

Cannabis sativa - Marijuana

- Cannabaceae - Warm, temperate zones worldwide



Marijuana Through Time

We cannot know now which of the several uses of Cannabis was earliest. Since plant uses normally proceed from the simpler to the more complex, one might presume that its useful fibers first attracted man's attention.

Indeed remains of hemp fibers have been found in the earliest archaeological sites in the cradles of Asiatic civilization: evidence of fiber in China dating from 4000 B.C. and hemp rope and thread from Turkestan from 3000 B.C. Stone beaters for pounding hemp fiber and impressions of hemp cord baked into pottery have been found in ancient sites in Taiwan. Hemp fabrics have been found in Turkish sites of the late eighth century B.C., and there is a questionable specimen of Hemp in an Egyptian tomb dated between three and four thousand years ago.

The original home of Cannabis is thought to be central Asia, but it has spread around the globe with the exception of Arctic regions and areas of wet tropical forests. Cannabis spread at a very early date to Africa (except for the humid tropics) and was quickly accepted into native pharmacopoeias. The Spaniards took it to Mexico and Peru, the French to Canada, the English to North America. It had been introduced into northern Europe in Viking times. It was probably the Scythians who took it first to China. *

The Indian Vedas sang of Cannabis as one of the divine nectars, able to give man anything from good health and long life to visions of the gods. The Zend-Avesta of 600 B.C. mentions an intoxicating resin, and the Assyrians used Cannabis as an incense as early as the ninth century B.C. Inscriptions from the Chou dynasty in China, dated 700-500 B.C., have a negative connotation that accompanies the ancient character for Cannabis, Ma, implying its stupefying properties.

Since this idea obviously predated writing, the Pen Tsao Ching, written in A.C. 100 but going back to a legendary emperor, Shen-Nung, 2000 B.C., may be taken as evidence that the Chinese knew and probably used the hallucinogenic properties at very early dates. It was said that Ma-fen (Hemp fruit) if taken to excess, will produce hallucinations [literally, 'seeing devils']. If taken over a long term, it makes one communicate with spirits and lightens one's body.

A Taoist priest wrote in the fifth century B.C. that Cannabis was employed by necromancers, in combination with Ginseng, to set forward time and reveal future events. In these early periods, use of Cannabis as an hallucinogen was undoubtedly associated with Chinese shamanism.

By the time of European contact 1500 years later, shamanism had fallen into decline, and the use of the plant for inebriation seems to have ceased and had been forgotten. Its value in China then was primarily as a fiber source. There was, however, a continuous record of Hemp cultivation in China from Neolithic times, and it has been suggested that Cannabis may have originated in China, not in central Asia.

About 500 B.C. the Greek writer Herodotus described a marvelous bath of the Scythians, aggressive horsemen who swept out of the Transcaucasus eastward and westward. He reported that they make a booth by fixing in the ground three sticks inclined toward one another, and stretching around them woolen pelts which they arrange so as to fit as close as possible.

Inside the booth a dish is placed upon the ground into which they put a number of red hot stones and then add some Hemp seed...immediately it smokes and gives out such a vapor as no Grecian vapor bath can exceed; the Scythes, delighted, shout for joy...

Only recently, archaeologists have excavated frozen Scythian tombs in central Asia, dated between 500 and 300 B.C., and have found tripods and pelts, braziers and charcoal with remains of Cannabis leaves and fruit. It has generally been accepted that Cannabis originated in central Asia and that it was the Scythians who spread it westward to Europe.

While the Greeks and Romans may not generally have taken Cannabis for inebriation, there are indications that they were aware of the psychoactive effects of the drug. Democritus reported that it was occasionally drunk with wine and myrrh to produce visionary states, and Galen, about A.D. 200, wrote that it was sometimes customary to give Hemp to guests to promote hilarity and enjoyment.

Cannabis arrived in Europe from the north. In classical Greece and Rome, it was not cultivated as a fiber plant. Fiber for ropes and sails, however, was available to the Romans from Gaul as early as the third century B.C.

The Roman writer Lucilius mentioned it in 120 B.C. Pliny the Elder outlined the preparation and grades of hemp fibers in the first century A.C., and hemp rope was found in a Roman site in England dated A.D. 140-180.

Whether the Vikings used Hemp rope or not is not known, but palynological evidence indicates that Hemp cultivation had a tremendous increment in England from the early Anglo-Saxon period to late Saxon and Norman times - from 400 to 1100.

Henry VIII fostered the cultivation of Hemp in England. The maritime supremacy of England during Elizabethan times greatly increased the demand. Hemp cultivation then began in the British colonies in the New World: first in Canada in 1606, then in Virginia in 1611; the Pilgrims took the crop to New England in 1632. In pre-Revolutionary North America, Hemp was employed even for making work clothes. Hemp was introduced quite independently into Spanish colonies in America: Chile, 1545; Peru, 1554.

There is no doubt that hemp fiber production represents an early use of Cannabis, but perhaps consumption of its edible akenes as food predated the discovery of the useful fiber. These akenes are very nutritious, and it is

difficult to imagine that early man, constantly searching for food, would have missed this opportunity.

Archaeological finds of Hemp akenes in Germany, dated with reservation at 500 B.C., indicate the nutritional use of these plant products.

From early times to the present, Hemp akenes have been used as food in eastern Europe, and in the United States as a major ingredient of bird food.

The folk-medicinal value of Hemp -- frequently indistinguishable from its hallucinogenic properties -- may even be its earliest role as an economic plant.

The earliest record of the medicinal use of the plant is that of the Chinese emperor-herbalist Shen-Nung who, five thousand years ago, recommended Cannabis for malaria, beriberi, constipation, rheumatic pains, absent-mindedness, and female disorders. Hoa-Glio, another ancient Chinese herbalist, recommended a mixture of Hemp resin and wine as an analgesic during surgery.

It was in ancient India that this gift of the gods found excessive use in folk medicine. It was believed to quicken the mind, prolong life, improve judgment, lower fevers, induce sleep, cure dysentery. Because of its psychoactive properties it was more highly valued than medicines with only physical activity. Several systems of Indian medicine esteemed Cannabis.

The medical work Sushruta claimed that it claimed leprosy. The Bharaprakasha of about A.D. 1600 described it as antiphlegmatic, digestive, bile affecting, pungent, and astringent, prescribing it to stimulate the appetite, improve digestion, and better the voice.

The spectrum of medicinal uses in India covered control of dandruff and relief of headache, mania, insomnia, venereal disease, whooping cough, earaches, and tuberculosis!

The fame of Cannabis as a medicine spread with the plant. In parts of Africa, it was valued in treating dysentery, malaria, anthrax, and fevers.

Even today the Hotentots and Mfengu claim its efficacy in treating snake bites, and Sotho women induce partial stupefaction by smoking Hemp before childbirth.

Although Cannabis seems not to have been employed in medieval Europe as an hallucinogen, it was highly valued in medicine and its therapeutic uses can be traced back to early classical physicians such as Dioscorides and Galen.

Medieval herbalists distinguished manured hemp (cultivated) from bastard hemp (weedy), recommending the latter against nodes and wennes and other hard tumors, the former for a host of uses from curing cough to jaundice. They cautioned, however, that in excess it might cause sterility, that it "drieth up...the seeds of generation in men and the milk of women's breasts."

The value of Cannabis in folk medicine has clearly been closely tied with its euphoric and hallucinogenic properties, knowledge of which may be as old as its use as a source of fiber.

Primitive man, trying all sorts of plant materials as food, must have known the ecstatic hallucinatory effects of Hemp, an intoxication introducing him to an other-worldly plant leading to religious beliefs. Thus the plant early was viewed as a special gift of the gods, a sacred medium for communion with the spirit world.

Although Cannabis today is the most widely employed of the hallucinogens, its use purely as a narcotic, except in Asia, appears not to be ancient. In classical times its euphoric properties were, however, recognized. In Thebes, Hemp was made into a drink said to have opium-like properties. Galen reported that cakes with Hemp, if eaten to excess, were intoxicating.

The use as an inebriant seems to have been spread east and west by barbarian hordes of central Asia, especially the Scythians, who had a profound cultural influence on early Greece and eastern Europe.

And knowledge of the intoxicating effects of Hemp goes far back in Indian history, as indicated by the deep mythological and spiritual beliefs about the plant.

One preparation, Bhang, was so sacred that it was thought to deter evil, bring luck, and cleanse man of sin. Those treading upon the leaves of this holy plant would suffer harm or disaster, and sacred oaths were sealed over Hemp.

The favorite drink of Indra, god of the firmament, was made from Cannabis, and the Hindu god Shiva commanded that the word Bhangi must be chanted repeatedly during sowing, weeding, and harvesting of the holy plant.

Knowledge and use of the intoxicating properties eventually spread to Asia Minor. Hemp was employed as an incense in Assyria in the first millennium B.C., suggesting its use as an inebriant.

While there is no direct mention of Hemp in the Bible, several passages may refer tangentially to the effects of Cannabis resin or Hashish, and the Gnostic Gospels refer to Cannabis as kaneh-bosm.

It is perhaps in the Himalayas of India and the Tibetan plateau that Cannabis preparations assumed their greatest hallucinogenic importance in religious contexts. Bhang is a mild preparation: dried leaves or flowering shoots are pounded with spices into a paste and consumed as candy -- known as maajun -- or in tea form. Ganja is made from the resin-rich dried pistillate flowering tops of cultivated plants which are pressed into a compacted mass and kept under pressure for several days to induce chemical changes; most Ganja is smoked, often with Tobacco. Charas consists of the resin itself, a brownish mass which is employed generally in smoking mixtures.

The Tibetans considered Cannabis sacred. A Mahayana Buddhist tradition maintains that during the six steps of asceticism leading to his enlightenment, Buddha lived on one Hemp seed a day. He is often depicted with Soma leaves in his begging bowl and the mysterious god-narcotic Soma has occasionally been identified with Hemp.

In Tantric Buddhism of the Himalayas of Tibet, Cannabis plays a very

significant role in the meditative ritual used to facilitate deep meditation and heighten awareness.

Folklore maintains that the use of Hemp was introduced to Persia by an Indian pilgrim during the reign of Khrusu (A.D. 531-579), but it is known that the Assyrians used Hemp as an incense during the first millennium B.C. Although at first prohibited among Islamic peoples, Hashish spread widely west throughout Asia Minor.

As early as 1271, the eating of Hemp was so well known that Marco Polo described its consumption in the secret order of Hashishins, who used the narcotic to experience the rewards in store for them in the afterlife.

Cannabis extended early and widely from Asia Minor into Africa, partly under the pressure of Islamic influence, but the use of Hemp transcends Mohammedan areas.

It is widely believed that Hemp was introduced also with slaves from Malaya. Commonly known in Africa as Kif or Dagga, the plant has entered into primitive native cultures in social and religious contexts. The Hotentots, Bushmen, and Kaffirs used Hemp for centuries as a medicine and as an intoxicant.

In an ancient tribal ceremony in the Zambesi Valley, participants inhaled vapors from a pile of smoldering Hemp; later, reed tubes and pipes were employed, and the plant material was burned on an altar.

The Kasai tribes of the Congo have revived an old Rianza cult in which Hemp, replacing ancient fetishes and symbols, was elevated to a god -- a protector against physical and spiritual harm. Treaties are sealed with puffs of smoke from calabash pipes.

Finally, Jesus Christ himself was recognized as such by his being anointed with the holy anointing oil, the use of which was restricted to the instillation of Hebrew priests and kings. The ancient recipe for this anointing oil, recorded in the Old Testament book of Exodus (30: 22-23) included over nine pounds of flowering cannabis tops, Hebrew "kaneh-bosm," extracted into a "hind" (about 6.5 liters) of olive oil, along with a variety of other herbs and spices. The ancient chosen ones were literally drenched in this potent cannabis holy oil.