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Introduction: Viking Wars

By many the Viking Age is associated with wars and raids, and the Vikings with brutality, bloodshed, and aggressive men. Ships, weapons and equipment have become important signifiers of the Viking Age, and beautifully handcrafted objects are often intertwined with narratives about plunder, raids and wars in popular culture. However, what has caused the reputation of the Viking Age to be so violent, masculine and frightening? Were the circumstances as sinister and violent as our contemporary portrayals suggest?

In varying degrees Viking Age narratives have been valued in the Scandinavian countries ever since Snorri Sturlusson (1179–1241) wrote the sagas about the former Norwegian kings (*Heimskringla*, compiled in c. 1230), and the stories describing the heroic deeds of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*) were compiled and transmitted. Despite having chosen different approaches, these sagas are medieval narratives dealing with a Viking Age past. In them, there are stories of bravery, robbery, warfare, and other types of violence. Interestingly, they both distance themselves from, and embrace the legacy of the ancestors. Over the centuries the medieval narratives have been used and reused for imagining the origins of the Scandinavian peoples, their internal relationships, and those to the outside world. The mysterious past the sagas convey – including brave ancestors – has influenced the creation of Scandinavian identities and unification – as well as separation – ever since.

From the late medieval period up until the early 20th century, personal and national unions have characterised how the Scandinavian realms were organised. The *Kalmar union* was established in 1397 by the Danish queen Margrét Valdemarsdóttir as a collaborative political platform for Denmark, Sweden (including Finland), and Norway (including the Norwegian tax countries: Iceland, the Faeroe Islands, Greenland, and the earldoms of Orkney and Shetland). Although, already in 1523 Sweden resigned from the union. From this stage, the Swedish and Danish-Norwegian kings respectively became more and more aware of their positions, and used the ancient narratives as tools for laying claim to the ancient origins of the Scandinavian countries. Alongside the sagas the monumental history of the Scandinavian countries was used, and the interest this sparked continued throughout the centuries, taking different shapes, and initiating various antiquarian collection practices.

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Artefacts from the Viking age created direct links between the past and the present. In the early 17th century the Danish professor Ole Worm initiated collections of historical and ethnographical objects for a cabinet of curiosities, the Museum Wormianum, as well as the documentation of runic monuments in Denmark-Norway for the *Danicorum monumentorum* (1643). The interest for documenting all these objects was part of creating a stronger national self-consciousness. Particularly, the Viking artefacts stand out in historical collections of craftsmanship, and they are often given similar prominent places in other historical exhibits all over Scandinavia. This is seen in extraordinarily neatly arranged ribbons, animals, and eventually plants, as well as in the unique preservation state of artefacts. The *Kongelige kunstkammer* (The Royal Art Cabinet) established by Frederik III in 1650, included Worm's collections, and made an even clearer image of the relevance of history for the authorities. Thoughtful use and selection of historical texts and objects became important for the creation of new identities also when the Danish-Norwegian union was dissolved, and the Danish King Frederik VI ceded Norway to Sweden in 1814. At this point a new personal union was created, which lasted for almost 100 years. During the period of the United Kingdoms of Norway and Sweden, the need for a national identity grew ever stronger in Norway, and the Vikings, and other elements of rural folk culture were used with a clear political purpose of creating a Norwegian cultural identity. This people's movement, which also included other aspects, unified the nation and subsequently led to Norway breaking free and achieving independence in 1905.

As soon as the historical objects – whether it be weapons, ships, or offerings – are put on display in a museum exhibit they become objects for admiration and fascination, and their aesthetical values are sometimes more apparent than their function. Thus, weapons, war treasures, and robbed artefacts have come to represent a spectacular past, in which beauty and brutality are tightly intertwined. But what is war, and how is it possible to define what war was in the Viking age today?

Given the fundamental character of war, subsequently accompanied by fear and loss, the first issue in the series *Viking Special Volumes* investigates how war characterised Viking Age society.

A modern definition of 'war' is a 'violent conflict with at least 1,000 combatants killed per year'. The provincial laws of Scandinavia, dating from the 12th to the 14th centuries, required a sighting of at least three warships for lighting a beacon, which defined a critical situation in the Viking homelands. Hence, it can perhaps be stated that a group of some hundred attackers defined a state of war during the Scandinavian Viking Age.

Viking Wars investigates the role of war in the creation, consolidation, and maintenance of collective identities, emergent polities and kingdoms in early medieval northern European populations and communities.

In the last decades, explicit studies of prehistoric warfare have emerged in Europe, partly inspired by archaeologist Lawrence H. Keeley's publication *War before Civilization* (1996). These studies have mainly focused on more obvious evidence of conflicts, such as skeletal trauma, weaponry, and resulting settlement patterns. This *Viking* volume investigates war as embedded in the social structure, which was also the topic of a conference held at the University of Oslo 12.–14. December 2018, organised by the Centre for Viking Age Studies at the Museum of Cultural History, at that time led by Associate Professor Ann Zanette T. Glørstad. The conference title was 'Weaving War', alluding to the many aspects of war –

ranging from required infrastructure, military strategies, economy, social relationships, as well as to resulting trauma, and emotional responses.

While much of the focus of previous research has been on the aggressive and violent aspects of Viking societies, fear has remained a relatively untheorized part of prehistorical research, particularly within archaeology. Although the Icelandic sagas contain several accounts of Vikings fleeing battles, what actually triggered these actions and the fear behind them is rarely discussed, or elaborated on. Fear of a superior rival posing an existential threat may have acted as a catalyst for response, making leaders and communities adapt strategies in order to reduce risk, and build resilience. It is suggested that the stereotypical characterisation of the Vikings as warriors or aggressive society is too simplistic. New theories – dealing with for instance domestical and architectural aspects of the Viking Age, as well as the contents of burials – challenge the traditional views of this hitherto perceived masculine warrior society.

In this volume, 14 authors and 13 chapters explore the overarching topic war from different perspectives:

Professor Frode Iversen argues that the warriors in equestrian graves were responsible for activating the local defence systems in parts of Norway between AD 800 and 1050. By identifying this, one of the aspects of the article draws attention to the importance of communication in warfare.

The Post doctoral Researcher Marianne Moen brings attention to how portrayals of the ideology of war are dominated by masculinity. She challenges the idea of a Viking age instigated by male violence as based on traditional Christian ideals, which subsequently has led to an understanding of Viking women as less inclined to violence since the same traditions tend to associate them with nurture and care. Her contribution also provides theories to reflect upon when reading the other articles in the volume.

Researcher Dr. Thorsten Lemm presents a reconstruction of one specific attack on the Frankish fort at present day Esesfelth by combined Danish and Slavic forces in AD 817, made possible by extensive archaeological excavations at the site. The excavation results have provided an excellent opportunity to explore various components of the fort – and the tactical considerations they represented – in detail, and the article offers exemplary insights into the infrastructure of war.

Senior Researcher Mads Dengsø Jessen and Conservation Scientist Dr. Michelle Taube argue that whetstone pendants were used ritually to express authority over, and control of metallurgical processes, as well as the associated trade of metal goods that they required. This reveals additional aspects of the importance and effort needed for the production of weapons and related equipment used in warfare.

Some of the Scandinavian medieval military features had long traditions. Some of these are identified by Associate Professor Beñat Elortza Larrea in his research regarding Viking age military features that survived the military transformations in the Middle Ages, especially those following the periods of internal struggles that the Scandinavian kingdoms underwent from the 1130s onwards.

Professor Judith Jesch explores the Old Norse concept of the *skjaldmær*, or ‘shield-maiden’. By tracing when and how the word first appears in textual sources, and how it has been interpreted ever since, she evaluates the origins of related concepts, and what the word actually represents.

The Post doctoral Researcher Leszek Gardela presents new insights into the customs of burying women with weapons in Viking Age Norway. He argues that the reasons for such burial practices may have been far more complex than previous shallow analyses have suggested, and that the archaeological finds from such burials may contain far more information about the lives and roles of the interred than previous research has argued.

The Associate Professor and Director Eva Andersson Strand focuses on the economic aspects of textiles and fabric in war and travel during the expansive Viking Age. She elaborates on the economic value of the textiles needed for travel and warfare for one journey across the North Sea on the Danish 10th century Ladby ship, and her calculations exemplify the significant demand for, and economic value of these textiles, as well as the increased effort needed to produce them.

The Post doctoral Researcher Christian Cooijmans presents a picture of the logistics of Viking encampment sites across Atlantic Europe. Such encampments served as military footholds for the Vikings on their sometimes lengthy campaigns, and also seem to have engaged surrounding populations of artisans, merchants, and suppliers.

The Senior Researcher Laila Kitzler Åhfeldt brings attention to how monumental runic stones, their inscriptions and carving techniques can provide information about migration, military campaigns, and traveling rune carvers, as well as the transmission of influences from other parts of Scandinavia and the Norse sphere. She argues that the erection of runic monuments may contain information about shifting power spheres but that it could also reflect new relationships between post-war communities.

The PhD candidate Joseph Ryder discusses how traces in the landscape can reveal the nature of cultural encounters between Norse settlers and indigenous populations in the Western Isles of Scotland. He argues that even though the Norse settlers dominated this late Viking Age and early medieval society, some aspects of the Pictish period ethnicity were retained, and became part of a unique regionality in the area.

Dr. Csete Katona presents different fates of captured and mercenary Scandinavians and Rus' in the East, based on contemporary Byzantine, Muslim, as well as later Old Slavic and Old Norse written sources. Where previous research has focused on Scandinavian and Rus' slave trade he demonstrates that neither of these intertwined groups was immune to the perils posed by other inhabitants in these eastern regions. The experiences and accounts dealing with captured or mercenary Scandinavians/Rus' include encounters with different military structures, and ways of servitude.

Professor Anne Irene Riisøy investigates how the weapons associated with the Viking warrior society also played important roles in Viking Age, and earlier Germanic legal rituals, for instance by conveying power, or as guarantees in oath swearing. She argues that they display how this warrior society and its associated ideologies depended on the inherent authority provided through its weapons.

As demonstrated above and in the separate articles, the contributions in this volume display a wide variety of facets dealing with Viking and early medieval war that may prove beneficial to the future study of the Viking Age.

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