Review: *Kings and Warriors in Early North-West Europe* (Rekdal and Doherty)

Patrick Wadden

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REVIEWS

Kings and Warriors in Early North-West Europe. Edited by Jan Erik Rekdal and Charles Doherty. Four Courts Press. Dublin, 2016. 480 pp. €50/£45/$74.50. ISBN: 978-1-84682-501-9.

Kings and warriors are ubiquitous in early Irish, Welsh, English and Norse literature, as are the interconnected themes of kingship and warfare. From Conchobar mac Nessa and Cú Chulainn to Bran and Efnisien, Hrōðgār and Beowulf to Harald *harfágri* and Egill Skallagrímsson, the relationships between such figures shape many of the most famous early medieval narratives from across north-west Europe. The research project, 'The representation of the warrior in relation to the king in the European Middle Ages (600–1200)', led by Jan Erik Rekdal and sponsored by the Centre for Advanced Study at the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters beginning in 2012, therefore addressed a fundamental concern of medieval literature. This book constitutes the fruits of the labour of the eight participants in the project. Theoretically informed and frequently providing novel insights into familiar sources, the essays collected here — some of them of considerable length — make a substantial contribution to our thinking about various aspects of the subject, both separately and in relation to one another. Furthermore, the collaboration evident, for example, in the discussion of the image of the warrior in the Book of Kells by both Charles Doherty and Rekdal, demonstrates the sorts of insight and progress that can be made through cooperative projects of the kind that led to its publication.

Each of the contributors has taken a different approach to the central theme; while some pursue ideas, images or even individuals across a variety of sources of different dates and genres, others survey clearly defined bodies of material. Ralph O'Connor takes the former approach in his excellent discussion of berserk fury, shapeshifting, and dysfunction in a selection of Irish and Norse texts. He demonstrates the necessity of closely reading the individual texts' descriptions of these phenomena and of considering their development in the context of the narratives within which they appear. Doing so discourages lumping them together as examples of cultural influence or common origins, as has been the case in the past. Marged Haycock takes a different approach in her wonderfully engaging essay on the representation of warfare in Welsh poetry over the course of seven hundred years. Her contribution impresses not only for the magisterial command of her sources she demonstrates, but also for the thoroughness of the discussion, which covers the various motives for warfare, military strategy and preparation, the depiction of success and failure, and more besides.

While Haycock's and O'Connor's essays stand out, there is quality throughout the collection. Charles Doherty's chapter on 'Warrior and king in

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Ireland' draws most explicitly of all the contributions on the work of Georges Dumézil, whose theory regarding the three functions in Indo-European society underpins the theme of the book as a whole. Doherty's discussion raises some intriguing and interesting possibilities about the nature of the *fían* and the changing character of Irish kingship in the early medieval period. Speculative in places, it engages with a broad array of sources and will engender fruitful debate and discussion. Morgan Thomas Davies's consideration of what he calls 'warrior time', that is the treatment of time in *Beowulf* and the *Táin* in light of Heidegger's theory of temporality, is highly stimulating, as is his demonstration that the *Táin* handles time in a manner completely different from that of the Old English text. Rekdal's discussion of conflict between two views of a good death — the Christian ideal of death on a pillow in old age and the warrior's death in battle — in Irish poetry of the eighth through twelfth centuries raises interesting questions about medieval Irish kings' and poets' commemoration of pagan ancestors. Ian Bauermann examines a group of Norse sagas dating from *c*. 1200. He argues that the depiction of the relationship between kings and warriors in *Jómsvíkinga saga*, *Færeyinga saga* and *Orkneyinga saga* was influenced by the violence of the reign of King Sverrir of Norway (d. 1202) and his interaction with the Scandinavian diaspora in Iceland and elsewhere. Stefka Eriksen examines the representation of warriors as complex, self-aware individuals in a selection of fourteenth-century Norse sagas, situating her discussion within the broader debate around the conceptualization of the 'self'. And Jon Gunnas Jorgensen surveys the depictions of Ólafr Haraldsson in a variety of sources. He notes that the surviving poetry composed during Ólafr's reign contrasts starkly with the poetry and the prose composed after his death and elevation to sainthood; earlier sources are silent regarding Ólafr's Christian identity and depict him predominantly as a warrior and a ruler, while the later material promotes the image of him as a man of God and associates him with miracles.

Individually and collectively, these essays make a significant contribution to our understanding of the representation of the warrior and the king in the literary traditions under examination. That is not to say the collection, either in overall conception or in terms of the individual contributions, is problem-free. For a start, the under-representation of Old English — Davies's comparison between *Beowulf* and the *Táin* is the only essay in which an Old English text is discussed at any length — will limit interest in the book among Anglo-Saxonists. This is especially unfortunate because, of all those who study north-west Europe in the medieval period, they are perhaps most in need of encouragement to study these literary traditions side by side.

The reluctance of some Anglo-Saxonists to engage with Irish and Welsh material in particular owes something to the continued influence of long-held perceptions of the Celts and Celtic literature that unfortunately find echoes in certain of the essays collected here. Haycock's brilliant survey of Welsh poetry demonstrates the dynamism of the poetic tradition and leaves the reader in no doubt about the evolution of its imagery over time in response to changing political and cultural circumstances. This approach stands in contrast to that

occasionally utilized by Doherty, however, whose use of medieval Irish textual sources raises some difficulties. For example, he suggests at one point that the appearance of a Roman emissary in the potentially early eighth-century tale about the death of Conchobar mac Nessa might reflect 'Armagh's ecclesiastical contact with Rome in the seventh century' (p. 131). This implicit recognition that vernacular tales were shaped by the contemporary concerns of their Christian authors and audiences stands in contrast to his willingness elsewhere to use medieval Irish texts as repositories of information about the ancient Celts, to be compared with Greek and Roman ethnographies and Gaulish coins. The justification for reading similar sources in such divergent ways is not made clear.

Similar issues emerge from some of Davies's conclusions regarding the different attitudes toward time reflected in the *Táin* and *Beowulf*. He suggests that the *Táin*'s 'temporal slackness' might be explained 'as a consequence of a more primitive, pre-reflective state of cultural or psychological development than we find depicted in *Beowulf*' (p. 286). While he is careful to state that this 'would not necessarily mean that the *Táin* itself is a more primitive work of literature than *Beowulf*' (p. 286), his assertion that 'it remains faithful to an ostensibly pre-Christian, pre-reflective perspective' (p. 286), in contrast to the 'alignment of Christian and heroic conceptions of time found in Old English poetry' (p. 307), seems to be underpinned by old stereotypes about the primitivism and conservatism of early Irish literature. The endurance of such attitudes among some scholars of early Ireland inhibits those outside the discipline from recognizing that medieval Irish scribes and scholars, including those responsible for writing the *Táin* in its surviving recensions, were participants in a vital, European, Christian, learned culture alongside their contemporaries in Anglo-Saxon England and beyond.

The distinctive ways in which Christian influence was enshrined in texts from the different regions of north-west Europe, and blended with older themes and concepts, will only become clear through continued collaboration and inter-disciplinary projects of the kind that led to the publication of this fine volume. Notwithstanding certain drawbacks, it makes a valuable addition to the scholarship on a variety of topics and will be an important addition to the library of researchers in a variety of fields.

Patrick Wadden

Belmont Abbey College, North Carolina

Clerics, Kings and Vikings: Essays on Medieval Ireland in Honour of Donnchadh Ó Corráin. Edited by Emer Purcell, Paul MacCotter, Julianne Nyhan and John Sheehan. Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2015. pp. xxvii + 537. €60.00. ISBN: 978-1-84682-279-7 (hardback).

The sheer size of this Festschrift, comprising forty-four academic contributions in addition to two personal prefatory tributes, is indicative of the vast number of individuals whose own work has been influenced, enriched and challenged