

Winroth, Anders. 2014. *The Age of the Vikings*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 320 pages. ISBN: 978-0-691-14985-1.

Anders Winroth's *The Age of the Vikings* is an accessible, engaging historical and cultural introduction to the Viking Age with much to recommend it, both for classroom use and for the general public's reading needs.

The book leads with a vignette calculated to catch the reader's interest, of a skald's recitation of his poem in the hall of a jarl. The book is full of little scenes like this, reconstructed to give a sense of the events of daily life in Viking Age Scandinavia, and all of them contribute to the book's very pleasant pace when read cover to cover. Most of them serve to illustrate good points (such as that at the beginning of Chapter 4, which begins with a vignette featuring Charlemagne that segues into a well-informed discussion of the Holy Roman Empire's influence in Scandinavian affairs). The author is also admirably fair in his effort to avoid gender bias and devotes a great deal of time not only to women's daily lives but also to notable individual women of the Viking Age, both those known from archaeological evidence (which is a particular emphasis of all of this book's chapters) and those described in later medieval literary sources.

Following the gripping introductory chapter, the chapters are organized by broad themes, beginning with Chapter 2, which treats violence and its place in Viking culture. One of the most interesting and unique of these chapters is Chapter 8, which examines what can be said about early religion in northern Europe (focusing on actual religious practice rather than mythology, leaving the primary sources to speak for themselves, and also including a generous and informative epilogue on the early practice of Christianity in Scandinavia). Winroth is always careful to note the degree of reliability we can attribute to each of our medieval sources and does so in an even-handed way that helps the reader appreciate just how much is not known and how lucky we are that we have the sources we do.

The author has clearly fielded many of the same questions that experts in this field frequently entertain from students and interested members of the public, because he anticipates them and answers them thoughtfully. For instance, on the question of where Norse settlements other than L'Anse-aux-Meadows might have been located in Vinland, he reminds us that good farmland for the Vikings was likely still good farmland for the later European settlers in succeeding centuries and that probably any Viking farms will be buried under modern fields (69). The book also treats us to a very fresh look at the Norse settlement in Greenland (61–64); the author is to be commended, in this chapter and others, for not simply saying the same old things we've all read in other popular books before.

Archaeological data is particularly well-utilized in recreating scenes from the past, especially in the discussion of the Oseberg ship burial and the sheer effort, skill, and time that must have been required in the making of a single ship

(Chapter 4). Chapter 5 features an interesting look at the remains of foreign currency in Scandinavia and discusses not only the influence that the Vikings had on the (re-)development of a monetary economy in Europe but also the role shifting trade patterns played in the end of the Viking Age. Chapter 7 stands out for its use of archaeological evidence in painting a vivid portrait of the miseries endured by peasant farmers in the Middle Ages.

If one thing is to be criticized in a book this excellent, it is the inconsistent Anglicization of Scandinavian names. For instance, it is odd to see a reference to a “bauta stone” (99) when very few readers will know what to do with the “bauta” part—why not write “bautasteinn” or translate the whole word into “memorial stone” or similar? There is also inconsistency in the way some historical names of people and places are presented in their modern Scandinavian forms, some in their Old Norse forms, and some in half-Anglicized forms (e.g. “Håkon” vs. “Bramr” vs. “Thorfinn,” all on page 138), and a more consistent approach would have been less jarring.

However, these are minor issues in a very well-presented and readable introduction to the world of the Vikings. This book is an outstanding resource for educators, and it does a capable job of filling the gap in the books available to the general public as an exciting read written by a very knowledgeable scholar.

Jackson Crawford
University of California-Berkeley