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CORRIGENDA

The following footnotes/endnotes were omitted from the published version of this article, given here as numbered in the text of the article itself.

² Georgia Irby-Massie (20, 101, and *passim*) assumes that there was some interchange possible in some instances, and that *Interpretatio Celtica* could also occur.

³ John Shaw (164-165) incorrectly states that Morrígan was glossed by *lamia*, rather than Morrígan glossing *lamia*.

⁴ For discussion of this ritual, see Carey (Three 47-50).

⁵ This is a huge subject, and has been the focus of a number of studies by John Carey (Cesair; Irish National; Native).

⁶ One such example is the work of Barbara Hillers on the tale *Merugud Uilixís meic Leirtis*.

⁷ I hope to be able to examine this text myself in the near future.

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form of theology. In other words, if we shift our understanding of what theology and religious discourse is, we can gain a greater appreciation for a vibrant religious world in later medieval Ireland.

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Interpretatio Hibernica

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The Irish instances of the use of classical deity-names as glosses or explanations of native Irish supernatural characters is not mere learned pedantry and literate name-dropping, but is instead a legitimate attempt at self-understanding through the usage of familiar and respected classical literary archetypes. Two particular occurrences of this phenomenon are examined: the glossing of the Morrigan by the name of the classical Fury Allecto, as well as the use of the former name to gloss the biblical lamiae; and the four deities (Jove, Mars, Apollo, and Osiris) mentioned in the Ulster cycle text Cath Findchorad as being propitiated with particular sacrifices by Ailill and Medb.

Students of Celtic mythology interested in comparing the continuities of belief and practices—if any—between the Continental Celts and the medieval Insular Celtic cultures have long had to deal with a phenomenon known as *Interpretatio Romana*, a term originally coined by Tacitus in his *Germania* Ch. 43 (Maier *Dictionary* 158).¹ This phenomenon occurs most often in religious contexts, occasionally in the written accounts of Continental Celtic religious practices but most frequently in the devotional context of inscriptions on altars and other objects. The general form it takes is the linking of a Celtic deity-name to a more familiar Roman theonym with the Roman name first, *e.g.*, Apollo Belenus, Mars Teutates; in some

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cases, the Celtic name has priority, e.g., Sulis Minerva. The majority of the literary occurrences of *Interpretatio Romana* are found in an ethnographic context, in which a foreign (and often hostile) power is observing the Celtic customs. The inscriptions come from time periods when the local Celtic cultures were in the process of being subsumed by Roman imperialization. These pieces of evidence, therefore, cannot be treated as unbiased records of the practices and beliefs concerned. Bernhard Maier ("Lug," "Comparing") and Jane Webster have both written on the perils of accepting these deity-name associations as legitimate evidence for Celtic religious activities. However, since the evidence for the cult and characteristics of many of the Celtic deities interpreted in this manner is often inaccessible beyond the information in such equations, perhaps we should not be quite as dismissive as that, while still accepting that the biases of the Roman observers and their universalizing, syncretistic and soft-polytheistic, imperialistic, and colonial motives are present. The fact that some care seems to have gone into this, rather than a random assignment of divine equivalences, and that at least some first-hand observation or participation was occurring during these processes,² makes these records closer to the truth of these matters than any other source of information currently available.

Another difficulty emerges, however, in the biblical and classical connections cited by later medieval Christian authors in relation to their Insular Celtic subjects, since first-hand knowledge of pre-Christian Irish religion was most likely neither possible nor desirable when the texts in which such items occur were written, and unlike the Roman situation, an atmosphere of general soft-polytheistic acceptance was not in operation. Past studies, which have been interested in the remains and reconstruction of pre-Christian Irish (and often Celtic or Indo-European) religion, have simply dismissed the biblical and classical connections as the irrelevant pedantries of the Irish monastic writers. Noting that these references to older literatures have occurred, and taking them therefore as

indications of a familiarity with such works as Virgil's *Aeneid* (Ó hUiginn 40), some scholars have used these references to suggest that the Irish epic tradition was in fact modeled on the classical Virgilian epic (Thurneysen 96). Others have viewed such references as demonstrating that such identifications between classical and native figures were simply scholastic commonplaces in Irish and Anglo-Saxon monastic contexts (Murphy 157-158 note 4). Rijcklof Hofman's investigation (197) elsewhere in Irish literature of the evidence for direct knowledge of Virgil referenced but did not discuss the particular gloss from the first recension of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (which will be discussed below) upon which so much weight had previously been placed. These studies have all advanced the understanding of the wider field of medieval Irish literature, but they have failed to take seriously the meaning of such glosses.

Part of this is due to the general trend for examinations of medieval Irish literature to focus on historical and linguistic concerns (as well as mythological-reconstruction), rather than their appreciation as literature, which is usefully explored and critiqued by Varese Layzer. Quoting such experts in Irish law and language as Rolf Baumgarten and Liam Breatnach, who have argued for the merit in looking at the texts themselves, Layzer (67-68) suggests that there is indeed great merit in pursuing such investigations and interpretations of the literature, despite the large amount of textual editing and translating that has yet to be done with medieval Irish literature, and the lack of an established canon. Further, Layzer opines that the medieval Irish authors' "glosses and 'interpolations' can be seen as converging opinions and possibilities, each with an equal claim to being 'true', although not necessarily in the same way" (27).

It is, therefore, the intent of the present investigation to take these references to biblical and classical literature within Irish sources seriously in their own right. I would prefer to see these connections not as learned and pedantic self-congratulation, or the overactive marginalia of

allegorizing minds, but instead as legitimate attempts at a self-understanding of the Irish pre-Christian heritage employing the imagery and tropes with which the authors were most familiar. These writings tell us much about paganism (the view of what pagan religion involved) rather than the realities of the Irish pagan religion (Salih 129 note 6); they give us an etic/outsider perspective on pre-Christian religion, but an emic/insider perspective on the writers of this literature, which is the sole source we have available on most of these subjects, and with which students and scholars must reckon. Any insights into the thought-worlds and the commonplaces of expression and imagery that can be clarified by such an investigation will ultimately prove useful in further interpretations of the literary products of the medieval Irish, whether or not these writings convey legitimate pre-Christian traditions or are instead synthetic and creative imaginings that have been innovated by the writers of a particular text. Understanding the multivalent medieval usages and understandings of the word *interpretatio*, and especially conscious of both the utility as well as the biases present in using information from sources exhibiting the *Interpretatio Romana* in examining Celtic religion, I would like to suggest that envisioning these Irish glosses and connections is neither mere learned fancy nor simply an indicator of the early Irish literary curriculum, but that they are instead what I would like to term *Interpretatio Hibernica*. Though these interpretations may tell us little about pre-Christian religious and mythological fact, they can speak volumes about the Irish interpretations and constructions of their own religious heritage.

Having thus described the method of interpretation that will be used in the present discussion, I would like to examine two instances of *Interpretatio Hibernica* to determine the viability of this interpretive framework, and to see whether this understanding can tell us anything useful about the medieval Irish attitudes toward and interpretations of their own ancestors' religious practices, or if instead it is simply a self-conscious hermeneutical

and epistemological exercise in understanding one possible way in which modern scholars might attempt to understand the self-understanding of the medieval literate Christian Irish. First, we will look at the figure of the Morrigan, and how she was glossed by the classical figure Allecto, as well as the use of her name to gloss the Latin *lamia*. Second, an unusual passage in the Ulster Cycle tale *Cath Findchorad* describing a pagan Irish sacrifice to various classical deities, including the Egyptian Osiris, will be examined. While a great deal can be—and has been—said about the first, little has been said about the second, and the breadth of the discussion of each therefore will reflect this abundance and paucity respectively.

Morrigan: Fury or Vampire?

As mentioned, one particular reference in the first recension of the Ulster Cycle epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge* has drawn a great deal of attention and speculation on its significance regarding the author's classical knowledge and the influence of classical models on Irish literature, and yet little attention has been paid to the content and significance of the reference itself in its context. This is the mention of the classical Fury Allecto in relation to the Morrigan. *Céin bátár didiu in tslóig oc tochim Maige Breg, forrumai Allechtu colléic, noch is í Mórrígan sòn i ndeiblé eúin co mboí forsin chorthi hi Temair Cúailnge*, 'While the army was going over Mag mBreg Allecto came for a while, that is, the Mórrígan, in the form of a bird which perched on the pillar-stone in Temair Cúailnge' (O'Rahilly 30 lines 954-956, trans. 152). This is a classic case of *Interpretatio Hibernica*, because the initiative for the comparison is coming from an Irish author, writing in Irish, in relation to an Irish figure, but in this particular case the classical figure seems to have precedence since she is named first.

Allecto was a figure known elsewhere in Irish glosses, including an extended Latin gloss on a passage from the *Liber Hymnorum's* version of *Amra Choluim Chille*, which presents a rather unique interpretation of classical literature in itself. *Tres filiae Orci quae uocantur diuersis nominibus*

in caelo et in terra et in inferno; in caelo quidem Stenna et Euriale et Medusa; .i. Clothus Lacessis Antropus; in inferno Electo Migera Stifone (Bernard and Atkinson Vol. 1, 164), 'The three daughters of Orcus, which were called by diverse names in heaven and on the earth and in hell; indeed in heaven (they were) Stheno and Euryale and Medusa; that is (on earth) Clotho, Lachesis, Atropos; in hell Allecto, Megaera and Tisiphone'. This interpretation links the three Gorgons (daughters of Phorcys, who was interpreted as "Porcus" in Irish and then linked to Orcus), the three Fates, and the three Furies to a common ancestry, though the latter two groupings are not related to either Orcus or Phorcys in any attested source (Stanford 114). These varying groups of three fateful and/or frightful female deities would certainly seem to be comparable to the Morrígan in some sense, since she is often one of three such aggressive supernatural female figures in Irish narrative. But a closer look at Virgil's *Aeneid* might bear further insights into why such a comparison would have been made.

In Book Seven, we find Allecto, under Juno's orders, stirring up trouble between the forces of Aeneas and the Trojans, and King Latinus and his people. When Allecto is first summoned, she is described as being able to assume many forms (Fairclough Vol. 2, 24-25 line 328), which fits the Morrígan's ability to assume a variety of both human and animal forms in the *Táin*. In particular, the Morrígan assumes the form of an eel to hinder Cú Chulainn's fighting ability in the ford against Loch (O'Rahilly 57, 61, 176-177, 180); this is similar to Allecto's arousal of a Bacchic-like fury in Queen Amata by throwing one of the snakes from her hair to poison her with resentment (Fairclough Vol. 2, 26-31). In her incitement of Turnus against the Trojans, Allecto initially assumes the form of an old woman, before revealing herself in her full furious appearance (32-35); likewise, the Morrígan also assumes the form of an old woman in order to trick Cú Chulainn into healing her by blessing her for each of the wounds he inflicted on her when she opposed him in the ford (O'Rahilly 62-63, 181-

182). While there is not a direct one-to-one correspondence between Allecto and the Morrígan in all aspects, nor a complete parallel in the plot-lines and motives behind their actions in each narrative, the similarity of both figures in being able to assume many forms—among them an elderly woman and a serpent or eel—and being part of a triplicity of divine female figures demonstrates that, if nothing else, the Irish literati were adept at noting what we might now term comparative mythological details in the two literatures.

What is particularly fascinating about the Morrígan in cases of *Interpretatio Hibernica* is that she is not only interpreted by classical figures in narratives concerning her, but she also is used to interpret classical and other figures in Irish commentaries on and translations of non-Irish sources. The ninth-century Irish scholar in Carolingian France, Joannes Scottus Eriugena, glossed a Latin Vulgate biblical manuscript of Isaiah 34:14 (*ibi cubavit lamia et inuenit sibi requiem*) as follows: *Lamia monstrum in feminae figura .i. morrígain* (Stokes and Strachan Vol 1, 2; Contreni and Ó Néill 146 §298), 'Lamia: a monster in feminine form, that is, the Morrígan'.³ Interestingly, Jerome's own glosses on the *lamia* include the Hebrew Lilith, as well as the Greek Erinyes and the Latin Furies (of whom Allecto was one); but here Eriugena has instead inserted something which was familiar to him from Irish mythology, and would no doubt have been recognized by his students who may have been using one of the three manuscripts which contained this gloss. Further, as discussed by Máire Herbert (148), the word *morrígain* is used in the sense of 'witch' or 'demon' to refer to Jocasta the mother of Oedipus in the Irish version of Statius' *Thebaid*, *Togail na Tebe* (Calder 6-7 lines 87-88), which agrees with the more general usage of the Morrígan's name to refer to various types of malignant spirits and creatures in *Sanas Cormaic* (Meyer 58 §697). In a syllogistic manner, it would appear that the glossing of *lamia* with the Morrígan, the explanation of the Morrígan via Allecto, and (via Jerome) the connection of the Furies/

Erinyes and Lilith to *lamiae* can be taken as something of an established fact for the Irish monastic scholars.

Lamiae appear elsewhere in early Irish sources. In an ecclesiastical text attributed to the bishops Patricius, Auxilius and Isernius, which may therefore date to the mid-fifth century (Bieler 2), *The First Synod of St. Patrick*, the following statement occurs: *Christianus qui crediderit esse lamiam in saeculo, quae interpretatur striga, anathemazandus* 'A Christian who believes that there is such a thing in the world as a vampire, that is to say, a witch, is to be anathematized' (Bieler 56-57 §16). If this document does indeed date to the mid-fifth century, when Irish paganism was still a major influence on the larger society, such a worry on the part of the evangelizing Christians is understandable. But is it possible that in this worry, there might in fact be some connection to belief in a pre-Christian female deity of some sort, which fit the wider Hieronymian understanding of *lamiae*?

While we do not have any evidence from Ireland that can shed light on this with certainty, we do have some interesting evidence from Roman Britain in the second to fourth centuries. On an altar from the fort of Condercum (modern Benwell) on the eastern end of Hadrian's Wall, an inscription occurs in dedication to the Three *Lamiae*, *LAMIIS TRIBVS* (Collingwood and Wright 440-441 §1331). From the same site, there is also a dedication to the Three Mother Goddesses of the Parade-Ground (Collingwood and Wright 441 §1334). While one cannot assume that all triads of female figures are reducible to one goddess or sets of goddesses in triplicate, the coincidence of both the Three *Lamiae* and the Three Mother Goddesses of the Parade Ground at this site is suggestive, not least because the Morrígan has her fierce and witch-like aspects, but she is also a warrior in addition to being a goddess connected to motherhood (Herbert 143; Shaw 166-167) and thus would be a particularly appropriate goddess to be a patroness of the warrior-activities which would occur on the parade grounds of the fort at Condercum. It seems possible, though by no means certain, that through this

chain of equivalences in *Interpretatio Hibernica*, perhaps some pre-Christian belief in a triple-aspected, fierce warrior-mother goddess could be conjectured to have been recognized in the religions of the Insular Celtic realm.

"What's a nice Egyptian like you doing in a place like this?"

The tale *Cath Findchorad* exists fragmentarily in a single seventeenth-century manuscript. The title of the tale exists as early as the twelfth century, at the end of the Book of Leinster's version of *Cath Ruis na Ríg* (Thurneysen 364). It is impossible to know whether this version of the tale was the one known in the twelfth century, and no study has yet examined the linguistic features of the text that might allow us to narrow down its likely date; indeed, this tale has garnered little scholarly attention in general. However, these questions—while valid and worthy of further investigation—will not inhibit the present discussion's examination of one passage in particular toward the beginning of the tale.

The tale begins with Medb and Ailill and their gathered army awaiting battle with Conchobor and the Ulaid at Findchorad (possibly Corofin, Co. Clare), and they ask the advice of their druids on the auspices of the approaching battle. *Do ronsad udhbarta do Mhairt, do Ois*[gap in text] *do Ióbhi, d'Ápaill. Bá hiád so imorro udhbarta do ronsatt dóiph .i. carna con, muc, cat*, 'They offered sacrifices to Mars, to Osiris (?), to Jove and to Apollo. These are the sacrifices they offered: the flesh of dogs, pigs and cats' (Dobbs 398-399 lines 10-12). The line which follows is fragmentary, but seems similar at one point to a description of the ritual of *tarbhfheis* or the 'bull-feast/bull-sleep' which is described in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* as a mantic technique used to divine who would be the next king of Tara (Knott 4 §11; Koch and Carey 168-169 §11). The three animals being sacrificed here also occur in the description of the poetic seership ritual of *imbais forosnai*⁴ in *Sanas Cormaic* (Meyer 64 §756), and in the Ulster Cycle narrative *Mesca Ulad*, the blood of dogs, cats and druids

is said to be boiling in a cauldron as poison for Dubthach Dóel Ulad's spear (Watson 32 lines 730-733; Koch and Carey 120 §44). Some of the details of this incident may very well be drawn from these earlier sources. However, no deities are ever named in the earlier texts, and thus the inclusion of four classical deities here is mysterious; Dobb's comment on the line is simply "Classical allusions are unusual in Tain cycle [sic]" (416 note 9).

To find Apollo, Mars and Jove in the writings of people familiar with classical literature is, admittedly, not incredible. In fact, the Irish *Togail na Tebe* even features, at one point, the three deities mentioned together in the same sentence at one point of the narrative (Calder 74-75 lines 1175-1180). But what of Osiris? It seems, at the very least, odd for this unrelated Egyptian deity to be included with three Roman deities, and to be named without Isis—whose Graeco-Roman cult was much more widespread—is even more unusual. However, without having seen the manuscript, and knowing that a gap exists at this portion of the text, it is difficult to say anything with certainty. The full form of the name might possibly be *Osir*, but the question remains as to how the information on the existence of this deity amongst the Graeco-Roman-Egyptian pagans of the past would be known to the Irish.

Osiris is mentioned in the writings of various church fathers, including Origen and Clement of Alexandria, and in the works of the Latin fathers Tertullian (*De Corona* 7.5, 8.3; *Contra Marcion* 1.13.5) and Athanasius (*Vita Antonii* 75; *Contra Gentiles* 9.4, 10.4). But, the most likely source for information on Osiris in an Irish context would probably be Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*, in which the Bishop of Hippo critiques the beliefs in and inconsistencies of various pagan doctrines and myths relating to ancient gods, often with reference to pagan critics. In 6.10, he cites Seneca's critiques of civic religion, and mentions that Osiris is first bewailed because of his death, and then celebrated in his resurrection (Green 354-355). In 8.26 and 27, Isis the wife of Osiris is the primary subject, in which Augustine details the critiques of Hermes Trismegistus

against the idolatry of his ancestors (Wiesner 136-137, 142-143). Perhaps most relevant to the present instance is his final mention of Osiris in 10.11, when he discusses Porphyry's critique of the theurgic practice of summoning the superior powers of the gods and then commanding and threatening them as if they were inferiors, "including even the terrible threat that he will scatter abroad the dismembered limbs of Osiris, if the gods fail to perform his commands" (Wiesner 302-303). This particularly vivid image might have encouraged a knowledgeable and literate writer to include Osiris' name amongst the deities which received the propitiatory sacrifice for the purposes of a hopefully favorable divination, with the implication that doing so was erroneous and idolatrous, but also potentially coercive (and thus within their general characters) on the part of the marauding forces of Ailill, Medb, and their advising druids.

The range of potential applications for the paradigm of *Interpretatio Hibernica* is very large indeed. Further possibilities might include examining the particular definitions of the Irish quarter-day of Beltaine in *Somus Cornuic* (Meyer 12 §122, 15 §153) as the "fire of Bel" (Williams 127, 130), referring not to some form of the god Belenus but instead to the Semitic god Bel found in Daniel 14:2-21. The entire pseudohistorical enterprise of the Irish, which attempted to synchronize Irish legendary history to both classical and biblical chronology, exemplified best in the various recensions of *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, would also seem to be an extended exercise in *Interpretatio Hibernica*.⁵ Examining more closely the Irish versions of classical texts for native elements and their use to interpret or gloss classical images would also be useful, not so much with an eye (as in the past) to how the classical texts influenced Irish literature as much as determining what Irish culture's understanding of classical narrative was and how it conveyed this through use of its own native myths, images and language. There is a note on page 3 in the manuscript Royal Irish Academy 1234 (C i. 2) on the classical deity Iannus, which has never been edited

or studied. The contents and interpretation of this figure through an Irish perspective might be very interesting indeed, especially given the existence of many multi-faced figures in Irish archaeology, including the Corleck Head now on display in the National Museum in Dublin. The paradigm of *Interpretatio Hibernica* might prove very useful in re-evaluating the use of "external elements" in Irish narrative, without the major emphasis being on where or how they originated, but instead with attention to how they functioned and illuminated the understandings of diverse subjects for the Irish authors who wrote them and the audiences that consumed these literary productions.

We have examined two cases of what I propose is *Interpretatio Hibernica*, the attempt to understand and interpret the practices of the pagan Irish through the lenses and filters of the classically literate Christian Irish, perhaps with some knowledge of pieces of pagan belief and practice (as in the case of the Morrigan), but often with no basis other than the earlier interpretations and writings of their own *Interpretatio Hibernica*-employing literary forerunners (as in the case of *Cath Findchorad*). Sometimes this exploration might yield valuable insights into the actual nature of pre-Christian practices, while at other points a classical and Christian bibliographic literary itinerary will be the only result; but both of these possibilities are of great utility. One could potentially take a broad view on these matters, and therefore consider every piece of medieval Irish literature that purports to give an account of the beliefs and practices of the pagan Irish to be in the mode of *Interpretatio Hibernica*, which would force one to question every such occurrence and every piece of information which has thus far been marshaled for the purposes of the reconstruction of pre-Christian Irish and Celtic religion. However, an equally valid option might be to adopt a more narrow view, and to employ the paradigm of *Interpretatio Hibernica* in those cases where there does not seem to be precedent elsewhere in the Irish literary tradition, nor in Celtic and Indo-European comparative contexts, for the associations and connections which a particular text

suggests. Both options are certainly useful, and there is truth in each of the broad and narrow applications of the paradigm. But, as ever, it would appear that the best course would be to navigate somewhere down the middle, between Pèist Chonchúinn (*i.e.*, Seylla) and Coire Breccáin (*i.e.*, Charabáids), as it were.

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