

INVITED REVIEW

The Vikings, victims of their own success? A selective view on Viking research and its dissemination

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The Viking age as a time of adventures and violence never ceases to fascinate the public. Both aspects remain central to the definitions of the period which can be found in recent introductions to the topic. Those definitions, developed in Western Europe and applied to the events taking place in this region, are currently being challenged by scholars arguing for the greater significance of economic, political and social developments on a broader scale, beyond the strict agency of individuals of Scandinavian origin. This discussion raises the question of the participation of different regions in the Viking phenomenon and their visibility in the research history. While Viking studies can benefit from this debate thanks to new perspectives on the cross-cultural dynamics of the Viking world, generalizations and excessive broadening may potentially lead the concept to lose its meaning. Therefore, we need to retain the focus on the specificities of the Viking age as a particular set of phenomena under the broader scope of contemporary pan-European historical processes and to pursue our research objectives independently from the desires and pre-conceptions of the public.

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Introduction

This essay proposes a review of recent syntheses about the Viking age and its definition in various regions of modern-day Europe. The question of which regions can claim to have had a Viking age is deeply entangled with recurrent academic debates about the themes, events and peoples which characterize the period. Indeed, the Viking Age is not only defined as a historical frame, that is, what happened between c. 800 and 1050, but also as a set of phenomena generated through particular activities and contacts. The extent of the involvement of ethnic Scandinavians in these phenomena is variously assessed, leading to alternative definitions of the Viking age. A strict definition of the period as that of raids, trade and colonization conducted by Scandinavian Vikings (the ‘ethnic’ model) is now challenged by more inclusive assessments focusing on cultural, social and economic processes broadly relating to maritime expansion in Northern Europe (the ‘processual’ model). By considering the scientific reasons for the inclusion and exclusion of various regions in the general picture of the Viking world, as well as the role of popular interest and political

tensions inherited from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it appears that the current discussions about which regions had a Viking age – and of what kind – is often more about why these regions want to have a Viking age. This approach might, in many instances, over-emphasize mistakenly the particularity of the period within the frame of early medieval European history, the Viking age thus appearing as victim of its own success.

The Viking world today, its definition and geography: a selective overview

The most common definition of the Viking age is the time of the maritime expansion of peoples of predominantly Scandinavian (i.e. modern-day Danish, Swedish and Norwegian) origin. This expansion was motivated by trade, colonization and raiding involving the eponymous sea-borne raiders, and had a deep impact on the involved populations, both in the lands of the expansion and in the Scandinavian homelands. At the time, these activities were recorded in annals and chronicles and described in letters and poems, most famously by Anglo-Saxon and Frankish clerics, but also by

merchants and travellers from the Muslim world. On this basis, the commonly used chronological frame of the Viking age has been set by modern historical scholarship to 793–1066, the dates of two attacks lead by Northmen, who reached the shores of England by ship. Alternatives to these dates, which are mostly relevant from a West-Scandinavian perspective, have been proposed in several instances, but adjustments have essentially consisted of a ‘smoothing’ of the absolute historical definition to a vaguer *c.* 800–1050 (or *c.* 700–1100), more suitable to the more transient archaeological chronologies.

The research history of the concept and its relation to and basis in the nineteenth century national-romanticism in the Scandinavian countries has been discussed in various instances (e.g. Lönnroth 1997, pp. 236–244; Svanberg 2003). The Viking age was then coined as the heydays of the Scandinavian past, according to the political needs of the time, but also based on the sources available at the time: essentially the records from England and France testifying of the Northmen’s fierceness and grandeur. The development of archaeology as an independent discipline throughout the twentieth century both supported and nuanced this view: objects in or inspired by Scandinavian styles have since shed further light onto the Viking settlement in England, for example (Kershaw 2013), while the ‘Viking achievement’ in terms of culture and society in the homelands has been stressed (Foote and Wilson 1970). The usual triad of trading, plundering and colonizing thus gave birth to expansion, cultural exchange and diaspora (e.g. Abrams 2012).

Previous research has unanimously acclaimed the skills at ship-building and navigation mastered by the Scandinavians during the Viking age (e.g. Crumlin-Pedersen and Olsen 2002), postulating that these technological improvements enabled the Viking age – rather than caused it (Barrett 2008, p. 673). It is certain that maritime expansion shaped the Viking world and made possible the multifarious contacts between individuals of Scandinavian origin and others in the territories of modern-day Europe, North Africa, the Levant and the North Atlantic. Viking studies are also conducted in equally many regions, each contributing with a particular view on the period. Therefore, in order to understand how the Viking age is currently

approached and defined, attention needs to be directed at the recent works which claim to offer a holistic overview, namely handbooks and introductions on the one hand and museum exhibitions and their catalogues on the other. A great amount of literature dealing with the Viking age as a whole has been produced for the past century (e.g. Almgren 1967, Brøndsted 1979, Graham-Campbell 1980, Richards 2005, Hall 2007), and it is not the aim of this article to provide a systematic assessment. Instead, a small selection of handbooks published since the 1990s are considered a valuable source, as their purpose is to provide students and the interested popular readership with a synthetic historical view established by previous research which should be, at least in theory, updated with the most recent results and discoveries.

A notable introduction to the period was offered by an English historian, Peter Sawyer (1997a). Starting his *Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, Sawyer gives us, in one page, the most standard definition of the period:

From the eighth century to the eleventh, Scandinavians, mostly Danes and Norwegians, figure prominently in the history of western Europe as raiders, conquerors, and colonists. [...] Other Scandinavians, mainly Svear from what is now east Sweden, were active in eastern Europe in ways that were very similar to those of their contemporaries in western Europe, despite the great differences between the two regions (Sawyer, 1997b, p. 1).

The stage is set: the Viking age is about the Scandinavians starting to play a significant part in European history. Accordingly, the Viking world here presented is composed (each with their individual chapter) of the Frankish Empire; England; Ireland, Wales, Man and the Hebrides; the Atlantic Islands; European Russia with few mentions, in relation with trade, of Finns, Saami and the West Slavs (Noonan 1997, pp. 150–153), whose role is here deemed ‘relatively unexplored’ (1997, p. 152). The Mediterranean is mentioned in the introduction (Sawyer, 1997b, p. 10), but is not treated further.

Ten years later what has probably become the most used teaching material by students of Viking studies was produced, Brink and Price’s *The Viking world* (Brink and Price, 2008a). Not a popular introduction as such, the book was thought as a synthesis for an academic audience. It introduces the Viking age in much a similar way as that of Peter Sawyer’s:

The Viking Age was the period when the Scandinavians made themselves known [...]. Norwegians in particular controlled and colonised the whole of the North Atlantic, from Norway, to the Faroes, Iceland, Shetland, the Scottish islands, parts of Ireland, Greenland and all the way to the eastern brim of North America. Especially Danes, but also Norwegians and Swedes, ravaged and had an impact on the political and social development of England and parts of France. Swedes travelled eastward, traded along the Russian rivers, and down to the Byzantine and Islamic world.

As for Peter Sawyer, the Viking phenomenon is described as the activities of ethnically (nationally?) defined Scandinavians abroad. The violent aspect of the phenomenon has, according to Brink, been neglected in the second half of the twentieth century to the benefit of the ‘peaceful, industrious, trading Viking’ because of the trauma of WWII – by aspiring to peace today, Europe found peace in its past (Brink 2008, pp. 4–5).

Although the editors regret in their preface that ‘most overviews of the Viking period have also been produced very much from a British perspective’ (Brink and Price, 2008b, p. xix) part II of the volume, ‘The Viking expansion’, dedicates over a third of the total pages and nearly half the number of chapters to one region: the British Isles. Certainly the British Isles were marked by contrasting landscapes, cultures, languages and political structures when Scandinavians entered the scene, and they deserve a nuanced approach, but the same can be said for the Continent, under which two regions are briefly distinguished in sub-chapters (Normandy, 5 pages; Brittany, 4 pages). The same stands for the one chapter about the ‘East’ which covers everything from the Southern Baltic, the Ladoga region, the Dniepr and Volga axes down to the Black Sea with, here again, a multitude of languages, ethnicities, social structures, religions and resources. The more specific relationship between the Rus’, Byzantium and Islam receive more attention.

In a recent *Reader* for the study of the Viking Age, the editors Russell A. McDonald and Angus A. Somerville offer a slightly more nuanced view, even though their angle is strictly textual (McDonald and Somerville 2014). In the introduction, the aspiring Viking scholar is reminded that ‘while a very small minority of early medieval Viking Age Scandinavians might well have resembled the

warriors and bandits of the stereotype, their fellow Norsemen were also renowned merchants, seamen, explorers, mercenaries, and poets, who contributed much to early medieval European civilization’ (2014, p. xv). Four chapters of little over 200 pages in total relate directly to the Viking expansion. The Viking attacks occupy over half that space and are presented through 14 sources: seven for the British Isles, four for the Frankish areas and two for Spain. The rest of the phenomenon is treated in three equal chapters about colonization (essentially in England with seven texts, Normandy only appearing as one source), the Eastern route (focusing on the Rus and Varangians) and the North Atlantic (mostly Iceland). Again, the British Isles are the main region of interest in discussing the phenomenon, but the editors do manage to cover a fairly large ground by giving attention to each region proportionally to the existence of written documentation.

Enthusiasm for the ‘traditional’ Viking Age is met in Anders Winroth’s introduction to *The Age of the Vikings* (Winroth 2014), which compiles the knowledge established by a long recent tradition more than it includes the results of recent research. His premise is that ‘the Vikings pique our imagination’, as ‘ferocious barbarians’ and ‘super-masculine heroes’ addicted to ‘slaughter, raid, rape’ (2014, p. 8), but also as ‘accomplished and fearless discoverers’ thanks to their mastering of ship-building and seafaring. In other words, we love the ‘barbarians’, but we comply with the ‘civilizators’. Winroth follows the rule of the genre and compensates for the troublesome first (Chap. 2, ‘Violence in a Violent Time’; Chap. 3, ‘Röriks at Home and Away: Viking Age Emigration’) with an overview of their ‘great cultural, religious, and political achievement’ (2014, p. 10–11) (Chap. 4, ‘Ships, Boats and Ferries to the Afterworld’, Chap. 5, ‘Coins, Silk, and Herring: Viking Age Trade in Northern Europe’, Chap. 6, ‘From Chieftains to Kings’, Chap. 7, ‘At Home on the Farm’, Chap. 8, ‘The Religions of the North’, Chap. 9, ‘Arts and Letters’).

In the introduction to the volume, Winroth first sketches an impressive Viking world spanning from Al-Khwarezm in Central Asia, to Newfoundland in America, Seville in Southwestern Spain and the White Sea (Winroth 2014, p. 8). Later, this area is drastically reduced in the chapter on the Viking expansion (Chap. 3, pp. 45–70). While Iceland,

Newfoundland, Russia, France and England, Ireland and the Low Countries are mentioned, the chapter offers a more general discussion of the Viking phenomenon mostly based on Frisia/the Northern Frankish areas, the British Isles and Ireland, as well as Greenland. The Baltic Sea region is treated in another context as sea-faring route and crossing point towards the East (2014, p. 84) and for the market towns of Truso and Wolin, visited by Scandinavians (Chap. 5, p. 111–112). Finland is treated once in a chapter on state formation ('From Chieftains to Kings', p. 155) – but in a twelfth century context. Russia receives more attention in relation to the navigation on rivers (Chap. 4, p. 80ff), the most famous account of the funeral of a Rus' chieftain in a boat by Ibn Fadlan (Chap. 4, p. 96), and for the trade centres and routes between the North and the Middle East (Chap. 5 Arabic coins, and foundation of Staraya Ladoga, p. 114).

Let us now turn to museum exhibitions and their catalogues. Many national museums across North-Western Europe feature a Viking section in their permanent exhibitions, but a closer look at some of the larger temporary exhibitions opened since the 1990s also gives an impression of how the academic knowledge about the Viking age is being presented to the public.

Les Vikings... Les Scandinaves et l'Europe 800–1200 (catalogue: Roesdahl *et al.* 1992) was the first large-scale exhibition after the fall of the Wall. Its ambition was not just to present the Scandinavian warriors and their dramatic actions abroad, but also the developments these international contacts triggered in their homelands – political, economic, religious and artistic (Roesdahl and Wilson 1992, p. 24). This massive project presented a large Viking world including equally the North Atlantic, Finland, the Saami, the Eastern route, the Slavs of the Southern Baltic, the Continent (essentially Frankish areas and Normandy) and the British Isles. This inclusive approach is a characteristic of Else Roesdahl's work; one can find an equally broad scope in her successful introduction *Vikings* (Roesdahl 2012, p. 198–300). This Post-Cold-War interest can also be seen in another exhibition dealing with contacts between East Scandinavia and the territories of Ancient Russia in the long Viking age presented at the State Museums of the Moscow Kremlin (Jansson 1996b). While not aiming at offering a total view of

the period, this exhibition was part of a cultural exchange program between Russia and Sweden and aimed at 'bringing together' the material evidence attesting of close contacts in the past.

A radically different take was adopted for the production of the catalogue of the latest large-scale international Viking exhibition, *Viking* (Williams *et al.* 2013). The volume offers an image of the Viking world *a minima* through an unapologetic focus on the good-ol' Vikings, those who fought and robbed. The Viking age is defined as the unprecedented expansion of Scandinavians. The nineteenth century scholars acclaimed the pirates among them, when the twentieth century scholarship, thanks to the development of archaeology, added merchants, colonists, crafts, poets, discoverers, ship-builders and sea-farers to the list of the Viking job description. But the reader is reminded that it is a history of violence, and is warned against the misguided, peaceful depiction of the past half a century (Williams 2013, p. 16). Accordingly, the catalogue is structured around four thematic axes: contact and cultural exchange; warfare and military expansion; power and aristocracy; belief and rituals. The Viking ship, presented separately, is the element that binds them all. The curators explain that it was not their aim to cover every aspect of the period, but only those which could be shed light upon via new, spectacular archaeological finds, or new research (Williams 2013, p. 17). This argument is a little difficult to accept, considering that many of the finds presented in the catalogue are not exactly recent, and that Viking research is continuously producing new knowledge on many more of the period's dimensions (e.g. urbanization). Furthermore, it so happens that these 'freshest' themes are also the public's most cherished ones: the obscure cult and the unbound violence, the rich and famous, are much sexier than the craftsman's skills, the landowner's recent conversion to Christianity and the – female – weaver's sail. While the exciting chapter on contacts and cultural exchanges sketches a rich and broad Viking world, stretching from Iceland to Byzantium (Kleingärtner and Williams 2013), the thematic choices imply that only particular regions outside of Scandinavia are treated in further details. Relations with the Continent, England and Ireland are considered for their military

character ('Continental defenses against the Vikings'; 'Viking camps in England and Ireland'), while the 'East' appears under friendlier, more pacific headings (e.g. 'Neighbours along the Southern Baltic coast'). The North Atlantic is absent.

A concurrent large-scale exhibition, however, presents a diametrically different view. *We Call Them Vikings* was shaped as two touring exhibitions by the Swedish History Museum and has been displayed at the Field Museum in Chicago and opened in November 2015 at the Schloss Schallburg in Austria. Its focus is to call our 'traditional view of the Vikings as brutal, bloodthirsty barbarians [...] into question' by focusing on the people, their society and culture, and their roles and relationships in everyday life (*We Call Them Vikings* 2015). The contribution of recent archaeological discoveries is highlighted as challenging pre-conceived ideas – a most reassuring approach for other fields of Viking scholarship not dealing with politico-military history.

Based on this overview, several co-existing trends appear: the Viking age and the Vikings are often described in a stereotypical manner by reproducing well-established clichés, formulated almost identically from one volume to the next and creating a schizophrenic image of the Viking as both bringer and destroyer of civilization; alternative views, generated by a large body of research on social, cultural and economic aspects (e.g. a number of now unavoidable volumes about urbanization and trade, e.g. Clarke and Ambrosiani 1991, or about women, e.g. Jesch 1991), have made the Vikings 'soft', and their brutality needs to be re-established; some aspects of the Viking period are better illustrated by events taking place in a selection of usual – regional – suspects grouped in an East/West dichotomy and very unevenly treated. Thus, we are currently witnessing a remarkable, though far from universal, development in the dissemination of knowledge about the Viking age, where a lot of the research conducted in the past 30 years does not seem to be part of 'what you need to know', and where the complexity of the period and its geographical span are being simplified and narrowed down to what is relevant to an Anglo-Scandinavian sphere, hereby catering to the public's expectations about the supremacy of the Scandinavian Vikings.

The Anglo-Scandinavian bias: a tentative explanation

While scholars often highlight the extent of the Vikings' achievement by drawing the distant borders of the ground they covered, the Viking world has a remarkably variable geometry when it comes to considering the period in detail. While the world in the Viking age never ceases to expand (Sindbæk and Trakadas 2014; Sindbæk 2015), how are we then to understand the current reduction in scope of the Vikings' world and the increasing Anglo-Scandinavian focus? One can find an explanation on three levels: cultural (what the public wants), scientific (the state of research and the available sources) and political (that of academia and of the rest of the world).

Indeed, the Vikings could not be more *dans l'air du temps*: they are commonly used in commercial branding (e.g. Winroth 2014, p. 9) and cultural branding (Pries 2014), leading some historians to fear for possible misuses and misrepresentations of national history for the sake of entertainment rather than knowledge dissemination (Stockmann 2015). They have also become a useful tool for European construction as they suggest a shared – though not necessarily mutually appreciated – European past (Sindbæk 2013, pp. 81–82). The whole world is being inspired by the Vikings. Through their hyper-active exploitation of trade routes they appear as paragons of an early medieval spirit of enterprise and the instigators of the liberal and entrepreneur ideal in today's Anglo-Saxon world – and beyond! (2013, p. 84). In its acclamation of the Nordic welfare state and economic dynamism as a model for reforming the public sector, the American Journal *The Economist* used the name Vikings to refer to the modern inhabitants of the Scandinavian countries as a convenient point of reference for an American audience: 'If you had to be reborn anywhere in the world as a person with average talents and income, you would want to be a Viking.' (The Nordic countries 2013). Admittedly, modern Scandinavians have not inherited this model from the Vikings, and no line of continuity seems implied. Instead, it is significant that the 'smallish countries' of Scandinavia become easier to situate and to relate to when they are incarnated by a hairy man wearing a horned helmet.

In the Vikings' taste for blood and for fearless adventures overseas, one may find ideals of masculinity, free-spirit and independence from the conformist rules of society. Winroth reminds us that 'while we may sympathize with and grieve for their helpless victims and feel put off by all the mindless slaying, we can scarcely help admiring the strength, courage, and virility of the Vikings' (Winroth 2014, p. 8). The success of re-enactment groups of Viking warriors, of HBO television series *Vikings* and of the latest exhibition *Viking* in Copenhagen, Berlin and London, leaves no doubt as to the appeal of this aspect of the Viking age among the public. The idea of independence even inspires political claims, for example in Scotland, where the Scottish National Party (SNP) wished in its campaign towards the referendum on 18 September 2014 to establish closer relations with Scandinavia, based on historical (i.e. Viking) and current affinities with Norway in particular (Kelly 2011).

The public's fascination with this aspect of the Viking age can possibly explain the current Anglo-Scandinavian focus in some curatorial and editorial choices. Indeed, politics, raids and military campaigns are traditionally seen as a trademark of the events in this part of the Viking world in opposition with the trade-oriented Eastern expansion, although there is abundant and long-known evidence for both aspects in both regions. A look-back at the research history may explain this unbalance. The Viking age as a historical period was created at a time when archaeology was in its infancy. Its definition thus relied essentially on written sources, mostly available in large numbers, compiled, edited and translated for the early medieval Anglo-Saxon and Frankish areas. Therefore, lands and phenomena not fitting the accepted definition and with few or no contemporary written testimony for having experienced the Viking phenomenon have since the beginning of scholarship received less attention, a trend which has largely been reproduced by later research.

Admittedly, the amount of evidence for Scandinavian activities and contacts in the favoured regions of the British Isles and the North Atlantic, both textual and archaeological, is extensive, much more than in Finland, for example, where evidence for traditional Viking activities – raiding, plundering and settling – is virtually inexistent, may it be written (Ahola and Frog 2014b, p. 30) or material

(Raninen *et al.* 2014, p. 339). Scandinavian contacts also appear in the linguistic and toponymical records (Schalin and Frog 2014), but the scarcity of examples indicates minor Scandinavian impact in comparison with their abundance in England and Normandy (Fellows-Jensen 2008, Ridell 2014). Changes in the source situation, namely with new archaeological discoveries, are constantly challenging our definition of the Viking world (e.g. the discovery of the settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland in the 1960s, Ingstad 1977), although the extent to which they effectively achieve a paradigm shift seems rather limited. This is visible, for example, in the *Viking world* which, although very inclusive towards archaeology, remains very close to the Anglo-centrist tradition. Written sources documenting Viking activities, both trade and raids, are no longer considered sufficient, and having an archaeological confirmation of 'what we know already' (Sawyer cited by Rahtz 1983, p. 15) has become paramount. The lack of archaeological finds in Normandy, for example, never ceases to puzzle in light of the wealth of evidence provided by written sources (for a summary of the discussion, Moesgaard 2011). Current projects are also aiming at gathering new material, for example in Galicia where archaeological structures revealed after a storm in 2014 may be comparable to constructions of documented camps in Ireland and England (Digging up the 'Spanish Vikings' 2014), or in Turkey, where objects of Scandinavian types identified at a recently excavated Byzantine settlement on the shore of Lake Kucukcekmece near Istanbul may indicate a port-of-trade visited by the Rus', as mentioned in the written sources (Stambul/Konstantynopol-Kucukcekmece 2015).

However, a lack of sources cannot explain the relative neglect towards the Western and Eastern Baltic. Evidence for some of the phenomena characteristics of the Viking Age have long been known there: traces of early sea-borne urbanization in the eighth and ninth centuries with the today Polish market-places of Wolin and Truso/Janow Pomorski (Jagodzinski and Kasprzycka 1991, Bogucki and Jurkiewicz 2012) and, earlier on, at the settlement and attached burial ground at Grobina in Latvia, already excavated before WWII (Nerman 1958); the burial ground and trading site at Wiskiauten, now in the Kaliningrad region, already investigated in the

mid-nineteenth century (Ibsen and Frenzel 2010), and of Staraya Ladoga in the territories of Karelia, ceded by Finland to Russia in 1940 (e.g. Sedov 1985). Rich evidence for trade does not imply that the Viking age in the Baltic was a peaceful era. Although the written evidence is more or less inexistent, the single, contemporary mention in the *Vita Anskarii* (Rimbert (1884), chap. XXX, pp. 60–61) of a military attack may be attested in the archaeological record from the site of Apul  (Lamm 2009, p. 133–137). More recently, the ship burials from Salme on the island of Saaremaa in Estonia can be counted as one of the most spectacular archaeological discoveries of the past decade for the Viking age (Konsa *et al.* 2009). If one interprets the find as the remains of a typical Viking attack, this implies that the Viking age did not start at Lindisfarne in 793 but about half of century earlier, in another sea. One might wonder, then, how the Viking age as a whole would have been defined if the Baltic region had had clerics to record their bloody encounters with seafaring people from the North.

Thus, the existence of sources, textual or material, does not guarantee inclusion in the Viking sphere; these sources also need to be accessible to the international research community. Linguistic and political issues have hindered to some extent the spreading of information. There is no need arguing about the absolute domination of English as academic language, a development which is obviously not unique to Viking studies. The Viking world is studied in many countries and equally numerous languages. It so happens that the British Isles and Ireland are not only one of the best documented areas of the Viking expansion; their scholarship is also composed of English speakers, communicating and publishing in their own language. As research in English is today more read and cited than in other languages, it results, rather simply, that research produced in other languages has a lesser impact and is less integrated in the general rendering of the great outlines of Viking history. This is arguably the case for Polish research (Gardeła 2015, p. 214).

Besides the linguistic aspect, communication between international scholars has to some extent been conditioned by twentieth century geopolitics. One of the most venerable institutions in Viking studies, the Viking Congress, illustrates perfectly the heritage of WWII in the constellation of the

delegate countries (Sindb k 2013, p. 84–85). Russia and other continental European countries were not invited; neither was Germany, who had made abundant use of the Viking imagery in the Nazi period. Sixty years later, the situation has little evolved. East European scholars have been invited as special guests sporadically, and the – very few – German delegates are attending as representatives of Schleswig-Holstein (e.g. 17th Viking Congress, Participants 2013). The core group of the Viking Congress, the British Isles and Scandinavia with its former commonwealth (i.e. the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland), were the winners of the post-WWII alliance. Scandinavia especially would rather look towards its Anglo-Saxon connections than its Germanic affinities (Sindb k 2013, p. 84). The Cold War comforted the North-Western European isolation – and self-perceived domination – by making scientific collaboration between East and West difficult and by reducing, at least in appearances, the contribution of Russia and the Baltic to the study of the Viking age to the limits of the Normanist controversy (e.g. Hannestad 1970, Klejn 2014). The most inclusive endeavour of public dissemination in terms of geographical span to date, the exhibition *Les Vikings*, was achieved because of the recent fall of the Eastern bloc which enabled access to museum collections all over Europe. It should also be underlined that the exhibition was supported by the European Council as an initiative promoting European integration (Mohen *et al.* 1992).

Challenges from the East: towards a new definition?

The vision of the Viking world *a minima* offered by some recent publications and exhibitions is not the only new trajectory taken by Viking scholars. Others are promoting a definition of the period not centred on the politico-military role played by ethnic Scandinavians in a small number of regions of Western Europe, but on the many processes ongoing across the continent at the time corresponding to the Viking age, focusing for example on the more theoretical question of identities on a larger scale (e.g. Jesch 2015). A particular approach, particularly critical to the established Anglo-Scandinavian scholarship, has also emerged in the regions which have

been somewhat neglected in the recent overviews, namely the Western and Eastern Baltic.

In the light of the abundance of sources, contacts with Scandinavians and the impact of these contacts on the local culture appear ‘largely understudied’ in Poland. Finding Scandinavians in the archaeological record is indeed not new (cf. Żak 1963, 1967) and continues to attract interest (e.g. Stanislawski 2013). This enthusiasm has been criticized by Leszek Gardela, who has judged often too simplistic the ethnic identification of archaeological remains, chiefly of burials containing Scandinavian objects or features interpreted as belonging to migrants from Scandinavia – anything exotic being seen as ‘Scandinavian’ or ‘Viking’ (Gardela 2015, p. 216). This is for example the case with chamber graves, which have sometimes been interpreted as potentially Scandinavian (Buko 2008, p. 404–414), whereas Gardela would rather understand the non-local traits in the light of supra-regional identities (Gardela 2015, p. 227). Gardela’s work on Scandinavian amulets and cultic objects is also showing the importance of the exchange of ideas between North and South of the Baltic Sea (Gardela 2014) rather than on their mere transfer from North to South; an idea which has also been stressed by scholars studying Slavic material culture in South Scandinavia (Roslund 2001, Naum 2008).

The same line of thoughts, though in more provocative terms, can be found on the Finnish side in a recently published anthology, *Fibula, Fabula, Fact. The Viking Age in Finland* (Ahola et al. 2014). The volume presents in English the results of a series of seminars held in the frame of the project *The Viking Age in Finland*. Showing ambitions of breaking with tradition by ‘re-conceptualizing’ and ‘reframing’, an objective visible in the relatively sparse references to international Viking research (Scandinavia, Western Europe and the Southern Baltic), the book seeks to frame events and cultural practices in Finland during the Viking period, to assess the possible impact of the Scandinavian expansion, and ‘to negotiate a definition of the Viking Age as a historical period in the cultural areas associated with modern-day Finland’ (Ahola and Frog 2014a, p. 8). As in Poland, interest for the Viking age in Finland is not new, although it has been more often rejected than integrated as a result of the problematic political situation with Sweden and the Swedish-speaking minority in

Finland, the Viking age being seen as Scandinavian, thus not Finnish, heritage (Aalto 2014, p. 140–147). But, in comparison with Poland, the source material attesting contacts with Scandinavians or their presence is very limited, and has sometimes been interpreted in a way which is now, as in Poland, deemed over-enthusiastic. Raninen and Wessman are critical, as well as Laakso, of previous attempts at finding Vikings in the archaeological material, for example at Luistari (Laakso 2014, p. 140–147) or in the Åland islands where the Scandinavian material has, in their opinion, been over-interpreted in regards to the finds relating to the Finnish mainland and the Baltic region (Raninen et al. 2014, p. 329–330).

Finland experienced the Viking age *stricto sensu* as a ‘contact zone’ for different groups of Scandinavian, but mostly Baltic and Finno-Ugric traders, who would pass by for collecting certain products such as furs (Heininen et al. 2014, p. 304) on the way towards lake Ladoga, lake Ilmen and the fluvial transport system of Ancient Rus’. The Ålanders may have facilitated trade, and some Finnish coastal communities would have linked the ‘Germanic Scandinavian’ travelling merchants and the inland Saami (Heininen et al. 2014, p. 307; Raninen et al. 2014, p. 334). The ‘Viking effect’ was thus limited to coastal areas, and most territories of modern-day Finland seem to have been exempt from the ‘silver fever’ (Raninen et al. 2014, p. 335; Talvio, 2014, p. 134), one of the most common explanations for the Viking expansion to the East. Identity-wise, the presence of swords and Scandinavian artefacts attest the valorization of some aspects of foreign culture among the North Finnic populations ‘in relation to perception of power’ (Heininen et al. 2014, p. 308). The many communities of these vast territories thus saw or heard very little of this foreign Viking age.

The editors of *Fibula* admit to have ‘wrestled’ with their effort at combining Viking Age and Finland (Ahola et al. 2014, p. 485). This led them to formulate an alternative to the traditional definition of the period, which they only find relevant for the events and scholarship in the Anglo-Scandinavian sphere (Ahola and Frog 2014b, p. 23) and more of a technical expression than an adequate tool for Finnish archaeology (Raninen et al. 2014, p. 327). As what was happening in Finland in the Viking age does not seem to have been ‘triggered’ by

contacts with ‘ethnic’ Scandinavians (Ahola *et al.* 2014, p. 488), the significance of these contacts as criteria for the Viking age is deemed over-emphasized in international research and even as a hindrance for studying the period in Finland (Raninen *et al.* 2014, pp. 329–330). While Gardęła advocated the importance of exchanges and cultural processes between populations of various regions, involving Scandinavians but not determined by them, *Fibula* promotes the Viking age in Finland as an ‘era of historical development impacted by Scandinavian contacts, but also paralleled to them (...) in culturally distinct ways’ (Ahola *et al.* 2014, p. 489). Instead of being characterized by the maritime expansion of ‘ethnic’ Scandinavians, the Viking age as a whole is seen as a time of ‘inter-regional developments and their influence on various societies of the period’ (Raninen *et al.* 2014, p. 327).

The Scandinavian hegemony over Northern Europe in the period *c.* 800–1100 has also been attacked by Przemysław Urbańczyk, who critically assesses the roots of the idea of a Nordic civilization embedded in that of the Viking period (Urbańczyk 2009). Urbańczyk finds the idea of ‘civilization’ highly connoted and problematic – those who are civilized (here, the Scandinavians) can only spread their superior culture among the barbarians (here, the Slavs) in a top-down process (2009, p. 156–157). While these ideas are not supported in current Viking research, they are an underlining part of its history. To mention one example, the work of one of the greatest names in Danish archaeology, Johannes Brøndsted, deserves a closer look. The Viking world presented by Brøndsted in his introduction (Brøndsted 1979 – first published in 1960) is geographically remarkably broad, especially in the light of current developments. While this large scope has perfectly valid scientific reasons, it might also reflect a certain view on the grandeur of Northern civilization – the more those subjected to it, the greater its glory. When asking ‘why was the North strong and the rest of Europe weak?’ (‘hvorfors var Norden stærkt og det øvrige Europa svagt?’), Brøndsted postulates that the Vikings’ success laid in their strength, which enabled them to take control over most parts of Europe. Brøndsted was certainly writing a national (in the sense of the Scandinavian family) history, praising the Vikings for having

‘made their era the greatest of the North’ (‘som gjorde deres tid til Nordens største’, 1979, p. 24).

If this was indeed Brøndsted’s agenda, and if Urbańczyk is correct in his assessment of the dangers of the nationalist and isolationist approach to the Nordic civilization (Urbańczyk 2009, p. 137; pp. 146–147), we must conclude that finding Vikings abroad is about affirming the superiority of ethnic Scandinavians over other populations – an obviously criticizable, nearly racist approach. Instead, Urbańczyk promotes a more processual approach to the Viking age as a period marked by reciprocal relations in which various ethnic groups were involved (2009, pp. 157–158), underlining at the same time that the Scandinavian populations themselves were not ethnically ‘pure’ and uniform (2009, pp. 139–143). This definition of the Viking age, although not explicitly advertised as being so, seems particularly adequate for the tenth–eleventh century Baltic region including the Slavic areas (2009, p. 158), which have, as also stressed by Gardęła, been largely ignored in a Viking world looking straight West or straight East.

Vikings at the crossroads: splendid isolation or total integration?

This Baltic, ‘processual’ trend is obviously rather new, but the ambition of challenging the traditional definition of the Viking age through an emphasis on the importance of specific historical processes over that of the agency of actors defined in terms of the modern nation-states will need to be followed. While these propositions concern mostly the regions which have not received much attention in mainstream, Anglo-centrist research recently, there is certainly more to the claim of these Polish and Finnish scholars than correcting an unbalance. Thus, is the international Viking research community to take up their critique and redefine the Viking age altogether?

It is true that Viking research in its traditional sense has been and is still biased towards the West, and does not include the Baltic sufficiently. While language and political antagonisms were a limitation for including the Baltic region and Eastern Europe during the Cold War, these can no longer be taken as an excuse. The fruitful Scandinavian-Baltic collaboration which immediately followed the fall of the Eastern Block resulted in a number of joint ventures:

the exhibitions already mentioned but also conferences and anthologies (e.g. Jansson 1996a, Jansson and Fransson 2007, Bjerg *et al.* 2013). New finds and, not least, the dynamism and desire of Baltic scholars to present their research to the international research community will presumably lead to a greater inclusion of the Baltic region in the general lines of Viking studies. Hopefully this will break the false dichotomy which still opposes the West and the East as separate scenes for politico-military expansion and for trade.

It is also certainly a sign of intellectual dynamism within a research field when knowledge established in former research is being challenged and when scientific ‘truths’ are deconstructed. The issues raised by the ‘ethnic’ definition need to be addressed by the international research community to a greater extent, not only because of the connoted idea of a superior Nordic culture and its political misuse in the past, of which most scholars are well aware, but also because of current trends in humanist research. Contacts, networks and interactions are central contemporary issues of debate on the global plan, but also echo with some of the most fascinating aspects of the Viking age, thus offering an amazing intellectual playground for investigating the processes engaged at cross-cultural encounters. The multiple identities formed hitherto are an interesting contextual product of a much broader interconnectedness. Taking into account these aspects may lead to consider a more dynamic Viking age, where identities all over Europe were negotiated, and where political, economic and cultural developments fed one another.

However, a clear balance between the defining role of these developments and that of the Scandinavians needs to be found. Indeed, a lot of the characteristics of the alternative Viking age seem rather unspecific and more generally applicable to the Early Middle Ages on a European scale. The proposal made by the authors of the chapter on geopolitics in *Fibula* illustrates well the matter at stake. They see the Viking age as a time when Northern Europe was ‘reconstructed’ as a ‘coherent’ area (Heininen *et al.* 2014, p. 296) and ‘Europeanized’. The combination of kingdom formation and of the Church as an increasingly important geopolitical actor (2014, p. 307) ‘restructured peer-polity interactions’ (2014, p. 309). The

Europeanization happened when Europe (i.e. Western Europe) became aware of Scandinavians. By ‘maintaining routes from the north to the Mediterranean [...], the Scandinavians “drew up” the borders of Europe as they are understood in the twenty-first century (referring to Käkönen 1998). Thus, the Vikings did nothing more nor less than redefine Europe’ (Heininen *et al.* 2014, p. 307). Through Christianization, the Northerners became integrated in a shared European identity (2014, p. 306; p. 315). The Christian kingdoms of Scandinavia believed in the ‘valorization of Continental court practices’ (2014, p. 308), while the elite abandoned its models of identity based on courage, endurance, curiosity and ‘adventurousness’ to the profit of those of Continental Europe (the authors do not let us know which ones; 2014, p. 310). The Viking age thus becomes the time of the simplification of identities, which reduced in number to be replaced by larger, shared identities (2014, p. 310).

This Europeanization seems a dodgy process. While the efforts of the Scandinavians in gathering Europe may please the European Council, there was no such idea of ‘Europe’ at the time, and their networks did not assemble the continent in any political or cultural entity which would have a direct continuity with today. Before the Vikings, Bronze Age people have also been given the title of first Europeans (cf. Graves-Brown *et al.* 1996, p. 14–17; now relayed by genetic studies in the popular scientific medias, Jakobsen 2015). The role of conquest, colonization and associated cultural change has also been underlined as part of the construction of a European, homogenous society in the following centuries (Bartlett 1993), but it does not imply that the involved actors thought of themselves as participants in a coherent European culture. Europeanization connotes some form of adoption of a superior – Western European – culture in a top-down process, in a much similar way as the spread of Nordic civilization described by Urbańczyk; a belief in the splendid isolation of Nordic culture before the Viking age; and an evolutionist view on history, with becoming European as a progress towards civilization (the Viking age is even described as a period ‘oriented towards progress’; Heininen *et al.* 2014, p. 311). Instead, it is clear that polities across the continent became increasingly connected in the

period corresponding to the Viking age, involving a multiplication of ethnicities (Garipzanov *et al.* 2008), constructed and expressed through intensive cross-cultural contacts. Even after the year 1000, a shared Christian belief cannot be assumed to have erased all differences, and that it was spread across the continent does not make it a marker of European identity.

While describing the Viking age in terms of Europeanization presents a number of problems, the factors selected to define the period (technology and knowledge; mobility; networks; identities and adaptation) appear, although established on the basis of the Scandinavian expansion, relatively unspecific. Technology, mobility, networks and identities are buzzwords of the post-modern world, and of any ‘globalized’ system, also in the past: the age of discovery in the fifteenth–sixteenth centuries, of the Greek expansion in the Mediterranean from 10th to 9th century BC onwards, etc. This lack of historicity is problematic when one attempts at writing history for such a clearly delimited period as the Viking age, but it is perhaps not a problem for the authors, who seem to believe in the very *longue-durée* (Heininen *et al.* 2014, p. 297): everything is always the same, but takes different forms as the frame is changing. Therefore, one can read Iron Age mentalities in nineteenth and twentieth century oral tradition (Ahola 2014, Frog and Frog 2014), for example. Furthermore, these factors are not specific for Viking age Scandinavia or even Northern Europe. Maritime expansion was not just the fact of Scandinavians (Sindbæk and Trakadas 2014). Social, cultural and political developments, settlement increase as well as the emergence of royal and ecclesiastical powers are not exclusive to Viking age Scandinavia either, and similar processes took place in other European territories in the period *c.* 700–1000 (or even up to *c.* 1250 according to *Fibula*), though at different paces and taking different forms according to pre-existing conditions.

With a Viking age broadly defined as ‘a time of change’, of ‘economical, technical, cultural and political exchange and interrelations between peoples, settlements and powers’ (Heininen *et al.* 2014, p. 298), it seems that any region of the world at any time of history could have had a Viking age. Also, if the traditional definition of the Viking age, however imperfect it may be, cannot be bowed to the reality of Finland in the generously defined period *c.* 750–1250, so that

Scandinavians need to be removed from the picture, why call it a ‘Viking age’? Is there such thing as the Viking age at all? Or are we over-emphasizing its importance, ‘vikingizing’ about and constantly pushing further the geographical and chronological borders of the period?

The proposal of the authors of *Fibula* invites, at the very least, to reflect upon the current definition of the period and its relation to the European early Middle Ages, as the Viking age is beginning to be used to describe what in many ways should be seen as symptomatic of the European early Middle Ages: a time of re-definition of the spheres of power and influence, of cross-cultural contacts, of new settlement patterns, economic strategies, and social and religious ideas. While this is all true, it is not because they occurred – partly – within the chronological frame *c.* 800–1050 (or even *c.* 750–1250) that they belonged specifically to and should define the Viking age. Pan-European contacts and phenomena do not need to be labelled ‘Viking’ to become more interesting. Urbańczyk describes some of these processes as participating in an ‘Europeanization’, a term which I have critically discussed earlier. Contrary to Heininen, Ahola and Frog, however, Urbańczyk does not wish to see Europeanization as the spreading of one particular culture, from the West towards the ‘rest’, but as a whole continent interacting and shaping together a shared culture (Urbańczyk 2009, p. 137). Seeing Northern culture in a European perspective is not new for the Viking age: from the perspective of the populations of Scandinavia who lived at the time, their ‘age’ must have appeared very European indeed (Brøndsted 1979, p. 279–280), and several of the works reviewed earlier agree on the Viking age being the time when Scandinavians become Europeans, however anachronistic the term may be. Throughout Europe, scholars have established different regional chronologies, some regions being in the Late Iron Age (with a number of more contextual, regional terms) while others were in the early Middle Ages. The lack of a coherent, inter-regional system may hinder comparison and correlation of contemporary situations. As similar developments seem to have taken place all over Europe at more or less the same time, we may be better off getting rid of the evolutionist distinction that some parts of the continent were still in pre-history while others had already jumped into history.

Furthermore, one cannot remove the Vikings from the Viking age, which is and will remain a term related to Scandinavia, both in scholarship and among the public. The Viking phenomenon involved mostly Scandinavians, whose identities were not uniform and fixed – especially not in terms of the modern national states, and what their interactions abroad did to the situation in their homelands. The Viking age is thus one of the many strange things which happened in the European early Middle Ages, and however industrious they may have been, many phenomena could occur simultaneously and in relation with one another without the Vikings' intervention.

While both former neglect and current academic debates appear as perfectly legitimate grounds for reshaping the Viking age in the Baltic regions, it is hard not to see in the flourishing of new research and the application of 'Viking' as a label a desire to be affiliated to an extremely popular topic. Indeed, everyone seems to want to have a Viking age, both among the public and among scholars. Modern academia aims at producing independent research defined after strategic and innovative scientific agendas. Yet academics are people too, and their interests cannot be separated from current social trends. Besides perfectly legitimate passion for the period, there might be more prosaic motives in choosing – or at least, for having the chance and support – to conduct research on the Viking age. University-based researchers are expected to finance their own research to a large extent thanks to public but also private grants. While it cannot be concluded that scholars choose to work with the Viking age for financial reasons, the requirement of disseminating the results of research projects to the public may be more easily met if those are dealing with popular topics such as the 'traditional' Vikings, their kings, their adventures and their gruesomeness, which incessantly attract media coverage. Gardela observed that the sudden burning interest among Polish scholars for the Viking age was 'not only fueled by the current research trends in international academia, but also largely influenced by the great popularity of the Vikings in mass media' (Gardela 2015, p. 215). One is left to wonder to which extent scholars – as well as their publishers and funding providers – are using Vikings as a brand. While it certainly is easier to sell a book if it includes in the title the word

'Viking' instead of 'Late Iron Age' or 'early medieval' (Christiansen 2006, p. 1) – does not the same apply to receiving research funding? The eagerness of some neglected regions to be re-integrated into the Viking world is thus reminding us of the power of fascination of the period and of the many motives being its promotion, not all of which being solidly grounded scientifically.

Conclusion

We can only be pleased by current attempts at addressing the definition of the Viking age. This might be what keeps Viking studies from being a romantic story-telling, only offering to the public what it expects and repeating itself within a simplified and ever more narrowing frame. A number of scholars, most notably from the Baltic regions which have been neglected in recent Anglo-Scandinavian research, are seeking to nuance ethnic definitions and to see the Viking phenomenon not just from the angle of the expansion of individuals of Scandinavian origin but as cultural exchanges and new identities emerging through various contacts involving – or not – said Scandinavians. The provocation of the dominant Anglo-centrist research, both in form and content, is stimulating regardless of the strength of the 'claim' to a Viking heritage they might have – the past is, after all, not owned by anyone. Discussing whether there was a Viking age and of what kind in various regions certainly gives a more nuanced view of the phenomenon: it underlines that Viking activities were highly adaptive to the peoples they involved and the conditions they met, and reminds us that what happened in the British Isles and the North Atlantic is not representative of the entire phenomenon. To reuse a term cherished by the authors of *Fibula*, it is now the time of negotiation and 'reconceptualization' of our definitions and of our field of research, and certainly the Baltic regions will increasingly contribute to this.

At the same time, the Viking age appears victim of its own success and its popularity is at the centre of an identity struggle for both scholars, actors of the tourist industry and enthusiasts. Those who feel entitled to it, based on tradition and national history, are currently emphasizing certain aspects, in a process which resembles a

claim to ownership; those who have not been part of the game are seeking to reinvent it, so there would also be room for them in the exciting Viking community. The Viking age is being twisted in all sorts of direction to match all sorts of purposes, and is starting to remind of a cheap piece of clothing tagged ‘One size fits all’: it is large, elastic and convenient, but does not actually really fit anyone. The attraction exercised by the period is still not entirely freed from national-romantic ideals. At the meeting point between the too distant, voiceless pre-history and of the supposedly alien Christian, European Middle Ages, the Viking age represents the last echo of an ‘Ur’-Scandinavian past, before it was perverted and integrated into a multi-ethnic, foreign community. In Denmark, where this article has been written, the current debates surrounding cultural canons, ‘Danishness’ and border issues makes of this question a highly political one. As citizens we are free to engage or not in this debate, but as scholars we have as a mission to disseminate the results of our research as they are, and not in a diluted manner in order to gather more visitors, readers or research grants. While studying the Viking age as an independent historical period is scientifically well founded, it will certainly benefit from more fluid views about ethnicities and cultural dynamics, and allow including other voices in the discourse about the past that those who dictated it over a hundred years ago.

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