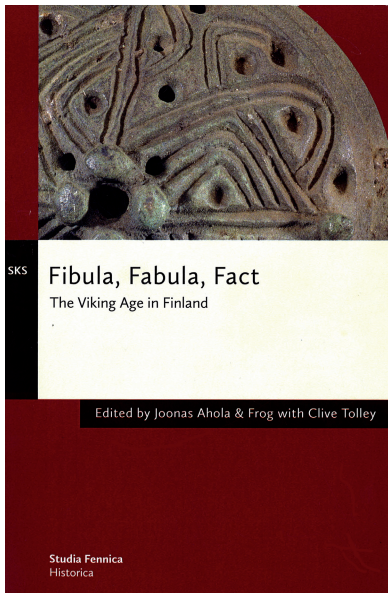


Joonas Ahola & Frog with Clive Tolley (eds.): *Fibula, Fabula, Fact: The Viking Age in Finland*. Studia Fennica Historica 18. Finnish Literature Society, Helsinki 2014. ISBN 978-952-222-603-7. 519 pp.



Already as a student in Scandinavian archaeology, you become aware of presumed differences between the regions east and west of the Baltic Sea. The differences are seldom tangible, but nevertheless considered great enough to leave Finland out of most textbooks on Iron Age archaeology in Scandinavia.

The Viking Age in particular has been regarded as a Scandinavian phenomenon and the archaeological remains from Finland during this period are seldom contextualised within a North-European framework but treated as ‘other’. This otherness tends to be based on the prevailing question ‘Were there Vikings in Finland?’ But the Viking Age is not simply about the Vikings, or at least not limited to them. Rather it is a period of historical processes that were characterised by societal change, mobility and networks of contacts. It was a transitional period that eventually and very gradually became what we today refer to as Medieval times.

The anthology *Fibula, Fabula, Fact* is a result of the first stage of the research project *Viikinkiaika Suomessa – The Viking Age in Finland (VAF)*. The project ‘seeks to develop dynamic holistic models through the triangulation of as many relevant fields and perspectives as possible’ (pp. 10–11). Supported by the Finnish Cultural Foundation, it is an interdisciplinary project aiming to contextualise the Viking Age ‘within the complexities of defining cultural identities in the past through traces of cultural, linguistic or genetic features’ (p. 8). With contributions also covering numismatics (Tuukka Talvio), climatology (Samuli Helama), archaeobotany (Teija Alenius), onomastics (Matti Leiviskä) and political sciences (Lassi Heininen et al.), the approach is wide indeed.

In both the project and its publication the Viking Age is considered to be more than merely a historical period. Instead the editors define the period as a social phenomenon based on how it affected people’s lives and cultures. This approach gives relevance to the periodisation and geographical limitation set by the book’s subtitle *The Viking Age in Finland*. Several of the authors also highlight the use and misuse of the ‘Viking’ trademark throughout history, often linked to contemporary processes in politics and state formation. Sirpa Aalto’s contribution exhorts discipline awareness, giving an important perspective on how the term has been used within different disciplines over time. ‘The Viking Age was politically and ideologically coloured already in the process of identifying it as a distinct and significant period in history’ (p. 23). Even more so, perhaps, as the term relates to processes and features that mainly took place outside the Finnish area.

STRUCTURE

The anthology contains 19 papers divided into three thematical sections titled ‘Time’, ‘Space’ and ‘People’. Each theme is introduced by the editors, highlighting important reflections and questions posed in the different contributions. A cross-reference system within the volume enhances the reader’s perception of this being an ongoing and vital discussion. The cross-disciplinary approach

requires forethought so that research and results within one discipline can be compared and related to results in other disciplines. It is essential to define relevant terms, what they mean and how they should be used. The project launches the term 'relevant indicator' as a discipline-neutral term that provides a tool for relating diverse data from a plurality of disciplines. A 'relevant indicator' is direct or indirect evidence of cultural processes, cultural practices or human activity. There is also a distinction made between tangible and intangible data and what their respective requirements are to be credible. Whereas tangible evidence reflects outcomes of synchronic processes and practices, intangible evidence has been preserved culturally rather than physically (with the notable exception of genetic data of current populations, cf. Elina Salmela). While the problem with tangible data is the diachronic or historical perspective on synchronically produced data, the intangible data is fully dependant on a continuous history of social use.

CONTENT

In the opening text 'Approaching the Viking Age in Finland', Joonas Ahola and Frog give a broad perspective and a compiled overview of the various important topics and problems that are included in the many contributions. In spite of the multitude of disciplines and wide variety of subjects the editors have accomplished to keep the publication coherent and easy to access. The structure of 'Time', 'Space' and 'People', together with the introductory texts for each section with short presentations of the different approaches helps the reader sort and relate to the great span of disciplines and results.

'Time' constitutes the opening theme of the book. Although acknowledging the Viking Age as a particular period in time and a constituent of the past of Finland, the papers eloquently show the difficulties with periodisation. The square dating brackets (750–1050/1250) pose the same problem in Finland as it does in Scandinavia. The Viking Age should rather be understood as a gradual change, rich in local and regional variation, that included new activities, social structures, networks of contacts and, perhaps above all, a change in scale.

Within the theme of 'Space' mobility is discussed as a primary factor in the construction of space. The correlation between landscape and live-

lihood, where the latter is seen as cultural practice, is put forward. Populations constructed spaces and places in relation to one another in the same way they constructed identities. The concept of reachability is introduced into the discussion (Jukka Korpela), adding new dimensions to space as it includes both physical and mental spaces. A strictly delimited geographical space is therefore not relevant, something that is true not only for Viking Age Finland but also for Scandinavia.

The closing theme of the book is 'People'. Here the various previous topics are condensed and clarified. The percipience of prehistoric societies inevitably returns to the people inhabiting and creating these societies. The Viking Age is no exception. There is a diversity of complex cultural practices that emphasises the plurality of people. The geographical region that is now Finland was even more heterogeneous than the contemporary regions west of the Baltic. The differences incorporate geography, livelihoods and societal structures and are noticeably reflected through e.g. the distribution of languages (Kaisa Häkkinen, Johan Schalin, Petri Kallio, Denis Kuzmin).

A key concern throughout the book is the validity of relating the Viking Age to Finland. Sami Raninen and Anna Wessman propose that the focus should be shifted from ethnic 'Vikingness' to inter-regional developments and the impact of popular 'Viking themes' such as long-distance contacts, trade and warfare on various societies of the period. Mobility and expansion characterised the Viking Age in Finland, as well as in Scandinavia. The differences lay in their directions and orientation. Instead of outwards via the open sea, Finnic populations were oriented north and east, particularly along the inland water routes (Jari-Matti Kuusela). From an archaeological point of view, the Viking Age constitutes a distinct period of the Finnish Iron Age (Ville Laakso). Even so the different regional characteristics and cultures constitute a significant characteristic. Clive Tolley's overview of languages in Viking Age Finland is an important introduction to the complexity of the situation and draws attention to the differences between Finland and Scandinavia.

The differentiation between regions or zones within Finland and how they relate to each other and to the processes typical for what we define as Viking Age is highly interesting and illuminating for how we should consider and interpret the different regions in Scandinavia as well. There is a

dynamic between cultural centres and peripheries, mobility and established patterns of intercultural relations. While Åland Islands and the Satakunta region are in many ways similar or the same as contemporary Scandinavia (Talvio, Raninen & Wessman), other regions had their own way of life, of forming society and relating to other parts of the world (Mervi Koskela Vasaru, Jari-Matti Kuusela, Denis Kuzmin). They had their livelihood but were also suppliers of goods to the trade route. In some cases they acted as intermediaries, linking the east and north with the European networks.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

A comprehensive book covering the Viking Age in Finland has been much in need and it was with great anticipation and some concern that I started reading. Is it even possible to cover an extensive and complex period in time in one publication? Approaching the Viking Age as a social phenomenon and not simply as a historical period is good starting point. History was created by people and a historical period should best be understood from how it affected people's lives and cultures.

In *Fibula, Fabula, Fact* the Viking Age is defined in relation to Scandinavia and beyond. This could be seen as a problem (as highlighted by Talvio and Koskela Vasaru in their respective contributions), but it may also be considered the only possible or even relevant perspective as mobility, networks of contacts and the relation to the surrounding world are perhaps the most significant characteristics of this period. The Viking Age was according to Ahola, Frog and Tolley 'an era of social and historical developments that were impacted by Scandinavian contacts but also paralleled them ... in culturally distinct ways' (p. 489). A significant remark is that even though cultural contacts with Scandinavia characterise the Viking Age in Finland, these contacts had already developed during earlier centuries (e.g. the contribution by Heininen et al.). This is particularly important as the remoteness and otherness of Finland in comparison to Scandinavia otherwise is a common approach in research.

There are passages within the papers where the general picture painted of the Scandinavian Viking Age feels a bit dated, with a somewhat unproblematised version of Viking war bands and

traders, mediating a rather biased and oversimplified image of the Viking as a raiding marauder. The references to research concerning Scandinavia do not always cover the most recent results and discussion. Current issues in Scandinavian Viking research include questions on urbanisation, more advanced forms of trade and contributions to the development of a more stable economic system in northern Europe and the British Isles. Including these productive aspects would have provided a more nuanced and updated image of 'Vikings' as taking an active part in and contributing to the historical developments in Europe during this time period.

The different regions reflected through livelihoods, languages, material culture, social practices, etc., is a recurring feature that the reader has to relate to throughout the book. General maps, reflecting the cross-disciplinary approach, would have been very beneficial. Now the reader is left to a constant browsing through the pages in search of maps in the different papers. As an archaeologist I would have liked to see more images of type artefacts, but also a list of terms etc., perhaps linked to the discussion on relevant indicators. Kuzmin, in his paper on languages in Karelia, provides a list of the relevant words making it easy for the non-linguist reader to follow the argumentation, but also making the text more accessible when going back for useful references.

I very much appreciate this book and will return to it many times. If not the whole book, at least the introduction should really be a part of the required reading list for any student of the Viking Age. The wide approach and high quality of papers have made a previously less known material accessible to a wider audience. The publication fills a long felt need for an overview of what the Viking Age Finland is all about. Though not the main aim, I anticipate that this book will be used as a handbook for the complex and fascinating topic of the Viking Age in Finland.

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