

## VIKING AGE FINLAND – THE LAND OF SAMIS AND FINNS

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*Ahola, J. & Frog with Tolley, C. Fibula, Fabula, Fact. The Viking Age in Finland. (Studia Fennica Historica, 18.) Finnish Literature Society, Helsinki, 2014. 519 pp. ISBN 978-952-222-603-7*

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The recently finished research project at the University of Helsinki, *The Viking Age in Finland* (VAF), has resulted in two large collections of articles. One of them takes into consideration Finland as a whole, another focuses on the archipelago of Åland. Although both books are published by now, only the first will be treated in this review, postponing a proper description of the Åland-book to the nearest future.

To begin with: the *Fibula-Fabula-Fact*-book is well written and fascinating to read, and can certainly be recommended to everyone interested in the Viking Age in Finland. The aim of the project has been to involve as many interdisciplinary approaches as available, which has been particularly successful in including such disciplines as language studies and folklore. Language and particularly folklore studies dominate the book, leaving archaeology, the traditionally prevailing discipline in Viking Age research, somewhat in the background. The majority of innovative and novel ideas about the Viking Age in Finland is presented in folklore or language articles, while articles treating different aspects of archaeology or numismatics predominantly remain overviews of the present level of research. It is, however, not meant as criticism – one of the best merits of the book is, probably intentionally, a comprehensive overview of the existing approaches and possibilities to develop further cooperation between different disciplines.

The book consists of 21 articles arranged in three blocks: Time, Space and People. Since it is difficult and probably not very practical to consider all the articles individually in this review, only some more general aspects and approaches have been analysed in the following. The editors of the collection have presented a symbiosis based on the results of the VAF-project in a long introduction and a somewhat shorter summary, including ideas and theories from all contributors. The editors are folklorists and linguists, and archaeologists can easily notice that, in the summarizing writings, the opinions based on these disciplines dominate over archaeological approaches. The presented new interpretations and ideas are intriguing, even though sometimes unusual and in some aspects discussable.

First of all, it is relevant to draw attention to the somewhat confusing use of terms for indicating ethnic groups, which emerges due to the interdisciplinary and, at least partly, international character of the research. Finno-Ugrian ethnic groups living around the Baltic Sea have been marked with the term *Finnic*; only some authors use or refer to the term *Baltic/Balto Finnic*, which, at least in Estonian academic publications, is still quite a widespread name. In some disciplines, e.g. archaeology, the same groups have frequently been called with a general name *Baltic Finnish*, which clearly refers to the fact that a great part of people indicated by the term *Finnic* actually lived or still live in the region that in the present time is normally called Baltic.

In the book, the term *Finnic* is used as a broader term, while *Finnish* indicates, accordingly, only the inhabitants of the present-day Finland. However, *Finnic* and *Finnish* have sometimes been used indiscriminately and for indicating the same phenomena, which might confuse researchers, who are not very familiar with the issue to draw the erroneous conclusion that *Finnic* equals *Finnish*. To make such a mistake is even more likely when we remember that in older archaeological literature the term *Finnish* sometimes really was used for all the Baltic Finnish or, according to the terminology in the *Fibula-Fabula-Fact*-book, Finnic groups. It is getting even more problematic, when to take into consideration that the term *Baltic* is frequently used not only for Viking Age ethnic Baltic groups (who lived in modern Lithuania and most of modern Latvia), but for all inhabitants in the present-day Baltic states, thus including ethnically *Finnic* Estonians and Livs.

Several articles in the book present a linguistic picture of Viking Age Finland that is in many aspects new, or at least has not yet become very widespread knowledge. We learn that Sami-habitation was much broader than previously believed both in Finland and the present-day north-west Russia, and that the areas were also inhabited by Proto-European peoples of unknown ethnic background, who assimilated into the Samis. The habitation area of ethnically Finnic groups embraced in the Iron Age only a narrow coastal zone in present-day west and south-west Finland. It has inspired several contributors to discuss the terms *Finland* and *Finnish*, as these names could have been used in the Viking Age. The ethnic situation in the Viking Age, as it is reconstructed in the book, also points to present-day Estonia as the core area of (Baltic) Finnic cultures. Several authors refer to Staraya Ladoga as a kind of centre for Finnic groups in the Viking Age, and consider regions east of present-day Estonia as central habitation areas for Finnic groups as well. However, these areas, Ingermanland and Votic lands, have always been regions with much less habitation than Estonia due to extensive wetlands and scarcity of arable land. The image of these areas as central is probably driven from folklore, from the great number of songs collected in this region. Nevertheless, folklore often survives best in peripheral districts that might never had had any economic or political central position.

Data from different disciplines indicate that the diffusion of ethnic Finnish groups to inland districts of Finland, as well as to present-day north-west Russia, gained momentum in the Viking Age or in the last centuries before that. Here it is easy to see possibilities to develop theories about the role of Finnic/Baltic Finnic groups in the eastern expansion of Vikings that took place approximately at the same time. Some authors have emphasized emigration from southern Estonia to the basin of Northern Dvina River, and from the coastal areas of Finland to the southern banks of Lake Ladoga. The latter is archaeologically known as one of the few regions where it is possible to talk of broader Scandinavian (agricultural) colonization (e.g. Duczko 2004, 96 ff.). This estimation is predominantly based on a number of artefacts found in sites on the southern coast of the lake, which have been considered Scandinavian. Great part of these artefacts (but not all!) represent, however, types that in the Viking Age were widespread not only in Scandinavia but also in Finnish and Estonian coastal areas.

Archaeology is probably not sufficiently represented in the discussions about chronology as it appears in several articles in the book. Although it was not considered necessary in most articles, written by archaeologists, to change the existing chronological system in the Finnish Late Iron Age

(Viking Age + Crusade Period), Joonas Ahola and Frog still introduce a new chronology in their summarizing articles. According to these, the Finnish Viking Age should cover the period 750–1250 AD. The main argument for the change of view is that the international Viking Age chronology (800–1050) is based on events that happened in the British Isles and have no direct connection with Finland. However, such a change would definitely bring along a need to provide all future publications with explanation why an internationally agreed term is understood differently in Finland. It can also be argued that the suggestion lacks a nuanced interpretation of archaeological evidence.

Ahola and Frog consider Viking Age as a homogeneous period that lasted several centuries, regardless of the economic, political and cultural differences that existed even inside the “classical” Viking Age, leaving alone the whole period 750–1250 (e.g. Mägi 2011). As for the eastern Vikings, one cannot overestimate the significance of the 10th century: the amount of Scandinavian artefacts in present-day Russia increased abruptly at the beginning of the 10th century, and disappeared even more suddenly around 1000 AD (e.g. Pushkina 2004). It was characteristic for the late 10th and early 11th century that several trade centres around the Baltic Sea disappeared or lost their importance (this also happened with Staraya Ladoga, presumed centre of Finnic groups – the international find material ceases clearly at the beginning of the 11th century; see e.g. Duczko 2004, 86 ff.; Sindbæk 2005, 210 ff.) and the inflow of dirhams ceased, which both probably indicated severe crisis in the eastern trade (see e.g. Skre 2007).

As for the Estonian archaeological evidence that in several aspect can be compared with the Finnish one, changes around 1000 AD can easily be followed. Several hill-forts were abandoned and new ones erected, adjacent settlements of hill-forts disappeared, numerous artefacts were gradually deposited in graves (Mägi 2015, 9 ff.). Especially the last phenomenon that, although on a smaller scale, is also characteristic for Finland, seems to indicate changes in the mythological world view, and should therefore be worth of consideration when reconstructing the Finnic mythology. The big alterations that took place at the beginning of the 11th century have inspired several Scandinavian archaeologists to end the Viking Age around 1000 instead of 1050 (e.g. Skre 2007; Pedersen 2014), which can possibly also be applicable for Estonia and perhaps Finland.

In articles dealing with language history and folklore, it seems to be quite a common practise that authors have referred to their earlier publications, and not argued for their ideas in the present book. The earlier publications, however, are not always immediately accessible for readers. Frog, for instance, has presented a novel view of earlier Finno-Ugrian mythology, interpreting it as very male-dominated. He is even constructed a superior god called *Ilmari* as the head of a pantheon consisting of other gods. He believes that the mythology was practiced by shamans, who were later replaced by an entirely male *tietäjä*-institution. However, as these views are not accepted by all folklorists as a matter of course (for earlier ideas, see e.g. Pentikäinen 1999), some kind of argumentation would have been useful, rather than simply presenting the ideas as facts and relaying on them in all further discussion.

The same goes for some articles dealing with languages, notably in the introduction written by Ahola and Frog. As an archaeologist it is difficult to avoid asking, whether, for instance, the distribution of language groups demonstrated on the map on page 52 should be taken seriously? It is in complete contradiction with the present knowledge that in all northern Latvia down to the Daugava River (Baltic) Finnic languages were spoken as late as around 1000 AD, while all of Curonia around the same time was inhabited by people who spoke Baltic languages.

The former remarks are directly connected with the chief weakness and criticism on editing the book – that Estonian, as well as Livic or Northern Curonian language and folklore material has practically been left out of the discussions. Evidence from southern (Baltic) Finnic areas, on the other hand, appears in various archaeological articles, as well as in some articles dealing with language history; however, these (selected) writings seem not have had any influence on the overall

syntheses. The summarizing articles, mainly written by Ahola and Frog, demonstrate not only the lack of information, but probably also the lack of interest in Estonian or southern (Baltic) Finnic material, as indicated by the list of references with only two Estonian publications. The situation is the more curious because the same researchers have, although mainly relying on their colleagues, reconstructed Estonia as the core area of (Baltic) Finnic cultures. Neither can it be said that the book focused only on Finland, and Estonia was left out because of that. On the contrary, Finland is not treated as an isolated area, and its contacts with Scandinavia and eastern Finno-Ugric cultures have deserved a lot of attention.

I assume that if Estonia had been included in the discussion, it would have potentially changed several ideas and interpretations presented in the book, especially concerning communication and folklore. It is, for instance, a widespread opinion that folklore collected from Estonia and east from Estonia is conspicuously female-dominated (see e.g. Mets 2003 and references; Metsvahi 2014), and could therefore challenge Ahola's and Frog's ideas that motives of strong women, as they are represented in Kalevala, are culturally influenced by Scandinavia. The makeup of stories and songs for Kalevala has been collected from peripheral areas (see e.g. map p. 364); one may, consequently, pose a rhetoric question of why should motives of sea-faring and Viking-like adventures necessarily point to west Finland, rather than to the Estonian islands or the north Estonian coast? The latter was intensively used in Viking Age trade and communication, and is in fact situated much closer to the collection area of the songs than west Finland.

Most researchers, including several of those contributing to the book, believe that the prevailing Viking Age trade routes ran along the north Estonian coast. The Estonian northern coast was, contrary to the Finnish southern coast, densely populated during the Viking Age. As for dirham hoards, north Estonian finds are nearly as numerous as they are on Åland. The latter phenomenon has, however, not deserved attention in the summarizing articles that instead try in several places to present Finns as the (Baltic) Finnic chief agents within the eastern trade. The small number of dirham finds in mainland Finland has consequently been explained away by a lack of cultural need to accumulate silver. However, looking at the habitation area of all (Baltic) Finnic groups, it needs a better explanation, why silver was not accumulated in mainland Finland, while other areas inhabited by ethnically (and probably culturally) similar groups were marked by abundant dirham-finds?

One may assume that the international trade route closely united south-west Finland and the coastal areas in Estonia, particularly because similar languages made it easier to communicate with each other. Archaeological culture in coastal Estonia should therefore be a relevant factor when interpreting Viking Age developments in coastal Finnish regions. Here it is hypothetically possible to challenge another quite widespread opinion – that the inhabitants of Åland might have been bilingual and accordingly played an essential role in binding together the Viking Age network. Still, the archaeological evidence on Åland is so strongly Scandinavian that it makes it possible to argue whether the reconstructed bilingualism is true or just a projection from modern political situation? The inhabitants of Åland are not particularly bilingual even today. It makes perhaps much more sense to suggest Scandinavian-Finnic bilingualism in the coastal districts of Estonia and south-west Finland, where the material culture was strongly Eastern-Scandinavian regarding the warrior sphere, while the rest of artefacts belonged to local types. More than anything else such a division in artefactual evidence should be interpreted as a synthesis of two cultures.

The authors and particularly the editors have clearly emphasized that the results presented in the book are by no means final, but rather meant for introducing possibilities for future research and cooperation. As it can be understood from personal conversations, the need to widen the geographic area of research has also been realized and thus put forward for future direction. We can just summarize that a very good start has been done and several matters for future discussions pointed out. Now it is only to await new and even more intriguing interpretations.

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