The wish to identify certain artifacts with certain ethnic groups has led to a stereotypical use of ethnic concepts like Viking, Slav, and Rus.1 But is it really possible to discern ethnicity in the archaeological material?

In cultural encounters, it might not always have been important to uphold ethnic boundaries. There is the possibility that people moving from one place to another sought to take on new roles or belong to new groups. In this article, I suggest that migrating people can take on a new, transmigrant identity that allows them to keep in touch with both an old and a new ethnic identity. I also argue that we should take a fresh look at the archaeological artifacts that were described as “hybrid” as early as 1914.2

However, many earlier works seem to take concepts like Vikings, Varangians, Rus’, and Slavs for granted, even though it is not easy to define who they were. Several excellent presentations6 of artifacts, archaeological sites, and historical sources concerning Viking Age contacts between Scandinavia and Eastern Europe lack a deeper analysis of what ethnicity really is and how it is related to the origin of artifacts.

There is no way of telling how an individual’s identity changes, but the material objects surrounding migrating people are bound to change. Historical sources suggest that Kievan Rus’ was founded by a people called Rhos, understood to be Scandinavians. I think that the idea that Kievan Rus’ started as a multi-ethnic society, marked by generations of migration and trading contacts, needs to be explored much further than it has been so far in archaeological research.7

Written sources
Attacks by Norsemen against Constantinople, as well as various Western European cities, are examples of events that often were dramatic enough to be written down in contemporary chronicles. There are several accounts of interaction across the Baltic Sea and the Eastern European river routes, as well as encounters between what seem to have been Scandinavians and people from the Frankish, Byzantine, and Arabian empires.8 However, peaceful cultural encounters might not always have been recorded by chroniclers. The first meeting between two cultures often passes unmentioned in written sources. Nor does it always leave...
physical traces in the form of archaeological evidence. A people called Rhos is mentioned in the Frankish Annals of St. Bertin in 839 AD and several times during the ninth and tenth centuries in Byzantine sources. Furthermore, Rus is the term generally used in Arabic sources to refer to what seem to have been Scandinavians. Ibn Fadlan’s account of Rus in the city of Bulgar on the Volga in the year 922 is perhaps the best-known example, but there are several other Arabic sources that mention Rus.13

The term Varangians is used in a slightly different way, apparently to denote a professional and not only an ethnic identity.14 Byzantine sources mention several sieges of Constantinople by Rus’ armies, often followed by peace treaties. But Byzantine emperors were also known to recruit soldiers among neighboring peoples, usually those of the Caucasus and Black Sea regions. Among recruits from more distant places, alongside Normans and Franks, were Rus’ soldiers, first mentioned as serving in the Byzantine army in 912 AD. From 988 AD on, sources such as the famous scribe Michael Psellus mention the Varangian Guard, then serving as the personal guard of the Byzantine emperor. According to the military historian Georgios Theotokis, there is a distinction between individual Rus’ soldiers, recruited one by one as mercenaries, and the Varangian Guard, which served as a unit.15

There are also Arabic sources, as well as a Georgian one, that mention Varangians. In an Arabic text by al-Masudi, the difference between Rus’ and Varangian societies is that there are men, women, and children among the Rus’, while the Varangians are a people consisting only of men. There is also a chronological difference: older Arabic records more often speak of Rus’, while from tenth century on the word surunan, Varangians, predominates.16 A Georgian eleventh-century source contains an account of how a group of 3000 variagi traveled up the river Rioni to meet with the Georgian king – an event that has been compared to a similar story in the Icelandic saga of Ingvar the Far-Traveled.17

When it comes to historical sources concerning Rus’ and Varangians, however, it is safe to say that the Russian Primary Chronicle is the most frequently quoted. The chronicle was written by the monk Nestor in twelfth-century Kiev, and tells the story of how the Kievan Rus’ empire came to be. The famous account of the “calling of the Varangians” describes how Kievan Rus’ was founded with the help of “recruited” men from across the sea, called Rus’. The name Rus’ is believed to derive from the Finnish word for Sweden, Ruotsi, although that word has also been said to denote the place Roslagen, on the east coast of present-day Sweden. In 862 AD, Rurik, his two brothers, and their entourages were called from their home to settle in what is now Russia in three different locations that later became urbanized trading centers. The Rurikid dynasty is believed to have ruled Russia all the way up to the sixteenth-century tsar Ivan the ‘Terrible’, and ended with the death of Ivan’s son.

Since these events were recorded in Kiev as late as the twelfth century, we obviously need to be critical of the sources. It is possible that the tale in the chronicle reflects not one but several encounters, and a process of interaction rather than a single event. The first few encounters between seafarers from Scandinavia and local inhabitants in what was to become Rus’ were probably more complex than what is described in early written sources, which means that we also need to consider a greater complexity in the relations between artifacts and ethnicity.

So far, we can conclude that both “Rus’” and “Varangians” signify people coming from one place and moving to, sometimes even settling in, another place – sometimes associated with specific roles such as warriors or princely retainers, sometimes representing a complete community on the move. Both the self-experienced and the ascribed ethnic identities may have changed along the way.

### The archaeological material

When archaeologists discuss ethnicity and artifacts, one of the most fundamental questions is that of how encounters and interaction are reflected in the archaeological material. The most obvious evidence of encounters in this case is trade-related objects, such as coins and weights, and prestigious commodities such as fur and amber. Arabic silver coins called dirhams seem to have spread through Eastern and Northern Europe mainly during the ninth and tenth centuries, and have been found in a large number of hoards in early Viking Age settlements such as Rurikovo Gorodische and Staraya Ladoga, Russia; Kiev, Ukraine; Birka, Köpingssvik; and on Gotland, Sweden. Staraya Ladoga in Northern Russia, one of the earliest Viking Age trading settlements in the Baltic region, has been pointed out in particular as a center of the silver trade. Furs from Northern Europe appear to have been a much sought-after commodity in Southern and Eastern Europe, as was amber.18

However, objects related to long-distance trade traveled both ways. Arabian coins, pottery, and costume details of Oriental style and origin have been found in Scandinavia, and indicate that the contacts were social and not only economic. The bulk of this material is believed to have been brought not only via Kievan Rus’, but also from more distant areas in Near and Central Asia via the Eastern European river routes.19

The most widely discussed archaeological material in the literature on the Eastern route of the Vikings is, perhaps, burial material. On several locations along the Eastern European river routes, such as the Dnepr and the Volga, Viking Age burial fields have been excavated, revealing burials of a kind that is significant for Scandinavia both in their topographic settings and in the funerary gifts found. This is thought to be the strongest evidence for Scandinavian settlements in Eastern Europe, but, interestingly, the single most distinct ethnic trait seems to be details of the female costume.

According to data published in 1997, around 400 brooches, bracelets, and pendants of Scandinavian type have been found in Eastern Europe, mainly in tenth-century contexts. Oval brooches were among the most common types, together with round, trefoil and penannular brooches.20 Oval brooches are often seen as a kind of trademark of the female costume in Viking Age Scandinavia, and are often accorded significance as both an ethnic and a gender trait. After Scandinavia, the greatest number of oval brooches has been found in Russia, with fewer examples in the Baltic Area. Because Slavic and Finno-Ugric women wore different costumes than Scandinavian women, the oval brooches are often seen as proof of ethnicity.21 Correct though this may be, this assumption leads to the idea of an entire Scandinavian culture being present wherever oval brooches are found. The Ukrainian archaeologist Fedir Androshchuk has pointed out that the understanding of the role of Scandinavians in the founding of Rus’ sometimes is based on the presence of female costume ornaments more than anything else,22 and his Russian colleague Vladimir Petrukhin writes that “among Russian archaeologists there is a joke that it was Varangian women who founded the Russian State”.23 In a similar way, temple rings, traditionally worn by Slavic women, are seen as a certain proof of the presence of a Slavic culture.24

Here we are at risk of falling into a circular reasoning: if oval brooches were worn by Scandinavian women, then the oval brooches were a Scandinavian costume detail, and if women wore oval brooches, they were Scandinavian. The same circular reasoning could confirm that temple rings were worn by Slavic women and therefore the temple rings were Slavic. I find it remarkable that female costume details seem to be treated more often than not as reliable ethnic markers.

Another category of artifacts that is often given a strong ethnic significance is Thor’s hammer rings. Miniature Thor’s hammers have been found on several occasions in Russia, while less often in the Baltic area. In Scandinavia, these objects are almost exclusively found in the Mälar Valley in Eastern Sweden and on the island of Åland in the Baltic Sea, a fact that puts these regions in a special connection with the Russian locations.25 Thor’s hammer rings, found in both burial and settlement contexts, are often given a purely ethnic value due to their strong Scandinavian mythological symbolism. At the same time, such objects are usually not seen as carrying any economic or aesthetic value.26 This interpretation seems to be made despite the possibility that Thor’s hammers and other originally symbolic objects can be either traded for economic value, or given a new symbolic meaning in a new location.

In all, archaeological evidence suggests intensified trade between Scandinavia and the Baltic and Eastern European regions in the eighth and ninth centuries, and the Swedish archaeologist Charlotta Hillestad comments on the interregional character of the settlements along the Baltic coast and in Eastern Europe.
The general opinion among archaeologists is that the Scandinavian settlers of the Russian towns rather quickly were assimilated into the local population.29

Locations and settlements
In the early Viking Age, towns28 had already existed for a couple of centuries in the Roman, Frankish, and English parts of Europe. And although urbanism spread north to Scandinavia, the vast majority of the population still lived in rural areas. Even in the Middle Ages, as little as 10% of Scandinavia’s population lived in towns. Nonetheless, towns were important for trade and economy, and they acted as an arena for political development.30

Interestingly, a transition between an older and a younger “phase” can be observed in several Viking Age trading settlements. The earliest urban settlements, such as Ribe, Denmark, and Birka, Sweden, seem to have been abandoned quickly after a few centuries of intense activity. This is sometimes explained as due to “natural causes” or regional coincidences, but the archaeological material doesn’t always support this. There are indications of several urbanization processes going on during the tenth century, followed by several reestablishments from an older to a newer location. The transition between early urban settlements such as Birka and Sigtuna, in Eastern Sweden, Rurikovo Gorodische and Novgorod on the River Volkhov, Gnezdovo and Smolensk on the River Dniepr, Russia, and Shestovitsa and Chernigov, Ukraine, might correspond to the contemporary transitions further west, from the Northern European settlement of Upplåka to Lund in Scania, Sweden, from Hedeby to Slesvig in Denmark (now Germany), and from Kaupang to Tönberg in southeastern Norway. We need to bear in mind that all those settlements and early cities aren’t identical, but there are clear parallels in the way several Viking Age settlements lost many of their inhabitants in favor of a new urban location in the same region.

Many researchers seek an explanation in the process of Christianization.31 Hillerdal and her Norwegian colleague Dagfinn Skre favor this theory and suggest that the reestablishment of a city was ideologically necessary because the identity of an older urban center wasn’t always convertible to the new power structure that came with the Church.32 The relatively autonomous Viking Age settlements needed to be reestablished in order to be deinstitutionalized. In this process, I believe that the ethnic identities of both groups and individuals alike, as well as the political and religious situation, might have undergone a change.

Kiev is an exception. When St. Vladimir introduced Christianity to Kiev in 988 AD (according to the Russian Primary Chronicle), the city had already played the role of an urban center for a couple of decades. There never seems to have been a transition between an earlier and a later settlement in the Kiev region, and the city probably served as one of the major trading centers in the region when it took on the role of a political and religious center, in close relation to Byzantium.33

So, what of the Vikings and their role in the process of urbanization in Eastern Europe? Should we even call them Vikings, or Varangians, or Rus’, or nothing at all, since they clearly seem to have been not one, but several groups undergoing a change in ethnic identity?

Theories of ethnicity
The nature of ethnicity in the various theories in the ethnicity discourse ranges from an effect of historic or political development to a universal cultural phenomenon. No one in recent anthropological discourse, however, seems to go so far as to call ethnicity an inert part of human nature. A popular way of explaining ethnicity seems to be as a psychosocial phenomenon. This theory explains ethnicity as a collective experience, ready to strengthen the boundaries of the ethnic group in times of conflict. In times of peace, when trade and political contacts with other groups are more strategically rewarding, the ethnic boundary is weakened to allow more intense interaction with other groups.34

One classic point of departure for discussions of the problem of ethnicity and ethnic boundaries is the analysis of Fredrik Barth.35 Barth describes a classic anthropological definition of ethnicity, which focuses on self-supporting populations with common values and a notion of “we”. Barth emphasizes the maintenance of ethnic boundaries rather than the internal dynamics of an ethnic group. Despite the superficial similarities, ethnicity, he stresses, is not identical to culture. There is a crucial distinction between experienced ethnicity and observable cultural differences.

Ethnic categories are thus arenas of communication, with differing content in different socio-cultural systems. What Barth doesn’t focus on, on the other hand, are situations in which the ethnic group chooses not to maintain its boundaries, and he doesn’t give much attention to what processes of interaction and assimilation do to an ethnic group. Barth seems to presuppose that ethnic groups always want to maintain their boundaries, while I see a need to examine those situations when individuals or groups chose to cross an ethnic boundary.

After more than 40 years, Barth still has a strong influence on the discourse of ethnicity among archaeologists. I find that, as Charlotte Hillerdal points out,36 the reason ethnicity is so difficult to discuss is that we try to turn a subjective experience into objective categories. It is hard not to fall back into talking about ethnic groups in the same way mostly Western scholars talked about cultures and tribes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is also crucial to keep in mind that, even though ethnic affiliation may be a dynamic and ever-changing experience, it can be deeply and strongly felt, sometimes persisting through many generations. Neil Price37 is one of many scholars who discuss ethnicity, with reference to Barth, in Viking Age contexts. The Viking Age, Price argues, should have been at least as complex and ethnically diverse as our own time, and he emphasizes the possibility that ethnic groups existed not only on a regional level, but also on a local level and among families. Ethnicity has two sides: a self-experienced identity and an ascribed one. The latter is sometimes forgotten, but just as important to include when discussing prehistoric and early historic situations. Many of the ethnic categories used in early Frankish, Byzantine, and Arabic written sources, as well as the Russian Primary Chronicle, are in fact ascribed ethnicities, and tell us nothing about all the ethnic group identities that might have existed on a local level. Likewise, present-day archaeologists tend to put large-scale ethnic labels such as Slavic and Scandinavian on groups of artifacts, and in doing so learn nothing about the self-experienced ethnicity of the artifacts’ long-dead owners.

An emigrant, an individual who has left a familiar environment to settle down in a new place, might often be seen as rootless and isolated, but isn’t necessarily so, according to the Swedish archaeologist Kerstin Cassel, who puts forward the concept of transmigration. Transmigration indicates the process by which a migrating individual is able to connect to a new environment without losing touch with the old one. The new identity is able to take shape in the space between the old and the new. Cassel also argues that the idea that a people can be identified based on its material culture in a certain territory is a modern concept, rooted more in the nineteenth-century formation of nation-states than in our knowledge of prehistory. There is nothing natural about sharp ethnic or cultural borders, unless they are created out of a certain situation.38

Therefore, the analysis of cultural encounters always must start with the question of what was most important for the groups involved. Was ethnicity an important thing to stress in the encounter? Was it more advantageous to maintain or to conceal the ethnic boundary? Might the ethnic boundary have been more important for the surrounding people than for the group itself?

Hybrid artifacts
“Hybrid” archaeological artifacts have been hotly debated ever since the Swedish archaeologist Ture J. Arne (1879—1963) noticed them and took them as proof of the presence of second and third-generation Viking colonizers.39 Artifacts in Eastern Europe that seem to bear a Scandinavian style, but display stylistic errors or “incorrect” variations, have been seen as indicators of migrants’ efforts to copy their ancestors’ ethnic patterns.40 A number of funerary finds from a burial field near Staraya Ladoga might be an example: objects identified as female brooches of typical Scandinavian design seem to have been made with “peculiarities in their manufacture and use” which lead us to suspect that they “were made by local craftsmen”.41 Yet others have classed them as purely Scandinavian objects after all, or completely discarded the concept of hybridity.42 Judging from the literature I have been able to go through so far, it is difficult to find specific examples of hybrid artifacts.

No one denies that certain objects clearly must have been produced somewhere else and brought to the site where they are eventually found. In this sense, Scandinavian artifacts in Russia are correctly called
Androshschuk, op. cit., p. 530.


7 An exception is Hillerød, op. cit.


11 For a more extensive discussion of Ibn Fadlan’s account see for example Price, op. cit., 1998.


13 Hedenstierna-Jonsson, op. cit., pp. 78–79.

14 Theotokis, op. cit., pp. 133–135.

15 Jansson, op. cit., 2005, p. 44.


22 Androshchuk, op. cit., p. 520.


26 See for example Anne Stalberg, “Scandinaviske vikingetidsfunn frå det gammelrussiske riket” [Scandinavian Viking Age finds from the old Russian Empire], Formvännan no 74, Stockholm 1979.

27 Hillerød, op. cit., p. 55.

28 There is an extensive discourse on how to define a town in the Late Iron Age and early Middle Ages: see e. g. Clarke & Ambrosiani, op. cit.; Dagfinn Skre, “The Development of Urbanism in Scandinavia”, in Stefan Brink & Neil Price (eds.), op. cit., 2009, pp. 83–94.

29 Skre, op. cit.


31 Hillerød, op. cit., p. 205; Skre, op. cit., p. 86.

32 See for example Callner, op. cit.


35 Hillerød, op. cit., p. 11.


37 Cassel, op. cit., pp. 77–78.

38 Arne, op. cit., p. 62.

39 See Androshchuk, op. cit., p. 532 and references.

40 Androshchuk, op. cit., p. 522.

41 See Androshchuk, op. cit., p. 532 and references.


43 Hillerød, op. cit., p. 66.