What are the Origins of Cannabis?



A wild cannabis plant in Qinghai province, central China. ©Guangpeng Ren

For years it’s generally been accepted that cannabis first originated natively somewhere along the Steppes of Central Asia.

However, recent genetic research confirms that cannabis originates in Eastern Asia, possibly in some parts of China.

According to the recent 2021 study, researchers used molecular analysis and “next-gen DNA sequencing” to look at 110 different genomes of Cannabis Sativa.

They discovered four genetic groupings of cannabis, which led them to new insights into the origins of cannabis. The lead author of the study, Fumagalli, says that the origin of cultivated cannabis traces to East Asia, including parts of modern-day

China.

“The split between ancient basal cannabis and modern cultivated cannabis occurred roughly 12,000 years ago, placing cannabis in the distinguished categories of one of the first cultivated crops on Earth.”

New Genetic Research on Origins of Cannabis

Basal cannabis is the name for the genetic group of cannabis from which all modern cannabis stems and researchers think that we’ve selectively cultivated cannabis so much that the original wild basal cannabis varieties have become extinct.

Around 12,000 years ago, in the Neolithic Period, it’s thought that nomadic peoples, such as Scythians, traveled with cannabis along trading routes, assisting in its spread across Asia and into Europe.

It’s around this time that the wild basal cannabis strains first split or evolved into new genetic groupings seen in different types of modern cannabis including,

 Hemp

Drug Cannabis Group 1

Drug Cannabis Group 2

Hemp includes the varieties of cannabis distinguished by low levels of THC, the psychoactive component of cannabis.

In Hemp’s case, it’s thought that varieties of cannabis selected primarily for fiber to make clothing and other materials evolved a loss of function gene that essentially turned off their ability to synthesize THC.

The first genetic group of “drug” cannabis includes all of the wild “landrace” strains with drug-like properties or higher levels of THC. The strains in this group originated in China, India, and Pakistan, and naturally produce psychoactive THC.

The second genetic grouping of “drug” cannabis includes all of the modern-day

cultivated strains around the world. These strains are essentially hybrid strains selectively bred for maximum THC content.

The new genetic research on cannabis indicates that the original basal strains of pure, wild cannabis, from which all other strains descend, may not even exist anymore.



Archaeologists found the two altars seen here featured burnt cannabis (right) and frankincense (left), respectively. Israel Antiquities Authority, Photo © The Israel Museum, by Laura Lachman.

Is Modern Cannabis Man-Made?

The study also sheds light on when humans first began cultivating cannabis, which created the second genetic grouping and evolutionary split for the cannabis plant.

Genetic evidence suggests that humans have been domesticating and selectively cultivating cannabis for at least 4,000 years and that it began in East Asia. It took about a thousand years for the modified genetic grouping to travel west into India.

According to the research, cannabis was primarily used as a multi-purpose crop for

thousands of years, with archeological evidence showing that hemp may have been among humanity’s first crops.

This goes on until about 2,000 B.C. when humans began breeding the plant more for its cannabinoid expression over its fiber properties. A trend that continues to this day. Also among the findings were five genetic samples of hemp that contain more genetic complexity than previously thought, which adds more mystery to the evolutionary lineage of cannabis.

Fumagalli’s team’s work
creates a valuable genomic resource for ongoing cannabis research and sheds helpful light on the evolutionary origins of the controversial plant as governments around the world consider revising their cannabis laws.

Who was the first to use Cannabis?

If you want to get technical, we have written evidence of humans using cannabis seeds and cannabis oil as far back as 8,000 years ago in Ancient China.

As far back as 2737 B.C. The legendary, perhaps even mythical, Chinese Emperor Shen-Nung of China is credited with being among the first to prescribe cannabis tea for a myriad of ailments.

There is also evidence in the form of chemical residue from Ancient Israelite temples near Tel Aviv that suggest the ceremonial use of psychoactive cannabis as far back as 2,700 years ago.

It’s around that same time frame that Bhang, a spiced cannabis drink, became popular in India as a critical aspect of religious celebration in events such as the Holi Festival.

Bhang is still used today in India and is exempt from its prohibitive drug laws due to its title as a religious sacrament.

What’s the oldest kind of Cannabis Edibles?

Fast-forward to around the 11th century (1,000 A.D. circa) and the world’s first

record of cannabis edibles appears in Persia.

Truly, different forms of the original cannabis treat called Majoun lived and died over the centuries. However, the Majoun is thought to be the first-ever cannabis edible.

A Majoun consists primarily of figs, dates, nuts, and spices, and of course cannabis in some form or another, typically a live resin hash made of fresh cannabis flowers.

Connoisseurs and historians may even argue that the Majouns from the old world are the inspiration for today's modern cannabis edibles.

If you enjoy cannabis cuisine, THC gummies, and other modern- day cannabis edibles, then you can thank the generations of clandestine Majoun makers that kept the tradition going.

Are we in a Post Prohibition Era of Cannabis?

Cannabis and Hemp slowly made their way from East Asia and China, and into the Middle East and Europe by way of trade routes.

It is only in the past few hundred years that cannabis has made its way to the Americas. First, Hemp came to America in the 1600s along with settlers and pioneers, before being overtaken by the more psychoactive varieties in the late 1800s.

By the first half of the 20th century, however, the US began outlawing psychoactive cannabis (and hemp as a casualty along with it), for political, economic, and racially motivated reasons.

When the 1970s had arrived, even though hippie culture was booming at the time, most of the world had already followed in lockstep to outlaw cannabis in almost any form.

It wasn't until around the 1990s, starting in California, that US states began revising their cannabis laws.

Now, in 2022 with a majority of US states legalizing cannabis to some degree, it

seems almost inevitable that cannabis will, at least, become federally decriminalized in the US within the very near future.