

Πόντια ἔρσα: a Botanical *Hapax* in Pindar (N. 7.79)

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The term λείριον ἄνθεμον ποντίας ... ἔέρσας, designating a component in the construction of wreaths, is to be interpreted as “pliant stalk of rosemary”. The meanings selected for λείριος and ἄνθεμον are documented by other texts and are seen to be consistent with ποντία ἔρσα meaning “rosemary”. This latter definition for a term not otherwise directly attested, and commonly understood as “coral”, is conjectured on the basis of the Latin botanical terms *rosmarinus* and *ros maris* (possible calques of ποντία ἔρσα) combined with evidence that rosemary was used as a component in the construction of wreaths in antiquity.

Μοῖσά τοι

κολλᾶ χρυσὸν ἔν τε λευκὸν ἐλέφανθ' ἀμᾶ
καὶ λείριον ἄνθεμον ποντίας ὑφελοῖσ' ἔέρσας.
(Pindar, *Nem.* 77-79)

The Muse in fact, having plucked a pliant flowery stalk of rosemary is fastening it together with gold and with ivory.

The reference to stringing wreaths (εἶρειν στεφάνους) earlier in v. 77 prompts the conclusion that the object that the Muse is fastening together is a wreath.¹ The third of its components, to go with the gold and ivory, is described by a periphrastic figure: λείριον ἄνθεμον ποντίας ... ἔέρσας. Just what physical correlative this phrase represents has never been identified with any certainty, although the conjecture favoured since the time of the scholiasts is that it is coral.² That conjecture, however, poses several problems that in turn implicate various semantic uncertainties relating to other words in the sentence. Principal among

¹ For other opinions see Segal (1967: 460); Race (1986: 99).

² See e.g. Slater (1969: *s.vv.* ἄνθεμον; ἔρσα; πόντιος); Boedeker (1984: 93); Griffith & D'Ambrosio-Griffith (1988: 262-265); Steiner (1986: 55); the translation by Race (1997: 79); Egan (1985: 20) with additional references.

those uncertainties is the meaning of the word λείριον which many have assumed to be a colour term, precisely one meaning “white”. That assumption has been widely challenged on various grounds,³ and it is implicitly rejected here. Furthermore, even if λείριον did mean “white” it would not, as has been observed, be an appropriate term for coral which is not usually white.⁴ In addition to that there is no evidence that coral was worked into artifacts in Pindar’s time.⁵

The meaning “pliant” or “supple” is adopted here for λείριος on the evidence of several ancient lexicographers (Apollon., *Lex. Hom.* s.v. λειριόεντα; Hsch. s.v. λειριόεντα; Hdn., s.v. λειρόφθαλμος; *Suda* s.vv. λειριόεντα, λειριόεσσα λειρόφθαλμος) who, unbeknown to LSJ, offer such definitions as ἀπαλός and προσηγής. This is an appropriate meaning for the adjective when it is linked with ἄνθεμον meaning “flowery stalk” as it regularly is elsewhere (Thphr. *HP* 1.13.1; 7.8.3; 7.14.2), sometimes indeed in poetic contexts where it designates the material of a floral wreath or crown (Sem. F7.66; Pi. *O.* 2.72-74; Ar. *Ach.* 992; Cratin. F105.1 *PCG*).⁶

No one has actually glossed or translated ποντία ἔρσα as “rosemary” before, although a couple of interpreters have, apparently inadvertently, come very close to doing so. Boeckh long ago translated v. 79 into Latin: *et liliaceum florem marino surreptum rori*.⁷ There is no reason to suppose that by *marino ... rori* Boeckh (or any of his readers) understood anything but a

³ E.g. Bury (1890: *ad loc.*); Reiter (1962: 75-76); Fogelmark (1972: 34); Giesekam (1977: 254); Carey (1982: 172); Silk (1983: 3/9); Gerber (1984: s.v.); Egan (1985). Cf. Führer (1991: 1662).

⁴ Irwin (1974: 205-207).

⁵ See Boedeker (1984: 93-94).

⁶ The present argument is to be reconciled with that made in Egan (1985) for the meaning “moist, fluid, dewy.” Liquidity and suppleness are often semantically contiguous in Greek as in, for example the case of ὑγρός, ὑγρότης etc. The present context where poetic eloquence and a physical object are metaphorically connected tolerates, if it does not demand, a certain amount of polysemy.

⁷ Boeckh (1821: 82).

literal rendering of *ποντία ἔρσα*. It seems only accidental, then, that Boeckh's translation actually matches one of the standard Latin terms (the others being *rosmarinus* or *ros maris*) for *Rosmarinus officinalis* L., known as "rosemary" in English and by cognate terms in other vernaculars. Much more recently Griffith and d'Ambrosio-Griffith, commenting on this very passage, note the "*coincidence fascinante*" that a literal Latin translation of *ποντία ἔρσα* designates rosemary. They even observe that crowns were fashioned from rosemary in antiquity, but this does not lead them to suppose that Pindar was actually referring to rosemary here.⁸ The coincidences that have arisen, generations apart, in the work of Boeckh (and perhaps other translators) and of Griffith and d'Ambrosio Griffith hint at a solution which, as it happens, can actually be supported by a fair amount of lexical and pragmatic data.

Latin botanical nomenclature is heavily derived, either by transliteration or calque, from Greek. Perusal of André's work on Roman plant names yields several dozen calques such as *sentis canis* < κυνόςβατος, *sempervivus* < ἀείζωον, *victoriae folium* < νίκης φύλλον, *iovis flos* < διόσανθος, *semen leoninus* < λέοντος σπέρμα.⁹ The formula *ros maris* < *ποντία ἔέρσα* would fit the same pattern provided that the Greek term could also be identified with rosemary. At present the data on Greek terms for rosemary are rather sparse. There is *no* such term recognized in documents earlier than Theophrastus. Thereafter the regular term is *λιβανωτίς* (*δενδρολίβανον* being less frequent) which is itself sometimes used in Latin transliteration for the same plant (Pliny, *HN* 19.12.62). It is a Semitic loan-word¹⁰ and covers several plants with aromatic resins in addition to rosemary.¹¹ The dearth of direct evidence notwithstanding, it is intrinsically likely that the Greek lexicon had some term(s) specifically designating rosemary before Hellenistic times. As it is, the gap

⁸ Griffith & d'Ambrosio Griffith (1988: 266).

⁹ André (1985: xiii & s.vv).

¹⁰ See Chantraine (1974: s.v.); Müller (1974): R.C. Steiner (2000).

¹¹ See Carnoy (1959: 161); André (1985: 144); LSJ, s.v.

in the lexical record can accommodate a hypothesis based on the Pindaric text and the Latin practice of botanical calques. Thus the scheme “λιβανωτίς = ἔερα ποντία = *ros marinus*” postulates ἔερα ποντία as a botanical term that had, by some indeterminate post-Pindaric date, given way to λιβανωτίς and δενδρολίβανον (at least in the medical and pharmaceutical contexts that are their only witnesses) and had vanished from the Greek lexical record but for a trace in the botanical lexicon of Latin and a *hapax* in *Nemean* 7.

It remains to consider pragmatic evidence in support of the hypothesis. Rosemary appears to have been used regularly in the construction of wreaths in the Greek and Roman world. Modern experts on ancient wreaths might show no awareness of this fact,¹² but such ancients as Dioscorides, Galen and Oribasius tell us as much, often explicitly identifying λιβανωτίς with what the Romans called *rosmarinus*: λιβανωτίδος τῆς ῥοσμαρίνου Ῥωμαιστὶ καλουμένης (Diosc. 2.58.7); λιβανωτίς, ἦν Ῥωμαῖοι ῥοσμαρίνον καλοῦσιν, ἣ καὶ οἱ στεφανοπλόκοι χρῶνται (Diosc. 3.75.1 & almost verbatim Orib. 11.λ.9). Cf. τῆς δὲ εἰς τοὺς στεφάνους χρησίμης (Gal. 12.61.5; Paul. Aeg. 7.3.11). Among the Romans themselves, Horace (*Carm.* 3.23.15-16) writes of crowning the Lares with rosemary: *parvos coronantem marino rore deos*.¹³ The *Herbarius* of Ps.-Apuleius cites *coronalis* as a Latin term for rosemary.¹⁴ Since Ps.-Apuleius names Soranus as his authority, *coronalis* is itself likely to have been a calque on some Greek term such as στεφανωτικόν. Another Latin witness is Servius who writes (on *Aen.* 12.120) of *ros marinus* ... *id est* λιβανωτίς as a sacred herb

¹² Notably, Blech (1982) contains no mention of wreaths made of rosemary.

¹³ The Horatian text affords an instructive comparison with our Pindaric passage. One can only imagine what, in the absence of external lexical data in Latin, scholarly ingenuity would have made of “crowning the little gods with sea dew.”

¹⁴ Cf. André (1985: s.v. *coronalis*); Orth (1920: 1128-29); Baumann (1982: 89).

qua coronabantur fetiales et pater patratus. In post-classical times rosemary is attested as a decorative and emblematic fixture of festive occasions, and as an ingredient in wreaths (hence its occasional designation as *Kranzkraut* in German). There is even mediaeval and modern documentation for gilded rosemary and for coronets consisting of gold, gems and rosemary.¹⁵ The material and technical means for the construction of such objects were available in Pindar's time.

The hypothesis advanced above on lexical and pragmatic evidence yields an intelligible and contextually appropriate reading of what has always been a difficult verse of Pindar. At the same time it adds an item to the botanical lexicon of Greek that in turn documents the history of a Latin term.

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¹⁵ See e.g. Grieve (1967: 681-682); Northcote (1972: 128-130); Beals (1917: 233-235).

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