

Public Viking Research in Museums and Beyond

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The popularity of the Vikings remains a mixed blessing for archaeologists and heritage practitioners; they are ‘victims of their own success’ on multiple registers (Croix 2015). This is all the more so because, over the last decade at least, we have been unquestionably living through a global ‘Viking revival’ (Birkett 2019:4). Today, Vikings are a focus of identity, faith, politics, consumerism and escapism in which archaeological sources are drawn upon in rich and complex fashions.

In this context, I fully welcome a leading expert in Viking archaeology offering a timely, eloquent, incisive, and (in some ways) disturbing critique of the commercialisation and populism inherent in two new exhibits about the Viking Age in national museums: Copenhagen and Stockholm. Whilst each exhibition is informed by a team of experts, blending a rich array of material culture with digital technology, Sindbæk (2022) warns us that international tourists are their principal ‘market’ for a refreshed populist ‘Viking brand’. Professional, attractive, high-quality and engaging thematic displays utilise the latest archaeological research but tell stories which end up traditional and uncontroversial.

Sindbæk argues that the museums provide risk-averse and anodyne Viking Ages which retain many of the long-established core narratives and thus remain replete with tired and overly-familiar nationalistic and colonialist tropes and dimensions. From Sindbæk’s discussion we gain a sense

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that this results not simply from ‘by default’ and ‘by committee’ decisions, but might reflect the influence of corporate sponsors and pressures in the heritage sector to provide a ‘tourist offer’ faced with severe financial constraints. As Sindbæk hints, the growth of populist ethnonationalist movements and global white supremacists discourses, trends reflected in both politics and the media, is further context for this situation (see also Niklasson & Hølleland 2018).

I have three critical points to make which aim to support and extend, not detract from or devalue, Sindbæk’s insights and inferences: ‘where’s the evidence?’; ‘what’s the context?’; ‘what do we do about it?’ These points together lead me to propose we must collectively adopt a refreshed and re-invigorated agenda to pursue dedicated and sustained ‘Public Viking Research’ into today’s Vikingisms in museums and elsewhere.

Where’s the evidence?

As with too many discussions of museums and heritage sites, Sindbæk’s evaluation is published without plans, images or details of the museum designs and layout. There is no data in regards to visitor numbers and visitor experiences to back up his observations. This is not exactly his fault: while there are online showcased artefacts (see Historiska Museet n.d.) they seem insufficient in supporting Sindbæk’s analysis or to help readers who have not visited appreciate the nature of the exhibitions. Indeed, he is only able to cite reviews and a catalogue (for the Copenhagen gallery). Moreover, while the Copenhagen gallery does have a FAQ section, it is brief and disconnected from specific choices of narrative, design and artefact selection and placement (Nationalmuset n.d). There do not seem to be publicly available statements by the museums themselves, and the Stockholm exhibition (like many) is not ‘authored’. What of the museum policies, rationale and strategies in designing the exhibitions and how are they being received beyond a few critics and academics? Which topics and items were displayed for the first time, which appeared in previous exhibitions and which were removed from display for the new exhibitions? These are but some of the unanswered questions whose answers I wish we could learn in order to inform our understanding of the two museums’ displays.

The combined effect of the nature of the review and the lack of available resources by the museums themselves hinder what we can constructively say. While undoubtedly unintentional, this constitutes a shared inability to foster data-rich transparent discussions of museum displays on the Viking Age. Therefore, Sindbæk’s insights are valuable and draw on extensive expertise, but remain only personal impressions.

This partial evidential trail from museum planning to academic critique helps no one and collectively we must do better. Curators, researchers, artists and designers involved in exhibitions should be encouraged to share their informed and critical choices, and to create spaces which foster rather than stifle criticism and commentary. Transparency in regards to authorship, policies and strategies as well as self-evaluation would help museums contribute to academic discourse and tackle public questions and academic criticisms equally.

I would contend that podcasts, vlogs, blogs and other micro-blogging social media platforms afford a profitable range of venues by which this might work better in future. In such publicly accessible venues, we can host commentaries and debate on museum displays, even if we must be wary of their misuse and descent into unethical misrepresentations, hyperbole and slanging matches! Certainly, I have endeavoured to utilise my academic blog to circumvent this challenge and would advocate this as one example of how we collectively improve how early medieval heritage interpretation is evidenced and debated by academics and researchers (e.g. Williams 2020a, 2021), but there is far more we can do together in this regard. To foster transparency regarding the changing character and strategies for heritage interpretations thus requires us to rethink how we evidence and debate the shifting design and reception of museum and heritage exhibitions (see also Tuckley 2020).

What's the context?

Sindbæk chooses two high-profile national museums that demand critical attention. However, we are left wondering whether these galleries are indeed representative of broader trends in narrating the Viking Age in Denmark and Sweden, let alone farther afield across the 'Viking world' and beyond. Are these two galleries really a legitimate proxy for general trajectories for Viking archaeology and heritage interpretation in contemporary society? In other words, regarding the nature of these exhibitions, what's the context?

First, I would contend that it's very unlikely that most Danes or Swedes, let alone international tourists, rely on city-centre national museums for their education regarding the Viking Age. Do they matter compared with other kinds of local and regional museums, heritage attractions, ancient sites and monuments? It is surely a priority that a comparative analysis is conducted with other heritage sites, monuments and attractions, including museums, to contextualise these challenges faced regarding museum policy and practice in education and entertainment relating to the Viking phenomenon.

A further point is key: how does what these new museums narrate relate to what is taught in Danish and Swedish schools and how does this compare with education regarding the Vikings elsewhere in Scandinavia and the world? While it is unfair to expect Sindbæk to have conducted such a broad study, the dearth of comparative data is a hindrance. Future analyses could profitably reflect on how these exhibitions relate to the way the Viking Age is taught to children within and beyond museum settings (see also Lang & Powlesland 2020).

Without this comparative understanding, I fear that archaeologists inadvertently fall foul of perpetuating the prioritisation given to national museums and national collections. This is especially important in regards to Sindbæk's claims that these galleries manifest and perpetuate nationalistic and colonial narratives and legacies. Surely our critical attention should also tackle how the Viking Age is interpreted at open-air sites and local museums, as well as festivals and other public events, which together are at the very least as affected by funding issues and pressures to suit popular narratives, rather than the privately sponsored national collections (see Williams et al. 2020a; Parsons & Strong 2020)? Hence, we are left wondering: how do these museums fit into a broader phenomenon of the heritage conservation, management and interpretation of Viking-period material cultures, sites, monuments and landscapes in relation to different nations and regions from L'Anse aux Meadows to Kiyv, from Dublin to Helsinki (see also Boyd 2019; Williams et al. 2020a)? Indeed, I would contend that for local communities, the 'Vikings' take on a host of different roles linking past and present. This is attested, by way of example, in the church of St Bridget's, West Kirby (on the Wirral peninsula, Cheshire, England, UK) where its 'hogback' tomb materialises the Viking story, as do the further carved stone museums in the adjacent West Kirby Museum and the replica of the hogback on display at the Museum of Liverpool (Williams 2016). The site constitutes one of a network of local place-names, sites and monuments which constitute a localised sense of 'Viking' identity in today's world, one which is very different from the narratives articulated within well-funded national museums.

This leads to a further crucial dimension: to what extent do any of these heritage locales and exhibits matter in regards to present-day populist Vikings? Moving beyond museums and heritage sites, Sindbæk does not frame his discussion in relation to the well-established transdisciplinary literature on Vikingism as part of a broader critical evaluation of the Early Middle Ages in politics and popular culture: a trend which can be readily illustrated by three recently published and one forthcoming edited collection (Birkett & Dale 2019; Hardwick & Lister 2019; Williams & Clarke eds. 2020; Ellis Nilsson & Nyzell eds. forthcoming). Furthermore, how is the

heritage sector set within nested global 21st-century Vikingisms spanning from social media to video games (Bäckvall 2019), from films such as *The Northman* (dir. Robert Eggers, 2022) to television shows like *The Last Kingdom*, *Vikings* and *Vikings Valhalla* (e.g. Williams 2019a; Williams & Klevnäs 2019.), but also via a host of fantasy, science fiction and other genres (Hall 2020)? Beyond academia, the Viking Age is mediated by cosplayers, larpers, gamers, re-enactors, medieval martial artists, survivalists and Norse Heathens (see Dale 2019; Karpińska 2019; Parsons & Strong 2020; Williams forthcoming a and b) as well as widely exploited by businesses, local, regional and national tourism authorities, the entertainment industry, extremist political groups and the broader media (Dale 2019; Walsh 2020). Archaeologists must both tackle and critique these dimensions, not just museums, in order to understand and evaluate Viking populism!

All these groups draw upon the Viking Age in our contemporary society in complex and overlapping fashions, as do amateur historians, archaeologists, mythologists and folklorists, citizen scientists and local communities. Moreover, they now share information via social media far more than libraries, museums and other physical locales. When we realise the complexity and enormity of our task of evaluating our many present-day Vikingisms, the precise narratives opted by a couple of national museums, despite their prominence and significance, fade into relative insignificance. Certainly, academics should not place isolated displays on a pedestal for either adulation or castigation: our task is far broader, more complex, and more challenging.

What do we do about it?

Like so many academic statements regarding the current populist fascination with the Vikings, Sindbæk's review is frustrating reading not only because it is thinly evidenced and relatively free-floating without addressing wider Vikingisms in popular culture, but also because it lacks any practical recommendations for moving forward. This is disappointing from an author who has more than most not only conducted high-quality research but established a public profile through a host of channels to become one of very few well-known 'faces' for Viking archaeology on the international stage. I welcome his response in which I hope we can perceive expert vision and guidance, but here are some suggestions to the question: what do we do about it (see also Williams et al. 2020b)?

First of all, I would argue that we must maintain and promote active public-facing dialogues and engagements with established institutions and the wider media. As well as engagements with a host of global, interna-

tional, national, regional and local communities and stakeholders, considerable influence can be garnered by agreeing to consult with the producers and creators of games, films and documentaries as well as popular print literature (see Price 2019; Jarman 2020). Further still, we must foster opportunities for new ‘Viking public intellectuals’, seeking in particular for archaeological equivalents to successful history, language and literature creators (Crawford n.d.). Reflecting on the YouTube channel success of Dr Jackson Crawford by way of example, which at time of writing posts to over 236,000 subscribers, there is an argument to be made that archaeology needs more trained, high-quality social media creators. Another good example is The Welsh Viking (nd.) who has over 53,000 YouTube subscribers at the time of writing. A further success is the ‘Gone Medieval’ podcast hosted by Cat Jarman (Gone Medieval n.d.). Put simply, we need multiple ‘Jackson Crawfords’, ‘Welsh Vikings’ and ‘Cat Jarmans’ for Viking archaeology and Viking studies more broadly, and voices which present a range of perspectives and ethnic and cultural backgrounds, rather than the same staid stories (Crawford 2020; Jarman 2020; see also Tarlow & Nilsson Stutz 2013).

We also need to rethink how we engage. I contend we must be proactive rather than reactive in providing reliable resources and pre-empting likely lines of questioning, misinformation and disinformation. In this regard, I have argued that while a public relations coup in may regards, the open-access peer-reviewed publications and media reporting of the genomic revaluation of the Birka Bj581 chamber-grave as a ‘warrior woman’ embodied significant lessons for public Viking archaeology (Williams 2019b). Indeed, ‘identities’ are a predictable and ongoing fascination linking the Viking past with contemporary aspirations. Therefore, responding in public fashions where possible and sensitive to the many challenges in popular perceptions of the Vikings must be combined with fresh rigorous research into those popular perceptions and aspirations for the Viking Age. We must dig into their roots and their motivations and contexts, as with the disturbing rise of geneticised Viking identities burgeoning through both modern and ancient DNA (Strand & Källén 2021). The same applies to a broad and ever-evolving catalogue of stereotypes, misinformation and disinformation perpetuated online. By responding to key questions posed about the Vikings by the public we can at the least retain a foothold in these popular understandings and contribute to policy and resources which offer informed and data-driven engagements with the Viking world (e.g. Thomas 2020; Williams et al. 2020a; Williams 2022). To do this, we must stop relegating public engagement, particularly digital engagement, to the sidelines of our research. It deserves support and funding within academia, museums and heritage sites to retain the Viking Age as key gateway to public understanding of the human past without letting it become dominated by extremist discourses.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I welcome Sindbæk's valuable contribution as it adds to the growing recognition of the importance of archaeological and heritage research on the power and problems of Vikingisms in today's world. His article shows how academics and heritage practitioners have both an ability and a responsibility to explore, critique and challenge popular perceptions and political uses and misuses of the Viking past. This is especially significant while we enjoy or endure the current 'Viking revival' we are experiencing, and also because ultimately many of the popular fantasies surrounding Vikings in regards to a host of tropes and stereotypes, from commerce and sexuality to warfare and race, are created and sustained directly or indirectly by archaeological research. Yet to do this we need more transparent and robust applications of theory and method so often obscured and stunted when these discussions hit peer-reviewed publications. We require a scope and depth of analysis beyond national museums, and we must propose new, radical, yet sustainable and responsible, solutions to our critiques and public engagements.

This is the stance I promote via a pair of forthcoming essays (Williams forthcoming a and b). We must move beyond abdicating responsibility and bids to cancel key terms like 'Vikings' driven by a mix of historical particularism and timidity in tackling their popular misconceptions and extremist misuses (see also Williams 2020b, contra Woolf 2022). Likewise, we must avoid the repeated directionless admonishing of our collective failings as academics as if the popular Viking Age were somehow ours to police and control (Croix 2015:94). When we do so, we must propose alternative visions and strategies for public engagement with the Viking Age. Instead, to foster such initiatives, I contend we must create a fresh transdisciplinary field of research which might be called 'Public Viking Research', building on recent theories and methods in public archaeology as both an exploration and a critique of archaeology's place in contemporary society.

In this context, Sindbæk is right and clear in this robust challenge to the museum stories being created. I join him in demanding we do better. Yet this must involve a shift to a broader focus and a more robust set of strategies which span from how we publish in open-access peer-reviewed journals to how we operate via social media in order to provide available resources to counter existing and new popular fantasies about the Viking Age. This relates equally to how we engage with film directors, game-designers, artists, re-enactors, faith groups and local communities. Viking Public Research relates to many facets of teaching, research and public engagement, and must attend to the many global, international, national and local manifestations of Vikingisms (e.g. Gardela 2019). Yet specifically, I would argue that it is

with the many digital Vikingisms we encounter online, more than via museum galleries, where the battle for the heart and soul of Viking archaeology has already long been taking place. This is where we must direct our attention in conducting Public Viking Research for museums and beyond.

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