

EMILY LYLE (ED.), MYTH AND HISTORY IN CELTIC AND SCANDINAVIAN TRADITION. — AMSTERDAM: AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2021, 304 PAGES.

Myth and History in Celtic and Scandinavian Tradition is an edited volume appearing in the series *The Early Medieval North Atlantic*, all of which gives some good indications of the material, themes, and time periods involved. The book title also hints at the contents, which are analyses of medieval writings which spoke of the past. Situating those writings in a particular medieval moment of composition is the focus of most of the chapters, which helps create a feeling of a fairly unified whole. Of course, there is a rather stark dividing line in the work: one half on Celtic material, and one half of Scandinavian. The utility of this duality seems doubtful: most scholars would work in *either* Norse or Celtic traditions, and so the different halves of the book would likely appeal to different scholars. Scholars interested in the overlap of Norse and Celtic materials will find little, here, either. Still, for either Norse or Celtic scholars, the relevant halves would likely prove very valuable. The various scholarship is, for the most part, first rate, with very little romantic over-generalizing. The “deeper past” is not explored, so much as the ideas *about* the deeper past in the medieval periods evidenced in these writings. The medieval versions are revealed to be situated in specific political, religious, and cultural sentiments of the day, and the chapters in this volume reveal how various characters, stories, and motifs were reworked over time, to fit the shifting demands placed on the past.

In the first (Celtic) half, three of the seven essays deal with aspects in the *Cath Maige Tuired* and the “evolving use of

myth” during the time period of its creation. The essay by John Carey deals with the various written accounts of the Fomoiri, showing how this group appears variously in various texts: the mundane, the monstrous, the semi-divine. This group is taken up again, and contrasted with the Tuatha Dé, in Elizabeth A. Grey’s “Tuatha Dé and the Fomoiri in *Cath Maige Tuired*,” which further documents that the consideration of such earlier peoples was not unified, but rather present in multiple variations, even within one text itself. For Grey, the larger point may be in the relationship between the two people, perhaps especially salient at the time of composition due to the experience with the Norse settlers in Ireland. The next chapter also pays attention to the writing of the *Cath Maige Tuired* in the late Viking age of Ireland, as Iona Tuomala explores this in terms of maintaining cultural identity in the face of increasing hybridity. The Tuatha Dé feature once more in Joseph Falaky Nagy’s “How Time Flies in the *Cath Maige Tuired*,” in which Nagy’s notes that the text shows that “major changes are taking place in the mythic Ireland it has presented, affecting the characters who populate it in the narrative present and in whatever future may follow it.” (111).

Alexandra Bergholm’s essay deals with how medieval Irish literature treated their ancestors’ worship of pagan deities, centering on Crom Cruaich. As the author put it: “the medieval Irish thus crafted an iconography of idolatry that suited their own understanding of Ireland’s historical past: their ancestors may have been misled by the devil to adore false images, but despite their depravity they were not inherently wicked.” (131).

A further chapter investigates the story of Dinn Ríg, as evidenced in multiple texts, and Kevin Murray makes the point that while

the various narratives “did not always agree fully on points of detail” (138), at the same time, quoting Seán Ó Coileáin, a “surprising degree of unity will be seen to emerge from a reconstruction of these often fragmentary sources.” In this case, the central mythic narrative of a defeat of an ancestor figure of the Uí Néill by the Laigin’s ancestor figure, was repurposed for then-present political purposes, and, further, that these increasingly became regarded as historical accounts, as earlier written fragments were used for later historical claims: in this case, the relation between myth and history being a fluid one.

The last Celtic chapter deals with a hagiographical account of Saint Berach, showing how this composition was crucially concerned with property claims of ecclesiastical groups. As the author, Ksenia Kudenko, puts it “Although the twelfth century was characterized by church reform, *Betha Bearaigh* seems to show little interest in contemporary religious discourse. Instead, the main purpose of the text seems to be concern with property, as well as desire to forge or revive connections with secular dynasties.” (p. 151).

In the Norse half, the authors also pay attention to historical detail of the manuscripts themselves, rather than seeing them merely as muddy windows into the mythic past. Karen Bek-Pedersen’s “Baldr’s Achilles’ Heel? About the Scandinavian Three-God B-Bracteates” is a careful reassessment of material items often taken to represent the narrative of the death of Baldr, and the author concludes that this is unlikely, and that they are instead derived from Roman coins, detailing some narrative of which we have no further understanding.

A slightly more reconstructive attempt is featured in Joshua Rood’s chapter “The Cult

of Ódinn in the Early Scandinavian Warrior Aristocracy” as the author considers some of the earlier attestations of Odin, to suggest that the divinity was “under construction” during the early Viking era, and that the deity was formed as part of the warrior Viking aristocracy. Such reconstructions are intriguing, yet difficult to trust. For example, the article relies heavily on the existence of “Odin” placenames in Scandinavia, yet many of these are far from the coast, and far from the maritime Viking culture that the author sees as its crucible. The interpretations of various motifs and artifacts are also difficult to interpret. Still, the author does demonstrate that, by paying close attention to particular time periods, deities will definitely appear in different forms.

Morten Warmind’s “Myth to History in Saxo” compares literary accounts, showing surprising similarities between separately authored versions, suggesting a strong folk tradition in maintaining many of these stories, or perhaps other unknown literary sources. Saxo’s take on relating such past stories is compared to Snorri’s, and the author shows that Saxo was interested in presenting the stories as history, while still mentioning mythic elements. In a similar vein, James Parkhouse’s chapter “Loki the Slandered God? Selective Omission of Skaldic Citations in Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda*” examines how Snorri left out known kennings which presented Loki in a more positive light, assumably to emphasize Snorri’s “demonization” of Loki, possibly due to Snorri’s exposure to Christian mythos, and the role of Loki now being influenced by the role of the Devil. Jonas Wellendorf in his chapter sees Snorri’s work as recrafting older stories in a dramatic fashion: “Like the creation of Odinn and his brothers, Snorri’s creation is not made *ex nihilo*, and like them he

dismembers his source material in order to fashion something which did not exist prior to his creative act” (p. 289). Wellendorf uses this realization to push back against incautious attempts to similarly imagine a unified and cohesive mythological world outside of Snorri’s writings, using two main examples: 1, that Loki as responsible for the slaying of Balder, an integral part of many mythic interpretations, is only present in the *Gylfaginning* source; and that 2, ideas of a theme of kin-slaying spanning the temporal arch—from killing of Ymir to the killing of Baldr, are likewise unlikely to represent anything outside of Snorri’s creation.

There are many valuable essays in this work that will be of great interest to scholars working in either Norse or Irish medieval materials. The authors are for the most part very careful not to over-generalize, and indeed the point of many of the essays seems to be the opposite: to show how the context of the written piece helps understand a great deal of what is being said. The various writings may have used stories of long ago to make their point, but it is their points being made that are their foci, rather than the past itself.

All that said, this reviewer did find a few things to critique along the way. Firstly, as mentioned, the utility of bringing together the Celtic and Norse examples was not particularly evident. Secondly, the “Celtic” in the title is displayed by Irish materials alone, while I would hold that “Norse”, rather than “Scandinavian”, would be a more appropriate appellation for the other half. Lastly, the introduction by Emily Lyle, and even more so her chapter, seem to be an ill fit for the rest of the work. These entries are the only ones to embrace a fanciful reconstructive approach, in stark contrast to

the rest of the submissions. Such outliers, however, should not detract from the real value in the rest of the essays provided. Many of these chapters will be of major interest to scholars of Irish and Norse medieval writings on the past, and perhaps even to scholars working in any field who seeking to understand the how the present continually utilizes the past. Rather than viewing medieval writings as “mistaken” about the deeper past, these essays show how these pieces were constructed according to the needs of their present moments, and they call scholars to study these as products of a particular performance, contextualized in a specific time and place.

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