

The Kingdom of Mann and the Isles

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Introduction

The Kingdom of Mann and the Isles, consolidated in 1079, provides an important insight into the impact of Vikings had beyond their homelands. In looking at the Viking Age in the Isle of Man, Orkney and the isles of Lewis and Skye, we can see that such activity had a profound and lasting effect on the development of not only these islands, but also on their relationship with the rest of the British Isles. Shaped by their experience in places such as Norway, the Vikings that settled these islands transplanted their traditions, culture and even political ideals, creating a unique microcosm of Viking culture that recognised a shared heritage but created a separate identity. This paper therefore endeavours to highlight the impact and legacy of this Viking kingdom; surrounded on all sides by powerful and influential forces, but which was able to develop somewhat independently. In looking at the history and emergence of the Kingdom of Mann and the Isles, and how the Viking settlers adapted to their new surroundings, we can see the development of a Kingdom that was distinctly Viking yet also adjustable, providing these islands with a legacy that would shape their future identity.

The emergence of a subsidiary kingdom under the Norse

The consolidation of the Kingdom of Mann and the Isles by Godred Crovan (King Orry) in 1079 was not a single or instantaneous event. Prior to 1079, the Vikings had been increasingly present and active in the British Isles. The emergence of this subsidiary kingdom – subsidiary initially to Norway – was therefore the result of prolonged Viking activity within the British Isles. It is suggested by John Haywood that the Vikings were familiar with the area and that whether before the consolidation of the kingdom, or during

that time, there were a number of coastal features around the Irish Sea with 'Scandinavian names – a sign of the Scandinavian domination of these waters during the Viking age.¹ Furthermore, David M. Wilson highlights in his work *The Vikings in the Isle of Man* that: 'The Irish Sea became in effect a Viking Sea for much of the tenth and eleventh centuries. Through it passed much of the north/south trade of the western littoral of Europe, from Norway and the lands of the North Atlantic, while fleets belonging to various rulers from Norway, the Northern Isles, the Isle of Man, Dublin and York fought to control it politically and economically.'² In many ways, the Kingdom of Mann and the Isles was not really a subsidiary kingdom, its important position made it a significant and potentially influential kingdom in its own right.

However, this position also meant that it was a Kingdom of many parts – both suðreyar (southern) and norðreyar (northern) - and also subject to various influences. Under the rule of Harald Finehair (also known as Harald Fairhair), many Vikings had fled Norway. Subsequent raids by wayward Vikings eventually led to the Norwegian King attempting to subjugate them once more to Norwegian rule. The islands of the Kingdom of Mann and the Isles therefore provided a safe haven for Harald's opposition to flee to, allowing those opposed to a united Norway, under single rule, to set out and create settlements which would become microcosms for their own ideal Viking society. However, using the islands as a base for attacks on Norway resulted in a campaign by Harald Finehair to subdue the islands and bring them under Norwegian rule. As a result of this campaign the Earldom of Orkney was established, and the islands as far south as the Isle of Man came under the influence of Norway. Despite this recognition of Norwegian supremacy however, the Kingdom was able to develop its own system of rule – whether this was due to the area concerned and its distance from Norway, or that it was in fact approved of by the Norwegian

¹ Haywood, John, 'The Penguin Historical Atlas of the Vikings', (Penguin, 1995), p.78

² Wilson, David M., 'The Vikings in the Isle of Man', Aarhus University Press (2008), p.22

crown however is questionable. It was therefore an unsettled period, with the region being one of 'highly fragmented and competing power structures: in Ireland, the many petty kingdoms and the independent Norse towns; the Welsh principalities; the Kingdom of Man and the Isles and its rival the Earldom of Orkney.³ Given this atmosphere of competition it is significant therefore that a strong Viking kingdom could not only develop, but survive as a whole for approximately 200 years, with a longer-lasting cultural legacy.

Norðreyar and the Earldom of Orkney

Initially the main power behind the Kingdom of Mann and the Isles, and later a rival to the position of the Isle of Man within the kingdom, the Orkneys held an important strategic position within the British Isles. Situated amongst the northern islands of the Kingdom – Norðreyar or Norðr - the Earldom of Orkney held a powerful and influential position. As Haywood outlines: 'Towards the end of the 9th century, the Norwegian Vestfold kings extended their control over Orkney, establishing an earldom under loose royal control. They also claimed sovereignty over the Hebrides, but it would be 200 years before their authority there was anything more than theoretical. The Orkney earldom soon expanded, taking control of most of the Scandinavian settled areas of Scotland by the reign of Earl Sigurd the Stout (c.985-1014).⁴ The development of the Earldom of Orkney was therefore gradual, but also strongly influenced by Norway, arguably maintaining the intention to somehow govern the wayward Viking settlements and prevent further raids on Norway. As a direct result, Harald established the Earldom of Orkney, placing Orkney under the control of 'Rognvald, Earl of Møre, in western Norway'⁵, ensuring that some form of Norwegian influence could be held over the islands. What then ensued, from the reign of Earl Thorfinn (1014-64) onwards, was the gradual consolidation of power by the earls, with Thorfinn, in

³ J. Haywood op. cit. p.111

⁴ Ibid, p.76

⁵ Roesdahl, Else, 'The Vikings' Revised Edition, (England: Penguin Books, 1998), p.212

1035, adding 'Ross, Shetland, the Isle of Man and, possibly, lands in Galloway and Ireland to his dominions.⁶ However, Orkney's hold on the islands was unstable, and 'after Thorfinn's death the Orkney earldom lost control of the Isles.⁷ However, the emergence of the Isle of Man as such a strong centre for the Sudreys, and indeed the Kingdom as a whole, is perhaps surprising therefore, especially given its southerly position. As discussed above, the earls of Orkney failed in their attempt to fully control the islands, though whether this was due to their geographic location is questionable. It is possible that given the Isle of Man's location, central in the trading centre of the Irish Sea, it could therefore hold a more powerful and influential role. Alternatively, it is possible that it was due to the issues of geography that the islands of the Kingdom are known by two terms: Norðreyar and Suðreyar, dividing the Kingdom between its northern and southern sections, and effectively identifying how control and authority could be managed. For the Orkneys themselves, Norwegian remained, as 'politically the Orkneys belonged to Norway right up to 1648 and the Shetlands until 1469, when they were given by King Christian I of Denmark and Norway to King James III of Scotland as security for the dowry of James' wife, the Danish princess Margarethe.⁸

From a cultural perspective, with the arrival of the Vikings in Orkney, native culture was effectively supplanted with that of the Norse incomers; yet John Haywood does suggest that although 'the native Celts were completely submerged by the newcomers...in the Hebrides and the southwest they were soon intermarrying with the Norse to produce a hybrid people known to the Irish as the Gall-Gaedhil ("foreign Gael").⁹ Although this may have been the case in Orkney, it is not clear whether this integration and intermarrying was the case throughout the Kingdom. Else Roesdahl, in her work *The Vikings*, states that

⁶ J. Haywood op. Cit. p.128

⁷ Ibid, p.128

⁸ E. Roesdahl op. Cit. p.214

⁹ J. Haywood op. Cit. p.76

'place-names and language show that the Scandinavians assumed total power in the Shetlands and Orkneys but it is not clear whether the native population was reduced to slavery or whether they merely lost what land and influence they had.¹⁰ What emerges is not therefore a uniform system, but perhaps individual periods and processes of settlement. However it was a process that lasted, as the Scandinavian language which the Vikings introduced to both Orkney and Shetland would survive, as the 'distinctive dialect, Norn, survived into the eighteenth century.¹¹ With religion too, the Vikings made their mark on the Norðr islands. Like other islands in the Kingdom, 'it is not known precisely when the earldom of Orkney became Christian, for the saga account of King Olaf Tryggvason's forced conversion in c.995 may not be reliable. It may have happened gradually here and elsewhere in Scotland, according to personal choice, during the tenth century, when pagan burial customs were abandoned and Christian funerary monuments were adopted.¹² However, the Church too was distinctly Scandinavian in character, particularly in its organization. It can be suggested therefore that once the Viking settlers converted to Christianity, they also wished to make their mark on that, incorporating their beliefs and practices to the new religion.

Suðreyar and the Isle of Man

As has been already stated, the Kingdom of Mann and the Isles is identified as consisting of two distinct parts, the second being the Suðreyar – or the Sudreys (later Sodor) – the islands of the Hebrides and the Isle of Man which together made up the southern part of the kingdom. The Sudreys, arguably served as stepping-stones for the advancement of the Vikings southward into the Irish Sea, enabling shelter for the journey from Orkney or even Norway southwards to Dublin. The Isle of Man, situated in the centre

¹⁰ E. Roesdahl op. Cit. p.212

¹¹ Ibid, p.214

¹² Ibid, p.216

of the Irish Sea therefore held a significant strategic position, and as David M. Wilson states in his work *The Vikings in the Isle of Man*: 'The strategic position of the Island in the Irish Sea gave potential for the ruler of Man to be a major player – sometimes victor, sometimes vanquished – in the eleventh-century politics of the region.'¹³ Arguably whoever controlled the Isle of Man, would therefore be able to control, or at least govern a significant area of the Irish Sea. The impact on trade and even travel in the Irish Sea area could therefore be significant. The interconnected nature of the Kingdom would therefore appear to suggest that each was significant in the overall success of the Kingdom. For instance the isles of Lewis and Skye arguably played an important role in the security of the more southerly of the Sudreys. G.V.C. Young states that 'in about 1098, Magnus Barelegs (King of Norway) attacked the Island of Lewis in the Hebrides and completely sacked Long Island and completely conquered it and, subsequently, the whole of the Sudreys.'¹⁴ It can be speculated then, that to be in control of Lewis and Skye must therefore have represented an important link in the control of the other islands in the Sudreys.

With the consolidation of the Kingdom of Man and the Isles by Godred Crovan in 1079, the rise in importance of the Isle of Man really began. It was arguably Godred's structuring of the Kingdom that increased its strength, preventing the failures that the Earls of Orkney had encountered in attempting to consolidate power. Haywood highlights that 'Godred divided his kingdom up into five regions, which together sent a total of 32 representatives to the annual assembly at Tynwald (from *Thingvöllr* - the meeting-place) in the Isle of Man.'¹⁵ As a result of this an effective power structure was established, similar in principal to the *Þingvellir* of Iceland, arguably working in the same manner to settle disputes, establish laws and deals with matters affecting the islands. It unified the Kingdom

¹³ D.M. Wilson op. Cit. p.121

¹⁴ Young, G.V.C., 'The Lewis and Skye Groups of the Hebrides under the Norse ca.800-1266', (Peel, Isle of Man: Mansk-Svenska Publishing Company Ltd, 1996), p.8

¹⁵ J. Haywood op. Cit. p.128

of Mann and the Isles politically, providing a place for each of the regions to be represented. The meeting place, or as Wilson states, 'the presence of the mound at Tynwald is another element which can be paralleled in Scandinavia'¹⁶ and again highlights the interconnectivity of the Kingdom with Norse culture as well as Celtic. Gjerset supports this by stating that:

*'the Norsemen, whenever they founded colonies, whether in Man, in France, or in distant Greenland, established a system of laws and government of a high type, and maintained order and justice, and an efficient administration of all public affairs. Their government, though not truly representative in form, approached so near to it in spirit that we feel the popular will and sense of justice expressed in their laws, and in the legal decisions rendered by the thing. It was their talent for organization, and their sense of legal justice and good government, as much as their enterprise in navigation and commerce, which enabled them to establish the Norse colonial empire at this early period.'*¹⁷

Gjerset therefore highlights the importance of a strong political structure in the development of the Kingdom of Mann and the Isles, as in other Viking Settlements. This focus on politics therefore serves to diminish the stereotypical view of Vikings as raiders and pillagers. As the establishment of Tynwald shows, they could also develop keen political structures, amongst the other roles they adopted, such as fishermen and farmers.

Although Celtic culture was in many ways replaced by Norse as the Vikings settled the isles, Young states that in Man, 'after the battle of Sky Hill, Godred Crovan gave the South of the Isle of Man to those of his Hebridean forces who wished to settle in the Isle of

¹⁶ D.M. Wilson op. Cit. p.123

¹⁷ Gjerset, Knut, 'History of the Norwegian People', (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1915), p.234, accessed via GoogleBooks on 17th December 2009 at: http://books.google.co.uk/books?pg=PA234&dq=History+of+the+Norwegian+People&lr=&id=io4NAQAAIAAJ&as_brr=1#v=onepage&q=&f=false

Man and gave the North of the Isle of Man to the surviving Manxmen.¹⁸ On the Isle of Man at least, the Manx or Celtic culture was allowed to survive, though the original place-names - and for a time language - were replaced with Norse meanings. This statement would seem to suggest that in the Isle of Man the Vikings gradually established themselves into the society they arrived in, never more so than with regard to religion. As the stone crosses show, there is a mixing of Norse and Christian imagery, suggesting that the Viking perhaps adapted Christian imagery to fit their own pagan beliefs, or alternatively that the Viking settlers used the imagery that was familiar to them in their adoption and understanding of Christianity. Therefore, as in Orkney, the Vikings sought to make their mark on the new religion. In the Isle of Man in particular we see the culmination of old and new beliefs through the Celtic Crosses. The carving of stone crosses in the Isle of Man had been common since the sixth century, and was adopted by the Vikings during their settlement of the Island. The crosses which emerged – such as the Andreas 128 cross or the Andreas 121 cross – show not only the conversion of the Vikings to Christianity, but also the transport of Norse legends and artistic styles, such as Borre, Jellinge, Mammen and Ringerike. The crosses give some indication into the developing cultural identity of the island, and the mixing of Celtic and Nordic cultures. However, Wilson suggests that such monuments and the use of runes are not only significant in relation to the Isle of Man, but to Viking activity throughout the western isles. The relatively small number of runic inscriptions across Viking Britain, particularly in Ireland and the western isles of Scotland, means that 'the Manx inscriptions, therefore – however formulaic – considerably enhance knowledge of the Viking Age in the west.'¹⁹ Despite the advantages of creating a mixed Celtic and Norse culture within the Kingdom, Gjerset suggests that to outsiders, 'from 820 to 830 the Vikings came in such numbers that the islands were called by Irish annalists "Innse Gall" (*i.e.* the islands of

¹⁸ G.V.C. Young op. Cit. p.6

¹⁹ D.M. Wilson op. Cit. p.75

the strangers).²⁰ There was clearly at this point in time already a distinction and a separation of cultures, marking that of the islands as distinctly other.

The Viking Legacy

There are many aspects of the Kingdom of Mann and the Isles that have left a strong legacy and historical identity for the islands that were affected. With the arrival of the Vikings across Orkney, Lewis, Skye and Man, the old established cultures and society were either overshadowed or overturned. With the Vikings came changes in language, place-names, art and even politics. The result for the Kingdom was an identity which was forever changed. Although in the Isle of Man, the later transferral of rule to the Scottish Crown did bring further cultural influences, and a reintroduction of Gaelic, today place-names of Norse origin remain, and so too does the descendant of the Viking's form of governance: Tynwald. The legacy of the Viking Age in the islands of the Kingdom of Mann, is therefore a cultural identity set apart from that of their neighbours. As Roesdahl states: 'There is a great deal of archaeological evidence of the Vikings' presence in Scotland and the Isle of Man, and Scandinavian influence here was strong and lasting.'²¹ Even Knut Gjerset, writing in 1915, commented on the fact that: 'The people of the Orkneys have retained to the present time their Norse character. They are proud of their Norse descent, and refuse to be called Scotch. They live on their country homesteads, as of old...and their accent strongly resembles that of the western districts of Norway.'²² It could be argued that some essence of the Viking spirit therefore remains, that islanders are proud of being different and embrace the aspects of their history that have shaped their culture.

With the establishment of Norse place-names, and visible monuments to the presence of the Vikings, that history is never far from mind. They create a sense of a

²⁰ K. Gjerset op. Cit. pp.47-8

²¹ E. Roesdahl op. Cit. p.213

²² K. Gjerset op. Cit. p.133

shared culture and history. As Haywood states: 'in Orkney, Shetland and Caithness, almost all placenames are of Scandinavian character. Scandinavian placenames are also common in the Isle of Man, Cumbria, Yorkshire and the East Midlands; in East Anglia, the Hebrides and Galloway; and, to a lesser extent, along the coasts of northwest Scotland, Lancashire, Cheshire and South Wales.'²³ Historically, these place-names provide some indication of the process of Viking settlement, but collectively reinforce a shared heritage and cultural identity. Such political developments as Tynwald also set the islands apart, as even today the Isle of Man is politically independent from the United Kingdom, with the oldest continuous parliament in the world (established c.979). The Viking settlement and impact on the islands has had a profound effect on the popular imagination of islanders today, with the emergence of Viking re-enactment groups and Viking festivals marking a resurgence in the interest in cultural roots and how people identify themselves.

Conclusion

Overall, the Kingdom of Mann and the Isles has had a lasting effect on the islands that it encompassed. Lasting from its complete form from 1079 to 1266, the Viking establishment of the Kingdom of Mann and the Isles shaped the future of its islands. In a kingdom with such variant influences and such a strong legacy, it is perhaps interesting how these islanders view themselves today; which identity is cherished strongest: Scottish, English, Celtic or Viking? It can be argued that the Kingdom of Mann and Isles has left a legacy whereby aspects of each culture can be identified with, but it is the combination of these influences on the isles which has resulted in islands that have developed a unique identity set apart from their neighbours. It is this strong ability to hold on to a shared cultural identity which sets them apart; an identity based on the Viking thirst for independence yet also retaining a sense of where you come from. Regardless, it is an

²³ J. Haywood op. Cit. p.78

identity which has failed to diminish despite the many centuries that have passed. Not only has the Kingdom of Mann and the Isles left its islands with a rich and varied history, it can be argued that it strengthened them to outside influence, helping them to develop an independent culture despite the influence of either Scotland or England in the subsequent centuries.

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