

REVIEW

Katherine Holman

The Northern Conquest: Vikings in Britain and Ireland

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THE Northern Conquest is a plucky and playful title, and names an equally plucky and playful paperback book. Intended as an inviting introduction to the subject of Scandinavian activity in medieval Britain and Ireland, rather than a specialist scholarly study, it is lively, warm and eminently approachable, helpfully concentrating in the main upon interesting ‘themes and controversies’ rather than factual ‘details’. Consequently, this will make a refreshing and enjoyable read for historians new to any of the sub-disciplines covered, as well as for popular-history addicts – and of course the school and university students and teachers who will no doubt gain most from it.

The Northern Conquest plugs a striking gap in the recent literature. As Holman points out in her Introduction, survey texts on exactly this subject are decidedly thin on the ground, despite the fact that there exists abundant relevant scholarship upon which survey-authors might draw, as well as (one presumes) a very large potential readership – a commercial market, even. This is not say, of course, that novice students of the Viking-Age have been in any way deprived of accessible reading matter: *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings* (ed. Sawyer), *Viking Empires* (edd. Forte, Oram and Pedersen), and even *The Vikings: A Very Short Introduction* (Julian D. Richards) are all fine textbooks which have appeared in recent years, and which have provided solid starting-points for further study of British and Irish material. In addition, there have of course been region- and discipline-specific works, such as the archaeologically-orientated *Vikings in Scotland* (Graham-Campbell and Batey). Holman has, in essence, simply addressed the obvious point that most

students educated in British schools or universities (or through British books and television) are best-accustomed to peering through an Insular-history lens, and find it a handy tool, particularly when trying to spot first landmarks in unfamiliar cultural territory.

Can such an approach be justified from a more theoretical angle, founded perhaps upon an argument that medieval inhabitants of the British Isles (including those of Scandinavian descent) would themselves have recognized the area as a unit, at least in some respects? Holman argues for the adoption of a 'wider perspective', based on the fact that viking armies 'moved around the British and Irish coasts indiscriminately', and scatters examples of interregional contact throughout her text – but somewhat more explicit discussion of this idea would have been welcome (as would a clearer response to the question begged by the delicious book-title: 'Was there, after all, a 'Northern Conquest'?) Additionally, in a revised edition, I wonder whether Holman might consider reinforcing her frame of reference still further by inserting a short background chapter characterizing Insular culture prior to the first invasions, as her predecessor Henry Loyn so valuably did, in *The Vikings in Britain*.

For her chosen readership, Holman improves upon Loyn in a number of ways. Firstly, she canters briskly – friskily, almost – through current research methods ('Uncovering the Viking Past'), revelling in explaining both possibilities and limitations. Secondly, she uses endnotes, demonstrating how to reference sources. Thirdly, she makes points graphically, introducing pictures (a few unfortunately rather indistinct), and a list of 'Key Dates'. Fourthly, her suggestions for further reading are, naturally, much more up-to-date. Her most substantial new contribution, however, is probably her chapter on the situation 'After the Norman Conquest'. Here (as in *OIHV*), attention is drawn to planned post-Hastings 'invasions' by two Danish kings. What Holman adds is a contention that, in particular geographical areas, support for the first of these kings may have been linked to some sense of Anglo-Scandinavian identity, perhaps also mirrored in a variety of literary texts. These would include, in Holman's estimation, runic inscriptions, which are her own specialism, and which provide a fascinating scholarly heart for this wide-ranging book. Next, there is more general discussion of post-1066 links between the British Isles and Scandinavia (many ecclesiastical, literary, or mercantile), and of specific Scandinavian political circumstances which appear to have affected Insular events in various ways.

At this point, it must be said that Holman strays a little from her 'minimum fact, maximum analysis' policy; and there is something of the same in an earlier chapter on 'Viking Kings'. But this is a minor flaw (and a matter of

personal taste). Holman does return again and again to Insular detail, stating perceived significance regularly – and probably all that is really required here is marginally firmer editing, allowing highlights to shine out through the rather densely-clustered names and dates. Indeed, the chapter ends strongly (on ‘Deterioration of Relations’ and ‘The End of the Scandinavian Period’), with plaguesome kings ushered from centre-stage to make room for more easily-grasped forces for change, such as the Hanseatic League and the Black Death.

What of the other topics covered by this book? A chapter on ‘Raiders from the North’ enlivens familiar material with sparky chat, whilst gently introducing a number of important scholarly ideas (‘The Second Viking Age’, for example). The focus is historical, but archaeological evidence is outlined too, and some illustrative primary sources are cited in translation; in fact, a little more of the same might have lent some extra crunch and spice. The chapter on ‘Colonists’ likewise sketches relevant archaeological findings, before launching into endearingly-enthusiastic explorations of current – often competing – interpretations of the available linguistic data. After slightly awkwardly-intervening chapters on ‘Viking Kings’ and the topic of ‘Pagan Meets Christian’, Holman turns to ‘Scandinavian Society’. That much of the first part of this chapter is devoted to conditions outwith the British Isles will, inevitably, seem illuminating to some, distracting to others. (The verse, *Rígsþula*, used by Holman as the basis for an exploration of social hierarchy, could perhaps have formed a cultural bridge here, if its possible Irish connexions had been emphasized.) What will certainly be shared by most non-specialist readers is an appreciation of the clarity of Holman’s sketches of legal and administrative matters (equivalent to Loyn’s overview of ‘Institutional evidence’). Similarly, Holman is impressively-disciplined in her focus on the social significance of the art she introduces. The ‘Pagan Meets Christian’ Chapter will undoubtedly be avidly-read by students, in the first instance for its inherently exciting subject-matter, but thereafter for its meaty primary source quotations, and for its fine coverage of key questions.

Apart from the minor flaws indicated above, the book contains a number of even more trivial glitches, which could be excised without difficulty in a revised edition. The two tiny typographical errors which sprang out on initial reading drew genuine smiles: ‘Author’sown photograph’ (vii, description of Fig 7) and ‘J.D. Bu’lock’ (247). More substantially, I would prefer to see un-anglicized versions of fully Scandinavian names: these do always tend to look a little odd at first, but I am not convinced that traditional English modifications help rather than hinder students new to this subject. That said, I mention this precisely because it is so exceptionally plain from the outset that it is above

all Holman's intention to aid, enthuse and encourage her readers to further investigation (as suggested in her sensible, generous 'Further Reading' section and Bibliography, both annotated). In this, I think, *The Northern Conquest* is bound to succeed.

Lisa Collinson