Opium for the Masses: Harvesting Nature's Best Pain Medication

By Jim Hogshire

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— Michael Pollan, Harper's
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HARVESTING NATURE’S BEST PAIN MEDICATION

BY JIM HOGSHIRE
PHARMACOKINETICS AND PHARMACOLOGY OF OPIATES
OPIOID DRUGS
HOW METHADONE GOT TO AMERICA

CHAPTER 6 - ENDORPHINS
THE BRAIN’S OPIUM
MORE THAN JUST A PASSEL OF ENDORPHINS
THE DAPPER PIPIE

CHAPTER 7 - THE DISCOVERY OF MORPHINE
THEN CAME MORPHINE,
THE POPPY WAS A GIFT THAT KEPT ON GIVING,
THE PAIN OF MORPHINE SCIENCE AND POLITICS
MORPHINE AND HEROIN
PART ONE: MORPHINE
CLASSICAL PROCESSES FOR OPIUM EXTRACTION
MAKING HEROIN OUT OF MOM’S CODEINE PILLS
PART II: HEROIN
HEROIN MANUFACTURING IN AFGHANISTAN
ANALYSIS OF THE DOCUMENTED PROCESS

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Theriaca Andromachi senioris.

VI. Therapheorum Stillicitorum 3 xii,
Viperinorum,
Magnatis Hedycrii,
'Piperis longi,
Opis Theobaci, ana 3 vi,
Replanum bringue,
Iridis,
Succis Glycyrrhizae,
Semitis Buniasdii,
Stordii,
Opholaii,
Cuminum,
Agathis 3 iii,
Coffe,
Nardis Indicae,
Dittamnus Creteii,
Rheum creticum,
Radicem Pentapola,
Zizyphus,
Praes albo,
Stachis Arabicae,
Schenanthii,
Seminis Petroselinii Macedonici,
Cuminum terra,
Calamintha mongana,
Caffa ligure,
Croci,
Piperis albi,
Niger,
Mirra Trochilidialis,
Thorni musaefolii,
Spermaceti,
Tamburici,
Mercurialis,
Batis majori,
Galli,
CHAPTER 1

ROMANTIC POETS AND DOPE FIENDS

Everything one does in life, even love, occurs in an express train racing toward death. To smoke opium is to get out of the train while it is still moving. It is to concern oneself with something other than life or death.

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JUST THE SOUND OF ITS NAME, OPium, EVOkES AN EXOTIC, seductive feeling. Gorgeous dreams and a quiet undertone of fear. Milk of Paradise, Plant of Joy, Destroyer of Grief: these are opium’s poetic nicknames.

Homer wrote of the drug in The Iliad and The Odyssey three thousand years ago. Since then, writers have praised opium for its seemingly divine properties. Victorian writers, particularly, are famous for their love of opium. Poets sought to describe the feeling opium gave them with otherworldly imagery. One writer said opium felt like “walking through silk.” Opium devotees have an unashamed and tender passion for their drug.

“Who was the man who invented laudanum?” wrote a nineteenth-century British author for the opiated drink. “I thank him from the bottom of my heart...”

“I have had six delicious hours of oblivion; I have woken up with my mind composed ... and all through the modest little bottle of drops which I see on my bedroom chimneypiece at this moment. Drops, you are darling! If I love nothing else, I love you!”

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ROMEO AND JULIET PALE BESIDE SUCH ROMANCE

FALLING IN LOVE WITH OPIUM IS EASY. OPIUM ALWAYS DELIVERS ON ITS promise. Smoked, eaten or drunk, opium never fails to banish fatigue and pain, to stimulate the mind and liberate the user from nervousness or worry. Another British
gentleman of the nineteenth-century said opium felt something like a gentle and constant orgasm! It gave him the same feeling he experienced at the end of a successful day and made the most mechanical tasks seem interesting. Such a drug is sure to have its fans.

America’s appetite for opium grew steadily throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1914 a San Francisco newspaperman described his first encounter with the drug in an opium den in Chinatown. Although he had previously shunned the stuff as a drug of the yellow hordes, he at last relented and breathed a huge lungful of opium smoke.

“In sixty seconds I was another man,” he wrote. “My barren brain... leap to its task. The ideas, the phrases, the right words, which, until then, had eluded my fagged mentality, came trooping forth faster than I could have written them had I been at my desk. My worries and responsibilities fell from me...”

“A half hour later I wrote a column of dramatic criticism that was quoted on the billboards and I reeled it off as fast as my fingers could hit the typewriter keys. I was never at a loss for a word. The story in its entirety seemed to lie ready in my brain. My task finished, I went to bed without my customary drink, and dropped asleep as peacefully as a child... I slept soundly and awoke refreshed and clear-minded with a zest for the day’s labor.”

Opium’s ability to banish sadness, relieve pain, and energize the soul borders on the miraculous. Opium can release the most wretched from life’s worst agonies. A nineteenth-century physician, Horace Day, mentions opium when describing the ghastly post-Civil War American countryside. Amid all that suffering, this plant sap could offer refuge to displaced, half-dead people:

Maimed and shattered survivors from a hundred battlefields, diseased and disabled soldiers released from hostile prisons, anguished and hopeless wives and mothers, made so by the slaughter of those who were dearest to them, have found, many of them, temporary relief from their sufferings in opium.

★

A love affair with opium cannot be taken lightly. The same poppy that can take its lovers to the gates of paradise has the power to send its slaves to a hell on earth, should they ever try to leave her.

Today the word “yen” means a kind of longing or desire. But its origin—from the Chinese yenyen—describes something more desperate: the torture of opium withdrawal. To yen for opium is to feel an intense lack of everything—of sanity, soul, and body—but mostly of opium.

Yen conjures up the image of a contorted, sweat-soaked figure whirling on rumpled bedsheets. Addicts kicking opium have described feeling as if their nerves were afire—“a thousand needles popping through the skin.” The body becomes a bloodless slab of pain.

Sleep is plagued with baroque nightmares and wakefulness feels worse. Muscles contract, so arms and legs jerk and kick without warning. This last feature of the yen
has given us the expression “kicking.” Worse, there is a definite and palpable emotional aspect of the suffering. Just as its presence is so often equated with being in love, its absence creates a void in the heart of the withdrawing user that is similar to a broken heart.

“It’s like having the worst case of the flu,” says a friend of mine, “and getting brutally dumped by your girlfriend at the same time.”

THE OPIUM PIPE SMOKER BY JEAN COCTEAU.

OPIUM ADDICTION: AN HONEST DISCLAIMER

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It is not I who become addicted, it is my body.
—Jean Cocteau, Opium—

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“If an addict who has been completely cured starts smoking again he no longer experiences the discomfort of his first addiction. There exists, therefore, outside alkaloids and habit, a sense for opium, an intangible habit which lives on, despite the recasting of the organism... The dead drug leaves a ghost behind. At certain hours it haunts the house.”

—Jean Cocteau, Opium—

PHYSICAL DEPENDENCE ON OPIUM IS A VIRTUAL CERTAINTY WITH PROLONGED and sustained use. There may be a psychological dependence to opium but that bears no relationship to the drug per se and has more to do with a user’s personality than anything else. The chances of psychological addiction to opium are no greater than with alcohol or marijuana.

Psychological problems are beyond the scope of this book. You know if you’ve got a problem—with shopping, compulsive lying, or substance abuse. This book is about opium and its children, so its physical addiction must be addressed—but “addiction” has become a term so freighted with social and political connotations that it is almost irresponsible to use the term in a book like this. Physical dependence will be the result of opium use sooner or later, but it doesn’t necessarily develop quickly, nor must it last forever.

Opium withdrawal hurts, but the pain (including the intense, broken-hearted feeling of loss) will end within a week to ten days. That’s how long the body needs to get shocked back into producing the chemicals replaced with constant opium use. Those are indeed hard days for the kicking addict but it is no worse than a nasty and prolonged flu. And like the flu, once the pain goes, it’s over. The user feels no more physical craving for the drug.

The psychological aspect of addiction might impose itself, and it could be at least several months before an ex-user feels himself again.

This is even true of heroin, as William Burroughs says in his candid novel-autobiography Junky. Burroughs says that once a junkie has kicked, it is easy to stay away from junk. This said, it should be noted that Burroughs was a lifelong heroin addict. So it is with opium, from which heroin is derived.

“Relapse” is another phenomenon loaded with social connotations. For many people life is simply better with opium than without it—that they should seek it is hardly surprising. Addiction to caffeine, for instance, has all the same features of opium addiction. Dependence develops, withdrawal hurts and then you get used to life without coffee. Some people decide to go back to drinking coffee, some just abstain for a while and go back—but the lack of coffee rarely preys on their minds so much they cannot stay away.

It is difficult to become physically dependent on opium in the first place. Before the body becomes truly dependent on opium (so that abstinence produces withdrawal symptoms) a user must take opium on a daily basis for at least a month or two. It takes this long for the body to “learn” to stop producing its own opiate chemicals and become dependent on an outside source. The amount of time needed to induce dependence or withdrawal differs among the various derivatives of opium or its alkaloids. In general, the longer acting the opiate drug the longer it takes for
withdrawal symptoms to develop after the last use and the longer they tend to last (although they are usually milder). As with almost anything related to the subject, there are few simple or rigid “rules.” Opium is too complex, too subtle.

Society’s fascination with addiction has propelled scientists (and the government functionaries who fund their research) to discover new ways to both prevent addiction from occurring and to ease an addict off of opiates with practically no pain at all. In recent years a new therapy known as “ultra-rapid detox” has become popular because it can collapse all of the pain and lethargy of the first week or ten days abstinence into just four hours. Since it is done under general anesthesia, the addict shouldn’t feel a thing, or suffer in the least. In theory, at least.

These latest methods of kicking an opiate addiction are not yet perfect. Nor are they inexpensive.

**WHO’S A HOPHEAD?**

IN COUNTRIES WHERE OPIUM IS FREELY AVAILABLE, IT IS PLAIN TO SEE THAT A portion of the population enjoys taking opium. It has been this way for thousands of years and opium has yet to impede civilization or cause it any harm.

Opium use in America rose steadily from Benjamin Franklin poppy consumption days until 1915 when it suddenly became illegal. Despite the fact that at least one out of ten Americans was addicted—a number cutting across all class and social lines—the U.S. was a prosperous nation. Universities were founded, science advanced, commerce blossomed, public works were carried out. By any measure of progress or success the United States became in all ways more prosperous when drugs were legal.

It could be argued that the age of prohibitions that started in the twentieth century has brought us more misery.

Dosage is a highly individual decision. This dose can vary within a certain range but generally stays the same and isn’t necessarily high. Use tends to increase at first, then plateau. Although tolerance can develop quickly or slowly, it is not an inexorable upward spiral toward impossible amounts of the drug and exorbitant consumption.

Most people, when allowed free access to any particular drug, do not go bananas over it. The use of alcohol in our society is proof of that. Most people don’t drink alcohol all the time. Same goes for coffee.

Pharmacologically, opium use is also self-regulating. When eaten, it is subject to a “first pass” through the liver where a considerable amount is inactivated. Larger amounts to compensate for this effect begin to pose a physical problem for the user—one can only swallow so much opium before getting sick, or at least getting full! Smoked, even less of the active parts gets through to the bloodstream and, once again, increasing the dose poses practical problems.

Still, the pleasure provided by opium makes continuous use fairly easy to accomplish. Most addicts know that, once free of the drug’s physical hold, it is enough to skip a day or two between uses to avoid re-addiction.
POETIC TESTIMONIALS TO OPIUM HAVE TYPICALLY BEEN USED TO DEFEND opium use. When such brilliant minds as Ben Franklin and Thomas de Quincey use opium, the argument goes, isn’t it obvious that it is harmless? Drug-use promoters of the 1960s seemed to constantly thump the cover of a copy of de Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* while making the case for marijuana. But marijuana is not like opium and neither is it like heroin, although heroin comes closer. Heroin is an opiate (derived from opium) elaborated from morphine but it is pharmacologically quite distinct from opium. Later incarnations of the morphine molecule are even less like opium.

Opium addiction—as we now define it—played no part in the lives of opium users before the twentieth century. Even as society began to criminalize opium and heap scorn on its user, the word “addict” was not used. At the time, doctors spoke of “habitués”—and without alarm. And why should they? Opium does not cause any harm to the body. Opium users still got up in the morning and went to work, had families, and paid their bills. What was there to be upset about?

Dependence on opium was observed but was not associated with the same kinds of value judgments as it is today. An addict was not a “dope fiend” or any other kind of antisocial monster. Opium addiction was not viewed as a particularly good thing and many addicts denied or hid their dependence. Many tried hard to kick the habit.

They tried to kick because, in their world as in ours, dependence was a negative trait. Perhaps it indicated a lack of moral fortitude or implied some other kind of weakness. But opium addiction, like alcohol addiction, was not criminal. Opium addiction wasn’t considered important in any medical sense. Doctors often remarked of their patients who tried to shake the habit that they could see no reason for all the trouble. Since opium did not interfere with their lives or health—so what?

Those who liked opium took it. Those who didn’t like it didn’t take it.

So to speak of Edgar Allan Poe—“opium addict” is next to useless, since this feature of his life probably meant as much or as little to him as any other facet.

In my opinion, the biggest problem of opium addiction is one of supply. Any others (social ostracism, criminal sanctions, etc.) are manmade quandaries.

Opiate dependence—especially if used to control chronic pain—does not interfere with normal life. Those with an adequate supply do not suffer as long as they have the drug. Sick people suffer if they do not have it. History is full of famous opium addicts whose habits did not interfere with their lives.

For many, the good to be gained from opium far outweighs its potential dangers. And, like other opium fans, I defy anyone to compare the destruction wrought by the natural consequences of drinking alcohol with whatever minimal difficulties may be caused by opium use. It is no longer disputed that opium or opiates do any harm to the body. Nineteenth-century physicians spoke openly about deliberately hooking their alcoholic patients on morphine as an effective way to end the damage chronic alcohol drinking caused. Opium is even more innocuous than morphine and I challenge those who still believe opium is a tool of the devil to show me a shred of serious evidence.
that opium is any more harmful than carrots.
A MINOAN GODDESS WEARING POPPY CAPSULES AS HAIRPINS; THE VERTICAL SLITS IN THE CAPSULES ARE STAINED BROWN LIKE OPIUM. THIS LITTLE STATUE (78 CM) WAS FOUND IN A SECLUDED SETTING SUGGESTIVE OF OPIUM SMOKING (C. 1300 - 1250 B. C.). (FROM THE HEALING HAND BY GUIDO MAINO, HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1975.)

THE ORIGINS AND HISTORY OF OPIUM

FOSSILIZED POPPY SEEDS AND OTHER ARCHEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FOUND IN DIGS NEAR LAKES IN SWITZERLAND REVEALS THAT THE OPIUM POPPY WAS USED BY NEANDERTHAL MAN AS LONG AS 30,000 YEARS AGO. PREHISTORIC USE OF POPPIES COULD HAVE GONE BEYOND THE USE OF OPIUM, AS THE POPPY YIELDS ABUNDANT QUANTITIES OF NUTRITIOUS SEED, WHICH CAN BE EATEN RAW OR COOKED. THE DRIED PLANT ALSO PROVIDES A CLEAN-BURNING FUEL, AND POPPY STRAW IS STILL USED TODAY FOR ANIMAL FODDER. ITS DRUG QUALITIES COULD HAVE ALSO FULFILLED A RELIGIOUS ROLE OF SOME KIND—A THEORY THAT HAS GAINED CREDENCE IN RECENT YEARS.

SUMERIAN IDEOGRAMS FROM ABOUT 4,000 B.C. REFER TO THE POPPY AS THE “PLANT OF JOY” (HUL - GIL). IN SOME PARTS OF THE WORLD, VARIATIONS ON THE WORD “GIL” ARE STILL USED TO SAY “OPIUM.” OPIUM POPPIES WERE CULTIVATED FOR MILLENNIA BY THE CIVILIZATIONS OF MESOPOTAMIA, PERSIA AND IN ANCIENT EGYPT. OPIUM USE IN ANCIENT EGYPT IS A DISPUTED TOPIC FOR SOME REASON, BUT THE EVIDENCE IS PRETTY SUBSTANTIAL. OPIUM IS MENTIONED IN THE EBERS PAPYRUS (DATING FROM AROUND 1500 B.C.) AND TRACES OF OPIUM SEEM TO HAVE BEEN FOUND IN THE TOMB OF THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN CHIEF ROYAL ARCHITECT KHA, WHO DIED ABOUT 1405 B.C. HIEROGLYPHICS FROM ONLY A HUNDRED YEARS LATER ARE NOT DISPUTED, HOWEVER, AS THEY TURN UP CLEAR REFERENCES TO OPIUM—ESPECIALLY AS A DRUG TO MAKE BABIES STOP CRYING.


DIOSCORIDES MUST HAVE THOUGHT THERE WAS SOMETHING USEFUL IN THE REST OF THE PLANT, HOWEVER, BECAUSE HIS BEST-KNOWN CONTRIBUTION TO THE CORNUCOPIA OF OPIUM MEDICINES WAS AN EXTRACT HE CALLED DIACODION, USING THE GREEK WORD FOR “POPPYHEAD.” THE SAME WORD WAS USED TO NAME CODEINE, WHEN THAT ALKALOID WAS FIRST ISOLATED IN 1832. DIACODION REMAINED IN USE AS A STANDARD MEDICINE, LATER REFERRED TO AS “SYRUP OF POPPIES,” FOR CENTURIES AFTERWARD.

ONE OF THE LAST OF THE GREEK PHYSICIANS, GALEN (WHO SHAPED EUROPEAN MEDICINE FOR SEVERAL HUNDRED YEARS), GUSHED OVER OPIUM’S PROPERTIES IN HIS MEDICAL TREATISES, REPORTING HOW IT WAS BROUGHT TO MANKIND BY THE BIRD-HEADED EGYPTIAN GOD THOTH. BUT
Galen also flatly denied the plant was “magical.” The good doctor prescribed it for cough, diarrhea, and to relieve pain. He recommended opium to calm an agitated patient, and to help insomniacs get some sleep. Galen also considered opium an antidote for poisons in general—snake venom in particular. Other items on his list of conditions treatable with some preparation of opium were deafness, failing eyesight and vertigo.

In *The Odyssey*, Homer described how Helen of Troy livened up some would-be partiers who were grieving over dead or missing loved ones when she added opium to the wine they were drinking. This combo, the poet said, would “lull all pain and anger, and bring forgetfulness of every sorrow.”

The mythological Greek goddess of agriculture, Demeter, searching for her daughter Persephone came to a place once known as “city of poppies.” It was there that she discovered that by tasting the gum oozing from the poppy capsule, she was immediately relieved of her sadness. Because of this, ancient Greek drawings of Demeter often portray her holding a small bouquet of poppies.

“Whoe'er drinks a draught thereof,” he wrote, “on that day no tear would fall down his cheeks, not even if his mother and his father died, not even if men slew his brother or dear son with the sword, before his own eyes.”—*The Odyssey*, Book IV

Other Greek gods were shown with poppies, including Nyx (goddess of night), Hypnos (god of sleep), Morpheus (god of dreams), and Thanatos (god of death). Morpheus, of course, became the namesake to opium’s principle alkaloid: morphine.

Opium’s power to produce fantastic dreams of astonishing clarity was certainly well known long ago, as this passage from the Greek writer Lucin’s true history shows us. Traveling to the Isle of Dreams, Lucin and friends visit the island’s port city, called “Sleep” or “Slumber.”

One Greek word for opium is *mekon* or *mekone*, the latter being the name of the prehistoric city later known as Kyllene. The word *mekone* means something like “Poppy Town,” is associated with Hermes, and is the place where Prometheus first brought fire to humans. Our own word, opium, comes from another Greek word —*opos*, meaning “liquid.”

This Greek word now appears in many variations around the world. In Arabic the word for opium is *afnoon* (Nryfa), in Urdu, *afim*, and *a-fouyong* in some dialects of Chinese. Even the Chinese word *yen* (which describes more than one aspect of opium) appears to derive from Greek. And the Japanese word for “narcotic,” *mayaku*, may be related to the Greek *mekone*. In any case, opium was not cultivated in Japan until the fifteenth century, so the plant may very well have a “foreign” name there. *Mekone* is the root for the word *mak* which refers to opium and to opium poppies in a number of eastern European languages including Russian, Czech, and even Romanian.

Images of poppy plants in ceremonial use can be found on coins and drawings in the ruins of past civilizations in Greece and other areas of the Mediterranean. Although it is said that opium smoking was not practiced by Europeans until the late fifteenth
century (then perfected by the Chinese after that), ancient pipes found in Cyprus apparently used for opium date from the late Bronze age (c. 1200 B.C.). Vases from this same time period depict methods of incising the capsule to gather opium.

TWO OF MANY SMALL JUGLETS (TOP RIGHT, BOTTOM LEFT) THAT CAME TO EGYPT FROM CYPRUS AROUND 1600 - 1500 B.C., COMPARED WITH POPPY CAPSULES (SAME SCALE). THE SIMILARITY IN SIZE, SHAPE AND SURFACE PATTERN SUGGESTS THAT THESE JUGLETS WERE FULL OF
As mentioned earlier, ancient Egyptian medicine made use of opium, and medical papyri describe hundreds of prescriptions containing opium. The substance appears in about a third of the formulas uncovered to date. Later on, the Egyptian city of Thebes became well-known for the opium it produced and sent out around the world. Hence, standard Egyptian opium was called *Thebic* opium. Today one of opium’s most important alkaloids, thebaine, reminds us of this city. A Persian word for “cure-all”—*teriak*—also found its way into English as a name for an opium-based panacea-type medicine.

The Romans used opium extensively, and the drug was sold everywhere in the streets of the eternal city. The Roman poet Virgil mentions opium in his *Aeneid*, and one of Rome’s most famous emperors, Marcus Aurelius, seems to have used opium frequently and regularly enough that he suffered from withdrawal symptoms if he went without, according to contemporary reports describing his well-being.

The famous Persian physician Abu ‘Ali al Husein Ibn Sina (known in the West as Avicenna) was another proponent of opium, prescribing it to quiet crying babies, treat diarrhea, cough, anemia and other afflictions. Avicenna’s medical work, *Canon of Medicine*, superseded Galen at the beginning of the Renaissance to become the basis for Western medicine right through the 1800s.

Avicenna also did extensive clinical testing of opium and was especially good at working out appropriate dosages and dosing schedules that allowed him to more effectively treat all the typical diseases, and then some. For instance, Avicenna took advantage of opium’s tendency to lower blood sugar levels and used it to treat diabetes. In later centuries, morphine would be used in the same way, not displaced until the advent of insulin injections.

Persians, Turks, and Arabs all called the poppy flower *Qashqash* (or similar variations—the name imitates the sound of poppy seeds rattling around in the dried capsule) and poppies and opium were an important part of their systems of medicine, later adopted by the West.

As the spread of the word opium indicates, use of the poppy’s juice dispersed outward from Greece and Asia Minor (Turkey), being mostly carried far and wide by the physicians and explorers of the Islamic world. The poppy was of great interest to
the early Muslims because the Koran forbids alcohol, the only realistic alternative to opium at the time, especially for anaesthesia and pain relief. These Muslim physicians even developed an anaesthetic sponge that was soaked in a mixture of opium and hashish, water and inert carrier substances (usually wheat). The sponge was then allowed to dry, and could be quickly brought into use by wetting it again. Held over the mouth and nose of the patient, the sponge could render a patient sufficiently unconscious that surgeons could perform abdominal surgery. Of course, much of this knowledge was lost on medieval Europeans, who were busy waiting out the end of their Dark Ages.

Opium is mentioned in that enormous collection of stories dating back around a thousand years and known in the West as The Arabian Nights or The Thousand and One Nights. These stories mention another poppy confection people consumed to lighten their mood: Post. The word post is still used in Bangladesh, Burma and some other places, where it seems to refer to poppy seed—specifically poppy seed mixed with other spices, sugar, milk, and possibly hashish or marijuana.

By no later than the eighth century A.D. poppies and the use of opium had spread throughout Arabia, India, and China. Its northward journey took a bit longer, but by the eleventh century, opium was in use all over the Eurasian continent.

Although opium was known to medieval Europeans, the drug jumped in popularity at the end of the twelfth century, when Christian crusaders, returning from their attacks in the Middle East, brought back Avicenna’s new medicines—along with silk, soap and remission from all their sins. Variations of a narcotic potion containing a large amount of opium was in widespread use in the later Middle Ages. In medieval England we have a recipe for a knockout drink used to render a patient unconscious “while men carve him.” The same or similar potions—sometimes called dwale—were simply used to bring on sleep in case of insomnia. Just such an opium-based medicine is mentioned by Geoffrey Chaucer in “The Reeve’s Tale”:

To bedde goth Alyn and also John
Ther nas na moore—hem nedede no dwale.

Chaucer refers directly to opium in another of The Canterbury Tales—this time in “The Knight’s Tale”—where it is used to spike a jailer’s drink, knocking him out and allowing a prisoner to escape. The escapee’s daring pal seem to have left nothing to chance and used the best opium he could get his hands on. Chaucer tells us that the Thebian opium used was “fyn.”

That soone after the mydnyght Palamon
By helpynge of a freend brak his prison
And fleeth the citee faste as he may go.
For he hadde yeue his gailler drynke so
Of a claree maad of certeyn wyn
With nercotikes and opye of Thebes fyn