

EARLY DIFFUSION AND FOLK USES OF HEMP

from "Cannabis and Culture," Rubin, Vera & Comitas, Lambros, (eds.) 1975.
39-49

SULA BENET

ABSTRACT

Despite the growing volume of literature on the subject of hemp, the historical routes of its diffusion remain obscure and there is scant reference to its ubiquitous role in folk ritual, magic and medicine among European peasantry.

The term cannabis, itself, has been considered to be of Indo-European origin. The paper re-examines the origin of the term cannabis to demonstrate its derivation from Semitic languages. Both the word and its forms of use were borrowed by the nomadic Scythians from peoples of the Near East and diffused among the people with whom they came in contact. Ritual and other folk uses are described.

Hemp, one of the most versatile and important plants discovered by man and used for millennia, has been long neglected in scientific literature. Not until society's recent concern with drug addiction has the existing body of knowledge about hemp become so readily available. In the past, such information could be found in pharmacopoeia, in occasional historical references, or in ritual folkloristic material.

Although the body of literature concerning hemp has grown rapidly in the last decade, the exact origin of the plant has yet to be established; the historical routes of its diffusion remain obscure, and there is barely any reference to the role it played in the life of the European peasantry. The latter should be of special interest in view of the ubiquitous use of hemp in folk ritual, magic, and medicinal practices. A major reason for the obscurity as well as confusion that becloud the issue is that previously suggested theories of diffusion have been repeated and elaborated without critical examination of their historical sources. For example, the German scientists, Schrader, Hehn, and Bushan, as well as learned biblical commentaries and modern botanists, have claimed that ancient Palestine and Egypt did not know hemp and its uses (Dewey 1913; Moldenke 1952).

In this paper, I propose to reconsider the origin of the term cannabis to demonstrate that it is derived from Semitic languages and that both its name and forms of its use were borrowed by the Scythians from the peoples of the Near East. We will thus discover that the use of cannabis

predates by at least 1000 years its first mention by Herodotus. Next, we will examine the diffusion of the plant to Europe and its continued use in peasant rituals, magic, and medical practices.

Western scholars have universally considered the term cannabis to be of Indo-European, specifically Scythian, origin. This widely-held opinion not only credited the Scythians with the name for hemp (which Linnaeus categorized as *Cannabis sativa*) but also with the initial introduction of the plant into Europe and Asia. There was barely any history of cannabis before the Greek historian Herodotus, in the fifth century B.C., observed that the Scythians used the plant to purge themselves after funerals by throwing hemp seeds on heated stones to create a thick vapor, inhaling the smoke and becoming intoxicated. "The Scythians howl with joy for the vapour bath" (Herodotus, IV: 142). To the Western world, Herodotus' account is the earliest source of knowledge of the ritual use of cannabis.

Tracing the history of hemp in terms of cultural contacts, the Old Testament must not be overlooked since it provides one of the oldest and most important written source materials. In the original Hebrew text of the Old Testament there are references to hemp, both as incense, which was an integral part of religious celebration, and as an intoxicant (Benet 1936) Cannabis as an incense was also used in the temples of Assyria and Babylon "because its aroma was pleasing to the Gods." (Meissner 1925 (II): 84).

Both in the original Hebrew text of the Old Testament and in the Aramaic translation, the word 'kaneh' or 'keneh' is used either alone or linked to the adjective bosm in Hebrew and busma in Aramaic, meaning aromatic. It is 'cana' in Sanskrit, 'qunnabu' in Assyrian, 'kenab' in Persian, 'kannab' in Arabic and 'kanbun' in /chaldean. In Exodus 30: 23, God directed Moses to make a holy oil composed of "myrrh, sweet cinnamon, kaneh bosm and kassia." In many ancient languages, including Hebrew, the root 'kan' has a double meaning --- both hemp and reed. In many translations of the Bible's original Hebrew, we find 'kaneh bosm' variously and erroneously translated as "calamus" and "aromatic reed," a vague term. Calamus, (*Calamus aromaticus*) is a fragrant marsh plant. The error occurred in the oldest Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, Septuagint, in the third century B.C., where the terms 'kaneh, kaneh bosm' were incorrectly translated as "calamus." And in the many translations that followed, including Martin Luther's, the same error was repeated. In Exodus 30: 23 'kaneh bosm' is translated as "sweet calamus." In Isaiah 43: 24 'kaneh' is translated as "sweet cane." although the word "sweet" appears nowhere in the original. In Jeremiah 6: 20 'kaneh' is translated as "sweet cane." In Ezekiel 27: 19 'kaneh' is translated as "calamus."

In Song of Songs 4: 14 'kaneh' is translated "calamus."

Another piece of evidence regarding the use of the word 'kaneh' in the sense of hemp rather than reed among the Hebrews is the religious requirement that the dead be buried in 'kaneh' shirts. Centuries later, linen was substituted for hemp (Klein 1908).

In the course of time, the two words 'kaneh' and 'bosm' were fused into one, 'kanabos' or 'kannabus,' known to us from Mishna, the body of traditional Hebrew law. The word bears an unmistakable similarity to the Scythian "cannabis." Is it too far-fetched to assume that the Semitic word 'kanbosm' and the Scythian word 'cannabis' mean the same thing?

Since the history of cannabis has been tied to the history of the Scythians, it is of interest to establish their appearance in the Near East. Again, the Old Testament provides information testifying to their greater antiquity than has been previously assumed. The Scythians participated in both trade and wars alongside the ancient Semites for at least one millennium before Herodotus encountered them in the fifth century B.C. The reason for confusion and the relative obscurity of the role played by the Scythians in world history is explained by the fact that they were known to the Greeks as Scythians but to the Semites as Ashkenaz. Identification of the Scythian-Ashkenaz as a single people is convincingly made by Ellis H. Minns (1965) in his definitive work on Scythians and Greeks. The earliest reference to the Ashkenaz people appears in the Bible in Genesis 10: 3, where Ashkenaz, their progenitor, is named as the son of Gomer, the great-grandson of Noah. The Ashkenaz of the Bible were both war-like and extremely mobile. In Jeremiah 51: 27, we read that the kingdoms of Ararat (known later as Armenia), Minni (Medea), and Ashkenaz attacked Babylonia. In 612 B.C. Babylonians with the aid of the Medians (Medes) and Scythians, coming from the Caucasus, dealt a deadly blow to Assyria (Durant 1954). Referring the threat of war, Herodotus reports that Scythians attempted to invade Egypt by way of Palestine and they withdrew only after the Pharaoh paid them to retreat.

There is evidence of the presence of the Scythians in Palestine. The city known as Beizan in modern times was originally called Bethshan and later renamed Scythopolis by the Greeks during the Hellenistic period, since many Scythians settled there during the great invasion of Palestine in the seventh-century B.C.

The importance of the geographical position of Palestine cannot be overlooked when considering the trade routes through which caravans moved, laden with goods and precious "spices." Palestine was situated along the two most vital trade routes of the ancient world. One was between Egypt

and Asia and the other ran west from Arabia to the coastal plain, from there branching off to Egypt to Syria. In the original Hebrew of the Bible (Ezekiel 27: 19), in a description of Tyre, the royal city of the Phoenicians, famous in antiquity for its far-flung trade, it is noted that "Vedon and Yavan traded with yarn for thy wares; massive iron, cassia and kanah were among thy merchandise." (The markets of Tyre were frequented by the Jews. Biblical quotation from "The Holy Scriptures," The Jewish Publication Society of America.) King Solomon, a contemporary and friend of King Hiram of Tyre (960 B.C.), ordered hemp cords among other materials for building his temples and throne (Salzberger 1912). Rostovtzeff (1932) describes the caravan trade between Babylonia, Egypt, Syria, and Asia Minor. Among the goods there was incense for the "delection of gods and men."

In addition to the caravan trade, the mobile, warlike Ashkenaz carried their raid to the Caucasus to the north and westward to Europe, taking with them their knowledge of the use of hemp as well as their dependence on its intoxicating qualities. So mobile were the Scythians that there is a good probability that as they spilled across much of Europe and Asia; they were the ones to introduce the natives to the ritual use of the plant and the narcotic pleasures to be derived from it. The Scythians apparently did not use hemp for manufactures such as weaving and rope-making. Yet, despite the plentiful quantity of wild hemp, the Scythians cultivated the plant in order to increase the amount available for their use. Apparently their need for it was great indeed.

Since hemp was originally used in rituals, it may be assumed that the Scythians spread their custom among the people with whom they came into contact. The Siberian tribes of Pazaryk in the Altai region (discovered by the Soviet archaeologist, S. Rudenko) left burial mounds in which bronze vessels containing burnt hemp seeds to produce incense vapors were found. Rudenko believes that these objects were used for funeral purification ceremonies similar to those practised by the Scythians (Emboden 1972: 223).

Another custom connected with the dead in parts of Eastern Europe is the throwing of a handful of seeds into the fire as an offering to the dead during the harvesting of hemp --- similar to the custom of the Scythians and of the Pazaryk tribes, two-and-a-half thousand years ago. There is no doubt that some of the practices, such as funeral customs, were introduced by the Scythians during their victorious advance into southeast Russia, including the Caucasus, where they remained for centuries.

Hemp never lost its connection with the cult of the dead. Even today in Poland and Lithuania, and in former times also in Russia, on

Christmas Eve when it is believed that the dead visit their families, a soup made of hemp seeds, called 'semieniatka,' is served for the dead souls to savor. In Latvia and the Ukraine, a dish made of hemp was prepared for Three Kings Day.

Since the plant was associated with religious ritual and the power of healing, magical practices were connected with its cultivation. In Europe, peasants generally believed that planting hemp should take place on the days of saints who were known to be tall in order to encourage the plant's growth. In Germany, long steps are taken while sowing the seed which is thrown high into the air. In Baden the planting is done during the "high" hours, between 11:00 a.m. and noon. Cakes baked to stimulate hemp growth are known as 'hanfeier.'

Following the planting, magical means are applied to make the hemp grow tall and straight. The custom of dancing or jumping to promote the growth of the plant is known throughout Europe. In Poland, married women dance "the hemp dance" on Shrove Tuesday, leaping high into the air. The hemp dance ('for hemp's sake') is also danced at weddings by the young bride with the 'raiko,' the master of ceremonies (Kolberg 1899). In the wedding rituals of the Southern Slavs, hemp is a symbol of wealth and a talisman for happiness. When the bride enters her new home after the wedding ceremony, she strokes the four walls of her new home with a bunch of hemp. She is herself sprinkled with hemp seeds to bring good luck. In Estonia, the young bride visits her neighbors in the company of older women asking for gifts of hemp. She is thus "showered" with hemp.

The odor of European hemp is stimulating enough to produce euphoria and a desire for sociability and gaiety and harvesting of hemp has always been accompanied by social festivities, dancing, and sometimes even erotic playfulness.

Women play a leading role in the festivities. In Poland, initiation ceremonies are held during the harvest. Young brides are admitted into the circle of older married women on payment of a token fee. Since the Catholic Church never deemed it necessary to interfere with these festivals, it must have regarded them as harmless and perhaps even socially benevolent. In Eastern Europe hemp is evidently not considered addictive and no case of solitary use among the peasants has been reported: it is always used in a context of group participation. In many countries, hemp gathering is an occasion for socializing. The Swiss call it 'stelg' (Hager 1919). Young men come to the gathering wearing carnival masks and offer gifts to the girls.

Hemp gathering rituals also reveal the sacred character of the

plant. In certain areas of Poland, at midnight, a chalk ring is drawn around the plant which is then sprinkled with holy water. The person collecting the plant hopes that part of the flower will fall into his boots and bring him good fortune. The flower of a hemp plant gathered on St. John's Eve in the Ukraine is thought to counteract witchcraft and protect farm animals from the evil eye.

Although it is believed that witches can use the plant to inflict harm, they are not likely to do so in fact, and hemp is often used against persons suspected of witchcraft. In Poland, it is used for divination, especially in connection with marriage. The eve of St. Andrews (November 30th) is considered a most propitious time for divination about future husbands. Certain magical spells, using hemp, are believed to advance the date of marriage, perhaps even signal the very day it will occur. Girls in the Ukraine carry hemp seeds in their belts, they jump on a heap and call out:

Andrei, Andrei,
I plant the hemp seed on you.
Will god let me know
With whom I will sleep?

The girls then remove their shirts and fill their mouths with water to sprinkle on the seed to keep the birds from eating them. Then they run around the house naked three times.

The sacred character of hemp in biblical times is evident from Exodus 30: 22-33, where Moses was instructed by God to anoint the meeting tent and all its furnishings with specially prepared oil, containing hemp. Anointing set sacred things apart from the secular. The anointment of sacred objects was an ancient tradition in Israel: holy oil was not to be used for secular purposes.

And thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel, saying, "This shall be a holy anointing oil unto me, throughout your generations." (King James Version, Exodus 30:31).

Above all, the anointing oil was used for the installation rites of all Hebrew kings and priests. Dr. R. Patai (1947) expresses the opinion that the use of sacred oil is based on the belief in its nourishing, conserving and healing powers. Dr. Patai discusses the spread of this custom from the ancient Near East to most of Africa where we find the ritual of anointing among other parallels in the rites of installation of kings.

Almost all ancient peoples considered narcotic and medicinal plants sacred and incorporated them into their religious or magical beliefs and

practices. In Africa, there were a number of cults and sects of hemp worship. Pogge and Wissman, during their explorations of 1881, visited the Bashilenge, living on the northern borders of the Lundu, between Sankrua and Balua. They found large plots of land around the villages used for the cultivation of hemp. Originally there were small clubs of hemp smokers, bound by ties of friendship, but these eventually led to the formation of a religious cult. The Bashilenge called themselves: Bena:Riamba --- "the sons of hemp,; and their land Lubuku, meaning friendship. They greeted each other with the expression "moio," meaning both "hemp" and "life."

Each tribesman was required to participate in the cult of Riamba and show his devotion by smoking as frequently as possible. They attributed universal magical powers to hemp, which was thought to combat all kinds of evil and they took it when they went to war and when they traveled. There were initiation rites for new members which usually took place before a war or long journey. The hemp pipe assumed a symbolic meaning for the Bashilenge somewhat analogous to the significance which the peace pipe had for American Indians. No holiday, no trade agreement, no peace treaty was transacted without it (Wissman et al. 1888). In the middle Sahara region, the Senusi sect also cultivated hemp on a large scale for use in religious ceremonies (Ibid).

USE OF CANNABIS IN FOLK MEDICINE

Hemp, both because of its psychoactive properties and its mystical significance, became a popular and widely-utilized plant in the folk medicine of Europe and Asia. Since ancient times its soothing, tranquilizing action has been known. The Atharvaveda (1400 B.C.) mentions hemp as a medicinal and magical plant. In the Zend-Avesta, hemp occupies the first place in a list of 10,000 medicinal plants given to a doctor Thritha. According to Dioscorides (100 A.D.), the resin of fresh hemp is an excellent treatment for earaches (Dioscorides 1902). In an old Germanic catalogue of medicinal plants, hemp is listed as a tranquilizer (Hoffer n.d.). An edition of Diocletian also mentions the use of cannabis as a medicament (Bretschneider 1881). Medieval Arab doctors considered hemp a sacred medicine which they called 'schahdanach,' 'schadabach' or 'kannab' (Dragendorff 1898). Syrenius wrote in 1613 that ointment made from hemp resin is the most effective remedy for burns (Syrenius 1613) and that diseased joints could be straightened with the roots of hemp boiled in water.

In Russia and Eastern Europe hemp was widely used in folk medicine, and references can also be found to its use in Western Europe. In Germany for example, sprigs of hemp were placed over the stomach and ankles to

prevent convulsions and difficult childbirth, and in Switzerland hemp was also used to treat convulsions. In Poland, Russia and Lithuania, hemp was used to alleviate toothache by inhaling the vapor from hemp seeds thrown on hot stones (Biegeleisen 1929). Szyman of Lowic (16th century) gives the following prescription: "For worms in the teeth, boil hemp seeds in a new pot and add heated stones. When this vapor is inhaled the worms will fall out." This method is varied somewhat in Ukrainian folk medicine, the fumes of cooked hemp porridge are believed to intoxicate the worms and cause them to fall out. In Czechoslovakia and Moravia, as in Poland, hemp was considered an effective treatment for fevers. In Poland, a mixture of hemp flowers, wax and olive oil was used to dress wounds. Oil from crushed hemp seeds is used as a treatment for jaundice and rheumatism in Russia. In Serbia, hemp is considered an aphrodisiac (Tschirch 1911). Hemp is also thought to increase a man's strength. In the Ukraine there is a legend of a dragon who lived in Kiev, oppressing the people and demanding tribute. The dragon was killed and the city liberated by a man wearing a hemp shirt.

Hemp is also used to treat animals. A cat that eats mukhomor, a poison mushroom, is kept in a hemp field to eat the plant until it "comes to its senses." And if chickens are given hemp seeds on Christmas Eve, they will lay all year round.

In central Asia, for cure or pleasure, hemp is eaten, chewed, smoked, rubbed over the body, inhaled and made into numerous elaborate concoctions. Since the Soviet Union leads a determined fight against the use of hashish, the subject is taboo, and the literature on 'nasha,' as hemp is called in central Asia, is virtually nonexistent. Prof. Antzyferov (1934) wrote a short but most interesting report on the use of hashish in central Asia. Hemp has also been used for the cure of chronic alcoholics in central Asia quite successfully, according to Dr. Antzyferov.

At the time of his report, Prof. Antzyferov was the head of the State Hospital at Tashkent where he collected among his patients and their relatives and friends numerous recipes for 'nasha.' All of his informants believed that a great deal of fat taken in food counteracts any harmful effect of 'nasha.' Some recipes are family secrets, others are well known and used for centuries by the general public, native and European settlers alike.

A mixture of lamb's fat with 'nasha' is recommended for brides to use on their wedding night to reduce the pain of defloration. The same mixture works well for headache when rubbed into the skin; it may also be eaten spread on bread.

A candy called 'guc-kand,' popular among women for a "happy

mood," is made of hemp boiled in water, put through a sieve with added sugar, saffron and several egg whites. The ingredients are mashed and formed into small balls and then dried in the sun. The candy is given to boys before circumcision to reduce pain and to children to keep them from crying. An ointment made by mixing hashish with tobacco is used by some women to shrink the vagina and prevent fluor alvus.

There is also "the happy porridge" made of the following ingredients: (1) almond butter mixed with 'nasha,' (2) dried rose leaves, (3) root of *Anacyclius pyrethrum*, (4) carnation petals, (5) crocus, (6) muscat nut, (7) cardamon, (8) honey, and (9) sugar. This mixture is the most expensive of all hashish preparations. It is eagerly sought by men who consider it the strongest aphrodisiac. The use of hemp in Europe and Asia is, of course, much older than archaeological, historical or linguistic evidence would indicate. Early man roaming around in search of edible plants must have easily discovered the seeds and powerful odor of the ripened tips of the weeds.

There is considerable difference of opinion concerning the place of origin of the plant and its diffusion, specifically, its appearance in Eastern Europe, but it is generally understood that it should be searched where it grows in the wild. (Editor's note: see article by Schultes in this volume.) The Russian botanist, N. Vavilov (1926) considers the region where the greatest number of varieties of a particular plant grow is the center of its evolutionary differentiation and variation. The common mid-European hemp is known as "Russian" or "German" hemp. This variety is spread over most of Europe except for the southern part. Hemp belongs to the group of plants which are self-planting and self-fertilizing. Yanishevski observed that it draws to its fatty tissue a bug, *Pirrhocoris apterus* L., which clings to the base of the hemp seeds. The *Pirrhocoris* and birds contribute to the dissemination of hemp seeds. The *Pirrhocoris* and birds contribute to the dissemination of hemp seeds. De Candolle (1883), seeing the wild plant in the Black Sea and Aral regions, concluded that this was the place of origin. We now know that hemp is also indigenous to the Russian plains, the Caucasus, Transcaucasia, the Crimea and the Urals, in fact, the whole area from China to the Balkan Peninsula (Vavilov 1926).

We must, therefore, conclude that there was not one but probably several origin sites and that whenever man discovered hemp he used it for food and probably as a stimulant. However, the ritual use of hemp as well as the name, cannabis, in my opinion originated in the Ancient Near East. >From there in the middle of the second millennium B.C. through trade contacts, migrations and wars, the ritual uses of the plant were carried to Egypt and Africa, westward to Europe, and eastward to central Asia.

Whether India received the plant from China or central Asia is not clear. Hemp, as used originally in religious rituals, temple activities, and tribal rites, involves groups of people rather than the solitary individual. The pleasurable psychoactive effects of hemp were then, as now, communal experiences.

I believe that the acceptance of tobacco in Europe was undoubtedly enhanced by European familiarity with smoking hemp. Tobacco was, in many ways a counterpart to hemp, all the familiar features were there. Brought to Spain from the New World as a medicinal plant, it came to be regarded as a cure-all; the Amerindian ritual use of tobacco may also have been known, and eventually also its psychoactive qualities. Even the use of pipes for smoking tobacco in the Near East was adopted from the water-pipes used for smoking hemp. Like hemp, tobacco is chewed, sniffed and smoked. Perhaps the spread of tobacco was so rapid and overwhelming in the Old World, because a receptive ground had been laid by the traditional folk uses of hemp.

REFERENCES

ANTZYZEROV, L.V. 1934 Hashish in Central Asia. Journal of Socialist Health Care in Uzbekistan. Tashkent [in Russian].

BENET, SULA (BENETOWA) 1936 Le chanvre dans les croyances et les coutumes populaires. Comptes Rendus de Seances de la Societe des Sciences et des Lettres de Varsovie XXVII.

BIEGELEISEN, H. 1929 Lecznictwo ludu Polskiego [Polish folk medicine]. Cracow.

BREITSCHNEIDER 1881 Gotanicon sinicum. Journal of Northern China, Branch of the Royal Asia Society I: 569.

DE CANDOLLE, ALPHONSE LOUIS P.P. 12883 Origine des plantes cultivees. Paris: G. Bailliere.

DEWEY, L.H. 1913 Hemp. Yearbook of the Department of Agriculture. 289.

DIOSCORIDES, ANAZARBEUS PEDACIUS 1902 Arzneimittellehre [Pharmacology].
Translated by J. Berendes. Vol. III. Stuttgart: F. Enke.

DRAGENDORFF, GEORG 1898 Die Heilpflanzen der verschiedenen Volker und Zeiten [The medical plants of various peoples and times]. Stuttgart: F.

Enke.

DURANT, W. 1954 Our oriental heritage. Vol. I. New York: Simon and Schuster.

EMBODEN , WILLIAM A. 1972 "Ritual use of Cannabis sativa L," in *Flesh of the Gods: the ritual use of hallucinogens*. Edited by Peter T. Furst. New York: Praeger Publishers. 223.

HAGER, K 1919 Flachs und Hanfund ihre verarbeitung im Bundner Oberland. *Jahrbuch des Schweizer Alpenclub* 147.

HOFLER n.d. *Altgermanische Heilkunde [Old-Germanic medicine]*. Neubuerger-Pogel's Handbuch I: 466.

KLEIN, SIEGFRIED 1908 *Tod und Begrabnis in Palistina*. Berlin: H. Itzkowski.

KOLBERG, O. 1899 *Mazowsze Lud. Towarzystwo Ludoznawcze V*: 206.

MEISSNER, B. 1925 *Babylonien und Assyrian. II*: 84. Heidelberg: von W. Foy.

MINNS, ELLIS H. 1965 *Scythians and Greeks. Vol. I*. New York: Biblo and Tannen.

MOLDENKE, H., A. Moldenke 1952 *Plants of the Bible*. Waltham, Massachusetts: Cronica Botanica Co.

PATAI, R. 1947 *Hebrew installation rites*. Hebrew Union College Annual XX.

ROSTOVTZEFF, M. 1932 *Caravan cities*. London: Oxford.

SALZBERGER, G. 1912 *Salomons Tempelbau und Thron [The building of Solomon's temple and throne]*. Berlin: Mayer and Muller.

SYRENIUS, SZ. 1613 "Zielnik [Medicinal plants]," in *Typographia Basilii Skalski*. Krakow: [in Polish].

TSCHIRCH, A. 1912 *Handbuch der Pharmakognosie [Pharmaceutical handbook]*. II. Leipzig: Verlag von chr. Herm. Tauchnitz.

VAVILOV, N. 1926 *Tzentry proiskhozhdenia kulturnksh rastenii [Centers of origin of domesticated plants]*. *Trudy no Prile Bot. I. Sel. XVI*: 109 [in Russian].

WISSMAN, H., et al. 1888 Im innern Afrikas [In inner Africa]. Leipzig:
F.A. Brockhaus.

"Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free."