

# Anmeldelser

UDSTILLINGER

**Vikings: Life and Legend. British Museum (Sainsbury's Exhibitions Gallery). 6th March–22nd June 2014.**

Within British culture in recent years there has been a growing fascination with all things Scandinavian. This has ranged from Danish television series *The Killing* (*Forbrydelsen*) through to hit Nordic noir novels and Northern European cuisine. At such an auspicious time when Britons have been re-evaluating their relationship with Scandinavia, UK museums have been exploring that most notorious period of Northern European history; 2013 saw a collaborative exhibition on the Vikings between National Museums Scotland and the Historical Museum (*Historiska Museet*) in Stockholm, Sweden. Now, London's cultural powerhouse the British Museum is tackling the subject in *Vikings: Life and Legend*, housed in the new custom built Sainsbury's Exhibition Centre and representing the first major take on the ancient inhabitants of the Nordic region in over 30 years at that institution.

This is part of a travelling exhibition that recently departed the National Museum of Denmark (*Nationalmuseet*) and will be

opening in September at the Berlin Museum for prehistory and early history (*Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte*). Despite the collaborative approach the exhibition is intended to be adapted to its different locales; whilst the National Museum of Denmark's display was designed to appeal in particular to young men (a demographic group frequently missing in museums), the British Museum hopes to attract families. Methods of exhibiting differ as well; in line with their general practice, the Danish National Museum's rendition tended to cluster several examples of objects together, whilst the British Museum here maintain their minimalist technique of mostly single examples, thereby offering an approach more narrowly focused on the details of individual artifacts. Each country also aims to emphasize distinctive elements, the British Museum's tailpiece being perhaps unsurprisingly the Viking legacy in the United Kingdom whilst in Berlin the curators intend to scrutinize German/Danish interaction in the 10th and 11th centuries.

Even for the most cynical museum visitors it will be surely difficult not to be impressed by the sheer wealth of remarkable artifacts on display here. This comprises skeletons, axes, jewels, amulets, mass graves, coin hoards and much more, including the most contemporary archeological finds such as a minute silver

104 Valkyrie dug out of the ground in Denmark in 2012. The material spans across the four continents of the Viking Age world, including Irish brooches through to Frankish silver cups and Islamic dirhams, with the powerful and sleek Danish ship Roskilde 6 taking center stage both physically and conceptually. However, to Viking Age aficionados what will perhaps be most notable here is the presence of objects excavated from modern day Eastern Europe; the last time the British Museum exhibited the Vikings, in 1980, due to the cold war there was minimal contact between eastern and western European scholars. Consequently it was impossible to secure loans from museums on the other side of the iron curtain; likewise the Germanic aspect of nation building in the East was frequently downplayed. Here however, the ubiquity of grave goods from Belarus, Russia and Ukraine rectify that situation, giving a more complete picture of the Viking presence and importance in Slavic speaking countries.

In its core message the exhibition aims to redress the balance between the perception of Vikings as either bloodthirsty marauders, pirates and rapists or peaceful traders and farmers, two diametrically opposite views that have traditionally characterized popular British historiography of the Viking legacy; instead, in line with current scholarly thinking the museum portrays the truth as lying somewhere midway. The Vikings may have been brutal and violent, yet this was a remarkably rich and artistic culture, accepting of new ideas and other's beliefs. It is in this last point that the exhibition seems to drive home a perhaps deliberate political point relevant for the modern age; the Vikings here are exposed as maritime businessmen, living in a cosmopolitan and multi ethnic culture,

expressed in the exhibition labels as well as the culturally diverse artifacts derived from across the globe. In this manner the exhibition provides lessons to be learnt for the modern day, such as the importance of a global market and the need to maintain good relationships with both Islamic countries and Russia. In a particularly British context, in light of Scotland's upcoming independence referendum the exhibition serves as a subtle reminder of how the North has shaped all of the identities in present day Britain.

It is in the design of the exhibition, not in the portrayal of the Vikings, where the main criticism of this exhibition lies; although this is an excellent and scholarly exploration, it seems bloodless and grey. In recent years it has become common parlance in museology to speak of the "atmosphere" within exhibitions, a means of moving attention away from objects to emphasizing the overall exhibition design in the process of meaning creation. In this regard *Vikings: Life and Legend* is severely lacking; the newly designed gallery has little charm and comes across as sterile and gray, with very poor lighting. Aside from the architectural aspect, the exhibition itself fails to engage the emotions or create an atmosphere. Dampening down any romantic notions of the Norsemen and negating any sense of wonder that no doubt many will hope to find in such a potentially emotive subject; this is instead an exercise in academic archaeology and starkly contemporary design. Although many of the objects burn brightly, there is little contextualization of the Viking Age narrative, with the artifacts seemingly expected to speak for themselves. Indeed the exhibition is very object focused (albeit that the dispersion of objects is rather sparse), and unfortunately lacking in much detailed

interrogation of the unique forms of poetry, sagas, myths, language and manuscripts that makes the Viking world so enduringly fascinating to many. It is for such reasons that the exhibition is not as evocative as it could be. In an age where museums frequently aim to appeal to diverse communities, the British Museum has maintained a traditional outlook along with few interactive elements, thus with little appeal here for younger audiences. In its apparent attempt to draw families the exhibition severely disappoints.

Indeed there has been a mixed reception of the exhibition amongst the British press tending towards the negative, with famed English art critic Brian Sewall proclaiming the exhibition “a crushing disaster”. An exhibition that aims to demythologize what makes the Vikings to many people so glamorous is bound to invite detractors. Although the nuanced and cool tone of the exhibition is recognizably noble in its attempts to portray the Norsemen as neither more or less violent than their contemporary Anglo-Saxons, Franks and Slavs, the curator’s absolute unwillingness to resort to any form of sensationalism overly neutralizes the Vikings. The ambience here is not quite the modernist aesthetics of the Viking Ship Museum in Norway (*Vikingskipshuset på Bygdøy*), but instead something more detached and bleached.

However, despite the overly clinical display method, this well thought out exhibition along with a fantastic and wide ranging programme of associated events, accessories, publications (including an excellent catalogue) and public outreach (not to mention a recreated Viking burial in the courtyard of the British Museum on April 24th) will no doubt insure that the Vikings continue to shine on in the British psyche for many years to come. Hopefully this

exhibition will mark the turning point of how the public perceives the Vikings, perhaps generating a greater appreciation of how the artistic merits of this truly global culture can be balanced with its more brutal and violent aspects, though whether it will be successful in this endeavor remains to be seen.

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#### PHD-ANMELDELSER

**Lise Camilla Ruud. *Doing Museum Objects in Late Eighteenth-Century Madrid*. (Thesis submitted for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor, Faculty of Humanities, University of Oslo, November 2012.)**

Carlos III of Spain was especially fond of pachyderms. In 1773 an elephant arrived in the port city of Cadiz, a gift from the ruler of the Carnatic region of India via the Governor-General of the Phillipines. After trekking 600 km it fascinated nobility and the masses alike in Madrid, then lived out its days in the royal menagerie at Aranjuez. But elephants often have afterlives as interesting and varied as their lives, and this one was no exception. Upon its demise in 1777, Juan Bru, the dissector at the Royal Cabinet of Natural History, hurried the 50 km to Aranjuez to preserve and prepare the specimen, and to secure it for his master, Pedro Franco Dávila. The King wanted an elephant to display, and