

Psychoactive plants and Sacred medicine in ancient Greece



Pythia and the Oracle of Delphi.

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Psychoactive plants and Sacred medicine in ancient Greece

Introduction

- In Ancient Greece in a period before medicine was purely physical or biochemical, treatments for ailments of the body were believed to be found through divine intervention and also in accessing hidden / repressed trauma in the mind and / or soul.
- Diseases were interpreted as punishment by the gods, either collective or individual but they were also considered as psychosomatic unbalances caused by traumas and by the disturbed relationship between the individual and the divine world.
- The most direct route to reaching information on the true reasons why disease was present and achieve health was found to be through rituals which were taking place in the Asclepeian Temples.
- In this talk I will focus on what is known about these rituals and the plants and substances that were involved in the ancient healing tradition of dream incubation.
- We will also see how psychoactive plants were used for medical and religious purposes in Ancient Greece.

Psychoactive plants and Sacred medicine in ancient Greece

Introduction

- Hallucinogens are substances that provoke false sensations or distort perception of the environment without causing loss of consciousness when taken in normal, non-toxic doses. They are also known as entheogens (substances that stimulate mysticism or divine communication).
- Numerous cultures have used these substances throughout history, and at present, many different ethnic groups still take part in rituals associated with the use of entheogenic plants.
- For example, mescaline and psilocybin-rich mushrooms are used by a number of Mesoamerican cultures. *Amanita muscaria* and *Ephedra* sp. were once used in Indo-European religious rites.
- They were probably included among the ingredients of soma, the sacred drink in the Rigveda, and Haoma, used in the ancient Zoroastrian religion.



**Minoan -Poppy Goddess
Figure, ca. 1300 BCE**

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Introduction

- In the Archaic period in Greece, poppies, cannabis, and other plants such as henbane or Belladonna were used for ritual and medicinal purposes.
- Ancient Greek Medicine was to a large extent Theurgic medicine (Magical in action). In Theurgical Medicine the cure for sickness was achieved with the help of all gods, mostly Apollo and Artemide; later healing art had it's own god: Asclepius.
- In the temples of Asclepius, the Asklepieia, prayers, sacrifices, offerings and magical rituals began to be associated with medical practical exercise and rational therapeutic systems. Rational Hippocratic Medicine found its own places in the cities: the iatreia.
- Although rational secular medicine, i.e. medicine founded on clinical observation and on the exploration of the natural causes of diseases, prevailed in Greece as late as the IV century B.C., testimonies of theurgical medicine survive in temples dedicated to the gods of medicine, e.g. Amphiaros and Asklepios.

Psychoactive plants and Sacred medicine in ancient Greece

Introduction

- Various references point to extended use in Greece of different psychoactive plants during the Archaic period. Opium was used to induce somnolence in the incubation rituals practiced in the temples of Asclepius, where patients were healed through the process of “Dream Incubation”.
- Nepenthe, described by Homer in the *Odyssey*, was probably an opium-based preparation; opium had been introduced to the Greeks by way of Egypt. On Crete, a Minoan shrine (1300 BCE) dedicated to the “poppy goddess” of fertility and health was discovered in the village of Gazi.
- Numerous golden seals from Mycenae and Boeotia show images of states of ecstasy associated with poppy consumption.
- Initiates in the Eleusinian Mysteries (1500 BCE-4th century CE), took kykeon, a psychoactive secret potion. It is thought that kykeon contained hallucinogenic substances that induced visions and the state of ecstasy associated with the Mysteries. Rye ergot, which contains lysergic acid amides, may have been one of the ingredients of the drink.

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- 1. Asclepius, god of medicine and the Asclepeia
- In Greek mythology, Asclepius was revered as the god of medicine. The son of Apollo and the mortal woman Coronis, Asclepius possessed the gift of healing, Apollo made love to Coronis, daughter of the king of Thessaly.



Statue of Apollo



Apollo and Coronis - Adam Elsheimer,
1607-1608

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Asclepius, god of medicine and the Asclepeia

- When he departed for Delphi, he left her guarded by a white crow. Some time later, the crow informed Apollo that Coronis had taken a new lover, the mortal man Ischys, to whom she was now betrothed.
- Apollo then cursed the crow, which has had black feathers ever since, and murdered Coronis. Before burning her body on a funeral pyre, Apollo snatched his son Asclepius from her womb.



Apollo and Coronis

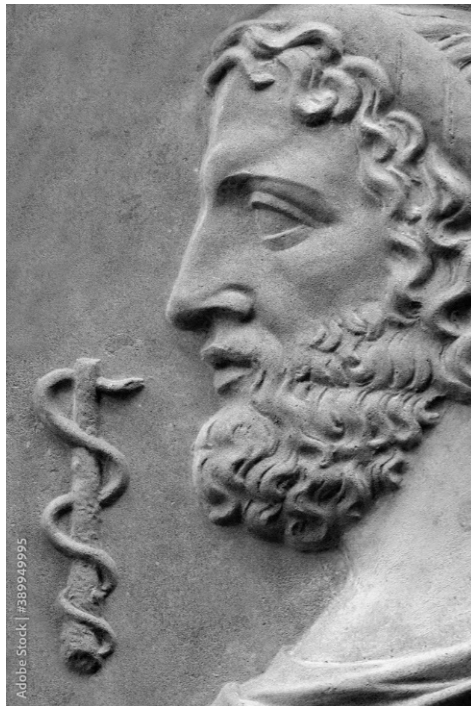


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Asclepius, god of medicine and the Asclepeia

- Asclepius was raised and educated by the centaur Chiron, who taught him the art of medicine, the use of medicinal plants, and pharmaka.
- But Zeus, envious of his healing powers and ability to resuscitate the dead, ended his life.
- After death, Asclepius rose to the heavens and became the constellation known as Ophiuchus, the serpent bearer; his symbol is a serpent entwined around a staff.

Asclepius and
Caduceus



Apollo entrusted
centaur Chiron
to train his son,
Asclepius

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Asclepius, god of medicine and the Asclepeia

- His sons Machaon and Podalirius continued practicing the medical arts their father had taught them. They were considered lesser gods, and Machaon is associated with surgery. A passage in the Iliad narrates how Menelaus sustained an arrow wound and was cured by Machaon.
- The daughters of Asclepius included Hygieia (the personification of health), Panacea (associated with universal cures), and Iaso (the goddess of recuperation).



Asclepius with his sons Machaon and Podalirius and his daughters Hygieia, Panacea and Iaso

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Asclepius, god of medicine and the Asclepeia

- Apollo was also considered an oracular god, and a major temple was dedicated to him in his sanctuary at Delphi, where the Pythia or oracle revealed her visions or predictions of the future.
- Apollo had the power to summon illnesses in the form of plagues and also to cure them.
- The figure of Asclepius was venerated in ancient Greek medicine, and his successors practiced his art in a network of sanctuaries and healing temples named asclepeia.
- Temples were often located near a spring or river whose waters were said to have medicinal powers.
- The shrine of Asclepius in Epidaurus was probably the most important during this period; other major shrines were located at Kos, Knidos, and Pergamum.

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Asclepius, god of medicine and the Asclepeia

- Within these healing temples, the sick made a series of offerings and sacrifices to Asclepius and underwent rituals including one-day fasts, three days of abstinence from wine, baths, and massages.
- The different buildings in the healing temple contained areas for physical exercise and special rooms for the sick.
- After finishing their purification rites, the sick were led to the abaton or incubation chamber where they would participate in a practice called 'dream incubation'.
- Asclepius would appear to a fortunate few in their dreams and cure them by touching the ailing part of their body.



Patients sleeping in the Asclepeion during the dream incubation procedure

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Asclepius, god of medicine and the Asclepeia

- On other occasions, Asclepius appeared in the dreams of the sick and informed them of what was causing their distress or provided a list of remedies that they should take upon waking.
- Many inscriptions show clinical cases, solved with the aid of the physician-god, who acts during the dream, which is an essential component in classical medicine and art of the medical treatment.



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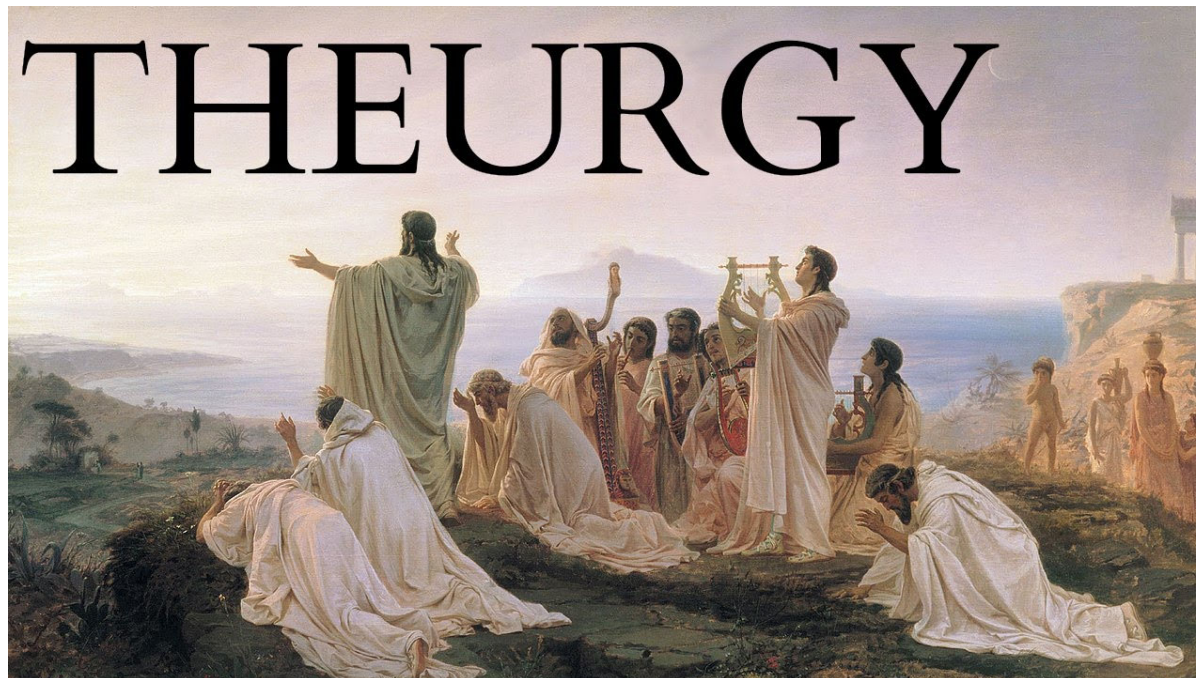
Asclepius, god of medicine and the Asclepeia

- The dream is the bridge between the sick persons and the healer god, who acts during the incubation of semisleeping patients in a forbidden room, near the temple.
- On the other hand, the dream in the Hippocratic medicine is useful for diagnostic purpose, other than for therapy.
- An extraordinary case of therapy for psychoneurotic diseases, such as melancholy or hypochondria, was the example of Aelius Aristides, who described his twelve-year experience of dreams related to Asklepiós in the Asklepieion of Pergamon.
- Numerous offerings and votive deposits were left in the temples in thanks for cures provided by the god.
- The exvotos that have been found inform us that Asclepius cured many diseases, treated ulcers and kidney stones, and restored sight to the blind indicate that sleep may have been induced by narcotics whose effects did not include the stupor provoked by the solanaceae family or the visionary trances caused by cannabis.
- With this in mind, opium is believed to be the main narcotic agent used in dream incubation.

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- 2.Theurgic medicine

- Ancient medicine was based on mythological beliefs and the idea that human beings were inferior to a divine power.
- Sickness was interpreted as punishment by the gods, and such punishment could either be collective (plagues) or individual (leprosy, blindness, insanity).
- Some sick people might be possessed by a malignant spirit or daimon, or as in cases of epilepsy, suffer from the effects of a curse.



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Theurgic medicine

- Theurgic medicine in ancient Greece was magical in nature and concerned with both prognosis and prevention; it also made use of a number of rituals.
- In the medicine described in Homer's epic the therapies, such as healing herbs, are a gift of the gods, the healing Apollo and Centaur Chiron. According to Hesiod, in the eighth century medicine was a combination of religious and magical elements along with hygienic rules, dietetics and healing herbs.
- Health and diseases were attributed to the gods and demons. All life events and diseases were happening because of human actions and the relationship between humans and the invisible world.
- Thus, theurgical medicine was practiced by the priests of Asklepius in the Asklepíeia which were built as places for all kinds of medical treatment.
- The Greeks practiced apotropaic magic (in order to avert evil influences or bad luck) and obtained the gods' favours through ritual sacrifices.
- Rites of propitiation and atonement were used in an attempt to ward off sickness. They used rites of katharsis to purge illness from the sick.

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Theurgic medicine

- This cleansing ritual made use of river water, although at times purification was achieved by using fire.
- The practice worked by the principle of analogy; it was believed that like followed like. Animals could therefore be used as vessels for illnesses, and their entrails were used after they were sacrificed.
- Logotherapy, healing with words, supplication, invoking the gods, commination and exorcism were yet other methods used by the priests at the Asclepeia, who served as intermediaries between patients and the gods.
- Niktiday -ceremonies with music and dancing- and nocturnal dances to purge the body of illness were used in this ritual context.
- An example of the magical approach to healing in ancient Greek medicine is the story of how Melampus healed the daughters of king Proetus by splashing pig's blood on their foreheads; the girls had been driven mad after refusing to participate in the rites of Dionysus.

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3.The emergence of Secular Medicine

- While use of healing temples was on the rise, botanical remedies for treating wounds were also being developed. Homer's Iliad contains a remarkably large anatomical vocabulary with more than 150 words.
- In the Iliad, Homer relates how Achilles treats and bandages the wounded arm of his friend Patroclus, which indicates a certain familiarity with techniques for treating war wounds.
- Later on, in the 6th century BCE, secular schools of medicine began to be founded which distanced themselves from the temples of Asclepius and their magical and spiritual approach.
- This was the birth of pre-Socratic and pre-Hippocratic medicine, which was further developed at the schools of Knido and Cos.
- These schools began using a scientific approach to analyzing symptoms, formulating the diagnosis, determining the prognosis, and prescribing treatment. These medical schools, which predate Hippocrates, would come to recognize that not all illnesses are curable and that no doctor can turn aside fate.

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The emergence of Secular Medicine

- The passage between theurgical / magical to secular rational medicine in ancient Greece is due to the naturalistic philosophers of the Ionian and the Hippocratic school, between 5th-4th century BC.
- In this era scientific observation became a common method of medical practice due to the physician working as a craftsman, arising from naturalistic philosophy, knowledge of anatomy, etiopathogenetic view of medicine and consideration of chronic diseases.

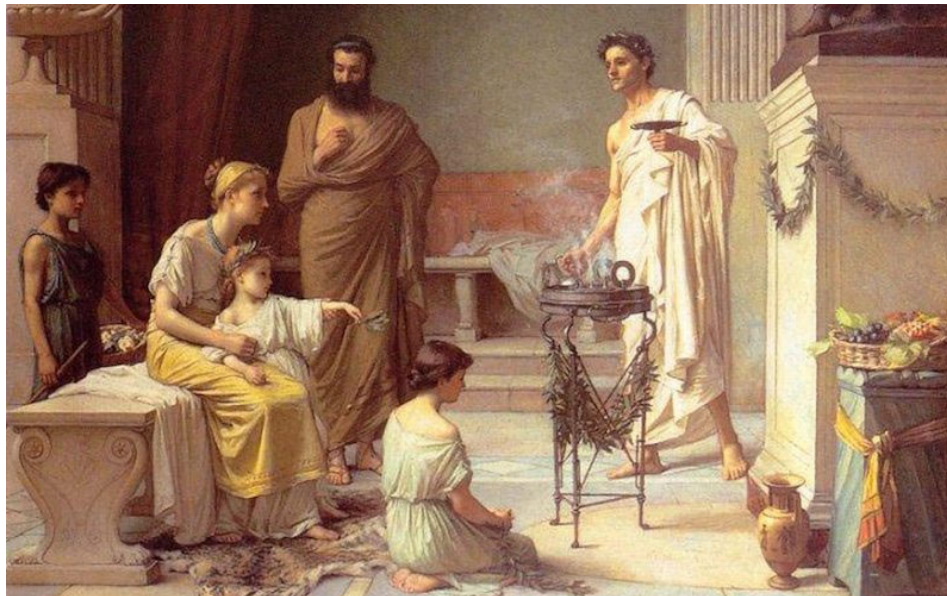


The ancient sanctuary of Epidaurus

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The emergence of Secular Medicine

- Health and diseases were thus seen as a balance of the whole person, holistic view of man.
- However, both theurgical and rational medicine coexisted in the temples of healing deified gods of medicine, i.e. Asklepion, Amphiaraos, etc.
- In the Asklepíeia the custom was to combine medicine with the practice of dreams (incubation) and theurgical aspects: the sacred spring, an odeïon or theatre, an ábaton for incubation and dreams, a temple devoted to the gods of healing (Apollo, Asklepius, Amphiaraos, etc.) were present together in those health buildings where physicians practiced medicine.



Patients in an Asclepeion

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2.Papaver somniferum

- The opium poppy is an annual herbaceous plant found throughout the entire Mediterranean region. Its mature encapsulated fruit and its sap contain a high concentration of alkaloids.
- The effects of opium are mainly due to its principal alkaloid morphine, which produces a sense of euphoria, happiness, and well-being, while at the same time lessening pain and inducing a state of drowsy contentment. Opium poppy consumption may cause nausea, vomiting, constipation, and headaches as side effects; users may also develop a tolerance and experience physical dependence.



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Papaver somniferum

- Homer's writings refer to the effects of a number of herbal potions made from different ingredients dissolved in wine. Nestor's drink in The Iliad, and the nepenthe referred to in The Odyssey, both fit this description.
- In the Hippocratic Treatises, Hippocrates recommends using poppy juice to treat a number of complaints, including leucorrhoea and dropsy of the womb. He indicates poppy ointment for treating eye problems.
- In the 3rd century BCE, members of the Empiric school, especially Heraclides of Tarentum, were deeply interested in psychoactive plants, and used opium to lessen pain and induce sleep. In this way, poppy juice made a name for itself as protective medicine.
- In contrast, in the 2nd century BCE in Pergamum, Nicander of Colophon described the drug's toxicity and stated that a lethal dosage of Thebaic opium could be as low 2 drachmas (7 g), with death certain to occur with 3 drachmas.
- At a later time, Scribonius Largus, physician to Emperor Claudius, rediscovered the Assyrian method of making incisions in the poppy pod and described it in his treatise Compositiones Medicamentorum.

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Papaver somniferum

- In Classical Greece, the opium poppy was used for sacred and profane ends, and it had both medicinal and nutritional properties. Poppies were associated with the gods in Classical Greek mythology. The ancient Greeks associated fertility and abundance with the poppy, which in turn was associated with the goddess Demeter.
- Demeter was therefore often depicted with opium poppies and sheaves of wheat and barley. Persephone and Narcissus are also associated with the poppy. Persephone is often shown rising from the underworld with a motif of poppy heads and lily leaves.



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3.Cannabis in Ancient Greece

- Hemp or Cannabis sativa has been used since antiquity for making cloth, foodstuffs (seeds), and psychotropic resins for any combination of medical, ritual, or spiritual purposes. Archaeological and ethnobotanical evidence shows that it has been used for more than 5000 years.
- Cannabis is made up of more than 400 alkaloids and substances extracted from Cannabis sativa. Some 60 compounds, called cannabinoids, act on the cannabinergic system; the most abundant are D9THC, cannabidiol, and cannabiol.
- D9THC is the main cannabinoid with psychotropic activity, and it was isolated in 1964.



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Cannabis in Ancient Greece

- Smoking cannabis is a relatively inefficient delivery method, since 70% of the D9THC is destroyed by pyrolysis. Historically, the oral route of administration was the most common.
- However, orally ingested cannabinoids are heavily metabolized at first, and as a result, only 10% to 20% of the dose taken orally actually reaches systemic circulation.
- The clinical peak effect is reached one to two hours after oral administration, and the effect lasts four to six hours. In contrast, delivery by the respiratory route has an almost instantaneous effect that is perceived within seconds.
- Cannabis has a euphoric and relaxing effect, although it may also cause sensations of panic and anxiety the first time or times it is consumed. In high doses, it can cause changes in temporal perception and orientation, intensify sensory experiences, and decrease attention, reaction time, and motor abilities.

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Cannabis in Ancient Greece

- Physiological changes due to cannabis intoxication include tachycardia and postural hypotension. However, the overall toxicity of cannabis is relatively low due to the short duration of its effect.
- Cannabis is frequently used along with tobacco in order to increase the efficiency of its effect.
- In the 5th century BCE, Herodotus wrote that inhaling cannabis smoke was a custom among Scythians and Massageteans of the steppes in purification rites held after the death of a member of the group.
- In his treatise Geography, Strabo indicates that this plant grew abundantly in Kolchis. He also mentions “those who walk in smoke”, referring to Getae dancers who burned cannabis flowers to reach states of ecstasy.
- Dioscorides, on the other hand, made no mention of its psychoactive properties. Instead, he records its use as a textile fibre and remedy for earache, and recommends direct application of the plant’s juice for that purpose.

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Cannabis in Ancient Greece

- Galen repeats Dioscorides' advice for otalgia and remarks on the intoxicating properties of the seeds. He states that some people consumed hempseed in sweets and desserts at important banquets in order to awaken pleasure and arousal.



Cannabis Indica



Cannabis Sativa

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4.Claviceps purpurea and the Eleusinian Mysteries

- The Eleusinian Mysteries were some of the most famous religious rites of Ancient Greece, in addition to being some of the most secretive. They were celebrated during nearly two millennia, from 1500 BCE until the 4th century CE.
- In the city of Eleusis, near Athens, participants honoured the goddess Demeter and recalled the abduction of her daughter, Persephone, by Hades the god of the underworld.

**General view of sanctuary
of Demeter and Kore and
the Initiation Hall center
for the Eleusinian
Mysteries**



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Claviceps purpurea and the Eleusinian Mysteries

- During the celebration of the Greater Mysteries, pilgrims journeyed from Athens to Eleusis and participated in a night-time ceremony involving drinking kykeon, a specially prepared hallucinogenic beverage.
- Participants who experienced marvelous visions were known as epoptai, or beholders. Famous figures including Aristotle, Plato, Sophocles, Pausanias and Pindarus participated in the Eleusinian Mysteries.
- Public sacrifices, rites, and purification ceremonies were performed during the procession associated with the Eleusinian Mysteries.



**Eleusis
archeological site**

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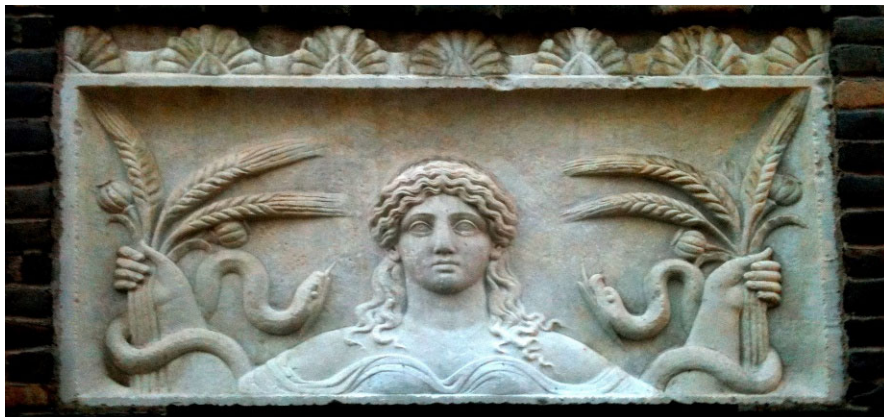
Claviceps purpurea and the Eleusinian Mysteries

- When the procession arrived at Eleusis, initiates fasted for a day to commemorate the fast of Demeter while she searched for Persephone. This fast was only broken to take kykeon.
- The Eleusinian ceremony, the most secret part of the mysteries, was celebrated in the great hall called the Telesterion on the night of the holiest day. Initiates participated in this visionary mystery only once in a lifetime, and were forbidden to reveal the content of the ceremony under pain of death.
- Kykeon was regarded as a secret potion that the enlightened ones were to take before initiation. It is thought that kykeon may have contained hallucinogenic substances that induced visions and the state of ecstasy associated with the Eleusinian Mysteries.
- By this method, initiates would enter a trance state, which was exacerbated by fasting and the preceding rituals.
- Kykeon was a mixture of several ingredients, including water, pennyroyal, and barley; the main ingredient was barley flour, which Hippocrates described as having nutritional (alimentary) properties.

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Claviceps purpurea and the Eleusinian Mysteries

- Hoffman, Wasson, and Ruck advanced the hypothesis that the Eleusinian state of ecstasy was provoked by alkaloids found in the ergot fungus which contaminated the grains of barley.
- The ergot fungus (*Claviceps purpurea*), parasitizes cereals in the Mediterranean region.
- It contains a wide variety of pharmacologically active substances, including more than 40 ergot alkaloids. An initiate could probably see his first visions after ingesting an infusion of cereals contaminated by ergot. It is believed that Eleusinian priests gathered ergot from cereals and paspalum grasses growing near the temple, ground it, and added it to the kykeon.



Demeter holding poppy heads, alongside her wheat and barley



Ergot fungus (*Claviceps purpurea*), parasitizes cereals

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Claviceps purpurea and the Eleusinian Mysteries

- Many other psychoactive agents have been proposed as the significant element of kykeon, though without consensus or conclusive evidence.
- Psychoactive mushrooms are another candidate. Scholars such as Robert Graves and Terence McKenna, speculated that the mysteries were focused around a variety of Psilocybe.
- Other entheogenic fungi, such as Amanita muscaria, have also been suggested.
- Another candidate for the psychoactive drug is an opioid derived from the poppy. The cult of the goddess Demeter may have brought the poppy from Crete to Eleusis; it is certain that opium was produced in Crete.



Great Eleusinian Relief (c 430 BC) depicting the ritual of the Mysteries. Athens museum

Psychoactive plants and Sacred medicine in ancient Greece

- **Claviceps purpurea and the Eleusinian Mysteries**
- Another theory is that the psychoactive agent in kykeon is DMT, which occurs in many wild plants of the Mediterranean, including Phalaris and/or Acacia.
- Alternatively, J. Nigro Sansonese (1994), hypothesizes that the Mysteries of Eleusis were a series of practical initiations into trance involving proprioception of the human nervous system induced by breath control (similar to samyama in yoga).



Votive plaque known as the Ninnion Tablet depicting elements of the Eleusinian Mysteries, mid-4th century BC

Psychoactive plants and Sacred medicine in ancient Greece

5. Other psychotropic plants

- In addition to poppies, hemp, and ergot, the ancient Greeks burned mandrake and henbane as incense, and infusions of hemp and myrrh in retsina wine were used to add sparkle to social gatherings. Classical authors such as Dioscorides describe various formulas involving wine and mandrake, belladonna, African rue, or black hellebore.

Mandragora officinalis

- Mandrake is native to the Mediterranean region. It is a perennial herb with a large root and poisonous fruits. One of the oldest references to mandrake is from the Bible and probably dates to 4,000 B.C.
- Because mandrakes contain deliriant hallucinogenic tropane alkaloids and the shape of their roots often resembles human figures, they have been associated with magic rituals throughout history, including present-day contemporary pagan traditions.
- All species of Mandragora contain highly biologically active alkaloids. The alkaloids make the plant, in particular the root and leaves, poisonous, via anticholinergic, hallucinogenic, and hypnotic effects.

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Mandragora officinalis

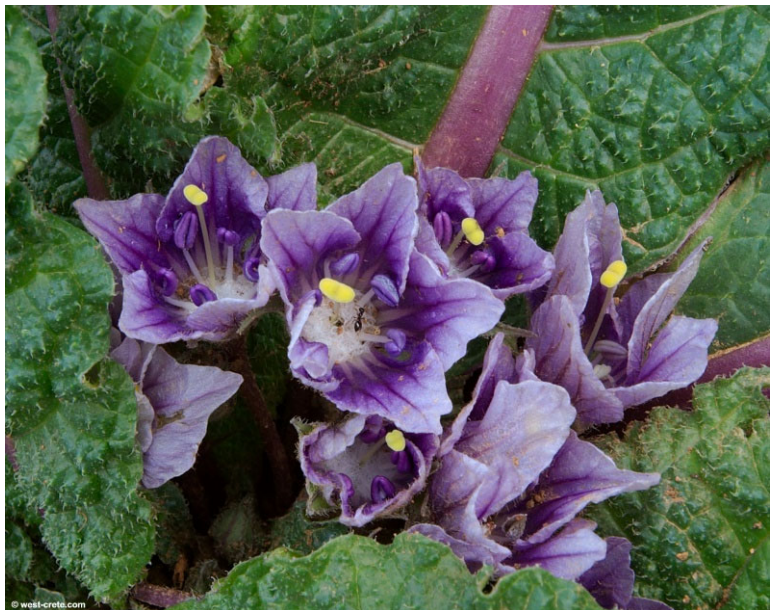
- Anticholinergic properties can lead to asphyxiation. Accidental poisoning is not uncommon. Ingesting mandrake root is likely to have other adverse effects such as vomiting and diarrhea.
- The alkaloid concentration varies between plant samples. Clinical reports of the effects of consumption of Mediterranean mandrake include severe symptoms similar to those of atropine poisoning
- These included blurred vision, dilation of the pupils, dryness of the mouth, difficulty in urinating, dizziness, headache, vomiting, blushing and a rapid heart rate.



Psychoactive plants and Sacred medicine in ancient Greece

Mandragora officinalis

- Hyperactivity and hallucinations occurred in the majority of patients.
- The narcotic effects of *Mandragora officinalis* were reported by Theophrastus and Aristotle.
- In Ancient Greece it was used medicinally for anxiety and depression, insomnia, and gout. It was also used as a love potion. It was in Greece that the resemblance of the roots to a human was first recorded.



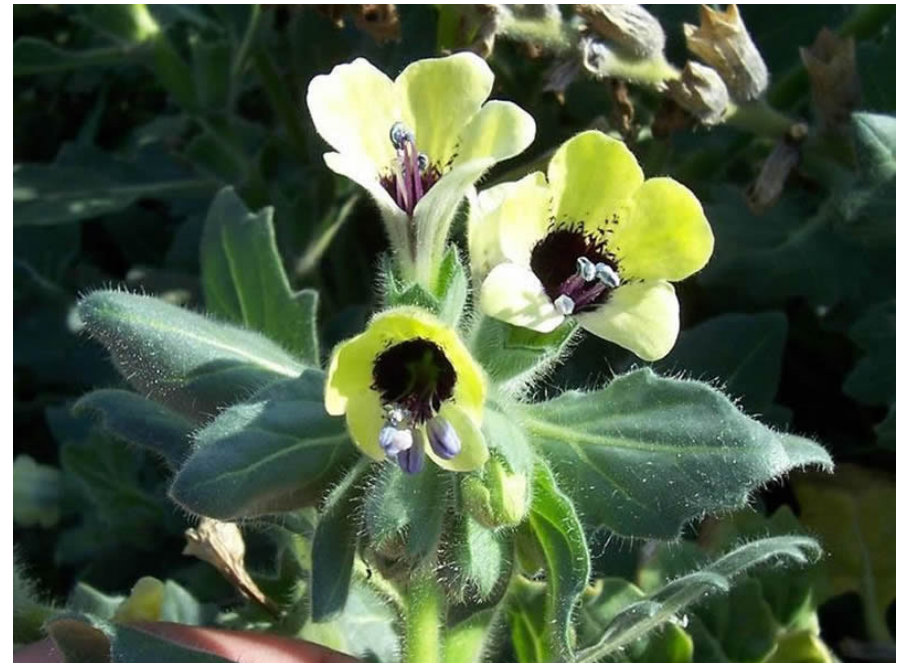
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Henbane (Hyoscyamus)

- Henbane was used by Assyrian and Babylonian priests as a powerful hallucinogen. In Greece, treatises written by Xenophon and Dioscorides refer to its intoxicating properties.
- Dioscorides, writing in the first century A.D. claimed Henbane as a sedative, which it is in small doses, effective in treating mania and madness. Pliny condemned Henbane as an intoxicant, though conversely it was a remedy for too much wine as well.



Hyoscyamus niger (black henbane)



Hyoscyamus albus (yellow or white henbane)

Psychoactive plants and Sacred medicine in ancient Greece

Henbane (*Hyoscyamus*)

- The genus *Hyoscyamus* consists of about 20 species and all of them contain powerful narcotic tropane alkaloids.
- The physical and psychological reaction to henbane was similar to other members of the Solanaceae containing stramonium and belladonna alkaloids: loss of muscular control, dilation of the pupils, heart palpitation, hallucinations, delirium (“madness”) and in large doses, coma, and death.
- The most commonly used magical and medicinal species in Europe were *Hyoscyamus niger* (black henbane) and *Hyoscyamus albus* (yellow or white henbane).
- In ancient Greece, it was considered a sacred “plant of Apollo.” Henbane was mixed with other herbs and used ritualistically to induce a hallucinatory or trance-like state of “madness” to commune with the divine.
- Henbane was one of the most important pain relieving medicines of antiquity. It was used as a sedating and calming agent as well as treatment for various forms of madness (mania).

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Henbane (Hyoscyamus)

- In the ancient world, the term “madness” was considered any kind of alteration of consciousness (not the pathological state we think of in the modern context).
- For the Greeks, madness could in fact be divinely inspired, whether by the Muses, or by gods such as Aphrodite (love, which explains the aphrodisiac beliefs), as well as Dionysus, who presided over all things intoxicating, particularly wine.



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Henbane (*Hyoscyamus*)

- Larger doses of Henbane can be quite intoxicating, with a long history of mystical and spiritual uses. Trance-like states brought on by Henbane which was believed by the Greeks to put you in touch with the divine, a form of sacred consciousness.
- Like most members of the Solanaceae family, symptoms of Henbane poisoning include dilated pupils and heart palpitation, loss of muscle control, intense and often terrifying hallucinations, madness and it could even cause coma and death.
- Even in small doses it can invoke most of the above, along with flushed skin, convulsions and vomiting, in addition to, cotton mouth. While the initial rush might only last three or four hours, it can hang on in various ways for up to three days.

Psychoactive plants and Sacred medicine in ancient Greece

Apollonian rites

- At times, psychoactive plants were used as part of more elaborate rituals. For example, in Apollo's Temple at Delphi, on the slopes of Mount Parnassus, the Oracle or Pythia delivered prophecies and oracular statements on future events that would have repercussions on social and political life in Ancient Greece.
- These predictions seem to have been made when the Oracle was in a trancelike state.
- She would prepare herself by sitting before the chasm or crack from which intoxicating vapours arose, chewing bay leaves, inhaling smoke from a variety of plants, and drinking water from a specific source, after which she would prophesy in an ecstatic trance state.



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Apollonian rites

- Plato and Aristotle describe delirium in a Pythia, and the Stoics point to a state of near rapture called enthousiasmos.
- It is believed by many authors that the Oracle of Delphi consumed some sort of psychotropic substance, some authors have suggested that apart from the fact that she chewed bay leaves she also consumed a preparation containing opium.



Apollonian rites and Pythia in the Oracle

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Apollonian rites

- One of the most popular theories for the trance-like state experienced by Pythia, was incense dosed with Henbane. Perhaps Henbane, Oleander or other plants were used to induce these states.
- Often the oracle was said to be in a frenzied state like Henbane intoxication is known for, and indeed the result of some prophecies was the oracle's death.
- Another hypothesis revolves around the inhalation of intoxicating nitrous oxide vapours emanating from a nearby geological fault.

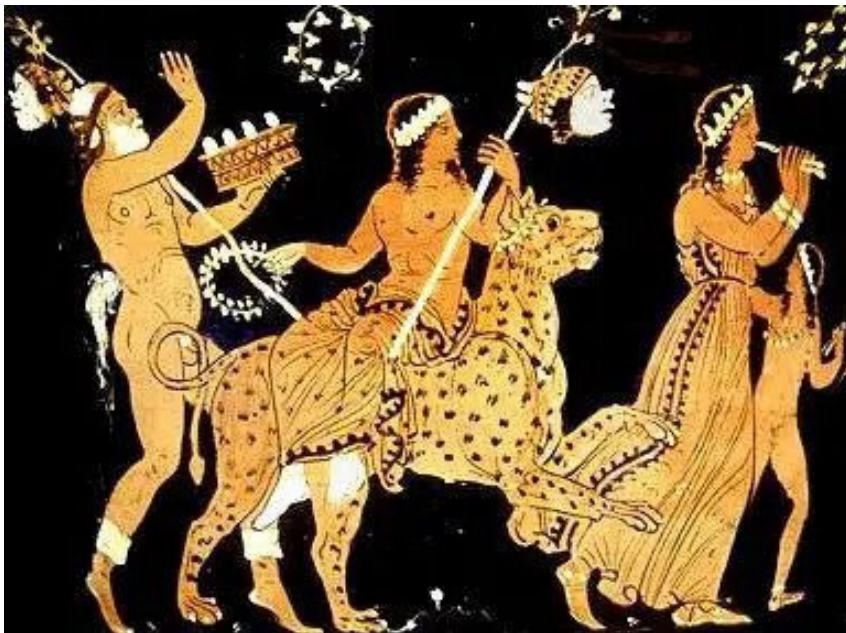


Oracle of Delphi.

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Dionysian rites

- Dionysus, the god of grape harvests and wine, was essentially Apollo's polar opposite. Worship of Dionysus was characterized by the ecstasy with which people expressed their feelings with the help of wine and dancing.
- Religious rites dedicated to Dionysus were celebrated every two years on Mount Parnassus. Women called maenads participated in the rituals, during which they would enter a religious trance under the intoxicating effect of the wine.



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Dionysian rites

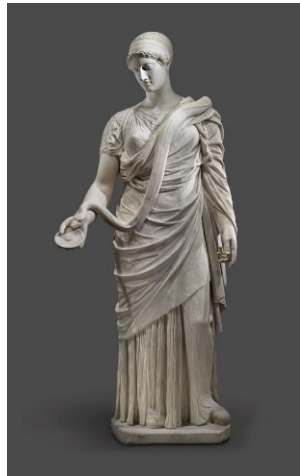
- It is said that the “maenads” ran up to the summit of Mount Parnassus bearing in their hands lit torches and a thyrsus, or rod adorned with grape and ivy leaves. At the summit, they would dance wildly to the sound of the aulos until dropping exhausted to the ground.
- Mystical intoxication was therefore achieved in this case through wine and dancing. Euripides described wine as follows: “there is no other pharmakon against troubles and to bring sleep; poured as a libation to the gods, it is a god itself”.



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Conclusion

- Although in modern times, such healing methods are often described as resorting to superstition, our ancient predecessors understood before Freud and Jung that the secret to healing the body was to heal the soul.
- Even if some of the methods were misguided, we are rediscovering that sometimes purely logical medicine does not work, and that magical or emotional / Archetypal / psychosomatic medicine is the missing link and plants can often be the gateway.



Hygieia



Iaso



Panacea

Psychoactive plants and Sacred medicine in ancient Greece



Sanctuary of Asklepios, Kos - Asklepieion of Kos

Thank you for your attention !!