

REVIEW

Richard Hall

Exploring the World of the Vikings

London: Thames & Hudson, 2007; pp.240 £18.95

ISBN 9780500051443

THIS beautifully illustrated volume (with 330 illustrations, 141 of which are in colour) sets out to provide a comprehensive and accessible account of the entire viking phenomenon, and does so from a thoroughly up-to-date perspective. The focus is on the history of and life in the viking age, but what came before and after is dealt with as well without stinginess. The book is divided into nine chapters.

The first of these provides a general introduction to the subject matter and overview of the historical outline, including a useful two-page table which tracks events all over the world relevant to the vikings, from the Roman period to the abandonment of Greenland. The problems of determining who was a 'viking', how we should conceive of the places they came from and the linking of archaeological evidence to a chronology are introduced in a lucid and jargon-free manner, as are the appearance of regions and central places in the archaeological record. From regions it proceeds to the gradual unification of Denmark, Norway and Sweden at different times, until at the end of the viking age (which is placed shortly after the time of Cnut the Great and St. Olav Haraldsson) there were recognisable 'quasi-national dynasties'. The second chapter introduces material culture and everyday life, covering clothing and jewelry, technology and crafts, before tracing the development of the classic viking war- and trading-ships. From this follows an exploration of the trading connections available to viking-age Scandinavia and the rise of the earliest urban trading-centres, exemplified in detailed discussions of Kaupang, Hedeby and Birka.

In the third chapter, we meet vikings as raiders and invaders, with a portrait of the viking warrior and his equipment. The 'targets and tactics' are then examined, with the reasons for attacks on famous targets such as Lindisfarne and Paris. The discussion then turns to viking activity in different regions, including the prime areas of Frisia, Francia, England and Ireland along with the more enigmatic Scotland and Wales, and even 'Iberia, North Africa and the Mediterranean'. Chapter four concerns the transition from raiding to settling, covering all areas affected from Russia to Ireland. The viking impact on village life and estate structure in England is discussed, as is Anglo-Scandinavian stone sculpture. This is only slightly marred by the statement (on page 108) concerning a Hogback with 'a large muzzled quadruped, identified as a bear, clasping the gable ends of the monuments, perhaps as a symbol of conversion from paganism to Christianity': some explanation of this interpretation of the symbolism would be useful, especially for a more general audience such as will use this book. York and Dublin are both accorded their own sections with a great wealth of archaeological material discussed.

The fifth chapter examines the new lands settled by the vikings in the North Atlantic, including North America. As in the rest of the book, archaeology takes precedence here, but with a cautious nod to the saga-accounts as possible guides.

Chapter six takes up the thorny issue of pagan religion, and again shows an admirable caution in its approach, which introduces the written sources and their problems (namely that they were written either after paganism ceased to be a contemporary religion in Scandinavia, as in the case of Snorri's Edda, or that they were written by outsiders such as Adam of Bremen) alongside the archaeological evidence, and especially art.

Chapter seven concerns the late viking age, beginning with the rise of the Danish state under Gorm and Harald and continuing through to the time of Cnut's Empire. The greatest error here is in the form of a map on page 192 which includes the northern and western isles, Man and Caithness among Cnut's dominions, when there is no reliable evidence for this; otherwise, it is a sound summary. The following chapter continues the story to the failures of Stamford Bridge and the post-conquest Danish invasions. Short accounts are given of the end of Norse rule in Ireland and the extinction of the Icelandic commonwealth, while we are treated to longer discussions of the later history of the Northern and Western Isles and the Greenland colony.

The final chapter, 'Nationalists, Romantics, Madmen and Scholars' is a look at the history of modern reception of the vikings. It follows neatly from the last chapter, which ended with the seventeenth-century Danish mission to rediscover the Greenland settlements, into the first modern antiquaries and

the birth of methodical investigation of the past, both through archaeological and textual means. Alongside this are presented the romantic misconceptions and hoaxes which captured the imagination of both scholars and the general populace over the years. These are seen as testimony of the continuing ability of the vikings to capture the imagination, both in their home countries and the areas they settled. The conclusion's optimism about the possibilities for future scholarship reflects this same ability and should act as an invitation for new scholars to enter the field; and those whose appetite is whetted will find a useful guide to further reading for all the subjects covered, along with a gazetteer of collections and museums in various countries.

All in all this is an admirable introduction or refresher-course to the subject, especially useful for undergraduates and interested members of the public, as well as for scholars seeking to quickly freshen up their acquaintance with areas of the field outside their own speciality. The author's account is up-to-date with recent scholarship, aside from a few points: he does not mention the tenuousness of the traditional identification of the King Eric of York deposed in 952^{x4}, pointed out already in 2004 by Clare Downham. Nor does he mention the similar dubious nature of the links of Olav Tryggvason and Olav Haraldsson to the Fairhair dynasty, which Claus Krag exposed in his own popular history of Norway 800–1130 for Aschehoug in 1995. Still, these may not be considered major omissions in a work of this type. A greater omission is the lack of attention paid to Skaldic verse: it is mentioned briefly as a source of mythological information, but not as one of historical events or as an underpinning for those recorded in the sagas. All in all, however, it is well-written, up-to-date and engaging and could remain a very useful work of introduction – especially for the archaeological side – for many years to come.

Paul Gazzoli
St. Catharine's College, Cambridge