



*The Sea Kings:
The Late Norse Kingdoms of Man
and the Isles, c.1066-1275*

Andrew McDonald
Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2019

Review by: Simon Egan



The Sea Kings: The Late Norse Kingdoms of Man and the Isles, c.1066–1275. By R. Andrew McDonald. Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2019. ISBN 978-1-91090021-5. xxii + 426 pp. £70.00.

R Andrew McDonald has, over the past twenty-five years, made a leading contribution to scholarship on the medieval Irish Sea world through notable publications such as *The Kingdom of the Isles: Scotland's Western Seaboard, c.1100-1336* (1998), and *Manx Kingship in its Irish Sea Setting, 1187-1229: King Rognvaldr and the Crovan Dynasty* (2007). By the author's own admission, however, scholarship on the Irish Sea world has, more typically, focused on Britain's more northern territories, namely the Hebrides and Scotland's western seaboard. This volume on the Manx kings is therefore a welcome contribution to the field of medieval insular studies. Moreover, it coincides with the publication of two other important works pertaining to the Isle of Man itself and medieval Scotland, *Norse-Gaelic Contacts in a Viking World* (2019) by Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, Colmán Etchingham, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, and Jon Viðar Sigurðsson, and Norman H. Reid's *Alexander III, 1249-1286: First Among Equals* (2019).

For over two centuries, the Manx kings held considerable influence over the politics of the Irish Sea world and were courted as allies by the English, Scottish, and Norse monarchies, as well as powerful Welsh and Irish lineages. The Kingdom of Man's territories were, moreover, not solely confined to their island home: at the height of their powers in the mid-twelfth century, the Manx kings also claimed dominion over the Hebrides. Moreover, as nominal subjects of the Norse monarchy, the Manx kings enjoyed strong, if at times somewhat troubled, relations with the court at Bergen. This book offers the first sustained study that charts the history of the Manx kings from the mid-eleventh century down to the later thirteenth century, when Man and its insular satellites were finally absorbed into the Kingdom of the Scots. Broadly speaking, the book is divided into three, main sections, the first of which locates the island kingdom within its wider North Atlantic context. Chapter One discusses Man's early medieval and early Viking heritage, and pays close attention to recent scholarship on Viking-age Britain and Ireland. Chapter Two offers a detailed discussion of relevant source material pertaining to the Kingdom of Man. Although sources directly relating to the history of Man are limited to a handful of chronicles, McDonald underlines the rich potential of drawing upon contemporary material from England, Ireland, Scotland, and Iceland. In Chapter Three, McDonald locates the Kingdom of Man within its wider insular and North Atlantic contexts, emphasising the importance of maritime links with Ireland, Britain, and the Norse world of Scandinavia.

The second section of the book charts the later chronological history of the island. Chapter Four traces the history of the kingdom from 1066 to 1153, focusing on the career of Godred Crovan (d. 1095), who is often perceived as the founder of the Manx royal house, and that of his son Olaf (d. 1153). During this eighty-seven year period, Godred and Olaf faced a series of challenges from their insular neighbours in Dublin and Wales, as well as from the ambitions of their Norse overlords. McDonald underlines that this period, however fraught by political tensions, was essential to the foundation of the Manx kingship and the establishment of its position within the wider insular and North Atlantic worlds. Chapters Five and Six focus on growing dynastic rivalries within Man and the wider Irish Sea world during the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Following the outbreak of war between Godred Olafsson (d. 1187)—a grandson of Godred Crovan—and his brother-in-law Somerled of Argyll (d. 1164), the wider Kingdom of Man and the Isles was divided. Godred Olafsson and his descendants retained Man, as well as Lewis and Harris, but Somerled's dynasty claimed the southern Hebrides as well as a sizeable chunk of western Scotland. Although both rival dynasties retained considerable military and naval resources, the fracturing of the wider kingdom resulted in a series of irreparable feuds that fundamentally weakened the authority of the Manx kings. Although the Manx king Rognvald (d. 1229), a grandson of Godred Olafsson, enjoyed the patronage of kings John (d. 1216) and Henry III of England (d. 1272), he was ultimately unable to stamp out dissent within the Isles. Rognvald's death in 1229 saw Man increasingly exposed to the machinations of the expanding kingdoms of Norway and Scotland. In Chapter Seven, McDonald explores the decline of Manx kingship in the face of these growing external threats. Man and the Hebrides, for much of the period *c.*1230-*c.*1266, became a battleground where the ambitions of the Norse and Scottish monarchies struggled for dominance. Although claimants to the Manx kingship often looked to the Norse court at Bergen for support, it was ultimately the Scottish monarchy that triumphed. Following a brief war in 1263-1264, Man and the Hebrides were ceded by the Norse crown to Alexander III of Scotland (d. 1286). Although Godred, an illegitimate son of the last Manx king Magnus (d. 1265), attempted to resurrect the kingship in 1275, the line of kings had effectively ended and the rebellion was crushed by Scottish forces.

The final section of this impressive volume discusses culture and society on medieval Man. Chapter Eight explores the economy of the island kingdom. Drawing upon historical as well as archaeological evidence, McDonald reveals that Man enjoyed a bustling economy during the medieval period. Fishing, farming, and trade were each important commercial activities on the island. Chapter Nine discusses the importance of sea power within

Man, and offers an important counter-point to narratives that have more typically focused on maritime and naval power within the Hebrides. In Chapters Ten and Eleven, McDonald investigates some of the older customs and identities associated with Man, such as the tradition of kingship and the role of the Church in island affairs. This volume is also replete with a series of very helpful maps, covering the Hebrides and western Scotland, the wider Irish Sea world, and the Isle of Man itself, as well as two genealogies denoting the Crovan dynasty and the descendants of Somerled. Naturally, this book will be an important reference point for those interested in the history of Man and the Irish Sea world during the medieval period. However, the book will also attract an audience of scholars working in the area of medieval kingship and warfare more generally, as well as scholars of the medieval Atlantic world.

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