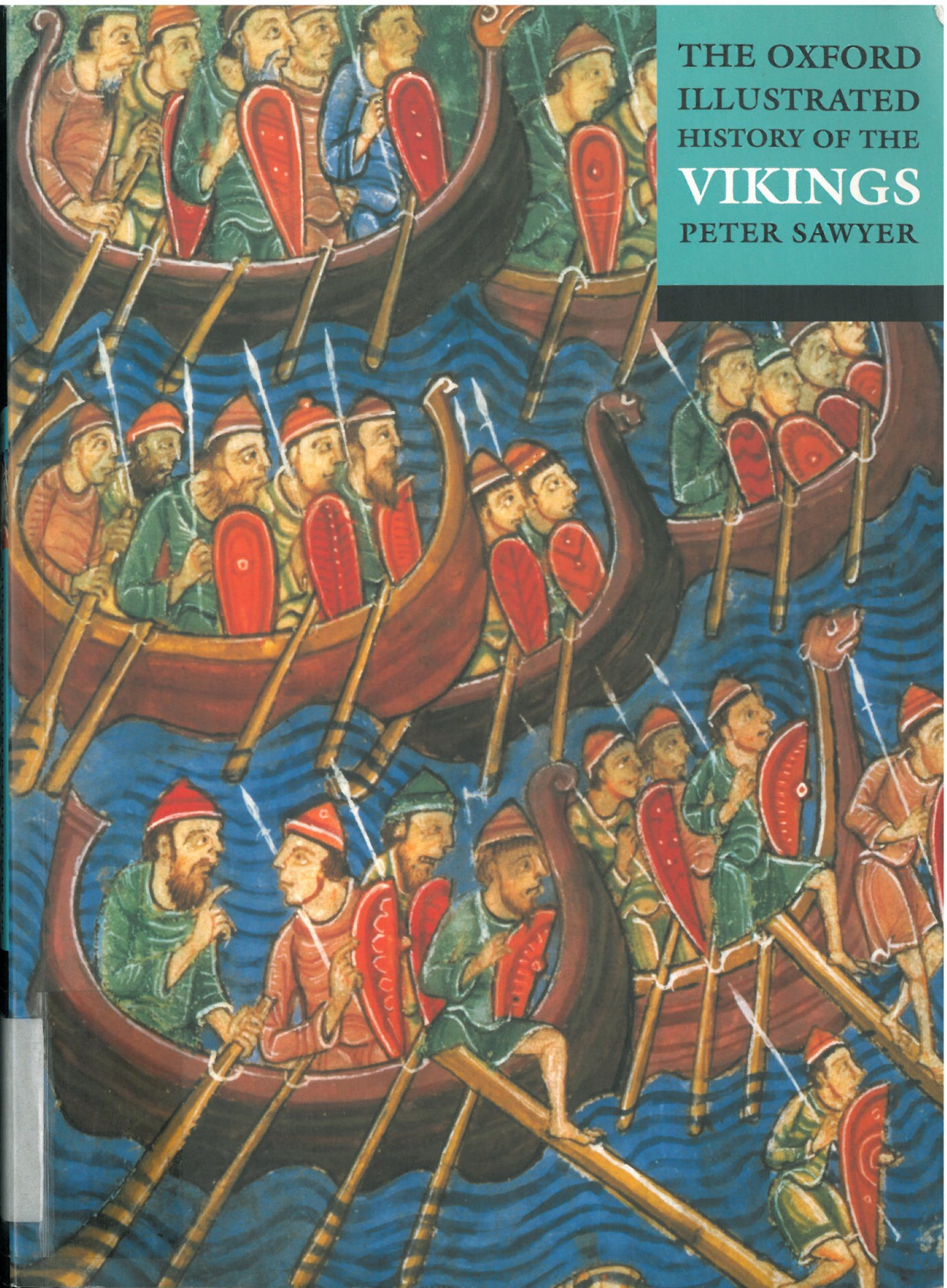

# THE OXFORD ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF THE VIKINGS

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# 10

# THE VIKINGS IN HISTORY AND LEGEND

LARS LÖNNROTH

The medieval writers who first recorded the activities of the Vikings saw them from the point of view of their victims, and it is thus natural that they did not give a very flattering picture of them. The barbaric brutality of the Vikings was simply taken for granted by some early writers, particularly in western Europe. The Arabs also saw the Scandinavians as barbarians, as can be seen from Ibn Fadlan's detached but terrifying eyewitness account, dating from *c*.930, of a Viking ship burial on the Volga, with its graphic descriptions of violence, filth, drunkenness, and offensive sexual behaviour.

## *The Heroic Age of Scandinavia*

When the Scandinavians themselves, however, started to record the exploits of their Viking ancestors, they painted a much more glorious picture of what they had accomplished as warriors, seafarers, settlers, and pioneering explorers of foreign lands. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when the classical Old Norse sagas and skaldic poems were committed to parchment, the Viking era began to be regarded as the heroic age of Scandinavia. A fascinating literature developed, particularly in Iceland, but also to some extent in Norway and Denmark; it is this literature, more than anything else, that has formed later ideas about Viking life, even today, and not only in Scandinavia.

It is practically impossible to make a clear distinction between 'history' and 'fiction' in these early Norse texts, since most of them contain some of each without separating one from the other. In that respect they may be

compared to American Westerns about legendary heroes such as Jesse James or Wild Bill Hickock. It is also, in most cases, difficult to determine how much of the narrative material was based on genuine oral tradition and how much was 'reconstructed' or simply invented by medieval writers. This is, in fact, one of the major problems of Old Norse scholarship.

*Gráskinna* ('the Grey Skin'), an Icelandic saga manuscript of about 1300. Many Icelandic saga manuscripts have a raw and rustic quality which suggests that they were made in ordinary farmhouses. Most were, however, written by priests for wealthy farmers and chieftains.

Most experts agree, however, that the skaldic poems, some of which undoubtedly date from the Viking period, contain the earliest and most reliable testimonies, since they seem to have been carefully remembered and preserved more or less literally for several generations. This kind of poetry, composed in very complicated metres and in an ornate metaphoric language which would have been mastered only by a small intellectual élite, was designed to celebrate particular kings or chieftains in a rhetoric worthy of their great exploits. But although the sophisticated wordplay of these artful verses is a delight to connoisseurs, the factual information they convey is often disappointingly slight; in most cases we only learn, after having straightened out the inverted syntax and deciphered all the intricate metaphors, that some great ruler, attended by brave warriors, defeated his enemies at such-and-such a place, thus making the life of local corpse-eating wolves and ravens a little happier.

The epic narrative of the sagas appears to be much more straightforward, factual, and 'objective' in its presentation, but it is nevertheless more open to suspicion from a modern historian's point of view, since no sagas were written or composed in their present form until the twelfth century, although some of them are evidently based both on ancient skaldic poetry and on oral tales. The king sagas (*konungasögur*) were the first to be recorded (from about 1150) and are also the ones that contain the most ambitious presentations of major historical events involving the kings of Norway, Denmark, and Sweden. The family sagas (*Islendingasögur*) are generally later (thirteenth century); they have become particularly famous for their dramatic and amazingly realistic stories—admired by anthropologists as well as by literary critics—about ordinary Viking feuds involving Icelandic farmers and their families. The mythical–heroic sagas (*fornaldarsögur*), on the other hand, most of which were not written down before the fourteenth century, are more openly fantastic and obviously based on folk-tales, romances, and mythical–heroic poetry of the eddic type.



Although these late sagas are nowadays more often read by folklorists and literary scholars than by historians, they were used as important historical sources by nationalistic Swedish antiquarians of the seventeenth century.

## *Saxo Grammaticus and Snorri Sturluson*

Among all the medieval texts of Scandinavia, however, two monumental works of historiography achieved more authority than the rest and became particularly influential in the Nordic tradition. These are *Gesta Danorum*, a Latin history of Denmark written by the Danish cleric Saxo Grammaticus (d. *c.*1220) and *Heimskringla* (History of the Norwegian Kings), a collection of king sagas written in Old Norse by the Icelandic chieftain Snorri Sturluson (d. 1241). Both were compiled in the first half of the thirteenth century on the basis of earlier (and partly lost) sources in verse and in saga prose. Many of the legendary stories told by later generations in Scandinavia about the Vikings can be traced back to these two celebrated works, which for several centuries were regarded as national monuments.

The title-page of *Gesta Danorum*, published in Paris in 1514, is a magnificent example of Renaissance art. The Viking heroes and Norse mythical figures of Saxo Grammaticus' Danish history, written in imitation of classical Roman historiography, are here displayed in classicist style as if they were Roman knights and creatures from Roman mythology.

Although basing their histories on similar narrative material, the style and historical philosophy of Saxo and Snorri are vastly different, and they have, through the centuries, appealed to different kinds of reader. Saxo is a superb Latinist, who knows how to use the classical rules of rhetoric and the Roman models of heroic conduct to make a rough Viking chief appear as a noble statesman of grand proportions. His goal is to convince the learned world of Europe that the early kings of Denmark were equal to the exemplary rulers of the Roman empire. This he tries to do by describing their virtues, as well as the vices of their enemies, in a high-flown emotional language, emphasizing the moral to be drawn from each story that he relates. His *Gesta Danorum* was particularly admired in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when it provided Shakespeare with the dramatic story of Hamlet and the royally appointed

historians of Denmark and Sweden with a lot of colourful material for patriotic boasting.

Snorri, on the other hand, is totally committed to the concise and seemingly objective style of the Icelandic sagas. He is a master of understatement and will rarely give his own opinion or express a direct value judgement, even though he obviously shares Saxo's admiration for some of the famous Viking rulers. He writes not only for learned clerics but for unlearned laymen, and instead of preaching to his readers he holds them in suspense by cleverly building up a sequence of dramatic scenes in which the heroism of the Viking Age is convincingly demonstrated. His *Heimskringla* was at first thought to be less elegant than Saxo's work, but since the nineteenth century he has generally been regarded as the more accomplished writer of the two, and his sagas of the Norwegian kings have reached a much wider audience in modern translation.

Nobody knows what Snorri Sturluson, the great Icelandic saga-writer and politician, looked like, but nationalistic artists in Norway and Iceland have tended to picture him as a wise and venerable farmer. This woodcut by Christian Krohg has been used as the frontispiece in numerous Norwegian editions of Snorri's *Heimskringla* ('History of Norwegian Kings').

The saga of King Olaf Tryggvason (d. 1000), as told by Snorri, may serve as a typical example of the Old Norse tales about Viking rulers that have been particularly admired until the present day; it is certainly one of the most influential stories of its kind. Olaf's father, King Tryggvi, is killed while Olaf is still a child, and his mother has to leave the country with him in order to escape the murderous plans of Tryggvi's enemies, Queen Gunnhild and Earl Håkon. Their ship is boarded by pirates in the Baltic, and the boy Olaf is separated from his mother and sold as a slave in Estonia. He shows his mettle at an early age by killing the pirate who sold him, and he is shortly afterwards adopted by the king of Russia, where he grows up and performs various heroic deeds, charming everyone around him with his bravery, good looks, and charisma. He is, in other words, a typical 'lucky man' (*gæfumaðr*), the kind of hero that sagas present as destined for success.

Somewhat later Olaf manages to collect a host of brave warriors and sail with them to Germany and the British Isles, where he makes huge Viking conquests, wins enormous wealth, and marries a couple of beautiful foreign women (who conveniently die, one after the other). Although he is a heathen he does not want to worship the pagan gods, and soon becomes a devout Christian before deciding to return to Norway. By a strange coincidence, the Norwegian farmers of Trondheim have at this very moment





decided to get rid of their present ruler, Earl Håkon, and Olaf is accepted as their new king. He then rules Norway successfully for some years and converts his countrymen to the new faith.

After this success story, the second part of the saga is devoted to Olaf's tragic decline and fall, when his luck changes and fate turns against him. The decline starts when he angrily strikes and insults his most recent lady friend, the proud Swedish queen Sigrid, because she does not want to become a Christian. She then plots a conspiracy against him, involving both the Swedish and Danish kings together with the son of Earl Håkon. Olaf's famous dragon ship, *The Long Serpent*, is insidiously attacked by an enormous navy at Svold in the southern Baltic as it returns from a visit to the land of the Wends. Olaf and his men are heavily outnumbered, but defend themselves valiantly against hopeless odds. The bowstring of the *Serpent*'s great archer, Einar, is finally destroyed by the enemy; when Olaf asks: 'What broke?' Einar answers: 'Norway out of your hands, King!'—a laconic reply that marks the end of Olaf's rule in the typical understated style of the best sagas. Realizing that his time is up, Olaf dives into the water and is never seen again. Some people are reported to have testified that he survived the battle and escaped to some foreign country, but Snorri himself puts his faith in contemporary skaldic verses, saying that he did indeed drown in the waves at Svold.

Although many elements in this saga are mythical—some are obviously borrowed from folk-tales, heroic poems, and even from foreign romances—it is told in such a factual and convincing manner by Snorri that it was accepted as history for several centuries. Many of its basic literary motifs, for example that of the hero's early exile, his valiant childhood deeds, his marvellous luck and charisma, his ability to endure hardship, his refusal to workship pagan gods, his tendency to express himself in few but salty words, and his eventual fated downfall in a major battle, became part of an established pattern for interpreting the lives of great Viking leaders. Important characteristics of such leaders in the sagas are usually their restraint, common sense, balance, and strong sense of honour, which make them respected by their men and fortunate in their undertakings—until they start to act rashly, often provoked by less balanced kinsmen or lovers. Chaos and tragedy are almost always caused by emotional mistakes of this kind.

## *Heroes and Villains*

It is an interesting fact, however, that such noble Viking heroes are never called 'viking' (*víkingr*) in the sagas. This term seems to have been tainted by

a certain amount of disapproval and is normally reserved for brutal and unpleasant characters, for example berserk thugs or heartless pirates of the sort that sell Olaf as a slave in his childhood. To go on a Viking expedition (*fara í víking*) may, on the other hand, be considered not only a legitimate but almost an obligatory experience for a true saga hero, provided that it is confined to an early stage of his career, after which he is supposed to settle down on his farm to a more peaceful and respectable way of life.

There is thus an inherent contradiction in the saga presentation of the Vikings, and this contradiction prevails in literary narratives even to this day. On the one hand they are the greatest heroes; on the other they are not heroes, but problematic characters—or even villains—if they devote too much of their life to typical Viking activities such as warfare, piracy, and plundering. This contradiction becomes particularly obvious in the ambivalent presentation of some saga characters such as the controversial Icelandic skald Egil Skalla-Grímsson of *Egils Saga*, one of the most realistic family sagas. Egil is, at different stages of his life and sometimes even simultaneously, a family man and a raving lunatic, a tragic hero and a comical, uncouth rabble-rouser, a defender of noble values and a ruthless avenger.

At the age of 12 he is reported to have composed a poem in which he expresses his dream to become a Viking in lines that have become a classic expression of 'Viking mentality':

That mentioned my mother,
My ship they should buy me,
A fleet one, fair-oared one,
To fare out with Vikings;
Stand up in the stem there,
Steer the dear sea-steed,
Hold on to her haven,
Hew this man and that man.

(trans. Gwyn Jones)

The structure of this short poem, with its idyllic, almost romantic beginning and brutal twist at the end, mirrors the saga as a whole. Later in life Egil is ironically described in situations where, among other things, he throws beer in the face of one enemy, pulls out the eye of another, and bites off the throat of a third. Typically these things happen when he is far away from home on one of his legendary journeys. At home on the farm in Iceland, on the other hand, he is generally pictured with empathy and respect, for example defending the honour of his family or grieving at the death of his son. Even as an old man, however, he can suddenly reveal his Viking mentality at home and at a meeting of the *Alþing* become a nuisance to his kinsmen, for example when he proposes to throw out the silver treasure he has brought home from England just for the pleasure of seeing people fight over his wealth.





While Olaf Tryggvason and Egil Skalla-Grímsson represent two principal types of masculine Viking hero in the sagas—the charismatic leader and the tough, wild, and not-so-noble fighter—Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir in *Laxdæla Saga* may be said to represent the typical Viking heroine. She is presented as an immensely proud, strong, and beautiful woman who is married several times and also has lovers out of wedlock, but who will not take second place to any of her men when it comes to independence, toughness, and authority. When her lover Kjartan leaves Iceland she wants to go with him, but he refuses to take her on board, since she has young brothers to care for, and asks her instead to wait for him three years. Guðrún does not want to promise anything, and when Kjartan returns she has married his best friend, Bolli; Kjartan therefore marries another woman and settles down. He is soon regarded as one of the greatest men in Iceland, but Guðrún, who secretly loves him but is too proud to admit it, is jealous and generally dissatisfied with her own marriage.

A tragic feud now develops between the two families, instigated by Guðrún, and she finally goads her husband Bolli to kill Kjartan. When Bolli returns after the killing she greets him with the following cool words: 'Morning tasks differ. I have spun yarn for twelve ells of cloth, and you have killed Kjartan.' Not until the end of her life, when all her men are dead, is she prepared to tell the truth about her passionate feelings for Kjartan: 'I was worst to him that I loved the most.'

Although it is stories such as these, composed in thirteenth-century Iceland by the period's best writers, that have in later years formed the educated reader's view of life in the Viking Age, they were at first not very well known except in west Scandinavia. Even in Iceland, that remote corner of the Scandinavian world, they seem to have been largely forgotten towards the end of the Middle Ages, when chivalric romances and ballads replaced sagas as the favourite literature of the upper classes. When interest in the Vikings started to flourish again in Scandinavia in the sixteenth century, it

Towards the end of the middle ages, Iceland became a Danish colony and its population was impoverished. It was in such circumstances that this leaf of parchment from a manuscript of *Sturlunga saga* was used to make a pattern for a child's shirt.

was largely a patriotic and antiquarian interest prompted by the intellectual leaders of the emerging national states of Denmark and Sweden, who wanted to demonstrate to the world that their countries had a longer and more glorious history than most other countries of Europe.

## The Gothic Revival

In order to achieve this goal, several Scandinavian historians, especially in Sweden, felt they had to go much further back in history than the Viking Age and show that their countries were venerable and respected even in the time of the Greeks and the Romans. They also tried to base their arguments on the Latin authorities that were available to the learned world of Europe and generally recognized as trustworthy. For this reason, histories such as Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, first published in Paris in 1514, were at first of greater interest to the patriotic antiquarians than the Old Norse texts, which were still unpublished and which few people in those days could read or understand.

Among the most influential of these antiquarians were the Swedish brothers Johannes and Olavus Magnus, who both lived in Rome after the Reformation, exiled by King Gustav Vasa for their refusal to abandon their Catholic faith in favour of Lutheranism. Challenged by Saxo's impressive achievement, the elder of the two brothers, Johannes (1488–1544), wrote *Historia de omnibus gothorum sveonumque regibus* (History of all the Gothic and Swedish Kings, published posthumously in 1554), in which he argued that the Gothic people of early European fame had really come from Sweden, thus making the Swedes an even more glorious people than the Danes and the Viking Age a mere revival of military policies successfully implemented in the Roman era. The younger brother, Olavus (1490–1557), wrote *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (History of the Nordic Peoples, 1555), enthusiastically describing the ancient and noble culture as well as the daily life of the Scandinavians in minute detail, derived partly from Latin authorities (including Saxo) and partly from his own experience.

The patriotic historiography of Saxo and the Magnus brothers was carried on in the seventeenth century by scholars such as Ole Worm (1588–1654) and Thomas Bartholin (1659–90) in Denmark, and Olof Rudbeck (1630–1702) in Sweden. An intense and sometimes bitter competition between the Danes and the Swedes made both sides eager to make the most of their respective histories. During this period the runic inscriptions from the Viking Age, as well as the Icelandic sagas, came into more frequent use as historical sources and were finally printed in scholarly editions with parallel translations in Latin. Early medieval manuscripts of Snorri's *Heimskringla* and other saga texts were transferred from Icelandic farms to the archives of Copenhagen and Stockholm, where they were compared to Latin texts and often became the objects of extremely imaginative interpretations which made the past of Denmark and Sweden increasingly glorious. These scholarly efforts culminated in Olof Rudbeck's notorious four-volume masterpiece *Atlantica* (1679–1704), in which the learned author tried to prove that Sweden was not only the cradle of all Greek and Roman culture but was in fact identical with Atlantis, the wonderful island that was supposed to have sunk into the sea according to an ancient myth related by Plato.





It should be noted, however, that even though Rudbeck and the other seventeenth-century antiquarians were very much inspired by Old Norse sources that either dated from the Viking Age or described that period at great length, they were not at all interested in 'Vikings' in the sense of rough and barbaric sea-warriors. On the contrary, these learned men wanted to demonstrate to the world that their ancestors had not been barbarians at all, but wise and noble human beings with a great civilization that had originated many centuries before the Viking Age. Admittedly, these ancestors had been used to a rough and simple life in their cold northern climate, and they were for this reason tenacious and good at overcoming difficulties when circumstances forced them to leave their homes and go to other parts of Europe. But they were at the same time cultural heroes who had brought civilization to the countries they visited.

## Enlightenment and the Nordic Renaissance

The enlightened eighteenth century brought a (temporary) end to this kind of historiography and also to the Great Power status of both Sweden and Denmark. Historical scholarship became more rational and pragmatic in the works of such historians as the Dane Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754) or the Swede Olov Dalin (1708–63), who tended to identify civilization with the Enlightenment of their own age. Neither Vikings nor Gothic conquerors were their particular heroes, and the chauvinistic theories of Olof Rudbeck were summarily rejected. The Icelandic sagas were still used as important historical sources for the earliest periods, but the Viking Age was not regarded as a golden age but rather as a barbaric and uncivilized period in the history of the Nordic countries.

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, however, the Vikings again became fashionable, this time not as cultural heroes but exactly *because* they were considered barbarians, hostile to modern civilization and enlightened culture. The time of Rousseau and the Noble Savage had come, and the

Viking was soon admired as a delightfully wild and romantic person, capable of the sublime passions which the polite rationalists of the Enlightenment had neglected. This admiration became one of the driving forces of the so-called 'Nordic Renaissance', which did not start in Scandinavia but on the European continent and in England, appealing particularly to young intellectual rebels involved in art and literature.

Sublime art was now defined by these young rebels as the art that violated the conventional rules of harmony, correct measure, and balance. It should be terrible, violent, and awe-inspiring like thunderstorms, enormous threatening mountains, endless deserts, nightmares, madness, divine revelations, and visions of Hell. The most sublime poetry was the barbaric and archaic verses of wild and primitive people like the Celts, the Scyths, or the Scandinavian Vikings, people who had not been tamed, domesticated, and corrupted by modern civilization. In order to experience the sublime, upper-class man had to leave his comfortable, cultivated, and enlightened environment to seek out wild and archaic nature and rediscover his primitive passions; one had, in short, to become rejuvenated, transformed into the original, genuine state of mankind.

Inspired by such ideas, the Nordic Renaissance movement introduced the Old Norse poetry of the *Edda* and the Icelandic sagas to the literary scene of western Europe. This renaissance should not, however, be understood as a revival of genuine Old Norse ideals, but rather as a systematic adaptation or reinterpretation, and partly a distortion, of those ideals in the light of the new aesthetic theories. As a result of this process, the mythical lays of the *Edda*—together with the Celtic songs of Ossian, Scandinavian folk-ballads, and various other mythical texts of supposedly barbaric origin—were thought to possess shattering powers of a special and mysterious kind, derived from nature and from wild, illiterate bards, not from the cultivated art of educated poets.

The first important figure of the Nordic Renaissance was Paul-Henri Mallet (1730–1807), a Swiss citizen of Geneva employed in the 1750s as Professor of French at the University of Copenhagen. In 1755 he published his *Introduction to the History of Denmark*, where he characterized Old Norse poetry in general accordance with the ideas of Ole Worm and other Scandinavian antiquarians of the seventeenth century: as a very sophisticated form of art, based on strict rules and presenting intellectual puzzles or enigmas to its readers. In the second edition of the same work, however, published in Geneva in 1763, Mallet changed his description of this poetry to conform to the new ideas of the sublime and make it more interesting to the faddish young literati of Europe. Now he characterized the poetry of the *Edda* and the Icelandic skalds as 'sublime but obscure', and continued:



> The soaring flights of fancy may possibly more peculiarly belong to a rude and uncultivated, than to a civilized people. The great objects of nature strike more forcibly on rude imaginations. Their passions are not impaired by the constraint of laws and education. The paucity of their ideas and the barrenness of their language oblige them to borrow from all nature, images fit to clothe their conceptions in. How should abstract terms and reflex ideas, which so much enervate our poetry, be found in theirs? . . . If it be asked, what is become of that magic power which the ancients attributed to this art? It may well be said to exist no more. The poetry of the modern languages is nothing more than reasoning in rhyme, addressed to the understanding, but very little to the heart. No longer essentially connected with religion, politics or morality, it is at present, if I may say so, a mere private art, an amusement that attains its end when it hath gained the cold approbation of a few select judges. (trans. Thomas Percy, 1770)

In its insistence on the emotional, irrational, barbaric, and magical imagery of great poetry, this statement is quite typical of the new aesthetics of the sublime. It was through inflammatory appeals of this kind that Mallet's presentation of Old Icelandic poetry had an enormous effect on young intellectuals all over Europe. People like Thomas Gray (1717–71) and Thomas Percy (1729–1811) in England, James Macpherson (1736–96) in Scotland, and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) in Germany all became enthused with the powers of such poetry and tried to collect it, translate it, imitate it, and present it to the world as a sublime and, at the same time, patriotic alternative to the classicist poetics of polite education. Admiration for the primitive but noble souls of one's rustic ancestors became the starting-point and the inspiration for a new and more romantic kind of nationalism, one that emphasized nature and the 'folk spirit' rather than civilization or military conquest.

It took several decades before this kind of thinking reached Scandinavia, but when it finally did, towards the end of the eighteenth century, its influence was far-reaching and profound, and it led to a complete revaluation of the Viking Age, which now for the first time appeared as the true golden age of all the Nordic countries, a time when Scandinavian culture was in perfect harmony with nature and the folk spirit. But although the ideology of the Nordic Renaissance was largely populistic, it was at first accepted only by a fairly small intellectual élite, who saw themselves as the chosen representatives of this folk spirit. Such ideas spread from Germany to academic circles in Copenhagen, Uppsala, and Stockholm, and from there eventually to a large segment of the Scandinavian middle class.

This new enthusiasm for the Vikings became particularly intense in Denmark and Sweden after both countries suffered humiliating military defeats during the first decade of the nineteenth century, Denmark through the

British bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807, Sweden through the loss of Finland in a war against Russia in 1809. Educated people of both nations became convinced that it was now time to regain the power, vitality, and self-respect that the Scandinavians had possessed during the Viking Age. The Nordic Renaissance was gradually transformed from a primarily aesthetic trend among intellectuals to a more general nationalistic revival movement with political overtones.

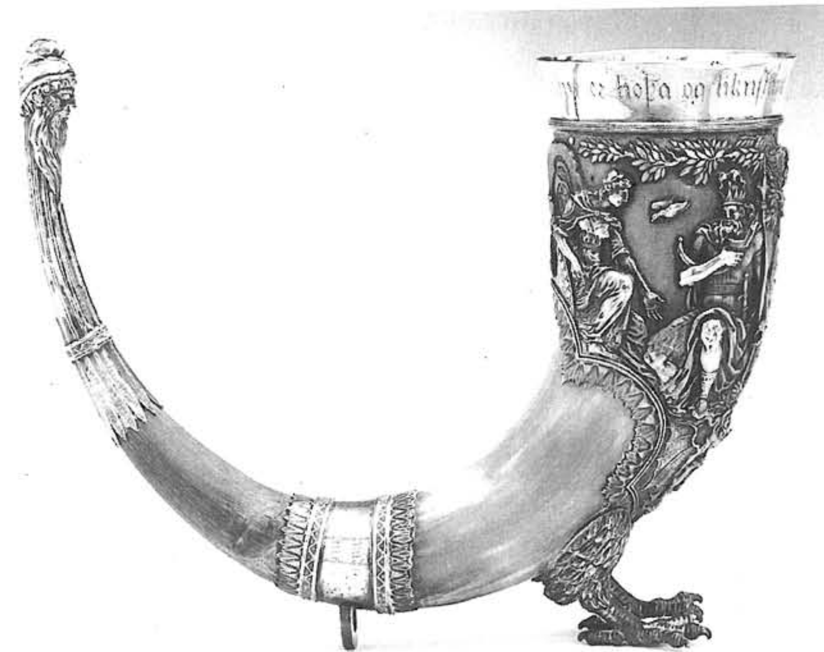
Denmark's two most prominent Romantic writers, Adam Oehlenschläger (1779–1850) and N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783–1872), thus wrote their earliest poetry, based on a strange combination of Old Norse myth and esoteric German philosophy, for a small circle of literary admirers, but they both became national figures with a strong influence on political ideology. Oehlenschläger's poem *Guldhornene* (The Golden Horns, 1803) eulogizes two precious artefacts from Denmark's archaic past as symbols of a mysterious glory that had once been given by the gods but had since disappeared; this text was interpreted in nationalistic terms by generations of Danish schoolchildren, although it was probably not originally intended to be read in that way. Grundtvig's poetic interpretations of Old Norse mythology eventually provided the ideological basis for the Scandinavian folk high schools.

## *The Gothic Society, Geijer, and Tegnér*

Nationalistic sentiments in Sweden, combined with interest in the Viking-Age and Old Norse literature, led in 1811 to the founding of a patriotic society, *Götiska förbundet* (the Gothic Society), by a group of young academicians and officers in Stockholm who liked to drink mead from horns, address each other by ancient saga names, recite poems from the *Edda*, and perform other Viking rituals in the optimistic hope that such activities would rejuvenate and strengthen their country in future conflicts with Russia. The intellectual leader of the society was Erik Gustaf Geijer (1783–1847), who was to become Sweden's most influential historian and one of its most admired poets. He edited the society's journal *Iduna* (named after the Old Norse goddess who provided Valhalla with the apples of immortality), publishing not only antiquarian articles about various aspects of Viking culture but also patriotic editorials and poems or songs in (considerably modified) Old Norse style.

Two of the poems that Geijer published in *Iduna* during its first year, *Vikingen* (The Viking) and *Odalbonden* (The Yeoman Farmer), soon became seen as classic expressions of true 'Viking spirit', and were often recited or sung at patriotic gatherings and later in many Swedish schools. In





This silver drinking-horn was presented to the Swedish historian and poet Erik Gustaf Geijer in 1816 by his admiring students. The horn was decorated by the artist Bengt Fogelberg with mythical scenes from the *Edda*, illustrating the divine origin of poetry and history. The romantic idea behind this gift is evidently that Geijer should drink skaldic mead from the horn and thus be inspired to write poetry in Old Norse style as well as a truly heroic history of the Viking Age.

*Vikingen* we hear a shipwrecked sea-warrior relate the story of his wild youth: how he runs away from home at the age of 15, roams the seas restlessly and desperately in search of adventure and glory, loses everything he has gained, and finally prepares to die as a famous hero in the cold waves at the age of 20. In the second poem, *Odalbonden*, skilfully built up as a contrast to the first one, we hear about a farmer who stays at home to defend his no less heroic way of life:

Though not allured by honour's name,
My heart well knows its worth.
I harvest not the field of fame,
I reap my own good earth.

I love not noise and vain display;
Great deeds are never loud.
Few traces mark the tempest's way
When fades the flaming cloud.

Each sickness wails in its degree
But health needs no such brawl,
And therefore no one speaks of me
Or thinks of me at all.

The mighty lords midst shriek and groan
Spread ruin all around;

The silent ploughman and his son
They till the reddened ground.

(trans. C. W. Stork)

By thus presenting the Viking and the farmer as heroic representatives of two alternative and opposite lifestyles existing simultaneously in Old-Norse society—a dramatic trick learned from Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*—Geijer makes the Viking Age attractive to people of different political persuasions. Comparing the two heroes and arguing in favour of one against the other became for a while one of the most common exercises in Swedish classrooms. The expected outcome of these scholastic exercises was usually that both heroes were equally necessary and good for the country, although the yeoman farmer has gained in political correctness at the expense of the Viking in the modern Swedish welfare state.

In his *Svenska folkets historia* (History of the Swedish People, 1832–6) and other historical works, Geijer used similar contrasts to present Viking-Age Scandinavia as a model society. In his opinion, the harmony of that society depended on a delicate balance between, on one hand, great kings and, on the other hand, the rural *þing*s, or assemblies of free farmers. The Viking kings provided leadership and military prowess, while the assemblies provided sound judgement, folksy common sense, and a certain amount of democracy. The absence of a real aristocracy made it possible for the people to be close to their kings and for the kings to be close to their people. According to Geijer, this balance was destroyed by the Catholic church and the feudal aristocracy during the Middle Ages, when the assemblies lost their power and the farmers most of their ancient freedom. A strong, free, and independent Scandinavian state such as Sweden should therefore, in his view, not seek its roots in the Middle Ages but rather in the pagan Viking Age and its Old Norse customs and institutions. This view of cultural development in Scandinavia strongly appealed to the Protestant and patriotic spirit of nineteenth-century Sweden, and it became more or less accepted by nationalistic historians for almost a century. A very similar view of the Viking period as dominated by free and proud farmers, irrepressibly speaking their minds to their king at the local assembly, may be found in many other Scandinavian writings of the nineteenth century, for example in the Norwegian histories of Rudolph Keyser (1803–64) and P. A. Munch (1810–63). It is a view that may ultimately be traced back to Snorri Sturluson, but it suited the political climate of the nineteenth century—in which farmers were struggling for more power—exceedingly well.

Although Geijer was by far the most influential member of *Götiska förbundet* during his own lifetime, another member, Bishop Esaias Tegnér

*Right*: Egil Skalla-Grímsson, the violent tenth-century Icelandic poet and Viking hero, is here shown as he appears in an Icelandic saga manuscript of the seventeenth century. According to the saga, Egil had 'a broad forehead, heavy eyebrows, a short and very thick nose, beard growing all over his face, an extremely broad chin and heavy jaw; he had such a thick neck and such broad shoulders that he was immediately noticed among other men, and he looked tough and cruel when he was furious'.

*Left*: The death of Baldr, the noblest and most beautiful of the Norse gods, is a motif which often appears in Scandinavian art and literature. This picture was made in the 1760s by an Icelandic country priest and shows how the evil god Loki fools the blind god Hǫðr into piercing Baldr with an arrow made of mistletoe. All three gods are dressed in contemporary Icelandic costumes.

(1782–1846), became even more famous outside Sweden through the publication of *Frithiofs Saga* (1825), a poetic romance in twenty-four epic songs about a Viking hero and his love, based on one of the mythical–heroic sagas from Iceland. Through its brilliant blend of Byronic verse, Romanticism, and Old Norse myth *Frithiofs Saga* became Sweden's first major international success on the literary market, translated into several foreign languages, including English, French, German, Russian, Hungarian, and Croatian. It was therefore Tegnér's version of the Viking Age that became the most well-known in the educated homes of Europe. His hero, like so many Icelandic saga heroes before him, vacillates between the role of *Vikingen* and the role of *Odalbonden*. In his wild youth he behaves like a Byronic Viking hero, after having lost his true love Ingeborg, and his 'Viking's Code' is a romanticized nineteenth-century version of some famous misogynous stanzas in the *Edda*:

> Now he swept o'er the seas, now he roamed far and wide, like the hawk
> in his airy abode:
> For the warriors on board he wrote rules and decrees. Shall I tell you the
> Wanderer's Code?
>
> 'Pitch no tent on the ship, in a house never sleep: in the hall none but
> enemies stand;
> With the sky for his tent, let the Viking-brave sleep on his shield with his
> sword in his hand . . .
>
> 'When the storm waxes fierce, hoist the sail to the top, it is blithe when
> the wind blows a gale:
> Let it go, let it go, they are cowards who furl, rather founder than take in
> thy sail.
>
> 'Leave the maid on the land, let her come not on board, were it Freja she
> yet would deceive;
> For her dimples are pitfalls, her locks are a net, in her smiles it is woe to
> believe.'
>
> (trans. L. A. Sherman, 1877)

Towards the end, however, when he is reunited with his Ingeborg (who, needless to say, has loved him faithfully all along) it is time for Frithiof to become a stable and responsible *odalbonde*:

> And as a bloody shadow sank his Viking's life
> With all its angry conflicts and adventures wild

Tegnér thus adjusts the Viking experience to the edifying pattern of the German *Bildungsroman*, in which an immature hero lives a stormy and

*Facing*: Ribe lies about 6 km from the west coast of Jutland. It developed from the emporium established early in the eighth century on the north bank of the river (among the trees). The medieval town grew up around the cathedral on the other side of the river.

unhappy life away from home during his youthful *Wanderjahre*, but then gradually becomes a more mature person, preparing him for his trumphant homecoming and ultimate success as a wise, reconciled, and thoroughly educated member of society. This is probably one of the main reasons why *Frithiofs Saga* became a success not only with Swedish educators, who made the text obligatory reading in schools, but also with the pious court circles of Victorian England, including Queen Victoria herself, to whom one of the English translations was dedicated. As one British scholar has put it: 'Here was just the Scandinavian tale to encourage Victorian matrons, shocked by Sarah Bernhardt's Cleopatra, to cry "how *very* like the home life of our own dear Queen".'

## *Grundtvig's Viking Revival*

Although *Götiska förbundet* was dissolved after some decades, its ideas lived on for more than a century, inspiring large numbers of educators as well as artists, poets, and politicians. Even more influential, however, was N. F. S. Grundtvig's campaign to infuse the Danish school system with large doses of Viking spirit. In the 1830s this charismatic priest and visionary poet, whom his followers saw as a prophet, presented a new educational programme aimed at abolishing grades and examinations and replacing Latin grammar with a mixture of Christian revivalism and Old Norse mythology. Grundtvig, who was a passionate enemy of bookish learning and despised traditional academic education, wanted to preach 'the Living Word', by which he meant not only the word of God in the gospels, but also the songs of the *Edda* and all kinds of oral folk traditions that he felt had been neglected by the conventional school system. His utopian vision of a new, free, humanistic, and voluntary school system for the common man, in which the Living Word prevailed over dead learning, inspired the Danish farmers' movement in their ultimately successful struggle against the conservative upper classes. With the help of the farmers, Grundtvig's followers in the 1860s established the first folk high schools, where students listened to pious sermons about Valhalla and learned to sing patriotic songs about their Viking ancestors.

The folk high school movement soon spread to the other Scandinavian countries. Although the emphasis on Old Norse culture was eventually scaled down in the curriculum, it was at least partly because of these new schools that, during the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Vikings became a major concern not only for a nationalistic élite but also for many ordinary farmers and to some extent for the liberal urban bourgeoisie. For the first time, the Vikings were exploited commercially by various Scandinavian companies, which used the names of Old Norse gods and saga heroes as brand names for their products. A rather anachronistic and romanticized 'Viking style' became fashionable in architecture, design, and interior decorating as well as in social gatherings and various types of social events. Artists painted romantic pictures of Old Norse gods and famous saga heroes. Politicians tried to speak like Viking kings to their constituents. Restaurants offered mead in drinking-horns and arranged Viking parties where people turned up in horned helmets and rattled their toy weapons. Public buildings, ships, furniture, and household articles were adorned with fancy dragon's heads, runes, and other symbols of the Viking Age.

Swedish high society dressed as Vikings for a fancy-dress ball organized in Stockholm in 1869.

On a more limited scale, this enthusiasm for the Vikings also spread to Victorian England, where not only Bishop Tegnér's *Frithiofs Saga* but also more genuine Icelandic sagas were translated into English and ambitious Old Norse programmes were started at both Oxford and Cambridge. Even more important was the fact that some of the Old Norse scholars and saga translators in Britain were prominent national figures such as Samuel Laing (1810–97) and William Morris (1834–96). Laing's interest (like that of some other Scottish intellectuals) clearly had something to do with the fact that he saw himself as a descendant of Viking settlers in Orkney. William Morris's enthusiasm, on the other hand, seems to have developed out of a more general interest in the arts and crafts of the Middle Ages. A third well-known British saga translator, George Webbe Dasent, made flattering comparisons between the Vikings and his own Victorian contemporaries:

The interior of Bravalla, a Swedish private home of the Victorian era, designed, furnished and decorated in Romantic 'Viking style'.





They [the Vikings] were like England in the nineteenth century: fifty years before all the rest of the world with her manufactories and firms—and twenty years before them in railways. They were foremost in the race of civilisation and progress; well started before all the rest had thought of running. No wonder therefore that both won.

Also in the Scandinavian countries similar comparisons were made between the Viking spirit and the enterprising spirit of modern entrepreneurs, travellers, scientists, politicians, and so on. The very idea behind the imitated 'Viking style' in art, literature, commerce, and interior decorating was obviously to promote nineteenth-century Scandinavians as true descendants of the Vikings. Such lofty comparisons and pompous imitations, however, were soon ridiculed by many younger intellectuals in the cities, where modern life seemed to have little in common with the Viking Age. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, usually seen as the 'Modern Breakthrough' in Scandinavian art, literature, and industry—and also as the beginning of social democracy—the Viking enthusiasm of earlier generations was again rejected and sometimes openly scorned by radical intellectual leaders such as the Danish critic Georg Brandes (1842–1927) or the Swedish dramatist and novelist August Strindberg (1849–1912). Historians in these two countries also began to be more critical in their attitude to the heroic stories told of the Vikings in the sagas, and the Grundtvigian folk high schools had to tone down some of their romantic enthusiasm for anything Old Norse.

In Norway, Iceland, and the Faeroe Islands, however, the provincial culture had always preserved some genuine traits of the Old Norse period. Vikings were also associated with the time when these west Scandinavian nations had been independent of Denmark and Sweden. Especially the Icelanders and the Faeroese, but also some Norwegians, spoke a language similar to Old Norse, and traditions from the *Edda* and the sagas still survived in local folklore. On the other hand, it took quite a while before such academic intellectual trends as the Nordic Renaissance or the Grundtvigian Viking revival were imported from Copenhagen to these remote and old-fashioned shores. When this finally happened, it coincided with the rise of the national independence movements. For a patriotic citizen in any of these three countries, returning to the Viking Age became more or less equivalent to a return to political independence. The Vikings thus gradually became a major concern for west Scandinavian nationalists and remained so long after the Modern Breakthrough.

Yet it was hardly the most ultra-Romantic or 'sublime' stories of the Vikings that appealed to Norwegian, Icelandic, or Faeroese readers, not

even during their struggle for national independence, but rather the tough and understated heroism of the family sagas or of Snorri's *Heimskringla*. It is characteristic that Snorri's Icelandic sagas about the Norwegian kings became a major national classic during the nineteenth century not only in Iceland but also (and particularly) in Norway, where it has been retranslated and reprinted over and over again ever since, often with marvellous woodcut illustrations by some of Norway's most prominent realist artists of the Modern Breakthrough: Christian Krohg (1852–1925), Erik Werenskiold (1855–1938), and others. It is also characteristic that these illustrations have tended to emphasize not so much the splendour, charisma, and wealth of the great Viking chiefs, but rather the hard struggle of poor and tough Norwegians to survive under difficult circumstances in their cold fjords and high mountains. A similar realist spirit, inspired by the Icelandic family sagas, is found in some early stories and plays about the Viking period by Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906), Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832–1910), August Strindberg, and other writers of the Modern Breakthrough, for example Ibsen's play *Hærmændene på Helgeland* (The Vikings of Helgeland, 1858).

The Norwegian enthusiasm for the Vikings increased considerably towards the end of the century as two stately Viking ships were found and excavated in large burial mounds near the Oslo fjord—the Gokstad ship in 1880, the Oseberg ship in 1904. Not only were these discoveries in themselves spectacular and the circumstances of their discovery in many ways sensational, but they also happened to coincide with the last stage of Norway's struggle for independence, which was finally achieved in 1905. It was thus natural that these ships would become treasured national symbols, prominently displayed in the centre of the new Norwegian capital of Oslo.

## *Vikings in America*

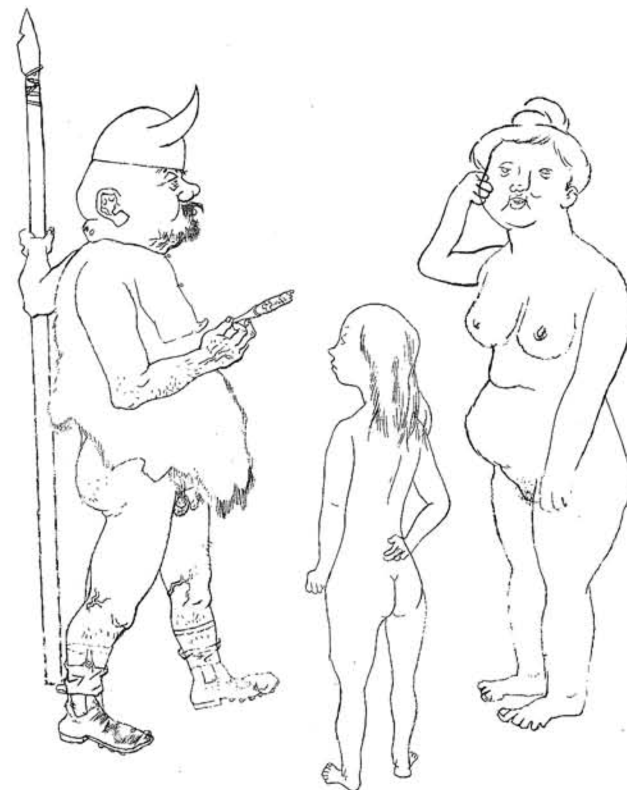
For the Scandinavians emigrating to North America in the course of the nineteenth century the Viking heritage also acquired an important national significance, particularly cherished in their initial struggle to assert themselves in relation to other immigrant groups in the United States or Canada. Many of these emigrants, many of whom settled in midwestern states such as Minnesota or Wisconsin, strongly identified with the Viking farmers who had once settled in the North Atlantic islands and in *Vínland*, settlements that are vividly described in the sagas. It was unavoidable that the Scandinavian Americans would choose as their particular hero Leif Eriksson, the legendary Norwegian Viking who was supposed to have discovered America centuries before Columbus. It was also unavoidable that they would write about the Vikings—fact as well as fiction—in their ethnic publications (some of which even had Old Norse names) and eagerly welcome any evidence that could convince the world that the Scandinavians were indeed the first to arrive in America. This opened the way for forgeries such as the Kensington Stone, said to have been 'discovered' in the soil of Minnesota in 1898 with an amateurishly concocted inscription supposedly made by fourteenth-century descendants of Viking settlers. The Kensington Stone actually became a major ethnic symbol for at least half a century, and there are still some Minnesotans who believe in its authenticity. Of greater significance in the long run, however, was the fact that the Scandinavian community in the United States encouraged several American universities to start ambitious academic programmes in Viking history and Old Norse culture.





## *Wagner and the Nazis*

Meanwhile in Germany enthusiasm for the Vikings took a more romantic, extreme and, ultimately, dangerous course. The tone had been set by Richard Wagner (1813–83) in the *Ring des Nibelungen* (1852–74), a stunning operatic extravaganza based on Old Norse and Early Germanic mythology. In Wagner's dramatic and musical recreation of these myths, interpreted in the fascinating but obscure light of Romantic philosophy, they achieved a new religious significance for the entire German nation. Siegfried is presented as the tragic Germanic hero destined to fall in his attempt to save the gods and the world from cosmic forces of greed, evil, and destruction. He and his passionate but self-destructive mistress, the Valkyrie Brünnhilde, are gradually both revealed to be the chosen heirs of Wotan himself, the incarnation of the world-spirit, and also of Erda, the Earth Mother, symbol of divine nature. The whole cycle of the *Ring* appeared to its audience as a sublime manifestation of the German spirit, and its performance at Bayreuth, originally sponsored by the king of Bavaria, became a sacred national ritual of gigantic proportions.



A German businessman in Valhalla, a caricature from the 1920s by the radical artist George Grosz. The drawing is evidently meant to satirize the kind of German middle-class enthusiasm for the Vikings and Norse mythology that later culminated in Hitler's national socialism.

When, towards the end of the nineteenth century, this Wagnerian mystique merged with Nietzsche's élitist philosophy of superman, imperialist ambition, and newly developed racist ideas of German supremacy it did not take long before some Germans began to see themselves as *Herrenvolk* and the Vikings as their own racial forebears and role models, destined to defeat their inferiors in other countries. During the first decades of the twentieth century such racist thinking resulted in a flood of uncritical German appreciations of the Viking Age and of Old Norse literature, the texts of which were often read as sacred expressions of a purely Germanic *Blut-und-Boden* philosophy, rooted in the home soil of one's family and the whispers of the blood inherited from heroic Viking ancestors. This kind of semi-religious thinking also found its way to England and Scandinavia, although it never became as influential or militant there as in Germany.

A few decades later, after Germany's humiliating defeat in the First World War, such ideas were turned into party politics by Adolf Hitler and his followers. When the National Socialists came to power in 1933 they started a crusade against 'decadent' modern culture, systematically replacing it with their own version of 'Aryan' culture, based on the heritage of the

A German *Dingspiel*, a semi-religious form of Germanic theatre organized by the Nazis and performed in large outdoor arenas reminiscent of the Old Norse Thing meetings. The plot was often taken from the *Edda* or the Viking world, and the idea was to create a large collective manifestation of the Aryan spirit.





Vikings, Old Norse mythology, Wagner, and German peasant culture. The Nazis particularly encouraged a new and supposedly Germanic form of drama, called *Dingspiel* ('thing play'), huge collective manifestations of the 'folk soul', with much parading and collective chanting of political slogans, performed in majestic outdoor arenas made to look like the places where, according to the sagas, Norse farmers held their *þing* meetings. During the German occupation of Norway and Denmark (1940–5), the Nazis were particularly eager to use the Vikings in their propaganda. 'Viking' was, for example, the name given to an infamous regiment of Nazi soldiers recruited among Norwegian volunteers and set against the Russians on the eastern front towards the end of the war. One typical poster from this period shows an SS soldier shaking hands with a young, blond Norwegian standing in front of a huge Viking ship carrying the following message: 'With Waffen. SS and the Norwegian Legion against their common enemy ... Against Bolshevism.'

This kind of Nazi propaganda does not seem to have had much effect on ordinary Scandinavians. As a matter of fact, Viking symbols were also used by the Resistance movement in its underground war against the German occupation. One legendary Resistance group in southern Denmark, for example, was named Holger Danske after a famous Old Norse saga hero. Its members mainly consisted of farmers who had grown up in the Grundtvigian folk high school tradition and therefore found it quite natural to be inspired by Norse mythology in their struggle against the German enemy, casually (and often jokingly) referred to in their daily conversations as 'the Fenriswolf' or 'the Midgard Serpent'.

## *Modern Attitudes*

When the war ended in 1945 the Nazi form of Viking enthusiasm naturally came to an end, at least temporarily, and the Viking heritage in general lost much of its appeal not only in Germany but also in the Scandinavian countries, particularly among academics and intellectuals. A more radically critical attitude to the Old-Norse sources, originally introduced in the early twentieth century by historians such as Lauritz Weibull in Sweden (1873–1960), finally prevailed in most Scandinavian and British universities, making the national romanticism of earlier Viking histories obsolete. Modern historians and archaeologists have generally not tried to present the Vikings as great national heroes or as glorious leaders of exciting military adventures, but rather as competent but fairly unglamorous tradesmen, colonists, shipbuilders, craftsmen, mercenaries, or (alas) plunderers.

This certainly does not mean that the Vikings lost their popularity after

the Second World War. On the contrary, they have become more and more popular all over the world, and particularly in the mass media, even in countries where they have only ever been seen as plunderers and hooligans. Yet one can say that they have, during the last fifty years, been relegated from 'high culture' to 'low culture' Nowadays they are rarely the heroes of serious novels or ambitious poems, but rather the popular anti-heroes of comic strips such as *Asterix* or *Hagar the Horrible.* Their dragon ships and horned helmets have commercial value and the power to attract large crowds of people, but such emblems of Viking culture are today considered funny rather than romantic or heroic. And the real Viking fans are today more often found among uneducated football supporters than within the intellectual avant-garde.

The most popular modern novel about the Vikings is probably *Röde Orm* (The Long Ships, 1941–5) by the Swedish author Frans G. Bengtsson (1894–1955) which has been translated into many languages, including English; the book has also been made into a musical and a Hollywood movie. It is a novel that still deserves to be widely read for its exciting adventures, its brilliantly ironic style, and its many entertaining episodes. What makes the text particularly interesting from a literary historian's point of view is the fact that it represents a transition from an older way of understanding the Vikings to a more modern one. On one hand, Bengtsson is an old-fashioned Viking admirer who has learned much from the sagas and from conservative histories where the Vikings are still pictured as heroes. On the other hand, he is also a modern intellectual who treats all kinds of exalted heroism or romantic posturing (especially of the Wagnerian or Nazi kind) with a good deal of sarcasm. The male protagonists of his story, the Viking companions Orm and Toke, are shown to be real heroes in their dealings with the enemy, but they are also rather funny in their homely style and unblushing, but very human, concern for simple material pleasures such as beer and pork. After escaping from a long imprisonment by the Muslims in Spain, the two companions manage to be invited to the Yule celebrations of King Harald Bluetooth in Denmark, where they demonstrate their prowess in battle against some particularly unpleasant Viking thugs. But weaker sentiments, which Orm and Toke have carefully concealed under their tough appearance, are suddenly revealed when one of the king's servants starts handing out their food:

> They sighed blissfully as he lifted out fine pieces of shoulder pork to put on their plates, reminding each other how long it was since they had last eaten such a dinner, and marvelling that they had managed to survive so many years in a country where no pork was allowed to be eaten. But when the blood-sausage arrived, tears came into their eyes, and they declared that they had never eaten a meal worthy of the name since the day they had sailed away with Krok.
>
> 'This is the best smell of all,' said Orm in a small voice.
>
> 'There is thyme in it,' said Toke huskily.
>
> (trans. Michael Meyer)





It is scenes like this, rather than the more conventional Viking adventures and battles, that have made *Röde Orm* a modern Viking classic. Orm and Toke, like Hagar the Horrible, seem to have become popular as comic heroes exactly because they do not possess any refinement and sophistication whatsoever. They will never become educated and civilized like Tegnér's Frithiof. Like modern working-class heroes, these Vikings have made a virtue of their simple tastes, rough exterior, and blunt manners. Naturally, their hearts are made of pure gold.

During the last decades of the twentieth century, the Vikings have become more popular than ever. Viking fairs and Viking festivals are celebrated each summer in the Scandinavian countries as well as in Britain, Germany, and the United States. Gallons of mead and thousands of horned helmets are usually sold at such occasions along with Viking jewellery such as Thor's hammer, Viking bread, Viking swords, models of Viking houses, and many other remarkable products. Young people are learning to build Viking ships and sail them over the ocean. Viking plays are performed, and Viking battles fought in commemoration of Maldon, Stamford Bridge, Stiklestad, and various other famous events of the Viking era. Some enthusiasts have even started new sects for the celebration of the Old Norse gods. Yet only small groups appear to take the Vikings completely seriously; the fact that some of them use Viking symbols in imitation of the Nazis to promote racist ideas has occasionally provoked well-meaning educators into saying that it is now about time to forget the Vikings altogether, since they do not seem to be entirely compatible with the progressive, liberal, and multicultural ideals of the modern Scandinavian welfare state. History should teach us, however, that the Vikings can be understood in many ways and exploited both for good and for evil.