

# Hip Viking Heritage

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Sindbæk has seen the new Viking-themed exhibitions in Stockholm and Copenhagen and concludes, after a brief analysis, that they are expressions of populism, created out of a will to meet consumerism and international tourism. He detects lurking danger here: museums are ‘repositories of accumulated knowledge, study, evidence’ (Sindbæk 2022:21) – to embrace anti-elite populism, he suggests, puts them in a precarious position, treading a perilous path to the future.

I have seen these exhibitions myself, and share some of Sindbæk’s concerns, both about the exhibitions and regarding wider developments in major museums. However, I think some of his conclusions may be questioned, while I wish to expand a little on other parts.

In my opinion, what is most lacking in both exhibitions is overall context and story. Both seemed to me to be compilations of the finest Viking Age artefacts from each museum rather than objects selected to tell a (new? urgent? important?) story of the Viking Age based on latest finds and results from archaeology and history. Instead of providing perspective and story, the museums seem to have put all the traditional highlights on display, letting the story come second. What is the message? What do they want to say to me as a visitor on a more profound level? Indeed, in concurrence with Sindbæk, the lack of clear message and story may be an expression of the museum having capitulated from a position of telling the story, towards letting the visitor create her own meaning out of the bits and pieces served, while not challenging prejudice or expanding a general frame of reference.

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Having said that, I would have liked more analysis by Sindbæk before concluding that the motivation is simply populism. He observes that the museums present the period ‘essentially in accordance with popular narratives’ (Sindbæk 2022:20), and notes that there has been a change of tone away from an instructing, educational one which is now ‘largely absent’. In my opinion these two museums, as institutions, are far from populist in a general sense, and indeed are distinctly ‘elite’ in many respects. Furthermore, the tone set in a specific exhibition does little to the overall context. I also think many museums are trying to develop how they address their audiences, and perhaps in a less ‘classical, instructional’ fashion, as part of a professionalization of their general communication. Seeking to communicate the same content but in a more accessible way is not necessarily populist. And, after all, looking at how Vikings have been presented previously in these two institutions – are the current exhibitions significantly more in accordance with the popular view of Vikings than what has come before? Have these museums ever challenged those popular views in profound ways?

Moving on, I think Sindbæk is not perceptive enough regarding differences between the Copenhagen and Stockholm museums. The Swedish History Museum has free entry, is almost exclusively government funded and has not, to my knowledge, been subject to any major staffing cuts for years. The exhibition sponsorship mentioned by Sindbæk is limited, and in no way comparable to, the contributions of private external funding to the Viking exhibition at the National Museum of Denmark. For these reasons, the Swedish History Museum is less dependent on entrance fees or on attracting sponsorship, and consequently should be under less pressure to fall into consumerism to gain revenue. It is thus hard to say that the issues described by Sindbæk should have grown out of such pressure in Stockholm. Having worked for many years in the Stockholm museum, my personal impression is that there was always an interest in attracting a wider audience but not out of economic pressure.

It is good for archaeologists to take a greater interest in museums, and as an archaeologist myself, I have had the opportunity to read up on museum studies in several museological projects and as an editor of the periodical *Nordisk museologi*. To engage with museum issues as a researcher, one needs to consider the existence of a vast body of museological studies and a long history of research into most aspects of museums within that academic field. The issues discussed by Sindbæk are no exception, and in recent years a substantial body of literature has been produced on the commercialization of museums, and also on their increasing communicational professionalization (the latter being a field for handbooks, e.g. Drotner & Schrøder eds. 2013; Slack 2021; Erdman et al. 2022; Mitchell et al. 2022).

The situation under debate is not least about business models derived from the private sector being adapted to public heritage institutions, and museologists have studied how such institutions cope and behave under these circumstances. Moreover, many other aspects of museum practice have come under scrutiny, including an ongoing, gradual change in audience expectations and a growing awareness in museums about the motivations and expectations of different audience segments (e.g. Gradén & O'Dell 2018; Christensen & Haldrup 2019; Valtysson et al. 2021).

Lizette Gradén and Tom O'Dell (2018) have coined the term *Hip heritage* to describe how institutions like museums have 'a disposition towards heritage that increasingly focuses upon its potential as a fashionable commodity with a broadly marketable aura'. Studying how heritage was affected when increasingly framed as a marketable commodity in several American museums, they found, above all, that the museum, as an institution, risks becoming a medium that transmits conformity rather than diversity. As noted by Gradén and O'Dell (2018:59):

Museums that seek to succeed through the hip factor that guide market forces, have to be on their toes and in constant tune with audiences' current desires, that depends more on trend analysis, focus group interviews conducted by hired market consultants, and flexibility based upon gut feelings than in in-depth knowledge about collections, their origin, ethnic identity and cultural value [...].

This may be on the same track as Sindbæk, though supported by more detailed observations.

In current debates, the relationship between 'enlightenment' (accumulating and conveying knowledge) and 'experience' (audience interaction) in museums is often seen as dichotomous. On the one hand there is the image of museums as temples of knowledge and on the other the 'Disneyfication', commercialization and adaptation to the experience economy. Some researchers, however, see enlightenment and experience as entangled in museums, one depending on the other, and this has also been illuminated in recent research (Christensen & Haldrup 2019). In the end there must be both. To reach audiences, and indeed to convey knowledge, museums must find a working balance.

To conclude, I agree with Sindbæk to a large extent, and trends he describes are known aspects of an overall transformation of museums in many places which have been observed and studied in some depth and detail in museology. To call it populism may be partly right and valid in some cases, but it is a somewhat crude way of describing the broader shifts in museum practice. I do not think these changes are about museums degrading their 'elite' or 'expert' status generally (though it may be about inhabiting their role differently), and in the Stockholm case I cannot see any significant drain

of professional, academic competence. Changes regarding audience interaction, using new methods or a change of tone, may be professionalization rather than populism, though of course they may serve commercialization at the same time. In becoming even more ‘hip heritage’, however, museum presentations of the Viking Age seem to be losing out on the opportunity to challenge preconceptions. They are thus ‘messaging conformity rather than diversity’ as Gradén and O’Dell (2018) put it, and that seems like a perilous path indeed.

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