

The great nut divide

by Sabine Eiche

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As I watch politics get a stranglehold on civilisation and flip the world topsy-turvy, I like to imagine how much simpler the present – the now – was for someone living in the first millennium. A thousand years ago, when not obsessing about daily dangers, an Anglo-Saxon with a horticultural bent might have thought about Britain as the hazelnut north. He might also have been aware that somewhere far to the south was the land of the foreign nut. The idea of associating ourselves with what grows around us is appealing and seems more respectful of the planet Earth than identifying with a political party or figurehead.

Latin and the Germanic tongues had words for nut that ultimately go back to the same Proto-Indo-European root, “kneu.” “Nux” was what the ancient Romans called it. The Germanic tribes, such as the Anglo-Saxons, knew it as “hnutu.”

The hazelnut is the fruit of the hazel tree, and the Old English word for it was “hæselhnutu.” When the ancient Romans spoke of “nux” (“noce” in modern Italian) they were referring to the walnut, which then grew primarily in southern Europe and Asia. They dismissed the hazelnut as the little nut, “nuceola” (“nocciola” in modern Italian).

Although the Romans who established camps in northern Europe are likely to have brought walnuts with them, the walnut tree is not recorded as growing in Britain before the 16th century. A thousand or so years ago, an Anglo-Saxon who saw a nut imported from the south identified it as a “walhnutu” – foreign nut – by prefixing the Old English “wealh,” foreign, to “hnutu.” The walnut stayed the foreign nut in many

other northern Europe languages: “Walnuss” in German, “walnoot” in Dutch, “valnøtt” in Norwegian, and so forth.

At the time the Germanic Anglo-Saxons invaded Britain in the 5th century, the island was already inhabited by people known as the Celts. Nonetheless, to the conquering Anglo-Saxons the Celt was deemed a “Wealh,” a foreigner, and “wealh” is the word at the basis of the place names Wales and Cornwall. It’s also the origin of Walloon (the people of southern Belgium and their dialect) and the family names Wallace and Walsh.

Eventually, the English used the adjective Welsh to convey the sense of inferior or substitute: a Welsh pearl was a fake pearl; Welsh rabbit, or rarebit has nothing to do with rabbit – it refers to a dish of toasted bread covered with a melted cheese sauce; a Welsh cricket was a louse; and a Welshman’s hug was an itch.

Also the word nut slid down into the derogatory. In the 19th century, nut became equated with head, leading to such phrases as to be off your nut. By the early 20th century, nut was used to describe someone who was eccentric, a screwball. In 2016, nut found a prime candidate for its derisive meaning in a certain political person making headlines just over the border. I fervently hope this particular nut will fall on infertile ground and not end up defining half a continent.