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The Scent of the Gods, the Treasure of Kings: The Multifaceted Use of Saffron in the Ancient Mediterranean World

Tanrıların Kokusu, Kralların Hazinesi: Antik Akdeniz Dünyasında Safranın Çok Yönlü Kullanımı

Meryem KARAKURT GÖKSAL*

Abstract: While the exorbitant economic value of saffron (*Crocus sativus L.*) and its historical equivalence to gold in the ancient Mediterranean are well-documented; modern scholarship has predominantly relegated the plant to the status of a luxury trade commodity. This reductionist approach obscures the complex socio-cultural, cultic, and pharmacological roles saffron played in antiquity. This study problematizes the strictly economic categorization of saffron by systematically investigating its multifaceted functions across the ancient Mediterranean world. Utilizing a multidisciplinary approach, the research cross-examines the literary accounts of ancient authorities, such as Theophrastus, Pliny, Dioscorides, Galen, and Strabo, with extant epigraphic and archaeological evidence. The paper first critically evaluates the geographic distribution of primary production centers, specifically focusing on prominent hubs in Cilicia, Lycia, and Sicilia. It subsequently analyzes the plant's integration into elite consumption practices, including gastronomy, textiles, pharmacology, religious rituals, and the perfumery industry. The findings argue that saffron transcended its material worth, functioning as a potent signifier of social stratification and a central element in cultural-religious paradigms. Ultimately, through a comparative analysis of ancient sources, this study re-contextualizes saffron not merely as a high-value raw material, but as a critical socio-cultural construct, opening a broader discussion on its symbolic dimensions in antiquity.

Keywords: Saffron (*Crocus sativus*), Ancient Mediterranean, Use of Saffron in Antiquity, Luxury Consumption, Socio-Economic History

Öz: Antik Akdeniz dünyasında safranın (*Crocus sativus L.*) fahiş ekonomik değeri ve altınla eş tutulması iyi bilinmekle birlikte, modern literatür bu bitkiyi çoğunlukla yalnızca lüks bir ticari meta statüsüne indirgeme eğilimindedir. Bu indirgemeci yaklaşım, safranın antik toplumlardaki karmaşık sosyo-kültürel, kültik ve farmakolojik rollerini gölgelemektedir. Bu çalışma, safranın salt ekonomik bir araç olarak kategorize edilmesini sorunsallaştırmakta ve antikçağdaki çok katmanlı işlevlerini bütüncül bir perspektifle incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Multidisipliner bir yaklaşımın benimsendiği araştırmada; Theophrastus, Plinius, Dioskorides, Galenos ve Strabon gibi antik otoritelerin metinleri, günümüze ulaşan epigrafik ve arkeolojik verilerle çapraz okumaya tabi tutulmuştur. Çalışma ilk olarak Kilikia, Lykia ve Sicilia gibi önde gelen üretim merkezlerinin coğrafi dağılımını ve üretim kalitesini eleştirel bir yaklaşımla değerlendirmektedir. Ardından bitkinin gastronomi, tekstil, farmakoloji, dini ritüeller ve parfüm endüstrisi gibi seçkin tüketim pratiklerine entegrasyonu analiz edilmektedir. Elde edilen bulgular, safranın yalnızca maddi bir değer taşımadığını; aynı zamanda sosyal statünün, dini sembolizmin ve kültürel kimliğin güçlü bir göstergesi olarak işlev gördüğünü ortaya koymaktadır. Sonuç olarak bu makale, antik kaynakların karşılaştırmalı bir analizi yoluyla safranı salt nadir bir hammadde olarak değil, Akdeniz havzasının sosyo-kültürel yapısında kritik bir unsur olarak yeniden konumlandırmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Safran (*Crocus sativus*), Antik Akdeniz, Safranın Anikçağdaki Kullanımı, Lüks Tüketim, Sosyo-Ekonomik Tarih

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Saffron (*Crocus sativus L.*) is a species belonging to the genus Crocus within the family Iridaceae, which is part of the order Liliales, the class Liliopsida, the division Magnoliophyta, and the kingdom Plantae[1]. There are approximately 80 species of the Crocus genus worldwide, 32 of which are found in Turkey, 18 of which are endemic. Some species also have subspecies, with numbers ranging from 2 to 10. Whilst some Crocus species flower in autumn, others flower in spring[2] and propagate vegetatively via bulbs[3]. They are characterised by having an annual above-ground part and a perennial underground part[4]. The plant's chemical constituents include safranal, which gives it its scent; picrocrosin, which determines its taste; and crosin, which provides its characteristic colour[5].

Saffron, regarded as the world's most expensive spice, is also known as 'the world's most expensive spice plant', 'the plant that has given its name to a district in Turkey', 'The sacred plant', "*The plant that can dye 100,000 times its own weight in water yellow*" and, most commonly, "*The plant where one gram is considered equivalent to one gram of gold*". In antiquity, saffron (largely sourced from various regions of Anatolia) served as a vital raw material widely used by the societies of the time[6]. Its uses stem from its colouring properties, pleasant fragrance, characteristic taste and medicinal effects, and it was particularly favoured in the manufacture of perfumes[7].

The aim of this study is to systematically examine the uses of the saffron plant in antiquity, based on archaeological finds and ancient written sources. The study aims to evaluate the cultivation of the plant, its quality classification, its functions in daily life, and its role in the perfume industry, drawing on the works of natural historians and medical writers of the period. In this context, the accounts of ancient authorities such as Theophrastus, Pliny, Dioscorides and Galen regarding saffron will be examined comparatively.

The Historical Development of Saffron Use in Antiquity

Archaeological remains, epigraphic documents and works written by natural historians of antiquity provide significant data on the geographical distribution, production techniques and consumption practices of the saffron plant. Although the plant's origin cannot be precisely determined[8], existing

1 Arslan 1986, 180.

2 Davis 1988, 9; see also Mathew 1984, 413 ff.

3 Bedevian 2021, 208.

4 Tisserand & Young 2014, 412.

5 Tarantilis & Polissiou 1999, 45; Kumar et al. 2009, 44 ff; Melnyk et al. 2010, 1982.

6 Saltu 2002, 7.

7 Açıkgöz, 2010, 3.

8 Tracing the origins of its cultural application, evidence indicates that saffron-based pigments derived from wild crocus species were utilized in 50,000 year old cave paintings in north-western Iran, a region now situated within the borders of modern-day Iraq (Humphries 1996, 20). Current archaeobotanical data is still far from establishing a definitive starting date for the domestication of the saffron plant (*Crocus sativus*). However, there are popular but as yet unconfirmed claims that pigment residues identified in certain cave settlements in north-eastern Iran, dated to approximately 50,000 years ago, may be associated with saffron. These claims are generally found in secondary sources and are not supported by scientific publications. Nevertheless, given the natural range of Crocus species and the biodiversity of the Iranian plateau, one might consider the hypothesis that wild saffron species in this region may have been recognised and potentially utilised by Palaeolithic communities. Acknowledging that the pigment traces in the aforementioned cave finds have not yet been confirmed through spectroscopic or phytolith analyses as belonging to the Crocus genus, the aim is to re-evaluate such claims in the light of archaeological and botanical data. The hypothesis regarding the early use of saffron can be tested through both iconographic

sources suggest that saffron originated in the Eastern Mediterranean, likely in the regions of Anatolia and Iran[9].

Egyptian medical papyri dating back to the 19th century BCE also provide important information regarding the pharmacological use of saffron. The presence of saffron among the herbal remedies listed in the Ebers Papyrus[10] clearly demonstrates the raw material's place in Egyptian medical practice[11]. Similarly, the Edwin Smith[12] and Hearst[13] papyri also systematically document the therapeutic properties of aromatic and colouring plants. Information regarding perfumery, particularly in recipes for the preparation of scented oils, suggests that saffron was also used. Indeed, some studies have reported archaeochemical data indicating that saffron pigments were found in ointment jars discovered in Egyptian tombs[14].

Further evidence from the Mediterranean Basin comes from the frescoes found at Akrotiri (Santorini), a Minoan settlement. Dating to around 1600 BCE and located in building Xeste 3, these wall paintings depict scenes of saffron harvesting and are referred to in modern literature as the 'Saffron Gatherers'[15]. These frescoes[16] are among the rare archaeological records that

analysis and palaeoenvironmental reconstruction techniques. In this context, a comparative analysis of the reddish pigments found in Palaeolithic settlements in Iran with compounds belonging to the Crocus genus (particularly crocin and safranal) may shed light on future interdisciplinary research.

9 Groom 1992, 406.

10 The Ebers Papyrus, a comprehensive medical text dating to around 1550 BCE and containing over 700 treatment prescriptions, is regarded as one of the most important sources regarding the use of plant-based medicines in ancient Egypt. Saffron (*Crocus sativus*) is also mentioned among the herbal drugs in this papyrus, indicating that saffron was not merely a dye or flavouring agent, but also a component utilised in medical applications.

11 Sarpaki 2001, 203; Baytop 2001, 13.

12 Dated to around 1600 BCE and likely a copy of an older text, this papyrus is one of the earliest medical documents focusing on trauma surgery. In particular, head injuries, spinal injuries and fractures are examined systematically; sections on examination, diagnosis, treatment and prognosis are provided in a structured manner for each case. It is notable for its rational and observation-based approach. See also Breasted 1930, 3–15.

13 The Hearst Papyrus is an important medical text, generally dated to the 16th–15th centuries BCE (New Kingdom, 18th Dynasty), containing approximately 260 prescriptions relating to Ancient Egyptian medicine. Written in hieratic script, the papyrus covers treatment formulas for the digestive system, urinary disorders, toothaches, skin diseases and parasitic infections. Although the text contains magical elements, it is notable for its systematic presentation of pharmacological applications based on plant, mineral and animal substances, and is one of the fundamental sources reflecting the practical therapeutic repertoire of the Ancient Egyptian medical tradition. See Reisner 1905, 8.

14 Marinatos 1984, 23–29; Doumas 1992, 45–47.

15 Yıldırım 2007, 10.

16 The compositions uncovered at the Akrotiri Archaeological Site, referred to in the literature as the 'Saffron Gatherers Frescoes', provide a powerful visual dataset demonstrating that in the Late Bronze Age Aegean world, aromatic plants were positioned not merely as objects of agricultural production, but as substances possessing high symbolic capital integrated with ritual and therapeutic practices. The depiction of crocus flowers within the composition, rendered with equal intensity and rhythmic repetition as the figurative field, reveals that the plant is conceived not merely as a background element but as a meaning-bearing subject situated at the iconographic centre. In particular, the fact that female figures perform the harvesting action through stylised, controlled, and ceremonial gestures suggests that this practice is encoded not as an ordinary agricultural activity, but as part of a sacred production and offering ritual. The manner in which saffron is gathered and transported indicates that it was incorporated into a cultic circulation within the context of healing, purification, and likely the production of aromatic oils or ointments, whilst the overall composition of the scene demonstrates that knowledge of scent and healing in the early Mediterranean was organised within a socially gendered and sanctified economic structure through the plant (woman)

visually document the cultural and economic importance of saffron in Bronze Age Aegean societies . The Nineveh tablets, dating from the 7th century BCE and unearthed in Mesopotamia, contain the earliest written evidence of saffron's use for medicinal purposes. These tablets record that priests used saffron in medical practices and that saffron was included in the medicinal preparations mentioned in the cuneiform texts of the period[17].

The earliest systematic text on saffron in the Hellenic world is found in Theophrastus's work *Historia Plantarum* (History of Plants). Theophrastus describes saffron as having a herbaceous structure and leaves as fine as a hair[18], and also notes that the plant flowers for a short period between the end of October and the beginning of November[19]. The Roman naturalist Pliny, in his work *Naturalis Historia*, corroborates Theophrastus's observations, recording that saffron blooms with its flower petals, though the leaves appear before the flowers[20]. In the same work, Pliny notes that the bulb's broad and fleshy structure sustains the plant's vitality, that planting it firmly pressed into the soil contributes to better growth, and that the highest quality saffron grows in frequently traversed areas such as roadside verges[21]. Regarding planting and harvesting periods, Pliny reports that saffron is planted in spring and harvested at the winter solstice, when the flower reaches its best colour[22].

Dioscorides, a botanist and pharmacologist living in the 1st century CE, noted that the drying process should be carried out in a clay pot under the sun and that the plant must be turned immediately to ensure it grinds easily[23]. Galen, a physician who lived in the 2nd–3rd centuries CE, provides detailed information on saffron processing techniques. According to Galen, after the stigmas are removed from the centre of the flower, they are left to dry for three to four

ritual triangle. In this context, the frescoes in question should be regarded as among the earliest visual documents simultaneously representing the social, medical and religious functions of aromatic substances. See also Day 2011, 337-379.

17 Although the term a-zu-pi-ru-um found in Mesopotamian cuneiform texts has been directly translated by some researchers as Crocus sativus, i.e. saffron, this interpretation is open to debate from both a philological and a botanical perspective. When the term's phonetic structure and sound values are considered, it is seen to bear a higher degree of phonetic and semantic similarity to Carthamus tinctorius (safflower), known in modern languages as 'false saffron'. In particular, the proximity of the suffix "-piru" to roots in Semitic languages that carry meanings related to essence, pigment or dye extraction suggests that this term refers to a plant-based dye. In this context, the possibility that a-zu-pi-ru-um refers not to saffron itself in Mesopotamian botanical terminology, but to the safflower plant—a similar yet more widespread, more accessible alternative used for similar purposes—should not be overlooked. Furthermore, it is known that in Mesopotamian medical and dye recipes, plants were identified not by their fixed biological species names, but by functional and contextual designations. Consequently, whilst the suggestion of 'saffron' as a translation for the term 'a-zu-pi-ru-um' (column 3, 19) is technically possible, it cannot be said to be definitive; linguistic and contextual indicators suggest that the term actually refers to another plant serving as a pigment source, likely an alternative species such as safflower. This situation also highlights the difficulties in directly matching ancient terminology with modern botanical classifications; it necessitates the combined evaluation of both etymological and functional approaches during the translation process. Tablet MSL 15, 008 A / P229672 Hilprecht Collection, University of Jena, Jena, Germany, Penn Museum, Philadelphia Museum number; CDLI (Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative). Tablet P229672 (MSL 15, 008 A; Museum no: CBS 07349 + HS 1874). Erişim adresi: https://cdli.earth/artifacts/229672; Civil 2004, MSL 15, 8 (Tablet P229672; CBS 07349 + HS 1874, Penn Museum ve Hilprecht Collection, Jena).

18 Thphr. *hist. plant*. VI. 6. 10.

19 Thphr. *hist. plant*. VI. 8. 3; VII. 7. 4.

20 Plin. *nat*. XXI. 34.

21 Thphr. *hist. plant*. VI. 6. 10.

22 Plin. *nat*. XXI. 31.

23 Dios. *Mat. Med*. 1. 25.

days; the part known as the 'spike' is cut off and discarded, and the remaining portion is stored in a tightly sealed clay pot[24].

Species Classification and Quality Assessment

In antiquity, natural historians classified saffron according to its varieties and recorded their quality assessments in their works. Theophrastus divides saffron into three groups: mountain saffron, odourless saffron and cultivated saffron[25]. In the following section of the same work, it is stated that there are two types of odourless saffron: white and spiny[26]. When ranking the quality of raw materials, Pliny notes that the best saffron is the wild variety, emphasising that whilst cultivated saffron is more visually appealing, its potency remains low. Pliny also records that even in Cyrene, where the flowers generally grow to the highest quality, the saffron yield is low[27]. Noting that saffron carries a risk of counterfeiting due to its high price, Pliny stated that a fake product could be identified by whether it crumbles when squeezed between the fingers[28]. Dioscorides, meanwhile, reported that the weight of saffron was increased by adding ground husks, lead or lead sulphide, and that a fake product could be distinguished by its smell[29].

Ancient sources offer differing assessments regarding the geography where the highest quality saffron is cultivated. Whilst Theophrastus states that the most fragrant saffron is grown in Cyrene[30], Dioscorides ranks them as follows: first, Corycus saffron from Cilicia; second, Olympus saffron from Lycia; and third, Aigai saffron from Aeolia. In the same passage, Dioscorides describes Cyrene and Sicilian saffron as low-quality, whilst classifying Italian saffron as expensive[31]. Strabo, whilst mentioning the superior quality of Sicilian saffron[32], records in the *Geographica* that the finest saffron is that of Corycus[33]. Pliny, on the other hand, states that the finest saffron is grown on MountCorycus, followed by products from Mount Olympus in Lycia and Centoripa in Sicilia[34].

Modern methods of classifying saffron by quality have been evaluated according to various criteria, much like in antiquity; however, it is evident that criteria varying from region to region have had a significant influence. For example, Kashmiri Saffron and Turkish Saffron have been assessed for quality according to their own criteria. To illustrate this, the classification of Kashmiri Saffron is Extra (Stahi), Medium (Mogra) and Low (Laçha). In Turkey, however, there is a standard regarding the quality of saffron. According to these established standards, it is divided into a total of three groups: Extra, First Class and Second Class[35]. Depending on the class into which it is grouped, the stigmas of the saffron plant have gained value particularly due to their exotic flavour, bitter taste, colour and scent, which adds value to perfumery[36].

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24 Gal. *Comp. Med*. 11. 26.
25 Thphr. *hist. plant*. VI. 8. 3.
26 Thphr. *hist. plant*. VII. 4. 4.
27 Plin. *nat*. XXI. 31.
28 Plin. *nat*. XXI. 34.
29 Diosc. *Mat*. *Med*. I. 25.
30 Thphr. *hist*. *plant*. IV. 3. 1.
31 Dios. *Mat*. *Med*. I. 25.
32 Str. VI. 2. 7.
33 Str. XIV. 5. 5.
34 Plin. *nat*. XXI. 31.
35 Açıkgöz 2010, 48.
36 Kumar et al. 2009, 48.

Uses in Everyday Life

In ancient times, the use of scent was viewed by people as a symbol of divinity and was associated with ambrosia (the food of the gods)– a substance unique to the gods[37]. According to mythological accounts, saffron grew as the first plant on Earth from the blood flowing from the liver of Prometheus, which was pecked by an eagle, after he was punished for stealing fire from the gods and giving it to humanity[38]. According to Homer's account, on the Gargarus peak of Mount Ida, where Zeus resided, a sweet dish made from saffron was served to Zeus and his wife Hera[39]. The colour of saffron was favoured in the garments of goddesses and queens[40]; the plant was used as an important symbolic image, both for its colouring properties and its pungent scent.

Ovid noted that saffron, known to play a significant role in religious rituals, was a costly raw material[41]. Lucretius described the atmosphere of temples where Cilician saffron was scattered and the scents of Eastern incense rose[42], noting that priests wore saffron-coloured robes during religious ceremonies[43]. When examining the use of saffron in incense form in the modern sense, it is believed that it reduces stress and anxiety in humans, may have a calming effect on the body and mind, and may assist in enhancing mental clarity. In particular, it is thought that its scent acts as a stimulant, helping to sharpen focus and concentration[44]. In particular, during the funerals of wealthy and prominent individuals, saffron was placed amongst the wood pile to release a pleasant fragrance into the air whilst the body was being cremated. It is known that the saffron used for this purpose was preferably sourced from Cilicia[45]. A notable epigraphic evidence regarding the use of saffron as incense is an inscription found near ancient Corinth. Dated to the second half of the 1st century BCE, this inscription relates how a lady named Iunia Theodora hosted Lycians, who had been exiled due to the civil war, in her residence in Corinth[46]. In return for this kindness, the Lycian League presented Iunia Theodora with 5 mna (approximately 2.15 kg) of saffron to be burned as incense at her funeral[47]. Given the economic value of saffron, this quantity represents an exceptionally generous and honourable gift.

The saffron plant had a wide range of uses in ancient daily life: as a flavouring in food, a dye in textiles, an ornamental plant in gardens, incense in religious ceremonies, and a raw material for medicine. The gastronomic use of saffron was primarily to colour wine, in the preparation of the special wine known as Aminnaious[48], to add both colour and aroma to honey[49] and and to impart a pleasant fragrance to pastries[50]. Horace, a poet of the Augustan period, also noted in a recipe that a small amount of Corycus saffron should be sprinkled over a sauce cooked with

37 Çapar 1990, 67.
38 Hist. Aug. *Hel*. 28. 5.
39 Hom. *Il*. 346–353.
40 Apoll. *Argon*. III. 851–857.
41 Ovid. *Met*. IV. 390.
42 Lucr. II. 414–417.
43 Apul. *Met*. VIII. 27.
44 Fukuki et al. 2011, 728 ff.
45 Plin. *nat*. XXI. 31.
46 Pallas et al. 1959, 496 ff; *BCH* 83 (1959) 496-508; *SEG* XVIII 143 lines 22–30.
47 *BCH* 83 (1959) 496-508; *SEG* XVIII 143 lines 61–65.
48 Plin. *nat*. XXI. 31.
49 *Geop*. VII. 13. 2.
50 *Geop*. VIII. 22. 3.

chopped herbs, followed by the addition of olive paste[51]. Pliny states that adding saffron to sweet substances such as honey is inappropriate, but that it yields excellent results in water and wine, particularly in sweet wines[52].

The use of saffron in the textile industry (specifically the dyeing of garments and fabrics with saffron) was a widespread and costly practice in both Hellenic[53] and Roman societies[54]. It is known that the preferred saffron-coloured fabrics were woven and dyed in Phrygia[55]. However, in modern times, synthetic food colourings have been banned in some countries due to their harmful effects, and there has been a return to natural dyes[56]. The extraordinary tinctorial potency of saffron, characterized by its ability to impart a vibrant yellow hue even at extreme dilutions, underscores its historical significance as a dye; moreover, the exceptional water solubility of its crocin content provides a distinct functional advantage within the agro-food industry [57]. As a food ingredient, it has been used to colour food products such as butter, pasta and cheese[58]. Due to its ability to impart a golden yellow colour, saffron has been a preferred raw material in dyeing, particularly for textile products[59].

Saffron is also known to be used as an ornamental plant in gardens due to its attractive appearance. It is known that saffron brought from Cilicia and Sicilia, where production was particularly intensive, was planted in Roman gardens[60]. Pliny notes that saffron production was not profitable in Italy; therefore, the plant was planted not for production but to adorn the city[61]. The author of the work *Geoponica* records that, in addition to providing an attractive appearance and a pleasant fragrance to gardens, saffron increases crop yields when planted amongst trees and is beneficial for bees[62]. It is also known that saffron was used for ornamental purposes in the modern era[63]. There are many species of crocus found in nature, but the saffron varieties used in urban landscaping have been specifically cultivated for ornamental purposes. Researchers have planned to systematically organise the flowering periods of saffron flowers, taking into account the plant's morphological and geographical characteristics[64].

Saffron was one of the most widely used plants in the field of medicine in antiquity. The fact that saffron was used in various forms is a notable point. In particular, while Dioscorides[65] noted that it was used by drinking, swallowing, and applying as an ointment to the body's outer surface, Pliny[66] recorded that it was generally stored in containers made of horn as an important mixture. It has been stated that, particularly regarding Corycus saffron, if it possesses a fresh, vibrant colour and a slight whiteness in its folds, the variety that is long, unbroken and intensely

51 Petr. *Sat*. 60. 6.
52 Plin. *nat*. XXI. 137.
53 Aristoph. *Clouds* 51; Colum. *Rust*. IX. 4. 4; see also Li & Wu 2002, 1305 ff; Mzabri 2019, 63 fn. 37-39; 41.
54 Hor. *Ser*. II. 4. 63–69.
55 Verg. *Aen*. IX. 614–618.
56 Thanoon & Jameel 2025.
57 Rabani-Foroutagheh et al. 2014; 1872 ff; Cardone et al. 2020, 272.
58 Ahmed et al., 2021, 221 ff.
59 Wachsmann et al. 1987, 36–39.
60 Apul. *Met*. VIII. 27.
61 Plin. *nat*. XIII. 10.
62 Colum. *Rust*. III. 8. 4.
63 Dalby 2003, 45.
64 Herbert 1847, 24.
65 Dios. *Mat*. *Med*. I. 25.
66 Plin. *nat*. XXI. 138.

fragrant is the most effective for medicinal use[67]. We read in the work recorded by Celsus that saffron, used as a medicine , possesses diuretic properties when first made into tablets and swallowed[68], and that when blended with iris flowers and wrapped around the head, it is beneficial for headaches and loss of consciousness caused by high fever[69].

Perfume production in antiquity reflected a remarkable mastery of blending diverse raw materials[70]. Pliny describes this situation in the following words: he notes that whilst people were not yet aware of the value of forests in terms of scent, they took pleasure in mixing various products that were insufficient on their own, and in extracting a single scent from this combination; he adds that the first invention of perfume may have taken place in this way, though there is no definitive evidence regarding its first inventor[71].

Saffron was among the most valuable raw materials used in perfume production[72]. Pliny noted that saffron was included in the prestigious blend known as 'royal perfume' or 'kingly perfume'[73] and recommended that alabaster bottles be used to store this perfume[74]. Throughout the ancient Greek period (c. 2000–146 BCE), saffron held a distinguished status as a royal dye, while also being extensively used as a perfume in a variety of public and private settings, including salons, courts, theaters, and bathhouses[75]. Over time, however, its use gradually extended beyond the elite to the wider population[76]. During the Roman Imperial Period, saffron played an active role in the perfume trade[77]. The Romans used saffron as scented water in many areas of daily life: in the living and dining rooms of their homes[78], by dipping their clothes in scented water, washing their courtyards with scented water, and pouring saffron-infused water into channels in the flooring; offering guests saffron-infused water to wash their hands and feet was a common tradition of hospitality[79]. However, ancient sources recount that emperor Elagabalus took this to extravagant extremes, swimming in a pool infused with saffron essence[80] and having the beds prepared for his banquet guests filled with saffron flowers[81]. Saffron essence was used not only in private residences but also in public spaces[82]. Ancient writers frequently referred to saffron when describing the scent of their surroundings[83]; they particularly emphasised that in theatres, saffron was sprinkled over the audience, soaking them[84] and that its sharp, powerful scent had exceptional longevity[85]. For this reason, Emperor

67 Dios. *Mat*. *Med*. I. 25.; see also Mzarbi et al. 2019, 63 fn. 42 ff; Koul & Patil 2022; 81 ff; Rafiei et al. 2023, 16.
68 Cel. *Med*. 5. 25. 16.
69 Cel. *Med*. 3. 18. 12.
70 Plin. *nat*. XIII. 1.
71 Plin. *nat*. XIII. 19.
72 Karakurt 2025, 33.
73 Plin. *nat*. XIII. 20; see also, Dadkhah et al. 2003; Mzarbi et al. 2019, fn. 23-24; 38-40;
74 Sen. *Ep*. 90. 15.
75 Li & Wu 2002, 1305 ff; Mzarbi et al. 2019, fn. 37.
76 Abrishami 1987; Giaccio 2004, 155 ff; Mzarbi et al. 2019, fn. 38-39.
77 Karakurt 2022, 45.
78 Plin. *nat*. XIII. 19.
79 Plin. *nat*. XIII. 19.
80 Lucr. II. 414–417.
81 Hist. *Aug*. *Hadr*. 19. 5.
82 Sen. *Ep*. 90. 15.
83 Lucr. II. 415.
84 Apul. *Met*. VIII. 27.
85 Mart. *Epig*. III. 63.

Hadrian had saffron essence sprinkled onto the seats of the theatre for his predecessor, Trajan[86]. Looking at its use in modern perfumery, it is known that saffron is generally used to impart a pleasant aroma to fragrance blends and to create a fixing effect. When added, saffron brings out the character of the scent; with its woody, sweet notes and suitability for the blend, it has found its place in both men's and women's perfumes, ensuring the fragrance has an original and exotic character[87].

The multifunctional use of saffron in the ancient Mediterranean world points to a phenomenon that cannot be explained solely by the raw material's economic value. The fact that a plant was considered equivalent to gold indicates that social and symbolic mechanisms were at play beyond market dynamics. The depiction of saffron in the Prometheus myth as the product of divine punishment elevates the plant to a cosmological plane. The use by humans of a raw material born of the wrath of the gods as perfume, dye and medicine points to a cultural practice in which the boundary between the profane and the sacred is constantly negotiated. The presence of a saffron bed during the union of Zeus and Hera on Mount Ida suggests that the plant carries not only divine but also erotic and fertility-related symbolism. This mythological framework provides an indispensable context for understanding the everyday uses of saffron.

The inscription of Iunia Theodora is a unique piece of evidence that concretises the function of saffron in social relations. The Lycian League's presentation of 2.15 kilograms of saffron as a funeral gift to a Roman citizen who had welcomed them during their exile clearly demonstrates the raw material's position within the gift economy[88]. When calculated at the prices of the time, this quantity goes far beyond that of an ordinary gift; it is the material embodiment of indebtedness and gratitude. When evaluated within the framework of M. Mauss's (1990, 10 ff; 39 ff) theory of the gift, saffron functions here not merely as a transfer of economic value, but also as a means of establishing and maintaining bonds between communities. The presentation of the gift in a funeral context implies that even death does not bring this reciprocal relationship to an end, but rather immortalises it.

During the Roman Imperial period, the use of saffron in public spaces was part of a strategy to establish the legitimacy of power through sensory experience. The fact that Hadrian's predecessor, Trajan, had saffron essence sprinkled on theatre seats demonstrates that political legitimacy was produced not only through the visual and auditory, but also through scent. Elagabalus's saffron-scented pools, however, represent a grotesque exaggeration of this practice, and it is precisely this excess that calls into question the limits of scent's political power. Does the emperor's body become sanctified when washed with saffron, or does this gesture reveal the fragility of power? The fact that ancient sources criticised Elagabalus for this behaviour suggests that the legitimate boundaries of luxury consumption were subject to social negotiation.

The prominence of Cilicia, Lycia and Sicilia as the most prestigious sources of saffron is not merely a matter of random geographical distribution. A common feature of these regions is that they were either under direct Roman control or maintained close ties with Rome. The quality of saffron derives not only from the biological characteristics of the plant, but also from the political and cultural prestige of the production region. The superiority of Corycus saffron can be interpreted not so much as an intrinsic quality of the plant itself, but rather as a reflection of the

86 Donato & Seefried 1989, 55.

87 Mzabri et al. 2019, 63.

88 Pallas et al. 1959, 496 ff; *BCH* 83 (1959) 496-508; *SEG* XVIII 143 lines 22-30.

economic and cultural ties Cilicia established with Rome. This perspective reveals that the concept of 'quality' in antiquity was shaped not by objective criteria but by processes of social construction. The fact that saffron was subject to counterfeiting and that ancient authors recorded the testing methods they developed to combat this highlights the paradoxical nature of the raw material's value. On the one hand, high prices encouraged counterfeiting; on the other, the risk of counterfeiting further enhanced the value of the authentic product. Pliny's finger-squeeze test and Dioscorides' suggestion of distinguishing by scent[89] indicate the existence of consumer awareness and quality control in antiquity. However, the extent to which these tests were reliable and how they were applied in practice remains unclear.

Consequently, saffron has been shown to have functioned in the ancient world not merely as an aromatic plant product, but as a multi-layered cultural artefact. When archaeobotanical data, written sources, iconographic representations and material cultural finds are evaluated together, it becomes apparent that the processes surrounding saffron (from its production to its circulation and consumption) created a space of constant negotiation between economic rationality and symbolic value. Saffron has become part of long-distance trade networks due to its high commercial value, whilst also establishing itself at the centre of ritual and daily life as a symbol of healing, purification, sanctity and status. In ancient societies, the use of saffron in the permeable spheres between perfumery, medicine, food and religious practices demonstrates that this substance is a cultural element that gains new meaning according to context, rather than having a fixed function. In particular, frescoes, funerary finds and pharmacological texts reveal that saffron was positioned not merely as a consumable commodity, but as a symbolic tool shaping social hierarchies, bodily perceptions and the sacred order. In this context, saffron served as a sensory interface bridging individual pleasure and the construction of collective identity. In the modern era, the use of saffron has largely become institutionalised and standardised within the frameworks of gastronomy, pharmacology and the cosmetics industry[90]. Nevertheless, the fact that saffron is still marketed today through discourses of 'luxury', 'rarity' and 'naturalness' demonstrates that the representations of prestige and privilege from antiquity persist in a transformed form. Saffron remains not only an economically high-value product but also preserves cultural layers of meaning associated with health, purification and aesthetics. This reveals that the plant has functioned not merely as a biological resource but as an active agent in the production of social value over the millennia. Consequently, saffron emerges as a raw material that continually redefines the boundaries between economic commodity and symbolic object across the long-term historical process spanning from antiquity to modernity. Its multifunctional nature has created a practical sphere that reproduces and transforms social tensions rather than resolving them. This study of saffron demonstrates how material culture is intertwined not only with relations of production and consumption, but also with prestige, belonging, body perception and sensory experience. Studying saffron goes beyond merely chronicling the history of a single plant; it offers an opportunity to understand how ancient societies constructed their value systems, circulated symbolic capital, and wove the sensory world with social meanings. When considered alongside its forms of use in the modern world, saffron serves as a concrete example of the dynamic relationship between cultural continuity and transformation, offering a powerful window into the long-term history of human–material relationships shaped through scent, taste and healing.

89 Dios. *Mat*. *Med*. I. 25.

90 Mzabri 2019, 63.

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