

What is an ‘otherworld’?

An ‘otherworld’ is not our world, not the familiar physical world we live in. It is a supernatural place. People may well believe that it has some kind of physical reality. They may think that it is geographically contiguous with our world. Perhaps, with luck, it may even be visible to mortals and reachable from our world, if only by a difficult or unpredictable route; but it is not part of our world.

Typically, an otherworld will have features that resemble those of our own world. These may include recognizable landscapes, plants and animals, and inhabitants. The way that these inhabitants are portrayed may vary: they may be idealized, or they may be very similar to us. Nonetheless they are not us, for otherworlds are typically the abode of gods and the dead.

Everything else about otherworlds is open to variation. The locations of otherworlds, for a start, are numerous. Perhaps there is an otherworld beneath our own, underground (a chthonic otherworld, from the Greek word *khthōn* meaning ‘earth’). Or maybe underwater, such as at the bottom of lakes or the sea. Overseas islands are another possibility. Then there are the entrances. In Irish tradition certain mounds or hills are otherworld portals (*síde*). The multiplication of such portals raises the question: is there one otherworld with many entrances, or a separate otherworld behind each magic door? Very often, however, it is impossible to rationalize the physical location of the otherworld in terms of normal geography. Time, too, may not obey the same laws in the otherworld as it does here. What seems like years in the otherworld may correspond to a few moments in our own, or vice versa.

Belief in such places appears to be widespread within human cultures, so what you learn here should be widely applicable elsewhere. What is particularly interesting about Celtic otherworlds, however, is that we can examine how the concept of an otherworld was adapted by Christian and monastic writers to express new spiritual meanings. Throughout this module we will find that ‘otherworld’ is an elastic and adaptable concept.

Reading

The scholar who has done most to elucidate Irish otherworld concepts is John Carey. You may wish to re-read his useful encyclopaedia article at this point:

John Carey, ‘Otherworld’, in John T. Koch (ed.), *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, California, 2006), vol. 4, pp. 1403–6.

There is a much more detailed account in this paper:

John Carey, ‘Time, Space, and the Otherworld’, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 7 (1987), 1–27.

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