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Heroic biography and the Viking age around the Irish sea

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Abstract

How was the Viking Age remembered in texts from the Irish Sea zone, and what can this tell us about the culture of this region? When considering historical representations of the Vikings, the most often-cited texts are contemporary and capture the emotional toll of raids on a civilian population, yet were largely written from a monastic perspective. This article argues that in ‘long twelfth-century’ texts from the Irish Sea zone, the Viking Age was remembered as a period of opportunity which provided the backbone for a shared genre of ‘heroic biography’ within the textual corpus of the region. Works describe the mustering of pan-Irish Sea zone forces in order to restore an unjustly banished, exiled or disinherited figure to his rightful lands and status. Within this group of texts, insular Viking activity provides a unifying and productive opportunity to regain something lost rather than a destructive force for societal disruption.

Keywords: Irish Sea, Viking Age, heroic biography, long twelfth century, historical writing, rebellion

The Viking Age brought about significant changes that fundamentally altered the political, cultural and economic landscapes of early medieval Europe.¹ Yet despite the notable impact of the Vikings on the medieval world, studying the written records of this era has proved notoriously challenging due to problems with the main bodies of textual evidence that exist.² The only sources written by the Vikings during the Viking Age are runic inscriptions and skaldic poetry, and

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¹ P.H. Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings: Scandinavia and Europe, 700–1100* (London, 1982); Henry Loyn, *The Vikings in Britain* (Oxford, 1994); David Griffiths, *Vikings of the Irish Sea: conflict and assimilation, AD 790–1050* (Stroud, 2010); Anders Winroth, *The age of the Vikings* (Princeton, NJ, 2014).

² See David N. Dumville, ‘Vikings in the British Isles: a question of sources’, in Judith Jesch (ed.), *The Scandinavians from the Vendel period to the tenth century: an ethnographic perspective* (Woodbridge, 2002), 209–50; Judith Jesch, *The Viking diaspora* (Abingdon, 2015), 11–18.

these texts represent a small and non-narrative corpus of material.³ Narrative sources for the history of the Viking era fall into two groups, both of which contain an inherent set of biases and challenges. On the one hand are contemporary annals and chronicles written by the targets of Viking raids. Once taken at face value, more recent scholarship on these theoretically ‘eyewitness’ accounts recognises their inherent biases, authored as they were by Christian peoples who found themselves the victims of pagan attacks.⁴ On the other are a group of Old Norse sagas set during the Viking Age. These likewise used to be treated as accurate descriptions of so-called Viking culture recorded by their descendants, but are now recognised as uniquely Icelandic literary productions that were written several hundred years after the events they purport to describe and which provide a romanticised view of the Viking era.⁵ Approaching the written historical records of the Viking Age has therefore required careful straddling of two groups of source material, neither ideal: contemporary but biased, or late and romanticised.

This article asks a different set of questions about medieval works depicting the Viking Age, namely, how was this era *remembered* in texts from the Irish Sea zone and what can this tell us about the culture of this region as the Viking era drew to a close? When seeking to discover how the Viking Age was depicted around the Irish Sea, the texts that first leap to mind are often those like the well-known Old Irish poem written in the margin of the St Gall Priscian, ‘Is acher in gáeth innocht’, that capture the emotional toll of Viking attacks on a civilian population. As the poem reads: ‘Is acher in gaíth in-nocht, / fu-fúasna fairggae findfholt; / ní-ágór réimm Mora Minn / dond láechraid lainn úa Lothlind’⁶ (The wind is fierce tonight: it ruffles the ocean’s fair mane; I do not fear the wild warriors of Norway sailing on a quiet sea).⁷ Entries from insular annals, chronicles and other historical sources which record the violence and horror of Viking raids have also been cited to bear this perspective out.⁸ Such evidence is contemporary to the Viking era, but

³ See Roberta Frank, ‘Skaldic poetry’, in Carol J. Clover and John Lindow (eds), *Old Norse-Icelandic literature: a critical guide* (Ithaca, NY, 1985), 157–96; Henrik Williams, ‘Runes’, 281–90, and Judith Jesch, ‘Poetry in the Viking Age’, 291–8, in Stefan Brink (ed.) in collaboration with Neil Price, *The Viking world* (Abingdon, 2008); Winroth, *Age of the Vikings*, 213–40.

⁴ Peter H. Sawyer, *The age of the Vikings*, 2nd edn. (London, 1971); Colmán Etchingham, *Viking raids on Irish church settlements in the ninth century: a reconsideration of the annals* (Maynooth, 1996); David N. Dumville, ‘Vikings in insular chronicling’, in Brink and Price, *The Viking world*, 350–67.

⁵ See Carol J. Clover, ‘Icelandic family sagas (*Íslendingasögur*)’, in Clover and Lindow, *Old Norse-Icelandic literature*, 239–315; Chris Callow, ‘Dating and origins’, 15–33, and Ralph O’Connor, ‘History and fiction’, 88–110, in Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson (eds), *The Routledge research companion to the Medieval Icelandic sagas* (Abingdon, 2017).

⁶ Whitley Stokes and John Strachan (eds), *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*, (2 vols, Cambridge, 1901–3), vol. 2, 290.

⁷ F.J. Byrne, ‘The Viking Age’, in Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (gen. ed.), *A new history of Ireland, vol. 1, Prehistoric and Early Ireland* (Oxford, 2005), 609–34: 626.

⁸ See e.g., Alfred P. Smyth, ‘The effect of Scandinavian raiders on the English and Irish churches: a preliminary reassessment’, in Brendan Smith (ed.), *Britain and Ireland 900–1300: insular responses to Medieval European change* (Cambridge, 1999), 1–38.

comes with the set of biases discussed above; yet it has seemed to accord with the perspectives of later texts as well. Recent work on how the ‘long twelfth century’ (most commonly defined in an insular context as the period between the Norman Conquest in 1066 and the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215) remembered the pre-Norman insular past has made clear that from the perspectives of both Britain and Ireland, the Viking Age in the Irish Sea region was indeed perceived as a period of brutality and danger. Yet at the same time, such studies have clearly demonstrated that medieval literary and historical texts are not as straightforward as they appear. From the Irish side, work on the Battle of Clontarf in light of its recent millennial anniversary has made clear what a sophisticated piece of twelfth-century political propaganda the narrative *Cogad Gáedel re Gallaib* is.⁹ Likewise, surveys by Robert Bartlett on ‘The Viking hiatus in the cult of saints as seen in the twelfth century’ and Julia Barrow on ‘Danish ferocity and abandoned monasteries: the twelfth century view’ in the collection *The long twelfth-century view of the Anglo-Saxon past* also make clear that memories of Viking attacks were used in Anglo-Norman England in very deliberate ways to explain the absence of ecclesiastical documents from the Anglo-Saxon period in later centuries.¹⁰ In other words, it has become increasingly clear that in several strains of twelfth-century writing, the Vikings could conveniently be cast as villains to suit contemporary political purposes.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Viking Age was remembered much more positively in texts written by those who could best be described as ‘participants’ rather than ‘victims’ of Viking raids.¹¹ The same pattern is evident in texts written around the Irish Sea that remember the role of the Vikings in shaping the region’s pre-Norman past. Recent work by scholars such as Clare Downham and Caitlin Ellis has underscored the distinctive culture of the Irish Sea zone as a region.¹² Contrary to expectations of ‘Danish ferocity and abandoned

⁹ See e.g., Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, ‘The date of *Cogad Gáedel re Gallaib*’, *Peritia* 9 (1995), 354–77; Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, ‘*Cogad Gáedel re Gallaib* and the annals: a comparison’, *Ériu* 47 (1996), 101–26; Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, *Brian Boru: Ireland’s greatest king* (Stroud, 2007); Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, ‘A neglected account of the battle of Clontarf’, *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 59 (2012), 143–67; Howard B. Clarke and Ruth Johnson (eds), *The Vikings in Ireland and beyond: before and after the Battle of Clontarf* (Dublin, 2015); Séan Duffy (ed.), *Medieval Dublin XVI: Proceedings of Clontarf 1014–2014: national conference marking the millennium of the Battle of Clontarf* (Dublin, 2017).

¹⁰ Robert Bartlett, ‘The Viking hiatus in the cult of saints as seen in the twelfth century’, 13–26, and Julia Barrow, ‘Danish ferocity and abandoned monasteries: the twelfth-century view’, 77–94, in Martin Brett and David A. Woodman (eds), *The long twelfth-century view of the Anglo-Saxon past* (Surrey, 2015).

¹¹ In addition to surveys of the *Íslendingasögur* noted above, see T.K. Heebøll-Holm, ‘Between pagan pirates and glorious sea-warriors: the portrayal of the Viking pirate in Danish twelfth-century Latin historiography’, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 8 (2012), 141–70.

¹² Clare Downham, ‘England and the Irish Sea Zone in the eleventh century’, *Anglo-Norman Studies* 26 (2003), 55–73; Clare Downham, ‘Living on the edge: Scandinavian Dublin in the twelfth century’, in Beverley Ballin Smith, Simon Taylor and Gareth Williams (eds), *West over sea: studies in Scandinavian sea-borne expansion and settlement before 1300: a Festschrift in honour of Dr Barbara E. Crawford*, *The Northern World* 31 (Leiden, 2007),

monasteries', in long twelfth-century texts from the Irish Sea region, the Viking Age—what Colmán Etchingam has termed 'the insular Viking zone'¹³—was remembered positively, as a period of opportunity. This article argues that the Irish Sea zone as a region produced a different strain of writing about the Viking Age in which the Norman Conquest was not treated as a rupture in insular Viking activities across the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries and that the era itself provided the backbone for a shared genre of 'heroic biography' within the textual corpus of the Irish Sea region.

The conventions of this shared genre were of course shaped by real historical circumstances—namely, the creation of multi-ethnic military coalitions for pragmatic reasons—within the Irish Sea zone. Discussing these episodes as elements of an insular 'heroic biography' is not to dismiss the historical events that stood behind them. However, this article argues that as time passed, the writing of 'heroic biography' in the Irish Sea region evolved to include common elements due to a dialogue between texts. I have recently argued for a shared intellectual culture which spanned the Irish Sea region.¹⁴ While literary tropes were first shaped by historical realities, as time passed, the texts written to describe those historical moments were in turn shaped by medieval authors' understanding of common literary tropes. Irish Sea historical writing about the Viking era was shaped by real historical events, but the literary conventions surrounding these events nonetheless became recognised as an important part of their textual histories.

When the genre of a text is defined not by language or region of origin but rather by common thematic elements, it becomes clear that there were a group of Irish Sea zone historical biographies with a shared narrative arc produced during the long twelfth century. They described the mustering of pan-Irish Sea zone forces in order to restore an unjustly banished, exiled or disinherited figure to his rightful lands and status. The phrase 'heroic biography' was popularised within the field of Celtic studies by Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, drawing on the work of Jan de Vries.¹⁵ In his study on *The heroic biography of Cormac mac Airt*, Ó Cathasaigh laid the foundation for understanding an early medieval Irish literary hero's life as following, by definition, a predictable pattern with set elements: the hero's life will always include his conception, birth, childhood deeds, wooing, battles and death.¹⁶ Ó Cathasaigh discusses the medieval Irish literary cycle concerning the deeds of Cormac mac Airt as an 'adaptation of the heroic biography to the native ideology of kingship'.¹⁷ Modified for the Irish Sea zone, the pattern of a shared 'heroic biography' during the 'long Viking

33–52; Caitlin Ellis, 'Impressions of a twelfth-century maritime ruler—Somerset: Viking warrior, clan chieftain or traitor to the Scottish king?', *Northern Studies* 51 (2020), 1–14.

¹³ Colmán Etchingam, 'North Wales, Ireland and the Isles: the insular Viking Zone', *Peritia* 15 (2001), 145–87.

¹⁴ Lindy Brady, *The origin legends of Early Medieval Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 2022).

¹⁵ Jan de Vries, *Heroic song and heroic legend*, trans. B.J. Zimmer (London, 1963).

¹⁶ Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, *The heroic biography of Cormac mac Airt* (Dublin, 1977).

¹⁷ Ó Cathasaigh, *Heroic biography*, 24.

Age' includes being unjustly deprived of one's rightful lands, inheritance or right to rule;¹⁸ mustering a pan-insular set of forces somehow involving Welsh, Irish and Scandinavian participants; and regaining power. Within this group of texts, insular Viking activity provides a unifying and productive opportunity to regain something lost rather than a destructive force for societal disruption.

The same cohesive set of interests has been noted for a slightly later time period and set of texts in the recent collaborative and interdisciplinary study by Colmán Etchingham, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh and Elizabeth Ashman Rowe on *Norse-Gaelic contacts in a Viking world*.¹⁹ Their book focuses on extended case studies of four key sets of Old Norse and Gaelic texts: the 'Wonders of Ireland' in *Konungs skuggsjá*; *Baile Suthach Síth Emhna*, a poem to Ragnall, King of Man; the Battle of Clontarf in Icelandic sources, namely, the lost *Brjáns saga*; and Gaelic ancestry in Iceland in *Landnámabók* and elsewhere; all of which the authors argue reveal Norse-Gaelic cultural contact in the thirteenth century.²⁰ The corpus of texts discussed in this book is noteworthy for its emphasis on a mixed Norse-Gaelic identity as a marker of distinction and pride. As the authors write (commenting here specifically on *Baile Suthach Síth Emhna*, a praise poem dedicated to Ragnall, King of Man), what makes Ragnall exceptional 'is the extent to which his status and power is claimed to be derived from both Irish and Viking strands in his makeup'.²¹ The methodology and conclusions that Etchingham, Sigurðsson, Ní Mhaonaigh and Rowe have applied to this thirteenth-century collection of texts are productive for a slightly earlier period and set of materials as well. Here too, in a range of texts from around the Irish Sea—encompassing Anglo-Saxon England, Wales, Man and the Isles, Scotland and Ireland—the ability to connect oneself to a set of Viking networks spanning the insular region is depicted as admirable, and this pan-Irish Sea set of connections is portrayed as necessary to the narrative arc of a successful heroic biography across the insular historical writing of the long twelfth century.

The colourful biographies that emerge from insular historical writing at the tail end of the Viking Age form a more cohesive Irish Sea literary genre than has been previously recognised. This article will survey this genre of insular writing over the course of the long twelfth century, beginning in the eleventh century with the Anglo-Saxon earl Ælfgar of Mercia in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* before turning to the twelfth century proper and the biographies of the Welsh Gruffudd ap Cynan; the Anglo-Saxon Hereward 'the Wake'; Wimund, bishop

¹⁸ For the role of exile in the medieval Irish literary heroic biography, see Ó Cathasaigh, *Heroic biography*, 87–92.

¹⁹ Colmán Etchingham, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh and Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, *Norse-Gaelic contacts in a Viking world: studies in the literature and history of Norway, Iceland, Ireland, and the Isle of Man* (Turnhout, 2019).

²⁰ Etchingham, Sigurðsson, Ní Mhaonaigh and Rowe, *Norse-Gaelic contacts in a Viking world*, 3.

²¹ Etchingham, Sigurðsson, Ní Mhaonaigh and Rowe, *Norse-Gaelic contacts in a Viking world*, 188.

of Man and the Isles; and the Irish Diarmait mac Murchada. Finally, this study will conclude in the thirteenth century with the Latin *Life* of Harold Godwinson and the activities of Godred Crovan as narrated in the *Chronicles of the kings of Man and the Isles*. Together, these texts evince an Irish Sea zone genre of historical writing in which insular Viking activity was understood as the fundamental backbone of a certain type of (secular) heroic biography.²²

One part of the overall argument of this article is that historical writing about the insular Viking zone shows more continuity across the Norman Conquest of England than it is usually granted.²³ Therefore, the first case study under consideration comes from the eleventh century in the form of the Anglo-Saxon earl Ælfgar of Mercia. I argue that the key insular Viking elements of Ælfgar's career are also present in those of many other Irish Sea zone figures and form a shared genre of historical writing in which insular Viking Age activity functions as a form of heroic biography. The activities of Earl Ælfgar of Mercia are related in fairly substantial detail by the various recensions of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and other historical sources from around the Irish Sea region.²⁴ Manuscript C of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* relates that when Earl Siward died in 1055, Earl Ælfgar was outlawed 'butan ælcan gylte' (without any guilt), and then, 'he gewende ða to Irlande 7 begeat him ðær lið, þæt wæs.xviii. scipa butan his agenan, 7 wendan ða to Brytlande to Griffine cinge mid þam werede, 7 he hine underfeng on his griðe'²⁵ (he went to Ireland and got himself a fleet—that was eighteen ships besides his own—and he went then to Wales to King Gruffudd with that army, and he took him in under his protection). The key elements of what I am characterising as a Viking-Age Irish Sea heroic biography are present in the narrative of Ælfgar's expulsion and return. Ælfgar is outlawed—crucially, in this recension of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, without having committed any crime—and traverses the Irish Sea in order to muster support.

The speed with which he is able to do so makes clear that strong political links between Ælfgar and those from whom he was able to draw support were already in place before his expulsion. Eighteen ships is not an insignificant

²² On hagiography, see James T. Palmer, *Early Medieval hagiography* (Leeds, 2018); Samantha Kahn Herrick (ed.), *Hagiography and the history of Latin Christendom, 500–1500* (Leiden, 2020); on insular hagiography, see Alan Thacker and Richard Sharpe (eds), *Local saints and local churches in the Early Medieval West* (Oxford, 2002), Colin A. Ireland, *The Gaelic background of Old English poetry before Bede* (Berlin, 2022); 201–19.

²³ E.g., as Terje Spurkland, *Norwegian runes and runic inscriptions*, trans. Betsy van der Hoek (Woodbridge, 2005), 95, writes: 'In England, the Norman Conquest in 1066 is often considered the definitive end of the Viking Age as well as of the Anglo-Saxon period. In Scandinavia, the end of the Viking Age is often linked to the introduction of Christianity to the region: the Viking Age ended when Christianity was introduced.'

²⁴ For more on the alliance of Ælfgar and Gruffudd, see Lindy Brady, *Writing the Welsh borderlands in Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester, 2017).

²⁵ Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a collaborative edition, volume 5: MS C* (Cambridge, 2001), s.a. 1055.

number, and it appears that Ælfgar was able to raise this fleet very quickly. The same holds true when it comes to his relationship with Gruffudd. As K.L. Maund has noted, it seems highly unlikely that Ælfgar would have sailed to Wales unless he was ‘moderately sure of being received peacefully’.²⁶ The ability to generate support from across both sides of the Irish Sea is an important component of Ælfgar’s narrative.

The narrative of Ælfgar’s biography, as the evidence from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* makes clear, was shaped by real historical patterns of geography and interaction within the Irish Sea zone. Discussing these patterns as elements of ‘heroic biography’ is not to say that the real-world events that stood behind them did not take place. Rather, as time went on, it became increasingly apparent within insular historical writing that such events were part of the expected narrative for a certain type of heroic figure. To return to the concept of ‘heroic biography’ as it has been used within medieval Irish literature, every human (obviously) has a conception and a birth. Nonetheless, exceptional birth and conception stories became an important part of an Irish hero’s literary biography. Likewise, within Irish Sea historical writing, real-world politics both stood behind the actions of these men and nonetheless became incorporated as an important element within the written narratives of their adventures.

In the same annal, manuscript C of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reports that Gruffudd and Ælfgar ‘gegaderadan ða mycle fyrde mid ðam yriscan mannan 7 mid Walkynne’²⁷ (brought together a great army with the Irish men and with the Welsh people). Ælfgar and Gruffudd routed the English army at Hereford, peace was brokered between the two sides, and ‘man geinlagode þa Ælfgar eorl, 7 man ageaf him eall þæt him wæs ær ofgenumen’²⁸ (men reinstated Earl Ælfgar, and men gave him all that was previously seized from him). These descriptions of Ælfgar’s activities in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* contain the key elements of a heroic biography within the insular Viking zone: unjust exile; the crossing of the Irish Sea to unite a fleet from Ireland, northern Wales and part of Anglo-Saxon England; and the successful restoration of the hero to his rightful lands and status.

These central components of Irish Sea heroic biography are further cemented when roughly the same set of circumstances were repeated in a second rebellion of Ælfgar and Gruffudd in 1058. The narrative is tersely related in manuscript D of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. The annal records: ‘Her man ytte ut Ælfgar eorl, ac he com sona inn ongean mid strece þurh Gryffines fultum. 7 her com scyphere of Norwegan. Hit is langsum to atellanne eall hu hit gefaren wæs’²⁹ (Here men exiled Earl Ælfgar, but he quickly came back again

²⁶ K.L. Maund, *Ireland, Wales, and England in the eleventh century* (Woodbridge, 1991), 135.

²⁷ O’Brien O’Keeffe, *MS C*, s.a. 1055.

²⁸ O’Brien O’Keeffe, *MS C*, s.a. 1055.

²⁹ G.P. Cubbin, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a collaborative edition, volume 6: MS D* (Cambridge, 1996), s.a. 1058.

with violence through Gruffudd's aid. And here came a ship army from Norway. It is tiresome to tell how it all happened). The annal itself makes clear that a great deal of information has been deliberately left out, and Welsh and Irish sources indicate the extent of this omission. The *Annales Cambriae* record an attack by Magnus, the son of Harald Hardrada, carried out with in alliance with Gruffudd: 'Magnus filius Harald, vastavit regionem Anglorum, auxiliante Grifino rege Britonum' (Magnus, son of Harald, wasted the territory of the English, aiding Gruffudd, king of the Britons).³⁰ Likewise, the Irish *Annals of Tigernach* preserve the gathering of 'Longes la mac rig Lochland, co nGallaib Indsi Orcc 7 Indsi Gall 7 Atha cliath, do gabail rigi Saxan, acht nocor' deonaig Dia sin' (A fleet [led] by the son of the king of Norway, with the foreigners of the Orkneys and the Hebrides and Dublin, to seize the kingdom of England; but to this God consented not).³¹ This revolt, then, encompassed the whole of the insular Viking zone: Scandinavian, Scottish, Irish, Welsh and Anglo-Saxon contingents united in military action. While the rebellion on the whole may not have been as successful as its participants had hoped, Ælfgar again regained his lands and his position. Even within these very sparse annalistic records, the elements of an Irish Sea zone heroic biography are evident: Ælfgar is exiled; aided by others around the Irish Sea, including Irish, Wales and Scandinavian forces; and regains his lands and status.

The circumstances of these rebellions are paralleled in the twelfth century in the events of the *Vita Griffini Filii Conani*, the *Life* of the 'disinherited' Welsh king Gruffudd ap Cynan who made numerous bids to recover his kingdom with the help of pan-Irish Sea zone military forces. The *Life* of Gruffudd ap Cynan appears to have been quite popular, as it is preserved in both Latin and Welsh recensions, the former (and earlier) of which Paul Russell has dated to the twelfth century in his reconstruction of this text from a later manuscript.³² Like that of Ælfgar of Mercia, the biography of Gruffudd ap Cynan has been generally understood as an exceptional text. While Séan Duffy and other recent scholars have made convincing cases for redeeming its value as a historical source,³³ it is still largely treated as a singular work: David E. Thornton, for example, characterises it as 'a unique document in mediaeval

³⁰ John Williams (Ab Ithel) (ed.), *Annales Cambriae* (London, 1860), 25, s.a. 1055.

³¹ Whitley Stokes (ed. and trans.), 'The Annals of Tigernach: the fourth fragment, A.D. 973–1088', *Revue Celtique* 17 (1896), 337–420: 399.

³² Paul Russell (ed. and trans.), *Vita Griffini Filii Conani: The Medieval Latin life of Gruffudd ap Cynan* (Cardiff, 2005); see Introduction, 1–50, for dating etc. The later Welsh version of the text is D. Simon Evans (ed.), *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan* (Caerdydd, 1977), and D. Simon Evans (ed. and trans.), *A Mediaeval Prince of Wales: the life of Gruffudd ap Cynan* (Lampeter, Dyfed, 1990). For more on Gruffudd ap Cynan's life and background and the tradition of his biography in medieval historiography, see the essays in K.L. Maund (ed.), *Gruffudd ap Cynan: a collaborative biography* (Woodbridge, 1996).

³³ Séan Duffy, 'Ostmen, Irish and Welsh in the eleventh century', *Peritia* 9 (1995), 378–96, and the essays in Maund, *Gruffudd ap Cynan: a collaborative biography*.

Wales'.³⁴ Yet when considered alongside other contemporary historical writing from the Irish Sea region, there is greater continuity than has been understood for a genre of heroic biography set within the insular Viking zone that carries across the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Numerous points within the *Life* of Gruffudd ap Cynan parallel the career of Ælfgar of Mercia in showing an active insular Viking zone as essential in the construction of heroic biography. For instance, Gruffudd's purported lineage showcases the impressive geographical range of his family connections right from the beginning of his *Vita*: 'Eius pater Cynannus erat rex Venedocie, mater vero Racvella filia Avloedi regis Dublinensis civitatis, ac quintae partis Hybernie...Insulae Mannae, qui e Scotia genus ducebat. Aliarum complurium insularum rex etiam habebatur ut Daniae, Galovidiarum, Arennae, Monae et Venedotiae' (His father, Cynan, was king of Gwynedd, his mother Ragnell, daughter of Olaf, king of the city of Dublin and of a fifth part of Ireland³⁵...of the Isle of Man, who derived his ancestry from Scotland. He was also considered to be the king of several other islands in as much as he was regarded as king of Denmark, of Galloway, of Arran, of Anglesey and of Gwynedd).³⁶ The genealogical information which introduces Gruffudd's *Life* underscores the pan-Irish Sea nature of his alliances, as his paternal ancestry is Welsh whilst his maternal ancestry is Hiberno-Scandinavian, and the geographical range over which his ancestors ruled is very much highlighted. While the precise factual reality of Gruffudd's genealogy as outlined in this text is uncertain,³⁷ his biography makes clear that his allegiances would have stretched across the Irish Sea and that he could draw upon support from a range of kingdoms.

This Irish Sea Viking culture of Gruffudd ap Cynan's ancestry is reflected in his deeds throughout the course of his biography, which contains numerous examples of this type of insular Viking zone activity. At one point, for instance, 'Proditione hac cognita hostiumque adventu, Griffinus de Mona Arvoniam, una cum Danmarcis et Hybernis quos potuit, deducit secum in hostes' (when Gruffudd realised their treachery and that the enemy was coming, he brought with him men from that part of Anglesey facing Arfon together with as many Danes and Irish as he could against the enemy).³⁸ Throughout his *Vita*, Gruffudd is depicted as unerringly opportunistic, drawing supporters from every region around the Irish Sea—as long as they are loyal to his cause. This episode, in which Gruffudd's forces draw together Welsh, Irish and Scandinavians, underscores the Viking Age setting of his narrative as well as the importance of Irish Sea alliances in shaping his victories.

³⁴ David E. Thornton, 'The genealogy of Gruffudd ap Cynan', in Maund, *Gruffudd ap Cynan: a collaborative biography*, 79–108: 103.

³⁵ Russell, *Vita Griffini Filii Conani*, 53.

³⁶ Russell, *Vita Griffini Filii Conani*, 55.

³⁷ See Thornton, 'The genealogy of Gruffudd ap Cynan'.

³⁸ Russell, *Vita Griffini Filii Conani*, 65.

At another point, ‘At Griffinus in Hyberniam appulsus... Quorum vocibus acquiescens cum triginta navibus Hybernorum Danorumque militibus plenis mare profundum sulcantibus in patrium solum vehitur, portumque Abermeney occupat’ (But after Gruffudd had been driven to Ireland... Agreeing with their views, with 30 ships full of Irish and Viking soldiers ploughing a furrow across the deep sea he returned to his native soil, and he seized the port of Abermenai).³⁹ Gruffudd’s biography has long been recognised as a work of political propaganda that skated around the edges of historical reality in its attempts to ‘show that Gruffudd was the equal of the neighbouring kings in Ireland and England’ as well as ‘the kinsman of ...the Norman kings in particular’.⁴⁰ Yet even as particular narrative details are clearly manipulated in Gruffudd’s favour, the text reflects contemporary expectations of how much support a leader would have been able to muster from across the Irish Sea. Gruffudd’s 30 ships full of Hiberno-Scandinavians tallies roughly with the fleet of eighteen ships that Ælfgar of Mercia was said to have been able to raise from Ireland in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. For the audience of Gruffudd’s biography, then, there appears to have been an expectation that a leader such as him would have easily been able to raise significant support from across the Irish Sea with a mixed army of Hiberno-Scandinavians. In the twelfth century, when the *Vita Griffini Filii Conani* was written, the Viking presence around the Irish Sea was still perceived as significant enough to be able to influence the political landscape of the region.

Later on in Gruffudd’s *Vita*, ‘...statim Griffinus iter accepit sequentibus eum Danis, Hybernis, amicisque aliis ad numerum centum sexaginta, agmen primum ductante Kyndelw filius Monensis...Terrore ingenti continentur reges, stupentque dum copias Griffini faeroces, constipata militum agmina, splendentia vexilla, Danos bipennibus armatos, Hybernos iacula ferreis cuspidibus ferentes conspiciunt’ (...Gruffudd immediately set off accompanied by Danes, Irish and other friends to the number of 160, the head of the column led by Cynddelw, son of Conws, of Anglesey...the kings were overcome with great terror and were stunned as they saw the fierce forces of Gruffudd, the dense columns of soldiers, the gleaming standards, the Danes armed with two-headed axes, and the Irish carrying iron-tipped spears).⁴¹ When Gruffudd’s military allegiances are mentioned within the *Vita Griffini Filii Conani*, their pan-Irish Sea nature is stressed: here again, Gruffudd is seen in command of an army including Scandinavian, Irish and Welsh troops. When he eventually dies, after a long and successful rule, his *Vita* reports that ‘Cambri, Hyberni ac Dani Griffini mortem flebilibus vocibus sunt prosequuti’ (Welshmen, Irishmen and Danes

³⁹ Russell, *Vita Griffini Filii Conani*, 67.

⁴⁰ See K.L. Maund, ‘Gruffudd, grandson of Iago: *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan* and the construction of legitimacy’, in Maund, *Gruffudd ap Cynan: a collaborative biography*, 109–16: 113.

⁴¹ Russell, *Vita Griffini Filii Conani*, 69.

lamented the death of Gruffudd).⁴² His reign is remembered not only in Wales, but also across the Irish Sea zone as a whole. Thus, the *Life* of Gruffudd ap Cynan likewise shows a career in which insular Viking zone activity constructs a heroic and successful biography.

The biographies of Ælfgar of Mercia and Gruffudd ap Cynan are fairly well known within studies of the insular Viking zone,⁴³ but they are not always put in dialogue with one another. What the *Life* of Gruffudd ap Cynan also illustrates is how these literary portraits of insular Viking zone activity continued even after the time that the Viking Age—according to standard historical accounts of Anglo-Saxon England, at least—was understood to be over. So too do the recorded activities of Hereward ‘the Wake’, the best known of those Anglo-Saxon earls who rebelled against William after the Norman Conquest.⁴⁴ Hereward’s legend is relatively well-represented across a handful of post-Conquest texts,⁴⁵ of which this article considers two twelfth-century narratives: the interpolation into the *Peterborough Chronicle* under the annal for 1070 and the Latin *Gesta Herewardi*. In both, Hereward is remembered as the quintessential Anglo-Saxon rebel, yet elements from his biography line up remarkably well with the insular Viking Age heroic biography outlined above.

The twelfth-century interpolations in the *Peterborough Chronicle* relate the Scandinavian backing of the fenland rebellion:⁴⁶ ‘Þa on þam ilcan geare com Swegn cyng of Denmarcan into Humbran... Þa comen into Elig Cristien þa densce biscop 7 Osbeorn eorl 7 þa densca huscarles mid heom, 7 þet englisce folc of eall

⁴² Russell, *Vita Griffini Filii Conani*, 91.

⁴³ See also K.L. Maund, ‘The Welsh alliances of Earl Ælfgar of Mercia and his family in the mid-eleventh century’, *Anglo-Norman Studies* 11 (1988), 181–90; Benjamin Hudson, *Viking pirates and Christian princes: dynasty, religion, and empire in the North Atlantic* (Oxford, 2005); T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons, 350–1062* (Oxford, 2013).

⁴⁴ On these, see Susan Reynolds, ‘Eadric Silvaticus and the English resistance’, *Historical Research* 54 (1981), 102–5; Maurice Keen, *The outlaws of Medieval legend* (London, 1961), 6–38; John Hayward, ‘Hereward the outlaw’, *Journal of Medieval History* 14 (1988), 293–304; and two more popular studies: Victor Head, *Hereward* (Stroud, 1995) and Peter Rex, *Hereward: the last Englishman* (Stroud, 2005).

⁴⁵ Brief references to Hereward’s life and rebellion are made in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, MSS D (1071) and E (a later interpolation into the 1070 annal); the Domesday Book (which records his estates in southern Lincolnshire); William of Malmesbury’s *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*; *The Peterborough Chronicle of Hugh Candidus*; the *Chronicle of John of Worcester* (which largely repeats the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*); Henry of Huntingdon’s *Historia Anglorum*; and the *Chronica Monasterii de Hida juxta Wintoniam* (known as the ‘Hyde’ or ‘Warenne’ chronicle). Longer, more legendary accounts of his life are to be found in several twelfth-century texts: the *Gesta Herwardi*, Geoffrey Gaimar’s *Estoire des Engleis* and the *Liber Eliensis*, as well as the fourteenth- or fifteenth-century *Historia Croylandensis* and a fifteenth-century genealogy of the lords of Bourne (the Wake family) who claimed descent from Hereward and whose name is the source of his spurious appellation.

⁴⁶ For more on this episode, see Brady, *Writing the Welsh borderlands*.

þa feolandes comen to heom⁴⁷ (Then in that same year King Swein came from Denmark into the Humber... Then Christian, the Danish bishop, came to Ely, and Jarl Osbern and the Danish housecarls with them. And the English people from all the fenlands came to them). The clear Danish agenda backing this ‘rebellion’ has of course been noted.⁴⁸ Here too, it is worth pointing out that this episode underscores the Scandinavian connectivity of the region. As has been noted above in the case of Ælfgar’s alliances, Swein would not have sailed from Denmark were he not certain of encountering a warm reception from local supporters.

The Scandinavian networks underlying the Irish Sea region are also emphasised later in the same annal, when: ‘þa ferdon þa dænescas menn ut of Ely mid ealle þa forenspræcena gærsume 7 læddon mid heom. Þa hi comen on middewarde þe sæ, þa com an mycel storm 7 todræfede ealle þa scipe þær þa gærsumes wæron inne—sume ferdon to Norwæge, sume to Yrlande, sume to Dænmarce⁴⁹ (Then the Danish men traveled out of Ely with all those treasures which were previously mentioned, and took them with them. Then when they came to the middle of the sea, there came a great storm, which drove apart all the ships which the treasures were in. Then some went to Norway, some to Ireland, some to Denmark). While there is no reason to discount the historical reality of the storm mentioned in this annal, its dispersal of the fleet nonetheless emphasises the networks of alliance that underpinned this rebellion. The return of the ships to Norway, Ireland and Denmark suggests that these were their ports of origin, reflecting the range of this alliance’s members.

The Latin *Gesta Herewardi* expands on these insular Viking zone connections.⁵⁰ This text has—justifiably—been dismissed by scholars as a fictional romance rather than an accurate historical record of Hereward’s life, but it clearly demonstrates that by the time that the *Gesta Herewardi* was written in the twelfth century, insular Viking activity had become a necessary component of heroic biography, whether that biography was embedded within a longer historical annal or chronicle or was written as a self-contained unit. As the texts discussed here have illustrated, in insular historical writing, activity during the Viking Age was used as a shorthand for heroic activity in general, in much the same way that a period of time spent as a Viking in one’s youth before settling down in middle age was used to signify bravery in the *Íslendingasögur* themselves.⁵¹ The *Gesta*

⁴⁷ Susan Irvine (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a collaborative edition, volume 7: MS E* (Cambridge, 2004), s.a. 1070.

⁴⁸ For the background to this episode, see Ian Howard, *Swein Forkbeard’s invasions and the Danish conquest of England, 991–1017* (Woodbridge, 2003); Kelly DeVries, *The Norwegian invasion of England in 1066* (Woodbridge, 1999).

⁴⁹ Irvine, *MS E*, 1070.

⁵⁰ T.D. Hardy and C.T. Martin (eds), *Gesta Herwardi incliti exulis et militis*, in *Lestoire des Engles solum la translacion maistre Geffrei Gaimar*, Rolls Series (2 vols, London, 1888).

⁵¹ See Carolyne Larrington, ‘Awkward adolescents: male maturation in Norse literature’, in Shannon Lewis-Simpson (ed.), *Youth and age in the Medieval North* (Leiden, 2008), 151–66.

Herewardi first introduces the youth Hereward having been exiled to Northumbria (that is, the Danelaw), where he proves his bravery by wrestling ‘a very large bear’—and not just any bear, but ‘the offspring of a famous Norwegian bear which had the head and feet of a man and human intelligence, which understood the speech of man and was cunning in battle. Its father, so the stories and legends told, was said to have raped a girl in the woods and through her to have engendered Beorn, King of Norway’.⁵² Hereward of course emerges victorious from an episode that could have been pulled straight out of an Icelandic saga, immediately situating him within a heroic Viking-Age landscape.

From there, Hereward goes on to experience a range of further adventures throughout Cornwall, Ireland, the Orkneys and Flanders before returning home to reclaim his family lands from the Normans. As noted above, this text has traditionally been dismissed as pure fantasy, at least in its first half, before Hereward’s return to England and rebellion against William the Conqueror.⁵³ Yet Elisabeth van Houts has persuasively argued that there is a real historical background to Hereward’s adventures in Flanders.⁵⁴ Whether or not the ‘historical’ Hereward actually traveled to Cornwall, Ireland and the Orkneys is beside the point. Rather, this narrative can best be understood by placing it within the genre of historical writing that depicted heroic biographies set within the insular Viking zone, where Hereward’s activities align perfectly with the now-familiar pattern.

Another figure whose biography fits this pattern is Wimund, bishop of Man and the Isles in the first half of the twelfth century.⁵⁵ Wimund was a colourful character whose deeds are related in some detail in William of Newburgh’s *Historia rerum Anglicarum*.⁵⁶ While his career has been treated as something of an anomaly for a bishop,⁵⁷ it nonetheless fits the pattern of heroic biography around

⁵² Michael Swanton, *Three lives of the last Englishmen* (New York, 1984), 47–8.

⁵³ E.g., Hugh M. Thomas, ‘The *Gesta Herewardi*, the English, and their conquerors’, *Anglo-Norman Studies* 21 (1999), 213–32.

⁵⁴ Elisabeth van Houts, ‘Hereward and Flanders’, *Anglo-Saxon England* 28 (1999), 201–24. For more on the historical background to this, see Eljas Oksanen, *Flanders and the Anglo-Norman world, 1066–1216* (Cambridge, 2012).

⁵⁵ On Wimund’s biography, see Andrew McDonald, ‘Monk, bishop, imposter, pretender: the place of Wimund in twelfth-century Scotland’, *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* 58 (1992–94), 247–70.

⁵⁶ Richard Howlett (ed.), William of Newburgh, *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*, in *Chronicles of the reigns of Stephen, Henry II, and Richard I*, Rolls Series 82 (4 vols, London, 1884–9) and Joseph Stevenson (trans.), *The church historians of England, volume IV, part II, containing the history of William of Newburgh; The Chronicles of Robert de Monte* (London, 1856); see also P.G. Walsh and M.J. Kennedy (eds and trans.), *William of Newburgh: the history of English affairs, book I*, Medieval Latin Texts (Warminster, 1988).

⁵⁷ For instance, one scholar introduces him by stating, ‘there is surely no stranger figure in twelfth-century Scottish history’: G.W.S. Barrow, *Kingship and unity: Scotland 1000–1306*, 2nd edn. (Edinburgh, 2003; repr. 2015); while another writes that, ‘of all the enemies of the Scottish kings in the twelfth century, the most difficult to make sense of’

the Irish Sea outlined in this article.⁵⁸ William relates that Wimund joined the monastery at Furness and rose rapidly to become elected Bishop of the Isle of Man. He then began to raid throughout the islands: ‘having collected a band of needy and desperate men, he feigned himself to be the son of the earl of Moray, and that he was deprived of the inheritance of his fathers by the king of Scotland’.⁵⁹ Like the lives of those other men previously discussed, Wimund’s motivation is unjust deprivation of an inheritance, and his biography also emphasises the centrality of the Irish Sea zone to his military activities. William writes that ‘whenever the royal army was despatched against him, he eluded the whole warlike preparation, either by retreating to distant forests, or taking to the sea; and when the troops had retired, he again issued from his hiding-places to ravage the provinces’.⁶⁰

After a few decades spent terrorising the Irish Sea region, Wimund’s career as a raider ended when he was blinded, castrated and sent to live out his days in Byland Abbey.⁶¹ Ironically, this punishment may give Wimund’s claims to be deposed nobility some weight, as blinding, castration and banishment to a monastery were punishments used far more often to block rival claimants to a throne than to punish errant bishops.⁶² Historiographically, Wimund has been treated as a shocking outlier, yet when his career is compared to secular figures rather than other bishops, it begins to make much more sense. Wimund’s biography is an almost exact parallel to those of his non-ecclesiastical contemporaries: the Welsh Gruffudd ap Cynan; the Anglo-Saxons Ælfgar of Mercia, Hereward ‘the Wake’ and Harold Godwinson; the Manx Godred Crovan; and the Irish Diarmait mac Murchada. Wimund’s career fits into this narrative arc of a dispossessed young leader who reclaims his lands by raiding around the Irish Sea region, even at the tail end of the Viking Age.⁶³

is the ‘bizarre career’ of Wimund: R. Andrew McDonald, “‘Soldiers most unfortunate’”: Gaelic and Scoto-Norse opponents of the Canmore Dynasty, c. 1100–c. 1230’, in R. Andrew McDonald (ed.), *History, literature, and music in Scotland, 700–1560* (Toronto, 2002), 93–119: 105–106.

⁵⁸ See Lindy Brady, ‘Rogue bishops around the Irish Sea before the mid-twelfth century’, *Peritia* 31 (2020), 9–27.

⁵⁹ Stevenson, *Church historians of England*, 431.

⁶⁰ Stevenson, *Church historians of England*, 431.

⁶¹ Stevenson, *Church historians of England*, 432.

⁶² Lisi Oliver, *The body legal in barbarian law* (Toronto, 2011); D.P. Kirby, *The earliest English kings* (London, 1991); Clare Stancliffe, ‘The kings who opted out’, in Patrick Wormald (ed.), *Ideal and reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon society* (Oxford, 1983), 154–76; William Sayers, ‘The Laconic Scar in Early Irish Literature’, in Larissa Tracy and Kelly DeVries (eds), *Wounds and wound repair in Medieval culture* (Leiden, 2015), 473–95; William Sayers, ‘Early Irish attitudes toward hair and beards, baldness and tonsure’, *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 44 (1991), 154–89; Katharine Simms, *From kings to warlords: the changing political structure of Gaelic Ireland in the Later Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 1987; repr. paperback 2000).

⁶³ For the same pattern in a later time period, see Barbara F. Crawford, ‘Norse earls and Scottish bishops in Caithness: a clash of cultures’, in Colleen E. Batey, Judith Jesch

In the thirteenth century, the same narrative arc underpins the biography of Leinster king Diarmait mac Murchada, who was notoriously held responsible for the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland.⁶⁴ As reflected in the Anglo-Norman work *The deeds of the Normans in Ireland / La Geste Des Engleis En Yrlande*, formerly known as *The song of Dermot and the Earl*,⁶⁵ Diarmait's career on the one hand follows the pattern of insular heroic biography discussed thus far: he is dispossessed of his kingdom and sails across the Irish Sea to gather aid from Britain before returning and successfully regaining his lands with the help of an insular coalition of forces. On the other hand, Diarmait's appeal is made not to a group of Viking leaders but rather to Henry II, the Plantagenet king of Anglo-Norman England, and the assistance Diarmait receives results in not only his recovery of his own lands but also the Norman invasion of Ireland. There are also significant stylistic differences between the texts already discussed and *La Geste Des Engleis En Yrlande*, which displays the influence of chivalric romances: fight scenes are much longer and more detailed, the text's heroes are Norman earls, battles emphasise the use of cavalry. The work as a whole appears much more reflective of the chivalric age than the Viking era.

Yet at the same time, *La Geste Des Engleis En Yrlande* participates in the insular tradition of historical writing in which aid is provided for land reclamation from across the Irish Sea. And while Diarmait mac Murchada himself is not depicted with a full insular Viking heroic biography, the poem describes these types of networks elsewhere, in its description of the activities of Asculf mac Turcaill, the last 'Viking' king of Dublin:

Este vus un fel aitant
Vers Dyvelin vint siglant:
Sus Dyvelin iert arivez
Hesculf Mac Turkil od cent nefz.
Mult de gent ad od sei menez:
Bien vint mil (homes) apretez.
De Eir vindrent e de Man,

and Christopher D. Morris (eds), *The Viking age in Orkney, Caithness and the North Atlantic: select papers from the Eleventh Viking Congress, Thurso and Kirkwall, 22 August–1 September 1989* (Edinburgh, 1993), 129–47.

⁶⁴ See F.X. Martin, 'Diarmait Mac Murchada and the coming of the Anglo-Normans', in Art Cosgrove (ed.), *A new history of Ireland, vol. 2: Medieval Ireland, 1169–1534* (Oxford, 1987), 43–66.

⁶⁵ Evelyn Mullally (ed. and trans.), *The Deeds of the Normans in Ireland / La Geste Des Engleis En Yrlande: A new edition of the chronicle formerly known as The Song of Dermot and the Earl* (Dublin, 2002). This text was previously published in an older, now out-of-date edition: Goddard Henry Orpen (ed. and trans.), *The Song of Dermot and the Earl: an Old French poem about the coming of the Normans to Ireland* (Oxford, 1892) and an unsatisfactory modern edition: Denis J. Conlon (ed.), *The song of Dermot and Earl Richard Fitzgilbert*, Studien und Dokumente zur Geschichter der Romanischen Literaturen 24 (Frankfurt am Main, 1992).

E de Norwiche i vint Johan:
Un vassal, Johan le Devé,
Ad Mac Turcul od sei mené.
Nevu ert cil (al) riche reis
De Norwiche, solum les Yrreis.

(Suddenly a rebel sailed
across to Dublin:
Asculf Mac Turcaill landed back in Dublin
with 100 ships.
He brought a large number of troops with him,
fully 20,000 men ready for battle.
They came from the Islands and from the Isle of Man,
and from Norway there came John:
Mac Turcaill brought with him
a vassal called John the Wode.
He was the nephew of the mighty king of Norway,
according to the Irish.)⁶⁶

The poem makes clear that there is still an Irish Sea ‘Viking’ network in the insular region, operating late in the twelfth century. Although nowhere near as politically powerful as some of his forebears, Asculf mac Turcaill was nonetheless remembered as the last ‘Viking’ king of Dublin. As *La Geste Des Engleis En Yrlande* makes clear, he was able to draw on the same types of Irish Sea Viking networks as the other figures discussed in this article. He is able to muster troops from ‘the Islands’ (Evelyn Mullally, this text’s most recent editor, suggests the Hebrides),⁶⁷ from Man and from Norway. The description of the ‘rebellion’ of Asculf mac Turcaill in *La Geste Des Engleis En Yrlande* underscores the fact that even at the late dates when these events took place and the text recording them was written, there was still a strong presence of Viking networks in the Irish Sea region. These networks are characterised as such in the texts that depict them: *La Geste Des Engleis En Yrlande* makes a point of noting the kin ties of Asculf mac Turcaill’s top fighter ‘John the Wode’, who ‘according to the Irish’ was the nephew of the king of Norway.

In other texts from the thirteenth century as well, reflexes of this insular Viking zone heroic biography underscore how well ingrained it had become as a literary trope by this point. One moment in which the idea of Viking heroic biography can be seen as a literary trope is at a moment of its failure, in the thirteenth century pseudo-historical Latin *Life* of Harold Godwinson, which imagined Harold as having survived the Battle of Hastings and died in anonymity as a hermit in the Welsh borderlands many years later.⁶⁸ In this curious text, Harold

⁶⁶ Mullally, *The deeds of the Normans in Ireland*, 110-111, ll. 2253-72.

⁶⁷ Mullally, *The deeds of the Normans in Ireland*, 160 n. 2261.

⁶⁸ Walter De Gray Birch (ed. and trans.), *Vita Haroldi* (London, 1885).

is said to have survived the Battle of Hastings, but been severely wounded. Immediately afterwards, he is hidden for two years in the cellar of a Saracen woman to heal. After he recovers, he dreams of taking back his kingdom: ‘He crossed over, therefore, to Germany, the home of his race, with the intention of proceeding to Saxony... With these and similar arguments he importunes the Saxons, as well as the Danes whom he visited with an equal anxiety, to secure their help in driving out the invaders from his kingdom’.⁶⁹ While Harold’s efforts ultimately do not succeed (in this text, the failure is interpreted as a sign from god that he should live out his days in penance as a hermit), even this unsuccessful attempt shows that the thirteenth century remembered Viking Age activity as a precursor to heroic action—even when, as in Harold’s case, it did not ultimately bring about the desired result.

A final text which illustrates how these elements pervade insular historical writing during this time period is the thirteenth-century *Chronicles of the kings of Man and the Isles*.⁷⁰ It is well-known that the beginning of this text borrows from the *Chronicle of Melrose*,⁷¹ yet the choice of what material to borrow and how to structure the *Chronicles of the kings of Man and the Isles* was nonetheless still a deliberate authorial decision.⁷² The *Chronicles* opens with Cnut and an overview of his insular Viking zone activities, placing heroic Viking biography at the forefront of its action. When the *Chronicles* turns to discussing the history of Man itself,⁷³ the activities of Godred Crovan are characterised in a familiar heroic insular Viking zone pattern. After conquering Man, the *Chronicles* reports that ‘Igitur godredus subiugavit sibi dubliniam and magnam partem laynestir. Scotos uero ita perdomuit ut nullus qui fabricaret nauem uel scapham ausus esset plusquam tres clauos ferreos inserere’ (Then Godred subjected to his rule Dublin and a great part of Leinster. Also he so tamed the Scots that no-one who built a ship or boat dared use more than three iron bolts).⁷⁴ It is clear that being the ruler of the kingdom of Man and the Isles in this chronicle is characterised as having the military power to control the Irish Sea region. Godred

⁶⁹ De Gray Birch, *Vita Haroldi*, 136–7.

⁷⁰ George Broderick (ed. and trans.), *Cronica Regum Mannie & Insularum: Chronicles of the kings of Man and the Isles*, BL Cotton Julius Avii (Belfast, 1979).

⁷¹ A.A.M. Duncan, ‘Sources and uses of the Chronicle of Melrose, 1165–1297’, in Simon Taylor (ed.), *Kings, clerics and chronicles in Scotland, 500–1297: Essays in honour of Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson on the occasion of her ninetieth birthday* (Dublin, 2000), 146–85; R. Andrew McDonald, *Kings, usurpers, and concubines in the Chronicles of the kings of Man and the Isles* (Cham, Switzerland, 2019).

⁷² The *Chronicles* is well known for its biases; see McDonald, *Kings, usurpers, and concubines*. For example, as Etchingham, Sigurðsson, Ní Mhaonaigh and Rowe, *Norse-Gaelic contacts in a Viking world*, 190, note: ‘*Cronica regum Mannie et Insularum* provides a different record for the period and one biased in favour of Ragnhall’s rival sibling Amhlaíbh’.

⁷³ On which see Seán Duffy and Harold Mytum (eds), *A new history of the Isle of Man, volume 3: the Medieval Period, 1000–1406* (Liverpool, 2015).

⁷⁴ Broderick, *Chronicles of the kings of Man and the Isles*, f. 33r–v.

Crovan's kingship is here described as the subjugation of not only Man itself, but also a significant portion of Ireland as well.

Later on in the same text, at the very end of the eleventh century, Magnus of Norway is characterised similarly as having subjugated the Orkneys, Man, Galloway, Anglesey and Ireland.⁷⁵ Here too Magnus, as ruler of the Isle of Man, is depicted as controlling not only that island but also the Orkneys and portions of Scotland, Wales and Ireland. Military control of the entire Irish Sea region is understood to be crucial to the ruler of the kingdom of Man and the Isles, and this understanding is embedded within the biographies of those kings depicted in the *Chronicles of the kings of Man and the Isles*.

Indeed, a similar pattern is recorded for Magnus's successor Olaf, the son of Godred Crovan. Olaf, we are told, 'Erat autem uir pacificus, habuitque omnes reges ybernie et scotie ita sibi confederatos ut nullus auderet perturbare regnum insularum omnibus diebus eius' (was a peaceable man and had all the kings of Ireland and Scotland as confederates in such a way that no-one dared disturb the kingdom of the Isles during his lifetime).⁷⁶ Here too, the successful rule of Man is understood as contingent upon the ability to exert influence over Ireland and Scotland. In this instance, Olaf's domination over the Irish and Scottish kingdoms is not depicted as a military one per se, as the *Chronicles* portray him as a peaceful ruler able to maintain strong alliances with the Irish and Scottish kings. Yet the end result is the same: control of the Irish Sea region, whether military or political, is necessary to protect Man from attacks by other kingdoms. Many similar examples from elsewhere in the *Chronicles* could be discussed in support of these points.⁷⁷ In this text as well, the insular Viking zone was depicted as a dynamic, continuous source of potential for heroic opportunity, and military or diplomatic control of this region was understood to be necessary for successful kingships.

Conclusion

The examples discussed in this article have underscored the fact that the Viking Age in the Irish Sea region was perceived as both more continuous and more positive than it is often understood from the periphery. While historical chronicles written from the perspective of a clear Norman invasion of England or Ireland often viewed the Viking Age in hindsight, texts from within the Irish Sea zone across the period of the (very long) twelfth century do not evince quite the same sense of rupture. The Viking Age in the Irish Sea region during the long twelfth century was not necessarily perceived as having ended. Moreover, without denying the real violence and damage inflicted across the Irish Sea region by Viking raids, it is worth noting that not all literary and historical texts from the

⁷⁵ Broderick, *Chronicles of the kings of Man and the Isles*, f. 34v–35r.

⁷⁶ Broderick, *Chronicles of the kings of Man and the Isles*, f. 35v.

⁷⁷ For a thorough study of Somerled which touches on many of the same themes, see Ellis, 'Impressions of a twelfth-century maritime ruler'.

Irish Sea region understood the Viking era in this way. There was another strand of narrative discourse about the insular Viking zone, one in which the Irish Sea provided a backdrop for adventure within insular heroic biographies set during the Viking Age.

The writing of heroic Viking Age biography within the Irish Sea region was shaped by real events, but this article has explored the ways in which certain key elements of those historical circumstances became understood as core features of the genre of heroic biography itself. The historical texts written about the Viking era across the Irish Sea region attempted to record events that had actually happened, but they did so in a way that emphasised shared literary conventions as an important part of their narratives. One final (admittedly speculative) conclusion on this point is that the existence of an ‘Irish Sea Viking heroic biography’ genre of literature also suggests the existence of an audience across the Irish Sea cultural zone who were eager to—and perhaps even expected to?—hear precisely these types of tales about local heroic figures, regardless of their precise points of origin. It seems that for one genre of texts produced over the course of the long twelfth century within the Irish Sea region, audiences may have been more interested in hearing about the adventures of those who raided than concerned with the plights of their targets. The poems, letters, chronicles and annals lamenting the horror and disruption of the Viking Age emerged from monastic settings—that is, from the primary victims of early Viking raids, those locations targeted for and stripped of their rich resources. Of the heroic biographies discussed in this article, apart from that of Wímund (whose apparently secular behaviours are condemned as they are narrated by William of Newburgh),⁷⁸ the rest of the figures discussed belong to the secular rather than ecclesiastical worlds. It does not seem an unreasonable hypothesis that because monasteries so frequently found themselves the targets of Viking attacks, historical writing which emerged from an ecclesiastical sphere understood the Viking Age as one of horror and disruption, and the rhetoric of narratives about it quickly turned towards one in which the Vikings were understood as divine punishment for contemporary sins. But for a young, landless (or dispossessed) noble, the Viking Age appeared differently, as a moment of opportunity. These divergent perspectives on this important historical era suggests that it was the latter audience who wrote and consumed the narratives of insular heroic biography discussed above, rather than an ecclesiastical audience who were more likely to understand the Vikings as divine punishment.

⁷⁸ Brady, ‘Rogue bishops around the Irish Sea before the mid-twelfth century’.