

## Kirja-arvosteluja – Book reviews

**Alexandra Bergholm: *From Shaman to Saint. Interpretative Strategies in the Study of Buile Shuibhne*. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia. Academia Scientiarum Fennica 2012. 212 pages. Price 30€. ISBN 978-951-41-1069-6.**

The work by Alexandra Bergholm opens a new chapter in the study of a medieval Irish text *Buile Shuibhne*. The interpretation of the title is the task that cannot be easily resolved. According to the author, ‘its title would assign it to the group of *buile/baile*, usually translated as “vision”, “prophetic exctasy” or “frenzy”’ (p. 51, fn. 43), yet also hinting at a view that the title ‘should be taken to refer to a vision or “revelation of the otherworld” (*baile*) rather than madness or frenzy’ (p. 160, fn. 180).

The book is divided into three parts. The first one presents an introduction to the study: the reader is provided with a background and purpose(s) of the study. A brief survey of the previous research available to the author follows, and a particular attention is paid to the problems of textual meaning, literary contexts and social models of reading of early Irish learned written tradition. Particularly useful is the introduction to an array of manuscript sources and texts in which the

text is contained, and the synopsis of the story provides the reader with a necessary tool to follow Suibhne’s convoluted tale.

Taking the phenomenon in its widest sense, the author provides an intriguing study into the figures and characters of *gelta*, both male and female, in Biblical and in medieval traditions, the latter including Irish, Welsh and Old Norse-Icelandic literatures.

The second part is a quadrangle of frameworks of interpretation. The nexus of historical and Christian frameworks of understanding is balanced with the pre-Christian and anthropological one. These pairs of mutually complementing approaches help the reader to perceive an ambiguous and complex figure of Suibhne, his rootedness in the native Celtic Wild Man tradition, his apposition to the Christian tradition, both as a figure of *deorad Dé* ‘exile of God’ and an analogue of early Eastern monastic *boskoi* ‘grazers’ and *deudritai* ‘tree-dwellers’ and his ambiguity as a liminal character—transcending ‘the boundary points between opposites’ (p. 159), coming very close to poet-seers, the *mna chaointe* ‘wailing women’ of Irish tradition and the analogous ‘native religious experts’ (p. 113) in the Old Irish (Finn mac Cumhal, Túan mac Cairill, Derg Corra), Welsh (Lleu Llaw Gyffes, Myrddin), Scottish

(Laikoken) and Arthurian (Merlin of Geoffrey of Monmouth) traditions.

The third part opens perspectives to the future study of the text, replacing the view on the text as ‘the completed accomplishment of a singular authorial figure’ with the methodology considering ‘the text as a product of an ongoing process of development’ (p. 177). The author insists that the close examination of the historical composition of the text and the complex processes involved in its transmission be given further attention, acknowledging the role of the anonymous Middle Irish author or compiler in the composition of the text and making the reader aware of the ‘mediating position of the Middle Irish redactors in handling the materials available to them’ (p. 178).

In conclusion, she proposes (p. 186) that The understanding of early Irish narratives in Celtic Studies scholarship has long been predicated on several assumptions, but most notably on the belief that there is something readily knowable called tradition which in itself holds explanatory power.

The author cautions against a comfortable triangle of interpretation that includes familiar notions of tradition, text and context, and, instead, calls the readers to appreciate the complexity of early Irish narrative from an entirely different perspective, in which the focal points include such concepts as the cultural continuity, as well as the intrinsic authorial function of performance and creativity.

*Maxim Fomin, University of Ulster*

**Jacqueline Borsje: *The Celtic Evil Eye and Related Mythological Motifs in Medieval Ireland*. Leuven: Peeters. 2012. xii + 387 pages. Price 42 €. ISBN 978-90-429-2641-7.**

‘For the sight, being very vigorous and active, together with the spirit upon which it depends, sends forth a strange fiery power...’<sup>1</sup> Jacqueline Borsje starts her latest book *The Celtic Evil Eye and Related Mythological Motifs in Medieval Ireland* very aptly with this quote from Plutarch. The notion of the evil eye, that is, the belief that harm is caused by looking at someone or something in a certain way, is more than five thousand years old and can be found in several different cultures around the world. It is the ‘invisible threats and dangers’ caused by the evil eye that are the subject of Borsje’s examination. As she states in her introduction, ‘[t]he present volume explores mainly medieval Irish beliefs on the notion of the evil eye, although some reference is made to modern Irish views and similar beliefs in other cultures’ (p. 1).

Borsje’s book consists of six essays, five of which are revised and updated versions of articles that have been published earlier. The essays, which can be read independently in any order, were originally intended for scholars in Celtic studies. Now the aim is at a wider readership, which makes the substantial appendices, comprising more than one fourth of the book, indeed necessary.

<sup>1</sup> Plutarch, *Symposiacs*, Book 5, Question 7.

The first of these, 'An Old Irish Law Fragment on the Evil Eye', taken from an article co-authored by Borsje, is by Prof. Fergus Kelly. The two other appendices provide two medieval Irish sagas, *Cath Maige Tuired* (The Battle of Mag Tuired) and *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel) in their entirety. Borsje uses adapted versions of the translations by Whitley Stokes—for copyright reasons (p. 2).

The first essay in the book, 'The Evil Eye in Medieval Irish Literature'<sup>2</sup>, explains the concept of the evil eye and discusses various examples of the motif. Borsje refers to the occurrence of the evil eye in several cultures, but focuses mainly on 'the terms used for it in Ireland and a description and analysis of textual references' (p. 5). The essay is further divided under five headings which discuss dangerous eyes in early Irish literature. The first of these is 'the destructive eye', *suil milledach*, as found for example with Balor, king of the Fomoir, a race known from Irish mythology. The second heading, 'the angry eye', introduces a discussion of angry eyes and eyes with multiple pupils in connection with the evil eye. The other parts of the essay deal with 'casting the evil eye', 'envy and the evil eye', and 'protection against the evil eye'. The author has drawn significantly on modern folklore studies in dealing with these three topics; this suits the examination well, since the modern

evidence does indeed seem to shed light on numerable issues concerning the medieval evil eye.

The author acknowledges in the 'Introduction' that the articles have been left more or less intact; and this seems to be true. The first essay of the book does not differ notably from the original article, and a reader with a special interest and knowledge of Celtic studies will be quite happy to read either. Nothing has been omitted in the book, and the changes are mainly stylistic (altered word order and different choice of individual words, for instance). Some quotes in Old Irish have, in the book, been moved to the footnotes, the names for the Irish texts are provided in both Old Irish and in English, and words that were originally in Greek script have been transcribed into the Latin alphabet (similarly, Roman numerals have been changed into Arabic numerals). The general reader will benefit from the explanations given for individual terms (e.g. Fomoir, p. 12, Femen p. 23, *cailleach* p. 25), whereas a Celticist will be happy to note the few references that have been added to the footnotes (e.g. footnotes 53, 54 and 55 on pages 17-18; fn 75 on p. 23 and fn 85 on p. 25, to mention but a few).

The second essay, 'The Evil Eye in Medieval Irish Law'<sup>3</sup>, discusses belief in

2 Borsje, Jacqueline & Kelly, Fergus 'The Evil Eye in Early Irish Literature and Law', *Celtica* 24, 2003, 1-39.

3 Originally published by Borsje in Dutch as 'Het "boze oog" in middeleeuwse Ierse wetteksten', in I. Genee, B. Jaski, and B. Smelik (eds), *Arthur Brigit, Conn, Deirdre...: Verhaal, taal en recht in de Keltische wereld. Liber amicorum voor Leni van Strien-Gerritsen*. Nijmegen:

the evil eye as it is found in the context of medieval Irish law. After a short introduction to early Irish law (which is most welcome again for the general reader), Borsje analyses the fragment translated in the Appendix I by Kelly. The fragment, which opens with the Old Irish words *no etlae tre fhormat*, ‘Or stealing away through envy’ continues with a commentary in Middle Irish which has been dated to around the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The best way to approach this essay is by reading it together with Kelly’s treatment on the text. The two work brilliantly together and give an insight into the matter of envy and the evil eye as seen by the medieval Irish.

The third essay of the book, ‘A Doomed King and the Motif of Being One-Eyed’<sup>4</sup>, focuses on the idea of asymmetry and unilaterality and deliberates the connection of the evil eye with ‘the supernatural in general and the topic of being one-eyed in particular’ (p. 79). After considering some of the interpretations of instances of one-eyedness in early Irish texts proposed by previous scholars, Borsje conducts a close reading of the famous Ulster cycle tale *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, ‘The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel’. Having adapted the anthropologist Mathieu Schoffeleers’

classification of unilaterality<sup>5</sup>, Borsje pays special attention to three different types of one-eyedness: 1) being literally one-eyed, 2) mediated one-eyedness (although one has two eyes, there is something wrong with one of them) and 3) figurative one-eyedness (having a one-eyed appearance temporarily, for example because the other eye is closed), through four different characters in the text: 1) Ingcél Cáech, 2) Fer Caille, 3) Nár Túathcháech, and 4) Cailb. The characters are well known to a Celticist audience, but again the non-Celticist reader will benefit from reading this chapter together with the actual tale which is provided in the Appendices. To summarise: in this chapter the author convincingly argues that the connotation of an ‘ominous sign’ should be attached to the motif of being one-eyed, which has been previously interpreted as a sign of supernatural insight pertaining to warrior symbolism (p. 115).

Here, as in the first essay, a Celticist can read either version of the essay (the one in the book or the original article), since the editing mainly consists of a few stylistic changes in individual sentences that do not change the meaning of the text. Again, the Old Irish text extracts have been moved to footnotes, more explanations are given of motifs and concepts possibly unknown to some readers (such as the concept of ‘sacred kingship’ [p. 79-80] and *tarbhsheis*, ‘bull-feast’ explained p. 97, footnote 65).

---

Stichting Uitgeverij de Keltische Draak, 2003, 38-50.

4 Originally published as ‘Approaching Danger. *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* and the Motif of Being One-Eyed’, in J.F. Nagy (ed.), *Identifying the Celtic: CSANA Yearbook 2*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002, 75-99.

---

5 Schoffeleers, M., ‘Twins and Unilateral Figures in Central and Southern Africa. Symmetry and Asymmetry in the Symbolization of the Sacred’, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 21 (1991), 345-72.

Up-to-date references are added (for example, on pp. 84-85 concerning *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*). Similarly, on pp. 88-89 (footnote 40) and pp. 93-94 (footnote 53) references are given to new studies on omens and fate in medieval Ireland. Perhaps the only major change, which reflects the development of the author's own understanding of the subject, is on p. 88, where Borsje explains how her interpretation of a particular phrase in the tale has changed.

In the fourth essay of the book, 'Encounters with One-Eyed Beings'<sup>6</sup>, Borsje goes through the previous translations for the word *túathcháech*; the most generally accepted of these is 'blind in the left eye' (p. 119). The remainder of the essay is divided into two main parts, of which the first discusses the semantics of the two constituents of the compound. Based on this examination, Borsje proposes in the second part of the essay an alternative translation for *túathcháech* 'that attempts to do justice to the possible meanings of the compound' (p.120). Borsje does this in an impeccable manner and concludes, after an impressive amount of literary evidence, that the word should be translated as 'with a sinister eye', 'which covers the general meaning of *cáech* as "one-eyed" and hints at the range of meanings of *túath-*, in that the English word "sinister" also has that sense of "evil, bad, inauspicious, unfavourable" and may refer to the left side' (p. 151).

6 Originally published as 'The Meaning of *Túathcháech* in Early Irish Texts', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 43, 2002, 1-24.

Borsje's argumentation is easy to follow, and despite quite a lot of repetition from the previous essays, the reader is still provided with new information and new references. All in all, there is no reason why this new translation should not be used in the future interpretations of the word. Similarly to the previous essays, there are not many differences between the original article and the essay in the book. Some Irish and Latin text originals have been moved into footnotes and Irish titles for different texts are given again in English. New references are provided for example on footnote 43, p. 128 and footnote 98, p. 143-144, as well as footnote 113 on p. 147. Explanations are supplied for words such as *Crúachu* (the royal dwelling of Medb and Ailill in the Ulster Cycle, p. 136-137), and *dindshenchas* (place name lore) p. 143. Some quotes have been removed because they appear in the other essays of the book.

A character called *Nár Túathcháech*, whom the reader has already encountered in the previous essays, is the topic for the fifth chapter of Borsje's book, 'Another Doomed King and His Banshee'<sup>7</sup>. This essay analyses the dissimilar features of

7 Originally published by Borsje in German as 'Über die Identität von *Nár Túathcháech* aus der verlorengegangenen Geschichte *Echtrae Chrimthainn Nia Nár*', in E. Poppe (ed.), *Keltologie Heute. Themen und Fragenstellungen. Akten des 3. Deutschen Keltologensymposiums – Marburg, März 2001*. Studien und Texte zur Keltologie 5, Münster, 2002, 169-93.

Nár, who is found in early Irish traditions both as ‘a man and a woman, as a sinister swineherd as well as a seductive female, as an inauspicious one-eyed prophet of doom and as a supernatural being with supernatural powers’ (p. 154). After such an introduction, the reader is left wanting to know more about this mysterious figure. As Borsje states, the tradition concerning Nár is fragmented and the original tale has been lost (p. 5). The author succeeds, however, in establishing the chronological order of Nár’s various portrayals and in offering a reconstruction of the original tale, based on the extant fragments.

The final chapter, ‘The Power of Words: The Intricacy of the Motif of the Evil Eye’, is the only essay that was specifically written for the book and it touches on the issues that Borsje has studied after the other articles had been published, such as word power and the performative context in which this word power was executed. Hence, Borsje discusses the ways in which the Irish people used to protect themselves against the evil eye as well as charms for healing eyes. As the medieval example of an eye curing charm, Borsje uses the spell found in the Stowe Missal, an 8<sup>th</sup>-century sacramentary. Finally, the motif of the evil eye is studied in the context of Saints’ Lives. As such, the concluding chapter does not draw together the lines from the different essays as promised in the Introduction; instead, it provides the reader with further nuances related to the topic. The conclusion is followed by the already mentioned Appendices, in

which Borsje’s footnotes to the original translations help the non-Celticist reader to get a grasp of many motifs and concepts that might not otherwise be as clear.

Borsje’s newest publication is difficult to evaluate as a book, due to its origin as separate articles. Perhaps that is still the best way to approach this work—as separate essays that can, as the author stated, be read individually. When approached in this way, the repetition of arguments as well as the substantial cross-referencing in the book, that might otherwise be quite disturbing, is not such an issue. Another point worth noting is that obviously a book consisting of works that have been already published elsewhere cannot bring much new to the debate in the subject matter. Be this as it may, it is still convenient for the booklover interested in the matter to have all the essays between the covers of one book.

Even if the book is, according to the author, aimed at a wider readership than that of scholars in Celtic studies, it will, undoubtedly, be highly appreciated by Celticists. A more general reader, however, might still find explanations of the terminology somewhat lacking and the references to other Celtic scholars confusing. As well as that, the exhaustive apparatus (i.e. footnotes) might turn out to be rather heavy to deal with; on the other hand, it will be useful to the interested reader who wants to explore the matter further. A reader fascinated by the book’s title, ‘The *Celtic* Evil Eye and Related Mythological Motifs in Medieval Ireland’, might be disappointed to a

certain extent, since the book really only deals with the motif in medieval Ireland. Why the word ‘Celtic’ has been chosen remains questionable.

Even with these few problematic points, Borsje’s new book is, without a doubt, a fine example of research that has been done and presented well. It will be of use to anyone interested in the matter and a must-read for Celticists. The book is reasonably priced and the cover is highly enjoyable—it represents Loch na Súil in County Sligo and, ‘[a]ccording to the local tradition, [it] is the place where Balor fell down and his evil eye burned a hole in the ground, which filled with water’ (vi). Thus ‘The Lake of the Eye’ is an apt cover for the book that deals with material—the evil eye—that is ‘wide-ranging, elusive, and subtle’ (p. 6). Borsje has studied these elusive and subtle cultural and textual hints exhaustively and even if this book surely is not the last word ever to be said about the evil eye in the Irish tradition, it certainly is an ambitious starting point and a hard act to follow.

*Ilona Tuomi*  
*Dept. of Early and Medieval Irish*  
*University College Cork*