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slide-show

IRISH SWEATHOUSES AND THE GREAT FORGETTING

Anthony Weir

click for a longer view

Are Irish sweathouses a continuation of a prehistoric tradition of inhaling consciousness-altering smoke, recently overlaid with the prophylactic function of saunas ?
Cannabis is not likely to have been used in Ireland for a millennium at least, but a much more seriously-numinous means of widening the awareness is still to be found all over the island: *Psilocybe semilanceata*, or "magic mushrooms"....

Killadiskert, county Leitrim

Irish Sweathouses are small, rare, beehive-shaped, corbelled structures of field-stones, rarely more than 2 metres in external height and diameter, with very small "creep" entrances which may have been blocked by clothing, or by temporary doors of peat-turves, or whatever came to hand. Most of those which survive could not have accommodated more than three or four sweaters. They resemble the small 'caves', built into banks, in which many Irish natives were reported to live in the seventeenth century.

Some have chinks to let out the smoke, but they were necessarily cleared of fire and ash before use - so any chinks (deliberate or otherwise) in the rough construction would have served as ventilation ducts in a cramped space. Where these were too big, they were stopped with sods or with mortar.

Cornamore, county Leitrim

They were often covered with sods of earth to counterweight and stabilise the corbelling, and these would also have acted as insulation after firing. That they were fired is certain, for soot remains on the ceilings of some.

Thus they are different from North American sweat-lodges or *inipis*, which were rarely if ever stone-built, and were heated by carrying hot stones from a nearby fire. Northern European saunas and bath-houses are a modern variant, with an enclosed stove upon or around which stones were placed. Stone retains heat very well.

click for a high-resolution photo

Cleighran More, county Leitrim: beside a stream

Dowra, county Leitrim.

The first - and only detailed - account of Irish sweathouses came from Latocnaye in the late eighteenth century: a man who spoke no Irish. [A Frenchman's Walk Through Ireland, *translation reprinted by* Blackstaff Press, Belfast 1984]. The rural Irishry who used them would not necessarily have told such a man - or any Dubliner, Anglo-Irishman or Englishman in a carriage - what functions the sweathouses served. To this day, the rural Irish of the

west (like peasants everywhere) will tell tourists what they think they want to hear, halving distances so as not to discourage the traveller, and enthusiastically recommending the nearest café. Nevertheless, reports of the *Sweating Cure* have been given in recent times to Brian Williams of the Archæological Survey of Northern Ireland, by people who are unlikely to have heard of it from the archæological literature, or from outside their immediate area.

Ballydonegan, county Derry: also beside a stream

A number of early writers on the Turkish bath quote the following from Catharine Gage, wife of the Reverend Robert Gage of Rathlin Island (between county Antrim and the Mull of Kintyre in Scotland), who wrote:-

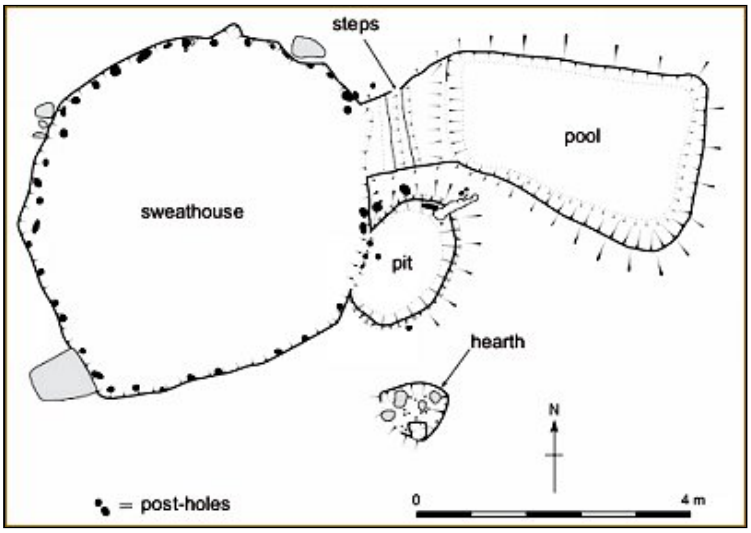
'Small buildings called sweat-houses are erected, somewhat in the shape of a beehive, constructed with stones and turf, neatly put together; the roof being formed of the same material, with a small hole in the centre. There is also an aperture below, just large enough to admit one person, on hands and knees. When required for use, a large fire is lighted in the middle of the floor, and allowed to burn out, by which time the house has become thoroughly heated; the ashes are then swept away, and the patient goes in, having first taken off his clothes, with the exception of his undergarment, which he hands to a friend outside. The hole in the roof is then covered with a flat stone and the entrance is also closed up with sods, to prevent the admission of air. The patient remains within until he begins to perspire copiously, when (if young and strong) he plunges into the sea, but the aged or weak retire to bed for a few hours.'

[Gage: A History of the Island of Rathlin, 1851]

He also mentions that young women use it for their complexion after burning kelp, and that after about 30 minutes use, their skin is much improved.

There is very little mention of sweathouses on the Web, apart from a summary of conclusions from a rescue-dig at Rathpatrick, county Kilkenny - whose author, knowing little about steam baths, saunas, or simple physics (or indeed about the sparse literature on the subject of Irish sweathouses), actually thinks that pouring water on hot stones increases the temperature! This summary suggests that temporary sweathouses of the North American type (made of bent wands and skins or fabric), with a pool, might well have existed in Ireland during the Bronze

Age - around 2,500 BCE. The only problem is that the report suggests that stones were heated in a hearth a couple of metres outside the temporary sweathouse, a labour-intensive operation, since it would be easier and safer to erect the structure over the hot stones in a hearth than to roll very hot (presumably rounded) stones down into what amounts to a tent. The author of the summary suggests, however, that they might have been carried on forked sticks. A correspondent from Rhode Island tells me that he and his friends use a shovel - or preferably a pitchfork - to transport glowing stones into the *inipi*. and that there are reports of deer-antlers also being used. "The stones are commonly the size of a man's head and never gathered from or near a river - because they explode."



Presumed sweathouse, Rathpatrick - Headland Archaeology Ltd.

Whether or not the temporary Rathpatrick structure was a place to sweat in, no stone-built sweathouse standing today is likely to be earlier than the second part of the 19th century, because of the fragility of the structures. If indeed they were built at that time for prophylactic use or to ease rheumatic pain, then (unless they were a curious 19th-century fad introduced by an eccentric) they very likely had an earlier - and more effective - function.

The first thing to note is that the present distribution is in the poorest parts of the ignored counties of Ireland: Fermanagh, Leitrim and Cavan, as well as northern Sligo - though 'outliers' have been identified in Wicklow, Cork and Kerry.

HOW MY INTEREST IN IRISH SWEATHOUSES STARTED.

My discovery of the existence of sweathouses was entirely due to Estyn Evans' *Field Guide to Prehistoric and Early Christian Ireland,* published in the mid-sixties. He

Coomura, county Kerry (photo by Aidan Harte)

They are often tucked away in rather magical, liminal places, near little

mentioned the Rathlin one (which I never found) and the Tirkane sweathouse near Maghera, co. Derry, which I decided to visit along with the fine portal-tomb at nearby ***Tirnony***.

It was in a glen owned by a Miss Dogherty who had serious arthritis and was getting on in years. She was thrilled that I wanted to see her sweathouse, and she took me down the slippery slope to show me it. After that, anytime I was in the area I called in with her. I brought her the first peach she had ever seen, and she told me that she had only once seen the sea (at Larne) and was still amazed by the waves. She was a splendid woman. Later I went to see her in hospital after a cataract operation (not the outpatient event it is today), and later again I went to see her after a nephew (I think) had had her house 'done up' with a grant. Gone was the turf fire and the cosiness, replaced by a lot of formica. She didn't like it at all.

streams and/or in little brakes or copses. This differentiates them from lime-kilns (also common in central Leitrim and NW Cavan) which have a similar construction but are much taller, more easily accessible - and have even-smaller "entrances" which only a stoat or a small dog could get through.

A typical lime-kiln of NW Cavan - with missing chimney.

The inhabitants of this area were until very recently amongst the poorest and most undernourished in Europe. They lived on potatoes and whey, never saw fruit, and after the Famine of the 1840s brought a continuing revulsion against the eating of anything wild and natural (e.g. blackberries and elderberries, let alone sloes, wild damsons, rose-hips, chickweed, nettles, sea scurvy grass, mushrooms etc.) had almost no variety of diet. Healthy pre-Famine infusions gave way to a dependence upon strong imported tea laced with imported, addictive and teeth-rotting sugar: expensive items which allowed little cash for real nourishment in a largely-subsistence society where great labour was required simply to provide fuel for winter.

click for a closer view 

Mullan, county Fermanagh

Sweathouses were carefully built, often corbelled, but sometimes slab-roofed, well away from permanent dwelling-houses and often from tracks. They would have had to be tucked away from the eyes of land-agents who might have charged rent on them. But they could have been close to impermanent dwellings, such as bivouacs of tarpaulin or rags and sticks, or the "cabins" of wattle and daub which give their name to county Cavan. It would have taken two or three skilled wall-builders two days to find and select the stones and build one. Some *townlands* (named units of land of

Recommended reading:

"*Sacred and Profane Substances: the ritual use of narcotics in Later Neolithic Europe*"
[pages 50-64 of **Proceedings of a Conference on Archaeology, Ritual and Religion**, Oxford 1981, *edited by* P. Garwood, D. Jennings and J. Toms *(Oxford Committee for Archaeology Monograph no. 32)* 1991.]

very variable size usually smaller than anEnglish parish) had several sweathouses, and even now three of four *townlands* have more than one sweathouse, intact or ruined.

The corbel-roofing goes back, of course, to prehistoric times, and is found in Neolithic tombs all over Europe. It involves the laying of stones in an ever-diminishing coil or spiral until it can be finished with a single stone.

▲ ***Corbel-roofed 'oratory' on Skellig Michael, county Kerry***
[click on the picture to see *clocháns* on the rock]

Corbel-roof of prehistoric tomb, Knowth, county Meath ▼

All sorts of corbelled rustic structures (mostly dating from the 19th century) can still be seen across Europe, with functions as various as hen-houses, dog-kennels, look-outs, shepherds' huts and stores. There are hundreds in the French *département* of the Lot and adjacent *départements* of Quercy-Rouergue, where they are known as *gariotas* when small, and *caselas* or *cabanas* when larger.

FEEDBACK

"My name is Tim. I live in Washington State in the U.S.A.
I am of mostly Irish heritage, but grew up around Native American culture. I practice native spirituality with traditional elders (Lakota mostly).

Outside the peyote cults (a relatively recent arrival on the Northern Plains), and occasional

experimenters, there is no drug use in Lakota "sweatlodges". In fact even the Peyote Church doesn't normally use that "medicine" in an *inipi* (sweat-lodge) ceremony. I am very familiar with Lakota, Blackfoot, Annishnabe, Dineh, Salish, and Cheyenne culture: none of them traditionally used mind-altering drugs with the possible exception of tobacco in their ceremonies. Some individuals played around with them especially in the past 200 years, but they are not a part of traditional spirituality especially in the sweatlodge.

Corbelled shepherd-hut, Artajona (Navarra), Spain and a* gariota *or* casela *in Quercy, France.

They all, however, have proper doorways, unlike the diminutive entrances of Irish sweathouses. These required considerable labour to heat. One report says that two donkey-cartsful of *turf* (which is what peat is called in Ireland) was required to get the stones to a high enough temperature for the sweating - and this is probably correct. In a society where not everyone had rights of turbary (the cutting of peat), and turf was burned in an open hearth, piece by frugal piece, this was quite an extravagance. Turf-digging is labour enough, but the throwing of it up the turf-bank, the stacking in small piles to dry in a wet climate, and its transportation to the dwelling-house still takes a several weeks of the summer, and still many Irish men working in Britain will come home in the summer to help with the turf. The prodigal use of it to heat up a sweathouse, presumably well away from the dwelling, suggests that sweathouses were in some way very important.

We go into a sweat-lodge for many reasons. The one reason was alluded to in a photo caption in your article where the entrance to the lodge recalled a passage-tomb. We go in the lodge to be reborn, which of course necessitates death.

Legeelan, county Cavan

As a newcomer to these ways and a person who has used drugs to expand my consciousness (with mixed results), it seems to me that drugs do not enhance the experience of an *inipi* ceremony. Rather they

make it difficult to perceive the spirits who are called to that dark and womblike place. Psylocibes and cannibis make it difficult to tell the difference between a personal vision or hallucination, and a manifestation of the presence of a "visitor".

That is the second reason we go into a sweat-lodge: to commune with the spirits of ancestors and non-human benefactors or protectors. And the third and perhaps most important reason is to pray to our creator in thanks - for a good ceremony, for good health and happiness, and for the divine to regard us as grandchildren (and whatever else we want to pray about)...

I liked your article, and the last speculation about 'burnt-mounds' being sweatlodge-remains sounds about right. I'm very interested in what my ancestors may have used the sweatlodge for. I do not doubt that they used psilocybes in them. However, drugs are not necessary for interacting with other worlds and the beings in them. Experiences

photo by Padraig Cumiskey - ***click to enlarge***

Doolargy, county Louth (one of several)

Parsons Green, South Tipperary

that we consider unusual or fantastic are not necessarily the product of drug induced hallucinations. I'd go so far as to say that the reason we consider them fantastic and unusual is a product of our delusions and the great "disremembering" you refer to.

As a young man I used drugs to shake up my delusional and narrow perception of the universe. In the absence of elders and genuine spiritual traditions this was a great gift. However, now that I am in the presence of elders and good spiritual ways that are now being rekindled but never were forgotten, my former drug-use still clouds my perception of the spirit world. The farther I get from it the more able I am to see the spirits and receive their teachings..."

Parke's Castle, county Sligo

In line with the Victorian insistence that explanations should be as free as possible from excitement or sin, it has generally been accepted that sweathouses were resorted to as a prophylactic sauna-treatment for aches and pains.

But far more aches and pains could have been incurred in heating a sweathouse than would ever have been alleviated. For a start, the entrance is as little as 75 cms high. To light a turf fire, maintain it and sweep out the ashes, ans strew the floor with bracken or rushes was no easy task. Even if the roof were partly dismantled to put the turf in, this would have been almost as awkward as bringing or throwing it in through the entrance - and the hot ashes would still have had to be swept out.

Myles McMorrow recounted that : Each person brought a leaf of cabbage and put it on his head to keep the head cool and avoid headaches. An hour or so being spent in continuious perspiration the patient clothed himself and hastily hurried

home. He then betook himself to bed having had a hot drink of whey prior to retiring.
Those old people found continuous relief from pain from the fore-mentioned process.

In a society where everyone had rheumatic pains and arthritis at the very least, and where it was regarded as the normal human condition, it is it really likely that sweathouses several hundred metres from the nearest (stone) house, holding a maximum of 5 people in considerable discomfort and some risk of fainting or even burning, would have been used for the uncertain alleviation of aches and pains ?

click on the picture for a better photo

Tirkane, county Derry, with shallow well in foreground

The better-off rubbed themselves with *poitín* and patent rubs on sale at markets and fairs; the poorer drank what they could get - *poitín*, or, in mid-Ulster, ether - to ameliorate bodily discomfort. In any case, sauna treatment is of no avail to such complaints as sciatica, arthritis, and the aching backs still suffered by a high proportion of the more mature population. Arthritic hands and feet would be relieved more easily and effectively by immersion in warm peat-ash from an overnight fire than by squatting uncomfortably in a tiny, dark place.

Nevertheless, there is this account on the Duchas site:

There was one on Phil Ward's land in Deffier [county Leitrim] and the walls were there up to ten or twelve years ago.
Joseph & Thomas Mahon saw it being used.

The people suffering were also bled at the sweat house if sweating was not able to bring relief.
The sweat house was beside the old house Terry Lynch was born in (John Yank's father).
Turlogh as Terry was called could bleed and sweat but not as good as the Lynchs before him. The Lynches for generations bled people.
If fever was supposed the sufferer was brought to the sweat house and if not relieved by sweating was bled.

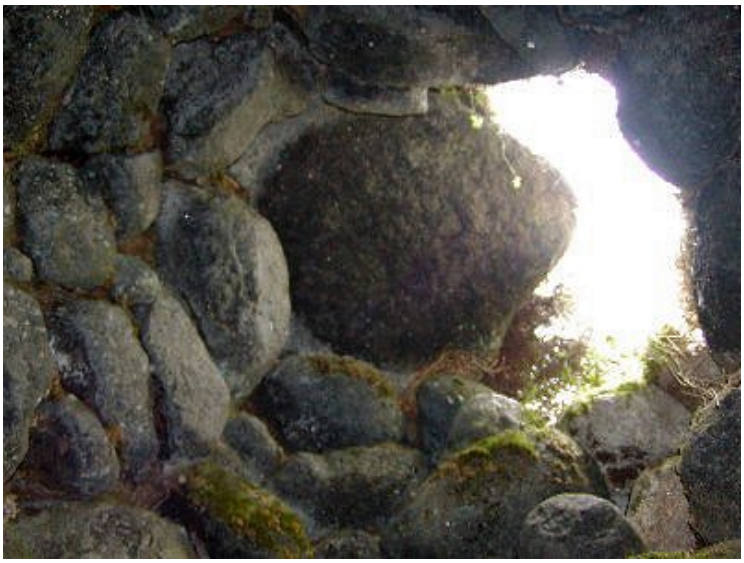
Also this:

In a place locally known as Claghan in the townland of Carrickhue *[just across the Border in county Derry]* there lived an old woman in the middle of the last century who was well known all over the parish for being able to cure many ills which existed at that time. There was no surgical operations for internal diseases such as appendicitis so all such cases were taken to old Martha Douglas as she was called for treatment. In the garden she had what was known as the "Sweat House" constructed much to the design of a lime kiln. Here the patient was placed rolled up in blankets on a large flat stone with a fire underneath. This operation continued from twelve to twenty four hours. Then the patient was removed and placed in a bed where she administered medicine made from herbs. After three or four days' treatment the patient was completely cured.
Old Martha never told the secret of her cures which died with her. But for many years the "Sweat House" stood until at last it was removed to make way for the plough.

click to enlarge 

Sweathouse doorway seen through a hole in the corbelled roof, Cuiltia, county Leitrim

If they were not used for prophylactic purposes, why would sweathouses (never more than 1.75 metres high internally and two metres in internal diameter) be built in such numbers ? (It is safe to assume that those which survive represent a tenth or less of the total built just in the county Leitrim.) What else could they have been used for ? And when were they introduced ?



A hole in the corbelled roof photographed from inside the sweathouse at Annacarney in county Wicklow,
far from the main distribution, but in a remote location. (Click the picture for more.)

Mrs McLoughlin of Tullynafreave claimed in 1992 that her maternal great-grandfather built the sweathouse standing some 50 metres from her modern dwelling to save his wife the trouble of travelling to the sweathouse in neighbouring Meenaslieve. She said that her grandmother and perhaps her mother also had used it, and did not think that their spouses had done so. But whether this is an isolated example of late construction (say around 1885) is impossible to determine. Similarly, it is impossible to establish a connection with the coal-mines (in use from the late eighteenth to the late twentieth centuries) that are at the heart of the currently-known distribution of sweathouses - now reported also from south-west Scotland.

Sweathouses are, of course, part of a circumpolar phenomenon which produced the now well-known Finnish *sauna*. The Turkic tribes who moved from central Siberia and eventually overthrew the Byzantine Empire, seem to have easily adapted to the Byzantine and Roman steam-bath, producing the *hammam* or Turkish Bath. The North American form was the *sweat lodge*, used not for mere hygienic reasons, but for spiritual and physical purification, and sometimes as part of the initiation procedures for boys' passage into manhood. We can be sure that the Finnish sauna was not used for merely hygienic reasons before the 19th century obsession with cleanliness as the prime virtue took hold in the Protestant countries of the North.

click for a  larger photo

Gubnaveagh, county Leitrim

The first Turkish Bath to be established in the British Isles was in county Cork in the 1860s - so there is no likelihood that it inspired simple Irish sweathouses, concentrated much farther north.

The Finnish sauna was an offshoot from a Siberian-Mongolian practice, so it is reasonable to suppose that the Irish sweathouse came from Scandinavia via the Vikings or their Gallowglass successors in the Northern Isles at some time between the 10th and the 15th centuries. That they are not found near the Viking settlements can be explained by the subsequent Norman and English occupation and expansion of those areas.

Before their secularisation, saunas were part of the universal combination of religious, medicinal and psycho-therapeutic modes which have only recently, like much else, been split off and compartmentalised by Western science and pseudo-science. Our culture has, as a consequence, taken 'exotic' and exciting elements of other cultures' psycho-social therapies (coffee, cocoa, tobacco, cocaine, cannabis and so on) as mere stimulants and 'highs'. The Turks made the public *hammam* a part of quasi-religious male confraternity. The Finns have likewise made the communal sauna a kind of men's club. Sweating is one of the many ways of altering consciousness, particularly when it is part (as sometimes in North America) of a series of tests and ordeals - and especially when it is done in the dark. **But there is no evidence that the small Irish sweathouses were used in the distinctly religious and reverential way that the large North American sweat-lodges were used - and such a highly-evolved function is most unlikely.** Something that few people allow themselves to realise is that many Native Americans were much more emotionally mature than the European invaders, who had (and have) destructive technologies way beyond their wisdom or insight or sensibility.

The medicinal psycho-therapy of Siberia and Mongolia, which is still practised by shamans both male and female, involves mushrooms (Fly Agaric), alcohol, sweating and rapid cooling, fasting, whirling, sleep-deprivation and so on. These produce visions and out-of-body experiences,

and are aids to achieving more aware states of consciousness than 'Western values' approve of, whereby the shaman-practitioner can see causes of illness or malaise, and the non-shaman can be suitably awed by the psychic forces released by the unblocking effects of physical ordeal and psychoactive drugs.

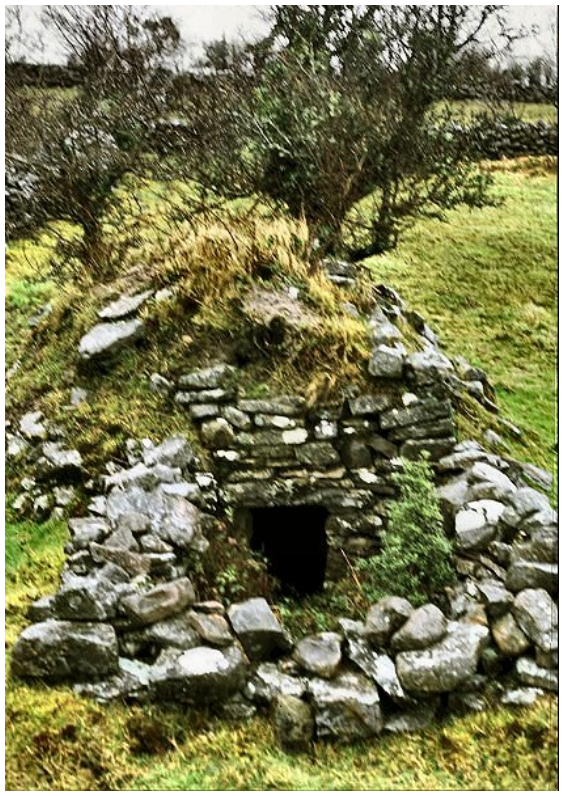
Herodotus describes the Scythian practice of altering consciousness through cannabis by throwing the seeds on hot stones inside a tent and inhaling the vapour - the smoking of cannabis and opium is a rather late development. Long before the Scythian incursions, however, cannabis seems to have been inhaled at La Hougue-Bie on the island of Jersey, where 21 pottery vessels marked with burnt resin were found in the untouched chamber recently discovered. Consciousness-improving substances have, of course, been found also in other European sites: the Iron Age site of Wilmersdorf, for example, where remains of cannabis were found in an urn.

Sweathouse with unusually large and grand entrance recalling a passage-tomb, Annagh Upper, county Leitrim

Closer to Ireland there have been serious suggestions that the "burnt mounds" also known as "ancient cooking-places" or *fulachta fiadh,* found in huge numbers in Ireland - and also in Britain - might have been used as sweat-lodges in the North American style, or as places for warm-water bathing. These shallow ponds, heated by rolling hot stones into them, could have had many purposes, of course - and warm baths would have been an obvious secondary function.

Could Irish sweathouses be a continuation of a tradition as old as the *fulachta fiadh* ? They are very flimsy structures, easily subject to total demolition by livestock, and would survive from prehistoric times only through the most extraordinary circumstances - so no evidence is likely to emerge. None has ever been excavated.

Could they be survivals of consciousness-improving chambers as at La Hougue-Bie and Wilmersdorf, latterly overlaid with the prophylactic function of saunas ?
Cannabis is not likely to have been used in Ireland for a millennium at least, but a much more seriously-numinous means of widening the awareness is still to be found all over the island.



Cornaguilla, county Leitrim.

There is a great deal of literature on the effect and use of various kinds of mushroom (*Psilocybe* spp. and Fly Agaric). The appearance of the formerly ubiquitous "magic mushroom", *Psilocybe semilanceata*, fits rather well with descriptions of pixies, leprechauns and other 'little green men'. A more gross mushroom-spirit is the modern Santa Claus, dressed in the colours of Fly Agaric, associated with reindeer (from whose urine the unmetabolised but detoxified active constituent was drunk bv the shamans of sub-arctic reindeer-herdsmen, who enters down a chimney and brings gifts. The entrance to many circumpolar dwellings is also the smoke-hole, as in Irish sweathouses. In our culture of acquisition the gifts are meaningless objects of desire rather than real numinous Gifts, and the shaman figure (who degenerated to Father Frost in Westernised Russia and Scandinavia) coalesced with St Nicholas, the Three Magi and the ancient gift-tradition of Saturnalia.

Corradeverrid, county Cavan, reportedly built by a Dr Greden

If Irish sweathouses were used like the secularised *hammam* and sauna, why were they not built close to stone-built dwellings and their turf-stacks

? Why were they, as reported, used infrequently - mostly in the Autumn ? Were they used exclusively by one sex ? Does one report of an "itinerant bath-master" indicate a psycho-therapeutic use supervised by a travelling doctor-shaman or Wise Man ? And why, in a country which, until the use of chemical fertlisers, was in October and November (the time of *The Gap of the Year, Samhain,* Hallowe'en) carpeted with *Psilocybe semilanceata*, also known as Liberty Caps, is there no record of their use ? These mushrooms are still plentiful on marginal land and on the edges of chemically 'fertilised' agricultural land. But there is a pattern of "collective forgetting" of mind-*expanding* plants and their extracts by cultures which inevitably adopt mind-*numbing* drugs such as alcohol. Thus the identity of Soma was lost, and only inactive "substitutes" were identified.

It seems unlikely (though not impossible) that *Psilocybe* mushrooms - probably as an infusion, maybe with other herbs - were not consumed up to the time of the Famine - but of course the agonising and protracted trauma of the hungry years and the halving of the population by death and emigration affected Irish behaviour and attitudes to Wild Food or "famine food" - as nutritious nettles, rose-hips, elderberries and so on are still considered. After the Famine, only grocery-store victuals were eaten. Even now, eating blackberries is far from universal in Ireland: those who pick them tend to be English, other foreigners, or local children paid (a penny a pound, as I remember in the 1960s) to gather them.

click to enlarge 

Tullynahaia, county Leitrim

For the decline of Irish traditions right across the spectrum, the Famine was Pelion piled upon the Ossa of Catholic Emancipation of 1829. This resulted in the rapid application to Ireland of a very urban-English Victorian-puritan 'respectability' that ran counter to many of the old ways and practices which had survived until the Penal days - practices which were bowdlerised and Christianised when they could not be suppressed. Ireland became for the first time - and remained until the end of the 20th century - a highly-conservative society which had also lost its traditions, and whose mores came from the right wing of the Catholic church. This is in contrast to Italy, for example, where all sorts of "pagan" survivals (from frog-cults and wolf-veneration to bleeding statues) can still be found in the centre and south, while sceptical atheism is almost the norm in Tuscany and the north.

click for a  larger photo

Annagh Upper (side view), county Leitrim.

So, after the Famine, few would have claimed or admitted to remember the eating of *Psilocybe*, which, it should be noted, were free, abundant and (through drying) available all year, and produce a state of consciousness far above that induced by alcohol. The world-wide phenomenon of the replacement of natural and fairly benign plants by manufactured, expensive and toxic alcohol is a sad paradigm for the take-over of the world by toxic "turbo-capitalism".

In the same way, 'pagan' practices such as painting or capping phallic stones, using cure-stones (which were promptly and cleverly dubbed *curse-stones*) some of which still survive, wild dancing (for which the Irish were famous) and the veneration of Fairy Thorns were discouraged.

click the picture for more 

Cure-stones, Killinagh, county Cavan

But *Psilocybe* mushrooms *must* have been recognised and taken (probably as a tea) in Ireland (and elsewhere), since they were so plentiful (right up until recent poisoning of so much agricultural land) - yet we have (so far as I know) no record, no evidence. Humans never miss out on a source of intoxication or hallucination (from ayahuasca to glue), no matter how complicated the process of extracting it. Moreover, traditional societies 'knew their mushrooms' even better than they do today (everywhere except the British Isles). Did whiskey supplant mushrooms ? If so, why ? Every hypothesis leads to more questions !

If dark, chthonic sweathouses had a psycho-therapeutic function stretching back at least to Bronze Age times, we can be sure that they too would have been discouraged by the twin powers of Church and State. By the time that uncasual enquiries started (after the First World War) they had fallen into desuetude, and their use had been erased (like much else) from the collective memory.

Small wonder that enquirers were fobbed off with glib explanations of autumnal prophylaxy and 'sweating out the bad' as Mrs McLoughlin of Tullynafreave expressed it. But *sweating out the bad* might very well have been more than a figure of speech in a desperately poor region in a poor country where every new mouth to fill was a curse, and one too many

could reduce a family to destitution and starvation. Mrs McLoughlin stated that only the women in her family had used the sweathouse. If only women used them, it is very possible that they were part of a procedure to induce miscarriage in unwanted pregnancies. Hot baths are a classic part of this procedure, and more effective if followed by cold ones. Ingestion of a large dose of Psilocybe mushrooms is also abortifacient. The water which is near so many sweathouses could also have been most useful for cleansing after a successful miscarriage. And finally, the distance and in some cases difficulty of access would ensure privacy and itself aid the process. The *'Itinerant Bathmaster'* could well have been a Wise Man practised in the art of inducing miscarriages. Perhaps he was also a sweathouse-***builder*** – for it would take some skill in building dry-stone walls to construct a sweathouse.

They could not have been social like Finnish saunas or Struell Wells in county Down. Nor were they 'sacred spaces'. As to their origin, a distant Viking connection is quite possible, because artefacts and traditions can hang on for hundreds of years in remote areas. Maybe Sligo in the NW, close to county Leitrim, was the chief point of entry. Saunas are and presumably always were made of wood, hence quickly rotted and forgotten, but in stony and boggy areas an adaptation could well have occurred and survived. There are descriptions in the National Folklore Collection about sweathouses with clay walls and thatch rooves. It is worth noting that the isolated group in county Louth is not far from Carlingford, a Norse settlement with a Norse name.

By the dawn of the 20th century very few - if any - people knew how sweathouses had been used, for in Ireland the rupture of handed-down knowledge, especially from mothers to daughters, occurred earlier than almost anywhere else in rural Europe. The Great Famine resulted in a collective Irish shame associated with traditional practices, the native language, and "wild food". It is curious that no accounts of them suggest an 'otherworldly' connection; no mention of the *sídhe* or 'good folk' as there has been been with reference to mounds or cairns and other ancient structures. This would tend to contradict the mushroom-imbibing theory.

Assaroe, county Donegal

How much arcane knowledge died in the hedges with Famine victims, or was carried across the ocean to America and deliberately forgotten there, we will never know. What we can be sure of is that there has been in Ireland a Great Disremembering which acted as undertaker to the Great Hunger, and may still not have run its course. And although sweathouses still lurk in secret places and leprechaun-hatted *Psilocybes* still grow, their use and possible connection remain as obscure to us as the mind-set of

Mesolithic hunter-gathers, the cosmology of Celtic kinglets, or the ecstasy of Atlantic anchorites.

Damaged sweathouse, Eskerbawn, county Roscommon.

[This text has been expanded from articles which previously appeared in *Archæology Ireland* (volume 3 number 1, 1989) and *The Ley Hunter* (number 119, September 1993).]

Most of the photos in these pages are from slides taken in the 1970s.

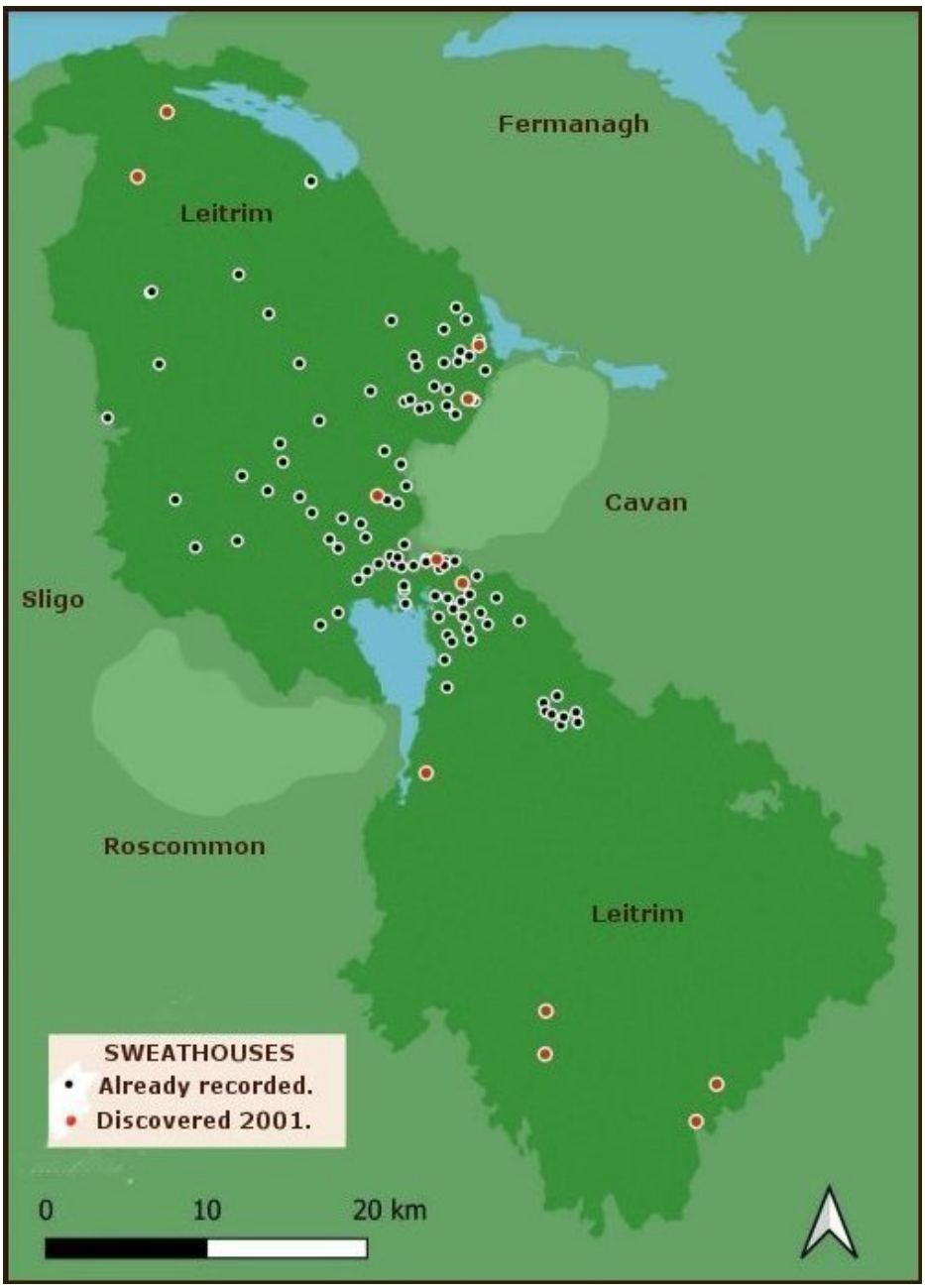
For valuable accounts of sweathouses and people who used them,

click here

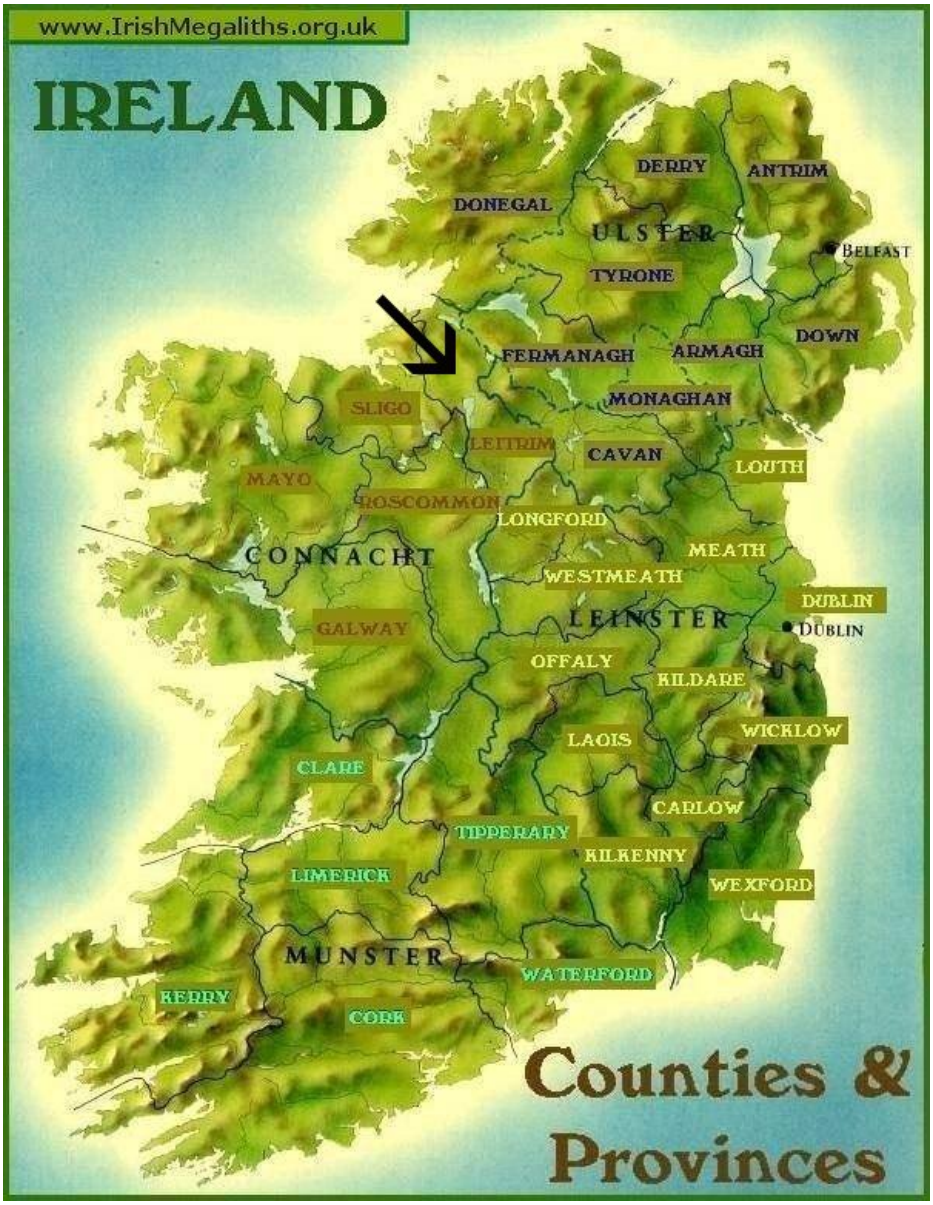
View *slide-show* >

Sweathouses in county Leitrim

(after Leitrim Sweathouse Project Report, 2001).



The pale green areas indicate concentrations in adjoining counties.
On the map below, the arrow points to county Leitrim.



APPENDIX I

In a quasi-erudite essay on *'Irish Soma'*, Peter Lamborn Wilson (aka Hakim Bey) asked if Psilocybe and Fly Agaric (Amanita muscaria) grew in Ireland in ancient times. Of course they did - in huge numbers.

I am interested in this question because I take microdoses (1 gram) of Psilocybe twice a week to alleviate mild bipolarity, and they work marvellously well. Can *Psilocybe semilanceata* have escaped the attention of people in Europe (and on the Mainland to this day) who could distinguish between wholesome, tasty mushrooms such as the once-ubiquitous *Agaricus campestris* and similar-looking poisonous ones*)* and who knew very well the effects (both salutary and dangerous) of Fly Agaric ?

Sweathouses were apparently used mainly in autumn, when *Psilocybe semilanceata* was plentiful. Could it have been a secret part of the treatment – for example, the 'herbs' administered by the *Old Woman* mentioned above ?

Moreover, the sameness of reports on sweathouses is suspiciously similar to the uniformity of other rural pseudo-myths, such as dock-leaves relieving nettle-stings, bats nesting in hair, or the definition of prehistoric tombs as Giant's Graves.

APPENDIX II

from the Birmingham (Warwickshire) City Council's website:

Prehistoric Birmingham- 3000 years old burnt mound

Reconstruction

Over 30 "burnt mounds" have been found in Birmingham. These are low mounds, usually 10 to 15m across, composed of heat-shattered stone, charcoal and ash. Some of Birmingham's burnt mounds have been dated to between 1500 and 1000 BC by radiocarbon dating of the charcoal.

Excavation of a burnt mound visible as a layer of burnt stones in a stream bank at Cob Lane in Bournville in 1980 and 1981 showed that it originally lay in a stream meander. Under the burnt mound, there were a burnt hollow, a timber and clay-lined pit next to the former stream bank, and many holes resulting from pointed branches being pressed into the ground. The former stream bed contained remains of beetles. The different beetle species indicate what the environment was like 3000 years ago, and included species usually found where animals are grazing. The silty clay on which the mound had accumulated is likely to be soil which had been loosened by ploughing on the slopes above the site, providing further evidence for prehistoric farming.

The burnt mound mystery - kitchen or sauna?

Burnt mounds are usually interpreted as the débris from when ancient people made water boil to cook food by dropping heated stones into it. Although experiments have shown that this could have been the case, we would expect to find animal bones and other débris from food preparation and cooking.

Another interpretation is that they are the debris from steam or sauna-type bathing. In North American Indian *Sweat Lodges*, steam is produced for bathing by pouring water over heated stones inside a tent or hut. Reconstructions based on the excavated evidence from the Cob Lane site and the structures used by North American Indians have shown that burnt mounds could well have been saunas. The reconstruction consists of a hearth on which the stones are heated and a tent on a framework of bent-over branches. The heated stones are placed in a hollow inside the tent and water ladled onto them from a clay-lined pit, to produce steam. This reconstruction replicates all the features found in the Cob Lane excavation: the shattered stones and charcoal which is the débris from the hearth, the holes resulting from the pointed branches used to make the tent, the burnt hollow which is where the hot stones are placed, and the clay-lined pit next to the former stream line.

(copied July 2002)

Note that 'Burnt Mounds' in Ireland are known as Fulachta Fía[dh] - and that in the above there is no reference to Irish Sweathouses.

ANCIENT IRISH BREWERIES ?

from ***The Irish Examiner*** 11th August 2007

by **Sarah Stack**

« Bronze age Irish men were as fond of their beer as their 21st century counterparts, it was claimed yesterday.
Two Galway archaeologists have put forward a theory that one of the most common ancient monuments around Ireland may have been used for brewing ale.

They believe that *fulachta fiadh* - horseshoe shaped, grass-covered mounds which were conventionally thought of as ancient cooking spots - could have been the country's earliest breweries.

To prove their belief that an extensive brewing tradition existed in Ireland as far back as 2500 BC, Billy Quinn and Declan Moore recreated the process. After just three hours of hard work, and three days of waiting for their brew to ferment, the men enjoyed a pint of the fruits of their labour.
Three hundred litres of water was transformed into a "very palatable" 110 litres of frothy ale.

"It tasted really good," said Mr Quinn.
"We were very surprised. Even a professional brewer we had working with us compared it favourably to his own. It tasted like a traditional ale, but was sweeter because there were no hops in it."

Mr Quinn said it was while nursing a hangover one morning, and discussing the natural predisposition of men to seek means to alter their minds, that he came to the startling conclusion that fulachta fiadha could have been the country's earliest breweries.

The two set out to investigate their theory in a journey which took them across Europe in search of further evidence.
On their return they used an old wooden trough filled with water and added heated stones. After achieving an optimum temperature of 60°C to 70°C they began to add milled barley, and about 45 minutes later simply bailed the final product into fermentation vessels. They added natural wild flavourings and yeast after cooling the vessels in a bath of cold water for several hours.

Tomorrow they plan to start work on a fourth batch they hope will taste as good as their first.
The archaeologists, who reveal their experiment in full in next month's **Archaeology Ireland**, point out that while their theory is based on circumstantial and experimental evidence, they believe that, although *fulachta fiadh* were probably multifunctional, a primary use was for brewing beer. »

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(It was this article, Aidan Harte told me by e-mail, which inspired him to study sweathouses, and which, in turn, led to the Leitrim Sweathouse Project - see above.]

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More accounts **>**

New!

see also the

Leitrim Sweathouse Project Report 2021

which contains photos and a full discussion.