

**John Waddell, *Myth and Materiality*. Oxbow Insights in Archaeology 4.**

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*Myth and Materiality* by John Waddell, former Professor of Archaeology at the National University of Ireland Galway, is part of the “Oxbow Insights in Archaeology” series of short books and consists of just 151 pages of text, followed by notes and bibliography. The aim of the book, as stated by Waddell in the introduction, is to promote the thesis that myth may illuminate archaeology and that, on occasion, archaeology may shed light on myth. As noted on the back cover, the book elaborates on some of the themes of his 2014 *Archaeology and Celtic Myth*, and it is based on the example of Irish myth: there is an abundance of references to ancient sites in Irish mythology, and although this connection has been noted before – by authors such as John Carey (1993, 29) and the excavator of Newgrange, Michael O’Kelly (1982, 47) – Waddell argues that these have not been explored to the extent that they could be, despite some advances.

The mythological themes explored in the book are those of sacral kingship, the Otherworld, the sacred tree and the Horse Goddess. Much of the evidence is provided by grave goods from the Bronze and Iron Ages, and he includes references to parallel Indo-European mythological concepts.

Sacral kingship is a major theme of Irish mythology, in which the king is chosen by the Sovereignty Goddess when she hands him a drink. The concept is particularly associated with Tara of the Kings in County Meath, a site that features strongly in the Fenian Cycle and the Historical Cycle of Irish mythology. However, Waddell observes that while literary clues for sacral kingship abound, the identification of the remains of a sacred king are hard to prove archaeologically, as sacredness leaves no archaeological trace.

In contrast, Waddell produces archaeological evidence indicating how the Otherworld was regarded as inverted and as having a reverse nature: indeed, the king represents cosmic order in contrast with the disorder of the Otherworld. Waddell produces archaeological evidence supporting the inverted and reverse nature of the Otherworld.

The sacred tree, representing the *axis mundi* or centre of the world, can be found in stories from around Europe, such as the Scandinavian *Yggdrasill*; the concept may also be connected with Greek and Roman sacred groves. Waddell considers evidence of the concept in tree roots found in bogs and in rock art.

The Horse Goddess is another guise of the above-mentioned Sovereignty Goddess, most readily identified with Macha, who has various similarities to the Welsh Rhiannon. Waddell looks at equine deities from all over Europe and asks if Macha and Rhiannon are ancient ancestors of the later Epona. He notes an association between horse goddesses and place names, emphasising sovereignty, and details archaeological findings that suggest an association between horses and powerful women.

Waddell's approach, in seeking to find in the myths what cannot be found in archaeology, does not find favour in all circles, a point he addresses in several places in the book. For the myths to shine a light on ancient cosmological views, they themselves must be ancient in origin. As Irish myths began to be written down in the early medieval period by Christian scribes, there are mixed views as to whether they are written versions of an ancient oral tradition, albeit with changes and amendments along the way (the nativist view), or, alternatively, whether they are an early medieval creation (the anti-nativist view). Waddell certainly takes account of where myths may be medieval inventions: indeed, the work's first chapter, titled "The Invented Past", opens with the mismatch between myth and archaeology at the great fort of Crúachain. While myth tells us this was the home of the legendary Queen Medb, geophysical survey suggests it was more likely a ceremonial centre. The wonderful descriptions of other extravagant and luxurious royal palaces that are common in Irish myths, Waddell concludes, are medieval exaggerations, as shown by archaeological investigations uncovering more modest abodes.

However, in general Waddell favours the nativist position, pointing out that the themes in the myths are of great antiquity and may be part of a common Indo-European inheritance that may be thousands of years old. He notes the persistence of Pagan beliefs in Ireland to illustrate his point.

The strength of this book is that, like his earlier works, it bravely embraces a view that will meet with resistance in archaeological circles, namely that archaeology cannot tell the whole story. Analysis that brings together myths and archaeological evidence is an area that merits much more investigation than it has received, and (despite a few typographical errors) Waddell's extensive knowledge of the subject shines through in every chapter. In conclusion, the book achieves its aim to show how archaeology and myth can each illuminate the other.

## References

- Carey, J., 1993. "Time, Memory, and the Boyne Necropolis". In *Proceedings of The Harvard Celtic Colloquium 10*, edited by W. Mahon, 24–36. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.
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- Waddell, J., 2014. *Archaeology and Celtic Myth: An Exploration*. Dublin: Four Courts Press.