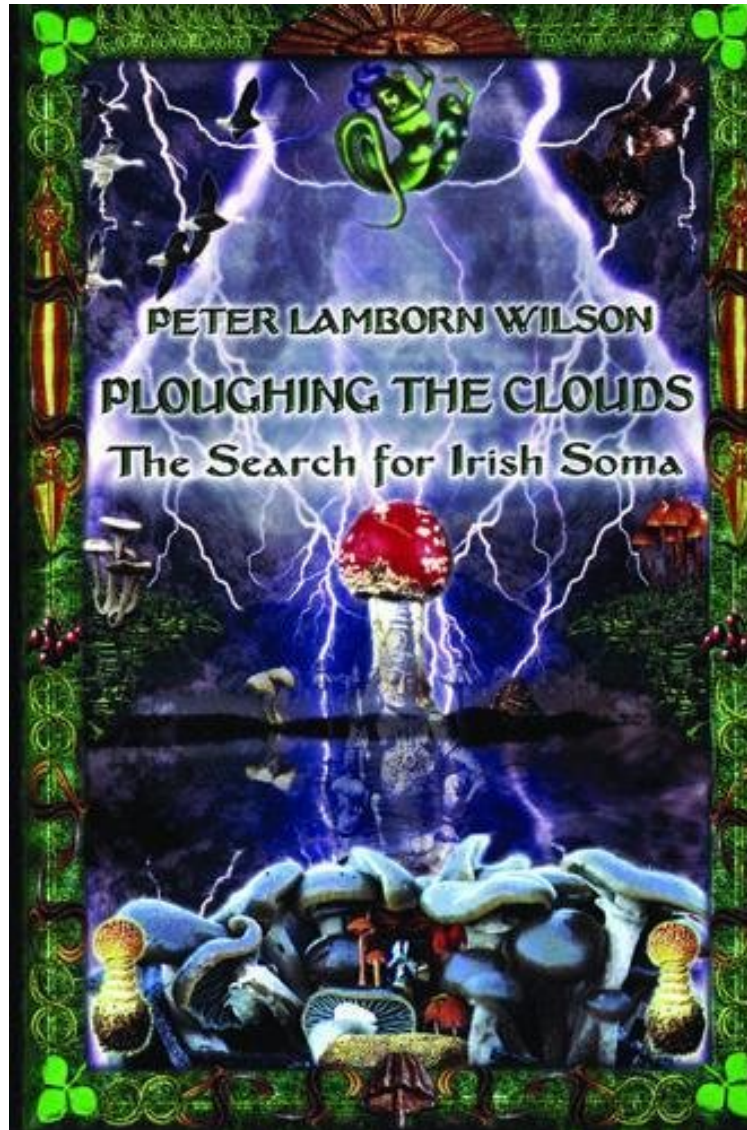


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Ploughing the Clouds: The Search for Irish Soma

Peter Lamborn Wilson

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Peter Lamborn Wilson : Ploughing the Clouds: The Search for Irish Soma before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Ploughing the Clouds: The Search for Irish Soma:

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. The Search for Irish Soma.By New Age of Barbarism_Ploughing the Clouds: The Search for Irish Soma_ by Peter Lamborn Wilson, published by City Lights Books, is an attempt to discover the use of the hallucinogenic mushroom among the early Irish and Celts. This book principally rests upon a theory advanced by maverick investment banker turned ethnomycologist R. Gordon Wasson that the mysterious substance "soma" mentioned in the writings of the earliest Indo-European peoples was actually the hallucinogenic

mushroom *Amanita muscaria* (the fly agaric) in his book *_SOMA: Divine Mushroom of Immortality_*. However, contrary to Wasson who argued in his book that the ancient Celts did not partake of the hallucinogenic mushroom, Wilson claims that the wide abundance of the growth of that mushroom in Irish lands would seem to indicate otherwise. In order to present his thesis, Wilson examines various tales from both ancient Indo-European myth (the Rg Veda) and ancient Irish and Celtic folklore. Indeed, the ancient Irish constituted one of the oldest Indo-European peoples and they may have originated in India before making their way to Ireland (although Wilson argues for an African origin for the Irish peoples). The phrase "ploughing the clouds" is an old Irish expression meaning to undertake a futile task, to analyze the ineffable. Wilson finds this particular phrase very appropriate to his undertaking here in demonstrating the existence of soma among the ancient Celts. This book begins by discussing the history of psychedelic substances (entheogens: "God-within-us") and their use among primitive peoples. In particular, the Indo-Europeans actively made use of the hallucinogenic mushroom which is mentioned extensively in the Vedas as "soma". Wilson turns his attention also to evidence for Irish soma. Here, he discusses his belief that the Druids may have made use of the mushroom in their rites. Similarly other peoples and mystery cults made use of the mushroom around the world. In the second part of this book, the author offers a comparison between various Vedic and Irish sources of soma. Here, he notes the roles of Vrtra, Vena, Fionn, Indra, and Agni. In particular, he mentions various legends from Ireland as they relate to the mystical initiation undergone by the partaker of the soma. The book also discusses the Gandharvas and Maruts, the firebird and the calendar, snakes and their chthonic power, "one-eye", and the jealousy of the gods. This book also includes a section featuring illustrations from various Celtic and Indo-European motifs which the author believes show evidence for soma among the ancient Irish. In particular, the snakes (supposedly driven out of Ireland by Saint Patrick) constitute a primitive link to the soma legend. The snake people may have been the original inhabitants of Ireland, and as Wasson has noted in his writings the snake is linked to the hallucinogenic mushroom. Wilson also discusses the role of women in the various legends concerning the soma. This book offers a fascinating perspective on the use of the hallucinogenic mushroom among the ancient Irish. While the thesis advanced in this book is radical, it nevertheless provides for very interesting reading concerning the ancient legends and folklore of this primitive people.

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful. *Dusting Off Myths and Legends to Uncover the Mysteries of Soma* By Justin Case At its dawn, the very heart, foundation and inspiration of the Vedic religion (what we today call Hinduism) was a sacred substance called Soma. Soma was both a living, growing thing made of matter (an entheogenic plant) and a god. It was the sacrifice and the deity receiving the sacrifice. The Rg Veda, one of the oldest of the world's sacred literature, contains many verses concerning Soma. Though it seemed clear that Soma was some psychoactive substance that would transform the consciousness of the worshipper, its actual identity had long been lost in the mists of time. Today Vedic priests use symbolic substitutes that are either non-psychoactive or only mildly psychoactive (the non-psychedelic stimulant ephedra being one common stand in for Soma today). In the area of Iran, the ancient people of the Zoroastrian religion had their own sacrament called Haoma. It fulfilled the same function as the Vedic Soma but its identity too has been lost in the distant past. In ancient Greece there were the Delphic and Eleusian mystery schools to which seekers hoped to gain admittance and partake in the life changing experience kept secret there. It is known that some sacramental drink called Kykeon was given there and that this drink, along with the guided experience orchestrated by the keepers of the mysteries, would give the seeker the experience of the divine. Some of the most influential thinkers of Greek culture were profoundly inspired by these experiences. Again, the actual identity of the sacrament was unknown; in this case it was deliberately kept a secret. In the Jewish tradition, there was manna, some bread-like substance that would transform the consciousness of the worshipper. Again, if manna ever actually existed historically, its actual identity had long been lost. Of course, the Christian religion has its own sacrament, the body and blood of Christ. Was this Eucharist at one time more than just bread and wine? Was it a consciousness-transforming substance like Soma, Haoma, Kykeon and Manna? In any case, these psychedelic sacraments were lost to western civilization, and lived on only in the woods where witches and warlocks had to hide their occult herb-craft from the witch-hunts and inquisitions of the establishment and the zealous villagers. When the Spanish Conquistadors encountered the Aztecs, they found that these people had their own sacraments. These sacraments were unquestionably effective; substances like peyote cactus, psilocybian mushrooms and a plant called pipiltzintzintli that may have been *Salvia divinorum*. But ironically this would make the Spaniards think of these substances as blasphemous false sacraments rather than long lost genuine sacraments. They considered them something the Devil used to mock Christianity. As such, these practices were exterminated with extreme prejudice. It was not until the 1800's that attention was given to the peyote the Native Americans of the American South West and it was not until this century that Westerners were aware of ayahuasca, the powerful sacrament of the . But for the most part, all these psychoactive sacraments remained obscure. That is until R. Gordon Wasson gave us his ground breaking book *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality* in 1968. In this work, Wasson, an amateur mycologist, proposed that the Soma of the Vedic tradition was originally the entheogenic mushroom *Amanita muscaria* still used by the shamans of the indigenous people of the Arctic Circle. Using his intimate knowledge of mushrooms and a careful reading of Vedic verses concerning Soma, Wasson made such a good case for *Amanita* as the original Soma that many scholars became convinced that his theory was true. It seemed that the identity of one of the great mysterious sacraments had

been solved. Shortly after this book was published, Wasson, following up on earlier searches by the great ethnopharmacologist Richard E. Schultes and others, Wasson rediscovered the sacramental use of psilocybian mushrooms among a remote tribe in the jungles of Southern Mexico and published his findings in LIFE magazine. Another entheogenic sacrament was recovered. Later, speculations would be made as to the identity of Haoma (*Amanita muscaria* and *Peganum harmala* being among the candidates). In 1986, Wasson, along with Carl Ruck, Stella Kramrisch and the Jonathan Ott gave us *Persephone's Quest: Entheogens and the Origins of Religion* that discussed the possibility of psychoactive mushrooms and other fungi as sacraments in ancient Greece, the Middle East, Siberia, Mesoamerica and elsewhere. In this book, Carl Ruck first put forth the theory that the Kykeon of the ancient Greek mysteries may have been a drink containing a variety of the fungus ergot. This drink may have given the worshipper LSD like effects. This last theory was later elaborated in 1998 in *The Road to Eleusis* by Wasson, Ruck and the father of LSD, Albert Hofmann. Though other classicists and historians have largely ignored this work, it also has not been seriously challenged. It seems another entheogenic sacrament may have been rediscovered. A point should be made here concerning the common Indo-European origin of many of these entheogenic sacrament traditions. Before history, a large group of people anthropologists call the Indo-Europeans occupied a wide area of Eurasia. At different times, large groups would depart from this general area and move into new areas, conquering the indigenous people there and both subduing and merging with their culture and religions. It seems these Indo-Europeans already had a long used an entheogenic sacrament and brought this with them when they migrated to other areas of the world. When the Indo-Europeans moved into the Middle East, it seemed they brought Haoma with them or replaced their own sacrament with an other entheogen available in the Middle East. When they moved into the India subcontinent they brought Soma with them. When they moved into the Mediterranean area, it seems they brought a sacrament with them or else replaced their old one with a new one - Kykeon. It is also known that the Indo-Europeans who moved into the Nordic and Siberian areas used *Amanita muscaria* as their sacrament. But what of the Indo-Europeans that moved into North-Western Europe, the Celts? Their folktales, myths and legends all suggested the influence of entheogens. We have tales of elves, gnomes, people being taken to the land of the faeries, magical red berries and other red fruit that seemed to give magical powers or magical awareness, magical hazel nuts, potions, the association of faerie creatures with mushrooms and so on. But we have no direct references to identifiable entheogens or hard evidence of entheogen use among the Celts. Indeed, although Terence McKenna had made casual suggestions about the possible use of psilocybian mushrooms among the Celts, the question of Celtic entheogen use has never really been given serious scholarly consideration at all. This is where Peter Lamborn Wilson comes in with *Ploughing the Clouds - the Search for Irish Soma*, a much needed look at the possibilities of entheogen use among the Celts of the British Isles, particularly those of Ireland. Wilson is a very well read literary genius displaying both an extensive knowledge of the literature of folklore, myth, and religion (unorthodox Islam being his specialty) and an original, unconventional and penetrating intellect. His ideas and hypotheses are both reasonable and wild and as an author he displays a thorough knowledge of classic literature yet what he puts forth is often revolutionary. His presentation is intelligent, sophisticated and at times his prose swells into poetic musing. Often it seems that Wilson could elaborate extensively on numerous topics but is forced to merely mention these tangents and move on so as to not overwhelm the reader with too much information or over-pack his books. Thankfully he does offer leads - bibliographic, branches of philosophy and so on - for readers to pursue the various subjects he touches upon. His bibliographies alone are valuable. In this book Wilson draws upon a variety of disciplines to tease the "Soma" out the Irish Celtic past. Anthropology, mythology, entheogen studies, archetypal analysis and comparative religion (like that of Joseph Campbell), linguistic and etymological analysis, and other approaches are employed but Wilson's particular focus in this book is the analysis and comparison of the Vedic literature of India and the folklore, sagas, poetry, and legends of the of Ireland. With that in mind, it should be said that the reader must have an appetite for Vedic verse, Irish folklore and the minutia of etymology and linguistic comparisons to enjoy the greater bulk of this book. Some may find Wilson's hypothesis itself to be more interesting than the actual examination of the evidence. However, to come to any reasonable conclusion the reader will need to patiently follow along with Wilson's multitude of details because it is in these many bits of evidence that the strength of Wilson's argument lays and not in any easily summarized pivotal evidence. The reasonable reader will appreciate that Wilson makes no unfounded claims. He doesn't push his hypothesis with positive assertion, claiming that it is true. Rather he presents his theme as a reasonable suspicion, one that may lead to further evidence if experts of various fields should use his book as a starting point to look further. Indeed, this is perhaps Wilson's major motive for writing this book, to stimulate others to look further into what he has so insightfully and studiously noticed and gathered together in this book. Some readers may remember that a few years before this book was written, Wilson's article *Irish Soma* was printed in *Psychedelic Illuminations* #8 (Winter 1995/96) as a sort of pilot test for his developing book. In this article, Wilson gives a shortened version of what would become his book. He makes it clear that his study was far from complete and asks for support, refutation and other feedback. He also indicated that he had specific questions for specialists of different fields with whom he wished to communicate. He must have received a good amount of feedback because in *Ploughing the Clouds*, Wilson gives thanks for help from a number of people including Allen Ginsberg, Robert Anton Wilson, Terrence McKenna, Gracie

and Zarkov, Dale Pendell, Albert Hofmann and others. Wilson considers the Soma function to be more fundamental than the actual botanical identity of Soma. He does, however, consider specific entheogens as candidates for Irish Soma. For the most part, *Amanita muscaria* seems to be the most likely candidate but psilocybian mushrooms (particularly *Psilocybe semilanceata*, also known in the area under the suggestive folk name "elf's cap"), henbane, nightshade and others are considered. Wilson also considers the possibility that various entheogenic plants and fungus may have served as Soma. Rather mytho-poetically, Wilson gives us a fascinating perspective on Soma as a tertium quid, that is a third dimension or a reconciliation to the dichotomy of the feminine and the masculine, between the dreamtime before history and history, between the hunter-gathering tribal society living nature and the agricultural hierarchal society living in civilization, indeed between the our subconscious nature before history and the conscious, language using, tool creating, city building humane culture of history. Like Terence McKenna, Wilson entertains the possibility that this Soma may have been the cause of the evolutionary leap from one side of the dichotomy to the other, inspiring language, tool making, art, and culture. Yet, once humanity moved into this phase, Soma also served as a reconnection to the older phase. Soma is also considered as the axis mundi, the axis of the worlds. This concept is found in almost every culture in different guises. It is the universal idea that there is a central vertical axis - the world tree, the pillar of cosmos, the chakras of the spine, the magic tent-pole of the shaman, etc. - that holds together the many worlds and provides a means by which the shaman can access the underworld of the ancestors or the upper worlds of the gods. This axis mundi is the tertium quid that connects the polarity of sky and earth, or the human world and the world of the gods. In this sense, it is easy to see Soma as this axis mundi. Insightful explorations like these give Wilson's writings an extra dimension. Throughout, Wilson also suggests a major sub theme; that of a possible revival of the ceremonious use of entheogens, a modern soma cult, something that seems to be sorely lacking in our modern materialistic culture. Ultimately it's about poetry in the deepest sense. It is about poetry as Soma, Soma as poetry in the sense that poetry is to language what Soma is to matter. Language has pulled our abstract minds out of the eternal dreamtime into the literal human consciousness of linear time and history we are both empowered by and limited by. Poetry is language that transcends the limitations of language and induces the unspeakable in the minds of those who grasp the essence of the poem. Soma is matter (albeit living matter; a growing plant), an entheogen of mass and weight that is of the earth yet it can induce the divine in the minds of those that are receptive to the transcendent. The most subtle and transcendent penetrate permeates the most crude and dense to open up a way between these opposites so that the receptive person can ascend the axis mundi from matter to spirit. No one can deny that an entheogenic plant is made of matter. Yet an entheogen is itself potentially the antithesis of matter because when combined with the nervous system of the true seeker, the poet at heart, the two (the entheogen and the mind of the seeker) become a third, they become one, the tertium quid, and this synthesis transcends matter itself in a reconciliation of heaven and earth, an amalgamation of body and soul. This, if this reviewer understands the essence of Wilson's message, is the poetic heart of the book, the spirit within the wealth of literal details and astute scholarship that he provides. This book deserves a place on the bookshelf besides the aforementioned Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality, The Road to Eleusis, Persephone's Quest, as well as The Apples of Apollo: Pagan and Christian Mysteries of the Eucharist by Ruck, Staples, and Heinrich, Sacred Mushroom the Cross: A Study of the Nature Origins of Christianity within the Fertility Cults of the Ancient Near East by John Allegro, The Mystery of Manna: The Psychedelic Sacrament of the Bible by Dan Merkur and others of the kind. This is an important book for any thorough study of entheogenic sacraments. It seems no other book explores the possibility of Celtic "Soma" and no study of the religious use of entheogens in history would be complete without this book. 7 of 11 people found the following review helpful. a great subject - a great writer - a great book! By A Customer This book is highly interesting, well-written and well-researched. Wilson's style is fun to read; there are a few pages of fascinating illustrations as well. Buy it!

The Rig Veda, written in India about 1500BC, praises a holy plant called Soma, which is sacrificed and consumed, granting the drinker an experience of enlightenment and ecstasy. The late Gordon Wasson identified Soma as a "magic mushroom," *Amanita muscaria*, and he and his followers discovered that such Indo-Europeans as the ancient Greeks, Iranians, and Norse had also used a Soma-type plant. In *Ploughing the Clouds* Peter Lamborn Wilson investigates the probability of a Soma cult in ancient Ireland, tracing clues in Irish (and other Celtic) lore. By comparing Celtic folktales, romances, epics and topographic lore with the Rig Veda, he uncovers the Irish branch of the great Indo-European tradition of psychedelic (or "entheogenic") shamanism, and even reconstructs some of its secret rituals. He uses this comparative material to illuminate the deep meaning of the Soma-function in all cultures: the entheogenic origin of "poetic frenzy," the link between intoxication and inspiration. "[*Ploughing the Clouds* is the best of its kind since Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*." Dale Pendell, author of *Pharmako/poeia: Plant Powers, Poisons and Herbcraft* "[This book] brings new perspectives to the problem of Soma and broadens and deepens the context of its discussion. Information on possible Celtic relationships with psychoactive plants and fungi are most welcome." Terence McKenna "Wilson uses his considerable research to explain and interpret the Indian soma ritual, and to imagine the Irish one. . . . His convoluted analyses, freighted with academic prose, will appeal chiefly to serious students of comparative religion, folklore and myth, ancient history or drug use." Publishers Weekly "Wilson is a

literary genius who possesses both an extensive knowledge of the literature of folklore, myth, and religionunorthodox Islam being his specialtyand an original, unconventional, and penetrating intellect. His ideas and hypotheses are both reasonable and wild; as an author he displays a thorough knowledge of classic literature but puts forth revolutionary thoughts. His presentation is intelligent, sophisticated and at times his prose swells into poetic reverie. Often it seems that Wilson could elaborate on numerous juicy topics but is forced to merely mention these tangents and move on so as to not overwhelm the reader. Thankfully he does offer leadsbibliographic, branches of philosophy, and so onfor readers to pursue the various subjects he touches upon." Justin Case, The Erowid ReviewPeter Lamborn Wilson is a scholar, critic, poet, and visionary best known for *Sacred Drift: Essays on the Margins of Islam*, also published by City Lights Publishers, and his radio commentaries on WBAI New York.

From Publishers WeeklyAncient India's collection of sacred hymns, the Rig Veda (circa 1500 B.C.), describes the ritual use of a plant called soma; whoever drinks it "becomes a kind of god, exalted to a visionary state." Combing Celtic folktales, myths and epics, and drawing parallels between Irish gods, heroes, seers, dragon-slayers and shape-shifters, and those of the Rig Veda, Wilson (*Sacred Drift: Essays on the Margins of Islam*) attempts to show that ancient Ireland, like Vedic India, had a psychedelic soma cult. Irish soma, Wilson believes, could have been a *Psilocybe* mushroom or *Amanita muscaria*, the mushroom identified as India's soma in Gordon Wasson's controversial *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality* (1968). Wilson uses his considerable research to explain and interpret the Indian soma ritual, and to imagine the Irish one, maintaining, for example, that Beltane (May Day) and the summer solstice were important in the Celtic soma ritual. All this is not so far-fetched as it might sound?many prehistorians believe that an Indo-European people branched out from central or northeast Eurasia to become Indians, Greeks, Iranians, Celts, Norse, Russians. Yet the parallels that Wilson delineates between Irish lore and the Vedic hymns often seem strained and tenuous. His convoluted analyses, freighted with academic prose, will appeal chiefly to serious students of comparative religion, folklore and myth, ancient history or drug use. For all his anthropological armature, Wilson makes his agenda clear: soma in Ireland, India and elsewhere "was repressed [by] religion and society based on rigid hierarchy... nothing is more democratic than" soma, "the entheogen, the god within"?and Wilson therefore hopes for a "revival of ceremonial entheogenism [psychedelic plant use] in the modern world." 20 pages of illustrations not seen by PW.- in the modern world." 20 pages of illustrations not seen by PW. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.