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# Tropes about Vikings and the Viking Age in State-funded Museums in Contemporary Scandinavia

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## Abstract

The popularity of the Vikings and the Viking Age in Scandinavian history cultures never seems to fade. As a projection surface for meaning-making needs in the present, the Viking Age constantly finds new ways to mirror the present, thus voicing new history-cultural trends. However, the Vikings also carry heavy history-cultural traditions that tend to lead them to being portrayed as national symbols and masculine warriors.

This paper explores the malleability of representations of the Vikings and the Viking Age by analysing tropes about them in state-funded museums in contemporary Scandinavia. This study compares three exhibitions: *Vikingr* at the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo, *The Viking World* at the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm, and *The Viking World* at the Danish National Museum in Copenhagen.

Four key tropes emerge from the analysis: 1) The multicultural world of the Vikings, reflecting modern society, particularly in Sweden and Norway; 2) The Vikings as nation-builders, a trope strongly present in the Danish exhibition; 3) The androcentric Viking as seafarer, warrior, trader, and farmer, recurrent in all exhibitions; 4) How Women also participated in social and domestic life during the Viking Age, which appears in all exhibitions but is less emphasised in Denmark. The exhibitions' tropes correspond to either a tradition or a trend, thus highlighting tensions between different dimensions in their history cultures.

**Keywords:** museum exhibitions, narratives, tropes, history cultures, Vikings, the Viking Age

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## Introduction

> Nationalism is dead or unwanted, many say. Should we then retell such a story in our time? Of course, we should! No story is more exciting than those that connect mysteries and enigmatic pasts with spectacular artefacts and raw power – past and present. An exhibition about the Viking Age contains all these ingredients, and TV series such as *Vikings* and *Game of Thrones* clearly show that such stories are by no means dead but engage and fascinate more than ever. However, as a university museum, as part of the University of Oslo, we should not tell stories like Hollywood. We will tell stories based on new approaches, new knowledge, research and real objects from bygone times (Glørstad 2019: 10).[1]

The quote above is an excerpt from the preface to a museum publication published in 2019 by the Museum of Cultural History in Norway in connection with the opening of the exhibition *Vikingr*. The preface, written by the museum's director, testifies to an awareness that few other historical periods have been as linked to nation-building and the creation of a historical identity in Norway as the Viking Age. However, the museum director believes that the mystique surrounding the Viking Age means that the Museum of Cultural History should emphasise the period, since visitors are assumed to be attracted by and want to consume narratives about it.

State-sponsored history in the national museum setting is never neutral. Museum professionals not only have to acknowledge the relevance of current scientific findings, but they also must adhere to the public's expectations, meaning that they have to balance between obeying traditions and following trends within the history-culture. This balancing act creates visible tensions between different interpretations of history in museum exhibitions.

In the era of national projects during the 1800s, the Viking Age became an essential part of the national historiography in the Scandinavian countries of Sweden, Norway and Denmark (Ellis Nilsson & Nyzell 2024: 8). The significant knowledge gaps created by the scarce sources made the period even more suitable for such history writing, as the National Romanticists were able to fill the cavities with qualities that were considered necessary in the contemporary world. In the time that has passed since then, the Vikings – as history-cultural symbols – have become so popular that they are now part of a global common historical frame of reference (Ellis Nilsson & Nyzell 2024: 7–9). Literary scholar Megan Arnott's finding that "[t]he Nordic countries have 'Vikings' as a recognizable brand that

will attract heritage tourists" means that state museums in Scandinavia, despite the period's recent connotations to nationalistic historiography, have many incitements to invest in depicting the Viking Age (Arnott 2024: 26).

In the exhibition *The Viking World* at the Danish National Museum, a national building myth, where Denmark's cradle is believed to be in the Viking Age, is reproduced when stating that Harald Bluetooth converted to Christianity after witnessing a miracle being performed. On the other hand, an exhibition at the Swedish History Museum, also called *The Viking World*, includes the theme "Boundless Encounters", which is justified by the following statement: "Much of what we now call Viking Age culture was created in the meeting between the norrænir menn (north men) as they called themselves, and other groups". Thus, the Viking age can be depicted in manners that challenge or confirm commonly held beliefs about the period. Indeed, it can reinforce or contest the Viking Age's supposed connections to national pasts.

The nationalised history of the Vikings meets a different reality in today's multicultural Scandinavian societies compared to the constitution of the national communities during the nineteenth century. How the past is made to reflect the present has changed, and the trope of the Vikings' multicultural world corresponds to a history-cultural trend that emphasises multiculturalism as a preferred foundation for society.

Though history cultures can change, this may be a slow-moving process. Nonetheless, certain events – which historian of philosophy Jörn Rüsen has called borderline events – are exceptions to the slow-moving change process within a history culture. These borderline events, such as the Holocaust, are so disruptive that they are hard to narrate in a meaningful way (Rüsen 2007: 205; Rüsen 2017: 29–30). However, as the Viking Age is not characterised as a borderline event, its values are more likely to be prone to gradual change. Although traditions within a history culture – dominating interpretations of history – gain a strong foothold and can be difficult to challenge, since history-cultural expressions correspond to meaning-making needs in the present, they are only natural to change over time. Indeed, there may be periods when history-cultural trends that correspond to such meaning-making needs relate to and often challenge the history-cultural traditions. When the meaning-making processes within a history culture change, so do the narratives mediated within it. In this study, I focus on Scandinavian museum narration and how various tropes about the Vikings and the Viking Age resonate with recognisable cultural themes within their respective historical cultures.

According to Rüsen, a culture can only be counted as a *history culture* when the past is positioned in relation to the present. Additionally, Rüsen argues that a history culture is characterised by history conveyed in narratives, bridging

the supposed differences between the past and the present (Rüsen 2004b: 45). Chafing often arises between history-cultural traditions and trends, and tropes corresponding to either cannot co-exist with tropes deriving from the other in the same narrative. This statement is true of the tropes representing a nationalised Viking Age and the Viking Age as a multicultural world. Similarly, it is also true of the history-cultural tradition to portray the Viking Age as distinctly male and with a focus on raiding warriors. The latter has resulted in tropes that challenge this androcentric view on history, focusing on women's different social and domestic roles during the Viking Age and that most men were not warriors but farmers. In this way, the Viking Age continues to be a projection surface for contemporary performances. Professor of archaeology Howard Williams states that "the Vikings today are versatile, malleable and relational [in an] array of local, nationalist and transnational myths, stories and themes" (Williams 2024: 229). Consequently, the Vikings are acquiescent and can be used to respond to different needs experienced in the present.

This study compares the mentioned exhibitions – *Víkingr* at the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo, *The Viking World* at the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm, and *The Viking World* at the National Museum in Copenhagen. The analysis includes supplemental material, such as digital and physical museum catalogues. The aim is to investigate which history-cultural tropes appear in the exhibitions and how these tropes relate to different history-cultural traditions and trends. Studies of this kind are relevant because state museums possess a trust capital, meaning their dissemination of history is considered trustworthy and representative of official historiography (EuNaMus 2012: 14; Rosenzweig & Thelen 1998: 91, 105–108). State-sponsored museums exist within a specific history-cultural zeitgeist, which means that they – like any other public history actor – must mediate history within the bounds of what the public finds acceptable.

## Tropes, Traditions, and Trends in History Cultures

Museum exhibitions contain historical narratives that, like other forms of narration, aid people in making sense of their existence through temporal orientation. When the narratives follow a structure that the recipient recognises, they can contribute to understanding the connections between past, present and future (Rüsen 2004a: 98). Entering a museum exhibition, the visitor enters a liminal space. In that space, the narratives being mediated can either challenge or confirm what the visitor already knows, meaning that during the museum visit, the visitor is put into a liminal state, understood here as transition, as the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep uses the concept it in his classic work *The Rites of Passage* (van Gennep 1960: 11).

In this study, I analyse the results of the meaning-making process in the structuring of the exhibition narratives. During this course, tropes – culturally recognisable themes, elements or figures – that are supposed to resonate with museum visitors are included in the narration. As linguist Randy Allen Harris points out, it is not enough to consider a trope as a metaphor, according to the limited definition that the trope replaces something else. Tropes should instead, according to Harris, be understood as ”rhetorical figures that guide our thoughts and shape our perceptions, sometimes condensing them, sometimes merging them, sometimes pushing them into extremes or oppositions, among their conceptual effects” (Harris 2022: 241). According to this interpretation, tropes are closely related to conventions and can be regarded as cultural anchors. Therefore, they are culturally inherited interpretations, or “[s]tylistic acts of conceptual salience that foreground meaning in marked ways” (Harris 2022: 227). In addition to analysing which history-cultural tropes appear in the exhibitions, I also observe whether they are influenced by or opposed to particular interpretations of history.

History-cultural trends arise when new interpretations of history are made salient within a history culture. Historian Ingmarie Danielsson Malmros argues that the concepts of trends and traditions are to be equated with the synchronous, respectively diachronic dimensions of a history culture (Danielsson Malmros 2012: 80). The trends relate to different meaning-making needs that arise in the present and are therefore likely to be linked to synchronous changes within a history culture, such as trying to challenge antiquated views on the Vikings as predominantly violent and male. The traditions are related to interpretations of history, which have dominated a history culture through a diachronic perspective, such as reproducing what the trend in this example is trying to challenge – the narratives of the androcentric Viking. A history-cultural trope can derive either from a trend or a tradition, meaning that it may reflect either a change in the historical culture that has happened in the present or recently or reproduce a sedimented, long-prevalent version of history.

However, when using the trope, one must navigate existing trends and traditions to impact the history culture in question significantly. The tropes thus have the potential to carry more significance than the sender intended, depending on to what other representations of Vikings and the Viking Age they relate. To consider the history-cultural significance of the tropes is to use the wordings of philosopher Paul Ricoeur to consider their excess meaning, which is created in the meeting between the world of the text – in this case, the exhibition – and the world of the recipient (Ricœur 1976: 55; Ricœur 1984: 70–71). Although I cannot know what conscious or unconscious history-cultural associations museum visitors make in their encounter with the exhibition narratives, I can make qualified interpretations of the meaning potential of the tropes, relating them to their

specific history-cultural contexts. Therefore, I use an abductive research method in this study, where the comparative perspective helps to highlight similarities and differences between the different history cultures that emerge in the exhibitions.

### *Museum Objects as Tropes*

In exhibitions, objects gathered and exhibited from the museum's collection of artefacts signify meaning concerning, but in a different manner than, textual narratives. According to museologist Henrietta Lidchi, it is possible to distinguish between an object's denotation – its physical properties – and connotations, the meanings ascribed to them, with the latter operating "at a broader, more associative, level of meaning" (Lidchi 2013: 164). The connotations of an object may change over time, depending on changes in the history cultures it relates to. Inspired by Lidchi, museologist Doreen Reinhold distinguishes between three types of objects in museum exhibitions: 1) typical or representative; 2) unique or extraordinary; and 3) iconic (Reinhold 2014: 197–199). The first two categories establish the objects' relationship to other objects, which concerns their physical properties – how many have existed and how many have been preserved? The iconic objects are material shortcuts to the historical period or event displayed, which the audience immediately recognises and connects to the topic in question (Reinhold 2014: 198).

In an exhibition, a trope can, and often does, appear in several places. In my analysis of the three exhibitions selected for this study, I discuss how museum objects serve as reflections of history-cultural themes based on their denotative and connotative qualities.

## The Museum Exhibitions

The Swedish History Museum in Stockholm is part of the National Historical Museums of Sweden and features the permanent exhibition *The Viking World*, which opened in 2020. It showcases 2 500 archaeological artefacts organised into ten themes, including "Boundless Meetings", "Family and Hierarchy", and "Trading and Raiding". While the exhibition offers many glimpses into Viking life, it is adapted for those with specialised interests rather than casual visitors. An accompanying publication provides narrative context, and additional information is available on the museum's website.

Since 2021, *The Viking World* has been located in the Danish National Museum at the Prince's Palace in Copenhagen. This exhibition offers a more straightforward chronological structure than its Swedish counterpart, spanning from the ninth to the eleventh century and covering themes such as raids, domestic life, traditions, and beliefs. A 32-metre-long ship, Roskilde 6, dominates

one side of the room, while the centre features display cases with archaeological artefacts and wax figures of a Viking man and woman. Unlike the Swedish and Norwegian exhibitions, no publication complements the Danish exhibition, but the exhibition texts are available online.

In 2019, the *Víkingr* exhibition opened at the Historical Museum in Oslo, part of the state-owned Kulturhistorisk Museum and the University of Oslo. It is the most comprehensive museum exhibition on the Viking Age in Norway, especially as *the Viking Ship House* is closed for renovations until the *Viking Age Museum* reopens in 2027. Unlike the exhibitions in Sweden and Denmark, *Víkingr* features a minimalist design with only 20 display cases and one runestone. The exhibition highlights handicrafts and artefacts reflecting Viking values, organised under three themes: "A Society in Change," "The Warrior," and "Roads to Riches". Visitors can access more information by scanning a QR-code or borrowing an exhibition catalogue. A more extensive publication, *Víkingr*, is available through the museum shop.

## Tropes about Vikings and the Viking Age in the Exhibitions

In my analysis of the three Scandinavian exhibitions about the Vikings and the Viking Age, I have found four distinct tropes pointing to distinguishing similarities or differences between Swedish, Danish and Norwegian history cultures. The first trope analysed depicts the multicultural world of the Vikings as mirroring today's multicultural societies in Sweden and Norway. However, the Viking Age as a highly nationalised past is still prevalent in the Danish exhibition, producing the second trope of the Vikings as nation builders instead. The third trope depicts the Viking Age as distinctly male, reproducing an image of the androcentric Viking as a seafarer, warrior, and trader, and is present in all three exhibitions. The fourth trope reminds the museum visitor that women also participated in social and domestic life during the Viking Age, thus responding to the prevalence of the third trope, and is found in all three exhibitions, albeit to a lesser degree in the Danish one.

The different natures of the Scandinavian countries' historical cultures affect how these tropes appear in the respective exhibitions. In Denmark, Danish history is used in building the country's national identity following a traditional pattern. National history is in the foreground, and using history to strengthen a national sentiment is not considered to be controversial. Elements such as multiculturalism or adopting a more critical stance towards the androcentric Viking do not easily make their way into the national historical narrative. On the other hand, Swedish history culture is characterised by an almost opposite relationship to the national

past. Grand narratives of the nation are frequently deconstructed following history cultural trends, as multiculturalism is considered the desirable state of society. However, the Norwegian history culture is more equalised, allowing for both traditions and trends to matter in how history is used to build a national community. These descriptions of the different Scandinavian history cultures are of a rough cut. However, the examples of how different tropes about the Vikings and the Viking Age are manifested in the different national museums support this depiction.

## *The Multicultural World of the Vikings*

Several researchers have observed that since the 1980s the Viking Age, especially in a Swedish context, has been used to reflect the present to show that there have been successful cultural encounters between Scandinavians and Muslims in the past (Roslund 2023; Knutson & Ellis 2021; Hyltén Cavallius & Charan 2018). A well-known textile find from the Swedish town of Birka, with a text fragment that some researchers interpreted as denoting "Allah", aroused enthusiasm because it was considered to be able to be used to showcase such positive cultural encounters (Roslund 2023: 149). However, this conclusion was hastily drawn and was soon disproved by other researchers. Archaeologist Sara Ann Knutson and historian Caitlin Ellis believe that the textile finds from Birka "cautioned researchers against simply wishful thinking for a more diverse, multicultural past beyond what the surviving medieval evidence can reveal" (Knutson & Ellis 2021: 1). Indeed, they trace the hasty conclusion to the desire to create a counterweight to the nationalistic use of the Viking Age that is often directed against Muslims (Knutson & Ellis 2021: 2).

In the Swedish exhibition *The Viking World*, another well-known find from Birka, a ring with an inscription that has been interpreted as "for" or "to Allah", is exhibited under the theme "Boundless Encounters". Because of its inscription, the ring received much attention when found in the soil. It has also previously been used as a material artefact that signals fruitful cultural encounters (Roslund 2023: 149). In *The Viking World*, contrary to some older Swedish exhibitions, it is not stated that the ring symbolises mutual respect and understanding between Scandinavians and Muslims. However, it is described with the more general statement that "people from near and far met at the trading posts". The inclusion of the theme "Boundless Encounters" is justified as follows: "Much of what we now call Viking Age culture was created in the meeting between the norrænir menn (north men), as they called themselves, and other groups". Under another theme, "Family and Hierarchy", the following is stated:

> The environment in which aristocratic men and women lived was a kind of cultural melting pot. They met and socialised with like-minded people from large parts of the then known world. As well as goods and services, they exchanged ideas and customs. This influence from outside Scandinavia can be seen in personal items such as jewellery and belt trimmings.

In the Norwegian exhibition *Vikingr*, case number 1 bears the title "The Silver Route – from Baghdad to Teisen" and displays silver objects as coins, twisted rings and hacked-up pieces of ingots. The second vitrine in the exhibition shows a gold treasure and talks about "the Vikings journeys and contacts networks, from the Caliphate in the east to England in the west". *Vikingr's* third display case shows objects from Charlemagne's kingdom, which illustrates Scandinavians' openness to other cultural impressions: "Powerful Scandinavians were attracted to ideas and objects from many places". Under the heading "Journeys to riches", the following is written in the book *Vikingr*: "The Vikings' travels and their encounters with other cultures and societies in many ways laid the foundation for the great social changes that began in the Viking Age, processes that changed Norway and shaped the society we have today" (Vedeler 2019: 18). In this statement, parallels are created between the Viking Age and the present, which testify to teleological historiography that points to the contemporary Norwegian multicultural society.

Following Reinhard's division of different museum objects into typical, unique, and iconic objects, the coins and silver used for payment – of which there are many – belong to the first category of object. These typical objects denote and hence bear witness to trade during the Viking Age (Reinhard 2014: 198). In the exhibition texts, the objects are further ascribed connotative meanings, signifying the multicultural reality of the Viking Age, derived from a trend in contemporary Swedish and Norwegian history cultures (Lidchi 2013: 164). As seen from how the Birka ring is described in the Swedish exhibition, the objects related to trade are shown as material evidence that supports the trope that the Viking World was multicultural, regardless of whether the objects were common or unique.

In both the Swedish and the Norwegian exhibitions, the focus is on wealthy Vikings' encounters with other cultures, including Muslim ones. Although it is not always explicitly stated that the cultural encounters referred to are encounters between Muslims and Vikings (and it is undoubtedly not always those that are meant either), for those who recognise the trope, such an interpretation is close at hand. As Allen Harris points out, tropes can be clear and recognisable when they "crystalize a moment in a text – an argument, a poem, a conversation – to make its claims or its themes more compelling and memorable" (Harris 2022:

227). Nevertheless, they can also be more challenging to recognise as a trope: "the salience of tropes can also decay into familiarity and ultimately disappear into entrenchment. So doing, they harden into daily canonical usage" (Harris 2022: 227). In both the Swedish *The Viking World* and Norwegian *Vikingr*, the trope of the Vikings' multicultural world appears in the latter format since the message – living in a multicultural world is a natural state of existence that the Vikings thrived in – is implicitly rather than explicitly stated.

Due to the multicultural character of Swedish and Norwegian society, the trope derives from a contemporary history-cultural context in which museum professionals and others engaged with public history search the past to find evidence of previously successful cultural encounters between Muslims and Scandinavians. The trope is thus an example of a history-cultural trend corresponding to a meaning-making need in the present. As stated above, the trope about the multicultural world of the Vikings has also been strengthened by functioning as a counter-narrative to the highly nationalised history-cultural traditions that have characterised interpretations of the Viking Age since the nineteenth century.

The Danish *The Viking World* focuses on another cultural exchange, namely that between England and Denmark. Describing the Danegeld, the exhibition text titled "The Danelaw" says that almost 35,000 Scandinavians moved to the British Isles, influencing their new homeland's culture. Therefore, the focus is on the cultural influence exerted by the Scandinavians over others, not on the possible cultural impulses from outside that were absorbed into Scandinavian life and societies. Though the exhibition text belonging to the theme "Byzantium the superpower" mentions that the Vikings travelled to the East, trade is emphasised as the primary purpose of such voyages, while the theme "Trade and plunder" indicates that the Vikings both influenced and were influenced by cultural encounters: "Travelling abroad led to the exchange of goods, people, skills and knowledge. The Vikings brought slaves, gold and silver with them, but also new ideas. The meaning of things changed, forming fashions and inspiring imitation". Such a statement opens up the possibility that the encounters with the East may also have influenced Danish Vikings in return. However, this is far less evident in such cases than in the Swedish and Norwegian exhibitions. Why the cultural meetings in the East are less prominent than those in the West in the Danish exhibition becomes clear when one considers the presence of the Danish nation-building myth.

## *The Vikings as Nation-Builders*

The Danish nation-building myth has it all: a king mentioned by name, a Christian miracle and a runestone left as a witness to how Denmark became a unified kingdom. The National Museum manages the latter, which is named "The Great Jelling Stone" and has its own dedicated museum. The presence of the trope of the Viking Age as the time of Scandinavian nation-building is most prominent in the Danish exhibition *The Viking World*. Under the theme "Kings and Christianity", the following can be read:

> The road to a Christian Kingdom was long. According to the German chronicler Widukind of Corvey, the Danes had long been Christians but still worshipped their old gods. This changed with Harald Bluetooth. According to a Christian account, the king was persuaded by a miracle to convert to Christianity. It was the priest Poppo holding a red-hot iron in his hand that convinced the king of the power of Christianity.

The text also mentions Harald's son, Sweyn Forkbeard, who conquered England, and his grandson, Canute the Great, who made himself powerful in the new country. Thus, Denmark's trope of nation-building is closely linked to the stories of the Vikings' westward journeys, forming a recurring theme in *The Viking World*. In addition, the exhibition talks about the finds of the significant Trelleborg keeps that were probably built during Harald Bluetooth's time and which constitute a symbol of the consolidation of power in the kingdom of Denmark. The exhibition makers at the Danish National Museum have chosen a mode of representation that confirms the prevalence of a history-cultural tradition in Denmark. Why they do this – whether it's due to the desire to appease the public or not – is hard to say with absolute certainty. However, it points to a crucial difference between the Danish and Swedish exhibitions, where the latter's focus on multiculturalism stands in stark contrast to the former's traditional national narrative.

In the Norwegian exhibition publication *Vikingr*, under the theme "A Time of Change", the consolidation of royal power, the introduction of Christianity, and the implementation of a coinage economy in Norway during the Viking Age is described. Though well-known historical characters such as Harald Fairhair and St. Olav are briefly mentioned in the book, they are not made central actors in the narrative (Vedeler 2019: 81). Moreover, the text states that Christian organisation and administration had been established in the country, "[and] most important of all; Christianity became the only accepted religion in the country, and the king was, in reality, its supreme leader. Thus, the king became the central figure both politically and religiously" (Vedeler 2019: 81). In the Swedish publication *The Viking World,* the trope of nation-building is even more understated than in its

Norwegian counterpart. Under the theme "Power was centralised", the author or the authors of the exhibition text unassumingly state that:

> During the second part of the 10th century, power in Scandinavia was centralised and Christianity had a greater impact. It also affected the large trading venues. The rulers no longer built their power with the help of old traditions. They saw themselves as leaders of Christian dynasties and as equal to other kings on the European continent.[2]

Even though there are well-known figures in Swedish history – such as Erik the Victorious and Olof the Swede (Olof Skötkonung) – in the sources (albeit with an uncertain basis), the Swedish History Museum chooses not to mention them by name. Consequently, in the Swedish exhibition, the national building trope is barely noticeable. Therefore, the trope of the Viking Age as the beginning of nation-building in Scandinavia appears most strongly in the Danish exhibition, then in the Norwegian exhibition and not at all in the Swedish one.

The trope of the Vikings as nation-builders goes far back in national historiography in Scandinavian countries. How the national museums in these countries decide to deal with this history-cultural tradition may, therefore, be considered significant in how they relate to nation-building through the use of history. Compared to the Norwegian and Swedish exhibitions, the Danish exhibition follows the tradition of national historiography to a greater extent. There is likely a correlation between the trope of the multicultural world being present in the former two exhibitions, but not in the latter, and how strongly the trope of nation-building is present in the exhibitions. Thus, the history-cultural tradition of depicting the Viking Age as the nation's cradle cannot be combined with the history-cultural trend in which the Viking Age is considered a mirror image of today's multicultural society. The Viking age nation-building is reproduced in the Danish exhibition, without regard to how contemporary society may look like – history is not aimed at uniting cultures but to solidify the national uniqueness of Danish history further. In recent decades, Swedish history culture has worked in the opposite direction, to use the Viking Age to show that multiculturalism is a natural state of society and that if they thrived during the Viking Age – so can the Swedes today. The Norwegian exhibition is more similar to the Swedish one than the Danish one, but still mentions well-known Viking kings and solidifying of the Christian kingdom. Thus, one might conclude that there is a continuum regarding how the nationalised past may be portrayed in relation the Viking Age. Norwegian history culture adopts a middle position, whereas the Danish and Swedish history cultures place themselves on the far ends by either side, with the nationalised past and multiculturalism as the norm, respectively. The differences

between the countries stem from both the desire to meet visitor expectations and the need to balance traditional interpretations of the Viking Age in these countries. The identified history-cultural trends show that the mediated historical narratives are highly nationalised pasts, even though many museum visitors today are not domestic, and thus would probably expect a more traditional depiction of the Vikings and the Viking Age.

## *The Androcentric Viking: Seafarer, Warrior, Trader – and Farmer*

The figure of a male Viking has taken on different roles – warrior, seafarer, merchant and farmer – depending on which characteristics of him has been emphasised (See Ahola & Frog 2014, 23–25; Lönnroth 2001: 236–249). In addition, research on the Viking Age has consistently stressed that a masculine culture rewarded violence, giving how the image of a fighting male Viking increased spread (Ekholst 2024: 171). In contrast, women's living conditions during the Viking Age are continuously gendered, meaning that portrayals of Viking Age women are determined and restricted by their gender, in the exhibition texts. This fact, as well as the palpable presence of the male Viking warrior, makes the androcentric view on history – prioritising men as the historical norm and gendering women – evident in all three exhibitions (Lipsitz Bem 1993: 41).

As he appears in the three analysed exhibitions, the male Viking is both a warrior, a seafarer and a merchant. In addition, several times in all the exhibitions, he is portrayed as a farmer whose primary occupation is to tend to his farm. There is thus an attempt to nuance the trope of the male Viking, which historian Neil Price has called "the tired image of the androcentric raider, maritime and violent" (Price 2019: 30). However, this ambition results in an ambivalence concerning how to portray the Vikings in relation to the material remains from the Viking Age, which risks appearing confusing to exhibition visitors.

In all three exhibitions, the many archaeological finds of metal – consisting mainly of weapons, coins, and jewellery – dominate the vitrines, while in the Swedish and Danish exhibitions, ship finds are also prominent. Historian Sara Ellis Nilsson argues that the ships today are so closely associated with the Vikings that it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate them from one another on a connotative level (Ellis Nilsson 2024: 160. See also Jesch 2015; Jarman 2021). As a result, travel has become synonymous with the Vikings in many contexts even though, to quote Price, "most of those we think of as 'Vikings' never went anywhere or did any harm to anyone" (Price 2019: 35). In addition, the Viking as a merchant, and not primarily as a brutal attacker, gained traction on the research front during the 1960s, when the general violence in the world – and not just among the Vikings – during the Middle Ages was emphasised (Ellis 2020: 2). Both

materially, in the form of physical artefacts, and textually, representations of the warrior, the seafarer and the merchant dominate all three exhibitions.

Also appearing in the exhibition texts is the fourth figure of the Viking – the farmer – and there are objects representing agricultural life in at least the Swedish and Danish exhibitions. However, the peasant figure abrades against the other three Viking figures. A Swedish *The Viking World* sub-theme is titled "Most men were farmers", and the exhibition text says, "In the Old Norse sagas the idealised image of a man involved war, hunting and riding. But most free men were not warriors, they were farmers. […] Weapons and horse equipment are fairly unusual grave finds". Under the headline, "Warriors were highly valued", it is further stated that: "Many free men and women owned and carried weapons. But far from all were, or identified themselves as, warriors". Despite these reprimands, ships, swords and finds that testify to trade and long-distance travel are frequently and centrally placed in the Swedish exhibition – showing how intricate the balancing act of interpreting the past the exhibition makers have to perform is.

In the Norwegian exhibition book *Vikingr*, an attempt is made to explain, regarding the archaeological finds, why the warrior is such a prominent figure in their exhibition: "When one studies Viking Age society through archaeological traces and written sources, it is striking how many references there are to violence in various forms. The amount of weapon graves from Norway shows how widespread weapons were" (Vedeler, 2019: 50). At the same time, the book's authors guard themselves against concluding that the use of weapons was widespread during the Viking Age. Indeed, they stress, "But in everyday life, life was lived far from war and struggle. The farm formed the economic and social core of the community. Most people lived on the farm: peasants, housewives and slaves, children and the elderly" (Vedeler 2019: 51). However, it is also stated that:

> Nevertheless, honour, violence, struggle, war and weapons were central elements in people's understanding and relating to the world and society. So when the peaceful peasants died, they were equipped as warriors. With weapons as signs of dignity and symbols of power, they entered death and further into the afterlife (Vedeler, 2019: 51).

Even though Viking-age peasants did not fight, at least not to a large extent, they were thus equipped as warriors for posterity at their burial. The many swords exhibited and allowed to denote the Viking Age are therefore different from how most people lived. It is also not uncommon for spectacular and unusual – unique – finds to be exhibited in separate vitrines, even though it is improbable that they represent common phenomena during the Viking Age. One example is the helmet from Gjermundbu in Buskerud, which "is the world's only completely preserved

'Viking helmet'. Only a few privileged warriors had such equipment" (Vedeler 2019: 56). However, the fact that the Gjermundbu helmet has been placed centrally in the exhibition, in its separate vitrine, gives the impression that it is essential and thus, possibly from a visitor's perspective, particularly representative of the Viking Age. Though the helmet is a unique object, at the same time, it relates to the iconic image of the horned helmets that many associate with the Viking Age, even though the latter is derived from a figment of the imagination of the national romanticists of the nineteenth century (Ward 2001: 9). On a connotative level, the Gjermundbu helmet itself is not iconic, but it accordingly borrows history-cultural significance from images of Viking helmets in popular culture, thus appearing as an iconic symbol of the Viking Age. The balance between expecations and scientific findings may not be more evident than this.

The Danish exhibition *The Viking World* tells the story of the Viking raids, focusing on the voyages to England. An explanation of the Vikings' wanderlust is given at a panel titled "At home and abroad":

> Although most Scandinavians were farmers, they saw travelling and settling elsewhere as an opportunity, possibly also to escape the social and familial constraints of life at home. […] Bold men and women seized the chance to create a better life in another country.

The theme of voyages continues in the panel titled "The raids": "Technically advanced Viking ships made it possible for warriors to make rapid, violent attacks on undefended coasts and riverbanks. Nowhere was safe". The narrative emphasises that the Vikings were ruthless and spread devastation wherever they went. However, under the theme "Spring Viking and Autumn Viking", it is stated that the raids were not the Vikings' primary occupation: "The farm was the prerequisite for the raids" and that the Vikings were at home and took care of the farm for large parts of the year. Elsewhere, under the sub-theme "Farmer and warrior", the exhibition text says, "In the Viking Age, the majority of the population were farmers", which also recurs in other contexts. Even though the Danish *The Viking World* emphasises ruthless violence more than its Swedish and Norwegian counterparts, it also guards against portraying the Vikings as mere warriors.

However, the message that most Viking men did not engage in warfare contrasts sharply with how the Viking Age is generally depicted in the exhibitions, which expresses an ambivalence and creates dissonance in the relationship between the exhibited objects and the exhibition texts. The androcentric Viking – the lone male warrior who sets out to conquer the world – still holds an appeal to the national museums. Holding on to this androcentric view means that the

male Viking continues to be the norm of history writing in the studied exhibitions. Why though, when the people behind the exhibitions seem aware of the problem surrounding this image? The exhibition makers' deeply ingrained beliefs about the Viking Age may be one explanation. Another related – and more reasonable cause – may be that the male Viking warrior has had such an impact on national history writing that they cannot escape it. The third possible explanation is that this Viking has made its way into popular culture, creating a supposed expectation among national and international visitors to meet a specific type of Viking in the exhibitions. Still, the awareness of the problem causes the exhibition makers also to portray a peaceful alternative – the farmer – which may be considered as a form of safeguarding or as a serious attempt to try and nuance the image of men during the Viking age, however with a slight chance of success.

The trope about the androcentric Viking warrior/seafarer/merchant currently exists in the middle of a conflict between a history-cultural tradition and a history-cultural trend. The history-cultural tradition to emphasise male-coded violence in depictions of the Viking Age clashes with the history-cultural trend of wanting to nuance the image of how commonplace the Viking warrior was. Consequently, the result is a confusing ambivalence about the trope about the androcentric Viking, thus pinpointing how difficult it can be to challenge history-cultural traditions with a firm standing in the history culture. As a museum professional, this is a never ending challenge. As a government-run museum, the tribulations of having to perform this balancing act are probably felt more strongly than by private actors, due to the public's expectations of being offered a true depiction of history within their walls. Another manner in which the trope about the androcentric Viking has been, and continues to be, challenged is by reminding visitors that women also participated in social and domestic life during the Viking Age.

### *The Gendered Viking Woman*

In addition to the male warrior Viking, tropes about his female companions have traditionally appeared in the forms of "the notion of the 'strong mistress of the hall and her shield-maiden sisters'" in various representations of the Viking Age (Price 2019: 30; See also Price *et al.* 2019: 182). Both female figures are present in all the studied exhibitions, albeit to different degrees. The Swedish *The Viking World* tells the story of the powerful lady of the hall and her role in public situations under the theme "Midgård":

> Drinking ceremonies could also be a way of legitimising and demonstrating power. In this, the mistress of the house had a central

> position. It was she who would be responsible for offering the guests a beaker and filling it, based on their position and rank.

Similar statements can be found in the Danish exhibition, for example, under the theme "Welcome to the great hall", where it is stated that "Guests were received by the lady of the house, who managed everything to ensure the occasion was a success. Women played an active role in running the farm, and also travelled widely". There is reason to dwell on the remark that women *actively* participated in the work on the farm – since there is a palpable tendency, in all the studied exhibitions, to remind visitors that women participated in social and domestic life during the Viking Age, deriving from the ambition to show women how to identify with aspects of the viking world. The reminder that women participated in work at the farm during the Viking Age consequently appears as another trope – similar to those about the mistress of the hall and the shield-maidens.

Women's history is traditionally gendered and othered, with men representing humanity and the norm, even if women are becoming increasingly visible in museum exhibitions (Bailey, LaFrance & Dovidio 2020: 1; Callihan & Feldman 2018: 179). That men remain at the centre of history is evident from the following example from the Swedish exhibition, under the sub-theme "The key – a symbol of responsibility", which states that:

> A free woman might be mistress of the house and, together with the master of the house, be responsible for the farm and the family. This role was denoted by one or a number of keys that she would wear, hanging from straps or chains on her clothing.

Pointing out that women could have power during the Viking Age corresponds to a history-cultural tradition emphasising that women lived more freely during the Viking Age than during the subsequent Middle Ages (Williams 2024: 230). However, such statements that point to the available possibilities of gaining power and influence are never produced when the subject of the exhibition texts is male. The most far-reaching example of how women are gendered in the Swedish exhibition can be found under the heading "Women's graves reflect complex roles":

> Jewellery and equipment in the graves of many wealthy and aristocratic women reflect the complex roles these women had, or were expected to have if they had lived for a long time. They lived and operated in a mixture between the private and the public, and also between the Scandinavian and the continental. Many of the objects in the graves of

> women show that they performed a variety of tasks. Their function was partly to maintain the traditions and tell people about customs, partly to update customs and ideals and perhaps even norms.

In an exhibition text mentioning the existence of *völvor*, female shamans and wise women, it is also pointed out that "Women in the Viking Age could be very influential, even though the majority of them had no formal power." When the exhibition texts mention Viking-age men's different social roles, they do not point out that men "could be" masters or possess power of various kinds, strengthening the claim that the historical narrative of *The Viking World* is written from a male perspective.

The gendering of women is evident in these examples. Women's lives, and the possibilities of social and cultural influence their circumstances allow, are being described out of the expectation of the prevalence of limitations. They are, first and foremost, women, and the peculiarity of their gender must, therefore, be commented on whenever they are portrayed in the exhibitions. These comments serve as a reminder to the museum visitors that, although they are used to meeting depictions of the androcentric male Vikings, women were part of Viking age society. However, they had to overcome the limitations of their gender first. This is not necessarily done consciously by the museum professionals. In all probability, it is a result of the heavily influential historical and cultural traditions regarding women from the Viking Age, which have most commonly depicted them as extraordinary individuals, thus making ordinary women invisible.

In portrayals of Viking-age women, the figure of the shield-maiden has recently found new prominence. *Vikingr* states that the renewed interest in the female Viking warrior is based on reinterpretations of archaeologists' graves with swords that have previously been interpreted as belonging to men, even though the skeletons were female: "But could it be that women in certain cases also got weapons in the grave? And if so, were they warriors?" (Vedeler 2019: 74). The Norwegian exhibition mentions a grave that was found in 1900 at Nordre Kjølen in Solør in Norway as well as the Swedish find in Birka, Bj.581. Finds of Viking-age female warriors have previously not received much attention, although they have been known, including the Norwegian find in Kjølen (Gardeła 2021: 145). When the Birka find was discovered to be that of a woman in the 2010s, with the help of DNA technology, the research team behind the discovery was met with great scepticism (Price *et al.* 2019). Regarding the latter find, a metahistorical remark on the contemporary discussion of the Viking-age female warriors is also made in *Vikingr*: "This study was published in 2017 and led to a heated discussion in the media" (Vedeler 2019: 74). The Swedish exhibition does not mention that women

fought, but rather that they engaged in trade, during the Viking Age, while the existence of warrior women is not mentioned at all in the Danish exhibition.

Though the tropes that serve as reminders that women participated in social and domestic life derive from reactions towards the history-cultural tradition of the androcentric Viking, they relate to different areas of social and political life during the Viking Age. The trope about the powerful mistress of the hall appears in the Swedish and the Danish exhibitions, whereas the shield-maiden is present in the Norwegian exhibition. In the Swedish exhibition, the trope about women participating in everyday life at the farm is very much present, but it is not found in either the Danish or the Norwegian exhibition. The tropes present in the Danish and Norwegian cases derive solely from history-cultural traditions. In contrast, the Swedish exhibition is marked both by the history-cultural tradition depicting the powerful mistress of the hall and a history-cultural trend that expresses itself as a reminder of women's participation in everyday life. Nevertheless, all three tropes reinforce the androcentric view of history further established elsewhere in the exhibitions.

## Conclusion

Based on a definition of the concept of tropes as a recurring or supporting theme in the studied exhibitions, I have identified four commonly occurring tropes in three state-funded exhibitions about the Viking Age in Scandinavia – *Víkingr* at the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo, *The Viking World* at the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm, and *The Viking World* at the National Museum in Copenhagen.

The existence of the trope of the multicultural world of the Viking, as well as the trope of the Vikings as nation builders, in the exhibitions shows that the Viking Age can be a projection surface for meaning-making needs in the present, either in support of a multicultural society, corresponding to a history-cultural trend, or stressing the importance of the Viking Age as the origins of the modern nation, following an established history-cultural tradition. The Swedish exhibition frequently highlights multicultural traits of the Viking Age, thus corresponding to the history-cultural trend to a great extent. In contrast, the Danish exhibition does not include the trope of the multicultural world of the Vikings at all, instead focusing on cultural encounters between Vikings and residents of the British Isles, which is part of the history-cultural tradition. The Norwegian exhibition occupies an intermediate position between the two others, including both tropes, thus responding to both the trend and the tradition.

The androcentric Viking trope places Viking-age men in the centre of the narrative, with the many archaeological finds, consisting of ships, weapons, coins,

and jewellery, that dominate the exhibitions forming the basis for claiming that a male seafarer, warrior, and merchant is the epitome of the Viking. However, the trope is also challenged when it is repeatedly pointed out, in all three exhibitions, that most people during the Viking Age were farmers who did not participate in any raids. Here, the interplay between objects and texts and in the exhibitions appears to be particularly important to consider, as the placement and framing of objects that indicate the use of violence during the Viking Age are given a prominent position compared to objects that testify to the non-violent existence of the majority population. The history-cultural trend of trying to nuance the image of the male raider by reminding visitors that most Vikings were farmers exists in the exhibitions at the same time as the history-cultural tradition of depicting the male Viking as a seafarer, warrior, and merchant. Thus, all three exhibitions simultaneously reproduce and challenge the trope of the androcentric Viking, resulting in confusing ambivalence.

The trope that the Viking woman also participated in social and domestic life summarises three different tropes that together constitute the palpable tendency to consistently remind visitors that women existed and occupied different social roles during the Viking Age: 1) The powerful mistress of the hall, who receives guests during drinking ceremonies, appears in both the Swedish and Danish exhibitions, but not in the Norwegian one; 2) The Viking female warrior, the shield-maiden, appears in the Norwegian and Swedish exhibitions, but not in the Danish one; 3) The farmer's wife, of whose existence visitors are continuously reminded of in the Swedish exhibition, but not in the other two, further strengthens the male-dominated perspective on Viking-age history, as women are consistently gendered in the exhibition texts. All three tropes correspond to the history-cultural tradition of inserting Viking-age women into androcentric narratives. However, the result often reinforces, rather than challenges, the male-dominated perspective in the exhibitions.

The article explores the diverse history cultures in Scandinavia, particularly how the Vikings and the Viking Age are represented. Swedish history culture leans towards contemporary trends, such as highlighting the multicultural aspects of Viking society and the roles of women, but traditional androcentric narratives still dominate. Danish narratives focus on a nationalized Viking past, emphasizing the Vikings as nation-builders, primarily depicting male figures with limited attention to women's roles. Norwegian history culture finds a balance, acknowledging both modern trends and traditional aspects, portraying a range of Viking roles while also including gendered tropes. The differences and similarities among these cultures reveal the complexity of interpreting Viking history, indicating a need to further explore tropes about the Vikings and the Viking Age in Scandinavian history cultures, at and beyond the national museums. Creating a museum

exhibition is a delicate balance act between meeting the public's expectations and showcasing accurate representations of the past. The national museums are, to varying degrees, letting representations of the past be imbued with meaning that has more to do with the perceived, or even desired, state of the present than what is known about the Viking world.

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## Endnotes

1 All exhibition texts are printed in their respective native language – Swedish, Danish, or Norwegian – as well as in English in the exhibitions. Therefore, all exhibition texts cited in this article are original unless stated otherwise. However, when the book *Vikingr* (Vedeler 2019; Glørstad 2019) is cited, the author has translated the original Norwegian into English.

2 Author's translation.

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