

Copyright Notice

Staff and students of this University are reminded that copyright subsists in this extract and the work from which it was taken. This Digital Copy has been made under the terms of a CLA Licence which allows you to:

- Access and download a copy
- Print out a copy

This Digital Copy and any digital or printed copy supplied to or made by you under the terms of this Licence are for use in connection with this module or course of study. You may retain such copies after the end of the course, but strictly for your own personal use.

All copies (including electronic copies) shall include this Copyright Notice and shall be destroyed and/or deleted if and when required by the University.

Except as provided for by copyright law, no further copying, storage or distribution (including by e-mail) is permitted without the consent of the copyright holder.

The author (which term includes artists and other visual creators) has moral rights in the work and neither staff nor students may cause, or permit, the distortion, mutilation or other modification of the work, or any other derogatory treatment of it, which would be prejudicial to the honour or reputation of the author.

Title of extract: **Review of Archaeology and Celtic Myth: An Exploration**

Name of Author: **Williams, M.**

Title/Author of book/edition (if applicable):

Name of Visual Creator or other acknowledgement (if applicable):

Journal details –title/Vol/Year (if applicable): **Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies Vol 73 (Haf 2017)**

Publisher: **University of Wales Press**

Pages scanned: **72 - 74**

Course of Study (Module name and number): **Study and Research Methodology CYCS7014**

Name of Designated Person

authorising scanning:

E. L. Harris

Date authorised: 17.10.17.

Moodle/Powerpoint

Archaeology and Celtic Myth. An Exploration. By JOHN WADDELL. Dublin: Four Courts Press. 2015. xv + 203 pp., 22 figures, 10 colour plates. Paperback reprint. €22.45

PROBLEMS WITH this volume begin with the second word of its title. What, precisely, is the nature of the connection between pre-Christian Ireland's archaeology on the one hand, and, on the other, the mythological elements in the writings of the island's medieval clerical intelligensia? Waddell conducts the reader through the first of these areas superbly, as one would expect from a scholar of such distinction, but on the second he finds himself on exceedingly treacherous ground. And when the attempt is made to make the two topics speak to one another, the upshot is an aggravating mass of instabilities.

Waddell's approach to the medieval textual material is strikingly behind the times. On the subject of pre-Christian ritual and religion in Ireland, medievalists and archaeologists have been tracing incompatible intellectual trajectories for decades. For those who deal with literary culture, the old-fashioned 'nativist' view that a pre-Christian origin should be ascribed to many of the themes of the vernacular narratives is long out of date. The anti-nativist 'new orthodoxy' (hardly new these days) has long since become part of the basic intellectual toolkit. There is no arguing with the evidence for Irish learning's deep and early engagement with classical and biblical tradition, and it is likewise clear that the themes of early Irish literature were mediated through (and may even, in some cases, have been created by) an undergirding Christian vision. In so sceptical an atmosphere, many medievalists would see the attempt to trace connections between archaeology and literary material as tricky at best, fundamentally misguided at worst. Two generations of scholars have made plain that medieval Ireland's tirelessly creative learned classes were happy to invoke ancient precedent whilst revising and repurposing the traditional material which had been handed down to them; we know now how much energy they invested in creating an imagined version of their island's pre-Christian past, and indeed a quarter of a century has passed since Kim McCone urged us to take our hats off to them in recognition of the splendour of their achievement. The effect is that it is impossible to tell whether any aspect of a given text — from large-scale narrative structure down to the finest detail — represents transcription from oral tradition, a radical monastic overhaul of an inherited myth, or medieval invention. Medievalists' confidence in the ability of their discipline to illuminate pre-Christian Irish belief has therefore been largely dismantled over the last forty years. In contrast, archaeologists have seen their understanding of stretches of the prehistoric past grow by leaps and bounds, not least thanks to new technology and to major excavations of Iron Age sites of the kind that Waddell himself has undertaken at Rathcroghan. What I do not understand about the way this book has been embarked upon is that its author clearly *knows* all this: he outlines a (rather dated) version of the developments traced above at the beginning, but then quietly ignores them for the rest of the study.

The argument works (in as much as it does) by the accumulation of suggestive detail, not much of which convinces. Chapter 2, 'The Otherworld Hall on the

Boyne', is typical. In it Waddell addresses Ireland's most immediately impressive archaeological landscape, the Neolithic necropolis which centres around Newgrange, *Bruig na Bóinne*. He searches the medieval material for evidence that the alignment of the sites to the cycles of the sun is reflected in the mythology of Óengus, son of the Dagda (and elsewhere in the tradition), noting with John Carey that a striking number of the relevant anecdotes involve manipulation of the heavenly bodies or of the flow of time. But all this falls apart on closer inspection: it is entirely possible that such stories could have been inspired by the landscape itself at any point, and it is not a good sign that Waddell invokes very late evidence, the fourteenth- or fifteenth-century saga *Altram Tige Dá Medar*, to bolster his case. Whoever wrote that exquisite tale would almost certainly have known the earlier stories about Óengus in textual form, and could thus have allowed his imagination to work upon the thematization of time within them. The sophisticated development of theme and variation in the work of medieval Ireland's literati simply cannot be used in this cavalier manner as evidence for the meaning of ancient sites.

Occasionally the effect is little short of bizarre. The author goes in for Indo-European parallels, chiefly from India, in a manner that has long been common in Celtic Studies (even among some anti-nativists), but the use of such material illustrates why it has largely fallen out of fashion. Discussing the idea of sacral kingship and the supposed Indian parallels to the grotesque Cenél Conaill 'horse-sacrifice' described by Gerald of Wales, Waddell allows himself (p. 104) to begin reconstructing the ceremony's pre-Christian liturgy:

It has been contended as well that in so publicly professing himself to be a beast (... *se quoque bestiam profitetur*) the Cenél Conaill inaugurant might have voiced an actual ritual utterance such as 'I am *ekwos, thou art *ekwā', recalling the Vedic marriage formula 'I am he, thou art she'. This too could have been part of the rites at Emain Macha.

Even more alarmingly, Waddell shows himself again and again to be deaf to the possible modulations of tone in the medieval literature: it is simply treated as a mine of data through which the significance of mute archaeological objects and landscapes can be retrieved. One example is the discussion of *Compert Con Culainn* in Chapter 1, which flatly asserts that the 'seasonal pattern of the tale would have been well understood' (p. 14). I am not even clear that the tale exhibits a seasonal pattern at all. 'The land lies waste', Waddell continues, 'at the beginning of winter and the sacred king Conchobar and the god Lug are both contenders for the kingship and for the fruits of the land represented by the goddess of sovereignty'. In all this he is much too dependent on a single, retro-mythological article by Marion Deane which fits his own method neatly but is in itself less than convincing. Another possibility (to choose only one) is that the author of the tale was actively sending up pagan gods; Waddell makes much of the fact that Sétanta, the future Cú Chulainn, undergoes three separate fatherings in the tale, and he is prepared to see this 'triple birth' as an archaic mytheme. But, given the parallels Irish men of learning drew between Cú Chulainn and Christ, perhaps the point is

that the pagan Lug — supposedly *samildánach*, ‘multitalented’ — can barely manage what the Christian God had done with ease, that is, become incarnate and be born of a virgin as a child both divine and human.

In all, this book is a missed opportunity. Near the beginning, Waddell asserts that the survival of pagan themes in medieval Irish texts is ‘not in doubt’ (p. 5). In a sense this is quite right, but it implies that a complicated web of questions can be reduced to a simple binary: in doubt or not in doubt? After all, not even the most trenchant anti-nativist would suggest that *no* archaic undertow whatsoever is to be detected in medieval Irish literature (not to mention — even more problematically — in Irish folklore). Surely the crucial issue is *how* and *why* did that undertow survive and come to the surface in the textual material. Archaeology cannot tell us much about what was going on within the bounds of the monastery, and more particularly about what was going on within monastic skulls, which is what we need to know in order to be able to weigh the material the book sets out. As I read it, I continually felt the need for a discussion, however speculative, of the mindset of (for example) the authors of the Old and Middle Irish sagas, or of the poets who composed the metrical *dindshenchas*. How does Waddell think idolatry and ideology separated out in the conversion period? If the Christian Irish were so prepared to bring over ideas from the pagan past (Waddell suggests that we place sacral kingship, the sovereignty mythos, and the concept of the otherworld in this category) then why did the Anglo-Saxons fail to go in for the same sort of thing? What made one north-western European, non-Romanized, Christian/monastic learned culture create a literature thronged with after-images of ancestral deities, while the other conspicuously did not? Are we even right to talk of ‘Irish myth’ at all, given the notorious difficulties of the second term? To what degree, in any specific case, might Irish men of learning have been introjecting imagery drawn from classical mythology, or from the Bible, or from elsewhere in Christian learned tradition? All these questions are difficult — if they were not, we would have reached a consensus long ago — but they needed to be tackled, not breezily dismissed. Somewhere, a book of this ambition needed to acknowledge that the relation between archaeology and literary myth is not one of direct transmission, but of transfusion and transmutation.

I regret not being able to write more positively about this volume, which is beautifully produced and elegantly written. It seems destined to end up in the ‘Use With Caution’ section of undergraduate reading lists, where it will join some noble and enduringly valuable company: one thinks of W. J. Gruffydd’s explorations of the *Mabinogi*, Proinsias Mac Cana’s posthumous *Cult of the Sacred Centre*, and T. F. O’Rahilly’s *Early Irish History and Mythology*. Professional medievalists are likely to find Waddell’s book most useful for the rich, learned, and clear summaries of the Bronze Age and Iron Age archaeological data, and will be able to ignore the interpretations of the later literature.