

Ann Christys, *Vikings in the South: Voyages to Iberia and the Mediterranean* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015). Print, 152 pp., US\$39.95, ISBN: 9781474213752.



Review

This volume is part of the Bloomsbury series ‘Studies in Early Medieval History’ and is fairly slim at only 104 pages. However in that length Ann Christys achieves a great deal. Her particular focus and therefore her challenge is to examine Viking attacks and voyages in the South, particularly Iberia and around the Mediterranean Sea. In contrast with the Danish and Norse Viking raids on the British Isles and Ireland, or the history of Normandy or the attention given to the Rūs, Christys is right to point out that Viking activity in Iberia is comparatively unknown in modern scholarship. Her challenge however is the nature of the evidence. Instead of contemporary evidence, Christys is mostly using sources written many years and centuries after the events in question and often they are literary rather than historic. She uses both Arabic and European sources, the evidence of toponyms, and some archaeological evidence.

The Vikings of course do not speak for themselves. The evidence is both Islamic and Christian responses to Viking attack. Some sources are far removed from the actual raids and date from the thirteenth century. As she points out, the sources have been redeveloped and revised, often to suit the needs of later ages (p. 3). Vikings appear in these sources as *Majūs* according to Arabic writers and as *gens Normannorum* for Christian writers. However as Christys points out, scholars will look in ‘vain for terminological precision’ in Arabic, Latin or Romance writings, a point with significant implications for the chronology of Viking activity (p. 19) and for the identification of raiders as Vikings. Different characteristics were ascribed to the Vikings by writers, including suggestions in Arabic sources that they were sun worshippers and Zoroastrians (p. 23). Evidence referring to ‘pagans’ is a ‘catch all category’ and allusions can be vague (p. 78).

Christys begins with what can be reconstructed of actual Viking activity in the south, including raids launched from Francia, attacks from AD 777 and then longer raids and the typical Viking pattern of staying over winter (pp. 5–6). The targets were both Christian kingdoms and Islamic emirates and resources included slaves (p. 11).

From her third chapter Christys begins detailed historiographic analysis of the medieval evidence including chronicles. From both Islamic and Christian sources Christys points to what she calls ‘an important theme in the historiography of the Viking attacks’, which is the emphasis placed on the defenders rather than the attackers (p. 31). There is however also great diversity, not simply because of differences in language and culture; stories received later additions and there are changes in emphasis from historian to historian. The histories are also the result of confused memories (p. 45). Christys points to obvious exaggerations and distortions, including impossibly high estimates of the numbers of Vikings and the number of years expeditions lasted (p. 35).

Christys also demonstrates that the Viking raids in time became part of larger national histories associated with particular schools of historical writing and particular patrons. They were part of a wider narrative in the *Historia Gothica*, a thirteenth-century national history (p. 43). They became part of a ‘pageant of history’ but as ‘supporting players’ (p. 44). In many narratives, there may have been the echo of actual events and actual historical people (p. 61). Vikings were also significant in ecclesiastical history, as indeed they were in northern records such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Vikings allowed Christian writers to construct narratives of sainthood and patterns of Christian behaviour, including legends of a bishop whose prayers repulsed a Viking raid (p. 86).

Some evidence is also archaeological but again the meaning is far from clear. The remains of what were fortified structures could be, Christys suggests, defences

against Vikings or could have been used by other groups (p. 71). Some defensive structures also predate Viking attacks.

The contribution of this volume is more than filling in a 'blank' spot in the wider modern histories of Vikings. Christys ambitiously embarks on the historiographic review of sources in different languages to consider what they reveal of Viking activity in Iberia but also the different ways that Vikings continued to matter to Christians and Muslims in centuries after they had actually sailed to Iberia. The book offers approaches to understanding how Islamic and Christian writers thought about themselves and their attackers and in particular the historiographic analysis is a thorough scrutiny of themes, differences and sources for the history of Vikings in the south. A useful appendix contains a glossary of the names and works of the historians she uses, and for the English-language reader it is especially helpful for the details on the Arabic writers.

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