

GARDEN  
LORE  
OF  
ANCIENT  
ATHENS



EXCAVATIONS OF THE ATHENIAN AGORA  
PICTURE BOOKS

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EXCAVATIONS OF THE ATHENIAN AGORA  
PICTURE BOOK NO. 8

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who have made possible  
the planting of the Agora Park

GARDEN LORE  
OF  
ANCIENT ATHENS



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1. Lotus and Palmette Design from a Vase. 5th century B.C.

### HYMN TO ATTICA

Stranger, you have reached a famous land,  
The abode of lovely horses,  
You have come to white Kolonos—  
Here in green foliage chants the nightingale,  
As she sits in the ivy among the branches—  
Here is the forest home of reveling Dionysos,  
Without sun, without wind, without storm,  
Where the god roams  
With the nymphs that nursed him.

Here, day after day,  
Blooms the fair narcissus, fed on dew,  
The flower that crowns the Goddesses—  
And here as well  
Glow the golden crocus;  
Nor do springs of water rest,  
But pour forth the streams of Kephissos  
To move over the rich earth,  
To bring forth from the land more and more fruit,  
And to lure the singing and dancing Muses,  
And Aphrodite, who drives men with her golden reins.  
Sophocles, *Oedipus Coloneus*



2. Attic Landscape near the Border Fort of Eleutherai.

The modern traveler to Greece is immediately struck by the beauty of the country. He wonders how the land looked in antiquity and how the ancients regarded the abundant plants and flowers.

Although scholars agree that the climate has not changed appreciably within historic times, Attica is probably less wooded now than when Odysseus hunted the boar on Mt. Hymettos. But the climate of Attica, though mild, was ever rigorous. The visitor who shivers in the March wind or scorches in the August heat is only enduring the excesses of temperature that made the Athenians tough soldiers and courageous sailors.

Ancient authors do not indulge in descriptions of landscape, but they sometimes bring to the reader glimpses of their setting: thus Homer alludes to the black wind on the sea and the silver trickle of water over a cliff. The ancient Greeks' awareness of landscape is also apparent in their choice of sites for temples and theaters, their love of trees in the care expended on temple groves, and their delight in flowers in the innumerable stories of mythological lore. They also use floral motives to give color and ornamental detail to architecture or as decorative designs in vase painting. A selection of such ornaments appears on these pages.



3. Bowl decorated with Wild Lilies; from an Athenian Grave. 14th century B.C.

Since the excavation of the Athenian Agora has uncovered evidence for planting, the area has been replanted, in an attempt to give something of its ancient aspect to the visitor, with trees and shrubs of the sort that grew there in antiquity. The first trees in this Agora Park, an oak (35) and a laurel (42) were planted by King Paul and Queen Frederika on January 4, 1954, on either side of the Altar of Zeus. In this booklet are presented some of the trees and plants, their botanical identification, their ancient uses, and the folklore associated with them.

Homer, in the fifth book of the *Odyssey*, describes an early Greek garden: 'In it flourish tall trees: pears and pomegranates and apples full of fruit, also sweet figs and bounteous olives. . . . Here too a fertile vineyard has been planted. . . . Beyond the last row of trees, well laid garden plots have been arranged, blooming all the year with flowers. And there



4. Cup from the Island of Kea.  
12th century B.C.

5. Crocuses on the Floor of a Bowl.  
Kea, 12th century B.C.



are two springs; one leads through the garden while the other dives beneath the threshold of the great court to gush out beside the stately palace; from it the citizens draw their water.'

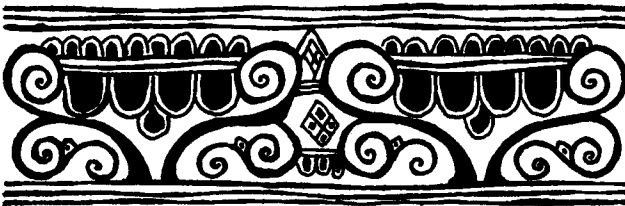
The paintings of gardens and rocky landscape on the walls of the Bronze Age palaces in Crete and Greece inspired the potters to sketch grasses and flowers on their cups.

The picturesque landscape of Greece also stimulated the imagination of early poets to people the streams with nymphs, the oaks with dryads, the caves with Pan and centaurs, and the forests with satyrs and silens. Each plant had its story: Narcissus gazed at himself in a Boeotian river; Daphne eluded Apollo by turning into a laurel; Persephone broke her fast by nibbling the seeds of the prolific pomegranate.

Ancient Greek gardeners did not write of their profession until in the late Hellenistic times they produced treatises called *Kepourika*. These experts instructed the Romans in topiary work and other extravagant forms of gardening. The thoughts of the humbler practitioner are rendered into a dedicatory poem to the patron divinity of gardeners by the fancy of a poet:

'To you, Priapos, this gardener gives his hoe  
That dug the thirsty earth within his plot,  
And with it his curved sickle, used to mow,  
His ragged cloak that saved him, were he caught  
In rain, his leather boots and shovel too,  
With which he brought the channeled water through—  
Tools that once gave him wealth, he gives to you.'

*Palatine Anthology*



6. Floral Border.  
7th century B.C.



7. Showerbath in an Athenian Gymnasium. Late 6th century B.C.

### GARDENS IN ATHENS

‘The fountains of water, whether of rivers or of springs, shall be ornamented with plantings and buildings for beauty. If there be a sacred grove or dedicated precinct in the neighborhood, let water be conducted to the very temples of the gods to beautify them at all seasons of the year.’

Plato, *Laws* (tr. Jowett)

Even in her great period, Athens fell short of this ideal. Aqueducts were built to distribute the meager supply of water to fountains situated in strategic places, as indicated on the plan (9). But these water lines supplied only the public fountains, temple groves and parks. The people in the small, crowded houses relied on wells and cisterns. Then, as now, trees and plants could be laid out only near water. The gardens of Aphrodite lay near the Ilissos river. The schools of philosophy, with their spacious grounds, were situated outside the



8. 'Plato's Olive' near the ancient Academy where youthful racers competed:

'But you will below to the  
Academe go, and under the  
olives contend  
With your chaplet of reed, in a  
contest of speed, with some  
excellent rival and friend;  
All fragrant with woodbine and  
peaceful content, and the leaf  
which the lime-blossoms fling,  
When the plane whispers love to  
the elm in the grove in the  
beautiful season of spring.'

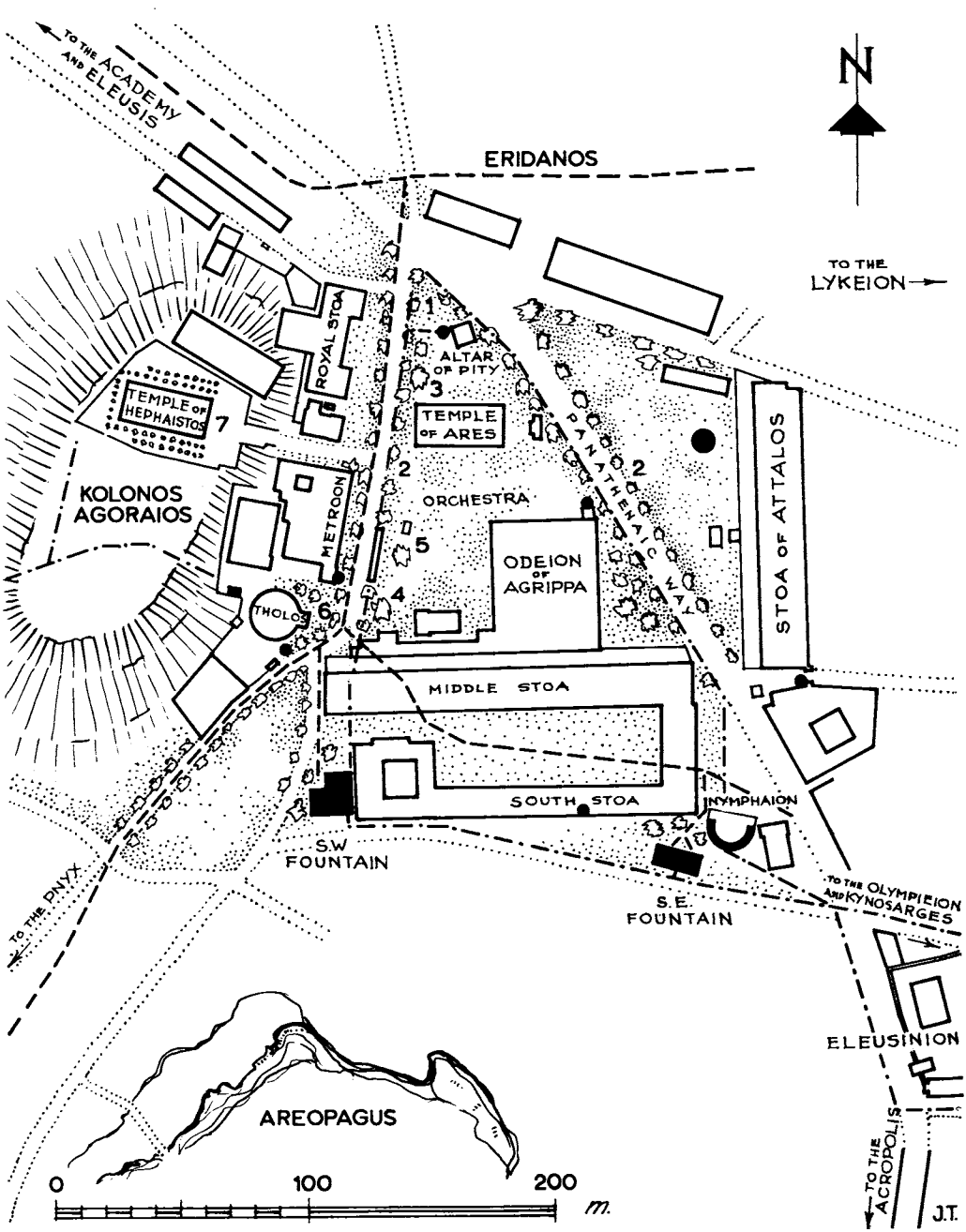
Aristophanes, *Clouds* (tr. Rogers)



city walls. The academy of Plato in the valley of the Kephissos was turned into a 'well-watered grove with trim avenues and shady walks' by the statesman Kimon. Plato lived in a garden near where he taught.

Near the Academy was the small Garden of Epicurus, laid out at a cost of 7000 drachmai (1 drachma was a day's wages). Epicurus, who lived there in a three-wheeled chair, willed the garden and house to his fellow-philosophers. Cicero recognized the place when he passed it with friends two hundred years later.

Outside the city to the northeast, in a large park, lay the Lyceum, where Socrates taught. Here Aristotle and his followers paced the walks (*peripatoi*) and became known as the Peripatetics. Lycurgus in the late 4th century B.C. modernized the gymnasium and palaestra and planted many trees which were cut down by the Roman Sulla during his siege operations against Athens in 86 B.C. The naturalist Theophrastos also taught in the Lyceum, but later established a garden near by where he erected a temple of the Muses. After the area was damaged, an old boundary stone was re-used to make two new boundary stones for the restored garden of the Muses. One of these inscriptions stands on a pedestal on the north side of Constitution Square in the heart of modern Athens.



9. Plan of the Agora showing aqueducts in broken and dotted lines, drains in broken lines, fountains in solid black. The probable sites of the various ancient trees mentioned on the opposite page are numbered.

## PLANTING IN THE AGORA

(Numbers refer to the plan on the opposite page)

Two large fountain houses and several small fountains supplied the Agora with drinking water. The overflow from the fountain houses was led down northward in two stone channels provided with dipping basins beside the main arteries of traffic. One of the channels watered the sacred grove of laurel and olive that surrounded the Altar of Pity (1) and shaded the unfortunate runaway slaves and refugees who sought asylum in the sanctuary.

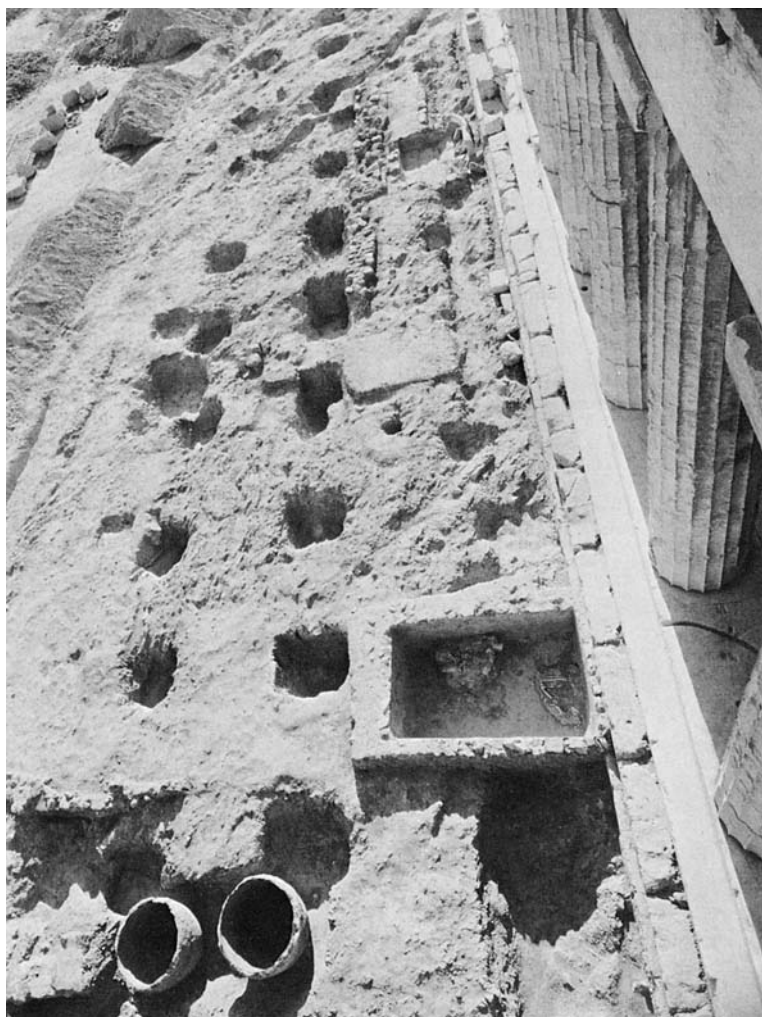
A few ancient authors and inscriptions refer to planting in the Agora. Kimon donated plane trees to shade the walks after the Persian Wars had devastated Athens (2). Under a small plane tree near the Temple of Ares stood a famous statue of the orator Demosthenes (3). On another plane the magistrates who supervised women hung the notice board that listed fines for the disorderly. Beneath a white poplar thieves and swindlers liked to gather (4). This must have been in a wet spot near the Great Drain. Near too must have been the black poplar (5) where the poor who could not pay the entrance fee established themselves to witness spectacles in the old orchestra. A tiny fountain (6) was set up beside the Senate House, perhaps the 'Fountain among the osiers' where the oligarch Phrynichos was murdered in 411 B.C. In Roman times a pious citizen dedicated plants to the Light-Bearers (Phosphoroi) who were minor divinities worshipped in the near-by Tholos.



10. Marble Plaque, ca. 200 A.D.: 'Olympos, son of Alexander of Pallene, dedicates the plants to the Phosphoroi while serving as chief adviser to Quintus Gaius.'

## THE GARDEN OF HEPHAISTOS

In 1936 the area around the building long known as the 'Theseum', but now identified as the Temple of Hephaistos, was cleared to rock. The excavation revealed a precinct wall around the temple. Within the precinct the rock had been dressed down to receive the building and then covered with only a few inches of soil. In this rock along the south side of the temple two rows of rectangular cuttings came to light. They had evidently been intended for planting and ran around three sides of the temple, but not across its front.



II. Cuttings in the rock. The pits were aligned with the columns. The inner row, three feet square and equally deep, contained the remains of unglazed flower pots.

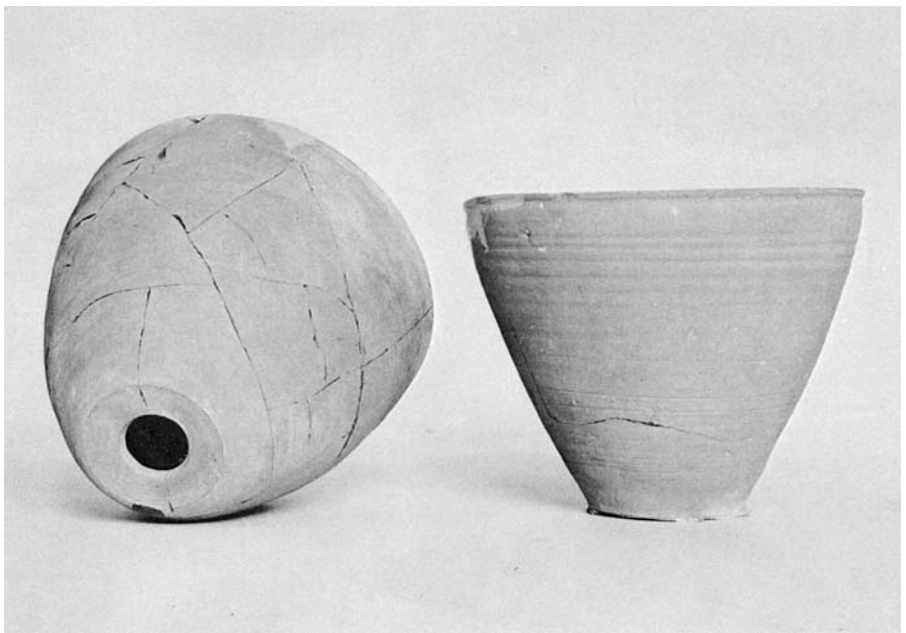


12. Below the original ground level in the pits rested the shattered flower pots. Cato (*Agricultura*) describes how they were used, 'To make shoots take root while on the tree, make a hole in the bottom of a pot and push the branch that you wish to root through it. Fill the pot with earth, press it thoroughly and leave it on the tree. When it is two years old, cut off the branch beneath the pot . . . shatter the pot and plant the branch in the pit together with the pot.'

The history of the Hephaisteion garden is told by the coins and fragments of pottery found in the pits. The first planting probably took place in the early third century B.C. At that time an aqueduct was constructed to carry water to the entrance of the precinct (9). The garden was maintained at least till the Augustan period. When the water system went out of use in the late first century after Christ, the garden presumably died of neglect.

Many sacred gardens and orchards are recorded, but only one other is known to have belonged to Hephaistos. This lay on Mt. Aetna in Sicily. It had a grove of sacred trees that were guarded by dogs. These animals were trained to welcome decent people, but to drive away any visitor suffering from a curse or pollution.

13. Flower Pots from the Hephaisteion Garden.





14. The Garden of Hephaistos replanted with myrtle and pomegranate willow, when grown, provide a pleasant promenade around the temple, as recommended by the Roman architect, Vitruvius, 'Tree-shaded promenades (*peripatoi*) are very healthy for the eyes because the air arising from the green planting is subtle and rarefied. This air flows into the body, clears the vision, removes thick humor from the eyes and sharpens the sight.'





15. A palm tree formerly stood near the church to supply its worshippers with branches for Palm Sunday. It had to be removed to permit the excavation of the area. The power of the palm to renew itself, considered symbolic of its sacred character, has been demonstrated by the number of young shoots now springing up near the site of the parent tree just beyond the Roman fountain, the Nymphaeum. Drawings of ancient palms appear on vases (38, 41).

### GARDEN OF THE HOLY APOSTLES

The area around the little eleventh-century church of the Holy Apostles (Picture Book No. 7) has been informally planted. Since no evidence was discovered as to its appearance in Byzantine times, the garden has been treated in the modern Greek fashion.



16. Floral Ornament on Architectural Block. 11th century.

## FAVORITE FLOWERS

In the spring and again in autumn after the first rains, most of Greece is covered with a prodigal display of wild flowers (21). Some 6000 species flourish, of which a few grow only in the Arcadian valley of the Styx.

The flowers in ancient gardens were those still most familiar to us, such as the crocus (22), violet, grape-hyacinth, anemone (*anemone coronaria*, 21), cyclamen (24), star of Bethlehem, iris, tulip, narcissus, daisy (*chrysanthemum coronarium*, 21), lily. Of all the most beloved was the rose (23). It goes back well into the Bronze Age in fresco paintings in Crete and appears in the *Iliad* as the flower of Aphrodite, who cured Hector's wounds with oil of roses. The sacred rose descended from Aphrodite to Eros and Isis and thence ultimately became the *rosa mystica* of the Virgin.

The rose was the only flower to be intensively cultivated. The single species (*rosa canina*, 23) and cabbage types (*rosa centifolia*) both flourished. In Roman times, roses became the rage and fresh blooms were rushed to Italy in winter by speedy ships from nurseries in Egypt. The island of Rhodes, which took its name from the rose and showed the flower on its coins, cultivated the rose so abundantly that sailors claimed that they could sniff the land before they sighted it. The petals were crushed for scent, even by the queen of Egypt, Berenike II, but true attar of roses was not distilled until the ninth century of our era.

Many stories are told about flowers. Persephone hated violets because she was picking them when she was snatched away to the Underworld. The fascinating colors of the anemones were thought to lure virgins to destruction. The goddess of the rainbow, Iris, gave her name to that flower of many hues. The unfortunate youths Narcissus and Hyacinth were transformed into the flowers still named for them.

Athenian poets, especially in lyric passages like Sophocles' hymn to Attica (first page), occasionally show their sensitivity to the flowers that still delight the visitor. Pindar called the city of Athens the 'violet-crowned'.



17. Corinthian Capital in the Odeion of Agrippa. 1st century B.C.





18. 'Acanthus lubricus et flexuosus.'  
'The involved and fluid forms  
of the acanthus.'  
Pliny, *Epistles*

## POETIC WEEDS

Several common weeds are famous for their mention in poetry. Of these the giant fennel (*ferula communis*, or *narthex* to the Greeks, 26) was used by Prometheus as a container for his gift of fire to man. Not only did its sturdy stalk protect his precious coals, but it also served as a staff to which vine or ivy leaves were bound to form the thyrsos that was carried by the Maenads.

The asphodel (28) was planted on graves because Homer had associated it with the Underworld: 'Past the gates of the sun and the home of dreams they went and came swiftly to the fields of asphodel' (*Odyssey*, xxiv). The commonest asphodel in Greece is the *microcarpus*, with pinkish gray flowers; its regal spears (Latin, *hastula regia*) suggested to poets the regiments of ghosts marching on the shores of Acheron.

Also tall, but mauve white, is the spire of the acanthus (bear's foot) which rises from a calyx of large foliate leaves. In Greece the *spinousus* grows wild; in Italy the more common type is the *mollis*; both species were cultivated in Greece. A sculptor of fifth-century Athens, Kallimachos, once saw an acanthus growing over a basket that had been set on the grave of a Corinthian girl by her devoted nurse. Struck by the rich plasticity of the curling leaves, he created the column capital that is still called 'Corinthian'.

## FRUITS AND NUTS

Lamon, the gardener, to Priapos prays,  
Grant that his limbs keep strong and all his trees,  
And this sweet gift of fruit before him lays:  
This golden pomegranate, this apple, these  
Elfin-faced figs, new grapes, a walnut green  
Within its skin, cucumbers' leafy sheen,  
And dusky olives, gold with gleaming oil—  
To you, oh friend of travelers, this spoil.

*Palatine Anthology*

Attica has always produced good fruit (20). Most important to the Athenians were the olive (8), the grape (47) and the fig (*figus carica*, 19, 20). Demeter was supposed to have presented the fig to the people who praised it as 'the god-given inheritance of our mother-country, the darling of my heart, the dried fig' (Alexis). Dried figs brought pleasant dreams, but green figs eaten at noon produced gripes and fever.

The innumerable seeds of the pomegranate (*punica granata*, 20) suggested fertility and crowned the scepters of the goddesses Demeter and Persephone. Clay rattles shaped like pomegranates were dedicated in the sanctuary of Hera, goddess of marriage, on Delos.

The apple (*malus pyrus*, 20) was ever popular; connected with Aphrodite, it was thrown in mischief by lovers. Pears, medlars, plums and cherries grew in Greek orchards. The peach was brought into Greece from Persia in the fourth century B.C., but it remained rare until late Roman times when its pits are frequently found in house wells. Of nuts, the almond was the best beloved. It was eaten in many ways, pressed for perfumed oil and ground to a paste for cakes.

19. A fig tree on the slopes of Kolonos Agoraios just opening its leaves in the spring.





20. Attic Fruits : Pomegranate, Apple, Grapes, Figs, Olives.



21. Wild Flowers : Anemones, Daisies.



22. Crocus.



23. Wild Rose.



24. Wild Cyclamen.



25. Caper.



26. Giant Fennel.



27. Oleander.



28. Asphodel.



29. Gorse.



30. The Acropolis and Hymettos, now deforested. The trees in the foreground have been planted and protected.

## TREES

‘The trees and forests were supposed to be the supreme gift bestowed by Nature on man. . . . These first provided him with his food, their foliage carpeted his cave and their bark served him for raiment. . . . We use a tree to furrow the seas and bring the lands nearer together; we use a tree for building houses; even the images of the gods were made from trees.’

Pliny, *Natural History* (tr. Rackham)

Attica never produced good timber; the shallow soil and hot dry summers did not permit trees to grow to any size on the mountains. In addition, the habit of pasturing goats stripped the young shoots from the hillsides. In a play of the fifth century B.C., a chorus of goats boasts of its appetite:

‘On arbutus, oak, and fir we feed, all sorts and conditions of trees,  
Nibbling off the soft young green of these, and of these, and of these;  
Olives tame and olives wild are theirs and thine and mine  
Cytisus, mastich, salvia sweet and many-leaved eglantine,  
Ivy and holm-oak, poplar and ash, buckthorn, willow and heather,  
Asphodel, mullein, cistus, thyme and savory all together.’

Eupolis (tr. Edmonds)

Athens had to go far north, even to South Russia, to obtain the timber for her ship-building. The poor growth of spruce on Mount Parnes was converted into charcoal for fuel. Wood for carpentry was expensive, but local woods, like the olive, were sometimes used to make boxes, cups and bowls of which examples have been found at Brauron on the east coast of Attica.



31. Olive-picking in the 6th century B.C.

### THE OLIVE

The olive tree clings to the Mediterranean coast and forms an important element in its economy. The cultivated tree, grafted on wild stock, is harvested in winter. The fruit for eating is hand-picked; that for oil-pressing is beaten down by poles.

The Athenians believed that the olive was the gift of the goddess Athena when she won the contest with Poseidon for the patronage of Attica. Her tree, reputedly burned by the Persians in their sack of the Acropolis, immediately sent forth the good omen of a fresh shoot. A successor has recently been planted on the Acropolis near the Erechtheion. The olive branch of Athena and the owl that loves to perch upon it are the characteristic symbols of Athenian coinage (Picture Book No. 4).



32. The old olive tree of the goddess is shown with her serpent on a statue base of the 2nd century after Christ in the Odeion of Agrippa. This is a Hellenized version of the ancient Eastern motive, the serpent of wisdom on the tree of life.





33. Plane tree supposed to have sheltered Hippokrates, the Father of Medicine, who lived on the island of Kos in the 4th century B.C. Actually, the tree cannot be more than 500 years old.

### THE PLANE

The plane (*platanus orientalis*) resembles the American buttonwood or sycamore, but it has a smoother, deeper-lobed leaf and its seed-balls hang in clusters. It usually grows by springs and streams where it can get sufficient moisture. It often reaches immense size. Planes were honored for providing vital shade; kings, like Darius, hung jewels on their branches and devotees tied fillets around their trunks. Pliny complains (*Natural History*), 'We have taught even our trees to be wine-bibbers', because admirers poured wine on the roots of favorite planes.

Many legendary planes are recorded: one on which the satyr Marsyas was hung, one planted by Agamemnon at Delphi, another large enough to lodge eighteen banqueters.

34. A family bringing offerings to a shrine under a plane tree. Note the fillet tied around it.





35. The holm-oak or ilex (*quercus ilex*) that was planted by King Paul beside the Altar of Zeus.

## THE OAK

The oak, impressive for its sturdiness, long life and great height, which attracts lightning, was naturally associated by the Greeks with Zeus. Through its leaves he gave oracles at Dodona. To honor well-deserving citizens, the Athenians sometimes presented them with oak-crowns of heavy gold. Thinner gold was used for the funerary counterparts that were laid in tombs.

Of the many varieties of this tree that grow in Greece, the best known are the true oak (*quercus robur*), which is deciduous, and the evergreen holm-oak (*quercus ilex*) and holly-oak (*quercus coccifera*). Acorns were regarded as fertility charms, especially when rendered as gold pendants on necklaces.

## THE CYPRESS

The finely-grained wood of the cypress was prized for carving and esteemed for its longevity. It was related to the cult of Artemis-Hekate and the doors of cypress wood of the temple of Artemis at Ephesos were famous for their great age. Blocks of cypress wood with metal pins which fastened together the column drums of the Parthenon have survived till today.



36. Two varieties of cypress, the widely spread *horizontalis* and the vertical *fastigata* just starting on the slope of Kolonos Agoraios. The latter is the stately tree that grows to great height and is even today associated with death (last page).



37. Aleppo pine (*pinus halepensis*), such as was cut down in the East and bound with fillets and violets to represent the dead body of the god Attis. Certain scholars believe that this tradition underlies the custom of decorating the European Christmas tree. Pines contributed pitch, much needed in antiquity for caulking ships and for flavoring wine, a practice still common today (Picture Book No. 6).



38. Apollo stands beside the palm on Delos. Leto clung to this tree while giving birth to Apollo and Artemis; Odysseus is said to have seen a shoot of it beside the altar of Apollo. Another descendant was pointed out to Cicero. It has been replaced once more in the dry bed of the lake on Delos. Early 6th century B.C.

### THE PALM

Two varieties of palm are found in Greece: *phoenix dactylifera*, which does not bear dates in Attica, and *chamaerops humilis*, a dwarf tree. Although the palm is always somewhat exotic in Greece, it appears on the gold cups of the Bronze Age from Vaphio. In antiquity rope was made from the fibers, but the fruit was its chief product.

From the famous tree on Delos Theseus was said to have broken branches for his comrades when they performed the dance of victory over the Minotaur. This use of palm branches was later taken over by the Athenians for the Panathenaic Games and ultimately became a universal symbol of victory, athletic and spiritual. This symbolism was inherited by the Christian Church (15).



39. Mosaic floor of a house on Delos. The amphora, wreath and palm branch refer to the owner's victory in a chariot race at the Panathenaic festival. 2nd century B.C.

### THE POPLAR

Of the two kinds of poplar in Greece, the black (*populus nigra*) is a mountain tree and no longer grows in the Agora. The white poplar (*populus alba*) still takes hold in moist areas. Its bicolored leaves, of which the dark side was thought to symbolize the Underworld and the white the Upper, naturally associated the tree with chthonic or underworld worship. A poplar wreath was worn by Herakles and athletes. Ovid (*Metamorphoses*) recounts how the sisters of the rash Phaethon, who stole the chariot of the sun-god and fell from the sky, were transformed into poplars to weep amber tears forever into the Eridanos River. This was not the Athenian stream, but a mythical river vaguely thought to be near the amber-bearing regions of the north.

40. White poplar near the southwest corner of the Agora where the drains bring water down from the Areopagus.





41. Apollo seated beside his laurel. His mother, Leto, and his sister, Artemis, stand beside the sacred palm (38), Aphrodite at the right.

### THE LAUREL

The bay or laurel (Greek *daphne*; Latin *laurus nobilis*) was sacred, especially to Apollo, because the mountain nymph whom he pursued turned into that tree to escape his attentions. A famous laurel grew within the sanctuary at Delphi, supplying the priestess with lustral branches and with leaves to chew before prophecy. Its cathartic function was emphasized for purification. Not only were branches used to sweep the floors of holy places, but they were set before houses, held by suppliants, carried in processions, and, as even today at festivals, scattered on the floors of shrines.

This handsome broad-leaved evergreen, often trimmed as a hedge or into formal shapes, grows naturally into a small tree. It produces yellowish blossoms and dark berries. Oil pressed from its leaves was used medically; it was also rubbed on the heads of falcons against lice. The bay leaf played a vital part in cooking, as it still does in many lands.



42. A Branch of Laurel in blossom behind the Temple of Apollo Patroos in the Agora.



43. Procession of Votaries carrying Myrtle Branches. 7th century B.C.

### THE MYRTLE

The fragrant myrtle (*myrtus communis*) had a two-fold nature, part lucky, part sad. It was used at weddings because of its association with Aphrodite (41) and for the crowns of initiates into the Eleusinian Mysteries. Its branches formed a convenient cover for the swords of the conspirators, Harmodios and Aristogeiton, when they assassinated Hipparchos in the Agora. A popular song began:

‘In a branch of myrtle I shall bear my sword,  
Just like Harmodios and Aristogeiton . . .’

The Athenians rated myrtle berries as one of their four greatest treasures, along with their honey, their Propylaia and their figs. They nibbled them like nuts. The myrtle is best seen in the Agora in the outer row of the Garden of Hephaistos (14).

### THE OLEANDER

Though known to modern Greeks as ‘pikrodaphne’ (=bitter laurel), the oleander (*nerium oleander*, 27) is not in fact a laurel, but a member of the family of *apocynaceae*, so-called because the leaf is fatal to animals that chew it. It is mentioned in literature only as an antidote to snake-bite. It grows wild in dry stream beds and waste areas, graciously covering desolate stretches such as the scars of excavation with masses of pink, or, more rarely, honey-colored blossoms.



44. Attic landscape at Rhamnous, a town so-called from the shrub (buckthorn) that covers its hills. The temples of Nemesis and Themis in the foreground.

## SHRUBS

Four-fifths of Greece is not arable and is covered merely with the shrubs characteristic of the Mediterranean. As pasturage, the shrubbery is acceptable only to goats. Among the most common shrubs are buckthorn, heather, gorse (*calycotome villosa*, 29), broom, strawberry-bush (*arbutus*), cistus (rock-rose) and many aromatic plants like rosemary and thyme.

Greek thyme is not an herb, but a woody shrub. There are two common varieties: the white (*thymus capitatus*) and the purple (*thymus serpyllus*). Its pungent smell is familiar to all visitors in early summer. It was used in antiquity as now for seasoning. It also furnishes the bees with a particularly aromatic honey that made the hives of Mt. Hymettos famous. The purple blossoms of the thyme colored the slopes of the mountain in the area described by the poet Ovid (*Ars Amatoria*):

‘Est prope purpureos collis florentis Hymetti  
Fons sacer et viridi caespite mollis humus . . .’

‘Near the purple hills of flowering Hymettos is a sacred spring and earth soft with green grass’, a perfect picture of the lovely setting of the monastery of Kaisariani in the charming garden recently restored.



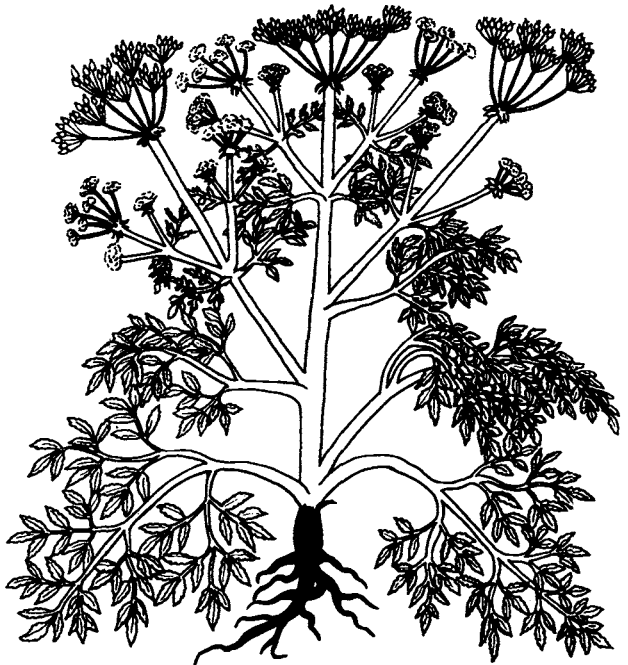
## HERBS AND DRUGS

Ancient Greeks, like their descendants, enjoyed highly seasoned food, drawing chiefly on native plants and on a few imported spices. Many plants that still serve us now grow in the Agora, such as rosemary (*rosmarinus officinalis*), lavender (*lavendula*), sage (*salvia trilobe*), savory (*satureia thymbra*), capers (*capparis sicula*, 25), organum (*vulgare*), marjoram (*origanum majorana*), mustard (*sinapis alba*) and basil (*ocimum basilicum*).

Innumerable plants also supplied drugs and lotions of which a few are still used, such as the almond lotion, the saffron (*crocus sativus*) for dye and perfume, opium from the poppy and arris powder from the iris and the deadly nightshade (*solanum japonicum*) for its strychnine. Drugs and poisons were raised as a hobby by the mad son of King Attalos II of Pergamon, the builder of the Stoa. Only one poison has been planted in the Agora, the so-called hemlock (*conium maculatum*, 45), which is a member of the parsley family and quite unrelated to the American evergreen of that name. The juice extracted from its root gives a swift and easy death; it was the potion drunk by Socrates (Plato, *Phaedo*).

All the medicinal uses of plants were recorded in an herbal by Dioscorides of Cilicia, who lived at the time of Nero; this pharmacological study has preserved for us most of our knowledge of ancient drugs. Unfortunately, the botanical drawings have survived only in debased copies (45).

45. Conium. Hemlock of the sort from which Socrates' fatal draught was extracted. After a drawing by a Byzantine artist of the 6th century A.D. in a manuscript of Dioscorides.



46. Ivy was utilized as a decorative motive on vases, particularly those used for wine, because of its association with Dionysos.

## VINES

In Greece many wild vines creep over rocks and ruins: the clematis, with a haze of tiny white flowers, the smilax, with clusters of berries, the purple periwinkle (*vinca major*), the honeysuckle and convolvulus, scented parasites. Commonest of all is the ivy, white, black and 'English' (*hedera helix*). Legend recounts that it encircled the mast of the ship that first brought Dionysos, the god of wine, to Greece, while from the tip of the mast sprang the most famous of all vines, the grape (*vitis vinifera*). Grapevines in antiquity were usually trained up on trellises. Innumerable varieties produced innumerable local fruits, including the seedless grapes of Corinth, which were dried as 'currants', and the white and red types that produced all sorts of wines. The most famous ancient Greek wines came from the islands and coasts of the Aegean (Picture Book No. 6).

Attica produced only a moderately good wine, but she proclaimed the joys of drinking on her painted pottery to be shipped all over the world (Picture Book No. 1). To Dionysos drama owes its origin, for it began in the songs of the Dionysiac festivals. Vase-paintings show satyrs and silens gathering and treading grapes to make the wine that they enjoyed.



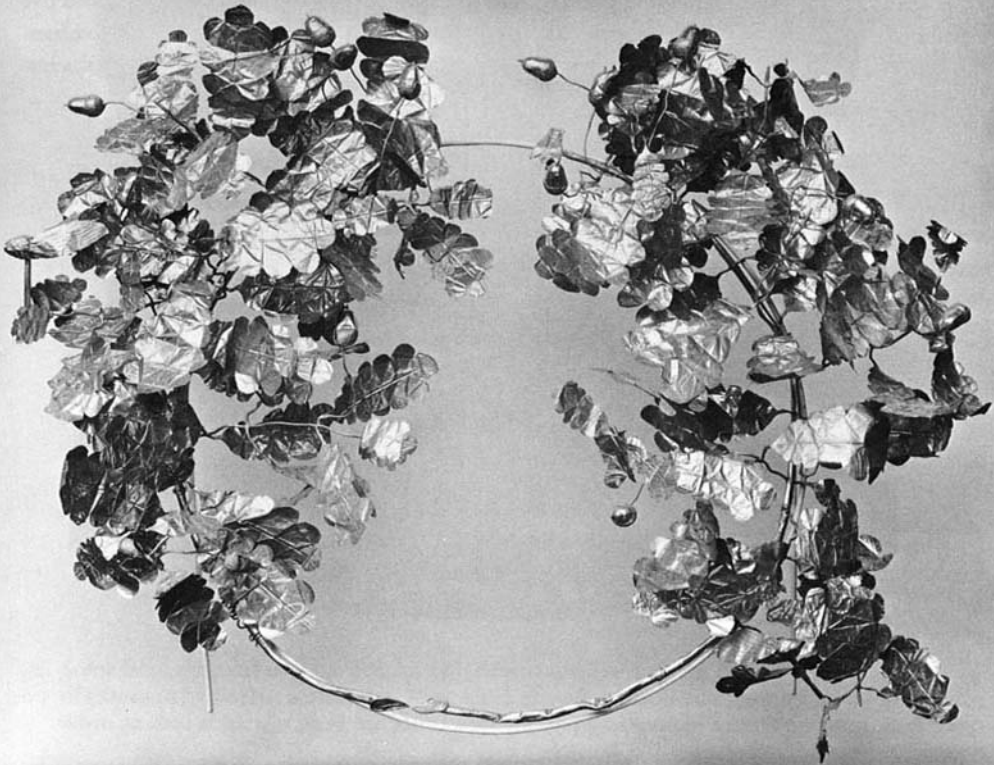
47. On a mixing-bowl from the North Slope of the Acropolis, a Maenad lurking in an Arbor. Mid 6th century B.C.

## WREATHS

Above all, the Greeks enjoyed flowers in the form of garlands and wreaths. They hung them by the doors of houses, by altars, at shrines, to lure beneficent spirits. They were offered as prizes to victors of the Games: wreaths of olive at the Panathenaia, of pine at the Isthmia, of laurel at Delphi, of wild olive at Olympia and of celery at Nemea. Wreaths made of gold or silver leaves were presented to benefactors of towns and sometimes placed in the graves to signify victory in the battle of life. At banquets, rituals and all sorts of festivals, wreaths were worn on the heads and in early days around the neck, giving the participants a festive air. They were brought into the symposium along with perfumes and flute-girls so that the guests, reclining on couches, could rejoice in wine, women and song in an aroma of flowers.

A wreath of myrtle was very popular because it dispelled the fumes of wine, whereas one of roses 'has a sedative power against headaches, beside a cooling effect. . . . But a wreath of stocks which excite the nerves of the head or one of marjoram, in fact all that are capable of stupefying or otherwise oppressing the head, must be avoided' (Athenaeus, tr. Gulick).

48. Gold Wreath of Oak Leaves from a Tomb. 3rd Century B.C.



The therapeutic properties of various flowers are frequently mentioned by ancient authors. Theophrastos lists many that were popular for wreaths (*Enquiry into Plants*). Among these are the rose, anemone, violet, carnation and lily. Especially esteemed was the 'gold-flower', a type of everlasting, which if made into a wreath and sprinkled with perfume, kept the good reputation of the wearer.



49. Girl offers a Wreath on an Altar. Early 5th century B.C.

“The beauty of a wreath, which does not last, is the symbol of an emotion, which, however adorned, is inconstant. Nature . . . believes that lovers should not put on wreaths before they have won . . . the withering of a wreath therefore we regard as a sign that the struggle is still going on.”

Athenaeus (tr. Gulick)

It was difficult to choose among the infinite variety of wreaths that were sold in the market by girls noted for their country complexion, who came early to their stalls in the 'Covent Garden' of antiquity. There shoppers 'all bathed, babble before it is bright daylight in the wreath market, while others gabble at the perfume booths over mint and larkspur' (Athenaeus).

An Athenian poet of the fourth century B.C. wrote a play about the Garland-Sellers in which we can see them at work:

Girl: You want some garlands, maybe; if you do  
Shall they be myrtles, thyme, or Flowers-all-through?  
Purchaser: We want those myrtles you've got over there.  
You can keep all the others.

Euboulos (tr. Edmonds)

The wreaths had power to allure:

This one of motley hue,  
Aigidion, is for you.  
Lord, how neat it is!  
Lord, how sweet it is!  
Who could forbear to kiss  
A girl who's wearing this?

Euboulos (tr. Edmonds)

No one evidently could resist the charms of a garland except the old cynic who once remarked, 'The people who like this kind of thing would join garlic and roses to make a wreath!' (Athenaeus).



50. Scene from the festival of the god Adonis. Athenian women planting 'Gardens of Adonis' of lettuce and fennel in broken jars. Their quick growth symbolized the rebirth of the god; when he died at harvest time, the plants were thrown into springs. Late 5th century B.C.

## FUNERARY GARDENS

Probably the most carefully tended of ancient gardens were those dedicated to the dead. They lined the roads just outside the city gates. These cemeteries were set out in family plots, which were embellished with carved grave reliefs. In late Hellenistic and Roman times, the rich transformed their plots into elaborate funerary gardens, *kepotaphia*. These were walled precincts, lavishly planted and provided with wells for watering. In some of these plots dining-pavilions were erected, set in groves of cypress, poplar or willow. A dedicatory inscription of the second century after Christ reads: 'Gallatis, the son of Python, established the garden with its well for myself, wife and children and for whomsoever they may select.'



51. Planting in the Burial Plot of the family of Hegeso in the Athenian Cemetery. Late 5th and 4th centuries B.C.

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Unless otherwise stated, the photographs are by Alison Frantz and the drawings from vases are by Hero Athanassiades. Numbers refer to the Agora inventory.

Front Cover. After Furtwängler-Reichhold, *Griechische Vasenmalerei*, pl. 111.

Title-page. After Pfuhl, *Malerei und Zeichnung der Griechen*, fig. 239.

Back Cover. Agora P 12178.

1. Agora P 8533.
3. Agora P 21300.
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6. Agora P 7016.
7. Photograph by courtesy of Museum van Oudheden, Leiden.
8. Photograph by Peter Broussalis.
9. Plan by John Travlos.
10. Agora I 4745.
13. Agora P 7261, 7034.
16. Agora A 2874.
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38. Agora P 9275.
39. *Monuments Piot*, xiv, pl. xA, 3.
41. Furtwängler-Reichhold, pl. 59, 1.
43. Agora P 26411; drawing by Piet de Jong.
45. R. T. Gunther, *Dioscorides*, p. 447, No. 79.
46. Agora P 5107.
47. *Hesperia*, vi, 1937, p. 485, fig. 9.
48. Photograph by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.
49. Agora P 24102.
50. Furtwängler-Reichhold, pl. 78, 1.

