

## The historical use of Henna (*Lawsonia inermis* L.) in the Balkans

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ABSTRACT: Henna was used medicinally and cosmetically by the classical Greeks as early as 1500-1400 BC. Henna does not occur naturally in the Balkans and was imported from the Mideast and North Africa. The Slavs, after their arrival in the Balkans in the 6th or 7th century AD, were probably introduced to the use of henna by Christian missionaries and Arabian merchants and the plant was later incorporated into the South Slavic pharmacopeia during the Ottoman occupation of the Balkans. Written accounts describe the use of henna medicinally and cosmetically by the Balkan Slavs during the early part of the 20th century, however, presently henna is exclusively used as a hair dye.

KEYWORDS: Henna, *Lawsonia inermis* L., Balkans, Slavs, ethnobotany.

The use of natural medicines and cosmetics among many different cultures is well known prior to the beginning of modern medicine and cosmetology (DIMKOV 1977, 1978, 1979). Henna is commonly used among the people of India (NADKARNIS, 1955), the Mideast and Africa. In North America and Europe henna is primarily used as a hair dye, and is especially popular among the people of the Balkans.

Henna (*Lawsonia inermis* L.: *Lythraceae*) grows in tropical and subtropical regions of Africa, Madagascar, Asia, Australia and the Mideast. Henna is known from isolated localities in Greece. The natural occurrence of henna in the Balkans is questionable and was probably introduced in the Balkans as a cultivar during historic times and has since become naturalized. The plant may have originated in India (VAVILOV 1949), the Mideast or East Africa (DE CANDOLLE, 1904).

The henna dye is extracted from the leaves of *Lawsonia inermis* L. (*Lythraceae*) as orange-yellow crystals. The dye is chemically known as Lawsone. To extract the dye, green or dried leaves are ground into a powder (a lemon may be added), and diluted with water. The dye solution or paste can then

be mixed with other natural products (e.g., Saponin) to produce a dark red, red, yellow or orange dye. The color of the henna dye depends on the concentration of Lawsone in the leaves, and the quantity of leaf material processed. The henna dye has an affinity for protein which makes it especially useful as a hair dye. The henna dye is easily fixed and has been used to color wool and silk a deep red in East Africa (GREENWAY, 1941).

The earliest known use of henna is by the Egyptians. They used the plant to stain the fingernails of mummies and mummy wrappings. The fragrant flowers are used to make perfume (BAUMANN 1960), which is still a popular practice throughout the natural range of henna. *Lawsonia inermis* L. is widely used medicinally, and in a variety of rituals among people of North Africa and the mideast (LEMORDANT, 1983). Henna is particularly held in high esteem by the Moslems. The assimilation of henna into the ethnobotanical repertoires of cultures that occur outside the natural range of *Lawsonia* is closely tied to ancient Mediterranean trade routes (AUBAILLE-SALLENAVE, 1982) and more recently to the spread Islam in historical times.

The classical Greeks as early as the Middle-Late Helladic period (1500-1400 BC) are known to have imported commodities from the mideast and North Africa. Lists of commodities on Linear B tablets from this time include cumin, and ivory, both items probably imported from the mideast or Africa. Although no written record of henna exists it might have been among the imported items of this time.

The earliest written accounts of henna use in the balkans (called Kupros or Cypros by the greeks) are from the first century AD by DIOSCORIDES and CAIUS PLINUS SECUNDUS (PLINY). Both maintain the Egyptian origin of henna and even mention where the highest quality henna is found, i.e., Ascalon in Judeae, Canopus in Egypt, and a particularly fragrant variety from Cyprus. It seems that henna was not grown in Greece, but the dried leaves or the extract made from the leaves was imported. PLINY tells us that a pound of henna can be bought in the market for five denarii (Pliny's Natural History, Book 12, Chapter 51). Henna was used by the Greeks to cure a wide variety of ailments. Both PLINY and DIOSCORIDES report that henna mixed with honey was used to relieve inflammations, carbunkles, headaches, sores and ulcers. Besides its medicinal uses it was mixed with Struthium (*Saponaria officinalis* L.) then applied to the hair as a dye. Struthium, which grows naturally in the balkans (POLUNIN 1980), contains saponin, which forms a soapy lather with water. Struthium mixed with henna is similar to commercial hair dyes that are applied as a shampoo.

In classical Greece henna was well known as a medicinal and cosmetic plant prior to the arrival of the slavs in the balkans during the 6th and 7th century AD. Henna was probably unknown to the slavs prior to their settlement in the balkans. The slavs are generally thought to have emigrated to the balkans from the North, well out of the natural distribution of *Lawsonia*. Prior to their arrival in the

balkans, the slavs had limited contact with the people of the mideast and North Africa. There are no written accounts of the use of henna among the balkan slavs from the time of PLINY and DIOSCORIDES (first century AD) to the 20th century, even though there are mediieval old church slavonic manuscripts describing medicinal plant use in the balkans (JAGIC 1878, and references therein). The customs and culture of the Ottomans, who occupied the balkans from the 14th century to the beginning of the 20th century, are probably responsible for the importation and common use of henna among the south slavs. KEMP (1935) reported that henna was used to cure typhoid fever among the slavs. A concoction was made by heating the henna in water, allowing it to cool, and then reheating it with the juice of twenty heads of garlic. This was then applied to the palms and the soles of the feet. It was believed that this would draw the sickness from the inflicted person. The application of henna to the hands and feet among slavs is similar to its use by the people of the mideast, who used henna to decorate their hands and feet during special occasions.

The most common use of henna among the slavs is as a hair dye. Dying the hair with henna was previously thought to eschew the evil-eye (KEMP 1935). Although henna was brought to the classical Greeks from the mideast and North Africa, the balkan slavs may have first been introduced to the use of henna by Christian missionaries or Arabian merchants from the 6-12 centuries (GRMEK, 1959, AUBAILE-SALLENAVE, 1982). However, it was probably the subsequent occupation of the Balkans by Ottoman Moslems that firmly established the use of henna among the South Slavs. Among slavized Moslems today henna is used medicinally and ritualistically, e.g., in Skopje, Yugoslavia during Ramadan and weddings Moslem women use henna to decoratively color their hands and fingernails, however the Christian slavs exclusively use henna as a hair dye (personal observation).

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