

Cannabis in the SCA Period

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0. Introduction and disclaimer

In this class, we'll talk about cannabis ~ one of humankind's oldest domesticated plants. It has been grown and used for millenia as a source of bast fiber, for its nutritious seeds and oil, and for its medicinal properties ~ our present focus.

I will use the word "hemp" to denote cultivars of cannabis optimized for fiber production, and "marijuana" or "weed" to denote drug cultivars, containing nontrivial amounts of THC. Some people these days avoid the word "marijuana" on the grounds that it has acquired racist or prejudicial overtones. My present position is that it is useful to have a specific word for THC-rich cannabis, and I'd like to see the word "marijuana" reclaimed rather than abandoned.

Marijuana is not presently legal for personal recreational use in the state of Pennsylvania. The organizers of Pennsic University have asked me to include a disclaimer that this class is a history class, and I do not encourage anyone to break the law, either at Pennsic or back home.

Weed is mundanely legal now in many parts of the Known World, including my home state of Massachusetts. As of 2019, its use is permitted by the SCA wherever it is mundanely legal.

This class is based on joint work with Domina Aelia Fortunata.

1. The cannabis plant

Cannabis: a genus of annual dioecious flowering plants in the family Cannabaceae, which also includes hops. The ripe seed-bearing flowers of the female plants are covered with tiny beads containing a sticky resin, which contains the medicinal stuff.

Cannabis sativa: species name originally given to European hemp.

Cannabis indica: the variety native to India (sometimes considered a subspecies of *sativa*).

Cannabis ruderalis: a third possible subspecies, from central Asia. Modern cannabis strains are usually hybrids.

Common Western names for cannabis include hemp, marijuana, and weed. The word cannabis derives from a Greek word borrowed from Scythian or Thracian, ultimately from Sanskrit or possibly Hebrew. Etymologically related to the English word canvas, reflecting the importance of hemp fiber for furnishing sailing ships.

Some other words for cannabis: *ma* (Chinese), *bang* (Indian languages), *hashish* (Arabic)

2. History of cannabis

Cannabis was first domesticated for fiber around 12,000 BCE.

Burned as an intoxicant by Scythians for funeral purification rituals circa 440 BCE (Herodotus).

Known in China as a drug from the Zhou dynasty (before 221 BCE). Its use was discouraged after the time of Confucius, and eventually forgotten.

The sacred *soma* plant described in the Vedas may or may not have been cannabis. Cannabis is consumed in India to this day in the worship of the Hindu god Shiva (the "Lord of Bhang").

Mentioned by Dioscurides (lived 1st century CE) as medicine, for an oil used to treat earaches.

Used as an intoxicant by Sufi Muslims from around 1000 CE.

3. Chemistry of cannabis

THC (tetra-hydro-cannabinol) is the chemical in weed that makes you high. It was first isolated in 1964 by Israeli chemist Raphael Mechoulam. It occurs in female cannabis flowers as non-psychoactive THCA, which must be converted to THC by decarboxylation.

To decarboxylate weed, heat it to about 240F for about half an hour. This happens automatically in the course of smoking or vaping.

CBD is another important medicinal compound in cannabis; it doesn't get you high, but it has other benefits. It occurs in the plant as CBDA and also requires decarboxylation.

THC and CBD are soluble in alcohol or oil, but not in water, so they can't be injected.

Ancient varieties of cannabis probably had flowers containing 1 - 3% THC. Historically, European hemp (*sativa*) had low THC; Indian hemp (*indica*) had somewhat more.

Until the 1980s, marijuana in the US generally had about 3 to 7% THC. It was commonly sold as a mix of flowers (with seeds), leaves, and small stems. The hybrid, seedless cannabis from modern dispensaries contains a far higher percentage of THC than anything available that was in the SCA period, or even 50 years ago.

Tincture of cannabis in alcohol was listed in the official US pharmacopeia 1850 - 1930. It was used to treat pain, gout, alcoholism, opiate addiction, insanity, and convulsive disorders.

3. Consumption by smoke inhalation

Smoking in the modern sense was not practiced in Europe or Asia until the introduction of tobacco in the 16th century. In the SCA period, cannabis was generally eaten or drunk. More on that later ~ first let's examine smoking-related consumption.

Ancient Scythians burned cannabis in a brazier under a small tent (about 18" tall), and put their heads inside to inhale the intoxicating smoke, as described by Herodotus. The equipment for this, including charred cannabis seeds, has been found in burial mounds.

Smoking in Africa: Bhang (cannabis *indica*) from India was introduced to the east coast of Africa by Moslem traders around the 13c, and became widespread south of the Congo River. In southern Africa, cannabis was burned in an open fire; the smoke was inhaled through reeds. Remains of gourd water pipes containing cannabis residue have been found in Ethiopia and

dated to the 14th-15th century.

The hookah is said to have been invented by a physician of the Mughal emperor Akbar in the mid 16c, for the purpose of purifying the smoke of tobacco (introduced by Jesuits from Goa).

The bong was invented in southeast Asia in the 16c, also for tobacco smoking. The name "bong" for a water pipe is derived from a Thai word for a bamboo tube; "bong" is etymologically unrelated to "bhang".

4. Drinking cannabis: bhang

Bhang is the word for the cannabis plant in Sanskrit-derived languages. Bhang also means the traditional Indian beverage made from green leaves and flowers of cannabis.

To prepare bhang, fresh plant material is steeped in hot water and drained; then it is repeatedly pounded with warm creamy milk, and strained through a cloth. Bhang is typically served as a sweet dairy drink flavored with nuts and spices ~ a cannabis lassi.

It is disputed whether bhang is the sacred drink *soma* of the Vedas. Whether or not it's the same plant, the preparation method for bhang is the same as that described for *soma*. The consumption of cannabis in India can be firmly dated to 1000 CE or earlier.

The preparation method for bhang doesn't heat the cannabis enough to fully decarboxylate it. Nevertheless, bhang can be quite potent when consumed by the cupful.

Bhang is traditionally consumed during Hindu religious festivals, particularly those celebrating Shiva, who is said to have given bhang to humankind.

The attached recipe for bhang replicates one of the many preparations offered for sale in the holy city of Benares. Note: bhang requires fresh green cannabis! If you want to try growing your own, some mail-order seed sources are listed at the end of the references.

5. Eating cannabis: hashish and majoun

"Hashish" is an Arabic word meaning "weed" or "herb". It first appears in writing as a slang term for cannabis in 1123, and eventually became the standard word for it.

In the SCA period, "hashish" is just weed, either the plant itself or the leaves and flower clusters (with or without seeds). The concentrates modernly called hashish are post-period.

Cannabis as a drug had not yet appeared in Arabia in the lifetime of the Prophet. Thus, in contrast to alcohol, it is not forbidden, or even mentioned, in the Koran.

Hashish was introduced to the Islamic world from Central Asia via Persia in the late eleventh century. It became associated with the mystical Sufi movement, and was widely used by the monks and hermits known as dervishes.

Wine, "the red one", and hashish, "the green one", were compared and contrasted in many poems.

Wine, while sinful for Muslims, was expensive and of fairly high status. Hashish, on the other hand, was cheap and easy to come by. It was often used by people of low status, and could lead to foolish behavior, so many writers looked down on it.

Hashish was consumed by eating it. It was first "toasted", ie. decarboxylated, by methods such as

roasting in an open pan over a fire. The toasted hashish could then be simply rolled into pellets, often with the addition of honey and/or nuts, and chewed.

Poems praise the convenience of hashish pellets, which could be carried in a pocket or pouch, as opposed to wine, which required a cup.

Majoun (ma'jun, majoon) is the term for a confection consisting of toasted hashish mixed with dried fruit (dates, figs, raisins), nuts, honey, and spices. Modern recipes for majoun often include butter and chocolate, but those additions are not mentioned in period texts.

A conjectural period-style recipe for majoun, developed by myself and Aelia Fortunata, is included in this handout. It can be made with commercially-available dried cannabis flower, either marijuana or CBD hemp.

6. Cannabis in the SCA

As of December 2019, the SCA permits the consumption of cannabis where it is mundanely legal.

However, I have yet to attend any event where the host site and the event steward were willing to allow me to openly serve actual marijuana products, even for an A&S presentation.

Fortunately, CBD hemp (containing negligible amounts of THC) is legal everywhere in the US and Canada, and can be used instead of marijuana for A&S projects. Several commercial sources of CBD hemp seed, and of dried and cured CBD hemp flower, are listed in the references at the end of this handout.

Selected references

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Sources for federally-legal CBD hemp flower and seeds

- Blue Moon Hemp (<https://bluemoonhemp.com>): dispensary-grade cured hemp flower
- Grow It From Home (<https://growitfromhome.com>): bulk culinary-grade dried hemp flower; also seeds and seedlings for growing your own CBD hemp
- Atlas Seeds (<https://atlasseed.com>): cannabis seeds, including some CBD hemp varieties
- Homegrown Cannabis Co. (<https://homegrowncannabisco.com>): cannabis seeds, including some CBD hemp varieties

Writings regarding hashish from medieval Arabic literature
Excerpts from *The Herb: Hashish Versus Medieval Moslem Society* by Franz Rosenthal.

In the purse, not the cup, I have a wine
Whose taste or smell makes me drunk.
The text of the Holy Writ has not forbidden it, neither
Has there been consensus in the law on its censure.
Obviously useful, it possesses (a power of) intoxication
That saves souls from their worries.
The gratitude owed to it is greater than the drunkenness caused by it,
And its usefulness is greater than the sin of using it.
~ from the Diwan of Safi-ad-din al-Hilli, 1297-1300

I have combined hashish with wine
And become so drunk that I cannot find my way.
You there, whoever you are, who will show me the way to my College
Will indeed be rewarded for it most generously.
~ from the *Tarid al-humum* of al-'Ukbari (13th century)

Give up wine and drink from the wine of Haydar,
Amber-scented, green the color of emerald.
It is presented to you by a Turkish gazelle, slender,
Swaying like a willow bough, delicate.
In his hand, you would think, as he turns it,
It is like the traces of down on a rosy cheek.
The slightest breeze makes it reel,
And it flutters toward the coolness of the continuing breeze.
The greyish pigeons coo upon its branches in the morning,
And the cadences of the warbling of doves cause it emotion.
It has many meanings the like of which are unknown to wine.
Therefore do not listen with respect to it to the words of the old censor.
It is virginal, not deflowered by rain,
Nor has it ever been squeezed by feet or hands.
No Christian priest has ever played around with the cup containing it.
Nor have they ever given communion from its cask to any heretic's soul.
Nothing has been said expressly by Malik to declare it unlawful,
Nor is the hadd penalty for its use found prescribed in ash-Shafi'i and Ahmad.
An-Nu'man has not established that it must be considered unclean per se.
Thus take it with the sharp edge of steel.
Stay the hands of worry with kaff and achieve joyful repose.
Do not lightly postpone the day of joy until tomorrow.
"The days will show you what you were ignorant of,
And someone for whom you did not provide will bring you the news."
~ ascribed to Ibn al-A'ma (d. 1292) of Syria/Egypt, or Ibn Khamis (d. 1308) of Spain

Bhang

Flavors of India, Shanta Nimbark Sacharoff (101 Productions, 1972)

Ingredients:

2 cups water
1 ounce marijuana (fresh leaves and flowers of a female plant preferred)
4 cups warm whole milk
2 tablespoons blanched and chopped almonds
1/8 teaspoon garam masala (a spice mixture)
1/4 teaspoon powdered ginger
1/2 to 1 teaspoon rosewater
1 cup sugar

Method

Bring the water to a rapid boil and pour into a clean teapot. Remove any seeds or twigs from the marijuana, add it to the teapot and cover. Let this brew for about 7 minutes.

Now strain the water and marijuana through a piece of muslin cloth, collect the water and save.

Take the leaves and flowers and squeeze between your hands to extract any liquid that remains. Add this to the water.

Place the leaves and flowers in a mortar and add 2 teaspoons warm milk. Slowly but firmly grind the milk and leaves together. Gather up the marijuana and squeeze out as much milk as you can. Repeat this process until you have used about 1/2 cup of milk (about 4 to 5 times). Collect all the milk that has been extracted and place in a bowl. By this time the marijuana will have turned into a pulpy mass.

Add the chopped almonds and some more warm milk. Grind this in the mortar until a fine paste is formed. Squeeze this paste and collect the extract as before. Repeat a few more times until all that is left are some fibers and nut meal. Discard the residue.

Combine all the liquids that have been collected, including the water the marijuana was brewed in. Add to this the garam masala, dried ginger and rosewater. Add the sugar and remaining milk.

Chill, serve, and enjoy.

Majoun

Conjectural SCA-period recipe by Aelia Fortunata and Ysabel da Costa

First, make “toasted hashish” by decarboxylating cannabis or hemp flower. This can be done in a variety of ways; the simplest is to bake the flower in the oven at 240 F for about 40 minutes.

Pound together in a mortar and pestle:

- 1 cup finely chopped dates
- 1 cup finely chopped figs
- 1 cup finely chopped nuts (almonds, pistachios, etc.)

Over this mixture, sprinkle:

- About 2 grams of toasted hashish, finely ground
- 2 Tbsp honey
- 1 tsp rosewater
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- 1/2 tsp ground coriander
- 1/2 tsp freshly ground black pepper
- 2 pinches of nutmeg

Knead the mixture until all ingredients are evenly distributed. Divide the mixture into 24 small balls. You may roll each ball in chopped nuts or nut flour so they won't be sticky. Store at room temperature.

Makes 24 pieces.

If your cannabis has a THC content of 17%, each piece will contain about 10 mg THC. Adjust as desired. CBD hemp flower, with negligible THC content, may be substituted.



Cannabis sativa, Vienna Dioscurides c. 512



Illustration from De Orta, Garcia, *Coloquios dos simples e drogas*, 1563



Shiva and his family making bhang on the bank of the Ganges
(miniature c. 1790)



Making bhang in modern Punjab