

ŁUKASZ ŁUCZAJ

## Bladdernut (*Staphylea pinnata* L.) in Polish folklore

### Kłokoczka południowa (*Staphylea pinnata* L.) w polskim folklorze

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**ABSTRACT:** *Staphylea pinnata* occurs in Europe, mainly in central and SE areas, and in Asia Minor. In Poland it has a few dozen localities in the Carpathians, plus scattered localities in other regions of southern Poland. The aim of the article was to summarise records on its traditional use in Poland. In some places of its occurrence *Staphylea* used to be a revered shrub, with many uses. Its hard seeds were used for making beads in rosaries. Its very hard wood was used to make butter-making dashers and small crosses. Due to the magic, apotropaic properties the plant was believed to have, not only were crosses made of it, but the plant's branches were blessed in churches (with other important plants) on Palm Sunday, on the eighth day after Corpus Christi, and on August the 15<sup>th</sup>. The branches were also attached to cows' horns, for magic purposes. Most of the presented traditional uses are practically extinct now, but are still remembered by the most elderly people. Only the making of bladdernut seed rosaries is still practiced by some monks, nuns and hobbyists. In Lubzina near Ropczyce a special church service is organised on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, in which the plant is blessed. Branches with bladdernut fruits are also blessed (by single individuals) on that day in some churches in the region south of Jasło. The variety of traditional uses of bladdernut in magic rituals strongly supports the hypotheses that the plant was grown from times immemorial and many of its localities are of anthropogenic origin.

**Key words:** ethnobotany, apotropaic plants, rosary, blessed plants, cows

### Introduction

Bladdernut (*Staphylea pinnata* L.) is a tall deciduous shrub, distributed in some parts of central and southern Europe, as well as in Asia Minor. In Poland it is a rare and protected plant, at the northern limit of its range. The largest number of its localities are to be found in the Beskid Niski Mountains and the adjacent part of the Carpathian Foothills (Kornaś, Wróbel 1972; Oklejewicz et al. 2008). Scattered localities of the species (at least some of them of anthropogenic origin) can be found in other parts of southern Poland, mainly in Silesia, the Częstochowa-Kraków Jurassic Upland and in Roztocze (Gostyńska 1961, Kornaś, Wróbel 1972, Zajac, Zajac 2001). The genus *Staphylea* was widely distributed in the Tertiary period (Środoń 1992), however later Holocene *Staphylea* remains are very rare. In that period the plant was found in

archeological material from Opole, Wrocław and Pruszcz Gdański, in Poland (Klichowska 1956, Latałowa 1994).

*Staphylea pinnata* was regarded as a magic plant in many parts of central Europe. According to Hegi (1925), bladdernut was planted by Celtic tribes on graves in Central Europe. The Carpatho-Rusyns of Eastern Slovakia used bladdernut stalks for making butter dashers (Varchol 2002). In Slovakia, belief in the healing power of bladdernut fruits (also in the form of cigarettes, filled with dried fruit shells) was known (Konečný 1894, Šistek, Kľokoč (*Staphylea pinnata* L.) 1932, after Gostyńska 1962). It was also used for medicinal purposes in Romania (Butură 1979). According to an old Czech superstition someone carrying a bladdernut twig, blessed nine times, could recognize a witch coming to church. It would be seen as a woman with a horse's hoof instead of a foot (Sobotka 1879). In western Ukraine, cows which had just given birth were protected from witchcraft in

a very special way. Holes were drilled in their horns. Such a hole was filled with “live silver” (maybe mercury?) and with a thread of blessed silk, and then shut with a piece of *Staphylea* wood (Kolberg 1888). Beliefs about the apotropaic properties of *Staphylea* are also confirmed by some oldest Polish botanical publications. Piotr Krescentyn (Księgi o gospodarstwie... 1549, after Gostyńska 1962) wrote that some people carry beads of this plant with them, as they protect the owner from thunder and witchcraft<sup>1</sup>. Ładowski (1804) stated that devil is scared of *Staphylea* wood and runs away from it. Also Rzączyński (Historia naturalis curiosa regni Poloniae...1721, after Gostyńska 1962) mentioned that simple people believe that evil forces are scared of the shrub.

Bladdernut was widely used in Europe for making rosaries (Gostyńska 1962). The fact that large amounts of bladdernut seeds were brought to Poland by pilgrims was noted in some botanical dictionaries (Jundziłł, Botanika stosowana 1799<sup>2</sup>, after Gostyńska 1962, Szubert, Opisanie drzew i krzewów...1827<sup>3</sup>, after Gostyńska 1962). The latter author stated that they came „from the East”. Gostyńska (1962) hypothesised that the seeds may have also been brought from Italy. Ładowski (1804) reports the use of *Staphylea* wood in making walking sticks.

Gostyńska, who mapped the distribution of the species in Poland (1961), devoted a separate article to the traditional use of the species in Poland (Gostyńska 1962). However many more cases of its use can be found scattered in ethnographic literature or even in the popular press. Also, during ethnobotanical research in SE Poland, I recorded some unpublished instances of its use. Hence the aim of the study was to summarise the present state of knowledge on the ethnobotany of *Staphylea pinnata* in Poland, nearly half a century after Gostyńska’s brilliant work.

## Methods

All available data on the actual use of *Staphylea* in Poland since the 19<sup>th</sup> century were summarised. Accounts in the popular press were included if they contained localised information, concerning use in a single village or area. Instances of the making of rosaries in monasteries and convents were also recorded. Bladdernut occurs in Polish folk culture under one unique name and its phonetic variants: *kłokoczka*, *kokoczka*, *kococyna* and the like. We assumed that all information referring to these names refers to *Staphylea pinnata*, as no widespread use of its name for other taxa has been recorded, and similar names for the species are used in other Slavic languages (e.g. Ukrainian and Carpatho-Rusyn *kłokička*, Slovak *klokoč*), and in Romanian *clocotici*.

Unpublished material from the author’s studies in the Krosno and Jasło area were used as well. It comes from

several semi-structured interviews about the blessing of flower bouquets in churches carried out by the author and his students in 2008, and informal conversations with local people from the Dukla area encountered in the streets during the summer of 2008 and in front of churches on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 2008.

A list of uses and localities was made. For reference, in naming a village the name of the county town (*powiat*) was given in parentheses. If the location of use was more vague (e.g. “w okolicach”) the word “area” was added to the location.

## Results

The number of references to the traditional use of *Staphylea* in the countryside seems to be proportional to the number of localities of the species. Most references come from SE Poland, from the Carpathians Foothills and the Beskid Niski Mountains. However the species was also used in other parts of Poland: in the vicinity of Kraków, in Silesia, Wielkopolska and Roztocze.

Most of the surviving uses or memories of past use are associated with religion (Table 1). The species is still used by individual monks and nuns for making rosaries (8 references). Such rosaries, bought from or given by monks, were presented to me a few times during field interviews. The species was also important in rituals, during which plant material is blessed in church. Branches with leaves, flowers or fruits (depending on the season) were added to Easter palms (9 references), to the wreath blessed on the eighth day after Corpus Christi (6 ref.) and to herbal bouquets blessed on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August (11 ref. – the commonest kind of use).

Another kind of use which was probably widespread in the past was the use of bladdernut wood in the butter making process. Dashers made with this kind of wood were thought to give particularly good butter and protect it from witchcraft. The wood was also used locally in SE Poland for making small crosses, which could be nailed above the door or attached to cows’ horns. Branches were also attached to cows’ horns.

Other uses, recorded only in one locality each, may be remnants of more widespread central European traditions, or purely local forms of bladdernut use. They include beads given to children for luck (19<sup>th</sup> century Sudety Mountains), branches used for cleansing kitchen utensils, wood used for protecting beer from witchcraft (both from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Wielkopolska), sticks used to find objects in the ground (Brenna), medicine for cows (Zawoje), wood used to make pipes (for smoking) and branches used to decorate roadside shrines (the latter two in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Dukla area, Beskid Niski Mountains).

## Discussion

Some of the traditions associated with *Staphylea pinnata* may have prehistoric origins, which has already been pointed out by other authors (Hegi 1925, Gostyńska 1962, Hendrych 1980, Latałowa 1994). Latałowa (1994) found *Staphylea* seeds made into a necklace in the late-Roman

<sup>1</sup> “... ludzie niektórzy paciorki sobie z tych ziarek dziaiaią, powiadając, iż kto je przy sobie nosi takowemu piorun, ani żadne czary szkodzić nie mogą.”

<sup>2</sup> “owoce jego pod imieniem kłokoczki znaiome od pielgrzymujących w paciorkach do nas przynoszone bywają...”

<sup>3</sup> “Nasiona brunatne i połyskujące się dojrzewią w Październiku, służą często do robienia paciorek i w takim użyciu, z kraiw wschodnich, w mnogiej ilości i do nas się dostawały.”

deposits near Gdańsk. She also emphasised the fact that all the Holocene archeological findings of *Staphylea* seeds come from the Roman and medieval period, mainly from the northern range of the species distribution. Hendrych (1980) describes a grave in Očkov near Nitra, from the early Roman times, in which bladdernut wooden fragments were deposited. Reverence for the shrub may have stemmed from the synergy of its many uses. The seeds were an ideal material for beads and later, for rosaries. The wood is very heavy and hard, useful for small durable utensils, and the fruits have the very characteristic shape of an oval, subdivided into segments, each segment ending with a tip. This shape may have evoked symbolic associations with horns, the moon or women's breasts or buttocks, which might have eradicated *Staphylea* from official use in times of Christianity as these associations were often attributed to the devil. However, the widespread use of beads for rosaries made bladdernut into a "holy plant", instead, with apotropaic properties. The association with the church was so strong that a prayer book *Modlitewnik Seraficki*, published in Kraków in 1935, contains a Latin prayer for the blessing of *Staphylea* on St Peter's Day (29.06), called *Benedictio ligni kłokotka*<sup>4</sup>. An identical prayer was quoted by Augustyn Heintze from Trzemeszno (Wielkopolska) in his letter to Józef Rostafiński from 1884 (ROST). He found it in a 18<sup>th</sup> century prayer book (Köhler 1993).

The new data gathered here, when compared to the data gathered by Gostyńska, do not significantly change our knowledge about the use of *Staphylea* in Poland. Gostyńska has already pointed out the main domains of its use, i.e. beads for rosaries, twigs in blessed herbal bouquets and wood to make objects protecting from evil or witchcraft. However this study presents single instances of some new uses, i.e. protecting beer from witchcraft, finding objects in the ground and using the wood to make smoking pipes (cigarette holders).

This study also presents the present state of use of the species in the Krosno and Jaśło area, in the area with the largest concentration of species localities in Poland. It must be emphasized that most local inhabitants, including a large proportion of elderly people do not know the plant, and only a very few people use it for bouquets blessed on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August. Although traditional widespread use of *Staphylea* stopped already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there is an increasing interest in growing *Staphylea*, enhanced by the media (e.g. Potoczała 2008, Marszałek 2008), which may at least preserve the tradition of making bladdernut rosaries. However attention should be paid to the conservation of this protected species. Many of its localities have already been decimated by transplanting shrubs to gardens or the breaking of branches used in church blessings, e.g. near Grybów

<sup>4</sup> The full text of the prayer (after Gostyńska 1962): "Oremus: Domine S. Pater omnipotens aeternae Deus, te suppliciter deprecor ut bene dicere digneris hoc genus arboris seu ligni quod in usum humani generis tribuisti et praesta: ut quicumque penes se illud portaverit, sive in loco aliquo deposuerit ab omnibus veneficiis, inspicuiis et ab omnibus tentationibus ac insidiis diaboli protegatur, et fiat obstaculum diabolo, contra perversas hominum persecuciones, contra saevorum bestiarum invasiones conferat illi sanitatem mentis et corporis et cuncta necessaria in praesenti vita ei largiri digneris. P. Chr. D. N. Amen".

Table 1. Traditional use of *Staphylea pinnata* in Poland

Use	No. of references
fruiting branches with fruits blessed in August 15 <sup>th</sup> bouquets	11
branches in palms blessed on Palm Sunday	9
beads used to make rosaries	8
flowering branches blessed in wreaths, on the eighth day after Corpus Christi	6
wood used to make dashers (for butter-making)	4
wood used to make small crosses	3
branches attached to cows' horns, for magical purposes	3
beads given to children for luck	1
branches used for cleansing kitchen utensils	1
sticks used to find objects in the ground	1
as medicine for cows	1
wood used for protecting beer from witchcraft	1
wood used to make smoking pipes (cigarette holders)	1
branches used to decorate buildings	1
branches used for decorating roadside shrines	1

(Gostyńska 1962) and in Sokole Góry near Częstochowa (Hyla, Zabytki i osobliwości powiatu częstochowskiego 1938, after Gostyńska 1962). The past human impact on the species' populations may have been even larger, as bladdernut wood was very valuable, so large shrubs may have been completely cut down in order to obtain large pieces of wood. The *ex situ* conservation of bladdernut is difficult as this is a slowly growing species with high habitat requirements. It grows badly if the soil has not got enough calcium, or nutrients, or if the ground is not humid enough. During my ethnographic interviews in the Krosno and Dukla region I frequently encountered stories about a shrub which used to grow in someone's garden and suddenly died. I was even shown a large, nearly hundred years old shrub in Cieszyna near Strzyżów, which is shrinking each year. Another large shrub, in Pietrusza Wola near Krosno (the only in the village) died suddenly several years ago. Maybe a pathogen is responsible for the disappearance of some populations?

## Appendix

List of references to a traditional use of *Staphylea pinnata* in Poland.

Abbreviations:

FISCHER = archival notes of professor Adam Fischer, the archive of Polish Folklore Society (Polskie Towarzystwo Ludoznawcze); *Materiały do encyklopedii roślin*, vol. 24, no. 225

ARCH = author's private archive

ROST = responses to Józef Rostański's enquiry stored in the Museum of the Botanic Garden of Jagiellonian University, archive symbol: "akta luźne, sygn. B-74", characteristics of the letters can be found in an article by Piotr Köhler (1993).

#### WIELKOPOLSKA (W Poland)

Odołanów (Ostrów Wielkopolski), in 1884, Józef Berkowski wrote to professor Józef Rostański: „*krokosz*, *krokoczym*, more often *krokoczyna*, its leaves are used for cleaning vessels with hot water”<sup>5</sup>. In a further letter, probably urged by Rostański to confirm the identification of the plant he explained: “I also enclose a twig of *krokoczyna* with leaves and a fruit. They make rosaries from its nuts, and leaves are used for cleaning vessels with hot water. Sometimes you can find a cow adorned with *krokoczyna*, against witchcraft. *Krokoczyna* is not a herb, it is a large shrub”<sup>6</sup> ROST.

Wielkopolska region. *Kłokotowe drzewo*. Stirring beer with a stick from this species protects from witchcraft (Kolberg 1988: 71).

#### SILESIA AND KRAKÓW AREA

Bolków (Jawor) seeds of bladderhut, called *Glücknusse*, were given for children for luck (Gerhardt, Flora von Liegnitz 1885, after Gostyńska 1962).

Grabczak (Opole) (presumably the author meant: Grabczok), *kokoczyna*, used to decorate Palm Sunday palms (Lebeda 2002: 185-186).

Golaśza (Będzin) *kokoczyna*, used to decorate Palm Sunday palms (Lebeda 2002: 185-186).

Skawina (Kraków). *Kokocyna*. In blessed bouquets for August 15th, as incense for cows (Udziela 1931).

Kraków area. Branches (with leaves or flowers) used to decorate Palm Sunday palms and wreath blessed on the eighth day after Corpus Christi (Gostyńska 1962).

Kraków. Nuns from Łagiewniki convent reported to make bladderhut rosaries (Potaczała 2008).

#### CARPATHIANS

Brenna (Cieszyn). *Kłokocz*. Believed to have magic powers. One day all of a farmer's sheep got dizzy and fell on the ground as if dead. One of his employees, an old and experienced man, did not panic, but cut off a bladderhut twig and went to the place where the sheep got the illness. Suddenly the twig bent downwards. He started scratching in the ground and found a tooth from a mill cog. He took this, went to the border of his lord's land and burned the tooth on the neighbouring ground. When he was back, all the sheep were up and grazing (Świbówna 1929)<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> original Polish version: “Krokosz, krokoczym, częściej “krokoczyna”, liści używają do wyparzania naczyń mianowicie do mleka używanych”

<sup>6</sup> original Polish version: “Załączam też gałązkę Krokoczyny z liśćmi i owocem. Z orzechów tych robią różańce, a liście do wyparzania naczyń od mleka. Czasem spotyka się jeszcze krowę uwieńczoną krokoczyną przeciwko przyrokowi. Krokoczyna nie jest zieleń, lecz krzakiem znacznej wysokości”.

<sup>7</sup> original Polish version: „Wierzyli i przypisywali wielką moc czarodziejską „kłokoczowi”. Jednego dnia pewnemu gospodarzowi wszystkie owce dostały zawrotu głowy, leżały jak martwe na ziemi. Miał starego owczarza, ten nie tracił głowy, poszedł i urznął gałązkę z kłokocza, trzymał przed sobą obiema rękami, ale tylko palcami, wskazującymi i poszedł na

Siedlce, Trzycież i Łęka (Nowy Sącz). *Kłokoczka*. In palms for Palm Sunday (Koch 1898).

Podegrodzie parish: Gostwica, Brzezna, Podegrodzie (Nowy Sącz). *Knokocyna* (*Staphylea pinnata*) - it is probably a printing mistake – should be *kuokocyna*. In palms for Palm Sunday. For this purpose, the species is planted in gardens (Frankowski 1914).

Zawoje (unidentified location - Zawoje near Rymanów or Zawoja near Sucha Beskidzka, probably the latter). In blessed bouquets for August 15<sup>th</sup>, given to a cow when it swallows a nail. (Materiały Rękopiśmienne Państwowego Gimnazjum Żeńskiego w Krakowie 1927, after FISCHER).

Grybów area (Nowy Sącz). Branches (with leaves or flowers) used to decorate Palm Sunday palms and wreaths blessed on the eighth day after Corpus Christi (Gostyńska 1962).

Kąclowa (Nowy Sącz). Wreaths, containing bladderhut branches, blessed on the eighth day after Corpus Christi were dug into the corners of fields at midnight (Gostyńska 1962).

Ropa (Gorlice). Wreaths, containing bladderhut branches, blessed on the eighth day after Corpus Christi were dug into the corners of fields at midnight (Gostyńska 1962).

Biecz area (Gorlice). Small crosses, up to 1cm long, made of the wood were attached to cattle's horns to protect them from witchcraft when they were first taken out to pasture (Gostyńska 1962); Branches (with leaves or flowers) used to decorate Palm Sunday palms and wreaths blessed on the eighth day after Corpus Christi (Gostyńska 1962).

Skotyszyn (Jasło). *Kokoczka*. Formerly blessed in bouquets for August 15<sup>th</sup>. The tradition stopped as the species died out there (ARCH, inf. supplied by a student who interviewed a 69 year old lady from Skotyszyn)

Stary Żmigród (Jasło). *Kokoczka*. Still occasionally blessed in bouquets for August 15<sup>th</sup>. It was not blessed in 2008 due to a large storm the day before. Blessed seeds were believed to bring a good broad bean harvest (Łuczaj 2008; ARCH, group interview with five elderly ladies, the oldest aged 74).

Żmigród (Jasło). Wood used to make dashers for butter-making (Gostyńska 1962).

Łysa Góra (Jasło). *Kokoczka*. On August 15<sup>th</sup> 2008 was blessed in four out of 18 bouquets blessed in the village in its only church service (Łuczaj 2008); traditional component of the bouquets (ARCH, 64 year old lady, former biology teacher in the village).

Mytarz (Jasło). *Kokoczka*. Still occasionally blessed in bouquets for August 15<sup>th</sup>, it is regarded as the most important of the herbs blessed on this day (ARCH, inf. supplied by a student who interviewed an 80 year old inhabitant of Mytarz).

Kończyce (Jasło). Wood used to make dashers for butter-making (Gostyńska 1962). Wreaths, containing bladderhut branches, blessed on the eighth day after Corpus Christi were used as incense for smudging cows before the first spring

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miejsce, gdzie wszystkie owce musiały przechodzić. Nagle mu się gałązka pochyliła ku ziemi, on zaczął nią grzebać w ziemi i znalazł kawałek zębu koła młyńskiego, który ktoś wymyślnie tam zakopał. Wziął ten kawałek i poszedł z nim za granicę majątności swego gospodarza, spalił go na „sąsiednim gruncie”. Gdy przyszedł z powrotem, wszystkie owce już stały na nogach i pasły się”

graze, in order to enhance milk production and protect from witchcraft (Gostyńska 1962).

Nienaszów (Jasło). In 2008, bladdernut was blessed in one bouquet (out of 42 bouquets blessed in the village in its only church service) for August 15<sup>th</sup> (Łuczaj 2008).

Iwonicz area: Iwonicz, Klimkówka, Wróblak Królewski, Miejsce Piastowe, Głowienka, Suchodół, Rogi, Równe, Jasionka, Lubatowa, Lubatówka (Krosno). *Kłokocina*. In palms for Palm Sunday, palms (*bagnięta*) with this species were used as incense for cows: after birth or at the start of spring grazing; palms for horses were made with *Taxus baccata* (Gustawicz 1900).

Jasionka (Krosno). A few decades ago wood was used for pipes (cigarette extensions) by forest workers, and some village women had rosaries made from seeds (ARCH, a former local forester, and from a series of street interviews in Jasionka and Dukla).

Lipowica (Krosno). Until recently in blessed bouquets for August 15<sup>th</sup> brought to the parish church in Dukla (ARCH, a series of street interviews in Dukla and inf. from a 50-year old female informant from Zawadka Rymanowska; however none of the 22 bouquets photographed in 2008 in the streets of Dukla contained the species). Wood used to make butter-making dashers and wooden pins for shoes (Gostyńska 1962).

Miejsce Piastowe (Krosno), bladdernut rosaries were made by one of the Michaelite monks (ARCH, a series of street interviews in Dukla and from a 50-year old female informant from Równe).

Równe (Krosno). *Kukoczka*. One shrub growing by the river Jasiołka was used in blessed bouquets for August 15<sup>th</sup>, and children used seeds for beads (ARCH, a series of street interviews in Dukla and from a 50-year old female informant from Równe).

Dukla area (Krosno). Branches used for decorating roadside shrines (Marszałek 2008).

Stępińska (Strzyżów). Grown in gardens and formerly used for making rosaries (ARCH, an older female informant encountered during field work; an interview with three female informants from Cieszyna, aged 70-81).

Cieszyna (Strzyżów). *Kokoczka*. Grown in gardens and formerly used in blessed bouquets for August 15<sup>th</sup> (ARCH, an interview with three female informants from Cieszyna, aged 70-81).

Lubzina (Ropczyce). On August 15<sup>th</sup> a special service *odpuść kokockowy* is organised in the church, devoted to blessing the species' branches (Potoczała 2008); small crosses are or used to be made of blessed wood, and nailed above the door (Gostyńska 1962).

Sanok area (Krosno & Sanok): Biedacz, Czerteż, Jaćmierz, Kostarowce, Rymanów, Sanok. *Kłokoczka* (Latin name given in the text is *Rhamnus cathartica*, but the article is full of completely inaccurate Latin names, so we can assume that the author referred to *Staphylea*). In palms for Palm Sunday. According to local people the plant resembles Christ's reed sceptre and that is why it is used as incense for cows, so that the butter is yellow (Sulisz 1906).

Niechobrz (Rzeszów), rosaries made by a priest from the local sanctuary (ARCH, a woman in her fifties showed me a rosary she bought there).

Gniewczyna (Przeworsk), *kapurczka*, branches used to decorate buildings and cows' horns (Lebeda 2002).

Przeworsk area (Przeworsk), wood used to make crosses (Potoczała 2008).

Przemysł, nuns were seen gathering bladdernut seeds near Krasiczyn to make bladdernut rosaries (Potoczała 2008).

Przemysł area. Pins for shoes were produced from the wood (Gostyńska 1962).

## ROZTOCZE (E Poland)

Łukowa (Biłgoraj), *kapurczka*, a plant with seeds like coffee, used to make rosaries. It was also wound around cows' horns to protect cattle from witches (Lebeda 2002).

Brusno and Podemsczyzna (Lubaczów), special plantations were made to produce beads for rosaries (Gostyńska 1962).

Jackowy Ogród, a local inhabitant named Ludwik Ważny was well-known for making *Staphylea* rosaries (Marszałek 2008).

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