

## THE LOCUS OF THE SACRED IN THE CELTIC OTHERWORLD

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The Celtic Otherworld of medieval Irish, Welsh and French Arthurian literature is popularly invoked as a fantastical setting for the supernatural adventures of medieval heroes and bold knights-errant: a place of unearthly beauty and enchanting music, fey and dangerous for the unwary traveller. This is the fabulous realm of Faerie, the land under the hollow hills, of disappearing islands like Ys or Lyonesse, populated by a host of magical beings – fairies, elves and water spirits. According to descriptions in early Irish literature, the Celtic Otherworld is a place of untold beauty and pleasure, where there is no age, no sickness and no death. It seems in general to be an idyllic extension or parallel to the everyday world of the pagan Celts of the Iron Age, with all of the things they enjoyed in life: feasting, music, colour, fighting; only better! However, the pre-Christian Celtic Otherworld was once a holy place with a deeper religious significance than the mythical land of Faerie. For the ancient Celts, the Otherworld was a sacred spiritual realm to be feared, respected and revered as the dwelling place of the gods, the supernatural and a place where spirits went after death.<sup>1</sup>

When, by means of a close comparative examination of the texts, we peer through the layers of the folklore and legend that have accumulated over the centuries, it may be possible to piece together a pre-Christian understanding of the Otherworld. It would seem that the Otherworld stories were originally remnants of an ancient cosmology or mythology concerning the Afterlife and developed from concepts regarding the realm of the dead, possibly stemming from a very ancient form of ancestor worship and burial ritual. As we shall see, the spirit of Place was indeed the wellspring of the sacred in the pagan Celtic world.

When attempting to reconstruct the religious beliefs of the Iron Age Celts, the writings of the Celts themselves, particularly the medieval vernacular manuscripts of Ireland, are of crucial importance.<sup>2</sup> These

literatures are thought to preserve remnants of ancient mythologies, handed down orally through the generations until written down by Christian scribes in the Middle Ages. However, we cannot take the stories at face value. It is now recognised as naïve to imagine some sort of direct "human pipeline" channelling unchanged the beliefs of the Iron Age Celts through two thousand years of history until recorded in the Middle Ages, without taking into account the influence of Christianity and literacy, or changes in the pagan religion itself over time.<sup>3</sup> The tales contain recurring themes linking motifs such as barrow mounds and royal fortresses with the Otherworld, and with corroborative evidence from archaeology we can speculate as to the original nature of these connections.

"Manuscript cultures" like Medieval Ireland and Wales were always marginally oral, preserving "a feeling for a book as a kind of utterance."<sup>4</sup> It seems likely that what we now have in the manuscripts are compositional "set-pieces" and motifs which have lost their original context, but still remain as reflexes or dim memories of pre-Christian religion and society. It is to these motifs that we must now turn, bearing in mind, however, that what is summarised here is perforce a generalisation of a complex picture of Otherworld beliefs which may have varied widely within the pagan Celtic world. Careful examination of early Irish and Welsh mythological narratives reveals two main traditions regarding the location of the Otherworld: the subterranean or antipodean Otherworld associated with burial mounds and/or royal sites, and the controversial "overseas" Otherworld located on magical islands, which seems to be more strongly influenced by medieval Christian beliefs.

#### S&D MOUNDS AND ROYAL SITES

In both Welsh and Irish literature the Otherworld is most often associated with "royal" hillforts or strongholds.<sup>5</sup> The legendary royal fort of Tara is not far from the *síd* dwelling *Brug na Boinne*, which in modern times we know as the burial mounds of New Grange, Knowth and Dowth.<sup>6</sup> Royal sites are often the transition points between this and the Otherworld. According to

the stories, not only can humans step into Otherworld realms from royal sites, but Otherworld beings can also access the "real" world there and are most often sighted near royal halls and assembly places. For example, the legendary Irish kings Conn and Cormac are said to be "on the ramparts of Tara" when they see visions of the Otherworld, and in *Immram Brain (The Voyage of Bran)* King Bran was "in the neighbourhood of his stronghold" when he heard the sweet, sleep-inducing music of the Otherworld.<sup>7</sup>

The four main sites considered in Christian times to be pagan Irish royal capitals were Tara and Dun Ailinne in Leinster, Cruachain in Connacht and Emain Macha in Ulster. Surprisingly, however, archaeological excavations reveal that *none* of these royal strongholds appear to have actually been permanent habitation sites. The evidence suggests that they were ceremonial centres incorporating ancient cemeteries and burial mounds, and were used mainly for tribal gatherings and festivities, seasonal or occasional meeting places in the open air where games and assemblies could be held.<sup>8</sup> That these places were used primarily for *sacred* or religious purposes in pre-Christian Ireland is borne out by the fact that the buildings at Emain Macha (Navan Fort) and Dun Ailinne were immolated, then buried in a cairn and coated with turf, essentially rendering them into huge mounds. The massive labour that went into these projects and the careful way they were carried out suggests that they were made "ritually redundant" and were most likely ceremonial precincts.<sup>9</sup>

The ancient Celts buried their dead in a way which strongly suggests they had some sort of belief in a life after death. Burial ritual is a physical manifestation of Otherworld beliefs, and Anne Ross believes that the hollow hills of Fairie or *síd* mounds of literary fame may have originated in beliefs associated with burial mounds.<sup>10</sup> During the Hallstatt period, the bodies of chieftains were found laid out with great care in wagons and surrounded by elaborate displays of weaponry, jewellery, drinking vessels and foodstuffs. All this was contained within a wooden chamber, which was then sealed and covered by a mound of earth.<sup>11</sup> Even in the La Tene period, though bodies were now burnt to ashes, they were still buried with personal possessions and feasting utensils. Evidently the dead person was thought to

require these sorts of possessions when they arrived in the Otherworld, and would carry on the business of living in much the same way, only better, and for all eternity, as is suggested by the literature.

Mound, hill or barrow motifs abound in the literature, and are strongly connected with visions of the Otherworld. For example, in the Welsh story *Pwyll Lord of Dyved*, Pwyll climbs the mound of Arberth because "it is the property of this hill that whenever a man of royal blood sits on it, one of two things happens: he receives blows and wounds, or he sees a wonder."<sup>12</sup> And indeed, Pwyll has a vision of his Otherworld bride, Rhiannon, once he ascends the mound. The custom of "sitting on a howe" or barrow-mound is also prevalent in Norse mythology, which has many parallels to Celtic beliefs. Scandinavian kings are often depicted as sitting on the burial mounds of their fathers, receiving the wisdom of the dead, which, according to Ellis, is thought to allude to the "priestly origins of kingship in Scandinavia".<sup>13</sup> Seeresses or *volva* also sat on high platforms where they experienced visions and gave prophecies, and both of these customs are thought to be connected with Odin, Norse god of the dead and occult magic.

As related in the mythological tales, the Otherworld is also very close to this world during tribal gatherings and assemblies. *Oenach* or "tribal assembly" is derived from the Irish word *oen*, "one", and "the fundamental concept is one of *unification*."<sup>14</sup> The "unifying" concept is one that operates on several different planes. The *oenach* was a time for feasting and game playing, where competitive sports and races were held, and one of the many pleasurable aspects of the Otherworld described is the abundance of sporting and gaming that the denizens enjoyed.<sup>15</sup> The *oenach* was also regularly held at the so-called "royal capitals" which we now know to be the great pagan ceremonial centres and burial sites. Furthermore, these tribal assemblies were apparently held at sacred times of the year, especially significant during the feast of Samhain on November the first, the day signalling the end of the old year and the beginning of the new, also thought to be the Festival of the Dead.<sup>16</sup> In pagan Celtic religion, Samhain was a festival marking the change in seasons between Summer and Winter, the "light" and "dark" halves of the year respectively. It was considered the darkest and most

dangerous day of the year, as on this day, the doors between this and the Otherworld were wide open, the dead could again stalk the earth, and unwary mortals (and immortals) were prey to magical or malign influences.<sup>17</sup>

The following passage in the tale *The Wasting Sickness of Cu Chulainn* amply illustrates the relationship between these sacred times and activities:

Each year the Ulaid held an assembly: the three days before Samuin and the three days after Samuin and Samuin itself. They would gather at Mag Muirthemni, and during these seven days there would be nothing but meetings and games and amusements and entertainments and eating and feasting.<sup>18</sup>

Descriptions of similar amusements and abundance are typically found in Otherworld narratives, making it possible to conceive of the Otherworld as a metaphysical embodiment of the quintessential Celtic festival or *feis*. Thus far a picture emerges where the Celtic Otherworld is intimately connected with kings or chieftains having visions or encounters during tribal gatherings in ceremonial centres which were sacred burial grounds. Ross believes the evidence suggests that "here we have an example of a custom of performing tribal rites about the graves of divine ancestors, the grave mounds constituting the visible focus of belief."<sup>19</sup> Feasting and games were events held in association with funeral ceremonies, and Raftery suggests that the *oenach* may even have originated in funeral games held for kings and heroes.<sup>20</sup>

John Carey also notes that there is "a direct symbolic equivalence between the Otherworld and the tribal assembly or *oenach*" of which the dead ancestors are a part: "society, affirmed and symbolised by the *oenach*, derives its legitimacy from the traditions received from ancestors who have departed into the Otherworld". It was "the source from which values and authority derived."<sup>21</sup> Hence, the descriptions of the Otherworld that we find in the vernacular literature are strongly linked to the notion of sacral kingship, where the locus of spiritual power was centred around the burial mounds and ceremonial centres of the pagan Celts, where the chieftain,

symbolic of the tribal consciousness, could act as a conduit between this and the Other world of the gods and the dead ancestors.<sup>22</sup>

### THE OVERSEAS OTHERWORLD

The stories about the Otherworld located on islands over the sea are much more subject to controversy than tales about the *sid* mounds, as the Voyage tales or *immrama* contain more overtly Christian matter. Much of the confusion about overseas Otherworlds originates from *Immram Brain*, or *The Voyage of Bran, Son of Febal*, which is one of the earliest surviving pieces of Irish literature, and is the precursor of the famous medieval Christian tale, *The Voyage of Saint Brendan*. Briefly, in *The Voyage of Bran*, King Bran is on the ramparts of his stronghold when he is enticed by a beautiful Otherworldly woman to sail across the sea in search of the marvellous islands she describes, where there is "neither decay nor death." He eventually finds the Island of Joy and the Land of Women where he is welcomed by the Otherworld queen to live forever in eternal youth.<sup>23</sup>

There is good evidence now that there was an earlier Bran tradition existing in a lost eighth century manuscript, *Cín Dromma Snechta*.<sup>24</sup> In this manuscript there is a verse called *Imbaccaldam*, which is essentially a dialogue between Bran's druid and a prophetess regarding the stealing of an Otherworld treasure at the bottom of a well, and the subsequent inundation of Bran's kingdom. It is well known that the Celts venerated wells, springs and lakes, which were a focal point of cult practice and ritual. Archaeology confirms the evidence for a Celtic cult of water and the ritual practice of casting precious objects into pools, lakes, wells and rivers, as many hoards of weapons, shields and gold ornaments have been found in bogs and lakes such as at Flag Fen in Britain, and Llyn Cerrig Bach on the island of Anglesey.<sup>25</sup> Water was particularly connected with goddesses, who were associated with the dual functions of fertility and death, given both the life-giving and destructive powers of water.<sup>26</sup> It is conceivable that removing these sacred objects from their watery graves would violate some sort of taboo, and retribution could be expected from the offended deities or spirits

of the Otherworld. The *Imbaccaldam* dialogue certainly seems to link the Otherworld treasure in the well with the flooding of Bran's kingdom, hinting that Bran may have tried to steal this hoard, thus offending the goddesses of the Otherworld. We can therefore conclude from this that the *earliest* Bran material concerned the inundation of Bran's kingdom, and not his journey to an overseas Otherworld.

The most striking thing about the *immrama* or voyage literature is their relevance to Christian society in the Middle Ages. Not only did they serve as wonder tales describing strange, far off lands, but they also mythologised the Irish anchoritic pilgrims who played such an important part in the development of the Christian church in Ireland. The voyage narratives recounting journeys to paradisaical islands such as *Tir Nan Og*, the Land of Eternal Youth, can thus be seen as primarily Christian inventions, fusing the pleasures of the old pagan Otherworld with allegorical tales of journeys to the Christian paradise. Though the Celts venerated water, and thought the Otherworld could be located in sacred places like lakes and springs, the notion of the overseas Otherworld is quite distinct, no doubt owing more to the influence of the Greek myth of Atlantis, and from the actual voyages of discovery made by Christian monks on pilgrimage. Saint Columba, for instance, founded a monastery on the island of Iona in the sixth century, and Irish anchorites sailed even as far as Iceland by the eighth century. Thus, though islands could well serve as sacred sites and sanctuaries, there is no conclusive evidence proving that mystical overseas islands were connected with a belief about the Otherworld of the dead in pagan Celtic religion.<sup>27</sup>

To conclude, royal sites, wells and lakes, groves, hills and mounds, were all sacred places for cult worship in ancient Celtic religion. True to the theme of this conference, we have seen that the spirit of Place permeated the pagan religious beliefs of the Iron Age Celts. It seems reasonable to say that the pagan Celtic peoples of the British Isles understood that any sacred site could serve as a gateway to the supernatural realms.<sup>28</sup> However, the vernacular Celtic myths hint that the locus of the sacred between this and the Otherworld intersected *most strongly* at the sites of the ancient burial

mounds and barrows found throughout Britain and Ireland. This further corroborates the view that the mythological origins of the Celtic Otherworld – based largely on evidence from the insular Celtic literatures with the backing of archaeology – stemmed from the notion of an existence after death and was connected to ancient earthen burial rites and sacred places. It seems likely that burial rituals and the veneration of divine ancestors in tribal gatherings at these sacred sites were embodied in the notion of Festival or assembly which was a unifying concept in the Celtic world-view. It was the nexus of sacred place and sacred time, where life and death, the sacred and profane, “this” world and the Otherworld were linked.

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#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> See H. R. Patch, *The Other World: According to Descriptions in Medieval Literature*, Octagon Books, New York, 1970.

<sup>2</sup> For an introductory discussion of the uses of mythology in the re-construction of early Celtic religion, see Morten Lund Warmind, “Irish Literature as Source-Material for Celtic Religion”, *Temenos*, 28, 1992, 209-222.

<sup>3</sup> Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*, Maynooth Monographs 3, An Sagart, 1991, 20.

<sup>4</sup> On the hallmarks of oral-formulaic expression and manuscript cultures, see Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, New Accents, Routledge, London, 1982, 31-125.

<sup>5</sup> John Carey, “Time, Space and the Otherworld”, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, Vol VII, 1987, 1-27, 5-7.

<sup>6</sup> R. A. Macalister, *Tara: A Pagan Sanctuary of Ancient Ireland*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, London, 1931, 86

<sup>7</sup> Conn is the hero of *Baile in S.cáil* (“The Phantom’s Frenzy”), and Cormac’s Otherworldly encounter is told in *Echtrae Cormaic* (“The Adventure of Cormac”) – both stories in Myles Dillon, *Early Irish Literature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1948, 107-112. The standard translation of Bran’s Voyage is by Kuno Meyer, *Imram Bran: The Voyage of Bran, Son of Febal to the Land of the Living*, including “Essay upon the Irish Vision of the Happy Otherworld and the Celtic Doctrine of Rebirth”, by Alfred Nutt, Grimm Library No. 4, David Nutt in the Strand, London, 1895.

<sup>8</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy*, Basil Blackwell, Great Britain, 1991, 167-8, and Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1967, 39.

<sup>9</sup> Hutton, *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Ross, *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Aedeen Cremin, *The Celts in Europe*, Centre for Celtic Studies, Sydney, Australia, 1992, 16-27.

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey Gantz, (ed. & trans.) *The Mabinogion*, Penguin, London, 1976, 52.

<sup>13</sup> Hilda Ellis, *The Road to Hel: A Study of the Conception of the Dead in Old Norse Literature*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1968, 105-111. Nora Chadwick also notes the similarity between Norse and Celtic mound or barrow motifs in her article, “Literary Tradition in the Old Norse and Celtic World”, *Saga Book XIV*, 1953-57, 164-99.

<sup>14</sup> Carey, *op. cit.*, 1987, 14.

<sup>15</sup> This feature is particularly emphasised in *Immram Bran*, where the Otherworld woman speaks of Mag Findargat, “the plain on which the hosts hold games: Coracle contends against chariot...” and she mentions a host racing along Mag Mon, the “Plain of Sport”. Meyer, 1895, *op. cit.*, 4 & 12.

<sup>16</sup> Carey, *op. cit.*, 13.

<sup>17</sup> Countless examples abound in the literature of Otherworld encounters occurring during assemblies, festivals or at Samhain. For example, in *The Wooing of Etain* it is during Samhain that Oengus Macc Oc tricks King Elcmar into letting him be king in *Brug na Boinne* for "a day and a night", after which he retains the kingship, and in *The Dream of Oengus*, the Otherworld girl, Caer, effects her transformations from human to swan shape during Samhain. Both stories in Jeffrey Gantz, (ed. & trans.) *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, Penguin, London, 1981.

<sup>18</sup> Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, *op.cit.*, 1981, 155.

<sup>19</sup> Ross, *op. cit.*, 39.

<sup>20</sup> Barry Raftery, *Pagan Celtic Ireland: The Enigma of the Irish Iron Age*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1994, 81.

<sup>21</sup> Carey, *op. cit.*, 1987, 13-15.

<sup>22</sup> On the religious/otherworldly dimension of ancient Irish kingship, see Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, "The Semantics of Sid", *Éigse*, XVII, 137-155. (particularly pp. 140-148).

<sup>23</sup> See Kuno Meyer, *op. cit.*, 1895.

<sup>24</sup> James Carney, "The Earliest Bran Material", *Latin Script and Letters AD 400-900*, eds. O'Meara & Naumann, Leiden, 1976, 174-193.

<sup>25</sup> Hutton, *op. cit.*, 1991, 184-7.

<sup>26</sup> Ross, *op. cit.*, 20.

<sup>27</sup> John Carey, "The Location of the Otherworld in Irish Tradition", *Éigse*, Vol XIX, 1982-3, 36-43.

<sup>28</sup> Carey, "Time, Space and the Otherworld", 1987, 6.