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Entering the Viking Age through the Baltic

Introduction

The 8th century is generally regarded as the prelude to the Viking Age proper. The historical narrative of the Viking Age is commonly thought of as beginning at the time when raiding Scandinavians became visible in a western European context, mainly during the 9th and 10th centuries following the attack on Lindisfarne in 793 AD. This particular event has come to characterise the starting point for the Viking expansion and has even affected the perception of the geography of the Viking world. It is in every way a simplified and Anglocentric construction – something we are all aware of, but it becomes even more inadequate when considered from an eastern Scandinavian perspective.

Approaching the questions of how, when and why the Viking Age started are at the heart of the *Viking Phenomenon* research project (VR 2015-00466). The interactions and developments in the Baltic region during the century preceding the Viking Age, may well give new insights and a better understanding of this process. Although the Viking Age is a historical construct, the emergence of this phenomenon as such has left traces both in the archaeological and textual records. Raiding, expansion, urbanisation, trade and technical innovation are all features that have come to be considered as characteristic of Viking Age society. While these most likely represent the continuation of processes that had been underway for some time, the Viking Age is the period when these features become archaeologically and historically visible for the first time. This paper provides a reflection on the importance of the Baltic region for the development of what we characterise as the Viking Age. This is perhaps a more natural starting point considering that at the end of the 8th century, interactions along the Baltic coast had been going on for centuries.

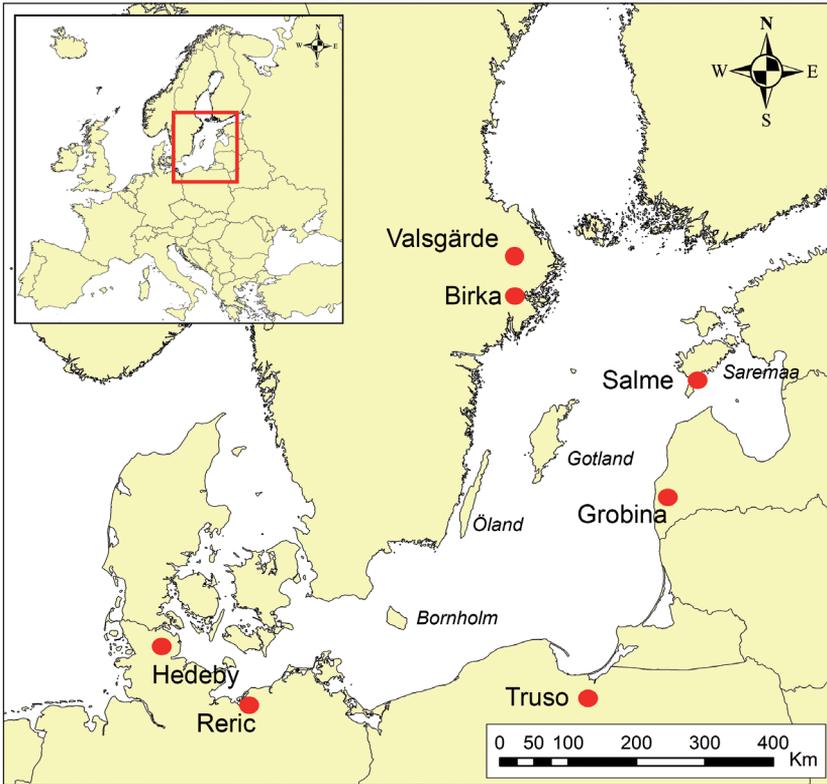


Fig 1. Map over the Baltic area with places named in the text marked out. Map by Laila Kitzler Åhfeldt, Swedish National Heritage Board.

An early raid

An intrinsic element of the Viking Age is overseas raiding. With the recent discovery of the spectacular boat burial site of Salme, the starting point for this development can be moved back in time. Around 750 AD, two boats were placed on the shore of the Estonian island of Saaremaa (Ösel). They contained over 40 men, many with evidence of sharp force trauma indicating a violent death. The equipment of the crew, including some 40 swords and other types of weaponry, were mainly of Scandinavian type, and recent strontium isotope analyses support an east Scandinavian origin for the expedition (Konsa et al. 2009; Peets et al. 2010; Peets et al. 2012; Price et al. 2016). The close parallels in burial custom and material culture between Salme and the boat burial cemetery of Valsgärde in Uppland, Sweden, suggests that



the crew members of the two boats were on their way from, or back to the Lake Mälaren region. The interpretation is further supported by isotopic data, though the conclusive report of the finds and contexts is a work in progress (Price et al. 2016) (Fig. 2).

The aim of the expedition is still a matter of speculation, but the condition of the skeletons and the quantity of weapons suggests a military campaign, raid or diplomatic mission. Did the event in fact mark the beginning of a new phase of interaction along the Baltic coast?

When the burial of the two boats on Saaremaa took place, there had been settlements with a strong Scandinavian presence, occasionally described as colonies, in the Eastern part of the Baltic for some time. Close to the Latvian coast and on the river Ālande, the modern town of Grobina holds the remains of a Late Iron Age complex with settlement areas, hill-fort and several cemeteries. Though only partly excavated, the cemeteries are thought to include over 3 000 Scandinavian-style burials, as well as numerous graves of local Curonians.

Fig. 2. Reconstruction drawing of the boat burial Salme I, by Þórhallur Þráinsson, © Neil Price, with permission.

Less is known about the settlement area, but thick and dark cultural layers, a so-called “Black Earth” area, has been identified stretching along the river (Petrenko & Urtāns 1995:14f; Gustin 2004:60–62). The activities in the settlement area has so far been dated from the 8th to 9th centuries, contemporary with the Scandinavian burials. The activities included iron working, bronze casting, weaving and bone and antler crafts (Petrenko & Urtāns 1995:19). Despite the presence of crafts in the settlement area, prehistoric Grobina was mainly an agricultural society. It is perhaps for this reason that the site was not recognised as a townlike settlement, unlike Truso or Staraja Ladoga. Like these sites the population seems to have been rather mixed, but based on the graves, the Scandinavians were in the clear majority, which might account for the designation of the settlement as a colony (cf. Virse 2017).

New technology

There is another interesting feature in the Salme burial context that might be of particular importance, or even a prerequisite, for the Viking expansion: the introduction of the sail. Though the exact starting point for the use of sails in Scandinavia and the Baltic is not yet known, the first archaeological evidence of sailing boats, apart from imagery on picture stones, is provided by one of the two Salme boats. Its construction included a keel, which was needed for sailing, and fragments of textile that once covered the boat have been interpreted as the remains of sail cloth (Peets et al. 2013; Price et al. 2016). The Salme boat is contemporary with images of sailing boats on the Gotlandic picture stones. Though the starting point for the motif has proven difficult to fix, it recurrently appears as a prominent feature on picture stones in the 8th century (Oehrl 2019:24–25, 94), thus further underlining the impression of this relatively new technical development (Fig. 3).

It is easy to overlook just how demanding sail production was. It required extensive amounts of raw material that then had to be processed, spun and woven, a time-consuming task that engaged many people. The production of one piece of sail cloth measuring 25 m² is estimated

Fig. 3. Picture stone from Lillbjärs, Gotland.
Photo: Gabriel Hildebrand, Swedish History Museum.



to have taken one person two years of full-time work (Andersson Strand 2011:4). The cloth was then covered in tar and fitted with rope, both with their own processes of production (Hennius 2018; Sundström 2018; cf. Andersen et al. 1989). The making of sails constituted a technological advancement that required a new level of organisation and planning.

Advanced craft production and the emergence of towns

Although perhaps not a requirement for, but rather as a result of this innovative kind of complex and highly demanding crafts production, a new type of settlement started to appear in the Baltic. The mid-8th century introduced the emergence of town-like structures. These Viking towns had features that we recognise from medieval towns, but have been more strictly reclassified as proto-towns. Regardless of the definition, these settlements constituted something different from the surrounding rural area, the economy was essentially non-agricultural, and trade and crafts were the main activities (cf. Callmer 1994:51 and there cited references, Kalmring 2016; Hedenstierna-Jonson 2016).

Two well-known examples of these townlike structures were Birka in present day Sweden, a node on the western side of the Baltic, and Staraja Ladoga by Lake Ladoga in north-western Russia, which was connected to the Gulf of Finland via the Neva River. Both sites were established in the 750s, and from their founding already displayed the characteristics of a town. One recurring and possibly diagnostic feature of these sites is the presence of advanced and complex production processes. Staraja Ladoga was, for example, the first site known to include more advanced forms of iron production on the Eastern side of the Baltic and the textile production in Birka was unparalleled in the surrounding region (Peets 1995; 2003; Andersson 2003; Callmer 2003; Sindbæk 2017; Andersson Strand & Heller 2017; Hedenstierna-Jonson in print [2020]). Both types of crafts included the import of raw materials as well as a complex production process that required various skills, perhaps even several craftsmen. Production took time and preparation, and a certain level of continuity in order to acquire material, produce and supply potential consumers. The production of sails is a good example of this.

But it was not only the Viking world that saw the emergence of towns. As discussed by Adamczyk in this volume, the South coast of the Baltic saw a similar development. On the southern coast, sites like Truso/Elblag in present day Poland and Reric/Groß Strömkendorf in the German state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, emerged at approximately the same time as Birka and Staraja Ladoga (cf. Müller-Wille 2002; Messal 2017 and there cited references).

The population within these sites was mixed, probably with variations in composition, but with a relatively small portion of locals compared to other types of settlements. As summarised by Adamczyk, it was the long-distance and cross-continental trading contacts that connected them. Archaeologically these connections are visible in the material culture, which comprises objects with varying places of origin, reflecting the heterogenous character of the population. There are also shared social and religious practices, including the emergence of new forms of practices that seem to be an outcome of the urban-like environment and long-distance networks of communication and interaction. The towns constituted a vibrant and dynamic social environment, as discussed by Kilger in this volume, and were milieus where new ideas and knowledge developed (e.g. the first appearance of the younger futhark in the 8th century Viking town of Ribe, see Kilger in this volume).

However, recent genetic and isotopic studies indicate that the archaeological material only provides part of a complex picture (e.g. Krzewinska et al. 2018; Arcini 2018; Hedenstierna-Jonson et al., in print [2020]). Rural sites in general had a more homogeneous and local population compared to the urban-like sites. But while differences in the composition of rural and urban populations would be expected, the studies have also shown that there are variations between the so-called urban-like sites, indicating differences in structure and function. The results indicate that the composition of a population could be a key feature when determining the character of the site, separating the truly urban settlements from other central places and market spaces.

The particulars of the Baltic Sea – land, coast and water

The land areas surrounding the Baltic were not countries in any modern sense, but there was a political geography of sorts. It included regions defined by the people who inhabited them, but also areas connected to

powerful political entities or even early kingdoms. An insight into the situation in the Western Baltic is given by the accounts of Wulfstan, travelling from Hedeby to Truso in the 9th century:

“Wulfstan said that he travelled from the Heaths [Hedeby], that he was in Truso in seven days and nights, that the boat was all the way running under sail. Wendland was on his starboard side, and on his port side were Langeland and Lolland and Falster and Skåne, and these lands are all subject to Denmark. And then the land of the Burgendas [Bornholm] was on our port side and they have their own king. Then after the land of the Burgendas there were on our port side these lands, which are called first island of the people of Blekinge and Möre and Öland and Gotland, and these lands are subject to the Svear. And Wendland was on our starboard side all the way to the mouth of Vistula.” (Wulfstan’s *Voyage*).

Although Wulfstan’s description is very general, it was clearly important to recount the relation between geographical regions and political powers. His travelogue gives one of the earliest mentions of what will develop into the Nordic countries of Denmark and Sweden.

One of the characteristics of the Baltic Sea is its multitude of islands. Though many of them are barren and unpopulated, others provide a thriving outland, inhabited and used for their resources, e.g. seal, fish and sea birds. The waters of the Baltic Sea were relatively calm compared to those of the North Atlantic, serving to connect, rather than divide the region. The greatest challenge was instead to navigate the partially shallow waters and archipelagos of the coastal regions. Unlike crossing an open water where routes could be set according to geographical directions, the sailing routes in the Baltic were complex pathways that had to be remembered and mediated through the possible use of pilots or local guides – a research strand worthy of further study.

Bornholm, Öland and Gotland, already mentioned by Wulfstan, as well as Saaremaa and Åland constitute some of the great islands of the Baltic Sea. Nowhere is the link-up of the Baltic more present than on these islands. While they present objects and influences that reflect contacts and interactions they all, in their different ways, also devel-

oped a characteristic culture of their own, with particular dress, housing, ways of living, and ways of burying their dead. (cf. Gustafsson, Raffield this volume).

The Baltic as a framework for the emergence of the Viking Age

The emergence of the Viking Age could be seen as a development of a new level of social organisation that enabled progress, innovation and expansion on a different scale. Already existing structures, networks and activities were enlarged, contacts intensified and new regions were explored. Viking cultural expression and social practice included elements that can be identified over vast geographical areas and over a millennium later. Local and regional practices and styles also flourished, incorporating parts of a general Baltic culture but also administering them in their own particular way. Most, if not all, of the features that could be seen as diagnostic for this development are visible in the Baltic Sea region during the 8th century: raiding, technical development of sails and sailing vessels, the emergence of new social structures and sites as well as administered trade and relatively regular expeditions along long distance trade routes.

The Baltic was a maritime landscape characterised by communication and connection, with landing sites, safe harbours, and sites for trade and the re-loading of merchandise into smaller boats for further transport inland. In some places all of these features came together, and ports of trade developed. Whereas Grobina, with its settlement and cemeteries, testifies to long-term contacts between the eastern and western shores of the Baltic, the spectacular discovery of the two ship burials from Salme provides a snapshot of a single event that captures both the movement and inherent violence of the period.

Birka and Staraja Ladoga were perhaps not the first settlements incorporating trade and crafts at a more advanced level, but they display these features in new ways. The development of these town-like structures also marks the archaeologically-confirmed start for a more established crafts and trading network that connected Scandinavia and the Baltic with the regions further east. Crossing the Baltic was the first step towards exploring and expanding into the uncharted territories that connected the European North with established routes and centres for trade in Europe and beyond.

The Baltic Sea region provides a lens through which to study the social and technological changes that emerged before and after the beginning of the Viking Age, thus creating a framework for discussing possible underlying factors and driving forces. It is even possible that the particular conditions of the Baltic acted as a catalyst for social and economic change and expansion, as suggested by Adamczyk in this volume. Viking Age Scandinavians were just one group of actors in the region. Equal parts were played by Baltic, Finnish and West-Slavonic societies, possibly creating a special kind of dynamic in the seascape that the Baltic created.

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