

## A Matter of Competitive Control: Warfighting Skillsets in the Viking Armies of Western Europe

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With a beginning in the 1970s and accelerating over the past two decades or so, our knowledge of Viking army logistics and structures has developed exponentially, largely driven by excavations at the so-called winter camps of England, the Irish longphuir, and related locales. Sites such as Repton, Heath Wood, Torksey, ARSNY and Woodstown have conclusively demonstrated the scale of the forces that occupied them, and illuminated something of their nature: Viking 'armies' were thousands strong, included women and children, conducted trade and manufacturing alongside a life of peripatetic violence, and were probably multi-ethnic.

Over the same period, a number of explanatory models (including several from outside Viking studies) have been applied in an attempt to understand what these groups really were, how they operated in local context, and their relationships with the power structures of Scandinavia. From my own work since 2008, these include the notion of hydrarchy drawn from comparative piracy research (recently taken up by Chris Coijmans) and, in relation to the camps, the anarchist concept of pirate utopias with the linked idea of the *temporary autonomous zone*. Since 2014, Ben Raffield has put forward his 'bands of brothers' reading of the *lið*, combined with in-group studies of Viking war-bands, militarised childhood, and slaving as an economic motor; in the past two years he has folded this research into studies of Viking operations within so-called *shatter zones*, a term used by anthropologists to describe ungoverned or disputed political borderlands with fractured, liminal communities.

This paper attempts to combine and unify these models by drawing on military Small War theory, advancing the proposition that much of Viking success in the field was due to their skill at navigating the volatile terrain of what have been termed *competitive control areas* (CCAs): regions in which non-state actors are both numerous and strong while central government is weak, characterised by extremely fluid landscapes of violence and shifting allegiance, variable legitimacy of authority, insurgency, and a deliberate opacity of political motive. In the Viking Age, it may be readily understood how the conflict zones of England, the Irish Sea, and most especially Frankia, can all be perceived as CCAs (and they may also be found elsewhere, for example along the eastern river systems). The qualities of command required to survive and thrive in a CCA are specific, and demand exceptionally high degrees of adaptation and the assimilation of fast-moving information flows; these in turn must connect to forces capable of equally rapid, smooth response to the resulting leadership decisions. In addition, there is an explicit aspect of subtlety in CCA warfighting, in that those actually exercising the greatest practical influence may not necessarily be the individuals perceived as doing so at the time. It will be argued that precisely these abilities marked out the more successful Viking hydrarchs, supported by the flexible structures of the 'armies' within which they moved, in socio-political environments of maximum vulnerability to exploitation.

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