

A Visual History of Basil

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ABSTRACT: This paper is to be presented in tandem with an illustrated map that depicts a visual history and geography of basil. Using primary and secondary sources and multidisciplinary methods, the author presents her research about basil's importance with humanity over time. The map is used as a research tool to better understand the nuances, complexities, and importance of basil's uses in cultures across time and space.

My illustrated map presents a tour through history with basil as the driving force. The map is a physical work of art that spans twelve feet by three feet. In order to make the piece virtual, I photographed segments of the map and stitched them together using Photoshop. You may examine the map by zooming in or out of the webpage.

I explore the use of illustrations to better understand the geography and history of basil. Through a thorough exploration, we will experience the history of basil and its adaptation into different societies. It is possible to begin at any point, going backwards or forwards in time, or starting in various geographical locations. Visual geography helps us learn about the history of food in different cultures by showing how a common ingredient takes different forms in recipes, medicines, and religions. Of course, these forms frequently overlap. This geographical angle encourages a deeper understanding of basil's importance in human history, and it may help us think about the future of that food differently. Visual geography manifests a storied past in order to understand the lateral migrations of basil across the world (and perhaps into outer space).

The map creates a holistic exploration to help understand how basil's relationship with humanity has evolved. This approach avoids a linear storyline, providing room for expansion as more research accumulates. Following this illustration of basil's global history will visually explain the complex nuances of its movements and cultural significance through varied spaces and peoples.

I am in the process of interpretation, situating the data historically and geographically. I express these ideas visually to help understand my research. Basil's migration was intentional – it did not travel around the globe accidentally, and it was important for people to take with them as they migrated.

Etymology and Taxonomy

While information about the etymology of basil is often conflicting or inconsistent, it is worth mentioning the following: the genus of basil is *Ocimum*, derived from the Greek

ozo, meaning “to smell,” likely related to the strong odor that the plant emits.¹ Basil is often referred to as the “king of herbs,” relating to the Greek word for “king,” *basileus*.² This could also be related to basil’s historical uses in medicine or perfumes for royalty.³ The word “basilica” derives from the same roots, and basil is frequently associated with cultures of conquest.⁴

Basiliscus in Latin and *basiliskos* in Greek, are commonly associated with the basil plant through symbolism and lore, translating directly to “little king,” but also referring to the serpent or the basilisk, because of the crown-like features on its head.⁵ In Latin, it could also mean “dragon,” and this may explain basil’s symbolic associations with scorpions and serpents in folklore, medicine, and religion.⁶ Basil was said to attract basilisks if carried in travellers’ pockets leaving India.⁷ The legend of the basilisk told that it could cause death with a single glance.⁸ In Hinduism, basil is associated with Vishnu who is frequently depicted sitting on a seven-headed serpent, a creator god named Shesha.⁹

One thing that categorizes the genus *Ocimum* is the great variability in both its morphology and chemical composition.¹⁰ Scholars tend to disagree on exactly how many species of basil exist. While several sources estimate about 60-65, other estimates suggest there are up to 150 species.¹¹ This may be due to taxonomic miscategorization.¹² *O. basilicum* refers to sweet basil and its cultivars, but there are many different types that are referred to by different taxonomic names, some of them hybrids.¹³ The sweet basil cultivars include, but are not limited to: Genovese basil, large leaf, lettuce leaf, and mammoth basil.¹⁴ Cultivars of purple basils within the sweet basil taxonomy include dark opal, purple ruffles, red rubin, and osmin basil.¹⁵ *O. sanctum* is otherwise known as holy basil, or tulsi.¹⁶ *O. americanum*, refers to lemon or lime basil, and *O. xcitriodorum*, a type of lemon-Thai basil.¹⁷ Aroma compounds vary throughout the species, cultivars, and hybrids, to the extent that some cultivars produce cinnamon, anise, licorice, or camphor fragrances.¹⁸

While different varieties, cultivars, and hybrids of basil exist world-wide, sweet basil has naturalized itself nearly all over the globe.¹⁹

Medicine and Prescriptive Literature

Some of the oldest uses of basil in medicine are included in the Rigvedas, Ayurvedic texts which date to 3500-1600 BCE.²⁰ In Ayurvedic medicine, basil was used to treat many ailments including snake bites, warts, cancer, and coughs.²¹ One medicinal Ayurvedic recipe calls for black peppercorns wrapped in basil leaves to be taken in the morning as a treatment for malaria.²² According to a medical journal, this recipe has been found to relieve the symptoms of the parasitic disease.²³

A Chinese herbal from 1060 CE mentions basil as a remedy for stomach spasms and kidney ailments.²⁴

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In ancient Egypt, Dioscorides recorded that basil was used to treat scorpion stings.²⁵ Other medicinal uses of basil in folk remedies treat insanity, nausea, impotency, epilepsy, deafness, gout, hiccup, and boredom.²⁶ Basil is commonly believed to have febrifugal properties in West Africa, where basil is known as the “fever-plant” and used to make fever-breaking tea.²⁷ In Japan, basil is used as a remedy for colds.²⁸

An early English book from 1596 entitled *A Rich Store-House or Treasury for the Diseased* included instructions for ‘A most excellent remedy to ease the raging paine of the teeth’:

Take a little balm and basill, and rub them both together in the palme of your hand, untill such time as they come almost to a iuice [juice], and then put it into your eare on the same side that the paine is on, and it will help you presently. This hath holpen many.²⁹

Another recipe in the ‘Preservatives Against the Plague’ chapter of *Queen Elizabeths Closset of Physical Secrets, with Certain Approved Medicines Taken out of a Manuscript Found at the Dessolution of One of Our English Abbies* included a recipe entitled ‘A Quilt for the Heart.’ What is interesting about this recipe is that the author, presumed to be an alchemist, used basil in a way in which it was neither ingested, nor used to make a balm. It seems to take the role of symbolic protector and healer in a sack that is placed over the heart of the sick while they sweat. Here “ana” means “of each an equal quantity,” and is used in writing prescriptions.³⁰

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Take the floures of Nenuphare, Burrage, Buglofs, ana, a little handfull: Floures of Balm, Rosemary, ana 3 iii. Red fanders, Red corall, Lignum aloes, Rinde of a citron, ana 3i. Seeds of Basil, Citrons, ana 3 i. Leaves of Dittander, Berries of Juniper, ana 3 i. Bone of a Stags Heart, half a scruple, Saffron, four grains.

Mixe all these in grosse powder, and put them in a bag of crimson Taffetie, or Lincloth, and lay it to the heart, and there let it remain. All these things being done, then procure him to sweat, having a good fire in the chamber, and windowes close shut, and so let him sweat three or four horse more or lesse, or according as the strength of the sick body can endure, and then dry the body well with warm clothes, taking great care that the sick catch not cold in the doing thereof, and then give him some of this Julep following, and apply the aforesaid quilt or bag to the heart.³¹

This researcher speculates that heat from the room or body could have released oils from the herbs in the sack, creating a vapor that was inhaled.

The basil plant and its varieties contain monoterpenes, sesquiterpenes, and phenylpropanoids – organic compounds that make up essential oils.³² These compounds protect the plant from predators, such as insects and herbivores, by creating an astringent

flavour, while also protecting the plant from pollutants, UV rays, and other plant stressors.³³ These same compounds are what lend themselves to the scientific basis that the basil plant possesses antiseptic, anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial, antiparasitic, and antiviral properties. Other aroma compounds in basil, such as estragol, eugenol and linalool also possess antiseptic, anti-inflammatory, and insecticidal properties.³⁴ Derivatives of basil are used in modern day pharmacology and further research is underway.³⁵

Basil in Religion and Death

Tulsi, also known as the tulasi plant or holy basil, is perceived as the place where heaven and earth meet in Hindu myth, folklore, and literature.³⁶ Tulsi is strongly associated with Krishna, Vishnu, and one of Vishnu's wives, Lakshmi.³⁷ It is said that another creator god, Brahma, lives on the branches of the tulsi plant.³⁸ Followers of Vishnu are often characterized as ones "who bear Tulasi round the neck," wearing necklaces, rosaries, or wreaths made from basil leaves, stems, and roots.³⁹

The Puranas, writings of Hindu legends and folklore, say that all things associated with the tulsi plant are holy, including the water given to it, the soil in which it grows, and all of its parts.⁴⁰ The writings also say that a person guilty of sins has their sins absolved if they are cremated with tulsi twigs.⁴¹ Basil is held in the hands of those making pilgrimages, known to repel the lord of death, to protect against evil and impurity, and drive away demons.⁴² Sprigs of tulsi are placed on the chests of those that are dying, as a viaticum, and often placed in the mouths of the recently deceased.⁴³ Mortuary practices often involve bathing bodies in tulsi water, which ensures the soul enters into heaven, a reinforcement of the idea that tulsi is the place where heaven and earth meet.⁴⁴

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Some of these symbolic interpretations of basil overlap with other religious traditions, likely in part due to Alexander the Great having brought basil to Greece from Iran, Afghanistan, or Western India.⁴⁵ Roman historian Elizabeth Pollard said, "religious ideas, detached from original social contexts, flowed east and west on the silk roads and gained ritual power."⁴⁶ Early Christians believed that basil grew on Christ's grave.⁴⁷ Flowers, possibly including those of the basil plant, were buried with ancient Egyptians and Greeks after death.⁴⁸ Basil is used in funerals in modern day Iran where it is planted on graves, and is used as a symbol of mourning in modern day Crete.⁴⁹ The ancient Greeks also regarded basil as a sign of mourning.⁵⁰

Basil is a symbol of conquest and kingliness and, in Greek Orthodox Christianity, basil is used to make holy water. Instructions from the Saint George Greek Orthodox Church in Chicago say that in order for a priest to bless your new home, he will need water to bless, and a sprig of basil to dip into the water, to sprinkle it into the corners of the home.⁵¹ Poet **George Kalogeris**'s 2001 poem 'Basil,' mentions a weekly Sunday ritual in which his father would bless their home in a similar fashion.⁵²

Culinary Basil

The culinary uses of basil vary greatly. Due to its naturalization and growth on every continent excluding Antarctica (where it is grown in greenhouses by scientists experimenting with space farming techniques), it is a common ingredient in many cultural foodways.⁵³ In a study of Los Angeles restaurants, of all types of restaurants, 79% used basil.⁵⁴ It is used fresh, frozen, or dried.⁵⁵ The seeds are also used, such as in *falooda*, a chilled dessert drink made with water-soaked basil seeds, strawberry or raspberry jelly, vermicelli noodles, ice cream, rose syrup, and nuts.⁵⁶ Basil seeds are also used in the recipe that follows. I am in the process of compiling historical recipes to be included in my larger project, but have included the following, as mentioned on the map.

This recipe is by culinary historian Pushpesh Pant:

Tulasi Sherbet Sweet Basil Sherbet

Origin: Awadh

Preparation time: 20 minutes, plus soaking and cooking time

Serves: 8-10

4 tablespoons of sweet basil seeds

120 g/4 oz (½ cup) sugar

1 teaspoon kewra water or rosewater

500 ml/18 fl oz (2¼ cups) cold milk

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Put the seeds in a large bowl, pour in 750 ml/1¼ pints (3¼ cups) water and soak for about 1 hour, or until they swell up. Drain off any excess liquid.

Heat 1 litre/1¾ pints (4¼ cups) water in a large heavy-based pan over low heat, add the sugar and stir until dissolved. Remove from the heat and cool.

Add the basil seeds and stir until well blended, then stir in the kewra water and milk before serving.⁵⁷

Other recipes of interest are turtle soup, pistou, pesto, and fetter lane sausages. I plan to further explore basil's use as a preservative for meat and fish before refrigeration.⁵⁸ A historical pesto recipe would be important to include here because it preserves basil for winter use and can be used as a concentrated seasoning.⁵⁹

Future recipe research will likely include using archaeological methods to better understand how basil was used in preservation and food storage. This research may be able to integrate contextual, social, historical, economic, and societal clues to help gain broader insights about the value and meaning of basil in people's lives and cultures. Using experimental archaeological approaches to recreate historical recipes and cooking techniques may also help to understand the relationships between basil and its users.

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The distinction between food and medicine rarely exists in quotidian life. Food and ingredients can simultaneously be recognized as both, either in dishes or on their own. It is important to separate them here to give weight to the scientific reasons as to why and how basil is medicinal and/or possesses medicinal properties.

Sinister Basil?

For all its perceived benefits and majestic qualities, some thought that basil had a darker side. In Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, written in the 70s CE, he described that basil should be planted "with the utterance of curses and imprecations, the result being that it grows all the better for it; the earth too, is rammed when it is sown, and prayers offered that the seed may never come up."⁶⁰ Boccaccio included basil as a central component in his story of Lisabetta and Lorenzo, with major themes of jealousy, intrigue, and madness in *Decameron*.⁶¹ Merely smelling the herb could breed scorpions on the brain, thought sixteenth-century French physician Hilarius.⁶² Herbalist Nicholas Culpeper thought basil was dangerous, straying from historical opinions of Arabian physicians that preceded him.

In *The English Physician*, Culpeper wrote the following:

14 And away to Dr. Reason went I, who told me it was an herb of Mars, and under the Scorpion, and perhaps therefore called Basilicon; and it is no marvel if it carry a kind of virulent quality with it. Being applied to the place bitten by venomous beasts, or stung by a wasp or hornet, it speedily draws the poison to it; *Every like draws his like*. Mizaldus affirms, that, being laid to rot in horse-dung, it will breed venomous beasts. Hilarius, a French physician, affirms upon his own knowledge, that an acquaintance of his, by common smelling to it, had a scorpion bred in his brain. Something is the matter; this herb and rue will not grow together, no, nor near one another: and we know rue is as great an enemy to poison as any that grows.

To conclude; It expels both birth and after-birth; and as it helps the deficiency of Venus in one kind, so it spoils all her actions in another. I dare write no more of it.⁶³

Basil in Poetry and Art

With Basil then will I begin,
Whose scent is wondrous pleasing,
—*Michael Drayton, Poly-Olbion 1612*⁶⁴

Literature, poetry, and art can show us what things were culturally important. The sensorial aspects of basil are extremely present in its description, which can be seen in this excerpt from Drayton's poem.

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As mentioned, Boccaccio's fourteenth-century *Decameron* is a story of lovers Lisabetta (also known as Isabella) and Lorenzo.⁶⁵ Lorenzo is murdered by Lisabetta's brothers.⁶⁶ She dreams of his burial site, exhumes the body, cuts off his head, takes it home, puts it in a pot, plants basil over it, and waters it with her tears.⁶⁷

Moreover she took wont to sit still near the pot and to gaze amorously upon it with all her desire, as upon that which held her Lorenzo hid; and after she had a great while looked thereon, she would bend over it and fall to weeping so sore and so long that her tears bathed all the basil, which, by dint of long and assiduous tending, as well as by reason of the fatness of the earth, proceeding from the rotting head that was therein, waxed passing fair and very sweet of savour.⁶⁸

The story ends with her brothers stealing the pot, and Isabella dying from the grief of losing her lover, twice.

This story further inspired a narrative poem by John Keats, 'Isabella, or the Pot of Basil' in the early nineteenth century; it mentions basil twelve times.⁶⁹ Keats' version of the poem inspired two nineteenth-century paintings by the same name, *Isabella and the Pot of Basil* by **William Holman Hunt**, and *Isabella and the Pot of Basil* by **John White Alexander**.⁷⁰ Frank Bridge wrote a **symphonic poem** inspired by the Keats' work in 1907.⁷¹

We find mentions of basil in contemporary poetry as well. The following is Sandra Gilbert's 1997 poem, which alludes to several of the themes represented in my research:

BASIL

A question the box of earth
still asks the kitchen,

as in green blades
of Liguria, green

spears of the watery
forests of Thailand,

peppery keen
airs of August,

as in wise king
do not fade,

as in a pot of,
where the lover's head

explodes into new
ideas, *as in*

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chop the loss finely,
add salt and stew

and halo the old charred
grandmother stove,

as in what to do
with the last

three stained tomatoes
hung on the vine.⁷²

Other contemporary poets, such as **Ilya Kaminsky** and **James Davis May** include basil as a symbol of normalcy and goodness, contrasting broader narratives about police brutality and domestic abuse within their poems.⁷³

Basil and its Miscellaneous Uses

Henry VIII employed a strewer, Thomas Tusser, who compiled a list of sixteen essential sweet-smelling herbs and flowers, including basil, that were to be spread across the floor of the castle, stepped upon as one would walk through, creating a sweet aroma from being crushed by a person's feet.⁷⁴

16 In many countries throughout Europe, basil has been, or is considered to be a token of love. In Tuscany, it goes by the name *amorino*, "little love."⁷⁵ In the Chieti Province of Italy, the smell of basil is thought to create instant attraction.⁷⁶ A pot of basil on a balcony could signal that a daughter is of marriageable age in Sicily, similar to the fifteenth-century story by Gentile Sermini, where removal of a pot of basil from a window served as a signal between lovers that the coast was clear for a meeting.⁷⁷ In Romania and Moldova, a sprig of basil is given as a love token.⁷⁸ In Iran, a person who consumes a dry mixture of basil and olives is certain to be loved.⁷⁹ Ayurveda and Pliny refer to basil as being an aphrodisiac.⁸⁰ Basil was seen as a symbol of chastity and virginity. In Vogtland, Germany, a sprig of basil was given as a test to young girls – if it withered in her hands, she was not chaste.⁸¹

In Hinduism, basil may be placed over the ear to keep a person from telling a lie.⁸² During British colonial rule of India, tulsi was used in lieu of a Bible, sworn upon by Indian citizens taking an oath in a court of law.⁸³ In Kenya, it is used to make brooms to sweep chicken coops to rid of fleas and as an insecticide on maize cobs.⁸⁴ Basil is commonly used ornamentally to drive away flies and mosquitoes.⁸⁵ Basil has strong astrological associations with Mars and scorpio.⁸⁶

Humanity's journey with basil is continuous. In 1998, NASA had plans to build a space garden.⁸⁷ Of the 30 plants to go in the garden, basil was important enough to be included.⁸⁸ Scientists are growing basil in Antarctica in an attempt to mimic growing conditions of outer space.⁸⁹ Future generations may see basil growing on Mars or the moon.⁹⁰

Conclusion

Basil has had numerous meaningful applications throughout human history. By tying together pieces of basil's history, using visual history and geography, and other multidisciplinary methods as research tools, we can discover more about basil's role in different aspects of human life. This includes social life, religion and engagement with the divine. Basil is an object that has been sensorially experienced and ingested by people all over the world across time. It has impacted our health and longevity: cured our ailments, broken our fevers, eased our raging pains, and derivatives are still used in modern pharmacology. It has preserved our foods, and provided flavour for winter months. It has been stepped on to freshen rooms or drive away insects, and carried in people's pockets across deserts and oceans. Basil's multiple uses and interpretations – its lore, myth, creed, power, symbolism, are modes of metaphorical expression of cultures.⁹¹ By further compiling and synthesizing this information, I aim to express the importance of basil in our global history and perhaps create a point in which to better understand the significance of its role in our future.

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