Chapter 8

Summing up and Conclusions

Writing this book has been a long-lasting process, in course of which several points of view have crumbled, even if some of them seemed unshakable in the beginning. The present-day Baltic States is an area where conceptions, ideologies, and beliefs from all possible directions meet each other, probably on a larger scale than in many other areas of the same size. As for Viking Age communication, the Eastern Baltic countries have traditionally been considered more or less irrelevant peripheries, looking from both east and west. In reality, it was rather a buffer zone between the east and the west. It was there where influences from the large inland areas of the present-day Russia met the maritime cultures of the Baltic Sea, and where connections were created for building up the Viking Age eastern trade networks that made possible the inflow of dirhams to Northern and Western Europe. All North European routes in the communication between east and west ran through the Eastern Baltic.

Scholars of the Baltic States have only too often treated Viking Age communication from the perspective of national states, projecting contemporary political situations back to a time more than a thousand years ago. Or is it, perhaps, not the completely wrong attitude after all? Language differences largely hinder mutual cultural contacts between the Baltic States in our time, and presumably did so even more, back in history. To limit the scope of one’s study to the boundaries made up by modern political borders, as we find them today, hampers our understanding of prehistoric processes from a time when those states had not yet been established. Ethnic entities and language groups crossed present states, thus leaving little room for some modern nation states to mirror themselves back in time.

The present book is an attempt to observe the Viking Age Eastern Baltic across the region, involving all available sources to characterise this epoch. A great part of the attitude adopted comprised logistical and topographic approaches, largely including geographical knowledge for drawing out realistic possibilities for how prehistoric communication could have been accomplished. The trans-regional approach has hopefully also justified itself when treating archaeological and historical source material. The change of perspective can alter the general picture beyond recognition. Several aspects, phenomena or finds that may seem most relevant from the national point of view, may not necessarily be so in a broader perspective, or vice versa.
8.1 Two Cultural Spheres in the Eastern Baltic

Although several similarities in the Eastern Baltic archaeological evidence can certainly be pointed out, there are quite as many differences. In addition to very clear variability in, for instance, grave or artefact types, there are some more general differentiating features. Particularly clear is the variability in burial customs, together with different aspects expressed through them, for instance gender systems, or the collective or individual attitude of a society.

The interpretation of late prehistoric society, which only some decades ago was stereotyped and actually nondescript in all the Baltic States, has changed remarkably during the last 20 years. In most countries on the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea new, innovative, and sometimes even contradictory visions of the pre-state social systems have been suggested. According to the interpretation in this book, in the Viking Age the northern, Baltic Finnic half of the Eastern Baltic was characterised by corporate power structures, which presumably differed quite considerably from the more hierarchical societies of the ethnic Balts with individually arranged political power. Another social difference embraces gender systems that seem to have been more egalitarian in the northern half, when compared with the southern half of the Eastern Baltic. It is even possible to assume matrilineal descent systems in some of the Baltic Finnic societies. Burial customs and grave goods suggest that warrior status was not particularly emphasised in Estonian and Livic societies before the second half of the 10th century.

Social systems are certainly one of the factors behind the methods that a society chooses for interaction with its neighbours. Here, too, two different patterns can be distinguished in the Viking Age Eastern Baltic, especially when overseas communication and contacts with Scandinavia are involved. The only Scandinavian colonies in the Eastern Baltic are known from areas inhabited by ethnic Balts – in Grobiņa and Kaup. The first stopped functioning as a colony as early as the beginning of the Viking Age. At these sites a number of burials, both male and female, have been unearthed, with grave goods that were unusual in surrounding areas but common in Scandinavia. The Scandinavian influence on the material culture of the surrounding areas, on the other hand, remained modest, and was expressed only by some selected, probably imported artefacts. Such a model of colonialism, based on socially complex immigration, is in the book classified as “middle ground colonialism”.

Quite a different type of cultural colonialism can be found in the northern half of the Eastern Baltic that was, and still largely is, inhabited by Baltic Finns. No complex colonies of Scandinavians have been found in these areas, but the Scandinavian impact in one particular sphere – that of warriors – was