



Vikings, History, and the Search for Ourselves

by Terri L. Barnes

Last year I embarked on a new project to teach a class on the Viking Age. As a historian who specializes in medieval and early modern Europe, I know the Vikings well, but in the college history surveys I usually teach, I never have enough time to get to them. Part of my interest in creating the class stemmed from a trip to Norway, and also documenting Scandinavian ancestry in both my parents' families. But, in the end, the most compelling tipping point was the interest in the Vikings expressed time and again by my students. Little did I realize that they, and the class, would teach me important lessons about history and human nature.

As I began researching (and prepping) the course, I was confronted with a frequent problem for historians of medieval Europe: since the Viking Age ran from roughly 800 to 1100 CE and featured a pre-literate Scandinavian culture for much of that time, sources are almost non-existent, and there are many problems with those that do survive. This

makes the Vikings difficult for historians to pin down. And yet for my students, the Vikings had a very real and certain presence. When I asked them what their conception of a Viking was at the beginning of the class, an incredibly specific and unified picture emerged. It begged the question: what drives our fascination with these people who lived so long ago, about whom we know relatively little and yet who my students see very clearly and definitively? How is this historical disconnect possible? I was intrigued and began to think more (than I usually do as a professional historian) about how we engage with the past, how we tend to remake it in our own image and interests, and most importantly, why.

The first question had to be, what is the appeal? My students are interested in the histories of many times and places, but for some reason the Vikings garner a special type of attention. By many accounts the medieval Scandinavians we call "Vikings" were a violent, filthy, pagan, male-dominated warrior

culture who stole, maimed, raped, killed, and enslaved their victims. They wrought havoc on many parts of western Europe and beyond beginning in the late-8th century, leaving death and destruction in their wake for at least two hundred years. What is appealing about that? Looking at depictions of Vikings in our popular culture it seems the answer is, plenty. A simple internet search results in Vikings as sports teams and school mascots, comic books, video games, books, articles, movies, clothing, toys, beer labels, advertisements for varied products from canned fish to Marriott Hotels, cartoons, heavy metal music, the writings of Tolkien and George R.R. Martin as well as the popular television series *Vikings* on the History Channel. In almost all instances we find scruffy, bearded Norsemen with horned helmet, shield, and sword. How on earth does this image entice one to buy a particular beer or stay in a certain hotel? The answer is the allure comes from several aspects of who we *think* the Vikings were and who we *want* them to be. It turns out they provide several opportunities for us to modify the past to suit our own ends. To illuminate this, I offer some of the discoveries my students made during the course about four popular conceptions they had of the Vikings, with a few reflections on lessons learned along the way about how we engage with the past.

Conception #1: The Vikings Had an Egalitarian Society

This was a definite selling point for many in my class, particularly female students. The belief that medieval Scandinavian women were equal to men in every way, existing in a society that presages our own elevated Vikings above other medieval Europeans. Couple that with the women known as “shieldmaidens,” who supposedly wielded swords and raided

alongside their men, and it seems Viking Age Scandinavia was a feminist paradise. But was it true? Some sagas do tell us of strong and outstanding women, as well as a few who are mean-spirited and vindictive, and though most historians now view the sagas as fiction, it is acknowledged these characterizations may have some basis in fact. However, as with stories from just about any human culture, they include ideals to which one may aspire or cautionary tales to heed, in contrast to reality.

To begin with, Judith Jesch rightfully cautions that we should not think of “Viking Age Women” as a monolithic group.¹ Even though Scandinavia is a relatively small area of northern Europe, and the Viking Age lasted

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a scant three centuries, all women were not treated *exactly* alike; conditions were dependent on time and place, though there were commonalities. Jesch and others have long concluded that Scandinavian women in the Viking Age carried out the same roles as women in other western European societies.² They managed the household and cared for children and domestic animals. When men were away during the summer trading and raiding season, women picked up the slack and kept the home fires burning, literally and figuratively. Theirs was a time when the community’s survival depended on women’s domestic and economic contributions, particularly in the absence of men; therefore, strong capable women were rewarded with responsibility and respect. But did that translate into *égalité*?

Equality is an important concept to us in the 21st century. We live in a culture with a sexual divide between male and female, and we strive to create equity between them. Carol Clover has argued that instead of this social binary of male-female, Viking Age society functioned under a different system based on strong and weak.³ She also asserts that where sex was concerned, “Norse society operated according to a one-sex model – there was one sex and it was male.”⁴ All of society was judged using a “male scale,” which meant gender roles were more fluid, and women could be considered socially male if they exhibited what they considered to be masculine attributes such as honor, courage, and strength. This concept does not appear to be unique to Viking Age society. Keith Thomas has stated it was the same in England even into the early modern period where concepts of masculinity and femininity applied to both sexes. For men in both England and Scandinavia, the dreaded charge of effeminacy was to be avoided at all costs.⁵ In Viking Age society, weakness also made women more feminine, whereas strength allowed them to achieve a masculine standing of sorts which gave them not equality, but power.⁶

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This power is evident in the sagas where we find women who are protectors of both personal and family honor and to that end, instigators of all sorts of nastiness. They may not wield swords, but through shrewd cunning it is they who are the powerful manipulators

of men, getting them to do their bidding usually through blood feud and revenge killing. Women’s purview was the family and the respect upheld by defending their own, so it is a testament to their resourcefulness and power that they created conditions under which honor was preserved. What my students saw in this was that Viking Age women were not merely passive figures, but rather just like men, they were active agents in their families and communities, as modern women feel they are today. By focusing on and admiring this aspect of Viking Age society, contrary to the historical truth that those men and women lived in separate, unequal spheres, students were essentially just validating our own cultural ideals about social equality. What they were doing amounted to historical cherry-picking for personal reasons, which is something we all engage in more often than not.

The reality is that for Viking Age women equality in our modern sense of the concept was likely not a laudable goal or even the point in life. There were more immediately pressing concerns, such as daily survival in a harsh and formidable climate. Moreover, if Clover is correct and the only way to achieve parity with men was to simply be more like them and exhibit masculine traits, then Viking Age women could never under any circumstance be equals by our 21st century standards anyway. We live in a culture that values individualism and people being treated equally in all spheres: social, political, economic, and legal. Viking Age women did have certain rights, among them the ability to inherit, own, and manage property.⁷ But despite this, women did not enjoy equality with men in political or economic life, or before the law.

Furthermore, there is no evidence that women warriors engaged with men in



Viking swords

raiding activity, despite my students' hopes to the contrary. They were disappointed to learn that, simply put, women were not even Vikings. Historians generally agree that the term "Viking" refers to a verb describing the raiding activity done by men. Admittedly, the sword-wielding shieldmaiden character Lagertha on the television series *Vikings* is hard for us to resist. She is capable of being tough, resilient, and killing with a vengeance just like the men, and yet she is also a loyal wife and caring mother who weaves cloth and makes dinner. She is the Viking version of Helen Gurley Brown's "Having It All" woman that modern women aspire to, so we naturally want her to have been real. However, the hard lesson for some in my class was that historical context matters. While we may be drawn to the illusion of an egalitarian Viking society where women held sway with men, it was not their reality, and we must be mindful when we project ourselves onto the past. The difficulty is we like it when the past looks like us; it is more relatable and understandable that

way, and importantly, it serves to reaffirm and validate those things we hold dear. Simply put, we persist in seeing what we want to see because it proves us right.⁸ As is often the case, the past becomes more about the present than we care to admit.

Conception #2: Vikings were the Toughest, Most Violent Warriors in the Middle Ages

As a pre-industrial society Viking Age Scandinavians inhabited a world modern people can only dream of. And those dreams translate nicely into the fantasy world where much of Viking lore plays out in our modern age. The medieval world required a toughness and resilience that many of us will never need to exhibit, and there is no doubt the Europe of that time was witness to a level of violence and brutality in the daily struggle for survival that is beyond our comprehension. For my students, to put it bluntly, Vikings were more badass than any of their contemporaries, and that made them cool. One student was so



Remains of the Oseberg Ship, Viking Ship Museum (Oslo, Norway)

intrigued she wrote her term project on the lure of Viking Age violence in video games.⁹ There, players re-enact such violence, exaggerating and embellishing to their heart's content, creating the history they wish to have been. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the student concluded that humans are naturally drawn to violence, but particularly to violence that has no consequences,¹⁰ such as that offered in many Viking themed games. This level of escapism is a particular benefit of studying the past in the first place according to David Lowenthal, because "In yesterday we find what we miss today. And yesterday is a time for which we have no responsibility and when no one can answer back."¹¹ As an escape, the past becomes something we can curate without being held accountable.

But here again, there is an obvious rift between what we want history to be and what

it actually was. We can look at contemporary sources such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and *The Annals of St. Bertin* and find evidence that the Viking raiders were as vicious and barbaric as we seem to want them to be.¹² But any historian worth their salt knows it is a fool's errand to look for objective information about Viking Age Scandinavians in the writings of their victims. The truth is, many scholars have concluded Viking warriors were not necessarily any more violent than their contemporaries in Europe and Asia Minor whom they raided, traded with, and settled amongst; there was plenty of cruelty to go around. Violent people in a violent age, they were all products of their time.¹³

The Vikings, however, acquired their reputation through stories of the horrific, brutal acts that single them out such as the famed "Blood Eagle." During this ritual a

victim's back is split open, the ribs are broken, and the lungs are pulled out and spread like an eagle's wings. It sounds completely dreadful – if indeed it ever happened. The ritual has for thirty years now been convincingly debunked, with Roberta Frank referring to it as “the bird that never was.”¹⁴ And yet millions of loyal viewers, including many of my students, tuned in to the second season of *Vikings* to watch the episode titled “Blood Eagle” and see this horrendous act being perpetrated on a character in supposed typical grisly Viking fashion. Frank's article was required reading in my class; what effect did it have? Almost none. One of my students was so disappointed by it that he simply refused to believe the Blood Eagle was not true, even when he knew there was solid scholarly evidence to the contrary. For the rest of the students who had not seen the episode but had read the article, their interest was more than piqued and they begged me to show the clip in class, to which I capitulated. For them as well, the stunning visual of an act of unspeakable cruelty won the day, and my students were content that the Vikings remained as cool as they thought they were and their version of history solidly and safely intact. It became clear they did not care what the historical truth was; there was something magical and fun in being able to get one's aggressions out by living vicariously through people who lived in an age where they could act in ways that we cannot.

Conception #3: Vikings were More Skilled Fighters and Seafarers than Everyone Else

No doubt Viking men were both of these things. Historical evidence overwhelmingly shows that their extraordinary success had much to do with their abilities in fighting and sailing. However, once more

we are confronted with a slight discrepancy between fact and fiction, our real and imagined Viking. My students loved the idea of the scruffy band of rag-tag warriors, tougher than everyone else, brandishing swords and decimating everything that got in their way. Were they right? Were Vikings really better fighters than their European counterparts? Yes and no, for it depended on circumstances and the type of combat in which they engaged.

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Essentially, they were formidable fighters when guerilla-style warfare was called for. Being quick and quiet was their forte, and as long as they could hit targets with smaller, concentrated forces they usually met with success. Their speed and stealth also owed much to their ships, which were built to carry men and materials both overseas and up inland rivers, enabling them to get close, raid, and get out with slaves and other types of portable wealth. As long as they could operate undetected until it was too late for their enemies, the Vikings would win almost every time. Almost.

They did have certain skills that were effective, but essentially they fought in much the same manner as other medieval Europeans. Vikings were not so entirely different and special, and at times things did not work out so well, particularly when forced to fight out in the open without the element of surprise. Because they fought primarily on foot in hand-to-hand combat, they were often beaten when outnumbered.²¹ As a matter of fact, it was the Vikings who ultimately had to adapt how they fought over the course of the Viking Age. As

they began to overwinter, band together to amass larger armies, and then fight for national monarchs in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, they increasingly became more European and less renegade Viking.

So the image students concoct of a formidable warrior who is never, or rarely, defeated because he possessed some otherworldly ability to out-violence any foe is, once again, one of our imagination. Why do we need them to be this way? I began to have the distinct feeling over the course of the term that I was repeatedly disappointing my students by shaking their unshakable image of the Vikings. Can't people simply exist and be interesting in their own historical context without needing also to be exceptional? Does the past need to contain superheroes? When looking at the fantasy comic book realm that Vikings inhabit in modern popular culture, the answer it would seem is yes. According to Lowenthal, "the past is always altered for motives that reflect present needs."¹⁵ Presently, it appears we need the Vikings to be exceptional in their time because perhaps we feel a lack of exceptional people in ours. We reach back into time to fill the gaps in our own.

Conception #4: Viking Age Society was Democratic

This is one area where some of my students' impressions finally came close to historical truth. Around 930, a parliamentary system known as the Althing was created that did have "proto-democratic" elements.¹⁶ When learning about the structure of the Althing, students enjoyed recognizing those factors present in our democratic government today; they knew it was unique in the feudal hierarchy that was medieval Europe.

The Althing was based on the law and intended to minimize feuds which could have

disastrous consequences for the community; it was a system of justice that sought to create a stable society for all. Decisions were made and enforced by the group, which meant everyone had "skin in the game" when it came to resolving disputes and curbing violence, and this involvement by all seemed very democratic to my class. Except for when they realized "all" did not include women. Here students ran up against our modern notion of democratic meaning *everyone*. Women certainly attended Althings, as they were large regional events that involved not only legal decision making, but

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also socializing, buying, selling, and general festivities. But they had no official roles, could not vote in court proceedings, and had to have male representation if they found themselves party to a dispute. Likewise, those who were enslaved had no legal rights, only obtaining a few if achieving freed status. Despite these inequities, my students were impressed to find groups of free farmers coming together and binding themselves to one another in an effort to work out problems and create a just community that benefitted everyone, rather than having to obey a lord or a king. Theirs was a society that operated by consensus rather than by decree,¹⁷ which to my students felt understandably familiar.

Another familiar element was adaptability, as the laws were reviewed each year and new ones made as necessary to ensure the rights of all. In many respects they were ahead of their time. And when we recognize the proto-democratic elements of their system, for us it becomes like looking in a distant mirror. Seeing ourselves in the past can serve

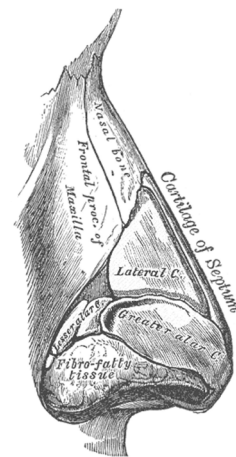
to reassure us that, like the Vikings, maybe we too are unique in the world. Their system was successful for three hundred years, after all. For my students, this interpretation of history once again was validation for things we regard highly in our modern system of governance, such as transparency, adaptability, and democracy, even if those things are still a work in progress.

Lessons Learned

What then did all this say about how we view and engage with the past? By the end of the class, my students acknowledged having begun the term with one conception of the Vikings and ending it with another, more educated view. And yet they also were confident that their new knowledge was largely not going to hamper how they viewed Vikings and what they wanted them to be. Why such dogged determination to have the history we want, rather than what actually was? Part of the answer perhaps lies in the fact that what we want is not history at all, but rather something more akin to heritage – that “fuzzy around the edges nostalgic past” to which we have emotional ties.¹⁸ With heritage, the past becomes what we need it to be for lots of reasons. The post-modern, global world has created an ill-defined, disjointed present that proceeds and changes at the most rapid pace ever experienced in human history. It is comforting to feel we know for sure where we came from, even if it is a past we knowingly, at least partially, fabricate because that informs not only who we are but where we are headed. And that certainty is reassuring.

The other part of the answer is that past and present have always been engaged in a dance with one another. Historians know this, even though we try to be scholarly and responsible, sticking to the corroborated evidence and facts. It remains true that, as Raphael Samuel puts it, “the past is a plaything of the present,” always a hybrid of

then and now, what was and what may have been.¹⁹ The holy grail of objective truth that we historians seek is largely mythic and elusive mainly because we cannot remove ourselves from it, and this has been true since the earliest histories of the ancient world. The very nature of the past being like a puzzle with missing pieces means that by necessity we interpret and reinterpret, filling in the gaps and inventing as we go. Therefore, over time, and for self-serving reasons, history has been crafted to inform, instruct, warn, and even to entertain. In this way, it resembles the Viking sagas from a millennium ago: a bit of fact mixed with a bit of fiction in order to preserve tradition and tell good stories. So, I came to realize that rather than flouting historical conventions and knowledge by stubbornly seeing the Vikings as they chose, by making the past in their *own* image and for their *own* purposes my students were simply practicing history the way it has always been done.



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End Notes

- ¹ Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1991), 203.
- ² Jesch, 22, 41, 65-68; Else Roesdahl, *The Vikings* (Penguin, 1992), 59-60; Birgit Sawyer, "Women in Vikingage Scandinavia – or: who were the 'shieldmaidens'?" in *Vinland Revisited; the Norse World at the Turn of the First Millennium*, ed. Shannon Lewis-Simpson (Historic Sites Association of Newfoundland and Labrador, Inc., 2003), 7.
- ³ Carol Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Speculum* 68:2 (Apr., 1993), 380.
- ⁴ Clover, 379.
- ⁵ Keith Thomas, *The Ends of Life: Roads to Fulfilment in Early Modern England* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 20-25.
- ⁶ Clover, 386-7.
- ⁷ Angus A. Somerville and R. Andrew McDonald, *The Vikings and Their Age* (University of Toronto Press, 2013), 42.
- ⁸ Lowenthal, 40-41.
- ⁹ Morgan Cope, "The Appeal of Viking Age Violence in Modern Gaming," in *Reading Between the Runes: A Glance at the Viking Age* (Portland Community College, 2015), 59-64.
- ¹⁰ Cope, 61.
- ¹¹ Lowenthal, 49.
- ¹² James Henry Ingram, transl., *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Project Gutenberg Ebook, 2008), accessed 19 July 2015, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/657/pg657.txt>; Georg Heinrich Pertz, ed., *The Annals of St. Bertin*, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica Scriptores*, Vol. I (1826), 439-454.
- ¹³ To name but a few: Guy Halsall, "Playing By Whose Rules? A Further Look at Viking Atrocity in the Ninth Century," *Medieval History* 2:2 (1992), 3-12; Philip Parker, *The Northmen's Fury: A History of the Viking World* (Jonathan Cape, 2014), chapter 1; P.H. Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings* (Edward Arnold, 1962), chapter 6, 194196 ; Anders Winroth, *The Age of the Vikings* (Princeton University Press, 2014), chapter 2.
- ¹⁴ Roberta Frank, "Viking Atrocity and Skaldic Verse: The Rite of the Blood-Eagle," *The English Historical Review* 99:391 (Apr., 1984), 343. This definitive work by Frank argues that the "Blood Eagle" was more a literary creation than a reality, whose embellishments and metaphors were taken literally in a later period thus creating this Viking Age legend that refuses to die, even into the 21st century.
- ¹⁵ Lowenthal, 348.
- ¹⁶ Jesse L. Byock, "The Icelandic Althing: Dawn of Parliamentary Democracy," in *Heritage and Identity: Shaping the Nations of the North*, J.M. Fladmark, ed. (The Heyerdahl Institute and Robert Gordon University: Donhead, 2002), 1-3, 12-14.
- ¹⁷ Byock, "Dispute Resolution," 87.
- ¹⁸ For an excellent discussion of the distinction between history and heritage, see David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- ¹⁹ Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* (Verso, 2012), 429, 443.