

Um Írlandshaf: Presentations of the Irish Sea in the long Viking Age

A perspective on the Vikings focused around the Irish Sea region, interconnected across political boundaries, has particularly emerged in the last fifty years and accelerated in the last twenty.¹ While this has certainly been a productive avenue for scholarly inquiry, this paper considers whether such an Irish Sea perspective is also apparent in medieval texts. It examines the presentations of the Irish Sea, and of Scandinavian or ‘Viking’ operators within it, in a range of written sources.

The first strand of the paper will survey presentations of Vikings in the Irish Sea found in vernacular sources from around that region. The chief sources are the Irish and Welsh annals, but the *Chronicle of the Kings of Man and the Isles* and works of Irish literature, both pseudo-historical and allegorical, will also be considered. While modern scholars emphasise connectivity and movement across the Irish Sea, the primary sources will be scoured for similar awareness of the movement of Vikings or links between different settlements. As a note of comparison, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle occasionally notes when Viking forces are travelling back and forth between England and the continent. The interconnected nature of Viking activity in the Irish Sea region may also be true of the literary traditions and tropes about them. For example, both Irish and Welsh sources use similar ‘foreigner’ terminology for Vikings. The hybridity suggested by archaeological evidence, is not often recognised in the written accounts – the notable exception being *gall-gaidhel* (‘foreigner-Gael’).

The second strand will survey presentation of the Irish Sea (*Írlandshaf*) in Old Norse-Icelandic sources. While the sagas post-date the traditionally ascribed end of the Viking Age in the eleventh century, they form part of what Judith Jesch has termed the ‘long broad Viking Age’.² Specific references to the Irish Sea in Norse literature – for example in *Eiríks saga rauða* and the *Saga af Tristam ok Ísönd* – seem relatively few. Elsewhere, including *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, journeys across the Irish Sea are implicit rather than explicit. If no particular conception of the Irish Sea as an important arena for Viking activity and Scandinavian settlement can be found in the Norse sources, plausible explanations for this lack will be offered.

This paper will therefore consider the Irish Sea itself from several perspectives in the medieval period or specifically in the long Viking Age. The findings will shed light on wider issues of identity, interaction, travel, and the relationship between the literary and the historical.

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Theme: Irish Sea Connections

¹ For example: Alfred P. Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin: The History and Archaeology of Two Related Viking Kingdoms*, 2 vols. (Dublin: Templekieran Press, 1979); Howard B. Clarke, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh and Ragnall Ó Floinn, ed., *Ireland and Scandinavia in the early Viking Age* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998); Downham, C., ‘England and the Irish-Sea Zone in the Eleventh Century’, *Anglo-Norman Studies* 26 (2003), 55–73; B. Hudson, *Irish Sea Studies: A.D. 900–1200* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006); David Griffiths, *Vikings of the Irish Sea* (Stroud: History, 2010); Howard B. Clarke and Ruth Johnson, ed., *Vikings in Ireland and Beyond: Before and After the Battle of Clontarf* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015)

² Jesch, *Viking Diaspora* (Abingdon: Routledge), 10, 55.