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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 narrative of travails of explorers, biologists, searching for the existence of the cotton plant. Many beliefs prevailed reflecting parallelism in conceiving the myths of the cotton plant. These things have been put together in a 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 its presence have been traced back at least eighteen hundred years earlier than that he has mentioned.



GUEST COLUMN

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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

Sr. No.	Name of the book/treatise	Name of the author	Year (AD unless mentioned)
1	Ii. Cap 106	Herodotus	445 BC
2	Indica (mentions tree garments)	Ctesias	404-398/397 B.C.
3	Journal of narrative- Nearchus-lost	Nearchus	325-324 BC
4	De Historia Plantarum lib IV Cap 4 (more vivid description of cotton planting)	Theophrastus (disciple of Aristotle)	306 BC
5	Historia Plantarum	Theophrastus, 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 Erythrai (contains valuable expeditions)	Fabius Arriamus	131-135
10	Talmud Lerosa Limitanum (Hebrew)	Rabi Jochanan	436
11	The Journal of Friar Odoricus of Friuli (Hakluyt collections of early voyages vol II (1809)	Odoricus of Friuli	1330
12	The voyage and travail	Sir John Mandeville	1357-1371
13	Notes on Russia- "Perum Muscovituanum commentarii, 1549	Sigismund, Baron von Herberstein	1517 & 1526
14	De Spennio Viventinum lib 3 cap 45	Fortunio Liyati Prof. Of Padua	1518
15	De Krum Natura	Sigismund von Herberstein	1557
16	Exotercarum Exercitationum, lib XV " De subtilitate ad Heironymum cardanum Exercit, 181, cap.29, Frankfurt, 1157	Julius Caesar Scaliger	1557
17	Liber de Carsis, seus de Principis et Originibus, Nature, c.	Guillaume Postel	1557
18	"La Semaine" - Poem (Adam and Eve got excited about the plant they spot in 'Garden of Eden')	Gulliam De Saluste	1578
19	Translator of 'Du Bartes- His Divine Weekes and Workes	Joshua Sylvester	1584
20	Historie Admirable de Plantes	Claude Duret	1605
21	Historia Nature (Antwerp)	Juan Eusebio, Nieremberg	1605
22	Maines sive de arte magnetic opus trigartum	Athanasius Kircher, Prof. of Mathemali Avignon	1641
23	Fasciculus Dissertation Sibetrum, p. 598	Antonio Deusinges, Prof. of Medeoni, Rector & Univer. of Gruningen	1660
24	Philosophical Translations	Robert Murray FRS	1678
25	Voyages de Jean de Struys en Muscovie, en Tartari et en Perse Chap XII, p. 167 Amsterdam; also in English translation from Dutch, by John Morrison, London, 1684	Jans Janszoon Strauss, a Dutch man known as Jean de Struys	1681
26	Amanitatum Exoticarum politico-physico medicarum fasciculi. X., lib.3, obs 1. Lemgo, 1712, Kaempfers MSS and collection were acquired by Hans Loane and were deposited in British Museum	Dr. Engelbrecht Kempfer	1683
27	Philosophical Translations. Vol XX. P.861 and Louthorp's Abridgement of the Phi. Trans. Vol II p.649	Sir Hans Loane	1698
28	A new book in Geography	Massimo Tobia	1705
29	Travels from St. Petersburg 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.	John Bell of Autermony	1715-1722
30	Communicated in Latin on the subject - Dissetiencula cle Agno Vegetalii Scythio Borametz, vulgo,; dicto. '-Phils. trans. vol VI.p.307	John Philip Breyn of Dontzii	1725
31	Voyages en Siberie, Paris.	Able Chaupe- Auroche	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. Breyn 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 Portuguese 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 cannabinus*) 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)
