

Lesson 1: The History of Tobacco

Tobacco in 15th Century Americas



Tobacco was used for a range of medicinal purposes from curing toothache to antiseptic qualities. The plant was offered as a gift to help cement social connections, and The Mayan people believed the tobacco plant to be divine.

Tobacco was a plant seen by some Native Americans as a means for providing communication with the supernatural world through the medium of the shaman, for either medicinal or spiritual purposes. **A strong mind-altering tobacco with a high-nicotine content was used in the performance of these shamanistic rituals and social ceremonies.** The tobacco was usually smoked but also chewed and drunk.

“The [Native Americans], to pass the time, smoke the tobacco to get drunk and to see those ghosts and things that they see and from which they received contentment...”

(Monardes, 1580. Historia medicinal de las cosas que se traen de nuestras Indias Occidentales)

Monardes was a Spanish doctor who travelled to Spanish colonies in America to learn their medicine. Ironically, he believed that tobacco was a counter-poison and an effective cure for cancer!

Extension:

“... the most striking features of early tobacco use are the variety of reasons employed to justify its consumption, and the diversity of ways in which it was taken. Tobacco was sniffed, chewed, eaten, drunk, smeared over bodies, used in eye drops and enemas, and smoked. It was blown into warriors’ faces before battle, over fields before planting and over women prior to sex, it was offered to the gods, and accepted as their gift, and not least it served as a simple pain-relieving drug for daily use by men and women. Tobacco’s popularity is in part explained by its **biphasic** nature as a drug. A small quantity of tobacco has a mild effect on its user, whereas in large doses it produces hallucinations, trances and sometimes death.

Many of the external applications of tobacco such as fumigation of crops and virgins were justified on practical grounds. Tobacco is a powerful **insecticide**, and blowing smoke over seed corn or fruit trees was an effective method of pest control. Some South American tribes also applied tobacco juice directly to their skin to kill lice and other **parasites**. These real qualities were embellished with mythical properties, so that tobacco came to be associated with cleansing and **fertility**, hence its application to virgins on their wedding night.”

(La Diva Nicotina: The Story of How Tobacco Seduced the World by Iain Gately)

Key words from extension text:

Biphasic: having two of something

Insecticide: a substance used for killing insects

Parasites: an organism that lives in or on an organism of another species (its host) and benefits by deriving nutrients at the other’s expense. For instance, a mosquito or a flea.

Fertility: the ability to conceive children

Lesson 1: The History of Tobacco

The colonization of tobacco

1492 – the year that European colonizers first invaded the Western hemisphere and the year that Christopher Columbus and his crew were first introduced to a plant that Indigenous people crushed up and smoked.

Recreational smoking of tobacco gained traction among white colonists in the mid-16th century when English colonist John Rolfe began growing tobacco in the Jamestown settlement (situated in Virginia, it was the first permanent English settlement in the Americas). Within a decade, tobacco was booming in Virginia and went from being a medicine plant to the “golden weed” of the colonies. Jamestown exported 2,300 pounds of tobacco to England between 1615 and 1616; by 1630, that figure rose to more than a million and a half pounds. Thanks to its rumored medicinal properties, including its ability to cure the plague, tobacco swept through Europe like wildfire, and its roots deepened in the North American colonies.

The intense labor required for tobacco crops, was a **major factor in the growth of slavery**. European colonizers transported more and more enslaved Africans and local Native Americans as tobacco sales increased in Europe. The original use of tobacco by the Native Americans was forgotten as the plant became the most lucrative cash crop for European colonizers.

In 1599, a Swiss traveller to England was astounded at what was quickly becoming a London-wide addiction amongst the elite and middling-sort: *‘They always carry the instrument on them...lighting up on all occasions: at the play, in the taverns, or elsewhere’*.

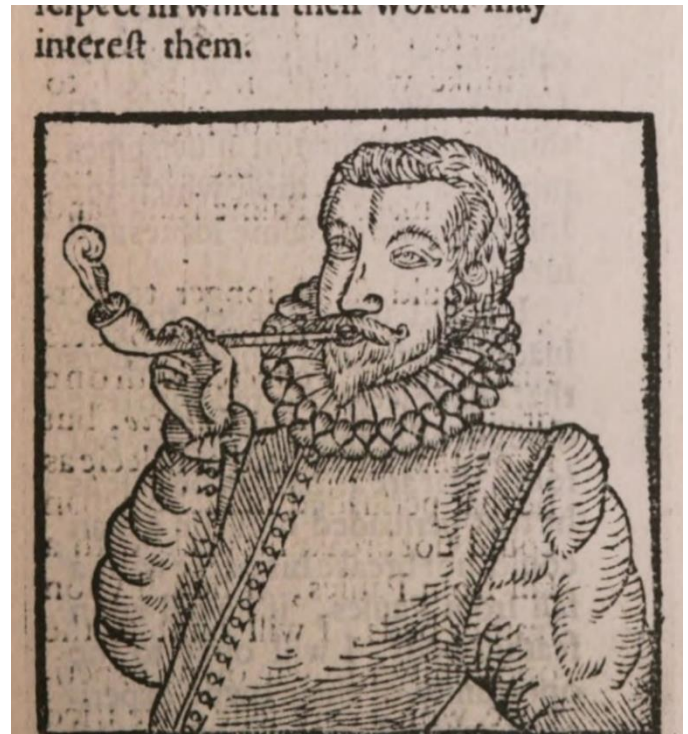


Image: Anthony Chute, Tobacco. London: 1595.
[The earliest depiction of an English man smoking tobacco.](#)

But...

King James I of England opposed the popularity of tobacco, and in his **Counterblaste to Tobacco**, published in 1604, he described smoking as *“a custom loathsome to the eye, hateful to the nose, harmful to the brain, dangerous to the lungs, and in the black, stinking fume thereof, nearest resembling the horrible Stygian smoke of the pit that is bottomless.”*

And elsewhere...

The Catholic Church: Popes Urban VIII and Innocent IX issued papal bulls excommunicating those who snuffed (sniffing tobacco) in church.

The Ottoman Empire: (covering large parts of The Middle East, Northern Africa and Eastern Europe) the Ottoman ruler Murad IV made smoking a capital offense (death!)

The Russians: those caught smoking were subject to having their noses cut off.

Lesson 1: The History of Tobacco

The global and cultural spread of tobacco



After tobacco's introduction into Europe, the smoking and cultivation of it rapidly spread to other parts of the world. By the mid-19th century, it was celebrated in prose, in verse (see Keats poem below), in art, and on the stage (see Bizet's opera), and its use came to be seen as a **central component of manhood**.

Image: Smoking by P. Chandra

(Depiction of a hill chief smoking, Pahari style, Basohli, late 17th century; in the National Museum of India, New Delhi)

Georges Bizet's opera, *Carmen*, centres on a Spanish heroine who works in a cigarette factory, while she smokes, and seduces men freely. When it was staged in New York City in 1878, it helped reinforce the American image of cigarette smoking as exciting, foreign, and sinful.

The painting on the side called "Las Cigarreras" by Gonzalo Bilbao is what inspired *Carmen's* opera



Give me Women, Wine and Snuff by John Keats

Give me women, wine, and snuff
Until I cry out "hold, enough!"
You may do so sans objection
Till the day of resurrection;
For bless my beard they aye shall be
My beloved Trinity.

(Snuff: tobacco that is snorted)

Lesson 1: The History of Tobacco

The industrialisation of cigarettes



Cigarettes were originally sold as an expensive handmade luxury item for the urban elites of Europe. However, cigarette manufacture was revolutionized by the introduction of a rolling machine called the **Bonsack machine**, which was patented by American James Bonsack in the United States in 1880 and introduced in Bristol in 1883.

Image: Bonsack's machine for cigarette mass production (1882). From History of Tobacco by Goetz Kloecker.



Prior to 1880, cigarettes were rolled by hand, which meant a rate of only a few cigarettes per minute.

The Bonsack machine could roll 210 cigarettes a minute, or 20,000 cigarettes in 10 hours. James Bonsack was spurred on by an industry prize that promised \$75,000 to anyone who could build a reliable rolling device!

James Bonsack was born in Virginia, USA.
Why might that be important?

Image: James A. Bonsack (1859-1924), General Negative Collection, North Carolina State Archives

Lesson 1: The History of Tobacco

Cigarettes and WWI



During World War I soldiers found cigarettes easier to smoke than pipes in the trenches, and tobacco companies, the military, governments, and newspapers organized a constant supply of cigarettes to the troops.

Image: A wounded German soldier lighted a cigarette for a wounded British soldier at a British field hospital in Nord, France, near the end of the war in 1918. By 2nd Lt. Thomas K. Aitken, British Army photographer, via *Imperial War Museums*

'Tobacco is not so much a luxury as an actual necessity to our men at the front.'

(Lieut-Colonel Henry Paul Treeby, Commandant of the East Surrey Depot, 1916)

'You ask me what we need to win this war. I answer tobacco, as much as bullets.'

(General John Joseph "Black Jack" Pershing, Commander-in-Chief of the American Expeditionary Force, 1917)

In April 1917 Edward Irwin of Hill Street observed from hospital in England:

'The nurses are very good to you. They fetch cigarettes and matches to you.'

Image: American Red Cross worker distributing cigarettes to soldiers at the A.R.C. Canteen at Orry la Ville



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Tobacco in the 1950s

Smoking was an acceptable form of social behaviour in all areas of life and was popular across all social classes. Most importantly, the cigarette habit was legitimated, celebrated, and glamourized on the Hollywood screen and transported to the rest of the world.

Image: In the 1950s, smoking was portrayed as glamorous. George Marks / Retrofile via Getty Images



By the 1950s around half of the population of industrialized countries smoked, and in countries such as the United Kingdom, up to 80 percent of adult men were regular smokers!

By the 1950s there was evidence showing the detrimental impact that smoking was having on health. With smoking beginning to decline, manufacturers had to market their products...



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