Konrad Vössing (University of Bonn): Searching for slavery in Late Antiquity

The nature and the extent of slavery in Late Antiquity (i.e. from the third century AD onwards) should not be understood merely as a continuation of conditions in the previous centuries. Slavery had become less important: in agriculture, there was a growing trend to replace slaves with coloni, free-born tenants who were tied to the land; while in towns and cities forms of unfree labour to an extent replaced earlier slave labour. On the other hand, members of the elite continued to value slaves for their representational functions as indicators of power and wealth. For scholars, the principal problem in attempting to weigh these trends, and more generally in investigating slavery in Late Antiquity and its transition to the Early Middle Ages, is the fact that the sources frequently refer to asymmetrical dependencies only vaguely and without clearly defined terms. As a result, the dimensions of dependency and the extent to which they determined social conditions are difficult to reconstruct. It also remains unclear whether the wars against and the conquest of Barbarian groups significantly increased the overall number of slaves. Possible criteria for dependencies beyond slavery include: a decrease of mobility and of the rights to choose personal names, marriage partners, occupations and religious practice; as well as restricted rights of inheriting and bequeathing.

Matthias S. Toplak (University of Tübingen): Invisible agents in Viking Age society - slaves and slavery in the archaeological record

A large number of different historical sources – travelogues, hagiographies or annals – document that the trade with slaves was an important economic factor in Viking Age society, especially on the eastern route through modern Ukraine and Russia towards the Islamic world, and according to early law texts as the Provincial Laws, slavery was also firmly embedded into everyday life the Scandinavian homelands. Yet, this socially significant element of Viking Age economy and culture remains nearly invisible in the archaeological record. Cemeteries for slaves or even larger numbers of slave burials are not known and the actual impact of slavery upon the society in Viking Age Scandinavia can only be estimated. This talk discusses current attempts to trace slaves and slavery from an archaeological and bioarchaeological perspective. Furthermore, it will illustrate some theoretical approaches to a more nuanced understanding of the social aspects of slavery, which is based on the concepts of resources by the Collaborative Research Center ‘SFB 1070 Resource Cultures B06 – Humans and Resources in the Viking Age. Anthropological and Bioarchaeological Analyses of the Use of Food Resources and the Detection of Migrations’.

Stefan Brink (University of Cambridge): Understanding Early Scandinavian slavery with the help of the slave terminology

The possibility to reconstruct the slavery we had in Scandinavia in the Middle Ages is rather good, thanks to the earliest laws, the provincial laws, from the 12th, 13th and 14th century. However, these laws are from a period when the slavery is in decline and finally is abolished in society (probably
c. 1200-1350). The laws probably give us the framework of this kind of slavery we had in Scandinavia, but we have the creeping suspicion that slavery might have looked rather, or even, very different in an earlier phase, let’s say the Viking Age. It becomes a difficult task to try to reconstruct slavery in that earlier phase in Scandinavia, due to the lack of contemporary written sources. Archaeology is, of course, very important, in this period with no written sources, but we have then to face the problem, reiterated by many archaeologists who have discussed prehistoric slavery, namely, how do you excavate ‘unfreedom’? In an attempt to find some way around this major problem I have tried to assemble as many different sources as possible and also to use a comparative approach in my reconstructions, and the perhaps most rewarding source in this endeavour has been the slave terminology, found in the provincial laws. It is possible to show that these terms for slaves must have an older background than the actual laws, hence used in the Viking Age and probably even earlier. In my paper I will discuss these terms, the words þræll, ámbatt, fostri, fostra, þý, þir, bryti, deigja, etc., their etymology and semantics, and what they can tell us of this ‘early’ slavery in Scandinavia.

Dariusz Adamczyk (Deutsches Historisches Institut Warszaw): Slaves, servants and free peasants in an economic-fiscal system of the Piast Realm (10th-12th centuries)

Despite the thin source material, we can safely distinguish in Early and High Medieval Poland between at least two categories of people: servi (slaves as well as servants) and liberi (also possessors), free peasants. This raises several questions. What was the legal difference between slaves and servants? Which fiscal functions did the servi and the liberi have to fulfil in the state apparatus? And last but not least, what was their economic status? In other words, were they economically autarkic or were they dependent on transaction at the local markets?

Janel Fontaine (University of London): Regulating and restricting slaving in Anglo-Saxon England

The Viking Age brought substantial changes to slaving practices in England. New and extensive trade networks encouraged the capture and sale of people for profit and altered their destinations. For rulers and clergy intent on protecting subjects and Christians, these changes posed significant challenges to their perception of authority. By seeking to delineate who could be enslaved and who could be sold where and to whom, these men put forward increasingly narrow guidelines designed to protect the ‘right’ people from falling victim to the slave trade. This paper will examine how these regulations contributed to developing ideas of kingship and protection under increasingly centralized systems of authority.

Colman Etchingham (Maynooth University): Slavery or ransom? Why Vikings took captives in Ireland and beyond

The documentary evidence is compelling that captive taking was the chief immediate purpose of Viking raiding in Ireland. It also features prominently in the Frankish annals’ record of Viking activity, but by comparison is poorly chronicled in England. There is positive and circumstantial evidence from Ireland that captives might be ransomed, as they might in Britain and in the Frankish realms. There is also evidence from Ireland that captives might be destined for enslavement, though that evidence is not as substantial or as clear-cut as one might expect. This paper will attempt to evaluate the evidence.
Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (University of Oslo): Viking Age Scandinavia: a society based on slaves (and women)?

Due to the source situation, we will never be able to get any clear answers to most of the questions we ask about the Viking Age society, for example, the number of slaves. One way to deal with that problem is to focus more on the question: what type of society was Viking Age Scandinavia? In this paper, I will argue that slavery was common, and that it actually was an important precondition for the Viking raids and trade. We can assume that parts of the work force on many farms spent time abroad, not just during the months of summer and spring, but even for a few years, and many never returned. To compensate for this, thralls needed either to be bought or captured. The keeping of thralls became a precondition for the Vikings being able to continue their activities abroad to the degree they did. In a way, this was a self-intensifying process. The more wealth acquired by the Vikings abroad, which could be used to buy thralls, the more people could be freed from their traditional tasks on the farms in order to engage in Viking activities. The number of men who could go on Viking voyages was still limited. After a while, it therefore became important to the great men, and especially the kings, to secure the support of warriors from outside of Scandinavia. Due to the intensity of Scandinavian (mostly male) activity abroad, the daily running of the farm was carried out by women, who took on the role as householders, the most important role in the Viking Age society.

Bjørn Poulsen (University of Aarhus): The development of free labour in medieval Denmark

Firstly, a historiographical overview is given of the literature dealing with the question: what social group developed out of the trælle / slaves during the 12th and early 13th century? Various answers have been given here: tenants (landboer), landless cottagers (gårdsåder), and servants (tyende). It is, of course, not possible to offer any definite solution to the problem, but the paper shall concentrate on the emergence of a group of free servants as it appears in the laws around 1200: leho hionæ / leghædræng (as opposed to slaves: anøþoht hionæ). Furthermore, the sources dealing with servants in medieval agriculture, lordly households and towns will be presented. The institutionalization of fixed periods of service (normally half a year) is discussed together with the ongoing process of monetarization. Of crucial importance in this context is the creation from around 1400 of large group of middle size tenant farms in Denmark (faætebønder) (constituting some 85 percent of the peasantry around 1500). On these farms servants were needed when the family group was not sufficient, that is when sons and daughters were not at hand. This is documented through the analysis of taxation list from the Duchy of Schleswig from the years 1524, 1534 and 1543. From these lists yearly payments to servants can be determined but also more interesting the fact that at that time it was the changing composition of the household that determined whether servants were actually employed. Only very large farms had evidently a constant need for employment of servants. Even if the very existence of the early modern taxation list signals a recognition of servants as a separate group in rural Denmark (not included organically in the familia), the lists also show that serving as male and female rural servants was mostly a stage on the road towards a position as householders on one’s own tenant farm.

Leszek Gardela (University of Bonn): Slaves and graves: reappraising an old problem in Viking and Slavic archaeology

Several medieval textual accounts concerning the ethnically diverse population of Eastern Europe (or Rus specifically) suggest that funerals of prominent Viking Age individuals often involved slave sacrifices. According to these sources, young women would willingly give up their lives to join their deceased lords or husbands on the funeral pyre. The historical authenticity of these accounts has
been subject to some critique in Viking and Slavic studies, and it has been argued that there is relatively little archaeological evidence to support them. This paper will seek to reappraise the idea of slave sacrifice, aiming to situate this phenomenon in a broad cross-cultural context and with a focus on a series of case studies from Scandinavia, Poland and Rus.

Ben Raffield (Uppsala University): The invisible inhabitants of the Viking world: comparative archaeologies of slave raiding and trading during the 8th-11th centuries

The Viking Age, was a time of extensive upheaval and disruption across the northern world. Beginning in the late 8th century, historical documents attest to a surge of viking raiding in northwestern Europe. While many raiding groups sought to acquire portable wealth and commodities, others are recorded as taking captives, either for ransom or for enslavement. 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 during large-scale raiding expeditions. Direct evidence for these practices, however, is difficult to identify in the archaeological record. In this paper, I will outline a comparative approach to the study of the Viking-Age slave trade, with a focus on the organisation and operation of raiding fleets and the practicalities of maritime slave trading. I will also consider how and to what extent these activities impacted communities living in different parts of the Viking world.

Wolfgang Neubauer (Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Archaeological Prospection and Virtual Archaeology Vienna), Immo Trinks (University of Vienna): Birka-Hovgården – New aspects on a proto-urban trade center

Birka-Hovgården is a listed world heritage and one of the most famous Scandinavian archaeological sites. All available arable fields of the site have recently been covered by a holistic non-invasive archaeological prospection project conducted by the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Archaeological Prospection and Virtual Archaeology. Based on a high-resolution airborne laser scan, motorized magnetometry and ground penetrating radar surveys were carried out covering an area of 68ha. All data were combined within a Geographical Information System and are currently under detailed archaeological analysis. The interpretative mappings of the main settlement area known as the Black Earth completed so far depict the earliest phases of occupation. They revealed an unexpected settlement layout contradicting the conventional model developed in the last century of research. The internal structure of the settlement, the topographic arrangement and the context within the landscape observed in the prospection data are indicating separated areas reflecting a strict social layering. New hypotheses derived from the extended archaeological prospection are standing in contrast to the current interpretation of Birka as a centre of trade and proto-urban settlement. The data will be presented for the first time and put up for discussion.

Rudy Simek (University of Bonn): Viking slavery from below

Many texts from the Viking Age talk about Viking slave taking and slave trading, but some even date from contemporary sources and contain full biographies of the victims. A starting point for the present paper is the 9th century Vita S. Findani, the life of an Irishman who escaped Viking slavery to become a monk on the Upper Rhine, but this is only one of several stories of Christians falling into Viking slavery which will be dealt with.
Tsukusu Jinn Ito (Matsumoto University): A reception study of an interpretation of Scandinavian slave-issue in post-war Japan: From the Japanese cartoon version of Vicke Viking to Vinland Saga

Vicke the Viking, or Wickie der Wikinger, is a juvenile novel by Runer Jonsson, a Swedish writer, in the 1960s, whose serials a Japanese TV production interpreted into a cartoon series in 1970s. The creators of the cartoon TV series were evidently conscious and cautious how to faithfully follow the original Scandinavian atmosphere around their presentation, using rarely available resources in Japan at the time. The narratives were as close to the original as possible, although the illustrations and the voice acting were to be sufficiently acceptable among the Japanese children. Still, the concept of slavery was represented as Jonsson depicted in the original novel. In the 70s, after the democracy began to be taught in schools in the post-war period in Japan, the classism was considered as a big issue in education. From the 80s to the 90s, the concept of slavery in the Northern Middle Ages was dramatically used for Manga narratives. Ashibe Yuho’s Crystal Dragon, for instance, shows the multi-cultural human asset custom/system in Roman Britain, Ireland Gaelic and the Scandinavian Middle Ages. In the 21st century, Yukimura Makoto’s Vinland Saga exhibits an aspect of slave trade based on the modern historical studies; a closer to the historical reality, educating the Japanese readers on the subject.

Hanne Østhus (University of Bonn): Uses of the past. How terms and notions from the middle ages were used in eighteenth century debates on freedom

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, issues of freedom and unfreedom were recurring themes in debates on lifting of adscription, easing of censorship and on Atlantic slavery in Denmark-Norway. This paper explores how terms and notions from the middle ages were appropriated and used in such debates.