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Irish Soma

Peter Lamborn Wilson

Many scholars believe that the Indo-Europeans used an entheogenic or psychedelic drug in their rituals – called soma amongst the Vedic people of India, and haoma in Iran. The ancient Greeks also used an ergot-based preparation in wine as the entheogenic trigger of the Eleusinian Mysteries. Soma has been identified as *amanita muscaria* or the fly agaric mushroom; haoma may have been the same, or it might be “wild rue,” a harmaline-containing shrub (see Bibliography under Flattery and Schwartz). If there’s any truth to these theories, we would expect to find that other Indo-European peoples also used such drugs shamanically or ritually. Terrence McKenna believes that psilocybe was once even more widely distributed than it is now, and therefore must also be considered in the soma context. Certainly entheogenic religions are far more thoroughly attested today than when Wasson launched ethnomycology with his “wild” speculations, which now seem rather conservative. Even if we cannot accept the “psychedelic experience” as the origin of religion, I believe that we must certainly see it as one of a complex of “origins”, a complexity which might best be expressed in a palimpsest of theories about those origins; in short, I would maintain that the

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failure to consider entheogenesis (“birth of the god within” by ingestion of psychotropic substances) must be considered a serious flaw in any integral History of Religion.

I consider it strange that in all the writing I’ve read about psychedelics, and about Ireland, not one text has connected the two subjects. My reading is of course far from complete, and my first query concerns this point. I can scarcely believe that I’m the first to consider the question of a soma cult amongst the Celts, those old-fashioned Indo-Europeans so loyal to ancient ways – and so fond of intoxication. An immediate presumption would be that the Celts lost soma, if they ever had it, when they migrated West from the Indo-European heartland; at best, they may have developed mead as a substitute. I know of no reference to intoxicants other than alcohol in use among the Celts, who in fact quickly became major importers of Mediterranean wines. We know, however, that a vast amount of orally-transmitted Druid lore is lost beyond recall, and we als/o know how entheogenic cults can thrive under the very nose of “civilization” and not be noticed (as in Latin America). Wasson and his school have demonstrated how mushroom language tends to be euphemized, masked, coded, buried in etymologies and even “false” etymologies. If we are to speculate about the possible existence of a Celtic – specifically Irish – soma, we must exercise a bit of detective work. Using some of their findings as possible structures for our exegesis, we can go back and read our texts over again and hope for a few glimmerings or clues.

Irish myths and legends were not written down till the Christian era, and then only by monks who might well have misunderstood or even censored any references to a soma-type substance or cult. By that time, any entheogenic knowledge or ritual once possessed by druids might well have already vanished (or retreated into folklore), and the memory of soma distorted beyond recognition. Any mushroom lore that survived till the ninth to twelfth centuries A.D. would be the province of illiterate peasant wise-women and wiz-

ards – not of literate monks. For this reason we can expect that the myths and legends of the monkish manuscripts will be hard to read from our special perspective. But Irish folklore, as distinct from myths and legends, may prove a much clearer source. For reasons known to folklorists, Ireland is a special case of the survival of Indo-European lore, comparable perhaps only to India. In fact, Indian material should be used to throw light on Irish material where areas of darkness exist. From this point of view I think we can take for granted that whatever we may 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. But the well-known affinity between Celtic and Vedic cultures should pre-dispose us to at least a certain open-mindedness.

The Irish material abounds in references to magical substances which bestow knowledge and/or pleasure when ingested. Perhaps the best-known are the hazelnuts of wisdom, eaten by the Salmon, fished up by the Druid, and cooked by young Finn—who, as “sorcerer’s apprentice”, burns his thumb on the Salmon’s skin, sticks thumb in mouth, and attains all the wisdom in his master’s stead. The “shamanic” overtones of this story are quite obvious. Turning to the older manuscripts, we have the enigmatic “Geste of Fraoch”¹, concerning the hero Fraoch who is half-fairy (Sidh) in origin. His sister is the nymph of the River Boyne. He seeks to marry Find-abair, daughter of Aillil and Maeve, the witch-queen. He arrives at their kingdom with his retinue and impresses everyone with his beauty, and his skill at music and chess. Find-abair falls in love with him. They meet secretly and she gives him her gold thumb-ring. Aillil and Maeve agree to the wedding, but secretly plot the hero’s destruction. Maeve invites Fraoch to bathe in her magic spring. Growing on its bank is the rowan tree.

¹ v. the Celtic Dragon Myth, J. F. Campbell and G. Henderson [Edinburgh, 1911]; Lemma Publisher, New York, facsimile, n.d.

Every fourth and every month
Ripe fruit the rowan bore:
Fruit more sweet than honey-comb;
Its clusters' virtues strong,
Its berries red could one but taste
Hunger they staved off long.

Rowan Berry juice could preserve life and cure dread disease. Maeve, sitting on the shore, begs Fraoch to swim over and pluck some berries for her. As she well knows, the rowan-berries are guarded by a dragon (or water-serpent), who attacks Fraoch. In one version, the beast kills him. In another version, as Maeve, her daughter, and the court ladies enjoy the sight of Fraoch sporting naked in the pool, Aillil steals the gold thumb-ring from Fraoch's purse, shows it to Maeve, and throws it into the water. Fraoch notices this, and also notices that a salmon gulps down the ring. Without anyone seeing him, he catches the fish barehanded, and hides it "a hidden spot by the brink" of the water. Thereupon Maeve demands the rowan-berries; Fraoch complies; the monster appears. Find-abair strips to the buff and leaps into the water with a sword, which she tosses to her lover. He slays the beast. Aillil and Maeve now plot the death of their own daughter. A ritual bath is prepared for Fraoch, "of fresh-bacon broth and heifer-flesh minced in it," a sign that he will be raised to royal status. Afterwards a feast is organized. During the feast Aillil orders that all his treasures be brought out and displayed. In order to complete this vulgar show, he demands that Find-abair produce her gold thumb-ring; when she fails to do so he threatens her with death. But Fraoch has meanwhile retrieved the salmon from its hiding-place and given it to Find-abair's maid to cook. The girl brings in the fish, "broiled..., well prepared with honey dressing." The ring is of course discovered. Aillil and Maeve are foiled.

In this version the tale ends happily. Ignoring the temptation to unpack too many clues from this story, we should confine ourselves to asking whether or not it can be read for possible ritual

MacCana, Proinsias, *Celtic Mythology* (P. Bedrick, NY, 1968, 1983).
O'Driscoll, R, ed., *The Celtic Consciousness* (Geo. Braziller, NY, 1981); contains "Near Eastern and African Connections with the Celtic World" by Heinrich Wagner, and "Irish Folk Tradition and the Celtic Calendar" by Kevin Danaher.
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might it have grown in Ireland in ancient times? I've never come across any written material on this, but during my last trip to Ireland (May, 1993) I made a few discoveries. At least one magic mushroom grows in Ireland, the "Liberty Cap," a type of psilocybe; I saw it grown at a mushroom farm in County Cork, but it is also found wild. Subsequently, in a village on the coast of the province of Munster, I interviewed a certain well-known shanachie or traditional story-teller, who must remain anonymous here due to his involvement in gun-running and pot-farming (neither very successful). "Mick" is said to speak the purest Irish in the southern Gaeltecht—and (somewhat magically) is reputed to live on nothing but pigsfeet and Guinness. In response to my query, he stated that magic mushrooms were known in Ireland in the time of the druids, and he agreed with me that "this explains a lot" about the druids! Since I'd been introduced to Mick by an old friend of his, I doubt he was trying to pull my leg; certainly he failed to elaborate on his statement, which he appeared to think was rather unexceptional.

Yes, it would explain a lot—but itself needs to be explained! Therefore, I ask for collaboration. The answer (however tenuous) seems genuinely worth knowing.

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content. The sacred pool, the sacred tree, the combat (which can be seen as a sacrifice, either of Fraoch or of a substitute, the salmon, or of the monster), the beef-and-bacon bath – during which a chorus of fairy women (Fraoch's sister Boyne and her maidens) appear and sing. All these motifs suggest that our legend is (at least in part) a masked ritual. In that case, the berries may also have a ritual significance. The salmon (with honey) and the thumb ring remind us of the shamanic complex again. The old manuscripts also preserve a number of imrama, or sea-going voyage-tales: the voyages of St. Brendan, of Bran, of Maeldun, and of the O'Corra brothers. The sailors in these romances find many marvelous islands, and on some of these islands they find marvelous fruits – some poisonous, some euphoriant, and some which stave off hunger. In "the voyage of the sons of O'Corra," for example, they visit an island whose trees are "laden with fruit, and the leaves dropped honey to the ground. In the midst of the island was a pretty lake, whose waters tasted like sweet wine. But after a week of rest by its shores, a "monstrous reptile rose up from the lake, and looked at them." The monster, however, disappears without harming them.²

Maeldun and his crew also experience an "Isle of Intoxicating Wine Fruits:"

They were now a long time tossed about on the great billows, when at length they came in view of an island with many trees on it. These trees were somewhat like hazels, and they were laden with a kind of fruit which the voyagers had not seen before, extremely large, and not very different in appearance from apples, except that they had a rough, berry-like rind. After the crew had plucked all the fruit off one small tree, they cast lots who should try them, and the lot fell on Maeldun. So he took some of them, and, squeezing the juice into a vessel, drank it. It threw him into a sleep of intoxication so deep that he seemed to be in a trance rather than in a natural slumber, without breath or motion, and with the red foam on his

² Joyce, 421; see bibliography.

lips. And from that hour till the same hour next day, no one could tell whether he was living or dead. When he awoke next day, he bade his people to gather as much of the fruit as they could bring away with them; for the world, as he told them, never produced anything of such surpassing goodness. They pressed out the juice of the fruit till they had filled all their vessels; and so powerful was it to produce intoxication and sleep, that, before drinking it, they had to mix a large quantity of water with it to moderate its strength.

St. Brendan seems to have visited the same island but, being a saint, he failed to experience the deep trance and euphoria of the more worldly Maeldun.³ Note that the color of the magic substance is usually red. Even hazelnuts are “reddened” by association with salmon-flesh. Maeldun sees red apple-like or nut-like fruit with a rough rind – which could be an accurate description of a fly-agaric “toadstool” or its dried cap. Maeldun’s squeezing of the juice reminds us directly of Vedic soma-ritual, and the warning to cut the juice with water reminds us of the Greek injunction to mix certain “wines” twenty-to-one with water, lest they be too powerful – obviously not wine as we now know it, as C. Ruck points out in *Persephone’s Quest*.⁴

Persephone’s Quest is the book which sparked my intention to draft this query. The specific impetus rose from Ruck’s brilliant essay on “The Offerings from the Hyperboreans,” i.e., the votive offerings sent from the semi-mythical land of Hyperborea to Apollo’s shrine oracle at Delos. In this text, Ruck makes no mention of the often-repeated but not very convincing identification of Hyperborea as Ireland, or the insular-Celtic lands in general. The route taken by the offering (a sheaf of wheat hiding some other

³ *The Voyage of St. Brendan*, translated by J. O’Meara [Dolmen Press, 1976], pp. 46–47.

⁴ *Persephone’s Quest: Entheogens and the Origins of Religion*, a collection of essays by Wasson, Stella Kramrisch, J. Ott, Carl Ruck, and Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty (Yale, New Haven, 1986)

is made, the acrobatic spear-leap. The point is, *Dermat* flies. He goes above. He transcends. He has shamanic powers, gained (or reinforced) by his overcoming and absorption of Fomorian/Fairy magic.

The tale of *Sharvan the Surly* is just that, a tale, not the text of a ritual. Nevertheless folktales have been known to “mask” myths, which in turn may serve as aetiological legends for certain rites, which in turn may derive in part from earlier myth, ritual, or lore. This particular tale seems to contain such ritual elements. The structure of the tale and many of its details might well pre-date its inclusion in the Finnian Cycle; any hero might experience such an adventure. And the Finnian Cycle itself seems to have roots in a past so distant that agriculture has not yet appeared, a world of pastoralism and hunting/gathering. Finn and his “merrymen” are anachronisms, free forest guerrillas held by only a slender link of reciprocity with settled society, and perilously close to that taboo realm of sorcery and alien otherness, the Forest. The world of *Sharvan the Surly* seems an archaic one indeed, ancient enough to contain traces of the soma ritual once common to all Indo-European people, as well as to the Semites, the Siberians and the New World Indians, etc.

That’s my hypothesis. I wouldn’t even begin to argue that we have “detected” an Irish soma. What we have here is a mere suspicion, not a case. I’m looking for support and/or refutation. A number of queries must be directed to specialists. From philologists we need exhaustive comparisons of mushroom and soma/haoma vocabulary from all the relevant languages, such as that which Allegro carried out for the Semitic languages in *The Mushroom and the Cross*. Celtic, Persian, and Sanskrit should be the main candidates for word-sleuthing. The Vedic soma ritual needs to be compared in detail with all texts and fragments from Celtic sources relevant to magic substances.

Ethnomycologists should investigate Irish (and insular Celtic) mushroom lore. Does *Amanita muscaria* grow in Ireland, and

vas might be related to the Ghandarvas, who appropriated soma from the gods and became its guardians.⁹

Angus then wraps Grania in his cloak of invisibility and flies off with her to Bruga of the Boyne. Dermat decides to stay behind, do the honorable thing and fight his way out. He makes a speech in self-defense, and the great hero Oscar is converted to sympathy with him. Oscar offers his life as surety for Dermat's, but to one dares to fight him. Dermat leaps lightly out of the tree, lands on his two spear shafts, pole-vaults over the heads of Finn's circle, and escapes with Oscar. He and Grania will live to flee Finn again and again – and eventually die at his hands.

On the assumption that the fairy-fruit of the quicken-tree is indeed soma, and that as soma it must be associated with a ritual, with a sacrifice (of itself), and with transcendence (either ritual or pharmacological), this charming tale would appear to function as a “mask” for just such a ritual. The berry is constantly equated with the head. The Celts were head-hunters, very much like the Dyaks of Borneo, the Guarani of Paraguay, etc. All wisdom and power are in the head. Because Dermat has taken on (or stolen) the wisdom of Sharvan by “dashing out his brains” (no doubt beheading him), Dermat acquires insight. In this heightened state, he plays the near-magic trick with the fruit and the chess-board, thrice-repeated. This foreshadows the thrice three heads of the Garvas, which will also (in a sense) fall ripely from the tree.

The one-legged one-eyed Fomor loses his head like a berry. Dermat should be the next sacrifice (like Gawain after the Green knight) but a substitution is made “at the last moment” (as usual). Nine mountain-men's heads are sacrificed – nine more berries, as it were – in Dermat's place. In the original tale, Dermat (like Grania) would no doubt have ascended the tree and escaped into the “other world”; instead another substitution (or “rationalization”)

⁹ See “The True Identity of soma” in M. T. Greene, *Natural knowledge in Preclassical Antiquity* (J. Hopkins University, 1992), p. 116.]

plant, apparently), is traced by three ancient authors, who all place Hyperborea beyond the Danube and beyond Scythia, near the Altai Mountains. This might locate Hyperborea somewhere near the vague (and controversial) origin-point of the Indo-Europeans and hence of the Celts. A Siberian origin for the Indo-Europeans is strengthened by Vedic references and a mass of other material which must not detain us here; suffice to say that the “Hyperboreans” are very close to the area in which *A. muscaria* still provides the entheogenic juice for shamanic practice. Ruck marshals a great deal of circumstantial evidence to identify the offerings as fly agaric, dried and wrapped in straw.

A possible historical connection between Hyperborea and the Celts, however fascinating, will not serve our purpose so well, however, as Ruck's discussion of a certain tribe living along the route of the offerings and involved with their delivery, the Arimaspeans. Their name, in the Scythian language, supposedly describes them as a one-eyed people, akin to gorgons and griffins. A number of other one-eyed and/or one-legged races appear in the story of Apollo and the Hyperboreans—for example, the Telchines, magic metallurgists “with a reputation for sorcery and drugs”⁵, masters of herbalism and the “evil eye”. Ruck explains:

“The fungus of the Hyperborean homeland would have come ... from the wooded slopes of the Altai Mountains, where conifers and birch abound, an environment, therefore, where *Amanita muscaria* is commonly found. Presumably, it would have fruited in the autumn and been preserved by drying so that it could be conveyed over the long journey, wrapped in straw, to arrive on Delos in late spring along with the other offerings of first fruits. Is there anything, we must now ask, in the Apolline traditions that might suggest that this was the identity of the secret plant?”

The one-eyed Arimaspeans, who, as we have seen, were either just another name for the Hyperboreans or, as a separate

⁵ Ruck, p. 236

people, were the first intermediaries in the transmission of the subterranean gold that was mined by the griffins. [They] are a personification of one of the attributes of soma as the “single eye.” So, therefore, are the Cyclopes, whose murder as primitive surrogate occasioned Apollo’s expiatory sojourn amongst the people of his northern homeland. There were two versions of these Cyclopes, and the Anatolian ones probably arose from a separate dissemination of the metaphor through Asia Minor, where the later discredited Lycian Telchines display the same attribute as their evil eye. These one-eyed creatures are a variant of another attribute of soma as the figure with a single foot, a characteristic of a supposed race of people called the Shade-foots, who came from the Indus valley and were fancifully implicated, according to Aristophanes⁶ in a profane celebration of the Lesser Eleusinian Mystery. It appears that the Arimaspeans may have come from the same general region, for Herodotus’s supposed Scythian etymology of their name is probably not correct, but they were really an Iranian tribe, called the Argempaioi or Argimpasoi. All these fabulous creatures can be traced to fungal manifestations and testify strongly that it was some kind of mushroom, if not actually Amanita, that was originally the Hyperborean plant. In its Hesperidean version, the plant bears still another attribute of soma as the ‘mainstay of the sky’, which is the role that Atlas plays as ‘pillar of heaven’ in the west⁶, just as his Titanic brother in the east, Prometheus, when presented as a Shade-foot, impersonates the sacred plant as a “parasol,” which is the same Sanskrit word as mushroom. The single-footed trait can also be seen in certain Greek heroes who, like Oedipus, have mythical roles as Apolline surrogates.”

The Shade-foots were also known as Monocoli or “One-legs”.⁷ This latter name is particularly interesting because when we find

⁶ Aeschylus, Prometheus 351

⁷ Pliny, Natural History 7.2.23; Aulus Gellius 9.4.9

Meanwhile Grania has developed an overwhelming obsession with the berries: she must taste them, or perish. Reluctantly Dermat sets out to find Sharvan, taking the sons of Morna along as witnesses. The giant is asleep; Dermat whacks him on the head and rouses him. The hero asks for berries, the Fomor refuses. They fight a ferocious duel, and Sharvan is slain by three blows of his own club (just as the soma was sacrificed by pressing or “wounding” the plant). Dermat orders the sons of Morna to bury the corpse while he goes to fetch Grania. Dermat then satisfies Grania’s desire, and also gives berries to the sons of Morna, who thank him profusely for sparing their lives, and set off to return to Finn. Dermat and Grania take over Sharvan’s tree-house high in the branches of the fairy-quicken, and settle down in bliss again.

Finn explodes with fury, rouses his loyal and not-so-loyal followers, and sets out to capture Dermat and Grania in their lair. They arrive at the Forest and find the tree, but no sign of the lovers. They gorge on fruit, and then settle down to wait. Finn and Oisín play chess beneath the tree. Time passes. Finn tells Oisín that he can win in one move, but Oisín can’t see the move. He ponders endlessly. Suddenly a quicken-fruit falls ripely onto the chessboard, as if to show Oisín the correct move; he makes it and wins. They play again, and the same thing happens: wisdom falls from the tree as fruit: Oisín wins. And a third time!

Finn finally realizes what’s up. He calls up into the tree, and Dermat answers from the treehouse. In a fury, Finn orders his men to surround the tree – then offers a huge reward for the head of Dermat O’Dyna. At this point nine men, all called Garva (and all hailing from various mountains around Ireland) attempt the coup against Dermat, but they all fail. The love-god Angus – deus ex megalitha – has flown invisibly from Newgrange to save his worshippers, Dermat and Grania. As each Garva climbs the tree, Angus casts a spell over him so that he appears to be Dermat. Each Garva is then pushed from the tree by the real Dermat, falls to the ground, is mistaken for the enemy, and at once beheaded. The Gar-

at the foot of the tree, watching; and at night he slept in a hut he had made for himself, high up among the branches”

The Fena or Finians or followers of Finn are Milesians, the last Iron Age Celts to arrive in Ireland. The Tuatha De Danaan are an earlier people, perhaps also Celtic but Bronze Age. The De Danaan have magical power, and after their final defeat by the Milesians they will retire into the megalithic mounds, such as the Brugh na Boine at Newgrange (which in this tale is the Castle of Angus, the god of love, patron of Dermat and Grania). They are in fact the fairies. The land of Promise or Land of Youth or Tirnanog, etc., is the mundus imaginalis or fairyland, Isles of the Blessed, Hy Brasil, etc. – the spirit land where the De Danaan are also “at home”. This is the origin of the various “crimson nuts and arbutus apples and scarlet quicken berries,” which are not native to Ireland but to the “other world,” the place where shamans go in trance. The quicken tree is the “quicken beam or mountain ash, or roan-tree; Gaelic Caerthainn,” a tree holy to the druids. The tree with its red fruit guarded by a giant recalls the Golden Fleece and the Golden Apples of the Hesperides; it is thus the world-axis, the shamanic ladder, and also the tree beneath which one finds fly agaric; it is the beanstalk, Alice’s tunnel to Wonderland, and all other liminal structures or gateways between levels. The fruit of the tree, like that of the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil in Genesis, is the principle of transformation and realization; it is the sacrifice; and it is soma. This will become more clear as the tale unfolds.

Dermat makes a peace-pact with Sharvan the Surly: refuge in the Forest, so long as Dermat keeps his hands off the quicken berries. For a while all goes well. Meanwhile, Finn receives an offer of fealty from two former enemies, the sons of Morna. Before he forgives them, however, he demands an erc, or blood-price: either “the head of a warrior, or the full of my hand of the berries of a quicken tree.”

Finn’s son Oisín takes pity on the sons of Morna and explains the situation to them; nevertheless they undertake the quest and set out for the Forest of Dooros. Dermat easily overcomes them.

these people in modern times, they will be a particular plant involved in Asiatic shamanism. Monocoli in Greek was an epithet of plants⁹. In modern times, the prodigious strength of their single leg will also be remembered from ancient traditions.

In his own essay, “Persephone’s Quest,” Wasson also discusses a number of one-eyed, one-footed beings from various folkloric and iconographic sources, including the Cyclopes, and soma itself, which is described in Vedic Sanskrit as Aja Ekapad, “Not-born Single-foot.” Mushrooms are “not born” because they have no seed; they are caused by lightning bolts. And mushrooms are single-footed, of course. The penis is the “one-eyed serpent,” and the mushroom is a penis. Folklore can be scoured endlessly to rake up further examples; Wasson’s point is that one-eyed one-legged beings are to be decoded as mushrooms, at least in certain contexts.

The Irish also have a one-legged one-eyed race in their past: the Fomoiré or Fomorians. In some legendary histories they seem to be the very oldest inhabitants of the island, but still they come from elsewhere, either “from the sea” (but “sea” is probably a false etymology for their name, fomorian); or else they invaded Ireland from Africa. In some tales the Fomorians live under the sea (like Chinese dragons) or else more prosaically on Tory Island. Sometimes they are giants, and moreover they can appear as one-eyed one-footed giants. Sometimes they appear to be a race of wizards, “human” enough to inter-marry with the Tuatha de Danaan (who, however, aren’t all that human themselves). In fact the half-breed King Bres, who causes war between the two races¹⁰ is described as the most beautiful youth in Ireland – even though the Fomoiré are usually depicted as ugly, low, hideous, deformed, etc. One gets the impression that the Fomorians represent a pre-Celtic Irish race, and that we are seeing them through the texts of the Celts, who invaded their land and subdued them, and now wish to present them as villains, boors, snake-worshippers, or even nonhuman monsters. This is a universal theme in folklore, which

often seems to harbor memories of an archaic “us/them” situation. Ultimately it may lead us back to the emergence of agricultural peoples and their “conquest” and enslavement of hunter/gatherer tribes – i.e., back to the very beginnings of civilization and history. The Fomorians, who are connected with the megaliths by folklore, and who survive to play roles as ogres and giants in Irish fairy tales, may have been remnants of the great Atlantic Megalithic peoples, who created the culture of New Grange and Stonehenge long before the Celts arrived in Europe. The marginalized “race” or “caste” survives as tinkers (primitive metallurgists, perennial outsiders), minstrels, vagabonds, fortune-tellers, herbalists, servants, grooms, prostitutes, wizards. Much later in history the Celts will undergo the same marginalization by new “invading races” – the Fomorization of the Celts, as it were.

What interests us here, however, is not the fate of the Fomorians but their special role as one-eyed shade-foots – i.e., their role in folklore. Whatever their other qualities in history, myth, or legend, they are clearly “Arimaspeans”, and hence are to be suspected of kinship with mushrooms. And if hazelnuts, or red berries, are used to “mask” the mushroom in Irish tradition, we should look for Fomorians lurking somewhere in the underbrush near the sacred tree.

Just such a conjunction occurs in the saga of Dermot and Grania, which in turn forms part of the Finnian Cycle.⁸ The hero and heroine are fleeing from the jealous wrath of Finn himself. Their flight takes them all over Scotland and Ireland, where many dolmens are still called “beds” of Dermot and Grania. At one point they come to the Forest of Dooros (a name containing the Celtic word for “oak” and thus identifiable as a druid grove) in the district of HyFicra of the Moy (later known as the barony of Tireagh, in Sligo). At this time the forest was guarded by Sharvan the Surly, a giant of Lochlann.

⁸ Joyce, 313 ff

“Now this is the history of Sharvan the Surly, of Lochlann. On a certain occasion, a game of hurley was played by the Dedannans against the Fena, on the plain beside the Lake of Lein of the Crooked Teeth. They played for three days and three nights, neither side being able to win a single goal from the other during the whole time. And when Dedannans found that they could not overcome the Fena, they suddenly withdrew from the contest, and departed from the lake, journeying in a body northwards.

The Dedannans had for food during the game, and for their journey afterwards, crimson nuts and arbutus apples and scarlet quicken berries, which they had brought from the Land of Promise. These fruits were gifted with many secret virtues; and the Dedannans were careful that neither apple nor nut nor berry should touch the soil of Erin. But as they passed through the Wood of Dooros, in Hy Ficra of the Moy, one of the scarlet quicken berries dropped on the earth; and the Dedannans passed on, not heeding. From this berry a great quicken tree sprang up, which had the virtues of the quicken trees that grow in Fairyland. For its berries had the taste of honey, and those who ate of them felt a cheerful flow of spirits, as if they had drunk of wine or old mead; and if a man were even a hundred years old, he returned to the age of thirty, as soon as he had eaten three of them.

Now when the Dedannans heard of this tree, and knew of its many virtues, they would not that any one should eat of the berries but themselves; and they sent a Fomor of their own people to guard it, namely Sharvan the Surly, of Lochlann; so that no man dared even to approach it. For this Sharvan was a giant of the race of the wicked Cain, burly and strong; with heavy bones, large thick nose, crooked teeth, and one broad, red, fiery eye in the middle of his black forehead. And he had a great club tied by a chain to an iron girdle which was round his body. He was, moreover, so skilled in magic that fire could not burn him, water could not drown him, and weapons could not wound him; and there was no way to kill him but by giving him three blows of his own club. By day he sat