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NEWS

How the Radanite Traders Spiced Up Life in Dark-Ages Europe

The first spice, according to the Bible, was found in the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 2:12 we are told of the land known as Havilah, “and the gold of that land is pure: Bdelium and onyx stone are there.” Bdelium (it is, in case you’re wondering, the only word in the English language that begins with the letters “bd”) is an aromatic gum resin obtained by incising the bark of certain species of shrub-like trees. In his splendid “The Book of Spices” (Pyramid, 1973), Frederic Rosengarten informs us that the bdelium resin hardens into transparent little wax-like pellets (“resembling fragrant pearls,” he charmingly notes), which women in ancient Egypt carried as perfume.

Though individual cases can get a bit tricky, spices are defined generally as the dried parts of aromatic plants — root, bark, seed and so forth; the leaves and stalks are, instead, herbs. Spices are mentioned many times in the Bible, from the Genesis story of Joseph (his brothers sold him for 20 pieces of silver to spice traders carrying balm and myrrh to Gilead) to the numerous references in the Song of Songs (“Who is that rising from the desert,” asks the lover, “more fragrant with myrrh and frankincense than all the spices of the merchant!”). Dozens of varieties of spices are discussed in the

Talmud, including many we would recognize today — ginger, cumin, mustard seed, black pepper — as well as more curious ones such as the roots costus and dodder.

In the ancient world, spices were used not only as a flavor enhancer, but also for medicinal purposes and religious ritual. (To take an example from the Jewish tradition, in Exodus 30:22-24, God instructs Moses on Sinai on the preparation of the anointing oil for the tabernacle, going so far as to give precise proportions for the spices to be mixed in: 500 shekels of myrrh, 250 of cinnamon, 250 of calamus, 500 of cassia.) Most of the spices were imported from the East, and by the time of the Diaspora, Jews were deeply involved in the flourishing spice trade. In the early centuries of the Common Era, the trade was carried on mainly by Jews and Syrians, but by the eighth century, Syria had been conquered by the Arabs, and Jewish merchants were left in control of the spice trade. Later, in the ninth and 10th centuries, these merchants came to play a key (and today, not widely appreciated) role in the very preservation of international commerce in Europe.

At the time — this is after the fall of Rome, which had earlier united all of Europe within a single empire — Europe was bitterly divided into two camps, Christian and Muslim. Virtually all trade channels between them had been shut down; by the year 800, it was no longer possible for a ship to sail from a Christian to a Muslim port. The only traders tolerated by both Christians and Muslims — and who thus enjoyed freedom of movement — were the Jewish traveling merchants known as the Radanites.

That today we have even heard of the Radanites (the name may have come from the Persian *rah dan*, meaning “knows

the way”) is due to a single written source, a geography book authored by one Ibn Khordadbeh, who served in the ninth century as the postmaster for the caliph of Baghdad. In “The Book of the Roads and the Kingdoms,” Ibn Khordadbeh tells of “Jewish merchants called Radanites,” fluent in several languages, who “journey from west to east, from east to west, partly on land, partly by sea.” From the West, he reports, the Radanites brought cloth, furs and swords, as well as eunuchs and female slaves for the harems of Asia; returning from the East, they carried back exotic spices.

The passage about the Radanites runs a scant two paragraphs — not much information to go on. Happily enough, though, in 1948, Rabbi Louis Rabinowitz of Johannesburg, South Africa, produced a fascinating little book called “Jewish Merchant Adventurers: A Study of the Radanites” that provides a full analysis of Ibn Khordadbeh’s brief account and places it in historical context. According to Rabinowitz, the Radanites plied four main trade routes stretching from Europe into North Africa and Asia. Along one of the routes, for instance, a Radanite trader would set out from France southward into Spain, then sail across the Mediterranean into Morocco, from where he traversed by camel caravan the entirety of North Africa into the Middle East, passed through the major cities of Baghdad and Basra, and made his way across India before finally arriving at the route’s terminus in central China.

That the Radanites could work such incredibly long trade routes was only possible because of a series of Jewish communities all along the way, from Spain at one end through, at the other, the Cochin and Bene Israel Jews of India and various settlements in China, including Hong Chou, Kaifeng and Canton. These communities allowed the

Radanites unrivaled access to the goods of the East, for they and the local Jewish merchants shared not merely a common religion, but also at least one language (Hebrew), a code of law, references for letters of introduction and, perhaps most importantly, a well-developed system of commercial credit. As a result, a Jewish trader from France could, with a minimum of confusion, conduct business with a Jewish purveyor of goods in, say, Cairo or Baghdad.

In his account, Ibn Khordadbeh specifically mentioned only four spices traded by the Radanites — “musk, aloes, camphor, cinnamon” — subsuming everything else under the general phrase “other products of the East.” These products may have included pearls and other precious stones, but certainly included numerous other spices as well, among them black pepper, cloves, nutmeg, ginger, galangal (similar to ginger) and saffron. Rabinowitz noted that spices constituted the most important commodity brought back by the Radanites from the East, for they readily fulfilled the three criteria necessitated by such an arduous journey: smallness of bulk, a ready market and huge profits.

By the end of the 10th century, though, the ascendant merchants of Venice were already challenging the Radanite monopoly. By the end of the 11th century, with the military successes of the Crusades, the blocked trade routes between East and West had been opened up again and the **Radanites, now superfluous, fell into an obscurity that has lasted to the present day.** But how important were they during their own times? Simply consider this: For more than 100 years, virtually every bit of spice that entered Christian Europe did so as a result of Radanite trade. Still, even the success of the undertaking is perhaps not as astonishing as the audacity of

[Editor: We believe this to be misdirection or ignorance. Radhanite bankers and merchants did not disappear at all. With the pressure on the Silk Road from Seljuk Turks, they renamed themselves "Aschenazi," enmeshed themselves with Khazarians, opened a northern route for the Silk Road, and became Europe's bankers and continued to promote **Babylonian usury**, to this day. Their blood lineage with Judaism is dubious. They are Babylonian, Persian, Sogdian and Khazarian.]

the undertaking itself. As Rabinowitz observed about the journeys of the Radanites, “Certainly this remarkable trek by four different routes

across the whole of the then known world and part of the unknown in pursuit of lawful trade constitutes a phenomenon to which there is no parallel in world history.”

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Garam masala, like curry powder or pickling spices, is actually a mixture of spices rather than an individual spice. Probably every family of the Bene Israel community in Bombay has its own recipe; this simple one is from Zimra Israel, who was born in Bombay and now lives in New York. Other *garam masala* recipes may include cumin seeds, nutmeg, coriander and black peppercorns.

Garam Masala (Indian Spice Mixture)

2 tbsp. cardamom pods

2 2-inch cinnamon sticks

1 tsp. cloves

1. Place all the ingredients in an electric spice grinder or coffee grinder. Grind until the spices are finely ground. Store in a tightly closed container.

Makes about 1/4 cup.

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Curried chicken is representative of much of the Bene Israel

Curried chicken is representative of much of the Bene Israel cooking style in that it uses lots of onions, and tomatoes and spices, including ginger, garlic, turmeric, bay leaves, cinnamon, cloves and cardamom, as well as cilantro. It was often the centerpiece of Friday-evening and holiday meals. This curry should be served on top of rice. Tamarind concentrate can be purchased in many Middle Eastern, Indian or specialty shops.

Kambdi cha Kanji (Indian Curried Chicken)

1 chicken, 3 to 4 pounds, cut into 8 pieces; or 4 split breasts, totaling about 3 pounds

1/4 cup olive oil

4 onions, chopped

1 tsp. red chili paste

1 tbsp. minced fresh ginger

1 tbsp. minced fresh garlic

1/2 tsp. turmeric

1 tbsp. garam masala (see above)

2 tsp. tamarind concentrate

1 tsp. salt, or to taste

15 ounces canned chopped tomatoes

4 bay leaves

1 cup water

1 tbsp. chopped fresh cilantro

1. Wash the chicken and pat it dry. Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Add the onion and cook, stirring often, until lightly colored. Add the chili paste, ginger, garlic, turmeric and garam masala and cook for about 2 minutes, stirring regularly. Add the tamarind concentrate, salt, tomatoes, bay leaves and water and stir to combine. Cover the pot and bring to a boil.
2. Add the chicken pieces to the pot. Lower heat and simmer, covered, until the chicken is cooked through, 35 to 40 minutes. Transfer to a large serving platter and serve hot, with rice.

Serves 4.



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