

Vikings of the Irish Sea: Conflict and Assimilation AD 790-1050

By David Griffiths. Stroud, Gloucestershire, UK: The History Press, 2010. 192 pp., 100 figures. £17.99. ISBN: 978-0-7524-3646-3.

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Griffiths' work provides the reader with a perspective that is somewhat unique in Viking studies in the British Isles. Rather than emphasizing the Vikings as a "national race" or emphasizing their role in the rise of a modern nation states by focusing on research within a single bounded territory, a problem that Griffiths believes exists in too many texts dealing with this subject, the purpose of this book is to bring together the archaeological and historical evidence of Viking activity from all of the areas around and within the Irish Sea (Ireland, Wales, southwest Scotland, northwest England and the Isle of Man) in order to place them "within the context of each other." As illustrated by the title, two of the principle themes in this work are conflict and assimilation. The main argument Griffiths makes is that it is more important for scholars studying the archaeology and history of Scandinavian presence in Britain and Ireland to focus on understanding the processes of contact, assimilation and change that took place between societies during and after the Viking Age, rather than continue to place emphasis on why the Viking Age took place and how it unfolded as a discreet period of time. This argument is both presented and supported well throughout the course of the book.

This book can be divided into five sections – chapter 1 is an introductory chapter, chapters 2 and 3 focus on conflict around the edges of the Irish Sea, chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 discuss different areas of cross-cultural impact and assimilation, chapter 8 deals with resulting cultural change and chapter 9 presents the authors concluding remarks.

In addition to outlining the overall purpose and principle arguments of the book, chapter 1 also explains Griffiths' choice of the Irish Sea as the region of focus for his book. As mentioned above, Griffiths believes there is too much emphasis on studying Vikings in the context of single bounded territories or countries. This is especially true given the importance of ships, sailing and seaways to Viking societies. The Irish Sea would have been important in terms of subsistence, communications, economics and the movement of peoples and ideas. Furthermore, the areas surrounding the Irish Sea are only a days apart by water, a much shorter time of travel than to many other locations within the countries they are now part of. The first chapter also provides very brief discussions of the

problems associated with modern conceptions of 'Vikings' and the various sources available for studying the Viking period including historical, linguistic, genetic and archaeological evidence.

In chapters 2 and 3 Griffiths discusses the conflict that accompanied the Vikings into the Irish Sea region. chapter 2 focuses primarily on Ireland, and contains a good overview of the historical accounts available in the form of the Irish Annals detailing the advent of Viking raids in Ireland and their course over late 8th and early 9th centuries. The author also discusses briefly the curious lack of any contemporary textual evidence for similar raids taking place on the eastern shores of the Irish Sea. The final topic of this chapter is the establishment of the first Viking bases in Ireland, the *longphort* or *dún* sites, the historical discussion of which is accompanied by a description of archaeological finds at some of the more important *longphorts* such as those at Dunrally, Annagassan and Dublin. chapter 3 continues to look at conflict, but examines Viking incursions into areas on the eastern side of Irish Sea – Galloway, Strathclyde, Cumbria, Northumbria, Mercia and Wales – after the establishment of Scandinavian presence in Ireland between the middle of the 9th-century, when these attacks are first documented, and AD 1050.

Chapters 4 through 7 highlight those areas where the impacts of the Viking presence, and where the resulting cross-cultural assimilation, are perhaps the most evident – settlement and patterns of land-holding (chapter 4), burial practices (chapter 5), trade (chapter 6) and urbanization (chapter 7). Griffiths believes that for the most part, Vikings coming into the Irish Sea region fit themselves into existing schemes of land-holding and land-use, rather than transplanting or creating new patterns; a claim that is assessed and supported primarily by ecclesiastical records of land grants and holdings and by place-name analysis. The burial practices of the area are comparatively analyzed by sub-regions – Ireland, the Isle of Man and the east coast of the Irish Sea from Scotland to Wales. The chapter dealing with trade focuses on numismatics and archaeological evidence of contact and exchange present in hoards and markets. Griffiths explores the nature of Viking related urbanization mainly through the case studies of Dublin, Chester and communities along the Bristol Channel.

Chapter 8 is entitled “Assimilation and Cultural Change,” and it is in this final chapter of the book that Griffiths truly broaches the effects of cross-cultural assimilation between the Vikings and the various cultures living around the Irish Sea and the changes that the contact between them may have had on their respective societies. Here attention is given to commonalities in burials and grave goods, the conversion of the Vikings to Christianity and the incorporation of Scandinavian motifs into Christian religious iconography, architecture, and the blending of languages. One interesting possibility Griffiths suggests is the existence of a hybrid Irish Sea metalwork tradition that begins to appear during the 10th century. This chapter also contains a brief three paragraph discussion of the concepts of hybridity and acculturation and their role in the process of cultural change.

Griffiths’ work possesses numerous strengths. First and foremost is the clear, concise and knowledgeable prose. Despite frequently changing the focus of a topic from one geographic area to another around the rim of the Irish Sea, the reader is never lost and does not feel as though they are reading ‘fluff.’ The various bodies of evidence are well integrated without over relying on any one type of source. Whenever possible the author uses primary texts, and examples of archaeological sites with brief discussions of the finds are provided whenever it is appropriate. Unfamiliar terms are clearly identified and defined, and the illustrations are both relevant and helpful.

One confusing element of this book is the seemingly ‘too little, too late’ amount of attention paid to the topic of change. Based on the work’s title and the author’s introductory comments, one expects cultural change to be a much more prominent element. Instead, the vast majority of the focus is on contact and topical areas of assimilation. At points throughout the book there is the feeling that the discussion could benefit from further development. One of the books great strengths is undoubtedly the vast amount of information that the author provides; however, the book is not a long one, being just shy of one hundred and fifty pages when excluding pages not given over to discussion, and there are sections that seem to end abruptly. This is particularly true of seemingly important sections at the beginning and end of the work, such as those detailing issues with modern conceptions of ‘Vikings’, available source material for the Viking period, and the processes of cultural change.

Overall Griffiths’ work possesses more strengths than weaknesses, and this is an interesting and insightful book that is recommended as a must read for all scholars studying aspects of the Viking Age in, as well

as the interaction between, any of the areas located in the Irish Sea region. Given the author’s very accurate statements about how the ‘Viking phenomena’ should be viewed in more holistic contexts, Viking researchers in other areas of Europe might enjoy and benefit from this book as well. With regard to the main weakness of the work, Griffiths himself admits in his concluding remarks that there is a significant amount of additional research to be done on many of these topics. Given the author’s expert knowledge of the subject any lack of information is more likely to reflect a hole in the historical and archaeological evidence available to scholars rather than an omission, and this is likely the cause of the truncated discussion of cultural change in the Irish Sea region. It is hoped that in the coming years more will be published on this fascinating subject.