite him at all.² He merely reproduces the data of Arabic writers: this is decisive, and leads us to reject any connection between the *ocimum* of the ancients and the species coming from the Orient and known to our science of botany as *Ocimum*.³

There is good reason to assume that at least one species, if not several, is a native of Persia, and was diffused from there to India and China, probably also to the West. This is *Ocimum basilicum*, the sweet or common basil. The name βασιλικόν ("royal") as the designation of an *Ocimum* first occurs in Byzantine literature, in Aetius (sixth century) and Symeon Seth; and, since the king of Persia was known to the Greeks simply as "the king" (βασιλεύς), it is more than probable that the Greek term is reproduced after the model of Persian *šāh-siparam* (*spram*) or *šāh-i sfaram*, which means as much as "fragrant

¹ Cf. BOSTOCK and RILEY, *Natural History of Pliny*, Vol. IV, p. 249.

² Cf. LECLERC, *Traité des simples*, Vol. II, p. 186; Vol. III, p. 191.

³ Leclerc upholds the opposite opinion, although Sprengel, Fée, and Littré argue in the same manner as here proposed.