

# From the Graeco–Roman Underworld to the Celtic Otherworld: The Cultural Translation of a Pagan Deity

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Medieval narratives and literary texts are outfitted with text-worlds inhabited by figures who are as diverse and complex as they are numerous in number. Although many of these figures represent unique artistic creations, some constitute prototypes with echoes in other literary and textual cultures. Although the narrative trajectories of medieval texts demarcate intended (or unintended) destinations for its cast of characters, it is important to note that the mere act of appearance within the narrative text-world is *itself* the destination for many of these figures, a destination that is often reached via a circuitous cultural peregrination. As reflections of cultural attitudes which are dynamic, protean, and in a state of constant flux, literary figures are effervescent and continuously adapting to contextual specificities. But although discrete literary cultures have their own defining and unique characteristics, they do not exist in a vacuum, hermetically sealed off from developments in religious, political, and sociocultural life. On the contrary, textual cultures and literary figures often demonstrate patterns of continuity (albeit in different forms) as the cultural systems of which they are a part interact with each other. Although such intercultural communication is typically viewed as a necessary by-product of an increasingly globalised world, it is not an invention of the modern age. Medieval cultures have all too frequently been negatively viewed as insular, monolithic systems frozen in time as fossilised blocs, which constitutes a reductive and totalising approach that overlooks how the social, political, literary, and religious systems of the Middle Ages actively mingled with each other in many contexts. It is the aim of this paper to chart the influence of a specific figure from Graeco-Roman mythology—the pagan god of the Underworld—on the figure of Midir, the ruler of the elfmounds of Brí Léith in the medieval Irish saga *Tochmarc Étaíne* (*The Wooing of Étaín*) via a two-pronged process of literary-textual and cultural transmission. Such transmission, which straddled pathways of both geospatial and chronological transport via networks of

trade and political conquest, can be more accurately described as a process of ‘cultural translation,’ and it is to an exploration of this translatory paradigm that this paper is dedicated.

The Greeks, broadly speaking, distinguished between two categories of gods—the chthonians (Gr. *chthon* = earth) who dwelled on earth and the ouranians (Gr. *ouranos* = heaven) who belonged to the bright regions of the upper air beyond the clouds and whose abode was at the summit of Mount Olympus. The *chthonioi* were spirits who lived in the dark recesses of the earth.<sup>1</sup> The ouranic gods usually trafficked with the living whereas the chthonians had jurisdiction over the dead. The earth was both the bearer of life (the realm of fertility and germination) as well as the receptacle of death (the place of interment of the dead). By virtue of this dual character of their abode, the chthonic gods also performed a double function—they ensured the fertility of the land and acted as guardians of the souls of the dead.<sup>2</sup> The name Hades, typically used to denote the Underworld of Greek religious imagination, was also applied to the lord of the *chthonioi*, thereby indicating that there was often no distinction made between the god and his dwelling-place.<sup>3</sup> As the deity tasked with the lordship of death, a state both unknowable by virtue of the mystery and uncertainty surrounding it, as well as terrifying by virtue of its finality, Hades was seemingly feared more than he was worshipped. Reluctant to risk disrespecting a god wielding such dreadful power, the Greeks used the euphemism *Plouton*—the Rich One—to refer to Hades, preferring through this attribution to ascribe greater importance to his role as a spirit of the earth’s fertility rather than to his function as the god of the dead.<sup>4</sup> His task was to maintain the line of demarcation drawn between life and death, ensuring that the living did not stray into the land of the dead and the dead did not escape back into the world of the living. In tandem with socio-political and historical changes which necessarily shape cultural evolution and consequently literary representation, the Greek conception of the Underworld evolved from a location situated across the ocean in the earliest recorded account

1 Ken Dowden, ‘Olympian Gods, Olympian Pantheon’, in *A Companion to Greek Religion*, ed. by Daniel Ogden (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 41–55 (p. 47).

2 D. Felton, ‘The Dead’, in *A Companion to Greek Religion*, ed. by Ogden, pp. 86–99 (p. 90).

3 Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 294. For a detailed account of the various ways in which Hades—both the god as well as the location—was conceived by the Greeks, see Robert Garland, *The Greek Way of Death* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 48–76.

4 Felton, ‘The Dead’, pp. 90–91.

(as evoked in Homer's *Odyssey*) to the gloomy underground portals which had become a stock feature of literary descriptions of the Underworld by the fifth century BCE.<sup>5</sup> This idea of a god dwelling in the nether regions of the earth and associated with both fertility and death was borrowed by the Romans from Hellenic mythology, although in later representations his position as a fertility god declined in importance whereas his lordship of the dead gained precedence.<sup>6</sup>

Moving away from mainland Europe to the British Isles, a different body of mythology is encountered, formed by the cultural efforts of a different set of peoples and shaped under different socio-religious and historical circumstances. The appellation 'Celtic' is usually used to refer to the inhabitants of this part of the world as well as their practices and beliefs, although the proper application of the term is linguistic rather than sociological.<sup>7</sup> Classical sources reported how the civilisations of Greece and Rome encountered the *Keltoi* (or the *Galli*, as the Romans called them) within the context of political and territorial expansion.<sup>8</sup> The Hellenic world also interacted with the Celts through the medium of trade, particularly through the city of Massalia (present-day Marseille) which, by virtue of its geographical position and status as trading intermediary, was

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5 Felton, 'The Dead', p. 92.

6 Deities, cults, and religious ideas filtered into Rome from the Hellenic world between the third and sixth centuries BCE through the influence of the Etruscans, Roman commercial relations with Cumæ, and the Pyrrhic War, among other factors. Indeed, by 249 BCE, during the period of the First Punic War, Pluto and Persephone had been introduced into Rome as the deities Dis and Proserpina. See Jesse Benedict Carter, *The Religious Life of Ancient Rome: A Study in the Development of Religious Consciousness from the Foundation of the City until the Death of Gregory the Great* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University Press of the Pacific, 2001), pp. 39–43.

7 The area extends from Ireland and Spain in the west and Scotland in the north to the Czech Republic in the east and northern Italy in the south, with forays beyond Europe into Asia Minor. See Miranda J. Green, 'Introduction: Who were the Celts?' in *The Celtic World*, ed. by Miranda J. Green (Oxford: Routledge, 1995), pp. 3–7. The idea of a common Celtic or insular heritage has been called into question by scholars, especially since although the speakers of the Celtic languages certainly shared common elements of belief, cultural features were also shared with non-Celtic speakers in north-western Europe. Although I use the terms 'Celt' and 'Celtic' in keeping with standard scholarly practice, perhaps, as Patrick Sims-Williams points out, 'Indo-European' or 'indigenous' would be a more appropriate umbrella term. See Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 4–8.

8 For a concise account of early Greek and Roman interactions with the Celts, see David Rankin, 'The Celts through Classical Eyes', in *The Celtic World*, ed. by Green, pp. 21–33. For a more detailed account of the precise references to the Celts in classical literature, see Rankin, *Celts and the Classical World* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 1–33.

influenced by a blend of Hellenic, Roman, and Celtic cultural characteristics.<sup>9</sup> Celtic contacts with the Roman world are, however, of greater cultural significance in view of the pervasiveness of Latin influence on the Celts, a process which has ubiquitously come to be known as ‘romanization.’ Visible traces of this Romano-Celtic interaction, found not only in literature and art but also in the emergence during the third and second centuries BCE of urban centres stretching from southern Gaul to northern Britain, have led Barry C. Burnham to note that ‘interaction with the Roman world, directly or indirectly, before the conquest, via diplomacy and trade, provided a vital infrastructure upon which romanization could be built.’<sup>10</sup> Through trade and military routes, the Celtic world thus came into contact with Greece and Rome, an interaction which was not simply economic and political, but also social and religious. This cultural intermingling had a decisive impact on the religious beliefs of the Celts which began to incorporate elements of Graeco-Roman paganism.

### *Cultural Translation between Religious Systems*

Current scholarship seems to indicate that as the Celtic and Graeco-Roman worlds encountered each other through martial and mercantile contacts, the native faith was modified as new beliefs were exchanged and assimilated to the old religion.<sup>11</sup> This modification was less of a replace-

9 Rankin, *Celts and the Classical World*, p. 42.

10 Barry C. Burnham, ‘Celts and Romans: Towards a Romano-Celtic society’, in *The Celtic World*, ed. by Green, pp. 121–41 (p. 129).

11 At this point, it is important to bear in mind that almost all of our knowledge about the gods of the Iron Age peoples has been derived from the writings of the Romans and is therefore necessarily one-dimensional. This strategy of *interpretatio Romana*—the Roman cultural project of identifying foreign or unknown gods with those of Greece and Rome—was typically practised by high-ranking members of the Roman army and civil administration. The Celtic world’s encounter with Rome did not happen on an equal footing. The Celtic peoples were politically subjugated by a militarily superior force, and the resultant amalgamation of religious ideas occurred within a matrix of unequal power relations. The reshaping of indigenous divinities was thus a ‘controlling strategy’, influenced as much by reasons of political expediency as it was by the forcible erasure of cultural difference exercised by a dominating power upon a colonised nation. Archaeological sources too are not entirely reliable because the majority of the epigraphic and iconographic evidence dates from the Romano-Celtic rather than the free Celtic (that is, pre-Roman) period. These facts should not, however, detract us from making observations about Celtic religion; much valuable information can still be obtained bearing in mind the proviso that the evidence available is both incidental and subjective. For a more detailed discussion, see

ment than a fusion, as parallels and congruencies were noticed between the different strands of socio-religious and cultural practice. In the case of the British Isles, though it is difficult to accurately determine the date of arrival of the Celts, archaeological evidence seems to suggest the presence of a Celtic population in the island by the third century BCE.<sup>12</sup>

However, archaeological evidence can at best offer only indirect evidence to endorse the possibility of the figure of Dis/Pluto having travelled from the Graeco-Roman to the Celtic worlds. Where tangible and empirically verifiable evidence is not forthcoming, a helpful metaphor for the transference of ideas across spatial, temporal, geopolitical, and cultural boundaries can be found in the concept of translation, especially in the way the term is employed in the fields of ethnography and social anthropology. In its simplest, most obvious sense, the primary meaning of the term 'translation' is linguistic where it usually refers to the act of mediating between different language systems by an individual interlocutor (or groups of interlocutors, called translators) or an institution for the purpose of exchanging ideas and mutual comprehension.<sup>13</sup> However, the recent critical turn in the fields of both linguistic and literary theory has expanded the semantic range of the term to include within its remit not only the question of language but also a variety of other applications. In fact, translation is now properly viewed as a complex, translangual act of communication tasked with the transcoding of cultural material.<sup>14</sup> Etymologically, the word 'translation' means 'carried from one place to another,' a kind of border-crossing that does not necessarily have to be

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Jane Webster, 'A Dirty Window on the Iron Age? Recent Developments in the Archaeology of Pre-Roman Celtic Religion', in *Understanding Celtic Religion: Revisiting the Pagan Past*, ed. by Katja Ritari and Alexandra Bergholm (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2015), pp. 121–54.

12 Rankin, *Celts and the Classical World*, p. 12.

13 Scholarship on translation studies is vast. For accessible overviews of the field, see Susan Bassnett, *Translation Studies*, 3rd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), Jeremy Munday, *Introducing Translation Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), and Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2008). Perhaps the most famous theorisation of the linguistic bases of translation was offered by Roman Jakobson who distinguished between three types of translation: interlingual (or translation proper), intralingual (or rewording), and intersemiotic (or transmutation). See Jakobson, 'On Linguistic Aspects of Translation', in *On Translation*, ed. by R. A. Brower (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), pp. 232–39.

14 Douglas Howland, 'The Predicament of Ideas in Culture: Translation and Historiography', *History and Theory*, 42 (2003), 45–60 (pp. 45–6).

limited to the linguistic field, but one which can transcend the barriers erected by the passage of time, spatial constructs, as well as sociocultural systems. Viewed in this way, a work can be said to be ‘translated’ when it has been displaced, transported, or carried across contexts, even when it is read in its original language by someone who belongs to another country or another culture and follows another discipline.<sup>15</sup>

A particular subset of this broader domain of translation is the concept of ‘cultural translation,’ a term which has especial currency in the fields of ethnography and social anthropology. Narrowly defined, cultural translation (as opposed to ‘linguistic’ or ‘grammatical’ translation) refers to those practices of literary translation that mediate cultural difference, convey extensive cultural background, or seek to represent another culture via the act of translation. More generally, however, cultural translation can be simply defined as a translation between discrete cultural contexts.<sup>16</sup> One of the most potent workings of such cross-cultural translation occurs in the domain of religion and within the context of the translatability or carrying over of gods and deities between different religious systems.<sup>17</sup> As one of the most important and characteristic components of culture, when different socio-cultural systems encounter one another in contexts which can range from commercial and economic to political and military, there is usually a concomitant impact on the religious beliefs of both cultures. This kind of religiously-orientated cultural translation crucially involves the notion of ‘translatability,’ generally defined as involving specific equations or identifications of deities across cultures and the larger recognition of the deities of other cultures in connection to one’s own pantheon of divinities.<sup>18</sup>

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15 J. Hillis Miller, ‘Border Crossings, Translating Theory: Ruth’, in *The Translatability of Cultures: Figurations of the Space Between*, ed. by Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 207–23 (p. 207).

16 See the entry on ‘cultural translation’ in the *Routledge Encyclopedia on Translation Studies*, 2nd edn, ed. by Mona Baker and Gabriela Saldanha (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 67–70.

17 For an overview of different arguments tackling the question of the interpenetration of religion and translation, see the essays contained in *Translating Religion*, ed. by Anita Houck and Mary Doak (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013).

18 Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), p. 6. A broader definition of the term is offered by Wolfgang Iser who views translatability as ‘an umbrella concept that allows us to inspect the interpenetration of different cultures and intracultural levels without necessarily organizing these encounters. Furthermore, translatability covers all kinds of translation, as it refers to a range of conditions that are only selectively realized in any one specific translation. The complete set of conditions comprised by this concept can never be brought to

The centrality of religion as a promoter of inter-cultural translatability has been intensively studied by Jan Assmann who has noted the practice of equating comparable deities across cultures, particularly within the context of the religious systems of the Ancient Near East.<sup>19</sup> Hailing this inter-religious translatability as one of ‘the major cultural achievements of the ancient world,’ Assmann observes how, despite external differences between ancient cultures—differences of language, nomenclature, iconography, ritual, and so on—there were some fundamental similarities in their formulations of divinities as well as elements of religious belief. According to Assmann, this essential commonality makes religion a powerful counterfoil to the process of ‘pseudo-speciation.’ Borrowing the term from the psychologist Erik H. Erikson who used it to refer to the formation of artificial sub-groups within the same biological species, Assmann applies ‘pseudo-speciation’ to denote the process of cultural differentiation in the human world. Although the creation of a unique cultural identity—the usual outcome of cultural pseudo-speciation—is not necessarily a bad thing, at its most harmful extreme it can result in absolute strangeness, isolation, avoidance, otherisation, and even abomination.<sup>20</sup> However, such effects can be mitigated by factors promoting intercultural communication and translation. One such factor was the establishment of political and commercial relations between cultures through trade and foreign policy. According to Assmann, cross-religious translation (which included the practice of translating foreign pantheons) as a corrective to cultural pseudo-speciation must be regarded within the context of this general emergence of a common world with integrated networks of commercial, political, and cultural contact.<sup>21</sup>

The transference of myths, ideas about death, afterlife, burial practice and the jurisdiction of the gods, and figures (in particular, the pagan god of the Underworld) from the Graeco-Roman to the Celtic world can be better understood with the application of translation theory, both the concept of cultural translation as well as, more specifically, cultural trans-

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bear in any actual translation, but it will enable us to discern which conditions govern the latter. Thus translatability opens up awareness of what each translation privileges and of the extent to which assumed references shape the positions that are transposed into one another.’ See Iser, ‘Coda to the Discussion’, in *The Translatability of Cultures*, ed. by Budick and Iser, pp. 294–302 (p. 295).

19 Jan Assmann, ‘Translating Gods: Religion as a Factor of Cultural (Un)Translatability’, in *The Translatability of Cultures*, ed. by Budick and Iser, pp. 25–36.

20 Assmann, ‘Translating Gods’, p. 27.

21 Assmann, ‘Translating Gods’, p. 28.

latability in the sphere of religion. As an instance of cultural translation, the Graeco-Roman Dis/Pluto may be said to have been *translated* into the Celtic world where it subsequently appeared in textual culture in a slightly modified form. This kind of divine translatability also occurred within the context of mercantile contact (trade relations between the Celts and Greeks) and political arbitration (the Celtic world was militarily subjugated by the Romans), as part of a larger cross-cultural transaction between distinct political, economic, and socio-religious systems in which Greek language and Hellenic heritage played a central part. Although translatability of divinities was not a unique achievement of the Graeco-Roman world, having existed at least as early as the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age, in the Graeco-Roman period translatability was built into the very fabric of cultural discourse, appearing in multilingual texts and treatises, blessings and curses, historiographical writing, as well as philosophical tracts. Graeco-Roman translatability saw the passage from the implicit interpretation of deities characteristic of earlier periods to the explicit translation of divinities in which older, indigenous information about deities was correlated with newer methods of interpretation.<sup>22</sup> This type of Graeco-Roman translatability was transferred on to the Celtic world when the two cultures encountered each other within commercial and political networks via a form of cultural translation that arranged itself according to assimilationist principles. This inter-religious cultural translation was at once horizontal—taking place across contemporaneous cultures—as well as vertical—having taken place through time—and thereby occupies the distinction of being simultaneously synchronic and diachronic in character.<sup>23</sup> However, in tracing the translation of the Dis/Pluto figure from the Graeco-Roman to the Celtic world, it must be remembered that this movement was not a one-time trade-off isolated at a particular point in time, but a sustained process of chronological transport, one which perhaps

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22 One such method was the practice of euhemerism (associated with the name of the fourth-century figure Euhemerus of Messene) which viewed deities of traditional mythology as human beings accorded divine honour after their deaths because of their achievements or benefactions to humanity.

23 Smith, *God in Translation*, pp. 272–73. Translation along lines both vertical and horizontal has also been discussed by Karlheinz Stierle in the context of the etymological evolution of the word ‘translation’ itself, from *transfere/translatio* in the Middle Ages to its various linguistic ramifications in the Romance languages in the early modern period (distinction between *translation/traduction* and *traslazione/traduzione* in French and Italian respectively). See Stierle, ‘Translatio Studii and Renaissance: From Vertical to Horizontal Translation’, in *The Translatability of Cultures*, ed. by Budick and Iser, pp. 55–67.

most significantly witnessed the radical transformation of the dominant religious system from paganism to Christianity. Rome's transition from polytheism to monotheism and the gradual emergence of Christianity as the dominant religious system, particularly in the wake of the efforts of Constantine (the Edict of Milan of 313 CE decriminalising Christian worship and the separation of the Western Roman Church from the Eastern Orthodox Church after 380 CE), had far-reaching effects on all subsequent cultural translatability. Cultural translation between the Graeco-Roman and the Celtic world, which had formerly been both assimilatory (the translation of Celtic divinities with the aid of Roman cultural apparatus in view of Rome's military dominance over the Celts) as well as mutual (reciprocal relations between Greece and the Celtic world in the context of cross-national commerce) in nature, began to assume the form of cosmotheistic monotheism (translation of the gods not only into each other but also into a third, overarching Biblical register) with the introduction and consolidation of Christianity.<sup>24</sup> This process can be fruitfully illustrated with the example of Ireland.

At this point, it is important to bear in mind that Ireland constituted a somewhat distinct linguistic and socio-religious subset of the British Isles. The idea of Ireland as 'Celtic' is a relatively recent phenomenon and can be traced back to 'sixteenth and seventeenth-century perceptions of the original affinity between the Gaelic and Brittonic languages on the one hand and, on the other, of the linguistic and cultural similarities between the early Britons and the Continental peoples known to the ancient world as Celts.'<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Ireland occupies the unique position of never having been politically subjugated by the Romans. There has, however, been a tendency to exaggerate the extent to which Ireland was regarded as an isolated and discrete cultural unit, and the singularity of the Irish literary tradition has sometimes been overemphasised. Despite its political independence, the country did come into contact with Rome directly through the proselytising efforts of the missionaries Patrick and Palladius in the early fifth century CE and indirectly by means of trade through the intermediation of Britain as its closest neighbour.<sup>26</sup> Although there is scant

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24 This classification of the three main types of religiously-orientated cultural translation—syncretistic translation or cosmotheistic monotheism, assimilatory or competitive translation, and mutual translation—is Assmann's. See Assmann, 'Translating Gods', pp. 34–6.

25 Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence*, p. 4.

26 For details about the Irish acquisition of *romanitas* supported by such archaeological evidence as the discovery of votive offerings, amphorae, vessels, and numismatic remains,

evidence of the survival of manuscripts, it is reasonable to conjecture that texts from the continent reached Ireland through routes both commercial and ecclesiastical, a transmission which undoubtedly encouraged the development of (among other kinds) classical learning on the island.<sup>27</sup> Irish scholars' engagement with classical material, although initially limited, was to receive an unprecedented boost from the ninth century onwards, a development encouraged both by the emergent literary practice of saga-writing as well as by the attempt on the part of authors to construct an Irish national lineage which would parallel the illustrious genealogies of the classical Greeks and Romans. With an upsurge in the composition of sagas and vernacular historiographies and mythographies on Irish topics, scholars were motivated to try their hand at adapting foreign material.<sup>28</sup> The adaptation of Greek and Latin classics into narratives written in Middle Irish was also an attempt to configure Irish identity politics along literary and genealogical lines, a plurilinguistic project which itself mirrored the cultural ambitions of the Romans several centuries earlier to mould their self-image in the fashion of Hellenic Greece.<sup>29</sup> Irish engagement with classical literary tradition found its embodiment in textual culture through a process that was, however, more than just a facile exercise in translation. Irish scholars produced a series of narrative texts which retold stories from Graeco-Roman antiquity in vernacular Irish prose through a process of

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see Jonathan M. Wooding, 'Trade as a factor in the transmission of texts between Ireland and the continent in the sixth and seventh centuries', in *Ireland and Europe in the early Middle Ages: texts and transmission*, ed. by Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), pp. 14–25 and Edel Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the medieval world, AD400–1000: Landscape, kingship and religion* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014), pp. 152–156.

27 On the unavailability of medieval Irish manuscripts of classical authors acting as negative evidence of classical influence, Brent Miles adds the helpful rejoinder that the 'absence of surviving medieval Irish manuscripts of classical authors says nothing about the deficiencies of medieval Irish libraries. Their absence speaks only of the deficiencies of our own.' See Miles, *Heroic Saga and Classical Epic in Medieval Ireland* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), pp. 21–22. Medieval engagement (particularly in England) with classical learning is also the subject of the essays gathered in *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature: Volume I (800–1558)*, ed. by Rita Copeland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), to which the reader is referred.

28 Ralph O'Connor, 'Irish Narrative Literature and the Classical Tradition, 900–1300', in *Classical Literature and Learning in Medieval Irish Narrative*, ed. by Ralph O'Connor (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014), pp. 1–22 (p. 9).

29 Pádraic Moran, 'Greek Dialectology and the Irish Origin Story', in *Early Medieval Ireland and Europe: Chronology, Contacts, Scholarship*, ed. by Pádraic Moran and Immo Warntjes (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), pp. 481–512 (pp. 508–509).

creative adaptation that remoulded Latin epics and legendary histories in the light of their sustained knowledge and awareness of the commentary and glossatorial tradition of the scholastic curriculum. Thus, while it is certainly true that the existence of the Gaelic vernacular as well as the country's political independence from Rome gave Ireland a certain distinctiveness of status, it is also true that the religious, cultural, and literary practices of the Irish were influenced by developments elsewhere on the continent. The combination of ecclesiastical and secular learning (especially the knowledge of classical texts and authors) in Irish literary centres testifies to the existence of a shared sociocultural tradition which variously imbibed the tenets of Graeco-Roman paganism, indigenous mythology, and insular Christianity. This common cultural domain functioned as the conduit through which ideas (and, by extension, figures such as Dis/Pluto) were translated into the literary milieu of the British Isles.

### *The Textuality of Ireland's Pagan Past*

Native Irish divinities were akin to localised spirits associated with specific places, peoples, and aspects of the natural world.<sup>30</sup> The earliest *written* traces of the pagan divinities of Ireland date from around the beginning of the eighth century.<sup>31</sup> Scriptural dispensation mandated that divinity in the Biblical sense could not be ascribed to the pagan gods; in order to ensure their survival in a Christian world, pagan deities had to be invested with new kinds of significance through such strategies as association with the ideology of kingship or with native systems of knowledge. This kind of secular retrofitting often produced properties which were mutually exclusive and incompatible—hence the bewildering complexity in the literary representation of the Irish gods.<sup>32</sup> Despite the confusing variety

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30 My discussion of the Irish divine and mythological canon draws heavily upon Mark Williams' examination of the subject in *Ireland's Immortals: A History of the Gods of Irish Myth* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. 3–71.

31 For a fuller discussion of the early Irish literary scene, see Elva Johnston, *Literacy and Identity in Early Medieval Ireland* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2013).

32 Williams offers the example of Manannán mac Lir in *Immram Brain (The Voyage of Bran)*, a figure whose representation evoked multiple ontological registers. As the god of the sea, Manannán is reminiscent of pagan water deities, and the description of his first appearance seems to contain echoes of the introduction of the Roman sea-god Neptune at the beginning of Virgil's *Aeneid*. However, Manannán is also made to discuss such decidedly Christian matters as the Fall of Man and the Incarnation, and his superior knowledge is interpreted by Williams as an instance of wish-fulfilment by clerical men of learning.

in characterisation, what united these figures was their abode or dwelling place—the *síde* or hollow hills. These supernatural residences were unique to Irish paganism and typically denoted a hill, a megalithic tumulus, or a pre-Celtic grave-hill.<sup>33</sup> Their inhabitants resembled human beings but were superior to humanity—not only were they more beautiful, but they also possessed magical powers and could usually outlive ordinary mortals; indeed, they were frequently immortal. *Síd*-mounds were usually synonymous with the Otherworld (or multiple otherworlds) which stood for an intermittently accessible parallel dimension in the Irish imagination.<sup>34</sup> Viewed as the remnants of a primordial past, *síd*-mounds were believed to represent a spiritual connection to the land, a kind of ancestral belonging which was both perpetual and immanent, and which thus became the locus of ritual practice as well as the site of veneration of the spirits of the departed.<sup>35</sup> For Christian authors, such *síd*-mounds, together with their human-like residents, their associations with a collective memory that was simultaneously primeval and regional, as well as their ritual significance as loci of ancestor worship and burial, offered fertile ground for utilisation as the dwelling-place of non-Christian divinities without running the risk of explicitly describing them as gods. In early literary productions, these liminal figures—supernatural entities who were neither entirely human nor wholly divine—frequently appeared within the context of Christian allegory. With the passage of time, however, the nature of literary composition changed, bringing with it changes in the portrayal of pagan divinities. The years which initially followed the island's conversion to Christianity were marked by a theological anxiety whereby the indigenous deities of Ireland's pagan past needed to be accommodated within a new radically different religious order. In the realm of literature, this anxiety channelled itself into the production of allegorical texts with a distinctively monastic flavour. Once the situation had stabilised and Ireland had begun to settle into a newly configured religious, cultural, economic, and political system, these anxieties largely dissipated. As social conditions changed, so too did

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For a fuller discussion of Manannán in this text and the multiple modes of signification embodied by the figure, see Williams, *Ireland's Immortals*, pp. 56–68.

33 Williams, *Ireland's Immortals*, p. 30.

34 The *síd* was at once the Otherworld, its inhabitants, as well as the earthly portals which led to such spaces. The range of signification of the term '*síd*' is reminiscent of Hades which denoted both the underworld deity as well as his kingdom in Greek religious imagination.

35 Tok Thompson, 'Hosting the Dead: Thanatopic Aspects of the Irish Sidhe', in *Communicating with the Spirits*, ed. by Gábor Klaniczay and Éva Pócs (Budapest & New York: Central European University Press, 2005), pp. 193–203 (p. 200).

the motivations behind literary endeavours, a transformation which was mirrored in the movement from allegorical composition to saga-writing. Politically, as Ireland encountered the Vikings and the Normans (the late eighth and the late twelfth centuries mark the initiatory points for the Viking raids and the Norman incursions respectively), a need was felt to champion indigenous history and native Irish legacy against the genealogical credentials of the outsiders. The literary form of the saga furnished the ideal training ground to rehearse such nationalist aims. Whereas the attitude of literary authors towards the pagan gods elsewhere in Europe frequently vacillated between viewing them either as merciful angels sent before the coming of Christianity to announce the advent of a new religious order, as half-fallen angels who by failing to take sides in the rebellion of Satan against God were stuck in a sort of limbo, or as diabolical forces deserving of outright condemnation, in Ireland the dominant strategy seems to have been one of euhemerism by which the ancient gods were reclaimed either as unfallen human beings or as neutral angels.<sup>36</sup> Since the practice of construing gods as mortal men who had been elevated to divinity by virtue of their renown had no scriptural warrant whatsoever, it is also an eloquent testimony to the creative powers and imaginative potential of medieval Irish saga-writers.

The conception and characterisation of the figure of Midir in *Tochmarc Étaíne*, an Old Irish saga conjectured to have been composed sometime around the seventh or eighth century, seems to hark back to the mythology and insular folklore of the Celtic lands.<sup>37</sup> Occupying an ontologically interstitial space where he is both supernatural being and euhemerised hero, the character of Midir shows the influence of both indigenous Celtic deities as well as their counterparts in Graeco-Roman mythology. Generally regarded as belonging to the Mythological Cycle of tales, *Tochmarc Étaíne* is divided into three sub-tales, all of which involve the figure of Midir, lord of the *síd*-mounds of Brí Léith.<sup>38</sup> The first sub-tale re-

<sup>36</sup> Williams, *Ireland's Immortals*, pp. 78–83. For a detailed, albeit dated, discussion of the practice of euhemerism, see John Daniel Cooke, 'Euhemerism: A Mediaeval Interpretation of Classical Paganism', *Speculum*, 2 (1927), 396–410.

<sup>37</sup> The textual history of *Tochmarc Étaíne* is enormously complicated, with different manuscripts preserving different sections of the story. For an account of the tale's manuscript history, see Osborn Bergin and R. I. Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', *Ériu*, 12 (1938), 137–141 and for a brief summary, see T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'Tochmarc Étaíne: a literal interpretation', in *Ogma: Essays in Celtic Studies in honour of Próinséas Ní Chatháin*, ed. by Michael Richter and Jean-Michel Picard (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), pp. 165–181 (pp. 165–166).

<sup>38</sup> Scholars have tended to divide the Irish sagas into four categories—the Ulster, Feni-

lates how Midir comes to foster Aengus, the illegitimate son of the Dagda, king of the Tuatha Dé, how he uses Aengus to demand the hand of Étaín, daughter of the king of north-eastern Ireland and the fairest lady in the country, in marriage, and how his jealous wife Fuamnach turns Étaín into a pool of water whereupon (through a combination of heat and evaporation) she turns first into a worm and then into a purple fly, is blown off-course by a gust of wind conjured by Fuamnach, and eventually falls into the cup of Étar's wife where she is swallowed and reborn as the daughter of Étar one thousand and twelve years later. The second sub-tale relates how the reborn-Étaín is married to Eochaid Airem, the king of Ireland, how Eochaid's brother Ailill is filled with love-sickness for Étaín who, in order to cure her brother-in-law's sickness, agrees to his (implicit) proposition of sexual union, but how every night she is hoodwinked into interacting with a mysterious man impersonating Ailill. At the conclusion of the second tale, it is revealed that it is none other than Midir who had orchestrated Ailill's love-sickness so that his clandestine meetings with Étaín could be arranged. Introducing himself to Étaín as her husband, he asks her to come away to Brí Léith with him, but she refuses to do so until Eochaid himself gives his permission. The third sub-tale relates how Midir appears to Eochaid at Tara in the guise of a warrior, challenging him to a game of chess. Eochaid is victorious during the first two games and extracts rewards from Midir. However, Midir is victorious the third time and, when asked what he would like as a reward, asks for a kiss from Étaín, which a reluctant Eochaid agrees to grant him a month hence. On the appointed day, Eochaid surrounds Tara with soldiers but Midir appears in the middle of the room, embraces Étaín, and transforms both of them into swans whereupon they escape through the skylight. As Eochaid and his men pursue the company to the elfmounds of Síd Ban Find, Midir appears and asks him to go home, promising him that Étaín would be returned to him on the morrow. The following day, fifty women all in the likeness of Étaín are sent to Eochaid who makes a choice on the basis of the elegance with which they pour a drink. Midir later visits Eochaid and informs him that he had actually chosen his daughter since Étaín had been pregnant with his child when Midir took her away. Eochaid is inflamed with rage and tries to dispose of his illegitimate daughter by throwing her into the

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an, King, and Mythological Cycles—on the basis of content. These divisions are, however, arbitrary and are primarily for the purpose of academic convenience. The Irish authors themselves showed an inclination towards arranging stories thematically, such as 'wooings,' 'cattle raids,' 'violent deaths,' 'elopements,' and so on. See Williams, *Ireland's Immortals*, pp. 73–74, footnote 7.

fireplace, but she is rescued by a kindly herdsman who takes her in and she subsequently grows up to be the mother of Conaire, a legendary Irish king.

The figure of Midir in *Tochmarc Étaíne* is a curious amalgam of opposing personality traits and features—at times his divinity shines through with peculiar force whereas at other times he seems to act with the kind of obsession that usually characterises fallible human characters; his sudden infatuation with and enduring dedication to Étaín are unexplained and appear to have no concrete motivation, as is his rather unjust behaviour towards his own wife Fuamnach; while his devoted, relentless pursuit of Étaín is evidently meant to paint him as a steadfast lover unwavering in his loyalty and affection, he has no qualms about resorting to trickery and deceit to achieve his aims (such as his orchestration of Ailill's love-sickness and hoodwinking Eochaid into choosing his wife incorrectly and thereby committing the crime of incest). Midir is thus represented as a hybrid figure whose personality and temperament combines the fickleness, unpredictability, and dishonesty that is typically characteristic of pagan gods with the kind of constancy, fidelity, and devotion that were regarded as the traits of a good Christian. Such a contradictory picture is fully in keeping with a culture that witnessed its pagan heritage being overlain with a new theological dispensation and deific system.

In the first sub-tale, Midir's friendship with the Dagda—who is explicitly identified as one of the Tuatha Dé—seems to ally him with the race of the god peoples.<sup>39</sup> In the third sub-tale, however, he is described as one who appears in the fashion of a warrior, an account which is more closely reminiscent of stock descriptions of heroes in romances. This identification is further borne out by the fact that for the rest of the story, Midir's primary role is that of loyal lover of Étaín—his divine potential is largely subsumed by the force of his passionate devotion to his earthly consort. A similar observation is made by Mark Williams who notes a shift in the ontological status of the divinities between the first sub-tale and the third. Pointing out the sexual profligacy of the Dagda in the first sub-tale, Williams discerns a parallel between the Dagda and Zeus/Jupiter of the Graeco-Roman pantheon, adding that the two were not only re-

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39 Another episode from the story would seem to reinforce the view that Midir has quasi-divine associations. His escape from Eochaid's palace at Tara with Étaín in the guise of a swan seems to be in keeping with the avian disguises frequently adopted by the *áes síde* or the magical deities of the *síd*-mounds. See Lisa Bitel, 'Secrets of the Síd: The Supernatural in Medieval Irish Texts', in *Fairies, Demons, and Nature Spirits: 'Small Gods' at the Margins of Christendom*, ed. by Michael Ostling (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 79–101 (p. 95).

flexes of the reconstructed Indo-European deity the 'Sky-Father', but that they would also have been known to the Irish through Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*. In particular, a parallel can be discerned between Midir and the Graeco-Roman Dis/Pluto in their shared role as abductors. Whereas the classical Dis/Pluto had kidnapped Proserpina/Persephone, daughter of the goddess of agriculture and fertility Ceres/Demeter, Midir snatches away Étaín, herself interpreted by many scholars as the embodiment of the Sovereignty Goddess who is the totemic safeguard of the land's fertility.<sup>40</sup> By contrast, Midir, who as a friend of the Dagda's is also to be read as a god in the first sub-tale, describes himself as belonging to the tribe of unfallen human beings in the courtship song related in the third sub-tale.<sup>41</sup> This poem, though a possible interpolation, offers a crucial glimpse into Midir's world and is therefore worth quoting in full:

A Bé Find, in ragha lium.  
a tír n-ingnadh í fil rind.  
is barr sobairci folt and.  
is dath snechta for corp slim.

O Bé Find wilt thou come with me  
to the wondrous land wherein harmony is,  
hair is like the crown of the primrose there,  
and the body smooth and white as snow.

Is ann nád bí muí na tuí  
gel ded and dubai a brai.  
is lí sula lín ar sluag.  
is dath síon and gach gruadh.

There, is neither mine nor thine,  
white are teeth there, dark the brows.  
A delight of the eye the number of our hosts,  
every cheek there is of the hue of the foxglove.

Is corcair muighi cach muín.  
is lí sula ugai luin.  
cidh cain deicsiu Muighe Fail.  
anam iar ngnais Muighe Mair.

A gillyflower is each one's neck,  
a delight of the eye are blackbirds' eggs,  
Though fair the prospect of Mag Fáil,  
'tis desolate after frequenting Mag Mair.

Cidh caín lib cóirm Insi Fail,  
is mescu cuirrm Thiri Mair.  
amrai tíre tír asber.  
ni théid óc ann ré sén.

Though choice you deem the ale of Inis Fáil,  
more intoxicating is the ale of Tír Mair.  
A wondrous land is the land I tell of;  
youth departs not there before eld.

Srotha téith millsí tar tír.  
rogha dé midh 7 fín.  
daine delgnaide cen ón.  
combart cen pecadh cen chol.

Warm sweet streams flow through the land,  
the choice of mead and wine.  
Stately folk without blemish,  
conception without sin, without lust.

Atchiam cach for cach leath.  
7 nícon aice nech.

We see everyone on every side,  
and no one seeth us.

40 See Charles-Edwards, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', pp. 172–174 and Williams, *Ireland's Immortals*, p. 88.

41 Williams, *Ireland's Immortals*, pp. 86–87.

teimel imorbuis Adaim  
dodonarcheil ar araim.

It is the darkness of Adam's transgression  
that hath prevented us from being counted.

[A ben día ris mo thuait tind  
is barr oir bias fort chind U.]  
mil fin laith lemnacht la lind  
rod bia lium and, a Bé Find.

[O Woman, if thou come to my proud folk,  
a crown of gold shall be upon thy head]  
honey, wine, ale, fresh milk, and drink,  
thou shalt have with me there, O Bé Find.

There is an unusually strong parallel between Midir's description of Fairyland and Pluto's description of his own domain of the Underworld in Claudian's *De Raptu Proserpinae* (*The Rape of Proserpine*):

“Desine funestis animum, Proserpina, curis  
et vano vexare metu. maiora dabuntur  
sceptra nec indigni taedas patiere mariti.  
ille ego Saturni proles, cui machina rerum  
servit et inmensum tendit per inane potestas.  
amissum ne crede diem: sunt altera nobis  
sidera, sunt orbis alii, lumenque videbis  
purius Elysiumque magis mirabere solem  
cultoresque pios; illic pretiosior aetas,  
aurea progenies habitat, semperque tenemus  
quod superi meruere semel. nec mollia desunt  
prata tibi; Zephyris illic melioribus halant  
perpetui flores, quos nec tua protulit Henna.  
est etiam lucis arbor praedives opacis  
fulgentes viridi ramos curvata metallo:  
haec tibi sacra datur fortunatumque tenebis  
autumnum et fulvis semper ditabere pomis.  
parva loquor: quidquid liquidus complectitur aër,  
quidquid alit tellus, quidquid maris aequora verrunt,  
quod fluvii volvunt, quod nutrivere paludes,  
cuncta tuis pariter cedent animalia regnis  
lunari subiecta globo, qui septimus auras  
ambit et aeternis mortalia separat astris. [...]”

“Cease, Proserpine, to vex thy heart with gloomy cares and causeless fear. A prouder sceptre shall be thine, nor shalt thou face marriage with a husband unworthy of thee. I am that scion of Saturn whose will the framework of the world obeys, whose power stretches through the limitless void. Think not thou hast lost the light of day; other stars are mine and other courses; a purer light shalt thou see and wonder rather at Elysium's sun and blessed habitants. There a richer age, a golden race has its home, and we possess for ever what men win but once. Soft meads shall fail thee not, and ever-blooming flowers, such as thy Henna ne'er produced, breathe to gentler zephyrs. There is,

moreover, a precious tree in the leafy groves whose curving branches gleam with living ore—a tree consecrate to thee. Thou shalt be queen of blessed autumn and ever encircled with golden fruit. Nay more; whatsoever the limpid air embraces, whatever earth nourishes, the salt seas sweep, the rivers roll, or the marsh-lands feed, all living things alike shall yield them to thy sway, all, I say, that dwell beneath the orb of the moon that is the seventh of the planets and in its ethereal journey separates things mortal from the deathless stars. [...]<sup>42</sup>

Both Midir's courtship song as well as Pluto's description of his own realm portray Fairyland/the Underworld as an arboricultural pleasance, expansive domains blessed with nature's bounty as well as holding the promise of unfettered wish-fulfilment. Whereas Pluto's account, clearly intended to both demonstrate his kingly might and largesse and impress Proserpina, presents an altogether more salutary and wholesome picture of the Underworld than was usually found in standard classical depictions, Midir's description of Brí Léith has been interpreted as a liminal paradisiacal space intermittently accessible to human beings which could nonetheless be localisable on a map (Ardagh Hill in Co. Longford).<sup>43</sup> It is difficult to proffer concrete evidence to show that the *De Raptu* was known in medieval Ireland, especially because the reception history of Claudian in the early Middle Ages is hopelessly fragmentary and patchy at best. He was known to such fifth- and sixth-century Gallic poets as Venantius Fortunatus and Sidonius Apollinaris as well as such poets at the court of Charlemagne as Alcuin, Angilbert, and Theodulf, thereby suggesting that his works had some currency within the wider continental literary-historical scene.<sup>44</sup> However, there is some evidence to show that the Pluto-Proserpina story was part of the canon of Irish classical studies by the early eighth century, since the English scholar Aldhelm makes a reference to it in his letter to Wihtfrith where he laments about the cultural preoccupation with pagan mythology that he saw as a characteristic of medieval Irish scholarship.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, the *Sanas Chormaic* (*Cormac's Glossary*), an

42 'De Raptu Proserpinae' ('Rape of Proserpine'), in *Claudian: Volume II*, trans. by Maurice Platnauer, Loeb Classical Library 136 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1922; repr. 1956, 1963, 1972, 1998), pp. 338–41.

43 Williams, *Ireland's Immortals*, p. 89.

44 Alan Cameron, *Claudian: Poetry and Propaganda at the Court of Honorius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 419 and J. B. Hall, ed., *Claudian: De Raptu Proserpinae*, Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries 11 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 67.

45 Miles, *Heroic Saga*, p. 17.

early Irish glossary containing etymologies and explanations of over 1,400 Irish words, contains entries not only on ‘Cera,’ connected to the root KAR and, by extension, to the Latin Ceres, but also ‘Plutad,’ explained as a reference to ‘Pluto, Smith of Hell.’<sup>46</sup> Although neither of these facts can be taken as incontrovertible evidence of the knowledge either of Claudian or of the *De Raptu* in medieval Ireland, it seems reasonable to conjecture that some version of the Pluto-Proserpina story—whether Claudian’s treatment of it or other accounts of Pluto, Proserpina, and the Underworld found in the works of such Latin poets as Virgil, Ovid, and Boethius—would have been known to the Irish, given the circulation of the story elsewhere on the continent, the pervasive intertextuality of the commentary and glossatorial traditions of the monastic schoolroom, as well as the robust influence of classical antiquity upon medieval Irish literature in general and the sagas in particular.

The concept of cultural translation can thus help to explain how a specific religious figure originating within a particular cultural context and given literary embodiment in a distinct linguistic milieu could have travelled across time, space, and radical shifts in religious orientation and social organisation to emerge within a wholly different mythic system and literary-textual culture. Midir in the *Tochmarc Étaíne* can be interpreted as a *translation* of the Graeco-Roman Dis/Pluto, a cross-cultural translation (read through the lens of Jan Assmann’s postulation) triggered by the interaction of two distinct social and religious systems within contexts of economic trade, political conquest, and an evolving literary-textual culture. As a translated figure, Midir is not an exact simulacrum of his pagan forbear but a hybrid figure who resembles certain features of his classical counterpart while simultaneously anticipating a unique literary creation of the Middle Ages. Viewed in this way, Midir becomes a ‘tilting’ or ‘reversible’ image, a figure capable of suggesting multiple perspectives not so much because of changes in formal constitution, but because of differences in audience and socio-cultural context.<sup>47</sup> This inter-cultural migration

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46 *Sanas Chormaic (Cormac’s Glossary)*, trans. by John O’Donovan, ed. by Whitley Stokes (Calcutta: O. T. Cutter, 1868), p. 47 (‘Cera’) and p. 139 (‘Plutad’).

47 The term ‘tilting’ or ‘reversible’ image is that of Moshe Barasch. In a discussion of religious syncretism as evidenced in iconographic representation, Barasch points out how a particular image or sculpture, its shape unchanged or only slightly modified, could be viewed in different ways by different cultures. A figure, viewed in a certain way by one religious culture, will be seen through an entirely different set of customs, practices, and traditions by the adherents of a different religion, even when there is no outward difference in form. This kind of semiotic transfer requires only a shift in reading and entails a ‘tilting’

is, however, not only a journey of diachronic transport, but also one whose destination has an ever-shifting horizon. Insular Celtic mythography was just a temporary destination for the Graeco-Roman Dis/Pluto. As cultural systems continue to evolve and interact with each other in new ways shaped by historical contingencies and contextually-specific currents of development, literary figures too are transported from one destination to another. Literary destinations are not unchanged fixities but dynamic signifiers with an actively-negotiated referent. To this end, the pagan Dis/Pluto which mingled with his Celtic equivalent to appear as a cognate deity in the textual culture of the British Isles was to be eventually ferried to a novel ontological and literary destination—that of the medieval fairy.

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or 'reversal' of meaning while the form remains unchanged. See Barasch, 'Visual Syncretism: A Case Study', in *The Translatability of Cultures*, ed. by Budick and Iser, pp. 37–54.

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