

THE CHINESE ORIGIN OF THE SANSKRIT WORD FOR WHEAT

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In *Atharvaveda* dated about 1500 B. C. there is the word for rice but not for wheat and the word for rice is Chinese in origin. Later a Chinese term for wheat was likewise Sanskritized as *godhūma*. The Chinese term is *ko-t' ou-me*, meaning corn—the chief—wheat, signifying the best cereal, the wheat *ko-t' ou-me* mutated into *go-dhu-ma* or *godhūma* in Sanskrit. It further changed into *ga-n-dhu-m* or *gandhum* in Persian.

The history of the wheat plant, particularly of the variety from which bread can be prepared, still remains a controversial subject. The *Wealth of India*¹ contains by far the most informative article than in any encyclopedic work of reference. Here it is stated that bread wheat was known in Iraq about 5800-5000 B.C. At Mohenjodaro Indian dwarf wheat was excavated which can be dated 3000 B.C. On p. 312 we read further that “from Iraq the cultivation of Emmer wheat reached Iran and Indus valley in the third millennium B.C.” Moreover “the Chinese also grew this cereal (wheat) as long back as 2700 B.C.” What was finally required was a positive reference to the natural habitat of the wild wheat plant. Here J. Hawkes² writes that, “wild barley Einkorn and Emmer wheats were the stable grains of early agriculture in the Old World. They grew wild only in the hilly belt from Syria through Southern Turkey into Iraq” Eventually the idea of breaking the ground and sowing the crop was introduced first proved at Mureybet, Mesopotamia” —p. 49. Thus the wheat plant spread all over from Syria—Mesopotamia. Fig. 1 is taken from Hawkes and illustrates the three grains mentioned above.

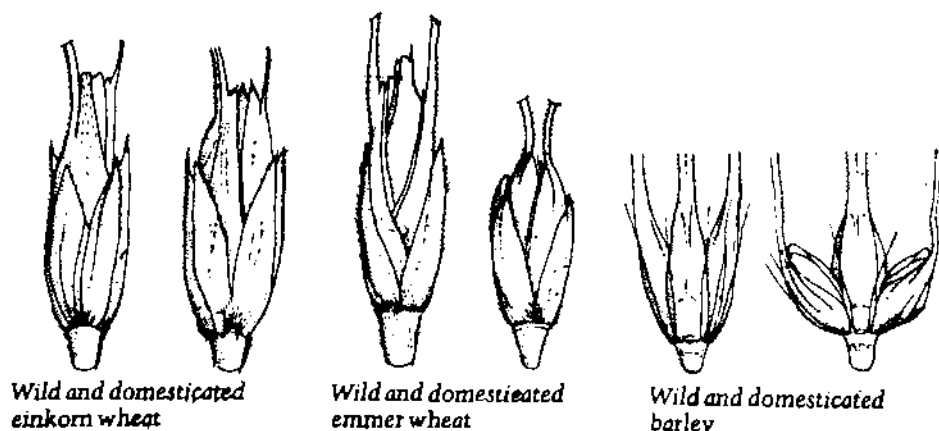


Fig. 1

The Aryans entered India about 3000 B.C. Their *Rgveda* was being composed while they were still in Central Asia or about 4000 B.C. while it was completed in India about 2000 B.C. *Rgveda* contains many references to barley but none to rice or to wheat, *Atharvaveda* may be dated 1500 B.C. It mentions both barley and rice but not wheat. Now all words for rice³ in Sanskrit, as also in Greek and even in Telugu, are loan words from the Chinese. The Sanskrit words for lac are *jatu* and *silāci* but what became popular is *lākṣā* which is Chinese⁴, and this is recorded first in *Atharvaveda*. Seeing that words for rice and lac are Chinese in origin there does seem the possibility of the word for wheat in Sanskrit also coming from the same source and subsequently to the period of *Atharvaveda*.

Max Muller among others tried to establish the etymology of the Sanskrit word, *godhūma*, for wheat, but did not succeed as he never tried to trace it to Chinese. Watt⁵ gives a number of synonyms signifying wheat with *godhūma* as the Sanskrit word. When taken to Chinese, *godhūma* becomes such a meaningful name that etymology here becomes as important as any history of wheat as cereal.

Mathews⁶ gives as character 3490, the word *ku*, meaning corn, grain. Just as a Chinese surname would come first *ku*, by its first position, suggests that the substance is a 'cereal'. Next to *ku*, comes the word *t'ou*, character 6489, meaning, 'top', 'chief'. However in suitable combinations it conveys the sense of being the first or best of its kind. Mathews translates the term *t'ou-ming* = the first on a list, the first in quality. Hence the term *ku-t'ou* would signify the first among cereals, the best cereal. Finally comes the word *me* or *meh* character 4379, which is the specific word for wheat. By now we have the term *ku-t'ou-me* literally, the cereal—the first of its kind—(which is) wheat.

We have now to discuss the transformation of the above term as the loan word in Sanskrit. *ku*, the first word, can mutate into *gu*, and with a change of vowel be modified as *go*, so that *ku=gu=go*. *t'ou* can become *dhou*, retaining its aspirated sound which it does even up to the last. *dhou* can be simplified into *dhu* when we find that *t'ou=dhou=dhu*. It is quite easy to grant that the syllables *me=ma*. Thus finally *ku-t'ou-me* mutated into *go-dhou-ma* or *godhūma* in Sanskrit.

Now if 'go' be pronounced imparting it a nasal 'N' sound then *go=gon* resulting in the term *gon-dhu-ma*. This simplified later appeared as *gan-dhu-m* or *gandhum*, the Perisan word for wheat.

REFERENCES

- ¹*The Wealth of India: Raw Materials*. Article on Triticum, Vol. X, 1976, Government of India Publication, New Delhi.
²Hawkes, Jacquetta. *The Atlas of the Early Man*, Dorling Kindersley Ltd., London, p. 49. 1976.
³Mahdihassan, S. The Chinese origin of the word Rice. *M. M. Potdar Commemoration volume*, Poona, 1951, pp. 50-58

⁴Mahdihassan, S. Lac as drug in *Atharya Veda* and its identity, *Hamdard—Medicus*, Karachi, Vol. 23 (1-2): 106-132, 1980.

⁵Watt George, *The commerical products of India*, Article on Triticum, London 1980.

⁶Mathews, R. H. *Chinese-English Dictionary*. Harvard Univ. Press. 1975.

APPENDIX

Max Muller in his work, *The Science of Language*, 1864, p. 66 makes the following statement: "In Sanskrit *śveta*, (white) is not applied to wheat, which is called *godhūma*, the smoke or incense of the earth and as a compound *śvetaśuṅga* (white awned) is entered into the name of barley." Wheat is not indigenous to India. It is not mentioned in *Rgveda*, nor in *Atharvaveda*. Its home is Syria. The critical reader can judge for himself which is the correct etymology.