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## BOOK REVIEW

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### **Sanmark, Alexandra. 2017. *Viking Law and Order* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press)**

Keith Ruiter

**T**his book, like the features of many of the assembly sites that occupy its analysis, is something monumental. With its roots stretching back to 2004 in the groundwork that paved the way for *The Assembly Project*, *Viking Law and Order* builds impressively off this carefully laid foundation, fully living up to its early promise to transcend descriptions of Old Norse assembly (*þing*) sites and enter into a rich investigation of the human practices and experiences at these assemblies. Sanmark's approach throughout is chronologically broad but careful and thoroughly multidisciplinary, allowing for new macro-level connections, analyses, and conclusions to be drawn. All this makes this monograph an indispensable contribution to scholarship that will be of interest to a wide range of researchers across a variety of fields.

*Viking Law and Order* consists of nine chapters, beginning with a very full, but helpful summary of the state of the field of assembly site research, demonstrating just how much time Sanmark has invested in this remarkable project. This is also where Sanmark establishes the three key themes that form the major strands of the 'thick tapestry of interpretation' (p. xviii) that makes up the volume: landscape, time, and memory. She returns to these themes throughout the book to enlightening effect, but it is here where she establishes the benchmark for her investigation: assembly sites were inscribed in the landscape, they were maintained in collective and social memory through multi-layered experience, and time, chronology, and time-depth could be manipulated by actors in these specialised spaces. From the very beginning she discusses her approach with careful reference to methodological

concerns and the limitations of each respective evidence set, moving through a helpful discussion of each set for readers who may be unfamiliar with one source-group or another.

From here, Sanmark leads the reader through her extensive study by first taking on the key features and functions of Scandinavian *þing* sites and assembly meetings; moving into how these assemblies traveled with the Scandinavian diaspora and inquiring after the comparisons and contrasts between these exported *þing* traditions and those in Scandinavia. It is transdisciplinary and theoretically rich discussions like these that will interest archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, and even scholars outside of the traditional range of Viking Studies, in equal measures. She concludes with an investigation into the legacy of these socio-legal institutions in their respective spheres through the medieval period and into the modern day.

Chapter two provides a background for the Scandinavian assembly tradition in terms of its function and logistics, and Sanmark plots its development back to a continental Germanic history and context. Sanmark's problematisation of the traditional male-female binary when it comes to Norse assembly participation (males were 'included', while females were 'excluded') is especially important and revealing and offers much to present discussions of female empowerment and agency in the early medieval world. Chapter three builds off this logistical discussion by moving into a survey of *þing* sites across Scandinavia and lays out the first full articulation of an 'ever-shifting pattern of assembly sites' (p. 14), highlighting just how harmonious archaeological and textual analysis can be by demonstrating that the hierarchies depicted in the written sources are also reflected in the archaeology of these sites. Chapter four moves deeper into an exploration of these hierarchies by investigating the use of features, like mounds, monuments, and enclosures in the elite-dominated rituals of these assemblies. Sanmark shows how these features had sophisticated purposes and meaning and how they could be manipulated or even built for purpose at new *þing* sites. Chapter five turns its attention to the rest of the community at the *þing* and their activities at the assembly by making use of archaeological evidence for communal meals and accommodation, as well as reflecting on the social dynamics of these gatherings. She highlights the complex interaction between communal and elite populations at *þing* sites and the role that this interplay has in accruing and exercising political and legal authority. Chapter six, the last to focus exclusively on the situation in Scandinavia itself, finally moves to explore the changing character of *þing* sites over time in light of such factors as Christianisation, Europeanisation, centralisation of power, and eventual royal control.

Chapter seven shifts its gaze to the North Atlantic Scandinavian diaspora, exploring Iceland, the Faroe Islands, and Greenland respectively, while demonstrating the continuity of *þing* models and traditions in each of these spheres. Sanmark does highlight some key differences between the Scandinavian traditions and the newly established assemblies in the areas of Norse settlement: namely, the use of *þing*-booths and a lack of connection between *þing* sites and mortuary sites, which she interprets as being due to a lack of necessity to lean on historical legitimacy in the sparsely populated North Atlantic fringe. By way of contrast, Chapter eight moves to look at the peculiar picture presented by Norse Scotland, where the connection between *þing* sites and mortuary monuments, especially large mounds, served as a way of connecting the socio-legal legitimacy of the *þing* to the local past. Sanmark also presents compelling evidence for cross-cultural influence of the Picts and Gaels in Norse assembly practices. With an eye on drawing the final threads of the tapestry together, Sanmark uses Chapter nine to confront questions of continuity and change, exploring the influence of major *þing* sites on central places and, eventually looking at modern administration, explores why some sites were used and reused for centuries while others were very short-lived.

Scholars of Anglo-Scandinavian England and the Viking diaspora in Normandy and Russia may be disappointed to find that *Viking Law and Order* does not cover these regions; however, the reasons provided by Sanmark for the geographical bounds of her study are justified and the sheer depth, breadth, and panache of her scholarship here provides ample comparative material, a range of exciting discussions on gender, diaspora, administration, social dynamics, ritual, and memory, and a masterclass in transdisciplinary methods. As such, the book not only reveals new and richer ways to think about the Viking Age and the peoples who populated it, but it does so in ways that spark interest, plug into pressing debates of the day, and invite further discussion. In my view, these factors make *Viking Law and Order* essential reading for specialists and generalists alike, while also offering a host of possible extracts and case studies for undergraduate and postgraduate classrooms.