

# Deep Roots in Language



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Damghan Pistachio  
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Iranian scholars have had various opinions regarding the origin and etymology of the word pistachio (پسته) in the Persian language. For instance, the renowned poet Malek osh-Sho'arā Bahār suggested that the word pistachio was borrowed from Greek and Roman languages into Persian. Mohammad Moein, the Iranian literary scholar traced the origin and root of the word pistachio in the Arabic word 'fastaq' (فستق), the Aramaic word 'pestaga' (فستقا), and the Greek word 'pistakion' (πιστάκιον). Moein believed that the word first originated in Syria, transferred to Greek, and spread to other European languages. On the other hand, Abu al-Qasim Soltani, the Iranian planetologist pointed out that the word 'bastaqia' (بسطاقيا) in Dioscorides' book was derived from the word 'bistak' (بيستک) or 'bestaga' (بستقا) in Persian literature.

پسته

Ebrahim Poordavud, the Iranian historian claimed that the word 'pistachio' (پسته) has been borrowed from Persian into European languages. According to Western sources, during the Crusades in the 12th century, Crusaders returning from Syria brought back sugar along with other products, including pistachios, saffron, and sesame, which introduced these words to Europe. Parviz Natel Khanlari, the Iranian linguist asserted that pistachio trees are native to northern



Khorasan, particularly the region of Saghd, and the word 'pistachio' spread from there to other regions. It should be noted that this theory was also held to be true by Barto Laufer, an American Iranologist who also emphasized the significance of pistachio trees, especially the *Pistacia vera* (known in Persian as *بنه کوهی*) in ancient Saghd and Khorasan.

Linguistic evidence shows the pronunciation of the word 'pistachio' to have deviated from its original pronunciation toward the end of the Sassanid era in regions beyond the Oxus River in present-day Central Asia. For instance, in the city of Bukhara, around 37 AH (Islamic calendar), there was a well-known market called the 'Pesteh Shekanan Bazaar'. This suggests that the terms bazaar (*بازار*) and Pesteh (*پسته*) were already in use in the modern sense. Furthermore, the pistachio crop in the forests and mountainous regions beyond the river and around Bukhara was abundant to the extent that a market was established in Bukhara to shell the pistachios produced in those regions.

Furthermore, the word 'pistachio' is a very ancient Iranian term whose origin and roots should be sought in the first habitat of these trees. Therefore, the word has its origins in the dialect of the people residing in the extensive pistachio-rich region of Khorasan which, in ancient times, covered a vast geographical area. This extensive region encompassed thriving cities and major pistachio-producing areas of ancient Khorasan, such as Balkh, Herat, Marv, and Nishapur, as well as the areas beyond the river, including cities like Bukhara, Samarkand, and many others. In fact, the Iranian word 'pistachio' (*پسته*) found its way from this region to other parts of the Iranian cultural sphere and the sphere of Persian language influence and was introduced to other nations and cultures around the world.

Perhaps one of the oldest statements on the origins of the word comes from Abu Mansur al-Tha'labi al-Harawi, a great Iranian scholar and Arabic lexicographer who was known for his comprehensive knowledge of Persian vocabulary and its integration into Arabic. It has been that Aburayhan Biruni, who was himself from a pistachio-producing region, quoted al-Tha'labi as saying that the Arabic word of 'fastaq' (*فستق*) is an Arabicized form of the Persian word 'pesteh'. This reinforces the idea that the word has deep roots in Iranian culture and geography





The word ‘pisteh’ (پسته) belongs to the dialect of the people of ancient Khorasan, which is still the term used in some regions of Khorasan such as Torbat Heydarieh, Javanrud, Khaf, Sabzevar, and Nishapur, as well as in many areas of Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and among Persian speakers in Central Asia. In the Lasgardi and Sarukhi dialects (from the Semnan region), the word pistachio is pronounced as ‘pestak’ (پستک) and ‘pesteka’ (پستکا). In particular, the word ‘pesteka’ phonetically resembles the ancient Persian word ‘pistaka’, which was in use during the time of the Achaemenids.

Linguistic evidence also shows that the pronunciation of the word ‘pistachio’ in various regions of Sarakhs, Zoroabad, Javanrud, Damghan, and Badghis has been a byproduct of the sound of breaking open the hard shell of wild pistachios (hence the pronunciations of ‘pisteh’ (پسته), ‘pestak’ (پستک), and ‘pestak’ (پستک)). Therefore, it is strongly believed that the Persian word ‘pesteh’ has a phonetic origin. In other words, the sound of breaking open the pistachio shells became the onomatopoeic name for this fruit.

Today, the pronunciation of the word varies somewhat in contemporary dialects. For instance, the word is pronounced in Yazd province as ‘pestah’ (پسته) and in the province’s Kalameyi dialect it is pronounced as ‘pesso’ (پسو) and ‘fessok’ (فسوک). In the Tat dialect of the Qazvin region, it is pronounced variably as ‘pestiah’ (پستیا) and ‘pesse’ (پسه). In the region of Delijan, it is pronounced



as ‘pesdonae’ (پسدون), and in the Khansari, Borujerdi, and Shushtari dialects it is pronounced as ‘pessa’ (پسه). Lastly, in the Azerbaijani dialect, it is pronounced as ‘pusta’ (پوسته).

