NEWS LESSON

Were People Getting High 2,800 Years Ago?



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. Do you think ancient people were more or less curious about plants than we are today?
2. What kinds of evidence do you think archaeologists trust most?
3. Have you ever been surprised by something you learned about history?

2 Key words

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

1	**compounds**	☐	A	connected to a prince, or very rich and grand
2	**traces**	☐	B	very small signs that something was there
3	**ceremonies**	☐	C	affected by a drug or alcohol
4	**intoxicated**	☐	D	to do with putting a dead person in a grave
5	**ancestors**	☐	E	people in your family who lived long ago
6	**princely**	☐	F	special events with fixed actions, such as weddings
7	**burial**	☐	G	normal, not special
8	**ordinary**	☐	H	chemicals made of two or more parts joined together

3 Read

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

Cannabis seeds and chemical traces in preserved hair from a Siberian tomb suggest that some Scythians were exposed to its intoxicating compounds about 2,800 years ago. The evidence is strong, but it leaves many questions open.

1 Cannabis is often discussed as if it were a modern issue, connected to changing laws, medical uses and arguments about personal freedom. Yet people have known about the plant for thousands of years, using it for fibre, oil and other purposes. A discovery in southern Siberia now provides unusually direct evidence that some ancient people were also exposed to its mind-altering compounds. The clue was not a written record but traces of chemicals preserved in human hair.

2 The study, published in the journal Science on 5 November 2026, examined a princely tomb associated with the Scythians, a horse-riding culture of the Eurasian steppe. Researchers led by archaeologist Gino Caspari of the University of Bern and the Max Planck Institute analysed cannabis seeds recovered from the tomb and hair belonging to people buried there. The evidence dates back roughly 2,800 years, to the early eighth century BC.

3 The hair contained cannabinol, a substance that can form when THC, cannabis's main intoxicating compound, breaks down. This matters because finding cannabis seeds by themselves would not establish that anybody used the plant to become intoxicated. Cannabis also has practical uses, including producing textiles and oil. Chemical traces in human tissue offer stronger evidence of exposure to compounds associated with its psychoactive properties. The scientists describe the discovery as the oldest directly dated evidence of this kind.

4 The burial context raises fascinating questions. Did cannabis play a part in ceremonies connected to death, or was it something people used in everyday life? Ancient writers, including the Greek historian Herodotus, described Scythian practices involving plant smoke, but such accounts were written long after some of the events they described. The new evidence gives researchers something physical to investigate, though it does not reveal exactly how the plant was prepared or consumed.

5 There are important limits to what can be concluded. The researchers cannot determine the THC strength of the original plants from these traces, and the evidence does not show that cannabis was common throughout Scythian society. Nor does its ancient use tell us whether present-day cannabis is safe or how modern laws should work. Historical evidence can explain what people did without settling what people ought to do now.

6 Nevertheless, the discovery is a good example of how science can change our understanding of history. A few preserved hairs can provide information that ancient writers never recorded. It also challenges the idea that our ancestors were somehow less curious about plants and their effects on the body. The plant we argue about today had several roles long before modern states existed. Does finding out that people used cannabis thousands of years ago make it seem more ordinary, or does it raise even more questions?

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 study gives a physical clue that written accounts could not give. T F NG
2. Cannabis seeds found in the tomb are enough to show that someone used it to become intoxicated. T F NG
3. The researchers have already planned a second study of the tomb. T F NG
4. The writer says ancient use proves that present-day cannabis is safe. T F NG
5. The study still leaves open the question of how the plant was taken. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

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

associated	challenges	establish	estimated	ignore	preserved	recovered	tissue

1. The tests have not yet been able to _____ a firm link between the plant and the people buried there.
2. Divers _____ several gold coins from an ancient shipwreck.
3. The Scythians are _____ with horse riding across the steppe.
4. The finding _____ the idea that ancient people knew little about plants.
5. Chemical evidence was found in human _____ , not only in seeds.
6. Dry, cold conditions kept the hair well _____ for thousands of years.

6 Verb forms

Write the correct form of the verb in brackets.

1. The study _____ in the journal Science on 5 November 2026. (PUBLISH)
2. By the time the scientists tested the hair, it _____ for about 2,800 years. (SURVIVE)
3. Ancient accounts must _____ with caution. (TREAT)
4. In recent years, archaeologists _____ a great deal from tiny remains. (LEARN)
5. If more hair _____ , scientists will learn more. (FIND)

7 Language focus: collocations

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Verb and noun often form a fixed pair. Notice which verb goes with which noun: draw conclusions, play a role.

conducted	draw	fixed	heavy	physical	played	shed

1. The discovery has _____ new light on how the Scythians lived.
2. The team _____ a detailed analysis of the hair.
3. It is hard to _____ firm conclusions from one tomb.
4. Cannabis may have _____ a role in funeral ceremonies.
5. The tomb offers _____ evidence, not just old stories.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

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

1. Why is chemical evidence in hair stronger than finding seeds in a tomb?
2. Which of the limits in the study do you think matters most, and why?
3. Does it change your opinion if something has a long history? 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 H · 2 B · 3 F · 4 C · 5 E · 6 A · 7 D · 8 G

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 NG · 4 F · 5 T

5 Vocabulary

1 establish · 2 recovered · 3 associated · 4 challenges · 5 tissue · 6 preserved

6 Verb forms

1 was published · 2 had survived · 3 be treated · 4 have learned · 5 is found

7 Language focus

1 shed · 2 conducted · 3 draw · 4 played · 5 physical

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