

Archaeobotanical and biomolecular research on medicinal and psychoactive plants and fungi in the prehistory and history of Europe

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Main Organizer:

Dragana Filipović

University of Algarve, Portugal; University of Bucharest, Romania

Co-Organizers:

Magdalena Moskal-del Hoyo

Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland

Cătălin Alexandru Lazăr

University of Bucharest, Romania

Enrico Greco

University "G. d'Annunzio" of Chieti-Pescara, Italy

Ahmed M. Abdel-Azeem

University of Bucharest, Romania; Suez Canal University, Egypt

Abstract:

The awareness and use of plants and fungi as remedies or mind-altering agents are widely documented by ethnographic, historical and pharmacological studies of traditional and early modern societies. Medieval and Classical written sources and art depictions record consumption of stimulants, most notably alcoholic drinks; hundreds of medicinal and 'magical' herbs were catalogued by ancient Greek and Roman physicians. For the periods preceding the written history, little is known about the consumption of psychoactive and healing plants – because the archaeological evidence has been limited.

Recently developed or improved methods of biomolecular archaeology now produce direct, unambiguous proof of the presence and use of plant-originating substances with medicinal or mind-altering properties. These methods integrate the analyses of proteins, secondary metabolites, ancient DNA and stable isotopes, and rely generously on archaeobotanical studies. They enable detection and identification of chemical compounds derived from plants or fungi with known psychoactive or healing effects, some of which are still used in pharmacology and medicine. We are now well-equipped to amend "the besetting sin of archaeologists to write the history of containers rather than that of their contents" (Sherratt 2007); to test associations of certain plants with certain artefact types and certain human behaviour. However, we are a long way away from fully employing this new scientific potential, and farther yet from addressing the questions pertaining to the cultural, social, political and religious roles of psychotropic and healing substances in the time before that preserved in

iconography and ancient texts. This session aims to present and discuss the evidence, problems and prospects in research, and the broader archaeological context and implications of the past practices involving “peculiar substances” (Sherratt 2007).

Sherratt, A. 2007. Introduction: Peculiar substances. In: Goodman, J., P.E. Lovejoy, A. Sherratt (eds) *Consuming Habits: Global and Historical Perspectives on How Cultures Define Drugs*, 1-10.