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Eponymic plants in Nicander of Colophon and Pliny the Elder: Alcibius' herb

Аннотация. В статье анализируются сведения о растении (либо растениях), названном (названных) по имени мифологического персонажа Алкибия, которые содержатся в «Theriaka» Никандра Колофонского и в «Естественной истории» Плиния Старшего. Рассматриваются два фрагмента, содержащие подробные этиологические экскурсы (Ἀλκιβίου ἔχις — *Ther*. 541–549; Ἀλκιβίοιο ποίη — 666–675). Идет ли здесь речь об одном растении или о разных, является предметом дискуссии. Плиний, не упоминая об Алкибии как об эпониме, говорит о двух растениях, названия которых, вероятно, связаны с этим персонажем: *archebion* (*NH* 22.51), описание которого во многом совпадает с таковым у Никандра, и *alcibium* (22.39), для которого Плиний лишь приводит рецепт — как и Никандр во втором отрывке. Этот пример, по мнению автора, подкрепляет гипотезу о том, что Плиний был непосредственно знаком с поэмами Никандра, а также иллюстрирует методы организации материала в медицинских книгах «Естественной истории». В статье также приводится список эпонимных растений, упоминаемых в корпусе сочинений Никандра, с указанием соответствий в энциклопедическом труде Плиния.

Ключевые слова: Никандр Колофонский, Плиний Старший, Алкибий, эпонимы, primus inventor, названия растений

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Eponymic plants in Nicander of Colophon and Pliny the Elder: Alcibius' herb

Abstract. The article analyzes information about the plant(s), named after an otherwise unknown mythological character Alcibius, which are found in *Theriaka* of Nicander of Colophon and in the *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder. The bulk of the two passages in Nicander (regarding Ἀλκιβίου ἔχις Ther. 541–549 and Ἀλκιβίοιο ποίη 666–675 respectively) consists of detailed etiological excurses, each telling about how the plant was found by Alcibius. Whether the plant is the same one in both cases, remains a subject of controversy. As for Pliny, he makes no mention of Alcibius as an eponym, but he nevertheless mentions two plants, names of wich very likely refer to this mythological figure: *archebion* (*NH* 22.51), whose external description overlaps in large part with the first account in Nicander, and *alcibium* (22.39), for which Pliny gives no description, but only a recipe — just like Nicander does in the second passage. Thus, the way Pliny arranges his information reflects the structure of both Nicandrian places. The example of Alcibius' plants, in the author's opinion, supports the hypothesis that Pliny was directly familiar with the poems of Nicander and also illustrates the methods of organizing the material in the medical books of *Naturalis Historia*. The article also contains a list of eponymic plants referred to in the corpus of Nicander's works, with corresponding places in Pliny's encyclopedia.

Keywords: Nicander of Colophon, Pliny the Elder, Alcibius, eponyms, primus inventor, names of plants

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Pliny's acquaintance with the works of Nicander of Colophon is a matter that has no final clarity and that, to my knowledge, has not yet been considered separately. Pliny mentions Nicander in the lists of sources for sixteen of the thirty-seven books of *Naturalis Historia* (Books 8, 10–11, 20–21, 23–27, 29–32, 36–37) and twelve times Nicander is referred to in the text. Most of these quotations show intersections with Nicander's poem *Theriaka* (about the bites of poisonous animals and antidotes against them), but there are also references to other works, including lost ones: thus, on the basis of two testimonies of Pliny (37.102, 127 = Nic. fr. 102, 101), Nicander is supposed to have written a work about stones. Pliny's quotations contain a lot of inaccuracies, in particular with regard to the identification of plants and the attribution of certain recipes to Nicander. For example, according to Pliny 20.25, Nicander recommends *raphanus* (radish) for poisoning with mushrooms, henbane and blood of bull, yet ῥάφανος in one of the corresponding places in Nicander (*Alex*. 527) denotes not a radish, but cabbage, and in the recipe for an antidote against bovine blood (*Alex*. 319–334) it is not mentioned at all. However, in some cases Pliny's text conveys even the verbal nuances of the original source[1]. There are also a number passages in Pliny where Nicander is not referred to, but for which he is very likely the source — this includes, inter alia, a report on the place of growth of Illyrian irises (Plin. 21.40 = Nic. *Ther.* 607) and the list of spiders (29.84–87 ≈ Nic. *Ther*. 716–751). Jean-Marie Jacques in his edition of *Theriaka* repeatedly expresses the opinion that Pliny was quite likely acquainted with Nicander's writings and could set out the information obtained from there without always giving a reference to his source directly in the text [Jacques 2002: lxiii, 198, 202, 207]. Therefore, according to Jacques, there is no need to explain the overlaps between Pliny and Nicander by the fact that the former used their common source [Ibid.: 198]. In this paper, I will confine myself to only one area — the so-called eponymic plants, which are mentioned in Nicander, as well as information about these plants in the *Naturalis Historia* of Pliny. One case concerning the plant named after Alcibius will be discussed in detail. Even such a selective analysis provides some observations as to what extent Pliny was familiar with the writings of Nicander.

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First, a few words about the selected material. Eponymic plants — that is, plants named after a mythological or historical character — are a special case of the literary topos πρῶτος εὑρετής (*primus inventor* in Latin), extremely popular in antiquity. It is based on a certain object, custom or technique being assigned to the figure of its 'discoverer' or 'inventor' [Baumbach 2001]. In the works of Nicander, who had, like other Hellenistic poets, a predilection for etiological stories [Fantuzzi, Hunter 2004: 49–50, Zimmermann, Rengakos 2014: 51, 57, 97, 169, 171], this technique plays a significant role [Overduin 2014: 109–112], and at the same time the majority of his *primi inventores* are characters that gave the names to medicinal plants. In addition, the eponymic plants in Nicander perform a compositional function: for example, in *Theriaka* the stories about two panacea plants (Cheiron's and Asclepius') as well as two digressions about plants found by a certain Alcibius are located symmetrically within the section on antidotes against snake bites, and thus structure long lists of ingredients and give a certain unity to the whole

[1] E. g. the interpretation of the word μύωψ, "closing the eyes", regarding the plant in Nic. *Ther*. 662 as "antequam floreat" in Plin. 21.183.

section [Overduin 2014: 57–59]. Pliny also does not ignore eponymous plants: e. g., a significant part of Book 25 is filled with reports about who first discovered one or another of the medicinal herbs that have a corresponding name (for example, the varieties of panacea *panaces Asclepion*, *Heracleon*, *Chironium* 25.30–32). It also should be noted that names represent one of the central concerns for Pliny [Doody 2010: 27–30], in particular, their ability to indicate the origin of the object to which they were assigned [Doody 2011: 123–124], and eponymic plants appear to be demonstrative in this regard.

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The following table lists eponymic plants which occur in Nicander, alongside corresponding passages in Pliny. Plant identifications are given insofar as possible.

Nicander	Pliny	Identifications of plants
Ther. 500–508 Cheriron's root Χείρωνος ῥίζα = *Ther*. 565 πάνακες	25.32 panaces Chironium 25.66 Centaurion = Chironion	Nicander: ? *Chlora perfoliata* = *Blackstonia perfoliata*, a plant from the family Gentianaceae. Pliny: ? common rock-rose *Helianthemum vulgare*. For further identifications see [Jacques 2002: 149]
Ther. 541–549 Alcibius' bugloss Ἀλκιβίου ἔχις = ? *Ther*. 666–675 Alcibius' herb Ἀλκιβίοιο ποίη	22.50 Echis (among other names) 22.51 Archebion (among other names) 27.39 Alcibium	Different species of bugloss *Echium*. See [Jaques 2002: 151; André 1985 s. v. alcibium, archebion, echion]
Ther. 627 Heracles' organy Ἡράκλειον ὀρίγανον = πανάκτειος κονίλη	25.32 panaces Heracleon = origanum Heracleoticum	A species of organy: *Origanum viride*, *Origanum Heracleoticum*
Ther. 685 Phlegyan* (= Asclepius') all-heal πάνακες Φλεγυήιον	25.30 panaces Asclepion	A plant from the family *Umbelliferae,* probably *Echinophora tenuifolia*
Ther. 764 Περσεύς = Alex. 99–105 περσείη Perseus' tree	13.60, 15.45 Persea	*Mimusops Schimperi*, a plant from the family *Sapotaceae*
Ther. 873 Telephus' plant φύλλα Τηλεφίοιο	? 25.42 Achilleos	A plant from the genus *Sedum*
Ther. 902 Hyacinth ὑάκινθος	21.66 Hyacinthus	? *Delphinium Ajacis*
Alex. 234-35 Kydon's plant Κύδωνος … φυτόν	—	*Pirus cydonia* quince
Georgica fr. 74.59 flower of Zeus Διὸς ἄνθος	21.59 Iovis flos	? *Dianthus inodorus* carnation

* In some traditions Phlegyas was the grandfather of Asclepius (*Hymn. Hom. Asclep.* 16.2–3, Pind. *Pyth*. 3.8, Apollod. 3.10.3).

Eponyms of three other plants occur only in the scholia on Nicander; I group them separately:

Aristolochia ἀριστολόχεια a) Sch. *Ther*. 509a a woman named Aristoloche Ἀριστολόχη b) Sch. *Ther*. 937 an inhabitant of Ephesus named Aristolochus	25.95 Aristolochia — explained as ἀρίστη λεχούσαις — "excellent for women in childbirth"	A plant from the genus *Aristolochia*
Organy κονίλη Sch. *Ther*. 626b a certain Conilos φησὶ Πέτριχος ἐν τῷ Ὀφιακῷ ὅτι Κόνιλος εὗρε τὴν βοτάνην	—	A species of organy
Promenus' pomegranate Προμένειος σίδη Sch. *Alex*. 490d a certain Promenus, an inhabitant of Crete	—	A species of pomegranate *Punica*

As we can see, the majority of eponymous plants mentioned by Nicander have parallels in the *Naturalis Historia*. From this list, I consider in more detail one case which I find most interesting: a plant named after Alcibius.

4

A l c i b i u s. A character bearing this name is known only from *Theriaka*. It is difficult to judge whether Nicander used a rare myth that is not preserved in any other sources, or whether Alcibius is a pseudo-mythological figure invented by the poet specifically to explain the name of the plant. Alcibius appears in two plant names: Ἀλκιβίου ἔχις Alcibius's bugloss (*Ther*. 541–549) and Ἀλκιβίοιο ποίη Alcibius's herb (*Ther*. 666–675).

***Ther*. 541–549**[2]
Ἐσθλὴν δ' Ἀ λ κ ι β ί ο υ ἔ χ ι ο ς περιφράζεο ῥ ί ζ α ν.
Τῆς καὶ ἀκανθοβόλος μὲν ἀεὶ περιτέτροφε χαίτη,
λείρια δ' ὡς ἴα τοῖα περιτρέφει· ἡ δὲ βαθεῖα
καὶ ῥαδινὴ ὑπένερθεν ἀέξεται οὔδεϊ ῥίζα.
Τὸν μὲν ἔχις βουβῶνος ὕπερ νεάτοιο χαράξας
ἄντλῳ ἐνυπνώοντα χυτῆς παρὰ τέλσον ἄλωος
εἶθαρ ἀνέπνευσεν καμάτου βίῃ· αὐτὰρ ὁ γαίης
ῥίζαν ἐρυσάμενος τὸ μὲν ἔρκεϊ θρύψεν ὀδόντων
θηλάζων, τὸ δὲ πέσκος ἑῷ περὶ κάββαλεν ἕλκει.

Consider now the excellent r o o t o f A l c i b i u s ' s b u g l o s s: its prickly leaves grow ever thick upon it, and it puts out a coronal of flowers like violets, but beneath them in the soil the root grows deep and slender. Alcibius a Male Viper wounded above the lowest part of his groin as he lay asleep upon a mound of uncleansed grain by the margin of a piled threshing-floor, straightway rousing him by the violence of die pain. Whereat he pulled the root from the ground and first broke it small with his close-set teeth as he sucked it, and then spread the skin upon his wound[3].

[2] Text according to [Jacques 2002].
[3] Here and subsequently translation of [Gow, Scholfield 1953].

***Ther*. 666–675**
Ἄλλην δ’ Ἀλκιβίοιο φερώνυμον ἄγρεο ποίην,
δράχμα χερὸς πλήσας, παύρῳ δ’ ἐν νέκταρι πίνειν.
τὴν μὲν ὑπὸ σκοπέλοισι Φαλακραίοισιν ἐπακτὴρ
Κρύμνης ἂμ πεδίον καὶ ἀνὰ Γράσον ἠδ’ ἵνα θ’ ἵππου
λειμῶνες, σκυλάκεσσιν Ἀμυκλαίῃσι κελεύων,
κνυζηθμῷ κυνὸς οὔλῳ ἐπήισε θυμολέοντος,
ὅς τε μεταλλεύων αἰγὸς ῥόθον ἐν στίβῳ ὕλης
κανθῷ ἐνὶ ῥαντῆρι τυπὴν ἀνεδέξατ’ ἐχίδνης·
καὶ τὴν μὲν κλάγξας ἀφ’ ἑκὰς βάλε, ῥεῖα δὲ ποίης
φύλλα κατέβρυξεν, καὶ ἀλεύατο φοινὸν ὄλεθρον.

Take herbage of another kind that also bears the name of Alcibius, fill your hand full, and drink in a little Wine. This it was that when hunting beneath Phalacra’s cliffs, on Crymna’s plain and about Grasus, and where lie the meadows of the Horse, as he hallooed to his Amyclacan whelps, he discovered through the anguished whimpering of his lion-hearted hound; for as it followed up a goat’s trail along some woodland path it had received the Female Viper’s stab in die watering corner of its eye. And with a howl it flung her off and readily ate the leaves of this herb and escaped deadly destruction.

The beginning of the second passage looks like the description of a different plant than the first one: Ἄλλην δ ‘Ἀλκιβίοιο φερώνυμον ἄγρεο ποίην “take a herbage of another kind that also bears the name of Alcibius”. The etiological stories accompanying the descriptions also differ from each other: in the first, the plant is said to be found by Alcibius himself, and in the second by one of his hunting dogs. Nevertheless, on the basis of the practical information given by Nicander one cannot clearly judge whether it is a question of the same plant or two different ones (see [Jacques 2002: 186–187]): in the first context Nicander describes a plant (*Ther*. 542–544) but says nothing about its use as an antidote, while in the second there is only a recipe (*Ther*. 667) without a description.

As for Pliny, he mentions three plants whose names are similar to those in Nicander. The first two — *echis* and *archebion* — follow directly after each other in Book 22 and are included in a series of alternative names for the plants *pseudoanchusa* and *onochilon* (= *anchusa*):

22.50 Echis[4]
Est et alia similis pseudoanchusa ob id appellata, a quibusdam vero echis aut doris et multis aliis nominibus, lanuginosior et minus pinguis, tenuioribus foliis, languidioribus. radix in oleo non fundit rubentem sucum, et hoc ab anchusa discernitur. contra serpentes efficacissima potu foliorum vel seminis. folia ictibus inponuntur. virus serpentes fugat (There is also another plant, which being like alkanet is called bastard alkanet, though some call it echis or doris or by many other names; it is more downy than the other and less fleshy, the leaves are thinner and more flabby. The root in oil does not give out a red juice, by which test it

[4] Text according to [Mayhoff 1892].

is distinguished from true alkanet. The leaves or seed taken in drink are a very sure antidote to snake bite. The leaves are applied to stings and bites, and their strong smell keeps snakes away[5]).

22.51 Archebion
Est et alia herba proprio nomine onochilon, quam aliqui anchusam vocant, alii a r c h e b i o n, alii onochelim, aliqui rhexiam, multi enchrysam, parvo frutice, flore purpureo, asperis foliis et ramis, radice messibus sanguinea, cetero nigra, in sabulosis nascens, efficax contra serpentes maximeque viperas et radice et foliis, aeque cibo ac potu (There is another plant also, the proper name of which is onochilon, called by some people anchusa, or archebion, or onochelis, or rhexia, and by many enchrysa. It has a short base, a purple flower, rough leaves and branches, a root blood-red at harvest time, though dark at other times, growing on sandy soils, an antidote to the bites of serpents, especially of vipers, both root and leaves being equally efficacious in food and in drink).

Ἀλκιβίου ἔχις in Nicander is usually identified with *archebion* in Pliny, since both authors refer to purple flowers (*Ther*. 543 λείρια δ ‘ὡς ἴα, Plin. 22.51 flore purpureo), which are mentioned also by Dioscorides in the description of a plant called ἄγχουσα ἑτέρα, Ἀλκιβιάδειον and ὀνοχειλὲς (4.24 <ἄγχουσα ἑτέρα>, ἣν ἔνιοι Ἀλκιβιάδειον ἠνοχειλὲς ἐκάλεσαν ... ἄνθος πορφυροειδές, ὑποφοινικοῦν)[6]. In this connection, the possibility arises that *archebion* contains, in a distorted form, the name of the Nicandrian character Alcibius. However, according to Jacques, there are insufficient grounds for such identification — among other reasons, because Ἀλκιβιάδειον in Dioscorides is used as a synonymous name for several plants [Jacques 2002: 186].

Of particular interest is a passage from the 27th Book of *Naturalis Historia*:

27.39[7]
A l c i b i u m qualis esset herba, non repperi apud auctores, sed radicem eius et folia trita ad serpentis morsum inponi et bibi, folia quantum manus capiat trita cum vini meri cyathis III aut radicem drachmarum III pondere cum vini eadem mensura (In my authorities I have found no description of alcibium, but only that its pounded root and leaves are applied locally, and taken in drink, for snake bite; a handful of the pounded leaves with three cyathi of neat wine, or three drachmae by weight of the root with the same measure of wine[8]).

Two points may seem surprising here. First, *alcibium* looks like a very accurate rendering of the plant name in Nicander, but Pliny says that he “has not found in his authorities” any information about its properties. Second, immediately after this phrase Pliny speaks about the use of *alcibium* as an antidote against snakebites, and he also gives a prescription using this herb. This implies that Pliny still knew something about the properties of the plant, and he is most likely to have obtained this information from some *auctores* — what he had just denied in the previous sentence.

[5] Here and subsequently translation from [Jones 1951].
[6] See more [Jacques 2002: 151–152].
[7] Text according to [Mayhoff 1897].
[8] Here and subsequently translation from [Jones, Andrews 1956].

The latter difficulty can be resolved by observing that the phrase *qualis esset* points not to any properties in general, but only to the external appearance of the plant (such as leaves, roots, flowers, etc.). This becomes clear when we consider descriptions of other plants in Book 27. In his botanical descriptions, Pliny usually places this kind of information immediately after the plant name, and for *alcibium* there is no such external description. However, as we recall, Nicander (*Ther*. 542–544) does describe in some detail the appearance of a plant named after Alcibius. This brings us back to Pliny's statement *non repperi apud auctores*.

In my opinion, everything can fall into place if we assume that Pliny considered Ἀλκιβίου ἔχις and Ἀλκιβίοιο ποίη as two different plants — just as Nicander's text suggests, where these two names are placed far apart and are accompanied by different etiological stories. In this case, *alcibium* will correspond to Ἀλκιβίοιο ποίη (*Ther*. 666), for which Nicander gives no description, but only therapeutic instructions. Nicander's prescription, unlike Pliny's, is formulated very briefly and superficially (for example, the proportions for wine are not given), but in Pliny we find the indication *quantum manus capiat*, which looks like a verbatim rendering of δράχμα χερὸς πλήσας in *Ther*. 667.

Thus, Pliny's phrase should not be understood in the sense that the authors (by which Nicander could be implied) do not report anything about *alcibium*, but in the sense that for some reason they do not consider it necessary to describe what this plant looks like. It is telling that two more contexts from Book 27 are built according to the same scheme as the section on *alcibium*:

> **27.103**
> *Leucographis q u a l i s e s s e t, s c r i p t u m n o n r e p p e r i, quod eo magis miror, quoniam utilis proditur sanguinem excreantibus III obolis cum croco, item coeliacis, trita ex aqua et adposita profluvio feminarum, oculorum quoque medicamentis et explendis ulceribus, quae fiant in teneris partibus* (A description of leucographis I have nowhere found in writing. I am the more surprised at this because in three-oboli doses with saffron it is considered useful for haemoptysis, and also for the coeliac disease; beaten up in water and applied as a pessary for excessive menstruation; useful too as an ingredient of eye salves, and for fining up ulcers that form on tender parts of the body).

> **27.141**
> *Trachinia herba q u a l i s s i t, n o n t r a d i t u r. credo falsum et promissium Democriti portentosum esse, adalligatam triduo absumere lienes* (We are not told the nature of the plant trachinia. I think it untrue, and the assurance of Democritus fantastic, that used as an amulet it consumes the spleen in three days).

Thus, in all three cases Pliny points to the absence of a plant description by using quite similar expressions. It is noteworthy that in 27.103 Pliny openly expresses his perplexity (*quod eo magis miror*) about the inconsistency demonstrated in the sources: indeed, if a plant is recommended as an extremely useful one, then the reader should be able to identify it, which is very difficult to do without a description. This remark becomes even more interesting if we compare it with another passage in the *Naturalis Historia* where descriptions of plants are discussed:

25.9
Quare ceteri sermone eas tradidere, aliqui ne effigie quidem indicata et nudis plerumque nominibus defuncti, quoniam satis videbatur potestates vimque demonstrare quaerere volentibus. nec est difficilis cognitio: nobis certe, exceptis admodum paucis, contigit reliquas contemplari scientia Antoni Castoris, cui summa auctoritas erat in ea arte nostro aevo, visendo hortulo eius, in quo plurimas alebat (For this reason the other writers have given verbal accounts only; some have not even given the shape of the plants, and for the most part have been content with bare names, since they thought it sufficient to point out the properties and nature of a plant to those willing to look for it. To gain this knowledge is no difficult matter; I at least have enjoyed the good fortune to examine all but a very few plants through the devotion to science of Antonius Castor, the highest botanical authority of our time; I used to visit his special garden, in which he would rear a great number of specimens).

Immediately before this passage (25.8) it is said that the illustrations by which some Greek authors supply their works are unreliable and rather complicate the correct identification of plants than contribute to it — in particular, for the reason that the same plant can look differently depending on the season. It seems likely that Pliny considers verbal descriptions more appropriate than pictures. Nonetheless, even verbal descriptions are optional and the narrative can be reduced to the name of a plant (*nudis plerumque nominibus defuncti*). Most importantly, Pliny explicitly states that such a reduction does not impede correct identification of plants (*nec est difficilis cognitio*). Now we see that Pliny contradicts himself when in the section on *leucographis* (27.103) he rejects the practice that he has found acceptable in 25.9.

Let us return to Alcibius and the plants named after him. If we suppose that Pliny knew both passages from *Theriaka* where Alcibius appears, then it would be logical to expect that the plants related to the same eponymous person would be mentioned together or at least their similarity would somehow be pointed out. However, *alcibium* and *archebion* appear in different parts of the *Naturalis Historia,* though *archebion* could be derived from Nicander's Ἀλκίβιος and *alcibium* almost certainly has this origin. How could this happen? Regarding this question, one preliminary conclusion can be drawn. Book 27 of the *Naturalis Historia*, in which *alcibium* is mentioned, is arranged as an alphabetical list of plants. This list must have required considerable preparatory work, including selection of plants according their names. In the course of such a selection, *alcibium* could have lost the connection with other names related to Alcibius in some way. Besides, it seems possible that at some stage of work with these preliminary materials the name of Alcibius could have been distorted or completely lost in Plin. 22.51, where Pliny alluded to Nicander *Ther*. 241–244.

Conclusions

Summing up, we can say the following. Pliny's descriptions —in both Book 22 and Book 27 — demonstrate quite obvious intersections with Nicander, who is included in the list of sources for both books. I have tried to demonstrate that both passages from *Theriaka* where Alcibius is mentioned (*Ther*. 541–544, 666–667) are visible in the *Naturalis Historia*. Pliny may have lost the connection between them due to a specific way of selecting material for the alphabetical list of plants in Book 27, and this fault can shed important light on his methods of work.

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