

## REVIEWS

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*Viking Law and Order. Places and Rituals  
of Assembly in the Medieval North*

Edinburgh University Press:  
Edinburgh, 2017: pp.320, £75

ISBN 9781474402293

THIS IS A STUDY which has long been needed, and it fills a big gap in our bibliographies of the Viking Age and of Norse culture. There have been many attempts to discuss the importance of the role of 'things' (Old Norse *þing*) in different parts of the north-European Viking zone and in the Norse settlements, but this is the first major study of the whole legal phenomenon in the Scandinavian countries and in the wider Viking diaspora. Its broad-ranging coverage is impressive. It builds on previous work by the author on assemblies and thing sites in Sweden and Norway, in Orkney and Shetland, as well as on the place of women at the thing and a study of ritual space. A multi-authored publication *Things in the Viking World* of the EU Northern Periphery Programme THING project was published in 2012, laying the parameters of the theme of the present book, and showing how the significance of this legal and judicial aspect of Viking society has come to the fore in recent years.

The present volume being reviewed is a useful historical and geographical expansion of that compilation, being a study in depth not only of the thing sites in their localities but also of the organization of Norse assemblies - and their predecessors in the post-Roman period - as well as of elite rituals, and the centralisation of power with Christianity and urbanization included. It is an exceedingly inter-disciplinary study, bringing saga and historical evidence to bear in the assessment of the role of assemblies in Viking and Norse society, and with full use of the archaeological evidence of the sites themselves (as

well as place-name evidence relating to the different sites). The author shows a good awareness of the geographical circumstances of the location of the thing sites, as well as of communications. These were an important aspect of the place of the things in the communities which they served, and understanding this aspect requires close attention to the landscape settings such as routes by water and overland, and proximity to prehistoric cemeteries and runestones or other stone settings. These features are analysed as relating to interlinked themes such as the required necessities for living when attending the thing, the significance of boundaries, the importance of connections to the past. This analysis is taking our understanding of the importance of these assembly sites in new and important directions relating to the needs of Viking society. Some of these issues and questions have been formulated as a result of the *Assembly Project - Meeting Places in Northern Europe AD 400-1500* which the author was involved in, in collaboration with other researchers from the Universities of Oslo, Durham and Vienna, and which has informed and refined her own methodology in her study of 'Places and Rituals of Assembly'.

The methodology employed or developed with regard to the extraordinary diversity of assemblies throughout Scandinavia and the Viking world is set out in Table 2.2. which helps the reader to understand the complexity of different names for the different levels of assembly (although one might suggest that a more appropriate term than 'Top-level assembly' could have been devised for the Lawthing/ Althing level). Of course each community or political entity could use its own terminology and did not need to adopt the name used by neighbouring kingdom or province. The author is aware of the dangers of attempting to fit all the varied forms of terminology into one structured system, and expresses some reservations about the consistency of 'strict organisation' of these different levels of assembly at all times. Before embarking on the detailed analysis of the sites in different countries, she has provided useful sections on the role of the thing as a political forum, as a law-making body and as an arena for the declaration of private and communal transactions. The composition of the assemblies is an area where there has been a certain amount of generalization and the presence of women has been assumed to be infrequent or peripheral, but the author gives a valuable corrective to this opinion, showing that the evidence is not at all specific and even the terminology has to be treated carefully for the actual meaning of 'man' or 'woman' is not always clearly defined.

The main assembly sites in the Scandinavian countries are discussed first with detailed analysis: this is a complex and broad-ranging preliminary topic which most English readers, with little knowledge of the countries or locations, might find a bit overwhelming in its complexity and diversity. However, the

different geographical locations are well illustrated with maps, and common features are compared in a way which brings out the parallel circumstances, particularly of geographical location and use of important landscape features such as crossing places and islands. The significant role of a 'well-organised group of people under strong leadership' leads into an extensive discussion of the groups who created and ran these assemblies 'in the context of rulership and elite expression' (p. 77).

So the narrative of sites and assemblies merges with a sociological exploration of the elite groups which competed with each other to control these power bases and ritual theatres. This is verging towards the newer themes of Viking history which are in vogue, but it is nonetheless an approach which is attempting to understand the wider significance of the assemblies in the life of Norse societies in the Viking homeland - as well as in the north Atlantic colonial settlements.

Before moving on to the north Atlantic arena, there is a chapter on the impact of Christianity and the importance of markets and towns in the history of thing sites. The close link with royal power and episcopal authority is introduced in a move from the 'top-level' (or provincial) assembly sites to the new medieval urbanized world. However the influence of urbanized royal and episcopal power is not so relevant in the assembly history of the islands in the north Atlantic as on the Scandinavian mainland. Iceland, Greenland and the Faeroe Islands have their own individual assembly histories, part of the particular political, social and cultural development of the island community. Orkney and Shetland and the Hebrides also have their own particular political, social and cultural development, but with an earldom or lordship authority having some influence on the establishment and function of assemblies (we assume, although the evidence is very inconclusive on that aspect).

Orkney, Shetland and the Hebrides are part of the last chapter on 'The Norse in Scotland' (Chap. 8) (but who are the 'New Ancestors?'). The evidence for the various geographical areas is very different, and evidence for the scattered sites in mainland Scotland is very place-name dependent. But the right geographical approach is taken to show how many of the supposed sites have similar geographical features, including water routes and isthmuses or 'aiths' (Old Norse for portage). However the linking of all these diverse sites in the islands and around Scotland results in something of an indigestible amalgam. They can only be understood properly in their distinctive political and cultural background, and the laudable effort to compare and collate is in some respects self-defeating, in that it is striving to extract common elements from a very diverse pattern. This pattern can only be understood within the different parameters of the political set-up and culturally distinctive societies

which historians strive to analyse from usually thin and contradictory source material.

Of course the comparisons are best made with good geographical illustrations, and the number of maps which have been prepared for every region which is discussed in this rich and rewarding study are exemplary. The same however cannot be said for the photographic illustrations, which are for the most part dire. How the very reputable publishers (EUP) which produce such excellent academic books could allow the inclusion of these illustrations surprises me. Without wanting to labour the point I would say that the photograph of Eynhallow Sound (4.14) and the tidal waters surrounding Eynhallow is showing nothing of the island or the tidal waters; while the view of Tingwall and the Law Ting Holm in Shetland (8.3) conveys only a good impression of a dreich day on the Shetland Mainland! The "View from the mound at Tinwald in Dumfriesshire" (Fig. 8.29) invites the reader to ask: A view of what?? Of a field with some very dark trees in the middle distance and a row of hills in the far distance (which are not identified). This disastrous collection of photos of the iconic sites discussed so interestingly in the text is a pity as they detract from that excellent discussion and give no real impression of the magnificent landscape and the location of the assembly sites within the landscape. A companion book could usefully be prepared which focusses on producing some good professional photographic illustrations of the sites which this book covers in Scandinavia and the north Atlantic. So many of these sites are so remote and peripheral to travel routes by land or sea that they are not well-known or much visited except for the 'top-level' sites like Thingvellir in Iceland (and even it is not usefully illustrated. Fig.7.7 misleadingly describes it as a view of the Althing when in fact it is a view of the Oxará river and the church site next to the President's summer residence!).

This is an excellent book on the thing sites of Scandinavia and the role of the assemblies in the lives of medieval communities. Readers should not, however, rely on the grey illustrations to give any accurate impression of the sites being discussed, but should go and visit the locations of these memorable and significant community gathering places in Scandinavia and the north Atlantic (and take your own photographs).

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