

Shannon Lewis-Simpson, ed. *Vínland Revisited: The Norse World at the Turn of the First Millennium. Selected Papers from the Viking Millennium International Symposium, 15-24 September 2000, Newfoundland and Labrador.*

Christina Lee

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REVIEWS

Shannon Lewis-Simpson, ed. *Vinland Revisited: The Norse World at the Turn of the First Millennium. Selected Papers from the Viking Millennium International Symposium, 15-24 September 2000, Newfoundland and Labrador*. St John's, NL: Historic Sites Association of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2003, ISBN 0-919735-07-X

AT A TIME WHEN IMMIGRATION and identity are discussed on a daily basis this collection of essays is an important reminder of the first wave of European settlers who crossed the Atlantic Ocean during the Viking Age. The book takes an ambitious interdisciplinary approach, one which unites science-based evaluations with the study of history, saga literature, and onomastics. The essays are written by a mixture of well-established scholars, younger researchers, curators, and educators.

This substantial volume (39 articles) is divided into three parts. The first section introduces the first wave of Viking expansion to Western Europe, and the situation in the homelands. The Vikings generated strong feelings of “us-and-them” in medieval writers, perceptions that are still echoed in some modern scholarship. It is therefore useful to be reminded that “the Vikings” comprised more than one ethnic group. Przemysław Urbańczyk’s article is a timely reminder that concepts of modern ethnicity should not be superimposed on medieval realities. He challenges the long-held popular conception that the settlers of Iceland were predominantly Norse. The thread of cultural versus ethnic identity runs through a number of the papers, such as Neil Price’s contribution on shamanism and *seiðr*, which shows the influence of indigenous Sámi people on northern Scandinavian practices.

Literary sources, and in particular the two sagas on the discovery of *Vinland* (*Grœnlendinga Saga* and *Eiríks saga rauða*), have played an important part in the quest for evidence for Norse involvement in the New World. However, the relationship between text and material culture is sometimes less than straightforward. In recent years archaeologists have deplored the image of being “helpmates” to history, required to verify historical events through material culture. For instance, the “extinction” of the Greenlandic settlements has been attributed to climate change and prolonged attacks by Inuit tribes, on the basis of descriptions in much later written sources. Jette Arneborg’s article shows the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in modern research, arguing that when the source material is compared to

archaeological data, there is no indication of a sustained attack on Greenlanders by the native population. It is puzzling that a second essay on this topic by Kenneth Baitsholts, which contains some interesting linguistic observations, was placed in a different section of the book.

The second part of the book is dedicated to discussions of the society, culture, and settlement of the Vikings in the North Atlantic. Kevin McAleese's essay on Norse settlement within the framework of a long-standing native culture is an important contribution to the question of how we study the past and the non-Eurocentric encounters of the Vikings, which often remain neglected. They did not explore an empty land, but made use of an area which has long been settled by others.

Re-enactors and educators in museums often act as "interpreters" of academic research to the wider public. There are important questions to be asked about how academic research is presented and how the public can be involved in the discourse. Darrell Markewitz's essay shows how the L'Anse aux Meadows Encampment Programme is trying to unite the need for a comprehensive representation with the still largely inconclusive material that is available for research.

There is much public interest in the everyday life of the Vikings, and the standard female Viking re-enactor kit usually contains an oval brooch or two. While no such brooch has been found in North America, Michèle Hayeur-Smith examines the examples from Iceland and postulates that they were only found among a certain group of upper stratum women. Correlations between dress and identity in the Viking Age are largely based on observations of items recovered from graves, which is problematic in itself. In Anglo-Saxon studies there have recently been discussions of the "ethnicity" of artefacts, the value of objects in the grave, the spacing of the dead and discussions about the relevance of the quantity of grave goods. Thus "Anglian" dress is adopted only when the "Angles" have long migrated from their homelands. Hayeur-Smith's observations of a "Scandinavication" of brooches in Iceland throws up interesting questions regarding the creation of cultural identity irrespective of genetic (or ancestral) reality.

The book would have benefited from some slimming down, and the occasional expansion. For example, women's roles in the Viking Age will have surely differed between the homelands and the colonies, and one would have wished for an evaluation of their place in the migration as well. The focus switches frequently between Scandinavia, Iceland, Europe, and the North Atlantic, which may be bewildering for a non-specialist. There could have been a clearer distinction between the culture of Scandinavians at home and the similarities and differences in the various places settled on their way to *Vinland*. At times there is a curious pairing of serious research with anecdotes from the excavation(s) or life in L'Anse aux Meadows, and while the idea of giving some form of general background to the Norse World is certainly laudable, the connection between settlers to the British Isles, the north Atlantic expansion and *Vinland* is not made explicit enough for the reader who does not

have a background in Viking studies. For the more experienced reader these outlines are very general and do not add much to standard works. The book is strongest where speculation gives way to research data, inviting the reader to form her own opinion of the theories presented.

Vinland Revisited is certainly a valuable introduction to the topic of Norse Migration. It emphasizes the need for a holistic approach to Viking studies, where the critical analysis of historical and linguistic sources is teamed with the examination of material culture. The apparent discrepancies and even contradictions that come with this method underline that this is an energetic field of study which is open for much further debate.

Christina Lee
University of Nottingham

Diane E. Goldstein. *Once Upon a Virus: AIDS Legends and Vernacular Risk Perception*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2004, ISBN 0874 215862 (cloth), ISBN 0974 215870 (softcover)

OVER THE PAST SEVERAL DECADES, the idea of “urban legends” has entered our academic lexicon, just as the legends themselves have overflowed into our fax machines and e-mail accounts. Sometimes it is implied that these stories are read and re-told as “simply” entertainment. But in this crisply written and eminently readable book, folklorist Diane Goldstein uses contemporary legends and urban myths to explore the nature of lay perceptions of health risks around HIV/AIDS. By citing a wide range of stories about AIDS, its origins, its dangers (real and imagined), and the actions of those with the syndrome, this book is able to convincingly illustrate the semiotic riches that contemporary legends offer.

The book begins by setting the provincial social and cultural context for the discussion. Here Goldstein points out the early exposure to ideas of risk through kids’ games (where AIDS may be used as a metaphor for risk), as well as the social context of the fear of the outsider. Given the high rates of teen sexual involvement in this province, and low rates of protection used, the author reminds us that interpretations of risk and danger are serious issues. Using several public health models, Goldstein shows how individual perceptions of risk can affect health decisions, giving the book significance beyond the study of AIDS.

The first three chapters function as an introduction to the topic and relevant theory. This is followed by four sets of legend themes that are used as illustration. The first set revolves around the struggle to determine the origins of HIV. This can become a search for who or what to blame, and it results in contemporary legends of transgression. For example, the arguments that HIV jumped from animals to humans provide a fertile space for distortions of cultural and sexual practices, while stories that AIDS is “man-made” feed into conspiracy theories.