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## Book Reviews

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# Book Reviews

Here you will find information about interesting books on the immigration experience, genealogical manuals, books on Swedish customs, and much more. We welcome contacts with SAG readers, suggestions on books to review perhaps.

If you want to review a book yourself, please contact the SAG Editor, at <sag@etgenealogy.se> so we know what you are working on.

## New story of the Vikings

*The Age of the Vikings*, by Anders Winroth, 2014, Princeton University Press, 304 pages, hard cover, Ill. Amazon.com, \$18.59 plus shipping.

Writing a history of the Vikings has long challenged scholars due to the lack of original sources from the Viking culture. Unlike other early civilizations, they had no written language and produced no written documents. Viking runes were used mainly for memorials to heroes or family members and were carved on stone. Many runestones have survived and can be read, but provide limited information about the culture. Other sources were written largely by the Vikings' victims, in other languages such as Latin or early English. A few sources are found in other languages such as French, Latin, or Arabic.

Some of the most useful information about Vikings is to be found in the sagas written by Snorri Sturlason

and other Icelanders over 150 years after the end of the Viking Age, from oral accounts that had been transmitted through storytellers for many generations.

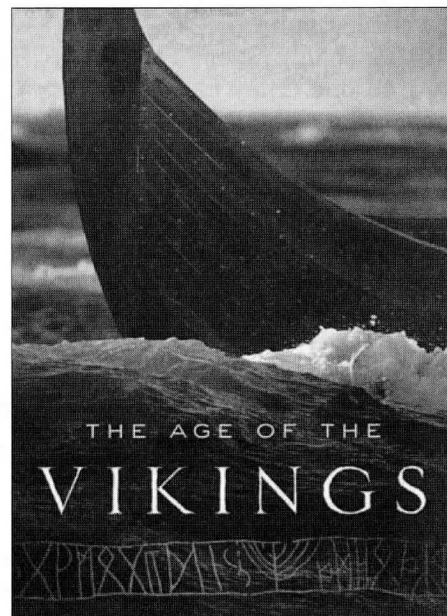
The historian must try and sort out real facts from dramatic enhancements added to the stories by later voices and writers. One of the most abundant sources about the Viking Age is archeological. The ships, the carvings, the jewelry, coins, and other artifacts are plentiful and hold a great deal of information about the culture. New materials are being discovered every year.

Anders Winroth has written a new history of the Vikings despite all these challenges, his effort being the most recent in a long line of books on the history of the Vikings. The oldest one in my possession dates to 1830, and I have several more from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is evident that he has drawn upon his knowledge of Old Norse, Icelandic, runes, and other languages in writing this new history. In so doing, he has added significantly to the body of literature about the Vikings. He has corrected many false or exaggerated images of the culture while shedding new light on the complexity of their culture and society. Winroth has characterized his research as "providing not any big surprise, but a number of small 'surprises.'"

The author was born in Ludvika, Sweden, in the province of Dalarna. After education in Ludvika, he attended Stockholm University. He then undertook master's and doctoral studies at Columbia University in New York and further postdoctoral research at the University of Newcastle-on-Tyne, U.K., as a Sir James

Knott Research Fellow. He specializes in the history of Medieval Europe and more recently with emphasis on the Viking Age. In 2003, he was granted a MacArthur fellowship, one of 24 awarded that year. He joined the Yale faculty in 1998 and became a full professor in 2004. This is his third major book in addition to his many research papers and lectures.

Winroth agrees with most previous historians in his definition of the Viking Age; that is, the nearly three century period between the first noted Viking raid on the island monastery of Lindisfarne in north-east England, to the defeat of the Viking armies of King Harald Hårdråde (hard ruler) in the year 1066 at the battle of Stamford Bridge, near York. In this last major battle in Western Europe, Harald was defeated by Harold Godwinson and his army; the Viking king died in the battle. Godwinson was in turn defeated two weeks later by Duke William of Nor-



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mandy, to become the king of England with the new title of "William the Conqueror." The transitions were more gradual, but these two historic events marked the turning points of the beginning and the end of the Viking era. These Nordic people had transitioned from lands with numerous chieftains struggling with each other for supremacy, to the emergence of three Scandinavian nations ruled by kings. Their victims in Europe had also changed to form stable kingdoms more capable of defending themselves against the Viking armies. Winroth in his book reinforces not only the influence of the Vikings within Scandinavian lands but their impact on the lands. they attacked and colonized by stimulating their own unification, stability, and strengthening of defenses.

The book is structured logically into major subject areas rather than chronologically, a help to the reader to understand the Viking culture more completely as it evolved. After an introduction to the subject, the author makes the important point in his first chapter that violence was not unique to the Vikings, but that these centuries were violent times for all of Europe. Most areas continued to be tribal in nature with local chiefs constantly vying with each other for land, wealth, and power. Not until near the end of the period did what are now the present nations begin to emerge with powers to enforce laws, levy taxes, and in other ways begin the process of national order and unity.

The next chapter puts into context the long history of emigration from the northern lands to the surround-

ing world. This did not begin with the Viking Age, but there was a history of travel and settlement in other lands by the Scandinavian people. Exploration, trade, and the seeking of opportunity motivated this emigration and helped the people learn more about the world around them, (including where wealth was to be found). People traveled to the east into Asia, the south to Europe, and the west to the British Isles, the Atlantic islands, and eventually to Iceland, Greenland, and North America.

The evolution of the Viking ships

which made this travel possible is the subject of the next chapter. In land surrounded by waters, these ships had evolved from simple boats propelled by oars on rivers and in sheltered waters to the masterful technology of large, ocean-going sailing ships capable of reaching faraway lands and, more importantly, returning with trade goods and treasure.

The evolution of these ships led to many possibilities of trade and commerce throughout northern Europe and into Asia, sailing coastally through Europe and into the Medi-

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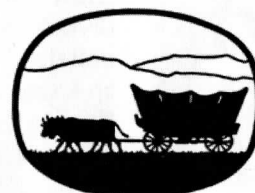
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terreanean Sea, along the rivers of Asia and linking up with trade routes to the east, and over the open oceans to the islands of the Atlantic. Trade was principally in herring, furs, slaves, warriors, and other northern resources in exchange for coins, silk, and treasures from other lands. Trade with the eastern lands was more inclined to be peaceable rather than violent, since traders had to return by the same routes they had followed and were thus very vulnerable to counterattacks. They could not find concealment as in the open oceans of the west.

The trade and commerce enabled by Viking ships led to increases in wealth by many chieftains, which in turn allowed them to increase the loyalty and allegiance of their followers and warriors through the giving of gifts and great feasts of food, drink, and ceremony. This is the subject of a succeeding chapter which explains how the most powerful chiefs began to assert their powers to control larger territories and eventually become kings.

The following chapter titled *At Home on the Farm*, is sort of an interlude. The author reminds the reader that while all this growth in

wealth and power by raiders and traders is going on, the majority of the people in the Viking lands are staying at home and tending to their lives on the farm. Families sowed and reaped year after year, tended to their cattle, and coped with weather, famine, disease, and life as it came to them. For most, it was a constant struggle against fate, the elements, disease, and the demands by the more ambitious among them to become chiefs or Vikings. They raised their families and, among other things, provided a steady supply of younger sons to join the raiders and traders to seek their fortunes and adventures abroad.

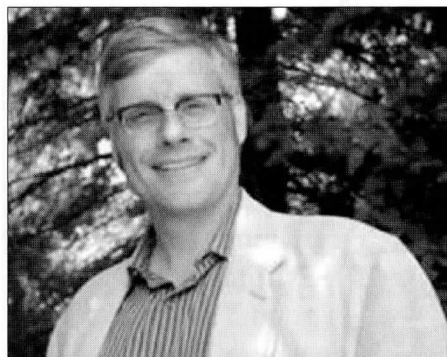
Winroth in his next chapter describes the pagan religions of the north and their transition into Christianity. The conventional wisdom has been that emerging kings, around the year 1000 AD, having concluded that it was expedient for them to become Christians in dealing with a Christian Europe, baptized their people at the point of a sword and with the gift of a new white gown. The small surprise of this chapter is that Christianity had been slowly seeping into Scandinavia due to multiple contacts over several centuries. Missionaries from continental Europe and multiple contacts through trade, immigration, and travel helped the Scandinavians become acquainted with this new faith and question their former pagan gods. Women were especially vulnerable to this new faith with its devaluation of violence and emphasis on peace. Chieftains and kings also found the new religion to be a more unifying force in their communities than was the paganism with its divisive degree of multiple gods and beliefs. The author maintains that the transition to Christianity in Scandinavia was much more complex and took place more gradually than earlier thought.

Arts and Letters in the Viking Age

is the subject of a final chapter, in which the author outlines the state of these elements in the Viking culture. Literature was limited due to the lack of a written language. The use of alliteration in the oral myths and sagas is discussed as is the role of runestones in the culture. The survival of the arts is particularly rich because of the large store of artifacts from the age found throughout Scandinavia, which continue to be found today mostly in the form of hoards found buried in the earth. As the Viking age drew to a close, the arts and architecture yielded to the strong influence of continental Europe and the typical Viking arts began to disappear. Sadly, there is almost no knowledge of Viking music since no way had been found for its preservation.

In an epilogue, Winroth summarizes the end of the Viking Age, symbolized by the event of the battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066. After this date, Viking kings now realized that it had become too risky to raid in Western Europe. Several later attempts were made but were unsuccessful because of the better organization and financing of armies by the now unified kingdoms of Europe. For a time Viking kings turned their attention elsewhere in the eastern Baltic and the Atlantic islands. At home the kings augmented their wealth and financed their armies by the levying of taxes, an idea borrowed from their former victims. Much effort was turned to struggling with each other over power, and within kingdoms with their own competitors, often in their own families. Increasingly, Scandinavia began to look more and more like Europe.

For scholars, this book has advanced the knowledge of the Viking Age in several ways through thorough research and documentation of sources, and is a worthy successor to a long line of histories of the age of the Vikings. For the lay reader or



*Professor Anders Winroth.*



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enthusiast, the book is a fine introduction to the Viking Age. Winroth writes clearly and in an interesting way, drawing the reader along in understanding the age as a whole and with the new information and insights that he offers. As a scholar of medieval history, he has developed his view of the Viking Age in the greater context of the history of greater Europe and the influence of each on the other. He also has taken a giant step in destroying the many popular but erroneous or incomplete images existing in the public mind about Vikings.

Dennis L. Johnson

## Memories from the SEI (part 1)

*Oförglömligt*, by Ulf Beijbom. In Swedish. Published by the Carlssons publishing company. Publication #14 by the *Emigrantinstitutets Vänförening* 2014. Hardcover, 534 pages, illustrated, name index. ISBN 978 91 7331 650 7.

Professor Ulf Beijbom, retired director of the Swedish Emigrant Institute (SEI) in Växjö has published many books, including his boyhood memoirs *Möten och människor i Nipornas stad* (2010). Now he has again taken a trip down Memory Lane, for which everyone interested in the field of late 1900s Swedish emigration research has a reason to be grateful.

Ulf Beijbom seems to have a remarkable memory, and with the help of his diaries, he gives vivid pictures of his life, starting with how he went through his National Service in Sol-

lefteå, and then had a life-changing time as an aide at the Restad mental hospital in Vänersborg, where he met the special girl who later became his wife.

Next he started his studies at Uppsala University, the first in his family to do so. He tells stories about professors and students, and also his curriculum necessary to become a high school teacher, which was then his goal.

Among his subjects was history, and here he came in contact with professor Sten Carlsson, who steered him into emigration research. The topic for his masters thesis was to be the Swedes in Chicago. Dr. Carlsson helped him to find scholarships to spend six months in Chicago, researching the old immigrants, and the rest is history.

Professor Beijbom tells much about the many people that helped him on his way, including the SAG founder Nils William Olsson.

In the mid-1960s the idea of an Emigrant Institute in Växjö, the capital of one of the most important emigration areas, was born in the mind of the then governor (*landshövding*) Gunnar Helén of Kronoberg county. Mr. Helén, a former politician, managed to gather much local support.



### SAG needs your help!

We regard the reviews as a very important part of SAG, as the readers are spread all over the U.S., Canada, and Sweden and a lone subscriber even in Australia.

For all of them it is very difficult to keep track of the many interesting books (and movies) that are published with a *Swedish* or *Swedish-American* theme.

We need you to keep your eyes open. And we are extremely pleased if you will write a review and send it to the SAG editor.

Family histories, church histories, local group histories, and lodge histories are among the things we would like to present in SAG. And all in English.

A good book review contains the full title of the book, name of author, year of printing, name of publisher, where it can be bought, and the price of the book.

Send all book reviews to the SAG editor!

Elisabeth Thorsell  
SAG editor

Mr. Beijbom was named the first director of the Emigrant Institute and a special house was built, named the *House of Emigrants*. Mr. Helén also convinced author Vilhelm Moberg to donate his material for his emigrant books to the fledgling institute, though Mr. Moberg had doubts of this young historian from Uppsala, as he felt that academics did not know enough to do proper emigrant research. But all went well and there was a big opening of the new building in 1968 with participants from Sweden and the U.S.

Professor Beijbom has an easy style of writing, and has many interesting stories to tell about the SEI and all his travels to the U.S. It is sad that this interesting book will probably not be available in English.

Elisabeth Thorsell  
(to be continued)