



JOURNAL ARTICLE

# The Sacred Narcotic Lily of the Nile: *Nymphaea caerulea*

William A. Emboden

Economic Botany

Vol. 32, No. 4 (Oct. - Dec., 1978), pp.

395-407 (13 pages)

Published By: Springer



<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4253981>

[Cite this Item](#)

**Read and download**

[Log in through your school or library](#)

**Alternate access options**

[For independent researchers](#)

[Preview](#)

## THE SACRED NARCOTIC LILY OF THE NYMPHAEA CAERULEA

WILLIAM A. EMBODEN<sup>1</sup>

A suggestion that certain water lilies might have narcotic properties is supported by their frequent use as a motif in funerary art among the Mayans. The work of Rands (1953, 1955) traced the New World water lily motifs throughout Mayan art and made important contributions. From the middle of the Classical period until the inception of the Colonial period the water lily motif is extremely common and highly varied. Rands makes the association between this tradition and the

Although Conard, in his 1905 monograph on the water lily, *Nymphaea caerulea* Sav. (Fig. 1) in a decorative sense, he cannot attribute any mythic associations to it and does not mention the possibility of water lily cults. The assertions of earlier writers that the Nymphaeaceae have an odor or unusual chemical properties. This represents the current opinion among most ethnobotanists, pharmacologists, and anthropologists.

In extending the earlier works of Rands, Dobkin de Rios investigated the psychotropic flora and fauna in Mayan culture and the use of the water lily motif in association with the toad (toads contain bufotenine in glands located near the tympanic membrane released in the matrix of a milky exudate when the amphibian is captured). Bufotenine is capable of inducing profound hallucinations after ingestion. This led Dobkin de Rios to the assertion that the water lily were probably more than decorative and connected with the development of a belief system that could be explained by the use of the toad and the water lily to alter states of consciousness. This approach met with some hostile reactions from anthropologists, who considered the approach inadequate, even in light of the amassed evidence.

Emboden (1974) touched upon the use of *Nymphaea caerulea* as a narcotic and has been in contact with Dobkin de Rios concerning the use of the flower as a narcotic. This paper explores the use of water lilies in the old world and especially in ancient Egypt. In a future paper with Dobkin de Rios we will treat transcultural phenomena related to narcotic water lilies in a comprehensive manner.

Of the several Mayan sites in which water lily motifs have

Of the several Mayan sites in which water lily motifs are the most dramatic are the murals at Bonampak, which are Egyptian murals that the similarity is startling. The association with the sensory modes pointed out by Rands (1953) is still one of the principal Bonampak murals, which I have seen at the Peabody Museum of Harvard University, there is depicted a scene in which water lilies are associated with the noses and foreheads of the dancers. Percussion instruments are played and many of the dancers are being blown as this unexplained ceremony takes place. Rands commented on these depictions and supports the contention that water lilies were used as a ritual narcotic. He quotes from poetry of a ritual of a hymn to the "precious aquatic flowers" and the "flowers of the beautiful narcotic flowers." The Nahuatl term *quetzal*

<sup>1</sup> California State University, Northridge, California.  
Submitted for publication October 17, 1977; accepted for publication November 1977.

*Economic Botany*, 32(4), 1978, pp. 395–407  
© 1979, by the New York Botanical Garden, Bronx, NY 10458

### Journal Information

Interdisciplinary in scope, *Economic Botany* bridges the gap between pure and applied botany by focusing on the uses of plants by people. The foremost publication of its kind in this field, *Economic Botany* documents the rich relationship that has always existed between plants and people around the world, encompassing the past, present, and potential uses of plants. The issues contain original research articles, review articles, book reviews, annotated...

### Publisher Information

Springer is one of the leading international scientific publishing companies, publishing over 1,200 journals and more than 3,000 new books annually, covering a wide range of subjects including biomedicine and the life sciences, clinical medicine, physics, engineering, mathematics, computer sciences, and economics.

### Rights & Usage

This item is part of a JSTOR Collection.

For terms and use, please refer to our [Terms and Conditions](#).

*Economic Botany* © 1978 [New York Botanical Garden Press](#)

[Request Permissions](#)

## Explore JSTOR

[By Subject](#)

[By Title](#)

[By Collections](#)

[By Publisher](#)

[Advanced Search](#)

[Image Search](#)

[Data for Research](#)

[Get Access](#)

[Get Support](#)

[LibGuides](#)

[Research Basics](#)

[About JSTOR](#)

[Mission and History](#)

[What 's in JSTOR](#)

[Get JSTOR](#)

[News](#)

[Webinars](#)

[JSTOR Labs](#)

[JSTOR Daily](#)

[Careers](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[For Librarians](#)

[For Publishers](#)

[Terms & Conditions of Use](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Accessibility](#)

[Cookie Policy](#)

[Cookie Settings](#)

JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization helping the academic community use digital technologies to preserve the scholarly record and to advance research and teaching in sustainable ways.

©2000-2021 ITHAKA. All Rights Reserved. JSTOR®, the JSTOR logo, JPASS®, Artstor®, Reveal Digital™ and ITHAKA® are registered trademarks of ITHAKA.

[Select Language](#)