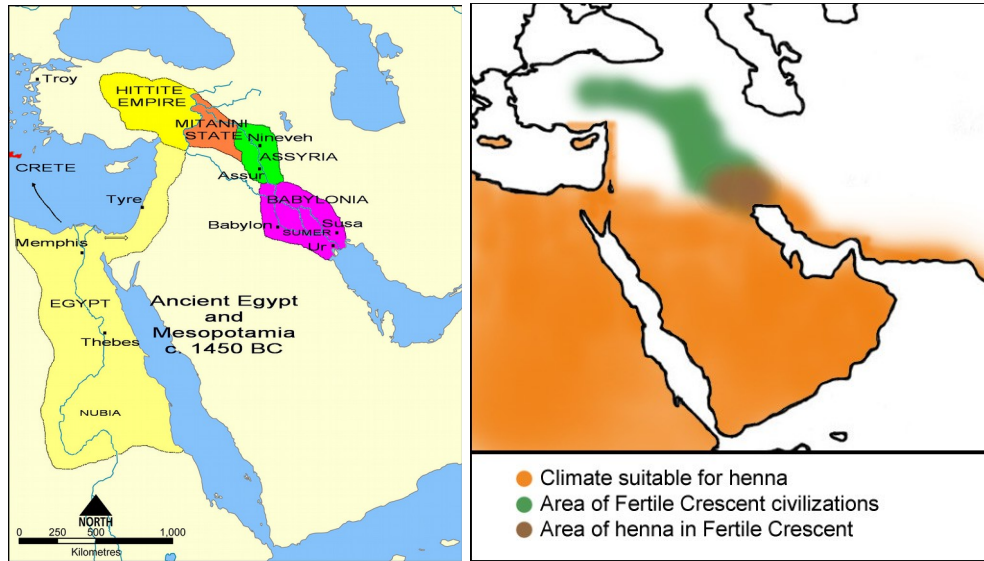


Ancient Sunrise® Henna for Hair Chapter 2

Part 1: The Evolution and Migration of Henna into Cultural Practices

Section 3: Mesopotamian and Levantine Henna



Map of the civilizations and cities of the ancient Mesopotamia¹ compared to a map of the areas suitable for growing henna

Henna could have begun to grow in the Gulf basin of the Fertile Crescent (except for the marshy areas) any time birds flew over and dropped seed during migrations. There are bird species that migrate from East Africa across and around the Arabian Peninsula through Kuwait and Iraq on their way to the Caspian and Black Seas. Henna could have been available, independently discovered and used at any time either by plant naturalization, or henna culture could have moved through cultural dispersion at any time the climate warmed enough in the Quaternary to leave the Gulf region a frost-free zone.

The shores of the Persian Gulf are suitable for growing henna, and henna is presently grown as a commercial crop in the southern part of the Kerman province near Hormuz. Babylon, particularly Susa, would have been geographically well suited to grow and use henna. Farther inland and north from the Persian Gulf, the plateau gains altitude quickly and that area has greater seasonal temperature variation with greater potential for winter frost, so Nineveh would have been unlikely to grow and use henna.

There are early Mesopotamian texts of medical diagnosis and treatment translated from Sumarian by Scurlock and Andersen in “Diagnoses in Assyrian and Babylonian Medicine”² the oldest being from the Ur III period, 2112 – 2004 BCE. The climate was similar to that of today, with summer heat rising to 49C (120F) and 200mm rainfall per

¹ Свифт/Svift, 2013 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%3AAncient_Egypt_and_Mesopotamia_c._1450_BC.png

year at the latitude of ancient Assur, with swampy wetlands at the Persian Gulf.³ These conditions should have been suitable in the areas of Ur and Babylon for henna to grow naturally except for the marshes at the outlet to the gulf. Farther north and inland such as in Nineveh, henna would not have survived winter frosts.

“Diagnoses in Assyrian and Babylonian Medicine” can be searched for evidence of lawsonia inermis being used for its most frequent application: covering gray hair. Assyrians and Babylonians lived long enough to have gray hair, and were vain enough to want to cover the gray. Unlike their Egyptian counterparts, there is no indication that they used henna to mask their gray hair. Assyrian and Babylonian physicians recommended that persons concerned about their gray hair rub a specially manufactured charcoal mixed with oil onto their gray hair, and prescribed a few herbal mixtures to prevent hair from going gray, “If a person’s head is full of gray hair while he is still young, to make the hair turn black...”⁴ Also, “In order for there to not be any gray hair...” a medicine to be rubbed into the scalp is recommended.⁵

Mesopotamians regarded red hair as a dangerous thing, a symptom of impending death from malnutrition (protein starvation), “If the hair of [his] head is red, he will die.”⁶ This implies that red hair was not considered healthy and normal, that there was no natural presence of the MC1R recessive variant gene red-haired gene in the population, and no inclination to dye hair red for the sake of vanity.

The dyers in the Fertile Crescent did know how to dye wool red, and if they wanted to dye hair red, they might have considered using madder for that purpose though found it unsuitable.⁷ If henna was present, there is no evidence that it was used to dye graying hair. As extensive as the herbal pharmacopoeia seems to have been, and as persistently curious as humans are about their environment, it would seem odd for henna to have not been used for some purpose if it had been available. Scurlock proposes that a plant, ‘kamantu’, was henna, and makes a very convincing case that *kamantu* was henna based on its reputation as a plant against evil omens, and having medicinal properties consistent with henna,⁸ but other Assyriologists dispute this interpretation. Red hair and brown-

² Scurlock, J., Andersen, B. 2005. *Diagnoses in Assyrian and Babylonian medicine: ancient sources, translations, and modern medical analyses / translated, and with commentary* University of Illinois

³ <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iraq/climate.htm>

⁴ Ibid, page 245: 10.201 DIŠ NA ina TUR-šū SAG.DU – su še-bi--tū DIRI ana ŠĪG GI (AMT5/1.5)

⁵ Ibid, page 245: 10.202: ana šib-tum NU GÁL ... (AMT3/6ii7)

⁶ Ibid, page 157: 7.9 (DPŠ III A r. 28' // Cr. 53 //G8 = TDP30:112; cf. Labat, Syria 33.125 r. 2-3) DIŠ ŠĪG S[AG.DU –šū] SA GAM

⁷To dye wool with madder, it is necessary to simmer the wool in a dye bath made with prepared madder root for two hours. If the wool is to be dyed without simmering, the fiber has to be left in the madder root dye bath for several days. Therefore, madder is poorly suited for dyeing human hair. Simmering one’s head for two hours or leaving it in a dye bath for several days is not an attractive proposition, and the ancient Mesopotamians did not seem inclined to experiment with it in any case.

⁸ Scurlock, JoAnn. 2007. “A Proposal for Identification of a Missing Plant: Kamantu/ ú ÁB.DUḪ = Lawsonia Inermis L./"henna"”. *Wiener Zeitschrift Für Die Kunde Des Morgenlandes* 97. Department of Oriental Studies, University of Vienna: 491–520. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23861432>.

stained skin may simply have been considered very undesirable in ancient Mesopotamia, and there is no evidence that henna was used as an ornamental body art, though it may have been used medicinally. *Kamantu* was described as being associated with sumac (the water from cooked sumac leaf is acidic and useful for henna's dye release). *Kamantu* was used to relieve athlete's foot and other skin fungal infections, a use consistent with *kamantu* being henna.⁹

Kamantu, which Scurlock believes is the probable word for henna in ancient Mesopotamian texts, seems to have no linguistic relationship to the KPR/PKR group of words indicating the probability of an independent discovery and development in the Tigris-Euphrates region and not related, at least initially, to the eastern Mediterranean development of henna culture. Scurlock's proposed that henna, *kamantu*, was one of the four plants used to avert evil omens and portents, and not a plant for skin ornamentation.¹⁰ The mentions of *kamantu* in Mesopotamian texts recommend it for treating burns, athlete's foot, scabies, and ringworm, all of which are effective applications of henna.¹¹ There is no particular reason why the presence of henna should necessitate its use on hands or to dye hair, and if there is a cultural dislike for brownish stained hands (which can resemble hands dirtied from agricultural labor, especially as henna exfoliates from skin) or red hair (as it was associated with starvation) it's unlikely that henna would be used for beauty. If Mesopotamians had access to henna, Assyriologists presently dispute translations of words they might have been used for henna; the translations are further complicated by the changing use of henna over the centuries: as a pharmaceutical, to avert malevolent spirits, as a cosmetic, and as hair care.

The formulations of *kamantu* (*lawsonia inermis*) in Scurlock's translations of Mesopotamian medical texts use either henna seed, leaf mixtures with oils or fats which would have inhibited stain on skin.¹² It would seem that the Mesopotamians understood useful characteristics of henna, but did not find the stain on human skin attractive, though they may have used it to dye leather.¹³

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Scurlock, JoAnn. 2007. "A Proposal for Identification of a Missing Plant: Kamantu/ ú ÁB.DUḪ = *Lawsonia Inermis* L./"henna"". *Wiener Zeitschrift Für Die Kunde Des Morgenlandes* 97. Department of Oriental Studies, University of Vienna: 491–520. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23861432>.

¹¹ Ruchi Badoni Semwala, Deepak Kumar Semwala, Sandra Combrinck, Catherine Cartwright-Jones, Alvaro Viljoen. June 2014. "Lawsonia inermis L. (henna): Ethnobotanical, phytochemical and pharmacological aspects," *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, 155(1):80-103

¹² Scurlock, J., 2104. *Sourcebook for Ancient Mesopotamian Medicine* SBL Press

¹³ Scurlock, JoAnn. 2007. "A Proposal for Identification of a Missing Plant: Kamantu/ ú ÁB.DUḪ = *Lawsonia Inermis* L./"henna"". *Wiener Zeitschrift Für Die Kunde Des Morgenlandes* 97. Department of

Henna, conquest, and change following the collapse of the Bronze Age

If there is one point at which the Mesopotamians changed their use of henna from averting malevolent spirits and medicinal use to body marking applications, it might have occurred during the centuries of cultural interchange between Syria, Phoenicia and Assyria during the rise of the neo-Assyrian empire beginning after 900 BCE. A climate event of prolonged drought and colder temperatures between 1300 BCE and 1000 BCE precipitated the Bronze Age collapse and subsequent upheavals of people and cultures.¹⁴ The eastern Mediterranean people used of henna as a bridal marking on hands, and as a dye for graying hair. During the expansion of Assyria to the Mediterranean coast by Ashurnasirpal II, reigning 883 to 859 BC would have brought them into closer contact than previously. Ashurnasirpal besieged many Phoenician and Syrian cities, sacked them, and returned to Assyria with luxury goods and tribute.¹⁵ These captive migrations continued for several centuries. The captured people brought their cultural understandings of henna from the Levant to Persia with them, and the traditions may have creolized into their new situation. There are traces of red coloring on the “King and his Courtiers” panel from 865 BCE Assyria¹⁶ that may be interpreted as evidence of henna used as dye and skin markings on both male and female images on the palms, soles and hair, though the red coloring might be an effect of weathering. Aubaile-Sallenave interprets an Assyria text in 800 BCE of a women being hennaed for her marriage.¹⁷

“Françoise Aubaile-Sallenave, s’appuyant sur les travaux de Gaston Maspero, signale en effet que “des texts assyriens du VIIIe siècle avant J.C., décrivant les préparatifs du mariage notent que la jeune fille se teint la paume des mains et les ongles avec la pâte de Henneh””¹⁸

At some point between 2000 BCE and 0 CE in the area of the Tigris and Euphrates, people began using henna to dye their graying hair as did Levantine and Egyptian people. Henna became thoroughly integrated into the culture of the Fertile Crescent region, for skin, for hair, to avert malevolent spirits, as a base of therapeutic remedies, and as a signifier of women’s marriages, luck, and fertility.

Oriental Studies, University of Vienna: 491–520. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23861432>.

¹⁴ Drake, B. 2012. “The influence of climatic change on the Late Bronze Age Collapse” *Journal of Archeological Science*, 39, p. 1862-1870 Elsevier and the Greek Dark Ages

¹⁵ DAVIAU, P. M. MICHÈLE, and STANLEY KLASSEN. 2014. "Conspicuous Consumption and Tribute: Assyrian Glazed Ceramic Bottles at Khirbat al-Mudayna ath-Thamad." *Bulletin Of The American Schools Of Oriental Research* no. 372: 99-122.

¹⁶ British Museum, King and his Courtiers, North West Palace, Room S Panel 3, Nimrud, Iraq, 865-860 BCE. British Museum Assyrian Archaeological Exhibit no. WA 124563.

¹⁷ Aubaile-Sallenave, 1982, “Jatba : journal d'agriculture traditionnelle et de botanique appliquée” *travaux d'ethnobotanique et d'ethnozoologie* 1982/2/123

¹⁸ Tazuin, Aline 1998. *Le Henné, Art Des Femmes De Mauritanie*. Editions UNESCO, Ibis, Paris p 11

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www.ancientsunrise.com

The Royal Unguent

Henna was used to dye graying hair in Hierakanopolis, Egypt, by 3000 BCE.¹⁹ If henna was absent from Sumeria and Assyria as a hair dye at 2000 BCE because red hair was undesirable during the Mesopotamian Bronze Age,²⁰ it was unquestionably being used in the Parthian Empire to dye hair by 100 BCE. Pliny²¹ wrote an encyclopedia of his world in the first century CE. He mentions henna as part of *Regale Unguentum*, the “Royal Unguent” for the Parthian kings. Parthia was an area of what later became Persia, and was formerly Assyria. “Royal Unguent” contained henna and a number of other spices and herbs: ben (myrobalan), putchuk, amomum, cinnamon comacum (unidentified), cardamom, spikenard, zatar, myrrh, cassia, gum storax, ladanum, balsam, calamus, ginger-grass, tejpat, serichatum (unidentified), thorny trefoil, galbanum, saffron, nut grass, marjoram, cloves, honey and wine.²²

There is neither reference to the source of Pliny’s information, nor to the proportions of ingredients in this mix. There is little clear evidence of how this mix was used, except that it was for special ceremonial occasions. However, if henna were to be taken as the primary ingredient, and the others as sources of tannins (myrobalan), of “terps”²³ (all of the spices and myrrh) and acids (zatar and wine) with an agent for smoothing texture and slowing drying (honey), and fragrant herbs for disguising the scent of henna, this would be a highly effective henna mix for hair and beards. Some Roman descriptions of men’s beards in the eastern part of the empire claimed that Persian men braided gold wire into their beards, but that is more likely to have been an observer’s best (and inaccurate) guess about the appearance of a graying black beard dyed with henna. Romans were critical of the men from Syria and Persia as being overly concerned with perfumes, cosmetics, and wearing henna which they considered decadent, vain, and feminine.

Pliny’s Royal Unguent cannot be assigned to a specific period prior to the writing of his encyclopedia, but we can infer that at some time between 1000 BCE and 100 BCE, henna became an acceptable dye for hair in Persia, and there is evidence to support that it has been in continuous use since.

¹⁹ Friedman, Renee F., Renée F. Friedman, Amy Maish, Ahmed G. Fahmy, John C. Darnell, and Edward D. Johnson. 1999. “Preliminary Report on Field Work at Hierakonpolis: 1996-1998.” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 36. *American Research Center in Egypt*: 1–35. doi:10.2307/40000200

²⁰ Scurlock, J., Andersen, B., 2005, *Diagnoses in Assyrian and Babylonian medicine: ancient sources, translations, and modern medical analyses / translated, and with commentary* page 157: 7.9 (DPŠ III A r. 28’ // Cr. 53 //G8 = TDP30:112; cf. Labat, Syria 33.125 r. 2-3) DIŠ SÍG S[AG.DU –šü] SA GAM
University of Illinois

²¹ Pliny, Gaius Plinius Secundus (AD 23 – August 25, AD 79) wrote an encyclopedic work, *Naturalis Historia*, with the intention of creating a body of work describing all of the known world at his time. This became a model for all other encyclopedias.

²² Field, H. (1958). *Body Marking in Southwestern Asia*. Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum, p 103

²³ Essential oils that contain monoterpene alcohols darken henna by increasing oxidation.

Henna in archeology, cultural assumptions and imaginings



“And so he sent her back to Failakus” Orientalist quasi-historical advertisement for Listerine, 1930 depicting the queen’s attendant as having hennaed feet²⁴

Translating and evaluating ancient texts is inherently prone to error, as there is inevitably a certain amount of guessing and associating based on the assumptions of the researcher. Campbell Thompson rejected *kamantu* as *lawsonia inermis* because he could not envision henna not being used as a marking on hands. He was familiar with henna as a skin stain, and assumed that it had eternally, universally, been used as an adornment.²⁵ People’s cultural assumptions may be used to erase henna from historical texts as well as to write henna into historical texts.

²⁴ Listerine. October, 1930. “Even a Queen Couldn’t Get Away With It.” *Pictorial Review*. New York, New York.

²⁵ Thompson, R. Campbell. 1949. *A Dictionary of Assyrian Botany*. London: British Academy.

In the absence of eyewitness accounts, texts, or artifacts writers may insert or remove henna according to their own cultural understandings and their narrative focus. When the understanding of an event is white, male, and Eurocentric, henna tends to disappear; henna was part of the Bronze Age Minoan and Phoenician culture, but writers misidentify it, as did Puglisi mistaking hennaed feet in the Minoan Lustral Basin for bloody feet.²⁶ This is a challenge for a nuanced reading of popular tales, historical, and anthropological texts. During periods of relative awareness of henna in the western imagination, henna is often written into or out of historical texts on the assumption that if henna exists in a place *now* it must have always existed, and existed in the same way as at the present, or if it does not appear at the present, it never did in the past. This assumption can be misleading.

Popular culture regularly plays fast and loose about where and how henna existed, and these inclusions and omissions are influential people's minds and attitudes. Queen Cleopatra is usually shown without henna in films, but Sarah Bernhardt always performed Cleopatra with hennaed hands, even making the audience wait for her henna to dry and stain. Mary Magdalene was shown in Scorsese's movie²⁷ with 'black henna' though for centuries she was shown in European popular arts with no henna designs on her skin, though often was portrayed as having hennaed hair. The historical person, Mary Magdalene, probably used henna regularly both on her skin and in her hair, but the stain would not have been black.

In an example of 'this is now, therefore must have been then' of henna in popular culture, a Listerine ad from 1930 shows a montage of artifacts arranged to sell mouthwash. In this full page lavishly illustrated advertisement, a princess had been called forth to be the queen of an ancient Persian king. This advertisement shows the entanglement of popular culture and archeology in misrepresenting the past. The entirely imaginary king, Darab, rejects the entirely imaginary princess Nahid, the loveliest of the Ruman princesses (Ruman being an entirely imaginary province). Nahid is rejected and cast from the king's presence because she has bad breath, and the image shows her staggering away, ashamed and distraught. Listerine proposes that mouthwash would have preserved the queen's honor and the king's esteem for her, insinuating that a modern woman would be well advised to use Listerine mouthwash to not be scorned by her suitor. The rejected queen's serving maid is portrayed as having hennaed feet in an authentic Iraqi henna 'slipper' pattern, similar to the henna described by colonial travelers in early 20th century Iraq.

The Listerine image shows how fictions of an exotic past are presented to discuss the mundane problems of the present; in popular culture, and fictions are often consumed as facts. In archeological works, translations of ancient texts, even scripture claimed to be inspired by God, henna has been written into and out of narratives.

²⁶ Puglisi, D. 2013. "Ritual performances in Minoan lustral basins: new observations on an old hypothesis" *Scuola Archeologica Italiana Di Atene*, Volume XC, Serie III, 12

²⁷ Scorsese, M. 1988. "The Last Temptation of Christ" *Universal Pictures*

Conquest, identity, and the erasure of henna in the southern Levant



Tunisian Jewish woman with fingernails and fingers on her right hand hennaed above the knuckle, postcard from 1922

At the end of the 19th century, henna was embraced by Sephardic and Misrahi Jews, particularly as adornment for the bride at her wedding.²⁸ The Yemeni Jewish bridal henna was one of the most complex henna traditions, involving several days of complex sequential henna application.²⁹ Jewish women across Persia, the Levant, and the Maghreb loved henna for everyday use as well as celebrations; weddings required that the bride be hennaed, with henna also for the groom and guests.³⁰ Kurdish Jews celebrated Purim with henna for young girls in the belief that Esther was hennaed for her meeting with King Ahasuerus.³¹ A Jewish Kurdish woman was hennaed for her wedding, and her groom and all the guests at the wedding had henna as well.³² If a person died when betrothed, that person was hennaed to meet the spouse as a newlywed in the

²⁸ Patai, R. *Encyclopedia of Jewish Folklore and Traditions*, Routledge, p 191, 171, 42, 123

²⁹ Douri, Z., *Eshkol Ha-Kofer* tr. Hagai Nagar

³⁰ Douri, Z., *Eshkol Ha-Kofer* tr. Hagai Nagar

³¹ Breuer, E. 1993. *The Jews of Kurdistan*, ed. Raphael Patai, Wayne State University Press p. 348-9

³² *Ibid* p 122 - 131

afterlife.³³ Henna was also part of hametz, the return to the joys of life at Pesach at end of Passover for Mimouna.³⁴



Hennaed bride from Rabat, Morocco, 1922

³³ Ibid, p 194-5

³⁴ Scott, Colonel, 1842, "A journal of a residence in the Esmailia of Abd-el-Kader and of travels in Morocco and Algiers". Whittaker and Co, London

Iranian Jewish girls had their hair and hands hennaed for marriage.³⁵ Jewish Algerian, Moroccan, and Tunisian hennaed for marriage, as well as regular beauty maintenance for their hair, feet and hands.³⁶ Israeli Jewish women hennaed into the modern era, though many abandoned the practice after immigration from Muslim-majority countries as a display of preference for modern, western-oriented cosmetics and modern, western-oriented culture.³⁷ The ‘Jewish Night of the Henna’ has recently had a resurgence in Israel as a wedding tourism event destination, with full bridal regalia and an ‘authentic traditional Jewish wedding henna experience’ with a caterer, a DJ, and a photographer.³⁸ A traditional Yemeni Jewish verse is, “She who will paint with henna will be with joy.”³⁹

The fondness Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish women had for henna before the modern era did not exist at the time when Jewish identity was forming. When Hebrew people first migrated from Egypt into the southern Levant, they entered an area where the indigenous people were polytheistic, culturally linked to the Minoan civilization, and devoted to the bull god, Baal and his consort, Anath. The Canaanite women stained their hands and feet (and presumably hair) with henna in the context of their polytheistic fertility based religion. Henna was an intrinsic part of the agro-ecological cycle of the Baal and Anath annual death and resurrection sequence.⁴⁰ The migrating Hebrews brought in Moses’ monotheistic religion, his cultural understandings of how the body should be adorned, how Hebrew bodies and customs should be ‘differenced’ from the indigenous people of the southern Levant. The Hebrew narratives were framed within the context of their territorial expansion and divine claim to the land; they vilified and erased the customs of the indigenous people captured in battle to secure their claim to the land and their God’s approval of this conquest.⁴¹

³⁵ Goldin, F., 2003. *Wedding Song*. Brandeis University Press p. 49 - 51

³⁶ Rubens, A. 1967. *A History of Jewish Costume*. Funk and Wagnells, NY.pp 65, 74, 76, 80.

³⁷ Goldberg, Harvey E.. 1973. “Cultural Change in an Israeli Immigrant Village: The Twist in Even Yosef”. *Middle Eastern Studies* 9 (1). Taylor & Francis, Ltd.: 73–80.

³⁸ <http://www.bs-touring.com/en/planning-and-celebrate-events-wedding-reception-bat-bar-mitzvah-in-israel/the-henna-ceremony-in-israel/>

“The henna ceremony is the most exotic part of the wedding! A travel full of colors that reminds you of your oriental roots...

At Blessing & Success Events, we think that the henna ceremony is a crucial step to make your wedding even more festive. Your guests will be delighted and so will you since our team takes everything in charge from A to Z.”

³⁹ Douri, Z., *Eshkol Ha-Kofer* tr. Hagai Nagar

⁴⁰ see previous chapter, “Henna, Astronomy, and the Agro-Ecology of the Mediterranean Bronze Age,” previous subheading,

http://www.tapdancinglizard.com/AS_henna_for_hair/chapters/chap2/Mediterranean_Bronze.pdf)

⁴¹ Author’s note: When claiming territory in the Americas, Europeans did likewise; the migrants erased and persecuted indigenous cultures and body scripts to support their claim of manifest destiny or divine destiny, establishing what eventually became the USA https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manifest_destiny, O’Sullivan, John L., 1845. “A Divine Destiny for America”

The practice of erasing the Canaanite female captives' body scripts to impose a Hebrew body identity was crucial in subjugation of the indigenous population. If one understands that Canaanite women of that period used henna in their hands, hair, as part of their devotion to their religion and to their cultural expression, Deuteronomy 21:11-13 takes on a different dimension than has been typically understood by European and North American Christians.⁴²

- 11: And seest among the captives a beautiful woman, and hast a desire unto her that thou wouldest have her to thy wife;
12: Then thou shalt bring her home to thine house; and she shall shave her head, and pare her nails;
13: And she shall put the raiment of her captivity from off her, and shall remain in thine house, and bewail her father and her mother a full month: and after that thou shalt go in unto her, and be her husband, and she shall be thy wife.

Levitical law included that her palms and soles be thoroughly scrubbed. Of course scrubbing wouldn't remove henna, but after the *required one month*, henna stains would have exfoliated from her palms and soles, her pared nails would have grown out with no trace of henna. Her shaved hair would eventually regrow without henna. Others have interpreted the purpose of waiting a month to be the determination of whether or not the woman might have been pregnant, but the text does not refer to a pregnancy, or what to do if the woman was pregnant. The text refers to stripping a captive woman of her relationship with her family, her henna, and her cultural identity, not a pregnancy. In the mythical world following the death of Abel, preserved in oral tradition and written down centuries later but not included in authorized scripture,⁴³ the daughters of Cain dyed their hair and stained the soles of their feet, and had facial tattoos.⁴⁴

“The Second Book of Adam and Eve” chapter 20 verse 31.

- 24: After this a hundred men of the children of Seth gathered together, and said among themselves, "Come, let us go down to the children of Cain, and see what they do, and enjoy ourselves with them."
30: But they rose up against Enoch, and would not hearken to his words, but went down from the Holy Mountain.
31: And when they looked at the daughters of Cain, at their beautiful figures, and at their hands and feet dyed with color, and tattooed in ornaments on their faces, the fire of sin was kindled in them.
32: Then Satan made them look most beautiful before the sons of Seth, as he also made the sons of Seth appear of the fairest in the eyes of the daughters of Cain, so that the daughters of Cain lusted after the sons of Seth like ravenous beasts, and

⁴² Holy Bible, King James Version

⁴³ http://www.bibliotecapleyades.net/vida_alien/alien_watchers09a.htm

⁴⁴ Graves, Robert; Patai, Raphael. 1983. *Hebrew myths: The book of Genesis*. New York: Greenwich House

the sons of Seth after the daughters of Cain, until they committed abomination with them.

36: Then Jared wept before the Lord, and asked of Him mercy and forgiveness. But he wished that his soul might depart from his body, rather than hear these words from God about the going down of his children from the Holy Mountain.

37: But he followed God's order, and preached unto them not to go down from that holy mountain, and not to hold intercourse with the children of Cain.

38: But they heeded not his message, and would not obey his counsel.⁴⁵

Henna is the most plausible material referred to in these verses. Henna was used to dye women's hands and feet was available in the southern Levant. Henna was part of the culture and the cycle of religious celebration. Facial tattooing among women existed as a family and tribal marker in that area, and continued among Bedouin women until the modern era. The women had body markings consistent with what we know of Canaanite women during the period of Hebrew migration into the area; they were desired by but forbidden to the Hebrew men. It is possible that this story narrates an ongoing cultural conflict between the groups if not an actual event. This 'differencing' between Hebrews who had unmarked bodies and indigenous women who wore henna and tattoos conflict may be the source of the requirement in Deuteronomy to scrub, pare, and shave a woman's henna if she was taken as wives from the spoils of war. There was tension between the Hebrew people and the indigenous people of the land they wished to occupy. A flashpoint of that tension seems to have been the expression of a polytheistic religion through henna, which they rejected, and hennaed women with whom they wished to fraternize.



Henna, lawsonia inermis

⁴⁵ *The Lost Books of the Bible and the Forgotten Books of Eden*, Cleveland 1926; A & B Book Dist Inc, March 1994

Reading ninth century BCE henna in the Book of Kings: Jezebel



19th-century painting of Jezebel by John Liston Byam Shaw, imagining the queen as a woman with hennaed hair⁴⁶

Jezebel was identified in the Hebrew Book of Kings, 1, 16: 31 as a 9th century princess, daughter of the king of Sidon, an elite of the indigenous people of what is currently Lebanon, and culturally linked to the Minoan, Phoenician, and Ugaritic civilizations. She was a powerful woman who held religious and secular power and property. Her name, Jezebel, meant, "Where is the Prince?" a ritual cry of grief in the religion of Baal and Anath as the bull god (the god of rain) died at the onset of the dry season in the region. The story of Jezebel, written 400 years after her death, legitimizes the murder of a queen. The story may reflect more of the Hebrew distrust of a powerful woman who adheres to a different culture and faith than it reflects of the woman herself.

When Jezebel married the Hebrew King Ahab, she convinced him to worship Baal and Anath, she banished the Hebrew prophets, and reestablished the indigenous religion as the official religion in the region. She continued to reign after the death of Ahab, his son, and his brother, until the military commander Jehu went to her to establish his own kingship and overthrow the polytheistic theocracy. Jezebel dressed, hennaed, and adorned herself in anticipation of Jehu's arrival, possibly to present herself as queen, or

⁴⁶ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:John_Liston_Byam_Shaw_003.jpg

possibly to negotiate a political marriage with the conquering leader. Jehu ordered her retinue to throw her from the upstairs window where she waited to consummate a political settlement.



Jehu's companions finding the remains of Jezebel, 1870, Gustave Dore

Elijah prophesied that Jezebel's body would be eaten by stray dogs, except for her feet, palms, and skull. This seems an odd statement, that dogs would have consumed all of her without touching the parts of her that would have been hennaed. Dogs are not repelled by henna; they take very little interest in it, one way or other. If Lowenthal's explanation of this passage is correct,⁴⁷ it does offer corroboration for Scurlock's interpretation of *kamantu* as henna in ancient Mesopotamia, as one of four plants used to avert malevolent spirits.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Loewenthal, L. J. A.. 1972. "The Palms of Jezebel" *Folklore* 83 (1). [Folklore Enterprises, Ltd., Taylor & Francis, Ltd.]: 20–40 p23

⁴⁸ Scurlock, JoAnn. 2007. "A Proposal for Identification of a Missing Plant: Kamantu/ ú ÁB.DUH = *Lawsonia Inermis* L./"henna"". *Wiener Zeitschrift Für Die Kunde Des Morgenlandes* 97. Department of

Lowenthal was assured by Persian Jewish women that if you show hennaed palms to dogs, they will turn away; in Persian folklore, henna averts the evil eye,⁴⁹ and dogs may be vessels of malevolent spirits.⁵⁰ Jezebel's hennaed hands (as well as feet and hair) were narrated in this story as keeping evil (spirits within dogs) from her body, even when condemned to a violent death by those who resented her adherence to her polytheistic religion and cultural difference, defying the monotheistic demand that she submit to their authority. If the book of Kings was written during the period of Babylonian exile, the Mesopotamian understandings of henna may have begun to entangle with the eastern Mediterranean understandings of henna in the imaginings of Jezebel's death. Jezebel's henna was protective, and deterred misfortune from her hands, hair, and soles even in death. When this seventh century narrative was written, centuries after the actual incident, henna's power to avert malevolent spirits was regarded with some respect, though Jewish tradition disavowed henna for its connection with Canaanite culture and religion.

During the centuries of Babylonian captivity, the Jewish attitude towards henna seems to have gradually evolved from absolute rejection, to grudging acknowledgment, to fond remembrance of the plant and its flowers, to eventual embrace through celebrating the adornment of Queen Esther with henna for Purim and wedding celebrations.



North African Jewish woman with hennaed feet, early 20th century⁵¹

Oriental Studies, University of Vienna: 491–520. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23861432>.

⁴⁹ Loewenthal, L. J. A.. 1972. "The Palms of Jezebel". *Folklore* 83 (1). [Folklore Enterprises, Ltd., Taylor & Francis, Ltd.]: 20–40 p23p. 26 - 27

⁵⁰ Ibid p 28 -31

⁵¹ author's collection

Echoes of Bronze Age Canaanite Henna in the Song of Songs



Image of henna from a mid-19th century edition of the Holy Bible, mid-19th century, illustrating the mention of henna (Camphire) in the Song of Solomon

Henna, *Lawsonia inermis*, referred to as 'Camphire', is mentioned in the Song of Solomon, "My Beloved is unto me as a cluster of Camphire in the vineyards of En-Gedi" Song of Solomon, I, 14, as well as in the Talmud.

Henna was grown as a hedgerow around vineyards to hold soil against wind erosion in Israel as it was in other countries. A henna hedge with dense thorny branches protected a vulnerable, valuable crop such as a vineyard from hungry animals. The hedge which protected the vineyard also had clusters of fragrant flowers. From this comes the metaphor for protection by a "beloved" who defends, shelters, and delights his lover. In the first millennium BCE, in the southern Levant, henna was closely associated with fertility and love in the Ugaritic eco-agricultural myth cycle of Baal and Anat.

The Song can be interpreted as sexual, and similar to love poetry in that time and region:

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"I am my beloved's,
 and his desire is for me.
 Come, my beloved,
 Let us go into the open, Let us lodge among the henna shrubs (*camphire*),
 Let us go early to the vineyards,
 Let us see if the vine (henna) has flowered,
 If its blossoms have opened,
 If the pomegranates are in bloom."
 Song of Songs 7:11-13

Pomegranate and henna blossoming time would have occurred in late April or early May, when the weather is warm but not severely hot in Israel. It is a time when one would be comfortable outdoors, wearing little or no clothing. Henna trees are short and dense at that time in the spring, with thick leafy growth, providing potential outdoor privacy for two people. "Lodging among the henna shrubs" would only be possible if two people were sitting or lying down. The flowering henna bushes would have made an intensely fragrant bower for two young lovers hoping for some private moments with each other, on the excuse that they were going out to tend the vineyards. This is the same season as marked in "The Seasonal Pattern in the Ugaritic Myth of Ba'lu According to the Version of Ilmilku," The 'Seven Sisters' hennaed their hands and went to seek their husbands as the Pleiades disappeared as a morning star, as if the sisters were disappearing into the dawn sun.

*CTA 3: B.2-3*⁵²
*kpr*⁵³ . *šb* . *bnt*⁵⁴ .
rh gdm w 'anhbm

It appears that as decades passed after the Jewish people entered the area that was occupied by the Canaanites, they eventually adopted indigenous Canaanite/Syrian fondness for henna and the association of henna with love, luck, and marriage. This association may have not existed when Hebrews resided in 16th C Egypt, as the early Egyptian cultural associations with henna at that time were largely therapeutic, medicinal, and as hair dye rather than for body marking, and they were clearly hostile to henna use on the hair and skin in the historical periods conquest in Deuteronomy 21:11-13 and Levitical laws regarding the treatment of captured women.

In the Song of Songs (Song of Solomon) 4:13-14, the bridegroom sings of spikenard:

Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates

⁵² De Moor, Johannes C. "The Seasonal Pattern in the Ugaritic Myth of Ba'lu According to the Version of Ilmilku" *Verlag Butzon & Berker Kevelaer*, Neukirchen – Vluyn, 1971 p. 85

⁵³ *kpr* is translated as 'henna', linguistically related to 'camphire', the Latin word for henna and 'kopher' the Hebrew word for henna, and *PKR*, the root word for henna in Phoenician, *poenikos*.

⁵⁴ De Moor interprets this as probably referring to seven lady's maids, as in Esther 2:9

With pleasant fruits,
Fragrant henna with spikenard,
spikenard and saffron,
calamus and cinnamon,
with every kind of incense tree,
with myrrh and aloes,
and all the finest spices.

Though this might appear to be a random list of herbs, there are many of the same ingredients mentioned here that are incorporated in Royal Unguent⁵⁵ as described by Pliny. This may be a bridegroom singing a song about preparing henna, incense, a wedding dinner, with pomegranates being a symbol of fertility.



Henna, *lawsonia inermis*

⁵⁵ “Royal Unguent” contained *henna* and a number of other spices and herbs: ben (myrobalan), putchuk, amomum, cinnamon comacum (unidentified), cardamom, *spikenard*, zatar, *myrrh*, *cassia* (possibly *cinnamon*), gum storax, ladanum, balsam, *calamus*, ginger-grass, tejpai, serichatum (unidentified), thorny trefoil, galbanum, *saffron*, nut grass, marjoram, cloves, honey and wine. Field, H. (1958). *Body Marking in Southwestern Asia*. Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum, p 103

Imagining Queen Esther

It is possible that the narration of the story of Queen Esther as recorded may have evidence of the gradual assimilation of henna into Jewish customs when they were in Susa, under Persian rule. Esther was brought into the royal harem and groomed to royal expectations. “Now when the turn of every maiden was come to go in to king Ahasuerus, after that it had been done to her according to the law for the women, twelve months--for so were the days of their anointing accomplished, to wit, six months with oil of myrrh, and six month with sweet odors, and with other ointments of the women.”⁵⁶ In the book of Esther one has several options for the interpretation of ‘ointments of the women.’ By the fifth century BCE Persia, henna seems to have been integrated into both Jewish and Persian women’s culture, and could have been of these “ointments of the women.” Whether or not an historical Esther had henna as part of her preparation, future generations of Jews ascribed henna to Queen Esther’s preparation, and celebrated Purim with henna for young women.

Purim celebrates Queen Esther's bravery in rescuing the Jewish people from a plan to massacre them; among Kurdish Jewish people into the early 20th century, girls celebrated Purim with henna, as they envisioned Esther as having been adorned with henna for her meeting with King Ahsaureus. Kurdish Jewish girls' had a celebrational bath, on *lel purim*, Purim eve. This bath was called *khiyapit benatha, ase ileni shiprit Ister*, "Bath of the maidens, may the beauty of Esther come to us". The girls went to the house of a rich man, the prettiest girl prepared and brought the henna. Their mothers went with them. The group sang *De mesulu*, "Come now, bring", and all the girls have their hands and feet ornamented with henna. After the hennaing, the mothers bathed their daughters, and sang *narike*, as if they were singing to a bride. The mothers then showered their hennaed bride-like daughters, made beautiful as hennaed Esther, with roses and nuts.⁵⁷

It is entirely possible that Esther would have been hennaed as preparation for presentation to Ahasuerus, (often identified as Xerxes I during the Achaemenid Empire). The event was in the area of Susa, a region where henna presently grows well, and where henna has been used by women to dye their hair and hands for centuries, though exactly when henna as body art began to be a cultural practice in this area is open to question. Kurdish Jewish tradition imagined that Esther had hennaed hair, hennaed hands, and feet; women in Kurdish communities have longstanding henna traditions. Rembrandt, when he painted “Ahasuerus and Haman at the Feast of Esther” in Amsterdam in 1660, did not imagine her as having any henna. Rembrandt regularly sought out subjects in

⁵⁶ Esther chapter 2:12

יב ובהגיע תר נערה ונערה לבוא אל-המלך
אחשורוש, מקץ היות לה כדת הנשים שנים עשר
חדש--כי פן ימלאו, ימי מרוקיהן: וששה חדשים, בשמן
המר, וששה חדשים בשמים, ובתמרוקי הנשים

⁵⁷ Brauer, E. completed and edited by Raphael Patai. 1993. *The Jews of Kurdistan*. Wayne State University Press, Detroit

Amsterdam's Jewish community, but henna was not part of their experience. Other northern European artists who painted Esther were also unfamiliar with henna.



“Ahasuerus and Haman at the Feast of Esther” by Rembrandt (1606–1669) Date 1660

As centuries passed, Jews adopted the use of henna when they lived in communities in Persia, South Asia, the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, northeast Africa, and the Maghreb where henna was part of the majority cultural practice; Jewish women adapted and enjoyed henna. When Jews migrated into northern Europe and Russia, there was no henna available and henna disappeared from their bridal and Purim traditions. There was usually some ‘differencing’ of practice between the Jewish community and their neighbors, but Jewish women enjoyed the practice, bought the same henna at the market, gathered and dried the leaves from the henna bushes growing nearby, and probably shared techniques with their friends and neighbors at the village bath, the hamam.

Evidence of henna use and difference among neighbors

The fact that Jews had slightly different henna practices than their neighbors, particularly in the application of henna to newborns and young children, for celebrations and as medicinal purposes can be evidenced through the different levels of G6PD deficiency in their populations. This difference may be the result of the fact that the application of henna to an infant or young child with homozygous G6PD deficiency can be fatal. Many geneticists believe that the varying prevalence of G6PD deficiency population is a reflection of adaptation to malarial environments.⁵⁸ If a segment of a population hennas infants for a ceremonial or curative purpose, the number of people with G6PD deficiency will be reduced generation by generation, as the homozygous G6PD deficient children suffer fatal hemolytic anemia from the application. If a different segment of people in the same population do not henna infants, the incidence of G6PD deficiency in that population will gradually rise, because G6PD deficiency protects against malaria, and these people will survive epidemics of malaria to pass on their genes to future generations.

During the late Neolithic and Bronze age, land was cleared for agriculture leaving standing pools of water exposed to sunlight. In this warm, still water, mosquitoes bred and malaria began to spread through human populations. A random genetic mutation of red blood cells, G6PD deficiency, also began to replicate into the populations because it offered the adaptive advantage of some protection against malaria. This mutation was only carried on the x chromosome; males present the outward effects of the disease more often than females, as is the case with hemophilia. Females can be carriers without showing any health effects. G6PD deficiency causes red blood cells to be vulnerable to oxidative hemolysis. Lawsone, the pigment in henna can cause oxidative hemolysis in homozygous G6PD deficient individuals. Because males only have one x chromosome, they are more vulnerable than females because they will always be homozygous. Female may have the gene only on one of their x chromosomes, or they may have two variants of the gene, and heterozygous, and be protected from oxidative hemolysis. The gendered difference between male and female cultural use of henna in populations where the G6PD deficiency gene existed came about because people occasionally saw males being weakened or falling ill after the use of henna (particularly juvenile males from oxidative hemolysis) while adult females seemed to have no observable unfortunate consequences from use of henna.⁵⁹

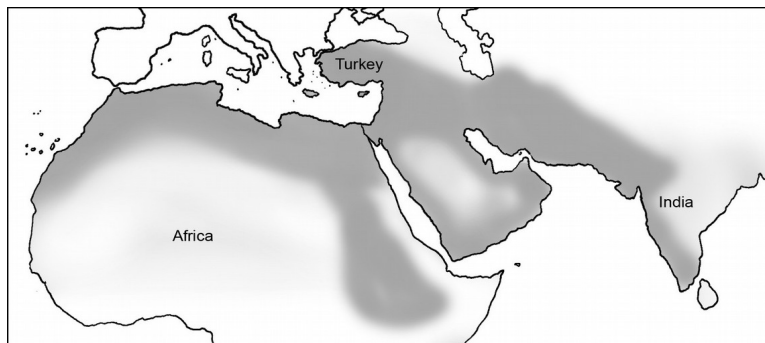
Genetic differences are often viewed as evidence of ancient environments and adaptations to those environments. This does not explain how two different cultures living in the same place, suffering same epidemics of malaria stressors, would have

⁵⁸ Greene LS. 1993. G6PD deficiency as protection against falciparum malaria: an epidemiologic critique of population and experimental studies. *Yearbook of Physical Anthropology* 36: 153 - 178

⁵⁹ Cartwright-Jones, C. 2008, "Henna and the Evil Eye, Salt and Lilith, and the Geography of G6PD Deficiency" TapDancing Lizard, LLC

different rates of G6PD deficiency. For Jews to have rates of 30% to 60% and Muslims to have 1.8% to 8.5% after living for centuries together in the region, something other than an adaptive response to malarial environments must have affected mortality.

G6PD deficiency is generally geographically positively correlated with a malarial environment, and is believed to protect carriers against malaria.⁶⁰ Jews and Muslims, who lived alongside each other for centuries in North Africa and the Levant, were presumably stressed equally by malaria as mosquitoes disregard religious affiliation when choosing whom to bite. Jewish Kurdish males have over 58.2% G6PD deficiency⁶¹ but their Muslim neighbors in Turkey and Iraq have 3% to 10% deficiency.⁶² Sephardic and Oriental male Jewish infants, whose ancestors lived in the region shown in the map below and were tested for G6PD deficiency at a well-baby nursery were found to have an aggregate G6PD deficiency rate of 34.9%. The Center for Arab Genomic studies found that Muslims presently living in the countries from which these Jewish children's families migrated had aggregate rates between 0.6% in Yemen to 4.5% in Egypt.⁶³



Edot HaMizrach, Temani and Maghrabiyyun Jewish Communities Before 1930

Jewish communities in areas with henna as a cultural cosmetic

Jews and Muslims lived alongside each other in many countries for many centuries, both used henna but in slightly different ways. Jews used henna as often as Muslims for brides and to care for their hair, but in fewer occasions on infants and children. One cultural application of henna in particular was practiced differently between Jews and Muslims, the age and body markings associated with male circumcision. Jews circumcised males a week after birth, and did not apply henna for this ceremony. If they had done so, males with G6PD deficiency would have suffered oxidative hemolysis and hemolytic crisis.

⁶⁰ Cappelini M. 2008. Glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase deficiency. *The Lancet* 371: 64 – 79

⁶¹ Kaplan M, and Abramov A. 1992. Neonatal hyperbilirubinemia associated with glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase deficiency in Sephardic-Jewish neonates: incidence, severity and the effect of phytotherapy. *Pediatrics*, 90, 3: 401 - 405

⁶² Hamamy H, Saeed T. 1981. Glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase deficiency in Iraq. *Human Genetics*, 58: 434 - 435

⁶³ Nair P, Ibrahim E, Fareed A, Tadmouri GO. 2008. Glucose – Phosphate Dehydrogenase. *The Catalogue for Transmission Genetics in Arabs*, Center for Arabic Genomic Studies. Dubai, UAE

Muslims circumcise males and henna the boy for circumcision, though this occurs at a later age, often between the ages of three and seven years old. Muslims also have folk medicine traditions of using henna to treat diaper rash, head lice, and burns from household kitchen accidents. These henna applications would have gradually reduced the number of G6PD males in the community; the cause of death might have been attributed to malevolent spirits, as infant mortality was always very high. This divergence is evidenced in the different levels of G6PD deficiency rates between Jewish and Muslim populations across North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Levant, and the Middle East; G6PD deficiency incidence rising in Jewish populations, and falling in Muslim populations.

The groups with 10% or lower rates of G6PD deficiency have traditions of using henna to Bless an infant and to cure some common diseases of childhood. The Jewish groups with 30% and higher rates of G6PD deficiency used salt instead of henna to bless children and soothe some ailments. Both groups adorned brides with henna for weddings, and women in both groups used henna to dye gray hair, and to color their soles, fingertips and fingernails. If malaria should have exerted similar pressures on people living alongside each other, tending to raise the rates of G6PD in a population, differing use of henna on infants is the most likely application to have caused diverging rates, because the elimination of pre-adolescent children would have removed them from the reproducing population. There is an increased risk of hemolytic crisis from G6PD deficiency when the henna/body mass dose is very high, as it would be in applications to infants. Young children are also less able to recover from hemolytic oxidation than adults. Males are more likely to have homozygous G6PD deficiency as G6PD is polyzygous, and the gene resides on the x chromosome, as is the case with sickle cell anemia. A female may be a carrier for G6PD deficiency and not suffer oxidative hemolysis from henna. If people observed that adult women seemed to never suffer any ill effects from henna while young males suffered sickness or death frequently enough to be noticed, this phenomenon would have favored the expansion of women's and bridal henna customs (as if henna was a lucky thing for women) and limiting factor for male or groom henna customs. Male henna traditions are typically limited to small applications, such as a single finger or a few body markings at a wedding, or to cover graying hair; these males would have higher body mass/dose to protect them from hemolytic oxidation as opposed to applying henna to infant males.

In the period from 3000 to 500 BCE, we have records of henna in texts which we can translate as well as tissue, hair and nails of mummies, and artifacts that show the use of henna in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the eastern shore of the Mediterranean. By 500 BCE, we can see that henna had developed a cultural identity that is consistent with henna culture today: henna was used to mark women for their weddings, henna was used to mask gray hair, henna was used to avert malevolent spirits, and henna was used in pharmacopeia for its therapeutic potential. As populations migrated and as cultures entangled and changed, henna practice has remained largely the same until today: a blessing for women, a mask for gray hair, and a cure for some simple maladies.

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