

*Pagan Ireland ; an archaeological sketch ;
a handbook of Irish pre-Christian antiquities*

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1895

Are The Early Irish Records Authentic ?

CHARACTERISTIC traits of human nature are pretty much the same all the world over, and therefore instead of looking on the pre-Christian inhabitants of Ireland as different from ourselves, let us, on the contrary, place ourselves in imagination in their position, live and act as we imagine we should have done in this exchanged existence, and throwing off the veneer of modern civilization, we shall probably arrive at the conclusion, that, similarly circumstanced, we might have lived and acted as did our predecessors, and so furnish an illustration of the epigrammatic saying : ‘ Grattez le Russe et vous trouvez le Tartare.’

Investigation of the truth is the object in view : therefore the subject ought, if possible, to be approached without prejudice, and in order to arrive at the truth, it is desirable to test the opinions and conclusions of those who, by a careful analysis of the probabilities and facts recorded by them, have travelled over the same ground before. The Irish reading public are, however, moved by impulse rather than by reasoning ; ‘ in nothing is this more apparent than when the question of the genuineness of ancient Irish history is for a moment called in question.’

Antiquarian research, in Ireland, may, with advantage, be directed towards filling in the social history of primitive man ; articles which are the result of the handiwork of the aborigines, illustrate, with much exactitude, life in the olden days, and cannot fail to assist, in that object, from the deductions which must be drawn from a state of society that necessitated the fabrication of those relics. A good antiquary nowadays is said to abhor a theory as much as, it is alleged, nature abhors a vacuum, and to launch a speculative theory on the troublous waters, where the currents of Paganism and Christianity meet in one blended stream, is like launching a ship into the Maelstrom—it is in almost certain danger of effacement. The period during which Christianity has reigned in Ireland is comparatively insignificant when compared with that occupied by pre-Christian religion or religions. It is strange that of this great epoch of the pre-historic past we know so little, that our knowledge may be compared to a rivulet, our ignorance to the ocean. Pride in ourselves, pride in our ancestors, are common foibles of human nature ; occurrences which redound to the glory, either of the individual, or of the community, are amplified and dwelt upon, whilst incidents derogatory to prestige are glossed over or ignored. O’Donovan relates how some of his former most intimate friends became his enemies on his expressing grave doubts regarding the authenticity of ancient Irish history.

That which is prevalent now-a-days existed in times more ancient, and especially on that border-line where ‘ the Creeds of Paganism had not ceased to be the superstitions of Christianity.’ The Bards and Chroniclers of Erin doubtless possessed accounts of the first settlement of the Island, probably more or less founded on tradition, and having more or less a sub-stratum of truth ; but on the arrival of the Christian missionaries, and the acquisition by the monks of the literary or traditional sources of information, then these ancient heathen histories, tales, and poems, became embedded in a mosaic of miracle-stories and classic-legends, so that it is nearly impossible, now, to separate the chaff from the grain. This school of amalgamated Pagan and Christian thought, amongst other absurdities, traces the pedigree

of the first settlers in Ireland up to Adam. Now, that part of the assertion is correct, namely, that Adam was the first man ; for we possess a higher authority than ‘ Irish Pedigrees’ for the assertion—but there must be grave doubts regarding the connecting-links in the chain of unbroken descent, as therein given, from our first Parent.

‘ With respect to the study of our early history, as extracted from the annalists and biographers,’ remarks Dr. J. K. Ingram, [1] ‘ I will only say that what we most require is, in my opinion, an increased application of the critical spirit. We have often in the past too readily assumed the truth of any statement found (as the phrase is) “ in one of our old books,” without examining the trustworthiness and the sources of knowledge of each authority. To take an example—in O’Curry’s “ Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish,” there is abundant learning—a wealth of quotation from the Chronicles—but in criticism it falls, I think, far short of the works of the recent Scottish historians. Criticism, I am aware, is not always popular.’

The heroes and heroines of the earliest traditions are certainly not Christians, whilst in the prevalent narratives, the varnish of Christianity is thinly applied. Most of the tales, at least those that have been at present translated, are but clumsily patched together, so that the junction of the Pagan and Christian portions is quite apparent. Take, for example, the legend of the formation of the present Lough Neagh, [2] as given in the *Lebor na H-Uidre*. The scene is laid in the first century of the Christian era—consequently before the introduction of Christianity into Ireland. In the King’s palace, which stood in the centre of the plain now occupied by the lake, was an enchanted well ; its origin was, to say the least, very peculiar—and when not in use it was kept covered as, owing to its magical properties, it would otherwise burst forth in a raging flood. Through neglect of the ‘ person in charge,’ it was left one morning uncovered, when all the members of the King’s household, with the exception of three, were drowned, and the present sheet of water was formed. One of the persons then preserved was a woman styled Liban, who, together with her lap-dog, was, by magic, preserved in safety beneath the waters. Liban soon became tired of her inactive life, and beholding, with envy, the lively tenants of the lake darting about and around her, expressed the wish of being changed into a salmon. Instantly, with the exception of her head, she was thus transformed, whilst her lap-dog became an otter, and in this manner she continued to roam for the space of three hundred years, until—and here the Christianising of the old story visibly appears—she is caught in the net of an Irish saint, is brought ashore, resumes her human form, sings her story in melancholy verse, receives the rites of the Church, dies immediately, and is buried in all the odour of sanctity.

In these semi-historical tales and legends it is singular how comparatively rare are the references to the ancient gods of Erin, and although the early fathers tell us less of heathendom than they knew, still it is difficult to understand how the clerical pruning knife was able, so scientifically, to cut off the principal characters from the scene, and leave it so readable ; yet ‘ however interesting to scholars in their original form,’ remarks Dr. Ingram, ‘ I do not think these tales will ever win their way to general esteem among cultivated readers, except as transmuted into shapes better adapted to our ideas, and, with a certain breadth of modern thought and feeling subtly mingled with their substance.’ St. Patrick is dragged into the legend of Cuchullin ; sometimes, though in rare instances, Druids appear on the scene, but how are they depicted ? Not as dignified priests—the guardians of religion and of science—but such as they are afterwards described by their opponents—the Christian missionaries—as mere jugglers. It seems to be now admitted that the iron age did not really commence in Ireland much before the introduction of Christianity, and yet these heroes of romance are represented as cutting at each other with swords of iron—like the Vikings of later date.

There is great similarity between the Persian story of Rustam and the bardic tale of Conloch : an Irish chief with an unpronounceable name and King Midas were both afflicted with asses ears ; a king of Macedon and also a king of Erin effected the destruction of their enemies by apprelling a number of young men to represent women. Thersites and Conan were both bald, were great boasters, and great cowards ; Balor and Perseus in some respect resemble each other ; in both stories the precautions taken are almost identical—precautions that were defeated by supernatural means—and in both instances the decree of destiny is fulfilled by the murder of the grandfather, whilst the peculiar property of Balor’s eye has its parallel in classic myth. The infant Hercules strangles a serpent when yet in his cradle ; the great Irish hero Cuchullin when a child strangles a huge watch-dog, the terror of the country side. The Greek Adonis and the brave and gay Diarmuid O Duibhne are each killed by a boar ; this last-mentioned legend was certainly the most popular and wide-spread tale current amongst the Irish-speaking population, and is, of all the legends which have descended to our days, that which has been least Christianised.

Of legends still current, some may be traced back to an Eastern origin. In the armorial bearings of the borough of Sligo a hare is depicted as being held fast by an oyster. According to local tradition the hare trod accidentally on an open oyster, and the bivalve resenting this intrusion at once closed on the foot of poor puss. A Cork boatman recounted a similar anecdote of a rat going to feed on an oyster, whose shell lay invitingly open, at low water ; but the oyster, closing on his snout, held him fast until he was drowned by the returning tide : this tale agrees with one of La Fontaine’s fables. The same incident—but in connexion with a fox—was narrated, some centuries ago, to one of the earliest western travellers as being then current in India. Thus a story may be traced from land to land, and from age to age ; and this agreement is very interesting, as tending to point out the common sources from which our traditions were derived.

In old bardic legends there are, here and there, glimpses of past phases of thought and character calculated to arrest attention. This literature comprises a ‘ very large number of prose tales, relating warlike adventures, voyages, tragic events, visions and the like ; many of these are still extant, and a considerable number have been translated or paraphrased, so that, though the renderings are sometimes unfortunate in point of style, an English reader can form a tolerable idea of their merit as works of imagination. As to this merit, the most opposite opinions have been expressed. Some have represented them as devoid of all value or interest ; others have spoken of them as a literature of the first order, and have almost implied that the Irish intellect of the present day would find its best possible culture in their study. The truth, as usual, lies between these extreme views. We possess in Irish no work of genius comparable to the Nibelungen Lied, or the song of Roland. To speak of the Táin-Bo-Cuailnge [3] as a Gaelic Iliad, seems, to say the least, an imprudent comparison. But without any great continuous composition, there are in the remains which have come down to us passages of much beauty and tenderness ; some of the tales are impressively and touchingly told, and there is one singular relic—“ the Vision of MacConglinne ”— which is instinct with genuine humour of the Rabelaisian type.’ [4]

According to modern criticism these ancient stories naturally divide themselves into two epochs, one comparatively ancient, the other modern. The older series is that of which Cuchullin is the centre, and is supposed to have first been reduced to writing in the seventh century, when monastic chroniclers converted mythical tradition into pseudo-history, and the after-descent of these stories belongs to written literature rather than to oral tradition. In fact each fresh transcriber adapted them to the times in which he wrote.

The legends of the second epoch cluster around Finn MacCumhaill, who is placed in the third century of the Christian Era. It would appear as if most writers on the subject have accepted the date ; but there is nevertheless a pleasing divergence of opinion ; some hold that Finn was really a very ancient mythical personage, dragged down, so to speak, by the monks to almost Christian times, while some of the German school turn Finn into a ninth century leader of the Irish against the Danes of Dublin, by whom he was slain.

‘ Whether the ancient Irish, before the Christian Era, possessed a primitive alphabet, differing essentially from that in use in other parts of Europe, is a question which has been debated by scholars with great earnestness. Those who maintain the affirmative appeal to the concurrent authority of the most ancient Irish manuscript histories, according to which an alphabet, called Ogham, was invented by the Scythian progenitors of the Gaelic race, and was introduced into Ireland by the Tuatha-de-Danaan about thirteen centuries before the birth of Christ.’ They also refer to the oldest Irish romances, which contain allusions to the use of Ogham, either for the purpose of conveying intelligence, or for sepulchral inscriptions ; they point to existing monuments presenting Ogham characters, and argue that they must be ascribed to a remote and Pagan period.

‘ Those, on the other hand, who dissent from this hypothesis, allege that the legendary accounts of the invention of Ogham bear all the marks of fiction ; and they contend that the nature of this alphabet, in which the vowels and consonants are separated, furnishes internal evidence of its having been contrived by persons possessing some grammatical knowledge and acquainted with alphabets of the ordinary kind. As regards the testimony of romantic tales, they impugn its authority by questioning the antiquity of these compositions, which, at most, prove the belief prevailing at the time when they were written, as to the use of letters in a much earlier age. Lastly, they assert that a considerable number of the existing Ogham monuments are proved, by the emblems and inscriptions which they bear, to belong to Christian times.’ [5]

Thus did a distinguished archæologist sum up the arguments advanced for and against the ancient use of alphabetical writing in Ireland, and little, if any progress in the elucidation of the subject has been since made ; for with the knowledge, or want of knowledge of letters, is involved to a great degree the genuineness or untrustworthiness of the Irish Annals. O’Donovan conjectures that the Irish had the use of letters [6] at the period of Cormac Mac Art, King of Ireland, about a.d. 253-277. The Romano-British Ogham bilingual inscriptions would appear, judging by the Latin lettering, to belong to a period certainly not earlier than from a.d. 400 to 500 : bilingual inscriptions appear also in Ireland. The early church in Wales was closely connected with that of Ireland, and the fact that Ogham inscriptions in Britain are, it would appear, to a great extent coincident with the area of early Irish missionary work is a curious coincidence. ‘ The strong interest which the Oghams at first excited has somewhat diminished. Zeuss thought the method of writing which appears in them to be possibly of great antiquity, and Stokes believed there were found in them traces of a very primitive form of Celtic speech ; but the tendency of recent research has been to bring them down to a more recent date, and the growing belief that they are often cryptic, that is, designedly obscure, has discouraged inquiry.’ [7]

Early History

TIGHERNACH, the most reliable of early Irish scribes, died about a.d. 1088, and if he be accepted as an authority, Irish history might be considered to open about two centuries before Christ ; his words, ‘ omnia monumenta Scotorum usque Cimbeath incerta erant,’ must, as O’Donovan remarks, inspire a feeling of confidence in the writer.

According to Tighernach the starting point of Irish history was the erection of the palace of Emania. A wild legend states its origin to be as follows :—Three kings who had been fighting amongst themselves finally agreed to reign for seven years—in alternate succession. They had each enjoyed the sovereignty for one of these periods, when the first king died, and his daughter claimed the right to reign when her father's term of sovereignty came round ; she was opposed, but vanquished all opposition. Her subjects suggested that she should put her prisoners to death ; this she refused to do, but condemned them to slavery, and employed them in building a huge rath or fortress, and ‘ she marked for them the dun with her brooch of gold from her neck,’ so that the palace was called *Eomuin*, from *eo*, a brooch, and *muin*, the *neck*.

The early history of Ireland—whether given by ancient or modern writers—is a strange mixture of truth, exaggeration, allegory, and downright fiction ; however, the fact of incredible exploits being ascribed to dim historic personages is not sufficient ground for denying the existence of those individuals. In the early history of almost every country, the appearance of mythical beings is reported, and formerly it was usual to deny the existence of such, but present-day historians rather incline to the opinion that these may have been real individuals who were remarkable for some great quality, or for heroic deeds, and around whom tradition gradually wove an accumulation of supernatural glory.

The statements presented by many writers as true history are, as remarked by O'Donovan, ‘ after all no more than their own inferences drawn, in many instances, from the half historical, half fabulous works of the ancients. In the middle ages no story was acceptable to the taste of the day without the assistance of some marvellous or miraculous incidents, which, in those all-believing times, formed the life and soul of every narrative.’

There is a strange kind of excitement in essaying to unravel a complicated problem, and certainly ample room is afforded to a student desirous of analysing and investigating the so-called history and description of ancient Erin, which has been handed down to us and repeated by writer after writer. The mythical stories by Geoffrey of Monmouth, and other scribes of that school, relative to the colonization and history of England, have long been consigned to the literary waste-paper basket ; and why should the extravagant legends related of Ireland be treated with more leniency ? To transmit, by oral tradition, a chain of events, extending back in an unbroken order to the Creation, would be an impossibility ; we possess also good authority for not giving ‘ heed to fables and endless genealogies,’ or to ‘ profane and old wives’ fables !’ Writers of the olden school usually commenced histories with fables, the length and extravagance of which was in proportion to their estimate of the importance of the theme ; and nothing has tended so much to bring discredit on the proper study of Irish history and Irish antiquities as this exaggeration.

Beranger, towards the close of the last century, wrote on this subject ; and, as remarked by Wilde, one would imagine that the cautious old Dutchman had been inditing a prospectus for the origination of an Archæological Society :—‘ No traces remain of the grandeur of the ancient Irish—which we are pressed to believe without proofs—except some manuscripts which very few can read, and out of which the Irish historian picks what suits him, and hides what is fabulous and absurd.’

No statement will be here advanced merely on the authority of native annals and manuscripts, unless corroborated by outside and disinterested evidence such as is afforded by classic or foreign writers, or the archæological and material evidences of sepulchral remains, dwellings, implements, ornaments, and other traces, left by the primitive inhabitants. If material objects be accepted as proofs of the pagan ideas and customs of the aborigines,

surely the evidence of still existent superstitious observances of the peasantry, which can be traced to a pre-Christian source, ought to be received with, at least, the same authority ; and we should look upon all these subjects as mere links in one great chain which binds together many separate periods of semi-culture.

It is to be hoped that research into the past, on these lines, may contribute to the reconstruction of early history—a work which can only be finally accomplished by many united efforts.

Evidence of the steady growth of a healthy current of archæological thought is apparent to the most careless observer ; yet we have made but little progress in higher and scientific archæology ; and the ancient antiquities of Ireland still remain in an unclassified condition. For a lengthened period archæology was not recognized as a science, although it treats of the arts, manners, customs, and entire past of primitive man, whilst now-a-days it must be acknowledged as an able assistant to ethnology and philology. It is evident that philology, as a guide, must give place to, or rest its evidence on, the material proofs produced by archæology or ethnology. Indeed, a student, seeking to discover the origin of a people through analysis of the spoken language, may be led to conclusions of the most erroneous description. For instance, in Ireland, a stranger, ignorant of its early history, and finding the vast majority of the population speaking English, might come to the conclusion that they were of English descent. Until a comparatively recent period Irish archæology was in a deplorable state : travellers along the road to antiquarian knowledge were beguiled at every step from the true track by false guides who, like ‘Will-o’-the-wisp,’ led them aimlessly about ; yet ‘ Vallancey, Ledwich, Beauford, Betham, and others, whom we have been taught to sneer at,’ remarks Wilde, ‘ must be tried, like other men in similar circumstances, according to the light of their times ; and while we laugh at their arguments, deductions, and assumption of learning, we must acknowledge that we are indebted to them for many facts that might otherwise have fallen through the sieve on which both grain and chaff were presented.’

Petrie’s Essay on the origin of Irish round-towers—a model for archæological writers—created a literary revolution. To the overthrow of romantic theories and fanciful speculations, he marshalled solid arguments and a bristling array of facts, and conclusively proved that the round towers of Ireland, instead of being Pagan temples of the remotest antiquity, were erected by ecclesiastics, perhaps for belfries, but especially for keeps or places of protection against sudden attacks. As is the case with too many other Irish writers, the amount of published matter which Petrie has left represents most inadequately his great knowledge of archæology.

The present school of archæology is pre-eminently that of the spade ; the spade is a great solver of problems, and destroyer of fantastical theories ; it must ultimately unfold in its entirety primitive man’s ideas regarding the dead, of the future state, of burial customs, ceremonials, and institutions to which they gave rise ; it is precisely at this early stage that the spade has much to tell, for where historical and legendary traditions are absent, the ultimate appeal must be to it.

The mass of literature which has appeared on the subject of the name and meaning of the ancient designation of Ireland would fill a goodly sized volume. In some of the earliest manuscripts, the name is written Eriu, and one legend, which appears to bear the impress of truthfulness, alleges, that, at some period, either prior to, or after, the deluge, Ireland was discovered by fishermen who had been blown out to sea in their skiff ; this was at least a natural and not improbable manner of discovering a new island.

Whether Ireland was known to the Phœnicians is a subject of controversy amongst antiquarians. Even had these energetic traders been acquainted with the island, it is more than probable that they would have tried to conceal their knowledge—as they were unwilling to allow other maritime nations to discover the sources from which they drew their riches. We have the well-known and hackneyed story of the wily Phœnician ship-master who, observing that, on his voyage to Britain, he was followed by a Roman galley which watched his course, voluntarily ran his vessel on a shoal, on which his pursuer also struck. The Phœnician, who was either a better, or more fortunate seaman, floated off his craft, but the Roman galley went to pieces.

The earliest writers of Greece and Rome who are supposed to refer to Ireland, have spoken of it in a manner so vague, that very little can be learnt from their words ; even if Ireland may be identified as Thule, as the ‘ Sacred Island,’ or the poetic ‘ Island of the Blest,’ in which the golden age of innocence and purity still continued to flourish after all the rest of the world had become corrupt : but these verses from Claudian are conclusive as to the designation of Thule—at any rate in the poet’s time—not being applicable to Ireland :—‘ The Orkney’s dripped (with blood) when the Saxons were put to flight ; Thule grew warm with the gore of the Picts ; icy Ireland bewailed the heaps of (slain) Scoti.’

Rufus Festus Avienus, a poetical writer of the fourth century, A.D., professes to have derived his information from a Carthaginian source ; and he is, it is alleged, the only ancient author as yet known, who specially applied the epithet of ‘ The Sacred Island’ to Ireland. His account is curious ; he states that at a distance of two days’ sail from the Æstryrnides, lay an extensive island called the Sacred Island, inhabited by the nation of the Hibernians. The legend of an ‘ Isle of the Blessed,’ or of a submerged continent, is still preserved in the folklore of almost every European nation. O’Flaherty states that the island of Hy-Brassil—marked on many old charts—was in his time, ‘ often visible.’ The subject has inspired several poets with beautiful fancies which have been woven into pathetic ballads. Many attempts were made to discover this fabled island. Leslie, of Glaslough, described as ‘ a wise man and a great scholar,’ was so imbued with the belief in its real existence as to take out a grant of the isle from Charles I. Edmond Ludlow, the celebrated republican, escaped to the Continent, in a vessel chartered at Limerick, to sail in search of Hy-Brassil ; and so firm was the belief in the actual existence of this enchanted island, that the captain of the ship was allowed to depart unquestioned. A pamphlet, purporting to give an account of the discovery of Hy-Brassil, obtained circulation in London in 1675. The existence of a land which would restore the aged to the full vigour of youth was of world-wide belief, but all attempts to discover this land necessarily ended in disappointment. Nevertheless, the strange spirit of adventure thus engendered, laid open to view countries which might otherwise have remained for centuries unknown.

A country of indefinite magnitude, called the island of Brassil, is marked on numerous maps made before, and about the time of Columbus. It is represented south of another island which, it is thought, represents the supposed position of the Scandinavian settlements of Vineland, for, although we designate the American continent the New World, it was apparently known to these ancient rovers of the sea.

O’Flaherty, writing in 1684, states that : ‘ From the Isles of Aran and the west continent, often appears visible that enchanted island called O’Brasil, and in Irish Beg-ara, or the Lesser Aran, set down in cards of navigation : whether it be reall and firm land, kept hidden by speciall ordinance of God, as the terrestiall paradise, or else some illusion of airy clouds appearing on the surface of the sea, or the craft of evill spirits—is more than our judgements can sound out.’

Belief in the existence of the island of Hy-Brassil may have arisen through optical illusions, which are not so very infrequent as is generally supposed. A correspondent writes : ‘ I myself, upwards of half a century ago, saw a wonderful mirage, resembling that lately described as having been visible off our Tireragh coast ; and had I been looking on the bay for the first time, nothing could have persuaded me but that I was gazing at a veritable city—a large handsome one, too—trees, houses, spires, castellated buildings,’ &c

The accord of Classic and Irish tradition is remarkable ; in both cases, somewhere far away in the western ocean, there was a spiritual country which passed under various names ; and that this was one of the Elysiums of the primitive Irish, as well as of classic writers, is very clear. It appears to have corresponded to the ‘ Land of the Saints’ of early Irish Christianity, where the souls of the Blessed awaited the Day of Judgment, even as the ‘ Land of the Living’ was, to the Pagan Irish, their happy ‘ Spirit Home.’ The general traditions of pagan peoples place the point of departure from this world, and entrance to the next, always to the west, and the journey lay westward.

The poet Longfellow makes even his Indian hero, Hiawatha, take his departure westward into the fiery sunset—

‘ To the Island of the Blessed,
To the Kingdom of Ponemah,
To the land of the Hereafter.’

Onamacritus, in a romantic Greek poem on Jason’s Colchian Expedition, takes his heroes over almost every part of the then known world, and in the course of their adventures in the Atlantic, they pass an island named Ierne. The passage, however, in Aristotle (B.C. 384-322), in which he noticed the island of Ierne, bears, it is alleged, ‘ the unquestionable stamp of a much more advanced stage of geographical knowledge than that of his age.’ Perhaps the earliest notice on which dependence can be placed, is that by Eratosthenes (B.C. 276-196). Most of his works have been lost : some, however, of his references to Ireland have been preserved by Strabo, who maintains that he was so well acquainted with the western parts of Europe that he had determined the distance of Ireland from Gaul. Strabo (born B.C. 70) in describing the extent of the habitable world, considered that it commenced to the north of the mouth of the Borysthenes. This parallel, at the other extremity, passed to the north of Ierne. Little was known of its inhabitants ; they were reputed to be mere savages, addicted to cannibalism, and having no marriage ties. Solinus—who is mentioned by Servius, Macrobius, and Priscianus, as well as by Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustin—enters into more details than any previous geographer. He wrote before the birth of our Lord :—

‘ Hibernia approaches to Britain in size ; it is inhuman in the rough manners of its inhabitants ; it is so luxuriant in its grass that, unless its cattle are now and again removed from their pasturage, satiety may cause danger to them. There is there no snake, and few birds—an inhospitable and warlike nation, the conquerors among whom, having first drunk the blood of their enemies, afterwards besmear their faces therewith : they regard right and wrong alike. Whenever a woman brings forth a male child, she puts his first food on the sword of her husband, and she lightly introduces the first ‘ auspicious’ of nourishment into his little mouth with the point of the sword ; and with gentle vows she expresses a wish that he may never meet death otherwise than in war and amid wars. Those who attend to military costume ornament the hilts of their swords with the teeth of sea-monsters, which are as white as ivory, for the men glory in their weapons. No bee has been brought thither, and if anyone scatters dust or pebbles brought from thence among the hives in other countries, the swarms desert their combs. The sea that lies between this island and Britain is stormy and tempestuous

during the whole year, nor is it navigable, except for a few days in the summer season. They sail in wicker-vessels, which they cover all round with ox-hides, and as long as the voyage continues the navigators abstain from food. The breadth of the island is uncertain ; that it extends twenty miles is the opinion of those who have calculated nearest the truth.'

The story about the bees and the supposed breadth of Ireland excepted, Solinus is comparatively free from errors in this brief description, for it can readily be imagined that, to the coracle-voyaging native, the Irish Channel might well be regarded as ' stormy and tempestuous during the whole year.' Pomponius Mela, who flourished in the reign of the Emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54), appears to have extracted some of his information from Solinus, but he corrects his errors relative to the size of the island :—' Beyond Britain lies Juverna, an island of nearly equal size, but oblong, with a coast at each side of equal extent, having a climate unfavourable for ripening grain, but so luxuriant in grasses, not merely palatable but even sweet, that the cattle in a very short time take sufficient feeding for the day, and if allowed to feed too long, they would burst. Its inhabitants are wanting in every virtue, and totally destitute of piety.' Pliny, who wrote about the same time as Pomponius Mela, states that Ireland was about the same breadth as Britain but two hundred miles shorter, and that it was distant thirty miles from the territory of the Silures. Diodorus, who lived in the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius, writes that the most ferocious of the Northern Gauls were stated to be ' cannibals like the Britons who inhabit Erin.'

From an allusion in Pliny, it has been surmised that the Romans possessed a map or topography of Ireland. After their conquest of Britain, Ireland became better known to them ; intercourse of a more or less restricted character must have sprung up, for commerce, in olden days, ' was the parent of geography.' Tacitus, in his life of Agricola, specially states that Ireland possessed a commerce superior to that of Britain, and that its harbours and estuaries were more frequented and better known to traders ; also that there was very little difference between the soil and climate, the religious worship and dispositions of the inhabitants of Ireland and those of Britain.

Claudius' Ptolemy, who, in the second century, compiled his work on geography, which remained a standard text-book until the fifteenth century, is the only early writer who has described the ports and inland places in Ireland with any exactitude. He essayed to systematize the result of ancient research, and although at first sight his map may appear grotesque, yet if the feeble appliances which he had at his disposal be considered, the ingenuity displayed in overcoming their deficiencies should excite admiration. His information consists essentially of a table of latitudes and longitudes, and he evidently intended it to serve as a sufficient guide for the construction of a map, without referring to any existing charts. Ireland, in Ptolemaic geography, is placed too much to the north, while Scotland has been made to tend towards the east instead of to the north. The map is not far wrong as regards the length and breadth of the island, but the former runs north-east and south-west instead of north and south, whilst the outlines of the coast depart in places so far from the reality as to render the identification of many of the headlands very problematic. Had Ireland, however, been placed in its proper position, and Scotland given the proper direction, the approximate outline of Great Britain and Ireland would have been fairly represented ; and this bears out the hypothesis that Ptolemy's information was drawn from three separate maps which afforded to him no guide as to their mutual relations.

It is strange that the designation Ivernia, as Ptolemy styled Ireland, differs more widely than that of Ierne, by which the island was first known to the Greeks, from the native name Erin.

The eastern coast must have been the one best known to foreign merchants sailing for the port of Dublin, which even at this period appears to have been a place of importance. The first headland sighted would be Howth, of which the ancient Irish name was Ben-Edair. Opposite the town of Eblana, there is marked on Ptolemy's map an uninhabited island styled Edrus ; and connected as Howth, *i.e.* Ben-Edair, is to the mainland by low-lying ground, it is no wonder that the geographer's informants mistook Ben-Edair for an island. Another adjoining island, Limnus, may be Lam bay, whilst Eblana is clearly Dublin (with the *d* softened or omitted).

To the south of this city there appears a river styled the Aboca, which points to its being the river Avonmore (Avon = Aboca) in Wicklow ; but not contented with its identification, the stream has been styled the Avoca. [8] The river Bovinda, to the north of Dublin, is clearly the Boyne ; the Vinderius, from its position, appears to be Strangford Lough ; whilst the Logia may be identified with the river Lagan at Belfast.

The shape of the northern coast of Ireland is the one most accurately represented, and its localities the most easily recognisable. Robogdium appears to be Fair Head ; the river Argita, the Bann ; the Vidua, the Foyle ; Vennicum, Malin Head ; and the Northern Cape may be the Bloody Foreland.

On the west coast the identification of localities is surrounded with greater difficulties. The river Ravius [9] may be the Erne ; the Libnius the river of Sligo, and Nagnata, either Sligo or Drumcliff ; the Ausiba, the river Moy ; the Senus corresponds in name with the Shannon ; whilst the Southern Cape is doubtless one of the headlands of Kerry.

On the southern coast the localities are quite as clearly defined as on the northern. The Dabrona answers in position to the Blackwater ; the Birgus, both in position and name, to the Barrow ; whilst the Sacred Cape appears to be Carnsore Point.

The names, as given by Ptolemy, of the towns situated in the interior of the country, as well as his enumeration of tribal territories, need not be noticed, as they have not been identified, at least with any unanimous assent. Places situated far inland, and never probably visited by foreign traffickers, would be by them pronounced in a more incorrect form than those at which they had landed. This would fully account for the fairly successful identification of localities along the littoral. But with regard to this identification it must be admitted that the conclusions of recent authorities of eminence are by no means unanimous. [10] The information collected and tabulated by Ptolemy was probably known, before his time, to traders belonging to, or frequenting, the western coasts of Caledonia and of Britain ; yet it is strange that no mention is made of Tara. It is alleged that all vestiges of buildings or earthworks now or formerly existing on the Hill of Tara may be classed under two distinct periods, both being within the limits of the Christian era. The most important period, and that to which it is alleged all the remains now observable belong, is in the third century. From this it has been concluded that, before that date, Tara was not distinguished as a regal seat or city, and hence its omission from the map of Ptolemy.

From vestiges of ancient remains at Tara it would appear that the original structures were altogether composed of earth and wood, and, from their uniform character, they were probably erected at about the same time and by the same people.

In the year A.D. 82 Agricola encamped on a portion of the Scottish littoral which faced Ireland. He appears to have entertained the idea of the conquest of Ireland, on account of its supposed strategic importance ; for the Romans, according to Tacitus, erroneously considered

it to be equidistant from Britain, Gaul, and Spain. It was therefore important as a connecting link in the consolidation of these provinces ; but Agricola was unable to bring his plans to maturity, owing to an invasion of the northern tribes, which compelled him to turn his arms in a different direction. A few writers go so far as to assert that the Romans, profiting by the after-tranquillity in Britain, crossed the Channel and subdued Ireland in part. It appears as if the statement of this alleged conquest were based upon a claim of nominal sovereignty, perhaps through the submission of some fugitive Irish chieftain such as the politic Agricola kept in his camp, as well as on a passage in one of Juvenal's satires, written about A.D. 97, wherein the Poet describes the conquests of his countrymen :—' We have indeed carried our arms beyond the shores of Ireland, and the lately subdued Orkneys and the Britons contented with a short night.' Juvenal speaks, however, not of the conquest of Ireland, but of the manner in which the Roman Eagles were pushed beyond Ireland northward, into the island regions where, in summer, the night time was of comparatively short duration. There is at any rate no notice of such an expedition in any classic writer, nor has proof of their occupation of the country ever been brought to light. The discovery of Roman coins in Ireland is exceptional, although found in abundance in Britain, more especially in the vicinity of the sites of Roman towns and military stations. The only really important find was made near Coleraine ; it consisted of 2000 silver coins and 200 ounces of silver fragments and ingots stamped with the names of Roman mint-masters. The money presented specimens of coinage from A.D. 363 to 410, so that it must have been committed to the earth after that date, probably about the time of the evacuation of Britain by the Romans. From the character of this treasure it would appear to have been a forgotten deposit of some Irish freebooters. The poet Claudian thus extols the success of Stilicho in repelling the conjoint Irish and Caledonian attacks on the Roman settlements in Britain :—' By him,' says the poet, speaking in the person of Britannia, ' was I protected when the Scot moved all Ierne against me, and the sea foamed with hostile oars' ; and again : ' nor did he, under a false name, conquer the Picts, and having followed the Scoti (Irish) with his roving sword, he cleft the northern waves with daring oars.'

The other Roman antiques which have been found from time to time are few in number and of an unimportant character, such as might have been the result of traffic with the Romans. In the same way, the discovery of small hoards of Saxon coins is of by no means rare occurrence, being the result of traffic, or of marauding expeditions to the English coast.

The fact of the discovery of a Roman coin is of little importance in itself. A single coin might be accidentally dropped and lost by some collector, but large deposits cannot thus be accounted for; probably in times of turbulence they may have been placed for safety where they were afterwards discovered. About the year 1835 workmen employed on the north side of Bray Head met with several human skeletons, placed in graves side by side, and one or more Roman copper coins lay on, or beside the breast of each skeleton. Of these coins, some bore the image and superscription of Adrian, and others those of Trajan ; several of them were greatly corroded, and altogether illegible.

As the Romans never, it is believed, formed a settlement in Ireland, the question arises, how came the coins found in this locality, and under such circumstances ? The bodies were probably portion of the crew of a Roman galley lost on the shores of Wicklow. Some of the survivors performed the funeral rites of their shipmates, for amongst the Romans it was deemed an act of great impiety to leave a corpse unburied. The coins, it is presumed, were the fee designed for the grim ferryman, as the shades of those who had not the proper toll (as well as those whose bodies remained unburied) were condemned to wander a hundred years on the banks of the Styx.

It is a curious fact that small coins are even yet, in some localities, cast into the new-made grave when the coffin is lowered. In the year 1870, at the funeral of a fisherman from the Isle of Skye, buried in the cemetery of the old Collegiate Church at Howth, his countrymen carried out this custom.

The following quaint proverb is a relic of paganism, analogous to the Roman custom of placing a small coin in the mouth of the corpse to pay Charon his toll :—

Cha deachaidh aon fhear a réamh go h-Ifrionne gun sé phighiridh air faghail bháis do,
i.e. no man ever went to hell without sixpence at the time of his death.

When we consider the various modes in which Roman coins may have found their way into Ireland, the wonder is not that so many, but that so few have been discovered.

Although the Romans made no settlements, yet, in early Christian times, many of them came to Ireland, and they have left their impress in local names still in existence; all these, however, are probably of ecclesiastical origin.

Orosius, who wrote about the year A.D. 410, states that Ireland surpassed Britain, both in climate and fertility, and he describes it as inhabited by the Scots. The designation of Scoti does not appear in any form as a tribal name on Ptolemy's map; and it is alleged that it is not mentioned by any writer, as a mere tribal name, until the close of the third century. If a conclusion can be drawn from St. Patrick's authenticated writings, the designation was confined to the ruling class, and the bulk of the people were styled Hiberionaces.

[1] *Proceedings, Royal Irish Academy*, vol. ii. (ser. iii.), p. 125.

[2] Two remarkable properties have been ascribed to Lough Neagh—a power of healing diseases, and a power of petrifying wood and other substances. An analysis of the water, however, discloses nothing to warrant such assumptions.

[3] ‘ Even seven hundred and fifty years ago,’ writes the Rev. E. Hogan, s.j., in his translation of *Cath Ruis na Ríg for Bóinn* (p. ix), ‘ such tilings were looked on as “ l’histoire véritable des temps fabuleux,” as the scribe of the Táin Bo Cuailnge in the Book of Leinster writes at fol. 104 b : “ A blessing on everyone who shall faithfully memorize the Táin in this form, and shall not put it into any other form. But I, who have transcribed this history, or rather fable, do not believe some things in this history or fable. For some things in it are delusions of demons, some are poetic figments, some seem true (similia), and some not ; some are written to amuse fools.” ’

[4] Dr. J. K. Ingram in *Proceedings, Royal Irish Academy*, vol. ii. (ser. iii.), p. 122.

[5] *Catalogue, Museum Royal Irish Academy*, pp. 136, 137.

[6] The poet Spenser, who cannot be accused of partiality for the Irish in his *View of the State of Ireland*, written in the sixteenth century, remarks :—‘ It is certain that Ireland hath had the use of letters very anciently, and long before England. Whence they had those letters is hard to say. Whether they at their first coming into the land brought them, or afterwards, by trading with other nations which had letters, learned them from them, or devised them among themselves, is very doubtful. The Saxons of England are said to have their letters, learning, and learned men from the Irish ; and that also appeareth by the likeness of the character, for the Saxon character is the same with the Irish.’

[7] Dr. J. K. Ingram in *Proceedings, Royal Irish Academy*, vol. ii, (ser. hi.), pp. 127, 128.

[8] Ptolemy places a town, called Dounon, on or near the river Oboca. The locality has not been identified, but the name is evidently derived from the Celtic designation of a fortress, i.e. *doun*, with the Greek inflexion on added to it.

[9] O'Donovan, in one of his letters, alludes to the names of Irish rivers, and the following extract is given, not alone as bearing upon the identification of ancient names, but as showing in what light this celebrated Irish scholar regarded some of the old Irish writers : —

‘ There is an old poem, preserved in several MSS., which states that there were ten rivers in Ireland at Partholon’s arrival. . . . Now, though we know that this poem is undoubtedly a fabrication, still it is very ancient ; while, therefore, we reject that absurd part which would give us to understand that the river Liffey is more ancient than the Shannon, we retain it as the testimony of an Irish bard, that such were the names of ten considerable and well-known rivers in Ireland at the time he flourished.’

Having quoted the Irish poem O'Donovan continues : —

‘ *Laoi, Buas, Banna, Bearbha, Saimer, Sligeach, Modhom, Muadh, Fionn, Liffe* were the names of ten considerable and well-known rivers in Ireland at the time that the author of the poem—beginning *Adhamh, athair, sruth ár sluagh*, ‘ Adam, father and source of our race,’ either fabricated this story, or drew it from other historic monuments then existing, or founded it upon foolish traditions, the like of which are to be found among every nation, and upon which the commencement of the history of most nations is founded.

‘ Let us trace where these rivers are situated, and by what names they are now known.

‘ *Laoi* is a river in the county Cork—anglicized *Lee*, and well known by that name to the natives at the present day. *Banna* and *Bearbha* are also known by these names to those who speak the Irish language at this day ; they are anglicized *Bann* and *Barrow*. *Saimer* is now called the *Erne*, as O’Flaherly testifies. *Sligeach, Modhom, Muadh* are also known by those names at this day ; they are anglicized the *Sligo, Mourne, and Moy*. *Fionn* is now properly anglicized *Fin* ; it is a river in the county of Donegal, which pays its tribute to the river Foyle. *Liffe* is now called *Liffey* ; it was the boundary between Magh Breágh (Moybrà) and Hy Kinsellagh. The river *Buas* alone remains doubtful.’

[10] *Archæologia*, vol. xl., pp. 377—396.

Pagan Ireland ; an archaeological sketch ; a handbook of Irish pre-Christian antiquities (1895)

Author : Wood-Martin, W. G. (William Gregory), 1847-1917

Subject : Ireland — Antiquities

Publisher : London Longmans, Green

Language : English

Digitizing sponsor : MSN

Book contributor : Robarts — University of Toronto

Collection : robarts ; toronto

Source : Internet Archive

<http://voluwwww.archive.org/details/paganirelandarch00wooduoft>

Edited and uploaded to www.aughty.org

February 26 2013