

Immram Brain, Echtrae Connlai: the scholarship of immram and echtrae

Types of otherworld narrative – a scene of much debate

Many Irish stories feature otherworld motifs, but a few tale types seem to focus on the otherworld more than others. Chief among these are the tales known as *echtraí* (singular *echtrae*) and *immrama* (singular *immram*). The definition of these genres and the difference between them have been quite hotly disputed. The word *echtrae* means ‘an outing, an excursion’, while *immram* means literally ‘a rowing around.’ A basic framework for understanding the two was laid down by Myles Dillon. He saw the *echtrae* as a tale of a visit to the otherworld by a human hero. It is the fact of visiting the otherworld that matters in the *echtrae*, whereas in the *immrama* the journey itself is the main focus of attention.

David Dumville greatly elaborated this idea in an article which remains one of the most incisive and useful on Irish otherworld literature. Since the *echtrae* describes a visit to the pagan otherworld, he saw the *echtrae* as deriving from a pre-existing pagan tale-type. Note that this does not mean that the extant *echtraí* are pagan tales – they are, after all, products of early Christian Ireland – but there is reason to assume that the tale type is older than the surviving examples. The *immrama*, on the other hand, are thoroughly ecclesiastical, and are to be understood as deriving from the phenomenon of actual monastic voyaging in the early medieval period, along with copious sources in classical and Christian literature. This does not exclude the possibility, of course, that native otherworld motifs were not also included, but the key point is that there were probably never any pagan *immram* tales, only *echtraí*.

Immram Brain is a problem text for Dumville's view, and he devotes some space to it. He argues that it is essentially a misnamed *echtrae* (as Dillon had done too), and has probably been conflated at some time during its transmission, resulting in the introduction of ecclesiastical and *immram*-like elements into the story, damaging its structure in the process. In fact, the term *immram* appears embedded in the text itself, in section 64, to describe Bran's adventures. But in one manuscript the tale is given the heading *Immram Brain meic Febail andso 7 a eachtra annso sis* – This is the *immram* of Bran son of Febail and his *echtrae* here below'. Moreover, in a medieval list of Irish tales divided by type there appears a tale called ‘*Echtra Brain*’ under the *echtraí*, whereas the tale does not appear among the *immrama*. It may be argued that these confusing signals tell us something about *Immram Brain* as a text: that it shares features of more than one genre. But should we attribute that to confused later editing, as Dumville does, or see it as creative writing by the author? This kind of debate appears again and again in the scholarship of early Irish literature. We have to decide for ourselves how to read such difficult, hybrid, polyvalent texts as *Immram Brain*.

Echtrae Connlai

This brief text is the best-known of the *echtraí*. It has become a battleground between supporters of Christian and non-Christian interpretations. Connlae is tempted to leave the earthly kingdom of his father Conn by an otherworld woman. She promises him immortality in Mag Mell, the plain of delights. Conn has his druid drown out the woman's enchanting song, but as she leaves she throws an apple to Connlae. For a whole month Connlae eats nothing but the apple, which never decreases. After a month the woman returns. Conn again summons his druid, but the woman warns him that druidry is doomed – apparently a foretelling of Christianity. Though Connlae declares that it is hard for him to leave, because he loves his people, nevertheless he goes away with the woman.

The traditional view of the tale as fundamentally pagan can be seen in Dillon, pp. 102–4, and it also informs Dumville's views in his article. On the other hand, Carney insisted that the tale was a Christian allegory in which the otherworld woman represented the Christian promise of everlasting life in heaven, characteristically resisted by the druid, to no avail. It is worth quoting a sentence from Dumville's article (p. 74):

Needless to say, the claim that the *echtrae* is a pre-Christian Celtic story-type should not be allowed to prejudice in any way the discussion of the origins of the extant tales which may very well be compositions of the historical period.

In other words, the idea that the *echtrae* is a form inherited from the pagan past does not mean that *Echtrae Connlai* cannot be a conscious adaptation of the form to express a Christian, perhaps even a militantly Christian, message.

Reading

Myles Dillon, *Early Irish Literature* (Chicago, 1948), pp. 101 and 124.

David N. Dumville, 'Echtrae and Immram: Some Problems of Definition', *Ériu*, 27 (1976), 73–94.

A very brief discussion of the genre of *Immram Brain* and Dumville's thesis:

Jonathan Wooding (ed.), *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature: An Anthology of Criticism* (Dublin, 2000), p. xii.

Finally, a strongly anti-nativist view of the two texts:

Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth, 1990), pp. 79–83.

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20 December 2013