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## Review:

### Fibula, Fabula, Fact. The Viking Age in Finland

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## Review: *Fibula, Fabula, Fact. The Viking Age in Finland*

*Fibula, Fabula, Fact. The Viking Age in Finland.* Edited by Jonas Ahola, Frog, and Clive Tolley. Studia Fennica, Historia 18. Finnish Literature Society. Helsinki. 519 pages,

The Viking Era is one of the most well researched time periods in Scandinavian archaeology, but in contrast our knowledge of what took place in the neighbouring country across the Baltic Sea is significantly more vague. *Fibula, Fabula, Fact* is therefore a welcome addition to the international literature on Viking studies.

From an international perspective, Finland has largely been excluded from Viking Age research. Focus on Vikings in the East has instead been on ancient Rus' and the lands southeast of Staraya Ladoga. Our understanding of the Viking Age in Finland is built on limited and diverse sources, heavily relying on analogical material, and, to an extent, assumptions. The current volume has taken on the task of merging contemporary research from across disciplines to present a collected picture of an up-to-date interpretation of Viking Age Finland, while also discussing the potential significance the concept applied in a native context.

The relevance in assigning a 'Viking Age' to Finland can be questioned; cultural traits generally attributed to Scandinavian Vikings are rare, and no

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Norse settlement has been identified in Finland. As pointed out by Ahola and Frog in the introduction, both as a geographical entity, and as an historical era 'Viking Age Finland' is a foreign construction.

Consequently, the aim of the editors of this volume is to negotiate new definitions of the Viking Age as a historical period in the cultural area associated with modern day Finland and Finnish Karelia from an endemic perspective. A second ambition is to identify a working definition for Viking Age Finland, contextualise the concept chronologically as well as geographically, and to contrast the traditional understanding of the era against the complexities of defining cultural identities in the past.

This contextualisation is suggested in the characterisation of the Viking Age as a period of migration and movement, and continuous renegotiations of cultural areas. Linguistics as well as archaeology supports such a characterisation.

The designation of the Viking Age as AD 800-1050 is claimed to be an arbitrary date in Finnish context, adopted from external conditions. This has led researchers to collect data within the set chronological restrictions of the period, rather than to construct a culturally relevant periodisation based on the data. Internal developments suggest an adjustment of the chronology.

A movement from Western Finland to Karelia, distinguishing for the Viking Age migration, can be seen already in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, probably advanced by the founding of Staraya Ladoga in AD 753. Thus, it is suggested that the beginning of the Viking Age should be moved back at to AD 750. This temporal relocation of the start of the Viking Age is hardly controversial. In a Scandinavian context, it is generally accepted that the social and cultural expressions we refer to as Viking Age were established already in the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

Similarly, the vernacular cultural processes distinguishing Viking Age in Finland did not stop with raiding activities in west (1066), and Finland was Christianised considerably later than its Eastern and Western neighbours. In addition, the centralisation of Royal power that occurs in Scandinavia with the end of the era is not paralleled in Finland. The first bishop of Finland was not established until 1150, and 1249 marks the assertion of political, economic and religious authority in the region. Thus, based on internal developments, the editors suggest a redefinition of Viking Age in Finland to AD 750-1250, with a Late Viking Age of 1050-1250.

The reasons for redefining the current time periods are sound, especially with reference to the currently used 'Crusade Period' (1050-1300) which seems

inspired by events far outside Finland and largely anachronistic. However, rebranding the period as 'Late Viking Age' brings about a completely new set of problems. Although established on internal processes, the movements and migrations identified as characteristic for 'Viking Age Finland' can be related to the foundation of Staraya Ladoga, and the eastern long distance trade network established, at least partially, by Scandinavian Vikings. The domestic developments can thus be directly linked to Norse activities in the east, something that is highlighted several times by different authors of this volume (e.g. Raninen and Wessman, Talvio). The focus on the reciprocal relationship between small scale and large scale, local and international, is indeed one of great strengths of this volume. It therefore seems unlikely that the internal development should not be affected by the breakdown of the same network, and the changes in economic as well as social relations this would have brought. A chronological void is then created between the end of the Scandinavian Viking Age and the onset of a politically defined 'medieval' era, which the editors suggest to be filled with the Late Viking Age. However, I do question the validity of defining a period on negative space.

As the editors state in the afterword, periodization is an analytical construct, and a local 'Late Viking Age' independent from Scandinavian developments may thus not be a suitable label for this period. A general framework for defining the 'Viking Age' is already established in international scholarship, and late developments peripheral to Scandinavian activity stand little chance to reform this framework. Additionally, not all authors in the book adopt the new chronology; Laakso for example, chooses to stay with the 'old' chronological definition, based on the archaeological evidence. Perhaps this is the more realistic way of dealing with the chronology, until a truly localised definition of the period between 1050 and 1250 can be agreed upon.

As a whole the book appears somewhat uneven, some chapters are substantial, both when it comes to page numbers, material, and issues covered, while others are stand out as rather skinny. This is maybe understandable given the character of the book, and the wide range of disciplines covered, but some chapters have considerably more influence than others. Despite the carefully thought out structure of the volume, and apparent attempts to present it as a coherent whole, it will most probably be used as a book of references. What holds the volume together is the very comprehensible introduction by Ahola and Frog, which clearly presents the ambitions behind the book, and raises many very interesting discussions. The afterword by Ahola, Frog and Tolley brings it all to an equally coherent conclusion.

The studies based on archaeological material and language belong to the more successful ones, and in the discussion the fuse between these disciplines is seamless. Linguistic (Tolley, Kallio, Kuzmin) and toponymic (Leiviskä,

Schalin) evidence reveal Viking Age Finland as a dynamic and versatile arena of interaction and cultural exchange between Sámi, Finnish, and Slavic groups. The Norse influence on these processes is restricted, and most visible in seamanship and trade. Linguistic research corroborates with archaeology, and reinforces the tendencies identified in the archaeological material. The potential for extended collaboration between these fields of research is substantial, as pointed out by the authors, and may open up entirely new fields of enquiry. These chapters are very convincing, and important contributions to the volume.

The diversity, fluctuation and adaptability of the era is evidently present in the archaeological material, suggesting a reorganisation of arable land, and changing zones of activity, as highlighted by Kuusela, and Laakso. The lack of archaeological material, mainly a result of limited excavations, unfortunately reduces these discussions to propositions, propositions that could be strengthened with data from palynology and similar studies within the field of environmental archaeology, as suggested by Alenius. These studies, however, remain to be done.

Ahola's discussion on epic tradition and heroic poetry is interesting and can be read with great benefit, but remains quite speculative, as does Korpela's. Korpela's discussion on traditional landscape, indigenous worldviews, and the relation between traditional and Christian time and constitution of space, is entertaining, but creates many questions, maybe more than it answers. A more balanced discussion on mythology and mythological thinking is presented by Frog.

It is clear from the different chapters in the volume that research on Viking Age Finland is in different developmental stages between disciplines. What is equally apparent is that all disciplines benefit from an open and collaborative methodology.

In taking a cross-disciplinary approach to the Viking Age in Finland, the authors of this volume above all manages to show how diverse and heterogeneous the era is, and not least, how eagerly more research is needed before we can reach a comprehensive picture of the Finnish Viking Age. As with most edited volumes, some chapters will have more impact than others, but this is a comprehensive and useful book that fills a knowledge gap for any scholar with an interest in the Nordic Viking Age.