

*Jan Erik Rekdal and Charles Doherty (eds)*

*Kings and Warriors in Early North-West Europe*

Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2016;  
480pp. Hardback. £45

ISBN 978-1-84682-501-9

WARFARE HAS BEEN a major factor shaping societies throughout history, so exactly how the warriors who fought and the leaders directing the fighting interacted with each other and their communities helped to define much of the medieval world. This was not only in the spheres of politics, socio-economics, and structures of power, but also in terms of ideals, customs, and social relations which determined the nature of the conflict. This book focusses on the mental and intellectual world of those fighters and kings who conducted war, and how they and others, in particular the Church, tried to reconcile the protective function of these warriors with the potentially dangerous and horrific reality of what battle might actually entail. It is the result of the 'Representation of the warrior in relation to the king in the European Middle Ages (600-1200)' project, concentrating on Ireland, Wales, Anglo-Saxon England, and Scandinavia, which was undertaken by a group of international scholars led by Jan Erik Rekdal in the 2012-13 academic year at the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters. The intention was to study the medieval literatures of these regions to consider how these sources depicted the relationships between warriors and kings, and the rest of society. The book, in fact, covers a wider subject area than the initial project, often considering sources from later than 1200, and touching upon Scotland in multiple chapters, since all of the languages whose literatures are studied in this volume were present in medieval northern Britain.

This long book enables the authors to explore their subjects in depth, providing a number of useful insights. The useful 'Introduction' explains some of the main themes and issues to be explored in the book, before providing a helpful summary of each of the eight contributions. The different contributors

focus on different texts and approaches, but are usually complementary in terms of subject matter: Marged Haycock, considering Welsh poetry from A.D. 600-1300, and Jon Gunnar Jørgensen, studying the representation of King Óláfr Haraldsson the Saint in medieval (especially skaldic) poetry and prose, provide lengthy studies of one subject over time, while others have studied a more restricted selection of texts from one country. Haycock's comprehensive study explores attitudes to war as well as its reality in the poetry, placing it effectively in the context of the historical evidence for conflicts undertaken by royal dynastic members, the warband, and the *penteulu*, the head of the warband. This chapter manages to generalise, as well as where appropriate, recognising issues with the evidence and changes over time. The result is a very useful analysis for anyone wanting to acquaint themselves with this subject, for instance when trying to understand the poetry of the 'Old North', such as *Y Gododdin*, which relates to southern Scotland.

Jon Gunnar Jørgensen, through his detailed study containing an appendix listing and translating the descriptive terms in the sources, demonstrates convincingly that the skaldic poetry contemporary with Óláfr Haraldsson's life focused on his kingly and warrior functions without reference to Christianity, but that this changed in the years immediately following his death, as skaldic poems began to regard him as holy, a depiction which came to dominate at the expense of other qualities in later centuries. While Jørgensen seems to explain the change as a shift in ideals of kingship, his own evidence that earlier the first Christian king, Óláfr Tryggvason, was depicted with Christian imagery contradicts this conclusion. Perhaps there were other reasons why Óláfr Haraldsson did not want to portray his reign as Christian? Maybe after his death, following his deposition and failure to retake Norway, perhaps Óláfr's Christianity, but not other aspects of his life, could become a potent weapon. Without exploring the immediate context more thoroughly than Jørgensen does, perhaps with parallels with royal 'martyrs' elsewhere (such as the later portrayal of Brian Boru in Ireland), it is difficult to explain why there was such an immediate change in the depiction of Óláfr Haraldsson after his death in 1030.

Ian Beuermann considers three Old Norse sagas from the late twelfth century – *Orkneyinga saga*, *Jómsvíkinga saga*, and *Færeyaringa saga* – which are studied in comparison with *Sverris saga*, a text about the Sverrir who, from an initially weak position in the Faroes, in the years after 1177 came to power in Norway through warfare. Beuermann compares and contrasts the depiction of kings and warriors and their inter-relationships, proposing that in *Orkneyinga saga* the warrior function of rulers is more prominent than in the other texts, but that all these sagas contain debates about how leading warriors should

interact with their kings, whether as subordinates or kingmakers, reflecting some of the issues that rulers of tributary peoples of Norway faced in the new conditions of King Sverrir's reign.

Stefka G. Eriksen's study of self-reflection and awareness in fourteenth-century Old Norse texts, in particular Icelandic Family Sagas (*Njáls saga*, *Egils saga*, and *Laxdæla saga*), Legendary Sagas (*Örvar Odds saga*, *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, and *Ásmundar saga kappabana*), and translated romances (*Parcevals saga*, *Erex saga*, and *Ívens saga*), places them in relation to the idea that there was a twelfth-century rise in the idea of the 'individual' in Europe. She argues that characters in these tales exhibit a strong ability to decide their actions rationally, considering the consequences of decisions. In some cases, characters do play 'social roles', such as that of the warrior, but not without reflection and rational decision-making. According to Eriksen, therefore, these sources reflect the idea of characters and the readers of these tales as individuals, negotiating their own lives in their social contexts, with the act of compilation of such stories in manuscripts representing another means of reflecting social identities.

Charles Doherty and Jan Erik Rekdal both consider early medieval Ireland, especially relations between kings and the Church, but they take somewhat different approaches. The former studies a variety of subjects with comparisons that range over time and space, from the ancient Romans and Celts to India, as well as analysing sources for Leinster and Ulster in relation to Armagh and Kildare, and the depiction of a warrior in the Book of Kells. The result is a somewhat disjointed study, with multiple lengthy sidetracks, which for many readers will probably make this a very difficult piece to follow. Doherty, while acknowledging briefly some of the recent scholarship expressing concerns about the use of Dumézil's work and reconstructions of common Indo-European and Celtic societies, then employs these approaches without sufficient criticism. For instance, he gives examples from Dumézil of warfare in Rome's early history without identifying the sources, many of which were actually written centuries after the purported events and could reflect later concerns and reconstructions of the past. While Doherty does produce an interesting parallel about developing perceptions of kingship between early Christian Ireland and Buddhism in India, given the lack of detailed discussion of the Asian example, the reader is left to wonder whether the similarities are coincidental rather than reflecting a broader structure of world human development. Doherty's study contains a lot of interesting ideas, but the argument is often not sufficiently focussed or explained.

In contrast, Rekdal focuses on three poetic texts which relate to Leinster from the period of A.D. 800-1200, providing a very useful commentary on

their contexts and how these inform the poems' contents, especially the degree to which they have Christian ideals and messages at their core. Both the studies of Rekdal and Doherty stress the importance of the Church in creating new ideologies relating to kings (they focus less on non-royal warriors), also suggesting continuities as the Church had to come to terms with the pagan ancestry of current ruling dynasties. Rekdal in particular, provides an excellent discussion of how poets, through describing the graves of heroic ancestors while recognising the superiority of more recent Christian kings and saints, enabled the memory of the pre-Christian past to be preserved and commemorated.

Two other chapters, those by Ralph O'Connor and Morgan Thomas Davies, adopt an alternative approach, comparing texts from different countries to make illuminating points about the nature of each literary tradition and the societies which produced them. Ralph O'Connor focusses on the 'monsters of the tribe', those warriors who become transformed in battle into something more powerful yet less controllable. In the Irish context he studies Cú Chulainn in the epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, and on the Scandinavian side Egil in *Egils saga* and Böðvarr bjarki in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, although the discussion, especially on Norse literature, is more wide-ranging. O'Connor has as a target the tendency of scholars, such as Georges Dumézil, to pick particular episodes and characters as aspects of a common pre-Christian warrior mentality and institution called the *Männerbund*, a group of unattached men living a wild warlike life outside of normal society, often symbolised by others and themselves by wolves, bears and similar animals, connecting Cú Chulainn's *riastrad* ('warp spasm') and *fianna* warriors to Old Norse berserkers and shapeshifting. O'Connor argues that when each text is considered in detail, the portrayal of characters is more complex: Egil is not a berserker; Böðvarr bjarki is not actually a shapeshifter and is an enemy of berserkers; and Cú Chulainn is not a member of a *fianna*, does not undertake his warp-spasm as much scholars have suggested, and as an adult is able to control his transformations more for the benefit of his people. He argues that the tales were not static reminiscences to be quarried, but living texts, with subtle meanings. We need to rethink the supposed centrality of *furor*, warrior frenzy, as the main 'causal motor' behind narratives about social dysfunction, or about people transgressing the boundary between humans and animals. O'Connor is scathingly critical of general accounts (p.234): 'By comparison with the distinctness, subtlety and power of the first recension of the *Táin* or the A-redaction of *Egils saga*, the static and composite resumés of wild warrior behaviour handed down to us in so many popular overviews (and some scholarly ones) are as bland and pointless as a three-course meal put into a blender.'

Morgan Thomas Davies, in his chapter entitled 'Warrior time', compares the Old English poem *Beowulf* to the first recension of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* in the light of Martin Heidegger's theory of 'authentic' temporality in his *Being and Time*; an 'authentic' person is someone who recognises their own mortality, but is not afraid of it and does not avoid thinking about death by only considering the present. Davies states that the character of Beowulf in his poem, and to some extent King Hrothgar and others, including even the monsters Grendel, Grendel's mother and the dragon, are given thoughts and the ability to undertake premeditated actions. The poem repeatedly moves backwards and forwards in time, as characters in the present reflect on the past as the basis for their future activities. In particular, Davies argues that Beowulf repeatedly cites and tries to emulate his previous feats when he is about to face monsters, so that Beowulf's actions and time itself become intrinsically connected, as he faces and does not fear death acting in an 'authentic' manner.

In contrast, according to Davies *Táin Bó Cúailnge* rarely contains similar meditations, with the hero Cú Chulainn generally involved in a series of encounters with enemy warriors and sometimes undertaking deeds which detract from his aim of defending Ulster and their special bull. Unlike O'Connor, Davies regards Cú Chulainn's *riastrad* as indicative of his fundamental instability and lack of control. While it might be argued that in focussing on these two texts, Davies is not comparing like with like, especially since Cú Chulainn, with his supernatural parentage and strength, seems almost undefeatable. The analysis at the end broadens out to consider the literatures more generally. His suggestion, that the inner dimension of *Beowulf* which characterises other Old English poetry reflects a fundamental disruption caused by the movement of the Anglo-Saxons from the Continent to Britain, whereas Irish texts focus more on explaining their landscape, is an interesting insight. Given the size of the corpus, it would have been welcome to have had another contribution on the English literary evidence to complement or contrast with Davies's study.

Overall, *Kings and Warriors in Early North-West Europe* contains a number of thought-provoking studies, including two comprehensive analyses of particular corpora. Often the subjects are complementary in terms of subject matter, although there is very little clear evidence such as cross references that the authors have interacted substantially in coming to their conclusions, as might have been expected given the nature of the project underlying the volume. Given the different backgrounds of the scholars, it is perhaps no surprise that there is no consensus reflected in these chapters. Indeed, the approaches of O'Connor and Doherty on the issues of continuity of practices from the ancient Indo-European or Celtic past, and the use of Dumézil's

work, are fundamentally opposed to each other. Many of the studies, in considering the texts in terms of their contemporary contexts and messages, represent a welcome shift away from regarding them largely in terms of a simple Christian versus pagan paradigm, but the larger question of whether similarities across societies regarding kings and warriors derive from a shared ancestry or from environmental and contextual factors is not really addressed in this volume. Nevertheless, even without a coherent message, this book is a very stimulating set of discussions, which hopefully will be a basis enabling future researchers to provide the bigger picture.

*Nicholas Evans*  
*University of Aberdeen*