

R. I. PAGE, *Chronicles of the Vikings: records, memorials and myths*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995. Pp. 240. ISBN: 0-8020-0803-8. \$50.00 (cloth). ISBN: 0-8020-7165-1. \$17.95 (paper).

It is nowadays generally accepted that the stereotyped image of barbarous Viking warriors trampling across the sensibilities of Christian Europe is obsolete and inaccurate. Against such an image, which has its origin in the prejudicial accounts of non-Scandinavian chroniclers, we can place the literature of the Vikings themselves. This literature, preserved in the form of runic inscriptions, skaldic verse, sagas and a few narratives, is represented in Professor Page's book by a selection of translated extracts designed to illustrate the attitudes, ideals and everyday lives of the Vikings. The book thus makes instantly accessible a sample of texts which, for many of us, would be difficult to locate without the expense of a great deal of time and effort.

The theme of the whole book is perhaps best encapsulated by the title of the first chapter, 'Getting to know the Vikings.' If this is one of the author's main objectives, then he has probably succeeded, at least in so far as the layman reader is concerned. Those of us who have hitherto encountered Viking society at secondhand, through the study of other medieval peoples, for example, can scarcely have escaped the influence of what Page calls the 'bad press' given by contemporary Western European chroniclers, so it is useful for us to see the Vikings' own opinions on their activities.

The book's fourth chapter, 'Vikings outside Scandinavia,' duly opens with extracts from two prejudicial sources: the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's account of Danish ravages in southern England in 1010–11 and Alcuin's letter to the monks of Lindisfarne in the aftermath of the Viking raid on their monastery in 793. Page immediately follows these with a selection of memorial inscriptions from mainland Scandinavia, which give an insight into the Vikings' own view of their overseas ventures, but which also show a depth of human feeling which we do not usually associate with the stereotyped Nordic barbarian: the grief of bereaved families for husbands, fathers and sons who have died in faraway lands. The inscriptions are followed by extracts from prose accounts, both Scandinavian and Byzantine, of exploratory expeditions, trade-treaties and other happenings, all of which detract from the pervasive image of Viking hordes rampaging and pillaging in an orgy of violence.

The most interesting contrast drawn by Page occurs in the fifth and sixth chapters, respectively entitled 'The heroic life' and 'The unheroic life.' In the former, we are presented with several prose and verse saga-extracts which give a glimpse of the familiar image of warlike kings and fierce warriors who 'hack through enemy shields' on their way to immortality in 'Odin's halls.' Page observes that the popularity in early medieval Scandinavia of some of the more barbarous of the ancient Germanic tales was in part because 'the violence, cruelty and mindless heroism they portrayed apparently struck a chord in the Viking mind.' In chapter six, however, we encounter the altogether different set of ideals held by the 'unheroic' members of Viking society: the lower classes, the peasantry, as well as those kings and nobles who failed to fulfil their true roles as warlords and leaders. For this purpose, Page selects verses from the *Havamal* collection of poems, in which the poet praises the virtues of poverty, of moderation

in food and drink, of staying alive rather than living dangerously ('what good is a corpse to anyone?'), and of not seeking too much knowledge.

The penultimate chapter, 'Myth, religion and superstition,' brings us back to familiar territory, with poems and tales recounting the exploits of Odin, Loki, Baldr and other deities. There is a certain continuity between this and the closing chapter, 'The conversion to Christianity,' in which Page uses a variety of sources to illustrate particular aspects of the conversion, such as the blending of paganism and Christianity evident from inscriptions, and the oft-frustrated attempts to establish the Faith in Iceland and Sweden.

Page is careful to acknowledge the limitations of his source-material. He notes, for instance, the absence of a corpus of early law-codes and other contemporary legal texts, which has left a significant gap in our knowledge of Viking literature and society. This absence is due in part to the practice of oral transmission, which meant that traditional laws were not committed to writing until long after the true Viking era.

The author's detailed attention to such problems, not merely in the opening chapter but throughout the entire work, provides what is perhaps the book's main usefulness as a pedagogic resource for medieval studies in general. Page has compiled a cross-section and representative sample of the literature of early Scandinavia, largely from the internal viewpoint of the region's inhabitants, which might be usefully compared with the literatures of other medieval European cultures. In particular, Page's comments on the structure and content of skaldic verse and the great sagas are surely applicable to similarly 'heroic' themes and works encountered within Arthurian literature.

The book does not include footnotes, but all quoted sources are referenced at the back, whilst a small bibliographical section closes the final chapter. I would recommend this book as a worthwhile addition to any medievalist's bookshelf, whether it be as a pedagogic or research tool or as a purely recreational tome. My only quibble is a minor one: the title might at first glance seem somewhat misleading to scholars, for this is by no means a collection of dry 'chronicles' but a vivid anthology of writings from one of the most maligned groups in European history.

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