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Citation

Bremer-McCollum, Adam. "Just Call It Weed On Arabic Edibles". Research Reflections Series. Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2025. © License: CC-BY-NC.

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Just Call It Weed: On Arabic Edibles

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Edited by, Aaron Michael Ullrey

Published: March 2025

The following Research Reflection is part of CSWR's ongoing series spotlighting the academic study of religions.

It turns out that fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Arabic texts have a lot to say about cannabis, i.e., weed. Historians, jurists, and poets all discuss weed's use and its users. In these sources, folk consume weed sold from jars, often toasting it and eating it prepared with other ingredients as a paste or a sort of candy bar or as small, dry, compressed pills. Weed was eaten at this time, not smoked. One recognizable name, *ḥašīš*, simply means “weed” or “grass,” just as we refer to cannabis in English. My research on weed texts in Arabic, accompanied by a glossary and commentary, will be published in the Center's [*Texts and Translations of Transcendence and Transformation*](#).

Weed experiences in these Arabic sources sometimes mirror contemporary descriptions. English has the word stoned; Arabic has the word *maṣṭūl*; both describe a person influenced by weed rather than alcohol. Users are observed “discussing what was and what was not, and then they ramble on and on, and they eventually come to bring up sweets and food.” Sound familiar? Feeling the munchies, another weed user recounts, “My eyes had turned red, and hunger had inflamed my insides.” Weed users see and experience imagined things, Arabic *kbayāl*, and “they think all this is a waking state, but it's really happening in a dream.” As graphically described for one cannabis-eater, “the weed vapor had risen in his head and its imaginations had penetrated his eyes.”

Smoking cannabis came from Africa to Western Asia only in the sixteenth century, accompanied by the technology of water-pipes. Nobody is smoking weed before that, neither by pipe, chillum, bong, nor rolled like a blunt or joint. The regular verb in Arabic for eating something (*'akala*) is the usual verb for ingesting cannabis. Weed is contrasted with wine. The prolific poet al-Ḥillī calls it “a wine whose jugs are ivory cases, and a wine whose cups are my palms.” That is, with wine, you need jugs and cups, but with weed, you just need a small container and your hand. And eating weed brings no hangover.

In a two-part work on wine and weed written in the 1460s, the historian al-Badrī collects comments and poem snippets dealing with cannabis. He lists names for weed used in certain places or names used by certain classes of people. In Yemen, it is “the Green.” In Diyar Bakr, it is “the Dusty.” In Antioch, it is “Cat-head.” In Egypt, a common name of uncertain meaning and origin is *Zih*. In Syria, it is known as “the Toasted” in Hama and “the Cheerer” in Homs.

Drifters might call it “the Sufis' well-known.” Women singers call it “branches of bliss.” Others call it “bush of rapture” and “bush of understanding.” The use of cannabis or “hemp” for rope making was long known, and rope makers, in fact, had their own moniker for weed, “the load-lightener,” as a recreational intoxicant. Deploying a pun in verse, one user declares, “It has untwisted my rope, and as long as I renounce it, I'm twisted.” al-Badrī concludes his list with a note that Satan and his helpers call weed “the trapper.”

Weed is also known as *al-qalandariya* and *al-ḥaydariya*, from the names of two Sufi Masters, Qalandar and Haydar, associated with introducing it. But where did weed come from in the first place? South Asian origins are most likely. A legend is reported of someone in India prior to Islam named Birartan

who learned about weed from conversing with an idol through which Satan spoke.

By the thirteenth century, weed spread from India to China, to Yemen and Ethiopia, and then to North Africa. Weed became well-known in the Islamic world around 1203 CE, “when Tatar power appeared,” emerging from Mongolia. That same, admittedly long-lived Indian, Birartan, is said to have met Qalandar and Ḥaydar around 1230 CE in Khorasan, the Iranian Plateau extending into Afghanistan. From Khorasan, “it pervaded the lands of the east, made the rounds in Byzantium, and landed in Syria.” In the Syrian port city of Latakia, we are told, weed was grown and then distributed throughout Syria. In Egypt, districts in Cairo bear names associated with weed production and weed use, raising concerns by civil authorities.

Some texts praise weed; others condemn it. The poet al-Ḥillī eulogizes weed as “surely a gift with its power to stone, it saves souls from their cares.” An anonymous poet refers to users as “constantly immersed in the secret world,” and one overuser is said to have reached “the point that Satan was in control of him.” Weed was not for everyone then, as it may not be now, but clearly, people then and now agree with al-Ḥillī’s lines: “We’ve found abiding ease in it, and it’s a paradise for those that choose it.”

Suggested Citation:

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Bio: Adam Bremer-McCollum completed his PhD in 2009 at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (Cincinnati), where he studied Semitic languages and Greek and Latin. His academic research experience includes five years as a cataloger of Syriac and Arabic manuscripts (Hill Museum & Manuscript Library) and time on a research project at the University of Vienna on Syriac, Greek, Arabic, Armenian, and Georgian logic and philosophy texts from the ninth century. For four years he taught languages and texts of Late Antiquity at the University of Notre Dame. More recently, he has taught various Aramaic languages, Gəŋəz, and Greek for Stanford and translated various Syriac texts. His research focuses on grammar, lexicography, and editing and translating texts in regional and transregional languages of antiquity from the Caucasus and the eastern Mediterranean to the horn of Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia. He has over two decades of experience studying, teaching, translating, and editing texts in Syriac and other Aramaic languages, Arabic, Hebrew, Gəŋəz, Coptic, old Georgian, old Armenian, and old Turkic/Uyghur.