

EDITORIAL

The archaic use of hallucinogens in Europe: an archaeology of altered states

The contemporary European use of intoxicants such as alcohol, synthetic narcotics, solvents and hallucinogens is the subject matter of the latest chapter in the long and little understood story of our civilization's interaction with psychoactive substances. This story is usually told in a greatly abridged form, beginning with alcohol as the inebriant *par excellence* of European culture and relegating the role of opium, cannabis and other intoxicants to mere footnotes. The unabridged version, which begins back in prehistory, sheds an entirely new light on the sequence of events with which we are familiar from the badly edited popular account.

Alcohol is, in fact, a rather late arrival on the prehistoric stage. Its use originated in Mesopotamia and the eastern Mediterranean in the fourth millennium BC and gradually filtered through the Early Bronze Age cultures of the Aegean and Anatolia, eventually reaching the shores of the Atlantic around 2500 BC. A number of the most important ceramic forms in the archaeological record have been identified as vessels used for the consumption of alcoholic beverages. In the process of its diffusion the drinking complex gradually displaced the use of other psychoactive plants including the opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum*) and hemp (*Cannabis sativa*) both of which were cultivated by Stone Age farmers. Current research indicates that the opium poppy was domesticated as early as the sixth millennium BC in the west Mediterranean region. Palaeobotanical evidence from a number of European Neolithic sites demonstrates its widespread use and the discovery of globular grass bags containing opium capsules at a multiple burial site in southern Spain (c. 4200 BC) highlights its role in indigenous ritual life. Various Neolithic archaeological sites in France have yielded up considerable numbers of a distinctive type of ceramic bowl known as a 'vase support'.

These artefacts have recently been interpreted by the Oxford prehistorian Andrew Sherratt as braziers for ritual inhalation e.g. of 'opium' (Sherratt, 1991). Approximately 160 such braziers have been found in a sacred enclosure at a megalithic site in Brittany indicating the scale of this opium cult. The case for the prehistoric use of cannabis is similarly well documented both by palaeobotanical remains and pottery braziers. The finds from a later third millennium BC burial site in Romania include a brazier containing charred hemp seeds. Other such artefacts from the period have been found elsewhere in eastern Europe and the ritualistic use of cannabis continued to flourish into the Iron Age (Sherratt, 1991; Rudgley, 1993). Like alcohol, opium and cannabis spread from east to west and in their wake probably supplanted other, earlier, intoxicants as they themselves were to be eclipsed by the dominant drinking complex.

With the present state of knowledge we can only speculate which other psychoactive plants were used in more archaic times. Likely candidates include the hallucinogenic black henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*) which was a common weed in and around prehistoric settlements in Britain and elsewhere (Lambrick & Robinson, 1979). The remains of various fungi have been found in a number of prehistoric contexts (most famously with the 5000-year-old Alpine 'Iceman' discovered in 1991) although they are species known by ethnographic analogy to have been used as tinder and in the treatment of wounds. It has been suggested that certain recurrent motifs of Scandinavian Bronze Age art are representations of the psychoactive fly-agaric mushroom *Amanita muscaria* (Kaplan, 1975) although this hypothesis is not confirmed by any hard palaeoethnobotanical evidence. Nevertheless, bearing in mind the later circumboreal use of *Amanita muscaria* among hunting peoples, the

archaic use of this or other hallucinogenic species of fungi cannot be dismissed out of hand.

A number of distinguished investigators have sought to overcome what Claude Lévi-Strauss has called Anglo-Saxon mycophobia by proposing a central role for hallucinogenic fungi among the ancient Greeks. Ergot (*Claviceps* spp.) has been put forward by R. Gordon Wasson, Carl Ruck and Albert Hofmann (the latter of whom first derived LSD-25 from ergot) as the intoxicant used by adepts in the Eleusinian Mysteries. Robert Graves had earlier suggested that a number of hallucinogenic fungi were utilized in Dionysian rites and the Mysteries including *Amanita muscaria*, *Psilocybe* spp. and *Panaeolus papilionaceus*, the latter of which is still used by Portuguese witches (Graves, 1976).

The most widely used psychoactive preparations of the European witch-cult were not derived from fungi but from other sources. The so-called flying ointments of the witches were, in fact, hallucinogenic salves administered transdermally (Rudgley, 1993). That they were known in antiquity is demonstrated by the use of such an ointment by the sorceress Pamphilē in the *Golden Ass* of Apuleius. Extant seventeenth century recipes for the ointments include diverse human and faunal ingredients (most of which are physiologically inactive) and a number of psychoactive substances of plant origin. Among these were alcohol, opium, cannabis, thorn apple (*Datura*), sweet flag (*Acorus calamus*) and, most commonly, the 'infernal trinity' of solanaceous plants—deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*), black henbane and the mandrake (*Mandragora officinarum*) all three of which contain the tropane alkaloids scopolamine, hyoscyamine and atropine. The hallucinogenic properties of all three have been verified by modern experimenters including the noted toxicologist Gustav Schenk (Schenk, 1956).

The significance of hallucinogens in the European witch-cult was widely recognized at the time by both the clergy (Lea, 1907) and physicians (Harner, 1973). The sheer number of psychoactive plants known to have been used in European witchcraft suggests that in pre-Christian practices there was a highly sophisticated cultural complex utilizing hallucinogens. In its ethnobotanical sophistication and integration of

intoxicants into the religious life it may be instructively compared with the shamanic use of hallucinogens in regions of Mesoamerica and the Amazon Basin. The hallucinogens consumed by the 'pagan' witches in their ecstatic rites became degraded to satanic plants under the intellectual and political domination of an ascetically inclined Church. The subsequent nomenclature of European folk botany attests to the relegation of these fallen sacraments.

Thus, not only is European history preceded by a long and continuous prehistoric tradition of intoxicant use (refuting any notion that opium and cannabis are recent, exotic imports) but it is also accompanied by a shadowy substratum of hallucinogen use preserved in the annals of witchcraft. The post-war proliferation of hallucinogen use in Europe is, in the light of such archaeological and archival findings, not so much an experiment with exotic drugs but a revival of archaic practices, albeit in a debased and almost exclusively recreational form.

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