



# NETWORK FEEDBACK

## ELEUSINIAN BAS-RELIEF?

Does anyone have any further feedback on the archaeological photograph on page 14 of STAMETS' *Psilocybin Mushrooms of the World*? Where does this bas-relief come from? While STAMETS' book seems authoritative enough, this photograph could have been better footnoted or referenced (thereby increasing the astonishing historical implications). — D.C., PA

The photo credit in *Psilocybin Mushrooms of the World* lists "GIORGIO SAMORINI & G. CAMILLA" as the photographers of this piece. Indeed, a "positive" photograph of this same image adorns the cover of *Eleusis, the Italian/English entheogen-related publication currently edited by GIORGIO SAMORINI and JONATHAN OTT* (see the *SUMMER SOLSTICE 1998 ER* p. 49 for more on the latest incarnation of *Eleusis*). We asked Mr. SAMORINI for additional information on this image:

## THE PHARSALUS BAS-RELIEF AND THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES

FIGURE 7 presents the 5th century BC bas-relief from Pharsalus (Thessaly, Greece), now in the Louvre Museum in Paris (no. 701, appearing in the catalog under the name "The Exaltation of the Flower"). The two goddesses of the Eleusinian Mysteries are represented, DEMETER and PERSEPHONE, showing each other various objects (usually interpreted as being flowers) and exchanging them (BAUMAN 1993). Actually, the



PHOTO BY GIORGIO SAMORINI & G. CAMILLA

FIGURE 7. The Pharsalus bas-relief depicting DEMETER and PERSEPHONE.

object that the figure on the right (PERSEPHONE) is holding in her hand is more mushroom-like and the shape suggests this, rather than a flower. Even the manner in which she holds it, with the lower part of the 'stem' or 'stalk' between her two fingers, is suggestive of the way one normally holds up a mushroom to show it to others. In 1957 ROBERT GRAVES first proposed a mycological interpretation for this work of art in his book *Food for Centaurs*; however, he did not include an illustration (at least there isn't one in the 1994 Spanish edition). On considering this bas-relief, GRAVES concluded that the prophetic inspiration of the Mysteries of Eleusis originates in *Amanita muscaria* (GRAVES 1994: 92). Strangely, he presented this idea to R. GORDON WASSON in 1957, which means that WASSON was actually aware of this bas-relief more-or-less twenty years before he and his collaborators proposed *ergot* as the Eleusinian entheogen. But WASSON included no discussion of this in his publications. GRAVES reports that WASSON also tended toward a mycological interpretation of the Pharsalus bas-relief, but: "since he was more cautious than me, he had doubts about stating his opinion on such an important matter as this until he had received expert advice" (*ibidem* 1994: 92; translated from the Spanish version).

I presented this bas-relief and discussed the basic idea in an article published in Italy (SAMORINI *et al.* 1995). With this current article, I intend to provide further information and a few more thoughts on the matter. This bas-relief takes us to the very heart of the "Eleusinian question," its mysteries, and the controversial issue of the Eleusinian entheogen's psychopharmacology. Researchers have recently cast





doubts on and rejected the hypothesis put forward by WASSON, HOFMANN & RUCK in 1978 that presents ergot and its visionary alkaloids as the psycho-pharmacological key to the Eleusinian Mysteries (MCKENNA 1993; VALENCIC 1994). Furthermore, even though they were apparently not familiar with the Pharsalus bas-relief, the agent that they considered the most likely Eleusinian entheogen is a species of psilocybian mushroom. The bas-relief would seem to confirm this hypothesis, but we must be careful not to rush to conclusions.

My own opinion is that in-depth analysis of this work leads to the conclusion that the original psychopharmacological key to the Mysteries is *not* a psilocybian mushroom. The bas-relief features three hands holding objects. The first object, the highest up in the bas-relief, is held by PERSEPHONE. It is shaped like a mushroom of the *Psilocybe* species or, as is more likely, a *Panaeolus*. DEMETER holds the second object. It is the same as the first—the same mushroom—but it is tilted and the hood would appear to be chipped. Alternatively, as GRAVES (1994: 92) suggests, it isn't chipped at all. His interpretation is that the fragment is intentionally missing because DEMETER is meant to have eaten it; this detail stresses the importance of *eating* taking place during the rite. Only careful examination of this bas-relief will help us establish if the mushroom hood was accidentally chipped or was instead meant to be incomplete. In any case, we can hypothesize that DEMETER and PERSEPHONE are holding mushrooms in their hands and that during *this* period and in *this* region—*i.e.* for *this kind* of Eleusinian Mystery—a psilocybian key may be perceived. In this context, we should not forget the important, albeit isolated, piece of ethnomycological information provided by CARL RUCK that, today, in some regions of Greece, the inhabitants are aware of a number of species of visionary mushrooms that are not *Amanita muscaria* and which go by the name of “crazy mushrooms.” The mushrooms are not considered toxic but rather “inebriating like wine, although in an entirely different way” (in WASSON *et al.* 1978: 122). It is therefore surprising to learn that RUCK should continue to identify the mushroom-like objects in the Pharsalus bas-relief as flowers, specifically roses (RUCK 1998) when there are no rose varieties or even parts of roses that are similar in any way to the mushroom shape seen in the bas-relief. This is an extremely realistic scene. However, the real enigma here is the third object DEMETER has in her left hand. If the first two objects represent visionary mushrooms—that is, if they represent a psychopharmacological key—we might suppose that the third object is also of similar psychopharmacological significance, and that it would be as immediately identi-

fiable (to initiates) as are the first two objects. We therefore have *two* psychopharmacological keys. This emerges clearly from the history of the Eleusinian Mysteries. When we consider these Mysteries, we must bear it in mind that we are dealing with an entheogenic cult that lasted 2,000 years in all and was present throughout the Mediterranean basin, not just at Eleusis (an example is the cult of the two Eleusinian goddesses in Sicily, with its specific regional connotations). This cult became increasingly complex from the psychopharmacological angle as well. First, we have DEMETER, the Mother Goddess of the neolithic period. Then PERSEPHONE, who is followed by other divinities, including DIONYSUS. The author of *The Homeric Hymn to DEMETER* (one of the oldest mythical renderings of the foundation of the Eleusinian cult) was unaware of the existence of DIONYSUS. This lack of awareness is also reflected in the 5th century BC epigraphic collections. Only during the second half of the 5th century BC does DIONYSUS enter into the scene in relation to Eleusis in Attic literary and artistic works (SFAMENI 1986). This is also the period of the Pharsalus bas-relief. If we consider the fact that visionary mushrooms belong more to the Dionysian sphere (SAMORINI *et al.* 1995) and that what we see in this bas-relief relates to the final phase of the Eleusinian cult and its psychopharmacology, it is possible to ascribe the presence of mushrooms to a Dionysian influence.

During the final phase, two rites made up the structure of the Eleusinian Mysteries—the Lesser and Greater Mysteries. We may therefore suggest that there were two entheogens and that these are represented by the two types of objects featured in the Pharsalus bas-relief.

We should remember that the researchers who sustain the ergot hypothesis also postulated two Eleusinian entheogens. CARL RUCK suggests that the entheogens used in the Lesser Mysteries of Agrai (reflecting the Dionysian influence) and the Greater Mysteries of Eleusis (the *kykeon* brew) were a species of mushroom and ergot, respectively (WASSON *et al.* 1978: 114–123). RUCK believes the mushroom was *Amanita muscaria*. However, psilocybian mushrooms are also likely candidates—as the Pharsalus bas-relief might suggest. We must not forget that the *complete* hypothesis put forward by WASSON and colleagues was that of the use, as part of the Eleusinian Mysteries, of psychoactive mushrooms *and* ergot. This complete hypothesis has been ignored by those critics of the ergot hypothesis who instead favor the mushroom hypothesis.





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As to the enigmatic third object held by DEMETER in the Pharsalus bas-relief, there are still no definite answers. Apart from the rose or some other generic 'flower,' a number of researchers have advanced the theory that it is a phallus or a fish. The phallus is not very likely as Greek artists have never represented a phallus in this manner (and they were masters of this art). What about the fish? But where are its fins? ROBERT GRAVES interpreted this object as a leather bag "such as those used for prophetic dice" (GRAVES 1994: 92; translated from the Spanish version). The problem here is that there is no known reference to the use of dice or other divinatory practices in the Eleusinian Mysteries. CARL RUCK sees this object as a symbol of the 'old religion' existing before the reform which, at a certain stage, the Eleusinian cult underwent (RUCK 1998). I personally think that this third object is an important clue to the identity of the original Eleusinian entheogen and, at the 1996 San Francisco ENTHEOBOTANY conference, I advanced the hypothesis that it represented a piece of bread formed in a specific manner (SAMORINI 1996).

For a more comprehensive criticism of McKENNA's and VALENCIC's objections to the ergot hypothesis, mentioned earlier, I would point out that they rest their case on the fact that no non-toxic entheogenic ergot-based brew has yet been produced. Be this as it may, what little has been carried out in the way of self-experimentation with ergot or ergot alkaloids (ergonovine, methyl-ergonovine; cf. BIGWOOD *et al.* 1979; OTT & NEELEY 1980) has not been as unfruitful as VALENCIC (1994) imagines. Moreover, the fact that a few number of experiments involving self-administration have failed means very little if we consider the great variety—in quantitative and qualitative terms—not only of the species that produce ergot alkaloids, but also of the possible manners of extraction and types of potion.

It is sufficient for us to note that in all there are at least 30 recognized species of *Claviceps* (ergot) and that *C. purpurea* alone infects at least 450 plant species (nearly all of which are grasses), *C. paspali* infects 36 plant species, *C. pusilla* 35, *C. nigricans* 12, and so forth. Alkaloid content varies greatly. Some strains do not produce alkaloids; others produce mostly toxic alkaloids and others produce mainly—perhaps, in some instances, only—psychoactive alkaloids, as is the case with the ergot strain (no. 178) isolated in the Mississippi region from *Cynodon dactylon* (L.) Pers. (Bermuda grass), a grass that is also frequently found in Europe. This strain produces significant quantities of alkaloids (of which 30% is ergonovine and 22% is ergonovine) (PORTER *et al.* 1974). A famous *C. paspali* strain isolated from *Paspalum*





*distichum* L. in the Rome area of Italy was found to produce mainly ergine and iso-ergine (ARCAMONE *et al.* 1960). Biotypes of *C. purpurea* have been divided into physiological, phenological and geographical kinds, and climatic types have been identified—such differentiation also affecting the typology of alkaloids produced. At least five chemical combinations have been identified in *C. purpurea*, and three in *C. paspali*. Furthermore, at least 16 kinds of *C. purpurea* have been identified on the basis of the specificity of the host plant (GRÖGER 1972). Perhaps the Hierophants of Eleusis had discovered an ergot strain endowed with naturally occurring psychoactive properties or a strain that was easy to prepare in a non-toxic manner, cultivated in the Rarian plain neighboring Eleusis. The priests of the Eleusinian temple had the right to farm cereals (not the psilocybian mushroom or *Amanita muscaria*) on this plain. Furthermore, new ethnobotanic data has come to light over the last few years in Peru, Africa and China which confirms that it is possible to obtain psychoactive brews from grasses and lower mushrooms of the *Clavicipitaceae* family. This data will be reviewed in G. SAMORINI, “A contribution to the discussion of the psychopharmacology of the Eleusinian Mysteries” (forthcoming).

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