

The Viking Brand in Crisis?

Chris Tuckley

Sindbaek's (2022) critique of the new exhibitions on the Viking Age at the Swedish History Museum and National Museum of Denmark starts and ends on a cautionary note, signalling a risk that museums face a 'perilous path' to a future as potential 'captives' of the Vikings. At first glance his warning might seem counterintuitive, coming as it does at a moment of triumph for Vikings in the public arena.

Never before has there been such a range of accessible, popular entertainments on a Viking theme. Vikings have loomed large in new releases for the home entertainment scene during the pandemic years, whose lockdowns put Viking exhibitions beyond the reach of many. Most conspicuous, perhaps, are the lavish television serials (*The Last Kingdom*, *Norsemen*, *Vikings*) available for streaming in households worldwide. *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, which launched in autumn 2020, brought Vikings into one of the most successful videogame franchises of recent times. This year has seen the theatrical release of *The Northman*, whose promotional campaign posted outsize images of its bare-chested hero wherever it was screened. At the time of writing, the fourth in a series of *Thor* movies, spanning more than a decade, is in cinemas. This profusion of Viking-flavoured output from major studios and software houses proves just how marketable and commercially successful the Viking brand has been. What is more, a distinctive Viking style or aesthetic has entered the mainstream, moving beyond the sub-cultures (Viking metal, biker gangs, fantasy fiction) that have traditionally deployed its iconography. Themed pubs, axe-throwing cen-

York Archaeological Trust
ctuckley@yorkat.co.uk

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tres, and boutique festivals offer paid-for opportunities to feel like a Viking away from museums or living history events. Under these circumstances, the impulse on the part of museum operators to cater for the same audiences of Viking enthusiasts is understandable.

Sindbaek detects in the two new displays that are the focus of his review a crisis within a Viking brand that has grown disproportionate to its settings and that pursues populist narratives at the expense of academic rigour and educational impact. For Sindbaek, it is symptomatic of a larger crisis around mission and funding in the museums sector: the rush to appeal to the museum visitor as a consumer or leisure seeker in the ‘comfortable role of a customer’ has in both instances meant that controversial content has been avoided, and a track record of more provocative Viking displays at both venues has been overturned.

His reflection on the haunting presence of the Birka Girl mannequin, for instance, translated from the prior display to the new exhibition in the Swedish History Museum, highlights how in his view the designers have sidestepped the vexed business of peopling their version of the Viking past: initially seeking to avoid representing its human aspect altogether, before arriving at a fudged compromise to include ‘last season’s star’. Although this may come across as an abdication of responsibility on the part of the museum team, there is perhaps more to be said for what may have been a deliberate choice to create a depopulated vision of a Viking world. The JORVIK Viking Centre is still evoked as the first to attempt a museum-based reconstruction of Viking people in authentic surroundings, an enterprise in which it has been judged successful and which is presented as the justification for subsequent efforts by others to do the same (Pentz et al. 2019); a closer look at JORVIK’s 40 years of reconstructing, performing and displaying Vikings, however, reveals how its Vikings have always drawn fire (Tuckley 2020), which is perhaps only to be expected where an historical brand, in its popular iterations, has been so mired in confrontational and problematic representations of gender, race and violence.

It seems that for those who take an interest in these matters, there is something essentially unsatisfactory about what we might term ‘public Vikings’. This may be behind the choice to avoid them altogether at the Swedish History Museum, or to revert to the safer option of celebrity Vikings such as Harald Bluetooth at the National Museum in Copenhagen (where the 2018 *Meet the Vikings* exhibition had taken daring steps to imagine and picture larger-than-life Viking characters by working with reenactors, tolerating or celebrating the anachronisms in the results; Pentz et al. 2019). Wherever they occur, public Vikings seem caught somewhere between (at least) two irreconcilable and competing sets of demands. On the one hand they should be sanitised, progressive, outward-looking and

aspirational. On the other, they are required to be difficult, regressive, insular, and informational. There is an overlap between the two camps, whose arguments are rehearsed with the advent of each blockbuster Viking exhibition. Might it be better on the whole to leave the Vikings out entirely, to allow the diverse, international audiences of the 21st century to see only themselves reflected in the displays? The Swedish History Museum exhibition in particular seems to represent a step towards this position: in Sindbaek's (2022:14) words, it is 'a world in which we [...] are the focus, and in which we can reflect our thoughts, views and identities, unconcerned with disturbing others'.

Leaving aside Sindbaek's evident misgivings about the spirit of populism running through the new exhibitions, an acknowledgement of the strengths of the approach emerges at places in his commentary. From the perspective of one who works in museum interpretation it is pleasing to see the emphasis placed by him on accessibility, and his awareness of how the needs of young visitors in particular might be met, the subtext being that an integrated approach from the outset is more successful than marginal additions around a separate exhibition core. Both exhibitions place a premium on the experiential or sensory (Historiska Museet n.d.; Nationalmuseet 2021), which may reflect an intention to facilitate access, as well as broadening appeal. Sindbaek does not make this connection explicit himself; for him, the tonal variations between the interactive installations in the exhibition at the National Museum in Copenhagen are further evidence of how the museum visit has come to resemble a shopping trip through a department store. Despite a degree of puzzlement around the purposes served by the audio-visual experience component (which Sindbaek sees as having been shared by most fellow visitors to the gallery), he concedes that it is 'interesting and innovative'; his account reminds me of other recent examples of artistic or abstract interpretations seeking to offer alternative perspectives on museum collections, for the ends of making them more accessible in one way or another (Tuckley 2021). Perhaps the laudable demands of accessibility and the dubious demands of populism can sometimes sound exactly alike.

Despite outward signs to the contrary, Sindbaek's review may have landed at a time of danger for public Vikings and the museums that depend upon them, and not only because of their tendency to a populism that undercuts the traditional functions of the museum. Will there come a point at which popular interest in the Viking period will wane, when public histories will have reached their Viking saturation point? *The Northman* seems not to have been the box office success that its studio had hoped for, and like *Thor 4* received very mixed reviews. There has been a more obvious backlash too, as in the 'Goodbye to the Vikings' piece by Alex Woolf in *History Today* (Woolf 2022), which argues for the scrapping of the term 'Viking'

as inaccurate, anachronistic, and misleading, with a flattening effect on a period that encompasses great variety and change: Sindbaek (2022:13) notices something of the sort in the Swedish History Museum's exhibition, which absorbs 'the very different ecologies and cultural traditions' of multiple regions, subsuming them 'into aspects of a single picture: Viking-age Sweden'. Going further, Woolf (2022) argues that the word 'Viking' is in itself harmful, especially when deployed as an ethnonym, and carries the taint of white supremacist thinking: who can foresee the extent to which this perception of the Viking brand will be a turn-off to prospective audiences in the future?

Perhaps the abiding quandary for all of us who do business with Vikings is whether it is possible to salvage them (whether by a name-change or by any other means) from a populism that has always surrounded and infused them, ever since they first entered the public arena (Wawn 2000); but that is a discussion for another time and place.

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