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THE IRISH VISION OF THE CHINESE*

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The Royal Irish Academy's *Contributions* (*DIL*, S, col. 153) includes the entries *Seiria* and *Seiricda*, rendered respectively 'Syria' and 'Syrian'; the examples cited are from glosses to the poem *Duan in choicat cest* (*DCC*; *ZCP* iv 236).¹ While it is easy to see how similar forms suggested this interpretation (*Siria* LL 161, 16224; *Sirecdai* *ibid.* 17636, *SR* 6766; cf. *Contribb* s.vv *Serdae*, *Sirdae*, *Sireta*), I believe it to be mistaken: our words derive from Latin *Sēres* (nom. pl.), *Sēricus* (adj.) < Greek *Σήρες*, *Σηρικός* 'Chinese'—the 'Silk-people' whose rumoured existence was the ancient world's first hint of the Far East. This can be demonstrated from the *DCC* glosses themselves; it emerges more clearly still from two further references, which it may be helpful to consider first.

The geographical poem 'Ro fessa i curp domuin dúir', by Airbertach mac Cosse (*ob.* 1016), includes the following quatrain (LL 16248–51):

In that eastern region, valour of hundreds,
are the *Serdai* with lasting fame;
for there are trees there
to which wool (*oland*) is not unfamiliar.

Contributions cites this passage among the examples of *Serdae* in the sense 'Syrian',² but this can hardly be correct. Airbertach places the *Serdai* between the Caspian Sea and Bactria, precisely where Isidore of Seville situates the *Seres* (*Etymologiae* 14. 3. 29):³

Seres is a city of the east, from which the Seric race and region are named. The latter extends from the Scythian ocean and the Caspian Sea to the eastern ocean;

* A version of this paper was presented as part of a Celtic seminar series at the Center for Literary Studies, Harvard University, on 17 October 1986; I am grateful for the comments and suggestions of the participants.

¹ The wealth of apocryphal lore preserved in *DCC* has scarcely begun to be appreciated. I have certainly been guilty in this regard myself; in a note on the query 'Where is Hēll?' (*Béaloideas* 1 42–3), I failed to mention the formula's occurrence in §10 of this poem (cf. also *Lib. Hymn.* 1. 69). Professors Joseph Harris and Jan Ziolkowski have drawn my attention to a large family of similar question-and-answer texts, found both in England and on the Continent; the group includes such works as *Ioca Monachorum*, *Adrian and Epictetus*, *Solomon and Saturn* and *L'Enfant sage*. Some connection with Irish lore is obvious in those which I have examined; I have, however, so far found nothing resembling the specific doctrines discussed in this article.

² Despite the correct identification by Thomas Olden, *PRIA*, 2nd ser., ii 237; cf. *Contributions* s.v. *olann*.

³ On Airbertach's use of Isidore see H. L. C. Tristram, 'Das Europabild in der mittelirischen Literatur', in H. Löwe (ed.), *Die Iren und Europa im früheren Mittelalter* (Stuttgart 1982) 726–8; and Rolf Baumgarten, 'The geographical orientation of Ireland in Isidore and Orosius', *Peritia* iii 189 note 2.

it abounds in noble trees from which fleeces (*vellera*) are gathered, which the Seres sell as garments to other peoples.

The second passage is a marginal gloss on the hymn *Hymnum dicat*, in the T manuscript of *Liber Hymnorum*; most of the text is in Latin, but the first line is Irish (*Lib. Hymn.* 1. 40):

Uellus sericum, .i. in cnái sericda .i. cenēle étaig maith sein (i.e., the Seric fleece; i.e., that is a kind of fine raiment): there are in Ethiopia and India certain worms which are called *pompices* (leg. *bombyces*), which spin very fine threads in the manner of spiders, whence is made silken raiment (*sericum uestimentum*).

This instance of the adjective *Seiricda* is entered in *DIL* (without cross-reference) s.v. *sirecda* ‘silken’.

We may now turn to the testimony of *DCC* itself. The relevant quatrains are §§12 and 18.

- §12. Let the learned now declare
 Adam’s offspring before the Fall.^a
 Who was the first son born to glorious Eve?^b
 In what place is his numerous progeny?^c

Glosses:

- (a) *Seir* is the son whom Eve bore to Adam before the Fall; from him are the *Seiri* and *Seiria*, as folk say.
 (b) Cain; or *Seir*, as the history (*stair*) says.
 (c) Between India and Scythia.

- §18. What three peoples, yonder in the east,
 did the ponderous Flood not drown?^d
 What assembly (*dál*) is there, amid thick mist,
 on the top of Sliab Parthiach?^e

Glosses:

- (d) The *Seiricda*, and the people of the Ark, and the fishes (*na bratána*).
 (e) The assembly (*comdál*) of the righteous souls of Adam’s race in Sliab Cailiaph.

There is much to consider here, nor do I feel competent to do the material full justice; but some preliminary observations can be made. That *Seiria*, situated between India and Scythia, is identical with the *Serica regio* is scarcely open to doubt: such a description would seem to have been standard in classical geography. Thus Ptolemy (*Geographia* 6. 16. 1) describes ἡ Σηρικὴ as being bounded on the west by Scythia, on the north and east by unknown regions, and on the south by India; and Pomponius Mela assigns the eastern rim of the known world to the Indians, Seres and Scythians: ‘the Seres inhabit more or less the middle of the eastern division, the Indians [and

Scythians] the extremities' (*De situ orbis* 1. 2. 3).⁴ There is no evidence that either Ptolemy or Mela was known in Ireland (although the latter was certainly available to the author of an anonymous Carolingian treatise *De situ orbis*).⁵ That the Seres lived between India and Scythia is by no means evident from Isidore, although the inference can with some difficulty be extracted from his discussion;⁶ it comes across considerably more clearly in the writings of the elder Pliny (*Historia naturalis* 6. 20) and Julius Solinus (*Collectanea* 50). Pliny's *Historia* was available to the Irish at least in part, and Bede had an excellent text which included the sixth book;⁷ Solinus is cited frequently by Aldhelm.⁸

That the ideas in the *DCC* glosses derive ultimately from either Pliny or Solinus is further suggested by the terms (borrowed by both from Mela) in which they describe the Seres. Of their closely parallel accounts, I quote that of Solinus:

... Beyond (these) uninhabited regions the first men of whom we learn are the Seres (*primos hominum Seres cognoscimus*); who, after cleansing the branches with sprinkled water, comb the fleeces (*vellera*) from trees with a stick (*adminiculo*), and with the moisture of fluid tame to acquiescence the subtle fineness of the down. This is *sericum* ... The Seres themselves are gentle (*mites*), and very peaceful (*quietissimi*) among themselves, but flee the gatherings of other mortals ...

I would suggest that the phrase *primos hominum Seres cognoscimus* (cf. Pliny, *primi sunt hominum qui vocantur Seres*) was at some point mistranslated 'we learn of the Seres, first of men'.⁹ This interpretation, taken together with their absence from the genealogical system elaborated from Genesis by Isidore, would lead naturally to the idea that the Seres were descended from a son of Adam older than those mentioned in the Bible; that this child was born before the Fall would further explain the innocence ascribed to the Seres, and their avoidance of other humans.

⁴ 'In ea primos hominum accepimus Indos, et Seras, et Scythas. Seres media ferme Eoae partis incolunt, Indi [et Scythae] ultima.' The phrase *et Scythae* is missing from the MSS, and was first supplied in the *editio princeps* of 1482; that it belongs here seems guaranteed by context.

⁵ M. Manitius (ed.), *Anonymi De situ orbis libri duo* (Stuttgart 1884); note especially p. 42.

⁶ It would be natural to suppose that their relative positions could have been ascertained from a map accompanying the text; but the Seres do not seem to have figured in maps attached to the *Etymologiae* (cf. R. Uhdén, 'Die Weltkarte des Isidorus von Sevilla', *Mnemosyne*, 3rd ser., iii 1–28)—nor, for that matter, elsewhere in early medieval cartography (Konrad Miller, *Mappae mundi*, Stuttgart 1898, 6 vols). More generally, I am aware of no evidence that world-maps existed in pre-Norman Ireland. That Airbertach mentions the five zones and three continents of early geography has led Tristram (op. cit. 728) to suggest that his poem is a 'Kartenbeschreibung', but these well-known doctrines were certainly current outside geographic (let alone cartographic) contexts: note for example the description of the zones in *SR* 149–60, and the glancing allusion to the *triquadra tellus* in *Hisperica Famina*, A 7.

⁷ Cf. my discussion in *Celtica* xvii 44–5; and K. Welzhofer, 'Beda's Citate aus der naturalis historia des Plinius', in *Abhandlungen aus dem Gebiet der klassischen Altertums-Wissenschaft* (Munich 1891) 25–41.

⁸ *Epistolae ad Acircium* (in *Sancti Aldhelmi ... opera quae extant*, ed. J. A. Giles, Oxford 1884), 283, 291, 292, 323, 324.

⁹ This usage of *primus* is again from Mela (cf. note 3 above); in his commentary C. H. Tzschuckius explains it as 'non respectu temporis et originis, sed situ in prima Asia, quam ab Oriente exorditur' (*Pomponii Melae De situ orbis libri tres* (Leipzig 1816) 7).

Such ideas would harmonize with the doctrine that the Seres lived in the farthest east. The Old Latin Bible's statement (Gen. 2:8) that 'God planted a garden in Eden, in the east' (*ad orientem*)¹⁰ had at an early date inspired the belief that Eden existed at the eastern edge of the world; it was also widely held that it had not been affected by the Flood, whether because situated on a mountain of unimaginable height or through simple remoteness from the haunts of sinful men.¹¹ The paradisaical eastern mountain appears already in the third- or fourth-century poem *De ave phoenice* (PL 7. 277):¹²

There is a blessed place, far in the utmost east (*in primo . . . oriente remotus*), where the great gate of eternal heaven stands open . . . There the fields are level: no hill looms, no hollow valley yawns. Yet that region overtops, by twice six cubits (*per bis sex ulnas*), our mountains, however high their ridges seem.¹³

We may compare a passage in the first book of Bede's *Hexaemeron* (PL 91. 43–4):

Some would have it that the place of Paradise is in the eastern part of the world, removed however by a vast space of sea or land from all regions now inhabited by the human race; accordingly the waters of the Flood, which utterly overwhelmed the whole surface of our globe, were unable to reach it. Whether the truth be here or elsewhere, God knows; at all events we must not doubt that it was and is an earthly place.

That a 'prelapsarian' race, living remote from all other men in the immediate vicinity of Eden,¹⁴ should have survived the Flood is accordingly a concept with a natural place in the medieval system of belief.

These were not the only Irish speculations concerning an unfallen, antediluvian people: similar claims were made on behalf of the Tuatha Dé, the old divinities of paganism. A passage claiming the authority of the lost eighth-century compilation *Cín Dromma Snechta* describes an encounter between the poet Amargen and the tutelary goddess Banba (ITS xliiv 34, 76):

The Book of Druimm Snechta says that Amargen inquired concerning her race. 'I am descended from Adam,' said she. 'To which lineage of Noah's sons do you belong?' said he. 'I am older than Noah,' said she. 'I was on the peak of a

¹⁰ The Vulgate adopted the alternative rendering *a principio* for Hebrew *m'qqedem*; but the idea of an eastern Paradise was already widespread in Jerome's day.

¹¹ Abundant references are supplied by H. R. Patch, *The Other World* (Cambridge, Mass. 1950) chap. 5, especially pp 134–47.

¹² On this poem's possible influence in Ireland see Alfred Nutt, *The voyage of Bran* (London 1895) i 238–47; James Carney, *Studies in Irish literature and history* (Dublin 1955) 283–5; Proinsias Mac Cana, *Ériu* xxiii 121–3.

¹³ This assertion of height must surely be an oblique reference to Paradise's escape from the Flood: cf. below the lines 'Et cum diluuium mersisset fluctibus orbem, Deucalioneas exsuperavit aquas'. In the biblical account, however, the waters rise *fifteen* cubits above the peaks of the mountains (Gen. 7: 20). The discrepancy is peculiar—might it stem from a simple scribal error (.xii. for .xu.) in the poet's Bible text? (Cf. the second recension of *Lebar Gabála: Dā cubat dēg . . . uasna slēbtib ata airdiu*, ITS 34. 30.)

¹⁴ We may perhaps speculate further that the Seiri are identical with the 'assembly of righteous souls' on the mysterious mountain Parthiach/Cailiaph (itself presumably the same as Sliab Protiach, glossed 'a mountain which is in Paradise' in *DCC* §11).

mountain in the Flood. As far as this peak,' said she, 'did the Flood's waves come; therefore it is called Peak of the Wave (*Tel Tuinne*).'

Still more apposite is Manannán's description of life in the Otherworld to Bran mac Febail:¹⁵

We are, since the beginning of the world, without age, without a covering of earth; hence we do not expect a time of weakness (?)—the Fall (*int immormuss*) has not touched us.

In *Tochmarc Étaíne*, Midir speaks of 'the cloud of Adam's transgression' (*teimel imorbuis Ádaim*) as a veil between mortals and immortals (*Ériu* xii 180); and descent from Adam is claimed for fairy women in *Serglige Con Culainn*¹⁶ and *Aided Muirchertaig meic Erca*.¹⁷ Similar passages occur elsewhere in the early tales; but we cannot pursue the subject further here.

Are there other traces of Seir and his descendants in Irish literature? The list of Adam's fifty sons in *Sex aetates mundi* concludes with the name *Sile*, and the statement follows that 'only three of those sons had families: Cain, Seth, and Sile, i.e. the youngest of Adam's sons, howsoever it be (*secip cruth*)'.¹⁸ Sile also appears as a son of Adam who left descendants in the poem 'Rédig dam, a Dé, do nim', and is mentioned in a poem in the *Chronicon* of Marianus Scotus.¹⁹ The degree to which the names *Seir* and *Sile* differ, and the circumstance that the former is Adam's eldest son, the latter his youngest, are puzzling: it would seem likeliest that the list of Adam's sons developed independently of the legend of Seir, and that the ascription of descendants to Sile represents an attempt to conflate the two traditions.

Another possible survival is considerably more interesting: the patronymic of *Partholón mac Sera*, first settler in Ireland after the Flood. In 1921 Kuno Meyer ingeniously explained the pseudo-historic use of the name *Partholón* (< *Bartholomaeus*) in terms of its traditional etymology 'son of him who holds up the waters' (*filius suspendentis aquas*, *Etym.* 7. 9. 16):²⁰

Indem nun die Erfinder der Urgeschichte Irlands 'aquas' auf die Wasser der Sündflut bezogen, wurde 'der Sohn dessen, der die Wasser aufhören lässt', der immerhin sinnreiche Name für den ersten Besiedler Irlands nach der Sündflut.

He went on to call attention to Isidore's statement that the name 'is Syrian,

¹⁵ *Immram Brain* §44; A. G. van Hamel (ed.), *Immrama* (Dublin 1941) 15.

¹⁶ Ed. Myles Dillon (Dublin 1953) 558.

¹⁷ Ed. Lil Nic Donnchadha (Dublin 1964) 323–4.

¹⁸ Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (ed. and trans.), *The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi* (Dublin 1983) 68–9, 112.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 98, 143; cf. B. McCarthy, *The Codex Palatino-Vaticanus, No. 830*, Todd Lect. Ser. 3 (Dublin 1892) 26.

²⁰ Derived by Isidore from Jerome's *Liber interpretationis nominum hebraicorum* (CCSL 72. 135). Meyer noted that Isidore's explanation is quoted in *Leabhar Breac* and in the glosses to *Félire Oengusso*; with these may be compared the couplet 'Bartholomaei impendamus nutibus/nati pendentis aequora in nubibus' in the hymn *Celebra Iuda*, ascribed to Cuimmine Fota (*Lib. Hymn.* I. 19. 15–16; cf. Kenney, *Sources* 266).

not Hebrew' (*Syrum est, non Hebraeum*), proposing this as the explanation for Partholón's patronymic.²¹

While accepting Meyer's conclusions enthusiastically, I feel that the legend of Seir sheds some further light upon the question. We may note that, apart from the adjective *Serdae*, forms in *Se(i)r-* are attested only in the sense 'Chinese'; and that *Sera* would be a feasible genitive of *Seir*. The flight of fancy which transformed a patristic etymology into a protohistoric colonist would have taken wing more readily if the phrase *Syrum est* (or the more ambiguous *is Serdae*) had evoked the aura of antediluvian antiquity which the laconic glosses to *DCC* suggest.

Isidore may have made a further contribution to the legend. *Seir* is listed in the *Etymologiae* (7. 6. 34) as an alternate name for Esau, and explained as meaning *pilosus* 'hairy'.²² This might well have reminded an Irish reader of the *geilt* (Welsh *gwyllt*), the shaggy sylvan madman of Celtic literature; the Old Testament glossary in Codex Reginae Lat. 215 (late ninth-century) in fact proposes *geltig* as an equivalent for the *pilosi* of Isaiah 13: 21 (*Theo. Pal.* i 2). Such an idea would be reinforced by the testimony of Mela and his followers concerning the Seres; Pliny's statement that they are 'gentle, yet like wild beasts (*feris similes*) in that they shun the rest of humankind' reads like a characterization of the protagonist of *Buile Shuibhne*.

A few years ago I argued that the late Old Irish tale *Scél Tuáin*, which describes the survival into the Christian period of a follower of Partholón, had been extensively influenced by an early version of the Suibne legend.²³ At the time I was unable to give any specific reason why the figure of the wild man should have become associated with Partholón's settlement, but the considerations advanced above may provide one. If the native literati had indeed derived from their reading the notion that the farthest east was inhabited by a hairy, reclusive, antediluvian people, it is entirely plausible that they should on the one hand have connected them with the legend of the *geilt*, and on the other linked them with the evolving schema of Irish synthetic history.

If I have not gone astray in all of this, I believe that one more puzzle can be resolved. The seventeenth canto of *Saltair na Rann* states that none survived

²¹ *ZCP* xiii 141–2; cf. van Hamel, *RC* I 217–37. Thurneysen cast doubt on Meyer's theory, pointing out that the patronymic *mac Sera* is first attested in the eleventh century, and that Partholón is not said to have arrived in Ireland until several centuries following the Flood (*ZCP* xx 378, 380–1). But it should be remembered that we have scarcely any references to Partholón earlier than *Lebar Gabála*, what there is being sketchy and inconsistent; while Thurneysen's second objection may perhaps be answered in his own words, with the surmise that 'die Partholón-Sage schon vor der für uns ältesten Überlieferung allerlei Wandelungen dargemacht haben mag' (*ibid.* 378–9).

²² Isidore again follows Jerome (CCSL 72. 72). This bit of lore is mentioned in at least one Irish exegetical work; cf. Robert E. McNally, *Der irische Liber de numeris* (Munich diss. 1957) 68.

²³ 'Suibne Geilt and Tuán mac Cairill', *Éigse* xx 93–105.

the Flood save for four men and four women (the company of the Ark), together with

... Enoch of keen faith,
as the scripture tells,
all alone, from wave to wave,
like any airy bird (2517–20).²⁴

Needless to say, *in scriptuir* tells us nothing of the sort: Enoch survived the Flood because ‘God took him’ (Gen. 5: 24), not because he could leap from wave to wave. The quatrain is more reminiscent of the accounts of Suibne and Tuán. Both of course are solitary; and Suibne too moves ‘like any airy bird’ (*amail gach n-ethaid n-áerdha*),²⁵ while Tuán assumes bird shape.²⁶ Enoch’s flight ‘from wave to wave’ also recalls Tuán’s, ‘from refuge to refuge and from cliff to cliff’,²⁷ and Suibne’s, ‘from estuary to estuary and from peak to peak and from valley to valley’.²⁸ The passage can best be explained as reflecting the association of wild men with the days of the Flood; and I believe that that association is to be understood in terms of the Irish vision of the Chinese.

²⁴ ‘Ocus Enōc crābuid gūir, / amal adfiad in scriptuir, / a oenur ō thuinn do thuinn, / amal cach n-ethait ētruim.’

²⁵ *Buile Suibhne*, ed. J. G. O’Keeffe (Dublin 1975), lines 202, 779–80. The close parallelism of the adjectives *étromm* and *aerda* is, as Dr Lionel Joseph has pointed out to me, borne out by their use together as a conventional pair, e.g. *inar . . . étrom áerda* (TBC 2528), in *n-anmain n-aerda n-ētruim tanaide* (LL 36266), *go hionnfuar étrom ardha* (Ériu v 76).

²⁶ *Ériu* xxxv 102. 53ff.

²⁷ ‘Ó dangun do dangun 7 ó aill do aill’, *ibid.* 101. 27.

²⁸ ‘Ó inber do inber 7 ó binn do binnd 7 ó glinn do glionn’, O’Keeffe 323–4.