THE WORD 'TOADSTOOL' IN BRITAIN

TONY BAKER
Mews Cottage, Main Street, Winster, Derbyshire DE4 2DJ

Fig. 1: 'Fungi' from Matthioli, P A (1554). *Commentarii*, p.485.

When Ramsbottom (1953) wrote that the derivation of the word 'toadstool' was self-evident, few at the time would have doubted it: 'a typical toadstool obviously might serve as a resting place for a sedentary bachtrian'. He proved the point with a sequence of photographs that show a toad clambering up a *Leccinum* fruitbody and ending — sedentary but scarcely comfortable — perched on top. The assumption is centuries old. The toadstool, Minsheu (1625) explained, is so named 'because toades doe greatly love it', hardly needing to add, as did the often quoted Lyly (1580), that the affection stemmed from having found 'a stool to sit on'. As Ainsworth (1976), however, has admitted 'the superficial derivation of "toadstool" is as apparent as the reason for the association of toads and agarics is obscure'; even Ramsbottom's photographic evidence seems to have been faked, though he may not have known it (Wasson & Wasson, 1957). Indeed, in recent years research has shown that the association of toads and frogs with fungi, far from being fanciful, is so deep-rooted that it not only occurs throughout the Celtic and north European world but also in central Africa, Japan, Nigeria, central America (Morgan, 1986; Wasson & Wasson, 1957).

How different peoples came to sense this profound affinity remains open to question, but it may at least be possible to offer some suggestions as to why, once it reached Britain, the word 'toadstool' should have become *the* popular generic term for fungi. 'Mushroom', of course, has wide currency but seems never to have been so general in dialect and still has a large restrictive application to supposedly edible fungi. From the earliest records it is clear that 'Toad*stool*' (known from 1398: 'tadstoles') is only one of several

figures linking toads with agarics: 'toodys hatte' is recorded from 1440, while entries in the 15th century vocabulary suggest that fungi might also have provided toads with bread (?) and cheese — '*Fungea, guidam panis . . . Item, i boletus. Item, an*ce a taddechese . . . *Tubera, an*ce a taddechese' (see Wright, 1884). In dialect there is a range of variants: 'toad's cap'; 'toad's meat'; 'toad's cheese' (particularly common); 'toad's paddock' and 'Tommy toad' (both Lancashire names); and 'toad's kep' — a fungus produced from ash trees — are all noted as surviving at least into the 19th century, while Ramsbottom (1948) mentioned 'brown toad' as a name for *Lepista saeva* in Devon where, he wrote, it was considered poisonous. Similar names alluding to frogs are almost as frequent — 'frog sates'; 'frog stool'; 'frog's meat'; 'frog's cheese' (most often reserved for puffballs): in Scotland 'padokchese' and 'paddokstole' are both known from the 15th century.

It puzzled Ramsbottom that fungi should be linked 'mostly with toads and not with frogs' but it seems doubtful whether the distinction was ever clearly made. 'Paddock' in fact tended to be used loosely of both frogs and toads; as an 18th century dictionary noted, the word meant 'a large frog, a toad' (Ash, 1775), and a century later the Scottish 'pade' was said to describe 'a toad or frog, as also PADDOCK/PUDDOCK' (Jamieson, 1880). Holme (1688) thought 'the *Frogg* and the *Paddock*, all being a like, only differ in colours' and popular names offer no more exact differentiation. In fact, the earliest source for 'toadstool' also supplies the first instance of 'froggestoles' and even gives the metonym 'froges' as a translation of the Latin 'fungos'. This alternation of 'frog' and 'toad' in fungus names, together with numerous examples of equivalents on the Continent, surely put paid to other etymologies. The toad *is* a toad and not, as Hay (1887) tried to argue, a version of 'the Saxon, or old English *tod*, meaning a bunch, cluster, or bush'; nor does Badham's (1847) more circumspect proposal that there might be 'some connection with the word tod, death' have any etymological foundation though to an English imagination it might well ring true.

Why the *toad* at all? Ramsbottom was surely right to think it might be partly explained by the 'old belief that toads were venomous'. Although generally harmless they can, if threatened, release a toxic secretion and toxicity is certainly a traditional attribute of toadstools: as the *Grete Herball* (1526) warned, toadstools are 'deadly and seeth them that eateth of them'. Moreover, like fungi in Britain, toads were generally despised. Whilst the naturalist Pennant (1768) might deplore the 'vulgar prejudice' against them, the attitude remained so entrenched that Thompson (1979) reckoned that until her grandfather's day 'the taking of sticks and stones to the toad was considered a public duty'. Fungi are still kicked over in the same spirit. Any name linking toads with fungi would have sounded appropriately contemptuous.

Several other features must have helped sustain the association. Just as agarics can 'swell' overnight, so frogs with their distinctive vocal sacs and toads with their habit of self-inflation to deter predators, are 'swelling' creatures: examples of both 'puffed' and 'swelling' used as conventional epithets for the toad

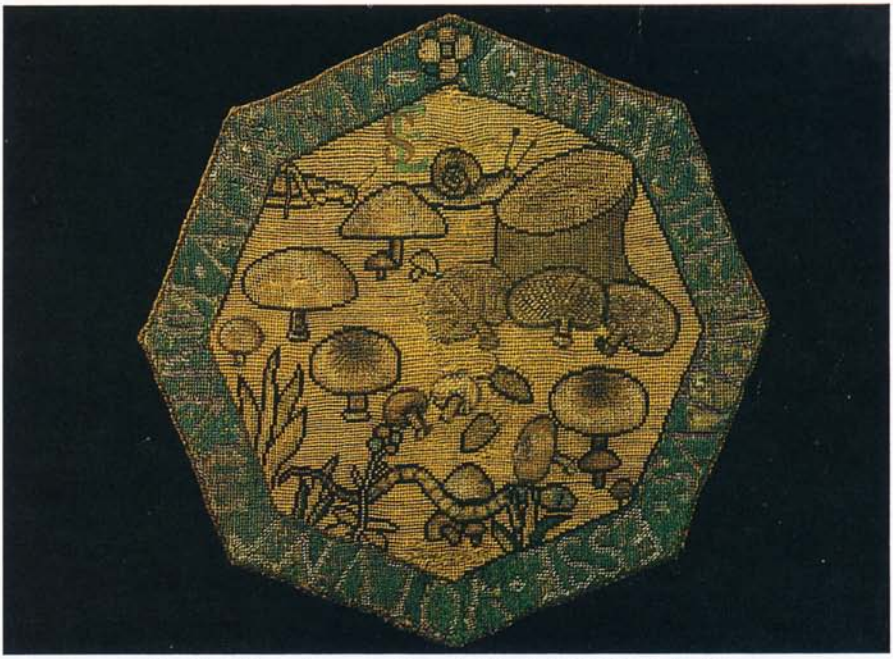

Fig. 2: 16th century needlework, Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire.
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can readily be found in 16th and 17th century writing. The fungal swelling now called the 'thrush' was formerly known as the 'frog' (though both words share the same root — viz. 17th century equivalents 'frosh', 'frush' and 'frogg', Norwegian 'frosk'), and there may be a parallel association in the ancient Greek σ πογγος from which the Latin 'fungus' derives, which in one sense referred to the glands of the throat from their 'liability to swell'.

Both these words — σ πογγος and 'fungus' — were also used in a further sense to describe any 'flashy excrescence, such as forms on wounds', a usage which survived in English into the 19th century. Would then the knobbly warts of a toad's skin have looked 'fungussed'? It may seem implausible, particularly as I have not come across any instance of such a usage in print, but the genus *Amanita* (with special claim to the title 'toadstool', through the chief suspect *A. muscaria*) was sometimes known as 'wart caps' according to Grieve (1931), and Sterbeeck (1675) noted the French 'dos de crapaud' — 'toad's back' — a name that still survives. Even if unmediated by the use of 'fungus' to refer to a swollen cicatrice, some association of fungi with a toad's warty skin may still have been commonly felt.

On the other hand an allusion to dung must have been plain. Britten (1877) lamented that 'it is . . . only too certain that the name (toadstool) really arose from the disagreeable notion that fungi in general sprung from the excrement of those reptiles', and other popular names such as 'Devil's droppings' or even the

apparently innocent 'buttons' could have endorsed his suspicions. Ramsbottom (1953) accepted that 'such unsavoury similes' were possible but unnecessary and dismissed any variation of 'toad' from 'tad' meaning dung. Wasson & Wasson (1957), however, made clear that both the French 'crapaud' and the German 'Krotte' linked toads with excrements: and in English both 'taid' and 'tath' meaning 'to manure land by the droppings of cattle' appear to be etymologically akin to 'tad'. With the obvious connotations of a 'stool', 'toadstool' it seems may be doubly dunged.

A more subtle link between frogs, toads and fungi may lie in the archaic belief that each were generated out of slimes and mucoid matter; if Greek σ πογγος Latin 'mucus', really is the root of our word 'mushroom' (see Baker, 1989), then both the chief fungus names in English may share this allusion. 'Slime and dirt engender toads and frogs', wrote Nashe (1594); 'tadpoles come of mud (and are) procreated in putrid water' a physician asserted in the next century, denying that they could come from 'Frog — Sperme' (Renodaeus, 1657). The idea goes back at least as far as Pliny who claimed that frogs 'in the winter time . . . are resolved into slime', a metamorphosis that Topsell (1658) disputed though he believed they could originate in slime. Not just frogs and toads: spiders, snails, slugs . . ., in fact any 'serpent' might be spawned in slimy matter. That slugs leave slime-trails in their wake prompted Bradley (1727) to wonder whether that 'viscous shining Matter' might not 'produce the mushrooms we find growing in Circles upon Commons', and some notion that the slimy slugs and snails might be implicated into the growth of fungi may also underlie the illustration in Matthioli's *Commentarii* (1554), which shows toadstools together with snakes and a snail (apparently carrying a toadstool on its back).

One further cause to associate toads with fungi was thoroughly explored by Wasson & Wasson (1957): 'toadstool', they felt, would have been imbued with special venom through the identification of toads with the Christian devil-figure. They adduced evidence to show that in parts of Europe the toad was regarded from ancient times as an object of reverence and that under Christian influence it came to be seen as a pagan emblem, readily grafted onto the iconography of the devil. Certainly, in the 17th century at the height of the witch-hunts in Britain, it was common to find a devil-figure represented in this guise. Milton's Satan, for instance, arrives in Paradise not in the form of a snake, but 'squat like a toad'; and like Holland (1601) in his translation of Pliny, it was not unusual to find some such remark as that toads bore 'two knubs . . . on their front like horns' (the parotid glands?), a strained analogy unless you positively wanted to see the toad as a 'horned beast'. 'Little devil' and 'toad' are still roughly equivalent 'nicknames', though generally now endearments. Given how few authentic names toadstools bear in English it may be significant that both *Phallus impudicus* and the genus *Lycoperdon* have common names relating to the devil; (though how old these are is sometimes hard to judge: Devil's' or 'Satan's boletus', however, is definitely a modern invention). Furthermore, as Evelyn (1664) remarked, in hiberna-

tion 'Toads will sometimes nestle at the Roots of Trees', from whence — in the words of Topsell (1658) — 'the Spring-sun . . . raiseth them up from death to life'. The autochthonic image cannot be read literally but it may reflect a deep-seated intuition that toads in spring and fungi in autumn were emblematic of the sort of earthly fecundity that the ascetic side of Christianity mistrusted.

Whatever part each of these possibilities played in establishing 'tadstool' in the English vocabulary, their collective resonance is peculiarly appropriate to the traditional English antipathy towards fungi. Why toad*stool* rather than any other 'toad' name became preeminent is unclear: it is also commonest among 'toad' names on the continent. Dialect variants in English show that the word occurs more consistently in books than it ever did in speech and it may be that literal use tended to stabilise it. Perhaps too, 'stool', besides its evocation of excrement, appealed more or less unconsciously to the imagination through its use to mean a 'tree-stump'; if it were not obvious enough that fungi grew especially readily in the vicinity of felled or rotting trees, books could reinforce the point with images. An illustration (Fig. 1), such as in Matthioli (1554), for instance, had a partly symbolic function: the life of toad*stools* and tree*stools* (and snakes and snails), it implies, is somehow mutual. If this sense of 'stool' was ever pertinent, it would effectively have suggested what mycologists now mean by 'mycorrhizal'.

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