

ORIGINS OF THE WORD 'MUSHROOM'

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'The place where they breed doth not swell or beare up one jote, nay, it sheweth no chinke or crevasse at all out of which they should issue'

Two thousand years ago, Pliny (1601, transl.) was as baffled about the origins of certain fungi as authors still are about some of their names; from what root, for instance, does our word *mushroom* issue? Ramsbottom (1945) speculated 'it is presumably the old French *moisseron* (*mousseron*) derived from *mousse*, moss', but the Oxford English Dictionary can only confirm this as the 'usually held' derivation. How accurate is it and do any of the alternative etymologies that have been mooted throw chinks of light on the word, or are its origins irrecoverably obscure?

Some authors seem simply to have guessed. Both Britten (1886) and Prior (1870), though they used rather different arguments, assumed that *mousseron* (also *mouceron*, *mousscheron*) referred to a fly-killing fungus, or *mouche-eron*; hence the original of our mushroom, they thought, must have been the 'fly-agaric'. Early forms of the French word, however, preclude this just as much as the lack of evidence that *mousseron*, though used for several species of fungi in France, was ever employed as a name for *Amanita muscaria*. Hay (1887) distrusted any derivation from the French because the name 'seems to be of older usage' and proposed instead that it derived 'most probably' from the 'old British, *maes*, a field, and *rhum*, a 'knob'. Perhaps influenced by the supposed existence of the Gaelic form, *maesrhin*, Cooke (1981) agreed, yet neither *maesrhum* nor *maesrhin* appear actually to be documented. The oldest 'British' names for fungi that we know are Anglo-Saxon and all are variants of

swamm (cf modern German, *Schwamm*), a word unrelated to mushroom (Cockayne, 1857).

A more puzzling possibility was unearthed by Grigson (1974): 'XV century. From Old French *moisseron*, earlier *meisseron*, from the VIth century Latinized form *mussirio*, accusative *mussirionem*, of a Frankish word used in Northern France'. His source is a treatise on food by a Byzantine physician, Anthimus, who wrote of 'mussiriones' and truffles. The word may be authentic or it may be a scribal interpolation; there are certainly no other known instances of its use. Amongst other commentators only Wasson & Wasson (1957), who made a life's work of studying mushroom names, seem to notice it, and they were sceptical about the word's existence. Moreover, they also mistrusted any derivation of *mousseron* from words relating to moss on the grounds that the Old French words rule it out. They attributed the idea to N. de Bonnefons, whose *Le Jardinier Francois* was translated into English by John Evelyn in 1658: he mentions those fungi that appear 'hid in the *mosse* in the woods from whence they seem to derive their name of *Mousch*, or *Mousserons*'. In fact the idea does seem older for Francis Bacon had previously quoted Salamius' opinion that *moucerons* were so-called 'because they grow . . . where the herbage is very short, and scarcely aught except moss' (see Rolfe & Rolfe, 1925); and we know from Parkinson (1640), who drew an analogy between 'the Mosses and excrescences of the Sea' and 'the Mosses and Mushromes of the Land', that mosses, sponges and mushrooms were regarded as kindred products. But is this sufficient to explain the origin of our mushroom?

At least one possibility seems never to have been noticed. In French, apart from referring to moss, *mousse* has also been used of sea-foam, or spume, i.e. any froth stirred up by the churning of water: modern English of course uses it to describe a 'frothy' dessert. One of the oldest notions about the nature of fungi was that they developed, as Pliny wrote, from a 'kind of glutinous fume or froth (*spuma lentior*)'. The persistence of this belief helps account for the association of mushrooms and sponges, for though they grow in different elements both were thought to be compacted forms of 'foame or froth' (Gerard, 1636): indeed etymologically *sponge* comes from the identical root as *fungus*. There is also a Norse myth which recounts how fungi grew from the flecks of froth that fall from Wotan's horse (Kavaler, 1967). Might then the *mousse* of *mousseron* refer at least as much to froth as it does to moss?

Wasson & Wasson, however, believed that the origins of *mushroom* were much older. Following a hint from Robert Graves, they traced *mousseron* back to the Greek word for mushroom, *μυκησ* (from which we get *mycology*) and argued that it 'was once, metaphorically, a glob of mucus'. The suggestion was not entirely original for Badham (1847) had remarked on the equivalence of *μυκησ* and Latin *mucus*, though perhaps because he found it distasteful, regarded it as a 'probably factitious' root. One of the first etymologists, John Minsheu (1625), had similarly recognised that the words might be linked. Wasson & Wasson, however, were able to support their theory by showing how deeply rooted was the association of mushrooms and mucoid matter. There was Pliny's evidence: 'these Mushromes take their originall and beginning of a slimie mud . . . they all take their beginning of nothing els but the slimie humour of trees'. There were the suspicions repeatedly voiced in the early herbals about the 'gleymynesse' or 'slymy softnesse' of certain fungi (Grete Herbal, 1539). There was also figurative usage.

Why should wax at a candle's rim have been known as a 'mushroom', Wasson & Wasson asked, except that its hardening from a molten 'slime'-like liquid seemed to parallel ideas about the formation of fungi? Virgil had written (in Gerard's translation):

And maidens which night tasks do handle,

*A winterly storm haue foreknowne
When sparkle they marked the candle:
And up rotten Mushrums be growne.*

English dialect preserved a similar use of 'mushroom' at least into the 19th century (Wright, 1898), although a candle-snuff was more commonly referred to as a *snot*. In slang *snot* has been used of several slimy things e.g. the pulp of yewberries (MacMillan, 1922); a slimy kind of flat-fish (OED). Nowadays it usually refers to nasal mucus, and for this the ancient Greeks used *μυξα* which, as Wasson & Wasson pointed out, was 'inextricably associated with *μυκησ*'.

The interweaving of such connotations, much more complex than is hinted here, convinced Wasson & Wasson that they had found the true root of the first element in *mousseron*. The suffix *-eron* they thought served in French to make a word of general application specific: hence *mousseron* would not have been used loosely like our *mushroom* but applied to some particular fungus, possibly *Calocybe gambosa*. If this is true of the ancient origins of *mushroom*, there seems little doubt that English has the word from French. In the list compiled by Rolfe & Rolfe (1925), all the earliest examples of the word in English are trisyllabic, as in French, and the retention of this pronunciation in the West Country *mishe-roon* (*masheroon* in Ireland according to Britten, 1886) proved the 'conservative tendency of dialect words' in MacMillan's (1922) view. It perhaps only proves that most intriguing etymologies are generally a mishmash. Ramsbottom (1953) cited one author who complained that the name *mousseron* was 'barbarous' because it had 'caused endless

confusion': had it not, however, would it now prove as curious?

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