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The Domestication of Sesame Seed - Ancient Gift from Harappa

The Indus Valley Civilization's Gift to the World

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Sesame Seed Pods at the Beanstalk Children's Garden, Kansas City, Missouri. [Protoplan Pickle Jar](#)

By [K. Kris Hirst](#)

Updated January 31, 2016.

[Sesame](#) (*Sesamum indicum* L.) is the source of edible oil, indeed, one of the oldest oils in the world, and an important ingredient in bakery foods and animal feed. A member of the family *Pedaliaceae*, sesame oil is also used in many health cure products; sesame seed

contains 50-60% oil and 25% protein with [antioxidant](#) lignans.

Today, sesame seeds are widely cultivated in Asia and Africa, with major production regions in Sudan, India, Myanmar and China. Sesame was first used in flour and oil production during the [Bronze Age](#), and [incense](#) lamps containing sesame pollen have been found at [Iron Age](#) Salut in the Sultanate of Oman.

Wild and Domesticated Forms

Identifying wild from domesticated sesame is somewhat difficult, in part because sesame isn't completely domesticated: people have not been able to specifically time the maturing of the seed. The capsules split open during the maturing process, leading to varying degrees of seed loss and unripe harvesting.

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This also makes it likely that spontaneous populations will establish themselves around cultivated fields.

The best candidate for sesame's wild progenitor is *S. mulariyum* Nair, which is found in populations in western South India and elsewhere in south Asia. The earliest

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reported sesame discovery is in the [Indus Valley civilization](#) site of [Harappa](#), within the mature Harappan phase levels of mound F, dated between 2700 and 1900 BC. A similarly dated seed was discovered at the Harappan site of Miri Qalat in Baluchistan. Many more instances are dated to the

Evolution and the Origins of Human Beings

second millennium BC, such as Sangbol, occupied during the late Harappan phase in Punjab, 1900-1400 BC). By the second half of the second millennium BC, sesame cultivation was widespread [in the Indian subcontinent](#).

Outside the Indian Subcontinent

Sesame was disbursed to [Mesopotamia](#) before the end of the third millennium BC, presumably through [trade networks](#) with Harappa. Charred seeds were discovered at Abu Salabikh in Iraq, dated to 2300 BC, and linguists have argued that the [Assyrian](#) word shamas-shamme and the earlier Sumerian word she-gish-i may refer to sesame. These words are found in texts dated to as early as 2400 BC. By about 1400 BC, sesame was cultivated in middle [Dilmun](#) sites in Bahrain.

Although earlier reports exist in Egypt, perhaps as early as the second millennium BC, the most credible reports are finds from the New Kingdom including Tutankhamen's tomb, and a storage jar at Deir el Medineh (14th-century BC). Apparently, the spread of sesame into Africa outside of Egypt occurred no earlier than about AD 500. Sesame was brought to the United States by enslaved people from Africa.

In China, the earliest evidence comes from textual references that date to the [Han Dynasty](#), about 2200 BP. According to the classic Chinese herbal and medical treatise called the Standard Inventory of Pharmacology, compiled about 1000 years ago, sesame was brought from the West by Qian Zhang during the early Han dynasty. Sesame seeds were also discovered at the Thousand Buddha Grottoes in the [Turpan](#) region, about AD 1300.

Sources

This article is a part of the About.com guide to the [Plant Domestication](#), and the [Dictionary of Archaeology](#).

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Bridge over the Indus River. [Bernard Gagnon](#)

By [K. Kris Hirst](#)

Updated December 04, 2014.

The Indus civilization (also known as the Harappan Civilization, the Indus-Sarasvati or Hakra Civilization and sometimes the Indus Valley Civilization) is one of the oldest societies we know of, including over 2600 known archaeological sites located along the Indus and Sarasvati

rivers in Pakistan and India, an area of some 1.6 million square kilometers. The largest known Harappan site is Ganweriwala, located on the bank of the Sarasvati river.

Timeline of the Indus Civilization

Important sites are listed after each phase.

- Chalcolithic cultures 4300-3200 BC