

Kelman, I. 1999. "Beware the Slides of March". Ye Gesta Asnacorum, Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic, University of Cambridge.

Full Text:

Have Anglo-Saxons, Celts, and Norse—or their society at Cambridge for that matter—considered the possibility of megafloods influencing these cultures?

Well, the time has come to exchange harp gear for SCUBA gear because the Storegga Slide might be on the horizon (literally). Every 7,000 years, or thereabouts, an immense underwater landslide near the coast of Norway causes a giant tsunami (dozens of meters high at impact) which inundates the coasts of Scotland and Norway for up to 16 kilometres inland. The last one occurred about 7,000 years ago, so we are seemingly due for more excitement soon. (And you thought that Celtic slides were just for Ceilidhs). To add further complications, the Norwegian government has apparently licensed extensive offshore drilling to explore for oil in the area of the slide. Pounding away at a volatile piece of cliff is not often considered to be a terribly intelligent landslide prevention measure.

Today, flood insurance can assist somewhat in working through such problems, but when our spiritual ancestors were dancing through flowers in stone circles and carving the first Clarke penny whistle, how would they have coped with tsunami difficulties? The quick answer is that they didn't have to: Scotland and Norway were likely inhabited, but by neither Celts nor Norse as we know them today.

So then how would those pre-NaCs have coped with a rather sudden and annoying wall of water destroying everything and everyone they know? The obvious answer is to enter the event in their society's memory and culture, through stories and legends—or more likely, being from Scotland, through songs or naming a whisky after it. There are no flood whiskies which have survived to the present day of which I know, so the search begins for flood myths.

Not much of the pre-NaCs or their literature survives these days, so the focus shifts to the NaCs to see if perhaps legends might have been passed on through intercultural exchange when the NaCs moved into their respective homes. Again, however, a difficulty exists since not much interaction seemingly took place between the NaCs and any predecessors.

Nonetheless, although we are not drowning in them, scattered flood myths do hover around these cultures. For example, floods are mentioned in the old Irish text *Lebor Gabala Erenn* (The Book of the Takings of Ireland) and in *Beowulf* and *Gylfaginning*. Furthermore, I once heard that a raving, senile lunatic, oops, I mean an all-knowing, esteemed professor, argued that the account of Branwen Ferch Lyr derived from a flood myth. But Irish tales are not necessarily Scottish stories and Germanic poems are not necessarily Norse myths.

So perhaps the Scots and Norwegians remain uninfluenced by flood myths—a most unusual situation since this aspect permeates the majority of Eurasian cultures. Or perhaps the stories are buried away in academics' cluttered minds simply waiting to pop out and tell themselves to me. Even if flood myths do abound, would they have been influenced by stories of the Storegga Slide or would the NaCs have experienced their own devastating flood events? In any case, they might just have borrowed (or been forced to nurture) stories from elsewhere, or possibly even created their own ideas of death and rebirth—another predominant theme in various mythologies.

These notions are speculative but intriguing. The hazard and fascination with history is that we only discover that which exists to be discovered. What disappears through time can never be known.

Ilan Kelman

<http://www.ilankelman.org>