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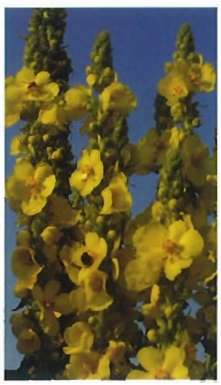


PARTYING WITH BORAGE

• SIBTHORP IN GREECE • ORIGANUMS

• CHELSEA REVIEW

Gareth Evans visits Greece at sea squill time and walks in the footsteps of John Sibthorp, who had followed the clues left by Dioscorides

Alonissos is an island on the outer edge of the Sporades archipelago that spreads out from the Aegean coast of Greece. The island is big enough to have a sizeable tourist influx in summer, but small enough to limit numbers so that impact on its quiet character is kept to a minimum. It is criss-crossed by paths that reach over its ridges and follow its green, cool ravines into the woods that hug the spectacular cliff tops on the south-west coast.

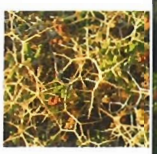
In September the most striking part of the flora on the bare backbone of the island are the stands of sea squill (*Urginea maritima*). Reaching a metre or more high the top third of the flower stalks have a beautiful wreath of flowers, a dramatic sight as they sprout from a large bulb, the size of a child's head, that projects above the ground. Some stands are so old that they form circles where the original parent bulbs have died away. The dry bulb has been anciently known for its ability to survive, sprouting its long, deep green leaves in winter for many years. An age-old symbol of regeneration, bulbs are still hung outside houses and restaurants at New Year.

Socrates' pupil Theophrastus (*circa* 370-285 BC) describes the thin, scrubby vegetation, called *phrygana,* and the aromatic and medicinal plants it holds. The robust sea squill is a good example. Containing cardiac glycosides it was valued as a treatment for water retention, or dropsy, that is associated with heart disease and it was a popular European drug. In smaller doses it has an expectorant action and is still found in herbal cough mixtures. An 'oxymel' of squill was a popular preparation, the mixture of vinegar and honey helping the alarming vomit-inducing tendency of sea squill that 'cleanses the stomach' as well as clearing the chest.

The Greco-Roman army doctor and writer Pedanus Dioscorides gave detailed instructions in his *De Materia Medica* on the preparation of sea squill. Such was the authority of this work that eighteenth-century botanists justified long excursions to the Levant or eastern Mediterranean in order to identify Dioscoridean plants. Some still puzzle botanists today.

Sibthorp's travels

The most famous of the British 'Levant lunatics' was the brilliant, ambitious and adventurous John Sibthorp. In 1784 Sibthorp succeeded his father, Humphrey, to became third Sherardian Professor of Botany at Oxford. He completed medical training but caught 'botanomania'. He joked with a friend: 'It is the *morbus hereditarius* that I trace up to the Loins of my Father. You would



laugh to see with what Avidity I hunt out a Moss, or how anxiously I scrape a stone to get a Lichen'

Thanks to independent means and a generous fellowship the young Sibthorp made two excursions to Greece and the western Mediterranean and spent more time overseas than at Oxford during his professorship. No known manuscripts of Dioscorides from the Classical period had survived, but there was a remarkable illustrated manuscript of *De Materia Medica* in Vienna. Sibthorp's many months there, a not entirely unplanned diversion on his way to Greece, allowed him to study the manuscript closely. The *Codex Vindobonsis* was complied in the sixth century for Juliana Anicia, daughter of the emperor at Constantinople. At best, these plant illustrations were not to be improved on for 1000 years until the European Renaissance.

Sibthorp acquired engraved copies of the *Codex* images and took them on his journey to 'facilitate my Enquiries' and 'throw some Light on the Absurdity of Dioscorides'. He meant to identify plants that were clearly falsely illustrated or named in the existing copies of *De Materia Medica*. At the southern tip of Greece Sibthorp was given a root of *Euphorbia apios* and when he checked his own identification of the species in his 'Dioscorides illustrated' he discovered that the gatherer's comments – 'the head of the root makes you vomit and the bottom gives you diarrhoea' – were just as described by Dioscorides more than a 1000 years before.

Votive lamps

In September the scrub largely consists of the impenetrable *aphana* or thorny burnet (*Sarcopoterium spinosum*) described for its astringent qualities by Dioscorides. The remarkable parasol-shape calyxes of *Iouminia* or false dittany (*Ballota acetabulosa*) that in summer bizarrely surround the 'labiatae' flowers, are still picked when dry to make wicks for the votive lamps of the many roadside shrines. Likewise, the verge-loving *Inula viscosa*, rank-smelling relative of elecampane, has been used to keep away wild animals and fleas.

In an Alonissos olive grove I came across sage bushes that were 'fruiting' with round galls. As with oak apples, these are produced by wasp larvae. Sibthorp had not only observed them but also feasted on these sage apples; conserved with sugar they apparently have an agreeable astringent taste.

The barren landscape we see now is the result of deforestation over centuries. Even Plato recorded that, ' ...what now remains compared with what then existed is like the skeleton of a sick man... only the bare framework of the land being left'. The forests that do remain today are protected and Alonissos has many deep, aromatic groves that in September were the best places to find pungent thyme, ➤

Facing page: Alonissos looking towards Scopelos and sea squill flowers.
Main picture: a stand of sea squill (*Urginea maritima*)

This page: *Inula viscosa*. Main picture: sage apples, produced by wasp larvae

CLASSICS

Above: Sea squill bulb on Alonissos. Far right: sea squill flowers

oregano and sage. These seem to be the most frequently used medicinal herbs for modern islanders.

The pine trees are still tapped for their turpentine, as in Sibthorp's day when he noted the trees disfigured by incisions. Greece was then still a part of the loosely-governed Ottoman Empire made up of small, sometimes feuding, territories each governed by a local lord, or *aga*. When one of them asked Sibthorp to help him with his stomach problems, Sibthorp led him to believe that the best herbs were in the mountains and if only the *aga* would give him permission to go there, the herbs would be collected and the *aga* would be treated. Permission was given, as well as protection from *banditti*. 'I now botanize always with loaded Pistols in my Pockets, these Plants should be worth something. They are earned with the Sweat of the [brow] thro' Perils & Dangers', Sibthorp remarks.

Sibthorp would also search out *caloyers,* or Orthodox monks who had herbal knowledge. On his first journey he stayed at the Convent of Jerusalem on Mount Parnassus where 'a monk of the Cloister, a venerable Octogenarian famous for his knowledge of Simples arrived'. He walked out with him into the wood and 'learnt from him more than a hundred names of plants growing in the Environs of the Monastery... some resting unaltered & uncorrupted the ancient names of Theophrastus & Dioscorides.'

> I now botanize always with loaded Pistols in my Pockets. These plants should be worth something. They are earned thro' Perils & Dangers

Aphana, or thorny burnet

While collecting on Mount Athos in Macedonia, Sibthorp found seeds of a foxglove that were unlike our purple native species. The seeds were raised at Kew on his return. From illustrations made of these specimens it is clear that they were what we know today as *Digitalis lanata*, the Greek or woolly foxglove, which is found only in the Balkan peninsula.

The effectiveness of our native foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*) in dropsy was noted by Birmingham physician William Withering, interestingly from folk use. This was two years before Sibthorp's first journey and foxglove was to gradually take over from sea squill to regulate the heart's action. Now grown in plantations *Digitalis lanata* is rich in the cardiac glycoside, digoxin. It is estimated to be worth £25m a year in sales. Sibthorp would be satisfied to know that at least one discovery of his has turned out to be more than 'worth something'.

In Vienna Sibthorp had made the acquaintance of Ferdinand Bauer, a gifted and energetic artist whom he hired to record the enormous number of specimens. A special colour coding was devised by the artist so that the work could be reproduced as true to the original as possible. But the planned volumes of work took many years to see the light of day.

Sadly, on Sibthorp's final return in 1795 he fell seriously ill and despite sea-water baths at Brighton and a diet of asses's milk he succumbed on February 8, 1796. In his will he made a substantial bequest to fund the publication of his *Flora Graeca*. Unfortunately, as a friend remarked, 'he trusted to memory and dreamed not of dying'. The lack of labels for his collection meant that the last of the 10 folio volumes were published in 1840 and only 28 copies were compiled, making it a rare and beautiful publication.

Further reading: *The Flora Graeca Story, Sibthorp, Bauer and Hawkins in the Levant*. Lack, H. W., Mabberley, D. J. Oxford University Press (1999)

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