

CARANTES NEWSLETTER

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Dear Friends,

Here in Ireland, the trees with their fiery leaves have now shed their vibrancy for their bare winter form as the short, dark days roll in with heavy clouds of grey. The start of this month saw deeply troubling news in the form of the US elections. There are so many things I wish to say: this is my fifth attempt at writing an introduction for November's newsletter (and partially why it is getting to you so much later than the 15th). However, I will try to keep this brief in the interest of everyone's time, but please do not mistake my brevity for a lack of concern.

The results were upsetting, especially with the president-elect actually winning the popular vote this time around, with his most anti-immigrant and anti-LGBTQ+ campaign to date (which is saying something). He is both a symptom and a cause of the far-right's rise: the far-right was already becoming more vocal in 2016 without his help, but then he became a mouthpiece for them, and has given 'legitimacy' to their vitriolic, hateful views for the last eight years. It then becomes a cycle, a wheel of sorts, in which the president-elect will latch onto a talking point of the far-right, which gives the facade of validity to that point, which fuels the far-right more, and the wheel rolls more and more to the right. And unfortunately, what happens in America does have an impact on the world; we have seen and will likely continue to see the rise of far-right leaders in many other countries. I know for me at least, being told to continue the fight, when already so many of us fight and struggle every day just to be ourselves, sounds overwhelming. If this can be of any help to anyone, in a not-condescending way, the term I have opted for in this moment is 'defiance'. Defiance can take countless forms; my defiance of putting on my makeup may be the opposite of your defiance of choosing to go makeup-less. Regardless, we are both refusing to become complacent under the current system in our own ways. It may change over the coming months and years, but the attitude of refusing to yield to their hateful mindset is what unites it all. And we of the Steering Committee of CARANTES hope that everyone is able to stay safe and feel supported through this distressing time. **You are not alone, and we hope we can provide at least some amount of community and support**, whether through our newsletter or through our Discord. We are in this together.

We hosted our second annual Samain public lecture on 9th November with the speakers who had presented for our session at the International Medieval Congress at Leeds this past summer. For those who were unable to attend, or for those wishing to have a refresher as to what was discussed, we have included summaries of the talks below. These summaries hardly do the talks justice, but we hope they at least whet your appetite for the fascinating research these scholars will produce. We would like to once again thank our wonderful presenters for giving such interesting, informative, and valuable presentations: your work is truly inspiring and we are grateful for you! Now, for the summaries, given in the order in which the speakers presented:



‘On the Face of It: The Problematic Modern Historiography of Tattooing in the Early Medieval British Isles’, Erica Steiner: As Steiner argued, popular notions about the ancient inhabitants of Britain and Ireland are usually connected by ideas of their having body decoration, which has become a shorthand for an ancient Briton or Pict. For the ancient period, images of tattooed Celts come from the period of the Julian invasion and not from the time of the Roman Empire, despite our knowledge that the Empire did tattoo people. For the medieval period, the tattooed depictions are almost exclusively of the Picts who are either in combat or about to be Christianised. Depictions actually from the late ancient/early medieval periods on the Islands, however, tend to show people in clothing that is sensible for the wet, cold climate (i.e., robes or long sleeves and pants); thus the bare body is rarely shown so it is difficult to say if there ought to be tattoos or other body decoration under the clothing. There are some illustrations of bodies with markings on them, but they are two-dimensional and do not necessarily tell us whether the markings are meant to be tattoos or not. As for the physical evidence, we do not have any tattoos on bog bodies, but they may just be effaced, so perhaps infrared imaging could help to show tattoos that are no longer visible to the naked eye.

In the face of so few attestations of tattooing, then, where do our modern portrayals of Celts and Picts as tattooed come from? One main culprit is a set of watercolours from the late 16th century that show Picts with tattoos all over their bodies; important to note is that these paintings were closely based on another set of watercolours claiming to depict Native Americans, and not from any specific source that described the Picts. In the Asterix comic series, tattoos are seen more frequently on the characters nowadays than they were in the earlier comics. There is a famous quote by Caesar that

describes Celts being decorated by a substance called *vitrum*: it is commonly translated as “woad”, but Steiner argued that it cannot be woad as there is another Latin word for that and the verb used for the application of *vitrum* has subdermal implications. Woad was also tested by a modern tattoo artist and they discovered that woad simply doesn’t work as a tattoo ink. The translation of *vitrum* as “woad” came about, as Steiner argued, in the 16th century, and was popularised by an Englishman from an industrial centre that used native English woad to dye clothing at a time when foreign indigo was threatening the popularity of woad. Nowadays, there is an element of primitivism inherent in the aesthetics chosen for depictions of Celts and Picts in movies, video games, TV shows, etc. In the online non-scholarly world people tend to take these depictions as being historically true and try to emulate them, with the TV show *Vikings* being taken as particular inspiration. With this, we have the melding of Celtic and Germanic ideas and artifacts without clear distinction being considered. In the modern far-right, we see this aesthetic being appropriated, utilising early medieval imagery legitimised by depictions in the media.



‘Fear and Loathing in Fairy Forests: Borrowings from Irish Mythology in Fringe (Quasi)Religious Groups within the Russian LARP Community’, Eachiarn Erbnen and Aodhán Morris: Erbnen and Morris began their talk by describing the state of medieval Irish material in Russian: what translations are available are liable to heavy censorship and, often, the Russian translations are actually retellings of Victorian matter rather than being worked on from medieval matter. Some Russian authors have even invented new features/stories for characters, such as Dían Cécht. In that same vein, fandom-produced works are sometimes taken to be as authoritative as folklore and actual (medieval) sources. What sources there are tend to be gatekept, often with the exaggeration of any supposed ‘pagan’ elements. For instance, the Túatha Dé are never seen as human, even when the medieval Irish story specifies them as such. With this background, Erbnen and Morris then compared worldwide LARP communities with those found in Russia. Worldwide, LARP shares roots with fantasy, sci-fi, Dungeons and Dragons, etc.; its members see mythology as a personal gnosis rather than authoritative truth; and members usually state that secondary texts remain secondary.

In Russia, however, LARP communities evolved from the Soviet Hippie system, and bardic and hiking subcultures; they have a taste for mysticism, Messianism, and insularity; and secondary texts become bases for hyper-real religions. Some go so far as to even call themselves real-life elves

(biologically or reincarnated), having taken their inspiration from secondary texts, especially Tolkien. In this environment, texts like Tolkien's are perceived to be authoritative accounts of medieval Ireland, which then is absorbed with a religious element by members who see themselves as descendants of such magical beings. Erbnen and Morris demonstrated the danger of this in the example of a singer-songwriter who believed they were a real-life elf who threatened with violence a girl who had written 'irreverent' fantasies of Tolkien characters. This singer-songwriter claimed the girl was an orc and thus it was their duty as an elf to attack the girl/orc. It is extremely dangerous and concerning that members of this community are fantasising about violence against dissenters. Despite this danger, the Russian LARP community is able to continue bringing in new members with promises of being able to express one's self in contrast to the authoritarian and oppressive nature of the Russian state. They attract vulnerable, isolated young people who are then drawn in and cut off even more due to the insularity of these communities.



'From Reaction to a Status Quo: The Question of the Origins of the Breton Language and the Breton People', Elisabeth Chatel: The final talk began with Chatel reminding us of the French Revolution and how it pushed the narrative of a struggle between the masses and the elites; the masses were seen to be Gaulish whereas the elites were seen to be Frankish. This added a racial element to the revolution, an element which was used in Brittany as well where the Breton elite tried to differentiate themselves using the Breton language to prove their own racial difference. This then led to investigations into the origins of Breton: one of the earlier ones in the 1830s was a collection of songs, which was more of a romantic reconstruction, in line with the likes of MacPherson in Scotland, than a necessarily rigorous academic approach. This was followed by La Villemarqué writing an essay in 1847 detailing a fusion between 5th-century Breton and Welsh. Building on this was Le Moyne de la Borderie who wrote a history of Brittany in six volumes in which he argued for a peaceful transfer of Breton to Armorica. Then came Loth who argued the still commonly held idea that Breton came from Britain through the war-like Welsh violently replacing the Latin-speaking population of Armorica. As such, the argument goes, the Breton people would be a different race than the French and therefore oppressed by the French.

Loth became a major public figure and his work gave Brittany a history of its own, being a bridge between Breton speakers and the Academy (Loth himself making it into College de France). He was hugely successful as an academic

and very popular in Breton ‘activist’ circles. For instance, in the article/Breton manifesto ‘Aveit Breiz-Vihan’, Breton is argued to be the most important part of Brittany’s heritage, and Loth is the sole academic source given. Interestingly, however, Chatel pointed out that Loth did not seem to advocate for separatism at all, he was not interested in the movement nor did it appear that he was even aware of Breton nationalists. Those same Breton nationalists, though, heavily relied on his work and would not have been able to do their work without Loth’s publications. The Emsav (Mouvement breton, or Breton Movement) is a movement with a variety of flavours spanning the whole political spectrum, and the original framework for the movement was created with Loth as the central authority. So, Loth wrote his work in response to previous accounts of the origin of Breton, and his work has in turn been used by Breton nationalists who take him on his authority to support their own movement which Loth himself never advocated for.



Discussion:

Despite the range of talks given, there did appear some common threads throughout each topic. The main one that jumped out at the audience was the act of the public latching onto certain sources and using them for their own means. Tied in with this, and something we have discussed many times, is the personal feeling associated with the source: people like sources, documents, etc. that *feel right* to them, whether or not there is proof or evidence. This can make disproving misconceptions incredibly difficult when those same people have built their lives and identities around those feelings. To this point the audience also brought up certain communities’ distrust or general dislike of academics, and how we ought to deal with that if we are trying to dispel commonly held, incorrect beliefs.

While it isn’t a cure-all by any means, the main suggestion that was offered was making accessible, up-to-date research readily available. This would hopefully give the public more nuanced, careful discussions that may discourage toxic appropriations. Making innovative, careful research free and publicly available will be extremely beneficial, and we will do the best we can to aid in that endeavour. We hope you enjoyed and/or found benefit in these talks; if any thoughts come to you which you did not get to express during the talks, please feel free to email us, and we could include your comments in the next newsletter (anonymised if you prefer!).



Just a reminder that we will not be having a newsletter in December; we will be taking a break until January and hope that all our readers are able to take some time to relax at the end of this year of all years. The link to our Discord (<https://discord.gg/ecP9Ne9b>) will be live for one week after this newsletter is

sent out: it is pretty active with casual, friendly chats about Celtic Studies and all that entails. Also in the Discord you will find information on a **new book club** that will have its first meeting in December, which promises to be quite exciting. The book club was started by members on the Discord who suggested it and took the lead on the project, so if you have any ideas for things CARANTES-related, you may find some people on the Discord who would be happy to jump on board with you!

To this end we will also be setting up an **action-oriented zoom meeting** in December. This will be a space to come and suggest projects that you think Carantes should take on, and connect with others who are interested in helping to organize them. If you want to do things but don't have a clear idea what, it's a good place to come, see what's needed and volunteer. If this sounds good to you, please email us so we can get a sense of everyone's schedule.

That is all for us now at the CARANTES steering committee. Please feel free to contact us if you have any reactions, thoughts or concerns, or if you would rather not get any more emails. We'd love to hear from you on the Discord server or by email, especially if you have any recommendations of your own to share.

Until next time, keep well and safe,
and thanks for doing this work with us.
Your friends at



CARANTES

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