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Ann Christys. *Vikings in the South: Voyages to Iberia and the Mediterranean*. Studies in Early Medieval History. London: Bloomsbury, 2015. xiv + 134 pp. ISBN 978-1-47421-375-2.

By Edel Porter

Ann Christys is a historian whose research to date has focused on relations between Christians and Muslims in medieval Iberia, particularly during the periods of the Umayyad Emirate and the Caliphate of Córdoba (756-1031). She has previously published on the Viking presence in al-Andalus (Christys 2012), and in this volume she extends the scope of her study to Viking activity in the rest of Iberia and its environs, an area which the author feels has been largely overlooked by modern scholars. Attributing this neglect, at least in part, to the inaccessibility of the Arabic sources, in her book Christys sets out to remedy the situation by means of a thorough revision of the primary material.

Reinhart Dozy was the first modern scholar to investigate the Arabic sources relating to Viking activity in the Iberian peninsula, which he assembled and translated under the title “Les Normands en Espagne”, and first published in the enlarged and revised second edition of his *Recherches sur l’histoire et la littérature d’Espagne pendant le moyen âge* in 1860 (not the 3rd edition of 1881, as Christys states) According to Christys, this text was the basis for all later collections and translations of the sources, adding: “[a]lthough later scholars added a few details, Dozy’s work represented the state of scholarship on Vikings in Iberia for more than a hundred years” (3). It would have been helpful if the author had offered some further elaboration on this remark, or indeed a review on the quality or scope of Dozy’s text, and subsequent research on the topic. As it is, the reader is left to assume many shortcomings and inadequacies in the translations and research to date, although Christys herself makes extensive use of many of them, in particular Jón Stefánsson’s English translation of Dozy, as well as Alexander Seippel’s *Rerum Normannicarum Fontes Arabici* (1896-1928), an edition of Arabic texts relating to the ‘Normans’ which was later translated into Norwegian by Birkeland (1954). Indeed, she specifically directs the reader to these collections for longer versions of the extracts she cites. However, it gradually becomes clear that Christys does not take issue with the translations or editions *per se*, but rather the way in which scholars with no knowledge of Arabic have accepted the Dozy version uncritically, resulting in the perpetuation of episodes and anecdotes which have little or no historical basis.

One such myth is addressed in the book’s second chapter, a theory first proposed by Lévi-Provençal (1950-53), “that a group of Vikings who had been defeated at Seville in 844 did not sail away, but settled in al-Andalus to make cheese”. The sole evidence for this idea comes from a statement attributed to one Ibn Ḥabīb (d. 853), who stipulated that, while “it is not harmful to eat the cheese of the *Rūm* [Byzantines, or more likely Christians in general] and so forth of the enemy among the Peoples of the Book. [But] one must not eat the cheese of the *Majūs*” (20-21). *Majūs* (lit. ‘fire-worshippers’) was originally used to describe Zoroastrians in Persia, and was possibly associated with the Vikings on the basis of a misunderstanding that fire-worship formed part of the Norse religion. However, as Christys explains, although the term *Majūs* was very often used to

refer to Vikings, it had a much wider semantic range, and could also be used to denote non-Muslims, or simply pagans in general, which is most likely the sense meant here.

Another story Christys gives little credence to, is that of al-Ghāzal's diplomatic mission to the court of a *Majūs* king and queen in 844. She concurs with Lévi-Provençal (1937), that this was a fictitious episode probably modelled on a very similar account of another mission by al-Ghāzal at the court of the Emperor in Constantinople. In her discussion, however, it is strange that Christys neglects to reference Sara Pons Sanz's extended analysis of the episode (2004, cited in Christys's bibliography), especially as their arguments correspond closely. For example, Pons Sanz identifies the queen's freedom to accept al-Ghāzal's courtship and frequent visits, as one of the "ethnographic motifs" used about westerners by Muslim writers: "the most frequent *topoi* are the lack of jealousy amongst men and the sexual freedom of (un)married women" (19). Christys similarly observes that "[the author] shows *Majūs* women as the object of a textual strategy housing both barbarian and female otherness, in which sexual freedom and the lack of jealousy of their men were *topoi*" (27). As we have noted above, Christys's dismissal of 'derivative' material in favour of the primary sources is made clear from the outset, but an overly rigid adherence to this principle leads her to neglect (or ignore) the small but growing body of very respectable research on the subject, which ought to be acknowledged especially when it coincides with her own conclusions.

One interesting observation Christys makes in her analysis of the Arabic and Latin sources is how little they differ in their characterization of the Vikings. Apart from the nomenclature, which in Latin reflects the Vikings' provenance rather than their religious otherness (*Normanni*, *Nordomannorum*, etc., and the mutated form, *Lothomanni*, *Leodemanes*), neither the Muslim or Christian writers demonstrate any interest in the precise nature or culture of the Vikings, who are almost without exception presented as an "extremely cruel" people who come to Spanish shores to ravage, plunder and lay waste with "slaughter and fire". However, as Christys repeatedly emphasizes, these accounts were often written hundreds of years after the fact, and it is essential to read them bearing in mind the context in which they were composed. It is likely that the ferocity and cruelty of the Vikings as depicted in the early chronicles, was later exaggerated to facilitate domestic political agendas; her fascinating account of the evolution of the sources clearly demonstrates an increasing interest in rewriting the stories of the Vikings attacks to aggrandize and glorify the heroic deeds of Christian and Arabic kings and leaders.

Christys's reading of the Latin and Arabic sources within their respective cultural backgrounds is one of real strengths of this book. She is scrupulous in her examination of the primary material, sifting through the sometimes bewilderingly complex genealogy of the Arabic sources with a sharply critical eye. Carefully setting each text within its historical and literary framework, she investigates the traditions in which accounts of the Vikings have been set down, taking into account factors such as the reputation of a historian in his own time, the reliability of his source material and the influence of domestic politics in the writing and rewriting of history. The result is a pared-down, factual account, stripped of legendary and anecdotal embellishment, and political bias, which can be summarized as follows:

In 844 Vikings raided the Galician coast, but having been repulsed, went south attacking first Lisbon and later Seville, where they were defeated by the "Saracens". In

a second expedition, which took place over the period 859-861, the northern coast was again attacked, and later Seville, where once again the Vikings met with stiff opposition. On leaving Seville they made for the coast of Morocco, and possibly sailed through the Straits of Gibraltar to raid the Mediterranean coast before returning to Francia. A third wave of Viking incursions include raids on Lisbon, Seville (c. 964-966), Galicia and the city of Santiago (c. 968), and further attacks on the Andalusian coasts (c. 971-972). As to the nature and detail of the activity, much can be speculated, although very little is certain. For instance, it does appear that the Vikings laid siege to Lisbon in 844 and burned the great mosque in Seville in 858, but the records provide conflicting evidence. One significant difference between the presence of the Vikings in Iberia and other destinations is that practically no material evidence whatsoever survives to corroborate the written sources. Although charters document the erection of fortifications to defend cities from Viking attacks, no traces of these remain, or at least they cannot be unequivocally attributed to such a motivation. The only unambiguously medieval Scandinavian artefact to be found in Spain to date, is a small carved bone casket kept at the church of San Isidro, León (illustrated on the front cover of the book), but the provenance of this article is undocumented. However, the paucity of archaeological evidence may simply reflect the fact that very little excavation work or research in this area has been carried out so far, and that much is yet to be discovered. The recent discovery (in 2014) of a number of flint ballasts and stone anchors washed up on a beach in O Vicedo, Galicia, if verified as being of Scandinavian origin, may have significant consequences for our knowledge of Viking activity in the area.

The concluding chapter, 'From Charter and Chronicle to Saga', focuses on Viking activity in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. For this period, the peninsular sources are few and laconic, although some interesting detail is to be found, such as a charter which records a father in northern Portugal selling property to ransom his three daughters from Vikings in 1015. Other recorded attacks include one on the castle of Vermudo, Portugal, in 1016, and the capture of Barbastro by 'an army of *Ārdumāniyīn*' (Norman Vikings from France) in 1064. The King's sagas and other Medieval Scandinavian sources also record a number of expeditions to *Galizuland* and *Spánn* around this time; Olaf Haraldsson/St. Olaf (here Christys does not make clear that the period 1015-1030 refers to Olaf's reign, not his life-span), King Sigurd 'the Crusader', and Earl Rognvald of Orkney, are all said to have stopped off in Iberia, where they did "a little looting" before continuing on their journey to the Mediterranean and beyond. While Christys is sceptical about the historical veracity of some of these accounts, pointing to a lack of corroborating evidence as well as a suspicious literariness, Helio Pires has recently argued convincingly for historically verifiable elements in one narrative of the expedition of King Sigurd (2014), and a more detailed examination of Norse accounts in an Iberian context is an area which certainly merits further investigation.

Overall, Christys's study shows the Vikings to have been a worrying, but relatively minor menace, and just one of a number of pirate bands that threatened the coastline of Iberia during the Middle Ages. While their attacks certainly caused a lasting impression, it is difficult to assess their true impact, at least from a material point of view. The evidence (such as it is) focuses far more on the response to the attacks, rather than the attackers themselves, and the most enduring legacy of the Vikings in Iberia is in the form of a stereotypical trope which was manipulated by Christian and Muslim historians alike. Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that the portrayal of the Vikings

as a ravaging, pillaging, “extremely cruel” people, is probably a fairly accurate reflection of the experience of medieval Iberians who came into contact with them.

In conclusion, Christys's expertise in Latin and Arabic opens fresh perspectives on a topic, which, as she notes, has for far too long remained in the margins or footnotes of general histories of the Viking World. Her book provides a fascinating insight into the way the story of the Vikings in Iberia evolved, and was perceived, within the Christian and Muslim cultures of the peninsula, and her meticulous examination of the Arabic records no doubt represents a significant contribution to medieval Iberian historiography. However, despite her helpful “Glossary of Histories and Historians” (Appendix I), in general I feel that the author has tried to pack too much detail from the primary sources into this short volume, resulting in a style that can be dense, laconic, and difficult to follow. A brief summary of the historical background, for example, would have been useful for the non-specialist reader (see Pires 2011, for a good overview), as would some more maps illustrating the boundaries of the territories concerned. That said, this is a very informative, scholarly book, which is sure to become a landmark in the field, and left me, at least, wanting more.

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