

Etymology of cannabis

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The plant name *cannabis* is from Greek κάnnabις (*kánnabis*), via Latin *cannabis*,^[1] originally a Scythian or Thracian word,^[2] also loaned into Persian as *kanab*. English *hemp* (Old English *hænep*) may be an early loan (predating Grimm's Law) from the same Scythian source.

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Word history

The *Oxford English Dictionary* records the earliest usages of *cannabis* meaning the plant "common hemp, *Cannabis sativa*" in 1548 and meaning parts of the plant "smoked, chewed, or drunk for their intoxicating or hallucinogenic properties" in 1848.^[3] The *OED* traces the etymology to the New Latin botanical term *cannabis* – proposed in 1728 and standardized in Carolus Linnaeus's (1753) *Species Plantarum* – from an earlier Latin *cannabis*, coming from Greek *kánnabis*.

Ancient Greek *kánnabis* transcribed a Scythian term in the earliest (c. 440 BCE) reference to recreational cannabis usage. Herodotus recorded cannabis steam baths in *The Histories*. "The Scythians, as I said, take some of this hemp-seed [presumably, flowers], and, creeping under the felt coverings, throw it upon the red-hot stones; immediately it smokes, and gives out such a vapour as no Grecian vapour-bath can exceed; the Scyths, delighted, shout for joy."^[4]

The historian and linguist Douglas Harper gives an etymology of English *cannabis* from Greek *kannabis*, from a Scythian or Thracian word, which is also the source for English *canvas* (viz., hempen fabric) and possibly *hemp*.^[2]

Indo-European etymologies

Based upon the botany, archeology, and linguistic history of cannabis, Elizabeth Wayland Barber concluded,

People all across the middle latitudes of Europe and Asia – and that would include the early Indo-Europeans (IE's) – knew and were using hemp since 5000 B.C. So when IE groups started borrowing a new word four millennia later, it had to have been for a new use: drugs. The old northern varieties of hemp did not contain the narcotic THC; and the 2nd millennium was probably the first time that enough people were travelling *back and forth* between Iran (where it grew) and eastern Europe that they could spread a *habit*, along with its source, the THC-bearing hemp. And the early 1st-millennium B.C. is just when we begin to find evidence for pot-smoking in the new zone.^[5]

Barber analyzed cognate words for "hemp" and "cannabis" in Indo-European languages, and proposed an etymological root of **kan(n)aB-* (where **B* represents a **p* or **b* bilabial stop). A reconstructed Proto-Indo-European (PIE) **p-* is evident in many IE subgroups: Slavic languages (Russian *konopljá*, Bulgarian *konop*, and Czech *konopě*), Baltic languages (Lithuanian *kanapės*, Latvian *kaņepe*, and Old Prussian *knapios*), Finnic languages (Finnish *kaneppi* and Estonian *kanep*), and unclassified languages (Armenian *kanap* and Albanian *kanëp*). Words in Germanic languages (Old English *hænep*, Old Norse *hampr*, and German *der Hanf*) go back to **hanap-*, which by Grimm's Law would come from a **kanab-* form, but this loanword preceded Romano-Germanic culture.^[6] A reconstructed PIE **b-* is evident in Latin *cannabis* (Vulgar Latin **can(n)abum*, **canaba*) from Greek *kannabis*, the earliest recorded term for the drug, which transcribed a Scythian or Thracian word. The Scythians spoke Iranian dialects, and Indo-Iranian languages have two words, represented by Sanskrit *śana-* "a kind of hemp" (from **kana-* or **kene-* forms) and *bhanga* "narcotic hemp" (cf. *bhang*). For Ural–Altaic languages, Barber cited Mari *kene* or *kine* "hemp", Chuvash *kantär*, Old Turkish *käntir*, Turkish *kendir* and *kenevir*, and Karakalpak *kenep*.^[7] Further corroboration comes from 1st millennium BCE Neo-Assyrian cuneiform texts, "where a word *qunabu* (*qunnapu*, *qunubu*, *qunbu*) begins to turn up, for a source of oil, fiber and medicine."^[8] Thus, Barber's well-researched hypothesis involves two stages: in the late Palaeolithic and early Neolithic, a **ken-* or **kan-* name spread across Asia with the hemp plant, which was used for fiber and food; then in the early Iron Age, "an enlarged version of this very word, local to Iran and perhaps northern India ... spread with the drug-bearing variety."^[8]

One such etymological hypothesis is Scythian **kanabis* from Proto-Germanic **hanapiz*, a compound of Uralic **kéne* "hemp" and **piš* "to burn; nettle" (compare Hungarian *kender* "hemp" and *peszeg* "to burn").^[9]

Semitic etymologies

Semitic etymologist Sula Benet, of the Institute of Anthropological Sciences in Warsaw, has indicated the origin to be the Hebrew word קַנְבּוֹס (*qannabbôs*) *kaneh bosm*. Benet, (also known as Sara Benetowa) is quoted saying:

The astonishing resemblance between the Semitic *kanbos* and the Scythian *cannabis* lead me to suppose that the Scythian word was of Semitic origin. These etymological discussions run parallel to arguments drawn from history. The Iranian Scythians were probably related to the Medes, who were neighbors of the Semites and could easily have assimilated the word for

hemp. The Semites could also have spread the word during their migrations through Asia Minor.

Benet — in Book of Grass^[10]

The word 'gan-zi-gun-nu' is referenced from stone tablets (dating 700 BCE) that indicate a connection with eastern and near-eastern terms for the plant (*gan-zi* > *ganja*, *gun-nu* > *qaneh*). This substance was used for witchcraft and prescribed as a useful remedy for a variety of ailments including depression and impotence.^[11]

Hebrew קנבוס (*qannabbôs*) from קנה בושם (*qĕnĕh bošem*) may derive from Sumerian *kunibu*,^[12] though the final -s does not seem to be present in Akkadian (Assyrian) or Sumerian forms. Leading authorities on the etymology of both the German and Russian languages list a Sumerian cognate.^[13]

Raphael Mechoulam and co-workers at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem suggest an alternative etymology for cannabis: Greek *cannabis* < Arabic *kunnab* < Syriac *qunnappa* < Hebrew *pannag* (= *bhanga* in Sanskrit and *bang* in Persian). They explain that in Hebrew, only the consonants form the basis of a word and the letters p and b are frequently interchangeable. The authors think it probable that 'pannag', mentioned in the Bible by the prophet Ezekiel (27:17), is in fact *Cannabis*.^[14]

The Biblical Hebrew term *qĕnĕh bošem*, literally "aromatic reed" (*qĕnĕh*- "reed", *bošem*- "aromatic"), probably^[15] refers to cannabis according to some etymologists,^[10] but is more commonly thought to be lemon grass, calamus, or even sweet cane, due to widespread translation issues.^[16] The Hebrew Bible mentions it in Exodus 30:23 where God commands Moses to make a holy oil of myrrh, cinnamon, *qĕnĕh bošem* and cassia to anoint the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle (and thus God's Temple in Jerusalem).^[17] Notably, this anointing oil is a special herbal formula that functions as a kind of polish and fragrance for the Ark and Tabernacle, and the Bible forbids its manufacture and use to anoint people (Exodus 30:31-33) with the exception of the Aaronic priesthood (Exodus 30:30).

Elsewhere, the Hebrew Bible simply uses "reed" *qānĕh* as the name of a plant in four places whose context seems to mean "reed of balm" as a fragrant resin, Isaiah 43:24, Jeremiah 6:20, Ezekiel 27:19 and Song of Songs 4:14. The Hebrew name "reed of balm" comes from *qĕnĕh* (the noun construct form of *qānĕh*) means a "reed" or "cane" and *bošem* means "balm" or "aromatic" resin. Hebrew may have adapted the name *qannabbôs* from "reed of balm" *qĕnĕh bošem* as a substitute for the ambiguous name "reed".

Unambiguous Hebrew or Aramaic references to cannabis are rare and obscure. Syriac has *qanpa* (a loan from *kannabis*) and *tanuma* (see the Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon.) but neither is found in the Peshitta, the Syriac Bible. Late Syriac Ahiqar texts include *qanpa* as "ropes of hemp" (*tunbei de-qanpa*). The Hebrew word *qanbes*, a loan word from *kannabis*, is used in the Mishnah as hemp [Kilaim 2:5; 5:8; 9:1,7; Negaim 11:2] in the sense of a constituent of clothing or other items.

Material uses and the various names by which materials are called also help to confirm etymology. Cannabis was also a common material among the Hebrews. The Hempen frock called "*Simlah*" in Hebrew^[18] was worn as a mark of the lowly. Hempen, of course, means made of Hemp (Cannabis).^[19] Being a "mark of the lowly" aligns with Jesus' teaching:

*"Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for **I am meek and lowly in heart**: and ye shall find rest unto your souls."* (Matthew 11:29, KJV)

*"But he that is greatest among you shall be your **servant**."* (Matthew 23:11, KJV)

Modeling what he preached, it is easy to see what Jesus himself wore — certainly not the fine robes typically worn by royalty and clergy. Among the culture from which Christ came, the identifying mark of a *servant* is a Simlah - a simple frock made specifically of Hemp.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia also asserts the following:

- *"The usual material for ropes was certainly flax (**hemp**)"*^[20]
- That the cloth for tents called *bait sha`r*, meaning "house of hair" were stretched over poles by ropes of goats hair or **hemp**.^[21]
- *"The poorer classes probably wore wrappers made either of unbleached flax or **hemp**"*^[22] (the hempen, again, being the Simlah)^[18]

It is clear that *qeneh bosem* was common among the biblical Hebrews not only for the Holy Anointing Oil as indicated above, but also for other material uses including clothing, rope and linen.

Likely, the name *cannabis*, derives in the west from Semitic merchants who traded it as a commodity throughout the ancient trade routes of Southeast Asia, thus utilizing Indo-Iranian terms 'panang', 'banag', and others in reference to the spice.

See also

- Marijuana (word)

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Appendix.

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Further reading

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External links

-  The dictionary definition of cannabis at Wiktionary

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