

FLY-AGARIC MOTIFS IN THE CÚ CHULAIND MYTH CYCLE¹

By

Thomas J. Riedlinger, M.T.S., F.L.S.

The ancient myths of Ireland include many fabulous tales regarding Cú Chulaind, a warrior of the Ulaid clan who lived in the province of Ulster. Some of these portray Cú Chulaind's legendary moodswings: at one extreme, a battle-fury so intense that it terrified even his family, friends and fellow warriors; at the other, a torpor with vivid, prophetic dreams in which he languished for a year. It strikes me that aspects of both of these states, as described in the tales, resemble the effects of ingesting *Amanita muscaria*, the psychoactive mushroom with a bright red cap and white "speckles" also known as the fly-agaric.

This connection is especially significant in light of recent theories which suggest that many ancient Irish myths contain thinly-veiled allusions to *Amanita muscaria*. Peter Lamborn Wilson was among the first to point this out in his 1995 article "Irish Soma."² According to him it is likely that the Celts who settled Ireland either used it there in rituals or remembered that it had been used by their ancestors prior to migrating westward from an "Indo-European heartland" near the southwestern edge of Siberia. Wilson calls it "Irish Soma" because *A. muscaria* also is considered a strong candidate for Soma, the unknown plant substance praised as a god in the Hindu *Rig Veda*. It is a curious but well-established fact that there are numerous strong similarities between the

¹ A paper presented 29 October 1999 at the Mycomedea Millennium Conference, Breitenbush Hot Springs Retreat and Conference Center, Detroit, Oregon. © 1999 by Thomas J. Riedlinger.

² Wilson, P. Lamborn. 1995. Irish Soma. *Psychedelic Illuminations* 1(8):42-48.

culture of the Irish Celts and that of the Aryan peoples who migrated southward to India from the same heartland, bringing with them an oral tradition of hymns that became the *Rig Veda*.³ Some even think the name "Ireland" derives from a Celtic word, "Erin," which is based upon or shares a common root with the Sanskrit "Arya."⁴ In Wilson's view, both cultures almost certainly first learned about the entheogenic effects of *A. muscaria* from Siberian shamans in the Indo-European heartland.

Support for Wilson's theory has been offered by Erynn Rowan Laurie and Timothy White in their excellent *Shaman's Drum* article, "Speckled Snake, Brother of Birch: *Amanita Muscaria* Motifs in Celtic Legends," which contends that motifs of magical foods in Irish Celtic lore are best explained as "metaphoric references to *Amanita muscaria*, the highly valued psychotropic, red-capped mushroom that was once used shamanically throughout much of northern Europe." While agreeing that these references "could theoretically be faded memories of earlier pre-migration Indo-European practices, preserved in oral legends passed down from generation to generation," they think it more likely that Irish Celts actually used this mushroom in religious rituals. Their reason is that Celtic legends seem, in their opinion, to contain "certain innovative occult symbols for *A. muscaria* that are fairly unique to the insular Celts." They maintain that such symbols would not have been needed unless a sacred mushroom cult was still being practiced in Ireland by Celtic Druid

³ See, e.g., Olmstead, G.S. 1994. *The Gods of the Celts and the Indo-Europeans*. Budapest: Archeolingua.

⁴ Schulberg, L. 1968. *Historic India*. New York: Time-Life Books, p. 39.

priests "who wanted to communicate teachings about the sacrament's use to initiates, while maintaining a protective veil of secrecy around its identification."⁵

Considered together, these two articles and Wilson's recent book on Irish Soma⁶ build a very strong case for the general theory that the myths of ancient Ireland reflect at least a lingering awareness of the psychoactive properties of *Amanita muscaria*. But none of them links *A. muscaria* directly to Cú Chulaind. For reasons discussed in the following pages, I think it plausible that he personifies this mushroom or at least its capricious effects. We will start by reviewing descriptions of Cú Chulaind's so-called "warp spasms" and "wasting sickness." Next we will look at reported effects of *A. muscaria* inebriation and compare them with these maladies. Finally, I will discuss the possibility that myths about Cú Chulaind may derive from a shamanic source in prehistoric times which also inspired the Soma cult of ancient India.

CÚ CHULAIND'S WARP SPASMS

The first of Cú Chulaind's two maladies is variously translated as "battle-fury,"⁷ "battle frenzy," "battle ardor"⁸ or--my personal favorite--"warp spasm."⁹ It is always accompanied by a temporary

⁵ Laurie, E.R. and White, T. 1997. Speckled snake, brother of birch: *Amanita muscaria* motifs in Celtic legends. *Shaman's Drum* 44:53-65.

⁶ Wilson, P.L. 1999. *Ploughing the Clouds: The Search for Irish Soma*. San Francisco: City Lights Books.

⁷ Rutherford, W. 1987. *Celtic Mythology: The Nature and Influence of Celtic Myth--from Druidism to Arthurian Legend*. London: Thorsons, p. 60.

⁸ Mac Cana, P. 1985. *Celtic Mythology*. New York: Peter Bedrick Books, p. 102.

⁹ Sharkey, J. 1975. *Celtic Mysteries: The Ancient Religion*. New York: Avon Books, p. 10.

physical distortion called a *ríastartha*¹⁰ or *riastradh*¹¹ which usually includes an aura-like glow around Cú Chulaind's head, described by various writers as the "hero's light"¹² or the "warrior's light."¹³ He first exhibits this proclivity in childhood, when, as related in *Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulaind (Macghnínhartha)*, some other boys provoke him with a barrage of toy javelins, balls and "hurleys" (slingshots)--150 of each. After knocking these missiles aside without much trouble, Cú Chulaind becomes a bit flustered:

You would have thought that every hair was being driven into his head. You would have thought that a spark of fire was on every hair. He closed one eye until it was no wider than the eye of a needle; he opened the other until it was as big as a wooden bowl. He bared his teeth from jaw to ear, and he opened his mouth until the gullet was visible.¹⁴

At this point, understandably, the other boys decide that they have somewhere else to go. But Cú Chulaind, now out of control, begins striking them down. He thrashes fifty before he is stopped by his patron and maybe father, King Conchubur of Emain Machae, who gently points out that he should have secured the protection of the other boys before he tried to play with them. In other words, he should not have presumed to barge into their games without asking permission. Cú Chulaind resolves instead that it is he who will protect the other boys, and all return to the playing field. After that he always wins no matter what they play, including a primitive version of golf, wrestling and "mutual stripping." (The rules of the latter are lost in obscurity, other than what is

¹⁰ Gantz, J. 1981. *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*. London: Penguin Books, p. 136.

¹¹ Mac Cana, p. 102.

¹² Cowan, T. 1993. *Fire in the Head: Shamanism and the Celtic Spirit*. San Francisco: Harper, p. 37.

¹³ Mac Cana, p. 102.

¹⁴ Gantz, p. 136.

deducible from the report that Cú Chulaind "stripped them all so they were stark naked, while they could not take so much as the brooch from his mantle.")¹⁵

Another episode in *Boyhood Deeds* relates that when Cú Chulaind was seven years old he went for a ride in a chariot driven by King Conchubur's charioteer. Upon encountering three fierce warriors from another clan, Cú Chulaind kills them and cuts off their heads to keep as trophies. Next he leaps from the chariot onto an antlered deer and subdues it. Then he captures twenty swans by knocking them out of the sky with well-aimed stones. The deer is tethered to the chariot and trots along behind; the swans, likewise bound to the chariot, fly overhead; the heads presumably are swinging to and fro inside the chariot. So much excitement in one afternoon proves too much for Cú Chulaind, who finds himself having a warp spasm just as the chariot approaches home. According to the tale,

When they arrived at Emuin, the watchman said "A man in a chariot is approaching, and he will shed the blood of every person here unless naked women are sent to meet him." Cú Chulaind...said "I swear by the god the Ulaid swear by, unless a man is found to fight me, I will shed the blood of everyone in the fort." "Naked women to meet him!" shouted Conchubur. The women of Emuin went to meet Cú Chulaind gathered round Mugain, Conchubur's wife, and they bared their breasts before him. "These are the warriors who will meet you today!" said Mugain. Cú Chulaind hid his face, whereupon the warriors of Ulaid seized him and thrust him into a vat of cold water. This vat burst, but the second vat into which he was thrust boiled up with fist-sized bubbles, and the third he merely heated to a moderate warmth.¹⁶

It is related in another of the tales, *The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulaind (Serglighe Con Culainn)*, that all of the Ulaid women who loved him "blinded one eye in his likeness," because "it was Cú Chulaind's gift, when he was angry, that he could withdraw one eye so far into his head that

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 139.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 146.

a heron could not reach it, whereas the other eye he could protrude until it was as large as a cauldron for a yearling calf."¹⁷ Also in this tale, which describes the hero's deeds as a young man, a third warp spasm comes upon him not long after he wakes from his year-long wasting sickness, described in the following section. This time he loses his cool (literally) during a furious battle in the land of Eithne Ingubai. Having just slaughtered thirty-four warriors, he finds it hard to stop even after the rest of the enemy army retreats. One of his own countrymen then says:

"I fear that the man will turn his anger against us, for he has not yet had his fill of fighting. Have three vats of cold water brought, that his rage might be extinguished." The first vat that Cú Chulaind entered boiled over, and the second became so hot that no one could endure it, but the third grew only moderately warm.¹⁸

In the tale of *Briancu's Feast (Fledh Bhricrenn)*, Cú Chulaind is challenged to "straighten" a house when, after lifting one side of it, he sets it down off-kilter. When he tries to comply but at first is unable to do so, the hero gets angry.

Then his *ríastartha*e came over him: a drop of blood appeared at the tip of each hair, and he drew his hair into his head, so that, from above, his jet black locks appeared to have been cropped with scissors; he turned like a mill wheel and he stretched himself out until a warrior's foot could fit between each pair of ribs. His power and energy returned to him, and he lifted the house and reset it so that it was as straight as it had been before.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 156.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 171.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 230.

Elsewhere in the Irish myths, Cú Chulaind's warp spasms are said to include: a booming heartbeat;²⁰ the ability to revolve within his own skin²¹ and thus fight in multiple directions at the same time; the aforementioned "warrior's light" which rose from the crown of his head; the "warrior's moon," a projection "as thick as a whetstone" from his forehead; and a "stream of black blood [which] geysered from his skull as tall as a ship's mainmast."²²

CÚ CHULAIND'S WASTING SICKNESS

The title event of *The Wasting Sickness* is triggered when Cú Chulaind tries to capture a pair of enchanted birds flying over a lake. The song of these birds, who are joined by a red-gold chain, causes people to sleep. Though King Conchubur's wife warns him that "those birds possess some kind of power," Cú Chulaind twice casts stones at them--and misses! "Now I am doomed," he says, "for since the day I took up arms I have never missed my target."²³ He then throws his javelin at them and pierces a wing, but both birds manage to escape. After walking a while, the angry Cú Chulaind sits down with his back to a stone and there falls asleep. The story continues:

While sleeping he saw two women approach: one wore a green cloak and the other a crimson cloak folded five times, and the one in green smiled at him and began to beat him with a horsewhip. The other woman then came and smiled and also struck him in the same fashion,

²⁰ hÓgáin, D.Ó. 1991. *Myth, Legend and Romance: An Encyclopedia of the Irish Folk Tradition*. New York: Prentice Hall, p. 131.

²¹ Mac Cana, p. 102.

²² Cowan, pp. 37-38.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

and they beat him for such a long time that there was scarcely any life left in him. Then they left.²⁴

When the Ulaid try in vain to rouse Cú Chulaind, Fergus, another hero, tells them: "No! Do not disturb him--it is a vision." At this point Cú Chulaind awakes, but cannot speak. For a year he remains in this state, confined to a sickbed, then slowly recovers. On hearing of his vision, King Conchubur counsels Cú Chulaind to return to the stone where he first fell asleep. There Cú Chulaind finds the green cloaked woman, who explains that she seeks his assistance as a warrior to fight on behalf of her people who dwell in the Sídh, a Celtic "other world." As noted by Mac Cana, the Sídh is a place of apparent contradictions whose people, though immortal, are not "permanently invulnerable nor exempt from violent death." The relativity of time and space is fluid there: "perspectives are reversed and brevity becomes length and length becomes brevity as one crosses the tenuous border between the natural and supernatural." Control of magic is the thing which most distinguishes lords of the Sídh from mortal kings and heroes,²⁵ as Cú Chulaind learns firsthand from his wasting sickness. When he tells the green-cloaked woman that he is "not fit to fight men," she replies: "That is soon remedied: you will be healed, and your full strength will be restored."²⁶ This comes to pass when an Ulaid woman later tells him: "Throw off sleep, the peace that follows drink, throw it off with great energy." Cú Chulaind then rises and, passing his hand over his face, at last

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Mac Cana, p. 64.

²⁶ Gantz, p. 159.

conquers "all weariness and sluggishness."²⁷ It is during a subsequent battle which Cú Chulaind fights for the green-cloaked woman that he slaughters the thirty-four warriors while in warp spasm.

EFFECTS OF *AMANITA MUSCARIA*

Before proceeding it will be useful to review the main symptoms of Cú Chulaind's two maladies. Those exhibited during his warp spasm are: agitation (manic behavior, bristling hair); visual distortions (one eye protrudes, the other recedes); facial distortions (he grimaces and gapes, a thick "warrior's moon" projects from his forehead); tachycardia (booming heartbeat); blood rushes to his head (a drop of blood at the tip of each hair, a geyser of it spurts from his crown); light rushes to his head (a spark of fire appears at the tip of each hair, the "warrior's light" from his crown); he becomes very strong and very limber. He also becomes very hot, needing three successive dousings in vats of cold water before his temperature returns to normal. The symptoms of his wasting sickness are: sleepiness, vivid dreaming and prolonged lassitude.

Next let us review some eyewitness accounts of the effects of *Amanita muscaria* among Koryaks and other indigenous peoples of Siberia:

[From an 1809 paper which describes the effects of fly-agaric mushroom eaten by Koryaks in Kamchatka:] The narcotic effect begins to manifest itself a half hour after eating, in a pulling and jerking of the muscles or a so-called tendon jump...The face becomes red, bloated, and full of blood, and...the head and neck muscles are also in a constantly convulsive state...According to their own statement, people who are slightly intoxicated feel extraordinarily light on their feet and are then exceedingly skillful in body movement and physical exercise. The nerves are highly stimulated, and in this state the slightest effort of will produces very powerful effects. Consequently, if one wishes to step over a small stick or straw, he steps and jumps as though the obstacles were tree trunks....[T]hese persons exert

²⁷ Ibid., p. 165.

muscle efforts of which they would be completely incapable at other times; for example, they have carried heavy burdens with the greatest of ease, and eye-witnesses have confirmed to me the fact that a person in a state of fly-agaric ecstasy carried a 120-pound sack of flour a distance of 10 miles, although at any other time he would scarcely have been able to lift such a load easily.

[From an 1893 book describing travels in Eastern Siberia from 1861-71:] When a Koryak consumes the fly-agaric...the mushroom seems to produce a peculiar effect on his optic nerves which makes him see everything on a greatly enlarged scale. For this reason it is a common joke among the people to induce such an intoxicated man to walk and then to place some small obstacle, such as a stick, in his way. He will stop, examine the little stick with a probing eye, and finally jump over it with a mighty bound. Another effect of the mushroom is said to be that the pupils become much enlarged and then contract to a very small size; this process is said to be repeated several times.

[From a 1903 book based on two years of field research with Siberian tribes:] The effect...became evident by the time the men had swallowed the fourth mushroom. Their eyes took on a wild look...with a positively blinding gleam, and their hands began to tremble nervously....After a few minutes a deep lethargy overcame them, and they began quietly singing monotonous improvised songs...They suddenly sprang raving from their seats and began loudly and wildly calling for drums....And now began an indescribable dancing and singing, a deafening drumming and a wild running about...during which the men threw everything about recklessly, until they were completely exhausted. Suddenly they collapsed like dead men and promptly fell into deep sleep....It is this sleep that provides the greatest enjoyment; the drunken man has the most beautiful fantastic dreams.

[From the diary of a Polish army officer, published in 1863, who was fed fly-agaric as medicine during a visit to Kamchatka in 1796 or 1797:] 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 [mesmerized] by the most attractive gardens where ...a group of the most beautiful women dressed in white going to and fro seemed to be occupied with the hospitality of the earthly paradise....[Later, upon taking more of the mushroom,] I fell asleep anew and did not wake up for twenty-four hours. It is difficult, almost impossible, to describe the visions I had in such a long sleep...What I noticed in these visions and what I passed through are things that I felt I had seen or experienced some time before, and also things that I would never imagine even in my thoughts.

These are only a few of numerous such accounts collected by R. Gordon Wasson, the man who theorized that Vedic Soma was *Amanita muscaria*.²⁸ Many others have been published

²⁸ Wasson, R.G. 1968. *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. The passages quoted appear on pp. 248-249, 254-255, 262 and 244-245, respectively.

elsewhere,²⁹ including a recent report that copious perspiration can sometimes result from eating this mushroom, making it seem to objective observers as if the imbiber has "swallowed fire."³⁰ Similarities with aspects of Cú Chulaind's warp spasms and wasting sickness--as well as with his "salmon leap," the hero's fabled ability to jump across great distances or high into the air--would seem to be obvious.

The emphasis here is on *aspects* of Cú Chulaind's abnormal behavior corresponding to various symptoms of *Amanita muscaria* intoxication. The combined effect of these aspects in Cú Chulaind is exaggerated, making his deeds "more often seem superhuman than heroic," as one scholar noted.³¹ There is nothing in the record to suggest that *A. muscaria* induces either lethal battle furies or year-long lassitude. Wasson, for example, was dismissive of the theory that the famous "berserk-raging" of the Vikings during battle was caused by ingesting this mushroom. Such "murderous ferocity," he noted, "is conspicuously absent from our eye-witness accounts of fly-agaric eating in Siberia."³² However, it seems to me feasible that Cú Chulaind's warp spasms and wasting sickness represent exaggerated versions of the mushroom's true effects as perceived by observers and subjectively reported by its users, including ataxia (loss of muscle control), frenzied dancing in

²⁹ One especially important recent article in *Shaman's Drum* magazine describes the use of *Amanita muscaria* by modern-day Koryaks. It corroborates all the essential details in most of the older stories quoted by Wasson. See: Salzman, E., Salzman, J., Salzman, J. and Lincoff, G. 1996. In search of *mukhomor*, the mushroom of immortality. *Shaman's Drum* 41:36-47.

³⁰ Heinrich, C. *Strange Fruit: Alchemy, Religion and Magical Foods*. 1995. London: Bloomsbury, p. 26.

³¹ Gantz, p. 25.

³² Wasson, p. 157.

shamanic rites, amazing feats of strength, dramatic optical distortions, and disruption of sleep patterns lasting for several days with unusually vivid dreams.

Another interesting property of *Amanita muscaria* is that the urine of a person who ingests it becomes psychoactive. Apparently the chemical constituent that causes its psychoactivity metabolizes only rather slowly. Thus the Siberians have a long history, noted with astonishment by many Europeans, of drinking their own or another person's urine to prolong the mushroom's usefulness. A witness to this practice described it as follows in 1809:

Among the Koryaks...it is quite common for a sober man to lie in wait for a man intoxicated with mushrooms and, when the latter urinates, to catch the urine secretly in a container and in this way to [*sic*] obtain a stimulating drink even though he has no mushrooms. Because of this curious effect, the Koryaks have the advantage of being able to prolong their ecstasy for several days with a small number of fly-agarics. Suppose, for example, that two mushrooms were needed on the first day for an ordinary intoxication; then the urine alone is enough to maintain the intoxication on the following day. On the third day the urine still has narcotic properties, and therefore one drinks some of this and at the same time swallows some fly-agaric, even if only half a mushroom; this enables him not only to maintain his intoxication but also to tap off a strong liquor on the fourth day.³³

In other words, the psychoactive urine becomes less so with each successive urination unless supplemented by ingesting more *Amanita muscaria*. This diminishing effect, confirmed by scientific research,³⁴ recalls the procedure of dunking Cú Chulaind in three vats of water in order to progressively curtail his warp spasm and restore him to a state of normal consciousness. Another interesting parallel is found in the *Rig Veda*, where hymn 9.97.55 mentions three filters through which Soma must be passed to render it clarified.³⁵

³³ Quoted in Wasson, p. 249.

³⁴ Ott, J. 1993. *Pharmacotheon*. Kennewick, Washington: Natural Products Co., p. 328.

³⁵ Wasson, pp. 51-58.

Also worth mentioning here is a striking description of Cú Chulaind's hair. According to one of the myths, it was "brown at the base" and "blood-red in the middle," with "a crown of golden yellow."³⁶ Dried caps of *Amanita muscaria* often exhibit the same three colors (see **Figure 1**).



Figure 1. Dried caps of *Amanita muscaria*. Photo by Thomas J. Riedlinger.

³⁶ Kinsella, T. 1969. Combat with Fergus and others. In *The Tain*. Translated by Thomas Kinsella from the Irish epic *Táin Bó Cuailnge* [subtitle]. London: Oxford University Press, p. 156

SHAMANIC ORIGINS

The foregoing adds credence to theories that the ancient Irish Celts may have used *Amanita muscaria* as an intoxicant or in Druidic rituals. If so, this would seem to refute Wasson's claim that the Celts were one of the peoples "infected with a virulent mycophobia, coming down from pre-history"³⁷ and his report of finding "no mushrooms in the records that we possess of the shadowy Druids."³⁸ Perhaps what Wasson interpreted as Celtic mycophobia was actually a strong tabu against the casual mention of a psychoactive mushroom used exclusively in secret magic rituals. I do find it curious that Wasson does not comment on the mysterious "magic egg" (*anguinum*) which, according to Pliny the Elder, was "esteemed by the Druids and believed by them to 'ensure success in law-courts and a favourable reception by princes.'" Pliny described it as "round, and about the size of a smallish apple," with a "cartilaginous shell...pocked like the arms of a polypus [octopus]." The Druids told him that it was composed of secretions and spittle from snakes. Scholars have guessed that it may have been either a sea-urchin minus its spines or the agglomerated egg-case of a whelk.³⁹ To me it sounds possibly fungal in origin--perhaps a mushroom somewhat altered in appearance by Druidic art.

In any event, it is certain that the Irish bards, themselves most likely Druids, do not openly allude to any psychoactive mushrooms in the ancient myths. We have heard the opinion of Laurie and White that these myths refer to *Amanita muscaria* only symbolically in order to "communicate

³⁷ Wasson, p. 181.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 176.

³⁹ Piggott, S. 1975. *The Druids*. London: Thames and Hudson, p. 188.

teachings about the sacrament's use to initiates, while maintaining a protective veil of secrecy around its identification." That may well have been the case. But they concede that Wilson's theory is another possibility; that Irish Celts may have "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 content."⁴⁰ Wilson's viewpoint also seems to be supported by the fact that *Amanita muscaria* does not readily grow in Ireland. Laurie and White think it may have been more common there in ancient times, before the almost total deforestation of that country in the last thousand years. But if so, as they themselves admit, "there is no irrefutable archeological evidence...such as the discovery of an archaic medicine bag filled with psychoactive mushrooms" to prove that Irish Celts used *A. muscaria* or any other "psychotropic substances capable of inducing ecstatic, visionary experiences."⁴¹

I would add that the effects of *Amanita muscaria* are so unpredictable that the Celts had strong incentive to abandon its ritual use before settling in Ireland. The problem for them was not only that *A. muscaria*'s active ingredients vary "considerably" from mushroom to mushroom.⁴² "Soil conditions and geographic and seasonal factors also affect its hallucinogenic properties."⁴³ Imagine the frustration of attempting to gauge the appropriate dose of local mushrooms for different people in varying regions and seasons and climates as the Celts migrated westward for thousands of miles

⁴⁰ Laurie and White.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Heinrich, p. 15.

⁴³ McKenna, T. 1992. *Food of the Gods: The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge*. New York: Bantam, p. 108.

from their point of origin! That alone would suffice to explain why the Celts abandoned using *A. muscaria* in favor of surrogate plants or mythic symbols such as magic food. However, my respect for the intelligence, resourcefulness and pluck of traditional shamans allows that it is possible that once they had settled in Ireland the Celts found some way to mitigate the mushroom's potentially dangerous effects. In that case what Cú Chulaind represented for the bards of ancient Ireland was not *A. muscaria*'s use in their contemporary culture but the difficulties that their Celtic ancestors experienced when using it before they came to Ireland. These difficulties may have been conflated with the memory of battles fought during the Celtic migration. For example, *The Cattle Raid of Cuailnge* (*Tàin Bó Cuailnge*), is believed to derive from a narrative version transcribed as early as the 7th century C.E. But the earliest surviving copy dates from the 11th century and appears to be "a conflation of two 9th-century texts with some extra material added by the compiler himself."⁴⁴ According to Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, who regards *The Cattle Raid of Cuailnge* as the "central, and structurally the basic, story in the [Ulster] cycle,"

This narrative is taken to encapsulate many aspects of the culture of the ancient Ulaidh [*var.* Ulaid], portraying a warrior-aristocracy organised on the lines of a heroic society and providing an authentic picture of an Iron Age Celtic culture. The military-political situation described in the narrative was explained by a series of "pre-*tales*" which were put together at a quite early date in support of the *Tàin*. These "pre-*tales*" also preserve fragments of myth and ritual from ancient tradition, and thus the general corpus evidences several details which can be compared with what Greek and Latin writers on the Continent attribute to the Celts known to them.⁴⁵

This reinforces the theory that Irish Celts retained in their traditions ancient memories of things that their ancestors did or saw done either during or before their migration from the Indo-

⁴⁴ hÓgáin, p. 414.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

European heartland. At about the same time that they started this westward migration around 2500 to 2300 B.C.E., their Aryan neighbors apparently left the same heartland and started moving southward into India. Reflecting on this process of migration and culturization, the distinguished archeologist Stuart Piggott has observed:

More and more the archeological evidence begins to reflect the existence, over most of Europe, of a warrior aristocracy of a type familiar to us from the heroic and epic literature ranging from the *Iliad* to the *Sagas*; from the *Rig Veda* to the *Tàin Bó Cuailnge*. If we look for an early context for the structure of society already ancient in early Europe, the tripartite social grading in its various forms; the government by king, elders, and assembly; the importance of the warrior class--it fits readily within the framework of what we can infer from the early second millennium B.C. onwards.⁴⁶

Piggott says that this earlier framework, comprising a "curious amalgam of traditions and techniques, of peoples and ideas," provided the general context from which Celtic culture emerged en route to Ireland.⁴⁷ Wasson, whose research exposed him to Piggott's ideas, sent Piggott a copy of *Soma* and received in return this endorsement of Wasson's fly-agaric theory in a previously unpublished letter dated 11 October 1970:

I would say straight away that I am persuaded that you must be right. One can never arrive at mathematical certainty in such things, but I find the cumulative effect of your always level-headed and judicious arguments quite convincing. I had already thought that, whatever *Soma* may have been, its use in Vedic religion as an agent to induce ecstasy [*sic*] meant that we were, in that religion, partly in a world that was not characteristically Indo-European, but which was somehow linked with shamanism in its widest sense. I recently wrote a little book on the Druids, and in it had to consider whether there was a shamanistic element in Celtic religion: with Eliade, I had thought there was none, but his book set me thinking in

⁴⁶ Piggott, S. 1965. *Ancient Europe: From the Beginnings of Agriculture to Classical Antiquity*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing, pp. 106-107.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

wider terms. The probability of Finno-Ugrian elements in Sanskrit would of course give just the links needed between the two worlds.⁴⁸

What Piggott actually says in his book *The Druids* is that the "Celtic tradition in Ireland conserved untouched archaisms in language, ideas and even prosody which have their counterparts in Sanskrit or Hittite, and we must be seeing fragments of a common heritage that goes back to the second millennium B.C."⁴⁹ His analysis of these archaisms led him to conclude that "the Irish vernacular sources, especially the hero-tales, are the product of a primitive, illiterate, heroic society with a warrior-aristocracy" which composed them in accordance with its values.⁵⁰ He also believes that certain Druidic practices of the Irish Celts suggest "a very archaic substrate of belief" reflecting, it may be, an even earlier and more "primitive" influence: Central Asian shamanism, possibly originating near the Altai Mountains which border Siberia.⁵¹ Rutherford, too, calls attention to this region as a possible shamanic nexus for the Druids and Vedic Aryans.⁵² In addition to observing that "the Brahmanic ritual drug soma...is plainly the descendant of those used by the shamans to assist in inducing the trances,"⁵³ he states in a footnote:

⁴⁸ Piggott, S. 11 October 1970. Personal letter to R. Gordon Wasson. On file in the Tina and Gordon Wasson Ethnomycological Collection in the Economic Botany Library of Oakes Ames, Harvard University.

⁴⁹ Piggott, *Druids*, p. 88.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁵² Rutherford, pp. 126, 128. See also Carl Ruck's comments on the Altai Mountains region as a possible source of *Amanita muscaria* in ancient times; in: Wasson, R.G., Kramrisch, S., Ott, J. and Ruck, C.A.P. 1986. *Persephone's Quest: Entheogens and the Origins of Religion*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, p. 253.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

Evidence as to whether the Druids used ritual drugs to aid trance is wholly circumstantial, coming in part from Pliny's description of the mistletoe-gathering ceremony, though the mistletoe-berry is not a hallucinogen, and partly from a folk-tradition that they extracted an opium-like substance from the poppy. It is also possible that the so-called "magic mushroom" was used for Druidic purposes.⁵⁴

The term "magic mushroom" is usually used in reference to those of the *Conocybe*, *Psilocybe* or *Stropharia* genera, which have very different effects from *Amanita muscaria*.⁵⁵ However, Rutherford's guess is more compelling in regard to *A. muscaria*. For even if the Druids did not use the fly-agaric in their practices, the fact that it grows only in mycorrhizal relationship with conifer and birch trees makes it similar in one important respect to mistletoe: the latter is a parasitic plant which grows only on trees. According to Pliny, the Druids considered "nothing more sacred than mistletoe and the tree that it grows on, so long as it is an oak." Beneath such trees, he said, they held religious feasts and sacrificed "with prayers to the god to render [their] offering propitious."⁵⁶ It thus seems feasible to me that the Druids used mistletoe in these rituals as a symbolic surrogate for *A. muscaria*.

CONCLUSION: THE SOMA CONNECTION

A similar process occurred, I believe, in the Vedic religion with Soma. However, this change would have happened more slowly because of different circumstances. Migrating westward from their

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 108.

⁵⁵ Wasson, p. 162.

⁵⁶ Pliny quoted in Eluère, p. 119.

Indo-European heartland, the Celts encountered a wider variety of indigenous cultures than the Aryans did heading southward into India. Each successive conquest of these cultures presumably altered the Celtic religion through a process of syncretic transformation, just as the religion of the Aryans was changed by local Indian religions. Since it took the Celts far longer to reach Ireland (apparently the first of them arrived there in the sixth or fifth century B.C.E.),⁵⁷ it is easy to see why the Irish myths differ so markedly from Vedic hymns to Soma while yet bearing what Mac Cana calls "the unambiguous marks of a common origin."⁵⁸

One of these marks, I believe, is the Indic god Rudra who figures in some of the earliest Vedic hymns. Clark Heinrich has convincingly explored the possibility that Rudra was initially identified with Soma.⁵⁹ I would add that Rudra's attributes remind me of Cú Chulaind. This is clearest in *Rig Veda* 2.33, the "Hymn to Rudra," which acknowledges his power to bestow special favors on those who worship him properly and to injure or at least withhold his favors from those who do not.⁶⁰ The first of the favors solicited is "the vision of the sun" (2.33.1). Next come prayers for protection, progeny and health or healing. As with Cú Chulaind, Rudra's powers are potentially useful in battle. He is asked to ensure that "our warriors on horseback remain unscathed" (2.33.1) and to fend off "all assaults of injury" (2.33.3). But also like Cú Chulaind, Rudra sometimes shows a tendency to injure those he normally protects. Helplessly acknowledging that Rudra's "shattering power" and "vast strength" (2.33.10) make him "like unto a beast" that is "fearful and strong, all

⁵⁷ Gantz, p. 6.

⁵⁸ Mac Cana, p. 14.

⁵⁹ Heinrich, pp. 37-43.

⁶⁰ All quotes from the *Rig Veda* in this paper are taken from O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger. (trans.) 1981. *The Rig Veda*. London: Penguin.

ready for the kill," his petitioners pray to be spared the effects of his "fearful wrath" (2.33.5) and "great ill-will" (2.33.14). Their exhortation, "lay another low--not us!" (2.33.11), sounds identical to what we would expect to hear Cú Chulaind's fellow warriors tell him.

The Vedic priests apparently tried hard to accommodate Rudra's capricious behavior. I believe this accounts for the complex stipulations of their Soma ceremony. If the mushroom itself had an unpredictable potency which threatened unpleasant experiences, there was only one recourse: all other variables had to be strictly controlled. This is consistent with an observation made by Andrew Weil:

One valuable influence of ritual is to minimize the disruptive potential of [psychoactive] drugs and maximize their useful effects. All drugs have this ambivalent potential: they can trigger positive, helpful reactions or unpleasant and unhelpful ones....Ritual in the use of drugs works to curb the development of panic reactions by standardizing expectation in a positive direction. It helps define reasons for taking psychoactive substances in the first place, and gives participants a framework of order through which to interpret their experience.⁶¹

In the Vedic Soma ritual, techniques were developed to standardize both the preparation of the sacrament and the constitutional receptivity of those who ingested it. The Soma plant was pressed to release its juice, a tawny liquid. Then this juice was mixed with milk or curds. Perhaps numerous *Amanita muscaria* mushrooms which had been harvested at different times in different locations were combined at this stage of the ritual, in order to average out their diverse potencies. The Soma drinkers prepared themselves to imbibe the concoction by fasting and chanting the relevant Vedic hymns for several days. This would have standardized the body biochemistry of different individuals as much as possible, while also adjusting their minds to provide an appropriate

⁶¹ Weil, A. 1978. Reflections on psychedelic mycophagy. In Ott, J. and Bigwood, J. (eds.). *Teonanacatl: Hallucinogenic Mushrooms of North America*. Seattle: Madrona Publishers, pp. 152-153.

"framework of order" for enlightenment. Yet despite these precautions, they sometimes, unpredictably, encountered Rudra's devastating wrath and eventually tired of it. Then they, like their cousins the Celts did at least temporarily, gave up using *A. muscaria* in favor of non-psychoactive alternatives that were dependably transmissible from adepts to initiates--most notably the esoteric system of philosophy laid out in the Upanishads. At that point Rudra-Soma joined Cú Chulaind as a literary vestige of the Indo-European heartland.