

# Scandinavia beyond the Vikings

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**With its distinct natural resources, its openness to the outside world, and the hierarchical society it fostered, the period before the Viking era counts among the most poorly known periods in Scandinavian history. It must be reinterpreted from the standpoint of a broader history of the first millennium CE.**

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Reviewed: Lucie Malbos, *Les Peuples du Nord. De Fróði à Harald l'Impitoyable, I<sup>er</sup>-XI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (The Northern Peoples: From Fróði to Harald Hadrada), Paris, Belin Éditeur / Humensis, collection "Mondes anciens," 2024, 616 p., 49 €.

## **Archeology, the key source**

By examining the first eleven centuries of the common era, Lucie Malbos upends the chronological framework that is firmly ensconced in the French and international historiography of pre-modern Scandinavia, in which the Viking period is systematically seen as a turning point. Incorporating the latter into a long first millennium, the book redefines the contours of ancient Scandinavian history by focusing on the Scandinavian Iron Age (from 500 BCE to 1000 CE). It offers specialists and non-specialists alike the first synthetic work on this period in French. It clearly shows that the Scandinavian Middle Ages begin after the period covered in the book, not in the fifth century CE, as maintained by chronologies based on the Western Middle Ages.

In taking on this period, Malbos wrestles with the true "prehistory" of Scandinavia, despite a lack of consistent written sources, as she explains in one of the "historian's workshop" sections found at the book's end. There exist a few runic inscriptions from the second century CE, along with the rich Skaldic poetry from the ninth century, and numerous western sources on the Vikings from the same period. Yet these bodies of written sources are too limited, in the first case, and, in the others, too late to cover the centuries the book deals with. Other than a few Latin sources from the first centuries of the common era that address the "Northern peoples" beyond the Roman *limes*, Malbos has no choice but to rely massively on archaeology: the study is full of synthetic descriptions of archaeological sites that are well-known (Gamla Uppsala, Valsgärde, Oseberg) and less well-known sites (Vorbasse, Gudme-Lundeborg, Hoby). This material is richly illustrated with many high-quality photographs, diagrams, and maps.

## Constant contact with the outside world

Throughout the book, we encounter a Scandinavia that is constantly on the lookout for external contact, starting with the Roman world, whose relations with Scandinavia are addressed comprehensively in chapter one. Malbos bases this chapter primarily on approaches drawn from English-speaking historiography, such as one of the latest books by Neil Price<sup>1</sup> and the work of the Danish archaeologist Lotte Hedeager.<sup>2</sup>

Contact intensified during the Viking period, which is addressed in the five central chapters, albeit from a perspective that prioritizes its internal consequences. In addition to the consolidation of political entities that slowly resulted in the formation of Scandinavian kingdoms around the turn of the tenth century, the period also experienced an extensive Christianization movement, which Malbos examines in all its complex interactions with local polytheism.

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Price, *Ancient Scandinavia: An Archaeological History from the First Humans to the Vikings*, Oxford University Press, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Lotte Hedeager, *Iron-Age Societies: From Tribe to State in Northern Europe, 500 BC to AD 700*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1992; *Iron Age Myth and Materiality. An Archaeology of Scandinavia AD 400-1000*, London, Routledge, 2011.

## Beliefs and imaginaries of a diverse Scandinavian culture

Rather than a linear history of the Christianization of Scandinavia as a process that irresistibly spread to the entire society, Malbos treats the diffusion of Christianity as a cultural phenomenon rather than a strictly religious one. This is the same approach that Malbos followed in her *Harald*<sup>3</sup> and which the French historiography of the Nordic world has embraced for several years.<sup>4</sup> In this respect, her approach is closer to historical anthropology than religious history.

The book's uniqueness lies in its consideration of the artistic dimensions of Christianization, drawing on many iconographic sources. One example is the weathervane of the Söderala church made in the Ringerike style, characterized by animal themes that recall the old mythology (p. 258-259). Malbos presents a religious world subject to many aesthetic influences, as evidenced by the mysterious buddha found in Helgö (p. 128), the subject of one of the boxed texts that are pedagogically laid out throughout the book.

These religious questions raise the problem of syncretism. On this point, the fragmentary documentation from the periods under consideration make prudence necessary. Even so, Malbos makes use of the concept in chapter 6 (p. 246-254) to refer to the religious forms that emerged from the first contact between polytheism and Christianity in northern Europe during ancient times. This uninhibited use of the term goes against the grain of studies that, in recent years, have argued for a more restrained use of the concept of syncretism when applied to Scandinavian Christianization. While different religious cultures may have intersected in this space marked by multiple cultural influences, it is not clear that a religion resulting from the fusion of Christian dogma and polytheistic beliefs appeared in Scandinavia. The question is still debated, due to artifacts that, like the casting mold bearing a Thor's hammer and a cross from Trendgården (Denmark, 10th century CE), suggest that the two paradigms coexisted before 1000, yet without establishing that they blended together into a single religion. Malbos invokes the notion of "cultural osmosis" used by Ildar Garipzanov over the past decade, while also proposing the more fluid term "adaptation." She adds the concepts of hybridization, compromise, and "the polysemy of certain themes and

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<sup>3</sup> Lucie Malbos, *Harald à la Dent Bleue. Viking, roi, chrétien*, Paris, Passés Composés, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Alban Gautier, *Beowulf au paradis. Figures de bons païens dans l'Europe du Nord au haut Moyen Âge*, Paris, Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2017; Stéphane Coviaux, *La Fin du monde viking*, Paris, Passés Composés, 2019.

symbols" (p. 248) to the vocabulary of interculturality, which represents the book's approach.

## **Gender, environment, migration**

Malbos' refusal to consider ancient Northern Europe as a world closed in on itself conveys her desire to embrace the most recent trends in the historiography of ancient Scandinavia. Clearly, the paths proposed in the third "workshop," on "new directions in Scandinavian studies" (p. 559-571), are well represented in the book. Her history of the Northern peoples also sheds new light on the Viking period, while building on recent French historiography's contributions to this topic.<sup>5</sup>

Chapter 8, which deals with the "patriarchal, composite, and changing" nature of Scandinavian societies (p. 317-369), is, from this perspective, illustrative. While it deals primarily with questions of material history, such as food, hygiene, and the games played by ancient Scandinavians, it also claims that men were the dominant gender, quickly dismissing speculation that the old North was ruled by strong women, as a pervasive stereotype maintains. The use of this analytical framework, which draws on gender studies, makes it possible for Malbos to present a world in which women, like slaves and children, were seen as inferior creatures and subject to masculine power.

Malbos also, however, emphasizes the "strong collective feeling" (p. 352) that preserved a certain equilibrium in these highly hierarchical societies. Without overlooking the important role played by women in the Scandinavian imaginary and ordinary situations in which men were absent, the book paints an accurate portrait of the material reality of women's submission to a patriarchal order in the household, from the various forms of divorce to the gendered division of domestic labor. The thorny case of the "Birka warrior," a female body found in a tomb with traits commonly associated with warriors, is not addressed, as Malbos has analyzed it on several occasions, notably in her last book.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See notably Pierre Bauduin, *Histoire des Vikings. Des invasions à la diaspora*, Paris, Tallandier, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Lucie Malbos, *Le monde viking. Portraits de femmes et d'hommes de l'ancienne Scandinavie*, Paris, Tallandier, 2022.

She does however address the environment and migration, which are the focus of a great deal of current historical and archaeological research and to which her book makes an essential contribution for French-language scholarship. For instance, the question of the interactions between Scandinavians and the natural milieu they occupy appears, throughout the text, as a guiding thread: its panorama of the geological conditions and territorial resources of each region of ancient Scandinavia is, from this standpoint, particularly valuable. (p. 20-30). Except for a handful of synthetic works in English,<sup>7</sup> this data was previously scattered across a myriad of publications in environmental archaeology not easily accessible to non-specialists.

Finally, the question of the "Viking diaspora"--a concept borrowed from Judith Jesch--is taken up in chapter 7 (p. 271-315) in a manner conducive to encouraging new discussion of this topic, particularly in the wake of the recent emergence of "migration studies." This vigorously interdisciplinary field appears to have inspired Malbos' approach, which, in addition to the traditional Scandinavian settlements in the Frankish world, considers Iceland, the Faroes Islands, and the North Atlantic as colonial territories. Yet Malbos nonetheless refuses to attribute "expansionist goals" (p. 271) to the ancient Scandinavians, as she negotiates a balance between a study of violence of conquest and a refutation of the stereotype of the bloodthirsty Viking.

In a book that blends the contributions of recent research, notably in archaeology, Malbos opens new scholarly vistas, especially for centuries prior to the Viking period, which have been largely ignored by French Scandinavian specialists. She has written, for whoever is interested in this region and particularly the ancient period, the first work of reference in French--a work that is both encyclopedic and historically innovative.

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Knut Helle, ed., *Cambridge History of Scandinavia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008.