

Wild growing plants in the cuisine of modern Assyrians in the Eastern Syrian-Turkish borderland

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The population of most Arab (and Muslim) countries doubles every 20 to 30 years. The birth rate is particularly high in rural areas where most people can neither write nor read. The arable land area per one member of an average Syrian family earning livelihood from farming had declined over the 15 years period between 1970 and 1985 from 2.5 to 1.1 hectare.¹ Unforeseen effects of land amelioration carried out in recent years have added to the problem since using water from the Euphrates river has resulted in increasing salinization of the soil. Sadly, little attention has been paid to the Sumerian experience in this area! Hence, apart from 2 to 3 km-wide forested tracts stretching on both sides of the Euphrates, the rest of the land extending from the southern outskirts of the town of Der iz-Zor down south to the Iraqi border is totally unfit for cultivation of any plants as the fields are covered with a white coat of salt.²

Cultivation of certain plant species (often imposed by the authorities) and use of poor quality fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides (not always selective ones) have upset the natural balance of the local flora. The problem of nitrates and nitrites has so far been nonexistent in Syrian publications.³ In the course of the last twenty years many wild growing plants have disappeared from the face of the Earth. Are these losses irretrievable?

The examples to support the thesis are many. In the 1960s in the village of Qalat el-Hadi, the land along the now unused railway line was overgrown with the plant called *tahliyye*. Today not a single *tahliyye* can be found there. Its young seedlings used to be fed to cattle and sheep and people considered its

¹ The *Ath-thawra* Daily, 23.02.1994, p. 8. Currently it is probably no more that 0.6 hectare per family member. M. Abdalla, Making the Most of Nature in the Middle East? The Example of Syria. In *Food from Nature: Attitudes, Strategies and Culinary Practices: Proceedings of the 12th Conference of the International Commission for Ethnological Food Research 1998*, P. Lysaght, ed. (The Royal Gustavus Adolphus Academy for Swedish Folk Culture, Uppsala 2000), 388-398.

² The search for plants resistant to salt in soil was to be a subject of scientific studies. A number of post graduate students from Syria wanted to write dissertations on the problem (1990).

³ In the summer of 1969 I worked with a team which carried out sprays of farms with DDT. The solution was prepared on the spot – according to instruction of use – right next to wells. There were puddles of white liquid around them. One day a Beduin asked us to spray him from head to foot because as he said: „insects were breeding in his body”. Many a time when spraying inside buildings where cereals and other food products were stored in bulk, we saw snakes and scorpions falling down from the straw ceiling. The DDT concentration must have been very high.

peeled stem a delicacy. Other extinct plants include *qateryothe* (a shrub with narrow white and green leaves, developing edible buds of the size of an almond in the petiole and stem joint) and *lofikat* (an herb of the ploughed fields, with edible leaves and root). Popular healers had to give up looking for a plant called *farmeeqo* mentioned in ancient writings and used by them to induce sneezing.

The young farmers' knowledge of herbs used by their parents in cooking and popular medicine is increasingly scarce. The transfer of experience has been discontinued. Interest in plants has weakened even among older generation as elderly people associate herbs with periods of food scarcity and rural poverty. Less and less do wild growing plants find their way to the family table. The fact that the plants, which in the past had served as food for people and animals, have never been described in a systematic manner is a great loss for science. Listening to popular tales one can hear now and then some magical name of an unknown plant on which an Assyrian hermit lived for long years. Nowadays most people in Syria would not know that a plant such as oats (Assyr. *dasi*, Arab. *shofan*) known and used in this region of the world in ancient times is not just a weed deserving eradication but a plant with unique nutritional and health promoting properties.⁴

Attempts to bring herbs back to grace made in some responsible and nature-loving societies are unfortunately paralleled by a progressing loss of interest in herbs in many nations of the Middle East, including the Assyrians. There are no research stations for the study of wild plants in the region, no national parks and protected areas to preserve them; even albums and guidebooks on wild plants are hardly available. Drying out of rivers, which cannot be ascribed to anomalous phenomena in nature, and the resulting lowering of the ground water table causes irreversible damage to natural life. At the same time, the need to feed the fast growing population forces intensive cultivation of conventional crops important for the economy.

The wild growing vegetables used in Assyrian cuisine to almost the same degree as vegetables cultivated in gardens include plants from the mallow family (*hunbaro*, *toleke*, Arab. *khubbaz*) such as, for certain, dwarf mallow (*Malva neglecta* Wallr.) and probably marshmallow (*Althaea officinalis* L.), and also cut-leaved mallow (*Malva alcea* L.) and wild mallow (*Malva silvestris* L.). Some of these species are of course more popular than others having juicier and less hairy leaves and more pleasant taste. Juicy and only slightly hairy leaves and seeds (mostly in April and May) are eaten raw (by youths) or cooked (youths and adults). They have a pleasant aroma and somewhat sour taste when cooked. Mature leaves become hard, lose the aroma and turn inedible. Depending on

⁴ Aware of the undeniable health promoting properties of oats, the plant of the 21st century, I managed, with some difficulty, to convince my relatives living in Sweden to have some 'porridge'. For them it was unthinkable that a 'weed' such as oats could be fit to eat by humans. The dish was rated as tasty and words of praise were addressed to Europeans for "yet another discovery."

whether a mallow dish is prepared on a holiday or in the time of Lent, it is made with butter, *qaliyyo*⁵ or eggs, or just with some oil and is usually eaten with bread.

From the purslane family (*parpare*, *farfheeno*) common purslane is picked (*Portulaca oleracea* L.). All the parts above ground, especially the dark green, fleshy and juicy leaves with distinct sour taste, are eaten raw or are cooked and served with the same additions as mallow. The difference is that purslane is less satiating than mallow. It is refreshing and stimulates the appetite. A similar dish is prepared from common chicory (*marurto*, Arab. *Hindhe*) *barriyye* (*Cichorium intybus* L.) and chicory endive (*Cichorium endivia* L. *Compositae*). From the Polygonaceae family (*homuto*, Arab. *hummayda*) patience dock (*Rumex patientia* L.) has its place on the menu. This is probably true also of French sorrel (*Rumex scutatus* Lam.), Alpine dock (*Rumex alpinus* L.) and curly dock (*Rumex crispus* L.) and toothed dock (*Rumex dentatus* L.). Fresh wide leaves, light green with red reflexes are used for making dolmas after initial scalding; sometimes they are also pickled together with other vegetables. Long petioles of its big leaves and young stems are put at the bottom of a cooking pot in which a dish is to be simmered. This is to prevent its burning and to add the aroma contained in the juicy leaf veins. The same effect is achieved when using cabbage-leaf veins. Villagers know also a wild spinach species (*Spinacia tetrandra* Roxb.). A plant similar to it is called wild lettuce (*hosmurto*, Arab. *khass barri* (*Scorzonera parviflora* Gilib. and/or *Crepis reuteriana* Boiss. and/or *Lactuca tuberosa* Jack. and/or *Lactusa serriola* Torn.). Its long dark green leaves are eaten raw as an addition to spring salads.⁶

Apart from wild growing plants, Assyrian cuisine also makes use of mushrooms. Finding them requires luck as they are extremely rare. Probably only two species are picked: truffles (*adro*, *dombalane*, Arab. *kame* (*Terfezia claveryi* Chat.) and champignons (*fataryotho*, Arab. *fīir*).⁷ A single fruiting body of a truffle resembling a small potato can be found in fallow land. Its presence can be identified by a slight swelling of or a fissure in the ground. The fruit of truffles is

⁵ Potato-size pieces of beef and mutton preserved in the Assyrian farms by salting and melting with tallow in a large pot over a fire. It is a sort of 'instant' food, very tasty and aromatic, consumed by itself on cold mornings. It only needs to be slightly warmed up before consumption. It can be also added to all meat and half-meat dishes, or to scrambled eggs.

⁶ Both the Latin and European names of spinach derive from an Arabic word *sabanigh*, which is originally from Persian language are still in use. M. Nowiński, *History of Horticultural Plants and their Cultivation* [in Polish], PWRiL, (Warsaw 1977), 132.

⁷ The popular knowledge of mushrooms is almost nonexistent. The owner of the land on which sporadic mushrooms appear from time to time is thought to be in good grace with God. A sudden death of a shepherd's family after a meal of mushroom picked in the fields (Qamishli, 1970s) was blamed on a malicious snake which allegedly had vomited his deadly venom on the mushrooms.

believed to be an effect of lightning discharges and thunders. White fruit-bodies of this mushroom are a highly valued delicacy. They are eaten raw or cooked with onion and *qaliyyo*.⁸ Champignons, on the other hand, are used as additives to almost all fried dishes.

In spring and summer people look also for plants whose botanical parts are fit to eat. This group includes four genera from the Caesalpiniaceae family (*goumo*, *shoqille*, Arab. *kashshum*). The author has managed to identify only three of them, namely St. Johnsbread (carob-tree, *Ceratonia siliqua*), Congo senna (*Cassia augustifolia* Vahl.) and Alexandria senna (*Cassia acutifolia* Del.). Their local Assyrian names are: *das-safroune* (bird's – small and delicate seeds); *dad-dewe* (wolf); *dak-kurfe* (adder's); *dat-tawre* (ox's)⁹ and *shaheek* or *khatoun* (smooth, noble). The last species is called wild peas (or rather lupine). The shelled seeds are eaten raw or cooked in buttermilk. There are also at least three species from the Compositae family growing on fields' boundary strips and fallow land: cardoon, a very thorny perennial plant (*karbash* – *Cynara cardunculus* L., other possible name: *Cnicus benedictus* L. – anthodia) whose peeled stems are eaten raw. A similar looking plant, milk thistle (Assyr. *qorute*, Kurd. *qivarat*, Arab. *murrer*, *ankeez* – *Carduus marianus* L.) is used in various stages of vegetation. When it is young and stemless with many dark green leaves prostrate on the ground (it is called *streezarke*, in Kurdish – 'yellow thorn') the rhizome is pulled out and cooked and added to onions fried in oil. A fully developed *streezarke* has a long stem with a slightly bitter taste. It is peeled and eaten raw. It is believed to have digestive properties. In late summer the stem turns hard. Inside the achenes covered with yellowish pappus develop seeds of the barley corn eaten by animals.

Another plant from this family, growing only in well scarified soil, is artichoke (*arkuwwe*, *lagno*, *gawo*, Arab. *kaoub*, *harshaf* – *Cynara scolymus* L.).¹⁰ The edible part of the plant is primarily the root and young leaves picked up to mid April. The root has a wide range of culinary applications: it is cooked with lentil soup popular at this time of year (the final days of the Lent), it can be pickled together with other vegetables or it is coated with flour and fried in oil. On holidays artichoke root is simmered with meat and onions. Dry artichoke flowerheads which have not been removed from a field sown with wheat find their way to the reaped wheat mass. They are of a reversed pyramid shape with

⁸ In 1997 the price of truffle in Syria was 40 times the price of meat.

⁹ The author's translation of plant names: 'adder's' and 'ox's' fails to fully render the original popular meaning; it is only conventional. Plants were given names according to their important properties. The name of the first of the listed plants means that it is particularly liked by adders, while the next one is willingly eaten by oxen.

¹⁰ It is also known under the Latin name of *Gundelia tournefortii* L. J. W. Cowan, A. H. Sakr, S. B. Shadarevian, Z. I. Sabry, "Composition of Edible Wild Plants of Lebanon," *Journal of the Science of Food and Agriculture*, vol. 14, no 4, (1963): 484- 487.

dentated calyxes and white tubularly set seeds. After threshing, the flower heads (*qalqe*) are picked and the seeds they hold are eaten. In order to facilitate seed removal the flower heads are sometimes cooked. Another plant with edible root (eaten fried) is common dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale* Web.), a plant popular and eaten also in Europe.¹¹

Carob-tree (*Kharruva*, *kharnoufo*, Arab. *kharnoub*, *kharroub* – *Prosopis stephaniana* Kunth), a shrub form of the Mimosaceae family, a wild growing fodder plant reaching from 30 to 75 cm, has a very strong root system reaching up to 15 m deep into the soil. Numerous stems grow from the base and form lateral branches with short, conical needles and 3 to 7 mm long lancet-like leaves. The plant's usefulness in the kitchen covers its three important development stages. In blooming time (June) the pollen (yellow in color) is collected from the flowers and is eaten with sugar. In July green round pods (up to 2 cm in diameter) or oval pods with compact flesh with a few seeds inside are used. The thin and bitter membrane covering the fruit is removed by rubbing against a stone with the use of large quantity of water. As a result of rubbing, the fruit becomes sweetish and tasty. When the summer comes to an end, the fruit turns dark and dries out, the flesh turns distinctly fibrous, and the seeds contained in small chambers become separated from the placenta and turn very hard. When lightly hit with a stone the dry flesh of the fruit disintegrates into flour which is then cleared of the remains of the shell and seeds, mixed with sugar and eaten with a tea spoon or licked. A certain amount of mesquite flour is stored in homes as it is a very effective remedy against diarrhea.¹² Mesquite is a favorite fodder of cattle which willingly feed on both the leaves and dry stems but refuse to eat the fruit.

Other wild growing plants used in traditional cooking in the springtime include meadow cress (*rashale*, Arab. *rashad barri*, Kurd. *pirqalache*–*Cardamine pratensis*). Its entire aboveground herbaceous part is eaten raw with bread or as an ingredient of salads.¹³ There is also wild carrot (*gezore*, *hurpouse*, Arab. *jazar barri* – *Daucus sativus* Rochl.) which is rarely used by settled people but often sought after by shepherds. Since its growth takes place in winter time, its fruit is usually smaller than that of sown carrots. Another plant used by Assyrians is garden radish (*fuljyo*, Arab. *fijl barri* – *Raphanus sativus* L.) with edible tuber and young leaves. Then there also is wild mustard (*hardlouno*, Arab. *khardal barri* – *Brassica juncea* var. *napiformis*) whose young leaves are eaten cooked.

¹¹ The author observed the same practice among some Assyrian immigrants in Sweden.

¹² Since 1978 the author has kept over 5 kg of mesquite fruit which were supposed to undergo laboratory tests.

¹³ Another name of this plant in the local al-Jazeere Arabic dialect is *harra*, while in Lebanon it has been given a Latin name of *Rapistrum rugosum* L. and its other English name is gold-of-pleasure. It is also worth noting that the Lebanese *rashad barri*'s Latin name is *Coronopus parviflora* Jacq. (Engl. wart-cress). J. W. Cowan et al., "Composition of Edible Wild Plants of Lebanon."

One should also mention at least two varieties of taro (Assyr. *balbouse*, Arab. *qalqas* – *Colocasia esculenta* Schott) belonging to the Araceae family. Both have feeble, unbranched single-tuber stems a fairly considerable length of which remains coiled underground, and the rest protrudes up to 20 cm above ground. Only the top of the stem is covered with leaves. In *ayno d-tawre* variety ('cow eyes', Kurd. *chave chelak*) the leaves form a verticil, are short, petioleless, lobed and cleft, dark green, inedible. The other variety is called *sheke d-safoure* ('goatling testicles') – also here the leaves form a verticil at the top of the stem; they are long, lancet-like, dark green, and inedible. Local names of both varieties refer to the size and shape of the tuber from which they grow. The tuber is sweet with a slight touch of bitterness. It is eaten raw.

Fairly popular watercress (*qurnitho d-nahro*, *jarjeero*, Arab. *jarjeer*, *qara*, Kurd. *touzike* – *Nasturtium officinale* R. Br.), growing on stream banks is eaten in salads. Being rich in vitamins C, A and D, in industrialized countries it is used to prevent and treat avitaminosis.¹⁴ Another edible herb is peppered white top (*Qinnawre*, Arab. *jennebra* – *Cardaria draba* L.) from the Cruciferae family. People pick leaves growing on lateral stems of a young plant. They are brewed and then simmered in oil with onions and/ or *qaliyyo*. Blooming plants are inedible. One should also mention penny-royal (*nenno d-baro*, Arab. *nanaa barri*, Kurd. *punike* – *Mentha pulegium* L.). Its fresh leaves are added to spring salads and dried ones serve as aromatic condiment for sandwiches popular especially among youths. Such a sandwich is composed of a slice of bread spread with thick tomato paste sprinkled profusely with dried penny-royal leaves.

One simply cannot skip the useful long-rooted onion (*toumo*, Arab. *thoum barri*, Kurd. *seerike* – *Allium victorialis* L.). It appears at the break of winter and spring in fertile uncultivated fields and is picked when young, mostly in March. It has long and narrow fusiform stems set in a fairly small rhizome. Its inflorescence contains a multitude of aerial bulbs. In addition to the main bulb, the entire aboveground part of the plant is edible. It is a valuable ingredient of spring salads and pickles with long use. However its most common application is in the production of mould cheese made from condensed buttermilk (cf. dairy products). Another variety of the plant in use is bear's-garlic (*baslo d-zouwo*, *bouno*, Arab. *basla*, *bsela*, *silq barid* – *A. ursinum*). Its aboveground part is less developed and is often composed of just two oval, lance-shaped leaves, 3 to 4 cm

¹⁴ B. Hlava, D. Lánská, *Spice Herbs* [in Polish], PWRiL, (Warsaw 1983), 134, 188. F. S. Simaan, J. W. Cowan, Z. I. Sabry, "Nutritive Value of Middle Eastern Foodstuffs. I – Composition of Fruits and Vegetables Grown in Lebanon," *Journal of the Science of Food and Agriculture*, vol. 15, no. 11 (1964): 799-805, adopted for a plant called *jarjeer* growing in Lebanon with Latin name: *Eruca sativa* (garden rocket). It is grown in Asia mainly as an oil plant as approximately 30% of its seeds' content is oil. In Europe it is used mainly as condiment and vegetable (for making salads). It is most commonly used in French cuisine.

wide. The plant's tastiest part is considered to be the deltoid scape covered with the leave ocreae. Almost the same description refers to twinleaf squill (*Scilla bifolia*), although it is smaller in size.

Rhizomes and young leaves of yellow day-lily (Arab. *eslan* – Kurd. *sarsbeeke* – *Hemerocallis lilio-asphodelus*) are eaten fried in oil or butter, often with onions. It is also added to cooked cracked wheat or simmered with other vegetables, usually with tomatoes.¹⁵

Wild growing plants used for making teas include hyssop (*zofa* – *Hyssopus officinalis* L.) and balm (*milleesa* – *melissa officinalis* L.) and roman chamomile (*baybunaj* – *Anthemis nobilis* L.) used as a herbal medicine for flatulence. There are also teas made of a combination of a number of herbs and spices (their leaves or flowers) such as chamomile, hollyhock (*Althaea rosea*), thyme, maize stigma, caraway, fennel, garden sage, aleaster (*Eleagnus angustifolia*), balm, peppermint, damask rose and anise. They are used to make the popular *zhurat* (Arabic name of a flower drink). Although *zhurat* is nowadays drunk in many Arab countries and in Turkey, it is still considered to be the national drink of Syria. It is sold in 60-gram containers, with the 4-year use by date. It is served both in homes and in coffee shops.¹⁶

An example of a herbal drink always served cold (in summer with ice) is *sous*,¹⁷ made from licorice root (*Glycyrrhiza glabra?* L.). Making of *sous* has been turned into an industry in Aleppo. In summer months entire families used to move to Qamishli, and the drink was distributed by itinerant vendors carrying big pitchers, decorated beautifully with artistic inlays, on their backs. This purple drink was believed to have medicinal properties, effective in particular in kidney problems.¹⁸ Another summer time drink, light brown in color, is made from tamarind seeds (*Tamarindus indica* L.).¹⁹

The sun-heated limestone slopes of the Tur Abdin plateau (see map) have particularly rich flora. Unlike the Syrian al-Jazeera plain, the Tur Abdin landscape features luminous shrubs and oak (*baloute*: with distinction between

¹⁵ It grows in nature also in South Europe, in the Caucasus, South Siberia and in Japan. M. Nowiński, *History of Horticultural Plants...*, 272.

¹⁶ Instructions for use written on the package: „Put one teaspoon of the mixture into a cup, top with boiling water and infuse under cover for 5 minutes, then strain and add sugar to taste”. Every time the author stayed in the Assyrian district of Qamishli he never saw the patrons of the only local coffee shop to order any other drink but *zhurat*.

¹⁷ In the Arabic dialect of Syria *sous* also means ‘bark beetles’.

¹⁸ Not very long ago, the dried and ground root was widely used by the Beduin for leather tanning. The occurrence and applications of the plant, including for ink making have been described by M. Nowiński, *History of Medicinal Plants and their Cultivation* [In Polish], PWRiL, (Warsaw 1980), 95-96.

¹⁹ For description of this tree, its history and use see: M. Nowiński, *History of Horticultural Plants...*, 81.

trees – *dawme*, saplings – *gayer* and shrubs – *tarishyotho*),²⁰ fig (*tene*) and sweet chestnut (*kastana*) groves. Other local plants include pomegranates, almonds and lentisk pistaches (Assyr. *sheegore*, *kiyyo*, Arab. *mistakke* – *Pistacia lenticus*) whose fruit is used to make greenish, durable and fairly hard chewing gum, and mahaleb cherry (*mahlab* – *Cerasus mahaleb* Mill.). *Mahlab* is a tree reaching 10 m of height whose wood contains coumarin. It is highly valued and resistant to disease.²¹ That is why the trunk of this long-living plant is used mainly as the stock for grafted noble varieties of other trees. Fruits are set in 4 to 12-flower corymbs which appear simultaneously with leaves. The pea-sized drupe is dark red in color and has an almond taste. It is juiceless and generally of no use.²² Another fairly common plant of the region is sumac (*Rhus typhina* L.). Its fruiting bodies are often used instead of citric acid and they color food pink. Sumac fruits are also used in a dish called *fattoush* (the top of a bread cake is painted with oil and topped with a layer of sumac with vegetables and onions and baked). Although sumac is believed to derive from North America,²³ its name

²⁰ Oak is very important also as animal feed for winter. Oak twigs (*sheeqotho*) are picked and piled into a 4-meter high stake (*kosheetho*) into the home yard. The top of the stake is then pressed with stones in order to keep the twigs in place. Goats like to feed on them. The same is true of *ptheele* which is straws of grass tied together into a solid bundle. Its dried external layer keeps the inside fresh for the whole winter. Oak leaves are sometimes covered with a sticky and shiny coating called *arouro* ('honey-dew'). Natives of Tur Abdin I spoke to about it, rejected my supposition that the substance is an excretion of the aphids feeding on the leaves. With their proboscises the insects make invisible openings in the leaves and suck out the juice which after processing in their bodies is excreted in the form of a sweet viscous substance. We know that aphids feeding on a linden tree are able to "produce" some 25 kg of honey-dew within 2 to 3 weeks. Gumowska I., *Bees and People* [in Polish], Watra, Warsaw 1986, pp. 5-6. The leaves are picked and rinsed and the solution obtained is boiled till thick. The resulting syrup is sweet and aromatic. Many of the people I spoke to assured me that this had been a popular foodstuff as late as in the 1960s. Oak is a prevailing species in Tur Abdin's vegetal cover, and the honey-dew period occurs every few years. Acorns of some oak varieties have a pleasant taste and they are eaten dried or roasted or sometimes in the form of sprouts (*nazghe*).

²¹ M. Nowiński, *History of Crop Plants and Plant Cultivation* [in Polish], PWRiL, Warsaw 1970), 318.

²² Monks of Tur Abdin can be proud of their profound theoretical and practical knowledge of tree crossing. In the Mor Malke monastery (mid way between Nusaybin and Midyat) I saw trees with mahaleb cherry trunks and fig, apricot and plum branches. Such a multi-tree blossomed in different colors and had fruit almost during the entire summer. According to the monastery's prior, trunks of the trees bearing bitter fruit make a good stock. *Mahlab* trees are said to reach over 200 years of age.

²³ M. Nowiński, *History of Horticultural Plants...*, 205.

means 'red' in Assyrian. There are also other fruit-bearing trees known to the author by their Assyrian names such as *gargnose* and *azrole* (with stone fruits similar to wild myrobalan plum and taste similar to pineapple). Among wild growing vegetables worthy of mention are: *karode* (a plant resembling leak with a feeble stem); *mzeegha* (a herb with large leaves used for making dolmas and served cooked); *hrafroufo* (a sour tasting herb); *lante* (a plant similar to *arkuwwe*, with hard rhizomes strongly rooted in the ground) and *horishme* which is a variety of taro with an edible tuber. *Horishme* has a single, straight and flexible stem, used for making plaits just for fun, made in such a way that the tubers are lined at one side. It is a weed growing in uncultivated vineyards. That is why an expression has been coined: *ak-karmaththe khayeebi* ('their vineyards have gone wild') meaning that the owners have left their land and the abandoned vineyards have been overgrown by *horishme*. Berry-bearing perennials or shrubs common in Europe do not grow in any of the regions discussed here.²⁴

In conclusion, the author cannot but briefly mention also common Middle East vegetables widely known also in Europe grown by Assyrian farmers in their fields and house gardens. These include onions, tomatoes, peppers, garlic, carrots, parsley, radishes, aubergines, summer squashes, head lettuce, cucumbers, pumpkins, cabbage, beans, broad-beans, Jamaica sorrel and, among condiments, peppermint and bittercress. Rural plots, which up to the 1970s could be of any size, were usually situated next to the farm buildings and surrounded with high walls made of clay. The gardens were usually synclinal in shape which facilitated their fertilization with manure and organic waste.

The native land's landscape is made by people but also by plants. At least half of the former Assyrian population of the region under discussion live currently as immigrants in Europe, USA and Australia. Will their return to the abandoned villages stop the work of destruction and restore vitality to this land?

²⁴ Plants whose names are still alive in the memory of the older generation of people but which the author was unable to identify include: *tartam*, *qirpish hayle*, *ardeko* and *birzayno*. Assyrian immigrants in Sweden did not know that the berries of currant bushes which are fairly common in this country and which like mushrooms are picked by hardly anyone, are edible. During a walk with relatives the author came across some currant bushes (in Södertälje and Västerås); during an hour we picked six full buckets of fruit. Using a gelling agent we processed them into jam and juice. Since that time the preserves have become an almost ever present kitchen stock. Now it happens that even some Swedes (like, for instance, the patrons of the author's brother-in-law's restaurant) pick the fruits from currant bushes growing in the vicinity of their houses and bring them to their Assyrian acquaintances.