

soap history

The history of soap making is very slippery indeed. Although it is one of the oldest industries in the world it is uncertain when soap was actually first made. There are myths and counter myths about its origin, but evidence of soap making dates back to about 2500 BC in Mesopotamia in an area known as ‘the cradle of civilization’ that is, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and now known as southern Iraq.

Roman legend has it that soap got its name from Mount Sapo where animals were sacrificed and the residual mixture of the sacrificial animal fat, wood ashes and rainwater flowed down to the Tiber River where the peasant women washed their clothes. They discovered that the soapy mixture from the fats and wood ashes made their clothes cleaner with less effort.

Bathing with soap and feeling clean is a pleasurable experience, and it is small wonder that the ancient Romans became obsessed with bathing as evidenced by the city’s many gigantic and elaborate public baths.

Soap making was established as a craft in Europe around the seventh century. Italy, France and Spain were early soap manufacturing centres due to the readily available supply of olive oil which became very popular for making high quality soaps. The natural *Savon de Marseille* became the most popular soap in France; it contained a blend of coconut, palm and 72 per cent pure olive oil. In 1688 Louis XIV decreed the ‘Edict of Colbert’; a law banning the use of fragrance, animal fats and colour in the manufacture of *Savon de Marseille*.

Coventry and London became soap making centres with many small business operations. The soap making industry became very lucrative and was heavily taxed. In 1632 King Charles I decreed that soap kettles should be fitted with padlocks to prevent tax evasion and a tax inspector must be present for any soap boiling. As a result of the heavy soap taxes, soap became too expensive for the lower classes to afford. The last soap tax was repealed in 1853, when Gladstone was Chancellor, making it possible for ordinary people to afford to buy soap.

As soap making was heavily regulated by the authorities it became difficult for the soap makers to conduct their business or have access to essential supplies. As a result soap makers learned to use a variety of oils to make their products. Modern soap making relies on the knowledge of oils and fats they developed because of the restrictions of early regulation of the trade and the work of French chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul who, in 1811, discovered unique chemical characteristics of oils and fats. We benefit from this today as high quality soaps are often made using several types of oils and fats, each with its own unique characteristics.

Commercial soap making really took off after Nicolas Leblanc discovered a way to make soda ash (sodium bicarbonate) from common table salt. Ernest Solvay's invention, in the mid-1800s, of the ammonia process for making soda ash, was another scientific advance which changed the status of good quality soap from a luxury item to an affordable everyday commodity.

The chemistry of soap manufacturing changed significantly in 1916 when the first synthetic detergent was developed in Germany in response to the shortage of fats during World War I. Most products on the market today are not true soaps by definition. They are termed 'beauty bars' because they are compositionally closer to detergents, similar to most brands of washing detergents. Just imagine soaking in a hot bath of washing powder – definitely not! Although modern chemistry has refined the raw materials and the techniques, soap making is fundamentally the same as it was two thousand years ago.