

Polynesians of the Atlantic? Precedents, potentials, and pitfalls in Oceanic analogies of the Vikings

Neil Price and John Ljungkvist

Department of Archaeology & Ancient History, University of Uppsala, Uppsala, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Comparisons between Viking-Age Scandinavia and the cultures of Oceania have long antecedents, stretching back at least to the late nineteenth century, with a significant milestone in the first-ever synthesis of Polynesian archaeology – Peter Buck's *Vikings of the Sunrise* published in 1938. This brief contribution offers some critical commentary on a recent example, Mads Ravn's paper in the 2018 volume of this journal, setting it in disciplinary context and also against Hawaiian work on this topic that has been undertaken by the authors since 2013. We consider the very real potential in this kind of comparative research, with some discussion of possible ways forward, and a note on pitfalls that must be avoided. Long sequences of continuous historical data, with a focus on internal social processes in addition to external influences, are at the centre of our approach. Above all, we stress the need for an emphasis on emic perspectives, not only in relation to native Hawaiians and other Pasifika, but also – as far as possible – in the study of the Scandinavian Iron Age.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 July 2018
Accepted 6 July 2018

KEYWORDS

Vikings; Polynesian cultures;
comparative archaeologies;
analogy in archaeology

Introduction

We are pleased to see Mads Ravn's 2018 paper in this journal, contributing to an important and developing new field in Viking studies – that of comparative archaeology in general, and Oceanic analogy in particular. This is of special interest to us because of our own work in precisely this area, not least on Hawai'i, which has been ongoing since 2013; we thank the editors for the invitation to comment after publication.¹

Like Ravn, we have been working with issues of state formation and complexity, in the same context of the prehistoric political economy as he takes up, but also addressing the theoretical paradigms constructed around the maritime cultural landscape and the notion of mariculture; issues of voyaging and migration; the entangled nature of cultural encounter; and the notion of prehistoric world systems. For the Scandinavian late Iron Age, we are particularly interested in the intersecting cognitive landscapes of power and ritual, not least in the context of cultural contact and religious change – a topic that has also begun to interest historians of religion (e.g. Schjødt 2017). We have

been exploring these in comparative perspective through two reconnaissance surveys on the main island of Hawai'i in 2013 and 2017, with work planned for other regions of Oceania. Our project is introduced more fully elsewhere (Price 2018a), and the purpose of this short contribution is not to take up these ideas in depth. Instead, we wish to briefly discuss three key dimensions of the search for Viking analogies among Hawaiian societies (and those of Polynesia more widely), which we feel would bring useful context to Ravn's analysis. The first of them is precedent.

Precedents: *Vikings of the Pacific*

These comparisons have long histories. Even before more formal academic crossovers, there were interesting connections between the archaeologies of Viking-Age Scandinavia and Oceania. From 1883 to 1885, the Swedish frigate *Vanadis* circumnavigated the world on a voyage of scientific exploration, partially under royal patronage. On board as the official expedition ethnographer was Hjalmar Stolpe (1841–1905), whose work during the mission essentially laid the foundations of

professional ethnography in Sweden, with a special emphasis on Oceania. Stolpe's subsequent publications strongly focussed on the arts of the Pacific (e.g. 1892), and he is a well-known figure in the Nordic countries as the founder of the National Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm. However, Stolpe had a prior, and partially parallel, career as a pioneering archaeologist, culminating in his major excavations throughout the 1870s and up to 1882 at the Viking-Age town of Birka in Lake Mälaren (he would also return to excavating the late Iron Age in the 1890s). Two biographies of Stolpe have been written, the first being a collective and highly critical account of the scientists on the *Vanadis* voyage, contextualising their behaviour against contemporary attitudes to racial anthropology (Ljungström 2004, and see our third section below); while following his ethnographic studies in close detail, this otherwise impressive work virtually ignores Stolpe's archaeological experience. A later, full biography (Erikson 2015) gives a more complete picture but strikes an almost hagiographically uncritical tone. Although his archaeological and ethnographic professions are often perceived in isolation, it should be noted that when Stolpe encountered the rich material culture of Oceania on island after island, he was only a year or two out from his Birka excavations and may fairly be described as then being one of the leading Viking specialists in the world. The connections thereby generated are absolutely visible in his subsequent work, and in many ways form the beginning of this kind of comparative study of 'distant Vikings'.

More familiar is of course Peter Buck's *Vikings of the Sunrise* (1938), reissued in 1959 as *Vikings of the Pacific*. Although employed more as metaphor than detailed comparison, it is telling that this title was selected for the first-ever synthesis of Polynesian archaeology, in addition written by a Māori (Buck was the English name of Te Rangi Hiroa) and a Director of the influential Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum in Hawaii. Although these kinds of comparisons have continued to surface long after (e.g. Kāne 1997, p. 9, another indigenous voice), it may well be more apposite to follow historian Michael King:

"Peter Buck, the great Maori anthropologist, called his forebears 'Vikings of the Sunrise'. He would have done

them, and Northern Europeans, greater honour had he referred to the Vikings as Polynesians" (King 2003, p. 31).

These connections and contradictions are important and resonate throughout a comparativist archaeological endeavour. The title of our commentary is deliberate.

Potentials: internal complexities

In the second of our three points, and the one on which we wish to dwell in critical perspective, it is abundantly clear that the comparative approach has great potential. In his paper, Ravn properly charts the evolution of his own, influential ideas on analogy in Pacific and Scandinavian archaeology (Ravn 1993, 2011). He also brings out the critique raised by Matthew Spriggs, a world-leading Pacific comparativist who early on (2008a) warned that European prehistorians' abundant take-up of Oceanic ethnographies ironically tended to ignore the somewhat contradictory narratives resulting from the actual archaeology of these same regions. Spriggs showed how the material record implied that much of the ethnography was itself a colonial artefact both in its data and conclusions, but – in a work omitted by Ravn – he also explicitly questioned the still-prevalent notion of the 'island as laboratory' (Spriggs 2008b).

In a more recent publication (Spriggs 2016a), a note of renewed optimism is found, but again it is puzzling that Ravn's essay does not take up what we see as a fundamental paper (Spriggs 2016b) in a fundamental book (Melheim *et al.* 2016), since it is here that a Pacific specialist addresses Viking archaeology in a truly comparativist way for the first time. Several prehistorians' papers in that volume use a Bronze Age frame of reference for these analogies, but it is Spriggs' work that brings in Oceania. The theoretical terrain separating these two discussions can also be profitably mapped out through more general comparative works in maritime contexts (e.g. Bentley *et al.* 2007, Anderson *et al.* 2010, the latter including both Polynesian and Viking examples, though unconnected).

A vital element in all this – and in Spriggs' theoretical agenda, which we largely share – must be a focus on *continuous* historical sequences as media of comparison, as opposed to spot analogies with

interesting details. Hawaii is a case in point, in that the complex socio-political story of the islands is very much a developing one. Ravn claims to address this by focussing on the *longue durée* and the ‘bottle-necks’ that he (and others) see within it. However, in practice, this nonetheless still appears to be represented either by selective examples chronologically fixed in place or else by a timeless continuum that is not followed in detail. Spriggs’ objections would therefore seem to stand.

Although Ravn sensibly cites the work of Pat Kirch, the doyen of Hawaiian archaeologists, this is restricted to a single paper and his synthesis from 2000 (actually now in a second edition from 2017). This is an important book, and in a sense also a successor to Buck’s 1938 volume, but to focus on this alone overlooks precisely the Hawaiian time depth with variation between and within islands that makes such comparisons so productive (e.g. local and archipelagic case studies in Kirch and Sahlins 1992, Kirch 2012, 2014, Bayman and Dye 2013, theoretical treatments in Kirch and Rallu 2007, Kirch 2010).

This leads to another critical aspect of Oceanic analogies, namely the potential for picking up the varying internal dynamics of non-linear socio-political processes. Unlike the existing comparisons with Neolithic and Bronze Age Europe, a focus on the Viking Age brings with it a wealth of external textual sources – it is a proto-historical period, similar in fact to the situation in contact-period Polynesia. What these sources also represent, of course, is a comparable range of external pressures and influences in the form of the European Empires of the early Middle Ages and the eighteenth century. Ravn notes this towards the end of his piece, contrasting the scholars who focus on internal and external forces for change, and using this balance as the central core of his arguments that analogies can provide a means to examine different ‘roads to complexity’. However, in all his preceding discussion, he clearly describes the gradual process of state formation in Scandinavia precisely as a result of outside pressures, which he contrasts with the ‘isolation’ of Hawaii that he sees as lacking the centre–periphery relations of Europe. We must be careful not to miss the subtleties of socio-politics here, in both regions. For example, there was considerable variation and competition among the Hawaiian

islands, and even parallel state structures on Hawai’i itself before the rise of Kamehameha. There was fierce inter-island rivalry, which saw competitors driven to the outer regions of the archipelago and perhaps even beyond; Ravn alludes to this, but does not pick up its contradictory implications for the analogies he proposes. Similarly, he treats his focal region of Southern Scandinavia as a single entity, yet it appears to have also contained potential cores and peripheries, such as a bipartite Skåne, Halland, Blekinge, Sjælland, Fyn and a possibly divided Jylland, to name but a few.

Within this southern region, Ravn raises many issues of social structure and land ownership, in particular seemingly rejecting the idea of formalised aristocratic or royal dominance over a notional peasantry. He speaks of leaders rather than landlords, of tribute instead of tax. We would question this terminology, not least in relation to the implications of sites such as Lejre and Tissø, and the realities of ‘tribute’ from the viewpoint of those providing it. We would also point to the place-name work on administrative landscapes arranged by secular office, military rank, and sacral duty (e.g. Brink 1997, 2014) as evidence of a highly regulated centralising power relatively early on.

Particularly in his tabulated lists, Ravn’s assumptions become sharper when compared with the situation in Hawaii. Activities and customs are contrasted directly (the presence/absence of ‘monumental’ burial mounds, hoarding of prestige goods, etc.) rather than in behavioural terms as signals of special status and difference (as in the private fish ponds, the sponsored *heiau*, and other projects requiring a mobilised workforce). There are also some questionably categorical assertions for the Scandinavian late Iron Age, such as the presence of ‘free farmers’, the idea that there was no private land ownership, and so on. Nuance is critical here, using solid data to avoid monolithic comparisons of simplistic, transferable templates. We must seek variation *inside* models of, for example, chieftaincies. Our comparisons must not search only for similarities, but also differences: what is the same, what is not, what is missing, is it needed, and why? Above all, how do the comparative studies illuminate the workings of these socio-political structures? Many of the models currently being activated, perhaps especially that of the political economy, present

to our eyes generally functionalist interpretations of human culture. This processual, somewhat deterministic emphasis could be modified – not least in the context of the prominent role clearly played by traditional, non-systemic ritual discourse both in Oceania and in the Viking-Age North.

In both regions of comparison, there is a real and long-overlooked legitimacy in the perspectives of the Pasifika and the Iron Age Scandinavians, and it is important to see how this at times conflicts with the imposed viewpoints of respectively the European colonists and the early medieval Christian cultures. We must be careful not to ‘primitivise’ the Vikings by overly emphasising the external influences at the expense of internal social developments, effectively thereby importing the same biases as afflicted Pacific anthropology for so long.

Pitfalls: against the etic

This brings us to our third point, in that for all the optimistic promise of a comparativist approach, we must also consider possible pitfalls. Perhaps the key concern in following this kind of theoretical path is a failure to contextualise, especially in historical perspective. In the case of both Polynesian anthropology and Viking studies, it is vital to acknowledge the very real traditions of romanticising stereotype (and worse) with which these fields have been infected, and which even now risk seeping into comparative models from one side or another.

For Oceania, the outsider perspective began at least with Bougainville and Cook, continued through later European explorers and missionaries, and achieved fully rounded form in the cultural anthropology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (a process that has of course been extensively documented, e.g. Thomas 1997, 2010, Smith 2010). If the Pacific embodied the myth of an untouched but highly sexed Paradise (cf. Salmond 2010), for the Vikings the trope was more one of androcentric maritime violence – a different kind of noble savage – coupled with a similarly exciting non-Christian worldview (again, a widely studied field, e.g. Roesdahl and Sørensen 1996, Wawn 2000). Not least, there are also direct links of transferred cultural bias, as in the interesting but compromised work of Thor Heyerdahl, with his

fantasies of meeting ‘almost Nordic’ Polynesians in the Marquesas (1938, a work published in English first in 1974 with the subtitle *Back to Nature*). It is no coincidence that Buck’s synthesis (1938) came out the same year, also with problematic connections drawn between the Polynesians and Caucasians.

These tensions have played out in the changing multivocality of both Oceanic studies and our views of the Viking Age. Just as Polynesians and other Pacific Islanders are taking a proper lead in perspectives on their own past, so the multi-ethnic nature of the Viking diaspora (augmented by isotopic and genomic work) has extended to the revelation that many ‘Viking’ groups were far from entirely Scandinavian in origin. In so many ways, the definitions of the Viking phenomenon itself are open ended as never before (Price 2015, 2018b). This gradual shift from an etic to an emic view is paralleled in the Pacific, typified in the influential work of the Tongan anthropologist Epeli Hau’ofa (e.g. 2008). We discuss his work more fully elsewhere (Price 2018a), but Hau’ofa’s concept of the ‘sea of islands’, a maritime cultural medium that embodied the essence of the Polynesians, is one that we find entirely applicable to Viking-Age Scandinavia. The agency and contribution of indigenous scholars is at last being acknowledged in Oceania: a truly comparative archaeology of the Viking Age must both engage with this and also search for the ancient Scandinavians’ own understanding of their world. Though unconnected in time and place, both the Vikings and the Polynesians were changed by their contacts with ultimately the same alien religion and external imperial forces – but they also incorporated and manipulated them to their own ends, and remained uniquely themselves.

Note

1. Our work has been presented at a number of conferences in Scandinavia and the Pacific. Ravn has kindly acknowledged (email pers. comm. 2018–05–31) that one of these papers, at the Viking Congress in the autumn of 2017, in part ‘sparked’ his own article submitted 3 months later.

Acknowledgments

Our Hawaiian work and this paper has been generously supported by the Swedish Research Council, within *The*

Viking Phenomenon project (grant 2015-00466). Matthew Spriggs, Helene Martinsson-Wallin, and Paul Wallin have all been of great assistance in the preparation of this piece. For comments and other help along the way, we are happy to thank Sophie Bønding, Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, Victor Melander, Aoife O'Brien, Poul Otto Nielsen, Simon Nygaard, Ben Raffield, Christoph Sand, and Gísli Sigurðsson.

Funding

This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council [2015-00466].

References

- Anderson, A., Barrett, J.H., and Boyle, K.V., eds, 2010. *The global origins and development of seafaring*. Cambridge: McDonald Institute.
- Bayman, J.M. and Dye, T.S., 2013. *Hawaii's past in a world of Pacific islands*. Washington, D.C.: Society for American Archaeology Press.
- Bentley, J.H., Bridenthal, R., and Wigen, K., eds, 2007. *Seascapes: maritime histories, littoral cultures, and transoceanic exchanges*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Brink, S., 1997. Political and social structures in early Scandinavia. aspects of space and territoriality – the settlement district. *Tor*, 29, 389–438.
- Brink, S., 2014. Reading cult and mythology in society and landscape: the toponymic evidence. In: T. Tangherlini, ed. *Nordic mythologies: interpretations, intersections, and institutions*. Berkeley: North Pinehurst Press, 157–172.
- Buck, P.H., 1938. *Vikings of the Sunrise*. Philadelphia: Lippincott. [Reissued in 1959 as *Vikings of the Pacific*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press].
- Erikson, B.G., 2015. *Kungen av Birka. Hjalmar Stolpe – arkeolog och etnograf*. Stockholm: Atlantis.
- Hau'ofa, E., 2008. *We are the Ocean: selected works*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Heyerdahl, T., 1938. *På jakt efter Paradiset: et år på en sydhavsø*. Oslo: Gyldendal. [English ed. 1974, *Fatu Hiva – back to Nature*. London: Unwin].
- Kāne, H.K., 1997. *Ancient Hawai'i*. Kona: Kawainui Press.
- King, M., 2003. *The Penguin History of New Zealand*. London: Penguin.
- Kirch, P.V., 2010. *How chiefs became kings: divine kingship and the rise of archaic states in ancient Hawai'i*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kirch, P.V., 2012. *A shark going inland is my chief: the island civilisation of ancient Hawai'i*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kirch, P.V., 2014. *Kua'aina Kahiko: life and land in ancient Kahikinui, Maui*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Kirch, P.V., 2017. *On the road of the winds: an archaeological history of the Pacific islands before European contact*. 2nd. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kirch, P.V. and Rallu, J.-L., eds, 2007. *The growth and collapse of Pacific island societies*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Kirch, P.V. and Sahlins, M., 1992. *Anahulu: the anthropology of history in the Kingdom of Hawaii*. Vol. 2, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ljungström, O., 2004. *Oscariansk antropologi. Etnografi, förhistoria och rasforskning under sent 1800-tal*. Möklinta: Gidlunds.
- Melheim, L., Glørstad, H., and Glørstad, Z.T., eds, 2016. *Comparative perspectives on past colonisation, maritime interaction and cultural integration*. Sheffield: Equinox.
- Price, N., 2015. From Ginnungagap to the Ragnarök: archaeologies of the Viking worlds. In: M.H. Eriksen, et al., eds. *Viking worlds: things, spaces and movement*. Oxford: Oxbow, 1–10.
- Price, N., 2018a. Distant Vikings: a manifesto. *Acta Archaeologica*, 89.
- Price, N., ed., 2018b. New horizons in the archaeology of the Viking Age. In: *Special issue of The Archaeological Record 18/3*. Washington, DC.: Society for American Archaeology.
- Ravn, M., 1993. Analogy in Danish prehistoric studies. *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, 26/2, 59–75. doi:10.1080/00293652.1993.9965559
- Ravn, M., 2011. Ethnographic analogy from the Pacific: just as analogical as any other analogy. *World Archaeology*, 43/4, 716–725. doi:10.1080/00438243.2011.624781
- Ravn, M., 2018. Roads to complexity: Hawaiians and Vikings compared. *Danish Journal of Archaeology*. doi:10.1080/21662282.2018.1468147
- Roesdahl, E. and Sørensen, P.M., eds, 1996. *The waking of Angantyr: the Scandinavian past in European culture*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.
- Salmond, A., 2010. *Aphrodite's island: the European discovery of Tahiti*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Schjødt, J.P., 2017. Pre-Christian religions of the North and the need for comparativism: reflections on why, how and with what we can compare. In: P. Hermann, et al., eds. *Old Norse mythology - comparative perspectives*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 3–28.
- Smith, V., 2010. *Intimate strangers: friendship, exchange and Pacific encounters*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Spriggs, M., 2008a. Ethnographic parallels and the denial of history. *World Archaeology*, 40/4, 538–552. doi:10.1080/00438240802453161
- Spriggs, M., 2008b. Are islands islands? Some thoughts on the history of chalk and cheese. In: G. Clark, F. Leach, and S. O'Connor, eds. *Islands of enquiry: colonization, seafaring and the archaeology of maritime landscapes*. Canberra: ANU Press, 211–226.
- Spriggs, M., 2016a. Lapita and the Linearbandkeramik: what can a comparative approach tell us about either? In: L. Amkreutz, et al., eds. *Something out of the ordinary? Interpreting diversity in the Early Neolithic*

- Linearbandkeramik and beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 481–504.
- Spriggs, M., 2016b. Thoughts of a comparativist on past colonisation, maritime interaction and cultural integration. In: L. Melheim, H. Glørstad, and Z.T. Glørstad, eds. *Comparative perspectives on past colonisation, maritime interaction and cultural integration*. Sheffield: Equinox, 271–280.
- Stolpe, H., 1892. Utvecklingsföreteelser i naturfolkens ornamentik. *Ymer*, 10, 193–250.
- Thomas, N., 1997. In *Oceania: visions, artifacts, histories*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Thomas, N., 2010. *Islanders: the Pacific in the Age of Empire*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Wawn, A., 2000. *The Vikings and the Victorians: inventing the Old North in 19th-century Britain*. Woodbridge: Brewer.