

10-2022

Review of Adrián Maldonado, *Crucible of Nations: Scotland from Viking Age to Medieval Kingdom*

Millie Horton-Insch
University College London

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal>



Part of the Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons

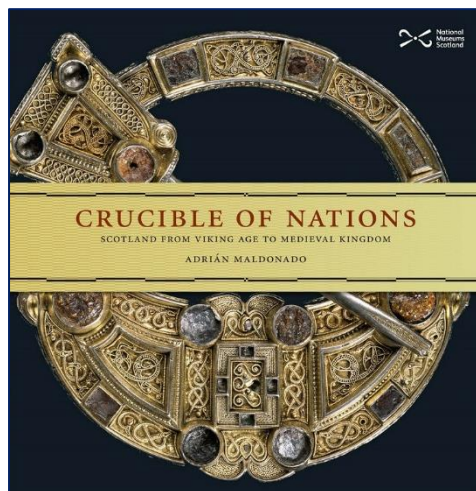
Recommended Citation

Horton-Insch, Millie. "Review of Adrián Maldonado, *Crucible of Nations: Scotland from Viking Age to Medieval Kingdom*." *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* 8, 3 (2022): 129-136.
<https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal/vol8/iss3/5>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Art History at Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* by an authorized editor of Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact noltj@kenyon.edu.

PEREGRINATIONS

JOURNAL OF MEDIEVAL ART AND ARCHITECTURE
VOLUME VIII, NUMBER 2 (AUTUMN 2022)



Review of Adrián Maldonado, *Crucible of Nations: Scotland from Viking Age to Medieval Kingdom*. Edinburgh: National Museums Scotland, 2021. pp. 240, 244 colour ills. £25. ISBN: 9781910682432

<https://shop.nms.ac.uk/products/crucible-of-nations>

MILLIE M. HORTON-INSCH
University College London

Crucible of Nations is the third book published as part of The Glenmorangie Company Research Project with the National Museums of Scotland, a project which for over a decade has supported research within the Museums' collection of Early Medieval (AD 300-1100) objects. Adrián Maldonado's book, written during a Glenmorangie Research Fellowship, follows *Early Medieval Scotland* (2012) and *Scotland's Early Silver* (2017) to address material from 800-1200 AD. Within it, Maldonado seeks to frame extant objects from this period as evidence of the construction of a 'Crucible of Nations', conveying to the reader a sense of 'not one, but many Scotlands' (21). Using objects to acknowledge the complexities of Scotland's cultural history, and to attempt to understand the idea of 'Nation building' in the early medieval period more broadly, is an exciting means of engaging with material from a period which, falling between traditional chronological boundaries, is often overlooked.

The book is structured around eight chapters which lead the reader through broad areas, each outlined as crucial within the construction of Scotland's 'Crucible of Nations', and which provide a contextual focus for the objects discussed. These



Figure 1 The Kilmichael Glassary bell reliquary, Argyll, height: 148 mm, NMS X.KA 5

areas include language (Chapter 1: Naming Nations), shifting political powers (Chapter 2: An Imperial Age), funerary practices (Chapter 3: Worlds of the Dead), the material evidence for raiding and trading (Chapter 4: Age of Raids), dress (Chapter 5: The Serpent and the Thorn), the development of a silver economy (chapter 6: A Silver Age), religion (Chapter 7: An Animated World), and some of the significant changes within material culture which occurred in the 11th and 12th centuries (Chapter 8: An Experimental Age). The breadth of these subjects covered within these chapters is a significant strength of the book and provides a varied means for the reader to engage with the material discussed – especially important when so few objects survive from early medieval Scotland. Indeed Maldonado’s acknowledgement of, and attempts to correct, the historic neglect of ‘the darkest bit of the ‘Dark Ages’’ (189), may perhaps be regarded as the book’s greatest achievement. Moreover, the superb quality of the images and Maldonado’s evocative prose will no doubt incite a wider audience’s interest in this enigmatic period. Particularly notable is the description of the boom in church building in the

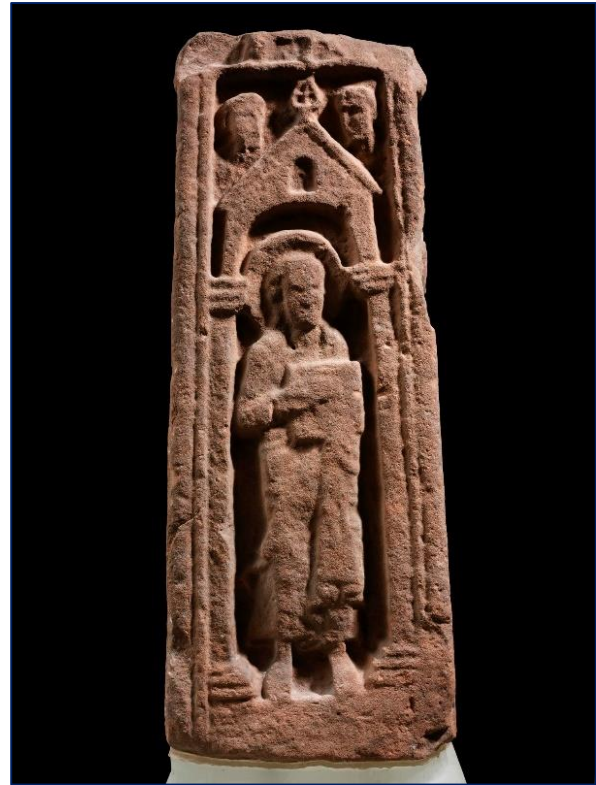
12th century, illustrated by stunning a stunning detail from the Kilmichael Glassary reliquary (**Fig. 1**): 'They were more than just landmarks. The first stone church towers in Scotland brought with them a new sound – the peal of church bells. Scotland had joined the soundscape of medieval Christendom' (209). Such imagery and ekphrasis undoubtedly supports the Glenmorangie's Research Project's commitment to public research, in possessing the potential to significantly illuminate blind spots in public knowledge of this period.

These illuminative efforts are supported by thorough archaeological research and an extensive bibliography. Maldonado draws details from these to provide further context and assert the potential of seemingly unassuming objects to enrich an understanding of Scotland's early medieval past. In a broader discussion of stone sculpture in the book's second chapter, 'An Imperial Age', Maldonado includes a wooden paddle from a horizontal mill, excavated in Bankhead, Dalswinton in Dumfriesshire (**Fig. 2**), as material evidence of the significant agricultural expansion in this period, and in particular the development of monasteries as major sites of



Figure 2 Wooden paddle from a horizontal mill, Bankhead, Dalswinton, Dumfriesshire, length: 393mm; NMS X.PD 12

Figure 3 Cross-shaft with haloed figures carved in relief, 8th or 9th century, Hoddom, Dumfriesshire, NMS X.IB 9



grain processing (31). Through this, it is outlined, the wealth needed to employ master sculptors was acquired, creating an economy in which works such as the relief crosses found at Hoddom were produced (**Fig. 3**) (31). In framing the objects thus, *Crucible of Nations* allows the reader to move deftly between considering the specific details of extant individual objects, and the broader context in which they were produced, simultaneously contextualising the objects, and giving them a stake in the formation of such a ‘Crucible of Nations’. This impression is further enriched by the inclusion of results from more recent archaeological interventions. The use of high-resolution laser-scanning to assess the ‘handwriting’ on mixed-script objects in Birsay and Cunningsburgh, for instance, is included in the first chapter, ‘Naming Nations’. From these it is revealed that scriptural carvings at the former were carved by different hands, while the latter’s were more markedly similar, suggesting an ‘interplay between writing systems in this multilingual and colonial context’ (15), alluding further to the potential for objects in this material to act as ‘tools through which identity was created’ in this ‘*experimental age*’ of multiple Scotlands (20-1). The

discussion of stable isotope analysis, and its potential to trace the mobility of individuals during their lifetime is similarly cited to emphasize the diversity within Scotland in this period and to underscore the 'high mobility' of the age (61).

The results of these studies further support Maldonado's positioning of Scotland within the context of long-distance trade routes. This not only allows the reader to consider the cultural exchange suggested by the material objects discussed, but also positions Scotland's border areas as central within the study. The significant amount of extant material from the Scottish Isles and coasts is contextualised by the assertion that there were no 'convincing urban centres' in early medieval Scotland, and instead seasonal 'beach markets' acted as venues for internal and external trade (154). This understanding not only challenges the modern reader's urban-centric perspective, but also further asserts Scotland's extensive involvement in global trade routes as central to its development as such a nation.

There is significant acknowledgement within this study, of the difficulties of identifying the 'different voices' within this 'Crucible', a metaphor selected as it does not imply blended identities, as 'melting pot' would, rather suggests 'how the layering of languages, and perhaps identities, created nations' (21). In outlining the challenges of any approach which seeks to consider different identities within material culture, Maldonado is explicit about the limitations of the material, asserting that: objects cannot prove the existence of an identity (6), identities are not static (8), material culture has significant limitations in attempts to 'reveal' the identity of the maker (9), textual sources outline how labelling people collectively can be fraught (10), any search for ethnic significance may blind scholars to textual objects' 'real meaning' (16), assigning 'ethnic labels' in the case of 'intentionally international objects' was a fallacy (55), the ethnicity of the owners of any object is impossible to prove (90), and perhaps most significantly that the period from the 9th to the 12th centuries was '*an experimental age*' in which objects did not express identity, but were tools through which identity was created, and thus scholars should seek evidence within each object of the experience of individual people,

rather than for differences between peoples (20-1). Such statements are suggestive of a nuanced approach to the extant material which centres the object and the individual.

Crucible of Nations is, however, primarily an archaeological study, and therefore lacks some of the substantive visual analysis which could have been applied were the book expanded to include art-historical methods, and which would no doubt have further supported a nuanced approach. Stylistic categories including 'Pictish style' (122), 'Winchester style' (202), 'Romanesque Style' (192), and 'Ringerike-style' (192) are applied often throughout the study. Though these stylistic categories reflect how material in the National Museums of Scotland has been catalogued and Maldonado does explicitly state that the ethnicity of the owner of any object cannot be gleaned from an object's appearance, the application of such stylistic taxonomies does nevertheless lead to some slippage in the use of certain terms. Maldonado is explicitly wary of such slippage, noting that 'material culture in the early medieval period is so often attributed 'ethnic' significance that it is all too easy for these labels to slip, as if by osmosis, onto the corpse' (49). And though Maldonado extensively outlines the complex histories of the 'broadly 'ethnic' categories' alluded to in early written medieval sources (6-10), there are instances where the applications of these terms within this book could be more clear. Though it is noted in the first chapter that the term 'Pict' referred to those who spoke a shared Pictish language, rather than 'a straightforward ethnicity' (6), a sculpted stone cross is described in the second chapter of the book as 'resolutely Pictish' (25). If 'Pictish' is to be understood as a linguistic term, then the meaning of its application to a visual object is not immediately apparent. Similarly, 'Viking' is acknowledged to have been understood in the early medieval period as an 'occupational term', and was 'never a single, self-identifying 'race' or ethnicity' (8), a point reiterated later in the book (73). However, 'viking' is on occasion employed (both with and without inverted commas) to describe burials and goods (48). And though Maldonado does, in places, problematise the use of material objects as indicators of identity, he nevertheless

describes the Croy Hoard as containing ‘little or no diagnostic ‘viking’ (as in Scandinavian) material’ (94) and asserts that ‘the hoards of the period are almost impossible to categorise as either ‘viking’ or ‘native’’, thereby implying that there is at least some possibility for the material to be understood this way (97). Readers may also find following the subtle implications suggested by the application of ‘Viking’, ‘Norse’, ‘Scandinavian’ and ‘Scoto-Scandinavian’ across various contexts in the book, to be a challenge.

More fundamentally, ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ are not themselves clearly defined as categories within the book. As issues of race and ethnicity have historically been so entwined with an understanding nationhood, and the words ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ are indeed used frequently in this study, readers would likely have benefitted from a more explicit critical introduction to these terms. The use of the terms ‘native’, ‘colonial’ and ‘imperial’ may similarly have benefitted from an explicit critical framework in which to understand them. Though Maldonado’s book contains a thorough archaeological bibliography, there is little representation of the numerous significant contributions made by scholars which consider the categories of race and ethnicity in the early medieval period. Moreover, it is surprising to see the continued application of the term ‘Anglo-Saxon’ in a book that cites Mary Rambaram-Olm and Erik Wade’s ‘The Many Myths of the Term Anglo-Saxon’, in which the authors outline the term’s historical inaccuracy and continuing associations with white supremacy (8). Use of the words ‘exotic’ to describe imported goods (130), ‘slave’ to describe the enslaved people transported from or through Britain as part of the extensive trans-national early medieval slave trade (156), and ‘the Islamic world’ to describe a presumably vast (though not clearly defined) geographical region (156) similarly do not reflect the lexicon preferred by many contemporary scholars, and has the effect of significantly ‘othering’ some groups and areas. However, Maldonado does acknowledge the adoption of the ‘viking’ stereotype by ‘nationalist and less savoury historical movements in modern times’, signalling to the reader the potential for these terms and these histories to be misused (82).

Crucible of Nations succeeds in what was surely its primary aim, to assert the complexity of an oft-overlooked period, its significance in the formation of Scotland as a nation, and the potential for material objects to illuminate an understanding of this time. The objects included and questions outlined within the book may prompt scholars of many disciplines to reassess this material and will draw attention to an age that has been neglected for too long. Maldonado makes a convincing case for the relevance of this material in considerations of the nationhood of early medieval Scotland. The book communicates these ideas in a manner suitably accessible so that these objects, histories and themes, will likely reach a much wider audience than has previously been possible. Nevertheless, in seeking to acknowledge the complexities surrounding categories of identity in this period, the reader may struggle to engage with some of the critical debates concerning more contested terms, and the merits of applying them to material culture more broadly. There has never been a more important moment in which to be critically rigorous about the terms applied to material objects. 🐼