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**Foraging for Psychedelic Mushrooms in the
Wrong Forest: The Great Canterbury Psalter
as a Medieval Test Case**

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Foraging for Psychedelic Mushrooms in the Wrong Forest: The Great Canterbury Psalter as a Medieval Test Case

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Abstract

For decades, a small group of scholars and popular writers have been claiming to find images of psychedelic mushrooms hidden in dozens, perhaps even hundreds, of historic pieces of Christian art, and most especially medieval art. With the recent resurgence of interest in psychedelic therapy and spirituality, which has focused on doing more credible work than has generally been the case since the psychedelic 1960s, we also see the interpretations of these writers seeping unchallenged into mainstream scholarship. The present article singles out the scene of the third day of creation in the 12th century Great Canterbury Psalter as an occasion to analyse and counter these claims while at the same time surveying the iconography of the third creation day especially in 11th–13th century Western European manuscript illumination. Given the focus of the third creation day on the introduction of trees (Genesis 1:11), which these authors tend to identify as psychedelic mushrooms, we shall also describe the medieval artists' process of drawing and painting stylized trees.

1. Introduction

We are presently experiencing a veritable explosion of interest in psychedelic research. Since 2018 at least nine new research programs and centres have been founded in major universities and hospitals across the US and Canada.¹ Much of the research has focused on the hoped-for therapeutic promise of the drugs, but interest in their relevance to consciousness expansion and spirituality is also booming in both popular and academic



Fig. 1: Great Canterbury Psalter, fol. 1r (detail); Lattin's "Exhibit C".

¹ An overview of these programs, which include U.C. Berkeley and Mount Sinai Medical School, is given in McGhee, *Expanding Academic Consciousness*, 24–28. Johns Hopkins, which had been involved in psychedelic research for some time, formally got its centre in 2019.

circles.² In 2015 a joint project sponsored by the Council on Spiritual Practices was launched by Johns Hopkins' University School of Medicine and NYU's Langone Health, entitled "The Effects of Psilocybin-Facilitated Experience on the Psychology and Effectiveness of Religious Professionals." Participants from a range of traditions were administered two doses of psilocybin each, "to measure whatever chemically induced mystical experiences they might have had and follow-up to see how that divine encounter helped—or hindered—they in their ministry."³ At the time of writing the results have not yet been published. However, the study was featured in both Don Lattin's 2023 book *God on Psychedelics*⁴ and a session at the August 14–18, 2023, Congress of World Religions in Chicago.⁵ During the previous week (August 6–11, 2023) Esalen Institute in California sponsored an invitation-only conference on Entheogenic Humanities.⁶ *Entheogens*, a term coined by Boston University's Carl A. P. Ruck in 1979, is a popular alternative to Humphry Osmond's earlier term *psychedelics* intended to express more explicitly the connection between psychedelics and spiritual realities.⁷

Earlier, on June 19–23, 2023, the Denver Convention Center hosted Psychedelic Science 2023, with some 13,000 in attendance, touted as the "largest psychedelic conference in history."⁸ Discussion of the relation of spirituality to psychedelics also occurred at the American Academy of Religion's November 2022 annual meeting (also in Denver) that featured papers on the subject in its New Religious Movements, Contemplative Studies, and Cognitive Science of Religion Units. The 2023 annual meeting of the Academy saw the introduction of a new Drugs and Religion Unit chaired by scholars from Stanford and Emory University. Throughout the latter part of 2023 the Graduate Theological Union

² The popular side includes seminars and workshops too numerous to mention including events like the Expanded States of Consciousness World Summit (December 10–27, 2023), which boasts on its website "65 world-class experts in psychedelics, breathwork, plant medicine, meditation, neuroscience and more." Numerous psychedelic churches have also sprung up and there is even an alliance they can join called the Sacred Plant Alliance which features discussion of legal issues and best practice (<https://www.sacredplantalliance.org>).

³ As summarized by Lattin, *God on Psychedelics*, 2. For the actual statement of the formal objectives of the study, see <https://classic.clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/show/NCT02421263>.

⁴ Lattin, *God on Psychedelics*, chap. 1.

⁵ Titled "Sacramental Plants and Fungi: Historical and Scientific Insights for the Religious Life," August 16, 2023, 5–7 PM.

⁶ From a description by Wouter Hanegraaff (University of Amsterdam), Charles Stang (Harvard Divinity School), and Jeff Kripal (Rice University) on Hanegraaff's FB page.

⁷ Ruck / Bigwood / Staples / Ott / Wasson, *Entheogens*, 145–46. In a personal communication, Ruck wrote: "As the only Classical scholar in the group, I invented the neologism." Ruck to the author (Oct 12, 2017). On Osmond's term, see Bisbee, et al., *Letters of Huxley and Osmond*, xx-xxi, 266 n. 31–267, and Osmond, *Clinical Effects*, 429.

⁸ See <https://2023.psychedelicsscience.org/>.

used Facebook to promote a free online course exploring the work of their joint project with the UC Berkeley Center for the Science of Psychedelics.⁹

One of the challenges facing this new phase of psychedelic research is freeing itself from the often-irresponsible speculations and claims attending earlier research. Indeed if there was a unifying theme of the academic side of Psychedelic Science 2023 it was to “do it right” this time, i.e., to avoid repeating the many extravagances of the psychedelic 1960s. One of the most notorious earlier examples was the ex-Harvard professor turned psychedelic guru Timothy Leary, whose public antics and claims about LSD’s potential were notoriously outrageous. At the same time, a number of other speculative theories have been spawned in the meantime, including, for example, Terence K. McKenna’s “Stoned Ape Theory,” which posited that psilocybin provided the catalyst for the leap in consciousness that separated homo sapiens from their hominin ancestors.¹⁰

McKenna’s theory is well known and often mentioned, not infrequently with amusement. But there is another small, tight-knit group of writers who claim they have discovered evidence of the ongoing religious use of psychedelic mushrooms in historical pieces of religious art. In the present article I shall refer to members of this group as PMTs (=Psychedelic Mushroom Theorists). Lacking an adequate understanding of Christian iconography and of the scriptural and hagiographical religious texts underlying it, these authors have by now imposed fanciful interpretations upon a myriad of ancient and medieval religious paintings, sculptures, and mosaics. As a working hypothesis the PMTs presuppose the persistence of an ongoing underlying religion or *prisca theologia* rooted in the use of psychedelic mushrooms. They adopted this approach in part under the influence of the controversial early Dead Sea Scrolls translator John Marco Allegro.¹¹

That the interpretations of this group appear in popular books from obscure niche publishers does not concern academics. That they are seeping into the mainstream in articles and dictionary entries appearing side-by-side with serious research in academic works treating religion and/or psychedelics *is* of concern and calls for a critical response. The writer was alerted to the situation by the appearance of PMTs Michael Winkelman and Mark Hoffman’s entry “Hallucinogens and Entheogens,” in *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion* published by the distinguished academic publisher E.J. Brill, an entry which en-

⁹ See <https://gtux.gtu.edu/?s=Psychedelics>.

¹⁰ McKenna, *Food of the Gods*, 24, 107.

¹¹ See Allegro, *Sacred Mushroom*. Allegro’s career is sometimes viewed as a classic case of academic suicide. On the problematic aspects of his works, see Strugnell, *Notes en marg*, 163–172; Brown, *Maverick*, 92; de Vaux, 135–61; Frend, *Worshipping the Red Mushroom*, 12–13, and the follow-up letter by Cooper, Allegrissimo, and, especially, Jacobsen / Richardson, *Mr. Allegro Among the Mushrooms*, 235–52. PMTs tend to view Allegro as a victim of religious bigotry and persecution.

dorses works that advance claims about Christian art that are frequently erroneous and/or fanciful.¹²

2. Trusted sources?

In the Brill entry, Winkelman and Hoffman assert that the “entheogenic pasts of Judeo-Christianity, including both Roman and Greek Orthodox Christianity, has been documented by Clark Heinrich (1995), Carl Ruck and colleagues (2000, 2001; Hoffman, Ruck, and Staples 2001) and others including Chris Bennett (1995, 2010), Dan Merkur (2001) and John Rush (2011).”¹³ Citing these authors, however, is problematic because their work on the subject is highly speculative and unreliable. A single example from each should illustrate the problem.

Heinrich asserts that the infant Jesus in the National Gallery’s *Petrus Christus Nativity* (c. 1450)—the image used on the cover of his *Strange Fruits* (1995)—is “lying on a dried or drying fly agaric [*Amanita muscaria*] cap”¹⁴ (Fig. 2). That is not so. The infant is actually lying on a mandorla of light, or, as Metzger says, a “radiance.”¹⁵ Heinrich calls the mandorla “the strangest manger ever seen.” But it is not a strange manger. It is not a manger at all. Nativity scenes influenced by Birgitta of Sweden’s August 1372 vision in Bethlehem regularly replaced mangers with mandorlas or some other indication of light emitting from the Christ Child. This is in accord with Birgitta’s description of the infant Jesus “lying on the ground, naked and shining.”¹⁶ Although *Petrus’ Nativity* does show Birgitta’s influence, in that he depicts the Christ child lying on the ground instead of in a manger,¹⁷ he had not originally included the mandorla. The one Hein-



Fig. 2: The Christ Child in *Petrus Christus Nativity* before and after Mandorla was removed; ca. 1450 CE. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

¹² Winkelman / Hoffman, *Hallucinogens and Entheogens*, 2.126–32.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 128–129.

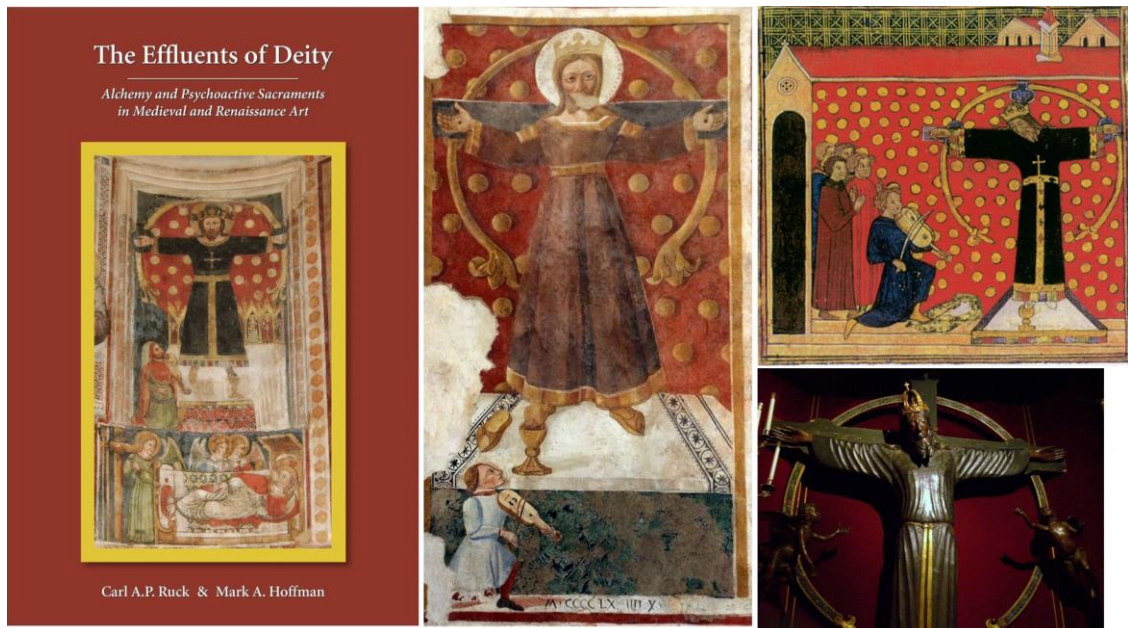
¹⁴ Heinrich, *Strange Fruit*, 189.

¹⁵ Metzger, *Washington Nativity*, 167–169. Heinrich’s view has been embraced by other PMTs who still appeal to the unrestored version. See, Backstead / Blankenagel / Noconi / Winkelman, *Entheogenic Origins of Mormonism*, 219–220, fig. 8.

¹⁶ Birgitta (Bridget) of Sweden, *Liber caelestis* 7.21.11 (ET: Denis Searby)

¹⁷ Other features of Bridgettine Nativities include Joseph carrying a candle, the virgin with long flowing hair, and her kneeling before the child lying on the ground.

rich imagines was original to Petrus was added later and painted over by restorers in the early 1990s (Fig. 2).¹⁸



Left to Right: Fig. 3: Volto Sancto, Parma Baptistery. c. 1370. Ruck / Hoffman cover; Fig. 4: Volto Santo, Church of St. Francis, Gualdo Tadino, Italy, 1474; Fig. 5: (top) Volto Santo, Codex Randoni, Vatican MS Pat.lat.1988, fol. 16v. c. 1400-1405; Fig. 6: (bottom) Volto Santo, 2011.

Ruck and Hofmann, on the cover of their 2012 book *The Effluents of Deity* (Fig. 3), display an image from the Baptistery in Parma, Italy, they say represents Christ on a cross set against the backdrop of a “red-orange communion wafer, spotted with golden apples...the mature version of the [*Amanita muscaria*] mushroom cap.” On the left below the cross is a kneeling man they identify as “King David...playing his fiddle.”¹⁹ The image actually depicts a miracle tale about a pilgrim playing his violin before a famous crucifix known as the *Volto Santo* (Holy Face) of Lucca, who is rewarded for his devotion by a shoe falling from the saviour’s foot.²⁰ According to the legend, the figure on the cross

¹⁸ Ruck and Hoffman are aware of the restoration (Effluents, 272). Michael Swicklik, Senior Painting Conservator at the National Gallery, informs me that “the painting was treated from 1992 to 1994...Extensive analysis of the gold leaf and pigments used to paint this area were conducted at the time of the painting’s conservation. This analysis concluded that the mandorla was applied after the completion of the painting and therefore could not have been in the hand of Christ. However, because the mandorla was consistent with the traditions of depictions of the infant Christ from 15th century Spain, and therefore could have been evidence of the painting’s historical location and provenance, it was not removed. Rather, the conservator in consultation with expert art historians, painted it out in totally removable restoration paints to reflect what Christus had likely originally conceived. Should there be a time when the prevailing art historical opinion suggests that the mandorla should show, then it is completely recoverable by the removal of the very soluble retouching in this area.” Email to author, 2 Jan, 2024.

¹⁹ Hoffman / Ruck, *Effluents of Deity*, 55.

²⁰ For a thirteenth-century account of the legend, see Ziolkowski, *Reading the Juggler of Notre Dame*, 136–137.

was carved by Nicodemus with an angel completing the face. The relic, which was frequently depicted in art, was fixed to a three-quarter-round metal frame and stood for a time during the 14th and 15th centuries before a wall that was red with golden discs. These discs covered the entire wall, and not just the portion behind the *Volto Santo*'s semi-circular frame.²¹ However, for some reason the Parma version now only shows the background within the bounds of the frame. This makes the cross look like it is standing in front of something like an *Amanita muscaria* mushroom cap, which Ruck and Hoffman seize upon as supposed proof of their mushroom theory (Fig. 3–6).

Rush, on the cover of his 2008 book *Failed God*, identifies an image from St. Mark's Venice as "Jesus with the cap of *Amanita muscaria*, the sacred mushroom, in his hand."²² It is actually an early *Noli me tangere* scene (John 20:17) and, as is typical in Eastern iconography, Jesus is holding a scroll not a mushroom.²³ Dan Merkur, who features texts rather than images, argues in the book recommended by Winkelmann and Hoffman that the manna of the biblical exodus was a psychoactive substance and that when Christian and Jewish mystics spoke of eating manna it was code language for taking psychedelics.²⁴

Chris Bennett identifies MS. Bodl. 602, fol. 27v, as "a fourteenth century painting from an alchemical manuscript showing a man intoxicated on *Amanita muscaria* mushrooms."²⁵ The manuscript is actually a thirteenth-century bestiary and the image depicts a man not intoxicated but dying from eating fruit poisoned by a salamander, as is made clear from the text the image illustrates.²⁶

The PMT's interpretations have made their way as well into other academic publications, such as the *History of Italian Mycology and First Contribution to the Correct Nomenclature of Fungi* published in 2013 by Italy's Institute for Environmental Protection and Research, ISPRA (Istituto Superiore per la Protezione e la Ricerca Ambientale). This was due to its dependence (pp 34–35) on the work of Italian PMT Giorgio Samorini, repeating, for example, his

²¹ The connection of the frame to the cross rather than the wall is also suggested by images of the relic in other contexts, see, e.g. Amico Aspertini, *Transport of the Volto Santo from Luni to Lucca*, Basilica of San Frediano, Lucca (1508–1509).

²² Rush, *Failed God*, x.

²³ In *Noli me tangere* scenes, says Dionysius of Fourna in his 18th century *Hermeneia*, "Christ stands before the tomb, holding his robe with one hand, and a scroll with the other" (Painter's Manual, 39). In the West Christ might be holding instead a flag or a shovel.

²⁴ Merkur, *The Psychedelic Sacrament*, 15–16.

²⁵ Bennett, C. / Osburn, L. / Osburn J., *Green Gold the Tree of Life*, 240.

²⁶ MS. Bodl. 602, fol. 2r explains: "For if it [a salamander] crawls into a tree, it infects all the fruit with poison, and it kills those who eat its fruit" (*Nam si arbori irrepserit, omnia poma inficit veneno, et eos qui ex eis pomis ederint occidit*). The text closely follows Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies* 12.4.36, which in turn echoes Pliny's *Natural History* 29.23.74. Samorini embraces this error too ("Mushroom Trees," 100–101, and *New Data*, 272–273), as do Ruck and Hoffman (*Effluents*, 51). But Ruck partially backed off it in response to a correction from historian Tom Hatsis (Ruck, *Son Conceived in Drunkenness*, 149, n. 373). Thanks to Hatsis for the reference.

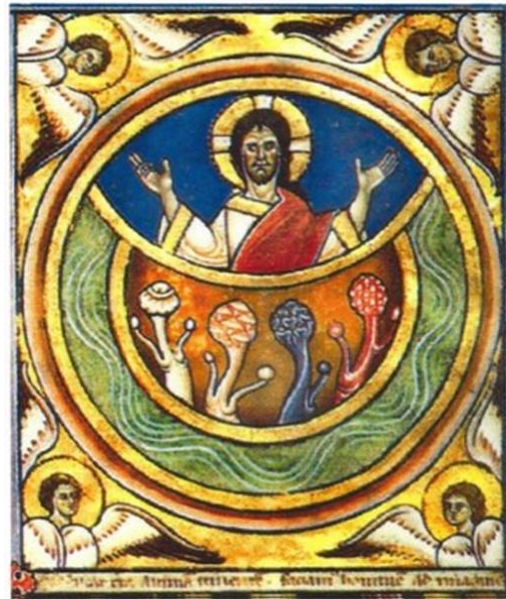
misidentification of a tree as a psilocybin mushroom in a fresco of the third / fourth creation day in the Abbey of Saint-Savin-sur-Gartempe, Poitou, France.²⁷

3. The Great Canterbury Psalter: Jesus blessing a bowl of mushrooms?

In his 2023 book *God on Psychedelics*, Don Lattin, the San Francisco Chronicle's veteran religion reporter, writes that,

the evidence [for psychedelic mushrooms] in Christian art can't be explained away. Just open to the insert of color photos in [Jerry B. and Julie M. Brown's] *The Psychedelic Gospels*. Exhibit A: a basket of *Amanita muscaria* mushrooms in the Basilica of Aquileia in Italy, circa 330. Exhibit B: An angel holding a mushroom in the fresco of a tenth century church in what is now Turkey. Exhibit C: Jesus blessing a bowl of mushrooms in the Great Canterbury Psalter in England, circa 1200. Exhibit D: numerous mushrooms tucked into the stained-glass windows in Chartres Cathedral in France, circa 1210.²⁸

Lattin's claim that these "exhibits" cannot be explained away is easily contradicted. Exhibits B-D reveal that those making the claims are not familiar with readily recognizable Christian iconographical themes and stylized landscape features. The angel allegedly holding a mushroom in Cappadocia's Snake Church (Exhibit B) is actually the Archangel Michael holding a globe, a standard feature of his iconography, often taking the form of a *globus cruciger*. The alleged mushrooms in the windows of Chartres Cathedral (Exhibit D) are actually stylized trees rendered in the same manner as hundreds of other trees from the period (see further below). The basket of alleged psychoactive *Amanita muscaria* mushrooms in the Basilica of Aquileia in



23. The Third Day, the Creation of Plants.
Paris "Eadwine" Psalter.

Fig. 7: Lattin's Exhibit C wrongly attributed to the Eadwine Psalter by Hoffman, Ruck, and Staples.

²⁷ Samorini, "Mushroom Trees," 94, figs. 9–10; New Data 270–71, fig. 15; *Funghi allucinogeni* 70–71, figs. 17–18.

²⁸ Lattin, *God on Psychedelics*, 69. See Brown / Brown, *Psychedelic Gospels*, plates 12 (exhibit C), 16 (D), 21 (A), 25 (B).

Italy (Exhibit A) could as easily depict the edible *Amanita caesarea*, a favorite of the ancient Romans.²⁹

The present article focuses on Exhibit C, the one Lattin describes as “Jesus blessing a bowl of mushrooms,” from the Great Canterbury, or Anglo-Catalan, Psalter (henceforth GCP).³⁰ Lattin’s description, which depends upon the claims of the Browns, is wrong on all three counts: (1) the image is of the Father, with Jesus as a stand-in for theological reasons,³¹ (2) there is no bowl, and (3) the plants are trees, not mushrooms (Fig. 1).

Lattin’s Exhibit C (GCP, fol. 1r) is one of the most frequently misinterpreted images by PMTs. The result has been that this has begun to appear in popular books, such as Taschen’s lavishly illustrated *Plant Magick* (2022), where it is erroneously titled *Christ with Mushrooms*.³² At least three PMT authors feature the image on the covers of their books.³³ When writing about the GCP, some PMTs confuse it with another work known as the Eadwine or Canterbury Psalter. This is the case, for example, in a 2001 article by Mark Hoffman, Carl A. P. Ruck, and Blaise Daniel Staples,³⁴ who incorrectly identify Exhibit C and other images from the GCP as coming from the Eadwine Psalter (Fig. 7), and images from both Psalters as if they derive from a single manuscript.³⁵ As a result a good deal of confusion reigns.³⁶ The Browns (Lattin’s source) tell the story of going to the Wren Library at Trinity College Cambridge asking to see the GCP only to be shown instead the Eadwine Psalter, which is housed there.³⁷ Did this occur because the Browns confused the GCP and Eadwine Psalter? They report producing a shelf number given them beforehand by a Wren librarian over the phone: W. H.16.18. As it turns out, that is not a Wren Library shelf number. However, H.16.18 is and refers to an 1874 photographic facsimile of the Carolingian Utrecht Psalter.³⁸ The Great Canterbury, Eadwine, and Harley Psalters are all reworkings of the Utrecht Psalter.³⁹

²⁹ Aaronson, *Fungi*, 316. Allegro himself wrote: “The two most likely candidates are *Amanita caesarea* and *Amanita muscaria*” (Allegro, *End of the Road*).

³⁰ Bibliothèque nationale de France [=BnF] Latin 8846. Further details below.

³¹ Based on the conviction that God the Father could not and should not be depicted (see Jensen, *Face to Face*, 69–130).

³² Hundley, *Plant Magick*, 75. The author emailed Hundley (Nov 20, 2023) pointing out the issue and asking for her source. So far Hundley has not replied.

³³ Brown / Brown, *Psychedelic Gospels*; Rush, *Mushroom in Christian Art*; Arthur, *Mushrooms and Mankind*.

³⁴ Hoffman / Ruck / Staples, *Conjuring Eden*, 31–33.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, figs. 23–26.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 47, n. 134. The same mistake was also made by Arthur, *Mushrooms and Mankind* (cover description), and Lash, *The Discovery of a Lifetime*.

³⁷ Brown / Brown, *Psychedelic Gospels*, 140–141.

³⁸ Wren Library Rare Book Cataloguer Maria Giovanna De Simone to the author (4 Dec 2023).

³⁹ The Browns blame the confusion on the unhelpfulness of the librarian, but perhaps they, like other PMTs, were just confused.

It should be noted that Hoffman, one of the authors of the article that confuses the GCP and the Eadwine Psalter, was also a co-author of the Brill dictionary entry referred to above. Another of the article's authors, Ruck, is the PMT with the most prestigious academic post (Professor of Classical Studies at Boston University). This, along with Ruck's coining the term *entheogens*,⁴⁰ may have been a factor in giving credence to his and the other PMT's interpretations. When one interviewer, for example, advised the influential amateur mycologist R. Gordon Wasson to "beware of seeing mushrooms everywhere," he countered that his views had "the backing of Carl Ruck, a professor of classics at Boston university."⁴¹ The trust Wasson placed in Ruck is the foundation of interdisciplinary research. But was it well placed in this case? One issue that casts a shadow over the work of Ruck and other PMT's is their tendency to resort to a kind of elastic, pseudo-mystical descriptive jargon that allows them the greatest possible latitude for insinuating entheogenic symbolism in art without having to inquire into how historians of Christian art and iconography interpret the same images. This results on the one hand in the PMTs presenting themselves as having access to the secret inner meanings of the images while on the other displaying a lack of familiarity with surface meanings known to every expert of Christian iconography.

Earlier we noted that the GCP is based on the Utrecht Psalter, but this is not the case for its first eight pages (1r–4v), which follow instead a different tradition appearing in a number of contexts, including other Psalters. Lattin's Exhibit C, represents one of a series of scenes treating the six days of creation, sometimes called the Hexameron (*from hex = six and hēmera = day*) (Fig. 8).

Homilies and treatises on the Hexameron by prominent theologians like Basil of Caesarea, Ambrose of Milan, and the Venerable Bede were popular in the early Church.⁴² However, they did not become a regular feature of artistic representations of Genesis 1 until about the 12th century.⁴³ Before that, depictions typically began not with the creation days but with Adam and Eve.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Ruck / Bigwood / Staples / Ott / Wasson, *Entheogens*, 145–46.

⁴¹ Forte, *Conversation with Wasson*, 89.

⁴² For a representative list of Hexamera from the earliest times, see Robbins, *Hexameral Literature*, 93–104.

⁴³ But see an early precursor in the 6th century Ashburnham Pentateuch, fol. 1v. See also the proposed reconstruction of the British Library's 4th–5th century Cotton Genesis (BL, Cotton MS Otho B VI) in Weizmann / Kessler, *The Cotton Genesis*, 48–52, 127–29.

⁴⁴ See, e.g. The Vienna Genesis, fol. 1r and 2v (early 6th cent., Austrian National Library, Vienna); Moutier-Grandval Bible (c. 830–40, BL, Add MS 10546, fol 5v.): Bible of St. Paul Outside the Walls (*Codex Membranaceus Saeculi IX*), fol. 8v (9th cent., Abbey of St. Paul outside the Walls, Rome); and the Vivien Bible or First Bible of Charles the Bald (9th cent., BnF, MS Lat. 1, fol. 10v): the Bernward doors in Hildesheim Cathedral (1015), The Todi Bible (c. 1025, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat.lat 10405), fol. 4v; Wiligelmo's story of the fall, West façade, Modena Cathedral, Modena, Italy (1099-not later than 1140), as well apparently as the two remaining fragments of his Adam and Eve story on the main façade of the Cremona Cathedral

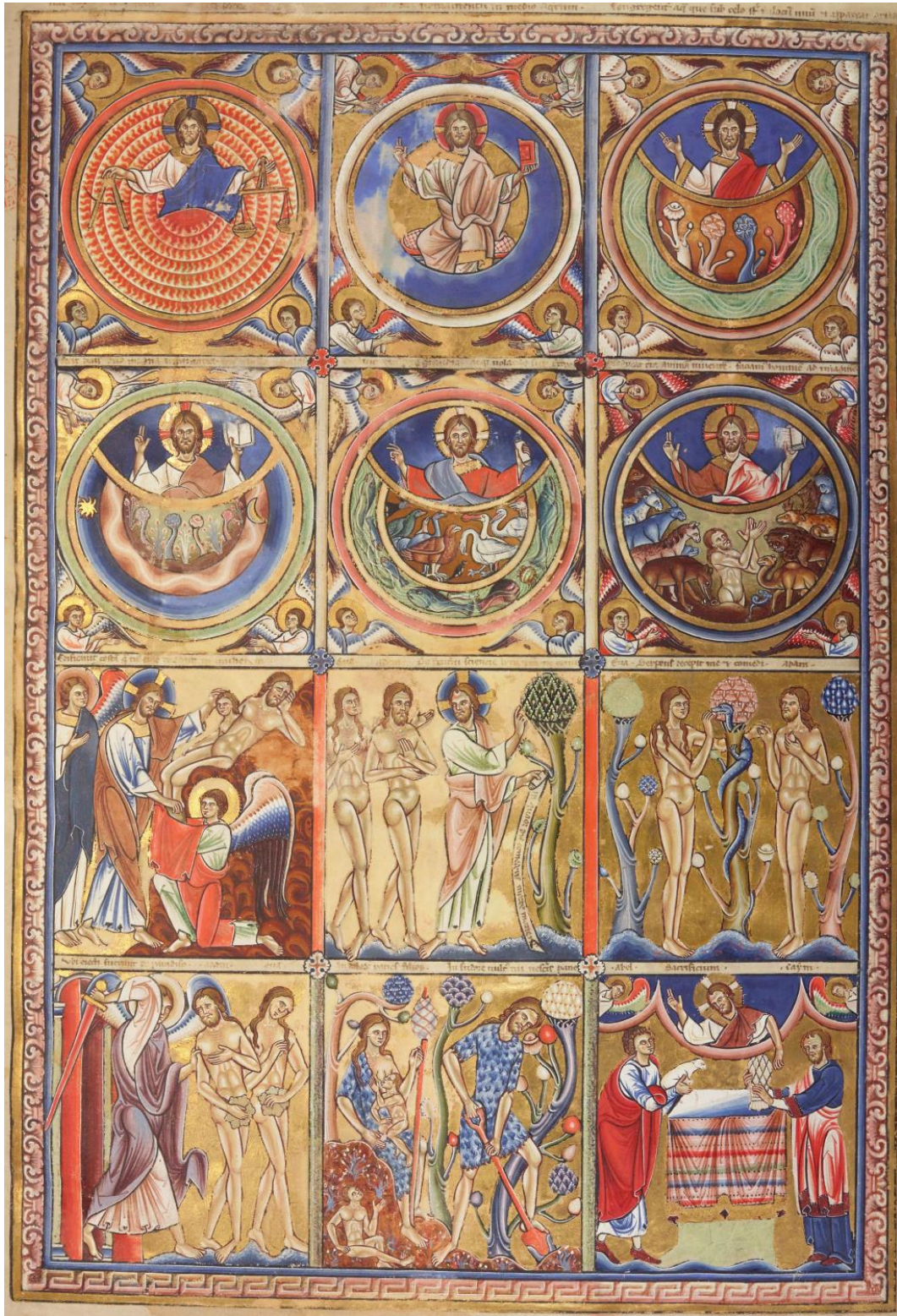


Fig. 8: Great Canterbury Psalter, fol. 1r.

just to the left of the main entrance. This starting point persisted, see The Hunterian Psalter (Glasgow University Library, MS Hunter 229 [U.3.2], c. 1170), fol. 7v.

In the period in which the GCP was produced there can be no doubt what its artist intended to represent in Exhibit C: the third creation day described in Genesis 1:9–13. The text accompanying the illumination in the GCP is taken from the Vulgate of Genesis 1:9: *Congregentur aquae, quae sub caelo sunt, in locum unum: et appareat arida* “Let the waters that are under the heaven,



Fig. 9: Trees from the third day of creation. Great Canterbury Psalter, fol. 1r. (detail).

be gathered together into one place: and let the dry land appear.” It has nothing to do with “Jesus blessing a bowl of mushrooms.”⁴⁵ It illustrates the events of the third creation day, including dry land appearing along with what resulted from God’s third-day command in Genesis 1:11: “Let the earth bring forth the green herb, and such as may seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after its kind, which may have seed in itself upon the earth.”⁴⁶ This is what its four colorful and (to the modern eye) strangely decorated trees represent (Fig. 9).

The PMTs imagine they can appeal to the colors, shapes, and patterns of the trees in this image to determine which psychoactive plant each one supposedly represents. John A. Rush urges his readers to “notice that the mushrooms are of different colors, suggesting that various types of mushrooms are used as the sacrament.”⁴⁷ The Browns identify (from left to right) the first as a “mushroom of the genus *Psilocybe*,”⁴⁸ the second, as a psilocybin-containing mushroom called *Panaeolis*, because of “the color, shape, and fringes of the eight tiny mushroom images embedded in the cap.”⁴⁹ Notice that this identification is *not* based on the shape of the plant’s actual crown (foliage head), which is round, but on the pattern *on* the crown, which could as easily be described as tiny trees or para-

⁴⁵ Lattin, *God on Psychedelics*, 69.

⁴⁶ Hoffman, Ruck, *Staples are aware of the biblical reference, but nevertheless insist that “these are no ordinary plants, but fungal trees”* (*Conjuring Eden*, 32).

⁴⁷ Rush, *Mushroom in Christian Art*, 202, loosely based on his own idiosyncratic account of the supposed meaning of colors in Christian art (pp. 70–75), according to which, “[r]ed with gold, white, black, or brown dots is almost always associated with *Amanita muscaria*. This configuration is seen with book, shoe, angel’s wings, cape, and so on” (p. 73).

⁴⁸ Brown / Brown, *Psychedelic Mushrooms*, 138, contra other PMTs who identify it instead as a poppy (opium). See, e.g., Rush, *Mushroom in Christian Art*, 202. Also Irvin / Ruajit, *Astrotheology & Shamanism*, 177, who follow Arthur, *Mushrooms and Mankind*, 79.

⁴⁹ Brown / Brown, *Psychedelic Gospels*, 138. The Browns note that others have identified this plant as a Syrian rue (*Peganum harmala*) pod, but insist that “careful inspection reveals that it bears no resemblance.” This contra Arthur, *Mushrooms and Mankind*, 79, followed by Irvin / Ruajit, *Astrotheology & Shamanism*, 177. Ironically, none of the four plants really resembles the mushrooms the Browns have identified them with.

sols as mushrooms.⁵⁰ Hoffman, Ruck, and Staples further claim that this plant is the same as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because its crown displays the same pattern.⁵¹ The third tree the Browns identify as a *psilocybe* mushroom based on its being blue,⁵² and the fourth with its red with white spots as Fly-agaric (*Amanita muscaria*).⁵³

None of these identifications bear up under scrutiny. The authors venture their claims without an adequate grasp of the standard way of depicting trees and other plants in the art of the period. Nor have they been much inclined to consult art historians, whose opinions on such matters they show little interest in.⁵⁴ This began when PMTs responded negatively to the advice art historian Erwin Panofsky gave to New York banker and amateur mycologist G. Gordon Wasson in 1952. Wasson contributed significantly to the emergence of the psychedelic Sixties by telling the story in the May 1957 *Life Magazine* of his experiences taking psychedelic mushrooms in Mexico. Unlike most PMTs, who tend to interact little with scholars outside their group, Wasson readily sought help from people with expertise in fields related to his research. Consequently, when his interest was aroused about the remains of a fresco of Eden's tree in the 12th century Plaincourault Chapel that mycologists had been identifying as *Amanita muscaria* since 1909,⁵⁵ he approached Panofsky, one of the most eminent art historians at the time, for an opinion. In his response, dated 2 May 1952, Panofsky makes a comment directly relevant to evaluating the PMTs interpretation of the GCP: "What the mycologists have overlooked is that medieval artists hardly ever worked from nature, but from classical prototypes which in the course

⁵⁰ Interestingly the Browns did not seize upon the little dots at the peaks of these trees/parasols to identify the mushroom instead as *P. semilanceata* which has nipple-like papillae at the top of their caps. Depictions of trees with little balls on top were quite common throughout our period, see, e.g., Physiologus Bernensis, Cod. 318, fol. 9v (9th cent.); Morgan Library, MS M.728, fol. 11v (c. 860); BL, Harley, MS 2821, fol. 16r (11th cent.); Uta Codex, 89v (11th cent.); Codex Aurelius of Echternach, fol. 52v (11th cent.); MS. Bodl. 602, fol. 14r (13th cent.); and the Bernward Doors (11th cent.) in Hildesheim Germany.

⁵¹ Hoffman / Staples / Ruck, *Conjuring Eden*, 32.

⁵² Brown / Brown, *Psychedelic Gospels*, 137. The same claim is made by Arthur, *Mushrooms and Mankind*, 79, followed by Irvin / Ruajit, *Astrotheology & Shamanism*, 177.

⁵³ Brown / Brown, *Psychedelic Gospels*, 137. See also, e.g., Irvin, *Holy Mushroom*, Pl. 6; Arthur, *Mushrooms and Mankind*, 79, followed by Irvin / Ruajit, *Astrotheology & Shamanism*, 177. An exception is Beckstead / Blankenagel / Noconi / Winkelman, *Entheogenic Origins of Mormonism*, 227, where it is identified as an ergot stoma.

⁵⁴ A few PMTs cite art historians reasonably often though seldom with an eye toward checking their theories (see, e.g., Ruck / Hoffman, *Effluents*).

⁵⁵ Rougé, *Folk-lore de la Touraine*, 214. Subsequently, Marchand / Boudier, *La fresque de Plaincourault (Indre)*, 31–32; Ramsbottom, *Handbook of the Larger British Fungi*, 28; Rolfe / Rolfe, *Romance of the Fungus World*, 291.

of repeated copying became quite unrecognizable.”⁵⁶ In a follow-up letter (May 12, 1952) Panofsky further noted that,

even the most mushroom-like specimens [of medieval depictions of trees] show some traces of ramification [i.e., of having branches]; if the artists had labored under the delusion that the model before him was meant to be a mushroom rather than a schematized tree he would have omitted the branches altogether.⁵⁷

Given Wasson’s importance the PMTs are generally aware of Panofsky’s warning, and of Wasson’s subsequent remark that “mycologists would have done well to consult art historians.”⁵⁸ But they reject it as “an unreflective dismissal [that] misses the point,”⁵⁹ or a case of Wasson’s being taken in by the “monodisciplinary blindness and interpretive slothfulness of professional researchers,” meaning Panofsky and the other unnamed art historians Wasson consulted.⁶⁰ One prominent PMT, J.R. Irvin, even complained that “Wasson adopted Panofsky’s interpretation and thenceforth began to force it upon other scholars. Uncritical acceptance of the Wasson-Panofsky view lasted, unchecked, for nearly fifty years.”⁶¹ It might be noted, however, that many of the works in which the PMTs express contrary views were published during the fifty years to which Irvin refers. The only real advantage Wasson has enjoyed was perhaps the result of his trusted reputation, based partly on his willingness to engage scholars in other fields as a way of cross-checking his own work, a feature not often encountered in the more generally insular PMTs. In the meantime, the few art historians with expertise in Ottonian and Romanesque art who are aware of the PMTs claims continue to echo Panofsky. When questioned on the topic by the writer, prominent art historian Elina Gertsman responded crisply: “I very much do not think that Ottonian or Romanesque imagery was in any shape or form influenced by psychedelic mushrooms.”⁶² Next to the GCP the Ottonian treasures of Hildesheim—Bishop Bernward’s doors, column, and chandelier, along with the painted ceiling of St. Michael’s Church—are among the most of-

⁵⁶ Erwin Panofsky to R. Gordon Wasson (May 2, 1952), in Tina and R. Gordon Wasson Ethnomycological Collection Archives, ecb00001, Series IV, drawer, W3.2, Folder: 20. Botany Libraries, Economic Botany Library of Oakes Ames, Harvard University.

⁵⁷ Erwin Panofsky to R. Gordon Wasson (May 12, 1952), in Tina and R. Gordon Wasson, Ethnomycological Collection Archives, ecb00001, Series IV, drawer, W3.2, Folder: 20. Botany Libraries, Economic Botany Library of Oakes Ames, Harvard University.

⁵⁸ Wasson / Doniger O’Flaherty, *Soma*, 179.

⁵⁹ Hoffman / Ruck / Staples, *Conjuring Eden*, 21.

⁶⁰ Samorini, *New Data*, 268. Wasson writes that Panofsky’s opinion reflected “the unanimous view of those competent in Romanesque art” (Wasson / Doniger O’Flaherty, *Soma*, 180).

⁶¹ Irvin, *The Holy Mushroom*.

⁶² Gertsman to the author (Nov 23, 2023).

ten discussed pieces of art by PMTs seeking hidden psychedelic mushrooms.⁶³ However, as historian Bernhard Gallistl points out:

The hidden symbolism in a picture can only be proven from the available textual sources. In my more than 30 years of experience as a manuscript expert at the Hildesheim Cathedral Library and researcher of the Hildesheim Middle Ages – preferably the 10th and 11th centuries – I have yet to come across a text in which I can see evidence of symbolism of this kind.⁶⁴

Gallistl's point about the absence of textual support for the PMTs theories is an important one that applies as well to their treatment of the GCP and of Christian art throughout early and medieval Christianity. Charles Stang, director of Harvard's Center for the Study of World Religions, states the problem well:

if the original Eucharist were psychedelic, or even if there were significant numbers of early Christians using psychedelics like sacrament, I would expect the representatives of orthodox, institutional Christianity to rail against it. I would expect we'd have ample evidence.⁶⁵

4. Fleshing out the problem from the perspective of iconography

The PMTs' first crucial misstep in interpreting the GCP third-day scene is assuming that the patterns used to render the foliage heads of the four plants can serve as a guide for identifying the illuminator's intent, and for discerning the relations of these four to the GCP's other plants / trees using the same patterns.

The illuminations in the GCP come from two distinct periods, the earlier, c. 1200, undertaken in the Benedictine Monastery in Canterbury, England, and the latter, c. 1340, in Catalanian, probably at Barcelona. All the illuminations prior to fol. 72v come from the earlier period, and all those after fol. 92r from the later period. The illuminations in between are a mix of the earlier and later periods. The third-day scene comes from the earlier period, a time when, as Panofsky stressed, medieval artists "hardly ever worked from nature, but from classical prototypes which in the course of repeated copying became quite unrecognizable." By 1200 this had long been the case. It is only later that a return to naturalism would render the kind of identifications the PMTs wish to make

⁶³ Hoffman / Staples / Ruck, *Conjuring Eden*, 22–24, 28–30, Brown and Brown, *Psychedelic Gospels*, 152–176; Jochen Gartz, *Narrenschwämme: Psychotrope Pilze in Europa* (fig. 1); Samorini, "Mushroom-Trees," 102–103; idem., *Funghi allucinogeni*, 197–199; Irvin, *Holy Mushroom* (pl. 9–12).

⁶⁴ Gallistl to the author (Nov 27, 2023). See especially Gallistl's *Die Bernwardssäule und die Michaeliskirche zu Hildesheim* and *Die Bronzetüren Bischof Bernwards in Dom zu Hildesheim*.

⁶⁵ Stang, "Psychedelics."

possible. A good illustration of the situation, as botanical art historian Celia Fischer points out, comes from Medieval Herbals:

These quasi-scientific handbooks of medical prescriptions, tried and tested by many generations, included descriptions of plants accompanied by illustrations. But these were inherited from classical prototypes and centuries of copying had rendered them lifeless and often unrecognizable.⁶⁶



Fig. 10: Top left: Pericope Book of St. Erentrud, fol. 96r (detail); Fig. 11: Bottom Left: Uta Codex, fol. 89r (detail); Fig. 12: Right: Great Canterbury Psalter, fol. 6v (detail).

Fisher identifies a copy of a work called the *Circa instans*, produced around 1300, a century after the earlier paintings in the GPT, as reflecting “the first signs of increased realism in the depiction of plants.”

During the centuries-long process in which the artists lost touch with the classical prototypes and their trees became, to use Panofsky’s term, “schematized,” they discovered the potential of

exploiting the foliage for decorative purposes by introducing bright colors and patterns to enhance the richness and beauty of their illustrations. This tendency advanced especially in the eleventh century when artists began giving up the idea that the crowns, and even the leaves on individual trees needed to have the same shape or color. Nor was it any longer deemed necessary to restrict one kind of crown to a particular tree, so that several different kinds might be seen sprouting from the branches of individual trees. Lines on the crowns, traditionally marking the various layers of foliage, also became occasions for introducing pleasing bands of com-



Left to right: Fig. 13: Codex Aureus of Echternach, fol. 52v (detail); Fig. 14: Golden Munich Psalter, fol. 9v (detail).

⁶⁶ Fisher, *Flowers in Medieval Manuscripts*, 7.

plementary colors in place of the traditionally expected uniform green. These bands could then be further elaborated with decorative lines, dots, and other patterns. Examples may be seen in the Pericope Book of St. Erentrud (11th–12th cent.), the Uta Codex (11th cent.), and the GCP (Figs. 10, 11, 12). Tree trunks and branches no longer had to reflect their natural color either, nor a single tree a single color (Fig. 13, 14).



Fig. 15: Illustration of Matthew 8:20. Great Canterbury Psalter, fol. 3v (detail).

It is along this same developmental trajectory that we arrive at works like the GCP and the closely allied Golden Munich Psalter (English, c. 1200). A superb example is found in the GCP's illustration of Jesus's saying in Matthew 8:2: "foxes have holes and the birds of the air nests" / *Vulpes foveas habent, et volucres caeli nidos* (Fig. 15). In the various crowns on this tree of nests we notice that three of the four patterns the PMTs identified as intending to depict psychedelic mushrooms in the third-day scene now appear along with one or two others on a single tree. In addition, several of the smaller crowns on this tree are simply colored circles or ovals.

The crown at the top right of the picture has the same little tree / parasol shapes as the one

identified by the Browns as *Panaeolis* in the third-day scene. Only here it is blue rather than tan (or brown). There are 20 examples of crowns decorated with these little trees / parasols in the GCP's earlier illuminations ranging in color from tan, to blue, to white, to red, to black, to reddish brown.

We also find in the middle at the top of the tree of nests a red crown of the sort the PMTs identified in the third-day scene as *Amanita muscaria*. But then lower down toward the bottom we see another using the same pattern but in white instead of red. There are eleven crowns of this pattern in the earlier illuminations of the GCP in red, white, grey-green, brown, and blue. In addition, the same pattern is employed by the artist(s) to render other items such as the black knobs on a throne (fol. 5v) and blue seat cushions (fol. 76r). The crown in

the third-day scene that the GCP artist(s) used most frequently was the one on the far left, which the PMTs identified as either a poppy or “another mushroom of the genus *Psilocybe*.”⁶⁷ It occurs 30 times in the manuscript in a wide range of colors.

The tree with nests also prominently displays another feature Panofsky had pointed out, namely, ramifications (branches). In this case there is only one tree, but with many branches. Each of the plants in the third-day scene also has branches. The mushrooms the PMTs wish to identify them with, however, do not.

3. Schematized Trees

The trees throughout the earlier illuminations of the GCP are completely formulaic and produced in a manner reflective of that. The artist draws simple parallel lines for the trunks and branches and tops them off with circles or ovals of various sizes. We can see unembellished examples of underlying drawings for such trees in the unfinished Douce Apocalypse (1250–1275) (Fig. 16).

After drawing the basic shapes, the artist adds the patterns they want to feature for each crown. In our example from the Douce Apocalypse this would consist of leaves in an oval; in many of the crowns in the GCP, it involved an initial stage of cross hatching the circle or oval that was to become the foliage crown. This is what was done in three of the trees in the third-day scene. The artist then elaborated the squares created by the cross hatching by adding further details, such as dots, tree / parasol shapes, etc. The same was done throughout the GCP with no attempt at consistently linking a particular pattern with a particular color or form of plant or tree.

The inclusion of ramifications (branches) is accomplished in two ways. The first is to divide the trunk or add branches to its sides. The other is to flare out the upper end of the trunk to make room for a small tangle of multiple branches at the top just under the crown. Again, the Douce Apocalypse provides examples of this latter type at the stage of the initial drawing (Fig. 17). The GCP uses



Fig. 16: Douce Apocalypse, Bodleian Library, Ms. Douce 180, fol. 48v (detail).

⁶⁷ Brown / Brown, *Psychedelic Gospels*, 138, contra Rush, *Mushroom in Christian Art*, 202; Irvin / Ruajit, *Astrotheology & Shamanism*, 177; and Arthur, *Mushrooms and Mankind*, 79.



Fig. 17: Douce Apocalypse, Bodleian Library, Ms. Douce 180; Left to Right: fols. 45r and 44r (details).



Fig. 18: Great Canterbury Psalter, fol. 1r (detail) Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

both approaches, the latter, for example, in its depiction of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Fig. 18). The presence of both kinds of branches under crowns of the same sort as appear in the third-day scene would seem to rule out any intentionality on the part of the artist(s) to depict mushrooms.

In another context, PMT Giorgio Samorini attempts to sidestep the problem of multiple branches supporting a single cap by suggesting that “these ramifications might represent the membrane enveloping mushrooms of the family of the Amanitaceae at the early stages of development. This membrane then breaks when the cap broadens out and separates from the stalk,”⁶⁸ This leaves behind on the stipe a remnant called a veil.

However, Samorini anachronistically projects a greater interest in botanical accuracy than is justified for artists of our period. The idea that they would go beyond depicting a mature *Amanita muscaria* to capture its appearance during a brief stage in its development is far-fetched. Furthermore, while the membrane Samorini refers to is a feature of *Amanitaceae* (including *Amanita muscaria*), it is *not* a feature of several other varieties of psychedelic mushrooms the PMTs want to identify as trees. Samorini’s suggestion also begs the question of images that he and other PMTs identify as psychedelic mushrooms whose crowns are supported by multiple branches but lack a central stalk or stipe, a crucial morphological feature of many psychedelic mushrooms.⁶⁹ Finally, even if we were to credit Samorini’s argument in relation to a tree with only two or three branches, it takes us nowhere near explaining the great tangle of branches we find on the GCP’s tree of nests.

⁶⁸ Samorini, “Mushroom Trees,” 89, and New Data, 268. The same argument was put forward already by Émile Boudier, in Marchand / Boudier, *La fresque de Plaincourault* (Indre), 32.

⁶⁹ See, e.g., the tree poisoned by a salamander in MS Bodl.602, fol. 27a (Samorini, “Mushroom Trees,” 100, fig. 17, New Data, 275, fig. 19, and Funghi, 192, fig. 79).

Given the persistent issue of ramifications (branches), the PMTs cause is not advanced when the Browns assert that “Numerous red, blue, orange, and tan stylized mushrooms dot the first hundred pages” of the GCP.⁷⁰ Of the more than one hundred trees in the GCP’s earlier illuminations, only eleven appear *without* branches, and for the most part these use the same crown patterns as those *with* branches. Seventeen of the trees

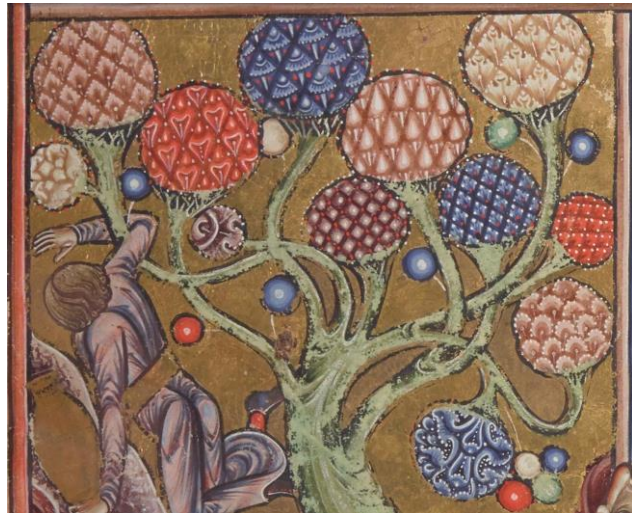


Fig. 19: Great Canterbury Psalter, fol. 5v (detail).

have a tangle of multiple branches just under the crown. The Browns’ appeal to other trees in the GCP actually undercuts their claims about the third-day scene, where they seek to identify the species of the various alleged psychedelic mushrooms *based upon* the combination of the pattern and color of each plant. The bigger picture provided by the use of color and pattern in the rest of the earlier GCP illuminations indicates that the combination of pattern and color on crowns is not fixed and implies no specific reference to any particular species of plant or tree. This is especially clear in cases where different mixes of color and pattern appear together on the crowns of single trees (Fig. 19).

5. Moving forward

It is only when we set aside the claims of the PMTs that we begin to get a clear picture of what is going on in the GCP’s third-day scene. If the brightly colored trees seem strange to modern viewers unfamiliar with medieval artistic conventions, the PMTs’ presenting the scene alone without the larger context of the manuscript as a whole, never mind the rest of the folio on which it appears, contributes to this. Furthermore, the PMTs focus entirely on seeming *similarities* between mushrooms and the trees of the third-day image, but pass over *differences* in silence. None of the plants really resemble the mushrooms with which the PMTs want to identify them. The red one on the right, for example, does share the color and the dots with *Amanita muscaria* but the resemblance ends there. The crown in the picture is round, not umbrella-shaped like a mature *Amanita muscaria* cap. Granted at an earlier stage in its development *Amanita muscaria* does have a ball-shaped cap, but the roundness of all the foliage

⁷⁰ Brown / Brown, *Psychedelic Gospels*, 137.

crowns in GCP's third-day scene, as indeed of the vast majority of other crowns in the GCP's earlier illuminations, is best explained by their being based on initial drawings of circles or ovals. Further, the stem (stipe) of the *Amanita muscaria* is white, has a partial veil when the mushroom is mature, and has no branches. In contrast, the entire GCP tree, apart from the white dots, is red, has branches, but no veil.⁷¹

Another serious weakness of the PMTs is their tendency to treat as fact that the images they seek to interpret illustrate familiar biblical or hagiographical passages as irrelevant to grasping their meaning. Often the individual scenes in the manuscripts are captioned and related to one another in a way that provides crucial clues for their interpretation. The “comic-book” format of displaying the scenes in the opening pages of the GCP (1r–4v) provides a typical example.

Lattin's claim that Christ was blessing a bowl of mushrooms misses the repeated use of circular or partially circular scenes elsewhere in the GCP's creation cycle. Circular scenes also appear, for example, in the near-contemporary English *Golden Munich Psalter* (c. 1200), the French *Bible de Souvigny* (1190–1199) (Fig. 20), and a number of manuscripts of the *Bible moralisée*.⁷²



Fig. 20: Bible de Souvigny, Bibliothèque de Moulins, fol. 4v (detail).

6. Freedom facilitated by structure

The fact that the artists of the medieval period were illustrating well-known texts actually gave them greater liberty regarding how they approached their subjects within the broader confines of well-established iconographical conventions.

As already noted, the presence of the trees in the third-day scene illustrates Genesis 1:11: “Let the earth bring forth the green herb, and such as may seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after its kind, which may have seed in itself upon the earth.” The Golden Munich Psalter takes a very similar approach to its third-day trees (note the cross hatching of the crowns) and features in this case the first portion of verse 11 on a scroll in God's hand: *Germinet terra herbam...* “Let the earth bring forth the herb...” (Fig. 21).⁷³ The third day of Genesis 1 consists

⁷¹ Although we would not expect to see a veil in the unopened mushroom.

⁷² See, e.g., Austrian National Library, Codex 2554 (French, 1225).

⁷³ See also BL, Add MS 18719, fol. 2r (c. 1280-c. 1295); Bodleian Library, MS. Bodl. 270b, fol. 3v. The third day scenes in these two manuscripts of the *Bible Moralisée* are accompanied by



Fig. 21: Golden Munich Psalter, fol. 8r (detail).



Fig. 22: Great Canterbury Psalter, fol. 1r (details): 3rd / 4th Days of Creation.

of two creation innovations: (1) The separation of the land from the sea (vss. 9–10) and (2) the creation of fruit-bearing trees and seed-bearing plants (vss. 11–13). The approach of the GCP artist to this pictorial problem was to refer to the separation of the land and sea (v. 9) in the caption and the creation of the trees in the picture (v. 11). The GCP artist does not however depict seed-bearing herbs in the scene, but waits to include them in the fourth-day scene, which is otherwise dedicated to the creation of the sun and moon (Fig 22).⁷⁴ Having details left out of third-day scenes but included on the fourth day also occurs elsewhere, as for example in the Acre Bible (1250–1254) where the illustration of the third-day features only the separation of the land and sea, with the trees appearing on the fourth-day (Fig. 23). Having either the trees alone or the herbs alone was generally felt sufficient to illustrate the third-day creation of trees and plants.

Contextualization made a rigidly fixed way of presenting the trees and plants of the third creation day unnecessary. Since Genesis 1:11 focuses on trees and plants containing seeds,⁷⁵ a third-day image might represent all trees, as in the GCP,⁷⁶ or a mix of trees and plants, or even something as simple as stand of grain (Fig. 24).⁷⁷ The focus of the underlying biblical text, after all, is on the fact that both the trees (in their fruit) and the herbs contain seeds, which mushrooms, being cryptogams, do not.

an abbreviated form of Genesis 1, verse 11: “*Germinet terra herbam virentem, et facientem [...] juxta genus suum.*”

⁷⁴ The artist also shows little interest in depicting the same trees in both the third- and fourth-day scenes. Notice as a separate consideration that the GCP’s fourth-day scene is in a poorer state of preservation compared with the third.

⁷⁵ See also verse 29: “I have given you every herb bearing seed (*herbam afferentem semen*) upon the earth, and all trees that have in themselves seed of their own kind (*ligna quae habent in semetipsis sementem generis sui*), to be your meat.”

⁷⁶ This seems to be the case because we find them mixed with smaller plants in the subsequent scene, which represents the fourth creation day, as well as in another scene later (fol. 6v).

⁷⁷ See also *Bible Moralisée*, BL, Add MS 18719, fol 2r (c. 1280-c. 1295), and Bodleian Library, MS 270b, fol. 3v (1226–1275).



Fig. 23: Acre Bible, Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, 5211, Genesis Frontpiece (detail).



Fig. 24: Bible Moralisée, MS Bodl. 270b, fol. 3v (detail), 1226-1275.

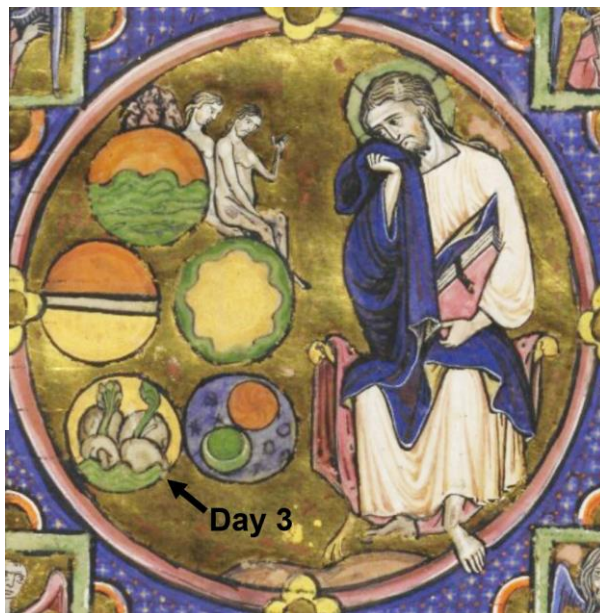


Fig. 25: Bible Moralisée, Codex Vindobonensis, ÖNB Cod. 2554, 1v, c. 1225-1249, Paris.

The more or less fixed character of the iconography of the six creation days even made it possible to depict all of the days in a single frame or illuminated letter, with the elements reduced to a few simple, but nevertheless immediately recognizable, “short-hand” forms

(Fig. 25).⁷⁸ In cases where the familiar individual creation-day scenes were presented out of their normal sequence, as in copies of the *Bible Moralisée*, the identity of each was supported not only by familiar iconography but also by descriptive captions.

7. Multiplying interpretive errors

PMTs sometimes assert that images contain figures holding something related to psychedelic mushrooms in their hands. The one perhaps most prone to this is John A. Rush, who also provides the most extensive collection of alleged examples of psychedelic mushrooms in art in his 2011 book *The Mushroom in Christian Art*. The work includes 261 color plates of alleged examples. Rush is one of the most adventurous of the PMTs, but his book has been warmly endorsed by other PMT writers including Ruck, who says it provides “an eloquent and sophisticated context for their [i.e., psychedelic mushrooms in art] significance, a kind of grammar of symbolic form.”

Writing of the GCP’s third-day scene, Rush asserts that it depicts God “holding something that looks suspiciously like a mushroom, but it might be the symbol for alpha and omega.”⁷⁹ Yet in the picture God is not actually holding anything. His left hand is open, palm-out and his right is formed into a familiar gesture known as the *benedictio latina*, with thumb and first two fingers extended while the other two are folded into the palm (Fig. 26).⁸⁰



Fig. 26: Great Canterbury Psalter, 1r; God’s right hand forming a *benedictio latina*.

Rush makes similar false claims about the other creation days that appear on the same page as our third-day scene (for the overall layout of the page, see Fig. 8 above). Of the GCP’s second-day scene, the frame to the immediate left of the third-day scene we have been discussing, Rush asserts that God is surrounded by “cherubs, each of whom is holding a mysterious-looking substance, probably a mushroom cap.”⁸¹ But again, the angels hands are empty (Fig. 27).

⁷⁸ For an example of the scenes in a single illuminated letter see The Bible of De Bello, BL, MS Burney 3, fol. 5v (1240–1253), which was also produced in England, perhaps at Canterbury itself.

⁷⁹ Rush, *Mushroom in Christian Art*, 202.

⁸⁰ Hoffman / Ruck / Staples similarly misinterpret a stone carving in which St. Martin of Tours’ hand forms the *benedictio latina*, imagining instead that he is pointing upward, allegedly at “a fungal sprouting” (*Conjuring Eden*, 47, n. 117).

⁸¹ Rush, *Mushroom in Christian Art*, 201 (Pl. 3:18b).

The images Rush provides are, as in this case, frequently not clear enough to tell whether they support his claims or not. Consequently, all one needs to do to counter Rush is to present clearer pictures. Rush further insinuates that the cushion God is sitting on in the second-day scene,⁸² as well as the book he is holding in his hand, are also psychedelic mushrooms, noting that the psychedelic mushroom “comes in many shapes and sizes”.⁸³ Rush further asserts that in the second-day scene God himself “manifests as the mushroom,” “resides in the mushroom,” and is striking a “mushroom-pose.”⁸⁴

Moving from the second creation day to the depiction of the first in the GCP (Fig. 28),



Fig. 28: God holding compass and scales. Great Canterbury Psalter, fol. 1r (detail).



Fig. 27: Great Canterbury Psalter, fol. 1r (detail); Angels with empty hands, God holding a book, seated on a cushion.

Rush tells us that “in [God’s] left hand there is a variation on the alpha and omega.”⁸⁵ Those familiar with the art of the period, however, will immediately recognize that what God is holding is *not* an alpha and omega, but an architect’s compass, a common feature in pictorial depictions of creation.⁸⁶ One of the most famous of these is the stunning front piece of Codex Vindobonensis 2554 produced in France c. 1225–1249 (Fig. 29). But many more examples could be cited.⁸⁷ It is this motif that stands behind William Blake’s famous “The Ancient of Days,” which serves as the frontispiece for his *Europe a Prophecy* (1794) (Fig. 30).

⁸² On identifying cushions as psychedelic mushrooms, see also Rush, *Mushroom in Christian Art* (Pl. 1:10b, 2:18, 2:26a).

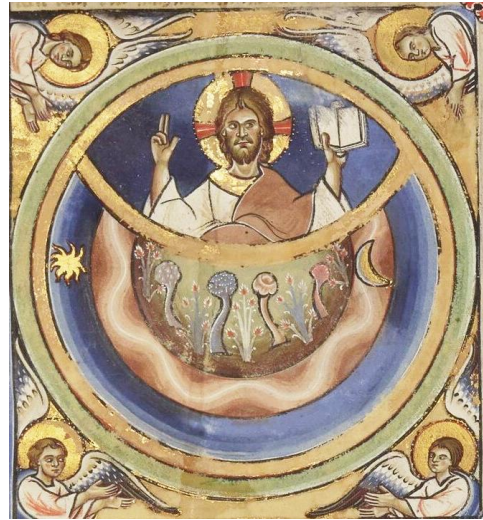
⁸³ *Ibid.*, 202, Pl. 3:18b.

⁸⁴ Rush, *Mushroom in Christian Art*, 201–202.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁸⁶ See, e.g., Friedman, *Architects Compass in Creation Miniatures*.

⁸⁷ Vindobonensis 2554 is presently in the Austrian National Library, Vienna. It is a copy of the Bible *Moralisée*. See, also, BL, Add MS 18719, fol. 1r (c. 1280–c. 1295); Bodleian Library, MS. Bodl. 270b fol. 1v (1226–1275); Tiberius Psalter, BL, MS Cotton, Tiberius C. VI, f. 7v (c. 1175–1250); BL, Royal MS 19, D III, fol. 3r (1411); Austrian National Library, Codex Vindobonensis, 1179, fol. 1v. (late 13th cent.); Holkham Bible, BL, Add MS 47682, fol. 2r (c. 1327–1335); and BL, Royal 15 D III, fol. 3v.



Left: Fig. 29: Vindobonensis 2554, frontpiece.
Right: Fig. 30: William Blake, frontpiece to *Europe a Prophecy* (1794).

Fig. 31: Great Canterbury Psalter, fol. 1r (detail); The Creation of the Sun and Moon.

But to return to Rush's interpretation of the GCP's first day scene. In addition to misidentifying the architect's compass in the picture, Rush goes on to claim that the first day's red circular backdrop with its rings of fire (Fig. 28) is actually the underside of a mushroom. He does this despite its lacking characteristic features such as gills!⁸⁸

Finally, turning to the scene of the fourth creation day (Fig. 31), which appears immediately beneath the first day scene on GCP folio 1r (see Fig. 8), Rush declares that in the picture "God is the mushroom, for this image suggests that mushrooms existed before the creation of heaven and earth, or at least were coequal with creation."⁸⁹ How Rush arrived at such a conclusion from the picture itself is anybody's guess. But what we are actually seeing presented in a typical way in the image, as the caption to the frame in the GCP indicates, is the introduction of the *duo luminaria magna* (the two great lights = the sun and moon), along with the stars (Genesis 1:16).⁹⁰

Thus, in his interpretation of a single page from the GCP, Rush provides multiple examples of the ways in which the PMTs typically display their imaginative tendencies, their elastic, pseudo-mystical jargon, and their basic unfamiliarity with surface meanings.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Hoffman, Ruck, and Staples, again imagining that the image comes from the Eadwine Psalter, make the same claim calling it a "spiraled orange-red cap" (Conjuring Eden, 32–33, fig. 25).

⁸⁹ Irvin, *Sacred Mushroom*, Pl. 33, similarly misidentifies the blood from the wound on Christ's right hand in the 14th century Holkham Bible (BL, Add MS 47682, fol. 42v) as a mushroom.

⁹⁰ Rush does not confuse the GCP with the Eadwine Psalter but he makes similar mistakes elsewhere, such as identifying a picture from the 12th century Ingeborg Psalter (fol. 12v) as coming from a 17th century painting by Domenico Fetti (Pl. 1:5).

⁹¹ A parallel example of another PMTs' basic unfamiliarity with the iconography of the Genesis story of the fourth day of creation is Jan Irvin's misinterpretation of the sun and moon in the 11th /12th century Romanesque fresco on the ceiling of the Abbey of Saint-Savin-sur-Gartempe in France (Holy Mushroom, Pl. 38).

8. Conclusion

The PMT's fanciful interpretations have provided us with an opportunity in this article to reflect in a positive way, using as our entry point one of the most exquisite 13th century examples, upon the range of artistic solutions to the problem of illustrating the hexameron in the 11th–13th centuries, and especially the third day of creation (Genesis 1:9–13). The imagery of the third-day scene specifically features the creation of trees, making way for us to explore how stylized trees were commonly approached by the artists of the period. Trees, being peripheral to the more central features of medieval iconography, are not often discussed by art historians. A noted exception is Albert Erich Brinckmann's *Baumstilisierungen in der mittelalterlichen Malerei* (1906), a work recommended by Panofsky in his letters to Wasson back in 1952.

On the critical side, Panofsky provided a starting point for articulating the following criteria for determining whether medieval artists had in mind depicting trees or mushrooms: (1) If it has branches, or multiple crowns, or a crown supported by multiple branches, it is a tree not a mushroom, (2) If it has indications of layers of foliage in the crown it is a tree not a mushroom, and (3) If it has fruit it is a tree not a mushroom, since mushrooms, being cryptogams, have neither fruit nor seeds. These three criteria rule out *all* the PMTs alleged examples of trees representing psychedelic mushrooms in medieval art that this author has encountered in his extensive survey of their materials.

We also identified key issues that generally discredit the PMTs arguments, most notably (1) their lack of supportive evidence from texts, (2) their tendency to press similarities and ignore differences, (3) their multiple errors stemming from a lack of familiarity with the iconography and the texts underpinning the images they seek to interpret, and (4) their dismissive attitude toward art historians like Panofsky. All these issues contribute to the PMT's lack of accuracy which in turn undermines the credibility of their work. Until we see significant improvements in these areas there is little hope of their producing anything worth taking seriously by artist historians, religious scholars, or other academics interested in the history and use of entheogens.

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