

Review: *Peritia: Journal of the Medieval Academy of Ireland*, vol. 26 (Johnston and Ó Cróinín)



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Peritia: Journal of the Medieval Academy of Ireland, vol. 26. Edited by Elva Johnston and Daibhí Ó Cróinín. 2015. Brepols, Turnhout. 294 pp. €68. ISBN 978-2-503-55100-5. ISSN 0332-1592.

That one learned journal reviews another — especially one where over the years the same scholars have contributed to both — may seem a little incestuous; however, there are good reasons for drawing attention to this volume of *Peritia*. For this journal's first 25 volumes, albeit that some of them were combination volumes, over the past thirty-six years — volume 1 appeared in 1982 — one man was responsible: the late Professor Donnchadh Ó Corráin of University College, Cork. He saw that there was a need for a journal that brought the various strands of early medieval studies, with particular reference to Ireland, together in one place: linguists would stand next to historians and archaeologists; those working on Irish texts would sit beside those working on Latin; those working on the history of ideas would rub shoulders with those studying early Irish farming. The mix has proven itself. *Peritia* is one of the few journals that is known and respected across the disciplines. Some time before he died, Ó Corráin handed over the concern to two new editors, both, like himself, primarily historians: Elva Johnston of University College, Dublin, and Daibhí Ó Cróinín of the National University of Ireland, Galway, and this volume is the first fruits of their editorship. And as befits a well-planned handover, the volume is dedicated to Donnchadh. Brepols, the publisher of *Peritia*, have taken the opportunity to give it a new cover and a fresh typographical look. This is striking and elegant, but will be a curse for librarians who still take the journal in paper format because the new volume is taller and wider than the old one (171×253mm as against 168×239mm). For the reader, however, this new shape and binding make a book that opens better and sits open more easily while one reads it.

So what has one got? First of all, eight major articles of around twenty pages each. For this alone one is thankful because of the increasing tendency to have very strict word-limits, so that arguments in many journals are tailored not to the problem but to the canvas available. These papers — all of them — have that pleasing quality of answering the topic they set, going into the necessary detail, and reflecting the state of scholarship. One cannot put a quart

into a pint glass — and this journal does not seek to impose a fixed size on each paper. Moreover, as befits a journal looking at early medieval topics, one gets real footnotes that carry the auxiliary information that another scholar may need, and the new editors are to be commended for not slipping into the practice that has occurred in other journal ‘re-launches’ of using a Harvard Style reference system. This system works well in many disciplines, and can even work well in books, but in medieval studies — particularly when one has to cite older materials and texts in a variety of languages — it simply occludes the detail that must accompany cutting-edge journal scholarship.

The range of articles is that for which *Peritia* has become well known and reflects the rich complexity of medieval scholarship with reference to Ireland. There are several pieces relating to the Anglo-Saxons — on hagiography, history, and their Irish connections. There is an edition and study of a fragment of Irish biblical exegesis in Latin. And continuing the Latin theme, there are two papers on the Irish and the study of Latin grammar in the first millennium. And on that continental theme, there is a study linking the Irish there, hagiography, and monasticism. One should not judge any journal by the mix it produces in a single issue, but the range in this volume augurs well. I would like to pick out two items for special mention, because in both cases they are monuments to great scholars who have died. When Bernhard Bischoff died in 1991 many Irish scholars were aware of him primarily as the man who first drew to attention the unedited legacy of early Irish exegesis in Latin. While there have been many disputes about his 1954 paper, now invariably referred to as ‘*Wendepunkte*,’ no one doubts its seminal importance. However, the contribution of Bischoff to early medieval scholarship more widely is far less known, and there his influence is very largely connected with his work in collaborating with E. A. Lowe on *Codices Latini Antiquiores*. A few years before his death Bischoff gave a lecture in London on this work and his own links with the earlier generation of palaeographers such as Traube, Beeson, and Ker, and that lecture is an illumination not only of the man but of a generation of industrious scholars in whose debt we still labour. This lecture is printed here (pp. 29–46) and the editors have added an apparatus that makes it a most useful guide to the development of palaeography in the twentieth century. The other paper is an appreciation by Dáibhí Ó Cróinín of Donnchadh Ó Corráin. It is only two pages in length (pp. 11–12) but it captures something of the generosity of Donnchadh as a scholar and his willingness to envisage large, new projects — of which *Peritia* was but one. It now reads — following his death — as a memorial to him.

The second part of this volume is dedicated to short notes — none more than a few pages — and this again continues a tradition of *Peritia*. Given that we often turn up little pieces of new evidence or information of value as a corollary of a major investigation, having a forum such as this where these discoveries can be set before other researchers is a real boon. In this volume there are just three such notes (pp. 201–7), but it would be a welcome development if we as a group of scholars got into the habit of publishing discoveries ‘by the way’ in such a place as *Peritia*.

The third section comprises a review article of eight pages and then a collection of twenty-four reviews taking up 73 pages. The article by Colin Ireland on Wilfrid — that central player in seventh-century Northumbria — is a most useful piece of work drawing together a complex range of studies and clarifying the *status quaestionis* on the man and his impact. Then, scanning the collection of the book reviews — all done to a high standard of academic reviewing — one wonders if the paper-based book review has had its day. A couple of generations ago the book review section was often the most used part of a journal. Going through the reviews was the way of keeping abreast of developments in a field: it told the reader what was happening outside one's immediate book environment; and, in a time when the volume of academic publishing was far smaller than today, the reviews section of a journal could endeavour to be comprehensive. Today neither of these conditions apply. We are more likely to turn to the web to find out what has been published and have simple methods for observing the publishing scene world-wide, while no journal could hope to embrace but a fraction of its field — and this problem is compounded for a journal like *Peritia* which has a wide perspective. Perhaps the time has come to ask if specialist reviews should be kept for very narrowly focused journals; more general reviews could be located on web-based book review sites, of which there is no shortage; and the space in a journal like this used more creatively by publishing more review articles that help digest the volume of published scholarship and give us an overview of the wood rather than snapshots of individual trees. This journal could have accommodated another main article and half-a-dozen review articles (similar to Colin Ireland's contribution), and I think we would have been better served.

Just before his death Donnchadh Ó Corráin gave an interview to *History Ireland* on his life as a historian and his perception of the state of the discipline, noting that still today 'it is not possible to write "the big tome" because so much is uncertain and there are so many big issues that we haven't even looked at.' That *Peritia* continues to thrive and is renewing itself is part of Donnchadh's scholarly legacy, and its work in teasing out uncertainties and looking at new questions continues.

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