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Understanding Celtic Religion: Revisiting the Pagan Past

Edited by Katja Ritari & Alexandra Bergholm.

Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2015.

181 pages, £95.00, ISBN (hardcover) 978-1-78316-792-0

REVIEW BY: PHILIP FREEMAN



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The modern scholarly and popular fascination with the myths and religion of the early Celts shows no signs of abating—and with good reason. The stories of druids, gods, and heroes from ancient Gaul to medieval Ireland and Wales are among the best European culture has to offer. But what can we really know about the religion and mythology of the Celts? How do we discover genuine pre-Christian beliefs when almost all of our evidence comes from medieval Christian authors? Is the concept of “Celtic” even a valid one? These and other questions are addressed ably in this short collection of papers by some of the leading scholars in the field of Celtic studies.

The essays in this volume originate in a colloquium held at the University of Helsinki in 2008 to address the key contemporary issues in the study of Celtic religion. Throughout the book, the scholars involved wrestle with the evolving concept of what “Celtic” means and how the term has been used over the last century. Celtic studies as a unified subject emerged from the philologically-based scholarship of Indo-European studies in the latter 1800s, but in recent decades there has been a movement away from linguistic and comparative study of Celtic religion and mythology to an appreciation for the great diversity of beliefs and practices within the early cultures of Europe which spoke Celtic languages. There has also been a

strong movement away from the effort to peel back the Christian layers of stories to discover the pure pagan beliefs which presumably lie beneath. This is not to say such efforts are unfounded or unproductive, as shown by several of the essays in this volume, only that scholarship of Celtic religion has evolved in the last twenty years to embrace a wider range of techniques.

In the first essay, Jacqueline Borsje uses the methodology of Christian exegesis to explore medieval Irish sources and examine the interaction between Christians and pagans in early Ireland, especially through the careful reading of charms and magic spells. Following this, John Carey examines the place and survival of supernatural beings in Christian Irish literature and the various ways these gods and demigods were adapted into the Christian world view, sometimes through demonization but more often as positive elements in the chain of beings linking humanity and God. In the next essay, Joseph Nagy continues this theme with a look at how the past became enshrined in Christian texts in ways that may not necessarily tell us about pagan beliefs, but nonetheless provide valuable insights into the ways that medieval Irish Christians imagined the beliefs of their ancestors. Thomas O'Loughlin follows with a valuable reminder of the pervasive role and influence of scripture in medieval Irish mythology and literature. After this, Robin Chapman Stacey looks at early Irish law, long a field of study restricted to philology, through promising techniques such as gender and political analysis. The final essay is an examination of what the latest archaeological studies can and cannot reveal about Celtic religion both in ancient Gaul and Ireland.

All of the essays in this volume are easily accessible to non-specialists, but also of great interest to scholars whose work deals with issues of religion, both pre-Christian and Christian, in early Europe. The emphasis in the book on Irish over Welsh and other sources is common and

understandable, but some readers may wish that more non-Irish material had been included. In short, this brief collection of essays is an excellent introduction to contemporary issues in the evolving field of Celtic religious studies.

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