

## Rhizotomos Word Study

For this paper I have conducted a word study on the Greek word *rhizotomos* (ρίζοτόμος, ῥ), currently defined as “one who cuts or gathers roots, esp. for purposes of medicine or witchcraft, *herbalist*” in order to come up with my own workable definition for the term based on how I believe the ancient Greeks viewed and would have defined it (Liddell 1570). To do this, I have analyzed the various ancient texts from across the ancient Mediterranean in which the word was used, as well as the cultural, historical, and linguistic context in which they appear in order to track its wide variety of uses throughout time.

The ancient sources containing this term that have survived until today come from a wide range of time periods, geographical locations, and nations ranging from Hippocrates in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE to Eustathius in the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE. Just a few of the various works that have analyzed for this paper include: Hippocrates’ *Epistulae*, Theophrastus of Ereso’s *Historia Plantarum* as well as his *Causa Plantarum*, Lucian of Samosata’s *Dialogues of the Gods*, Pedanius Dioscorides’ *On Medical Material*, and Eustathius’ *Commentarii ad Homeri Iliadem*.

The term’s literal translation means “root-cutter” or one who cuts roots, which comes from the word ρίζα meaning root, with the suffix -τομος which indicates a person of a particular profession. While “root-cutter” covers the basic action of the profession, it doesn’t tell us the context of the action or the connotations that are often attached to the practitioner – particularly with its later usage which often connotes one with potentially negative connections to magical practices.

By studying its various appearances I was able to narrow the definition to include these aspects, such as with its earlier use in Theophrastus’ works in which the roots are cut for purely

medicinal purposes, to its later use in Macrobius' *Saturnalia*, which describes Medea in Sophocles' lost play *Rhizotomoi* as cutting roots for magical uses. The definition this paper aimed to construct through the study of these various sources also takes into account the term's transition through time from a simple profession to a marginal (and often suspicious) practice. This divergence in usage also has varying implications for the various types of practitioners according to the Greek world, including foreigners and women which I also briefly discuss in my paper.

In conclusion I think it has been very useful to conduct a word study on the term *rhizotomos* due to its status as a fairly uncommon word used in very specific instances throughout the ancient Mediterranean world, and this in-depth study into the cultural, historical, and linguistic background of this term hopefully will be helpful to other scholars researching ancient magic, religion, and medicine as well.

### Bibliography

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