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The Origin of the Kingdom of the Isles and *Caithréim Chellacháin Chaisil*¹

Clare Downham

THE MEDIEVAL 'Kingdom of the Isles' was a territory stretching along Britain's western seaboard from Lewis to the Isle of Man. The term risks giving us a false sense of political unity to these scattered islands. As Seán Duffy has pointed out, the medieval title of 'king of the Isles' could variously apply at different times to a king of one island or a group of islands with wider ambitions and it is possible that more than one king operated in this region at any one time.² This paper analyses the development of an over-arching kingship highlighting potential insights from the somewhat neglected Middle Irish text *Caithréim Chellacháin Chaisil*. This saga is thought to have been written in the second quarter of the twelfth century. It narrates events of the mid-tenth century, combining fact and fiction to celebrate the achievement of Cellachán, an early-tenth-century king of Munster.

While vikings were active around the western seaways from the end of the eighth century, the first clues regarding the political organisation of Man and the Hebrides are problematic. As Alex Woolf has noted, earlier historians were led by the relatively late Icelandic *Landnámabók* in their evaluation of the origin of the Kingdom of the Isles. This provides the narrative that a leader called Ketill Flatnose was sent by the Norwegian king Haraldr hárfagri to win control over the Hebrides. However, Woolf has dismissed this account, suggesting this was "a story created in later days to legitimate Norwegian claims to sovereignty in the region".³ The narrative promoted the idea that the political unit (the *Suðreyjar* or Southern Isles) was formed by a single act of the Norwegian ruler.

1 This text is based on a section of the Angus Matheson Memorial Lecture at the University of Glasgow presented in 2022, with thanks to the hosts and the audience of this event and additional thanks to the peer reviewers of this paper for their feedback. Lower case 'v' is preferred for the word 'vikings' as I do not consider it to be an ethnic label.

2 Duffy 2002, 53.

3 Woolf 2007, 296.

Place name evidence suggests that the process of land-taking across this chain of islands by speakers of Old Norse was probably not achieved by one individual, but that the process was decentralised and variable.⁴

Drawing on contemporary sources for named leaders in the Isles, a struggle for control of the seaways between Ireland and Britain can be observed in the second decade of the tenth century, after the dynasty of Ívarr were expelled from Ireland in 902. Ívarr and his descendants had established themselves as leaders in Dublin from the late ninth century with ambitions to control large parts of Britain. Their expulsion from Ireland in 902 by a coalition of kings of Brega and Leinster meant a significant loss to their power and prestige.⁵ There was a brief flurry of viking activity in eastern Scotland in 903 and 904 including a battle in which Ívarr grandson of Ívarr was killed.⁶ This may reflect attempts by the dynasty to expand their power outside Ireland. In 913, vikings defeated a “new fleet from Ulster” (*nochoblaigh de Ulltaib*) in battle off the English coast.⁷ The reference to a new fleet could suggest that during the absence of the dynasty of Ívarr from Ireland, Irish kings took the opportunity to beef up their naval power. In the following year, there was a power struggle at sea between two rival groups of vikings as Barðr Ottarson and Rögnvaldr grandson of Ívarr clashed at the Isle of Man.⁸ For the dynasty of Ívarr, asserting their power over the seaways between Britain and Ireland was the precursor to re-establishing control over Waterford and Dublin in the following years.⁹

It is in the next decades that we get the first references to kings of the Isles, albeit in later sources. The *Annals of Clonmacnoise* record the death of Gebeachán ‘king of the Islands’ at the Battle of Brunanburh in 937.¹⁰ The text is an early seventeenth century English translation of an earlier Irish chronicle and this name does not appear in other accounts. Gebeachán is a Gaelic name, and Andrew Jennings suggests he may have been appointed as a subordinate of Óláfr Guðrøðsson, king of Dublin, who is named as king of Ireland and ‘many islands’ (*multarumque insularum*) in the early-twelfth-century Chronicle of John of Worcester when he fought at the Battle of Brunanburh.¹¹ John’s claim that Óláfr was a son-in-law of Causantín (Constantine) king of Alba could suggest that he drew from a lost Scottish source, but nevertheless the reliability of these statements are uncertain. This grandiose title for Óláfr Guðrøðsson given by

4 Kruse 2005, 141-56; Kruse & Jennings, 2009.

5 *Annals of Ulster*, s.a. 902.

6 ‘The Scottish Chronicle’, 150, 155; *Annals of Ulster*, s.a. 904.

7 *Annals of Ulster*, s.a. 913.

8 *Annals of Ulster*, s.a. 914.

9 *Annals of Ulster*, s.a. 914, 917.

10 *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, s.a. 931[=937].

11 Jennings 1994, 203; *The Chronicle of John of Worcester*, II.392-3.

John follows his victory over Óláfr *Cenncairech* 'Scabbyhead', king of Limerick in 937, and accompanies his attempt to conquer Northumbria.¹² Óláfr Guðrøðsson died in 941. In the same year, the Hebrides or some of them were raided by the Northern Uí Néill overking Muirchertach mac Néill.¹³ Muirchertach had been a long-term enemy of Óláfr Guðrøðsson. He may have taken the opportunity of his rival's death to try to win control over Óláfr's former territories. In the same year, Muirchertach also toured Ireland gathering hostages and the attacks could also have been part of a larger strategy to exert authority over other Irish kings.¹⁴

These early sources suggest that, from at least the beginning of the tenth century, the dynasty of Ívarr fostered ambitions to dominate parts of what would later become 'the Kingdom of the Isles'. However, there may have been more than one king active in Man and the Hebrides at this time. An interesting perspective is provided by the early twelfth-century saga *Caithréim Chellacháin Chaisil*. Its narrative of events relates to affairs of the late 930s and early 940s, and multiple leaders in the Hebrides are named in their conflicts with Cellachán king of Munster. The rulers named in this text are Morann, son of a fleet-king of the Isle of Lewis; there is Mór daughter of Áed son of Echu, king of *Innsi Gall*, wife of Sigtryggr, lord of Dublin. There is also Eiríkr referred to as *rí na n-innse* 'king of the islands' who is an ally of Sigtryggr. What is to be made of these claims? They could be dismissed as fantasy given that *Caithréim* is a late and semi-fictional source. A study of the text by Donnchadh Ó Corráin highlighted how the authors drew on genealogical data as a source of names in the story, this contrasts with other saga-like narratives in the *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland* and *Cogad Gáedel re Gallaib*, which drew on chronicle literature to underpin their narratives.¹⁵ The bulk of names in *Caithréim* do correlate to historical figures, but some of the names are one or more generations out of chronological sequence. However, does the historical character of the Irish names in the text also apply to vikings and their associates, or are these anachronistic inventions?

If we start with Mór daughter of Áed son of Echu, king of *Innsi Gall*, and look to Irish sources, it is possible to identify her as the daughter of Áed son of Echucán (a diminutive form of Echu) of Dál Fiatach, king of Ulster, who

12 *Annals of the Four Masters*, s.a. 935[=937].

13 *Chronicon Scotorum*, s.a. 940[=941]; *Annals of the Four Masters*, s.a. 939[=941]. These are called 'islands of Alba' in the *Chronicon Scotorum*, and 'islands of the foreigners' in the *Annals of the Four Masters*.

14 *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, s.a. 934[=941]; *Annals of the Four Masters*, s.a. 939[=941]; *The Circuit of Ireland*, 24–58.

15 Ó Corráin 1974.

died in 919.¹⁶ If so, this makes the conflict in 913 between vikings and a new fleet of Ulster intelligible as a battle for control of the Isles, or part of them. The designation *Innsi Gall* suggests that the islands which Áed ruled had been settled by vikings, perhaps in a decentralised process of land-taking, but they were under the control of an Ulster king, either by conquest or by invoking an ancestral claim over them.¹⁷ This tantalising piece of evidence could be a missing puzzle piece in the early history of the Hebrides. In 942, Matudán son of Áed son of Echucán is in conflict with the son of Rögnvaldr (probably the son of Rögnvaldr grandson of Ívarr who fought a battle off Man in 914). Rögnvaldr's son plundered Downpatrick and, soon after, he was killed in revenge by Matudán and the island of the foreigners was taken from them—which island is not named.¹⁸ This suggests inter-generational conflict between the dynasty of Ívarr and the royal dynasty of Dál Fiatach of Ulster for control over islands settled by vikings. A marriage alliance to settle a dispute between the daughter of Áed and a lord of Dublin Sigtryggr, as claimed in *Caithréim*, would make some sense. Sigtryggr is identified as a military leader in Dublin, but not as a king. He could be the same leader of Dublin named in the *Annals of the Four Masters* for the year 941 who was taken captive by Muirchertach mac Néill during his circuit of Ireland, although the annal seems derived from a twelfth-century poem.¹⁹ If these later accounts point to a real historical figure, he could have been the shadowy ruler called Sigtryggr who was a king or sub-king at York, whose name is witnessed on coins.²⁰ Sigtryggr may have a subordinate in Dublin to Óláfr Guðrøðsson (who died in 941) or Blakari Guðrøðsson (who took control of Dublin in 940) or an interim leader, given that there seems to have been something of a power struggle between the sons of Guðrøðr and their cousin Óláfr Sigtryggson at this time. Thus far, *Caithréim* presents us with plausible names, suggesting that in the early tenth century, Áed, king of Dál Fiatach, exercised direct control over part of what would later become the Kingdom of the Isles.

There is the otherwise unattested Morann, son of the fleet-king of Lewis, who is described in *Caithréim* in heroic terms: *Is annsin do eirig in tuir gan*

16 *Caithreim Cellachain Caisil*, § 29; Jennings 1994, 203 suggests an alternative identification linking Áed with Áed Albanach who died defending Dublin against an attack by Uí Fhailge in 941.

17 Duffy 1992, 98 notes that tension between Kings of the Isles and kings of Ulster over Rathlin island rumbled on into the eleventh century and beyond.

18 *Annals of Ulster*, s.a. 942; *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, s.a. 935[=942]; *Chronicon Scotorum*, s.a. 941[=942]; *Annals of the Four Masters*, s.a. 940[=942].

19 *The Circuit of Ireland*, 35. I have been previously dismissive of the record of this king based on the scepticism of Ó Corráin 2000, 240–3; cf. Downham 2007, 269.

20 Blunt et al. 1989, 211; Gooch 2012, 99–105.

turbroth 7 in tren gan traethad 7 in leoman gan lagad gusan la sin .i. Morann mongach muintergharbh moirmenmach, .i. mac righ loingsi Leoghasa co tri c curad 'na coimeirgi ("Then arose the unbroken tower, and the unwearied strong man, and the lion without compromise until that day, i.e. the long-haired, high-spirited Morann of the fierce people i.e. the son of the fleet-king of Lewis with 300 warriors who arose with him").²¹ According to the saga, he is killed defending Limerick from an attack by Cellachán of Cashel, and he falls alongside 'Óláfr of Limerick of the blue blades', who may be identified as the Óláfr 'Scabbyhead' of Limerick who was captured in 937. Morann is a Gaelic name, but if he was a real historical figure, he may have been of Gaelic, Pictish or Scandinavian ancestry (or any mix thereof!) but raised within a Gaelic cultural milieu. This rather raises the question, why would the son of a fleet-king based in Lewis, fight to defend Limerick, so far away in the south-west of Ireland?

This point links to the final identification in the trio of island rulers mentioned in *Caithréim*. This is Eiríkr, king of the Isles (*rí na n-innse*) who is also presented as an ally of Sigtryggr of Dublin. Alexander Bugge identified him with Eiríkr son of Haraldr, the king who ruled Northumbria in the late 940s and early 950s.²² I have tentatively supported this conclusion, and linked Eiríkr to the royal dynasty of Ívarr, but I disagree with Bugge's further identification of Eiríkr with Eiríkr Blóðøx king of Norway. This is a point I will come back to. Eiríkr may have been a son of Haraldr, king of Limerick, who died in 940. The title accorded to Eiríkr in *Caithréim* is relevant for discussion. In Thomas Clancy's discussion of Hebridean politics, he notes that "the first certain use of *na hInnsi* 'the isles' as part of Norse hegemony" is the *Annals of Ulster* record of the Battle of Tara in 980 won by the Southern Uí Néill king Máel Sechnaill over "the foreigners of Dublin and the Isles" *Gallaibh Atho Cliath 7 na h-Insedh*.²³ It is possible that Eiríkr, if historical, ruled over the islands linked to the dynasty of Ívarr after Óláfr Guthfrithson (if we trust John of Worcester) and before Óláfr Sigtryggson.

After 980, the term *rí Innse Gall* ('king of the Islands of the Foreigners') was used to describe Guðrøðr son of Haraldr (a brother of Eiríkr?) who was killed in Dál Riata by his own slave while he was drunk in 989. If we compare his title to *Innsi Gall* with its use in *Caithréim*, this could point to the rulers of Dál Fiatach having lost their share of the Hebrides to the dynasty of Ívarr between the 930s and the 980s. Guðrøðsson Haraldsson ruled in the Hebrides after his brother Maccus, who appears as a powerful leader named in Irish, Welsh and English accounts. The brothers can be identified as sons of Haraldr

21 *Caithreim Cellachain Caisil*, § 16.

22 *Caithreim Cellachain Caisil*, § 44.

23 Clancy 2008, 26.

of Limerick, with circumstantial evidence provided by a seeming attempt by Maccus to reclaim his Irish patrimony in 974 when he attacked Scatterry Island in the Shannon estuary with his lawmen and captured Ívarr, king of Limerick. Further entanglements between the sons of Haraldr and affairs in Ireland (whether relating to ambitions in Munster or Dublin) have been highlighted by Benjamin Hudson.²⁴ The sons of Harald made an expedition to Waterford in 984 to confirm an alliance with Brian Boru, king of Munster, against Dublin (this could relate to competing claims over parts of the Hebrides as well as the politics of Munster). Hudson has also uncovered evidence for a marriage between a daughter or granddaughter of Guðrøðr Haraldsson and the royal dynasty of Osraige, a kingdom close to Waterford on the borders of Munster and Leinster.²⁵

The account in *Caithréim* points to a tentative new narrative for the early history of the Kingdom of the Isles. The account suggests that in the early tenth century, control of the Hebrides and Man was split between at least three rulers. The dynasty of Ívarr appears to have been carving out a power base in the Isles in rivalry with Dál Fiatach and a family of ‘fleet-kings’ based in Lewis. Such division may not be surprising given that, at the eve of the Viking Age, Man is considered to have been under Brittonic control (perhaps linked to the kingdom of Gwynedd), and the Hebrides were plausibly split between Gaelic Dál Riata (focused on the southern and Inner Hebrides) and Pictish overlordship (focused on the northern and Outer Hebrides). These political divisions may have persisted or their boundaries adopted even after the islands began to be colonised by Norse speakers. It may be relevant to note here the record of the *Annals of Roscrea* in 980 to Muirgú, abbot of Iona and “pre-eminent bishop of the three divisions” (*sui-epscoþ na Trí Rand*). Thomas Clancy has suggested that these represent three areas of Óláfr Cuarán’s lordship—Dublin and its hinterland, the Isles, and the Rhinns of Galloway.²⁶ Another possibility is a bishopric over the Kingdom of the Isles that covered three historic power blocs that would later coalesce.

A note of caution is of course required before using the evidence of *Caithréim* to draw such radical conclusions. Some viking names in the *Caithréim* are clearly problematic, such as Gilla Ciarán, and Ottir the Black which match with names of participants at the Battle of Clontarf in 1014, which is anachronistic for the setting of this story. Furthermore, the claims of great victories by Cellachán in the saga at Limerick, Waterford, Armagh and the Hill of Allen do not match up well with chronicle records of his reign (it does partly, but it is far from an

24 Hudson 2005, 60–62.

25 Hudson 2005, 61.

26 Clancy 2008, 27–28.

accurate account). The saga in its narrative of events cannot be relied upon, even if the names within it are drawn from earlier sources. Before building speculation on speculation, it is necessary to be wary of the dangers of this evidence, cross-reference and compare its value with other sources which have been used to interpret the politics of this era.

It is possible to draw on non-textual sources to highlight the links between the Hebrides and Limerick suggested in *Caithréim*. In particular, the flow of silver along the Viking-Age sea routes some of which can be traced in hoards. One way we can interpret politics in the early Viking Age is “to follow the money”. The Isle of Man is particularly rich in silver hoards, and the development of hoarding on the island may be linked to exiles arriving in the Isles immediately before or after the collapse of the viking kingdom of Northumbria in 954.²⁷ A silver hoard recovered from Mungret near Limerick deposited around 954 is identified by Kristin Bornholdt-Collins as having Manx features with its mix of components and the presence of half and quarter pennies.²⁸ Michael Dolley had earlier suggested that this hoard, and two other near contemporary coin hoards in Munster (from counties Tipperary and Cork), had been deposited by refugees from Northumbria, implying a flow of people across the Irish Sea.²⁹

The movement of refugees from Northumbria to the Hebrides around the time that Eiríkr, the last viking king of Northumbria, was killed in 954, may also have kick-started the development of new forms of silver bullion in the Isles. From the mid-tenth century plain penannular arm-rings, or ‘Scoto-Scandinavian ring money’ as it has been dubbed, come into circulation.³⁰ These new economic developments also have links with Munster, which fits with the suggested relationship of Eiríkr to Northumbria, the Isles and Limerick. In relation to Scoto-Norse ring money John Sheehan has remarked on the links with North Munster across a broader time frame ranging from the late tenth and early eleventh century, noting that “The River Shannon, Skehacreggaun and Scatterry Island finds should be viewed as forming a fairly compact hoarding horizon of Scoto-Scandinavian background”.³¹

The tenth century appears to have been a period of intense rivalry between different groups and within the dynasty of Ívarr in and around the Irish Sea. Ultimately the dynasty of Ívarr would retain a long-term hold over the Hebrides, and culturally the islands looked both to the Gaelic world and to Scandinavia. Indeed the twelfth century Cambro-Latin text *Historia Gruffydd*

27 Bornholdt Collins 2024, 9–13.

28 Bornholdt Collins 2005, 35.

29 Dolley 1960, 131–2.

30 Bornholdt Collins 2024, 58–61.

31 Sheehan 2013, 274.

ap Cynan claimed the family of Ívarr was descended from the Norwegian ruler Haraldr hárfagri (Harold Finehair), perhaps to bolster the illustriousness of this dynasty.³²

This brings us back to the enigmatic figure Eiríkr named as king of the Isles in *Caithréim*. In 2004, I published the suggestion that this Eiríkr was Eiríkr Haraldsson king of York, a brother of Maccus and Guðrøðr kings of the Isles, and son of Haraldr king of Limerick.³³ Such a relationship would make some contextual sense of the links between Northumbria, Man and Limerick noted in the tenth century. However, it had been firmly established in historiography that Eiríkr was a son of Haraldr hárfagri, king of Norway. To challenge that, *Caithréim* is a problematic source but no more problematic than thirteenth century Icelandic sagas that have often been used to understand Hebridean history. There has been dissatisfaction with critiquing historical claims made in great works of Icelandic literature, namely *Egils Saga* and *Heimskringla* where the story of Eiríkr Blóðøx ruling in York is fully developed. Such a revision would seem to diminish the legacy of this famous Norwegian king. However, to counter that, I would suggest that until the years of the Celtic Tiger (when Ireland became seen as international success story), Ireland's impact on British history tended to be downplayed. It is only in the last few years that there has been any consensus that the dynasty of Ívarr had a foothold in Northumbrian affairs before the 920s. Alternative perspectives are not always welcomed, especially when the evidence from both sides is inconclusive. In this matter, historians are operating in a realm of competing hypotheses rather than historical certainties.

The argument I made as a postgraduate student has been challenged on a number of points, and it seems worth briefly restating parts of the case here, given its significance for the origins of the Kingdom of the Isles. For a start, English historical sources do not link Eiríkr Haraldsson of York to the Hebrides or to Scandinavia. They identify two periods of his rule in Northumbria, ca.946-948 and ca.952-954.³⁴ He was entangled in rivalries with Óláfr Cuarán king of Dublin, who ruled in York in 941-944 and 949-952. The late-tenth-century *Life of Cathróe* states that Eiríkr of York was related by marriage to the rulers of north Britain.³⁵ This relationship may explain the actions of Malcolm I of Alba in attacking Northumbria in 950, in association with men of the Isles.³⁶ This event is recorded in the *Chronicle of the Kings of Alba*, dated to the early

32 *Vita Griffini Filii Conani* § 4.

33 Downham 2004a.

34 Downham 2003.

35 *Vita Sancti Kaddroe*, §17 in *Acta Sanctorum Veteris et Maioris Scotiæ*, 497.

36 Downham 2007, 154–155.

eleventh century. Malcom's relations with Eiríkr may have soured soon after. The expulsion of Óláfr and restoration of Eiríkr in 952 may link to a battle recorded in the *Annals of Ulster* that reports a victory by vikings over the forces of Alba, Strathclyde and the English.³⁷ It is tempting to link this victory with the claim in the skaldic poem *Hofuðlausn* that Eiríkr was 'the destroyer of Scots' (*fárbjóðr Skota*). The Northumbrian source, *Historia Regum* (Part II) states that Eiríkr was killed in 954 by Maccus son of Óláfr. Maccus is a name of mixed Gaelic and Scandinavian culture, and it is possible he was a son of Óláfr Cuarán or Óláfr Guðrøðsson of the dynasty of Ívarr. Roger of Wendover (who wrote in the thirteenth century but had some access to tenth-century information) records that Eiríkr was defeated by Maccus at Stainmore.³⁸ Stainmore lay on the route from York to the Irish Sea, which suggests Eiríkr was travelling west when he was slain. Matthew Townend has suggested that Eiríkr was heading towards Carlisle and the Solway Firth, thus in the direction of the Isles rather than Dublin.³⁹ Overall, the evidence points to Eiríkr having association with North British and Irish Sea affairs.⁴⁰

The Scandinavian sources do not fit chronologically with the English evidence. The arrival of Eiríkr Blóðøx in England is linked to the reign of King Athelstan of Wessex and therefore dates to the 920s or 930s and not the 940s or 950s. In Scandinavian sources, Eiríkr has a Scandinavian wife, different from the one identified in the *Life of St Cathróe*. There is also conflicting evidence as to when and where Eiríkr died in Scandinavian histories, and it is only in the later sources that Eiríkr Blóðøx is assigned a role in Northumbrian politics.⁴¹ Either through mistaken identity or a desire to develop the story of Eiríkr Blóðøx I would suggest that his activities were conflated with the rule of Eiríkr of York. It is possible that Eiríkr of Norway did visit England briefly in the 930s before dying or travelling elsewhere, but he was not awarded control of Northumbria by Athelstan, for there is no English evidence of this. It therefore seems unlikely that he was ruling Northumbria so long after Athelstan's death.

Counter-arguments which have been made to support the link between Eiríkr of York and Norway include a lack of other members of the dynasty of Ívarr with the name Eiríkr. However, while there was a common stock of names within the dynasty (Ívarr, Sigtryggr, Óláfr, Guðrøðr, Rögnvaldr, Bárðr), there were members of the family with other names recorded in every generation.

37 *Annals of Ulster*, s.a. 952.

38 Thornton 1997. The name Maccus has been interpreted by David Thornton as a coining by Norse speakers influenced by Gaelic culture derived from the word 'mac' meaning son.

39 Townend 2014, 81.

40 Cf. Later Scottish identification in *Anglo-Scottish Relations*, no. 30.

41 Downham 2004a, 55–57.

The name of Eiríkr's father Haraldr is common enough within the dynasty of Ívarr with examples recorded in 940 and 999.⁴² The *Annals of Clonmacnoise* appears to refer to an Eiríkr son of Barðr fighting with the Dubliners at the Battle of Brunanburh in 937, which rather calls the counter argument into question.⁴³

Another claim is that a son of Haraldr of Limerick would not have been old enough to rule in the mid-tenth century, so he could not be the father of Eiríkr of York (or the Hebrides).⁴⁴ Haraldr was the son of Sigtryggr who died in 927. His death is recorded in the *Annals of Ulster*. This is a trusted source for events in early medieval Ireland. In a copy of the original manuscript an addition was made to the text '*inmatura etate mortuus est*'.⁴⁵ Thus, Matthew Townend concludes, if Sigtryggr died at an immature age in 927, he couldn't have had a grandson ruling in Northumbria by 947.⁴⁶ That seems fair. However, we have good reason to question the text added to the *Annals of Ulster* entry. This is because Sigtryggr grandson of Ívarr is recorded as leading armies from his first arrival in Ireland in 917. I would assume if a man was old enough to lead an army, he was old enough to impregnate a woman. Furthermore, two sons of Sitryggr were battling for control of Dublin in 927, so they had reached some sort of maturity by that date. The manuscript addition could be a mistake, or maybe we should read it with an extra gap between words, that Sigtryggr "died (*in matura*) at a mature age". Either way, Matthew Townend's argument is invalid. Haraldr son of Sigtryggr could have fathered a son before his death who was old enough to have an active role in politics (certainly by medieval standards) in the late 940s.

There is a body of skaldic poetry relating to Eiríkr of York and Eiríkr blóðøx surviving in Icelandic sagas, but the poetry never explicitly links Eiríkr of York with Eiríkr of Norway. Historians have treated the skaldic verse as more reliable historical data than the prose sagas that encompass them, although the dating

42 Downham 2007, 29.

43 Townend 2014, 76. It is also possible that Eiríkr, perhaps the Hebridean Eiríkr, raided St Mullins (Co. Carlow) in 953. The *Annals of Four Masters* reports 'Orccain Tighe Moling iar muir ó Laraic' (Destruction of St Mullins from the sea by Laraic). 'Laraic' makes no sense as a personal name, but the formula 'Orgain [place name] ó [personal name]' is found often enough to suggest a personal name is intended here. The status of the first letter L is ambivalent as it looks like it was added in the UCD autograph manuscript of the *Annals* in a different hand, perhaps overwriting a dash. The L is found in the RIA autograph manuscript, but it is far from clear if this manuscript gives the more authoritative reading. I would suggest the letter in the original source was hard to read, and L was mistaken for H. Substituting L for H would mean the name can be understood as a leader called Eiríkr or Hárekr raiding from across the sea. The two manuscripts in question are Dublin: University College Dublin MS A 13 and Dublin: Royal Irish Academy MS C ii 3.

44 Townend 2014, 76.

45 *Annals of Ulster*, s.a. 917.

46 Ibid.

and attribution of this material is not always clearcut.⁴⁷ Matthew Townend has noted that the poem *Arinbjarnarkviða* attributed to the tenth-century poet Egill Skallagrímsson in *Egils saga* mentions Eiríkr as a king in York and identified him with an ancient dynasty of Scandinavian kings, the Ynglings, although he also suggests that this could also be a poetic synonym for regal status.⁴⁸ However, as *Historia Gruffud* shows the dynasty of Ívarr would also claim descent from the royal line of Norway.⁴⁹ More recently Þorgeir Sigurðsson has set about a reconstructed reading of *Arinbjarnarkviða*, which survives in fourteenth-century manuscript. He provides a new interpretation of the text to read that Eiríkr was “a grandson of Halfdan”, arguing therefore that Eiríkr of York must be the same as Eiríkr Bloodaxe.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the most technologically advanced readings of the manuscript are unclear on the relevant lines and the claim remains a hypothesis.

If Eiríkr of the Hebrides was the same as Eiríkr of Northumbria—and I will be quite open about the fact that it cannot be proven—this would cast an interesting perspective on the events which followed. The precedents created meant a king with a claim on Man and Hebrides might also stake a claim to Northumbria. This may be a contributory factor as to why English kings Edgar, and later Cnut, were keen to bind kings of the Isles into formal relationships. In 973 we have the famous episode of Edgar’s treaty at Chester with six or eight kings, including Maccus Haraldsson named ‘king of many islands’, when later stories claim that Edgar had his subordinates row him along the River Dee.⁵¹ Sweinn king of Denmark raided the Isle of Man in 995 prior to his short-term conquest of England, and the island was attacked by Aethelred II of England in 1000 perhaps in a bid to counteract this threat.⁵² Patrick Wadden has also examined how Scottish rulers laid claim to the former territories of Dál Riata, comprising Argyll and the inner Hebrides, in the last decade of the tenth century through the reworking of genealogical texts.⁵³ The isles had a strategic significance to their own right, but they might also hold the key to claims elsewhere.

Through the sons of Haraldr, control of Limerick seems also to have carried a claim to the Hebrides. Brian Boru and his successors in Munster claimed authority over the Kingdom of the Isles through the eleventh century and into the twelfth. The title *Imperator Scotorum* or ‘Emperor of the Gaels’ was assigned

47 Males 2024, 86–87; Sapp 2023, 327–328.

48 Townend 2014, 77.

49 Cf. *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*, §§ 239, 259, 268, 330.

50 Þorgeir Sigurðsson 2019, 71–74. The name Halfdan appears in Irish records for two viking leaders one who died in 877, the other in 926. Downham 2007, 238.

51 Thornton 2001.

52 Downham 2007, 197.

53 Wadden 2016.

to Brian in the *Book of Armagh*, perhaps added in the year 1005, implying a claim of suzerainty over Gaelic speaking areas in Britain as well as Ireland.⁵⁴ In the same year Rögnvaldr son of Guðrøðr, son of Haraldr, king of Man and the Isles, died in Munster.⁵⁵ Rögnvaldr's death in Munster might indicate that Brian was attempting to assert over-kingship of the Isles by drawing the king to his side. However, such claims may have excited resistance. Brian would later be opposed by contingents from the Isles at the famous Battle of Clontarf. Irish and Icelandic sources suggested that Sigtryggr of Dublin gathered forces from Orkney and the kingdom of the Isles against Brian. The man who killed Brian, called Broðir, is linked with the Isle of Man in some sources (and York in others). In the *Annals of Ulster*, an Óláfr son of Lagmann fought at Clontarf in 1014, alongside Broðir. He also appears in the early twelfth-century Irish saga *Cogad Gáedel re Gallaibh* as Óláfr son of Lagmann son of Guðrøðr. James Henthorn Todd concluded that Lagmann was a son of Guðrøðr son of Haraldr, a brother of Rögnvaldr who died in 1005, and a member of the dynasty of Ívarr.⁵⁶ While *Cogad* presents a very negative view of the islesmen among a force described as "ignorant, barbarous, stupid, wild, anti-social foreigners", *Caithréim Cellachain Chaisil* demonstrates a more positive view, even though the islemen are shown as enemies of the hero Cellachán.⁵⁷ The text seems to have been written during the reign of Cellachán's descendant, Cormac Mac Carthaigh, king of Munster, whose rise to power in the 1120s benefited from infighting among the descendants of Brian Boru. We have already heard of *Caithréim's* reference to long-haired high spirited Morann of Lewis. In addition, Mór, daughter of the King of the Isles and wife of Sigtryggr of Dublin, is presented as falling head over heels in love with Cellachán and is happy to betray her husband to help his cause. It may be that Cormac had less ambitions to wield political power over the isles than Muirchertach Ua Briain, descendant of Brian Boru who sponsored *Cogad*. Therefore, a more generous view of the Hebridean leaders was presented. Cormac may have desired for an alliance with the Hebrides against his Uí Briain rivals, rather than conflict.

The purpose of this paper then is to highlight the points of interest in the twelfth-century saga *Caithréim Cellachain Chaisil* which may shed light on the tenth-century history of the Kingdom of the Isles. While the exploration of this material is tentative, it provides a new, alternative story for the origin of the Kingdom of the Isles which is no more flawed than some of the other sources which have had a dominant role in this debate. Such an examination also reveals

54 Gwynn 1978.

55 *Annals of Inisfallen*, s.a. 1005; Downham 2007, 197; Downham 2017, 93.

56 Downham 2004b, 61.

57 *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, §87 ... buirb, barbarda, dicheillid, do chisc, do chomaind, do gallaibh...

the complex interactions of the Kingdom of the Isles with neighbouring peoples as it emerged from the mists of history. The analysis presented here suggests that the territory of the isles may have been split between competing rulers in the early tenth century, including Dál Fiatach and the dynasty of Ívarr. From the mid-tenth century, links with Limerick and York can be traced through historical events as well as the flow of silver through the Insular seaways. The sources highlight the strategic significance of Hebrides and Man to any tenth-century ruler who wished to wield power over the Irish Sea region, serving as a lynchpin in the Viking Age histories of Britain and Ireland.

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