

Through the Door...

Through the door and the holes in the wall claws are crawling;
Through the door and the holes in the wall the flights glide.
It's the rustle of hippogriffs' wings and silk falling,
and a flurry of snowflakes, a soft drifting tide.

In the air hover hieroglyphs, darkly entralling:
Skinny necks twist around in mischievous pride
To decipher their meaning. Then, wheeling aside,
The flock lights on wasteland, clumsily sprawling,

And marches, a band of prim pundits in column,
Mumbling strange words in a gibberish obscure—
Single-minded, their beaks so ascetic ignore

The spiders which gnomes, with their hands far from solemn,
Have displayed in the corners like fruit on a stand...
The procession advances, to some distant land.

Alfred Jarry 1893 (*Translated* by Simon Watson Taylor)

From the Entheomycological Society's Collection

In ancient times, the dictum that the “mushrooms are the food of the gods” was a familiar one. Probably the oldest written record of fungi in general was provided by Euripides (480–406 B.C.). The first written mention of inebriating mushrooms and the rituals associated with them comes from the historical document *Historia General da las Cosas de Nueva España*, which was compiled between 1529 and 1590 by the Franciscan missionary Bernardino de Sahagún. This work contains what is probably the oldest graphic depiction of the ritual consumption of mushrooms (*teomanacatl*). The very earliest representation of mushrooms is a rock painting in the Tassili plain of the southern Sahara (Algeria), which has been dated to the late Neolithic period. The conjectures that Euripides wrote about psychedelic mushrooms and that the rock art in the desert are depictions of early mushroom shamans appear in a new light as a result of the knowledge and discoveries of modern ethnomycology.

The Neoplatonist Porphyrios (third century A.D.) referred to mushrooms as “the children of the gods.” The poets spoke lovingly of the “children of the earth” (Lonicerus, 1679). Many researchers have suggested that the divine “drink of immortality”—whether known as soma, haoma, *amrita*, ambrosia, or *nektar*—was a fungus or, more precisely, a psychoactive mushroom. Even the tree of knowledge has been interpreted as a fly agaric mushroom, and Christianity as originally a secret mushroom cult. Similarly, the Sufis are said to have employed mushrooms, which they called the “bread of crows” so that they could know God. Terence McKenna (1946–2000) has advanced the hypothesis that psilocybin mushrooms of the species *Psilocybe cubensis* were the catalyst in primate evolution that led our apelike ancestors to become human.

We are only beginning to understand the immensely important role psychoactive fungi have played in human cultures. The branch of science that investigates these questions was founded by an American banker, R. Gordon Wasson (1898–1986), and is known as ethnomycology.

There is no debate about the fact that the psychoactive fly agaric mushroom is associated with shamanism. Over the past decades, it has become ever clearer that this mushroom was or is used throughout the world. In spite of all the efforts that have been made to prove it, Wasson’s thesis that the fly agaric was the renowned soma of the Aryans is still unproved, as is the question of whether the fly agaric was the tree of knowledge. The suggestion that the fly agaric was in fact a secret means for buddhist monks to induce states of enlightenment remains speculation as well. Moreover, it is uncertain when the mushroom was first used for shamanic purposes. However, it has been possible to confirm that it had a shamanic significance in the Germanic regions. And it is possible that the fly agaric found ritual use among the prehistoric Beaker people, who used Stonehenge as a ritual site.

Although the shamanic use of the fly agaric in Siberia was discovered only in the eighteenth century, it has been suggested that its use is rooted in the Stone Age and that it was used throughout Europe. Wasson has suggested that the fly agaric and its effects were well known and its shamanic usage was common throughout Asia before the Bering Straits were crossed. When the Paleoindians migrated into North America, they brought the fly agaric cult with them and continued it in the Americas.

In his book *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* (1970), John Allegro, a former Jesuit who apparently had access to certain ancient writings that are preserved in the Vatican but unavailable to the public, advanced the theory that Jesus was actually a fly agaric mushroom and that the so-called original Christianity was a secret fly agaric cult. The fly agaric was the flesh of Christ that was consumed at the evening meal—a nocturnal cult circle—together with the blood of Christ, red wine. If Allegro is correct, then the original Christianity would have been a direct continuation of the cult of Dionysos, in which the adherents apparently consumed a wine that contained mushrooms.

Robert Graves has argued that ambrosia, which the centaurs used to honor Dionysos in the autumn, was in fact fly agaric. He has also suggested that the maenads did not merely consume beer or wine to which ivy had been added, but that they also were inebriated from fly agarics.

Joseph Wohlberg views the Thracian Dionysos Sabazios as the analog of the Indian soma and the Persian haoma and has propounded the theory that the Thracian god is identical to the fly agaric mushroom. The greek scholar Carl Ruck has suggested that the secret offering of the Hyperboreans to the Delian Apollo was a fly agaric mushroom and was thus the last reminder of the Indo-Germanic soma. He views the leopard, the sacred animal of Dionysos, as a symbol for the fly agaric, which was consumed ritually and used for entheogenic purposes, because the marks on the leopard's coat resemble those on a dried fly agaric cap. In general, Ruck regards the fly agaric as the original entheogen of the Greek culture(s), which over the course of time was replaced by a variety of (placebo) agents and ultimately forgotten. The pine and spruce were sacred to Dionysos because they are the trees with which the fly agaric lives in a symbiotic relationship. The Golden Fleece and the golden apples of the Hesperides have also been interpreted as fly agarics. Vestiges of this ancient or archaic fly agaric cult may have been preserved among the Basques and in Catalonia.

It is possible that the fly agaric was known in Egypt by the name *raven's bread*. Because some legends say that Saint Anthony nourished himself in the wilderness on bread that had been brought to him by ravens or similar birds, it has been suggested that fly agarics produced the visions that tempted Saint Anthony. It has also been proposed that the fly agaric was the "elixir" of the alchemists of the late ancient and subsequent periods; it has even been interpreted as the Grail.

Carl Ruck interpreted a very enigmatic scene in Aristophanes' *Birds* as an allusion to a mushroom cult surrounding the philosopher Socrates:

Amidst the shade-foots / there is a certain swamp / where Socrates, unwashed, / summons up souls. /
Amongst his clients came Peisander, / who begged to see a spirit that had forsaken / him / while he
remained alive.

"Shade-foot," or *monocoli*, was a paraphrase for anthropomorphic mushrooms. The "pond" was the secret swamp of Dionysos in Athens. The "unwashed" Socrates was impure because he had profaned the lesser Eleusinian mysteries, i.e., had carried them out in his own home. This is the reason why he was regarded as a summoner of souls, because he had induced the youth, represented here by Peisander, to consume the sacred drug. That the latter would search for the soul that had slipped out of his living body (a thoroughly shamanic motif) during an appropriate mushroom ritual can be understood only in this way. According to Ruck, the main mysteries at Eleusis, during which *kykeon* was administered, were contrasted by these "lesser rites" in which entheogenic mushrooms were cultically consumed. Support for this assertion comes from a late ancient relief found in Eleusis that dates to the fourth century A.D. On the relief are Demeter and Persephone; the great Goddess is shown holding a mushroom in her hand, which she is presenting to Persephone.

Christian Rätsch, (from *The Encyclopedia of Psychoactive Plants: Ethnopharmacology and Its Applications*, 1998/2005).

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