

Manx crosses: a handbook of stone sculpture 500-1040 in the Isle of Man, by David M. Wilson, Oxford, Archaeopress Archaeology 388, 2018, iv and 182 pp., Illus. 63, £19.99 (Hardback), ISBN: 978 1 78491 757 9.

We have needed this book: an authoritative and holistic introduction to the Isle of Man's early medieval sculpture. From the book's Preface we get a good sense of just how hard-won its contents have been for the 'retired', eminent Viking scholar Sir David Wilson, who long ago made the Isle of Man his home. The Island lacks a modern corpus of these carved stones – and the number of stones has doubled since P. M. C. Kermode published *Manx Crosses* in 1904. Such an absence makes this book all-the-more of an achievement, yet we must also wonder what it would have looked like if its author had been able to draw on a modern corpus that met current scholarly ideals and standards. (Scotland lamentably also finds itself in the same position, unlike England and Wales.)

Over the course of six chapters we are introduced to: the island (and a map with the location of the crosses discussed); early stones and sacred sites; the monastery at Maughold and pre-Scandinavian monuments; the ninth-/tenth-century cusp of Scandinavian settlement; the sculpture of the tenth-/eleventh-century settlement; and the Scandinavian runic inscriptions. There is a bibliography of suggested reading for each chapter, an appendix containing a hand-list of the sculpture, and an index. Throughout, Wilson draws effectively on his extensive knowledge of the early medieval, particularly Scandinavian world, to situate the Manx story, as revealed through its sculpture, in its Irish Sea and wider European context. He draws on wide interdisciplinary sources, not all of which are in English, but the emphasis is often on what can be learnt from more art-historical perspectives, playing to the author's specialism. An additional concluding chapter might usefully have drawn together and reinforced the international significance of the Manx crosses, which is otherwise gradually revealed to the reader during this book's journey.

The target audience for this 'Handbook' is stated to be the general reader, although it is admitted (p. 141) that the writing is more detailed than necessary in places because it is hoped that students might also use it; sub-headings provide regular and helpful orientation. Interested students and scholars will be frustrated by the lack of references in the core text but appreciate the discursive reading lists. In the absence of referencing, it is also difficult to fully appreciate when the author is to be credited with new ideas and observations.

With its robust and very attractive cover the book feels fit for the field but it is not a guidebook and, strictly, it would be wrong to think of it as a novice's portal, as the title 'Handbook' implies. Although finely written, the content and arguments still require an attentive read of the text and

illustrations, and the occasional recourse to a specialist dictionary (e.g. for explanation of a term like "'scholastic" ogam'). The interested reader will also have to research images of most of the art-historical parallels described throughout the text. The Hand-List at the end will be a starting point for future serious students and scholars, but in its unillustrated tabular form may prove challenging for the general reader.

To reach a broader readership, or to broaden the appeal of the subject, the Hand-List could have been improved and enlivened with thumbnail images of the sculptures, but as Wilson states in his preface (p. viii), 'Text photographs have presented a problem'. In the absence of a modern, consistent survey of the sculptures, he has had to draw on photographs and drawings from multiple and largely historic sources. He notes that at the time of writing a 'systematic high-technology series of images of the stones is planned'. Manx National Heritage has since advertised the launch in early 2019 of 3D digital images of the 210 Manx crosses on <www.imuseum.im>, and we must hope that this is swiftly followed by complementary, full and interdisciplinary analysis of the sculptures, their contexts and wider biographies. This book's emphasis is on understanding the early medieval period, but we are offered some tasters of the material's longer-life biographies (not least the historic graffiti that some stones attracted), as well as the archaeological potential of sites where the sculpture was found. Wilson's book promotes a wider recognition of the significance and future potential of this resource, an appetite for greater understanding that will surely be whetted further when readers can at the same time view these sculptures in the round.

Sally Foster
Lecturer in Heritage and Conservation
University of Stirling
s.m.foster@stir.ac.uk