

EINKORN TALKING, JANUARY



Hello everybody, I'm Einkorn.

I'm the grain that started it all, the farming that led to civilizations in the Fertile Crescent and onward. Not bad for a grass, eh.

If it's the first time you're hearing a grass speak, relax. We have a long story ahead of us.

Now in January I'm not doing much. Those green tufts you see under a bit of snow cover, they're not growing in the cold. It's a kind of dormant state. The field got seeded late August, so the tufts in the furrows grew around eight inches tall before winter.

My most recent relatives, industrialized wheats, have either winter or spring habit, meaning that planting must come before or after winter, depending on cultivar. We ancient grains are more flexible, we're seeded as spring grain in some places, as winter grain in others. In general, winter grain is higher risk for the farmer because when temperatures plummet to extremes, winter kill will decimate the stand; but winter grains yield better than spring grain.

Out the kitchen window of the Lentz Spelt Farms farmstead on the Columbia Plateau in Eastern Washington, deer are a daily sight in winter, small herds traversing the field to feed where they feel safe. It's the sugar in the grass that draws them here from their hide-outs in the shrubsteppe coulees.

My theory is that some grasses turned sweet as a matter of coevolution. Grass needed a partner to fend off the trees who form forests with all that duff and shade. The best

way to keep trees off meadow, prairie and steppe was to attract grazing animals, and nothing draws them better than sugar.

Perhaps it's not a coincidence that Einkorn's place of origin is Turkey's Karacadag – *Deer Mountain*.

You yourself can taste the grassy sweetness in wheatgrass juice, a most peculiar flavor, rather different than cane or apple. Some folks swear by the stuff. Of course you can also grow trays of Farro grass from Einkorn or Emmer or Spelt seed for juicing; not surprisingly, even at this very young stage the Farro flavor is distinctly other than that of wheat.

But back to the concept of coevolution. Michael Pollan makes a point of it in his *The Botany of Desire*, choosing apple, tulip, cannabis and potato as examples of how humans and crop plants inter-relate in evolutionary terms. Humans benefit by way of sweetness, beauty, intoxication and control, respectively, he writes. The plant bends to human will because it desires species spread.

In the case of Einkorn, the grandest coevolutionary coup traces back to the trait that causes the spikelets to cling to the stem, even when the kernels are ripe. Some wise old woman must have noticed this trait in an Einkorn subpopulation, and realized that non-shattering grain makes for much better harvest gathering. Maybe she wondered how to encourage this particular subpopulation. Maybe that's how she hit on the idea (or was it a vision?) to save some seed for planting.

The consensus among historians seems to be that women were the first farmers, because as the gatherers in a tribe they were more attuned to botanical cycles. There is also consensus that agriculture started in several parts of the world, independently and in approximately the same era, namely after 500,000 years of human wandering: agriculture is a darn recent invention. We'd do well to keep that in mind.

On the rice terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras, where some tribes are still animists, harvest does not commence until sage old women have walked the fields and gathered seed for planting the next season. That's why we picture an old woman in the non-shattering Einkorn. Seed gathering was not a task but a rite.

The pre-agrarian grain storages archeologists have unearthed in the Levant were likely built by men.

Of course we can question the long-range human benefit of becoming agrarians with homesteads, then agriculturists on commercial farms, then dependants, mostly, on ag industries, in thrall to the military-industrial complex. The resurgence of Einkorn lately signals a small reversal of the trends.

Inbetween wars and exploitation, some periods of peaceful farming did occur while an immense agricultural biodiversity established itself: as farming spread, each ecosystem newly conquered by Einkorn changed the species through subpopulation shifts. Also, some mutations undoubtedly survived in some places, not in others. Before long there were thousands of landraces. (*Landrace* is the term for a crop variety selected from naturally occurring species variations, in contrast to cultivars arrived at by breeding, biotechnology, and/or chemically-forced mutation.)

Take that long rock 40 miles south of Turkey, the island of Cyprus. Archeologists say that the first Cypriots arrived probably from Asia Minor, bringing with them a few animal and plant species – Einkorn! – new to the island. The migration was one-way; proof of this is that the early Cypriot culture developed very differently than nearby mainland cultures. For one, these Cypriots remained an *aceramic* culture, meaning that they were a people without pottery. They also established the strange custom of burying their dead folded-up inside their circular stone houses. *Grandpa's still around, right here under the flagstones*, is how archeologists explain the custom.

An expanse of forest covered Cyprus in those days. In meadow areas, Einkorn adapted to local climate and soil conditions, changing some of its traits in the process just as the isolated human culture changed over time.

It wasn't long, however, before the forests of Cyprus were felled; copper had been discovered – *Cyprus* has its root in the word *copper*, linguists speculate –, and wood was needed for smelting. It was an early case of deforestation that must have altered growing conditions, from acidic soils to alkaline. And once again Einkorn on Cyprus adapted, changing traits.

The Cypriots didn't stay isolated for long – colonization defines the island, empire after empire successively invading, Phoenicians, Achaeans, Assyrians, Macedonians, Egyptians, Persians, and so on.

Einkorn, meanwhile, had already spread far and wide by the Copper Age, as

evidenced by that Copper Age fellow Ötzi The Iceman, whose last meal shortly before his death had been Einkorn. Mummified by a glacier in the Alps, he's now on display in Italy. Poor guy – this can't be restful.

On Cyprus today, cereal grain conveys an Arcadian feeling, the fields bent around trees. They're invariably small fields, a few hectares is all, with a couple dozen olive trees and carob trees in irregular pattern left to produce. The harvest of carob – a relative of pea – is locally used as animal feed; some is exported to Europe as syrup and other products.

But the topic of companion crops belongs in another chapter. Suffice to say that Cyprus grain fields are an agrarian beauty in these eyes.