

of this article here instead of the section dealing with the material remains is not quite clear since the last three items in the book focus on much later, mainly eighteenth- and nineteenth-century, representations of Glendalough. In the first of these, Peter Harbison surveys antiquarian interest towards Glendalough providing a detailed look into early modern illustrations of Glendalough and examining the information that may be gleaned in them. While Harbison studies the pictorial illustrations of Glendalough, the next contribution by Máirín Ní Cheallaigh looks at verbal images of the monastic site. Her article provides an interesting look into the ways in which nineteenth-century tourists engaged with the landscape and scenery of Glendalough. Aileen M. Ireland's article on the contribution of the Royal Society of Irish Antiquaries to the preservation of Glendalough forms a fitting ending for the book.

All in all, this extensive collection of articles demonstrates admirably the plurality of approaches which can be applied to the study of holy places. The book's focus on one specific site, Glendalough, guarantees that there is some coherence to the collection as a whole, although in some of the articles the link seemed to be quite superficial. Despite the tight thematic focus of the book, most of the authors are able to address wider issues concerning medieval and early modern Irish economy, politics and learning with the help of evidence pertaining specifically to Glendalough. The ample illustration of the book is

beautifully reproduced, and especially Ms. Pozdechova's evocative photographs and the early modern drawings of the site printed as part of Harbison's contribution complement the scholarly articles by giving a real feeling of the beauty of the place.

*Katja Ritari*  
*Department of World Cultures/  
Study of Religions*  
*University of Helsinki*

\*

**Meid, Wolfgang: *The Celts*. Innsbrück: Innsbrücker Beiträge zur Kulturwissenschaft, 2010. 182 pages. ISBN 978-3-85124-228-7. Price: 24€.**

New introductions to the Celts for general audience are published almost every year. Most of them are written by authors, who have a keen interest in everything Celtic, but are not themselves professional scholars. The scholarly works are most often produced by archaeologists, which is understandable, as most of the evidence—especially on the Continent—for the Celtic cultures comes from archaeological artefacts. This is why it is refreshing to read this new introduction on the Celts by the distinguished linguist Wolfgang Meid.

The book is intended for a general audience, so a knowledgeable reader finds little that is new or controversial in the book. Meid starts with issues dealing with identity and languages. He then goes

on to discuss the history of Celtic cultures in the light of the archaeological evidence and Classical sources. But it is the Celts of the British Isles that the focus of the book lies. It is here where Meid's background comes visible. He makes some use of the archaeological evidence, but it is etymology and early written sources that his description basically consists of. Indeed, although Meid clearly restrains himself in many occasions, an irritation towards many of the archaeological interpretations of the material is present in the text.

It is well known that especially among archaeologists there are scholars who have during the last decades or so doubted if we can talk of the Celts and Celtic cultures in scholarly terms. They have tended to stress the local nature of the archaeological evidence and the ethnic diversity of the tribes that we tend to call the Celts. Meid's work is clearly meant as a counter-argument for this kind of an approach and, by stressing the linguistic identity of different tribes, it argues for the existence of a common Celtic cultural identity for them.

Meid uses both notation and references sparingly. This is understandable, as the book is directed for a general audience. At the same time, I personally felt that more references would have been in order at times. As it stands, it is difficult to make judgments on some of Meid's arguments, while their referential background is not mentioned. Neither does Meid discuss competing interpretations of the material. He sticks to his own story of the Celts and leaves debating to scholarly forums.

Interestingly, after discussing Celtic society and culture in one chapter, Meid picks out religion and discusses it separately. This is understandable in the light of general interest towards druids and the popularity of Celtic storytelling, which makes religion one of the more popular aspects of Celtic culture. As a historian of religions, one still wonders about Meid's actual motives for doing so. It is almost as if Meid thought that religion is something separate from culture and society.

This becomes obvious in his approach to religion. In a somewhat old-fashioned way he almost exclusively sticks to mythology and makes an effort to reconstruct the theology behind it. The reader might get from this approach the impression that there actually existed a common Celtic mythology and underlying theological manifestations shared by all Celtic cultures. However, this seems not to be the case. As with other Iron-Age societies, religion was for Celts not theology and belief, but ritual, ceremony and participation. More important than sharing common beliefs, was to share ritual community. Therefore, it is a pity that Meid discusses the ritual practices of the Celts only for less than two pages. We must continue to wait for a well-informed and scholarly argued introduction to Celtic religiosity.

Celtic scholars are not very fond of discussing methodological and theoretical issues in print. This is also the case with Meid's book. Indeed, a book meant for a larger audience might not be the right place to have this kind of discussion.

However, Meid shortly discusses methodological issues in the beginning of his chapter on religion. He writes about the difficulty of making statements on the essence of Celtic religiosity and how there always is a speculative element involved, when we discuss religion. For a historian of religions these kinds of claims sound banal. I would like to argue that this is the case—not only with religion—but with all aspects of Celtic culture. Religion is nothing special as a topic of scholarly research. The speculative element is as much present in the etymological interpretations of social structures or legal practices as in religion. Interpretations of archaeological artefacts or the written sources by Classical scholars include as much of a speculative element as interpretations of religious practices. I cannot see how studying religion as a cultural phenomenon would be somehow more (or less) difficult and speculative than any other aspect of Celtic culture. For Meid religion appears as something subjective and mysterious that cannot be apprehended through scholarship. But this is true with other aspect of culture as well, if we try to learn what they mean to individual members of the society. Naturally, as scholars of religion, we must know which battles to choose. Much can be said about religion without having to discuss its subjective meaning for individuals. This is why it is so important to place it in the proper cultural framework and approach it as an inherently cultural thing and not something that is beyond and outside culture.

Meid's work can be recommended as an introductory reading not only for general audience but also for introductory courses for Celtic Studies. It provides a sane, well argued, and scholarly overview of the field and our research object. Despite some of its failings, it belongs among the best available introductions to the field.

*Tom Sjöblom*  
*Department of World Cultures*  
*Study of Religions*  
*University of Helsinki*

### Ancient curses, medieval charms?

**Bernard Mees: *Celtic Curses*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press. 2009. viii + 229 pages; 12 illustrations. Price £60.00. ISBN 978 1 84383 457 1.**

Dr. Bernard Mees, who has published important studies on a broad range of topics, has given his newest publication the concise but ambitious title *Celtic Curses*; in the same spirit, the cover of the book maintains that the work is 'the first comprehensive study of early Celtic cursing'. As such, Mees' work supplements the scholarship published within the past years concerning magical traditions in the insular context.<sup>1</sup> This contribution also addresses a gap in the coverage to date by calling attention to texts from the late Iron Age and the Roman period, some of which have only been discovered recently.