NEWS LESSON

Hair From a Tomb Shows Ancient Cannabis Use



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. What can people make from a plant, besides food?
2. Do you think hair can tell scientists things about a person?
3. How can scientists learn about people who lived thousands of years ago?

2 Key words

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

1	**archaeologists**	☐	A	in contact with something, with no protection
2	**ancient**	☐	B	very, very old
3	**intoxicating**	☐	C	a type of material, for example a powder or a liquid
4	**substance**	☐	D	making a person feel strange, like drink or drugs can
5	**exposed**	☐	E	scientists who study the past by digging up old things
6	**burial**	☐	F	wanting to learn and find out about things
7	**curious**	☐	G	to do with putting a dead person in the ground
8	**complicated**	☐	H	not simple, with many parts

3 Read

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

Scientists found chemical traces in hair from a Siberian tomb. They think people may have used cannabis 2,800 years ago, but many questions remain.

1 When we think about cannabis, we often imagine a modern argument about health, laws and personal choice. But the plant has a much longer history. Archaeologists studying an ancient tomb in Siberia have found evidence that people may have used cannabis for its mind-changing effects about 2,800 years ago. What makes the discovery special is that scientists found more than old stories or drawings. They found chemical evidence in human hair.

2 The research was published in the journal Science on 5 November 2026. The tomb belonged to members of the Scythian culture, whose people lived across parts of Central Asia and were known for horse riding. The researchers discovered cannabis seeds and analysed preserved hair from the burial site. The hair contained a substance called cannabinol, which can form when THC, the main intoxicating chemical in cannabis, breaks down.

3 That matters. Seeds alone might show that people had cannabis, but they would not prove why. The plant can also be used for making rope, cloth or oil. Chemical traces in human hair give scientists stronger evidence that people were exposed to its active compounds. Researchers therefore believe cannabis may have been used for its intoxicating effects. They still cannot say exactly how people took it.

4 Why might the ancient Scythians have used it? We do not know for certain. The tomb was an important burial place, so the plant may have played a part in special ceremonies. Some ancient writers described the Scythians using smoke from plants, but written accounts can be difficult to check. Modern scientific tests offer new clues that can support or challenge old ideas about the past.

5 The discovery does not tell us how strong ancient cannabis was or how often people used it. It also does not mean every person in that society took drugs. Scientists must explain the evidence carefully. The hair and seeds are real, but many details about the people's lives remain a mystery.

6 The story reminds us that humans have used plants for many reasons for thousands of years. Some plants were food, some were medicine and others were part of ceremonies. The same plant could have several purposes. Finding out about these habits helps us see ancient people as curious and complicated, much like people today. Does learning about the long history of a drug change how we think about it now?

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 research was published in the journal Science. T F NG
2. Seeds are the only evidence that the scientists found. T F NG
3. Scientists can say exactly how people took cannabis. T F NG
4. The Scythians grew cannabis on large farms. T F NG
5. Seeds alone would not show why people had cannabis. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

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

analysed	explain	invented	preserved	prove	purposes	recorded

1. Dry air helped to keep the hair _____ for thousands of years.
2. A good teacher can _____ a difficult idea in simple words.
3. The same plant can have different _____ , for example food or medicine.
4. A few old seeds cannot _____ that someone used a plant as a drug.
5. The team took small samples and _____ them carefully to measure the chemicals inside.

6 Verb forms

Write the correct form of the verb in brackets.

1. The researchers _____ cannabis seeds at the burial site. (DISCOVER)
2. The research _____ published in the journal Science. (BE)
3. The Scythians _____ across parts of Central Asia. (LIVE)
4. Scientists _____ found chemical evidence in human hair. (HAVE)
5. The hair _____ a substance called cannabinol. (CONTAIN)

7 Language focus: collocations

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Some words go together naturally. Learn the pair, not just one word: make a discovery, play a part.

broke	held	made	paid	played	raised	shed

1. The scientists _____ an important discovery in Siberia.
2. Cannabis may have _____ a part in special ceremonies.
3. The finding _____ many new questions about the Scythians.
4. For years, nobody _____ attention to the old seeds.
5. The discovery _____ light on how ancient people lived.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

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

1. Why are seeds alone not enough to show why people used a plant?
2. What can the hair and the seeds tell us, and what can they not tell us?
3. Do you find it interesting to learn how people lived in the past? Why, or why not?

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

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 F · 4 NG · 5 T

5 Vocabulary

1 preserved · 2 explain · 3 purposes · 4 prove · 5 analysed

6 Verb forms

1 discovered · 2 was · 3 lived · 4 have · 5 contained

7 Language focus

1 made · 2 played · 3 raised · 4 paid · 5 shed

This lesson is free. If it saved you time, you can support johnplusnews at **ko-fi.com/johnplusenglish**