

**CHILDREN**

**OF ASH**

**AND ELM**

**A HISTORY OF THE  
VIKINGS**

**NEIL PRICE**

Sámi homeland today, known as Sápmi, ignores the geopolitical boundaries of the Nordic countries and stretches across the northern areas of Norway, Sweden, and Finland, with a small extension into Russia on the Kola Peninsula. In the Viking Age, however, the Sámi ranged much farther south. Burials conducted with what would elsewhere clearly be understood as Sámi rituals, the characteristic remains of circular tent encampments with central stone hearths, and isolated finds of objects decorated with art styles common among the Sámi have been found around Trøndelag county in the Norwegian central region and even just to the north of Oslo, and in central Sweden they were present in Uppsala. Identity is a more complex matter than patterns of ornament or the burial rites of the dead, but in combination the mass of data is compelling, especially contrasted with the surrounding settlements of equally typical 'Norse' type.

Some Sámi herded domesticated reindeer (the animal called caribou in North America) and used every part of the beast, including its milk for daily sustenance and ultimately its meat and the raw materials provided by its body. Others hunted and trapped for food and furs, or fished the rivers, lakes, and coasts. The Sámi were people of the mountains, as in their popular image today, but also of the waterways, the boreal taiga forests, and the tundra to the north.

Above all, the Sámi were people of the drum—the sacred instrument that was the primary tool of their *noaidi*, or what anthropologists would call a shaman. Their spiritual beliefs and practices were deeply connected to those of other circumpolar cultures, and differed markedly from those of the Scandinavians. In the early modern period when missionaries tried to convert the Sámi to Christianity, often by brutal force and the intentional destruction of their ancient spiritual values, a word was coined to represent the rapidly fading past of the old ways, encapsulating traditions that went back to the Viking Age and beyond: *goabdesájgge* (in the Lule Sámi language), the 'Drum Time'. Throughout the

narratives of this book, it should always be kept in mind that the time of the Vikings was also the time of the drums.

Viking-Age Scandinavia thus supported two distinctive populations living in close proximity and in relative cooperation—occasionally in the same settlements or even households—but following their own ways of life and employing substantially different kinds of material culture. The Sámi seem to have taken little active role in the political consolidation of the North, although they were integrated in its economy. However, support from their communities in the forests and mountains may have been a critical factor in maintaining stability and a grip on power.

In Norway, the early polities centred on fjords, with a view towards control of the sea lanes, and on the small strips of farmland along the valleys. In Sweden, their areas were larger around the central and southern plains and lakes, but smaller and concentrated on the river mouths in the north, straddling the water routes down from the mountains. In Denmark—a region both spatially smaller and flatter, and also closer to the great power blocs of the Continent—the fledgling polities were larger still, following the shadowy push towards faster political cohesion that can be sensed there earlier in the Iron Age.

These realms in miniature seem to have been conceptualised as kingdoms, but very small ones to modern eyes. A key factor in the new structures of power was the right to own land, which in turn hinged on how that land was obtained. In the social order that rose after the 'Fimbulwinter', land tenure seems to have been newly concentrated into the hands of the few rather than the many and then parcelled out in a form of tenancy. Absentee landholding seems to have begun well before the dust veil in 536, but clearly accelerated afterwards. A transition of this kind may have occurred by force, or perhaps vacant farms—empty because their inhabitants were either dead or gone—were simply appropriated, another context in which the passage of arms may have provided its own legitimacy.