

REVIEWS

Adrián Maldonado

*Crucible of Nations: Scotland from Viking Age to
Medieval Kingdom*

Edinburgh: NMS Enterprises Limited-Publishing,
2021

ISBN 9781910682432

THIS 2021 publication by Adrián Maldonado is both an accessible introduction to 'Viking Age' Scotland and a work which demonstrates the value of fresh approaches to archaeological collections, even those as well-studied as those held by the National Museum of Scotland. Much of the subject matter has been covered before, and many of the featured objects are exemplars of their type. What makes this volume come alive, however, is the revolutionary stance which Maldonado takes from the first page: that Scotland's past is more nuanced and dynamic than has been traditionally appreciated, and that studying this past, even through objects in museum collections (suspended in animation through sanitised display case environments or, as in this book, the portrait-style photograph), should be in no way stagnant. The work is organised into eight chapters, wherein diverse objects and events are allowed to enter into conversation under broadly-thematic headers, providing an alternative to tendencies in academic archaeological writing to categorise and delineate.

In the first chapter, *Naming Nations*, the 'active-ness' of the past is shown to be central to our understanding of the book's subject matter: 'this book is not actually about Scotland,' but something far more nebulous (page 3). Importantly too, Maldonado clarifies potential issues with the volume's reliance upon several terms which may give academic audiences pause, most notably 'viking'-related terminology (8-9). At its core, this introductory chapter illustrates the book's titular metaphor, that of the crucible as a conduit for a transformative historical experiment through which Scotland as understood today would fortuitously be forged.

In Chapter Two, Maldonado discusses Scotland's role in the long eighth century, advocating 'new and more sustainable' methods of interpreting evidence related to the interaction between pagan and Christian traditions (43). Instead of revealing an incompatible 'clash' (epitomised by the culturally-engrained idea of the all-destroying 'viking raid'), the material evidence reveals that these forces often came together *dialectically*: an active and nuanced 'invention of traditions' (29). By proposing a shift in how we conceptualise 'viking' influence (e.g., from something negative/oppositional/destructive to something which extends/broadens/transforms, Maldonado expands what questions can be asked of a limited body of evidence and, arguably, facilitates more meaningful discussions in response.

In the second chapter, Maldonado imbues even the material world of the dead with agency and complexity by shifting focus away from the information that graves reveal about buried individuals (which is, as he suggests, ultimately very little), to what insights they reveal about the communities who buried them. Through an empathetic study of past communities' experiences of *burying* and *burial* ('theatres of performance' popularised by Judith Butler), Maldonado explores human memory, visuality, and even emotions, his study providing a stark contrast to traditional archaeological approaches which attempt to categorise buried individuals within reductionist and modern conceptual frameworks (e.g., 'warrior graves,' 'female burials'). It is clear that there is significant value to be gained through such approaches.

In Chapter 4, the continuing effects of antiquarian romanticism are challenged through an investigation of how modern archaeological studies conceptualise the *hoard*, the object-type considered most traditionally emblematic of the violence of the Viking era. This overly-simplistic association is called into question through Maldonado's consideration of two hoard 'biographies' (the Talnotrie and Croy hoards), revealing them to be nebulous groups of objects capable of blurring boundaries and revealing meaningful insights into the complexities of past cultural interactions.

Chapter 5 explores the concept of the individual through the medium of brooches, objects which potentially shaped and were shaped by their relation to their human wearer in a type of 'body politics.' Like in the preceding chapters, objects, in this case brooches, are demonstrated to be 'alive with power and agency' in the lives of those who wore, viewed and experienced them on multiple, shifting scales: in terms of large-scale cultural interactions between Scotland and Scandinavia, as well as in the negotiation and performance of local social relations between communities and individuals (109).

The next chapter presents a transformative approach to one of the most defining archaeological signatures of this period: silver. Maldonado spends

relatively little time on traditional avenues of studying these objects (i.e., production, typology etc.) but rather uses silver as a conduit through which to explore the social and economic processes that attracted raiding groups to Northern Britain. Most memorably, this chapter concludes by confronting the reader with the revelation of what Scotland's silver *meant* in this period, emphasising that we have been desensitised to the violence of human slavery that potentially (if not probably) underpinned the silver economy with which these familiar museum treasures were inextricably entangled.

In Chapter 7, Maldonado explores the dynamic qualities and shifting meanings of 'sacred' objects - "locally meaningful objects of power"-traditionally viewed within two separate realms of interpretation and meaning: Christianity and paganism (165). Although one of the less stimulating chapters, Maldonado nonetheless demonstrates how even seemingly radical changes were tied to gradual and dialectical processes of exchange and renegotiation between an emerging 'Europeanising' trend and the 'lingering regional artistic tradition' within Pictish culture (181).

Lastly, Maldonado explores the idea of the twelfth-century renaissance-namely, the impact and consequences of conceptualising the era within themes of progress and development. This chapter critiques approaches which situate the emergence of 'modern' Scotland within this period as teleological and problematic. Historical changes do not appear *ex nihilo* fully-formed, but have 'deeper roots' in the past from which they extend (205). As Maldonado concludes the volume, he proposes an outlook which both celebrates the "messiness and complexity" of the past and limitlessly expands the questions we can ask of it (*ibid.*).

Maldonado engages historical texts and archaeological material in a dialectic which illuminates the nuances and even shortcomings of our attempts to understand the past through either medium. Further, the association with NMS means that volume's relation to archaeology is unique and selective, with most featured objects forming part of the Museum's collection (although not exclusively, the book highlights numerous objects which had not previously been included in publications) and thus unlikely to reflect the scope of surviving archaeological material, nor the actual range of individuals once populating Scotland's past. However, all archaeological work is characterised by its absences and an inability to be holistic. Maldonado's methodology is mindful and empathetic of this shortcoming, and this transparency is among the volume's greatest strengths.

The book is thoughtfully organised and illustrated, with detailed large-scale images emphasising the textures and materiality of the artefacts, sometimes to such extremes that objects become context-less and abstracted. This makes

for a striking contrast between the reverence with which we encounter archaeological objects today via museum and book settings and their once very-active embeddedness in human lives, encouraging us to question how and to what effect our perception of the past is mediated. Coupled with Maldonado's flowing writing and comprehensive bibliography, the volume is accessible and engaging for academic and non-academic audiences alike (the review copy kept on my desk was misplaced on nearly a daily basis by various family members picking it up for a read-through).

This publication greatly adds to our understanding of the dynamic and complex qualities of Scotland in this period, and is a clear example of the insights that post-processual archaeological approaches can offer. Maldonado succeeds in re-animating the material culture of the past from museum curios to objects actively at the centre of past human experience, an exciting and meaningful approach which shall hopefully inspire future works in a similar vein.

*Sophia Kniaz
University of St Andrews*