**Convivencia in a Borderland:The Danish-Slavic Border in the Middle Ages**

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# Archaeology and Cultural Mixture



**Edited by W. Paul van Pelt**

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# *Convivencia* in a Borderland:
# The Danish-Slavic Border in the Middle Ages

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## Introduction

Borderlands are ambiguous landscapes. Anzaldúa (1987) describes them as places of contradiction where two or more cultures edge each other and the personal and cultural distance between them diminishes without erasing the possibility of conflict and rupture. Anzaldúa (1987: 78) argues that the clash of cultures in borderlands results in mental and emotional perplexity and leads to the emergence of a new consciousness, which she calls the 'New Mestizaje'. She argues that those living in-between— willingly or unwillingly—recognize the authority of two conflicting sets of norms. The immediate result of living in-between, so described, is the experience of ambiguity and restlessness involving moments of clarity and distance from one's culture, enabling one to think creatively both about who one is and how to regard others (Anzaldúa 1987: preface, 78).

Anzaldúa's theorizing was influenced by her experience of growing up on the Mexican-Texan border and the struggle of '*Chicanas*' (Mexican-American women) as women who live between Mexican and Anglo-American culture, but her observations are helpful to understand the intricate realities of other borderlands as well.

The complex character of borderlands is also highlighted in the volumes on ancient and modern borders edited by Bartlett and Mackay (1989), Power and Standen (1999), Abulafia and Berend (2002) and Zartman (2010). They define borderlands as fluid, marginal places that exhibit dynamic relations towards the centres of power, both internally and externally. They observe that borderlands are inhabited by individuals and groups that are distinct in their experiences and identity, and these locations can be characterized as sites of creativity and marked difference. These landscapes are also seen as places of manifold realities where friendly cohabitation and dialogue can be easily disrupted by tensions and open conflicts. These conditions create a type of life that is considerably different from that in central areas. Borderlands may allow greater freedom, entrepreneurship and creativity, but can also signify a stricter control by authorities, the necessity of manoeuvring between local knowledge and opposing ideologies, between local sentiments and orders from the centre (Anzaldúa 1987; Berend 2002; Naum 2010; Power and Standen 1999; Zartman 2010). In these complex landscapes one can find evidence for many of the cultural processes that are described by postcolonial scholarship, e.g. hybridity in the sphere of material culture, the presence of multiple and seemingly contradicting identities, public and hidden transcripts employed in the dealings with authorities, and narratives of difference and racial/cultural prejudice employed in official state propaganda.

Postcolonial theories, which in recent years have breached the boundaries of modern imperialism and are now influencing research on premodern cases of prejudice, inequality and 'othering', can play an important role in re-examining the cultural geographies of borderlands (Ashcroft et al. 2007: 117; Cohen 2000, 2006; Gosden 2004; Hahn 2001;

Naum 2010, 2012). Postcolonial theories, with their stimulating way of problematizing cultural processes in the interstices of different ideologies, worldviews and cultures, provide a useful angle for looking at and approaching the complexity of borderlands. The method of deconstructive analysis embraced in postcolonial writing when applied to written narratives and extended to the analysis of material culture observed in border zones can help to expose the ambiguities of these landscapes.

The complexity of borderlands makes it appropriate to regard them as materializations of what Bhabha (2004) calls the 'third space'. Bhabha defines this as a space of translation and construction of a political object that is new, neither one nor the other. It is a space of constant dialogue and remaking that emerges in colonial situations, a discursive field illustrating that "the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (Bhabha 2004: 55). For Bhabha (2004: 56), the third space is "the precondition for the articulation of cultural difference" and it can serve to create the "instability which presages powerful cultural changes". Those that occupy this in-between territory have a potential to disrupt and question power claims and reveal the falseness and instability of official ideology. Hybridity, which Bhabha (2004) describes as an interstitial passage, as it were, the connective tissue between the colonizer and the colonized, has the same potential to threaten the singular voice of authority and contest categories of difference and purity (cf. also Bakhtin 1981: 75–76, 304–305, 343–370).

Some scholars, such as Stockhammer (2012: 46), argue that Bhabha's concept of the third space and his understanding of hybridity "can hardly go beyond the narrow realm of postcolonial studies and cannot be used beyond any colonial or post-colonial context" because of the apparent political dimension of these concepts. However, similar developments of new worldviews, identities and practices in the context of sometimes asymmetrical power relations and against the rhetoric of irreconcilable difference voiced by the centres of power take place in the liminal
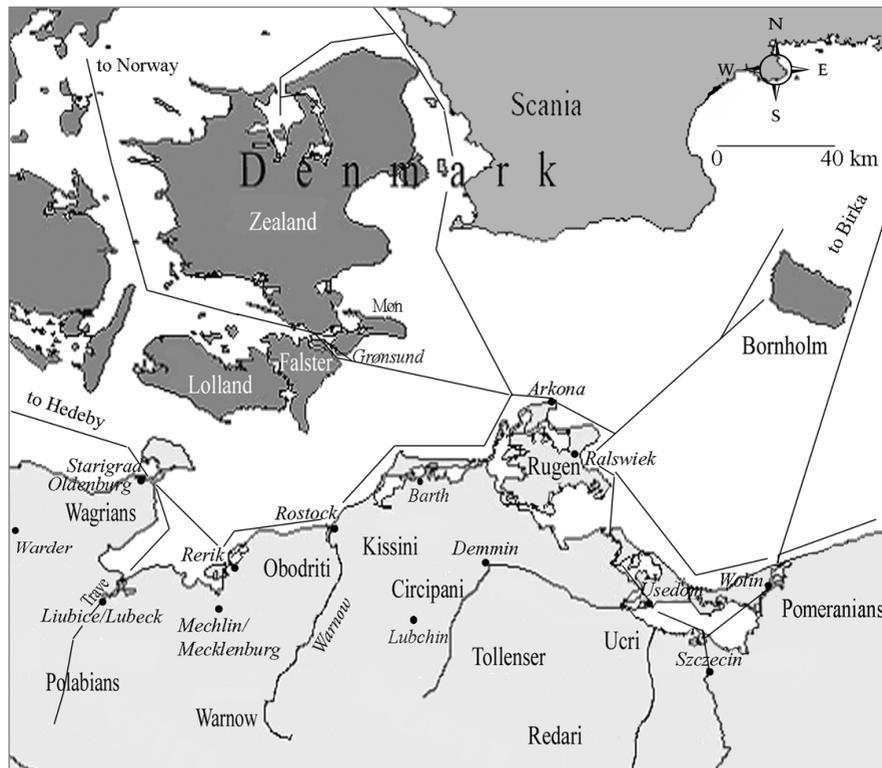
Fig. 1. Geography of the southwestern Baltic Sea rim with some of the medieval trading routes. Areas west of the river Warnow were part of the Obodriti Confederation. Groups living east of the river were united in the Lutizi Confederation. Rani lived on the island of Rugen. Map by the author.

geographies of borderlands. Mixed material culture, entangled identities and allegiances of people that inhabit these zones challenge the binary oppositions of 'us' and 'them' separated by a border. They illustrate that a complex cultural merger is possible, one that can thrive and endanger ideologies built upon neat categorizations and narratives of difference.

Bhabha's idea of the third space is powerful and I see its strength as a metaphor for describing the creative potential of borderland landscapes, not only those created through colonial encroachment, but also those that emerged in landscapes unmarked by colonial expansion. Borderlands, colonial or not, just like the third space, are landscapes in-between where negotiations take place and identities are reshaped and invented. They are

created through the discourses and dialogues of multiple voices, not only those of the people that actually live in the border areas, but also those of administrators and authorities located outside this zone. Bhabha's third space is an intervention disrupting homogenizing tendencies. Liminal, borderland conditions may be characterized in similar terms as at times disruptive and tense landscapes whose inhabitants may have agendas of their own, incompliant with official political goals, and whose decisions, action and creative cultural solutions run counter to ideas of difference voiced by authorities.

This article deals with one example of such an ambivalent, in-between borderland. It focuses on the two southernmost Danish islands of Lolland and Falster positioned in close proximity to Slavic territories further south. By applying postcolonial concepts and by deconstructing medieval narratives of the Danish-Slavic borderland, I will describe the particular culture(s) and identities that developed among the islanders. I will discuss in what sense this specific borderland can be seen as a materialization of Bhabha's third space and as an example of Anzaldúa's mestizaje consciousness.

## Dissolute Slavs and Pious Danes: From Borderline to Borderland

To regard Lolland and Falster as a borderland is a relatively new thesis. For a long time the landscape of the medieval western Baltic was conceived as being rigidly divided: mainland areas, governed by different Slavic rulers and Saxon dukes, were seen as clearly delimited from the mainly insular realm of Denmark (fig. 1). The narrow bodies of water lying in between these areas were perceived as natural barriers for day-to-day interactions (cf. Andersen 1982; Grinder-Hansen 1983). This image of geographical distance was strengthened by the general picture of cultural difference and hostility painted in the *Gesta Danorum*, a major source for the medieval history of Denmark written in the late twelfth century by Saxo Grammaticus (1980–81). The almost constant state of animosity and vast cultural divides between the Danes and their Slavic neighbours, as highlighted in Saxo's *magnum opus*, were largely taken

at face value by nineteenth and early twentieth century medievalists (cf. Damgaard-Sørensen 1991; Grinder-Hansen 2001; Steenstrup 1900). Only after the Second World War, and particularly in the last thirty years, the study of archaeological data and new historical analyses of medieval texts have brought about a more nuanced understanding of Danish-Slavic relations. The positive aspects of contacts such as trade, cultural influences and dynastic intermarriages were underlined, and the sea was recast as a connector rather than barrier (Andersen 1982; Duczko 2000; Grinder-Hansen 1983; Hansen et al. 2004; Selch Jensen et al. 2000; Villads Jensen 2002). With this new approach, the rigid national borders of Saxo's narrative became permeable and cultural differences less apparent.

I argue that a careful study and deconstructive reading of the surviving historical descriptions of the Slavic-Danish borderlands coupled with a contextual analysis of material culture can push our understanding of the everyday realities of these areas even further. The challenge is to consider the meanings of the categories of 'border', 'borderland' and 'difference' and the way these categories are constructed depending on the prevailing political circumstances and the observer. A critical examination of some of the notions introduced by Saxo unveils Lolland and Falster as complex borderlands rather than clear-cut limits of the Danish realm.

Saxo's work had two major agendas. His first objective was to portray Denmark as an ancient kingdom: a patria with a well-defined geographical extent, language and custom, whose history, although occasionally broken by civil wars, showed cultural continuity and whose people shared an awareness of a common past, identity and sense of belonging. His second objective was to justify the war against the Slavs launched by King Valdemar I and Bishop Absalon (an event which was witnessed by young Saxo) through pejorative description and 'othering' of Denmark's southern neighbours. In his narrative the Danes were pictured as pious Christians, innocent victims of the Slavic pirates' treachery. Slavs, on the other hand, were seen as a pagan race, bloodthirsty and lower than wild animals that needed to be tamed by Valdemar's army and subsequently

by Christian missionaries (Grinder-Hansen 2001; Lind 2000; Lind et al. 2004; Villads Jensen 2000). To exemplify the dissolute character of the Slavs, Saxo describes the destruction caused by their raids on Denmark, and quotes several instances of their corruptive influence. Inhabitants of Lolland and Falster, two islands located at the limits of Danish territory, sandwiched between the heart of the medieval Danish kingdom in Zealand and major Slavic strongholds in Arkona, Starigard and Mecklenburg (fig. 1), figure prominently in these stories of Slavic perfidy.

## Testing Liminality: Lolland-Falster and Valdemar's War Against the Slavs

Valdemar's War against the Slavs (the Rugians, Kissini and Circipini) started with an attack on Rugen in 1159 AD, followed by a series of assaults throughout the 1160s. The king mobilized a large army consisting of soldiers recruited from various Danish provinces. Although Saxo praised the bravery of the Danes, he particularly mentioned the hesitation of the residents of Falster and Lolland to take up the sword. As a result, their loyalty was questioned by Valdemar's inner circle, and their apparently ambivalent attitude was loathed by contingents from other parts of the kingdom (Saxo Grammaticus book 14: xxii). The negative attitude of the islanders allegedly went beyond mere sluggishness on the battlefields. They were accused of active disobedience and betrayal by discussing the Danish attack plans with the Slavs, keeping spoils of war and captives for the Slavs and providing intelligence about Valdemar's forces. Despite the gravity of these accusations their lives were spared, but they were henceforth kept in the dark regarding war plans: "the Lollikers and Falstrings were ordered to join the fleet the last of all, lest having been instructed long in advance, they should send over secret information of the enterprise to the Slavs" (Saxo Grammaticus book 14: xxiii.2).

Saxo defends the islanders by arguing that the services they rendered to the enemy were motivated by fear rather than love, and were dictated by a need for self-preservation (Saxo Grammaticus book 14: xxii.2). He blamed the Slavs for taking advantage of the geographical proximity of

the islands and the islanders' precarious situation to blackmail them into collaborating and spying on their behalf.

The story of the collaboration between the people of Lolland-Falster and their southern neighbours is not the only example of the supposed corrupting influence of the Slavs. In the context of the early expeditions to Rugen, Saxo introduces one Gnemer (or Gvemerus). Gnemer lived on Falster, but judging from his name, his knowledge of the Slavic language and his geographical acquaintance with parts of the southern Baltic Sea coasts, he was probably an immigrant who had settled on the island. Perhaps Gnemer's 'insider' knowledge coupled with his military skills enabled him to obtain the position of ship commander in Valdemar's army. Gnemer is described by Saxo twice. In 1159 AD, during the first assault on Rugen organized by Valdemar, Gnemer offered the king his advice which protected the army from potential disaster. Instead of directly attacking the heavily defended coasts of Rugen, Gnemer indicated easy access areas that were good for pillaging the neighbouring district of Bardo (Barth) (Saxo Grammaticus book 14: xxiii.20). However, only a year later Gnemer's actions are described as disappointingly treacherous. Saxo wrote that in the wake of preparations to counter an expected attack by the Slavic army, the Danish fleet gathered off Møn. Bishop Absalon, the right hand of King Valdemar, selected two ships, one manned by Zealanders, the other by a group of Falstrings, to quietly spy on the enemy's moves. When Absalon left the troops, Gnemer decided to give a banquet to his crew and by making them drunk he prevented them from completing their task. He also provided information on the Danes' strength and position to a Slavic spy, who seemed to have been a regular guest at his household (Saxo Grammaticus book 14: xliv.9). Consequently, the Danish plan was jeopardized by Gnemer and the Slavic navy which, once provided with information on the numbers and location of the Danish troops, launched an attack on Grønsund.

Undoubtedly, this story is quoted by Saxo to illustrate yet another example of Slavic deception and dishonourable behaviour and their seemingly evil and corrupting influence on the inhabitants of Lolland and Falster. However, Saxo's accounts might also be indicative of a particular and real complexity of the borderland. The story of Gnemer and his household, bilingual spies, translators residing on the islands and a cast of other characters with strong connections on both sides of the sea (which are mentioned in passing in his text) indicate that Saxo was aware of the intricacies of this frontier region. Yet in his narrative he chose to trivialize and downplay the history of mutual connections by turning attention to the dangerous character of this neighbourhood, which fitted his own political agenda. In doing so, perhaps without realizing it, he produced interesting insights into the in-betweenness of Lolland and Falster and acknowledged the existence of deep connections between these territories and people across the Baltic Sea.

Saxo's stories can then be read quite differently from how they were intended by the author. Rather than being illustrations of the degenerative character of the Slavs, they are examples of the complexities that arose from geographical proximity and a long history of cohabitation and collaboration. They vividly illustrate the contradictions and disruptive character of the third space of a borderland, the indecisiveness and perplexity of mestizaje consciousness and the uneasy choices that dwelling in the interstices sometimes demands. These examples also highlight the troublesome political consequences of in-betweenness for an idea of unity posited by the authorities. They show the difficulties in understanding, acknowledging and articulating the possibility of the existence and legitimacy of a middle category of borderland, characterized by overlapping traditions, multiple identities and characteristic ambivalence.

This particular stance of the islanders was a result of a long history of contact and cohabitation. In order to contextualize Saxo's stories of non-compliant, deviant Lollikers and Falstrings as borderland inhabitants and to understand how this complex landscape evolved we must turn to the centuries preceding the war.

## Lolland-Falster in the Middle Ages: Emergence and *Convivencia* in a Borderland

Interactions between the inhabitants of Lolland and Falster and the Obodrites, Lutizi and Rani who lived on the southern coast of the Baltic Sea can be traced back to at least a couple of centuries prior to Valdemar's War (Etting 2000; Hansen et al. 2004; Løkkegaard Paulsen 2001; Naum 2012). The islands attracted Slavic immigrants since at least the early eleventh century AD. This migration was caused by increasingly difficult political and economic conditions in their homelands due to aggressive Saxon expansionism and frequent internal strife among the Slavic ruling class (Helmold book 1: 56, 84, 88, 89, book 2: 101; Lotter 1989; Turasiewicz 2004). Their settling on the islands is hinted at in historical sources and is also reflected in the presence of Slavic place names and material culture (Helmold book 2: 101; Housted 1994; Jørgensen 2001; Løkkegaard Paulsen 2001).

Slavic place names tend to concentrate along the islands' coastline, suggesting that easy access to sea routes and maintenance of contact with the old homelands might have been important considerations for the newcomers (fig. 2). However, there is not enough historical and archaeological evidence to establish whether immigrant communities on the islands lived separately in ethnic enclaves. An example from the village of Tilitze on Lolland, which, judging from its name, might have been established by a certain Tilo and his kin who emigrated from the southern coast of the Baltic Sea, indicates that Danes and Slavs could have lived quite closely to one another. A commemorative runestone dated to c. 1050 AD was discovered at the village which mentions four local residents with Scandinavian names: Eskil, Sulke, Thora and Toke.[1]

The *convivencia* on the islands resulted in borrowings, changes and inventions in material culture. Slavic settlers introduced a new pottery tradition, the so-called Baltic ware, which was stylistically and technologically related to late Slavic pottery.  Similarities ranged from

[1]   Tilitze or Tylitze was first mentioned in the sources in 1327 AD, but the large size of the village and its early status as the centre of a parish suggest that the settlement was already established in the eleventh century (Lisse 1989: 71).
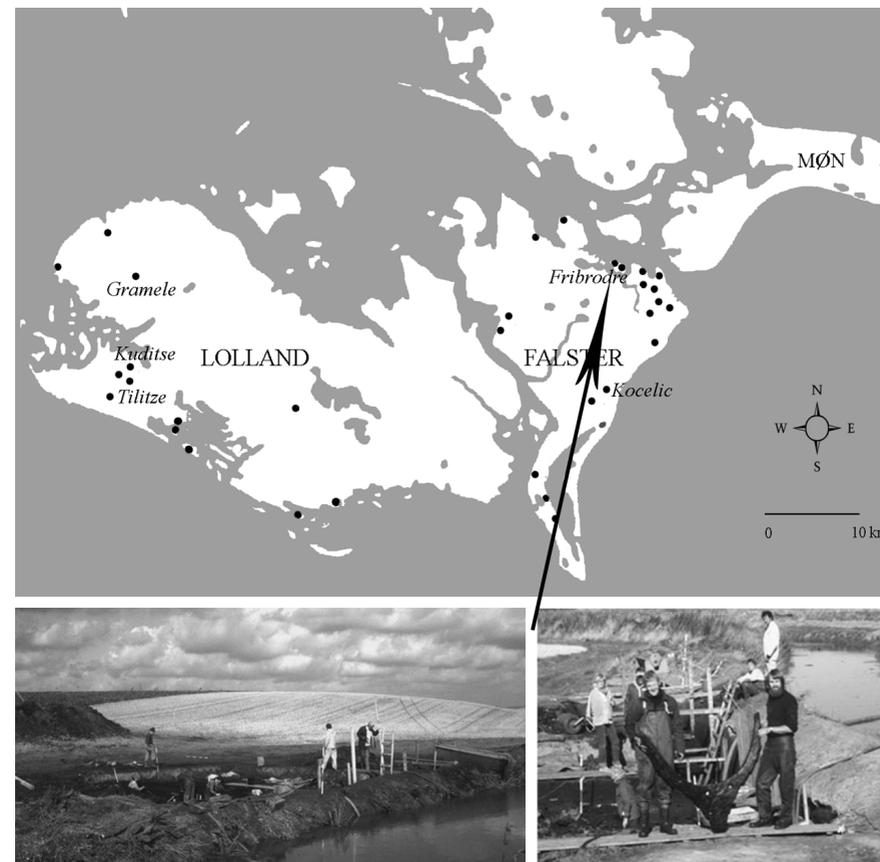


Fig. 2. Settlements and sites with Slavic-sounding place names on Lolland and Falster and the location of the Fribrødre wharf. Map by the author. Photographs courtesy of Roskilde Viking Ship Museum and Jan Skamby Madsen.

vessel decoration and a preference of certain vessel shapes to technological parameters, such as the use of a turn-table (a predecessor of the potter's wheel) and firing in a reducing atmosphere (Gebers 1980; Naum 2012; Pedersen 1989). On Lolland and Falster, the production of Baltic ware started sometime in the late tenth/early eleventh century and seems to have continued at least until the early/mid-fourteenth century, outlasting the production of late Slavic pots on the rapidly Germanized southern coasts of the Baltic Sea by more than a century (Gebers 1980; Pedersen 1989; Ruchhöft 2003). Slavic influences on local pottery production seem to be relatively continuous. While there are sites on the islands that

show clear evidence of potters copying stylistic solutions typical of early eleventh century ceramics, there is also evidence of later influences, for example, the occurrence of the so-called *Ringaugen* pots decorated with circular stamps. This type of pottery seems to be exclusively related to late twelfth century Obodrite pottery production.

The potters working on Lolland and Falster also developed unique vessel shapes and types. The most interesting and apparent example of such innovative hybrid creations are oil lamps. The ceramic oil lamps produced on the island closely resemble the lids of so-called Bobzin pots. Some of the covers seem to be turned into lamps simply by turning them upside down. However, other examples indicate that potters were improving their designs to meet the technical and technological requirements of ceramic lamps, while at the same time they continued to make traditional bowl-like vessels of the Bobzin type (Naum 2012).[2] These material adoptions and innovations combined with a continuous receptiveness to external influences are a frequently noted feature of borderlands.

The cultural and geographical proximity and in-between position of the inhabitants of borderlands also means that they are often engrossed and drawn (willingly or not) into political developments at their doorsteps. The islands served as a place of refuge for Slavic political refugees, such as members of the Obodrite ruling class related to the Danish royal family who were ousted from their homeland due to their political views (Saxo Grammaticus book 14: xxiv.2, xliii.5; Helmold book 1: 34).

The liminality and in-between position of the islands, apparent in their geography, culture and the loyalties of their inhabitants, created unique opportunities and invited subversive acts. Historical sources and recent archaeological evidence suggests that islanders harboured Slavic pirates that menaced the Baltic Sea and harried Danish coasts. Piracy in the Baltic

Sea, particularly the plundering expeditions of Slavs in Denmark, peaked in the middle of the eleventh century and remained largely unchecked as Danish rulers were caught up fighting civil wars. Medieval chroniclers, like Saxo Grammaticus and Helmold von Bosau, repeatedly lamented the destruction caused by pirates and name the fjords and hidden bays of the southern Danish islands as the pirates' hiding places (Helmold book 1: 50, 55, 70, 84, book 2: 109; Saxo Grammaticus book 12: iv, book 14: v.1, vi, xv, xliv). One such hide out might have been a recently excavated wharf on the banks of the River Fribrødre in northeastern Falster (fig. 2; Naum 2012; Skamby Madsen and Klassen 2010). The wharf, dendrochronologically dated to 1050–1105 AD, was located in a protected site, along one of the waterways of a fjord opening onto the Grønsund strait—a communication channel between the southern Baltic and the Great Belt utilized by merchants and military forces (*Knytlinga saga* chapters 120, 124, 126, 127; Saxo Grammaticus book 14, book 15). The strategic location of Grønsund and its natural geography made it a perfect location for launching pirate attacks.

The remains of boats and tools recovered at the wharf suggest that individuals working at the site dismantled boats and recycled parts to mend their own ships (Skamby Madsen and Klassen 2010). Careful technological studies of the broken hull parts and repaired sections of ships indicate that while the majority of the dismantled ships were constructed according to the Scandinavian tradition, the repairs were more in accordance with Slavic shipbuilding practices (Indruszewski 1996, 2004; Klassen 2010: 192–194). Thus, the site seems to have been used by individuals familiar with Slavic boat construction. In this context it is interesting to consider the name of the river on whose bank the site is located. The main element in the name Fribrødre River most likely originates from the Slavic term *pri brode*, meaning 'at a ford'. It is likely that the river was named after a crossing-site located nearby that was used by Slavic-language speakers.

It is difficult to determine if the site was used by the inhabitants of Falster or if it was used by Slavic pirates on a seasonal basis. In any case,

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2    Pottery constitutes the overwhelming majority of excavated material from the rural sites on the islands. Consequently, detecting the development of new forms and the merger of previously known ones is easier for ceramic vessels than for other types of material culture.

by either passively acknowledging the choice of their island as a vantage point for clandestine activities or by actively taking part in these raids, the inhabitants of Falster made a curious decision (not that different from their stance in the upcoming war). Siding with Slavic pirates in targeting other territories within the kingdom shows a very different allegiance than one would expect. This collaboration and special friendship between Lolland-Falster and the areas to the south, undoubtedly resulting from geographic proximity and family ties, can perhaps explain why the islands enjoyed relative peace and protection from the plundering expeditions of the pirates (Saxo Grammaticus book 14: xv.5).

This long history of cohabitation and collaboration led to the emergence of sentiments and allegiances that can be categorized as a form of mestizaje consciousness. In their acts and decisions, the medieval residents of Lolland and Falster exhibited tolerance for ambivalence, divergence and seeming inconsistency described by Gloria Anzaldúa as common features of borderland mentalities. They "walked out of one culture and into another, being in all cultures at the same time" and shared a pluralistic outlook of the surrounding world, which incorporated incompatible systems of logic, multiple voices and languages and the histories of peoples who stood on antagonistic sides (Anzaldúa 1987: 77–78).

Anzaldúa (1987: 38–39) argued that the cultural and political practice of the people in borderlands is characterized by their awareness and acceptance of the plural self and guided by a particular type of knowledge ('la facultad'), which is a dormant "sixth sense" and a "survival tactic". One can recognize this knowledge being enacted in decisions to become involved in clandestine activities and harbouring pirates. As a survival strategy, this decision might have been a result of calculating and recognizing contemporary power dynamics in the region, weighting the likely benefits (protecting oneself against the potential threat of pirate attacks and sharing the spoils) against the unlikely retribution of weakened Danish kings.

Another context in which these particular positions and unique identities were revealed and tested was Valdemar's War against the Slavs, described by Saxo Grammaticus. The individuals portrayed on the pages of his chronicle, such as Gnemer, spies and informants working for both sides (sometimes simultaneously) and men joining the army and harbouring the spoils of the enemy, embody the difficult choices and contradictions of borderland subjectivity. The unexpected decisions and multiple and shifting allegiances exhibited by the islanders must have caused bewilderment to outside observers. The collaboration between the islanders and the Slavs questioned the very foundation of Danish war propaganda, which was built around supposedly irreconcilable differences between people, the righteousness of the Danes and the bestiality of the Slavs. This perhaps helps to explain why Saxo chose to disguise Danish-Slavic collaborative acts as forced, insincere cases of courtesy, rather than viewing them against a long historic background of migration, cohabitation and cultural exchange.

## Conclusions

The landscape that developed in the medieval western Baltic formed a complicated space. Its amalgamate character gave rise to unconformity and unexpected decisions, novel forms of material culture and mind-sets, and new consciousness and identities developed by its inhabitants. The disarray and unpredictability of this (and other) borderlands as well as the difficulties in dealing and making sense of them in the official narratives likens them to colonial landscapes. The methods embraced in postcolonial critique and the concepts developed in postcolonial scholarship help to understand borderlands as a merging point, a geographical, political and cultural third space positioned in between two centres, whose political agenda at times denied even the possibility of its existence. Postcolonial theories and methodology facilitate grasping the complexities of border landscapes and reveal the uneasiness of the authorities over their existence. The concepts introduced by postcolonial scholarship are useful when examining complex processes in socio-cultural interstices,

following the meeting, the coming together, the clash and coexistence of different human groups and cultures in borderlands. They help to identify the intricacies of cohabitation in these zones as well as interpret the terms and outcomes of *convivencia*.

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