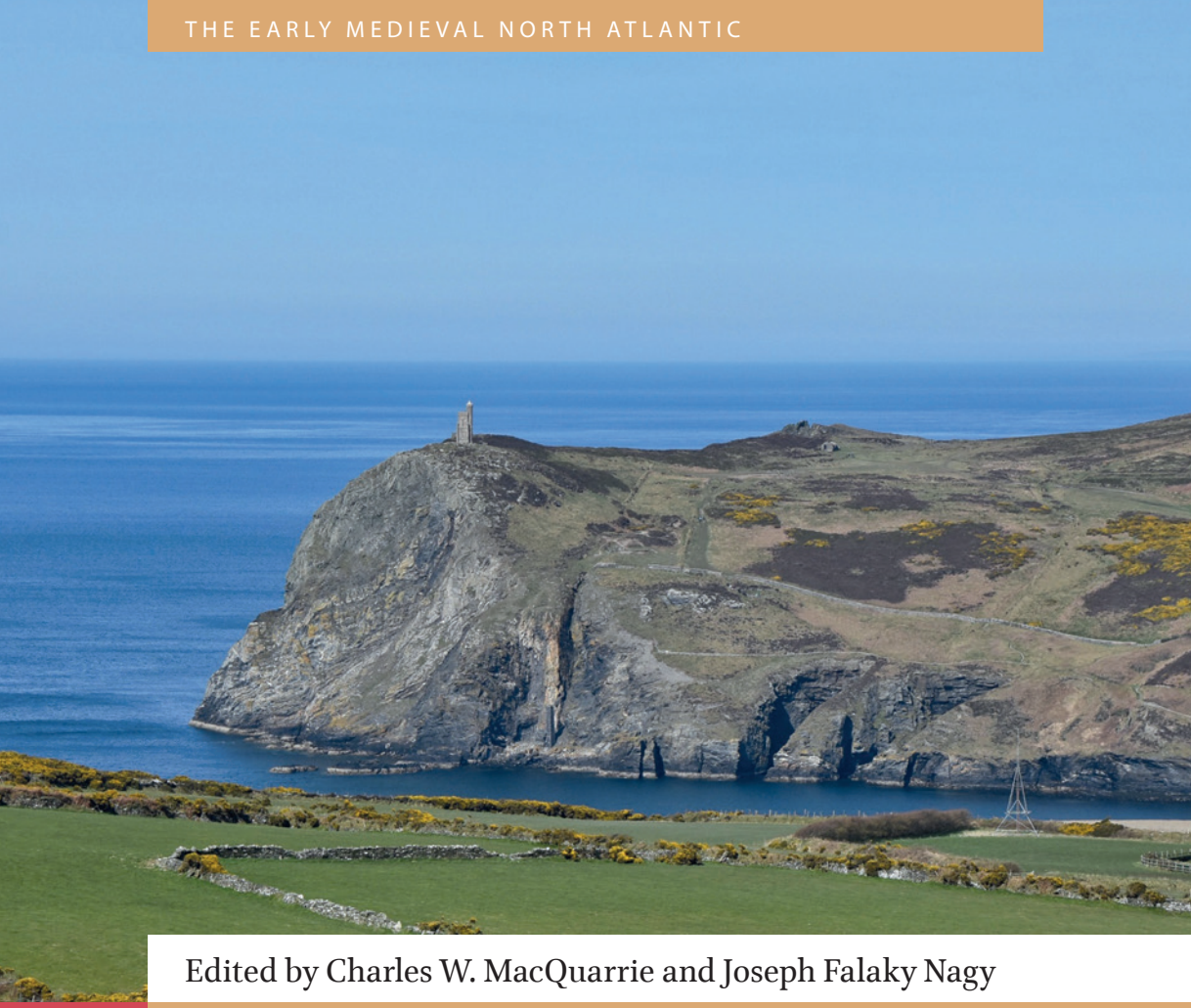
THE EARLY MEDIEVAL NORTH ATLANTIC



Edited by Charles W. MacQuarrie and Joseph Falaky Nagy

The Medieval Cultures of the Irish Sea and the North Sea

Manannán and his Neighbors

Amsterdam
University
Press

The Medieval Cultures of the Irish Sea and the North Sea

The Early Medieval North Atlantic

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Map of the Irish Sea and Northern Sea Area *c.* 1000–1200 CE

Preface

This book derives from a 2015 Summer Seminar for University Professors, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities of Washington, D.C. The seminar commenced on June 8 in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and ended on July 12, in Glasgow, Scotland, after an extended stay in Douglas on the Isle of Man. The co-editors of this volume, who were also the co-directors of the seminar, are forever indebted to the extraordinary participants, our colleagues and friends, whose research projects, presentations, and contributions to the lively and provocative discussions helped to make the experience so memorable and productive. In addition to the authors of the essays included herein, those participants included Kay J. Blalock, Tracey Cooper, Emily C. Cox, Donna E. Crawford, Sandy Feinstein, Leslie Jacoby, and Jeff A. Rudy. Thank you all!

We are also grateful to the NEH itself, especially Doug Arnold and Rebecca Boggs, as well as to our gracious hosts and invited seminar speakers—Thomas Clancy, Peter Davey, Jennifer Kewley-Draskau, James P. Mallory, Gregory Toner, Sir David Wilson, and M. Joseph Wolf—and to our redoubtable administrative coordinator, Milissa Ackerly. Special thanks to the indispensable Andrea Weikel, who completed the final accounting on the grant. We would also like to acknowledge the Centre for Manx Studies, formerly a research unit of the University of Liverpool; the Manx National Heritage and the Isle of Man Museums, for letting the members of the seminar use their facilities and resources, for providing photographs of items from their remarkable archaeological collection for our publication, and for permitting us to quote extracts from the Manx Folk-Life Survey Archive; the Royal Overseas League in Edinburgh; Strathmillis College in Belfast; and the University of Glasgow. This grateful acknowledgment extends to Peter Killey, who has allowed us to use his beautiful photograph on the cover.

Of course, our heartfelt gratitude goes out in a special way to the Amsterdam University Press, in particular Erin Dailey (who, in addition to all his editorial assistance, so expertly designed a map for us), Lucia Dove, and Chantal Nicolaes. Without the guidance, wisdom, and faith in the project with which they honored us, our book could not have become a reality.

Charles W. MacQuarrie
Joseph Falaky Nagy

Introduction

Manannán and His Neighbors

Charles W. MacQuarrie

Keywords: Manannán, kingship of Man, Anglesey, Lordship of the Isles, *Cronica Regum Manniæ et Insularum*, linguistic microcosm

The Isle of Man occupied a place both central and peripheral in the history of the North Atlantic. Because of its location it was, no doubt, central to the sea trade routes in and around the Irish Sea region already in the prehistorical period, and in the medieval period it played an important role in the politics of Ireland, England, Wales, and Scotland, and was by 1000 CE an important seat of Scandinavian power. Later, in a related development, Somerled Macgilbred, the first Lord of the Isles, seized the Hebrides from the King of Man, and took the title King of the Hebrides and King of Man, although the Lordship of the Isles never actually included the Isle of Man.[1] Before and after its domination by the Norse, Man clearly was a place known to and settled by speakers of Celtic languages, from both sides of the Irish Sea. For example, in an anecdote told in the late Old Irish text known as "Cormac's Glossary" (*Sanas Cormaic*, dated to the late first millennium CE), the island appears as a place of exile for a lost-and-found poetess, as well as a base of mercantile operations, inhabited by Manannán mac Lir, believed by the pagan Irish to have been a god, but who was in fact, according to the author, a successful merchant and seaman.[2] An Irish Sea Shangri-La or Bali Hai of

1 Rosemary Power, "The Isle of Man and the Kings of Norway: Magnús Barelegs and After," in *A New History of the Isle of Man*, vol. 3*: The Medieval Period 1000–1406*, ed. Seán Duffy and Harold Mytum (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 27–57.

2 Alongside an introduction to the text, the relevant passages are translated and discussed by Paul Russell in "Poets, Power and Possessions in Medieval Ireland: Some Stories from *Sanas Cormaic*," in *Law, Literature and Society*, ed. Joseph F. Eska, CSANA Yearbook 7 (Dublin: Four Courts, 2008), 9–45.

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sorts, Man seems to have held a significant place in the mythology of the Irish and to have been associated with the supernatural via its connection with the ubiquitous Manannán, who in later folklore is said to protect the island by shrouding it in mist.[3]

Its mysterious protector notwithstanding, Man, as the historian Sir David Wilson has pointed out, did fall prey to the vicissitudes of history, undergoing various economic undulations.[4] While there was a significant amount of commerce involving the island during the Lordship of the Isles—tellingly, a mint was established there already *c.* 1025[5]—and it served as a waypoint for Scandinavian trade from Dublin up through the Irish Sea into the North Sea, after the coming of English rule *c.* 1400 the Isle of Man suffered a significant economic decline, changing from a trade-based to a largely self-sustaining agrarian economy.[6] Over time it alternated between being a thriving place of promise and one of poverty and isolation. Rosemary Power notes that the island was the site of legendary figures, and medieval accounts of deeds from the heroic past seem to represent it, in the Old Norse *Orkneyinga saga* (*c.* 1200) and other sagas, as "the extremity of the known world."[7]

Already mentioned above was the island's centrality at one time to the political hegemony of the Lordship of the Isles in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries CE. It was at the yearly Tynwald (a traditional assembly still held on the island) that the "keys of Man" came together, that is, the representatives of the various groups from Iona to the Shetlands who were voting members of the confederation centered on the Lordship.[8] And yet Man was also viewed in some premodern sources as a distant island, unsettled, and rebarbative, whose few inhabitants were both disturbingly recherché and yet poetically, magically powerful. Even though the "Mona" mentioned by Tacitus as the

3 For a more extensive discussion of this topic see Charles MacQuarrie, "The Isle of Man in Early Irish Literature," *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, 5 vols, ed. John T. Koch (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 1: 377–79, and "The Isle of Man in Medieval Gaelic Literature," in Duffy and Mytum, *New History*, 281–304.

4 David Wilson, "Introduction—Setting the Scene: Man at the Turn of the Millenium," in Duffy and Mytum, *New History*, 1–8.

5 Wilson, "Introduction," 2 and 5; Benjamin Hudson, "The Isle of Man in a European Context," in Duffy and Mytum, *New History*, 187–209, at 194–96; David Ditchburn and Benjamin Hudson "Economy and Trade in Medieval Man," in Duffy and Mytum, *New History*, 377–410, at 396; Kristin Bornholdt Collins "Coinage," Duffy and Mytum, *New History*, 411–65, at 412, 423, 425, 427–23, 440.

6 Power, "Isle of Man and the Kings of Norway," 49–50.

7 Power, "Isle of Man and the Kings of Norway," 29.

8 Ruth Constain-Russell, "The Reigns of Guthröthr and Rögnvaldr, 1153–1229," in Duffy and Mytum, *New History*, 78–96, at 78.

home base of druids and druidism is presumed by scholars to be Anglesey, as we shall discuss presently Man and Anglesey are closely connected in the Classical imagination. Man, the traditional residence of the figure Manannán mac Lir who in Irish sources is sometimes said to be the king of the supernatural Túatha Dé Danann, has plenty of otherworldly cachet.[9] Writing about the land assessments and divisions of Man and their connections to Welsh, Irish, Scottish, and English models, Gareth Williams points out that one of the most solid transmarine connections in the pre-Norse history of the Isle of Man was its connection with the Welsh dynasty of the kingdom of Gwynedd (northwestern Wales), of which Anglesey was an important part. He further observes that Anglesey and the Isle of Man are thought of as a pair by Bede and other early authors.[10] Man, far more so than Anglesey, is cast in some medieval Irish sources as the sanctuary or place of exile for visionary poets as well as a prison and place of exile (something in between Australia and Alcatraz) for aristocratic political prisoners.[11]

The oxymoronic nature of the island, like that of its most famous resident Manannán himself, is sometimes sweet and at other times sour, or calm and then stormy, a contrast mirrored in the bifurcated realms of the religious and the secular, as important on the Island as they were throughout medieval Europe. One of the few medieval sources thought to have been written on the Isle of Man, the *Cronica Regum Manniæ et Insularum* (*Chronicles of the Kings of Man and the Isles*), which covers the period from *c.* 1000 to 1316 CE, gives us only a few details about the life, language, and culture of the everyday people of the Island in those times. Primarily dealing with matters pertaining to the Viking ruler Magnus, son of Olaf, during whose reign (*c.* 1250–65) the bulk of it was probably recorded, the *Cronica* also gives us details about various

9 The Túatha Dé Danann are one of the mythological populations said to have preceded the Irish on the island in some of our medieval Irish sources. In some (later medieval) texts, such as *Altram Tige Dá Medhar* (The nourishing of the house of the two milk-pails), Manannán mac Lir is described as the king of the Túatha Dé Danann. They were thought to live in an otherworld which is often imagined to be underground, sometimes thought to be under or over the sea, and is putatively connected to the Isle of Man, which is sometimes identified as Emain Abhlach ("the Plain of Apples") and may be connected to magical Avalon from Arthurian tradition. See Charles MacQuarrie, *The Biography of the Irish God of the Sea from the Voyage of Bran (c.700 A.D.) to Finnegans Wake (1939): The Waves of Manannán mac Lir* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), 9–11 and 333–35. See also MacQuarrie, "Isle of Man in Early Irish Literature," 377–79.

10 Gareth Williams, "The System of Land Division and Assessment," in Duffy and Mytum, *New History*, 466–83, at 476.

11 Occluded residents of the island include the female poetess mentioned as living there in *Sanas Cormaic* (see above). The Isle of Man is also the place where the legendary lovers of the medieval Irish Ulster cycle, Deirdriu and Noísiu, spend part of their exile—see note 2 and 9 above, MacQuarrie, *Biography*, 223–27.

other kings and monks, with its interest seemingly centered on Rushen Abbey.[12] Indeed, as Peter Davey observes, the monks were perhaps even more interesting to the anonymous chronicler than the monarchs. While eremitically inclined holy men from Ireland, Wales, and Scotland no doubt had used the island as a place of ascetic isolation from the early Middle Ages on, by 1130 a more elaborate monastic system was being established on Man, partly at the behest of the kings of Man, who in their backgrounds reflected the fusion of Gaelic and Norse populations in Ireland and Scotland.[13]

The Manx language, which probably coexisted with and succeeded the British Celtic languages spoken on the island in the early years of the first millennium CE, is grounded in Irish, with lexical borrowing from Latin, Norse, Anglo-Norman, and English. It therefore presents a linguistic microcosm of the multifaceted complexity that characterizes the history of Man as sketched above.[14] The archeological record left on the island is no less complex, and the numismatic evidence bears witness to dramatic political and economic change. Coins from Dublin mints give way to those produced on the island in the later first millennium CE, after which imported coins alternate, in the period 1000 to 1400, with coinage traceable in turn to England, Ireland, and Scotland.[15]

Peripheral and isolated yet at the same time central and cosmopolitan—a palimpsest of multilingual and multicultural hybridity—the Isle of Man both was heavily influenced by and widely influenced its neighbors in the North Atlantic, helping to create and consolidate a maritime culture and economy throughout the area. Yet, while the surviving evidence—literary, archaeological, numismatic—provides valuable clues, there is still much we do not know about Manx history. Perhaps the most compelling witnesses to the past of the island are the standing stones and crosses that often bear traces of the languages that were spoken at this nexus point in the middle of the Irish Sea. Inscriptions in Latin and Irish, Welsh names, and Norse stories (represented pictorially and with runes) on the Manx stones—all these testify to a complexity of origin and influence, inviting reflection and research, and set the tone for the bold and intellectually honest work that characterizes this edited volume of research essays, which were gestated

12 Seán Duffy, "Man and the Irish Sea World in the Eleventh Century," in Duffy and Mytum, *New History*, 9–26, at 16–17, and Bernadette Williams, "The Chronicles of the Kings of Man and the Isles," in Duffy and Mytum, *New History*, 305–28, at 306–28.

13 P.J. Davey, "Medieval Monasticism and the Isle of Man c.1130–1540," in Duffy and Mytum, *New History*, 349–76, at 349.

14 R.L. Thompson, Language in Man: Prehistory to Literacy," in Duffy and Mytum, *New History*, 241–56, at 245–47.

15 Collins "Coinage," 411.

on the Isle of Man and then developed by our contributors in the weeks, months, and years that followed.

Chapter 1. Innovatively tapping into the extensive numismatic evidence, Helen Davies analyzes the complex political and economic dynamic that extended across the Irish Sea, particularly between the Viking kingdom of Dublin and the rulers of the Isle of Man, during the late first and early second millennium CE. This period provides the background to the author's study of the evidence for a more subtle balance of power obtaining in this relationship than what previous studies have proposed.

Chapter 2. Contributed by M. Wendy Hennequin, this essay centers on the figure of (H)unferth in *Beowulf*, offering an innovative view of the oft-debated function of this character in the story the Old English poem tells. Instead of viewing Hunferth's challenge to Beowulf as gratuitously antagonistic, Hennequin analyzes it in terms of stylized forms of incitement, as documented in the early medieval literatures of Ireland, Britain, and Scandinavia.

Chapter 3. A scholar of drama and dance, Ron J. Popenhagen advances our understanding of the somatic basis of the medieval Irish hero Cú Chulainn's heroism—that is, the remarkably exposed and shifting state(s) of his body as evident in saga literature when it describes his performance in battle. "Performance" is indeed the key word, for, as Popenhagen observes, Cú Chulainn like other heroes of the medieval Irish Sea milieu, triumphs by virtue not only of the remarkable feats of which he and/or his body are capable, but also of his theatrical presentation of himself.

Chapter 4. Brian Cook provides a clearheaded overview of the complications of text, transmission, and provenance evidenced in a major medieval Icelandic chronicle of northwest European politics, the *Orkneyinga saga*. Cook focuses on the connivances of the legendary queen Ragnhild and their impact upon North Sea islands and kingdoms. Is she a Norse reflex or importation of the Irish sovereignty figure? And, as deadly as it might be, does sexual association with such a figure endow her lovers with legendary cachet? These are among the questions Cook attempts to answer.

Chapter 5. Classicist Stephen Kershner, using the lens of Statius and the tradition of Roman epic, finds meaningful patterns in what the medieval Irish translator of the *Thebaid* kept and didn't keep of the Roman poet's sensitive framing of the story of the Seven against Thebes. In simultaneously embracing and distancing itself from its Latin source, this Middle Irish text reveals the long-lasting impact of Statius on the literature of early Ireland, Britain, and the Western Middle Ages in general.

Chapter 6. Rhonda Knight intrepidly re-examines the connections between the Stanley family, sometimes known as the "Kings of Man" during the period

of English domination, and what has been called a "farrago" of texts contained in the famous seventeenth-century manuscript known as the Percy Folio. The mysterious and disruptive outsider of medieval romance together with the marcher lord, a major player in the politics of late medieval and early modern Britain, come together in the Percy Folio to provide posterity with a picture, vividly presented in Knight's essay, of a turbulent and changing society.

Chapter 7. Maria McGarrity examines Seamus Heaney's rendering of *Beowulf* in the context of the poet's probings of the interface between the Irish and English languages, and that between the British and Irish registers of English itself. Heaney's choices of vocabulary and phrases, ranging from the subtle to the conspicuous, are shown artfully to recast the Old English masterpiece in a contemporary dialogue, not at all free from tension, among neighboring cultures of the Irish Sea Cultural Province.

Chapter 8. Ethel B. Bowden, a scholar of children's and young people's literature, employs approaches borrowed from her field to take a fresh look at the "heroic biography" model by which the boyhood deeds of the medieval Irish hero Cú Chulainn have been interpreted by earlier scholars. The author concludes by considering the implications and consequences (including the "pluses" and "minuses") of introducing the narrative life and times of such early medieval heroes—given these stories' undeniable surfeit of violence—into the contemporary classroom.

Chapter 9. In the concluding contribution to this collection, Marc Pierce, a specialist in Germanic historical linguistics, presents an insightful juxtaposition of the modern histories of Manx and "Texas German." He focuses his analysis on the question, why and how has Manx been revived in modern times to at least a limited extent, while the German once spoken extensively in Texas has fared far less well.

About the author

Charles W. MacQuarrie is a Professor of English at California State University, Bakersfield. He is the author of two books on Manannán mac Lir, one an academic monograph and the other a collection of translations primarily intended for children. He has also frequently presented and written on, and continues to research, the history, myth, and folklore associated with Celtic tattooing. He is the former editor of the Celtic Studies of North America newsletter, has directed or co-directed four National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminars, and is a long-time Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.