

The Spicy Stories of Herodotus

The 5th century BCE Greek writer Herodotus is the author of the first great historical narrative of the ancient world, called *The Histories*. The main purpose of his text is to tell the story of the 5th century BCE wars between the Persians and the Greeks, giving a lengthy explanation of the history of Persian expansion. Into the main thread of the narrative are woven stories related to the author's extensive travels--some factual and some complete fabrications.

In Book 3 of *The Histories*, Herodotus discusses the stories that Arab traders tell potential buyers of spices in order to make the collection of these exotic foods appear to be difficult, dangerous, or even life-threatening. Below are two of the stories he includes in his work.

"When the Arabians go out to collect cassia*, they cover all their body and their face with the hides of oxen and other skins, leaving only holes for the eyes, and, thus protected, go in search of the cassia, which grows in a lake of no great depth. All round the shores and in the lake itself there dwell a number of winged animals, much resembling bats, which screech horribly, and are very valiant. These creatures they must keep from their eyes all the while that they gather the cassia.

Still more wonderful is the mode in which they collect the cinnamon. Where the wood grows, and what country produces it, they cannot tell---only some, following probability, relate that it comes from the country in which Bacchus was brought up. Great birds, they say, bring the sticks which we Greeks, taking the word from the Phoenicians, call cinnamon, and carry them up into the air to make their nests. These are fastened with a sort of mud to a sheer face of rock, where no foot of man is able to climb. So the Arabians, to get the cinnamon, use the following artifice. They cut all the oxen and asses and beasts of burden that die in their land into large pieces, which they carry with them into those regions and place near the nests: then they withdraw to a distance, and the old birds, swooping down, seize the pieces of meat and fly with them up to their nests; which, not being able to support the weight, break off and fall to the ground. Hereupon the Arabians return and collect the cinnamon, which is afterwards carried from Arabia into other countries."

*Also called cassia bark, Chinese cinnamon. A variety of cinnamon derived from the cassia-bark tree.

Sources:

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