

Medieval News

January 2016 No. 1



Winter is Coming...



Birkebeinerne

In 1204 Norway civil war raged. On one hand fought the “Baglers” supported by the Danish King; on the other side the “Birkebeiners”, supporting the king in Trondheim. Sometime in spring 1205 Inga of Varteig gave birth to a boy, who she claimed was the the son of Haakon Sverresson (Haakon III), who had been king of Norway and leader of the “Birkebeiner” faction. This happened at Folkenborg in Eidsberg in the middle of bagler-controlled territory. In the winter of 1205-06, when the boy was no more than six or seven months old, the Baglers (supported by the Danes) searched for him in order to kill him. The mother and child fled together with loyal Birkebeiners. However, the party was struck by a blizzard and two famous Birkebeiner skiers, Torstein Skevla and Skjervald Skrukka volunteered to carry the child over the mountains to safety at

the court of King Inge in Nidaros (Trondheim) in Trøndelag. This famous feat saved the boy who grew up to become a mighty Norwegian king.

In the 1930s this led to the popular annual skiing event, Birkebeinerrennet, which starts at Rena and ends at Lillehammer. All participants carry a backpack weighing at least 3.5 kg symbolizing the weight of a newborn babe. This distance is 54 km.

In 2016 a film telling the dramatic story will premiere in Oslo. The film has primarily been filmed on location and many of the stunts have been carried out by the actors. In order to do the flight over the mountains, the actors have had to learn how to ski the medieval way. This issue of Medieval News tells the story about the reenactment of the skiing...

Medieval News

- read about new exhibitions, books, research and much more

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Photo (frontpage):

Downward on 1300-year old reconstructed skis from Oppland in Norway. © Espen Finstad, Oppland County Municipality. Photos are to the best of our ability either published by permission or under the CCA.

Two men, who were the best to ski, ran ahead with the boy...

“During summer, after Inge had been taken to King, the Danish king and Bishop Nicholas got the faction of the Baglers to revolt. At that point Inga [who had slept with the king at Borg] stayed in Viken in a village, called Heggin on the farm called Folkensborg. There lived a priest called Traand. Here Inga fell ill and gave birth to a male child. But Traand priest knew that King Haakon Sverressøn was father to the boy. He baptized the boy and let him be named Haakon, but kept it so quiet that he trusted no one to bring the child to the baptismal font except his two sons and his wife. Traand priest brought up the boy quietly.

A man named Erlend [lived at] Husabø. He was kin to king King Sverre and belonged to the kindred of Guttorm Greybeard. Traand priest walked over to Erlend and consulted with him about the boy; they agreed, that they should

be as quiet about it as possible. The next twelve months, the boy stayed with Traand, the priest. However, the following winter, Erlend and Traand the priest decided to move from east to west. With them they brought the son of the king and his mother into the Opplands. At Christmas Eve [1205] they arrived at Hamar in Hedmarken. Here two Birkebeiners ruled. One was called Fridrek Slavse, the other Gjavvald Gaute, Both had a large retinue and ruled with a heavy hand [literally: through fear] as there were Baglers around in the Oppland.

At that point Ivar Bishop was in Hamar; he was always a mighty enemy of the kindred of Sverre and all the Birkebeiners. Even though they tried to keep it quiet, the bishop soon became aware of the presence of the son of a king. The bishop now invited the boy and his mother to spend Christmas with him and told them that he



was kin; as indeed he was. However, the Birkebeiners were suspicious and told the bishop that the boy would be brought to him after Christmas as he and his mother were tired after having travelled across country. As soon as Christmas day had ended, the Birkebeiner lords took three horses and led the boy and his mother away. And they did not rest until they had reached Lillehamar; from here they moved on through Østerdalene [the Eastern Valleys] from where they were planning to go to Trondheim.

In this venture they suffered much evil from foul and freezing weather and snow. During nights they stayed in forests or in the wilderness. One night a blizzard struck and they did not know their whereabouts. At this point they had two men, who were the best to ski, run ahead with the boy; one was Torstein Skevla and another Skervald Skrukk. They got two peasants, who knew the way, to act as pathfinders. They ran as if it was a race, but they

did not succeed in finding the village. Instead they came to a shieling where they struck a fire and rested the boy. Later the pathfinders went back to locate the rest of the party, who arrived at midnight. Now it became impossible to stay inside as the fire started to melt the ice off the roof of the shieling; it was better outside. They had nothing to feed the boy, except melted ice. Where they stayed was called Navardal [perhaps near Neversjøen north of Lillehammar]. There, they met so much hardship, that they had to make way through the snow by using the staffs of their spears to stamp it. However, wherever they came [amongst people] in Østerdalene, the peasants helped them on their way, lending them horses and showing them the way to go..."

(Translated from: Haakon Haakonsøns Saga. Translated by Alexander Bugge. I. M. Steinersens Forlag, Kristiania 1914.)



Skiing in the Viking Age

A few years ago archaeologists made a breath-taking find: a 1300-year old ski with the binding intact. Last year the skis were reconstructed. Now they have been tested.

Climate change is causing the glacier in Reinheimen National Park in Norway to melt, yielding lost artefacts from the Norwegian Iron and Viking age. So far archaeologists have uncovered more than 2000 artefacts from the glacier in Oppland.

One of the more significant finds has been a very old ski, dated to around AD 700. Of course archaeologists have found ancient skies before, several dated earlier. What makes the ski from Reinheimen in Oppland somewhat unique though, is the fact that the binding was still intact. This means that not only a proper reconstruction has been possible. It has also been

possible to recreate the ancient way of skiing; (another example of such a lucky find is the ski found at Mantta in Finland).

The Reinheimen Ski

The ski is made of birch and measures 172 cm long and 14.5 cm wide, making it somewhat akin to present day free riding skis, also called big mountain skis. The intact binding is at the back and consists of a wicker pulled through a hole in a slightly elevated platform and fastened with strings of leather around the back of the foot. This tells us a lot of how they manoeuvred, says the archaeologist Espen

Archaeologist Runar Hole with the 1300-year old ski © Aud Hole, Oppland County





The 1300-year old ski with its binding © Vegard Vike, University of Oslo, Museum of Cultural History

Finstad. He adds that the ski was probably used by a hunter moving across the glacier, tracking reindeers or other prey.

In 2015 local craftsmen from Garmo in Lom, Kjell Bengtsen and Reidar Marstein have reconstructed the ski in order to try the design out. The point of the wide modern skis is that they glide on top of the snow. The question raised by the archaeologists has been whether the ski from Reinheimen had the same quality.

Recently the reconstructed skies were tried out by Dag Inge Bakke. The reconstruction was recorded by Espen Finstad and the team behind.

Inspiration of how to ski was found in ancient depictions of skiers from the mountains of Altay in China. Here cave paintings have shown skiers driving reindeer with the same techniques as are used today

among the Chinese from that region. Those skies are also wide.

According to Dag Inge Bakke and the team behind the reconstruction, the challenge appeared to be not to get the skis on edge, but instead keep the snow under the skis. Skiing in the ancient way involves a sharp bend in the knees and letting the body weight rest backwards on the long stick, which must be used as a kind of rudder. The bindings are rather loose demanding a constant bodily vigilance.

Birkebeiner

But the reconstruction has also found wider application: in a grand film on the feat of the “Birkebeiner” in 1206 set to premiere in February 2016, the actors have had to learn how to race downhill using the ancient technique. The skis have been reconstructed by Ole Kristian Ødegård, who

has made his own transition from modern racing skis to the old traditional skis made of birch. He considers himself more of a mountaineer than a skier. As part of the contract with the film project, he has helped to teach the actors, Kristofer Hivju, Jakob Oftebro og Pål Sverre Hagen to walk the talk.

The background of the film is the civil war, which raged in Norway in the beginning of the 13th century and the story of the future king of Norway, Haakon Haakonson and how he was rescued by two famous Birkebeiner skiers, Torstein Skevla and Skjervald Skrukka, who volunteered to carry the child over the mountains to safety at the court of King Inge in Nidaros (Trondheim) in Trøndelag.

Skiing hunter from Osterunda Church in Uppland, Sweden. Source: Wikipedia



The main source of information concerning Haakon and his rescue is the Saga of Haakon Haakonsson (Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar), which was written in the 1260s following his death. Commissioned by his son Magnus, it was written by the Icelandic writer and politician Sturla Þórðarson (nephew of the famous historian Snorri Sturluson). The history of the civil war and the later rule of Haakon Haakonson has played a significant role in the formation of different factions of Norwegian historians since the 19th century, alternately casting the king as a Norwegian hero or an international sell-out.

The Sagas and Cronicles

The claim that Norwegians are born with skies on their feet tend to be true: to be an adroit skier was and is not only important in daily life, but also considered an important and status-filled ability any Norwegian has to master. In the Norwegian royal sagas skiing is mentioned several times as an important skill and the story of the Birkebeiners race across the mountains in a blizzard has been central to the formation of later Norwegian heroes like Birger Strømsheim, one of the legendary heroes who carried out the raid on the heavy water production facility in the Telemark in 1943. Afterwards the small group of six commandoes succeeded in escaping into Sweden by skiing cross-country for more than 250 km.

Another famous skier, who has fed this Norwegian myth, is Palnatoke (alias the Norwegian hero, Heming Aslaksson alias the later Wilhelm Tell). About this mythical hero we are told by Saxo Grammaticus and in the Icelandic Saga of the Jomsvikings that he was pagan who founded Jumla on the Baltic. But he was also a mighty



Kullaberg (Kullen) in Wintertime. © Erik and Pia Sjostedt

warrior and a very proficient skier. The story Saxo tells is this:

“Harold [Bluetooth] boasted of his proficiency in that technique, which the Finns use when passing through snow-covered forests; Toke then dared to brag about his own talents and compare them to those of the king. This forced Toke to prove his capabilities on the mountain of Kullaberg. But what he lacked in practice, he made up for in courage. He went to the upmost top of the mountain and with smooth planks beneath his feet and only a slender staff to support him, set off at a terrifying speed. In breakneck fashion he hurdled down on his skis across sharp rocks; nevertheless he succeeded cold-bloodedly to control them. Neither the great danger nor panic of any art kept him from keeping erect. Any other would have been terrified by the great chasm before even venturing upon this experiment. At the end the skis splintered against the rocks and he was hurled into the air, but this in fact saved his life... he hit the cliff at great speed, the skis broke and thus he ended the run in a safe manner. If not great boulders and deep holes had been in

his way, he would for sure have ended up in the sea below the cliff. Here some sailors picked him up and in his hatred to the king he did nothing to slay the rumours that he had ended up worse than was the case... he decided then to shift his allegiance to the son of the king, Sven [Forkbeard]” (*Saxo Grammaticus, 10: 7, 4. From c 1190 -1200.*)

It is worth remembering that Saxo was part of the entourage of the Archbishop Absalon (1128 - 1201). As such he had probably sailed past Kullen (Kullaberg) any number of times. Passing by, he seems to have wondered what was the truth behind the fairy-tale about Palnatoke and the Norwegian myth of the mighty skier. An echo of these reflections may obviously be found in this vignette from his grand chronicle, *Gesta Danorum* (Acts of the Danes).

Norwegians and Swedes

Today the race is still on between the Scandinavians to decide which country is the mightiest skiing nation of the world. However, now the “fight” is played out between the Swedes and the Norwegians with the Danes left out (no mountains and very little snow in winter). Key events here are the two yearly races, the Swedish Vasaloppet and the Norwegian Birkebeinerrennet. Of these the Vasaloppet is the oldest, founded in 1922 in order to commemorate the escape of the future Swedish king, Gustav Vasa in 1520. The story is that Gustav had ended up in Mora where he tried to enlist the locals in a rebellion against the Danish rule. At first the Dalkarlans refused to join him in his effort to strike back at the Danes and the future king began to flee towards Norway. Later, however, he was caught at Sälen by two Mora broth-

ers on skis. The men in Mora had changed their minds. In 1523, Gustav Vasa was crowned king of Sweden. Thus ended the Danish rule of Sweden. The race covers 90 km cross-country and is held on the first Sunday of March. It runs between the village of Sälen and the town of Mora.

There is no doubt that the Vasaloppet was one of the decisive inspirations for the creation of its Norwegian counterpart, Birkebeinerrennet in 1932, which starts at Rena and ends at Lillehammer. All participants carry a backpack weighing at least 3.5 kg symbolizing the weight of a newborn babe. This distance is 54 km.

In general a Swede wins the Vasaloppet, while a Norwegian captures the throne of the Birkebeinerrennet. However, the last three years, the Norwegians have beaten the Swedes in Dalarna. In Lillehammer, the Swedes have beaten the Norwegians to the post four times, but the last win was in 2009. This year, the competition will be vicious...

Modern Reconstruction

Wish to try out skiing the Viking way? **EVI Ski in Oppdal** has created a modern version of the ancient skis in carbon fibre. Beware, though, physicists have measured the caloric output needed to navigate ancient skies as double that of the modern types. You will not win the races...

SOURCES:

Rekonstruksjon av Reinheimskia

Urgammel Ski testet på Øyerfjellet (with a video presenting the test-run of the re-constructed ski)

Skiing: from its origins to the modern practice of Nordic and alpine disciplines.

Prehistoric Skis from Glacial Ice in Norway. By Espen Finstad, Julian Martinsen, Runar Hole og Lars Pilø. In prep.

From the Lom Ski Festival © Espen Finstad, Oppland County Municipality





Ecce homo Skerium -

At “Land of Legends” in Lejre the quest for the origins of the ski have begun...

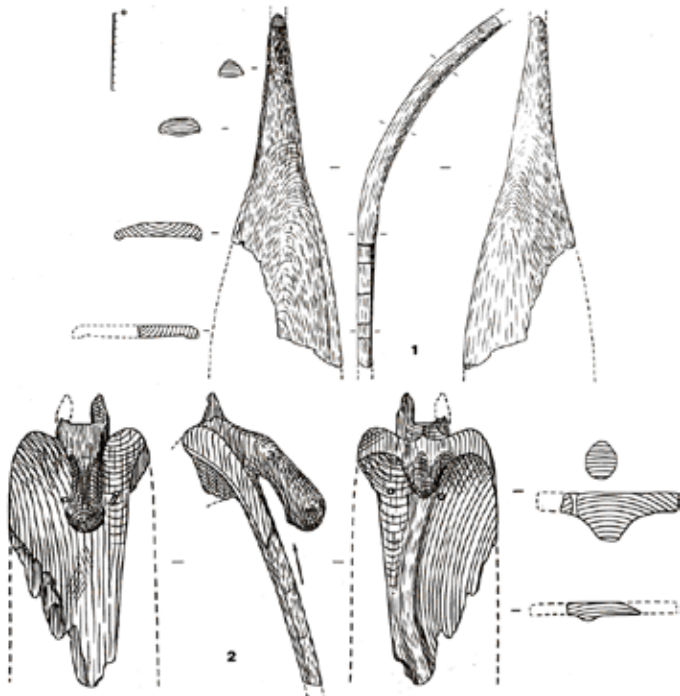
Crossing the Greenland ice sheet in 1888, the Norwegian polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen made skis worldwide famous. Since then wintersports and skiing has become symbols of both a global touristic leisure activity and an advanced technology.

However, what few people know is that skiing is the result of a much longer development spanning over at least 10,000 years and two continents.

Archaeological evidence for skiing and sledging in Northern European and Asiatic regions over the last 15.000 years is well established. More than 200 finds of skies, poles, sledges, sleds and canoes or related rock carving motives, strew the Eurasian continent from Northern England to Eastern Siberia, from Scandinavia to China. In his Greenland-expedition reports, Nansen already attempted to sketch the his-

torical and geographical origins of skiing, by tracking the different names for ‘ski’, linking linguistic origins and ethnic migrations, from Norway back to Central Asia. Some 120 years later, ethnology and archaeo-genetics have surprisingly suggested similar migration ways from the Altay region, both (north)westwards to Scandinavia and Eastern Europe, and eastwards beyond the Bering Sound; all this spanning a period of at least 25.000 years.

However, to understand this apparently simple means of transportation calls for a combination of knowledge about not only ancient wood and tool technologies, but also geographical insights, nivology (science of snow), ethnicity and functionality. Thus, the experimental linking of skis to their technological cousins (travois, sledges, sleds, canoes & snowshoes) might reveal their leading role in prehistoric mi-



The ski finds from Vis, Russia (a.6.800bc), attest to two "schools" for making skis: one as a bow with an elk-head avoiding backsliding, the other as a modern finlandic spring ski with the cut of the wood's annual ring on the snow.

grations through Asia, Europe and maybe, America, after the last Ice Age.

Currently the Centre for Historical-Archaeological Research and Communication Sagnlandet Lejre - **Land of Legends** - is attempting to know where and when hu-

mans first fastened skis under their feet. Part of this consists in implementing archaic woodworking processes with Stone Age tools.

Even if archaeological finds are scarce through times and space, we can compare them with many ancient but still living skiing traditions in subarctic regions, where hunting and reindeer herding depend on these aboriginal peoples' mobility. There, a few factors have paradoxically allowed skiing to survive: 1) snow as a long seasonal obstacle to overcome obstacles against hunting and transhumance; 2) wood as the primary raw material even in the desolate and road less tundra; and 3) a vivid know-how developed through milleniums on efficient fabrication methods and way of using. A pair of thin split or lightly shaped, heat bended planks may be adapted in very different ways to propel humans forward whether on snow, grass, sand or mud.

Revising a nearly 45 years old and outdated typology of skis, the aim of **"The land of Legends"** is to understand is to under-

It may be possible to interpret from the 28.000 years old double grave finds from the Russian Sunghir, showing similar aligned heat bended mammoth bones and a ski pole "basket" or wheel.



stand the emergence of the ski, linking raw materials, tools and function, through regional & historical developments, to nowadays' ski, sled, canoe & snowshoe making traditions. The way forward is through archaeological reconstruction using archaic woodworking processes on prehistoric facsimiles.

Hopefully, the documentation of all these parameters, observations and experiences may contribute to design a “techno-genetic family tree” through times and continents, for this fascinating item and its related cousins, from Central Asia to Norway, from the Ice Age to the Viking Age.

*Laurent Mazet, Archaeologist,
Land of Legends*



Gloves and Mittens From the Past

Mittens, gloves and gauntlets represent a number of different types of protective gear for the hands. Their history has recently been told in a new Dutch book.



*Shepherds with mittens – Nikolaus Stürnhöfer
1515-© Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum*

The word of glove is etymologically as old as the phenomenon: to protect the hands from touching or being touched. The root is Proto-Germanic **ga+*lōfō*, meaning “the whole + palm = hand”. The word Gauntlet stems from French: little glove (“gant plus let= gantelet”). Its roots, though, are also Proto-Germanic **wantuz* (from Proto-Indo-European **wendh-* [“to wind, or

wrap”]); an immediately recognizable derivative of this is the word “vante”, “wante”, “wonte” and other variations known from Old Frisian, Saxon, German etc.

An early example of the use of this word may be found in the Life of St. Columbanus written c. 640 by Jonas of Bobbio. Here we are told of an occasion where the Saint, who had come to dine the monastery of Luxeuil, had

“laid his gloves, which the Gauls [= Franks, i.e. Germans] call Wanti and which he was accustomed to wear when working, on a stone before the door of the refectory. Soon, in the quiet, a thievish raven flew up and carried off one of the gloves in its beak. After the meal, the man of God went out and looked for his gloves. When all were enquiring who had taken them, the holy man said, “There is no one who would venture to touch anything without permission, except the bird which was sent out by Noah and did not return to the ark.” And, he added, that the raven would not be able to feed its young if it did not quickly bring back the stolen object. While the brethren were looking, the raven flew into their midst and brought back in its beak the object which it had basely stolen. Nor did it attempt to fly away, but forgetful of its wild nature, humbly in the sight



The three Magi meeting up with king Herod. Notice they are wearing gloves signifying their just and righteous character as opposed to Herod, whose hands are ungloved while he is sitting with his sword in his hands. From The Murthly Hours c. 1280, fol 25. Source: Pinterest (National Library of Scotland)

of all, awaited its punishment. The holy man commanded it to go. Oh, wonderful power of the eternal Judge who grants such power to His servants that they are glorified both by honors from men and by the obedience of birds!

(From: Medieval Sourcebook: The Life of St. Columban, by the Monk Jonas)

Workers protection

There is no doubt that the primary function of such “Wanti” – or in proper modern English: mittens – were to protect against cold, heat and wear while one was going about one’s business. As such they are – if not a common find – not unusual in archaeological excavations from sites with favourable wet conditions. Such a place is Amsterdam and recent metro-excavations there have yielded an assemblage consist-

ing of twelve leather mittens, four woollen mittens and one woollen glove. To this should be added at least four more leather mittens, five more cloth mittens and two iron gauntlets found elsewhere in the city. Building upon this, Annemarieke Willemssen has recently made an inventory of the more than 100 finds from the whole of the Netherlands. Together with finds from England, France, Germany and Scandinavia she has now published an overview of the different types of handshoes known from both literature, art and archaeological excavations. Published in Dutch it may fortunately be perused together with an essay, which was recently published and which presents her research to English readers.

Symbolic Artefacts

According to this, mittens, gloves and gauntlets took many forms and had many functions of which practical ones were only a few. While mittens were meant to keep hands warm in the cold climate of Northern Europe or protecting them when working with rough materials or work-processes, gloves with all fingers separated were symbolically loaded artefacts in Europe from as far back as it is possible to follow their history.

Gloves Signalling Justice

Already in Carolingian and Ottonian Europe royals wore ceremonial gloves while expensing justice. Later in the 10th century this custom was introduced amongst bishops, and some of the earliest ceremonial gloves have been found in the graves of bishops and kings, signalling their right to exert personal power over their surroundings. We know of this complex symbolism from a number of old sayings – it is in his hands now, he will take hand, the

gloves have come off, to be handled with kid gloves, rule with a velvet glove, rule with an iron hand (aka gauntlet) etc. Other such idioms can be found in other European languages. Central to these idioms is the general idea that the glove signifies a more judicial and less violent approach than if the “gloves have come off”.

Gifts Signalling Submission

It is probably in this light we should understand the tradition of gifting gloves to rulers, basically asking for justice, mercy and perhaps leniency – a motive, which we may find beautifully rendered in the parable above featuring Columbanus and the Raven, where it is obvious the bird solicits the Saint for a blessing by gifting him as “launegeld” with his own gloves. In the same vein, we may explain the use of gloves among princely bishops, although

another explanation often offered might be the need to signal cleanliness while handling the liturgical objects. However, then the prerogative to carry gloves would not have been limited to bishops. It is more probable that bishops in the 10th and 11th century began to mimic the use of Royal Insignia, hence their adoption of gloves as part of their liturgical vestments.

Another situation, where the glove might stand in a pars pro toto for the hand was in connection with marriages, gifts between betrothed and – curiously enough – when soliciting extramarital liaisons. As is well known “to be hand in glove” means suiting one another naturally, to “work hand in glove” to do something in close collaboration. Gloves as precious pre-marital and betrothal gifts have been known from all over Europe and in a wide variety of historical and folkloristic contexts.

Mitten from Southwark London 15th century





Knitted liturgical mittens from Spain, 15th century. © Victoria & Albert Museum. Source: Pinterest

Annemarieke Willemsen tells the story of a number of such gifts in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, and thus provides an intimate picture of the practical and symbolic uses of gloves in the period from which we have significant archaeological finds to render materiality to the discussion.

Practical mittens and elaborate gloves

It stands to reason that mittens and gloves thus come in all sizes, materials and colours suitable for practical, ceremonial and symbolic purposes. It is exactly this variety, which Annemarieke Willemsen presents in her new book and which makes it a precious new publication to be studied

by “living historians”, reenactors as well as archaeologists and cultural historians.

SOURCE:

The Geoff Egan Memorial Lecture 2013 Taking up the glove: finds, uses and meanings of gloves, mittens and gauntlets in western Europe, c. AD 1300–1700

By Annemarieke Willemsen
In: Post-Medieval Archaeology, Volume 49, Issue 1, 2015

Honderden. Van hand tot hand – handschoenen en wanten in de Nederlanden voor 1700

By Annemarieke Willemsen
Spa uitgevers B.V. 2015



Knitted Mittens from the 13th century

Estonia is known for its very old tradition for using knitted mittens for prestigious gifts. The oldest fragment is from the 13th century.

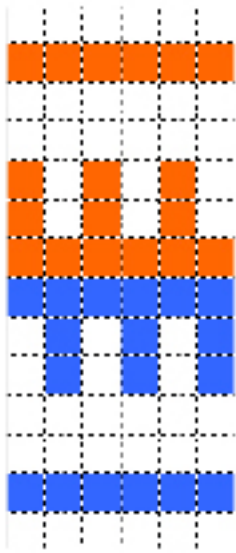
In 1949 a cemetery from the 13th century in Jouga near the northern coast of Estonia was excavated. One grave, dated to 1238-1299, contained a very precious find: a fragment of what appears to be a knitted mitten. Until recently the find was only published in German; (however an English discussion of the singular piece **may be found [here](#).**)

The find is singular in so far as most of the other fragments of mittens from Estonia, Finland, and Western Russia (Novgorod) appears to have been made with needle-binding technique, also called knotless netting. However, this fragment has definitely been knitted.

Knitting is generally believed to have been invented in Northern Africa and exported via Southern Italy and Spain into Northern Europe via the crusaders. The unique find in Estonia is believed to reflect the import of the technique via the German Order, which conquered the Baltic area in the 13th and 14th century. However, another route might be the vibrant trade from the Middle East through Novgorod and into the Baltic. Until now, the earliest European knitted textiles were found in the royal burials in Las Huelgas in Burgos.

Mittens in Estonia

Mittens played a very important role in the traditional folklore in Estonia. First of all



they signified fertility. When a man wished to court a woman, his mother would send a bottle of spirits to the family of the girl. If the bottle was returned empty and with a pair of mittens attached, he was said to be on. Rings were later exchanged, but with gloves on! Apart from that, mittens were placed in sheep-sta-

bles to further fertility, carried in the belt even in summertime and – not least – used for gifts. At burials the deceased wore mittens, like the ones, from which the knitted fragment stems.

The Fragment

The mittens were made of white wool and with a pattern made from dyed wool. The blue was dyed with indigo, while the red was dyed from madder. There is some confusion as to whether the fragment had been started with rows of purl. The “reconstruction” in the featured photo was made with an ordinary functional rib (practical for pushing up under the sleeve of a child’s jacket). The gauge in the fragment was 2.5 x 3 rows pr. cm.

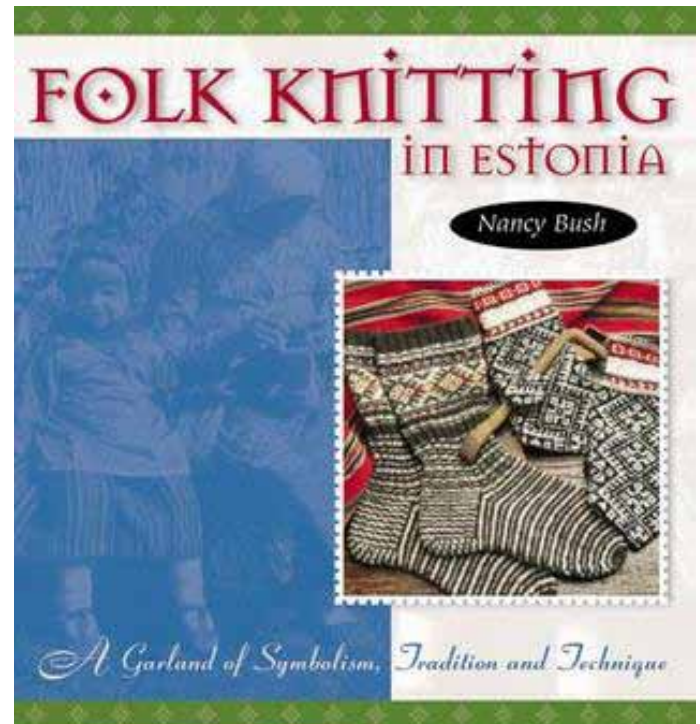
SOURCE:

Totenhandschuhe im Bestattungsbrauchtum der Esten und anderer Ost-seefinnen

By: Juri Peets

In: Fennoscandia archaeological IV (1987)

READ MORE:



Folk Knitting in Estonia. Tradition and Technique

By Nancy Bush

Interweave Press 2000

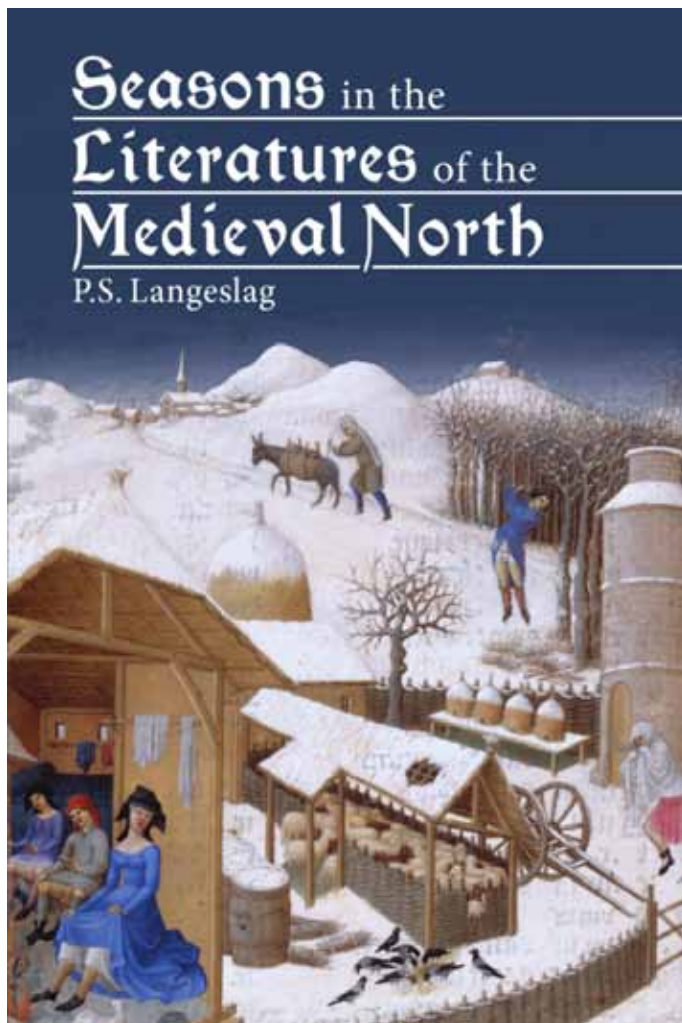
ISBN 1883010438



BOOK REVIEW:

Seasons in the Literatures of the Medieval North

It is a curious fact that people in Northern Europe more and more experience that spring is a time of the past. It feels as if winter now-a-days transcends into summer in the twinkling of an eye. It appears the same was the case in Medieval Europe



Seasons in the Literatures of the Medieval North

Paul S. Langeslag
Boydell & Brewer 2015
ISBN: 9781843844259

During my lifetime the beech trees have moved back their leafing at least two to three weeks. It used to be around the 5th of May, said to be nature celebrating the

surrender of Nazi Germany in 1945. Today, it happens around mid April, which is obviously a sure sign of the climate changes we are experiencing right now. However, accompanying this shift is another change of more profound character: it seems as if spring akin to a gradual softening of the weather has totally disappeared. Instead we seem to experience a rather brisk seasonal shift from winter and directly into summer. In short we are left with two seasons in stead of four; which a delightful new book tells us was also the case in the Middle Ages; at least in Northern Europe.

The book – Seasons in the Literatures of the Medieval North - outlines the narrative and psychological functions of seasonal settings in the literatures of medieval England and Iceland from the 8th to the 14th centuries. In this tour de force readers are invited to reflect upon both the material realities and figurative and literary functions of the seasonal spaces inhabited by poets and listeners/readers of such disparate works as Beowulf, Gawain and the Green Knight and the Norse sagas.

This is a book about the psychology of landscapes and seasons unfolding as set-pieces for the monsters of our world and how we came to conquer them through performing the seasons as rituals. As such the title is perhaps a bit misleading: this



From the 17th century Icelandic manuscript AM 738 4to, now in the care of the Árni Magnússon Institute in Iceland

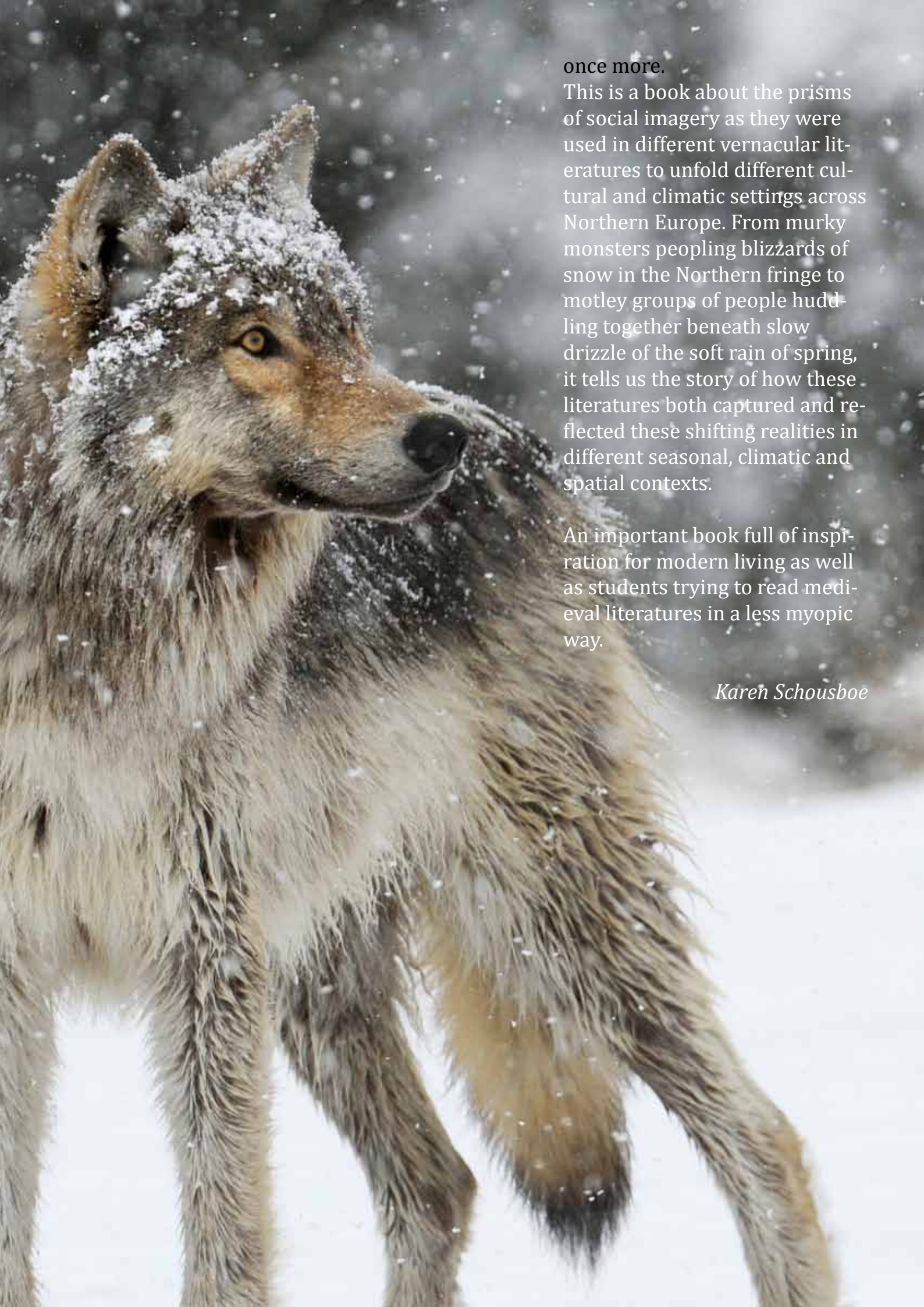
book may be about the seasonal mindscapes of yesteryear; in fact, though, it deals primarily with the idea of Winter, which the literature captures so eloquently. Thus we move faultlessly through the cold and icy waters and snowy landscapes where monsters are lurking, and into the shallow warmth spread in the halls by roaring fires. Through this literary but also cultural historical movement, we sense a different world, where winter with all its fear and mourning will inevitably creep in upon us. These were the predominant Anglo-Saxon and Norse literary conventions, which came to conquer a wild landscape in the minds of people well-versed in the more folkloristic undergrowth of practical day-to-day living in such hostile environments.

Is there a blissful summer? Oh yes, but it definitely seems to be located in a much later period: summer adventures are as Langeslag writes a strictly late medieval and romantic feature famously brought forth by “The sweet showers of April piercing to the root the dryness of March” (Chaucer in his prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*). However, at that time climate was

decisively changing into the Little Ice-Age and four seasons became both the sensed and literary convention, which we have lived with for so long - and which some of us may mourn. If the cuckoo came to herald summer at this point in history, it is perhaps significant that it seemed to have missed out the opportunity the last few summers, where I live!

This book is about a strange world, we might once more be on the brink to inhabit; a world, where the limits of living is gradually moving north together with the climatic shifts we are experiencing. This is anew a binary world where winter and summer stands apart with two major festivals domesticating the seasons and our living space: Yule-tide (Christmas) and the bonfires of St. John at the height of summer.

Perhaps - as glaciers melt and barley might once again be grown in the South of Greenland - we shall curiously no longer seek out the heat of the desert, but rather the occasional ray of sunlight piercing the darkness of winter descending upon us



once more.

This is a book about the prisms of social imagery as they were used in different vernacular literatures to unfold different cultural and climatic settings across Northern Europe. From murky monsters peopling blizzards of snow in the Northern fringe to motley groups of people huddling together beneath slow drizzle of the soft rain of spring, it tells us the story of how these literatures both captured and reflected these shifting realities in different seasonal, climatic and spatial contexts.

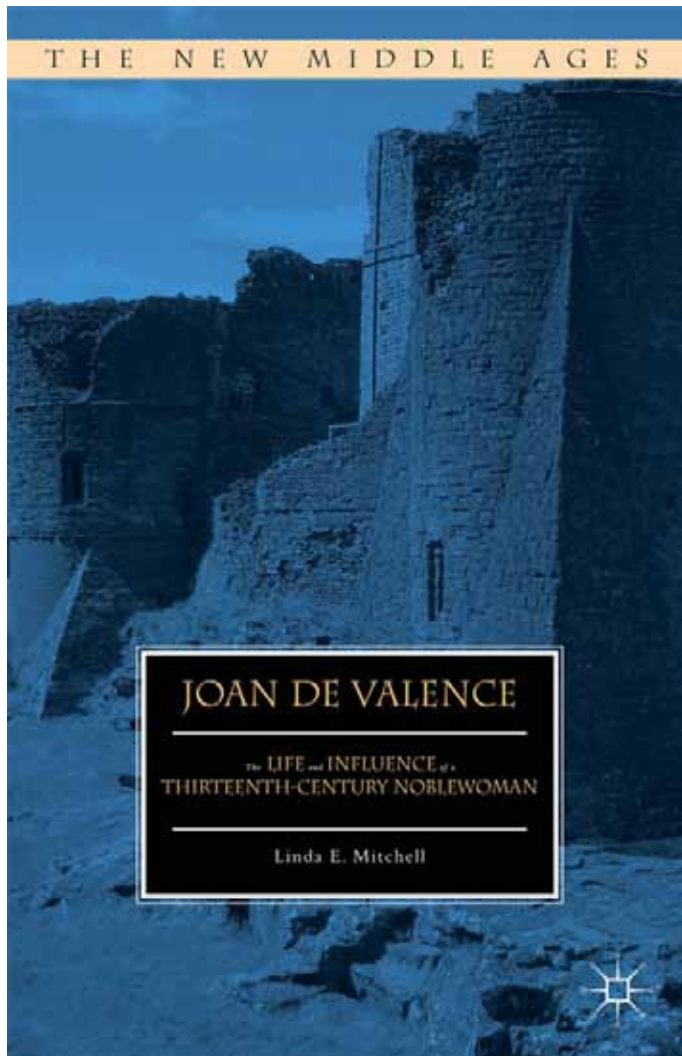
An important book full of inspiration for modern living as well as students trying to read medieval literatures in a less myopic way.

Karen Schousboe

REVIEW:

Joan de Valence. The Life and Influence of a Thirteenth Century Noblewoman.

Joan de Valence c. 1230 – 1307 was a great heiress with powerful roles to play as wife, mother and head of a princely household. New book tells the story



Joan de Valence

The Life and Influence of a Thirteenth Century Noblewoman.

By Linda E. Mitchell

Palgrave Macmillan 2015

ISBN: 9780230392007

Joan de Valence was a granddaughter of William Marshall, 1st Earl of Pembroke and Isabel de Clare. In spite of a large number of sons no male heirs would be regis-

tered in the third generation and in 1240s the enormous wealth of the Marshalls ended up being divided by the descendants of his daughters. This made Joan de Valence a very wealthy heiress and ward of the king, who married her off to his half brother, William de Valence. Her portion included the castle and lordship of Pembroke, an earldom in Wexford in Ireland plus scattered properties – towns, honours, and castles – spread across Wales, England and Ireland.

In the general biographies of Joan of Valence she has been seen through two skewed lenses. First of all, she was married to one of the *bêtes noires* of Matthew of Paris, William de Valence. Throughout his life William was constantly loyal to his half brother Henry III and later his nephew, Edward I. As such, he was on the king's side in the Second Barons' War against the faction of Simon de Montfort, and took part in the final battle at Evesham. Further, she was a woman and thus generally viewed from a misogynistic point of view. Thus, the couple early on received a bad press, which later slipped into the official history writing of the 19th and 20th centuries. While Simon de Montfort and Eleanor of Leicester have received a number of biographies, the Valences have not been so fortunate; this, in spite of the fact that their personal history and political roles definitely merit much more attention.



Valence Casket © Victoria & Albert Museum.
Source: Pinterest

In a fascinating new book Linda E. Mitchell has presented us with at least half of the story, a biography of Joan of Valence. From her we learn about a woman of decisive charm, much wit and not least vast resources, who successfully juggled her roles as wife, mother and lady of the manor(s) in a time wrought with civil war. Later, as a widow, we see her enact the role of magnate deftly weaving a network of politics through alliances with family and friends. It appears, even Edward I was slightly afraid of her political acumen (p. 137).

Of course the book relies heavily on the fact that there exists fragments of the household roll of Joan de Valence, countess of Pembroke, which details her life in the final months of her marriage and her first year as a widow. Among other things these accounts number the very extensive correspondence, she upheld with a huge number of friends and dependents, while organizing the day-to-day life of the household of a grand lady responsible for her grown-up children and not least grandchildren.

It is through this correspondence we get a glimpse of what it took to get the economy

of a great household to work. But we also get a very fine glimpse of her travels at this point in her life, detailing routes, which regularly covered stretches of 30 – 40 km pr. day in rumbling carriage. Impressive for a lady at the age of 70! (There are maps in an appendix)

But Mitchell has also deftly sieved through a vast array of unpublished sources as well as published chronicles, rolls, registers etc. Through this we are presented with a probably complete gazetteer of her many litigations concerning her rights and lands.

Medieval biographies have to balance between micro-history and prosopography, writes Mitchell in the introduction (p. 4) and lists the general scholarly reserves against these two genres. Microhistory works by embedding the person in his or hers culture and may thus end up “depersonalizing” the subject. Prosopographies, on the other hand, may include so many “persons” that sight is also lost. However, medieval biographies are notoriously difficult to write, because so few traces remain of any person. For instance, we do not know – although we can guess - where Joan of Valence spent her childhood or how she was brought up. Neither do we get more than a couple of glimpses of her relationship with her husband. And we don’t know where she died and was finally buried (although Mitchell does present us with a carefully worked out argument for her death at Goodrich).

We do have to weave, claims Mitchell and proceeds. Does she succeed? In general, the answer must be yes. We are given a deftly woven portrait of a particularly successful woman and what it took to keep it all together in times of war (an exiled husband), sorrow (death of her children) and widowhood (old age). However, the

biography definitely leans in the prosopographical direction. The microhistorical approach has to a certain extent to be teased out by the reader.

Reading the book thus left me with a number of questions, answers to which I had to go “hunting” elsewhere. For instance:

- We learn that she was probably personally active in designing Goodrich Castle, where she obviously felt at home in her old age and we get glimpses of the castle plus some photos taken by the author. A groundplan to make sense of the place has not been included, though. (Some of this probably reflect back to the publisher, though).
- We learn about her Christmas feast in 1296 (p. 204), where herring, salmon, congers, cheese and pottage were served. But in a footnote, we learn, that

this was much less sumptuous than that served by Elizabeth de Burgh in 1349 – 50. In what way?

- We can read extensively about the construction of the tomb of her husband and its use of enamelled decoration and that it echoes that of the so-called Valence Casket. But again: in what way?

Perhaps these remarks are unfair. Very often, we get microhistories of the “daily life” of noble ladies from the Middle Ages without any real sense of what it took personally and politically to keep it all together. This is definitely offered here, and we should be thankful that Joan de Valence has been fleshed out as a deeply political person engaged in trying to keep her family afloat.

It is just this: more will have more... a highly recommendable book.

Karen Schousboe

Goodrich Castle with the Solar in the upper right corner of photo. Source: Pinterest





WHEN HISTORY MATTERS:

Taharrush Jama'i – and Charivari

In the years leading up to the Arabic Spring, sexual harassment was widely used in Egypt as a political instrument to prevent women to gain access to public spaces and rallies. At first the phenomena did not play a significant role in the international media. However, after an instance of an Egyptian taharrush jama'i (also called taharrus gamea) attack at CBS reporter Lara Logan, a prominent female journalist, who was molested by hundreds of men in Cairo's Tahrir Square, it became part of the general lore of Western Women travelling in the Middle East to avoid "open spaces".

New Year's Eve, this specific type of sexual harassment finally became mainstream in European media, when more than a 1000 refugees and illegal migrants attacked and molested a very large number of young

girls in the central square in Cologne. As of now, more than 500 females have lodged a complaint with the police, including two allegations of rape. Afterwards, it has become apparent that the phenomena have played out for several years at musical festivals all over Europe. However, in several instances (not least in Sweden) police and politicians have colluded in order not to feed what they have characterised as the xenophobic feelings of the rabble. It appears this has also been the case in several other German situations.

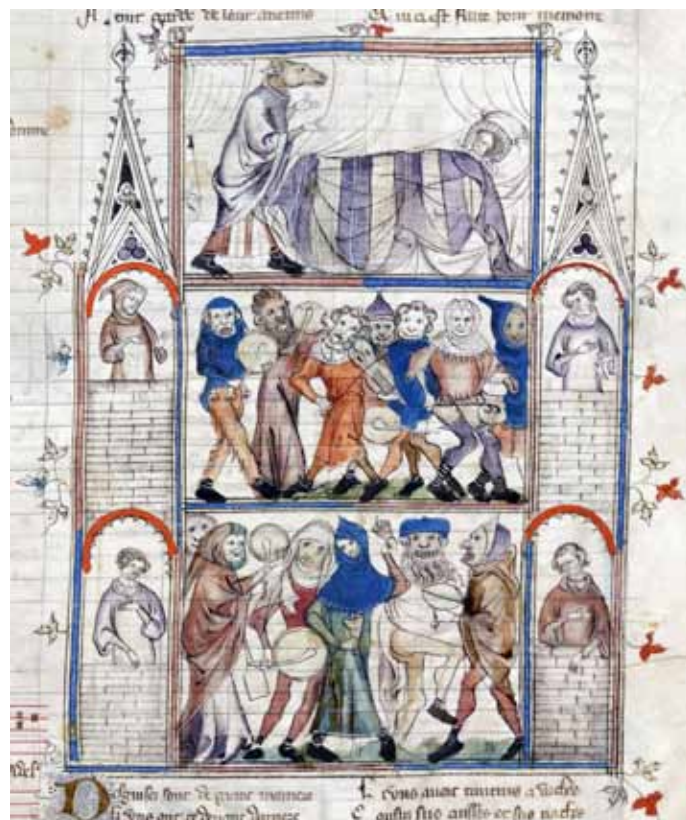
What has been missed in this discussion, however, is the political agenda built into the phenomenon of "Taharrush jama'i". In the aftermath of Cologne, the events there have primarily been described as the result of sexually starved young men, growing up in cultures, where girls as a rule are

kept sequestered until the time, when a marriage can be successfully negotiated. Coming to Europe, it thus appears that girls are offering themselves up for the taking. Not knowing the law of the land, these young men go on a rampage.

Comparing the events in Cologne with those in Cairo must, however, leave us with a very uneasy feeling: that this might also be a political instrument used to make a statement about the way of life of ordinary Europeans and European girls. As such, the acts of violence are the mirror image of the sexual harassment, which Muslim girls often experience in public spaces and in schools, when gangs of young Muslim men try to “police” them, if they are not veiled or otherwise properly dressed according to the law of Sharia. The difference is of course that these girls do not complain to the police or their teachers as did the German girls, who were molested in Cologne.

The Charivari

Such customs are of course not unknown in a European context. The medieval and early modern phenomenon of the Charivari springs to mind. Charivari (also called “rough music”) is the term for a French folk custom in which the community gave a noisy, discordant mock serenade, while pounding on pots and pans, at the home of newlyweds. The loud, public ritual evolved into a form of social coercion used to force an as-yet-unmarried couple to wed or to voice opposition to heterogeneous marriages when elderly men had scored one of the younger women. Villages also used charivari in cases of adulterous relationships, wife beaters, and unmarried mothers. In some cases, the community disapproved of any remarriage by older widows or widowers.



Depiction of charivari, early 14th century. From the Roman de Fauvel, fol 34 r. © BNF, Français 146

The difference, however, is that while the Charivari was a medieval practice, now long forgotten except by medieval geeks, the modern harassment of Taharrush jama'i seems to be here to stay.

SOURCE:

The Reasons of Misrule: Youth Groups and Charivaris in sixteenth-century France. By Natalie Zemon Davis In: Past and Present 50 (1971) pp. 49 -75

“When She Stands Among Men”: Sexual Harassment of Women at Political Protests in Cairo, January 2011 – August 2013.

By Serena Hollmeyer Taylor, Amy Tan, Phoebe Sloane, Maggie Tiernan, and Faiqa Mahmood
In: The Fletcher School’s online journal on Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization 2014.