REVIEW

R. Andrew McDonald. *The Sea Kings: The Late Norse Kingdoms of Man and the Isles, c. 1066–1275*. Edinburgh: John Donald, 2019. Pp. xxii, 426. ISBN: 978-1-910900-21-5. £70.00.

While modern scholars have examined at length the feuds and conquests between English, Gaelic and Norse kings in the medieval period, few have analyzed the Manx and Hebridean kingships of Man and the Isles in depth. R. Andrew McDonald successfully fills this void by providing a fascinating retrospective look at the history of these kingdoms in *The Sea Kings: The Late Norse Kingdoms of Man and the Isles, c. 1066–1275*. McDonald examines a variety of contemporary and non-contemporary sources, taking on the challenge of revealing the forgotten history of these maritime kingdoms. He argues that the Manx and Hebridean kingships are significant for many different reasons.

Presenting a detailed timeline of this history can be rather daunting. McDonald chooses to present this information chronologically and thematically to the reader. The first part of the book focuses primarily on a timeline of the Manx and Hebridean kingships, beginning by providing background information on the Gaelic kingdom of Dál Riata and its conflicts between Picts, *Scotti* (Irish), and Saxons c. the fifth century. The introduction of the Norse in Scotland follows, with McDonald detailing the eventual rise of the first Kingdom of the Isles in the tenth century under Godred Crovan (d. 989). McDonald then looks to the sources to detail the history of the kingdoms, many of these sources being documents such as the thirteenth-century *Chronicles of the Kings of Man and the Isles*, twelfth to thirteenth-century Scandinavian sagas such as

Orkneyinga saga and the *Saga of King Hakon*, and more. Many of these documents are not completely contemporary to events, and there are several dating errors throughout. McDonald acknowledges these errors and strives to use a variety of other sources to present a timeline of Manx and Hebridean kingship in a more organized fashion. He then examines the many kings that ruled the Isles. From brotherly feuds for the throne, to kings establishing connections with English rulers, McDonald reveals that the Kingdoms of Man and the Isles truly had an extensive and interesting history.

In the second part of his book, McDonald establishes a more thematic approach in his analysis of the Kingdoms of Man and the Isles. He explores social and economic aspects of this history. For example, he examines the use of coins as currency for the period in his eighth chapter based on coin hoard discoveries on the Isles of Man and the Hebrides. Previously, scholars believed that it was highly unlikely that the coins found on the Isle of Man were used in this period. However, modern scholars have discovered an increasing number of coin hoards on the Isle of Man, and technology has allowed them to discover more and accurately date them. McDonald expertly reveals that the economy of these maritime kingdoms appears far more advanced than scholars initially believed. McDonald also provides a fascinating discussion on gender and social factors of the Kingdoms in his tenth chapter, examining how sources such as the *Chronicles of the Kings of Man and the Isles* reveals notable female figures like the unnamed Queen of the Isles married to King Rognvald of Man (d. 1229). After she learned that the marriage of her sister to Rognvald's brother was uncanonical, the document reveals that she wrote a letter to the King's son, impersonating her husband and demanding that his son kill Rognvald's brother. McDonald argues that her name was likely censored as it is probable that the scribe believed that she caused disharmony in the Kingdom. This section of the Chronicle also reveals how

heavily involved the church was in the Isles. McDonald delves into this further in his eleventh chapter, revealing how religion was an important aspect of this maritime society.

He concludes his book by detailing the final efforts to consolidate the kingship of Man by the last Manx king, Godfrey, in 1275. While Godfrey was successful in reclaiming Man, his reign did not last long. Battles for control of Man and the Isles raged on following this event between English and Scottish kings, proving that the Isles were truly a power base sought after by neighbouring kingdoms. McDonald reiterates this point quite succinctly with the statement, "... whoever sought to dominate the western seaways would first need to control Man and the Isles." (p. 304) In this final sentence of the book, McDonald expertly wraps up his argument for the significance of Man and the Isles, largely determined from the development of its kingdoms.

McDonald successfully presents a detailed summary of the Manx and Hebridean rulers of Man and the Isles from c. 1066 – 1275 in a well-organized manner, and those interested in Norse-Gaelic relations and kingship of the Isles should certainly consider reading it.

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