

## **Speckled Snake, Brother of Birch: *Amanita Muscaria* Motifs in Celtic Legends**

By Erynn Rowan Laurie and Timothy White

References to magical brews and foods abound in Celtic legends dealing with journeys to *Tir Tairngire* (Land of Promise) or into the *sidhe* (faery mounds). In the Welsh *Hanes Taliesin*, the young Gwion Bach imbibes three drops of magical brew simmering in Cerridwen's cauldron; he is immediately gifted with inspiration, and then he is launched on a magical journey that entails shapeshifting into various animal forms, being eaten and rebirthed by Cerridwen, and then being set adrift in a dark skin bag on an endless sea for forty years. In the Irish *Adventures of Cormac*, Manannan, king of the Land of Promise, gives Cormac a magical, sleep-inducing silver branch with three golden apples and, before long, Cormac travels to the otherworld where he discovers a marvelous fountain containing salmon, hazelnuts, and the waters of knowledge. Considering that the old Celtic legends of Ireland and Wales are filled with motifs of sleep-inducing apples, berries of immortality, and hazelnuts of wisdom, it is remarkable that Celtic scholars have largely ignored the possible shamanic use of psychoactives and entheogens in the British Isles.<sup>i</sup>

There are several sound reasons why Celtic scholars have feared to tread where amateurs now dare to venture. First, due to the prohibition on writing that surrounded the ancient Celtic druids and Irish *filidh* (poet-seers), we know few specifics about the religious practices of the ancient Celts. Second, there are no direct references in the early histories to the Celts using psychoactives other than meads and wines in their ceremonial rituals and practices. Third, there is no irrefutable archaeological evidence—such as the discovery of an archaic medicine bag filled with psychoactive mushrooms—to prove the Celts actually used psychotropic substances capable of inducing ecstatic, visionary experiences.

Nevertheless, the abundance of Celtic legends about crimson foods which induce mystical experiences, inspire extraordinary knowledge, and impart the gift of prophecy, is highly suggestive. To our knowledge, no one has adequately explained why apples, berries, hazelnuts, and salmon were selected by the *filidh* as magical foods, or why they were associated with otherworldly journeys, and with the training of poets. None of these foods are inherently psychotropic.<sup>ii</sup>

Even if one assumes that the frequent Celtic literary references to magical brews of knowledge indicate that the Celts utilized some type of psychotropic substance, several questions remain—most notably, exactly what was used and how was it used? Given the paucity of reliable information on Celtic religious practices, the answers to these questions

may remain forever speculative. However, the absence of direct evidence is not proof that evidence is nonexistent.

The Celtic druids and bards had a definite penchant for poetic metaphors—for always speaking in “riddles and dark sayings,” as the Roman historian Diogenes Laertius observed.<sup>iii</sup> It can be assumed that if the druids and filidh did use a psychotropic substance to access knowledge, healing, and wisdom, they would have carefully protected its identity from Roman invaders and Christian missionaries. We contend that the motifs of magical foods can best be explained as metaphoric references to *Amanita muscaria*, the highly valued, red-capped mushroom that was once used shamanically throughout much of northern Eurasia.<sup>iv</sup>

### **Wasson’s Findings on Celtic Toadstools**

One reason the possible role of a psychoactive mushroom in Celtic mythology has been overlooked is that *A. muscaria* is difficult to find in Ireland today. *A. muscaria* grows only in a symbiotic, mycorrhizal relationship with the roots of birch, spruce, and some conifers—and Ireland has been almost totally deforested over the last thousand years. However, there were once great forests of birch and pine in Ireland, so the red-capped mushroom could easily have grown there, as it still does in the forests of England and Scotland, and on the Isle of Man (located between Ireland and England).<sup>v</sup> Furthermore, even if *A. muscaria* never grew in Ireland, the filidh could have easily obtained supplies of dried mushrooms from their Celtic neighbors.

The mere availability of *A. muscaria* does not prove its use, however. Even ethnomycologist R. Gordon Wasson—the most enthusiastic proponent of the theory that *A. muscaria* was used by the ancient Indo-European peoples—once admitted that, in all his research, he had found little evidence suggesting the shamanic use of fly-agaric (*A. muscaria*) among the Celts, Germans, or Anglo-Saxons. He stated explicitly that he could find no direct evidence that psychoactive mushrooms had been used either by the “shadowy Druids,” or medieval witches.<sup>vi</sup>

Despite the lack of hard evidence, Wasson never totally dismissed the possibility of *A. muscaria* use in Europe. Based on his studies into why most European languages are filled with mycophobic references toward mushrooms in general and fly-agaric in particular, Wasson arrived at a very interesting conclusion:

*I suggest that the 'toadstool' was originally the fly-agaric in the Celtic world; that the 'toadstool' in its shamanic role had aroused such awe and fear and adoration that it came under a powerful tabu, perhaps like the Vogul tabu where the shamans and their apprentices alone could eat it and others did so only under pain of death...This tabu was a pagan injunction belonging to the Celtic world. The shamanic use of the fly-agaric disappeared in time, perhaps long before the Christian dispensation. But in any case the fly-agaric could expect no quarter from the missionaries, for whom toad and toadstool were alike the Enemy.*<sup>vii</sup>

The absence of evidence led Wasson to conclude that Indo-European usage of the sacred mushroom may have disappeared early during their migrations into Europe. He hypothesized that, as the Indo-Aryans migrated into warm, dry climates, they were forced to adopt various local psychoactive plants as substitutes for *A. muscaria*. Although historical evidence in India, Turkey, and the Mediterranean may support his theory, the proto-Celts would not have needed to find substitutes for *A. muscaria* in their new homelands—the red-capped mushroom flourished throughout much of northwestern Europe.

### **Did the Irish Practice a Soma Cult?**

Peter Lamborn Wilson suggests that—in light of the “well-known affinity between Celtic and Vedic cultures,” and the fact that “entheogenic cults can thrive under the very nose of ‘civilization’ and not be noticed”—it should be considered whether the Irish may have once had a “soma cult.”<sup>viii</sup> Although Wilson seems reluctant to draw definitive conclusions, he argues that if the Irish did use soma, the evidence should be encoded in early Irish literature and folklore. “I think we can take for granted,” he states, “that whatever we find in Ireland that looks like soma, and smells like soma, so to speak, might very well be soma, although we may never be able to prove the identity.”

Although Wilson does not conclusively identify the Vedic soma, he seems to accept R. Gordon Wasson’s theory that it was probably *A. muscaria* or—if not that—another psychoactive mushroom.<sup>ix</sup> Whatever its source, soma was clearly an ecstasy-inducing drink once used by the ancestors of India’s Vedic priests, who recorded hundreds of hymns praising its miraculous powers in the 3,500-year-old *Rig Veda*, the oldest extant Indo-European text. Utilizing Wasson’s research on soma and *A. muscaria*, Wilson focuses primarily on identifying soma motifs—such as one-eyed, one-legged beings—that also appear in Celtic mythology.<sup>x</sup> Wilson suggests that the Greek legends of one-eyed, one-legged Hyperboreans

may be connected to the Irish legends of the Fomorians (the mythic primordial inhabitants of Ireland), who are sometimes depicted as one-eyed, one-legged giants.

The theme of one eye, arm, and leg certainly appears prominently in several Celtic legends about the Fomorians, but the most fascinating reference occurs in the *Second Battle of Magh Tuired*, when the Irish sky god Lugh performs a curious shamanic ritual. During the battle, Lugh adopts a strange posture, standing on one leg, one arm behind his back, and closing an eye in order to cast spells on his opponents, the Fomorians. Working magic in this posture is called *corrguinecht* or “crane sorcery,” and Lugh’s practice of *corrguinecht* is a clear indication of his shamanic associations.<sup>xi</sup> Lugh is well renowned as a shamanic magician who used his magical weapons and spells to win battles. As a deity associated with thunderbolts and magic healing as well, Lugh may also qualify as a god of *A. muscaria*—suggesting a possible link between shamanism and *A. muscaria* in early Irish legends.<sup>xii</sup>

As Wilson ultimately admits, the mere existence of soma motifs in Celtic literature does not prove the use of soma by the insular Celts. It is possible, given their conservative nature, that they preserved soma motifs in their myths without actually continuing the use of soma—just as Christians still cherish many ancient pagan religious symbols, such as Yule logs and decorated trees at Christmas, and fertility bunnies and eggs at Easter, without understanding their original pagan context.

While we believe that Wilson is essentially correct in his identification of soma-like motifs in Celtic literature, our quest into the roots of Celtic religion has further convinced us that Celtic legends dealing with foods of knowledge point directly to the use of *A. muscaria* in Celtic shamanism. Of course, even if we can demonstrate the presence of psychoactive mushroom metaphors and motifs in Celtic legends, that still does not prove that the druids or filidh used the red-capped mushroom. As in the case of Wilson’s soma motifs, the veiled references to *A. muscaria* could theoretically be faded memories of earlier pre-migration Indo-European practices, preserved in oral legends passed down from generation to generation.

### **Dreams of Paradise**

The first hint that the Celts may have used *A. muscaria* can be found in the Irish descriptions of the beautiful, magical Land of Promise and the sidhe realms of the Tuatha de Danaan, the old Celtic gods of Ireland. Celtic otherworlds are almost always exquisitely beautiful places endowed with many attributes typical of psychotropic experiences. Brilliant colors abound, and humans and animals shift from shape to shape. Time and space are typically distorted,

faery music is often heard on the wind, and foods tend to taste particularly delicious. Some of these otherworld motifs could theoretically have been inspired by various psychotropic plants, by other forms of spiritual journeying, or even by hunger-induced hallucinations. However, when considered as a whole, the Celtic legends paint pictures that look remarkably similar to dream-visions experienced under the influence of *A. muscaria*.

Consider the following description of the Land of Promise in *The Adventures of Art MacConn*. In the middle of the story, the father, Conn, embarks in a magical, oarless coracle (skin boat) that takes him wandering over the sea for a month and a fortnight until he comes to a fair, strange isle:

*And it was thus the island was: having fair fragrant apple-trees, and many wells of wine most beautiful, and a fair bright wood adorned with clustering hazel trees surrounding those wells, with lovely golden-yellow nuts, and little bees ever beautiful humming over the fruits, which were dropping their blossoms and their leaves into the wells. Then he saw nearby a shapely hostel thatched with bird's wings, white, and yellow, and blue. And he went up to the hostel. 'Tis thus it was: with doorposts of bronze and doors of crystal, and a few generous inhabitants within. He saw the queen with her large eyes, whose name was Rigrú Rosclethan, daughter of Lodan from the Land of Promise...<sup>xiii</sup>*

Now compare the above scene to a description of an *A. muscaria* experience translated by Wasson from the journal of Joseph Kopec, a Polish brigadier who tried the mushrooms while visiting Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula in 1797.<sup>xiv</sup> Once, while very ill with a fever, Kopec sought medical help from a local Russian Orthodox priest, who recommended that he take some "miraculous mushrooms." Because Kopec's description of his dream-visions is fairly typical of accounts of *A. muscaria* experiences, it is worth quoting here:

*I ate half my medicine and at once stretched out, for a deep sleep overtook me. Dreams came one after the other. I found myself as though magnetized by the most attractive gardens where only pleasure and beauty seemed to rule. Flowers of different colors and shapes and odors appeared before my eyes; a group of most beautiful women dressed in white going to and fro seemed to be occupied with the hospitality of this earthly paradise. As if pleased with my coming, they offered me different fruits, berries, and flowers. This delight lasted during my whole sleep, which was a couple of hours longer than my usual rest. After having awakened from such a sweet dream, I discovered that this delight was an illusion.*

Delighted by the results of his first experience, Kopec took an additional dose of dried mushrooms and had a series of new visions, which he unfortunately did not describe. He did, however, volunteer some intriguing observations about their nature:

*I can only mention that from the period when I was first aware of the notions of life, all that I had seen in front of me from my fifth or sixth year, all objects and people that I knew as time went on, and with whom I had some relations, all my games, occupations, actions, one following the other, day after day, year after year, in one word the picture of my whole past became present in my sight. Concerning the future, different pictures followed each other which will not occupy a special place here since they are dreams. I should add only that as if inspired by magnetism I came across some blunders of my evangelist [the priest] and I noticed that he took these warnings almost as the voice of Revelation.*

The parallels between Kopec's *A. muscaria* dream-visions and the chronicles of Celtic journeys to the Land of Promise are noteworthy. Kopec visits a land "where only pleasure and beauty seemed to rule," encounters beautiful women dressed in white, and comes back with visionary insights—not unlike the gift of inspired sight found frequently in Irish myths. By themselves, such parallels might seem to be coincidental and inconsequential. After all, beautiful people and magical objects are the building blocks of many myths and legends. However, as we shall soon show, Celtic myths of the otherworld are filled with motifs of magical, wisdom-inducing foods and brews that closely parallel what we know about the use of red-capped mushrooms in Siberian shamanism. But first, let us see if there is any historical evidence that could have involved the use of *A. muscaria*.

### **Traces of Celtic Shamanism**

So little is known about the spiritual practices of the druids that some scholars have questioned whether it is appropriate to even speak of Celtic shamanism per se. However, based on comments scattered throughout the early records of Roman historians as well as later accounts recorded by Christian monks, we can conclude that the druids performed shamanic functions comparable to those performed by Siberian shamans.<sup>xv</sup> Celtic legends mention that the druids practiced battle magic, invoked storms, conducted healings, used enchantments to put crowds of people to sleep, and performed oracles to predict the future.<sup>xvi</sup> We also know that the *filidh* were not only inspired poets but also visionary prophets, healers, and workers of magic.<sup>xvii</sup>

Working knowledge of druidic shamanic practices may have vanished with the druids, but Irish histories and commentaries have preserved many short descriptions and notes about the divinatory practices of the filidh. Through statements made in the tenth-century book *Cormac's Glossary* and elsewhere, we know that the pre-Christian druids and filidh practiced three oracles, at least one of which could be considered shamanic: *imbas forosnai*, which can be translated as “manifestation that enlightens” or “kindling of poetic frenzy;” *teinm laída*, or “illumination of song;” and *dichetal do chennaib*, or “extempore incantation.”

Nora Chadwick has compiled an informative study of the many historical references to these three methods of divination.<sup>xviii</sup> Unfortunately, the extant historical notes are usually brief and occasionally contradictory, and they deal primarily with the external forms of the oracles, so we can only speculate on how these divinatory practices actually worked. Nevertheless, because documentation is available on these oracles, any evidence linking them to the use of *A. muscaria* would add historical flesh and bones to the *A. muscaria* metaphors found in Gaelic legends.

According to *Cormac's Glossary*, the *imbas forosnai* ritual involved chewing a substance described as the “red flesh” of a pig, cat, or dog; chanting incantations; and invoking and making offerings to idols of the gods.<sup>xix</sup> After this the *fili* (singular of filidh) covered his cheeks with his palms or went to sleep in a dark place for a three- or nine-day period of incubatory sleep called a *nómaide*. During that time, several other filidh usually stood watch to make sure that the sleeping *fili* was not disturbed and did not move. The seer was expected to experience visions of the gods and the future, and to receive answers to questions being asked. This oracle would qualify as a shamanic ritual under the most stringent definitions of shamanism.

None of the extant accounts of *imbas forosnai* adequately explain how the divinatory visions were induced, but they all indicate that the ritual involved eating “red” flesh and being confined in darkness. Perhaps the filidh were natural psychics or lucid dreamers, and chewing the red flesh was merely incidental to the ritual. However, if they were chewing on pieces of dried red-capped mushrooms, that would explain how the ritual induced prophetic dreams. As Wasson and Saar note, *A. muscaria* is often used in Siberian shamanism for the incubation of prophetic dreams.<sup>xx</sup> The idea that the red flesh used in the *imbas forosnai* ritual could be a veiled reference to *A. muscaria* may seem farfetched at this point, but it should make sense after we examine other motifs of magical crimson foods found in Celtic legends.

Accounts of the other two divinatory traditions—*teinm laída* and *dichetal do chennaib*—are less consistent, perhaps because those practices were less formal and could be conducted extemporaneously, without specific ceremony.<sup>xxi</sup> *Dichetal do chennaib* has been translated variously as “extempore recital,” “incantation from the ends (of the fingers),” and “inspired incantation.” It appears to have involved the recitation of *dicetla* (spells) or verses in order to find the answers to the questions posed. This was the one form of divination that Saint Patrick tolerated, reportedly because it did not involve the invocation of pagan deities.

The varied accounts of *teinm laída* suggest it involved the chanting of intuitive images received through the psychometric reading of objects. In one of the Fionn stories, the hero Fionn is asked to identify a headless body. Fionn puts his thumb into his mouth and uses a repetitive chant—referred to as *teinm laida*—to divine that the body belongs to Lomna, his fool. Interestingly, Fionn’s ability to achieve poetic insight by sucking or chewing on his thumb harks back to his childhood consumption of a magical red and white speckled salmon, and as we will show later, the salmon may be a metaphor for *A. muscaria*.

Other references also suggest metaphorical links between *teinm laida* and *A. muscaria*. As Joseph Nagy points out, the word *teinm* means “cracking or chewing of the pith,” and this word is found in the phrase *teinm cnó*, to crack open a nut; thus *teinm laida* can be translated literally as “the chewing (or breaking open) of the pith (or nut).”<sup>xxii</sup> Chewing the nut could conceivably refer to mulling over poetic images, but if crimson hazelnuts are *A. muscaria* metaphors (as we hope to show), then the *teinm laida* could have been inspired by chewing the red-and-white mushroom.

Vague references to chewing red meat or nuts are hardly conclusive evidence of an underground Irish mushroom cult, but they do suggest that the Irish seers were chewing something “red.” In light of the many Celtic legends about magical red foods—red berries, crimson nuts, and apples—which inspired the gift of insight and induce prophetic visions, we do not think the red flesh used in the *imbas forosnai* was incidental. We also do not think it is coincidental that all these red foods happen to exhibit traits reminiscent of *A. muscaria*.

Assuming that the red-capped mushrooms were used in the *imbas forosnai* ritual to induce prophetic dreams, the purpose of covering the eyes and retreating into a dark environment could easily be explained. *A. muscaria* intoxication can cause such a pronounced visual sensitivity to light that the light of a single candle can hurt the eyes. Since the shamanic use of *A. muscaria* has tended to rely on dream-visions rather than waking journeys, the darkness would also have helped secure the trance-sleep necessary to gain prophetic visions.

## The Red Berries of Immortality

Various legends mention that the Tuatha de Danann ate magical red rowan berries which had the properties of preserving immortality, returning youth, and offering the gift of healing to those who consumed them.<sup>xxiii</sup> In the medieval Irish tale “The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne,” we are told that one of the magical berries fell from the table at one of these feasts and grew into a tree. This tree is guarded by a giant who refuses to allow any mortal access to the berries (could this be a literary relic of a Celtic taboo against commoners using *A. muscaria*?)

Diarmuid’s description certainly supports the *A. muscaria* metaphor: “In all the berries that grow upon that tree there are many virtues, that is, there is in every berry of them the exhilaration of wine and the satisfying of old mead; and whoever should eat *three* berries of that tree, had he completed a hundred years he would return to the age of thirty years.”<sup>xxiv</sup> Although no known psychoactive reverses aging so dramatically, many Siberian tribes, such as the Koryak, consider *A. muscaria* brews to be rejuvenating, and they say that in moderate dosages—approximately *three* mushrooms—*A. muscaria* produces a mild inebriation comparable to drinking wine or beer.

*The Voyage of Maelduin* provides a description of some other magical berries found on a tree on an otherworldly island. They are as large as an apple but have a tough rind. When their juice is squeezed out and consumed by Maelduin, he falls into a deep intoxication and sleeps for an entire day. His companions cannot tell whether he is dead or alive, but when he awakens he tells them to gather as much of the fruit as they can, for the intoxication that it produces is wondrous.

Maelduin’s magical berries sound suspiciously like soma and the red-capped *A. muscaria*. The *Rig Veda* describes soma as being pressed out as a juice, and *A. muscaria*, when consumed in large doses, can result in an intoxicating sleep associated with wondrous visions. Assuming Celtic druids wanted to maintain a veil of secrecy around their use of *A. muscaria*, the image of large, red rowan berries would make a fair substitute for red-capped mushrooms. There are other reasons besides their shape and color why rowan berries would make a useful metaphor for *A. muscaria*.

Throughout northern Europe, the red rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*) commonly grows in association with the birch (*Betula sp.*), one of the primary hosts of *A. muscaria* mycelia. In

many parts of the Eurasian tundra—the primary habitat of *A. muscaria*—the fruiting season of the mushroom follows the early fall rains and coincides fairly closely with the peak of the berry season. Thus, forests in which red rowan berries grow would make excellent places to look for red-capped mushrooms.

There is another less obvious yet vital connection between berries and *A. muscaria*. Many Siberian cultures drink psychoactive brews made from *A. muscaria* mixed with berries. The Khanti believe that mixing *A. muscaria* with bog bilberry (*Vaccinium uliginosum*) strengthens the effect of the mushroom.<sup>xxv</sup> If adding acidic berries helps make the *A. muscaria* brew not only more palatable but more psychoactive, then large red rowan berries could have made an instructive metaphor for the sacred mushroom.

### **Journeys to the Land of Apples**

Diarmuid’s descriptions of magical red berries “as large as apples” may help explain the frequent association between magical apples and the Celtic otherworld. Apples are so commonly associated with the Land of Promise, ruled over by Manannan Mac Lir, lord of the mists, that his kingdom is sometimes called *Emain Ablach*, the Land of Apples.

Anne Ross quotes a passage in *The Sickbed of Cú Chulainn*, translated by Myles Dillon, where the motif of magical apple trees appears: “*There are at the great eastern door / Three trees of crimson crystal, / From which sings the bird-flock enduring, gentle / To the youth from out the royal rath.*”<sup>xxvi</sup>

In the twelfth-century Irish collection of tales known as *Táin Bó Cualigne*, a figure variously identified as Lugh, Eochaid Bairche, or Manannán gives a wheel and a magical apple to Cú Chulainn when the young warrior goes to seek out the martial school of Scathach in the Otherworld. The wheel and apple miraculously guide Cú Chulainn on his quest to the gates of the woman warrior’s domain.

In one *immrama* (vision voyage), when Teigue MacCian reached the shores of the Otherworld, he noticed “a wide-spreading apple-tree that bore both blossoms and fruit at once.” When Teigue meets a fair youth holding a fragrant golden apple, he asks, “what is that apple tree yonder?” the answer he receives is revealing: “That apple tree’s fruit it is that for meat shall serve the congregation which is to be in this mansion...”<sup>xxvii</sup>

Magical red apples would make a good visual metaphor for the fresh red-capped mushroom. Furthermore, one well-known trait of *A. muscaria* is that the dried mushrooms are more psychoactive than the fresh red caps, and dried *A. muscaria* caps tend to look a bit like dried red-brown apples. But how does one explain the fairly frequent references to golden apples in Celtic legends? Some varieties of the mushroom turn a metallic golden color when dried.<sup>xxviii</sup>

It is not hard to see that red rowan berries and apples might make effective visual substitutes for *A. muscaria*. But why would the Celts have used hazelnuts and salmon as magical foods of knowledge? Could they be less obvious metaphors for the red-and-white mushroom? As we shall soon demonstrate, there is ample circumstantial evidence linking those foods to *A. muscaria*.

### **The Crimson Nuts of Wisdom**

At first glance, it might appear difficult to explain the many references in Celtic legends to hazelnuts that impart instantaneous knowledge and foresight. There is no evidence that eating hazelnuts is likely to induce visions, wisdom, or precognition. However, there is evidence that the nuts could have served as useful metaphors for *A. muscaria*. First, let us examine some of the linguistic evidence linking hazelnuts and mushrooms.

In Celtic legends, hazelnuts are variously called *cuill crimaínd*, the hazels of knowledge; *bolg fis*, bubbles of wisdom; *bolg gréine*, sun bubbles; and *imbas gréine*, sun of inspiration. These terms refer not only to the nuts but also to the bubbles caused by the nuts falling into the waters of the well of wisdom. Significantly, *bolg* is a word frequently found in both Irish and Scots Gaelic names of mushrooms. Wasson and Wasson offer this analysis on the use of the word *bolg*:

*In Irish there are two words for a bag or a pouch, bolg, which is related to the Latin bulga, and púca, which was probably borrowed between AD 800 and 1050 from Scandinavian sources...In Irish one way to refer to a wild fungus is bolg losgainn, literally "frog's pouch," and another way is púca beireach, "heifer's pouch." If the "heifer's pouch" refers to the udder, as we suppose, the same figure of speech that in Albanian means "toad" turns up in Irish meaning "toadstool." In Irish, bolg seidete, "blown-up bag," is a term for the puffball. It is easy to see why the fungi figure in all these metaphors; puffballs, toadstools, all the wild fungi of the forest and field, impress the visual sense as creatures that quickly swell up.<sup>xxix</sup>*

Colloquial Gaelic preserves other links between mushrooms and the traditional hazelnuts of wisdom, even today. In Irish, we find the phrase *caochóg cnó*, literally a “blind nut”—which means a nut without a kernel. Scottish Gaelic, which often preserves older uses of the language than does Irish Gaelic, gives us the words *caochag*, which means either a nut without a kernel or a mushroom, and *caochagach*, the state of being full of nuts without kernels or full of mushrooms. Colloquially, the word *caochóg* is also used in phrases referring to shyness or to winking. To wink is to close one eye and, as we have seen, Celtic sorcery is often performed one-eyed. The linguistic links between nuts, mushrooms, and the one-eyed winking state are intriguing but there is even more definitive evidence.

In the seventh-century Old Irish text known as “The Cauldron of Poesy,” there is a direct statement that the filidh found inspiration by chewing on the hazelnuts of wisdom. The text explains that poetic inspiration and the gift of poetry originate in three full cauldrons found within the body of the fili. Poetry is said to arise from the experience of sorrow and joy, and one of the divisions of joy experienced by the fili—which leads to imbas, the gift of prophetic vision—is the “joy of fitting poetic frenzy from grinding away at the fair nuts of the nine hazels on the Well of Segais in the sidhe realm.”<sup>xxx</sup>

The Middle Irish gloss on this passage offers a very tantalizing item—the phrase *bolcc imba fuilgne*, “the bubble which sustains or supports imbas.” One possible translation of the gloss on this phrase is: “The bubble that sustains imbas is formed by the sun among the plants, and whoever consumes them will have poetry.” In short we have a direct statement that consuming *bolcc* produces the gift of prophetic vision.

In light of the linguistic link between *bolcc*, *bolg*, and mushrooms, it is not hard to read these phrases as statements that some type of mushroom was chewed to sustain poetic inspiration. The fact that imbas, the poetic inspiration or poetic frenzy of the Irish, is frequently described as a “fire in the head” also suggests that the most likely mushroom would be *A. muscaria*. “Fire in the head” is an excellent term for a signature symptom of *A. muscaria* inebriation—a pronounced heating of the head, apparently caused by blood rushing to that area.<sup>xxxi</sup>

### **The Sacred Trees of Knowledge**

From numerous sources, including the ogham alphabet, we know that the Celts, like other Indo-European cultures, once venerated the birch. According to Celtic myths, the ogham was given to druids and filidh by the god Ogma as a secret language for the preservation of their wisdom. The ogham alphabet begins with *beith*, the letter for “birch.” This tree is given

primacy of place in the alphabet because it was the first letter created by Ogma, who carved seven beith strokes on a birch branch. This reference alone suggests that the Celts held great reverence for the birch tree.

As Wasson points out in his book *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality*, most cultures that use *A. muscaria* as a sacred psychoactive have adopted the birch as the sacred world tree. He attributes this association to the symbiotic relationship between the birch and the mushroom. As noted before, the mycelia of *A. muscaria* can grow only in symbiotic relationship with the roots of a few types of trees—primarily the birch, the spruce, and certain conifers.

Wasson suggests that the motif of sacred world trees found in many Mediterranean cultures originated in the birch forests of Eurasia at a time when Indo-European cultures were still using *A. muscaria*:

*The Peoples who emigrated from the forest belt to the southern latitudes took with them vivid memories of the Herb of Immortality and the Tree of Life spread also by word of mouth far and wide, and in the South where the birch and the fly-agaric were little more than cherished tales generations and a thousand miles removed from the source of inspiration, the concepts were still stirring the imaginations of poets, story-tellers, and sages. In these alien lands far from the birch forests of Siberia, botanical substitutions were made for Herb and Tree.*<sup>xxxii</sup>

Wasson's theory may accurately describe what took place in the drier lands of Iran, India, and the Mediterranean. However, the birch has always grown well throughout northwestern Europe, so the insular Celts would not have needed to substitute the hazel for the birch, (the scarcity of birch in many parts of Ireland and Scotland today is due not to warming trends but the relentless overgrazing of sheep and cattle).

Assuming that the Celts never abandoned their use of *A. muscaria*, why would they have bypassed the sacred birch and chose the hazel as their tree of knowledge? As far as we know, *A. muscaria* does not grow under hazel trees. However, the hazel (*Corylus avellana*) is a member of the *Betulaceae* family, and its leaves and catkin flowers resemble those of the birch. Thus, the image of crimson nuts appearing under the hazel tree would make an apt occult metaphor for the birch and the *A. muscaria* that grows at its roots. It would also make a good teaching tool for reminding initiates how to identify the tree beneath which the crimson nuts of knowledge can be found.

## The Red-Speckled Brother of Birch

The ogham alphabet may contain another most interesting veiled reference to *A. muscaria*. The ogham alphabet is not unlike the Norse runic alphabet in that the letters are named after various objects starting with the particular letter in question. Although the original names of most ogham letters have known meanings—such as *h-uath* (terror), *tinne* (a bar of metal), and *sraiph* (sulfur)—one letter, *edad*, is a nonsense word with no known meaning.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Fortunately, each letter in the ogham has a color, bird, tree, and other objects, as well as kenning phrases called “word oghams,” associated with it.

According to Damian McManus and Howard Meroney, the color for *edad* is *erc*, or “red-speckled,” and its word oghams are “discerning tree” and “brother of birch.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> This association of “red-speckled” and “brother of birch” is very suggestive, and the often white-speckled, red-capped *A. muscaria* grows best at the roots of the birch tree. Is it possible that *edad* was one of the names of the mushroom? We may never know, but the notion is intriguing.

The association of “brother of birch” with *erc* or “red-speckled” provides a vital clue linking several potential *A. muscaria* motifs. According to the *Dictionary of the Irish Language*, the word *erc* can refer to speckled fish, particularly the salmon and the trout, and to speckled or red-eared cattle.<sup>xxxv</sup> Significantly, *erc* can also refer to “a reptile of some kind”—for instance, a “viper.” In fact, the phrase “red-speckled” is often used in Celtic legends to identify liminal objects and creatures that come from the Otherworld.

## Red-Speckled Salmon

There are a number of Celtic legends in which eating salmon instantaneously imparts miraculous powers of knowledge. In “The Boyhood Exploits of Finn,” a boy named Demne went to learn poetry from Finn Éices, or Finn the Poet.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Finn Éices had spent seven years watching for the salmon of Féc’s pool, because it had been prophesied that nothing would remain unknown to whomever ate the salmon of Féc. When the salmon was found, Finn Éices told Demne to cook it but not to eat any of it. While turning the fish over in the pan, the lad accidentally burnt his thumb on the fish and, without thinking, stuck his thumb into his mouth. Honoring this quirk of fate, Finn Éices renamed the lad Finn and gave him the salmon of knowledge to eat. From then on, whenever Finn “put his thumb in his mouth, and sang through *teinm laida*, that which he did not know would be revealed to him.”

Is there any reason the Celts might have selected salmon as a source of instantaneous wisdom? In some of the stories, we are told that salmon gain their miraculous powers by nibbling on the bubbles of knowledge or the hazelnuts floating in the fountains of knowledge, but as far as we know, consuming salmon—even those that have eaten hazelnuts—does not lead to instantaneous enlightenment or poetic insight. However, assuming that the druids used occult metaphors for their miraculous inebriant, the salmon—which is silver and white, speckled with red spots—would make a fair metaphor for *A. muscaria*. Pieces of dried *A. muscaria* could be discretely referred to as pieces of dried salmon—and, in some cases, students may have inadvertently eaten them as salmon. Suddenly the legends about eating the salmon of knowledge begin to make more sense.

### **The Speckled Snake**

Alexei Kondratiev, former president of the Celtic League American Branch, has encountered folk references to *A. muscaria* being called *an náthair bhreac*, the speckled snake, in Scotland and Ireland.<sup>xxxvii</sup> This direct linguistic link between speckled snakes and *A. muscaria* is certainly intriguing, particularly in light of folk legends that Saint Patrick exiled all serpents from Ireland. As we have already noted, *Cormac's Glossary* claims that Saint Patrick banned the oracular practices of *teinm laida* and *imbais forosnai* because those rituals invoked pagan gods. Is it possible that Saint Patrick was waging war against a sacred mushroom cult that involved the invocation of snake deities? If so, post-Christian *filidh* might have had good reasons to adopt the speckled salmon, crimson hazelnuts, or red rowan berries as new metaphors for the most potent *A. muscaria* metaphor—the speckled serpent.

The serpent is certainly an important figure in Celtic mythology, particularly on the continent but also on the islands. Serpents are associated with a number of Celtic deities—especially Brigid, the goddess of poets, and Cernunnos, the god of shamans.

The De Danaan goddess Brigid—whose mythology was later transferred to the fifth-century Saint Brigid (Saint Bride) of Kildare—was originally a triple-aspected goddess, the patroness of smithcraft, medicine, and poetry. Brigid, whose name means “high or exalted one,” was associated with the sun and fire, and she was invoked as a guardian of the home and the hearth fire. As a goddess of healing, Brigid was also closely linked with healing springs. However, Brigid is best known as the goddess of poets, and *Cormac's Glossary* praises her foremost as the archetypal female sage and woman of wisdom. Given the tradition of poets seeking inspiration at wells of wisdom, Brigid may have been one of the pagan deities invoked in the shamanic divinatory ritual of *imbais forosnai*.

In “The Life of Brigid,” recorded in the fifteenth-century *Book of Lismore*, Saint Brigid is portrayed as a dutiful virgin of Christ, but her metaphoric links to the liminal Otherworld are well preserved, even there.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Saint Brigid was born at sunrise on the threshold of a house—neither within nor without the house. She was raised in the house of a “wizard,” who instructed her to drink only the milk from a white, red-eared cow. Once, when her nurse was ill, Brigid went to a well and fetched some water, which tasted like ale and also healed the nurse. Later, as a nun, she reportedly turned water into milk, which she used to heal one of her sister nuns. Fiery pillars often appeared over Brigid’s head, and in one story, sun rays supported and dried her wet cloak.

Brigid’s numerous associations with possible *A. muscaria* themes—red-eared cows, fiery pillars over her head, and healing waters—are highly suggestive. Her ability to transform water into healing wine and milk could hark back to the *New Testament* miracle, but it could also refer to the healing, rejuvenating powers of *A. muscaria*. Ultimately, it is Saint Brigid’s close link to snakes that reveals her essentially pagan nature. Long after Patrick reportedly banned snakes in Ireland, the Scots continued to believe serpents came out of their lairs on Saint Brigid’s Day, originally a pagan holy day called Imbolc or Oimeic, celebrated in early February. Significantly, Ó Catháin notes that the feast day of Brigid is associated with two colors—“the Eve of Brigid’s Feast, speckled—the Day of Brigid’s Feast, white.”<sup>xxxix</sup>

While the cult of Brigid was tolerated in subverted form under the Celtic Church, the cult of the antlered god was forced underground—or into the forests. In Gaul, the antlered lord of the animals—known there as Cernunnos—was closely associated with ram-horned serpents of wisdom, and with the world tree through his connection with the stag.<sup>xl</sup> It doesn’t take a theologian to explain why Christians incorporated the shamanic horned god with his serpents into their imagery of the devil.

One of the earliest European images of the stag-antlered deity may be the so-called “dancing sorcerer” painting, at Les Trois Frères, in France. Some of the most interesting petroglyphs depicting the antlered lord of shamans are found in the Valcamonica (Valley Comonica) of northern Italy—an area inhabited by early proto-Celtic and Celtic cultures. Michael Ripinski-Naxon points out that the rock carvings in the Valcamonica depict several classic Indo-European shamanic motifs, including stylized sun disks and representations of antlered “shamans,” and “shamans” dancing around or over small trees.<sup>xli</sup> Noting that a prehistoric rock carving of a naturalistic spotted mushroom has been found near Monte Bego—also in northern Italy—Ripinski-Naxon cautiously concludes that Indo-Europeans in the region were

familiar with *A. muscaria*. If more evidence can be found in those regions directly linking antlered shamans to the use of spotted mushrooms, it would support our speculations about the use of *A. muscaria* in Celtic Ireland. For now, we must wait.

Probably the most familiar image of the stag-antlered figure is that depicted on the Gundestrup Cauldron, a marvelous work of mythic art undoubtedly inspired by Celts, though most likely crafted by Thracian artists.<sup>xlii</sup> One panel shows a man, crowned with seven-tined stag antlers which branch like tree limbs, who is holding a speckled, ram-horned serpent. Other panels on the cauldron may portray other Celtic gods or scenes from Celtic legends. Although there is no evidence how the cauldron was used, numerous scholars have assumed that it probably had ritual significance. Could the cauldron have been used in a shamanic cult of the speckled serpent? Could it have been used to serve a brew of *A. muscaria*? The idea is certainly provocative.

### **The Red-Peaked One**

An old Scottish folk tale, *Fionn and the Man in the Tree*, directly links the primary magical food motifs of the shamanic lord of the animals and to the world tree. In this story, Fionn is hunting in the forest for Derg Corra, a version of the lord of the animals. The epithet *Derg Corra* means “red-peaked” or “red-pointed,” and “red-peaked” would make an excellent metaphor for the red-capped *A. muscaria*. Coincidentally, Derg Corra—like several other heroes of the Celtic otherworld—is famed for his power of leaping, a trait which is associated in Siberia with *A. muscaria*.<sup>xliii</sup>

While searching through the forest, Fionn beholds a strange sight—a man perched at the top of a tree. A blackbird sits on the man’s right shoulder. In his left hand is a bronze vessel in which a salmon leaps. Below him, at the base of the tree, is a stag. This peculiar figure, who is really Derg Corra in disguise, cracks a nut (*teinm cnó*), giving half to the blackbird and eating half himself. He splits an apple in two and shares it with the stag at the base of the tree. Then, he shares the water of wisdom with the salmon, the blackbird, and the stag.

The story is highly significant because we know that druidic apprentices gathered in sacred groves hidden deep in the forests in order to learn their poetic arts. We can infer from other sources that the ranks of the filidh were viewed as positions on the world tree.<sup>xliiv</sup> Minor or student filidh were the roots, experienced filidh were the trunk, and the most powerful filidh were the uppermost branches. In this story, Fionn is considered to be a powerful fili—having consumed the red-speckled salmon of wisdom in his youth—but now he stands at the root of

the tree below the figure of Derg Corra, who holds and eats not one but several wisdom-inducing substances.

In short, this legend weaves together several *A. muscaria* metaphors into an unmistakable tapestry. Fionn has come to study with Derg Corra—the red-peaked lord of the animals, who in many cultures is the lord of shamans. Each of the magical items—the apples, waters of wisdom, and sacred hazelnuts—shared with the animals by Derg Corra is closely linked in Celtic literature with the otherworld and with the imparting of poetic inspiration and prophetic knowledge. Based on this story—and the other evidence we have presented—we will climb out onto the limb of that sacred tree and suggest that the use of *A. muscaria* could have played a prominent teaching or initiatory role in the ancient druidic sanctuaries.

### **Kindling Poetic Inspiration**

Some Celtic scholars may rise up in arms at our suggestion that the druids and filidh used *A. muscaria* as a source of poetic inspiration. However, given what we know about soma's role in inspiring the *Rig Veda*, it is certainly conceivable that *A. muscaria* could have inspired the visions and verses of Celtic poets. In Siberian shamanism, *A. muscaria* is definitely associated not only with ecstatic visions, but also with the inspiration of poetry and songs.<sup>xlv</sup> We know from historical accounts that the filidh had to memorize great tracts of legends and poems, but they were much more than just versifiers. In addition to being epic poets, they were inspired philosophers and powerful enchanters. If we are correct that crimson hazelnuts and spotted salmon are metaphors for *A. muscaria*, then we can assume that the ancient filidh used the red-and-white mushrooms as a significant source of poetic inspiration and prophecy.

In the Old Irish poem known as “The Song of Amergin,” the primal fili of the Milesian invaders announces himself as he sets foot in Ireland: “I am a wind of the sea, I am a wave of the sea, I am a sound of the sea, I am a stag of seven tines, I am a hawk on a cliff, I am a tear of the sun, I am fair among flowers, I am a salmon in a pool, I am a lake on a plain, I am a hill of poetry, I am a god who gives inspiration (literally: forms fire for a head).”<sup>xlvi</sup>

Could the god who gives inspiration—who forms “fire in the head”—refer to a god connected with *A. muscaria*, or to the mushroom itself? We have already noted that Brigid, the goddess of poets, was associated with fires around her head and that *A. muscaria* intoxication can produce a pronounced heating of the head. Moreover, we know from many sources that imbas forosnai and teinm laida were both associated with light and the fire of illumination itself.<sup>xlvii</sup>

In the twelfth-century *Hanes Taliesin (Romance of Taliesin)*, the Welsh poet Gwion announces himself with a similar list of associations, plus a few additions: “I have been a fierce bull and a yellow buck. I have been a boat on the sea...I have been a blue salmon. I have been a spotted snake on a hill...I have been a wave breaking on the beach. On a boundless sea I was set adrift.”<sup>xlviii</sup>

A commoner without a broad background in Celtic myth would have found it hard to catch the many metaphors woven into these poems. On one level, the phrases undoubtedly refer to key themes of Celtic legends. However, it is intriguing that many of the phrases could refer to the motifs that we have linked to *A. muscaria*: the stag of seven tines to the stag at the base of Derg Corra’s tree; the salmon in pools to the salmon that eat the hazelnuts of wisdom; the boat on the sea to the magical coracles that carry poets to and fro the Land of Promise; and the spotted snake on the hill directly to the red-and-white mushroom that grows on the sidhe mounds.

Judging from the manner in which poems similar to “The Song of Amergin” are repeated by various Irish and Welsh poets, these poems may have served as the oral calling cards of the filidh entrusted with Celtic legends. In the text known as “*Immacallam in do Thuarad*” (*Colloquy of the Two Sages*), two bards meet and politely test each other’s knowledge.<sup>xlix</sup> In the opening salvo, the aged Ferchertne asks: “A question, wise lad, whence have you come?” The young Nede answers:

*Not hard: from the heel of a sage,  
From a confluence of wisdom,  
From perfection of goodness,  
From the nine hazels of poetic art,  
From the splendid circuits in a land  
Where truth is measured by excellence,  
Where there is no falsehood,  
Where there are many colors,  
Where poets are refreshed.*

In short, Nede appears to be saying that he has learned the poetic arts by eating the hazelnuts of wisdom. After a lengthy exchange of poetic metaphors, Ferchertne and Nede acknowledge and honor each other’s poetic wisdom. Then, Nede asks: “And you, O aged one, have you tidings?” Ferchertne launches into a long list of oracular predictions for the future.

If hazels are metaphors for *A. muscaria*, then we can assume that Nede and other filidh probably chewed on inspirational mushrooms during their training, perhaps in a ritual form similar to *imbas forosnai*.<sup>i</sup> Ferchertne's long list of predictions certainly suggests that he also could have been engaging in some type of prophetic divination practice on a regular basis.

While the early historic references to the schools of the druids and filidh offer few details about their training practices—beyond mentioning the long lists of verses that had to be memorized and the subjects of grammar, law, mathematics, and natural philosophy—we know from the legends and poems that the training ultimately culminated in the kindling of poetic inspiration. Descriptions of eighteenth-century bardic schools indicate that their initiates—the descendants of the filidh—spent long hours practicing and composing poetry in small, dimly lit cells.<sup>ii</sup> Although sensory deprivation may be conducive to the practice of poetry and the kindling of prophetic insight, the darkness may have served a more immediate purpose.

If *A. muscaria* was used in the training of the filidh, its tendency to increase sensitivity to light would have necessitated the use of dark environments. This pronounced sensitivity to light could also explain the initiatory account of Taliesin being sown into a skin and set adrift on the seas. Based on the many references linking *A. muscaria* metaphors to poetic inspiration, we hypothesize that the training of filidh probably included visionary journeys undertaken in darkened rooms or inside bull skins, under the watchful eyes of trained filidh—and probably under the influence of *A. muscaria*.

Ethnographic studies of other shamanic cultures show that folk stories are often used to inculcate esoteric shamanic teachings, particularly in oral cultures.<sup>iii</sup> If we are correct in identifying the presence of *A. muscaria* motifs in Celtic legends and literature, we should fully expect to find traditional teaching about its use woven into those same legends. Indeed, as we have already seen, Celtic stories may include useful information and teachings relevant to the identification and use of *A. muscaria*.

Is it possible that many of the legends of magical voyages into the otherworld were teaching stories based on the *A. muscaria* experiences of previous generations, refined and polished through the art of poetry? If so, that would explain why new initiates started their training by learning the legends of the past: the legends would provide metaphoric maps and teachings for novices preparing to embark on journeys into the waters of inspiration.

### **The Wells of Inspiration**

Celtic legends are filled with heroes drinking from wells of wisdom or from streams that flow from those wells, and the well of wisdom is often referred to as the ultimate source of the fili's art. One of the highest grades of fili is even called *ansruith*, or "great stream," referring directly to this flowing of watery wisdom. Although the motif of cosmic wells of wisdom is found in many parts of the world, the Celtic legends contain numerous elements linking these wells fairly directly to the shamanic use of *A. muscaria*.

*Cormac's Adventures in the Land of Promise*, also called "Cormac's Cup," mentions several key *A. muscaria* motifs in direct association with the well of knowledge. For brevity, we will offer only a very abridged version of the story here.

One day at dawn, Cormac encounters a grey-haired warrior carrying a silver branch with three golden apples. Cormac is fascinated by the branch, which makes such wonderful music that when it is shaken it puts to sleep sore-wounded men, women in childbed, and folk in sickness. The mysterious warrior—who is Manannán in disguise—explains that he comes "from a land wherein there is naught save truth, and there is neither age nor decay nor gloom nor sadness nor envy nor jealousy nor hatred nor haughtiness."<sup>iiii</sup> The two men agree to make an alliance, and Cormac asks for the branch to seal the deal. The warrior agrees, but he asks in return for three unnamed boons to be granted later. Each year afterward, Manannán returns and asks for one of his three boons—first Cormac's daughter, then his son, and then his wife. A man of his word, Cormac grants the boons, but after the third request, he follows the mysterious warrior into a great mist—the *ceo-druidechta* (druid's fog) that appears around him on the plain, and soon he finds himself in a strange fortress in the Land of Promise.

Cormac is shown a silver house, half-thatched with the wings of white birds. Then, he sees a man kindling a voracious fire. Finally, he enters another fortress with a palace that has bronze beams and silver wattling and that is also thatched with the wings of white birds. He sees people drinking from a marvelous fountain with five streams flowing from it. Nine hazel trees grow over the well, dropping their nuts into the water, and "five salmon open the nuts and send their husks floating down the streams."

Cormac is shown Manannán's magical pig, which is cooked in a cauldron by telling four truths. After his hosts tell three truths, cooking three quarters of the pig, Cormac reveals his truth—that he is saddened by the loss of his daughter, son, and wife. When his hosts give him a portion of the pig to eat, Cormac declines, saying he never eats without fifty in his company. Manannán puts Cormac to sleep, and when he awakens he is accompanied by fifty

warriors—and by his wife, son, and daughter. During the banquet, Cormac becomes intrigued by a marvelously crafted gold cup. Manannán explains that whenever three falsehoods are spoken under it, the cup breaks into three, and that the only way to restore the cup is to speak three truths under it. Demonstrating how the cup works, Manannán tells three falsehoods, breaking it, and then three truths to fix it again. Manannán then offers Cormac the magical cup as a gift, promises to let him return home with his family, and interpret the strange visions that Cormac has seen.

Manannán functions as a teacher and guide who helps interpret the meaning of the visions for Cormac—and for any students being told the story. According to Manannán, the fountain is the well of knowledge, and the streams are the five senses through which knowledge is obtained. Manannán explains: “No one will have knowledge who drinketh not a draught out of the fountain itself and out of the streams. The folk of many arts are those who drink of them both.”

### **Drowning in the Waters of Wisdom**

By studying the lessons preserved in Celtic legends in the context of what is known about *A. muscaria* and about the training and divinatory practices of the filidh, a diligent student could conceivably be able to resurrect what appears to be one of the most viable and best documented Celtic shamanic practices. However, before imbibing large quantities of *A. muscaria* in the hopes of becoming instantly enlightened, enthusiastic students would do well to read and heed the warnings found in some of the Irish legends. For example, new initiates interested in exploring the marvelous otherworlds of *A. muscaria* visions would do well to remember that during the imbas forosnai, the fili seeking the vision was watched over by other filidh, who presumably had experience in dealing with the effects of consuming the mushrooms.

In the Irish *dinnshenchas* (land-name tale) of Siannan, the goddess of the Shannon River, we find a teaching that the wisdom from the nine hazel trees can be overwhelming. In this story, the goddess travels to Conla’s well, which is said to be the origin of the Shannon, the Boyne, and a number of other rivers. Siannan goes there seeking wisdom, and the waters of wisdom overwhelm her. She flees before them along the course of the river, drowning in wisdom at the mouth of the Shannon. Significantly, the hazel trees around Conla’s well miraculously produce their leaves, flowers, and nuts in the space of a single hour—much like mushrooms appearing suddenly after a rain.

The story provides a warning that eating the hazelnuts at the well of wisdom can involve certain dangers. For one thing, if one is not properly prepared, the intensity of the experience can be overwhelming. It is perhaps possible that Siannan's death could also be a warning that eating the wrong *Amanita*—the highly poisonous, green-white *Amanita phalloides*, appropriately known as “Death-Caps”—can be fatal.

If Celtic legends such as this served as shamanic teaching stories, we should expect some of them to include metaphoric maps aimed at helping new initiates navigate the potentially overwhelming waters of wisdom. Let us examine a *dinnshench*a which describes the creation of the sacred Boyne River from the waters of Nechtán's well. In this story, the goddess Bóann, whose name means “the white cow,” is married to the god Nechtán. While the hazelnuts of wisdom are not mentioned directly in this tale, we can assume they also inspired Nechtán's waters of wisdom. Nechtán—whose name means “clean, pure” or “white, bright”—is a symbol of fire in the water and of the power of poetry that comes from the well of wisdom.

The legend states that Nechtán has three cup-bearers who must accompany anyone seeking wisdom and the well or dire consequences will result. Ignoring the traditional warnings, Bóann went to the well alone and challenged its power by walking counter-clockwise around it three times. In response to this action, the waters of the well rose up and ripped Bóann's right eye, arm, and leg from her. She fled before the stream of water, running down to the sea, only to be drowned at the mouth. The waters became the Boyne River, named after her.

It is noteworthy that when Bóann approached the well of wisdom without assistance and challenged its power, she lost an eye, arm, and leg, and then was drowned in its waters. This legend not only links the motif of one-eyed, one-legged beings with the well of wisdom, but also provides a warning about the inherent dangers of using *A. muscaria* without appropriate guidance. A one-eyed person lacks perspective, and a one-legged person lacks balance—two conditions that can overwhelm a novice.<sup>liv</sup>

Many teachings can be conveyed in a single legend. The names of the three cup-bearers at Nechtán's well—*Flesc* (a wand or stave engraved with ogham letters), *Lesc* (which can mean lazy, sluggish, or still), and *Luam* (a steersman or guide)—may convey hidden information about the rituals performed at the well of knowledge. *Flesc* may refer to the *bunsach comairce* or “rod of safe passage” that filidh carried during their travels. In a mundane social sense, this rod of safe passage referred to the right of the filidh to travel unmolested between

tribal territories, but it may have also represented a fili's right to partake of the well of wisdom and to commune with the gods and spirits.

Lesc, as stillness, could be a veiled reference to the period of prophetic incubatory sleep experience during the rites of *imbas forosnai* and *tarbhfeis* and to the fact that ingestion of *A. muscaria* sometimes produces a somnambulant state. Lesc, as sluggish, could also refer to the fact that heavy usage of *A. muscaria*—perhaps in intensive initiation rites—can result in post-use depression.

Luam, the guide or steersman, could refer to someone who keeps watch, as during the ritual of *imbas forosnai*. If so, this ritualist, most likely an experienced fili, would have made sure that the vision-seeker did not turn over during the ritual sleep. The watcher would have also kept vigil to prevent disturbances and to monitor the experience between the seeker and the spirits.

The one-eyed, one-legged goddess Bóann is associated with another sacred triad. She is the mother of the three sacred harp strains: *Goltraige*, the sorrow strain; *Gentraige*, the laughter strain, and *Suantraige*, the sleep strain. Sorrow and joy are the two emotions that turn the internal cauldrons discussed in the “Cauldron of Poesy” text, while the sleep strain seems to describe the state necessary to access the internal cauldron of wisdom through the trance rites of *imbas forosnai* and *tarbhfeis*. Knowing that sorrow, laughter, and sleep are potential side effects of *A. muscaria* consumption might help to keep vision-seeking poets from being overwhelmed by the waters of inspiration.

It is not hard to identify Nechtán's well with that of Manannán and also with the well of Segais mentioned in the “Cauldron of Poesy” text. They are all the well of knowledge found beneath the sea at the center of the world and at the base of the world tree—the source of all the rivers of the earth, as well as the source of the five senses. Although there are many methods for crossing the thresholds between the worlds and dipping into the well of knowledge, the ritual ingestion of *A. muscaria* is certainly one ancient and honored way. The warnings and teachings woven into Celtic legends about the wells of knowledge suggest that the Celts treated their magical crimson foods as the sacred food of the gods—to be approached with care and respect. The wisdom of these teachings is still applicable today—if approached with care, entheogens can be enlightening, but, if abused, they can be deadly.

## **In Search of the Land of Promise**

The ultimate question remains: Did the Celtic druids and filidh use *A. muscaria* in shamanic rituals? Circumstantial evidence suggests that the druids and filidh engaged in shamanic oracles, quite possibly involving the use of a vision-producing substance. Based on the complex of legends linking magical red foods with journeys to the otherworld, we believe that the pre-Christian Celts once used one or more vision-producing substances. We think it is significant that all the red substances happen to look a bit like *A. muscaria*, happen to inspire ecstatic poetry as does *A. muscaria*, and happen to induce prophetic visions as does *A. muscaria*. The ongoing use of *A. muscaria* metaphors in the Celtic corpus, in close association with references to the development of poetic wisdom, suggests that the use of the red-speckled brother of birch could have survived underground, perhaps well into the Christian era.

While hard evidence proving the shamanic use of *A. muscaria* in Ireland and Scotland may have disappeared forever—like the Formorians and De Dananns into the sidhe realms—we believe that the Celtic legends are filled with many veiled and shadowy traces of an ancient secret tradition. Perhaps enough remains to inspire the recreation of a viable, fairly authentic Celtic shamanic practice. For those brave souls ready to explore the otherworlds of the red-speckled brother of birch we offer this advice, once given to Bran as he left on a journey in search of the Land of Women:

*“Do not fall into sleeping stillness / nor let your intoxication overcome you / but begin a voyage over the pure, bright sea...”<sup>lv</sup>*

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Except for the early linguistic inquiries of R. Gordon Wasson, *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), and the mythopoeic studies of Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1948/1966), there was, until recently, little scholastic interest in the historic use of psychoactive mushrooms in Celtic Europe.

Since the 1960s, numerous cross-cultural studies have established that shamanic use of psychoactive substances to induce altered states of consciousness is much more prevalent in all parts of the world than once thought. See for example Peter Furst, ed., *Flesh of the Gods: The Ritual Use of Hallucinogens* (New York: Praeger, 1972); Michael Harner, ed., *Hallucinogens and Shamanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Michael Ripinski-Naxon, *The Nature of Shamanism: Substance and Function of a Religious Metaphor* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1993); Richard Evans Schultes and Albert Hofman, *Plants of the Gods: Their Sacred, Healing, and Hallucinogenic Powers* (Rochester, VT: Healing Arts Press, 1992); and R. Gordon Wasson, *The Wondrous Mushroom: Mycolatry in Mesoamerica* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980).

Ripinski-Naxon 153-166 provides a good summary of the evidence that Indo-European peoples have, at various times, used psychoactive substances in their shamanic rituals. Historical and archaeological evidence indicates that the ancient Scythians burned *cannabis* in their sweat tents, the Greeks used opium poppies and other psychoactives in their mystery religions, and the Voguls (Khanti) of western Siberia used *A. muscaria* in shamanic rituals.

Although there is still no direct evidence indicating *A. muscaria* usage among the Irish Celts, there is growing evidence suggesting its possible use in other parts of Europe. Ripinski-Naxon 154-165 summarizes evidence for the prehistoric use of *A. muscaria* in Europe and includes the interesting research of Italian entho-botanist Giorgio Samorini. Based on the appearance of mushroom-like motifs in the rock carvings of Valcamonica, and one naturalistic image of a spotted mushroom (*A. muscaria*?) depicted in association with an individual or effigy, it is conceivable that the Celts, who once inhabited the region, might have practiced a ritual mushroom complex.

<sup>ii</sup> It is likely that the apples, berries, and hazelnuts were sometimes made into alcoholic brews, for there are references to hazel mead in Celtic texts. However, alcoholic inebriation tends to produce drunken fools, not instantaneous wise men.

<sup>iii</sup> As quoted in Stuart Piggot, *The Druids* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1968/1987) 117.

<sup>iv</sup> For information on the widespread use of *A. muscaria* in northern Eurasia, see R. Gordon Wasson, "Fly Agaric and Man," *Ethnopharmacologic Search for Psychoactive Drugs*, ed. Daniel H. Efron (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1967) 405-414; Wasson, *Soma*; and Maret Saar, "Ethnomycological Data from Siberia and Northeast Asia on the Effect of Amanita Muscaria," *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* 31 (1991): 157-173.

*A. muscaria* was known to the Khanti and Mansi of western Siberia as *panx*, to the Ket as *hango*, to the Mordvinians and Heremis (Mari) of eastern Europe as *pango*, to the Yurak Sammoyed as *ponka*, to the Chukchi of eastern Siberia as *pon* or *pónmpo*, and—if Wasson is right—to the ancestors of India's vedic priests as *soma*. Wasson, "Fly Agaric" 408-413 argues—based on the widespread appearance of the panx-ponka-ponmpo word pattern among Siberian tribes, as well as on certain linguistic links between Magyar *bolond gomba* (fool's mushroom), Slavic *gomba* (sponge), Greek (*s)póngos* (touchwood)—that Indo-European usage of *A. muscaria* could date back to 3,500 years.

<sup>v</sup> Contemporary nature guides indicate that *A. muscaria* is still relatively common in the woods of England and Scotland. In 1995, the Isle of Man's Philatelic Bureau issued a 20-penny stamp depicting *A. muscaria*, indicating it is still found there.

British naturalist Oliver Rackham notes that renowned birch forests were once found throughout the British Isles. It is quite probable that *A. muscaria* was once abundant in Ireland, at least until the Irish forests were cleared. Interestingly, as Rackham observes, the last well-wooded remnants of forests in Ireland were typically found on islands or on the ancient earth mounds known as *raths*—the very places said to hold the underground homes of fairies. Oliver Rackham, *The History of the Countryside* (London: Dent & sons, 1986) 112.

<sup>vi</sup> See Wasson, *Soma* 176. For a thorough discussion on how the mycophobic attitudes of Europeans are reflected in their names, for *A. muscaria*, see Wasson, *Soma* 172-203.

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<sup>vii</sup> Wasson, *Soma* 191.

<sup>viii</sup> Peter Lamborn Wilson, “Irish Soma,” *Psychedelic Illuminations VIII* (1995): 42-48.

<sup>ix</sup> The hymns of the *Rig Veda* never directly identify the main ingredient of soma, but they are filled with numerous descriptive references to the mysterious plant. Based on these descriptions, Vedic scholars have proposed various psychoactive plants—including *Peganum harmana* and even *Cannabis sativa*—as possible candidates for soma. A few scholars still favor alternate candidates, but many scholars now endorse Wasson’s persuasive proposal that soma was probably *A. muscaria*.

Terence McKenna, *Food of the Gods: The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge* (New York: Bantam, 1993) 97-120 argues, based largely on two negative personal trials, that *A. muscaria* could not have been responsible for the rapturous visionary ecstasy of the Vedas. He suggests instead that soma is more likely to have been a psilocybin mushroom, possibly *Stropharia cubensis*, but he has not established the availability of *Stropharia sp.* in ancient India.

There is substantial evidence that *A. muscaria* can produce ecstatic, euphoric visions. Francesco Festi and Antonio Bianchi, “Amanita Muscaria,” *Integration 2-3* (1992): 79-89 note that it can produce “colorful bright dreams with a particular sense of ‘lucidity’ as well as dreamlike states in which reality is experienced “as an inner world with a strong feeling of introspection.” Clark Heinrich, *Strange Fruit* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1995), who has worked extensively with *A. muscaria*, notes that it is quite capable of inducing euphoric, ecstatic states. While Heinrich’s suggestion that biblical prophets used *A. muscaria* is highly speculative, he provides some excellent evidence from the Vedas and other Hindu traditions supporting Wasson’s original soma thesis.

<sup>x</sup> Although Wasson was primarily interested in proving that *A. muscaria* was the most promising candidate for soma, many of his observations and comments may be extended to support links between *A. muscaria* and the wondrous Celtic brews of knowledge. For example Wasson, *Persephone’s Quest: Entheogens and the Origin of Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986) 60-67 argues that Vedic references to soma as “single-eyed” and “not-born single-foot” may have the same roots as the one-eyed and one-legged mushroom beings of Siberia. Wilson, “Irish Soma,” examines soma motifs found in the saga of Dermat and Grania from the Fionn Cycle, and he suggests that Sharvan the Surly—the one-eyed Formorian giant who guards the magical scarlet rowan berries of the Tuatha de Danaan—could be a mushroom being. In addition, based on the observation in Wasson, *Soma* 44 that soma was pounded to extract a divine inebriant, Wilson suggests that the act of Dermat clubbing Sharvan to death could be a symbolic reference to the ritual sacrifice and pressing of soma.

<sup>xi</sup> The crane is often associated in Celtic legends with druidic magic, and the magical objects of both the otherworld god Manannan and the hero Fionn MacCumhail were stored in crane-skin bags.

<sup>xii</sup> As Wasson, *The Wondrous Mushroom* 229 points out, soma is associated with thunderbolts, and many cultures associate thunderbolts with *A. muscaria*, which typically fruits after the first thunderstorms of fall. Lugh’s association with thunderbolts could link him to *A. muscaria*.

<sup>xiii</sup> For the complete text see Tom Peete Cross and Clark Harris Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales* (Totowa: Barnes & Noble, 1936/1988).

<sup>xiv</sup> Wasson, *Soma* 244-245.

<sup>xv</sup> The earliest written records of Druidic and Celtic religion were, for the most part, based on secondhand reports, which were then filtered through the personal prejudices of the Roman authors. For a discussion on the information and misinformation contained in Roman histories, see Piggot 91-120.

Christian penitentials occasionally condemned prevailing pagan practices, but they gave little substantive information about the practices, and they didn’t directly mention any shamanic use of psychotropics. The seventh-century *Liber Penitentialis* of S. Theodore, seventh Archbishop of Canterbury, condemned various magical practices and ceremonies, in particular the idolatry of “soothsayers, poisoners, charmers, diviners.” Theodore also threatened to expel from the church anyone who acted as a wizard, invoked demons, raised storms by evil craft, or conducted sexual magic. See Montague Summers, *The Geography of Witchcraft* (New York: A. A. Knoph, 1927) 65-6.

<sup>xvi</sup> The Old Gaelic legends—preserved orally for centuries by Irish filidh and bards—often mention pagan and druidic practices in passing. Although the written versions of the Gaelic legends were recorded much later by Christian clerics, these legends contain remarkably sympathetic, insightful comments about druidic practices. Unfortunately, the stories seldom provide detailed descriptions of the rituals, so the best we can do is piece together Celtic practices from various sources. For a sampling of passages dealing with the shamanistic practices of the Celts, see John Matthews, *Taliesen:*

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*Shamanism and the Bardic Mysteries in Britain and Ireland* (London: Harper Collins/Aquarian Press, 1991); and Caitlin Matthews and John Matthews, *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Wisdom* (Rockport, MA: Element Books, 1994).

<sup>xvii</sup> The functions of the filidh are documented in great detail throughout the literature of the early Irish, although no one source compiles all this information into one place. As Joseph Falasky Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985) notes, Fionn MacCumhail is an archetypal shamanic fili, composing poetry, healing by offering a draught of water from his hands, journeying into the sidhe mounds, and conducting rituals of divination.

<sup>xviii</sup> Nora Chadwick, “Imbas Forosnai,” *Scottish Gaelic Studies* Vol. VI, part II (1935): 97-135.

<sup>xix</sup> *Cormac’s Glossary* is a tenth-century Old Irish text found in the *Yellow Book of Lecan*. Because the glossator was commenting from a time several centuries after the practice of imbas forosnai had been outlawed, he was presumably speaking from historical tradition rather than direct experience. However, it is conceivable that the practice of imbas forosnai continued underground.

We know that Scottish descendants of the filidh practices two oracles—the tarbhféis and taghairm—which bear certain similarities to imbas forosnai. Seventeenth-century Scots practiced a rite called the tarbhféis, or “bull-feast,” which also involved chewing or consuming red flesh. According to one account by the historian Geoffrey Keating, a bull was sacrificed and then the seer consumed some of its flesh and broth, wrapped himself in the fresh hide of a bull, and waited for a dream or vision (cited in Matthews and Matthews 243). In an eighteenth-century book, *Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*, Marin Martin describes another divination ritual, known there as taghairnu. “A party of men, who first retired to solitary places, remote from any house...singled out one of their number, and wrapp’d him in a big cow’s hide, which they folded about him, his whole body was covered with it except his head, and so left in this posture all night until...[he gave] the proper answer to the question at hand,” (cited in Matthews and Matthews 334). No mention is made in Martin’s account of chewing on red flesh, but such a detail could easily have been overlooked.

<sup>xx</sup> Wasson, *Soma* 244; Saar.

<sup>xxi</sup> Matthews 184 quotes a passage from the *Senchus Mor*, a collection of law texts from various periods, that appears to confuse the practice of teinm laída with that of dichetal do chennaib: “When the fili sees the person or thing before him, he makes a verse at once with the ends of his fingers, or in his mind without studying, and he composes and repeats at the same time...” However, the passage gives a good description of how, “before Patrick’s time,” teinm laída was done differently: “The poet placed his staff upon the person’s body or upon his head, and found out his name, and the name of his father and mother, and discovered every unknown thing that was proposed to him, in a minute or two or three, and this Teinm Laegha [sic] or Imus Forosna [sic], for the same thing used to be revealed by means of them; but they were performed after a different manner, i.e. a different kind of offering was made at each.”

<sup>xxii</sup> Nagy 137.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Although Siberians don’t associate *A. muscaria* directly with immortality, Salzman et al report that the Koryak of Siberia make a tonic of blueberries and *A. muscaria*, which is drunk for health and longevity. Again, we see parallels to the Vedic soma—just as immortality was promised to Vedic priests who drank soma, immortality is promised to those who eat the foods and drink of the rowan berries of the de Danaan. Emanuel Salzman, Jason Salzman, Joanne Salzman and Gary Lincoff, “In Search of Mukhomor, the Mushroom of Immortality,” *Shaman’s Drum* 41 (1996): 36-47.

<sup>xxiv</sup> The English translations of quotations from “The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne” are based on Cross and Slover.

<sup>xxv</sup> Wasson, *Soma* 246, 324 cites statements made by Georg H. Langsdorf, in 1809, and Carl Hartwich, in 1911, that it was fairly common for Siberians to consume a drink made from *A. muscaria* mixed with bog bilberries (*Vaccinium uliginosum*) or the leaves of the narrow-leafed willow (*Epilobium augustifolium*). Like Wasson, Saar 168 also cites Langsdorf as stating the Khanty believe berries strengthen the brew. Neither source provides any pharmacological explanation for the belief.

Wasson, *Soma* 153-155 notes that there is clear consensus among the Siberians that it is vital to dry the mushrooms before use. Some Siberian tribes say that eating fresh mushrooms is dangerous; others say that fresh mushrooms are more nauseating. Wasson, *Soma* 155 describes how he and his friends discovered that toasting the mushrooms enhances their psychoactive strength.

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Jonathan Ott, *Pharmactheon: Entheogenic Drugs, Their Plant sources and History* (Kennewick, MA: Natural Products Co., 1993) 339 cites pharmacological studies by Repke that drying the mushrooms causes decarboxylation of ibotenic acid into the more potent psychoactive muscimol. Ott 328 also suggests that stomach acid may convert ibotenic acid into muscimol. The mixing of acidic berries and *A. muscaria* may catalyze a similar synergistic biochemical interaction. On the basis of personal use, White has observed a synergistic relationship between blueberries and *A. muscaria*.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967) 269.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Quotations from Standish H. O'Grady, *Silva Gaelica* Volume 2 (London & Edinburgh: Williams & Norgate, 1892) 394.

<sup>xxviii</sup> The references in Celtic literature to golden apples remained a riddle until, while working on this article, White came across a photo of a dried *A. muscaria* specimen with a metallic white sheen. In light of this discovery, it should be considered whether the Greek and Indo-European legends involving sacred golden apples may also be teaching stories about the use of dried *A. muscaria*—designed to remind initiates of useful esoteric knowledge.

<sup>xxix</sup> R. Gordon Wasson and Valentina P. Wasson, *Mushrooms, Russia, and History* (New York: Pantheon, 1957) 93.

<sup>xxx</sup> For a more detailed discussion see Erynn Rowan Laurie, "The Cauldron of Poesy," *Obsidian* vol. 1, no. 2, Spring 1996.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Wasson, *Soma* 248 quotes an observation by Langsdorf: "The face becomes red, bloated, and full of blood, and the intoxicated person begins to do and say many things involuntarily." Conrad H. Eugster, "Isolation, Structure, and Synthesis of Central-Active compounds from Amanita Muscaria," *Ethnopharmacologic Search for Psychoactive Drugs*, ed. D. H. Efron (Washington D.C.: U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1991) 435 notes that the warming and flushing of the face is caused by ibotenic acid. While the reddened face is most visible to observers, users experience a pronounced heating of the head.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Wasson, *Soma* 215.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Popular understanding of the ogham makes the names of the letters out to be solely names of trees. The tree ogham is but one of some 150 different ogham lists. According to Damian McManus, *A Guide to Ogham* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1991), the strong identification of the ogham with trees was popularized by fourteenth-century antiquarians who were working with a tradition several centuries old and only partially understood. McManus suggests that the original names of the ogham letters included words, varied objects, and concepts. McManus, and Meroney (1949) before him, offer translations of the known ogham letter names, but a few of the names are obscure and not amenable to translation. Edad is one of these.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> McManus 43; Howard Meroney, "Early Irish Letter Names," *Speculum* vol. XXIV, no. 1 (1949): 19-43.

<sup>xxxv</sup> E. G. Quin, ed., *Dictionary of the Irish Language Based Mainly on Old and Middle Irish Materials* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1990) 278.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Story based on Nagy 214.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Kondratiev notes that the use of the name *an náthair bhreac* in widely separated locations suggests that the name is not a new invention. The use of the term "speckled snake" in thirteenth century Welsh pseudo-Taliesin poetry could be significant.

Wasson and Wasson demonstrated the Indo-European link between the serpent and the mushroom but noted that "the snake-mushroom association of Greece and the Indic world, with all its baggage of associations, becomes the toad and toadstool glyph of the West." In the face of "the speckled serpent" associations, however, it appears that the conservative Irish may have preserved the ancient association of the snake with the mushroom.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> The Whitley Stokes (1890) translation of the "Life of Brigid" is reprinted in Iain MacDonald, ed., *Saint Bride* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1992).

<sup>xxxix</sup> Ripinski-Naxon 155-157.

<sup>xl</sup> The symbology and functions of the stags, trees, and ram-horned serpents of Cernunnos are discussed in some detail in Miranda Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 86-96; and Miranda Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1992) 39-61.

On some Gaulish coins, the stag bears the quartered circle of the solar wheel between its antlers, clearly linking the Gaulish Cernunnos with solar attributes—a trait he shares with the Gaulish Belenos, who is related to the Welsh Beli and the Irish ancestor god Bilé, whose name means "a great sacred tree."

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<sup>xli</sup> Ripinski-Naxon.

<sup>xlii</sup> For a discussion on the origin of the Gundestrup Cauldron, see Timothy Taylor, “The Gundestrup Cauldron,” *Scientific American* March 1992: 84-89.

<sup>xliii</sup> Wasson, *Soma* 249, 273-4 cites statements by Langsdorf and Bogoraz that *A. muscaria* users are sometimes prone to leaping and may exhibit unusual physical stamina. See also Sarr and Salzman et al.

<sup>xliv</sup> Laurie notes that the “Cauldron of Poesy” text describes imbas as a tree that is “climbed through diligence,” implying that the more training and inspiration the fili has, the higher up the tree he or she advances. Nagy 281 notes the word *taman* “trunk of a tree, stock, stem” is used in some Irish bardic and legal texts to describe a lower order of poet. One of the higher orders of fili is called the *druimclí*, the top of the ridgepole or roof-tree of knowledge. Eugene O’Curry, *Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History* (Dublin: William Hinch & Patrick Traynor, 1878) 9 says, “the man who was a druimclí was supposed to have climbed the pillar or tree or learning to its very ridge or top.” Taken together, these nuggets of information suggest a picture of filidh inhabiting levels of the world tree according to their rank and station.

<sup>xlv</sup> Saar 164 cites an observation by Langsdorf that the heroic epic singers of the Khanty used to consume several mushrooms and then sing inspired songs all night long. Salzman et al 42 indicate that *mukhomor* (*A. muscaria*) continues to inspire songs and singing among the Koryak of Kamchatka.

<sup>xlvi</sup> *Lebor Gabala Erenn (The Book of the Taking of Ireland)* translation quoted in Matthews and Matthews 11.

<sup>xlvii</sup> Chadwick records several stories in which teinm laída is associated with songs being chanted by severed heads placed near fires. Chadwick observes that the word teinm is generally regarded as being derived from the word *tep-* (“heat”).

<sup>xlviii</sup> *Hanes Taliesin*, translation by Macalister, quoted Graves 211.

<sup>xlix</sup> *Immacallam in do Thuarad (Colloquy of the Two Sages)*, translation by Dr Whitley Stokes (1905), glossed in Matthews and Matthews 203-218.

<sup>i</sup> According to early Irish law texts, the rituals of imbas forosnai, teinm laída, and dichetal do chennaib were taught during the eighth year of study, after the fili was already considered an *ollamh*, the highest rank of poet (Calder 1997: xxi). If our contention that *A. muscaria* was the “red flesh” chewed during the imbas forosnai ritual is correct, the students may have begun their training with the mushrooms at some earlier point in their course of study so that they would be prepared to take on the role of diviner during this ritual.

<sup>ii</sup> Matthews 123 quotes an interesting account of bardic training found in the *Memoirs of the Marquis of Clanricarde*, a text written in 1722. The text tells how the training of bards—at that time—took place in “a snug, low hut” located somewhere in a solitary setting. Each student had a small, windowless apartment, or cell, without much furniture beyond a bed, and they spent days and nights in the dark practicing their art on subjects assigned by a professor.

<sup>iii</sup> Franz Boaz, Ronald and Catherine Berndt, Dennis Tedlock, and numerous other ethnographers have emphasized the role of myth in carrying the teachings of indigenous cultures. Nootka shaman and storyteller Jonny Moses often speaks about how traditional stories are used both as teaching tales and as transformative shamanic healing tools. Daniel Merkur, *Becoming Half-Hidden: Shamanism and Initiation Among the Inuit* (Stockholm: Almquist & Wiksell, 1985) provides an in-depth study of how esoteric information about Inuit shamanic practices is woven into their songs, stories, and legends through the use of archaic symbols and other circumlocutions.

<sup>iiii</sup> “Cormac’s Cup” quotations are from Cross & Slover 503.

<sup>iv</sup> The single-eyed motif may have multiple symbolic meanings. In early Norse mythology, Mimir’s well of wisdom is located at the roots of the world tree Yggdrasil. At that well, Odhinn sacrificed one of his eyes to the giant Mimir in return for wisdom. “Single-eyed” may indicate that both Odhinn and Bóann have one eye in this world and one eye in the otherworld. The single arm and leg could easily be metaphors for the ability to move and act both in this world and in the otherworld realms.

<sup>v</sup> Translation by Erynn Rowan Laurie, work in progress.