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Edited by Leonhard Schmitz

Excerpt

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THE  
CLASSICAL MUSEUM.

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I.

ON THE USE OF THE TERMS ACANTHUS, ACANTHION,  
&c., IN THE ANCIENT CLASSICS.

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GREAT confusion exists among the writers of antiquity in the use of the allied terms, *Ἀκανθος*, *Ἀκανθα*, *Ἀκάνθιον*, *Lat.* *Acanthus*, *Acanthium*; and this confusion is multiplied tenfold by the critics and commentators, who have endeavoured to illustrate these terms by identifying them in the several instances where they occur, with plants known to the modern botanist. Nevertheless, I venture to pursue their steps, because some of the passages to be elucidated occur in the most favourite authors, and are, on other accounts, highly interesting and beautiful.

These names, agreeably to their etymology (*AC*, *a point*, and *ANTH*, *flower*), appear to have been given almost indiscriminately to any *spinous flower*, to any flowering plant which bore thorns or prickles. These may be conveniently reduced to five classes, each including plants which, though now accurately distinguished in botanical systems, have so many common properties that in ancient times they would all be comprised under the same denomination. I shall produce them according to their order in the Linnæan arrangement.

I.

THE GENUS ACANTHUS.—*Linn.* (*Didynamia Angiospermia.*  
*Nat. Order, Personatæ.*)

This is the plant known in pharmacy and in the gardens under the name *Brank-ursine*. It appears to be accurately

III.

B

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

described by Dioscorides, III. c. 19, 20<sup>1</sup>. He distinguishes between the cultivated and the wild acanthus, the former of which is supposed to be *Acanthus Mollis*, *Linn.*, the latter *Acanthus Spinus*, *Linn.*

To the cultivated kind Vitruvius evidently refers, under the name *Acanthus*, in the account which he gives of the invention of the Corinthian capital by Callimachus<sup>2</sup>. Any one may observe the exact identity of form in the leaves of the *Acanthus Mollis* and those of the Corinthian capital. He may remark the rich effect produced by the overlapping of the deeply divided segments, and the elegance with which the upper part of the leaf falls backwards. It is to be observed, however, that the works of the ancient sculptors and architects shew great varieties in the acanthus leaf, according as it is more or less sharp-pointed at the edges, more or less deeply divided into segments, according also to the degree of its curvature backwards, the degree of overlapping in the segments, and the general fullness and luxuriance of the whole leaf. All these varieties might probably be copied from the brank-ursine in different states of cultivation. In the annexed figure, Lobel (*Icones*, II. p. 2. *Antwerp* 1591) has represented it with an aspect very different from what it has in the richest candelabra and Corinthian capitals, but not unlike some of the varieties in ancient monuments.



Pliny, the naturalist, mentions the use of this plant in ornamental gardening<sup>3</sup>; and that it was highly esteemed for this

<sup>1</sup> He is supposed here to refer to the Linnæan genus *Acanthus*, by Saracenus, Matthioli, Sibthorp, Smith, Sprengel, Billerbeck, Schneider, Passow, and many

others.

<sup>2</sup> L. IV. c. I. p. 92, 93, ed. Schneider.

<sup>3</sup> XXII. 34. s. 22.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## ACANTHUS, ACANTHION, &amp;c.

3

purpose among the Romans, appears also from the younger Pliny's description of his Tuscan villa<sup>4</sup>, where it was used in great abundance to adorn the parterres. Sir J. E. Smith thought (I apprehend, with great reason) that the *Acanthus Mollis*, *Linn.*, was only a cultivated and very luxuriant variety of the *Acanthus Spinus*<sup>5</sup>. This fact, if admitted, may account for the praises which Pliny bestows on the acanthus of his garden, as "lubricus et flexuosus,"—"mollis et pene liquidus." If the plant was, by cultivation, gradually divested of its stiff and thorny character, it would be more admired, the more it became soft and smooth, spreading and flexible; and an enthusiast in rural decorations might easily perceive a similarity between its large glassy leaves and the curling waves of the sea. Nemesianus probably alludes to the same plant, when he represents a beautiful damsel plucking flowers in a garden, and filling her lap "with soft acanthus."

Hanc, cum vicini flores in vallibus horti

Carperet, et molli gremium completeret acantho,

Invasere simul.

Bucolica, Ecl. II. 4, 5.

The brank-ursine may probably be meant by Virgil (*Ecl.* iv. 20), where he mentions "the smiling acanthus" among favourite garden flowers; and to this herb, divested of its thorns by art and cultivation, Columella alludes, in an account of the varieties of the artichoke, which I shall have occasion to quote hereafter.

This plant was admired and imitated, not only by the architect, but also by the goldsmith, the brass founder, the sculptor, and the painter. Diodorus Siculus<sup>6</sup> mentions "a golden acanthus" (*χρυσοῦς ἄκανθος*) as one of the ornaments of the magnificent chariot employed to transport the corpse of Alexander. The chariot was surrounded with a peristyle of golden pillars, and in the intervals between the pillars was the golden acanthus. Mys, a contemporary of Parrhasius at Athens, appears to have excelled in the minuteness and delicacy of the acanthus-leaves, which he wrought in gold and silver:—

Et Myos exiguum flectit acanthus iter. Propert. III. 7.

The leaves of the acanthus often form the most elegant orna-

<sup>4</sup> v. Ep. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Rees's *Cyclop. Addenda*, art. Acan-

thus.

<sup>6</sup> Vol. II. p. 278, ed. Wesseling.

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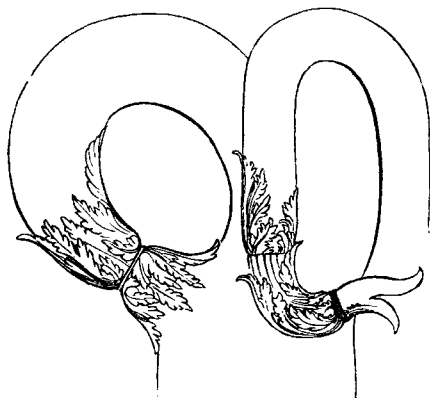
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Excerpt

[More information](#)

ment of the bronze lamps and candelabra of the ancients. In sculpture we have a familiar, and, at the same time, an exceedingly fine example in the Warwick vase, discovered among the ruins of Hadrian's villa, in which six magnificent acanthus-leaves radiate from the top of the shaft, and cover the bottom of the capacious vessel placed on it. In other instances the leaves stretch upwards, so as to cover nearly the whole body of the vase. Sometimes a circle is drawn round the vase, about the middle, especially when its shape is tall rather than flat; and in this case the part above the circle, *i. e.* the upper half, is decorated with acanthus-leaves. Occasionally also the band of acanthus-leaves surrounding the upper part of the vessel is so narrow, as to form a mere border beneath the margin. Another very elegant application of this leaf is seen in the handles, which are surrounded with acanthus, as shewn in the two different arrangements of it copied in the wood-cut from Piranesi's *Vasi e Candelabri Antichi*.



By attending to these varieties in the decoration of antique vases, as we actually see them in existing remains, we are enabled, I think, more clearly to comprehend some passages which I shall now quote, and which are loosely or incorrectly explained by the commentators.

Theocritus, describing a cup or bowl of Ætolian manufacture, first gives an account of the figures *within* it, and then says of the outside—

Παντᾶ δ' ἄμφι δέπας περιπέπταται ὑγρὸς ἄκανθος.

The pliant acanthus is expanded all around the cup. Idyll. i. 55.

The scholiast explains ἄκανθος thus: Εἶδος φυτόυ ἀκανθῶδες χαμαλζήλον, εἰς μῆκος ἐξανθοῦν λίαν. This agrees with the plants of the present class, which are 'prickly;' they may be called 'low,' as the leaves rise immediately from the ground, and they "send out a tall spike of flowers."

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[More information](#)

## ACANTHUS, ACANTHION, &amp;c.

5

In Virgil, *Ecl.* III. 45, Alcimedon makes two cups of beech-wood, and "surrounds the handles with soft acanthus:"

Et molli circum est ansas amplexus acantho.

Virgil has here translated the above line of Theocritus, but deviates from his original so far as to express a different conception of the way in which the acanthus was applied. In Theocritus it covers the whole outside of the vessel; in Virgil only the handles. Both of these ideas we now see realized in the remains of ancient art; and as similar works must have been familiar to both these poets, there seems no reason to question the originality of their descriptions.

Ovid (*Met.* XIII. 682-701) describes a magnificent vase, the outside of which was covered with figures composing a mythological story. All this part was "of ancient brass" (antiquo ære), *i. e.* bronze. The poet adds,—

Summus inaurato crater erat asper acantho.

We are therefore to suppose a band of acanthus-leaves wrought in gold, and placed beneath the margin, so as to form a border round the top.

It may be remarked, that in all vases, as well as in the capitals of Corinthian pillars and other ornaments, the rib of the brank-ursine leaf is always placed perpendicularly, or in the direction of the axis of the object which it decorates, or radiating from that axis. This is agreeable to its natural position and mode of growth.

Beautiful examples of the *border* of brank-ursine leaves, used to form beads and mouldings in sarcophagi, altars, and other specimens of sculpture, may be seen in Piranesi.

In the paintings of the baths of Titus at Rome we often see the brank-ursine in the graceful arabesques, and in many instances combined with parts of animals. Two paintings, representing Apollo and Pomona, are especially deserving of remark<sup>7</sup>. In each the border of the square picture is formed of leaves of brank-ursine, which are so shaded as to seem moulded on a semicircular bead.

The brank-ursine was quite unfit for making crowns or wreaths to place upon the head; nor could much use be made of it for the garlands, which were hung in front of temples, or used on other festive occasions. Nevertheless, among Sir T. Lawrence's collection of architectural casts in the British Mu-

<sup>7</sup> *Description des Bains de Titus*, Pl. 20, 21.

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Edited by Leonhard Schmitz

Excerpt

[More information](#)

seum, we see a representation of a large festoon of this kind, in which brank-ursine leaves are used to encompass the two extremities of the festoon, by which it is suspended. This may explain the design of the damsel in the verses above quoted from Nemesianus, who represents her gathering 'soft acanthus' together with garden flowers. I have described another very beautiful example of such a festoon in Smith's *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, article ΣΕΡΤΑ.

## II.

THE GENUS SPARTIUM.—*Linn.* (Diadelphia Decandria. *Nat. Order*, Papilionaceæ.)

Several species of the genus Spartium are armed with thorns and prickles. Spartium Spinoseum, S. Villosum, S. Horridum, belong to this class. They have a strong general resemblance; so that they might doubtless be included under the same denomination, and they are all common in Spain, Italy, Greece, and the Archipelago. I shall endeavour to shew that these plants were known to the ancients under the name Acanthus, and hereby to throw some light upon passages which have hitherto been misapplied to the brank-ursine.

In the *Lexeis Atticæ* of Mœris, we find it expressly stated, that the same plants, which in the Attic Greek were called Ἀσπάλαθοι, were called in common Greek ἼΑκανθαί.

Ἀσπάλαθοι, Ἀττικῶς Ἴακανθαί, Ἑλληνικῶς<sup>8</sup>.

But it is generally agreed among classical botanists, that the Ἀσπάλαθος of the ancients is the Spartium Villosum of Linnæus, a specimen of which, preserved in Sir J. E. Smith's Herbarium, is exhibited in the annexed lithograph. Dr. Sibthorp found this species everywhere in Greece and in the isles of the Archipelago, where it still bears nearly the same name, being called Σπάλαθος, Ἀσπάλατος, or Ἀσπαλαθεία<sup>9</sup>. Sprengel supposes the term to include Spartium Horridum also<sup>10</sup>.

We first find the term Ἀσπάλαθος in Plato *De Republicâ*<sup>11</sup>. Giving an account of the torments of the wicked in another state, as conceived by a native of Pamphylia, he describes some of the sufferers, who, having had their hands and feet

<sup>8</sup> P. 20, ed. Fischer.

<sup>9</sup> Walpole, *Memoirs on Eur. and As. Turkey*. p. 251, and Sibthorp's *Flora Græca*.

<sup>10</sup> See his German translation of Theophrastus, Vol. II. p. 359.

<sup>11</sup> x. p. 505, ed. Bekker.

bound, are flayed, and then dragged over Ἀσπάλαθοι, so as to be scratched by the spines. Theocritus mentions Ἀσπάλαθος in two passages<sup>12</sup>, and in such a manner as to show that it was a common spinous shrub, used for fire-wood. The scholiast, on the former of the two passages, says, it is a kind of thorn (εἶδος ἄκανθης). An author quoted by Athenæus<sup>13</sup> introduces “the tender aspalathus” (ἄπαλας ἀσπαλάθους) among those plants which were admired as beautiful, and were used in composing wreaths and garlands.

Theophrastus<sup>14</sup>, Dioscorides, and Pliny mention the use of aspalathus as a perfume in preparing ointments. The plant thus referred to, however, was not the aspalathus of Greece. Indeed it is doubted whether it belonged to the genus Spartium at all, as Pliny says it had a rose flower (floré rosæ). Dioscorides<sup>15</sup> expressly states the distinction between the common aspalathus of the Greeks, and the aspalathus which was used in perfumery, which grew in Rhodes and Syria, and which some good judges suppose to be Convolvulus Scoparius. As the one of these shrubs bore a striking resemblance in form and appearance to the other, the Convolvulus Scoparius having “the habit of a broom,” the Greeks, as we may reasonably presume, transferred the name of the common and familiar shrub to the more valuable foreign production. We find the latter distinguished as the *fragrant* or *aromatic* aspalathus<sup>16</sup>. The identification of the *aromatic* aspalathus of the ancients may be attended with difficulty, for want of a more accurate knowledge than we possess of the botany of the Levant; but still it may be regarded as certain, that the thorny or prickly kinds of broom were the shrubs to which that name was given

<sup>12</sup> *Idyll.* iv. 57 and xxiv. 87.

<sup>13</sup> xv. p. 685, Casaubon.

<sup>14</sup> *Hist. Plant.* ix. 7, and *De Odor.*

<sup>15</sup> Ἀσπάλαθος οἶδε ἐρυσίσκηπτρον, θάμνος ἐστὶ ξυλῶδης, ἄκανθας πολλὰς κεκτημένος, γεννώμενος ἐν Ἰστρίῳ, καὶ Νισούρῳ, καὶ Συρίᾳ, καὶ Ρόδῳ, ὡ χρῶνται οἱ μυρεψοὶ εἰς τὰς τῶν μυρῶν στυψείς, ἐστὶ δὲ καλὸς ὁ βαρὺς, καὶ μετὰ τὸ περιφλοισθῆναι ὑπέρυθρος ἢ πορφυρίζων, πυκνὸς, εὐώδης, πικρίζων ἐν τῇ γευσεῖ· ἐστὶ δὲ τι καὶ ἕτερον εἶδος αὐτοῦ, λευκὸν, ξυλῶδες, ἄνοσμον, ὃ δη καὶ χείρου καθίστηκε.—Dioscor. i. 19.

<sup>16</sup> Schneider on *Theophrastus*, *H. Plant.* ix. 7, Vol. III. p. 738, and Sprengel's *Translation*, Vol. II. p. 358—360.

The reader may consult Thunberg *De Aspalatho*, and the recent French translation of Pliny by M. Sardaigue, who supposes the fragrant wood of the aspalathus to be the drug called Lignum Rhodium. This is now believed to be the wood of Convolvulus Scoparius, and Pliny's expression 'flore rosæ' would not be very ill applied to a Convolvulus, as contrasted with a Spartium.



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[More information](#)

in its common application. Pliny's account of the *aspalathus*<sup>17</sup> agrees in general with that of Dioscorides. But in addition to what we find in Dioscorides he says, "Per Hispanias quidem multi et inter odores, et ad unguenta utuntur illâ, aspalathum vocantes." It may be remarked, that *Aspalathus* may be a modification of *Spartus*, just as the modern Spanish *Espuela* is a modification of the Teutonic *Spur*. The same prolongation of the consonantal into a more vocal form, with the common change of R into L, would convert *Σπάρτος* into *Ἀσπάλατος*, and would be agreeable to the genius of the modern, perhaps also of the ancient, language of Spain.

The different species of broom (including the modern genera *Spartium*, *Cytisus*, *Genista*), and more particularly those species which are without thorns, were designated by the name *Σπάρτος*, or *Spartus*, which is properly Greek, and by *Genesta*, or *Genista*, which is Latin, and is retained in the modern Italian. Of these shrubs we find it frequently stated, by both ancient and modern authors, that their tough and flexible twigs were used for tying vines, and similar purposes, and that their honeyed and fragrant flowers were acceptable to bees, on which account they were planted near bee-hives. They were used for hedges, and we may presume that for this purpose the prickly kinds were preferred: and they were employed in making festoons and garlands<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> L. XII. c. 24, and L. XXIV. c. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Aristot. Hist. Anim. IX. 40. Dioscor. IV. 139. Plin. XVI. 37. XXIV. 9, (*Genista quoque vinculi usum præstat. Flores apibus gratissimi*). XI. 8, (*In Hispaniâ multa in spartiis mella herbam eam sapiant*). XX. 12 (*Genistas circumseri alveariis gratissimum*). XXI. 9, (*The flowers used for garlands, 'coronæ'*). Columella, IV. 31, (*Genistæ, cum sit satis firmum, tum etiam lentissimum est vinculum*). IX. 4, (*He here says, the honey derived from Spartus and Arbutus was thought very bad*). Martial I. 44, I. 100, V. 5, (*Et pira, quæ lentâ pendent religata genistâ*). Virgil, Georg. II. 12, (*Molle siler, lentæque genistæ*). II. 434,

(*Salices, humilesque genistæ, Aut illæ pecori frondem, aut pastoribus umbram Sufficiunt, sepemque satis, et pabula melli.*)

Sibthorp mentions (*Fl. Gr. Spartium Junceum*), that the twigs of the Spanish Broom are still used for tying vines. Martyn, on Virg. Georg. II. 12, says, "The Italians weave baskets of its slender branches. The flowers are very sweet, last long, and are agreeable to bees." Castor Durante (*Herbario Nuovo*, Venet. 1684, folio) and Matthioli (in *Dioscor.* IV. 152), in an account of some species of broom, which they distinguish from the Spanish Broom, and one of which, called *Genestrella*, is prickly, inform us, that, in some parts of Italy, these shrubs cover whole mountains, which, in May and June, are so universally adorned with their beautiful and brilliant blossoms, that, at a distance, they look as if they were of gold, and present a grand and delightful spectacle to the traveller. These authors also state,



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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## ACANTHUS, ACANTHION, &amp;c.

9

I shall now produce those passages, in which, as it appears to me, the word *acanthus* may be best interpreted of the spinous kinds of broom. It will be observed, that all these passages occur in the Latin poets: and I apprehend, that we ought to consider this application of the term as poetical. In prose, the same shrub would have been called *Genista*.

Virgil, *Georg.* iv. 123—"Flexi vimen acanthi." This expression occurs in the enumeration of plants, which employ the cares of the gardener. Soon after, in the same poem (l. 137), the aged Corycian, dwelling near the Galesus in Calabria, shears the foliage of his soft *acanthus* for the benefit of his bees.

Ille comam mollis jam tum tondebat acanthi.

Most of the commentators suppose the *Acanthus* in these passages to be the brank-ursine<sup>19</sup>. But the term *Vimen* is quite inapplicable to this plant, and the notion of shearing its beautiful leaves, on which, when fully developed and uninjured, its elegance depends, cannot for a moment be entertained. Indeed, Heinsius, Voss, and Heyne, have in the last passage rejected "*acanthi*," and substituted "*hyacinthi*," which is found in some of the best MSS. But who does not see that hyacinths are even less adapted to form a hedge than brank-ursine, and that no gardener would think of shearing either the one or the other?

That most tasteful and accomplished botanist, the late Sir James Edward Smith, perceiving these difficulties, conjectured that Virgil meant to speak of the holly (*Ilex Aquifolium*, *Linn.*)<sup>20</sup>; and Ciofani long ago advanced the supposition, originating with himself, and supported by the opinion of many of his learned neighbours in the country of Virgil himself, that the poet meant to speak of the *Smilax Aspera*, an evergreen

that the kinds of broom alluded to are set near bee-hives, as bees delight in their flowers; that their branches are used, instead of willows, for tying vines; and that they are macerated like hemp, and made into ropes and sack-cloth.

My friend, Professor Hosking, informs me, that the vicinity of Selinus, on the south coast of Sicily, is so completely overrun with the *Genestrella*, that the odour of the bloom, in the early

spring, is quite overpowering. The honey of that district is, nevertheless, almost offensively flavoured with *ihyme*.

<sup>19</sup> Martyn on *Georg.* iv. 123; Heyne and J. H. Voss on *Ecl.* III. 45; Fée, *Flore de Virgile*, p. 10; Sprengel in Ersch. u. Gruber's *Encycl.* v. *Acanthus*, and in his *Hist. Rei Herb.* Vol. I. p. 145.

<sup>20</sup> Consid. respecting Cambridge, &c., and Rees's *Cyclop. Addenda art. Acanthus*.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

plant with red berries, which is very common about Rome, and which climbs over trees and hedges, hanging by its tendrils<sup>21</sup>. To these interpretations it may be objected, that, although both of the plants specified are thorny, we have no proof that the name 'Acanthus' was ever given them; nor do their properties suit the passages to which they are applied. We can see no reason why a man should shear the rampant Smilax; nor could either of these plants be called 'mollis,' or be used advantageously for tying vines. On the other hand, the epithet 'mollis' might be applied to the thorny kinds of broom, on account of the downy hairs with which they are invested<sup>22</sup>. In reference to this distinction we find the Bucolic poet Calpurnius using the phrase 'hirsuta genista.'

Nothing seems better adapted for making a garden-hedge than the prickly kinds of broom. Even the Spartium Scorpius, the *Σκοπιός* of Theophrastus, which resembles our Gorse (*Ulex Europæus*, *Linn.*), would not be ill-suited to this purpose. But the other kinds, which I have mentioned, would be far more agreeable to the eye. Their twiggy branches, which are extremely tough as well as flexible, agree exactly with the description "Flexi vimen acanthi," and would be useful for tying vines. That these gay and fragrant shrubs were preferred to be set near bee-hives we know, and shearing would be necessary to make them into a good close hedge.

In the *Eclogues* of Calpurnius (iv. 58), we find the following sentence: "Tityrum cantantem rutilo spargebat acantho Nais." The bright yellow flowers of the spinous broom might properly in poetry be called 'rutili;' but the epithet seems quite inapplicable to the flowers of brank-ursine, which are white; nor could any other plant, which grew in Italy, and was called acanthus, be employed to weave a garland, or to shower in any sportive manner upon the head of a musician.

Here perhaps we may, with the greatest propriety, introduce those passages of the *Æneid* (i. 649. 711), which mention a veil ornamented with a border of acanthus.

"Circumtextum croceo velamen acantho."

"Pictum croceo velamen acantho."

<sup>21</sup> Ciofani, *Obs. in Ovidii Met.* XIII. 701.

<sup>22</sup> Savi, in his description of *Spartium Villosum*, says, "Ramis junioribus to-

mentosus, calycibus leguminibusque villosis."—*Botanicon Etruscum*, T. 1. p. 171.