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CAROB TREE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN LANDSCAPE IMAGINARY

A Prolegomenon For A Possible Hermeneutics Of The Mediterranean Flora

An island is a land surrounded by the sea, while the Mediterranean is a flow encircled, enclosed and completed by land. The enclosed Mediterranean Sea is an inverted picture of an island - its negative. As a matter of fact, the Mediterranean is a sea island surrounded by *terra firma* - a firm land softened by its gentleness. This big sea surrounded by land will also determine the nature of the land that surrounds it; it will soften the harshness of its occasionally harsh shores and the character of the people who found their homes and their temples in this land, who, in order to reach other shores and to meet other people, build their boats from firm cedar trees and from crooked branches of pine trees and holly-oaks that are bent by the salty hands of sea winds, and who plant into that land the seeds taken by the first people from the garden of Eden.

Many plants of the Mediterranean flora are not only planted into the soil that can be Mediterranean: red, yellow or black, shallow or deep, protected from winds or exposed to winds which carry the breath, salinity and warmth of the sea deep into the land; these plants are also planted into the humus of man's time on this maritime area and they have determined not only his visual but also mental identity.

The hermeneutics of the Mediterranean flora has probably not been written yet and it could be possible to describe the Mediterranean by describing its plants, by explaining their meanings, to disclose their significance in the history of the Mediterranean, by clarifying their meaning in the mental matrix of the Mediterranean world as well as in its art, religion, customs, celebrations, beliefs and prejudices as well as by reading the history of human effort in agricultural architecture, whose signs, engraved into the soil and the rocks, are still visible. The roads through which the plants traveled from their original habitat, the Garden of Eden, are the roads of the people who traveled through their human time and who earned their bread by the sweat of their brows.

Some plants are the primordial inhabitants of the Mediterranean shores, deep-rooted in the land and in the language of Mediterranean minerals, waters and winds; some of them are more or less adapted newcomers who are still learning the language of survival: the rules of the land and water, the rules of the sun and the Mediterranean winds.

Some of the plants among these indigenous species have become icons of Mediterranean imaginariety. Some of them, in spite of their origin in the depths of biblical times have remained almost unnoticed in the conventional perception of the Mediterranean landscape as well as in the symbolism that recognizes within plants the signs that sublimate the meaning of human time. It is almost impossible to imagine the Mediterranean landscape without the fig and olive tree, without the cypress and laurel, it is almost impossible to remember the Mediterranean landscape without remembering the fragrance of the sea rose - rosemary, without remembering sage and fennel, marjoram, immortelle and wormwood.

The fig tree is the holly tree of the Mediterranean, a symbolic topos of its myths, legends and tradition. It stands at the exit of Eden, at the door of human time, at the door of history when man enters from eternity into the temporariness of human existence, when he realizes his nakedness and covers it with a fig leaf under the strict gaze of Jehovah.

The olive tree is peace, fertility and purification, strength and victory. It is warmth and light, spice and refreshment, consistency and consolation; it is the last rites, the symbol of purification from the burden of corporality at the exit from human temporality into eternity of the transcendental.

In ancient Greece it was dedicated to Athens - the Goddess of wisdom, and in ancient Rome - to Jupiter and Minerva. In Islam, the olive tree is the axis of the world, its center.

Cypress is the tree of darkness, the plant of Had. For ancient Greeks and Romans this tree was dedicated to the deities of the underworld. In Christian Europe it is the tree of the cemetery, the keeper of the eternal peace of the deceased, the tree of mourning.

Laurel symbolizes immortality so Romans used it as a symbol of glory: *laurus* becomes the synonym of glory acquired through the spirit or courage through the sword or feather. It is dedicated to the god Apollo, and its leaves are used to decorate heroes, poets and wise men.

Among such indigenous inhabitants of the Mediterranean landscape, of its slopes and valleys by the sea, its bays and points, of its lesser and bigger islands, its cultivated or untended or completely wild areas, one could count many other plants that by means of their symbolism participate in the enormous job of fixing the chaotic reality that flows through the wide river of human time, in the enormous job of making sense, of putting in place human memory. There would be also place for the pine tree and aloe, lemon and orange tree, vine, palm and oleander, heather, pyrethrum, basil and sage, marjoram, myrtle, rue and immortelle, mint and fennel, mulberry, almond and service-tree.

THE SEVENTY-YEAR-LONG DREAM OF A TORAH INTERPRETER

Many of these plants were sung by poets. Many have become certain icons of the Mediterranean imaginariety. However, on that map of the Mediterranean flora that participates in the affairs of the spirit, one has to notice an inexplicable gap.

On the map there is no carob. Although the most imposing one by its size, the lushness of its tree top, the multitude of its fruits, although widespread along Mediterranean shores,

from Palestine to Morocco, from Tunisia to Vis, although along with olive tree the longest living plant, although biblical, the carob is being neglected, almost unnoticed among the cultivated plants of Mediterranean coastal and insular areas.

Intending to begin this text with a proverb, some verses or a sentence about carob that I would use to tie the thread of this story, I flipped through many pages of books and my own memories, but to no avail. I have not found anything. It is only in the Talmud, the holy Hebrew book, that I found a story for which I eagerly tie a thread from the ball of wool of my story about the long living, oldest inhabitant of the present-day Mediterranean, about carob, some of which are, together with occasional olive-tree, the only living contemporaries of the time of Christ.

The biblical *Song of returnee* (Psalm 126) speaks about the return of the Jews from the seventy year long slavery in Babylon: *When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them the dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue was singing...*

The end of the Babylonian exile was marked by the planting of trees in Israel, by converting desert into fertile land for future generations.

Honi HaMagal was in his time the most learned scholar of old Jewish texts. He was confused by the verses about the seventy-year-long sleep in the slavery of Babylon. He wanted to find their sense. One day Honi was walking on a path in the field and saw a man planting a carob tree. Honi approached the man and asked him:

-How many years will it take to pick fruits from that tree? - The man answered:

-Seventy years.

-Are you sure you will live another seventy years to pick the fruits of that carob tree?

-I live off the carob. Just like my ancestors planted carobs for me, knowing that they will not pick their fruits, I also plant carob trees for my children.

Having heard this, Honi continued his journey and then when he grew tired he sat to eat something. Sleep overcame him. As soon as he fell asleep a rock was formed around him that protected him from the look of passers-by. Honi was sleeping for a long time and when he woke up, he returned along the same path where he came from. He recognized the place where the man was planting the tree. On that spot there was now a huge carob tree, under which a man was gathering its fruits. Honi asked the man:

-Are you the man who planted this tree?

-No, I am his grandson!

-This means that I was sleeping for seventy years!

Honi went to his home. When he saw the host he did not recognize them so he said he was Honi HaMagal, but not even his grandson believed the story as he was convinced that his grandfather Honi had been dead for a long time.

Then Honi went to wise men to introduce himself but they also did not believe him so they did not pay the usual respect to him. He wished for death then since without friendship and the trust of others he was not able to fulfill his life's meaning as Torah interpreter. However, since his life span was not influenced by the time he had spent asleep, he lived to the end of his foreseen time (Talmud: Tannis 23a).

The story about the life of Honi HaMagala, the interpreter of old Hebrew texts is also a story that is in want of interpretation. The Jews have a unique celebration on the day of Tu bi-Shevat, and it is the fifteenth (tu) day of the fifth month (Shevat) according to the Jewish

civil calendar or in the eleventh month according to the religious calendar. It is the day of the *New Year of the trees* (in January, on the full moon in the middle of winter) when the Jews mark the milestone of the natural cycle eating fruits: grapes, pomegranates, figs, dates, olives and carobs.

Eating carobs, they remember the story of Honi HaMagal. It is a story about connectedness and reciprocity among generations. It is a story about the dream of a refugee who dreams abroad that into his land he plants a seed that his descendants will pick. It is a story that evokes the Jewish myth of Return, and planting a tree is a symbolic act of faith in the persistence of life on the assigned land from which dust one is created. Those who plant long-living trees believe in the future, they believe in the possibility that even over the span of their short lives they can continue living the lives of their descendants, just like in their lives live their ancestors and they remember them every time they pick the fruits of their work.

On the trunk of carob tree there are new shoots growing and they become strong thick branches full of fruits, while the old branches become hollow inside, they rot and come closer to the ground leaving to the young ones the ascent to the sun. This is how the carob tree regenerates itself and rejuvenates and lives for centuries. This is how the human tree lasts as its shoots come out of the old trunk whose roots are deep in time.

In the civilization that mercilessly uses and destroys numerous unrenewable resources of the Earth, animal and plant species, water, land and air, in the civilization that takes away from unborn generations of people, instead of planting for them the seed which fruit they will pick, the story of Honi HaMagal warns, reminds of the proportion of loss that has inflicted the civilization. This time has no time to plant its own carob tree! On his journey through time, one has reached unknown areas when one finds no place in life for ancestors and one has lost faith in the meaning and possibility of existence in the lives of those who will be created out of his own clay. Some invisible hands have cut off the shoot of the carob tree and have planted it far from the tree from which it originated. The candle of the culture of remembering is extinguished, and poets, who in their numerous books sang about the olive tree, did not notice the cut-down carob tree.

THE BIBLICAL BREAD

"In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins: and his meat was locusts and wild honey" (Matthew 3:1-4).

The uncertainty about whether in the gospel according to St. Matthew the word *locust* means grass-hopper or carob was solved in the book by Winifred Walker - *All the Plants of the Bible* (New York, Harper 1057). In the Croatian translation of the Bible (Zagreb 1968) the word *locust* was translated as grass-hopper, and it was this biblical story about St. John the Baptist that has contributed that in some languages carob is also called St. John's bread.

In Dalmatia, together with the name *rogač* or in cakavian dialects *rogoc/goroc*, there is also the name *karobel/karober/karuba* for the plants of botanical name of *Ceratonia siliqua* from the family of *Leguminosae*, a type of *Ceratonia*.

In the Komiža dialect there is also the term *hlepcić* for small carob, which is not gathered at harvest, but is left for those who come to pick up the remains after the harvest. It is a godsend for the fruit that He gave, and this is what the poor collect since they have no carobs. This word evokes the legend of St. John the Baptist in the desert of Judaea.

The Dalmatian terms (*karobel/karober/karuba*) for carob stem from the Arabic word *kharub* that stems from the Assyrian *harubu*. The Greeks call this word *teratsia xjlokeratea*, its fruit *teratsi xjlokeraton*, and the carob seed *kerátion*, in French it is *caroubier*, the fruit is *caroube*, in Spanish it is *algarrobo/allgarrobero*, the fruit is *algarroba*, in Portuguese *alfarrovo*, the fruit is *alfarrova/pao de Sao Joao*; in English *carob tree/Saint John's tree*, fruit *Saint John's bread/ carob bean*, in German *Johann's brod-baum*, fruit *Johannisbrot*, in Italian *carrubio*, fruit *carruba* and *pane del povero*, in Venetian *carober*, fruit *caroba*.

This means that in the name of the carob, in its metaphorical variants, there is included the memory of the one who announced the arrival of the Messiah, the memory of St. John the Baptist who fed himself in the desert with the honey of wild bees and the bread from the carob tree.

Carob was also the bread of the constructors of the pyramids in Egypt, the bread of Mohamed's army and Roman legions, it was the bread of seamen on long journeys and of galley-slaves who were chained to the banks of the galley.

I remember an event from the Maritime museum in Barcelona that is situated in the huge reconstructed arsenal in Dresan. Together with a group of visitors I climbed aboard a huge galley. In one moment, on a canvass that was up to then invisible and spread across the boat like a sail, at the same time permitting the entire bow-board, appeared a sight of the very same board with the chained rowers who rowed together with the sound of a whip. However, on that historic ship, on which everything is perfectly reconstructed, up to mice that bite on wheat bags in the bellow decks, one thing is not reconstructed - the smell. The story told by a guide, that we listen to from tape on headphones, tells how it was possible to know due to the smell that a galley is coming, even when it was three miles away from shore. The fact is that galley-slaves, chained to the banks of the ship, would relieve themselves on the straw that was placed under their feet. The eastern Adriatic word *pajol* stems from Venetian word *pagiol* that stems from the word *paglia* which means straw. When a galley would enter the port, it would first sail to a designated place where it would be swept and where the dirty straw would be removed; only after that would a galley come to the dock with clean straw. In order to facilitate hard-to-maintain hygiene on galleys, the rowers would receive a daily portion of carob in order to have hard stool which is easy to sweep. At the same time the highly caloric carob was giving the necessary energy in the extremely strenuous job of the galley-slaves.

THE JOURNEY OF CAROB

The natural habitat of carob is the Persian Gulf. From there it spreads toward Anatolia to the areas of Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Israel and Egypt. Already in the 20th c. B.C. the

culture of carob was accepted by the Phoenicians and it spread on the shores of the Mediterranean. Carob can be found on Cypress, on the Aegean islands, Malta, Sicily and Sardinia. It was cultivated by the Greeks, Chartagans, Romans, Byzantines and Arabs. The Arabs brought it in the Middle Ages all the way to Morocco and Spain. In Spain the provinces of Andalusia and Levante as well as the island of Mallorca are famous for carob and in Portugal in the province of Algarve. Carob made it all the way to the Canary Islands and Balears in the Atlantic. Two strongest maritime countries of the Mediterranean, Genoa and Venice, contributed to the spread of carob in past centuries. Genoa's seamen imported its seed from the east and planted it on the shores of the large Genoa Gulf. This is the north most habitat of carob in the Mediterranean. Carob is widespread in the Italian provinces of Liguria, Lazio, Campania, Basilicata, Calabria and Puglia. Venice encouraged planting carob in Dalmatia. It is its only province where carob can grow. Venice needed the carob to feed galley-slaves on its numerous galleys and they tried to increase the production of this plant.

Carob was introduced to Dalmatia by Greek colonists who on Dalmatian islands founded cities - called polis. Greeks from Syracuse in the 4th. c. B.C. founded the town of Issa in St. George's Port (today's Vis) on the island of Vis. Together with vine they brought the culture of carob. During the time of Venice, the largest contingent of carob in Dalmatia was in Komiža, and Venice introduced legal measures to encourage the planting of carob. The condition for marriage was planting a certain number of carob trees. A special sort of carob appeared in this southwestern bay - the so-called long carob of Komiža, at one time extremely appreciated on the European market.

Spanish missionaries brought the culture of carob into Mexico and southern California. In 1856, the Patent office of the USA distributed 8, 000 seedlings of carob from seed from Spain into the southern states of Texas, Arizona, California and Florida. Dalmatian immigrants also imported carob into California. For them, carob is a tree of nostalgia. They plant it as they plant the fig tree in their gardens so that these trees remind them of "old home", of their childhood in which these trees were, along with the olive tree, the only reliable feeders.

FOOD OF SURVIVAL

In 1949 Dr. Walter Rittenhouse created a foundation for establishing a 30-year-long experiment on ground in the north of San Diego province where seedlings of carob were grafted with Mediterranean varieties. In the experiment they used seed from several thousand carob trees from California and Arizona, with the aim of identifying superior types of human food. The best quality seedlings were distributed from there to Tunisia, Israel, Australia, South America, Hawaii, Mexico, Brazil and Chile.

The experiment identified seven superior varieties whose fruits contain over fifty percent sugar. These sorts mostly originate from the Mediterranean: *amela* from Italy, *casuda* from Spain, *clifford* from California, *sfax* from Tunisia, *sante fe* from California, *tantillo* from Sicily and *tylliria* from Cyprus. Among the thirty most famous varieties are also two types from Dalmatia: *carob* from *Šipan* and *long carob* from *Komiža*.

Christopher Nyerges, the author of the book *Guide to Wild Foods* says: "Carob is an incredibly rich source of food, it is probably the ideal survival food since it lasts for a long

time, it does not require special storage, it can be eaten without any preparation". He also says it is very rich in Calcium (for the sake of comparison, it has twice as much as milk enriched with calcium). Carob has four % of protein and seventy-six % of carbohydrates which are mostly created by sugars (glucoses, fructose and maltose). The percentage of sugar in carob is twice higher than in sugar-beet. Beside that, carob is rich in phosphorus, magnesium and iron and vitamins A, B, B2, B3 and D, and a kilogram of carob gives around 1, 800 calories.

During the Spanish War of the 1930s, children who ate carob avoided ravaging stomach diseases, and during World War II the military troops on Malta and people in Greek villages owed their survival under German occupation to carob, more than any other food. This is also witnessed by the experience from the island of Vis when onto its free territory in 1944 came thousands of refugees from the Balkans to be transported further to Italy and from there further to El Shat on Sinai in refugee camps. In the overall shortage of food, carob saved thousands of hungry people.

In the past, when sugar was not widely available, carob was the principal food sweetener. "Chocolate that grows on tree" was extremely valued. Today, modern medical revelations again affirm carob and it becomes inevitable in healthy food stores throughout the world. It appears in hundreds of various products under the title of "organic food." It is added to bread and cakes, and many who are allergic to chocolate can easily substitute it with carob as it contains no caffeine and teobromine that chocolate contains and which can cause allergic reactions, and it has no tiramine that can cause migraines.

Carob successfully replaces cocoa that also has caffeine and teobromin. Also, the advantage of carob is that cocoa has considerably more fat (23% compared to 7% in carob), and 10 times less sugar than carob (only 5%).

Besides, carob is used in the production of numerous drinks and syrups and it lends its specific taste to them. It is also used to produce alcohol, and from one hundred kilograms of carob it is possible to get fifty liters of brandy.

In Praise of Carob

From the Greek word *kerátion* which stems from the Arabic word *qirat*, meaning the weight of four grains, came the word *karat* that is used to measure diamonds, pearls and gold, due to the extraordinary weight consistency of carob seeds. In the modern world, carat becomes a weight unit of one-fifth of a gram, and it is used to determine the purity of gold.

It is interesting that in the history of the Mediterranean maritime carat was used to mark the share in boat property. The number of carats varied in different areas, and in Dalmatia it was a common practice for a ship to have twenty four carats. The owner of the ship was always trying to sell part of a ship to the crew, especially to the captain, so that they rule the ship more responsibly.

In medicine it is used against diarrhea, and as prevention against dysentery. "Pectin and lignin in carob not only regulate digestion, they also take harmful substances (even

radioactive substances) from digested food and eliminate them from the organism" writes Marian Seddon in Dessert magazine. In the pharmaceutical industry carob is an ingredient in many medicines, and its seeds are used to make coatings for pills. Pills containing the extracts of carob are used by sportsmen during extreme performances.

From bark of a carob tree one produces tannin, and the carob tree is used in the production of pulleys on ships, for the production of luxurious furniture (ancient Egyptians decorated their temples with the carob tree), in sculpture it is especially valued for its hardness and intense red color and it is also used as fuel due to its great caloric value. Carob trees contribute to the recuperation of fertile land, they prevent erosion, and in some areas people plant it around houses as it is difficult to burn.

Carob seeds are used in the production of rubber and glue; the dust of the seeds is a part of writing ink, it is used in the production of shiner, shoe creams and various cosmetic preparations, such as face masks, toothpaste, and seeds are used as stabilizers, emulsion, thickening agents and as a means of the prevention of sugar crystallization. The seed powder is part of detergents, colors, starch for textile, photo paper and film tape, various insecticides etc; all the way to phosphorous matches.

I sing this praise to carob counting hundreds of its usages, although it would be enough just to praise the beauty of the oldest inhabitant of the Mediterranean. For to praise carob it would be enough the beauty of its lush tree top and amazing maze of branches that are twisted in all directions by the winds of past centuries, that crickets sing about in the heat of summer noons; it would be enough the beauty of its rough bark that is rough as the hands of my father and my mother and all the hands of my ancestors who remember these ancient branches, since these hands loved them, since these hands fed them and they took gratefully their exuberant gifts, since these hands grew among those branches, since these hands were branches, and branches of the carob trees were the hands of my ancestors.