

Charles Doherty and Jan Erik Rekdal (eds), *Kings and Warriors in Early North-West Europe*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2016. 480pp. €50.00, ISBN 978-1-84682-501

This book sets out to form a synthesis of the characterisation of Kings and Warriors in the three broadly defined areas: The Celtic World, the Norse World, and the Anglo-Saxon world. It is the product of a project based at the University of Oslo and the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters led by Jan Erik Rekdal. While its broadness may lead to criticism of the volume for its lack of depth, it serves as a collection which helps to highlight the commonalities and differences between the situations in these three distinct areas.

One of the main common themes of many of these essays is the impact of Christianisation in these societies on the perception of warriors and kings. This is seen clearly in Ian Beurmann's exploration of the difference in portrayal of Pagan and Christian jarls in the *Orkneyinga saga*, the latter seen as being less war-like than the former. This was because warriors had, at times, a fractious, relationship with wider society. While they had the duty of protecting the population, their martial nature could also put their lives in peril. The survival, or lack thereof, of a pagan tradition within Christian contexts, a debate which has raged and will continue, is explored at length in this book: a settlement to the argument is yet to be found, if one exists.

The idea of the ideal Christian king is a recurring theme. The concept of the *speculum principum* or 'King's Mirror' is prevalent, especially in the Irish case with the *Audacht Morann* and *Tecosa Cormaic* being utilised by Doherty and Rekdal in their respective chapters. While there are commonalities between the three situations, it is the contextualisation of their idiosyncrasies which can be more instructive for looking at contrasting developments.

Marged Haycock explores the nature of rulership and warfare through the large corpus of Welsh poetry c. 600–1300 AD, which, she

asserts, amounts to roughly eighty-five percent of the whole. The narrative opens with a description of an ideal kingdom in *The fair thing of Taliesin* with the sound of warfare and its actors off to one side, but in the socio-political realm of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Wales, war and violence were ever-present. Battles, such as Camlan and Conwy, are portrayed could be viewed as part of an historical trauma, Haycock uses them to look at the attitude of the Welsh poetic tradition towards other invaders, most notably the English (85). Haycock deals with the treatment of themes of warfare, including the preparations and aftermath, as well as the action itself. This includes talking about the atrocities of war.

Both Charles Doherty and Ralph O'Connor use the work of Georges Dumézil in their chapters (88–92;180–1), as his wide-ranging exploration of the warrior in Indo-European societies proves a fruitful point of departure for looking at comparisons between the different societies of northwest Europe. Doherty explores the nature of the hero's *furor*, when this ability to lose control can be a destabilising factor for society, while the warrior's transition into a disciplined soldier is more effective at keeping the king safe. While the Dumézilian comparisons with Gaul from the classical era may prove fruitful to an extent, it is uncertain how his treatment of the depiction of animal iconography, for example salmon and bears, on coins in Gaul, would prove to be useful in finding a link between early medieval Ireland and the 'world of the ancient heroic warrior'. This is also true of the accounts of the Celts as seen through the ideas of Roman writers such as Strabo, Diodorus Siculus and, most notably, Caesar in *De Bello gallico*. However, this is an inherent problem when looking at early medieval Ireland where the era before the early medieval period has no historical sources and a dearth of archaeological material, although projects such as Katharina Becker's Invisible People project are helping to increase our knowledge of the Iron Age in Ireland.

The exploration of the extent to which pre-Christian ideas of society survived in early medieval Ireland is a debate which has raged between the

nativists and anti-nativists, which emphasizes the difficulty of using only Irish material to look at the pre-Christian past. While many would say that these difficulties make such studies null and void, any comparisons which could prove fruitful must be welcomed for raising possibilities. The impact of Christianisation and the Church is explored through both text and imagery from the Book of Kells to examine the Church's views on warfare and warriors. Doherty notes the changing of the passage from Matthew 10:34 in the Book of Kells, that Jesus had not come to bring 'peace but joy' from the original 'peace but sword'. While elsewhere Jesus is not as erstwhile in his denigration of violence: the attitude of the church to warbands, *díberg*, 'son of death', was intensely hostile (111–3).

Jan Erik Rekdal opens his exploration of these themes by talking about the trapped warrior, seemingly frozen by the damage he can inflict on society, or the possibility that Christianity had a civilising effect on the warrior bands, shown through the context of the gospel text in the Book of Kells (149–50). He also explores the logically contradictory themes of legitimisation through pagan ancestors and the territorial symbolism of kingship as espoused by the Christian ideal. He states that any claim to future authority is useless without the means of first legitimating their ancestry, even pagan ones. Furthermore, he explores the royal dilemma over what was to be preferred: death on the battlefield or *bás fri hadhart*, peacefully in their bed. This once again explores the dichotomy between the martial and ruling aspects of the king's role in society, as many of the kings in the saga literature, including Conn Cetchathach, often have epithets which extoll marshal prowess. He also explores the links between secular and ecclesiastical authorities, for example that between Brigit and the Leinster kings through the cemetery in which they are all buried (155–160).

Ralph O'Connor discusses the bestial nature of warriors and whether or not this imbues the warrior with a liminal nature within society. He explores sagas from both the Irish and Norse tradition; *Tain Bó*

Cúailgne, *Egils Saga* and *Hrolfs saga kraka*. The bestial, and almost non-human, imagery with which warriors are bestowed is explored, words such as berserker and ‘warp-spasm’ for the warrior’s spirit. However, the extent to which people viewed this destabilising impact of bestial rage as necessary for the preservation of the societies they represented is shown in the ability of these warriors to transcend such episodes to become dignified members of society again (205).

Morgan Thomas Davies’s essay is an attempt to give ‘authentic’ temporality to what he terms ‘warrior time’, and shows how widespread this phenomenon was across the different literary traditions. He opens the section with a passage from Homer’s *Iliad* which, while not explicitly stated by the author, may implicitly be viewed as another aspect of the process of orality and how stories may change over the generations before being committed to writing. He does reflect on this with regard to the different recensions of the *Táin Bó Cúailgne* that have survived and the difference between an author and compiler(267). The main focus for this study is the exploration of the insular epics of the *Táin Bó Cúailgne* and *Beowulf* which, while sharing many similar themes regarding warfare. However one of the differences is that the latter is awash with the intentionality of the characters and their motives, thus placing them as ‘tensed’ towards the future.

The Irish tradition, in contrast, contained hints and nudges towards a character’s thoughts to the future rather than having them explicitly stated. Medb’s idea of the future is based on the success of the collective expedition, rather than on her existence (269). This is seen most clearly in her reasoning behind the digging of a pass at Bearnas Bó Cúailgne, which was to serve as an insult to the Ulsterman rather than as a symbol of Medb’s prowess.

Another effect of these traditions is while the narrative of *Beowulf* tries to obfuscate the events to come, the Irish tradition often has the events preordained from the beginning of the narrative. This is clearly

shown by Medb's foreshadowing of the closing episode of the *Táin* where the Donn Cúailgne and the Finnbennech clash.

Jan Gunnar Jorgensen provides an account of Óláfr Haraldsson, one of Norway's most celebrated kings who was canonised within a year of his death in 1029 AD. This chapter tangentially also explores the nature of time, and how the perception of the Christian view of an ideal king can be established post-mortem, and that their characterisation while still alive, can be in stark contrast. Through an exploration of the full corpus of work on Óláfr, Jorgensen has shown that while alive chroniclers very rarely, if ever, talked about Óláfr as a Christian, as opposed to the missionary he was portrayed after his death, such as in the account contained within his *Life* (357–59).

Ian Beurmann explores the influence that warriors could have in the decision-making of kings and the moralistic nature of the saga-writers' take on these episodes, most clearly demonstrated in *Jomsvikings* saga. He also used the *Orkneyinga* and *Fæeryinga* sagas, along with mentions from *Sverris* saga, to expand on these themes. While the last of these is the earliest work in the corpus known as the King's sagas, the three former are only sometimes included in it, but also included in their own sub-genre, as 'colonial' or 'political' sagas. Sverrir takes the Norwegian throne by force, but it is through his descent from a former king of Norway that he legitimises himself, added to the will of both God and St Óláfr, rather than as a conqueror. It was during his reign that Norwegian interest was rekindled in the north Atlantic archipelago.

In the *Jomsviking* saga, this differentiation between warriors and kings is more blurred, as only four of the kings represented are actively involved in warfare, while the *Faeryinga* saga has as clear a differentiation as the *Orkneyinga* saga (329–30). For instance, in two episodes involving Óláfr Tryggvason his warrior credentials are not stressed, and with the latter episode involving Sigmundr and the pagan ring, it could be seen as the king's piety being emphasized. The *Jomsviking* and *Orkenyinga* saga

also highlight the role of warriors in the process of king-making, and the implications for wider society due to these actions taking place

Stefka G. Eriksen explores the nature of the warriors' self-characterisation and how they saw their role in society through the cognitive actions of reflection and self-awareness (400–1). She opens her narrative with a wide-reaching exploration of what amounts to war, including military actions to the act of harrying, and also on a spiritual and internal level through writing. She combines this narrative with an exploration of the socio-political developments in fourteenth-century Iceland, the most significant of which was its incorporation into the Norwegian kingdom in 1263 and the increasing isolation of Iceland, which culminated in the treaty of Kalmar in 1397. She concludes that the genres of literature explored in the article i.e. Icelandic family sagas, legendary sagas and translated romances, treat its warriors and society, and their inter-relationship, differently. She achieves this by making a distinction for the role of the heroes in each, with those in the familial sagas being represented as warriors involved in feuds with various factions (406–14), whereas those in the legendary sagas were the more archetypal image of the 'hero' (415–23). This is also reflected in their roles in the sagas, with the warriors in the former being interested in land disputes, and those in the latter being imbued with superhuman abilities. The heroes of the translated romances are akin to the chivalric knights of courtly tales of Chrétien de Troyes (423–29), and in these, the singular acts of heroes are to the fore.

While some of the chapters may be viewed as overly long, the volume as a whole serves as a basis for discussion on the nature of violence and authority that should interest those both within and without the field of medieval studies: The constant themes of rulership, and the ability to conduct marshal action while also controlling the unstable nature of the warrior, as exemplified by O'Connor's chapter (180–236); as also the development of Christian ideals of the disciplined warrior shown in

Rekdal's chapter (149–79); the idea of development of new ideas over time, as shown explicitly in the Haycock's essay as well as those of Beumann (310–44) and Eriksen (399–432). Furthermore, the overall length may have been the rationale for not including a concluding chapter to bring the comparisons and differences into focus, but overall the explorations of these themes will hopefully spur on further research.

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