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***Viking Law and Order: Places of Ritual and Assembly in the Medieval North.* Edinburgh By Alexandra Sanmark. ISBN 9781474402293. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017. RRP £75.00**

As its acknowledgements point out, this book is the product of almost fifteen years of personal and collaborative research which began in 2003 and gradually developed into *The Assembly Project* of 2010-13. It is an ambitious study which seeks to develop an international, archaeological approach to 'Viking' assembly or 'thing' sites, a field that has hitherto been dominated by documentary research and place-name studies.

As the first two chapters make clear, however, the author's emphasis on the physical characteristics of assembly sites does not mean that she turns her back on this earlier research, which is discussed at length and has clearly played a key role in shaping research. At the heart of this study is the identification of a range of topographical and archaeological features that are consistently associated with assembly sites across the Viking diaspora, from '(proximity to) land routes' to [128/129] 'place-names of a cultic nature', these being the first and last of a list of twenty features which Sanmark identifies at the beginning of chapter 3. Some of these features are a little imprecise or difficult to identify conclusively, and others are regionally specific, but the book demonstrates that there are recurring features and clear patterns, and that some physical characteristics of Scandinavian assembly sites were reproduced by migrating groups as they settled in the Norse North Atlantic.

While this is very useful research, this book is much more than an exercise in classification of assembly sites by features. In chapters four and five, the author considers the relationship between these features and the ritual activity which took place there. Her argument is most convincing in the case of 'elite' activity, which led to the development and use of specific objects and structures at sites, from the runestones of central Sweden to the booths of the Norse North Atlantic, and the clear manipulation of the landscape to reinforce social hierarchy. The discussion of community activity at these sites, while absolutely valid, is more problematic. The very nature of thing assemblies means that less powerful individuals must have been present, but their impact on thing sites was much more ephemeral, and the archaeological evidence, whether for traveling or for communal feasting, is much less clear-cut. Indeed, even the *vébönd*, or 'holy bands', which separated those who participated directly in the proceedings of the thing from those who witnessed it, and which must have formed a key part of ritual activity at these sites, will not necessarily have left any clear traces in the archaeological record.

Sanmark's research also explores the tension between a desire to link assembly sites to what she calls an 'ancestral past', above all by situating them close to prehistoric monuments, and the need to adapt and change their layout, and indeed their location, to reflect changing social, political and administrative needs. Given the limited number of excavations at thing sites anywhere in the Viking world, her research focuses on Sweden, where runestones and documentary sources provide a chronological perspective which is inevitably lacking elsewhere, even if it can sometimes be postulated.

While the chronological scope and interdisciplinary range of the volume are impressive, it is its geographical scope which is most striking. Having discussed Sweden, Norway and Denmark in considerable detail, it moves on to consider the North Atlantic and the Norse colonies of Iceland, the

Faroes and Greenland, and the extent to which these sites immitate, discard or modify the features associated with assembly sites in Scandinavia.

Readers of this journal will be particularly interested in Sanmark's chapter on the assembly sites of Norse Scotland. She identifies no less than thirty potential sites, the overwhelming majority using place-name evidence, which are spread through the north and west of the country. She argues that many of these sites are deliberately located beside 'ancient' (i.e. prehistoric) monuments, in a manner that reflects the location of many thing sites in Scandinavia, but which here represents an appropriation of a 'local' past by an incoming community seeking to consolidate control of new territories. Another feature of some Scottish thing sites is their proximity to furnished 'Viking' burials, although these are sometimes several kilometres from the proposed assembly sites. Many readers will be surprised by Sanmark's relatively critical assessment of the Scandinavian influence on **[129/130]** Doomster Hill at Govan, but her comments serve as a useful reminder that the Norse were by no means the only group active in early medieval Britain and Ireland whose assembly sites were associated with mounds. Conversely, Sanmark draws quite extensively on north Scottish evidence when discussing the abandonment of open air assembly sites and the move 'inside', often to buildings close to the original sites.

Beyond a clearly written and well-structured text, this book is also to be commended for its many clear plans of assembly sites across the Viking diaspora, and for the equally useful maps showing the territories under the authority of what are here termed 'top-level' things. Both provide a physical dimension for law codes that are often considered in much more abstract ways, much like the thing sites themselves.

Things were crucial to the maintenance of law and order in Viking society, and a consideration of their physical layout and chief characteristics is long overdue. This study is successful in demonstrating that they shared characteristics, but it also identifies a number of regional variations that were equally important. In considering the role of elites and communities at these sites, it offers useful insights to the nature of social authority and power in the Viking Age, at home and abroad. While its broad scope means that the discussion of individual sites, and sometimes themes, is necessarily brief, a comprehensive index and bibliography make it a very useful reference text, as well as a comprehensive introduction to a complex topic. As such, it will form a useful addition to any Viking library.

Stephen Harrison