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Decolonising the Viking story in the North Atlantic

Abstract

This paper juxtaposes the ways in which literary, historical, and archaeological narratives of the Viking Age have been instrumentalised for political purposes in the high medieval and modern periods. Written at a time of increased political tension in Iceland, *Orkneyinga saga* arguably sought to legitimise Norwegian territorial claims over parts of the North Atlantic with its narrative of the earlier settlement era. This theme is traced forward from the 13th century to the nationalist and later neo-imperialist stance of 19th and early 20th century Norwegian attitudes to the Viking Age. Scandinavian and British scholarship of the culture-historical era produced a colonial and racial paradigm for the Viking expansion which was dominant for most of the 20th century, but now requires deconstruction and revision. New insights from recent scientific and humanistic research have helped to break down the dominance of culture-history and a reinvigorated subject has emerged.

Introduction

Historians and archaeologists (myself included) are usually principally preoccupied with the search for new information. The pursuit of new archaeological evidence or (more rarely) new documentary information provides the most powerful motivation to ongoing inquiry. Equally important however, if not more so, is the continued forensic re-examination and re-evaluation of evidence which has existed for much longer as part of the research environment. One danger of concentrating largely on the production of new knowledge is the relative neglect of older and perhaps more familiar sources, which deserve at least as much critical attention as do newer finds. Judith Jesch's exposition of the gestation of *Orkneyinga saga* (Jesch, this volume) exemplifies the need to drill down into well-known and perhaps well-loved sources to provide often revelatory critical insights into their original meaning and purpose. Wider than this, the influence of previous academic scholarship also needs to be critiqued, as many of the outlooks and ideologies of the past have left us with a distorted legacy of vision and interpretation around our small but important stock of evidential material for the Viking Age.

As Jesch outlines, the works which came together as *Orkneyinga saga*, consisting of a literary history and genealogy of the earls of Orkney, were composed in Iceland in the early 13th century. This was a dynamic period in Icelandic politics and society, with divisions strengthening between those who favoured greater royal connections with Norway and those who sought to preserve the independent Icelandic commonwealth of the Alþingi. Complex and violent factional struggles took place between competing interests, in both Iceland and Norway. Feuds, class warfare and other sources of civil strife became mixed up with this national question. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the later life story of Snorri Sturluson, now Iceland's most revered medieval literary figure, but in his own lifetime a controversial and divisive political actor. Snorri was generally associated with the Norwegian royal cause, despite meeting his end brutally at the hands of assassins claiming to be agents of the Norwegian king. Two decades after Snorri's death, in 1262, the Alþingi ratified the union with Norway. The settlers in Greenland had voted a year earlier in 1261 to accept Norwegian sovereignty, complementing their longstanding religious attachment to the Nidaros archdiocese. With the Faroe Islands having officially joined Norway in the early 11th century, together with the Earldom of Orkney, and the kingdom of the Suðreyjar on Scotland's west coast including the Isle of Man, Norway's empire in the North Atlantic was complete.

The later (mis)use of Snorri's masterwork *Heimskringla* to promote Norwegian nationalist aspirations in the era of top hats and crinolines (see below) is an example of «presentism» whereby the legacy of the past is put to work for the political purposes of the present, without enough due consideration of its historical context or legitimacy. Arguably the wider canon of medieval Icelandic sagas and poetry embodies a presentist sensibility in their widespread use of narratives from the preceding Viking Age to bolster, embellish and add colour to the worldview which their authors sought to promulgate in the context of their own times. Falling somewhere between giving a wholly true historical picture, and a manufactured literary fantasy, Icelandic writing in its medieval golden age drew heavily upon oral tradition, much of which had its roots in the real events and personalities of three to four centuries earlier. However, the stories of those events and personalities were selectively preserved and artfully retold so as to be only a relatively distant echo of who and what happened for real in the Viking Age. In writing the sagas, legacy, history and reputation were put to work: to enhance the standing of those who dominated society in the 12th and 13th centuries, and to give credence to the current political issues of the day. One such was the question, and later the reality, of Icelandic union with Norway. From this stable of wonderful but pragmatic creativity emerged the *Orkneyinga saga*, a colourful but partial account of the history of the Earldom of Orkney (for a widely-available English translation see Pálsson and Edwards 1978, although scholars tend to prefer A.B. Taylor's 1938 version).

***Orkneyinga saga* as a colonial narrative**

Jesch outlines the story of the Orkney earldom's origins as presented in *Orkneyinga saga*. After a mythical and apocryphal origin-story of Norway itself in chapters 1–3, some known historical personages emerge into the text. King Haraldr Hárfagri (Finehair) became annoyed with the activities of «Vikings» in the Northern Isles «whose plunderings he could no longer tolerate» (chapter 4). Harald sailed west one summer conquering Shetland,

Orkney and the Hebrides, before venturing south to the Isle of Man, which sits at the centre of the Irish Sea, leaving it in ruins. On his way back to Norway he granted Orkney and Shetland to his henchman the Earl Rognvald of Møre, who had lost his son in one of the battles during the expedition. Rognvald however did not wish to rule his new possession personally, and passed it to his brother Sigurd, who became the first earl. No date is given for these events, and Haraldr was reputed to have been a long-lived king (probably dying in 932 or 933) but scholarly consensus has them happening in the 870s, around the time of the initial settlement of Iceland. This conjunction of events appears to owe something to the close relationship between the saga's narrative and its composition in Iceland. Thereafter *Orkneyinga saga* describes the exploits and death of Sigurd (I) of blood-poisoning after being struck by a tooth in the dead head of Maelbrigte, a Scottish ruler whom he had defeated and beheaded. Sigurd, the saga says, was buried on the banks of the River Oykel in Scotland, which flows from the wilderness of the northern Highlands towards the Moray Firth, and Sigurd's stronghold was built in the «south of Moray». At this time therefore, the earl was apparently not resident in Orkney itself, although the saga tells us that Sigurd's nephew and successor Hallad was briefly resident on the Orkney Mainland before Viking attacks and unhappy locals drove him back to Norway where he accepted a humbler status as a common landholder, something which it says «made him a laughing-stock». A theme throughout the early chapters is the testy relations between the Norse earls and the local farming inhabitants of Orkney, who are not explicitly characterised as Scandinavian incomers.

The early chapters of *Orkneyinga saga* say remarkably little about Orkney itself, the richness of the islands' geography and place-names characteristic of its later coverage only starts to assume prominence at the fourth or fifth generation of earls. Its account of Torf-Einarr begins to show some appreciation of the landscape. He was a famous earl who the saga says lived for a long time and died peacefully in his bed; his son Thorfinn (Þorfinnr *hausakljúfr* «Skull-splitter») took charge, also died peacefully, and was the saga tells us buried in a huge mound at Hoxa on South Ronaldsay. The alleged burial site, referred to by Jesch (this volume) is substantially the remains of an Iron Age broch, pre-dating the Viking Age, although a secondary use for burial cannot be entirely ruled out as it has not been subject to excavation other than a very poor effort in the mid-19th century. It is nonetheless a very prominent site. It appears the saga writer knew of a huge mound and conflated it with the funerary monument of this famous and powerful earl, but as yet the connection between the saga and historical events is still tenuous. The shape and clarity of a convincingly first-hand history only becomes more apparent with the reigns of earls Sigurd II, who died at the Battle of Clontarf in Ireland in 1014, and Thorfinn II (the «Great») who succeeded him, and built the first cathedral of the earldom at Birsay. Thereafter the saga becomes a less fantastical and more prosaic account of the various earls and their kin, their disputes, killings, alliances and adventures, much of which projects a ring of historical authenticity.

It is arguable therefore that *Orkneyinga saga* starts to echo the true tenor of Orcadian politics from around 1000, but prior to this it has more the character of an origin-myth story. Why would this be important in the context of early 13th century Iceland, where it was written and composed? The early chapters are clear in apportioning the credit for the creation of the earldom to the king of Norway who was seen as the most influential in the Icelanders' own origin story. Haraldr Hárfagri was then, and remains, an enduring symbol of Norwegian unity and expansionary prowess. Details of his life have had to be assembled from later

sources and its historicity is still a point of academic contention (Jakobsson 2016), but his status as progenitor of all subsequent dynastic claims is clear. In figuring so prominently in the saga, Haraldr's legendary reputation as a unifier provided a prop to those Icelanders seeking to uphold Norway's claims to rule the North Atlantic territories including Iceland. He may never have accomplished the near-impossible feats attributed to him by the saga, including conquering the north and west of Scotland and the Isle of Man in one summer expedition. Nevertheless, the geopolitical circumstances of the early 13th century were very different to those of the 9th or 10th centuries. Norway's direct cultural influence over the North Atlantic had actually increased after c.1000, with the rise of the stockfish trade. *Orkneyinga saga* provided retrospective legitimisation to the supporters of Norwegian overseas ambitions of the high middle ages, especially those seen from the perspective of Iceland, whilst also being a wonderful epic story.

Norwegian nationalism, Viking Archaeology, and the rise of Culture History

As seen above, with the voluntary absorption of Iceland and Greenland in 1261–1262, the full extent of Norway's North Atlantic imperium was achieved, but it turned out to be extremely short-lived. The Suðreyjar were wrested from Norway at the Battle of Largs in 1263 and ceded to Scotland by the Treaty of Perth in 1266, which also recognised the separation of Caithness from the Earldom of Orkney. The plague-ridden decades of the mid-14th century hit Norway and its North Atlantic possessions very hard, and the vicissitudes of intra-Scandinavian politics led to Norway with its overseas territories entering a union with Denmark in 1380, followed by the tripartite Kalmar Union with Sweden in 1397. The islands of Orkney and Shetland remained officially under Denmark-Norway, but as early as 1232 had come under the local influence of the Mormaer of Angus in north-eastern Scotland (Crawford 2013). With Scandinavian authority diminishing, and Scottish influence increasing, the Northern Isles were impignorated (pawned) by the Danish to the Scottish crowns as part of a Royal marriage dowry in 1468–1472, a pledge which has never been redeemed.

From the later 14th century, Norway was a vassal of Denmark. Most cultural and legislative activity took place in Copenhagen and intellectual enquiry in Norway had no home except for the Lutheran church. Increased prosperity based on Norway's vast natural resources of fish, timber and iron in the 18th century led to demands for greater self-sufficiency. Public institutions were needed, and a university was founded in Christiania (Oslo) in 1811. The restoration of full independence was however frustrated by the treaty signed at Kiel in 1814 by the victorious powers in the Napoleonic Wars, led by Britain, which transferred titular sovereignty over Norway from Denmark to Sweden, which unlike Denmark had backed the winners in the wars. A brief armed attempt to resist the decision was humiliatingly put down by Swedish troops. However, under the treaty Norway's former territories of Greenland, Iceland and the Faroe Islands did not follow their original colonial master into its new status as subject to the Swedish realm but remained under the Danish crown, as Greenland and the Faroes (autonomously) still do.

Despite the establishment in 1814 of a national constitution and parliament, Norwegian society, especially among the educated classes, was increasingly dissatisfied with their country's adjunct status to Sweden throughout the rest of the 19th century. The rising tide of 19th and early 20th century Norwegian nationalism coincided with an upsurge in public fas-

ination with the Viking Age. As referred to above, Snorri's *Heimskringla* and other Old Icelandic literature gave a sense of past national greatness which could hopefully soon be recaptured. These were given greater emphasis by developments in contemporary literature and culture in Scandinavia and elsewhere.

Our modern concept of the Viking Age as heroic and adventurous is largely a Victorian invention (Fell 1987; Wawn 2000). In Britain, the «Danes» as they were usually referred to, had been a known feature of antiquarian interest (Graham-Campbell 2004). However the word «Viking» was little known or used in English until the early 19th century (Wawn 2000:3). Printed editions of Old Icelandic literature and poetry had begun to circulate in antiquarian circles in Scandinavia and Britain in the 18th century. During the 19th century, the Old Norse World was widely popularised and became an adjunct to the imperial mindset. The Scottish cultural titan Sir Walter Scott was an early adopter. The clean, icy beauty of the far North offered a beguiling contrast to the smoky and squalid cities of the industrial revolution, and the Vikings symbolised drama and warlike prowess, and (for some of their admirers) Whiteness and Nordic superiority. Sagas and other heroic Norse literature were printed in beautiful volumes, some by the polymath aesthete William Morris who first visited Iceland in 1871. *Orkneyinga saga* was first published in English in 1873 (Goudie et al. 1873). In addition to translations from Old Icelandic, semi-fictionalised literature on the Vikings' exploits abounded. Their daring voyages across the North Atlantic towards Greenland and Vinland attracted widespread fascination, at a time of European and American colonial expansion, exploitation and violence against indigenous peoples across the world. The glacial grandeur of the Norwegian fjords, and the wild volcanic Icelandic landscape, provided an intense cultural and artistic appeal. This was influential among the pre-Raphaelites, and stimulated writing and illustration by scholars such as W.G. Collingwood (Griffiths and Harding 2014:9–13). Sea travel to the northern lands became fashionable for a wealthy minority, offering encounters with the land of the sagas and, for Americans in particular, the chance to explore the origins of the Vinland discovery (Lethbridge 2020). Group tourism replaced individual exploration as passenger steamship companies increasingly offered cruises with day-trips on land to significant places such as Þingvellir.

In Norway, the discovery and excavation of the Tune ship in 1867 and the Gokstad ship burial in 1880 brought the Viking Age into yet greater focus as an object of nationalist sentiment. After five centuries of secondary status in relation to its neighbours, a strong and adventurous national sensibility was in the process of redefining itself. This growing sense of patriotic prowess was celebrated with the daring voyage of Gokstad's full-sized replica *Viking* from Bergen to Chicago in 1893, where it was exhibited at the World Columbian Exposition, making a clear point about the primacy of the Norse voyages to North America at an event dedicated to celebrating the claim of Christopher Columbus to have «discovered» the continent. *Viking* then sailed down the Mississippi to New Orleans and back to Chicago where it remains to this day. The following decade saw an even greater admixture of nationalism and Vikings in Norway. The lavishly-decorated Oseberg ship burial was excavated and publicised in 1903–1904. At that time the nation's desire for self-determination appeared to be heading towards confrontation with Sweden as had happened in 1814. Norway armed itself with militias, and four British-built pre-Dreadnought warships (one of which was named *Harald Haarfagre*) were mobilised in anticipation of a Swedish attack. In the event Sweden opted not to force the issue into conflict. Following a plebiscite which was

near-universally in favour of the break-up, the Storting proclaimed Norway's full independence in August 1905 (Thorkildsen 2014:272). Ditching Oscar II of Sweden, it took the Danish Prince Carl as the new King Haakon VII, his regnal name deliberately chosen to create a sense of continuity from Norway's medieval monarchy.

The Director of the Oseberg excavations, the expatriate Swede Gabriel Gustafson, certainly felt the heat of nationalist sentiment, complaining that he felt ostracised by his colleagues in Christiania (Welinder 1998:18–23). But Norway was not the only country experiencing a fascination with Vikings in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Hjalmar Stolpe's excavations at Birka, Sweden, took place between 1871 and 1895, and investigations began at Hedeby in 1900. Sophus Müller popularised a nationalist perspective on Denmark's ancient past (Müller 1897). Studies of the Vikings' overseas settlements were, by the later 19th century, already well provided for with a robust and widely-respected methodology. This had largely begun with the visit to Britain and Ireland in 1847 of the Danish museum curator and archaeologist Jens J. A. Worsaae. On this trip Worsaae examined finds from large pagan cemeteries unearthed by railway works in the west of Dublin, many of which had been collected by the surgeon William Wilde, father of Oscar. The material was found to have a great deal in common with Viking-Age burial assemblages in the Danish National Museum in Copenhagen. Worsaae published his findings (Worsaae 1852) and they became influential. Before absolute dating techniques, archaeologists and curators relied on increasingly complex, cross-referenced typologies, based on detailed knowledge of museum collections, for determining chronology and cultural progression. Scandinavian museums were seen as holding the original material culture of the Nordic race, to which any diasporic finds, such as those in Ireland, should primarily be referenced. This style of national-ethnocentric analysis of (then mainly burial-sourced) antiquities in museum collections was confirmed and made monumental in Norway by the works of Oluf Rygh (*Norske Oldsager*, 1885) and later Jan Petersen (*De Norske Vikingsverd*, published in 1919). The study of Vikings was not limited to museum collections. A contemporary of Rygh, the philologist Sophus Bugge, was instrumental in bringing the canon of saga literature to academic attention and thence to a wider audience. His son Alexander Bugge became a historian and won an essay prize in 1903 on the unusually enlightened topic (for the time) of «How or to which extent have the Norse, and particularly the Norwegians' culture, way of living and society been influenced from the Western Countries [i.e. the British Isles]». During his work on this he learned the Irish language and did extensive studies of archives in Dublin and London.

Assisting Gustafson with the Oseberg excavation was Haakon Shetelig, a younger and romantically nationalist-inclined Norwegian archaeologist. Shetelig became Curator at Bergen Museum in 1914. Five years later, the *Vitenskabelige Foskningsfond av 1919* was created by the Storting. Shetelig wanted to establish a proper archaeological study of the overseas exploits of the Norwegian Vikings, and the 1919 fund offered a means of resourcing it. He founded the research and cataloguing project which led to the *Viking Antiquities in Great Britain and Ireland* volumes, a monumental study which remains influential to this day (despite its title it carried some coverage of continental Europe). In the mid-1920s Shetelig, together with colleagues Jan Petersen, Sigurd Grieg, Johannes Bøe and Anathon Bjørn, undertook summer study trips to their respective research areas (Grieg to Scotland, Bøe to Ireland, Bjørn and Shetelig to England, with later shorter trips to the continent) for studies of Viking artefacts in museum collections, in which they were assisted by leading

curators. Their methodology was directly taken from the tradition established by Worsaae, seeking to classify the objects found in British and Irish museums in relation to Scandinavian collections, notably those in Bergen and Oslo. In 1933, seven years before the project reached final publication (in English), Shetelig published an overview and justification for his research written in Norwegian in which he characterised the Viking invasions as the last of the great waves of folk-migration after the Roman period (Shetelig 1933:7). He was evidently something of an Anglophile and is credited with establishing the now-commonplace notion that the Viking Age began with the seaborne attack on the monastery of Lindisfarne in Northumbria in AD 793. In the preamble to *Viking Antiquities* (Shetelig 1940:11) he wrote that the Viking attacks had «unleashed a new-awakened energy in the North», adding that «Scotland was as yet an entirely barbarous country», that Ireland lacked the ability to put up concerted resistance to the invaders, but that (perhaps tellingly) «In England, the social conditions were *of course* far more consolidated than in Scotland or Ireland» (my italics).

In the first half of the 20th century «Culture History» was on the rise everywhere. All over Europe, including in Britain and France, archaeologists sought to equate ancient sites and finds with national origins, and where some of these traits these had made their way across border and overseas, migrations and conquests were deduced from them (Trigger 2007:217). The spread of advanced ideas and technology was then seen primarily in racial terms, where stronger and more vigorous ethnic groups overcame the less advanced, the weaker and the unenlightened. Warfare was seen as an enabling mechanism for progress. Most infamously, in Imperial Germany, the influential scholar Gustaf Kossinna was studying the prehistory of the «Teutonic Race». Kossinna promulgated theories that by prehistoric precedence the Germanic or Aryan peoples possessed the ancestral rights to the territory not just of contemporary Germany, but of much wider areas to the east and south. Kossinna is now seen as academically notorious and his theories scandalous; he died in 1931 but his ideas were adopted by the Nazis and imposed into the school curriculum.

Hitler's rise to power set Germany on a fateful course of extreme ideological aberrance. However before the Second World War, national pride even in the democratic western European countries was equated with racial superiority, dominance over other peoples, and the possession of external territory. The colonial mindset owed much to the aggrandising ideologies of the major imperial powers, but even Sweden and Denmark had participated in the West African slave trade and possessed some Caribbean island colonies. After 1905, newly-independent Norway had no colonial possessions, was relatively poor, and as a neutral country wielded little influence in international affairs. In the 1920s and 30s Norway engaged in its own search to restore its past territorial greatness. The heroic explorations of Nansen and Amundsen had emphasised national prowess, and after continued expeditions Norway claimed lands in the polar regions including Svalbard and Jan Mayen island in the Arctic, and Bouvet and Peter I islands together with a slice of the Antarctic continent known as Queen Maud Land. Norway's quest to regain its long-lost status included an attempt at illegal territorial annexation. In 1931 a small group of adventurers led by the trader Hallvard Devold raised the Norwegian flag and announced the occupation of a stretch of uninhabited hunting territory on the east coast of (Danish-owned) Greenland which they dubbed 'Erik the Red's Land'. Following Devold's landing, the Norwegian Government issued a proclamation of intent to reclaim a large section of Greenland. This was pressed by the Farmers'

Party (*Bondepartiet*) which led the cabinet, within which Vidkun Quisling was a leading minister. Denmark contested Norway's claim at the Permanent Court of International Justice in The Hague (known as the «Eastern Greenland Case»). In April 1933, the court ruled in favour of Denmark and Norway withdrew. The campaign to repossess Greenland had owed much to the backing of archaeological scholars. In 1926 the leading Oslo archaeologist Anton W. Brøgger (who at that time was busy organising the building of the new Viking ship museum on Bygdøy to house the Tune, Gokstad and Oseberg finds) undertook the chairmanship of the *Oslo* (later *Norges*) *Grønlandsforening*, a society dedicated to pressing Norway's case for ownership of Greenland (Keller 1991; Scott 1996). Brøgger was a man of his time. He had been politically-active and although a nationalist was not a Nazi-sympathiser; he later fell foul of the wartime regime, was arrested and held in a concentration camp.

The first five volumes of *Viking Antiquities in Britain and Ireland* were published in 1940, the year that Norway fell under German occupation (Volume 6 was published in 1954, shortly before Shetelig died). During the occupation, especially from 1942 to 1945 under the puppet government led by Quisling, who was by then head of a fascist political formation known as National Assembly (*Nasjonal Samling*), popular and propagandist perceptions of Vikings took on their darkest tone. An SS panzer-division was given the name «Viking» and a number of Scandinavian men joined it to fight against the Soviet Union on Germany's eastern front. Viking imagery appeared on pro-Nazi and anti-Bolshevist recruitment posters. The Viking-Age Royal burial site at Borre in Vestfold was used as a backdrop to Nasjonal Samling's political rallies, and traces of the concrete foundations of 1940s viewing stands around marching and speaking arenas are still to be seen in the grassed surfaces near the grave mounds. The Greenland grievance was revived by Quisling, hoping for German help to retake the territory, but this was thwarted by the war in the North Atlantic. A plan to take the Oseberg ship to Berlin to be displayed as an example of «Aryan» culture was narrowly but thankfully avoided, as it probably would not have survived the journey or the allied air raids which were increasingly flattening the Nazi capital.

Vikings were used during the Second World War conversely as symbols of Nazi ideology and of resistant nationalism within occupied Scandinavia. The huge ceremonial 10th century burial complex at Jelling, Jutland, an important object of Danish national sentiment, was extensively excavated at this time (Dyggve 1948). Archaeologists were mostly opposed to the German occupation and several were arrested. The privations of hunger, fear of an authoritarian state, and loss of liberty, were vividly described to the present author, then a young visiting student, by Charlotte Blindheim whom I met at Universitets Oldsaksamlingen in 1989. Blindheim, the doyenne of Norwegian Viking studies at that time, had been a junior archaeologist during the war;¹ she became influential in post-war academic circles and excavated at Kaupang, Vestfold. A member of the Viking Congress series of conferences, she was adamantly opposed to the admission of German delegates. Ironically, the attitudes towards their own past of people who had gone through the uniquely terrible experience of wartime occupation may have served to strengthen a sense of injured national pride with an acute but normative awareness of «national character» and of intercultural differences, thus contributing to the dominance of culture-historical leanings of academia in the post-war period.

These attitudes found a ready partner-audience among contemporary British scholarship. Similar outlooks of national pride, mixed with recent wartime adversity and a general sense of loss, pertained in the twilight of Britain's colonial era. Many British people took pride in having «won» the war, or at least in having avoided invasion. But the party was over for the Empire. As Britain's colonies attained independence in the 1950s and 60s, a widespread sense of diminished world power took hold, and the lustre of victory in 1945 gave way to pessimism about the country's future prospects, despite great improvements in health, housing and education. The imperial mindset was still very strong, and many people wanted to believe in a more heroic past. The home audience was entertained by documentaries and fiction about the early historic era. Early BBC television broadcasts contributed short films and dramas. The spectacular finds from the 7th century Anglo-Saxon ship burial at Sutton Hoo, little-known when excavated just before the war, reached national prominence. The Anglo-Saxon response to Viking attacks was credited with having brought about English statehood under Alfred the Great and his successors. Sagas and medieval literature became widely-read in translations published in paperback, and fictionalised epics based upon them were brought to a young popular audience by authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien and Henry Treece.

Iceland became fully independent of Denmark in 1944; the Faroe Islands voted for independence in 1946, but the result was not accepted by Denmark, however Home Rule was implemented in 1948. Iceland and the Faroe Islands were enthusiastic participants in the «Viking Congress» from its beginning in 1950. A glance through the early proceedings volumes of the Congress reveals the grip which Culture History and nationalism had over the mindsets of the participants. At the inaugural congress, in Lerwick, Shetland, A.W. Brøgger was unable to attend due to illness (he died a year later) but contributed a commentary for the opening of the proceedings, referring to Norwegian Vikings who settled overseas:

Some of the emigrants of olden times actually did make their homes in southern lands, some became freeholders both in England and France. In these cases, however, they came under other forms of law in countries where they lost their racial identity and disappeared, swamped in an alien race (Brøgger in Simpson 1954:x).

The themes addressed at earlier Viking congresses at Lerwick in 1950, at Reykjavík in 1956 (Eldjárn 1958) and Tórshavn, Faroes in 1965 (Nielsen 1968) contrast vividly with the congresses which took place at those same places in 2013, 2009 and 2001 respectively. By the early 21st century, a wide range of approaches and critical insights were aired. There is much more of a «groupthink» feel to the earlier congresses, in which the role of Archaeology was primarily to confirm the authenticity of the sagas. The peoples or races predated upon by the Vikings, such as the «Celts» (usually meaning the Irish), were mostly seen as passive and inert victims. Despite historical evidence of Irish military success against the Vikings and of maritime adventurousness before the Viking Age, any notion that insular artefacts in Norway might have been brought there by the Irish themselves, rather than by the Vikings, was simply not considered. It might also be added that the early Viking congresses were extremely male-dominated and mainly by the older, pre-war generation. A handful of female scholars are visible in the group photographs, but were only occasionally named in the lists of national participants or invited to submit papers. At York in 1961, shockingly to 21st cen-

tury sensibilities, the women present were only accorded the status of «associate» members (Small 1965), but by 1965 in Tórshavn they had started to become full members, and female scholars published several distinguished papers in the proceedings.

Vikings in the North Atlantic: colonial expansion or something else?

Shetelig wrote (1933:7) that the Vikings took the Faroes in 800, whereas Orkney and Shetland had been taken earlier, and from there had begun the Viking invasions of the British Isles. His notion that Orkney and Shetland had been the first base of a Viking folk migration into Britain and Ireland has proved to be enduringly powerful. The concept of the Viking attacks as a Norwegian invasion has been, until relatively recently, unquestioned. With *Orkneyinga saga* readily to hand, most archaeologists and historians have mostly (perhaps unconsciously) tried to fit the evidence to the accepted scenario. Part of the reason for this is the warm reception which Shetelig's premise found amongst British, and specifically Orcadian scholars. The Orkney antiquary and popular writer J. Storer Clouston assisted Shetelig's colleague Sigurd Grieg on his research trip to Orkney in 1925, and was a keen proponent and excavator of Viking remains in Orkney.² Slightly later in the 20th century, the Orcadian scholar Hugh Marwick took up the invasion theory, arguing for a violent Norse arrival presaging a total replacement of the pre-Viking culture of the islands (Smith 2003).

Marwick was a highly influential figure in Orkney, he was the headmaster of the islands' most important senior school, and knew his audience well. Most Orcadians and Shetlanders were happy to accept that they were descended from the original Viking settlers, and took pride in the Scandinavian heritage of the islands. Place-names and the traditional Norn language (which developed as a dialect of Norse), were universally assumed to have arisen with this early, violent and complete ethnic displacement. The pre-Norse inhabitants of Orkney were thought to have been killed or driven out by the Vikings, and indeed their identity and culture were not well-understood. The Picts, in the 1950s and 1960s, were seen as a «problem» people (Wainwright 1955), a shadowy population of north-eastern Scotland and the Northern Isles who lived in underground dwellings, whose strange and unintelligible abstract art was found on carved stones, who spoke an unknown language, and whose ethnic origins were believed by some to be extra-European. Few if any Orcadians then felt any affinity with them. This was still a picture present in academia when I was a student in the 1980s. The debate at that time hinged upon whether the Vikings had destroyed Pictish society in a sudden rush of violence, or whether they had sought to dominate the Picts whilst tolerating some aspects of their presence (such as marrying their womenfolk), leading to their slightly more gradual disappearance. Archaeological support for these contrasting views was cited from excavations at sites such as the Udal, on North Uist in the Outer Hebrides, where evidence was apparently found of burnt pre-Viking buildings and a small Viking fort (these are hard to substantiate as the site has never been published), and at Buckquoy, Birsay, Orkney, where elements of Pictish material culture were believed to have been assimilated into Norse phases of occupation of the settlement, marked by a change from a rounded towards a rectilinear building style (Ritchie 1977). Recent re-dating and analysis of building types has led to a reappraisal of Buckquoy. Its later rectilinear-style settlement phases have been re-dated and are now accepted, including by its original exca-

vator Anna Ritchie, as being pre-Viking. Elsewhere in the Northern Isles, evidence for a Viking presence as early as 800 remains elusive. Some pagan graves are giving radiocarbon dates of the 9th century, but others, such as the rich boat burial from Scar, Sanday, Orkney, have given confusingly later ones. Traditional interpretations of the Orcadian Viking Age, embodying the «Big Bang» theory of a Viking folk-invasion around 800, are to be regarded with a heavy dose of scepticism (Griffiths 2023). A more incremental growth of Scandinavian influence is now becoming evident. My excavations and studies of sites and landscapes in Orkney's West Mainland (Griffiths et al. 2019) have given rise to a view that a widespread landed takeover by Scandinavians did not happen until the later 10th century, with the full picture of Norse language, toponymy and tradition not emerging until the 12th century.

Further west into the North Atlantic, long-held assumptions of national origins bequeathed to us by the Icelandic *Landnámabók* and *Íslendingabók*, together with the sagas covering Iceland, Greenland and the Faroes, have come under revisionist pressure from stable isotope and DNA studies. DNA has been sampled from (live) modern populations and more recently from (dead) Viking-age inhumations (aDNA). Genetic data sampled from modern populations, such as those published by Helgason et al. (2001), has shown an unexpectedly high incidence of DNA interpreted as characteristic of Irish or British ancestry, particularly on the female side. A paper published very recently in a highly influential archaeological journal (Plomp et al. 2023) uses a different technique on inhumed remains, geometric morphometric analysis of cranial base shape, which led its authors to state that a significant majority of Icelandic settlers in Greenland (63 %) had British or Irish ancestry. Mitochondrial aDNA sampled from 80 individual burials from Norway in 2015 (Krzwińska et al. 2015) gives further credence to the emerging view that women originating in Ireland or Britain had been instrumental in forming early settlement populations in the North Atlantic. Studies of stable isotopes from burials have also become influential. Montgomery et al. (2014) in analysing teeth taken from Viking burials at Westness, Rousay, Orkney, found that two of the male inhumations probably originated in Scandinavia, but a third, a female, most likely grew up in Ireland or Western Scotland.

As argued in the previously cited papers (Griffiths 2019, 2020) I suggested that, instead of Norwegian Vikings just coming directly to the Northern Isles as «first base» in Britain, a «southern route» was of greater significance than previously understood. Initially attracted by the opportunities offered by raiding and trading in the towns of the southern North Sea, in the Baltic, Northern France and the English Channel, the first Vikings made their journeys south. They were capable of travelling long distances and appeared in the Bay of Biscay and south-western France at a surprisingly early date. They progressed to the Irish Sea and founded Dublin. When excavating in Orkney, I found significant links with the Irish Sea region among the material culture of a 10th to 11th century longhouse settlement. I suggested that some Viking influence in Orkney had in fact come from the diaspora to the south including Ireland, picking up other influences along the way (Griffiths 2020).

The scientific studies referred to above have helped to open a new critical argument about the question of who the Vikings really were. Studies of war-bands (see Price 2020; Raffield et al. 2016) have stressed that the ideological underpinnings of Viking activity were conditioned not by nationality but by group identities, shared supranational allegiances and belief systems, and that war-bands encompassed individuals of varying ethnic origin. The main agency at play was not of biological or national predisposition but circumstance and

opportunity. Conjunctions of people and beliefs swept up in a chain of events was in itself a stimulus to new forms of society and acculturation. Scandinavian traits in burial practice and material culture were adapted to new places, but not without admixture of motives, cultural impulses and technologies. Hybrid groups emerged, such as the Gael-Gaedhil in the Irish Sea region, and inter-marriage and Christianity wove complex threads through the mix. Extending across the Viking world, aDNA studies are showing how heterogenous the Vikings actually were. The inhabitants of Norway prior to the Viking Age are now seen as less homogenous and monocultural than they once were perceived to be. Rather than just a ‘homeland’ for what went outwards, Norway and wider Scandinavia are seen in many important respects to have been receivers of external influence during the Viking Age.

We have seen how the ulterior mission of *Orkneyinga saga* was to legitimise the case for Norway’s authority over the North Atlantic by retro-fitting history to this purpose. A carefully-crafted narrative of the Viking Age was put to work in the interest of a high medieval political standpoint. In the 19th and earlier 20th centuries, another era of historical presentism occurred. Histories and legends of the Vikings provided a useful prop to national and neo-imperial ambitions to recapture past greatness and lost territory. In the early 20th century some academics got directly involved in politics, but the majority were not overtly political in the uses they made of their studies. Nevertheless, they lived in very different times to ours; colonialism and imperialism were generally strongly approved of by the European public (with a few notable exceptions) and notions of racial superiority, historical prowess and a warlike spirit were considered healthy and desirable. But now in a new century, racial stereotyping now seems a very dated and inappropriate lens through which to view the events of the Viking Age.

Many leading scholars of the 1940s–50s phase of culture history continued the monoethnic emphasis on the expansionary and colonising exploits of the Vikings, whom they saw as a male-dominated, white, warlike Scandinavian race. This was in keeping with more general attitudes towards the European past (Arwidsson 2006). Academic fashions began to change during the 1960s. Marxist, and Processual or New Archaeology made some impact on Scandinavian prehistory, but studies of the Viking Age remained largely untouched. The spread of post-processual theory from the later 1980s has had a more profound impact, including on gender, ritual, and relations with Sámi and Inuit peoples, as also has the rise of archaeological science. In more recent times studies of decolonisation in world archaeology have gained pace, and the movement is having an impact on some interpretations of the Viking Age (e.g. Svanberg 2003; Wang 2023).

The year 2023 marked forty years since I arrived at Durham University as a young fresher. I took up early medieval and Viking-age studies soon after my arrival, in history, archaeology and (to a lesser extent) in medieval languages, and my interest in Scandinavia later took me to the University of Tromsø as a visiting research student. My Viking journey has in one sense been a drawn-out realisation that the ideas and concepts which I learned about in the 1980s provide a very flawed vision of history. Yes, the excavations and research behind them were thorough, but their interpretative framework was based on an inherited understanding, taken from the high era of culture-historical scholarship, which seemed factual and uncomplicated but was actually full of biased assumptions. Many of the senior figures who participated in the Viking Congresses inhabited this academic worldview. They controlled appointments, funding, and access to primary archaeological data; some were open-minded but others did not

welcome being challenged by a career upstart. I confess it took me a long time fully to question these notions myself, and even longer to develop the purpose and confidence to critique and oppose them publicly in lectures and in print. It is pleasing to see that, as new evidence emerges, it always seems further to undermine these outmoded ways of thinking, and to add to the colour, strangeness and diversity of the Viking Age.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Judith Jesch and Ben Raffield for their comments on this paper.

Notes

- ¹ For a short biography of Blindheim, see Martens 1987.
- ² Clouston was author of, amongst other forgotten classics, *Vandrad the Viking* (London 1912).

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