

Victims of Their Own Success

Academia and Public Research on 'The Vikings'

Matthias S. Toplak

In discussing two new major exhibitions on the Vikings – 'Join the Raid' in the Danish National Museum Copenhagen and 'The Viking World' in the Swedish State Historical Museum Stockholm – Søren M. Sindbæk addresses what is currently the most important question for museums concerning the presentation of the Vikings: how should we as an academic community impart knowledge of the Viking Age to the interested public? And, do we want to act formatively, bringing our research into the public discourse, or do we agree to be passively driven by current socio-political discourses, popular myths and new focuses and habits in media behaviour? At the end of his short introduction, Sindbæk poses a provocative question: 'Will Vikings free museums – or turn them into captives?' (Sindbæk 2022:11). Upon reflection, a slightly rephrased version of this thorny question seems more to the point: 'Will museums free Vikings – or will popular perceptions of the Vikings turn museums into captives?'

Sindbæk rightly notes that 'the Viking Age is one of the world's most well-known and popular historical brands' (Sindbæk 2022:11), and the Vikings are omnipresent in many aspects of daily life, from media to commercials. Globally-known glossy media formats such as the TV series 'Vikings' enshrine a glorified and romanticized version of the Viking Age in

Viking Museum Hedeby, Schleswig-Holstein State Museums Foundation Schloss Gottorf
matthias.toplak@landesmuseen.sh

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the public's perception which – as they correspond precisely to the needs and desires of the zeitgeist – are too often uncritically accepted as historical truth (see Hardwick & Lister 2019). Thus, they are both a curse and a blessing for the academic world. On the one hand, they create broad interest in the Viking Age, even among social groups which are otherwise less interested in history. On the other hand, they present a distorted perspective of the Viking Age, which is shaped far more by contemporary ideas, beliefs and discourses than by historical accuracy. Touching the nerve of time, the Viking Age, perhaps more than any other historical period, seems to be a projection screen for our modern desires. Certainly, for almost everyone in the Western world, the term 'Viking' triggers a crude, fuzzy chain of associations. At the same time, the Viking Age is shrouded in a mysterious fog of lack of knowledge: many questions remain unanswered by academia, and these voids can be filled with myths, desires and ideologies to create new narratives.

Thus, the Viking Age is the ideal place of longing for many people who feel they are losing their identity in a modern, domesticated and increasingly complex world which is characterized by profound social, political and economic changes. These insecurities and anxieties of the individual need some form of corrective, a tool to deal with this condition of society that sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has called 'liquid modernity' (Bauman 2000; see also Bida 2018). The Viking Age seems to be this kind of nostalgic tool for modern society, an idealized past as a desired future (Hasberg 2016; Nordström 2016). It certainly encapsulates the spirit of adventure, freedom and socially legitimized violence – the wild and untamed – and kindles the imagination to perceive it as a time of socio-cultural norms and deep-rooted values that make the Viking Age a place of longing, a 'retrotopia' (Bauman 2017) for Western society (Nordström & Toplak 2019).

The media can – as the success of series such as 'Vikings' or 'The Last Kingdom' clearly highlights – satisfy these needs of the audience. They present the Viking Age as an exciting era full of adventure and freedom, of romance and authenticity, which at the same time is characterized by norms and values such as honour and loyalty. They reflect modern discourses such as gender equality by showing female warriors as a normal aspect of Viking culture and fill content voids with convincing and fascinating narratives in a way that scientific institutions, limited by historical facts, would never be able to do. In addition, museums are increasingly driven by 'histotainment' (Popp et al. 2015) events, such as 'Vikingaliv' in Stockholm, or action-based re-enactment events, which often claim to present the 'real' Viking Age. In competition with these formats, it is not surprising that exhibitions in museums often appear static and boring to many visitors. Furthermore, a problem arises that Sindbæk has already addressed with the

definition of ‘populism’ (Sindbæk 2022:20). A populist imagination of the Viking Age is the imagination of the public in contrast to that of an elite. In this specific case, this elite is academia, whose source-related gaps in knowledge and internal scientific debates, but especially their disagreement with particularly popular myths, are sometimes interpreted as evidence of ignorance towards ‘common knowledge’. This has created two parallel levels of reception of ‘the’ Viking Age that are far from congruent: a popular one and an academic one.

With their new exhibitions, both museums are trying to respond to the visitors’ changing needs for entertainment and to the competition presented by media and histotainment events. However, both exhibitions, as discussed by Sindbæk, clearly illustrate different approaches to this crucial question, certainly due to the different socio-political approaches to the historical heritage of the Viking Age in both countries. The exhibition in Copenhagen reacts to these public demands in a very direct way. It focuses on weapons and silver, thus reproducing the popular myths of the Viking Age as an age of shining jewellery and heroic warriors. While the reality of everyday life during the Viking Age is mentioned only marginally, both in terms of content and social position, many references are made to concrete persons or individual fates in order to give the Viking Age individual faces. With the video installation portraying Björn Ironside’s legendary journey, which concentrates on the presentation of a (more or less fictitious) narrative, it almost seems as if the exhibition deliberately wants to go one step further than ‘Vikings’ or other media formats, by giving the visitors the impression of literally ‘joining the raid’. Without a doubt, this creates an immediate, multimodal and personal approach to a particular aspect of the Viking Age, and leads to a more visceral and intensive absorption of knowledge than classical showcases and wall texts. After the video installation, however, the question inevitably arises as to what knowledge about the Vikings the visitors will have internalized at the end of their visit: that the Vikings, as warriors and plunderers, brought back a lot of silver from their equally heroic and dramatic raids, just like a legendary hero they also know from ‘Vikings’? Or, that the Viking Age was a fascinating epoch full of far-reaching contacts and cultural exchange, elaborate art and craftsmanship and social and religious change?

In contrast, the new exhibition in Stockholm almost completely disregards both the spectacular narratives and myths and the direct, personal approach to the people of the Viking Age through individual fates, aiming to present a far more nuanced and comprehensive, although inevitably incomplete, picture of the Swedish Viking Age. Striking are the omissions of what is not presented. Dísá, the girl from Birka, loses her individual identity and is reduced to an exhibit for modern scientific investigations, and

the inventory from the heatedly-debated grave of the ‘female warrior’ from Birka is presented without mention of the sensational gender determination, nothing but a symbol of the warrior identity in the Viking Age. Many topics that are currently discussed in society – gender roles, colonialism, identity, slavery – are only partially mentioned in the context of a general description of the Viking Age. Social hierarchization with unfree and slaves is just as much a part of the exhibition as are the prominent raids (which are thematized together with trade journeys), but there is no special emphasis attempting to link these aspects with the contemporary social discourse.

In the competition to grab the visitors’ attention, both exhibitions convey a feel-good atmosphere. They offer confirmation of a general image of the Vikings as conveyed by the media, while at the same time evading both controversies and difficult political issues that could possibly cast doubt on the image of the Viking Age as a glorious era full of adventure and heroism. Nevertheless, both exhibitions are spectacular and worth seeing due to their design and especially the finds which are presented. More specifically, they also show the development of an ever-closer entanglement of cultural institutions, contemporary social discourse and media consumption. In this way, they initiate a discussion about how museums should appear in an increasingly medial world: as accompanying events in the background of the socio-cultural discourses that are trying to satisfy the needs and interests of the public for economic reasons; in other words, as profit-oriented service providers to the tourism sector? If so, museums would inevitably make themselves redundant, as the success of the popular media formats works through a ‘populist’ representation of the Viking Age as the general public wants to know it, ‘free from any revisionism, critique or other “elitist” discourse’ (Sindbæk 2022:20). This representation has no need for either museums or universities; it sometimes even seeks to contradict academia. Or, should museums continue to assert their elitist position as a central academic authority and thus spur on the tension between populism and elitism?

The middle way between the two positions seems most promising: that is, to take up the interest of the public by reacting to the glossy images of the opulent and visually powerful media formats. It would be grossly negligent, both economically and culturally, not to take advantage of the enormous, unbroken interest in the Viking Age fuelled by the media, in order to reach culturally disinterested strata – the non-visitors – which make up about half of the German population (Wegner 2010; Renz 2016). And what other topic has the potential to reach people who are otherwise indifferent to history and visits to museums if not the Viking Age? If we succeed in seeking the dialogue with the interested public, if we accept the obvious need for such a ‘retrotopia’, if we discuss popular myths, misconceptions and longings without preaching and present the current state of research,

embedded in scientifically tenable but exciting narratives, we will certainly attract many visitors while remaining the undisputed authority on the Viking Age. Thus, we will get the opportunity to initiate social discourse, to correct cherished myths and, above all, to show that the ‘real’ Viking Age is much more complex and fascinating than that portrayed in the media.

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