

NEW APPROACHES  
TO CELTIC RELIGION  
AND MYTHOLOGY



# UNDERSTANDING CELTIC RELIGION

REVISITING THE PAGAN PAST

EDITED BY

KATJA RITARI AND ALEXANDRA BERGHOLM

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BAR	British Archaeological Reports
CCCM	<i>Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis</i>
CCSL	<i>Corpus Christianorum Series Latina</i>
CG	<i>Críth Gablach</i>
CIH	<i>Corpus Iuris Hibernici</i>
CMCS	<i>Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies</i> (1-25), thence <i>Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies</i> (26-)
CSANA	Celtic Studies Association of North America
CSEL	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i>
CSIR	<i>Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani</i>
DIL	<i>Royal Irish Academy Dictionary of the Irish Language</i>
EC	<i>Études celtiques</i>
ITS	Irish Texts Society
JRA	<i>Journal of Roman Archaeology</i>
LU	<i>Lebor na hUidre</i>
MGH AA	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Auctores Antiquissimi</i>
MMIS	Medieval and Modern Irish Series
PL	<i>Patrologia Latina</i>
PsG	Greek Psalms from the Septuagint
PsH	Hebrew Psalms
PRIA	<i>Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy</i>
RC	<i>Revue celtique</i>
SCF	<i>Studia Celtica Fennica</i>
YBL	Yellow Book of Lecan
ZCP	<i>Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie</i>

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## FOREWORD BY THE SERIES EDITOR

**I**t is timely that one of the major university presses in the Celtic nations is launching a series on approaches to Celtic religion and mythology. The myths and religious ideas of the Celtic-speaking peoples have had an enduring appeal for scholars as well as general readers. Our new series acknowledges this long-standing interest, while also picking up on the particular energy that approaches to religion and spirituality have brought to studies of Celtic sources across recent decades. By the end of the 1980s the old conception of a 'Celtic Church' had been set aside – and with it long-held assumptions of cultural isolation and insularity. At the same time, another revisionist movement, arising from studies of narrative literature, took aim at 'nativist' approaches to literature; these had been concerned with perceived mythic structures in texts, but often at the expense of narrative meanings and the more immediate sources of tradition. Such revisionist perspectives, though arising in the first instance out of more historical and literary concerns, had the effect of opening up new spaces for the study of scriptural, patristic, and classical influences on a Celtic culture which had too often been perceived as isolated and exceptional.

Scholars of religion from a range of countries – several of whom contribute to this first volume of our series – were thus encouraged to engage with Celtic topics. A further generation of scholars – amongst them two outstanding Finnish scholars who are the editors of the present collection – have taken this study further forward. At the same time, developments in the disciplines of Religious Studies and Theology brought new perspectives on questions of indigenous religion, narrative studies of myth, and historical interpretation of the theology – all of which benefit studies of Celtic sources. In Classical studies, new approaches to Roman provincial religion and religious diversity in late antiquity further serve to contextualise developments in the religions of the Celtic-speaking peoples. We are beginning to move beyond a preoccupation with defining what is – or what is not – distinctly 'Celtic', to find new energy in studying the processes of encounter between religious cultures.

The studies in this first volume all set examples of how to bring new approaches to traditional data. Together they make an outstanding collection and an exciting start to our series.

*Jonathan Wooding  
University of Sydney, Australia*

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION: 'CELTIC RELIGION': IS THIS A VALID CONCEPT?<sup>1</sup>

*Alexandra Bergholm and Katja Ritari*

The last few decades have witnessed a paradigmatic change in the human sciences which has challenged the very basis of the process of acquiring knowledge. In the study of history, the point at issue is the one about possessing 'objective' knowledge of the past: if all history is unavoidably situated, how do the scholars' presuppositions and methodological choices concerning the 'proper' way of 'doing history' shape our understanding of historical reality?<sup>2</sup>

It could be argued that the reverberations of this shift have been slow to reach Celtic Studies, which since its inception as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century has been firmly grounded on the methodological premises of comparative philology. Indeed, writing less than twenty years ago in 1996, Hildegard L. C. Tristram could observe that '[c]ritical discourse has only just begun in Celtic Studies and research with more modern methodologies than philology are [sic] as yet rare'.<sup>3</sup> With regard to Tristram's poignant remarks on the stagnant nature of scholarly discourse in the field, an illustrative case in point would be the so-called nativist/anti-nativist controversy, which until relatively recently dominated the study of early Irish textual material. As Jonathan Wooding has observed, this debate concerning the origin and nature of these sources had its roots planted in contemporary cultural politics and wider intellectual commitments of twentieth-century scholarship, and therefore cannot be seen as purely a problem of textual or literary analysis.<sup>4</sup> From a methodological point of view, however, what is particularly noteworthy is the manner in which the constructed oppositions characterising this polemic – oral/literary, native/foreign, archaic/medieval, or pre-Christian/Christian – reflect a particular understanding of the possibility of recovering historical 'reality' from early textual sources, which in itself stems from a fundamental, albeit narrowly conceived, philosophical dichotomy between truth and fiction. Thus, despite the polarised views



of the two camps, the epistemological premise of the controversy was ultimately the same: to quote Wooding, 'we either can recover the past – or earlier strata of texts – through "excavating" texts, or we cannot.'<sup>5</sup>

While the efforts of perpetuating and maintaining such rigid polarisations have gradually given way to more dynamic approaches, the question of the methodologies underpinning the study of various sources at our disposal still remains pertinent.<sup>6</sup> In the case of early Irish texts, however, several important publications published in the past few years alone demonstrate that the field is moving towards more theoretically informed approaches, with scholars adopting a plurality of analytical perspectives that present old material in a new light. Recent examples of this include studies addressing topics such as cultural memory, transmission history, textual interpretation, classical learning, narrative strategies, performativity, and literacy, to name just a few.<sup>7</sup> In highlighting the multifaceted nature of the textual material, and bringing to the fore the complexity of intellectual mechanisms of literary communication, this work is increasingly reaching beyond the 'monolithic, self-assertive and positivistic discourse of philology',<sup>8</sup> thereby redefining the questions we should be asking of our sources.

Although such heightened theoretical awareness may still be seen as a relatively recent development in Celtic Studies in comparison to many other neighbouring disciplines, other issues have been more thoroughly subjected to critical interrogation, which has subsequently called into question many of the traditional assumptions guiding scholarship in the field. This is perhaps most readily apparent in the criticisms levelled against the term 'Celtic' – a concept which, according to its critics, has little (if any) basis in historical or ethnographic reality, and equally little value as an analytical scholarly category.<sup>9</sup> The contours of the controversy surrounding the notion of 'Celticity' have been traced many times,<sup>10</sup> and the various arguments need not be rehearsed here. For the purpose of the present volume, the importance of questioning definitions – in other words, of asking *who* the 'Celts' are, and *what* counts as 'Celtic' – is, of course, evident, as the term 'Celtic religion' in itself presupposes an understanding of some shared commonalities between the various phenomena included under this broad umbrella term. However, whereas the various ideological implications of 'Celticity' are nowadays generally recognised, relatively less analytical attention has been paid to the fact that as a scholarly term, 'religion' is equally complex and contested.<sup>11</sup> In seeking conceptual clarity with regard to 'Celtic religion', it is therefore worth framing the question anew, asking not only what counts as 'Celtic', but also what counts as 'religion'.

In the academic study of religion, it has become something of a truism to observe that 'religion' as a category is as familiar as it is impossible to define. In this vein, Willi Braun for instance characterises the term as a 'floating signifier', which is 'capable of attaching itself to wide range of objects – many of them obscure – to countless blurry ideas and a host of often imprecise definitional propositions.'<sup>12</sup> For many, this indeterminacy of meaning entails that scholars should abandon the efforts of arriving at a universal definition of the concept altogether, and rather focus on the dynamic processes and operations by which certain social and cultural formations are marked off as belonging to the category 'religion'. At the same time, the questioning of the validity and heuristic utility of the term has also raised the issue of the ethnocentric and Western bias of the concept which, as an academic construct, derives from a Christian (and predominantly Protestant) understanding of religious belief and practice.<sup>13</sup>

In light of these theoretical considerations, it is clear that the critical appraisal of how such conceptual categories as 'religion', 'mythology', 'pre-Christian', or 'Christian' are defined and used in the field of Celtic Studies is also timely.<sup>14</sup> In recent years, some of these terms have come under scrutiny especially due to the eclectic appropriation and re-creation of 'Celticity' in the context of popular movements known as 'Celtic Christianity', 'Celtic Paganism', or 'Celtic spirituality'.<sup>15</sup> Other scholars, focusing on theology in particular, have revised the long-held view of the insularity and marginality of Christianity in the British Isles, and enhanced the appreciation of the reception and development of Christian intellectual tradition in this area throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>16</sup> The present volume serves as a contribution to this wider discussion, by bringing to the fore some of the methodological challenges involved in the demarcation of boundaries that define the elusive entity called 'Celtic religion'.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the questions that we wish to raise are: When scholars attempt to construct the belief system of the Celts, what counts as 'religion'? Or, when something is labelled as 'religion' as opposed to 'mythology', what do these entities entail? To what extent is it possible to attain the pre-Christian stratum through the extant textual sources which themselves present us with a mediated understanding of the religious traditions of the past? And what theoretical viewpoints or analytical tools could help towards a better understanding of the essence of the different strata usually labelled as 'pre-Christian', 'Christian' or 'Celtic'?

This collection of articles has its origins in a two-day colloquium, held at the University of Helsinki back in 2008, where a group of twenty scholars from different disciplinary orientations working in the field of Celtic

Studies gathered together to discuss these issues from the point of view of their individual research interests. As the purpose of the meeting was to encourage free dialogue and to create a stimulating atmosphere for the exchange of ideas, we did not expect solutions or ready-made answers. We were delighted by the success of the event, which provided sustenance to our conviction that the topic was indeed worth addressing. The importance of examining the existing paradigms on the one hand, and introducing new insights to the field on the other, became the dominant theme of the colloquium, which generated lively discussion and civilized debate.

It was clear to us from the outset that the current methodological premises of the field also merited critical re-evaluation in print. Therefore we asked our guest speakers to contribute to this volume by elaborating on the problems of methodology with regard to their own research materials. With this aim we also invited a number of eminent scholars who were not present at the colloquium to participate in the publication. In each of the articles, the authors reflect upon the same broad theme, drawing from a range of materials including theology, narrative literature, history, law and archaeology. The case studies illustrate particular problems related to individual genres, while also highlighting fundamental questions and concerns pertaining to the study of 'Celtic religion' at large.

One of the central themes in this regard is the process of Christianisation, which is addressed by several contributors with particular reference to the early Irish literary material. Jacqueline Borsje offers a balanced discussion of the multilayered nature of early Irish sources by considering the survival of indigenous beliefs from the viewpoint of translation and adaptation in literary communication. Drawing upon the methods of theological exegesis, she examines how ritual expression is represented in texts containing spells and other words of power, concluding that pre-Christian cultural elements may be gleaned in the extant sources in a number of different ways. Borsje's observation that the early missionaries in the fifth century did not arrive in a vacuum, but had to seek ways to communicate their message in a manner that was intelligible in the new cultural and social context, is an important one, as it foregrounds the question of how this ongoing process of negotiation is reflected in the textual evidence. This topic is addressed by John Carey, whose article discusses the place accorded in medieval Irish literature to supernatural beings who are evidently derived from the gods and goddesses of the pagan period. The significance of this, and its implications for the nature of Irish tradition, have been matters of spirited debate in recent decades. Instead of confronting the question of origins, the article

looks in the opposite direction, endeavouring to trace some of the ways in which the Irish vision of the immortals continued to flourish and further develop in the later medieval period.

The Christian attitudes towards the pre-Christian past are also at the focus of Joseph Nagy's contribution, which takes a performative approach in its examination of the depictions of the non-Christian otherworld in medieval Irish narratives. After a careful assessment of current scholarly approaches to the elusive archaic religious tradition, he argues that even if the early Irish sources cannot be read as accurate or authentic representations of the pre-Christian past, the manner in which this past is enshrined in the texts still merits investigation. The discussion highlights this point by looking at how the otherworldly confrontations in the narrative sources can be understood not only as an encounter between the human and the supernatural, but also in terms of a relationship between the otherworldly performer and his or her audience.

In his examination of the central importance of the Christian scriptures in the literary cultures of the early Middle Ages, Thomas O'Loughlin calls for a dialogue between different disciplines by demonstrating why competence in handling biblical materials should not be confined to theologians and historians of biblical exegesis. Considering the works of Gildas, Adomnán, and Muirchú alongside the Irish collection of canon law *Collectio canonum hibernensis*, the author draws attention to the pervasive role of the scripture in these works, as well as in collective memory and imagination throughout Christendom. Accordingly, he argues that a re-evaluation of our own fundamental scholarly assumptions is a necessary prerequisite of a fuller appreciation of the biblical dimension of early medieval mentality.

Robin Chapman Stacey's article focuses on a body of material that has long been at the centre of debates about the origins of the earliest Irish sources. Early Irish law tracts have played a major role in scholarly efforts to define the nature of the extant source material and to reconstruct the historical 'reality', whether pagan or Christian, that these sources reflect. The fact that the secular legal material has traditionally been given an unusual place of prominence in the study of the religious institutions and practices of the early Irish is in itself noteworthy, and highlights the need for a reassessment of this body of texts alongside other source materials analysed in this volume. In her discussion, Stacey departs from the positivist approach of much of the earlier scholarship in order to apply new methodologies to her analysis of three of the main early Irish status tracts, *Críth Gablach*, *Uraicecht Becc*, and *Míadshlechte*. Examining issues of gender,