NEWS LESSON

What a Siberian Tomb Reveals About Ancient Cannabis Use



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. How can historians tell the difference between a fact and an interesting possibility?
2. What are the risks of judging the habits of the past by the values of today?
3. When a discovery fits an old story, how careful should we be about believing it?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**provoke**	☐	A	to cause a strong reaction or argument
2	**steppe**	☐	B	the amount of a substance in a mixture
3	**affiliated**	☐	C	affecting the mind or mood
4	**psychoactive**	☐	D	a huge area of flat grassland with few trees
5	**ceremonial**	☐	E	standing for an idea rather than being practical
6	**principal**	☐	F	main, most important
7	**concentration**	☐	G	officially connected with an organisation
8	**symbolic**	☐	H	connected with formal rituals or special occasions

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

Preserved seeds and chemical traces in human hair give unusually direct evidence of cannabis exposure 2,800 years ago. The evidence has clear limits, and so does what it can tell us about the present.

1 Few plants provoke as much contemporary debate as cannabis. Depending on whom you ask, it is a medicine, a recreational drug, a commercial opportunity or a public health concern. Yet its place in human history extends far beyond modern legal arguments. An archaeological discovery in southern Siberia has provided unusually strong physical evidence that people were exposed to cannabis's intoxicating compounds approximately 2,800 years ago, offering a glimpse into a practice that previously rested largely on interpretation and historical accounts.

2 Reported in the journal Science on 5 November 2026, the research focused on a princely tomb associated with the Scythians, a horse-riding culture whose influence spread across the Eurasian steppe. An international team led by Gino Caspari, affiliated with the University of Bern and the Max Planck Institute of Geoanthropology, studied preserved cannabis seeds and human hair recovered from the tomb. The findings were dated to the early eighth century BC and offer what the researchers describe as the oldest directly dated evidence of the intoxicating use of cannabis.

3 The crucial clue was cannabinol detected in the hair. This compound can develop as THC, the principal intoxicating component of cannabis, breaks down over time. Seeds alone would have been much less informative, since cannabis was historically valuable for making fibre, oil and other products. Detecting chemical residues in human tissue allows researchers to make a more specific argument about exposure to the plant's psychoactive constituents. It does not, however, establish precisely how the substance was taken or what the experience felt like.

4 The setting adds another layer of intrigue. The material came from an elaborate burial context, suggesting a possible connection to ceremonial practices. Ancient accounts, notably those attributed to the Greek historian Herodotus, describe the Scythians using plant smoke, although such texts must be treated with caution. Combining archaeological evidence with scientific analysis helps researchers move beyond speculation, but the evidence remains incomplete. It is tempting to imagine a detailed ritual, yet the physical remains cannot reveal the participants' intentions or the meaning they attached to the plant.

5 Equally important is what the discovery does not prove. The chemical traces cannot establish the original plants' THC concentration, the prevalence of cannabis use or whether it occurred in ordinary daily life. Evidence from one burial site cannot be generalised to an entire society. Nor should historical use be confused with a modern endorsement of any particular policy or health claim. Something's ancient origin may make it culturally interesting without making it harmless or desirable.

6 The wider significance lies in the way tiny biological remains can reshape our picture of human behaviour. Rather than treating ancient societies as remote and fundamentally different, the finding reveals their complicated relationships with plants, substances and cultural practices. The same crop could serve practical, symbolic and intoxicating purposes, depending on the context. Scientific methods are increasingly allowing archaeologists to investigate such distinctions. When modern societies debate cannabis, should its long history influence the conversation, or should present-day evidence about health and harm carry all the weight?

Sources: University of Bern, Cannabis was used as an intoxicant as early as 2,800 years ago; Science, Direct evidence for psychoactive cannabis use 2,800 years ago. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The writer implies that written accounts are a weaker basis for the claim than the chemical analysis. T F NG
2. The hair evidence shows that cannabis was part of everyday life for the Scythians. T F NG
3. The researchers plan to test hair from other Scythian burials. T F NG
4. Seeds are less informative than hair because cannabis had uses unrelated to intoxication. T F NG
5. The writer concludes that the long history of cannabis should settle modern policy debates. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

detected **elaborate** **endorsement** **generalised** **reinforced** **residues** **tempting** **tentative**

1. Findings from a single excavation should not be _____ to the whole population of the region.
2. Traces of the toxin were _____ in the blood sample, though only at very low levels.
3. Archaeologists found _____ of resin on the inside of the clay vessel.
4. A study of ancient habits should not be read as an _____ of present-day policy.
5. It is _____ to read a complete ritual into a handful of clues, but the evidence is thin.
6. The tomb contained an _____ arrangement of gold ornaments and carved wood, which pointed to high status.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. Some historians dismiss ancient accounts as _____ . (RELIABLE)
2. The _____ of seeds alone would have told researchers very little. (PRESENT)
3. The team's findings are, if not conclusive, at least highly _____ . (SUGGEST)
4. The researcher spoke _____ about what the traces can show. (CAUTIOUS)
5. The main _____ of the study is that the evidence comes from a single site. (LIMIT)

7 Language focus: collocations

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Strong collocations are often fixed in academic writing. Learn the whole chunk: fall short of, cast doubt on, circumstantial evidence.

broad	cast	circumstantial	deliberate	falls	sparked	treated

1. The evidence _____ short of proving that cannabis was used in rituals.
2. Ancient accounts must be _____ with caution.
3. The findings _____ doubt on the assumption that ancient societies were simple.
4. The discovery has _____ a fresh debate about ritual drug use.
5. The authors stress that this is _____ evidence from a single site, not proof of wider habits.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. Why might it be misleading to treat evidence from one tomb as a picture of a whole society?
2. Should a long history influence how we think about a substance today, or should present evidence carry all the weight?
3. Does this kind of discovery make ancient societies seem more similar to us, or just as different as before?

9 Role-play: how should the museum tell this story?

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the museum curator

Your museum wants a display about the Siberian tomb. You like the headline 'People Got High 2,800 Years Ago'. It will bring in visitors. Explain why, and listen to your colleague's worries.

Student B · the scientist

You worked on the study. The evidence is real, but it leaves many questions open. Explain what the hair and seeds can show and what they can't. Suggest a better headline and try to agree.

Useful phrases

I'd like a headline that grabs people's attention.

That's true, but it isn't the whole story.

We can't say that for certain.

The hair shows exposure, not how often people used it.

How about a title that's honest and still interesting?

I think we can agree on that.

Afterwards, tell the class: what headline did you agree on, and why?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 A · 2 D · 3 G · 4 C · 5 H · 6 F · 7 B · 8 E

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 NG · 4 T · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 generalised · 2 detected · 3 residues · 4 endorsement · 5 tempting · 6 elaborate

6 Word forms

1 unreliable · 2 presence · 3 suggestive · 4 cautiously · 5 limitation

7 Language focus

1 falls · 2 treated · 3 cast · 4 sparked · 5 circumstantial

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