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NEIL PRICE

Understanding the Viking phenomenon

IN THE MORE THAN thirty-five years that have passed since I began my undergraduate studies in Viking-Age archaeology, the image that we have of this time has changed profoundly. It is no exaggeration to say that these historical reconfigurations extend to the very concepts on which our understanding of early medieval Scandinavia is based.

Not so long ago, the Viking Age was generally agreed to begin in 793 CE with the first recorded seaborne attack, on the monastery of Lindisfarne in Northumbria, and to end with the death of the Norwegian King Haraldr harðráði at Stamford Bridge in 1066. It is symptomatic of this approach, and its problems, that the same date range can be expressed even more precisely – actually to the day! – from the raid of 8th June to the battle on 25th September: clearly, a historical era defined in this way bears no resemblance to life as lived.

Scholars now speak more broadly of the period from c. 750 to c. 1050, though with a conscious fuzziness of several decades at either end of the scale, and conceptualised in terms of transformations (social, ideological, spiritual, and political) rather than events. As part of this re-evaluation, we have also seen an important shift from the notion of a Viking ‘expansion’, at its core an imperialistic notion of purposeful conquest and Nordic exceptionalism, to the recognition that a more appropriate term

would be ‘diaspora’ – something much more haphazard, fluid, and multivariate, with movement in all directions, cultural feedback, and a complex set of relations between ideas of ‘homeland’ and the world beyond.¹

Viewing the major research themes since the 1980s, and particularly of the past twenty years, one can perceive a radical shift from what was previously seen as a relatively homogenous Viking world. The sources of social power are being explored from every angle, with projects addressing the rise of monarchies and centralised states, and their tensions with legal structures and popular assembly; the developing rural and urban environments, in symbiosis with complex, nodal networks of trade at a variety of scales; migration and demographics; warfare, conflict, civil defence and fortification; art, craftwork, manufacturing, and design. A particular signature of the last two decades has also been an emphasis on the more intangible aspects of the period, such as ideology and world-view, gender and identity, spiritual beliefs and practices – and their expression in rituals and mortuary behaviour that go very much further than the restrictive framework of ‘religion’.

Alongside all this revisionism, however, focus has also been directed to something even more fundamental, namely the artificiality of making such historical periodisations at all, and the obvious fact that ‘the Viking Age’ (whether as an expansion or a diaspora) is an academic construct with roots that go back to the nineteenth century and beyond. Part of this discussion has concerned the word itself: what does *Viking* actually mean, and how should we use it? The etymology of Old Norse *vikingr* has been much debated, there is no consensus, and in any case a word’s ultimate origins do not necessarily connect with its everyday employment. Clearly too, the many senses of the term as used in the late Iron Age (including the most common, broadly approximating to ‘pirate’) are distinct from ‘Viking’ today, which both in English and the Scandinavian languages has become a modern word with equally modern meanings.

In all this confusion and ambiguity, of vague terms and unclear borders, how then should we proceed? The Viking Age, however we define

it, had no obvious beginning, any more than an obvious end. The various motors that drove ‘whatever it was’ revved up and wound down in different ways, at different speeds, at different times, and in different places. But while there can be no question of a single trigger for all this, no smoking gun or monolithic explanation, the essential question remains, summarised in that phrase *whatever it was* – so what *was* the unfolding social process that we more or less agree to call the Viking Age, and how did it start?

The search for an answer lies at the heart of a major archaeological research project located at Uppsala University, generously funded with 50 million kronor by Vetenskapsrådet as part of their Distinguished Professor programme. Running for ten years, 2016–2025, its objective is to understand the driving forces behind what can be described as the Viking phenomenon.

The Viking Phenomenon

A key principle of the project was the establishment of several ‘terms and conditions’ for our work, of which the first was a commitment to the Viking Age as an empirical reality, open to theoretical illumination and interdisciplinary comparative analysis. We understand the need for critical deconstruction, of course, but there is also a risk that very real historical trends and movements can be effectively caveated out of existence. Just because nobody then living would have recognised the concept of a Viking Age (and they would have been *very* surprised to learn that people of later centuries would label them all as Vikings), does not mean they would not have appreciated the changing feel of their *Zeitgeist*.

The second principle of the project was a response to this, and concerns chronology. The illusion of a 793–1066 timeframe has been mentioned above, but we also see a danger in fixing a watertight temporal frontier at all. In particular, this relates to the division between the Viking Age and the preceding centuries, a rather confusing era that goes by different names across Scandinavia: in Denmark, the period from



THE VIKING PHENOMENON

The logo of the Viking Phenomenon project is taken from a fragmentary bronze mount for a sword scabbard, recovered from a cremation grave at Solberga in Askeby parish, Östergötland. The object dates to c. 700 CE, the eve of the Viking Age. There is a figure in a boat – is he a man, a god, or something else? Who or what is the female being in the water below, resplendent in her gown, shawl and necklace? Is she helping or hindering his fishing attempt? Or is she the catch? Why was this scene thought suitable to decorate a weapon? The enigmatic motif is known nowhere else, but has been suggested to come from an episode of the Finnish *Kalevala* – an intriguing connection if correct. Whatever it means, it may once have been easily recognisable from the ancestral stories of the North, most of which are now lost to us. It serves today as an evocative window on all that we have yet to learn about the Viking phenomenon. Statens historiska museer inv. no. 21921. Original drawing by Harald Faith-Ell, 1939; reworked by Andreas Hennius and Södra Tornet, 2017–2018.

c. 550–750 is known as the Late Germanic Iron Age; in Norway, it is the Merovingian period, referencing the contemporary kingdom of the Franks; in Sweden it is *Vendeltiden*, the Vendel Period, named after the famous boat grave cemetery in northern Uppland where its characteristic elites were first identified. Part of our project is a critical enquiry into the debateable reality of the Vendel-Viking transition, and the possible erasure of that border – a point I return to below; we therefore concentrate on the period roughly 750–850, and the decades on either side.

The third condition of the project can initially seem banal, but in fact breaks with a long tradition of uniformity in how the Viking Age is perceived. Our firm contention is that the people of the time were individuals, every bit as complicated and varied as we are. And really, why would anybody imagine that they were not? As a basic position, this obviously embraces issues of identity, gender, and diversity in every form, but it actually also encompasses everything else about the variations found within any human community. The Viking Age of our project is no single entity, but a myriad of experiences.

Reactions to that contention, some of which have been highly critical (especially from those who prefer their ‘Vikings’ to be exclusively maritime, violent, male, white, and straight), connect to the fourth and final of our project principles. Put simply, we believe that the process of studying the Viking Age must also involve a critical acknowledgment of the weight and breadth of its legacies in contemporary society. Again, this is explored further below.

The Viking Phenomenon project has a core team of three, with myself as director and two senior researchers – docents Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson and John Ljungkvist – who each supervise half of the programme; Charlotte’s presence also connects us to the Swedish History Museum and its collections. We are joined by a number of other archaeological scholars, including docent Ben Raffield who has been a key project member throughout, several researchers from museums and universities in the UK and Canada, and Professor Anders Ögren who

brings expertise in economic history. As explored below, the project also has a filial group in Estonia, working on a specific aspect of the excavated material.

The project is divided into two primary sections, one linked to the analysis of archaeological excavation data and the other oriented around multiple, interdisciplinary workshops and seminars. Each strand also includes public outreach components. As is natural with an undertaking on this scale, a number of summary progress reports have appeared over the years,² but what follows here is an overview of our thinking around the design of the research, and an outline of where we stand at the start of 2022.

Boat Grave Culture

The first sub-project is directed by John Ljungkvist and addresses what we have called Boat Grave Culture, exploring the nature of Scandinavian societies around the start of the Viking Age. Taking the classic raids as a starting point, the central questions here are why, when, and how did they begin? Where did they come from? Which social groups were responsible? Why just then, and in that way? Were the raids part of larger socio-political processes? Our focus is on two excavation programmes, one quite old, the other relatively recent.

The Valsgårde cemetery lies a few kilometres north of Uppsala, occupying two slopes of a low hill rising from the Uppland plain. It was excavated by Uppsala University from the 1920s to the 1950s, with a break during the war, revealing a total of 15 boat graves (constructed roughly once per generation, apparently for men), and more than 60 other graves in chambers and cremations, many of which were the burials of women. The cemetery spans the whole of the later Iron Age, from c. 500 to around 1120, and seems to contain no Christian elements at all – which, astonishingly, means that people were still being buried with traditional rites on the Valsgårde hilltop a couple of decades *after* the First Crusade. The boat graves include some of the most spectacular finds from all of

the late Iron Age, especially those dating to the Vendel Period, comparable to the contemporary boat burials from the Vendel type-site itself. However, there is nothing to say that these obviously impressive graves were intrinsically more important than the others around them, just that the rituals involved were different; there were clearly people of very high status indeed in the chambers and cremations. The Valsgårde cemetery, with its long, continuous chronology, gives us a unique insight into a single, prosperous community in central Sweden, their views of death and life, both before, during and after the Viking Age.

More recent, but unexpectedly related, excavations took place across the Baltic on the Estonian island of Saaremaa (Ösel in Swedish), at a coastal village called Salme. Between 2008 and 2012, two boat burials were uncovered in rescue excavations, and proved to contain an unprecedented 7 and 34 men respectively. The vessels were full of weapons, with more swords than men, together with numerous sacrifices of dogs, birds and fish. On the larger boat, which seems to have been a sailing ship, the dead were arranged in a great pile covered with shields, two swords stuck vertically in the top. It is one of the most significant archaeological finds of the last hundred years, and a unique monument. Significantly, isotope studies indicate that with four exceptions (who seem to be Gotlanders) all the men came from the Mälaren Valley, an origin that is supported by comparisons of the weapons. Many of the bodies bear clear signs of trauma – the Salme burials seem to be battle casualties, perhaps from a Svear raid that went wrong. The burials are dated to c. 750, right at the supposed start of the Viking Age, and nearly a half-century *before* the Lindisfarne raid. The implications for the timing and location of early raiding – in the mid-eighth century at the latest, and in the east rather than the west – are obvious.

The Viking Phenomenon project has been pleased to provide financial support for the analysis and publication of the Salme finds, which are the subject of an autonomous study led by Dr Jüri Peets of Tallinn University and his four-person team. At the start of our project in 2016, only 6 of the

15 Valsgärde boat graves were published, and none of the other burials: by 2025 and the project's conclusion, our intention is that the cemetery will be reported in its entirety. Since it is clear that the Salme raiders came from the same region of central Sweden, it is possible that they might even be from Valsgärde, and if not, they certainly knew the people there. The investigation of the two sites gives us a wonderful diachronic possibility to study the 'first Vikings', metaphorically speaking, at home and away, and thus to explore what the start of the Viking Age may really have looked like.

Viking Economics

The second sub-project is directed by Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, and takes as its starting point the notion that the three pillars of the Viking stereotype – raiding, trading, and slaving – were in fact integrated parts of the same activity. We have chosen to call this Viking Economics, referring not to economic systems in the Viking Age, but rather to the economics of Vikings in the specific sense of the term. There are five themes clustered within the main one, looking respectively at ideologies and the notion of mobile pirate polities; social dynamics, including demography, gender, and identity; slavery and involuntary servitude; military infrastructures, army organisation and warband logistics; and mechanisms of exchange, including the regulation of trade. Together, we argue that these form the social processes underpinning 'Vikingsness'.

In the course of this research, here too there have emerged some defining perspectives for our study. We reject the notions of 'eastern' and 'western' arenas of the Viking Age, long a staple of synthetic works, as relics of the Cold War that are increasingly irrelevant to today's international collaborations. In many instances, the same individuals moved across the vast diaspora, and we can use similar terminologies in approaching them. It is also clear that *vikingr* was a multi-ethnic concept, at least to a degree.

More than a dozen different investigations have been undertaken

within the Viking Economics strand during the first half of the research programme, ranging from studies of the armies' winter camps to the role of hegemonic masculinities in the social construction of childhood. Archaeologies of enslavement have formed a special focus of this work. With an emphasis on internationalisation, networking, collaboration and making the most of interdisciplinary intellectual capital, the sub-projects of Viking Economics operate primarily through thematic workshops and conferences, of which we have so far held eight in Sweden, Greece and Spain, with more to come. The results are appearing in edited volumes and as peer-review journal articles.

Preliminary conclusions at the halfway mark

After six years of research, it is already clear that the time of the Vikings was part of a *long* late Iron Age, and that we must look to earlier centuries if we are to understand the period. There is no doubt that Scandinavian connections with Europe went back millennia, even in the east. High-status objects were being imported before the Viking Age, including exotica such as garnets from India and Sri Lanka, cowries from the Persian Gulf, and more. It seems likely that active trade contacts were established with the overland and maritime Silk Roads as early as the 500s; one of our associated projects is even exploring proxy connections with Tang China, the Silla kingdom of Korea, and Nara Japan.

In an attempt to understand how these developments came about, our work has extended back to the so-called crisis of the Migration Period, from the late 400s to the end of the 500s. The events of these years are intensely debated even at the most fundamental level, with widely differing academic opinions as to what happened, when, to what degree, and why. Some scholars have argued for a very sharp social decline visible in different aspects of the archaeological record, with a major reduction in the absolute numbers of settlements and cemeteries, and in human activity generally. All agree that this is manifested with considerable regional variation, with researchers arguing for both maximalist and minimalist

impacts, and all points in between. Key components of the Migration Period discussion in Scandinavia include the effects of post-Roman economic retraction and disruption to supply chains, political instability and civil strife, and the potentially devastating climatic consequences of multiple volcanic eruptions in the 530s and 540s (this last is particularly controversial). Can we see some kind of break with an earlier way of life, and a transition to something different during the long process of recovery?

It is certainly possible to perceive a new, militaristic elite emerging in Scandinavia during the period from c. 550–750, the two centuries leading to the Viking Age as currently construed. These trends were there in embryo before, but now they were manifested in a discrete culture of the hall and a steeper social hierarchy, in which aggressive, competitive and expansionist rulers were supported by warband retinues and long-distance trade. The whole system was legitimised by the construction of monumental landscapes, burials and architecture, all combining both secular and ritual power, with a claimed descent from the Æsir gods.

Several scholars have produced meditations around the question of ‘what caused the Viking Age’,³ but these have tended to focus on menus of determinism, whether technological, environmental, demographic, economic, political, or ideological. Our project instead sees the logical extension of multiple complex and gradual processes that had begun centuries earlier. Raiding had long been a norm *inside* Scandinavia, and ‘the Viking-Age’ change seems to have been simply that these predations were projected increasingly outwards, an export of violence first to the east and then to the west. This was slow at first, but picked up pace over time as regional ambitions shifted. Similarly, long-distance trade continued as it had done for centuries, but now with the Scandinavians themselves travelling to the foreign markets. We suggest that these several factors appear to have converged in a kind of historical singularity sometime around 750, plus or minus 20 years or so.

At the same time, all this was also a movement of individuals, exercis-

ing their agency in pursuit of new opportunities, land and wealth, better social prospects, political success, networks and contacts, or simply adventure and the chance of a different life. Everyone, even those who stayed at home and never did any harm to anyone, was drawn into the orbit of these events and their trajectories. They had different motivations and justifications, some were aware of what was going on, others less so – but all this was taking place against a vast backdrop of cultural encounters at every level.

Viking legacies

No scholar working with the Viking Age can be unaware of its resonances today, some of them deeply problematic. A critical engagement with this aspect of Viking studies has been a priority for the project. The process of cultural or political appropriation of the Vikings began almost in their own time, with the distortions of chroniclers among their contemporaries, and continued into the Middle Ages as they were further demonised in Christian propaganda. In Elizabethan England they were activated again, projected as external, historical catalysts for the country's incipient greatness. Something similar was attempted by the Nationalist Romantics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, manifesting in an affinity for Norse myths. Later still, Victorian imperialists claimed a fictive kinship with 'the North' (a code for the white, Germanic-speaking peoples) and sought in Old Norse literature a kind of retrospective legitimisation of their self-proclaimed manifest destiny of empire.

Worst of all was the Nazis' ideological crush and racist fixation on the Vikings, which extended into so many facets of their history, literature and material culture as to contaminate the entire subject for decades after the war. Academia did not escape, since the Nazi pollution of Viking studies included the deep moral compromise and active collusion of several prominent scholars in the 1930s and 1940s, whose intelligence made them all the more dangerous. This has left toxic legacies today, in the form of white supremacists adopting Viking-Age symbols in their image-

ry and narratives, together with the far right's spurious view of 'Nordic heritage' that includes gendered stereotyping and anti-LGBTQ prejudice, as well as broader xenophobia and racism.

Of course, there is also a parallel, broader world of public engagement with the Vikings, a more innocent though sometimes naïve interest. Re-enactors and gamers enthuse about the period, streaming dramas and movies are in constant production, as are documentary programmes and exhibitions. In addition, Vikings can be seen everywhere in advertising and branding, especially in Scandinavia. The public appetite for the Vikings can seem endless.

The Viking legacy is thus a tangled net of gender politics, identity, ideology, profit-seeking, pride and prejudice – but also creativity, as well as genuine historical interest. Among the most common tropes of these somewhat contradictory narratives are (white) masculinity, a concern for 'the Nordic', a kind of focused construct of 'authenticity', notions of 'the strong Viking woman', and also a basic entertainment factor. They are not all connected, but what ultimately binds them is that each, in its own way, is a vector of admiration.⁴ All this needs to be discussed, without obscuring its complexities, both within the academy and with the public.

While in no way minimising the carnage of the raids, the slaving, the patriarchal misogyny and violence – all of which was very real – the Viking Age was also a time of many identities, genders and ethnicities, few of them necessarily fixed; of cultures that recognised diversity and difference; and of world-views that in some ways were utterly alien to our own.

The Viking Phenomenon project has generated considerable interest, both within academia and also among the public. As of early 2022, members of the project have held more than 60 open-access talks, and published more than 20 articles in popular science magazines. This has been supplemented with TV documentaries, media interviews, podcasts and the like. Early in the project, *National Geographic* sent a journalist and photographer to shadow our work for an extended period, resulting in a cover story and multiple online tie-ins, reaching a global audience of

more than 30 million. Beginning in 2018, the Valsgärde finds have also been on an extended exhibition tour of the United States, appearing in multiple cities from Connecticut to the Pacific Northwest; *The Vikings Begin* was produced by Uppsala University's Museum Gustavianum in collaboration with project staff, and as a product of our work.⁵

Our academic output has been equally productive, with some 9 books including a major synthesis, more than 50 peer-reviewed journal papers, and over 90 presentations at conferences and workshops around the world. We also have a dedicated book series on Viking archaeology with Routledge publishers. On occasion, professional and public interest has overlapped, as with our 2017 work on the Birka burial Bj.581 interpreted as that of a female Viking warrior, which went viral across the globe; in addition to millions of online readers, the paper's attention scores ranked it as 43rd of 2.2 million scientific articles on all subjects published in 2017, and it was acclaimed as one of the top 10 discoveries of the year.⁶

The project presents us with both challenges and possibilities, though we consciously refute the notion of a *definitive* history – as one reviewer of my 2020 book wrote, “the more we understand the Vikings, the more comfortable we are with how little we actually know about them”. Our long-term aim is not only to consolidate the study of the Viking Age at Uppsala University, with a lasting centre of research excellence, but to bring new, pluralistic and critical perspectives on this crucial period of world history to a wider audience than ever before.

Inträdesföredrag den 1 juni

A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

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NOTES

1. Sindbæk & Trakadas 2014; Jesch 2015; Price 2020, Introduction & ch. 13.
2. E.g. Price 2017a, 2017b and 2018, with references to the background of the project components.
3. E.g. Barrett 2008; Ashby 2015.
4. See my 2021 article, 'Should we admire the Vikings?'. Spoiler: the answer is No.
5. Hedenstierna-Jonson *et al.* 2018.
6. Hedenstierna-Jonson *et al.* 2017, and subsequent publications; Friðriksdóttir 2020.

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