Past mirrors: Interaction and Integration in the North Sea region in the Bronze and Viking Ages

December 1st 2012
Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo

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Organized by the Nordic Graduate School in Archaeology / Dialogues with the Past and The Museum of Cultural History

UiO: Museum of Cultural History
University of Oslo
Conference Hall, Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo

December 1\textsuperscript{st}, 9:00-17:00

The doors open at 08:45

9.00-9.30
Past Mirrors: an introduction to the conference
Zanette Tsigaridas Glørstad and Lene Melheim

9.30-10.15
Recurring social dynamics: Bronze Age versus Viking Age
Kristian Kristiansen

10.15-10.30 Coffee break

10.30-11.15:
Migration, identity and material culture: a case of medieval Baltic Sea
Magdalena Naum

11.15-12.00
Nothing to lose. Waterborne raiding in southern Scandinavia
Christian Horn

12-13.15 Lunch at Hotel Europa

13.15-14.00
Pirates of the North Sea? The Viking ship as political space
Neil Price

14.00-14.45
Boundaries and flows and “maritime” comparative advantage
Johan Ling and Mike Rowlands

14.45-15.00 Coffee break

15.00-15.45
Children of the Vikings: ‘are we nearly there yet?’
Dawn Hadley

15.45-
Final discussion
ABSTRACTS

**Recurring social dynamics: Bronze Age versus Viking Age**
Kristian Kristiansen, University of Gothenburg

By focussing on the dialectic between heterarchical and hierarchical forces of power, I develop a theoretical and interpretative model to explain the particular historical conditions that governed Bronze Age societies in the Nordic realm, as an example of decentralised complexity. In the Bronze Age participation in international networks was crucial for the reproduction of political power, and it further demanded local access to and control over surplus production. In this way there emerged a social organisation that integrated the economy of local polities with the trading economy of an international network, and it also integrated internal and external sources of knowledge and power. I make a comparison with the Viking Age in Scandinavia, where historical sources tell us of an archaic state. Similarities in material culture speak of societies whose cosmology and social ethos was linked to travel and warfare, the main difference being in their range. While Bronze Age seafaring remained within the Nordic realm, itself a huge maritime territory, Viking seafaring went far beyond and colonised territories in England, Iceland and Greenland. A high degree of individual agency was part of the Viking expansion, sometimes in opposition to existing rulers, so heterarchical powers were also operating within a relatively hierarchical society, creating a dialectic political counterforce. The same was true of the Bronze Age, the main difference being that larger groups had social access to compete in the Bronze Age. Without written sources we might not have been able to infer that Viking society was an early state. It follows from this that we have generally been too unwilling to admit ranking and complex social organisation to societies without written records, by downplaying indications of social and institutional complexity.

**Migration, identity and material culture: a case of medieval Baltic Sea**
Magdalena Naum, University of Lund/Cambridge

The Viking Age and the Middle Ages were periods of extensive interactions, material exchanges and mobility. People traveled to purchase and sell goods, wage warfare, proselytize and to relocate. This paper focuses on a particular type of mobility: the late Viking Age and medieval migration in the Baltic Sea region. I explore three case studies: 1) Slavic migration to the Danish islands of Lolland-Falster in the 10th-12th century following conflicts and the feudal pressure in the Slavic territories; 2) the relocation of Hanseatic merchants to the Swedish town of Kalmar in the 13th-15th century related to the Hanse trade operations, and 3) Scandinavian, German and Russian settlement in the late medieval town of Tallinn following the conquest of Estonia and motivated by profitable trade with Novgorod. I discuss the transformative effects of migration on the identities and self-perception of the immigrants, their dilemmas in choosing allegiances and navigating between categories of difference and sameness. Focus is placed on the importance of
material culture in dealing with relocations, in particular its role as a connective tissue with places of origin and its symbolic quality in negotiating immigrants’ particularism.

**Nothing to lose. Waterborne raiding in southern Scandinavia**
Christian Horn, University of Gothenburg

This paper will explore the impact of warfare on the ritual behavior of past people. Use-wear analysis shows a large amount of Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age weapons in southern Scandinavia were actually used in combat, before they entered the realm of rites and sacrifices. Therefore, weapons account for warfare and warriors in ritual depositions, which enables archaeologists to study prehistoric warfare. These weapon depositions will be discussed in light of the ‘rites de passage’, especially the liminal phase. This phase is regarded as the most dangerous, as a threat people coped with in rituals. Warfare is a liminal activity, and warriors are persons in liminal state, or as Carlos Castaneda once wrote: “A warrior considers himself already dead, so there is nothing to lose.” Liminality has a distinct spatial dimension, which is reflected by the water-bound distribution of the weapon sacrifices under consideration. Seafaring, another liminal activity, is connected by the weapon sacrifices to warfare. From this vantage point waterborne raiding will be considered one of the major activities in southern Scandinavia. The historical parallel to the Viking Period does not only illuminate routes and passages, but also the aim of these raids.

**Pirates of the North Sea? The Viking ship as political space**
Neil Price, University of Aberdeen

The contextualised meaning of specifically ‘Viking’ identities, in relation to the general population of early medieval Scandinavia, is a topic of perennial debate. Who were the Viking raiders, how did they see themselves, and how did others see them? How did our artificial construct of ‘the Viking Age’ actually begin? A key concept in unravelling these problems may be what the Vikings’ much later successors, the pirates of the so-called Golden Age, called “the new government of the ship”. Over the last two decades, influential work on these pirate communities has recast them as radical actors and social revolutionaries, subverting political norms among state-based societies to create a new and freer maritime identity for themselves and others on the margins. More recent studies have retreated from this vision of political enfranchisement and instead re-emphasised the rational pursuit of self-interest and profit under the cloak of controlled anarchy. All this research can be usefully applied to the Viking Age, not by a direct transfer of paradigms but as a lens through which to view the period afresh, a springboard for a new model of agency and influence to present a different understanding of the Viking in the Viking Age.
**Boundaries and flows and “maritime” comparative advantage**  
Johan Ling & Mike Rowlands, University of Gothenburg and University College London

The subject of our paper will be to explore the nature of long-term cultural boundaries that seem to persist despite evident changes in content. We argue, following Barth, that the very nature of boundaries lies in their porosity, allowing transcultural flows of peoples, substances and things whilst at the same time appropriating and transforming them to local conditions and identities. In our case study we argue that the Scandinavian Bronze Age and Viking Ages share certain limit boundary conditions. In the Bronze Age we show the conditions of maritime position, the peculiar role of amber and the significance of ships formed the basis of a Nordic comparative advantage in the ‘international’ metal trade networks. Thus Bronze Age materials, boundaries and connectivities suggests ‘maritime worlds in creolisation’ and the hybridity of practice.

**Children of the Vikings: ‘are we nearly there yet?’**  
Dawn Hadley, University of Sheffield

This paper explores the experiences of children of migration during the Viking Age in the British Isles, drawing on the evidence from written sources, the funerary record, material culture used by children, and new insights from scientific evidence, principally stable isotope evidence. We should have no doubts that children played an important role during the Viking Age in the processes of migration and settlement, and studies of recent migrations by anthropologists and sociologists offer some potentially useful analogies for our understanding of Viking Age child migrants, highlighting the capacity of children to embrace the opportunities offered by migration. Children can be shown to act as mediators of cultural interaction and assimilation, and may prove better at adapting to language change and creating new networks of acquaintances than adults. By drawing on the insights to be gleaned from analysis of better-understood migrations we can have the confidence to interrogate our Viking Age evidence afresh, and in turn ask fundamental questions of the broad social processes that are central to the scholarly literature on migration – including acculturation, ethnogenesis and conversion – all of which are routinely discussed purely with reference to adults. In seeking to render children as agents of past social change we can hope to develop more nuanced narratives of migration.