

Viking Ethnicities: A Historiographic Overview

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Abstract

The ‘Viking Age’ is well established in popular perception as a period of dramatic change in European history. The range of viking activities from North America to the Middle East has excited the interest of many commentators. Vikings are variously regarded as blood thirsty barbarians or civilised entrepreneurs; founders of nations or anarchic enemies. But how cohesive was the identity of the ‘Vikings’ and how did they see themselves? In recent years the answer to this question has been evaluated from a range of perspectives. Established paradigms (often situated within a nationalist framework of thought) have come under greater scrutiny and new ideas have entered the debate. This paper will review some trends in the historiography of viking ethnicities and cultural identities in the period 800–1000 AD. This overview also highlights the value of comparative analysis of human migrations to the field of Viking Studies.

Who are the Vikings?

The word ‘viking’ is itself used by different scholars to mean different things. Its use in Modern English stems from the early 19th century and it was broadly used to describe people of Scandinavian cultural identity active in the 9th, 10th and 11th centuries.¹ In Old Norse the masculine noun *víkingr* is normally translated as ‘sea warrior’. It was not used as a general description of Scandinavians in the Middle Ages. The noun denoted the activities of a minority of men and it was not an ethnic label.² Because of divergence between the word’s origin and modern popular usage, some scholars would argue that ‘viking’ (with a lower case ‘v’) should be restricted to descriptions of Scandinavian warriors (although the distinction between warriors and non-warriors may be problematic in some situations).³ Some treat ‘Viking’ (with a capital ‘V’) as an racial label to describe the peoples of medieval Iceland and Scandinavia at home or abroad.⁴ Others regard ‘Viking’ (with or without a capital ‘v’) as a cultural label to describe the spread of Scandinavian influence *circa* 780–1050. It is the last designation which is used in this paper.

The potential divergence between popular and scholarly definitions of vikings is indicative of a broader phenomenon: that interest in viking history flourishes as much outside the academy as within it. In the words of Frederik Svanberg, ‘its location at the core of national identities of Swedes, Danes, Norwegians and Icelanders, makes it a quite extraordinary field of implications and hidden dimensions’.⁵ Many people from areas of Scandinavian settlement in Europe, North America, New Zealand and Australia also consider themselves to be descended from ‘Vikings’. It is therefore nearly impossible to engage in contemporary debate without touching on the sensitivities of people who regard vikings as nation founders or ancestors. On the other side of the coin, vikings have a long established place in the historiography of non-Scandinavian west European nations as blood-thirsty raiders whom national heroes (such as King Alfred in England or Brian Ború in Ireland) fought to overcome.⁶ This may represent the biased historiography of countries

who resisted vikings. Nevertheless, Old Scandinavian skaldic poetry highlights aggression and military prowess as desired traits among the male elite.⁷ The celebration of excessive violence was characteristic of warrior fraternities across early medieval Europe.⁸ Vikings were perhaps not remarkable for being more aggressive than neighbouring peoples but because their mobility (assisted by superior ship technology) enabled a broad range of military (and other) activities.⁹

In the 19th century the violence associated with vikings could be subsumed within a positive view of their actions as empire builders, exhibiting strength, nobility and enterprise. In a postcolonial world there has been increasing emphasis on portrayals of vikings as less brutal and less exceptional within a European context. Greater emphasis has been placed on the cultural achievements of medieval Scandinavia, highlighting that the society consisted of much more than its high profile male warriors.¹⁰ There remains a lack of consensus (both inside and outside academia) as to how exceptional or violent vikings were in relation to their neighbours, and the issue is highly contentious. A related development in recent historiography has been the analysis of assimilation and acculturation in viking settlements outside Scandinavia.¹¹ These processes are important for interpreting how Scandinavian identities and perceptions of ethnicity altered during an age of migrations.

National Identities

A theme in early 20th century historiography was that the unification of kingdoms could be associated with the victory of one leader or group over its neighbours. This perception fits well with medieval accounts of national origins. Related to the concept of state formation, viking migrations have been regarded by some historians as colonial ventures extending nationhood to new areas. So for example, settlement in Russia has been perceived as a Swedish venture, viking settlement in England has been regarded (primarily) as a Danish enterprise and conquests in Scotland extended the dominion of Norwegian kings. In areas where two Scandinavian national groups were perceived as active, it is often assumed that there were political tensions and even outright hostility between them.¹² The value of this paradigm may be questioned as a potential anachronism for the early Viking Age.

The origin of Scandinavian kingdoms is a much debated research area.¹³ The birth of modern identities is often sought in the Viking Age. There is nonetheless recognition that such retrospective projections risk making the evolution of states seem predetermined or natural. This awareness parallels developments in other nations' historiography.¹⁴ In the 'History of the Goths' the sixth-century author Jordanes identified 28 different population groups in Scandinavia, suggesting a plethora of local identities.¹⁵ From this point it was not inevitable that the national identities of Danes, Norwegians and Swedes would evolve in the Viking Age. Medieval myths of union linked to a particular king or political event make compelling narratives. However, their value as historical evidence may lie in what they reveal about the time they were composed rather than the events they purport to describe. A case has been made that medieval state formation should be interpreted as a developmental process rather than as a single event.¹⁶

In Norway, King Harald Finehair was credited with the unification of the kingdom in the medieval sagas, an event which could be dated to the late ninth century.¹⁷ There is some modern scepticism over Harald's achievements and the size of the territory which he ruled.¹⁸ An English account by the Scandinavian traveller Ottar (Ohthere) reported in the 890s indicates that a 'Northmen's land' comprising western parts of what is now

Norway was a recognised entity, but this was much smaller than modern Norway.¹⁹ The role of Saami in early Scandinavian history has received little attention, but archaeological evidence has highlighted the extent of their settlements in northern Norway.²⁰ In southern Norway the Viken region was intermittently ruled by kings from Denmark. A better attested process of unification in Norway took place later on, during the reigns of Olaf Tryggvason (r. 995–1000) and Olaf Haraldsson (r. 1015–1028/30). Late medieval sources asserted that these kings were descended from Harald Finehair (thus creating a continuous narrative in the formation of the nation). However, Claus Krag has argued that these genealogical links may have been invented retrospectively.²¹ Debate continues among historians as to whether a ‘Norwegian’ identity existed in the ninth and tenth centuries which preceded or followed the development of the kingdom.

Sweden derives its name from the *Svear*. This has been regarded as an ethnic name by many historians. Thomas Lindkvist has, however, argued that this was a functional name as much as an ethnic label.²² *Götar* are referred to from the ninth century, sometimes as a separate people but also as a subdivision of the *Svear*. The creation of Sweden may be a tale of one ethnic group, the *Svear*, subjecting another people, the *Götar*.²³ Alternatively, Sweden may have developed as a confederate kingship over multiple units.²⁴ There is evidence of political centralisation as early as the eighth century around Lake Mälaren with the development of a sophisticated early trading centre at Birka in proximity to a royal manor.²⁵ Nevertheless a kingdom of Sweden uniting groups of *Svear* and *Götar* is not attested before the 12th century.²⁶

The unification of Denmark has in recent years been attributed to a range of dates in the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries. As Søren Sindbæk has remarked, ‘The ambiguity of the sources has allowed for the development of entirely different perceptions’.²⁷ Denmark (*Denemearce*) is first recorded in the Old English translation of Orosius’s History of the 890s. It literally means ‘borderland of the Danes’. In the same Old English text a distinction is made between North Danes and South Danes and Northmen, which may indicate that there was not a united kingdom of Denmark. It is unclear from the text whether Sjælland (or some have argued even Jutland) was part of Denmark.²⁸ Other written sources and archaeology testify to the expansion of trade and political ambition in the late eighth and early ninth centuries in southern Scandinavia, pointing to a centralised polity based in Jutland.²⁹ Frankish sources demonstrate that kings from the region (identified as *Nordmannia*) were flexing their muscles in the early ninth century. This has led Janet Nelson to conclude that early ninth-century Denmark ‘was a passable early medieval kingdom’.³⁰ Nevertheless political divisions in the late ninth century may have persisted until the reign of Harald Bluetooth (r. *circa* 958–87) when the great runestone at Jelling proclaims that ‘the whole of Denmark’ was united under one king.³¹ Harald’s additional claim to have made the Danes Christian represents the intended scale of his authority over spiritual as well as temporal matters.

The skeletal survey given above of national origins indicates that at different times in the early Viking Age not all peoples in Scandinavia could be regarded as subjects of a kingdom of Norway, Denmark or Sweden. It is questionable that Scandinavians would have routinely labelled themselves in such a way. Recent archaeological research has emphasised the strength of local ties in the Viking Age.³² As identity is by its very nature multilayered, individuals may have regarded themselves primarily as members of a community, family, retinue or region. National affiliations (certainly by modern standards) may have been relatively weak.

A Long Way from Home

Because much viking activity took place outside Scandinavia, it is necessary to question how individuals and communities were identified away from their perceived homeland. Written evidence from an Old Scandinavian standpoint in the ninth and tenth centuries is rare; so we are largely reliant on the observations of non-Scandinavians for evidence. Such interpretations may have been hampered by the nature of cross-cultural contact, the common language of vikings (Old Scandinavian, the *dönsk tunga*), broad cultural similarities, and the potentially diverse nature of viking war-bands and communities. The Old English Orosius indicates some awareness among merchants in Scandinavia of distinctions between 'Northmen', northern 'Danes', and southern 'Danes' in the late ninth century. However, the labels *Dani* and *Nordmanni* were interchangeable in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon chronicles recording activities outside Scandinavia.³⁵

Many labels for vikings were descriptive of characteristics other than ethnicity, although they were equated with people of Scandinavian culture. For example, 'Rus' (Old Swedish **roþs* – originally meaning 'rower'), 'Varangian' (Old Norse *væringi*, 'body-guard'), 'pirate' (Latin *piratus*), 'heathen' (Latin *paganus, gentilis*; Arabic *majūs*). Occasionally references are given to the regional origins of a piratical band. For example, a force from Vestfold was recorded in Aquitaine in the 840s, and three ships which came to Wessex between 786 and 802 were retrospectively identified as originating in Hordaland.³⁴ Most often, however, groups were identified by their leaders or by their location within the host country.

Patterns of Migration

Research in Viking Age migration has focused on the causes of population movement (a topic recently summarised by James Barratt).³⁵ Less work has been done on the patterns and processes of migration.³⁶ It has often been assumed that people travelled together from one kingdom to a new area and that their descendents retained the identity of their 'homeland' (as Dane, Norwegian or Swede) through multiple generations. Nevertheless, a case can be made that migration was rarely that simple. For example, in relation to Ireland, it has been argued that there was a wave of Norwegian settlement followed by attempted Danish settlement in the mid-ninth century and that divisions between Norwegians and Danes continued into the 10th century. Colmán Etchingham is the most recent proponent of this view.³⁷ On the other hand, David Dumville and the present author have argued that the Irish terms for viking groups (which literally translate as 'fair foreigners' and 'dark foreigners') have been misinterpreted as meaning 'Norwegians' and 'Danes' and that the colour terms reflect more local political concerns.³⁸ The issue of how migration took place is pertinent for evaluating group identities among vikings outside Scandinavia.

Geographical factors (e.g. sea routes and distance) naturally have a strong influence on population movement. Geographical determinism has had a significant place in evaluating Viking Age population movements. Political and economic factors nevertheless play a part as migrants seek to maximise their opportunities abroad. Viking elites and their retinues showed a high level of mobility. A 'big (*micel*) army' referred to in the 'Anglo-Saxon Chronicle' travelled between different kingdoms of England and the Continent from the mid-860s. This was a composite force of leaders and their men drawn from different spheres. Throughout the history of this army, forces coalesced and divided, with contingents settling at different locations.³⁹ A comparative tendency for different war-bands to

join forces when advantageous, or to divide, has been observed in ninth-century Francia.⁴⁰ These patterns of activity may challenge the notion that viking groups were mono-ethnic (i.e. always composed of individuals from one Scandinavian country).

Migration naturally proceeds along routes or networks of communication. Stepped migration (that is a sequence of population movements) often results and this phenomenon is observable in the Viking Age. Scandinavians who had settled in Gaelic-speaking areas and their descendants participated in the colonisation of Iceland, the Faeroes, parts of Normandy and north-west England. This brought people of Gaelic heritage into the viking diaspora. Viking settlements soon developed a cosmopolitan character as other peoples entered the viking migration network: for example, Frankish moneyers at York, Anglo-Saxon merchants in Dublin, and the possible presence of Saami and Slavs in Iceland.⁴¹ This represents a range of non-Scandinavian migrants, ranging from slaves (a significant component in early medieval society) to entrepreneurs.

The trading networks of the Viking Age brought peoples from different parts of Scandinavia into increasing contact. Vikings from Denmark have been identified among the Rus (who are generally identified as being of Swedish origin).⁴² Meanwhile the development of a 'Pomeranian School of Scandinavian-Insular Art' at Wolin may point to a fusion of Scandinavian influences.⁴³ It is striking that many viking settlers did not just travel from A to B. Stepped population movements, periodic migration, and migratory counter-flows are all widely observed features of historic migration. These factors (although bland titles for an exciting range of lived experiences) muddy the waters if we seek to assign particular areas of viking activity to one national group.

Distinct aspects of homeland identity did nevertheless travel with Scandinavian emigrants. This may be observed in the distribution of particular burial practices. The generally eastern distribution of chamber graves within the Viking World and the western distribution of ship burials may be indicative.⁴⁴ An intriguing example of ritual transfer is the burial of miniature clay animal paws with cremation vessels. The distinctive practice was used in Åland and is found in a cluster of graves along the Volga and Kljaz'ma Rivers in Russia.⁴⁵ This provides evidence of an emigrant group continuing the practices of their home community. It may shed light on the significance of social capital – bonds of kinship, friendship and shared community origin – within a migration network.

Due to the resources needed for long-distance travel, elites from Scandinavia probably initiated the first wave of viking activity. Comparative studies highlight the role of pioneers as recruiters to a new area, drawing on their social networks from home.⁴⁶ The character of early viking migration could therefore be akin to family businesses rather than state led enterprises. This would lead to multiple small scale linkages between places of origin and migratory destinations, rather than large scale unidirectional flows. If we consider a modern example from southern Morocco, separate lineages and communities tend to opt for different migratory destinations, for example France, the Netherlands, Spain or Italy.⁴⁷ Migratory networks can often be exclusive and competitive. There is more scope to explore this dimension of Viking Age population movement. Comparative analysis might explain why vikings acted in hostility as much as in allegiance with each other in ninth-century Ireland or Francia (other than attributing these antagonisms to national rivalries between 'Danes', 'Norwegians' or 'Swedes').

In the early 20th century, areas of viking immigration were sometimes perceived in the manner of national colonies (perhaps influenced by 19th-century imperialism). The idea that Norwegians dominated the North Atlantic, that Swedes colonised Russia, and Danes settled in England and the Continent, makes geographical sense when looking at a modern map. Nevertheless it is questionable whether national identities were strongly

adhered to by early viking migrants. Furthermore, population movements were probably less orderly than the paradigm suggests, allowing many exceptions to the generalised picture. Nevertheless it is interesting to note that retrospective attempts were made to identify the national origin of viking settlers as medieval state formation developed. For example, conflicting myths of Danish or Norwegian ancestry exist for the royal dynasty of Dublin and the ducal line of Normandy in texts which date from the 11th to the 13th centuries. Such ambiguities indicate that Scandinavian ancestry was seen in a positive light but that its precise historical nature was not always self evident. A diasporic identity may have functioned to facilitate contacts to other areas of Scandinavian cultural heritage. It conferred membership of a network of external links which could be politically and economically important.

Hybrid Identities

It is evident that vikings retained elements of their Scandinavian identity to define themselves in a new environment. But what of their children and grandchildren born into that environment? The appearance of groups called *Gall-góidil* ('Foreigner-Gaels') in Ireland in the mid-ninth century suggests that immigrant groups might quickly assimilate elements of their host culture and develop new hybrid identities.⁴⁸ Trading communities were also open to cultural influences from a wide range of trading partners, resulting in an eclectic cultural mix. These polyethnic affinities could enable viking communities to bridge the divide between their host societies and external networks. This was necessary for their long term success, particularly as cross-cultural trade was an essential part of viking activity. Host societies participated in the formation of new identities as individuals joined vikings in military or economic ventures or through intermarriage or enslavement. Examples include a Frankish monk who in 868 had renounced Christ and joined vikings; marriages within Gaelic society, and elite emulation which may have contributed to a Scandinavianised regional identity in Northumbria.⁴⁹

The character of new hybrid identities varied from place to place. Among the vikings of Russia and Ukraine distinct societies emerged blending Slavic elements with cultures from around the Baltic and further influenced by links to Turkic and Byzantine trading partners. This ethnic mosaic is witnessed in personal names, material culture and burial practices.⁵⁰ The hybridisation of culture is marked in the late 10th century. The viking leader of Novgorod, Svjatoslav (r. 964–71), sported a Slavic name and lived the lifestyle of a Eurasian steppe chieftain.⁵¹ Byzantine influence in this period is witnessed by conversions to Eastern Orthodox Christianity and a male dress-style of short coats with bronze buttons originating from the Byzantine *skaramangion*.⁵²

In Normandy, assimilation to Frankish culture was rapid. Scandinavian place-names are clustered around Rouen, Cherbourg and Bayeux, but Old Scandinavian had little influence on the language of the region. The archaeological evidence for a Scandinavian presence is also meagre. This is despite the apparent grant of land to a viking chieftain Rollo (Hrólfir) who settled with his followers and whose descendants ruled successfully as dukes of Normandy.⁵³ In Dublin, the mix of Gaelic and Scandinavian culture is witnessed in the 10th century in personal names and literature, conversion to Christianity (including the adoption of cults of Gaelic saints) and the adoption of Irish style dress ornaments which was linked with a distinctive Irish Sea metalworking tradition of brooches, buckles, strap-ends and ringed pins.⁵⁴

As a result of processes of assimilation, it can be argued that by 1000 a host of regional 'viking' cultures had developed. For example, vikings from Russia would live and dress

quite differently from vikings in Ireland or Normandy. To call all these groups 'Scandinavian' seems rather misleading. As a result of intermarriage and assimilation with neighbouring peoples, vikings in different areas might be ethnically and culturally quite distinct. Nevertheless a notion of Scandinavian heritage was consciously maintained among these groups supporting ties to other viking communities. The political and economic marginalisation of this diasporic network from the late 11th century heralded the end of the Viking Age.

In some areas outside Scandinavia links to a viking identity persisted for a long time. This is best represented in the cases of Iceland and the Faeroes which strongly maintain their Scandinavian culture and identity to this day. These islands were uninhabited (with the possible exception of a few Gaelic clerics) when vikings arrived and unusually there was no need to assimilate with a host culture. Modern genetic research has suggested that there was a strong Gaelic component among the early viking settlers.⁵⁵ Nevertheless in the expression and memorialisation of Icelandic and Faeroese identities the Gaelic contribution was not regarded as highly significant. In Northern Russia, Scandinavian naming practices persisted in some communities into the 14th century.⁵⁶ In Dublin, Hiberno-Scandinavian culture continued into the 13th century and the Scandinavian ancestry of the urban elite was commemorated in modern times.⁵⁷ The Viking Age had a significant impact on a wide range of local identities in Europe.

Gender and Migration

An important research area which has recently been promoted by the 'Viking Identities Network' (<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/csua/researchprojects.aspx>) is the importance of women in expressions of cultural identity.⁵⁸ It has been assumed that women played a numerically minor part in viking migration. Nevertheless, textual and archaeological evidence indicates that they performed prominent roles. The status of Scandinavian women may have been higher in emigrant communities than they had experienced at home. The role of women in maintaining cultural practices within a domestic sphere may have been especially prized in a diaspora context.

A classic symbol of Scandinavian female identity, the paired oval or 'tortoise shell' brooches, were sometimes preserved as heirlooms in non-Scandinavian contexts and possibly venerated as emblems of 'homeland' identity. Jane Kershaw has studied female display of Scandinavian affiliation in Anglo-Scandinavian areas through their choice of dress ornaments.⁵⁹ Gender distinctions in expression of ethnic identity are widely observable in modern diaspora contexts. Might it be possible to argue that in 'viking' societies there was sometimes a greater expectation on women to maintain the dress and customs of the Scandinavian homeland? If women were expected to act as guardians of domestic identity in certain circumstances; gender stereotypes may have led men to display a more hybrid identity in certain situations as their assigned economic and political roles positioned them as mediators with the outside world. Ethnic display is situational. It can be used to demonstrate economic or political roles or perpetuate gender stereotypes on different occasions. How people demonstrated their identity in the Viking Age may communicate messages about how they saw their own role in society.

The 'Viking Age'?

Recent works by Frederik Svanberg and Richard Hodges have questioned the validity of the Viking Age as a concept. First, Svanberg has critiqued the notion of a common viking culture.⁶⁰ However, as Neil Price has pointed out, while Scandinavian society

exhibited much local variation, there was a common language (Old Scandinavian) accompanied by common cultural traits and practices.⁶¹ ‘Viking’ therefore remains useful as an umbrella term. Nevertheless, Svanberg’s analysis is valuable in showing that the range and diversity of plural viking cultures is sometimes downplayed in the historiography of the Viking Age.

From a different perspective, Richard Hodges has asserted that the significance of vikings as agents of change in European history has been exaggerated. He has regarded the viking diaspora as symptomatic of broader economic trends. There is clearly some mileage in this. All history is an interconnected web of causality and historians often focus on political symptoms (events) rather than underlying (*longue durée*) conditions. However, Hodges’s argument that the intensification of viking raids in the 840s was the consequence of contraction in the Carolingian economy is not wholly convincing.⁶² There were other factors involved. Viking ventures seem to have increased as successes encouraged greater numbers from Scandinavia to raise the resources to go overseas, as economies of scale and established networks came into play and as intelligence about target areas increased. The substantial rise in viking activity in Ireland recorded already in the 820s and 830s does not, for example, fit with Hodges’s thesis.

It is undoubtedly the case that contemporaries would not have identified themselves as living in a Viking Age. Most would not have regarded vikings as a crucial factor in their lives. Nevertheless, such critiques can be applied to most labels applied to historic and prehistoric eras. It does not follow that all such labels should be rejected. The so-called ‘Viking Age’ witnessed a significant Scandinavian diaspora which led to cultural, economic and political change in different parts of Europe. For this reason above all the Viking Age remains a valid concept. Recent critiques are, however, important in facilitating a more nuanced understanding of events.

Conclusion

Interpretations of the Viking Age through a nationalist framework have had a dominant place in historiography. Nevertheless it can be argued that the ethnic and cultural make up of the vikings was multi-faceted and multi-layered. The success of vikings as a phenomenon was linked to their ability to adapt and change according to local circumstances. At the same time they maintained a trans-national network through claims to common Scandinavian ancestry (this was reflected in consciously maintained cultural traits and origin legends). In recent years, scholars have increasingly questioned received notions of national and ethnic identity in the Viking Age. This opens up new approaches to exploring this important era in European history.

Short Biography

Clare Downham is a lecturer in the Institute of Irish Studies at the University of Liverpool. She holds an M.A. in Mediaeval History from the University of St Andrews and an M.Phil and Ph.D. in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic from the University of Cambridge. Clare has published over 25 articles focused on the Viking Age in Britain and Ireland. A book based on her doctoral thesis *Viking Kings of Britain and Ireland: The Dynasty of Ívarr to A.D. 1014* was published by Dunedin Academic Press in 2007 (a slightly revised edition came out in 2009). Clare Downham is currently the Principal Investigator of a 2-year Arts and Humanities Research Council project exploring the works of the 12th century hagiographer Jocelin of Furness (working with Fiona Edmonds of the University

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Notes

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