

Dark Gold: Bringing Chocolate from Mesoamerica to Europe

Intro: Welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best, and occasionally unknown, history. We'll be speaking to experts as well as enthusiasts, asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold stories.

Gabby: Hello, everyone. Welcome to the first episode of our special set of series on the history of chocolate. Your hosts today are me Gabrielle Storey, I'm a historian of medieval queenship and sexuality and Johanna Strong, a historian of Mary I and her legacy at the University of Winchester.

Please note that for this episode, we will be discussing sensitive topics including enslavement and acts of violence. So please be aware that some of the material we focus on may be distressing. In today's episode, Jo and I are going to take you through the development and consumption of chocolate in the early modern period.

Johanna: So we're going to start with a brief discussion on the production of chocolate, so where the cacao is grown and why where it's grown is important in the story of chocolate. We're also going to talk, as Gabby has said, about enslavement and how the enslaved labour was used in order to be able to provide chocolate for European consumption. We're also going to talk very importantly about how this affected the indigenous populations. We're going to end on perhaps a more upbeat note, and talk about chocolate's journey to Europe. So we're going to go from the good, the bad and the ugly and to give you a whole sense of what chocolate production was like during this time. So we're going to start from the very beginning and ask where exactly does chocolate come from.

Gabby: Yeah. So for a lot of people, I think you know about the history of chocolate, you know, we've often associated it with the Mayans. So, Cacao trees are native to central and south America. And actually it might have been used as early as 5,300 years ago by the Mayo-Chinchi in Southern Ecuador or even in 1500 BC by the Olmecs and this history of it, we can find by looking at it as an ingredient, looking at its origin. There have been traces of theobromine which is found in chocolate and tea, which have been uncovered in vessels found in the area, but we don't 100 percent know if they used cacao beans, or just the pulp of the cacao pod itself and rather interestingly, one cacao tree can actually produce enough every year to make 500 grams or 1.1 pounds of chocolate. And what is often a confusing point is, you know, is it a cacao or cocoa, or is it chocolate? So cacao here refers to the actual bean itself, chocolate is the end product, because as we will discuss, and as some of our colleagues will discuss on future podcasts, there's lots of uses for chocolate. There's lots of changes to how it's mixed in, how it's produced. And the cacao pod is a really versatile ingredient, and we're really interested and looking forward to talking to you more about how it develops.

So Jo, why chocolate? How has it been used originally?

Johanna: So chocolate is really interesting. because it needs very, very precise conditions to grow, which means that it's kind of a luxury or a, an extravagant source and crop. So it needs limited sun, but it needs plenty of humidity. And really the only place naturally that that occurs is 20 degrees north or 20 degrees south in terms of latitude of the equator.

So there's a very thin strip of the world where cacao is naturally grown. It was first used as a ceremonial drink by the Mayans for celebrations and to finalize transactions, but it was universally available. On the other hand, the Aztecs use chocolate as currency and for ceremonial purposes, but it was really only limited to those uses and wasn't a universal drink available for everyone.

So you can see because cacao is in this limited area, it becomes a very high status item. What's different about how cacao and chocolate were used in the indigenous communities - different to how it is today - is that the Aztecs and the Mayans would have sweetened their chocolate with honey, or even with spices, such as chilies. And so the drink was often a lot more bitter than we would have it today. The standard indigenous preparation was to have powdered cacao steeped in water with honey, cornmeal and peppers. So that's very different than how we would have today when you put on the kettle, or boil some milk to make hot chocolate and there's on top of all of this, a really interesting dispute about the etymology of the term. I will say, Spanish and indigenous languages are not my first language. so I will try to pronounce these as best as I can. so chocolate is potentially from the Nahuatl word cacahuatl but there's also been some thought that it's from a Yucatec Mayan word, chocol meaning hot and the Nahuatl atl meaning water.

There's also some thought that it derives from an original Eastern Nahuatl form, which has chicolatl which then relates to the term that they've used for a beater or a frothing stick. so in the same way that you would froth milk today for a latte, they would use that to froth the chocolate to drink, and that's called a chicoli so it's hot chocolate is literally a beaten drink. There's also some thought from other historians that the first element of the name is unknown. But they agree that the original form was likely chicolatl. So we have all of these different forms of the word, but they all come together to create what we today call chocolate.

So we've talked a little bit about how cacao becomes chocolate, and I think Gabby, you have some more information on how this process actually happens from bean to what we would recognize as a piece of chocolate.

Gabby: Yeah. So it's quite interesting because let's say obviously we are talking, you know, centuries ago in terms of this process and the original way in which you would get to this production is you would have a heavy cylindrical cone known as a Manay, which would crush the cacao beans on a grinding stone. So a [inaudible] so kind of like a very old fashioned mortar and pestle in a way. And you would have a fire burning underneath it in order to soften the cacao into a form of paste which, historians have estimated took about eight hours. This paste is then left to dry, and it's then either grated, or it's diluted to make hot chocolate. And, this is the real origins of what we would view as today's hot chocolate. You know, this dilution, this mixing of it into the liquid, as a drink. but interestingly as well, when we move further forward and you've got the expansion of how it becomes chocolate

American chocolate production actually occurred in the winter more often to allow the chocolate to harden. That's a real change to the process we see as it develops throughout the early modern period.

Jo, what about the process of actually making chocolate more kind of formalized and institutionalized. How does this change?

Johanna: Yeah. So chocolate originally started, as we said, from the cacao tree, which was just a wild tree that grew naturally without human intervention and kind of, as soon as they realized that you could make something of the cacao tree, it began to be cultivated in the Amazon, by indigenous people at first. And so we know that by 1670 there were small semi/quasi plantations that were run by indigenous people where they would take these wild trees and they would cultivate cacao from them. But once European colonization happened and once Europeans arrived in the Amazon, they realized 'we're going to have to make this a more formal process if we want to have as much cacao and chocolate as we want'.

So chocolate demand at that point grew so high because so many European markets were demanding chocolate that plantations became necessary and having these natural or wild trees just wasn't enough. So plantations were created, which were worked by enslaved peoples so the more that was produced, the less expensive chocolate got, the less expensive chocolate got the more people could afford to buy chocolate, which means that you start that cycle all over again, that there's more production to fill the higher demand, which then again, decreases the price of chocolate.

So as this entire economic cycle kept moving, plantations became more and more essential so these plantations would grow obviously cacao, but they would also grow sugar at the same time because the Spanish, unlike the indigenous peoples, sweetened their chocolate drinks with manufactured ingredients like sugar, instead of natural sweet sources, like honey.

So we know that by the 1790s plantations in Venezuela were producing 8.8 million pounds a year, which is quite a lot, but understandably, these plantations and this entire plantation market is disrupted by Anglo Spanish maritime conflict. So there is this conflict in the route of getting the cacao and the processed chocolate back to Europe because of these naval conflicts.

So we see that disrupted from 1796 to 1802 and then 1803 to 1808. But all through that period, there is this growth of a more formal, and I think a more consequential chocolate market in the use of plantations and the use of enslaved labour. So with this growth in production, we do have enslavement. And so the big question here is kind of to what extent was enslavement used to keep up with demand?

Gabby: Sorry, sadly as any historians of empires and trade will tell you, enslavement is essential to keeping up with this demand and to cover a brief history of it for the early modern period. So before about 1518 Portugal had enslaved people to work on the Eastern Atlantic islands and Spanish ships also brought enslaved Africans to the Iberian peninsula.

From 1518 you have the first authorization of Africa to Caribbean slave voyages. And many of these were enslaved inland in Africa, and then brought to the ports and enslaved peoples

would often die of malnutrition on these ships and some threw themselves overboard. So you've got a real risk factor even before they make it to the plantations.

And David Wheat who is a historian has suggested that thousands of enslaved Africans arrived in the Caribbean in the 1520s and these were replacing the indigenous enslaved workers, which had been killed by European disease. So you've really got this emphasis that the Spanish, the Portuguese are not using their own workers primarily, they are dependent upon enslavement be that of the indigenous populations or of Africans to ensure the production of chocolate. So you also see the decimation of native south Americans, through warfare and conquest alongside disease and enslavement. As well, particularly in Peru, there's a focus on gold as well as consumables for the Spaniards, they are out for everything they can get, be that the production of consumables, be that money, be that expansion. There's lots of different reasons why they are pushing the conquest of south America.

Turn to England. So England colonizes Jamaica in 1655 and inherits the cacao plantations. This cacao boom lasts until about 1670s. And we know in the early 1670s, there are around 47 to 60 cacao plantations with an annual harvest of 188,000 pounds. By 1673 we know that there was a 5,000 pound harvest due which was likely to a plant [inaudible].

Across the borders you also see France that has cacao plantations in Martinique, Guadeloupe, Saint Domingue which is now Haiti and Cayenne, but they never flourish and they eventually peter out after damage caused by earthquake and hurricanes. So it's not an entirely productive venture for everyone in terms of gathering these consumables.

The Dutch cacao cultivation occurred in Suriname and from 1726 to 1741, we know that 87 plantations are established but cacao was second priority to coffee. They obviously have their focus on the other form of caffeine. So for enslaved peoples they are treated as merchandise on these ships and when they die their brand and cause of death was recorded for commercial purposes only. So you've got a real sense of the dehumanization that occurs for these enslaved people.

Moving on to the US we know that Virginian chocolate, indeed, perhaps other factories in modern day southern American states was made by enslaved people of colour. And we also know that Spanish American colonies had some free people of colour. And so race was not yet as tightly tied to slavery as it would go on to be.

But it's a real indictment of the Western European empires that they are so dependent on enslaved peoples, either indigenous or the Africans that they transport over to make sure that their wealth base continues.

Jo, so what's the consequence for these people. you know, what is the consequence for these indigenous individuals?

Johanna: Yeah. So this is, as some historians have termed it, this is the bitter side or the dark side of chocolate. and it's, it's not the most uplifting story, but I think it is essential to our understanding of chocolate and its history.

So Mesoamerican enslaved workers originally were used by the European plantation owners but they were increasingly killed by European diseases because they didn't have, you know, the natural immunity that Europeans would have, but being exposed to these diseases again and again and again. So as they were increasingly killed by European diseases, enslaved African people were brought to work the plantations to replace the indigenous labour. So when disease wiped out these indigenous populations supply came from Guatemala and modern day El Salvador. So we see kind of people are being wiped out and then entire chocolate markets are moving from their original locations and they moved to Mexican producers because that's where the labour is available.

Indigenous communities at this point are being decimated for their labour. The work was occasionally done by low wage labourers, as well as the enslaved. But we do see that enslavement is a massive part of this manufacturing process. And so you might wonder how do we actually get from working the fields on a voluntary basis to this plantation enslavement? And so what happens for the indigenous people is that when Spain arrives and begins to formally colonize these new to the European places, Spain imposes work tributes. And so essentially working in a cacao district fulfilled this obligation for indigenous communities.

So indigenous farmers were encouraged to plant more cacao, even though it had only ever been a secondary crop up to this point. So on top of being essentially forced to work on plantations, even if it's not official enslavement, they really have no choice. And so as they're producing, not only is this production involuntary, but 5% of the annual cacao crop - so that's about 300,000 pounds - that's a significant amount, is taken by the Spanish as tribute. So the Spanish come in and are taking labour, but they're also taking the means of survival and the means of income from these indigenous communities. We also have records indicating that the Portuguese often went up the Amazon river looking to capture indigenous people that they could then trade for labour.

So the company Companhia do Grão Pará and Maranhão - apologies for my, probably terrible, Portuguese was a joint stock company for Portugal and their charter was issued in 1755. And this required them to send armed fleets to Northern Brazil and to provide an adequate supply of enslaved Africans for reasonably priced, according to them, European goods.

So we see this abuse of indigenous communities and then their decimation, and then the replacement of this lost labour by enslaved Africans. And from 1729 onwards, we have technology and the industrial revolution, and this sees a massive increase in production, which again, continues to have consequences for the indigenous peoples.

So we know that plantations obviously produced quite a lot of chocolate. But Gabby, how did it all get to Europe from these colonies?

Gabby: So chocolate first comes to Europe via Spain, and most of our listeners I imagine will know about Christopher Columbus and his voyages. So in 1492, the crown of Castille issued the charter which authorized Columbus' journeys to the New World. And as people who have looked at Columbus's journey realize that he didn't quite reach where he intended to reach, first time round. And by 1494, you have the treaty of Tordesillas, which splits the

New World between Portugal and Spain and this, you know, is meant to ease any conflicts between the Portuguese and the Spanish as to what land they can grant with their expeditions.

And in 1529, we have a third attempt by grant from Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain, Charles V, to explore south America. So it's possible that chocolate was brought by Columbus after he intercepted the trade ship in 1502 we know that the Aztecs introduced it to Hernan Cortes, a Spanish Explorer, and he may have brought it back, but it wasn't in the inventory of the items that he provided to Charles V. Also possible that friars could have given cacao to King Philip II of Spain in 1544 when they gifted him and Guatemalan Aztecs. And this is more plausible because chocolate gains popularity after the conquistador age is over so we know that Spain begins to import chocolate in 1585. And we also know that Italy and France bring back chocolate on their travels.

As you just saw earlier for discussing the differing importance that the various European powers place on types of consumables, cinnamon and sugar are viewed as important to the Spanish colonies. this alongside cacao is what they were after. And most of the chocolate, which is imported to Spain and its colonies was already processed. And you see by the 1620s there are thousands of pounds of cacao and chocolate imported to Spain annually and we know that by spring 1727, 700,000 pounds of cacao and chocolate were in the great storehouses. And the population was only 130,000 so that's a lot of chocolate for that population, you know, in comparison. So it's obviously quite key here, how Spain is using it as a trading. We also know that between 1565 and 1815, that Chinese-made porcelain cups are exported via the Philippines to Spain and Spanish colonies they're often called tea cups, but they're found archaeologically on ships which didn't carry tea.

In 1598, we know that 2,700 pounds of chocolate had been exported to Spain and by 1613 over 400,000 pounds of chocolate has been exported. In 1717 we see Spain, ban the importation of Portuguese cacao from the Amazon. and a couple of decades later in 1764 700 pounds of chocolate is exported from South Carolina to Gosport Hampshire. And with the history of chocolate, I think it's importance as a beverage is really often unrecognized due to the focus on tea and coffee. Our histories tend to focus on tea as a real significant import, as a real moment of trade, but actually hot chocolate and chocolate as a beverage is just as worthy of attention.

And actually chocolate is used first for medicinal purposes and then as a consumable, and this is going to be a topic that our third episode will focus on, which is the different recipes and uses of chocolate.

I think that wraps everything up for today. So thank you so much for joining us. And, we look forward to hearing your thoughts on our first episode and in the next episode of this series historians, Holly Marsden and Johanna Strong will be discussing the history of chocolate in Hampshire and the use of chocolate in early modern court life. Thank you so much Jo for having this discussion, it has been a joy to talk about the history of chocolate with you.

Johanna: Absolutely, always happy to talk about chocolate.

Outro: We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you would like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, www.winchesterheritageopendays.org or click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information. Thank you.