

# Archaeology and Celtic Myth: Some Points of Comparison and Convergence<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article arises from a plenary invitation to compare myth and archaeology in the context of Celtic-speaking cultures. Approaches to myth in this context have undergone significant reassessment in the light of revisionist approaches to definitions of ‘native’ culture and ‘Celtic’ identity. These reassessments have implications for comparisons that are made between archaeological evidence and narratives, or elements thereof, that are arguably identifiable as mythic. New approaches to data in both subject areas affect roles that have long been played by myth in public reception of archaeological discoveries and in supporting cultural identities. Past approaches to such comparisons inspire caution, even scepticism, but some critical use of myth as an idea can be seen as productive – for example, in questioning conservative interpretations of textual or material data.

Keywords: *Celtic identity, archaeological thought, narratives, nativism*

At first glance there can appear to be little in common between archaeology and myth. Archaeology is a discipline increasingly concerned with its scientific dimension. Myth, by contrast, can give the impression of something elusive in quality or opposed to science. Are these elements that are even safely brought together? I am mindful that two distinguished archaeologists who recently published studies on this particular topic did so only *after* they had retired (Waddell 2014; Mallory 2016). Perhaps they are wiser than I am. But I also think back to an encounter right at the very beginning of my career when, browsing in a bookshop in Cornwall, I came across a shelf labelled ‘Occult and Celtic Archaeology’. This glimpse of how some others see us, despite our best efforts, is an enduring reminder that anyone who works on ‘Celtic’ matters lives continuously with the burden, as well

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as the opportunity, of engaging with a spectrum of complex ideas and entrenched perceptions!

In accepting this invitation to compare studies of myth and archaeology, I am encouraged by some archaeologists who have recently questioned the tendency, which emerged in the mid-twentieth century (see Trigger 1989, 312–19), to present archaeological knowledge as discrete from the types of knowledge found in texts. Recent trends towards studying the ‘cultural biography’ of objects (Van der Noort 2011; Hingley 2011, 621f.; Andrén 2005, 107), or to contemplate religious motives for events in prehistoric travel (Samson 2006), allow new spaces for the narrative and the sacred to feature in explanation of material patterns. Whilst I do not wish to make claims of a now strong interest in myth on the part of the archaeological community – of which I am at best a peripheral member – there is at least potential here for dialogue between the two subjects. In what follows we will identify some examples of convergence of interest between archaeologists and scholars of myth. We will also reflect on whether treating some stories as ‘myths’, rather than more generally as ‘texts’, is productive in making comparisons.

### Definitions

Convergence is one thing, and should cause practitioners of the two subjects to take an interest in each other’s work, but clear definitions as well as case studies are needed if any comparison is to be more than just a glance in either direction. The term ‘myth’ is used variously in Celtic Studies to refer to extant literary narratives, putative lost myths of gods or demi-gods, and structures inherent in a shared linguistic inheritance from the distant past. The term ‘mythological’ is also used to identify a school of literary criticism in which theories of myth are applied to medieval literature.

So, how do we make a definition suitable for our comparison? Robert Segal, in his recent short study of myth, defines it as:

A story. That myth, whatever else it is, is a story may seem self-evident. After all, when asked to name myths, most of us think first of *stories* about Greek and Roman gods and heroes [...] Lévi-Strauss ventures beyond the story into the ‘structure’ of myth, but again the structure is conveyed by the story (Segal 2004, 4–5).

For Segal myths are stories ‘about something significant’ (Segal 2004, 5). The Celtic scholar Joseph F. Nagy (2018) also defines myths as significant stories,

[...] told, performed and transmitted in a special and stylised way [...] feature a shared repertoire of themes, motifs, characters and narrative procedures [...] are the stories that a society unmistakably marks as important for its members to know.

These two recent definitions broadly agree on the criteria of form and significance. We will follow them in defining myths as a type of story about something important that is often told to explain the origin or meaning of things. I would be inclined to add that myths are often *mutable* stories which can be adapted to new settings. We will put aside some older, narrower and now dated, perceptions of myth. One is that myths are stories that are generally falsified by science (see Segal 2004, 3f.), which gives rise to the popular – and incorrect – perception that ‘myths’ are by definition false explanations. Recent approaches have tended to empower myth as a tool in criticism, rather than something only opposed to, or demystified by, knowledge (Lincoln 2014, 3ff.; also Hingley 2011, 621). We will also put aside the older presumption that the sacred or supernatural element in myths necessarily derives from their having been originally stories of gods or demi-gods (Segal 2004, 5; Mallory 2016, 73f.).

Some of our criteria for myth are potentially measurable in the material record. We should be able to discern how important things were to past people from archaeology – though we should keep in mind Sir Mortimer Wheeler’s famous caveat on assessing the historical significance of Jesus from the scale of his materiality (Wheeler 1954, 213f.). Origin legends are also a type of myth that may be susceptible to archaeological assessment. Bruce Lincoln, in a northern European case study, argues that stories of origins/migrations are narratives that subsist between myth and history (Lincoln 2014, 1–6). Archaeology offers tangible data of settlement change or continuity to which legends of migration from Celtic-speaking nations can be compared and contrasted, as we will see below. It is further arguable that the presence of mythic narratives may at least be inferred from the use or placement of material things, even if we cannot recover the narratives themselves. Miranda Green suggests that narrative myths might be inferred from religious artworks with sufficiently complex iconography (Green 2015, 24). The methodology of ‘social maritime archaeology’ includes attempts to theorise the enterprise of sea travel in terms of archaeological evidence for rituals and the cosmological ideas that sup-

ported long-distance contacts – for example, the ‘otherworldly’ qualities of exotic goods (Van Der Noort 2006, 268–73, 278f.; Van Der Noort 2011, 528f.). Studies of material culture in texts also provide some useful models for inferring myths in material patterns or rituals (Clunies-Ross 1998).

We should observe that for some medieval literatures, including those in Irish and Welsh, there is a perception that the terms ‘literature’, ‘mythology’, and even ‘folklore’ are interchangeable. This assumption is certainly found in the publishing industry, but even obtains in some fields of literary criticism – for example, studies of the *Mabinogi* (see Rodway 2018; Hutton 2011). Such treatment often begs finer questions of context and chronology that are essential for any comparisons of literature with archaeology.

### **‘An indubitable “Arthur” or his ilk’**

We will begin with a case study, the ‘historical Arthur’, in which archaeology and myth have long been partnered for purposes of archaeological interpretation or public reception. The main causes here are clear enough. Myths are relatable narratives of explanation that often appeal to the layperson ahead of the social or economic theories that are characteristically applied to material data. The currency of Arthur as a figure in popular culture is also an aid to publicity. Archaeology is a comparatively expensive activity and public interest in excavations is important.

Arthur’s floruit is in a period we might describe as ‘proto-historical’ – that is, an era that is on the boundary of prehistory, or where we have written records only from some parties to an encounter. His setting, the period of Saxon expansion into the west and north, is plausible in historical terms, but he is not himself reported in contemporary sources – while today having far greater public recognition than those, such as Ambrosius or Gildas, who are. We might ask whether Arthur is a mythic rather than merely a legendary figure. Although claimed as a figure of the migration era, Arthur tends to derive his most familiar materiality from legends of later, high medieval, date – knights in ‘stove-pipe’ armour, living a courtly existence in castles of high medieval type. The Arthurian story in this way is a mutable one, adapted by the English and the Normans to symbolise their own difference, real or imagined, from other peoples. The story of Arthur is also more than just a political narrative, as Arthur is given a myth of future return. Arthur’s story in these ways fits more than one of our above criteria for a myth. This, I will note, is a separate question to older attempts to find underlying myths in Arthurian narratives (cf. Loomis 1927).

A narrative of what is known as the 'historical' Arthur as a resistance leader converges with a pattern of refortification of hilltop forts in the fifth and sixth centuries, making him a figure epitomising British resistance to Saxon settlement. Myth and archaeology long coexisted here in garnering public appeal and impact for excavations. As long ago as 1926 Sir Mortimer Wheeler, whose excavation methods are held to be foundational for the discipline of archaeology (Piggott 1977, 641), attracted controversy during excavations at Caerleon in Wales for regularly briefing reporters on 'Arthur's Round Table' (Hawkes 1982, 96ff.). Forty years later Leslie Alcock's excavations at South Cadbury (Somerset) were sponsored by a 'Camelot Research Committee' that was chaired by Wheeler, with the mythologist Geoffrey Ashe as secretary. They again attracted criticism for throwing out the name of Arthur to engage the public (Thomas 1969, 27–30; 138ff.). This certainly helped with funding. Alcock himself had begun his research campaign by accepting the historicity of Arthur – only subsequently being persuaded to accept Arthur's contingency (Alcock 1987, 173, 181, 185f.). He nevertheless came to interpret the occupation of South Cadbury in terms of what Wheeler rather paradoxically termed 'an indubitable "Arthur" or his ilk' and whom the media termed 'an Arthur-type figure' (Alcock 1972, 8).

Looking back, it is hard not to see Arthur as having been a useful – albeit a somewhat exploitative – instrument for explaining the story revealed by the excavation. South Cadbury was a pre-Roman hill fort, refortified with culturally 'Roman' features in the context of Saxon advances in the fifth/sixth century. The diagnostic dating evidence for this event was pottery of a late-Roman type imported from the Mediterranean, much of it containers for wine and oil. This fits one iteration of the 'historical' Arthur as a leader working in a decolonised environment in which warlords maintained some of the material trappings of the departed empire. An 'Arthur-type' figure nonetheless has self-evident limitations as an instrument for interpretation. What if the rebuilding of Cadbury had actually been led by a woman? Or was it a cooperative effort (Monty Python's 'anarcho-syndicalist commune' perhaps)? Thinking about the legend of Arthur might also lead us to overvalue culturally 'Roman' elements found in a post-Roman context (Faulkner 2005, 6). What if the wine was less about a thirst to stay Roman than just a thirst for wine?

Some objections raised by Alcock's contemporaries need to be understood in the context of the intellectual environment of the time. In 1966, when Alcock commenced his excavation, some archaeologists aspired to an archaeological mode of discourse which would be immune from pressure

to explain archaeology in historical – which back then was equated with textual – terms (Rahtz 1985, 3–7). In the same year that Alcock commenced work at South Cadbury Graham Clark published his famous critique of the ‘invasion hypothesis’ (Clark 1966). This highly influential article was mainly concerned with refuting a clichéd model of interpretation of material data, but in the background was a desire to throw off the influence of Classical histories over the interpretation of the European Iron Age and to think beyond the ‘migrationist’ paradigm of cultural development that their narratives inspired (see below). Another contemporary, Charles Thomas, was concerned about expectations that such quasi-historical associations raised in the public mind:

Lest the very real progress made in the last few decades in the archaeology and history of Early Christian Britain should be vitiated or discounted by any failure to produce clear-cut ‘Arthurian’ results (Thomas 1969, 30).

Interpretation in terms of literary narratives was here perceived as a serious issue for an industry that was trying to develop its own criteria for knowledge – in the face of historians who saw archaeology only as a ‘very expensive demonstration of the obvious’ (Sawyer 1983). It became axiomatic for a time that a distinct role of archaeology was as a source for people other than kings – real or legendary. This cast archaeology in something of an artificial class conflict with history. The 2012 discovery of the body of Richard III at Leicester reminds us that archaeology *can* recover famous people and even verify aspects of their appearance that one might have suspected were exaggerated by propaganda (Buckley et al. 2013, 536f.; cf. Tey 1951).

It is arguable that our ideas have changed substantially since these polemics of the 1960s, and that we are now less concerned that reference to Arthur by archaeologists will simply reify a myth – or that some existential danger would ensue if it happened to do so. In the present era the contingency of *all* information is perhaps more generally accepted than it was in 1966; reflection on myth indeed is a dimension of modern critical theory (e.g. Barthes 1972). A 2012–13 project by University of Wales Trinity Saint David on ‘The Archaeology of the Mabinogion’ appears to have passed largely without comment, as did a recent BBC documentary (2018) on ‘Arthur’s Britain’ hosted by Alice Roberts. The cinematic depiction of a late-Antique Arthur – the Arthur of archaeology – has more recently (2004) displaced the later medieval literary materialities of older films such as *Camelot* (1967) or *Excalibur* (1981), showing indeed that archaeological models can be seen to

contribute an ongoing dimension to the myth of Arthur and so do not just serve to affirm or deny its historicity. None of the above comment is to be taken as an endorsement of romantic invocations of Arthur in studies of history or archaeology, but only to reflect on a use that is already made of the story of Arthur by archaeologists.

### **Geopolitical myths**

Another proto-historic context in which the archaeology of Celtic-speaking peoples regularly comes into contact with what could be seen as 'mythic' narratives is at the beginning of the Roman era in Gaul and Germany. Passages in works by Classical writers of the first centuries BCE/CE such as Caesar, Valerius Maximus, or Ammianus Marcellinus – and, through these, lost works of Timagenes, Posidonius, Polybius, and others – explain distributions of populations, their religious practices, and social structures. The detail derives from a mixture of personal observation by Classical authors, accounts inherited from older works, and information passed by the Gauls themselves to Classical authors. Some of these accounts have qualities of myth, being stories that explain national origins through migrations that occurred in later prehistory. The archaeologist Richard Hingley, in a stimulating critique to which I will give close attention in this section, also finds qualities of myth in the complex ways in the narratives of explanation made by historians and archaeologists themselves, who

usually aim to base their myths of origin on an explicitly reasoned and critical assessment of materials from the past, whether text or object, but we all need stories to articulate the available archaeological materials (Hingley 2011, 621).

As in the 'Arthurian' era above, there is an extent to which 'myth' is possibly an inherent factor in interpretations of proto-historic migration by both ancient writers and modern scholars.

Since, in particular, the work of Colin Wells there has been a strong trend in scholarship to compare archaeology and these texts dialectically to suggest that Celtic identities in Gaul were substantially invented, or reinvented, to serve the requirements of Roman propaganda (Wells 1972, 23–30; Wells 1995, 603–20; Green 1990, 13). This interpretive model respects the disjunctions that are often evident between claims of recent migration in Classical histories and the evidence of archaeological cultures, which often shows longer patterns of continuity. Ewan Campbell (2001) has

asked similar questions about the origin story of the Scots as late-Antique migrants to north Britain.

Hingley's critique, however, proceeds from a perception that research into the late Iron Age in northern Europe was not only central to the development of modern archaeology but contributed in an ongoing way to geopolitical myths of modern identity. As we increasingly question older conceptions of 'ethnic' identity, we should acknowledge that modern identities too have deep roots in both archaeology and Classical sources, which may present us with a matrix of narratives so intertwined as to obviate the simple use of archaeology as an objective control on history (see also Webster 2015, 123). Indeed, one approach from the archaeological side has been to try to shake off labels such as 'Celt' or 'German' in developing models that are separate from the terms of dominant Classical narrative and 'culture-history' conceptions (see Trigger 1989, 148–207). Archaeological data, once used to affirm identities, are used to question or subvert such identities. Hingley, however, suggests it may not be the role of the archaeologist

to educate people to abandon their fundamental myths of origin, especially when these popular ideas are based, at least in the past, on the writings of archaeologist [*sic*] [...] the idea we should correct people's assumptions appears to be based on a pseudo-scientific idea that we, as archaeologists, have an authoritatively accurate understanding of the past (Hingley 2011, 631).

The question of 'Celtic' identity is a case in point, and one is struck by the paradoxical offering of books (James 1998; Collis 2003; cf. Sims-Williams 1998, 1–2) and exhibitions on 'Celts' which seem to question the validity of the very conception they are promoting (British Museum and Royal Museums of Scotland 2015). The selling power of the supposed myth of 'Celtic' identity subverts its supposed deconstruction. Hingley's critique appeals here for the use he makes of the concept of myth in developing a nuanced approach to the differing perspectives of prehistorians, and of Classical archaeologists and Classical historians.

I am further minded by these comparisons of archaeology and myth to reflect on whether (*pace* Hingley 2011, 319) the stories of origins conveyed by Classical writers might themselves be iterations of *native* myths that were gathered through contact with the Celtic-speaking peoples themselves (see Ó Riain 1986, 243f.). The stories of the migrations of the Belgae and Veneti (e.g. Caesar *Gallic War* II.4) are, as John Carey (1994, 2f.) cautiously observes, 'tantalisingly reminiscent of the basic framework of Irish legendary history



we find crystallised in the *Lebar Gabála*, the body of Irish origin/migration legends that can be traced from sources from around 830 CE onwards. We might see Caesar as a propagandist who invented identities for his own purposes, but might we also envisage him reifying and adapting native myths to his own ends? Recent studies by Clifford Ando (2005) and Ralph Häussler (2012) invite us to consider that later provincial encounters of Roman and native knowledge were often two-sided, not one-sided, conversations – evinced, amongst other evidence, by the fact that equations between Roman and Celtic deities are diverse rather than normative.

It has proved easy for some archaeologists to argue that conceptions such as ‘Celt’ are a myth in the sense of something false or invented, sometimes only because historic identities are not simply coterminous with archaeological cultures. Hingley’s nuanced critique respects the complexity of narratives here when we interpret origin stories against the evidence of archaeology. The origin stories from Classical and medieval histories are themselves myths with which archaeology has interacted since its inception. There is food for thought here for scholars of myth.

### **Sacred and profane seafaring**

Older paradigms of social archaeology and ‘economic’ prehistory were often reluctant to study or explain their evidence outside sublunary ideas of production and demand, except where the unexplained was sometimes deemed, often tongue-in-cheek, as ‘ritual activity’ (code for ‘I can’t think of another explanation’!). Those who knew and worked with archaeologists who were formed in the culture of the 1960s will also know that more than a few were, in the spirit of the time, rather dismissive of religion as an idea. Some recent studies of prehistory have sought to reflect on the boundary between ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ behaviour in ways that appear to subvert the traditional materialist causes adduced to archaeological events. These attempts seem to be worth a brief comment as another example of where there may be possible convergences with studies of myth.

Alice Samson (2006) proposes that we might interpret offshore finds of scrap metal in the Bronze Age English Channel as deliberate votive offerings rather than ‘trade interrupted’. Her analysis considers a dataset of 18 shipwrecks from the Channel coasts of Britain, France, and Holland: eleven from the Late Bronze Age (c. 1000–700 BCE) and the others from the Middle Bronze Age (c. 1500–1000 BCE). Samson suggests that patterns of intentional damage to items as well as their proportions converge with characteristics

of inland votive deposit and speaks against their being collections of scrap metal (Samson 2006, 378ff.). This logically extends a mainland paradigm of water as a place of access to the supernatural (Bradley 2017).

Samson's thesis suggests a changing perception of the role of ideas in archaeology – a sympathy to the possibility that sacred and/or mythic conceptions may have been causes of deposition. Admittedly, some recent arguments move in the opposite direction. In the case of Llyn Cerrig Bach in Anglesey a similar (but reverse) case has been argued by Owain Roberts (2007, 30–37), who suggested that deposits of metalwork were chance deposits by a shipwreck, contradicting an interpretation, predicated on Tacitus's historical account of Anglesey as a centre of druidic sacrifice, that they were votive deposits. These debates might be seen as at least venturing onto the same ground as studies of myth in considering sacred conceptions as a cause for action. It remains to be argued whether putative ritual deposits presuppose *myths* rather than a sea perceived as animate and requiring sacrifices. In the mid-first century BCE Greek writers such as Homer, Hesiod, and Heraclitus, whose floruit was proximate to the Late Bronze Age, invested the sea with supernatural qualities and some qualities of myth (Lindenlauf 2006). It also remains to be argued whether a comparable, or related, mythology can be inferred for early Celtic-speaking cultures in the same period.

### **Medieval Literature, Myth, and Archaeology**

In Celtic-speaking Britain and Ireland, from the period after c. 400 CE, we find another point on the proto-historic horizon at which myth potentially converges with archaeology. In Ireland and Wales, where prehistory runs to the beginning of the Middle Ages, medieval literary cycles such as the (Irish) Ulster and Mythological Cycles as well as the (Welsh) Mabinogi have frequently been used to interpret aspects of local pre- and proto-history. There is, as we have already noted, a tendency on the part of publishers and literary critics to alternate between 'myth' and 'literature' in defining these literatures. Many of the tales are explicitly situated in a prehistoric context, though this is, of course, no proof of antiquity. Archaeologists share in the tendency to see literature as myth, where such stories might appear to offer insight into monuments and patterns from Insular prehistory. The medieval British and Irish literatures are also often questionably used to interpret Classical-era religious iconography from the Continent, for which we lack any contemporary narrative exegesis (Wooding 2017).

We will not rehearse here the whole fraught debate about ‘nativism’ and ‘pagan survivals’ in medieval Celtic Studies (McCone 1990; Warmind 1992; Williams 2016; Wooding 2009). The tendency to refer to ‘myth’ in this context is, or was originally, based on the assumption that extant literature stands at the near end of a receding continuum of oral tradition. It is the present consensus of literary scholars that these literatures are in fact to be regarded – at least by default – as wholly medieval in context, and their ‘archaic’ qualities more likely to be the product of authorial art than genuine survivals from a distant past. Recent criticism has indeed progressively drawn the dating of many tales further away from the prehistoric context. On this basis many literary scholars would be minded to discourage any approach to these texts by archaeologists. The habitual use of models of myth in literary criticism also fuels scepticism. In the latter case structural theories of myth – for example, the works of Georges Dumézil and Claude Lévi-Strauss – often came to be used without specific reference to the ‘deep’ chronologies mythologists envisage for them. Tom Sjöblom (2004, 63f.) has suggested that such use of structural theories amounts to a ‘weak’ form of mythological criticism, used primarily because it is productive of ideas (cf. Ó Cathasaigh 2014, 42f.); mythologists themselves would argue that their ideas need to be understood holistically rather than selectively (Schjødtd 1996, 184–96; Lyle 2018). In all this one can only say that definitions of myth *and* the way in which critical theory of any type are applied in Celtic Studies could both bear more reflection.

Within this rather fraught retreat from orality and nativism there remains a need to address the extent to which our earliest extant texts may have been preceded by earlier tales, oral or written (see Padel 2013, 131), whether or not these putative earlier tales are explicitly treated as myths. These questions need to be unpacked and not treated as synonymous, even if the net outcome is that there is effectively nothing that can be said. Archaeology may have some part to play here, as it does in the comparable problems of the ‘Homeric question’ of early Greek studies.

James Mallory, in a recent monograph, takes a detailed approach to chronologies and the problem of transmission (Mallory 2016, 60–74). He is inclined to favour the definition of the medieval tales as literature rather than myth in the first instance, but reflects in detail on comparisons with myth and Homeric proto-history. As a basis for testing whether the contents are likely to contain archaic survivals, Mallory’s main instrument is to assess whether the *mise en scène* of extant texts is contemporary or in some way atavistic. This he achieves through a detailed comparison of material descrip-

tions in texts with archaeological finds. Deliberate anachronism in creating material settings is, of course, not uncommon in literature and is part of the creative element of writing (Mallory 2016, 74f.; cf. Orwell 1946, 165). Mallory provides a robust hermeneutic to test the contemporaneity of settings (Mallory 2016, 130f., 229–53). His work in this context is distinguished by its use of chronological frameworks and benchmarks, tracking ‘start and end date to fix an object in time’ (Mallory 2016, 77). Mallory mostly fights against claims of long survival of descriptions of earlier events or artefacts in the medieval narratives – such as Kenneth Jackson’s famous thesis of a ‘window on the Iron Age’ (1963) to explain apparent archaisms in the Ulster Cycle (see also Mallory 1986). For example, he finds the material culture of the *Táin bó Cuailnge* consistent with the broadly late first millennium CE context envisaged for its composition; earlier than the extant versions, but later than the prehistoric era to which it is self-ascribed. Mallory still allows that a case such as the Corlea trackway (second century BCE) gives pause. Here the dates – presumably medieval conjectures – assigned in the ‘prehistoric’ Irish annals to King Eochaid Airem converge disarmingly with dendro-chronological dates from the excavated timbers. Eochaid, in the medieval Irish tale *Tochmarc Étaíne* (‘ Wooing of Étaín’), is said to have built a trackway across the same bogland (Mallory 2016, 275; Green 2015, 16f.). Mallory’s approach thus appeals for its robust empirical model as well as his explicit reflections on myth as a genre.

John Waddell (2014) makes use of the concept of ‘Celtic myth’ in an adventurous monograph based on his Rhind Lectures for 2014. Here he makes broad comparisons between prehistory and tales from medieval literature, proceeding from the premise that in some of these tales ‘survival of archaic mythic themes and pagan concepts is not in doubt’ (Waddell 2014, 5). Waddell has made major contributions to the study of ‘royal’ and/or ritual sites in early Ireland. As these major prehistoric centres feature in the medieval literary tradition, it might at least seem reasonable that he should make approaches to this tradition, but for it to convey valid information of the prehistoric use of these sites would require transmission of ideas across a long distance in time. Waddell begins by admitting the virtual impossibility of dissecting the putative myths from the medieval context of their transmission, thus rather casting doubt on his whole approach at the outset (Waddell 2014, 5f.). His monograph has, accordingly, received mixed reviews, which in some cases identify him as taking a dated ‘nativist’ perspective (e.g. Casey 2015; Karl 2016; Williams 2017). I will not attempt to unravel the many issues with Waddell’s approach that the reviews reasonably raise, but it may be

pertinent here to reflect on the disciplines' different priorities. Prehistorians deal in much longer sweeps of time than the increasingly narrow chronologies allowed for the floruit of the medieval narratives. Waddell's study, for me at least, despite its rather brief reflection on myth, is useful in showing the contrast between the sorts of continuities of culture that on the one hand prehistorians envisage across long phases of prehistory, and on the other the discontinuity that many medievalists perceive in the transition to Christianity (Bradley 1995; Bradley 2017, 180–98).

Miranda Green is another distinguished archaeologist who has approached medieval sources on the premise that they preserve fragments of older religious ideas (Green 1990; 1994). Green, like Mallory, takes a cautious approach to the survival of data from past contexts. From the outset she notes the limits of potential data of Celtic religion from medieval texts, which describe beings who are plausibly seen as euhemerised gods, but present little detail that could possibly be construed as an inheritance of pre-Christian ritual – something Anders Andrén also observes concerning medieval Icelandic literature (Green 1986, 17; Andrén 2005, 106). Green does find evidence for continuity between prehistoric archaeology and medieval literature at the level of iconography in such imagery as horses, human heads, cauldrons, and triplism. Her model for survival might be described as atomised, as any symbolism coming through into the medieval literature is presumed to be in a stripped-down state, in some ways comparable to the Indo-European model of transmission of structures (Schjødt 1996). Where does this leave myth? We should note that Green's model does not really presume a narrative dimension to early Celtic religion, as she presents it as broadly animistic (Green 1989, 2f.), hence not requiring the presence of myths, as we have defined them above, as stories. Green does define the extant medieval literature as a 'mythic literature', explicitly 'post-pagan' in context (Green 1992, 14; 2015, 25). She dates the creation of this literature to the late first millennium CE (Green 2015, 17), though she allows that there may have been older, oral, forms of medieval stories (Green 2015, 24). The medieval literature is undeniably a narrative context, though one wonders if it is necessary to define it as a 'mythic' context at all – in contrast, say, to the more traditional nativist model in which extant tales are held to be derived from older versions that would have more obviously evinced the characteristics of myths (Mac Cana 1977, 24–31).

The approaches of Mallory, Waddell, and Green, whatever shortcomings critics may find in them, are attempts at assessing a scholarly model that has persistently connected prehistoric centuries with medieval narratives – with an attendant use of the term 'myth'. Whether thinking in terms of myth is

productive in any of these cases is arguable, but some reflection on the use of the term is inevitable, given its ubiquity in past debates. There may also be a heuristic value in thinking in terms of myth here. Mallory, in a review of Green's book *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art*, contrasts Dumézil's mythic interpretation of the image of Esus on the Paris Altar with Green's (1989, 103–104) animistic one. Mallory observes in this case that

While the Dumézilian interpretation may hardly convince, it does remind us that religious iconography may also be mythic, that is, narrative in origin and I wonder if a survey of Germanic religious art would be content to abstract Thor's hammer or the Midgard serpent into symbols of protection or fertility (Mallory 1991, 249; also cf. Puhvel 1987, 170ff.; cf. Tolkien 1964, 26f.).

The mythologist's model, as Mallory demonstrates, has the virtue at least of helping us to imagine that there may have been narratives surrounding these motifs. The latter point becomes important when we reflect on treatments of Gaulish/Celtic religion that were made across the twentieth century. The archaeologist Terence Powell, for example, assessed the character of pre-Christian Celtic religion as something short of a 'clear-cut body of belief' and characteristic of a 'primitive' culture, echoing historical assessments by Anton van Hamel (Bacon 1913; van Hamel 1934; Powell 1958, 115; critical responses by Rees 1966, 37f.; Mackey 1992). There is a danger of positivism in studies confined to single categories of data. If it is difficult to recover stories from artefacts and if artefacts are the only expression surviving from a culture, we need to be cautious that we do not find absence of evidence to be evidence of absence. Green herself makes this point concerning the temptation to see some innovations in Celtic religion as coterminous with the Graeco-Roman context in which they are first expressed (Green 1989, 1, 224; Green 1995, 140). Considering myth, whether or not on the basis of much evidence, is again a counterbalance to reconstructing prehistoric cultures on purely materialist models (see also Hingley 2011, 626).

### **Concluding thoughts**

The foregoing has presented some brief comparisons of Celtic myth and archaeology, taking account of the evolving histories of the two subjects, as well as where archaeologists have approached the topic of myth in the context of Celtic-speaking peoples. Studies of Celtic myths bear a weight of justifiable scepticism arising from past scholarship, as does the mixing of

legend and archaeology in contemporary media (Anderson 2018). In such an environment no one should venture a comparison lightly. Reflection on myth, however, taking a broad definition of the term, has contributed productively to deconstructions of positivistic thinking and claims of objectivity for one category of evidence over another. Myths are also found to be potent triggers for engaging the public in a discipline, archaeology, that is public facing. We need to be sympathetic to the different perspectives of each subject. The pre-/proto-historic centuries are legitimately the territory of the archaeologist, whose perspective, in contrast with to that of the medievalist, begins with evidence from those periods (cf. Williams 2016, 48). The thinking of some archaeologists now exhibits points of convergence with the territory of mythologists. There is certainly food for thought here for those who have interests in both subjects.

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