

# Cannabis: Origin, Name and Global Spread

*Origin, taxonomy, global spread and scientific evidence*

*Cannabis sativa* is among the earliest plant species cultivated by humans, with a history that extends far further back in time and is geographically closer to the Albanian region than is commonly assumed.

The plant originated in Central Asia, where it was cultivated as early as the Neolithic period, with evidence of specialized fibre processing dating to approximately 8,000 years ago in northern China.

## INTRODUCTION

The name *cannabis* has a much more ancient origin than might be assumed. It derives from an ancient Indo-European root, documented more than five thousand years ago, from which the Greek (*kánnabis*), Latin (*cannabis*), Slavic forms (*konoplja*), English (*hemp*), and Albanian (*kërp*) terms are thought to have developed. The plant's name itself therefore constitutes linguistic evidence of its antiquity: *cannabis* has accompanied humankind since the earliest stages of civilization.

Today, *cannabis* is primarily associated with legal and social debates, while its long history remains relatively little known. Yet, long before it became subject to prohibitions and restrictions, it was among the earliest plants cultivated by humans and one of the few to accompany them to the most distant regions of the world.

## ORIGIN OF THE PLANT

The origin of *Cannabis* lies in Central Asia, particularly in the highlands and steppes extending from Mongolia to southern Siberia. According to researchers Robert C. Clarke and Mark D. Merlin, authors of the seminal work *Cannabis: Evolution and Ethnobotany*, the plant naturally occurs in human-disturbed environments, such as manure-rich sites, riverbanks, and cleared areas, where light and nutrients are abundant. Under these conditions, it became established in proximity to human settlements, creating the conditions for its subsequent cultivation by humans.

*Cannabis* is an annual, generally dioecious, wind-pollinated plant. Researchers consider it among the earliest plants cultivated by humans. A 2024 study published in *The Holocene* (Liu et al.) documents specialized fibre-processing activity dating to approximately 8,000 years ago in northern China.

## TAXONOMY AND SCIENTIFIC NOMENCLATURE

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Few plants have generated as much scientific debate as *Cannabis*, beginning with the question of how the plant itself should be classified and named. The plant belongs to the family Cannabaceae and has *Humulus (hops)* as a closely related genus, which is used to impart the characteristic flavour to beer. The genus *Cannabis* was formally described by Carl Linnaeus in 1753 under the name *Cannabis sativa*. In 1785, the French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck described a second type originating from India, *Cannabis indica*, while in 1924 the Russian botanist Dmitri Janischewsky added a third, from the steppe region, *Cannabis ruderalis*.

Since then, the scientific community has remained divided between those who recognize a single species with different forms and those who recognize multiple species. An important development came in 1976, when Ernest Small and Arthur Cronquist proposed a practical threshold of 0.3% THC, explicitly describing it as an arbitrary threshold, to distinguish industrial *cannabis* from varieties with higher psychoactive content. This threshold underlies contemporary legal definitions of industrial *cannabis* in many parts of the world. Contemporary researchers, such as John McPartland, also emphasize that the commercial labels “*sativa*” and “*indica*” rarely correspond to distinct botanical species.

## THE GEOGRAPHICAL SPREAD OF CANNABIS

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From its centre of origin in Central Asia, *Cannabis* spread in several directions along trade routes and through the movements of peoples, a process that geographer Barney Warf has described as a distinct “historical geography” of the plant. To the east, it reached China; to the south, India; and to the west, the Middle East. Significant evidence of this early presence includes ancient ropes and textiles discovered in the “Christmas Cave” in Israel, whose fibres were identified as *Cannabis* through DNA analysis (Murphy et al., 2011).

In Anatolia, *Cannabis* has a centuries-old cultivation tradition, while its presence in Europe appears to be older than previously thought. A 2018 study (McPartland, Guy and Hegman), based on the analysis of fossil pollen, concluded that *Cannabis* is also native to the European continent. Later, it spread to Africa and, through European explorers, to the American continent. Today, *Cannabis* is cultivated in nearly every region of the planet and across all continents, with the exception of Antarctica.

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## CANNABIS PRESENCE IN EUROPE AND THE BALKANS

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This geographical context closely connects the history of the plant with our region. In the reconstruction proposed by Clarke and Merlin, one of the ancient refugia of *Cannabis* during the Ice Age is located precisely in the Balkan Peninsula and the Caucasus, representing a centre from which the plant subsequently spread across Europe.

The tradition of its use was preserved for centuries. According to data compiled in the international CANNUSE database (Balant et al., 2021), industrial *cannabis* was widely utilized in the Balkans for fibre and food, from seeds to oil. Within this historical context, Albania is no exception: the Albanian word *kërp*, inherited directly from an ancient Indo-European root, provides linguistic evidence that the plant has long been part of life in this region.

## FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE PRESENT DAY

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For millennia, *Cannabis* was one of the most useful and widespread plants known to humankind, accompanying the development of civilizations. It was only during the 20th century, in the context of policies targeting psychoactive *Cannabis*, that the plant gradually disappeared from widespread use and public life.

Today, the plant is being rediscovered. Its long history demonstrates that, long before becoming the subject of legal regulation, *Cannabis* had been one of the fundamental plants associated with human civilization.

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