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Review of “Affectionate Cannibalism and the blood drinking motif in Gaelic literature” by
Simon Rodway.

Introduction

This essay will review the article by Dr Simon Rodway titled '*Affectionate Cannibalism and the blood drinking motif in Gaelic literature*'. Within the review, the essay will look at Rodway's own academic background, whether blood drinking was part of Irish funerary rites, links to classical historic writers such as Strabo and Diodorus Siculus, and Julius Caesar. The essay will then go on to examine the links put forward by Rodway for similarities between blood drinking within Gaelic literature and the ritualised blood drinking found within modern Christian practice in the form of holy communion.

Findings

This review will begin by looking at Simon Rodway himself as a means of providing some background to the article.

Simon Rodway holds a doctorate in Middle Welsh from Aberystwyth University and a degree in Celtic Studies, and has been a lecturer at Aberystwyth University since 2003 where he lectures on modules titled 'Introduction to the literature of Gaelic Ireland¹' and 'Medieval saga literature of Ireland²'. Dr Rodway also conducts research on the topics including old and middle Irish Celtic philology³ i.e. the history of middle Irish Celtic language.

This background gives Dr Rodway an ideal insight into the topic of the blood drinking motif within Gaelic literature.

Dr Rodway's article starts with a quotation that states 'Your blood was streaming from you, I did not stop to wipe it, but drank it up from my palms'⁴ which he took from an old Irish Keen,

¹ Aberystwyth University, *Staff profiles – Dr Simon Rodway* (2020) <https://www.aber.ac.uk/en/cymraeg/staff-profiles/listing/profile/syr/> [accessed 16 October 2020]

² *ibid*

³ *ibid*

⁴ Simon Rodway, 'Affectionate Cannibalism and the Blood Drinking Motif in Gaelic Literature', *Cambridge medieval Celtic studies*, 74 (2017), 47-65 (p. 47).

where the words were being spoken by a grieving wife or mother at the grave of her husband or child.

From this we can see that there is the suggestion that blood drinking is a part of ancient Irish funeral rites., a suggestion that is reinforced with numerous other references to other texts including the '*Carmina Gadelica*', and the story of the death of the Irish demi-god Cu Chulainn.

This could lead the reader to believe that there is some evidence for blood drinking as part of funeral rites. However, Dr Rodway then seeks to expand his article to discuss whether there is evidence of actual blood drinking and cannibalism within Irish funeral rites or whether it is purely a literary device or technique used by writers to convey extreme grief or as noted by Caroline Nic Craith, that it might be a way of accessing supernatural powers⁵.

Rodway quickly introduces the notion that blood drinking was not merely a literary device, but that there is evidence of actual blood drinking from what he has termed 'non-literary sources'⁶.

Citing Edmund Spencer from the sixteenth century, Rodway suggests to the reader that actual evidence of blood drinking and cannibalism exists. He takes a quote from Spencer that reads

at the execution of a notable traytour at Limericke, called Murrogh O-Brien, I saw an old woman, which was his foster mother, take up his head whilst he was quartered, and sucked up all the blood that runne thereout, saying, that the earth was not worthy to dinke it, and therewith also steeped her hair and breast, and tore her haire crying out and shrieking most terribly⁷

Rodway then takes the reader back further into history by citing Strabo, the Greek Geographer who died in AD 19.

In the quote that Rodway refers to, Strabo is stated as saying that the Irish are cannibals 'they are man-eaters'⁸, and that they 'openly have intercourse with their mothers and sisters'⁹. This could lead the reader to believe that this gives us evidence that blood drinking and

⁵ Rodway, 'Affectionate Cannibalism and the Blood Drinking Motif in Gaelic Literature', p. 48.

⁶ Rodway, 'Affectionate Cannibalism and the Blood Drinking Motif in Gaelic Literature', p. 49.

⁷ ibid

⁸ Rodway, 'Affectionate Cannibalism and the Blood Drinking Motif in Gaelic Literature', p. 50.

⁹ ibid

cannibalism existed as a physical practice within Ireland. However, the quote also states that Strabo had ‘no trustworthy witness for it’¹⁰. From Strabo’s own admission, it raises the question for this reader as to whether the quote should be taken as factual evidence of the practice within Ireland, or whether it could be construed as sensationalistic writing of the time, akin to modern day tabloid journalism, that was playing to the paymasters and populace of the time. A topic of further investigation perhaps.

An important aspect of Rodway’s article is the comparison of cannibalism between the Irish and the Gauls. Quoting Edmund Spenser’s work ‘*View of the state of Ireland*’¹¹, it is noted that there is a correlation of evidence between the customs of the Gauls and the customs of the Irish in terms of drinking blood and painting their faces with the blood of their slain enemies.

This is of particular interest in that it could provide some evidence of common ancestry for the Celts or at least the Irish and Gaulish aspects of it. It is accepted that there is a common ancestry in the language of the two nations in the Indo-European language as can be seen in the linguistic family trees put forward by Ringe et al¹², and also in the continental and insular models of Celtic languages¹³. However, commonality of traditions, and behaviours may also suggest a link between the two different peoples even though geography separated them.

Rodway also considers the differences between affectionate cannibalism, aggressive cannibalism and survival cannibalism.

Thus far we have considered affectionate cannibalism i.e. blood drinking as part of funerary rites. Rodway also cites sources that evidence of both aggressive cannibalism i.e. the eating of slain enemies, and also survival cannibalism i.e. consumption of human flesh and blood as a way of not starving to death. The citing of Diodorus Siculus could be considered to evidence aggressive cannibalism¹⁴, although by Rodway’s own admission, Siculus did not make clear as to whether he was referring to aggressive or affectionate cannibalism, so this should potentially be discounted.

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ Rodway, ‘Affectionate Cannibalism and the Blood Drinking Motif in Gaelic Literature’, p. 49.

¹² Ringe et al, ‘Indo-European and Computational Cladistics’, *Transactions of the philological society*, 100.1 (2002) 59-129 (p74).

¹³ ‘Historical Aspects’, in *The Celtic Language*, ed. By Martin J Ball and James Fife (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), pp 4-7.

¹⁴ Rodway, ‘Affectionate Cannibalism and the Blood Drinking Motif in Gaelic Literature’, p. 51.

Rodway cites the 'De Bello Gallico'¹⁵, the work of Julius Caesar writing about the Gallic Wars, where Caesar notes that Gaul leaders had promoted cannibalism as a means of not starving during a siege, as evidence of survival cannibalism. For this reader, the account is believable as it suggests a level of pragmatism during a war time situation where to do otherwise would potentially have meant the death of an entire tribe.

Three other main themes were put forward within Rodway's article. The first being the citing of several literary passages. The first of these is a Welsh poem 'Gododdin' where he cites the section '*If the blood of all those you killed were wine you would have (?) plenty for three years and four*'¹⁶. However, for this reader, this could easily be dismissed as a literary device whereby the writer is using metaphor to suggest the sheer amount of killing that had taken place by specific individuals. Rodway also cites the tale 'Culhwch ac Olwen'¹⁷ where Cyledyr was forced to eat his father's own heart and subsequently went mad. Again, this could be viewed as purely a literary device rather than historical documentation of an actual event. However, the fact that these exist at all within ancient writings raises questions for the reader as to where the imagery and ideas for these passages may have come from. Where they perhaps based on other knowledge of actual historical acts and practices that were then not mentioned within the specific passages that Rodway cited?

In the second main theme, Rodway returns to the work of Strabo, where he links themes put forward by Strabo with those put forward by other ancient writers such as Herodotus. Rodway seeks to dismiss the accuracy of both of these writers noting that the quote from Strabo mentions that he does not have a reliable source for what he is himself quoting, and that the work of Herodotus references a group of people, the Essedones or Issedones, that are considered by some to not actually be a real people¹⁸. In this way Rodway concludes that these accounts cannot be relied upon for historical accuracy and cannot prove that these practices actually took place.

The final main theme of Rodway's article draws parallels within Christian era practices.

Rodway cites the work of Alexandra Bergholm, a lecturer in religious studies at the University of Helsinki, who looked specifically at the passion of Christ and also a 14th century text in which the virgin Mary recounts that she kissed the blood of the crucified Jesus.

¹⁵ Rodway, 'Affectionate Cannibalism and the Blood Drinking Motif in Gaelic Literature', p. 56.

¹⁶ Rodway, 'Affectionate Cannibalism and the Blood Drinking Motif in Gaelic Literature', p. 57.

¹⁷ Rodway, "Affectionate Cannibalism and the Blood Drinking Motif in Gaelic Literature", p. 58.

¹⁸ Rodway, 'Affectionate Cannibalism and the Blood Drinking Motif in Gaelic Literature' p. 62.

Rodway cites several areas of investigation by Bergholm in which she has looked at the motif of the virgin Mary licking or drinking the blood of Jesus in various texts from the 4th century to the 14th century¹⁹. It is not difficult to see how this parallels the concept of blood drinking within Irish/Gaelic funerary rites and literature. If we look to current times, we can see evidence of the same thing, although in ritualised form. If we look at the Christian Bible we can see in Matthew 26: verses 26-28 references to Jesus breaking bread and pouring wine and telling his disciples that they are his body and his blood and to eat and drink them²⁰. We can also see this same motif in John 6 verses 53-58 where Jesus is quoted as saying that eternal life is given to those who eat his flesh and drink his blood²¹. This has been brought into modern practice as communion where wine and a wafer of bread are used to represent the blood and the body of Christ. If we look at the wording of the first order for holy communion that can be found on the United Reform Church website we can see that people taking communion are metaphorically eating the body and drinking the blood of Jesus

Take, eat; this is the body of Christ, broken for you. Do this in remembrance of him.
This cup is the new covenant in the blood of Christ, shed for you and for all, for the forgiveness of sin. Drink of it, all of you, in remembrance of him²².

Although ritualised with physical metaphor, it is not that difficult to see the parallels to the accounts mentioned by Rodway within his article, although the taking of communion bread and wine would not be seen as strange or unusual, whereas the drinking and eating of physical blood and flesh as put forward in the passages noted by Rodway most definitely would be.

Conclusions

Rodway's article shows that the image of blood drinking does exist within Gaelic literature and cites many examples of where this is the case. What it does not do is give a definitive answer as to where the imagery used originated from, i.e. whether it represents a pre-Christian Celtic practice or whether it has come from a Christian representation of the crucifixion of Christ and the teachings of the Christian bible. In this way it allows the reader to investigate further into the topic should they choose to do so, and also to potentially draw their own

¹⁹ Rodway, 'Affectionate Cannibalism and the Blood Drinking Motif in Gaelic Literature', p. 63.

²⁰ Bible Study Tools, *Communion bible verses* (2020), <<https://www.biblestudytools.com/topical-verses/communion-bible-verses/>> [accessed 21 October 2020].

²¹ *ibid*

²² United Reform Church, *First order of Holy Communion* <https://urc.org.uk/images/Free-Ebooks/WB_First_Order_of_Holy_Communion.pdf> (2020) [accessed 21 October 2020].

conclusions as to the origins of the practises that are mentioned. The only definitive conclusion that it does make is that the writings of Strabo in connection with cannibalism and the Celts is not a reliable source. The true reasons for Strabo's words may never be known, and certainly for this reader as someone at the start of their studies on the Celts, would only unknown and merely conjecture. This is not to fully discredit the works of Strabo, but to guide the reader away from an avenue of investigation that can be disregarded in this context.

Word Count: 1929.

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