



The Archaeological Journal

Book Reviews



VIKINGS! By Gunnar Andersson. Pp. 64, Illus 64. National Museums Scotland Enterprises-Publishing, 2013. Price: £6.99. ISBN 978 1 90526 776 7.

This slender volume is designed as a companion to a major touring exhibition — *Vikings! The Untold Story* — held in the first part of 2013 at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. Its attractive format, full colour illustrations and wide-ranging content provide additional contextual information on the five hundred exhibits on loan from the Swedish History Museum, Stockholm. The presentation of new research ideas and thematic studies is of considerable importance and presented here in a way which is both informative and enjoyable for the informed public. It brings together many new strands of study, in both religion and social structure, enabling a fuller understanding of the Scandinavian people, or *Norraener men* (Norse men), beyond the job description which we identify as Viking.

The volume is subdivided into brief thematic sections, following the plan of the exhibition. This ranges through the importation of exotic goods and trade links, the structure of society, the role of strong women, religious changes and craftsmanship. Each element provides an insight into ongoing research themes, for example the role and identification of the *seidr* or seer, the combination of the symbols of the pagan gods with Christian elements, and the identification of changes in artefact decoration with the migration of both craftsmen and purchaser. The integration of the Icelandic saga record is helpful and provides some insight, with due caution applied! Although the text seems to simply peter out, the booklet concludes with a useful list of further reading.

The text is supplied by the Swedish History Museum and written by Gunnar Andersson. It has a good style and the text flows well. However, there are a number of unfortunate points to raise, not least of which was the late availability of this publication, appearing some months after the opening of the exhibition. The major problem here, however, is the quality of many of the images used: e.g. the Birka cross (p. 10), the Helgö ladle (p. 13), the iron staff (p. 28) and the amulet ring with Thor's hammers from Vallentuna (p. 58), amongst others. These were no doubt originally Museum-quality images, and the lack of resolution in the volume has to be a production issue. These are very disappointing, and none more so than the image on page 59 of a pile of iron boat rivets from Ultuna. The quality is inadequate, but the biggest disappointment lies in the contrast of the presentation of this material. The exhibition itself had a truly remarkable display of boat rivets, the specific forms and sizes of nails being located on suspended wire, almost invisible to the eye, but emerging as a ghostly and fully formed prow of a vessel. This was a remarkable design feat and certainly could have been effectively reproduced in this volume.

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Despite these unfortunate inadequacies in the publication, the exhibition provided a rare insight into new research on the Vikings, and did indeed bring to an international audience some of the outstanding cultural highlights of the period from Sweden.

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