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**The Development of Merchant Identity
in Viking-Age and Medieval Scandinavia**

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ABSTRACT

Merchants in the pre-medieval Nordic world are not particularly well-studied figures. There is plentiful archaeological evidence for trade and other commercial activities around the Baltic and Atlantic. The people involved in trade, however, feature only rarely in the Icelandic sagas and other written sources in comparison to other figures – farmers, kings, poets, lawyers, warriors - meaning that the role of merchants, whether considered as a “class” or an “occupation,” has remained fairly mysterious. By examining a broad variety of material, both archaeological and written, this thesis will attempt to demonstrate how merchants came to be distinguished from the other inhabitants of their world. It will attempt to untangle the conceptual qualities which marked a person as a “merchant” – such as associations with wealth, travel, and adventure – and in so doing offer a view of the emergence of an early “middle class” over the course of pre-modern Nordic history.

ÁGRIP

Kaupmenn norræna víkingaldar hafa ekki verið nægilega rannsakaðar persónur. Það eru nægar fornleifalegaheimildir fyrir verslun og öðrum viðskiptaháttum í kringum Eystrasalthafið og Atlanshafið. Fólk í tengslum við vöruskipti, kemur mjög sjaldan fyrir í Íslendingasögum og öðrum rituðum heimildum ef borið saman við aðrar persónur, bændur, konungar, skáld, lögfræðingar, bardagamann, sem þýðir að hlutverk kauphéðna, hvort sem horft er á það sem „stétt“ eða „atvinnu“, hefur haldist leynt. Með því að fara yfir efni frá bæði fornleifaheimildum og rituðum mun þessi „ritgerð“ reyna að sýna fram á hvernig verslunarmenn fóru að aðgreina sig frá öðrum þegnum þeirra veraldar. Hún mun reyna að skera á þann huglæga hnút sem eyrnamerkti manneskju sem „kaupmann“ – sem dæmi væru auðæfi, ferðalög, og ævintýri – og með því að bjóða upp á aðra sýn af þróuninni fyrir snemm borinni miðstétt yfir þann tíma.

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TERMINOLOGY

Attempting to solve issues in periodization by means of terminological quibbling is a favorite pursuit of the historian. While precision is, of course, to be desired, I see little reason to suppose that banishing the word “Viking” from our vocabularies, or spending overmuch time in defining the boundaries of the Viking age from the Medieval period, should enhance our understanding of the issues at hand. As such, I do not intend to worry too much about these problems. In keeping with the general practice of the historians of the past few decades, I will use “Viking” only in reference to pirates and other such characters, or in reference to the “Viking Age,” which I understand to mean the period of Scandinavian expansion which began somewhere around the reign of the 8th- and 9th-century Carolingians in continental Europe and which fizzled out with the triumph of the Christian monarchies in Scandinavia in the 11th-12th centuries. Elsewhere, I will be using the conventional archaeological terminology pertaining to periodization. When more clarity is called for, I will specify the century or date in question.

Translations will be provided for quotations in languages other than Old Icelandic, or if the Old Icelandic in question is perilously non-normalized.

INTRODUCTION

The medieval era in Scandinavia was not a time defined exclusively by violence, as popular histories so often remind us. The scholarship of the period has long sought to problematize the Romantic notion of a heroic, martial Viking Age, drawing attention to the greater nuances and complexities of the interplays of power and law, gender and sexualities, technologies and trade that characterized early Scandinavian society. Where a hundred years before the field had been completely dominated by discussion of “great men” and under the sway of the Whiggish notion of a progression towards the goal of the establishment of the modern Scandinavian states, it is now scarcely possible to find a study upon which this social-historical turn in the scholarship has not left some impression. Histories now abound on the rise of Christianity and its collusion with the early kingships to produce the later medieval Scandinavian states, and the social milieus of all the stock characters of medieval Scandinavia – the martial lord and his retainers, the bishops and his priests, the free farmer and his household – have all been studied in extensive depth, with the exception of one figure: the merchant. As often as the wares of the medieval Scandinavian merchant are displayed in museums, and as often as their activities figure in studies of economic history, the identities, ideologies and cultural conceptions of the merchants themselves remain infrequently studied.

What, precisely, did a medieval or premedieval Scandinavian merchant do? What were the expectations placed upon them, and how did they figure into the broader society of the medieval Nordic world? They do not fit neatly into the old trifunctional model of prehistoric European societies as initially proposed by Georges Dumézil,¹ nor do they have a place in the traditional historiographical model of the medieval “feudal economy”² (whatever we may take that to mean.) Inasmuch as it is conventional to speak of the pace of trade accelerating throughout the Scandinavian world as it emerged from its premedieval period to integrate into Christian European society, a large labor force of people involved in these activities is implied – a labor force engaged in a close relationship with a newly-emerged economic activity. The development of such a new

¹ See Georges Dumézil, “The Rígsþula and Indo-European Social Structure,” trans. John Lindow, in *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, ed. Einar Haugen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), *passim*.

² As notably expressed, for example, by Georges Duby, *The Early Growth of the European Economy: Warriors and Peasants from the Seventh to the Twelfth Century*, trans. Howard B. Clarke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979,) 31-48.

group of people may be expected to have occasioned the development of a new body of social-cultural norms and expectations, and we may speculate that these people likely felt themselves to share some common ground – as members of a defined economic group, or a class.

Theories of class and identity

If our objective is to investigate the genesis of a merchant “class,” the first task before us is to describe what precisely we mean by that word, as well as to consider the ways by which we may attempt to infer conceptions of status and identity through the fragments of written and physical materials which have survived to the present. We must necessarily begin by acknowledging that “class” is, more or less, a modern theoretical construction: the word first attained its present sense of (roughly) “stratifications within a society into groups based on social or economic status” in the early stages of the industrial revolution.³ Earlier modern writers made reference to “ranks,” “orders,” or “degrees” of society,⁴ and certainly one finds ample evidence for such conceptual divisions of society in the written productions of the Middle Ages and earlier; but the point remains that our modern understanding of class as defined by differing relations to the “means of production,” and characterized to greater or lesser extent by a sense of antagonism between and solidarity within classes,⁵ owes mostly to the early part of the nineteenth century. Certainly, we would be hard-pressed to find anything like a sense of “class struggle” in the written productions of the earlier or later Middle Ages; nor can be observed any sense of the classes as a social, and thus *human* construction. Class, in the Middle Ages, seems to have been conceived of as more or less the natural (and thus, of course, divine) order of things; we are therefore unlikely to see any sort of conception of classes as developing or changing over time within our primary sources.

Applying as we are an anachronistic conceptual framework onto our source material, we must therefore proceed cautiously if we wish to avoid shoehorning data into a theoretical mold as an end of its own. We might go so far as to question whether there

³ Asa Briggs, “The Language of ‘Class’ in Early Nineteenth-Century England,” in *History and Class: Essential Readings in Theory and Interpretation*, ed. R.S. Neale (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher Ltd., 1983): 3.

⁴ Briggs, “The Language of ‘Class,’” 3.

⁵ Harold Perkin, “The Birth of Class,” in *History and Class: Essential Readings in Theory and Interpretation*, ed. R.S. Neale (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher Ltd., 1983): 165.

is any benefit to be gotten from such an approach, or whether such an approach must necessarily be so reductive to the particular nuances of medieval Scandinavian society as to render any conclusions we may derive from it meaningless. Why should we attempt to view the first appearance of professional merchants in the medieval Scandinavian social milieu through the lens of class and class identity?

The early theorists of class tended to follow Karl Marx' lead in identifying class identity as necessarily antagonistic,⁶ distinguishing "class in itself" (a subset of society with a common relation to the means of production) from "class for itself" (a subset of society organized in pursuit of its common goals.)⁷ In this conception of class relations, "class-consciousness" was the result of "class for itself," both preceding and necessitating class struggle and thereby explicating, via the historical dialectic, the broad sweep of human history; thus, Marx' famous maxim, "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."⁸ This may strike the reader as rather a reductionist approach, and certainly is not one into which we may neatly fit the early medieval Scandinavian experience. Later thinkers such as Georg Lukács, attempting to rectify the perceived over-broadness of orthodox Marxist thought on this point, responded by introducing a dizzying array of new vocabulary and conceptual baggage, expounding on the means and circumstances through which class consciousness might be achieved,⁹ under which class relations undergo "reification" into commodity fetishism,¹⁰ etc. Though such currents of Western Marxist thought attempted to introduce a degree of specificity into earlier Marxist theories of history there is no need, for our purposes, to evaluate such philosophical arguments here; it is sufficient to note that the earlier, narrower models of class relations as inherently antagonistic cannot (or at least should not) be applied to the time period presently under study, its dearth of written materials

⁶ Not to discount a handful of pre-Marxist writers who treated the subject, but who tended nonetheless to view class in the context of industrial struggle over property and control of means of production.

⁷ It should be noted that Marx himself never explicitly drew this distinction, though it became a recurring theme within Marxist scholarship. See Edward Andrew, "Class in Itself and Class Against Capital: Karl Marx and His Classifiers," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 16 (1983): *passim*.

⁸ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, trans. Samuel Moore (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Co., 1910), 12.

⁹ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1971): 46-82, *et passim*.

¹⁰ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 83-110.

being insufficient to support a complete reconstruction of the social psychologies of its inhabitants. It is transparently obvious that the medieval Scandinavians were bearers of very different conceptions of class and identity to the modern world – conceptions completely foreign to the world of industrial class relations treated by later Marxist theory.

How, then, are we to treat the topic of the rise of the Scandinavian merchant “class,” if indeed we may consider it to constitute such? The best solution is, perhaps, to strive for a degree of flexibility in considering class relations, identifying in Marxist fashion a merchant “class” by its common relation to economic activity while rejecting the more dogmatic claim that its interests must *necessarily* be antagonistic to those of the other stations of society, and making sure to recognize the value of culture, unified identity and self-expression in delineating the social boundaries of the group. Precisely such a formulation of class identity is articulated, in typically elegant fashion, by the British historian E.P. Thompson:

...Class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interest as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born – or enter involuntarily. Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms.¹¹

This model, then, will help us to distinguish merchantry as an activity from merchantry as an occupation, identity or, indeed, “class.” We will attempt to ferret out the means by which Scandinavian trade changed from an occasional activity, carried out haphazardly, into one carried out as an end in itself – thereby distinguishing merchants as occupying a social station of their own. In doing so, we may perhaps gain some insight into the ways in which the developing class identity of merchants was recognized, articulated and expressed.

¹¹ E.P. Thompson, “Class Consciousness,” in *History and Class: Essential Readings in Theory and Interpretation*, ed. R.S. Neale (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher Ltd., 1983): 165.

PRE-VIKING AGE TRADE IN SCANDINAVIA

A history of merchants is necessarily a history of trade, and as such a brief outline of the earliest traces of Scandinavian mercantile activity (or at least goods exchange) is in order. Authors frequently situate the advent of long-distance trade somewhere around the beginning of the Viking Age, sometimes going so far as to attribute the cultural processes of raiding, power consolidation etc. which typified the era itself to an increase in trade and economic complexity. This narrative, unfortunately, is largely one born of the convenience it poses to the historian in attempting to discern causes and results. Rather than supporting anything like a “birth” of trade somewhere around the 7th or 8th centuries, roughly along the boundary of the Migration and Viking Ages, the archaeological record instead demonstrates a slower process of intensification. Indeed, long-distance exchanges of goods are in evidence from the earliest history of human settlement in the region. The paleolithic settlers of Fennoscandinavia entered the region somewhere in the 9th or 8th millennium B.C., likely from the Russian plane, bringing with them a distinctive material culture and technology. The archaeological record demonstrates a slow dissemination of elements of these cultures through Scandinavia and the Baltic regions over the course of the next millennium, though the appearance of stone technologies characteristic of the earliest Scandinavian cultures within material-cultural settings geographically distant from their apparent origins suggests some manner of cross-cultural exchange, either physical or intellectual.¹²

Archaeology of the earliest Scandinavian trade

Whatever the situation of the earliest Scandinavian settlers, there is far more plentiful evidence for goods exchange within the next few millennia. By the late Mesolithic (6000-4000 B.C.,) exchanges of goods no longer followed the earlier patterns of slow dissemination between neighboring groups; a robust network had emerged which enabled transportation and exchange of wares throughout the entirety of the Baltic Sea basin. Marek Zvelebil, summarizing the archaeological literature, distinguishes exchange

¹² Whether the distribution of lithic technologies in the region is better attributed to exchange or to migration is, admittedly, the subject of some debate. See Mikkel Sørensen, *et al.*, “The First Eastern Migrations of People and Knowledge into Scandinavia: Evidence from Studies of Mesolithic Technology, 9th-8th Millennium BC,” *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 46 (2013): 44-46, *et passim*.

in this period as occurring on three levels: regional, interregional, and long distance,¹³ the dynamics of which we may reasonably assume to have differed from one another. Regional exchanges of goods, per Zvelebil, are those which occurred within a single community, presumably to utilitarian purpose, and as such cannot be easily identified within the archaeological record, though some archaeologists have attempted to discern patterns in local exchange within this period on the basis of distribution patterns of trade good finds.¹⁴ As most regional exchanges likely dealt in non-exotic, relatively inexpensive goods, there is little reason to suppose that they were necessarily much different in character to the sorts of barter that have been traditionally seen as characterizing prehistoric and medieval economies, nor that they would have been the provenance of any particular defined social group.

Interregional exchanges of goods, per Zvelebil, occurred across distances of one to a few hundred kilometers (and thus presumably across non-cohesive social groups.)¹⁵ The types of materials traded along these distances included both semi-manufactured and finished artifacts, ranging from flints and ochre pigments to finished stone battleaxe, adzes and ornaments of worked bone and horn.¹⁶ It is not difficult to imagine that the motivations underlying these exchanges would have been more social than commercial: following the “anthropological turn” in archaeology in the second half of the 19th century, the scholarship of the period has tended to see in these transactions such motivations as securing alliances or marriages between important individuals.

The last of the three categories of exchanges – goods exchanged over long distances of hundreds of kilometers – is obviously most germane to the present investigation, and presents the most dramatic findings. Included among these finds are ambers originating from southern Scandinavia and the Baltic coast, broadly distributed across the northern half of the Baltic and as far inland as northwest Russia and middle Sweden; seal oil from the Baltic islands, including Gotland, Öland and Åland, found both

¹³ Marek Zvelebil, “Mobility, contact and exchange in the Baltic Sea basin, 6000-2000 BC,” *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 25 (2006): 182-183.

¹⁴ Zvelebil, “Mobility, contact and exchange,” 182. Knutsson *et al.* consider the issue of distribution of lithic goods in northern Sweden as possibly indicating a “commodity exchange” within a cohesive social-cultural territory. Knutsson *et al.*, 2003

¹⁵ Zvelebil, “Mobility, contact and exchange,” 183.

¹⁶ Zvelebil, “Mobility, contact and exchange,” 183.

in northern Poland and Scandinavia; as well as pumices, slates and other specialized lithic products, originating from northern Norway, Russia and Karelia, found distributed across southern Scandinavia and the Baltic.¹⁷

These same broad patterns in exchange – lower-value products circulating regionally, more exotic products circulating over greater distances – may be seen playing out in the archaeological record over the following millennium as the transition from lithic tools to bronze wares got underway, beginning around 1750 B.C., resulting in the dramatic flourishing of travel and manufacture that marked the Nordic Bronze Age. This process was not the result of any indigenous discovery; it was catalyzed by the introduction of bronze technology from abroad. The earliest Nordic bronze wares were initially suspected to be of foreign origin on stylistic grounds by the likes of Oscar Montelius, founding father of Swedish archaeology, and his peers; these claims were challenged in the 1970s and 1980s before being reconfirmed by metallurgical analyses in the 2000s and 2010s.¹⁸ One of the more recent surveys has indicated a staggering diversity in likely origins of bronze goods found in Scandinavia, ranging from present-day Austria and Germany to Spain and Sardinia to Greece and Cyprus.¹⁹ Glass beads, another high-status object, have also been frequently found in Bronze Age contexts, and recent work has again confirmed Montelius' suspicions that these were of foreign origin: these were manufactured as far afield as Egypt and Mesopotamia.²⁰ If these were indeed trade goods, we would expect to find objects of similar rarity and status distributed in the regions where the bronze goods originated – and, indeed, Scandinavian and Baltic amber is very well-attested in Bronze Age finds from Britain and Spain to the Mediterranean. These finds are sufficiently numerous as to allow the tentative reconstruction of about three distinct Bronze Age trade routes from the southernmost reaches of Europe to the northernmost: one following the Atlantic coastline, one overland through central Europe, and one beginning in the Black Sea and following the waterways of Eastern Europe to

¹⁷ Zvelebil, "Mobility, contact and exchange," 183-184.

¹⁸ Johan Ling, *et al.*, "Moving metals II: provenancing Scandinavian Bronze Age artefacts by lead isotope and elemental analyses," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 41 (2014): 106-107.

¹⁹ Ling *et al.*, "Moving metals II," 119-126.

²⁰ Varberg, *et al.*, "Between Egypt, Mesopotamia and Scandinavia: Late Bronze Age glass beads found in Denmark," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 54 (2015): 168-181.

emerge in the Baltic²¹ - prefiguring the Viking-age Varangian trail by nearly two millennia.

These early good exchanges continued apace into the Nordic Iron Age, furnishing us a continuous thread of evidence for trade between the Baltic-Scandinavian world and the rest of Europe. The find of the famous Gundestrup cauldron, for example, which today is prominently displayed at the Danish National Museum, has provoked a tremendous volume of scholarship as to its origins – possible candidates include southeastern Europe or the Celtic territories²² - but it is universally agreed to be of foreign manufacture. The volume of trade goods being exchanged seems to have decreased slightly around the era of the Roman conquests of Europe before rebounding at the beginning of the Migration Age, around the fourth century A.D. Here we begin to see hints of the emergence of the wide-reaching Scandinavian trade networks which dominated the Baltic and North Atlantic worlds over the next several hundred years – evidenced, for example, by the large numbers of Anglo-Saxon jewelry and bracteates found distributed around the eastern Baltic.²³

This era witnessed the emergence of aristocratic hall complexes with accompanying manufacturing facilities – glassworks, forges, foundaries – including those at Borg, Dankirke, Gamla Uppsala, Lejre, Lofoten, and Slöinge.²⁴ These complexes seem to have arisen as aristocrats sought to consolidate their holds on power by expanding their manors, to the point where they began to resemble settlements.²⁵ The centralization of manufacture which occurred at these sites allowed for an intensification of economic activity, witnessed in the rapid growth of population surrounding these farms, and prefigured the later emergence of true urban centers. Crucially, these hall complexes did not only serve as manufactories, but as centers of import and export: finds such as Russian

²¹ Ling *et al.*, “Moving metals II,” 126-129.

²² Flemming Kaul and Jes Martens, “Southeast European influences in the Early Iron Age of Southern Scandinavia: Gundestrup and the Cimbri,” *Acta Archaeologica* 66 (1995): *passim*.

²³ Hayo Vierck, “Zum Fernverkehr über See im 6. Jahrhundert angesichts angelsächsischer Fibelsätze in Thüringen: Eine Problemskizze,” *Goldbrakteaten aus Sievern: Spätantike Amulett-Bilder der ‘Dania Saxonica’ und die Sachsen- ‘Origo’ bei Widukind von Corvey*, ed. Klaus Düwel, Heinrich Tiefenbach and Hayo Vierck (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1970,) 380-390.

²⁴ Anders Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia: Vikings, Merchants, and Missionaries in the Remaking of Northern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012,) 17-23.

²⁵ Jens-Henrik Fallgren, “Farm and Village in the Viking Age,” in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 69-70

belt hardware in sixth century graves at Gamla Uppsala indicate that foreign wares were making their way into Scandinavia.²⁶

These complexes represented power and status, but their domain was not exclusively temporal: these were cultic sites, as well. Work in etymology has demonstrated cultic significances for many placenames surrounding these complexes,²⁷ with occasional hints of such behavior evident in the archaeological record as well.²⁸ The Gamla Uppsala complex represents an unusually well-studied example of the interdependence of “church” and “state” at these complexes in the pre-Christian era. Adam of Bremen’s famous description of the supposed “temple” there, written a few hundred years after the period currently under consideration, offers a report of the kinds of cultic activities which might have been practiced at such aristocratic-religious complexes:²⁹ festivities, rituals and dramatic sacrifices, all serving to symbolically affirm the natural order of the world and, thus, kingship and power. Gamla Uppsala was hardly unique in this regard: many of the previously-mentioned aristocratic manors, as well as a few others such as Tissø, have yielded bracteate finds and other religious paraphernalia which attest to a concentration of sacral as well as political power at their respective locations. While we have no indication that the people involved in the earliest trade were specifically involved in the performance of religious activities, we should at least reflect on the implications of the presence of crafting and trading activities being concentrated in these areas of political and religious authority.

Thus, we have surveyed a few details of the archaeological evidence for the earliest trade in Scandinavia and the Baltic and now find ourselves poised on the dawn of the Viking Age. This briefest of summaries is intended to underline the point that the better-known trade networks of the Viking Age did not emerge overnight, with a sudden leap forward in maritime technology or social-political organization, as some authors have supposed. On the other hand, this earliest trade clearly differed in some particulars

²⁶ Wladyslaw Duczko, *Viking Rus: Studies on the Presence of Scandinavians in Eastern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2004,) 64.

²⁷ Stefan Brink, “Naming the Land,” in *The Viking World*, Stefan Brink and Neil Price, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2008,) 62.

²⁸ Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia*, 22.

²⁹ Adam of Bremen, *History of the archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, Francis J Tschan, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 59.

from the commerce of the Viking and Middle Ages: there is little evidence in the archaeological record for anything like the large volume of trade in wool fabric, for example, that characterized North Atlantic trade in later centuries, and which so often features in the sagas. Indeed, the predominance of high-value, high-status goods – from the finished stone battleaxes of the Mesolithic to the jewelry and amber of the Iron Age – has led some authors to suppose that these exchanges could not have been commercial. These authors typically argue that these objects must have been exchanged in order to secure alliances, arrange marriages or reinforce social bonds – perhaps these were gifts, more or less, though given in the expectation of reciprocity. Other authors invoke concepts like social capital, similarly deemphasizing a commercial motive underlying these exchanges and instead preferring to see gifts given to earn prestige and status. There is, regrettably, no firm evidence to support or disprove any of these arguments; we must ultimately acknowledge that any conclusions we may choose to draw on this subject are little more than informed speculation. A degree of scholarly agnosticism is called for here.

The written record

As to the social considerations involved in such goods exchanges, the historical record furnishes scant material to consider. The standard roster of sources by the classical authors are largely mute on the subject of trade or traders; Strabo does not mention trade whatsoever in the relevant section of his his *Geographica*,³⁰ but Tacitus does provide the briefest of hints:

“...quamquam proximi ob usum commerciorum aurum et argentum in pretio habent formasque quasdam nostrae pecuniae adgnosunt atque eligunt. Interiores simplicius et antiquius permutatione mercium utuntur. Pecuniam probant veterem et diu notam, serratos bigatosque. Argentum quoque magis quam aurum sequuntur, nulla adfectione animi, sed quia numerus argenteorum facilius usui est promiscua ac vilia mercantibus.”³¹

...Those tribes that are on our border highly appreciate gold and silver for the purposes of trade, and recognize and preferentially accept some varieties of our coins. The interior tribes still exchange by barter after the more primitive and ancient fashion. They like money that is old and familiar, in the form of pieces having deeply-indented rims, and bearing the impression of a two-horse chariot.

³⁰ Strabo, *Geography* Book VII, trans. Horace Leonard Jones (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1923): 312-344.

³¹ Publius Gaius Tacitus, “Germania,” in *Tacitus*, ed. R.M. Ogilvie (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 5. Loeb Classical Library 35 Vol 1.

Silver, too, rather than gold attracts them, not that they are any fonder of it as a metal, but because the reckoning of silver coins is easier for men who deal in a variety of cheap articles.³²

We may take from this that certain of the Germans were accustomed to haggling for goods with Roman merchants, and did so with sufficient frequency as to prefer certain media of exchange to others. One is tempted to speculate as to whether the early Germans were at least familiar with monetary exchange, even if they only considered the precious metal content of coins valuable. We may further question whether this indicates anything like the evolution of a body of norms and standards pertaining to exchange – indicating, perhaps, that trade *per se*, – not gift-giving, not barter – was a familiar enough institution. Conversely, Tacitus claims a little earlier³³ that the Germans had been accustomed to exchange exclusively in barter, and only became familiar with coinage after it was introduced to them by the Romans – a claim which the archaeological record disproves, and which he himself contradicts – so here, as with every aspect of the work, the *Germania* must be taken with a grain of salt.

Conclusions

As we have seen, long-distance exchanges of goods have featured in Scandinavian history essentially from the period of its earliest settlement. The archaeology of the period proves that trade occurred regularly and in greater volume and across greater distances than we might expect. Local trade, or that which Zvelebil categorizes as “regional” or “interregional,” likely occurred within related social groups, and we need not suppose that the people involved in these exchanges enjoyed any special status as “traders” or “merchants;” anthropological studies furnish plentiful examples of goods exchanges motivated by such factors as, e.g., strengthening (fictive) kinship bonds. Indeed, examples such as the Edved girl – the famous Bronze Age burial from Denmark, interred with an assortment of typical trade goods, and whose isotope analysis later confirmed to have lived most of her life far to the south of her eventual resting place³⁴ – demonstrate that some trade may have served to strengthen marital alliances, and was not necessarily conducted

³² Publius Gaius Tacitus, *The Agricola and Germania*, R.B. Townsend, trans. (London: Methuen & Co., 1894), 58.

³³ Tacitus, *The Agricola and Germania*, 57.

³⁴ Louise Felding, “The Egved Girl: Travel, Trade and Alliances in the Bronze Age,” *Adoranten* 2015: 5-19.

with a commercial motive in mind. On the other hand, trade was conducted across such large distances and in such volume as to render the suggestion that it was never commercial in nature rather incredible: it is difficult to imagine marital or military alliances being brokered between the respective elites of Mycenae and Denmark. Certainly, those who conducted these trades intended to be enriched by them.

We unfortunately have no way of knowing whether these objects were traded directly between their point of origin and their eventual destination or whether they filtered along trade routes in stages: it is quite possible that goods such as the Middle Eastern glass beads which have occasionally turn up in Nordic Bronze Age contexts might have changed hands at several points on their journey from Mesopotamia to Jutland. Both models of trade are known from the Viking Age. Barring the discovery of some archaeological “smoking gun” (a Nordic boat burial in Greece?) we are unable to draw any firm conclusions one way or the other.

The total lack of Scandinavian written records for this period, as well, means that we can draw few concrete conclusions as to the social nuances of trade in this period. Tacitus’ off-handed mention of trades with Germans confirm that at least certain of the Germans were accustomed to trading with some regularity, and that they were familiar enough with Roman coinage as to have developed preferences for some examples over others. Conversely, a society-wide familiarity with trade does not indicate that any of the early Germans, or Scandinavians particularly, considered it to be their occupation. Before the development of the true urban centers, and without any indication that trade occurred systematically rather than on an ad-hoc basis, we are left without any indication of anything like a proto-merchant class.

MERCHANTS IN THE VIKING AGE

Though there is, as has been shown, no reason to consider long-distance or local trade in Scandinavia and the Baltic region to be a novel development of the Viking Age, certainly there is ample evidence to indicate that the volume of trade was increasing. Though historical studies of the growth of early medieval economies have traditionally focused more on the development of the “feudal” economies of Continental Europe, a reasonable amount of scholarly attention has been paid to the situation in Scandinavia and around the North Sea. As is ever the case in early medieval Scandinavian historiography, such studies have been somewhat hampered by a dearth of written sources. Historians have instead traditionally attempted to infer something of its situation by examining, e.g., Anglo-Saxon accounts of plundering in the Danelaw, or else falling back on the evidence offered by such allied disciplines as archaeology or numismatics.³⁵

The sheer volume of evidence these disciplines have to offer stands in sharp distinction to the paucity of the historical record. The task before one who would attempt to discern a narrative from these materials is not to piece together what few scraps remain, but rather sifting through a formidable mountain of evidence in order to assemble a coherent picture of the situation. This imposing task has been undertaken often enough, and with sufficient thoroughness, as to require little in the way of further comment. Studies abound pertaining to the archaeology of increasing urbanization³⁶ (largely synonymous with trade and economic intensification in Scandinavia, as will be discussed later,) while numismatians have thoroughly documented the steady increase in monetary exchange through the broader Norse world over the course of the Viking Age – with the staggering volume, diversity of origin and geographic dispersal of coins attesting to a thriving and steadily intensifying trading (and sometimes raiding) economy,³⁷ even if they were valued more for their precious metal content than used as

³⁵ E.g. in Georges Duby, *The Early Growth of the European Economy: Warriors and Peasants from the Seventh to the Twelfth Century*, trans. Howard B. Clarke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974,) 129-131.

³⁶ See, e.g., Helen Clarke and Björn Ambrosiani, *Towns in the Viking Age* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1991.)

³⁷ An excellent brief overview of the discipline of Viking-age numismatics, as well as some of the difficulties in discerning the precise nature of monetary exchanges, is available in Sveinn H. Gullbekk, “Coinage and Monetary Economies,” *The Viking World*, Stefan Brink and Neil Price, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2008,) 159-169. As the subject is exceedingly broad, and as the interpretation of coin hoard finds is a fiercely debated subject, it will not be dealt with here.

currency, as the large number of coins which have been incorporated in jewelry, cut into pieces or otherwise altered suggests. The general picture that emerges is of an economy undergoing a transition from one marked exclusively by barter and an impressively complex social “system” of gift-giving to one marked by far more regular monetary exchange. Scandinavian society in the Viking Age, then, was marked by its state of economic and social flux; the expansion of the market economy and increased foreign contact, as we are able to reconstruct from the sources available us, must have resulted in shifting conceptions of self-identity. Where, then, might we look to identify the beginnings of these developments?

Archaeology of Viking Age towns and trade

During the Viking Age the first true urban areas emerged in Scandinavia. Though aristocratic compounds had begun to emerge from the late Migration Age onward, as previously mentioned, and some Scandinavians had lived in villages previously,³⁸ these were of comparatively limited size, less densely-populated, and basically integrated into the rural economy. True towns – ie., settlements which did not produce enough food to sustain themselves, and which were thus reliant on some other industry³⁹ - first began to emerge in the 8th century. Birka, situated on an island in Lake Mälaren, was established somewhere after 750, followed within 50 years by Ribe, Kaupang and Hedeby. A lull in town settlements followed for the next two centuries before a new wave of establishments emerged around the turn of the millennium.⁴⁰ The reasons for the lack of continuity in Scandinavian urbanization within this period continues to be debated, though the majority opinion locates the cause for this stall with the classic social forces at work within the period: conflicts over monarchical attempts at centralization, Christianization, and developments in social organization and technology.⁴¹ These early towns were loci of economic activity – producing and consuming, importing and exporting manufactured products and goods. In a few cases, these early towns evolved from early seasonal

³⁸ Fallgren, “Farm and Village in the Viking Age,” 72.

³⁹ Dagfinn Skre, “The Development of Urbanism in Scandinavia,” in *The Viking World*, Stefan Brink and Neil Price, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2008,) 84.

⁴⁰ Skre, “The Development of Urbanism in Scandinavia,” 84-85.

⁴¹ Skre, “The Development of Urbanism in Scandinavia,” 84-86.

markets,⁴² presumably as people began to settle in the region year-round and shifted from agricultural to mercantile livelihoods. Manufactories were established later, producing much the same manner of high-value worked goods as had been produced a few centuries earlier on the grounds of aristocratic complexes: worked iron, jewelry, combs, and likely textile goods. These centers more than likely also saw extensive local trade from the surrounding areas, in wares such as food, fodder, fuel, etc.; but as these “soft” finds seldom leave traces in the archaeological record, we are sadly limited in our attempts to ascertain anything of the scale on which these local trades may have occurred. Some indication of the economic importance of these sites may be reached by estimating their populations: the buildings found in larger towns such as Birka, Hedeby or Ribe suggest permanent populations on the order of several hundred to a few thousand inhabitants.⁴³

And so urbanism advanced, not only within Scandinavia but also to the East. Towns and urbanism in had featured in the social landscapes of Christian Europe for hundreds of years, with the British Isles following steadily behind; along the Baltic, though, trading settlements sprang up roughly simultaneously as those in Scandinavia, and for roughly the same reasons. Starigard (Oldenburg,) the westernmost Slavic settlement within Europe,⁴⁴ was founded at roughly the same time as Hedeby, Ribe and Kaupang. Wolin, one of the largest Baltic towns of the Viking age, was settled further in the East, on the mouth of the Oder estuary, growing to encompass over 20 hectares in area.⁴⁵ Smaller Slavic settlements surrounded the southern coast of the Baltic up through Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia, which demonstrate little evidence of urbanization until well into the medieval period. Another cluster of settlements sprang up around the mouth of Lake Ladoga in Russia, including a large Finnic hill-fort in the seventh or eighth century A.D, conventionally called Staraya Ladoga today.⁴⁶

Despite these sites being incontrovertibly Slavic or Finnic, though, they demonstrate considerable evidence for a Scandinavian population, and for being closely linked in with the emerging Scandinavian trade economy. Many of the trade goods found

⁴² Søren Sindbæk, “Networks and nodal points: the emergence of towns in early Viking Age Scandinavia,” *Antiquity* 81 (2007), 119-123.

⁴³ Skre, “The Development of Urbanism in Scandinavia,” 84.

⁴⁴ Clarke and Ambrosiani, *Towns in the Viking Age* 108.

⁴⁵ Clarke and Ambrosiani, *Towns in the Viking Age*, 113.

⁴⁶ Duczko, *Viking Rus*, 65.

in Starigard and Hedeby share apparent provenances and strongly indicate an eastern trade orientation: glass-beaded bracelets, ceramic wares and Russian textile equipment indicate regular commercial links with eastern Slavic areas, while typologically Scandinavian jewelry finds and Norwegian stone goods demonstrate the site's linkage with the economies of the Atlantic world.⁴⁷ The artifact finds surrounding Wolin, the products of industries such as iron- and antler-working are typologically similar to those of Birka or Hedeby, despite the town's Slavic origins and substantially Slavic population (to judge from the architecture and ceramic finds at the site.)⁴⁸

Though we cannot afford to underestimate the importance of the aforementioned social and political factors in enabling the growth of these settlements, it is worth considering advances in technology as well. The period around the Viking Age saw significant changes made to ships, following the introduction of the sail – probably a Mediterranean technology – to the Baltic and Scandinavian region in the Viking Age.⁴⁹ Maritime archaeological finds, though sadly limited by a relatively small number of *in situ* ship finds (in distinction to the comparatively high number of ship burials,) demonstrates a slow evolution toward ship forms more characteristic of the well-known Norse trading vessel, the *knørr*; earlier ship finds lacked the deeper holds and wider beams more suitable for carrying serious volumes of cargo, and instead were characteristically shallower of draft and narrower of beam,⁵⁰ yielding a swifter vessel that was easier to beach. Indeed, the earliest findings of any moorings – quays, piers etc. – occur rather late in the Viking Age period, at presumed shipbuilding and trading centers. Before this, presumably, any loading or unloading of ships would need to occur after they had been beached: obviously a more labor-intensive process. By about the turn of the millennium, ships had developed to be both wider and deeper.⁵¹ These precursors to the trading ships of the later medieval world were fully specialized to transporting cargoes,

⁴⁷ Clarke and Ambrosiani, *Towns in the Viking Age*, 109.

⁴⁸ Clarke and Ambrosiani, *Towns in the Viking Age*, 115.

⁴⁹ Jan Bill, "Viking Ships and the Sea," in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (New York: Routledge, 2008), 171.

⁵⁰ Ole Crumlin-Pedersen, "Ships as indicators of trade in northern Europe 600-1200," in *Maritime Topography and the Medieval Town*, ed. Jan Bill and Birthe Clausen (Copenhagen: National Museum of Denmark, 1999), 12.

⁵¹ Crumlin-Pedersen, "Ships as indicators of trade in northern Europe," 11-20.

unable to transport either numbers of troops or travel at the speeds demanded by military applications. These two ship-forms were diverging, resulting in specialized vessels for either military or for commercial purposes. Not only did these developments in shipbuilding allow for an increased volume of trade, they also marked the beginnings of participation in the maritime industries outside of the martial social sphere of the aristocrat or king and his retinue.

Taken together, these trends in the archaeological record affirm the standard historiographical narrative of a steady increase in the volume of trade, a shifting of the predominant economic orientation away from the purely agricultural, and an increase in societal complexity. Unfortunately, the evidence thus far surveyed pertaining to these rather broad developments leaves us with little firm understanding about the role of individual players in this process. We would certainly expect that such an upset in the traditional social-economic order would be reflected in the cultural expressions of the people experiencing them, and we find evidence of such in the burial record.

The Birka graves

Undoubtedly the greatest wealth of evidence pertinent to the social roles of Viking Age merchants is that furnished us by the famous finds surrounding the island trade emporium of Birka, situated in the channels of Lake Mälaren. This town, among those visited by Anskar in his mission to Scandinavia, occupied an area known as the “Black Earth,” roughly 7 hectares in area, with soil layers indicating occupation up to two meters thick.⁵² Birka is unique amongst the developing urban emporia of the era in the long history and thoroughness of its excavation: the earliest such efforts were made in the 17th century by Johan Hadorph,⁵³ and the first scientific excavations were conducted in the late 19th century by Hjalmar Stolpe, often considered the founder of modern archaeology in Sweden. More recently, further intensive excavations have been carried out by Björn Ambrosiani in the 1990s.⁵⁴ Over 2000 mound graves and 1000 flat graves have been identified, comprising one of the largest Viking-Age burial sites in Sweden.⁵⁵ The

⁵² Clarke and Ambrosiani, *Towns in the Viking Age*, 73.

⁵³ Clarke and Ambrosiani, *Towns in the Viking Age*, 71.

⁵⁴ Nancy Wicker, “Christianization, Female Infanticide, and the Abundance of Female Burials at Viking Age Birka in Sweden,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 21 (2012): 246-247.

⁵⁵ Wicker, “Christianization, Female Infanticide, and the Abundance of Female Burials,” 247.

tremendous body of evidence which these burials provide have enabled a number of archaeological studies of society, population, class and ethnicity, and has much to offer us in our search for the development of a merchant identity.

Several approaches have been used in attempting to read identity in the Birka graves. A plurality of the studies of the subject have predicated their arguments on a presumed association between burial goods and identity – likely the most secure association we may make (if not necessarily the only one.) The variety and distribution of burial goods found at Birka do indeed suggest that burial goods were not randomly placed nor merely nebulously indicative of “social status”: on the contrary, their placement seems to have been deliberate and laden with symbolic meaning. It is always dangerous, of course, to suppose that we may correctly infer prehistoric mentalities from prehistoric artefacts, and the scholarly literature of the subject has yielded plentiful debate but few universal conclusions⁵⁶– but the sheer number of objects found in such close proximity to such a well-known trading center makes connection seem hard to argue against. The National Historical Museum of Sweden lists 199 individual graves in which objects associated with trade were found: specifically, scales, weights, coins, bags or purses, and hack silver. (Intriguingly, the deposition of these objects in burials does not seem to correlate with the sex of person they accompanied: the graves containing objects linked to trade contain roughly even numbers of male and female remains.)⁵⁷ That those interring the bodies should have seen fit to outfit them with trade gear is a strong indication that their identities in life had been predicated on the use of this equipment. These were not the graves of people who occasionally took part in trade; these were the graves of people who were defined by trade.

Equally noteworthy is the degree to which the settlement represented an early ethnic “melting pot.” Though foreign trade goods and grave goods are found in virtually every Scandinavian trade emporium, the material record in Birka is marked by an unusual degree of variation (for Scandinavia, at least) in apparent typological origins of artifacts.

⁵⁶ See Heinrich Härke’s 2000 article for an overview of the nuances of social interpretation of burials: Heinrich Härke, “Social Analysis of Mortuary Evidence in German Protohistoric Archaeology,” *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 19 (2000): 369-384.

⁵⁷ Emma Nordström, “The trading Lady of the House at Birka,” in *Med hjärta och hjärna: En vänbok till professor Elisabeth Arwill-Nordbladh*, ed. Henrik Alexanderson, Alexander Andreeff, Annika Bünz (Gothenburg: Institutionen för historiska studier, 2014), 301-302.

This has led certain authors to question whether the inhabitants of the town were of a variety of foreign backgrounds – perhaps representing a Baltic or Slavic settler population. Recent work in isotopic analysis has tended to indicate the opposite: a 2008 study of 23 samples of human remains at the site confirmed significant diversity in geographical origins. Intriguingly, typologically foreign grave goods, identified as most “elite,” were found in the graves of local people. Two particularly noteworthy examples include grave Bj496, containing a male skeleton. The burial also included weapons, horse gear, Islamic coins and Byzantine-style metal ornaments. Bj632, a female burial, was found with a considerable amount of jewelry, including a necklace on which was mounted a Byzantine coin, and Russian belt mounts.⁵⁸ Other finds associated with the graves, including silk textiles and furs, also point toward material-cultural associations between exotic goods and high status.⁵⁹

Certain authors have attempted to discern geo-social or cultural orientations through, eg., Scandinavian adoption of Eastern dress patterns or burial practices. Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, in her PhD dissertation, lays out an argument for the Birka elites having adopted an easternly-oriented identity as a visual indicator of social prestige.⁶⁰ Hedenstierna-Jonson specifically considers this eastern orientation in ornamental style to indicate identification with a “warrior elite,”⁶¹ largely differentiating these on the basis of weapon burials – which Hedenstierna-Jonson considers to indicate martial orientation, if not actual warrior status - though there is, as she herself reminds us, no particular reason to read martial identity from weapons included in burials alone. Weapons, as the sagas frequently remind us, signified status and authority – and in any case, such written records as have survived indicate that merchantry was not necessarily seen as an activity in opposition to martial activity (on which, see “The historical record,” below.) We might consider whether merchants, as well, might have adopted this style as indicative of their station. We find a suggestion of this in *Laxdæla saga*, when Gilli the

⁵⁸ Anna Linderholm, *et al.*, “Diet and status in Birka: stable isotopes and grave goods compared,” *Antiquity* 82 (2008): 452-458.

⁵⁹ Bjorn Ambrosiani, “Birka,” in *The Viking World*, Stefan Brink and Neil Price, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2008,) 97-99.

⁶⁰ Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, “The Birka warrior: material culture of a martial society” (PhD diss., Stockholm University, 2006.)

⁶¹ Hedenstierna-Jonson, “The Birka warrior,” 33-40.

merchant is introduced while wearing a fine set of “Russian” clothes and hat.⁶² It would seem that clothing in the eastern mode indicated elite status, and could equally as well be taken to belong to a merchant or a warrior.

Runic and skaldic material

For all the data the archaeological record has to offer us, the degree of interpretation inherent in attempting to draw conclusions regarding such nebulous concepts as “identity” or “class” from such material may leave the more skeptical of us uneasy. We may attempt to discern a narrative in the confused mass of data by turning to the written record, such as is now available to us. Very few Scandinavian writings survive, of course, which may uncontrovertibly be dated to before the advent of Christianity, and thus more general literacy; the exception, of course, is the corpus of runic inscriptions and skaldic poetry. Viking Age runic inscriptions offer another massive dataset with which to potentially glimpse the social mentalities of the period, albeit one that proves infamously difficult to interpret. The known inscriptions which mention merchants or trade are far outnumbered by those pertaining to other themes, but some examples which are relevant to our present inquiry do survive.

These are treated at some length by Klaus Düwel in his 1987 article “Handel und Verkehr der Wikingenzeit nach dem Zeugnis der Runeninschriften,” wherein he presents a systematic reckoning of the surviving inscriptions relevant to trade and travel. The great bulk of the surviving examples of runic take the form of laudatory inscriptions laid out according to the well-known stereotype:⁶³ “X raised this stone in memory of Y, his/her brother (husband, father...)” followed by a brief description of the deeds for which Y was particularly well-known. These stones were erected as memorials to the person or deed being commemorated, and pose an interpretive challenge to their use as historical sources: can we take the claimed deeds at face value? One approach taken has been to side-step the issue by focusing not on the events described by the inscriptions, but on the language used. These stones present what are likely to be idealizing accounts of the deeds of the person, or details of the event, memorialized; we are attempting to discern the particular

⁶² *Laxdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit 6 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1934), 22-23.

⁶³ Klaus Düwel, “Handel und Verkehr der Wikingenzeit nach dem Zeugnis der Runeninschriften,” in *Untersuchungen zu Handel und Verkehr der vor- und frühgeschichtlichen Zeit in Mittel- und Nordeuropa*, ed. Klaus Düwel *et al.* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987): Vol. 4, 314-315.

valences of traders and trade, so these idealized accounts are particularly useful. We are not concerned here with what merchants actually did, but with what they were *considered* by their peers to have done.

Düwel divides the runic inscriptions on the basis of their predominant themes: inscriptions mentioning trade routes, destinations, trade goods and technologies (e.g. scales and weights,) means of transport, and individuals and groups associated with trade. Of particular interest for our purposes, of course, is the last category. Düwel first treats the runestones commemorating people identified as a *stýrimaðr*: “‘Führer eines Kriegeschiffes’ oder ‘Eigentümer eines Handelsschiffes, der auf See auch die Führung des Fahrzeuges in der Hand hatte.’”⁶⁴ The precise function a *stýrimaðr* had on a ship is not entirely certain;⁶⁵ the mere identification of a given figure as such seemed to have served to bestow a certain social cachet. The inscriptions make clear that a semantic separation was drawn between this term and *skipari*, probably more similar to the modern conception of a “captain” or “officer:” there may be multiple *skipari* aboard a ship, while there is only ever a single *stýrimaðr*; a *skipari* is never attributed any other titles, while a *styrimannr* are also described as a *drængr* or *felagi* – terms with potentially martial connotations – as was Erik, the man commemorated on the Haddeby stone for his exploits in the South.⁶⁶

What precisely was meant by *drengir* or *felagi* has been the subject of considerable discussion⁶⁷ The former word, particularly, is noteworthy for its relative frequent attestation in the skaldic and to a lesser extent runic corpus⁶⁸ as a term of comradeship, though it had acquired a somewhat archaic flavor by the classical Old Icelandic era,⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Düwel, “Handel und Verkehr der Wikingerzeit,” 328-332.

⁶⁵ Düwel, “Handel und Verkehr der Wikingerzeit,” 328.

⁶⁶ þurlfr| × |risþi × stin × þonsi × × himþigi × suins × eftir × erik × filaga × sin × ias × uarþ
taupr × þo × trekiar satu × um × haiþa×bu × i=a=n : h=a=n : u=a=s : s=t=u=r=i:m=a=t=r :
t=r=e=g=r × × harþa : kuþr ×

Þórunfr reisti stein þenna, heimþegi Sveins, eptir Eirík, féлага sinn, er varð dauðr, þá drengjar sátu um Heiðabý; en hann var stýrimaðr, drengr harða góðr.

“DR1,” *Samnordisk runtextdatabas*, accessed August 3, 2017, <http://www.nordiska.uu.se/forskn/samnord.htm>.

⁶⁷ For a brief overview of the relevant scholarship, see Judith Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age: The Vocabulary of Runic Inscriptions and Skaldic Verse* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2001,) 217-218.

⁶⁸ Düwel, “Handel und Verkehr der Wikingerzeit,” 333-334.

⁶⁹ Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age*, 218.

even if its use survived in somewhat different contexts. Judith Jesch has exhaustively demonstrated that the word in the Viking Age had connotations of “youth, travel, service, manliness and promise,”⁷⁰ that the word was used within groups of fighting men as a term of address.⁷¹ *Felagi*, another word often used of *stýrimaðr* (and *drengir*) is another word laden with semantic nuance, carrying with it connotations of partnership, in either an economic or military sense. Intriguingly, it never seems to have undergone the sort of generalization which *drengir* did, and is not recorded as being used of family members or for addressing someone familiarly. Its use appears to have remained largely limited to mean “partner” in a technical, perhaps almost legalistic sense: its appearance on the U954 and D68 runestones, for example, when describing men killed by the treachery of partners,⁷² serves highlight the legal-contractual aspects of these acts of betrayal.

Worthy of special mention are the four runic inscriptions mentioning a *gildi*, “guild-brother”: Ög 64,⁷³ U 379,⁷⁴ U 391,⁷⁵ and Ög MÖLM1960:230.⁷⁶ What precisely is meant by this term is unclear; there is little to be found in the written records of the next several hundred years to provide us with any specific information on how the organizations of which these men were members – guilds – may have functioned in the time period. Jesch notes, however, that the two Uppland stones were found nearby to Sigtuna,⁷⁷ a significant trading center after the abandonment of Birka. We should also

⁷⁰ Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age*, 218.

⁷¹ Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age*, 229-231.

⁷² Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age*, 234.

⁷³ **trikiaR + risþu + stin + þisi + aft + krib kilta + sin + lufi + rist + runaR + þisR + iuta + sunu**
Drengir reistu stein þenna ept Greip, gilda sinn, Lófi reist rúnar þessar, Júta son.
Düwel, “Handel und Verkehr,” 340.

⁷⁴ + **frisa : kiltar · letu · reisa · s(t)ein : þensa : ef(t)iR · (þ)(u)(r)--- ----a · sin : kuþ : hialbi : ant · hans : þurbiurn : risti**
Frísa gildar létu reisa stein þenna eptir Þor[kel, gild]a sinn. Guð hjalpi ónd hans. Þorbjörn risti.
Düwel, “Handel und Verkehr,” 337.

⁷⁵ × **frisa : ki... ... : þesar : eftR : alþoþ : felaha : sloþa : kristr : hia : helgi : hinlbi : ant : hans : þurbiurn : risti**
Frísa gi[ldar] ... þessar eptir Albóð, félaga Slóða. Kristr hinn helgi hjalpi ónd hans. Þorbjörn risti.
Düwel, “Handel und Verkehr,” 337.

⁷⁶ ----a : **oliR : ristu : stin : þins- : (i)f(t)iR · (t)rik · (a)ukis : sun : kilta : sin :**
... *Ólvir reistu stein þenn[a] eptir Dreng, Eygeirs(?) son, gilda sinn.*
“Ög MÖLM1960:230,” *Samnordisk runtextdatabas*, accessed August 3, 2017,
<http://www.nordiska.uu.se/forskn/samnord.htm>.

⁷⁷ Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age*, 239-241.

note that the second two of these refer specifically to a “frísa gildi,” a “Frisian guild-brother:” we might potentially take this to mean that the concept of the guild was a foreign import to Scandinavia, or at least indicative of significant foreign influence within these institutions, whatever they may have been. Given the degree of evidence for Frisian influence within Scandinavian towns **-here an example would be good** – we may wish to bear this in mind.

These specialized terms for various parties aboard a trading (or raiding) ship, as well as for orienting individuals with their partners in economic pursuits, indicate a developing specialized terminology for conceptualizing social relationships within the context of maritime trade. That these terms overlapped with those used in the context of warfare or raiding is highly suggestive: these two forms of organization operated within two closely-related, but conceptually distinct spheres – which is why a merchant *styrimannr* needed to also be specified as his colleague’s *felagi*, or a martial *drengir* in his own right.

There is also some slight evidence for trade and commerce to be found within the corpus of the skaldic material. Judith Jesch summarizes the few instances featuring vocabulary pertaining to these themes in her *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age*; these sometimes take the form of personal boasts and, more frequently, poems of praise to kings:

Gramr vann gǫrvan,
 en glatat þjófum,
 kaupmönnum frið,
 þanns konungr bætti,
 svát í Elfi
 øxum hlýddi
 flaust fagrbúin
 í fjöru skorða.⁷⁸

The prince made peace for the merchants, which the king improved, and he flattened thieves, so that it was possible to prop the beautifully prepared ships with axes on the shore at Götaälv.⁷⁹

We might take such instances of mentions of merchants in skaldic verse in connection with kings simply to be the result of the genre conventions of this poetry, or to reflect

⁷⁸ *Morkinskinna*, Finnur Jónsson, ed. (Copenhagen: J. Jørgensen & Co., 1932), 306.

⁷⁹ Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age*, 66.

who these verses were addressed to; we might also, on the other hand, consider the possibility that the station of merchants was considered to be strongly linked to the institutions of kingship.

The written record

Having surveyed the “harder” evidence available to us, we are now left to contend with the written record. Regrettably, the standard roster of (Christian, European) sources to which historians of the period turn when attempting to treat premedieval Scandinavia offers little of particular relevance to the topic at hand. P.H. Sawyer explains the difficulties in our written sources succinctly:

Merchants and markets... only occur in our sources if they were relevant to the spiritual or ecclesiastical purpose of the writers, for example if they played some part in demonstrating the power of a saint or of his relics. The saints’ lives and collections of miracle stories written in the Dark Ages contain many references to merchants but these are only incidental and can give little information about the scale of the commercial activity they mention.⁸⁰

Elsewhere in Europe, early references to commerce may be found in sermons, letters, charters and the like, but premedieval Scandinavia’s largely preliterate status means that no such works survive to detail the business arrangements of Scandinavian merchants before and around the period of Scandinavian Christianization. Of the conversion narratives which form the backbone of the written record for the period – those written by Adam of Bremen, Widukind of Corvey, and the like – only Rimbert’s *Life of St. Anskar* features merchants at any length. The work, a typically medieval *vita*, presents the deeds of Anskar, a Frankish missionary working in Scandinavia on behest of the Carolingian emperor Ludovic.⁸¹ The work details his trials and tribulations in the course of his mission in typical fashion, emphasizing the brutishness of his pagan enemies and the godliness of Anskar and his cause. Its structure is episodic, following Anskar’s adventures around the Baltic as he works to win souls while avoiding Vikings, angry kings and demons – presenting its medieval reader a gripping adventure story and moral *exempla*, and happily

⁸⁰ P.H. Sawyer, “Kings and Merchants,” in *Early Medieval Kingship*, ed. P.H. Sawyer (Leeds: University Printing Service, 1979,) 139.

⁸¹ Rimbert, *Anskar, the apostle of the North, 801-865*, trans. Charles H. Robinson (London: The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, 1921,) 45-48.

presenting us with some evidence against which to check that which we have gleaned from the archaeological record.

In the course of his proselytizing, Anskar arrives at a number of frontier towns and encounters the local merchants. While they hardly figure as prominently as the churchmen and royal figures Anskar encounters – none of them are given names, for example – their depiction does raise a few intriguing points. Anskar's first major encounter with Scandinavian merchants occurs at a time of crisis:

Per idem fere temporis accidit, ut etiam quidam rex Sueonum nomine Anoundus, eictus regno suo, apud Sanos exul fuerit. Qui fines regni quondam sui denuo repetere cupiens, coepit ab ipsis auxilium quaerere, spondens, quod, si se sequerentur, multa eis possent donaria provenire. Proponebat enim eis vicum memoratum Birca, quod ibi multi essent negotiators divites et abundantia totius boni atque pecunia thesaurorum multa...⁸²

About the same time it happened that a certain Swedish king named Anoundus had been driven from his kingdom, and was an exile amongst the Danes. Desiring to regain what had once been his kingdom, he sought aid of them and promised that if they would follow him they would be able to secure much treasure. He offered them Birka, the town already mentioned, because it contained many rich merchants, and a large amount of goods and money...⁸³

A war party of Danes sets off and arrive shortly in Birka, finding it undefended as promised.

Tantum supradictus Herigarius, praefectus ipsius loci, cum eis qui ibi manebant negotiatoribus et populis praesens aderat. In magna ergo angustia positi, ad civitatem, quae iuxta erat, confugerunt. Coeperunt quoque diis suis, immo demonibus, vota et sacrificia plurima promittere et offerre, quo eorum auxilio in tali servarentur periculo. Sed quia civitas ipsa non multum firma erat, et ipsi ad resistendum pauci, miserunt ad eos legatos, dextram at foedus postulantes. ...⁸⁴

Only Herigar, the prefect of this place, was present with the merchants and people who remained there. Being in great difficulty they fled to a neighbouring town and began to promise and offer to their gods, who were demons many vows and sacrifices in order that by their help they might be preserved in so great a peril. But inasmuch as the town was not strong and there were few to offer resistance, they sent messengers to the Danes and asked for friendship and alliance. ...⁸⁵

⁸² Rimbart, *Vita Anskarii auctore Rimbarto: accredit Vita Rimbarti*, ed. Georg Waitz (Hannover: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1884): 41.

⁸³ Rimbart, *Anskar, the apostle of the North*, 65.

⁸⁴ Rimbart, *Vita Anskarii*, 41.

⁸⁵ Rimbart, *Anskar, the apostle of the North*, 65-66.

At this point, it seems clear that Rimbert, at least, clearly regarded the “merchants” as distinct from the general public. Whatever a Scandinavian observer might have thought of the situation, it was apparently a simple enough distinction for an educated European to draw.

The merchants encountered above seem to have been defenseless against the Danes, entreating the gods for mercy. At another point, though, we encounter a band of doughtier “merchants” in an unlikely situation: a siege is underway, and both sides have been at a stalemate for eight days. The pagan attackers, fearing their gods have abandoned them, have begun to despair:

“Quid,” inquit, “infelices acturi sumus? Dii recesserunt a nobis, et nullus eorum adiutor est nostril. Quo fuimus?” [...] Cum itaque in tanta essent angustia positi, quidam negotiatorum, memores doctrinae et institutionis domni episcopi, suggere eis coeperunt: “Deus,” inquit, “christianorum multotiens ad se clamantibus auxiliatur et potentissimus est in adiuvando. Quaeramus, an ille nobiscum esse velit, et vota ei placita libenti animo spondeamus.” ...⁸⁶

“What,” said they, “shall we, unhappy people, do? The gods have departed from us and none of them will aid us. Whither shall we flee?” [...] When they were in this great difficulty some merchants, who remembered the teaching and instruction given by the bishop, offered them advice. “The God of the Christians,” they said, “frequently helps those who cry to Him and His help is all powerful. Let us enquire whether He will be on our side, and let us with a willing mind promise offerings that will be agreeable to Him.”⁸⁷

Having thus converted themselves, the formerly pagan army – and, presumably, the accompanying merchants – set about the siege with renewed vigor, and, of course, are victorious. The appearance of the merchants in this context is worth noting: it seems strange indeed that they should be taking part in a battle rather than observing from a safe distance.

Conclusions

Having examined this body of evidence, we may hazard a few broader guesses as to the nature of the social position of merchants in the Viking age. First and foremost, it is apparent that some people self-identified as merchants at this period: they had developed a degree of “class-consciousness,” to apply the Marxist terminology. That

⁸⁶ Rimbert, *Vita Anskarii*, 61.

⁸⁷ Rimbert, *Anskar, the apostle of the North*, 98.

numerous graves finds included scales and other trading equipment, while trade equipment is unknown in the burial record of a few hundred years earlier, is testament enough to this.

If, following E.T. Thompson, we take class consciousness to result from shared experiences within a group, often conceptualized in opposition to other groups, we may wonder which experiences contributed to this shared identity. We find our answer in the opening of new frontiers to the east, and the establishment of a semi-indigent population of travelling merchants. The steady increase in ships' cargo capacity allowed the bulk transportation of less costly commodities, reducing the barrier of high entry costs and allowing profits to be realized on less valuable materials, leading – if we permit ourselves to engage in some informed speculation – to a growth in the number of merchants. Certainly, grave finds such as those at Birka speak to a dramatic increase not only in the amount of wealth in circulation, but also to its wider distribution within the population than had previously been the case. Rather than supposing that this must necessarily have resulted from the distribution of spoils of war or conquest, particularly in light of the lack of overtly aristocratic architecture at the newly-established trade emporia, we might see in this development of a sort of proto-middle class. Not only did this new identity result from the experience of travel and a new relationship with modes of production, it further expressed itself in those terms. A merchant could be identified by his (or, perhaps, her) equipment: his scales and weights, his ship, and his ostentatious and exotic clothing. Though not ethnically “Other,” the merchant was able to engage with the foreign - this was his stock in trade.

It is difficult to ascertain how conceptually distinct a “merchant” was from a “warrior” or a member of a king's retinue at this period. Certainly, the corpus of runic inscriptions and skaldic verse pertaining to merchants, as well as the little we see of merchants in Rimbert's *Life of St. Anskar*, indicates that the two were not yet entirely conceptually separate. If we ascribe a martial significance to weapons in burials (as opposed to merely seeing them as symbolic of authority,) we might discern a certain blurring of categories. Merchants and warrior retinues were both of the elite, and thus shared many characteristics: the dividing line between them was yet to be fully drawn. This development would come later, as Scandinavia progressed from the Viking Age in to its early Middle Ages.

TOWARD THE MIDDLE AGES

The complete adoption of Christianity which marked the end of the Viking age was accompanied by the spread of literacy, replacing one scholarly problem with another: where previously we have had to endure a comparative paucity of evidence, now we are faced with a bewildering overabundance. We have seen early indications of the development of conceptions of merchants as a “class” in the closing days of the Viking age, but the final steps still lie ahead of us. We are fortunate now to be able to access the voices of the people alive during this period, even if their conceptions of social position and status were very different to our own. We will now examine a few of the written materials available to us and attempt to discern how merchants were considered in the early Scandinavian Middle Ages.

Konungs skuggsjá

We could not hope for a more perfect source than the *Konungs Skuggsjá*. Written in Norway in about the mid-thirteenth century,⁸⁸ the book is an example of the *speculum* literature, not dissimilar in intent to a modern encyclopedia. The work is presented as a discussion between a father and his son; the son asks his father for information on various practical, political and moral matters and the father dispenses didactic advice on how best to proceed. The work is divided into three major sections: a discussion of the role of the merchant, continuing on to address the role of *hirðsmenn* in the king’s retinue and ending with the figure of the king himself. Over the course of the discussion, the tone becomes increasingly philosophical, shifting from the mostly practical advice given regarding merchants to a more theoretical conversation on the nature of kingship and law. The author of the work also illustrates his points with numerous asides, including a lengthy description of the geography, flora and fauna of the

⁸⁸ For discussion on the difficulties of precisely dating the work, see Sverre Bagge, *Political Thought of the King’s Mirror*, (Turnhout: Brepols Publishing, 1987), 12-13 and 209-210. The author of *Konungs skuggsjá* himself is unknown, choosing intentionally to remain anonymous: “Enn ef nockur girnist edur forvitnast at heyra edur nema þessa bok þá er eigi naudsýn at forvitnast þess nafn edur hvá manna sá var er saman setti og rita liet þessa bok at eigi bæri svo at at nockur hafne því sem til nytsemdar má þar j finnast annat hvort fyrir háðungar sakir edur ofundar edur einshvers fiáandskapar vid þann er giordi.” *Speculum regale, ein altnorwegischer Dialog nach Cod. Arnemagn. 243 Fol. B und den ältesten Fragmenten*, ed. Oscar Brunner (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1881), 3. This has not prevented some considerable speculation as to their identity: see Laurence Marcellus Larson, “Introduction,” *The King’s Mirror*, ed. Laurence Marcellus Larson (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1917,) 54-60.

North Atlantic – in keeping with the encyclopedic tradition within which the author was working.

The section on the proper behavior of merchants is brief but has a tremendous amount of material to consider in attempting to understand medieval Scandinavian conceptions of this emerging class. Making up the first part of the book, it begins after a perfunctory introduction, in which the son recounts his search for wisdom. He approaches his father for advice, as he is “in [his] most vigorous years and [has] a desire to travel abroad,”⁸⁹ but has no desire to attach himself to a court. His father, understanding what he means by this, responds by recounting the habits of an effective merchant. He begins by emphasizing a requirement for moral uprightness: a merchant must be “polite and agreeable,”⁹⁰ must always try to attend church services, and must attend to his business interests diligently. The merchant must also take care that he behave in a seemly fashion:

Borð þitt skaltu wæl bua mæð hvitum ducum oc reinni fæzlo oc goðum drycc. Gett þer wæl at borðe þinu æf þu at þæss koste... En æf þu kæmr aprt til hærbærgis þa rannzakadu warning þinn at æigi wærðe siðan firi spiollum er þer ihænndr kæmr. En æf spiall wærða a warning þinum oc skaltu þann warning sælia þa leynþu þann all dri er kauper syn hanum þan spioll sæm a ero oc sæmit siðan kaup yccart sæm þit mægot þa heiter þu æigi swicari. Mæt oc warning þinn allann igott wærð oc þo nær þwi en þu ser at taka ma ækki or hofe þa heiter þu æigi mangare.⁹¹

Keep your table well provided and set with a white cloth, clean victuals, and good drinks. Serve enjoyable meals, if you can afford it... On returning to your lodgings examine your wares, lest they suffer damage after coming into your hands. If they are found to be injured and you are about to dispose of them, do not conceal the flaws from the purchaser: show him what the defects are and make such a bargain as you can; then you cannot be called a deceiver. Also put a good price on your wares, though not too high, and yet very near what you see can be obtained; then you cannot be called a foister.⁹²

The father continues his advice by stressing the importance of learning, both of laws and of languages:

Gerðu þer allar logbœcr kunnar en mæðan þu er wilt kaupmaðr wæra þa ger þer kunnigan biarereyiar rett. En æf þer ero log kunnig þa wærðr þu æige ulaugum

⁸⁹ Larson, trans., *King's Mirror*, 79. “Mæð þvi at ec em nu alettazta alder þa izsumz ec at at fara lannda mæðal...” Brunner, ed., *Speculum regale*, 5.

⁹⁰ Larson, trans., *King's Mirror*, 80.

⁹¹ Brunner, ed., *Speculum regale*, 6-7.

⁹² Larson, trans., *King's Mirror*, 80-81.

beittr æf þu at malum at skipta wið iafn oca þinn. Oc kanntu at logum swara ollum malum. En þo at ec rœdda nu flæst um logmal þa wærðr ængi maðr til fulz witr nema hann kunne goða skilning oc goðan hatt a ollum sidum. þar sæm hann wærðr staddr oc aef þu willt wærða fullkomenn í froðleic. Þa næmðu allar mallyzkur en alra hælz latinu oc walsku. Þwiat þær tungur ganga wiðazt. En þo tynþu æigi at hældr þinni tungo.⁹³

Make a study of all the laws, but while you remain a merchant there in no law that you will need to know more thoroughly than the Bjarkey code. If you are acquainted with the law, you will not be annoyed by quibbles when you have suits to bring against men of your own class, but will be able to plead according to law in every case. [...] But although I have most to say about laws, I regard no man perfect in knowledge unless he has thoroughly learned and mastered the customs of the place where he is sojourning. And if you wish to become perfect in all knowledge, you must learn all the languages, first of all Latin and French, for these idioms are the most widely used; and yet, do not neglect your native tongue or speech.⁹⁴

The father continues his advice by emphasizing the importance of moderation in speech and avoiding vices and of becoming a proficient navigator. He then discusses the necessity of maintaining good relationships with kings and other authorities.⁹⁵ After a few more remarks on the importance of moderate behavior and good seamanship, the father concludes by discussing the importance of investing one's profit's suitably in order to afford a suitable retirement.⁹⁶

Many of the themes we have touched upon in the preceding chapters are reflected in the father's advice to his son. First and foremost, we see an implicit presumption that merchants will be working in urban environments. Early medieval continental Scandinavia continued its haphazard trend toward urbanization; the establishment of cathedral towns and royal residences at such centers as Nideros and the relocated Uppsala providing new opportunities for intensification of trade, and witnessed the foundation of a permanent, truly urban population – this was likely the *milieu* to which the author of *Konungs Skuggsjá* belonged. The author, by having the father character repeatedly emphasize the importance of keeping up appearances, underlines the extent to which this group was intensely conscious of social status. Not only was it important that ships be

⁹³ Brunner, ed., *Speculum regale*, 7-8.

⁹⁴ Larson, trans., *King's Mirror*, 81.

⁹⁵ Larson, trans., *King's Mirror*, 83.

⁹⁶ Larson, trans., *King's Mirror*, 85.

properly outfitted – an obvious safety concern – but also that the merchant look the part. Proper clothing and hospitality were a must. This was a society undergoing a process of social stratification: the social status of a merchant was contingent on his maintaining the appearance of success.

The father's repeated emphasis on the importance of maintaining good relationships with "kings or other chiefs"⁹⁷ is likely more than merely sound advice for avoiding trouble: we are reminded that the operations of merchants was largely contingent on the contingent on the continued favor of the monarchy. The earlier linkage between merchants, kings and urban centers was only reinforced in this period, as marketplaces increased in size while decreasing in number. As the Scandinavian monarchies exerted considerable effort to centralize, it was natural that they should attempt to bring markets closer under their control – and, indeed, they were able to accomplish this goal, by promulgating town charters which explicitly predicated trade in the interests of the monarchies.

Also worthy of note is the strong implied connection between trade and travel: not only does the father repeatedly mention the importance of maintaining ships properly, as has been noted above, but he is able to infer that his son intends to become a merchant merely when he asks about the possibility of travel and adventure. To add to this, the father mentions the importance both of literacy and of speaking foreign languages as regards merchant ventures. We have examined how the status of merchants was, in the earlier Viking Age, demonstrated by an association with foreign adventures and ability to travel; it is thus unsurprising that the father should advise his son to cultivate these skills.

In sum: *Konungs skuggsjá* offers a singular account of obligations and expectations of merchants within medieval Scandinavia. The father's speech to his son confirms the importance of many of our earlier findings, and demonstrates a clear consciousness of merchants as occupying their own position in society.

Merchants and the law

We might suspect *Konungs skuggsjá* to be more a collection of desiderata than an accurate description of social life. In order to further our survey, we may wish to cast a somewhat broader net; and, following the father's suggestion that his son "make a study of all the

⁹⁷ Larson, trans., *King's Mirror*, 83.

laws,”⁹⁸ we will now turn to legal materials concerning merchants, such as we have received them. There is a tremendous body of material to examine here, and limitations of space prohibit an extensive survey of the subject; we will have to content ourselves with a few representative samples. The earliest substantive Scandinavian legal texts to have survived to the present day cannot be conclusively shown to predate the medieval period,⁹⁹ and as such will be considered as pertaining to this period, rather than the Viking Age. Whether or not the body of pre-medieval Scandinavian law contained statutes specifically related to practices of trade, it is nonetheless noteworthy that they should first be formally codified in the early medieval period. Clearly, the lawmakers of the period were concerned with regulating and engaging with trade.

While it is perhaps historiographically inappropriate to describe medieval theories of trade as “mercantilist,” the body of laws we have received from this period demonstrate many of the same preoccupations as those which characterized the later economic philosophy: Nordic laws on trade are primarily concerned with delineating and defining trade monopolies in order to advance the interests of the king (and thus the state.) A case that will be well-familiar to students of the sagas is presented by the “Finn tax” (*finnskattr*.) whereby Scandinavians extracted or extorted trade goods – furs, feathers, whalebones, animal oils – from the “Finnish” or Sámi populations of northern Norway and Finnmark. This rather unique practice, amounting to little more than state-sanctioned robbery, was a hereditary privilege of the land-owning classes of Helgeland: “...en Jamtr váru mjök alls í millum, ok gaf engi at því gaum, fyrr en Hákon setti frið ok kaupferðir til Jamtalands ok vingaðisk þar við ríkismenn.”¹⁰⁰ The warrior-farmer-merchants who

⁹⁸ Larson, trans., *King's Mirror*, 81.

⁹⁹ There is broad scholarly agreement that at least some of the material the *Gulapingslög* preserves evidences a considerably older origin – such as, notably, its granting “permission to expose a child that is born with a serious deformity and the rather lenient attitude toward carnal sins” (Laurence Marcellus Larson, *The Earliest Norwegian Laws* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), 28; and see also Gustav Storm, ed., *Norges gamle love*, vol. 4 (Christiania: Grøndahl & Søn, 1885), 641-644. *Landnámabók*, moreover, explicitly names the *Gulapingslög* as the basis for Iceland’s first law code, the *Úlfjótsslög*, which regrettably does not survive. These hints, coupled with a continuing fascination with all things “Viking,” have led to a large body of scholarly work attempting to discern something of the nature of the earliest Germanic law. Nonetheless, the earliest surviving manuscript of the *Gulapingslög* is conventionally dated to c. 1200, and thus any discussion of Viking-age law will necessarily involve some considerable degree of speculation. As such, the subject will not be addressed here.

¹⁰⁰ *Hákonar saga góða*, in *Heimskringla I*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk fornrit 26 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1979), 165.

carried out these duties were then obligated to bring the wares they had acquired to the Norwegian king, who held the sole right to sell certain of them on.¹⁰¹

Though this specific practice was exceptional in the degree to which it monopolized trade in the hands of the monarchy, it nonetheless demonstrates that the continental Scandinavian conception of trade and commerce was necessarily predicated in its serving the interests of the king. The later town laws which began to spring up in the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries similarly define trade as a concern of the monarchy. Particularly notable is the standard language – medieval “boilerplate” – which ground market rights in royal fiat. The creation and definition of monopolies for seemingly every category of trade good, as well, did not merely represent an attempt to streamline the process of levying taxes, though this was a foremost concern; rather, they reflected a conception of trade as an affair of the state. The various charters’ differing sums of reparations to be paid upon the death of a merchant reflect a sort of concentric circle of closeness to kings – Scandinavian merchants were most “valuable” in death, then Frisians, then Germans, and so on – and, thus, how great an injury to the state their deaths were to be considered. Merchants, then, were de-facto agents of royal power.

This conception of merchants operating both for the sake of and by the grace of the kings was reflected, as well, in the restrictions on trade which were occasionally implemented, whether in the form of taxes or by legally circumscribing the right to trade to certain individuals. Such an approach is evident in, e.g., the *Frostathinglög*:

“þat e ross oc kunnict at af engu eydiz í enu meir ríki vart en af því at eigi kann vinnumenn fá í heröðum, því at allir vilja nú í kaupferðir fara en engi vinna fyrir bóndum. oc fyrir því vilium vér þat vandlega fyrirbióða at nökkurr maðr fari sá í kaupferðir er minna fé á en til iij.marca. Scal þetta forbod standa frá páscum oc til Michialsmesso hvert ár.¹⁰²

While ostensibly restricting trade in order to deal with a labor shortage, it is notable that this restriction applies only to those of lesser means – those, presumably, less able to leverage their capital to produce profit, and less able to profitably represent the king.

¹⁰¹“...En klóvöru alla fyrir norðan Umeyarsund, þar á konungr einn caup á. En ef ármaðr kennir þat manni at hann hafi þar vöru ceyppt. þá skal koma fyrir lýritar eiðr. oc secr .iij. mörcum við konung ef hann hefir ceyppt. oc láta scinnin...”

“Den ældre Frostathings-lov,” in *Norges Gamle Love*, vol. 1, ed. Rudolph Keyser and Peter Andreas Munch (Christiania: Grøndahl, 1846), 257.

¹⁰² “Den ældre Frostathings-lov,” 125.

The appearance of the Hanseatic League in Nordic marketplaces from the 13th century onward had a markedly destabilizing effect on this conception of merchants as subservient to the monarchy, and as such was heavily resisted. Charters demonstrate special categories of trade restrictions placed on Hanseatic traders in Iceland and Norway, as well as Scandinavians' increasing frustration at being outcompeted by foreign influences. The nationalistic 19th-century historiography of the period took these legal conflicts, and eventual total control of Nordic trade by the Hanseatic League, as the beginning of the end of Scandinavian legal and economic sovereignty,¹⁰³ and thus the start of a period of stagnation that was only reversed by the revival of Scandinavian influence in the period of the Reformation. This implicitly economically revanchist viewpoint overstates the influence of the Hanseatic League on the Scandinavian monarchies, but their ability to negotiate charters outside the confines of the Nordic legal systems indicates that the period after the 13th century was one in which Scandinavian merchants were less empowered to engage in trade than had previously been the case.

Merchants in the sagas

At this point, we have reviewed the bulk of the evidence concerning merchantry in the medieval Nordic world, in greater or lesser detail. The remaining body of evidence, the “elephant in the room” of the present study, is of course the saga corpus. The sheer volume of material they present represents a considerable challenge to our purposes – as do the issues surrounding them. The difficulties posed by their interpretation has allowed the growth of a lively scholarly cottage industry devoted to disentangling the questions of their origins and transmission, whether they represent an effort to report “fact” or should be taken as purely literary “fiction,” or indeed whether we should regard them as essentially literate productions – perhaps even a localization of a foreign literary style! – or remnants of an earlier culture of oral composition and storytelling. There are reasons to be skeptical enough of them to avoid taking them at face value as historical documents; nor should we necessarily follow the hardest line advocated by certain archaeologists and other scholars by disregarding them entirely. Our purposes will be well-served by regarding them through an essentially anthropological lens: we need not accept that they

¹⁰³ See, e.g., Schreiner's lamenting account of the Norwegians' loss of trade sovereignty in the 12th-13th centuries, in Johan Schreiner, *Hanseatene og Norges nedgang* (Oslo: Steenske forlag, 1935,) 2-22, *et passim*.

represent the literal historical *truth*, but clearly the stories they described made sense to their audiences. Thus, when we witness saga characters arguing the specifics of a contract, or attempting to define the terms by which a given interaction is characterized, we may be reasonably sure that the 13th- and 14th-century Icelanders who initially “consumed” the sagas felt the characters to be raising valid (or at least understandable) points.

Having noted this, we may begin to look for appearances of merchants and evidence of commercial interactions within the sagas themselves. The terminology for merchants in the sagas differs somewhat from that used on runic inscriptions, as discussed previously: in the saga corpus we come across people described as *farmaðr* or *kaupmaðr*, terms relatively uncommon in the runic corpus. The activities of a *farmaðr* were clearly considered to be in distinction to those of a *víkingr*, as seen in *Egils saga*: “Björn var farmaðr mikill ok stundum í víking en stundum í kaupferðum.”¹⁰⁴ While going “a-viking” was clearly in contrast to the activities of a merchant, however, it appears that a single individual could engage in both: besides Björn, Þórir klakka in *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* is described in similar terms.¹⁰⁵ Perhaps these men followed the advice of the narrator of *Konungs skuggsjá* by involving themselves in merchantry for a period and raiding later.

We may observe an element of social climbing at work in these texts as well: even if many merchants seem to have been born into families of some means themselves, merchantry was nonetheless a path to riches:¹⁰⁶

Maðr er nefndr Karl en annarr Biorn. Þeir voro brødr .ii. litils hattar at byrþom oc þo framqvembarmenn. verit saltmenn enn fyra lvt efi sinnar oc aflat sva penninga. en nv var sva orþit at þeir vorv rikir kavpmenn oc vinselir oc mikilmenni i skapi.¹⁰⁷

A man was called Karl, and another Biorn. They were two brothers of unimportant lineage and yet became successful. They had been salt burners at first, and thus earned their money. But now it was so, that they were rich merchants, and well-liked, and great men in temperament.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ *Egils saga Skalla-Grimsonnar*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, Íslensk fornrit 2 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933): 83.

¹⁰⁵ *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*, in *Heimskringla I*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslensk Fornrit 26 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1979), 291.

¹⁰⁶ Else Ebel, “Der Fernhandel von der Wikingerzeit bis in das 12. Jahrhundert in Nordeuropa nach altnordischen Quellen,” in *Untersuchungen zu Handel und Verkehr der vor- und frühgeschichtlichen Zeit in Mittel- und Nordeuropa*, ed. Klaus Düwel et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987): Vol. 4, 272.

¹⁰⁷ *Saga Magnús góða*, in *Morkinskinna*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, (Copenhagen: J. Jørgensen & Co., 1932), 3.

¹⁰⁸ Translation my own.

This passage presents us with the strongest contrast yet between the presumed social station of merchants and those affiliated with kingly retinues and other martial activities: kings' retainers are overwhelmingly described as sons of well-off (if not necessarily noble) families, while it was apparently conceivable that two brothers could rise from the station of salt burner – an economic activity characteristic of what we might loosely call the Nordic “peasant class” – into the ranks of merchants. We might note a similar motif in the well-known *Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka*, where an impoverished Icelander buys a polar bear in Greenland and manages, with considerable difficulty, to bring it to the Danish king Svein, earning wealth and social status in return.¹⁰⁹ The traditional scholarly understanding of this tale has hinged on the mechanisms of gift-exchange at work (as examined, for example, by no less a scholar than William Ian Miller in his monograph *Audun and the Polar Bear*,)¹¹⁰ but it is nonetheless worth noting that Auðun's lucky streak is initiated by a commercial exchange. His ability to enter into the elaborate web of social obligation that eventually results in his finding fortune hinges on his willingness to take a financial risk by engaging in commerce. Auðun, too, was a man who rose from the lowest levels of society to a place of prominence by engaging in the activities of a merchant.

The sagas further confirm our general impression of the status of merchants as being in some way linked to their foreign trade, and the special cachet their ability to navigate unfamiliar lands granted them. Merchants presenting themselves as elite by fact of their exotic clothing appear throughout the saga corpus: in addition to the case of Gilli inn gerzkr, discussed earlier, Ólafr pái (“the peacock”) features prominently in *Laxdæla saga*, lent a noble air by his splendid foreign attire¹¹¹ as well as his association with the Irish slave Melkorka. Successful merchants were also marked by their ability to speak foreign languages:

En er Viðgautr var búinn, þá siglir hann brott með sitt fõruneyti, ok er ekki sagt frá hans ferðum, fyrr en hann kom austri í Hólmgarð á fund Haralds konungs, ok heimti hann sik brátt fram í fégjöfum við konunginn. Haraldr konungr tók honom

¹⁰⁹ *Auðunar þáttur*, in *Vestfirðinga sögur*, ed. Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson, Íslensk fornrit 6 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1943).

¹¹⁰ William Ian Miller, *Audun and the Polar Bear: Luck, Law, and Largess in a Medieval Tale of Risky Business* (Leiden: Brill, 2014): 99-115.

¹¹¹ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Laxdæla saga*, 27, 38-39.

sæmiliga, því at Viðgautr var frægr maðr ok djarfr í máli ok kunni margar tungur ok þyrfti ekki túlk fyrir sér.¹¹²

Viðgautr's gift for languages was apparently enough to impress the king; his status was enhanced by his ability to engage with foreigners on their own terms. Here, as elsewhere, a merchant was able to leverage the skills he gained in his career to enhance his social status.

Conclusions

By the end of the 13th and 14th centuries, Scandinavians clearly considered merchants to occupy their own social station, similar in many respects but ultimately distinct from the aristocratic warrior *milieu* of a king's retainers. The fundamental distinction between these two groups was their relationship to economic "means of production," to employ a decidedly Marxist turn of phrase. Both occupied elevated positions in society, enhanced by their proximity to kingly authority. Where a king's retainers engaged in systems of gift-giving and symbolic exchange, though, merchants engaged in economic transactions – exchanges of goods aiming ultimately at turning a profit. Though merchants and warriors' identities were similar, as evidenced by the occasional overlap in terminology applied to their activities and their related material cultures of conspicuous consumption of prestige goods, it appears that merchantry was not an activity restricted only to the wealthy landowners and petty aristocrats who surrounded the king. Becoming a successful merchant was a means of attaining higher social status than one had been born into - a means of entering into a sort of parallel aristocracy which entitled one to many of the same social benefits as were bestowed upon kings' retainers.

Konungs skuggsjá and the saga sources make clear that 13th- and 14th- century merchants had a clear conception of what sort of behavior and self-presentation befit men of their station: an appearance of wealth, an orientation towards travel, an ability to engage with the law, and a close proximity to royal power. These characteristics were the result of an interplay of societal forces and pressures within Scandinavia from the time of the earliest long-distance travel and goods exchange, developing in concert with the emerging technologies of trade and travel and reflecting the ways in which the monarchies

¹¹² *Knýtlinga saga*, in *Danakonunga sögur*, ed. Bjarni Gudnason, Íslenzk fórnrit 25 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1982), 247.

reshaped pre-medieval and medieval Scandinavian society to consolidate their power and authority.

The clearly-defined self-conception of Scandinavian merchants indicates that trade was no longer merely an activity, but could also constitute an identity – at least by the period of the High Middle Ages. We may thus justifiably identify the early medieval merchants of Scandinavia as constituting a sort of proto-middle class. Though the figures which populated this slice of society would remain of peripheral social importance in Scandinavia until centuries later,¹¹³ the seed had been planted for the emergence of a group who would eventually guide the bourgeois revolution which was to result in modern capitalism.

¹¹³ Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren, *Culture Builders: A Historical Anthropology of Middle-Class Life* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987,) 42-58, *et passim*.

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