Review: *The Vikings in Ireland and Beyond: Before and After the Battle of Clontarf* (Clarke and Johnson)

Lisa Collinson

Celtica 30 (2018), 214–217

DOI: 10.58480/SCS-ucmpb-9xchg

DIAS
Institiúid Ard-Léinn Bhaile Átha Cliath | Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies

© School of Celtic Studies, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies. This work is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/

The Vikings in Ireland and Beyond: Before and After the Battle of Clontarf. Edited by Howard B. Clarke and Ruth Johnson. Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2015. 564 pp. €40. ISBN 978-1-84682-495-1.

Delightfully, this immaculately edited collection of essays on Viking Age Ireland begins with a poem by Seamus Heaney ('Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces') inviting us to 'Come fly [. . .] / come sniff the wind / with the expertise / of the Vikings'. This verse not only gestures towards the subject-matter of one of the most stimulating studies in the volume (Jessica L. McGraw, 'Practice makes perfect? Motif-pieces as tools of communication and the exchange of tacit artistic knowledge in Viking-Age Dublin') but, more generally, offers readers a charming hint of the scholarly enthusiasm and welcoming approach to newcomers to the field which will be encountered throughout the volume. The poem is followed by a warm obituary of Richard Hall by the editors. After the contents pages, there is a foreword by the Chief Executive of Dublin City Council (Owen Keegan), then lists of illustrations, abbreviations, and contributor profiles, before acknowledgements and a preface by present and former presidents of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland (Rachel Moss and Charles Doherty). At the end is an impressively full, twenty-eight page index. There are black-and-white images throughout, and sixteen sides of coloured images in the centre. The book is hardbound, and neatly printed on high-quality paper.

The main part of the book has a beautifully clear structure, with three chronologically ordered sections on the periods before, during and after the Battle of Clontarf in 1014, preceded by a further section ('In prospect') containing one essay, and a final section ('In retrospect') consisting of two more.

As suggested by careful reading of the subtitle of the book — *Before and After the Battle of Clontarf* — the section on the period 'During the battle' is in fact the shortest of the chronologically themed sections, containing a single pair of essays, each on an individual associated with this event: one, by Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, on 'A man of two faces: Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill in Middle Irish sources' and another, by Howard B. Clarke, on 'King Sitriuc Silkenbeard: a great survivor'. The approaches of the two authors are quite different, however. Whilst Ní Mhaonaigh's study analyses representations of Máel Sechnaill in written sources of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Clarke's focuses on Sitriuc as an historical figure, participating in the important political and military events of early eleventh-century Ireland. In Clarke's essay, the final part ('Prognostications') is likely to be especially helpful to fresh entrants to the field, by whom a number of very useful — and highly quotable — general comments on the nature of Irish kingship are bound to be appreciated.

The 'Before the battle' section contains twelve essays on the pre-1014 period, ranging from tightly focused studies of particular items or sites to considerations of wider issues such as the nature of 'The first generation in Ireland, 795–812: Viking raids and Viking bases?' (Emer Purcell), 'The

longphort in Viking-Age Ireland: the archaeological evidence' (Eamonn P. Kelly), 'Viking camps and the means of exchange in Britain and Ireland in the ninth century' (Gareth Williams), 'The break-up of Dál Riata and the rise of the Gallgoídil' (Clare Downham), and the difficulty of pinpointing any effects of tenth-century Viking activity in Ireland on the development of Irish art (Ruth Johnson, 'Mind the gap: the supposed hiatus in Irish art of the tenth century'). Most of the 'keyhole' studies also provide starting-points for explorations of broader questions about life in Viking-Age Ireland: to what extent did impulses from southern Scandinavia, specifically, influence developments in Ireland? (John Sheehan, 'Fighting with silver: the Woodstown assemblage'); how did Vikings select locations for their Irish bases, and were their strategies similar in Ireland and Francia? (Colmán Etchingham, 'Vikings at Annagassan: the evidence of the annals and the wider context'); how did 'longbow' use evolve in Ireland during the Middle Ages? (Andy Halpin, 'The Ballinderry bow: an under-appreciated Viking weapon?'). Elsewhere in this section, Linzi Simpson offers a vivid description of one particular young Viking male, and the context in which he was buried ('A Viking warrior grave from Dublin'), and Brian Hodkinson presents a succinct summary of evidence for the geography of 'Viking Limerick and its hinterland'. Signe Horn Fuglesang's article on 'Written sources for pre-Christian sanctuaries in northern Europe' stands out a little in its slightly tangential connection to Viking-Age Ireland, but it does provide a handy summary of this type of evidence which is likely to be of use to any readers interested in considering possible sanctuary-related behaviour by Scandinavian-origin (or Scandinavian-influenced) people in Irish settings during this period.

The section on the period 'After the battle' is equally abundant in information and ideas. A highlight is the article 'Celtic berserkers and feeble steersmen: Hiberno-Scandinavian military culture in Middle Irish literature', in which Catherine Swift argues that examination of such literature shows that 'Scandinavians in Ireland had indeed a profound effect on Irish military, cultural and even linguistic development.' This deliciously rich essay is in part a response to the work of two other contributors: Gillian Fellows-Jensen, who had previously suggested that there was only ever limited linguistic contact between the Irish and Scandinavians, and Andrew (Andy) Halpin, who had proposed that 'the Vikings and their Hiberno-Norse descendants had a profound effect on Irish military and political development.' In this new volume, Fellows-Jensen summarises some of her earlier work on Scandinavian names in England, the Isle of Man and Scotland (including the Isles), and illustrates the difficulties of identifying and interpreting Nordic personal and place-names in Ireland, whilst also offering some interesting solutions to particular problems, such as the relationship between the Irish and Scandinavian bynames of an unfortunate individual apparently known as something like 'Grim Seal-Head' or (possibly worse) 'Grim Bucket-head'. Like Swift, Fellows-Jensen ('Through a glass darkly: some sidelights on Viking influence on personal names and place-names in Ireland') makes valuable links between verbal and

physical evidence for the nature of the shared Hiberno-Norse world, and the ways in which this was perceived by its inhabitants. Also in this section, there are several equally illuminating articles focusing more squarely on material evidence, including 'Costumes and contact: evidence for Scandinavian women in the Irish Sea region' (Christina Lee), 'The environment of Viking-Age settlements: recent evidence from Ireland to Russia' (Eileen Reilly), 'Where are the longhouses? Reviewing Ireland's Viking-Age buildings' (Rebecca Boyd), 'Viking-Age domestic settlement at 26–29 Castle Street, Dublin: a preliminary view based on archaeological excavations' (Martin Byrne), and 'Prelude to the Hiberno-Scandinavian coinage: the Castle Street and Werburgh Street hoards' (Andrew Woods).

Art history is well-represented in this section, which contains McGraw's excellent article on motif-pieces, mentioned above. Uaininn O'Meadhra's essay, 'Copies or creations? Some shared elements in Hiberno-Norse and Scandinavian artwork', includes not only meaty case studies for art historians to enjoy chewing over, but also introductions to broader questions and methodological issues which are sure to be stimulating for many non-specialists, too. Griffin Murray's essay on 'The art of politics: the Cross of Cong and the Hiberno-Urnes Style' deftly links art history with ecclesiastical history, and it is excellent to see this reflected in the title, to help steer non-specialists towards this fine work. 'Rathdown slabs revisited' by Christiaan Corlett, meanwhile, is a real treat, exploring an intriguing group of twelfth-century Hiberno-Norse grave-slabs found exclusively in one specific area, just south of Dublin.

As readers might expect, some of the biggest ideas in the volume are tackled in the 'In prospect' and 'In retrospect' sections. In 'Ireland and the Viking Age,' the sole article in the 'In prospect' section, the editors provide a very welcome summary of the history of scholarship on Viking-Age Ireland, and outline recurring discussion-points, including the precise geographical origins of the Scandinavians who came to Ireland, the different forms of periodization employed by historians and archaeologists, and the reasons for the failure of Scandinavians to conquer the whole island at any point. This last topic is taken up again by Donnchadh Ó Corráin in the 'In retrospect' section, where he convincingly challenges claims that Viking activity in Ireland was a complete 'disaster' for its Irish inhabitants, partly by drawing attention to 'continuity in scholarship and education' here during the Viking Age ('Vikings in Ireland: the catastrophe'). Placed immediately before this is an essay by David Griffiths on 'Irish Sea identities and interconnections during the Viking Age' which invites us to consider Viking-Age continuities from different angles: 'continuity and change within existing Irish-British relationships throughout the period of Irish attacks and settlements' along with persistence of 'Scandinavian-derived traits' in the complex, fluid, hybrid culture of the region.

The essays in this collection will appeal to various types of reader. Many have been written with a level of directness and approachability which make them ideal for early-stage undergraduate or even pre-university teaching, as well as for advanced research (for example, Lee, 'Costumes and contact'). This is perhaps especially true of the essays contained in the 'In prospect'

and 'In retrospect' sections, which are well-suited for introducing the topic of Viking Ireland and stimulating big-picture thinking. Others may appeal more to researchers looking for up-to-date interpretations of Viking activity at specific geographical locations (Simpson on Dublin, for instance). Certain essays seem particularly likely to attract readers with existing specialist knowledge and appetites for thought-provoking new contributions (Ní Mhaonaigh, 'A man of two faces', Downham, 'The break-up of Dál Riata') — although, thanks to crystal-clear writing, even these will be accessible enough for keen non-specialists to enjoy. Any readers hoping to use this book as a source of ideas for Viking-related experimentation in the creative arts might well be drawn to O'Sullivan's examination of the glass beads found in mysterious Dunmore cave, or Clarke's suggestion that Sitriuc Silkenbeard could be 'one of those characters in search of an author'.

Overall, it is difficult to imagine how this lovely volume could have been improved, other than by adding a few more maps, here and there (for readers such as myself with limited knowledge of Irish geography), and perhaps also by ensuring that all sources quoted in translation were accompanied by the relevant original-language texts. This is a colourful and authoritative collection which is highly recommended for specialist researchers, university-level students, and other Irish history enthusiasts looking for fresh perspectives and exciting new questions to consider.

LISA COLLINSON

University of Aberdeen

Altirische Erzählkunst. Johan Corthals. Revised edition, CreateSpace, 2016. 123 pp. €9.95. ISBN 978-1530451562.

Johan Corthals's new edition of his book, *Altirische Erzählkunst* (first edition: Forum Celticum. Studien zu keltischen Sprachen und Kulturen 1, Münster, 1996), contains translations of eight tales along with an introductory overview of early Irish, a pronunciation guide, and bibliographical details and suggested reading. The tales translated in the new edition of the book are the same as in the 1996 version: *Organ Denna Ríg*, a section of *Tochmarc Étaíne*, *Scéla Mucce meic Dathó*, *Echtra mac nEchach Mugmedóin*, *Tochmarc Becfola*, *Síaburcharpat Conculaind*, *Immram Snédgusa ocus Mac Riagla* and the beginning of *Acallam na Senórach*. The new edition explicitly states the aim of the book, namely to serve as an introduction to the world of early Irish narratives primarily for those who are not familiar with it ('Dieses kleine Buch möchte in die fremde und fremdartige Welt seines Themas einführen', preface). To my knowledge there are relatively few modern German translations of medieval Irish texts from the original, some of which are by Corthals, and further translations carried out by someone with a scholarly background in the discipline present a noteworthy contribution in attempts to make the material accessible to general readers in German-speaking countries. For this reason alone, the book, in its original edition and in the new edition,