

Venice Ibrahim Shehatta Attia
Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, Cairo

Mushrooms in ancient Egypt

Abstract

This article¹ tackles the question why mushrooms were represented on the walls of tombs, of temples and in texts written on papyrus sheets and other various manuscripts found throughout ancient Egypt.

The ancient Egyptians referred to mushrooms by several names, such as: “sons of the gods”, or “plants of immortality”. Consuming mushrooms was an exclusive privilege of the Egyptian pharaohs and royalty; ancient scholars and historians also mentioned mushrooms and their use in their writings and books, in the Pyramid Texts and in the ancient Egyptian cult.

Mushrooms and other fungi also had extensive medical uses in ancient Egypt. Furthermore, modern scholars have also theorized the meanings of the shapes of some ancient Egyptian signs, and their relation to the shapes of endemic mushrooms.

Keywords: Ancient Egypt, fungi, mushrooms, plants of immortality

¹ This article is a summary of a research paper discussing mushrooms in ancient Egypt, their types, symbolism, availability and uses.

Modern scientific dating methods, such as the radiocarbon analysis of human remains found in burial sites determined to be an age of approximately 18.700 years old have shown that some of the food remains preserved in dental calculus came from mushrooms. This has led scholars to conclude that mushrooms and other fungi were in current use by ancient communities².

Nature was recorded by ancient Egyptians on the walls of temples and on sheets of papyrus. Many findings across various Egyptian temples feature countless pillars that are shaped like plants or plant leaves, while mushrooms, with their significant tall stems and umbrella caps, were likewise found depicted and carved.

The earliest record of Egyptian fungi may be dated back to 4.500 B.C., a date corroborated through uncovered depictions of certain extant kinds of mushrooms that were in current use during in ancient Egypt. Such depictions were found on the walls of tombs and temples, and also inscribed within unearthed texts, papyri and various manuscripts found throughout Egypt³.

Traditionally, Egypt is considered to be the cradle of mycology. This is because ancient Egyptians had several distinct hieroglyphic depictions of psychedelic mushrooms that they not only etched into temple walls, but also noted down in hieroglyphic texts found in various sites within Egypt.

The majority of temples bearing numerous pillars, such as the temple of Philae at Aswan, themselves resemble enormous mushrooms; furthermore, many old dynastic ear studs and other similar items were crafted in an obvious fungal likeness⁴.



A pillar with a fan or oyster-shaped top in the Temple of Philae at Aswan

² Kotowski, M.A., 2019, p. 1.

³ Abdel-Azeem, 2010, p. 124.

⁴ Arthur, 2000.

King Khufu, the owner of the Great Pyramid of Giza around 4.575 years ago is said to have adored truffles, and would allegedly made sure they were routinely available on his royal menu⁵. Moreover, it is important to highlight that available evidence suggests Predynastic Egyptians did indeed train their hunting dogs to seek out truffles.



King Khufu



The Great Pyramid of Khufu at Giza

Since there is no word for ‘mushroom’ in Egyptian hieroglyphics, the ancient Egyptians depicted the unnamed, ‘unknown plants’ as umbrella-shaped figures, referring to them, in the Pyramid Texts, as a golden plant with magical properties. Nevertheless, mushrooms – including psychoactive varieties – did carry several vernacular terms or given names which include epithets such as: “sons of the gods”, “plants of immortality”, or “food of the Gods”. Ancient Egyptians believed that that Seth, the deity of storms, created mushrooms by hurling lightning bolts coated in mushroom seeds to the Earth⁶.

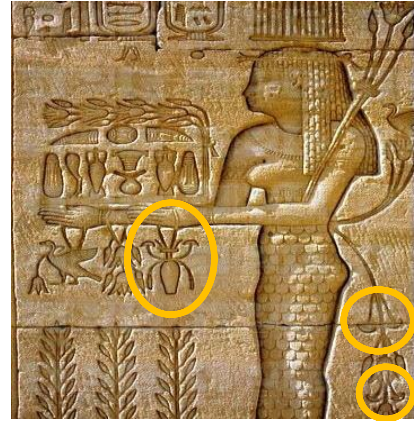
Since mushrooms do not sprout from seeds, however, ancient Egyptians also believed that they were placed on the Earth by the god Osiris. That is the principal motive invoked for limiting their consumption to the priesthood, the upper classes and royalty (who were seen as having descended from the Gods themselves). The consumption of mushrooms was the exclusive privilege of the Egyptian pharaohs and their companions that shared food with royalty, across the feasting hall.

In support of this enshrined position, scholars have unearthed an ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic inscription carved about 4.600 years ago which states in no uncertain terms that common citizens were forbidden

⁵ Abdel-Azeem, 2018, p. 149.

⁶ Budge, 1967.

from consuming or even touching mushrooms, given that they were strictly consumed by members of royalty and the higher echelons of the priesthood; it was considered as the food of, and for, the Gods.



Wall reliefs depicting mushrooms and mushroom baskets offerings.
Hathor Temple, Dendera, Egypt

Ancient Egyptians considered mushrooms a scrumptious source of power, a delicious and healthy source of food – a fact also chronicled by the writings of various scholars and historians, such as Athenaeus of Naucratis⁷, an Egyptian scholar who, in the early 400s, included a mushroom-containing recipe for a dish called ‘Mykai’ in his book, “*Deipnosophistae*” (*The Banqueting Professors / The Gastronomers / The Learned Banqueters*), a description of several conversations on food, literature, and the arts over a series of banquets held in Rome at the house of the rich patron Larensius). In his book, Athenaeus mentioned that ‘Mykai’ was, in fact, stewed mushroom – a popular dish during the Roman era.

Athenaeus also recommended mushrooms as a healthy food, and mentioned their benefits and medicinal uses by ancient Egyptians, pointing to mushrooms’ great significance – both culinary and medicinal – during the pharaonic era.

Athenaeus of Naucratis
Pliny the Elder



⁷ Kaibel, 1890, pp. 561–564.

In his *Historia Naturalis*, Pliny the Elder⁸ described fungal ecology, noting that the generative base of mushrooms can be traced to slime, to fermented wet soils and the roots of trees. According to Pliny, the most poisonous mushrooms are those which have a livid colouring. Pliny also mentioned a few known cases of poisonings caused by mushrooms which resulted in death. The author also described various ways of distinguishing between edible and poisonous mushrooms.

Further evidence of the availability and consumption of mushrooms in ancient Egypt is recorded in the ‘Egyptian Book of the Dead’, Papyrus of Ani⁹, which mentions that mushrooms are called “the food of the Gods”, “celestial food” and “the flesh of the Gods”. Indeed, ancient Egyptians believed that mushrooms were the plants of immortality, and called them “a gift from the God Osiris”.

Egyptologists have argued that ancient Egyptians cultivated mushrooms and other kinds of fungi on barley grains, noting their culinary and medical uses as well as their cultural, spiritual and religious significance. In the Pyramid Texts, some entries refer to an unknown red and golden plant used in sacred rites, which scholars agree probably refers to various kinds of mushrooms.

Concerning the use of other kinds of fungi, the Hearst papyrus (1550 B.C.) contains prescriptions 89-92 that record the treatment of skin abrasions or contusions by the use of mouldy bread crumbs as one of the principal ingredients, which offers further clarity that ancient Egyptian physicians were aware that moulds were helpful and effective in the prevention and treatment of skin infections, demonstrating a thorough knowledge of the use of fungi as a medical ingredient in the treatment of ailments.



Hearst papyrus, Plate II

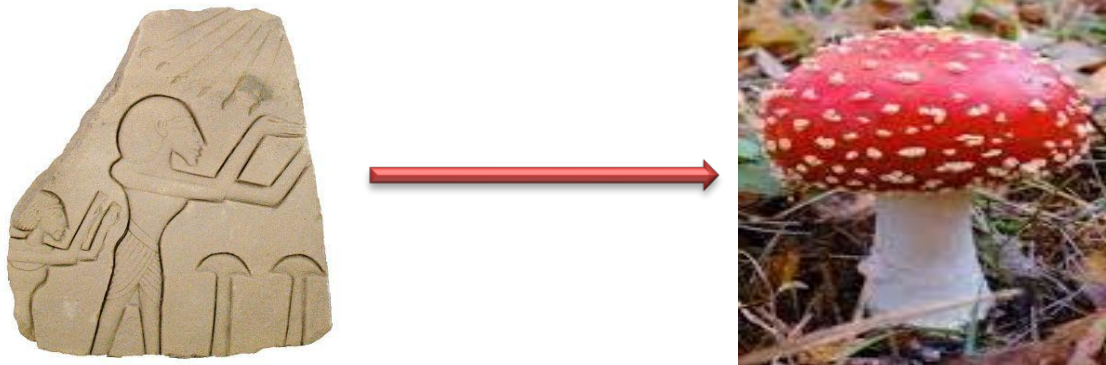


The Pyramid Texts, Pyramid of Teti, Saqqara

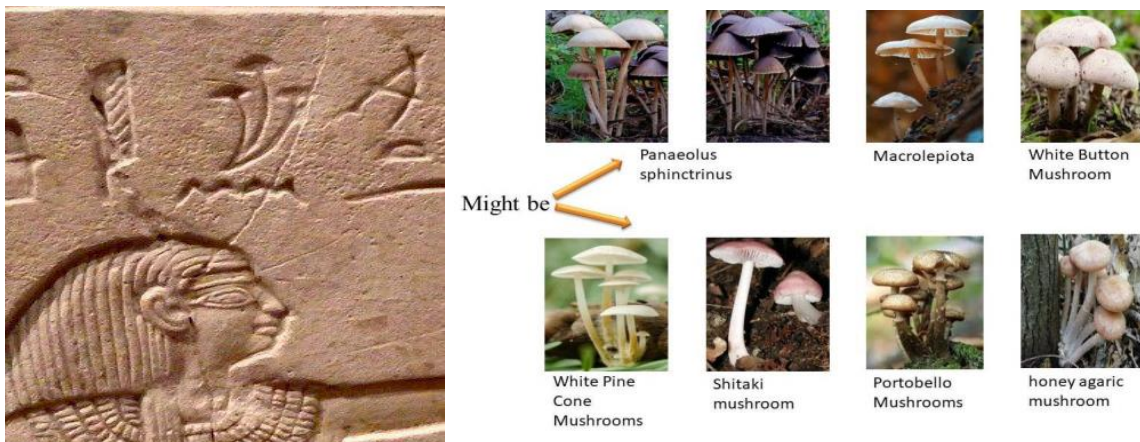
⁸ Harduin (commentator) 1827, Alexandre, Lemaire (eds.), pp. XLIX–L.

⁹ Budge, 1967.

In what follows, we offer several clear depictions of various mushroom species in ancient Egyptian art:



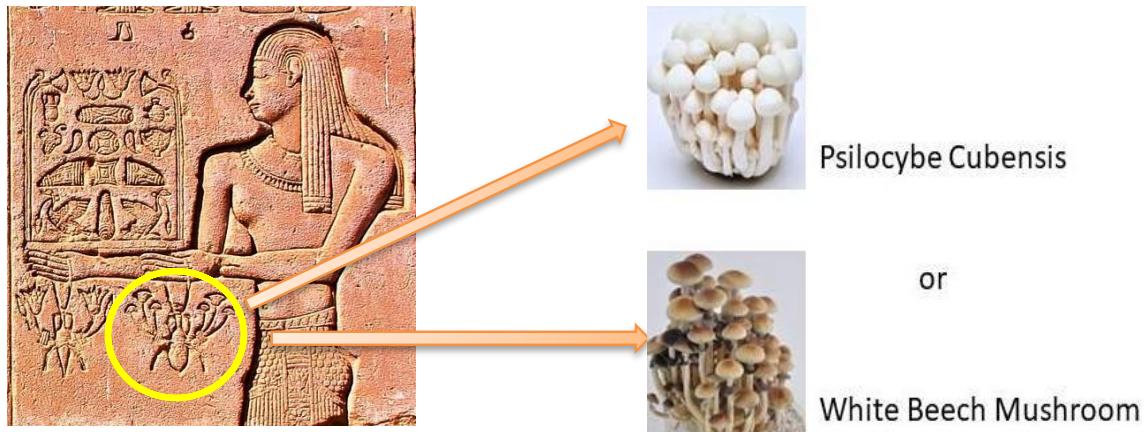
18th Dynasty sandstone (1570 – 1342 BC)¹⁰ Akhenaten and Nefertiti, depicted alongside a figure similar to the *Amanita muscaria* mushroom¹¹



Wall relief depicting mushrooms and mushroom basket offerings found in Hathor Temple, Dendera, Egypt.

¹⁰ <http://www.worldwidestore.com/36340c.htm>

¹¹ Arthur, 2003, pp. 44–53.



Wall relief depicting mushrooms



Ancient Egyptian faience bead or ear stud, in the shape of a mushroom¹²

In conclusion, we can safely claim that Ancient Egyptians did, in fact, know mushrooms very well – they cultivated and used them as a source of food, while mushrooms held special significance in ancient Egyptian culture, traditions and religious rituals. However, we can just as rightly claim that the previously available information and data from ancient Egypt concerning fungi in general and mushrooms in particular is still incomplete, and in need of much further study.

¹² https://www.nms.ac.uk/explore-our-collections/collection-search-results/?item_id=299929.

References:

- Abdel-Azeem, A. M., 2010. "The history, fungal biodiversity, conservation, and future perspectives for mycology in Egypt." *IMA Fungus* 1(2): 123–142.
- Abdel-Azeem, A. M., 2009. "Operation Wallacea in Egypt. I: A preliminary study on the diversity of fungi in the world heritage site of Saint Katherine, Egypt." *Assiut University Journal of Botany* 38: 29–54.
- Allegro, J., 1969. *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*. Garden City, NY, Doubleday.
- "Athenaeus." Lacus Curtius. N.p., n.d. Web. 14 Oct. 2016
- Arthur, J., 2003. *Mushrooms and Mankind: The Impact of Mushrooms on Human Consciousness and Religion*. San Diego, Book Tree Publishing.
- Bostock, J., & Riley, H. T., (eds.), 1856. *The natural history of Pliny*, vol. IV. London, Henry G. Bohn.
- Berlant, S. R., 1999. "The prehistoric practice of personifying mushrooms." *Journal of Prehistoric Religion* 13: 22-29.
- Berlant, S. R., 2005. "The ethno-mycological origin of Egyptian crowns and the esoteric underpinnings of Egyptian religion." *Journal of ethno pharmacology* 102: 275-288.
- Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 1982, *Egypt's Golden Age, the Art of Living in the New Kingdom, 1558–1085 B.C.*, Catalogue of the Exhibition.
- Budge, E.A. Wallis, 1967. *The book of the dead: the papyrus of Ani in the British Museum*. New York, Dover Publications.
- Cavender, J. C., Landolt, J. C., Ndiritu, G. G. & Stephenson, S. L., 2010. "Dictyostelid cellular slime moulds from Africa." *Mycosphere* 1: 147-152.
- Festi, F. & Bianchi, A., 1991. "Amanita muscaria: mycopharmacological outline and personal experiences." In T. Lyttle (ed.), *Psychedelic Monographs and Essays*, vol. V, P. M. & E. Publishing Group. Available online at <http://leda.lycaeum.org/?ID=16317> (accessed on 18 September, 2005).
- Gaius Plinius Secundus; Jean Harduin (commentator), 1827. "Ad Pliniam Vitam Excursus I: de Plinii Patria". Caii Plinii Secundi Historiae Naturalis Libri XXXVII. Bibliotheca Classica Latina (in Latin and French). C. Alexandre; N.E. Lemaire (editors and contributors). Paris, Didot.
- Heinrich, C., 2002. *Magic Mushrooms in Religion and Alchemy*. Rochester, VT, Park Street Press.

- Kaibel, Georg (ed.), 1890. *Athenaei Naucraticae Dipnosopistarum*, Libri XV, Vol. 3. Leipzig, Teubner.
- Kotowski, M., 2019. "History of mushroom consumption and its impact on traditional view on mycobiota - an example from Poland." *Microbial Biosystems Journal* 4(12), available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337658040_History_of_mushroom_consumption_and_its_impact_on_traditional_view_on_mycobiota_-an_example_from_Poland
- Leake, C. D., 1952. *Old Egyptian medical papyri*, Lawrence, KS, University of Kansas Press. Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund, available at <https://www.speciesconservation.org>.
- Merlin, M., 2003. "Psychoactive plant use in the Old World." *Economic Botany* 57(3): 295-323.
- Munn, H., 1973. "The mushrooms of language." In M. J Harner (ed.), *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- McKenna, T., 1992. *Food of the Gods: The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge: A Radical History of Plants, Drugs and Human Evolution*. New York, Bantam Books.
- Pliny the Elder, 1969-1989. *Natural History*, with an English translation by H. Rackham. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.
- Puharich, A., 1959. *The Sacred Mushroom: The Key to the Door to Eternity*. Garden City, NY, Doubleday.
- Samorini, G., 1992. "The Oldest Representations of Hallucinogenic Mushrooms in the World (Sahara Desert, 9000-7000 B.P.)". *Integration* 2/3: 69-78, available at <http://www.shroomery.org/index/par/25043>.
- Samorini, G., 2001, "New data on the ethnomycology of psychoactive mushrooms." *International Journal of Medicinal Mushrooms* 3(2-3): 257-278.
- Schultes, R. E. & Hoffman, A., 1992. *Plants of the Gods: Their Sacred Healing and Hallucinogenic Properties*. Rochester, VT, Healing Arts Press.
- Stamets, P., 1996. *Psilocybin Mushrooms of the World: An Identification Guide*. Berkeley CA, Ten Speed Press.
- Wasson, R. G., 1968. *Soma, Divine Mushroom of Immortality*. Harcourt, NY, Brace & World.
- Wasson, R. G., 1980. *The Wondrous Mushroom: Mycolatry in Mesoamerica*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Wasson, R., Kramrisch, S., Ott, J., & Ruck, C., 1986. "Lightningbolt and Mushrooms. " In *Persephone's Quest: Entheogens and the Origins of*

- Religion*. New Haven, Yale University Press, pp. 83-94. Retrieved August 2, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1bh4cgm.5>
- Wainwright, G. A., 1923. "The Red Crown in early prehistoric times." *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 9: 3-26.
- Wexler, P., 2014, *History of Toxicology and Environmental Health: Toxicology in Antiquity II*. London, Academic Press.