



Joonas Ahola & Frog with Clive Tolley (eds), *Fibula, Fabula, Fact: The Viking Age in Finland* (Studia Fennica Historica 18), Finnish Literature Society: Helsinki 2014. 519 pp.

This book made me curious for several reasons. First, it has a wonderful title, with an alliteration catching the study of both material and textual sources. Second, as new finds should question our definition of the Viking Age, I was looking forward to read about the Viking Age from a Finnish perspective. Third, as a close neighbour, Finland is an interesting area in relation to Scandinavia. An additional reason was added by reading the introduction: not only is the current modern Finland in focus, but also the surrounding regions. For example, areas within the former Soviet Union have for long been underexposed in Viking-Age research.

The publication is the result of a project negotiating definitions of the Viking Age as a period in the area of modern Finland, rather than investigating detailed case studies. The project seeks to ‘develop dynamic holistic models through the triangulation of as many relevant fields and perspectives as possible’. (10–11) The contributions are aiming for a presentation of sources, methods and perspectives from a number of fields, which should be accessible to specialists outside the respective fields, and outside Finland. In addition to an introduction and a concluding chapter, nineteen articles deal with different perspectives on the Viking Age in Finland. These cover a wide range of fields, like history, archaeology, palaeobotany, genetics, studies of numismatics, languages, folklore, epics and toponyms. For those who are not familiar with the methods and potential of information in various sources to Viking-Age history, this book provides a rich, up-to-date overview.

The text is organised in three main sections: ‘Time’, ‘Space’ and ‘People’. Section one negotiates the definition of the period, section two

discusses the geographic area in general and 'Finland' in particular, while section three deals with problems related to the ethnicity and identities of peoples residing in the area. There are many links between the themes in each section as the topics are closely inter-connected. No reader could be expert in all the fields represented, and only a selection of articles will be commented upon in this review. However, the editors have done a wonderful job making the articles accessible to people outside the fields by starting each of the three sections with short abstracts of each article, clarifying the main topic and the relevance of the contribution to the overall discussion of the section.

In the introduction, Joonas Ahola and Frog line up questions like: were there Vikings in Finland? How do we understand 'Vikings'? What do we mean by 'Finland'? They also provide a general overview to the topic of the Viking Age in Finland. It is observed that '[l]anguage is one of the most central markers of social identities' (65), but Ahola and Frog describe how complicated the language history situation is in the relevant area. The source situation is also difficult, particularly for the Viking Age, as there are no written documents from this period or the following centuries from Finland. One example is the Åland Islands, regarded as an important contact zone between Scandinavia and Finland, but even the language spoken there in the Viking Age is uncertain. However complicated, the text provides a valuable overview of the history of various languages in the area.

In section one, Sirpa Aalto's article on Viking-Age Finland demonstrates how the focus on the Viking Age and use of the term in Finland may be related to politics and identity, like nationalistic movements. The Swedish-speaking minority would for instance see the 'Vikings' as their ancestors. Discussing language in Viking-Age Finland, Clive Tolley reminds us that Finnish, Swedish and Sámi languages are official languages today, and a century ago, we would have to add Russian. Correlating relative chronology in linguistic etymology to a short period such as 800–1050 is difficult. Tolley's discussion regarding correlating language areas with archaeological material is followed up by the contribution of Ville Laakso from an archaeological perspective, describing Finland's different regions in terms of their characteristic features: central areas are dominated by cemeteries with cremations covered by cairns or under the level ground. The exception is Satakunta, where inhumations occurred already in this period, and Åland, where mounds dominated the picture, similarly to Sweden. Outside these areas, only single burials and stray finds have been discovered, even if palaeoecological studies have demonstrated that cultivation was going on in these areas. From the study of

dendrochronology, Samuli Helama concludes that the climate was growing warmer and dryer throughout the Viking Age, which made it easier to travel by sea, allowing trade and other communication, in addition to improving conditions for cultivation. Tuukka Talvio's studies of coins and hoards suggest that Satakunta was based on a barter economy rather than a silver economy. Petri Kallio discusses Proto-Finnic languages through processes of diversification and dispersal and argues that Finnic languages were most likely not spoken in the majority of the territories where Finnish and Karelian are found today.

In section two, Mervi Koskela Vasaru discusses the name 'Bjarmaland', particularly known from mytho-heroic sagas, but of uncertain geographic location. Norwegian expeditions to Bjarmaland are dated to ca. 875 (earliest) and 1222 (latest). After surveying even archaeological sources, it is cautiously suggested that Bjarmaland was associated with trade of furs between Norwegians and a group settled on the White Sea. Jari-Matti Kuusela defines geographic activity zones, and observes an important shift from activity concentrated on the coast to the inland zone between 600–800. This activity increased over time during Late Iron Age, and included actions of violence and trade. Further on, evidence shows that cultivation of rye and slash-and-burn agriculture started at Lake Ladoga around 600 AD, and spread from there. In Kuusela's view, 'archaeology should not label data with ethnic terms', (221) and artefacts are poor proof of immigration or ethnicity (232), a view that may be rather unexpected by many scholars today. This was the view in post-World War II archaeology in many countries. It has been demonstrated how minorities suffered from this view,<sup>1</sup> and few archaeologists today would express it in such clear-cut terms.

Teija Alenius analyses botanical evidence, which shows among other things that hop and hemp increased from the Viking Age, probably associated with brewing beer. Denis Kuzmin suggests that Sámis in the Viking Age were settled in most of the area currently called Karelia and in neighbouring areas. An interesting discussion by Lassi Heininen, Ahola and Frog regarding the term 'geopolitics' ends the section, arguing that 'the Vikings did nothing more nor less than redefine Europe' (307). There are no signs of Scandinavian colonies in Finland, and little evidence of Finns in Scandinavia, although the connection between Finnic cultures and Scandinavians seems to have been close. It appears very reasonable to highlight Lake Ladoga as a contact zone between diverse cultures. When

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<sup>1</sup> Audhild Schanche & Bjørnar Olsen, 'Var de alle Nordmenn? En etnopolitisk kritikk av norsk arkeologi', in T. Hultgren, R. Jørgensen, B. Olsen & I. Storli (eds), *Kontaktstensil 22/23*, Tromsøprodukt Tromsø 1983.

comparing the political situation in Finland and the Baltic with Viking-Age Scandinavia, I however find it a fair comment that the level of the social organisation in the Viking Age of Scandinavia seems to be over-rated in their argumentation.

Section three starts with a chapter on Finland's association with the 'Viking World': Sami Raninen and Anna Wessman find Åland particularly important for east-west contacts in Viking Age. Åland is the only place they may consider as associated with 'Vikings', based on analysing archaeological material. A 'Scandinavization' is observed in burial customs, but there is also clear evidence for contacts with mainland Finland and Baltic areas. Like the other authors of the volume, they find the Finnish mainland consisting of two zones: sedentary farmer communities, combined with hunting and fishing, mainly Finnish-speaking, and the 'wilderness' – where hunters and fishers lived, mainly Sámi speaking. They highlight the importance of trade, particularly in furs, exchanged at marketplaces like the one excavated on the island of Hitis. A new type of boat and sledge was developed, promoting communication along the waterways. Increased activity in trade and communication may in some ways be associated with activities associated with 'Vikings' elsewhere.

In my opinion, the editors have reached their main aims successfully in this book. Throughout the book, it is clearly demonstrated that the term 'Finland' is both fixed and negotiable, and so is the period term 'Viking Age', discussed from the perspectives of many fields. New results on Finland in the Viking Age are very welcome too. It seems sensible when the editors, as part of their conclusions, find it reasonable to apply the term 'Viking Age' also to Finland, but find the name of the following period, 'Crusade Period', misleading.

Having said this, however, I could add a few critical notes. First of all, the book would have benefitted from a good map that would provide an overview of the most important regions and locations in the volume. Not all of us are familiar with the mentioned provinces in and around modern Finland. And, although negotiating the term 'the Viking Age' is one of the project's central objectives, the perspective could have been more obvious in several of the contributions. The discussion cannot avoid the question of relations to Scandinavia and how the Vikings are generally conceived, and several contributions discuss such aspects. But even if the Viking raids are only part of the definition, they are generally regarded as characteristic, and would be regarded very differently from a Scandinavian perspective (as only part of life in a certain period), and from the perspective of people who were raided. Both perspectives deserve the term 'Viking Age', but it is not

always obvious which is the most relevant to Finland. Even if Finland is characterised by trade and mobility, this is not very different from the situation in Europe in the periods before and after the Viking Age.<sup>2</sup>

One could also expect comments on finds like the Merovingian ship finds in Salme, Estonia, for instance, questioning the definition of the period, which has been very dominated by the countries west of Finland regarding when and in which direction Viking expeditions started.<sup>3</sup> And after being enlightened about various language groups in Finland, I am perhaps even more confused than before whether the groups mentioned in Norse medieval sources and later toponyms as 'Finns' and that have been interpreted by Norwegian historians as Sámi,<sup>4</sup> were in fact Finnic or Sámi-speaking people. With regard to these last comments, however, it must be said that they concern issues that are beyond the scope of the book.

From an ignorant archaeologist's perspective and given that there are no documentary sources earlier than the thirteenth century, I find it sometimes hard to trust the chronology and dispersal of languages and epics from the Nordic Bronze Age (see, for instance 164) to the Middle Ages. Finally, on a more general note I found it somehow frustrating that detailed presentations of sources and methods are offered throughout the book only to be followed by a note that 'this field has great potential', 'provides a valuable source' or 'needs further studies', and much less was offered in terms of results. Nevertheless, these comments should not be held against this book. They should rather raise the expectations for more results to be presented in forthcoming volumes from this, still ongoing, project. I find the book fascinating and enlightening on Finland and its surroundings in the Viking Age, and I congratulate the editors and authors for their contribution to the study of the Viking Age in Northern Europe.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe. Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 950–1350*, Allen Lane: London 1993, 111.

<sup>3</sup> Raili Allmäe, Liina Maldre & Teresa Tomek, 'The Salme I Ship Burial: An Osteological View of a Unique Burial in Northern Europe', *Interdisciplinaria Archaeologica* 11:2 (2011), 109–24; Marge Kõnsa, Raili Allmäe & Liina Maldre, 'Rescue Excavations of a Vendel Era Boat-Grave in Salme, Saaremaa,' *Archaeological Fieldwork in Estonia* 2008, 53–64.

<sup>4</sup> Bjørn Bandlien, 'Trading with Muslims and the Sámi in Medieval Norway', in Cordelia Heß & Jonathan Adams (eds), *Fear and Loathing in the North: Jews and Muslims in Medieval Scandinavia and the Baltic Region*, de Gruyter: Berlin 2015.

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