

Puck and the Bogymen as Reflexes of Indo-European Conceptions of Fear and Flight

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The folk beliefs and fears of the British Isles are haunted by a wide range of ambivalently or openly malevolent beings, two families of which are considered below. Along with the *Puck* best known from Shakespeare is the ambiguous *pooka* (Old English *puca*, Middle English *pouke*). Their kin among the explicit frights are the *bug*, *bugbear*, *bogy/bogey*, *bogyman*, *bogle*, and *boggard*. The pucks are defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* as evil, malicious, or mischievous spirits or demons, while the bogymen are objects of terror or dread, goblins, even the devils of Christian belief. Apparent here is a distinction between active agent and menacing, potential agent, a puck being like a brownie gone bad and the bogy typically evoked only in terms of the emotions, chiefly fear, that its immanence arouses, and of the harm it can inflict on disobedient children.¹ The consideration of regional use across the British Isles, as documented in *The English Dialect Dictionary*, would add further shading to these basic notions.² The *pooka* is attested from about the year 1000 (glossary entry: “uagantes demonas : wandrigende pucan”), while the *bogle* does not “surface” until some 500 years later.³ Despite the differences in function and affect, the question at the heart of the present inquiry is whether the names of these two sets of supernatural beings have a common origin.

Welsh *bwg* “ghost, bugbear, hobgoblin”, *bwgwl* “terror, terrifying” (whence the verb *bygylu* “to terrify”), and *bygel* (var. *bugail*) *nos* “a hobgoblin of the night” have been adduced in this context and the last-named has a parallel in Breton *bugail nos* “lad (lit. cowherd) of the night”.⁴ The euphemistic effect and affect of the last-named is the result of the near-homonymy of the terror word with a compound meaning cow-herd. While a comprehensive Welsh etymological dictionary remains a desideratum, Welsh *bwg* and related are most plausibly traced to the reconstructed Indo-European root **bheug-* meaning, *inter alia*, “to flee in fear, be frightened off”, not previously considered in connection with these and comparable terrifying beings.⁵ Cognates are found in Sanskrit, and in the Baltic, Slavic, and Tocharian languages; the perhaps best known of these is Greek φόβος “fear, flight”.

In the interest of comprehensiveness, one might look for the presence of this root in Gaulish, especially as a source of a possible trans-Rhenan loan from Celtic to Germanic, along with more prestigious terms for kingdom (*Reich*) and administrative office (*Amt*). Yet, no term on the **bheug-* root has been noted in Gaulish, which displays one word for terror based on the root *crito-*, and another, *boios* “terror-inspiring, terrible”, found in ethnoyms such as *Boii*, the future Bohemians and tentatively traced to a different Indo-European root, **bhei* “to fear”.⁶ Agent reflexes of the root **bheug-* meaning “to flee from fright” are seen in German *bögge*, *bögke*, *boggel*, and *boggelmann*. These terms also designate masked figures impersonating the bogymen (cf. the name *Butzenmann*).⁷

What other relevant Germanic evidence there is for such goblins is largely limited to north Germanic and is more reminiscent of English *Puck* than of Welsh *bwg*, although it is apparent that the unvoiced nature of the consonants is the only fundamental phonological difference. Recorded are Old Danish *puge*, Modern Danish *pokker*, Swedish and Norwegian *puke*, Icelandic and Faroese *púki*, Shetlandic *puki*.⁸ Old Saxon evidence does not include a reflex of this name for the pooka but Frisian does, in *puk[e]*. Considerable circumstantial evidence supports the idea that the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes brought the name of this spirit to Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries, rather than, say, the designation having been brought by the Scandinavian raiders, traders, and settlers later in the eighth and ninth centuries. Firstly, the Scandinavian evidence seems late, as if it has surfaced in the written record after the conversion to Christianity. There is no *púki* in the sagas of Icelanders, set in the pre-conversion ninth and tenth centuries, but this absence could be explained by the importance accorded *landvættir* “land spirits”, given that property ownership and dispute over it bulk so large in the texts. By turning the pooka into the Devil of Christian belief, fright generated by an external stimulus has been replaced by a desired moral aversion, although the assumed malevolence remains constant. Secondly, the presence of *puck* names in Britain is spread well beyond the North Sea coastal regions and the Danelaw. Mawer and Stenton, for example, call attention to the wealth of place names incorporating the element *pook(a)-* in Sussex, well off the Viking path.⁹ It might be counter-argued that the Scandinavian forms are loans from Old English but, although a medieval loan from Britain might reach Danish and Norwegian, it would be less likely to take root in Iceland, the Faroes, and Shetland on the one periphery or in Sweden on the other (which abuts the zone of the Balto-Slavic god *Perun*, who would be similarly downgraded in Christian times; cf., too, Finnish *Perkele* “devil”).

In his *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Jan de Vries traced Old West Norse *púki* to the Indo-European root **beu-* “to blow, inflate”.¹⁰ This derivation seems encouraged by the idea of the evil spirit as an insubstantial manifestation, something blown up out of nothing (cf. the will o’ the wisp). Elof Hellquist, in his etymological dictionary of Swedish, on the other hand, derived *puke* from the language used with, and by, children (although the short vowel and geminated consonant typical of Germanic in this regard are here missing; cf. German *bögge*, seen above).¹¹ As an alternative to the suggestions of de Vries and Hellquist, all the above forms, among which German *bögge*, Old West Norse *púki*, and Old English *puca*, may be seen as regular developments of the earlier noted Indo-European root **bheug-*, albeit with unvoiced consonantism in the latter two instances.¹²

To return to the Celtic languages, Welsh *bwg* has no recorded correspondence in Old Irish, although *bugh* is listed by Dwelly as an obsolete term in Scots Gaelic, which in most respects reflects its Irish source.¹³ This rare word may well be a term assumed from Cumbric, the Celtic language spoken in what would become the kingdom of Strathclyde and thought close to northern Welsh. A substratum loan of **bwg* from Cumbric into Scots Gaelic, Manx, and northern Old English would account for *bug* in the regional speech of southern Scotland and northern England – much more satisfactorily than the assumption of a later loan from

Welsh. Since *puca* and *bug* differ only in consonantal voicing/unvoicing, the Angles and Saxons may have met and half-understood the latter in the Old British of southern Britain. Without generating a discrete term, its semantics could have merged with native Germanic **puk-*. More speculatively, if the native British-speaking population were seen as a subaltern Other by the Irish extending their sway from Dál Riata into Scotland or by the invading Anglo-Saxons, one of their “alien” words could be suitably incorporated into the language used with children, who have always, it would seem, been threatened with expulsion or kidnapping from the home community and its language. The etymology of such a loan would not remain transparent. While the simplex *bug* is recorded in English, numerous kinds of suffixing and compounding for various affective purposes are also evident: in *bogy* (familiarity via a diminutive suffix), *bugbear* (compounding in the interest of clarity), *bogyman* and *bogle* (suffixing to indicate agency), *boggard* (aggrandising suffix, with comic potential). Not to be discounted in this speculative reconstruction, however, is the long subterranean life these words must be assumed to have led in popular belief before first appearing in written records in the sixteenth century.

Puck and *bug* represent two streams by which archaic conceptions of supernatural beings inspiring fear and flight, anathema to males in a heroic society, reached English from Proto-Indo-European: a Germanic stream originating in the continental north-west, and a Celtic stream, perhaps everywhere present in Old British but more firmly posited for Cumbric, in the north-west of present-day England. With this Indo-European source now clearly recognised, additional bugbears may be discovered in the languages of Europe. *Puck* and *bug* illustrate the diminution in efficacy and marginalisation that a proselytising Christianity sought to impose on popular belief. As with Gregory the Great’s injunction to build churches on pagan ritual sites, pookas and bogles were not stamped out but were spared and demonised in a very Christian way, becoming yet one more manifestation of the Devil, his malevolence and maleficence.

Puck and *bogy* illustrate an indirect approach to behaviour modification in the interests of social control, in which conduct is nudged toward the conventional path through the invocation of supernatural beings, whose intimidating appearance, it is hoped, will nonetheless not be realised.¹⁴

Notes

1. See Widdowson and other studies by this author.
2. Wright, *s.vv.* *bogie*, *bogle*, *puck*. On the *boggard*, see Young and other works by this author; on names for other supernatural beings, *pixie* and *brownie*, see Sayers.
3. Meritt, p. 6. In another early gloss, *puca* is equated with Latin *larvula* < *larva*, here “ghost, spectre”; “Aldhelm Glosses” (Cambridge University Library, MS Gg.5.35), in Napier, p. 191, col.1. As for *bug*, it is recorded from ca. 1425. When *larva* began to be used in the seventeenth century of an insect in the grub state and of the early immature form of animals of other classes, *bug* tagged along in a kind of unconscious pun and then came to be used of

- insects. Among its congeners, *bogle* was known to William Dunbar (1507): “The luf blenkis of that bogill fra his blerde ene,” (“The Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo”) in Bawcutt, p. 43.
4. Welsh evidence noted in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. *bogy*; *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*, s.vv. *bwg*, *bwgwl*; Le Gonidec, s.v. *bugel-nôz*. For a different reading of this evidence, see Cooper.
 5. Köbler, s.v. *bheug-1*.
 6. Delamarre, s.v. *boios*. Other tentatively identified Proto-Celtic “fear” words are **ag-* (**āg*), **ang-e/o*, **bikulijā-*, **bot-e/o-*, **dwoilo-*, **obno*, **øratu-*; Celtic Lexicon, 2017.
 7. Grimm and Grimm, s.vv. *boggelmann*, *bögge*, *bögke*.
 8. The term was absorbed from Old West Norse into Middle Irish as *púca*, later doubtless reinforced by Hiberno-English *pooka*; Quin.
 9. Mawer and Stenton (vol. 2, p. 562) comment that Sussex “was goblin-haunted to an extent without parallel elsewhere”; noted in *OED*, s.v. *Puck*. This onomastic density is reflected in the title of Kipling’s *Puck of Pook’s Hill*, with its setting in east Sussex.
 10. De Vries, p. 429, s.v. *púki*.
 11. Hellquist, p. 755, s.v. *skråpuke*.
 12. For the received view of the origins of these words, see *OED*, although conclusions are no more than tentative. Entries for the various *bogy* words carry the caveat that they have not been updated since 1887 or 1888. The entry for *Puck*, on the other hand, was revised in 2007 and illustrates the greater amplitude possible with notes in the *OED Online*. Here the possibility of an association of *bug* and *puck* is briefly mooted but not pursued.
 13. Dwelly, p. 137, s.v. *bugh*; cf. *bòcaidh* “terrifying object”, p. 103. In Old Irish *úath* “dread, fright, spectre, phantom” occupies a comparable lexical slot but is based on a different root; Quin.
 14. There are myriad other names in the British Isles for a wide spectrum of benevolent and malevolent supernatural beings, drawing on associations from many realms, not least the nocturnal and spectral. In Scotland, *bawkie* is an alternative name for the bogle but is also used of the bat, alone or in such compounds as *bawkie-bird* (< Old Norse *blaka* “flutter”). See further Briggs’s venerable *Encyclopedia of Fairies* and, in this instance, *Scottish National Dictionary* (which, however, derives *bawkie* from Old Norse *bokki* “he-goat”), as well as Sayers, 2018.

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