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REVIEW

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The Northern Routes to Kingship: a history of Scandinavia AD 180–550. By DAGFINN SKRE. 235 mm. Pp xxviii + 666, 75 figs, 13 tabs. Routledge, London and New York, 2025. ISBN 9781138831377. £116.00 (hbk).

Be it an eye-catching piece of wordplay or prosaically descriptive, the first part of the title of a scholarly publication usually locates the work against broad key concepts; after the colon you get more idea of what it really deals with. Even this aspect of Dagfinn Skre's new monograph bears appreciation. It *is* a sustained discussion of the incipient development of kingship in Scandinavia, in the Late Roman Iron Age and Migration Period in conventional Nordic terms, while also presenting detailed explorations of social, economic and ideological dimensions of culture necessarily associated with that. In this way, then, the principal topic is one appropriate way in to a representative history of what is actually late prehistoric Scandinavia. Skre is also comfortable in approaching this stage of Scandinavia's past from a perspective rooted in Norway. There are Danish and Swedish scholars who could have written equally thorough studies of the same topic, but they would inevitably have been markedly different. There is a gentle wink in the book's main title, as 'northern route' is precisely the etymological root of the name 'Norway'.

Not playful, though, is the connected turn of that same awareness of personal standpoint in Skre's reflections on his work in the book's 'Epilogue' (pp 569–74), where an 'emic' perspective is emphasised in relation to a historical reconstruction that concurrently 'decentres Rome' and still explains this fundamental stage in the emergence of kinship in Scandinavia in terms of a 'rebirth of Rome in the North' (p 559). It is a transformative adaptation of Roman influences, not some mere, clumsy, barbarian emulation and cultural cringe that was involved. Historically, the primary factor, Skre argues, was the Marcomannic Wars from AD 166 to the early AD 180s. Sufficient numbers of Scandinavian men were recruited to serve in the Roman army, where they were trained and acquired a Roman pattern of military structure and practice, which could be brought back by veterans and imposed as a new social structure over considerable areas of Scandinavia. Concurrently, the values attached to ethnic identities in an earlier 'tribal' configuration of the population could be adapted to, and adopted by, this new form of power. A persistent theme of this study is that ethnic identity should not be reduced to something exclusively functional, or 'instrumental', but rather 'political ethnic rhetoric *worked*, and … identity *mattered* to people' (pp 571–2). It is important to stress that the terms 'tribe' and 'tribal' are used only after careful deliberation (pp 52–3). I am sympathetic to Skre's position on that, but retain substantial reservations, not least because of the still strong, simplistic and pejorative connotations of the term 'tribe'. Although some scholars explore them carefully and thoughtfully, in general discourse it is also too easy to use terms like 'tribe' and indeed 'ethnicity' as if there were no need to worry about or explain what those words are supposed to mean. That is categorically not the case.

The discussion of how best to translate the terminology of primary sources such as Latin *gens* into Modern English comes towards the middle of an extended theoretical introduction – Part I, 'Coming to Grips with Early Kingship'. In a preceding general 'Introduction' to the book, the author disarmingly invites readers who find this 'hard to digest' to skip most of this section (pp 14–15). The most fundamental disagreement I have with Skre is that I would advise readers to do no such thing! This section is informed by deep, relevant learning and thought, used without pretentiousness; controversialised subjects are assessed with firm critical judgment, but equally without preaching. The explanation of the challenges, and the value, of balancing analyses focused essentially on impersonal systems and processes with more intuitive recognition of individual human motivations is clear and valuable; likewise the review of the sensitive historical background to the study of this period and topic, and the problems of

terminology; that of various forms of rulership and the rulers' immediate followers, the 'retinue'; and the presentation of frameworks for understanding religion without belittling it as primitive superstition. Skre has a precise definition of 'agency' that is more individualistic and specifically human than I am familiar with; the use of 'heterarchy' was new to me although the condition it describes was not. In its pairing with 'hierarchy', it is an apt and informative concept.

The one section of Part I readers are not excused from is that on 'the heroic warrior ethos', under the broader heading of a 'societal perspective' on 'religiously derived ethics', and based largely on the Old English poem *Beowulf*. Here, this provides an excellent introduction to heroic ideals and their realisation (as far as we can tell). *Beowulf* is argued to be a more realistic portrayal of that sphere of elite life than has conventionally been thought for generations now. But Skre will face weighty pushback on his representation of *Beowulf* as a Scandinavian story of the sixth century that was brought into England pretty much as we now see it (p 91). That is *not* because groupthink in the field of Old English studies rejects a Scandinavian origin out of hand. It is incorrect to dismiss a sequence of scholarship from Rosemary Cramp in the first issue of *Medieval Archaeology* in 1957 through now, in fact, to Jan-Peer Hartmann (2025, 142–91), as unvaried attempts 'to accommodate the material culture of *Beowulf* within the Anglo-Saxon evidence' (p 89, top). Regrettably it is true that dominant cliques in Old English studies through to the 1990s were too inclined to subject views that diverged from and challenged their own to ridicule, but Theodore Andersson's quoted reference to 'a consensus of mirth' against any suggestion of a Scandinavian original for the poem is rhetorical, and in reality imaginary. Andersson, in *A* Beowulf *Handbook* (Bjork and Niles 1996), looked solely at literary parallels as potential sources – and did find a good deal of Scandinavian material there, albeit foregrounding folk-tale rather than legendary history. Catherine Hills, in the same volume, also carefully included Scandinavian evidence in her study of '*Beowulf* and archaeology'; since the 1990s, the evidence for centres of power and chieftainly halls in Scandinavia has grown and changed immensely. Just as the 1980 Toronto conference on 'The Dating of *Beowulf*' set a vital framework for discussion for the following quarter-century – even if its claims have since widely been refuted – a further major conference comparing, contrasting and integrating the Scandinavian components of *Beowulf* with its Anglo-Saxon components would be both timely and productive now.

Part II of the book narrows in on a 'Military Twist' in Scandinavia from *c* AD 180, and does so by introducing a range of forms of empirical evidence relevant, as presented here, to different facets of the topic: essentially what the forms of wealth and power that might be pursued actually *were*; kinship and other social ties; the partition and control of the resources of land and coasts. Especially informative here is a presentation of the wealth of recent *denarius* silver coin finds from Norway from early in that period, correlated with already identified masses of Roman swords that became available in Scandinavia around the same time. Chapter 5, 'Kinsmen and strangers', focuses particularly on personal names, now recorded in runic inscriptions, with persuasive and interesting analogical data and sociolinguistic propositions concerning both compound ('dithematic') appellative names and simplex nicknames from the late second to the fifth centuries AD. One counter-suggestion may be made and one mistake noted, constructively not negatively. I believe the second element of *asugisalas* on a spearshaft from the Kragehul bog-deposit is probably misidentified as the reflex of Germanic **gaisilaz*, in origin a diminutive of **gairaz*, 'spear', and interpreted as 'arrow-shaft'; that word's principal descendant in Old Norse is *geisli*, 'ray, beam'. The alternative identification is with **gīslaz*, 'hostage', apparently a very early loan from Celtic to Germanic: Old Norse/Old English, *gísl*/*gīsl*. The alternative interpretations were judiciously discussed in relation to the Old High German onomasticon, where the term is frequent, albeit usually as the first element in dithematic names, by Ernst Förstemann (1900, cols 647–8); however, the runologist Wolfgang Krause plumped without discussion for *Sproß*, 'plant-shoot' (Krause 1937, 483), and that has been unquestioned ever since. From **gīslaz* this would be another name-element to add to the 'guest/servant/client' semantic field, and significantly extend the nature of the 'hospitality' thus implied. Meanwhile, the first element of the name of Beowulf's father, *Ecġþēow*, is not from Germanic **agaz*/*agiz*, whence Modern English *awe* in the sense of 'fear', but rather from **agjō*, a feminine noun that has descended in English *edge*, pan-Scandinavian *egg*. *Ecġ*- names are very numerous in Anglo-Saxon England; *Egg*-names, by contrast, very few in Scandinavia. However *Ecġþēow* has a direct parallel in *Eggþér*, the name of a giant who appears in the Eddic poem *Vǫluspá*. No convincing case has yet been

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made for Beowulf's father and Eggþér somehow to be reflexes of a single original figure.

Parts II and III ('Obtaining Wealth') appear to run fairly seamlessly together, from the organisation of a new imposed hierarchy in settlement for the exploitation of resources (Chapter 6) through an account of complementary long-distance trade routes – from the far north, south to the Continent and towards Eurasia in the south-east – and then on to information on geographically specific, high-value resources: iron and arctic fauna (Chapters 7–9). A short Chapter 10 acknowledges, but can answer few questions about, possible slave-trading. Along with these, however, there are further illuminating new observations on an apparently second-wave militarised settlement of Hålogaland in North Norway in the fourth century (pp 359–82), and a hillfort zone across the centre of the main Scandinavian peninsula, apparently representing defensive measures where slave-raiding could have been a major threat (pp 386–93).

Parts IV and V, 'Old Ways, New Beginnings (AD 180–500)' and 'Building the Kingdom (AD 450–550)' develop the interpretative history from a long period of transition to a short period of consummation – before the disasters of the Late Antique Little Ice Age and Justinian Plague struck just before the middle of the sixth century. This opens with a helpful recapitulation of the principal points argued for thus far, and not least a useful description of the postulated 'tribe' (pp 398–400). We are also presented here with a zoning of Scandinavia that coincides very closely with the medieval kingdoms of Denmark in the south, Sweden in the east and Norway in the west. Much of that is concerned with the challenge of fitting the many Danish ritual hoards of weaponry, great and small, into a geo-political context. Part V begins, in fact, with a review of the very new aDNA evidence for a startlingly high level of immigration and settlement into southern Scandinavia from the Continent further south in the fourth century.

The first full chapter of Part V, however, 'Swearing in The Men', opens with a study and interpretation of the Scandinavian gold bracteates of the fifth–sixth centuries. Once again, attention moves rapidly to personal names on inscribed bracteates, compared and contrasted with those in earlier inscriptions (mostly the large weapon-hoards) plus early runestones, and the range of names embedded in what are understood to be equally early toponyms ending in *-lev*. Etymologically, there are some salient differences between all of the categories: at the very least, they consistently do not appear to be random samples of a single common stock. Yet what strikes me most of all is how little attention is typically paid in social interpretations of the bracteate phenomenon to the fact that these are female dress-accessories. This is no targeted critique of Skre's approach, who does indeed acknowledge the issue (pp 479–80), but proposes that the female grave-finds of bracteates, which are indeed 'restricted' to a large peripheral zone, are unrepresentative, a function of secondary 'conversion' outside the central area of bracteate production. Actually, even within that central area (where grave-finds of the relevant date are extremely few), bracteates recurrently appear in caches of female dress-accessories, not weapon-fittings, for which some time ago I ventured an interpretation as 'surrogate burials' (Hines 1989, esp. 197–9 and tab 1). In that light, what stands out even more from the list of names in bracteate inscriptions is that – with the possible exception of the mysterious *tanulu* on a C-bracteate from Börringe in Skåne – they are all unambiguously masculine. Skre's history of Scandinavia AD 180–550 is absolutely a history of what men got up to. Given the topic of kingship, that is realistic; it is how things were. But women can appear in the archaeological picture, and they were not quite so marginal and deprived of their own agency as this approach to bracteates makes them.

It is the task of a reviewer to assess and evaluate, but that is not to act as a referee or examiner – in Norway, the rather adversarial *opponent*. This book was most certainly written in order to stimulate thought and provoke debate. If I opt to differ more decidedly from the author in some respects (and I do not think, either, I shall start using the terms 'consilience' and 'glocal'; we shall see about 'transcultural'), I regard it as testimony to the importance of the arguments he has offered to do so. This *magnum opus* is a new peak in a career of massively important scholarly contributions. I for one rejoice to see such strength and dynamism in Scandinavian, and not least Norwegian, archaeology as we enter the second quarter of the twenty-first century. The best perspective of all is that research is always work in progress; there are endless further questions. For instance, not least with regard to the secondary wave of settlement transformation in Hålogaland, I would ask how colonising movements of the second half of the fifth century, from the territory of the Svíar across the Baltic to occupy parts of Finland and Estonia and from Norway over the North Sea to Humberside and East Anglia, could be incorporated within this

historical study. Those are to some degree 'parochial' questions, but entirely valid ones to add to what is anything but a parochial history.

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