Simeon Seth on Cannabis
(Cognoscenti of Cannabis II)

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ABSTRACT. Simeon Seth’s Lexicon on the Properties of Foods (Syntagma de alimentorum facultatibus) is perhaps the most important document providing an understanding of how dietetics were applied in Byzantine and Arabic culture in the 11th century. Its author was a physician and scientist of the Byzantine emperor’s court in Constantinople. A selection from his treatise is herein translated by the author from Greek and Latin sources. This pertains to the use and possible side effects of cannabis as an element of contemporary nutrition of the era.

KEYWORDS. Cannabis, nutrition, Byzantine culture, history of medicine, hemp seed

ARTICLE

Only a few original texts concerning a physician’s actual practice of medicine survive from the eleventh and twelfth centuries of the Byzantine Empire. Of these, Simeon Seth’s Lexicon on the Properties of Foods (Syntagma de alimentorum facultatibus) is perhaps the most important for understanding how dietetics were applied in Byzantine and Arabic culture.
Although his date of birth is uncertain, Simeon Seth was likely born in 1003 in Constantinople, though his family was probably from the environs of Syrian Antioch. His name appears in the English literature under a number of forms: Symeon, Symeone, Sethi, Sethy, Seth, etc. In the century prior to Seth’s birth, Antioch had been reclaimed by the Byzantine Empire from the Arabs (year 969). Seth benefited from a fluent knowledge of both the Arabic and Greek languages, and he became fascinated with the medical books of both therapeutic traditions. His translation skills, however, were not limited to medical topics. Seth was also responsible for the translation from Arabic into Greek of a popular Indian fable. At the request of Alexis I Comnenus (d. 1118) Seth translated this tale of two jackals, Calila and Dimna (in Greek, Stephanites and Icnhelates) as a moral work directed at courtly courtesans as to how people should behave.

At the age of twenty-five, Seth found favor with the imperial court, and became the medical officer in the court of three Byzantine emperors: Constantine VIII (d.1028), Romain III (1028-34), and Michael Ducas (1071-78). Seth was given the title Master of the Palace at Antioch, and was physician to the emperor. In addition to his work as a physician to the court, at the age of thirty-five, Seth retired to the convent at Mount Olympus to devote himself solely to the study of science and the religious life.

Seth’s interests included not only medicine and religion, but also the larger medieval disciplines of Aristotelean physics and natural science. He wrote *Conspectus rerum naturalium*, a work on natural science with reflections on heaven and earth, matter and form, place and time, soul and spirit, and the five senses. The Byzantine men of science and medicine built their theories upon the previous advances by Nicandrus, Dioscorides and Galen, but they gradually added “remedies from the east, from Arabia and Persia, to those obtained from their native flora and fauna” (Vogel 1967, p. 293). While others such as Theophanies Nonnus, Michael Psellos and John Actuarius addressed the important relation of food and health, the most important treatment of the medical properties of food and herbs was Simeon Seth’s *Syntagma*. Seth was the first to mention, and to translate into Greek, the information about a number of natural substances and medications employed in the oriental world.

After a brilliant career serving the imperial court under three emperors, researching natural science and medicine, and exploring the
Seth’s Syntagma de alimentorum facultatibus is a catalog of various food and herbs and their properties or effects. In 1868 Bernhard Langkavel produced a critical edition of Seth’s Syntagma using a number of Greek manuscripts (Langkavel 1868).

Seth’s treatment of the plants is arranged alphabetically. Under “K” (kappa in Greek) Seth treats cannabis (Kanabos) in a short paragraph. In Langkavel’s edition there are two textual variants noted in Seth’s treatment of cannabis. The first concerns the title. In manuscript K the heading reads “cannabis seeds” (kannabourosperma). The other variant (also in manuscript K) concerns the Greek word touton, which is changed from the accusative to the genitive toutou. This variant occurs in a phrase that is problematic and difficult to translate or understand. Perhaps the variant is an attempt to clarify the difficult meaning of the phrase, as will be noted below.

Seth’s treatment of cannabis has a certain medical significance. The first possibility concerns the harm of cannabis. This is found in the opening sentence when he says, “The seed of cannabis when eaten has about equal [resembling] harm as coriander.” There are also several references to the psychoactive effects of cannabis and also its usage among the Arabs. Particularly, Seth notes that when “eaten without moderation . . . it produces wandering of mind [delirium].” Does the use of the phrase “without moderation” imply that cannabis was used also with moderation and that such usage did not produce delirium? The last phrase having possible medical significance is, “The dried leaves being drunk . . . produce a hospitable [strange?] drunkenness and lack of perception [lack of sensation/or unconsciousness] for the eater.”

A translation of the Greek text of the Langkavel edition follows. The words in brackets [ ] indicate an alternative translation of a word or phrase, or a supplied word; the words in double brackets [[ ]] indicate a difficult or obscure meaning:

The seed of cannabis when eaten has about equal [resembling] harm as coriander. For being eaten without moderation, as that [coriander?], it produces wandering of mind [delirium]. The dried leaves being drunk as/like whole meal or rather as a drink [[the same whole meal being dried]], produces a hospitable
[strange] drunkenness and lack of perception [lack of sensation/or unconsciousness?] for the eater. Among the Arabs this is crushed [chewed?] in place of [instead of/for] wine and they are intoxicated; but the offspring [product of the plant] dries/drains just as camphor [literally: but it dries/drains/parches the product just as camphor].

Some further explanation of the bracketed and double-bracketed phrases is required. In the second line the word “coriander” is not used; however, the remote demonstrative “that” (ekeinos) most probably refers back to coriander in the previous sentence.

In line four the double-bracketed “the same whole meal being dried” does not make sense. Seth has just described the dried leaves as a drink, but then he refers to the same whole meal being dried. There is a possibility that this phrase pertains to a preparation of hashish. Vogel (1967, p. 293) indicates that Seth refers to hashish. As noted above, this difficult phrase is where one manuscript has changed touton (accusative) to toutou (genitive). It should be acknowledged that the 1542 Latin translation by Leonhart Fuchs is also problematic at this same point (Fuchs 1999).

Another bracket is used in line four with the word “hospitable.” While this might mean “strange,” the primary meaning of xeven concerns hospitableness and this is confirmed in the Fuchs’ Latin translation where hospitalem is used.

In the fifth line “lack of perception” could also be translated “lack of sensation” or even “unconsciousness.” The Greek word is literally anaisthasian, from which the modern term “anaesthesia” is derived. However, “lack of perception” is probably the intended meaning given the eleventh century context.

In line six “crushed” could mean “chewed,” and at the end of the same line the Greek anti is here translated as “in place of” wine, but it may well mean “for” or “instead of” wine; the use of “for wine” is what the Latin translation by Fuchs indicates with the use of pro uino.

The end of line seven and all of line eight demonstrate a number of grammatical problems. The first relates to the subject-verb agreement. In the Greek text ekmethuousi is an active verb third person plural. The meaning here is that they, the Arabs, are drunk or intoxicated by the use of cannabis. The Latin text of Fuchs changes the number to a third person singular inebriat, which would mean that it, the cannabis
concoction, intoxicates and thus, Fuchs maintains or preserves the active voice of the verb. The second grammatical problem is found in the final phrase of the paragraph. Literally the phrase reads “but it dries/drains/parches the product just as camphor.” The problem here concerns the antecedent of “it.” The Greek verb *xerainei* is third person singular. If the antecedent is the “Arabs” (meaning = they dry the plant product like they dry camphor), there is a number disagreement between the subject (Arabs) and the third person singular verb. There is the possibility that Seth meant, “the plant product is dried like camphor” but the verb is active not passive voice. Another possibility is that the antecedent of “it” is that difficult earlier phrase “the whole meal being dried.” Here Fuchs’ Latin translation provides no real help for the Latin *desiccat* is also third person singular and active voice. It should be noted that the Greek *gonan* denotes “offspring,” “race” or “plant product” and probably refers to the seeds. This is confirmed by Fuchs’ translation in which he employs the Latin *semen genitale*, “the offspring seed.”

Given that Fuchs’ Latin translation was not mentioned in Langka-vel’s edition, and that it may well reflect an attempt to correct some of the grammatical difficulties of Seth’s Greek text, a translation of Fuchs’ passage concerning Simeon Seth may be helpful. The following is a rough translation of the pertinent passage from Leonhart Fuchs, *De historia stirpium commentarii insignes*, 1542 (Fuchs 1999, vol 2, p. 392). The word in brackets [ ] indicates a supplied or implied word, and the two phrases in double brackets [[ ]] remain difficult to translate or have some obscure meaning.

**FROM SYMEONE SETH**

The cannabis seed, having been eaten, brings the same harm as Coriander: if it is eaten without moderation, it produces delirium as the same [i.e., Coriander]. Indeed the dried leaf, when drunk, as meal, or rather [[as dried meal for a drink]] produces a hospitable drunkenness and lack of sensation by the eater. For it is crushed or kneaded among the Arabs for wine, and it inebriates. [[It dries the offspring seed like Camphor]].

While containing only one brief paragraph on cannabis or cannabis seeds, the *Syntagma* of Simeon Seth is yet important. Clearly this
Byzantine physician and man of science reflected his knowledge of the use of cannabis in the eleventh century and included it among the many herbs used in his day. Seth indicated that the plant could be abused when taken without moderation or in excess, but he also supported the relatively negligible harm of the plant, noting it to be akin to that of coriander. He was also aware of the psychoactive properties of the herb, which may produce delirium, lack of perception or a hospitable drunkenness. While there are phrases that are either grammatically problematic or obscure, the tone and gist of Seth’s blurb on cannabis remains clear: cannabis was known and employed as an herb in the medieval world.

REFERENCES


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