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PAPER PROPOSAL

Between pagan Scandinavia and the Christian Occident: Tracing bi-cultural Viking-Age Imagery in the Irish Sea Region

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When the Vikings arrived in the Irish Sea and eventually settled along its shores during the ninth century, they brought with them their pagan religion and its mythology to traditionally Christian surroundings. During a period of spiritual reorientation and syncretism, they adopted and adapted the local custom of erecting Christian grave markers and stone crosses and introduced their own iconography into Irish Sea imagery. Particularly the stone monuments in the Isle of Man ('Manx Crosses') and in north-west England offer examples that feature motifs from both pagan Norse mythology and occidental Christian traditions, the most prominent of them being 'Thorvald's Cross-Slab' in Kirk Andreas (Isle of Man) and the High Cross in Gosforth, Cumbria (England). The direct juxtaposition of figural imagery of two religions on one and the same stone is intriguing and raises several questions.

The occurrence on these bi-cultural stone monuments of motifs originating not only from different religions, but distinct and far-flung 'countries' creates a contact zone in the Irish Sea region that strongly indicates that an exchange of ideas took place, both before and during the Viking Age, between that area and both the European Continent and the Scandinavian North. To investigate the different iconographical links and influences the clerical designers who created the stones appear to have drawn on, this paper compares Christian images to Continental examples as well as Norse figures to Scandinavian models.

At the same time, it explores the intention of the stones' designers in their choice of motifs; whether, for example, they possibly either meant to 'demonise' the figures and deities of the 'heathen Vikings' and educate their flocks about their falsehood by depicting them on the stones or instead aimed to convey a common Christian message by combining two 'visual languages', one for a Christian, the other for a pagan audience to understand, in order to facilitate conversion.