

**SMALL THINGS
WIDE HORIZONS**

**STUDIES IN HONOUR OF
BIRGITTA HÅRDH**

Edited by

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Preface

The 16th of August 2015 is Professor Birgitta Hårdh's 70th birthday. At the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History in Lund, an editorial group was set up for the publication of a Festschrift in her honour.

For several decades Birgitta has been an important staff member and researcher at the Department. Her doctoral dissertation was based on Viking Age silver deposits in southernmost Sweden. This is a field that she later developed in several national and international publications. As a result she is regarded as one of the leading experts on the Northern European Viking Age, engaged in diverse research projects both in Sweden and internationally, and she is a vital collaborator in various networks specializing in the Viking Age.

Through time, Birgitta has extended her research to comprise other periods in the Iron Age. This is particularly clear in her research on the major site of Uppåkra outside Lund. Here she has devoted articles to a detailed treatment of the finds from the Late Iron Age. She has also edited several of the volumes in the series Uppåkrastudier, with both national and international contributions.

Another special field examined by Birgitta Hårdh is the megalithic graves in south-west Scania. Both find material from individual sites and broader perspectives on the Middle Neolithic have been covered in these studies.

Besides doing research, Birgitta Hårdh has for several decades been a lecturer and professor, with long experience of teaching students and supervising doctoral candidates in the subject. She has also been director of studies and served on a number of committees in the Faculty of Arts and Theology.

A feature common to all Birgitta Hårdh's research is that she has been able, through analysis of a body of finds, to broaden the perspective, not least geographically through her profound knowledge of phenomena in Northern Europe and indeed all of Europe. This book has been given the title *Small Things – Wide Horizons*, which is a good summary of Birgitta's research hitherto.

Thanks to the large network of contacts to which Birgitta Hårdh belongs, the call for papers for this Festschrift met a great response. A total of forty titles were submitted to the proposed volume.

Through this Festschrift we wish to thank and honour Professor Birgitta Hårdh as a fine colleague and an excellent scholar. We all look forward to coming years and many more important contributions to archaeological research.

*Lars Larsson, Fredrik Ekengren,
Bertil Helgesson, Bengt Söderberg*



BIRGITTA HÅRDH

Vikings and the Western Frontier

Jes Wienberg

Abstract

The article investigates how and why the Vikings became world-famous. The point of departure is the World Exposition in Chicago in 1893, where an icon for the Viking, a replica of the Gokstad ship, arrived the very same day as Frederick Jackson Turner presented his frontier thesis. The origin of the word Viking, the romantic revival of the Viking, the creation of the Viking Age and the criticism of the Viking and the Viking Age is discussed. Finally the article argues that the Viking and the American frontiersman represent similar characters. The concept of the Viking has spread worldwide as an expression of an ideology central to the West.

Encounter in Chicago

The World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 celebrated the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the new world in 1492. Thus there were replicas of his ships, the *Santa Maria*, the *Niña* and the *Pinta*, at the exposition. It was a manifestation of an upcoming world power, the United States, and visited by more than 27 million people (Appelbaum 1980).

However, as a reminder of an earlier discovery of America by Leif Ericson around AD 1000, a Norwegian replica of a Viking ship attracted great attention, when it arrived at the exposition under the command of Captain Magnus Andersen. The ship was a replica of "Gokstad", which had been uncovered in 1880. The replica named the *Viking* departed from Bergen and crossed the Atlantic Ocean via Scotland and arrived at Newfoundland in only 28 days. The spectacular expedition, which was the first example of experimental or adventurous sailings with Viking ships, was shortly afterwards presented in a popular book; the ship still exists and is on display in Geneva, Illinois (Andersen 1895; Petersson 2003, 76ff; also Petersson's contribution in this volume; www.vikingship.us).

The very same day as the *Viking* arrived in Chicago, 12 July 1893, an American historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, presented a paper at the American Historical Association in the city. In "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" Turner for the first time presented his famous Frontier thesis on the colonizing of the Great West (Turner 1894).

This encounter between a replica and an essay, the Gokstad ship and a scholarly thesis, represents more than

an accidental event. I'll argue that the narrative of the Viking and the frontier represent quite similar stories on origin and expansion; they are both paradoxically popular and criticized, although they seem irreplaceable. I'll also argue, that the Viking has travelled worldwide as a symbolic expression of an ideology central to the West.

Words and the Viking World

Words are small immaterial objects, which both are inside and outside the world, both a part of the world and man-made tools to view, describe and interpret the world. Words may create large imaginary worlds more or less bound to past realities. The choice of words is in itself meaningful. From the word Viking arises a web of materiality, images and texts which taken together constitute the Viking world. Another word might have constituted another world.

The Vikings are everywhere in research, heritage and popular culture. The literature is enormous, with coffee table books, handbooks, monographs, periodicals and articles. The Viking gives his name to museums, visitor centres, exhibitions, conferences, festivals, novels and movies. Recently, "Vikings", a Canadian-Irish television drama following the life of Ragnar Lodbrok, who wanted to explore the west, has been broadcast since 2013. The Viking has also become a brand to be exploited in numerous contexts—as the name of a space probe, a satellite, a lottery, a shipping company, river cruises, an investment trust company and many hotels.

The most frequent icon representing the Viking (besides the horned helmet) is the longship, with Gokstad as the prime example. The image of the Viking ship adorns numerous book covers, posters and post cards. Inside the books the reader will find maps of the Viking world stretching from Greenland to Africa, from Newfoundland to the Caspian Sea. At the large Viking Exhibition, travelling in 2013–15 from Copenhagen to London and Berlin, the visitor meets the obligatory map of the Viking world supplemented with beautiful photographs and the dominant focal point of the exhibition is the longest known Viking ship, the *Aegir* or Roskilde 6. From Southern Scandinavia, circles of Viking expansion frame the surrounding world—by way of war, colonization or trade (Williams, Pentz and Wemhoff 2013, 12f). Vikings created and inhabited a whole world, as witnessed not least by titles referring to the "Viking World" (e.g. Klindt-Jensen 1967; Graham-Campbell 1980; Roesdahl 1987, Steinsland and Meulengracht Sørensen 1994; Brink and Price 2008; Sindbæk & Trakadas 2014).

Is the Viking world a past reality or a cultural construction? Are the Vikings invented or re-found? The answer is not an either-or, but a both-and. There is a third viewpoint between objectivism and constructivism, realism and relativism, called “scientific perspectivism”. According to this, a telescope is a man-made tool that enables us to perceive a section of light from the universe just as a map or a model represents an idealized image of the world. The telescope is restricted to a particular perspective, but reveals a part of an objective reality (Giere 2006). Words are also tools revealing a certain perspective on past reality. The Vikings and the Viking Age represent a past reality, but not the only possible reality. What we see of the past depends on the words we use.

The history of the concepts of the Viking and the Viking Age is fairly well documented. The etymology of the word Viking, the importance of the sagas, romanticism and nationalism, the definition of a Viking Age and the use of the Vikings are described and debated in a number of articles and books (e.g. Wilson and Roesdahl 1992; Roesdahl 1994b; Roesdahl and Meulengracht Sørensen 1996; Svanberg 2003; Haavardsholm 2004; Wallette 2004; Lind 2012). However, it is still not recognized how and why the concept of the Viking became a global icon seemingly invulnerable to criticism.

Viking Origins

The word Viking comes from Old Norse *vikingr*, meaning a pirate, with the related noun *viking* meaning piracy, but it first appeared around 700 in Old English, in the form *wīcing*, meaning a sea warrior from the North, although it might be much older (Hødnebø 1987; Lind 2012, 153f). The Old Norse *vikingr* can be read on a number of runestones, e.g. the stone from Gårdstånga in Scania (DR 330; also 216 Tirsted and 334 Västra Strö; SRI 8: 3, U 617 Bro and Vg 61 Härlingstorp). The word is also known from medieval written sources, e.g. the chronicle by Adam of Bremen, where he mentioned that pirates from Zealand in Denmark called themselves “Wichingos” (*Magistri Adam Bremensis*, IV 6, 233). The term Viking was used for people and actions related to the North Sea, whereas other concepts such as Varangian were used for the Eastern sphere.

However, the etymological origin of the word Viking is highly disputed. There have been at least three rival theories (cf. Hødnebø 1976; 1987): Viking might be derived from Viken, the south-east coastal area of Norway, and signify sea warriors who came from this region or had the practice of hiding in fjords (Munch 1852, 455). Viking might be derived from Old English *wīc* or the Latin word *vicus* meaning town or fortified camp, and thus associated with merchants (Bugge 1881–89, 5, 542). Or Viking might signify someone who is “vikande”, e.g. making a detour or away from home (Askeberg 1944, 114ff, 180ff).

Viking Revival

The Viking as we know him (it is usually a man) was gradually recreated out of the romantic occupation with the past after the turmoil of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, which redrew the map of Europe. From the Icelandic sagas the Viking is evoked as a positive character and later equipped using archaeology. The Viking was useful as a freeborn warrior in creating a Scandinavian hero and role model belonging to a golden age in the past. The Viking was common for the Scandinavian countries and at the same time a national character. The Viking matched both Scandinavism and nationalism in Denmark, Norway and Sweden.

In a famous poem “The Viking” by the Swedish romanticist Erik Gustaf Geijer, a brave young man is longing for the conquest of distant land using his ship and sword (“Wikingen”; Geijer 1811). The Viking revived during romanticism is a sea warrior exploring the world on brave expeditions. The Viking conquers land and discovers new territories. If necessary the Viking uses violence, otherwise he may have the identity of a merchant or a farmer. Thus the Viking takes colour according to present needs.

The Romantic Viking is seen in most of the Viking revival of today. There is a direct line between the romantic hero and the modern re-enacted Viking. However, even serious scholars clearly admire the Vikings and their achievements (cf. Foote and Wilson 1970; Roesdahl 1987, 318ff; Williams, Pentz and Wemhoff 2013). In fact, the admiration of the Viking, the Viking achievements and the Viking World is the very core of the Viking obsession of today.

Viking Age Creation

The Viking Age gradually developed from a romantic and negative concept invented by a Swedish scholar in the 1830s into a scholarly and positive concept re-invented, spread and made popular by Danish, Norwegian and Swedish colleagues in the following decades. However, in Denmark a Danish scholar is often highlighted as the inventor (Worsaae cf. Roesdahl 1994b, 159), in Sweden a Swede (Montelius, cf. Svanberg 2003, 42; Hagerman 2006, 275ff) and in Norway a Norwegian (Munch, cf. Haavardsholm 2004, 47ff). The creation of the Viking Age became a source of national pride.

The first to coin the concept of a Viking Age was the Swedish historian Abraham Peter Cronholm. The period appeared once in his introduction to a volume on “Northerners in Western Viking” (*Nordboarne i Vesterviking*) from 1833. Cronholm perceived the Vikings as violent barbarians literally drinking human blood. And he poetically characterized the era of the Vikings: “But this light flickered faintly among the tombs of the heroes in the night of the Viking Age, when the sun of Christianity even approached the North on its journey over the Earth” (Men detta ljus flämtade matt bland hjeltgrafarna i

Vikingatidens natt, då kristendomens sol på sin färd öfver jordkretsen äfen nalkades Norden; Cronholm 1833, 2; also 1835, 30f; cf. Haavardsholm 2004, 43f where Cronholm wrongly is named Albert).

Shortly afterwards a Danish historian, Erich Christian Werlauff, mentioned the Viking Age once as a neutral term for a time when a western sailing route to the Mediterranean Sea was known (Werlauff 1836–37, 48).

The Viking was recreated with a new and broader meaning, when the Danish archaeologist Jens Jacob Asmussen Worsaae was on a research trip to the British Isles. In a lecture to the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin in 1846 Worsaae presented the Danes not only as robbers and murderers, but also as civilized traders (Jensen 2007, 144ff, 246f). In “An Account of the Danes and Norwegians in England, Scotland and Ireland” (*Minder om de Danske og Nordmændene i England, Skotland og Ireland*), which was published in 1851, he described the later Danish conquests at the Baltic Sea as an offshoot from the Viking Age (Worsaae 1851, 16). However the concept was still peripheral to his investigation. In the English version the concept of a Viking Age was omitted (cf. Worsaae 1852).

The journey of the Viking Age as a central concept for the study of the past began with the Norwegian historian Peter Andreas Munch. He gave the concept a prominent position in the first volume of his major work “The History of the Norwegian People” (*Det norske Folks Historie*). A chapter here was devoted to “The Viking Age and Reign of the Danes” (Vikingetiden og Danevældet; Munch 1852, 356ff).

The Viking Age appeared often in the following decades. Thus Worsaae in 1863 used the period both in the naming of a chapter and in the description of the period in the book “The Danish conquest of England and Normandy” (*Den danske Erobring af England og Normandiet*; Worsaae 1863); Worsaae had numerous references to Munch (Worsaae 1863, e.g. unpaginated notes 3–4). Later the period appeared in a popular book by Worsaae explicitly devoted to this era, “The Culture of the Danes in the Viking Age” (*De danskes Kultur i Vikingetiden*; Worsaae 1873).

From Worsaae the Viking Age can be followed to articles and books by the Swedish archaeologist Oscar Montelius in the 1870s (e.g. Montelius 1872, 52, 67; 1877, 240, 264ff). His book “On Life in Sweden during Pagan Times” was translated into French, German and English (*Om lifvet i Sverige under hednatiden*; Montelius 1873, 76ff).

The first mention of a Viking Age had no impact, as the concept was meant negatively and the inventor Cronholm was a relatively marginal scholar. The travel to fame only began when the Viking Age was used as a positive concept by Scandinavian scholars holding or soon to attain key positions as professor and/or state antiquarian—Worsaae in Denmark, Munch in Norway and Montelius in Sweden. The three scholars were all highly productive

and popularized their research, had large international networks, and several of their publications were translated into foreign languages.

Viking and Viking Age Criticism

Vikings are known worldwide and very popular. This is probably also the reason why “bashing” the Vikings is a widespread activity among scholars. Vikings and the Viking Age have been analysed and critically reviewed in a number of publications (e.g. Mahler *et al.* 1983, 130ff; Cederlund 1998; Østigård 2001; Svanberg 2003; Lind 2012).

Most of the criticism circles around a number of related topics: The Viking is seen as a dubious character because of the origin in questionable ideas—romanticism, nationalism and colonialism. The image of the Viking is criticized for not being representative of real past people and their lives in the Viking Age thus hiding the majority of “others”. They were not all Vikings in the Viking Age! The concept of the Viking is criticized for being too easy abused for ideological, political and economic purposes, e.g. for creating a collective identity, for expansionism or entertainment. Furthermore, it is claimed that Vikings wrongly are made similar to “us”, when they actually must have been different.

However, the origin in different “isms” is not a sufficient argument for rejection of the Viking. A problem of representativeness arises when the Viking is generalized into a Viking period and a Viking world. However, all concepts of humans, periods and space mean of necessity a simplification. All phenomena may be used or misused depending on the perspective. If critics see the Viking as belonging to a “foreign country”, it only means that one axiom is replaced by another.

A recurrent critic concerns the Western bias of the Viking and the Viking Age, which neglects the importance of early eastern contacts; a bias which was increased by the lack of interest in “Rus” during the Soviet era (e.g. Askeberg 1944, 8ff; Ambrosiani 2001; Lind 2012, 161ff).

Even if sea warriors from the North had many other epithets in their own time, none of these have managed to challenge the Viking in defining a period: Normans, Ascomanni and Danes, Gall or Lochlannach (in Irish meaning strangers or people from the North), *ar-rus* or *al-madsjus* (in Arabic meaning heathens or people from Roslagen in Sweden) (cf. Askeberg 1944, 114). Attempts to use other names such as “Normans” and “Norman time” have been short lived and inconsistent (e.g. Steenstrup 1876–82; Ramskou 1976, 115ff). In vain the linguist Fritz Askeberg argued for a “Varingian Age” as reasonable from a Swedish perspective (Askeberg 1944, 11) and recently the Danish historian wished to replace the Vikings with “Scandinavians” (Lind 2012, 163f).

SMALL THINGS – WIDE HORIZONS

Regardless of all the criticism, the Viking and the Viking Age are more popular than ever. They have been neither replaced nor redefined. In my opinion the Western bias might be something to criticize, but is also a clue to understanding the invulnerability and popularity of the Viking.

Vikings and the West

The Viking faced West in several ways. The first known appearance of the word Viking is in the British Isles. The concept was mainly in use in Western Scandinavia. The Viking survived in and was resurrected from the Icelandic sagas. The scholarly concept of a Viking Age was inspired by a tour in the British Isles. And the conventional chronological definition is tied to historical events in England—Lindisfarne in 793, the “first” known Viking attack, and Stamford Bridge in 1066, the “last” Viking invasion.

Even proposals for a redefinition of the Viking Age starting back in the eighth century rely heavily on new finds and observations in a western context (Jensen 1986; Myhre 1993; Ambrosiani and Clarke 1998; Feveile and Jensen 2000); the proposals have hitherto been rejected (cf. Roesdahl 1994a).

History, place-names and plenty of finds connect Scandinavia with the British Isles. The revival of a Viking hero exploring and colonizing the world fitted well into the ideology of the Victorian British Empire with its naval superiority. After World War II the North Sea connection was resumed symbolically with another expedition of a Gokstad replica—the voyage of the *Hugin* in 1949 from Jutland in Denmark to Kent in England; the replica is on display at Ramsgate (Røjel 1949; Petersson 2003, 103ff).

Of great importance was the establishment of a series of Viking Congresses, the first launched in 1950 in Lerwick in Shetland. Every third to fourth year since then a congress has been organized and the lectures afterwards regularly published (www.vikingcongress.com). The congresses and their participants constitute a community of scholars devoted to the Viking Age from countries bordering on the North Sea; this is clearly a community oriented to the West and exhibiting a strong self-identity around its research field. The participants, often clearly admiring the Vikings, are also the leading scholars when it comes to research, publishing and teaching on the Viking Age. If anything keeps the Viking Age on its western tracks it is the impact of the Viking Congresses and their participants.

When the Gokstad ship was discovered in 1880 in a barrow in Viken, the region in Norway which probably gave its name to the Viking, it materialised an icon long looked for by romantic poets and nationalistic scholars. The ship belonging to “the Viking” of Geijer was found. When the *Viking*, a replica of Gokstad, managed to cross the Atlantic in 1893 the Viking became invincible. The expedition to

Chicago can only be described as a brilliant publicity stunt that once and for all inscribed the Viking on the world map.

The American connection was and is still upheld by a large Scandinavian group of immigrants in the United States. From the western side of the Atlantic new “evidence” materialized in 1898, the Kensington stone in Minnesota. Even though this rune-stone is supposed to be from 1362 and has been identified as a fake (cf. Larsson 2012), it furthermore accentuated the Viking transatlantic connection (Ward 2000). Later the discovery of a settlement at L’Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland in 1960 definitely proved the former Viking presence on the American continent (Ingstad 1965). However, the American connection also has an important ideological dimension.

The Frontier Thesis

The thesis put forward by Frederick Jackson Turner in Chicago in 1893 described a special American identity created in the continuous move westwards. Immigrants had to undergo a development from a primitive to an advanced urban life. The frontier created a new citizen, who was no longer European. Turner argued that the American nationality, sense of democracy, individualism and freedom were an experience from the frontier movement (Turner 1894).

The frontier thesis is a story about the identity of the Americans, where the rifle, the horse and the wagon became central icons in exploring new territories. The thesis was formulated in the same decade as the frontier was formally closed; the last territories and Indians were subjugated.

Even when the participants at the meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago were few, Turner’s thesis would have a profound influence on the writing of American history. Turner repeated and promoted his thesis for the rest of his life—and also spread it through his many pupils. After decades of success the thesis was criticized starting in the 1920s, when other questions came into focus. The thesis was perceived as too negative, as misunderstanding the development on the western frontier and as neglecting groups in American society—women and ethnic minorities. However it still turns up and has had a profound influence on the popular image of America as seen in novels and movies (Billington 1966; Faragher 1994, 1ff, 225ff).

Vikings and the Western Frontier

The encounter in Chicago in 1893 was between more than a replica and an essay, it was two western stories with much in common, even though the actual processes of colonization was different: two stories highlighting expansion, stories about the exceptional origin of nations shared by both scholars and laymen, two stories that are both popular and criticized, but which survive criticism because they serve ideological purposes.

Stories do not have to be true. Just as communities might be imagined, Vikings and the Viking Age are likewise only images of the past seen from a certain perspective. The stories of the Vikings are partly true pictures from the past, but not the whole picture.

The Viking with the sword and ship crossing the Ocean is an analogy to the colonizer with the rifle, horse and wagon colonizing the Great West of America. Both are icons of still living ideologies related to the dominant power of the West. The Viking exploring new horizons is similar in attitude to the pioneer on the American Frontier.

Where Western countries are connected in the present by the English language, by military, political, economic and cultural ties, the Viking and the Viking Age express the same common destiny in the past. In other words, as long as there is a “Western World” in the present, there will also be a need for a world inhabited by Vikings.

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