

Islands in the West

A project supported by a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Intra-European Fellowship within the 7th European Community Framework Programme at the *Institut für Nordische Philologie*, LMU Munich.

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Project objectives

The project 'Islands in the West' focused on some of the mythological islands of immortality of pre-Christian and medieval Europe, and particularly on the reception of this mythological complex in medieval Iceland. The main aim of the project was to deepen our understanding of the *longue durée* of some Old Norse-Icelandic literary motifs connected with transmarine otherworlds and of the mechanisms and processes of religious and cultural contact in early European history.

The empirical starting point of the project was the motif complex of the paradisiacal transmarine otherworlds of immortality of medieval north-western Europe and the ancient Mediterranean. Some of these otherworlds – like the Glæsisvellir in Scandinavia, the Isle of Avalon of Arthurian literature, and the Graeco-Roman 'Islands of the Blessed' – show remarkable similarities: recurrently, such 'islands of immortality' are described as places of a supernatural extension of life and as gardens of miraculous abundance where no agricultural labour is necessary, and are ruled by supernatural, priestly, or magical female figures who receive their (male) visitors with utmost liberality.

The combination of these and other motifs can be found equally in the mythologies of Greece, Rome, and Etruria, in 'Celtic' western Europe, and in medieval Scandinavia. This raises the two main questions of the project:

- Are these similarities due to early religious contacts (as it has recurrently been suggested by earlier scholarship)? Or are they the result of a purely literary reception or of independent parallel developments?
- What does this material indicate about the mechanisms of religious contact in ancient and early medieval Europe?

Work performed since the beginning of the project

Since the beginning of the project, a close study has been undertaken of Old Norse, medieval Irish, Arthurian, continental Celtic, Etruscan, Roman, and Greek engagements with the motif of an 'island of immortality', transmarine otherworlds, and paradisiacal islands of the dead. This study has, in an interdisciplinary perspective, brought together a broad spectrum of material that reflects engagements with ideas of transmarine otherworlds in sources as diverse as Old Norse saga literature, medieval Latin cosmographical writing, Old French poetry, medieval world maps, vernacular Irish as well as Hiberno-Latin literature, Viking Age burial customs, classical ethnographic writing, Etruscan funerary iconography, and classical Latin and Greek literature and epigraphy.

Results and potential impact

On the basis of its close engagement with a broad spectrum of material, the project has been able to demonstrate that there does indeed seem to exist a *longue durée* of a certain type of paradisiacal transmarine otherworlds in the religious history of Europe: through a complex history of processes of reception, adaptation, and transformation, the direct and indirect impact of classical Graeco-Roman geographical myths of islands of immortality reaches as far as medieval Irish literature and Old Norse-Icelandic cosmology (fig. 1). It has also been possible to develop a typology of the kinds of cultural contact and the underlying strategies that can be observed in this corpus of data; here, it has been possible to distinguish and define four fundamental types of intercultural connection

that could be observed on the example of the ‘Islands in the West’: *influence*, *borrowing*, *adaptation*, and *quotation*.

By showing the close entanglement of Old Norse-Icelandic culture in a wider European context, the project not only makes a fundamental contribution to our understanding of this culture within the scholarly discourse, but also has a wider societal relevance: throughout much of the twentieth century, ‘Germanic’/Old Norse culture has become associated with racist and xenophobic ideas of ‘racial purity’ and cultural distinctiveness. The results of the project ‘Islands in the West’ illustrate that all such ideas of a separateness of ‘Germanic’/Norse culture are fundamentally flawed, ignoring as they do the openness of Old Norse-Icelandic culture to foreign influence, which has deeply shaped this culture and its way of imagining the world.

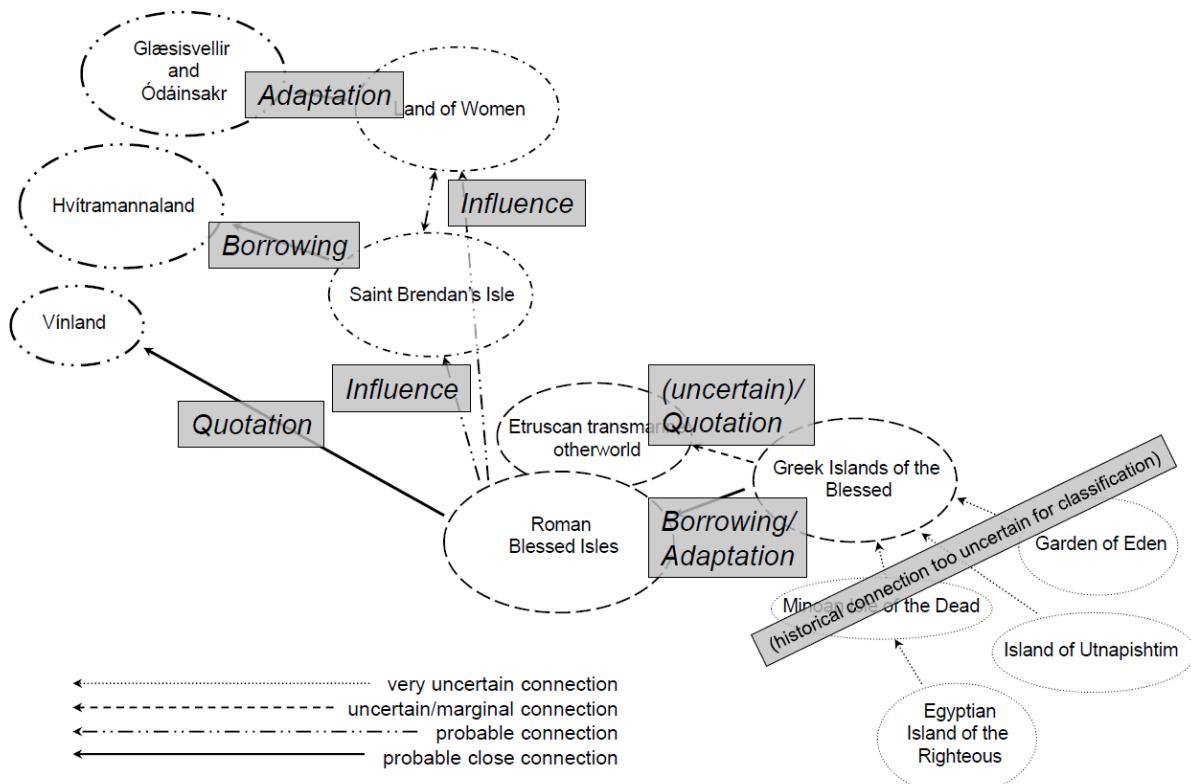


Fig. 1: Graphic summary of the main results of the project ‘Islands in the West’: analysis of the historical relationships between main examples of the paradisiacal transmarine otherworld in ancient Mediterranean, Irish, and Norse mythical geography.

The final main results of the project are primarily published in the form of two monographs:

- Egeler, Matthias: *Avalon, 66° Nord. Zu Frühgeschichte und Rezeption eines Mythos*. (=Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 95), Berlin – Boston: de Gruyter 2015.
- Egeler, Matthias: *Islands in the West. Classical Myth and the Medieval Norse and Irish Geographical Imagination*. (=Medieval Voyaging 4), Turnhout: Brepols, in press.