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Review:

The Viking Age in Åland. Insights into Identity and Remnants of Culture.

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The Viking Age in Åland. Edited by Joonas Ahola, Frog & Jenni Lucenius. Finnish Academy of Science and Letters Annales. Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae. Humaniora 372. Sastamala 2014. Pp. 427; indices. 978-951-41-1098-6 paperback.

Both multi- and interdisciplinary approaches are common in the study of Viking Age; many publications address the period from different perspectives as well as present new knowledge achieved by the integration of disciplines. Various scientific disciplines are also represented in the present volume that undertakes to elaborate on the understanding of the Åland Islands during the Viking Age; the aim is a collaborative interdisciplinary synthesis of diverse perspectives.

The ambition of the volume is laudable and the focus on Viking Age Åland much appreciated, since this archipelago in the Baltic Sea region, although situated centrally along both west-east and south-north directed seabound traffic, seldom receives academic attention in its own right. Despite the very central geographical position of the Åland Islands during the Viking Age, extensively characterised by maritime connections and related large-scale changes, Åland is often considered a periphery or a border zone of adjacent cultural areas. The main strength of the present volume is that it manages to emphasise Viking Age Åland as being a field to be studied on its own premises,

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and not just an appendix to more highlighted regions. This emphasis is also well in line with similar conclusions that have been increasingly articulated in more recent research on Åland during prehistoric times. However, the reader seeking to find new understanding and/or knowledge about the general current state of research on Viking Age in Åland – as the title suggests the volume is going to deliver – might become disappointed. The title of the present volume does not entirely reflect the prevailing content of the book that has a greater emphasis on the search for what is specifically “Ålandic”, using different sources, than on Viking Age in Åland. That being said, the volume does offer a number of high-quality studies inspirational for new hypotheses about Viking Age Åland.

In 12 articles of varying length and quality, 13 specialists focus on their respective fields. Although the disciplinary affiliation of the contributors is not explicitly stated, five different disciplines are represented: archaeology, folklore, history, linguistics and geopolitics. Of the 12 contributions, and in addition to the preface, three editors of the volume stand for three individual chapters and two editors are further involved in three additional contributions in the publication; thus, the editors are authors and co-authors on half of the chapters. It is well into the second part of the preface the reader is informed that the present volume is not just the edited volume, but also the result of a seminar-workshop. In my view, this fact should have been explicit already on the cover as this does have an impact on what the reader can expect – and why.

The volume is organised into three parts following the introductory section. In order to provide a framework to the chapters, all three sections also have their own separate introductions demonstrating that the editors have worked hard towards producing an understanding of a continuous, coherent flow of ideas. Furthermore, in order to interweave the discussions in different chapters, a conscious cross-referencing to other chapters in the volume has been conducted throughout all three sections of the publication. According to the editors, the book is meant to be read from the beginning to the end. However, the chapters stand well on their own without making for an uneven reading experience; thus, one can easily move through the volume selecting chapters that appeal.

The general introductory section starts with the preface, which contextualises the overall goal and process related to the volume, and continues with an overview article by Jan-Erik Tomtlund about the Viking Age Åland, as we know it, primarily from archaeological sources. The overview synopsis is intended to guide the reader through the wide variety of aspects connected to Åland during the Viking Age and provide an important background to the following chapters, but the abundant ideas and statements presented in relation to themes such as the society, economy, technology, religion etc. of Åland during the Viking Age lack any references. As this contribution is not a self-

contained study and, furthermore, as it is the only comprehensive examination of Viking Age Åland in the present volume, the lack of references is troublesome and a serious drawback. It is also very problematic when considering the cross-referencing to this chapter in the following chapters.

The first part of the volume includes three chapters that are all, in one way or the other, dealing with historiographical matters. The focus is on the work of few selected scholars. The interpretations of the early Finnish historian Karl August Bomansson and the archaeologist Matts Dreijer are discussed in an article by Jenni Lucenius in the context of political history writing and regional identity on Åland. The idea of the folklorist Kaarle Krohn from the 1920s on the plot potentially including the Åland Islands in Kalevalaic poetry (The Kalevala – the national epic of Karelia and Finland) is dissected in the contribution by Joonas Ahola who also emphasizes the nationalistic aspects in the early research. The first section is closed with the lengthy and highly critical chapter by Per Olof Sjöstrand, in which the issue of early medieval settlement discontinuity *versus* continuity in Åland is considered based on the arguments of the place name researcher Lars Hellberg, the cultural geographer Birgitta Roeck Hansen and the art historian Åsa Ringbom.

There is a number of works written about Ålandic historiography and regional identity on Åland² and the idea of Bomansson and Dreijer both working in the framework of national idealism is not new, but it is always useful to be reminded how our political environment affects our interpretations and of the necessity to develop methodologies to alleviate this. Neither is the reminder of the nationalistic dimension in the early interpretations of The Kalevala groundbreaking. However, the systematically analytical and thorough approach on Åland as a potential referent to the poetic image of an island in the Kalevalaic epic is well developed, making this chapter, in general, an interesting read. While the conclusion concerning the referents of the poetic images in the past states the impossibility of certainty, the source-critical scrutiny of the potential of Åland as a referent is relevant for building a framework for the final conclusion that the poetic image of an island is, above all, reflecting the perception of islands, including Åland, in Finno-Karelian Kalevalaic epic tradition.

² One of the most recent and comprehensive treatments studying regional identity making that is coloured by national idealism among other things, and including Åland is the research project from 2010-2013: "Islands of Identity: Identity Building on Bornholm, Gotland, Åland, Saaremaa and Hiiumaa, 1800-2000".

The final chapter in the first part also delves into familiar areas, and does so in detail. It seems to me, unfortunately, that even though the ambition is an interdisciplinary synthesis on the topic of the early medieval settlement on Åland, the chapter instead separates the results from different branches of science. The focus on details in this article, evident from the 98 footnotes, on occasion very lengthy, tends to overshadow the analytical discussion. Being heavily loaded with facts, it might be inevitable that a few can be inaccurate, such as the statement that there are no Tuna-names on Åland. The author seems firmly set on demonstrating settlement discontinuity, and has chosen his source material accordingly, relying predominantly on the history/etymology of place names. I find myself longing for the author to explore alternative avenues of explanation, not least since the discussion on the early medieval settlement on Åland has been on-going for a long time and the unwillingness on behalf of place name researchers to consider approaching the matter in a more nuanced manner is beginning to feel tiresome, especially as there is a growing body of research results from archaeology contradicting the settlement discontinuity theory.

The second part of the volume, consisting of four chapters, starts with the empirical and jumps into abstract reasoning; there is an abrupt shift from a very particular focus on prehistoric Åland to matters with no direct relevance for Åland and discussions remaining abstract in the interpretation of Viking Age Åland. All these chapters, however, represent well-organised and systematic case studies raising interesting questions that yield productive analyses.

The more empirical part of the second section of the volume includes two chapters. The chapter by archaeologists Rudolf Gustavsson, Jan-Erik Tomtlund, Josefina Kennebjörk and Jan Storå discuss cultural change on Åland based on Late Iron Age grave finds and osteology. The authors are doing an excellent job of providing and contextualising a detailed analysis of both old and new material, approaching Åland without having to rely too much on preconceptions derived from the archaeology of other regions. As such, this chapter is one of the strongest in the volume providing the reader with up-to-date knowledge and an emerging understanding of the diversity and complexity of the society on Åland during the Late Iron Age. The chapter by Teija Alenius on the Iron Age landscape development on Åland based on pollen and macrofossil data adds an important empirical insight into the increasing human impact on the island and a continuity of habitation. This chapter is followed by a focus on the ethnographic representations in the saga literature by Sirpa Aalto, who discusses the group called *Finnar* in Old Norse sources. Although the author mentions Åland in this discussion, Åland does not appear anywhere in Old Norse sources and it is clear that the saga literature, however fascinating a source for the Viking Age North, is not suitable as a source material for the direct study of Viking Age Åland. Similar

to Ahola's contribution in the first section, what we get here is not definite information about the subject matter, but rather a reflection on how the “matter” was perceived, i.e. how *Finnar* were perceived by the authors of old Norse sources. The second part of the volume closes with the intriguing topic of the language of Viking Age Åland by Joonas Ahola, Frog and Johan Schalin. The exciting and well-substantiated analysis provided in this chapter suggests multilingual competence in Åland during Viking Age, but admits the impossibility to identify the conventional language.

The third part of the volume sets off with continued focus on the immaterial traces of the past. Place-names are used as a source material both in the chapter by Johan Schalin and Frog in order to highlight the somewhat self-evident significance of seafaring on Åland, and in the chapter by Mikko Heikkilä on the chronological aspects of the linguistic situation in Åland and southwest Finland during the end of prehistoric times. If the present volume is read successively, at this point, there have been four consecutive chapters where place-name evidence has been used to varying degree to answer the questions posed by the authors. Although the choice of source material is dependent on the questions posed, the extensive usage of place-name evidence in this volume might wrongly imply that place-names are the best source-material for the study of Viking Age Åland. This impression is further enforced by the fact that, generally speaking, there is not enough integration of data and research results from other disciplines – something that is directly contradicting the set aim of the volume. Therefore, it is very satisfying that the third part of the volume concludes with two chapters that are truly insightful and stimulating contributions, brilliantly managing to offer new ideas and suggestions through a successful interdisciplinary synthesis.

The chapter by Lassi Heininen, Jan Storå, Frog and Joonas Ahola is a contribution that offers the reader fresh ideas and insights into Viking Age in Åland. The authors hypothesize that Åland was politically divided between a north-eastern and a south-western territory, both with different cultural traits and contact networks; a complex societal order is suggested. This theory is substantiated by an analysis of the distribution of the hill forts as well as of differences in the archaeological record between the two entities. Furthermore, with this as a background, the idea of the *longue durée* of identity and territoriality is examined opening up avenues for, among other things, interpreting the historical phenomena of periods following the Viking Age. This chapter is an absolute recommendation for those seeking an intriguing and informative study on Viking Age Åland, as is also the final chapter of the volume by Frog discussing Ålandic mythology both theoretically and methodologically. Although the conclusions of prehistoric mythology remain largely abstract, the probabilities are made substantial by the employment of an interdisciplinary approach with a particular empirical focus on the distinctly

Ålandic cultural tradition of placing small paws made of clay in cremation burials of the Late Iron Age.

To sum up, given that the present volume states to delve into the topic of Viking Age Åland, it is surprising that there is so little archaeological data used and only one original archaeological research study. While more uncommon perspectives on the topic are introduced, I feel that the period is largely approached from angles that are not maximizing the probability of reaching a comprehensive grasp, which also results in giving the very misleading impression of a lack of archaeological evidence regarding Viking Age in Åland. As a result, the volume suffers from a certain incoherence, which is unfortunate, since substantial thematic coherence is important when the title of an edited volume suggests consistency. However, it could be argued that chapters of real quality are even more essential. In my opinion, the present volume contains a number of worthwhile contributions that make it, in general, recommendable, but it would still have benefitted from a more appropriate title.