

Hordeum

Gramineae

[*Poaceae*]

Hordeum is derived from Latin *horridus* (rough, shaggy, bristly) with reference to the beard of barley, and is a classical Latin name for ‘barley’.

Farming is thought to have begun in the Near East from about 8000 BC [archaeologists have found what are so far the oldest known remains of wild barley (and wild wheat, *Triticum*) that are believed to have been part of a large store at a site in Syria dating from about that period] and species of barley (previously gathered by hand from the wild and scattered over food as seasoning) were among the first wild cereals to be domesticated. The Egyptians, who authorities say cultivated barley from about 5000 BC, attributed its presence to Isis who in legend was closely connected with the Nile delta where the barley was grown. Later on the ancient Greeks grew a related species, two-rowed barley (*Hordeum distichon*), from which many others were developed – and this was also treated as sacred in the Greek tradition. (It is more than likely, authorities muse, that the spike of grain unveiled at the climax in rituals associated with the Greek goddess of agriculture, Demeter, was barley.)

The English translations of the Old Testament of the *Bible* refer to barley on several occasions. For instance in the Book of Exodus it was one of the crops devastated by hailstones, and in the Book of Ruth Naomi returns to Bethlehem with her daughter-in-law Ruth (both of them now widowed), as the barley harvest is beginning. From the New Testament Christians are familiar with the stories in St. Mark’s Gospel of the feeding of the multitudes with a few loaves – barley loaves – and fishes.

Cultivated barley crops were widespread in the Mesopotamian area from about 3500 BC. And on the other side of Asia the Chinese are believed to have begun to farm barley at about the same time as the Greeks ie. around 2000 BC if not a little earlier. [Records of about 2800 BC refer to barley as one of the five sacred Chinese cultivated plants – the others being millet (*Panicum miliaceum*), rice (*Oryza*), soya (*Glycine max*) and wheat (*Triticum*).] The ancient Egyptians and succeeding societies have used the grain not just for food but also for medicine and (fermented) for beer, and this grain was valued more highly than the wheat that was also cultivated. Barley beer or *çerveoise* (which is probably derived from the Gallic *cerevisia* which combines Ceres, Roman goddess of agriculture, corn and plenty and a Latin word for ‘strength’ *vis*) was made from fermented barley, rye (*Secale cereale*) or oats (*Avena sativa*) (and occasionally wheat) until hops (*Humulus lupulus*) became the more popular basic ingredient in the 14th Century.

Like other grasses, such as millet (*Panicum miliaceum*), rice (*Oryza*) or wheat (*Triticum*), barley has played a significant role in the civilization of man. It was one of the very first plants to be farmed by man and its need for constructive irrigation and its participation in early ‘bartering’ between small farm communities were significant factors in the emergence of larger and larger communities.

Barley was eaten by man (and drunk as ale) when he was still a gatherer, hunter and fisher – before he learnt how to tame wild cereals. Archaeologists have found remains of barley in Europe (on the site of the Swiss lake dwellers at Robenhausen) going back to 8000 BC. At about this time in Sumeria (at the eastern end of the Mediterranean) people were

beginning to cultivate the crop. [Authorities say that before the soil began to turn sour from the methods of irrigation then used, Sumerian records of about 2500 BC indicate that they employed about 40% of the total grain crop in making ale. They had many different kinds of ale (including 8 made from barley) and some of these were only used in temple rituals by the priestesses – most of whom were, themselves, brewers.] By 3000 BC it was said that the farming peasants in Egypt had become so proficient that annually they produced three times the amount of food (and ale ingredients) needed for their own families and this provided a valuable, and massive surplus that could be traded. Unlike the Sumerian ale, some of which was taken as food as well as drink, the most common early Egyptian ale was made from a variety known as ‘red barley’ which had a quality that produced a drink nearer to wine than beer. The Israelites learnt how to make beer during their enforced sojourn in Egypt, and apparently tradition maintains that those Jewish prisoners in Babylon who would have been susceptible to leprosy escaped the disease by drinking a bitter beer to which hops (*Humulus lupulus*) had been added. Excavations in Pakistan made from the 1970s in the Indus valley (originally part of northern India) indicate that barley was being farmed there by at least 2300 BC if not earlier. By the time of the early centuries AD barley was common throughout northern India and was also to be seen growing in the south of the Continent during the cooler Winter months.

Meanwhile in Greece barley was farmed on a small scale until about 600 BC. The Country had appointed an Athenian poet, merchant and lawgiver, Solon (640 or 638-559 BC) to reform their constitution and during his tenure from around the turn of the Century he decreed that olive oil (*Olea europaea*) would be the only permitted agricultural export. From then on the Greek landscape experienced a devastating change. Part of the loss was most of the few barley fields with the result that barley became one of that Country’s imports. Nevertheless for the Greek peasant barley paste, gruel or flatbread continued to be an important part of the diet.

It was the barley species *Hordeum vulgare* that appeared on ancient Greek and Roman coins of about 500 BC. Roman gladiators were also known as ‘barley men’ *hordearii* as the cereal was an important part of their diet. But unlike the Greeks some authorities point out that as the Roman quality of living increased so, gradually, did their preference for wheat (*Triticum*) and their disparagement of barley. It must still have retained a measure of importance for the Romans for several centuries however as Scipio the Elder (236-183 BC) demanded barley as tribute from Carthage after his victory at Zama in 202 BC – 300,000 bushels of it. But barley degenerated in time to become a form of punishment recognized by the barley porridge-like meal that was prepared for arrested soldiers. This practice was to be reflected hundreds of years later in 17th Century Europe when monasteries inflicted a penance of barley bread and water on any of their brethren found to be at fault. (This could only have ever been considered as a penance after the 16th Century in western Europe as until that time barley was a staple bread grain there.)

Barley has long been grown in northern and western Europe although, generally, second to wheat (*Triticum*). An ear of cereal thought by some to be barley appears on coinage (which can still be seen today) of the 1st Century chieftain, Cunobelin. He came from the Catuvellauni tribe that invaded Britain and ruled from a capital established near Colchester (his allegiance or opposition to Rome, the occupying power, is still debated). For one period at least in Gallic farming history barley was likely to have been an important crop because of its use in making beer. This was during the 200 year Roman occupation from 92 AD when Rome recognized severe competition and an economic threat from the French vineyards and had half of them destroyed. As a result many of France’s ancestors, the Gauls, began to develop a taste for beer. However in due time

once France was encouraged to re-establish her vineyards to bolster the Roman exchequer, she started to regain her name for wines over succeeding centuries, and during the more recent period, Germany has assumed the mantle as the prime beer-drinking European Country.

In the 6th Century AD the European Continent was turning its attention to new farming techniques, particularly crop rotation. This not only helped to nurture the soil but also improved the yield and quality of an annual supply of produce. At that time a 'three-field system' was generally adopted in which barley featured in the cycle as a possible successor to wheat (*Triticum*). (By the 19th Century this system had developed further and many farmers were using a four-crop cycle in which barley still played a role.) Meanwhile in Russia they were using barley (sometimes rye, *Secale cereale*) for a beer known as *kvas* that was still being made and enjoyed at least 800 years later.

It is interesting to note from the comments of one or two authorities that some of the American Indian tribes had introduced a three crop rotation with native plants before it would seem Europeans on the other side of the Atlantic had themselves worked such a system out. Barley is said to have been brought to America first in 1543, and attempts to cultivate it in New England were made by the Pilgrim Fathers with little success. (Records indicate that it was eventually cultivated for food by a few North American Indian tribes, including the Tohono O'odham, the Cahuilla and the Yuki. The latter not only made bread from the ground seeds but also used the dried seeds for a substitute coffee.) With regard to the introduction by the Europeans of brewing beer it was another matter. There seems to have been a well-established brewery on Manhattan Island by the early 17th Century. The Pilgrim Fathers landed on the Massachusetts' coast from Britain at the end of 1620 (not least it is said because they had run out of beer) and in 1637 the first brewery license was awarded in New England. The importance of brewing on that Continent is apparent when one notes that many of the early United States' politicians were either, themselves, brewers or members of brewing families, including Samuel Adams (1722-1803), who was one of the signatories of the 1776 Declaration of Independence, George Washington (1732-1799), who was the First President, Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), who was the Third President and James Madison (1751-1836), who succeeded Jefferson as President.

In the West today most of the barley crop goes into animal foodstuffs, and the remainder is used for brewing, distilling and human food (porridge, flour and thickeners for soups and stews). Whereas in Moslem North Africa and western Asia it features in porridge and flatbreads little different to those enjoyed centuries ago.

Like so many other plants, roasted and ground barley kernels have also been used as a coffee substitute as, mentioned earlier, in connection with European settlers in North America.

In Britain, apart from ancient fertility rites (during which the barley was castrated and ceremonially murdered at the harvest feast to end the king's ie. barley's reign) there are many old farm traditions and superstitions connected with the plant. Although it used to be the custom to sow barley on 29th January [the Eve of St. Agnes (died c. 305)] one of the sayings relates to 1st March ie.

Upon St. David's Day
Put oats and barley in the clay.

Another that was still being quoted in the 1940s ran

When the blackthorn is white, sow barley both day and night.

Then in the west of Scotland it was traditional to declare that the cuckoo flew South once it had seen an ear of barley.

Barley has also been used in love divination in England. One method from the North of the Country required that a girl hopeful of seeing her future partner should scatter barley under an apple tree (*Malus*) while reciting

Barley, barley, I saw thee,
That my true love I may see,
Take thy rake and follow me..

Barley (or more specifically one of its derivatives – whisky) is celebrated in the traditional English song *John Barleycorn*.

The corn dollies often made from wheat (*Triticum*) or oats (*Avena sativa*) were occasionally woven from barley too and for many were considered to bring good luck.

Quite a few public houses in Britain are called the ‘Barley Mow’ and this actually means a ‘pile’ or ‘stack of barley’.