

REKDAL, Jan Erik, & Charles DOHERTY (ed.): *Kings and warriors in early North-West Europe*. Dublin / Portland: Four Courts Press, 2016. 480 pp., ISBN 978-1-84682-501-9. € 50.

This substantial volume, fittingly edited in a Norwegian-Irish collaboration, assembles eight equally substantial contributions that examine the relationship between the king and the warrior in a North-West European comparative perspective, i.e. equally covering Old Norse, Welsh, Irish, and Anglo-Saxon material. It presents the results of a project on ‘The representation of the warrior in relation to the king in the European Middle Ages (600–1200)’ that had been funded by the Norwegian Academy of Sciences and Letters. The first contribution, by Marged Haycock, addresses ‘Living with war: poets and the Welsh experience c. 600–1300’. Here, Haycock presents an in-depth engagement with the treatment of war in the corpus of Welsh poetry, of which she estimates that 85% are dedicated to this topic. She focuses on how warfare is communicated and mediated in poetry: the life of the king and his war-band, for whom warfare is a way of life, the how and why, physical suffering (especially in its only very selective presence in the poetry, which contrasts with its soberingly blunt treatment in the law books), atrocities, issues of control and discipline, peace-making, and finally a broader ‘culture of war’ that permeates also spheres of activity not as such connected to warfare. This is followed by a chapter by Charles Doherty on ‘Warrior and king in early Ireland’, which takes a very different approach to the topic, applying a perspective inspired by the work of Georges Dumézil’s comparative Indo-European studies. However, Doherty does not apply the Dumézilian paradigm of the ‘three functions’, which has long been shown to be a more than questionable construct,¹ but merely uses Dumézil’s work in a heuristic fashion as a mine of comparative material that can provide inspiration for interpreting the North-West European data: a measured approach which can only be applauded. Doherty thus touches upon a wide range of material, covering the semi-mythical history of ancient Rome, the Celts of antiquity as described by Greek and Roman ethnography, continental Celtic gold coins, Irish medieval iconography (both illumination and sculpture), place-names, and medieval Irish and Welsh literature. In the course of this highly learned tour de force, Doherty suggests that some of the motifs depicted on Iron Age Celtic gold coins can, through the literatures of Ireland and Wales, be explained as symbols of kingship and the warrior that indicate a degree of continuity between the worlds of medieval Ireland and the Celts of antiquity. An new analysis of the figure of a warrior with an erect penis in the Book of Kells leads Doherty to view this warrior as caught in a deer

¹ Cf. the fundamental critique by Bernfried Schlerath: “Georges Dumézil und die Rekonstruktion der indogermanischen Kultur,” in: *Kratylos* 40 (1995), pp. 1–48; 41 (1996), pp. 1–67.

trap, which he interprets as a negative clerical comment on excessive violence and, in a further step, as a comment on the wider role of the *fian* in contemporary society. Other parts of his wide-ranging discussion touch upon topics as diverse as *díberg*, the support for an Irish high-kingship by the Church as a strategy to reduce warfare between petty kingdoms, the politics of Kildare and Armagh (including the political use of the Ulster Cycle king Conchobar), and beheadings. Thus, presenting a kaleidoscope of often boldly and consciously speculative but always stimulating ideas (even if not every reader will find every suggestion equally convincing), he outlines a development of the ideal of kingship from pagan warrior-king to pious, European-style Christian king. In the next chapter, Jan Erik Rekdal addresses ‘The medieval king: Christian king and fearless warrior – Straddling the ideals of death in a ditch on the battlefield and the death on a pillow in a monastery’. In this contribution, Rekdal engages with the ideological conflict inherent in early medieval Irish kingship, which he argues is torn between a warrior ideology that Rekdal associates with the pre-Christian past of this institution and an ideal of peace associated with Christianity. His differentiated discussion does, however, take into account that there was no simple correspondence of warlike vs. peaceful ideals and paganism vs. Christianity, but that, for instance, Irish saints could be described as warriors (albeit warriors now fighting under the new standard of the cross) and that poems praising kings for their martial prowess were written by members of the clergy. One might sometimes wonder whether the deconstruction of the contrast between a pagan/warlike vs. a Christian/peaceful ethos could not have been pushed further – can one really assume an association between Christianity and peace? –, but here the material certainly leaves room for interpretation. Three poems in particular are the core topic of Rekdal’s analysis, including the puzzling *Fianna bátar i nEmain*, and Rekdal approaches them with particular focus on how they are adjusted to the discrepancy between the ideals of heroic death on the battlefield and more peaceful Christian ideals. In this connection he also discusses the importance and literary as well as ideological use of royal burial sites. The chapter by Ralph O’Connor approaches ‘Monsters of the tribe: berserk fury, shapeshifting and social dysfunction in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, *Egils saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*’, i.e., he explores the de-humanisation of the warrior in his battle-frenzy in some of the medieval sagas of Ireland and Iceland. In these texts, the warrior, whose violence is necessary to protect the peaceful order of society but can be difficult to control once unleashed, is the object of complex and ambivalent treatments that are not always sympathetic to the warrior’s inhuman behaviour. Typically set in a remote temporal or geographical (even otherworldly) distance, such narratives employ animal and monstrous imagery as tools for a symbolic discourse on contemporary concerns. O’Connor first surveys the theoretical frameworks and Indo-European reconstructions that previous research has based on the three texts he discusses, then presents detailed analyses of passages from *Egils saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*, and finally focuses the bulk of his attention on the First Recension of the *Táin*. The importance of

O'Connor's contribution lies in his exemplary method, which is aware of the theories surrounding the material he treats but rightly chooses to approach the topic of the warrior's 'dysfunctionality' through a careful, historically contextualising reading of the primary material. By considering their wider narrative structures, this reading uncovers hitherto overlooked layers of meaning in the texts under scrutiny, shows how all of them are subtle works of the storyteller's art whose engagement with the relationship between society and the warrior is far removed from any assumed ancient mythological significance, and in doing so makes evident just on how problematic a basis classical and recent theorising on the topic rests. Morgan Thomas Davies in his chapter on 'Warrior time' investigates the possibility of whether there is a typology of the epic and heroic treatment of time that unites the Old English *Beowulf* and the Irish *Táin Bó Cúailnge*: using a theoretical framework that draws heavily on Heidegger, Davies enquires into 'the fundamentally existential matter of how time gets represented or configured in these two texts' (p. 238). Finding that the treatment of time in these two 'epics' is remarkably different – to simplify in the extreme, *Beowulf* is preoccupied with time and especially with transitoriness, whereas the *Táin* has remarkable little interest in questions of the passing of time and instead is focused on space –, Davies then in a concluding section touches upon the question of what cultural or historical factors might have brought about the differences between these two texts. Tentatively and in a consciously speculative manner, he connects these differences with the impact that the experience of abandoning their homeland, and the resulting loss of the landscape which must have served as a mnemonic device of their previous history, might have had on the culture of the Anglo-Saxons. Ian Beuermann discusses the 'The low men on the totem pole: warriors and rulers in Old Norse texts from c. 1200'. More specifically, his chapter has its focus on the three texts *Jómsvikinga saga*, *Færeyinga saga*, and *Orkneyinga saga*, all of which are thought to stem from the early period of saga writing around AD 1200. Beuermann analyses these texts with a view to the relations between rulers and warriors stemming from the upper strata of society (which are the only ones to feature prominently in the texts): the relations between the Jómsvíkingar and Danish kings, the relations of the Faeroese hero Sigmundur Brestisson with jarls and kings, and the interdependence of warrior and jarl in the depiction of the warrior-like Orkney jarls. In this analysis, Beuermann is able to show that the three sagas each have very different agendas in their depiction of the relationship between ruler and warrior, and proposes that they, although in markedly different ways, contextualise the relative place of warriors and rulers with a view to *Sverris saga*. This Beuermann also connects with the discussion about saga genres, as the three sagas sit uneasily within the conventional boundaries of the main saga genres established by modern scholarship. The chapter by Jon Gunnar Jørgensen approaches 'Óláfr Haraldsson, king, warrior and saint: presentations of King Óláfr Haraldsson the Saint in medieval poetry and prose'. Saint Olaf is one of the most intensely-treated figures of medieval Norse literature, being the object

of the greatest number of different textual sources as well as the longest saga biography, which (fittingly) is extant in more manuscripts than any other. But only part of this material – the skaldic poetry treating him – was, considerable problems of dating aside, produced contemporaneously. Jørgensen's chapter aims to analyse the descriptions of Saint Olaf with a focus on the question of whether and how the different accounts depend on the time of their composition. This he does by separating the skaldic verse (some of which is arguably contemporaneous with Óláfr's life) from the (much later) prose in which it is preserved and by analysing both these types of sources separately, a tried-and-trusted method. In doing so, Jørgensen focuses on the three aspects of 'Óláfr the king', 'Óláfr the warrior', and 'Óláfr the Christian'. The lion's share of the study is dedicated to tracing the changing depiction of Óláfr through the (more or less) datable skaldic poetry; this is then rounded off by a sketch of the further development in the later prose accounts. Overall, Jørgensen observes that the emphasis of the image of Óláfr presented by the sources over time undergoes a marked shift from, during his lifetime, highlighting Óláfr's side as a warrior to, after his death at Stiklestad, highlighting his Christian side. Finally, Stefka G. Eriksen explores 'The role and identity of the warrior: self-reflection and awareness in Old Norse literary and social spaces'. Her chapter studies the way in which the warrior is represented across a number of genres of Old Norse literature, focussing particularly on what literary warriors themselves think about being warriors, and on the tension between their role as warriors and both their own personal emotions and their social identity. Eriksen develops these topics with recourse to the Icelandic literary production of the fourteenth century, focusing on a selection of Sagas of Icelanders (*Egils saga*, *Njáls saga*, *Laxdæla saga*), Legendary Sagas (*Örvar-Odds saga*, *Ásmundar saga kappabana*, *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*), and translated Arthurian romances (*Parcevals saga*, *Valvens þáttr*, *Erex saga*, *Ívens saga*). A central selection criterion of the discussed texts is that, notwithstanding different times of composition, all of them are attested in fourteenth-century manuscripts. Thus, Eriksen achieves a synchronic study of a broad spectrum of literary images of the warrior as they co-existed within a single cultural context, showing both differences and similarities between the treatments of the warrior in the three genres under discussion. This invites her to pose the question of whether the selection of specific texts in specific manuscripts might have been related to processes of the negotiation of identities within the social class that produced these manuscripts.

As a collection (i.e., over and above the value that its individual contributions would already have as stand-alone texts), one of this book's most attractive aspects perhaps is how it showcases both the continuities and – especially – the cultural variety found across the volume's geographical spectrum, as well as the breadth of methods that can be brought to bear on this material, highlighting the widely different perspectives that are possible on the testimonies under discussion; one may only note the range of variation between the treatments of the Welsh *Battle of the Trees* by Haycock (p. 86) and Doherty (p. 106); of the

letter trapping the warrior's foot in an illumination in the Book of Kells by Doherty (pp. 103 ff.) and Rekdal (pp. 149 f.); or of Egill Skallagrímsson's wrinkled eyebrows by O'Connor (pp. 200 f.) and Eriksen (p. 410). Looking at the medieval literatures of North-West Europe not only in their wider North-West European context, but also from a broad spectrum of theoretical and methodological angles, the collection of articles assembled in this volume clearly demonstrates the potential of its multifaceted approach.

Berlin and München
Matthias.Egeler@lmu.de

Matthias EGELER