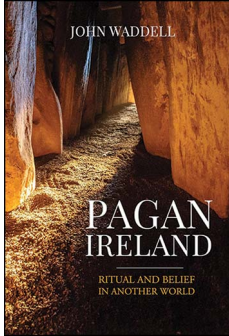


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JOHN WADDELL. 2023. *Pagan Ireland: ritual and belief in another world*. Dublin: Wordwell; 978-1-913934-92-7 paperback €30.



This book presents a welcome, refreshingly new exploration of Ireland’s ritual and religious past. The author begins with an apt quotation by William Faulkner “The past is never dead. It’s not even past”, a sentiment to which John Waddell returns at the end of his far-reaching volume. This is a long book, divided—unusually—into 30 short chapters, each finely illustrated with colour and black-and-white images. While this division can occasionally make the text appear somewhat disjointed, at the same time—as a book intended for a wide general readership—it makes sometimes quite dense narrative comparatively straightforward to navigate. The writer covers a vast period of Irish pagan pre-

history and early history, from before 4000 BC to the medieval period where paganism still sometimes lurked behind the façade of Christianity. The author’s writing style makes the text accessible, taking pains not to hide behind abstruse vocabulary and, where necessary, provides good explanations of complex themes. It avoids too didactic an approach, leaning rather to an attractively informal discourse. Waddell’s penetrative study is a worthy successor to Barry Raftery’s *Pagan Celtic Ireland* (1994), Dáithí Ó hÓgáin’s *The sacred isle* (1999) and J.P. Mallory’s *The origins of the Irish* (2013).

The chapters cover an immensely wide range of subjects, based mainly on archaeological evidence but including some relevant medieval textual references associated with Irish mythology and the pagan/Christian interface. Thoughts on solar and cosmic rituals begin the volume, associating them with round monuments, such as stone circles. Thereafter, discussions cover all manner of apparently ritual behaviour, from the treatment of dead bodies (and partial bodies) to objects, sometimes whole, often deliberately broken and offered as fragmented things. The author dwells on themes such as who was chosen for special burial and what happened to the remains of other people, together with the contrasting symbolism of inhumations and cremations; and the power of place, whether mountains, cliff-edges, boggy sites and even middens, in which offerings were sometimes put. Although, I am surprised that in this discussion of significant locations, he omits the significance of islands. I would have thought the Skelligs are both worthy and relevant for inclusion. Waddell raises issues concerned with the symbolism of human skulls, sometimes found in strange and anachronistic contexts. Other chapters deal with the sacred powers attributed to triplism: three-headed or triple-horned images, and the notion of a tripartite world, similar to thinking associated with shamanic cultures, where the underworld, the material, human-centred domain, and the upper stratum of the spirits, and the links between them, are key elements in their world-view. There is discussion of stone and wooden images, though the crucial symbolism of wood-decay is not mentioned. Various other themes are covered in the latter part of Waddell’s

volume, which is particularly slanted towards the medieval period: sacral kingship, sacred trees and the transformative magic of metalworking, especially iron. The final chapters discuss the 'old gods', the coming of Christianity and conclude with 'The Pagan Continuum'.

A particularly impressive element in *Pagan Ireland* is the inclusion of new and gripping archaeological information and, in particular, the presentation of up-to-date scientific data, including DNA and strontium isotope analyses, that enable so much greater understanding of ancient Irish societies. For example, Waddell has used these front-line techniques to form exciting new theories about the important ceremonial site of Navan in Co. Armagh, which has now been proven to involve complex rites including the import of animals, especially pigs, from long distances, probably for communal feasting events.

There is so much original thinking and question-posing in this book, including the importance of performance in the religious rituals, particularly relevant to early agricultural societies as they developed coherence in relatively large, sedentary groups. Other significant ideas raised include interesting discussions about: how cemeteries were used, lasting for many years but often episodically; what might have been behind the symbolism of fragmentation of bodies and things; how it might be possible to identify ritualists from the remains of their bodies; and the 'shamanic' equipment they used to communicate with the gods. A very insightful comment, made early in the book, raises the issue of the need of people in ancient Ireland (and, by implication, almost everywhere) for the supernatural, in order to have some measure of control over their own world.

There are a few aspects of this book that I found less convincing. The early chapters, concerning solar veneration, circularity and cosmic symbolism are, to my mind, over-interpreted, risking the presentation of ideas too dogmatically as 'correct', despite their basis on speculation that may or may not be accurate. Particularly in books designed for general readership, it is perhaps wise for academic authors to make it clear that reading archaeological evidence is by no means an exact discipline; findings are subject to many different interpretations, no matter how rigorous the scrutiny of material culture. The other issue that does not sit entirely well within the text is the 'dropping-in' of ethnographic parallels. Referral to other cultures, past and present, can be extremely useful as an interpretative tool but, in this instance, the examples appear—to me at least—to be presented without exploring their precise use in helping us to understand what they might mean for our own reading of archaeological evidence.

Notwithstanding the one or two caveats mentioned in this review, *Pagan Ireland* is a work of outstanding scholarship, exhibiting encyclopaedic and impressive knowledge of up-to-date research about ancient Ireland, its sites, rituals and beliefs. As its subtitle states, *Ritual and belief in another world* explores the otherworld but subtly, in two ways: the otherworld that is the past; and the otherworld that is of the spirits and ways in which ancient Irish communities attempted to reach out to it. I have learned a great deal from reading Waddell's book and, like many a good academic work, it has left me buzzing with thoughts and ideas that eagerly await further exploration. That is the mark of a fine book and I can recommend it with enthusiasm to anyone with an interest in the sacred past.

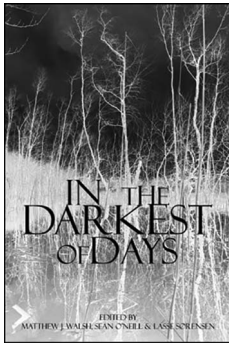
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MATTHEW J. WALSH, SEAN O'NEILL & LASSE SØRENSEN (ed.). 2023. *In the darkest of days: exploring human sacrifice and value in southern Scandinavian prehistory*. Oxford: Oxbow; 978-1-78925-859-2 paperback £38.



The edited volume *In the darkest of days: exploring human sacrifice and value in southern Scandinavian prehistory* brings together novel explorations of the topic of human sacrificial violence, ranging from Mesolithic to Viking times. Some of the contributions were originally presented at a conference at the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen in 2018, within the framework of the ‘Human Sacrifice and Value’ project of the University of Oslo.

The book consists of a general introduction followed by 12 chapters, which are placed in a roughly chronological order, and are significantly varied in scope, theoretical framework and methodological approach. The main focus throughout most chapters is on two archaeological contexts: bogs and other watery places yielding human and ‘non-human’ remains; and ‘dryland’ burial data. In the last three chapters, dealing with the Viking Age, historical texts take a more prominent position. Potentially relevant quotes from classical authors surface occasionally in other contributions. Combined, this set of contributions provides a fascinating overview of the unparalleled richness of the southern Scandinavian data on human violence and ritual.

The huge scope of the current volume—chronologically, spatially and thematically—inevitably brings challenges. These mainly evolve around the definitions of (human) sacrifice, offering and ritual, the potential entanglement of ritual and violence, and how sacrificial practices may (or may not) be reflected in the archaeological record. These themes are central in most chapters and prompt the question to what extent general trends may be expected across time and space. In the Introduction (p.xi), the authors follow Bruce Lincoln’s (1991: 204) definition of sacrifice as “most fundamentally a logic, language, and practice of transformative negation, in which one entity—a plant or animal, a bodily part, some portion of a person’s