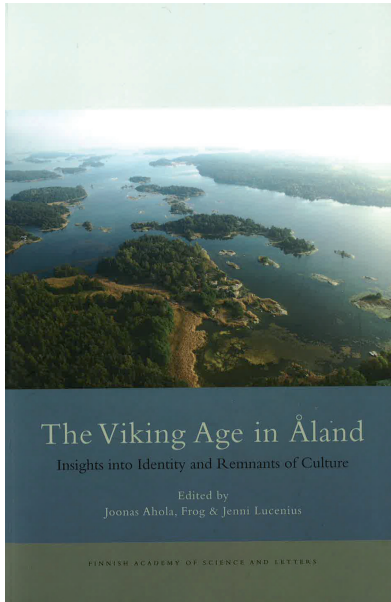


Joonas Ahola, Frog & Jenni Lucenius (eds.): *The Viking Age in Åland: Insights into Identity and Remnants of Culture*. Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae, Humaniora 372. Academia scientiarum Fennica, Helsinki 2014. ISBN 978-951-41-1098-6. 427 pp.



Few would argue against the claim that the (pre) history of the Åland Islands is both elusive and complex. Placed in the crossroads of a travel route, Åland provided a place for encounters connecting the otherwise rather dissimilar regions to the east and west of the Baltic Sea. The source material is relatively scarce but mediates an image of discontinuity where expansions and breaks follow after another in an unevenly distributed passage of events. Perhaps this is why the islands are characterised as alternately being on the route, in the periphery, out of the periphery (out of sight), in the middle or in the border zone.

In more recent times the historical past of Åland has become an instrument in the political positioning of the islands, further fuelled by the League of Nations declaring the islands to be an autonomous part of Finland after the First World War. With its autonomy, affiliation to Finland

and Swedish language, the character of Åland as a border zone became even stronger than before. But as Jenni Lucenius (p. 53) states in her paper: 'our past is not a product of the present, but our interpretations are'. It is time to approach the issue of the Viking Age in Åland from a culture-historical and regional perspective.

The anthology *Viking Age in Åland: Insights into Identity and Remnants of Culture* is an ambitious attempt to do just that. The result is highly satisfying but at the same time leaves the reader in want of more. Much like its 'sister' anthology *Fibula, Fabula, Fact* (Ahola et al. 2014; for a review see Hedenstierna-Jonson, this volume) the present volume presents a multitude of papers from various disciplines providing the reader with a wealth of different perspectives. By its multidisciplinary approach and interdisciplinary discussion the anthology presents new ways to process and interpret the particular traits that are specific and unique to the Åland Islands. The use of a cross-reference system between the different entries in the volume increases the experience of an ongoing discussion and establishes the anthology as part of a work in progress. The anthology consists of 12 papers divided into three sections, each with its own introduction. Setting the scene and introducing the geographical area and time period, Jan-Erik Tomtlund, in his opening paper 'the Viking Age in Åland', gives an overview and assists the reader to orientate in the following papers.

Although divided into different sections – titled 'Interpreting Evidence of the Past', 'Between Sources and Their Lack', 'Context, Contacts and Perceptions' – the contributions adhere to three overall themes: 1) that Åland's history is a history of discontinuity and change, 2) that the particular prerequisites for economy and subsistence that come from being an archipelago in northern Europe affects life and activities on the islands and 3) that people and their identities provide the key to further understanding of the islands.

## THE CHARACTERISTIC OF DISCONTINUITY

One of the most characteristic features of Åland's history and prehistory is discontinuity. Periods

of expansion end in sudden breaks where the archaeological record indicates stagnation. However, paleobotanical analyses show what other disciplines cannot – that even though there are breaks in the settlement patterns and in the distribution of material culture and burial practice there is a constant use of land (Teija Alenius, Per Olof Sjöstrand).

In his paper Sjöstrand (p. 92) presents Åland as a zone of repeated wars and periods of abandonment leaving the archaeological and historical record filled with breaks and restarts. During the Viking Age the region in closest contact with Åland, at least as reflected through the archaeological record, was the adjacent area on the Swedish mainland (Uppland) and the people living there – the ‘svear’. The close link ended in a sudden break in the mid-11th century, coinciding in time with a shift in religious and societal structure in Uppland. This could be interpreted as a break in the continuity of ‘svear’ in the Åland Islands but does not necessarily mean a break in continuity in the activities of the islanders themselves. The continuation in production reflected through e.g. pollen diagrams (Sjöstrand, p. 85) indicates that the island population carries on much as before. The lack of recognised evidence could instead imply that it is not the actual islanders that we can see and study in the archaeological material, for as stated by Joonas Ahola et al. (p. 244) ‘the indigenous population should not be assumed to simply disappear’. Åland is situated along the trade routes, not only east-west, but also north-south as pointed out by Lassi Heininen et al. Yet it is not mentioned in the Old Norse sources (Sirpa Aalto, p. 220). It is impossible to say if this lack of mention is an expression of ignorance of the islands and the people living there or of their relative unimportance. It is even possible that the islanders were not identified as a separate group of people but rather as an extension of the mainland socio-political context of the time. This would imply that the cultural identity of the islanders, in the eyes of the beholder, was shifting over time.

The role of the Viking Age town of Birka (in central Uppland) is in several of the papers characterised as instrumental in the Viking Age development of Åland (e.g. Sjöstrand, Aalto). There is an undeniable link between parts of Åland, the activities of Birka and the eastern trade route. However, the trade network and the expansion of

the so-called eastern contacts that can be seen in Birka and its eastern counterparts is a complex topic, and the somewhat simplified and generalised references made only risk muddling the picture even further. That there may have been a more active involvement by Ålanders in the activities of the trade network can be deduced from the presence of clay paws, a type of finds particular to the islands and areas of contact in the east (such as Timerevo along the Volga River). In order to fully understand the magnitude and character of this participation, more research is needed.

## IDENTITIES IN AN ANTHROPOCENTRIC WORLD

The concept of identities runs through the anthology underlining the fact that the Iron Age was all about the people, a period characterised by anthropocentricity. How people grouped themselves together, how they defined themselves as opposed to others and what and who they related to are central issues. This is perhaps even more so at the Åland Islands, as they are situated in between two relatively well-defined regions with their own characteristic traits and with interaction on both sides, even if it is not yet fully mapped or understood. It is also important to include the route connecting the north and the south, a significant but largely overlooked direction of contacts and movement during the Viking Age. Though mentioned in a couple of contributions (Heininen et al.) it would have benefited the anthology as a whole to introduce the theme of north-south contacts into the overall discussion.

The particular characteristics and prerequisites of Viking Age society in Åland another theme that, while present in the volume, could have been further elaborated on. Rudolf Gustavsson et al. recognise the ambiguity of the archaeological record by describing the regional cultural characteristics of Åland as identities in transition. In previous discussions, Åland Viking Age identities have usually been based on identities and cultural expressions on either side of the islands and ‘the period has always had a tendency to be defined in relation to an outer influence’ (Lucenius, p. 48).

For a study on the complex issue of (pre)historic identities, the source material available is fragmented and ambiguous at best. In this case

it includes archaeological evidence of social and religious practices, such as burial traditions, settlement patterns (Gustavsson et al.) and particular elements of material culture (Frog). During the Viking Age the visible burial practice was closely linked to that of Uppland and it is reasonable to assume that the burial practice and location of cemeteries reflect, if not people migrating, at least strong influences emanating from this area. But the question is: how representative are these burials and the people that built them of the island population of Åland? Language is another parameter in most discussions on identities. Ahola et al. (p. 227) highlight the fact that the notion of languages as emblematic of cultural identity is a modern perception, with little bearing on prehistoric identities. Mikko Heikkilä (p. 317) concludes that the Viking Age linguistic landscape of the Åland Islands most likely was rather different than that of succeeding periods. Highly relevant for the particular context of Åland is the possible presence of multilingualism and its effect on both activities and identities. A more complicated but nonetheless valuable source of knowledge of identities is that of oral traditions. Although they reflect historical environments on a secondary basis, as pointed out by Ahola (p. 63), the use of – in this case – Kalevalaic epic as a source for historical studies contributes with new perspectives and at times may reflect mentalities of ‘bygone eras’.

## ECONOMY AND SUBSISTENCE

Economy and subsistence are at the core of the discussion of activity and interaction of any island community. They both have great impact on the settlement pattern as well as on social practices and material culture. The Åland Islands have very particular prerequisites when it comes to arable lands as shore displacement provides a relatively fast changing landscape (see Ahola et al., p. 230).

As subsistence economy could not rely on agriculture alone there were multiple strategies, a typical feature of populations in the Baltic archipelagos. Animal husbandry constituted an important part but seal, sea fowl and fish must have been equally important. Another essential aspect brought about by the location at sea and along the trade routes is put forth by Ahola et al. as they present Åland as a significant site for

shoreline-based navigation (see also Heininen et al., Johan Schalin & Frog). The local knowledge of how to navigate the difficult waters must have been an asset and a means of livelihood.

The need for a multidisciplinary approach becomes evident when dealing with questions of subsistence and economy. By combining archaeology and osteology, Gustavsson et al. highlight similarities between the Baltic islands, where sealing has been a relatively important part of subsistence as opposed to the economies of the mainland. Based on pollen evidence, Alenius presents the Viking Age as a period of settlement expansion where cultivated fields and grazed areas increased. The paleobotanical analyses also show a long-term continuation in agricultural production that extends well into the Middle Ages, even though other sources of evidence for this continuity are missing.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The anthology *The Viking Age in Åland* is a result of a scientific seminar-workshop held in Mariehamn in 2012, initiated by the collaborative interdisciplinary research project *Viikinkiaika Suomessa – The Viking Age in Finland (VAF)* and co-organised and hosted by the Åland Board of Antiquities. As the VAF project is published contemporaneously with the anthology *Fibula, Fabula, Fact: the Viking Age in Finland* (Ahola et al. 2014), it seems relevant to compare the two volumes. Like *Fibula, Fabula, Fact*, the *Viking Age in Åland* is a generous read, displaying a diversity of approaches, perspectives and disciplines. The interdisciplinary approach is represented not only by the respective papers, but is also present within several of the contributions, taking the scientific discussion to a higher level and providing the reader with a more mature processing of facts, topics and perspectives.

One of the greatest assets of the volume is that it transfers Åland from its previous position in the periphery to a region in its own right. Making Åland the focal point prevents us from defining the islands by their relation to other regions and socio-political structures and enables us to consider the specific features that made up an ‘Ålandic’ way of life and society. What I find lacking is a broader discussion on the similarities and differences between Åland and the other large islands of the Baltic Sea, their particular

prerequisites and roles in the network of contacts linking both shores of the Baltic and beyond. Even if there are comparisons made in some of the papers (e.g. Gustavsson et al.), they constitute exceptions that highlight the need for a 'Baltic island perspective' in general. It is also important to distinguish local variation within the Åland Islands. Iconic sites like Saltvik and Sund behave differently from other Åland sites like Jomala, Finnström, and Eckerö, etc. We must recognise that the islands and their people, albeit limited in geographical space and population numbers, did not necessarily constitute a homogenous group or culture.

Many of the contributions relate their particular source material or discipline to concepts of identity, something that I find highly relevant. However, as the particular prerequisites for shaping identities in an island context constitutes a main perspective in the anthology, applying the theoretical framework of island archaeology might well have been beneficial for the general discussion. Researchers like Evans (1973), Gosden and Pavlides (1994), Rainbird (1999), Broodbank (2000) and Fitzpatrick (2004) have introduced and discussed the concept of island archaeology based on the premise that island cultures possess distinctive, often unique characteristics. The great changes in the role of the Åland Islands that can be seen from an archaeological perspective may only be a result of the research conducted and the questions asked. Perhaps we are yet to find the structures and materials of the Ålanders' themselves. There is a preconception of what defines the Viking Age that keeps us from searching for the less obvious.

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Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson  
Researcher, Department of Archaeology and Classical Studies, Stockholm University  
charlotte.hedenstierna.jonson@arklab.su.se