

**Matthias Egeler, ed., *Landscape and Myth in North-Western Europe, Borders, Boundaries, Landscapes 2* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2019).
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Review

This engaging collection of twelve essays is the second volume in Brepols' *Borders, Boundaries, Landscapes* series, which aims to publish interdisciplinary works that reassess borders and frontiers as places of dynamic cultural innovation and interaction, and that conceptualise these landscapes both geographically and metaphorically. *Landscape and Myth in North-Western Europe* succeeds in both of these goals. Developed from papers delivered at a conference of the same name in 2016, the result is not so much a conference proceeding, as a collection of new and important essays united by their common focus on medieval North-Western Europe – specifically, on Iceland, Ireland, and Wales – providing a valuable reminder that what we might see as the peripheries of Medieval Europe were in fact more deeply and closely connected to one another by sea than less distant places were by land.

Four of the contributions are concerned with the Scandinavian, and especially Icelandic, context of how landscapes are connected with myth. Terry Gunnell discusses the importance of physically interacting with a space in the landscape in order to give it mythic meaning as a place within cultural memory. Richard Hennig closely examines an Old Icelandic word, *landsleg*, which has been argued by others as being translatable into a modern aesthetic appreciation of landscape for its own sake within medieval Icelandic culture. Matthias Egeler takes a case study approach to a single location within Iceland, the Hvanndalur Valley, and shows the close correlation that a number of medieval and early modern descriptions of this place have with a particular location in

medieval Ireland. Nicholas Meylan analyses *Sverris saga* as a ‘myth’, not in the sense of being concerned with supernatural beings or events, but in how the very landscape that Sverrir battles and journeys through on his path to taking the throne is presented in an ideological way, to confer legitimacy on his rule.

Six of the essays concentrate on sources from medieval to modern Ireland. Gregory Toner looks at the importance of onomastic mythology and literature through a categorisation of the naming of natural and man-made landscape features in *Lebor Gabála Érenn*. Grigory Bondarenko (in collaboration with Nina Zhilova) explores the etymological and mythological connections between the hill Benn Codail in the *Dindshenchas Érenn* and the male hero Codal Corrchíchech. The stories of the Finn Cycle are the focus of Elizabeth FitzPatrick’s lengthy contribution, where she links the places Finn and his warriors would hunt and interact with the Otherworld to the Modern Irish place-name element *formaoil*, referring to high places of bare rocks, boundaries and battlefields, but most importantly to wilderness. Continuing with tales of Finn defeating monsters, Tiziana Soverino presents the medieval and modern place-name lore associated with two fords. Marie-Luise Theuerkauf shows how a detailed local knowledge of both the physical and mythological landscape made Cú Chulainn the ideal, and indeed the only true candidate to marry Emer in the riddling colloquy of *Tochmarc Emire*, ‘The Courtship of Emer’. Finally, Edyta Lehmann takes a novel ecocritical approach to the forest itself as an important physical presence, a key actor even, within Irish literature from the early medieval period onwards, focusing on the Middle Irish *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne*, ‘The Pursuit of Diarmaid and Gráinne’, and *Buile Suibne*, ‘The Frenzy of Suibne’, as well as the modern poetic retelling, *Mis*, of an eighteenth century tale, *The Romance of Mis and Dubh Rois*.

And lastly, two essays in this volume focus on the landscapes of medieval Wales and northern France. Gregory R Darwin explores the Mélusine legend and two others of the fairy-bride genre linked to specific locations and families in Lusignan, France, Llyn y Fan Fach in Carmarthenshire, Wales, and Lough Inchiquin in northern county Clare, Ireland. Natalia Petrovska looks at two different thirteenth-century vernacular translations of the same twelfth-century Latin text, *Imago Mundi*, one in Welsh and one in French, and concludes that differences in the global ‘conceptual geography’ of the two translated texts are due to political events, namely the Crusades and the rise of the Mongol Empire.

All the contributions to *Landscape and Myth* are well-written, pertinent, and have excellent points within them, but in my opinion, there are a few which I found to be of particular personal importance. Gunnell’s essay, in which he explores the meaning of spaces, places, liminality, and how the actions of an individual or a group ‘actively *change* the conception, perception, and experience of a space or place’ (p. 28) either temporarily or permanently, is one which should be read widely. Indeed, many places were, in his analysis, important *because* of the events that took place there. He also makes the very underrated point that even though we as modern scholars cannot ever truly understand these cultural landscapes because the performative aspects of events which took place in the landscape have no living witnesses, he does suggest that among many tools such as archaeology, onomastics, and literary studies, scholars should also seek to do comparative research with other living societies to understand how landscape is interconnected with myth and practice.

Egeler’s article has an intriguing suggestion that cultural links between medieval Ireland and Iceland are stronger than suspected with the apparent borrowing of the tales of an ‘Island of Immortality’ being behind the Norse *Ódáinsakur*, ‘Field of the Not-Dead’. He also makes the very

important point that stories centred on very specific locations can indeed have great longevity and coherence for many generations – a point which is slowly being made by other researchers within the fields of folklore and mythology studies around the world.

Lastly, both Bondarenko and Theuerkauf take different but equally meticulous approaches to their Early Irish texts and show how deeply connected to the landscape these stories are, while Soverino shows that her chosen medieval myths are so intimately connected with the landscape that they have survived into modern recorded folklore.

Landscape and Myth is divided into two sections, ‘Myth and Real-World Landscapes’ and ‘Myth and the Landscapes of Literature’, but, after reading the essays, this seems to be something of an arbitrary distinction that, in my opinion, does not reflect the content of the actual contributions which argue for the deep inter-relatedness of literary (whether fictional, mythical, or factual) and physical landscapes. It imposes unnecessary categories upon the essays that actually function very well as a single conceptual body of work on how inseparable landscapes are from every other aspect of a society. It also makes the division between the two sections lop-sided with eight essays in the ‘Real-World’ section, and four in the ‘Literature’ section, even though most of the primary sources the various authors use is early medieval to early modern literature. I am not sure that a geographical division would convey the right tone either, especially after Egeler’s informative Introduction which takes the time to point out how the connections between these cultural areas may be greater than previously considered, and moreover, it would also highlight that only two essays discuss material from outside of Iceland and Ireland. Instead, reading all the essays within this volume as a single themed exploration on the inextricable links between landscape, myth and folklore within the medieval and modern societies of North-Western Europe is the most fruitful approach.

This volume is one which I would highly recommend not just to scholars specialising in medieval Iceland or Ireland, but indeed to any academic whose field involves understanding how the stories of a society both shape and are shaped by their environment, as the varied contributions here would surely stimulate a reconsideration of stories and texts from other times, spaces, and places, and in doing so similarly enrich their own disciplines.

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