

Celtic otherworlds in ancient authors

Lucan on the druidic otherworld

And you, ye druids, having laid aside your arms, have returned to your barbaric rites and sinister mode of worship.—To you alone it is granted or withheld to have knowledge of the gods and the powers of heaven, you who dwell in deep woods in sequestered groves. Your teaching is that the shades of the dead do not make their way to the silent abode of Erebus or the lightless realm of Dis below, but that the same soul animates the limbs in another sphere [*orbe alio*]. If you sing of certainties, death is the centre of continuous life. Truly the peoples on whom the Pole star looks down are happy in their error, for they are not harassed by the greatest of terrors, the fear of death. This gives the warrior his eagerness to rush upon the / steel, a spirit ready to face death, and an indifference to save a life which will return.

Lucan, *Pharsalia*, Book 1, lines 450–62. Translation: Nora K. Chadwick, *The Druids* (Cardiff, 1966), pp. 53–4.

The Roman poet Lucan (AD 39–65) wrote a long poem on the Roman civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey, called the *Pharsalia*. Book 1 contains a description of the beliefs of the druids of Gaul (lines 450–62). Here Lucan states that the druids were held to be the sole intermediaries between gods and humans, and that they dwelt in remote woods. The druids taught that after death the shades of mortals did not go to Hades, as classical belief suggested; rather, both soul and body survived *orbe alio* (line 454). This may (but does not have to be) translated as ‘in another world’.

What might *orbis alius* mean in Lucan’s account? We have to investigate the various senses of the word *orbis* in the Latin of his time. The underlying meaning is ‘circle, disc, orbit’, and from this arose the meaning ‘world’. Later, with a qualifying adjective, it could mean a restricted part of the world, as in the phrase *orbis Romanus* ‘the Roman world, Roman empire’. This usage is found in Lucan. From this arose the sense ‘region’. It was particularly common to refer to islands and landmasses distinct from the writer’s own as another *orbis*. The late-4th century poet Claudian calls Britain an *alius orbis*. The same phrase was used of Ceylon (Sri Lanka): the geographer Pomponius Mela, writing c. AD 43/4, says that Ceylon is ‘either a very large island or the nearest part of an *alter orbis*’. We might translate *alter orbis* here as ‘another continent’.

We cannot be sure where Lucan’s *alius orbis* was thought to be, or even whether Lucan had any clear idea himself. From his testimony, however, it seems clear that the druids preached some kind of resurrection and perhaps immortality in a sphere removed from our own, perhaps in some other part of the globe. It seems reasonable to accept that this sphere is an ‘otherworld’ according to the definition I offered at the beginning of this module. Lucan’s own tone is sceptical, indeed cynical in these lines. He pointedly does not

endorse the druidic view ('... if what you sing is true ...'). Moreover he offers a severely practical assessment of the belief in immortality: it allowed Gaulish warriors to fight without fear of death, thus conferring on them a significant advantage over other peoples.

Plutarch on sacred islands

The Greek historian and philosopher Plutarch (AD c. 46–120) has an account of islands near Britain which bore a religious significance (perhaps the Isles of Scilly, off Cornwall). Some were named after divinities or heroes (in Greek usage, a 'hero' might well imply someone with divine attributes). Plutarch's source here was an acquaintance of his, Demetrius, who had been ordered by the emperor to visit the nearest of these islands. According to Demetrius its only inhabitants were 'holy men, who were all held inviolate by the Britons'. While he was on the island there was a violent storm, which the holy men interpreted as a sign of 'the passing of someone of the mightier souls'. On another island, according to these holy men, Kronos was imprisoned, guarded by Briareus and surrounded by daimons. This is a particularly interesting example of *interpretatio*, which I talked about earlier: the representation of native deities or mythological figures in terms that would be familiar to Mediterranean observers. In Greek mythology Kronos was the father of Zeus, and was overthrown by his own son, while Briareus was one of Zeus's allies. It was presumably Demetrius who applied the Greek names and Greek myth to the characters and story he encountered in the British islands. What the story was like in the mouths of the British holy men we will never know; unless, of course, the story was already affected by Greek myth before Demetrius heard it. Given that the Roman occupation of Britain was already more than half a century old, this cannot be ruled out. In any case we have here some evidence that islands could bear a religious and mythological significance in pagan belief.

Procopius on Britain as an otherworld

The 6th-century East Roman historian Procopius has a digression about Britain which contains some extraordinary statements. He refers to a wall built across it long ago (presumably this was inspired by Hadrian's wall). He goes on to say:

and the climate and the soil and everything else is not alike on the two sides of it. For to the east of the wall there is a salubrious air, changing with the seasons, being moderately warm in summer and cool in winter. And many people dwell there, living in the same fashion as other men, and the trees abound with fruits which ripen at the fitting season, and the corn-lands flourish as abundantly as any; furthermore, the land seems to display a genuine pride in an abundance of springs of water. But on the west side everything is the reverse of this, so that it is actually impossible for a man to survive there even a half-hour, but countless snakes and serpents and every other kind of wild creature occupy this area as their own. And, strangest of all, the inhabitants say that if any man crosses this wall and goes to the other side, he dies

straightaway, being quite unable to support the pestilential air of that region, and the wild animals, likewise, which go there are instantly met and taken by death.

This is remarkably similar to some episodes in the later Irish voyage tales involving divided islands and walls that cannot be crossed. Even more extraordinary is Procopius's account of how the fishermen of the neighbouring coast of Gaul ferry the souls of the dead over to Britain. He claims that this belief was related by these men themselves. This, again, sounds remarkably like a belief that Britain was an island 'otherworld', but how could inhabitants of coastal Gaul, who must have had plenty of normal, day-to-day contact with the inhabitants of the opposite shore, have believed such a story? It may be that it has been thoroughly garbled by Procopius. Procopius himself refuses to credit the story.

Conclusion

These passages illustrate the point that I have been making throughout, namely the difficulty we have in deciding whose testimony the classical authors are relating. We do not know how Procopius's stories originated or how much they have changed on their way to him. It is likely that they were brought to Constantinople, where Procopius lived, by Frankish ambassadors (see Thompson's article below). But are they Celtic legends or Frankish ones, or the travellers' tales of Greeks, for whom distant Britain was indeed another world?

Do the above fragments of evidence allow us to declare that the ancient Celts believed in an 'otherworld'? It does seem clear that belief in some kind of supernatural zone or zones was present among them, but putting all these testimonies together to form a single picture is a task fraught with uncertainty.

Reading

Here are the passages I have been discussing. I have posted weblinks to the Lucan and Plutarch texts on Moodle. Procopius is not available online.

Lucan, *Pharsalia*, i.450–62; ed. J.D. Duff, *Lucan: The Civil War* (London and New York, 1928).

Plutarch, *On the Obsolescence of Oracles*, Chapter 18, ed. F.C. Babbitt, *Plutarch: Moralia*, vol. 5 (London and New York, 000), pp. 402–5.

Procopius, *History of the Wars*, Book 8, chapter 20, ed. by H.B. Dewing, *Procopius*, vol. V (London and New York, 1928), pp. 252–71.

On Procopius, it is worth consulting the following article, though much of it is devoted to the geography of Procopius's account:

E.A. Thompson, 'Procopius on Brittia and Britain', *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series, vol. 30, no. 2 (1980), 498–507. On JSTOR.

The final article is in French and quite specialized and is not necessary reading. I note it here simply as the source for what I have said above regarding the meanings of *orbis*.

Salomon Reinach, 'Le mot *orbis* dans le latin de l'empire', *Revue Celtique*, 22 (1901), 447–57.

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19 December 2013
Revised 17 February 2014