

Ancient Global Myths Confirming the Existence of the Cotton Plant

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Many global myths have prevailed since ages concerning the existence of a cotton plant. In 1887, Henry Lee came out with a vivid description, a chronological travails narrative of explorers, biologists, searching for the existence of the cotton plant. Many beliefs prevailed

reflecting parallelism conceiving myths of the cotton These things plant. have been put together meticulously woven book called -

The vegetable land of Tartary, A curious fable of the cotton plant (A sketch of the cotton and cotton trade).

Sir John Mandeville published his version of the story in which barometz, a word from Tartar, signified both a tree, animal and a living plant. This was based on his expedition to the land of Tartary, spreading far into Siberia under the reign of the Scythian Empire at that time. The tree was known as the "Tartar of the east" formerly called "Scythia". This story of the wonderful plant which bore living lambs for its fruit and grew in Tartary was brought into

> public notice in England during the reign of Edward III by Sir John Mandeville. The natives of that country wore garments and head dresses prepared from the fleeces of these lambs of surpassing whiteness as snow. Sir John Mandeville appears to have never known of such a strange existence of the plant before but reports of

> > mentioned.

its presence have been traced back at least eighteen hundred years earlier than that he has

The chronology of the discovery goes way back from 1330 when Odoricus of Friuli returned from the mountain of Capsius (the province called "Kalor" in Tartary) and spread the news of the existence of barometz (described both as tree animal and a living plant), to the era of John Mandeville's discovery. However the mention of the existence of such a botanical curiosity has been

made in many sacred texts dating 445 BC by Herodotus in Greek and many other works as given in Table 1.

Table1. Chronology of the prevalence of the cotton myth as described by various explorers

No. Mentionest	Sr.	Name of the book/treatise	Name of the author	Year (AD unless
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B.C. Section	1	Ii. Cap 106	Heredotus	445 BC
De Historia Plantarum lib IV Cap 4 (more vivid description of cotton planting) The cotton planting)	2	Indica (mentions tree garments)	Ctesias	
cotton planting) Theoprhastus, lib IV. Cap. 4 306 BC 6 Geographia Strabo 21 7 Di, Situ Orbis, lib III. Cap. 7 Pomponius Mela (account of India) 43 8 Naturalis Historia Pliny 77 9 Historia indica and Periphus Maris Frythrai (contains valuable expeditions) Fabius Arriamus 131-135 10 Talmud Lerosa Limitanum (Hebrew) Rabi Jochanan 486 11 The Journal of Frior Odoricus of Friuli (Hakluyt collections of early voyages vol II (1809) Odoricus of Friuli 1330 12 The voiyage and travail Sir John Mandeville 1357-1371 13 Notes on Russia- "Perum Muscovituanum commentari, 1549 Sigismund, Baron von Herberstein 1517 & 1526 14 De Spenneo Viventinium lib 3 cap 45 Fortunio Liyati Prof. Of Padua 1518 15 De Krum Natura Sigismund, Baron von Herberstein 1517 & 1526 15 De Krum Natura Sigismund von Herberstein 1518 15 Ta Scotecarum Exercitationum, lib XV." De subtillitate ad Heinorymum cardanum Exercit, 181, cap 29, Frankfurt, 1157 Julius Caesar Scaliger	3	Journal of narrative- Nearchus-lost	Nearchus	325-324 BC
6 Geographia Strabo 21 7 Di, Situ Orbis, lib III. Cap.7 Pomponius Mela (account of India) 43 8 Naturalis Historia Pliny 77 9 Historia indica and Periphus Maris Erythrai (contains valuable expeditions) Fabius Arriamus 331-135 10 Talmud Lerosa Limitanum (Hebrew) Rabi Jochanan 436 11 The Journal of Frior Odoricus of Friuli (Hakluyt collections of early voyages vol II (1809) 337-1371 12 The voiyage and travail 337-3371 13 Notes on Russia- "Perum Muscovituanum commentarii, 1549 Sigismund, Baron von Herberstein 1517 & 1526 14 De Spenneo Viventinium lib 3 cap 45 Fortunio Liyati Prof. Of Padua 1518 15 De Krum Natura Sigismund von Herberstein 1557 16 Evolercarum Exercitationum, lib XV " De subtillitate ad Heironymum cardanum Exercit, 181, cap.29, Frankfurt, 1157 Julius Caesar Scaliger 1557 17 Liber de Carsis, seus de Principiety Originibus, Nature, c. Guillaume Postel 1557 18 "La Semaine" - Poem (Adam and Eve got excited about the plant they spot in 'Garden of Eden' Guillam	4		Theophrastus (disciple of Aristotle	306 BC
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X., lib.3, obs 1. Lemgo, 1712, Kaempfers MSS and collection were acquired by Hans Loane and were deposited in British Museum Philosophical Translations. Vol XX. P.861 and Louthorp's Abridgement of the Phi. Trans. Vol II p.649 Sir Hans Loane 1698 A new book in Geography Massimo Tobia 1705 Travels from St. Petersberg in Russia to various parts of Asia, in 1716, 1719, 1722 by John Bell, Autermony, Dedicated to the Governor, Court of Anissa, and Freeman of Russia, London, 1764. Communicated in Latin on the subject - Dissetiencula cle Agno Vegetalii Scythio Borametz, vulgo,: dicto. '-Phils. trans. vol VI.p.307	25	Chap XII, p. 167 Amsterdam; also in English translation from		1681
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Vegetalii Scythio Borametz, vulgo,: dicto. '-Phils. trans. vol VI.p.307	29	in 1716, 1719, 1722 by John Bell, Autermony, Dedicated to the	John Bell of Autermony	1715-1722
31 Voyages en Siberie, Paris. Able Chaupe- Autoroche 1768	30	Vegetalii Scythio Borametz, vulgo,: dicto. '-Phils. trans. vol	John Philip Breyn of Dontzii	1725
	31	Voyages en Siberie, Paris.	Able Chaupe- Autoroche	1768

32	The Botanical Garden', a poem into two parts with philosophical notes	Dr. Erasmus Darwin	1781
33	Floro. Cochinchinensis.ter.,1.p.675, Lisbon, 1790.	Juan de Louveiro, Portuguese botanist (Fellow of the Royal Society, Lisbon, travelled in Cochin China, China	1790
34	Connubia florum Latino Carmine Demonstrata. Bath 1791. (Latin poem) Dr. De La Cruix, the botanical author, 1791.	Bishop Atterbury	1791
35	The cotton manufacturers of Great Britain, p.71	Dr. Ure	1836
36	Synopsis Filicum; Arb: Dicksonia barometz	Sir W. J. Hooker and J. G. Baker	1863

For many years the cotton plant was perceived as a "zoophyte", pertaining to the animal kingdom. In September 1725, Dr. John Philip Breyn of Dantzic addressed the Royal Society of London and describing a specimen of the *barometz*, expressed his disbelief at the existence of such a mythical plant! This substance of artificial animal exhibited by Sir Hans Sloane and Dr. Breyen conferred the long root of the genus "*Dicksonia*". This species of *Dicksonia* is assumed to have given rise to the fable of "Scythian lamb" which further led to the name as *barometz*. It is further mentioned that doll lambs were made native to Southern China, Assam, Malayan Peninsula and the islands as quoted by Sir J.W. Hooker and J.H. Baker in 1863.

Juan de Lourere, an accomplished Portugese botanist and Fellow of the Royal Society of London who lived and laboured as a Catholic missionary in the then Cochin China for more than thirty years and afterwards for three years in China mentions, "The polypodium barometz grows in hilly woods of China, Cochin China."

Many others have written of the Scythian lamb or the barometz. Thus the conception and transition of this curious fact of the existence of the Scythian lamb to the origin of the cotton plant went through numerous interpretations based on many expeditions to the land of Tartary or the Scythia. The Scythian empire spread across the Caucasian mountains, Siberia and down South beyond the Himalayas, the portion of which was called Indo-Scythia. It was here towards the Indus, when Narcheus the Rear Admiral of Alexander's the forces noticed a strange set of people who were wearing white garments presumed to be made of cotton wool. Thus John Mandeville eventually agreed with the idea that cotton existed as a plant (Gossypium herbaceum), known as levant cotton since the antiquity was more often queried by the early explorers in Europe and far Asia.

However, the earlier existence of cotton has been in mentioned in the Rig Veda, an ancient Indian epic depicting the use of cotton thread by Brahmans for religious ceremonies, the use of Sana (Crotolaria juncea, Hibiscus canabinus) by Kshatriyas and use of wool by Vaisiyas for religious ceremonies as quoted by John Royle (1851) in On the Culture and Commerce of Cotton in India. Interestingly, in another mention by Mathew (1916) in his book, Textile Fibres, has written that the earliest mention of cotton appears in a sacred text Asvalayana Srantra Seitra about 100 B.C. The books of Manu reveal that the sacred thread of the Brahmin must be made of cotton (karpas) so as to put over the head in three strings (Book II, No.44), let a weaver who has received 10 palas of cotton thread give it back increased to 11 by the rice-water and the like used in weaving; he who does otherwise shall pay a fine of 12 palas (Book VIII, No. 307), theft of cotton thread was made punishable by fines of three times the value of the article (Book VIII, 236).

The original book by Henry Lee bears the photos revealing the myth of the cotton plant. The above narrated brief depiction in the text suffices to explain the existence of the myth of the cotton plant prevailing for centuries.

Suggested Reading:

1. The Vegetable land of Tartary, a curious fable of the cotton plant (to which is added), A sketch of the history of cotton and cotton trade. By Henry Lee, 1887, Publ. Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, London.

2. Wikipedia : The Vegetable Lamb of Tartary by Henry Lee

(The views expressed in this column are of the author and not that of Cotton Association of India)
