

## Islands of Life and Death

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**F**ACED WITH THE SKY we imagine gods; faced with the ocean we imagine islands. Absence is terrifying, and so we fill the gaps in our knowledge with invented things. These bring us comfort, but they conflict, too, with our desire for certainty and understanding. And sometimes that desire gives us back the absences we sought to fill.

For as long as people have been making stories, they have been inventing islands. In literature and in legend, they are there from the very start. For societies living at the sea's edge, the dream of other shores is the most natural dream there is. Polynesians, Marsh Arabs, the ancient Greeks, the Celts: all imagined lands beyond their horizon. All of them told stories of islands.

These places were not quite like the everyday world. They were supernatural regions, where the lines between life and death were blurred. The ocean divides us from other lands, just as death divides us from the living. The crossing can be made, but only once. Islands, then, are perfect metaphors for other worlds and afterlives. They are separate and yet connected; they are distant and yet tangible. The sea of death is cluttered with imaginary islands.

Today, we try to draw strict lines between facts and fictions. But myth, superstition and religion have been part of human life for as long as we have been human. They have shaped our thinking and guided our actions. The way we comprehend our existence is indivisible from the stories we have told ourselves. So while the islands in this chapter may be mythical, they were no less real for that.

**T**HE NOTION OF A paradise on Earth has long been part of European mythical traditions, and in Homer's *Odyssey* we find one of the oldest extant versions of the story. There, Elysium, or the Elysian Plain, is the land to which those favoured by the gods are brought. According to Proteus, the Old Man of the Sea, people there 'lead an easier life than anywhere else in the world, for in Elysium there falls not rain, nor hail, nor snow, but Oceanus breathes

Plato, in the fourth century BC, Elysium was most commonly imagined as an island or archipelago in the western ocean. It was known as the White Isle, or the Isles of the Blessed, and some considered it a place to which all could aspire.

In Plato's dialogue *Gorgias*, Socrates outlines his own belief, in terms that clearly anticipate the Christian religion yet to be born. After death, he says, body and soul become

# The Isles of the

ever with a west wind that sings softly from the sea, and gives fresh life to all men'. This, then, was not a place beyond death, but an alternative to it.

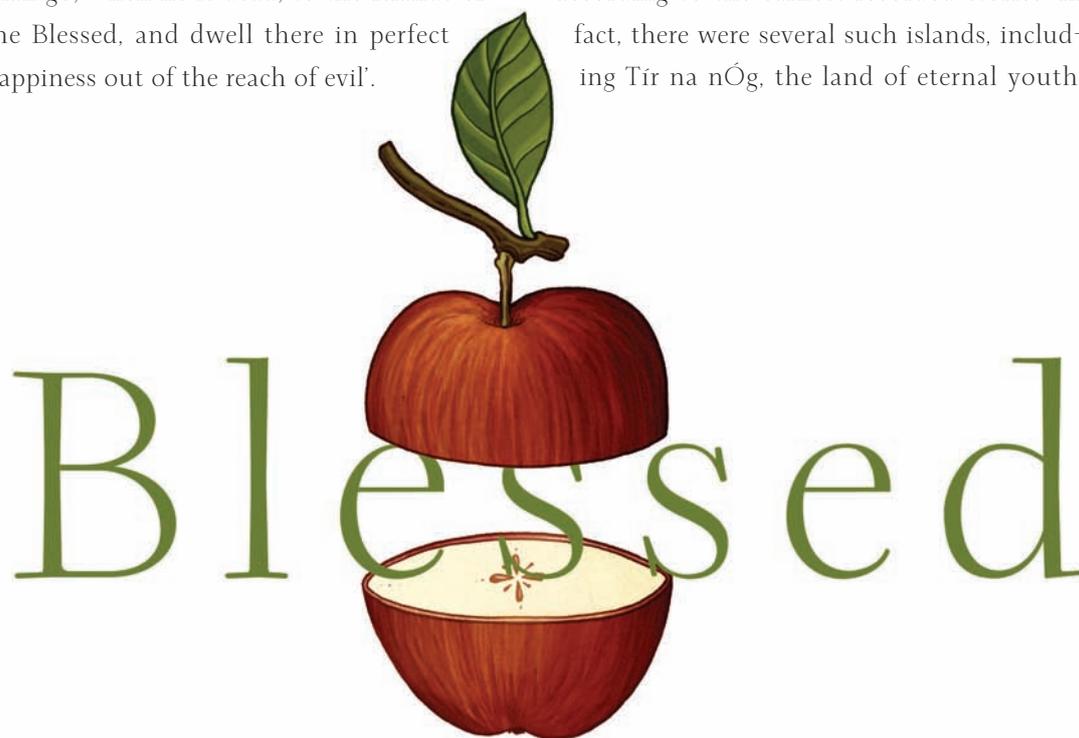
The ancient Greeks did not have one single version of this story, however. It was an evolving and multifarious idea. By the time of

separated, but each retains the character it had when alive. The fat remain fat; the scarred remain scarred. At least for a time. Equally, 'when a man is stripped of the body, all the natural or acquired affections of the soul are laid open to view'. Unlike the body, however, the soul must face judgement after death, a task un-

dertaken by three sons of Zeus. Aeacus judged those from the west and Rhadamanthus those from the east, with Minos as the final arbiter. Anyone who has 'lived unjustly and impiously shall go to the house of vengeance and punishment, which is called Tartarus'; whereas, 'he who has lived all his life in justice and holiness shall go, when he is dead, to the Islands of the Blessed, and dwell there in perfect happiness out of the reach of evil'.

The fact is, Socrates told them, 'that to do injustice is more to be avoided than to suffer injustice, and . . . the reality and not the appearance of virtue is to be followed above all things, as well in public as in private life'. Only then can one guarantee a passage to paradise.

The Celts too believed in a blessed island, according to the earliest recorded stories. In fact, there were several such islands, including Tír na nÓg, the land of eternal youth.



Socrates knew that his listeners – the rhetoricians Gorgias, Callicles and Polus – considered this story to be a myth. But he suggested they reconsider. His own life had been well lived, he claimed, and he felt ready to present his soul 'whole and undefiled before the judge'. Did they share that confidence in themselves?

It was there to which the young warrior poet Oisín eloped with Niamh, the daughter of a sea god called Manannán mac Lir. On returning to Connemara to visit his family, three years after the marriage, Oisín discovered that a year in Tír na nÓg was the same as a century in Ireland. His family were long dead.

Other such realms were often used interchangeably. There was the island of Mag Mell, akin to Homer's Elysium, where deities and favoured mortals lived without pain or sickness. There was, too, Emhain Ablach and its Welsh equivalent Ynys Afallon, the island of apples. Fruitfulness, for the Celts, was a key feature of the place.

In medieval times, that island of apples became known most famously as Avalon. It was there that King Arthur's sword Excalibur was forged, and it was there where the king himself would later reTire after being wounded at the Battle of Camlann. Just as for the early Greeks, the heroic Arthur had earned his place on the blessed isle, and his journey to it was an alternative to death. According to legend, the king would one day return from Avalon to fight for his people: a kind of Celtic messiah.

It is from the twelfth-century cleric Geoffrey of Monmouth that much of the story of Arthur is derived. In his *Vita Merlini*, Geoffrey described Avalon in some detail – detail that has been drawn directly from the Roman tradition of the Fortunate Isles and the Greek traditions of Elysium, the garden of Hesperides and the Isles of the Blessed.

*The Island of Apples gets its name 'The Fortunate Island' from the fact that it produces all manner of plants spontaneously. It needs no farmers to plough the fields. There is no*

*cultivation of the land at all beyond that which is Nature's work. It produces crops in abundance and grapes without help; and apple trees spring up from the short grass in its woods. All plants, not merely grass alone, grow spontaneously; and men live a hundred years or more.*

In cartography, the Fortunate Isles became associated with the Canaries, and medieval maps often rendered that archipelago as *Insula Fortunata*. But the mythical origins of the name were not forgotten. Although Christian teaching insisted that paradise lay in a supernatural realm, the idea of a promised land on Earth never left the European imagination. The fruitful isle remained on the western horizon. In England, the blissful land of Cockaigne was the subject of countless stories and poems; in Germany it was Schlaraffenland, the land of milk and honey; and in Spain it was Jauja, a name now attached to a small city in Peru.

As European explorers began pushing further into the Atlantic in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, many expected to find such an idyll somewhere out there. Later, after Columbus, that expectation seemed for a time to have been met, and the language and imagery once associated with the Isles of the Blessed were bestowed upon the newly discovered continent. The promised land had been found, it seemed, and it was called America.



**A**FTER DEATH, THE bodies of islanders from Mabuiag in the Torres Strait would be taken outside and laid on a platform. Clan members of the dead person's spouse would then watch over them, to ensure that the spirit, or *mari*, had properly evacuated the corpse. They would also protect it from the hungry mouths of lizards.

After five or six days, the body, which by then would be putrid, was decapitated. The head would be placed in a nest of termites, or in water, to remove the flesh. The rest of the corpse remained on the platform, covered in grass, until only the bones were left.

Once cleaned, the skull would be coloured red and placed in a basket, decorated with feathers and hair. The deceased's in-laws, who were in charge of these rituals, would then perform an elaborate ceremony in front of the dead person's family. For this they would paint themselves black and cover their heads with leaves, before presenting the skull to the closest relative. A chant would be offered to console the mourners:

*When the wind comes from the north the sky is black with clouds and there is much wind and pouring rain, but it does not last long, the clouds blow over and there is fine weather once more.*

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Other islands of the western Torres Strait had rituals that differed slightly from this one. In some, the body would be buried in a shallow grave, or else desiccated and mummified, while on others the skull would

be adorned with beeswax and shells. On one island – Muralug – a widow was expected to carry the skull of her husband in a bag for a year after his death, while other family members might wear his bones as ornaments, or keep them safe in their houses.

*mari* would be carried there on the prevailing south-easterly winds.

Upon arrival, the spirit was met by the ghost of an acquaintance – usually their most recently deceased friend – who would take them into hiding until the next new moon.

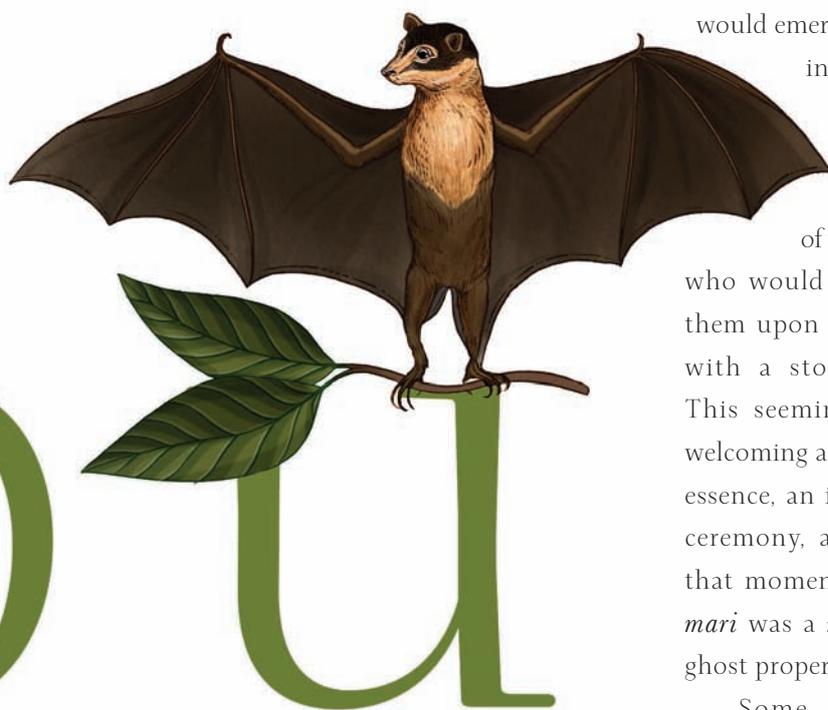
At that time they would emerge and be introduced to the other spirits of the island,

who would each hit them upon the head with a stone club. This seemingly unwelcoming act was, in essence, an initiation ceremony, and from that moment on the *mari* was a *markai*: a ghost proper.

Some believed the *markai* spent their time in treetops, crying, perhaps in the form of flying foxes.

One element was common to all, however: the belief in an island of ghosts, to which the dead person's spirit would travel. That island, called Kibu, was beyond the northwest horizon, and once it had escaped from the body the

But most agreed that the afterlife was not so different from this one, and that the spirits remained in human form. During the day they would hunt for fish with spears, and in the early evening they might dance on the

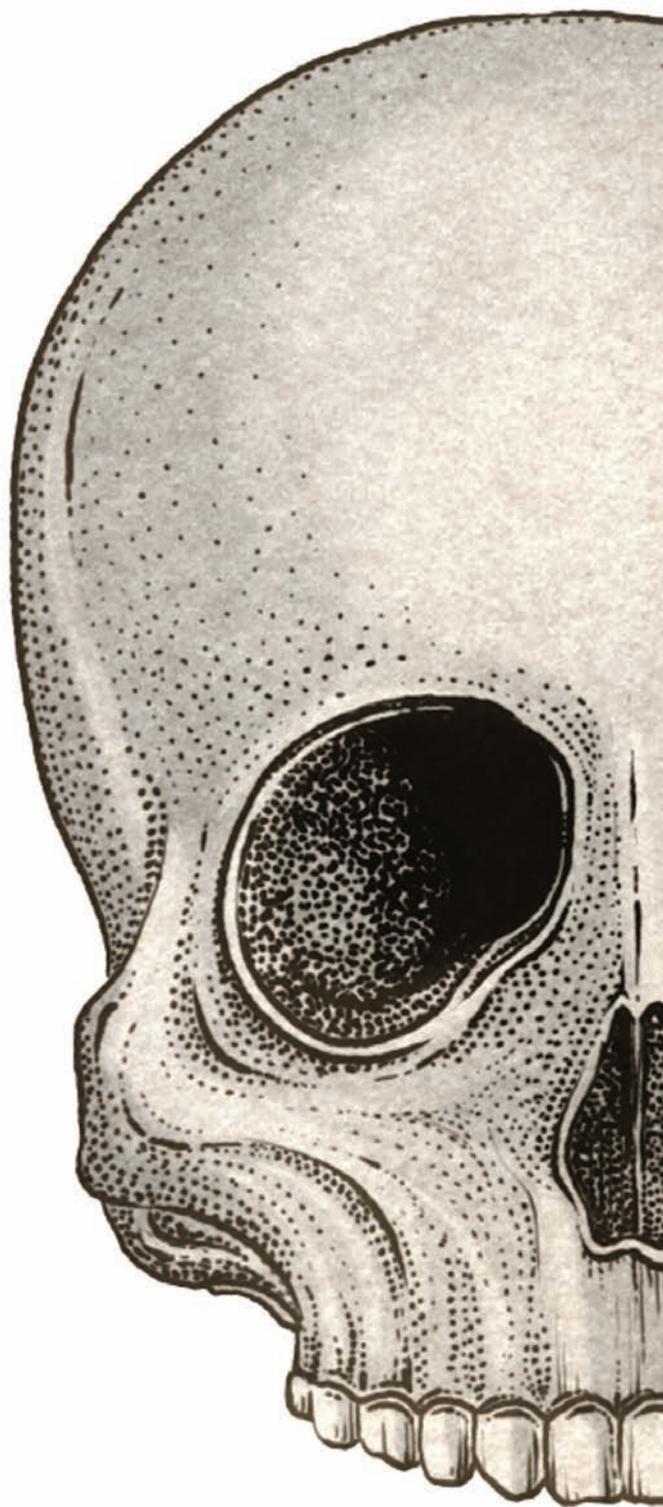


beach. The *markai* could also catch turtles and dugong (a marine mammal related to the manatee) by creating waterspouts, up which the animals would be drawn.

But ghosts were not restricted to Kibu. They could return home temporarily if they wished, and sometimes they would even go to war with the living. Islanders often invoked the *markai*, whether individually, through divination and spirit consultation, or in ceremonies such as the 'death dance', which was usually held several months after a person had passed away.

In Mabuiag, these ceremonies were called the *tai*, or simply the *markai*, and were held on the nearby uninhabited island of Pulu. Often they would mark the deaths of several people at once, and the details of the performance would depend on who and how many were being commemorated. The essence of the ceremony, however, was the representation of the dead by the living. Those taking part would rub their bodies in charcoal and decorate themselves with leaves and feathered headdresses, until they were fully disguised. Each would take on the character of a specific person, and would become, in the minds of the audience, that person's ghost.

The performers carried bows and arrows, or brooms, and danced and jumped before the spectators. There was an odd, slapstick element to these dances, with one performer skipping and falling over, while others loudly





broke wind. The ceremony concluded with the beating of drums and with a great feast.

Throughout the *tai*, the performers were imitating and personifying the dead. It was a form of consolation for the relatives, and an insistence on the continuation of that person's spirit. It was believed that the ghost was present within the dancers, and that it would continue to be part of the world. This connection was crucial. The divide between life and afterlife was like that between islands: it was real, but not insurmountable. It could be crossed. Like Kibu itself, the ghost world was accessible and comprehensible. But that accessibility would not last forever.

The rites and beliefs of the Torres Strait islanders were recorded by members of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition at the very end of the nineteenth century. But already then things were changing rapidly. The islands' government, together with missionaries, were eager to suppress and replace native customs. More spiritually and physically hygienic forms of burial were insisted upon, and the traditional beliefs were gradually replaced by Christian ones.

Kibu too was replaced, of course, by a heaven that was entirely unlike the islanders' own world. The afterlife today lies not just over the north-west horizon but skyward, detached entirely from the islands and from the sea. Unlike Kibu, heaven is unimaginable, and the ghosts of the dead are now gone for good.

# Hawaiki

**WHEN MĀORI PEOPLE** first began to communicate with Europeans in the eighteenth century, they insisted that New Zealand was not their original home. Instead, they explained, their ancestors had come from Hawaiki, an island somewhere over the north-east horizon. What's more, they had not arrived in the distant past, but only a few hundred years previously.

The details of this migration were not entirely clear. Different tribal groups, or *iwi*, told different versions of the story. And though their cultural memory was rich in detail, many Māori were understandably reluctant to share such important knowledge with settlers, especially since those settlers were also demanding to share their land.

In the best known version of the country's early history, a fisherman and explorer called Kupe discovered New Zealand more than a thousand years ago. He arrived there by accident, while chasing a giant octopus south across the ocean. Kupe then returned to Hawaiki and told his people about this new land in the south, which he called Aotearoa, the 'long white cloud'. Around **1350**, following the instructions he had given, a 'great fleet' of seven large canoes set out to make the crossing back to Aotearoa. The

passengers in those canoes were the ancestors of today's Māori.

The problem with this story is that it wasn't reliable. It was a constructed history, an amalgamation of many different tales pieced together by an ethnologist, Stephenson Percy Smith, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Smith was a thorough researcher, but his conclusions were misleading. Rather than accept the inconsistencies and mythical elements that he found within traditional stories, Smith tried instead to iron them out and present the results as fact. In doing so, he built a narrative that was neither historically accurate nor truly representative of what the Māori themselves actually believed.

As it turns out, the date Smith proposed for the 'great fleet' was not that far wrong. According to the most recent evidence, the first people to settle in the country arrived around **1280**, though not in a single flotilla but more likely in several groups, perhaps over a period of decades. The Polynesians were highly skilled navigators, and there could have been contact for some time between the new and old home. In total, there may have been as few as **200** people among those first immigrants.

The Māori's geographical origin can also

now be pinpointed with a fair degree of certainty. They came from eastern Polynesia: specifically, the Cook and Society Islands. Which might provide a simple answer to the question of Hawaiki. Except that it doesn't. For Hawaiki is not simple at all. In traditional stories it is a multifaceted idea that cannot be pinned down to a single location. This island was not just the migrants' point of departure, it was part of their luggage – that rich, mythical tradition with which they arrived.

In 1793, a Māori chief called Tuki Tahua was asked to draw a map of New Zealand for the governor of New South Wales and Norfolk Island. This he did, with an impressive degree of accuracy. But in addition to the physical features of the land, Tuki also included what he called a 'spirits road', which traced the line of mountain ranges from the far south right up to the North Cape. This was the path that one would follow after death, he explained, which led ultimately to Te Reinga Wairua, 'the leaping place of the spirits'. From that final point of land, at the tip of the North Island, each spirit would dive into the ocean then swim towards the underworld, where they would find Hawaiki.

But this island unfolds still further, for these were the words with which newborn babies were traditionally welcomed into the world:

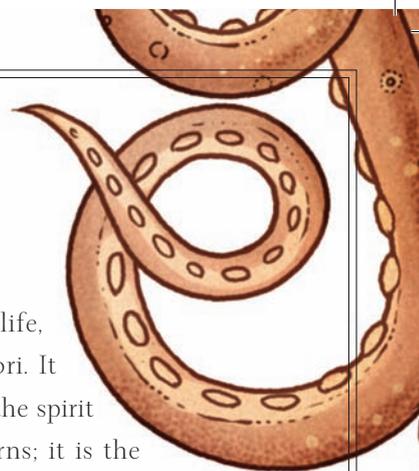
*E taku pōtiki, kua puta mai rā koe i te toi  
i Hawaiki.*

*My child, you are born from the source,  
which is at Hawaiki.*

Both afterlife and prelife, Hawaiki surrounds the Māori. It is the place from which the spirit comes and to which it returns; it is the source and the destination. In some stories, it is also the place in which the very first human was created: a kind of Eden, where gods still dwell. The precise way in which the island is portrayed – the balance between physical homeland, spiritual origin and underworld – varies greatly, depending on the story being told and the local culture of the teller. But Hawaiki is a shared idea; it ties people together. And not just within New Zealand.

Eastern Polynesia is among the most recently inhabited parts of the world. Many of the islands of that region – which stretches from Hawaii in the north to Easter Island in the east and New Zealand in the south – were populated only within the past fifteen hundred years or so. The traditions of these places are closely related and interlinked, and the notion of an origin elsewhere has remained fresh in the thinking of their people. Where most cultures have myths of creation, the Polynesians have myths of migration.

For the Māori, Hawaiki is a place of goodness. It is the place from which their people, their traditions and their culture derive. It is both real and imagined, both geographical and mythical. Yet it does not divide them from their current home, for it is within as well as without. It connects, in time and in place.







**A T THE CONFLUENCE OF** two great rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, there was once a wetland that covered thousands of square miles, the largest of its kind in all of Western Eurasia. This region – once part of Mesopotamia, now southern Iraq – was the birthplace of modern civilisation, and home to the Ma'dān people, known as the Marsh Arabs. The Ma'dān are descended from Babylonian, Sumerian and Bedouin cultures, and for five millennia their lifestyles barely changed. The way in which they lived was defined, always, by the place in which they lived.

That place was one of shallow lagoons, gangling bulrushes and low floodplains. It was a strange world, where buffalo waded among the reeds and pelicans flocked overhead; beneath the waves swam deadly serpents. Few outsiders ever knew this place, and until the mid-twentieth century it was a mysterious, half-mythical location. Gavin Maxwell travelled to the marshes in 1956, from where he brought back Mijbil, the otter that was to be at the centre of his most famous book, *Ring of Bright Water*. That otter was of a subspecies previously unknown to science, and today it carries his name: *Lutrogale perspicillata maxwelli*.

Maxwell wrote of his time in the marshes in *A Reed Shaken by the Wind*, and in his first encounters with the place he seemed confused about how to respond. It was both repellent and beautiful to him, like nowhere he had ever seen before. 'It was in some ways a terrible landscape',

he wrote, 'utterly without human sympathy, more desolate and inimical than the sea itself'. And yet, two days later, that 'terrible landscape' had become:

*a wonderland, and the colours had the brilliance and clarity of fine enamel. Here in the shelter of the lagoons the reeds, golden as farmyard straw in the sunshine, towered out of water that was beetle-wing blue in the lee of the islands or ruffled where the wind found passage between them to the full deep green of an uncut emerald.*

The people of this region lived with what their home provided. The water buffalo were not eaten, but their milk was drunk and their dung used as fuel and as cement. The Ma'dān fished with spears, kept birds to eat, and in the saturated earth they cultivated rice. The reeds that grew there in abundance were tall and strong enough to be used for making boats and building houses. From inside, the great halls they constructed – *mudhifs* – looked like the hollowed interior of a whale. Tall, curved ribs of woven reeds supported a thick, thatched skin. Everything that was needed came from the water.

The Ma'dān were Shia Muslims, and some were descendants of the prophet Mohammed himself. They believed in supernatural spirits, or *jinn*, that could take the form of snakes and other creatures. But they also retained elements



# Hufaidh

of pre-Islamic beliefs, including stories about a magical island somewhere out in the marshes. The explorer Wilfred Thesiger visited the Ma'dān several times in the 1950s, living with them for many months at a time. On one of his

stays, Thesiger was asked if he had ever heard of Hufaidh. He had, he said, but he wanted to know more. Waving towards the south-west horizon, his host told him: 'Hufaidh is an island somewhere over there. On it are palaces, and

palm trees and gardens of pomegranates, and the buffaloes are bigger than ours. But no-one knows exactly where it is.'

'Has no-one seen it?' Thesiger asked. 'They have, but anyone who sees Hufaidh is bewitched, and afterwards no-one can understand his words. By Abbas, I swear it is true. One of the Fartus saw it, years ago, when I was a child. He was looking for a buffalo and when he came back his speech was all muddled up, and we knew he had seen Hufaidh.'

The Ma'dān explained that anyone searching for the island would fail to find it. The *jinn* could make it disappear at will. But Hufaidh was real, they said. The sheiks knew of it, the government knew of it; there was no room for doubt. Like many such islands, Hufaidh existed in a region bridged between life and death. It was part paradise and part hell, both of this world and of another.

But Hufaidh is no longer of this world, for the marshes are a very different place today. The draining of the wetlands began around the time of Thesiger and Maxwell's visits. Initially it was on a small scale, to increase the availability of agricultural land. But as the decades passed, more irrigation channels diverted water away from the rivers, and the marshes began to shrink. It was not until the 1990s, though, that the damage was truly and deliberately done.

Saddam Hussein hated the Ma'dān. As Shi'as, they were hostile to the Sunnis who were in power, and had sheltered dissidents and re-

bels. So when the first Gulf War ended, Saddam took terrible revenge. He diverted the flow of the Tigris and built a new canal to ensure the water would go elsewhere. The plan succeeded. Within two years, two-thirds of the wetlands had dried up, and by the end of the decade ninety per cent of the marshland was gone. It was an act of devastating barbarism, a human and ecological tragedy.

Thousands of miles of southern Iraq, once home to fish, plants, birds and mammals, turned to desert. A unique ecosystem was lost. And the people who depended on that ecosystem – who were, in fact, part of it – were forced to flee. In the 1950s, there were half a million Ma'dān in the region. Today, there may be only ten per cent of that number, and perhaps fewer than **2,000** living as they did for five millennia, in reed huts on the water.

After the second Gulf War, Saddam's work was undone. The embankments were destroyed, and water was allowed to flow into the marshes once more. In the years since then they have grown, slowly, and they continue to grow. Some of the species that once inhabited the region have returned, though some are extinct and can never come back. The restoration of such a place is not a simple task, and some damage cannot be undone. The culture of the Ma'dān may not be lost forever; those who remained may stay, and some who left may return. But Hufaidh – that island of palm trees and pomegranates – has gone. It has turned to sand, and scattered in the wind.

