



Traditional foraging in Southern Italy and Mesopotamia: The inextricable links among human ecology, food heritage, and taste

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, research concerning local perceptions and uses of wild food plants, and that which is nowadays called “foraging”, has increased in the Mediterranean and Near East. Most of these works, however, mainly focused on simple lists of food plant uses and did not thoroughly address the issue of cross-cultural comparison, and therefore they could not explore possible links between foraging and both human ecology and taste.

This talk will reflect upon 20 years of ethnobotanical field studies conducted in the Mediterranean and Near East, specifically focusing on the perceptions and categorizations of wild vegetables and their embeddedness in the local ecology and taste perceptions. Drawn from case studies conducted in Southern Italy (among ethnic Albanians) and in Northern Iraq (among Kurds, Assyrians, and Yezidis), profound interconnections between ecology and foraged species, as well as between the diverse human ecology of the foraged wild vegetables and their different perceived tastes, will be shown. The presentation suggests that the human ecology of local populations, i.e. their traditional strategies of plant food procurement, has not only influenced the typology of foraged wild vegetables, but also the prevalence of certain tastes. Moreover, the talk will briefly address promising future research trajectories at the crossroads between ethnobotany and cognitive and sensory sciences.

Video and PowerPoint to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sctalk.2022.100101>.

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Figures and tables

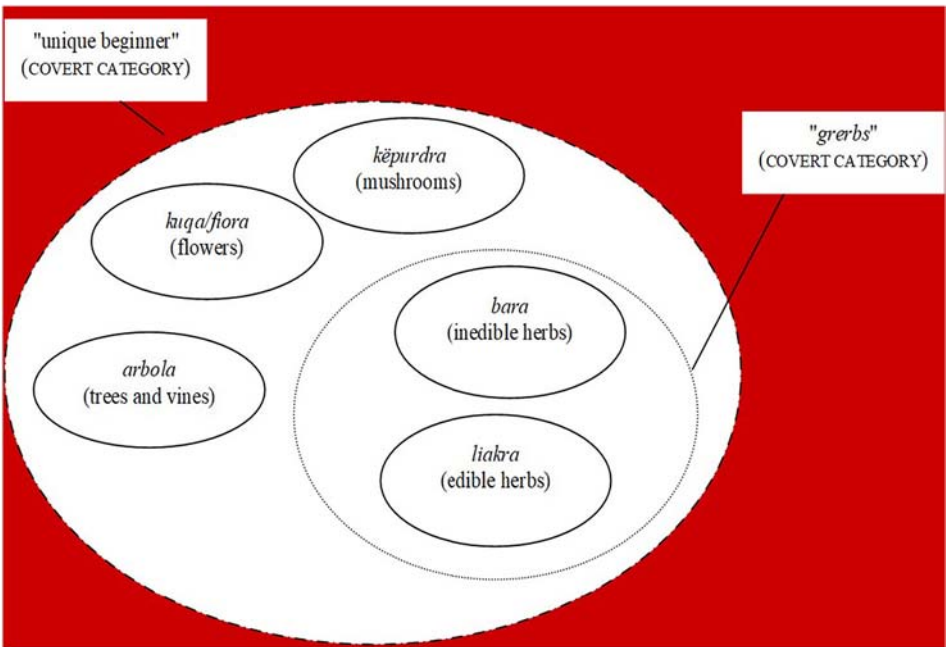


Fig. 1. Folk classification of plants in the village of Ginestra, Southern Italy [1].

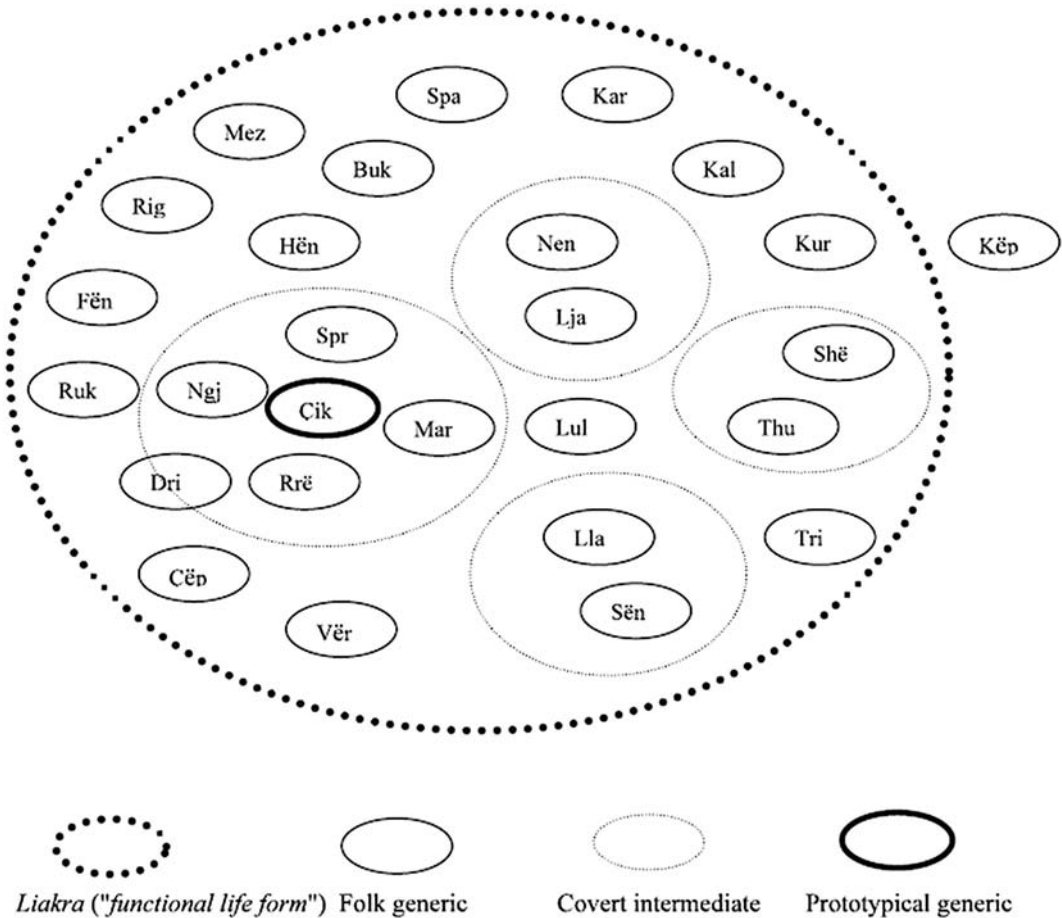


Fig. 2. Folk categorization of locally foraged wild vegetables in the village of Ginestra, Southern Italy; main groupings roughly correspond to perceived similar tastes (abbreviations correspond to the initials of local folk plant names, see [1]).

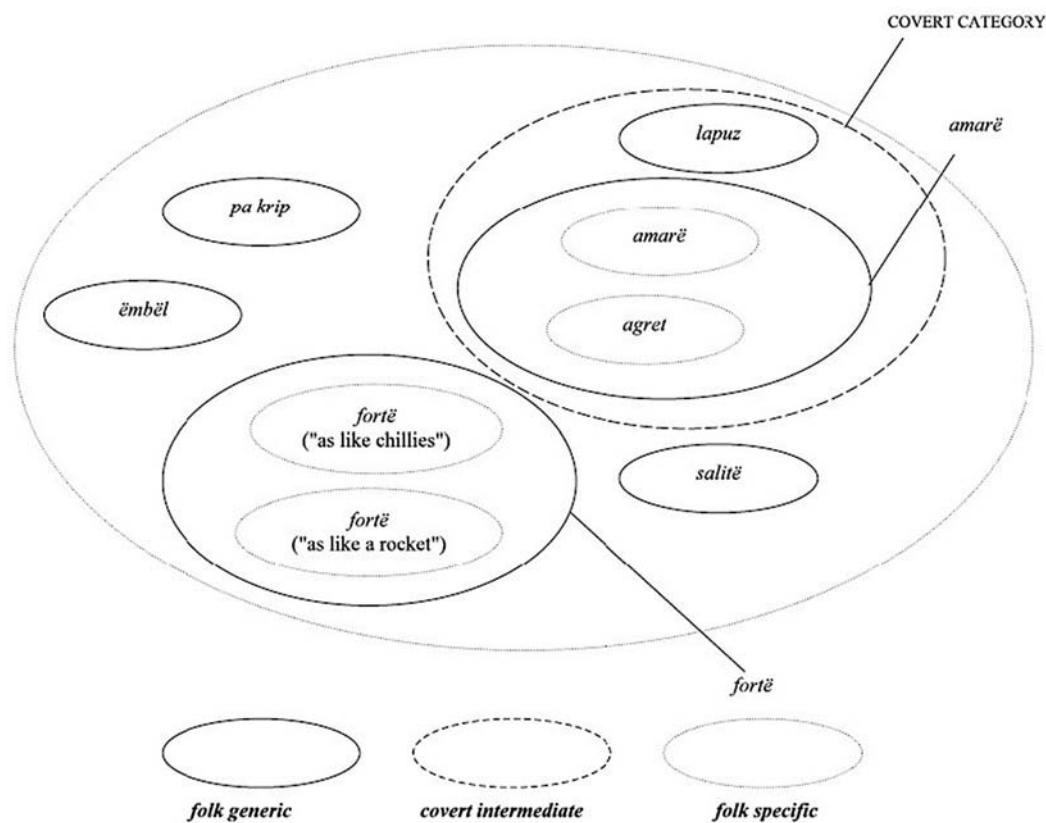


Fig. 3. Folk taxonomy of wild food plant tastes in the village of Ginestra, Southern Italy [1].

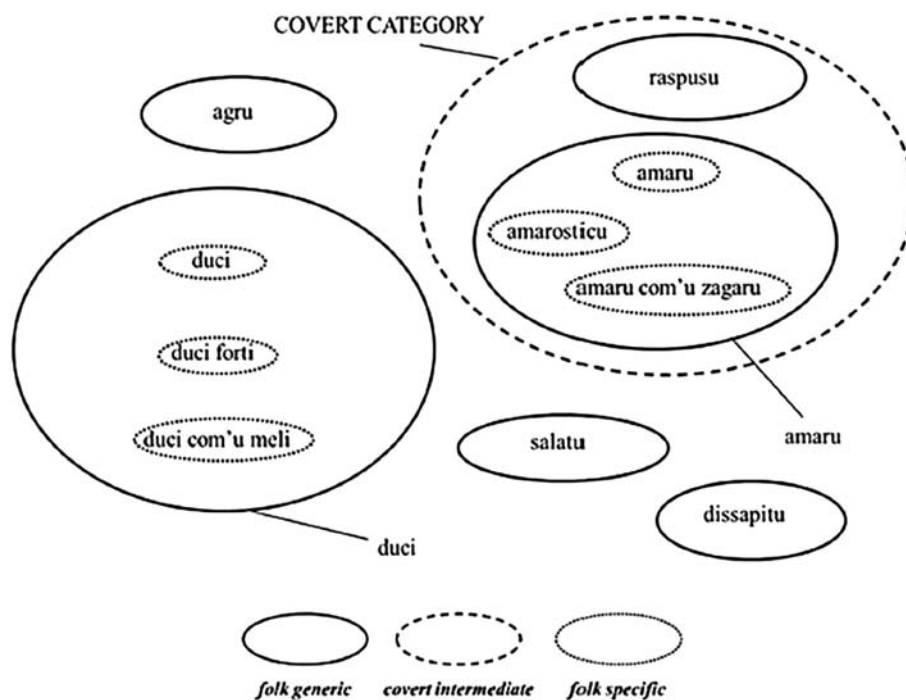


Fig. 4. Folk taxonomy of wild food plant tastes on the isle of Vulcano, Southern Italy [2].

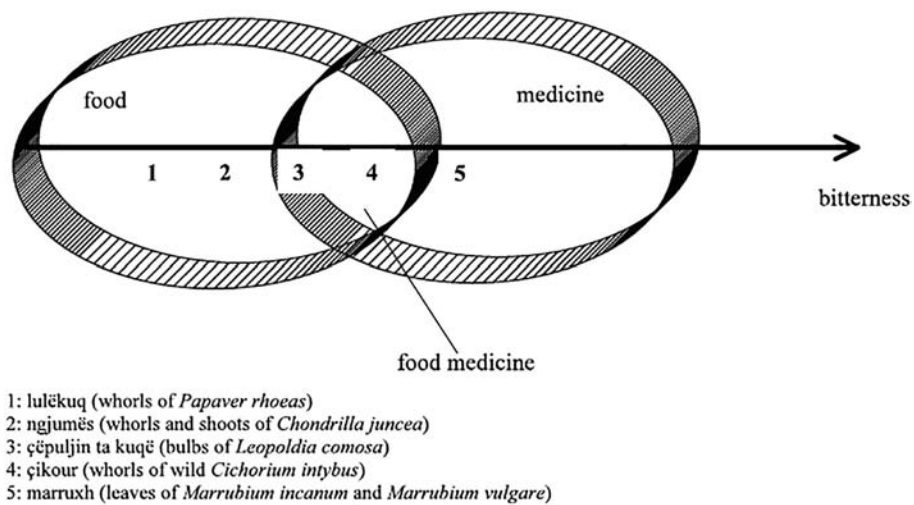


Fig. 5. Link between the perception of the food and medicine continuum and perceived bitterness in relation to the wild plants traditionally foraged in the village of Ginestra, Southern Italy [1].

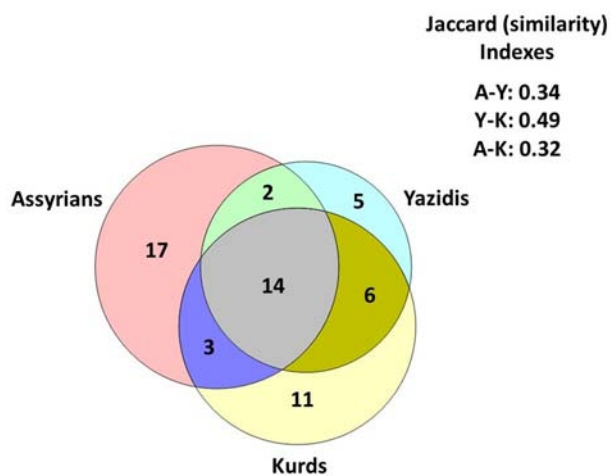


Fig. 6. Venn diagram showing the overlap among the wild vegetables foraged by Kurds, Assyrians, and Yazidis in Northern Iraq [3].

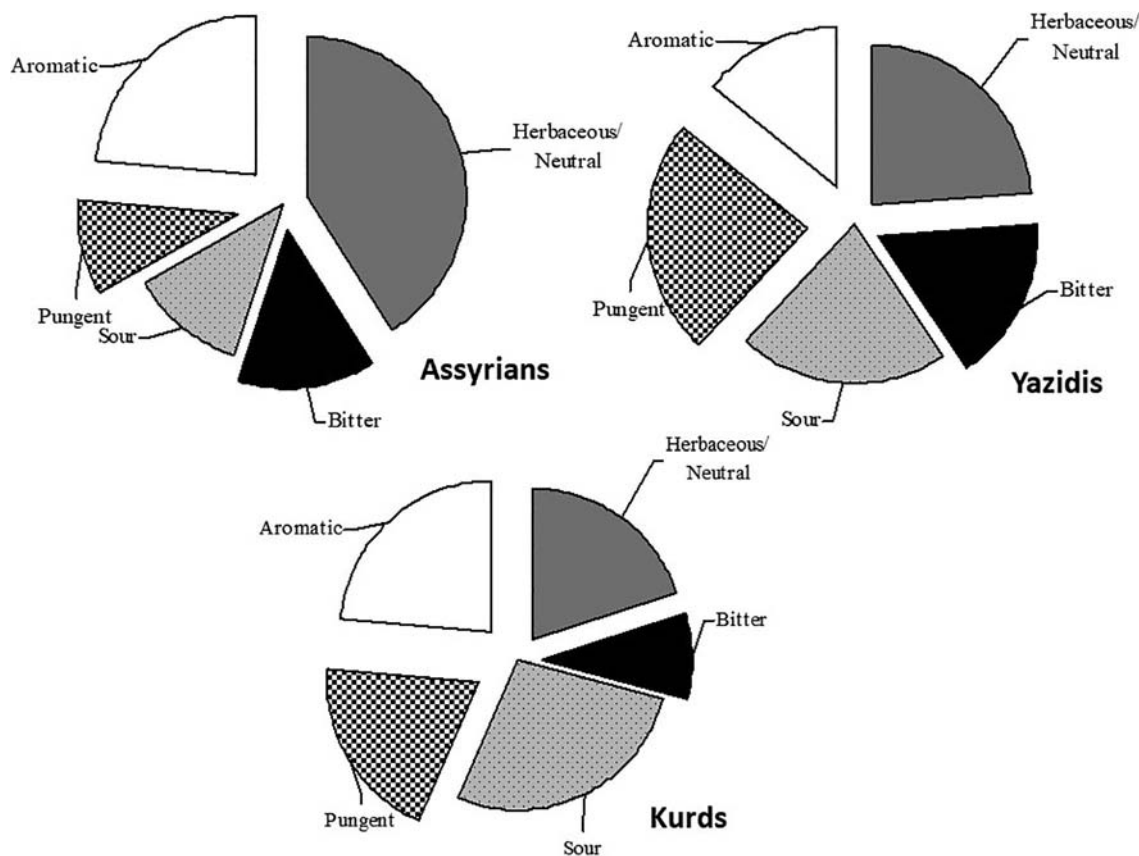


Fig. 7. Taste prevalence of the foraged wild vegetables among Kurds, Assyrians, and Yazidis in Northern Iraq [3].

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Declaration of interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Andrea Pieroni - Trained in medical botany at the University of Pisa, Andrea Pieroni earned his doctorate in life sciences from the University of Bonn in Germany. He has worked as a Research Assistant at the University of London (2000–2003) and as a tenured Lecturer and, later, Senior Lecturer at the University of Bradford in northern England (2003–2009). From January 2009 he has been hired as Professor of Ethnobotany at the University of Gastronomic Sciences of Pollenzo, Italy, where he has been Chancellor from 2017 to 2021. Pieroni has served as the Vice-President and President of the International Society of Ethnobiology (2008–2010), he is the founder and Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine*, and sits on the boards of diverse international peer-reviewed journals. His research focuses on spatial and temporal dynamics of local wild plant knowledge and attached food heritage; the main targeted communities are minorities and diasporas in the Mediterranean, the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East.