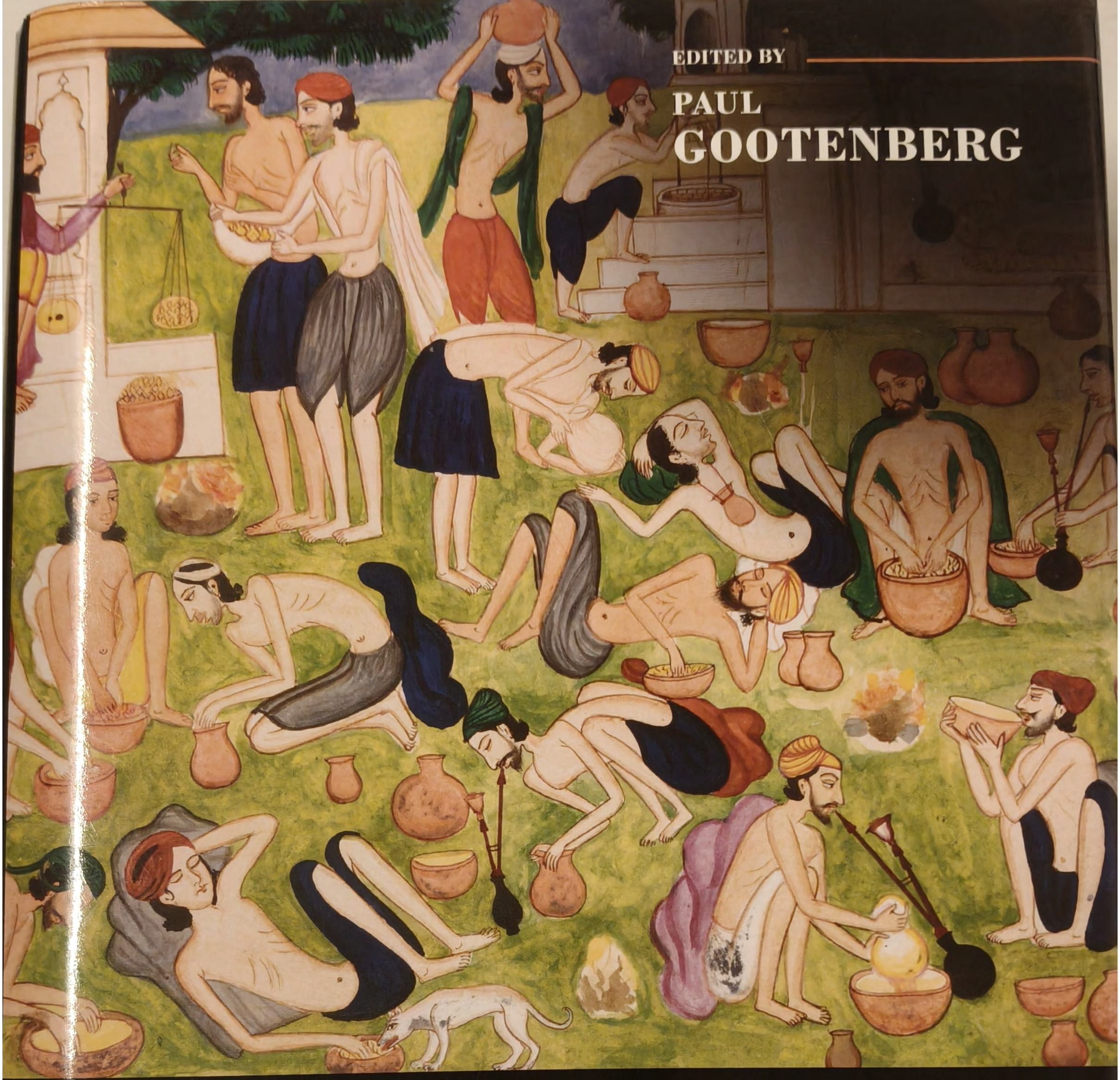

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The Oxford Handbook *of* GLOBAL DRUG HISTORY

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CHAPTER 2

PSYCHOACTIVE DRUGS IN EUROPEAN PREHISTORY

ELISA GUERRA-DOCE

In a passage of his *Histories*, written around the mid-fifth century BCE, the Greek historian Herodotus was surprised by a curious habit of the Scythians, a nomadic Central Asian "barbarian" group. The Scythians inhaled burning fruits of cannabis during their funerary ceremonies. The way Herodotus described both the plant itself and its euphoria-inducing properties indicates hemp was probably unfamiliar to the Greeks. The Massagetae, another "barbarian" group who lived farther to the east, also inhaled the fumes of a certain plant, possibly hemp, and according to Herodotus, "they become intoxicated by the odor, just as the Greeks do by wine."[1] This comparison is remarkable: Would this imply that ancient Europeans, or at least the societies of the classical world, preferred alcohol to drug plants as mind-altering products? After all, there is a rich body of evidence supporting the deep roots of alcohol in Eurasia, and more particularly wine is one of the cultural hallmarks of ancient Greece and Rome.[2] Moreover, it is significant that the Greek word *pharmakon* can be translated as both drug (remedy) and poison. It seems, then, that the Greeks were familiar with nonalcoholic drugs, but there was a cultural preference toward the use of wine as an intoxicant.

The use of naturally occurring psychoactive substances (plants, mushrooms, animal venom/secretion, among others) has been a feature of most cultures in many regions of the world.[3] This should come as no surprise considering that the quest for intoxication seems to be a natural motivation of animal biology, and it functions in a very similar way to the drive for food, sleep, and sex. Drug-induced altered states of consciousness among humans can be traced back over millennia, as archaeological evidence illustrates how prehistoric societies drew on the mind-altering effects of specific local substances. Therefore, it seems quite logical to assume that the earliest inhabitants of Europe also consumed drug plants.[4]

However, while our remote ancestors recognized the effects of certain mind-altering products, the patterns of use and the cultural contexts in which they were consumed in the past dramatically differ from those encountered nowadays. To make a broad cultural

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