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**The Book of Pomegranates**  
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In world religions, the pomegranate has symbolic attributions and appears in legends and myths. The multiple connotations of the fruit run like a red thread through the cultures of antiquity. At the same time, this gives clues as to the path it took. Cuneiform references to pomegranates from Mesopotamia can be dated back to the second half of the 3rd century BC. In many places there are artefacts showing pomegranates in one form or another. Fertility goddesses are associated with the fruit. Sometimes the proportions of visual depictions raise doubts: for example, some stone-carved images representing fruit in the former Assyrian cities of Nimrud and Nineveh, have been interpreted as both poppy pods and pomegranates. The same is true of a relief from the late Hittite period (around 2500 BC), which shows the goddess Kubaba.

Did the Hanging Gardens of Babylon really exist? Babylonian inscriptions do not offer a conclusive answer, but if ancient literary references hold any truth, the gardens may well have been crowded with pomegranate trees. Their presence in Nimrud, 30 kilometres from Mosul, is documented by inscriptions made by King Aššur-nāṣir-apli II, who ruled from 883 to 859 BC. He describes creating gardens next to the citadel and on the banks of the Tigris. The lettering on stone stele includes the phrase: “The pomegranate trees, decked with clusters of fruits like vines, enrich the breezes in this pleasure garden.”

From the middle of the second century BC, the pomegranate appears on Egyptian murals. The naturalist Georg Schweinfurth found plant remains from the 12th Dynasty (1970-1800 BC) in the Dra Abu el-Naga necropolis on the western banks of the Nile. A large dried pomegranate (dated to circa 1470 BC) was found in the tomb of Djehuty, an Egyptian official under the ruling Queen Hatshepsut. Findings in the tomb chambers of Pharaoh Ramses IV prove that it was common to give the dead a pomegranate as a both a burial offering and a provision for the journey into the underworld. A papyrus, also from this period, proves the use of pomegranate for medicinal purposes: the peel was prescribed as a remedy for intestinal

parasites. Sometimes the fruit is represented together with figs, slaughtered poultry and flatbread. Reliefs in the botanical garden of Thutmose III show pomegranate trees hanging with fruit. A limestone relief in the tomb of the vizier Ramose of Thebes contains a fruit pyramid of pomegranates and figs with a papyrus bushel. Pomegranates as ornamentation can be found in many places, combined with the foliage of other plants such as vine and acanthus.

A spectacular Byzantine tapestry, *Hestia Polyolbos*, dating from the 6th century and also from Egypt, shows the goddess Hestia (known as the “Blessed Goddess”) sitting on a throne surrounded by six cherubs, each serving her a pomegranate. In her hair hangs a golden ring to which two pomegranates are attached.

In Persian mythology, there are various references to this fruit. The legendary hero Esfandiyār is said to have become invincible by eating a pomegranate.

By the 8th century BC at the latest, the pomegranate became known in Greece when it appeared in Homer’s *Odyssey*: there it grew in the paradisiacal gardens of the mythical island dwellers, the Phaiaks. The pomegranate was sacred to the Greeks, who linked it to the belief in an afterlife. It also belonged to the hidden items in the so-called “mystical box” in the Telesterion, or great sanctuary, in Eleusis, the capital of the Demeter cult, which were revealed to the initiated during the rite of the Eleusinian mysteries. In fact, the pomegranate is mentioned many times in Greek mythology: during the quarrel of the three goddesses Hera, Athena and Aphrodite on the question of who is the most beautiful, Paris decides on Aphrodite by handing her a pomegranate; Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty and love, is said to have planted a pomegranate tree in Cyprus by her own hand; a half-clad Aphrodite carries a long sceptre, which is crowned by a pomegranate. The myth also recounts how she creates the first pomegranate from the blood of her beautiful lover Adonis, after he had made the mistake of hunting a wild boar, which in turn was the embodiment of the god Ares.

There are numerous edifices and reliefs that testify to the use of the pomegranate as food and a fertility symbol. Sometimes the fruit is the attribute of a god, a sacrifice for the living, or an offering in one form or another to the heroized dead. Sometimes the pomegranate appears on a par next to an egg, flower or cockerel.

The myth of Persephone is closely linked to the pomegranate. It shows that the fruit is, on the one hand, a symbol of life, but on the other, is linked to death and the divined afterlife. The daughter of the fertility goddess Demeter was kidnapped one day by Hades (Pluto), the god of the dead, and dragged into the underworld. To bring about her daughter’s release, Demeter prevents plants from bearing fruit, thus creating winter – a hitherto unknown phenomenon. By order of Zeus, the father of the gods, the kidnapper releases the girl. But Hades ties Persephone to himself forever by feeding her pomegranate seeds. She spits them out again – all save six, that is, which allows Hades to keep her close for six months a year: the winter months.

The pomegranate therefore always retains a certain ambiguity: it is associated with life, but is also a force from the underworld. The fruit was modelled in clay, bronze, gold, glass and ivory and used to make burial objects. The shape of the pomegranate was often slightly modified in the process, sometimes supplemented with ornaments, and then reproduced as an oil bottle, perfume container, ointment vessel, glass vase or golden pendant. Its name was also used to name places. Side, an ancient city on the Turkish west coast, is said to have been named after the fruit according to legend. A fertility goddess is said to have ossified there into a pomegranate tree. At the time, the coins of the city were minted with a pomegranate.

Pomegranates appear as attributes of deities. One example is Priapus, the son of Dionysus and Aphrodite, the god of fertility and sexual desire, and of wealth and love, whose enormous member was erected as a crude wooden sculpture in orchards, fields and vineyards to scare off thieves and birds.

Diodorus Zonas of Sardis wrote the following epigram in circa 85 BC:

*A newly split pomegranate, this quince covered with soft down,*

*a navelled fig with wrinkled skin*

*a purple cluster of grapes, fountain of wine,*

*and a walnut, just out of its rind,*

*The fruit-watcher dedicated to rustic Priapus,*

*carved out of a trunk, this sacrifice from the trees.*

(Translated by W. R. Paton, *A Dictionary of Greek Classical Quotations*, 1916)

The fruit came to Rome and Lazio via Greek lower Italy. Later, sweeter varieties from North Africa arrived in the country, which suggests that it increasingly became a popular dessert fruit, and no longer just a cult fruit or one used for decorative purposes. This is illustrated by still lifes of glass jars filled with fruits. In ancient Rome, young women adorned themselves with wreaths of pomegranate branches and hoped that this ritual would bless them with abundant offspring. Stone-carved, stylised, garland-like fruit pendants adorned temple friezes, holy altars, grave altars and sarcophagi as everlasting offerings. As a frieze found in front of Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome shows, the building used to have a garland of three rows of fruit: pine cones, poppy heads, but mainly burst pomegranates.

During archaeological excavations in La Alcudia, southern Spain, remains of a charred pomegranate from the first century BC were found, as were ceramics fashioned in its form.

In the *Song of Songs* of King Solomon, the tree and fruit are described several times as symbols of love, and the red juice as the nectar of lovers: "Let us rise early and go to the vineyards to see if the vine has budded, if the blossom has opened, if the pomegranates are in

bloom. There I will give you my love.” The narrator says elsewhere: “Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon, and your mouth is lovely. Your temples are like a slice of pomegranate behind your veil.” Later, the woman invites him: “I would give you the nectar of my pomegranates.”

Besides olives, dates, figs, grapes, almonds and carob, pomegranates were among the seven symbolic fruits of the Bible, of which it was thought that special blessings were promised. Judaism states that the pomegranate contains 613 seeds, corresponding to the number of commandments in the Torah. Moses allegedly told the disgruntled Israelites, whom he led out of Egypt on their exodus through the desert, that they would find the pomegranates and grapes they demanded in the Promised Land of Canaan. Although this is a mere legend, it can be interpreted as a reference to the abundance of pomegranate trees in Egypt.

The fruit’s characteristic calyx is said to have inspired the crown of King Solomon and, from then on, that of the European kings. The Israelites considered it a symbol of happiness and blessing. When priests entered a shrine, they had to wear a robe with pomegranates hanging from the hem. And the columns in the Temple of Solomon were decorated in the shape of pyramidal golden pomegranates. The Hebrew name for the pomegranate, which also appears in the Hebrew Bible, is *rimmon*. It was cultivated in many places, reflected in the fact that some villages were named after it. Gath-Rimmon, a former town in western Palestine, means “pomegranate press”. This indicates that the fruit was not only eaten, but also squeezed and processed into must.

“And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it became pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make her wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and also gave unto her husband with her, and he did eat.” (Gen. 3:6)

What fruit is being referred to that grew in the Garden of Eden? Was *Punica granatum* perhaps the “apple” mentioned in the first seduction of mankind and whose indulgence led to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise? First of all, it is probably necessary to quash a misconception that precedes this question. There is, in fact, no mention of an “apple” anywhere in the Book of Genesis – just of “a fruit”. An apple tree needs a resting period with cool weather in order to produce fruit: it has to be ruled out from growing in the Garden of Eden, as it would have been too warm. The reason for the survival of the legend of the apple could be due to a mistake on the part of early translators of the Latin Vulgate, who confused *malus* and *malum* – the word “evil” with the word for “apple” (*malus* means bad in Latin). The phrase “*lignumque scientiae boni et mali*” translates as “the tree of knowledge of good and evil”, with no mention of an apple. And from there, it was only a small step to the first Bible illustrations with an apple in Eve’s hand. This misunderstanding has carried on over centuries since circa AD 5 to the present day; one thing led to the next. The word “fruit” was translated as “pomum” – a generic term for all fruits – but due to the numerous illustrations, the association with the apple overlaid all others. And “pomme” in French still means “apple” today. Christian Wagner points out that even Martin Luther is not entirely innocent of the same confusion, in his (rather too) free translation of the Hebrew word “*dudaim*” as “love apple”, and elsewhere as “lilies”, although it refers to the yellow fruit of the mandrake, which is poisonous and gives off an intense odour.

Which “fruit” is really referred to in the Bible? The apricot, perhaps, which was named the “golden apple” by the Greeks? Or the fig or the date? We will have to accept that the Bible does not reveal what the forbidden fruit actually was. Irrespective of this mystery, the story of the fall of man has sparked people’s fantasies for over thousands of years.

It is reminiscent of the enigma surrounding the legendary golden apples of the Hesperides. Whereas more recent paintings clearly show apples, until the end of the fourth century BC the fruit of the Hesperides was equated with quinces, which thrived better in Greece than the apple and pear varieties that grew there at the time. But then new fruits arrived on Athens market: lemons, which from then on were considered “golden apples”.

Speculations about the apple of paradise are also reminiscent of the discussion about the true character of the mystical tree of life, which played a role in the myths of the ancient cultures of Mesopotamia, the Levant and India. Scientists long disagreed whether it was a pomegranate tree or a date palm. However, a more recent botanical examination, which took into account the representations available, revealed that the tree of life or immortality was in all probability a carob tree.

On panel paintings from the late Middle Ages, Mary and the Child Jesus are sometimes depicted with a pomegranate, such as in Sandro Botticelli’s painting *Madonna of the Pomegranate* from 1487, and Hans Holbein the Elder’s *Mary giving the Child a Pomegranate* (circa 1510), as well as comparable paintings by Raphael and Lorenzo di Credi. In Christian symbolism, the pomegranate represents the community of believers in the congregation, the fertility of Mary and the love and devotion of Jesus. Seeds emerging from the fruit are sometimes also interpreted as a parable for Jesus rising again from the dead.

In Hieronymus Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights* (ca. 1503-1515) there are some strawberries and cherries, fruits filled with people, which can be interpreted as oversized, boat-like embodiments of the pomegranate. And Albrecht Dürer shows Emperor Maximilian with a pomegranate in his hand; it has been cut, which makes the fruit clearly identifiable.

A late 15th-century Dutch tapestry adorned with many botanical details can be seen in New York’s Cloisters Museum, featuring a unicorn set in a compound, chained to a pomegranate tree with a few burst fruits. Does the tamed animal have some injuries seeping blood, or are splashes of juice covering the animal’s light-coloured body? It could well be that the anonymous artist was deliberately playing on this ambivalence. In any case, the unicorn does not appear to be suffering. It even seems to feel good in its floral surroundings. Here, the animal symbolises the Virgin Mary, fertility and loss of innocence.

The holy João Ciudad Duarte (also known as “Saint John of God”) established a hospital in 1539 and a fraternity in Granada for the care of the destitute and chose the pomegranate as the symbol of the order. The Order of the Brothers of Mercy, financed by donations, whose symbol united a stylised pomegranate with a cross that seems to grow out of the calyx, spread rapidly throughout Catholic countries. The hospitals, which were founded around 1615 in

Vienna and Graz, still exist today. They are affiliated to pharmacies with the name “The Pomegranate”.

A portrait of by Hans Bock the Elder, which was carried out by the well-known Basel physician, naturalist, naturalist and humanist Felix Platter, who at the time was researching an antidote for the Plague, not only shows a small lemon tree, a lemon and a flowering branch lying on a table, but also a cut pomegranate. On the one hand, the noble fruit emphasises the rank of the sitter, but it can also be safely assumed that these items were deliberately chosen and linked to his research. Platter’s herbarium was so well known that, in 1580, Michel de Montaigne stopped by on his way to Italy to visit the researcher.

The fruit is not always so clearly identifiable as in this case. It can be confused with a “hand-warming ball”; a hollow, luxurious mostly brass object that was screwed open and filled with smouldering charcoal or a glowing metal bolt.

Beside its ubiquity in cook books, the fruit’s frequent appearance in still lifes can be seen an indicator for its popularity. However, pomegranates almost always occur only at the edges of these groups of fruit, an exotic splash of colour. A certain M. Cohier de Lompier, quoted by Alexandre Dumas, wrote as follows: “There are no nice dessert fruit baskets without pomegranates; just as there are none without oranges. An open pomegranate looks like a wealth of rubies or sparkling shells and is one of the most beautiful jewels of our majestic fruit baskets. Nothing comes close to the effect of a few half-opened pomegranates on the edge of a fruit pyramid. “

If you take a closer look at the basket of fruit on Caravaggio’s painting (circa 1593), you discover the seeds of a pomegranate in addition to the usual suspects. A few decades later, the English poet Andrew Marvell compared it to jewels: “And does in the pom’granates close / Jewels more rich than Ormus shows”, whereby he may have been alluding more generally to the ornamental wealth of Persian culture, especially since the rocky, barren island of Ormus in the Gulf does not much has to offer in the way of botany.

The pomegranate turned up later in Pre-Raphaelite paintings. Dante Gabriel Rossetti immortalised Jane Morris (the wife of William Morris) in his portrait of her as the Roman deity Proserpina with Titian red hair: she holds the pomegranate meaningfully in her hand as if it were a mysterious cult object. In the painting *Il Barbagianni* by Valentine Cameron Prinsep, which shows a woman with an owl, the fruit appears on the periphery, and is only recognisable at a closer look.

The pomegranate was brought to Central and South America by the Spaniards. Its cultivation in what was then Spanish Florida and British Georgia is documented during the early 18th century; and in California during the early 18th century by Spanish settler, who introduced it there in 1769. Crop plantation during the San Gabriel Mission was particularly prosperous. At the end of Padre Zalvidea’s leadership of the mission in 1826, the orchards are said to have included 2,333 fruit trees including oranges, figs, pomegranates, peaches, apples, limes, pears and lemons. In California, the pomegranate tree was mainly cultivated in the San Joaquin Valley,

the southern part of the valley. However, as long ago as 1907, in his book *The Pomegranate* Robert W. Hodgson mentioned how low demand was for this fruit; at that time there were only fifty to sixty hectares of pomegranate orchards in California. "This is easily accounted for by the ignorance on the part of the American public of the good qualities of the fruit. Spanish-speaking peoples fully appreciate the pomegranate and consume the fruit in considerable quantities, while the customers in the neighbourhood of the large fruit markets of the United States, being accustomed to the apple, peach, grape, and orange, hesitate before a strange fruit, to the good points of which they have not been educated. The extension of the pomegranate industry is therefore largely dependent on the education of the public," the agronomist lamented. In the meantime, however, a new era has dawned and pomegranate cultivation has increased significantly over the past few years.

[...]

## THE BIOCHEMICAL MIRACLE OF BERRIES

Is pomegranate juice the real elixir of life? It's very tempting to attribute all kinds of powers to this unusual plant. In fact, evidence of its various properties goes back a long way.

Hippocrates (circa 460-370 BC) recommended that a woman suffering from stomach pains should take just one meal a day consisting of barley grains drizzled with pomegranate juice.

Galenos of Pergamon (circa 129-215) commented on this as follows:

*Harmful fluid had clearly moistened the area around the stomach entrance, also known as the cardia, and thus caused vomiting and stomach discomfort in the woman. [...]*  
*The barley grains dried up this liquid and the pomegranate juice taken at the same time strengthened the body, enabling it to flush out the liquid retained in the stomach lining. The pomegranate provides the body with very little sustenance, so we never consume it for nourishment but only as a remedy.*

The Roman general Cato (234-149 BC) knew of the worming properties of bark. In *Satyricon* there is reference to the bark of the pomegranate being used to relieve abdominal

pain. Every part of the plant has been used in traditional medicine. The juice is considered to be antipyretic (i.e. used to prevent or reduce fever), while its root bark has astringent properties and is effective in treating worms. A paste prepared from the bark of the tree trunk is recommended for the treatment of haemorrhoids. Powdered flower buds are prescribed for bronchitis. A paste made from the leaves relieves burns and prevents infections.

One observation that does not chime with the fact that the fruit has so often been used as a fertility symbol owing to its large number of seeds, is its reputed contraceptive effect. The peel was allegedly even used in ancient times and the Middle Ages to induce abortions. This particular use of the plant's materials has long been common in India and continues even to this day. It would explain the contradiction of the traditional anecdote that Catherine of Aragon ate pomegranate seeds to give Henry VIII a son — but without success. In the past, it was often claimed that pomegranates contain oestrogens: this, however, has not been confirmed by recent studies.

Paracelsus (1493-1541) recommended pomegranates to prevent dental diseases. He compared the seeds visible in a cracked-opened pomegranate to rows of incisors and, following the so-called "doctrine of signature" (i.e. that herbs resembling parts of plants could be used to treat ailments for those body parts), thought he saw a connection. After all, the use of the tannin-rich pomegranate bark can actually have a soothing effect on inflamed gums.

Levin, mentioned elsewhere, reports that Soviet cosmonauts, pilots, submarine drivers and coal miners were given pomegranate juice to boost their health and endurance. Even the monkeys aboard USSR spaceships are said to have been given a mixture of pomegranate and rosehip juice.

What effect do these plant's substances have on the human body? By now, its ingredients have been precisely analyzed. First, the fruit contains various vitamins and minerals, such as phosphorus and potassium, in addition to dietary fibre. Interestingly, the pomegranate's

vitamin C content of between 4 to 15 milligrams per 100 grams of edible portion, is not particularly high. But what is striking is the high content of polyphenols and flavonoids it contains, which are said to have an antioxidant effect. Some suspect that it is precisely this mixture of different substances that plays a crucial role. The synergism of polyphenol compounds seems more effective than isolated ingredients such as punicalagin, ellagic acid or tannin-rich extracts. What's more, the antioxidant potential of pomegranate juice is apparently significantly higher than that of red wine, green tea, and blueberry and grape juice. A strong inhibition of microorganisms that cause dental plaque has also been observed. But to protect teeth enamel, dentists recommend an interval of an hour between drinking pomegranate juice and brushing your teeth.

There is growing evidence for the preventive and therapeutic health effects of pomegranate or fermented pomegranate extract, namely to treat arteriosclerosis, hypertension, rheumatic diseases, bacterial infections, various cancers and disorders of the lipid metabolic system. The Spanish nutritionist Enrique Roche Collado, who represents a multitude of pomegranate researchers here, is confident that pomegranate extract can delay, albeit not altogether stop, the progression of Alzheimer's disease. He also claims that the Omega 5 content of the seeds has a positive effect on increased cholesterol levels and acne. He has also found that high-performance athletes recover much faster after competitions when they drink pomegranate juice immediately afterwards. This kind of information should, however, be taken with a small pinch of salt. Making the leap from promising cell cultures to successful human treatments often needs to be proven in costly clinical trials.

Here it bears remembering that all that glitters is not gold. About ten years ago American researchers created a stir with the hypothesis that pomegranate juice contains HIV entry inhibitors in particularly high concentrations, which might prevent infection from pathogens. My spot-check query with a leading scientist at the time, however, showed that this theory had not been pursued.

While there were a mere thirty essays on the effect of plant substances in scientific journals between 1945 and 2000, this number has proliferated since then. One of the main reasons for researchers' sudden interest in the fruit is a study by Israeli biochemist Michael Aviram, who first published a report on the antioxidant effects of pomegranate juice in 2000. He had previously dealt with various types of fruit and vegetables and their effect on arteriosclerosis before discovering that pomegranate juice is even more favourable than red wine in this respect. The Haifa-based researcher has since continued his research. From 1999 to the present day, he has contributed to no less than fifty-five studies. And it's probably not that surprising that he claims to eat pomegranates regularly himself. In response to questions about his further plans, Aviram considers experiments with mixtures of different ingredients to be a particularly promising field. For example, pomegranate juice in combination with date-nut oil or statins is now being administered to absorb free radicals and to lower blood serum cholesterol.

POM Wonderful, the American market leader in a ready-to-drink pomegranate juice, decided to launch a widespread, aggressive marketing campaign in 2012. However, the German Federal Trade Commission ruled that POM's advertising was misleading, because it claimed that pomegranate juice could prevent, reduce or even cure heart disease, prostate cancer and erectile dysfunction. The company felt compelled to defend itself by broadcasting new adverts freely citing quotes from the ruling. This is how it came up with a picture of a juice bottle with a noose around the neck and the slogan: "Cheat Death. Pom Wonderful. The Antioxidant Superpower". Meanwhile, POM uses the slogan "crazy healthy" in a slightly more restrained claim to the fruit's alleged benefits. Fire-breathing dragons, among other things, now feature in its commercials.

The range of products using pomegranate parts is widespread. The cosmetics industry offers cold-pressed pomegranate seed oil. The oil extracted from the seeds contains unsaturated fatty acids that moisturize the skin and promote its regeneration.

Pomegranate wines, which already existed back in ancient Egypt, are still a niche product

today. However, when buying them it is good to bear in mind that drinks declared as “wines” are sometimes only flavoured or mixed with pomegranate juice. Drinking an Armenian pomegranate wine was a rather sobering experience: its taste reminded me of pepsin wine. But the jury is still out. Others have already compared it to Génépi, a herbal liqueur. The Israeli-based Rimon Winery on the Lebanese border near the Sea of Galilee, which is run by the Nachmias family, offers both sweet dessert wines and dry pomegranate wines. Grenadine, the syrup once made exclusively from grenadine pomegranates, gives Tequila Sunrise its beautiful reddish colour.

Finally, not everything that claims on the label to contain pomegranate extracts actually does so. The suspiciously strong Turko-Baba pomegranate tea blend, which was once offered to me in an oriental bazaar and is reminiscent of sherbet powder, probably only has one thing in common with the fruit: its colour.