This is a book review published in *Medieval Review*.

Citation for the published paper:

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Medieval Review, 2012, Issue: 01-09
URL: http://hdl.handle.net/2022/14061
This slim volume captures the proceedings of a 2010 workshop on medieval islands convened as part of an informal international network of scholars working on medieval peripheries. The label "proceedings" is central to comprehending the contents of this volume—it is a collection of oral presentations given by workshop participants, some of which have been extended into full articles and others of which are essentially conference paper talks. This is not an edited collection in which the editors have worked with the authors to create a coherent set of papers that speak to the same themes. In fact, the editors have written only a one-page introduction to the volume, leaving the reader with no feel for the intellectual project at hand. With no effort put into making a true collection, this book is not greater than the sum of its parts.

In the scholarly environment of Europe, getting research out in print is a necessity as individuals, departments, and universities are judged by publication records (this is particularly the case in Norway, the home of five authors in this volume)—it is understandable, therefore, that the network participants want to have their papers published. Yet, a reader of this volume has to question the wisdom of such an approach to publishing. Some of the essays are quite good and could have gone through a standard journal review process, being strengthened along the way, and then made available to a wide-range of scholars. Instead, they are buried in a relatively obscure volume of essays with an incredibly wide range of quality.

The most frustrating part of this volume is the lack of editorial involvement in putting together the book. At the end of the short introduction, the editors identified six overarching themes for the papers, but three of the themes have only one paper each. Even with the six themes identified, the editors did not sort the papers to reflect the themes—the papers are printed in a seemingly random order instead. In spite of this shortcoming by the editors, I have identified three major themes to group the papers for the purposes of this review: physical and economic connections of islands, the qualities and functions of islands in literature, and the influence of real experiences on imagined islands.

The first theme is the physical and economic connections of islands, which is at the heart of three papers in the collection. Johnny Granjean Gogsig Jacobsen offers a tantalizing glance at monastic settlements in Denmark, arguing that although isolation was a religious ideal, it was not carried out in practice. Jacobsen's map of the medieval monasteries shows that while most of the monasteries are on islands (since Denmark consists of primarily of island landmasses), they were founded on large, populated islands rather than on the many small, more remote islands. The reasons were practical: the monks needed to be connected with estates and patrons, and they needed running water which could be hard to come by on small islands. Jacobsen notes, however, that some orders such as the Benedictines and Premonstratensians tended to pick more remote locations, even if they were not completely isolated. If this essay had been prepared as a full-length journal article, the reasons for this difference would have likely been explored, but since it is a shorter conference paper, they are left for future scholarship.

Juhan Kreem's contribution shows us that the level of isolation of medieval islands changed along with the seasons. In the eastern Baltic, ice cover, which might be hindrance for some kinds of ships, also provided opportunities for easier access. Winter's snowy trails and frozen rivers and seas replaced summer's swampy land routes and water crossings as it became colder. Only the freeze and thaw cycles of spring and fall were particularly problematic for travelers. Kreem's paper is a welcome reminder to all that environmental conditions are not static throughout a year, and therefore need to be taken into account in the telling of histories.

Torstein Jørgensen's study of Utstein Monastery in Norway also stresses the connective power of seas; rather than seeing Klosterøy as isolated, it is physically and socially connected to the mainland. Using the few surviving documents about Utstein, Jørgensen paints a picture of an institution intertwined with other religious houses, the monarchy, and trading networks. The tit-for-tat violent conflicts between the abbot of Utstein and the bishop of Stavanger illustrate (somewhat humorously) how politically and physically connected the monastery was to the mainland.

The second group of papers in my mind consists of papers that focus on the qualities and functions of islands in literature. Three of the four papers addressing this topic deal with Norse literature. Kristel Zilmer discusses transformative religious experiences on islands which give them narrative significance. Isolated islands made good locales for mysterious events best kept secret such as the activities of the smith Völundr in the eddic poem Völundarkviða, while at the same time, the strategic
location of some islands made them practical and symbolic sites for religious rituals with a more public flavor such as the
baptism of King Olaf Tryggvason on the Scilly Isles. Her message that the same types of symbolism and pragmatism can lead
to both aloof islands and connected ones is important to keep in mind when studying a place's role and function.

Eldar Heide offers us an extended analysis of islands as otherworldly places in the longest contribution in the book. Using Old
Norse sources as well as later folklore from Irish, Norwegian and Sami peoples, he makes an interesting claim about the
watery interface between the world and the Otherworld existing in two directions: horizontally across the water and vertically
beneath the water. Islands, being on the other side of water, can thus take on supernatural characteristics if they have caves
that extend under the water, are accessible by foot through the water (for at least some period of time), are always
submerged, or are particularly remote. As he notes in the conclusion, islands are not necessarily liminal—they must also be
"different" from other islands to be a holy place. When they do fall into the holy category, the Otherworld is close at hand.

Bernt Øyvind Thorvaldsen takes a close look at one stanza from The House Lay in which the god Heimdallr and the trickster
Loki battle over a "sea-kidney" (hafnyra) in a rather problematic essay. Thorvaldsen lays out some thoughtful research about
the role of kinship in the conflict between Heimdallr and Loki, but his contention that the hafnyra refers to an island is
contentious. He mentions scholarship identifying the hafnyra as a necklace (without any citations), then dismisses it off-
handedly because there are some similar expressions referring to rocks, cliffs, and islands, based on the work of Kurt Schier.
He does not refute the connection first made by Birger Pering that hafnyra should be read as a mysterious stone/seed
believed in Scandinavia to have magic powers to lessen pain during childbirth (known under various names including
vettenyrer). In my opinion, Thorvaldsen's exposition about the role of kinship in the battle fits better with the interpretation of
the hafnyra as birthing amulets--Heimdallr who had the most extraordinary birth by nine mothers and serves as guardian of
the gods battles the trickster fathered by a giant for control over the magic to control the pain of childbirth.

Gerhard Jaritz gives a very short overview of the qualities of islands in Middle High German literature. He identifies four
extraordinary characterizations given to islands in these sources: distant and isolated; wild and dangerous; marvelous; or rich
and beautiful. Jaritz quotes lengthy passages of Middle High German poems in the footnotes, which can be quite useful for
those unfamiliar or without access to such sources, but provides almost no analysis of these sources—the length of his text is
probably a total of four pages. Thus this essay can be read only as a call for more scholarship on these sources.

The third group of papers exposes the interplay of real experience and imagined islands. In this category, Felicitas Schmieder
offers a compelling and well-illustrated article on paradise islands in cartographic representations. Medieval thinkers and
cartographers often mixed together the locus deliciarum and insulae fortunate traditions to identify islands that were the home
of Paradise. Schmieder examines the case of the Canary Islands and the Islands of Saint Brenden, showing that "the finding
and clear identification of traditionally 'known' geographical items did not, in the later Middle Ages, lead to abandoning different
readings" (12). She closes her piece by cautioning scholars that the spiritual, economic, military, and historical motivations for
the search for paradisiacal islands cannot be neatly separated into distinct categories.

Else Mundal's article discusses both the Old Norse and Irish traditions about the mysterious island Hvitrannamnaland located
somewhere west of Ireland. In these tales, Hvitrannamnaland, also known as Great Ireland, was a place inhabited by real
people, although it might also be a place of no return. Mundal concludes that the stories about Hvitrannamnaland were
traditional Irish tales modified by real Viking encounters with hostile Native Americans.

Margaret Elphingstone reflects upon the concept of the Unknown Island, proposing that it is both beyond the boundaries of
gеographical knowledge and yet real. It is sometimes an island previously unknown to the readers of the text, such as
Pytheas' descriptions of Britain in the Hellenistic period; in other cases, such as the islands Brendan encounters, the Unknown
Island is magic and wonderful. Rather than being a research paper, this contribution is more of a thought piece about the
concept of Unknown Island as a driver of discovery and its persistent aloofness.

I believe the three themes I've described above can be useful for thinking about how these papers fit together. The odd man
out in this is Torben Kjersgaard Nielsen's piece on medieval asceticism. His article argues that the bodily exercise of
asceticism marginalized the body and the religious practitioner (who Nielsen calls an "athlete") while at the same time honoring
the body and the athlete as an instrument of salvation. While this article may offer some interesting interpretations of the
meaning of medieval asceticism, I do not see how it fits within the scope of this book on islands. The editors tried to classify it
under the theme, "the human body as an island of religious achievement" (2), but this is a big stretch--the article itself never
uses the term island, although it does talk about isolation of the body and religious ascetics.

Overall, these papers leave the reader wanting more. About half of them are too short to fully explore their topics since they
are relatively unmodified conference presentations. There are, however, interesting ideas and food for thought presented in
many of the essays. Readers unfamiliar with Norse sources in particular get a nice taste of these materials. The authors
generally included both original source material and English translations, although the placement of one or the other in the
footnotes versus the text was left up to each author and some even changed in different sections of their text. In addition to
making readers aware of Nordic sources, much of the scholarship referenced in the footnotes is in Nordic languages, and it is
always welcome to have some discussion in English of this substantial body of work.