

Invisible cargoes, invisible markets: comparative perspectives on slave trafficking and sale in the Viking world

From the late 8th century, historical annals and chronicles provide explicit descriptions of slave-raiding and trafficking, not only by viking groups operating in western Europe but also among the Rūs in what is now Russia and Ukraine. The scale of slaving increased in the years following the initial raids, with documentary sources indicating that hundreds and even thousands of captives were being taken, both during small-scale, opportunistic raids and also much larger-scale raiding expeditions involving dozens of ships. While many of these captives were likely taken to the home communities of raiders, others were funnelled into the long-distance trade networks that spanned the Viking world.

In the historical and literary records, we catch fleeting glimpses of captives being sold as commodities at regional markets and assemblies, as well as at nodal port towns located in the British Isles and Scandinavia. We also encounter them on the river systems of the east – human cargoes making their way to Constantinople and the great slave markets of Khazaria and Volga Bulgaria. In return, travelling north and west, came a vast array of goods including silver, beads, glassware, and textiles, at least some of which likely represent ‘proxies’ for the slave-trading that we know to have been taking place. The study of slaving activity, however, will always be hampered by a lack of direct archaeological evidence. Discussions of these practices are generally underpinned by the conscious acknowledgment that captives are for the most-part a largely ‘invisible’ social group. In this paper, I will present the initial findings of a research project that seeks to explore Viking-Age slaving practices through the application of an interdisciplinary, comparative approach that draws on cross-cultural studies of global slavery. Focusing on maritime slave trading and the archaeological study of slave markets, I will demonstrate how this broad, inclusive approach can assist in shedding new light on the lives of subaltern populations.

Ben Raffield
Dept. of Archaeology and Ancient History
University of Uppsala
Box 626
SE-751 26 Uppsala
Sweden