

The location of the otherworld

The overseas otherworld in *Immram Brain* and *Echtrae Connlai*

Interpretations of the otherworld in *Immram Brain* shadow the debate over pagan and Christian elements. Older scholarship tended to see it as of pagan inspiration. Carney rejected this idea, but it was restated in a series of thoughtful articles by Proinsias Mac Cana during the 1970s. Carney had found the sexual nature of the otherworld delights a problem for his Christian interpretation, and this difficulty was a fundamental one for Mac Cana. A Christian, monastic author simply could not be using such symbolism to convey any Christian idea of paradise. The author, even though he was a Christian himself, had to be grappling with inherited material.

Unfortunately, the debate over the nature of the otherworld in *Immram Brain* became bogged down in an immensely technical discussion of the sources of the work and its relations to other texts, notably the short tale called *Echtrae Connlai*, the early tales about Mongán mac Fiachna, and two other brief texts known as the Lough Foyle Colloquies. If you read around the topic of *Immram Brain* you are sure to come across some of these discussions.

It is not clear that we can really reconstruct the prehistory of these texts or say definitively which one (if any) influenced the others: Wooding, *Otherworld Voyage*, p. xvi says aptly that ‘This sort of literary archaeology is intriguing but unresolvable’. For the purposes of this course, it would be preferable to focus on the texts as we have them, and not to pursue further the question of their alleged prehistory.

The debate does, however, have relevance for the otherworld. Carney insisted that the whole idea of an overseas otherworld is not Irish, and was introduced into Irish literature for the first time in *Immram Brain*, being derived from contemporary monastic voyaging. This view has found favour with Carey, but is treated with scepticism by Sims-Williams.

Whether the pre-Christian Irish therefore recognized the concept of otherworld islands is currently still in dispute; it has obvious implications when we try to compare the Irish and the ancient classical sources which were discussed in Unit 2.

The *síd*

In most Irish texts the *síd* is the commonest location of otherworld experiences. A *síd* (plural *síde*) appears to have been a mound which was believed to be hollow; inside was an otherworld realm whose dimensions bore no relation to the size of the outside. There were several of these *síde* in Ireland. Some, such as Bruig na Bóinne, were clearly prehistoric monuments. Bruig na Bóinne is the great Neolithic tomb at Newgrange, co. Meath. Individual *síde* appear to have been under the jurisdiction of named characters

who belonged to the *Tuatha Dé* – generally believed to be reflexes of pagan deities. A classic description of a *síd* is given in the short tale *De Gabáil in tSída*, which describes how one of them, the Mac Óc, outwitted his father and took possession of Bruig na Bóinne.

The etymology of the name is uncertain, but it is identical with another word *síd* meaning ‘peace’, and they may be related. The Welsh word *gorsedd*, meaning a mound, may also be related. Welsh *gorseddau* can also be associated with otherworld encounters. This is discussed in more detail by Sims-Williams.

Welsh *Annwn*, *Annwfn*

This Welsh otherworld is best known from the First Branch of the Mabinogi, where the hero, Pwyll, visits *Annwn* in place of its king. It was a kingdom, apparently underground, though not always, since it could also be reached by sea. This variability seems to be characteristic of many imagined otherworlds. The etymology of the name is discussed by Sims-Williams, who sees it as a derivative of *dwfn* ‘deep’ or the identical word *dwfn* ‘world’.

Annwn would appear to be primarily a chthonic otherworld – that is, one located under the ground. That is rather like Irish *síde*, though the connection with mounds is not so clear. But *Annwn* was apparently a single realm. In contrast, it is disputed whether Irish tradition gives any indication that the various *síd*-realms were interconnected. Carey says yes, Sims-Williams no.

Reading

Proinsias Mac Cana, ‘The Sinless Otherworld of *Imram Brain*’, *Ériu*, 27 (1976), 97–115. Reprinted in Wooding, *The Otherworld Voyage*.

Vernam Hull (ed.), ‘*De Gabáil in tSída* (Concerning the Seizure of the Fairy Mound)’, *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 19 (1933), 53–8.

‘The Ulster Cycle: The Taking of the *Síd*-Mound’ (no translator named), <http://ulstercycle.wordpress.com/2009/11/07/the-taking-of-the-sid-mound/> (accessed 24 January 2020)

T. Ó Cathasaigh, ‘The Semantics of *Síd*’, *Éigse*, 17 (1977–9), 137–55.

John Carey, ‘The Location of the Otherworld in Irish Tradition’, *Éigse*, 19 (1982–3), 36–43. Reprinted in Wooding, *The Otherworld Voyage*.

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

Patrick Sims-Williams, ‘Kaer Sidi and Other Celtic Otherworld Terms’, in Patrick Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 53–78.

Barry Lewis
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