

The Atlantic as Mythical Space

An Essay on Medieval Ethea



Alfonso J. García-Osuna
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Series in World History



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Foreword

What was the Atlantic to ancient and medieval people? How did this immense body of water buttress or disturb their assumptions regarding reality, life and the afterlife? Is it possible to capture the cultural importance of this indefinite, chimeric, protean space that confused primitive intuition and undermined common-sense perspectives on the world? Why was the Atlantic the site of a concealed, preternatural cosmos where ancients had access to the most bizarre, ecstatic dreamscapes? The endeavor to answer these questions is the essence of Dr. Alfonso J. García-Osuna's *The Atlantic as Mythical Space: An Essay on Medieval Ethea*.

Herein, the author covers an impressively extensive range of topics, myths and legends, and while he confesses, with a tinge of apologetic remorse, that he did not have a preconceived strategy when configuring this book, it is obvious that its heterogeneity and diversity of perspectives not only speak to the wide scope of his interests, but also gives the text much of its manifest value.

The texts analyzed in this book verify that the Atlantic, savage and splendid, hostile and magnificent, was a space full of unknown dangers, spiritual uncertainty, and a paramount source of wonderment, fear and curiosity. The ocean generated that anxiety which is usually provoked by unfathomable mysteries and, as the author skillfully demonstrates, this disquiet both troubled and utterly fascinated the medieval mind. In the *immrama* and *echtraí*, be they Irish or Galician, this fascination was conjugated into a literary aesthetics dominated by the objective of making the readers/listeners participate in a journey into a vast unknown. Most importantly, this space was unanticipated by their holy book, and because of it, these stories offered the delights of venturing into murky spaces in the collective imagination, into speculative recesses not well-shielded from extraneous influences by the faith's dogmatic prescripts.

As a consequence of this objective, the language used to describe mythical Atlantic journeys, with its methodical descriptions of monsters and aberrations, is built upon that anxiety and that fascination, so that the enjoyment of reading or listening to the stories can be considered analogous to the delight of transgressing, of going beyond limits, of subverting, of seeing beyond statutory horizons. As the author shows, a story of sailing into the unknown is, by definition, a subversion of the status quo order, a journey that propels the listener/reader towards a place of danger, towards a mindscape where the imagination can overwhelm the ordered common beliefs upon which authority systems build consentient awareness.

Therefore, and as the author eloquently informs the reader, the Atlantic is an exotic place of wonder that beckons the medieval mind towards a heteromorphic reality; upon arrival, it can rid itself of intransigent dogma and imagine new worlds among the metamorphosed creatures it finds there. Such monsters, in a way, symbolize the power of the human spirit to break shackles and transform the world. Accordingly, the medieval Atlantic voyage represents the flight of the suppressed, intimidated imagination to a place where the shortcomings of daily existence fade away.

In the light of it, and as we delve into this book, we verify that a crucial objective is to show that for ages the Atlantic has been contested space, an unrestrained mental geography that needed to be controlled or occupied by uneasy authority establishments, especially the Church. The danger posed by these uncontrolled jaunts would have been palpable: they had the power to seriously undermine those substantial collective identity patterns that underpinned that authority's doctrinal claims.

An upshot of García-Osuna's analyses is that Atlantic myths and legends are the result of that particular character that is common to the broad cultural community that developed along the ocean's European shores. The idea of Atlantic cultural cohesion is substantiated by the manner in which the ocean became a "mythical space," a "relevant metaphor" for profound anxieties and a providential geography where the unencumbered medieval imagination could roam.

This text demonstrates García-Osuna's vast knowledge of his subject, a knowledge aided and abetted by his Canary Islander origin, which must have exposed him since childhood to Atlantic lore (I might be excused for declaring that origin is relevant here, as the Canaries are a focal point of so many myths and legends regarding the Atlantic). Consequently, he embarks us on an intense journey through the many and sundry places along the ocean's shores that have contributed to its myths.

Far from feeling overwhelmed, we can turn that long journey into a profound learning experience across multiple myths and cultures. Through his erudite as well as entertaining prose, the author invites us to imagine the world that created those myths and to recreate the cultural contexts in which they were fashioned. These contexts include more recent interpretations and leaky analyses. As the author explains, the overly enthusiastic "research" that accompanies the discussion surrounding myths, especially investigations conducted in more recent centuries, can be cloaked in a shroud of absurdity—at least in the view of modern academics—yet these scholars are included here not as researchers, but as contributors to the myth. In other words, in their own way, they've added interesting fictional dimensions to the mythologization of diverse islands and places along the ocean's shore.

Myths have a long lifespan, and many are still in vogue. All epochs, including our current one, need myths, and on many occasions, cultures reframe old myths to fit new environments. Besides naughty aliens pointing the way to Hy-Brasil for dumbfounded US soldiers in recent news stories, we might recall that the island of San Borondón (St. Brendan's Isle), in the Canary Islands, still pops up through the waves when it feels like surprising the locals. On our screens, the always-popular Merlin still haunts Hollywood productions, Arthurian legends proliferate in contemporary television shows, and many other ancient myths materialize in film and literature.

The author has put an enormous amount of work into this book and provided a wealth of data. Admirable is the interdisciplinarity that is evident in the research and the depth of his global vision, one that embraces the diverse and complex traditions united by this ocean. For those of us that have an interest in Atlantic cultures, there are many passages of pure enjoyment in these pages. I would recommend reading this book slowly and with an open mind, one ready to learn, reflect upon and assess those mythological energies that shaped the societies and cultures of Europe's western fringes, creating a very broad network of knowledge that cohered and helped to "reinforce and share models for communal cohesion."

It has been a pleasure to read this book, and I am grateful for having had the opportunity to contribute these comments. Moreover, I am proud to share with the author our origin, the Fortunate Islands, the Canary Islands, a condition that gives us an intimate familiarity with that thunderous Atlantic, an ocean captured in the verses of that famous Canary Islander Tomás Morales in his "Ode to the Atlantic" (1920):

Thunderous Atlantic! With robust spirit,
Would my voice once more acclaim your ardor.
Be ye, Muses, favorable to my quest:
Blue sea of my homeland, sea of Dreams,
sea of my childhood and my youth... sea of mine!

Isabel Pascua-Febles, University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 2020.

Introduction

*O Gilgamesh, there has never been a way across,
nor since olden days can anyone cross the ocean.
Only Shamash the hero crosses the ocean:
apart from the Sun God, who crosses the ocean?
The crossing is perilous, its way full of hazard,
and midway lie the Waters of Death, blocking the passage forward.*

(Shiduri's counsel to Gilgamesh, tablet X, lines 79-84, in George 2000, 78)

The idea for writing this book sprang from the gracious invitations extended to me by Professors Patricia Navarra (Hofstra University Irish Studies Program), Isabel Pascua Febles and Elisa Isabel Costa Villaverde (University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria), Minni Sawhney and Taruna Chakravorty (University of Delhi, India) requesting that I deliver end-of-semester seminars in their respective institutions. Furthermore, its realization was made possible by the gracious support and encouragement of Provost Joanne Russell, at the City University of New York. Imparted to diverse and international groups of students, these seminars all hinged upon my interest in cultures that have flourished on Atlantic islands and coasts. Frankly, it is an interest whose origin is not easy to understand. Perhaps the circumstances of having been born on an island in the Atlantic (Cuba), of having been raised on another island in the Atlantic (Gran Canaria), of having traveled extensively for academic reasons in two other Atlantic isles (Ireland and Great Britain) and of being presently living in yet another Atlantic isle (Long Island, NY), has predisposed me to the development of an intellectual curiosity that has been focused on the cultural life of groups around that great body of water. I can, however, give a more coherent reason for why the Atlantic has continued to draw my attention: historically, that immense, unstructured space has provided those groups' popular imagination with the latitude to colonize it with whatever their unrestrained imagination could conceive. This gives researchers wide-ranging analytical vistas that never cease to yield new insights.

Because the ocean was a preferred location for spiritual *essentia*, another noteworthy aspect of the Atlantic that has captured my attention is its peculiarity of being a contested space. I mean contested not only in the sense that nations and empires have fought over its sea-lanes, islands, ports, and coastlines for centuries, but also, and more importantly because cultures have clashed for the right to colonize its metaphysical space with their particular *etha*. For many centuries, pagan Celtic cultures had placed their most basal

beliefs, those regarding paradise, the afterlife, otherworldly beings, and the like firmly in the Atlantic Ocean. Thus, when the Christianization of Ireland began in the early Middle Ages, it was not simply the incursion of a new religion into a pagan island; the invasion needed to include the pagan Atlantic next to it, an ocean filled with mythical matter that had to be subsumed into the new faith's ethos if its dogmas were to succeed.

This entailed the modification and reorientation of pagan legends and myths focusing on the Atlantic, stories that had been transmitted orally and were firmly ingrained in the pagan culture of the Celtic Crescent. Such an effort has a strong analog in the conversion of pagan shrines into Christian churches, a practice that was common throughout Christendom.

Accordingly, Christianity populated pagan Atlantic myths and legends with its own heroes, generating distinctly syncretic versions that would be centaurs if they had material substance. Symbolic spaces like the Atlantic imprint customs, rituals and traditions of the past, so Christian proselytizers were not entering an empty space that could be bought or requisitioned. To me this gave rise to questions of how erstwhile pagans might have experienced the newfangled dogmatic aura that intruded new meaning into their deep-rooted symbolic space, imposing an unfamiliar functionality onto protagonists and events.

It is to be assumed from my observations in this work that the Atlantic, as symbolic space, is considered an "otherworld." Medieval descriptions of mythical places in the Atlantic betray ancient existential yearnings and angst; such feelings can only be portrayed through the depiction of spaces that lie beyond the confines of common human experience and understanding. Thus, the "otherworld" is the product of subjective solutions to a spiritual bewilderment for which there are no commonsense answers. These solutions attend the primaevial need to reach a place that validates human intellection regarding transcendence.

Such places have been produced by the human imagination, most likely, ever since we came down from the trees and started being conscious of our feelings, thoughts and perception, wondering why we are here, why we *are* and why we die. We began by fashioning deities that were associated with places that were unique or at the very least infrequent, such as an unusually large tree, a remarkably tall mountain, a cave that stretched far into the womb of the life-giving ground and places with life-sustaining water like a spring or a lake. These were places where interaction with supernatural beings was believed to be possible; they were removed from commonplace reality (temple, from the Latin *templum*, has the same root as the Greek τέμενος, which means detached or separated space), they were "other" worlds. One can only imagine the overwhelming emotional and notional associations experienced by the first human groups that reached the shores of the Atlantic and found that they could

not sail across to other places as they were accustomed to doing in the Black Sea or the Mediterranean. The Atlantic was believed to be endless, separated in every conceivable way from commonplace reality; the Atlantic was the ultimate “temple,” the quintessential “otherworld.”

As a result of my interest in many of the varied analytical possibilities offered by the Atlantic, this work reflects a myriad of insights and, as a result, its parts are as diverse as the imagination of peoples and cultures that have prospered on the ocean's shores. I think of this as an asset: hopefully, the heterogeneous character of my work will mitigate against the prospect of having its conclusions be applicable only to a specific type of text or context.

For these reasons, *The Atlantic as Mythical Space: An Essay on Medieval Ethea* might seem a euphuistic title for a collection of ideas recorded on various occasions and for different reasons. I will not profess to have had a particularly articulate design in mind when I began to put them together to form this book, and this will be evident in the wide range of topics and diversity of cultures that, as mentioned, are considered in its pages. To illustrate this point: the reader might be a bit unsettled by the way in which I swerve at will from early medieval Ireland to the pre-Hispanic Canary Islands to courtly-love France. But there is one obvious and consequential ligature that runs throughout the different sections of this text, the Atlantic Ocean, a bewildering expanse of mythical substance that for centuries has fueled the imagination of ocean-side peoples. From time immemorial the ocean has been a stage upon which Europe's imaginative genius has represented abstract anxieties and transcendental yearnings. The Atlantic is a great font of myth.

Among the agents that drive the human will to overcome the indifference of an apathetic universe, myth is critically important, and myths with the Atlantic as a preferential stage are especially relevant in pagan and early Christian western Europe. To elaborate on the significance of myth, it should be noted that, especially during the period in question, myth served to forge and propagate assumptions that fashioned the way communities thought about reality. An important stimulus for the activity of myth-creation was the fact that those societies were not disposed to view natural phenomena as the outcome of processes that could be understood through experimentation; consequently, they were not overly anxious about *natural* causality. Thus, in the fabulous realm where the sun sank enigmatically into the waters, prescientific societies fashioned an alternate cosmos where events, beings and places existed in harmony with communal mental structures whose most eloquent representative is the druid. In that contrived watery domain, these societies' angels and monsters were able to materialize with wonderful profusion.

The faculty to create worlds that challenge the blind dictates of what we call “reality” has allowed human beings to explain what is essentially unknowable:

the origins of the universe and the reason for our existence in it. Myth, the communal reorganization of a “reality” that is otherwise chaotic and meaningless, is therefore an instinctual creation that characterizes our will to *be* purposefully and, moreover, exposes our need to overcome the distressing suspicion that we are here accidentally. For this reorganization, intended to reconstruct reality in accordance with the designs of human will, the Atlantic has been a privileged environment.

But the need to reorganize the world in which we seem fortuitously inserted is not limited to the physical reality of *this* world. There is at the end of life an inexplicable emptiness the thought of which causes overwhelming dread, an angst that must be overcome if human beings are to live in harmony with their environment. The process to overcome begins with filling that void with anthropocentric concepts such as that of a “created” world, one where life has a purpose and leads to another, more significant existence. Such concepts demand substantiation, and lacking a scientific underpinning to their constructs, premodern societies used language to produce alternate realities that populated the emptiness with places and beings that linked the otherworld with the world of the living. The undefinable was thus defined in concert with the needs of the individual and the community.

Any activity geared towards the creation of an alternate reality, one more in tune with human spiritual needs, must be metaphysical, intimately connected with antithetic or “sacred” spaces. For ancient and medieval communities, the Atlantic, site of the Isles of the Blest, the Celtic Otherworld, the Green Isle, Hy-Brasil, the White Island of Atala, the Great Isle of the Solstice and sundry other mythical/sacred places, has been habitually endowed with compelling metaphysical traits and has acted as an important agent in the genesis and evolution of spiritual assumptions. Here it is important to note that metaphysical thought emerges from the depths of human consciousness, promotes the formation of communal mental objects and fuels the evolution of the traits that distinguish human beings from the rest of creation. Evidently, when a significant part of this foundational activity is enacted in a particular geographical space, the importance of that space for the development of normative structures of cognition and social cohesion cannot be understated.

In view of the scopic nature of the subject, and to structure my arguments in a reasonably coherent manner, I offer the premises for my assertions regarding myth and its metaphysical and social scope in this “Introduction” and in the “Portolan.” As a reminder, portolan charts were “characterized by rhumb lines, lines that radiate from the center in the direction of wind or compass points and that were used by pilots to lay courses from one harbor to another. The charts were usually drawn on vellum and embellished with a frame and other decorations” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “Portolan”). Understanding the

special place that metaphor has in medieval thought, I use the portolan metaphor as an aesthetic expedient, but also because I trust that the section's content, acting as a portolan, will give an initial sense of direction to the reader.

Consistent with the nautical trope, the rest of the book is divided into four major chapters named after the four cardinal points. Given that our mythological heroes' general direction of travel will almost always be due West, this nomenclature denotes the general environment of the myth's source. Consequently, "North" deals with Atlantic myths originating around Scotland and Scandinavia; "South" is devoted to the Iberian Peninsula, the Canary Islands and Africa's Atlantic coast; "East" embarks upon an analysis of myths regarding the Atlantic from biblical lands and the eastern Mediterranean in general, and "West," the bulkiest chapter for obvious reasons, analyzes Irish and Brittonic myths.

I can think of no period in the history of human cultures that does not offer distinct signs of the constitutive impact of myth in the formation of communal mental structures. For the ancient and medieval inhabitants of the western shores of Europe, the experience of living in close proximity to the Great Mystery, that immeasurable *alia natura*, generated certain social and cultural attitudes that were shaped by that specific environmental circumstance, one that clearly accounts for many of their teleological narratives and for the distinguishing features of their mythical worlds.

Even while laying in a different course in the analysis of the medieval Atlantic, I am guided by the insights of researchers like d'Arbois de Jubainville, Patch, Eliade, Campbell, Lavezzo, and Byrne, whose influential work has guided the way for future studies. I am confident that the analysis of the function and features of medieval Atlantic myths, despite the diverse social and cultural contexts, will pull all the different sections of this book in the same thematic direction, will make them coalesce in chorus around the theme of the Atlantic as mythical space, and will give this text whatever rational symmetry it may have.

Alfonso J. García-Osuna, Hofstra University, May 23, 2022.

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