

**Popular Vikings:
Constructions of Viking Identity in Twentieth Century Britain**

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Abstract

Vikings are a vibrant part of modern popular culture. Although the Viking Age ended nearly a millennium ago, today Viking images are everywhere, functioning as tourist attractions, marketing devices, role models, and sources of regional/national pride and identity. This thesis examines the causes of the Vikings' adoption as icons of popular culture, and looks at the various ways in which Vikings are used.

Crucial to an understanding of modern Viking constructions are questions of popular culture's roles, and its relations with high culture and academia. As an historical people who have been re-invented by popular legend, Vikings illustrate the problematic relations between scholars and the popular incarnations of those scholars' subjects. Scholars in the Viking field often feel antagonism toward the popular images which they see as distorting their topic. Yet without the popular Viking visions, it would be difficult for academic work on the Vikings to continue. Popular interest is what sells books, brings visitors to venues such as the Jorvik Viking Centre, and attracts many scholars to the Viking field in the first place.

The thesis first discusses theories of popular culture, and the development of cultural studies. From there it turns to a chronological overview of political, literary and archaeological developments which have influenced the evolution of Viking images.

In the third chapter, attention turns to questions of the popular Vikings' appearance. Viking men, Viking women, Viking ships and Viking helmets are discussed in the context of the physical traits assigned to them by popular imagery, and the various sources of these representations.

The fourth chapter examines a central dichotomy of Viking constructions, the question of whether Vikings are good or evil. A discussion of cross-cultural constructions of the word "barbarian", and the interactions between barbarism and civilisation, is followed by an examination of the Vikings in their barbarian interpretation. The chapter also looks at the reverse side of these barbarian images, by which Vikings gain sympathy through their characterisation as a people who have been done wrong by history, and need to be rescued from their barbaric reputation.

Chapter Five looks at the Vikings' positive roles, in which they function as models of discipline and skill, industriousness, independence, and adventurousness, and illustrate ways in which "the human spirit reached new heights".

Finally, Chapter Six looks in more detail at questions of why the Vikings are important today, attempting to discern what elements of the Viking myth have ensured its survival in modern popular consciousness.

Introduction

In his study *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*, Andrew Ross writes that "Although it may not always be evident, research is always autobiographical".¹ Of necessity, the subject and approach of this study have developed out of my own background and interests, and have changed shape and direction as my research caused me to confront my own theoretical standpoints.

In the discussion of theory in Chapter One of this thesis, I define my theoretical stance as basically "cultural populist" (see 1.3.3., below). It has become increasingly obvious to me in the course of this research that I have long taken a cultural populist standpoint, with some elements of post-modernism thrown in, although I did not always have these terms at my fingertips with which to define my outlooks.

My interest in popular culture is long-standing. I recall, throughout most of my school career, strongly objecting to the enforced study of a "canon" of high literary works, and I debated with my father, when I was around fourteen years old, the question of why Edgar Rice Burroughs and *Star Trek* novels were not considered worthy of study. I remember arguing that such works, read and enjoyed by large numbers of people, said more about the culture of their time than did the "high culture" works which we were forced to pore over. I wondered, as well, about the different definitions of "classic", by which works such as *The Three Musketeers*, surely as thoroughly "pulp fiction" as any contemporary genre novels, could be published in series such as Oxford World's Classics, but could also be ignored by most scholarly criticism.

The standpoints which I take in this study are further influenced by my current position as an American studying in Britain. Theories regarding the "spreading ooze of mass culture"² have often been tied to fears of the "Americanization" of British culture. Leavisite arguments, for instance, hold that "America leads the way in introducing into the world 'mass-production and standardisation'",³ with multiple sinister effects.

¹ Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (Routledge, London and New York), 1989, p. 14.

² Dominic Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture* (Routledge, London), 1995, p. 14. Strinati is quoting D. MacDonald, 'A theory of mass culture', in B. Rosenberg and D. White (eds.), *Mass Culture* (Free Press, Glencoe), 1957.

³ John Docker, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture: A Cultural History* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge), 1994, this edition 1995, p. 19.

Likewise, early works of cultural studies expressed fears of the Americanization (and by implication, the destruction of people's ability to maintain their own cultural traditions) which is threatening authentic, valid British working class culture.⁴ (See 1.2.1., below.)

The idea of Americanization has become a commonplace, encountered continually in British newspapers and other sources of social commentary, and generally seems to be taken for granted. It cannot be denied that much of the internationally-distributed contemporary popular cultural output emerges from industries that either are centred on, or were originally developed in, the United States, and that, as Andrew Milner writes, "Such transnational cultural forms can be represented as peculiarly American and, no doubt, this internationalization has been massively facilitated by the brief American imperium that endured for much of the second half of the twentieth century". However, as Milner continues,

the resultant politico-economic and cultural configurations are no longer in any meaningful sense specifically American. Wherever the origins of science fiction and jazz, rock and the Hollywood movie, these have become internationally available cultural forms, part of the common cultural heritage of the species. Postmodernity thus threatens to reduced [sic] to redundancy all cultural nationalisms, including the American.⁵

I would agree with John Docker's statement in *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* that the idea of Americanization is "a prime modernist myth":⁶ as myth, worthy of study for what it reveals about the societies that produce it, but also myth in the sense of not being a direct reflection of "reality". At any event, the experience of being associated with a nation that is seen as the source of a "spreading ooze" of cultural decline has done nothing to encourage me to accept modernist and other elitist claims at face value.

Since the theme of this study is twentieth-century constructions of the Vikings, my identity and background as a citizen of the United States must raise questions about my own interactions with the Vikings. I should state that I am not, so far as I know, of any Scandinavian descent, and do not belong to the Scandinavian American sub-culture which is particularly concerned to claim Viking identity and heritage. I do not come

⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 57-9.

⁵ Andrew Milner, *Contemporary Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (UCL Press, London), 1994, p. 44.

⁶ Docker, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*, p. 96.

from a region of the States in which this particular cultural heritage is of serious concern; my home state of Indiana never received a major influx of Scandinavian settlers as did more northerly states such as Minnesota and Wisconsin.

I do not recall being particularly interested in Vikings as a child, although I did own a copy of Anne Civardi and James Graham-Campbell's *The Time Traveller Book of Viking Raiders*. I had been exposed early on to the concept of Vikings as explorers, through works such as *Asterix and the Great Crossing*, and a novel about Leif Eriksson which my father read to me. My first personalised and passionate interaction with Viking pasts, however, occurred early in my undergraduate studies, when I read Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards' translation of *The Orkneyinga Saga*, and became enamoured of the vibrant, cinematic quality of its narrative. It was the desire to learn more about the Vikings that brought me to York, where the post-graduate programme at the Centre for Medieval Studies offers Viking courses, and where the current identity of the city itself is complexly intertwined with notions of Viking heritage.

As a so-called "Viking city" -- although the true historical depth and importance of York's Viking connection, and the processes by which York was, in the late 1970's and early 1980's, re-created in the Viking image, will continue to be discussed and debated -- York might be seen as less than representative of the current situation in Britain as a whole. There is, then, the possible danger that, being inevitably influenced by my surroundings, my concept of current Viking usages reflects York, rather than Britain in general. Much of my work has centred around the collection of the North Yorkshire County Public Library in York, which contains in particular a large collection of children's non-fiction on Viking subjects, necessary to meet the demands of local history units in nearby schools. It is, as well, probably more common in York than in most other regions of the country to see armoured Viking re-enactors strolling casually about the streets or stopping off at a cash point.

But rather than seeing these perhaps atypical elements as a drawback, it can be argued that York, and the other cities and regions that actively claim a Viking identity, can serve as a demonstration and microcosm of the more widespread current cultural attitudes toward Vikings. As a region in which the Viking pasts play many, very obvious contemporary roles, the example of York can show with unusual clarity the ways in which Vikings are perceived today.

Chapter One

Why Vikings?

1.1. Vikings

1.1.1. Popular Vikings

Vikings are a part of everyday life. For a people who lived around a thousand years ago, their omnipresence is remarkable. They are a marketing device, a tourist attraction and a subject on the national curriculum. They appear at museums, Viking festivals and English Heritage sites, and in comic strips, films, novels and children's history books. They are a focus of academic controversy, with scholars waging an ongoing war over the proper interpretations of the Viking past, and they lend themselves readily to use in constructing various national and regional identities.

Ross Samson writes, in his tongue-in-cheek introduction to *Social Approaches to Viking Studies*, "Everyone loves the Vikings ... Vikings are contemporary, Vikings are popular, Vikings sell".¹ This popularity is a sensitive subject for scholars in the field of Viking studies. As Christine Fell has observed, Viking scholars "are in a perilous situation. All of us are constantly approached by publishers for more glossy books, preferably with the word 'Viking' somewhere in the title".² The continuing demand for such works helps keep Viking studies alive, but scholars often express unease over popular Viking "misinterpretations". In the words of David M. Wilson, "The popular image of the Vikings is often infuriating to the specialist".³ A popular fantasy such as the Vikings' horned or winged helmets is, according to Wilson, "irritating to the archaeologist who has to explain it away year in, year out".⁴

Whether Viking scholars like it or not, however, the Vikings have become public domain. In the evocative if hackneyed phrase of the paperback guidebook *Vikings*:

¹ Ross Samson (ed.), *Social Approaches to Viking Studies* (Cruithne Press, Glasgow), 1991, p. xi.

² Christine Fell, "Norse Studies: then, now, and hereafter", in Anthony Faulkes and Richard Perkins (eds.), *Viking Revaluations* (Viking Society for Northern Research, London), 1993, p. 95.

³ David M. Wilson, *Vikings and Gods in European Art* (Moesgård Museum, Århus), 1997, p. 9.

⁴ *ibid.*

Lords of the Sea, Vikings have "sailed out of history into the realm of legend",⁵ and no amount of scholarly grumbling over the inaccuracy of horned helmets will cause the Vikings of popular consciousness to disappear.

My goal in the current study is to look at some of these popular incarnations with an attitude less judgemental than those which are often taken. Rather than simply dismissing the popular impressions, it is useful to trace their development and to study how they are used.

If the Vikings have sailed into the realm of legend, if everyone loves the Vikings, then the question is, why? What qualities have set Vikings apart from so many other historical peoples, to make them a part of modern popular culture? How have the historical and legendary Vikings intersected with later time periods in order to create the contemporary Viking myth?

1.1.2. Heroes or villains?

A keynote of the Vikings' reputation is this binary opposition. Discussions of the Vikings often begin with the question of whether Vikings were "ruffians or heroes",⁶ or, as James Graham-Campbell has summarised the two choices, "salt-water bandits or stout-hearted gentlemen of the north".⁷ In both scholarly and popular treatments of the Vikings, the interpretation of their status as a positive or negative force shapes the approach to all other questions.

Viking interpretations of the late twentieth century are largely in a positive phase, but the question of what qualities *make* the Vikings a positive force does not always provoke the same answer. Over the last four decades of this century there has been a general move toward emphasising constructive aspects of Viking culture -- urban and rural life, Viking contributions to Europe's economic and industrial developments during their era, the vibrancy and "freshness" of Viking visual arts -- rather than focusing on warfare. As C. Patrick Wormald observed in an article published in 1982, "the Vikings used to be thought, in the immortal terminology of *1066 and All That*, a 'bad thing'; they

⁵ Yves Cohat, *The Vikings: Lords of the Seas* (Thames and Hudson, London), first published 1987, English translation by Ruth Daniel, 1992, this edition 1995.

⁶ Jacqueline Simpson, *Everyday Life in the Viking Age* (B. T. Batsford Ltd., London), 1967, p. 11.

⁷ James Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World* (Frances Lincoln Ltd., London), 1980, this edition 1989, p. 22.

are now considered 'a good thing'.⁸ Attractions such as the Jorvik Viking Centre in York and Scotland's Largs "Vikingar!" Centre try to ensure that visitors depart with a strong impression of the domestic side of Viking life, and the rapidly proliferating children's non-fiction works on Vikings tend to follow their lead. The party line is stated in the Council of Europe's 1996 publication *Follow the Vikings*, which is meant to serve as "a reminder of just one aspect of the common cultural and historical legacy of the peoples of Europe":⁹

It seems important to the Council of Europe to draw the attention to [sic] today's Europeans to the Viking period and to make better known the high level of civilisation of the Nordic peoples during the dramatic centuries before and around the year 1000.¹⁰

The 1995 *Timewatch* television programme "Evidence of Vikings" describes contemporary work on the Vikings as "a battle between romantic history and political correctness. A battle about the real meaning and use of history".¹¹ Political correctness has seemed to be winning this conflict, but in recent years more violent images have been staging a comeback against the "house-trained Viking".¹² Already, in the early 1980's, Wormald had objected that focusing too strongly on the Vikings' economic roles was as misleading as examining only raids and bloodshed.¹³ In *The Viking Art of War* (1995), Paddy Griffith argued that an understanding of the peaceful aspects of Viking culture was now firmly enough established, and scholars could once again look at Viking warfare without being seen as somehow betraying the entire field of Viking studies.¹⁴ Other scholars have also felt that their hands have been tied by the forces of political correctness. Interviewed on "Evidence of Vikings", Birthe Kjølbbye-Biddle observed, "people used to see them [the Vikings] as hugely attractive and exciting, but

⁸ C. Patrick Wormald, "Viking Studies: Whence and Whither?", in R. T. Farrell (ed.), *The Vikings* (Phillimore and Co. Ltd., London), 1982, p. 129.

⁹ Dan Carlsson and Olwyn Owen (eds.), *Follow the Vikings* (The Council of Europe and Viking Heritage, Visby), 1996, introduction.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Alan Ereira (writer and producer), *Timewatch*, "Evidence of Vikings" (BBC), 1995.

¹² Catherine Hills, *The Blood of the British: From the Ice Age to the Norman Conquest* (Guild Publishing, London), 1986, p. 178.

¹³ Wormald, "Viking Studies", in Farrell, *The Vikings*, pp. 132, 134.

¹⁴ Paddy Griffith, *The Viking Art of War* (Greenhill Books, London), 1995, p. 25.

that was before the new morality came in, whereby nobody's allowed to be huge in any way, attractive or exciting. So they're being made to be like everyone else".¹⁵

Contemporary Viking images may be approaching a crisis. The domestic emphasis runs the risk of robbing the Vikings of their mystique, and thereby diminishing public interest. Since the Viking period itself, it seems that a crucial aspect of the Vikings' mythos has been that they are *not* like everyone else. Modern institutions actively involved in presenting Vikings to the public, such as the Jorvik Viking Centre, have to tread a fine line in promoting constructive Viking characteristics, making the point that Vikings had a "high level of civilisation", but not entirely wiping out the Vikings' more swashbuckling image.

The hero/villain controversy, to a large extent, has been the element that keeps the Viking myth alive. The Vikings' glamour is a glamour of extremes: they are the most bloodthirsty barbarians of all time or else the most glorious adventurers, and promoting one side of this conflict or the other is a time-honoured way of interacting with the Viking past.

In the late twentieth century, heroic and villainous Vikings seem to have made an alliance of convenience against the Viking home-maker. This restructuring of the conflict helps explain Viking scholars' uneasy relationship with the Vikings of popular imaginings. The heroic and/or villainous Vikings may seem academically suspect, but they are still the Vikings that "sell". They are the Vikings who bring visitors to museums and Viking Centres, who create much of the market for Viking-themed publications, and who, surely, must be credited with initially bringing many scholars into the field of Viking studies. I would agree with Wormald and Griffith, and argue that this field needs to come to terms with the Viking warrior, rather than shunning all warlike aspects due to their association with popular images.

1.1.3. Defining "Viking"

Up to this point I have been using "Viking" in a fairly cavalier manner, without attempting to define the word. Such definition is essential, but the meanings of "Viking" are a notoriously murky subject.

The origin of the word "Viking" is a focus of much argument. Often it is

¹⁵ Ereira, *Timewatch*, "Evidence of Vikings".

connected with Old English *wicing*, a word meaning "pirate",¹⁶ which is known from pre-Viking Age sources, and is used occasionally in *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entries.¹⁷ Meanwhile, the West Norse words *víking* and *víkingr*, meaning respectively piracy (or warfare at sea) and pirate/sea-warrior, are used frequently in the post-Viking Age Icelandic sagas, and are the direct ancestors of the modern word. Again, however, their derivation is a subject of debate.¹⁸

One of the most commonly encountered suggestions for the origin of *víking/víkingr* is the Norse word *vík*, meaning creek or bay, which would make the Vikings "people of the bay", or, a more aggressive possibility, perhaps "people who attack from the bays/creeks".¹⁹ There is also the specific place name *Vík*, referring to the Oslo Fjord region of Norway, but it seems more plausible to assign the place name and the term Viking a common origin rather than to argue that Vikings were, at least initially, seen as hailing from the *Vík* region.²⁰

Following the lead of *wicing* and *víkingr*, then, it seems logical to use the modern word viking as an equivalent to pirate. *The Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (1993) takes this line, giving a straightforward interpretation untroubled by the debates and confusions that frequently cloud the issue: a Viking is a "Scandinavian pirate and raider of the 8th-11th centuries".²¹ Equally simple is the distinction used in *Books in Print*, in which the subject heading Viking covers "works on the Norse sea warriors only. General works are entered under the heading Northmen".²²

¹⁶ David M. Wilson and Else Roesdahl, "What the Vikings Meant to Europe", in Svenolof Karlsson (ed.), *The Source of Liberty: The Nordic Contribution to Europe* (The Nordic Council, Stockholm), 1992, p. 46.

¹⁷ The term is used in entries for the years 921 and 982, but the term more frequently used throughout the *Chronicle* is simply "Danes". (M. J. Swanton (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (J. M. Dent, London), 1996, pp. 102, 124.)

¹⁸ Else Roesdahl, *The Vikings* (Penguin Books, London), first published 1987, English translation Susan M. Margeson and Kirsten Williams, 1991, this edition 1992, p. 9.

¹⁹ Johannes Brøndsted, *The Vikings* (Pelican Books, London), 1960, new translation 1965, this edition 1978, pp. 37-8.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 37.

²¹ Della Thompson (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, second edition (Oxford University Press, Oxford), 1993, p. 1025.

²² Brenda A. McElroy (senior managing editor), *Books in Print 1991-2, Subject Guide Q-Z* (R. R. Bowker, New Providence, New Jersey), 1991, p. 7835.

Unfortunately, uses of "Viking" are seldom so uncomplicated. Although the piratical meaning of the word is readily acknowledged, in practice Viking has been burdened with far more complex associations. Modern standard usage generally tends to interpret Viking as referring to the entire Scandinavian peoples of the so-called Viking Age (hence the usual practice of capitalising the word), and scholars working on the period follow varying tactics in approaching this usage. Anna Ritchie, in *Viking Scotland*, writes "Some explanation is needed of these terms, Viking, Scandinavian and Norse, for though they may appear to be interchangeable, in fact their meanings are different. Viking, in particular, is such an evocative word that it is often used (as in the title of this book) in a general sense to cover the whole episode of raiding and colonisation from Scandinavia."²³ James Graham-Campbell, in *The Viking World*, decides that "the usage is too convenient and long-established to be abandoned, and will be applied here to all those of Scandinavian blood, whatever their occupation or intent, unless they are further identified by nationality -- as Danes, Swedes, Norse (from Norway), Icelanders or whatever the case might be."²⁴ Barbara Crawford, meanwhile, takes a sterner stance on the question, writing in *Scandinavian Scotland* that, "The term 'Viking Scotland' has been avoided (although it might have helped the book to be a best-seller) because it is inapplicable to colonial settlements of farmers, and particularly inappropriate to Scotland, for the term 'Viking' was never used in contemporary sources of the pagan raiders around the Scottish coasts".²⁵

To add further complexity, the word Viking is sometimes invested with implications regarding the Vikings' character. For instance, David Wilson writes in *Vikings and Gods in European Art* that "in this catalogue the term is used in its modern sense referring to an early medieval Scandinavian of some nobility of character".²⁶

Faced with such a mass of possible interpretations, in this study it will be impossible for me to adopt a strict definition of "Viking". Since I am looking at modern popular interpretations of the Vikings, my study must include all of the definitions above, comforting though it would be to narrow it to one definition. My

²³ Anna Ritchie, *Viking Scotland* (B. T. Batsford Ltd., London), 1993, p. 9.

²⁴ Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World*, p. 10.

²⁵ Barbara E. Crawford, *Scandinavian Scotland* (Leicester University Press, Leicester), 1987, p. 1.

²⁶ Wilson, *Vikings and Gods in European Art*, p. 14.

topic embraces whatever peoples are referred to as Vikings -- even when, as in Hammer Films' "historical epic" *The Viking Queen*, the people in question are neither Scandinavian nor Viking Age, nor do they go anywhere near the sea.²⁷

1.2. Medievalisms and cultural studies

1.2.1. The trouble with popular culture

Anyone who studies popular culture must confront two major challenges: the question of what "popular culture" actually means, and the frequently encountered belief that "popular" forms are necessarily inferior, the poor relations -- or even the enemies -- of "high" culture.

Widely varying definitions of popular culture exist, each with different implications for popular culture's value or lack thereof. Raymond Williams, a leading figure in the emerging discipline of cultural studies, listed the following interpretations in an essay of 1976. According to Williams, popular culture

still carries two older senses: inferior kinds of work (cf. popular literature, popular press as distinguished from quality press); and work deliberately setting out to win favour ... as well as the more modern sense of well-liked by many people, with which, of course, in many cases the earlier senses overlap. The recent sense of popular culture as the culture actually made by people for themselves is different from all these; it is often displaced to the past as folk culture but it is also an important modern emphasis.²⁸

Among the inescapable questions that the practitioner of cultural studies must decide for her- or himself are, who is popular culture created by? Who is it for? What roles is it meant to fulfil? Is it, as Dominic Strinati writes in his *Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, "there to indoctrinate the people, to get them to accept and adhere to values which ensure the continued dominance of those in more privileged positions who thus exercise power over them? Or is it about rebellion and opposition to the social order?"²⁹ Is popular culture a force that rises up from below, or that sinks

²⁷ John Chaffey (director), *The Viking Queen* (Hammer/Seven Arts), 1967.

²⁸ Dominic Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture* (Routledge, London), 1995, pp. 2-3. Strinati is quoting Raymond Williams, *Keywords -- a Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Fontana, London), 1976, p. 199.

²⁹ Strinati, *Theories of Popular Culture*, pp. 3-4.

down from elites on high?³⁰ Or is it some heterogeneous combination of both?

The second half of the twentieth century has seen a gradual, though by no means strictly linear, shift from negative interpretations of popular culture, to interpretations granting it more positive value. Over the last three decades, the study of "popular" and frequently scorned cultural products such as television soap operas, Hollywood action films, romance novels, cult science fiction, and so forth, has become marginally more acceptable, with the emergence of an expanding body of scholarly works in which the authors attempt to provide more balanced portrayals of these genres' roles in contemporary society. The defenders of popular culture's worth and importance are growing in number, but they are still frequently ghettoised within the academic world. Although their work is a major trend in the academic cultural studies of the late twentieth century, of necessity they tend to begin from a defensive standpoint, struggling to prove that the popular forms in question are worthy of study.

Students of popular culture face not only active hostility to their subject, but also an often startling scholarly ignorance of the popular forms which are so determinedly derided. Australian scholar John Docker, for example, begins his *Postmodernism and Popular Culture: a Cultural History* with an account of the disdain and disbelief with which colleagues in the 1970's and '80's greeted his attempts to defend the cultural value of popular television programmes.³¹ Docker observes that fellow academics who sneered at his studies "had seen very little of the culture they denounced".³² Similar points are made by Carol Thurston in *The Romance Revolution*. Thurston writes, "my personal experience is that very, very few of my academic and social peers, male or female, have any knowledge at all of this mass medium [of contemporary romantic fiction] or its audiences. And most of them are proud of it."³³

This disdain of popular forms, which has been a hallmark of twentieth-century academic attitudes, has multiple sources. It can be traced to the ways in which English developed as an academic discipline, to the pre-eminence of the modernist aesthetic in

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 3.

³¹ John Docker, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture: A Cultural History* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge), 1994, this edition 1995, p. xi.

³² *ibid.*, p. xii.

³³ Carol Thurston, *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity* (University of Chicago Press, Urbana and Chicago), 1987, p. vii.

early-to-mid twentieth-century academia, and to the particularly pessimistic brand of Marxism which flourished in the mid-century writings of the Frankfurt school and which strongly influenced the ways in which mass culture and media have been approached.

True culture is often seen as something set apart from ordinary life. In the nineteenth century, educational reformer Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) promoted the study of English literature in state-established schools as "a liberal, 'humanising' pursuit",³⁴ that would bring the middle and working classes into harmony with the "best" of their nation's culture.³⁵ For Arnold, culture was a force that stood opposed to material civilisation, and which was increasingly necessary in the mechanised modern world.³⁶

The discipline of English developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a "poor man's Classics",³⁷ and a suitable field of study for women (then gaining wider admission into the academic world), the lower classes, and the natives of Britain's far-flung colonies.³⁸ Thus as a second-rate alternative to the gentlemanly pursuit of Classics, English was initially looked down upon in the ancient enclaves of Oxford and Cambridge.³⁹ Departments of English were established at both universities before the First World War, but it was only after the war that the discipline gained widespread acceptance in these institutions, as it was adopted as part of the post-war reconstruction of the English national character and consciousness.⁴⁰

Arnold and those who followed his lead had seen literature as something apart from and opposed to the more squalid aspects of industrialised modern life.⁴¹ In the early decades of the twentieth century, this attitude was bolstered by the ideals of modernism.

Modernism's proponents tend to have little sympathy with the relativist attitudes

³⁴ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford), 1983, p. 25.

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 24.

³⁶ Andrew Milner, *Contemporary Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (UCL Press, London), 1994, p. 22.

³⁷ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, p. 27.

³⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 27-8, and Milner, *Contemporary Cultural Theory*, p. 25.

³⁹ Milner, *Contemporary Cultural Theory*, p. 25.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 26.

⁴¹ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, pp. 23-4.

that mark, and are often said to mar, postmodernism. Modernists are in no doubt that they know what is good and what bad, and how the human condition is to be improved. John Docker has described the theories of Le Corbusier (Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, 1887-1965), a prophet in the field of modernist architecture, as follows:

The architectural new world represents 'evolution' for humanity. Civilisations advance. They pass through the age of the peasant, the soldier and the priest, and attain what is rightly called culture, the flowering of the effort to select. Selection means rejection, pruning, cleansing, the clear and naked emergence of the Essential ... Evolution is a movement from elementary satisfactions ('mere decoration') to the 'higher satisfactions' (mathematics). Evolution is a movement from the female to the male, from styles of architecture like the Gothic, to an architecture of graver ends, capable of the 'sublime', impressing the most brutal instincts by its objectivity, calling into play the highest faculties by its abstraction. It is a movement from the 'frivolous' to an art which is 'austere', of 'severe and pure functioning elements', which has 'discipline' and 'economy'.⁴²

In literary modernism, an equivalent role to that of Le Corbusier is played by T. S. Eliot, whose theories on culture and the role of literature coloured subsequent developments in academic English studies, and whose poetry was to be a key element of the literary canon. As described by Andrew Milner,

A culture, in Eliot's sense of the term, is only properly such insofar as it is shared in common by a whole people. But a common culture is not, however, one in which all participate equally: it will be consciously understood only by the cultural elites of the society, but can nonetheless be embodied in the unconscious texture of the everyday lives of the non-elite groups."⁴³

Another source of the elitist standpoints characterising academic attitudes to popular culture is the school of literary criticism that followed in the footsteps of F. R. (Frank Raymond) Leavis (1895-1978) and Q. D. (Queenie Dorothy) Leavis (1906-1981). The work of this husband and wife team, based in the Cambridge English department, "would eventually provide the central rationale for the profession of English teaching".⁴⁴ The Leavises' work makes a clear distinction between literature and fiction, the former

⁴² Docker, *Post-Modernism and Popular Culture*, pp. 9-10. Docker is quoting from Le Corbusier (Charles Jeanneret), *Towards a New Architecture* (The Architectural Press, London), 1923, this edition 1965.

⁴³ Milner, *Contemporary Cultural Theory*, p. 27.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 29.

being of value and the latter being unworthy of serious consideration.⁴⁵ Such, for example, is the thesis of Q. D. Leavis' *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932). As she states in her introduction, *Fiction and the Reading Public* is not intended as a work of literary criticism, since the fiction she is examining cannot be called literature, and is unworthy of detailed literary analysis. Like the later twentieth-century scholars of whom Carol Thurston complains, who inveigh against romantic fiction while being totally ignorant of the genre, Q. D. Leavis feels competent to analyze the nature and function of works such as the *Tarzan* novels, without bothering to read them.⁴⁶

The bad press that popular culture has received is traceable as well to the branch of Marxism practised by the scholars of the Frankfurt School. As this "school" was largely composed of Jewish intellectuals who had fled to the United States to escape persecution in Nazi Germany, it is probably not surprising that their Marxism took on a bleaker tone than earlier versions which had built on optimistic hopes of a socialist or communist future. The members of the Frankfurt School had seen at first-hand a populace turning not to socialism and revolution but to totalitarian excess.⁴⁷ The "masses" became seen not as workers who could be united, but as a brutish, brutalised and terrifying force.

As a result, the Frankfurt School's Marxism took on as elitist a viewpoint as that of high literary modernism.⁴⁸ Frankfurt School theorists share with Leavisites the concept that pleasure and entertainment are incompatible with valuable, true culture. Literature, indeed, in the Leavisite conception, ought to be disturbing: "In being critical, the ideal modernist text will cause 'disturbing repercussions in the reader's emotional make-up' ... By contrast, the bestseller ... doesn't unsettle common preconceptions and beliefs, and so leaves the mass reader 'with a comfortable state of mind', washed in 'reassuring sentiment'". The 'fantasy' element of popular fiction helps to create passive readers, who have no necessity to think for themselves.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 34.

⁴⁶ Docker, *Post-Modernism and Popular Culture*, p. 24. Here Docker is working from a passage in Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (Folcroft Library Editions, New York), 1974, pp. 40-1.

⁴⁷ Docker, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*, p. 37, and Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (Routledge, New York and London), 1989, p. 50.

⁴⁸ Docker, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*, p. 36.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 32-3. Docker is again quoting from Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*.

Very similar arguments are made by the members of the Frankfurt school. Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) and Max Horkheimer (1895-1973), scholars whose work is usually cited as the mainstream of Frankfurt School theory,⁵⁰ write in their celebrated essay "The Culture Industry" (1944) that

Pleasure always means not to think about anything, to forget suffering, even where it is shown. Basically, it is helplessness. It is flight; not, as it is asserted, flight from a wretched reality, but from the last remaining thought of resistance. The liberation which amusement promises is freedom from thought and from negation.⁵¹

True art, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, "always involves the tragic".⁵²

These, then, are some of the influences that have led to popular culture's denigration by critics who tend to see themselves as allied with some definition or other of "high" culture. The development of cultural studies as a discipline, or perhaps an "antidiscipline" as cultural studies practitioners often term it,⁵³ has been characterised by attempts to move away from some or all of these concepts.

Cultural studies, however, was not initially set up in direct opposition to notions of the high/popular culture conflict. Rather, pioneers in the field tended to argue that there was some worth in popular forms, while not denying that the division between "high" and "popular" was a valid theoretical framework. It has been pointed out that works of cultural studies often show a sort of reverse elitism, praising aspects of popular culture for their subversive, resistant qualities, but ignoring so-called high culture.⁵⁴ At times the literary modernist continuum is simply reversed, with popular culture depicted as unfailingly good, a force that allows people the chance to express themselves and resist domination, and high culture as the instrument of oppression.

Cultural studies emerged as a separate field in the 1950's and '60's, using the

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 37.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 36. Quoting from Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Verso, London), 1944, this edition 1979, p. 144.

⁵² *ibid.*, p. 40.

⁵³ "Cultural studies has always defined itself as an antidiscipline, and even if we take this with a grain of salt as a self-validating claim, it remains true that it doesn't have the sort of secure definition of its object that would give it the thematic coherence and the sense of a progressive accumulation of knowledge that most disciplines see, rightly or wrongly, as underlying their claim to produce and to control valid knowledge." (John Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value* (Clarendon Press, Oxford), 1995, p. 7.

⁵⁴ Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture* (Routledge, London), 1995, p. 32.

techniques of literary close reading to study popular cultural activities rather than written texts. It can thus be seen, in at least its early phases, as an attempted combination of literary studies and anthropology.

The scholars usually hailed as the first key figures in cultural studies are E. P. Thompson (1924-1993), Richard Hoggart (b. 1918), and Raymond Williams (1921-1988).⁵⁵ Hoggart, who became the first director of the renowned Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies when it was founded in 1964, was the author of *The Uses of Literacy* (1958), a "landmark" work⁵⁶ which marks "the point at which post-Leavisite culturalism decisively shifted away from 'literature' and toward 'culture'"⁵⁷. This transformation, however, did not involve a complete rejection of ideas held by Leavisites and Frankfurt theorists, as Hoggart did believe that modern culture was in decline, and that "The old forms of class culture are in danger of being replaced by a poorer kind of classless ... culture ... and this is to be regretted".⁵⁸ Williams, meanwhile, was the scholar in whose work was first seen cultural studies' "dramatic reversal of socio-cultural evaluation, such that a distinctly working-class cultural achievement comes to be valorized positively rather than negatively".⁵⁹

Throughout the 1960's and '70's cultural studies continued in the traditions of Hoggart and Williams, exploring working class culture and focusing both on "the dangers of conformity to what *The Uses of Literacy* referred to as 'all the canned entertainment' of postwar capitalist society" and "sources of 'resistance' to media and mass culture".⁶⁰ So the emphasis had changed, from literature to culture, and it was possible now to see positive aspects of some cultural forms besides high culture. But media/mass culture was still generally being demonised, and the folk culture of the working classes, seen as a remnant of practices from the era before mass media, was portrayed as heroic and valuable because it could resist the blandishments of mass

⁵⁵ Milner, *Contemporary Cultural Theory*, p. 36.

⁵⁶ Docker, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*, p. 55.

⁵⁷ Milner, *Contemporary Cultural Theory*, pp. 36-7.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 37, quoting Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Penguin, Harmondsworth), 1958, p. 343.

⁵⁹ Milner, *Contemporary Cultural Theory*, p. 38.

⁶⁰ Docker, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*, p. 59.

entertainment.

John Docker has described the orthodoxy that prevailed when he made his first tentative forays into the study of popular culture. He writes,

In the late 1970s and early 1980s 'dominant' was a key word, a required notation, various forces were always dominating. If you didn't see various things as dominating, not least, mass culture produced by media barons for the market, that source of evil in the world, then you were naive, slightly ridiculous, and uncaring about how people were the victims of the media and mass culture and how mass culture kept social and ideological change, disruption, transformation from happening.⁶¹

The '70's and '80's however, were also the decades in which cultural studies underwent a further shift in direction. Again according to Docker, who here draws on the arguments put forward by Stuart Hall in his introduction to Allon White's *Carnival, Hysteria and Writing*,

... the 1970s 'moment' in cultural studies was characteristically Marxist. Key metaphors were of social, cultural and political transformation where a dominant order and class could possibly be overthrown by subordinate, oppositional forces. The dominant and the subordinate were in constant relations of negotiation, resistance and struggle. The 1980's 'moment' disturbed such clear binary oppositions, drawing on Bakhtin's notions of carnivalesque to point to cultural life, particularly in its relations of 'high' and 'low', as historically ever hybrid and ambiguous.⁶²

Essential to this transformation was the rise of various theoretical standpoints which would come to be classified under the heading "postmodern".

There are, not surprisingly, many different interpretations of what postmodernism actually is. However, it is generally tied to an idea of the demise of metanarratives. In other words, "isms" are falling by the wayside; it is no longer necessary to explain all cultural and historical forces through the use of one or the other over-arching set of laws. Postmodernism also tends to bring with it an acceptance of ambivalence and relativity, as well as a tendency to "take pleasure seriously",⁶³ in defiance of the modernist claims that enjoyment necessarily implies an absence of thought.

Of course, postmodernism is itself an "ism", and metanarratives can never totally

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. xi.

⁶² *ibid.*, p. xx.

⁶³ Jim McGuigan, *Cultural Populism* (Routledge, London), 1992, p. 67.

be discarded. Commentators have pointed out dangers in the new directions taken by cultural studies. There is the risk that students of culture will find themselves trapped in a maze of relativism, attempting so diligently not to make value judgements that they find themselves incapable of any analysis at all. Docker, as well, expresses concern over the tendency to celebrate the notion of pleasure, leading, as he sees it, to "the danger of positions more sympathetic to popular culture becoming codified, formulaic, moving to the rhythms of orthodoxy".⁶⁴

Keeping these concerns in mind, it nonetheless seems to me that the intersection of cultural studies and postmodernism provides the chance for useful and invigorating new studies of so-called popular culture. Certainly I believe that the attempt to put aside strict judgemental oppositions, and to think beyond the stultifying constraints of a "high culture" canon, has been long overdue in academic circles.

The creeping threat of orthodoxy notwithstanding, cultural studies in the late twentieth century continues to be defined by many of its practitioners as an oppositional field, bringing with it the excitement of reclaiming and defending aspects of culture which have been scorned by more traditional studies.

Cultural studies, according to the editors of *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, is not "a 'discipline', but an area where different disciplines intersect in the study of the cultural aspects of society".⁶⁵ The editors go on to state their opinion that "orthodoxy ... is the enemy of a truly 'open' science".⁶⁶ A similar picture of cultural studies as a self-consciously "unorthodox" field is painted by Jim McGuigan: "Academic cultural studies may not be a popular discourse, yet it is not strictly an official discourse either. It is, rather, a semi-official discourse mainly due to a politically impelled engagement with popular culture".⁶⁷ Fred Inglis takes the idea further, with a remarkably romanticised (as well as medievalised) definition: "... in the last years of this millennium they [cultural studies] stand rather off-centre and relatively low on the academic ladder. Their practitioners take a necessary satisfaction from this,

⁶⁴ Docker, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*, pp. 102-3.

⁶⁵ Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis (eds.), *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies* (Routledge, London, in association with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham), 1980, p. 7.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p. 10.

⁶⁷ McGuigan, *Cultural Populism*, p. 12.

as Robin Hoods and Maid Marians of the feudal order of academic life."⁶⁸

This Robin Hood metaphor is not as bizarre as it may sound, for one characteristic frequently met with in contemporary cultural studies is an active delight in reclaiming previously "neglected" materials⁶⁹ (which, to continue the metaphor, would take the role of the poor, with high culture and/or elites as the rich from whom Robin Hood steals). As Roger Horrocks writes in *Male Myths and Icons: Masculinity in Popular Culture*, "There is something valuable and pleasurable in 'reclaiming' areas of culture that were formerly disdained or simply ignored".⁷⁰

Horrocks gives further reasons for seeing the study of popular culture as justified. He writes,

I see popular culture to some extent as dream-like, naive, not censored by a more sophisticated intellectual understanding. It is full of images that seem archetypal, primitive, welling up from the depths of the psyche ...

Then, just as dreams can be used to gain insight into areas of the psyche that we are unwilling or unable to penetrate consciously, so popular images can be used to investigate collective unconscious attitudes and feelings.

At the same time, popular culture seems to relay political ideas very quickly, and can be seen as an arena where certain political struggles are contested ...

Popular art forms are also interesting in themselves, because they have a high degree of energy, an aesthetic quality that may lack finesse but provides something satisfying in its own way.⁷¹

In this last point, popular culture seems an ideal companion for the Vikings. For they too are continually being praised for their "energy", for their rough-and-ready vigour which may lack the polish of civilisation, but which brings its own virtues.

Another point which Horrocks raises is the question of whether "escapism" is necessarily bad.⁷² In modernist viewpoints, escapist or fantasy elements are among popular culture's most damning characteristics. This is an attitude which is often taken for granted in literary criticism; for example in *The Forms of Historical Fiction* Harry

⁶⁸ Fred Inglis, *Cultural Studies* (Blackwell, Oxford), 1993, p. 10.

⁶⁹ Hall *et al.*, *Culture, Media, Language*, p. 21.

⁷⁰ Roger Horrocks, *Male Myths and Icons: Masculinity in Popular Culture* (Macmillan, London), 1995, p. 1.

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² *ibid.*, p. 32.

E. Shaw comments that "The use of history as a source of dramatic energy is not limited to the debased and escapist form it often takes in popular literature".⁷³ This equation of "escapist" with "debased" seems unnecessarily limiting, a pompous attitude which the proponents of cultural studies would do well to deflate. For surely "escapist" works reveal just as much about the reality that produced them, and are as valid ways of approaching that reality, as the high culture works defined by Q. D. Leavis which supposedly confine themselves to "actual life".⁷⁴

Turning, finally, to a less philosophical question, it is necessary here to state the definition of "popular" which will be used in this study. This has been a difficult question to answer, for it should go without saying that scholars are also people, and are as influenced as anyone else by the attitudes of the culture in which they live.⁷⁵ Further, there is a continual interplay between scholarly and more popular works. For instance, in the Viking field of the late twentieth century, it takes a very short time for the current orthodox attitudes of the academic Viking studies community to find their way into works of the "child's first guide to Vikings" variety. And, as mentioned above, popular interest in Vikings often provides the Viking scholars' paycheques.

In this study, then, I will be using a definition of "popular" which somewhat sidesteps the questions of interpretation and value that have been discussed in this section. "Popular" will be simply taken to refer to any source which might be available to the general public, and is not aimed at an exclusively academic audience. Thus works such as Hagar the Horrible, or the Viking bodice-ripper novels, fit into the definition, but so also do the coffee-table books written by scholars in the Viking field, which are readily available in general bookshops and public libraries. Works such as archaeological site reports, or articles in scholarly journals, would not fit into the

⁷³ Harry E. Shaw, *The Forms of Historical Fiction: Sir Walter Scott and his Successors* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London), 1983, p. 82.

⁷⁴ Anthony Easthope, *Literary Into Cultural Studies* (Routledge, London), 1991, p. 78. One well-known work which follows the lines suggested here is Janice A. Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*, which examines the escapist genre of modern romance fiction in terms of what it reveals about the conditions readers and authors wish to escape from, and what they hope to escape to. (Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (Verso, London), 1984, this edition 1994.)

⁷⁵ As Edward Said observes in *Orientalism*, "No one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member of society" (Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London), 1978, p. 10.)

discussion, as they are readily available to only a small proportion of the population.

1.2.2. Constructing the past

The current work fits into discourses of contemporary cultural studies, influenced by postmodern developments and the idea of cultural studies' role in reclaiming neglected cultural material. It is also influenced by recent academic works examining the construction and uses of ideas about the past.

Among the most celebrated works in this genre is David Lowenthal's *The Past is a Foreign Country* (1985). Although it has been criticised in some quarters for being an uncritical jaunt through a selection of amusingly eccentric uses of history,⁷⁶ *The Past is a Foreign Country* and Lowenthal's other works have been widely influential on other writers examining questions of the usages of the past in modern life.⁷⁷ Raphael Samuel's *Theatres of Memory* (1994) is a work with a similar focus, in which history is presented as "an organic form of knowledge, and one whose sources are promiscuous, drawing not only on real-life experience but also memory and myth, fantasy and desire; not only the chronological past of the documentary record but also the timeless one of 'tradition'."⁷⁸ Samuel argues for the importance of "unofficial knowledge": "those lower depths -- history's netherworld -- where the imaginary rubs shoulders with the real".⁷⁹ This is a good definition of the world which the Vikings of modern consciousness inhabit.

In fields such as archaeology and history, many volumes have been produced in recent years which focus on how the disciplines function, and how their practitioners relate to the pasts with which they work. Among the archaeologists who have written along these lines are Michael Shanks and Chris Tilley, co-authors of *Re-Constructing Archaeology* and *Social Theory and Archaeology* (both 1987), which, according to

⁷⁶ Stuart Piggott, Review of David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, in *Antiquity* 60, 1986, pp. 152-3.

⁷⁷ For instance Keith Jenkins, in *Re-thinking History*, draws on *The Past is a Foreign Country* in his introductory chapter "What History Is", and recommends Lowenthal's works to the student wishing to explore the nature of history and humanity's relations with its pasts. Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (Routledge, London), 1991, pp. 11, 13.

⁷⁸ Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory, Volume One: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (Verso, London), 1994, p. x.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

Shanks, "were an attempt, for me at least, to make sense of an archaeology which fascinated me but also frustrated in its attenuation or dismissal of feeling which seemed so important; a scientific and academic archaeology seemed to lose so much of what made the past human and attractive."⁸⁰ In Shanks' *Experiencing the Past: On the Character of Archaeology* (1992), he writes, "There seems to be presented a choice: write poems, novels, paint watercolours -- subjective fictions; or do archaeology -- concerned with the past itself. I want to deny that there is this simple choice."⁸¹ Another of Shanks' arguments, fitting into postmodern ideas about the validity of pleasure, concerns the intellectual "puritanism", as he refers to it, by which pleasure "seems to have been banished from much academic archaeology to 'popular' genres which are almost by definition not intellectual or frivolous. To resist this puritan equation of intellectual virtue and hard work is not to be anti-intellectual. Nor is pleasure only respectable in the service of acquiring knowledge."⁸²

Over the past two decades, academic interest has also been developing in the field of medievalism, or, as Leslie J. Workman defines it, "the continuing process of creating the Middle Ages".⁸³ In 1976 Workman founded the journal *Studies in Medievalism*, which is apparently still "the only periodical devoted to the postmedieval invention and historiography of the Middle Ages".⁸⁴ Workman has written that the journal grew from a recognition of "subjective and personal factors in scholarship and the importance of imagination in scholarly hypotheses ... the study of medievalism would cast light in these dark places and thus enrich our understanding of medieval studies".⁸⁵

As Workman recounts recent developments in the study of medievalism,

in 1994, after we had been publishing and conducting a very active program of conference activity for fifteen years without apparent effect, everybody suddenly discovered medievalism. Conferences sprang up, there were

⁸⁰ Michael Shanks, *Experiencing the Past: On the Character of Archaeology* (Routledge, London), 1992, p. 2.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, p. 12.

⁸² *ibid.*, p. 181.

⁸³ Leslie J. Workman, Preface to *Medievalism in Europe II, Studies in Medievalism VIII* (Boydell and Brewer Ltd., Woodbridge, Suffolk), 1997, p. 1.

⁸⁴ *Studies in Medievalism Newsletter* (Winter 1996-7), Department of English, Hope College, Holland, Michigan.

⁸⁵ Workman, preface, *Medievalism in Europe II*, p. 1.

graduate courses and books on medieval historiography, to which Norman Cantor had given the lead with his *Inventing the Middle Ages* (1991), and there began to be increasing debate on the future of medieval studies ...⁸⁶

The current work has developed in this atmosphere of increasing scholarly interest in medievalism as well as in the general subject of relations with the past.

There have been many previous investigations into the evolution of the Vikings' reputation. Most are articles in journals or in larger volumes on Viking themes, rather than longer studies. *The Northern World*, edited by David M. Wilson, includes a chapter on "Romanticism and Revival", by Jöran Mjöberg, which focuses primarily on attitudes to the Old North in the eighteenth through mid-twentieth centuries.⁸⁷ Wilson and Roesdahl's article in *The Source of Liberty* traces ideas of the Vikings from their own age to the modern day.⁸⁸ In *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, edited by Peter Sawyer, Lars Lönnroth's "The Vikings in History and Legend" provides another useful overview of the developing Viking images, and of the state of the Vikings' reputation in the late twentieth century.⁸⁹ More extended discussion of various aspects of post-medieval interactions with the northern past are found in *The Waking of Angantyr: the Scandinavian past in European culture*, edited by Else Roesdahl and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen,⁹⁰ and in *Northern Antiquity: the Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga*, edited by Andrew Wawn,⁹¹ both of which are collections of essays on a variety of post-medieval interactions with Norse and Viking pasts. American popular Viking interactions are discussed in one chapter of Erik Wahlgren's *Vikings and America*,⁹² and in Birgitta Linderöth Wallace's article "The Vikings in North

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, p. 2.

⁸⁷ Jöran Mjöberg, "Romanticism and Revival", in David M. Wilson (ed.), *The Northern World: The History and Heritage of Northern Europe, AD 400-1100* (Thames and Hudson, London), 1980, pp. 225-38.

⁸⁸ Wilson and Roesdahl, in Karlsson, *Source of Liberty*, pp. 39-63.

⁸⁹ Lars Lönnroth, "The Vikings in History and Legend", in Peter Sawyer (ed.), *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings* (Oxford University Press, Oxford), 1997, pp. 225-49.

⁹⁰ Else Roesdahl and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (eds.), *The Waking of Angantyr: The Scandinavian Past in European Culture* (Aarhus University Press, Aarhus), 1996.

⁹¹ Andrew Wawn (ed.), *Northern Antiquity: The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga* (Hisarlik Press, Enfield Lock, Middlesex), 1994.

⁹² Erik Wahlgren, *The Vikings and America* (Thames and Hudson, London), 1986, pp. 99-120.

America: Myth and Reality", in Samson's *Social Approaches to Viking Studies*.⁹³ The most recent major work on post-medieval Viking myths is David Wilson's *Vikings and Gods in European Art*, a catalogue written to accompany an exhibition of the same name. There have been, as well, many discussions of the current state and the future of Viking studies, which often touch on questions of how popular Vikings impact the work of Viking scholars.

The work I have encountered which is closest to my own theme is Jenny Howsam's 1991 MA dissertation for the Centre for Medieval Studies, University of York, *Twentieth Century Images of Vikings*.⁹⁴ Howsam's study and mine were conducted at the same institution, and in a city, York, which is marked by particularly active and self-conscious interactions with the Viking past.

The majority of these works, with the exception of Howsam and of various articles in *The Waking of Angantyr* and *Northern Antiquity*, tend to focus more on seventeenth through nineteenth-century interactions with the Viking past, rather than the condition of the Vikings in the late twentieth century. As well, they generally tend to focus on works that can be fit into the sphere of "high" culture: as Wilson phrases it in one of his articles, "serious art by serious artists".⁹⁵

The topic of the current study differs from the majority of these other examinations in that I will be focusing on the Viking image at a different point in its evolution than most of these works address, and in that I will not be restricting discussion to "serious" art. I agree with Shanks' refusal to see "serious" work and entertainment as incompatible. As a confirmed postmodernist, in this sense at least, I would argue that works of frivolity and of seriousness are equally important elements of the society that produces them.

1.3. Methodology and sources

1.3.1. The topic

The temporal range of this study is the twentieth century, and its geographical

⁹³ Birgitta Linderöth Wallace, "The Vikings in North America: Myth and Reality", in Samson, *Social Approaches to Viking Studies*, pp. 207-19.

⁹⁴ Jenny Howsam, *Twentieth Century Images of Vikings* (Centre for Medieval Studies, University of York), MA dissertation 1990-1.

⁹⁵ David M. Wilson, "The Viking Age in European art: a note", in Roesdahl and Sørensen, *The Waking of Angantyr*, p. 171.

extent is the British Isles. The decision to focus on the twentieth century was taken when it became clear that the previous definition of the topic, which had included both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was too broad for the discussion to do justice to the multitude of factors involved in creating Viking images. The nineteenth, and earlier centuries, will appear in the discussion when aspects of earlier Viking images are specifically relevant to the evolution of contemporary visions. But discussion will focus on the twentieth century, and primarily the half century following World War II. I will attempt to build my interpretations around an archaeological and historical framework, hoping to show how some of the popular Viking images interact with developments in academic concepts of the Vikings.

The decision to make Britain the subject of this examination was partially taken for reasons of convenience, with British sources and attitudes being more immediately available for study. But the topic of British interactions with the Vikings is rewarding for other reasons.

Britain is in something of an anomalous position in its relations with the Viking past. A long-standing dichotomy exists in British attitudes toward the Vikings. Vikings can be seen as part of Britain's heritage, as glorious forebears. However, they came to this country as outsiders, and can be portrayed as ruthless invaders, whom every true English man/woman should resist, in the tradition of King Alfred.

Modern Britain, then, approaches its Vikings with these mixed feelings ingrained, and contemporary depictions are coloured by this background. To be sure, modern Scandinavians have mixed feelings about the Viking past(s) as well. But it is a less problematic process for Vikings to be incorporated into the modern Scandinavian nations' self images, than it is in Britain, alternately the Vikings' home and their victim.

At the same time, Britain's Viking interactions are also different from those characterising the United States. The Vikings' actual historical/archaeological impingement on America seems to have been very slight, but that has not stopped them from being widely incorporated into American popular legend. American constructions and uses of the Vikings, far more firmly in the realm of fantasy, provide a revealing contrast to British uses, which contain their own fantasy element but also have extensive historical, archaeological and philological sources on which to build. So modern Britain's Vikings are part fantasy, part "reality", both re-created and combined to fit contemporary needs.

1.3.2. Sources

James Lull, in his *Media, Communication, Culture*, advocates the study of "all mass media, including less recognised forms such as postage stamps, store windows, automobile bumper stickers, tee-shirts, even museums and restaurant menus".⁹⁶ Culture, for Lull, is simply "everyday life".⁹⁷

This approach has been part of my own research, which has at times seemed a jumbled cornucopia of ephemera, from t-shirts showing Garfield the cat in Viking garb, to "Mega-Blocks" Lego-esque Viking ships, to boxes of Viking safety matches. However, several genres of sources, more readily categorised than matchboxes and Viking biscuits, have formed the main body of my research.

Children's literature of the latter half of the twentieth century has played a major role in my work. This literature can be divided into further categories, including historical fiction, mostly dating from the 1950's and '60's but still widely available in the 1980's and 90's; texts specifically designed for school work, most of those that I have looked at dating from the mid-1980's to the early 1990's; and more general non-fiction introductions to the Vikings, most dating from the late 1970's onward. A growing sub-genre within this last category is that of humorous, but still basically factual overviews of Viking history and culture, such as Terry Deary's *Horrible Histories: The Vicious Vikings* (1994)⁹⁸ and John Farman's *History in a Hurry: Vikings* (1997).⁹⁹ The flippant approach of these works is an attempt to make them more pleasurable and accessible to their readers, but the difference in technique does little to alter the basic content of these books, which contain the same core of information that is supplied by more sober and traditionally presented works.

These works aimed at children are particularly important for an understanding of the popular images of Vikings, as impressions received in one's early years are likely to colour one's ideas throughout later life. As well, the non-fiction and school texts are specifically didactic, aimed at presenting in the most clear and comprehensible forms

⁹⁶ James Lull, *Media, Communication, Culture: A Global Approach* (Polity Press and Blackwell Publishers Ltd., Cambridge and Oxford), 1995, p. 9.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 66.

⁹⁸ Terry Deary, *Horrible Histories: The Vicious Vikings* (Scholastic Children's Books, London), 1994.

⁹⁹ John Farman, *History in a Hurry: Vikings* (Macmillan Children's Books, London), 1997.

possible the contemporary orthodox views on Vikings. There can be few better ways to get at the heart of what one is meant to think of one's past at a particular moment in history, than by studying what each period tries to teach its children.

Another genre which I have studied in detail is the sub-genre of romantic fiction set in the Viking period. This has been a flourishing field since the mid-1980's, and the presentation of Vikings in these works sets out with great clarity the perceived characteristics of Vikings in the late twentieth century, and a great many of the uses to which Vikings are put.

Works of re-construction, both in Viking Centres such as those at York and Largs, and the various "Dark Age" re-enactment groups, have been important sources, revealing as they do the ways in which Vikings are actively presented to the public.

Glossy Viking-themed books of the type mentioned by Christine Fell, generally written by Viking scholars but aimed at a mass audience, are also a useful source, vividly illustrating one intersection of popular and academic impressions.

The Vikings presented in cinema and television are also essential to my research. As David Lowenthal has written,

The adaptation of history to television exacerbates tendencies to accept versions of the past as gospel. Even when producers confess that shows commingle fact and fiction, viewers mistake them for literal accounts of what actually happened and what life was really like, assuming that what costs so much and is seen by so many must be true.¹⁰⁰

Even when no viewer "mistake" as such is involved, the vividly presented images of film and television are easily internalised, giving embodiment to one's impressions of a particular past. Medieval Scotland takes the form of Mel Gibson's William Wallace,¹⁰¹ the Napoleonic Wars are now embodied by Sean Bean's Sharpe, and for many, surely, Vikings look like Kirk Douglas and Tony Curtis. The frequent recycling of films on television and on video, moreover, means that the images are presented time and again, vastly increasing their ability to colour popular impressions.

Finally, a very useful source has been the internet. A medium through which all manner of ephemera and contemporary trends find expression, it has helped, more than

¹⁰⁰ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge), 1985, this edition 1986, p. 230.

¹⁰¹ This is true even to the extent that a statue of William Wallace, unveiled in Stirling, Scotland, in September 1997, bears the face and hairstyle of Mel Gibson in the film *Braveheart* (*The Times*, page 2, 11/9/97).

any other source could, to provide a general picture of the omnipresence of Vikings in contemporary culture.

1.3.3. Methodology

If I were asked to define my own approach by any particular "ism", I would turn to the definition of "cultural populism" given by Jim McGuigan. McGuigan writes that "*Cultural populism is the intellectual assumption made by some students of popular culture, that the symbolic experiences and practices of ordinary people are more important analytically and politically than Culture with a capital C*" (italics original).¹⁰²

Of course, as McGuigan admits, the phrase "ordinary people" is itself problematic. McGuigan glosses this phrase as "an open category constructed in opposition to 'intellectuals', who serve as the agents of 'exceptional' culture, the senior branch from the point of view of academic conservatism".¹⁰³ In this context, it seems useful to recall Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's observation that "all men [sic] are intellectuals ... but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals".¹⁰⁴

I am not quite comfortable with the notion stated by McGuigan that everyday culture is *more* important than "culture with a capital C". I am happier instead with the point of view put forward by Douglas Kellner in *Media Culture*, when he suggests that a "possible move within cultural studies would ... simply be to take culture itself as the field of one's studies, without division into the high and the low, the popular and the elite -- though, of course, the distinctions can be strategically employed in certain contexts".¹⁰⁵

Certainly, I would agree with the form of cultural populism which "disputes absolutist criteria of 'quality'".¹⁰⁶ I am not concerned to identify particular cultural artefacts as good or bad, debased or exalted, or any other such judgemental description. My interest is in what all such artefacts reveal about the culture in which they are produced, and the uses to which they are put, not in subjective judgements that praise

¹⁰² McGuigan, *Cultural Populism*, p. 4.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Strinati, *Theories of Popular Culture*, p. 171.

¹⁰⁵ Kellner, *Media Culture*, p. 34.

¹⁰⁶ McGuigan, *Cultural Populism*, p. 79.

one cultural form as worthy and intellectual, while sneering at another as unworthy of consideration. Of course, it is impossible to fully escape from the use of value judgements; as Steven Connor points out in *Theory and Cultural Value*, even the attempt to avoid such judgements is itself the product of a system of values, in which to be "value-free" is seen as more valid than to pass judgement.¹⁰⁷ But I would hope at least that the assigning of value is incidental here, rather than being a major focus of this work.

A useful model for me has been Edward W. Said's work on *Orientalism*. In this celebrated work, Said is concerned "not with a correspondence between Orientalism and Orient, but with the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient ... despite or beyond any correspondence, or lack thereof, with a 'real' Orient".¹⁰⁸ Further, Said observes,

evidence is found just as prominently in the so-called truthful text (histories, philological analyses, political treatises) as in the avowedly artistic (i.e., openly imaginative) texts. The things to look at are style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices, historical and social circumstances, *not* the correctness of the representation nor its fidelity to some great original.¹⁰⁹

Thus, in this study I am examining "Vikingism". It is not part of my agenda to praise one popular Viking image or another for its faithfulness to academically accepted, "correct" versions of the Viking past. Rather, I hope to trace the Vikings' development into an icon of contemporary popular culture, and explore some of the ways in which this icon is used.

It has been my aim to identify and analyze a variety of themes that appear throughout twentieth-century attitudes to the Vikings. I do not claim to have identified all such themes, nor have I any illusions as to this work being an exhaustive study. This study does not provide a definitive list of all popular cultural works on the Vikings. Such an undertaking would be massive and probably impossible. New popular works on Viking themes are constantly being produced, and many are, as well, of an ephemeral

¹⁰⁷ "... we should acknowledge that value and evaluation are *necessary* as a kind of law for human nature and being, such that we cannot help but enter the play of value even when we would wish to withdraw from or suspend it ... The non-evaluative or value-free will always be a particular suburb of the domain of value, never a space outside it." Steven Connor, *Theory and Cultural Value* (Blackwell, Oxford), 1992, pp. 8-9.

¹⁰⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 5.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, p. 21.

nature. As an example, the field of children's non-fiction is one in which publications are constantly being supplanted by new works on the subject, and older works tend to vanish swiftly from the shelves of bookshops and libraries. Other works, such as Viking-themed novels, are often difficult to trace once they have gone out of print, and unless one has the time to pore through the publication records of all publishing houses throughout this century, the process of discovering such works is often one of pure chance, in which the shelves of second-hand bookshops prove the most crucial source.

In a sense, then, my study has followed the technique of random sampling. However, I do not believe that this detracts from the study's value. Few or none of the claims made in this study are based on one source alone. The themes which emerge from this work are common themes found in a large number and variety of sources, of different genres.

I have certainly not said everything there is to say about the Vikings. My hope is that I have identified some of the most commonly encountered twentieth-century usages of the Vikings, that I have traced the development of these usages, and that this study may stimulate further discussion of both the uses of the past, and of the interplay between the popular and academic worlds.

Chapter Two

Chronological background

Attempting to trace the events, developments and attitudes that have shaped the Viking image is a complicated process. For a large portion of their history, ideas about Vikings have been inseparably mixed with those concerning other, more-or-less Northern barbarians. Vikings, Goths, Celts, Gauls, Saxons, and Germans of various descriptions blend into, as David Wilson has put it, "a happy elision of all the *barbares du nord*".¹ In various periods and circumstances, the notions surrounding these peoples have played crucial roles in building the self-images of different nations and cultural groups across Europe.² Thus a truly thorough discussion of the history of Viking images would require one to range as far afield as did the Vikings themselves. One would need an understanding of the political and cultural history of Europe, from before the Viking Age itself until the present day.

Many scholars have written on specific periods within the Viking image's development.³ Else Roesdahl and David Wilson's article "What the Vikings Meant to Europe"⁴ and Lars Lönnroth's "The Vikings in History and Legend"⁵ give overviews of attitudes to the Vikings from the Viking Age to the late twentieth century. But a full length, in-depth look at the subject is yet to be written, and would be an immensely

¹ David M. Wilson, "The Viking Age in European art -- a note", in Else Roesdahl and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (eds.), *The Waking of Angantyr: The Scandinavian Past in European Culture* (Aarhus University Press, Aarhus), 1996, p. 177.

² See Leon Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas in Europe*, translated by Edmund Howard (Sussex University Press & Heinemann Educational Books, London), 1974.

³ See Jenny Howsam, *Twentieth Century Images of Vikings* (Centre for Medieval Studies, University of York), MA Dissertation, 1990-1; Roesdahl and Sørensen, *The Waking of Angantyr*, Andrew Wawn (ed.), *Northern Antiquity: the Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga* (Hisarlik Press, Enfield Lock, Middlesex), 1994; and David M. Wilson (ed.), *The Northern World: The History and Heritage of Northern Europe 400-1000* (Thames and Hudson, London), 1980.

⁴ David M. Wilson and Else Roesdahl, "What the Vikings Meant to Europe", in Svenolof Karlsson (ed.), *The Source of Liberty: the Nordic Contribution to Europe* (The Nordic Council, Stockholm), 1992, pp. 39-63.

⁵ Lars Lönnroth, "The Vikings in History and Legend", in Peter Sawyer (ed.), *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings* (Oxford University Press, Oxford), 1997, pp. 225-49.

useful addition to the field.⁶

Clearly, such a detailed examination is beyond the range of the current study. Like all attempts at rapid summation, this chapter runs the risk of leaving out as many crucial points as it includes. It certainly has no pretension to being a full cultural or political history of the centuries that separate us from the Viking Age. What it will attempt is to give a brief selection of events and developments which have played particularly important roles in the creation of the Vikings as we know them today. (See also Appendix 1: Chronological background timeline.)

As the subject of this study is Viking images in Britain, naturally this chapter will have a British focus. But since British ideas of the Vikings do not develop in isolation, we must also look at some of the factors which have spurred the evolution of Viking images in other areas of the world.

2.1. *Political developments*

In Britain, the Reformation is generally cited as causing the first post-Viking Age upsurge of interest in the Old North. Before this time, there was certainly some knowledge that the Danes and their fellow Northmen had played a role in this country's history. Literary works such as *King Horn* and *Havelok the Dane*, surviving in manuscripts from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries,⁷ preserve traditions of Scandinavian presence in the British Isles, both in their plots and in Scandinavian-influenced narrative structure and vocabulary. The so-called end of the Viking Age did not sever ties between Britain and the Scandinavian countries, which continued to be

⁶ In particular, ideas of the Vikings in the post-Viking medieval period are a rarely discussed topic, as discussions of the Vikings' reputation generally tend to skip from the Viking period straight to the Enlightenment. In part, this is due to the fact that ideas of the Vikings in this intervening period were themselves fairly misty, with general European knowledge of the Old North only developing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and fully coming of age in the late eighteenth. Nonetheless, it would be useful to have a greater understanding of the roles Vikings and their fellow Northmen played in ideas of history and identity in the high and late middle ages. In Iceland, clearly, the Viking era remained a focus of attention in the sagas. But in other regions, through avenues such as folklore and hagiography, some knowledge of the Viking period was preserved, and it would be rewarding to examine this question in more detail.

⁷ Rosamund Allen (ed.) *King Horn* (Garland Publishing Inc., New York and London), 1984, pp. 3, 8, 13, and Walter W. Skeat (ed.), *The Lay of Havelok the Dane*, 2nd edition (Clarendon Press, Oxford), 1923, p. xxiii.

influential in each other's politics and cultural development throughout the Middle Ages.⁸

The knowledge did survive that the Danes had once been enemies whose incursions in the British Isles were a cause of dread. Medieval historians writing after the Viking period, such as William of Malmesbury (c. 1095-c. 1143), Simeon of Durham (fl. 1100-1150), and Henry of Huntingdon (?1080s-c. 1155) draw on earlier sources such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Asser's *Life of Alfred* in their discussions of the Danish wars.⁹ There are indications as well that certain folk traditions, such as the Hocktide celebrations shortly following Easter, were interpreted by some observers in at least the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as being connected with Danish presence in Britain, usually with a heroic English defeat of the Danes.¹⁰ Unfortunately, though the Hocktide festivals seem to be of earlier origin, there is no evidence as to whether the Danish connection was an idea held in previous centuries. It may be that the analyses linking Hocktide to a defeat of the Danes originated in fifteenth-century scholars' attempts to explain obscure customs.

Further, these writers' glosses on Hocktide bear little resemblance to any Viking history that modern scholars would recognise. David Wilson has argued that the Viking past was for the most part forgotten, at least outside Iceland and to a lesser extent Scandinavia, from the late eleventh century.¹¹ The Danes and their fellow Northmen --

⁸ For a discussion of Anglo-Scandinavian literary relations in the centuries immediately following the Viking era, see Henry Goddard Leach, *Angevin Britain and Scandinavia*, (Kraus Reprint Co., Millwood, New York), 1921, reprint 1975.

⁹ William Henry Stevenson (ed.), *Asser's Life of Alfred* (Clarendon Press, Oxford), 1904, p. lv, and Christopher Tyerman, *Who's Who in Early Medieval Britain (1066-1272)* (Shepherd-Walwyn, London), 1996, pp. 106-7, 110-3, 118-9.

¹⁰ The supposed "defeat of the Danes" with which Hocktide is most frequently cited as being connected is the St. Brice's Day Massacre of 1002 (although the Massacre was dated to 1012 in a 1575 description of a Hocktide play), with an alternate interpretation connecting it to the death of Hardicanute and the accession of Edward the Confessor in 1042. According to the 1575 description by Robert Laneham, on their defeat the Danes were "led captive for triumph by our English weemen" [sic] (E. K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, Volume One (Oxford University Press, London), 1903, p. 154). For discussions of the uncertainties surrounding the attribution of the Hocktide festivals, see Chambers, pp. 154-5, and Katherine L. French, "To Free Them from Binding': Women in the Late Medieval English Parish", in *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Volume XXVII, Number 3, Winter 1997 (MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts), pp. 389-90. I am grateful to Christopher Humphrey for pointing out to me the Hocktide connection.

¹¹ David M. Wilson, *Vikings and Gods in European Art* (Moesgård Museum, Århus), 1997, pp. 13, 17. Wilson writes, "The activities of the Vikings were largely forgotten outside Scandinavia in the Middle Ages. The few saints martyred by the Vikings were remembered by the church, some more popularly than others, but generally memory was dim" (p. 17).

the term "Viking" was not to be used in standard English parlance until the early nineteenth century¹² -- had blended into British history, with little to distinguish them from any other peoples. Their image had not yet taken on the aggressive uniqueness which is so strong a feature of the Viking reputation today.

The Old North began to emerge as an important facet of Britain's past at the time when the Reformation required a restructuring of national identity and heritage. The classical models on which English ancestry had long been based were now somewhat tarnished by Rome's inescapable connection with Catholicism.

Ernst Breisach, in *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval and Modern*, writes that, "to the rising English national consciousness with its strong Protestant component, the Romans were 'foreigners'. Now was the time the Anglo-Saxon tradition, which would eventually prevail, gathered its early advocates."¹³ Many of these early advocates were specifically churchmen, who looked to the early, Saxon period history of the Church in England to find "a prototype of the reformed church".¹⁴ The study of Anglo-Saxon law and language began to develop a Northern model for English heritage.

Interest in the Anglo-Saxon background was spurred not only by the break with Rome, but also by tension with France, which led to a development of scholarly hostility toward the Norman elements in England's past. Ideas of the destructive effects of the dreaded "Norman Yoke", and of the virtues of Anglo-Saxon freedom, grew out of this hostility.¹⁵

In these nationalistic contexts, some of the most influential works of British antiquarianism were written. Among these are the works of William Camden: his *Britannia*, first published in 1586 and widely seen as chief among the seminal antiquarian texts, and his *Remaines Concerning Brittain*, first published 1607.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 14, and Wilson and Roesdahl, "What the Vikings Meant to Europe", in Karlsson, *Source of Liberty*, p. 45. The word *wicing*, apparently signifying a pirate, had been used in Anglo-Saxon sources in the pre-Viking period, and was occasionally used in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (see 1.1.3., above). However, after the Viking period it seems to have gone out of use in English until its nineteenth-century revival. According to Wilson and Roesdahl, "Although the term *wicing* was discussed in both England and Germany in the seventeenth century, the word Viking is basically a product of European Romanticism, recorded in English, for example, for the first time in 1807" (p. 45).

¹³ Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval and Modern*, 2nd edition (University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London), 1994, p. 176.

¹⁴ David C. Douglas, *English Scholars 1660-1730*, 2nd edition (Eyre and Spottiswoode, London), 1971, p. 52.

¹⁵ Poliakov, *Aryan Myth*, p. 46.

Revisions and enlargements of Camden's *Britannia* appeared in 1695 and 1789.¹⁶ Camden, following the example of various ecclesiastical writers who had been promoting the Anglo-Saxon model,¹⁷ focused on the Saxons as the source of England's greatness, calling them "this warlike, victorious, stiffe, stout, and vigorous nation".¹⁸ Camden was a supporter of the idea, which gained increasing popularity in his era, that through the Saxons the English language and nation ultimately derived from the German race: "the most glorious of all now extant in Europe, for their moral and martial vertues".¹⁹

Another influential antiquarian author who held similar views was Richard Verstegen, whose *Restitution of Decayed Intelligence: In Antiquities. Concerning the most noble and renowned English nation* was first published in 1605, and was to run to five editions between that year and 1670.²⁰ Verstegen was of Dutch background, but was fiercely loyal to England, and was determined to prove the modern English descent from the honourable Saxon race.²¹ Among his aims was to show "How the ancient noble Saxons the true ancetors [sic] of Englishmen, were originally a people of Germanie, and how honorable it is for Englishmen to be descended from the Germans".²² Quoting extensively from Tacitus, whose writings on the German race began to have a major impact on national and racial ideologies during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,²³ Verstegen emphasised that the Germans were "the only possessors of their country", had never been subdued, and had kept themselves "unmixed with foreign

¹⁶ Stuart Piggott, *Ruins in a Landscape: Essays in Antiquarianism* (University Press, Edinburgh), 1976, p. 33.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ Poliakov, *Aryan Myth*, pp. 46-7.

²¹ Richard Verstegen, *A Restitution of Decayed Intelligence: In Antiquities. Concerning the most noble and renowned English nation* (The Scolar Press, Ilkley and London), first published Robert Bruney, Antwerp, 1605, reprint 1976, p. 7.

²² *ibid.*, p. 25.

²³ Poliakov, *Aryan Myth*, p. 46.

peoples".²⁴

These were ideas that would be encountered many times over the next four centuries. But Verstegen is important not merely as an early proponent of Germanic greatness. In his work we find many of the ideas which were to become standard elements in the Viking matrix. Verstegen, though emphasising the essential racial unity between Germans, Danes and Norwegians, did discuss the Scandinavian incursions on Britain in the eighth through the eleventh centuries separately from the earlier Saxon invasions. He wrote of the Norwegians, in essentially the same terms as many twentieth century writers attempting to explain the Viking expansion, that "whether it were through the sterrillitie of their countrey, or that they were moved through their own courage and hardyness, or rather occasioned by both, they betook themselves ... to rob upon the sea costes of the Netherlands, England and France".²⁵ His frequent use of the term "hardy" sets the stage for the nineteenth century catchphrase "hardy Norsemen".²⁶ His discussion of the pirate Rollo's founding of Normandy includes an early appearance of the famed, if apocryphal, prayer *A furore Normannorum, libera nos Domine*.²⁷ (See also 4.2.2., below.) And like many later writers, Verstegen seems torn between horror at the Vikings' depredations, and admiration for their adventurous character. He writes of the Norse pirates as "barbarous and pagan people"²⁸ and describes their "pitiful slaughter of the Christian inhabitants",²⁹ but he also acknowledges the "great spirit" of adventurers such as Rollo.³⁰ Further, for Verstegen, the Dane Canute, who had taken England by conquest, was "the greatest king ... that ever England had, and proved in the end a very notable and good Christian prince", although Verstegen seems to base his

²⁴ Verstegen, *Restitution*, p. 42.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 165.

²⁶ That this was already a cliché by the 1870's is indicated by R. M. Ballantyne placing the phrase in quotation marks in the preface to his novel *The Norsemen in the West* (R. M. Ballantyne, *The Norsemen in the West, or America Before Columbus. A Tale* (James Nisbet and Co., London). 1873). Edna Lyall's 1889 novel *A Hardy Norseman* celebrated the virtues of the Nordic character (see 2.2., below).

²⁷ Verstegen, *Restitution*, p. 167.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 166.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 167.

³⁰ *ibid.*

summation of Canute as the "greatest" king simply on the fact that Canute was the monarch of England who controlled the largest territory.³¹

Political developments of the seventeenth century brought further reasons for promoting England's Northern past. The proto-communist Levellers' and Diggers' movements, in the mid-1600's, allied themselves with their free Anglo-Saxon ancestors against Norman oppression, and "claimed to speak for all Englishmen when they rose up against an oppression which they said had begun in 1066".³² As Christopher Hill has pointed out in his discussion of the Norman Yoke concept, the memory of the free Saxons was frequently conjured up by Parliamentary propagandists during the Civil War.³³ The Glorious Revolution of 1688, as well, was presented as a triumph of Saxon liberty and of the true English, i.e. Saxon, constitutional system.³⁴

These examples of course do not specifically relate to attitudes toward Vikings. But the various political motivations for study of the English past helped develop Anglo-Saxon scholarship, which in turn led scholars to gradually delve deeper into Scandinavian sources. And the passion for the free, sturdy, vigorous Anglo-Saxons helped lend the same mystique to their brother ancient Northerners, the Vikings.

Similar political developments helped build the Northern mystique in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Like the English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution, the French Revolution could be interpreted in terms of valorous, independent-minded peoples finally breaking free from their ancient oppressors. The Third Estate was urged by Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès to overthrow both Roman and Frankish conquerors, thus restoring Gaulish freedom.³⁵ Although the classical Roman past played a powerful role in the world view promoted by French revolutionary leaders, the more misty barbarian antiquity also struck strong emotional chords, as is seen in Napoleon Bonaparte's love for the works of the supposed Celtic bard Ossian (see 2.2.

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 162.

³² Poliakov, *Aryan Myth*, pp. 47-8.

³³ Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in the Interpretation of the English Revolution of the 17th Century* (Secker and Warburg, London), 1958, p. 67.

³⁴ Poliakov, *Aryan Myth*, p. 49.

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 28.

and 5.3.1., below).³⁶ Ideas of liberty had been further tied to the Northern past by the theories of the philosopher Montesquieu, who perceived a direct relationship between climate and character. In his *De L'Esprit des Lois* (1748), Montesquieu theorised that the cold of the North made its people more strong, energetic and independent than the inhabitants of balmy climes.³⁷ Montesquieu was a pronounced Germanophile, turning to Tacitus' account for inspiration as had so many before him, and contributing to the developing concept that the Germanic peoples were to be the saviours and rejuvenators of a degenerate world.³⁸

Throughout most of the development of interest in the North, Vikings had remained fairly indistinguishable from their various Germanic brethren. All had become seen as representative of perceived Northern values, the strength and independence which were to provide antidotes to Southern decadence. In the political debates of mid-nineteenth-century Britain, however, the Scandinavian Norsemen could become separated from their other Germanic counterparts.

In part this was due to a vastly increased familiarity with Norse literature and history (see 2.2., below). But there were also political reasons to distance oneself from a specifically German heritage. In some circles the shared heritage of Britain and Germany was celebrated, finding expression in works such as the marble statue now in the National Portrait Gallery, depicting Queen Victoria and Prince Albert as early medieval Anglo-Saxon monarchs. Other factions, however, were concerned to cut down on contemporary German influence in British politics, and seized eagerly on the Scandinavian background as an alternative to the German.³⁹ The German connection became increasingly suspect after German unification in 1871, as the unified German nation emerged as an increasingly strong rival to Britain's imperial ambitions.⁴⁰ In this context, claiming a glorious Scandinavian heritage could seem much more palatable than the equally glorious, but politically distasteful German version.

³⁶ Jöran Mjöberg, "Romanticism and Revival", in Wilson, *Northern World*, p. 211.

³⁷ Régis Boyer, "Vikings, Sagas and Wasa Bread", in Wawn, *Northern Antiquity*, p. 71.

³⁸ *ibid.*, and Poliakov, *Aryan Myth*, p. 25.

³⁹ Andrew Wawn, "The Cult of 'Stalwart Frith-thjof' in Victorian Britain", in Wawn, *Northern Antiquity*, pp. 232-3.

⁴⁰ Poliakov, *Aryan Myth*, p. 52.

In nineteenth century British attitudes, the Old North served a wide variety of purposes. Andrew Wawn has pointed out the conscious identification of Queen Victoria with Ingebjorg, heroine of the wildly popular *Friðþjófs/Frithjofs saga* (see 2.2., below),⁴¹ but the Frithjof story, and Norse-themed works in general, could lend themselves to far more resistant readings. In his discussion of the Friðþjóf/Frithjof story, Wawn points out that the saga's usage as a royally sanctioned "tale about duty and loyalty"⁴² coexisted with a reading of the story as "a challenging account of ancient democratic processes".⁴³

Vikings did not merely support the status quo. Certainly, the perceived greatness of the Norsemen provided a jingoistic explanation for why Britain, as successor to the Viking empires, had every right to rule the waves,⁴⁴ and it celebrated the shared Viking and modern British glories of trial by jury, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and a host of other rights and freedoms which made up the "spirit of the age".⁴⁵ But the example of the old Northern freedom could also point out the perceived weaknesses in contemporary Britain, as in the case of the Udal League of the 1880's, which, "according to its constitution ... sought 'to promote and encourage a general revival and assertion of the Teutonic or Norse characteristics of the British nation -- straightforwardness, and obedience to constitutional law and government'".⁴⁶ A further nineteenth-century usage which Wawn discusses is the use of Vikings as heroes of Britain's industrialised north: "much of the industrial wealth of the country lay in the North, and there were many eager to establish and proud to celebrate links between the ancient presence of Viking

⁴¹ Wawn, *The Cult of Stalwart Frith-thjof*, in Wawn, *Northern Antiquity*, pp. 235, 238-9.

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 238.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 239.

⁴⁴ Paul B. Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age: the Early History, Manners and Customs of the Ancestors of the English-Speaking Nations*, Vol. I (John Murray, London), 1889, p. vii.

⁴⁵ The classic and trend-setting statement of this idea occurs in the Preliminary Dissertation to Samuel Laing's 1844 edition of *Heimskringla*: "All that men hope for of good government and future improvement in their physical and moral condition -- all that civilised men enjoy at this day of civil, religious and political liberty -- the British constitution, representative legislature, the trial by jury, security of property, freedom of mind and person, the influence of public opinion over the conduct of public affairs, the Reformation, the liberty of the press, the spirit of the age -- all that is or has been of value to man in modern times as a member of society, either in Europe or in the New World, may be traced to the spark left burning upon our shores by these northern barbarians." (Samuel Laing, *The Heimskringla, or, the Sagas of the Norse Kings* (John C. Nimmo, London), 1844, this edition 1889, p. 9.

⁴⁶ Wawn, "The Cult of 'Stalwart Frith-thjof'", in Wawn, *Northern Antiquity*, p. 243.

settlers in the region and its modern industrial and commercial success."⁴⁷

In the Scandinavian countries, meanwhile, interest in the Northern past had waxed and waned in connection with contemporary politics, moments of political strength and increased nationalism often leading to a greater emphasis on glorious antiquity, which would fade again in the countries' quieter, less powerful eras. This is the general pattern observed by Ole Klindt-Jensen in *Scandinavia's Renaissance/Early Modern relations with its past*.⁴⁸ However, the opposite pattern also held true at times, with periods of relative contemporary weakness leading to a nostalgic emphasis on past national glories and an attempt to recreate them in the present.⁴⁹ In the convoluted interplay that was nineteenth-century Scandinavian international relations, successes and failures followed close on each other's heels. The Old North could be called upon in both circumstances: as a glowing precursor to contemporary heroism, or as a salve for contemporary wounds and an incitement to reclaim the old greatness.

For instance the members of Sweden's *Götiska Förbundet* ("Gothic League/Alliance"), a patriotic society in existence from 1811 to 1845, turned to the heroic past for solace and example in a period of national disheartenment at the loss of Finland to Russia.⁵⁰ The League's aims were "reviving the ancient spirit of freedom, fostering courage and preserving national independence, and ... promoting research into the sagas and traditional history".⁵¹ One member of the Gothic League who played a massive role in building the Viking image was Bishop Esaias Tegnér, the author of *Frithjofs saga* in its vastly successful poetic version.⁵²

At around the same time, Norway had achieved its own constitution and political

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 218.

⁴⁸ Ole Klindt-Jensen, *A History of Scandinavian Archaeology* (Thames and Hudson, London), 1975, p. 32.

⁴⁹ As Lars Lönnroth writes, "This new enthusiasm for the Vikings became particularly intense in Denmark and Sweden after both countries suffered humiliating military defeats during the first decade of the nineteenth century ... Educated people of both nations became convinced that it was now time to regain the power, vitality, and self-respect that Scandinavians had possessed during the Viking Age." (Lönnroth, "The Vikings in History and Legend", in Sawyer, *Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings* pp. 235-6.)

⁵⁰ Klindt-Jensen, *History of Scandinavian Archaeology*, p. 61.

⁵¹ Mjöberg, "Romanticism and Revival", in Wilson, *Northern World*, p. 233.

⁵² Wilson, *Vikings and Gods in European Art*, p. 35.

separation from Denmark.⁵³ Jan Ragnar Hagland has argued that the Norwegians of this period, pre-occupied with creating a viable national identity, had more interest in the political than the poetical aspects of their Old Norse heritage. Thus, Hagland writes, Norwegian ideas of the Norse past did not share "that pursuit of the sublime which so characterised the reception of Old Norse writings in Eighteenth century England, Germany and Denmark".⁵⁴

In Denmark of 1843, in which "Everyone was expectantly awaiting a decisive trial of strength between the opposed policies of Denmark and Schleswig-Holstein", the young archaeologist J. J. A Worsaae found an enthusiastic audience for his claim that "It is inconceivable that a nation which cares about itself and its independence could rest content without reflecting on its past".⁵⁵ In 1864, Denmark lost Schleswig-Holstein to Prussia, and it has been theorised that in this period of national disappointment we see again the phenomenon of a widespread turning away from the expansionist Viking past, that past being seen as an ideal no longer possible to emulate.⁵⁶

In Iceland, which in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries underwent a lengthy process of gaining its independence from Denmark, Norse heritage in the form of the sagas became an increasingly important statement of national identity. Iceland could make use of both the poetical and the political aspects of Old Norse literature. The sagas were, after all, composed in Iceland, and so could be seen as Iceland's own cultural property. As well, the theme emphasised in many of the family sagas, that the settlers of Iceland sought out the island as a refuge from tyranny in their homeland, accorded well with the movement to regain Icelandic independence.⁵⁷ (See also 5.3., below). Iceland had been granted a new constitution in 1874, the year that officially marked the millennium of Iceland's founding. It was granted home rule in 1904, received new status as the Kingdom of Iceland, in union with Denmark, in 1918, and

⁵³ Jan Ragnar Hagland, "The Reception of Old Norse Literature in Late Eighteenth Century Norway", in Wawn, *Northern Antiquity*, p. 27. Norway gained its constitution in 1814.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 37-8.

⁵⁵ Klindt-Jensen, *History of Scandinavian Archaeology*, p. 70.

⁵⁶ Marie Louise Stig Sørensen, "The fall of a nation, the birth of a subject: the national use of archaeology in nineteenth-century Denmark", in Marguerita Díaz Andreu and Timothy Champion (eds.), *Nationalism and Archaeology in Europe* (UCL Press, London), 1996, pp. 32-3.

⁵⁷ For example, early chapters of *Egils saga*, *Grettis saga* and *Laxdaela Saga*.

finally achieved full statehood in 1944. In the midst of this process, in 1911, Reykjavik University was founded.⁵⁸

As a new, decolonised nation, Iceland found in the world of the sagas an invaluable aid for emphasising its independent character.⁵⁹ This factor may play a large role in creating the extreme focus on the past which is often seen as characteristic of the Icelanders, of whom it has been said that their "individual and communal roots intertwine to make history all-pervasive".⁶⁰

Iceland's independence, or lack thereof, had resonance for others outside of Iceland. For many Victorian Britons, Iceland became a sort of home of the imagination, the tangible representation of the Viking heritage they so vigorously claimed. To many of these Icelandophiles, Iceland's decline from independence was a painful spectacle. William Morris, for example, wrote of contemporary Iceland, "what littleness and helplessness has taken the place of the old passion and violence that had place here once ... whatever solace your life is to have here must come out of yourself or these old stories".⁶¹ The contrast between Iceland's former glories and the decline of Icelandic independence was encapsulated by a later, American observer. Sveinbjorn Johnson, the author of *Pioneers of Liberty* (1930), saw Viking Age Iceland as a shining example of civil and political liberty,⁶² and saw the eventual demise of Iceland's independence as a warning to contemporary society: "the government collapsed because of elementary defects, and the principal cause of failure is of interest today because it was that very spirit of lawlessness which President Hoover justly deprecates in our country."⁶³ If Iceland's founding fathers were the model to which American government should aspire, then the internal violence which weakened the medieval Icelandic state was a dread

⁵⁸ Jesse L. Byock, "Modern Nationalism and the Medieval Sagas", in Wawn, *Northern Antiquity*, pp. 174-5.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 165, 168.

⁶⁰ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge), 1985, p. 46. Lowenthal quotes Stephen Klaidman, "Iceland, where the past is prologue" *International Herald Times*, 17 February 1981, p. 4.

⁶¹ Jack Lindsay, *William Morris: His Life and Work* (Constable, London), 1975, p. 178.

⁶² Sveinbjorn Johnson, *Pioneers of Freedom: An Account of the Icelanders and the Icelandic Free State 874-1262* (Stratford Company, Boston, Massachusetts), 1930, p. i.

⁶³ *ibid.*, pp. v-vi.

warning of what might yet occur in an America ruled by Al Capone and the mobs.

The most infamous twentieth century usage of Northern heritage is of course its appropriation by Hitler's National Socialists. In attempting to turn occupied Denmark into a true friend of the Third Reich, Nazi recruitment drives emphasised once more the essential unity between Germans and Scandinavians, and urged the "true descendants of the Vikings" to join the glorious cause.⁶⁴ Heinrich Himmler was an enthusiastic patron of the excavations at the Viking town of Hedeby, which from 1938 on were funded by the SS,⁶⁵ and good German women were advised to model their behaviour on that of the brave, noble women of the Norse sagas.⁶⁶

David Wilson has expressed surprise that the Vikings could have survived as popular figures after their Nazi usage.⁶⁷ But even at the time that Hitler's followers were claiming Viking heritage, Viking images still lent themselves easily to rival uses. Vikings, as vastly successful conquerors, made an excellent Nazi role model,⁶⁸ but as usual, the Vikings were not limited to fighting on only one side of a conflict. They could also be a symbol of unity for the Third Reich's enemies.

This is the line taken by Gordon Young, author of the 1949 travel guide *The Viking Lands*, who comments that "we know more than we used to of Scandinavia, thanks to the war",⁶⁹ and hopes to strengthen through tourism the friendship begun through shared wartime hardships. Young recounts a wartime anecdote showing one use of Vikings to take the wind out of Nazi sails:

... in Britain no anecdote of the last war was more popular than that 1940 story of the Nazi officer inspecting in Oslo the hulk of one of the old

⁶⁴ Michael Müller-Wille, "The Political Misuse of Scandinavian Prehistory in the Years 1933-1945", in Roesdahl and Sørensen, *Waking of Angantyr*, p. 156. See also Wilson and Roesdahl, "What the Vikings Meant to Europe", in Karlsson, *Source of Liberty*.

⁶⁵ W. J. McCann, "Volk und Germanentum: the presentation of the past in Nazi Germany", in Peter Gathercole and David Lowenthal (eds.) *The Politics of the Past* (Routledge, London), 1994, p. 81.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p. 76.

⁶⁷ Wilson, *Vikings and Gods in European Art*, p. 78.

⁶⁸ Müller-Wille, "Political Misuse of Scandinavian Prehistory", in Roesdahl and Sørensen, *Waking of Angantyr*, p. 157. Müller-Wille discusses the use of "finds of the Viking Age (sword, axe, helmet, shield)" in propaganda posters of 1933-45: "The repeated concentration on weapons and ships indicates to posterity an idolization of the Vikings in which heroism and splendour obscures other aspects of society."

⁶⁹ Gordon Young, *The Viking Lands* (Evans Bros., London), 1949, p. 10.

Viking sailing-ships which are on exhibition there, with its fiercely carved figurehead and its seats for twenty oarsmen. "What is that?" the German was reported to have asked the small Norwegian boy standing by. "Oh, that?" replied the little boy politely. "That is one of the ships we used for our invasion of England."⁷⁰

Young observes, "it is strange, indeed, that these lands, to which we can to-day usefully turn for example, should be the same ones from which our ancestors prayed for divine deliverance ... Now, on both sides of the North Sea, we all boast happily of our Viking ancestors as not a shameful memory, but a proud bond between us."⁷¹

Shared Viking heritage has become an emotive bargaining tool in modern Anglo-Scandinavian business ventures, with appeals to the Viking past being used as a means of attracting investment. It has also been suggested, by Catherine Hills in *Blood of the British*, that modern Anglo-Scandinavian ties of a very personal nature have played a role in creating the contemporary emphasis on kinder and gentler Vikings. Hills writes, "not unnaturally, modern civilized Scandinavians have preferred to stress the more constructive sides of their ancestors' lives. Some of the British scholars who have followed the same lines have Scandinavian wives and might have felt similar influences."⁷² It seems a valid point, though Scandinavian husbands of British scholars are of course also worthy of mention. But as for "civilized" Scandinavians preferring constructive Vikings, that is only one possible attitude. Another perspective shows "modern civilized Scandinavians" longing for some glamorous, adventurous alternative to their lauded civilized virtues, and enjoying the Viking heritage specifically because it provides a wildness which seems absent from admirable modern Scandinavia.⁷³

2.2. Literary developments

In attempting to come to grips with Saxon laws, history and antiquities, some sixteenth-century scholars concluded that a knowledge of Old English was essential.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ *ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

⁷² Catherine Hills, *The Blood of the British: From Ice Age to Norman Conquest* (Guild Publishing, London), 1986, p. 178.

⁷³ Roesdahl and Wilson, "What the Vikings Meant to Europe", in Karlsson, *Source of Liberty*, p. 39.

William Camden was among them, deciding that Old English language was necessary for his research.⁷⁴ The study of Old English grew in popularity throughout the century that followed, with the first comprehensive Anglo-Saxon dictionary appearing in 1659.⁷⁵

Meanwhile, the specifically Old Norse past had begun to make its first tentative reappearances in literature. Greatly influential was the 1514 publication, in Paris, of Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*, a twelfth-century account of Danish history. Along with the works of two Swedish brothers, the *Historia de omnibus Gothorum Sueonumque Regibus* (History of all the Gothic and Swedish Kings) of Johannes Magnus (Rome 1544) and the *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* (History of the Nordic Peoples) of Olaus Magnus (Rome 1555), this publication of Saxo provided, for a century to come, most of the literary world's knowledge of early Scandinavian history.⁷⁶

Old Norse studies in Britain lagged behind Anglo-Saxon, but by the end of the seventeenth century they were beginning to come into their own. Their researches led some scholars of Old English to believe that Norse sources were worthy of investigation in their own right, and the latter half of the 1600's saw the first substantial appearances of Old Norse literature in English publications.

Christine Fell has discussed the process by which Norse sources went from being almost entirely unknown, to being at least a focus of scholarly interest.⁷⁷ Studies of the origins of the English people published in the 1670's began to include quotations from the eddas and sagas in their discussions, basing their work largely -- though often with indifferent accuracy -- on Latin translations by scholars in Scandinavia.⁷⁸ Fell's article closes by examining the works of George Hickes, which included a two-volume *Thesaurus Veterum Linguarum Septentrionalium* (published 1703-5), and *The Waking of Angantyr*, a hugely influential poem which was translated and extracted from

⁷⁴ Piggott, *Ruins in a Landscape*, p. 64.

⁷⁵ Douglas, *English Scholars*, p. 52.

⁷⁶ Wilson, *Vikings and Gods in European Art*, pp. 14-6.

⁷⁷ Christine E. Fell, "The first publication of Old Norse literature in England and its relation to its sources", in Roesdahl and Sørensen, *Waking of Angantyr*, pp. 27-57.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 28-34. Fell discusses Robert Sheringham's *De Anglorum Gentis Origine Disceptatio*, 1670, "the first extensive occurrence of Old Norse texts in an English context" (p. 28), and Aylett Sammes' *Britannia Antiqua Illustrata: or the Antiquities of Ancient Britain derived from the Phoenicians*, 1676, which "probably did more than Sheringham to make people aware of the wealth of material in Norse literature" (p. 29).

Hervarar saga.⁷⁹ Hickeys was among those scholars of Old English who had been led to the Norse works through Anglo-Saxon, and the ideal course of reading he prescribed for a student of Anglo-Saxon included the *Heimskringla* and the *Eddas*.⁸⁰

Fell places Hickeys in a different category from his predecessors, ranking him one of the "first serious Old Norse philologists outside of Scandinavia".⁸¹ But after Hickeys, the flurry of activity in Norse studies seems to have died down. What interest survived seems to have manifested itself largely in poetry, but only in the 1760's would the Old North reappear as a focus of widespread scholarly and popular enthusiasm.⁸²

This time, the North fully captured public imagination, and held it for over a century. The floodgates were opened by the Swiss author Paul-Henri Mallet, whose *Monumens de la mythologie et de la poésie des Celtes, et particulièrement des anciens Scandinaves* (1756), a work focused on Denmark and incorporating the *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson, was vastly influential in constructing the British notion of Denmark and the North in general.⁸³ *Monumens*, an English edition of which was published in 1763,⁸⁴ continued, as its full title suggests, the equation of the Scandinavian past with that of other glamorous barbarian groups such as the mysterious Celts.⁸⁵ In harmony with ideas such as those of Montesquieu, it "portrays the North as the home of liberty", and is "a defence of liberty and a backward-looking picture of a golden age".⁸⁶

Such backward-looking struck a responsive chord. In 1760, Scots poet James Macpherson had created a sensation with his *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, allegedly collected from a Gaelic bardic epic preserved through oral tradition in the Scottish

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 34, 41.

⁸⁰ Douglas, *English Scholars*, pp. 89-90.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, p. 53.

⁸² David M. Wilson, "The Viking Age in British literature and history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries", in Roesdahl and Sørensen, *Waking of Angantyr*, p. 58.

⁸³ *ibid.*, pp. 60, 63.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, p. 59.

⁸⁵ Wilson, *Vikings and Gods in European Art*, p. 24.

⁸⁶ Wilson, "The Viking Age in British Literature", in Roesdahl and Sørensen, *Waking of Angantyr*, p. 61.

highlands.⁸⁷ Macpherson built on this success with *Fingal* (1762) and *Temora* (1763), published together as *The Works of Ossian* in 1765.⁸⁸ From the time of their first appearance, Macpherson's epics were dogged with controversy, some seeing him as a fraud who passed off his own poetry in the guise of ancient genius,⁸⁹ certain Scots observers complaining of his massive cosmetic alterations to the poems he had collected,⁹⁰ and Welsh and Irish commentators being aggrieved at Macpherson's denigration of those countries' own poetic traditions.⁹¹ All this taken into consideration, Macpherson's poems were still wildly successful. Their vision, of a misty, noble past of heroic lost causes and self-sacrifice developed to a fine art, created an international Ossian craze, with the poems being translated into Italian, French, German, Polish, Russian, Danish, Spanish, Dutch, Bohemian and Hungarian.⁹²

The English poet Thomas Gray was among the many readers enthralled by Ossian. After reading two of Macpherson's *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* in 1760, Gray declared that he had "gone mad about them", although he had his doubts that they were as authentically ancient as Macpherson claimed.⁹³ At the time, Gray was engaged in planning a never-completed study of the origins of English poetry, which led him to investigate, among others, "Scaldic, British and Saxon" poetic forms.⁹⁴ The British Museum had opened in 1759, and Gray practically moved into its library, writing "'My only employment and amusement in town ... has been the Musaeum [sic]'".⁹⁵

⁸⁷ Fiona Stafford, "Introduction: The Ossianic Poems of James Macpherson", in James Macpherson, *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, edited by Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh), 1996, p. xii.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, p. xiii, and Fiona Stafford, *The Sublime Savage: A Study of James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh), 1988, p. 185.

⁸⁹ Stafford, *Sublime Savage*, pp. 163-4.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 169.

⁹¹ *ibid.*

⁹² Stafford, "Ossianic Poems of James Macpherson", in Macpherson, *Poems of Ossian*, pp. xv-xvi.

⁹³ Roger Lonsdale (ed.), *The Poems of Thomas Gray, William Collins, Oliver Goldsmith* (Longmans, London), 1969, pp. 211-2.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 211.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

Out of these various influences came Gray's two poems based on Norse sources, *The Fatal Sisters* and *The Descent of Odin*, both written in 1761 although not published until 1768.⁹⁶ Gray introduced his audience to themes which were to be strongly emphasised in the popularisation of Norse themes, including the role of the Valkyries as fates, and a focus on mysterious prophetesses. At the time Gray wrote, this was unfamiliar territory; Horace Walpole wrote of the poems that "Gray has translated two noble incantations from the Lord knows who, a Danish Gray, who lived the Lord knows when".⁹⁷

Gray's noble incantations served to develop a popular interest in Norse themes, assisted in this by Thomas Percy's *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry* and Percy's 1770 translation of Mallet's *Monumens*.⁹⁸ In early 1800's Walter Scott, that great figure in the evolution of the historical novel, added his own touches to the developing Viking image, with the vigorous swashbuckling of his poem *Harold the Dauntless* (1817) and the more melancholy vision of Northern traditions in his novel *The Pirate* (1822). *Harold the Dauntless* comes complete with many standard features of later Viking impressions, including lightning-swift raids, the practice of drinking out of one's enemies' skulls in Valhalla, and an improving story of a wild pagan Viking being civilised by true love and Christianity.⁹⁹

In the early nineteenth century such images were becoming increasingly familiar, but they were still glimpses into a world that was for the most part mysterious and obscure. During the century this situation was to alter drastically, with Norse sources becoming almost required reading, and an integral part of British culture.

A massively influential role was played by the Swedish poet Esaias Tegnér, mentioned above as a member of the Gothic Alliance, whose 1824 adaptation of the late Icelandic saga *Friðþjófs saga hins froekna* set off another literary craze as passionate as that which surrounded Ossian. Tegnér seems to have consciously set out, through his hero Frithjof, to popularise the Viking mythos. He wrote, "My object was to present a

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 210, 212-3, 220.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 212.

⁹⁸ Wilson, "The Viking Age in British literature and history", in Roesdahl and Sørensen, *Waking of Angantyr*, p. 63.

⁹⁹ J. Logie Robertson (ed.), *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott* (Oxford University Press, London), 1904, this edition 1960, pp. 517-552.

poetical image of the old Northern heroic age. It was not Frithiof as an individual, whom I wished to paint; it was the epoch of which he was chosen as the representative."¹⁰⁰

As a populariser of the Viking era, Tegnér was phenomenally successful. As Andrew Wawn has demonstrated, the noble Frithjof/Friðbjóf became the nineteenth century epitome of the Viking hero, and his story appealed as a tale of duty and sacrifice, a sentimental love story, a "paean to noble paganism", a meritocratic success story, and a rip-roaring boys' adventure.¹⁰¹ A staggering number of Frithjofs appeared in print, with at least fifteen independent English versions of Tegnér's poem being published between 1833 and 1914. There were also three separate nineteenth-century English translations of the original saga, making it the most published of any Icelandic saga during that century.¹⁰² The original saga has a further claim to fame as the first complete saga to be published in English, with its earliest translation appearing in 1839.¹⁰³ That Frithjof had become the embodiment of Northern virtues can be seen in an 1889 novel, Edna Lyall's *A Hardy Norseman*. The novel has a contemporary setting, and takes as its hero a strapping Norwegian youth named after the saga Frithjof, who teaches his English companions the immeasurable value of Norwegian frankness, courage and generosity. Throughout the book, the saga Frithjof is held up as the modern Frithiof's example.¹⁰⁴

The period from the 1840's to the turn of the century has been called "the golden age of Old Norse study in England".¹⁰⁵ In this period Norse literature went from being

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Wilson, *Vikings and Gods in European Art*, p. 35.

¹⁰¹ Wawn, "The Cult of 'Stalwart Frith-thjof'", in Wawn, *Northern Antiquity*, pp. 235-6, 238-9, 244.

¹⁰² *ibid.*, p. 222.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Edna Lyall, *A Hardy Norseman* (John F. Shaw and Co. Ltd., London), first published 1889, this edition n.d. The modern Frithiof is first described as follows: "He was tall and broad-shouldered, with something unusually erect and energetic in his bearing; his features were of the pure Greek type not unfrequently to be met with in Norway; while his Northern birth was attested by a fair skin and light hair and moustache, as well as by a pair of honest, well-opened, blue eyes, which looked out on the world with a boyish content and happiness" (p. 6). His sister, meanwhile, "possessed a delightful fund of quiet common sense, and her judgement was seldom at fault, while, like most Norwegian girls, she had a most charmingly simple manner, and an unaffected light-heartedness which it did one good to see" (p. 11).

¹⁰⁵ Karl Litzenberg, "The Victorians and the Vikings: a Bibliographical Essay on Anglo-Norse Literary Relations", in *Contributions in Modern Philology*, vol. 3, 1947, p.9.

an esoteric subject explored by a few scholars, and only scantily touched on in popular culture, to being readily accessible and something of a national passion. George Webbe Dasent, one of the most enthusiastic proponents of Norse studies, entered the field in the 1840's, with his translation of Snorri Sturlusson's *Edda* appearing in 1842 and his translation of Rask's *Grammar of the Icelandic, or Old Norse Tongue*, in 1843.¹⁰⁶ Samuel Laing's translation of *Heimskringla*, the prefatory dissertation of which set forth widely influential ideas on the Norse contributions to British liberties (see footnote no. 45, above), was published in 1844.¹⁰⁷

In the middle years of the nineteenth century, Norse mythology entered the realm of children's literature, with the continually republished *Heroes of Asgard* (1857)¹⁰⁸ and various translations of Asbjörnson and Moe's *Popular Tales from the Norse*.¹⁰⁹ Saga translations continued, with works such as Dasent's version of *Njáls saga* (1861) and his *The Story of Gisli the Outlaw* (1866).¹¹⁰ Around this same time, Viking-themed novels became a popular genre. Some novels were adaptations of specific sagas, such as Sabine Baring-Gould's *Grettir the Outlaw: A Story of Iceland*¹¹¹, while others introduced original characters into situations made familiar by the sagas. One of the authors to venture into this genre in its early years was prolific adventure novelist R. M. Ballantyne, with his Viking tales *Erling the Bold* (1869) and *The Norsemen in the West, or, America Before Columbus* (1873). Ballantyne was very clearly influenced by Samuel Laing's ideas on Norse freedom, and his preface to *Erling the Bold* explains the

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁷ Wawn, "The Cult of 'Stalwart Frith-thjof'", in Wawn, *Northern Antiquity*, pp. 234, 244.

¹⁰⁸ Edith M. Cairns (ed.), *Catalogue of the Collection of Children's Books 1617-1939 in the Library of the University of Reading* (University of Reading Library, Reading), 1988, p. 2.

¹⁰⁹ Described as "the first collection of Norse folktales appropriated by children" (Jane Bingham and Grayce Scholt, *Fifteen Centuries of Children's Literature* (Greenwood Press, Westwood, Connecticut), 1980, p. 191). Litzenberg mentions an edition of 1859 (Litzenberg, "Victorians and the Vikings", in *Contributions in Modern Philology*, p. 10); Bingham and Scholt mention G. W. Dasent's translation of 1842 and state that "the translator's subsequent edition, selections, London 1862, was intended for children" (Bingham and Scholt, *Fifteen Centuries of Children's Literature*, p. 191).

¹¹⁰ Wawn, "The Cult of 'Stalwart Frith-thjof'", in Wawn, *Northern Antiquity*, p. 222.

¹¹¹ Sabine Baring-Gould, *Grettir the Outlaw: A Story of Iceland* (Blackie and Son, London), 1890.

Norse contribution to British culture in terms almost identical to Laing's.¹¹²

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, Viking adventure novels were a vastly prolific field. They presented, for the most part, fairly standardised depictions: noble Viking heroes who displayed the glorious English virtues of manliness, love of fair play, and the proverbial stiff upper lip, who might perhaps begin the novel slightly too bloodthirsty for their own good, but who would invariably be gentled by conversion to Christianity and/or by the love of a good woman.¹¹³

More scholarly aspects of Norse studies continued to develop. Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson's Icelandic-English dictionary, which has been hailed as the first "adequate" dictionary for use in Old Norse studies, was published in 1874.¹¹⁴ Where in the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries British scholars had to rely on Latin translations, and even Scandinavian scholars were greatly dependent on the assistance of their Icelandic colleagues,¹¹⁵ the saga corpus by the end of the nineteenth century was readily available in English translations, and those who wished to read the originals had all the necessary tools to hand. One well known example of collaboration between British and Icelandic scholars in bringing the sagas to public view is the association of Eiríkr Magnússon and William Morris, frequently cited as playing

¹¹² R. M. Ballantyne, *Erling the Bold: A Tale of the Norse Sea-Kings* (Blackie and Son, Ltd., London), 1869, this edition n. d., preface.

¹¹³ Examples of these themes are numerous. Erling the Bold, at the instigation of the heroine, studies the art of writing from a Christian hermit. The hero of *Vandrad the Viking* learns from the example of the gentle Christian heroine to abandon his dreams of vengeance (J. Storer Clouston, *Vandrad the Viking, or, the Feud and the Spell* (Thomas Nelson and Sons, London), 1897). In *The Viking Path* the majority of the characters are converted to Christianity, including a pagan priestess who gives up her power and authority in order to embrace the tender, womanly submission taught to her by the Christian man whom she loves (J. J. Haldane Burgess, *The Viking Path: A Tale of the White Christ* (William Blackwood and Sons, London), 1894). Also popular were adaptations of sagas that focused on Christian Viking kings such as Olaf Tryggvason and Olaf the Saint. (See Robert Leighton, *Olaf the Glorious*, (Blackie and Son Ltd., London), 1895, Mary Frances Outram, *In the Van of the Vikings, or, How Olaf Tryggvason Lost and Won* (The Religious Tract Society, London), n.d., this copy given as school prize 1912, Charles W. Whistler, *King Olaf's Kinsman* (Blackie and Son Ltd., London), 1898.) The theme of the hero's character development being caused by the love of a good woman and by conversion to Christianity is found also in Tegnér's *Frithjof's saga*, a fact which probably played a large role in making this theme such a standard element of the nineteenth-century Viking novels. (Lönnroth, "Vikings in History and Legend", in Sawyer, *Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, pp. 239-40.)

¹¹⁴ Litzenberg, "Victorians and the Vikings", in *Contributions in Modern Philology*, p. 10.

¹¹⁵ Fell, "The First Publication of Old Norse Literature in England", in Roesdahl and Sørensen, *Waking of Angantyr*, p. 53.

a pre-eminent role in shaping the latter nineteenth century's view of the Vikings.¹¹⁶ Morris had begun his study of Old Norse and the Icelandic sagas in 1868, with Magnússon as his tutor.¹¹⁷ Morris and Magnússon's first saga translation, of *Gunnlaug's Saga*, was published in 1869.¹¹⁸ Both individually and in collaboration, Morris and Magnússon continued to produce translations and adaptations of various sagas during the 1870's, '80's and '90's. Their Saga Library, a collection of their previous translations, began publication in 1891.¹¹⁹ While the eccentric style in which Morris told his versions of the sagas may do little to endear them to many readers in the late twentieth century, the work of Morris and Magnússon played an important role in the sagas' transformation from obscure foreign literature into a genre widely recognised, admired and emulated.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the passion for Viking-themed literature seems to have declined, although the popular works of the previous century were still frequently republished. Another upsurge of Vikings in literature occurred in the 1950's, with the approximately twenty years' renaissance of children's historical fiction. The works of authors such as Rosemary Sutcliff and Henry Treece traced the adventures of Viking heroes, often using plots and approaches very similar to those employed by late nineteenth century Viking novelists. Treece, especially, showed himself akin to his predecessors, in adapting and elaborating the saga accounts of historical protagonists such as King Harald Hardradi of Norway.¹²⁰

One greatly influential twentieth-century work of Viking fiction is *The Long Ships* (*Röde Orm*), by Swedish novelist Frans Bengtsson (published 1941 and '45 in Sweden, with a 1954 English publication). This international bestseller tells its story in a style deliberately modelled on the sagas, attempting to recapture the characteristically

¹¹⁶ Wilson, "The Viking Age in British literature and history", in Roesdahl and Sørensen, *Waking of Angantyr*, p. 67.

¹¹⁷ Johanna Banham and Jennifer Harris (eds.), *William Morris and the Middle Ages* (Manchester University Press, Manchester), 1984, p. 13.

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹¹⁹ William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon, *The Saga Library Vol. 1, The Story of Howard the Halt, The Story of the Banded Men, The Story of Hen Thorir* (Bernard Quaritch, London), 1891.

¹²⁰ Hardradi appears in four of Treece's novels, as a supporting character in *Hounds of the King*, 1955 (in which the focus is on Harold II Godwinson), and *Man with a Sword*, 1962 (the hero of which is Hereward the Wake), and as the main character in *The Last of the Vikings* (1966) and *Swords from the North* (1967). (Laura Standley Berger (ed.), *Twentieth Century Young Adult Writers* (St. James Press, Detroit), 1994, pp. 655-6.)

underplayed, laconic and often dark humour that the sagas display. The Vikings in this work are violent and do not apologise for the fact, but a great deal of domestic, everyday detail is included in the story, making the violence seem largely an unremarkable part of life. A similar effect is achieved in Kirk Douglas' blockbuster film *The Vikings* (1958), which admittedly follows the technique of "delightfully emphasizing their [the Vikings'] vicious qualities",¹²¹ but is remarkably free of value judgements, and portrays many of the Saxons just as unfavourably as the worst of their Viking enemies.

In 1962 was published Peter Sawyer's *The Age of the Vikings*, a work which is widely credited with sparking off a new era in Viking studies.¹²² C. Patrick Wormald wrote in the early 1980's that Sawyer's work was the starting point in a series of "very marked advances which scholars have made in the last 20 years", characterising *The Age of the Vikings* as "one of those works which, however controversial, yet attracts almost all subsequent work into its orbit".¹²³ Sawyer's main thesis in this work is that "the Scandinavian activity of the Viking period is not so much inexplicable as misunderstood",¹²⁴ and argues that "some assumptions about the Vikings are accepted, used and given the stamp of authority by repetition, when they ought to be rigorously tested."¹²⁵ Among his most influential and controversial arguments is the theory that Viking "armies" had consisted of much smaller numbers than had been previously assumed. *The Age of the Vikings* presents the Vikings as human beings, rather than mysterious and larger-than-life figures, claiming that "once the prejudices and exaggerations of the primary sources are recognised the raids can be seen, not as an unprecedented and inexplicable cataclysm, but as an extension of normal Dark Age

¹²¹ Wilson and Roesdahl, "What the Vikings Meant to Europe", in Karlsson, *Source of Liberty*, p. 59.

¹²² According to the jacket description of the second edition of Sawyer's work, in 1971, "The first edition of *The Age of the Vikings* provoked considerable controversy and discussion. It was widely accepted that Professor Sawyer had done a great service to Viking studies by his criticism of the established order". (P. H. Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings* (Edward Arnold Ltd., London), 1971, jacket description.)

¹²³ C. Patrick Wormald, "Viking Studies: Whence and Whither?", in R. T. Farrell (ed.), *The Vikings* (Phillimore and Co. Ltd., London), 1982, p. 128.

¹²⁴ Sawyer, *Age of the Vikings*, p. v.

¹²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 8.

activity made possible and profitable by special circumstances."¹²⁶ This approach was to have a strong influence on the late twentieth-century trend in Viking studies to focus on domestic Viking life rather than on the exploits of assorted heroes.

The late twentieth century has seen new Viking-themed genres emerging in both fiction and non-fiction. In fiction, a characteristic product of the 1980's and '90's is the Viking bodice-ripper romance (see 3.1.3. and 3.2.2., and 5.3.3., below). These novels make free use of a wide range of Viking images. They typically feature tall, blond and blue-eyed Viking heroes, and Valkyrie-inspired warrior maids. But they also tend to tie in with the scholarly developments of twentieth-century Viking studies, which make an effort to emphasise the peaceful elements of Viking life. As the heroes of romantic novels, the romance Vikings must be active and forceful, but there is a tendency to make them, in true late twentieth-century style, merchant princes or noble farmers rather than simple pillagers.

In non-fiction, emphasis has been determinedly placed on the more peaceful Viking. A widespread increase of popular interest in Vikings attributed to a succession of high profile museum exhibitions in the early 1980's¹²⁷ has created a burgeoning field of glossy Viking-themed coffee table books, written usually by scholars in Viking studies, but seeking a wide popular audience. Influenced by these, and by the celebrated Jorvik Viking Centre, is the vast selection of children's non-fiction works on the Vikings, which in the 1980's and '90's has played a large role in introducing more domesticated, politically correct Vikings into popular culture.

David Wilson and Else Roesdahl have written that

The public conception of the Vikings remains loosely the same as it was in the late nineteenth century. A romanticism attaches itself to these people, who are seen as bold seafarers, skilful poets, young, brave and blond. Although pirates, they are seen as kings of the sea, noble adventurers with a democratic mission and a benign colonizing spirit.¹²⁸

All of these points do indeed hold true, as will be discussed in later chapters. But the late twentieth-century Viking has also acquired attributes that his nineteenth-century

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 202-3.

¹²⁷ David M. Wilson, "Fifty years of Viking-Age Archaeology. A personal view", in Else Roesdahl and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (eds.) *Beretning fra femtende tværfaglige vikingesymposium* (Afdeling for Middelalder-arkæologi, Aarhus Universitet, Moesgård), 1996, pp. 20-1.

¹²⁸ Wilson and Roesdahl, "What the Vikings Meant to Europe", in Karlsson, *Source of Liberty*, p. 61.

brethren did not possess. Already in the nineteenth century proponents of the Vikings were concerned to argue that Vikings were "not barbarians", and had many civilized skills rather than being simply pillagers.¹²⁹ But the distinctive emphasis on domestic Viking life is a construction of the last several decades of the twentieth century. The peace-loving Viking has been promoted with such zeal that it comes to seem almost a crime for a serious writer to focus on Viking warfare.¹³⁰

2.3. Archaeological developments

Developments in Scandinavian scholarship in the seventeenth century had their impact on British ideas of material remains as well as on philology. The Dane Ole Worm, whose collection of antiquities eventually became the property of King Frederik III, was influential in shaping seventeenth century British notions of the North,¹³¹ through works such as his *Danicorum Monumentorum* (1643),¹³² and the catalogue *Museum Wormianum*, published after Worm's death in 1655.¹³³

The use of Worm's writings, in which were found Danish monuments and antiquities which had parallels in Britain, led British antiquaries to assign to the Danes assorted remains which had previously been seen primarily as Roman. Many now fanciful-seeming ideas developed, such as the notion that the Vikings were responsible for building Stonehenge. The possible credit for creating Stonehenge was an honour the Danes shared with an eclectic assortment of historical and legendary peoples, including, according to a list compiled by Thomas Tanner c. 1695, the Romans, the Phoenicians, giants, Boadicea, Uther Pendragon, and the Druids.¹³⁴

Danish conquerors were on various occasions credited with a miscellany of other monuments. Camden had suggested that the Rollright stone circle might have been

¹²⁹ Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age*, Vol. I, p. 3.

¹³⁰ Paddy Griffith, *The Viking Art of War* (Greenhill Books, London), 1995, pp. 24-5.

¹³¹ Wilson, "The Viking Age in British literature and history", in Roesdahl and Sørensen, *Waking of Angantyr*, p. 60.

¹³² Stuart Piggott, *Ancient Britons and the Antiquarian Imagination: Ideas from the Renaissance to the Regency* (Thames and Hudson, London), 1989, p. 104.

¹³³ Klindt-Jensen, *History of Scandinavian Archaeology*, p. 22.

¹³⁴ Piggott, *Ancient Britons*, p. 115.

constructed in honour of Rollo of Normandy.¹³⁵ John Aubrey (1626-1697) was of the belief that "circular (or roughly round) earthworks were infallibly Danish",¹³⁶ and Robert Plot (1640-1696) argued that while Saxon and Danish earthworks were almost indistinguishable from Roman, the Saxon fortifications were square and the Danish round.¹³⁷ Thomas Tanner wrote of Millbarrow near Avebury that "it is so like those *Wormius* describes ... it was the sepulcher of some Danish Commander".¹³⁸ Such ideas survived into the eighteenth century, with Francis Wise, in 1720, producing an interpretation of the Uffington white horse and nearby fortifications which assigned them to the context of Alfred's war against the Danes, and explained the White Horse itself as a monument to King Alfred's victory at Ashdown.¹³⁹

Scandinavian studies of the eighteenth century began to narrow the field, though still assigning to the Vikings a good many artefacts which are now dated to periods far outside the Viking era. A particular selection of monuments and artefact types emerged which would be connected in popular imagery with sagas and Norse mythology, including, as Jöran Mjöberg lists them, "rune-stones and burial mounds; swords, spears, helmets and drinking horns; temples and ships".¹⁴⁰ Physical examples of the runestones, mounds, drinking horns and weapons were available by the end of the eighteenth century. But Viking Age temples had left little or no trace and the visions of them were constructed from brief literary descriptions and plentiful imagination, the helmets were equally creations of fantasy (see 3.4., below), and the Viking ships were not to enter the tangible archaeological scene until the latter half of the nineteenth century.

The ships offer some of the most vivid examples of archaeological influence on popular impressions. Until the 1860's, there was little or no physical evidence for the structure of Viking ships, so images were concocted from saga descriptions and a potluck of other historical examples (see 3.3., below). In 1867 the first of the

¹³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 104.

¹³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 119.

¹³⁷ *ibid.*

¹³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 121.

¹³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 137. This idea has survived into twentieth-century popular culture, being the explanation of the White Horse put forward in Edward Rutherford's novel *Sarum* (Century Hutchinson Ltd., London), 1987, p. 325.

¹⁴⁰ Mjöberg, "Romanticism and Revival", in Wilson, *Northern World*, p. 226.

substantial ship remains assigned to the Vikings was discovered at Tune in Norway, and the Tune ship took its place alongside the saga descriptions.¹⁴¹ But these remains were fragmentary. It was only in 1880 that a largely complete Viking Age ship was discovered at Gokstad, Norway, and the Viking ship was given a new, archaeologically verifiable image. Christine Fell cites this discovery, along with that of the Oseberg ship in 1904, as being responsible for solidifying the image of superhuman nautical prowess which is so much a part of the Viking reputation today: "it is not really until archaeologists discovered the great Gokstad and Oseberg ships ... that the Vikings as sea-goers recaptured the imagination".¹⁴²

Various other discoveries added their own touches to the Viking image. An elaborate horned helmet discovered in the Thames near Waterloo Bridge in 1868 would eventually be assigned to the first century B.C.¹⁴³ (see Figure 1), but it resonated with and helped to add tangible substance to the popular fantasies of the Viking horned helmet. Among other influential horned depictions was a bronze helmet-plate die found at Torslunda on the island of Öland in 1870¹⁴⁴ (see Figure 2), which showed a dancing horned warrior and was used alongside the Waterloo Bridge helmet to support the horned Viking image.¹⁴⁵ (These and other examples of horned headgear will be discussed in 3.4., below.)

Other helmets, very different in type and far closer to the Viking Age proper, were discovered in the early decades of the twentieth century, eventually becoming almost as influential as their horned rivals in creating Viking images. Chief among these are the visored, iron helmets with bronze mountings found in cemeteries in Vendel and

¹⁴¹ N. Nicolaysen, *The Viking-Ship from Gokstad*, (Gregg International Publishers Ltd., Westmead), originally published Kristiania, 1882, reprinted 1971, pp. 12-3. Nicolaysen's second chapter, "Review of the condition and progress of shipping in Norway, from the earliest period, to the close of the Middle Ages", was based on a study Nicolaysen had written before his excavation of the Gokstad ship, and was left in its original form, thus giving a useful outline of ideas of Viking shipping before the Gokstad discovery.

¹⁴² Christine Fell, "Norse Studies: then, now, and hereafter", in Anthony Faulkes and Richard Perkins (eds.), *Viking Revaluations* (Viking Society for Northern Research, UCL, London), 1993, p. 94.

¹⁴³ J. V. S. Megaw, *Art of the Iron Age: A study of the elusive image* (Adams and Dart, Bath), 1970, p. 170 and plate 294.

¹⁴⁴ Rupert Bruce-Mitford (ed.), *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology: Sutton Hoo and Other Discoveries* (Victor Gollancz Ltd., London), 1974, p. 214.

¹⁴⁵ Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age*, Vol. II, p. 100.

Valsgärde, both in Uppland, Sweden, and the similar and widely celebrated example from Sutton Hoo, which was first uncovered in 1939 (see Figure 3). The earliest-discovered helmet remains to be occasionally incorporated into Viking images are those of the Anglo-Saxon Benty Grange helmet with the boar figure on its crest, discovered in a burial in Derbyshire in 1848.¹⁴⁶ Another helmet which makes frequent appearances in late twentieth-century Viking depictions, and one of the very few helmet discoveries to be given a date firmly within the Viking period, is the fragmentary visored helmet discovered in Gjermundbu, Norway (see Figure 4). With the helmets from Benty Grange, Vendel, Valsgärde and Sutton Hoo, the Gjermundbu helmet has been an important model for the non-horned Viking depictions of the late twentieth century, although of these archaeological prototypes only Gjermundbu can be given a demonstrably Viking Age provenance.

Meanwhile, the flights of fancy which pictured Vikings as the builders of Stonehenge found later echoes in archaeological fantasies of Viking explorers in America. Erik Wahlgren and Birgitta Linderöth Wallace have both produced entertaining summaries of this particular avenue of Viking archaeology.¹⁴⁷

Among the most influential and determinedly supported examples of this category is the infamous Kensington rune stone, which entered the Vikings-in-America controversy in 1898. Wahlgren has suggested a possible genesis for the stone, as a hoax created in the context of late nineteenth-century enthusiasm for the idea of pre-Columbian American Viking adventures.¹⁴⁸ Although most Viking specialists follow Wahlgren's lead in debunking the stone, it has retained enthusiastic support through decades of passionate writings, a stint at the Smithsonian museum in 1948-'49, and a Runestone Museum in Alexandria, Minnesota, as well as several Kensington Runestone pages on the World Wide Web.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Rupert Bruce-Mitford and Marilyn R. Luscombe, "The Benty Grange Helmet", in Bruce-Mitford, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology*, p. 223.

¹⁴⁷ Erik Wahlgren, *The Kensington Stone: A Mystery Solved* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison), 1958, Erik Wahlgren, *The Vikings and America* (Thames and Hudson, London), 1986, and Birgitta Linderöth Wallace, "The Vikings in North America: Myth and Reality", in Ross Samson (ed.), *Social Approaches to Viking Studies* (Cruithne Press, Glasgow), 1991, pp. 207-19.

¹⁴⁸ Wahlgren, *The Kensington Stone*, pp. 121-3.

¹⁴⁹ See, for example, the Kensington Rune Stone home page, at <http://admin.hps.osrhe.edu/htmls/runtest.htm> (visited 19/1/98), which provides links to other related sites, and "Is the Kensington Runestone the Genuine Article?!", at <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/keithngail> (visited 19/1/98).

Rather more academically respectable than the Kensington Stone, the 1939 excavation of an Anglo-Saxon ship burial at Sutton Hoo in East Anglia has generated equally intense enthusiasm. Sutton Hoo has become the classic embodiment of Anglo-Saxon archaeology, with artefacts such as the buckles, shoulder-clasps, sceptre and helmet taking on the character of icons. In the public imagination, Sutton Hoo images -- most frequently the re-constructed helmet -- have come to stand as short-hand for any "Dark Age" warrior, be that warrior King Arthur, as on the cover of Bernard Cornwell's novel *The Winter King*,¹⁵⁰ or King Alfred's great opponent Guthrum the Dane.¹⁵¹ The remains from Sutton Hoo are intertwined with Viking images, standing alongside *Beowulf* and the few Norse mythological accounts of shipboard burials to support the romantic vision of the Viking's funeral.

In Denmark, meanwhile, excavations were carried out from 1934-'41 on a circular Viking Age fortress at Trelleborg, which gave its name as a generic description for the three similar "Viking camps" later found at Aggersborg, Fyrkat and Nonnebakken.¹⁵² The Trelleborg fortresses, like the Sutton Hoo burial, became swiftly intermingled in both popular and scholarly thought with features from saga and Viking Age history: many theories have connected the Trelleborgs with the semi-mythical fortress of the Jomsviking mercenaries in the *Jomsvikinga saga*, while hypotheses were frequently put forward suggesting the fortresses as headquarters for Svein Forkbeard's invasions of England in the early eleventh century.¹⁵³ Recent dendrochronological findings have dated the Trelleborgs instead to the tenth century, with a more likely historical

¹⁵⁰ Bernard Cornwell, *The Winter King: A Novel of Arthur* (Penguin Books, London), 1995, front cover.

¹⁵¹ Guthrum, according to the *Jackdaw* on Alfred the Great, "probably wore something similar" to the Sutton Hoo helmet. (David Johnson, *Jackdaws No. 89: Alfred the Great* (Jackdaw Publications, London), 1969, Exhibit 13, "Anglo-Saxon Warfare".) In the 1969 film *Alfred the Great*, Guthrum wears a helmet based on one of the helmets from Valsgerde, several of his bodyguards appear in Sutton Hoo helmets, and Alfred himself wears a helmet inspired by that from Benty Grange. (James R. Webb (director), *Alfred the Great* (Bernard Smith/MGM British), 1969.)

¹⁵² Paul Nørlund, *Trelleborg* (National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen), first published by the Committee of the Exhibition Danish Art Treasures, London 1948, fourth revised edition 1968, pp. 4, 9-10.

¹⁵³ See Sidney L. Cohen, *Viking Fortresses of the Trelleborg Type* (Rosenkilde and Bagger, Copenhagen), 1964, pp. 29-38.

connection being with the centralization of Danish rule under King Harald Bluetooth,¹⁵⁴ but the invasion hypothesis continues to appear in various contexts, such as the 1992 novel *Jorvik: A Tale of the Last Viking*.¹⁵⁵ Assorted reconstructions of houses excavated at Trelleborg and its fellow Viking camps have also taken their place among common Viking images, being used as a basis for illustrations of Viking houses and in evocations of Viking life such as the Viking houses in the open air museum at Moesgård, Denmark.¹⁵⁶

The 1940's saw various archaeological developments which were to impact both scholarly and popular visions. In 1940, Haakon Shetelig published the first portions of his *Viking Antiquities in Great Britain and Ireland*, on which he had been working since 1919, and which was to be a standard text for Viking scholars for decades to come.¹⁵⁷ In the Isle of Man, German archaeologist Gerhard Bersu, who had been detained in Man as an enemy alien during the war, excavated between 1944 and 1946 three Viking Age burials which were to capture the public imagination, again largely through their possible spectacular connections with literary sources. In particular, the inclusion in the mound at Ballateare of what appears to have been a female sacrificial victim has consistently gained attention since its discovery, due to its echoes of works such as the Arab traveller Ibn Fadlan's sensationalist account of a Viking funeral in Russia.¹⁵⁸ The possible sacrificed slave girl of Ballateare has given some archaeological backing to popular images of rapacious Viking sexual practices.

A series of discoveries from the 1940's onward have added to knowledge of

¹⁵⁴ Else Roesdahl, *Viking Age Denmark*, translated by Susan Margeson and Kirsten Williams (British Museum Publications Ltd., London), 1982, pp. 12, 151.

¹⁵⁵ Sheelagh Kelly, *Jorvik: A Tale of the Last Viking* (Random Century Group, London), 1992, p. 24.

¹⁵⁶ Brochure, *Moesgård: The Prehistoric Trackway* (Kannike Tryk), no. 8, The Giber River: "Here on the beach Boy Scouts have, in collaboration with the Prehistoric Museum, erected a reconstruction of a Viking house of Fyrkat type, as a boat-house for the Scouts' copy of a Viking ship, 'Imme Aros'." The prehistoric museum also includes a "Viking town" (no. 10), in which is found the "Hedeby house", "a full-scale reconstruction based on excavations carried out at the Viking town of Hedeby a mile or two south of Schleswig". According to this brochure, "The house has been furnished and equipped with copies of objects which have been found on various Viking sites, particularly in the great Norwegian burial-mound of Oseberg".

¹⁵⁷ Wilson, "Fifty years of Viking-Age Archaeology", in Roesdahl and Sørensen, *Beretning fra femtende tværfaglige vikingesymposium*, p. 8.

¹⁵⁸ Gerhard Bersu and David M. Wilson, *Three Viking Graves in the Isle of Man* (Society for Medieval Archaeology, London), 1966, pp. 90-1.

Viking seamanship, and helped build the popular image of Vikings as the greatest sailors and explorers of their day. In a 1945-'48 excavation at Uunartoq Fjord in Greenland, C. L. Vebæk uncovered an artefact which was, in the 1970's, to become widely accepted as a Norse bearing dial, or sun-compass (see also 5.1.3., below).¹⁵⁹ Since the development of this hypothesis, several voyages on re-constructed Viking ships as well as on modern vessels have been navigated using bearing dials modelled on Vebæk's discovery, and the general consensus tends to support the idea of Vikings as navigators of surprising skill.¹⁶⁰

In 1957, excavation began on five Viking Age ships which had been submerged in the Roskilde Fjord, Denmark. Excavation continued until 1962,¹⁶¹ and the discovery of the ships led to the creation of the Viking Ship Museum at Roskilde.¹⁶² These ships, known as the Skuldelev ships for the harbour near which they were discovered, have greatly increased knowledge of Viking period ship-building, although as more workaday vessels, they have not replaced the flashier Oseberg and Gokstad ships in the public imagination. Largely inspired by the Skuldelev vessels, there developed from the late 1960's onward a growing passion for the construction of Viking ship replicas, which has played a large part in popularising Viking ship images in Scandinavia, Britain and the United States (see 3.3., below).

The 1960's brought two rival discoveries regarding the Vikings in America, one now widely thought to be a fraud, but the other standing at the forefront of the very few archaeologically supportable American Viking finds. A flurry of excitement was caused by the publication in 1965 of the so-called Vinland Map, which purported to be a later medieval world map showing territory which could only have been known had the Vikings truly reached North America and influenced the map-maker by their reports. Analysis of the ink used, along with other features, has suggested that the map is likely

¹⁵⁹ C. L. Vebæk and S. Thirlund, *The Viking Compass: Guided Norsemen First to America* (Gullanders Bogtrykker: a-s, Skjern), 1992, pp. 9, 13-4.

¹⁶⁰ For example, Sir Robin Knox-Johnston, conducting a trial of the bearing dial for the television programme *Timewatch*, declared "That's pretty fantastic ... I didn't think we'd be that close", having arrived, with a reconstruction of the bearing dial as his only navigational instrument, at less than one nautical mile from his intended destination. (Ereira, *Timewatch*, "Evidence of Vikings", 1995.)

¹⁶¹ Olaf Olsen and Ole Crumlin-Pedersen, *Five Viking Ships from the Roskilde Fjord*, 2nd edition, translated by Barbara Bluestone (Viking Ship Museum, Roskilde), 1990, p. 9.

¹⁶² *ibid.*, pp. 85-92.

to be a forgery, dating probably to the 1920's.¹⁶³ The Vinland Map, however, still has its proponents, and for almost a decade it had made its way into academic works and had been widely hailed as final proof that the Vikings had indeed reached American shores. Such proof was in fact forthcoming in the excavations at L'Anse Aux Meadows in Newfoundland, conducted in 1961-'68 by Helge and Anne Ingstad, which provided the one known example of a provably Viking settlement in America.¹⁶⁴ At last proponents of the Vikings in America could claim vindication of their beliefs, without having to support the cult archaeologists' rhapsodies on runestones, Viking towers and mooring-holes.¹⁶⁵

In the second half of the twentieth century, Viking urban archaeology has played an important role. From the 1950's, urban archaeology became increasingly characteristic of work in Scandinavia, helping to develop the increasing emphasis on Vikings as town-dwellers, craftsmen and merchants. This emphasis gained dominance in Britain with the addition of specific urban Viking excavations, in Dublin in the 1960's and the late 1970's and in York from 1976-'81. The Dublin excavations in the 1970's became the focus of public controversy when they were threatened by building projects, helping to popularise the issues of preservation and rescue archaeology as well as the idea of Dublin as a Viking town (see 6.2.1., below). York, meanwhile, became Britain's Viking city *par excellence*, both through the widely publicised dig and through the subsequent tourist attraction, the influential and controversial Jorvik Viking Centre.

The York excavation and the Jorvik Centre, in turn, led to the focusing of widespread public attention on Vikings. As mentioned above, three high-profile museum exhibitions -- "The Vikings", shown in London, New York and Minneapolis in 1980-'81, "The Vikings in England", Copenhagen, Århus and York 1981-'82, and "From Viking

¹⁶³ See Helge Ingstad, *The Norse Discovery of America, Volume 2: The Historical Background and the Evidence of the Norse Settlement Discovered in Newfoundland* (Norwegian University Press, Oslo), 1985, pp. 340-1, and the web page "Update for the Vinland Map and the Turin 'Shroud'", at http://www.mcri.org/vm_shroud_update.html (visited 29/1/98).

¹⁶⁴ See Anne Stine Ingstad, *The Norse Discovery of America, Volume 1: Excavations of a Norse Settlement at L'Anse Aux Meadows, Newfoundland, 1961-1968* (Norwegian University Press, Oslo), 1977, reprint with corrections 1985,

¹⁶⁵ Wallace, "Vikings in North America", in Samson, *Social Approaches to Viking Studies*, pp. 208-12. See also "Memo to Those who Claim the Inscription on the Kensington Runestone Is A Fake", at <http://members.aol.com/kensrune/index.htm> (visited 19/1/98), in which it is stated that "the route from Hudson Bay to Kensington is marked by a series of Viking-style mooring holes", and a discussion of mooring holes at <http://www.knowledge.co.uk/frontiers/sf069/sf069a01.htm> (visited 19/1/98).

to Crusader", Paris, Berlin and Copenhagen, 1992-'93 -- kept Vikings in the public eye.¹⁶⁶ At least one of these exhibitions, "The Vikings in England", was specifically inspired by the excavation at York, plans for the exhibition being set in motion during the 1977 visit of Jorvik excavator Peter Addyman to Queen Margrethe of Denmark.¹⁶⁷ The exhibitions provided a massive publicity campaign for the Vikings, boosting the sales of all genres of Viking literature and helping to establish Vikings as a worthy focus of school history classes.¹⁶⁸

By the mid-1980's the Vikings were everywhere. They were, however, not the same Vikings as in their earlier incarnations. To the Viking equation had been added the "peaceful trade and craftsmanship" of the museum exhibitions. The kinder, gentler Viking, a standard of academic Viking work for decades, had taken his place in the arena of popular images.

¹⁶⁶ Wilson, "Fifty years of Viking-Age archaeology", in Roesdahl and Sørensen, *Beretning fra femtende tværfaglige vikingesymposium*, p. 20.

¹⁶⁷ "It all began with Peter Addyman's fitted attaché case full of finds from Coppergate in York. He arrived to show them to our Danish patron, H. M. Queen Margrethe, in February 1977. Others of us had the chance to see these objects made by Danish Vikings in Jorvik, and to hear evidence of the peaceful trade and craftsmanship they carried on there 1,000 years ago -- evidence of our shared past, which goes a long way to explain the close relationship still existing between us." (Introduction by Dame Anne Warburton, HE the British Ambassador to Denmark, in Else Roesdahl, James Graham-Campbell, Patricia Connor and Kenneth Pearson (eds.), *The Vikings in England and in their Danish Homeland* (The Anglo-Danish Viking Project, London), 1981.

¹⁶⁸ To quote the North Yorkshire County Public Library publication *Vikings! Books for Children and Young People*, "For 250 years the Vikings were a decisive force in the history of Europe, as raiders, settlers, craftsmen and merchants ... Discoveries like those from York have prompted a reappraisal of the Viking episode in our history. To this end, a major exhibition, 'The Vikings in England', is being mounted at the Yorkshire Museum.

"We publish this annotated booklist in recognition of the importance of the Vikings to the history of our own country, and in anticipation of the interest which the exhibition will arouse amongst young people."

(Roland Walls, *Vikings! Books for Children and Young People* (North Yorkshire County Public Library, York), 1992, p. 1.)

Chapter Three

The Look of the Vikings

The Viking is a creature of extremes.

As will be discussed in later chapters, this point holds true for many aspects of the Viking image. Vikings are portrayed as ruthless villains or the greatest of heroes, as the most dreaded barbarians, or as the greatest sailors and explorers of their day. This tendency to discuss Vikings in terms of superlatives also characterises discussions of the Vikings' appearance. A Viking, it seems, cannot be simply ordinary. Vikings must be intense in some way; they must be the tallest and the strongest and the blondest, must have the most artistic ships in the world, and must bare their muscular limbs in the skimpiest of outfits, undaunted by the icy Northern winds.

In addition to this pattern of extreme representations, modern visual impressions of the Vikings are built on a foundation of standard images and clichés. Some of these images have developed over centuries, while others are based on relatively recent archaeological discoveries. In late twentieth-century depictions, Vikings live in a remarkably standardised world. Controversy may still rage over whether the Vikings are good or bad, but heroes and villains alike have little choice as regards their physical appearance. There is a good deal of validity to the claim made in a Viking romance novel that "all Vikings look alike".¹

3.1. Viking men

3.1.1. Tall, blond and blue-eyed

Vikings are blond.

This is a truism one encounters in Viking depictions widely separated in period and context. Blondness has become almost a prerequisite for Viking status. Paul Du Chaillu's *The Viking Age* (1889) defines the Vikings as "a blue-eyed and yellow-haired seafaring people".² Nearly a century later, *The Time Traveller Book of Viking Raiders* informs its young readers that "Even today, in the countries in which they settled, you

¹ Catherine Coulter, *Lord of Raven's Peak* (Jove, New York), 1994, p. 44.

² Paul B. Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age: The Early History, Manners and Customs of the Ancestors of the English-Speaking Nations*, Vol. 1 (John Murray, London), 1889, p. viii.

can see the descendants of the tall, blond and blue-eyed Vikings."³ When darker Vikings appear, they are almost invariably presented as the exception that proves the rule: Earl Thorfinn of Orkney in the novel *Macbeth the King* (1978) is "unlike most of his race, dark-haired",⁴ while a character in *Lord of Raven's Peak*, a Viking romance novel, is described as "an unlikely-looking Viking in his darkness".⁵

The idea of the blond Viking does not come out of nowhere. It is certainly true that one finds a high percentage of blondes among the Scandinavian peoples, although Scandinavians now as in the Viking Age are not as uniformly flaxen-haired as the standard Viking image suggests. As for the question of Viking height, Else Roesdahl writes that

The examination of skeletons from different localities in Scandinavia reveals that the average height of the Vikings was a little less than that of today: men were about 5ft 7 3/4in. tall and women 5ft 2 1/2in. The most extensive recent anthropological study was carried out in Denmark, but the situation must have been similar elsewhere. Skeletons of people as tall as 6ft 1/2in. have been found, and those in richly furnished Viking graves -- belonging to high-ranking people -- were on average considerably taller than those in the more ordinary graves, undoubtedly because of better living conditions.⁶

These results do not show Viking Age Scandinavians to have been remarkably short, but neither do they support grandiose visions of Vikings as a race of giants.

Perhaps more important than the mere prevalence of fair hair and reasonably tall individuals among the Scandinavians is the fact that blondness and great height seem to have represented ideals of male beauty for the medieval Scandinavians themselves. Norse poetry and the sagas, on which later depictions of Vikings rely so heavily, suggest that fair colouring and lofty stature were often viewed as being associated with heroism and nobility.

³ Anne Civardi and James Graham Campbell, *The Time Traveller Book of Viking Raiders* (Hayes Usborne, London), 1977, p. 31.

⁴ Nigel Tranter, *Macbeth the King* (Hodder and Stoughton, London), 1978, p. 17.

⁵ Coulter, *Lord of Raven's Peak*, p. 37.

⁶ Else Roesdahl, *The Vikings* (Penguin Books, London), 1987, English translation 1991, this edition 1992, p. 31. Roesdahl goes on to point out that great height did not invariably accompany high status: "the skeleton found in Jelling church, thought to be that of King Gorm of Denmark (later known as Gorm the Old), was only of average height. This man was 5ft 7 3/4in. tall, with heavy, robust features, but not heavily built."

The eddaic poem *Rígsþula*, possibly dating from the tenth century,⁷ introduces personifications of three main social classes, Thrall (slave), Karl (freeman) and Jarl (earl). The three are given descriptions which have been seen as reflecting their characters and their roles in society: Thrall has dark hair and is described as ugly,⁸ Karl has a ruddy face and flashing eyes,⁹ while Jarl, the highest in prestige, is "tall, with blond hair and rosy cheeks, and his eyes were bright and fierce".¹⁰ In some cases, saga descriptions of men who are said to be handsome display similar features to those of Jarl. Gunnar in *Njal's Saga*, we are told, "was a handsome man, with fair skin and a straight nose slightly tilted at the tip. He had keen blue eyes, red cheeks, and a fine head of thick flaxen hair".¹¹ The much-lauded King Harald Hardradi is described as "a handsome man of distinguished bearing. He was fair-haired, with a fair beard and long moustaches. One of his eyebrows was slightly higher than the other. He had long, well-shaped hands and feet".¹² He is also said to have been five ells tall, or seven feet six inches, but Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson cast doubt on this, suggesting that the ell used in the saga "may refer to an older, shorter Danish measurement whose exact length is unknown".¹³ However, they add, "all accounts agree that King Harald

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 30.

⁸ Henry Adams Bellows (trans.), *The Poetic Edda* (The American-Scandinavian Foundation, New York), 1923, this edition 1957, p. 205. According to Bellows' footnote to this stanza, "dark hair, among the blond Scandinavians, was the mark of a foreigner, hence of a slave" (footnote 7, p. 205), although this, at least from descriptions in the sagas of dark haired characters, seems to be an over-simplification.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 208.

¹⁰ Peter Speed, *Life in the Time of Harald Hardrada and the Vikings* (Cherrytree Books, Bath), 1992, p. 11. According to Henry Adams Bellows' translation, "Blond was his hair, and bright his cheeks/Grim as a snake's were his glowing eyes." (Bellows, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 212.)

¹¹ Magnus Magnusson and Herman Pálsson (eds.), *Njal's Saga* (Penguin Books, London), 1960, p. 73. It should be pointed out, however, that not all saga characters who are said to be handsome have blond hair. For example, of the three sons of Njal, Skarp-Hedin is described as having "curly chestnut hair and handsome eyes", Grim is "tall and strong and dark-haired, more handsome than Skarp-Hedin", while the third is "a handsome man with a fine head of hair", the colour of which is not specified (p. 83). In *Njal's Saga*, "fine" hair is more likely to be part of the description of a man said to be handsome than is a specific mention of his hair colour.

¹² Snorri Sturluson, *King Harald's Saga: Harald Hardradi of Norway*, translated with an introduction by Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (Penguin Books, London), 1966, pp. 160-1.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 161, note I.

was an exceptionally tall man".¹⁴

Sagas were the main source for the Viking adventure novels which proliferated in the middle-to-late nineteenth century. Many of these novels are retellings and elaborations of saga accounts, while other novelists frequently introduced saga characters or incidents into the adventures of their own, original characters. The nineteenth-century Viking novelists took the descriptions of characters like Harald Hardradi and used them as the blueprint for their own Viking heroes. Many of the images which resulted remain in circulation in the late twentieth century.

Nineteenth-century Viking heroes are invariably taller and blonder than all those around them. Examples of this could fill volumes. There is, for instance, Erling the Bold, from 1869, who is:

almost a giant in size; fair, very strong, and remarkably handsome. His silken yellow hair fell in heavy curls on a pair of the broadest shoulders in the dale. Although so young, he already had a thick short beard, which was very soft and curly. His limbs were massive, but they were so well proportioned, and his movements so lithe, that his great size and strength were not fully appreciated until one stood close by his side or fell into his powerful grasp.¹⁵

Very similar to Erling is Ulric the Jarl, from the novel of the same name, of 1899. The heroic Ulric is described as

a very embodiment of the warlike young manhood of the race of Odin. His blond beard and mustache were full but not yet heavy. His complexion was fair, notwithstanding its weather-bronzing, and his steel-blue eyes seemed both to flash and to laugh as he stood with folded arms and listened ... [he was] more than six feet in height, deep-chested, lithe and quick of motion ...¹⁶

Figuratively and literally, Ulric is imbued with a golden glow: "The foaming water dashed across the deck and drenched Ulric at the tiller. He wore no headpiece now, and the salt spray drops glittered brightly among his yellow curls ... the sun had risen and his [sic] first rays lit the hero face of the son of Odin".¹⁷

The saga-renowned Harald Hardradi himself often appeared as a character in

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ R M. Ballantyne, *Erling the Bold: a Tale of the Norse Sea Kings* (Blackie and Son Ltd., London), first published 1869, this edition n.d., p. 13.

¹⁶ William O. Stoddard, *Ulric the Jarl: A Story of the Penitent Thief* (Robert Culley, London), 1899, this edition n.d., pp. 11-2.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 59.

nineteenth-century Viking novels, as did his fellow Norwegian kings Olaf Tryggvason and Olaf the Saint. Novelists took the saga description of Harald and embellished it, moulding him into an ideal of youthful Norse manhood along the same lines as Erling and Ulric. The lengthy description of Harald in David Ker's *Last of the Sea-Kings* is worth quoting in full, as a demonstration of his transformation into a classic Viking hero of the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth centuries:

Youth as he was (for he could hardly be more than nineteen) he towered a full head above the tallest of the stalwart forms around him, fully bearing out the reports that made him more than seven feet high; and the great knots of muscles that stood out on his bare arms and limbs amply accounted for the amazing force that he had shown in the combat.

Giant as he was, however, there was nothing heavy or ungainly in the grand proportions of his massive frame; and although his hands and feet were unusually large (a very rare thing in a Norse warrior) they were undeniably well shaped. His all but beardless face (the fresh ruddiness of which had been but slightly browned by sun and storm) was beautiful as the fabled Baldur of northern legend; and the large blue eyes, that looked out from beneath the long golden hair which hung tossing like a mane over his head and shoulders, were bright with a frank, fearless, boyish good-humour that was indescribably attractive, though a slight inequality in one eyebrow (which was a trifle higher than the other) gave a somewhat stern look to his noble features when in repose.¹⁸

Although it would be easy to dismiss these depictions as antiquated hyperbole, such portraits have in fact a very long shelf life, and continue to appear throughout the twentieth century.

A selection of children's Viking-themed fiction from the middle of the century shows that for these writers the Vikings remained tall and golden. In Rosemary Sutcliff's *The Shield Ring* (1956), the gallant Jarl Buthar is "a golden giant", "tree-tall in his bull-horned helm" (for horned helmets, see 2.4., below). Starkad the Berserker in Henry Treece's *Horned Helmet* (1963) is the tallest man that the book's protagonist has ever seen.¹⁹ The Danes in Geoffrey Trease's *Mist over Athelney* (1958) are "tall as

¹⁸ David Ker, *The Last of the Sea-Kings* (Thomas Nelson and Sons, London), n.d., circa 1910, pp. 26-7. For tentative dating of this work see W. H. Shercliff, *Morality to Adventure: Manchester Polytechnic's Collection of Children's Books 1840-1939* (Manchester Polytechnic Library, Manchester), 1988, p. 141.

¹⁹ Henry Treece, *Horned Helmet* (Puffin Books, London), 1963, p. 23.

trees" and "broad-shouldered as oxen",²⁰ while in *The Namesake* (1964), C. Walter Hodges writes, "man for man they seemed bigger than the English. They were fair-haired and red-faced."²¹ King Olaf Tryggvason appears as the hero's mentor in Pauline Clarke's *Torolv the Fatherless* (1959), and is described in glowing terms reminiscent of the nineteenth century Viking kings:

Tall gruff men gathered round him ... but the man they called Ali [Olaf Tryggvason] was taller by head and shoulders than most ... He was younger than many of his men, his skin glowed, his long hair and beard were straight and fair, as bright as the wide gold arm-rings he wore. The sun came up on their right, and the light of its path on the seaway led to his arm-rings and made them shine.²²

The children's "information books" on Vikings which have proliferated in the 1980's and '90's, present images similar to those in the mid-century novels. Rarely does one encounter a Viking who is not blond. In *How They Lived: A Viking Sailor* (1986), the typical Viking is described as "a tall, fair-haired man".²³ Most of the Vikings in the illustrations to this work are shown as blond, although a very few appear with brown or red hair. In *The Time Traveller Book of Viking Raiders* the illustrations do not depict a single dark-haired Viking, reserving dark complexions exclusively for the Vikings' victims. The cover illustration to *See Through History: The Vikings* (1993) goes further, for not only is everyone on the cover blond, but the men all have identical pudding-bowl haircuts.²⁴

Meanwhile, the purple prose style seen in so many nineteenth-century Viking descriptions is alive and well in Viking romance novels. The superlative-rich images of Vikings lend themselves easily to the romance genre, which requires that its heroes function as ideal males. Novels with Viking Age settings are a prolific sub-genre in the

²⁰ Geoffrey Trease, *Mist Over Athelney* (Macmillan, St. Martin's Press), 1958, this edition 1969, pp. 234-5.

²¹ C. Walter Hodges, *The Namesake: A Story of King Alfred* (G. Bell and Sons Ltd., London), 1964, p. 27.

²² Pauline Clarke, *Torolv the Fatherless* (Faber and Faber, London), 1959, this edition 1973, pp. 22-3.

²³ Christopher Gibb, *How They Lived: A Viking Sailor* (Wayland Publishing Co., Hove, East Sussex), 1986, p. 4.

²⁴ Anne Pearson, *See Through History: The Vikings* (Hamlyn, London), 1993.

late twentieth-century historical romance (see 4.3.7. and 5.3.3., below), and the heroes of these works are very close relatives of Ulric the Jarl and Erling the Bold.

In Viking romance novels, the hero is unfailingly described as the tallest and handsomest man the heroine has ever seen.²⁵ He is, of course, blond, and has "piercing" blue eyes which have a tendency to change their shade according to his mood ("sky blue when his mood was even, a blue as deep as the Oslo Fjord when he was angry"²⁶). Frequently, he is referred to as "a golden god", or words to that effect.²⁷ A fairly typical example of these depictions is the introduction of the hero in Heather Graham's *The Viking's Woman* (1990):

Eric stood tall and towering and powerful, like a golden god against the wind, a booted foot braced hard against the prow. The wind played against his hair, and it was as golden as the lightning, his eyes a blazing cobalt blue. His features were strongly chiselled, ruggedly, implacably handsome. His cheekbones were high and wide, his jaw firm. His mouth, wide and sensual, was set in a straight line as he watched the shore. His beard and mustache were clipped and clean, redder than the hair upon his head, and his flesh was handsomely bronzed ... his stature and the confidence of his stance made men tremble. The very air about him seemed charged, revealing his vitality. To maids of any race or creed he created a startling, arresting appearance. He was graced with extraordinary power in his muscles, in the breadth of his shoulders, in the width of his chest, in the strength of his thighs.²⁸

The one major difference between Graham's hero in this description and the majority of

²⁵ For example, from Johanna Lindsey's *Fires of Winter*: "A man this pleasing to look upon she had never seen before. Long, wavy hair of a golden color curled about exceptionally wide shoulders. The nose was long and straight, the chin firm and smooth. The strong bare arms were corded with thick muscles, as were the broad chest and back, muscles that rippled and danced with each movement." (Johanna Lindsey, *Fires of Winter* (Avon Books, New York), 1980, p. 69.) Or, from Heather Graham's *Lord of the Wolves*: "She had never seen one [a Viking] quite so finely muscled, so well displayed in both armor and clothing. One quite so golden, or one who seemed to sit upon his horse quite so easily, quite so tall." (Heather Graham, *Lord of the Wolves* (Dell Publishing Co., New York), 1993, p. 102.)

²⁶ Catherine Coulter, *Season of the Sun* (Onyx, New York), 1991, pp. 7-8. Other examples of heroes whose eyes change shade according to mood are found in Johanna Lindsey's works *Fires of Winter* and *Surrender My Love* (Avon Books, New York), 1994.

²⁷ Among others, Rebecca Brandewyne, *Swan Road* (Severn House Publishers, Sutton, Surrey), 1995, p. 9 ("the giants leaped into the sea, a gold-headed god at their vanguard"), Catherine Coulter, *Lord of Raven's Peak* (Jove, New York), 1994, p. 20 ("If you didn't have the scar, you would be beautiful. Your hair is golden, like a god's ..."), and Heather Graham, *Golden Surrender* (Dell, New York), 1985, p. 288 ("Legs slightly parted, one knee crooked upon a rising ledge, he appeared as something legendary, a golden god").

²⁸ Heather Graham, *The Viking's Woman* (Bantam Doubleday Dell, New York), 1990, pp. 14-5.

other Viking romance novel heroes is the beard. Graham's Viking protagonists in her trilogy of *Golden Surrender*, *The Viking's Woman* and *Lord of the Wolves* are all bearded, in common with the Vikings of many other genres. But the majority of heroes in other Viking romance novels are clean-shaven, leaving the more historically accurate facial hair to their family, friends and enemies.²⁹

The picture generally presented in Viking romance novels does not depict the hero as alone in his godlike attractiveness. Frequently, the entire Viking race is credited with remarkable height, strength and good looks. The difference between each novel's specific hero and the rest of his people is one of degree; he is simply the tallest and handsomest of a tall and handsome race. *Fires of Winter* informs its readers that "The Norsemen are a race of giants. There are none like them."³⁰ According to *Lord of Hawkfell Island*, "they were Vikings and they were all blond and blue-eyed, tall and strong",³¹ and a non-Viking character in the novel expresses his exasperation with "those damned blue eyes that most Vikings had".³² In *Hawkfell Island's* sequel, *Lord of Raven's Peak*, we read that "Rorik is like all Viking men. He is beautiful, well-formed, stout-hearted."³³

To a large extent, the tall, blond and blue-eyed Vikings have conquered other physical images. This one image cuts across genre borders, appearing so often that it comes to seem natural and inevitable. The idea that Vikings must be blond is often taken for granted, and is cheerfully used in contexts where there is in fact evidence to the contrary. For example the eleventh-century Earl Thorfinn, mentioned above as a character in Tranter's *Macbeth the King*, is described in the *Orkneyinga Saga* as having black hair.³⁴ *Macbeth the King* and another novel in which Thorfinn appears, Dorothy

²⁹ For example the hero and his best friend in *Fires of Winter*, whose identities are proclaimed immediately by this description: "One had auburn hair and a trim beard; the other was blond and clean-shaven". (Lindsey, *Fires of Winter*, p. 28.)

³⁰ Lindsey, *Fires of Winter*, p. 16.

³¹ Catherine Coulter, *Lord of Hawkfell Island* (Jove, New York), 1993, p. 186.

³² *ibid.*, p. 336.

³³ Coulter, *Lord of Raven's Peak*, p. 277.

³⁴ Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (eds.), *Orkneyinga Saga: The History of the Earls of Orkney* (Penguin Books, London), 1978, this edition 1987, p. 50.

Dunnett's *King Hereafter*, describe the Earl in terms based on the saga account.³⁵ But a third novel which features Earl Thorfinn, Juliet Dymoke's *Shadows on a Throne*, turns the black-haired Earl into a standard twentieth-century blond Viking: "a tall man with a fine bearing and long fair hair hanging to his shoulders. He had bright blue eyes ..." ³⁶ Whether Dymoke was unfamiliar with the saga description or simply chose to ignore it, it is significant what model of Viking appearance she chose to use in its stead.

3.1.2. Do all Vikings have big red beards?

The Usborne Starting Point History *Who Were the Vikings?* (1995) states that "People often imagine the Vikings as tall and fierce-looking, with long red beards and helmets with wings or horns on them." To the question "Did they really have big red beards?", the answer of *Who Were the Vikings?* is "Only the ones with red hair. And none of the women and children. Many Viking men did grow beards, probably to keep warm, look fierce, and avoid shaving. But some of them would have had fair or even dark hair."³⁷

Flippant though this approach is, the red beard is indeed a frequently encountered aspect of Viking depictions -- not as all-pervasive as blond hair and blue eyes, but still, as its presence in *Who Were the Vikings?* demonstrates, an image which is familiar enough to have made an impact. As another example, a web page discussing Viking-themed landmarks and tourist attractions in the United States off-handedly refers to Vikings as "the redbeards".³⁸

Large beards, frequently though not exclusively red, are often presented as an essential part of Viking nature. Andrew Wawn has recently commented upon the length of nineteenth-century saga scholar George Webbe Dasent's "Viking-style beard".³⁹ The

³⁵ Dorothy Dunnett, *King Hereafter* (Arrow Books, London), 1982, pp. 17, 37.

³⁶ Juliet Dymoke, *Shadows on a Throne* (Alan Wingate, London), 1976, pp. 24-5.

³⁷ Jane Chisholm and Struan Reid, *Who Were the Vikings?* (Usborne Publishing Ltd., London), 1995, p. 4.

³⁸ <http://www.roadsideamerica.com/set/OVERrune.html>, visited 19/01/98.

³⁹ Andrew Wawn (ed.), *Northern Antiquity: The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga* (Hisarlik Press, Enfield Lock, Middlesex), 1994, Foreword, p. vii. Wawn's reference to Dasent's beard is in the context of Charles Cavendish Clifford's observation "Of Herculean height and strength, with his long black beard descending to his waist, he resembled a Viking of old, and such I conceive at times he

image of Viking hirsuteness seems to have been an object of ire for Richard Hall of the York Archaeological Trust when interviewed in the *Timewatch* programme "Evidence of Vikings", as he remarks that "Vikings are usually thought of as being hairy warriors and plunderers who come to do no good, and clearly that doesn't apply here."⁴⁰ On the same programme, another scholar, Janet Nelson, refers to the popular impression of Vikings as "hairy heroes".⁴¹ There are, of course, many different types of Vikings. The massive beard is not a characteristic of the clean-cut, noble Viking hero, but represents another category within Viking representations.

As seen above, heroes of Viking romance novels tend to be clean-shaven, or to favour a neatly trimmed beard. This may largely reflect the tastes of the romance genre's readership, and/or the image presented to the readers, for clean-shaven romance novel heroes do seem, as a general rule, to be more common than those with facial hair. Indicative of this is the fact that, even when a hero is bearded in the novel's text, he is likely to be presented as smooth-chinned in the cover illustration.⁴² But there is more to the question than this.

The Viking heroes of nineteenth-century adventures tended to sport beards which were short, or "full but not yet heavy". In *The Vikings* (1958), those famous Viking heroes of cinema Kirk Douglas and Tony Curtis continue the pattern, Curtis opting for a trim, restrained beard, and Douglas remaining clean-shaven, showing off his famous chin. The film's memorable large beard -- in this case grey, not red -- belongs to Ernest Borgnine, playing a Viking of the raping and pillaging, carousing, "lovable rogue" variety. (See Figure 5.)

A similar prominently-bearded Viking, although his activities do not include rape, is Boltar of the *Prince Valiant* comic strip and films (see also 5.2.1.a., below). He is a classically extravagant Viking figure: red-bearded of course and wearing his red hair in braids that seem to defy gravity, barrel-chested, six foot tall, never speaking in tones below a bellow, striding about bare-thighed, bare-armed and bare-chested in huge fur

supposed himself to be." (Charles Cavendish Clifford, *Travels by 'Umbra'* (Edinburgh, 1865), pp. 3-4.)

⁴⁰ Alan Ereira (writer and producer), *Timewatch*, "Evidence of Vikings" (BBC), 1995.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² For instance Heather Graham's *Lord of the Wolves*, featuring one of Graham's characteristically bearded heroes, nonetheless has a perfectly shaven "golden god" on its cover. (See Figure 10.)

boots and a fur loincloth. (See Figure 6.) Boltar is "the most lovable old scoundrel who ever sailed the sea".⁴³ He is also, it would seem, a direct ancestor of Hagar the Horrible, another red-bearded "lovable scoundrel" who shares Boltar's large girth, his dress sense, his bluster, and a humorous, send-up approach to the pillaging lifestyle. (See Figure 7.) Boltar and Hagar have another relative in Krok Fulbelly of Eva Ibbotson's 1987 children's novel *The Haunting of Hiram C. Hopgood*.⁴⁴ Krok the Viking spectre is "a huge ghost, six foot four in his thonged sandals, with a thick curly beard which had been red when he was alive".⁴⁵ He has an "enormous hairy stomach" and a "deep Viking voice".⁴⁶ Like Boltar and Hagar, he is more likeable than fearsome, but he revels in the idea that he is ferocious. Ibbotson comments, "the thought that they were frightening pleased the ghosts. Krok put on his helmet and tipped it over one eye".⁴⁷

Ernest Borgnine's Ragnar, Prince Valiant's comrade Boltar, Hagar the Horrible, Krok Fulbelly: all are examples of the Viking who is louder, larger and more uproarious than life. The beard need not be red, but the image of a huge, wild beard, as over-the-top as so many other facets of the Vikings, does seem to be connected with the wilder aspects of the Viking character. The "wild man" image is not restricted to Vikings, and it does seem that the wilder the man, the more excessive the beard. The beard is perhaps the mirror of the man, restraint in one's beard showing restraint in one's behaviour. If this supposition is not too fanciful, it may suggest as well one reason why the notion of specifically red-bearded Vikings has taken hold, since red hair is in popular wisdom taken as a sign of wild, irrepressible character. The red-bearded image may also in part be inspired by the appearance of the god Thor, a volatile character who is said to have sported a red beard.⁴⁸

⁴³ Harold Foster, *Prince Valiant, Vol. II: Companions in Adventure* (Nostalgia Press and King Features Syndicate, New York), 1974, 23 August, 1942.

⁴⁴ This character is perhaps partially inspired by the film *The Long Ships*, in which a similarly over-the-top, bearded Viking is also called Krok. (Jack Cardiff (director), *The Long Ships* (A Warwick/Avala Production), 1963.)

⁴⁵ Eva Ibbotson, *The Haunting of Hiram C. Hopgood* (Macmillan Children's Books, London), 1987, pp. 8-9.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 8, 14.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴⁸ H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (Penguin Books, London), 1964, p. 73.

Of course, other factors are involved in determining the appearance of different styles of Vikings. Tastes in male fashion at the time these Vikings were created must play a role; it is not surprising that Viking heroes of the middle to late nineteenth century, when facial hair was almost *de rigueur*, are more frequently bearded or moustached than their counterparts in the middle twentieth century, when facial hair had largely fallen out of favour. In 1950's films with medieval settings, beards are occasionally allowed to the hero as a concession to the medieval context. But they are invariably of the neatly trimmed variety, and more frequently, facial hair is the sign of a villain. Tony Curtis, as mentioned above, gets away with wearing a well trimmed beard in *The Vikings*, but in *The Long Ships* (1963), which sought to cash in on *The Vikings'* success, our young Viking heroes are as squeaky-clean, smooth-jawed and wholesomely American as it is possible to imagine. The same holds true in the bizarre low-budget endeavour *The Saga of the Viking Women and their Voyage to the Waters of the Sea Serpent* (1957), in which the clean-cut young Vikings' jaws gleam like a razor advertisement.⁴⁹

The very fact that central heroes so often tend to be young must have an impact on Viking appearance. The *Bildungsroman* narrative type often used in films and novels, tracing a young protagonist's adventures and personal development, makes it only logical that the characters on which Viking stories tend to focus will frequently have bare chins or the delicate first beard of youth, while their mentors, followers and enemies will be older, more heavily bearded men.

All this taken into consideration, it still seems valid to claim that style of beard is representative of character type. If a Viking is to be straightforwardly heroic, the massive beard is discarded; if he is to be an over-the-top wild man, the larger and more unrestrained the beard, the better. It is even possible that the beard-equals-character equation may be partially responsible for the trend in 1980's and '90's children's information books to present Vikings with braided beards.

The braided beard has become a common image in Viking-themed children's literature, but its origin is somewhat difficult to trace. That beards were in fact a standard element of male fashion in the Viking era -- or at least were perceived to be so in the thirteenth century, the heyday of saga writing in Iceland -- can be seen by the

⁴⁹ Roger Corman (director), *The Saga of the Viking Women and their Voyage to the Waters of the Great Sea Serpent* (American International Pictures/Malibu Productions), 1957.

fact that Njal, of *Njal's Saga*, is mocked for being unable to grow a beard, and is nicknamed "Old Beardless" by his enemies.⁵⁰ However, although men's beards are often mentioned in Norse literature, specific references to braided beards are harder to locate. There is the case of a man known as "bound beard" who appears in *Rigspula*,⁵¹ and there is of course King Svein Forkbeard of Denmark, but it is not specified whether the fork in his beard was caused by braiding. Pictorial representations from the Viking era, such as the man's profile carved from elk horn, or the heads on the Oseberg cart, show beards, but the beards in these cases do not seem to be braided.⁵² It is possible that on some statuettes and gaming pieces which show men or gods clutching their long beards, the beards are braided, but the details of these beards are for the most part difficult to discern.⁵³

A few clear pictorial examples of braided beards do survive from the Viking period. There is the face, possibly of a god or demon, carved on a runestone at Århus, Denmark,⁵⁴ which seems to have a braided beard, although as it also appears to have horns, and large ears on the top of its head, it should probably not be interpreted as a realistic representation of male fashion. Finally, braided beards appear in ninth and tenth-century art from Ireland. High crosses at Clonmacnois and Durrow, both in County Offaly, show figures with braided beards,⁵⁵ although there is nothing to indicate

⁵⁰ Magnusson and Pálsson, *Njal's Saga*, pp. 74, 114, 255. According to the saga, "Njal was wealthy and handsome, but he had one peculiarity: he could not grow a beard" (p. 74).

⁵¹ Bellows, *Poetic Edda*, p. 209.

⁵² James Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World*, 2nd edition (Frances Lincoln Ltd., London), 1989, pp. 119, and Magnus Magnusson, *Viking: Hammer of the North* (Orbis Publishing Ltd., London), 1976, this edition 1979, p. 98. According to Else Roesdahl, some of the moustaches on the Oseberg cart heads are "neatly plaited", but this does not seem to apply to the beards. (Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, p. 32.)

⁵³ Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World*, p. 182, and Magnusson, *Viking: Hammer of the North* pp. 68-9.

⁵⁴ James Graham-Campbell (ed.), *Cultural Atlas of the Viking World* (Andromeda Oxford Ltd., Abingdon), 1994, p. 100.

⁵⁵ Peter Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland: An Iconographical and Photographic Survey*, Vol. I (Dr. Rudolf Habelt GMBH, Bonn), 1992, pp. 49, 80, and Vol. II, plates 133, 250, and Françoise Henry, *Irish Art during the Viking Invasions* (Methuen and Co. Ltd, London), 1967, plate 92. I am grateful to Kirsty Hartsiotis for pointing out to me the occurrences of braided beards on these Irish crosses.

that these figures are meant to be interpreted as Vikings.⁵⁶ Rather, the braided beard
m a y i n
this context be simply an indication of high status, as the figure on the cross at Durrow
has been interpreted as representing King David,⁵⁷ and an image of the crucified Christ
in the Southampton Psalter also wears a beard which is clearly braided.⁵⁸

Regardless of the image's source, the braided beard has become a standard feature
of the late twentieth century's typical Viking warrior. (See Figure 8.) It is interesting
to note that these beards have been adopted during a period in which Viking revisionism
is in the ascendant, and a crucial portion of many writers' agendas is to prove that
Vikings were more polished than the "hairy pillagers" image suggests. Perhaps the
braiding of the beard helps to restrain the perceived wildness of the Vikings' characters,
as well as of their facial hair. Is the braided beard yet another way in which the
civilised, self-controlled and favourably presented Viking is moved to the fore?

3.1.3. Loincloths and mighty thews

Another aspect of the Viking image which has become engraved on popular
consciousness is the Vikings' scanty costumes and apparently lunatic indifference to
cold. It is difficult to watch a Viking film without worrying that the actors must have
gotten frostbite. In *The Vikings*, *The Saga of the Viking Women ... (etc.)* and *The Long
Ships*, arms and legs are bared with reckless abandon. Expanses of bare flesh are
apparently a must for Viking movies, in men's costuming just as much as in women's.
According to an anecdote of one of the film's supernumeraries, the director of the 1997
version of *Prince Valiant* persecuted his castmembers by continually diminishing their
costumes, insisting "shirts off! You don't need trousers! We need more flesh!" -- and

⁵⁶ Some images on Irish crosses of this period have been interpreted as reflecting the Viking
presence, either by actually depicting Norsemen, or by using Vikings as the basis for biblical characters
such as the soldiers who torment Christ on the way to his crucifixion. (Harbison, *High Crosses of
Ireland*, Vol. I, pp. 143-4.) However, these possibly Viking-influenced figures do not, so far as I have
found, seem to be those depicted with braided beards. For example the warriors depicted on the cross
of Muirdach at Monasterboice, which have been interpreted as the soldiers mocking Christ but also as
Vikings threatening a captured churchman, wear large moustaches, but no recognisable beards. (See
Henry, *Irish Art*, plate 77.)

⁵⁷ Harbison, *High Crosses of Ireland*, Vol. I, p. 80.

⁵⁸ Harbison, *High Crosses of Ireland*, Vol. I, pp. 49 and 80, and Vol. II, plates 133 and 250, and
Henry, *Irish Art*, plate 45.

this while filming in weather so vile that the rain was falling sideways.⁵⁹

One influence on this image of Viking costuming may be the semi-legendary berserkers, a Viking subculture that continues to exercise considerable fascination (see 5.1.2., below). The berserkers are the ultimate Viking wild men. According to the *Ynglinga saga* in Snorri's *Heimskringla*, the berserkers "went about without armour and were mad like hounds or wolves, and bit their shields and were strong as bears or bulls; they slew men, but neither fire nor steel would deal with them".⁶⁰ The description of berserkers going without armour is sometimes elaborated into a lack of clothing in general. Two rival derivations of the word *berserkr* both have implications for the image of the half-dressed and/or fur-clad Viking. The word has been interpreted both as meaning "bear-shirt", suggesting that the berserkers may have dressed in bear skins, and as "bare of shirt".⁶¹ It is further suggested that wearing the pelts of bears or wolves may have been seen as giving the warriors some of the characteristics of those animals; as in the case of Sigmund and Sinfjotli in *Volsunga saga* who "donned wolfskins, used the speech of wolves and howled when attacked", and a berserker in the employ of Hrolf Kraki, who is said to have fought in the shape of a bear.⁶² In *Egil's Saga*, as well, there is an acknowledged connection between shape-shifting and the berserkers, when the saga writer comments, "It is said of those who were shape-changers, or were taken by the berserk-fury, that while it was on them they were so strong that nothing held against them, but as soon as it left them they were weaker than usual."⁶³ Some of the characteristics of berserkers may well have been transferred and become attached to Vikings as a whole, helping to create the notion of Vikings as half-clad wild men.

A more immediate influence is the costuming in productions of Wagner's *Ring* cycle. *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, of which *Das Rheingold* was first performed in 1869,

⁵⁹ Simon Buckley, Norse Film and Pageant Society, personal communication.

⁶⁰ Snorre Sturlason, *Heimskringla, or The Lives of the Norse Kings*, edited by Erling Monsen and translated with the assistance of A. H. Smith (Dover Publications, Inc., New York), W. Heffer and Sons edition 1932, this reprint 1990, p. 5.

⁶¹ Ian Heath, *The Vikings* (Osprey Publishing, London), 1985, p. 47.

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ Christine E. Fell (trans. and ed.), *Egils saga* (J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., London), 1975, p. 39.

Die Walküre in 1870, and *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* in 1876,⁶⁴ remains one of the strongest influences on popular impressions of Viking appearance, although of course the operas' characters are not strictly Vikings, but rather figures from Germanic mythology. Siegfried, Wagner's guileless, muscle-bound hero, is frequently shown in photos from the operas, and illustrations inspired by them, as clad in a scanty tunic, often made of fur, with his arms and legs bare and with one shoulder and half of his chest exposed.⁶⁵ (See Figure 9.) The 1924 German film *Siegfried*, directed by Fritz Lang, shows a similar scanty fur costume,⁶⁶ while the murals on the walls of a music room in Neukastel, Germany, painted in the 1920's, include a Siegfried who is "blond and half dressed, like a faun".⁶⁷

Siegfried's operatic dress style has been adopted in many representations of Vikings. As mentioned above, it is the mode of dress favoured by *Prince Valiant's* larger-than-life Boltar, although interestingly, in later years of the comic strip's existence, Harold Foster added a sleeveless shirt to Boltar's fur boots and loincloth ensemble.⁶⁸ Another comic strip character, "Jon the Viking Prince", is also presented in the familiar bare chest and fur loincloth style.⁶⁹ The image is used in illustrations even in cases where the text to which they are connected does not support it. For instance the romance novel *Lord of the Wolves* describes its Viking hero as being clad in deerskin boots, trousers, a linen shirt, a leather jerkin, chainmail, a cloak, and a conical helmet.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Herbert Barth, Dietrich Mack, Egon Voss (eds.), *Wagner: A Documentary Study* (Thames and Hudson, London), 1975, p. 252.

⁶⁵ See, for example, the photograph of Siegfried in Act II of a San Francisco Opera Company production of *Siegfried*, in John L. Di Gaetani (ed.), *Penetrating Wagner's Ring: an Anthology* (Da Capo Press, New York), 1978, p. 217. For photographs and drawings of the costumes in the 1876 production of the *Ring* cycle, see Barth *et al.*, *Wagner: A Documentary Study*, plates 219-26.

⁶⁶ Christine E. Fell, "Gods and Heroes of the Northern World", in David M. Wilson (ed.), *The Northern World: The History and Heritage of Northern Europe AD 400-1100* (Thames and Hudson, London), 1980, p. 27, plate 28, and Joseph R. Fliesler (ed.), *Siegfried*, souvenir programme (Patrick McNerney and Co., New York), 1925, pp. 5, 7, 9.

⁶⁷ Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski (eds.), *Wagner Companion* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London), 1992, p. 362.

⁶⁸ Harold R. Foster, *Prince Valiant, Vol. 28: The Savage Girl* (Fantagraphics Books, Thousand Oaks, California) 1985, 10 September 1960 *et seq.*

⁶⁹ Bob Kanigher and Joe Kubert, "The Outcast Viking", in *DC Special, Vol. 6, No. 25, Dec.-Jan. 1976/1977* (National Periodical Publications, Inc., New York), 1976.

⁷⁰ Graham, *Lord of the Wolves*, pp. 12, 55, 101.

But he appears in the novel's cover illustration as the epitome of the scantily-clad Viking: gleaming bare chest, bulging muscles, furry loincloth and all. (See Figure 10.)

The minuscule fur costume is of course also familiar from Sword and Sorcery fantasy, worn by heroes of the Conan the Barbarian variety.⁷¹ This is not surprising, as the genre has been heavily influenced by Norse/Germanic mythology. Robert E. Howard, the creator of Conan, borrowed many Norse motifs for his version of prehistory, blending them freely with myths of Atlantis, the Amazons, Picts and Ancient Egyptians.⁷² Conan himself is described by Fritz Leiber, a fantasy writer who followed in Howard's footsteps, as "a true hero of Valhalla, battling and suffering great wounds by day, carousing and wenching by night, and plunging into fresh adventures tomorrow".⁷³ To a large extent the fantasy barbarians share a world with the irrepressible Vikings of popular imagination, and it is probably as much through the Sword and Sorcery genre as through specifically Viking-themed works that images such

⁷¹ It should, however, be noted that, like the hero of *Lord of the Wolves*, Conan and his fellows are not always illustrated as they are described in their texts. For instance, Conan in Howard's story "The Tower of the Elephant" is described as wearing a "cheap tunic [which] could not conceal the hard, rangy lines of his powerful frame, the broad heavy shoulders, the massive chest, lean waist and heavy arms", rather than the improbable small fur outfit immortalised by artists such as Frank Frazetta, although later in the story Conan does discard his tunic and spends the rest of the adventure "naked except for a loincloth and his high-strapped sandals". (Robert E. Howard, "The Tower of the Elephant", in L. Sprague de Camp (ed.), *Conan* (Sphere Books, London), 1967, this edition 1985, pp. 44, 46.) In a later story, we again read that Conan's "threadbare tunic failed to mask the hard lines of his mighty thews". (Robert E. Howard and L. Sprague de Camp, "The Hall of the Dead", in Sprague de Camp, *Conan*, p. 73)

⁷² In his essay "The Hyborian Age -- Part One", written to provide background for the Conan stories, Howard states, "In the north, golden-haired, blue-eyed barbarians, descendants of the blond arctic savages, have driven the Hyborian tribes out of the snow countries, except the ancient kingdom of Hyperborea, which resists their onslaught. Their country is called Nordheim, and they are divided into the red-haired Vanir of Vanaheim, and the yellow-haired Æsir of Asgard." (Robert E. Howard, "The Hyborian Age -- Part One", in Sprague de Camp, *Conan*, p. 27) Hyperborea is Latin for "far north", Nordheim and Vanaheim are words of Norse derivation, the Vanir and Æsir are warring clans of gods in Norse mythology, and Asgard is the world of the gods in which Valhalla is located. In recasting these mythological motifs as prehistoric tribal warfare, Howard was following the lead of a long-established line of argument which traced Norse myths back to an historical basis, with Odin being a warrior chieftain who was deified after his death, or who even specifically set out to establish himself as the focus of a new religion. (Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (Chapman and Hall Ltd., London), 1841, this edition 1904, pp. 21-9.) This argument was already in existence in the 13th century, when Snorri, attempting to rationalise the pagan faith of his ancestors, presented Odin as a human being in the early chapters of his *Heimskringla*. (Sturlason and Mosen, *Heimskringla*, pp. 2-7).

⁷³ Fritz Leiber, quoted on the back cover of Sprague de Camp, *Conan*.

as the all-but-naked hero and the horned helmet are perpetuated.⁷⁴

Even when not appearing in loincloths designed by Frank Frazetta, Vikings are often portrayed in fairly scanty costumes, showing off to best advantage their muscles and their hardy imperviousness to cold. The Vikings in the illustrations of Terry Jones' children's fantasy *The Saga of Erik the Viking* wear short, sleeveless tunics,⁷⁵ similar to those worn by the Viking men in *The Saga of the Viking Women and their Voyage to the Waters of the Great Sea Serpent*, and to Tony Curtis' costume in the early sequences of *The Vikings*. Unsurprisingly, in the Viking romance novels, in which Vikings are used specifically as sex symbols, their costumes allow for much baring of bronzed, muscular limbs. So the hero and his best friend in *Fires of Winter* are described as wearing "short, sleeveless tunics with tight-fitting long leggings".⁷⁶ In *Lord of Hawkfell Island*, the hero "wore only a tunic that was belted at his waist and thick leather shoes cross-gartered to his knees", and his bare arms are encircled with silver arm bands.⁷⁷ We read that the hero of *The Viking's Woman* "was clad only in a short leather tunic; his shoulders were bare, the muscles of his arms massive and taut".⁷⁸ The cover illustrations typical of these works, moreover, go out of their way to display bare muscular chests, although the characters in the books may well be fully clad in the sequences the illustrations are meant to represent.

The Viking body on display fulfils several functions. Mighty thews are revealed, confirming the Viking's status as a warrior hero of high repute. The Viking man shows his more than human indifference to the harsh northern climate. And the Viking sex symbol, the golden god, awes and tantalises with his features so prominently on show, and those which are barely concealed.

3.2. Viking women

⁷⁴ As Paddy Griffith observes, "it is not very difficult to find modern animated cartoon films and video games which portray the evil villains as wearing 'Viking style' horned helmets", regardless of whether the works have any specifically Viking content. (Paddy Griffith, *The Viking Art of War* (Greenhill Books, London), 1995, p. 24)

⁷⁵ Terry Jones, *The Saga of Erik the Viking* (Puffin Books, London), 1983, *passim*.

⁷⁶ Lindsey, *Fires of Winter*, p. 28.

⁷⁷ Coulter, *Lord of Hawkfell Island*, p. 9.

⁷⁸ Graham, *The Viking's Woman*, p. 68.

3.2.1. Archaeologically correct Viking women?

The question of what people actually wore is as difficult to answer in the case of Viking men as of women. But the question has tended to assume a greater centrality in Viking women's images. In recent popular-scholarly renditions, the Viking woman, far more than the Viking man, is defined by a prescribed set of fashion options. The presence of oval or "tortoise" brooches in a grave, for instance, has been generally taken as incontrovertible proof that an early medieval Scandinavian woman was buried there.⁷⁹ The men's graves may be identified as Viking on as slim proof, but the interpretation of these grave finds does not tend to create as uniform a depiction of Viking men as of their female counterparts. Perhaps because the images assigned to Viking men tend to be more dynamic, their physical depictions are allowed more fluidity. The Viking woman, however -- the angel of the hearth, who maintains stability at home while the men go adventuring abroad -- is assigned more static roles, which are reflected in her costume.

Paul Du Chaillu wrote in his Viking Age study of 1889 that "In the sagas we have only partial descriptions of the dress worn by men and women, and though many names of pieces of clothing are mentioned, very little light is otherwise thrown upon the subject".⁸⁰ To a large extent, the difficulty stated by Du Chaillu still exists. Ideas of Viking period dress are a tapestry pieced together from varying sources, but the tapestry has many holes in it.

Sagas give the names of clothing types, but seldom descriptions which are precise enough to provide much aid in reconstruction. Furthermore, as Graham-Campbell has pointed out, most of the literary sources "date from the later medieval period [and] we cannot be sure that in such details they are not drawing more on current fashions than on memories from several generations before".⁸¹ Artistic sources such as carvings on

⁷⁹ According to Haakon Shetelig and Hjalmar Falk in their *Scandinavian Archaeology* (1937), the Viking period "women's ornaments ... have a distinctive national character ... There were large oval brooches ('tortoise brooches') which were worn in pairs, one on each shoulder, and also a third brooch of a different shape fastened in the middle of the breast ... This invariable and characteristic set of ornaments was probably influential in giving a peculiarly Norse style to the costume, common to Danes, Norwegian, and Swedes". However, "As for the men, we are unable to indicate any correspondingly national costume". (Haakon Shetelig and Hjalmar Falk, *Scandinavian Archaeology*, translated by E. V. Gordon (Clarendon Press, Oxford), 1937, pp. 276-7.

⁸⁰ Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age*, Vol. II, p. 285.

⁸¹ Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World*, p. 114.

the Gotland picture stones, a tapestry found in the Oseberg ship burial, and Swedish pendants showing female figures, are relied on heavily in descriptions of Viking Age dress,⁸² but there are difficulties here as well. The highly stylized Viking period art is not user-friendly to a twentieth-century observer accustomed to naturalistic depictions, and more crucially, the scenes represented often appear to show ceremonial occasions or mythological settings; in both cases, contexts which might suggest the use of costumes both more standardised and more ornate than would be likely for everyday wear.

Clothing fragments discovered in burials, meanwhile, provide information on textile types and on the use of brooches,⁸³ but the interpretation of these finds opens a theoretical can of worms. For, like the depictions on picture stones, tapestries and pendants, the standardisation suggested by the burial finds is of dubious relevance to day-to-day Viking period fashion. An idea has developed from these finds that all Viking women dressed the same, across all areas of Scandinavian influence and throughout the centuries of the Viking period. This notion, "that all Scandinavian women wore a kind of folk costume -- the same style of dress with standard jewellery" is dismissed by Else Roesdahl as erroneous.⁸⁴ Roesdahl writes that "Such a dress was worn only by the nobility and the well-to-do middle-class ... was presumably kept for 'best' and was nothing like as stereotyped as has been thought".⁸⁵

However, the idea survives. A brochure from the Historical Museum of the University of Oslo states that "Women in the Viking Age must have been quite conservative in their dress and taste for jewellery. This is seen in the popularity of the oval brooches used to fasten the straps of their dresses, which remained in fashion throughout the entire Viking period."⁸⁶ The standardised costume of headscarves or caps

⁸² See Johannes Brøndsted, *The Vikings* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex), first published 1960, translated 1965, this edition 1978, pp. 128-33, Graham-Campbell, *The Viking Age*, pp. 114-21, and Else Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, pp. 32-41.

⁸³ As Graham-Campbell writes, "Brooches were first and foremost dress-fasteners; it is thus possible to deduce something about the number and nature of the clothes in use from the number and disposition of the brooches needed to hold them all together." (Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World*, p. 114)

⁸⁴ Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, p. 37.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

⁸⁶ Supplementary notes to museum cases on Viking period, Cases 37-40, "The Love of Art". (Oldsaksamlingen, Historisk Museum, Universitet i Oslo), n.d., circa 1996.

(the latter based on a silk cap discovered in the Coppergate excavation at York)⁸⁷ and pinafore-style overdresses fastened by oval brooches appears on the women illustrated in children's information books and in the garb of women in Viking re-enactment groups. (See Figures 11 and 12.) Given the paucity of sources providing detailed images of Viking period dress, it is understandable that those sources available should be used with regularity. But the result is to create an unrealistically stereotyped vision of a culture which resists all change and carries mass production to a hardly feasible extreme. This standard Viking woman of the late twentieth century, as propagated by popular-historical coffee table books, children's non-fiction, and re-enactment societies, has become so omnipresent as to seem natural, a scrupulously proven image which it would be ridiculous to doubt. However, a century ago these Viking women would have been largely unrecognisable to students of the Viking Age.

The depictions of Viking women in the nineteenth century provide an intriguing contrast to their late twentieth-century counterparts. Some of the information used in creating the twentieth-century depictions was, to be sure, not available for most or all of the previous century. Detailed work on the burials remained limited, and the Oseberg burial with its famous tapestry was not excavated until 1904. However, other sources, including the Gotland stones and literary descriptions, were used, but were -- perhaps because they were largely unrestricted by stereotyped images imposed through use of the burial evidence -- interpreted in more varied ways.

Du Chaillu, for example, writes in a description primarily based on saga accounts and on the images from the Swedish pendants⁸⁸ that

The most important piece of clothing worn by women was the *kyrtil* (gown). It was made very wide, with a train, and was usually provided with long sleeves reaching to the wrists. It was fastened round the waist by a belt, often made of gold or silver, from which a bag was suspended for rings, ornaments, housewife's keys, etc. Sometimes this dress was narrow at the waist, and had a close-fitting jacket. Over the kirtle was wore [sic] a kind of apron (*blæja*) which sometimes

⁸⁷ Richard Hall, *The Viking Dig* (The Bodley Head, London), 1984, this edition 1986, p. 88, and Plate 106, facing p. 112.

⁸⁸ Three of which Du Chaillu uses as illustrations; Vol. II, p. 302, figures 1161, 1162 and 1164. These pendants, along with the Gotland picture stones, are among the sources used in late twentieth-century depictions for the characteristic knot hairstyle attributed to Viking women, a hairstyle on which Du Chaillu also comments (p. 302).

had fringe at the bottom.⁸⁹

It is interesting to consider the similarities and differences of this image and late twentieth-century presentations. The wide kirtle with the train seems based on the images on picture stones and pendants, but is largely rejected in the late twentieth-century pictorial versions. Likewise, in these later representations it is very rare for a woman to be shown wearing a belt. The housewife's keys, etc., which Du Chaillu mentions, are still a part of the image, but are now depicted as being suspended from the dress-fastening oval brooches. The *blæja* apron may correspond with the over-dress familiar from late twentieth-century depictions, but the "close-fitting jacket" is now almost unknown. We can find such garments in the illustrations of various nineteenth-century Viking women, such as the heroine in G.A. Henty's "boy's novel" *The Dragon and the Raven* (See Figure 13), but in versions from the later twentieth century they have vanished.

The Viking woman of the nineteenth century was an intriguing combination of contemporary fashion (as seen in an illustration reproduced in Wilson's *The Northern World* which shows the heroine Ingebjorg of *Frithjof's saga* in a garment suspiciously resembling a crinoline),⁹⁰ general romantic ideas of medieval dress, and contemporary Scandinavian folk costume. The twentieth-century Viking woman, by contrast, has far more restricted fashion options -- perhaps in themselves more archaeologically viable, yet also perhaps creating as unrealistic an image of day-to-day Viking Age reality as do the wildest Victorian flights of fancy.

3.2.2. Warrior maids and hefty hulking wenches

When the words "Viking" and "women" are mentioned in close proximity, the image that springs most immediately to mind is likely to be of a buxom beauty, clothing artfully disarranged, being carried off over the shoulder of a grinning Viking marauder. (See Figures 14 and 15.) In much of the Viking myth, women function primarily as victims: kidnapped, ravished, and turned into long-suffering slave girls who have axes thrown at their braids and who must clean the longhouse after each Viking booze-up.

However, Viking women -- women who are members of Viking society rather than simply the victims of abduction -- are a very different matter. A longstanding dictum

⁸⁹ Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age*, Vol. II, p. 301.

⁹⁰ Mjöberg, "Romanticism and Revival", in Wilson, *The Northern World*, p. 219, plate 26.

on the Viking Age holds that the women in medieval Scandinavia enjoyed more freedom than their counterparts in other regions of Europe.⁹¹ (See also 5.3.3., below.) This idea colours many physical representations of Viking women. Sharing qualities assigned to Viking men -- independence, courage, strength of body and of spirit -- the Viking woman can also be given many of the same physical traits as are the men. Like the men, Viking women can be used as warrior ideals and as sex symbols, depicted with similar statuesque, limb-baring glamour.

The Viking woman exists in two basic models, the distinction between them linked to the different interpretations of the term "Viking" itself. (See 1.1.3., above.) If "Viking" is taken to mean the early medieval Scandinavian people as a whole, then "Viking women", naturally, includes all women within that society. Here we find the Scandinavian housewife, faithfully and efficiently keeping the home fires burning while her menfolk risk their lives on the high seas. She is the version of the Viking woman who, in the late twentieth century, appears in those inescapable pinafores, Coppergate caps, and oval brooches hung with keys and scissors. If, however, "Viking" is read in its vocational sense, as equalling pirate and warrior, the phrase "Viking woman" summons up images of the Norse amazon, breastplate gleaming and long golden hair flying behind her as she rides into battle. (See Figure 16.) Often, of course, these two models are blended. Definitions of "Viking" are very seldom kept distinct, and the idea of the Viking warrior maid has frequently influenced images of medieval Scandinavian women in general.

This Viking warrior woman concept has been much discussed, with debate focusing on what relevance the presence of such figures in legend may have had for the lives of actual women in the Viking period.⁹² As Birgit and Peter Sawyer have written,

⁹¹ See Birgit and Peter Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia: From Conversion to Reformation, circa 800-1500* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London), 1993, pp. 188 *et seq.*

⁹² See for example Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Boydell Press, Woodbridge, Suffolk), 1991, pp. 130 *et seq.* and 176-9, and Carol J. Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women and Power in Early Northern Europe", in Nancy F. Partner (ed.), *Studying Medieval Women: Sex, Gender and Feminism* (The Medieval Academy of America, Cambridge, Massachusetts), 1993, pp. 61-85. Jesch tends to characterise Viking warrior women and goddesses of war as "figures of male fantasy" (p. 206). Supernatural types like the valkyries, and women in the sagas who incite their male relations to violence, are presented as "a useful and colourful myth that accounts for the horrors of violence while removing the blame for it from male shoulders" (p. 191). Clover, by contrast, sees the literary accounts of warlike/powerful women as reflections of the occasional need for women in Viking society to take on perceivedly male roles, such as in cases where there was no male heir to fulfil familial obligations. Clover argues that in these contexts "masculine" behaviour was acceptable for women, and further, that modern definitions of masculine and feminine are not the best tools for examining Norse attitudes toward

"Early discussion of women's status made much use of Tacitus and of Icelandic sagas, which were believed to show that an early ideal of active and martial 'shield-maidens' was replaced by the passive and submissive Madonna ideal favored by the church."⁹³

Regardless of whether legendary and literary martial female figures show that a military lifestyle was indeed open to Viking Age women, it is certainly clear that the connection of women with warlike themes was a powerful motif in Norse tradition. Figures such as the valkyries and other female personifications of war reveal this connection in surviving Norse poetical sources.⁹⁴ Accounts also exist of non-supernatural Norse female warriors. Writing around 1200, Saxo Grammaticus in his *Gesta Danorum* attempted to explain away the presence of warrior women in Danish historical traditions. While he clearly disapproved of such unladylike behaviour, he could not deny it had occurred, and so dismisses his Danish amazons, who freely take part in battles and piracy, as examples of the general barbarism of pre-conversion Denmark.⁹⁵

When Norse themes began their return to popularity in the middle-to-late eighteenth century, valkyries were among the first figures from Norse tradition to be revived. Thomas Gray's poem *The Fatal Sisters* (published 1768), usually cited as among the earliest influential popularizations of northern antiquity, presents a grisly picture of valkyries -- here combined in their role with the norms, or fates -- as they "weave the crimson web of war".⁹⁶ The introductory note to the poem explains for readers who may not be familiar with northern mythology that the subject of the poem is

the *Valkyriur*, female divinities, servants of *Odin* (or *Woden*) in the Gothic mythology. Their name signifies *Choosers of the slain*. They were mounted on swift horses, with drawn swords in their hands: and in the throng of battle selected such as were destined to slaughter, and conducted them to *Valkalla* [sic], the hall of *Odin*, or paradise of the brave, where they attended the banquet, and served the departed

gender roles.

⁹³ Sawyer and Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia*, p. 188.

⁹⁴ See, for example, the Helgi poems, in the Elder or Poetic Edda, which repeatedly bring their heroes into contact with valkyries. Bellows, *Poetic Edda*, pp. 269-331.

⁹⁵ Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, pp. 176-8.

⁹⁶ Thomas Gray, *Poetical Works* (John Sharpe, London), 1826, p. 35.

heroes with horns of mead and ale.⁹⁷

Probably the greatest populariser of the valkyrie concept is Richard Wagner. His *Ring* cycle operas, most specifically of course *Die Walküre*, have ingrained on popular consciousness the image of a troop of winged-helmeted, armour-clad female cavalry, galloping across stormy skies and singing lustily all the while.⁹⁸ Also courtesy of Wagner's role in the process is the image of valkyries as vast-bosomed operatic sopranos. The notion of the hefty valkyrie may owe something to the general large build seen as typical of Scandinavians as a whole. But its entry into legend is primarily due to the proliferation of visions inspired by Wagner's operas. The operatic Brunnhilde, with her flaxen braids and massive, armour-sheathed chest, has become the stereotypical embodiment not only of valkyries, but of female opera singers in general.

Various twentieth-century depictions show their indebtedness to aspects of the valkyrie legend and to traditions of the warlike, independent Norse woman.. The novel *The Thrall of Leif the Lucky* (1902) describes its heroine as the perfect romanticised valkyrie, although without the weight problems of the Wagnerian soprano. (See Figure 17.) She has golden hair that streams out like a banner when she rides, and wears a silver helmet and a scarlet kirtle that stops at the knee.⁹⁹ The novel's hero is initially shocked at her unorthodox garb and behaviour, but is nonetheless entranced by her beauty: "Despite her strange dress and general dishevelment, he could see now that she was a beautiful girl ... Her face was as delicately pink-and-pearly as a sea-shell, and corn-flowers among the wheat were no bluer than the eyes that looked out from under her rippling golden tresses."¹⁰⁰ Her rejection of conventional women's clothing and behaviour only adds to her attractiveness: "Helga was the best comrade in the camp, whether one wished to go hawking, or wanted a hand at fencing, or only asked for a quiet game of chess by the leaping firelight. Her ringing laugh, her frank glance, and

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 33-4.

⁹⁸ For two early pictorial representations of Wagner's valkyries, see the drawings by Theodor Pixis for Act II, scene 4 and Act III, scene 2 of the 1870 production of *Die Walküre* (Barth *et al.*, *Wagner: A Documentary Study*, plates 171-2.)

⁹⁹ Otilie A. Liljencrantz, *The Thrall of Leif the Lucky: A Story of Viking Days* (A. McClurg and Co., Chicago), entered at Stationer's Hall, London, 1902, this edition 1904, pp. 19-20.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, p. 21.

her beautiful glowing face made all other maidens seem dull and lifeless."¹⁰¹

Some portrayals of women in Viking contexts use the warrior woman image in a perfunctory way, with the heroine blithely donning armour but conspicuously failing to manage any military achievements. Such is the case in the novel *King Harold's Son* (1946). The heroine here, an Irish princess, enthusiastically declares "I will go a-Viking with you, and fight beside you, as did Queen Maev of Connaught in the days of Cuethlin and the Red Branch knights of Ulster",¹⁰² but the only practical result of her donning male garb and accompanying the hero on his wanderings is to provide the Viking crew with a pleasant view of her shapely legs.¹⁰³ Similar roles, as decorative but ineffectual warriors, are played by the titular heroines of the film *The Saga of the Viking Women and their Voyage to the Waters of the Great Sea Serpent*. They are remarkable for their leather bikinis, long legs, elaborate hairstyles which remain undamaged by tempest and shipwreck, and their ever-impeccable mascara, and the main heroine shows herself to be a competent horsewoman and huntress. But as sailors and fighters, these Viking women leave a great deal to be desired. (To be fair, the Viking men in this film are not much more effective than their women.)

In the world of the Viking romance novel, meanwhile, the idea of the warrior woman has taken a firm hold. In this context, the concept's usefulness is due largely to the plot and character demands of the romance novel. The typical structure of these books requires that the hero and heroine be in conflict with each other, figuratively and/or literally. In the Viking novels it is a frequently used technique for this to take the form of literal combat, with the heroine being a warrior maid attempting to defend her homeland from marauding Vikings. In these cases, of course, the heroine is not a Viking woman as such, but her presentation is clearly influenced by ideas of Viking shield-maidens. In the Viking trilogy by Heather Graham, the heroines are an Irish princess who leads a double life as the "Golden Warriress" spearheading resistance against the Danes,¹⁰⁴ a cousin of King Alfred who is "an amazing markswoman" and

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, pp. 64-5.

¹⁰² Richard Strong, *King Harold's Son* (Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., London), 1946, p. 62.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, p. 63.

¹⁰⁴ Graham, *Golden Surrender*, pp. 77-8 and *passim*.

nearly kills the hero in their first encounter,¹⁰⁵ and a French countess who leads her people into battle, garbed in a gilded chain mail tunic.¹⁰⁶ A similar structure is used by Johanna Lindsey in *Fires of Winter*, in which the Welsh heroine is an only child whose father has taught her all the warrior arts he would have taught his son. Naturally she fights the Norwegian Viking hero every step of the way, and when she eventually becomes an accepted member of the hero's family, her father-in-law characterises her as an honorary "Viking maid, where courage and pride reign uppermost".¹⁰⁷

Not all warrior women in Viking romance novels are from the ranks of the Vikings' enemies. In Graham's *Golden Surrender*, the hero is embittered early in the novel by the death in battle of his lover, a classic embodiment of warlike, golden-haired Norse womanhood: "So tall a woman, she could almost meet his eyes. So courageous that she blazoned into battle like a man. So uniquely beautiful that she held his heart and soul ... She was strong, his Viking love, yet all woman."¹⁰⁸ The heroine of Betina Krahn's *My Warrior's Heart* is cast in similar mould, a tawny-haired warrior maiden who is taller than most men, can defeat in combat any man except the hero, and is said to be the daughter of a valkyrie.¹⁰⁹ The novel *Viking*, one of a series of romance novels based around the persona of the celebrity supermodel Fabio, makes particularly blatant use of the Viking warrior woman concept to put the conflict between hero and heroine into motion. The heroine, who begins the novel as the hero's sworn enemy, is "dressed not as a Viking wife but as a valkyrie, in chain-mail tunic, short, tight leggings, and iron helmet."¹¹⁰ And in the hero's opinion, she is "all primal woman, and so intriguing. The thought of taming her ferociousness into spirited passion tantalized him."¹¹¹

The warrior maidens of the works discussed above tend to be of the slim and

¹⁰⁵ Graham, *The Viking's Woman*, pp. 11 and 25-33.

¹⁰⁶ Graham, *Lord of the Wolves*, pp. 75, 86-7, 91. "The mesh was extremely fine. It would be incredibly difficult to penetrate. At the same time, the garment was beautiful, decidedly feminine. It was decorated in elegant patterns in a fine gilding, the golden coloring glistened magnificently in the firelight." (p. 75)

¹⁰⁷ Johanna Lindsey, *Fires of Winter*, p. 306.

¹⁰⁸ Graham, *Golden Surrender*, pp. 37, 39.

¹⁰⁹ Betina Krahn, *My Warrior's Heart* (Avon, New York), 1992.

¹¹⁰ Fabio Lanzoni and Eugenia Riley, *Viking* (Avon, New York), 1994, p. 32.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 71.

leggy variety, but the overweight soprano aspect of the Wagnerian valkyrie also survives in images of Viking women. In the children's novel *Mist Over Athelney*, Viking women are off-handedly referred to as "hefty hulking wenches".¹¹² A more flattering, but still markedly Brunnhilde-esque description is given to Countess Ingebiorg of Tranter's *Macbeth the King*: "She was a big blond woman, tall, large-breasted, splendidly made, with long plaited yellow hair, round laughing features and notably blue eyes, comely rather than beautiful -- and strong-thighed and calved, for she had her skirts kilted high".¹¹³ In *The Haunting of Hiram C. Hopgood*, a cameo appearance is made by a valkyrie who is unabashedly Wagnerian in every feature:

An enormous beast -- an eight-legged stallion as black as night -- had come to rest outside the window. And on the back of the horse was the fattest, largest woman they had ever seen. Her swelling bosom was covered by a steel breastplate, she wore a helmet over her thick, golden pigtails, her thighs, in their leather breeches, spread to cover the saddle. No wonder she rode an eight-legged horse; a four-legged one would have collapsed under her.¹¹⁴

Two of the best known Viking women in contemporary culture are undoubtedly the wife and daughter of Hagar the Horrible. These two embody the contrasting characteristics assigned to the popular valkyrie. Helga, Hagar's wife, is an enormous woman in a horned helmet -- though the helmet in itself means little, since in Hagar's world helmets are worn even by dogs and ducks -- who henpecks Hagar to within an inch of his life. The daughter Honi, on the other hand, is the valkyrie at her most alluring: slender, voluptuous, clad in a low-cut breastplate, with a winged helmet perched atop flowing masses of golden hair. (See Figure 18.)

The popularity of the Viking warrior woman is linked to attitudes toward medieval women in general. In popular usages there are, it seems, two basic types of heroine possible in a medieval setting. One is the damsel in distress, the beautiful princess with waist-length hair and a tall pointed hat, who sits about waiting for the knight in shining armour to rescue her. The other possible heroine is the medieval tomboy, who practises warrior arts, dresses like a boy, and is prone to long diatribes against embroidery, arranged marriages, and the other perceived restrictions of the medieval woman's life.

¹¹² Trease, *Mist Over Athelney*, p. 19.

¹¹³ Tranter, *Macbeth the King*, p. 82.

¹¹⁴ Ibbotson, *The Haunting of Hiram C. Hopgood*, p. 137.

Of these two heroines, it is the tomboy who has become more acceptable in twentieth-century perceptions. In a climate of constant and highly-publicised controversy over the rights of women, women of earlier time periods tend to be viewed with some discomfort unless it can be shown that they, too, were rebels, conscious of the societal injustices being done to them at every turn. Nor is it enough to find examples of them asserting themselves within their officially-sanctioned female roles. They must attire themselves as warriors, and beat the men at their own game, proving that, as these heroines so frequently claim, they "can fight as well as any man".¹¹⁵

In many cases, these warrior heroines only manage to take the process partway. They are still restricted by the princess-in-the-tower image, and must eventually be rescued by some strapping hero, just as if they had never bothered to put on armour in the first place. But these heroines allow readers and viewers the chance to have their cake and eat it. They are reasonably politically correct, emancipated modern women, but are still capable of being swept off their feet when the right man comes along. They fight against sexual discrimination, but are still profoundly decorative in their tightly fitting armour.

This is not to imply that the Viking warrior woman is entirely a construct of modern attitudes. As has been seen, the concept of female military figures was certainly present in Norse tradition. The prevalence of the idea may well, as Clover argues, reflect realities in which women were expected to take on predominantly male roles. As well, there are sufficient historical accounts from other periods, concerning women who take up arms in times of crisis, to show that the idea is far from being simply the creation of attitudes which cannot accept a woman of the past unless she rebels.

The Viking warrior maiden is the sum of her medieval and modern parts. And as a vision from a colourful past, an independent modern woman, and an impressive pin-up girl, she provides something for everyone.

3.3. Viking ships

3.3.1. Prototypes

Perhaps even more than the Vikings themselves, the Viking ship of popular

¹¹⁵ As is claimed by the heroine, Princess Ilene, in the shooting script of the 1997 film version of *Prince Valiant*, who then proceeds to be kidnapped and installed in a Viking harem. (Anthony Hickox and Carsten Lorenz, *Harold R. Foster's Prince Valiant* (Constantin Developments Inc., Los Angeles), shooting script 27 February, 1996, pp. 47, 67.

consciousness is characterised by mass production. There are, one would think from most late twentieth-century representations, only two basic designs of Viking ship, three possible figureheads, and one colour combination acceptable for the Viking sail.

This standard ship design is based on existing sources, but it puts into use only a meagre portion of the examples available. Our knowledge of Viking period ships certainly does not provide an embarrassment of riches, but it is interesting to see what a small proportion of even this limited field of knowledge becomes incorporated into the accepted image of the Viking ship.

Like the question of Viking costume, images of Viking ships are constructed from a variety of source types. The sagas provide literally glowing descriptions, as do a few other literary/historical sources such as the eleventh-century *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, which describes fleets under sail in the reigns of Kings Svein Forkbeard and Cnut the Great.¹¹⁶ There are various forms of pictorial representation, including the Bayeux Tapestry (showing Norman ships, of course, but often used in discussion of Viking vessels on the assumption that the vessels depicted are basically the same type of ship used by the Normans' Viking ancestors), the Gotland picture stones,¹¹⁷ graffiti showing sketches of ships,¹¹⁸ and medieval Scandinavian coins with ships represented on them.¹¹⁹ Finally, a handful of archaeological discoveries, which have increased exponentially during the twentieth century, allow one to add a few actual Viking period ships into this melting pot of impressions.

As with Viking women's dress, increasing archaeological discoveries have tended to restrict rather than widen the accepted representations of Viking ships. Although we may know more of Viking period shipbuilding than did our nineteenth-century counterparts, the Viking ship of the late twentieth century is limited and rather bland by comparison with those of a century before.

¹¹⁶ Alistair Campbell (ed.), *Encomium Emmae Reginae* (Royal Historical Society, London), 1949, pp. 13, 19, 21.

¹¹⁷ See Erik Nylén and Jan Peder Lamm, *Stones, Ships and Symbols: the Picture Stones of Gotland from the Viking Age and Before* (Gidlunds Bokförlag, Stockholm), 1988.

¹¹⁸ See Liz le Bon, "Ancient Ship Graffiti: Symbol and Context", and Arne Emil Christensen, "Ship Graffiti", in Ole Crumlin-Pedersen and Birgitte Munch Thye (eds.), *The Ship as Symbol in Prehistoric and Medieval Scandinavia* (National Museum, Copenhagen), 1995, pp. 172-9 and 180-5.

¹¹⁹ Ole Crumlin-Pedersen (ed.), *Viking-Age Ships and Shipbuilding in Hedeby/Haithabu and Schleswig* (National Museum of Denmark and Viking Ship Museum, Roskilde), 1997, pp. 172-6.

The nineteenth-century Viking ship was a colourful creation, based largely on saga descriptions, with an occasional nod in the direction of the Bayeux Tapestry. In *The Viking Age*, Du Chaillu quotes extensively from accounts in *Heimskringla* and *Flateyjarbók*, describing the Viking ships' paintwork, gilded dragon head prows, and multi-coloured sails.¹²⁰ Of sails Du Chaillu writes, "Beautiful sails were highly prized; these were generally made of *vadmal*, or coarse woollen stuff. The Sagas often mention that they were striped, of different colours, red, blue, and green, being sometimes embroidered and beautifully lined with fur; but some were as white as the newly-fallen snow."¹²¹ Du Chaillu also quotes saga descriptions of sails apparently lined with a type of velvet.¹²² The bodies of the ships themselves, in the accounts Du Chaillu uses, are painted above the waterline, some in blue, one in red, purple and gold, another in red and white.¹²³

At the time Du Chaillu wrote, the remains of two Viking period ships were available as resources: the fragmentary remains of the ship discovered at Tune in 1867, and the more substantial Gokstad ship, excavated in 1880. Du Chaillu discusses both, citing in particular the Gokstad ship's yellow and black painted shields, which seem to corroborate the alternating colours of shields lining the gunwales of ships in the Bayeux Tapestry.¹²⁴ Du Chaillu also reproduces several illustrations from the Tapestry, apparently showing painted ships, striped sails, and colourful figureheads as described in the sagas.¹²⁵

Viking novels of the period gave similarly kaleidoscopic accounts, showing their indebtedness to the saga descriptions and, in the post-Gokstad years, to the Gokstad ship and its shields. One account particularly remarkable for its technicolour glory is the description of a Viking fleet in *The Viking Path* (1894):

In the red glare of the rising sun the ships presented a magnificent appearance ... the fiery sunlight striking on the gilded dragon heads and

¹²⁰ Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age*, Vol. II, pp. 152-60.

¹²¹ *ibid.*, p. 153.

¹²² *ibid.*, pp. 154-5.

¹²³ *ibid.*, pp. 155-6.

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 158.

¹²⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 160-1.

tails with which many of their bows and sterns were ornamented, and on long rows of black-and-yellow Viking shields that hung in order, overlapped, upon their sides. The dragon figure-heads were always gold, sometimes even solid gold. Many of the ships were gilt from stem to stern, and lay upon the water in a blaze of light. Others of the fleet were painted over with strange patterns and designs in brilliant, even gorgeous hues of scarlet and blue and white and gold, flinging bright reflections on the faintly-rippling wavelets of the *sund* ... The great sails that hung idly by the masts, bulging and swaying lightly in the gentle breeze, were striped with green and red and blue and white. The galleys of the chieftains had their sails embroidered with rich fabrics, some of them with fur, and, wrought upon the sails, the symbols of the various commanders ...¹²⁶

Illustrations from before the discovery of Gokstad often show exuberantly fanciful Viking vessels; ornate, sea-monster-headed behemoths that seem more closely related to the triremes of the ancient Aegean than to the streamlined Viking longship as we know it today.¹²⁷ This trait is in common with the pattern seen in Viking representations as a whole, in which early artistic treatments fell back on the established tradition of Classical representations, presenting the Norse gods, for instance, as a would-be Greco-Roman pantheon.¹²⁸ As Norse/Germanic themes became an accepted genre in their own right, distinctive Northern styles developed away from the Classical model.

The 1880 discovery of the Gokstad ship moved discussion of Viking vessels from the realm of literary and artistic fantasy into that of tangible fact, and the Viking ship was redesigned in the image of Gokstad. We have seen above how, in *The Viking Path*, the yellow and black shields of Gokstad become the norm of Viking shields. Nicolaysen, one of the first scholars to study the Gokstad ship, wrote in the official report of 1882 that

... we shall not disinter any craft which, in respect of model and workmanship, will outrival that of Gokstad. For, in the opinion of experts, this must be deemed a masterpiece of its kind, not to be surpassed by aught which the shipbuilding craft of the present day could produce. Doubtless, in the ratio of our present ideas, this is rather a boat than a ship; nevertheless, in its symmetrical proportions, and the eminent beauty of its line, is exhibited a perfection, never since attained, until, after a much later but long and dreary period of clumsy unshapeliness, it was once

¹²⁶ J. J. Haldane Burgess, *The Viking Path: A Tale of the White Christ* (William Blackwood and Sons, London), 1894, p. 117.

¹²⁷ Jöran Mjöberg, "Romanticism and Revival", in Wilson, *The Northern World*, p. 228.

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 210, 216, 228.

more revived in the clipper-built craft of our own century.¹²⁹

The Gokstad excavation ushered in the era of the Viking ship replica, now such a common feature in Viking images. The first replica Viking ship was Magnus Anderson's 1893 vessel *Viking*, based on the Gokstad ship, which was sailed from Norway to the United States for the World Exhibition.¹³⁰

For two decades Gokstad was *the* Viking ship, but in 1904 its great rival emerged, giving the lie to Nicolaysen's fervent assertion that "any larger or better appointed vessel ... [than Gokstad] can hardly be found".¹³¹ The Oseberg ship, more ornate than Gokstad, took a stand as the alternate Viking vessel, and panegyrics for both ships continue to appear.

In Jacqueline Simpson's *Everyday Life in the Viking Age* (1967), it is Gokstad which "has contributed the most to our picture of a typical Viking vessel of the ninth century ... The whole beauty of the Gokstad ship is sober and functional, the beauty of clean, strong lines and superbly calculated construction".¹³² Meanwhile, Oseberg, to Johannes Brøndsted, is "that celebrated revelation of the art and spirit of the Vikings ... the lines of the Oseberg ship are inexpressibly pure and fine".¹³³ Oseberg has melted the hearts even of some of the Vikings' sternest detractors; Jacqueline Simpson draws attention to the statement of historian T. D. Kendrick, no lover of the Vikings, that "no one who has ever looked at the [Oseberg] ship herself ... can ever again think of the ninth-century Norsemen as completely vile and soulless barbarians".¹³⁴

Further rivals appeared in the late 1950's and early 1960's, with the excavation of the Skuldelev wrecks in Roskilde Fjord, Denmark. The Skuldelev ships have greatly increased knowledge of Viking Age ship building. Unlike Gokstad and Oseberg, both

¹²⁹ N. Nicolaysen, *The Viking-Ship from Gokstad* (Gregg International Publishers Ltd., Westmead, Hants.), originally published Kristiania, 1882, the edition reprinted 1971, p. 71.

¹³⁰ Arne Emil Christensen, "'Viking', a Gokstad ship replica from 1893", in Ole Crumlin-Pedersen and Max Vinner (eds.), *Sailing into the Past: Proceedings of the International Seminar on Replicas of Ancient and Medieval Vessels, Roskilde, 1984* (Viking Ship Museum, Roskilde), 1986, pp. 68-77.

¹³¹ *ibid.*

¹³² Jacqueline Simpson, *Everyday Life in the Viking Age* (B. T. Batsford, London), 1967, pp. 75, 79.

¹³³ Brøndsted, *The Vikings*, pp. 143, 146.

¹³⁴ Simpson, *Everyday Life in the Viking Age*, p. 13.

interpreted as more-or-less representing the type of longship used for war and piracy (although Oseberg appears to have been primarily a leisure vessel) the Skuldelev vessels provide a variety of ship types, described as "a ferry, two longships, a merchant ship and ... [a] deep sea trader".¹³⁵ Shortly after the Skuldelev discoveries, the vogue for Viking ship replica construction moved into high gear. There had been earlier examples, Magnus Anderson's *Viking* of 1893 being succeeded by another Gokstad replica, the *Hugin*, which sailed from Denmark to Kent in 1949.¹³⁶ But from the late 1960's onward, Viking ship replicas became a craze, a trend put into motion largely by the adoption of Viking ship-building as an occupation for Scandinavian boy scouts.¹³⁷ In the last three decades of the twentieth century, the seas have been sailed by Scandinavian, British and American replicas of Gokstad, Oseberg, the smaller ship's boats excavated with Gokstad, Skuldelev 1, 3 and 5, the Ladby vessel (a Danish warship from around 950 surviving only in fragments), and by mix-and-match ships combining a selection of the above.¹³⁸

3.3.2. Figureheads and sails

One might think that, with so many authenticated Viking vessels to chose from -- Gokstad, Oseberg, the Skuldelev ships -- the Viking ships depicted at the end of the twentieth century would be a widely varied host. It seems, however, that just the opposite has occurred. Viking ships in their pictorial representations appear to have come off an assembly line. If you have seen one Viking ship, then you have very nearly seen them all.

In general, the modern Viking ship is based on Oseberg and Gokstad, with details of other ships occasionally thrown into the mixture. The figureheads depicted are a particularly obvious example of this borrowing from archaeological prototypes.

The Gokstad ship was discovered with no figurehead or stern decoration. (See

¹³⁵ Ragnar Thorseth, "Operation Viking", in Crumlin-Pedersen and Vinner, *Sailing into the Past*, p. 78.

¹³⁶ Heath, *The Vikings*, p. 10, and Naomi Mitchison, *The Swan's Road* (Naldrett Press Ltd., London), 1954, p. 18.

¹³⁷ Søren Vadstrup, "Experience with Danish Viking-Ship Copies", in Crumlin-Pedersen and Vinner, *Sailing into the Past*, pp. 84-5.

¹³⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 86-93.

Figure 19.) From written sources we know Viking ship figureheads to have been removable, as there is a law which stipulates that figureheads must be removed when coming in to land, as a sign of respect to the local deities.¹³⁹ Thus it is not thought impossible that the Gokstad ship could have had some figurehead not included in the burial, and it is often shown in illustrations with prow and stern decorations added on.¹⁴⁰ As well, the blunt, unadorned prow and stern of the Gokstad ship as we know it are often used to illustrate more everyday, working vessels, and ships which have come in to land and thus presumably had their figureheads removed.¹⁴¹

Oseberg, meanwhile, has an interlace-decorated gunwale and a prow and stern which curve upward into a distinctive spiral pattern. (See Figure 20.) Oseberg's spiral and interlace make frequent appearances,¹⁴² but even more inescapable are a selection of five carvings that were included in the Oseberg burial. There is no evidence that these carvings, generally described as "animal-headed posts" in more cautious scholarly literature, were ever used as ship figureheads.¹⁴³ Yet they have been eagerly claimed as such, and adopted as the characteristic figureheads appearing on nearly all Viking ships. The heads are variously described as dragon heads, lion heads, or simply as animals. One, which has been nicknamed "the Academician's post" in scholarly circles due to

¹³⁹ This law is detailed in the *Landnámabók*, according to which "men should not have ships with animal figure-heads at sea, but if they had them, they should unship them before they came in sight of land, and not sail near the land with figure-heads with jaws gaping wide or grinning muzzles, which would terrify the 'land-spirits'." (R. I. Page, *Chronicles of the Vikings: Records, Memorials and Myths* (British Museum Press, London), 1995, p. 175.)

¹⁴⁰ For instance Haydyn Middleton and Henrietta Leyser, *Presenting the Past, Book One: Invasion and Integration* (Oxford University Press, Oxford), 1986, p. 49. This representation of the Gokstad ship under sail has a spiral stern suggested by that of Oseberg and by some of the Gotland picture stones, and the figurehead shown is explained as follows: "None was found on the Gokstad ship but we can guess what it looked like from the decorations on the ship's furnishings."

¹⁴¹ Peter Speed, *Life in the Time of Harald Hardrada and the Vikings* (Cherrytree Books, Bath), 1992, pp. 28, 37, 42, 48, 55.

¹⁴² An exact copy of the Oseberg ship's prow and stern spirals and interlace appears, for example, as the funeral ship of the god Balder in an illustration to Brian Branston, *Gods and Heroes from Viking Mythology* (Eurobook Ltd. and William Clowes, Beccles), 1978, pp. 138-9. The ship in the foreground on the cover of Hazel Mary Martell, *Over 900 Years Ago: With the Vikings* (Zoë Books, Winchester), 1993, has a modified version of the spiral and interlace, and the ship-building scene of Jill Hughes' *Find out about Vikings* shows another fairly precise replica of the Oseberg prow. (Jill Hughes, *Find out about Vikings* (Hamish Hamilton, London), 1984, p. 11.)

¹⁴³ In *The Oseberg Find and the Other Viking Ship Finds* (1959), it is suggested that the animal head posts were carried in ritual processions, but "can scarcely have had any 'practical' use". (Thorleif Sjøvold, *The Oseberg Find and the Other Viking Ship Finds* (Universitetets Oldsaksamling, Oslo), 1959, pp. 38-9.)

both the intricacy of its carving and its conservative style compared to other works of art in the Oseberg find,¹⁴⁴ seems to be utilised with slightly more frequency than the others (see Figure 21), but the "First Baroque" post and the "Carolingian" post¹⁴⁵ also make frequent appearances. Together, they have become immediately recognisable short-hand for "Viking ship". The novel *Wolfshead Four: Viking Slaughter* (1974)¹⁴⁶ shows on its cover a funeral ship that has just been set alight. Its figurehead is a Baroque Oseberg post, and it has a red and white striped sail -- of which more later. Near relation to this ship is the ship which appears on the cover to the hardback version of Sheelagh Kelly's *Jorvik* (1992).¹⁴⁷ This time it is the Academician's post which has been copied exactly, but the sail is still of red and white stripes.

The Oseberg posts have only one major rival, and this is a carving whose identification as a Viking figurehead is just as hard to justify as are those of the Oseberg animals. The Scheldt, or Appels, carving, now in the British Museum (see Figure 22), is one of several wood carvings found in the River Scheldt in Belgium,¹⁴⁸ and is often identified as a ship's figurehead. It is thought, however, to hail from some 300 years before the time usually cited as the beginning of the Viking period.¹⁴⁹ This does not stop it from being regularly used as an example of the dreaded Viking dragon prows that spread such terror throughout Europe.¹⁵⁰

The cover illustration of the children's book *Life and Times: Canute and the Vikings* gives its ship two Scheldt figureheads, one each at prow and stern.¹⁵¹ Various

¹⁴⁴ Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World*, p. 135.

¹⁴⁵ Susan M. Margeson, *Eyewitness Guides: Vikings* (Dorling Kindersley, London), 1994, pp. 56-7.

¹⁴⁶ Arthur Frazier, *Wolfshead Four: Viking Slaughter* (New English Library, London), 1974.

¹⁴⁷ Sheelagh Kelly, *Jorvik: A Tale of the Last Viking* (Random Century Group, London), 1992.

¹⁴⁸ For a discussion of two possible figureheads found in the river Scheldt, the Appels post (generally referred to as the Scheldt figurehead) and the Moerzeke-Mariekerke post, see Rupert Bruce-Mitford, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology: Sutton Hoo and Other Discoveries* (Victor Gollancz Ltd., London), 1974, pp. 175-87.

¹⁴⁹ Margeson, *Eyewitness Guides: Vikings*, p. 6.

¹⁵⁰ The Scheldt post is used, for example, on the front cover of Brøndsted's *The Vikings*, along with the Gokstad ship.

¹⁵¹ Robin May, *Life and Times: Canute and the Vikings* (Wayland Publishers, Hove, East Sussex), 1984, cover illustration.

cartoon versions of Scheldt appear in *Horrible Histories: The Vicious Vikings*.¹⁵² Scheldt appears numerous times in other children's information books, including *See Through History: The Vikings*, *History Highlights: Viking Longboats*, and *How they Lived: a Viking Sailor*.¹⁵³ *Project Homework: Vikings* shows a Viking funeral ship with a figurehead based on Scheldt and a spiral stern carving based on Oseberg.¹⁵⁴ (See Figure 23.) Scheldt is clearly the inspiration for the Viking ship's head described in the children's novel *The Raiders* (1996), as well as being the basis for the cover illustration. The figurehead here is described as "some kind of yawning bird's head", a fairly reasonable summation of Scheldt.¹⁵⁵

As essential as figureheads to the representations of Viking ships are sails. Here, one standard image has taken over, moving all others into the background. A few rival images do appear, and are making a counter-attack. But the sail immediately recognised as "Viking" is still the red and white striped sail.

This is a curious phenomenon. The stripes themselves are easy enough to account for. As seen above, sails with different coloured stripes are mentioned in saga accounts, and appear as well on the Bayeux Tapestry -- although of course the relation of the Tapestry's images to actual ships as they would have appeared in that time period is open to doubt.¹⁵⁶ But these striped sails are a variety of colours, the most usual

¹⁵² Terry Deary, *Horrible Histories: The Vicious Vikings* (Scholastic Children's Books, London), 1994, p. 12.

¹⁵³ Anne Pearson, *See through History: the Vikings* (Hamlyn Children's Books, London), 1993, cover illustration and page 26, Margaret Mulvihill, *History Highlights: Viking Longboats* (Gloucester Press, London), 1989, title page, and Christopher Gibb, *How they Lived: A Viking Sailor* (Wayland Publishers, Hove, East Sussex), 1986, p. 5.

¹⁵⁴ Hazel Mary Martell, *Project Homework: Vikings*, (Franklin Watts, London), first published 1993 as *Clues to the Past: Viking Times*, this edition 1996, p. 27.

¹⁵⁵ Garry Kilworth, *The Raiders* (Mammoth, London), 1996, p. 23.

¹⁵⁶ David Wilson writes that it is "important to examine this material critically, to ponder the sources and the likely models for the items portrayed. The Anglo-Saxon artist, so far as we know, did not go out into the countryside with a sketchbook in search of original objects or sites. Rather, he would construct his pictures from memory, from imagination or from scenes -- often Biblical -- portrayed in books or paintings available to him ... the Tapestry has always been used as the chief basis for discussion or description of shipping in these waters at this period. Once again, the problem of the artist's vision must be considered. Had he seen any ships of this type? Had he indeed ever seen a ship of *any* type?" (David M. Wilson, *The Bayeux Tapestry: The Complete Tapestry in Colour* (Thames and Hudson, London), 1985, pp. 213, 226.) Further, the colours in the tapestry need not be seen as being naturalistic, and thus representing the actual colours used on ships of the period, since that would necessitate also accepting at face value such details as Edward the Confessor's green beard.

combination mentioned being red, blue and green. Viking novels of the Victorian period tend to follow this lead, going for the red, blue and green combination, or giving their ships sails striped with the patriotic combination of red, white and blue.¹⁵⁷

It is likely that the red and white sail, which has come to so overshadow all other possibilities, can be traced to two inter-connected sources. In the Gokstad ship burial was found a lump of woollen cloth, apparently in a pattern of red and white stripes. It is theorised that this cloth might have been from a tent.¹⁵⁸ Suggested probably by this find, the sail of the 1893 replica ship *Viking* was red and white striped.¹⁵⁹

Viking had a large contemporary impact. It was given a grand send-off from Oslo, and caused a sensation on its arrival in the United States with a triumphal entry into New York.¹⁶⁰ It seems logical that *Viking* played an important role in fixing the image of the red and white striped sail in the popular mind, to a far greater extent than would have been accomplished by the battered bits of cloth from the Gokstad burial.

From such seemingly humble beginnings, the red and white striped sail has come to be one of the great symbols of the Vikings. Green, blue, and all other possibilities have more or less vanished, and the red and white striped sail is found everywhere. A red and white sail on the cover of a novel immediately announces the story's Viking provenance. (See Figure 24). Red and white sailed Viking ships appear in advertising

¹⁵⁷ Ballantyne, *Erling the Bold*, pp. 57, 221, and Haldane-Burgess, *The Viking Path*, p. 117.

¹⁵⁸ Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age*, Volume II, p. 169. The question of tents on Viking ships is a much argued one. Arne Emil Christensen, when writing of the 1893 Gokstad reconstruction *Viking*, observes that the crew on that voyage had a tent constructed for their sleeping quarters, and writes "Whenever you see a more or less fanciful picture of a Viking ship at sea with a large tent amidships, that is based on this structure and not on anything from the Viking Age." (Christensen, "'Viking', a Gokstad ship replica from 1893", in Crumlin-Pedersen and Vinner, *Sailing into the Past*, p. 71.) However, Christensen seems to be too harsh in this judgement. Many tents depicted on Viking ships seem to be inspired by the burial chambers constructed on the decks of the Gokstad and Oseberg vessels, and that on Gokstad is probably partially responsible for the design of the tent on *Viking*. Further, saga accounts tell of tents being stretched over ships at night, or when the ships are beached or at anchor, tents being set up on shore. (Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age*, Vol. II, pp. 146-7.)

¹⁵⁹ Christensen, "'Viking', a Gokstad Ship Replica from 1893", in Crumlin-Pedersen and Vinner, *Sailing into the Past*, p. 71.

¹⁶⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 71, 77. Christensen points out that according to *Viking's* captain Magnus Anderson, the labels from the "Viking Beer" which had been specially brewed for the voyage "were very popular in the States as souvenirs" (p. 71).

and on many twentieth-century replica Viking vessels,¹⁶¹ and are ubiquitous elements of Viking-themed films. They are almost inevitable in the pages of children's literature, which has a tendency to present all Viking ships as having identical sails. Extreme examples abound. There is, for instance, the scene in *Find out about Vikings* which shows "a Viking fleet entering England", in which every last one of the eighteen ships visible is pictured with a red and white striped sail.¹⁶² (See Figure 25.) The Viking predilection for red and white striped fabric is perceived to have gone beyond sails, as *The Time Traveller Book of Viking Raiders* shows women at looms weaving red and white striped cloth, and shows wall hangings of the same familiar pattern. In the same book, tents set up at a meeting of the Althing are red and white striped as well.¹⁶³ Red and white tents appear at the Thing again in *See Through History: The Vikings*,¹⁶⁴ and in a trading scene in *The Usborne Illustrated World History: The Viking World*.¹⁶⁵ The idea of the stripes is so ingrained that Viking sails are illustrated in this manner even in cases where sails are specifically described to the contrary. For instance the children's novel *Beyond the Dragon Prow* describes two ships as "the red sail of Arnulf and the black sail of Sven". However, in the illustration to this sequence, the sails are still depicted as striped, just as though the author had not bothered to describe them otherwise.¹⁶⁶

The red and white striped sail is not quite alone in the field. In an early sequence of the 1958 film *The Vikings* we see light-coloured, non-striped sails with animal designs on them, and this image in turn has affected other representations, such as the

¹⁶¹ For example, the ship in the cover photograph of Palle Petersen's *Vikings*, which has a red and white striped sail and a rather clumsily attached and flimsy-looking version of the Scheldt figurehead. (Palle Petersen, *Vikings* (Adam and Charles Black, London), published 1978, English edition 1980, cover illustration.)

¹⁶² Hughes, *Find out about Vikings*, pp. 20-1.

¹⁶³ Civardi and Graham-Campbell, *The Time Traveller Book of Viking Raiders*, pp. 6-7, 17, 26.

¹⁶⁴ Pearson, *See Through History: The Vikings*, pp. 36-7.

¹⁶⁵ Philippa Wingate and Anne Millard, *The Usborne Illustrated World History: The Viking World* (Usborne Publishing Ltd., London), pp. 34-5.

¹⁶⁶ Robert Leeson, *Beyond the Dragon Prow* (William Collins Sons and Co. Ltd., London), 1973, pp. 33-4.

Viking ship depicted on the cover of the novel *Hall of Sparrows*.¹⁶⁷ The most powerful modern rivals for the red and white striped sails, however, are sails marked with diamond patterns. These are originally inspired by ships shown on the Gotland picture stones, and in recent decades much research, including experimental archaeology using Viking ship replicas, has gone into the interpretation of this mysterious diamond pattern.¹⁶⁸ Theories range from suggesting that the sails were made of strips of cloth braided together, to each diamond being a separate piece of cloth sewn to the others, to the diamonds being a pattern of ropes used as part of the ships' rigging. Late twentieth century illustrations of Viking ships, particularly, again, in the children's information works, have picked up on these theories, and sails with diamond patterns are now a fairly common sight. But they have a long way to go before they can overtake their red and white striped comrades.

3.4. Viking helmets

The Viking helmet is a *cause celebre*, perhaps the biggest controversy surrounding this people today.

The type of helmet a Viking wears signifies the type of Viking one is dealing with. Horned or winged helmets symbolise all those Vikings who are no longer acceptable in the scholarly community: larger than life Wagnerian heroes, rampaging horned barbarians, cartoon marauders such as Hagar the Horrible and his friends. The Viking with an unadorned conical helmet may still be a raider, but he is nonetheless a New Viking, a Viking touched by the forces of political correctness. It is no longer enough to say that actual historical Vikings probably never wore horned helmets. The issue of whether they did or not has taken on the baggage of many other Viking controversies, until it has come to seem the most important of all questions about the Viking character. Whether or not they wore horns is not just an archaeological or art historical question, it is a moral standpoint, whereby one cannot gain acceptance as a

¹⁶⁷ Beth Carsley Jones, *Hall of Sparrows* (Judy Piatkus Ltd., London), 1985. Jacket illustration by David McAllister, jacket design by Ken Leeder. This cover illustration also provides an example of the tendency to base cover art on film stills, even when the film has nothing to do with the book. The man and woman embracing on this novel's cover are directly based on a still of Peter O' Toole and Jane Merrow in the 1968 film of *The Lion in Winter*, while two of the other Vikings in the illustration are copied from images of Lee Majors and Cornell Wilde in *The Norseman* (1978).

¹⁶⁸ Nylén and Lamm, *Stones, Ships and Symbols*, pp. 42-3, 162-9, and Owain Roberts, "Viking Sailing Performance", in Sean McGrail (ed.), *Aspects of Maritime Archaeology and Ethnography* (The Wadle Press, London), 1984, pp. 123-4.

serious student of the Vikings unless one decries the horned helmets at every opportunity.

3.4.1. Origins

The fantastically-appendaged helmets of popular imagery are not entirely without factual basis. Some helmets and head-dresses incorporating horns have indeed been discovered, although these archaeological finds are now firmly dated to before the Viking era. Among the most celebrated of these helmets is one found in the river Thames, and dated to the first century B. C.¹⁶⁹ It bears little actual resemblance to popular Viking helmets, as the horns are of the same metal as the bowl of the helmet, rather than being of animal horn, and are straight rather than curved. (See Figure 1.) Other helmets from the Bronze Age do include the more familiar curved horns, but again these horns are of metal, and they are generally far more expansive than even the most over-the-top of popular Viking horns.¹⁷⁰

Magnus Magnusson hypothesises that helmets of this type are "the ritual headgear of priests or priest-gods used in magical cult activities, perhaps to invoke the virility and courage of a bull for fertility or battle rites", adding that actual use in battle would be impractical, as "it would be difficult to imagine a more burdensome and potentially dangerous encumbrance for a warrior in action".¹⁷¹ Other horned artefacts with possible ritual usages -- muddy though the term "ritual" is -- include apparent masks fashioned from stags' skulls, with the antlers still attached, such as those discovered at the Mesolithic site at Star Carr, North Yorkshire.¹⁷² These again far pre-date the Viking period. But the existence of such items, however far their eventual dating places them from the Vikings, can only have helped to lend verisimilitude to the concept of the Viking horned helmet.

There are a few horned representations from art of the Viking period. The tapestry

¹⁶⁹ J. V. S. Megaw, *Art of the Iron Age: A study of the elusive image* (Adams and Dart, Bath), 1970, p. 170 and plate 294.

¹⁷⁰ Magnus Magnusson, *Viking: Hammer of the North* (Orbis Publishing Ltd., London), 1976, this edition 1979, p. 12.

¹⁷¹ *ibid.*

¹⁷² Catherine Hills, *The Blood of the British: From Ice Age to Norman Conquest* (Guild Publishing, London), 1986, pp. 21-2. Hills writes concerning these head-dresses that "The word 'ritual' has a bad name in archaeology, as it all too often means 'something peculiar which doesn't seem to have any obvious practical use', but sometimes, as here, it does seem to be perhaps justifiable." The site at Star Carr was excavated 1949-51.

discovered in the Oseberg burial shows procession scenes, and in these are included occasional human figures that seem to be wearing horns.¹⁷³ Also frequently used as art historical back-up for the horned helmet idea is the bronze metalworker's die from Öland, Sweden, generally dated to the 6th or 7th century. (See Figure 2.) This die, used for moulding foil with which to ornament helmets (as seen in the helmets from Vendel and Väsgerde, Sweden, and also that from Sutton Hoo), shows two humanoid figures. There is an animal-headed one usually interpreted as some kind of were-beast or berserker, and there is a man, possibly dancing, holding two spears, and wearing a sword and what appears to be a horned helmet -- or head-dress -- in which the curved horns meet at the middle. The horns appear to have bird's heads at the ends of them.¹⁷⁴ Very similar images, of men holding swords and/or spears and wearing apparently bird-headed horns appear on artefacts from across Europe, dated to before and during the Viking period: on the decorations of the Sutton Hoo helmet, on a bronze belt buckle from the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Finglesham, Kent,¹⁷⁵ as an amulet found in a woman's grave from Uppland, Sweden, and in other examples including artefacts from Gotland and Ribe.¹⁷⁶

These examples certainly exist, but their relevance to standard Viking period dress is probably limited. The actual horned headgear found, and artefacts such as the Öland metalworker's die, the Sutton Hoo horned figures, and the Finglesham belt buckle, pre-date the Viking Age. That such images were also used in the Viking period is shown by the Oseberg tapestry and sources such as the amulet from the Uppland grave, which has been dated to the Viking era. But the procession in the Oseberg tapestry does not seem to be an everyday event, and scenes like that on the Öland die are generally interpreted as showing some kind of ceremony, perhaps, as suggested by the prevalence

¹⁷³ Else Roesdahl and David M. Wilson (eds.), *From Viking to Crusader: The Scandinavians and Europe 800-1200* (Nordic Council of Ministers and The Council of Europe, Copenhagen), 1992, p. 47.

¹⁷⁴ Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age*, Vol. II, p. 100, Graham-Campbell, *Cultural Atlas of the Viking World*, p. 29, and Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World*, p. 178.

¹⁷⁵ Middleton and Leyser, *Presenting the Past*, 1986, p. 34.

¹⁷⁶ Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World*, p. 179, and Stig Jensen, *The Vikings of Ribe* (Den antikvariske Samling, Ribe), 1991, p. 50. Jensen suggests that the apparent horns in these representations are not horns at all, but rather birds: "The man with a bird on either side of his head is interpreted as Odin with the two ravens Hugin and Munin. Similar representations are known from the whole area where the Vikings travelled -- from England in the west to Russia in the east."

of spears and by the bird motif, connected with the worship of Odin.¹⁷⁷

At any event, these apparently horned depictions seem to be the exception rather than the rule. In Viking period representations, they are far outnumbered by simple helmets of conical shape, frequently including nose guards but without any horns, or indeed wings. A head carved from elk horn, often cited as one of the few Viking period examples of naturalistic depiction of a human subject,¹⁷⁸ shows a helmet of this type, complete with nose guard.¹⁷⁹ (See Figure 26.) Many runestone carvings include similar representations.¹⁸⁰ The celebrated Middleton Cross, a piece of tenth-century Anglo-Norse artwork generally interpreted as showing a fully-armed Viking warrior, gives its central figure a conical head which certainly suggests a helmet of that description.¹⁸¹ A thirteenth-century woodcarving from Hylestad Church, Norway, admittedly post-dating the Viking period proper, depicts a series of scenes from the life of the hero Sigurd/Siegfried, not in scanty fur costume *a la* Wagner, but fully clothed and with a conical helmet which seems to have both a nose-guard and flaps to protect the back of the neck.¹⁸² With Viking period examples existing of both types of headgear, adorned and unadorned, and with the latter greatly outnumbering the former, it is intriguing to trace how and why the more spectacular helmets emerged as the popular favourite.

It is difficult to cite a first occurrence of the horned and winged helmets in post-medieval depictions of the Vikings, and equally difficult to trace the direct sources of these images' adoption. An early appearance of a winged helmet in Viking era depictions is found in a study for one of a series of historical paintings commissioned by King Christian IV of Denmark in the 1630's.¹⁸³ Illustrations of Viking period

¹⁷⁷ "This example depicts two warriors taking part in a ritual dance. One wears a horned helmet ending in beaked heads and the other is clad in a wolf-head mask. The scene may be connected with the cult of Odin." (Graham-Campbell, *Cultural Atlas of the Viking World*, p. 29.)

¹⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p. 205.

¹⁷⁹ Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World*, p. 119. The carving was found in Sigtuna, Sweden.

¹⁸⁰ The Ledberg runestone, Östergötland, and a stone from near Stenkyrka, Gotland, providing two particularly clear examples. (Illustrated in Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World*, pp. 34 and 170.)

¹⁸¹ *ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁸² Fell, "Gods and Heroes of the Northern World", in Wilson, *The Northern World*, p. 26.

¹⁸³ Gerrit van Honthorst's *Lamentation at the death of Rolfe Krake*, c. 1637. (David M. Wilson, *Vikings and Gods in European Art* (Moesgård Museum, Århus), 1997, p. 11.)

subjects in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries tended to depict characters in basically contemporary dress,¹⁸⁴ and when the depictions did begin to move away from such contemporary settings, the chosen style of dress originally owed more to classical sources than to medieval. A major role in this process was played by the circumstances under which Norse themes returned to popularity. As mentioned above (3.3.1.), the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century upsurge in the subject's celebrity came at a time when there were no established artistic conventions for depicting specifically Norse/Germanic themes. Artists fell back on classical styles and on images of the later middle ages. Some of the early appearances of winged helmets, then, may be traceable to the typical depictions of classical gods such as Hermes,¹⁸⁵ with the image's popularity being reinforced by helmets of the later middle ages, a period when helmets with elaborate and top-heavy appendages were indeed used, although they were worn primarily in tournaments rather than in actual warfare.¹⁸⁶

Jenny Howsam suggests that the association of Vikings with horns may be connected with the Vikings' aspect as the Scourge of God and the enemies of Christendom. The bloodthirsty image that tended to prevail in eighteenth and early nineteenth-century representations of the Vikings, before the "Vikings as founders of liberty" concept moved to the fore, may have lent itself to depicting helmets that "highlighted their alleged ungodliness by giving them the horns of Satan".¹⁸⁷

This may well be so, but the horned helmet and its winged counterpart have survived beyond the period when Vikings were seen as primarily a force of evil. Whether villains or heroes, Vikings have long been identified by their winged and horned helmets, the larger and more unfeasible the better.

3.4.2. Wings and horns

While a horned helmet seems to be the most frequent choice for a twentieth-

¹⁸⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 15, 20, 21.

¹⁸⁵ For example, John Trumbull's illustrations to Macpherson's *Fingal*. (Mjöberg, "Romanticism and Revival", in Wilson, *The Northern World*, p. 210.)

¹⁸⁶ See David Edge and John Miles Paddock, *Arms and Armour of the Medieval Knight* (Defoe Publishing, London), 1988, pp. 57, 138, 154-5, and Otfried Neubecker and J. P. Brooke-Little, *Heraldry: Sources, Symbols and Meaning* (Macdonald and Jane's, London), 1976, pp. 145, 158-9, 160.

¹⁸⁷ Jenny Howsam, *Twentieth Century Images of Vikings* (University of York, Centre for Medieval Studies), MA dissertation 1990-1, p. 4.

century popular Viking, for his predecessors of the nineteenth century and earlier the winged helmet appears to have carried the field. When the Viking was gaining fame as a figure of popular culture in the early nineteenth century, the winged helmet was already part of the image. Frithjof, the hero of a late Icelandic saga which achieved massive popular acclaim through the 1825 saga-pastiche by Swedish poet Esaias Tegnér, appears in Tegnér's poem wearing a helmet with eagle's wings.¹⁸⁸ Arguably the most popular Viking hero of the nineteenth century, Frithjof, with his winged helmet, set the stage for the Vikings that followed him.¹⁸⁹

Another Viking hero of early in the nineteenth century, De La Motte Fouqué's *Thiodolf the Icelander*, opts for the horned variety of helmet, although his helmets are outlandish enough to put most later examples to shame. When Thiodolf's uncle offers him a "polished helmet", Thiodolf instead opts for "a head-covering that he had prepared from the head of a mighty bull, which his father had slain in the Norwegian mountains. It was held together by strong iron bands, and still adorned with the immense horns".¹⁹⁰ Later, as a member of the Varangian guard in Byzantium, Thiodolf devises an even more eye-catching headpiece:

when the new helmet shone on the youth's brow it still looked like a bull's head, but most beautifully worked out of precious metal. The face of the animal looked fiercely and boldly out from the gold plates in front, the silver horns rose majestically above, two costly diamonds shone in the hollow of the eyes, and many rubies and emeralds sparkled in the fastenings and clasps.¹⁹¹

That this headgear is not the norm even in Thiodolf's world is shown by the Captain of the Varangians remarking that Thiodolf will "look strange in it to many people".¹⁹²

While they are on the whole less exhibitionist than Thiodolf the Icelander, nineteenth-century Vikings seldom appear in helmets that lack appendages. We read of

¹⁸⁸ Mjöberg, "Romanticism and Revival", in Wilson, *The Northern World*, p. 227.

¹⁸⁹ For Frithjof's popularity, see Andrew Wawn, "The Cult of 'Stalwart Frith-thjof' in Victorian Britain", in Wawn, *Northern Antiquity*, pp. 211-224.

¹⁹⁰ Friedrich Heinrich Karl de La Motte Fouqué, *Thiodolf the Icelander*, Book One (George Routledge and Sons, London), first published in German 1815, this English edition 1877, p. 70.

¹⁹¹ *ibid.*, Book Two, p. 25.

¹⁹² *ibid.*

Havelok the Dane's "steel, horned helmet",¹⁹³ of Erling the Bold's "small scull-cap, or helmet, of burnished steel, from the top of which rose a pair of hawks' wings expanded, as if in the act of flight",¹⁹⁴ and of the Viking commander from *The Viking Path* in his golden helmet with eagle plumes.¹⁹⁵ In G. A. Henty's *The Dragon and the Raven*, wings alone are not enough: "The chief of the Northmen was a warrior of lofty stature. On his head he wore a helmet of gold, on whose crest was a raven with extended wings, wrought in the same metal."¹⁹⁶

Winged helmets announced many Victorian Viking novels' themes before one even opened the books. In many works from this period, the covers and spines are emblazoned with gilt winged helmets, or scenes of winged-helmeted warriors in combat. The spine of *Olaf the Glorious* is illustrated with a winged helm.¹⁹⁷ That of *In the Van of the Vikings* shows a winged-helmeted Viking in battle, with arrows protruding from his shield.¹⁹⁸ The cover of *Harold the Norseman* shows a warrior with massive wings on his helmet, and on the spine of the book stands one of his fellows, jauntily posing in a helmet crowned with enormous horns.¹⁹⁹ Winged helmets had become a standardised warrior motif. The early twentieth-century work *A Child's Book of Warriors*, which includes Olaf Tryggvason among the heroes it holds up for emulation, shows a winged-helmeted figure on its title page, illustrates King Olaf in helmets with huge wings (See Figure 27), and opens with this introductory verse:

For you who love heroic things
In summer dream or winter tale,
I tell of warriors, saints and kings,
In scarlet, sackcloth, glittering mail,

¹⁹³ C. W. Whistler, *Havelok the Dane: A Legend of Old Grimsby and Lincoln* (Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., London), 1899, this edition n.d., p. 294.

¹⁹⁴ Ballantyne, *Erling the Bold*, p. 44.

¹⁹⁵ Haldane Burgess, *The Viking Path*, p. 22.

¹⁹⁶ Henty, *The Dragon and the Raven*, p. 236.

¹⁹⁷ Robert Leighton, *Olaf the Glorious* (Blackie and Son Ltd., London), 1895.

¹⁹⁸ M. F. Outram, *In the Van of the Vikings, or, How Olaf Tryggvason Lost and Won* (The Religious Tract Society, London), n.d., this copy given as Sunday School prize 1912.

¹⁹⁹ Fred Wishaw, *Harold the Norseman: A Tale of Harold Hardrada, King of Norway* (T. Nelson and Sons, London), 1897.

And helmets peaked with iron wings.²⁰⁰

The winged or horned Viking was not the only possibility in this period. Other images were seen, such as the illustrations in an often reprinted 1899 edition of the *Heimskringla*, hailed in later scholarly works for their accuracy in showing conical nose guard helmets without wings or horns.²⁰¹ Paul Du Chaillu, whose work influenced so many Viking novelists, did not specifically take a stand in favour of helmets with appendages. He did by implication suggest the possibility of horns on Viking helms, as his discussion of helmets includes a reproduction of the famous Öland metalworkers' die, with the comment "The horned helmet is similar to one in the British Museum", referring, presumably, to the Waterloo Bridge helmet. However, in his actual text he quotes several saga descriptions, none of which mention wings or horns, comments that helmets in the sagas "were generally gilt, or of gold", and adds "In the finds they are extremely rare; one of silver has been found, and a fragment of another inlaid with gold, and one or two of iron."²⁰² The only helmet from a find illustrated in Du Chaillu's work is an iron example without wings or horns, ornamented in a lattice pattern that seems equally unfamiliar both to eyes accustomed to the winged creations of the illustrators and novelists, and to those used to the Sutton Hoo, Gjermundbu and Vendel-inspired helmets of late twentieth century Vikings.²⁰³

Winged and horned helmets continued to co-exist alongside the more restrained, archaeologically and art historically justifiable versions. As the twentieth century progressed, the voices of Viking specialists became increasingly insistent in their crusade against unrealistic helms, yet the wings and horns showed little sign of being discarded. The comic strip *Prince Valiant*, which began in 1937, abounds with winged and horned helmets, worn by Saxons, Vikings, and various generic barbarian types. The titular hero of the children's novel *King Harold's Son* (1946) is illustrated in wings of phenomenal

²⁰⁰ William Canton, *A Child's Book of Warriors* (J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., London), n.d., illustrations 1912.

²⁰¹ The illustrator in question was Erik Werenskiöld, "the art editor and main illustrator, [who] chose to depict a helmet without wings or horns, but with a nose guard, of a type which had appeared in Hefner-Alterneck's survey of dress and household goods of the period 1060-1220." (Mjöberg, "Romanticism and Revival", in Wilson, *The Northern World*, p. 227.) This was a Norwegian edition of *Heimskringla*, but it swiftly and frequently appeared in English translation.

²⁰² Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age*, Vol. II, p. 100.

²⁰³ *ibid.*, p. 101.

proportions, out-doing even the most extrovert of nineteenth-century Vikings. (See Figure 28.) In children's historical novels with rather more serious intent, such as Rosemary Sutcliff's *The Shield Ring*, wings and horns are still the norm. Jarl Buthar of *The Shield Ring* is "tree-tall in his bull-horned helm", and there are mentions of a "winged helm" and "a winged Viking head".²⁰⁴ Peter Carter's *Madatan* (1974), a particularly dark work of juvenile historical fiction, makes full use of the bestial potentials of horned helmets: "The man was not a man! Its head was long and pointed, and horns swept up from it. From underneath the horns a mass of tangled hair swung and trembled ... the figure was a monster, come from the sea to kill them all."²⁰⁵

Two Ladybird books on Viking themes illustrate the general shift in attitudes toward horned/winged helmets. In the 1956 *King Alfred the Great*, horns and wings are still a fully accepted reality. In this book it is a very simple matter telling Vikings apart from Saxons. Both are blond, but Vikings wear helmets with horns or with tall, sweeping wings, while Saxons choose the more tasteful, restrained variety. As well, Vikings tend to wear less than the Saxons, preferring to show off their brawny arm muscles, and only Vikings in this book are shown wearing ear rings. (See Figure 29.)

By the time of the 1976 Ladybird work *Great Civilisations: The Vikings*, however, the emphasis had shifted. Here, the only winged helmet to appear is in the book's endpapers, perhaps surviving from an earlier edition. Within the book itself, only simple conical helmets are used -- although the Vikings do still seem inclined to favour short-sleeved tunics.

The 1976 Ladybird book appeared at a time when the proponents of non-horned (and non-winged) helmets were rapidly gaining ground. It would soon be essential for all scholarly and popular-scholarly works on Vikings to proclaim, somewhere in their text, that horned and winged helmets are pure imagination. However, that still does not stop horns and wings from appearing in the popular Viking image.

Nigel Tranter's 1978 *Macbeth the King* cheerfully makes use of traditional helmet motifs, giving various characters winged or horned helmets, and describing the Viking hero Thorfinn as wearing a "great golden helmet with flaring black wings".²⁰⁶ In an

²⁰⁴ Rosemary Sutcliff, *The Shield Ring* (Oxford University Press, London), 1956, this edition 1965, pp. 37, 44, 181.

²⁰⁵ Peter Carter, *Madatan* (Oxford University Press, London), 1974, p. 5.

²⁰⁶ Tranter, *Macbeth the King*, p. 16.

illustration to *1000 Great Lives* (1984), Leif Eriksson is pictured in full popular Viking regalia, complete with massive horned helmet and a red and white sail behind him.²⁰⁷

Certain usages seem to lean toward winged and horned images. In advertising, logos must be instantly recognisable and memorable, and winged or horned Vikings tend to be both. The Vikings used as advertising logos seldom stray from the traditional popular view, with examples occurring in remarkably similar form throughout Britain, Scandinavia and the United States. The Viking Sun Lodge in Daytona Beach, Florida, uses a horned-helmeted Viking as the logo for its front desk,²⁰⁸ Viking Travel of North Carolina uses a winged helm,²⁰⁹ the Knights Out theme restaurant in Reading advertises its Viking Nights with a jolly little Viking in horned helmet and red beard,²¹⁰ the Viking Mall, Iceland, an internet "interactive shopping experience" uses cartoon Vikings who are blond, bearded, horned-helmeted, and brandishing swords,²¹¹ horned helmets appear in the internet advertisements for Viking Components computer enhancement products,²¹² Viking Computers,²¹³ Viking Dodge,²¹⁴ Viking Industrial Products of Keighley,²¹⁵ Viking Tyres U.K.,²¹⁶ Viking Industries, Inc. (New York),²¹⁷ and Viking Athletics.²¹⁸ Nor should we forget the very nineteenth century-looking Viking who advertises Viking Fence ("a Texas tradition in fencing"), with his kite-shaped shield, wind-blown beard,

²⁰⁷ Plantagenet Somerset Fry, *1000 Great Lives*, (Hamlyn, London), 1975, revised edition 1984, p. 76.

²⁰⁸ <http://www.sunviking.com/>, site visited 03/97.

²⁰⁹ <http://www.vikingtravel.com/viking/>, visited 18/01/98.

²¹⁰ http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/knights_out (visited 6/4/97).

²¹¹ <http://www.viking-smart.is/>, visited 30/3/97.

²¹² <http://www.vikingmem.com/>, visited 30/3/97.

²¹³ <http://www.vikingcomputers.com/>, visited 18/1/98.

²¹⁴ <http://www.vikingdodge.com/>, visited 18/1/98.

²¹⁵ <http://www.vikingtapes.co.uk/>, visited 18/1/98.

²¹⁶ <http://www.viking.co.uk/>, visited 18/1/98.

²¹⁷ <http://www.packageit.com/>, visited 18/1/98.

²¹⁸ <http://www.vikingathletics.com/>, visited 18/1/98.

and elegant winged helm.²¹⁹

As a tourist attraction, Vikings are again useful in their horned traditional guise. The Newfoundland tourist industry, for instance, tries to lure visitors through conjuring up visions of popular Vikings: "There springs to mind a dramatic picture of the high-prowed 'longships', with sweeping oars supplementing the square wollen [sic] sails. Battle shields line the gunwales and behind them are the fierce Viking warriors, clad in garments of leather and fur with horned metal helmets glinting in the sun."²²⁰

In the many editorial cartoons that appeared concerning the controversy over Dublin's Wood Quay excavation in the late 1970's and the site's threatened destruction due to development plans (see also 6.2.1., below), traditional horned and winged Vikings were depicted protesting against the developers. (See Figure 30.) The Vikings were used as a symbol for Dubliners to rally around, enlisting sympathy for the endangered past. What was needed in this case was a Viking who would be instantly recognisable, not some historically accurate creation that would have to be explained every time it was used.²²¹

Even in the 1990's, when the forces of the non-horned Vikings seem so dominant, the traditional horned image still makes its appearance in works which choose to depict Vikings as barbarians. Particularly blatant is the shooting script of the 1997 film of *Prince Valiant*, in which the equation of horned Vikings with satanic images is employed with shameless glee. On the first page, the screenwriters state that "Their dark figures resemble wild beasts as their horned Viking helmets protect them from unbearable cold. Amongst the Viking beasts, one stands out, smaller than the others, obviously a woman..."²²² The practicality of relying on a metal helmet to ward off cold is of course open to debate, but in cases such as this, image is all that counts.²²³

²¹⁹ <http://vikingfence.com/>, visited 30/3/97.

²²⁰ <http://www.nfld.com/nfld/tourism/vikings.html>., visited 31/3/97.

²²¹ John Bradley (ed.), *Viking Dublin Exposed: the Wood Quay Saga* (O'Brien Press, Dublin), 1984, pp. 25, 49, 52.

²²² Hickox and Lorenz, *Harold R. Foster's Prince Valiant*, p. 1.

²²³ It is interesting to note that, as actually filmed, the Vikings in this scene and throughout the film tend to wear non-horned helmets, although one particularly villainous Viking wears a helmet with horns that point downward. The lack of horns in the actual film is probably due to the fact that the film's supernumeraries were drawn from the ranks of Britain's Dark Age re-enactment groups, which no longer include horned helmets as an element of their garb. (Anthony Hickox (director), *Prince Valiant* (Constantin Film), 1997.)

3.4.3. The great helmet debate

In the scholarly Viking scene of the late twentieth century, horned helmets are the great enemy. They have come to symbolise everything that is thought of as wrong, outdated and non-politically correct in popular Viking images.

Ross Samson wryly acknowledged the horned helmets' centrality in the collection of papers *Social Approaches to Viking Studies*, by titling his introduction "The Case of the Horned Helmets".²²⁴ Peter Addyman, of the Jorvik Viking Centre, writes that at the time of the Jorvik Centre's creation "Horned helmets were still synonymous with Vikings in the popular mind, despite half a century of archaeological publicity to the contrary." The task of the Jorvik Centre is to correct such "misconceptions".²²⁵

Particularly vehement denunciations of horned helmets and their ilk come from David Wilson in his discussions of Vikings in British literature and art. Wilson writes that "the illustrators of the mass-produced children's books ... were the medium through which the horny-helmetted Vikings made their impression on popular imagination."²²⁶ For him, this is unquestionably a bad thing; one Viking novel of the nineteenth century is described as "sick-making", and the illustrations to Ballantyne's *Erling the Bold* are dismissed with the comment "the dreadful illustrations by Malcolm Patterson include all the usual winged-helmet nonsense."²²⁷

Some of the archaeological publicity had been paying off long before Peter Addyman's glum appraisal of the popular mind. Kirk Douglas, star and producer of 1958's *The Vikings*, was determined that the film should create as archaeologically and historically accurate a picture of the Viking Age as possible.²²⁸ Researchers were dispatched to the Viking Ship Museum in Oslo, from which blueprints were obtained

²²⁴ Samson, *Social Approaches to Viking Studies*, pp. xi-xiii.

²²⁵ Peter V. Addyman, "Reconstruction as interpretation: the example of the Jorvik Viking Centre, York", in Peter Gathercole and David Lowenthal (eds.), *The Politics of the Past* (Routledge, London), 1994, p. 258.

²²⁶ David M. Wilson, "The Viking Age in European Art -- a note", in Else Roesdahl and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (eds.), *The Waking of Angantyr: The Scandinavian Past in European Culture* (Aarhus University Press, Aarhus), 1996, p. 187.

²²⁷ David M. Wilson, "The Viking Age in British literature and history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries", in Roesdahl and Sørensen, *The Waking of Angantyr*, p. 66.

²²⁸ Richard Fleisher, director of *The Vikings*, interviewed in Christopher Frayling's "Print the Legend", Radio Four, 1/12/95.

and copied to construct the ships of Douglas' Vikings, sagas were drawn on heavily for both plot elements and milieu, and the helmets used are resolutely non-horned, based on archaeological examples such as the helmets from Valsgerde, Sutton Hoo, and Gjermundbu. (See Figures 3 and 4.)

The horned helmet lesson has also been absorbed by the writers of Viking romance novels. In the crop of such works appearing in the 1980's and '90's, horned helmets make very infrequent appearances. In *Season of the Sun* (1991), the cover illustration shows one of the archaeologically accepted nose guard helmets.²²⁹ The hero in *Lord of Hawkfell Island* appears in a silver helmet with nose guard.²³⁰ Masks or visors such as that of the Sutton Hoo helmet are suggested by the description in *Lord Of Falcon Ridge* of "Viking helmets covering their faces".²³¹ *The Viking's Woman* describes a helmet with a silver mask,²³² and in *Lord of the Wolves* we read of silver "conical Viking helmets" with "noseplates".²³³ Only once in the romance novels surveyed does a horned helmet appear, and it is worn by an enemy, a Danish Viking portrayed as more barbaric than the novel's Hiberno-Norse heroes.²³⁴

In Fabio's *Viking*, the horned helmet debate is summarised by the novel's hero. The protagonist, a movie star who travels back to Viking times, is at the opening of the novel starring in a Viking film, and he starts a heated argument with the film's director on the question of Viking horns. Fabio's alter-ego states the party line of late twentieth-century scholarship: "Vikings only wore plain helmets, never horned ones, during battle. Horns were reserved for religious or ceremonial occasions". The response of the director, understandable under the circumstances, is "who cares whether or not Vikings actually wore horns, for heaven's sake?"²³⁵

In answer to the question of Fabio's film director, it seems that in the late twentieth century, everybody cares -- or at least they are taught that they should care.

²²⁹ Coulter, *Season of the Sun*, cover illustration.

²³⁰ Coulter, *Lord of Hawkfell Island*, p. 8.

²³¹ Catherine Coulter, *Lord of Falcon Ridge* (Jove, New York), 1995, p. 135.

²³² Graham, *The Viking's Woman*, p. 202.

²³³ Graham, *Lord of the Wolves*, p. 101.

²³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 342.

²³⁵ Lanzoni and Riley, *Viking*, p. 6.

It has become essential for children's information books on Vikings to state that "Vikings never wore helmets with horns or wings", possibly adding the caveat that they may have worn horned helmets on ceremonial occasions. *Horrible Histories: The Vicious Vikings* uses the latter tactic, and presents a very few horned helmets in its illustrations, one appearing on the god Thor, and another being worn by a Viking at a funeral.²³⁶ When *Craft Topics: Vikings* instructs its young readers how to construct a Viking helmet, it uses as an example a photograph of one of the helmets from Vålsgerde, with spectacle-like eyeguards and a nose guard, but emphatically no wings or horns.²³⁷

The statement that "Vikings never wore horned helmets" is constantly re-iterated. We hear it in the *Timewatch* "Evidence of Vikings", and it appeared to be the main text of the announcer for the Viking Longship Regatta at the 1997 Jorvik Viking Festival. If one is to know only one fact about Vikings, it seems, this should be that fact.

Archaeologically and historically accurate this fact may be, but accuracy can have its drawbacks. I cannot help thinking of the father I overheard at a battle re-enactment during the same Jorvik Viking Festival, informing his young son, "you know, Vikings never wore horned helmets". The son greeted this with the complaint, on seeing the combatants parade around the field, that he couldn't tell the Saxons and the Vikings apart.

²³⁶ Deary, *Horrible Histories: The Vicious Vikings*, pp. 12, 13, 29, 69, 124.

²³⁷ Rachel Wright, *Craft Topics: Vikings* (Franklin Watts, London), 1992, p. 20.

Chapter Four

Barbarians and bias

Do you want the English to think we're barbarians?

-- Ragnar (Ernest Borgnine) to Einar (Kirk Douglas),
The Vikings, 1958.

Tell me who you call a barbarian and I will tell you who you are.

-- Arno Borst, *Medieval Worlds: Barbarians, Heretics
and Artists in the Middle Ages*, 1991.

4.1. The barbarian idea

4.1.1. Evolution of "barbarian"

A commonly encountered Viking image is that of the Vikings as barbarians. Vikings are at times portrayed as barbarians *par excellence*: they are "bold and handsome barbarians",¹ "the last and most terrible of the Teutonic barbarians".² "In a barbaric age," we are told, "Vikings were the most brutal".³ Never before or since was there anything like them: "In all history, there have been no people -- Goths, Vandals, Huns included -- who have been more dreaded than the Vikings. These sea-pirates were more deliberately brutal, greedy and cruel than any other invaders who have reached Britain's shores".⁴

Emphatic as these statements may be, the use of the term "barbarian" can pose more questions than it answers, for the word brings with it a thoroughly mixed bag of implications. The meanings that have accrued to it in different contexts over the last two millennia combine to create a jumble of inter-related, but often widely discrepant ideas. A characteristic twentieth-century English dictionary entry for *barbarian* includes the following definitions: "one who was not a Greek nor a Roman: a foreigner: one without taste or refinement: a somewhat uncivilised man (but usually not a savage)."

¹ S. C. George, *The Vikings* (David and Charles, Newton Abbot), 1973, p. 62.

² T. J. Oleson, "Viking -- Tunnit -- Eskimo", in Robert S. Hoyt (ed.), *Life and Thought in the Early Middle Ages* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis), 1967, pp. 123-4.

³ Robin May, *Life and Times: Canute and the Vikings* (Wayland Publishers, Hove, East Sussex), 1984, p. 11.

⁴ R. J. Unstead, *Invaded Island: A Pictorial History. The Stone Age to 1086* (Macdonald Educational Ltd., London), 1971, this edition 1978, p.48.

To be barbaric can mean that one is "foreign", "uncivilised", "tastelessly ornate and ostentatious", or "wild and harsh".⁵ Barbarism can attack from outside or be at the core of all human interactions; can imply simple foreignness; can be the enemy of civilisation or can be the force that is to rejuvenate the world. It is all too easy to take for granted that the meaning of "barbarian" is clear, without stating which version of the word one wishes to invoke.

Arno Borst, who has written on the development of "barbarian" as a European catchword, identifies three major understandings which inform modern interpretations of the word. To Borst, the primary definitions of barbarian are an ethnological interpretation, a political, and an ethical one.

Barbarian begins its career in the European languages as *barbaros*, a Greek term meaning "stammering".⁶ The word implies the incomprehensibility of foreign languages, but does not, according to Borst, suggest any pejorative connotations. Borst cites an example of the word's usage in Homer's *Iliad* which indicates only foreignness, without the sense of being a value judgement. Homer, Borst writes, "appreciated the masculine power and refined culture of the barbarians",⁷ seeing them as different but in no way inferior to his Greek heroes.

The negative qualities to barbarian appear, in Borst's account, when the word takes on a political context. Expansionism such as that of Alexander the Great brought a new urgency to Greek encounters with things foreign, transforming all non-Greeks into potential opponents. Borst sees "this us-or-them" pattern as the second major strand in understandings of barbarism, that "has turned the originally neutral term 'barbarian' into a word of passion, an insult."⁸

Borst's third definition emerges from the second: "Even amid the sharp-witted Greeks and powerful Romans there arose 'barbarians', raw, uncultivated and cruel men ... Inhumane, animal-like stupidity is not a characteristic of foreign nations, but of all

⁵ William Geddie (ed.), *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*. Revised Edition with Supplement (W. R. Chambers Ltd., London), 1966, p. 82.

⁶ Geddie, *Twentieth Century Dictionary*, and Arno Borst, *Medieval Worlds: Barbarians, Heretics and Artists in the Middle Ages* (Polity Press, Cambridge), 1991, p. 4.

⁷ Borst, *Medieval Worlds*, p. 4.

⁸ *ibid.*

of us; something that must be moulded into civilization by cultivation and education."⁹

These three perceptions of barbarism remain the major influences on subsequent understandings of the word, with each perception coming to the fore in the political contexts most conducive to it. In cultures not under particular stress from outside pressures, one can afford to take the more tolerant, value-free view of barbarians as simply foreign and different, or to find barbarism within one's own culture. But when the foreign barbarians are perceived as a direct threat, they must also be cruel, uncivilised and subhuman.

The continuing evolution of the term "barbarian" follows a largely cyclical pattern, with successive groups of barbarian outsiders moving into the sphere of "civilisation", and the barbarian label being transferred to the latest perceived Other. Meanwhile, a further, connected meaning of barbarism emerges in the period conventionally seen as marking the death of the Middle Ages. In the Europe of the fifteenth century, a trend developed for the intellectual community to see itself as divorced from the immediate past, and heir to a more distant and glorious model, the perceived pre-eminence of the "Classical" world.¹⁰ To the barbarism of one's contemporary enemies was added that of an allegedly out-moded past, with the archaic values of that past being frequently attached to one's contemporary antagonists. From this conjunction arise statements such as Lorenzo Valla's 1440 tirade against "the raging, vehement, barbaric government of priests".¹¹ The same attitude is seen in outlooks of the Enlightenment period, in which, as Borst writes, "anything backward or obsolete was called barbaric, especially the Middle Ages and religion."¹² In an ironic shift of attitude, religion, once seen as the heroic bulwark against the chaos of barbarism, becomes barbarism's companion among the pernicious relics of times past.

Meanings assigned to the past, however, are in constant flux. Developing alongside this trend to consign past values to the dustbin of history, we find the opposite movement, towards idealising the past and making it the source of all human virtues. In this connection, barbarism begins to take on some favourable connotations. If

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁰ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge), 1985, p. 86.

¹¹ Borst, *Medieval Worlds*, p. 9.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 11.

barbarism is a characteristic of the past, and the past holds virtues worthy of emulation by modern society, then to be a barbarian is to be a rejuvenator of the world. It is this sense of barbarism that is found in eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century European movements to idealise and claim connections with an heroic Germanic past. This movement is linked with the Romantic revulsion against an Enlightenment emphasis on pristine order and the control of nature. It is no coincidence that the Romantic period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw a shift of emphasis from humanity's control of its environment, to the wild glories of an untamed Nature, and from the elegance and balance claimed for Greek and Roman culture, to the rough, vibrant exuberance seen as characteristic of Northern "barbarians".¹³

In this context, we see the development of ideas which have been thrown into fairly wide disrepute by their connection with movements such as Nazism. Nietzsche, evolving the concept of his "blond beasts", put the barbarian on a paradoxical pedestal as the saviour of civilisation, not its destroyer. To be barbarians "in every terrible sense of the word, predatory men, possessing unbroken strength of will and a craving for power"¹⁴ is for Nietzsche not a fault but a blessing, leading to the conquest of the world by men who will rebuild civilisation in a pure and virtuous form. The influence of the barbarians is seen as invigorating and revitalising, and will bring much-needed new blood to a decadent world. Goebbels and Hitler both proclaimed their delight at being labelled barbarians, with Goebbels declaring, "They call us barbarians. We *are* barbarians. We glory in the name of barbarian",¹⁵ and Hitler stating along the same lines, "You call me uneducated, a barbarian. Yes, we are barbarians. It's a title of honour. We are the ones who will rejuvenate the world."¹⁶

Barbarians are foreign, those seen as essentially different. They are the enemy,

¹³ For example, Jöran Mjöberg, "Romanticism and Revival", in David M. Wilson (ed.), *The Northern World: The History and Heritage of Northern Europe 400-1100* (Thames and Hudson, London), 1980, pp. 208-11.

¹⁴ Borst, *Medieval Worlds*, p. 12.

¹⁵ Mjöberg, "Romanticism and Revival", in Wilson, *Northern World*, p. 238.

¹⁶ An earlier instance of this can be found in attitudes of the Emperor Napoleon's circle, such as the statement by painter Jacques-Louis David that the example of "primitive" peoples from ancient Germanic history provide "the means to regenerate our soul and our spirit". (Mjöberg, "Romanticism and Revival", in Wilson, *Northern World*, p. 211.) In this sense, barbarism can be seen as a particularly useful tool for new and/or revolutionary regimes, by which they can not only neutralise the insults of their opponents but also turn them into a mark of greatness.

civilisation's opponents, but they can equally be more noble and virtuous than degenerate civilisation. Barbarism can also be seen as an integral part of civilisation, the third of Borst's definitions. An example of this is found in the work of sociologist Thorstein Veblen, writing at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, who saw barbarism as being reflected in every human action that is "wasteful, useless, [and] ostentatious", and as being at the core of modern society.¹⁷

These concepts, eclectically and often indiscriminately mingled, lie behind our uses of the word "barbarian", creating a philological and historical guessing game as to what each statement of barbarism is intended to accomplish.

4.1.2. Common trends in "barbarian" encounters?

As suggested above, ideas of barbarism do not develop in isolation. Each definition of barbarian thrives in the political and cultural milieu to which it is best suited.

This acknowledgement, however, leads to a chicken-and-egg debate. Are the common, recurring characteristics in these depictions of barbarians primarily a cultural construct, which leads succeeding ages to think of barbarians in the same ways as did their predecessors simply because they are following those predecessors' literary examples? Or is it the encounter with barbarians that is primary and displays recurring trends, trends reflected in the literary and historical constructions?

Particularly in Borst's second model, the encounter with a foreign, barbarian threat, it seems possible to identify common characteristics that appear in different historical settings. I will return to the question of whether these characteristics inspire the literary models, or are formed by them. Before turning to that debate, it will be useful to explore the nature of these apparently common trends.

Most immediately noticeable when studying cross-cultural barbarian encounters is the conflict between sedentary and nomadic societies. As has been frequently observed, history is written from a sedentary point of view,¹⁸ and the depiction of

¹⁷ Stjepan G. Meštrović, *The Barbarian Temperament: Toward a Postmodern Critical Theory* (Routledge, London), 1993, pp. xii, 30.

¹⁸ Dennis Sinor, "The Barbarians", in *Diogenes* No. 18, (University of Chicago Press, Chicago), Summer 1957, p. 49. See also the comments of D. Turton, in the discussion of Morten Axboe's "Danish Kings and Dendrochronology: Archaeological Insights into the Early History of the Danish State", in G. Ausenda (ed.), *After Empire: Towards an Ethnology of Europe's Barbarians* (Boydell Press, San Marino), 1995, p. 250.

barbarian/civilised relations is coloured by this perspective. Throughout history and across the world, one consistently meets the image of strongly-rooted and eminently civilised sedentary cultures being challenged by powerful and violent, but ultimately ephemeral, nomadic peoples. The most currently notorious examples, at least in the historical consciousness of Europe and North America, are the Fall of Rome and the relations between Imperial China and the peoples of the steppes.¹⁹ But the pattern has many additional, far-flung examples.

The eighteenth-century B. C. conflict between Egyptians and the nomadic Hyksos is one case in point. Descriptions of this encounter are similar in many ways to those concerning the demise of the Roman Empire, over two thousand years later. Like the migrations of barbarian tribes which contributed to the fall of Rome's empire,²⁰ "The invasion of the Egyptian delta by the Hyksos had been part of a widespread movement of peoples".²¹ When the Hyksos government in Egypt was eventually overthrown, the former barbarian overlords "were pursued with such vehemence that Palestine and Syria were occupied".²² Long after their power had faded, the Hyksos remained the most hated enemy in Egypt's historical consciousness. For having dared to challenge Egypt's dominance, the Hyksos were demonised by Egyptian tradition.²³

In another example, the history of India's civilisation shows a recurring pattern of incursions by nomadic barbarian outsiders, who are drawn in by the lure of India's wealth only to be subsumed within Indian culture. It is argued that "India's civilisation proved to be so superior to the culture of the newcomers, that it was not endangered by

¹⁹ Catherine H. Brendt and Ronald M. Brendt, *The Barbarians: an Anthropological View* (Penguin Books, London), 1971, p. 22.

²⁰ It is worth remembering, when considering the question of how "barbarism" is seen, that the events surrounding the fall of Rome which are generally called "barbarian invasions" in English, are known by the far less judgemental term *Völkerwanderung*, migration of peoples, in German. See Arthur Ferrill, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: the Military Explanation* (Thames and Hudson, London), 1986, p. 17.

²¹ H. Frankfort, "The Ancient Near East", in Dennis Sinor (ed.), *Orientalism and History* (W. Heffer and Sons Ltd., Cambridge), 1954, p. 11.

²² *ibid.*

²³ See John A. Wilson, *The Burden of Egypt: An Interpretation of Ancient Egyptian Culture* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago), 1951, pp. 154-65.

the foreign elements so introduced."²⁴

The same dynamic is well known as a defining characteristic of China's relations with its own Northern barbarians. China's barbarian neighbours were the nomads of the Inner Asian steppes, peoples who "follow their herds and the water".²⁵ The traditional view of Chinese historians was that periodic barbarian incursions were part of the natural order of things, and each wave of nomadic barbarians would be conquered by the vastly superior Chinese way of life.²⁶ In this way, invasion and even conquest could be transformed into victory by the conquered, as the vigorous but impermanent barbarian cultures were subsumed by the righteous and eternal Chinese way. Several of China's ruling dynasties, including the last, the Manchu, were in fact founded by nomadic conquerors, who then discarded their nomadic culture to become "more Chinese than the Chinese".

Western examples of barbarian/civilised interactions show similar patterns. The Scythians described by Herodotus, who were to be a literary model for many subsequent depictions of barbarians including the Turks, Mongols and Huns, were also nomadic warriors, who lived in wagons, depended on their herds for food,²⁷ and had a love-hate relationship with the alien but alluring culture of sedentary civilisations.²⁸ The waves of barbarians who "over-ran" the late Roman Empire, like China's nomadic neighbours, are seen as being drawn in by the lure of Rome's civilisation and riches.²⁹ The Vikings, while not nomads *per se*, were a people whose power was intimately tied to their mobility. Their attacks on sedentary European civilisations, though momentarily terrible, can be seen as being ultimately conquered in the same way as the nomadic incursions

²⁴ J. E. Van Lohrizen-de Leeuw, "India and its Cultural Empire", in Sinor, *Orientalism and History*, p. 38.

²⁵ Dennis Sinor, "Central Eurasia", in Sinor, *Orientalism and History*, pp. 85-6. See also Ssu-Ma Ch'ien, *Records of the Grand Historian of China*, Vol. II, translated and edited by Burton Watson (Columbia University Press, New York and London), 1961, p. 155.

²⁶ John K. Fairbank and Edwin O. Reischauer, *China: Tradition and Transformation* (George Allen and Unwin, Sydney), 1973, this edition 1982, p. 152.

²⁷ Herodotus, *The Histories*, translated by Aubrey de Sélincourt (Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, Middlesex.), 1954, p. 257.

²⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 266-8.

²⁹ Brendt and Brendt, *The Barbarians*, p. 22. These writers observe "The word 'over-run' itself suggests a disorderly, tumultuous onrush, sweeping aside all obstacles -- including such obstacles as humanitarian considerations."

on India and China. Once within the charmed circle of sedentary civilisation, the barbaric invaders are assimilated into the society they once attacked.

This paradigm of barbarian/civilised relations is essential to understandings of barbarism and of civilisation. One repeatedly finds that to be sedentary or, more flatteringly put, permanent, is a mark of civilisation, while nomadism or mobility dooms a people to be seen as merely a flash in the pan. This is one of the definitions put forward in Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation: a Personal View* (1969). To Clark, civilisation must at least strive for permanence. In his discussion of the Vikings and previous Germanic migrants/invaders, Clark writes:

one must admit that the Norsemen produced a culture. But was it civilisation? ... Civilisation means something more than energy and will and creative power: something the early Norsemen hadn't got, but which, even in their time, was beginning to reappear in Western Europe. How can I define it? Well, very shortly, a sense of permanence. The wanderers and the invaders were in a continual state of flux. They didn't feel the need to look forward beyond the next March or the next voyage or the next battle. And for that reason it didn't occur to them to build stone houses, or to write books.³⁰

The concept of mobile barbarism and sedentary civilisation has penetrated into sociology, as seen in the writings of de Tocqueville, Veblen and Tomasic. As described by Stjepan Meštrović in his study *The Barbarian Temperament* (1993), Thorstein Veblen felt that

among the Aryans, there were groups who possessed more of the peaceable character traits, and these typically became farmers, whereas the nomadic herders of sheep, cattle, and horses -- the famous cowboys -- were more barbarian and power-hungry. The cowboys were more likely to possess these "habits of the fight", and turn to crime or run for political office than the peaceable types.³¹

Dimko Tomasic, writing in the 1940's and '50's, came to similar conclusions regarding the Central Asian nomadic peoples incorporated into the Soviet Union. To Tomasic, again as described by Meštrović,

the Bolsheviks as well as latter-day communists were more likely to come from groups that made a living herding than from farming. He isolated the Ural and Dinaric Alps as two important sources of the brutal values that informed communism in practice, much like Tocqueville pointed to the South for the source of aristocracy and

³⁰ Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation: a Personal View* (British Broadcasting Corporation and John Murray, London), 1969, p. 14.

³¹ Meštrović, *Barbarian Temperament*, pp. 22-3.

cruelty in America.³²

Barbarians, then, are warlike nomadic outsiders who periodically "over-run" superior sedentary societies. But the ability of the barbarians to swoop in on their prey is often seen as being connected to crises within the sedentary society itself. The theory is that "When the barbarians appear at the frontiers of a civilization it is a sign of a crisis in that civilization."³³

Examples of this idea can be found across a wide swathe of cultural and historical settings. In the Chinese tradition of dynastic cycles, barbarian incursions were seen as a natural accompaniment of the degeneracy that marked the closing years of each dynasty.³⁴ Christian Roman theorists of the late Roman Empire often saw the barbarians as precursors to the end of the world,³⁵ God's judgement on his sinful and disobedient people. The Hun leader Attila, in particular, was and still is known by the dramatic title of "the Scourge of God".³⁶ This general idea, though usually without the religious overtones, is still current among the late twentieth-century explanations for Rome's fall: the notion that barbarians contributed to the toppling of the Empire, but that they never could have succeeded if Roman society were not already crumbling from within.³⁷ In the Early Middle Ages, the Scourge of God attitude toward barbarian invaders is seen in Gildas' *The Ruin of Britain*, in which the rampaging Saxons are portrayed as God's punishment for the weakness and indolence of the Britons,³⁸ and is a viewpoint frequently assigned to Alfred the Great regarding the invading/punishing Vikings and

³² *ibid.*, p. 23.

³³ Lawrence Lipton, *The Holy Barbarians* (Julian Messner Inc., New York), 1959, preface.

³⁴ Fairbank and Reischauer, *China: Tradition and Transformation*, pp. 70-1, and Owen Lattimore, *Studies in Frontier History* (Oxford University Press, London), 1962, p. 486.

³⁵ Otto J. Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns: Studies in their History and Culture* (University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London), 1973, pp 3-5.

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. xxiv.

³⁷ This is one of the ideas advanced by Edward Gibbon in his celebrated *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. To Gibbon, "the cause of decay was to be sought within the system itself" (F. W. Walbank, *The Awful Revolution: The Decline of the Roman Empire in the West* (Liverpool University Press, Liverpool), 1969, p. 107). For further discussions of the causes of Rome's fall, see Ferrill, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, pp. 13-22, and Donald Kagan (ed.), *The End of the Roman Empire: Decline or Transformation?* 2nd Edition (D. C. Heath and Company, Lexington, Massachusetts), 1978, *passim*.

³⁸ Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain and Other Works*, edited and translated by Michael Winterbottom (Phillimore and Co. Ltd., London), 1978, pp. 25, 27, verses 22 and 24.1.

the invaded/punished Saxons.³⁹ The biblical example of Jeremiah I.14 was used by ecclesiastical writers to provide a precedent for God punishing his people through "the tribes of the kingdoms of the north",⁴⁰ a particularly useful comparison when the barbarian attackers in question, such as the Vikings, were indeed northerners.⁴¹ For some medieval historians, the "scourge of God" idea worked as an explanation for all of the successive invasions of the British Isles. For instance Henry of Huntingdon, writing in the 1120's, saw the Romans, Picts and Scots, Angles and Saxons, Danes, and Normans as "five plagues",⁴² which served to impose "the justice of God".⁴³

This concept of barbarians as the instrument of God's judgement plays a role in impersonalising the images of "barbarian" peoples, turning them from human beings into generic destroyers. The Foreword to Maenchen-Helfen's *World of the Huns* observes that

From the beginning these people were denigrated and "demonized" ... by European chroniclers and dismissed as avatars of the eternal but faceless barbarian hordes from the east, against whom vigilance was always necessary, but whose precise identity was of little importance ... reports of this folk have tended to treat them as mere barbaric destroying agents -- "vandals" spilling blood across the remnants of the declining Roman empire.⁴⁴

³⁹ Haydyn Middleton and Henrietta Leyser, *Presenting the Past, Book I: Invasion and Integration* (Oxford University Press, Oxford), 1986, p. 57, and P. H. Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings*, 2nd edition (Edward Arnold, London), 1972, 144. This attitude also appears in Alcuin's famous response to the Viking raid on Lindisfarne (793), in which "the sackers of Lindisfarne were God's instrument of wrath visited on the sins of the people" (Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings* (Oxford University Press, Oxford), 1968, p. 196.) (See Eleanor Shipley Duckett, *Alcuin, Friend of Charlemagne: His World and His Work* (Archon Books, Hamden, Connecticut), 1965, p. 161.)

⁴⁰ "Then the Lord said to me, out of the north evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land, for lo, I am calling forth all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, says the Lord; and they shall come and every one shall set his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its walls round about and against all the cities of Judah. And I will utter my judgement against them, for all their wickedness in forsaking me; they have burned incense to other gods, and worshipped the work of their own hands." (*The Bible: Revised Standard Version* (British and Foreign Bible Society), thirteenth impression 1977, p. 600.)

⁴¹ Alcuin makes this comparison in one of his letters regarding the situation on Lindisfarne and the degenerate state of the church and the country in general (Stephen Allot, *Alcuin of York c. 732-804 -- his life and his letters* (William Sessions Ltd., York), 1974, p. 40).

⁴² Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum, The History of the English People*, translated and edited by Diana Greenway (Clarendon Press, Oxford), 1996, p. 273.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 275.

⁴⁴ Maenchen-Helfen, *World of the Huns*, p. xvii.

The very use of the term "vandal", originally the name of another barbarian tribe, illustrates the metamorphosis of individual barbarian groups into cliches of wanton destructiveness, as does the labelling of Germans in the First World War as "Huns".

From being the Scourge of God it is but a short step for barbarians to become agents of the Devil. With the Huns, at least, this point was quickly made explicit: it was claimed the Huns were the offspring of demons, and were "fiendish ogres, roaming over the desolate plains beyond the borders ... from which they set out time and again to bring death and destruction to the faithful".⁴⁵ Maenchen-Helfen adds that "Even after the fall of Attila's kingdom, the peoples who were believed to have descended from the Huns were in alliance with the devil."⁴⁶

Another element contributing to the barbarians' semi-supernatural aura may be the skill with which they mount their attacks on civilisation. This is the other side of the dread with which barbarian outsiders are viewed: instead of horror, civilised observers may also react with awe or even grudging admiration.

Such was the reaction of the Greek historian Herodotus to the nomadic Scythians. In his account of the war between barbaric Scythians and civilised Persians, Herodotus writes:

The Scythians ... though in most respects I do not admire them, have managed one thing, and that the most important in human affairs, better than anyone else on the face of the earth: I mean their own preservation. For such is their manner of life that no one who invades their country can escape destruction, and if they wish to avoid engaging with an enemy, that enemy cannot by any possibility come to grips with them. A people without fortified towns, living, as the Scythians do, in waggons which they take with them wherever they go, accustomed, one and all, to fight on horseback with bows and arrows, and dependent for their food not on agriculture but on cattle: how can such a people fail to defeat the attempt of an invader not only to subdue them but even to make contact with them?⁴⁷

The Scythians in Herodotus' account handily defeat the prestigious and highly trained army of the Persians, both through their skill in fighting on horseback⁴⁸ and

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴⁶ *ibid.* The survival of the Hun/demon conjunction in popular perceptions can be seen in Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*, in which the fiendish vampire protagonist boasts of his descent from Attila. (Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (Wordsworth Classics), 1897, this edition 1993, p. 33.)

⁴⁷ Herodotus, *Histories*, p. 257.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 284.

through the easy mobility with which they avoid their opponents. Appropriately, "Scythian" became a generic term often applied to the Huns, among other nomadic barbarians,⁴⁹ for the Huns, like Herodotus' Scythians, were known for their "dare-devil", almost superhuman cavalry: the Hun mercenaries in Theodosius' army "were 'carried through the air by pegasi', they did not ride, they flew."⁵⁰

The mobility inherent in nomadic cultures lends them the advantages of speed and surprise; time and again one finds nomadic barbarians making "lightning attacks" and disappearing again before their sedentary opponents can recover from their amazement. Nomadic warriors, according to Central Asianist Dennis Sinor, "brought virtually to perfection a method of warfare which, for almost two thousand years, held its own against other military systems".⁵¹ War with their sedentary neighbours being the main way by which nomadic leaders could gain wealth and prestige, it was in their interest to develop military techniques which would be as efficient and successful as possible.⁵²

This efficiency and success could in fact be so great that members of sedentary cultures adopted the lifestyle of their erstwhile opponents. The nomadic barbarians could possess an allure of their own, as great as that of sedentary civilisation.⁵³ Further, joining up with the barbarians is a time-honoured response of those who feel that their "civilised" society has betrayed them.

This is a side of barbarian/civilised interactions which civilised writers tend not to discuss quite as frequently, but one finds examples widely dispersed both historically and geographically. The Byzantine ambassador Priscus, visiting the court of Attila, records an encounter with a Greek merchant who had defected to the Huns, due to injustices he felt he had suffered in the Empire.⁵⁴ Salvianus of Marseilles, writing in the fifth century, states that

Things have deteriorated to such an extent, that many -- and often people of noble origin and good education -- take refuge with the enemy, so as

⁴⁹ Maenchen-Helfen, *World of the Huns*, p. 6.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵¹ Dennis Sinor, "Introduction: the Concept of Inner Asia", in Dennis Sinor (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge), 1990, p. 13.

⁵² Sinor, "Central Eurasia", p. 92.

⁵³ Maenchen-Helfen, *World of the Huns*, p. 58.

⁵⁴ Sinor, "The Barbarians", p. 57.

to avoid death under the pressure of the persecution by the state. Among the Barbarians they search for the humanity of the Romans because among the Romans they cannot endure the barbarous inhumanity.⁵⁵

The relations between the Chinese and their barbarians, as well, turn out to be more dynamic than the dogma of Chinese cultural superiority implies. It has been persuasively argued that Chinese converted to barbarism fully as frequently as the reverse. Owen Lattimore, in his influential study *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, examines the dynamic whereby Chinese and "barbarian" lifestyles intermingled, and argues that the importance of the famous Great Wall lay more in keeping border inhabitants within the Chinese cultural orbit than in preventing barbarian onslaughts.⁵⁶ Lattimore cites frequent incidents in the histories of the "Grand Historian" Ssu-ma Chi'en (died circa 90 B. C.) in which Chinese officers who feel misused by the Imperial Court defect and fight for the barbarians.⁵⁷ But Lattimore sees this as a far more widespread phenomenon, affecting not only disgruntled military officers but all the inhabitants of a constantly shifting cultural and political frontier, in which the alleged enemies on both sides of the border often have more in common with each other than with the states to which they officially owe loyalty.⁵⁸ In a different slant on the idea of barbarian onslaughts being cued by decline or crisis within the civilised culture, Lattimore argues,

In proportion as the support of the State was withdrawn the Chinese of the border could only survive by adapting themselves to local conditions in such a way that they became partly barbarian in character and interest. When this adaptation had gone far enough it became doubtful whether a man were more barbarian or more Chinese; it became as easy for him to enter the nomad orbit as to stay in the Chinese orbit, and his allegiance might shift under the influence of a comparatively slight shift in the total balance between China and the steppe. As for the barbarian who abandoned part of his nomad heritage in order to adhere to the Chinese edge of the marginal terrain, he might easily revert to the steppe unless his allegiance were made profitable.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Owen Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China* (American Geographical Society, New York), 1940, p. 498.

⁵⁷ Lattimore, *Studies in Frontier History*, p. 505. See Ch'ien, *Records of the Grand Historian*, pp. 166, 170-2, 175, 180, 190, 191.

⁵⁸ Lattimore, *Studies in Frontier History*, p. 470.

⁵⁹ Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, p. 498.

To Lattimore, the key figures in barbarian conquests of China are men of the borders, low-ranking officers familiar with both cultural milieux, who have little to lose by throwing in their lot with barbarism and attempting a full-scale conquest. Great unifying barbarian leaders such as Tumen and Modun of the Hsiung-nu, Chinggis Khan of the Mongols, and Nurhachi of the Manchu dynasty all fit in with this pattern.⁶⁰ It is a concept that would be interesting to apply to the study of Rome and its barbarian interactions.

In conclusion, barbarian encounters are typically portrayed as conflicts between sedentary civilisation and predatory nomadic marauders. The nomads are depicted as the aggressors, although studies such as Lattimore's suggest that a very large pinch of salt should be taken with such depictions. The arrival of the barbarians at the gate is often caused by or coincides with decline within the sedentary culture; at times, indeed, the barbarians are God's vengeance on a degenerate society. The barbarians can be faceless hordes, impersonal instruments of destruction. But dreaded though they may be, their way of life can also be attractive, due to both their easy acquisition of other people's wealth and to their potential as a refuge from injustices within one's own culture. The nomadic barbarians are warriors *par excellence*, with the ability to ride rough-shod over the civilised world and, for a while at least, get away with it. When they are conquered, it is more through the inherent greatness of civilisation, which eventually draws them into the fold, rather than through civilised military resistance.

We should return, finally, to the question posed at the beginning of this section, of whether similarities in barbarian encounters are more the product of similar historical environments or of literary motifs.

Literary precedent clearly plays a major role in colouring the ways later observers react to situations perceived as equivalent to those found in the works of earlier writers. But the conclusion seems unavoidable that these encounters are not *solely* literary constructions, that instead they emerge from consistent and widespread patterns of human interaction. Ammianus Marcellinus and his fellow Hunnophobes may have described their enemies in terms inspired by Herodotus' Scythians, but it would be far-fetched indeed to ascribe the same literary inspiration to the works of Ssu-ma Chi'en.⁶¹

These, then, in their inter-related and contradictory manifestations, are the

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 540, 543.

⁶¹ Sinor, "the Concept of Inner Asia", p. 4.

barbarians who periodically hammer at civilisation's gates. And chief among them, one is frequently assured, are found the dreaded Vikings.

4.2. Vikings as barbarians

4.2.1. The fury of the Norsemen

The prayer *A furore Normannorum, libera nos, Domine* -- "from the fury of the Northmen, O Lord deliver us" -- has been described as "the epitaph chiselled by general historical opinion on the Viking gravestone".⁶² Students of the Vikings may protest as vigorously as they please that the famous prayer is almost entirely spurious,⁶³ but popular opinion shows no intention of giving it up. It is an appropriate point with which to begin a discussion of Viking barbarism, for this wail of a ravaged Europe is frequently presented as the baseline of knowledge about Vikings, the one piece of Viking lore that all modern readers are likely to share. The "furious Northmen" has become a cliché, and like all clichés, it has enormous power.

The dramatic impact of the notorious prayer has given the "fury of the Northmen" a hallowed place in the opening paragraphs of Viking-themed literature. Children's historical fiction, adult fiction and non-fiction studies alike make use of this vivid opening gambit. A typically colourful example appears in the opening lines of C. Walter Hodges' children's novel *The Namesake: A Story of King Alfred* (1964):

All this Christian land is now at peace. Englishman and Dane together
plough and reap as neighbours under the same sky, and over them King

⁶² F. Donald Logan, *The Vikings in History* (Routledge, London), 1983, p. 15.

⁶³ It is very difficult to trace the source of the "fury of the Norseman" prayer; generally it is quoted without any source being given. Roesdahl and Wilson, in "What the Vikings Meant to Europe", quote the *Antiphonal of St. Corneille de Compiègne*, dating from the second half of the ninth century and now in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, a passage of which reads "de gente fere Normannica nos libera quae nostra vastat, Deus, regna ..." ("grant us freedom, Lord, from the wild men of the North who lay waste our realms"). (Else Roesdahl and David Wilson, "What the Viking Meant to Europe", in Svenolof Karlsson (ed.), *The Source of Liberty: The Nordic Contribution to Europe* (The Nordic Council, Stockholm), 1992, p. 42.) As far as I have been able to determine, this is the only extant medieval usage of anything resembling the famous prayer as it has been transmitted into popular legend. That the "fury of the Northmen" prayer has long been part of the Viking legend is seen by its use in Richard Verstegen's *Restitution of Decayed Intelligence*, 1605: "... the Frenchmen had great reason to add as they did, into their litanies, the prayer *A furore Normannorum, libera nos Domine*" (see 2.1., above). (Richard Verstegen, *A Restitution of Decayed Intelligence: In Antiquities. Concerning the most noble and renowned English nation* (The Scolar Press, Ilkley and London), reprint 1976, p. 167.) Both the *Antiphonal of St. Corneille* and Verstegen's statement refer to Norse activity in France, rather than in England or western Europe as a whole, but later popular uses of the prayer make it relevant to all the areas of Viking activity.

Alfred's grandson rules the land in the strength and wisdom of King Alfred's law. Yet still in my mind's eye I see how thickly the smoke blew about and how the thistles grew, back there in the days of my boyhood, around the deserted farm where the dead man's legs stuck out of the ditch beside the teamless plough ... how the holy King Edmund came to the church at Thornham, and how in his thin rough garment he knelt all night before the altar, praying and weeping and praying for the victory which was beyond hope, while from the darkness behind the candles the monks of Thornham intoned their litany:

*"From the fury of the Northmen, O Lord deliver us!"*⁶⁴

The romance novel *Swan Road*, by Rebecca Brandewyne (1995), makes similar use of the furious Northmen prayer. When the novel's heroine, one of those Welsh Princesses-in-distress so beloved of Viking novelists,⁶⁵ has a prophetic vision of a Viking attack on her village, the famous prayer is her first and only defense:

Her lips moved as she whispered the litany over and over, as though it were a spell to protect her.

"A furore Normannorum, Domine, libera nos. A furore Normannorum, Domine, libera nos."

It was the only Latin that Rhowenna knew -- but like all in Wales, young or old, she knew it by heart: From the fury of the Northmen, O Lord, deliver us.⁶⁶

Children's non-fiction of the latter decades of the twentieth century creates an impression of the entire population of early medieval Europe chanting this plea in unison. "Save us, Lord, from the fury of the Northmen", is the opening line of Tony D. Triggs' *History in Evidence: Viking Britain* (1989).⁶⁷ "The Fury of the Northmen" is the title of the first section in Christopher Gibb's *How they Lived: A Viking Sailor*

⁶⁴ C. Walter Hodges, *The Namesake: A Story of King Alfred* (G. Bell and Sons Ltd., London), 1964, p. 1.

⁶⁵ *Swan Road*, as Brandewyne acknowledges in her Author's Note, is heavily indebted to Edison Marshall's 1951 novel *The Viking*, which also formed the basis for the 1958 film *The Vikings* (Rebecca Brandewyne, *Swan Road* (Severn House Publishers, Sutton, Surrey), 1995, pp. 365-6.) In all three works, the plot revolves around a kidnapped Welsh princess and the Viking half-brothers who vie for her hand. Similar situations appear in other works. It is, for example, typical of the entire Viking sub-genre of romance novels for authors to choose as their heroines members of non-Viking, often Celtic, aristocracies, thus providing the required plot element of conflict between hero and heroine, as well as allowing the heroines to be physically differentiated from the Viking characters, with perceived non-Viking traits such as black hair and green eyes. (See 3.2.2., above, and 4.2.7. and 5.3.3., below.)

⁶⁶ Brandewyne, *Swan Road*, p. 11.

⁶⁷ Tony D. Triggs, *History in Evidence: Viking Britain* (Wayland Publishers Ltd., Hove, East Sussex), 1989, p. 5.

(1986).⁶⁸ Although hard evidence for the prayer's actual use is difficult to find, one would not know this from most of its appearances in juvenile non-fiction: works such as Kevin Crossley-Holland's *Green Blades Rising: the Anglo-Saxons* (1975) and S. C. George's *The Vikings* (1973) assure their readers that the prayer was added to the Anglo-Saxon litany,⁶⁹ and Robin May's *Life and Times: Canute and the Vikings* (1984) declares entirely straight-faced -- although, alas, without citing the source of its evidence -- that the prayer is "inscribed on an ancient stone cross".⁷⁰ That so many books of this genre are produced by a small selection of publishing houses suggests that many of the writers are working from outlines designed by the publishers, and that the fury of the Norsemen is part of the standardised fare that all children's literature on the Vikings is expected to provide.

4.2.2. The Vikings are coming!

Taking pride of place beside "Norse fury" as a primary image of the Vikings is the raid motif. For many, this image may indeed be the most immediately recognisable essence of the Vikings, not forgetting of course the horned helmets (see 3.4., above). Vikings, according to this interpretation, are defined by their involvement in the clichéd "raping and pillaging" (see also 4.3.7., below).

As one famous example, the opening sequence of the 1958 blockbuster film *The Vikings* is a Viking raid on England, with the chieftain Ragnar slaying an English king and, offscreen, having his wicked way with the newly-created widow. That such sequences have become a definitive Viking trait is shown by the opening sequence of Terry Jones' film *Erik the Viking* (1987): again the film begins with a raid and at least an attempted rape, but in this case the reluctant Viking hero has never raped anyone before, is unsure how to go about it, and has to be urged on by his intended victim.

A similar inversion of the Viking raid motif appears in the children's ghost story *The Haunting of Hiram C. Hopgood*, published in the same year as *Erik the Viking* was released:

⁶⁸ Christopher Gibb, *How they Lived: A Viking Sailor* (Wayland Publishers, Hove, East Sussex.), 1986, p. 4.

⁶⁹ Kevin Crossley-Holland, *Green Blades Rising: the Anglo-Saxons* (André Deutsch Ltd., London), 1975, p. 44, and George, *The Vikings*, p. 7.

⁷⁰ May, *Canute and the Vikings*, p. 13.

Fulbelly the Fearless they'd called him, and he'd been a brave and mighty soldier, leaping ashore from his long-boat and burning, pillaging and slaying with the best of them. But one day as he was pulling a captive woman out of her burning hut and dragging her towards his ship, he suddenly said: "Enough! I'm not going on any more raids. After this I'm staying at home."

It wasn't the fighting Krok minded -- over the years he'd lost an ear, three of his hairy toes and his right thumb and hardly noticed, because Vikings are like that. It was taking all those screaming women back that upset him. The way they kicked and shrieked and bit -- and then when he got them back home, the way they lay about in his house, gossiping and having babies.⁷¹

Viking raids, like the Fury of the Norsemen, are used as a standard starting-point for juvenile non-fiction studies of the Vikings, even in works which otherwise tend to take a revisionist stance and focus on more peaceful Viking activities. The cover illustrations of works such as *How they Lived: A Viking Sailor* and *The Usborne Illustrated World History: the Viking World* use the classic images of axe-wielding blond warriors striding through the surf, their red-and-white sailed, dragon headed ships looming grimly behind them. (See Figure 31.) This image may be largely irrelevant to the main content of the book, as is the case with *A Viking Sailor*, which focuses on shipboard life and exploration rather than on piracy, but this does not prevent the illustrators from presenting it as an encapsulation of Viking nature.

Likewise, the raid sequence forms a convenient and attention-grabbing opening for the text. The Ladybird book *Great Civilisations: The Vikings* begins, as does *A Viking Sailor*, with the description of a raid. The first illustration in the book is a vividly impressionistic nightmare of terrified farmers, their faces a good approximation of Munch's *The Scream*, fleeing toward the viewer while swarms of warriors spring ashore from their pink-and-blue-painted dragon ship. The text begins,

If you had lived ten or eleven centuries ago in a village along the coasts of Northern Europe, the most terrifying thing in your life would have been the sight of a large square sail on the horizon. Just imagine you are standing on a beach or clifftop watching that sail. You cannot take your eyes off it; as you watch, the long slim warship beneath the sail comes into view. Perhaps the sunlight is making bright sparks flash off the shields that line the side of the ship. By the time you can see the fierce-faced warriors sitting in the ship with their spears, swords and axes, you are running back to your village with the terrible news

⁷¹ Eva Ibbotson, *The Haunting of Hiram C. Hopgood* (MacMillan Children's Books, London), 1987, p. 9.

that the Viking raiders are approaching.⁷²

4.2.3. Barbaric cruelty and the blood eagle

"Barbaric cruelty" is a now-standard catchphrase, and Vikings have been frequently depicted as displaying an impressive amount of this quality. The reputation for cruelty has made an impact even on writers who otherwise see the Vikings as worthy of respect. An example is C. F. Keary, whose study *The Vikings in Western Christendom* was published in 1891. Keary admires many qualities of the Viking character -- their bravery, military discipline, skill as explorers, even their sense of humour. However, his admiration is brought up short by his dismay at "the darker vices of a half-savage warlike people: a cruelty, or at least a carelessness of life, which spared no age nor sex."⁷³ Keary saw the Vikings' cruelty as balanced and partially mitigated by their virtues, but for many other interpreters, cruelty is in fact the essence of Viking nature.

This cruelty is graphically displayed in the Northmen's taste for devising fiendish methods of torture, each one more ingenious than the last. Taking first place among fiendish Viking tortures is the so-called "blood eagle". As with the "fury of the Norsemen" prayer, extended scholarly debate continues over whether this famous torture ever in fact existed.⁷⁴ Among those who believe in the torture's authenticity, there are varied interpretations of its meaning and techniques, two frequently encountered suggestions being that the picture of an eagle was carved on one's victim's back,⁷⁵ or that one extracted the victim's ribs and lungs and spread them out over the back like an eagle's wings.⁷⁶ Literally pouring salt on the wound appears to be an optional extra.⁷⁷

⁷² Brenda Ralph Lewis, *Great Civilisations: The Vikings* (Ladybird Children's Books Ltd., London), 1976, p. 4.

⁷³ C. F. Keary, *The Vikings in Western Christendom, A.D. 789 to A.D. 888* (T. Fisher Unwin, London), 1891, pp. 144-5.

⁷⁴ See Roberta Frank, "Viking Atrocity and Skaldic Verse: the Rite of the Blood-Eagle", in A.D. MacIntyre and P. H. Williams (eds.), *The English Historical Review*, Vol. XCIX (Addison Wesley Longman, Harlow), 1994, pp. 332-43.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 333, 337.

⁷⁶ May, *Canute and the Vikings*, p. 14, and Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings* (Oxford University Press, Oxford), 1968, pp. 219-20.

⁷⁷ Frank, "Viking Atrocity and Skaldic Verse", in *English Historical Review*, p. 334, n. 2.

Roberta Frank has argued that the notion of the blood eagle arises from twelfth-century misinterpretations of complex skaldic verse. By the time the saga-writers came to use such verse as sources, the poetic conventions of the verse would have been nearly as obscure to twelfth and thirteenth-century scholars as they would be to most scholars of the twentieth century.⁷⁸ In Frank's interpretation, the original extant blood eagle reference is far more likely to be an example of the standard poetical phrase in which killing enemies is referred to in terms such as "stretching them under the eagle's claws".⁷⁹ From a verse stating merely that Ivar the Boneless killed King Ælla of Northumbria, then, has grown an immense corpus of blood eagle legend.

The accounts of Ælla being blood-eagled in revenge for the death of Ragnar Lothbrok have given rise to the theory that blood-eagling was a specific punishment meted out by sons to the killer of their father, while the *Orkneyinga Saga's* blood-eagling sequence adds into the equation the notion that blood eagle victims were offered as sacrifices to Odin.⁸⁰ The blood eagle concept was accepted whole-heartedly by post-medieval writers on Viking themes, and has been constantly repeated and elaborated upon, from eighteenth-century works such as Cottle's *Icelandic Poetry* through to late twentieth-century disputes over the Vikings' character.⁸¹

Scholarly disputes have had little impact on the torture's general popularity. In the epic novel *Sarum*, tracing the history of England from the Stone Age to the twentieth century, the Vikings' first, defining appearance involves a graphic blood eagling sequence as well as the murder of a twelve-year-old boy.⁸² Off-hand references to the blood eagle, which seem to assume reader knowledge of its details, frequently occur in Viking-themed fiction, such as in Rosemary Sutcliff's *The Shield Ring*⁸³ and Richard

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 336-9.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p. 338.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p. 333.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, pp. 332-3, 336. The blood eagle debate continues in forums such as the 1996 Annual General Meeting of the Viking Society for Northern Research, at which Rory McTurk's address revolved around the legends and interpretations of Ragnar Lothbrok, his family, and the infamous blood eagle.

⁸² Edward Rutherford, *Sarum* (Century Hutchinson Ltd., London), 1987, pp. 305-6.

⁸³ Rosemary Sutcliff, *The Shield Ring* (Oxford University Press, London), 1956, p. 50.

Strong's adventure novel *King Harald's Son*.⁸⁴ The poet Seamus Heaney evokes the Vikings through use of the blood eagle motif: "Come fly with me,/come sniff the wind/with the expertise of the Vikings./... With a butcher's aplomb/they spread out your lungs/and make you warm wings/for your shoulders."⁸⁵

In late twentieth-century children's non-fiction on the Vikings, both school texts and more general works seem to accept the historical validity of the blood eagle, ensuring that new generations emerge with the deeply ingrained impression of blood eagling as a keynote of the Viking character.⁸⁶

However, although its popularity as a literary motif is assured, the blood eagle has apparently proved too lurid to be invoked in many visual representations. For instance although the film *The Vikings* is loosely based on the tales of Ælla of Northumbria's conflict with the family of Ragnar Lothbrok, the film steers well clear of introducing the famous torture into its plot. The film character Ragnar's death is clearly inspired by that of his saga equivalent -- the film Ragnar being forced into a wolf pit, rather than into the rather more unlikely snake pit of the original -- but the revenge taken by his sons stops short of the blood eagle inflicted by their saga counterparts. Although Viking barbarism is one of the themes around which the film revolves, that barbarism is only permitted to go so far. The sight of Kirk Douglas and Tony Curtis extracting an enemy's ribs would no doubt have had a disastrous effect upon the film's rating.

Robert Southey, in his preface to Amos S. Cottle's 1797 *Icelandic Poetry*, evokes the blood eagle alongside another celebrated habit of Viking barbarism. In his version of the Ragnarssons' revenge, Southey writes:

And when his sons
Avenge'd their father's fate, and like the wings
Of some huge eagle spread the severed ribs
Of Ella in the shield-roofed hall, they thought
One day from Ella's skull to quaff the mead,

⁸⁴ Richard Strong, *King Harold's Son* (Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., London), 1946, p. 6.

⁸⁵ Seamus Heaney, *North* (Faber and Faber Ltd., London), 1975, pp. 23, 24. Quoted in Middleton and Leyser, *Presenting the Past*, p. 55.

⁸⁶ Examples include May, *Canute and the Vikings*, p. 16, John D. Clare, *I Was There: Vikings* (The Bodley Head, London), 1991, pp. 6-7, Peter Speed, *Life in the Time of Harald Hardrada and the Vikings* (Cherrytree Press, Bath), 1992, p. 30, Kevin Crossley-Holland, *Green Blades Rising*, p. 44, and Middleton and Leyser, *Presenting the Past*, p. 53.

Their valour's guerdon.⁸⁷

In their discussions of this drinking-from-skulls motif, both Frank and Howsam argue that it too arises from a poetical misreading, in this case the seventeenth-century interpretation of a term for "drinking horn" as "skull".⁸⁸ However, while this misreading may well have provided the concept's immediate source, drinking from skulls has an illustrious literary history as a defining characteristic of barbarian enemies.

Like so many other standards of the barbarian image, the practice of drinking from skulls makes an early appearance in Herodotus' description of the Scythians. According to Herodotus, the Scythian warriors, in addition to drinking the blood of the first man they kill, are known to imbibe out of the skulls of their most hated enemies. The more wealthy Scythians customarily have the interior of these skulls gilded.⁸⁹ The custom appears again over a millennium later in the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, this time assigned to the Central Asian nomads the Pechenegs, who are said to have turned the skull of the tenth-century Prince Svyatoslav of Kiev into gold-plated drinking cup.⁹⁰ If a textual misunderstanding indeed prompted the earliest depictions of Vikings as drinkers from skulls, there was hallowed literary precedent to give such an image credence.

The notion of Vikings drinking from their enemies' skulls appears to have become most widely accepted as an activity practised by the heroes in Valhalla, and not so much by living Vikings, with the possible exception of super-Vikings such as the sons of Ragnar Lothbrok. Thus in Walter Scott's poem *Harold the Dauntless*, a long-dead hero is addressed with the words

Proud Eric, mightiest of thy race,
Where is thy shadowy resting-place?
In Wild Valhalla hast thou quaff'd
From foeman's skull metheglin

⁸⁷ "Epistle from Robert Southey", in Amos S. Cottle, *Icelandic Poetry or the Edda of Sæmund* (Bristol), 1797, pp. xxxiv-xxxv, cited in Frank, "Viking Atrocity and Skaldic Verse", in *English Historical Review*, p. 336.

⁸⁸ Frank, *Viking Atrocity and Skaldic Verse*, in *English Historical Review*, p. 336, and Jenny Howsam, *Twentieth Century Images of Vikings* (Centre for Medieval Studies, University of York), MA dissertation 1990-1, p. 6.

⁸⁹ Herodotus, *Histories*, p. 262.

⁹⁰ Samuel Hazzard Cross and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor (eds.), *The Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text* (Medieval Academy of America, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1953, p. 90.

draught,
Or wanderest where thy cairn was
piled
To frown o'er oceans wide and wild?⁹¹

The idea of Vikings drinking from skulls in the after-life surfaces in late twentieth-century children's non-fiction works such as Tony D. Triggs' *History in Evidence: Viking Britain* (1989) and Terry Deary's *Horrible Histories: The Vicious Vikings* (1994), both of which state that the Vikings look forward to drinking from their enemies' skulls in Valhalla.⁹² However, twentieth-century Viking barbarians do not seem to be frequently depicted as drinking from skulls during life, except in humorous treatments such as Goscinny and Uderzo's satirical comic strip adventure *Asterix and the Normans* (published in French edition 1967, English translation published 1978). In Goscinny and Uderzo's vision of Viking Norway, skulls are the Viking household's most common decorative motif, serving as candle-holders and pendants as well as drinking vessels.⁹³ Repeated references are made to drinking from skulls, with the story's Viking chieftain declaring that "apple brandy drunk from the skulls of our enemies" is the Norwegian national drink.⁹⁴ During a fight, one raider worries, "I hope you haven't cracked his skull ... the chief doesn't like chipped glasses."⁹⁵

4.2.4. Monks, pagans, and King Alfred

Post-Medieval British views of the Vikings result from the intersection and rivalry of two alternate genres. Vikings can be the furious Northmen, who "erupt" to "rampage", "swarm" and "swoop" over Europe, and who are likened to "plagues of

⁹¹ "Harold the Dauntless", Canto III, verse v, in Walter Scott, *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott, with the author's introduction and notes*, edited by J. Logie Robertson (Oxford University Press, London), 1904, this edition 1960, p. 532.

⁹² Terry Deary, *Horrible Histories: The Vicious Vikings* (Scholastic Children's Books, London), 1994, p. 16, and Triggs, *History in Evidence*, pp. 10-1. How it would be possible to drink out of one's enemy's skull in this context when, in Valhalla, all warriors are said to be fully restored and revived after each day's combat, is anyone's guess.

⁹³ Goscinny and Uderzo, *Asterix and the Normans*, English translation by Anthea Bell and Derek Hockridge (Hodder and Stoughton, London), 1978, pp. 7, 16 *et seq.*

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 8.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 19.

locusts", "packs of hungry wolves" and "great thunderclouds".⁹⁶ They can also, as will be seen in subsequent chapters, be valiant, honourable heroes and carefree adventurers, and glorious paragons held up for emulation. The dichotomy of these two models leads back to two different source types: on the one hand historical accounts which report Viking depredations, these being insular or continental in origin, while on the other, the Icelandic sagas, in which Vikings can be protagonists, not simply predators. Whether later authors choose to depict Vikings primarily as ruthless destroyers or as daring heroes depends on which genre of inspiration they favour.

In Britain, this question has an especial poignancy, since the British Isles, as the author of *Life and Times: Canute and the Vikings* informs us, were among "the chief victims of Norse fury".⁹⁷ Thus Vikings can be abhorred for daring to attack one's homeland. But Vikings were settlers as well, and they added their blood -- and in some accounts, their genius -- to Britain's gene pool. Further, their power, and the jaunty heroism of the Icelandic sagas, can seem appealing models with which to identify oneself. This is the core of the dilemma dividing British attitudes on Vikings: are they the enemy, or are they part of us?

The "plague of locusts" view traces back to chronicle accounts, often of monastic provenance. The question of how Vikings were viewed in their own time period, and how these views evolved over subsequent centuries, is a complex and multi-faceted one. There is neither the time nor the space in this particular study to delve far into the development of Viking images from the eighth century to the present. But the cries of distraught monks continue to play a major role in creating contemporary impressions of the Vikings.⁹⁸

Of the two potential first recorded appearances of Vikings in Britain, the killing

⁹⁶ Examples of these usages include Hodges, *The Namesake*, p. 130, Jason Hook, *Look into the Past: the Vikings* (Wayland Publishers, Hove, East Sussex), 1993, p. 5, Middleton and Leyser, *Presenting the Past*, p. 45, and Marjorie Reeves, *Alfred and the Danes* (Longmans, Green and Co., London), 1959, pp. 5, 13, 14-5. This type of description is inspired by medieval sources such as Henry of Huntingdon's *Historia Anglorum*, in which the Vikings are described as locusts and swarms of bees (Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, pp. 275, 289.)

⁹⁷ May, *Canute and the Vikings*, p. 13.

⁹⁸ As acknowledged in an advertisement for the CD Rom *The World of the Vikings*: "The cries of frightened monks, whose monasteries were plundered, still colour our own view of the Vikings. We think of the Vikings as brutal warriors -- the despoilers of the England of King Alfred, and the Europe of Charlemagne." (Advertising brochure, *The World of the Vikings*, n.d.)

of a Dorset tax-collector circa during the reign of King Beorhtric (786-802)⁹⁹ and the raid on the monastery at Lindisfarne in 793, the latter has made far greater impact on the popular imagination. This raid was reported with a sense of high drama by the churchman Alcuin, writing at the court of Charlemagne, and his complaint that "never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we have now suffered from a pagan race ... nor was it thought possible that such an inroad from the sea could be made"¹⁰⁰ is taken as evidence that this so-called first Viking raid was "a bolt from the blue",¹⁰¹ an unprecedented attack by a previously little known people.¹⁰² Alcuin's lurid description of "the church of St. Cuthbert, spattered with the blood of the priests of God, despoiled of all its ornaments; a place more venerable than any other in Britain ... fallen prey to pagans"¹⁰³, sets the tone for innumerable later depictions of the Viking lifestyle as a bloodbath of looted churches and butchered monks. The classic picture of the Viking raid would be incomplete without the blood-stained corpse of a monk or two, with the torn pages of an illuminated manuscript drifting beside their lifeless hands. (See Figure 32.)

The pagan faith of the Viking attackers was, to the monks who reported their depredations, all that could be needed to prove the raiders' barbarism. This viewpoint has had its impact on later representations. "Pagan barbarian" is as much of a standard

⁹⁹ More precisely, the killing of a king's reeve, who according to various versions of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* encountered these early Viking raiders at Portland. A version of the encounter runs, "in his [King Beorhtric's] days there came for the first time three ships of Northmen and then the reeve rode to them and wished to force them to the king's residence, for he did not know what they were; and they slew him. Those were the first ships of Danish men which came to the land of the English." (Dorothy Whitelock (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Revised Translation* (Eyre and Spottiswoode, London), 1961, p. 35.) Showing the often generic quality of the term "Danish" in early medieval English usage, versions D (Worcester), E (Peterborough) and F (Canterbury) of the Chronicle specify that the "three ships of Northmen" which made this attack were manned by men from Hórhland in Norway (*ibid.*). (For discussion of the different surviving manuscripts of the Chronicle and their interrelation, see M. J. Swanton (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (J. M. Dent, London), 1996, pp. xvi-xxvii.) Referring to the hapless reeve as a tax-collector, which would have been among his duties, is a technique often used to introduce a lighter tone to the encounter, implying that the Vikings' action in killing such a person is perfectly understandable. (See, for instance, Deary, *The Vicious Vikings*, p. 11.)

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Ian Heath, *Osprey Elite Series: The Vikings* (Osprey Publishing, London), 1985, p. 3.

¹⁰¹ Magnus Magnusson, *Viking: Hammer of the North* (Orbis Publishing Ltd., London), 1976, this edition 1979, p. 7, and Jones, *History of the Vikings*, p. 194.

¹⁰² P. H. Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings*, 2nd edition (Edward Arnold, London), 1971, p. 1.

¹⁰³ Heath, *Osprey Elite Series: The Vikings*, p. 3.

catchphrase as is "barbarian cruelty", and the pagan barbarian Vikings have been depicted as single-minded persecutors whose abiding aim in life is to victimise Christian monks. The reasons cited for this persecution vary. The lure of monastery treasures is given as the main Viking motivation in Geoffrey Middleton's *Focus on History: Saxons and Vikings* (1968): "Many monastery churches had beautiful gold and silver ornaments ... the ruthless Vikings wanted them."¹⁰⁴ Besides ruthless, Vikings can also be depicted as practical: "Many monasteries were raided, because the Vikings knew that they were often full of treasures, and were not guarded by soldiers."¹⁰⁵ The most extreme proponents of Viking barbarism may hold that the Northmen were "savage pagans who took a special delight in looting monasteries and ill-treating monks",¹⁰⁶ but more common at least in writings of the later twentieth century is the pragmatic explanation that Viking raiders focused on monasteries simply because they were among the most vulnerable and rewarding targets.

However, that note of practicality does not prevent the Vikings' paganism from being used as symbolic of their darker qualities. Paganism can be portrayed as both the outward sign and the underlying cause of Viking cruelty. The observation of R. J. Unstead that "Unlike Christianity, Viking religion was ultimately hopeless, morbid and cruel" permeates and in some cases defines the Viking character.¹⁰⁷ All manner of brutal cruelties are possible for the Vikings, simply because of their pagan nature. For instance the infamous blood eagle, following the suggestion in *Orkneyinga saga*, is often depicted as a ritual of Odin worship. Unsurprisingly, in views coloured by this "hopeless, morbid and cruel" outlook, the demise of Viking paganism is intimately connected with medieval Scandinavia's desertion of the Viking lifestyle. The standard, if simplistic, equation holds that "The coming of Christianity to Scandinavia had calmed the more

¹⁰⁴ Geoffrey Middleton, *Focus on History: Saxons and Vikings* (Longman, London), 1968, p. 43.

¹⁰⁵ Hazel Mary Martell, *Hidden Worlds: The Vikings and Jorvik* (Zoë Books Ltd., London), 1993, p. 4.

¹⁰⁶ I. Tenen, *Junior Histories: This England, Part 1* (MacMillan and Co. Ltd., London), first published 1948, this edition 1960, p. 128. Tenen does not necessarily hold this opinion personally, but cites it as a line most likely taken by pro-Alfred propagandists in the period of Alfred the Great.

¹⁰⁷ Unstead, *Invaded Island*, p. 49.

savage elements in the Norse character",¹⁰⁸ and that now the Vikings "built churches instead of burning them".¹⁰⁹

If murdered monks and ravished women are the archetypal victims of Viking outrages, the classic Viking opponent is King Alfred the Great. Works that take Alfred as their hero tend to portray Vikings in the darkest hues. The 1969 film *Alfred the Great* is something of an exception in this: Alfred, although still the hero, is portrayed as a man with many faults and weaknesses, while the Danish leader Guthrum, as played by Michael York, is allowed a certain sympathy and anti-heroic charm.¹¹⁰ But the majority of works focusing on King Alfred have a vested interest in making the Vikings seem as inhuman as possible. The greater the peril represented by the Vikings, the greater is Alfred's achievement in conquering them.

The Ladybird book of *King Alfred the Great* (1956) presents a straightforward good-and-evil dichotomy: in Alfred's England, "everyone could have been very happy, if it had not been for the Danes."¹¹¹ The title to the Viking Age chapter in a 1980's school history text, "When the Vikings rampaged through Europe and in England only King Alfred of Wessex could stand up to them",¹¹² encapsulates the views of King Alfred's admirers; Alfred is portrayed as the last bulwark of English liberty against Danish oppression.

The Alfredophile view states that England as we know it would never have existed were it not for Alfred. This argument is not based on down-to-earth observations that different monarchs would have succeeded to the throne and sent English history down other paths than those we know it to have followed. The "alternate England" that the most fanatical Alfred adherents postulate has far greater implications:

But for him, we probably would have inherited a Scandinavian culture from the Danes, rather than one which is basically English. If he had been defeated by the Danes, the English language might have disappeared from England except for a few odd words, just as the old British tongue did after the Saxon invasions. So the fact that English is spoken by so

¹⁰⁸ May, *Canute and the Vikings*, p. 52. See also Gibb, *How They Lived: A Viking Sailor*, p. 30.

¹⁰⁹ Jill Hughes, *Find Out About Vikings* (Hamish Hamilton, London), 1984, p. 29.

¹¹⁰ James R. Webb (director), *Alfred the Great* (Bernard Smith/MGM British), 1969.

¹¹¹ L. Du Garde Peach, *King Alfred the Great* (Ladybird Books Ltd., London), 1956, p. 6.

¹¹² Middleton and Leyser, *Presenting the Past*, p. 45.

many millions of people all over the world today is very largely due to Alfred the Great.¹¹³

When Alfred is the saviour of England and English culture, his opponents must be as demonic as possible. A typically anti-Dane stance is taken in the children's historical novel *Mist Over Athelney* (1958), by Geoffrey Trease. The novel's protagonists are young supporters of King Alfred, and with only one exception the Vikings depicted are brutal and monstrous. An "undisciplined mob", they "swarm", they are likened to maggots, they have "fiendish" and "crude" laughter, and display the tendency to "go mad at a word".¹¹⁴ Trease clearly takes much of his inspiration from ecclesiastic accounts of Viking brutality. In the most extreme example, one of the young heroes imagines the death of a captured friend, a death unmistakably based on the 1012 murder of Archbishop Ælfeah by members of the invading Danish army:¹¹⁵

He knew what some of these barbarians were capable of when they had enough ale inside them. He had heard marrow-freezing stories. In his mind's eye he saw Edward dancing for their amusement till he was ready to drop with exhaustion. He saw the flushed, jeering faces, saw the great hairy hands uplifted with bones and platters and empty jugs. Edward would be a target. First they would pelt him only with harmless fragments of the meal. Then, as the fun grew more fast and furious, some drunken brute would go one better and hurl something heavier. Edward would stagger, try to shield himself with his arms, the heavier missiles would come in a shower, the blood would start to flow, and at the sight of it the Danes would howl like a wolf-pack. And Edward would die ...¹¹⁶

Contrasted with these monsters, the civilisation and erudition of Alfred is all the more striking. Alfred is a forward-looking statesman who cares only for his people, not himself; the Vikings are brutes who care only for themselves and the pleasures of the moment. Alfred is civilisation and the Vikings are barbarism, it is as simple as that.

4.2.5. Viking mobility

In their barbaric model, Vikings show strong adherence to the characteristics discussed above as marking barbarians in general. Although not technically a nomadic

¹¹³ David Johnson, *Jackdaws, No. 89: Alfred the Great* (Jackdaw Press, London) 1969, Broadsheet No. 4: "Alfred's England".

¹¹⁴ Geoffrey Trease, *Mist Over Athelney* (MacMillan, St. Martin's Press, London), 1958, pp. 1, 2, 92, 202, 212, 217.

¹¹⁵ Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, pp. 142-3, and Jones, *History of the Vikings*, p. 367.

¹¹⁶ Trease, *Mist Over Athelney*, p. 213.

society, the Vikings' relations with "civilisation" are in many ways consistent with those between sedentary civilisations and nomadic barbarians.

First and foremost, the Vikings' success is portrayed as depending on their mobility, and the hallmarks of Viking tactics read like a sea-borne version of the strategies that wreaked havoc on civilised armies facing nomadic cavalry. The claims made by scholars of Central Asia, that the nomads of the Steppe evolved the most efficient and successful style of warfare of their time, are matched by the frequent assertions that Vikings "perfected a new kind of ship which was better than any other in Europe".¹¹⁷ (See 5.1., below.) According to Ammianus Marcellinus, Nomadic barbarians such as the Huns practically lived on horseback,¹¹⁸ and the Vikings seem equally at home on the sea. Like Herodotus' Scythians and the later nomadic peoples described in their image, Vikings raiders follow a hit-and-run strategy: they strike with devastating force and vanish before their victims can mount an effective response.¹¹⁹ Viking success is consistently ascribed to "ferocity and mobility",¹²⁰ and to "courage and lightning attacks".¹²¹

As mentioned above, Alcuin's post-Lindisfarne claim that "never before" had such a peril been known on England's shores has promoted a picture of the Viking onslaught coming as a complete surprise. The connection of the Lindisfarne raid with the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's* portents of doom for the same year -- whirlwinds, flashes of lightning, dragons in the sky¹²² -- perpetuates the connection between nomadic mobility and an aura of the supernatural (see 4.1.2., above). Even after the shock of that supposed first attack has subsided, the seemingly more-than-human mobility remains, to give a larger-than-life impression of the Viking reign of terror.

Pupils working with Haydyn Middleton and Henrietta Leyser's *Presenting the Past* are told that the Vikings "turned up 'in the twinkling of an eye' ... This was one reason

¹¹⁷ Gibb, *How They Lived: a Viking Sailor*, p. 7.

¹¹⁸ Maenchen-Helfen, *World of the Huns*, p. 14.

¹¹⁹ Clare, *I Was There: Vikings*, p. 17.

¹²⁰ Anne Pearson, *See Through History: The Vikings* (Hamlyn Children's Books, London), 1993, p. 31.

¹²¹ Philippa Wingate and Anne Millard, *Usborne Illustrated World History: The Viking World* (Usborne Publishing Ltd., London), 1993, p. 14.

¹²² Whitelock, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, p. 36.

why everyone feared them so much. You could never tell when they might come. There were no warnings. Again and again, Vikings struck when no one was expecting them."¹²³ The combination of Viking tactics and superior Viking ship-building and seamanship makes these raiders all-but unbeatable. The frequently encountered opinion is that "Speed is the key element of a Viking raid and the longships are perfectly designed for sudden attacks."¹²⁴ In more detail,

Vessels like the Gokstad ship were perfect for raiding. They were fast and had oars and sails so that the Vikings could make a surprise attack wherever they wanted. They could leave as quickly as they came. They had no problems with landing, since they just ran their ships onto the beach and jumped ashore. If need be they could row a long way upriver, deep into enemy country.¹²⁵

The Vikings add insult to injury by using not only their victims' rivers, but their victims' own horses against them. A representative account of Viking tactics is provided in the novel *Mist Over Athelney*:

The Danes were as much at home in the saddle as on the sea. Their first move, when they landed on a hostile shore, was to get hold of horses and transform themselves into mounted infantry. That was what had won their victories, time and time again -- their speed of movement, their terrifying striking power, north or south, east or west, sailing up rivers or galloping across country as they chose.¹²⁶

Like Scythians on steroids, the Vikings emerge as the ultimate embodiment of sedentary societies' nightmares: unpredictable, elusive, striking and disappearing at will. The beleaguered Anglo-Saxons, meanwhile, join the ranks of perpetually harassed and out-manoeuvred barbarian-fighters. The complaint voiced in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and quoted in a late twentieth-century children's history of the Vikings -- "when the enemy was in the east, our army was in the west. When the enemy was in the south, our army was in the north"¹²⁷ -- could be equally be the cry of Herodotus' Persians or Ssu-ma Ch'ien's Chinese, faced with the eternal menace and aggravation of the nomads from beyond the gates.

¹²³ Middleton and Leyser, *Presenting the Past*, p. 48.

¹²⁴ Clare, *I Was There: Vikings*, p. 17.

¹²⁵ Speed, *Harald Hardrada and the Vikings*, p. 28.

¹²⁶ Trease, *Mist Over Athelney*, p. 43.

¹²⁷ Speed, *Harald Hardrada and the Vikings*, p. 33. See also Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, p. 140.

4.2.6. The Men You Love to Hate

Like their fellow barbarians, Vikings show a penchant for "over-running" civilised societies. They arrive in "hordes", a seemingly inevitable trait of the barbarian.¹²⁸ They are motivated by "ravening greed" for the riches of civilisation,¹²⁹ a characteristic insisted on by Roman and Chinese writers alike concerning their own barbarian menaces.¹³⁰

However, there is apparently, at least for observers in Western cultures, a significant difference that sets the Vikings apart from their fellow barbarians. Paddy Griffith, in his study *The Viking Art of War*, notes this discrepancy in image between the Vikings and their barbarian comrades the Huns, Vandals, Mongols, etc. Not himself fond of the picture of Vikings as horned-helmeted marauders, Griffith writes that:

About the only thing that can be said in favour of the 'heroic barbarian' image of the Vikings is that it did at least serve to enhance their international profile and make them familiar figures in Western culture. This has had an oddly positive effect upon their reputation, to the point where they seem to have escaped the linguistic fate of other 'barbarians' such as the Huns, Vandals, Tartars or Mongols -- all of whose names have in recent times been used as terms of abuse. People are not insulted today by being called 'Vikings'.¹³¹

It may be that in the cultures which are or see themselves as descended from the other barbarian groups, these other labels are seen in as complimentary a light as "Viking" often is in Western cultures. The difference may simply be one of degrees of foreignness: Huns, Mongols and the Tartars are inescapably the Other to Western perceptions, whereas Vikings, though perhaps admittedly barbarous, are *our* barbarians. And as barbarians, the Vikings are immensely successful, not only in their day but also in our own.

This latter-day success is not as raiders, but as marketing devices and tourist attractions. To be sure, the barbarian impression is not the only current image of the Vikings, as will be explored in later chapters. But it seems inescapable that a large portion of the Vikings' popularity as cultural icons is due to their aura of lawlessness.

¹²⁸ See Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, p. 488. Lattimore disposes of the perception that nomad "hordes" are invariably "a swarm of irresistible numbers".

¹²⁹ May, *Canute and the Vikings*, p. 20.

¹³⁰ Sinor, "the Concept of Inner Asia", pp. 4-5, and Sinor, "The Barbarians", p. 51.

¹³¹ Paddy Griffith, *The Viking Art of War* (Greenhill Books, London), 1995, p. 24.

Like the outlaws of the Old West, whose fame has far eclipsed that of the lawmen who struggled to track them down, Vikings have become an example of the "man you love to hate" phenomenon, villains or anti-heroes who are more beloved than the heroes themselves (See 6.3., below).¹³²

Other examples from the field of popular culture seem relevant to this aspect of the Viking experience. Roger Horrocks, who has studied images of masculinity in popular culture, makes several observations which could easily be applied to the question of Viking popularity. One of Horrocks' topics of discussion is the issue of "villains" in late twentieth-century sport. As Horrocks writes of television sports coverage:

There is a huge ambivalence about law-breaking in male sport. This can be seen clearly in televised sport, when commentators often speak complacently of a football or rugby game being played in 'the best possible spirit'. Yet any aggressive clashes between players are focused on, replayed in slow motion, while pundits in the studio analyze it in detail. Clearly everyone is thoroughly enjoying the misdemeanours, just as in society at large, much cant is expended on the subject of crime, barely concealing a fascination and an identification with it ... This ambivalence can be seen in the treatment of sportsmen in the media. While homage is paid to the gentlemanly player, the 'villain' is given bigger headlines ...¹³³

The same observations could well be made of Vikings. They are frequently cast in similar roles to those of the villains in sport: while their "gentlemanly" opponents are admired, it is the rule-breaking Vikings who win the day and whose lawless antics provide viewers/readers with vicarious enjoyment. In one description of Viking warfare in Ireland, for example, it is specified that the Irish looked upon war as a "gentlemanly sport". While this attitude may be admirable in theory, the implication is that it was also foolish, allowing the Viking "professionals" to cheerfully walk all over the Irish and their gentlemanly ideals.¹³⁴

Another of Horrocks' categories of study is the horror film genre. Again, several of his observations could equally apply to the Vikings. In Horrocks' interpretation of

¹³² For a discussion of the appeal of crime and rule-breaking in popular culture, particularly in genres such as the western and the gangster film, see John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance* (University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London), 1976, pp. 51-79.

¹³³ Roger Horrocks, *Male Myths and Icons: Masculinity in Popular Culture* (Macmillan, London), 1995, pp. 152-3.

¹³⁴ Tenen, *This England*, p. 118.

the genre, horror

exploits the tensions between the safety of repression, indeed the requirement for repression in society, and the fascination, terror and disgust we feel at letting go of repression, and seeing what lies underneath it ... In the horror movie we get to have our cake and eat it: the vampire is permitted his oral excesses, to our enjoyment, but he is also vanquished, to our relief.¹³⁵

Horrocks continues with the comment that, "Under order lies disorder: the disorder terrifies and fascinates us, while the order irritates us."¹³⁶

Here, perhaps, is the impulse behind an outlook reported by Kenneth Clark in his *Civilisation*: "People sometimes tell me that they prefer barbarism to civilisation."¹³⁷ Clark concludes that this is merely because the people in question have not given barbarism a long enough trial. In his view, "the boredom of barbarism is infinitely greater" than the boredom of civilisation. Clark paints a gloomy picture of barbarism as "very restricted company, no books, no light after dark, no hope. On one side the sea battering away, on the other infinite stretches of bog and forest. A most melancholy existence ..."¹³⁸

Quite apart from questions as to whether Clark's image of the barbaric life was ever actually experienced, Clark also ignores the possibility, raised by Horrocks, that "preferring barbarism" can be a natural element of the human psyche. This concept, perhaps best known today through Freudian theory, is discussed by Stjepan Meštrović in his look at *The Barbarian Temperament*. Meštrović examines together Freud, the sociologists Veblen and Durkheim, Schopenhauer, and Plato, concluding that all were in basic agreement on the necessity of maintaining both order and disorder, within society and within each human being. Control is necessary, but too great control causes disaster. As Freud observed in 1938, "Impeded aggressiveness seems to involve a grave injury. It really seems as though it is necessary for us to destroy some other thing if we are not to destroy ourselves."¹³⁹

These observations may explain one of the uses of the Vikings. Through the

¹³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 83.

¹³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 84.

¹³⁷ Clark, *Civilisation.*, p. 7.

¹³⁸ *ibid.*

¹³⁹ Meštrović, *Barbarian Temperament.*, pp. 138-9.

cathartic excess of their raids and pillaging, one can identify with the unimpeded aggressiveness of the Viking marauders, and release some of one's "irritation" at the order necessary in one's own life.

4.2.7. Romance and the Viking rapist

At the same time, while identifying with Viking raiders, it is also possible to gain enjoyment through identification with at least some of the Vikings' victims. This is an aspect of the Viking phenomenon which has become a keynote of the Viking romance genre.¹⁴⁰

The concept of Viking barbarians as appropriate characters for romance novels might at first seem a bizarre juxtaposition. But in fact the Viking raider image easily lends itself to adoption by this genre. The Vikings' role as rapists and abductors, paradoxically, has turned them into ideal romance heroes.

The threat of male violence toward women, and the search for a caring, supportive relationship amidst the perils of abuse and exploitation, are crucial themes in the romance novel as it has developed in the late twentieth century.¹⁴¹ The roots of these plot elements can be found in earlier manifestations of the romance genre. As Helen Hughes points out in her study *The Historical Romance*, "saturnine, abrasive" and powerful heroes have been "found in romance since the heyday of the Gothic novel in the eighteenth century", and became a definitive ingredient of the romance formula in the period from the 1920's onwards, as the genre was moulded by the influence of best-selling authors such as Georgette Heyer.¹⁴² Hughes discusses "the saturnine, brutal hero

¹⁴⁰ By "Viking romance" in this context I mean the primarily twentieth-century genre of romance novels, and films with similar themes. These should not be confused with the thirteenth-century Icelandic "Viking romances" represented in works such as *Seven Viking Romances* (Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (trans. and ed.), *Seven Viking Romances* (Penguin Books, London), 1985). I should point out here that although the majority of the romance novels I will be citing here are American publications, I have checked that all of the romances I discuss here are available in Britain. Some, like Rebecca Brandewyne's *Swan Road*, are published in both Britain and America, while others are available in Britain as imports. While it is true that the imports may not be readily available throughout the entire country, they are certainly available to dedicated readers of romance through the medium of specialist romance bookstores such as Heartlines on Charing Cross Road.

¹⁴¹ For discussions of this issue, see Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (Routledge, London and New York), 1982, this edition 1990, pp. 30, 41, 47, and Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (Verso, London and New York), 1984, this edition 1987, pp. 71-6, 133, 141, 214.

¹⁴² Helen Hughes, *The Historical Romance* (Routledge, London and New York), 1993, p. 39.

of women's romance, the spirited heroine who challenges him and succumbs to his *force majeure* ... [and] the abductions and escapes typical of the romantic genres."¹⁴³ The hero as abductor and potential rapist is a pivotal motif in twentieth century romance fiction, one famous example being the vast appeal of Rudolph Valentino, whose legendary film, *The Sheik* (1921), cast him as the flashing-eyed Arab abductor who whisks the imperious English heroine to his tent in the desert, threatens her with the proverbial fate worse than death, and eventually wins her love.¹⁴⁴

It has frequently been asserted that the popularity of such rape-narratives within the romance genre shows masochistic tendencies on the part of the genre's readership, that to suffer -- or enjoy -- such mistreatment is a fantasy shared by the romance novels' primarily female audience. Alternate interpretations, however, have been proposed by Tania Modleski in *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women* (1982), Janice A. Radway in *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (first published in 1984), and Carol Thurston in *The Romance Revolution* (1987).

Both Radway and Modleski argue that the romance novels' version of rape is in fact a response to fears of male violence, and an attempt to define and control that violence within acceptable parameters. Not only do the heroines of these narratives survive the experience of rape or other violence by the hero, but it usually transpires that his violence was prompted either by a misunderstanding of the heroine's actions, or simply by his uncontrollable passion for her. In either case, rather than creating an unhealable breach between hero and heroine, their initial violent contact paves the way for the development of a blissful, loving relationship. By portraying such violent acts as ultimately controllable and as a sign of love, romance novel rapes may provide readers with a bearable context and interpretation for violence within their own lives.¹⁴⁵

Thurston carries the argument further, asserting that recent developments in the romance genre allow these narratives to function not only as guidebooks for rationalising and dealing with violence, but as proof of the possibility of female independence,

¹⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁴⁴ George Melford (director), *The Sheik*, 1921.

¹⁴⁵ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, pp. 72-3, 75-6, 141.

demonstrated through the heroines' "battle to become mistresses of their own fate".¹⁴⁶ Thurston was working with a body of romance literature that overlapped with the foci of Modleski and Radway's research, but which also included more recent works, that Thurston sees as evidence of extremely rapid evolution in the genre's depictions of women and their proper roles in society. While some more conservative types of romance novel continue to be published, in which the heroine is still defined exclusively through her relationship with the hero (Thurston gives as an example the works of Barbara Cartland),¹⁴⁷ the romance genre is now characterised by "erotic stories about heroines who tried and often succeeded in challenging the male-female power structure".¹⁴⁸ Thurston writes that "the strong, independent-minded heroine -- a woman bent on becoming a full-fledged human -- has become as essential to the romance as a happy ending."¹⁴⁹ In this context, the violence which is still found in the genre serves not so much as a masochistic acceptance of women's inferiority and necessary submission, but as one of the trials the heroines must overcome in their search for identity. According to Thurston, to simply call these characters victims

would be to miss the crucial point ... because hardship is the device used to set the stage for what the readers prize almost as much as the developing love relationship -- the heroine as a woman of indomitable spirit and wit, a fighter who 'gives as good as she gets' and overcomes by 'holding her own ground', as readers often describe her.¹⁵⁰

The abductions in the romance genre can also serve as a form of escapism. That the romance genre is very literally understood as a form of escape is pointed out by Radway, who observes that the romance readers she interviewed used their reading time as a conscious escape-route from the pressure of their duties as wives, mothers and home-makers.¹⁵¹ The fantasy of relinquishing all responsibilities and self-control, to be swept away by a forceful but ultimately loving abductor, allows readers to vicariously

¹⁴⁶ Carol Thurston, *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity* (University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago), 1987, p. 68.

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 37-8.

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 68.

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 80.

¹⁵¹ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, pp. 11, 52.

escape their everyday duties, without having to take any blame for desiring this escape.¹⁵²

All of these roles can be played by the abduction narratives of the Viking mythos. Rapaciousness, as discussed above, is one of the Viking barbarian's defining characteristics, and carrying off women is part of the Viking job description. We see this in repeated visual representations of Vikings with women slung over their shoulders,¹⁵³ in the 1920's *Punch* cartoon in which a Viking wife nags her husband to bring back some *useful* slaves for a change, not just buxom wenches,¹⁵⁴ in the sequence of *The Haunting of Hiram C. Hopgood* in which Krok Fulbelly has his crisis of conscience while dragging a woman off by the hair.¹⁵⁵ That popular depictions often show Vikings as incapable of thinking beyond their immediate sexual urges is vividly demonstrated by a sequence in the film *The Long Ships* (1963), in which a band of captured Vikings botch their escape attempt by stopping for some entertainment when they stumble onto their captor's harem.

The Viking rapist can be used as a source of horror, and proof of the Vikings' villainy and brutality. This is the sense, for instance, in which the theme is used in the novel *Sarum*, with Viking raiders gang-raping a woman before killing her and her household.¹⁵⁶ However, the sexual elements of the Viking image can be portrayed in more positive lights, and metamorphose the Viking into a sex symbol in his own right,

¹⁵² *ibid.*, pp. 76, 142-3. Radway observes that the rape motif in the romance novel allows the male character to take all responsibility/blame for the arousing of the female character's sexuality. As Radway writes, "because the hero initiates the sexual contact that the heroine later enjoys, it is ultimately he who is held responsible for activating her sexuality. She is free, then, to enjoy the pleasures of her sexual nature without having to accept the blame and guilt for it usually assigned to women by men. Rape in the ideal romance thus helps to perpetuate the distinction between 'those who do and those who don't', just as it continues to justify and make possible the repression of female sexuality. This is especially ironic because ... subsequent developments in the ideal romantic narrative attempt to demonstrate that once awakened by a man, a woman can respond to him unhampered by her previous repression." (pp. 142-3) These points should be qualified by the observation that in the romances of the period studied by Thurston, a greater variety of sexual roles is becoming acceptable, and the "those who do and those who don't" rule is no longer inviolable.

¹⁵³ David M. Wilson, *Vikings and Gods in European Art (Moesgård Museum, Århus)*, 1997, pp. 51, 54-5, and Yves Cohat, *The Vikings, Lords of the Seas* (Thames and Hudson, London), French edition 1987, English translation Ruth Daniel 1992, this edition 1995, pp. 56-7, 115.

¹⁵⁴ Cartoon by George Macdonald, in *Punch*, 22 December 1920.

¹⁵⁵ Ibbotson, *Haunting of Hiram C. Hopgood*, p. 9.

¹⁵⁶ Rutherford, *Sarum*, pp. 312-13.

rather than simply a predator (see also 3.1.3.). Further, in the genre of Viking romance, the raping, abducting and conquering aspects of the Viking character are used in a variety of more constructive ways.

One example that seems to be a sort of halfway point for this motif is the film *The Vikings* (1958). Here the Viking abductor is anti-hero instead of hero, but the heroine's abduction does have ultimately positive effects on her life. In the film, demure Welsh princess Janet Leigh is abducted by dashing but sadistic Viking Kirk Douglas. Douglas attempts to force himself on her, but is prevented at the last moment by the intervention of his heroic half-brother, played by Tony Curtis. In *The Vikings*, the princess and her would-be rapist do not end up together; Douglas expiates his sins with an heroic death -- another example of Horrocks' having one's cake and eating it, allowing the audience to enjoy Douglas' excesses while reassuring them with his eventual punishment -- and, at least by implication, Leigh and Curtis find happiness together. But the film makes no secret of the fact that the princess is attracted to her abductor. Further, it is through the abduction that she eventually finds fulfilment, though not with her original abductor: had she never been kidnapped, she would have been doomed to a loveless existence with her cold and manipulative fiance -- civilisation and order personified? -- while only through the ordeal of her capture does she find love with Tony Curtis. The heroine's dilemma seems to act out the conflict perceived by Durkheim and Freud: civilisation and order seem necessary for continued human existence, but too much order can destroy an individual completely.

In the Viking romance novels of the 1980's and '90's, the romantic raider becomes a more positive figure, a combination, as it were, of the Douglas and Curtis roles. In this period Viking romances have become acknowledged as a distinct subgenre within romantic fiction. For example, advertisements inside the front covers of Johanna Lindsey's Viking series urge readers to "experience *all* the breath-taking ecstasy of Viking passion",¹⁵⁷ while according to the *Romance Reader's Quarterly*, Heather Graham's novel *Golden Surrender* is "one of the most exciting Viking romances you have ever read".¹⁵⁸

There are many explanations for the Viking period's attractiveness as a setting for

¹⁵⁷ Johanna Lindsey, *Surrender My Love* (Avon Books, New York), 1994, inside front cover.

¹⁵⁸ Quoted in the advertisement pages of Heather Graham, *Lord of the Wolves* (Dell Publishing, New York), 1993.

romance fiction (see 5.3.3., below), but not least of these is the adaptability of the "raping and pillaging" theme to the context of romance novels' focus on the issues of violence and its results. Faced with the threat of Viking raiders, the Viking romance heroines are justifiably concerned that rape is to be their fate. Often they witness the violent rape of other women during Viking attacks, as in Graham's *Golden Surrender*¹⁵⁹ and Lindsey's *Fires of Winter*,¹⁶⁰ but the heroines themselves are miraculously spared. They are, almost inevitably, abducted by the hero, and suffer violence from him -- although this violence does not always take the form of rape -- but the novelists are careful to let us see that the hero is disturbed by his actions. Due to the remorse that the hero characteristically suffers for his behaviour, he sets out to win back the heroine's esteem by proving that he can be a gentle, caring and nurturing lover.

Rape is a consistent theme in the antagonistic relationship of Viking hero and heroine, even when no actual violence is taking place. The heroines often taunt the heroes with being rapists and barbarians, simply because they are Vikings. In Heather Graham's Viking novels, in particular, verbal duels about raping and pillaging are keynotes of the hero and heroine's relationship, the heroes making comments such as "I've waited too damn long to rape and ravage already"¹⁶¹ and "Vikings are supposed to rape and ravage all women, so surely I could not be a credible Norseman were I to do any less with my wife."¹⁶² Graham is here making the point that Vikings are not in fact all rapists, for in these works the heroine has unjustly accused the hero of being a rapist, and his harping on the theme is a result of his anger at the accusation. As the hero of *The Viking's Woman* declares to his hostile new wife, "You've called me a barbarian, and alas! The raw and primitive side of my nature has sprung forward ... I am a Viking, a beast! 'Tis what you desired, your creation!"¹⁶³

In the Viking romances, as in much of the romance genre as a whole, the intertwined notions of conquest and surrender are essential themes. Typically, both hero

¹⁵⁹ Heather Graham, *Golden Surrender*, (Dell, New York), 1985, p. 19.

¹⁶⁰ Johanna Lindsey, *Fires of Winter* (Avon Books, New York), 1980, p. 40.

¹⁶¹ Graham, *Lord of the Wolves*, p. 47.

¹⁶² *ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁶³ Heather Graham, *The Viking's Woman* (Bantam Doubleday Dell, New York), 1990, pp. 179.

and heroine are eventually said to have conquered, and surrendered to, each other. For instance, we read in the appropriately titled *Golden Surrender* that the hero is "no longer aware of anything but the female he conquered and surrendered to in turn".¹⁶⁴

Much use is made in the Viking romance genre of the stereotypical image of the Viking raider with a woman slung over his shoulder. The advertising blurb at the front of *Golden Surrender* begins, "The Viking picked her up in one smooth motion". In his first encounter with the heroine, the hero of Catherine Coulter's *Season of the Sun* experiences a longing to "haul her over his shoulder and take her into the woods and mount her beneath the drooping branches of the thick fir trees",¹⁶⁵ although he suppresses this urge and asks her to marry him instead. Carrying off over the shoulder sequences occur in Krahn's *My Warrior's Heart*¹⁶⁶ and Graham's *Lord of the Wolves*,¹⁶⁷ while in Lindsey's *Surrender My Love*, the famous image is recast in a playful manner: near the end of the novel, when hero and heroine have finally conquered and surrendered to each other, the hero suggests that the heroine should carry him off over her shoulder.¹⁶⁸

A romance publisher's guidelines quoted by Radway assert that "a woman's fantasy is to lose control with a man who really cares for her".¹⁶⁹ The Viking romances provide their heroines and readers with this fantasy loss of control, as well as with a promise of escape from the repression and tedium of a too-ordered existence. In many cases, the adventurous, fulfilling life the heroine achieves with her Viking is contrasted favourably with the "civilised" alternative that awaited her had she not been swept away. For example, the heroine of Rebecca Brandewyne's *Swan Road* is betrothed to a Prince of Mercia, who turns out to be remarkably unimpressive compared to the Viking hero. In Coulter's *Season of the Sun*, the heroine is briefly married to an elderly and abusive man, the drudgery of that marriage providing striking contrast to the idyll that her relationship with her Viking becomes. The heroines of Graham's novels *Golden*

¹⁶⁴ Graham, *Golden Surrender*, p. 204.

¹⁶⁵ Catherine Coulter, *Season of the Sun* (Onyx, New York), 1991, p. 10.

¹⁶⁶ Betina Krahn, *My Warrior's Heart* (Avon, New York), 1992, p. 324.

¹⁶⁷ Graham, *Lord of the Wolves*, p. 134.

¹⁶⁸ Lindsey, *Surrender My Love*, p. 400.

¹⁶⁹ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, p. 75.

Surrender and *The Viking's Woman* both have previous romantic attachments which are sundered by their forced marriages to the Viking heroes, but in retrospect their first sweethearts are shown to be well-meaning but uninspired, no threat at all to the exciting, magnificent and caring Vikings.

Being swept up into the Vikings' world provides freedom from repression, though for the heroines of the novels it is ultimately freedom purchased at the cost of marriage. The contrast between civilised restraint and Viking freedom is well expressed in Kathleen Woodiwiss' *The Wolf and the Dove*, which is in fact a Saxon/Norman romance, but includes some Viking characters and themes:

Seated crosslegged on the pile of furs and with her hair loose and flowing over her shoulders, she looked like some wild Viking bride of old. Perhaps some of the blood from those seafarers coursed in her veins, for the warmth of the fire and the sight of this man half naked and closeted with her for the night made her pulse beat faster ... the thought crossed her mind that were she that savage Viking maid she might rise now and go to him and caress that slick and shining back, run her hands down those mighty arms ...¹⁷⁰

(For further discussion of the character of Viking women in romance novels, see 5.3.3., below.)

The Viking romance gives its heroines and its readers the chance to become those savage Viking maids. And in its pages, the Viking raider is ultimately the source not of dread and suffering but of passion: he is, as the heroine of Coulter's *Lord of Falcon Ridge* discovers, "so barbaric, so wonderfully alive, she never wanted to let him out of her sight".¹⁷¹

4.2.8. The Viking barbarian -- some conclusions

At this point I should perhaps state what I am *not* saying. In no sense do I mean to imply with the arguments above that male viewers/readers will only identify with the raiding aspect of the Vikings, and female viewers/readers with the Vikings' victims. It has, I believe, been convincingly argued that identification is a far less gender-defined

¹⁷⁰ Kathleen Woodiwiss, *The Wolf and the Dove* (Futura Publications Ltd., London), 1974, this edition 1977, p. 115.

¹⁷¹ Coulter, *Lord of Falcon Ridge*, p.209.

experience.¹⁷² As Horrocks observes regarding the issue of sadism, "if a film contains a sadistic scene -- say, a man torturing a woman -- it is rather simplistic to argue that the male viewer identifies with the screen male. Rather, we can suggest that the inner sadist in the viewer identifies with the screen sadist, and the inner victim with the screen victim."¹⁷³

Clearly, the extent to which such non-gender-specific identifications occur varies according to different genres and media. In the case of romance novels, which have been shown to be consumed primarily by a female readership,¹⁷⁴ it seems unlikely that many male readers would identify with the heroine's experiences, simply because male readers of this genre are relatively few. As well, it was suggested by Radway's investigations that it is uncommon for female romance readers, at least those interviewed by Radway, to identify with the viewpoint of a male character.¹⁷⁵ The immense success of this genre seems partially based on an exceptionally strong identification that takes place between reader and heroine.¹⁷⁶

However, on the whole I believe that it is possible for both female and male audiences to identify with the excesses of the Vikings, and with the combinations of victimisation, release and empowerment that can be experienced by the Vikings' prey. In both identifications, one issue at stake is the experience of at least temporary release from one's own repressions. To vicariously maraud with the Vikings allows one to escape the restrictions imposed by daily existence in society, while to be carried off by a "wonderfully alive" Viking barbarian provides adventure, fulfilment, and freedom both from responsibility -- for at least at first, all power and decisions seem to rest with the abductor -- and from civilised, ordered existence.

There are no doubt many other interpretations of the Viking barbarian. It seems, however, that the appeal of these figures must be traceable at least in part to their roles

¹⁷² Horrocks, *Male Myths and Icons*, pp. 44, 47, 102-3.

¹⁷³ *ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁷⁴ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, pp. 44-5, 55-8.

¹⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p. 180. However, Thurston observes that the romance novels which she studied seem to show a move away from this strict reader/heroine identification, as increasing numbers of novels include sequences from the point of view of the hero. In fact, it appears from a survey of romance readers that the hero's point of view is something readers would like to see more of in the genre. (Thurston, *Romance Revolution*, p. 99.)

¹⁷⁶ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, p. 113.

as champions of (restrained) disorder. Within the confines of their genres, their pillaging escapades provide a sense of escape, and the chance to thumb one's nose at the restraints of society. One can identify both with the furious Vikings and with the women they sweep off their feet, and take pleasure in both identifications. No doubt if one's town were actually under attack by Vikings, one would feel differently, just as being dragged into the desert by the Sheik of Araby would probably be anything but a romantic experience. But within the boundaries of popular culture, the excesses of Viking barbarians can be enjoyed with perfect safety.

4.3. *Vikings as victims*

Every culture and every viewpoint creates the opponents it deserves. Just as Chinese civilisation itself, in the interpretation of Lattimore, provided the catalyst that created "a new kind of nomadic barbarian",¹⁷⁷ so too the proponents of the "Vikings as barbarians" theory have been met by a vast backlash against their view. For every writer prepared to swear that Vikings were "dread demons of chaos ... mighty agents of destruction",¹⁷⁸ one will appear who is equally convinced that the Vikings were a civilised and sophisticated people, who have been sorely maligned by history.

In *The Viking Art of War*, Paddy Griffith discusses the rise of what he calls the "War and Society counter-attack" against straight-forward raping and pillaging views of the Vikings. By this, Griffith means the school of argument which maintains that Viking warfare was only one aspect of their society, and that activities in one field of culture should not be judged by activities in another. According to Griffith, "the 'war and society' scholars have completely revolutionised our view of the vikings during the past two generations", and have "successfully come to dominate our view of the subject ... it has in effect become a new orthodoxy".¹⁷⁹

Griffith complains that the twentieth-century "war and society" revisionists, in their struggle against the proponents of Viking barbarism, have shifted the balance too far in the opposite direction, leading scholars to focus on Viking arts and crafts to the

¹⁷⁷ Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, pp. 382, 410-11.

¹⁷⁸ Oleson, "Viking-Tunit-Eskimo", p. 123.

¹⁷⁹ Griffith, *Viking Art of War*, pp. 24-5. This may be true, to an extent, but Griffith does not note that the "counter-attack" has roots far deeper than merely the past two generations. It was an important issue for many nineteenth-century students of the Vikings, as well, to emphasise the more positive characteristics of the Northmen.

detriment of understanding the role of warfare in their culture.¹⁸⁰ This imbalance can be clearly seen in the 1995 *Timewatch* television programme on the Vikings. The *Timewatch* account seeks to discredit the violent image of the Vikings, by showing that Vikings also farmed, fished, and produced works of art. This is of course true, but it does not negate the fact that war was also a part of Viking society.

The basic failing of *Timewatch's* approach is that it neglects to define the word "Viking". As discussed in Chapter One, above, "Viking" in its earliest definitions means "pirate" or "raider". It was not intended to refer, as it is generally taken to do in late twentieth century uses, to the entire society of "Viking Age" Scandinavia. Thus it would be perfectly valid to study and to publicise the peaceful and civilised aspects of the culture, while not denying that actual vikings -- in the vocational sense of the word, not a racial or cultural one -- were indeed warriors. But the *Timewatch* programme's approach demonstrates the defensiveness of many twentieth-century Viking scholars. Having had, for so long, to endure the Viking barbarian image, they feel obliged to race in entirely the opposite direction, insisting that Vikings were gentle and peaceful, and ignoring the fact that it is possible for gentleness and violence to co-exist.¹⁸¹

The question of the Vikings' barbarism or civilisation is a *cause celebre* in the late twentieth century. Interest in the Vikings' reputation has become intimately connected with the idea that the Vikings have been "done wrong" by history. Like King Richard III, whose problematic reputation has produced legions of passionate supporters, at least two appreciation societies, and innumerable pro-Richard historical novels, many supporters are drawn to the Vikings by the notion that an injustice has been done, that the Vikings have been misused and betrayed by the anti-Viking bias of historians. As a result of this emphasis, one late twentieth-century role of the Vikings, found with particular frequency in school history texts, is as an ultimate example of bias at work.

Bias, in these school texts, tends to appear as the great enemy, a danger lurking around the corner of every historical investigation. With their high profile conflicting images, the Vikings have been adopted as the perfect illustration of this bugbear.

¹⁸⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 24-5.

¹⁸¹ This point is discussed with down-to-earth humour in Terry Deary's *Horrible Histories: The Vicious Vikings*: "Some people get upset if you say the Vikings were vicious. They argue that the Vikings were a cuddly, loveable people who were really quite clever ... But the historians who say the Vikings weren't vicious are kidding themselves. What they should say is that the Vikings were no more vicious than the rest of the world at that time." (Deary, *The Vicious Vikings*, pp. 26 and 127.)

An example is M.V. Lyons' *Investigating History: Medieval Britain* (1987). This book, aimed at students from eleven to sixteen years of age, is designed to present its readers with "opportunities to investigate historical problems by using a wide variety of sources, as the emphasis in classrooms moves towards analysis, interpretation and evaluation of evidence."¹⁸² The first question posed on the back cover of the book is "How was the popular image of the Vikings formed and how close is it to reality?" The chapter "The Viking Image" opens with a drawing of Viking ships manned by horned-and-winged-helmeted men with blond beards, jauntily waving spears and axes and seemingly unperturbed by the arrows ploughing into their shields. The text comments, "Until recently the picture opposite was the view which most people had of the Vikings", adding that, like the "Red Indians", Vikings have been shown as "all looking the same and all being violent."¹⁸³

Lyons, like many other commentators on the Vikings' image, depicts the controversy as being "monks versus archaeologists".¹⁸⁴ The terrorised Early Medieval monks provide the Vikings' satanic image; archaeologists revise the picture through discovering more peaceful, domestic aspects of Viking period life. Another school text that presents this picture is Carolyn May's *Evidence and Investigations* (1990), aimed at Key Stage Three pupils (ages eleven through fourteen), which emphasises the detective-like role of the historian. After instructing students in techniques of "looking for bias",¹⁸⁵ May states:

Biased accounts can still be useful to us, provided that we can check the information or spot the things added on or left out.

However, sometimes, if we are not careful, we can end up with some distorted ideas.

Case Study -- Monks and Vikings.¹⁸⁶

The discussion of Vikings and bias in this work is illustrated with a cartoon of a rotund, distraught-looking monk at prayer, the thought balloon above his head showing

¹⁸² M. V. Lyons, *Investigating History: Medieval Britain* (Macmillan Educational Ltd., London), 1987, p. 6.

¹⁸³ *ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁸⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 27-33. See also Hazel Mary Martell, *Hidden Worlds: the Vikings and Jorvik* (Zoë Books Ltd., Winchester), 1993, pp. 4-5.

¹⁸⁵ Carolyn May, *Evidence and Investigations* (Hodder and Stoughton, London), 1990, pp. 20-1.

¹⁸⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 22-3.

nightmare visions of demonically fanged Viking warriors, and the text of his prayer being, "From ghoulies and ghosties and long legged beasties and from the wrath of the Northmen ... good Lord preserve us."¹⁸⁷ The monk and the entire "furious Northmen" concept are made to appear laughable, with the implication that intelligent students who see beneath the surface of history will learn to reject this distorted image.

Following a technique similar to that pursued by the *Timewatch* look at the Vikings, M.V. Lyons encourages pupils to take part in the renovation of the Viking image. Furious Viking bloodletters are out, Lyons suggests, and domestic peace-loving Vikings are definitely in. The activity suggested at the end of Lyons' Viking section is for pupils to design a pro-Viking "publicity package", with the revisionist Vikings personified by Hagar the Horrible:

Hagar the Horrible has decided to change his image! For too long he has tried to give the impression that he is a barbarous, violent, unfeeling brute. Now he feels that the time has come to show the more peaceful, positive side of his (and his countrymen's) character.

He has now hired a public relations company to update the Viking image ...

As a young, promising agent of this Public Relations Company, Scandsell, Ltd., you set out to see Hagar who lives in the Viking town of Jorvic [sic].

a) Using evidence in sources 11-20, make a list of the non-violent Viking activities which you will use to create a more positive view of the Vikings.

b) You now have to plan how to achieve a new image of the Vikings. Use some of the following methods to create a 'publicity package' which will give history a new view of Hagar ...¹⁸⁸

In many respects, it would appear that the development of the Viking image through the latter portion of the twentieth century has indeed been the work of "Scandsell Ltd.". The celebrated fame of the Viking barbarians has created their reverse image, the artists and fishermen of Scandsell Ltd. and *Timewatch*. But this viewpoint can only go so far before the Scandsell-style revisionists shoot themselves in the foot. For the appeal of the barbaric/civilised controversy regarding the Viking character depends on the Vikings' very notoriety as barbarians. One image cannot survive without the other, or at least cannot hope to maintain popular interest. Like the Freudian conception of the interdependence of order and disorder, both Viking extremes are

¹⁸⁷ *ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁸⁸ Lyons, *Investigating History*, p. 38.

dependent upon each other. If the Viking barbarians were wiped from popular consciousness, the demise of the peace-loving Vikings would not be far behind.

Chapter Five

Role Models

5.1. The professionals: Vikings as warriors and sailors

Vikings attract superlatives.

Whatever the Vikings do, a frequently-expressed outlook maintains, they do it to the full. Whether the image presented is of rampaging barbarian hordes or of highly trained professional soldiers, Vikings seem inevitably to gravitate toward extremes. They are simply the best in their field, whether that field be terrorising Europe, building the most advanced ships of their day, or sailing to where no man has gone before.

In the late twentieth-century pantheon of Viking interpretations, this idea of the super-Viking has great force. Across genres and media, one encounters the claim that the Vikings were "unique". Proof of this uniqueness varies, but two perceived features of the Vikings' character are most frequently called to testify: "their fighting prowess and their superb longships".¹ The Vikings of this interpretation are "among the most successful warriors in history",² and they possessed "the best ships in the world".³

5.1.1. A cow's death: Vikings and Valhalla

In the 1964 children's novel *The Namesake*, Viking commander Guthorm declares that Vikings "live to fight and are not afraid to die". He then goes on, encapsulating one of the most lasting concepts of the Vikings:

... we think to die in battle is the noblest end of a man. The blood-red battlefield is the pathway to Valhalla, where the warrior who has died fighting lives again, crowned forever in the glory of his battle deeds. That is why our young men seek the battle so eagerly, why they rejoice to kill and be killed. That is what has made us strong.⁴

¹ Robin May, *Life and times: Canute and the Vikings* (Wayland Publishers, Hove, East Sussex), 1984, p. 26.

² Michael Gibson, *Peoples of the Past: The Vikings* (MacDonald Educational Ltd., London), 1976, p. 40.

³ Jill Hughes, *Find Out About Vikings* (Hamish Hamilton, London), 1984, p. 11.

⁴ C. Walter Hodges, *The Namesake: A Story of King Alfred* (G. Bell and Sons Ltd., London), 1964, p. 195.

The concept of Valhalla has long been adduced as a cause of Viking pre-eminence in warfare. Valhalla and the Norseman's desire for death in battle are key elements of the Viking image, and have been since the earliest scholarly delvings into the Norse past. Early examples include a 720-page Latin volume dealing with the ancient Danes' contempt for death, published by Danish scholar Thomas Bartholin in 1689,⁵ and William Temple's *On Heroic Virtue* (1690), in which the dread of dying a peaceful death is seen as one of the main characteristics of ancient Northern society.⁶

The idea can be followed back to saga accounts. *Ynglinga saga*, the first work in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, relates the death of Odin, in this version a deified king. Odin dies in his bed, but "when he was near death he had himself marked with a spear point, and dedicated to himself all men who died through weapons."⁷ After Odin's death, the king who succeeds him also dies in bed, and has himself "marked for Odin before his death".⁸

In another saga example, the poet-hero of *Kormak's Saga* finds himself dying ignominiously, his ribs having been crushed in combat with a giant. Kormak bewails his fate in several verses, one of them using the term *kördauða* (implying death in a sick-bed) while another uses *strádauða* (straw-death).⁹ The "straw-death" concept also appears in *The Saga of Hakon the Good*, another volume of *Heimskringla*. Here, an elderly warrior remarks, "For a while during the long peace, I feared that I should die of old age in my straw bed, but I would rather fall in battle following my chief".¹⁰

⁵ Flemming Lundgreen-Nielsen, "Grundtvig's Norse Mythological Imagery -- An Experiment that Failed", in Andrew Wawn (ed.), *Northern Antiquity: The Post-Medieval Representation of Edda and Saga* (Hisarlik Press, Enfield Lock, Middlesex), 1994, pp. 42-3.

⁶ Jenny Howsam, *Twentieth Century Images of Vikings* (Centre for Medieval Studies, University of York), MA dissertation 1990-1, p. 18.

⁷ Snorre Sturlason, *Heimskringla, or the Lives of the Norse Kings*, edited with notes by Erling Monsen, translated into English with the assistance of A.H. Smith (Dover Publications Ltd., New York), reprint of W. Heffer edition 1932, reprint 1990, p. 6. The phrase used for Odin's dying in bed is *Odinn varð sottadauðr*, that for "men who died through weapons" is *vapn-dauða menn* (Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla, Noregs Konunga Sogur* Finnur Jonsson ed. (G.E.C. Gads Forlag, Copenhagen), 1911, p. 9, and Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 3 vols. (Mál og menning, Reykjavík), 1991, I. 13.).

⁸ Sturlason and Monsen, *Heimskringla*, p. 6.

⁹ Lee M. Hollander (ed.), *The Sagas of Kormak and the Sworn Brothers* (Princeton University Press, Princeton), 1949, pp. 71-2, and T. H. Möbius (ed.), *Kormaks saga* (verlag der buch handlung Des Waisenhauses, Halle), 1886, pp. 55-6.

¹⁰ Sturlason and Monsen, *Heimskringla*, p. 93.

Odin and his successor Niord apparently change the nature of their peaceful deaths through being ritually wounded. A similar attempt to rewrite one's death appears in a twelfth-century account of the c. 1055 death of Earl Siward of Northumbria (later to become a supporting character in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*).¹¹ The phrase used in this instance is "cow's death". Although the story is told in Anglo-Norman sources, it has been argued that the account shows strong resonances with Icelandic saga tradition. Siward's life is portrayed in a mixture of styles, moving from the fabulous, fairy tale world of works such as the *fornaldar* sagas, into the more political/historical arena of the *Heimskringla*.¹² Apparently Siward, a mighty and powerful warlord of Norse descent, was eventually struck down by disease. In Henry of Huntingdon's c. 1129 account, Siward remarks: "What a pity that I could not have died in so many battles to die at last like a cow". He goes on to command:

Put on my impenetrable byrnie, gird me with my sword, my
helm on my head, my shield in my left hand, put my gold
inlaid axe in my right, so that I, the bravest of warriors,
may still die like a champion.¹³

Building on such sources, it has become an integral part of the Viking mythos that a peaceful death is anathema to everything Vikings believe in. Popular and scholarly works alike make use of the theory that the Vikings' greatness as warriors was due to an almost pathological loathing for the prospect of dying in bed. Johannes Brøndsted, in *The Vikings* (1960), one of the most widely available general Viking Age studies, cites "a yearning for glory, a desire to excel in battle, and a scorn for death", as among the chief explanations of Viking expansion.¹⁴ The twentieth-century prevalence of the idea that Vikings fear peaceful death above all else has its immediate ancestry in nineteenth-century works, particularly the Viking-themed novels of that era, in which the

¹¹ Cited and discussed in Axel Olrik, "Siward Digri of Northumberland. A Viking-Saga of the Danes in England", *Saga Book of the Viking Club*, Vol. VI, Part II, January-December 1909 (Viking Society for Northern Research, London), 1910, pp. 212-37. For the full passage, see Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum: The History of the English People*, translated and edited by Diana Greenway (Clarendon Press, Oxford) 1996, pp. 379, 381.

¹² Olrik, "Siward Digri of Northumberland", pp. 218-221.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 217.

¹⁴ Johannes Brøndsted, *The Vikings* (Penguin Books, London), 1960, p. 27.

fear of a "cow's death" is depicted as a culture-wide paranoia.¹⁵

That this has become an immediately recognisable aspect of the Viking image is illustrated by the treatment the notion receives in Terry Jones' film *Erik the Viking* (1989). Here, a running joke involves one character taunting another with the accusation that his grandfather had died in bed, a slander which goads the grandson into murderous frenzy.¹⁶ The concept that eternity in Valhalla is available only to those who die as warriors is frequently taken to obsessive extremes. Attempts to change the symbolism of one's death, such as those employed by Odin, Niord and Siward, help create the notion in later works that in order to reach Valhalla it is necessary to die literally sword in hand. In the 1958 film *The Vikings*, the solemnly intoned prologue informs viewers that such a death is the greatest goal of every Viking: "The greatest wish of every Viking was to die sword in hand and enter Valhalla, where a hero's welcome awaited them from the god Odin".¹⁷ It is no longer good enough to perish in combat, now one must actually be clutching one's sword at the moment of death in order to obtain a passport to Valhalla. This device is used twice in the film. Both cases involve dying warriors -- one slain in a duel, the other about to be fed to wolves -- who beg onlookers to hand them a sword, so they may die with the assurance that they will dine in Odin's hall.

Children's non-fiction works, which play a major role in shaping new generations' ideas of the Vikings, continue to promote the Viking longing for violent death, citing it as a crucial ingredient in their greatness as warriors. *The Usborne Illustrated World History: The Viking World* (1993) states that "The greatest honour for a Viking warrior was to die fighting".¹⁸ *History Highlights: Viking Longboats* (1989) elaborates:

The Vikings who died in battle went to a special heaven. Odin sent warrior maidens called valkyries to carry them off to the great hall known as Valhalla. They would spend the rest of their days there feasting

¹⁵ Two examples in which the concept is especially prevalent are William O. Stoddard, *Ulric the Jarl* (Robert Culley, London), 1899, and Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Harold: The Last of the Saxon Kings* (J. M. Dent and Sons, London), 1848, this edition 1918, in which Siward himself appears and makes his "cow's death" comment.

¹⁶ Terry Jones (director), *Erik the Viking* (1989).

¹⁷ Richard Fleischer (director), *The Vikings* (United Artists), 1958.

¹⁸ Philippa Wingate and Anne Millard, *The Usborne Illustrated World History: The Viking World* (Usborne, London), 1993, p. 23.

and drinking. Knowing that Valhalla was their reward, Vikings [sic] soldiers showed great courage.¹⁹

Peoples of the Past: The Vikings (1976) repeats the notion that "warriors hoped to reach Valhalla by dying with a sword in their hand".²⁰ *Canute and the Vikings* (1984) gives a moralistic slant to the Valhalla discussion:

those who died in battle went straight to Valhalla. The rest were less lucky, going down to a land of snow and mists called Niflheim. This dismal belief led some to ask their friends to kill them to avoid going to Niflheim. Such is the power of myths and legends!²¹

5.1.2. Vikings and paratroops

Viking devotion to warfare may be portrayed as having other-worldly motivation, but its manifestations are eminently practical. They may hope to party for eternity, but while on earth the Vikings are ultra-serious and ultra-efficient practitioners of the art of war.

The notion of the super-Viking has its detractors. Two examples are Magnus Magnusson and Paddy Griffith, late twentieth-century authors whose works span the divide between scholarly and popular, and who caution against seeing Vikings as "fighting supermen"²² and "the invincible iron-men they have become in popular legend".²³ In Magnus Magnusson's view, the Vikings were "too loosely organized to be really effective as fighting units", and were "at their most successful as hit-and-run 'commandos'".²⁴ According to Griffith, the contribution of the Vikings to the art of war did not take the form of superior tactics or technology, but was simply "their exceptional energy and enthusiasm", which "gave a new meaning to the already perennial and

¹⁹ Margaret Mulvihill, *History Highlights: Viking Longboats* (Gloucester Press, London), 1989, pp. 20-1.

²⁰ Gibson, *Peoples of the Past*, p. 44.

²¹ May, *Canute and the Vikings*, p. 51.

²² Paddy Griffith, *The Viking Art of War* (Greenhill Books, London), 1995, p. 49.

²³ Magnus Magnusson, *Viking: Hammer of the North* (Orbis Publishing Ltd., London), 1976, this edition 1979, p. 29.

²⁴ *ibid.*

familiar concept of the seaborne barbarian".²⁵

Such statements notwithstanding, the fighting supermen image remains deeply ingrained. Competing against "loosely organized" Vikings such as those portrayed by Magnus Magnusson, we find the idea of the Vikings as a superbly disciplined, elite troop. This viewpoint can be clearly seen in the Osprey *Elites*, a military history series which places the Vikings alongside *The Paras: British Airborne Forces 1940-84*, *The US Marine Corps since 1945*, *US Army Special Forces 1952-84*, and *French Foreign Legion Paratroops*.²⁶ R. J. Unstead, discussing Viking invasions of England, makes the same equation in his school history text *Invaded Island*: "The sea-robbers took to regular warfare with the same sort of thoroughness used in training modern commandos and paratroops."²⁷

The popularity of the elite Viking impression may in part be due to the mythos of saga-extolled mercenary societies such as the Jomsvikings and the Varangian guard, with the legendary skill and discipline of these groups being extended to apply to Vikings as a whole. Both Jomsvikings and Varangians have proved popular in fictional interpretations, a large crop of nineteenth and twentieth-century novels tracing the adventures of these mercenary brotherhoods.²⁸ The Osprey *Elite* volume discusses the Jomsvikings separately, making it clear that not all Vikings would have followed the almost monastic discipline allegedly practised by the men of Jomsborg.²⁹ But in other cases the distinction is not so clear.

A particularly influential twentieth-century source for these depictions of

²⁵ Griffith, *Viking Art of War*, p. 209.

²⁶ Ian Heath, *Osprey Elite Series: The Vikings* (Osprey Publishing, London), 1985, back cover.

²⁷ R. J. Unstead, *Invaded Island: A Pictorial History, the Stone Age to 1086* (Macdonald Educational Ltd., London), 1971, this edition 1978, pp. 44-5.

²⁸ Examples include De La Motte Fouque's *Thiodolf the Icelander* (1815), in which the eponymous hero joins the Varangians in Byzantium, David Ker's *The Last of the Sea-Kings* (n.d., c. 1910), which follows the adventures of one-time captain of the Varangians King Harald Hadradi, Richard Strong's *King Harold's Son* (1946), which also takes its hero to Byzantium, and Henry Treece's 1950's-'60's series of novels on Harald Hadradi, as well as his 1963 *Horned Helmet*, which involves a band of Jomsvikings. The influence of the *Jómsvíkinga saga* can be seen in the number of novels which recount or adapt the famous incident of the Jomsvikings on the log, a particularly beloved illustration of the Vikings' contempt for death. Among the novels which use this sequence are Robert Leighton's *Olaf the Glorious* (1895), Mary Frances Outram's *In the Van of the Vikings* (n.d., c. 1910), Treece's *Horned Helmet*, and Frans Bengtsson's *The Long Ships* (published in Sweden in two volumes, 1941 and '45, English translation published 1954).

²⁹ Heath, *The Vikings*, p. 45.

disciplined Vikings seems to have been Winston Churchill's discussion of the topic in his *History of the English Speaking People*. Having described the Vikings' ships, Churchill moves on to give his impression of a typical Viking band:

... this superb instrument of sea-power would have been useless without the men who handled it. All were volunteers. Parties were formed under leaders of marked ability. In the sagas we read of crews of 'champions, or merry men': a ship's company picked no doubt from many applicants, 'as good at the helm as they were with the sword'. There were strict regulations, or early 'Articles of War', governing these crews once they had joined. Men were taken between the ages of sixteen and sixty, but none without a trial of his strength and activity. No feud or old quarrel must be taken up while afloat or on service. No woman was allowed on board. News was to be reported to the Captain alone. All taken in war was to be brought to the pile or stake, and there sold and divided according to rule.³⁰

Churchill, unfortunately, does not seem to have taken much interest in citing specific sources for this vision, beyond "in the sagas". One fairly clear influence on descriptions of Viking discipline such as that which Churchill gives is the *Jómsvíkinga saga's* account of the rules adopted by the Jomsborg Viking brotherhood:

... Pálna-Tóki with the advice of wise men gave Jómsborg laws with a view to increasing their fame and strength as much as possible. The first section of their laws was that no man should become a member who was older than fifty or younger than eighteen ... Kinship was not to be taken into consideration when those who were not members wished to be enrolled. No man must run from anyone who was as doughty and well-armed as himself. Each must avenge the other as his own brother. No one must speak a word of fear or be frightened in any situation however black things looked. Anything of value, however big or small it was, which they won on their expeditions was to be taken to the banner, and anyone who failed to do this was to be expelled. No one was to stir up contention there. If there was any news, no one must be so rash as to repeat it to all and sundry, as Pálna-Tóki was to announce all the news there. No one must have a woman in the city and no one must be away longer than three days.³¹

The *Frithjof's Saga* of Tegnér, which played such a central role in shaping nineteenth century impressions of the Viking world (see 2.2., above), is another likely source for visions such as Churchill's. One chapter in Tegnér's *Frithjof's Saga* is

³⁰ Winston S. Churchill, *A History of the English Speaking People, Vol. 1* (Cassell and Company Ltd., London), 1956, p. 73.

³¹ N. F. Blake (trans. and ed.), *The Saga of the Jomsvikings* (Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, London), 1962, pp. 17-8.

"Vikingabalk", or "The Vikings' Code".³² This code includes instructions for dividing booty, and states that women are not to be allowed on board ship.

In turn, Churchill's account seems to have directly influenced genres such as the late twentieth century Viking-themed juvenile non-fiction, which often place very similar emphasis on the detailed rules observed during Viking voyages, and on the stringent Viking code of honour. For instance *How They Lived: A Viking Sailor* (1986) specifies that "the crew had to follow very strict rules. No quarrelling was allowed on board, and women were forbidden to accompany men on raids. Special regulations decided how the plunder should be divided up."³³ Another markedly Churchill-esque impression is given in the Viking section of *Invaded Island*: a Viking ship's crew "were carefully chosen, for a man had to be as good with an oar as with a sword; all were volunteers between 16 and 60; all were equal under the captain, and all shared the plunder, which was divided according to custom."³⁴ *I Was There: Vikings* (1991) presents Viking warriors almost as chivalric paladins, in a striking reversal of the raping and pillaging image: "Viking raiders believed they were fair fighters. Their laws forbade them to attack farmers, traders or women. Nor were they allowed to attack a man who was already involved in a fight."³⁵ While such descriptions may have been true of certain Viking groups, they surely cannot be held to have characterised the Vikings as a whole. The continuing, indiscriminating use of these disciplined and rule-conscious portrayals, drawing on specific saga descriptions and on Winston Churchill's interpretation, helps add to the image of Vikings as "invincible iron-men".

The superbly disciplined Vikings had already appeared on the scene by the 1880's, when C. F. Keary penned his study *The Vikings in Western Christendom*.³⁶ Keary displayed mixed feelings about the Vikings. While their depredations against Christian

³² E. Tegnér, *Fritiof's Saga*, translated in the original metres by C. D. Locock (George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London), 1924, pp. 99-102, and *Poems by Tegnér: The Children of the Lord's Supper translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Frithiof's Saga translated by Rev. W. Lewery Blackley* (Humphrey Milford and Oxford University Press, London), 1915, pp. 148-51.

³³ Christopher Gibb, *How They Lived: A Viking Sailor* (Wayland Publishers, Hove, East Sussex), 1986, p. 10.

³⁴ Unstead, *Invaded Island*, p. 45.

³⁵ John D. Clare, *I Was There: Vikings* (The Bodley Head, London), 1991, pp. 16-7.

³⁶ C. F. Keary, *The Vikings in Western Christendom, A.D. 789 to A.D. 888* (T. Fisher Unwin, London), 1891, p. ix.

Europe are deplorable in Keary's presentation, the Vikings must nonetheless be admired for their superior military skill. Keary describes them as "mounted marines",³⁷ marvelling at the ease with which Vikings mastered warfare both on land and on sea, and rhapsodises over their use of the "sham flight" technique. This cocksure tactic, in which one retreats in order to lure the enemy out of formation, then turns again to wipe them out before they can regain their lines, is seen by Keary as "almost a special 'note' of the viking battle", and proof of their exceptional discipline.³⁸ Keary observes, "I think any general would admit that there have been but few disciplined armies in the world's history which could be trusted to execute such a manoeuvre as this."³⁹

Many of the points made in Keary's summation remain consistent elements of the twentieth-century Viking image. Examples are found in the children's novels *Mist Over Athelney* (1958), *The Namesake* (1964), and *Black Sun* (1980). *The Namesake* highlights Viking use of the sham flight tactic.⁴⁰ *Mist Over Athelney* emphasises the Vikings' dual prowess on land and sea, calling them "the best-equipped army in Europe".⁴¹ *Black Sun* emphasises Viking "speed and discipline", and makes a point of the weeks of "meticulous planning" and reconnaissance work that precedes each raid.⁴²

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 152.

³⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 143-4.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 143. It is difficult to find substantial sources for Keary's impression of the "sham flight" as a Viking trademark, but the idea has become an element of the standardised depictions of Vikings. Churchill, for instance, also believed in this aspect of Viking strategy: "... their strategies have been highly praised. Among them the 'feigned flight' was foremost. Again and again we read that the English put the heathen armies to rout, but at the end of the day the Danes held the field" (Churchill, *History of the English Speaking People*, p. 77.). This notion may be based on accounts in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, such as the comment that the English "for a long time in the day put them to flight", but that, in the end, "the Danish had possession of the place of slaughter" (M. J. Swanton (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (J. M. Dent, London), 1996, pp. 72-3). It seems, however, that this could equally refer to an actual change of fortune during the battle, rather than an intentional strategy of feigned retreat. One medieval description of feigned flight as a planned strategy is found in William of Malmesbury's account of the battle of Hastings, in which "They fought with ardour, neither gaining ground, for [the] greater part of the day. Finding this, William gave a signal to his party that, by a feigned flight, they should retreat" (G. A. Giles (ed.), *William of Malmesbury's Chronicle of the Kings of England from the Earliest Period to the Reign of King Stephen* (George Bell and Sons, London), 1889, p. 277). The technique is also reported of various Central Asian nomadic groups, such as the Hsiung-nu "barbarian" opponents of the Han Chinese (Ssu-Ma Ch'ien, *Records of the Grand Historian of China*, Vol. II, translated by Burton Watson (Columbia University Press, New York and London), 1961, p. 165).

⁴⁰ Hodges, *The Namesake*, p. 98.

⁴¹ Geoffrey Trease, *Mist Over Athelney* (Macmillan, London), 1958, this edition 1969, p. 235.

⁴² T. F. G. Jones, *Black Sun* (Granada Publishing, London), 1980, p. 16.

5.1.3. "No men on earth could sail the seas as they did"

Mention of the Vikings' military greatness seldom appears without its nautical accompaniment. What makes the Vikings most remarkable, it seems, is their combination of warrior skills and seamanship. There have been other great warriors in history, but the Vikings' ships make them something special. The longship is frequently used to symbolise the Viking Age as a whole, becoming the ultimate distillation of what it means to be a Viking.⁴³ The essence of this viewpoint is found in Churchill's poetical turn of phrase, "The soul of the Viking lay in the longships".⁴⁴ Or, to quote the 1995 *Timewatch* programme "Evidence of Vikings": "Vikings made ships. Ships made Vikings."⁴⁵

Kenneth Clark, in *Civilisation*, goes so far as to declare:

... if one wants a symbol of Atlantic man that distinguishes him from Mediterranean man, a symbol to set against the Greek temple, it is the Viking ship. The Greek temple is static and solid. The ship is mobile and light ...⁴⁶

It is a longstanding and hardy cliché that "the Vikings ruled the seas". This was the main thesis of Paul du Chaillu in his epic and eccentric study of *The Viking Age* (1889), and it remains a common perception in the late twentieth century. Viking dominance of the ocean is seen as consisting of two major elements: the excellence of the ships themselves, and the Vikings' unique skills of navigation.

The Viking ship is surrounded by enthusiastic hyperbole. Johannes Brøndsted's *The Vikings* provides a typical example: "The ships of the Vikings were the supreme achievement of their technical skill, the pinnacle of their material culture; they were the foundation of their power, their delight, and their most treasured possession."⁴⁷

It is frequently stated that a technological revolution in ship-building was one of the major causes of Viking expansion overseas. As Brøndsted summarises the ships'

⁴³ P. G. Foote and D. M. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement* (Book Club Associates, London), 1970, p. 232, James Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World* (Frances Lincoln Ltd., London), 1980, p. 38, and Else Roesdahl, *The Vikings* (Penguin Books, London), Danish edition 1987, English translation 1991, p. 83.

⁴⁴ Churchill, *History of the English Speaking People*, p. 72.

⁴⁵ Alan Ereira (writer and producer), *Timewatch*, "Evidence of Vikings" (BBC), 1995.

⁴⁶ Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation: a Personal View* (British Broadcasting Corporation and John Murray, London), 1969, p. 14.

⁴⁷ Brøndsted, *The Vikings*, p. 139.

evolution:

Compared with the older vessels of the Scandinavian Iron Age, the viking ships show several improvements in construction: the flat bottom plank is replaced by a true keel which serves as a backbone and is strong enough to resist the pressure of the water outside.⁴⁸

According to Gwyn Jones, "With her mighty keel and flexible frame and planking the Viking ship was an inspired combination of strength and elasticity."⁴⁹ The flexibility of Viking-designed ships has been remarked upon by the participants of voyages in reconstructed Viking vessels, whose experiences bear out the claim that "Viking ships were designed to be supple and to 'ride the punch' of the sea, rather than be rigid and battle against it."⁵⁰ Magnus Anderson, captain of the first such voyage in 1893, commented on the rudder of his facsimile Gokstad ship:

This rudder must be regarded as one of the conclusive proofs of our forefathers' acumen and skill in ship-building and seamanship. The rudder is a work of genius ... a man could steer with this tiller in all kinds of weather without the least discomfort.⁵¹

Also frequently claimed as a crucial development is the adoption of sails, which Foote and Wilson cite as "probably the most important element in the genesis of the Viking ship".⁵² Next to these technological marvels, the ships of other Viking Age Europeans are presented as out-dated and fairly pathetic. In extreme versions of this argument, readers are informed that "none of their [the Vikings'] neighbours had ships with sails, so none could travel as quickly".⁵³ Even when the argument is not taken so far, non-Vikings seem nonetheless to have drawn the short straw in nautical matters. According to Brøndsted, "The Vikings were skilful navigators, more confident on the sea than either the Anglo-Saxons or the Franks, and they had better ships."⁵⁴ In

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 141.

⁴⁹ Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings* (Oxford University Press, Oxford), 1968, p. 187.

⁵⁰ Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World*, p. 59.

⁵¹ Quoted in Brøndsted, *The Vikings*, p. 142.

⁵² Foote and Wilson, *Viking Achievement*, p. 240.

⁵³ Hughes, *Find Out About Vikings*, p. 11.

⁵⁴ Brøndsted, *The Vikings*, p. 17.

Graham-Campbell's version, "For 300 years the Vikings were the most accomplished shipbuilders and seamen of the northern seas".⁵⁵ Gwyn Jones sees the Vikings' combination of oar and sail as putting them far ahead of the competition: "By turning into the wind and making off by oar", he writes, the Viking ship "was almost immune from pursuit by the clumsier sailing ships of the lands she preyed on."⁵⁶

Alongside the perceived technological uniqueness of the Vikings' ships stands the concept of the Vikings' own uniqueness as sailors of daring and genius. The seas of Europe become a "Viking Lake",⁵⁷ where the Norse adventurers roam at will, unchallenged by their more timorous neighbours. "In nearly all other countries", we are told, "the sea was feared".⁵⁸ The *Timewatch* "Evidence of Vikings" dramatically proclaims that, "In this, at least, Vikings *were* different. They used the sea as others used the land ... in the eighth century the sea was like the sky, uncrossable"⁵⁹ -- except, of course, to the Vikings.

In the last several decades of the twentieth century, support has grown for the notion of Vikings as superb navigators, far ahead of their time. This idea has not always been a standard one. In the film *The Vikings*, for instance, much is made of the Norsemen's lack of navigational technology.⁶⁰ But Viking enthusiasts have long been intrigued by the question of how the Vikings navigated, and have not always taken so pessimistic a view.

In Rudyard Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906), a Viking captain uses a rudimentary compass, although admittedly the compass was introduced to him by a Chinese slave.⁶¹ One story-line to appear in the *Prince Valiant* comic strip in 1947

⁵⁵ Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World*, p. 37.

⁵⁶ Gwyn Jones, *History of the Vikings*, 187.

⁵⁷ Phrase borrowed from Joseph O'Neill, *Wind from the North*, (Jonathan Cape, London), 1934, p. 85.

⁵⁸ Palle Petersen, *Vikings* (Adam and Charles Black, London), Danish edition 1978, English language edition 1980, p. 12.

⁵⁹ Ereira, *Timewatch*, "Evidence of Vikings".

⁶⁰ As the film's prologue informs us, "The compass was unknown. They could steer only by the sun and the stars. Once fog closed in, they were left helpless and blind. After all, the world was flat. Sail too far off course, and the black wind would blow them across the poison sea which lay to the west, and over the edge of the world into limbo." (Fleischer, *The Vikings*.)

⁶¹ Rudyard Kipling, *Puck of Pook's Hill* (Macmillan, London), 1906, this edition 1981, pp. 79-80.

involves a young Viking navigator and ship-builder, who navigates using "a forerunner of the sextant".⁶² Donald Duck, trying to emulate the Viking way of life in the 1952 comic book *Donald Duck and the Golden Helmet*, takes great pride in navigating by the stars, as the Vikings would have done.⁶³

Two much-discussed tools of Viking navigation are the sunstone and the bearing-dial, or sun-compass. The nature of the sunstone, which is mentioned in several sagas, so far remains mysterious. Gwyn Jones suggests that the Vikings had "learned to make use of the light-polarizing qualities of calcite or Icelandic spar (*solarsteinn*, sun-stone), and could thus make an observation of the sun even when it was hidden from view."⁶⁴ Many writers accept this hypothesis as proven. However, modern attempts to re-enact this with pieces of Icelandic spar have thus far ended in failure,⁶⁵ and some writers on Viking subjects, such as Foote and Wilson, prefer to consign sunstones to the realm of fantasy.⁶⁶

A more widely saluted Viking navigational device is the bearing dial or sun-compass. Discussion and reconstructions of this are based on a wooden fragment excavated at Narsarsuqq, Uunartoq Fjord (Southern Greenland), in 1948. The identification of this fragment, "a small half-moon shaped wooden disk",⁶⁷ as part of a bearing dial was made in 1978, when incisions on the dial were recognised as gnomon curves, following the path of the sun. The gnomon is "a short wooden rod or cone, as on a sundial", at the centre of the dial.⁶⁸ Although not all Viking scholars are convinced by the bearing dial theory, it is now claimed in many discussions of Viking navigation that, through the use of the bearing dial, "the Norse navigator used the daily path of the

⁶² Harold R. Foster, *Prince Valiant, Volume 12: The New World* (Fantagraphics Books, Seattle), 1991, 2 March, 1947, 30 March, 1947, and Harold R. Foster, *Prince Valiant, Volume 13: The Sun Goddess* (Fantagraphics Books, Seattle), 1991, 16 November, 1947, 23 November, 1947, 4 January, 1948.

⁶³ Carl Barks, *Walt Disney's Donald Duck and the Golden Helmet*, Donald Duck no. 408 (Dell Publishing Co., New York), July-Aug. 1952, p. 18.

⁶⁴ Gwyn Jones, *History of the Vikings*, pp. 192-3.

⁶⁵ C. L. Vebæk and S. Thirlund, *The Viking Compass Guided Norsemen First to America* (Gullanders Bogtrykker, Skjern), English translation 1992, p. 34.

⁶⁶ Foote and Wilson, *Viking Achievement*, p. 255.

⁶⁷ Vebæk and Thirlund, *The Viking Compass*, p. 9.

⁶⁸ James Graham-Campbell, *Cultural Atlas of the Viking World* (Andromeda Oxford Ltd., Abingdon), 1994, p. 180.

sun's shadow to guide him".⁶⁹ (See Figure 33.)

Reconstructed bearing dials have had many practical trials, including use on Ragnar Thorseth's trans-Atlantic crossing in a replica Gokstad ship in 1991,⁷⁰ and a demonstration for *Timewatch's* "Evidence of Vikings" by Sir Robin Knox-Johnston, in which Knox-Johnston's modern boat, navigated only with the bearing dial, arrived less than one nautical mile from its intended destination. (See also 2.3., above.)

The bearing dial is hailed as proof of the Vikings' impressive knowledge and skill, adding to the image of Vikings as the superiors of their contemporaries, in technology as well as courage. The fact that Anglo-Saxons, Franks, and the rest of Europe may of course have had bearing dials as well has done little to dim the glowing picture.

As might be expected, there are arguments against the notion of unique Viking seamanship, just as there are against that of the fighting supermen. In *Dark Age Naval Power* (1991), John Haywood argues that "though we do know that the Vikings' ships were excellent, it does not necessarily follow that they were superior."⁷¹ He points out that archaeological evidence is largely lacking for the ships of the Vikings' contemporaries, thus giving the Viking ships more emphasis than may rightfully be due to them.⁷² Haywood also observes parallels between Viking exploits and those of the Anglians and Saxons before them, both periods of naval activity demonstrating "a phase of hit-and-run pirate raids ... a period when raiding colonies are formed ... and ... a prolonged period of settlement and consolidation."⁷³ As well, Haywood adds, "it is also

⁶⁹ Vebæk and Thirslund, *The Viking Compass*, p. 9. As Thirslund describes the process of constructing a bearing dial, "To make a sun compass at any place in the world: Place a circular wooden plate of about 20 centimetres in diameter horizontally in a place where the sun can shine on it during the whole day. In the centre, a gnomon (a shadow caster). Best is a cone with a height of 1 to 2 centimetres. In the morning when the sun begins to cast a shadow, mark the end of the gnomon's shadow and continue doing so throughout the day. If the marks are placed at each full hour, you also have a sun dial. In the evening the marks should be connected, and this makes the gnomon curve for that particular day, but in practice also for some days ahead.

"To divide the compass, mark the place on the curve nearest to the centre. This is where the shadow is shortest and the sun's altitude is highest, and a straight line through this mark and the centre is the north/south line from which the compass may be divided into compass points or degrees." (Vebæk and Thirslund, *The Viking Compass*, p. 24.)

⁷⁰ Vebæk and Thirslund, *The Viking Compass*, p. 28.

⁷¹ John Haywood, *Dark Age Naval Power: a re-assessment of Frankish and Anglo-Saxon seafaring activity* (Routledge, London), 1991, p. 133.

⁷² *ibid.*

⁷³ *ibid.*, pp. 61-2.

noteworthy that the range of the Saxons and their associates, from Orkney to Southern Spain, is only slightly less wide than that of the Vikings."⁷⁴

All that being said, it is still unlikely that the image of uniquely successful Viking seafarers will deflate swiftly, if at all. In historical consciousness, the unique is always more attractive and memorable than the ordinary, and the Vikings might soon be discarded if public opinion decided they were just like everyone else. At any rate, even widespread scholarly acceptance of Haywood's views would hardly change general perceptions overnight. One thinks of the horned helmets, debunked in the scholarly world for at least a century, but still amongst the most recognisable of Viking images (see 3.4., above).

Seafarers of genius, disciplined elite warriors: the images can turn Vikings into objects of adulation. At the very least, they serve to dilute more anti-Viking viewpoints. Even the writers who most vigorously lament the Vikings' predatory activities are often unable to entirely restrain their admiration. C.F. Keary praised the Vikings' military discipline while regretting their acts of piracy. The Vikings of novelist Geoffrey Trease, otherwise unredeemed ruffians, are still "men ... so long as they were at sea".⁷⁵ The Vikings in the novel *Madatan* (1974) are largely figures of distaste and contempt, but the fact remains that "No men on earth could sail the seas as they did."⁷⁶

The closing sequence of the children's book *How They Lived: A Viking Sailor* provides a romantically evocative last word:

The Vikings were much more than just savage fighters. Their skills as shipbuilders, craftsmen and explorers have become part of our heritage. The Viking sailor, battling across the Atlantic waves in his little ship, deserves our admiration.⁷⁷

5.2. Respectable merchants and honest pirates: mercantile Viking images

5.2.1. Trade and/or raid -- the chicken or the egg

The fortuitously pleasing rhyme of the phrase "trade or raid" is not the least among the factors that have led it to become a key catch-phrase in Viking discussions. The

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p. 62.

⁷⁵ Trease, *Mist Over Athelney*, p. 222.

⁷⁶ Peter Carter, *Madatan* (Oxford University Press, London), 1974, p. 30.

⁷⁷ Gibb, *A Viking Sailor*, p. 43.

phrase rolls off the tongue with a naturalness that perhaps tends to obscure its more tendentious aspects. Trade or raid is not as simple an opposition as it sounds, and there exist many competing readings of the Viking trade/raid dichotomy.

An essential part of the agenda for some Viking revisionists requires emphasis on peaceful trade at the expense of warlike Viking activities. Others in the Viking field tend to see mercantile activity as a subsidiary offshoot of violent contact, while to still others the two go hand in hand. Vikings would not be Vikings, in this third view, were they not equally adept at haggling with Arab merchants as at splitting Saxon skulls.

The trade/raid controversy gained momentum in the 1960's, and became perhaps the most crucial strand of late twentieth-century Viking debates. It is an aspect of the Viking image on which the impact of archaeological developments can be particularly clearly seen. Archaeological evidence to support the Viking trader and urbanite has multiplied exponentially during the same period in which the "trade" side of the conflict gained ground. Thus the Viking merchant and his⁷⁸ opponents can illustrate, with especial contemporary relevance, the interface of professional, academic, and popular visions.

a. Piracy

Foote and Wilson, in their 1970 work *The Viking Achievement*, mourn the fact that "The tendency to consider the Vikings only as pirates has obscured an important facet of their political and economic life."⁷⁹ James Graham-Campbell comments in his *The Viking World* (1980) that the image of Vikings as traders is less familiar than their raider persona.⁸⁰ Whether such comments still hold true is debatable -- at least among certain circles, in which the Viking raider barely makes an appearance amidst the crowds of industrious merchants. Still, it does seem valid to state that, until recent decades at least, the Viking pirate has received the lion's share of publicity. That Vikings are

⁷⁸ The Viking trader is stereotypically pictured as male, although there is evidence which could indicate considerable female involvement in the world of Viking commerce. See Anne Stalsberg, "Women as Actors in North European Viking Age Trade", in Samson, *Social Approaches to Vikings Studies*, pp. 75-83.

⁷⁹ Foote and Wilson, *Viking Achievement*, p. 196.

⁸⁰ Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World*, p. 88.

pirates has frequently been taken for granted.⁸¹

This is the attitude which informs Viking representations such as those in Scottish novelist Nigel Tranter's *Macbeth the King* (1978). Viking piracy is casually, even humorously, accepted, leading to observations such as "Unheard of, they paid for all they received -- or at least Thorfinn and Macbeth did -- however much it went against the grain of the Vikings."⁸² It is the "normal Viking fashion" simply to take, and it causes much amazement when the Vikings' leaders insist that they must pay for something.⁸³

A similar bantering note is struck in the characterisation of the Viking captain Boltar, in Harold Foster's long-running comic strip *Prince Valiant*. Six foot tall, red-bearded Boltar is, as he repeatedly informs anyone who will listen, a "respectable merchant and honest pirate". The standing joke is of course that Boltar is anything but respectable and honest. In the sequence during which Prince Valiant first encounters him, Boltar complains that he has been cheated out of his cargo by wily Greek merchants: "'the Greeks are smart, shrewd, nimble and have got the best of me'", he declares. Smart, shrewd and nimble they may be, but that does not stop Boltar and his crew from leaving port with a large, rich cargo: "'Just some stuff we picked up,' says Boltar, with a grin, 'my men find it here and there and bring it aboard just before we sail.'"⁸⁴ The sequence which appeared in newspapers the following Sunday encapsulates Foster's vision of Boltar and his Viking lifestyle:

Westward, ever westward glides the trim ship of Boltar, the Viking,
and half the navies of the world would like to lay this wily scoundrel by
the heels!

Occasionally they touch at small villages and for dried fruit and fish,
honey, wine and mead Boltar pays generously ... and there is rejoicing.

Now and then they do business with passing merchant ships, but in
a different way ... and there is much complaining.

⁸¹ This would of course be a perfectly reasonable attitude, given the probable derivation and original meanings of the term "viking". Modern usages, however, have muddied the waters, generally using "Viking" to embrace all aspects of early medieval Scandinavian society. See the discussion of this issue in 1.1.3., above.

⁸² Nigel Tranter, *Macbeth the King* (Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., London), 1978, this edition 1994, p. 272.

⁸³ *ibid.*, p. 140.

⁸⁴ Harold Foster, *Prince Valiant, Volume Two: Companions in Adventure* (Nostalgia Press and King Features Syndicate, New York), 1974, 21 December, 1941.

And once, because his rovers are spoiling for a fight, Boltar sacks and burns a fortified town on the African shore ...

They sail on, with much rich loot and many wounds, but call it a successful business transaction.⁸⁵

Boltar may insist that he is "really only an honest, hard-working merchant, piracy is only a sideline",⁸⁶ but Foster leaves his readers in no doubt as to which is the Viking sideline and which their main occupation.

Like Boltar and his men, the Vikings envisioned by saga scholar Jesse Byock can switch from trader to raider and back again at a moment's notice. Byock's summation of Viking activity for the *Timewatch* programme "Evidence of Vikings" is that: "the Vikings were opportunists". They would trade if they reached a village when its people were ready to defend themselves, but if the villagers were not on the alert, the Vikings would happily raid them.⁸⁷

The children's work *History of the World: the Early Middle Ages* (1993) adopts the theory that Vikings chose the trading option only when nothing else was possible: "While the Vikings were mostly pirates and invaders, they came as merchants to those areas which were too strong to be conquered."⁸⁸ *Life in the Time of Harald Hardrada and the Vikings* (1992), another work of juvenile non-fiction, also expresses a marked Viking preference for piracy:

People could just make a living by farming and trading, but both involved hard work and less effort was needed to go raiding. With any luck, they might find a rich monastery to plunder, but if not, they could always kidnap some prisoners to sell in the slave markets.⁸⁹

b. Trade

Else Roesdahl, in her study *The Vikings*, cites Viking piracy as a necessary first step in the development of the Scandinavian countries' more peaceful economic activities. In this analysis, "The plundering of foreign lands and tributes paid by

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 28 December, 1941.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 23 August, 1942.

⁸⁷ Ereira, *Timewatch*, "Evidence of Vikings".

⁸⁸ Brian William, Remo Berselli and Antonio Molino, *History of the World: The Early Middle Ages* (Cherrytree Books, Bath), Italian edition 1989, English translation 1993, p. 55.

⁸⁹ Peter Speed, *Life in the Time of Harald Hardrada and the Vikings* (Cherrytree Books, Bath), 1992, p. 30.

subjugated people were partly responsible for the spread of wealth and goods. Trade and industry grew apace ..."90 Foote and Wilson give a similar interpretation: "... they began to shed their piratical past and trade became of paramount importance. Once the Vikings had settled in a new land they quickly became acclimatized to its political structure and with their adventurous background became competent traders."91

This theory is frequently reversed. Du Chaillu's influential 1889 tome *The Viking Age* holds that the Vikings were traders before they were plunderers. Du Chaillu writes, "The maritime expeditions of the Northmen to distant lands were undertaken with a great deal of care and foresight ... their previous knowledge of these far-off lands was no doubt gained in trading, and it was only after being thoroughly well-acquainted with the geography of the part to be attacked that they ventured on their invasion."92 As well, Du Chaillu adds, "the people of the North were, from very early times, great traders."93 The same basic views appear in a very different setting in Haywood's 1995 *Historical Atlas of the Vikings*: "Scandinavian trade with the rest of Europe increased in the 8th century and probably encouraged the Viking expansion. Scandinavians on trading voyages would have become aware of the unguarded riches of western Europe ..."94

Trading and the haggling skills it requires can be seen as integral to the Viking nature. Thus Henry Treece asserts in the Author's Note to his novel *Horned Helmet* that the "Vikings were great bargainers on everything."95 The opposite side of the theory mentioned above that "less effort was needed to go raiding" appears in Graham-Campbell's observation "Piracy was all very well, but it could hardly supply a steady income of the kind that might be had, for instance, by supplying the Arabs with slaves in exchange for their excess wealth of silver."96 Of course, piracy is a great assistance

⁹⁰ Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, p. 108.

⁹¹ Foote and Wilson, *The Viking Achievement*, p. 196.

⁹² Paul B. Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age: The Early History, Manners and Customs of the Ancestors of the English-Speaking Nations*, Volume I (John Murray, London), 1889, p. 177.

⁹³ *ibid.*, p. 209.

⁹⁴ John Haywood, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of the Vikings* (Penguin Books, London), 1995, p. 38.

⁹⁵ Henry Treece, *Horned Helmet* (Puffin Books, London), 1963, p. 8.

⁹⁶ Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World*, p. 88.

in the process of acquiring slaves to sell, illustrating the point that trade and raid are very often inter-related.

This idea of commerce as an essential part of the Viking character has been current since at least the mid-nineteenth century, although the Viking merchant did not for a long time receive the amount of attention lavished on his warrior compatriots. Charles Kingsley observes in *Hereward the Wake* (1866) that

The Norse trader of those days, it must be remembered, was none of the cringing and effeminate chapmen who figure in the stories of the Middle Ages. A free Norse or Dane, himself often of noble blood, he fought as willingly as he bought, and held his own as an equal, whether at the court of a Cornish Kinglet or at that of the great Kaiser of the Greeks.⁹⁷

As Otilie Liljencrantz's *The Thrall of Leif the Lucky* (1902) notes, "Peaceful merchants were also men of war between times in those days".⁹⁸

One such merchant and man of war is portrayed in T. F. G. Jones' 1980 children's novel *Black Sun*. This character, Hoskuld Wanderer, is at first scorned by the novel's young protagonist for being a trader rather than a warrior, but eventually he proves himself a skilled and cunning war-leader, more successful by far than the fighters who rely only on their strength. Of Hoskuld, Jones writes:

Some spoke of the great wealth he had amassed in his home among the skerries of Jutland, yet he lived like a hermit and never stayed home long enough to enjoy what he had earned. He was a roamer and a bargainer. He was known from Iceland to the Baltic, from Athens to Cologne: abused by some, trusted by more, buyer and supplier, dealer and carrier, serving Arab princeling and Irish chieftain with impartiality, even (it was said) Harald Bluetooth, King of Denmark, and the Byzantine Emperor himself. He presented a quiet, un-assuming face to the world, haggled with firm intelligence, and knew how to slip his moorings before dawn before a customer could change his mind. Robbers took his hard prices with a meek shrug, Galloway farmers found him fair, Uppsala wives knew there were delights in cloth and jewellery to be winkled out of his chests and jars and bags.⁹⁹

Writers such as Roesdahl and Haywood, whose works find both a scholarly and a popular audience, emphasise the part-time nature of many Viking occupations.

⁹⁷ Charles Kingsley, *Hereward the Wake* (Everyman's Library, London), 1866, this edition 1908, p. 58.

⁹⁸ Otilie A. Liljencrantz, *The Thrall of Leif the Lucky: A Story of Viking Days* (A. C. McClurg and Co., Chicago), 1902, this edition 1904, p. 16.

⁹⁹ T. F. G. Jones, *Black Sun*, pp. 10-1.

Roesdahl writes, "There must have been merchants in huge trading centres such as Birka and Hedeby for whom trade was their sole occupation, but many Scandinavian traders had agriculture, hunting or fishing as their main occupation and only went on trading expeditions from time to time".¹⁰⁰ Haywood adds fighting to the list of part-time Viking activities: "Some Scandinavians made a living exclusively as merchants, but most were part-timers who engaged in farming, crafts or even piracy. The most valuable goods were initially acquired as plunder or tribute."¹⁰¹

The late twentieth-century children's non-fiction works have eagerly taken up the theme of Vikings as all-rounders. A typical summary of Viking lifestyles appears in *Life and Times: Canute and the Vikings* (1984): "The Viking world was not divided into traders and warriors. Some were both. A man who had been slaughtering and pillaging a month earlier might be found in the market place getting a good price for his loot."¹⁰² S. C. George's *The Vikings* (1973), though generally emphasising the Norsemen's "ferocious" aspects, states "Trade and piracy went hand in hand",¹⁰³ and *Craft Topics: Vikings* (1992) holds that "Raiding and trading went together, and the Vikings were good at both."¹⁰⁴

5.2.2. Urban images and politically correct Vikings

5.2.2.a. Viking towns

Trade and raid are not always so evenly matched. Viking images in the late twentieth century are a battleground, with the warlike Viking reputation under attack by scholars and enthusiasts who are determined to promote more peaceful, domestic Viking visions.

The "peaceful Vikings" movement has been supported by dramatic recent increases in archaeological knowledge of Viking Age towns. Helen Clarke and Björn Ambrosiani, in their *Towns in the Viking Age* (1991), refer to the "spectacular growth in the number of archaeological excavations during the past thirty years" which has made such a study

¹⁰⁰ Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, pp. 118-9.

¹⁰¹ Haywood, *Historical Atlas of the Vikings*, p. 38.

¹⁰² May, *Canute and the Vikings*, p. 37.

¹⁰³ S. C. George, *The Vikings* (David & Charles, Newton Abbot), 1973, p. 11.

¹⁰⁴ Rachel Wright, *Craft Topics: Vikings* (Franklin Watts, London), 1992, p. 5.

possible.¹⁰⁵ Clarke and Ambrosiani's survey examines a large number of sites, "newly discovered through archaeological excavations, mostly small markets and manufacturing centres".¹⁰⁶ But while such sites will no doubt have an impact on future Viking representations, the majority of the urban scenes in late twentieth-century works are based on a handful of excavations, most of which also either date from the latter half of the twentieth century or have been vastly extended during that period: Birka in Sweden, Hedeby (now within the borders of Germany), Ribe in Denmark, Kaupang in Norway, Dublin in Ireland, and York in England. Of these, the Birka and Hedeby excavations were the most influential until Dublin and York, in Else Roesdahl's words, "took the world by storm".¹⁰⁷

Birka, Sweden's largest town during the Viking Age,¹⁰⁸ was the earliest to be excavated, with some initial investigations being made in the seventeenth century, and the cemetery being first studied in the 1820's.¹⁰⁹ The main period of archaeological work at Birka, on which most reports and analyses have been based, took place from the 1870's to the 1890's. The majority of this work was on Birka's graves, providing much detailed information about the inhabitants of the town, but little on how the town itself would have appeared. Since 1990, work has been in progress on Birka's occupational layers, and knowledge of the buildings and the town's plan is increasing.¹¹⁰ But for tangible impressions of a Viking town's appearance, the emphasis has, until recently, largely fallen on Hedeby.

The site of Hedeby was discovered near the end of the nineteenth century,¹¹¹ and

¹⁰⁵ Helen Clarke and Björn Ambrosiani, *Towns in the Viking Age* (Leicester University Press, Leicester and London), 1991, p. 1.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁰⁷ Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, p. 20. The Dublin excavations began in 1962 and were expanded in 1974-81, and the Coppergate dig at York was in progress 1976-81.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁰⁹ Richard Hodges, *Dark Age Economics* (Gerald Duckworth and Co. Ltd., London), 1982, p. 85.

¹¹⁰ Graham-Campbell, *Cultural Atlas of the Viking World*, p. 86.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 81.

the major excavations took place in the 1930's and the 1960's.¹¹²

James Graham-Campbell writes of Hedeby that

only about 5 percent of the area of the Viking town has so far been uncovered. Nevertheless, this is a far greater expanse than has been investigated in any other such Viking Age settlement. The layout of Hedeby's wooden-paved streets can be traced in great detail, as can the groundplans of the buildings that served as dwellings, workshops and stores for the inhabitants of this prosperous trading center.¹¹³

Hedeby's impact can be clearly seen in the representations of Viking towns. Children's works such as *The Time Traveller Book of Viking Raiders* (1976) and *I Was There: Vikings* (1991) use scenes in Hedeby as their portrayal of Viking merchant activity, the accompanying illustrations matching the archaeological picture in which "Rectangular houses of two or three rooms were arranged in yards surrounded by ditches and wooden fences. The short side of the yards faced wooden-paved streets, probably essential in a place that must frequently have been flooded."¹¹⁴ *The Usborne Illustrated World History: The Viking World* (1993) does not identify its "reconstruction of a Viking trading town and its port" as Hedeby, but the illustration is identical to descriptions of Hedeby and other pictorial representations of the town.¹¹⁵ (See Figure 34.) *The Everyday Life of a Viking Settler*, a fictionalised account of Viking Age urban life, focuses on the son of a "brave and wealthy merchant" whose home is in Hedeby.¹¹⁶

Archaeological findings are assisted in creating images of the Viking town by literary descriptions surviving from the Viking era or shortly after. In some cases, the descriptions have inspired the excavations, such as those at Kaupang that were motivated

¹¹² Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World*, p. 94. A telling example of the differing ways in which evidence can be used appears in discussion of the Hedeby excavations. Although in later twentieth-century works the town is largely used as an illustration of domestic and mercantile Viking activities, in 1938 quite different aspects commended themselves to Herbert Jankuhn, who was seeking in the site evidence for the superiority of the German character. According to W. J. McCann, "No shields were found at Haithabu [Hedeby]. Jankuhn comments that the almost total absence of protective weapons 'is probably connected with the individual nature of the Germani and their attitude to combat, which was conditioned by their blood ... in the same way as their refusal to build fortresses'". (W. J. McCann, "'Volk und Germanentum': the presentation of the past in Nazi Germany", in Peter Gathercole and David Lowenthal (eds.), *The Politics of the Past* (Routledge, London), 1994, p. 83.)

¹¹³ Graham-Campbell, *Cultural Atlas of the Viking World*, p. 80.

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 83.

¹¹⁵ Wingate, *Usborne Illustrated World History*, pp. 18-9.

¹¹⁶ Giovanni Caselli, *The Everyday Life of a Viking Settler* (Macdonald and Co. Ltd., London), 1986, p. 5.

by the desire to test whether Kaupang could be identified with the trading centre "Sciringes heal", mentioned by Norwegian trading magnate Ohthere/Ottar in his audience with King Alfred the Great.¹¹⁷ Ohthere also mentioned Hedeby; Hedeby, Birka and Ribe were briefly discussed in the ninth-century *Life of Ansgar*,¹¹⁸ and Hedeby was given a detailed, if somewhat snide, description by the tenth-century Arab traveller Al-Tartushi, from Cordoba. We are indebted to Al-Tartushi for his vivid and often quoted report of Hedeby, including such features as animal sacrifice, personal hygiene, cosmetics, infanticide, and Viking singing skills (in most of these categories, he was far from favourably impressed). Al-Tartushi's descriptions are frequently used in children's works, which make the most of his colourful details, regaling young readers with images of badly singing Vikings in eye make-up. His account of animal sacrifice -- in which "He who slaughters a sacrificial animal erects a wooden scaffolding by the door of his house and places the animal upon it, be it an ox or a ram or a he-goat or a pig. Then people know that he has honoured his god"¹¹⁹-- makes its way into many depictions of Viking towns. Sacrificed animals, for instance, appear in the town scenes of *The Time Traveller Book of Viking Raiders*, *The Usborne Illustrated World History* and *Everyday Life of a Viking Settler*, while the time-travelling Viking Sigurd, who arrives from Viking Age Hedeby to invade the family of a late twentieth-century English hotel owner in the novels *There's A Viking in My Bed* and *Viking in Trouble*, greatly distresses his modern hosts by displaying sacrificed chickens on the hotel roof.¹²⁰

5.2.2.b. The politically correct adventures of Jorvik

Given the vast emphasis placed on Viking Age York in works that post-date the 1984 opening of the Jorvik Viking Centre, it is surprising to realise how very little was known of Jorvik before the late 1970's Coppergate excavation. Like Birka, Hedeby and Ribe, it has its medieval literary mentions, appearing in *Egil's Saga* and being described in the c. 1000 *Life of St. Oswald* as:

¹¹⁷ Hodges, *Dark Age Economics*, p. 81. Major excavations at Kaupang were begun in 1956. (Foote and Wilson, *Viking Achievement*, p. 213.)

¹¹⁸ Graham-Campbell, *Cultural Atlas of the Viking World*, p. 81.

¹¹⁹ Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, p. 153.

¹²⁰ Jeremy Strong, *There's a Viking in My Bed* (Puffin Books, London), 1990, this edition 1992, pp. 58-60.

Once nobly built (by the Romans) and most solidly constructed with walls which are not decayed by age, indescribably rich, packed with the goods of merchants who come from all over but especially from the Danes, a multitude of people numbering 30,000, not counting infants ...¹²¹

Detailed archaeological knowledge of York's Viking period, however, was scarce. In 1970, the statement appeared in Foote and Wilson's *The Viking Achievement* that "The archaeological evidence [for Viking towns in Britain] ... is very slender. Only one structure -- a wharf at York -- can be associated with any certainty with the Viking period, for the rest we rely on casual finds".¹²² Just six years later, Jorvik -- or more precisely, the Jorvik Viking Centre reconstruction -- was well on its way to becoming *the* image of the Viking town.

When it opened, the Jorvik Centre was feted as the advance guard of a new era in museum presentation, a high-tech and user-friendly "heritage centre".¹²³ It continues to be widely publicised as a must-see tourist attraction, retaining its high profile through such routes as its association with York's annual (since 1985) Jorvik Viking Festival.

The Jorvik Centre made an immediate impact on ideas of how Vikings should be represented. The National Curriculum history guidelines mention Vikings in York as a possible "aspect of the local community during a short period of time" that children might study in their Study Unit Five local history unit,¹²⁴ and even before the Jorvik Centre opened, photographs and reports from the dig were frequently appearing in juvenile non-fiction works. For example the "Beans Series" book *Vikings*, published in 1980 as part of a series which "explores the lives of ordinary people, both past and present",¹²⁵ makes extensive use of photographs from the excavation, including the remains of workshops, wooden cups and bowls, antler combs, and a leather boot, placed,

¹²¹ M.V. Lyons, *Investigating History: Medieval Britain* (Macmillan Education Ltd., London), 1987, p. 33. More conservative modern estimates suggest that Viking Age York's population may in fact have been closer to 10,000 or 15,000. (Richard Hall, *English Heritage Book of Viking Age York* (B. T. Batsford Ltd. and English Heritage, London), 1994, p. 42.)

¹²² Foote and Wilson, *Viking Achievement*, p. 218.

¹²³ For an early discussion of the Centre's aims, see Peter Addyman and Anthony Gaynor, "The Jorvik Viking Centre: An Experiment in Archaeological Site Interpretation", in *The International Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship* 3 (1984), pp. 7-18.

¹²⁴ *History in the National Curriculum* (Department for Education, HMSO, London), January 1995, p. 9.

¹²⁵ Petersen, *Vikings*, back cover.

for the purposes of the photograph, onto a bone ice-skate.¹²⁶ The 1986 school text *Presenting the Past* includes in its Viking section photographs of one of the Jorvik Centre's tableaux -- a woman and children gathered around a loom -- and of an antler comb and a boot, also included in the Centre's exhibition.¹²⁷ *Investigating History: Medieval Britain* (1987) also relies heavily on photos of the Jorvik Viking Centre's reconstruction and artefacts, including a scene around the hearth in a Viking house, an antler-carver at work on his combs, a leather-worker's stall, and a selection of bowls, combs and beads.¹²⁸

Based on the corpus of 1980's and '90's juvenile non-fiction on Vikings, one could be forgiven for thinking that all Vikings lived in Jorvik. Images from the Centre's reconstruction are reproduced time and again, not only in photographs but also in original illustrations based on the exhibition's tableaux. Some works, such as *What Happened Here? Viking Street* (1994) and *Hidden Worlds: Vikings and Jorvik* (1993) are straight-forward companion pieces to the Jorvik Viking Centre reconstruction, with their paintings of Jorvik street scenes copying the JVC displays in detail.¹²⁹ Other books introduce their Jorvik scenes more indirectly. *The Everyday Life of a Viking Settler*, discussed above, embodies the shifting emphasis in Viking urban images from Hedeby to Jorvik. Like so many pre Jorvik Viking Centre works, *Viking Settler* uses Hedeby as its archetypal Scandinavian merchant town. But partway through the book, the hero's father decides to move the family to England -- where, unsurprisingly, they settle in Jorvik, on the very street which appears in the JVC reconstruction.

Such frequent appearances of the Jorvik Viking Centre contribute to an over-emphasis on the importance of the excavation and the Centre. A Vikings work published in conjunction with the National Curriculum history programme makes the statement that the Coppergate site is "one of the most important sites outside

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

¹²⁷ Haydyn Middleton and Henrietta Leyser, *Presenting the Past, Book One: Invasion and Integration* (Oxford University Press, Oxford), 1986, p. 47.

¹²⁸ Lyons, *Investigating History*, pp. 34-7.

¹²⁹ *Hidden Worlds: The Vikings and Jorvik* does however present a rather more glamorised picture than that presented by the Jorvik Viking Centre. The townspeople in its illustrations are considerably more slender, graceful and cheerful than the stunted and bad-tempered-looking mannequins of the Jorvik Centre's original displays. (Hazel Mary Martell, *Hidden Worlds: The Vikings and Jorvik* (Zoë Books Ltd., Winchester), 1993, pp. 18-9.)

Scandinavia",¹³⁰ which is a reasonable claim. Other works, however, go much further. In *Indiana Jones Explores: the Vikings* (1994), the claim is made that the Coppergate excavation "has done more than any others to bring the lost world of the Vikings back to life",¹³¹ an assertion which unfairly ignores the contribution of Scandinavian sites. The omnipresence of JVC images even leads the author of *Life in the Time of Harald Hardrada and the Vikings* (1992) to state that the "entire town" of Jorvik has been excavated.¹³²

Richard Hall, in the *English Heritage Book of Viking Age York* (1994), attempts to provide a more balanced portrayal. He points out that the Coppergate excavation covers only "1/400 of the town itemized in *Domesday Book*", and acknowledges that excavation of other areas might reveal very different facets of life in Viking York from those that Coppergate brought to light.¹³³ The Coppergate craftsmen would not have had the town to themselves, and Hall observes that Jorvik must have also held "the aristocrats' town houses or halls, at one end of the social spectrum, and ... hovels and shanties at the other".¹³⁴ Further, Jorvik is not immune to the difficulties of interpreting Viking Age towns, as pointed out by Clarke and Ambrosiani:

These aspects [street plan and plot arrangement] of Viking-age towns are very difficult to describe in general terms, as so little of the total area of any town has been excavated, and the dwelling surfaces have often been disturbed by later agricultural use, or are still occupied. In no case has a complete town plan from the Viking age been retrieved ... no study of early town plans can be complete because the areas which have been archaeologically excavated are small, at best comprising no more than a few per cent of the total occupied area (0.125 per cent in York and 5 per cent in Hedeby, for example).¹³⁵

It is hardly appropriate, then, to use the Coppergate site as a representative example of Viking Age urbanism, and still less to claim that it encapsulates the Viking world. However, the mercantile and domestic slant of the remains recovered at

¹³⁰ Hazel Mary Martell, *Project Homework: Vikings* (Franklin Watts, London), first published 1993 as *Clues to the Past: Viking Times*, this edition 1996, p. 6.

¹³¹ John Malam, *Indiana Jones Explores: the Vikings* (Evans Bros. Ltd., London), 1994, p. 15.

¹³² Speed, *Harald Hardrada and the Vikings*, p. 9.

¹³³ Hall, *Viking Age York*, pp. 80-1.

¹³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 81.

¹³⁵ Clarke and Ambrosiani, *Towns in the Viking Age*, pp. 138-9.

Coppergate fit in well with the agenda current in Viking studies at the time of the excavation, an agenda which sought to promote peaceful, industrious Viking images at the expense of more bloodthirsty versions.

These priorities are clearly stated in York Archaeological Trust director Peter Addyman's 1994 discussion of the Jorvik Centre and its genesis. The Centre's goal, Addyman writes, is to present "worthy and responsible messages", showing the Viking age in Britain "in quite a different light from the conventional one".¹³⁶ This "conventional light" which the JVC is to overcome is represented by Addyman's account of market research undertaken at the time of the Centre's development: "This research showed misconceptions as fundamental as the belief that the Viking age came before the Roman age (because Vikings were 'more primitive'). Horned helmets were still synonymous with Vikings in the popular mind, despite half a century of archaeological publicity to the contrary."¹³⁷

The tableaux in the Jorvik Centre sedulously avoid horned helmets, but they also, it seems, go out of their way to avoid more archaeologically justifiable hints of Viking warfare. To be sure, the leather-worker's stock does include sword scabbards,¹³⁸ and one of the characters appearing in the reconstructed market place is intended to be a renowned war-leader mentioned in *Egil's Saga*.¹³⁹ The voice-over conversation in several of the scenes, moreover, concerns the adventures of famed maverick warrior Egil Skallagrimsson.¹⁴⁰ These details, however, are unlikely to be recognised by most casual visitors to the Jorvik Centre, unless they know Icelandic and/or have bought all of the relevant guide books. A ship does appear in the Coppergate reconstruction, but it is a trading vessel, with men unloading a cargo of herring,¹⁴¹ rather than returning from a rape and pillage outing.

¹³⁶ Peter V. Addyman, "Reconstruction as interpretation: the example of the Jorvik Viking Centre, York", in Gathercole and Lowenthal, *Politics of the Past*, pp. 262-3.

¹³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 258.

¹³⁸ Lyons, *Investigating History*, p. 36.

¹³⁹ Christine E. Fell, *Jorvikinga Saga: The Saga of the Jorvik Vikings* (Cultural Resource Management, York), 1984, p. 10.

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 16.

It can be argued that the firmly non-warlike emphasis is valid, as it simply reflects what was found in the Coppergate dig. Richard Hall writes that "The random sample of archaeological evidence, small though it is, does not support a picture of York as a military encampment ... Instead, the evidence points to Jorvik increasingly becoming a manufacturing and commercial centre."¹⁴² Weapons finds, such as a spearhead from a 1993 excavation on North Street¹⁴³ and "a bronze chape for the end of a sword scabbard, decorated in the [Viking Age Scandinavian] Jellinge style",¹⁴⁴ are seen as the exceptions that prove the rule. However, Hall himself has suggested several factors that might cast doubt on this entirely civilian emphasis: the small size of the archaeological sample, the possibility that different types of remains wait to be found in other areas of the city, and the point that "Admittedly, weapons were too costly to be discarded; their metal content made them worth recycling, and thus they are an infrequent discovery on occupation sites."¹⁴⁵

The civilian, mercantile interpretation was not the only possible route the designers of the Jorvik Centre could have taken. It was, however, the one that best served the message they hoped to send. Peter Addyman calls the Jorvik Viking Centre "a propaganda machine for the Vikings and for archaeology", and hails it as a success, observing that "in a small survey (80 people), 81 per cent admitted that they now thought differently of the Vikings, for instance considering them more civilised."¹⁴⁶

Civilization is all very well, but the question arises as to whether the kinder, gentler interpretation embodied by Jorvik Viking Centre is in fact an improvement on Vikings of the rapacious, marauding variety. One possible response to the Jorvik Centre is to feel that its Vikings are missing something essential. They have lost that feeling of excitement, the breath of sea air and adventure, which has helped to make the Vikings meaningful cultural icons. (See 5.4., below.) This is the attitude expressed by the narrator of the *Timewatch* "Evidence of Vikings". The JVC is called "a Viking centre without, when you come down to it, much sign of the Vikings", and the narrator

¹⁴² Hall, *Viking Age York*, p. 83.

¹⁴³ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World*, p. 100.

¹⁴⁵ Hall, *Viking Age York*, p. 83.

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 262.

comments that "the new Viking is a decent, respectable migrant, and quite frankly, a little dull."¹⁴⁷

Debate continues on whether the Viking civilian can be as thrilling a figure as his warrior counterpart. Foote and Wilson emphasised the glamorous side of the Vikings' merchant image:

The trading connections of the Vikings demonstrate the far-flung extent of their contacts. It was the Vikings who extended the existing eastern trade-routes through Russia from the Baltic to the Arab worlds; they it was who traded with Byzantium and North Africa, with Lapland and with England. Silver and gold poured into their homeland; silks, furs and wine formed part of their stock-in-trade. But the very glamour of these world-wide connections sometimes causes scholars to ignore the problem of internal trade ...¹⁴⁸

On the other hand Erik Wahlgren, in a publication of 1986, writes that "The day to day activities of hewers of wood and drawers of water, of farmers, fishermen, housewives and children in 9th, 10th or 11th century Scandinavia do not form a large part of our modern world picture. The excitement and horror of a Viking raid fill the vacuum nicely."¹⁴⁹

This comment is germane to the problem of the Jorvik Viking Centre. However strenuously the warrior image is avoided in the reconstruction, in the Centre's gift shop it returns in full force. Visitors are bombarded with "Erik Bloodaxe Rules" t-shirts and images of Garfield the Cat in horned helmet, cheerfully brandishing an axe. The painting on a Jorvik Centre jigsaw puzzle shows a bloody battle scene. The pamphlet *Jorvikinga Saga*, a transcript and discussion of the voice-over conversations in the Centre's tableaux, bears on its cover a cartoon of armed-to-the-teeth warriors leaping from the side of their dragon ship, with no relevance whatever to the pamphlet's contents.¹⁵⁰ Even the Jorvik Centre, trying as hard as it does to present "worthy and responsible messages", cannot escape the fact that the warrior image sells more t-shirts.

There is not necessarily anything wrong with this. It may well be that proponents of the peaceful Vikings are protesting too much. As Paddy Griffith observes in *The*

¹⁴⁷ Ereira, *Timewatch*, "Evidence of Vikings".

¹⁴⁸ Foote and Wilson, *Viking Achievement*, p. 191.

¹⁴⁹ Erik Wahlgren, *The Vikings and America* (Thames and Hudson, London), 1986, p. 62.

¹⁵⁰ Fell, *Jorvikinga Saga*, front cover. See also illustration to p. 6.

Viking Art of War, the peaceful interpretation

fails to confront the idea that, for all their cultured and creative skills as civilians, it was mainly by naked force of arms that the Vikings were able to create their globally significant near-empires. Hence the inner secret of their success and historical prominence surely lay in their qualities as warriors (or 'pirates') first of all, and in other things only afterwards.¹⁵¹

As has been seen above, there is no consensus as to whether Viking piracy is indeed "first of all" as the explanation of their prominence. However, the point is valid that domestic Viking features should not be allowed to efface more warlike aspects of Viking society. An appropriate last word comes from C. Patrick Wormald, who in a 1980 article protested against this strictly peace-loving emphasis. Wormald states that "Important as the Vikings were in the economic history of Europe, it is an illusion that their contribution was wholly, or even mainly, peaceful, and the illusion can only be encouraged by too much talk of trade."¹⁵² For, Wormald warns us:

it is well to remember that experience of the West Saxon king's reeve at Portland some time between 786 and 802: he thought that the three ships of Northmen were traders, but he was wrong. Scholars may now be making the same mistake, if with less lethal consequences to themselves.¹⁵³

5.4. *Vikings and freedom*

Liberty is the vitamin of Civilization.

-- Ramsay Muir, *Civilization and Liberty*.¹⁵⁴

In the field of popular history, the freedom fighter is an idolised and idealised figure. Freedom is popular history's darling. It is Robin Hood and his fellow independent Saxons who win hearts, not the authoritarian conquerors who supposedly subjugated Old England to the Norman Yoke. The concept of freedom has become a magic talisman, the mention of which can elevate the most routine historical events to

¹⁵¹ Griffith, *Viking Art of War*, p. 25.

¹⁵² C. Patrick Wormald, "Viking Studies: Whence and Whither?", in R. T. Farrell (ed.), *The Vikings* (Phillimore and Co. Ltd., London), 1982, p. 134.

¹⁵³ *ibid.*, p. 132.

¹⁵⁴ Ramsay Muir, *Civilization and Liberty* (Jonathan Cape, London), 1949, p. 9.

a heroic higher plane. One need only think of Mel Gibson's William Wallace, leading an attack on Northern England in the 1995 blockbuster film *Braveheart*.¹⁵⁵ A dispassionate viewer might conclude that Gibson's Scots are being no more high-minded than their own English oppressors, and that plunder and revenge are what they are likely to gain, not any fine ideal. But because they are bellowing the magic word, "freedom!", the raiders become heroes, and an Australian actor in a kilt becomes a figurehead for late twentieth century Scottish nationalist movements.

This issue of freedom has played a major role in granting the Vikings heroic status. The image of Vikings as champions of freedom can be traced at least as far back as the Icelandic saga writers of the thirteenth and subsequent centuries. A large part of the medieval Icelandic self-image came from the notion, emphatically stated in many sagas, that Iceland's society was founded by Norwegian refugees from tyranny.¹⁵⁶ According to the saga writers, in the late ninth century Norway's ancient freedoms were being trampled upon by King Harald Fairhair, and rather than submit to his rule, the writers' ancestors sailed west to build a new life and a free society in Iceland.¹⁵⁷ Since it is from the Icelandic sagas that much of our knowledge of Viking society is gleaned, the idea of freedom as a pre-eminent Viking value has become deeply ingrained.

Further, the Vikings are part of a larger pattern, the concept of Germanic peoples as the founders of democracy. This idea, like the saga writers' heroic vision of their individualist ancestors, is intertwined with the European countries' search for national identity. At one time or another, most nations that can claim Germanic/Nordic peoples among their founders have used this idea, claiming that their descent from ancient Freedom-loving Germans or Norsemen assures their current greatness (see 2.1., above). Germany's National Socialist uses of the concept during the most recent World War have become a particularly infamous example of this practice, but it has been in common use across Europe for at least four centuries, and has spread as well to the

¹⁵⁵ Mel Gibson (director), *Braveheart* (20th Century Fox and Paramount Pictures), 1995.

¹⁵⁶ See P. H. Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings*, 2nd edition (Edward Arnold, London), 1971, pp. 207-8.

¹⁵⁷ For instance, characters early in *Grettis saga* and *Laxdaela saga* leave Norway due to their inability to live under Harald's rule. See George Ainslie Hight (trans. and ed.), *The Saga of Grettir the Strong: A Story of the Eleventh Century* (J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., London), 1914, pp. 2-3, 4, 14, and Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (trans. and eds.), *Laxdaela Saga* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex), 1969, this edition 1981, pp. 48-9.

United States, where ties to the past and the notion of freedom both take on particular urgency. In Britain, the idea gained its greatest currency during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but although it has become more muted by the late twentieth century, it has not entirely faded from the scene. The notion still survives in British politics and education that Britain's system of government is unique, and that British democracy is an innately superior system, a heritage owed to heroic Northern ancestors.

5.3.1. Liberty, history and the founders of democracy

The First Baron Acton, a respected historian and politician of the late nineteenth century, stated that "liberty is not a means to a higher end, it is itself the highest political end".¹⁵⁸ The statement of Hegel that "history is the history of liberty" has become a frequently encountered catchphrase, often employed in contexts very different from that in which Hegel used it.¹⁵⁹ In the case of British historiography, the notion that liberty is the goal to which all historical processes tend plays a major role in the so-called "Whig interpretation of history", one of the dominant strands of nineteenth and twentieth-century British historical thought. This Whig interpretation portrays English history as "the story of our liberty", and states that "all Englishmen ... [are] beneficiaries of the centuries-long evolution of constitutional liberties, achieved for the most part by gradualist methods which respected the heritage of the past."¹⁶⁰

Although generally agreed that freedom is the goal of human progress, liberty-worshipping history writers do not always agree on where the historical roots of freedom are to be found. The main schism is between those who find liberty's birth in the classical world of the Greeks and Romans, and those who trace it to Germanic tribes.

The conflict is traceable at least as far back as the sixteenth century, and the upheaval and restructuring of various national identities in the wake of the Reformation.

¹⁵⁸ John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton, First Baron Acton, *The History of Freedom, and Other Essays*, edited with an introduction by John Neville Figgis and Reginald Vere Laurence (Macmillan and Co. Ltd., London), 1922, p. xxix.

¹⁵⁹ Benedetto Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty*, translated from the Italian by Sylvia Sprigge (George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London), 1941, p. 59. The English title of this book is in fact an example of the frequent cavalier usages of the Hegel quote, as it misrepresents Croce's subject. The Italian title is *La storia come pensiero e come azione*, or *History as Thought and Action*.

¹⁶⁰ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (Longman, London), 1984, p. 5.

Prior to this time, it had remained standard practice for European countries to claim an antique, heroic identity by tracing their ancestry to Roman and ultimately Trojan founders. This practice, however, became increasingly problematic as Rome fell into disfavour with newly Protestant governments. In the immediate post-Reformation period, opposition to the contemporary Roman church cast a pall on the admiration and emulation of ancient Roman heroes.¹⁶¹ (See 2.1., above.)

The classical model of freedom's origins was never completely supplanted, and in twentieth-century studies of freedom and democracy it seems to have again become pre-eminent. Typical of the classical model's proponents is J. B. Bury's *A History of Freedom of Thought*, 1913, in which Bury writes of the Greeks and Romans that "our deepest gratitude is due to them as the originators of liberty of thought and discussion".¹⁶² Likewise, Ramsay Muir in *Civilization and Liberty*, first published in 1940, writes that "the birth of Freedom in Greece" is one of the "seminal ideas of western civilization".¹⁶³ Of the early Germanic peoples, Muir scornfully writes that "Hosts of barbarians from the forests of Germany ravaged the peaceful provinces, plundered their inhabitants, and fought one another: law was the will of the strongest, and liberty no more than the freedom to kill and plunder."¹⁶⁴ That Muir should be unimpressed by the Germanic liberty model is not surprising, as he wrote his study of liberty during the Second World War, largely in response to "the gravity of the threat to Liberty which arises ... from the Nazi horror".¹⁶⁵

On the other hand, Lord Acton, writing without these particular historical circumstances to colour his view, was more sanguine about the Germanic contribution to freedom. In his essay "History of Freedom in Antiquity", Acton wrote,

... liberty is ancient, and it is despotism that is new ... The heroic age of Greece confirms it, and it is still more conspicuously true of Teutonic Europe. Wherever we can trace the earlier life of the Aryan nations we discover germs which favouring circumstances might have developed

¹⁶¹ Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval and Modern*, 2nd edition (University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London), 1994, pp. 175-6.

¹⁶² J. B. Bury, *A History of Freedom of Thought* (Williams and Norgate, London), 1913, p. 22.

¹⁶³ Muir, *Civilization and Liberty*, pp. 25-6.

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 9.

into free societies. They exhibit some sense of common interest in common concerns, little reverence for external authority, and an imperfect sense of the function and supremacy of the State. Where the division of property and labour is incomplete there is little division of classes and of power.¹⁶⁶

Much the same note is struck by Marx's observation that "communal property ... was an old Teutonic institution, which lived on under the cover of feudalism."¹⁶⁷ Similarly, A. J. Penty, a leader of the Guild Socialist Movement in England during the early twentieth century, argues that far from marking the onset of a barbaric Dark Ages, the Germanic invasions of southern Europe in the early middle ages were a victory for selflessness, which "triumphed as the Germanic tribes conquered Europe -- tribes which still maintained the practices of primitive communism".¹⁶⁸

Depending on the observer's individual pre-occupations, communism, socialism and democracy are equally traceable to the primeval forests of the northern lands. The appeal, of course, of Germanic origins for current institutions is that it validates the culture and identity of those who claim these origins. No longer must the people of western and northern Europe rely on Roman outsiders to show them the way to civilisation, for they themselves possessed a more free and equal society before the Romans ever arrived.¹⁶⁹ Further, a portion of the Germanic peoples were among the conquerors and destroyers of the by-then-decadent Roman empire. The Scandinavian countries can take this argument one step further and proclaim themselves entirely free from corrupting Roman influences, being the one major region of Europe that Rome never conquered. The fall of Rome can be seen as a disaster for civilisation which sparked off centuries of savagery, or it can be a cleansing renewal, with the degeneracy of Rome replaced by Germanic/Nordic vigour and manly independence.

This latter choice was the tack taken by sixteenth-century English scholars who wished to rid their country of politically distasteful Roman connections. In England, Germanic origins were to be most celebrated in the realm of law. As described in Ernst

¹⁶⁶ Acton, *History of Freedom*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁶⁷ Quoted in William Stafford, "This once happy society: nostalgia for pre-modern society", in Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase (eds.) *The Imagined Past: history and nostalgia* (Manchester, Manchester University Press), 1989, p. 36.

¹⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁶⁹ Poliakov, *Aryan Myth*, pp. 85, 95.

Breisach's account of this process,

In 1568, Lambarde published the texts of old Anglo-Saxon laws (Archaionomia), and from this time began in earnest the fascination with the common law and the unique English institution, Parliament. The legal continuity seemed so convincing that it gave rise to the idea of the common law's immemorial antiquity and of Parliament as a part of a mythical ancient constitution.¹⁷⁰

Building on such foundations, the popular appeal of ancient Germanic culture received a dramatic boost in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Romantic movement found in the Vikings and their fellow northern heroes an excitingly new, wild and untamed source of literary and artistic inspiration.

As in the sixteenth century, this upsurge in popularity was again tied to nationalist stirrings. Jöran Mjöberg, in *The Northern World: The History and Heritage of Northern Europe*, writes that

The heroic age of the sagas made a sudden and very dramatic impact upon the imagination of the late eighteenth century. In part this was due to a new sense of national identity, so that Englishmen, Scotsmen, Irishmen, Germans, Norwegians, Swedes, Danes were no longer content to look for their origins in the Classical-Christian culture that they all shared, but to demand something more tangible and particularised. This went hand in hand with an intellectual movement away from the qualities valued by the Age of Reason -- urbanity, sophistication, taste -- and towards the primitive and the barbaric.¹⁷¹

In this period, ancient Germans, Goths, Scandinavians and Celts were alike seen as representatives of a loosely defined heroic age of the north. They embodied a vigorous independence which could regenerate the nations of modern Europe.

Among the most influential contributors to the development of this idea was poet James Macpherson (see 2.2., above). Macpherson's work launched the bard Ossian into the poetic firmament as the Homer of the north, and helped set into motion the craze to recapture the virtues of the northern past. The Ossian of Macpherson's creation was a popular best-seller and a political weapon. To governments which were building new identities justified by doctrines of liberty, the independence and rugged sense of honour of the northern "barbarians" seemed an ideal way of proving that governmental policies were based on pure and ancient virtues. Napoleon himself was a devotee of Ossian, and

¹⁷⁰ Breisach, *Historiography*, p. 176.

¹⁷¹ Jöran Mjöberg, "Romanticism and Revival", in David M. Wilson (ed.), *The Northern World: The History and Heritage of Northern Europe, 400-1100* (London, Thames and Hudson), 1980, p. 208.

not only carried a volume of the poems with him on campaign, but also commissioned a painting by Girodet of *Ossian Receiving the Warriors of the Revolution into Paradise*.¹⁷²

5.3.2. Vikings and liberty in the late twentieth century

The survival and utility of myths depends greatly on their flexibility. The same Northern heroes who gave their blessings to Napoleon's revolutionary conquests are equally capable of proving Britain's uniqueness and glory, and, in the right political circumstances, her immemorial right to rule the waves.

Since the sixteenth-century burgeonings of interest in Britain's constitutional history, the country's Anglo-Saxon period had been lauded as creating in Britain a uniquely virtuous form of government. David Lowenthal has written of this "belief that English institutions, like no other in the world, were the result of slow growth from Saxon days, that, like a coral reef, precedent had fallen on precedent, creating a bulwark of liberty".¹⁷³ The elision of various Germanic groups in popular concepts of the northern past meant that the creation of England's liberty was often attributed to Vikings as well as to Saxons. These peoples were frequently seen as one and the same -- fierce opponents at times, in their own period, but both possessing within them the spark of liberty. This vital spark they passed down to their descendants, leading to the inevitable glory of the British Empire. In this context, Vikings could be particularly useful ancestors. Like the greatness of Britain in the nineteenth century, Viking success was based largely on naval power. The Vikings had ruled the seas, and it stood to reason that their modern British descendants should rightfully do the same.¹⁷⁴

In the late twentieth century, when Britain no longer stands as the pre-eminent imperial power, it might seem that this interpretation of the Vikings has outlived its usefulness. But the patterns of historical thinking do not turn about-face overnight, and the dismantling of Britain's empire has not meant that the outlooks built up around that empire are readily discarded. Although the British self-image of the late twentieth century may have a more wistful element than when the Empire was a fact of life, the

¹⁷² *ibid.*, p. 211, and Clark, *Civilisation*, pp. 302-4.

¹⁷³ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge), 1985, p. 370.

¹⁷⁴ For a classic statement of this outlook, see Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age*, Vol. I, pp. vii, viii.

notion that Britain has a unique tradition of freedom has survived.

The endurance of a Whig interpretation of history can be seen in the comments of Kenneth Baker, Secretary of State for Education in the late 1980's, regarding the goals and content of a new National Curriculum. The key events which should be included in school history programmes, Baker stated, include "the spread of Britain's influence for good throughout the world."¹⁷⁵ Further, Baker declares, "We should not be ashamed of our history ... our pride in our past gives us our confidence to stand tall in the world today."¹⁷⁶

The free Norsemen concept is still an important aspect of the Vikings' image. In his 1963 children's novel *Horned Helmet*, Henry Treece opens with an Author's Note delineating his views on Viking culture. Treece was a devotee of the Icelandic sagas, and specifically set out to recreate the saga "feel" in his writing.¹⁷⁷ In keeping with the saga viewpoint, Treece emphasises that "these independent 'Icelanders' created a form of rough law and self-government that was quite amazing".¹⁷⁸

Robert Leeson's *Beyond the Dragon Prow* (1973), also following the lead of many sagas, looks at the difference between King Harald Fairhair's view of proper government and that of his Viking countrymen. King Harald's high-handed demand for levies to join him in a war alongside the King of the Franks is met with resistance by the leading characters, not because they believe the war to be wrong, but because they are aggrieved that their king has made treaties with strangers without seeking their consent.¹⁷⁹

T. F. G. Jones' novel *Black Sun* (1980) emphasises the freedom of the Vikings. As the young focal character looks about him at his Viking companions, Jones states: "He loved the scene before him. He knew all these men, had grown up with all of them, he shared their freedom, the strange mixture of chance and design and daring that

¹⁷⁵ Richard Aldrich and Dennis Dean, "The Historical Dimension", in Richard Aldrich (ed.), *History in the National Curriculum* (Institute of Education, University of London, London), 1991, p. 95.

¹⁷⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ Treece, *Horned Helmet*, p. 8.

¹⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁷⁹ Robert Leeson, *Beyond the Dragon Prow* (William Collins Sons and Co. Ltd., London), 1973, p. 30.

was their lives."¹⁸⁰ Among the main characters of the novel is the mysterious Hoskuld Wanderer, discussed above (5.2.1.b.) as an example of the Viking trader *par excellence*, who also embodies the Vikings' unpredictable and quixotic individuality. At first disdained by the young hero as mere traders, Hoskuld and his followers are pivotal characters, whose decision to throw in their lot with the hero ensures his eventual victory. As Jones writes, "Hoskuld was strange and elusive and he made his own rules."¹⁸¹

In the three novels mentioned above, the Vikings are the heroes. Their independence is seen as simply one among many admirable qualities. But the quality of independence can also be depicted as the one saving virtue that redeems the Vikings from thorough villainy.

Such is the case in Geoffrey Trease's *Mist Over Athelney* (1958). This novel focuses on King Alfred's resistance to the Viking incursions, with the Danes portrayed for the most part as brutal and ruthless. One of the few indications that they may have redeeming qualities is found in the brief statement that "The pirates had their leaders, but they prided themselves that they were all free men."¹⁸² In this particular case, however, the freedom means little -- for while the "pirates" may be free from much over-weening control by their superiors, they are not free from their own selfishness and greed.

In the field of juvenile non-fiction, liberty is again represented as among the most salutary aspects of Viking culture. It is taken for granted that freedom is a force for good, and the perceived devotion of the Northmen to this cause helps build an image of Vikings as worthy of both admiration and emulation.

Peoples of the Past: The Vikings, by Michael Gibson (1976), specifies that the Vikings are among history's great civilisations.¹⁸³ The discussion on the back cover of this work illustrates a common pattern in this genre's portrayal of the Vikings. It opens with a mention of the Vikings' reputation as feared warriors, then goes on to state that there were many other, more positive aspects to Viking culture, including "an

¹⁸⁰ T. F. G. Jones, *Black Sun*, p. 18.

¹⁸¹ *ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁸² Trease, *Mist Over Athelney*, p. 215.

¹⁸³ Gibson, *Peoples of the Past: The Vikings*, back cover.

enlightened form of parliament".¹⁸⁴ To the Vikings, Gibson tells us, being "manly" meant "having a mind of their own and standing up for what they believed in". Further, Viking warriors "valued their freedom". Gibson backs up this point with a frequently quoted story in which, "When a messenger asked to be taken to the leader of Rollo's army, he was told that there was no leader, everyone was equal."¹⁸⁵

This story also appears in another work published in 1976, the *Jackdaw* information pack No. 133, *The Vikings*. In this *Jackdaw*, intended primarily for use in schools, the incident is described as follows: "On the whole, the Vikings were not very class conscious. There is a nice story about a foreign messenger hailing a Danish ship in the late 10th century and asking the name of her master. 'None,' came the answer, 'we are all equal.'"¹⁸⁶ That this story is viewed as reflecting favourably on Viking civilisation is indicated by one of the final statements in the Viking *Jackdaw*, that "the better human values do not seem to have changed so very much!"¹⁸⁷

Many juvenile non-fiction works emphasise the Viking "concern for the rule of law".¹⁸⁸ It is common for works in this genre to include a scene of Norsemen meeting at a Thing (an institution irreverently described in *Sticky Histories: The Vikings -- Longships and Battleaxes* (1994) as "a cross between Glastonbury festival and the Houses of Parliament").¹⁸⁹ In some cases, these works continue to trace the development of modern institutions and attitudes back to Viking origins. We read, for instance, in Margaret Mulvihill's *History Highlights: Viking Longboats* (1989) that "the word 'law' is also a Viking word and out of their assemblies, the Things, modern-day parliaments have developed."¹⁹⁰ A particularly fervent example is John D. Clare's *I Was There: Vikings* (1991). Clare enthuses over the Northmen's "just laws and ... system of

¹⁸⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ *ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁸⁶ Sylvie Nickels, *Jackdaws: No. 133, The Vikings* (Jackdaw Publications Ltd., London), 1976, broadsheet eleven.

¹⁸⁷ *ibid.*, broadsheet twelve.

¹⁸⁸ Anne Pearson, *See Through History: The Vikings* (Hamlyn Children's Books, London), 1993, section one.

¹⁸⁹ Rosemary Border, *Sticky History Books: The Vikings -- Longships and Battleaxes* (Henderson Publishing PLC, Woodbridge, Suffolk), 1995, p. 42.

¹⁹⁰ Mulvihill, *History Highlights: Viking Longboats*, pp. 28-9.

democracy",¹⁹¹ and sees the Vikings as embodying all that is best in modern Western civilisation. As he writes in the book's closing section, "Many of the Viking ideals -- honour, law, democracy, the equality of women and the freedom of the individual -- are still thought to be worth dying for a thousand years later."¹⁹²

The historical outlook of late twentieth century Britain has not come to a consensus on the question of Britain's indebtedness -- or lack thereof -- to the Vikings. Statements are still encountered to the effect that "The Saxons laid the foundation of modern England".¹⁹³ But on the Viking role in this process, the jury is still out. Pan-Germanic interpretations are largely out of fashion, and those currently responsible for building the attitudes of future generations show little agreement on whether the Vikings are to be viewed in the same light as our Saxon forebears, or whether they are mere interlopers, predators from beyond the seas.

This dichotomy can be seen in the Department for Education's 1995 guidelines for the teaching of *History in the National Curriculum*. Vikings are included in the discussion of "the ways in which British society was shaped by different peoples".¹⁹⁴ But there is a subtle difference between the way Saxons emerge from this discussion, and the treatment given to the Vikings. Pupils are required to learn about the "*arrival and settlement of the Anglo-Saxons*", but about "*the Viking raids and settlement*"¹⁹⁵ (emphases mine). Of both the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings, pupils are to study "the legacy of settlement, eg. place names and settlement patterns, myths and legends, Anglo-Saxon/Viking remains, including artefacts and buildings", but in the case of the Anglo-Saxons "the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity" is included, while the conversion of Vikings in Britain goes unmentioned.¹⁹⁶ The discrepancies may seem slight, but the implication remains that the National Curriculum's creators cast themselves on the side of the Anglo-Saxons.

¹⁹¹ Clare, *I Was There: Vikings*, p. 6.

¹⁹² *ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁹³ John Hamilton, *Saxon England* (Lutterworth Press, Guildford and London), 1964, this edition 1977, jacket description.

¹⁹⁴ *History in the National Curriculum* (HMSO, London), 1995, p. 4.

¹⁹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁹⁶ *ibid.*

The initial Anglo-Saxon immigrants, at least from such historical sources as survive, could surely be described as "raiders" with as much validity as could their Viking counterparts. And the Vikings seem to have become Christians with as much fervour as did the Anglo-Saxons. But in the National Curriculum, these peoples are not equivalent. The Anglo-Saxons are honoured forefathers, who "arrived" in Britain to make an invaluable contribution to the British way of life. The Vikings, on the other hand, are outsiders, foreign raiders who can never be quite so much a part of the British soul as are their Anglo-Saxon opponents.

And what of the Vikings' and/or the Anglo-Saxons' contribution to Freedom? The National Curriculum guidelines make no mention of it. But as can be seen from works such as *I Was There: Vikings*, the idea has not perished. With no British Empire to justify through the glorification of Viking precedent, some of the concept's urgency has faded. But the notion of Viking freedom has survived, helping to make the Vikings acceptable as heroes by current Western standards. Even in works which focus on the victims of Viking raids, it is difficult for authors to avoid showing some admiration for "the daring, sheer independence and strength of will"¹⁹⁷ perceived as belonging to the Vikings. Anglo-Saxons may have emerged in the view of late twentieth-century Britain with a more consistently wholesome image, but it is the free and independent Vikings who bring to the early middle ages "an utterly distinctive dash, a sense of dangerous excitement."¹⁹⁸

5.3.3. Vikings and women's liberation

An additional aspect of Viking freedom, which has further endeared the Norsemen to various twentieth-century observers, is the concept of Vikings as pioneers of women's rights. This can at first blush seem a humorous notion, considering the immediately recognisable image of Vikings as abductors and rapists. Yet the argument is frequently encountered that women had far greater freedom in Viking society than amongst any of the Vikings' contemporaries. Interaction with the past shows a pattern of give-and-take: the Vikings become acceptable by apparently conforming to modern values, and these values are given validation and support by the Viking precedent.

¹⁹⁷ Kevin Crossley-Holland, *Green Blades Rising: The Anglo-Saxons* (André Deutsch Ltd., London), 1975, pp. 43-4.

¹⁹⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 44-5.

The question of women's rights has long been an element of the Viking paradigm. It was discussed in the late 1880's by Paul Du Chaillu, as part of his evidence for the Norsemen having enjoyed a uniquely high level of civilisation. The following discussion opens the second volume of Du Chaillu's *The Viking Age*:

It is particularly striking, in reading the Sagas and the ancient laws which corroborate them, to see the high position women occupied in earlier and later pagan times.

If we are to judge of the civilisation of a people in their daily life by the position women held with regard to men, we must conclude that in this respect the earlier Norse tribes could compare favourably with the most ancient civilised nations whose history has come down to us ... In a word, a retrograde movement in regard to the rights and standing of women took place after the extinction of the Asa creed [i.e., Norse paganism]. The high position they had occupied before was lost, and it is only latterly that they have striven, and in some countries with success, to regain the authority that once belonged to them in regard to property and other matters.¹⁹⁹

Following the lead of arguments such as Du Chaillu's, Otilie Liljencrantz's 1902 novel *The Thrall of Leif the Lucky* uses a Viking setting to strike home messages of women's rights. Liljencrantz, who cites Du Chaillu as among her main sources,²⁰⁰ depicts an independent-minded heroine, Helga, "the best comrade in the camp, whether one wished to go hawking, or wanted a hand at fencing, or only asked for a quiet game of chess by the leaping firelight."²⁰¹ Helga is passionate in her loathing for the restricted lifestyle that Liljencrantz sees as available to most medieval -- and contemporary? -- women, and her vibrant freedom is seen as a natural heritage of her Norse race, with the novel's hero swiftly being converted to her point of view:

He understood then that it was not boldness, nor mere waywardness, that made her what she was. It was the Norse blood crying out for adventure and open air and freedom. It did not seem strange to him, as he thought of it. It occurred to him, all at once, as a stranger thing that all maidens did not feel so, -- [sic] that there were any who would be kept at spinning, like prisoners fettered in trailing gowns.²⁰²

Pioneers of Freedom, a 1930 study of Icelandic culture written by an American of Scandinavian descent, uses the same points as did Du Chaillu to prove the Vikings' high

¹⁹⁹ Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age*, Vol. II, p. 1.

²⁰⁰ Liljencrantz, *The Thrall of Leif the Lucky*, Note of Acknowledgement.

²⁰¹ *ibid.*, pp. 64-5.

²⁰² *ibid.*, pp. 32-3.

civilisation and open-mindedness. Written to celebrate the thousandth anniversary of Iceland's Althing, *Pioneers of Freedom* paints a picture of Viking culture as a point of light in the midst of an otherwise almost universal Dark Age. *Pioneers of Freedom's* author, Sveinbjorn Johnson, writes that "the position of women in society is some index of the quality of the civilization".²⁰³ Of Viking women, Johnson states:

It is certain ... that they were not kept under lock and key as was almost literally true in some other countries during this period ... That they were regarded as independent and not the inferiors of men in intellectual gifts appears from the fact that the Saga writers depend upon them [as sources] with as much confidence as upon men ... they were expected to develop self reliance and independence of character and to be able to look after themselves ... By comparison with the lot of women elsewhere in this period the position of women in Iceland was conspicuously advantageous.²⁰⁴

This tradition of Viking women as uniquely independent for their time period survives in the non-fiction children's books on Vikings which have proliferated in the late twentieth century. Here, the status of women is presented as another way in which Vikings conform to modern standards of civilised behaviour. In general, these works share the view of Du Chaillu and Sveinbjorn Johnson that Viking women had more freedom than most or all of their contemporaries, and that this helps place the Vikings in a higher bracket of culture.

It is an almost invariable practice for these non-fiction works to include a section on women's rights, often entirely interchangeable with those in other books. Robin May's *Life and Times: Canute and the Vikings* (1984), while for the most part a fairly non-revisionist work that focuses on Viking raids and slaughter, follows the party line in its statement that

Viking women had more freedom than the women of other parts of Europe. When the men were away for months at a time, raiding or trading, the women were in complete charge of the household. They were permitted to keep their property after marriage. If they did not like the husband chosen for them by their father, they were usually spared

²⁰³ Sveinbjorn Johnson, *Pioneers of Freedom: An Account of the Icelanders and the Icelandic Free State, 874-1262* (The Stratford Company Publishers, Boston, Massachusetts), 1930, p. 290. While this is an American publication and therefore strictly outside the topic of this thesis, I have nonetheless used it because I believe it reflects ideas also current in Britain at the time. Also, the copy I used belongs to the Brotherton Library at the University of Leeds, and while this is no indication of widespread distribution throughout Britain, it does at least show that the work has not been entirely unknown in this country.

²⁰⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 288-9.

the marriage. Divorce was easy if things went wrong.²⁰⁵

Nearly identical listings of Viking women's rights appear in, among others, *How They Lived: A Viking Sailor* (1986),²⁰⁶ Cherrytree Books' *History of the World: The Early Middle Ages* (1993),²⁰⁷ *Life in the Time of Harald Hardrada and the Vikings* (1992),²⁰⁸ and Michael Gibson's *Peoples of the Past*, which adds, "women could be very independent, especially if they were from a wealthy family. They were allowed to own land and other valuables and to act as farmers and traders in their own right ... The woman looked after the farmhouse if the husband was away. She would defend it against attack."²⁰⁹

The Viking romance novels of the late twentieth century, as well, have inherited the concept of independent Viking women. As discussed above (see 4.3.7.), it has been argued that the romance fiction published in this period reflects developments in the feminist movement, and the increasing diversity of the roles available to women. Romance novels, though often scorned by observers who identify themselves as feminists, and in fact by "intellectuals" as a whole,²¹⁰ have, according to Carol Thurston, "played the role of unsung and often maligned heroine to the feminist movement's macho and often sadistic hero, reaching millions of women most feminist writing, whether fiction or non-fiction, has not."²¹¹

In this climate, the heroines of romance fiction have become increasingly strong and independent figures. This is an element which, in the historical romance sub-genre, can create problems of anachronism, with heroines who are supposedly from earlier time periods using the phrases and outlooks of late twentieth-century women to defend their rights. Intriguingly, it has been suggested that this issue is one of the causes of the

²⁰⁵ May, *Canute and the Vikings*, p. 41.

²⁰⁶ Gibb, *A Viking Sailor*, p. 23.

²⁰⁷ William, Berselli and Molino, *History of the World: The Early Middle Ages*, p. 42.

²⁰⁸ Speed, *Harald Hardrada and the Vikings*, p. 25.

²⁰⁹ Gibson, *Peoples of the Past*, p. 40.

²¹⁰ Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (Routledge, London and New York), 1982, this edition 1990, pp. 11, 14, and Carol Thurston, *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity* (University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago), 1987, pp. vii.

²¹¹ Thurston, *Romance Revolution*, p. 11.

medieval romance novel's popularity. Successful romance novelist Roberta Gellis, author of a series of romances with medieval settings, asserts that

medieval women, the nobility, were all something ... They had a real place in society. They were left to keep the estate running and to defend it when the men were away. In medieval times there were no written laws saying a woman can't ... Anything a woman could, she could do, up to the middle of the thirteenth century. After that, legal restrictions on women began to appear ... The lowest point in feminine value was the eighteenth and nineteenth century.²¹²

Gellis reports that, judging by reader response, her medieval novels are the most well-liked of her books, and she suggests that this may be because "people in the medieval books are intrinsic to, a part of, the political events going on. They move history, while in the nineteenth century the history of the time moved the characters."²¹³

If medieval women can be seen as comparatively independent figures, then the heroines of works with specifically Vikings settings have advantages that give them the opportunity to be more independent still. As discussed above (3.2.2.), there is a long-standing tradition that warrior women were part of Viking culture. The Viking warrior maids are ideal figures to be incorporated into the genre of historical romance, for since the early 1970's these works have been marked by forays of the heroines into allegedly male realms, such as that of warfare. According to Thurston, discussing a sample of historical romance novels published between 1972 and 1981,²¹⁴

In one-third of the stories the heroine either poses as a man or boy (such as a squire to a knight, binding her breasts in order to conceal her gender) or assumes a male role even though she is known to be female -- often as a pirate ... Rather than a denial of her femininity, these episodes read as the acting out of an equal-to-men fantasy, in which the heroine becomes player rather than spectator.²¹⁵

The Viking romances I have studied, though largely published after the works that Thurston surveyed, frequently use this technique, with the heroines, though of course superbly feminine in their beauty, being able as well to function as successful, active players in their male-dominated world. The Viking romance heroines are often trained warriors, and can be depicted as being even more skilful than the heroes, as in the case

²¹² Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 174.

²¹³ *ibid.*, p. 175.

²¹⁴ For a listing of the works in Thurston's sample, see *ibid.*, pp. 88-9.

²¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 77.

of Brenna of *Fires of Winter*. In this work we are told that the hero "was skilled with the sword, and he had strength behind his blows, but he did not have her expertise, nor her cunning".²¹⁶

Students of the romance genre have observed that the heroes and heroines of these works tend to be increasingly marked by androgynous characterisation; that is, as described by Thurston, they exhibit "both what traditionally have been considered feminine and masculine personality traits".²¹⁷ As Radway observes, the typical hero is "traditionally masculine ... [but] expressive in a feminine way",²¹⁸ while the heroine is associated "with traits and behaviour usually identified with men".²¹⁹ The Viking romance heroines tend to fulfil this requirement through their involvement in warfare, and even when they are not specifically warriors, other characters in the novels often express doubts about the heroines' femininity. For example, it is observed of the heroine in *Lord of Hawkfell Island* that "she leads men and they heed her. She has a woman's parts, but her actions aren't always those of a woman".²²⁰ This heroine is characterised as possessing both feminine and masculine accomplishments: "she could sew and cook and keep his household and fight like a man".²²¹ While it might seem that the allegedly masculine traits of the heroines are negated at the end of the novels, when they take their destined place as loving wives, the novelists are concerned to point out that the heroines' independence and warrior skills survive. Brenna of *Fires of Winter*, for instance, reappears in that novel's sequel as the heroine's mother. So far from having lost her "fiery" nature, in the second novel Brenna holds her future son-in-law at knifepoint and forces him to marry her daughter.²²²

Like the hero of Liljencrantz's *The Thrall of Leif the Lucky*, the Viking romance hero, while often initially nonplussed by the heroine's behaviour, is converted to a belief

²¹⁶ Johanna Lindsey, *Fires of Winter* (Avon Books, New York), 1980, p. 210.

²¹⁷ Thurston, *Romance Revolution*, p. 72.

²¹⁸ Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (Verso, London and New York), 1984, this edition 1987, p. 216.

²¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 123.

²²⁰ Catherine Coulter, *Lord of Hawkfell Island* (Jove Books, New York), 1993, p. 28.

²²¹ *ibid.*, p. 11.

²²² Johanna Lindsey, *Hearts Aflame* (Avon, New York), 1987, pp. 339-40.

in the justice of her claims and the validity of her attitudes and actions. The hero of *My Warrior's Heart*, for example, treats the heroine's warrior lifestyle as a joke, until he makes the realisation that it is indeed possible to be both a warrior and a woman:

She *was* a warrior! It poured through him like molten iron: a warrior with all the courage and skill, all the honor and pride a warrior could possess ... Every crass, demeaning remark, each low, sexual taunt he had ever flung at her now came stinging back to him, piercing his inflated male pride. He had seen her as a desirable body, a curiosity, a conquest, then finally as a person. But until that moment, he had not seen all of her. Nor, he realised, had he wanted to.²²³

Although it is usually near the end of the book before a Viking romance hero reaches such a moment of clarity regarding his beloved, it is still generally expected that Viking women will be something special, independent and strong beyond other women. In Coulter's *Lord of Falcon Ridge* it is observed, "she's a Viking woman. She's strong and proud",²²⁴ and, in *Fires of Winter*, we read that the heroine is a true "Viking maid ... [for whom] courage and pride reign uppermost".²²⁵

Viking women, like their people as a whole, are seen to value their freedom. And in so doing, they help to promote the Vikings as an historical people whose values are still acceptable today.

5.4. Exploration and the Viking spirit

What sent the Vikings voyaging out of their northlands, to make such a vivid impact on Europe and on popular consciousness?

Students of the Vikings have an impressive list of causes from which to choose, including:

Famine, pestilence, cataclysmic natural disasters in their native land, over-population ... the custom of driving out younger sons to fend for themselves, the cutting off by the Arabs of the old trade connections with Byzantium, an obsessive mania to destroy other peoples' property, a fanatical loathing of Christianity, and an insatiable appetite for high adventure ...²²⁶

While the more sensationalist of these catalysts find little favour with most late

²²³ Betina Krahn, *My Warrior's Heart* (Avon, New York), 1992, p. 235.

²²⁴ Catherine Coulter, *Lord of Falcon Ridge* (Jove, New York), 1995, p. 276.

²²⁵ Lindsey, *Fires of Winter*, p. 306.

²²⁶ John Geipel, *The Viking Legacy* (David and Charles, Newton Abbot), 1971, p. 31.

twentieth-century Viking specialists, academic treatments and the popular works influenced by them continue to present readers with a mix-and-match selection of causes for the Viking Age.²²⁷ Each discussion may give pride of place to different reasons for the "explosion" of Vikings onto the world scene, but one reason which almost invariably appears is the last listed above: the Viking love of adventure.

5.4.1. Northmen of adventure

Vikings are adventurers. They are wanderers,²²⁸ voyagers, always on the move, unpredictable beings for whom everything in life is an adventure. Of all Viking images, this is perhaps the most inescapable, making its appearance in all other positive and negative incarnations. Whether plunderers, traders, colonists, or explorers, Vikings are defined by their mobility and their seemingly continual voyaging throughout the known world and beyond its borders.

The "Viking spirit" has been given many definitions. Gwyn Jones' light-hearted encapsulation of the spirit of the Viking Age is "willingness to have a go".²²⁹ To Alan Binns, who took part in a voyage from Norway to the Isle of Man in a reconstruction of the Gokstad ship, the defining characteristic of both the Vikings and Binns' modern Manx shipmates is a "mixture of careless enthusiasm and cheerful realism".²³⁰ Magnus

²²⁷ A fine, albeit irreverent, summation of these varied "causes" can be found in Terry Deary's *Horrible Histories: the Vicious Vikings*. To the question "Work? Or Adventure? What were the real reasons for the Viking invasions?", Deary gives the following suggestions:

"It was getting *too crowded* in Scandinavia -- the Vikings wanted more land ... The monasteries were an easy way to *get rich quick* on treasure and slaves ... There was *too little food* in Scandinavia because the soil was useless ... There was *too much food* being grown in Scandinavia -- the Vikings needed to trade some of it ... Viking rules meant that younger sons got *no land* when their father died -- they had to go overseas and pinch someone else's land ... Some pretty *vicious kings* took over in 9th century Scandinavia -- many Vikings sailed off to escape from them ... A change in climate made Scandinavia *cold and uncomfortable* ... even wild, wet England was better than that ... There was a sudden *shortage of herring* in the North Sea -- their main food supply ... Sea trade was growing in the north of Europe -- more trade meant more chances for *piracy* ... The Vikings enjoyed *sailing and fighting* better than staying home and farming". (Terry Deary, *Horrible Histories: The Vicious Vikings* (Scholastic Publications Ltd., London), 1994, pp. 9-10.

²²⁸ See Clark, in *Civilisation*, who classes the Vikings as "wanderers", and novelist Henry Treece, who defines "Viking" as "wanderer", without giving any hint of the word's piratical connotations. (Clark, *Civilisation*, p. 14, and Treece, *Horned Helmet*, p. 7.)

²²⁹ Gwyn Jones, "Vikings and North America", in Farrell, *The Vikings*, p. 219.

²³⁰ Alan Binns, *Viking Voyagers: Then and Now* (Heinemann, London), 1980, p. 105.

Magnusson refers to the Viking Age as an "extraordinary adventure",²³¹ while Erik Wahlgren makes casual mention of the Norsemen's "seldom dormant spark of adventurousness".²³² One of the more idiosyncratic, though appealing, explanations for Viking adventurousness is postulated by Orkney writer and "buccaneer among scholars"²³³ Eric Linklater:

... I became aware of an extraordinary physical pleasure. It suffused my body and possessed my mind. Eyes and ears contributed to it, but my lungs were filled with it -- I breathed the euphoria that blows down from an arctic spring -- and I realised that physical exhilaration must be accepted as a factor in Norse history, an impulse in the viking mood; and it helps, indeed, to explain much that the vikings did.²³⁴

Such notions of Viking adventure are crucial to understanding the Vikings' popular metamorphosis from villains into heroes. Régis Boyer, in a discussion of nineteenth-century French views of the Vikings, writes: "Two related images define the new face of the old myth: liberty and the sea, the latter symbolising the potential in human life for adventure, for remarkable discoveries, and not least, for growth and change."²³⁵ In this version, "the roaming Viking represents not only the fact of actual adventure in the singular, but also the potential for all possible adventures in the plural."²³⁶

This alluring aspect of the Viking equation appeared as well in British and American writings in the nineteenth century, and has continued to gain momentum in the twentieth. Paul Du Chaillu, whose work was to influence many writers of Viking fiction, wrote that when researching the Vikings he himself "felt like one of those mariners of old, on a voyage of discovery".²³⁷ He compares Viking history to the contemporary settling of the United States' western frontier, both periods demonstrating

²³¹ Magnus Magnusson, *Viking: Hammer of the North* (Orbis Publishing Ltd., London), 1976, p. 21.

²³² Erik Wahlgren, *The Vikings and America*, p. 80.

²³³ Eric Linklater, *The Ultimate Viking* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York), published in Great Britain 1955, first American edition 1956, dustjacket description.

²³⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

²³⁵ Régis Boyer, "Vikings, Sagas and Wasa Bread", in Wawn, *Northern Antiquity*, p. 73.

²³⁶ *ibid.*

²³⁷ Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age*, Vol. I, p. viii.

"the frontier life with its bold adventures, innumerable dangers, fights, struggles, privation and heroism".²³⁸ The "wild west" connection was also drawn by Du Chaillu's contemporary C. F. Keary, who writes:

I do not know where we should find a modern parallel to such a character as I have described, unless it were in the western states of America. There we should see the same recklessness, the same stoicism, something of the same rude magnanimity; we should find a code of honour, if not as strict, certainly as fantastic as the Viking's; and finally we should find a grim humour almost the exact counterpart of his.²³⁹

Keary repeatedly emphasises the "discoverers" aspect of the Vikings' character, in their European exploits as much as in the North Atlantic expansion which is more commonly associated with Viking exploration. To him, "It is a fine picture. All the world being alike unknown, it mattered little which way they went".²⁴⁰ Of the early Viking period, "The one thing of all others which it is hardest for us to realise is, that the life *was* so new, the world so unknown to the greatest number."²⁴¹ Although avowedly no admirer of Viking violence, Keary nonetheless admits that he "likes to linger over these early attacks, so adventurous were they -- such an exploring of a new world by the Northmen".²⁴²

A century after Du Chaillu's experience of Viking research as a voyage of discovery, an advertisement for the CD Rom *World of the Vikings* proclaims that "like a viking" the package's "user becomes an explorer, charting courses across the time and space of the World of the Vikings." Likewise, late twentieth century children's non-fiction enthuses over the Vikings' prowess as explorers. Vikings were "the most adventurous explorers of their time", according to *Beginning History: Viking Explorers* (1989).²⁴³ They made "amazing voyages",²⁴⁴ and "knew more of the world than anyone

²³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 24.

²³⁹ Keary, *Vikings in Western Christendom*, p. 147.

²⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 154.

²⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 162.

²⁴² *ibid.*, p. 249.

²⁴³ Rupert Matthews, *Beginning History: Viking Explorers* (Wayland Publishers, Hove, East Sussex), 1989, p. 5.

²⁴⁴ Hughes, *Find out about Vikings*, 1984, p. 30.

before them".²⁴⁵ The author of *Indiana Jones Explores: the Vikings*, writing in the persona of the cinema's archaeologist hero, declares, "I am full of admiration for those brave Vikings who sailed west into the North Atlantic. Their voyages became ones of discovery -- to the very edge of the known world and beyond."²⁴⁶

The Vikings can be portrayed as addicted to danger. This is the line straight-facedly taken by the English language handout which accompanies the Viking cases in the University of Oslo's Historical Museum. Visitors are told that "There was something about long, dangerous sea voyages that must have appealed to the Norsemen",²⁴⁷ although one imagines that the Vikings must certainly have grumbled about tempests, waves and waterlogged boots at least as frequently as they composed odes in their praise. Nonetheless, the idea of Vikings as in love with the sea and its attendant dangers is a standard one. It was celebrated by Tegnér in the chapter of *Frithjof's Saga* "Frithjof at Sea", in which Frithjof declares, "How my soul rejoices/Battling with the tempest!/Storm alike and Northman/Flourish on the waves",²⁴⁸ and by Mildred I. McNeal in her poem "Storm Song of the Norsemen" in which McNeal's Norse narrator describes his mirth, exultation and "rapture" at the experience of a storm at sea, and addresses the god of the ocean:

O Ægir, take my hands in thine --
Soft ease and safety are but vain;
We'll quaff with thee the windy wine
And dare the farthest main.²⁴⁹

A bleaker poetic evocation of the same addiction is given by Rudyard Kipling in his "The Harp Song of the Dane Women" (c. 1906), with its refrain "what is woman that you forsake her/And the hearth-fire, and the home-acre/To go with the old grey Widow-

²⁴⁵ Jason Hook, *Look into the Past: The Vikings* (Wayland Publishers, Hove, East Sussex), 1993, p. 5.

²⁴⁶ Malam, *Indiana Jones Explores: the Vikings*, p. 30.

²⁴⁷ Oldsaksamlingen, Historisk Museum, Universitet i Oslo, notes to cases 12-19, "Skilled in Trade and Craft: the Merchants", n.d., c. 1996.

²⁴⁸ Tegnér, *Fritiof's Saga*, p. 66.

²⁴⁹ Mildred I. McNeal, "Storm Song of the Norsemen", with drawings by Maxfield Parrish. The poem was published in an American magazine, probably early twentieth century. I have been unable to find precise information regarding the poem's publication, as I was given the relevant pages out of the magazine, and the pages show neither the magazine's title nor a publication date. For a full text of this poem, see Appendix Two.

Maker?"²⁵⁰ In a far jollier interpretation of the subject, the desolation of Danish widows is absent from the version presented by Brenda Ralph Lewis in the Ladybird book *Great Civilisations: the Vikings* (1976): "For a Viking, one of the most exciting places to be was on the sea. They called the sea 'the happy place' and 'the silver necklace of the Earth', and they loved it so much that many of them wanted to be buried in it after they died".²⁵¹

"The Harp Song of the Dane Women" was written to accompany Kipling's story "The Knights of the Joyous Venture", a light-hearted tribute to Viking exploration. The story has two strands; a contemporary one in which a boy and girl based on Kipling's own children play at being explorers (inspired by the volume of poetry they are reading, the children quote Longfellow's "The Discoverer of the North Cape" and name their dinghy *Long Serpent*, after Olaf Tryggvason's longship which appears in Longfellow's "The Saga of King Olaf"),²⁵² and an eleventh-century tale of Vikings who sail to Africa in search of ivory and gold. Perhaps inspired by the accounts of Bjorn and Hastein's c. 860 voyage on which they raided Spain, Morocco, and allegedly reached Alexandria,²⁵³

²⁵⁰ Rudyard Kipling, *Puck of Pook's Hill* (Macmillan London Ltd., London), 1906, this edition 1981, p. 68.

²⁵¹ Brenda Ralph Lewis, *Great Civilisations: the Vikings* (Ladybird Books, London), 1976, p. 25.

²⁵² Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (Frederick Warne and Co., London), n.d., pp. 477-8, and 359-80.

²⁵³ Wingate, *Usborne Illustrated World History*, p. 56. The voyage of Bjorn and Hastein is a semi-legendary tale which has become conflated with the story of Ragnar Lothbrok and his sons. William of Jumièges, c. 1070, writes of a "Bier costae ferrae, Lotbroci regis filius", who shared the captaincy of an expedition to the Mediterranean with another Viking named Hastingus. William's Bier has been identified with a Berno who appears in Frankish annals between 855 and 858. (R. W. McTurk, "Ragnarr Loðbrók in the Irish Annals", in Bo Almqvist and David Greene (eds.), *Proceedings of the Seventh Viking Congress* (Royal Irish Academy, Dundalgan Ltd., Dundalk, Ireland), 1976, pp. 107-8.) As the legend of Ragnar and his sons developed, the figure of Berno/Bier/Bjorn was associated with the sons of "Ragnall" who journey to Africa in an Irish annal account. (McTurk, "Ragnarr Loðbrók in the Irish Annals", p. 106.) Arab accounts inform us that there was a Norse raiding expedition that reached Spain and Africa in the years 859-61, but the commanders of this expedition are not named, so there is no evidence as to whether they were the celebrated Bjorn and Hastein. (Jón Stefánsson, "The Vikings in Spain: From Arabic (Moorish) and Spanish Sources", in *Saga Book of the Viking Society* Vol. VI, 1908-1909 (AMS Press, New York), reprint 1980, pp. 40-2.) See also Allen Mawer, "Ragnar Lothbrók and His Sons", in *Saga Book of the Viking Society* Vol. VI, pp. 68-89. Another famed Viking said to have reached Africa is King Harald Hardradi, who according to Snorri Sturluson spent several years in "the land of the Saracens" (Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, *King Harald's Saga: Harald Hardradi of Norway* (Penguin Books, London), 1966, pp. 51-2), although Magnusson and Pálsson suggest that "Africa" in this passage may in fact be a mistake for Asia Minor (p. 51, note 2).

Kipling's Danes journey "beyond the world's end"²⁵⁴ in the quest for wealth, their prowess tested by stormy seas, tropical disease, and gorillas.

In turn very clearly inspired by Kipling is the African odyssey of comic strip knight errant Prince Valiant. Valiant, whose adventures ran in Sunday newspapers from 1937 through the 1970's, is the Prince of Thule, a northern nation which seems from internal evidence to be largely based on Norway. Although perhaps not quite a Viking himself, Valiant shares the cheerful wanderlust so frequently assigned to them, and spends his life "laughing into danger, every peril a challenge, every hazard a joy".²⁵⁵ (See Figure 35.) Valiant speaks Old Norse,²⁵⁶ and he has constant interactions with Vikings: on a friendly basis when the Viking in question is his red-bearded companion-in-adventure Boltar the "respectable merchant and honest pirate",²⁵⁷ and in a more antagonistic sense with the various raiders who have a habit of abducting Valiant's womenfolk. Valiant first encounters Boltar in Athens, and joins the respectable pirate and his crew on a southern expedition which, like that of Kipling's adventurers, brings them sunstroke, fever, encounters with African tribesmen, a battle royal with a band of gorillas, and finally *almost* as much gold as they could desire. (See Figures 36 and 37.)

5.3.2. Vinland -- the final frontier

The adventures of Prince Valiant bring us to the land most indissolubly tied to the notion of Viking exploration: Vinland/America. Since Valiant's wandering leads him through all the known world, it is fitting that he should be among the many legendary Norsemen credited with the discovery of America. In a sequence that ran from January 1947 to April 1948, Valiant and company hunt down the Viking who has abducted Valiant's wife, the pursuit accidentally leading them to North America. Having rescued the wife (after duelling the abductor at the edge of Niagara Falls), the prince and his followers settle down for a year of American adventures, in the course of which they

²⁵⁴ Kipling, *Puck of Pook's Hill*, p. 82.

²⁵⁵ Harold R. Foster, *Prince Valiant, Vol. 13: The Sun Goddess* (Fantagraphics Books, Seattle, Washington), 1991, p. 596, 11 July, 1948.

²⁵⁶ Harold Foster, *Prince Valiant, Volume 2: Companions in Adventure* (Nostalgia Press and King Features Syndicate, New York), 1974, 14 December, 1941 and 21 December, 1941.

²⁵⁷ Foster, *Prince Valiant, Volume Two*, 9 August, 1942.

explore the northern forests, journey to Lake Huron, and are, naturally, adopted as gods by the Native Americans.

Prince Valiant, of course, has many rivals for the "discoverer of America" title. Examples include two fellow comic strip adventurers, their exploits primarily inspired by the main historical contender, saga protagonist Leif Eriksson: *Donald Duck and the Golden Helmet's* Olaf the Blue, discoverer of Newfoundland,²⁵⁸ and *Asterix and the Great Crossing's* visionary Norse explorer Herendethelessen.²⁵⁹

The escapades of Vikings in America hold an enduring fascination. According to saga translators Magnus Magnusson and Herman Pálsson, *Grænlendinga saga* and *Eirík's saga*, the main surviving primary accounts of Vikings in the New World, have inspired more secondary literature than any other sagas.²⁶⁰ The slightest hint can send Viking devotees into the enchanting realms of Norsemen-in-America fantasy, two examples being the mysterious statue, hypothesised as Norse, which inspired John Greenleaf Whittier's poem "The Norsemen",²⁶¹ and the alleged "Viking Tower" of Newport which similarly formed the inspiration for Longfellow's "The Skeleton in Armour".²⁶² The phenomenon continues, evidenced in the various "Viking runestones" spread across the United States which inspire passionate devotion, and the "Norse Altar" at Marquette, Michigan, enthusiastically hailed as proof that the Vikings reached Lake

²⁵⁸ Barks, *Donald Duck and the Golden Helmet*, *passim*. Olaf the Blue also makes a brief appearance in a belated sequel to the 1952 comic (Dan Rosa, *Walt Disney's Donald Duck: the Lost Charts of Columbus*, Donald Duck no. 43, Series II (Bruce Hamilton Company, Prescott, Arizona), April 1997).

²⁵⁹ Goscinny and Uderzo, *Asterix and the Great Crossing* (Hodder and Stoughton, London), first published 1975, English language edition 1976. On setting foot on American soil, Herendethelessen proclaims, "One small step for me, a giant leap for mankind!" (p. 36)

²⁶⁰ Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (trans. and eds.), *The Vinland Sagas: the Norse Discovery of America* (Penguin Books, London), 1965, p. 10.

²⁶¹ "Some three or four years since, a fragment of a statue, rudely chiselled from dark gray stone, was found in the town of Bradford, on the Merrimack. Its origin must be left entirely to conjecture. The fact that the ancient Northmen visited New England, some centuries before the discoveries of Columbus, is now very generally admitted." (John Greenleaf Whittier, *The Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, (Macmillan and Co., London), 1874, p. 471, note 30.)

²⁶² "The following Ballad was suggested to me while riding on the seashore at Newport. A year or two previous a skeleton had been dug up at Fall River, clad in broken and corroded armour; and the idea occurred to me of connecting it with the Round Tower at Newport, generally known hitherto as the Old Windmill, though now claimed by the Danes as a work of their early ancestors." (Longfellow, *Poetical Works*, p. 15.)

Superior.²⁶³ Viking presence has been claimed for all manner of outlandish places, including Oregon, South Dakota, the Gulf of Mexico, and, in the fanciful nineteenth century novel *Voyage to Vinland*, the Mayan empire.²⁶⁴

It is not only the more fictional Vikings that awaken such passion. Leif Eriksson, the saga-approved Norse explorer, has been elevated to the highest rank of legendary heroes. He makes his way into *1000 Great Lives* as a man with a "thirst for discovery and ... [an] ability to lead men through dangerous waters".²⁶⁵ He is "Leif Erikson the adventurer",²⁶⁶ one of the three "great Viking adventurers" discussed by Indiana Jones in *Indiana Jones Explores: the Vikings* (along with his father Erik the Red, and King Cnut),²⁶⁷ and his journey to America forms the basis for the "Viking voyage" ride in Norway's Vikinglandet theme park.²⁶⁸ An American society, Leif Ericson Vikingship Inc., has taken on the mission of publicising Leif's exploits and pressuring calendar companies into including Leif Erikson Day, October 9, in their calendars.²⁶⁹ As well, Leif and the Viking spirit of exploration received the highest official approval in a Leif Erikson Day proclamation by US President Bill Clinton:

Every October, we celebrate Leif Erikson Day and honor the memory of that great Norse explorer who first set foot on North American soil nearly a millennium ago. At a time when mankind has travelled from pole to pole and even journeyed into the vast reaches of space, Leif Erikson's bold determination stands as an early example of the spirit of adventure

²⁶³ Discussed in the Michigan Nordic Link website, <http://www.nordiclink.org/viking.html>, visited 29/03/97.

²⁶⁴ Wray Hunt, *Voyage to Vinland*, cited in Christine Fell, "Norse Studies: then, now, and hereafter", in Anthony Faulkes and Richard Perkins (eds.), *Viking Revaluations* (Viking Society for Northern Research, London), 1993, p. 94.

²⁶⁵ Plantagenet Somerset Fry, *1000 Great Lives*, revised edition (Hamlyn, Feltham, Middlesex), 1984, p. 76. The other Vikings included among the "1000 great lives" are Rollo of Normandy, Olaf Tryggvason, Svein Forkbeard, Cnut the Great, and Harald Hardradi.

²⁶⁶ Wingate and Millard, *Usborne Illustrated World History*, p. 38.

²⁶⁷ Malam, *Indiana Jones Explores: The Vikings*, p. 34.

²⁶⁸ "Sail with Leiv Eriksson, the man who discovered America, on our Viking Voyage -- Toktet. Modern technology and special effects draw you into a spectacular voyage across a turbulent ocean, as you are watched over by the Norse gods ... " (Vikinglandet NorgesParken brochure, "Have Fun in the Viking Way" (NorgesParken A S, Vinterbro, Norway), circa 1996).

²⁶⁹ Leif Ericson Vikingship web page, <http://Libertynet.org/~viking/index.html>, visited 29/03/97.

and enterprise.²⁷⁰

5.4.3. Why did the Viking cross the sea?

It is perhaps not surprising that Vikings as explorers have achieved such popular acclaim. Viking explorers are heroes that one can embrace whole-heartedly, without the taint of bloodshed to trouble their supporters' consciences. Not everyone can quite accept Viking raiders and plunderers as good role models, but surely there can be no shame in admiring the courageous voyagers who braved Atlantic waves and strange new lands. There is a suggestion of this in Kipling's "Knights of the Joyous Venture". Piracy is portrayed as something that one grows out of. When asked if they are playing pirates, Kipling's children reply, "Oh, no. We gave up being pirates years ago ... We're nearly always explorers now."²⁷¹

As explorers, Vikings are not only socially acceptable, they are an example of "the way the human spirit achieved new heights".²⁷² But such majestic statements notwithstanding, Viking ventures are not always portrayed as being caused only by a disinterested, high-minded devotion to exploration. In the sagas, voyaging and discovery have a number of practical motivations, chief among them the search for land or profit, and simple accident. Bjarni Herjolfsson, the first Norseman to reach America in *Graenlendinga saga*, does so by accident, having gone off-course in a fog, and we are told, as well, that the first sea-farers to sight Greenland had been "driven westward off course".²⁷³ That Vikings did not set forth into unknown seas with carefree abandon is suggested by Bjarni's comment when setting out for Greenland: "This voyage of ours will be considered foolhardy, for not one of us has ever sailed the Greenland Sea."²⁷⁴ The urge to explore is portrayed as among the motivations of Leif the Lucky and many of those who followed him, but it is present in at least equal portions with a practical interest in Vinland's land and timber resources. Not that this detracts from their laurels as explorers; Christopher Columbus travelled in search of riches, and few would deny

²⁷⁰ *ibid.* Proclamation dated 6 October, 1995.

²⁷¹ Kipling, *Puck of Pook's Hill*, pp. 70-1.

²⁷² Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World*, p. 7.

²⁷³ Magnusson and Pálsson, *The Vinland Sagas*, p. 52.

²⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p. 52.

him the title of explorer. But there are certainly forces at work besides just a Norse compulsion to see what lies beyond the next wave.

These factors are reflected in many post-saga treatments of the Norse explorers. Prince Valiant is seeking not for a New World, but for his kidnapped wife. Herendethellessen is indeed a starry-eyed visionary, but he is beaten to the New World by Gauls Asterix and Obelix, who have been blown off course during a fishing trip. When he returns to Norway, no one believes Herendethellessen's tales of discovery, accusing him of sneaking off to Gaul to chase girls.²⁷⁵ Kipling's Viking captain is openly scornful of suggestions that he is voyaging merely for the love of adventure. On being told that their journey is a "joyous venture", he snaps "Venture! ... I am only a poor sea-thief. I do not set my life adrift on a plank for joy, or the venture. Once I beach ship again at Stavanger, and feel the wife's arms round my neck, I'll seek no more ventures. A ship is a heavier care than wife or cattle."²⁷⁶

Nonetheless, love for the venture remains the most potent aspect of the Vikings' image as explorers. The terms "Viking" and "explorer" are often used interchangeably. When NASA's Mars mission was named "Viking", the intended implications were obvious. Predatory though the United States is often seen as being, there was surely no intentional implication that "Viking" was flying to Mars to rape, slaughter and pillage.²⁷⁷

As final examples of this aspect of the Viking character, we can turn to two novels separated by nearly a century. Liljencrantz's *The Thrall of Leif the Lucky*, first published in 1902, portrays its Vikings firmly in the adventure-loving camp. They show the spirit of "dauntless enterprise",²⁷⁸ and native to their blood is a longing for "adventure and open air and freedom".²⁷⁹ When the Vikings reach Vinland, Liljencrantz comments that "The fire of exploration burned hot in every vein."²⁸⁰ Most importantly,

²⁷⁵ Gosciny and Uderzo, *Asterix and the Great Crossing*, p. 44.

²⁷⁶ Kipling, *Puck of Pook's Hill*, pp. 82-3.

²⁷⁷ Perhaps coincidentally, the dates of the Viking mission -- Viking 1 launched 20/8/75, arrived Mars 19/6/76, and Viking 2 launched 9/10/75, arrived Mars 3/10/76 -- are contemporary with the publication of *Asterix and the Great Crossing*, and Herendethellessen's "one small step for mankind" quote (see note 259 above).

²⁷⁸ Liljencrantz, *The Thrall of Leif the Lucky*, p. 11.

²⁷⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 32-3.

²⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p. 259.

perhaps, the Vikings enjoy what they are doing. Liljencrantz compares them with later European explorers of the New World, and the Renaissance/Early Modern voyagers do not emerge favourably from the comparison. For them exploration is business; for Vikings it is a joyous venture. As Liljencrantz writes, "They must have missed a great deal of enjoyment, to whom a new world meant only a new source of gold and slaves."²⁸¹

The explorer Vikings are as much a part of legend as their looting and pillaging brothers, and Vikings have become icons of exploration as thoroughly as did Odysseus before them. These are the Vikings invoked by Terry Jones in his novel *Erik the Viking* (1983). For Vikings, Erik and his men show remarkably little interest in plunder and profit. They are explorers pure and simple. Erik sets forth "to find the land where the sun goes down at night",²⁸² and he would like to see the edge of the world -- so that he can tell his wife about it when he gets home.²⁸³ These are the Vikings who stir the hearts of Bill Clinton, the Leif Erikson Vikingship Inc., and the Michigan Nordic Link. They are Vikings for whom "Our deeds are our gold, our quest is our goal".²⁸⁴

²⁸¹ *ibid.*, p. 296.

²⁸² Terry Jones, *The Saga of Erik the Viking* (Puffin Books, London), 1983, p. 9.

²⁸³ *ibid.*, p. 113.

²⁸⁴ *ibid.*, p. 166.

Chapter Six

Claiming the Vikings

In the closing years of the twentieth century, Vikings are everywhere.

Erik Wahlgren, discussing a phenomenon he has dubbed "American Norsemania", observed in the mid 1980's that "Vikings are proliferating exponentially".¹ Wahlgren was examining the Vikings in terms of their role in American popular/cult archaeology, but his statement could equally refer to the situation in Britain, where Vikings appear to be popping out of the woodwork. The year in which this chapter was written, 1997, could well be called the Year of the Viking Festival. In addition to such now-standard annual events as Shetlands's Up-Helly-Aa on the last Thursday of January and York's Jorvik Viking Festival in February, Viking enthusiasts could take advantage of "Vikings '97", a week-long festival in July marking "the return of the Vikings to West Devon after 1000 years",² and the Largs Viking Festival, in September, focused on the recently-opened "Vikingar!" centre in Largs, Scotland.³

The Viking Festivals are just one example of the Vikings' continuing incursions on everyday life. In the summer of 1997 the Vikings of the art world made an appearance in the exhibition "Vikings and Gods in European Art", designed by Else Roesdahl and David Wilson, which travelled from Århus to the English Viking cities of York and Nottingham. Meanwhile, rival "Dark Age" re-enactment groups vie for the distinction of providing the most serious and authentic embodiment of Britain's Viking Age, horned and winged helmets continue to regularly appear in advertising logos, and the consumer is encouraged to purchase Viking Tyres, Viking Cereals, Viking billiard cues, Viking sewing machines.

¹ Erik Wahlgren, *Vikings and America* (Thames and Hudson, London), 1986, pp. 109-10.

² "In July 1997, a new Viking fleet will be seen on the same waters, but this time symbolising friendship and present-day links with Scandinavia". Attractions of the festival included "authentic Scandinavian Viking ships and crews", "re-enactment battles", "living history displays" and the "carving of commemorative runic stone", and the festival was advertised as "A thousand years of spectacle not to be missed". (Kate Petitt (design), *Vikings '97* brochure (West Side Press), 1997.) *Vikings '97* was sponsored by Rover Cars, whose familiar logo is a dragon-headed Viking ship.

³ Brochure, *Vikingar! The Saga of the Vikings in Scotland* (North Ayrshire Council), n.d., and Hillary Murray, *Welcome to Vikingar! The official guide to Vikingar! A Saga of the Vikings in Scotland* (North Ayrshire Council and Legend Design Consultants, Glasgow), n.d.

Vikings are now a "Scandinavian trademark",⁴ as Else Roesdahl has pointed out, but they have become more than that. They have entered the public domain, as one of the standard images of historical imagination. Raphael Samuel makes this point in *Theatres of Memory*: to him, Vikings are among

our stock figures, our subliminal points of reference, our unspoken points of address ... The Crimean War is Florence Nightingale with her lamp. The retreat from Moscow is Napoleon on a horse looking downwards. The Viking is a man wading ashore from a long-boat, dressed in a horned helmet and holding a broad-sword in his right hand: he is off to sack a village.⁵

In the opening chapter of this thesis, I asked the question "why Vikings?". In part the question referred to the reasons that led to me to choose Vikings as the subject of this study. But the other part of the question is, why have the Vikings become one of these "points of reference"? Is fame something integral to the Viking character; are Vikings intrinsically more suited to such distinction than other, less omnipresent peoples? What facets of human interaction with the past have led Vikings to emerge from the morass of history and play their many roles as hero, villain, role model, and icon?

6.1. *Uses of the past*

The use, and abuse, of humanity's past is a fashionable topic in late twentieth-century discussion, both at academic and more popular levels. There is a sense in much of this discussion that the past is an increasingly inescapable part of day-to-day life, and that there may be a growing danger in the ways the past is manipulated. Particular targets of such concern in Britain are the commercialisation of history, and the rapid growth of the country's controversial "heritage industry". A representatively alarmist line is taken by Robert Hewison in *The Heritage Industry -- Britain in a Climate of Decline*. Hewison states glumly that Britain is "a country obsessed with its past, and unable to face its future ... Hypnotised by images of the past, we risk losing all capacity for creative change."⁶ According to Hewison, "we have no real use for

⁴ Else Roesdahl, *The Vikings* (Penguin Books, London), 1987, English translation 1991, p. 3.

⁵ Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory, Volume One: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (Verso, London), 1994, p. 27.

⁶ Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry -- Britain in a Climate of Decline* (Methuen, London), 1987, pp. 9-10.

this spurious past, any more than nostalgia has any use as a creative emotion."⁷

Hewison's argument is typical of commentators for whom nostalgia has become a force to be dreaded. As David Lowenthal writes in *The Imagined Past: history and nostalgia*,

Three perceived emphases engender special ire. One is the commercialisation of nostalgia and the inauthenticity felt to accompany it. The second is nostalgia's perversion of the media, with its attendant sense of unreality. The third is nostalgia's reactionary slant, glossing over the past's iniquities and indignities.⁸

Nostalgia and heritage, however, are staging a counter-attack against this dim view. Much of Lowenthal's work, and that of Raphael Samuel, denies that nostalgia should be seen as such a "spurious" emotion, and argues instead that it is a necessary part of creative human life. A study by Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, contests the view that nostalgia should be "denounced, checked, ridiculed ... even forbidden".⁹ To Davis, Lowenthal and Samuel, the nostalgic impulse is something to be studied and explored, rather than disdained. Fred Inglis, in his *Cultural Studies*, states emphatically that "nostalgia is not a swearword";¹⁰ for him, "kitsch is the killer", rather than nostalgia itself.¹¹

Past/present interactions are being examined from archaeological standpoints as well. (See also 1.2.2.) Such works include Michael Shanks' *Experiencing the Past: On the Character of Archaeology*, Shanks and Christopher Tilley's *Reconstructing Archaeology*, and Shanks, Hodder *et al.* in *Interpreting Archaeology: Finding Meaning in the Past*. Again, these works are exploratory, tending for the most part less to judge human uses of the past than to determine how these uses develop and function. Shanks, in particular, would like to see greater academic acceptance of "popular" encounters with

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 138.

⁸ David Lowenthal, "Nostalgia tells it like it wasn't", in Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase (eds.), *The Imagined Past: history and nostalgia* (Manchester University Press, Manchester), 1985, pp. 21-2.

⁹ Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (The Free Press, Macmillan, New York), 1979.

¹⁰ Fred Inglis, *Cultural Studies* (Blackwell, Oxford), 1993, p. 46.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 74.

the past.¹² To him, it is a delusion that academics/professionals have a monopoly on what is meaningful, nor must interactions with the past always be "serious" in order to be valid.¹³

It is possible to discern two basic, if inter-related, strategies in the appropriation of past events and peoples. One strategy is to bring the past forward, using it to alter current perceptions. The construction and bolstering of current identity through association with a past group seems to fit into this category. Past peoples become meaningful through being claimed by a current group or nation, and in turn, past achievements give a sense of glory and self-worth to the modern people laying claim to them.

The other basic strategy is to go into the past oneself. This is, of course, strictly impossible, as the heritage-dreading commentators never let one forget. But it is at the root of many attitudes toward the past, and the cultural forms in which these attitudes are manifested.

Forms such as historical fiction, time-travel fantasy, and the re-enactment movement, three leading ways of "going into the past", tend often to be described as "escape". Hewison, in his indictment of heritage, acknowledges that "we actually want to live in the past",¹⁴ but does not really examine the question of why this should be so. When the question is addressed, the answer is generally found to lie in a feeling of dissatisfaction with the present. It is frequently observed that, in order for nostalgia to permeate a society as it is perceived to do in late twentieth-century western culture, there must be a widespread sense of the present's inadequacy. Nostalgia and its manifestations are a "safety valve" in this context, helping to combat the disappointments and frustrations of daily existence.¹⁵ One example is provided by Samuel, when he writes that a way of "attempting to account for the popularity of heritage, as also the rapidity with which it has spread, is to see it as an attempt to escape from class. Instead of heredity it offers an ideal home which is defined not by pedigree

¹² Michael Shanks, *Experiencing the Past: on the Character of Archaeology* (Routledge, London), 1992, pp. 1, 12.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 181.

¹⁴ Hewison, *The Heritage Industry*, p. 31.

¹⁵ Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, pp. 9-10, 98-9. Davis is here discussing the arguments of psychologist Charles A. A. Zwingmann.

but by period".¹⁶ In Lowenthal's analysis, meanwhile,

The diverse goals of contemporary nostalgia do have one point in common. They mainly envisage a time when folk did not feel fragmented, when doubt was either absent or patent, when thought fused with action, when aspiration achieved consummation, when life was wholehearted. In short, a past that was unified and comprehensible, unlike the incoherent, divided present.¹⁷

This idea of "wholehearted" life appears as well in Harry E. Shaw's discussion of historical fiction and its development. By setting their works in the past, novelists can provide for their readers "a world in which life is more intense, passions simpler, men braver, women more beautiful than they appear to be today."¹⁸ The cliché is still going strong: the past offers us that glowing world where "life was life, and men were men".¹⁹

Escape into the past creates an alternative to the present,²⁰ although, as detractors point out, that alternative must also be fundamentally unlike the past that it makes use of. The "ideal home" usage "robs the past of its terrors".²¹ It presents a new and improved past, which has more excitement and glamour than the present, and is cleaner and safer than life could ever have been in the period being appropriated. For example the Society for Creative Anachronism, the oldest and largest of today's re-enactment groups, offers its members a chance to experience life in "the Middle Ages as they should have been" -- a world of chivalry and honour, attractive costumes, and the chance to fight (without dying) for King and Country, free from such less pleasant aspects of medieval life as pre-modern plumbing, famine, plague, and a generally low life-expectancy.²² The appropriated past becomes a form of safe display, as in the

¹⁶ Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, p. 246.

¹⁷ Lowenthal, "Nostalgia tells it like it wasn't", in Shaw and Chase, *Imagined Past*, p. 29.

¹⁸ Harry E. Shaw, *The Forms of Historical Fiction: Sir Walter Scott and His Successors* (Cornell University Press, London), 1983, p. 82.

¹⁹ While I have no idea as to the earliest appearance of this particular cliché, it was certainly in use by 1929, as witness a verse used in Douglas Fairbanks' film of that year *The Iron Mask*: "Then come with us to France of old/To fiery days when hearts beat high/When blood was young and hate was bold/When sword crossed sword to dare and die./For love and honour gloried then./When life was life, and men were men." (Allan Dwan (director), *The Iron Mask* (United Artists), 1929.)

²⁰ Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, p. 221.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 265.

²² SCA web page, "Life in the Current Middle Ages", <http://www.sca.org/sca-intro.html> (visited 29/1/98).

Norwegian package tour "VikingQuest", which enables the tourist to "savor the experience like the Vikings would have, from the sea, only without the hardship!"²³

6.2. Using the Vikings

6.2.1. Identity

In this portion of the discussion, I will look briefly at contrasts between Scandinavian/Icelandic, North American, and British interactions with the Vikings. I certainly do not claim to be presenting a full and representative picture of the Scandinavian and American situations, but even a cursory glance at them can be a useful tool for placing the British outlooks in perspective. The Vikings are used as a source and focus of identity in all three cases, but each takes a different route in the ways this identification is used.

At first glance, it would seem that Scandinavian relations with the Viking past should be the most straightforward of the three examples. The idea of continuity seems to make things simple. Vikings were Scandinavians, so surely modern Scandinavians will identify and empathise with the Vikings.

To an extent this is the case. The Viking "heritage" is often treasured in Scandinavian attitudes. Else Roesdahl, in discussing the "Scandinavian trademark" aspect of the Viking image, writes that

The foundations of modern Scandinavia were laid in the Viking Age. Never before had so many decisive changes taken place in such a short space of time, and never before or since have Scandinavians played so great a role abroad. This lies at the heart of the Viking myth ... Scandinavia looks upon the Viking Age as a golden age, when noble deeds were performed abroad and there were great developments at home."²⁴

S. Thirlund, writing in *The Viking Compass*, finds it easy to identify with the Viking seafarers. When he discusses the Norsemen, they are described as "our ancestors". Thirlund observes that modern Scandinavians and the Vikings share many experiences:

Our ships had become equipped with the modern electronic instruments, but naturally, the weather conditions were unchanged. We could still have a hard time fighting fogs, storms and ice, and once more we wondered how our ancestors had been able to maintain more than 400 years of

²³ VikingQuest web page, <http://www.supernet.net/~thestuff/a/Norway.htm>, visited 10/11/97.

²⁴ Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, pp. 3, 187.

steady trade between Norway and Greenland/North America.²⁵

However, it is far too simple to say "Scandinavians identify with the Vikings", and leave it at that. For a start, there are differences in the ways the individual Scandinavian nations relate to the Viking past. Marie Louise Stig Sørensen, discussing nationalism and archaeology in a Danish context, writes that in Danish official rhetoric of the nineteenth century, when the borders of modern Denmark were being established, "there clearly seems to be an emphasis on accepting the imposed borders and on legitimizing the limits of the people."²⁶ This, she suggests,

possibly explains why the Vikings (who represents [sic] an expansionist phase) have generally played only a modest role in the construction of Danish identity. This is in contrast to Norway and Sweden ... who at the time underwent very different political transformations. A clear emphasis on the Vikings is a very recent phenomenon, and its obvious association to tourism may suggest that this is responding to others' image of the nation rather than an expression of self-identity.²⁷

This point brings up the question of how much Viking identity is chosen by Scandinavians, and how much it is imposed. Non-Scandinavians often tend to use "Viking" as synonymous with "Scandinavian" when referring to the modern people. For instance, the travel guide *The Viking Lands*, published in 1949, focuses on contemporary Scandinavia, scarcely touching on the actual Viking period. An idea of continuity between Vikings and modern Scandinavians is taken for granted in this work:

It is strange, indeed, that these lands, to which we can to-day usefully turn for example, should be the same ones from which our ancestors once prayed for divine deliverance ... Now, on both sides of the North Sea, we all boast happily of our Viking ancestors as not a shameful memory, but a proud bond between us ... We know more than we used to of Scandinavia, thanks to the war, and in these days it is we ourselves who are considering, as holiday-makers, travellers or students, the invasion of the Viking lands.²⁸

Part of the omnipresence of the Viking image may well be, as Sørensen has suggested, a response to the demands of tourism. If tourists to Scandinavia expect to see Vikings,

²⁵ C. L. Vebæk and S. Thirslund, *The Viking Compass Guided Norsemen First to America* (Gullanders Bogtrykkeri a-s, Skjern), 1992, p. 21.

²⁶ Marie Louise Stig Sørensen, "The fall of a nation, the birth of a subject: the national use of archaeology in nineteenth-century Denmark", in Marguerita Díaz Andreu and Timothy Champion (eds.), *Nationalism and Archaeology in Europe* (UCL Press, London), 1996, p. 32.

²⁷ *ibid.*, note 1, p. 33.

²⁸ Gordon Young, *The Viking Lands* (Evans Bros. Ltd., London), 1949, pp. 9-10.

and will pay for the privilege, then Vikings are what they will get.²⁹

Some Scandinavians certainly see the Viking heritage as over-rated, such as the Norwegian university student with whom I shared a coach trip to London in 1995, and who proclaimed himself exasperated at being continually identified with people that he saw as little more than boozing, irresponsible ruffians. A similar line is taken by Gunnar Karlsson of the University of Iceland, interviewed for *Timewatch's* "Evidence of Vikings". He remarked,

Personally, I do not see myself as descending from Vikings, and I do not think that people in Iceland generally do. They may do it for tourists, but not genuinely. When I first came to England I was surprised to find out that I was considered to be almost a Viking since I came from Iceland. I had never thought of myself like that.³⁰

However, despite Gunnar Karlsson's scepticism, other observers have pointed out the intense identification which modern Icelanders tend to feel for the sagas set in their own regions of Iceland.³¹ It has been suggested that Iceland's Viking period has a particularly vivid relevance for modern Icelanders, due in part to the recent emergence of Iceland as a politically independent nation.³² Iceland is singled out in *The Past is a Foreign Country* as a country "where individual and community roots intertwine to make history all-pervasive". "The past", we are told, "plays a paramount role in Icelandic nationalism".³³

Gunnar Karlsson may be correct that most of his fellow countrymen do not identify with Vikings in the strictest sense, even if the tendency to lay claim to the sagas is strong. Sagas and Vikings are not synonymous, and certainly not all of the

²⁹ A similar process has occurred in York since the time of the celebrated Coppergate dig and the opening of the Jorvik Centre. Vikings played little role in the city's advertised image before that period, but once the Coppergate floodgates were opened, Vikings moved to the forefront of York's tourist industry, and the visitor to York is now confronted with costumed Vikings parading the streets and such useful items for purchase as ear-rings with Viking warriors on them and Viking longship embroidery patterns.

³⁰ Alan Ereira, *Timewatch*, "Evidence of Vikings" (BBC), 1995.

³¹ Jón Karl Helgason, "We who cherish *Njáls saga*: the Alþingi as literary patron", in Andrew Wawn (ed.), *Northern Antiquity: the Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga* (Hisarlik Press, Enfield Lock, Middlesex), 1994, pp. 143-161.

³² Jesse L. Byock, "Modern nationalism and the medieval sagas", in Wawn, *Northern Antiquity*, pp. 163-187.

³³ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge), 1985, p. 46. Lowenthal's comments are based on an article by Stephen Klaidman, "Iceland, where the past is prologue", *International Herald Tribune*, 17 February, 1981, p. 4.

characters in the Icelandic family sagas are Vikings in the occupational meaning of the word. As Kristján Eldjárn, sometime director of the National Museum, Iceland, points out in his article "The Viking 'Myth'", the period is more frequently called "the saga time" than "the Viking time" in Iceland. But Vikings -- or saga heroes -- do play a role in Icelandic self-images, and not simply as tourist-trapping propaganda. Eldjárn remembers, as a child, pretending to be a Viking, and he remarks,

Of course we admired the ancient heroes, but looking back I find it peculiar how little we were affected by the violence and the relatively frequent killings in these stories ... It lies in the nature of the myth to skip lightly over the cruel acts of the Vikings and at the same time to see their valour and gallantry through magnifying lenses.³⁴

Not all Icelanders see themselves as Vikings, just as not all citizens of the United States see themselves as cowboys or gunfighters. But the Viking hero has much the same seminal role in Icelandic culture as the hero of the Wild West does in the States.

Moving on to American claims of Viking identity: it would be all too easy to present the topic as a joke. US relations with the Vikings provide many fine examples of the apparent insanity which gives rise to the expression "only in America". But laughable though the United States' rapidly proliferating runic messages, mooring-holes and Norse altars may be to non-believers, even the most lunatic of these American Viking manifestations have their roots in crucial issues of identity and self-image.

Americans of European descent are an uprooted people,³⁵ with comparatively brief historical ties to their own country, and often very little knowledge of their forebears in Europe. In this context, a family's background can become of immense importance, ties to one's ancestral homeland providing a refuge from current anomie and uncertainty. Many Scandinavian Americans put a particularly strong emphasis on this background, and staking a claim in the Viking past provides a way for them to proclaim their deeply felt links to the home of their ancestors.³⁶ Scandinavian ancestry is not a prerequisite for an American to be interested in Vikings. However, it is revealing, for instance, to

³⁴ Kristján Eldjárn, "The Viking 'Myth'", in R. T. Farrell (ed.) *The Vikings* (Phillimore and Co., London), 1982, p. 262.

³⁵ "Long uprooted and newly unsure of the future, Americans *en masse* find comfort in looking back; historic villages and districts become surrogate home towns that contain a familiar and reassuring landscape for people whose points of reference elsewhere have been altered beyond recognition." (Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, p. xv.)

³⁶ See Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, p. 3: "... people in many parts of the world, from the Shetlands to Normandy and the United States, celebrate their Nordic roots by remembering the Vikings."

study the membership list of the American-based society The Viking Navy, and notice what a high percentage of members cite their Scandinavian heritage as their main reason for wanting to build Viking longships.³⁷

Celebrating Scandinavian ancestry and shared Viking heritage is not always enough to satisfy longings for identity and a secure spiritual home. It is from this point that the more elaborate flights of fancy take off, their proponents seeking to prove that the Vikings themselves wandered the wilds of primeval America. As Birgitta Linderöth Wallace writes in her discussion of "The Vikings in North America", such cult archaeology

... enjoys a special appeal within the North American WASP segment of the population, that is White Anglo-Saxon Protestant society, whom it provides with ancient roots on a continent where these people have traditionally been regarded as newcomers ... Interwoven with the claim for a Norse or other Old World origin for a plethora of North American features is the unspecified assumption of the supremacy of an Old World culture, especially the culture of the Norse ...³⁸

These outlooks provide the background for extreme claims to Viking heritage such as those in the promotional video for that Minnesotan icon the Kensington rune stone. Accompanying visuals of canoe-paddling Vikings exploring the tree-shadowed reaches of a Minnesota river, the good-old-boy drawl of the voice-over urges visitors to "Touch the hidden past. Sense it. Feel it. Hear it. See it. Yep [sic]. Them boys was here all right. We have our own legacy to prove it, with the Kensington rune stone."³⁹

In Britain, the situation lies somewhere between Scandinavian and American examples. Britain can claim some Scandinavian heritage. Scandinavians are part of the "melting pot" that forms the British people, though it is a melting pot of far greater antiquity than its counterpart in North America. Britain's early history has been and still is often presented as a series of one group of outsiders after another, arriving to add their own particular genius to the bloodline of the British.⁴⁰ The Vikings are "one of the

³⁷ <http://www2.digalog.com/viking/essays/enlisted.htm>, visited 10/12/97.

³⁸ Birgitta Linderöth Wallace, "The Vikings in North America: Myth and Reality", in Ross Samson (ed.), *Social Approaches to Viking Studies* (Cruithne Press, Glasgow), 1991, pp. 211-2.

³⁹ Kensington Rune Stone promotional video, clip used in Ereira, *Timewatch*, "Evidence of Vikings".

⁴⁰ See Simon Trafford, *Theoretical Approaches to Early Medieval Migration* (University of York), DPhil thesis, 1997, *passim*.

more gaudy elements" of the English-speaking peoples' "colourful and mixed past".⁴¹

Modern Britons can claim not only Scandinavian ancestry, but authentic Viking heritage. There is no need here to wistfully fabricate a Viking presence, for Britain has its own historically and archaeologically authenticated Viking raids, battles, settlements. But this is where the issue starts to become more complex.

The Vikings really *were* here -- and their activities included raping and pillaging, rather than just heroically exploring as the mythical United States Vikings tend to do. This factor leads to an ambivalence in British attitudes toward the Vikings. In some senses, Vikings represent a glorious, exciting and commercially profitable heritage, that should be claimed eagerly. As well, it is a shared heritage between modern Britain and Scandinavia, a useful link when one is attempting to promote smooth business and political relations.

In another sense, however, the Vikings are still the outsiders. Alcuin's dismay, and "the fury of the Norsemen", still resound clearly, and they lead to uneasiness over laying claim to Britain's Viking past.

Interactions with the Vikings, naturally, differ in varying regions of Britain. Some regions can claim little or no Viking presence, while in other areas, Vikings are a main key to the region's identity. Traditionally, the regions in which a Viking identity remains most important have been those that are most distinct and/or isolated from standardized, London-centric culture. Island regions such as Orkney, Shetland and the Isle of Man, where Scandinavian-focused culture arguably survived longer than in mainland areas of Viking settlement, are also the regions that claim Viking heritage as an active alternative to the mainland culture in which they appear as peripheral backwaters. As Alan Binns writes of the significance of Viking ship festivals to island societies:

The point about viking ship festivals, none very old, is not at all continuity, but its opposite, an attempt to cross a gap which is very well known to exist, and is really regretted by some ... No wonder that the viking ship makes for them [islanders] a symbol of a golden past as well as an identity with which to confront the visitor. It manifests the difference between their ancient culture and that continental one which produced Europe's cities, castles and cathedrals. An Englishman's home may be his castle, but the Islander's castle was his boat, and you need to remember this when you face the sad

⁴¹ David M. Wilson, foreword to James Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World* (Frances Lincoln Ltd., London), 1989, p. 6.

multiplication of viking ship ashtrays, salt-cellars and tulip-vases.⁴²

The Isle of Man uses Viking heritage to assert the uniqueness of its culture, not only through Viking longships but also through Norse legal and governmental tradition. An Isle of Man web site presents the island's history in the following terms:

Throughout the centuries the Isle of Man has developed a way of life and a culture all of its own. Many world events such as the Roman and Norman invasions of Britain passed it by and the island quietly took visits from Irish and Scottish freebooters in its stride. The arrival of the Vikings, however, did leave a lasting mark on this tiny Celtic nation.

After a period of turbulence the Celts and Vikings came together and without a doubt the great single gift left by these fearsome Northern warriors was a unique system of Government that exists to the present day -- Tynwald.⁴³

In some regions it proves difficult to chose between rival identities. Ireland, like the Isle of Man, can boast both Scandinavian and Celtic heritage, but the Viking side of the equation is not always seen as something worth boasting about. Some of this tension is revealed in discussions of the controversy that surrounded the rescue excavations at Wood Quay, Dublin. The destruction of this tenth and eleventh-century site to make way for an office complex sparked massive public protest, and played a major role in the founding of the group Friends of Medieval Dublin. The site was identified with Vikings, and protestors identified themselves with the Vikings as well: protest signs shown in photographs bear legends such as "God save our Vikings", and "Save Viking Dublin",⁴⁴ various protestors marched wearing horned helmets⁴⁵ or took to the Liffey in makeshift dragon ships with "save Wood Quay" blazoned on their shields,⁴⁶ and the banner of the group which occupied the building site bore "the black raven, symbol of Viking prowess".⁴⁷ But while the Viking identification seemed to

⁴² Alan Binns, *Viking Voyagers: Then and Now* (Heinemann, London), 1980, p. 102.

⁴³ Isle of Man web site, <http://www.isle-of-man.com/information/history.htm>, visited 30/03/97.

⁴⁴ John Bradley (ed.) *Viking Dublin Exposed: the Wood Quay Saga* (The O'Brien Press, Dublin), 1984, pp. 14, 44-5.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 43, 183.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, frontispiece.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 70. The raven banner had a narrow escape: "... the jib of a crane was swung out over Winetavern Street several times and succeeded in tearing the Old Dublin Society and the Liberties Association banners; however the symbolically important Black Raven was saved due to the prompt action of a journalist." (p. 80)

appeal to popular sympathies, there are indications that it may have played a role in the lack of interest shown in the site at some official levels. Howard Clarke, in "The Historian and Wood Quay", writes that "in certain quarters there is, apparently, an attitude of mind that attaches inferiority or even irrelevance to non-Gaelic aspects of the history of this island."⁴⁸ Support for the protestors by the Danish embassy, and interest expressed in the site by the National Museum of Denmark and Queen Margarethe of Denmark herself, failed to stop the site's destruction. It would be going too far to assert that Wood Quay perished simply due to ethnic hostility to the Vikings. Bureaucratic inertia is a more likely candidate. But the implication remains strong that Wood Quay's "foreign" aspects helped to undermine its chances, and that the destruction of the site, denying official recognition of the Viking contribution to Ireland's history, was a betrayal of "that pluralism without which there cannot be peace and true unity in a re-united country of thirty-two counties".⁴⁹

In other regions where Viking identity now plays a major role, the ethnic issues are less fraught. York, although it may once have witnessed tension between Viking and Saxon, is now a city which wholeheartedly embraces its Viking heritage in order to lure the tourists. This is of course not a strictly fair analysis; Vikings *were* an important element of York's development, and York was a tourist town which lived off its history long before the York Archaeological Trust and the Coppergate Vikings arrived on the scene. It can hardly be denied, however, that York's leap to the Viking bandwagon has its opportunistic motivations -- motivations of which a pragmatic Viking businessman would no doubt heartily approve. The success of the Jorvik Viking Centre has inspired other areas to join in, with establishments such as the "Vikingar!" centre in Largs springing into existence complete with their own Viking festivals. Vikings are often credited with stimulating Britain's economy in their own period -- though having first disrupted it through raids and warfare -- so it is perhaps fitting that appropriation of the Viking past should bring economic success once again.

This aspect of the Viking image in Britain may be most directly responsible for phenomena such as the Vikings '97 festival in West Devon. Vikings are a good thing now, they are fun, they bring in tourists and investment. So even the areas which are

⁴⁸ Howard Clarke, "The Historian and Wood Quay", in Bradley, *Viking Dublin Exposed*, p. 144.

⁴⁹ F. X. Martin, "Politics, Public Protest and the Law", in Bradley, *Viking Dublin Exposed*, pp. 65-6.

most likely to remember Viking depredations are willing to celebrate the Viking presence. Vikings '97 marked the 1000th anniversary of a Viking plundering mission reported in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.⁵⁰ The sites where the festival's re-enactments took place were once ravaged by the very people that the festival celebrates, yet the festival is meant to symbolise "friendship and present-day links with Scandinavia". It is an odd juxtaposition. The siting of the Largs centre and festival is perhaps equally peculiar, for Largs was the location of a famous Norse *defeat*.⁵¹ Vikings, it seems, are "in" -- so in, that they can be celebrated in locations where they once brought only destruction, or where they suffered destruction themselves.

6.2.2. Escape

"Live like a Viking for a day!" urges the brochure of the Vikinglandet theme park near Oslo. Vikinglandet advertises itself as a total sensory experience: "sail with them, listen to them, learn from them, be a part of it, taste it, try it".⁵² Danelaw Village, at the Yorkshire Museum of Farming on the outskirts of York, likewise offers visitors the opportunity to "be a Viking",⁵³ and events such as the Jorvik Viking Festival provide a variety of ways for festival-goers to vicariously participate in the Viking experience (see Figure 38).

The desire to join the Vikings, to escape from our world into theirs, is a powerful element of interactions with the Viking past. Vikings, with their rugged outdoor lifestyle, their emphasis on courage and physical vigour, and the adventurous elements of their mythos, can easily embody visions of that vivid, whole-hearted past in which people could really *live*.

⁵⁰ "The Danes ravaged Cornwall, Wales and Devon. They went into the mouth of the Tamar, continuing up until they came to Lydford, burning or killing each thing they met -- they burnt down Ordulf's monastery at Tavistock and brought with them to their ships indescribable plunder." *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, quoted in Vikings '97 brochure. See M. J. Swanton (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (J. M. Dent, London), 1996, p. 131.

⁵¹ Brochure, *Vikingar! The Saga of the Vikings in Scotland*.

⁵² Vikinglandet NorgesParken brochure, *Have Fun in the Viking Way* (NorgesParken A S, Vinterbro, Norway), n.d., circa 1996.

⁵³ Brochure, Jorvik Viking Festival events at Houlgate Village (now re-named Danelaw Village) (Houlgate Village, Murton Park, York), n.d. Among the events held during this particular Jorvik Viking Festival were "Be A Viking ... Spend a couple of hours trying to live like a Viking (costumes provided)", and "Viking Saga Night ... Join the Vikings in their hall. Sagas, games, trials of strength, food to sample."

One particularly striking example of the longing to become part of the Viking past is the novel *Wind from the North*, published in 1934. The novel seems almost an exercise in nostalgia, putting into practice all of Lowenthal, Samuel *et al.*'s observations on the phenomenon. It is a time-slip tale, in which the hero, a government office clerk miserable with his life in modern Dublin, finds his true destiny when he is transported to Viking Dyflin. Life in Dublin seems grey, non-descript and hopeless to our hero. He feels himself to be "solitary and isolated", and writes "What I desire above everything is to go back again to Dyflin, away from this twentieth century world that has grown strange and lonely to me".⁵⁴ His life in the past brings him exuberance, meaning and hope: "... I thought that I had never breathed such delicious air, nor ever seen the sunlight so bright ... The snow had ceased and the air was pure and sweet with a tang of frost. I drew in great breaths of it, full of exultation. My blood raced through my veins with a sense of freshness and new beginnings."⁵⁵ The past provides him with a feeling of community, but his interactions with the Dublin Vikings retain a bittersweet tinge, as he realizes that he is still in some sense only a visitor in their world. Watching his Viking companions, the hero observes:

Their faces were hard and weather-beaten, except in the very young. Their cold blue eyes held a mixture of greed and generosity and caution and audacity that gripped me. Now they were laughing and smiling and excited, in their holiday mood, and their laughter and excitement gave an extraordinary impression of a mixture of joyful vitality and gloom, of ferocity and good faith and comfortable kindness, that made me feel that they were a people about whom stories could be told. I felt an intense longing to make intimate contact with them, to make one of them.⁵⁶

This almost hallucinatory jumble of impressions may say more about the hero's, or the author's, state of mind than about the Vikings, but it remains a vivid instance of that wistful desire and envy which paints the supposedly heroic past in so much brighter hues than the confused and undistinguished present.

A similar usage of the Vikings appears in the 1952 Donald Duck comic book *Donald Duck and the Golden Helmet*. Here, Donald Duck sees the Vikings as representatives of all that the degenerate human race has fallen away from. Donald is working as guard at a museum, the collection of which includes an Oseberg-inspired

⁵⁴ Joseph O'Neill, *Wind from the North* (Jonathan Cape, London), 1934, p. 9.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 29, 43.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p. 74.

Viking ship. The ship leads Donald to reflect on the vast chasm between Viking adventures and modern life. "Those old Vikings fought walruses and whales and savage tribes, and I tell goggle-eyed nature boys where to find butterflies!" Donald groans. "Oh, that the race of men could ever sink so low!"⁵⁷ Donald would like to identify himself with the perceived qualities of the Vikings: "I'm the rugged type!" he declares. "I like adventure -- the kind of rip-snorting fun those old Vikings must have had!"⁵⁸ Despairing of the present, and his own role in it, Donald feels that his only option is to "go up on the deck of this old scow for a few minutes and *pretend* that I'm a he-man!"⁵⁹

Donald Duck and the hero of *Wind from the North* have a good deal of company in preferring the Viking life -- at least their image of the Viking life -- over the present, and wanting to become part of the past. Members of re-enactment Viking groups may not be able to literally go back in time, but they have succeeded in constructing a subculture in which their Viking lifestyle often provides them with more meaning and satisfaction than do other facets of their modern existence. As happens to *Wind From the North's* protagonist, often the past that one chooses to re-enact and celebrate seems to be more one's home than the present. For instance, a member of the Vikings (Norse Film and Pageant Society) whose re-enactment name is Katla Yngvarsdottir writes her web page in her Viking persona, and states "... I am a Viking lady and I have been transported to your time. I have adjusted well and I think there is nothing to tell me apart from someone like you ... You need to look into my heart before you can see the difference".⁶⁰

Robert Hewison speaks disparagingly of the "new vogue for historical re-enactments".⁶¹ In a sense, re-enactment is a far older phenomenon than Hewison believes;⁶² one thinks of the Victorian middle- and upper-class vogue for recreating

⁵⁷ Carl Barks, *Walt Disney's Donald Duck and the Golden Helmet*, Donald Duck no. 408 (Dell Publishing Co., New York), July-Aug. 1952, p. 2.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 1.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ Katla's Kitchen, <http://www.angelfire.com/va/Katla/index.html>, visited 4/4/97.

⁶¹ Hewison, *Heritage Industry*, p. 3.

⁶² "As well as anticipating the 'virtual reality' of computer games, 'living history' could be seen as a reincarnation or new incarnation, of quite ancient forms of play. In particular historical re-enactment is one of the oldest of the mimetic arts, and a perennial favourite in children's make-believe ... As a

oneself in the image of (largely mythical) medieval chivalry, and the quixotic and ill-fated Eglinton tournament of 1839, probably the last major tournament to be staged before the founding of the Society for Creative Anachronism.⁶³ However, the re-enactment group as it appears today is largely a development of the latter portion of the twentieth century. Raphael Samuel suggests that connections may exist between the rise of re-enactment and living history, and the growing interest in DIY re-constructions of past technology, a phenomenon that gained in popularity from the 1950's onwards.⁶⁴ Samuel also discusses post-modern implications of the re-enactment movement:

In place of facts it offers us images -- 'hyper-realities' -- in which the old is faked up to be more palpable than the here-and-now. It involves a quite conscious exercise in make-believe, not so much trading on our credulity as inviting us to connive at the subterfuge and give ourselves up to its pleasures. It eschews epic and grand narrative in favour of personal observation and local knowledge. It invites us to play games with the past, and to pretend that we are at home in it, ignoring the limitations of time and space by reincarnating it in the here-and-now.⁶⁵

The late 1960's and early 1970's seem to have been a hotbed of inspiration for the growth of re-enactment societies. The SCA, a California-originated medieval group which has now spread world-wide, was founded in 1966. Two years later the English Civil War re-enactment group the Sealed Knot, most venerable of the British groups, was formed. The Roman group the Ermine Street Guard was formed in 1971, as was The Norse Film and Pageant Society, setting the stage for a schism in the mid-1980's which would create the Vikings (current Norse Film and Pageant Society), and their great rival in the Dark Age Society stakes, Regia Anglorum. Both groups now insist that they are the most "authentic" Dark Age re-enactors.⁶⁶

watchword of conceit, 'living history' was a coinage of the 1960's, but it had been anticipated and pre-figured in a series of resurrectionary movements, each concerned, after its own fashion, to animate the inanimate and bring tradition back to life." Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, pp. 180, 182.

⁶³ See Ian Anstruther, *The Knight and the Umbrella: An Account of the Eglinton Tournament 1839* (Alan Sutton Publishing, Gloucester), 1963, this edition 1986.

⁶⁴ "Living history' owes a great deal to the do-it-yourself enthusiasm of mechanical fanatics who spend their weekend breaks, or their summer holidays, resurrecting some long-lost skill -- be it getting up steam on the footplate, negotiating the sluices of a canal lock, messing about in boats, or trying their hand at steam ploughing." (Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, p. 176.)

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 195-6.

⁶⁶ The Vikings (N.F.P.S.) call themselves "the largest, and most experienced Dark Age Re-enactment organisation in the United Kingdom", and write: "The events we stage range from educational school visits to large-scale re-enactments ... wherever possible, scripts are based around recorded historical

The re-enactment Vikings of the late twentieth century are in a curious position. They are creations of the widespread fascination with things Viking, but they also help to ensure that fascination's continued growth. Re-enactment groups play a major role in keeping Vikings in the public eye. They transcend media boundaries. Virtually every weekend over the spring and summer, group members can be found staging living history events at locations such as English Heritage sites, but one does not need to take a day out at a castle in order to encounter re-enactment Vikings. Their hard-won expertise in presenting an image of Dark Age realism makes such groups much in demand as extras and technical advisors in film and television. A member of The Vikings (N.F.P.S.) writes that

... 1995 was the busiest year we've ever had in terms of tv work, with two programmes for the Learning Channel (on the Normans and The Irish in a series entitled Ancient Warriors), BBC productions including a Timewatch programme entitled Evidence of Vikings, an episode of The Detectives with Robert Powell and Jasper Carrott, appearances on Disney adventures, and a cookery programme (!) [sic] and a short film for the Royal Armouries to our credit.⁶⁷

Viking re-enactors are also used as models in photo-documentary style books such as *I Was There: Vikings* and *Eyewitness Guides: Vikings*. Through festivals, television appearances, English Heritage events, school visits and juvenile non-fiction, the N.F.P.S. and Regia Anglorum ensure that a remarkably homogenous image of Vikings is presented. They may not have erased the horned helmet from public consciousness, but the re-enactment Vikings are seeing to it that their own "authentic" image becomes nearly as ubiquitous in contemporary Britain.

events which occurred in the region in which the show is to take place. With both living history and battle displays fully integrated, this extra educational dimension greatly adds to the enjoyment of the spectators -- audiences find out why the battle occurred and learn something about Dark Age culture in the process ... Each item of equipment that we use is carefully researched and based on a historical example from our period -- not only the clothing [sic], footwear, armour and weapons, but also the cooking utensils, tents and craft tools used in living history displays." (<http://www.biochem.ucl.ac.uk/~davis/vikings.html>, visited 5/4/97.)

Meanwhile, Regia Anglorum claim: "We are not purely a combat society, and have come a long way from the old hack-and-bash image associated with many re-enactment societies. We are in fact not a 're-enactment society' but a 'living history society'. Our basic tenet is authenticity. To this end we will not portray any image, support any ideal, or make any item of kit which we cannot provenance from contemporary sources. The society invests large sums of money and thousands of man hours getting it right. From our experiences with other superficially similar societies, we are certain that no other society from our period of interest takes this matter so seriously." (<http://www.ftch.net/~regia/regblurb.htm>, visited 5/4/97.)

⁶⁷ http://www.biochem.ucl.ac.uk/~davis/nfps_article.htm/, visited 5/4/97.

6.3. *Why Vikings? (revisited)*

One of the points insisted upon by Fred Davis in his study *Yearning for Yesterday* is that "It is incorrect to suppose that qualities associated with some slice of the past 'cause' the nostalgia we feel today".⁶⁸ In other words, nostalgia and other uses of the past are produced by present conditions, not by the characteristics of the past itself. "Almost anything from our past", Davis argues, "can emerge as an object of nostalgia, provided that we can somehow view it in a pleasant light."⁶⁹

But there is an essential difference between general, amorphous nostalgia, which can attach romantic associations to anything from Victorian baby clothes to rusting farm equipment, and the selection of particular groups or periods from history as worthy of being mythologised, claimed, re-enacted, and glorified as "our heritage". Michael Shanks makes the point that a past must be *right* for the uses to which it is put, comparing the appropriation of a particular past to a ritual of sacrifice:

Heritage is symbolic exchange; it is a sacrifice of the past for the present. This does not mean that the past is necessarily of no importance. In fact the opposite is true of sacrifice. It is vital that the victim is correct for its purpose.⁷⁰

With this in mind, is it possible to pick out characteristics of the Viking myth which make it particularly relevant for this sacrifice? Why are Vikings still used and remembered?

One does not have to search far for evidence that Vikings are, indeed, one of the stock historical images of contemporary British culture. It is almost impossible to escape from them; "Viking" is a vastly popular brand name, for anything from Viking Computer Services to the Viking School of Motoring. An intriguing example of Vikings as an historical reference point is found in the Reading restaurant *Knights Out*, "the UK's premier theme restaurant".⁷¹ Here, Viking nights are among the historical choices on offer for theme dinners. The Vikings share this distinction with medieval banquets, Wild West nights, pirate nights, 1920's gangster nights, and Tudor banquets hosted by

⁶⁸ Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, p. viii.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ Shanks, *Experiencing the Past*, p. 108.

⁷¹ http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/knights_out, visited 6/4/97.

Knights Out's own version of Blackadder.⁷²

The question, again, is why? What has placed the Vikings alongside pirates, gunfighters, medieval knights and 1920's gangsters in the Valhalla of popular memory? The proprietors of Knights Out must have chosen these themes for a reason. There must be something in these settings and periods which is seen as attractive, making them a feasible lure for diners with more money than sense. What, then, do the Knights Out themes have in common?

It is interesting to note that, with the apparent exception of the 1920's gangsters, Knights Out's historical periods are all ones which also appear as the settings of historical romance novels. The iconic heroes of these time periods are frequently fit into the mould of the dashing, though ultimately caring, abductor, who carries the heroine away to his love nest -- be that love nest in castle, Viking hall, outlaw stronghold or pirate lair. The heroes of romances must be forceful and adventurous, and Knights Out seems to have appropriated the historical periods for these same qualities, although the restaurant does not seem to have followed the romance novel technique of making its female characters forceful and adventurous as well.⁷³ These time periods as Knights Out depicts them all have a strong masculine emphasis. We are back to "when life was life, and men were men". The independent heroines of the romance novels, who make their way into traditionally masculine spheres in order to become actors rather than spectators, have not penetrated the consciousness of Knights Out's designers. Women may be "more beautiful",⁷⁴ in these heroic pasts, but that's as far as it goes; in Knights Out they are relegated to being the "delightful serving wenches", "delightful molls" or "delightful cowgirls" that the restaurant rather unimaginatively offers.

Leaving aside Tudor Blackadder, as being more directly inspired by a particular

⁷² "The Long Boat's ready, the oars are in place. And we feel like having a bit of fun! So stand by for yet another Viking raid of pillaging and plundering as we set sail for that far off land of Bonny Scotland! Join our 'Hagar the Terrible' and his trusty henchman, 'Erik the Red' as we test out you, the audience, to see who can join the boat and who stays behind to look after the kids!" (http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/knights_out/page6.htm, visited 6/4/97). Knights Out also offers many not specifically historical themes: fright nights, Caribbean nights, French nights, Rock 'n' Roll nights, Cult-Following nights, Cockney pub nights, Bavarian beer keller nights, and Back to School nights.

⁷³ As Thurston points out, "the emphasis in the bodice rippers is on adventure, not domesticity". (Carol Thurston, *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity* (University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago), 1987, p. 70.

⁷⁴ Shaw, *Forms of Historical Fiction*, p. 82.

work of entertainment than by the time period itself -- although the makers of *Blackadder* will not have chosen the Tudor period at random -- all but the medieval setting specifically contain an element of lawlessness. Vikings, gunfighters, pirates, Al Capone and company: all can be figures who take the law into their own hands, who are not always bound by the stultifying rules of civilised life, and who can be romanticised for this feature, even though the reality of their activities is often sordid and bloody. There may be an element of this in the medieval mythos as well, with the wandering knight errant playing something of the same role, as a figure outside the constraints of society's daily existence.

All of the periods which *Knights Out* has chosen hold a strong element of violence. Medieval warfare and torture, Viking raids, pirates making their victims walk the plank, Wild West gunfights, Chicago gang wars: one might think these not particularly appetizing accompaniments to one's dinner. But these are the sorts of images that become enshrined in historical memory. Peace, to be blunt, leaves little to remember. Far more alluring are blood-and-guts, kill-or-be-killed moments of crisis -- at least when the crises are no longer real, but merely something to be enjoyed in the company of bellowing actors in horned helmets, and dinner presented by those delightful serving wenches.

Vikings, like their fellow *Knights Out* themes, are noticeable. They are something exciting, a break from the general monotony of existence and historical record, fitting into Raphael Samuel's observation that in history "it is the remarkable occurrence and larger-than-life personality which stirs the interest".⁷⁵ And as John Haywood remarks somewhat apologetically at the opening of his *Historical Atlas of the Vikings*, "war makes far more exciting history than peace".⁷⁶ Because the celebrated roles that Vikings play tend to be active ones, as disruptors or, more positively, as catalysts to development and change, they become seen as a people with "an interesting lifestyle", as a web page for the re-enactment group the Realm of Chivalry describes them.⁷⁷

Not only are they "interesting", Vikings are immediately recognisable. This also

⁷⁵ Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, p. 16.

⁷⁶ John Haywood, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of the Vikings* (Penguin, London), 1995, foreword.

⁷⁷ <http://www.halcyon.com/roc/newcomer.htm#PersonaeDevelopment>, visited 5/4/97. The other peoples with "interesting lifestyles", according to the Realm of Chivalry, are Scottish highlanders and Moors.

seems to be true of their Knights Out companions: everyone knows a knight, a pirate, a gunslinger or a gangster when they see one. These groups each have an identifiable visual image -- historically and archaeologically doubtful though the images may often be -- which helps to rescue them from historical oblivion. In this sense the much-maligned horned/winged helmets, so abhorred by the "serious" Viking scholar, may in fact be the Viking's salvation.

It remains to be seen whether the long-standing campaign to promote non-horned Vikings will eventually negate this aspect of the Viking image. Personally, I doubt it. The horned helmeted Viking, striding ashore from his longship, has gone into legend, and legends are not destroyed by the quibbles of "authenticity". If Robin Hood existed, he lived in South Yorkshire not Nottinghamshire, and was a couple centuries late to have known Richard the Lionheart; Richard III was totally lacking in the hunchback and withered arm department, and King Arthur's knights in shining armour would probably have been lucky if they could scrape together one breastplate and helmet between the lot of them. But the legends survive, untarnished by the emergence of factual knowledge. At the very least, the horned Viking helmet will continue to co-exist alongside the unadorned conical variety, and will continue to ensure that everyone knows what a Viking looks like -- even if no one can actually agree on which is the "true" picture.

The Knights Out groups also seem to be envisioned as people who know how to have fun. There is potential wildness about them; even the people of the chivalrous middle ages knew how to throw a good party. "Eat, drink and be merry" could well be Knights Out's watchword, and the periods they have chosen lend themselves to this attitude.⁷⁸ It is difficult to imagine, for instance, a Puritan night -- accompanied by a witch-burning, perhaps? -- or a Victorian industrialist night.

As mentioned above, the majority of the Knights Out historical themes focus on characters who are outside the law. They can be whiter-than-white heroes, or evil-to-the-core villains, depending on the context and the agenda of those who are presenting them. This is one of the defining characteristics of the Vikings' celebrity. The

⁷⁸ The middle ages, for instance, offers "a glorious four course banquet meal amid much merrymaking and raucous entertainment" (complete, naturally, with serving wenches and minstrels), while the pirate evening provides "a Jolly Roger of an evening with good food and absolutely loads of nautical nonsense and sing alongs". (http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/knights_out/page2.htm and [page7.htm](http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/knights_out/page7.htm), visited 6/4/97.)

good/bad Viking dichotomy has been integral to their legend from its beginnings. The two basic source types on which later Viking depictions are based have enshrined this conflict of extremes. Vikings are the demons of European chronicle accounts, or they are the quick-witted, stylish and larger-than-life heroes of the sagas composed by Vikings' descendants.

The question of whether Vikings are good guys or bad guys adds a special *frisson* to their reputation, providing a choice between vicarious enjoyment of double-dyed Viking villainy, or protective sympathy for a people who have been done wrong by history. As Paddy Griffith has written, the barbarian image of the Vikings has "served to enhance their international profile and make them familiar figures in western culture."⁷⁹ The desire to protect and defend the Vikings is reflected in politically-correct revisions of the Viking myth, in Regia Anglorum's claim to have escaped from the "old hack and bash image", in the statement of a member of The Viking Navy, whose motivation in joining the group was to help "clear the Vikings of their bad historic reputation".⁸⁰

Whatever their basic category, heroes or villains, Vikings do not do things by halves. Exciting, "interesting", and identifiable, the Vikings are also "the best". The best at what, is of course another question with many different answers. Either they are the most feared barbarians of all time, or the greatest professional warriors of their era, or the finest shipwrights, sailors and navigators of the middle ages, or the most daring explorers in history. Régis Boyer discusses this aspect in his examination of the Viking image in France: the myth demands that "Vikings must excel and be superior in something. In order to accord with the values of the late twentieth century ... this superiority is now seen to reside in the technical skills of the men of the North -- whether juridical, military, commercial, or technological. In short, Vikings are good at making ships and swords."⁸¹

The exceptionality of the Vikings -- no matter what their exceptionality may consist of -- helps to keep them tangible, making them a recognisable entity rather than a dead society just like any other. To survive as something that people care about, as

⁷⁹ Paddy Griffith, *The Viking Art of War* (Greenhill Books, London), 1995, p. 24.

⁸⁰ Viking Navy web page, <http://www2.digalog.com/viking/>, visited 10/12/97.

⁸¹ Régis Boyer, "Vikings, Sagas and Wasa Bread", in Andrew Wawn (ed.), *Northern Antiquity: the post-medieval reception of saga and edda* (Hisarlik Press, Enfield Lock, Middlesex), 1994, p. 77.

the inspiration and focus for re-enactment, novels, merchandising and theme restaurants, it is necessary to be memorable, to stand out from the crowd. There must be the potential for excitement, and for escape from humdrum reality.

These are qualities which the Viking myth supplies in abundance. And while it may not be possible to truly make history live, the interaction of present with past at least creates an afterlife of sorts, in which "the remarkable occurrence and the larger-than-life personality" continue to make their impact on modern humanity. So the Vikings, mixed reputation, horned helmets, red and white sails and all, live on.

Appendix One
Chronological Background Timeline

Date	Political	Archaeology and Art	Literary and Historical
1514			Paris publication of Saxo Grammaticus, <i>Gesta Danorum</i>
1531	Henry VIII declared Supreme Head of the Church of England		
1544			Johannes Magnus, <i>Historia de omnibus Gothorum Sueonumque Regibus</i>
1555			Olaus Magnus, <i>Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus</i>
1586		Publication of Camden's <i>Britannia</i>	
1605			Verstegen's <i>Restitution</i>
1642	Beginning of English Civil War		
1643		Worm's <i>Danicorum Monumentorum</i>	
1655		catalogue <i>Museum Wormianum</i>	
1659			first comprehensive Anglo-Saxon dictionary
1688	Glorious Revolution		
1703-05			Hickes' <i>Thesaurus</i>
1748			Montesquieu's <i>De L'Esprit des Lois</i>
1756		Mallet's <i>Monumens</i>	
1759		British Museum opens	
1760			Macpherson's <i>Fragments of Ancient Poetry</i>
1762			Macpherson's <i>Fingal</i>

1763		English edition of <i>Monumens</i>	Macpherson's <i>Temora</i>
1765			Macpherson's <i>Works of Ossian</i>
1768			Gray's "Fatal Sisters" and "Descent of Odin" published (composed 1761)
1770		Percy's translation of <i>Monumens</i>	
1787	French Revolution begins		
1807			first known use of word "viking" in modern English
1811	Götiska Förbundet founded, Sweden		
1814	Norwegian Constitution		
1822			Scott's <i>The Pirate</i>
1824			Tegner's <i>Frithiof's Saga</i>
1839			Earliest English translation of original <i>Friðþjófs saga</i>
1842			Dasent's translation of <i>Prose Edda</i>
1843			Dasent's translation of Rask's <i>Grammar of the Icelandic</i>
1844			Laing's <i>Heimskringla</i>
1848		Benty Grange helmet found	
1857			Keary's <i>Heroes of Asgard</i>
1859			Asbjörnson and Moe's <i>Popular Tales from the Norse</i>
1861			Dasent's <i>Njal's Saga</i>
1864	Prussia gains Schleswig Holstein from Denmark		

1867		Tune ship excavated	
1868		Waterloo Bridge helmet found	
1869			Ballantyne's <i>Erling the Bold</i> ; publication of Morris and Magnússon's first saga translation; first staging of <i>Das Rheingold</i>
1870		Torslunda helmet dies found	First staging of <i>Die Walküre</i>
1871	German unification		
1874	New Icelandic constitution		Cleasby/Vigfusson Icelandic-English dictionary
1876			Publication of Morris' <i>Sigurd the Volsung</i> ; first staging of entire <i>Der Ring des Nibelungen</i>
1880		Gokstad ship excavated	
1889			Du Chaillu's <i>The Viking Age</i>
1891			Publication of Morris and Magnússon's Saga Library begins
1892			Viking Society for Northern Research founded
1893		voyage of <i>Viking</i> , replica Gokstad ship	
1898		Kensington Rune Stone	
1904	Iceland granted home rule	Oseberg ship excavated	
1911	University of Iceland founded		
1918	Kingdom of Iceland, in union with Denmark		
1934-41		Excavation of Trelleborg	

1937			Comic strip <i>Prince Valiant</i> begins publication
1938		SS funds Hedeby excavations	
1939	Britain enters Second World War	Sutton Hoo excavated	
1940		Publication of Shetelig's <i>Viking Antiquities</i> 1-5 (Part 6 published 1954)	
1941 & '45			Swedish publication of <i>Röde Orm</i>
1944	Iceland gains full Statehood		
1944-46		Bersu's Isle of Man excavations	
1945-48		Uunartoq Fjord excavations	
1948-49		Kensington Rune Stone exhibited at Smithsonian Museum	
1954			English publication of <i>The Long Ships</i> (<i>Röde Orm</i>)
1957-62		Skuldelev ships excavated	
1958			release of film <i>The Vikings</i>
1960			Brøndsted's <i>The Vikings</i> published
1961-68		L'Anse aux Meadows excavations	
1962			P. H. Sawyer's <i>The Age of the Vikings</i>
1965		Vinland Map published	
1976-81		York Coppergate excavation	
1977-81		Wood Quay excavation, Dublin	

1980-81		"The Vikings" exhibition, British Museum	
1981-2		"The Vikings in England" exhibition, Yorkshire Museum	
1984		Jorvik Viking Centre opens	
1991			Else Roesdahl's <i>The Vikings</i> published in English translation
1991-93		"From Viking to Crusader" exhibition	
1997		"Vikings and Gods in European Art" exhibition	

'Storm Song of the Norsemen', by Mildred I. McNeal



(The Ægir was the old Norse god of the ocean.)

I.

THE Ægir 's gone abroad to-night;
He calls you all, my merry men,
And tunes afar his mocking flight
O'er watery moor and fen.
Why bide ye in the drowsy bay,
The home of sloth and dull delight?
Heave yo! Heave yo! my merry men,
And follow we away!

II.

The beetling cliffs grow black amain,
The stormy west gleams redly through,
And roaring surges plunge again
Across the startled view.
The little craft, the harbor round,
Fret at their fetters in disdain
As we, along the roughening blue,
Slip past them, seaward-bound.

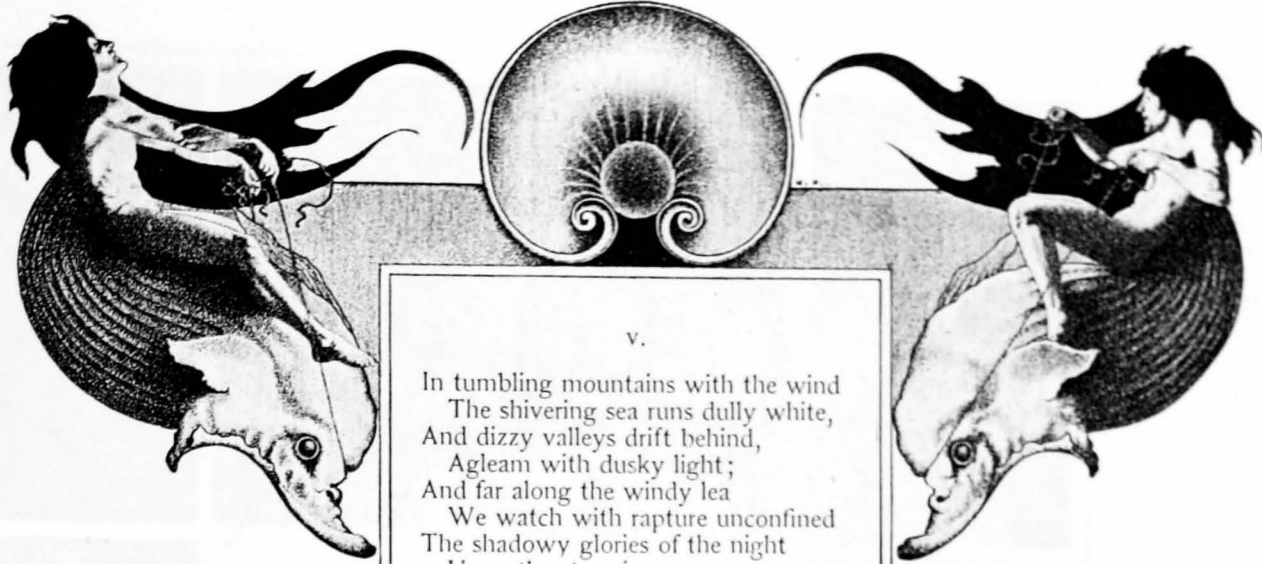
III.

Now ho for the mirth of a moving ship!
And ho for the white sails blowing wide!
And ho for the salt wine on the lip,
And the rush of the mellow tide!
More faintly comes the breakers' boom,
And far arear the home lights slip,
And fast the thundering jetty-side
Runs back athwart the gloom.

IV.

Oh, the prow is up and the wind is on!
The Ægir comes with rush of rain
And greetings as in years ago
From all his stormy train.
What fire flames the exulting blood
As we with them fare on and on!
What madness moves in every vein,
And merry hardihood!





v.

In tumbling mountains with the wind
The shivering sea runs dully white,
And dizzy valleys drift behind,
Agleam with dusky light;
And far along the windy lea
We watch with rapture unconfined
The shadowy glories of the night
Upon the storming sea.

vi.

Along the beam the bright foam runs,
And fumes and hisses through the dark,
And flaunts a myriad mimic suns
About our flying bark.
Aloft the great sails beat and blow
Like rout and roar of hungry guns,
And bend to brush their eager mark
Along the hills of snow.

vii.

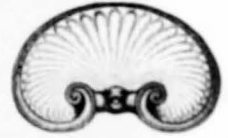
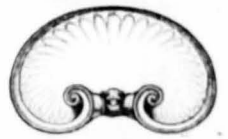
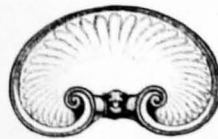
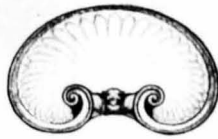
O Ægir, take my hands in thine—
Soft ease and safety are but vain;
We 'll quaff with thee the windy wine
And dare the farthest main.
Thy breath is round us, wild and warm,
And bright along the rushing brine
We sweep with all thy shining train
On plumed wings of storm.

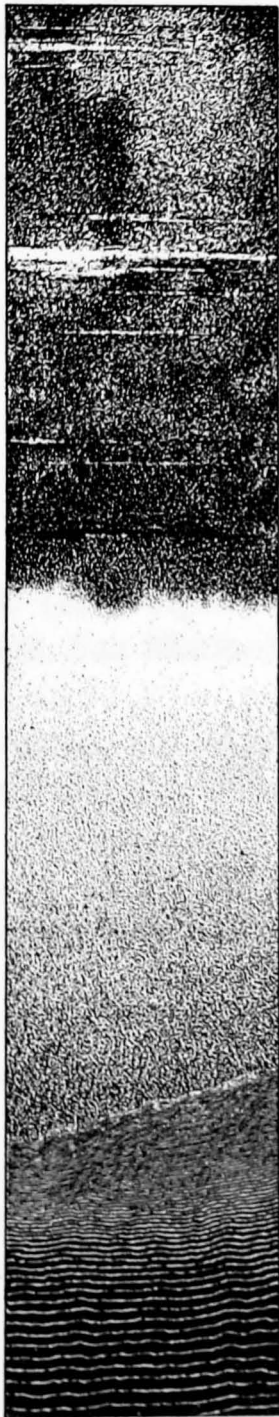
viii.

The wet winds whip the wintry spray
To whirling fury in our path,
And toss afar their shattered prey,
And roar in hardy wrath.
Like hounds upon a hurrying trail,
Their baying blows from far away,
And echoes up the foaming strath
Upon the angry gale.

ix.

Now from the rolling mists there come
The wraiths of stately ships, that swept
In years agonè the fretting foam,
Ere wives and babes had wept.
Young hearts sang then in hardy glee,
But e'er the winds wore sobbing home,
And mate and manful master slept
Beneath the wintry sea.





x.

They speed upon us, pale and high,
 And rock along the rushing blast,
 Nor comes there moan, nor call, nor cry,
 As they run stilly past.
 Wild is the wind, the sea is gray,
 But courage glows in every eye,
 And courage sends them faring fast
 Adown the flying spray.

xi.

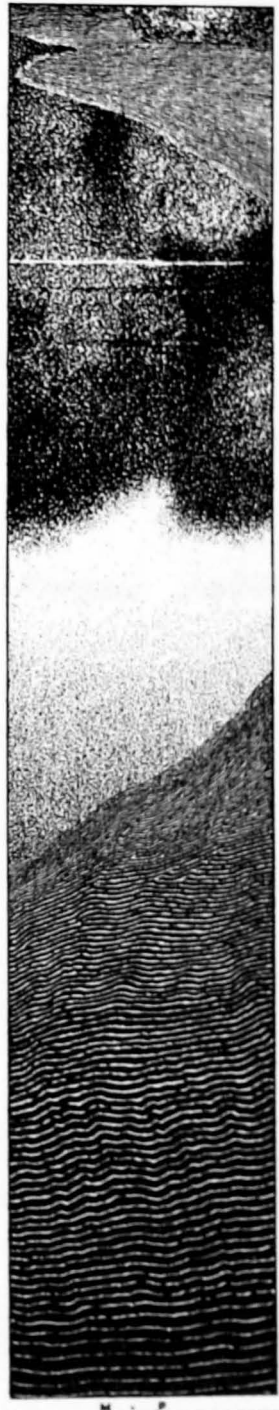
One day while yet the storm runs new
 In rapture round a thousand lands,
 This bright-browed comrade will undo
 The clinging of these hands,
 And there will be for me no more
 The sheltering cliffs, the bay's soft blue,
 No more the low hut on the sands,
 Or cheery call ashore.

xii.

O Ægir, friend, thy years are fleet—
 Soon comes the time of couch and staff;
 We follow thee with earnest feet,
 Nor dream thy joys in half.
 The hurrying wine of living strife
 Upon the eager lip is sweet,
 And to the jeweled brim we 'll quaff
 The glorious cup of life.

xiii.

The Ægir 's gone abroad to-night;
 He calls you all, my merry men,
 And tunes afar his mocking flight
 O'er watery moor and fen.
 Why bide ye in the drowsy bay,
 The home of sloth and dull delight?
 Heave yo! Heave yo! my merry men,
 And follow we away!



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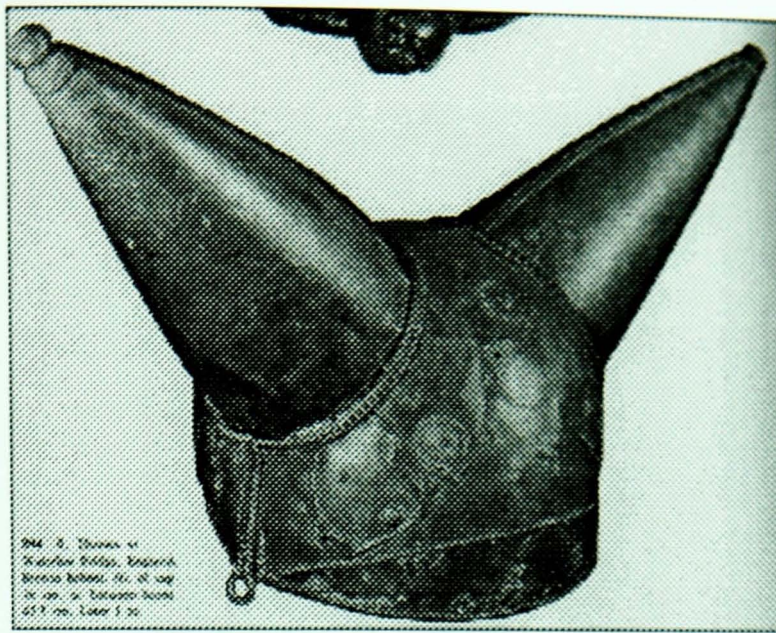


Figure 1: The Waterloo Bridge helmet, discovered in 1868. (J. V. S. Megaw, *Art of the European Iron Age: A study of the elusive image* (Adams and Dart, Bath), 1970, plate 294.)

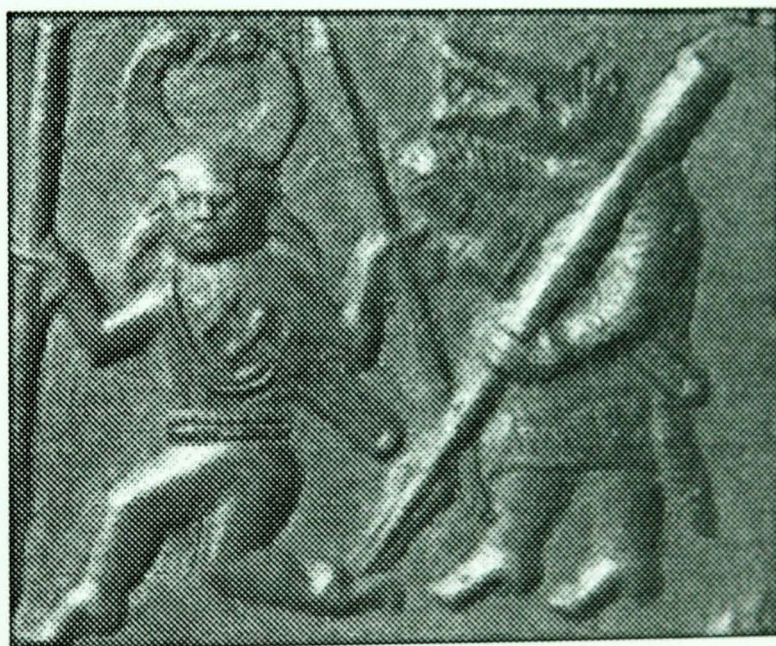


Figure 2: Torslunda helmet plate, Die D. (Rupert Bruce-Mitford, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology: Sutton Hoo and Other Discoveries* (Victor Gollancz Ltd., London), 1974, Plate 57b.)



Figure 3: The Sutton Hoo helmet, 1972 reconstruction. (Rupert Bruce-Mitford, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology: Sutton Hoo and Other Discoveries* (Victor Gollancz Ltd., London), 1974, plate 47a.)



Figure 4: The Gjermundbu helmet. (Susan M. Margeson, *Eyewitness Guides: Vikings* (Dorling Kindersley, London), 1994, p. 13.)

Original in colour.



Figure 5: The Viking beard styles parade. Ernest Borgnine, Tony Curtis and Kirk Douglas in *The Vikings*, 1958. (Photograph from author's collection.)

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Figure 6: Boltar, the respectable merchant and honest pirate. (Harold R. Foster, *Prince Valiant, Volume Two: Companions in Adventure* (Nostalgia Press and King Features Syndicate, New York), 1974, 8/9/42.)

Originals in colour.



Figure 7: Hagar the Horrible. (Dik Browne, *Hagar on the Rampage* (Attica Publications, Harlow, Essex), 1986, front cover.



Figure 8: The Viking warrior of the late twentieth century. (John Malam, *Indiana Jones Explores: The Vikings* (Evans Bros. Ltd., London), 1994, p. 33.)



Figure 9: “Siegfried Kills the Dragon Fafner”, by Donn P. Crane, 1936. (Mary Henderson, *Star Wars: the Magic of Myth* (Bantam Spectra, New York), 1997, p. 33.)

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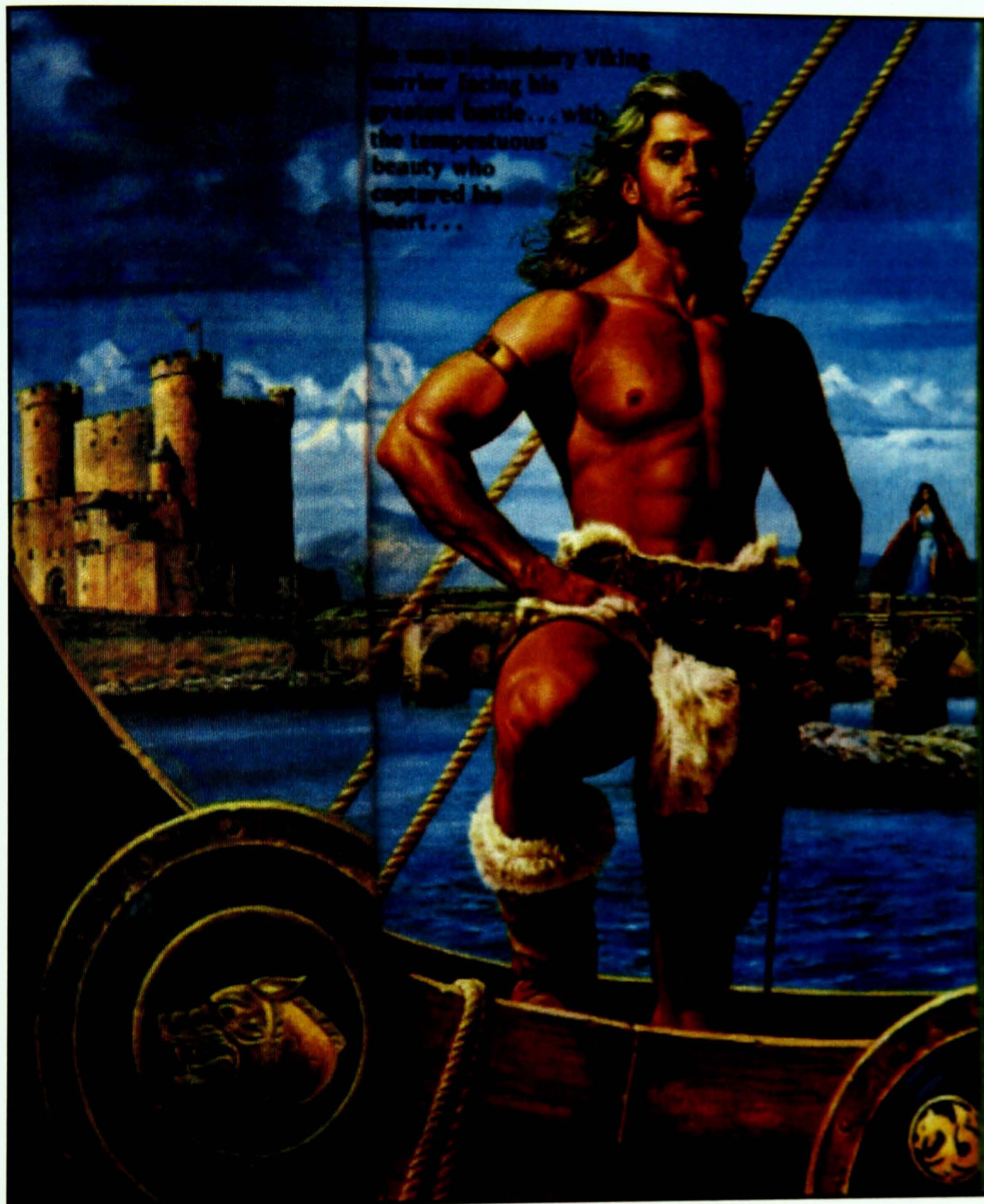


Figure 10: Conar, the Lord of the Wolves. (Heather Graham, *Lord of the Wolves* (Dell Publishing, New York), 1993, front cover.)

Originals in colour.



Figure 11: A Viking re-enactment society member models Viking women's dress for *Eyewitness Guides: Vikings*. (Susan M. Margeson, *Eyewitness Guides: Vikings* (Dorling Kindersley, London), 1994, p. 31.)



Figure 12: Viking period dress as depicted in *Over 900 Years Ago: With the Vikings*. Note the Coppergate cap on the central female figure. (Hazel Mary Martell, *Over 900 Years Ago: With the Vikings* (Zoë Books, Winchester), 1993, p. 25.)



Figure 13: An 1880's example of Viking women's dress. (G. A. Henty, *The Dragon and the Raven* (Blackie and Son Ltd., London), 1886.)

Original of Figure 15 in colour.



Figure 14: The Viking with a woman on his shoulder, 19th-century engraving. (Yves Cohat, *The Vikings: Lords of the Seas* (Thames and Hudson Ltd., London), 1992, p. 57.)

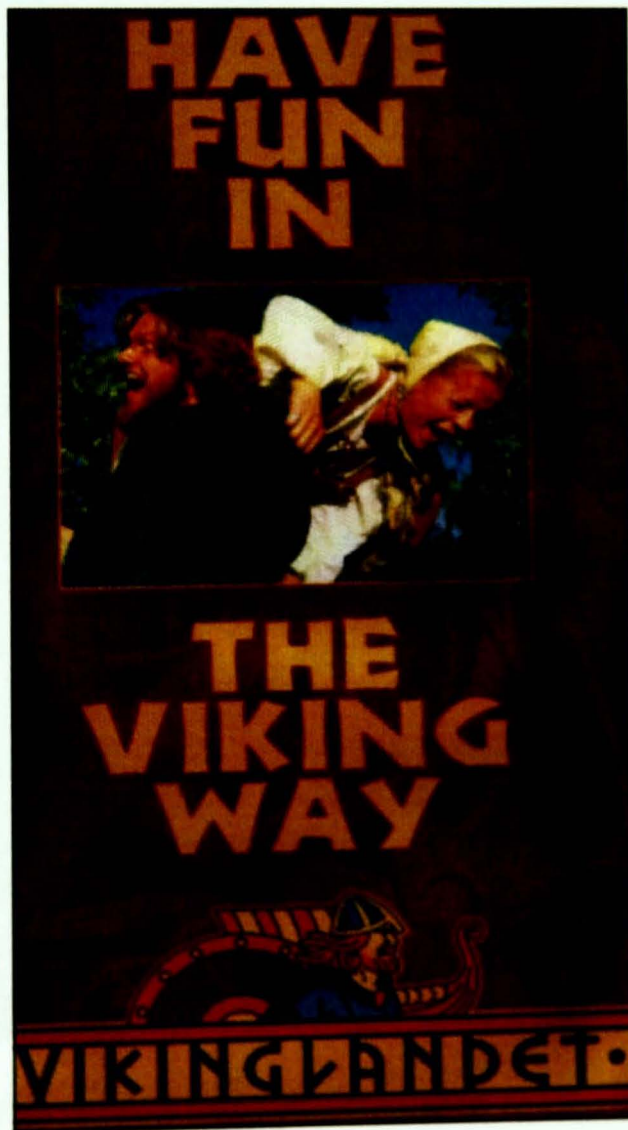


Figure 15: The woman on the shoulder, late 20th-century style. (Vikinglandet Norges Parken brochure (NorgesParken AS, Vinterbro, Norway), circa 1996.)



Figure 16: A valkyrie, as envisioned by Peter Nicolai Arbo in 1869. (David M. Wilson, *Vikings and Gods in European Art* (Moesgård Museum, Århus), 1997, p. 66.)

Original of Figure 17 in colour.



Figure 17: Helga, the Viking warrior heroine of *The Thrall of Leif the Lucky*. (Ottolie A. Liljencrantz, *The Thrall of Leif the Lucky: A Story of Viking Days* (A. C. McClurg and Co., Chicago) 1904, facing page 286.)

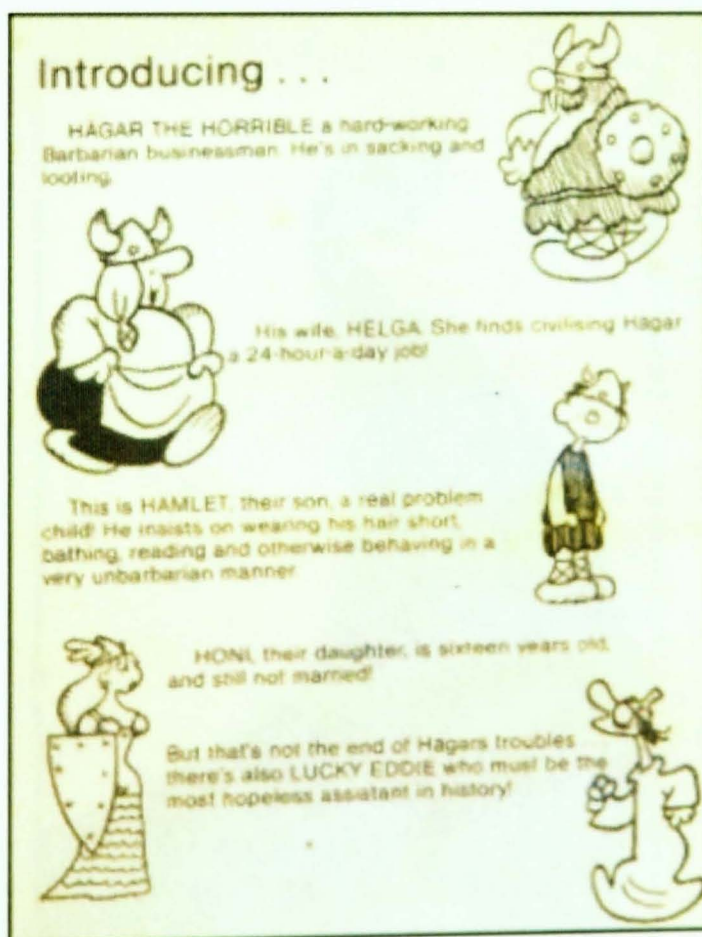


Figure 18: Contrasting styles of Viking women: Helga and Honi in *Hagar the Horrible*. (Dik Browne, *Hagar on the Rampage* (Attica Publications, Harlow, Essex), 1986.)

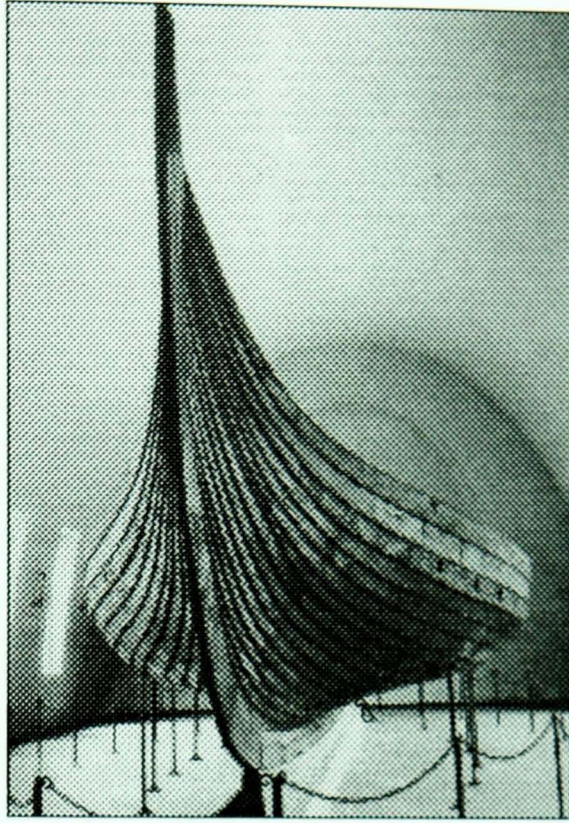


Figure 19: The Gokstad ship. (Ian Heath, *The Vikings* (Osprey Publishing, London), 1985, p. 9.)

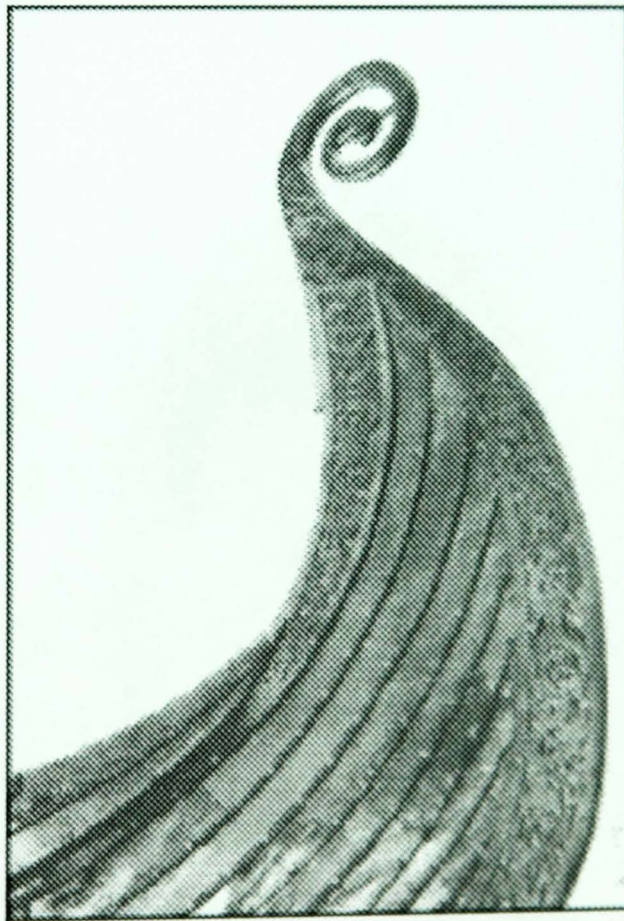


Figure 20: Prow of the Oseberg ship. (Ian Heath, *The Vikings* (Osprey Publishing, London), 1985, p. 8.)

Figure 21: The Skuldelev
Archaeology: Sutton Hoo and
Plate 32.)

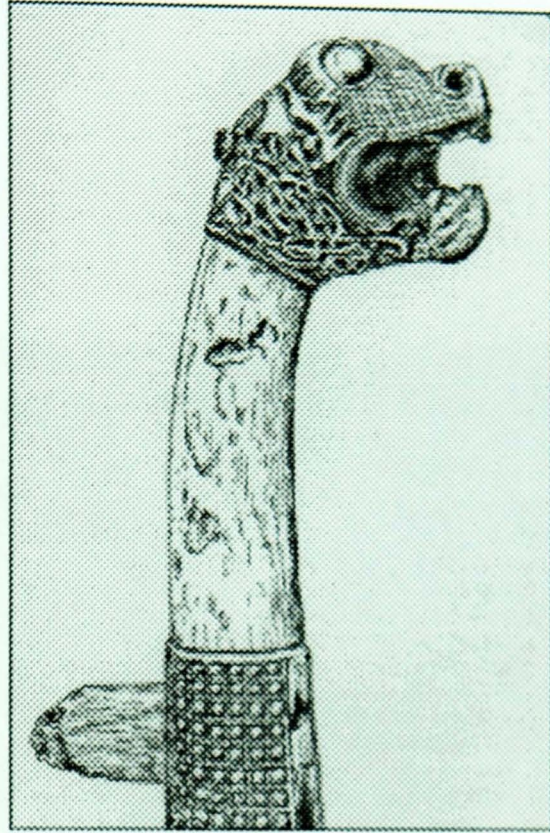


Figure 21: Drawing of the “Academician’s Post”, one of the animal-headed posts from the Oseberg ship burial. (Holger Arbman, *The Vikings* (Thames and Hudson, London), 1962, p. 119.)



Figure 22: The Scheldt “figurehead”. (Rupert Bruce-Mitford, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology: Sutton Hoo and Other Discoveries* (Victor Gollancz Ltd., London), 1974, Plate 32.)

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Figure 23: A Viking's funeral, with a composite Scheldt and Oseberg ship. (Hazel Mary Martell, *Project Homework: Vikings* (Franklin Watts, London), 1993, p. 27.)

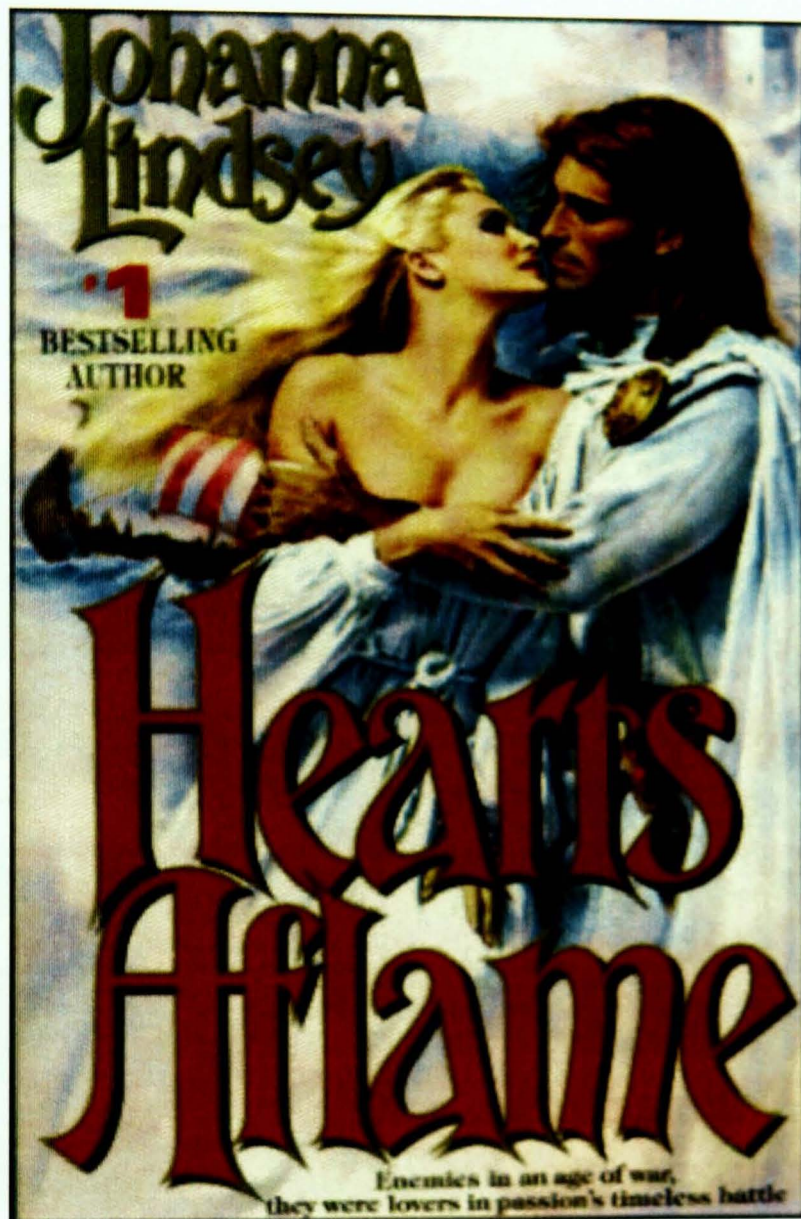


Figure 24: The red and white sailed ship proclaiming the Viking setting of *Hearts Aflame*. (Johanna Lindsey, *Hearts Aflame* (Avon Books, New York), 1987, front cover.)

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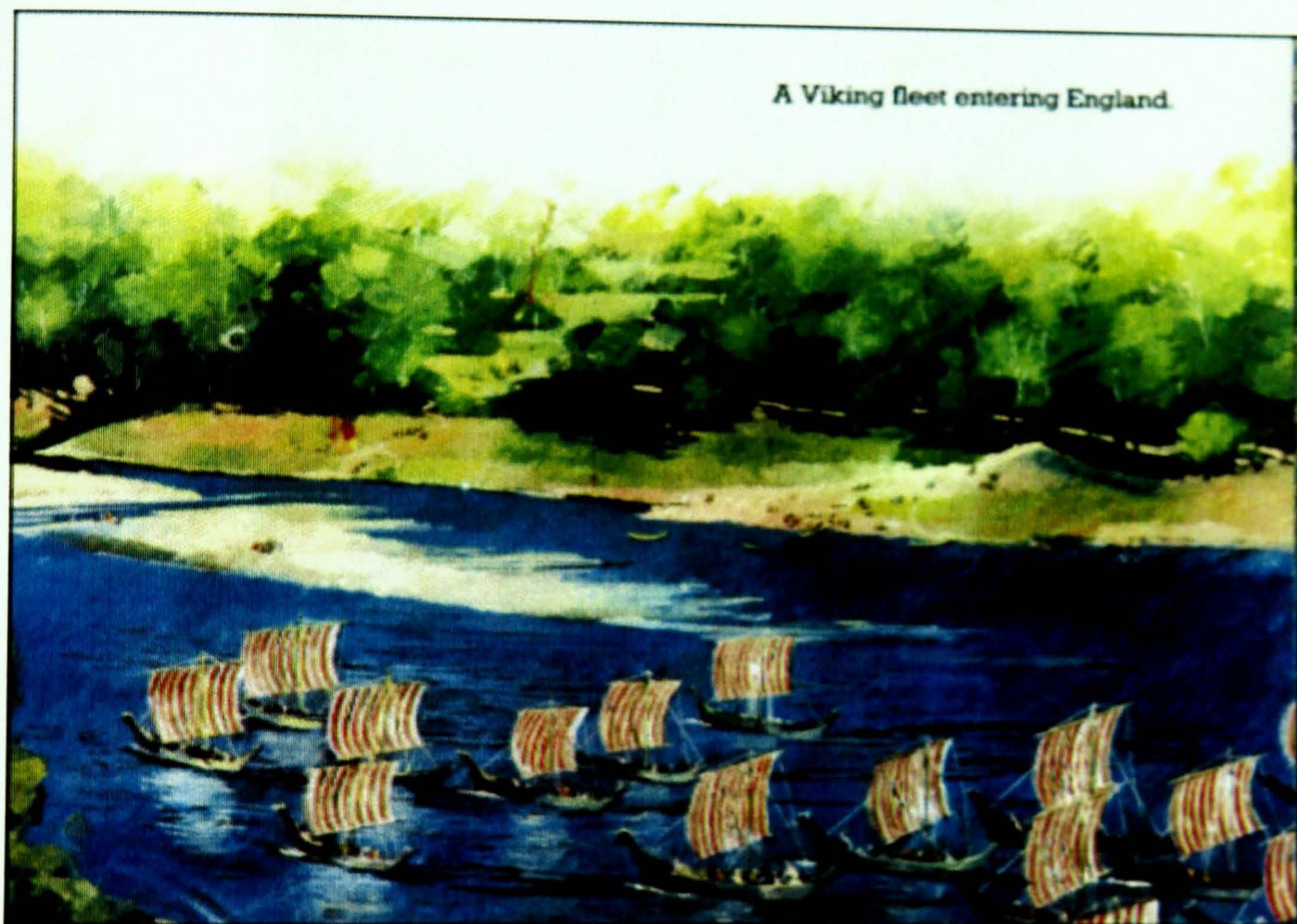


Plate 25: A mass-produced Viking fleet entering England. (Jill Hughes, *Find out about Vikings* (Hamish Hamilton, London), 1984, p. 21.)



Figure 26: A man's profile carved from elk horn, found in Sigtuna, Sweden. (Ian Heath, *Vikings* (Osprey Publishing Ltd., London), 1985, p. 48.)

Figure 26: A man's profile carved from elk horn, found in Sigtuna, Sweden. (Ian Heath, *Vikings* (Osprey Publishing Ltd., London), 1985, p. 48.)

Figure 28: The winged helmet of Athena, found in the Parthenon, Athens, Greece. (John Thomas Nelson, and John G. Taylor, *The Parthenon* (Oxford University Press, Oxford), 1998, p. 100.)

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Figure 27: King Olaf Tryggvason in winged helmet. (William Canton, *A Child's Book of Warriors* (J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., London), n.d., illustrations 1912, facing p. 232.)



Figure 28: The winged helmet to end all winged helmets. (Richard Strong, *King Harold's Son* (Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., London), 1946, front cover.)



Figure 29: Viking fashion sense versus Saxon: Guthrum the Dane and King Alfred in the Ladybird book of Alfred the Great. (L. Du Garde Peach, *King Alfred the Great* (Ladybird Books Ltd., Loughborough), 1956, p. 31.)

FRIENDS OF MEDIEVAL DUBLIN

Save our National Monument at Wood Quay

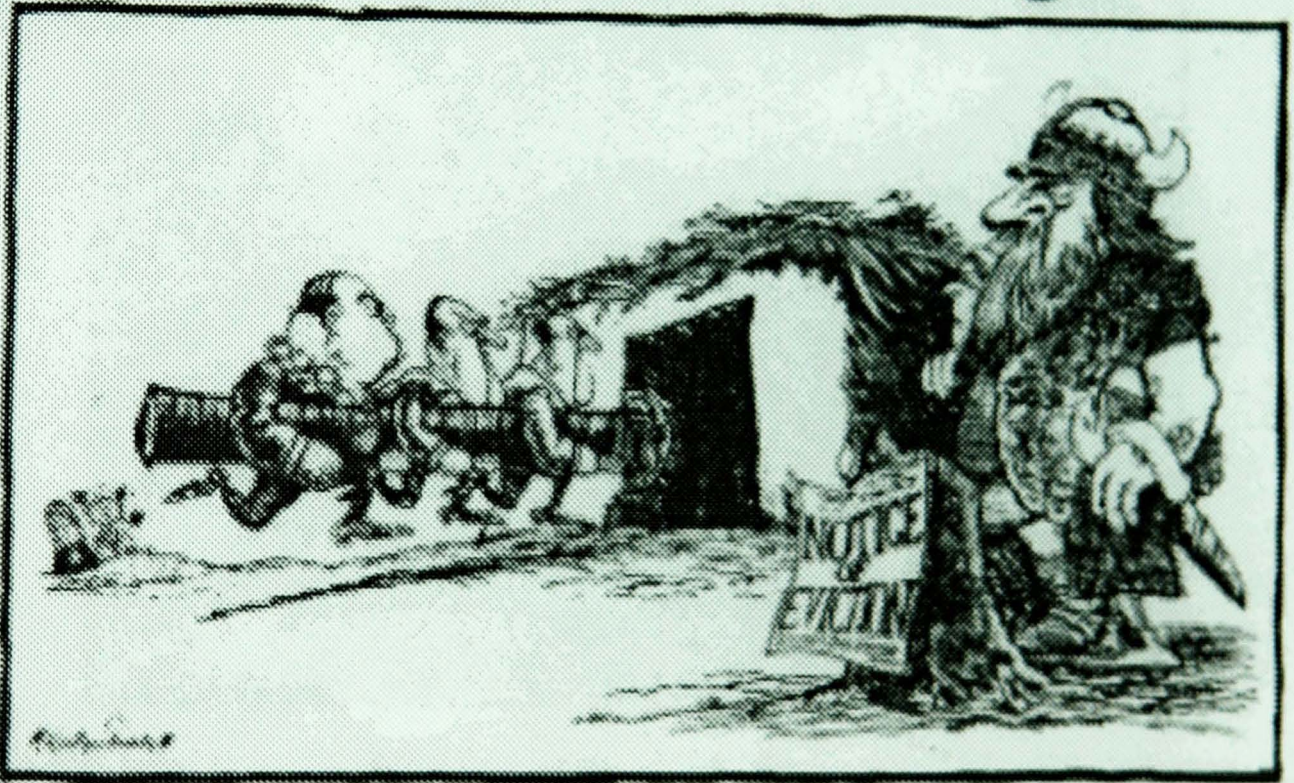


Figure 30: Horned Vikings face eviction from Wood Quay, Dublin. (John Bradley (ed.), *Viking Dublin Exposed: the Wood Quay Saga* (O'Brien Press, Dublin), 1984, p. 49.)

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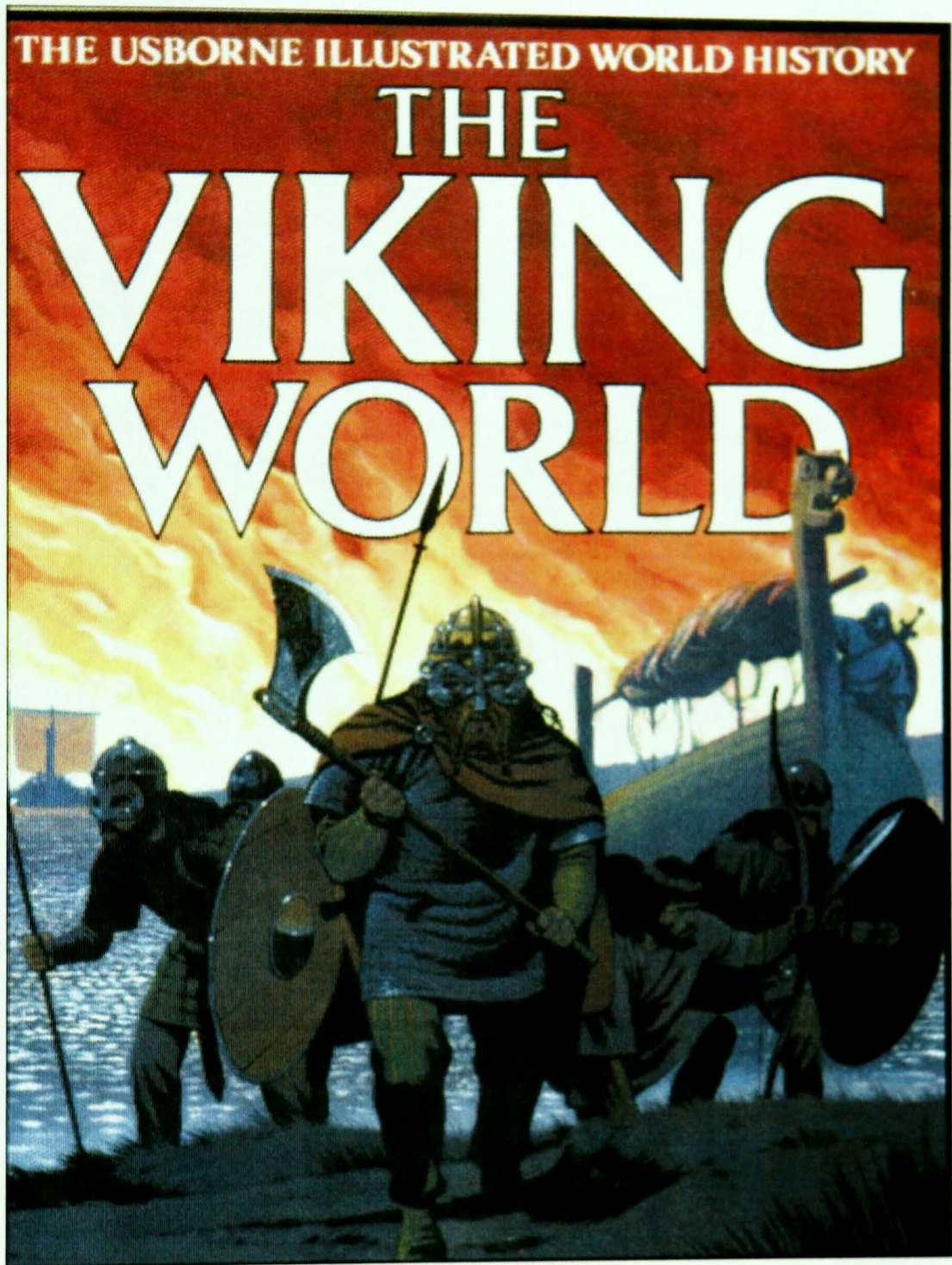


Figure 31: The classic Viking raid scene. (Philippa Wingate and Anne Millard, *The Usborne Illustrated World History: The Viking World* (Usborne Publishing Ltd., London), 1993.)

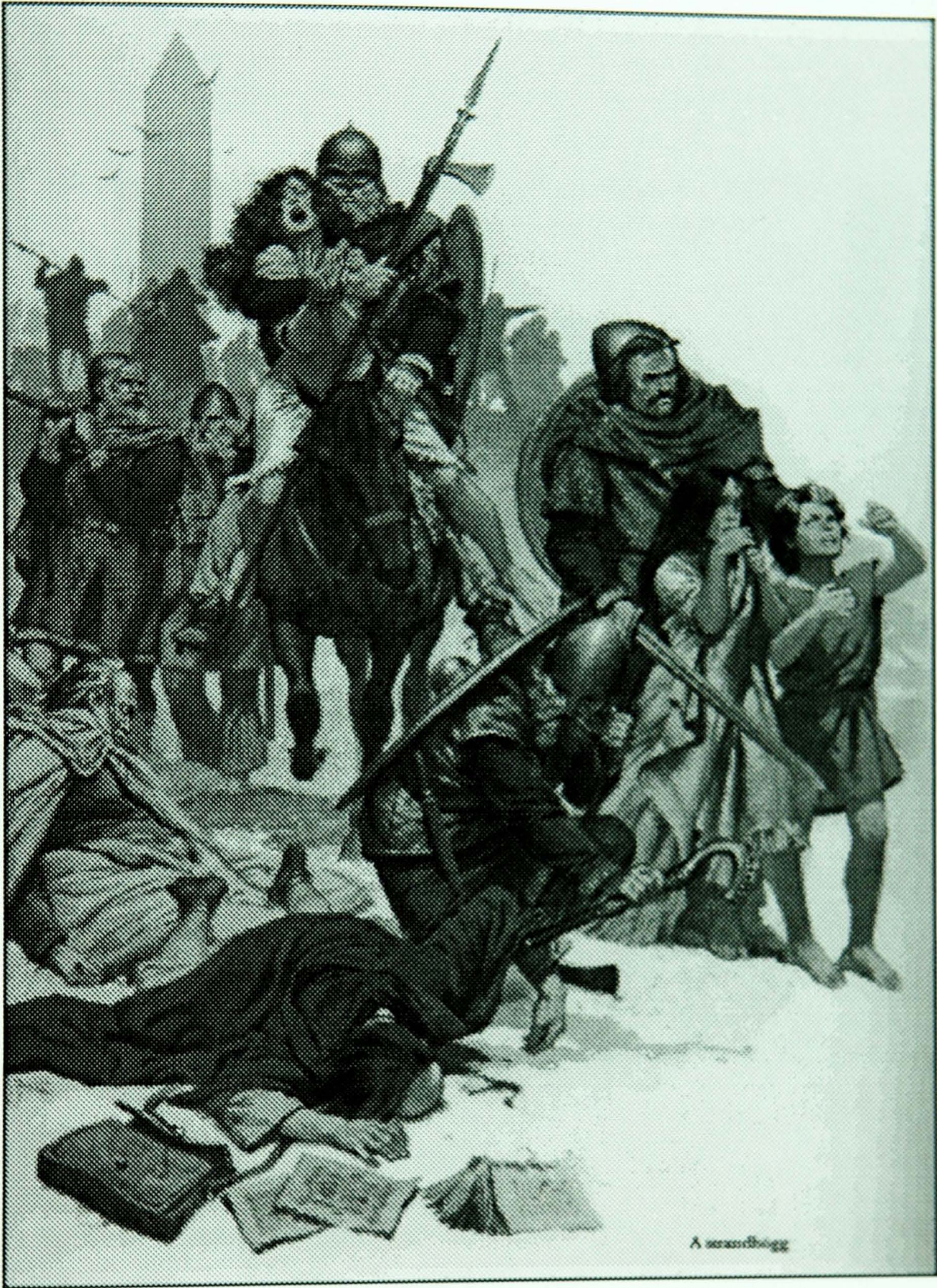


Figure 32: The classic Viking raid scene 2: kidnapped women and murdered monks. (Ian Heath, *Vikings* (Osprey Publishing Ltd., London), 1985, Plate F.)



Figure 33: Carl V. Sølver's hypothetical reconstruction of the Uunartoq Fjord bearing dial. (S. Thirslund and C. L. Vebæk, *The Viking Compass Guided Norsemen First to America* (Gullanders Bogtrykkeri a-s, Skjern), 1992, p. 36.)

Viking towns

Most settlements in Viking times were small farming communities which developed in areas of fertile land. There were a few large towns which grew into important trading posts. The most famous of these were Hedeby in Denmark and Birka in Sweden. Archaeologists have also excavated Viking towns at York in England and Dublin in Ireland.

Viking towns were crowded and dirty, with the smoke from many household fires polluting the air. Craftsmen were attracted to towns for protection and to be near their customers. Merchants of many nationalities came to buy Viking goods such as slaves, furs, walrus ivory and falcons. They also bought items that Viking merchants had brought back from the East such as silks, spices and wine.

This is a reconstruction of a Viking trading town and its port.



Figure 34: A Viking town, based on archaeological interpretations of Hedeby. (Philippa Wingate and Anne Millard, *The Usborne Illustrated World History: The Viking World* (Usborne Publishing Ltd., London), 1993, p. 18.)



Figure 35: Prince Valiant demonstrates the Viking spirit. (Harold Foster, *Prince Valiant Volume One: In the Days of King Arthur* (Nostalgia Press and King Features Syndicate, New York), 1974, introduction.)



Figure 36: Vikings in Africa 1: Thorkild and the Forest Devil. (Rudyard Kipling, *Puck of Pook's Hill* (Macmillan, London), 1906, this edition 1981, facing p. 90.)

Original in colour.



Figure 37: Vikings in Africa 2: Prince Valiant and the Ogre. (Harold Foster, *Prince Valiant Volume Two: Companions in Adventure* (Nostalgia Press and King Features Syndicate, New York), 1974, 25 January, 1942.)



Figure 38: "Have your picture taken as a Viking." The author (left) and colleague JoAnne Wilde photographed as Vikings, Jorvik Viking Festival, York, 1994.