

# Alcohol and drugs: Not just for modern man: 'Anthropology of intoxication' in prehistoric European societies

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Unlike modern Man, the prehistoric people of Europe did not use mind-altering substances simply for their hedonistic pleasure. The use of alcohol and plant drugs – such as opium poppies and hallucinogenic mushrooms – was highly regulated and went hand-in-hand with the belief system and sacred burial rituals of many preindustrial societies. Elisa Guerra-Doce of the Universidad de Valladolid in Spain contends that their use was an integral part of prehistoric beliefs, and that these substances were believed to aid in communication with the spiritual world. Guerra-Doce's research appears in Springer's *Journal of*

*Archaeological Method and Theory.*

Despite the fact that the consumption of these substances is as ancient as human society itself, it is only fairly recently that researchers have started to look into the historical and cultural contexts in which mind-altering products were used in Europe. To add to the body of literature about the anthropology of intoxication in prehistoric European societies, Guerra-Doce systematically documented the cultural significance of consuming inebriating substances in these cultures.

In the research, four different types of archaeological documents were examined: the macrofossil remains of the leaves, fruits or seeds of psychoactive plants; residues suggestive of alcoholic beverages; psychoactive alkaloids found in archaeological artifacts and skeletal remains from [prehistoric times](#); and artistic depictions of mood-altering plant species and drinking scenes. These remnants include bits of the opium poppy in the teeth of a male adult in a Neolithic site in Spain, charred Cannabis seeds in bowls found in Romania, traces of barley beer on several ceramic vessels recovered in Iberia, and abstract designs in the Italian Alps that depict the ritual use of hallucinogenic mushrooms.

Because Guerra-Doce mainly found traces of sensory-altering products in tombs and ceremonial places, she believes such substances are strongly linked to ritual usage. They were consumed in order to alter the usual state of consciousness, or even to achieve a trance state. The details of the rituals are still unclear, but the hypothesis is that the substances were either used in the course of mortuary rites, to provide sustenance for the deceased in their journey into the afterlife, or as a kind of tribute to the underworld deities.

She adds that the right to use such [substances](#) may have been highly regulated given that they were a means to connect with the spirit world, and therefore played a sacred role among prehistoric European societies.

"Far from being consumed for hedonistic purposes, drug plants and alcoholic drinks had a sacred role among prehistoric societies," says Guerra-Doce. "It is not surprising that most of the evidence derives from both elite burials and restricted ceremonial sites, suggesting the possibility that the consumption of mind-altering products was socially controlled in prehistoric Europe."

**More information:** Guerra-Doce, E. (2014). The Origins of Inebriation: Archaeological Evidence of the Consumption of Fermented Beverages and Drugs in Prehistoric Eurasia. *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*. [DOI: 10.1007/s10816-014-9205-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10816-014-9205-z)

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