

The Sacred Island: An Ancient Name for Ireland

Alexandra Madeła
Trinity College Dublin

Abstract

That Ireland's Greek name Ἱέρπη was connected with the word ἱερός (sacred) is attested only by a Latin writer. The following article argues that this derivation is also represented by an etymological pun in the Orphic Argonautica, a Greek epic poem from late antiquity.

Introduction

In his *Ora Maritima*, the fourth-century AD Latin writer Rufus Festus Avienus provides the following information about Ireland:

*Ast hinc duobus in Sacram (sic insulam
dixere prisci) solibus cursus rati est.
haec inter undas multam caespitem iacet,
eamque late gens Hiernorum colit.*

From here a ship can sail in two days to the Holy Island (so the men of old used to call it.) It ~~is situated~~₁ among the waves, ~~extending over broad stretches of land~~₂, and the race of the Hierni inhabits it far and wide.

He gives Ireland the name *insula sacra* (holy island), which, so the scholarly consensus, originates from a false etymology in Greek. Ireland's oldest Greek

name, Ἱέρνη, is quite similar in sound to ἱερὴ νῆσος (holy island) with the initial /h/ not pronounced, as the Ionic-speaking Massalians (probably the earliest Greek discoverers of the British Isles) would have called it.¹ Avienus must have been drawing on a Greek source that made this etymological connection. Unfortunately – so it is believed – there is no extant Greek text which preserves this para-etymology, so that it only left a trace in the Latin of Avienus.

I would like to draw attention, however, to a usually disregarded source of information about ancient Ireland: the *Orphic Argonautica*, an anonymous late antique Greek epic about the Argonauts. This poem makes mention of Ireland two times: The Argonauts sail past the ‘island of Ireland’ (νῆσον Ἱερνίδα, 1181) and shortly before this, it is referenced by the ship Argo in an address to its own crew (1165-1169):

*Nῦν γὰρ δὴ λυγρῆς τε καὶ ἀργαλέης κακότητος
λήξομαι, εἰ νήσοισιν Ἱερνίσιν ἄσσον ἴκωμαι.
Εἰ μὴ γάρ μ' ἱερῆσιν ἐπιγνάμψαντες ἄκρησι
κόλπον ἔσω γαίης τε καὶ ἀτρυγέτοιο θαλάσσης
ἴξεσθ', ὅμ πέλαγος Ἀτλαντικὸν ἐκτὸς ἴκωμαι.*

*Now I will suffer ~~woeful~~ and painful trouble if I
approach the Irish islands.² For if you don't make me*

¹ Freeman (2001) 29; Isaac (2009) 53; Killeen (1976) 209.

² νήσοισιν Ἱερνίσιν is Vian's universally accepted emendation – also found as a variant reading in one manuscript – for the nonsensical νήσσοισιν Ἐρινύσσοισιν. It is virtually certain that Ireland was mentioned in this line, since shortly after the Argonauts sail past Ireland, as predicted by the Argo. Cf. Vian (1987) ad v. 1168.

double the Sacred Capes and reach the bay formed by the land and the barren sea, I will come out onto the Atlantic Ocean.

Here the name ‘Irish islands’ (νήσοισιν Ἰερνίσιν, meaning Ireland and Britain) is followed in the next line by the word ἱερῆσιν (‘holy’). In the late Greek pronunciation which was familiar to the author of the poem, the two words sounded almost identical.

The η of ἱερῆσιν was pronounced as ι, since the diphthong η/ηι turned into /i/ in Koine by the mid second century BC, a development followed later by the simple vowel η as well.³ Additionally, the distinction between long and short vowels was lost at around the same period, which means that there was no perceivable difference in pronunciation (as distinct from scansion) between this new /i/ and the short ι in Ἰερνίσιν.⁴ The two words also share the accent on the penultimate syllable. This accent, too, was identical, despite the fact that it appears as a circumflex in one word and an acute in the other; for as a result of the loss of vowel-length distinctions the different accents fell together and shifted to a stress accent.⁵ The word had also lost its initial aspiration (the loss of initial /h/ was completed by about the second century AD), so that IERNISIN (‘Irish’) was in pronunciation – but not spelling – followed by IERISIN (‘holy’).⁶ Clearly, this is an etymological pun by the anonymous author who enjoyed such word-games

³ Brixhe (2010) 232; Horrocks (1997) 109; Petrounias (2007) 605.

⁴ Horrocks (1997) 111; Petrounias (2007) 602.

⁵ Horrocks (1997) 67-8, 104, 111.

⁶ Petrounias (2007) 607.

also elsewhere in his poem. For example, he explains the other name of the god Eros, *Phanes* (Φάνης), as ‘he who appeared first’ (πρῶτος γὰρ ἐ-φάν-θη, 16).

To make the pun even clearer to his audience, the anonymous poet on purpose uses the Ionic dative plural ending in -ῆσι(v) for ἱερῆσιν in order to make the word sound more alike to Ἱερν-ίσιν. At the other time that the feminine dative plural of this word appears in this poem (1244), the alternative and metrically identical ending in -αῖσι (ἱεραῖσι) is employed. It is also no coincidence that both ἱερῆσιν and Ἱερνίσιν are followed by words starting with a vowel, which makes the addition of a final -v necessary – this further facilitates the assonance.

This word-play presupposes that the author knew about the assumed connection between the words Ἱέρνη and ἱερός, the Greek adjective for ‘sacred’. Avienus, then, is not the only ancient source to preserve this folk-etymology.

It appears highly unlikely that Avienus found the name ‘Holy Island’ for Ireland in the *Orphic Argonautica*, an obscure poem of unknown provenance. Nevertheless, the etymological word-play in this epic provides further proof that the mistaken derivation of the appellation Ἱέρνη originated in Greek, and that it continued to be known in the Greek literary tradition until late antiquity, when the *Orphic Argonautica* was composed.

Bibliography

Brixhe, C. ‘Linguistic Diversity in Asia Minor during the

- Empire: *Koine* and Non-Greek Languages’, in E.J. Bakker (ed), *A Companion to the Ancient Greek Language* (Malden/Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 228-252.
- Freeman, P.M., *Ireland and the Classical World*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001).
- Horrocks, G., *Greek: A History of the Language and its Speakers* (London/New York: Longman, 1997).
- Isaac, G.R., ‘A Note on the Name of Ireland in Irish and Welsh’, *Ériu* 59 (2009), 49-55.
- Killeen, J.F., ‘Ireland in the Greek and Roman Writers’ *PRIA* 76 (1976), 207-215.
- Petrounias, E.B. (transl. Lillie, W.J.) ‘Development in Pronunciation during the Hellenistic Period’, in A.-F. Christidis (ed.), *A History of Ancient Greek: From the Beginnings to Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 599-609.
- Vian, F. (ed.), *Les Argonautiques Orphiques* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1987).