
Edel Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the Medieval World AD 400-1000: Landscape, kingship and religion*

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Recensão

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Teaching medieval history in the 21st century, particularly Irish medieval history can be a challenging task. Most people identify better with more recent historical periods, finding it too complex to comprehend the distant past and its historical sources. Another factor that quite often makes the teaching of medieval history difficult is the lack of good textbooks. While there are a number of useful textbooks on early Irish history, *Ireland in the Medieval World AD 400-1000* will greatly assist lecturers in guiding their students through their learning of this fascinating period of Irish history.

In this book, Edel Bhreathnach masterly combines erudition with clarity. The reader of *Ireland in the Medieval World* will notice immediately that this work is the result of many years of accumulated research, and yet, if not familiar with the historical period, the reader will hardly encounter difficulties in understanding it. Throughout, Bhreathnach carefully provided translations for Irish terms and seeks to explain their meaning. Although she provides a good deal of information about Irish sources and historiography, she did it in a discrete way, so then a scholar looking for these sources can trace them through the endnotes, but the non-expert reader can ignore them and simply imagine what early medieval Irish society might have looked like through Bhreathnach's perception of it. Instead of following an old fashion style and dividing the book chronologically, Bhreathnach divided it thematically as suggested by its subtitle: *landscape, kingship and religion*. However, as expected, all aspects behind these three key factors, which involves economy, politics, and religion are not strictly

separated in each chapter, on the contrary, they permeates each other, evidencing the complexity of this society. But yet, it is displayed in a smart didactic format for easy comprehension.

In chapter one “The landscapes of early medieval Ireland”, the author describes the natural environment in which the early Irish lived, how they interacted with this landscape and appropriated it (pp. 9-39). She engages with the complex definitions of what would have been rural, semi-rural and urban settlements in medieval Ireland (pp. 17-30). In that exercise, the key economic activities of the early Irish are evidenced, such as farming, fishing, milling, and trading. The impact of the arrival of Christianity and of the Vikings in Ireland is highlighted as key factors that changed patterns of settlement and contributed to a process of urbanization and economic growth (pp. 26-38). By engaging with the discussion of whether or not the large religious settlements such as Clonmacnoise, in County Offaly, functioned or not as “cities”, she brings into the equation an anthropological approach to argue that traditional definitions of classical and medieval urbanization are not helpful in the Irish case, and that a broader perspective should be adopted. She quotes from Aidan Southall to imply that if a given settlement was the greatest point of populational concentration of a particular place and functioned as a key centre for economic and religious activities, it therefore fulfills the role of a “city” (pp 26-30).¹ It is indeed a very interesting approach, which due to the purpose of the book was not further explored, but demands further investigation.

Chapter two “Kingdoms, kings and people” deals with an area in which the author has extensive expertise based on prior publications (pp. 40-129). In this chapter she brings together history, archaeology and comparative religion. The concept of kingship is defined through examination of vernacular and Latin sources and key historiographical debates are discussed (pp. 48-64). The author maintains the current accepted interpretation that these sources reflect a society, and therefore a concept of kingship, that was appropriated by the Irish Church, and, therefore, amalgamated pre-Christian and Christian traditions (pp. 51-2). She discusses the relationship between written

¹ SOUTHALL, Aidan –*The city in time and space*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

documents and reality, with the support of recent archaeological findings. This presents an interpretation of how things might have worked in real life, which is an excellent approach given that the target audience of this book is a general readership, which would include undergraduate students.

Attention is given to all the facets of a king's role and life, such as his relationship with his people, his family and the phases of his life. The mutual obligations between a king and his people and the extent and limits of his power are considered. The position of queens and other women associated with a king's family is also analysed (pp. 64-77). The complexity of Irish noble marriage and divorce is examined and exemplified in the example of the marriages of Lann, queen of Ireland (d. 890). Lann was married to three different kings, at different moments of her life, and the reasons and conditions of each matrimonial agreement are explained in a clear and interesting way (pp. 82-87). The different phases of the king's life are illustrated in the last sections of this chapter, where attention is given to his childhood, fosterage and education, election as king, and finally death and burial (pp. 88-129).

One aspect that is intriguing in this chapter is the chronology, particularly when we place Irish history in a wider European context. The author argues that "this general debate on kingship is particularly relevant to early medieval Irish kingship and especially as to how a prehistoric, non-Christian institution was remanded into a medieval, Christian office" (p. 49). Besides, two of the subheadings of this chapter were titled as: "From prehistoric sacral kingship to kings "ordained by God"" (p. 48) and "The kingship of Tara: from prehistoric sacral kingship to medieval kingship" (p. 56). Irish history, according to the traditional historiography, starts around the fifth-century, when Christianity and writing are recorded on the island. As a consequence, there is a chronological jump in the Irish division of history from what scholars call "Irish pre-history" to "Irish Medieval history". This is a very conservative and artificial way of reading history, suggesting that the texts are depended on entirely for the understanding of history. Recently, the field of archaeology has greatly added to our knowledge of that society prior to and after the arrival of Christianity, proving that Ireland had connections with the wider Roman world. Certainly through both archaeological and textual evidence, a history can be told about Ireland before the arrival of Christianity and

writing, as argued by Bhreathnach throughout her book, and further reinforced in the title chosen for the publication. However, she maintains the traditional approach to the Irish chronological division and nomenclature.²

In chapter three “Religion, ritual and ritualists” the author added anthropological and cognitive science to her interpretation of religion and rituals, which enriches her approach to the sources (pp. 130-239). She deals with pre-Christian and Christian religion in Ireland as two different religions that co-existed in the same period, which were so often blended into each other. The author believes that despite the fact that “narrative religion in early Ireland is dominated by Christianity” “it is possible to identify genuine non-Christian religious practices and practitioners’ in the sources and archaeological evidences (pp. 130-131). She analyses a number of important “rituals”, as she named it, and how the pre-Christian and Christian ideals shaped them, such as the rites of passage of birth, initiation, puberty, death, rebirth and burial (pp. 132-147). All these rites, as expected, permeate aspects of life other than religion, such as politics, marriage, and economic factors, and therefore they are strongly linked to topics covered in the previous chapter on kingship.

While analyzing the position of the “ritualists” of the pre- or non-Christian religion, Bhreathnach proposes that the traditional debate around the druids should be put aside due to the information about them emanating from classical continental sources and are therefore disconnected from the Irish context. She proposes instead that the versatility and variety of religious agents encountered in the Irish sources should be identified and observed on its own right (pp. 148-151). The longest part of the chapter is dedicated to the impact of Christianity and its institutions in the Irish society and landscape. Patterns of settlement and structure of the Irish Church are summarized taking into consideration the most recent studies on the topic. Clonmacnoise and Armagh are the Christian settlements that received most attention. Clonmacnoise is studied in comparison with

² For further on that see: FARRELL, Elaine C.S.P.; SANTOS, Dominique V.C. – “*Early Christian Ireland - Uma Reflexão Sobre o Problema da Periodização na Escrita da História da Irlanda*”. In BAPTISTA, L.V.; SANT’ANNA, H.M.; SANTOS, D.V.C – *História Antiga: Estudos, Revisões e Diálogos*. Rio de Janeiro: Publit, 2011, pp. 185-213.

continental “rural monastic states” such as Lorsh and Fulda (pp. 283-192). A case-study is dedicated to Armagh, “the Rome of Ireland”, focusing on its claim to primacy over the other Irish churches and examining how both Irish and non-Irish sources prove that people did in fact perceive Armagh as the head and representant of the Irish Church (pp. 192-213). The last section of the chapter is dedicated to the “religious experience of the laity” where the Church’s attempts and limitations to provide pastoral care are addressed and where the “popular religious practices” are analysed. Once more Bhreathnach emphasizes the cultural amalgamation that took place in Ireland during the Middle Ages. She highlights how forms of “charms” and “spells” were exercised by agents of the church and not only by ritualists operating on the margin of society. This cultural amalgamation is also evidenced in the material and practical manifestations of religion such as in the high crosses, wells, cult of relics and pilgrimage. (pp. 224-239).

Bhreathnach’s book provided a rich up-dated multi-disciplinary approach to the early medieval Irish History. Through the introduction and conclusion, the reader will sense the author’s passion for history as well as her concern with its future as a subject. It is the work of an expert on the medieval Irish sources, who has a personal intimate knowledge of the Irish landscape and demonstrates an awareness of all recent archaeological discoveries in the country. This is an extremely enjoyable read which promises to be a commercial success. I hope that her heart’s desire will be heard: that the new generations of students of Irish history will be inspired by her book and will carry on the task of investigating and narrating the history of the Irish Medieval people. The book is easily accessible in Irish bookstores and through the publisher’s website: <http://www.fourcourtspress.ie>. Its price is quite fair. The hardback is €50.00, and €45.00 the web price, while the paperback is €24.95 and €22.45 the web price, and there is also a *Kindle* edition available for £6.95 at Amazon.co.uk.

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