History of Opium, Morphine and Heroin

3400 BC The opium poppy is cultivated in lower Mesopotamia. The Sumerians would soon pass along the plant and its euphoric effects to the Assyrians. The art of poppy-culling would continue from the Assyrians to the Babylonians who in turn would pass their knowledge onto the Egyptians.

1300 BC In the capital city of Thebes, Egyptians begin cultivation of opium thebaicum, grown in their famous poppy fields. The opium trade flourishes during the reign of Thutmose IV, Akhenaton and King Tutankhamen. The trade route included the Phoenicians and Minoans who move the profitable item across the Mediterranean Sea into Greece, Carthage, and Europe.

1100 BC On the island of Cyprus, the “Peoples of the Sea” craft surgical-quality culling knives to harvest opium, which they would cultivate, trade and smoke before the fall of Troy.

460 BC Hippocrates, “the father of medicine”, dismisses the magical attributes of opium but acknowledges its usefulness as a narcotic and styptic in treating internal diseases, diseases of women and epidemics.

330 BC Alexander the Great introduces opium to the people of Persia and India.

300 BC Opium is used by Arabs, Greeks, and the Romans as a sedative and soporific.

400 AD Opium from the Egyptian fields at Thebes, is first introduced to China by Arab traders.

1300’s Opium disappears for two hundred years from European historical record. Opium had become a taboo subject for those in circles of learning during the Holy Inquisition. In the eyes of the Inquisition, anything from the East was linked to the Devil.

1500’s The Portuguese, whilst trading along the East China Sea, take on the smoking of opium. The effects were instantaneous, as they discovered, but it was a practice the Chinese considered barbaric and subversive.

1527 During the height of the Reformation, opium is reintroduced into European medical literature by Paracelsus as laudanum. These black pills or “Stones of Immortality” were made of opium thebaicum, citrus juice and quintessence of gold and prescribed as painkillers.

1606 Ships chartered by Elizabeth I are instructed to purchase the finest Indian opium and transport it back to England.
1680 English apothecary, Thomas Sydenham, introduces Sydenham’s Laudanum, a compound of opium, sherry wine and herbs. His pills along with others of the time become popular remedies for numerous ailments.

1689 Use of tobacco-opium mixtures (madak) begins in the East Indies (probably Java) spreads to Formosa, Fukien and the South China coast.

1700’s The Dutch export shipments of Indian opium to China and the islands of Southeast Asia; the Dutch introduce the practice of smoking opium in a tobacco pipe to the Chinese. Use of hashish, alcohol, and opium spreads among the population of occupied Constantinople.

1729 Chinese emperor, Yung Cheng, issues an edict prohibiting the smoking of opium and its domestic sale, except under license for use as medicine.

1750 The British East India Company assumes control of Bengal and Bihar, opium-growing districts of India. British shipping dominates the opium trade out of Calcutta to China.

1753 Linnaeus, the father of botany, first classifies the poppy, Papaver somniferum – ‘sleep-inducing’, in his book Genera Plantarum.

1767 Opium from Bengal continues to enter China despite the edict of 1729 prohibiting smoking. The British East India Company’s import of opium to China increases in frequency from 200 chests annually in 1729 to a staggering two thousand chests of opium per year. Tariffs are collected on the opium.

1772 The East India Company establishes a limited monopoly over Bengal opium; the company has general control but the operation is in the hands of contractors, who advance company funds to the farmers, purchase the opium produced, and sell it to the company which then auctions it off to merchants in Calcutta. British companies are the principal shippers.

1779 First mention of actual opium trading in opium at Canton, China.

1780 British traders establish an opium depot at Macao. Another Imperial edict prohibits consumption of opium and reiterates prohibition of its sale.

1787 Trade in opium is still less important than trade in commodities; directors of the East India Company, recognizing China’s objections to the importation of opium, make offers to prohibit the export of Indian opium to China. However, company representatives in Canton declare that the Chinese are never sincere in their declared intentions of suppressing illicit traffic, as long as the officials issue prohibitory edicts with one hand and extend the other to receive bribes from the illegal trade.
1793 The British East India Company establishes a total monopoly on the opium trade. All poppy growers in India were forbidden to sell opium to competitor trading companies.

1799 The 1799 edict increases traffic through Macao and other areas beyond government control enabling unprecedented growth. The British declare only their legitimate cargo, leave opium on board to be picked up by Chinese merchants who smuggle it ashore in small, fast boats. China’s emperor, Kia King, bans opium completely, making trade and poppy cultivation illegal. A strong edict by authorities at Canton, supporting the emperor’s decree of 1796, forbids opium trade at that port. A concurrent drive against native poppy growing is initiated. Opium becomes an illicit commodity.

1800’s Patent medicines and opium preparations such as Dover’s Powder were readily available without restrictions. Indeed, laudanum (opium mixed with alcohol) was cheaper than beer or wine and readily within the means of the lowest-paid worker. As a result, throughout the first half of the 19th century, the incidence of opium dependence appears to have increased steadily in England, Europe and the United States. Working-class medicinal use of opium-bearing nostrums as sedatives for children was especially prominent in England. However, despite some well known cases among 19th century English literary and creative personalities (Thomas de Quincey, Byron, Shelley, Coleridge, and Dickens) recreational use was limited, and there is no evidence that use was so excessive as to be a medical or social concern.

1800 The British Levant Company purchases nearly half of all of the opium coming out of Smyrna, Turkey strictly for importation to Europe and the United States. Opium becomes identified with official corruption, criminals and antigovernment secret societies. An edict prohibits domestic cultivation and repeats the prohibition against importing opium. China develops an anti-opium policy, at least on paper. Edicts continue to be issued reiterating prohibitions against importation, sale, and consumption of opium.

1803 Friedrich Sertuerner of Paderborn, Germany discovers the active ingredient of opium by dissolving it in acid then neutralizing it with ammonia. The result: alkaloids – principium somniferum or morphine. This may have been the first plant alkaloid ever isolated and set off a firestorm of research into plant alkaloids. Within half a century, dozens of alkaloids, such as atropine, caffeine, cocaine, and quinine, had been isolated from other plants and were being used in precisely measured dosages for the first time.

1819 Writer John Keats and other English literary personalities (Thomas De Quincey, Confessions of an English Opium-eater) experiment with opium intended for strict recreational use – simply for the high and taken at extended, non-addictive intervals.

1827 E. Merck & Company of Darmstadt, Germany, begins commercial manufacturing of morphine.

1830 The British dependence on opium for medicinal and recreational use reaches an all time high as 22,000 pounds of opium is imported from Turkey and India.
1832 Codeine was extracted from opium.

1839 Opium and its preparations are responsible for more premature deaths than any other chemical agent. Opiates account for 186 of 543 poisonings, including no fewer than 72 among children. Lin Tse-Hsu, imperial Chinese commissioner in charge of suppressing the opium traffic, orders all foreign traders to surrender their opium. In response, the British send expeditionary warships to the coast of China, beginning the First Opium War.

1841 The Chinese are defeated by the British in the First Opium War. Along with paying a large indemnity, Hong Kong is ceded to the British.

1843 Dr. Alexander Wood of Edinburgh discovers a new technique of administering morphine, injection with a syringe. He finds the effects of morphine on his patients instantaneous and three times more potent.

1852 The British arrive in lower Burma, importing large quantities of opium from India and selling it through a government-controlled opium monopoly.

1853 The hypodermic needle was invented.

1856 The British and French renew their hostilities against China in the Second Opium War. The importation of opium is now legalized.

1874 English researcher, C.R. Wright first synthesizes heroin, or diacetylmorphine, by boiling morphine over a stove. In San Francisco, smoking opium in the city limits is banned and is confined to neighbouring Chinatowns and their opium dens.

1878 Britain passes the Opium Act with hopes of reducing opium consumption. Under the new regulation, the selling of opium is restricted to registered Chinese opium smokers and Indian opium eaters while the Burmese are strictly prohibited from smoking opium.


Heinrich Dreser working for The Bayer Company of Elberfeld, Germany, finds that diluting morphine with acetylts produces a drug without the common morphine side effects. Bayer begins production of diacetylmorphine and coins the name “heroin” As head of Bayer’s pharmacological laboratory, he was responsible for the launch of two drugs: aspirin, which the world now consumes 40 billion tablets a year, the world’s most successful legal drug; and heroin, the most successful illegal one. There were heroin pastilles, heroin cough lozenges, heroin tablets, water-soluble heroin salts and a heroin elixir in a glycerine solution.
1898 The Bayer Company introduce heroin as a substitute for morphine.

Early 1900’s The Pure Food and Drug Act was passed, forming the Food and Drug Administration and giving it power to regulate foods and drugs, and requiring labelling of contents on foods and drugs.

The philanthropic Saint James Society in the U.S. mounts a campaign to supply free samples of heroin through the mail to morphine addicts who are trying give up their habits.

1902 In various medical journals, physicians discuss the side effects of using heroin as a morphine step-down cure. Several physicians would argue that their patients suffered from heroin withdrawal symptoms equal to morphine addiction.

1906 The first Pure Food and Drug Act becomes law; until its enactment, it was possible to buy, in stores or by mail order medicines containing morphine, cocaine, or heroin, and without their being so labelled. China and England finally enact a treaty restricting the Sino-Indian opium trade. Several physicians experiment with treatments for heroin addiction. Dr. Alexander Lambert and Charles B. Towns tout their popular cure as the most “advanced, effective and compassionate cure” for heroin addiction. The cure consisted of a 7 day regimen, which included a five day purge of heroin from the addict’s system with doses of belladonna delirium.

1909 The first federal drug prohibition passes in the U.S. outlawing the importation of opium. It was passed in preparation for the Shanghai Conference, at which the US presses for legislation aimed at suppressing the sale of opium to China.

5,000 cocaine and heroin related deaths are reported by the U.S. government. To prolong the opium trade Britain forces the U.S.A. to put cocaine along with opium on the international drugs agenda.

Cocaine and heroin sales are restricted under the Harrison Act in the U.S.A. the Act requires doctors, pharmacists and others who prescribed narcotics to register and pay a tax. Start of 1st world war. Cocaine given to British troops in the form of ‘Forced March Tablets’.

The Defence of the Realm Act introduced which makes it illegal for cocaine and morphine to be sold to British Armed Forces.

1923 The U.S. Treasury Department’s Narcotics Division (the first federal drug agency) bans all legal narcotics sales. With the prohibition of legal venues to purchase heroin, addicts are forced to buy from illegal street dealers.

1924 The Heroin Act made manufacture and possession of heroin illegal.

1925 In the wake of the first federal ban on opium, a thriving black market opens up in New York’s Chinatown.
Early 1930's Japan is worlds leading cocaine producer, followed by the U.S.A., Germany, Great Britain and then France. China recovering from the British opium trade now has to endure Japan flooding the market with cocaine.

1940’s During World War II, opium trade routes are blocked and the flow of opium from India and Persia is cut off. Fearful of losing their opium monopoly, the French encourage Hmong farmers to expand their opium production.

1945 Burma gains its independence from Britain at the end of World War II. Opium cultivation and trade flourishes in the Shan states.

1950’s U.S. efforts to contain the spread of Communism in Asia involves forging alliances with tribes and warlords inhabiting the areas of the Golden Triangle, (an expanse covering Laos, Thailand and Burma), thus providing accessibility and protection along the southeast border of China. In order to maintain their relationship with the warlords while continuing to fund the struggle against communism, the U.S. and France supply the drug warlords and their armies with ammunition, arms and air transport for the production and sale of opium. The result: an explosion in the availability and illegal flow of heroin into the United States and into the hands of drug dealers and addicts.

1960’s Again regaining popularity with the drug revolution of the 60’s era. Media yet again play down its dependent qualities as in the late 1800’s. The importation of cocaine to the US is starting to be controlled by the Cuban’s. Burma outlaws opium.

Early 1970’s Involvement in Vietnam is blamed for the surge in illegal heroin being smuggled into the States. To aid U.S. allies, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) sets up a charter airline, Air America, to transport raw opium from Burma and Laos. Some of the opium would be transported to Marseille by Corsican gangsters to be refined into heroin and shipped to the U.S via the French connection. The number of heroin addicts in the U.S. reaches an estimated 750,000.

1973 President Nixon creates the DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) under the Justice Dept. to consolidate virtually all federal powers of drug enforcement in a single agency.


1978 The U.S. and Mexican governments find a means to eliminate the source of raw opium – by spraying poppy fields with Agent Orange. The eradication plan is termed a success as the amount of “Mexican Mud” in the U.S. drug market declines. In response to the decrease in availability of “Mexican Mud”, another source of heroin is found in the Golden Crescent area- Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, creating a dramatic upsurge in the production and trade of illegal heroin.
1982 Comedian John Belushi dies of a heroin-cocaine- “speedball” overdose.

1984 U.S. State Department officials conclude, after more than a decade of crop substitution programs for Third World growers of marijuana, coca or opium poppies that the tactic cannot work without eradication of the plants and criminal enforcement.

1992 Colombia’s drug lords are said to be introducing a high-grade form of heroin into the United States.

Twenty-three-year-old actor River Phoenix dies of a heroin-cocaine overdose, the same “speedball” combination that killed comedian John Belushi.

The Golden Triangle region of Southeast Asia is now the leader in opium production, yielding 2,500 tons annually. According to U.S. drug experts, there are new drug trafficking routes from Burma through Laos, to southern China, Cambodia and Vietnam.

2004 Opium and heroin production increases in Afghanistan. Afghanistan the main supplier of heroin to the UK street market.

2010 Heroin drought hits the UK. Heroin being cut with benzodiazepines. Opium crop failures in Afghanistan in 2010 may have led to heroin shortages in the UK, the United Nations says.

2012 In its report, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime says plant disease, which wiped out almost half of the crop in 2010, appears to have affected illicit heroin markets elsewhere in the world. A fresh blight is poised to hit Afghanistan’s poppy fields this year.