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Russell Andrew McDonald, Angus A. Somerville, eds. *The Viking Age: A Reader.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010. xvii + 503 pp. $39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4426-0148-2; $80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4426-0147-5.

Reviewed by Scott Mellor (University of Wisconsin Madison)
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Courses on Vikings

Angus A. Somerville and R. Andrew McDonald, both in the History Department at Brock University, have put together a book entitled *The Viking Age: A Reader.* The introduction promises that "[t]his book provides a comprehensive and accessible one-volume collection of primary documents that will be of use to instructors and students as well as to the general reader interested in the Viking Age" (p. xiii), and the book delivers what it promises. Though a general reader will need to supplement it with analytical material on the era, this book is perfect in the classroom for those teaching the Viking age and for the students who wish to understand it through the documentation of the time. The text begins with a short introduction and then is divided into fifteen chapters, convenient for many college and university semesters. It retails for $42.95 in the United States (check Amazon where it can be had for slightly less). Since one could teach an entire class using only this reader, it seems a great value.

I was teaching a Vikings course the term that I evaluated this book. Mostly, this book presented the material in much the same way that I have presented the material in the past, but there were some additions and variations in the organization of the material that I tried in my teaching and I liked them very much.

The introduction is very short, just over four pages, but the editors position us in time and space for the Viking age. They define Viking, discuss the European context, and the movement of the medieval Scandinavians through Russia and even to the Americas. The map at the beginning is helpful, even if there is a lack of detail. The chapters are set up thematically and are very useful for teaching.

Chapter 1, entitled "The Scandinavian Homelands," includes two short excerpts, one from *The Voyages of Ohthere and Wulfstan* and the other from Adam of Bremen's *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen.* Both texts are introduced with short paragraphs of explanation of who these people were and the significance of the texts. Together, these two texts describe and give the feel for the lands from which the medieval Scandinavians came. The text from Adam of Bremen includes not only the primary Scandinavian countries, but also includes the short description of Iceland, Greenland, Helgeland, and Vinland, giving a complete view of the Scandinavian world.

The next chapter, entitled "Scandinavian Society," includes mythic as well as saga accounts of life at home through four texts. The first text in this chapter is "The Lay of Rig." This poem, accompanied by a very short paragraph, sets up the mythic three-tiered system of medieval Scandinavian society. As indicated in the introduction, "[u]nless otherwise noted, all the Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon texts are newly translated for this reader" (p. xvi). As many know, poetry is difficult to translate, but I found the translations good:

4. Then Greatgrandmother took
a lumpy loaf,
think and heavy,
full of bran.
More:
she brought it
placed in the center
of dishes.
There was broth in a bowl;
She placed it on the table.
He rose up from there and
got ready for sleep.

In this poem, as in much of this reader, the editors succeeded in conveying the information in the texts, though poetic qualities such as the alliteration are lost.

However, the translations do not employ archaic language, and I personally prefer this compromise. The remaining three texts are from the sagas, again translated by the editors. The nine chapters from the beginning of *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* are a good departure point for a discussion on the motivations for the settling of Iceland, and "Hosuld buys a Slave," chapter 12 of *Laxd-Fla saga*, and "How the Hersir Erling Treated his Slaves," chapter 23 from *Ólafs saga helga* in *Heimskringla*, provide good material for a discussion on slavery in medieval Scandinavia and segue nicely into the next chapter since this was one of Saint Anskar's issues too.

Chapter 3 is entitled "A Glimpse of Ninth-Century Scandinavia" and is taken from *The Life of Saint Anskar*. For this text the editors used the 2004 revision of the 1921 translation by C. H. Robinson. I personally find the language in this 1921 translation stilted, starting many clauses with participial forms in order to approximate the Latin: "[h]aving then been dismissed by the emperor"; "[h]aving started then with considerable difficulty" (p. 43); "[h]aving said this" (p. 52). I could have wished they had used the translation from *Sanctity in the North*, from the same press, but since it came out in 2008, it was possibly not available to the editors at the time. I am, however, delighted by the inclusion of the text in this book. It is a rare, albeit biased, glimpse into Scandinavia from this period.

It has always been a dilemma for me to know when to include material on the pre-Christian culture from Scandinavia: before or after a discussion of Christianity. The editors include it in chapter 4, "Early Religion and Belief," which I think works well, coming after the texts from Saint Anskar with its introduction to Christianity of this time. There are thirteen texts, all excerpts, in this chapter to convey the early Scandinavian belief system. Mostly they are from Icelandic sources: *The Prose Edda* and *The Poetic Edda*, and sagas like *Eiríks saga rauxa* and *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*. The editors have also included excerpts from ibn Fadlana and Adam of Bremen, which give an external as well as internal view of the Scandinavian belief system.

Chapter 5, "Women in the Viking Age," includes material from the sagas, largely drawing from *LaxdFla saga*, with a number of excerpts also from *Brennu-Njáls saga*, which seem aimed at giving the reader insight into women and the domestic area of Scandinavian, though probably largely Icelandic, life. The incident of Freydis drawing a sword in Vinland is included, as well as one from Saxo on warrior women and a poetic example from *The Poetic Edda* concerning Gudrun driving her sons to take revenge. Largely, the texts describe the motif of woman as inciter, and marriage and divorce in Iceland at this time.

Chapters 6 and 7, "Viking Warriors and their Weapons" and "Fjord-Serpents: Viking Ships" respectively, include texts on the mainstay of Viking life: battle, the sword, and ships. These chapters include texts from a variety of Icelandic sagas, including texts from family sagas, like *Orkneyinga saga* and *Brennu-Njáls saga*, king sagas, like *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* and *Ynglinga saga*, and legendary sagas like *Volsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka,* giving a full idea of warriors and their paraphernalia from literature. The inclusion of some diagrams of swords is useful.

Somerville and McDonald include a chapter on how the Vikings were seen from the outside in "Sudden and Unforeseen Attacks of Northmen." This chapter includes entries from *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, *The Annals of Ulster*, *The Royal Frankish Annals*, and several other texts concerning the raids in Anglo-Saxon England, Ireland, Scotland, and the Frankish coast, as well as the Iberian Peninsula. I think the most praiseworthy part of this chapter is the inclusion of material from the Muslim world. Though ibn Fadlan is often included in Viking studies, the inclusion of Muslim texts is less common, though it allows for discussion of the Scandinavians on the Iberian Peninsula and other parts of the Muslim world. I find the inclusions of the Muslim material to be very useful, firstly, since it is often not included, but also since its inclusion can be used to facilitate a conversation about Christian/Muslim relations today by comparison. Such discussion makes relevant medieval Scandinavian studies to students today.

An attempt to combat the appearance that the medieval Scandinavians were merely brutish raiders from the north appears in chapter 9, "The Heathens Stayed; From Raiding to Settlement." Again, a considerable space is given to *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and *The Annals of Ulster*, perhaps explaining the use of the term "heathen" in the title. This view of the Scandinavian as an outsider who stayed is somewhat balanced by the inclusion of two short saga entries, one from *Eyrbyggja saga* and another from *Orkneyinga saga*, and the chapter concludes with a selection on Rollo from the *History of the Normans*.

Chapters 10 and 11 look at the expansion of the peoples from Scandinavia over a significant part of the globe. Chapter 10 is entitled "Austrveg: The Vikings' Road to the East." This chapter includes often excluded Muslim material on the contact the Scandinavians had in the East down to the Middle East such as texts on the attack of the

Rus on Constantinople and the founding of the Varangian guard. Another source of material for this chapter is the *Primary Chronicle* from Russia which is a great plus. The Scandinavians had a tremendous effect on Russia, with the founding of Kiev and Novgorod, and reading the texts from this area and from the era helps the student understand their profound impact. Chapter 11 looks to the Viking expansion to the west and is entitled "Into the Western Ocean: the Faeroes, Iceland, Greenland, and Vinland." The material on the West is thorough and includes the discovery of Greenland and Vinland.

Chaper 12, "Viking Life and Death," addresses from Icelandic texts how the medieval Scandinavian faced death, at least in literature. Though we may wonder how representative the death of Gunnar, Njal, or Egil is, the inclusion of an excerpt from *King's Mirror* may help to give a perspective on how medieval Scandinavians who went abroad were expected to meet their death.

Chapter 13, "From Odin to Christ," looks at the conversion to Christianity. The conversion of Scandinavia took several centuries. This chapter consists of Nordic texts from each of what are today the modern Scandinavian countries and uses them as a point of departure for discussion of the reasons for the conversion.

Chapters 14, "State-Building at Home and Abroad," and 15, "The End of the Viking Age," deal with the cultural changes that began the end of the Viking period as they adapted to the religion of those they had started raiding and began a type of nation-building that arguably brought about the end of the Viking age. The texts about the conversion are taken primarily from the sagas; Adam of Bremen is included in three excerpts too.

In the end, I found this to be a very useful book. It will be a valued addition to the collection of medieval material for teaching purposes.

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