CHAPTER 1

Identity Formation and Diversity: Introduction

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The self-identification of peoples and states in the Baltic region is heavily influenced by historical templates and stereotypes. Some of these stereotypes have been woven into highly influential national and nationalistic myths, despite the lack of historical evidence supporting them. Especially in the Baltic Sea region, the eastern part of which is commonly referred to as the Scandinavian or Norse cultural sphere, the existence of an all-encompassing, predominant Viking Scandinavian culture can be questioned in light of abundant evidence of intense interaction between East and West, as well as increasing evidence of cultural regionalization and complexity.

The dominant template of the Viking period in mainstream research still tacitly promotes the concept of a particular, homogeneous, and hegemonic Viking culture and of Scandinavian supremacy in the Baltic Sea. In the eastern part of the Baltic region, the reactions to this image of the early historical period have varied over the years, from happy acceptance to fierce opposition.

In Sweden, the myth of a homogeneous Scandinavian culture, as well as the myth of an original nation and an original homogeneous Swedish national identity, is traditionally projected onto the Early Middle Ages. In Finland and Estonia, the same general problems connected with early national history are maintained in mainstream research and in a wealth of popular historical literature. In north-west Russia, the main research is still very much occupied with the question of the earliest Slavic presence. This book, in contrast, aims at playing down the national concepts and works towards a new understanding of the early history of the Baltic region, focusing on regional diversity, pluralistic cultural identities, and inter-personal and inter-regional communication.

Due to the character of the available sources, the articles rely heavily on archaeology. Historical texts and sources do however play a considerable role in the analyses; for example, Anne Stalsberg’s chapter uses capitularia from the Carolingian Empire to shed light on the possible export of swords. The period in question can be characterized as proto-historic rather than prehistoric: while certain written sources were produced in the area, the society as such was still not a literate one. Additionally one finds written sources concerning the area but produced by others – visitors, travellers, or learned compilers of
geographical data. These sources should be understood as biased, with intentions deriving from the contemporary political and cultural context.

Though the role played by archaeologists and archaeological research in connection with nation-building has been heavily debated, the majority of archaeological studies are still performed on material located within the borders of a single country; thus, the significance of current national borders is perpetuated, and they are implicitly treated as boundaries separating people long before the nation state came into existence. This book will instead undertake and pick up on research that goes beyond existing national borders, in order to capture interaction between regions. We will investigate in particular how this interaction contributed to regional diversity and to a variety of cultural identities within and between regions, some of which cut across current national borders. For many, the trading networks, family ties, and formal partners around the Baltic were no less important parts of the self and cultural identity than were historical affiliations or existing embryonic states. Intermarriage between partners of different groups and regions was common on all levels of society, and one's group identity was then likely to shift throughout life.

The book focuses on a selected number of regional social agglomerates with different lines of development, different patterns of interaction, and mutable cultural identities. These social aggregates were located in eastern Central Sweden, Åland, Estonia, the northern and southern coasts of the Gulf of Finland, and parts of north-west Russia. The regions have different timetables for dynamic social and economic change. People of Finnic and Baltic origin contributed to the development of the Baltic region in several important ways from the late eighth to the thirteenth century. Especially in the north-easternmost parts of the region, strong processes of integration can be studied together with the Slavic expansion to the east and north from the late eleventh to the thirteenth century in Novgorod, Pskov, and Suzdal'. Members of all groups acted as important trading partners, as families connected to all levels in society, not only aristocratic and royal, and as intermediate agents between the Baltic Sea area and the regions further to the east. Among them cultural and ethnic identities played an important role in the communication process.

Cultural Patterns, Cultural Identity, and Ethnic Identification

A large number of publications and articles were produced from the late 1980s to the late 1990s concerning cultural and ethnic identity. The topic has seen weak theoretical development since then. In this century the discussion has focused on early medieval ethnogenesis, chiefly in western and central Europe,