I saw a television show which said that the ancient Egyptians, as depicted on numerous friezes and reliefs, used as a drug plant the blue lotus (Nymphaea caerulea). At parties and social occasions, they would dip it into their wine before drinking it. In the UK, a TV programme called Sacred Weeds (Aug 1998, Channel 4) showed two volunteer subjects partaking of the same plant in the same way, between them drinking wine in which 19 flowers had been steeped, and then eating the flowers themselves two and three-quarter hours later.

They used terms like ‘happy’ and ‘jolly’, and ‘relaxed’ but ‘alert’, and reported the effects as starting to diminish two and a quarter hours after consuming the first dose in wine. Professor William Emboden has described the plant as ‘narcotic?’ After watching the programme, I was myself intrigued to know how the effects of the plant might compare with those of drugs I was personally familiar with, in particular ecstasy (MDMA). In short, I wanted to know if the blue lotus was a psychedelic.

By lucky chance, while on a recent work assignment in Egypt, I was able through my job to make contact with somebody who allowed me to take one flower from a blue lotus plant that was being grown under cultivation. As the lotus is now a rare species, my access to it was a special privilege, and I felt it only right that I should check out the plant’s effects in something approaching a scientific manner, and communicate my experiences to others with an interest in the field, although in the event the dosage I took was low, and the effects were by no means spectacular.

In trying to compare the effects of the lotus with those of drugs that I was personally familiar with, I note doing that no tryptamine (LSD-like) or phenethylamine (MDMA-like) alkaloids have ever been isolated from the blue lotus, and that its effects are usually attributed to the presence of nuciferine, which is not known to have any psychedelic properties. Although the dose I was able to take was low, I was confident that I could detect psychedelic activity in even small doses. The subjects on the Sacred Weeds programme had taken 19 flowers between them, in two consecutive doses nearly three hours apart, and one website that I have seen (Clear White Light at http://www.clearwhitelight.org/hatter/lilly.htm) suggests a dose of 3 to 5 flowers. This means that I would be taking just a fifth to a third of a hit. The website describes the plant as ‘a pretty good sedative with a mild, opioid like feeling’, though other websites I have seen call it an ‘entheogen’, which I take to mean the same as psychedelic.

I plucked the flower from the plant at about 1.30pm, bought a bottle of wine and one of cheap
brandy, and immersed the bloom completely in about 100ml of wine to which I had added about 50ml of brandy. The ancient Egyptians did not have distilled liquor, but I felt that the addition of the brandy would help draw out the plant’s active principles: as I had only one flower, I was keen to maximize the effect.

At 5.15pm, I chewed up and swallowed the flower (no discernable bitterness), and washed it down with the wine and brandy that it had been steeped in. I took it on an empty stomach. Apart from the alcohol, I don’t believe that any other drugs could have influenced my experience: I had consumed no caffeine since my customary breakfast cup of tea, and (unusually for me – I am generally a daily smoker), no cannabis at all during the previous month.

5.40pm – feeling a twinge of something happening

5.55pm – feeling of heat or warmth around the head, pleasantly comfortable

6.30pm – maybe slight stimulant effect, but nothing really noticeable, except a general feeling of warmth and well-being. No visuals at all when I closed my eyes.

7.00pm – no discernable effects save a general feeling of well-being and pleasant lethargy, like the feeling you might get after a massage. I had been doing some work, but now no longer felt like working, and lay down in peaceful and enjoyable carefree repose. There were no visual effects whatsoever, neither with eyes closed, nor on textures where you would expect to discern them after even a mild dose of any psychedelic. Even cannabis would have produced more than this.

7.10pm – I shut off my computer and gave up on work, lay down (this is a common thing for me – I usually go through a wanting-to-lie-down phase on acid and even on E) but did not feel at all drowsy; indeed, if anything, I felt mildly stimulated, with a pleasant, slightly loved-up feeling – loved-up that is, as opposed to horny, which I did not feel, though I’d guess this would be a good aphrodisiac.

7.30pm – the feeling seems to be subsiding slightly

By 8.15pm, all effects seem to have gone.

MY CONCLUSION: The blue lotus is definitely psychoactive in some way (I cannot attribute the effects I felt to the alcohol I had consumed with it), but it is also definitely not a psychedelic. No doubt a higher dosage would give a clearer picture, but I can state with confidence, even at the dose I took, that it had no psychedelic effects whatsoever. No visuals at all, with eyes open or closed, no patterns, no traces, no thought stimulation or flow of ideas, nothing that you would associate with psychedelics except for a hint of the loved-up feeling typical specifically of MDMA. While I can see how this plant would have made parties go with a bit of a swing back in ancient Egypt, I can’t see it as being the source of any religious or social ideas despite its place in Egyptian mythology.