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Review of Plants and Humans in the Near East and the Caucasus: Ancient and Traditional Uses of Plants as Food and Medicine, a Diachronic Ethnobotanical Review (2 vols)

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Abstract

Review of *Plants and Humans in the Near East and the Caucasus: Ancient and Traditional Uses of Plants as Food and Medicine, a Diachronic Ethnobotanical Review* (2 vols). Vol. 1: *The Landscapes. The Plants: Ferns and Gymnosperms*. Vol. 2: *The Plants: Angiosperms*. Diego Rivera Núñez, Gonzalo Matilla Séiquer, Concepción Obón, Francisco Alcaraz Ariza. 2011. Ediciones de la Unverisdad de Murcia. Pp. 1056. EUR 23.76 (paperback). ISBN 978-84-15463-07-08 (2 vols.), 978-84-15463-05-4 (vol. 1), 978-84-15463-06-1 (vol. 2).

Disciplines

Near Eastern Languages and Societies

Plants and Humans in the Near East and the Caucasus: Ancient and Traditional Uses of Plants as Food and Medicine, a Diachronic Ethnobotanical Review (2 vols). Vol. 1: The Landscapes. The Plants: Ferns and Gymnosperms. Vol. 2: The Plants: Angiosperms.

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Diego Rivera and his colleagues have produced a comprehensive reference of ethnobotanical and archaeobotanical data for a region which saw early experiments in plant cultivation and fruit growing, the earliest agropastoral systems known, and the first urban societies. The modern nation states covered in most detail are: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia in the Caucasus, and Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey, a group of countries that have experienced varying amounts of attention from archaeobotanists.¹ As is true of the ancient and modern peoples covered, the available data also cross modern international boundaries, and so information from the Arabian peninsula, Cyprus, Israel, Jordan, and Palestine are included; of these countries, Israel is best documented, but many of the sources are difficult to find chapters in site reports or regional journals.

The core of the work is the last part of the first volume (ferns, gymnosperms), and the entire second volume (angiosperms). Families, genera, and species are listed in alphabetical order. The basic format of the entries is: genus, species, authority, phytogeographical zone; modern fruit and/or seed description; habitat; archaeological examples; text or linguistic references; ethnobotanical uses. Additional sections (e.g., wood description and biology) are added as appropriate to some entries. The fullest archaeological treatment is given to the best documented types, cereals and pulses; many of these entries include measurements compiled from other publications. Most of the species for which traditional uses are

listed, however, have not yet been reported for archaeological sites.

The first volume of the set provides basic background on the physiographical, climatic, phytogeographical, ethnographic, historical, and archaeological setting of the region covered. In such a broad survey, there are a few arguable statements. For example, it would be more appropriate to call Akkadian the earliest written Semitic language, not the origin of Semitic languages (vol. 1, p. 118). Also, the most useful historical or ethnographic information for an archaeobotanist concerns old technologies, such as the use of straw lined storage pits in Syria (vol. 1, p. 127), rather than national crop production statistics from the late 20th century. Nevertheless, for researchers familiar with part of the area covered, volume one provides expedient access to information and references about the entire region. Of direct importance to non archaeobotanists, the authors provide a brief summary of the nature of the physical and textual evidence for ancient plant use (vol. 1, pp. 184-187). The country-by-country listing by site includes basic information: location, period, references, and, for most sites, latitude and longitude; locational data are harder to find than you might think, so this is a great service.

The two volumes cover much of the same geographical territory as Zohary et al. (2012), but provide much more botanical and ethnobotanical information. The benefit of the book for archaeobot-



anists is the sheer number of species included, the data for plant use in the Caucasus, and the archaeobotanical information collected from sometimes hard-to-find sources. The three main audiences for these volumes are botanists, ethnobotanists, and archaeobotanists. The work presumes a basic understanding of botany and plant taxonomy.

This compendium represents an enormous research effort. Its limited print run (250) is understandable, given the current state of academic publishing. This fact provides an excellent argument for reproducing the work in digital, searchable format. Indeed, ideally it could form the core of a website to which other researchers would add their own published data, including seed measurements, photographs, site latitude and longitude, and maps showing the site locations. The absence of an index makes clear the other great advantage of a digital format: searchability. The economics of publishing and requirements of academic advancement are beyond the control of the authors. Yet it would be a great contribution were the underlying database of this volume more readily available to researchers worldwide.

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Notes

¹Nowadays, paleoethnobotany and archaeobotany are used interchangeably to refer to the study of archaeological plant remains, typically macroremains such as seeds and charcoal. In the early 1980s, preference for the term “paleoethnobotany” grew in Americanist archaeology after Richard I. Ford (1979:286) narrowly defined paleoethnobotany as the “analysis and interpretation of archaeological remains,” relegating “archaeobotany” to “the [mere] *recovery* and *identification* of plants” [emphasis in original] (*ibid.* p. 299), specifically not their interpretation (for usage history of the terms in British and American English see Google Books 2013).