

Besprechungen

BONDARENKO, Grigory: *Studies in Irish mythology*. Berlin: curach bhán publications, 2014. ix, 287 S., ISBN 978-3-942002-15-8. € 35,00.

Grigory Bondarenko's *Studies in Irish Mythology* presents a collection of sixteen papers (thirteen of them previously published, but revised; three of them new) dealing with what Bondarenko terms the "mythological substratum" of Old and Middle Irish literature; a strong, but not exclusive, focus lies on the *Dindsenchas* tradition. The overall aim of the book is to provide the reader with the reconstruction of an "early Irish mythological worldview" (p. vii). Bondarenko attempts to achieve this aim through an approach which relies on in-depth analyses of early Irish texts and literary motifs within the context of early Irish literature, but sometimes supplements this strictly Irish approach with very wide-ranging and learned comparative studies that, over and beyond the engagement with Irish literary texts, heavily draw on Indo-European (not least, Russian) material. (It should be noted, however, that the comparative element is much less prominent in the book than it is suggested both by the blurb on its cover and by its introduction, and that especially the Eurasian comparisons promised are quite marginal.) Importantly, Bondarenko does not take 'myth' to be automatically 'pre-Christian'; he focuses on texts involving supernatural beings and occurrences, but fully acknowledges that these stories may in many cases have been created or substantially modified in a Christian environment (p. viii). 'Irish mythology' for Bondarenko is emphatically not 'pagan mythology', an important methodological tenet. He also does not restrict his comparative studies to (really or seemingly) 'non-Christian' narratives, but includes questions of biblical (and other Christian) elements both in the Irish tales and in his comparative material.

The first chapter of the book, '*Hiberno-Rossica: "knowledge in the clouds" in Old Irish and Old Russian*', discusses an example of formulaic similarities between Old Irish and Old Russian poetic language. An Irish and a Russian literary character, each combining supernatural, heroic and monstrous/'chthonic' features, are the objects of a primarily typological comparison in 'Cú Roí and Svyatogor: a study in chthonic'. 'Autochthons and otherworlds in Celtic and Slavic' discusses the separation of a lower otherworld from the human world, the autochthonous inhabitants of this otherworld, and the 'beginning of history' in Irish literature and northern Russian folklore. An example of the phenomenon of 'cosmological pentads with closely corresponding functions' is

studied in a comparative perspective in ‘The significance of pentads in Early Irish and Indian sources: the case of five directions’. This chapter also touches upon questions of the five-fold division of space in early Irish literature, and the analysis of aspects of this five-fold division is continued in the following chapter, which approaches ‘The five primeval trees in Early Irish, Gnostic and Manichaeian cosmologies’; the latter essay reaches the conclusion that the ‘five sacred trees’ of Irish literary mythology are likely to reflect a mixture of native elements and Near Eastern (Gnostic / Manichaeian / apocryphal) influences. The following two chapters further pursue the tree theme. ‘The alliterative poem *Eó Rossa* from the *Dindsenchas*’ presents an edition, translation, and interpretation of an alliterative poem on one of the five great sacred trees of Ireland; Bondarenko identifies both likely native and manifold Christian elements in this poem. The essay ‘The *Dindsenchas* of Irarus: the king, the druid and the probable tree’ then provides a semidiplomatic edition, translation, and discussion of two variants of the prose *Dindsenchas* of Irarus, aiming to contribute further to a picture of the early medieval Irish perception of sacred trees with their combination of both native pre-Christian and foreign learned elements. After this botanically-minded group of essays, the book turns its attention to questions of kingship. ‘The king in exile in *Airne Fíngéin*: power and pursuit in Early Irish literature’ explores the relationship between power and exile and between kingship, the supernatural periphery of the human world, and supernatural knowledge; and the following chapter presents an analysis of one of the most prominent legendary kings of Ireland, ‘Conn Cétchathach: the image of ideal kingship in Early Medieval Ireland’.

The next essay, ‘*Búaid Cuinn, rígróit rogaídi* – an alliterative poem from the *Dindsenchas*’, presents an *editio princeps* and first discussion of an early Irish *rosc* from the *Dindsenchas* of Slige Dala that touches upon the mythological motif of the ‘five major roads of Ireland’; in its extant form, Bondarenko dates this *rosc* to the twelfth century. The essay ‘Roads and knowledge in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*’ continues the discussion of the theme of roads in mythology from a somewhat less philological and more literary angle, using a structuralist perspective. A more strongly theoretical approach, which takes its starting point from memory theory, is taken by ‘Oral past and written present in “The Finding of the *Táin*”’; here, Bondarenko uses this particular text to explore the early Irish perception of written and oral texts through the motif of the text which comes (back) into existence through the ‘revelation’ of its ‘lost’ original version. ‘The migration of the soul in Early Irish tales’ presents a review of the evidence for ideas of a migration of the soul in the tales *Compert Con Culainn*, *Tochmarc Étaíne*, and *De chophur in dá muccida*, and considerations on how such concepts were viewed by the Christian authors of these narratives. ‘Goidelic hydronyms in Ptolemy’s Geography: myth behind the name’ draws a number of comparisons between medieval Irish names of water bodies and names in Ptolemy’s Geography, in order to explore the deeper time frame of the Irish tradition of mythological place names; specifically, Bondarenko

discusses the names of the rivers Boyne, Barrow, and Shannon, concluding that the linguistic evidence appears to indicate a certain degree of continuity between the continental Celts of Antiquity and the pre-Christian early Irish period, and that the *Dindsenchas* stories about rivers testify to a pre-Christian identification of rivers with goddesses. 'Swineherds in Celtic lands' presents a general collection of material on pigs and their keepers with a focus on (but not restricted to) early Ireland, concluding that pigs do not always play a role as otherworldly animals and that the swineherd has a low, marginal status and yet is often ascribed an important high social position. Finally, the last essay – 'Fintan mac Bóchra: Irish synthetic history revisited' – turns to a character first attested in the tale *Airne Fíngéin*, presenting a re-edition, commentary, and contextualisation of the relevant passage from this oldest testimony. The book also contains a number of indices. (In fact, there are too many different indices; a simple single general index would have been easier to use.)

As with every book, there are also aspects in Bondarenko's *Studies in Irish Mythology* which one could criticise. The representation of Greek quotations, for instance, is a bit hit-and-miss. Sometimes, the use of critical terms like 'shamanic' or 'archetypal' leaves the reader wondering which meaning exactly these highly charged terms are meant to convey; in such cases, a historian of religions will be especially worried, or at least puzzled, by the recurrent and uncritical use of Eliadean theories of shamanism, the 'sacred' and the 'profane', or the '[sacred] centre', even though these never are crucial for Bondarenko's approach. Mircea Eliade is one of the classics of the history of religions, with a *floruit* in the mid-20th century, but has long been recognised to be ultimately crypto-theological rather than scholarly in his approach, and there is very little in his theories that has survived critical scrutiny by later scholars, making his works unsuitable to serve as the basis for further interpretations, however tangential they may be to the main argument. Another source of potential confusion for the reader is a certain blurring of 'typological' and 'historical' comparative approaches. In ch. 2, for instance, Bondarenko argues that one virtue of an Irish-Slavic comparison can be to allow the researcher to look at the myths under discussion "in a wider context of Indo-European mythology – a particular motif or a mythologem can show what has been lost or forgotten in a motif or a mythologem from another Indo-European tradition." Such an approach (leaving aside the question of to which extent it really is viable) seems to be a historical one, aiming at historical reconstructions and presupposing historical connections between the data under consideration. However, in the very next sentence Bondarenko continues: "The aim of the present chapter is to trace these typological similarities [...]" (p. 16), suddenly implying that the aim of the comparison is a purely typological one. Indeed, through wide parts of the comparative sections of the book, the reader keeps wondering what exactly the aim of the suggested comparisons is: historical or typological? The comparative chapters of the book would have gained from a clearer distinction between the two. Another feature of the book which is slightly distracting for the reader who

tries to appreciate the book as a book is that it has not really made the transition from a collection of previously published essays to a coherent monograph: in his essays, Bondarenko returns to a number of texts that are at the core of his interests (esp. the *Dindsenchas* and *Airne Fíngéin*) time and again, yet whenever one of these texts recurs, it is introduced as if it were new to the reader. While this certainly increases readability of the book for the piecemeal reader (and who of us can really claim not to be such?), it has the drawback that the book never feels like a unified entity.

These, however, are obviously very minor points of criticism. Overall, Bondarenko has presented a book which is rich in its attention to detail and its easy display of wide-ranging learning, giving exemplary attention both to the possibly native and the manifold Christian aspects of Irish literature. Furthermore, while *Studies in Irish Mythology* is just that – a collection of a group of heterogeneous, in-depth studies on a number of selected aspects of medieval Irish literary mythology – this book still has at least one aspect which permeates a large number of the studies contained in it, holding these studies together and doing so in a particularly refreshing way: its emphasis on the spatial dimension of Irish mythology. Bondarenko even goes so far as to argue that “[t]he whole megatext of early Irish literature might be interpreted as an extended *Dindsenchas Éirenn*” (p. 56), and shows that such an approach can be highly profitable. (For the present reader, one of the book’s highlights was the demonstration of how Irish literature uses references to the Christian Earthly Paradise in the construction of an Irish sacred landscape: pp. 60–62.) Its constant emphasis on spatiality and landscape is perhaps one of the most important aspects brought to the fore by the collection of Bondarenko’s previously widely dispersed articles in a single book.

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