
‘The initial results of some recent archaeobotanical and archaeochemical finds’, says author Brian Muraresku, ‘point to a prehistoric connection between religion and psychoactive brews as the real driving force behind modern civilization’ (p. 106). Moreover, Muraresku suggests that this ancient religion with no name— one grounded in ritual use of psychedelic substances—may well provide a ‘New Reformation’ for the 27 percent of Americans who identify as spiritual but not religious (SBNR). But beyond the SBNR crowd, ‘today’s 2.42 billion Christians (almost one-third of the global population) will have to decide whether they will continue sipping from a placebo amid “ninety minutes of boredom,” or join the revolution that just might rescue a dying faith and a civilization on the brink of extinction. Two thousand years in the making, the crisis is real. And the stakes couldn’t be higher’ (p. 18). He alludes to the ecologic crisis currently unfolding on the planet. The true religion of the masses—the ancient world’s 99 percent—was hijacked by Church fathers, in the process forcing out the female overseers of the key ancient ritual and eradicating the pagan rituals. Perhaps, Muraresku wonders, might a new ‘popular outbreak of mysticism be able to heal our lost connection to Mother Nature and to each other’ (p. 389).

The ideas advanced in the book are, for the most part, not new. Trained as a classicist and now a practicing lawyer, Muraresku unpacks the raft of evidence which attempts to confirm the ‘pagan continuity hypothesis’: the ‘theory that Christianity did not appear from one day to the next, but rather inherited pagan elements from the Greco-Roman cults of the Mediterranean world’ (p. 14). Like others before him, Muraresku traces evidence of multiple potions and from secret psychedelic rituals of the Ancient Greeks and argues that the first Greek-speaking Christians were imbibing a psychedelic pharmakon, a potion which over time morphed into a Eucharist made of ordinary bread and wine (p. 15). The new tools that Muraresku brings to the table include the relatively more recent emergence of the fields of archeobotanical and archaeochemical research, as well as consideration of some provocative new archaeological sites. It is interesting to see this grand narrative of the religion with no name—which persists from prehistoric times to contemporary experimentation—put into conversation with the current ecological advocacy. Muraresku even suggests that the explosion of new scientific inquiries related to entheogens (the preferred nomenclature for those in the Religion
and Nature orbit) could cause that shift in consciousness that can help arrest environmental degradation. The evidence is more robust than once it was, but there still is no smoking gun, no red-hot piece of data that acts as the final nail in patriarchal Christianity’s coffin.

Mararesku’s argument unfolds in two main parts: ‘Brewing the Psychedelic Beer’ (Part One), and ‘Mixing the Psychedelic Wine’ (Part Two). In the first he walks the line between the Paleolithic and the Neolithic, making the case that the transition was sparked by the first experiments with brewing beer, which was likely psychogenic. Muraresku reviews the work of archaeologists who argue that it was grains that domesticated humans, not the other way around. One interesting site on the Anatolian peninsula, Gobekli Tepe, provides a useful illustration of a settlement that straddled the emergence of the Paleolithic and Neolithic. At Gobekli Tepe, occupants remained reliant on hunting and gathering, even as the first inklings of domestication are evident in nearby sites. Were the residents of Gobekli Tepe resisting the emergence of new modes of subsistence in favor of the older ways? We’re not sure. In any case, the nearby presence of domestication is evident among their neighbors, but they did not follow suit.

One more piece of evidence related to this shadowy past, and perhaps relevant to our story: although there was no evidence of domestication, there were a multitude of stones and vessels utilized to grind up plants and seeds. This was obviously a group dependent upon hunting and gathering food, and they also foraged and utilized a number of the local flora for purposes other than preparing food. Some of the vessels appear to have been used to ferment beer. If the archaeological interpretation is correct, then, the use of plants for celebratory rituals pre-dated the widespread domestication of plants and animals, and widespread civilizations. As Muraresku argues, ‘If beer really is the oldest biotechnology, it could very well be responsible for….that sudden shift from hunting and gathering to a sedentary, community-based lifestyle known as the Neolithic….The first farmers did not lure the passing hunters and gatherers into their risky agricultural endeavor with a dry piece of stale bread. It must have been a mind-altering potion’ (p. 108).

Part Two of the book is occupied with narrating the transition from sacred psychedelic beer to magical wine. If the visions revealed by consumption of this conscious-raising cordial catalyzed the emergence of civilization, it persisted through the emergence of a civilization that was ostensibly ‘Western’. In some geographies and social/political ‘scapes’, the ritual use of beer developed into a penchant for wine. As with the earlier rituals, the object was to endure an intensely affective, ego-dissolving ritual—to die before you die—to drink from the cup of

1. See the article by Chas Clifton 2005, describing the use of the term and its cognates.
2. One of the most powerful entheogens ever discovered came from a chemical isolated from an ergot fungus, which grows on grain crops including wheat and barley. The Swiss chemist Albert Hoffmann first isolated lysergic diethylamide (LSD) in 1938. Later he accidentally imbibed it, had a fantastical experience, and continued experimenting on himself with it. Archaeochemical evidence demonstrates the presence of ergot in cereal grains in the Anatolian peninsula which sets the stage for the emergence of the Mysteries.
3. See also Eisenberg 1998.
immortality. In this case, then, hunter-gatherers who lived at the cusp of this pivotal transformation between older modes of subsistence and domestication were apparently brewing beer and having celebrations before domestication became widespread. We all learned in school that somewhat later than the heyday of Gebekli Tepe something called the agricultural revolution occurred. Whether it ought to be granted the positive connotation of a ‘revolution’ given the profound negative consequences of farming as it evolved remains a matter of debate. But what does seem clear is that something preceded the agricultural revolution, a deeper taproot which stands behind the later development of large civilizations. Our professors told us a fib. They taught us about an agricultural revolution. But where we ought to be looking for clues was in the earlier beer revolution—among celebrants who imbibed carefully curated cocktails which may have included psychoactive substances, from stimulants to depressive agents, and which may have been the focus of collective rituals.

Interestingly, Muraresku points toward these ancient rituals and their preservation in small group ceremonies typically led by women ‘pharmacists’ as an exercise in social power. They democratized the possibility of relationship with the gods—that transcendent sense of belongingness and ego-death was available to all, not just the elites. Muraresku insists that the author of the Gospel of John intentionally directly linked the Greek Mystery cults which drank the magical wine to early Christianity. That Gospel appealed to Greek-speaking populations where Christianity was taking root, encouraging them, telling them that the vehicles of the ancient Mysteries were preserved in the teachings of Jesus. As Muraresku argued, ‘The Jesus they would have seen was a Jesus who didn’t come to start a new religion. But a Jesus who came to save the fragile Mysteries with an epic, encore performance. A Jesus who came to open source the magical wine for the masses, and to finish the populist movements he started in Greece….when his name was Dionysus’ (p. 219). Dionysus and Jesus looked the same to the ruling class—they were both symbolic figureheads of the 99 percent who believed that the vision of immortality was not relegated only to the elites or the upper class, and they were therefore both dangerous (p. 221).

For scholars of Religion and Nature, there is much to like here. The case is clearly elaborated in great detail, including photographs or renderings of several pieces of art, motifs, and linguistic production that illustrate that the continuity between the Paleolithic and the contemporary world: ‘This is the political and spiritual backdrop of the pagan continuity hypothesis….They were not so different from the spiritual-but-not-religious of today, seekers on the hunt for transcendence’ (p. 221). There is something appealing about finding a common search for meaning among ancient populations and contemporary ones where increasing numbers of people do not resonate with or report allegiance to any institutionalized religion. But this thread gets lost in the details in the rigorous analysis of the linguistic, artistic, and other expressive evidence of the pagan continuity hypothesis.

Like the contemporary spiritual seekers, his attention to the scientists at Johns Hopkins and beyond who are pioneering groundbreaking theoretical techniques with the use of entheogens drops in mostly at the beginning and the end to frame the story. A similar project may await sociologists who wish to study more directly the connections between SBNR populations and their historical predecessors. Or others who might narrate a cultural history of the medicinal uses of these plant
teachers. This book provides a bit of historic backdrop to such developments. Some linguists would find problematic Murareskku’s claim that the proto-Indo-European cultures and their languages indicate a common ancestor for entheogens which range from Spain to India. Some have noted that the ancient Indian mixture soma (equated here with some of the elements of the pharmakon of the ancient Greeks), whatever substance it was, likely did not contain entheogenic elements like the ones Muraresku is after (Whitaker 2011). Perhaps, though, the deployment of the term soma in the development and maintenance of social order in the ancient Vedic world is analogously, if not genealogically related to the Greek elixir of immortality.

The (in)famous popular author Graham Hancock penned the Foreword for the book. Those who know his work may be familiar with his ideas about connections between ancient civilizations in disparate geographies (Mesopotamia, Egypt, India), and about their spiritual affinities. Hancock faced great criticism from anthropologists and archaeologists for cherry-picking data, and intentionally ignoring evidence that did not support his theories—indeed he was a poplar author and not a scholar. The path Muraresku tracks obviously has resonances with Hancock’s academically questionable material, but while Hancock is represented in the Foreword, he was not one of Muraresku’s informants, nor does his name even appear in the index. This book covers a lot of provocative scholarly terrain. It might prove helpful for some engaged in ecofeminist scholarship as women were the traditional keepers and revealers of the religion with no name. Likewise, those who follow some Neopagan and New Age spiritualities might find the historical connections revealed here informative. What remains to be seen is whether the emerging popularity of entheogenic medical interventions will represent a popular wave of mysticism and earth healing as Muraresku hopes.

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References

