



Press Release

Remaking the Vikings in our own image

Vikings have become new heroes for the modern age, says archaeologist from University of Tübingen SFB ResourceCultures

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Vikings are the new heroes of the modern age. Recent decades have seen a full-on Viking hype arise which has made the Vikings into a global brand, as research by Dr. Nina Nordström of the University of Tübingen's ResourceCultures collaborative research center shows. In place of their old image as primitive warriors, the Scandinavian seafarers now stand for courage, adventure, revolution, and strong women, Nordström says. "They are seen as people with vast potential and are identified with around the globe - not just in Europe, but also in places like Saudi Arabia, China, and Latin America. This global enthusiasm is unique - neither the Romans nor medieval knights can compare with it." Nordström is an archaeologist who has analyzed Viking themes in society and the media for three years. She collects media reports, follows the development of various fan movements, and conducts interviews with Scandinavian researchers, exhibition designers, and craftspeople.

Viking themes have long held a fascination for modern society - whether it was the excavation of the Gokstad and Oseberg ships in Norway in the early 20th century, in Hollywood movies of the 50s, or in Extreme Metal music. Yet our knowledge of them is limited. "The Vikings" as we imagine are based on Scandinavian settlers of the Early Middle Ages (800-1060 A.D.). *To go viking* was their term for war and trade journeys; the people of the north did not call themselves Vikings. Unlike their European neighbors, they did not leave written records; our knowledge of them today is primarily based on their material legacy, which reflects a high standard artistically.

The current enthusiasm for "the Vikings" fits well with a phenomenon of modernism described by the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Baumann as "retrotopia," Nordström says. It expresses how people today are less likely to aspire to utopias and visions of the future than to look back at the past. The desire to live in a better world is projected onto past ages, which experience a popular revival.

“In this thinking, the Vikings represent modern Scandinavia and vice versa. They have become an identity-giving resource in a far wider context,” according to Nordström. “They are a source of inspiration for discovery, adventure, and rebellion in an ever-more-complex world which is searching for heroes.” Returning to a real or imagined “base” of Viking culture and lifestyle has a stabilizing effect amid fears of globalization, she says. “In their search for a calming influence, people want to be a part of the ‘Scandinavian miracle’ of the ‘modern Vikings’ - they connect it with catchphrases like prosperity, lifestyle and nature.”

For instance, Vogue magazine ran a headline which said: “Beyond Paleo: Is Eating like a Viking the Next It Diet?” - showing a laden dinner table with a serving dome in the shape of a polished Viking helmet. The Vikings’ old, rough image appears to have been forgotten; today the Vikings have arrived in high society. “The retrotopia trend doesn’t go as far as wanting to return to the Viking age - not in the era of the smartphone,” Nordström says. “But - with the idea that some Viking blood in your veins must be a good thing - more and more people in the United Kingdom, for instance, are undergoing DNA tests in the hope of finding they are related to the Nordic peoples.”

Today’s “Viking” scene is varied and colorful - and consciously distances itself from undesirable (e.g. nationalist) currents in the public arena, according to the researcher. For instance, modern boat-builders are looking at recreating Viking ships as authentically as possible. Nordström asked craftsmen about the clever techniques used and the lost knowledge about Viking shipbuilding. Even today, it is extremely difficult to reproduce a Viking vessel.

More recent is the combination of Extreme Metal and ancient Nordic folk music at festivals attended by people from all around the world. The fans are on a musical quest for the supposed origin and identify with the pre-Christian Vikings who represent it, Nordström says. The three-day Midgardsblot metalfestival in the Norwegian town of Borre is held on the grounds of the Midgard historisk senter, next to the most famous Viking-era cemetery. Workshops are held on topics as diverse as political misuse of the Viking heritage, women’s equality, and Extreme Metal. Nina Nordström says festivals like this showcase the interaction between the media and the portrayal of the Vikings. For example, visitors to the festival had braids and partially shaven heads, as seen in the TV series “Vikings” - in contrast to the 19th and 20th century image of the Vikings with long hair and beards. Imaginative tattoos give the Vikings of the imagination a new - but historically undocumented - dimension.

Publications: Nordström, Nina 2016. The Immortals: Prehistoric Individuals as Ideological and Therapeutic Tools in our Time, in H. Williams and M. Giles (eds.) *Archaeologists and the Dead*, 204-232, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nordström, Nina and Staecker, Jörn 2014. Ick bin een Wikinger! Das Bild der Wikinger im Wandel, in *Museums Journal*, Wikinger – Leben und Legende, 3/2014 Juli – September.



The famous Viking ships are being recreated in Norway's oldest city, Tønsberg, where the annual Viking Festival is held.

Photo: Nina Nordström



American painter Robert Fox decorates part of the Oseberg ship replica at the Tønsberg Viking Festival.

Photo: Nina Nordström



KAMPFAR official, a Pagan and Folk metal band at the Midgardsblot Music Festival in Borre, Norway. Some of the world's biggest metal bands meet annually at the famous Viking-era burial mounds at Tønsberg.

Photo: Stig Pallesen, StiPa Photography

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