

New Data from the Ethnomycology of Psychoactive Mushrooms

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This presentation focuses on the research on the ethnology of psychoactive mushrooms developed during the last 20 years, after the pioneering work by Robert Gordon Wasson, the “father” of modern ethnomycology.

The most important new data refer to the Old World, particularly Africa, southern India, and Europe. Through two research missions in the core of the Sahara Desert (Tassili, Algeria), the author focused attention on a group of rock paintings, the works of prehistoric Early Gatherers dating back to 9000–7000 B.P., in which mushroom effigies are represented repeatedly. The polychromic scenes of harvest, adoration, and the offering of mushrooms, and large masked “gods” covered with mushrooms, lead us to suppose we are dealing with an ancient hallucinogenic mushroom cult.

Another significant archaeological documentation referring to an old mushroom religious cult is located in the Kerala State, southern India. It belongs to a megalithic culture dating back to 1000 B.C.–100 A.C. In particular, the so-called *kuda-kallu* (“umbrella-stone”) attracted the author’s attention during two research missions. They may resemble a parasol, but even more a large mushroom. There seems to be no direct relationship between these megalithic monuments and the Indoeuropean (Vedic) culture. Indeed, the *kuda-kallu* are works by pre-Indo-European people, that is, by Dravidian people.

In Europe, an effigy of a mushroom, very likely fly-agaric, is carved on a rock engraving of

Mount Bego, southern France, dating back to ca. 1800 B.C. and belonging to an Indo-European Bronze Age culture. The mushroom effigy is inserted in a scene with shamanistic connotations. Further important archaico-ethnomycological documentation is to be found in the Greek culture. In particular, the author discusses a 5th century B.C. bas-relief from Pharsalus (Thessaly). The two goddesses of the Eleusinian Mysteries, Demeter and Persephone, are represented, showing each other various objects, two of which have a mushroomlike shape. This bas-relief takes us to the very heart of the “Eleusinian question,” its mysteries, and the controversial issue of Eleusinian ethnobotany and psychopharmacology.

Finally, various examples of the so-called “mushroom trees” to be found in early and medieval Christian art works from a number of churches in Tunisia, central France, and other regions of Europe are presented and discussed. The author makes it clear that the works of art presented here are considered from the point of view of the possible esoteric intention of the artists in their inclusion of the mushroom motif. The author reaches two main conclusions, based on the most recent research. First, the typological differentiation among the “mushroom trees” of these works would appear due to a natural variation among psychoactive mushrooms. Second, on the basis of analysis of the works in question, a call is made for a serious and unprejudiced ethnomycological study of early Christian culture.