

Somerville, Angus A., and Andrew R. MacDonald. 2013. *The Vikings and Their Age*. Companions to Medieval Studies. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 160 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4426-0522-0.

In 2010, Angus A. Somerville and R. Andrew McDonald published *The Viking Age: A Reader*, which contains over 100 translated primary source readings from the Viking Age, grouped according to topic. The most comprehensive reader on the Viking Age to date, this volume—the second edition of which was published in 2014—is of tremendous use to students and scholars alike and presents many accounts of the Vikings not previously available in the English language. Three years after the publication of the first edition of the Reader, Somerville and McDonald published *The Vikings and Their Age*, the first in University of Toronto Press’s Companions to Medieval Studies series. The product of the authors’ many years of teaching courses on Old Norse and the Vikings at Brock University, the book serves as a companion to the *Reader* and, as such, aims to contextualize the primary source readings and provide a brief introduction to the period and a general reference for students.

Chapter 1, “The Viking Age: An Overview,” provides definitions and important geographical and chronological information. The authors discuss the socio-political environments of pre-Viking Age Scandinavia and detail the possible causes of and catalysts for Viking expansion, considering in detail (and with specific archaeological examples from Norway and Denmark) Viking ships and the advanced naval technology that gave explorers, traders, and raiders from the North a decided edge. They then summarize the major events that characterize the Viking Age, describing the military raids of the first half of the Viking Age (the “First Viking Age”) and the period of settlement that followed, in particular on the British Isles (the “Second Viking Age”). Next are brief overviews of eastern voyages to Byzantium and to the Islamic empire and journeys west over the North Atlantic to the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Greenland, and eventually North America. They consider the various markers used to determine the close of the Viking Age and close the chapter with a summary of evolving scholarly views and debates on who the Vikings were—and whether or not they were as destructive as some primary sources would indicate.

In Chapter 2, “Society and Religion in the Viking Age,” the authors outline the major social classes present in the Viking Age: kings, aristocrats, freemen, and slaves. Several pages are dedicated to the role of women, with particular emphasis on their socio-political status according to archaeological and literary evidence. They then briefly discuss family unit and domestic roles and responsibilities before a more detailed overview of Viking Age legal systems, state building, and Iceland’s unique situation as a nation without an executive power. The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to Viking Age religion and belief, with

particular attention given to Norse mythology. The authors summarize the main sources for our knowledge of the pre-Christian Scandinavian belief system and briefly describe and define the pantheon and the cosmos. An account of the conversion to Christianity in the various Scandinavian countries concludes the chapter.

Chapter 3, “Viking Biographies,” contains biographies of eight of the most memorable and significant figures from the Viking Age, “in order to give a sense of the richness and diversity of the period” (67): Egil Skallagrimsson, Harald Bluetooth, Olaf Trygvason, Harald Hardradi, Eirik the Red and Leif Eiriksson, Gudrid Thorbjarnardughter, Unn the Deep-Minded, and Svein Asleifarson. In Chapter 4, “How Do We Know About the Vikings?,” the authors provide overviews of the various sources for our knowledge of Viking Age Scandinavia, both native and foreign. Excerpts from illustrative examples are provided in intertextual boxes to give the reader a sense of the wide range of material, including runic inscriptions, letters, chronicles, annals, and histories. The authors dedicate the bulk of the chapter to the written sources from late medieval Iceland—the sagas—and to “a discussion of each type of saga and its contribution to our knowledge of the Viking Age” (105). Tales (*þættir*), historical texts, and poetry (both eddic and skaldic) are also covered in detail.

Chapter 5, “A Case Study Exercise: The Wandering Monks of Saint Philibert,” “provides an opportunity for the reader to engage directly with a short document from the Viking Age...with as little mediation as possible” (129). The document in question is a hagiographic text written by the ninth-century monk named Ermentarius. Ermentarius describes the miracles and the translation of the body of Saint Philibert from the island of Noirmoutier, which are precipitated by “the sudden and unforeseen attacks of the Northmen” (131). The account is followed by questions prompting the reader to consider issues of authorial perspective, religion, and specific historical events. This exercise is followed by an afterword reflecting on the Viking legacy and their lasting economic, political, geographical, social, technological, literary, and linguistic impact.

As stated above, the book is intended primarily as a pedagogical tool, and this is clear from the presentation of material. Interspersed throughout are boxes containing textual examples and related information, as well as maps and photos of important sites. The authors include a basic chronology (including all events mentioned throughout the text) and a glossary of important names, places, and terms. All names are Anglicized for the reader (see above in the chapter 3 summary), and there are questions for reflection and discussion following the afterword.

While the companion is meant to complement the *Reader*, and relies on the same sources, one should not expect to be able to read the two works side-by-side in a coordinated manner. Information in *The Vikings and Their Age* is presented in a different order than in the *Reader*, which contains fifteen themed chapters

compared to the companion's five. In my opinion, the companion would benefit greatly from cross-references to relevant material from the primary source collection, for ease of navigation for both instructors and students. Another issue with the book—which at the same time makes it a good tool for students—is its brevity and level of detail. As such, much nuance is missing. An important example is the authors' discussion of women's consent in marriage arrangements during the Viking Age and their implication that this is an instance of Christianization "having deprived women of earlier liberties" (43). More specifically, they note that "the sagas of Icelanders recount several instances where a pre-Christian woman was consulted about her betrothal, whereas such consultation is remarkably absent from thirteenth-century contemporary sagas that recount events that took place long after Christianization" (43). However, as has been demonstrated in recent scholarship, examples from the sagas of women being consulted about betrothals are not indicative of a more egalitarian pagan mindset but rather have to do with the late medieval Church's push towards mutual consent in marriage. Essentially, the scribes penning the sagas re-envisioned historical details in hopes of implementing new ecclesiastical doctrine during a time period in Iceland when, as the authors correctly note with reference to the contemporary sagas, women's consent appears not to have been taken into consideration. In instances such as these, it would be helpful to include footnotes to more comprehensive treatments for further consultation.

Aside from these issues, however, the book is an excellent educational resource, and the authors should be praised for providing an accessible introduction for students that is broad in focus and multi-disciplinary in approach. I look forward to using this companion in my own courses on the Viking Age and to (hopefully) seeing the work expanded with some of the above-mentioned changes implemented for future editions.

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