



# Fibula, Fabula, Fact

*The Viking Age in Finland*

Edited by  
Joonas Ahola and Frog with Clive Tolley

**Studia Fennica**  
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#### EDITORIAL OFFICE

Hallituskatu 1

FIN-00170 Helsinki

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# Preface

## The Project, Goals, Methods and Outcomes



VIKING AGE IN FINLAND

The chapters of *Fibula, Fabula, Fact – The Viking Age in Finland* are intended to provide essential foundations for approaching the important topic of the Viking Age in Finland. These chapters are oriented to provide introductions to the sources, methods and perspectives of diverse disciplines so that these resources and the history of discourse from which they emerge are accessible to specialists from other fields, specialists from outside Finland, and also to non-specialist readers and students who may be more generally interested in the topic. Rather than detailed case studies of specific aspects of the Viking Age in Finland, the contributors have sought to negotiate definitions of the Viking Age as a historical period in the cultural areas associated with modern-day Finland, and in areas associated with Finns, Karelians and other North Finnic linguistic-cultural groups more generally. Within the incredible diversity of data and disciplines represented here, attention tends to center on the identification of the Viking Age through differentiating it from earlier and later periods, and on contextualizing it geographically in an era long before the construction of modern nations with their fenced and guarded borders. Most significantly, the contributions lay emphasis on contextualizing the Viking Age within the complexities of defining cultural identities in the past through traces of cultural, linguistic or genetic features.

### *Fibula, Fabula and Fact in the Pursuit of the Viking Age in Finland*

In the title of this volume, *Fibula, Fabula, Fact* refers to the triangulation and negotiation of ‘facts’ about the Viking Age in Finland, sorting through the *fibulae* and *fabulae* of different disciplines. In addition to being a term for a particular leg-bone, a *fibula* is a variety of brooch. The type of fibula depicted on the cover of this volume is geographically associated with Finland and chronologically associated with the Viking Age. It has thereby become considered emblematic of Finland in the Viking Age. In the title, this fibula is emblematic of material or tangible evidence of the Viking Age in Finland as

one of two broad categories of data discussed in this collection. On the other hand, this fibula is equally emblematic of aspects of evidence encountered in different fields that point directly or indirectly to the Viking Age in Finland. Thus, this type of fibula's geographical and chronological associations point to connections or continuities from the Viking Age and/or cultural contacts with Finland even when the specific examples are found in later or geographically remote burials. A *fabula* is a narrative or tale. The term is here used to refer simultaneously to the narratives in medieval sources, such as Old Norse saga literature, that offer early information on Finland in the Viking Age, and also to the epics and other stories in vernacular folklore that have been connected with the Viking Age. More generally, it is emblematic of aspects of intangible culture and heritage including language, which represent the other broad category of data discussed in this collection. In addition, 'fabula' also refers to all of the fabulous tales that have circulated in academic and popular writing about the Viking Age in Finland. It is therefore simultaneously emblematic of the social construction of the image of the Viking Age in Finland that remains vital and significant in the present day. Sorting through the *fibulae* and *fabulae* of different disciplines makes it possible to triangulate and negotiate *facts* about the Viking Age in Finland and their reliability.

Every field, every discipline works with particular types of source materials – 'facts' of data that can be analyzed. However, the term 'fact' is thus somewhat deceptive. It implies some type of absolute and incontrovertible truth, when it really means that something is – or should be – accepted as beyond controversy, or generally agreed to be 'true'. The reality is that 'facts' are socially constructed and negotiated. This does not mean that nothing is 'true', but rather that accepted 'facts' can be questioned, tested and contested from different perspectives and in relation to new data and new methods. Even construing data from raw information can never be divorced from interpretation: identifying a 'fact' of data is a process of interpretation and categorization, separating what is considered relevant from what is considered irrelevant – and perspectives may vary considerably over time and by discipline. The 'facts' that provide data for analysis and interpretation in different disciplines are subject to these processes, both on a case by case basis and more generally regarding the relevance and significance of different categorical types, whether these are spear-heads in archaeology or genres of folklore. Also subject to these processes are the broader 'facts' that provide fundamental backgrounds and frames of reference for discussion, such as that there was indeed a 'Viking Age', that during this period, groups of individuals travelled literally thousands of kilometers for trade, exploration and spiritual pilgrimage, and so forth. The fewer the layers of interpretation between a 'fact' and raw information, the more likely it will prove sustainable, but even something as simple as 'a fibula was found' could be a misidentification, misinterpretation or even a strategic misrepresentation. This is important to recognize because 'facts' tend to be taken for granted as eternal, when in reality they are placed in continuous dialogue both within and across disciplines and fields of inquiry.

Each type of source material presents its own potential evidence of different historical cultures and historical periods. In fields dealing with tangible evidence of cultures and physical processes, such as archaeology, potential evidence may be situated in an absolute chronology. However, this evidence is often extremely difficult to interpret in relation to cultures, cultural practices and its significance to living communities. Potential evidence from intangible aspects of culture, such as language and forms of expressive cultural practice, is often only documented long after the Viking Age. Such data can be much easier to interpret in relation to cultures, cultural practices and significance in society, but the potential information extractable from such data can often only be situated in a relative chronology and/or very broadly and according to a degree of probability. A significant problem has been that for the past several decades, disciplines have generally negotiated the ‘facts’ of their data internally or only across closely related disciplines. Opening discussion more widely across disciplines brings a much more extensive and various range of ‘facts’ into dialogue. An inevitable consequence of this increase of (sometimes inconsistent or contradictory) ‘facts’ in the discussion is that facts are tested, reassessed, negotiated. From this will follow a more generally, cross-disciplinarily viable and relevant understanding of the Viking Age in Finland, and of what can and cannot be said about it from the perspectives of these disciplines.

### *The VAF Project and Its Goals*

The recent international interest in the question of the Viking Age in Finland has been frustrated by the language barrier. Any investigation faces the challenge that the lack of early written sources from territories of Finland and Karelia has resulted in enormous chronological gaps between the data addressed by different disciplines. Thus even within Finnish scholarship, the time between archaeological evidence and relevant evidence from linguistics or folklore opens like a ravine that at times has seemed impossible to bridge. The present volume is the product of the first stage of the interdisciplinary research project *Viikinkiaika Suomessa – The Viking Age in Finland (VAF)*. The VAF formed as a cooperative group of scholars from different disciplines and institutions across Finland and also internationally with a primary concern of overcoming the problems of the plurality of data and working toward a nuanced, multidisciplinary perspective on the question. Thanks to the support of the Finnish Cultural Foundation, we brought together a wide variety of specialists in order to give concentrated attention to this topic and the methodological problems that it posed in an environment of cross-disciplinary discussion. Among our goals was precisely to make the outcomes of these negotiations internationally accessible, open to be engaged by international scholars through the publication that you presently have before you.

Rather than seeking to coordinate and build bridges between only two disciplines, this project seeks to develop dynamic holistic models through

the triangulation of as many relevant fields and perspectives as possible. These models work toward a synthesis of insights, approaches and evidence offered by diverse disciplines while taking into consideration both the history of discourse surrounding the Viking Age as well as the strengths and limitations of the contributions from each field. Rather than fixating on whether specific features or details are or are not connected to the Viking Age, we seek to recontextualize details and perspectives in a broader cross-disciplinary perspective for the construction of a more comprehensive overview of the Viking Age for Finno-Karelian cultures and cultural areas of habitation. The present collection has been organized to meet the interest and need to open and explore discussion on the Viking Age in Finland. This is the first concerted effort to bring together representatives of these different disciplines and to address and negotiate these issues.

The first phase of the VAF project has concentrated on constructing a working definition of the Viking Age in Finland and an outline of the significance of this era in cross-disciplinary perspective. This has been a foundational endeavor for opening discussion across diverse disciplines and for negotiating understandings between them. The title of the project reflects its two sides: *time* and *space*. On the one hand, it is necessary to consider what precisely the ‘Viking Age’ refers to with regard to Finland and North Finnic cultures – for example, is it simply 800–1050 AD or, like the Iron Age, should it be considered to begin and end at different times than in Western Europe? Or is it indeed relevant at all? On the other hand, it is necessary to consider what is meant by ‘Finland’ centuries before the formation of national borders, and how or whether this should be regarded especially in relation to (or as distinct from) Lapland and Karelia. At the nexus of negotiations related to time and space has remained the central question of *people* – the Viking Age was not simply a historical period; it was a social phenomenon, and discussion inevitably returns to how it affected peoples’ lives and cultures.

### *‘Relevant Indicator’ as a Working Tool*

There is almost no direct evidence of the cultural circumstances in Finland during the Viking Age. In order to construct an overall picture, it is therefore necessary to seek and triangulate a plurality of diverse evidence and research results associated with different fields. To use the emblems and metaphors introduced above, the many *fibulae* and *fabulae* of different disciplines are all potentially relevant to understanding aspects of culture in the Viking Age in Finland. Assessing the relevance (and irrelevance) of particular *fibulae* and *fabulae* to an aspect of culture, to a cultural practice or to any other cultural phenomenon, inevitably involves interpretation. Placing different *fibulae* and *fabulae* in dialogue both tests these interpretations and offers the possibility of yielding new information and new perspectives on the relevance of particular data within and across disciplines. The challenge is sorting out which *fibulae* and *fabulae* from different disciplines should

be placed in dialogue with one another. The VAF project approaches such evidence in terms of *relevant indicators* – potential indicators of different aspects of cultural reality that can be discerned from the data and findings of different disciplines.

Within individual disciplines, data indexing strategies are easily organized according to formal features. Across the past half-century in particular, different disciplines have developed rich infrastructures for indexing data of this type. These research infrastructures allow a single fibula or coin found in an archaeological excavation to be easily situated on a chronology because, with the vast number of examples, huge comparative surveys showed correlations between formal types and historical periods. These research infrastructures similarly allow such a fibula or coin to be situated in relation to an overall geographical distribution of other finds of the same type and the geographical distribution of places or regions where they were produced. Corresponding infrastructures similarly allow a remarkably detailed chronology of phonetic histories for different languages. In other words, the history of linguistic research has developed something like a ‘map’ of sound changes that enable the reconstruction of the probable earlier form of a particular word for any period in a language’s history. Potential loan-words can then be assessed by comparing the probable phonetic and semantic histories of words in different languages, looking for a point where they might historically coincide. However, data indexing strategies according to formal criteria tend almost invariably to be discipline-specific.

Formal features do not work as a foundation for cross-disciplinary indexing because the data almost inevitably has different formal criteria. For example, archaeological data, loan-words and motifs from mythology may all reveal information about the historical assimilation of iron-working technologies. However, these three groups of data will not share any formal features and therefore cannot all be indexed for potential comparison according to common formal criteria. In order to accommodate this, the VAF project proposed *relevant indicator* as a discipline-neutral term that provides a tool for relating diverse data from a plurality of disciplines. A ‘relevant indicator’ is direct or indirect evidence of cultural processes, cultural practices or human activity. Although the relevant indicator may be realized through formal features, such as the appearance of a new style of fibula or a shift in stress in words of a language, the formal features are *indicators of socio-historical processes* that occurred in real-time cultural arenas. In some cases, the relationship to cultural features may be considered self-evident – e.g. a fishing-hook is a relevant indicator of fishing practices. However, correlation with other indicators related to settlements, livelihoods, the symbolism of cultural expression, and so forth can be triangulated for perspectives on the significance of fishing within the culture. A single relevant indicator may also prove significant to multiple developments simultaneously. For example, a new design used in jewelry could simultaneously be a relevant indicator of changes in metal-working technologies, cultural aesthetics, mythology in the images it portrays or belief and ritual activity through patterns of use. Correlating diverse relevant

indicators according to themes and areas of cultural practices brings them into dialogue for the production of information. For example, the etymology of the Finnish word for ‘hops’ can be identified as a Germanic loan that was introduced into the language at some point during a long period in the Iron Age, but it cannot be situated more narrowly on the basis of phonetic evidence alone. When this etymological information is situated in relation to palaeoecological data on hops in agricultural practices in Finland, the linguistic loan can be situated in the Viking Age with a high probability. (See HÄKKINEN and ALENIOUS.) The use of ‘relevant indicators’ as a cross-disciplinary indexing strategy is intended to help stimulate and advance the negotiation of diverse data across disciplines as well as to assist in the identification of bundles or clusters of relevant indicators that appear to be interconnected with common historical processes.

### *Methods of the VAF Project*

Opening discussion across diverse disciplines can be a feat far more challenging than it may at first sound. Research disciplines do not exist in isolation from one another and the seminars which produced this volume highlighted again and again that every discipline involved was dependent on others in order to develop informed interpretations of their own data. However, tensions and difficulties arise because representatives of different disciplines work from different frames of reference. Each is embedded in a disciplinary discourse that shapes the concerns, priorities and even the very language of its representatives – they may use the same words in different ways and different words for common concepts. These challenges were increased in the second half of the twentieth century, during the era of disciplinary separatism. The same period that saw tremendous internal advances in different fields was a period in which different fields stopped talking to one another, and did not follow one another’s advances. The resulting problem is strikingly encapsulated by an aphorism of Ludwig Wittgenstein (2009: 235, II.xi.327): “Wenn ein Löwe sprechen könnte, wir könnten ihn nicht verstehen” [‘If a lion could talk, we would not be able to understand it’].<sup>1</sup> In spite of their interrelationships and interdependence, communication presents an obstacle between disciplines insofar as their representatives – immersed in a particular academic discourse’s concerns and priorities – effectively speak different languages. (Frog with Latvala 2012: 11–12.) Overcoming these thresholds and opening cross-disciplinary discussions was a primary objective of the first phase of the VAF project.

This first phase was accomplished through multidisciplinary seminars hosted by the Department of Folklore Studies, University of Helsinki, in 2011 (see further Aalto 2011). These two-day seminars were methodologically oriented to opening cross-disciplinary discussion. All speakers were invited and the seminars were made free and open to the public. In many seminars, the central question of each participant in both presenting and listening to papers is: ‘How is this useful to me?’ In our seminars, participants were

asked to arrive with the questions: ‘How is what I do useful to scholars from other disciplines? How can I help to make the data, resources and insights from my field intellectually accessible to scholars from other fields? How can I help scholars from other fields to avoid using data or resources from my field inappropriately?’ In order to promote discussion and facilitate understanding, each twenty-minute presentation was followed by a forty-minute period for questions. This seminar model provided a rich venue for the lively negotiation of perspectives from diverse areas of knowledge – an essential environment for sorting through the many *fibulae* and *fabulae* among the resources of different disciplines in working toward cross-disciplinary understandings of what can and cannot be said about the *facts* relevant to the Viking Age in Finland.

Discussions and debates engaged in the seminar continued into a virtual workshop environment (on which, see further Frog with Latvala 2012). The virtual workshop was organized and maintained in 2012 and part of 2013 around the circulation of selected working papers among all participants. This was done during the processes of peer-review orchestrated by the editors and the subsequent period of revision for publication. Participants in the virtual workshop were encouraged to contact and consult one another directly as well as to cross-reference other contributions and open dialogues with other papers. (*Throughout this volume, cross-references are indicated by the author’s name appearing in small capitals.*) The virtual workshop was later briefly reopened in 2014, when we received comments from the peer-reviewers of the volume as a whole organized by the editor of the *Studia Fennica Historica* series and during the process of finalizing the text for publication. This collection is therefore the product of more than three years of discussion among the contributors in order to negotiate a broad understanding developed from the synthesis of diverse perspectives offered by many disciplines. However, this volume is simultaneously accessible as a multidisciplinary collection with clearly distinguishable approaches and points of view that posit different scientific disciplines in relation to the topic under investigation.

### *Perspectives in Dialogue*

Across recent decades, there have been increasing movements toward interdisciplinary cooperation, yet our experience was that images of other disciplines generally tended to be rooted in what those disciplines were when they began closing off from one another – i.e. in the state of research, research methods and methodologies current in the 1960s and 1970s. There was a lack of awareness of the tremendous internal advances that has characterized individual disciplines since that time. Consequently, interdisciplinary endeavors by outsiders to a field often engaged outdated research and methodologies. Opening discussion across disciplines was a significant step in changing those perspectives. In some cases, current views and understandings in different disciplines were considered

quite striking. For example, many were surprised by the perspective from historical linguistics that most of Finland and Karelia were Sámi language areas in the Viking Age. Introducing current perspectives into an extensively multidisciplinary discussion environment situated every discipline's data in new light, generating innovative new perspectives and new understandings leading to new knowledge. These discussions opened new research questions and provided foundations for further investigations that are fully interdisciplinary in nature. Perhaps the most significant overall outcome of discussion was the general consensus that every discipline was dependent on others in order to appropriately contextualize its data, and therefore that interdisciplinary discussion and networking is essential. The chapters brought together in *Fibula, Fabula, Fact* are a concrete product of the discussions and the insights that these enabled. As a totality, they help to contextualize the results in individual disciplines within a wider picture by presenting discussions across a broad range of disciplines. These chapters are particularly oriented to carry forward the raising of awareness of the potentials and limitations of different disciplines in order to provide essential foundations for informed multidisciplinary research on the Viking Age in Finland.

The title of the Viking Age in Finland project presents two intersecting areas of discussion: the 'Viking Age' as a period of time and 'Finland' or the related historical territories as a geographical and cultural space. As was observed above, these two sides of investigation are invariably concerned with inhabitants of these territories during these periods. The chapters of this volume are organized according to these three different, yet inseparable spheres of discussion: *Time, Space, and People*. Each section offers introductions to material from different disciplines allowing the reader to consider the many facets of these broad thematic areas from multiple, complementary perspectives. The introductory chapter that opens the volume offers a synthetic overview of the current and developing perspectives on of the Viking Age in Finland. This is followed by the section on *Time*, constituted of six chapters that discuss, from the perspectives of different disciplines, how the Viking Age emerges as a period, the relevance and significance of that period as a historical era, and how that period has been presented, constructed and construed in later academic and popular discussion. This is followed by the section on *Space*, constituted of seven chapters offering diverse and complementary discussions of the geographical territories concerned, the social construction of places and their relationships, and the problems surrounding identifying places in earlier periods with particular linguistic-cultural groups when the distribution of language areas has changed radically across the intermediate centuries. The final section is *People*, constituted of six chapters concerned with the populations that inhabited these times and places, their cultures and the changes that took place within them, their identities and the riddles of meaningfulness and valuations in the social environments of earlier periods. An afterward draws the volume to a close with a look at some of the common threads that weave these many chapters together and also reveals certain lacunae in the study

of the Viking Age in Finland, considering both challenges and potentials for future research. Together, these twenty-one contributions unfold a multidimensional image of the role and significance of the Viking Age in Finno-Karelian areas of habitation. Together, these diverse contributions with their many and various perspectives and approaches reveal that the Viking Age in Finland was a transitional era characterized by radical changes that comprehensively reshaped the Finno-Ugric cultural environments in this part of the globe.

Helsinki,  
1<sup>st</sup> April 2014  
Joonas Ahola & Frog

## NOTES

- 1 Richard Macksey employed this quotation in the same capacity nearly half a century ago, when he opened the international symposium “Les Langues Critiques et les Sciences de l’Homme” [‘The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man’] (Macksey 1971: 13).

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'Were there Vikings in Finland?' *Fibula, Fabula, Fact – The Viking Age in Finland* is intended to provide essential foundations for approaching the Viking Age in Finland. The volume consists of a general introduction followed by nineteen chapters and a closing discussion. The nineteen chapters are oriented to provide introductions to the sources, methods and perspectives of diverse disciplines. Discussions are presented from fields including archaeology, folklore studies, genetics, geopolitics, historiography, language history, linguistics, palaeobotany, semiotics and toponymy. Each chapter is intended to help open the resources and the history of discourse of the particular discipline in a way that will be accessible to specialists from other fields, specialists from outside Finland, and also to non-specialist readers and students who may be more generally interested in the topic.



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