

Vikings: Beyond Boundaries

The ViS Conference 2015, 2nd–4th December

Hosted by the Centre for Viking-age Studies (ViS)

at the Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo, in cooperation with

– Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History, University of Oslo

– Department of Archaeology, History, Cultural Studies and Religion, University of Bergen

While most Scandinavian scholars study the trading, raiding and emigration of the Viking Age from a ‘homeland’ perspective, the majority of colleagues elsewhere explore them in the context of the receiving societies. Are these two perspectives compatible? Is it at all possible to develop approaches that embrace both, or even transcend the boundaries between them? We believe it is, and that such an ambition is necessary to grasp the full dynamics of the period and understand the 9th–11th-century transformations of societies, cultures and polities in Eastern, Western, and Northern Europe.

“The Viking hype is hard to escape”

Professor Frands Herschend

The profound transformation of Scandinavia in the Viking Age cannot be understood without taking the overseas mobility into account. Seen from Scandinavia, the homelands were hubs of economy and long-distance travel; new institutions and polities emerged. When seen from the outside, though, Scandinavia can seem remote and marginal. From the ‘homeland’ perspective, the ventures of the Scandinavians appear as a creative and forceful process that shook and changed Europe and, in turn, altered Scandinavian societies and identities irrevocably. However, seen from the Continent, the British Isles and Ireland, Scandinavians were but one factor in

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the comprehensive political and economic changes of Europe in the times of Charlemagne, Bulan, Ruric, Alfred, Al-Muqtadir, Otto, Mieszko, and Brian Boru.

This multitude of perspectives on the Viking Age is one of the great assets of the field; they challenge and complement each other, and as long as there is a dialogue, the tension between them is productive. However, research on this period, essentially local in nature, can perpetuate the exceptionalistic approach developed in the romantic and nationalistic era. We hold that transcending this approach is a prominent ambition within Viking Studies. General perspectives that embrace the grand contexts of the Viking Age need to be developed alongside the local.

The opening up of traditional boundaries within Viking Studies is well underway in scholarly communities. This conference is intended to push that development even further by stimulating dialogue between the different research perspectives involved. We believe that dismantling the boundaries between perspectives is best achieved by drawing to the fore some of the high-quality empirically based studies that have been conducted in recent years.

From the perspective of Scandinavians as an external force, issues of identities, conquest and impact have been broadly debated. These investigations have proved indispensable for a more nuanced look

at the overseas presence of Scandinavians, as it has also drawn attention to cultural interaction and exchange, the blending of art styles and languages, and the emergence of diasporic identities.

As pertinent as asking how the Scandinavians changed the societies they ventured to is the question of how influences from foreign shores changed Scandinavia. During the Viking Age, Scandinavian societies were calibrated and fell in line with the larger forces that dominated the Insular world and Continental Europe: by absorbing the powerful symbiosis of Christianity and Monarchy, adapting to the idea of royal lineage and supremacy, and developing a buzzing urbanism coupled with large-scale trade networks, the emergence of a monetary economy, Scandinavia truly became part of Europe.

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However, is the distinction between homelands and diaspora exaggerated? Is the notion of the Viking Age as a formative period for Scandinavian societies, even those of the modern world, in reality the result of 19th-century romantic and nationalistic ‘Viking hype’? Is the grand transformation of post-Roman Europe a more relevant context for discussion, rather than making connections with the Christian kingdoms of medieval and modern Scandinavia? If so, how should the role of Scandinavians in that huge and complex process be adequately researched and comprehended?

To explore these issues we have invited a heterogeneous group of speakers; some are well-established experts in their field, others are younger

colleagues who have produced high-quality research. What unites them is their striving for synthesis. In line with the above ambitions we have gone outside the confines of Viking-age scholarship and invited experts on other aspects of the history and archaeology of the period and of the regions.

We have chosen to dedicate one session to each of the three main geographical zones of the Scandinavian diaspora as seen from Scandinavia: the South, the West, and the East. There will be an introductory session where some general perspectives on Viking-age research will be discussed.

We have asked the first speaker in each of the three geographical sessions to take a general perspective on that zone. The zones’ histories of research, as well as the way the Scandinavians were present there, differ significantly. Therefore, the three sessions will not conform to a strict list of subjects, but will address topics that have received recent scholarly attention within each zone. To inspire comparison and discussion we have asked some speakers in each session to address some common themes. Thus, in each session, aspects of politics, economy, and identity will be discussed.

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