



RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Viking Paradigm in Early Medieval History

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Abstract

In this short note I query not so much the use of the word ‘vikings’ or the fraught question of whether it should be capitalised, but rather whether ‘the Vikings’ is a useful concept that helps us understand history, or whether it creates an inaccurate essentialist category for which there is no historical evidence. The piece argues for more nuance and specificity when dealing with Scandinavia and the Scandinavian diaspora in our period, and argues that the variety of phenomena across times and space warrants more serious consideration. The time has come to ditch this twentieth-century concept and to return to the sources.

In June 2022 I published a piece in the magazine *History Today* asking people to think a bit more critically about the paradigm of ‘the Vikings’ in historiography.¹ Unfortunately an editorial decision was made to add a sub-title to this article reading; ‘The term “Viking” as it is commonly used is misleading, warping our perception of the Middle Ages. It should be retired’. This was not the case I actually argued in the article but sadly this was the message that was sent out. The editors of this journal have given me the opportunity to restate my original case and expand upon it, for which I am very grateful. My objection, in the original article was not to the term ‘viking’, which appears (as Old English *wicing* and Old Norse *víkingr*) in our primary sources, and which can be very useful. It was a term used in these medieval languages to describe pirates, regardless of their ethnic or national origins. Icelandic saga authors seem to have imagined that it was quite common for the sons of chieftains and well-off farmers to spend part of their late adolescence and young manhood engaged in ‘viking’ activity before returning home to marry and establish themselves. Instead, I was

¹ A. Woolf, ‘Goodbye to the Vikings’, *Hist. Today* 72 (2022), 90–3.

expressing disquiet at the rise of the pseudo-ethnographic concept of 'The Vikings', which in contrast to the term 'viking' is actually very recent. This ethnographic usage, often indicated by the appearance of the definite article 'the' and a capitalised initial 'V', suggesting a proper rather than a common noun, has crept up on us gradually. The early historiography, up to the later nineteenth century, confines the use of 'viking' and its cognates, to Scandinavian pirates of the early and central Middle Ages; a use close to that is found in medieval Icelandic texts. Thus the notorious E. A. Freeman writes of Rollo/Rolf, the founder of Normandy that '[h]e is described as having been engaged in the calling of a Viking both in Gaul and in Britain for nearly forty years before his final occupation of Rouen'.² These early works were much more likely to use terms such as 'Danes', 'Northmen', and 'Heathens' to describe the broader range of Scandinavians, mirroring the usage of the primary sources. Kings, armies and settlers tended to be described as 'Danes' or 'Northmen', or by specific regional and national designations. Charles Francis Keary, whose *The Vikings in Western Christendom, A.D. 789 to A.D. 888*, published in 1891, seems to have been the first book published in English to use 'Viking' in something like the generic, ethnographic sense that it has today, although this usage was slow to dominate the field in the way it has come to, with the pseudo-ethnographic 'Viking' emerging clearly only after the Second World War and coming to dominate the discourse only from the 1970s.³

My main issue is with the expansion of the term to cover all aspects of life among Scandinavian-speaking communities, so that we now have 'Viking children', 'Viking farms', 'Viking towns' and 'Viking systems of government', 'Viking diaspora', etc. The key problem with this approach is that it detaches Viking-Age Scandinavians from the continuity of Scandinavian history and denies the huge variety of ecological and cultural environments present in Scandinavia and the diaspora. This was noted as long ago as 1992 by Bjørn Myhre, who argued that beginning a period in the 790s made no sense for understanding the domestic archaeology of his native Norway.⁴ One of the sites he took to exemplify this was the great mound cemetery at Borre in southeastern Norway that began long before the Viking Age. More recent work has confirmed that it was in use across the period c. 400–1050.⁵ The same case can be made of other important sites across Scandinavia, from Borg in Lofoten, where the site had a history from the third to the tenth centuries of the Common Era, with continuous occupation of a hall site from the sixth century, to Uppåkra in Skåne, a cult site with a similar date range.⁶

² E. A. Freeman, *A History of the Norman Conquest of England: its Cause and its Results*, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1867) I, 188.

³ C. Fell, 'Modern English Viking', *Leeds Stud. in Eng.* ns 18 (1987), 111–23.

⁴ B. Myhre, 'The Beginning of the Viking Age: Some Current Archaeological Problems', *Viking Revaluations: Viking Society Centenary Symposium*, 14th–15th May 1992, ed. A. Faulkes and R. Perkins (London, 1993), pp. 182–204.

⁵ C. Tonning et al., 'Halls at Borre: the Discovery of Three Large Buildings at a Late Iron Age and Viking Age Burial Site in Norway', *Antiquity* 94 (2020), 145–63.

⁶ G. S. Munch, O. S. Johansen and E. Roesdahl (eds.), *Borg in Lofoten: a Chieftain's Farm in North Norway* (Trondheim, 2003), and L. Larsson, 'The Iron Age Ritual Building at Uppåkra, Southern Sweden', *Antiquity* 81 (2007), 11–25.

The idea of the Viking Age is peculiarly English in origin and its application beyond England is problematic. It appears to have originated as a term with the Franco-American Paul Du Chaillu (1831–1903) in the late nineteenth century.⁷ Du Chaillu's main claims to fame were as the first white man to observe both gorillas and pygmies in equatorial Africa, and it was as an explorer of Africa that he made his name. His interest in northern antiquity came late in life. Du Chaillu's 'Viking Age' was far longer than its modern descendant, encompassing what we might call Late Antiquity, since he saw the Frankish and Saxon invasions of the Late Roman West as part of the same process as the later expansion of the Northmen. Since his time, however, the Viking Age has become fixed at 793 to 1066 (occasionally rounded up or down to give the illusion of scientific method). These dates clearly reflect periodisation in specifically English history from the earliest certain date of a raid by pagan Scandinavians on English territory (in this case Lindisfarne) to the Norman Conquest, from which point cultural and political connections with France are perceived as replacing those with Scandinavia in terms of importance. This end date is often equated not with the Battle of Hastings but with the defeat of the Norwegian king Harald Sigurðsson at the battle of Stamford Bridge and occasionally Svein Estríðsson's expedition to the Humber in 1069–70.⁸

Questions might be raised, however, about the legitimacy of linking the raiders who sacked Lindisfarne, who may have been actual *vikingar* – pirates – and who were certainly pagans, to Harald and Svein, Christian kings leading national expeditions with specific political goals in mind. These kings, and Cnut the Great before them, have far more in common with Scandinavian rulers after the magical cut-off point of 1066/70 than they do with the pirates of the late eighth and early ninth centuries. Of course there were still real vikings in the eleventh century, but this was also true of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Our understanding of how such non-state actors operated is heavily influenced by the account of Sveinn Ásleifarson in Chapter 105 of *Orkneyinga saga*. Here we read how this Orcadian big farmer went on a Spring viking cruise after he had sown his crops and an Autumn viking cruise after he had reaped them.⁹ This man died in about 1170. In Denmark and Norway increasingly successful attempts to monopolise the exercise of violence by kings and their officers brought an end to viking activity but such complex state structures did not reach the Scottish islands until the early modern period, so viking-style raiding, piracy, and private warfare continued.

Of course, from the perspective of English national history, 1066 was and remained a significant turning point and it is true that the Anglo-Danish milieu of

⁷ P. B. Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age: the Early History, Manners, and Customs of the Ancestors of the English-speaking Nations. Illustrated from the Antiquities Discovered in Mounds, Cairns, and Bogs as well as from the Ancient Sagas and Eddas*, 2 vols. (London, 1889).

⁸ These classic bookends of the Viking Age are laid out succinctly in Peter Sawyer's *The Age of the Vikings* (London, 1962), pp. 1–4.

⁹ *Orkneyinga saga*, ed. Finnogi Guðmundsson, Íslenzk fornrit 34 (Reykjavík, 1965), pp. 283–4; for a translation see *Orkneyinga saga: the History of the Earls of Orkney*, trans. H. Pálsson and P. Edwards (Harmondsworth, 1981).

the Godwinssons and other great aristocrats of pre-Conquest England was replaced by Anglo-Norman, and later Angevin connections, which emphasised links with the francophone world. This date, however, was not significant for Scandinavia or for most of the Scandinavian diaspora. The last few decades of the tenth century might be seen as a more significant period of transition at home. Most obviously we see the final conversion of Denmark and Norway and the beginnings of the conversion of the Swedes. This period of late tenth-century conversion seems to follow on from a major economic shift in Scandinavia. During the early ninth century at the latest, the Baltic, and fairly rapidly the rest of Scandinavia, had experienced a massive influx of Islamic silver that fuelled economic development. By the 970s, however, this supply had come to a halt (probably due to events in Central and Western Asia) and German and English coin had replaced it.¹⁰ An increased need for secure economic relations with western markets and rulers probably prompted Scandinavian rulers to finally commit to joining Latin Christendom, with which they had been flirting for some time. If we wanted to find a period in Scandinavian history that roughly approximated to our Viking Age it would probably be the period when Islamic silver dominated exchange in the region, c. 800–970.¹¹ Indeed, it has been argued that raids on the west intensified as specific local groups within Scandinavia were excluded from access to this Islamic silver and resorted to stealing what they could not afford to buy.¹²

The growing dependence of Scandinavians on commercial contacts with the Frankish and English kingdoms had also begun to emerge prior to the onset of the Viking Age. We see this most clearly in the excavations from Ribe and the research that they have provoked.¹³ Ribe, on the southwest coast of Jutland, emerges as a complex site displaying urban features in the decades around 700 (a century before the raid on Lindisfarne), and appears to have been the northernmost node of the trade network dominated by Frisian merchants that stretched from here to Quentovic on the Continental coastline and from Southampton to York on the English side of the narrow seas. It should come as no surprise that Denmark, and particularly Jutland, should be fully engaged with its neighbours around the southern North Sea. In terms of landscape, agricultural potential, and even to some extent settlement patterns, it had long

¹⁰ R. Naismith, *Making Money in the Early Middle Ages* (Princeton, 2023), p. 163.

¹¹ It is worth noting that Allen Mawer, in his 1930 CUP book *The Vikings*, did indeed see the Viking Age as closing with the consolidation of the Scandinavian kingdoms in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries (at p.4), favouring the former over the latter.

¹² K. Randsborg, *The Viking Age in Denmark* (London, 1980), pp. 152–62; Randsborg has been followed by scholars such as James Barrett, 'Rounding up the Usual Suspects: Causation and the Viking Age Diaspora', *The Global Origins of Seafaring*, ed. A. Anderson, J. H. Barret and K. V. Boyle (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 289–302, and Søren M. Sindbæk, 'Silver Economies and Social Ties: Long Distance Interaction, Long Term Investments – and Why the Viking Age Happened', *Silver Economies, Monetisation and Society in Scandinavia, AD 800–1100*, ed. J. Graham-Campbell, S. M. Sindbæk and G. Williams (Århus, 2011), pp. 41–66.

¹³ S. Sindbæk (ed.), *Northern Emporia, I: the Making of Viking-Age Ribe* (Højbjerg, 2022), and *idem* (ed.), *Northern Emporia, II: the Networks of Viking-Age Ribe* (Højbjerg, 2023).

had more in common with the low countries and eastern England than with the Scandinavian peninsula.¹⁴ Denmark had by far the largest population in Scandinavia throughout the first millennium. Our stereotypes of ‘the Vikings’, however, connect them with the Norwegian fjords. In part this is because this is the landscape so vividly portrayed in Icelandic sagas of the thirteenth century, and in part, presumably, simply because it emphasises ‘otherness’ and provides a cinematically appealing backdrop. The fjords, however, will always have supplied a very small percentage of the medieval Scandinavian population. True enough, both the specific origin of settlers and environmental factors make these West Norse communities useful comparanda for the diaspora communities established in the Scottish Islands, but we need to recognise how different Danish armies arriving in eastern England were. Regions like Lindsey, the eastern Midlands and East Anglia must have seemed very familiar to them in terms of landscape and settlement hierarchy. Like eastern England, much of Denmark comprises sandy soils overlying chalk or limestone geology. Nucleated settlements had existed since at least the Roman Iron Age in some areas, and long-established central places such as Gudme, Tissø and Uppåkra provided venues for elite consumption and communal religious activity.¹⁵ Understanding Danish society and Danish contact with England, however, requires us to look back beyond the Viking Age, to the shared gradual development of North Sea communities. The consensus regarding the dating of the Old English epic *Beowulf* seems to have shifted back to the traditional pre-Viking Age date.¹⁶ Excavations at Lejre, where Scandinavian analogues locate the Scylding court, seem to confirm that this was a significant power centre in the sixth century as well as in the Viking Age.¹⁷ The connection between the Danes and Frisians suggested by the Finnsburh episode in *Beowulf* and in the fragment of a longer treatment published by George Hickes in 1705, together with a similar linkage between the two peoples in the Alcuin’s *Vita Willibrordi* suggest, along with the archaeological data, that Denmark at least should be seen as part of a North Sea commonwealth in the centuries preceding the traditional onset of the Viking Age.¹⁸ We have inherited from our medieval and early modern scholarly forebears a religious prejudice which encourages us to

¹⁴ For the long-term development of Danish settlement patterns see L. Hedeager, *Iron Age Societies: from Tribe to State in Northern Europe, 500 BC to AD 700* (London, 1992).

¹⁵ For nucleated settlements see Hedeager, *Iron Age Societies*, pp. 180–223; for central places see U. Näsman, ‘Central Places in South Scandinavia: a Transformation Twenty Years on’, *Transformations in North-Western Europe (AD 300–1000): proceedings of the 60th Sachsensymposium*, ed. T. A. S. M. Panhuysen (Hannover, 2011), pp. 185–93.

¹⁶ L. Neidorf (ed.), *The Dating of Beowulf: a Reassessment* (Cambridge, 2014).

¹⁷ J. D. Niles (ed.), *Beowulf and Lejre* (Tempe, 2007); T. Christensen, ‘Lejre beyond the Legend: the Archaeological Evidence’, *Siedlungs- und Küstenforschung in südlichen Nordseegebiet* 33 (2010), 237–54.

¹⁸ For fragment and episode see J. R. R. Tolkien, *Finn and Hengest: the Fragment and the Episode* (London, 1982); the most recent edition of the Life is Alcuin, *Vita sancti Willibrordi: Das Leben des heiligen Willibrord*, ed. P. Dräger (Trier, 2008). A translation of the life of Willibrord is available in C. H. Talbot (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany* (London, 1954), pp. 3–22.

create barriers where the archaeological and vernacular literary evidence suggests they did not exist.¹⁹

What surprised contemporary commentators about the earliest attacks at the turn of the eighth and ninth centuries was the fact of heathen attacks going largely unpunished. For some five centuries, on this northern frontier of Christendom, the Faith had relentlessly expanded, rapidly converting unbelievers whom they encountered. For the English in particular, whose own journey into the light had been so succinctly narrated by Bede less than a century before, and who had been so active in the conversion of their fellow Germanic-speaking neighbours beyond the Rhine, the sudden appearance of heathen warriors who often seemed to be targeting churches must have been perplexing. It seemed to defy their understanding of providential history. What had they done to deserve this kind of punishment from God? This phase, however, was short-lived. By the middle of the ninth century it became clear that the various Scandinavian military commanders operating in the West had much clearer and more relatable aims and objectives. Many can be identified as certainly or probably members of the Danish royal dynasty who had come overseas following succession disputes. These Danish exiles operating in Frankish dominated Frisia or England were very different from the, probably Norwegian, raiders in the north of these islands. Their motivation, *modus operandi*, dialect, and perhaps other features such as dress and equipment were very different.

When we get to the tenth century, we find the descendants of ninth century invaders based for multiple generations in the west. Two of the participants at the Battle of Brunnanburh are worth considering together; one, the son of a member of the Great Army, the other a great grandson of one. The second-generation immigrant was Oda, Bishop of Ramsbury, who would go on to become Archbishop of Canterbury,²⁰ the fourth-generation immigrant was Olaf Guthfrithsson, the king of Dublin. Traditionally we present Olaf as a Viking but the dynasty of Ívarr, who dominated the Irish Sea region from the early tenth century to the early eleventh, was deeply rooted in the region. They were intermarried and allied with local dynasties and even founded churches.²¹ If Oda can be presented as English despite his more recent Scandinavian heritage, we must question Olaf's identity and alterity. Bundling such people together with everyone else with some Scandinavian ancestry, from Tmutarakan on the Black Sea to Kingitarsuaq in Greenland, over a 250-year period as 'Vikings' does not help us to understand them. Now most serious scholars understand this, but nonetheless in the titles of our books, articles, and university modules, we still pander to this oversimplified and misleading model. This has led, among other

¹⁹ See also A. Woolf, 'Sutton Hoo and Sweden Revisited', *The Long Seventh Century: Continuity and Discontinuity in an Age of Transition*, ed. A. Gnasso, E. E. Intagliata, T. J. MacMaster and B. Morris (Oxford, 2014), pp. 5–18.

²⁰ See C. Cubitt, 'Oda (d. 958)', *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004): <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/20541>.

²¹ For an overview of their activities see C. Downham, *Viking Kings of Britain and Ireland: the Dynasty of Ívarr to A.D. 1014* (Edinburgh, 2007).

things, to the Battle of Largs, fought in Ayrshire in 1263, between Norwegian and Scottish royal forces, being labelled ‘the last battle of the Vikings’ by the BBC.²²

So far, I have not mentioned the Scandinavian diaspora in the east but this fits into the same complex pattern, beginning long before the traditional start of the Viking Age. In Finland and Estonia the earliest Scandinavian settlement seems to begin around the year 600, and Staraya Ladoga in Russia was founded by 753 at the latest.²³ It is also not at all clear that the patterns of behaviour which we see governing first contact or continued interaction are at all similar in east and west. The predatory nature of Svear kingship, for example, which mobilised fleets from around the Malar basin to extract tribute and plunder across the eastern Baltic sees no neat parallel in the West.²⁴ Likewise, the Swedish and Gotlandic exploitation of the long-distance riverine routes of eastern Europe for trade and settlement are unparalleled in the Scandinavian interaction with the west and have a chronologically distinct pattern. My central argument is that the sheer diversity of the experience of Iron Age/early medieval Scandinavians in both time and space is done no service by the simplistic Viking paradigm.

Iceland, whose twelfth- and thirteenth-century literature has done so much to shape our perception of medieval Scandinavia, was perhaps as atypical as it was possible to be. It was settled *de novo* in the decades around 900 with no native population to interact with and few if any state institutions. Only in the twelfth century, as a small number of powerful chieftains amassed most of the original 30 or 40 chieftaincies, did it begin to resemble even vaguely most Scandinavian polities.²⁵ The closest parallel to Iceland is probably Gotland, also a ‘farmer republic’ with no state institutions and an annual Althing.²⁶ While a much smaller island, Gotland may have had a similar carrying capacity for population, but here location created a huge difference with Gotlanders playing a major role in inter-regional trade from at least the second century of the Common Era through to the thirteenth. Gotland’s symbol stones,²⁷ and the sheer quantity of hoards – both golden from Late Antiquity and silver from the Viking Age – are unparalleled. Binding Gotlanders and Icelanders together as ‘Vikings’ helps us understand neither. The period when they flourished extends with no natural

²² ‘The Last Battle of the Vikings’, BBC News website (14th December, 2012): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-20697117>.

²³ J. Ahola and Frog, ‘Approaching the Viking Age in Finland: an Introduction’, *Fibula, Fabula, Fact: the Viking Age in Finland*, ed. J. Ahola and Frog, with C. Tolley (Helsinki, 2014), pp. 21–84. For elsewhere in the eastern Baltic see M. Mägi, *The Viking Eastern Baltic* (Leeds, 2019).

²⁴ For the development of kingship in Sweden see N. Blomkvist, S. Brink and T. Lindkvist, ‘The Kingdom of Sweden’, *Christianisation and the Rise of Christian Monarchy*, ed. N. Berend (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 167–213.

²⁵ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth* (Odense, 1999).

²⁶ *Guta lag and Guta saga: the Law and History of the Gotlanders*, ed. and trans. C. Peel (London, 2015); J. Gruszczyński, M. Jankowiak and J. Shepherd (ed.), *Viking-Age Trade: Silver, Slaves, and Gotland* (London, 2021); A. Rio, *Slaving and the Funding of Elite Status in Early Medieval Europe*, Joseph C. Miller Memorial Lectures 21 (Berlin, 2024).

²⁷ A. Andreef, ‘Gotlandic Picture Stones, Hybridity and Material Culture’, *Encounters, Materialities, Confrontations: Archaeologies of Social Space and Interaction*, ed. P. Cornell and F. Fahlander (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 242–58.

break well beyond the traditional end point of the Viking Age and their material culture, even within the Viking Age, was extraordinarily different. When we compare their experiences with those of the Irish Sea World, the Danelaw, or Normandy, we see that they have very little in common at all and deserve to be studied each in its own context.

The Viking Age has something to commend it for English history, marking as it does an era when links between the English kingdoms and Scandinavia were re-energised and when a discourse of resistance against Scandinavian aggression was utilised by one of those kingdoms, Wessex, to legitimise its absorption, characterised as liberation, of the other kingdoms. It is much harder however to see this time period of c. 800–1050 having any meaningful significance outside of England. The exportation of this periodisation, and the pseudo-ethnographic ‘Vikings’ associated with it, into analyses of Scandinavia and the wider Scandinavian diaspora is deeply problematic, distracting us from a real engagement with the processes and events that shaped these regions in the course of the Middle Ages.