

J. Bill: Disentangling the Viking ship

Scholarly literature on the Viking Age routinely stresses the maritime interconnectedness of the Scandinavian world. But recent results from genetic research indicates that this world was not really that interconnected. The populations in eastern, western and southern Scandinavia appear to have been genetically quite separate, apart from some genetic and communicational hotspots like Gotland and Öland. This lack of general Scandinavian genetic admixture puts into question the long-held notion of ships and seafaring as a glue bonding Scandinavia closely together, and it points to the key importance of a limited number of nodes in the communicational network, rather than to a seafaring that indiscriminately connected all Scandinavian coastal landscapes.

This finding has also implications for our understanding of the development of Scandinavian shipbuilding and seafaring. Hitherto this understanding has, based upon the notion of a highly interconnected region, been rather single-stranded and pan-Scandinavian, even in spite of the quite clear differences in the archaeological record across the area. But if the different parts of Scandinavia were not that closely connected, and their connections often channelled through insular nodes like Gotland, should we then not rather expect Scandinavian shipbuilding to consist of different, regional traditions rather than of a single, common one? And would the adaption of shipbuilding technology not meet contemporary local and regional demands, rather than any posteriorly perceived, pan-Scandinavian ones?

The aim of this paper is to try to disentangle our perception of Scandinavian Viking Age shipbuilding by exploring diversity in the archaeological material from a multi-regional perspective. This is not merely an exercise in studying technicalities of shipbuilding. Rather it is an attempt to investigate if such a perspective would throw a different light on some key developments with large societal impact in Scandinavian shipbuilding, for example the introduction of sail and of open-sea voyages. At the same time the paper will bring into the discussion some of the findings of recent years, be it the new dendrochronological dates of older finds like Kvalsund, or the ships from the new ship graves at Salme and Gjellestad.