



Reviews and short notices

THE ATLANTIC AS MYTHOLOGICAL SPACE: AN ESSAY ON MEDIEVAL ETHEA. By Alfonso J. García-Osuna. Pp 298. Wilmington, Delaware: Vernon Press. 2023. US\$58.00.

Ever since Johan Huizinga's reassessment of the medieval mind (*Herfstij der Middeleeuwen*, 1919) as a passionate intensity, scholars have sought to understand pre-scientific perceptions of nature. García-Osuna's medieval Ethea captures this point; the hero's moral framework and perception strategies reflected their assimilation of society's communal codes for perceiving, judging, and acting: 'Those codes are the source of the hero's supply of implicit knowledge' (p. 222). At the centre of this study is a reconsideration of the role of myth in the medieval view of the Atlantic Ocean. García-Osuna proposes that an explanation of reality offered by myth 'is just as valid as that offered by science in the sense that, as a human social construct, "reality" ... is effectively intertwined with human experience. ... The legitimacy of myth, then, flows from its ability to supply human beings with a coherent, qualitative method of interpreting reality through metaphorical patterns and symbolic archetypes' (p.10). Myths are rooted in the community's collective consciousness and imagination that allows one to travel beyond any material world easily observed, for 'without imagination, the superficial world of objects would be the measure of "all there is" ... Myth is continual imagination' (p. 15). The medieval traveller structured their narrative identity within 'a sheltering infrastructure of clan and tradition' (p. 197).

The Atlantic Ocean was a gateway to another world; it had immense power, even over the sun. Although the sun provided light and heat, it appeared to be extinguished in the ocean as it disappeared each evening, yet was born of the sea each morning. The ocean was a liminal space, whereby the traveller searched for a distant island where reality and time were suspended, and one could see magnificent things. In entering the ocean, 'this other sphere is a mental space as much as it is physical, a hypothetical cosmos through which the medieval psyche drifts as in a dream, roaming free, unconstrained by the limitations of a map' (p. 27).

Pre-Christian journeys were designated as *echtraí*, the old Irish word for adventure to the otherworld of *Tír Tairngire*, the Celtic paradise or land of promise. By the late seventh century the Christian journey became known as *Immráma* (or *Immráma*, literally rowing about) and in some cases it is motivated by the need for penance (*Snedgus* and *Mac Riagla*) or vengeance (*Máel Diúin*). One of the well-known stories is Brendan's *Navigatio*, and this *Immráma* became the primary means by which Christian proselytisers legitimised their doctrines and beliefs; however, the pagan substratum in *Immráma* remained for centuries. The Irish otherworld was a material space and therefore Christian saints needed to become seafarers to gain credibility for their claims. When the Norsemen first arrived in Iceland they discovered Irish books, bells and crosiers. Thus, the *immram* journey proves that Christianity is based on universal and self-evident truths. In turn, the Irish church's concessions challenged the Roman church's official set of doctrinal beliefs. These concessions created a unique Irish Christianity that had a 'syncretic character', and in this way it paralleled older Irish mythology with basic Christian beliefs, so that many older practices (such as reverence for holy wells) appeared as a natural development (p. 31). García-Osuna reminds us that many continental theologians criticized the Irish church for this; however, one could also make the argument that the increased sale of relics on the continent pointed to its own syncretism; certainly, Erasmus made this point. Indeed, if the world was sea, the church would become the ship (p. 82).

García-Osuna poses an important question: if the bible contains all the knowledge that Christians need for salvation, what is the purpose of *Immráma*? In the case of Brendan's

Navigatio, one can consider three points. First, ‘ostensibly, Brendan’s interpretation of the biblical passage “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life” (Matthew 19:29)’ (p. 204), was a powerful incentive to depart his own lands. Secondly, his voyage was also an exploration of ‘the periphery of the human self, an enigmatic expanse symbolised by the Atlantic Ocean’ (p. 204). This required the hero to return from his adventure to become a mentor to others with his new enlightened message. Thirdly, Brendan needed to conform to social expectations since the quest had to display all the expectations of its audience. He had to ‘accomplish a sort of thaumaturgy: to denature the story’s pagan essence’ (p. 205). Thus, from the medieval perspective, the story’s verisimilitude did not depend on how well it described a material reality, but its description of the expected mental landscape. ‘Free from the demands of plausibility’, medieval Christian *Immrama* accounts like Brendan’s *Navigatio* had the power to transform the stories and characters of Irish mythology to help understand basic Christian beliefs: ‘Realistic portrayals would only serve to conceal what *really* counts for the writer and reader behind a complicating, vast volume of extraneous information’ (p. 206). Garcia-Osuna has concluded that in contrast to the continental Christian doctrine of Augustine, where faith seeks understanding, for the medieval Irish Christian the formula would have been altered to ‘men in boats seeking understanding’ (p. 228).

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USING CONCEPTS IN MEDIEVAL HISTORY: PERSPECTIVES ON BRITAIN AND IRELAND, 1100–1500.

Edited by Jackson W. Armstrong, Peter Crooks & Andrea Ruddick. Pp 201. Cham: Springer. 2022. £22.99.

A characteristic aversion to pretentiousness, rather than intellectual inadequacy, explains the reluctance of medieval historians to resort with much frequency to the word ‘concept’ in their writings. Whether we acknowledge the fact or not, of course, we employ concepts all the time in our work, and this volume is a welcome prompt to think more deeply about how we go about doing this. The word ‘Using’ in the title is reassuring and important: ‘These essays’, the introduction (pp 13–14) states, ‘are not an exercise in “conceptual history” ... The chapters provide a set of working examples of how particular concepts can be fruitfully put to work by medieval historians ... We would claim that conceptual work by historians must ... remain firmly grounded in real examples if it is to be in any sense meaningful.’ In other words, ‘the defeat of narrative by vision’, bemoaned by Edward Said forty-five years ago as he scrutinised the ways in which observation had yielded so often to preconceived ideas (*Orientalism*, p. 239), is here consciously and profitably avoided.

The avoidance of arcane terminology is important in encouraging medieval historians to engage with concepts, and it must be said that the editors and contributors to this volume do not always succeed in this regard. The use of the inexplicably fashionable but vacuous word ‘valence’ (pp 6, 160) is a minor lapse; more off-putting is the appearance of *etics* and *emics* (pp 8, 141). Andrea Ruddick is right when she says (p. 113) ‘Public engagement also needs to be borne in mind here; it is possible to produce such specialised vocabulary that it becomes unintelligible to anyone outside our immediate field of expertise.’ However, she somewhat undermines her case by referring, without apparent irony, to ‘an onomasiological as opposed to a semasiological approach’ to her topic elsewhere in her contribution (p. 111, n. 17).

There is also a deeper and unexplored tension in the volume between the ideas of ‘concept’ and ‘theory’. Elizabeth Brown is careful to distinguish between the two and has little time for those ‘devoted to theories, principles and simplicity’ (p. 48, and n. 126). Peter Crooks, on the other hand, treats the words as synonyms, arguing that ‘the very idea that we can eschew abstractions and understand past societies solely on their own terms seems