

Kirja-arvosteluja – Book reviews

“Each single man of Eamhain’s land has a counterpart in spirited, lordly Troy”

Brent Miles: *Heroic Saga and Classical Epic in Medieval Ireland*. Studies in Celtic History 30. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd. 2011. x + 272 pages. Price £60. ISBN 978-1-84384-264-4.

One of the great questions regarding the Medieval reception of the Classics is how well-versed in literature do we hold the receiving and transmitting authors to have been within their own context. Ireland, an area in the unique position of hosting the first society that had no previous Roman past to foster its Latin literature, is certainly no exception. On the contrary: it seems that the intellectual elite of Medieval Ireland was fostered in a culture based in large part for acquiring their Latin language skills through the traditional training in *grammatica* through its local manifestations. The eagerness of the Irish for their imported prestige language appears to have been tangible, and there is scarcely better testimonies to this than the Insular reception of Virgil and his commentaries (Servius, Filargirius, and Donatus) – texts that had been truly fundamental for the teaching of grammatics from the Imperial Era onwards. At the same time, however, the interest of Irish scholars in their native language intensified, too, both in its Old and Middle forms; indeed there is evidence that Irish increasingly was co-opted as a prestige

language suitable for high literary pursuits. *Heroic Saga and Classical Epic in Medieval Ireland*, a fascinating new contribution by Brent Miles focuses mainly on the 11th-century relationship between the native Irish narratives and the Latinate scholarly tradition of the intellectual elite, as well as the influence that the classical epics had upon the newly salient narrative writing in the vernacular. In chronological terms, his position envisions the vernacular heroic narratives gaining most of their classicizing elements during the 11th century (16), a view that also constitutes a prominent (and necessary) argument against the modern and bafflingly influential scholarly fantasy of ‘Ireland saving the Western civilization’ (21).

In his ‘Introduction,’ Miles takes up the ambivalent heritage of Augustine’s attitude towards *figmenta poetica* (the untranslatability of which the author defends); the church father both lambasts them as *inania*, and yet seems prepared to see their value at least for the practice of *grammatica*. The expression *figmenta poetica* is not implicitly derogatory in itself, and neither does it seem to have been understood unambiguously as such by the Irish ‘classicists.’ The two principal Middle Irish texts of *figmenta* that are examined in most detail in the book are the *Togail Troí*, based upon the Late Imperial pseudo-Dares of Phrygia, and the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, wherein Miles detects the classical examples manifested in more subtle ways. He claims (7) that there may well have existed a particular interest in classical epic in the 11th century Ireland. The classical interests

of the ‘conservative learned class’ in Ireland appear to form a relatively independent literary current (11), though nonetheless intriguingly connected with contemporary and preceding continental fashions, which in themselves were influenced by the Byzantine classicizing register.¹ The great difference, of course, is the new prominence of the native Irish language as a vehicle of learned commentary. The introduction ends in a brief review of earlier scholarship of the relevant themes, with an almost mandatory nod towards the nativist–anti-nativist debate.

Chapter 1 (‘Classical Learning in Medieval Ireland: The State of the Question’) looks at the reading of Classical epic and their scholia in Ireland, as well as the Irish tradition of commenting upon those works. This interest is postulated by Miles to have been predominantly secular in nature, and interestingly he proposes to call them ‘nascent medieval Irish classical studies’ (7).² Later on, he opts for the much less problematic expression ‘medieval Irish classicism.’ The chapter abounds in perceptive observations concerning the nature of the Irish classical tradition, only a few of which can be singled out on this occasion. The pre-9th century history of Irish interest in ‘classical studies’ is outlined, and Miles brings up some passages where outsiders describe the Irish teaching of classical learning as something morally dubious.³ He goes on to report the earlier editors’ views regarding the possibility that the Compiler of ‘Servius Danielis’ worked in Ireland, but remains largely noncommittal himself. Further on, other early Medieval Virgilian commentaries and their possible presence in Ireland are examined at length, with valuable treatment of the possibly interlinked Virgilius Maro Grammaticus and

the ‘Aethicus Ister’ *Cosmography* of Pseudo-Jerome, who can be interpreted to satirize the Irish style of classical commentary of the 7th and 8th centuries. Moreover, a short glimpse to the knowledge of Greek in Ireland is provided—among its other points reinforcing the notion of Servius Danielis and other Virgilian commentaries presenting many characteristics of ‘Irish classicism’ (35ff.)—as well as a lengthier section regarding the continuation of secular Latin learning in the post-Carolingian Ireland of increased vernacular influence, of which Miles finds the best evidence in the later translations into Irish themselves.⁴

Chapter 2 (‘The Irish Classical Tales: Texts and Sources’) approaches the question of reception through the classically inspired narratives, and their possible value as testimonies regarding a ‘survival of classical studies’ into the 11th century in Ireland. From the second chapter onwards Miles turns his gaze to the examination of vernacular sources in order to detect and analyse remnants and testimonies of their producers’ classical learning. He starts by observing that by the 15th century the Middle Irish ‘classical tales’ had demonstrably been adopted as classics in their own right, their language being emulated by certain writers of Early Modern Irish. Similarly welcome are his caveats regarding the difficulties inherent in the manuscript transmission of even comparatively late vernacular texts, sometimes extensively reworked by later editors and recensors. Along with highlighting the sentiment, apparently shared by their authors, of writing as continuators of a long and prestigious tradition, Miles then proceeds to enumerate the narratives which he covers with the term ‘classical tales.’⁵ Besides the overall high competence of the discussion, many

incidental and highly interesting authorial choices are glimpsed—it can only be regretted that in a work of such dimensions some of these cannot be elaborated upon; one of those that luckily are looked into at some length is the possible existence of a now-vanished Irish pseudo-Virgil (‘Fergil’: 64-6; also 78). Likewise valuable is his documentation of the eclectic nature of pursuits within the Irish ‘classical studies’, with many scholars not being content with transmitting one source, but supplementing their main narrative with details lifted from other authors, often obscure (to us): the traditions concerning Jason and Medea are treated as a lengthy exemplar of this. Hercules, obviously, is another intriguing figure in this sense: he scarcely lacked prominence among the diverse sources. Towards the end of the chapter, the First Vatican Mythographer obtains an important place among the witnesses, and, indeed, his method may bear some important similarities to those of the Irish ‘classicists’, though with a heavier emphasis on moral judgements.

These early chapters, particularly, are very considerate towards readers who approach the work from the direction of Classical Reception rather than Irish Studies. Miles proves to be well acquainted with his classics, and on the whole handles competently the literature whose reception and use his work documents. In a few places, perhaps, his reading of the testimonies of continental ecclesiastical figures leaves unconsidered the hardly negligible effect of received Greco-Roman literary motifs or their epideictic inversion. These can be suspected, for instance, behind the highly entrenched notion of northern islands being devoid of piety, learning and sexual restraint, and its inversion in considering

such areas, when Christianized, to produce ‘reformed barbarians’ of exceptional acuity and diligence. To give an indication of the spread of this technique, a similar formulation appears to be used about the Theopaschite ‘Scythian monks’ in Dionysius Exiguus’ letter to John and Leontius.⁶ Effectively, part of the reputation of the Irish for learning may well be an early medieval reflection of dynamics akin to Momigliano’s ‘alien wisdom.’⁷ Within a tradition where adoption of classical rhetorical figures was an important stylistic aspiration, it is difficult to ascertain whether an intellectual actually thought all the things he wrote, or, indeed, wrote at all what he thought.

Chapter 3 (‘Classicism and *Togail Troi*’) presents the first sustained case example of the work, focusing on the probably tenth-century *Togail Troi*, which already provided much of the material in the second Chapter. Miles endeavours to use the text to argue for an Irish desire to produce in vernacular an epic counterpart to the admired classical literary works. He begins perhaps slightly surprisingly by considering the reception of ancient literary theories in medieval Ireland; the importance of this for his argument, however, rests on the high classicizing aims that he detects in the *Togail Troi*, ‘more successfully Virgilian than even *Imtheachta Aeniasa*’ (99). He proceeds to consider what the techniques used in the work can reveal of the particularities of the Irish classicism of the 11th century—in particular he finds evidence of expansion of episodes that were mere asides or mentions in Pseudo-Dares’ original, in a way that may well have had something to do with the training in *grammatica* (103f.). Not surprisingly, *ekphrasis* is supported by even greater evidence—though here the influence of the native Irish narrative

tradition may have to be considered, as well; it is consequently no wonder that *ekphrases* end up occupying a very considerable section of the chapter. The chapter's examination of classical *topoi* and set pieces as inspiration for vernacular medieval literature constitutes a significant contribution to the reception studies not only in what regards Ireland, but the Western narrative tradition itself.

Based upon the preceding chapters, Miles' fundamental starting point in *Táin* studies is that both the author of the most polished version of the tale and his audience possessed rather more than a smattering of familiarity with classical epic. The classical influence within this 'disproportionately' (145) studied narrative that very much has captivated the public imagination of a 'typical' Irish heroic saga, is the subject of Chapter 4 ('*Táin Bó Cúailnge* and Latin Epic'), with a particular eye to how the tradition of *grammatica* influenced the form it took during the 11th century. Perhaps wisely, Miles does not set about to radically reform the old arguments of Thurneysen and Carney regarding the classical influence upon *Táin*. Prominent role within this chapter – and the last one – is obtained by the concept of *imitatio*, nowadays often spoken of by the classicists: Miles painstakingly enumerates the likely instances of *imitatio* in the Irish epic, while subjects deserving further study are mapped. A remarkable point, likewise, is Miles' proposed motivation for the producers of *Táin* to have so laboriously constructed a classically imitative work, namely the *exemplum* of *Togail Troí*: this would be well in keeping with the consciously self-referencing nature of the Irish classicizing tradition (183).

Finally, Chapter 5 ('The Rhetorical Set Piece and the *Breslech* of the Plain Murthemne')

forms a study of compositional techniques in Irish classicizing prose works, and the possible influence these have wielded upon depictions of heroic figures in Irish vernacular narratives. The starting point derives from the emergence of detailed battle descriptions in the Irish epic, apparently in the wake of the fashion to translate and adapt classical tales. While recognizing the likelihood of other, particularly biblical, inspirations for certain episodes in the description of Cuchulainn's battle against the men of Ireland (e.g. 197), Miles focuses on the evidence for specific parallels and allusions between vernacular classicizing narratives – evidence which for the most part takes the form of set piece descriptions and topical expressions (just as such things would take within the classical tradition, too). The techniques of *ekphrasis* and expansion discussed above come across as favourite tools for the Irish writers in a series of examples taken up by the author, though the explanatory power of even these is strained when the unique-seeming *ríastrad* of Cuchulainn is tackled. Miles does, however, manage to find convincing parallels from the vernacular descriptions of Achilles' battle-rage in the 'Irish Achilleid', and notes that the spectacularly outlandish description in the *Táin* likely constitutes an instance of imitative (or rather, competitive) literary expansion taken to its very limits (217). A fine conclusion to an utterly fascinating study. A brief afterword for the book sketches out possible vistas for future research, while stressing the importance of the Irish case study for the larger scheme of mapping medieval reception of the Classics in the West. The back matter for this thoroughly learned contribution is entirely satisfactory, with a stimulating bibliography joined by a pleasant index, especially helpful to a reader

approaching the intricacies of Irish classical tradition from the direction of the Classical literature itself.

Whether tackling the intricacies of the Irish reception of *Corpus Vergilianum* with its scholia and commentaries, revising the evidence of rhetorical exercises in the training of Irish intellectuals, or cautioning against readings discounting the influence of classical tales upon Irish vernacular epic, Miles is consistently approachable, reflective and meticulous. Codicological passages and the study of manuscript variants, while crucial, are never allowed to overwhelm the underlying argument (and, as sometimes happens with less disciplined scholars, the reader). Another proof of Miles' disciplined attitude is his treatment of previous scholarship, which comes across as unapologetic yet respectful, even when voicing disagreement. A few instances of unnecessarily prolonged speculation are to be overlooked, while in certain other passages the author has chosen to present his subjective evaluations in a way that perhaps comes across as overly 'Altertumswissenschaftlich'. All in all, however, *Heroic Saga and Classical Epic in Medieval Ireland* is a remarkable and welcome contribution, which can be wholeheartedly recommended to medievalists, Middle Irish scholars, and students of classical reception alike.

Notes

1 While agreeing with Máire Herbert that the Irish "classicism" was not really antiquarian in nature, Miles goes on to comment that the Middle Irish commentators appeared to appreciate the older form of their native language and the need to comment upon it—something that arguably comes quite close to antiquarianism. Later on in the work (e.g. 90)

Miles comes to the (conditioned) conclusion that the Irish authors of the classical tales were perhaps less indebted to the Carolingian revival than has been assumed, instead drawing upon the earlier scholarship of their own island to a remarkable degree.

2 Classicists might object to this use of 'classical studies' and instead recommend opting for the already established concept of 'classical reception'—the validity of which, indeed, Miles recognises (13). In any case, his worthwhile point that the classical reception in Ireland was consistently associated with the vernacular literary production should by no means preclude the use of this term.

3 Here we may be faced with another reflection of the long-standing defamatory *topos* of the inhabitants of the British Isles being intellectually sluggish, impious in religion, and morally dubious; in the case of one exemplary passage it is the English scholar Aldhelm who has cast himself as the representative of the normative centre—a technique that the English considered expedient to adopt in many periods *vis-à-vis* their northern and western neighbours.

4 The lack of *any* manuscripts of classical authors found in Ireland constricts the study in a very obvious way—a fact remarked upon in several occasions by Miles.

5 These include the *Togail Troí*, the *Scéla Alaxandair* ('The Tidings of Alexander', interestingly deriving primarily from Orosius spiced with pseudepistolography), and the more recent *Imtheachta Aeniassa* ('The Adventures of Aeneas' based upon Virgil), and *In Cath Catharda* ('The Civil War' of Lucan). The three Statian works, the 'Irish Achilleid', *Togail na Tebe* and *Riss in Mundtuirc* ('The Tale of the Necklase'), the two latter incorporating elements from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, are likewise included, as are the *Merugud Uilixis meic Leirtis* ('The Wandering of Ulysses son of Laertes'), 'the most characteristically Irish' (60) of the classical tales on account of its intriguing method of reconstructing the story of Odysseus from references to him in the *Imtheachta Aeniassa*. Minor pieces such as *Sgél in Minaduir* ('The Story of the Minotaur'), *Finghala Chlainne Tanntail* ('The Kin-Murders of the Children of Tantalus'), and *Don Tres Troí* ('On the Third Troy') of Flannacán are not overlooked, either.

6 Eduard Schwartz (ed.) 1914, *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum* 4.2, *Concilium universale Constantinopolitanum sub Iustiniano habitum* 2, Strasbourg.

7 Arnaldo Momigliano 1975, *Alien Wisdom: the limits of Hellenization*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

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Lisa M. Bitel: *Landscape with Two Saints: How Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. 299 pages. Price 26.00€. ISBN 978-0-19-533652-8.

The title of Lisa Bitel's book, *Landscape with Two Saints*, is quite revealing since her emphasis is much more on the landscape than the saints themselves. This eloquently written book has in its focus two early medieval female saints—the Gaulish Genovefa and the Irish Brigit—and their relationship with the surrounding landscape and their role in building a new Christian society. In Bitel's words the cult of the saints lived on 'through both the words of the vitae and the stones of their churches' (p.xv) and it is the 'brick and syllable, writer and supplicant, builder and architectural audience' that 'together created the two saints and their cults' (p.xv). Topography and hagiography are the two elements at the heart of this innovative study into the Christianization of the landscape through words and churches.

The first part of the book deals with Paris before, during and after Genovefa's lifetime (ca. 420-502). Bitel draws a vivid picture of a ruined Roman city with imperial past asking how its inhabitants viewed its history and to whom it belonged. In chapter two, Bitel maps the history of Paris as a sacral city—both pagan and Christian—and its transformation through the twin processes of conversion and the building of churches. In chapter 3 Genovefa herself emerges as a saint who brings St Denis back to renown through the building of his shrine and church. As an exceptional woman she is able to escape the restrictions set by the society and to make a lasting impact upon the surrounding physical environment. Chapter 4 looks into the varied fates of her memory and of her building project during the following centuries.

In chapter 5, Bitel moves on to Ireland at the time of conversion with an interesting discussion of the gendering of the landscape. After Patrick's work of converting the people, it is time for Brigit, in chapter 6, to finish the job by creating 'a new kind of uniquely Irish ecclesiastical territory' (p.135). According to Bitel, Brigit's 'greatest contribution to the landscape of Irish Christianity was the fixed point of her church and city' (p.139). Chapter 7 focuses on the posterior fame of Brigit and her church in Kildare and chapter 8 finally brings the two saints together in a discussion of their relics.

The book's emphasis on the physical environment of Christianity and the people who inhabited it serves as a good reminder that behind the literary artefacts in our hands lie real people who walked the landscape and had a relationship with its present and its past. Bitel writes in an engaging and highly readable style, although sometimes her almost poetic language makes the reader wonder whether scholarly

precision has been displaced by more vivid and colourful descriptions. The main problem of the book, however, is methodological. It is not always clear whether Bitel is treating the saints as hagiographical constructions or as real people. In some places she clearly states that we are seeing Genovefa and Brigit only through the eyes of the hagiographers, but in others she seems to be forgetting this and treating the saints and their actions as historical, which especially in the case of Brigit is questionable considering the debatable nature of her existence. The second main problem of the book is its structure. Since the two saints are never brought into contact apart from the last chapter—and even there they are discussed successively rather than side by side—the work seems more like two separate case studies. Bitel sensibly refrains from suggesting any direct connection between the two but this leaves the reader wondering about the reasons for choosing specifically these two saints as subjects of the study. One approach for comparing the two and for making the book into a more unified whole would have been a discussion of the possible models for the portrayal of the saints that might have been used by their hagiographers. Thus the relationship between the two would have been on the level of literary representations, and not of historical reality.

At the beginning of the book, Bitel justifies her choice of the two saints by their shared nature as ‘peripatetic, influential women responsible for building prestigious churches’ (p.xiii). This is certainly true of Genovefa who is credited with building the basilica in her Life, but in the case of Brigit it is not quite so clear. Her followers undoubtedly accredited her with founding the church in Kildare since Cogitosus states that she drew the boundaries

for its suburbs, but the connection between the actual church building and the saint herself is more complicated. Cogitosus does not state anywhere that the church as it stood in his own time was actually built by the saint, and it seems more plausible that, if the saint ever existed, the church of her own time would have been a much more humble affair. This, however, does not make Bitel’s point concerning the saints’ influence on their landscape any less valid, since it is their posterior fame as church builders that she is interested in, even if her use of language sometimes gives the impression that she is talking about the historical persons.

Bitel’s lengthy discussion of Cogitosus’s description of the church in Kildare as an ekphrasis adds a new dimension to the reading of this most analysed episode of the Life by treating it as a text guiding the steps and actions of the pilgrims visiting the church. A definition of the term ekphrasis and some background of its use in the medieval context would, however, been welcome. In addition to the Life by Cogitosus, there is some discussion of the Latin Life known as *Vita Prima* and the Irish *Bethu Brigte*. Bitel assigns the former to the eighth century with no indication of the controversy surrounding its dating and the suggestion that it could possibly be earlier than the work of Cogitosus. Bitel offers new insights into the character of Brigit by looking into the changes in her portrayal over the centuries. In her view, in the later Lives Brigit’s powers resemble those of the druids and the spellbinding women of the secular tales thus making her into a Christian successor of the territorial goddesses. This is undoubtedly true at some level, but it is also true of most of Irish saints regardless of their gender, and especially of those with Lives written in the Irish language.

There are also some gaps in Bitel's bibliography. In a book dealing with an Irish female saint and the gendering of the Irish landscape one would have expected to see a reference to the works on Irish holy women by Elva Johnston and to some more works of Dorothy Ann Bray apart from the two included in the bibliography. Christina Harrington's book *Women in a Celtic Church: Ireland 450-1150* is not mentioned either.

Despite these reservations, Bitel's study of the two female saints and their influence on the surrounding landscape is highly innovative and opens up new and interesting vistas into the medieval world of Genovefa and Brigit (or more accurately to that of their hagiographers). These two women (whether they were historical or not) were certainly exceptional in being able to control their lives and their physical environment, and to leave a lasting impression on the landscape thus having command over resources unreachable for most women.

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**David Jenkins: 'Holy, Holier, Holiest':
*The Sacred Topography of the Early Medieval Irish Church. Studia Traditionis Theologiae 4. Turnhout: Brepols, 2010. 213 pages. Price 60.00€. ISBN 978-2-503-53316-2.***

The starting point of this book is the contention that the sacred space of the early Irish Church was consciously ordered according

to 'a canon of planning' inspired by the biblical Temple model. The question asked is not simply *how* but *why*: what can this canon of planning tell of the builders' understanding of sacred space and where did their models come from. The focus of the book is clearly theological and Irish Church is here treated as an integral part of the wider Christendom, although the influence of the native traditions of building, the local landscape and the building materials available is taken into account.

The book opens with a survey of earlier studies into the topography of the early Irish Church and then moves on in chapter 2 to present the pattern for organising the sacred space. In support of the existence of this pattern Jenkins combines the material evidence with the literary. Jenkins's archaeological survey is based on four sites which he has chosen as paradigmatic of the most common forms of religious settlement encountered in Ireland in this period: Skellig Michael, High Island, Reask and Clonmacnoise. His literary sources include saints' Lives, Adomnán's *Vita Columbae* among others, and in particular the *Hibernensis*, which is one of the main pieces of evidence for the existence of Jenkins's argued canon of planning. In chapter 3 Jenkins turns to the exegetical background of the Temple motif (and the Tabernacle preceding it) explaining in detail how sacred space and its ordering were understood in the Bible and the Patristic writings, as well as in Early Irish exegesis. Jenkins argues that the Irish church builders shared this same understanding concerning the organisation of sacred space based on Scriptural models. In chapter 4 Jenkins discusses the possible modes of transmission responsible for the diffusion of the scriptural

‘canon of planning’ including the pictorial, as in the schemas found in the early ninth century Benedictine *Plan of St Gall* and the eighth to ninth century Irish manuscript *Book of Mulling*. Despite the existence of these drawn plans, what is more important, according to Jenkins, is the adherence to an idea rather than technical blueprints. It is this shared understanding, dubbed by Jenkins as ‘shared wisdom’, that guided the actions of the church builders who tried to follow this ideal as far it was possible within the limits set by the local landscape and building materials. In addition to the pictorial presentations of ‘the canon of planning’, other modes of transmission might include saints’ Lives, and especially the widely influential *Vita Antoni* with its eremitical model of the desert as a holy place. In the conclusions to chapter 4 and the epilogue, Jenkins repeats his contention that Irish ecclesiastical sites regardless of their size and site reflect the same idea of spatial organisation based on scriptural precedent. The sanctification of ecclesiastical sites as a holy space was effectuated by drawing the boundary between the sacred and the profane and by ordering the sacred space into areas of varying importance and holiness.

Jenkins’s argument for the sanctification and ordering of the holy places is hardly contentious and the importance of boundaries has also been highlighted by a number of scholars in an Irish context before. The separation of the sacred from the profane and the concern for restricting access to the holy can be seen as universal human tendencies present in most, if not all, religious traditions. Notwithstanding the unoriginality of Jenkins’s starting point, his contribution lies in his insistence on the theological inspiration for ‘the canon of planning’. Throughout the

book Jenkins stresses the ideological over the practical and the biblical over the native. By doing this, he is extending the parameters of academic discussion concerning the topography of early Irish ecclesiastical sites by introducing a theological view alongside with the archaeological. The Irish understanding of sacred space and its organising principles can be located within the same scriptural hermeneutics as their learning in general, albeit with some local colouring due to the restrictions set by the landscape and building materials available. Jenkins’s outlook is markedly inclusive, approaching Ireland as an integral part of the Christendom, and using it as an example that can highlight similar trends in church building elsewhere instead of stressing the isolation or the special ‘Celtic character’ of Ireland.

Jenkins’s main question is why the sacred space was organised as it was, but he never asks the additional question of how it was used and how its use affected its layout. He looks for the theological roots of a scripturally inspired canon of planning, but does not consider how the ritual aspects of ecclesiastical life may have affected the ordering of the sites. These two aspects are by no means contradictory but rather supplementary: the spiritual significance of sacred space clearly had an influence over its layout, but its use as a holy place may have informed its building just as well. The same eremitical and coenobitical models Jenkins uses to support his argument for the transmission of his ideal ‘canon of planning’ probably also disseminated ideas concerning the ordering of the sacred time and actions within the sacred space. The second point of criticism concerns the lack of any illustrations in the book. The discussions of the archaeological sites as well

as the drawn schemes found in the *Plan of St Gall* and the *Book of Mulling* would have been considerably more illuminating if they were accompanied by images.

Jenkins states the main argument of his book very clearly from the beginning and then proceeds systematically to prove his hypothesis concerning the existence and theological background of his 'canon of planning'. He is well versed in exegesis and takes care to explain the biblical hermeneutic also for a non-specialist reader. The ordering and use of sacred space are clearly popular topics among scholars in Celtic studies at the moment since similar issues have been touched upon in a number of recent publications, including Lisa Bitel's *Landscape with Two Saints* reviewed in this same volume, Tomás Ó Carragáin's more archaeological *Churches in Early Medieval Ireland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), and some of the articles in *Glendalough: City of God* edited by Charles Doherty, Linda Doran and Mary Kelly (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011). Jenkins's approach is markedly theological thus stressing the exegetical rather than the structural or functional. All these views can be seen as supplementary rather than mutually exclusive, highlighting different aspects of the topography of early Irish Church. Jenkins's book can be regarded as a valuable contribution for introducing a supplementary perspective to the discussion concerning the spatial organisation of the Irish churches.

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Theresa C. Oakley: *Lifting the Veil: a New Study of the Sheela-na-gigs of Britain and Ireland*. BAR British Series 495. Oxford: Archaeopress. 2009. ii + 239 pages, b/w illust. Price £48.00 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-4073-0589-9.

In her preface, the archaeologist Theresa C. Oakley relates the story of her study of 'sheela-na-gigs', which is the name given to a decorative feature often found on stone buildings in Ireland and Britain from the 12th century onwards. These explicit carvings of naked women seem incongruous to their (often religious) surroundings and for decades have baffled academics and non-academics alike. Their origin, meaning and function have been widely speculated upon and they have been analysed as portraying everything from a Celtic goddess or a witch to a saint or Mater Ecclesia personified. *Lifting the Veil: a New Study of the Sheela-na-gigs of Britain and Ireland* is based on Oakley's dissertation, having been written with the aim of providing new and accurate information on the subject. Oakley validates her research with the claim that 'none of the previous literature provided a serious academic study of the subject' (1), and invokes her 'intuitive feeling that there was an obscured deeper meaning attached to sheelas' (2). The book's reader may be forgiven, however, for feeling that there is still room for serious academic study in this area.¹

Lifting the Veil consists of four chapters. Apart from the actual text, Oakley has provided good quality black and white photographs, as well as a gazetteer including fieldwork notes by the author together with detailed descriptions of the figures visited. In the somewhat brief first chapter Oakley introduces the reader to the

subject with general account of sheela-na-gigs (covering topics such as their distribution and dating, and the origin of the name). Chapter Two focuses on the data Oakley gathered during her fieldwork as an archaeologist, along with her methodology and the results of her analysis on the figures. It has indeed been the case, as archaeologist Niall Kenny has pointed out in his article on the topic, that ‘there has been very little exploration or any real interpretation of the archaeological context of sheela-na-gigs’², so that a project such as Oakley’s is both sorely needed and very welcome. While it is understandable that any single researcher can personally visit only a limited number of sites within a limited period, this does not mean that a study should be based solely on the figures visited. This, however, seems to be the case with Oakley. She reports on having visited 41 figures in Britain and 34 figures in Ireland, which taken together represent her sample. While 75 figures is an impressive number, it is still hardly enough considering the total of 90 figures still existing in Ireland (plus 20 of which we have the record only) and 56 in Britain (plus one with record only).³

Where an archaeological study with the emphasis on context would, by and large, be expected to include only figures *in situ*, Oakley has included ‘one or two completely ex-situ examples’ in order ‘to compare those still in the field’ (7). Oakley has also, rather puzzlingly, incorporated examples ‘some of which are definitely not sheelas’ (4). In general, such a small sampling—potentially skewed by the addition of extraneous material—is likely to present problems, especially when used as a basis for theories and conclusions. Oakley sees no such problem and finds the amount and quality of the figures adequate:

‘This may be taken to be a representative sample, with the results of the analysis being given as percentages. Thus, it is feasible to extrapolate from my results and apply them for *all* sheelas’.⁴ Whereas the idea of treating Ireland and Britain separately in order to discern possible differences is an interesting one and could present the audience with new and informative evidence, the results can hardly be taken as representative, especially when remembering the uniqueness of every single figure. It is to be regretted then, that the archaeological context, which should be of primary importance in an archaeological study, leaves something to be desired, and hence the author seems to be contradicting herself when emphasizing how ‘as with any archaeological material evidence, context clearly is a most important factor in trying to understand the imagery’ (14).

In Oakley’s third chapter, ‘Contexts’, she analyses previous studies on sheela-na-gigs, which are frequently the objects of her criticism. This critical analysis has been conducted by adapting a chronological framework which does suit this kind of review, showing differences in the approaches within academia during the last two hundred years. While a fairly impressive amount of previous scholarship is covered, it is at times hard to distinguish the several different authorial voices being discussed because of deficient apparatus—a disturbing flaw in an academic publication. Sometimes a reader with previous knowledge on the subject is also left wondering whether the author has perused all of the original works in question, or whether she is relying on the expertise of a secondary source (for example in the cases when she scrutinizes the Irish antiquarians on pp. 15-16, and Dr.

Vivian Mercier on pp. 24-25). Oakley is keen to evaluate the works of those who have gone before her, especially the study of the art historian Jørgen Andersen.⁵ In the 88 pages which comprise the main body of the text, ‘a thorough critique’ of Andersen’s work takes up an unnecessary extensive total of nine pages (22–30). The other point to draw attention to in this context is Oakley’s condemnation of Dr. Barbara Freitag—whose highly valued work remains essential for anyone interested in sheela-na-gigs—for not including some popular works in her review of previous scholarship on the matter (35). Oakley for her part does refer to such works and evaluates them side by side with their scholarly counterparts, despite their fundamental discrepancies of approach.

Chapter Four in *Lifting the Veil* focuses on the study’s theoretical framework, and introduces big concepts such as liminality, ambiguity, apotropaia, the grotesque and the sacred, among others. Also included are negative theology, mysticism, Medusa, Baubo and classical myth more generally, ventriloquism (engastrimythia) associated with the Delphic oracular myth, the evil eye and the concept of *mana*, spirals and maze-like imagery, not to forget the Mother Goddess and the Cambridge Ritualists. If only on account of the book’s theoretical breadth, the absence of an index is a real deficiency. Moreover, there is a notable lack of headings for sub-chapters (which are many) in the list of contents. Using her ‘seemingly ramshackle approach of applying disparate theoretical views’ (i), Oakley arrives at the ‘perhaps intuitive rather than scientific’ (52) understanding of sheela-na-gigs as ambiguous, liminal representations, with a deep spiritual significance and resonance and thus working as a means of

accessing the sacred. While using intuition as a primary method in science can be seen as a way of challenging more usual approaches, to privilege it in this way is problematic in what purports to be a ‘serious academic study’.

Despite the (almost too) effortless formulations of theories and brave interconnections—with all the possible pitfalls that entails—Oakley’s chapter occasionally works rather well. Her theoretical framework is, despite its excessive range, undoubtedly the best part of Oakley’s doctoral thesis. Earlier scholarship has not taken much interest in explanatory paradigms formulated in other fields of study, and a new way of approaching the matter is refreshing and highly desired. Oakley presents the theory of liminality, originally introduced by Arnold van Gennep in his *Les rites de passage* in 1909 and further developed by Victor Turner as well as the anthropologist Mary Douglas.⁶ This theory works extremely well in the study of sheela-na-gigs. Similarly, the idea of the *carnavalesque* advanced by Mikhail Bakhtin in his study *Rabelais and His World*, the concept of the *grotesque* espoused by the philosopher Julia Kristeva, and Dr. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s monster theory all open new ways of interpreting the material, creating new approaches to common questions as well as raising new questions.⁷

A point that has to be raised regarding the connection of sheela-na-gigs and the evil eye is that of local sources. Oakley, while explaining the idea of the evil eye, draws anthropological examples from Ethiopian and Arabian folklore as well as Italian and South African sources. Irish sources are not to be found in Oakley’s work, even though they exist: thus the travel diary *Reisen In Irland* by the German geographer Johann Georg Kohl describes

women who had the ability to avert the evil eye and who had made this their profession.⁸ These women, frequently visited by young men who believed themselves to be victims of the evil eye, were called Shila na Gigh. Kohl confesses that he does not know the origin of the name, but that people used to make stone figures in order to replace the real women. The custom of women exposing themselves in a ritualistic manner was still alive in 20th-century Ireland: 1977, one Walter Mahon-Smith wrote in the *Irish Times* that he had witnessed this himself as a small boy around the time of the Second World War.⁹ It is an interesting question whether, if Oakley had known about the Irish folklore, it would have changed her argument and conclusions. In addition to this, the custom in question has been thoroughly studied by several folklorists, such as Satu Apo and Laura Stark-Arola. Given that Stark-Arola's thesis is in her bibliography, it might have been assumed that Oakley would have known about these studies.¹⁰

Oakley sees her work as 'the first attempt to discuss sheelas in depth in a scholarly, fully contextualized way, and with a set of data that has been properly analysed' (87). This evaluation is difficult to accept without serious qualification; and the book cannot be wholeheartedly recommended due to its methodological problems, lack of references, intuitive opinions not suitable for an academic study, and to the author's inability to decide whether to write an archaeological study with theoretical viewpoints or a general survey with archaeological examples. With a subject like sheela-na-gigs, prone to attract speculation and wild theories, a researcher has to exhibit precision in methodology and source criticism, to analyse the data scientifically and to reach a

well researched and argued conclusion. When these measures are neglected it is much harder for scholars of the same subject to present their studies without having to face additional prejudice. It is to be feared that the study under review here may have this unfortunate effect.

1 This is not to say, however, that Oakley is correct in her assertion that no serious academic work on the subject has been undertaken hitherto.

2 Kenny, Niall. 'The Irish Sheela-Na-Gig – Once Scorned But Now Revived and Celebrated' in Brian Dolan, Amy McQuillan, Emmett O'Keeffe and Kim Rice (eds.) *Proceedings of The Association of Young Irish Archaeologists Annual Conference 2007*. Dublin: The Association of Young Irish Archaeologists, 2008

3 Freitag, Barbara. *Sheela-na-gigs: Unravelling an Enigma*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004.

4 Oakley 2009, 7. Emphasis mine.

5 Andersen, Jørgen. *The Witch on the Wall. Medieval Erotic Sculptures in the British Isles*. Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1977.

6 van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage*. 1909, Reprint London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960.

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Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An analysis of concept of pollution and taboo*. 1966, Reprint London and New York: Routledge, 2010.

7 Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.

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Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. 'Monster Culture: Seven Theses' in Cohen, J.J. (ed.) *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. Minneapolis University Press, 1996.

8 Kohl, Johann Georg. *Reisen in Irland. Zweitwl Theil*. Dresden and Leipzig: Arnoldische Buchhandlung, 1843.

9 *The Irish Times*, 24 September 197, page 13.

10 Apo, Satu. ““Ex cunno Come the Folk and Force”. Concepts of Women’s Dynamistic Power in Finnish-Karelian Tradition”. pp. 63-91 in *Gender and Folklore. Perspectives on Finnish and Karelian Culture*. Eds. Satu Apo, Aili Nenola and Laura Stark-Arola. Studia Fennica Folkloristica 4. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 1998.

Stark-Arola, Laura. *Magic, Body and Social Order. The Construction of Gender Through Women’s Private Rituals in Traditional Finland*. Studia Fennica Folkloristica 5. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 1998.

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Wooding, J.M., R. Aist, T.O. Clancy & T. O’Loughlin (eds.) Adomnán of Iona: Theologian, Lawmaker, Peacemaker. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010. 335 pages. ISBN: 978-1-84682-102-8. Price: € 50.00.

This collection of papers is the fruit of a conference held in the Iona Village Hall on 24-27 September 2004 to commemorate the centenary of Adomnán’s death, on 23 September 704. The fifteen contributions then presented, complemented by three papers by G. Markús, M. Low and T. O’Loughlin, shed light on a variety of aspects of Adomnán’s world view, his ambitions, and his literary legacy. In fact, the title of the book possibly somewhat detracts from the breadth of

subjects under discussion in the volume. The collection has been divided into two parts, the first titled ‘Adomnán – Life and Cult’, the second ‘Adomnán the writer’. Though the majority of the papers in the first part are concerned with various aspects of Adomnán’s life, both as abbot and lawmaker, they are contextualised by the inclusion of papers on Adomnán’s genealogy and his legacy in later medieval tradition. Brian Lacey’s review (20-35), of the relationship between Adomnán’s Cenél Conaill lineage and his mother’s Cenél nÉndai lineage (as claimed by the *Cáin Adomnáin*) in the light of the Cenél Conaill’s expansion from the sixth century onwards deftly calls into question not only Adomnán’s Cenél Conaill roots, but also the claim that most of Iona’s abbots belonged to that family. The papers of part two, which focus on the *Vita Columbae (VC)* and the *De Locis Sanctis (DLS)*, are, likewise, contextualised by Ewan Campbell’s paper (139-44) on the archaeology of writing in Adomnán’s time, which questions both the available archaeological evidence and the possibility of secular literacy. I will proceed with a discussion of some of the notable or recurrent topics in the collection.

In a book which titles Adomnán a ‘peacemaker’, an evaluation of this epithet cannot go wanting. James Fraser (95- 111) critically considers Adomnán’s reputation as a peacemaker through analysis of the parables and violent episodes in the *VC*. Fraser concludes that Adomnán was, in fact, a realist rather than a pacifist and held views much in keeping with contemporary clerical attitudes towards war and violence. Considering the abundance of references to fighting clerics and royal wars in the Irish annals and Adomnán’s

important political position, this observation puts his motivation for pushing the *Lex Innocentium* into perspective. Fraser stresses, however, that the content of the law was likely less controversial and innovative than we are inclined to think.

Adomnán's political ambitions are questioned also in Barbara Yorke's review of his role in improving the relations between Iona (and by extension Ireland) and Northumbria in the aftermath of the synod of Whitby (36-50). She argues for a reappraisal of Moisl's theory that Aldfrith's succession to the Northumbrian throne was beholden to a Hiberno-Pictish alliance (1983, 120-4) and suggest that Ecgrith may have promoted Aldfrith as an eligible heir to the throne to ensure the future of his lineage. The role of Adomnán in this succession remains indistinct, and Yorke's suggestion that Adomnán could have been promoting Aldfrith's interests and was consequently claiming a debt of obligation when he came to collect Irish captives after Aldfrith's installation as king, though intriguing, cannot be verified. Yorke's suggestion that his gift of the *De Locis Sancti*, one of a set of learned books given to Aldfrith by reputable scholars and friends after he became king – and all, likely, written with an underlying motive, served to promote Iona in the wake of claims of heresy regarding the calculation of Easter is intriguing, and as Yorke suggest, may have contributed to Aldfrith's attempts to reconcile the 'Irish' and 'Roman' parties in his kingdom.

That Adomnán likely shared Aldfrith's conciliatory attitude regarding the Easter controversy is made clear by Clare Stancliffe's lucid evaluation (51-68) of the circumstances of Adomnán's conversion to the 'Roman' Easter. She convincingly argues, in my opinion, that

Columba's deathbed scene in the *VC* reveals both that Adomnán was a 'Romanus' and that his personal conversion would not have prevented him from living in communion with the monks over which he was abbot, regardless of their adherence to the older 'Irish' system. She, moreover, contrasts this scene with Bede's account of the death of Cuthbert in the *Vita S. Cuthberti*, in which the latter is made to appear strictly opposed to communing with 'heretics'. The problem of Adomnán's inability to convert his monks has been the subject of some discussion in the recent past and this is apparent in another contribution in this volume, that of David Woods (193-204), which ought to be read side by side with Stancliffe's. Woods considers it impossible that Adomnán could have reached a compromise with his monks considering the centrality of the Easter celebration to the liturgical year and posits that Adomnán's conversion must in fact have taken place during a third (unrecorded) visit to Northumbria c. 702. Yet, Woods' argument follows Bede's interpretation of the events, which is contradictory to the Irish sources and reflects rather Bede's attempt to reconcile a situation that was to him as inconceivable as it appears to Woods. Ultimately, in my opinion, Woods' argument does not hold up in the light of Stancliffe's evidence: e.g. Stancliffe's analysis of *VC* directly contradicts Woods' claim that it 'cannot contribute in any decisive fashion to the determination of the date of Adomnán's rejection of the traditional Irish Easter table' (198). The two articles read together will, however, present the reader with an interest in the Easter controversy with a good evaluation of the problem and an overview of both sides of the argument.

Woods' discussion of the place of composition of the *DLS*, however, also brings to the fore the question whether Arculf and Adomnán could have actually met or whether Adomnán got the information he attributes to Arculf from a (Northumbrian, according to Woods) manuscript. This question will not be easily solved since Adomnán on occasion revised or adapted the information he attributes to Arculf, as is evident from Rodney Aist's discussion (162-180) of the validity of *DLS* as a source for Early Islamic Jerusalem and the pitfalls associated with taking it at face value. The role Bede played in transmitting the information regarding Arculf's arrival down to us is also as yet unclear.

The last six articles in this volume are concerned with the *VC*. Each of these contributions demonstrates there is much yet to be gleaned from this mysterious and complex work. Tomás O'Sullivan, for instance, revisits the question of the theology behind the motif of the 'naturally good' pagan in this text. Much of the previous scholarship on this topic has revolved around the question whether the *VC* betrays a Pelagian or Augustinian frame of reference. H. Conrad-O'Briain (2002) and G. Márkus (2005) are among those who have argued for a more Augustinian worldview, whilst Herren and Brown (2002) have argued for a Pelagian outlook. O'Sullivan, however, argues that the theology underlying the motif of the 'naturally good' pagan is dissonant with both and finds that it owes much more to John Cassian. Moreover, his analysis of the 'Artbrennan passage' (*VC* I.33) 'reveals it to be a careful rebuttal of the doctrines of Pelagianism' (270).

Adomnán's ability to carefully weave his theological paradigm into his works, visible

only to those who know how to read it, is evident not only from O'Sullivan's paper, but also from Jennifer O'Reilly's analysis (69-94) of his representation of Columba as teacher to Baithéne, which draws (among other sources) on Ps. 33 and the Rule of St. Benedict, from Stancliffe's analysis of Columba's last words (*VC* III.23), for which he draws on John 13:33-4, Rufinus' translation of Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* and 2 Corinthians, and from Katja Ritari's careful analysis (274-288) of Adomnán's representation of sanctity through Columba's vertical miracles, which demonstrates his dependence on a great variety of works, including Gregory the Great's *Dialogi* and the *Vita Antoni*. Thomas Charles-Edwards (205-18), moreover, demonstrates his dependence on Book II of Gregory's *Dialogi* for the structure of the *VC* and his careful allusions to the story of the Patriarch Jacob in Genesis to suggest a comparison between Columba and Jacob.

If nothing else, this brief sampling testifies that we have still much to learn about Adomnán and his work. The contributions included in *Adomnán of Iona* reflect a significant move forward in revealing the man behind the work and it is perhaps fitting that, in the words of Thomas Clancy, it is Adomnán's own words which, more than anything, have informed medieval and modern appreciation of him, and that, as such, through his own work, he wrote his own hagiography (122).

Lastly then, a brief appraisal of the book itself is due. The book itself is a well-formatted, elegant production, with plenty spacing to be easy on the eye. Printing errors are few and far between: I have noted only one typesetting error, one typographical error, one omission from the bibliography and two

omissions from the list of abbreviations. The book has been supplied with a twenty-page bibliography and indices for chapter references to Adomnán's works and manuscript references beside a general index. The paper quality is excellent and the typescript clear. In short, a commendable effort.

To conclude, the volume presents new scholarship on some of the more difficult aspects of Adomnán's life and work. This volume is not, therefore, nor does it claim to be, a handbook on Adomnán or an introduction to his life—there are other volumes better suited to the general reader. Nevertheless, it covers a sufficiently wide field to be attractive to non-specialists and specialists alike, without losing out on depth and focus. It is an excellent volume for those readers who wish to deepen their knowledge of Adomnán and his ambitions, the relationship between Iona and Northumbria, or the late seventh century literary milieu. The various contributions provide insight into contemporary debates on the Easter controversy and Adomnán's theology and into his clever use of source material in particular, and enable the reader to compare different scholarly opinions. *Adomnán and Iona* is a contribution to be appreciated by a wide scholarly audience and is recommended to anyone with an interest in the early medieval period.

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