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# NORTHERN STUDIES

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*The Journal of the Scottish Society for Northern Studies*

Volume 55

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2024

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*Tim Clarkson*

*A Mighty Fleet and the King's Power:  
The Isle of Man AD 400 to 1265*

John Donald / Birlinn: Edinburgh, 2023

ISBN: 9781910900802.

THE ISLE of Man is located in the middle of the Irish Sea, between England and Ireland, Scotland and Wales, in a remarkably central and strategic position that, over time, has played an important role in a great variety of ways. But despite this significance, the Isle of Man's early-medieval and Viking-Age history is a subject that has been largely neglected in scholarly literature and discourse for quite a long time, so for taking on this challenge alone, this book is to be recommended.

The book's author, Tim Clarkson, after gaining his PhD in medieval history from Manchester University, has pursued his own scholarly interests as an independent researcher and has written several books on a wide and intriguing variety of subjects focused on (early) medieval northern Britain, and particularly in Scotland – ranging from a sweeping history of 'The Picts' to the biography of the rather obscure sixth-century prophet Lailoken, 'Scotland's Merlin' (both published 2016). In his new book, he has applied himself to a rather small region, the Isle of Man, and covers its history during the long period between AD 400 and 1265.

The chapters of this book progress chronologically through the Island's history. Following a thorough presentation of methods, sources, and previous research in an introductory chapter, the text wisely begins at the very beginnings and outlines Man's physical key data as well as the rather misty period of prehistory, from the earliest human settlement until the Iron Age.

During the more than 800 years of history covered by this book, the Isle of Man experienced influence, influx, and impact from all of its neighbours, and this is closely reflected in the structure of the book. Chapter Three discusses the phase of "Gaelic-speaking and Britannic-speaking elites competing for control" (p. 183) over Man during the fifth to the late sixth centuries, and also includes the important issue of early Christianity on the Island. Chapter Four

reflects on Northumbrian contacts with Man in the seventh century, before the fifth chapter turns to the Welsh kingdom of Gwynedd, whose influence on or even direct rule over the Island lasted for nearly 300 years, nearly unbroken, from the late sixth century into the Viking Age in the Irish Sea.

The early Viking Age in the Isle of Man is discussed in Chapter Six, as the Island by about 870 was colonised by Vikings from Dublin and then was a part of the new kingdoms created by the Scandinavians in both Britain and Ireland. The subject of the creation of Viking realms, the fight for control over the Irish Sea waterways between the late tenth and the late eleventh centuries, and the position of the Isle of Man in this power struggle is covered in the seventh chapter. The following three chapters focus on the legendary king Godred Crovan and his dynasty, which ruled the Isle of Man – now capital of the mighty ‘Kingdom of Man and the Isles’ – for about 200 years. Thanks to improved availability of contemporaneous texts, the narrative of this late period stands on much firmer footing than the earlier ones and provides more detail in its historic events and processes. The final chapter, ‘Epilogue and Legacy’, looks beyond the end of Scandinavian authority in Man in 1265 and considers how the period discussed in this book left its mark on the Island up until the present day.

The author makes it clear that his “book is a study of history, not of archaeology”, using only “some archaeological information” (p. 2), yet he uses enough to satisfy archaeologically minded readers (such as this reviewer). Particularly during the early period, where there are no written sources at all, reconstructing the political history of the Isle of Man is an ambitious and difficult endeavour, but the author admirably manages to create a coherent narrative out of the scattered and often ambiguous clues. That this, at times, requires “informed speculation” (p. 182) is an important caveat that clearly would have been better placed in the ‘Introduction’ rather than in the ‘Conclusion’, however.

In its recount of the pre- and early-Viking-Age Manx history, the author works quite closely along the same lines of the historical sections (covering the period from Roman times to the ninth and into the tenth centuries) in my own study of early-Scandinavian Isle of Man,<sup>1</sup> which he apparently did not consult. This could be due to the fact that my book was published in German and consequently no doubt is not as widely read in the British Isles as I should wish. He largely arrives at the same conclusions, though, so

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1 Dirk H. Steinforth, *Die skandinavische Besiedlung auf der Isle of Man. Eine archäologische und historische Untersuchung zur frühen Wikingerzeit in der Irischen See. Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 92, De Gruyter: Berlin/Boston, 2015: see pp. 21–94, 349–59, 381–90

that I find little to criticise regarding methodology, content and results. It is particularly gratifying that Clarkson did not wade into the century-old mire of under-discussed claims and hypotheses about the Scandinavians' initial arrival in Man that used to confuse the issue so much, but instead draws a concise picture of that phase according to recent research.

While Clarkson handles his materials transparently and competently, academic readers occasionally may find that the author's delivery of the evidence (particularly archaeological and linguistic) appears to be a bit overconfident and somewhat uncritical of the serious concerns regarding many sources' flaws and unreliability; but as the book is directed at both students and a lay audience, this point – as well as other minor defects (such as the confusing incompatibility of the Island's parishes in their sheadings in text and map: p. 19) – does not at all diminish the book's value as an accessible, nuanced, well-paced, and well-researched account.

With its easy availability and readability for experts and the general reader alike, this book is a welcome introduction to Manx history and a valuable contribution to the research of the political history not only of the Isle of Man, but, owing to the Island's many contacts with its medieval neighbours, that of the littoral Irish Sea region in general.

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