

Pirates in the Age of Populism

New Viking Exhibitions in Stockholm and Copenhagen

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Within the space of a few months, new major exhibitions on the Viking Age have opened at two of Scandinavia's main museums: at the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm, and at the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen. Meanwhile, work is in progress in Oslo to bring together the famous ships formerly exhibited at the Viking Ship Museum with the general Viking Age collection of the Museum of Cultural History in a new dedicated 'Museum of the Viking Age' to be opened in 2026.

The Viking Age, always the popular star of Scandinavian prehistory, thus continues to be an object offered to the public for adulation. So what do these new initiatives aim to achieve? Tourism is the surprisingly simple answer, as both museums have signalled. In this way, the exhibitions provide an insight into the adaptation which major museums have been moving towards over the 2010s in order to thrive in the age of populism, consumerism and privatization. The new exhibitions are thus a dry run for the heritage policies of the 2020s. The Viking Age is one of the world's most well-known and popular historical brands, and the major Scandinavian museums are bustling with fascinating objects and captivating stories to present. Is this enough for them to prosper? Will Vikings free museums – or turn them into captives?

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Stockholm: The Viking World

‘The Viking World’ opened in June 2021 at the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm. The museum’s previous gallery on the period, ‘The Vikings’ was launched in 2001, and evolved gradually over the following twenty years with significant changes and additions in 2004–5, 2011 and 2016. An important addition came in 2016, when a special section was added with a focus on the Sámi. The exhibition had a prominent educational agenda, aiming to show the Swedish public ‘real people’ from the period, and to raise awareness of political uses of the period’s heritage, such as in Swedish nationalism and Nazi ideology (Anon. n.d.). By the late 2010s the exhibition was deemed to be out-of-date, and out-of-line with the interests of an increasing audience of international tourists. When the popular commercially operated visitor centre ‘Vikingaliv’ was launched in 2017 in Stockholm’s Djurgården recreational area, this was branded as filling a gap of ‘Viking attractions’ in Stockholm, raising debate on the display at the Swedish History Museum (Daun 2017).

The new exhibition is credited to an unnamed team at the museum, working together with external partners, and with interior architect Atsuko Hamanaka Brandt highlighted as creating the exhibition design. The online presentation boasts of numbers, promising 1000 square meters and 2,500 original objects, the latter including a fair number of clench nails and hack silver fragments. It has opened to generally favourable reviews, which have emphasized the stylishness and the effective use of digital media (Cederskog 2021; Bäckstedt 2021).

The show starts out in the most obvious setting for an attraction aimed at international tourists: in a gift shop. At least, this is the first association created by the elegant line of glass showcases, crammed with dazzling objects in bright, refined lightning. If visitors are coming from or proceeding to the museum’s famous Gold Room, they will sense a familiar feeling that they have arrived at the next level of a department store. The question suggested in this setup, the sense of wonder and curiosity which this framing invokes, is simple: which ones would you like to buy?

Admittedly, in the contemporary consumers’ world, this may well be just about the most inviting and acceptable way to greet visitors. Not with questions or instructions, but with a bargain on offer, and a short introduction text headlined ‘boundless encounters’. And what a bargain indeed. Stockholm can draw on the rich finds from Birka, the hoards of Gotland, and unique finds from all of Sweden, from Skåne to Lapland. For any museum, this would be an enviable trove from which to present a slice of the past. And the exhibition team generally makes the most of it. Entering the

exhibition, the fundamental experience is one of inviting, engaging, and professional communication, and impressive and intriguing content.

In their freestanding, all-glass showcases, the objects can be appreciated at close range from all sides, and literally at all levels, with well-selected objects placed at child's height. Famous finds and hidden gems alike, they have never before been so accessible or so well-presented. An excellent set-up for a guided tour, said my experienced companion. There are no texts with the objects, but the adjacent touchscreens provide detailed information on any item, and make it possible to zoom in on high-resolution images. These are also available for further study on the exhibition website (Historiska Museet n.d.). And they are not just gold and treasure: for example the website holds 38 excellent images of all kinds of spindle whorls, to be enlarged beyond measure (yes, you can actually *see* the museum dust).

The main exhibition room is themed by pagan mythology, easily still the most famous aspect of Viking Age Scandinavia, and a convenient way to suggest a connection between each and every other focus in the exhibition. It is also a convenient way in which to bypass the fact that the items enrolled for this narrative are brought together from a wide range of regions and traditions. In many ways, regions like Gotland, Norrland or Småland have very different ecologies and cultural traditions, but this exhibition turns them all into aspects of a single picture: Viking Age Sweden.

At the centre of the exhibition stands a representation of the world tree, Yggdrasil, as a symbolic anchor of cosmology. There are ten thematic focus areas, ranging from crafts, social structure and gender to cultural exchange and travel... ever more travel. The visual experience and the content thrive from the extraordinary diversity of objects available for display. The theme 'Divine craftwork' showcases the stark iron tools and the sturdy wooden box of the Mästermyr find, while 'The living and the dead' captivates the eye with a dazzling installation of iron boat rivets from a cremation burial, suspended on thin wires to produce the outline of the boat.

As the visit progresses, one begins to sense that one is moving in two parallel worlds – those of texts and objects respectively. On the higher ground, written on the walls, runs an easy and slick general narrative about the Viking Age. Along with it, providing beautiful backdrop distraction, are the showcases with their objects, but too often with no immediate connection between the two. It is easy enough to stretch imagination when passing attention from the texts to the objects, which can often be thought of as exemplifying some aspect of the text. But if an exhibit captures your curiosity, the words will often fail you.

Nowhere is this more conspicuous than in the corner where we find a star of the former exhibition, the 'Birka Girl'. This is a block-lifted child's grave excavated at the trading town Birka. In 2011 an accurate life-size re-

production was made of the child in her garments, reconstructed using the latest in biomolecular and forensic science. The installation was designed to bring you face to face with the human side of the past, a key aim of that exhibition.

The grave remains in the exhibition, now subsumed under bland texts explaining ‘Town-like centres’ and how ‘Teeth reveal people’s mobility’. But the resurrected girl has left. Somewhat disturbingly, she is still there. She is waiting in the corridor as you leave the last room, penned in a corner framed by wooden rafters. The scene may be meant to show her as hanging out by the farm fence; but it presents a disquieting image of a defiant orphan, separated from her parentage and habitat, and fenced-in like an inconvenient truth. The rudimentary diorama reeks like an afterthought – someone in the exhibition team must have objected to leaving out last season’s star altogether.

The Birka Girl brings out starkly what, of all things, is not to be found in the new exhibition. Among all the stories, the myths, the treasures, the crafts and the symbolic objects, there are no humans. Not as images, not as figures, and rarely even as named or imagined individuals in the texts. This is a world in which we, the spectators and consumers, are the focus, and in which we can reflect our thoughts, views and identities, unconcerned with disturbing others. In its unplanned way, the sight of the orphaned prodigy provides a thought-provoking coda to the ‘Viking World’ exhibition – a world in which the human aspect of the past has turned into an unhappy ghost child.

Copenhagen: The Raid – Join the Vikings

Also in June 2021, following delays caused by the pandemic-induced lockdowns, the National Museum in Copenhagen opened the doors to a new, permanent exhibition on the Viking Age. The title ‘The Raid – Join the Vikings’, is a rhetorical escalation compared to Stockholm, pledging drama, engagement and celebration in five short words. The exhibition is produced with archaeologist Jeanette Varberg as lead organizer, assisted by curators and researchers Anne Pedersen, Lisbeth Imer and Peter Pentz (Varberg ed. 2021). Film director Martin De Thurah has created a visual experience, which takes up a third of the exhibition space, and is planned as the first of a series of shifting special exhibitions within the wider frame of the room (Nationalmuseet 2021). This and much more is detailed in the extensive exhibition website (Nationalmuset n.d.).

Despite its standing in the popular imagination, the Viking Age has led a troubled existence at Denmark’s main historical museum in Copen-

hagen. When the exhibition about Danish prehistory was renewed in the 1980s, the Viking Age gallery was the last to be produced, at a time when the project was running low on resources. Some displays were left visibly unfinished for the next two decades. When a new makeover was produced in 2009, the Viking Age gallery was again only partially finished to plan. Whether due to serendipity or institutional inertia, nobody at the National Museum apparently felt compelled or empowered over a 30-year period to take charge of the public presentation of a key gallery. If visitors asked to see the collections from the Viking Age, they were shown through an exit door into the somewhat unresolved back part of the prehistoric exhibition.

Through the 2010s staff at the National Museum created several highly successful international exhibitions on Viking Age themes, but the permanent gallery remained largely unchanged. In an attempt to improve the experience, a new museum director invited designer Jim Lyngvild to brush up the gallery in 2018. Lyngvild's striking designs, his ability to engage the audience, and his deliberate challenges to the cultural establishment, were a success with the public. Yet the result of a rushed process and somewhat faltering communication left aims and frames unclear and caused mixed reactions (Sindbæk 2018; Pentz et al. 2019). For the new permanent gallery, the museum has clearly aimed to steer a different course. If Lyngvild's show was provocative, but also genuinely inviting to an audience beyond habitual museum visitors, 'The Raid' is somewhat a regression to mean.

Entering into the main room, one is dazed by the outline of a large ship, a large open plaza and a runestone with an image of another ship. Guides kindly approach the visitors to explain the proper route to take. This leads to a rather less overwhelming introduction display, with a grand screen showing maps of sea-routes, by now a commonplace of Viking Age exhibitions. The maps show Europe covered in names in Norse, which probably rather inflates the impression of the Scandinavian impact for the average museum visitor.

Beside the map is a little showcase with the first actual objects encountered. It frames a bright idea, which has come across rather poorly. To the inaugurated, the tiny objects – coins, amulets, pendants – all contain images that allude to pagan religion, and thus suggest encounters with a culturally different world. However, out of forty students I took to visit the exhibition, only a few guessed the meaning, thinking instead that the small glittering objects in the shadow of the route-map alluded to wealth and plunder. Drawings, enlargements, or simply text, could have brought out the point – there are some 20 square meters of bare, black wall behind the showcase available for the purpose – but as it is, many will miss it.

There follows a row of attractive showcases, lining up against the exhibition's top showpiece: the remains of the world's largest known Viking

ship, Roskilde 6. The ship, or rather the stainless-steel framework built to hold together the sparse surviving parts, makes a dramatic framing for the room. It has starred in earlier travelling exhibitions as the centrepiece around which the displays were organized. However, placed as it is here at the edge of the main exhibition room, partially screened by showcases, there is no spot from which the public can get close to this unique find, or can get a proper overview. It effectively becomes a sumptuous room divider.

Visually, the gallery is impressive and attractive. The room is dark, with black surfaces and minimalist, expensive-looking furnishings. The objects are well lit, though less accessible than in Stockholm, most of them visible only from one side. The amount of text in the showcases is minimal, and the design is clearly meant to be experienced in conjunction with the touchscreens, which are placed at intervals. The latter are rather few, though, and sometimes several metres distant from the objects. On a busy day, the visitor will only be able to access them sparsely.

The middle part of the display initially appears like a maze of showcases. This section is organized chronologically in a few main periods, signalled along one sidewall with year-tags. Within this broader framing, various themes are highlighted. One of the highlights is two skeletons of men who lived around AD 1000. One was found buried in a mass grave in Oxford, the other in a small burial ground on Fyn, but a recent DNA study has shown the two to be close relatives, perhaps an uncle and a nephew. Simple as this is, the two skeletons effectively communicate a relatable, personal view of the past, while also providing a demonstration of new heritage science.

Skeletons apart, a slight sense of monotony creeps in at this point of the exhibition, if not before. The reason is that an overwhelming proportion of the objects in most showcases is tiny silver or other metal ornaments, their numbers boosted by the thousands of finds made through private metal detecting in recent years and acquired by the National Museum by default through the Danish treasure trove system. With relatively few other materials prominently on display, it is easy to acquire a sense of metal fatigue.

While part of the justification for the exhibition was the need to showcase the Viking Age to international tourists, this remains in some ways an inimitably Danish exhibition. By contrast to Sweden, expressions of nationalism are widely seen as innocent in Danish public life, and the use of heritage in national discourses is sometimes unreflected, even naïve. This is also the case here.

At the centre of the exhibition is a large, prominent showcase, which has been made to hold a varied collection of the most famous and artistically important objects of the collection – perhaps due to the prohibitive costs of modern high-security cabinets. The ‘treasures’ include such items as the Søllested harness bows, the Hornelund brooches and the Tissø gold ring.

This showcase is prominently labelled ‘Harald Bluetooth’, and supplied with a text about this king, who has come to be seen as a founding father of Denmark. As often with celebrity stars, it is hard to tell what exactly has caused Harald Bluetooth’s present fame in Denmark. Certainly his association with the Jelling monuments, with large building works including the Trelleborg-type ring-fortresses, and with the conversion to Christianity have all contributed to making him a household name to the Danes. (So has – entirely undeservedly – the association with the Bluetooth system for short-range wireless interconnection).

Few if any objects in the showcase can be associated in any meaningful way with Harald Bluetooth. Their conjunction with the king can only be explained as an imposition of national myth, presented in a blunt, unmitigated way: Harald Bluetooth is an important modern myth, so he needs to be given an important place in the gallery. This installation is almost certainly destined to become a favourite case study for critical heritage studies.

Once this experience has sunk in, the celebration of national myths is also apparent in other parts of the display, for example in the part that deals with the ‘North Sea Empire’ of Cnut, who ruled over England, Denmark, and some of the Swedes. In other places, national history plays a more direct and again strangely unreflected part in the display. This is when the colonization of the North Atlantic is illustrated with prime finds from Iceland, not in Copenhagen on loan, but because they have remained there since Icelandic independence in 1944. None of this colonial history is problematized or even thematized, a fact which stands out as quite striking in the current intellectual context.

Along the sides of the main room, two literal sideshows are faintly integrated with the main exhibition. In a gallery along one side, there is a child-friendly display with items to touch – perhaps in recognition of the fact that many showcases in the main exhibition are too high for small children to see objects properly. Along with these is a series of cartoon-style life-size paintings of kings and queens in period costume drawn by Jesper Ejsing. Tucked away in the side aisle, the images are tongue-in-cheek, and probably meant to balance the seriousness of the main display. The historic accuracy in the images is inconsistent, as if that does not matter here in the back space: Svein Estridsen’s queen Gunhild (mid-eleventh-century) is shown clutching the Gunhild cross, a twelfth-century ivory crucifix.

In the far side of the gallery, in more than one sense, one enters the temporary installation on ‘The Raid’. This is mainly an audio-visual experience, supplemented with a few archaeological objects, narrating the story of Bjorn Ironside’s expedition to the Mediterranean. Once again, the style, presentation, and experience changes dramatically, for what mainly seems an art installation. The story unfolds to a slow, dream-like, even drugged voice

and flickering images of a still, drowning figure. Most people I watched were struggling to determine when to move on and to follow the trip, and not a few gave up. In itself, the installation is interesting and innovative. But in conjunction with the rest of the display, it spells a complete break – speaking in a different voice, in a different frame of reference, and perhaps to a different audience than the main exhibition.

It is not clear how the very different components of ‘The Raid’ complement each other. Perhaps they were conceived as separate ideas, which ended up for practical reasons sharing the same space. Perhaps they were planned to be different all along. By turning the different parts of the exhibition into very different experiences, visually and contents-wise, the gallery strengthens the underlying similarity to a shopping trip in a department store – a world where the visitor can take on the comfortable role of a customer, and where the people of the past recede to the role of obliging assistants, ready to cater for whatever their posterities expect and demand.

Museums, the Vikings, and the populace

What do these new exhibitions aim to tell us about the Viking Age? What stands out most strikingly is how middle-of-the-road both are, compared to their predecessors. There is little of the moralizing about minorities, political abuse or the individual that formerly formed an undercurrent in the Stockholm gallery. Nor is there any of the brash probing of the relationship between museums and their audience which drew crowds to Lyngvild’s makeover in Copenhagen.

The two exhibitions both take pains to present Viking Age Scandinavia in a flattering light, carefully circumnavigating controversies. The Viking World, it would appear, was an exciting place of awesome people who had great styles, held great ideas, and did great deeds – true influencers. Slavers and warriors too, to be sure, but such was the order of the day. Hardly anyone will raise an eyebrow. If the ethos of the former gallery in Stockholm was that of a sermon, and Copenhagen that of an outburst, the basic experience in both is now that of a subtle sales-pitch. The title of the Copenhagen exhibition even spells out the bandwagon appeal: ‘Join the Vikings’.

Most previous efforts at both museums were directed above all to the national public, whether imagined as a nation, civil society, or taxpayers. Something is different this time. This was apparent already when plans were published in 2018 for a refurbishment of the existing Viking Age gallery at the National Museum in Copenhagen, and subsequently for an entirely new exhibition dedicated to the period. Director Rane Willerslev justified the focus on the Viking Age in the official press release by observing that

the ‘Vikings are one of the big draws for both Danes and tourists’ (Nationalmuseet 2018). Not the educational needs of the public or the nation, but tourists – consumers.

In the light of such statements, it is clear how the outlook of the exhibition, and the choice of subject matter, reflect the priorities of a more general change in the economics and policies of the heritage sector. Museums are traditionally regarded as providing a public service, curating and presenting important, public-held assets, and preserving and disseminating knowledge. More perhaps than most other parts of the public sector, museums also have an evident commercial potential. In a situation where governments are committed to cuts and privatization, while a generally affluent public is ready to spend considerable amounts on entertainment and recreation, and expects to receive a service from the public sector similar to what they meet as consumers elsewhere, the question is inevitably raised as to how far museums should be subsidized, or be able to sustain themselves as commercial businesses.

The enabling aspects of this new economy are shown by the availability of the very considerable funds which have gone into the two new exhibitions. The Copenhagen Exhibition is produced with substantial contributions from the Augustinus and A.P. Møller Foundations, while the Stockholm exhibition is listed as sponsored by the commercial company MuseumsPartner. This situation is not unique to the two museums. In 2022, Denmark’s other main archaeological museum, Moesgaard Museum, has also launched a new Viking exhibition, focused on Eastern Europe, and produced on a similar scale and ambition as those in Stockholm and Copenhagen (Asingh & Jensen 2022). Meanwhile in Oslo, an even bigger project is underway to create a new dedicated ‘Museum of the Viking Age’, a united exhibition for the former Viking Ship Museum and the Viking Age collection of Museum of Cultural History. Similar to Stockholm and Copenhagen, these initiatives illustrate the new drive for museums to sustain themselves on tourists and private sponsors – and the key role of the Viking Age in that effort.

Yet for all the love of Vikings, and despite the magnificent collections the museums have at hand, the dependency on commercial income has shown itself a vulnerable position. Despite favourable reviews (Cederskog 2021; Bäckstedt 2021; Pedersen 2021; Blüdnikow 2021), both exhibitions have initially struggled to attract the expected crowds. This fact can largely be ascribed to the weakening of international tourism in the midst of the 2020–22 pandemic, yet the fact begs the question of where the policies of the last decade have left museums. Framed as visitor attractions with the core task of sustaining income, museums have become prey to an unprecedented degree to fluctuating visitor numbers. Despite the lifting of pandemic restric-

tions, the National Museum in Copenhagen recently announced major cuts to staffing, including a substantial group of senior academic staff. These cuts were explained with direct reference to ‘the missing visitors, especially tourists’ (Nationalmuseet 2022).

The concentration on the business of tourism has thus had direct, palpable consequences for staffing, basic curatorial tasks, and knowledge-building. This will eventually put a question to policymakers: whether they are ready to help the museums out, or to let less visible aspects of museum curation deteriorate – or perhaps, in some versions of heritage ideology, to be passed on in the future to the domain of private sponsorship and volunteers.

Beyond the condition of privatization, and the turn to tourism and consumerism, the outlook of the two exhibitions also expresses another change of orientation, which is equally characteristic of their time. In acquiescing to follow popular demand and focus the key efforts on the Viking Age, and in presenting that period essentially in accordance with popular narratives, both museums seem to step down from an academic, elite position and come forward to the general populace. This perspective is epitomized in the introduction to the book published with the Copenhagen exhibition. Here the Viking Age is celebrated in no uncertain terms: ‘With ships, swords, ingenuity on the battlefield, a sense of trade, and a strong belief that luck follows the brave, the Vikings left their mark throughout the known world’ (Varberg 2021:10). This, to be sure, is the Viking Age as the general public will know it, free from any revisionism, critique or other ‘elite’ discourse.

The most appropriate term for this perspective is populism. Museums need popular appeal, to be sure – but this is different. Populism is the political discourse that claims to emphasize the ideas of the people, often presented as a group juxtaposed against the elite. By all accounts, its growth has been one of the salient hallmarks of politics across much of the world in the last decade. Much of the public rhetoric about the 2018 Copenhagen refurbishment was couched in terms of elite v. the people. This element is much less pronounced in the two present exhibitions, yet a component remains in the fact that the instructing, educational tone, which could be sensed in former galleries, is now largely absent. Instead, the exhibitions seem to have tacitly accepted the terms of popular discourse. What do you want to hear about the Vikings? Mythology? Adventures? National glory and Harald Bluetooth? Then that’s what we’ll give you!

The implicit orientation was recognized in a conservative Danish newspaper for the Copenhagen exhibition: ‘It is a pleasure to see that the objects are in focus and that one does not embark on far-reaching narratives that must satisfy the identity-political currents of the time, #metoo wishes or other political fads’ (*Berlingske Tidende* 2021). By contrast to such concerns, the reviewer had no objections to the celebration of national mythol-

ogy, nor to the admiring rhetoric about ships, swords, battlefields and luck that follows the brave. Populism ostensibly serves the populace, but more consistently serves to empower its protagonists at the expense of anyone and anything that can be construed as an elite. For museums – repositories of accumulated knowledge, study, evidence – to embrace such a perspective is a precarious position to say the least.

There is a paradox in the fact that exposure to a growing market of consumers has enabled two leading Scandinavian museums to launch large and generally professional and attractive exhibitions, yet at the same time placed them in a situation which plainly limits their choice of action, subject matter and approach. Even more so in the fact that the appeal to international tourists should lead to more culturally conservative and nationally focussed exhibitions than most previous ones. If museums have nothing better to offer, they will tread a perilous path to the future, no matter how many Vikings they summon.

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