

Vikings, the Barbaric Heroes:  
Exploring the Viking Image  
in Museums in Iceland and England  
and its Impact on Identity

Thesis submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

At the University of Leicester

By

Gudrun D. Whitehead

School of Museum Studies

University of Leicester

March 2013

# Vikings, the Barbaric Heroes: Exploring the Viking Image in Museums in Iceland and England and its Impact on Identity

Gudrun D. Whitehead

Vikings: a term so well known that it instantaneously evokes an image of bloodthirsty warriors, weapons, hoards, burning monasteries and heroic battles. Despite growing academic knowledge about the limitations of this stereotype of Vikings, it is nevertheless strongly rooted within popular culture. How can visitors to museums help us to understand the role of Vikings in constructing, maintaining and modifying collective, national and personal identities? This research explores the image of Vikings in English and Icelandic society and in two museums, Víkingaheimar in Reykjanesbær, Iceland and Yorkshire Museum in Yorkshire, England. The aim of this thesis is analyse visitor responses to museum representations of the Vikings. Its findings demonstrate the role of collective memory in the meaning creation process within museums and the use of the Viking stereotype as a trope in order to construct collective, national and individual identities. Furthermore, by exploring individual responses to history, the research advances understanding of the impact within modern society of the Viking image and its representation within museums. It also shows how history, in particular, history beyond living memory, is used in order to make sense of present social issues.

Fieldwork conducted at Víkingaheimar and Yorkshire Museum is analysed using theories on historical distancing, collective social memory, nationalism, otherness and representation within museums. These theories are discussed in relation to identity formation and collective memory to examine the role and influences of the Vikings and their age upon modern Icelandic and English society. The results show that participants in the study used the collective social past in order to rationalise present social issues and events. This enabled a positive interpretation and fluid formations of their various identities within the museum exhibition. Additionally, participants made the past more personal by reflecting on their own identity through history. Participants in this study are shown to interpret the past based upon collective memory, ignoring the museum's historical exhibition narrative in favour of their pre-existing ideas on history.

# Acknowledgements

Throughout the course of my doctoral research I have received much support, encouragement and assistance from numerous individuals who made this thesis possible. Special thanks go to Dr Sheila Watson, my supervisor, whose inspirational guidance, encouragement and enthusiasm were invaluable to me. I would also like to thank Professor Simon Knell for his helpful advice and assistance.

My research was also greatly assisted by the support, advice and assistance of the following individuals: Dr Guðni Elísson (University of Iceland) and Dr Martin S. Regal (University of Iceland) my former supervisors, who have continued to inspire my academic work, Dr Sigurjón B Hafsteinsson (University of Iceland) for encouraging me to start a doctoral study in the field.

The students and staff at the University of Leicester have been invaluable to me, providing me with academic support and much needed entertainment throughout my studies. In particular I would like to thank Dr Viv Golding, Christine Cheeseman, Dr Julia Petrov, Dr Jennifer (biddy-buddy) Binnie, Stephanie Bowry, Vincent D Furnier, Jennifer Walklate, Elee Kirk and Dr Helen Saunderson.

I am grateful for the cooperation and friendliness of the Yorkshire Museum and Víkingaheimar, along with the individuals affiliated with these institutions.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for their patience, love and support. In particular I am grateful to my parents for always believing in me.

This thesis is dedicated to my late grandmother, Guðný Bjarnadóttir (1917-1996).

# Table of Contents

Picture Credits.....	8
Figures .....	8
Tables.....	9
Glossary .....	10
Introduction.....	14
Introducing the Vikings .....	14
Havoc, Honour and Heroism: The Making of the Viking Image in England and Iceland .....	20
Icelandic Vikings .....	20
English Vikings.....	25
About the Author .....	26
Thesis Structure .....	28
Chapter 1.....	31
Constructing the Image of the Vikings .....	31
Introduction.....	31
Brief History of the Viking Age .....	32
The Development of the Viking Image .....	37
Conclusions: The Vikings through Time.....	49
Chapter 2.....	51
History, Meaning and Identity .....	51
Introduction.....	51
What is Identity?.....	52
Creating Meaning: Representation in Museums.....	58
Collective Memory .....	64
Historical Distancing .....	77

Nationalism.....	80
Ethnicity versus Race.....	86
Otherness .....	90
Conclusions: Preconceived Ideas on History and Identity Creation within Museums...	97
Chapter 3.....	104
Methodology and Case Studies.....	104
Introduction.....	104
Research Aims and Objectives .....	105
Choosing the Museums for Fieldwork.....	106
Fieldwork Museums: Information and Layout .....	113
Text Panels and Glass Cases: Yorkshire Museum and Víkingaheimar Introduced .....	120
Exhibition Analysis: Yorkshire Museum .....	122
Exhibition Analysis: Víkingaheimar .....	126
Development of Fieldwork .....	129
Icelandic Fieldwork: Translation Process and Word Explanations .....	140
Questionnaire Data: Statistical Information on Participants.....	142
Conclusions: Research Developments and Methods Summarised .....	145
Chapter 4.....	147
Word Association Responses.....	147
Introduction.....	147
Appearance of Vikings .....	149
External Viking Characteristics .....	151
Society and Family .....	154
Farming .....	157
Folklore and Religion .....	158
Maritime Activities .....	159
Connections with Other Societies .....	162

Objects and Items.....	163
Conclusion: Who were the Vikings? .....	165
Chapter 5.....	168
Impressions of Vikings and the Museums .....	168
Introduction.....	168
Expectations towards the Museums.....	169
Learning in the Museum .....	172
Prior Knowledge of Vikings .....	180
What could have been done Differently? .....	186
Impressions of Vikings within the Museum .....	187
Women in the Viking Age .....	195
Connections with the Present.....	200
Conclusion: Vikings in the Museums .....	205
Chapter 6.....	208
Identity .....	208
Introduction: Overview of Themes Covered within the Section .....	208
Tourism and Identity.....	209
National Identity .....	213
Regional Identity.....	217
Are You a Viking? .....	221
Personal Identity .....	228
Conclusion: Vikings and Identity. ....	232
Chapter 7.....	234
Analysis of Fieldwork.....	234
Introduction.....	234
Creating Meaning in Museums .....	235
Collective Memory .....	242

Historical Distancing .....	257
Nationalism .....	267
Otherness .....	277
Conclusion: Historical Interpretations within the Museum Space and Individual Responses to the Past.....	284
Conclusions: Historical Understanding and Identity Development .....	288
Introduction.....	288
Interpretation, Identity and Representation: A Reflective Discussion of the Research	288
History and the Development of the Viking Myth.....	288
Fieldwork Results: Overarching Themes .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Memory, Meaning and Motivation: Analysing the Fieldwork Results.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Final Thoughts on the Research.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Evaluating the Research.....	308
Possible Future Research Developments .....	311
Appendix 1.....	319
Word Association .....	319
Yorkshire Museum .....	320
Víkingaheimar .....	333
Appendix 2.....	346
Interview and Questionnaire Protocols .....	346
Questionnaire Protocols .....	346
Interview Protocols .....	347
Appendix 3.....	349
Interview Samples.....	349
Yorkshire Museum Interview .....	349
Víkingaheimar Interview .....	355
Bibliography .....	361
Other sources .....	372





# Picture Credits

## Figures

**Figure 1.** *Hägar the Horrible* – Hägar explains why he has a right to loot and pillage English castles. © 2013 by King Features Syndicate, Inc. World rights reserved.

**Figure 2.** *Hägar the Horrible* – Hägar demonstrates the ‘Viking way’ of successful shopping. © 2013 by King Features Syndicate, Inc. World rights reserved.

**Figure 3.** This image was taken from the entrance to the main gallery in Yorkshire Museum, showing the four stone statues from the abbey. Objects on display within the two glass cases are the York helmet (dated 750-775) and the Cawood Sword (dated 1100).

**Figure 4.** A photograph showing the archway and two rows of pillars in Yorkshire Museum running through the centre of the gallery. On the right hand side is the glass case displaying the York helmet.

**Figure 5.** Close-up of the columns in Yorkshire Museum on the right hand side and glass cases displaying objects from the Middle Ages according to theme. Note the visible grey barrier which creates a passage on the far right side (where the visitors stand).

**Figure 6.** View from the entrance of the main hall of Yorkshire Museum looking at the entrances to the side rooms, that is, the ‘Treasury’ and ‘Trade and Industry’ rooms, visible on the image is a glass case displaying pottery.

**Figure 7.** The longboat *Íslendingur* as seen from the ground floor at Víkingaheimar.

**Figure 8.** View from the ground floor at Víkingaheimar, showing the exhibition spaces on the right hand side and the stairwell leading to the upper level. The closed doors of the gallery no longer in use can be seen on the right.

**Figure 9.** Photograph taken on the upper floor at Víkingaheimar, looking out towards the main entrance on the front of the museum. The exhibition space is situated to the left of the image.

**Figure 10.** Upper floor exhibition space at Víkingaheimar, showing reconstructed sleeping quarters.

## Tables

**Table 1.** Table listing the time and place of initial pilot work and continued fieldwork.

**Table 2.** The gender, age and nationality of participants.

**Table 3.** This table shows who accompanied the participants to the museum, their nationality and gender.

# Glossary

Below are listed in alphabetical order some of the main terms used within this research and their meanings defined, a further discussion of which can be found in Chapters 2 and 7 as well as the final chapter, Conclusions: Collective Memory and Identity Development.

**Ethnic/ethnicity:** As defined by Smith and discussed further in Chapter 2, an ethnic community is a group of people who share myths of common ancestry, historical memories and some cultural elements.<sup>1</sup> Ethnic communities are not necessarily constant, but are subject to change and can disappear, or be absorbed into a larger, dominant society. Littler suggests that ethnicity (or an ethnic identity) is a social and cultural construct, shaped by social, geographical and historical experiences.<sup>2</sup> The distinction between race and ethnicity is that racial identity is based on biological commonality, while ethnic identity is primarily cultural.

**Identity:** Woodward explains that identities in the contemporary world are derived from a common nationality, ethnicity, social class, community, gender, sexuality and more.<sup>3</sup> Each person has multiple identities, which can conflict, be fragmented and/or contradicted. As Woodward explains, identity gives individuals a location within the world, and connects them to the society in which they live.<sup>4</sup> *Personal identity* is formed through personal experiences, while *national identity*

---

<sup>1</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 12-19.

<sup>2</sup> Jo Littler, 'Introduction: British Heritage and the Legacies of 'Race'', in *The Politics of Heritage: Legacies of 'Race'*, ed. by Jo Littler and Roshni Naidoo (Abingdon, Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 1-21 (p. 6).

<sup>3</sup> Kathryn Woodward, *Identity and Difference* (London, Thousand Oaks, CA & New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2007), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

refers to how individuals define themselves as part of a nation sharing a collective understanding of history and society. Additionally, consider Woodward's definition of *essentialist identity*, which suggests clear, authentic characteristics, shared by a group, unaltered across time, and non-essential identity, which focuses on changeable differences and commonalities, both within the identity-group and outside it.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Hall explains that *cultural identities* have a shared past and are subject to transformation due to changing cultures and power.<sup>6</sup> Identity is one of the key concepts in this research and is therefore discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

**Nation:** According to Anderson, the nation is “an imagined political community – imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign”.<sup>7</sup> It is imagined, because even in the smallest nations, it is impossible for a member to know all his fellow-members, yet they share a collective image of their communion.<sup>8</sup> The collective image is partly formed and maintained by memorials, museums and other places of remembrance. Misztal writes that the nation is an example of a mnemonic community which affects memory; it determines what should be remembered and what should be forgotten.<sup>9</sup> In other words, a nation is a group with a shared collective history and memory. The same is also articulated by Smith, who defines a nation as a human population, which is bound together

---

<sup>5</sup> Woodward, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’ in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), pp. 222-237 (p. 225).

<sup>7</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London & New York: Verso, 2006), p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara A. Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering*, Theorizing Society Series (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003), pp. 17-19.

through territory, codes of law, nationalism and a shared history and memory.<sup>10</sup>

It is the shared collective cultural identities which are built around shared memories of how nations wish to remember their own past.<sup>11</sup>

**Popular culture:** Popular culture is defined here as pertaining to mass-produced culture, produced by corporations and culture industries in order to appeal to the majority groups within society.<sup>12</sup> It is not suggested here that it is in any way ‘inferior’, but rather, as explained by Barker, to suggest it is a mass-produced culture in which individuals make their own meanings and make it serve their own interest.<sup>13</sup>

**Social Memory/Collective Memory:** As defined by Halbwachs, this is the social framework for individual memory.<sup>14</sup> According to Misztal, social memory refers to organised cultural practices which guide people’s opinions, understanding of the world and actions.<sup>15</sup> As will be discussed in Chapter 2, within the context of my research, ‘social memory’ is not limited to living memory.

**Society:** Society is understood within this research as described by Jenkins, to be a network of people who relate to each other through some commonalities, with each member adhering to the same rules and expected behaviour patterns.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), pp. 53-56.

<sup>11</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 208.

<sup>12</sup> Christ Barker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* (London, Thousand Oaks, CA, New Delhi & Singapore: Sage Publication, 2008), pp. 51-52.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 38.

<sup>15</sup> Misztal, pp. 12-13.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Jenkins, *Foundations of Sociology* (Hampshire & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 40-43.

Society suggests inclusivity through criteria of membership and a collective framework from which individuals model their everyday life.

**Viking:** The linguistic origin of the word ‘Viking’ is uncertain, however, by the end of the Viking age it was commonly used for warriors fighting at sea or land.<sup>17</sup> The ‘Vikings’ were given various other names outside Scandinavia, such as ‘Heathens, Northmen’, ‘rus’, ‘the foreigners’.<sup>18</sup> During the Viking age, trading and raiding journeys were seasonal; very few people made this their main occupation, although there are instances of full-time mercenary Scandinavians, who fought on the side of the highest bidder.<sup>19</sup> As a result, early sources mostly refer to Viking-journeys as ‘fara í Viking’, meaning ‘going on a Viking-journey’. The term developed and was popularised in its modern meaning in the Victorian age in Britain but it has also acquired a wider meaning. In Britain, due to the nature of the historical connection to the term ‘Viking’, it mainly refers to male warriors. However, during my fieldwork in York some participants referred to the term in a wider context, meaning a man or a woman, warrior, sailor and a farmer, i.e. a person born in the Nordic countries during the Viking age.<sup>20</sup> This was also the case during my fieldwork in Iceland. For this reason the term ‘Viking’ is used within this research for all people, men and women, from the Nordic countries in the Viking age (and their descendants) regardless of their occupation, unless otherwise stated.

---

<sup>17</sup> *The Viking Age: A Reader*, ed. by Angus A. Sommerville and R. Andrew McDonald (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), pp. xiii-xvii.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. xiv.

# Introduction

## Introducing the Vikings

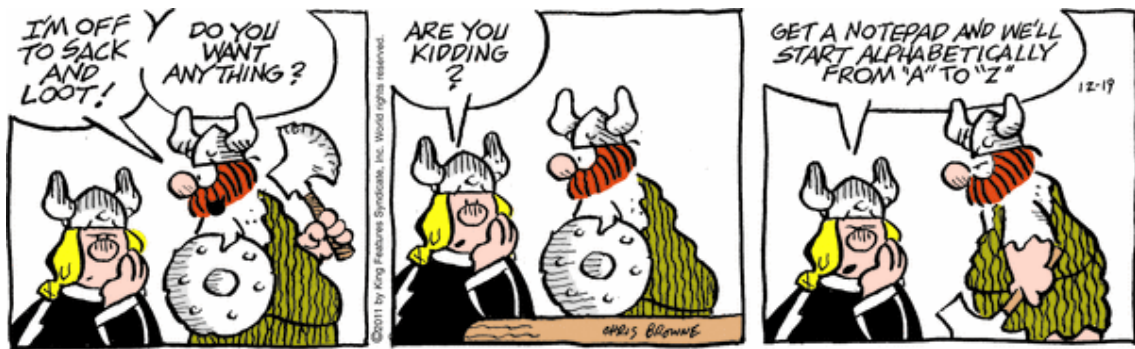
This study analyses the responses of Icelandic and English individuals in regards to their views on the Viking image as represented within museums and in society. This overarching question opens up a variety of discussions on socially relevant topics, including identity formation, nationalism, historical understanding of individuals, cultural institutions like museums and society as a whole. Museum exhibitions are a reflection of the preferred and official interpretations and understanding of history. This being the case, this research analyses how adult museum visitors reflect upon the representation of Viking history within museums in Iceland and England. The research thus makes a comparison between the views of individual visitors and the museums, demonstrating how historical understanding, identity and meaning is created within cultural institutions. In addition, this study explores whether the Viking stereotype is understood by visitors to be reinforced or contested within museums with a view to the impact of that image on identity and social perceptions. Leading on from this comparison, the relevance of Vikings in present society will be analysed in order to clarify some aspects of nationalism and how societies and individuals understand the past within a collective social framework. If it is accepted that the Viking myth is relevant to current society, how, then, does it manifest itself within social regulations and norms and what impact does it have on national and personal identities? And what is the relevance of the Viking stereotype for museums?



**Figure 1.** *Hägar the Horrible* – Hägar explains why he has a right to loot and pillage English castles.  
 © 2013 by King Features Syndicate, Inc. World rights reserved

Vikings have more than a historical relevance for Iceland and England; they also have a strong connection with popular culture within both countries. Due to this multi-dimensional connection, Vikings are used within this research to analyse identity and historical perceptions. They provide a good starting point for a discussion on social norms and practices, identity and historical perceptions. The mere word ‘Viking’ evokes an image of strong, bloodthirsty warriors, who stopped at nothing to gain loot, land and slaves. Viking stereotypes still have a huge following within popular culture all over the world. They appear in various media, for example films, music, literature, games, company logos and various comics and graphic novels. For example, the American comic strip *Hägar the Horrible*, first appeared in 1973 and has been popular ever since. The comic strip follows the life and work of a Viking named Hägar, who drinks, has adventures and is ruled with an iron fist by his stubborn wife, waiting for him to come home from raids. One of the things that make Hägar so lovable and funny is the interesting pull between his domestic life and pillaging of English castles and monasteries. He is, for example, shown raiding a castle and commenting on the increasing difficulties of shopping (Fig. 2):





**Figure 2.** *Hägar the Horrible* – Hägar demonstrates the ‘Viking way’ of successful shopping.  
 © 2013 by King Features Syndicate, Inc. World rights reserved.

The humour clearly lies in the fact that a Viking *has* a domestic life. His reasoning and philosophy in life are what makes him a popular character. He raids to support a family; he has bills to pay, a wife and children to feed and beer to buy and drink. This is a recurring humour in Viking-related materials. Hägar sharpens a sword and admits to lying awake at night, wondering why he *has to* raid and pillage in England, until he realises that it is simply his job to do so (fig. 1). As he walks out of the frame on the last panel, with sword in hand, assumedly he will not be considering a career change in the near future.

Another example of this phenomenon are the Muppets, in episode 524 of which (first aired in December 1980) ‘Kermit the Frog’ introduced the Vikings as cruel, heartless marauders who earned the title of “worst humans in history” until the character known as ‘Swedish Chef’ protests by hitting him over the head with a skillet. Kermit then retracts his statement and calls the Vikings “gentle, quaint, fun-loving charmers”. This is followed by a song-and-dance number where Viking pigs sing a version of the popular disco pop song, “In the Navy”, while raiding and ransacking a village. An interesting detail in that scene is that one of the villagers helps the Vikings leave with their loot, by pushing their ship out to sea again. One can only conclude that a visit from the Vikings was exciting and fun rather than horrifying and terrible.

This is exactly what makes the Vikings so interesting. Playing up their exploits and interpreting them in a positive and amusing way allows for positive and entertaining stereotyping. However, it begs the question of whether people distinguish between the actual historical Viking age and this stereotype of Vikings? Is it merely an external image, meant to amuse children and to be sold as tacky tourist memorabilia, or is it so engrained in society that it has in some way become part of the national identity and collective memory of countries that have historical Viking links? Furthermore, how does this image contrast with museum exhibitions on the Viking age? How does the museum narrative build on, or contradict the concepts of Vikings which have deep roots in both countries and have been created over a long period in both countries? And finally, how is the image and message about the Viking age within exhibitions interpreted by domestic visitors, who are bound to have been influenced by the stereotype image of Vikings?

In order to answer these questions I conducted fieldwork at the Yorkshire Museum in York, England and Víkingaheimar in Reykjanesbær, Iceland. The fieldwork was aimed at adult visitors and members of staff in both museums, who were asked to take part in a three-part study, consisting of a questionnaire, recorded interview and a word-association task. These various assignments were designed to gain information on the image of Vikings within museums and in current society.

The fieldwork allowed me to gain a better understanding of the views of domestic visitors and members of staff. What I discovered quite early during the fieldwork was that most participants considered themselves to have a personal connection with the Viking past. Moreover, they seemed to visit these museums within the framework of their national identity and so reflected on the exhibitions from that mind-set. My analysis explores these results based on various relevant theories on

personal and national identities, historical understanding and collective social memory in order to understand the importance and uses of the Viking image within society. Indeed, this research is based on theories relating to history, philosophy, museology and sociology with the aim of gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the themes resulting from the fieldwork. This allowed for a comparison between Iceland and England, exploring their commonalities and differences in order to further understanding of both cultures.

The fieldwork demonstrated, amongst other things, that visitors understood the museums' representations of the Viking age from their own preconceived ideas about their society's past. Although visits to the museums may have added something to their understanding, contradicting knowledge held little power in the long run and instead yielded to the stronger image originating in collective memory. This conclusion clearly demonstrates the deep roots of national identity within a collective, common reading of the past. It also enabled an analysis of the relevant exhibitions in both museums, based on the effects they had on visitor responses. In chapter 3 I will illustrate how, in some ways, the exhibitions enabled visitors to create their own meaning due to the choices of display methods and narratives. As will be discussed in this thesis, museums are not neutral spaces; in fact, exhibitions are set up to reflect a narrative chosen to convey certain ideas and messages about the past. However, visitors do not always perceive messages as they were intended. The museums under study certainly provided relevant examples of the roles of visitors and the institutions in creating meaning within exhibitions. A distance between visitors and history exists within museums that allowed them to partake in the process and make judgement calls on the past based on their own preconceived ideas. This, in turn, was influenced by collective social ideals and memory. History, in this case, Viking history, is therefore shown to be relevant for

present society and national identity and becomes a political tool to frame various policies and rules. It can influence perceived communal personality traits, national and personal identities and help establish social unity.

As will be discussed in detail in later chapters, the Vikings are regarded as a part of society, yet they stand outside of it at the same time. This is in some way due to the influences of the popular cultural stereotype of Vikings. It mixes in with actual historical facts to create a link which is at the same time imagined and unreal yet immediate and relevant to modern English and Icelandic society. England has been influenced by a variety of different cultures throughout its long history not least because of invasions, immigration and its imperial past. Some of these influences, such as those of the Normans and Vikings, are simultaneously regarded as part of the inner national identity and as standing outside it. On the other hand, Icelanders are a nation based on a homogenous racial and a cultural identity because they commonly and unquestioningly trace their ancestry back to the Viking settlers and their Nordic culture. Furthermore, Iceland has a shorter history and has not experienced hostile invasions and the rate of immigration that England has.

These two countries therefore represent two different kinds of national identities, making them ideal for a comparison of the kind undertaken in this research. The similarities and differences in the views of the participants on the Viking age and how they related to their social background and identity produced quite clear results. It was obvious that Icelandic and English participants demonstrated nationalistic attitudes in a very different manner which was also reflected in the way they used the past in order to make sense of present social norms. This is partly due to the fact that nationalism has developed in rather different forms in England and Iceland, as will be discussed in greater detail later.

Note, that within this thesis I am mainly concerned with English identity, rather than British identity. I recognise that many of the ideas on Vikings originate from Victorian times when Britain was being constructed as a new nation. However, the Vikings were being imagined and viewed differently within the constituent parts of Britain, i.e. Scotland, Ireland, Wales and England. Moreover, the majority of participants whom I interviewed in York were English. When those participants discussed their identity, it was not always clear whether they were referring to ‘British’ or ‘English’ identity. In chapter 6 I will discuss the connection between this discrepancy and English nationalism and identity formation. However, for the sake of clarity and continuity, I will mostly refer to England and English identity within this thesis, unless otherwise stated.

## Havoc, Honour and Heroism: The Making of the Viking Image in England and Iceland

### *Icelandic Vikings*

As part of my study, I undertook preliminary research into the major literary and historical influences of the Viking image in England and Iceland. An analysis of the data obtained at Víkingaheimar, led to the conclusion that the major influences on the Viking myth in Iceland stemmed from the Icelandic sagas and other medieval sources covering the settlement of Iceland and the Viking age in a Nordic context. The manuscripts of these medieval works were written in Iceland in the 13<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries and provide the oldest written sources on that period in the Nordic countries. As will be discussed in Chapter 1, the sagas and the medieval historical works form to some extent the basis of Icelandic national identity and understanding of the past.

Most of the sagas focus on the mid-10<sup>th</sup> to the early 11<sup>th</sup> century, telling the story of the lives and adventures of the original settlers and their families, but concentrating mainly on their later descendants.<sup>21</sup> One of the most famous sagas is *Brennu Njáls saga*, which tells the story of the wise man Njáll Þorgeirsson and the noble hero Gunnar Hámundarson.<sup>22</sup> The main narrative deals with the long term effects of blood feuds. As is common in the sagas, supernatural omens also play their part, manifesting themselves for example in dreams. Honour is shown to be a major characteristic of the Viking way of life and sometimes the slightest provocation could result in destruction and bloodshed which spanned generations.<sup>23</sup>

Quite telling of the image of the Vikings both at the time when the sagas were written as well as presently, is that the most common insult mentioned is a man's manhood being called into question. Together with the value of honour, it shows the exaggerated and restrictive image of masculinity. This is still one of the main characteristics of the stereotypical Viking warrior, who is still commonly viewed and presented as a strong, manly male.

The exaggeratedly masculine male warrior meets his equal in the occasional representations of fierce Viking women in the sagas and in various skaldic verses (which are poems composed by Scandinavian poets, or scalds, preserved mostly in

---

<sup>21</sup> For a full translation of the sagas, see: *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* ed. by Vidar Hreinsson and others, vols I-V (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> *Brennu Njáls Saga*, vol III, pp. 1-220. Note regarding the Icelandic names: Icelanders retain the ancient Nordic naming convention whereby a person's first name counts as the principal name. Apart from a few family names, the second name is only a patronymic indicating the father's name with the addition of 'dottir' (daughter) and 'son' (son).

<sup>23</sup> Jesse L. Byock has pointed out that Icelandic society was not as violent as it is often portrayed. He believes that the tendency is to focus on extreme situations in the sagas, while generally, people attempted to find peaceful compromises. See further: Jesse L. Byock, 'Feuding in Viking-Age Iceland's Great Village' in *Conflict in Medieval Europe: Changing Perspectives on Society and Culture* ed. by Warren C. Brown and Piotr Gorecki (Aldershot & Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), pp. 229-241.

written sources dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century). These women were frequently described as having an iron will and sometimes rough disposition, regardless of whether they were presented as friends or foes. Sometimes, they mercilessly manipulate the men around them to claim vengeance on other families for perceived wrongdoings or in order to get rid of their husbands. Hallgerður Höskuldsdóttir, a famed beauty and the wife of Gunnar, for example, caused the death of five members of Njál's family because of an argument she had with his wife. She also famously got her revenge on Gunnar for slapping her by refusing to give him a lock of her hair to use as a bowstring during his final battle. Another famous female character in the sagas is Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir, who appears in *Laxdæla saga*.<sup>24</sup> She was known for her beauty, for being married four times and for being the first Icelandic nun. Guðrún is a classic example of the Icelandic stereotype of woman in the Viking age. Because women were unable to carry out vengeance themselves, they had to use other, more devious means of doing so. Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir was headstrong and refused to bow to the will of others. When she felt repressed by the men in her life, she found some means of changing her fate. From these types of stories, it is sometimes shown, that while the male characters are the brawn, the women represent the brains. Notably, the devious actions of some of the female protagonists are not necessarily perceived as negative in the sagas. On the contrary, it is occasionally shown as a sign of inner strength and as a positive reinforcement of family honour and values.

The long-term effect of this representation of Icelandic medieval society is that Vikings are still frequently perceived in this glorified way in the country. Despite the main narratives of the sagas being clearly fictional, the characteristics of the main

---

<sup>24</sup> *Laxdæla Saga* Volume V, pp. 1-119.

protagonists demonstrated within them still stand strong and influence the way that Icelanders view their national and even personal identity, history and collective social characteristics. The sagas are known to the great majority of Icelanders as being important national treasures and the pride of Icelandic literature.<sup>25</sup>

In present society the sagas are regarded as a proof of the genealogical and social link of present-day Icelandic peoples to Vikings.<sup>26</sup> They paint a glorified picture of the settlement age in Iceland, which is shown as a time of prosperity, mental and physical strength, honour, valour and blood-revenge. As will be briefly discussed in Chapter 1: ‘Constructing the Image of Vikings’, the relevance of these source materials also lies in the emphasis placed on their value by the Icelandic independence movement which used them to encourage the nation to demand independence from Denmark. This nationalist view on the medieval literature is still strong in present Icelandic society which is still under strong influence of conventional nationalism.

As an example of this influence, Magnús Einarsson uses the theory on the ‘rhetoric of the image’ developed by Barthes to discuss the connection between Icelandic national identity and mass tourism.<sup>27</sup> He writes that Icelandic identity has been deeply influenced by an ideology of nationalism. By creating and endorsing cultural traditions, mythmaking and relics, a continuity is created between the past and the present. Magnús continues that official and historical buildings and cultural institutions, such as museums, attempt to preserve the roots of the nation and serve to confirm and

---

<sup>25</sup> Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithica & London: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 171.

<sup>26</sup> Dr. Kári Stefánsson, chief executive officer of deCode genetics said in an interview in *Morgunblaðið*, on the 24th of November, 1996 that Icelanders were in possession of a great deal of information about themselves due to their obsession with tracing their ancestry, preferably back to Egill Skallagrímsson (the main protagonist of *Egilssaga*).

<sup>27</sup> Magnús Einarsson, ‘The Wandering Semioticians: Tourism and the Image of Modern Iceland’ in *Images of Contemporary Iceland: Everyday Lives and Global Context*, ed. by Gísli Pálsson and E. Paul Durrenberger (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996), pp. 215-235 (p. 216).



defend nationalistic ideology in society.<sup>28</sup> Although modern Iceland is deeply involved in international relations, nevertheless, Icelanders still pride themselves on preserving their unique, ancient identity and traditions.<sup>29</sup>

Within this theoretical discussion, nationalism means that Icelanders are proud of their ancestry and their social and historical background and attempt to keep their language and culture from being altered too much by foreign influences, providing with an interesting comparison to English nationalism, which is more subtle in some ways.

Niels Einarsson writes that national identity in Iceland is naturalised through notions of race, which is then expressed through notions of purity.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, various geographical locations are considered important for the Icelandic nation because of their connection with the settlement age and the medieval commonwealth. Þingvellir, the original site of parliament established in 930, is, for example, protected as a national park. Furthermore, Borgarnes is a small town located at the shores of Borgarfjörður, close to the scene of *Egilssaga*. A museum has been established in the town, where the story of *Egilssaga* is retold through wooden art installations. The importance of that saga is further established through various monuments which have been erected in the town to commemorate various important events related in that saga.

Thus, the importance and impact of the sagas on current national identity and structure once again emerges. This suggests that while some Icelandic museums may attempt to present the Viking age in a more impartial way, they still promote to some extent the Viking myth. In the same way, no matter what messages museums, such as

---

<sup>28</sup> Magnús Einarsson, p. 216.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 231.

<sup>30</sup> Niels Einarsson, 'Whale-Siting: Spatiality in Icelandic Nationalism' in *Images of Contemporary Iceland: Everyday Lives and Global Context*, ed. by Gísli Pálsson and E. Paul Durrenberger (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996), pp. 25-45 (p. 39).

the ones chosen for my fieldwork, try to convey about the past, when visitors get to the gift shop - usually the last room before the exit - the majority of Viking-themed items for sale promote the stereotype Viking warrior image.

### *English Vikings*

The Icelandic sagas were also influential in the Victorian age when the modern image of the Viking myth in England was created. In medieval English chronicles the Vikings were described as foul, uncivilised brutes who went about killing, looting and burning monasteries. However, during the Victorian age, they increasingly became to be regarded in a more positive light. Vikings were recreated through scholarly research and publications of the Icelandic sagas and medieval historical works. These books were translated and studied by academics, they inspired musical compositions, literature, theatrical works and more. The Vikings came to be romantically regarded as poetic and heroic barbarians, who embodied strong moral values and a desirably close relationship to nature. It was also in this context, that the external image of Vikings was developed and their helmets sprouted horns and wings. While the English public in present society has, for the most part, never read the Icelandic sagas, this literature was during Victorian Britain an important part in reforming the Viking image, which has persisted to this day.

Viking re-enactment societies have sprung up all over Britain, which is also the scene of various Viking festivals, literature, music, theatre, not to mention numerous films and documentaries. Unlike Iceland, however, Vikings are only one part of a complicated, multi-cultural pool of England's genealogical background and history. As I discuss in chapter 2, rather than espousing a primarily racial identity as Icelanders do, English identity is an ethnic one and is based on a cultural background. The results of

my research imply that these various external, cultural influences on society mean that individuals, such as the English participants of my study, are able to decide for themselves which historical culture or group they mainly relate to, be it Vikings, Romans or some other entity. It is clear, however, that while the Vikings and the Romans are by no means the *only* forefathers of the English, they are still an important part of the national identity. The Vikings still draw considerable interest from the public, as is evident from their strong presence within popular, mainstream culture and influence upon modern English society.

## About the Author

My personal and intellectual background has shaped how this research was developed and framed. To begin with, I would like to emphasise that I am writing this research thesis as an Icelandic, influenced by my national identity and social surroundings in the same ways as the Icelandic participants of my fieldwork study. As the daughter of a historian, I grew up having the Icelandic sagas read to me as a bedtime story. I sat wide-eyed and mesmerised as my father read my favourite saga, *Egilssaga*, out loud for my sister and me, enjoying in particular the many gruesome and dramatic scenes of vengeance and murder. Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir, who was discussed above, was someone I took a particular liking to, for having great inner strength and an iron will. I enjoyed reading Icelandic folktales, Viking poetry and the sagas. Like the Icelandic participants of my study, I was taught about the Icelandic sagas and medieval manuscripts in school. I grew up believing the Viking age was not only the Golden Age of Icelandic culture, but something which gave Iceland a unique status. I was influenced and guided by the same Icelandic films, depicting the honour and strength of the rebel Viking settlers of Iceland.

I was fortunate enough to grow up in an international setting, because my family and I moved abroad several times. We lived for a total of three years in Germany, one year in France and one summer in Oxford. As such, my research interest is significantly influenced by my own experiences as an Icelander living abroad and in Iceland. When starting my academic studies and learning more about Iceland and Britain's Viking history, I recognised the same ideas and misconceptions in myself which were discussed there. Questioning and analysing them from an academic standpoint naturally guided my academic, theoretical trajectory.

In some way, then, Scandinavian and in particular, Icelandic culture and history has been a part of my university studies since the very beginning. My bachelor's degree at the University of Iceland was in comparative literature, with a minor in folkloristics (meaning the academic discipline concentrating on the study of folklore, in addition to social and cultural study of the past and present). The main subject of my studies was the literary and cultural history of countries all over the world, with an emphasis on Iceland. My study of folkloristics focused on the study of Nordic (especially Icelandic) culture, history and heritage in the past and present. My undergraduate study was the first step into my academic understanding and interest of the Viking myth, national identities, historical understanding and the development of social perceptions.

My master's degree was also in comparative literature. During the first year of my two-year course of study I was in the Erasmus exchange programme at the University College London. During that time I focused on the history and culture of the Nordic countries and studied the Viking age in Britain. This year was particularly enlightening for the development of my academic interests, as it provided me with an English intellectual perspective on the Viking age and Nordic culture and history.

# Thesis Structure

I have attempted to organise this thesis in a way that reflects the diversity and complexity of the research topic without lacking in detail. Chapter 1: Constructing the Image of the Vikings, thus introduces briefly the history of the Viking age and the development of the Viking image within Icelandic and English society. The aim is to introduce the wider framework of the research subject, and show the main influences on the Viking image through history.

Chapter 2: History, Meaning and Identity, summarises some of the key theories used within this research to analyse the data from the fieldwork conducted at Víkingaheimar and Yorkshire Museum. This chapter discusses some of the main influences on visitor perceptions, identity creation and how memory and history, especially ancient history, is used in modern society in order to explore and explain present social matters.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Case Studies, focuses on the development of the fieldwork study and how museums were chosen for the fieldwork. After stating the aims and objectives of my research, the chapter depicts the Yorkshire Museum and Víkingaheimar and explains, and compares the general layout and background information of the museums. This is followed by an analysis of the exhibitions in both museums, which is based on visitor responses and my own observations. The chapter then describes the development of the three-part study used during my fieldwork to gain information on the image of Vikings from adult museum visitors and members of staff. The three following methods were used: a word-association task, questionnaire and a semi-structured interview with each participant. After a brief explanation of how the

Icelandic data was translated, I then introduce the statistical data obtained by replies to the questionnaire.

Chapter 4: Word Association Responses Analysed, summarises the various themes which emerged from the word association task and compares them to the interview responses on the same subject. The chapter is divided into the following themes: Appearance of Vikings, External Viking Characteristics, Society and Family, Farming, Folklore and Religion, Maritime, Connection with Other Societies and Objects and Items. These categories focus on how participants discussed the image of the Vikings and their society.

Chapter 5: The Museums and Impressions of Vikings, is the first of two chapters presenting an overview of the results of the interviews. The chapter demonstrates what participants thought about the museums they had visited, i.e. Víkingaheimar and Yorkshire Museum. The preconceptions and understanding of the participants are listed and their image of Vikings within the museum divided according to themes. After the discussions on the museums themselves, the chapter focuses on general impressions of Vikings, going on to explore, in particular, the image of women in the Viking age and finally, how participants connected that with the present in various ways.

Chapter 6: Identity is the second chapter showing the results of the interviews with various participants, focused on how national, regional and personal identity was discussed in connection with the Vikings. The various links that people made to Vikings, demonstrate that they are a relevant part of modern society and individual understanding of national, regional and personal identities.

As the title suggests, in Chapter 7: Analysis of Fieldwork, I explore the main themes of the participant responses and analyse them using the theoretical framework set in chapter 2.

The last chapter, Conclusions: Historical Understanding and Identity Development, summarises the research and discusses the overarching results of the fieldwork and theoretical analysis. It then goes on to list the limitations of the research and concludes by listing various possible avenues for development.

There are three appendixes in this thesis. The first one offers scanned versions of the word association sheets, the second includes interview and questionnaire protocols and the third includes transcriptions of two interviews, one from each museums.

# Chapter 1

## Constructing the Image of the Vikings

### Introduction

The age of Vikings lasted from the 8<sup>th</sup> century till the 11<sup>th</sup> century. It was a time when Scandinavians sailed across Europe and beyond, in search of loot, new lands and trading opportunities. As will be discussed below, the earliest sources available for that period show a varied description on what sort of people the Vikings were and what indeed they were up to, all depending on the author and his motives. Through the ages the image of Vikings has further changed and evolved and that process is still at work in the present. The image of Vikings in society therefore does not necessarily reflect the truth uncovered on the Viking age through archaeology and such academic fields of study.

The aim of this chapter is to broadly summarise the image and history of Vikings from the earliest sources to the present. This will show how and why the image of Vikings has developed into what it is presently. The history of the Vikings will provide background information necessary to understand the framework of the participant responses. In other words, it helps to explain *why* the participants answered in the way they did.

This review could have been written in various ways. I could have focused on the development of academic discourse into the Viking age, that is, the various interpretations and understanding of the Viking age throughout history. It could also have proven interesting to focus on how the Viking age was used by the Icelandic nationalist movement in order to encourage the nation to demand independence from



Denmark, or indeed to analyse further the various important literary and academic influences on the Viking image within Iceland and England. A variety of extensive research exists on these topics; however, this chapter merely provides a brief summary.<sup>31</sup> While the above mentioned topics are both important and interesting, this research was not specifically designed to evaluate them. Instead, it focuses on the contemporary image of Vikings and its uses in current English and Icelandic society. To this effect, the historical information included in this thesis serve only as reference; future research into the development of the Viking myth within Icelandic and English society could broaden the understanding of its current image.

## Brief History of the Viking Age

The Viking story begins in the 8<sup>th</sup> century when Scandinavian Vikings (mostly from Denmark and Norway) began making a name for themselves as fearful raiders, conquerors and colonists.<sup>32</sup> All through to the 11<sup>th</sup> century they plundered extensively in the British Isles, the Frankish empire (territory ruled and inhabited by Franks, which refers to Austrasia, centred on the Rhine and Meuse rivers in northern Europe), the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa.<sup>33</sup> In the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the Viking raiders gained control over Orkney, Shetland, most of the Hebrides and a large part of England. In addition, they set up base on the coast of Ireland, from which they launched attacks

---

<sup>31</sup> Peter Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings* (London: Edward Arnold, 1962). Peter Foote and David M. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement: The Society and Culture of Early Medieval Scandinavia* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1970). Magnus Magnusson, *The Vikings* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing, 2003), Else Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, trans. by Susan M. Margeson and Kirsten Williams (London: Penguin, 1998), Jesse Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas and Power* (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1993), Stefan Brink and Neil Price, *The Viking World* (London: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>32</sup> Roesdahl, p. 186. Peter Sawyer, 'The Age of the Vikings and Before' *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, ed. by Peter Sawyer (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 1-19.

<sup>33</sup> Sawyer, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, p. 1. Roesdahl, pp. 195-203.

within the country and across the Irish Sea.<sup>34</sup> These Nordic intruders were raiders, traders, settlers, mercenaries and had a huge impact on a number of countries. To this day, Nordic people, especially Icelanders and Norwegians, proudly look upon this time as the ‘Golden Age’ and take their Viking heritage very seriously.<sup>35</sup>

When the Viking raids started these were mostly of the so-called ‘hit-and run’ type which hardly ever extended far inland.<sup>36</sup> However, this changed soon and by the 830s the raids escalated significantly, increasing both in scale and extent.<sup>37</sup> The main area of the Viking attacks was in Frankia and the British Isles, where they took slaves and sold them to Spain and North Africa.<sup>38</sup> They also pillaged and happily took advantage of internal conflict to gain power and more loot.<sup>39</sup> Dorestad in Friesland, the biggest settlement of North-western Europe during the Middle Ages, situated approximately 80 km from the open sea, was attacked by the Nordic raiders at least seven times in the years 834-864.<sup>40</sup> All over Western Europe, churches were being targeted for loot, except in Ireland where the raiders preferred taking slaves to plundering churches as these usually did not possess any riches.<sup>41</sup> In the rest of Western Europe, the same churches were also raided multiple times.<sup>42</sup> They were perfect places to attack, because they were frequently full of ‘loot’, poorly guarded and conveniently located.

---

<sup>34</sup> Sawyer, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> Roesdahl, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Sawyer, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> For information on slavery in Viking society, see: Roesdahl, pp. 53-55.

<sup>39</sup> Sawyer, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, pp. 9-10. Roesdahl, pp. 198-199.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Sawyer, ‘The Viking Legacy’ in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, ed. by Peter Sawyer, pp. 250-263 (p. 255). Roesdahl, pp. 195-203.

<sup>41</sup> Sawyer, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, p. 10.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

In the last decade of the 8<sup>th</sup> century up to the 9<sup>th</sup> century countries on both sides of the English Channel started taking action against the raiders, ensuring the safety of their churches and coasts. As a result of growing Frankish resistance, the Vikings turned their attention to England in 863, but later, internal political struggles in Frankia enabled the Vikings to take advantage of the situation and start pillaging and raiding in the empire again until 891.<sup>43</sup> The English would pay a substantial amount of money for peace, even if it was just temporary and the raiders did not take long to realise and use this to their advantage.<sup>44</sup> After repeated attacks on England, Knut the son of Sven Forkbeard (the first Viking chief to lead a major raid on England in 991), was recognised as king by the English in 1016. His fleet subsequently provided for an effective defence against Viking attacks.

By the 10<sup>th</sup> century Nordic Vikings had rather limited opportunities for raiding as the British Isles and Normandy were already partly settled by their kinsmen who took unkindly to newcomers. In Iceland the best land was already claimed by settlers and all over Western Europe, countries were taking increasing action against the Vikings by fortifying their defences as well as organising armies.<sup>45</sup> Conflicts within Scandinavia itself prevented individual Viking clans from combining forces and invading Europe on a large scale.<sup>46</sup>

In the meantime new opportunities were opening up for the Vikings in Eastern Europe. There the raiders (mostly from eastern Sweden) met with little local defences and could easily loot slaves, silver and fur. Some managed to gain control in centres of power and establish a permanent settlement in the Rus state, now Northern Russia. They

---

<sup>43</sup> Sawyer, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>46</sup> Roesdahl, pp. 64-65.

established trading routes and trade centres to market local goods, profiting heftily in the bargain.<sup>47</sup> By the late 9<sup>th</sup> century Scandinavians had been active in European Russia (the entire area between the Arctic and Black Seas and between Poland and the Urals) for almost 150 years.<sup>48</sup>

In the 10<sup>th</sup> century huge silver deposits were discovered in the Hindu Kush, enabling the Samanid rulers of Transoxania to produce a vast amount of coins and use them to buy goods from Russia.<sup>49</sup> Numerous Nordic graves in the area confirm that this aroused great interest amongst Vikings, who increasingly settled there.<sup>50</sup> The volume of trade grew significantly until reaching its peak in the 940s and 950s.<sup>51</sup> The trade flow declined in the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century for unknown reasons, and had ceased entirely by the 1010s.<sup>52</sup> The Viking age was over.

Scandinavians were not only active raiders; they also established permanent and temporary settlements wherever they went. Countries in which they settled include North America (temporary settlements), England, Russia, Greenland (until approximately the late 15<sup>th</sup> century) and of course Iceland, which, as will be discussed below, is said to have been discovered by mistake in the latter half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

There are not many reliable written sources from the Viking period on the settlement of Iceland. The oldest ones were written (or re-written) by Icelandic scholars in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century, which was after the Christianization of the country. These

---

<sup>47</sup> Sawyer, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas S. Noonan, 'Scandinavians in European Russia', *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, ed. by Peter Sawyer, pp. 134-155 (p. 146).

<sup>49</sup> Sawyer, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, p. 15.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Noonan, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, p. 147.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

sources give varied accounts as to why the original settlers of Iceland left their homelands in search of new lands, and of the settlement period itself.

According to *Landnámabók*, Iceland was discovered by accident by the Viking Naddoddur, when he drifted to the island on his way to the Faroe Islands.<sup>53</sup> He gave it the name Snæland (Snow-land) and continued his travels. There were a couple of other people who settled temporarily in Iceland after that, changing the island's name and then left again.<sup>54</sup> The *Landnámabók*, *Íslendingabók* and other sources assert that Iceland was originally settled by Irish monks, *Papar*, who fled when the pagan Vikings started arriving.<sup>55</sup> However, there is little direct evidence to support this claim. Some crosses inscribed on the walls of manmade caves in the south of Iceland have been found, and there are also a few places named after the monks, for instance Papey Island. Some scholars believe that if Irish monks actually settled on the island, they were most likely killed or enslaved by the Viking settlers rather than being allowed to leave in peace.<sup>56</sup>

The first man said to have permanently settled in Iceland was Ingólfur Arnarson and his foster brother, Hjörleifur Hróðmarsson. They found the island when fleeing Norway after killing two brothers. According to *Landnámabók* they stayed in Iceland one winter before returning to Norway.<sup>57</sup> An oracle told Ingólfur that his destiny lay in Iceland and so he soon returned. When first arriving at the coast of Iceland, he cast out his High Seat pillars ('öndvegissúlur', these were a couple of wooden poles which were placed on each side of the seat which belonged to the head of the household) and then

---

<sup>53</sup> *Landnámabók*, ed. by Jakob Benediktsson, , Íslenzk fornrit, vol 1 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1968), vol 1, pp. 34-35.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 35-40.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32. *Íslendingabók*, ed. by Jakob Benediktsson, Íslenzk fornrit, vol I (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1968), p. 5. Peter Godfrey Foote and David M. Wilson, p. 52.

<sup>56</sup> For a discussion on the Irish monks in Iceland see: Foote and Wilson, pp. 9-10. See also: Gunnar Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years: History of Marginal Society* (London: Hurst & Company, 2000), pp. 9-10.

<sup>57</sup> *Landnámabók*, pp. 40-43.

settled where they drifted up, in Reykjavík. Other settlers soon followed and set up farms in Iceland; amongst these early pioneers was Auður Djúpauðga (meaning Deep-wealthy), a no-nonsense, robust woman who claimed a vast amount of land in the west of Iceland, which later gave livelihood to well over 80 farmers.<sup>58</sup>

Following Ingólfur Arnarson's settlement in Reykjavík in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Iceland slowly became fully inhabited. The country appears to have been relatively well-connected to the outside world by means of ships owned by the settlers and merchants and goods, primarily wool, were exported. In the year 930 Icelanders founded a commonwealth (*þjóðveldi*) with the establishment of parliament, *Alþing*. Laws were enacted and the commonwealth had judicial and legislative power, but no executive power.<sup>59</sup> The various chieftains who dominated the parliament started blood feuds and power struggles which are recorded in various sagas, such as *Eyrbyggjasaga*, *Laxdælasaga* and *Brennu-Njáls saga*, which survive as 13<sup>th</sup> century manuscript copies. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century the struggle of the chieftains developed into a kind of a civil war which seems to have contributed to the collapse of the Icelandic commonwealth in 1262-1264, when Icelanders swore allegiance to the king of Norway.

## The Development of the Viking Image

As mentioned earlier, sources written in the Middle Ages give different accounts of Vikings. The earliest sources, written outside Scandinavia, describe Vikings from the standpoint of the victims who describe them as filthy, rowdy barbarians, who pillaged and killed wherever they went. Nordic sources, many of which were written in Iceland,

---

<sup>58</sup> More on the settlers see: Foote and Wilson, pp. 54-55. See also: Gunnar Karlsson, pp. 9-15.

<sup>59</sup> For further information on Althing, see: Gunnar Karlsson, pp. 20-27.

tell a different story.<sup>60</sup> The Vikings are described as pioneers, adventurers and heroes, fighting on behalf of their chieftain and for honour. Going on Viking voyages is depicted as a good summer occupation for young, brave adventurers. However, much has changed since these accounts were recorded by authors who obviously had a tendency to glorify the exploits of their ancestors. The image of Vikings has gone through multiple changes, both inside and outside the Nordic countries as will be discussed in this chapter section.

The origins of the Viking legend in Iceland, the sagas, have been largely discredited as reliable sources by modern scholars.<sup>61</sup> A further influence on Icelanders' view of the Viking age are historical manuscripts written (or re-written from earlier copies) such as *Landnámabók* and *Íslendingabók*, composed by local scholars recording the settlement of Iceland and the lives of the settlers.

The earliest written source on the settlement and the Viking age is *Landnámabók*, which was briefly discussed above in connection with the history of the Viking age.<sup>62</sup> It was written in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century in Iceland and is preserved in five different versions and is clearly the work of numerous authors. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century it was rewritten by orders of local Icelandic chieftains, wanting to trace their lineage to original settlers for political and economic reasons. As with all written accounts from that period, it is impossible to guess who exactly wrote which part of the book, for whom and for what reason, and so its historical claims cannot be taken at face value.<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Lars Lönnroth, 'The Vikings in History and Legend', *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, ed. by Peter Sawyer (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 225-250 (p. 225).

<sup>61</sup> Gunnar Karlsson, pp. 11-15 and pp. 66-71. Roesdahl, pp. 11-19.

<sup>62</sup> *Landnámabók*.

<sup>63</sup> For a discussion on why *Landnámabók* was written, see for example Jakob Benediktsson's introduction: *Landnámabók*, ed. By Jakob Benediktsson, Íslensk fornrit, vol II (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska

In *Íslendingabók*, written in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, the author Ari ‘the Wise’ Þorgilsson asserts that King Haraldur the ‘fair-haired’ objected to the emigration to Iceland, imposing taxes on any man leaving from Norway to Iceland.<sup>64</sup> Other sources go as far as to say that the Vikings who settled in Iceland fled Norway because they objected to King Haraldur’s rule and his efforts to create a unified state in Norway. However, this cannot be verified due to lack of documentary evidence and many scholars believe that it was in fact the shortage of agricultural land in the Western fjords of Norway that was the main cause of emigration to Iceland. Indeed, evidence suggests that the relationship between Norway and Iceland was generally not hostile.<sup>65</sup>

Traditional Icelandic history, written under strong influence of nationalism has, however, depicted the settlement of the country as an act of noble and freedom-loving rebels who defied the dictatorial laws and regulations of the king of Norway. One of the most influential books in this tradition is *Gullöld Íslendinga* (the Golden Age of Icelanders) written by Jón Jónsson Aðils in the early twentieth century.<sup>66</sup> According to Ingi Sigurðsson, Jón Aðils was greatly influential in framing the views and understanding of the collective past of the nation.<sup>67</sup> The book contains lectures by Jón Aðils and was originally printed in three books in the years 1903-1910. He was sponsored by the local government for ten years to write and deliver these lectures; he became the first lecturer in history when the University of Iceland was founded in 1911. The message behind Jón Aðils’ writings was based on the Romantic nationalist theories

---

forritafélag, 1968), pp. CXVIII-CXX and Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas and Power*, pp. 16-19.

<sup>64</sup> *Íslendingabók*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>65</sup> Foote and Wilson, *The Viking Achievement*, p. 53. Jesse L. Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas and Power*, pp. 53-55.

<sup>66</sup> Jón Jónsson Aðils, *Gullöld Íslendinga*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Reykjavík: Þorleifur Gunnarsson, Steindórsprent hf, 1948).

<sup>67</sup> Ingi Sigurðsson, *Íslensk sagnfræði frá miðri 19. öld til miðrar 20. aldar* (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1986), p. 24.



of the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder.<sup>68</sup> His aim was to show that Iceland had a noble heritage and that the story of the nation was a story of “frelsisást og karlmannlegt sjálfstæði”, i.e. “love of freedom and manly independence”.<sup>69</sup> Jón Aðils wrote about the just laws and high moral standards of the settlement age in Iceland, and that Iceland would only regain its former glory when it was free from foreign rule.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, Jón Aðils believed that Iceland’s true national identity would be preserved through the purity of the Icelandic language, wherein the Icelandic sagas were a key element.<sup>71</sup>

It appears, as was clearly demonstrated by the Icelandic participants of my fieldwork, that this version of history is still most popular among Icelanders. It fully corresponds with medieval Icelandic accounts of the Vikings as heroic, hardy and honourable warriors. The accounts of the settlement also describe Iceland somewhat romantically as a wooded, fertile island, a ‘living’ country of volcanic activity and spewing hot water springs, rich with wild animals for hunting and trees for building.<sup>72</sup>

Modern scholars have argued that the reason for this glorification and idealisation of the Viking age, and Iceland in particular, is due to various political factors. *Íslendingabók* for instance, may have been written to emphasise the importance of Iceland, urging the nation to unify under the leadership of Gissur Ísleifsson, the

---

<sup>68</sup> Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, ‘Réttlæting þjóðernis. Samanburður á alþýðufyrirlestrum Jóns Aðils og hugmyndum Johanns Gottlieb Fichte’, *Skírnir* 169 (1995), pp. 36-64 (pp. 51-53).

<sup>69</sup> Jón Jónsson Aðils, p. 4.

<sup>70</sup> For discussion on Jón Aðils, see for example: Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, ‘Réttlæting þjóðernis. Samanburður á alþýðufyrirlestrum Jóns Aðils og hugmyndum Johanns Gottlieb Fichte’ as quoted above.

<sup>71</sup> Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur. Þjóðerni, kyngervi og vald á Íslandi 1900 – 1930*, (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2004).

<sup>72</sup> Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, p. 54.

contemporary bishop.<sup>73</sup> The author of *Íslendingabók*, Ari Thorgilsson belonged to Gissur's family, Haukdælir, one of the most powerful dynasties of Iceland.<sup>74</sup>

It is impossible to identify the exact authors of the Icelandic sagas and their origins have long been debated.<sup>75</sup> They might originate from oral transmission later recorded or be the works of authors who used historical motifs for their stories, or a mixture of the two.<sup>76</sup> They were written after Iceland became Christian in the year 1000, and are preserved in 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts. This indicates that they have been rewritten and changed from the originals; indeed, some have only been preserved as copies of copies, which increases the likelihood of error.<sup>77</sup> They are not considered valid historical sources, but can be used with care to provide some comparison with other sources and archaeological evidence.

These sagas were written for an Icelandic audience and scholars have argued that one underlying purpose of some of the authors was to prove the noble heritage and ancestry of Icelanders.<sup>78</sup> The settlers and their families are frequently described as wise, proud people, who stopped at nothing to protect their honour, families, land and wealth. This might also indicate that powerful families arranged for the writings of these manuscripts in order to prove their relationship to particular settlers to secure their hereditary right to a particular land and to underline the importance of their ancestry.<sup>79</sup> The image of Vikings as ferocious, vindictive, yet noble people was formed by the

---

<sup>73</sup> Jakob Benediktsson's introduction: *Íslendingabók*, pp. XVIII-XIX.

<sup>74</sup> Gunnar Karlsson, p. 35.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 70, also: Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas and Power*, pp. 35-50. Birgit and Peter Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia: From Conversion to Reformation, circa 800-1500*, the Nordic Series, vol 17 (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 21-24.

<sup>76</sup> Roesdahl, p. 12.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Birgit and Peter Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>79</sup> Roesdahl, p. 11.

sagas and has continued to this day in a particularly potent form in the country, as my research will show.

Other relatively contemporary written sources on the Viking age are Skaldic Verses.<sup>80</sup> The authors of the poems are often known and because the metre is rather complex, it is obvious when they have been tampered with and changed. This is the case for instance with *dróttkvæði*, or court poetry. These poems were written to flatter kings and therefore are tools of propaganda. Because they were originally oral transmissions, it is also probable that they changed over time. However, as with the sagas, these poems can provide us with some insights into the life of Vikings when compared with other sources. They also provide an interesting image of life in the Viking age. Other important poetry includes *Vikingavísur* (the story of Sighvatur Þórðarson and Saint Ólafur Helgason, king of Norway), *Völuspá* (a poem about paganism) and the *Eddic Poetry*.

The *Eddic Poetry* tells stories of gods and heroes and how they interact; they are believed to go back to the Viking age, however the date is often debated.<sup>81</sup> They have mainly existed in a manuscript called *Codex Regius* or *The Elder Edda*, in contrast to Snorri Sturluson's *Younger Edda*, or *Snorri's Edda*.<sup>82</sup> These verses do not provide historical accuracy, however they show what the image of Vikings was at the time when they were written down in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. They talk about heroes slaying monsters, and Vikings, both men and women, brutally slaying each other to avenge loved ones. The author's sympathy often lies with the person who is avenging, as is evident for

---

<sup>80</sup> For discussion see: Birgit and Peter Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia: From Conversion to Reformation, circa 800-1500*, pp. 24-26.

<sup>81</sup> For the full texts of the *Eddic Poetry* see: Peter Hallberg, *Old Icelandic Poetry, Eddic lay and Skaldic verse* (Lincoln, Nebraska & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1976).

<sup>82</sup> Roesdahl, p. 13.

example in three poems called ‘Guðrúnarkviða’ I-III and ‘Atlakviða’. These poems tell the story of Guðrún, who was forced to marry Atli, the killer of her two brothers. To avenge for their death, Guðrún kills the two sons she had with him, and serves them as the main course in a banquet she prepares. There are three poems describing Guðrún’s hard life, her sorrows and her mental greatness. Her vicious revenge on Atli does not only seem justified within the poems, but is also shown as verification of her inner strength and general superiority.<sup>83</sup>

There are a few other texts from the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries written in the Nordic countries (mostly in Iceland) which tell the story of kings and other great men of the Viking age. It has been suggested that all these texts have one thing in common, being written for political reasons, either to show the right of ownership over land, inflate the importance of kings and the ancestry of families in power in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>84</sup> Some of them were written by priests who wanted to show their own country and heritage in a more civilised manner. They painted a golden, glorious picture of the Vikings as noble warriors and heroes, rather than bloodthirsty pagans.<sup>85</sup>

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Danish and Swedish rulers anxiously wanted to prove to the rest of Europe that Scandinavia had a far superior and glorious history than most other countries. This renewed interest in Vikings, who were shown in a patriotic and respectful light.<sup>86</sup> This version of the Viking conquests continued into the 17<sup>th</sup> century when the Icelandic sagas and other Icelandic medieval manuscripts were increasingly seen as valid historical sources. These manuscripts fitted perfectly with the goal of

---

<sup>83</sup> See Guðrúnarkviða I-III and Atlakviða, Eddic Poetry, *The Poetic Edda*, ed. and trans. by Lee M. Hollander, vol 1, 11th. printing (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1962).

<sup>84</sup> Roesdahl, pp. 11-19.

<sup>85</sup> For a discussion on this topic, see: Lönnroth, ‘*The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*’, p. 225.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 231-232.

Danish and Swedish rulers to glorify the past, and seemed to prove that the culture of these countries had been so superior that it bordered on the mythical.<sup>87</sup>

During the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century this kind of historiography was finally brought to a temporary end. Vikings were no longer seen as noble heroes, but as uncivilised barbarians.<sup>88</sup> In the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, the traditional view on the Vikings was revamped by Romantic European thinkers, such as Rousseau and especially embraced by in the Victorian age where the image of Vikings as it is known in Britain today was really invented.

Vikings became a fashionable subject in Britain precisely *because* they were ancient heathen barbarians. They were romantically described by authors as the opposite of the corrupt modern and enlightened civilization. Soon archaeologists and historians followed in the footsteps of writers and poets, and enthusiastically revisited the history of the Vikings in Britain. Vikings once more were acclaimed for their barbaric ways and passionate feelings.<sup>89</sup>

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Scandinavia also adopted this kind of romantic thinking, leading to a complete revaluation of the Viking age and turning it into the true ‘Golden Age’ of Nordic culture. This was especially enthusiastically embraced by Denmark and Sweden, which suffered humiliating military defeats in the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Iceland, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the importance of the Viking myth was strengthened during the fight for independence from Denmark.

---

<sup>87</sup> Lönnroth, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, pp. 232-233, Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 91 and 133.

<sup>88</sup> Lönnroth, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, pp. 232-233.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.233-235.

One of the most notable political forces of the Icelandic independence movement was *Fjölnismenn*, a group of writers and poets who founded the journal *Fjölnir* in Copenhagen in the years 1835-47.<sup>90</sup> In 1840 Jón Sigurðsson, who had gone to Copenhagen in 1833 to study philology, abandoned his studies and with full force entered the political arena soon becoming the undisputed leader of the independence movement.<sup>91</sup> After a brief involvement with *Fjölnir*, he established a new annual journal, *Ný félagsrit* (New Society Papers) in 1841.<sup>92</sup> *Fjölnismenn* were romantics, who were eager for *Alþing* to be located at Þingvellir, where it had first been established in 930. However, Jón Sigurðsson, eager to start modernizing Iceland, believed *Alþing* should be situated in the capital, Reykjavík. Although Reykjavík was largely a Danish town, dominated by Danish merchants and their servants, Jón Sigurðsson believed it would become Icelandic with the help of the presence of an independent *Alþing*.<sup>93</sup>

While *Fjölnismenn* and Jón Sigurðsson disagreed on some points, they all inspired Icelanders to unite and built up their self-image, each in their own way: *Fjölnismenn* through poetry and Jón Sigurðsson, who had studied the Icelandic medieval manuscripts extensively, used them as evidence of the political rights of Iceland. This would form the theoretical basis of Iceland's demand for autonomy.<sup>94</sup> He believed they proved Iceland's inherited right for self-government.

Some years later, the glorious Viking past, as described, for example by Jón Aðils (see discussion above) served as a further reminder for people that they should

---

<sup>90</sup> Gunnar Karlsson, pp. 203-204.

<sup>91</sup> For more detailed information on the Icelandic Independence movement see: Gunnar Karlsson.

<sup>92</sup> Gunnar Karlsson, p. 206.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., pp. 206-207.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., pp. 203-210.

regain the greatness they once had possessed.<sup>95</sup> This way of thinking was so influential that it has survived until this day within the Nordic countries and outside them.

According to Wawn, the word ‘Viking’ which in its modern meaning was much elaborated by the Victorians had come to be in common household usage by the 1880s.<sup>96</sup> Various books, poems, lectures, essays, fables, journals, translations, plays and more were published, which painted a picture of the Vikings as defiant, triumphant sailors and warriors, adventurers, merchants, raiders, lovers and poets.<sup>97</sup> The Vikings or ‘Norsemen’ became the embodiment of the most important Victorian values, and in addition to the Anglo-Saxons and Normans, the ideal Englishmen.

The enthusiasm for the Vikings was also present in archaeology, as the few existing material objects from Britain’s Viking past were re-examined and antiquarians took creative licences in order to fill the historical gaps.<sup>98</sup> Various locations in Iceland and Norway mentioned in them became popular travel destinations for Victorian Britons.<sup>99</sup> The Viking history was used in various ways, such as to justify and strengthen national identities, link the upper class to powerful ancestors, justify values held in high regards in Victorian Britain and to support various political causes.<sup>100</sup> Publishers such as Maurice Hewlett had various sagas translated, with extensive literary embellishments, by taking the basic narrative text and recasting it in novelistic form in order to make them relevant to modern readers.<sup>101</sup> Hewlett drew a comparison between the heroic Viking warriors and British soldiers, which served to cast a positive light on

---

<sup>95</sup> Gunnar Karlsson, pp. 235-236.

<sup>96</sup> Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), p. 3.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 312-313

British heritage, nationality, colonialism and more. At the same time, it established a lasting impression of the Vikings as celebrated heroic, masculine warriors, with good moral values.<sup>102</sup> Family life was also important to Victorians, which is reflected in various novels, where Vikings realised their true place at home after a series of adventures on sea.<sup>103</sup>

Wawn writes that Vikings have held onto their power and attraction to this day because they have the ability to undergo cultural translations and modernisation.<sup>104</sup> And so, despite falling out of fashion in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were always some post-Victorians who did not abandon their idealization of the Vikings.

In no country, with the possible exception of Iceland, did the glorification of the Nordic medieval heritage, including the Viking myth, reach such heights and respectability as in Germany. The German nationalist movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century embraced the Nordic heritage as a vital part of the ‘pure’ Germanic culture it espoused in contrast with ‘decadent’ western and southern cultural influences. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the National Socialist (Nazi) movement in Germany subsequently inherited this attitude towards Nordic culture with a greatly reinforced emphasis on the superiority of the Nordic-Germanic race. This became the official dogma of the Third Reich of Adolf Hitler with terrible consequences for the whole world.<sup>105</sup> The glorification of the Vikings in 19<sup>th</sup> century Iceland and England has survived in some form into the 21<sup>st</sup> century despite being discredited particularly during the period following the end of the Second World War and the collapse of the Third Reich.

---

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 313.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., pp. 327-328.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 371.

<sup>105</sup> Arthúr B. Bollason, *Ljóshærða Villidýrið. Arfur Íslendinga í Hugarheimi Nasismans* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1990). Hans-Jürgen Luthhöft, *Der Nordische Gedanke in Deutschland. 1920 – 1940* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag, 1971).



Despite the Viking image having become somewhat tarnished by its association to Adolf Hitler's Nazis, during the war Viking symbols were sometimes also used by the movements resisting the German occupation of Norway and Denmark. This demonstrates further the adaptability of the Viking myth. After the Second World War, the Nazi form of Viking imagery ended for a while in Germany while its English form resurfaced yet again. While academics started researching the Vikings in a more critical light, rendering much of the early romanticised academic works obsolete, popular culture and mass media celebrated the Victorian created image of Vikings.

This brings us to modern interpretations and views on the Vikings and their age. While archaeology has revealed fuller, more accurate historical information on that age, the stereotypical Vikings themselves have managed to 'sneak' their way into almost all corners of contemporary culture. There are comics, romantic novels and video games starring them, music genres bearing their name (a special type of metal music is called 'Viking metal') and songs dedicated to them (such as Led Zeppelin's 'Immigration Song'). Interestingly, an iPhone application was recently developed by the Dutch company M2H Game Studio which is called 'Vikings and Bankers' where the aim is to deceive and eliminate Vikings and bankers by mimicking them. This is worth keeping in mind for the later discussion in Chapters 5 and 7, about the influences of the recent financial crisis in Iceland on the Viking image. Even beer brands (such as the Icelandic 'Einstök' beer, meaning 'unique', which decorates a Viking with a horned helmet on the label, and Barelegs Brew, from Ireland, which has a longboat as a logo) have been named after the Vikings, with bottles and cans decorated with images of fierce-looking Nordic warriors with classic (non-authentic) horned helmets. Sport teams around the world have also embraced 'Viking' in their name, as well as numerous companies and company logos. The mere term 'Viking' has become to mean something strong, mighty

and great. All over the Nordic countries (and elsewhere) Viking products are sold as tacky souvenirs for tourists, including postcards, statues, key chains and other knick-knacks. The Viking culture has been mass-produced and sold for profit in the name of global culture and the tourist industry.

On the cultural front, museums dedicated to Vikings can be found almost everywhere they had ever set foot. There are modern Viking societies both in and outside the Nordic countries dedicated to the preservation and re-enactment of Viking culture. One of those is 'Einherjar', a Viking Society based in Reykjavik, which organises an annual festival in Reykjavik.<sup>106</sup> On its homepage appears the poll question: "Are Icelanders real Vikings?" Interestingly, 90% of respondents answer 'yes'.

Viking festivals are in fact held in many countries, notably the 'Up Helly aa' festival which has been an annual occurrence in Shetland since the 1880s. Approximately one thousand people carry lit torches through the town with up to five hundred spectators cheering them on.<sup>107</sup> In York, the Jorvik Museum organises a week-long Viking festival, especially aimed at families with children wishing to learn more about the Viking age. At the end of the week, a longboat replica is burned, re-enacting Viking boat burials.

## Conclusions: The Vikings through Time

The history of the Viking age in Iceland is largely based upon a literary heritage. Various manuscripts, sagas and poems which describe life during that age have shrouded it in myth. The settlement age of Iceland was used during the independence

---

<sup>106</sup> Their homepage: <http://einherjar.blog.is/blog/einherjar/>

<sup>107</sup> See more on the festival's homepage: <http://www.uphellyaa.org/about-up-helly-aa/procession>

movement in Iceland to inspire the nation to take pride in its history and culture. It was presented as a time of heroes, prosperity, and most importantly, independence. The image of Vikings as it was presented during this struggle still holds strong in present Icelandic society.

As described in this chapter, the medieval Icelandic literary and historical sources on the Viking age have also played an important part in creating the English image of the Vikings. In short, these sources were translated, reinterpreted and used for various causes and reasons in Britain. According to Wawn, Vikings mixed with Anglo-Saxons and Normans and were admired by many influential Victorians as the embodiment of desirable characteristics of any Englishman and part of a new emerging national identity in Britain. Since Victorian times, the Viking myth has been re-used and reinterpreted various times and, as my research will show, has continued to be up to the present an active and important part of national identities in Iceland and England. Furthermore, due to gaps in reliable historical knowledge about the Viking age, the myth has proven adaptable and is still used in society.

# Chapter 2

## History, Meaning and Identity

### Introduction

Drawing on theories and ideas about identity, representation in museums, collective memory, historical distancing, nationalism and otherness, this chapter outlines some of the key issues affecting our understanding of the visitor experiences in museums and in particular of the past within exhibitions. In Chapter 7, I then draw on these ideas, in particular, those of Oakeshott (1999), Halbwachs (1992), Misztal (2003 and 2007), Fentress and Wickham (1992), amongst others, to demonstrate that in order to understand how visitors experience museums, particular attention needs to be given to theories relating to national identity, collective social behaviour and national understanding and interaction with social history.

Fundamental to these discussions is the term ‘identity’, which is used throughout this thesis. In addition, the terms ‘ethnicity’ and ‘race’ are important to the analysis of nationalism and identity. While all three of these words were briefly introduced in the glossary, this chapter includes a detailed definition, in order to demonstrate how they relate to my research. This discussion precedes the research analysis in Chapter 7, where the main results of my fieldwork are discussed in relation to theories introduced here.

While the theories introduced in this chapter were useful for my analyses of the fieldwork responses, they are not always rooted in practice. My research attempts to

take that next step and explores how the responses of my fieldwork reflected on subjects such as meaning creation within museums, national identity and social identities.

## What is Identity?

In a discussion about the difficulties of using ‘identity’ as an analytical tool, Cooper, an American historian, lists some of the ways in which it has been understood and used.<sup>108</sup> It has, for example, been made to symbolize the collective and consequential sameness of a group of people, manifesting itself through collective actions and consciousness.<sup>109</sup> For others, ‘identity’ describes the core aspect of individuals, which is to be valued, cultivated and preserved.<sup>110</sup> It has been seen as the reason for, and product of, various social and political actions and the manifestation of the multiple, fluctuating and fragmented nature of the contemporary self.<sup>111</sup> Cooper stresses that while some of these definitions function together, they also demonstrate a strong tension as well.<sup>112</sup> Indeed, Cooper is right; identity is a loose term, used in a variety of ways to mean different, sometimes contradictory things. Cooper suggests alternative words to use for the different functions of ‘identity’. Instead of using a variety of intersecting synonyms, I will attempt in the following section to define the way in which the broader term ‘identity’ is used in this research.

In the glossary I discussed identity as defined by Woodward, Hall and others as a collective memory shared by a group of people, which affirms particular versions and images of the past and accepted behaviours and views in the present. Winters explains

---

<sup>108</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64-65.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

that in this way identities are “performative”, that is to say, they are constructed from a performed version of the past in a way which confirms a sense of collectiveness.<sup>113</sup> Personal identity enables individuals to define and understand themselves through their own personal experiences, either as a part of, or as standing outside of their social surroundings and background. National identity on the other hand, enables individuals to connect to others, such as their family, social group or society, through shared commonalities, including ethnicity, religious beliefs, race, political views, or a mixture of these.<sup>114</sup> Anderson considered nations to be imagined, political communities.<sup>115</sup> Similarly, Handler writes that nations are imagined as natural objects in the real world and as such, have a unique identity which can be defined within precise spatial, temporal and cultural boundaries.<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, according to Kellas, all identity is based both upon spontaneous feelings that people have, as well as various social positions (such as the ones listed above) because they can inspire emotion and loyalty.<sup>117</sup> By “spontaneous feelings” Kellas is referring to human nature and human psychology which, in his view, provide the necessary conditions for ethnocentric and nationalistic behaviour and identity.<sup>118</sup> Lowenthal theorized in much the same way when he wrote that “we may be modest about what we *are*, but rarely about what we

---

<sup>113</sup> Jay Winters, ‘Introduction: The performance of the past: memory, history, identity’, in *Performing the Past: Memory, History and Identity in modern Europe*, ed. by Karin Tilmans, Franklin van Vree & Jay Winter (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), pp.11-34 (pp. 15-16).

<sup>114</sup> Chris Lorenzo, ‘Unstuck in Time. Or: The sudden presence of the past’, in *Performing the Past: Memory, History and Identity in modern Europe*, ed. by Karin Tilmans, Franklin van Vree & Jay Winter (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), pp.67-104 (p. 78).

<sup>115</sup> Anderson, p.6.

<sup>116</sup> Richard Handler, ‘Is “Identity” a Useful Cross-Cultural Concept?’ in *Commemoration: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. by John R. Gillis (New Jersey & West Sussex: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 27-40 (p. 29).

<sup>117</sup> James G. Kellas, *The Politics of Nationalism and Ethnicity* (Basingstoke, Hampshire & London: Macmillan Education, 1991), p. 15.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18-19.

were”.<sup>119</sup> That is to say, identity allows people to celebrate both their individual, as well as collective social past, even if it is shameful or negative in some way.

Each individual has multiple identities that coexist without having stable values or meanings. Indeed, they can exist and be created temporarily, be assimilated, abandoned or re-valued and changed according to each person’s needs and experiences. Within this research, participants’ identity is, in part, modified by the museum exhibition narratives they experience and by the moments in which they are interviewed by the researcher (see Chapter 3). Kellas wrote that official identities are created when the state classifies people according to ethnic group, nationality and race.<sup>120</sup> When this imposed identity is not fully accepted, it frequently leads to dual or multiple identity creations which demonstrates the way in which identities are influenced by each other.<sup>121</sup> They are shaped by different representations and discourses, suggesting that an individual’s *personal* identity can be influenced by *national* values.<sup>122</sup> As Duara writes, identity suggests a “prior, *primordial* self that identifies with a social or cultural representation.”<sup>123</sup> Identity, then, refers to the ‘self’ which is created neither spontaneously nor monolithically, but is negotiated within a “network of changing and often conflicting representations.”<sup>124</sup> Consider for example, as Lorenzo does, how the temporality of identity can manifest itself through political shifts or rupture, which leads to accepted social norms and “accepted representations of continuities” to change, as

---

<sup>119</sup> David Lowenthal, ‘Identity, Heritage and History’, *Commemoration: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. by John R. Gillis (New Jersey & West Sussex: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 41-57 (p. 46).

<sup>120</sup> Lowenthal, *Commemoration: The Politics of National Identity*, p. 15.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 178.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

well as parts of the nation's history to be rejected or re-evaluated.<sup>125</sup> In other words, the instability of national identity can be traced to a variety of factors, such as the changing criteria of identity formations, transference of loyalty to a subgroup, or due to transnational visions of nationalism.<sup>126</sup>

In the context of transferable, changeable identity, Kellas' definition of *dual identities* includes English people, who are both part of a national identity, as well as a British identity.<sup>127</sup> For example, there are official, legal, political and administrative distinctions between Scottish and English identity, and British and Scottish identity.<sup>128</sup> While distinctions are also made officially and non-officially between English and British identity, it serves an additional purpose, namely to make 'English' the same as 'British'. This goes a long way to explain why English people are less sure of the differences between their historical national identity (English) and their modern citizenship (British).<sup>129</sup> At the same time, however, they display the same dual loyalty and identity as Scots. As I will discuss in Chapter 7, in the section titled 'Nationalism' this is reflected somewhat in my research, albeit rather confusingly when the participants used the words 'English' and 'British' interchangeably.

These different, temporal identities are all part of how a nation is created. According to Winters, this happens through multiple stories, mixing together history and memory in chameleon-like ways.<sup>130</sup> The different stories are expressed through a multitude of identities (such as personal, national and ethnic), each with their own understanding of past and present. Assmann argues much the same, theorizing that

---

<sup>125</sup> Lorenzo, *Performing the Past: Memory, History and Identity in modern Europe*, p. 79.

<sup>126</sup> Duara, p. 10.

<sup>127</sup> Kellas, pp. 15-16.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Winters, *Performing the Past: Memory, History and Identity in modern Europe*, p. 17.



identity is constructed from the memory created by institutions and large social groups, such as nations, states and churches with the help of memorial signs and monuments, including museums.<sup>131</sup> In this context, compare also Lorenzo's theory that all relationships to the past are inevitably shaped by present modes of representations and understanding.<sup>132</sup> That is to say, similar to memory, identities, be they personal, national, ethnic, class or gender based, in this way, *might* be based on collective understanding of the past, but they are *always* framed by present ideologies.

Gillis writes that instead of thinking *about* identity and memory, people think *within* them.<sup>133</sup> Therefore, identity and memory only exist within politics, social relations and histories. Furthermore, every assertion of identity means making a choice that influences not simply ourselves, but others as well, meaning that identity does not have a material existence, neither can it be lost or found.<sup>134</sup> In fact, identity is not fixed, but changes over time, it represents or constructs reality, and it is subjective, rather than objective.<sup>135</sup> Memory and identity are then not merely framed by the present, but shaped and revised in order to fit within present society and norms.

Politics and identity are closely connected, each shaping, and being used by the other.<sup>136</sup> Lowenthal writes that national identity requires having a heritage which is considered, at least internally, as unique.<sup>137</sup> As will be discussed further in this chapter,

---

<sup>131</sup> Aleida Assman, 'Re-framing memory. Between individual and collective forms of constructing the past', in *Performing the Past: Memory, History and Identity in modern Europe*, ed. by Karin Tilmans, Franklin van Vree & Jay Winter (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), pp. 35-50 (pp. 42-43).

<sup>132</sup> Lorenzo, *Performing the Past: Memory, History and Identity in modern Europe*, pp. 87-88.

<sup>133</sup> John R. Gillis, 'Memory and Identity: The History of Relationship', in *Commemoration: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. by John R. Gillis (New Jersey & West Sussex: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 3-24 (p. 5).

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-5.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> See for example: Kellas, p. 19.

<sup>137</sup> Lowenthal, *Commemoration: The Politics of National Identity*, p. 46.

identity and heritage differentiate people: they include and celebrate some groups by excluding other ones. In fact, Lowenthal suggests that national identity is about admiring domestic history, regarding foreign ones to be incompatible with, and even less special than our own. Importantly, it is frequently considered that it takes an insider view to understand national identity.<sup>138</sup> According to Smith, national identity involves some type of political community, common institutions, collective, accepted behaviours, duties for each member of the community and a well-defined social space within which individuals can identify with and feel as if they belong within it.<sup>139</sup>

Nations exist within strict territorial boundaries, which mark the ‘homeland’, a sacred place of history, mythology, common mass public culture and collective social memory. As Smith writes, the meaning of the homeland can only be understood by “the initiated, self-aware members of the nation”.<sup>140</sup> Additionally, it creates a social bond between the various social classes and subgroups through shared values, symbols and traditions. People are reminded of their shared national identity, their social bond, daily in various ways, for example, with flags, uniforms, cultural institutions and monuments and similar symbols.<sup>141</sup>

Identity is fluid, changeable and fundamental to any nation attempting to create social and nationalistic unity and to each individual’s sense of belonging. Within the context of my fieldwork, I recognize that due to the spontaneous nature of identity creation, some of my respondents’ ideas relating to personal and national identity may have been influenced, or indeed created by the museum’s narrative and interpretations

---

<sup>138</sup> Lowenthal, *Commemoration: The Politics of National Identity*, p. 48.

<sup>139</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (London, New York, Victoria, Ontario, Auckland and Middlesex: Penguin Books 1991), p. 9.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

on history, which they had just experienced. Furthermore, I, as an interviewer and an Icelandic, may, in some way have influenced that identity creation and discussion as well. Rather than reducing the validity of the resulting data, it demonstrates some of the fundamental features of identity: not only its fluidity, but its collectiveness and the way in which individuals are able to interpret their surroundings to fit within their multiple selves. Shore's theory of how identity shifts and readjusts according to context and the position of the observed reflects these various features as well.<sup>142</sup> He writes that individuals have various different roles to play in their everyday life, and accordingly they have multiple identities, which "shift according to the position of the actor in relation to others".<sup>143</sup> In other words, identity is constructed collectively, within the boundaries of the perceived community or society.

## Creating Meaning: Representation in Museums

Museums contain the cultural heritage of society, the building blocks of national identity, where the past is reconstructed through stories told about the artefacts on display.<sup>144</sup> However, culture can be read and interpreted in multiple ways.<sup>145</sup> Meaning is produced in society in order to construct identity with which individuals can identify. This meaning is contained in shared cultural myths and stories, collective memory and

---

<sup>142</sup> Chris Shore, 'Ethnicity as Revolutionary Strategy: Communist Identity Construction in Italy', in *Inside European Identities*, ed. By Sharon Macdonald (Providence & Oxford, Berg Publishers, 1993), pp. 27-53 (p. 36).

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>144</sup> Fiona McLean, 'Museums and the Construction of National Identity', in *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, issue 3:4 (2007), pp. 244-252. Fiona E.S. Kaplan, *Museums and the Making of 'Ourselves': The Role of Objects in National Identity* (London & New York: Leicester University Press, 1994).

<sup>145</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Introduction', *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. by Stuart Hall (London, Thousand Oaks, CA & New Delhi: Sage Publication, 1997), pp. 1-11.

images constructed from the past and present.<sup>146</sup> In order to share ideas and concepts within museums successfully, the message creator and the recipient must understand the message in roughly the same manner. This does not always happen because objects, museums and collections are subject to social and political changes and so do not have a static, unchangeable meaning.<sup>147</sup> The way that objects are displayed and used is constantly changing and simultaneously the meaning and interpretation of them change. Meaning is a dialogue which exists within any medium where ideas and feelings are shared and interpreted through signs and words. Museums have, for example, their own ways, embedded in conventions, of conveying and creating meaning of objects and history.<sup>148</sup> As Costa and Bamossy conclude, museums have control over the objects on display and contextualise the objects in order to convey a certain meaning about them, which they deem appropriate for their audiences.<sup>149</sup> Consider also, as Proesler proposes, that museums construct a new reality around objects by contextualising them.<sup>150</sup> But who creates that meaning within the museum? And does the intended message of the museum exhibitions get through to the visitors or do they create their own meaning?

My research analysis accepts the fundamental principle that museums need to understand visitor reactions to their exhibitions. As Black writes, museums should take

---

<sup>146</sup> McLean, p. 244.

<sup>147</sup> Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, p. 3. Kaplan, p. 5. Paul du Gay, 'Introduction' in *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, ed. by Paul du Gay, and others (London, Thousand Oaks, CA & New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1997), pp., 1-5.

<sup>148</sup> Henrietta Lidchi, 'The Poetics and the Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures', in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. by Stuart Hall (London, Thousand Oaks, CA & New Delhi, Sage Publications: 1997), pp. 151-222.

<sup>149</sup> Janeen A. Costa and Gary J. Bamossy 'Culture and the Marketing of Culture: The Museum Retail Context', in *Marketing in a Multicultural World: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Cultural Identity* (Thousand Oaks, CA, London and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995), pp. 299-328.

<sup>150</sup> Martin Proesler 'Museums, Masks and Cultural Change: The Ambalangoda Mask Museum', in *Writing the Past in the Present*, ed. by Frederick Backer and Julian Thomas (Lampeter: Saint David's University College, 1990), pp. 133-137.

their audiences more into account when creating exhibitions.<sup>151</sup> In his view, the most successful way of creating an exhibition is by interpreting it with the audience as an equal partner in the process and the collection as a medium between the two. It would improve the museum experience for visitors and strengthen the museum's role in present society.<sup>152</sup> The museum does not only have obligations to the objects on display, but also to the visitor and the past.<sup>153</sup> This is why museums should seek to be engaging for their visitors and to create exhibitions which encourage individual understanding and exploration.<sup>154</sup> Objects should not be represented in a way that excludes non-specialist audiences and the visitors' pre-conceived ideas have to be taken into account. In other words, museums should seek to represent the communal identity of the society in which they originate. A museum's national culture of origin, as Costa and Bamossy write, is bound to influence the orientation toward the consumer, both in the marketing context and in the exhibition process.<sup>155</sup> Instead of forcing a meaning upon objects, museums should seek to display objects in a way that allows visitors to make personal connections with the objects, enabling them to engage with different cultures from their own perspectives.<sup>156</sup>

Museums attempting to represent a specific imagined community should consider how this 'collectivity' can be identified and how 'ordinary' non-elite people can be included within the exhibition space. According to Dicks, museums seek to focus

---

<sup>151</sup> Graham Black, *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement* (London & New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>152</sup> Graham Black, p. 185.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 185., see also: Kaplan, who reviews numerous literature on the construction of national identity in museums.

<sup>154</sup> Graham Black, pp. 185-187.

<sup>155</sup> Costa & Bamossy, p. 304.

<sup>156</sup> This is discussed for example by O'Neill in connection with Glaswegian identity in museums: Mark O'Neill, 'Museums and Identity in Glasgow', in *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol 12:1 (2006), pp. 29-48).

their exhibitions around deconstructed moral or political values, rather than accept that collective identities are often fragmented and conflicting.<sup>157</sup> A united image of the nation tends to imply a sense of romanticism, social immobility and political abeyance, yet, if the diversity of collective identity is to be accepted, how can it be represented adequately?<sup>158</sup> Furthermore, creating a museum narrative based on an imagined united past runs the risk of excluding difference.<sup>159</sup> Certainly some level of ‘othering’ will always occur in museums, yet allowing for a unitary view of the past allows a museum and its curators to promote local identity, the area’s sense of roots and unique local myths.<sup>160</sup> Interpretation, as Dicks remarks, is a “sieve through which the ingredients of the recipe are shifted.”<sup>161</sup> However, a professional interpretation must incorporate local voices in order to become ‘authentic’.<sup>162</sup> The question remains then, *how* can meaning be represented and created within museums?

According to Hall, there are three basic approaches to representation and the creation of meaning: ‘reflective’, ‘intentional’ and ‘constructionist’. According to the reflective approach, meaning naturally exists in the world. It is within the objects themselves and therefore language merely serves to reflect those pre-existing ideas.<sup>163</sup> This means that there is only one *right* way of representing objects, leaving little or no room for interpretation. This approach does not seem to take into effect the changing nature of society. The original, intended meaning of objects can get lost in time as the society it originates from evolves, changes or disappears. In such cases, any attempts at representing the object must fail, and language will not be able to reflect the original

---

<sup>157</sup> Bella Dicks, *Heritage, Place and Community* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), p. 95.

<sup>158</sup> Dicks, p. 95.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 175-176.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> Graham Black, pp. 185-187.

meaning. In addition, I would question *who* decided which idea represented the ultimate true representation of an object.

The intentional approach argues the exact opposite. Objects do not have a ‘natural’ meaning; speakers create and share their unique meaning of the world through language.<sup>164</sup> However, language is never completely personal and private because it can only be fully understood when shared by a group of people. Within the museum context, an exhibition is therefore only fully successful when its message and meaning is understood by the intended recipients, the visitors. Finally, the constructionist approach recognises that language needs to be shared in order to have a meaning. Meaning cannot be fixed, but it can be conveyed through language systems and communication.<sup>165</sup>

Hein writes that according to constructivist learning theory, museums need to enable visitors to apply their own pre-existing knowledge to a new learning situation within exhibitions.<sup>166</sup> Dicks emphasises much the same, writing that the visitor’s knowledge and uses of history are important should a museum wish to represent authentic local heritage and community.<sup>167</sup> The analysis of my fieldwork verifies this, as participants seemed to make a visual or emotional connection with new information based on their own ideas in order to make sense of it. Exhibitions which include these pre-existing meanings in their structural framework, would fall under, what Dicks has identified as ‘community museum ideology’. Here local views and environments are mirrored in order to create active and reciprocal relations with the surrounding

---

<sup>164</sup> Graham Black, pp. 185-187.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>166</sup> George E Hein, *Learning in the Museum* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 156.

<sup>167</sup> Dicks, pp. 199-200

community.<sup>168</sup> She warns that such museums fail to interrogate how the community itself is influenced and produced by these sites of mediation, such as museums.<sup>169</sup> Communities are produced through collective imaginations and museums certainly need to take this into account if their educational exhibitions are to be successful. This is achieved by connecting unfamiliar objects with familiar ones and by making those familiar objects the focus of exhibitions.<sup>170</sup> Depending on the subject, museums were then able to resist, accommodate or reevaluate common pre-existing understanding of the past, social values and ideas. This would then help avoid the dangers of re-creating “a homogenized and idealized vision” identical to the ideology of the community.<sup>171</sup> Meaning would then be created by the interaction between the exhibition and the visitors, which Dicks considers the only authentic way of representing a community.

As my analysis will show, no object can represent the ultimate truth about history and all objects are indeed liable to interpretation. On the subjects of historical accuracy and truth, Macdonald writes that museums usually do not attempt to explain the broader context of the historical narrative to their visitors, but rather create an exhibition where *one version* of historical accounts is displayed under the pretext of objectivity.<sup>172</sup> The museum’s political agenda is expressed through multiple agents. That includes the architecture of the building housing the museum, in the selection of items chosen for display (and those who are excluded), in the choice of target visitors and the way in which objects are displayed within the exhibit and in correlation to

---

<sup>168</sup> Dicks, pp. 96-97.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Hein, p. 161.

<sup>171</sup> Dicks, p. 97.

<sup>172</sup> Sharon Macdonald, ‘Exhibitions of Power and Powers of Exhibition’ in *The Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture*, ed. by Sharon Macdonald. (London & New York, Routledge, 1998), pp. 1-25 (p. 1).



surrounding items.<sup>173</sup> However, this does not mean that the visitor is passive in this context; they are also active in creating meaning for the objects on display, but they are subconsciously influenced by the museum's framework.

A further important principle fundamental to my research relates to the notion of the past, as theorised by Oakeshott. In my later analysis I found it useful to consider Oakeshott's two kinds of pasts, the historical past and the practical past. They are used to distinguish modern, professional historical practices from the approaches of other disciplines and non-experts.<sup>174</sup> The historical past is a product of historians: it gives the appearance of being neutral, impersonal and professional and disconnected from the present. The practical past, however, is influenced by social rules and values, and collective memory. It is used in order to deal with everyday situations and decisions made by and for people by various institutions (such as museums for example).

## Collective Memory

The term 'collective memory' refers to ideas, rules and historical understanding shared in societies. Rather than being rooted in the past, collective memory is largely created in the present, therefore representing contemporary society.<sup>175</sup> Both individual and collective memory can be distorted, false, invented or implanted.<sup>176</sup> It is not necessarily consistent across different groups of people within a given society. Indeed, various groups can have different approaches to historical events, for example, depending on their social status, possible involvement in the event, or for other such reasons.

---

<sup>173</sup> Macdonald, 'Exhibitions of Power and Powers of Exhibition', pp. 1-3.

<sup>174</sup> Michael Oakeshott, *On History and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), pp 1-48.

<sup>175</sup> Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi & Daniel Levy, 'Introduction', in *The Collective Memory Reader* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 3-63 (p.42). See also: Jan Assman, *The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 9.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

However, within the context of my research, collective memory refers to the views of the social majority. The research I undertook explores personal and collective identities and responses of visitors to the past. In addition, the theoretical discussion on identity also demonstrates the existence of collective memory through the similarities of participant views and responses and how this collectiveness is used within society to support a sense of a unified past. However, within the subject of Vikings, the past is a violent one, and so requires re-interpretation by social collective memory in order to create a cohesive national identity. The theories explored in this section are intended to explore how collective memory and identity influence visitors' perceptions of museum exhibitions.

Within historiography, there is a continuous debate between those who consider history and memory to be completely separate and those who believe them to be continuous with each other.<sup>177</sup> Agreeing with the latter view, Goff writes that until the appearance of book printing in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, it was difficult to separate oral from written transmission.<sup>178</sup> Subsequently, historians no longer had to count on memory and oral accounts of events, because history was written down and mass-produced. But historians write their historical accounts unavoidably influenced by the views (and the collective memory) of their own age. Furthermore, as Berger points out, the past is constantly being reinterpreted in retrospect and indeed past events only become significant after being reconstructed in the present.<sup>179</sup> This happens partially through biographies written by individuals who are attempting to explain history to their present society. In turn, history is socially conditioned to be, consciously or unconsciously,

---

<sup>177</sup> Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi & Levy, *The Collective Memory Reader*, p. 43.

<sup>178</sup> Jacques le Goff, *History and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 81.

<sup>179</sup> Peter Berger, 'From: *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Approach*', in *The Collective Memory Reader* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 216-224 (p. 217).

selected, interpreted and distorted.<sup>180</sup> Thereby, it is modified according to the needs of modern society.<sup>181</sup> In this way, history and collective memory have been used as a political tool in the present. Assmann writes much the same, adding that the politically constructed or influenced, memory is not fragmentary and diverse. Neither is it connected directly to the memory of others.<sup>182</sup> Political memory is stabilized and transmitted from generation to generation through various material and visual signs, such as museums.<sup>183</sup> Through this process it reaffirms collective participation, unity and self-contained closure.

Goff further argues that the 18<sup>th</sup> century saw the acceleration of scientific movements and the opening of museums, libraries and other such institutions for the public. He suggests that these institutions provided national collective memories with monuments of remembrance.<sup>184</sup> Specialists were trained to study the material objects on display in these institutions giving the objects a meaning that showed history in a politically desirable way. Thus, these specialised institutions (such as museums) became a reflection of how the governing forces of society wished to remember the past. In other words, the practical past was being used by these institutions in order to influence social norms and attitudes in the present.<sup>185</sup>

Continuing the discussion on history as a political tool, Black theorises that history has contributed to the invention of tradition and shaping of collective

---

<sup>180</sup> Peter Burke, 'From: History as Social Memory"', in *The Collective Memory Reader* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 188-193 (p. 188).

<sup>181</sup> Jan Assman, pp. 10-14.

<sup>182</sup> Aleida Assmann, p. 43.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Goff, pp. 87-88.

<sup>185</sup> Oakeshott.

memory.<sup>186</sup> However, the image of a nation is a product of more than one social group and can be described from multiple perspectives. Collective memory enables subgroups to feel unique and set apart from society creating a sense of continuity with previous generations.<sup>187</sup> Both personal and collective memory is selective; they change from one subgroup to the other, shaped by various different media.<sup>188</sup> These rival views seek to offer their own version of the nation's past and its public history to support their views.<sup>189</sup> The history they 'produce' is therefore a way to gain power, as happened when Icelanders demanded home rule and later full independence from Denmark. Black goes on to say that it is virtually impossible and indeed actually unhelpful to "distinguish between history and memory: the public use of history is frequently a matter of collective memory and its uses".<sup>190</sup> In other words, some forms of history are so closely connected with memory that they become inseparable. Foster took a similar view when he stated that a nation as an imagined community requires a collectively held construction of the past in order to maintain its social identities.<sup>191</sup> Further on this point, Cubitt wrote that "history helps to foster a sense of trans-generational belonging" in which people who are removed from each other, both physically and chronologically, as well as culturally and even intellectually, are able to feel a sense of sympathy and understanding towards each other.<sup>192</sup> History, in other words, is one element in the construction of political and cultural identities.<sup>193</sup>

---

<sup>186</sup> Jeremy Black, *Using History* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005).

<sup>187</sup> Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi & Levy, *The Collective Memory Reader*, p. 42.

<sup>188</sup> Burke, *The Collective Memory Reader*, p. 189.

<sup>189</sup> Jeremy Black, pp. 7-8.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>191</sup> Robert J. Foster, 'Making National Cultures in the Global Ecumene', in *Annual Reviews of Anthropology*, 20 (1991), pp. 235-260 (p. 241).

<sup>192</sup> Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 42.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*

Before continuing this discussion on memory and history, the principal differences between historical narratives and collective memory should be clarified. Historical narratives are either linear or fragmented representations of various important past events, in the same way myths represent stories of how collectively held social rules.<sup>194</sup> As I explored in the start of this section, history is irreversibly linked with memory, because the past is always remembered according to present social norms and beliefs. Both collective memory and history are subjective, rather than objective, they are a representation or construction of reality, rather than reality itself.<sup>195</sup> Yet collective memory represents more than history and myths. It includes collective ideals, variable national and personal identities, socially accepted rules and regulations, justifications of the state of the world and more. As reflected in my data, collective memory *uses* history rather than merely represents it. Individuals, such as the participants of my study, establish their various identities and accept their social roles through their collective social memory. Indeed it frames and influences all levels of society and even individual memories and thoughts. Collective memory enables individuals to sense a belonging to a group and a nation and so strengthen or produce a sense of durability.<sup>196</sup> The past and the future are resources central to the creation and continuity of a nation.<sup>197</sup> Collective memory, which is social in nature, is located outside history itself, existing within social rules, laws, routines and records.<sup>198</sup>

Nationalists are a good example of a group that started using history and memory to achieve its political goals at least as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It still remains

---

<sup>194</sup> Jan Assman, p. 15.

<sup>195</sup> Gillis, p. 3.

<sup>196</sup> Ireneusz P. Karolewski & Andrzej M. Suszycki, *The nation and Nationalism in Europe: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 45.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

one of their most important instruments of ruling countries.<sup>199</sup> Cultural institutions, such as the museums I studied, reflect the nationalistic ideals and collective memory of societies. They impose a particular interpretation of the past in order to shape and maintain the memory of specific historical events.<sup>200</sup> Wertsch considers remembrance to be an active act, mediated through various cultural forms, such as museums, which provide a particular narrative of the past.<sup>201</sup> They are a form of commemorative rituals, which rejuvenate and renew the sentiments of national unity by sharing myths of a common social past.<sup>202</sup> National identity, Karolewski and Suszycki write, “can be forged first and foremost against the background of common history”.<sup>203</sup> Commemorative rituals and cultural institutions are an important tool for maintaining a shared social heritage, because through their symbols the continuity and regeneration of national identity is assured. The past is displayed under the influence of current society and museums are bound, directly or indirectly, to express its political agendas.<sup>204</sup> This provides individuals and societies a framework from which they can affirm, protest, alter or indeed within which they create their own meaning and understanding of a collectively held past.<sup>205</sup> In other words, individuals remember both *through* and *with*

---

<sup>199</sup> For further on nationalism in connection with my fieldwork, see Chapter 7.

<sup>200</sup> Burke, *The Collective Memory Reader*, p. 190, see also: Jan Assman & John Czaplicka ‘Collective Memory and Cultural Identity’, in *New German Critique*, no. 65, Cultural History/Cultural Studies (1995), pp. 125-133 (p. 129).

<sup>201</sup> James V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 6.

<sup>202</sup> Karolewski & Suszycki, p. 46.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> A discussion on the social role of museums can be found in: Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 89-105. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, ‘Interpretive Communities, Strategies and Repertoires’ in *Museums and their Communities*, ed. by Sheila Watson (London & New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 76-94.

<sup>205</sup> Wertsch, p. 6.

translucent media, meaning commemorated objects, people or events, in order to honour a common past.<sup>206</sup>

Maurice Halbwachs disagreed with theorists such as Bergson that memory is an individual construct.<sup>207</sup> He argued instead that memory is a specific social construct.<sup>208</sup> In his view, memory is a product of different minds working together in society, creating and shaping it according to present social norms and arrangements.<sup>209</sup> Halbwachs wrote that: “even at the moment of reproducing the past, our imagination remains under the influence of the present social milieu”.<sup>210</sup> Each individual thus reflects on the past in accordance with his or her own past experiences, but within the bounds of a wider collective, social memory.<sup>211</sup> That is to say, memory is only possible through participation because to remember is to honour a nation’s shared past.<sup>212</sup> The only way to completely isolate individual memory and thoughts is in dreams. However, dreams do not have any stability or depth.<sup>213</sup> The only people who have lost their contact with collective memory are aphasiacs, who are like foreigners in their own country: “they may have learned about the history of the country, but they don’t speak the language anymore.”<sup>214</sup> They lose their place within society and can only keep vague contact with collective social memory through their own personal past. In this context, consider also Berger, who wrote that only a madman “or the rare case of genius” can

---

<sup>206</sup> Edward Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 247.

<sup>207</sup> See further: Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (London: George Allen, New York: The Macmillan Co, 1912) pp. 86-92.

<sup>208</sup> Halbwachs, p. 38.

<sup>209</sup> The social, collective aspect of individual memory has been extensively discussed, see for example: Jeffrey Blustein, *The Moral Demands of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), Cubitt, *History and Memory* and Wertsch.

<sup>210</sup> Halbwachs, p. 49.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid. See also: Casey, p. 185 and Assman & Czaplicka, pp. 126-127.

<sup>212</sup> Casey, p. 253.

<sup>213</sup> Halbwachs, p. 44.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

live in a world of complete individual meaning and memory.<sup>215</sup> The reason for this, as has been argued above, is that the personal past has been modified by collective memory and therefore serves as a guideline on correct social behaviour.<sup>216</sup> This shows that at the same moment that people believe themselves to be alone with their thoughts they are in fact surrounded by other people and the social groups to which they belong.<sup>217</sup> People are a part of a community because they adapt their own memories in accordance with social norms and in turn shape collective identity as members of the group. Societies thus rely on social unity in order to survive, just as individuals rely on social memory in order to belong.

Karolewski and Suszycki warn that a nation which is united mainly by a historical memory runs the risk of isolating immigrants and various ethnic groups.<sup>218</sup> Collective memory of a shared past fosters to an “ancestral form of political obligations”, that is to say, society feels obliged to preserve that which their ancestors have built.<sup>219</sup> It follows that those who do not share the collective racial background of the social majority are then excluded. Blustein argues that it is important to keep in mind the social implications of collective memory, because it entails moral obligations to promote social justice in the present.<sup>220</sup> Rather than promote unity, here, museums can play an active role, and indeed some have already attempted this. Various museums have tried to challenge social norms, show more than one view on history with outreach programs, communal involvement in exhibitions and taking an active standpoint on

---

<sup>215</sup> Berger, *The Collective Memory Reader*, p. 219.

<sup>216</sup> See also: Barry Schwartz, ‘From Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of American Memory’, in *The Collective Memory Reader* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 242-247 (p. 245).

<sup>217</sup> For a further analysis of Halbwach’s theory on dreams, see: Cubitt, *History and Memory*, p. 159-162.

<sup>218</sup> Karolewski & Suszycki, p. 47.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>220</sup> Blustein, p. 146-147.



social issues. Consider for example the *1807 Commemoration Project* and the many projects conducted by the RCMG (Research Centre for Museums and Galleries).<sup>221</sup> The RCMG have collaborated on various exhibitions and projects which promote public engagement in challenging debates on various social issues and ideas.<sup>222</sup>

Museums, such as the ones chosen for my research, can offer cultural spaces where cultural memory and identity are at the core of exhibitions. As Wertsch writes, museums, as all narrative texts used in collective memory, are tools to be used when organising or reconstructing a particular version of the past.<sup>223</sup> These socially influenced spaces promote social unity and provide individuals with the opportunity to reflect upon their social history and identity and link to their own personal memories and ideas.<sup>224</sup> As a result, the individuals' positions as active members of society and collective social memory is re-established and/or strengthened. Dicks identifies this process as one of the core features of an imaginary community.<sup>225</sup> Each member is encouraged to share collective interests and put them before individual ones because is seen as beneficiary to

---

<sup>221</sup> There are multiple examples of museums attempting to take an active part in their local community and attempting to rebuild and/or alter identities. See for example: Tamasin Wedgwood, 'History in Two Dimensions or Three? Working Class Responses to History', in *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol 15: 4 (2009), pp. 277-297, where Wedgwood analyses the responses of working class people to history and a sense of self. Also consider visitor responses to the *1807 Commemorated Project*, for example: Laurajane Smith and Emma Waterton, 'Guest Editorial: Museums and the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the British Slave Trade', in *Museums and Society* vol 8:3 (2010), pp. 122-126. See also the following article on this topic: Geoffrey Cubitt, 'Bringing it Home: Making Local Meaning in 2007 Bicentenary Exhibitions', in *Slavery and Abolition*, vol 30:2 (2009) pp. 259-75.

<sup>222</sup> See for example: *Rethinking Disability Representation in Museums and Galleries* ed. by Jocelyn Dodd, and others (Leicester: RCMG, 2008). Also: *Towards a Social Purpose: Redefining the Role of Botanic Gardens*, ed. By Jocelyn Dodd, (Surrey: Botanical Gardens Conservation International, 2010). Finally: *An Evaluation of sh[OUT]: The Social Justice Programme of the Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow, 2009-2010*, ed. by Richard Sandell and others (Leicester: RCMG, 2010).

<sup>223</sup> Wertsch, p. 8.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., see also: and: Cubitt, *History and Memory*.

<sup>225</sup> Dicks, p. 107.

both the collective, as well as the individual.<sup>226</sup> It implies cultural homogeneity and a harmony of values, norms and collective understanding of the past.

According to Halbwachs, people define themselves according to social norms, regardless of whether they attempt to be outside the social frame or not. Subcultures are a perfect example of social groups attempting to cast off the shackles of society and create their own reality outside of it. However, that is not entirely possible because their image is based on material objects (their clothes, music and such) which are products of the very same society they attempt to turn their backs on. Subcultures are also bound to the same social norms they try to defy because they are still reacting to them and define themselves in relation to them. That is to say, they know the rules of society and base their identity upon opposing them. In this situation, there can only be two outcomes: either to be assimilated back into society or to change its rules and thereby, again, becoming a part of it.

The tension between subcultures and mainstream society also exists between individual and collective social memory. Society, writes Halbwachs, has a tendency to erase from its memory all that might separate or distance individuals and groups from each other in order to survive.<sup>227</sup> It rearranges and modifies memories of events so as to suit the needs of the present.<sup>228</sup> Scholars such as Schwartz have shown that present society is able to sustain different versions of an event, just as an event can be remembered unchanged through different presents.<sup>229</sup> Although it is true that memory is never fully standardized, within society there is still a dominant collective memory, held by a social majority. In this context, memory has a collective function, which distorts

---

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>227</sup> Halbwachs, p. 182.

<sup>228</sup> Assman & Czaplicka, p. 130.

<sup>229</sup> Schwartz, *The Collective Memory Reader*, p. 247.

events for a greater, larger coherence.<sup>230</sup> Traditions yield to collective memory and are replaced by it if the ideas are held in consideration by a larger, collective experience. The ideas and memories of society are not abstract. They are always embodied in persons or groups. If the group upholding these beliefs is big enough, it can modify the past to meet the needs of the present, as the example on subcultures above shows. They can even create memories in individuals of events they did not experience in the first place. In time, memories become generalised and require a social context to stay preserved. Gillis takes the same view as Halbwachs, writing that memory is a subjective representations or construction of reality, which is constantly being revised in order to fit in with current national identities.<sup>231</sup>

Demonstrating further the distortive nature of memory, consider Burke (2011) and Ducharme & Fine (1995), who write that past events are remembered through collective memory as ‘imagos’, and that certain individuals are remembered because they fit within a stereotype.<sup>232</sup> In order for a person to fit fully within the stereotype, his/her image becomes distorted. As society changes, so does the function and meaning of the stereotype. Ducharme and Fine analyse this further, writing that negative events and identities can be of benefit to society.<sup>233</sup> They demonstrate changing moral boundaries, warn against deviance and reaffirm accepted normative behaviour and communal integration.<sup>234</sup> However, some historical events and people, such as the Vikings, are both positive *and* negative, which challenges attempts at commemoration. Ducharme and Fine suggest that society creates a split image of the object in order to

---

<sup>230</sup> Halbwachs, p. 183.

<sup>231</sup> Gillis, p. 3.

<sup>232</sup> Burke, *The Collective Memory Reader*, p. 190, see also: Lori J. Ducharme & Gary A. Fine, ‘The Construction of Nonpersonhood and Demonization: Commemorating the Traitorous Reputation of Benedict Arnold’, in *Social Forces*, vol: 73:4 (1995), pp. 1309-1331 (pp. 1309-1310).

<sup>233</sup> Ducharme & Fine, p. 1310.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

address and preserve both its virtues as well as depravities.<sup>235</sup> Yet, this theory does not fully explain how the participants of my study discussed the Vikings. They did not completely separate the ‘bad’ and ‘good’ characteristics of the Vikings. Instead, the various heroic or villainous acts of the Vikings were explained and excused within the framework of their collective social memory.

Ducharme and Fine would warn against this type of romanticising and magnifying ‘evil’, because: “it can be made to appear larger than life”.<sup>236</sup> By becoming routinized, the danger is that in retrospect, wicked deeds can be seen as having been conducted to achieve socially accepted goals.<sup>237</sup> Yet, as discussed further in Chapter 7, my research indicates this can also serve various social purposes.

In my analyses I demonstrate how the social development of collective memory manifests within museums and visitor responses to that. It focuses, in particular, on how collective social memory influences the way individuals imagine the frequently stereotyped Vikings and their age to have been. This demonstrates that individuals think *within* memory and identity, not *about* them.<sup>238</sup> However, according to Misztal, memory is an individual mental act, even though it is constructed and framed by cultural forms and context.<sup>239</sup> Personal memories of an event are never the same. Unlike Halbwachs and Gillis, Misztal believes that memory can never be completely standardised and conventionalised even though it is socially organised. In other words, collective memory is the language from which each individual constructs his or her own personal

---

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., p. 1311.

<sup>236</sup> Ducharme & Fine, p. 1327.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Gillis, p. 5.

<sup>239</sup> Barbara Misztal, ‘Memory Experience: the Forms and Functions of Memory’, in *Museums and their Communities*, ed. by Sheila Watson (London & New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 380.

way of expression.<sup>240</sup> My research analyses this connection between personal and collective memory and attempts to understand how individuals use the past to influence (and be influenced by) their national identity. Moreover, it shows how collective memory is used in order to make sense of the present.

Also relevant to my analysis on the individual and social understanding of the past are Pennebaker and Banasik's theories about collective memory as a dynamic, social and psychological process, involving active members of society interacting and sharing their memories of an event.<sup>241</sup> This interaction happens, for example, in cultural institutions, such as museums, and is crucial to keep collective memory fresh. As a result, most collective memories of any event have an apparent effect on society and/or individuals because they are shared and maintained collectively. Pennebaker and Bansik also identify the different ways in which society modifies its collective memories. First of all there is the 'selective omission' where disagreeable facts are omitted in order to maintain a positive self-image.<sup>242</sup> Secondly, there is the 'fabrication', i.e. false memories are invented and adopted by society. However, few examples of *complete* fabrication can be found, at least in societies that maintain the right of members to freedom of expression. Mostly, memories are distorted, altered or reinterpreted, as my research will show.<sup>243</sup> The most common alteration to collective memory is exaggeration. Most groups adopt a glorified version of their past in order for them to be proud of their past. This must be especially true for small countries such as Iceland,

---

<sup>240</sup> Misztal, pp. 380-381.

<sup>241</sup> James W. Pennebaker, Dario Paez and Bernard Rimé, *Collective Memory of Political Events: Social Psychological Perspectives* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1997), p. 4. See also: Cubitt, *History and Memory*, p. 118.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., p. 280.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., p. 282.

where nationalism and pride in the heritage played an active part in the struggle for independence.

Analysing further the distortion on collective memory on the Viking age for the purpose of creating a positive national identity, I examined Baumeister's and Hasting's theory on social memory being gradually and systematically distorted.<sup>244</sup> The purpose of such distortion is to cast a positive light on the past and in turn the nation's identity as a whole. That, however, does not mean that all social groups refuse to acknowledge wrongdoing; furthermore, values can change and evolve differently between groups.<sup>245</sup> Changes also generally do not happen fast, but rather subtly from one generation to the next.

## Historical Distancing

Historical distancing takes place when historical events, no matter whether positive or negative, become neutralised when they happen in the distant past. It enables people to use the past in order to explain issues and situations in the present, or to use history in order to view national identity in a positive light. Before continuing with this discussion, it is worth noting, as was explained in the glossary, that within the context of my research, 'social memory' is not limited to living memory.<sup>246</sup> It is, rather, thought of as being a cultural tool used to shape the way people think about the history of their society and as guidelines on social norms and practices.

---

<sup>244</sup>Baumeister and Hasting, 'Distortions of Collective Memory: How Groups Flatter and Deceive Themselves', in *Collective Memory of Political Events: Social Psychological Perspectives* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997), p. 277.

<sup>245</sup>Baumeister and Hasting, p. 280.

<sup>246</sup>See for example: Eviatar Zerubavel, 'From: "Social Memories: Steps toward a Sociology of the Past"', in *The Collective Memory Reader* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 221-224.

Phillips writes that historical distance is constructed by historians, museums and other media.<sup>247</sup> Taking this theory into account, my research analyses what effects it has upon museum visitors. Because it is a communicative narrative, all history, in whatever form, must take its audience into account and construct distance or closeness to the past according to its needs and understanding. Phillips continued to say that museums in present society seem generally more aware of how they present their historical narrative and are now attempting to engage more with their audience, for example, through open displays and technology.<sup>248</sup> They use various ways to reduce the distance between object and visitor so that the past becomes less distant and more comprehensible. Moreover, historical distance is a deliberate political and social construct, created by authoritative texts and institutions such as museums.<sup>249</sup> Furthermore, detachment/engagement (or distance/closeness) is always variable, as it is “shaped by balances or tensions among a variety of separable aspects of narrative construction and social or intellectual commitment”.<sup>250</sup> In other words, it is shaped by surrounding factors, such as social need and the views of the historian him/herself.

Based on the theories of Baddely (1989), Warnock (1987), Pennebaker, Paez and Rimé (1997) and others, Misztal suggests that memory is a social construct, created by social communication and influenced by the dominant discourses.<sup>251</sup> Collective memory provides a social framework for individual recollections and influences how

---

<sup>247</sup> Mark S. Phillips, ‘History, Memory and Historical Distance’, *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, ed. by Peter Seixas (Toronto, Buffalo & London: University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 89.

<sup>248</sup> Phillips, *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, pp. 92-93.

<sup>249</sup> Mark S. Phillips, ‘Relocating Inwardness: Historical Distance and the Transition from Enlightenment to Romantic Historiography’, in *Modern Language Association of America*, vol 118:3, (New York: Modern Language Association, 2003), pp. 436-449.

<sup>250</sup> Phillips, *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, p. 439.

<sup>251</sup> Barbara Misztal, ‘Memory Experience: the Forms and Functions of Memory’, in *Museums and their Communities*, ed. by Sheila Watson (London & New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 380-381. See also: Alan Baddeley, ‘The Psychology of Remembering and Forgetting’, in *Memory: History, Culture and the Mind*. ed. by Thomas Butler (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 33-60 and Mary Warnock, *Memory* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987) and Pennebaker, Paez and Rimé.

people view the past. It is a way of understanding society and the world through culturally organised practices, and provides with the culturally accepted behaviour and beliefs.<sup>252</sup> According to Fentress and Wickham, collective social ideas are “social facts”, resulting from social and historical forces, forces which are based on oral history and memory.<sup>253</sup> Memory then is also a social fact because it is mostly transmitted orally and exists within its own historical context. Memory is never fixed, because our knowledge of the past and present are based on ideas and needs in the present mind.<sup>254</sup> Furthermore, consider Rüsen (1993) and Seixas (2005) on traditional historical consciousness, where the past is understood and remembered as events which have a direct relevance to present society.<sup>255</sup>

Pennebaker and Bansik explain that nostalgia is an example of the ways societies maintain an image of the perfect past due to present social needs.<sup>256</sup> Historical distance enables societies to create this perfect image of its origins, simply because it happened such a long time ago that the events are only remembered inaccurately within social memory. Historical distancing in museums allows visitors to explore the exhibition narrative from their own personal and social understanding and pre-determined ideas. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, this happens through the exhibition set-up, such as the way objects are displayed, or gaps in the narrative which enable visitors to fill it in with their own meaning.<sup>257</sup> This allows for a positive reinterpretation

---

<sup>252</sup> Misztal, p. 382

<sup>253</sup> James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford & Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992), p. 7.

<sup>254</sup> Wickham & Fentress, p. 2.

<sup>255</sup> Jörn Rüsen, *History: Narration, Interpretation, Orientation* (New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005) and Peter Seixas ‘The Progress of Knowledge in a Postprogressive Age’, in *Narration, Identity, and Historical Consciousness* (New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005).

<sup>256</sup> Pennebaker, Paez & Rimé, p. 209.

<sup>257</sup> See Chapter 3 for an analysis of VÍkingaheimar and Yorkshire Museum for details on this topic within my research.



of history, in particular violent or difficult history such as the Viking age, because the past gets neutralised through historical distancing. My research explores the connection between visitor and museum interpretations and the effects of historical distancing and collective social memory. In order to achieve this, I found the above-mentioned theories on how national identity relies on collective social memory in order to maintain unity quite useful. By creating a distance between the present and the past, reinterpretation becomes possible, and so Viking warriors become a positive part of national identity and memory.

## Nationalism

Nationalism is an important part of national identity. Throughout history, it has been used as a political tool in order to create and alter social rules and regulations, and to influence the views of both various social groups and societies as a whole. Based on scholars such as Duara (1995), Smith (1999) and others, this research accepts that nationalism is a representation of a collective consciousness or identity which seeks to attain and maintain autonomy and unity of a human population.<sup>258</sup> Nationalism and national identity are then constructed and upheld within a network of changing and frequently conflicting representations of, for example, the nation or the past. Nationalistic ideals are one of the fundamental underlying themes emerging from the analysis of the visitor interviews and in questionnaires in Yorkshire Museum and Víkingaheimar. In various ways, whether conscious or subconscious, people visit museums looking at things within the framework of their national identity, expecting a

---

<sup>258</sup> Duara, p. 7 and Anthony D Smith 'The Nation: Real or Imagined?' in *People, Nation & State: The Meaning of Ethnicity and Nationalism*, ed. by Edward Mortimer and Robert Fine (London & New York, I.B. Tauris, 1999), pp. 36-42 (p. 37).

positive reinforcement of social ideas and structure. Karolewski and Suszycki define the need individuals for a positive image of their nation as the “self-esteem booster effect”.<sup>259</sup> In other words, individuals use social resources for their psychological benefits and through a process of positive comparison to other nations, gain, produce and maintain their self-esteem.

Parekh informs us that national symbols of collective identification, such as monuments, the national anthem and national ceremonies, epitomize and nurture national identity and “a shared sense of common belonging”.<sup>260</sup> Individuals seek out these national symbols because they demonstrate and preserve that which a nation is most proud of. As suggested in the glossary and confirmed by Parekh, nations are partially imagined, because they are comprised by millions of strangers, bound together by common past and present attachments and interests.<sup>261</sup> Individuals require a constant reminder of what this shared culture consists of. Symbols such as museums are ideal for such affirmation because they do not require a commitment to a particular view of the country’s history or collective goals.<sup>262</sup> Such messages are understood from a collective framework and can therefore be individually interpreted. Spencer and Wollman write that the collective unity of a nation rests on national identity standing out above all other identities.<sup>263</sup> In order to ensure its position as the principal identity, national identity

---

<sup>259</sup> Karolewski & Suszycki, p. 45.

<sup>260</sup> Bhiku Parekh, ‘Defining National Identity in a Multicultural Society’ in *People, Nation & State: The Meaning of Ethnicity and Nationalism*, ed. by Edward Mortimer and Robert Fine (London & New York, I.B. Tauris, 1999), pp. 66-74 (pp.67-69)

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> Philip Spencer and Howard Wollman, *Nationalism: A Critical Introduction* (London, Thousand Oaks & New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2002), pp. 62-63

frequently has links to other deeply rooted personal groups, such as family and community.<sup>264</sup>

Hutchinson mentions two kinds of nationalism, cultural and political, which I found useful to consider during my research analysis.<sup>265</sup> While cultural nationalism attempts to preserve the uniqueness of some groups of people within nations, political nationalism seeks to eliminate it. Political nationalism aims at creating rules and regulations that will ultimately transcend cultural differences and create a unified, educated culture. On the other hand, cultural nationalism tends to respect cultural uniqueness and “natural divisions” within the nation.<sup>266</sup> It does not regard societies as being constructed politically, but see them rather as randomly and naturally constructed, and to be preserved as such. These two nationalist categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as they can coexist in society, each forming a distinctive organization and working to its own separate political agenda. Further to this discussion, Day and Thompson write that the important question is not whether nationalism is culturally or politically constructed, but how, from what, by whom and for what.<sup>267</sup>

Starting with cultural nationalism, Hutchinson suggests that cultural nationalist movements tend to be small and with little following. Furthermore, this type of nationalism fails when it comes to its communitarian goals. It is largely unable to extend beyond the elite, high culture social group. It is not a complete failure, though. It

---

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> John Hutchinson, ‘Cultural Nationalism and Moral Regeneration’ in *Nationalism*, ed. by John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 122-131.

<sup>266</sup> Hutchinson, p. 122.

<sup>267</sup> Graham Day and Andrew Thompson, *Theorizing Nationalism* (Hampshire & New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 105-106.

can inspire greatness in society and be a force for moral innovation which seeks to eliminate all the differences in society in order to create a unified nation capable of competing in the modern world.<sup>268</sup> However, on this point I have to disagree with Hutchinson, because my research suggests that cultural nationalism is not exclusive to any particular social class, but actually widely spread within society. According to Karolewski and Suszycki, nationalism can be understood to refer to nation-building, meaning the efforts of the political elites to sustain and construct nations and nation-states.<sup>269</sup> National identity is then used to mobilise the nation for the nation-building and to legitimise policies which might otherwise not gain sufficient political support. As a cultural discourse, nationalism may remain in the domain of the elites, it must, at least superficially, be accessible and comprehensible to the wider nation.<sup>270</sup> In other words, nationalism may be instigated and maintained by elites, but the outcome of using it as a political tool varies, it can become widely accepted, rather than being doomed to fail.

Political nationalists seek to uproot traditional divisions within society in order to establish new (universal) citizenship rights.<sup>271</sup> They reject laws and regulations that stand in the way of their ideal cosmopolitan concept of how a nation should be. They do not believe that the state is an accident, but that it is constructed and founded by laws which shape the nation. In other words, it is not the community that makes a nation; it is the laws *controlling* the community that create a nation. From this point of view, nations are political constructs which political nationalists wish to shape to their own ideals. This can only be achieved by substituting individual identities for a national (or even a universal) one. Iceland is a country which fought for its independence with

---

<sup>268</sup> Hutchinson, p. 129.

<sup>269</sup> Karolewski and Suszycki, pp. 7-8.

<sup>270</sup> Karolewski and Suszycki, pp. 7-8.

<sup>271</sup> Hutchinson, p. 125.

politically constructed nationalism; however it does not seek to establish a global identity, but retain a national one. Relevant to this discussion is Karolewski's and Suszycki's theory of nationalism being based on pre-existing cultural identities, which are used to support political claims and preserve specific group cultures.<sup>272</sup> Collective political symbols and propaganda are used in order to stimulate feelings of a shared national collectiveness and cultural ties.<sup>273</sup>

According to ethno-symbolism, a theory evolved by Smith and Armstrong, nationalism gains power through myths, memories and traditions. National identities are reconstituted in each generation through these ideologies, as the nation becomes more inclusive and as its members cope with new challenges.<sup>274</sup> Because these ideas exist outside government control, they evolve solely based on shared cultural memories and collective identities within society.<sup>275</sup>

Theorists such as Öskirimli criticise Smith, saying that he fails to understand the real difference between modern nations and earlier ethnic communities.<sup>276</sup> Öskirimli believes that nationalism and nations did not exist in pre-modern eras as most societies (except perhaps for the elite classes) had limited consciousness of cultural peculiarities, nor did they make claims to territory, autonomy or independence. These types of claims were not made because they were only authorised in the age of nationalism, meaning that conditions allowing for the growth of a nation are products of modernization.<sup>277</sup> Furthermore, he claims that nationalistic movements cannot be based on myths and

---

<sup>272</sup> Karolewski and Suszycki, p. 7.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, p. 9.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>276</sup> Umut Öskirimli, *Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire & London: Macmillan Press, 2000).

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., pp. 184-186.

traditions as they can be interpreted in various, conflicting ways, and more importantly, they are produced, not inherited. Finally, Öskirimli explains that modernists do not believe in the persistence of ethnic identities, therefore cultural history only has significance as the tool of modern nationalists.<sup>278</sup> Yet, while it may be true that nationalism is a modern construct, nations have a long history which pre-date modern times, Britain being a good example of this.

As Spencer and Wollman speculate, there are some inequalities and intolerances that could be said to be connected with nationalism.<sup>279</sup> They can only be justified by establishing them as part of deeper, unchangeable differences, for example by establishing race or ethnicity as the foundations of national identity.<sup>280</sup> According to Smith, it is important to make a distinction between race and ethnicity, because ethnic identities continuously resurface within collective social memory and are handed down through the generations regardless of the nation's changeable racial backgrounds.<sup>281</sup> This theory is useful for my analysis as it clarifies how England has an ethnic identity, which is traced through a racially diverse history. Iceland, on the other hand, has a short history of a limited, racial diversity and the population is therefore inclined to a different type of nationalism from that in England.

---

<sup>278</sup> Öskirimli, p. 187.

<sup>279</sup> Spencer and Wollman, pp. 63-64.

<sup>280</sup> Spencer and Wollman, pp. 63-64.

<sup>281</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, p. 11.

## Ethnicity versus Race

According to Cohen, a social scientist, there are various political reasons for the continuous reappearance of ethnic identities.<sup>282</sup> They embody the closest association achievable by collectivism, they embrace the unity of society and suggest “loyalty, pride location, belonging, of identity, trust, acceptance and security”.<sup>283</sup> Smith (1999), Calhoun (2007) and others argue that ethnic ties and identities pre-date modern nationalism.<sup>284</sup> While nations are not all built on these early ethnic memories or communities, they cannot be understood without some reference to them.<sup>285</sup> In Karolewski’s and Suszucki’s view, contemporary nations would not have achieved relevance if it had it not been for the effectiveness of the ethnic social formation and unity.<sup>286</sup> In order to survive, a nation needs coherent mythology and shared understanding of history and culture. If it is not in possession of these ethnic ties, the community must forge them.<sup>287</sup>

In the glossary, I introduce the term ‘ethnic’ and ‘ethnicity’ as understood by Smith (1999). Ethnic nationalism refers to a community with a shared genealogical descent, culture, native history and/or popular mobilisation and heritage.<sup>288</sup> Day and Thompson define ethnic nationalism as shared ancestry or blood ties, which should be distinguished from civic nationalism, referring to “birth or residence in a national

---

<sup>282</sup> Robin Cohen, ‘The Making of Ethnicity: A Modest Defence of Primordialism’ in *People, Nation & State: The Meaning of Ethnicity and Nationalism*, ed. by Edward Mortimer and Robert Fine (London & New York, I.B. Tauris, 1999), pp. 3-11 (pp. 5-7).

<sup>283</sup> Cohen *People, Nation & State: The Meaning of Ethnicity and Nationalism*, p. 5-7.

<sup>284</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *People, Nation & State: Meaning of Ethnicity & Nationalism*, p. 40 and Craig Calhoun, *Nations Matter: Culture, History and the Cosmopolitan Dream* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 67.

<sup>285</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *People, Nation & State: Meaning of Ethnicity & Nationalism*, p. 40.

<sup>286</sup> Karolewski and Suszcki, p. 20.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

<sup>288</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *People, Nation & State: Meaning of Ethnicity & Nationalism*, p. 41.

territory.”<sup>289</sup> While I agree that there is an important difference between civic and ethnic nationalism, I consider their definition to be rather narrow. It does not include, as in the analyses of Smith (1999), Spencer and Wollman (2002) and other scholars, groups with shared cultural and historical ties. Calhoun writes that ethnicity has various ties to nationalism, which are formed by a ‘high culture’ and transform everyday cultural traditions into historical claims.<sup>290</sup> Smith has a similar theory, writing that nation states with predominantly civic nationalist ideals are based on the discourse of dominant ‘ethnies’ which frequently have little to offer ethnic minorities.<sup>291</sup> For the purpose of remedying this situation, states turn to ethnic nationalism in order to reconstruct their community in a more inclusive manner as ethnic nations.<sup>292</sup> Parekh agrees with this view, writing that in order for a society to be truly multicultural, a national identity needs to allow for ethnic, religious and cultural identities, without charging those involved with divided loyalties.<sup>293</sup> In other words, individuals must, for example, be allowed to be simultaneously Icelandic and Christian, or British as well as Scottish. This demonstrates Calhoun’s theory that *certain* ethnic similarities are considered *the* definition of a political community.

Spencer and Wollman warn that while ethnicity is an important concept, it cannot *make* a nation, because society is able to constantly reinvent its own history. Furthermore, specific ethnic identities are normalized by elites through political and economic processes.<sup>294</sup> In other words, ethnicity is not the *cause* of political action, but a consequence of it. The dominant ethnicity in any given society is not random or

---

<sup>289</sup> Day and Thompson, p. 132.

<sup>290</sup> Calhoun, p. 63.

<sup>291</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *People, Nation & State: Meaning of Ethnicity & Nationalism*, p. 41.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Parekh, *People, Nation & State: Meaning of Ethnicity & Nationalism*, pp. 69-70.

<sup>294</sup> Spencer and Wollman, p. 8.



‘natural’, it is always based upon a political decision. I do not consider this to disprove Smith’s theory of the ethnic origins of nations. Firstly, as I have demonstrated above, Smith does not say that *all* nations have ethnic origins. Secondly, those nations without a shared dominant ethnic identity make a conscious political decision to *create* one, in order to maintain social unity. Here, ethnicity may not be the origin of a nation, but through political actions it certainly becomes its *core*.

Race is one of the fundamental bases for social division. Accepting this, Reicher and Hopkins write that those who define their social identity on a core feature such as race, accept that the world and all relationships between and within it are organized by ‘races’.<sup>295</sup> That is to say, national identity based on race means placing yourself and others according to the same system of categorization. Yet, race cannot be seen as the uncontested core of a nation any more than other major frameworks of meaning and categorization, such as class, sexuality and ethnicity, because it has been interpreted, contested, challenged and revised in a variety of ways.<sup>296</sup> It is true that being of a certain nationality means sharing such collective traits as race, culture, history and/or language. Day and Thompson point out that this collectiveness involves rights and obligations, but these can be contested and defied.<sup>297</sup> This demonstrates the urgency to find main features shared by a nation, which are unchangeable despite changes and reinterpretations of national identity. According to the modernist approach, this means that those who are of the ‘wrong’ culture or race can be excluded from the benefits of modernization.<sup>298</sup> This viewpoint relates, firstly, to the temporal aspect of national

---

<sup>295</sup> Stephen Reicher and Nick Hopkins, *Self and Nation* (London, Thousand Oaks & New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001) pp. 46-48.

<sup>296</sup> Day and Thompson, p. 103 and Paul Gilbert, *Philosophy of Nationalism* (Colorado & Oxford: Westview Press, 1998), p. 38.

<sup>297</sup> Day and Thompson, p. 103.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

identity, verifying its ties to a notion of evolutionary progress. Secondly, it demonstrates a certain aspect which will be discussed further in the next section of this chapter, namely, social ‘othering’ of foreign cultures and marginal groups.

The main difference between race and ethnicity is that the former is a way of categorizing people from what is perceived as a ‘natural’ state, *outside* history and as such it is inherently exclusive.<sup>299</sup> Yet, as Jenkins has demonstrated, they are seen as differences, because they are culturally and socially *made* to be so.<sup>300</sup> In other words, race is never as objective as it is made out to be. On the other hand, ethnicity is believed to allow for historical, cultural and territorial changes and reinterpretations and so to be inclusive and mainly occupied with moving a nation forward as a cultural community.<sup>301</sup> Yet, race cannot be said to be natural in a modern society, because there are no reliable ‘natural’ non-cultural makers.<sup>302</sup> Even those who seem to share physical or bodily structure do not necessarily share the same genetic makeup.<sup>303</sup>

Jenkins has argued that there is indeed a relationship between race and ethnicity, which cannot be ignored. He defines ethnicity as “collective identification that is socially constructed” which has been around “for as long as cultured humans have lived in social groups”.<sup>304</sup> Races, on the other hand, are abstractions, political attempts at imperial and colonial domination, with a shorter history than ethnic identity. Indeed,

---

<sup>299</sup> Spencer and Wollman, p. 65.

<sup>300</sup> Richard Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity: Arguments and Explorations*, 2nd Edition (London, Thousand Oaks & New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2008), p. 77.

<sup>301</sup> Day and Thompson, p. 131.

<sup>302</sup> Gilbert, p. 39.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid.

<sup>304</sup> Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity; Arguments and Explorations*, p. 78.

according to Jenkins, racial classifications are an effect of clashing ethnic identities attempting to dominate each other.<sup>305</sup>

The discussion in this section aims at clarifying key terms used continuously in this research, i.e. ethnicity and ethnic nationalism as represented by English nationalism, and race and racial nationalism, which is typical in Iceland. As I have attempted to demonstrate above, neither type of nationalism is objective or more 'correct'. Indeed, it has been argued that *all* nations have an unstable meaning at their core. The collective racial element of Icelandic national identity was created and exaggerated in order to create a social unity at the time Icelanders were fighting for their independence. The English have a complex relationship with their own colonial past. As a consequence their national identity was reshaped to be inclusive instead of aggressive and dominating, as well as British or universal rather than English. Furthermore, this instability of identity and nationalist values demonstrate the way in which nations continuously recreate themselves and change in order to fit changing moral and ethical social values, lifestyles and living standards. This process does not only takes place on a national scale, indeed each individual draws upon this collective social framework to develop and understand his or her own personal identity and life.

## Otherness

The term 'otherness' refers to how various groups, such as minority groups, families and nations create unity and maintain social structures by identifying outsiders as the 'other', which are either fought against or idealised as idyllic and romanticised, for example, as 'noble savages'. The term 'otherness' was developed by theorists such as

---

<sup>305</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

Foucault, and is one of the fundamental theories of any research into social behaviour and identity. Within the context of my research, Vikings are the archetype ‘others’ who have been assimilated into a sense of national identity and self by two nations in a rather unique way. During the process of assimilation, behaviour generally considered negative (such as violence, theft and human trafficking often connected to the Vikings) becomes both justifiable and even fun in the context of historical distancing.

Foucault wrote that in all societies there are people who do not behave according to social convention, and are therefore marginalised and excluded by society.<sup>306</sup> It is part of human nature to exclude those who are considered different, because people generally see themselves as the norm, and so the other, different, person must be abnormal. In other words, people usually only see and understand things from their own perspective and so pass judgement on the outside from their own experiences, that is, from the inside. According to Duara, at its core, a nation and national identity are not original, but rather designed as a way to include some groups, while knowingly excluding, and marginalizing others.<sup>307</sup> It follows, that the nation is considered ‘the self’ which is defined as opposite ‘the other’. As Billig writes, “there can be no ‘us’ without a ‘them’.”<sup>308</sup>

Scholars such as Duara theorize that there are various smaller ‘others’ contained within the nation. This includes regional identities, various subcultural identities and political identities.<sup>309</sup> This demonstrates a fundamental principle of nations, namely, they choose to “privilege its difference and obscure all of the cultural bonds that had

---

<sup>306</sup> Michael Foucault, *Aesthetics: The essential works of Foucault*, vol 2, trans. by James D. Faubion and others (London: Penguin, 1998), pp. 336-337.

<sup>307</sup> Duara, p. 15.

<sup>308</sup> Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London, Thousand Oaks & New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995), p. 78.

<sup>309</sup> Duara, p. 15, see also: Assman & Czaplicka, p. 127.

tied it to its sociological kin”.<sup>310</sup> In other words, a nation promotes internal differences as positive cultural diversity, while simultaneously obscuring similarities to other nations.

Durrans writes that differentiating between self and other is necessary to maintain a grasp of the world.<sup>311</sup> Moreover, this increases the likelihood of error, because, how we portray ourselves and see others, is subject to bias.<sup>312</sup> Consider also, as has been argued, that by constructing an image of ‘the other’, a nation shapes its own internal identity.<sup>313</sup> External othering is frequently a political act, conducted in the initial stages of nation formation.<sup>314</sup> When defining ‘otherness’, Grossberg writes that difference, just as identity, is an effect of power. Difference does not necessarily establish otherness, but rather accepts that it exists independently, within its own sphere.<sup>315</sup> Certain aspects of external cultures are then exaggerated in order to establish them as ‘the other’.

When judging others based on personal experiences, the differences of the other group are emphasised and the similarities are discarded in order to isolate a potential threat. People constantly fear the loss of social structure and the breakdown of nations. Spencer and Wollman inform us that this, in turn, is projected unto selected others,

---

<sup>310</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>311</sup> Brian Durrans, ‘The Future of the Other: Changing Cultures on Display in Ethnographic Museums’, in *The Museum Time Machine*, ed. by Robert Lumley (London & New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 144-169.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>313</sup> Anna Triandafyllidou, ‘National Identity and the Other’, in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21: 4 (1998), pp. 593-612 (p.602). See also: Arash Abizadeh, ‘Does Collective Identity Presuppose an Other? On the Alleged Incoherence of Global Solidarity’, in *American Political Science Review*, vol. 99:1 (2005), pp. 45-60 (pp. 54-55).

<sup>314</sup> Ibid., p. 602.

<sup>315</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, ‘Identity and Cultural Studies – Is That All There Is?’, in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London, Thousand Oaks, CA & New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1996), pp. 87-107.

excluding them from the nation.<sup>316</sup> Furthermore, a nation is formed through legitimizing its difference from the other through a shared history, in order to create a single identity among many contested identities which can potentially threaten the nation's unity.<sup>317</sup> However, this does not prevent alternative narratives, created by internal 'others', from challenging the hegemonic representations of the nation.<sup>318</sup> This 'social othering' can also be used to justify social rules, behaviour and various political actions, using 'the other' as a potential threat to current social structure. Indeed, in the opinion of Rüsen and others, humans discriminate between themselves and the other because they have a need for their identity to be positive.<sup>319</sup> Often this positive element can be found in history, which provides identity the necessary symbolical and interpretational historical frame of reference.<sup>320</sup>

According to Woolf, Abizadeh and other scholars, the most memorialized events are in times of resistance to aliens.<sup>321</sup> While I agree that war and resistance are strong motivators for social unity and can strengthen national identity, it should be kept in mind that the definition of *who* is considered alien, i.e. the 'other' changes. While the invading Viking hoard, in their time, may have been seen as the 'other' by inhabitants of, for example, York, in present society they have entered into the local collective memory as part of the internal identity and society. By highlighting the differences, a common enemy has the ability to unite a nation for a common cause. Accepting this

---

<sup>316</sup> Spencer & Wollman, p. 62.

<sup>317</sup> Duara, p. 81.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

<sup>319</sup> Jörn Rüsen, 'Future-Directed Elements of a European Historical Culture', in *The Many Faces of Clío: Cross Cultural Approaches to Historiography, Essays in Honor of Georg G. Iggers*, ed. by Q. Edward Wan, Franz L. Fillafer & Georg G. Iggers (Oxford & New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), pp. 163-172 (p. 167). See also: Spencer and Wollman, p. 63.

<sup>320</sup> Daniel Wolf, 'Of Nations, Nationalism and National Identity: Reflections on the Historiographic Organization of the Past', in *The Many Faces of Clío: Cross Cultural Approaches to Historiography, Essays in Honor of Georg G. Iggers*, ed. by Q. Edward Wan, Franz L. Fillafer & Georg G. Iggers (Oxford & New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), pp. 71-103 (p. 90).

<sup>321</sup> Ibid. see also: Abizadeh, pp. 45-60.

theory, Karolewski and Suszycki therefore do not consider the image of the enemy important, but rather its perceived attributes.<sup>322</sup>

Society relies on ‘otherness’, emphasising the differences of alien cultures in order to define a nation’s uniqueness. Lowenthal, for instance, considered national identity to be created from a distinct legacy, which was considered virtuous by comparison to other nations’ identities, which are then thought of as barbaric, fanatical and blind.<sup>323</sup> Similarly, Shore wrote that a nation’s collective national identity is a process of classifying others according to given social and cultural markers.<sup>324</sup> In other words, a group must be ‘the other’ if they are not part of the internal social ‘us’. Again, however, I would stress that identity is unstable and changeable and so the definition of who is considered ‘the other’ can easily change. However, there is constantly some form of ‘othering’ within society. This difference is expressed in various forms, for example through media, within cultural institutions (such as museums) and through various myths and legends which are passed down one generation to the next. Within museums, an exhibition based on Foucault’s theory on ‘otherness’ would manifest itself through a representation and creation of cultural difference.<sup>325</sup> This type of exhibition would allow visitors to imagine themselves *as* the other.<sup>326</sup> Researching visitor experiences in museums, Dicks writes that representing otherness in exhibitions is a vital part of the “heritage gaze”, through which visitors view the past.<sup>327</sup> This gaze mirrors the self, as well as the other. Furthermore, through the differences, the cultural

---

<sup>322</sup> Karolewski & Suszycki, pp. 39-40.

<sup>323</sup> Lowenthal, *Commemoration: The Politics of National Identity*, p. 46.

<sup>324</sup> Shore, *Inside European Identities*, p. 36.

<sup>325</sup> Lidchi, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, pp. 186-187.

<sup>326</sup> Dicks, pp. 203-204.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid.

strangeness of the ‘the other’ creates a focus point, which has a great impact on the visitor.<sup>328</sup>

Stereotyping is frequently used in order to distinguish ‘us’ from ‘them’ because it contributes to a nation's sense of uniqueness.<sup>329</sup> Additionally, according to Jervis, myths show a clear image of the myth-makers, rather than the societies which are being represented in them.<sup>330</sup> The differences of the other culture are emphasised, either to show them as dangerous or as idyllic inhabitants of a ‘Golden Age’ of a ‘natural’ culture. Any Golden Age is seen as a time of innocence and uninhibited behaviour, when people followed their natural instincts rather than being repressed by the social rules and behaviour of modern society. Yet that time is not reflective of how things really were, but rather shows the past through the eyes of current dominant culture. Jervis theorises further that people from that Golden Age are seen as innocent yet somehow superior; they had no laws and no culture to burden or repress them.<sup>331</sup> However, at least within my research topic, I suggest that the allure of an idyllic Golden Age is not always due to the absence of culture or laws, but it tends to be in opposition to *modern* culture and the perceived closeness to nature.

Yet this otherness is not necessarily constant. Within the context of museums, artefacts have varied meanings, depending on the visitors’ social background and personal experiences.<sup>332</sup> Moreover, just as societies change, so too does national identity change and evolve. As a result, various marginalised social groups, or groups discarded as ‘the other’ are re-assimilated into mainstream society when internal social changes

---

<sup>328</sup> Ibid.

<sup>329</sup> Billig, p. 81.

<sup>330</sup> John Jervis, *Transgressing the Modern* (Oxford & Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1990), p. 57.

<sup>331</sup> Jervis, p. 59.

<sup>332</sup> Durrans, *The Museum Time Machine*, p. 146.



call for it, such as is the case within my research topic, the Vikings.<sup>333</sup> Furthermore, the factors which make the other culture so distant and strange are often the ones what make it fascinating and desirable. In the case of Vikings, their culture and perceived dangerous lifestyle invoke a sense of danger and adventure. In this context, consider Karolewski and Suszycki, who wrote that there are various levels of othering, but only the significant, primal ‘Other’ is important for to collective identity formation.<sup>334</sup>

Foucault identifies three kinds of struggles between the internal ‘us’ versus the external ‘other’ which exist at any given time in societies.<sup>335</sup> These struggles are waged against domination, exploitation and lastly, subjection and submission. Domination can be ethnic, social or religious and is constantly present in all societies in some way. Exploitation conflict can be of the type that separates individuals from their produce or against “that which ties the individual from himself” meaning for example economic exploitations.<sup>336</sup> Finally, subjection and submission mean that one group is deemed inferior in some way and is ruled over by a dominant social group. These struggles are not mutually exclusive but often coexist, either mixed up or isolated although one of them is always dominant. Furthermore, these “anti-authority struggles”, as Foucault calls them, are not always against the highest power, or “chief enemy” but the *immediate* one.<sup>337</sup> These three struggles are all forms of power relations constantly prevailing in society because new political forms of power (the state) are constantly developing and seeking to meet the demands and needs of the social ruling classes and

---

<sup>333</sup> The previous chapter discussed how the Viking image has evolved and changed in English and Icelandic society through the ages.

<sup>334</sup> Karolewski & Suszycki, p. 40.

<sup>335</sup> Michael Foucault, *Power: The Essential works of Foucault*, vol 3, trans. by Robert Hurley and others (London: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 331.

<sup>336</sup> Foucault, *Power: Essential works of Foucault*, p. 331.

<sup>337</sup> Foucault, *Power: Essential works of Foucault*, p. 331.

groups.<sup>338</sup> Analysing further the result of Vikings being ‘the other’ and simultaneously part of Icelandic and English society, Foucault’s social power relations demonstrate the complex way in which national identity is created, modified and/or maintained.

## Conclusions: Preconceived Ideas on History and Identity Creation within Museums

The intention of this research was to study visitor reactions to the image of Vikings within museums and in Icelandic and English society. In order to understand how participants in my study relate to that image, it was necessary to analyse some of the influences affecting their understanding of history and society. The two main topics of the theoretical discussion in this chapter are identity creation and individual responses to historical narratives within museums.

Identity relates to nationalism, collective and personal memory, otherness and the way in which individuals understand themselves as being part of an imagined nation and various social and ethnic groups. As it connects to all of these themes, this chapter used theories from such scholars as Lowenthal (1994), Winters (2010), Kellas (1991) and Assman (2010) to define identity as representing collective memory. It involves a group of people united, for example, through shared moral values, racial background, ethnicity, nationality, social understanding of the world or a collective understanding of the past. Each individual has multiple identities which exist simultaneously, mix, change, appear and are abandoned according to each person’s changing needs and experiences.

---

<sup>338</sup> Ibid., p. 332.

Personal identity mirrors how people view and understand themselves as individuals, set apart from everyone and everything else. Yet, scholars such as Halbwachs (1992), Blustein (2008), Cubitt (2007) and others have demonstrated that it is impossible to stand completely outside of society, because memory is social and interactive. In other words, individuals can see themselves as being part of the collective or indeed standing outside it as the 'other'. However, when people position themselves, they are still defining their personal identity from collectively held beliefs and values.

If personal identity is constructed from an individual's personal experiences, national identity consists of shared commonalities connecting individuals within a nation. It inspires loyalty for collectively held ideas and values which are important for maintaining social structure. National identity seeks to be the predominant identity and is as such subject to alterations and revaluations when its social framework changes. Yet certain identities, such as ethnic ones, predate modern nations, because they embody the closest possible collective associations (Cohen 1999). They tend to persist and survive through collective memory even as a nation's racial identity and background changes (Smith 1999).

Ethnicity is understood, as discussed by Smith (2007), Cohen (1999) and Karolweski and Suszucki (2011) and others, as a community with, for example, a shared racial background, culture, history or heritage. Ethnic ties, that is to say, ethnic identity, embody close collective associations (Cohen 1999), which predate modern nationalism. Yet ethnic identity shares various ties with nationalism, because it is formed by a high culture which uses cultural traditions to make historical claims (Calhoun 2007). As a result, ethnic identity and nationalism are at the core of any political community. Yet ethnicity, just as racial identity, relies on culturally and socially created subjective differences in order to thrive (Day and Thompson 2004).

Thus they favour certain cultures at the expense of others, demonstrating the temporality of national identity and social othering of foreign cultures.

This chapter discussed ‘otherness’ as developed and theorized by Foucault (1998), Duara (1995), Rüsen (2007), Abizadeh (2005) and others. It was demonstrated how instable the idea of ‘the other’ was, in the same way that personal identity and memory is never fully individual. Otherness is created when similarities are ignored and differences are exaggerated. The constructed image of the ‘other’ reflects a more accurate image of the myth maker rather than the myth and on the internal national or personal identity rather than the external perceived ‘other’. Nations, just as individuals, rely on differentiating between self and others and alienation of external cultures in order to survive. This means that identities are not just framed by collective memory, they are shaped by it. As was argued above in a section entitled ‘What is Identity’, national identity is a political, well-defined social collective which individuals can identify with or through and feel as if they belong within it. It creates boundaries from which individuals and collectives create their own identity, as well as judge external ones.

Both personal and collective memory is shaped in order to fit in with changing social norms, to promote unity and gain approval of political decisions and nationalistic ideas. This national unity is only possible by excluding certain collective identities, while embracing others. As was argued in the section ‘Otherness’, people discriminate in this way, because they need their collective and/or personal identities to be positive. For nations, this can be achieved in various ways. For example by systematically distorting collective memory (Baumeister and Hasting 1997), promoting a desirable version of the past within cultural institutions, selective omission, fabricating or distorting memories (Pennebaker, Paez and Rimé 1997) or by reimagining past events

and individuals as ‘imagos’ or stereotypes (Burke 2011 and Duchame and Fine 1995). Additionally, identity can be reshaped in a positive way through historical distancing, which is the process of neutralizing a potentially problematic history. This is achieved by ‘othering’ the historical events, emphasising that they happened in the past and by focusing on how society has developed since.

Considering Phillips (2003), Misztal (2007) and others, I suggest that historical distancing is a political and social act, where distance and closeness is constructed in order to maintain a collectively held positive image of the past and maintain nationalistic ideals in the present. History and memory are fragmented, allowing for historical distancing which in turn enables societies to maintain an image of a perfect past and a positive collective, national identity. Through this process of ‘othering’ the fragments of the past, of memory and history become a narrative which gains substance when shared and interpreted in a social setting.

Nationalism is another important political tool which creates and alters collectively held ideas and images in order to maintain national identity. In this chapter, nationalism was discussed using theories from such scholars as Smith (1999), Hutchinson (1994), Day and Thompson (2004), Karolewski and Suszycki (2011), Parekh (1999). It can inspire greatness, either by promoting culturally diverse identities within a nation (cultural nationalism) or by attempting to eliminate them (political nationalism). In this respect, nationalism can be said to be connected to some inequalities, as a racial or ethnic identity of nations can only be established by promoting differences.

The various theories discussed in this chapter aim at framing an analytical tool for studying individual responses to museum exhibitions in regards to identity, society

and history, in particular Viking history. I do not intend to enter into a debate on history in itself, or indeed dispute the importance of scientific procedures when setting up museum exhibitions on the Viking age (or for that matter any other historical period). It is suggested that theories discussed above on the role of visitors in creating meaning within museums is an important part of that process as well. Individuals make judgement calls on history based on their own experiences and preconceived ideas. The exhibition messages might therefore not always be understood as intended by museum curators.

While visitors have their own preconceived images of Vikings, and history in general, their personal memory is shaped by collective social memory. In other words, individuals are influenced by the rules, ideas and historical interpretations of their society. Within collective memory, history is reinterpreted to fit in with changing social needs, to create unity and shape identity. Collective memory is interactive; it relies on individuals sharing cultural and social values in order to change and be maintained. Cultural institutions, such as museums, are places allowing such interactions. Within them, national identity and collective memory are preserved and maintained. Thus they represent the idealized self-image of a nation. However, museums are capable of more, they can challenge social norms, take active standpoints on social issues and promote changes to national identity (Blustein 2008). Museums need to identify the collective community they represent and attempt to include 'ordinary' people within the exhibition space (Dicks 2000). In other words, museums need to acknowledge the role of the visitor in the creation of meaning within exhibitions (for example: Black 2005, Kaplan 1994 and Costa and Bamossy 1995).

Visitors' preconceived ideas on history are formed not only by their collective memory, but also their various, conflicting, temporal and permanent identities. As was

described above, nations and individuals tend to erase that which does not fit within their ideology and pre-existing understanding of the world. Using constructivist learning theory (Hein 1998), museums would enable individuals to learn and understand new information based on their own pre-existing knowledge and identity framework. This increases the chances of the museum's messages on history and society to be understood as intended. Furthermore, accepting that identities are fluid and changeable, such exhibitions would allow individuals to interpret the exhibition to fit within their multiple selves, and for their various identities to be shaped and altered by the museum experience. Yet, as has been demonstrated in this chapter and my research verifies, various conflicting meanings and identities can be held simultaneously. Identities are framed within collective memory, using history, myths and collective ideals in various ways in order to verify various, conflicting understanding and meanings. Within this research, collective memory is shown as a driving force in all meaning creation. It exists apart from standard historical narratives as exhibited in museums, using them for their own means.

Because the Viking past is a violent one, my research shows how participants used historical distancing in order to neutralise the past and so view their national identity in a favourable light. Historical distancing also enables individuals to explore and justify various political decisions, rules and social structure of the present through a comparison with the past. Within my fieldwork such connections include women's rights, religion, family bonds and the recent Icelandic financial crisis. This comparison was not always favourable because individuals inevitably judge others based on their own personal experiences and identities. Yet, in as much as identities and memory is unstable in meaning, so is the definition of 'the other' as is evident from the responses of my research participants. Vikings are shown to have a complex link to English and

Icelandic society because they are simultaneously part of the inner social structure and among the outsiders, or the other.



# Chapter 3

## Methodology and Case Studies

### Introduction

This chapter reviews the development of the research methods and explores the framework from which the fieldwork was conducted. It starts with a discussion of how I created and developed the questionnaires, interviews and word association task used during the fieldwork to gain as much information about the participant's views on the research topic as possible. I then go on to analyse the exhibitions at the Yorkshire Museum and Víkingaheimar where I conducted my fieldwork in order to establish the wider framework on what influenced the participant responses. These museums use different methods in order to engage with and influence their visitors' understanding and interpretation of the past. The historical narrative created within the museums is influenced by social norms and seeks to either verify the social image of the past or uproot it, depending on the subject.

The comments made by participants and my subsequent analyses of the exhibitions in Víkingaheimar and Yorkshire Museum are based on the layout during the time which I conducted the fieldwork (that is, at Víkingaheimar in August 2010 and July 2011, and in Yorkshire Museum in November 2010 and August 2011). Furthermore, my analysis of the museum exhibitions was based on my own impressions, as well as the views of my participants and so did not necessarily reflect on the views of these institutions.

## Research Aims and Objectives

During the first year of my doctoral studies, my research focus changed significantly. Originally the intention was to research the representation of local history in regional museums and explore how it compared to the views of their visitors. After the initial first few months of general desktop research, I started focusing on national history, the Viking period in particular. During my undergraduate years I had studied various aspects of Vikings and their history which provided a good basis for further research on that topic. Moreover, Viking history is a common aspect of the history of Iceland and England, the main difference being that the Vikings raided the British Isles, but not Iceland, where their settlement started quite peacefully. This historical link provided a unique opportunity to compare the views of domestic museum visitors to the different representation and image of Vikings in two countries with different historical connections to the Viking age. Leading on from this, my research aimed mainly at exploring the visitor reactions to the representation of Viking culture within museums, and subsequently the relevance of the Viking image to Icelandic and English society and identity.

My objectives and research focus were thus refined during the course of my fieldwork. In anticipation of the responses, I developed five main research objectives which directed the analysis for my fieldwork, which were then further narrowed and developed after the initial pilot study. My main objective was then to examine how visitors understood and reflected upon the history on display in museum exhibitions, whether they accepted and understood the museum's intended messages, or whether they simply extracted the information which validated their pre-determined ideas of Vikings from the exhibit, regardless of what the museum's intended messages were.

Furthermore, I wished to ascertain whether (and if so, how) people perceived Vikings as part of their own heritage and national identity or if they were seen as ‘the other’.

I have opted to divide the fieldwork results into Chapter 4: Word Association Responses Analysed, Chapter 5: Impressions of Vikings within the Museums and Chapter 6: Identity. The first one focuses on the word association task, the latter two discuss the interview results. The reason for having three chapters on the fieldwork analysis was that it resulted in a variety of themes and rich data and in order to reflect this diversity it needed to be divided in this way. The data within the three chapters are categorised into multiple subcategories, which analyse various individual themes within the fieldwork. Chapter 4 explores themes on the Vikings themselves, how participants imagined they looked like, how they acted and what they did. Chapter 5 explores what participants thought about the museums, how they related the historical information within the exhibits to themselves and Chapter 6 demonstrates how they discussed their multiple identities and present society in general. Various discussion topics came up during both the word association task and the interviews; in such cases the data from both were discussed in one place and the category division maintained.

## Choosing the Museums for Fieldwork

In 2010 during the first year of my study I visited numerous potential museums in Iceland and England in order to determine which one would be most suitable for my fieldwork. After the initial pilot work and visits to various museums, I chose to conduct further fieldwork in museums with different exhibition methods. However, it was clear to me that this could impact the fieldwork and its ensuing analysis in various ways. Choosing one museum in each country with different methods of displaying Viking history could influence which topics were most likely discussed and so could make a

comparison between the Icelandic and the English participants more problematic. A general comparison of the exhibitions themselves would be impacted in the same way. Taking into consideration the limited timeframe which the PhD research allows, as well as the preliminary results of my pilot study in both countries, I decided that for the purpose of this PhD research, which was to analyse visitor responses to exhibition narratives on Vikings, one museum in each country would be sufficient. The results of the pilot study showed that participants largely ignored the intended messages of the museum they were visiting and discussed the Vikings based mostly on their own ideas and personal memory (but within a collective social framework, as I analyse further in Chapters 2, 6 and 7). The topics of discussion in both museums proved quite similar, despite the external exhibition differences. For example, in both, people discussed Vikings as warriors who robbed and pillaged, however their interpretation of that image varied depending on the participants' social background. The limitations of this decision must be acknowledged, yet the results of the fieldwork resulted in strong, analytically interesting themes, which proved to be a good starting point for understanding identity formations in museums. In the Conclusion chapter, I demonstrate the various ways in which this initial research can be built upon to further this study, including by conducting fieldwork in two additional museums, in order to address this.

Moreover, as there are multiple ways of approaching Viking history, as with any museum topic, and so I decided that it could prove fruitful for the two museums to be quite different from each other. That would allow examination of the effects that different exhibitions had on visitors. The choice was then to conduct fieldwork in one museum focusing on the farming, i.e. the domestic side of Viking society, while the other would mainly show the warrior, fighting, pillaging maritime aspect. That would also allow me to evaluate the museums individually based on the differences, as well as

making interesting social and cultural comparisons between Iceland and England, based on the different historical connection those countries have with the Viking age.

Below is a table showing the time and place of my initial pilot work and the continued fieldwork (see table 1). Note that I spent a longer time in Víkingaheimar than Yorkshire Museum because it is a smaller museum, with very few domestic visitors. Therefore, it took a longer time to find suitable participants for the study:

<b>Period:</b>	<b>Place:</b>	<b>Fieldwork conducted:</b>
13 May 2010	British Museum	Pilot: General observations
14 May 2010	Maritime Museum	Pilot: General observations
15 May 2010	Museum of London	Pilot: General observations
9 August 2010	Reykjavik 871 ±2	Pilot: General observations and interviews/questionnaires
14 August 2010	Víkingaheimar	Pilot: General observations and interviews/questionnaires
18 August 2010	Landnámssetrið Borgarnesi	Pilot: General observations and interviews/questionnaires
11 - 13 November 2010	Yorkshire Museum	Pilot: General observations and interviews/questionnaires
4 - 20 July 2011	Víkingaheimar	Interviews/questionnaires
26 - 30 August 2011	Yorkshire Museum	Interviews/questionnaires

**Table 1.** Table listing the time and place of initial pilot work and continued fieldwork.

In 2010 I started my research in London, England by visiting the National Maritime Museum, the Museum of London and the British Museum. I also went to York, the historic capital of the Anglo-Norse kingdom of Jorvik, part of the larger Danelaw, and visited several museums, including the Jorvik Viking Centre and the Yorkshire Museum. The first two museums that I visited in London were quickly excluded from the study as they had very limited displays on Viking history. In one of the main

galleries at the Maritime Museum, there was some information on the skills of Vikings as sailors and in the hands-on, children's section, they were shown as somewhat barbaric and exotic to appeal to children.

At the Museum of London, the main case with Viking objects was made out of glass exhibiting numerous Viking weapons found in the Thames, which aroused the attention of some visitors. Yet it clearly had a minimal role in the exhibition narrative, which told the story of medieval London, from the 400s to 1558. The British Museum had a more extensive collection of Viking objects and a more interesting one, albeit the exhibition methods and text panels that appeared a little dated. This was evident from the way objects were displayed within glass cases, the general style and images used on text panels and the general colour scheme. At the time when I did the observations, the museum was also displaying the 'Vale of York' hoard and the highlights of the Viking collections from the Yorkshire Museum, which was being renovated.

The difficulties in covering the British Museum exhibition were caused by the fact that it is a vast, global museum with heavy visitor traffic throughout the day. This presented various problems for fieldwork. For example, focusing on the views of local and domestic visitors would prove to be a challenge simply because they would be quite hard to identify in the crowd. Moreover, due to the large size of the museum and the exhibition halls, visitors had a tendency to go quickly through it in order to see as much as possible. They would therefore be less likely to have time to answer my questionnaires and agree to interviews.

As a result, I decided to search for suitable museums in York, which has numerous Viking-related attractions and is one of England's most famous Viking settlements. The Jorvik Centre provided an interesting visit. It has diverse display

methods, various interactive displays, including a short ride, described as travel through time to the backyards and houses of York during the Viking age. The museum focuses firmly on archaeological artefacts and the daily life of the farming community in the Viking age. It is a huge tourist attraction, managed by the York Archaeological Trust, which is an independent charity managing other museums in York such as the Jorvik Dig, Barley Hall and other cultural facilities. As a tourist attraction, the first problem with the Jorvik Museum would have been to single out the demographics chosen for the study, that is, domestic people. Secondly, while Jorvik has a great collection of Viking artefacts, the Yorkshire Museum, along with the British Museum, recently came into possession of the Vale of York hoard, found as recently as 2007. It is one of the most important finds of its type in Britain due to its size and quality and includes artefacts from Afghanistan, Ireland, Russia, Scandinavia and continental Europe.<sup>339</sup> Finally, after visiting the Yorkshire Museum, I decided it would be the right place for a pilot study. The museum will be discussed in greater detail below in the section named ‘Exhibition Analysis: Yorkshire Museum’, but one of its strengths is the fact that the permanent exhibitions are based upon archaeological finds and seemed to be much frequented by visitors from various parts of Britain as well as by local visitors.

Finding a suitable museum in Iceland for a study was quite challenging because the museum industry there is generally aimed at the tourist market. The result is that very few Icelanders think of visiting museums in their free time, except perhaps when accompanying foreign visitors, or when educating their children on the history and culture of Iceland. Museums that aim at attracting domestic visitors tend not to include

---

<sup>339</sup> See further: Gareth Williams and Barry Ager, *The Vale of York Hoard*, Objects in Focus Series (London: British Museum Press, 2010).

much (if anything) on the Viking age in particular, and place a greater emphasis on later periods and the farming community.

In search of a suitable museum in Iceland during the summer of 2010, I started by visiting the Settlement Centre in Borgarnes which has two permanent exhibitions; one on the settlement of Iceland and the second on *Egilssaga*, the rather gruesome tale of a local family in the Viking age. The museum's founder, Kjartan Ragnarsson, has a long and successful career behind him in theatre, as an actor, playwright and director. He incorporates this into the Settlement Centre, where he regularly shows and produces plays as well as combining the theatre with the exhibitions. After an interesting interview with Kjartan it was clear that, while the museum was highly original and entertaining, it was not suitable for my purpose for two reasons. First, the museum has relatively few Icelandic visitors, and secondly, Kjartan deliberately avoids any mention of Vikings which he does not believe were a part of the Icelandic, medieval society. In his view, the people who migrated to Iceland were "farmers and colonisers" who *attempted* to go on Viking expeditions with foreigners and lied about having done so. He added that in reality, half the population of Iceland during the settlement age were slaves, too busy trying to survive on their farms to have hobbies such as Viking expeditions.<sup>340</sup> Conditions were so harsh during those first years of settlement, that they would not have time to go "sport-hunting Christian people on the other side of the globe".<sup>341</sup>

---

<sup>340</sup> Interview taken at Landnámssetrið, on the 18th of August 2010.

<sup>341</sup> While the original settlers of Iceland may have been Vikings, it is true that most of them settled down to a life of farming after moving to Iceland. However, some Viking raids are mentioned in the sagas, for example *Egilssaga* and so there may have been the occasional trip. In addition, Icelanders did go westwards to colonize Greenland and even sailed to North America (see for example: Gunnar Karlsson, p. 28-32).



In the summer of 2010 I visited Reykjavík 871 ±2, which is an exhibition presenting the settlement of Iceland, based on various archaeological excavations in the city centre, most notably of the ruin of a hall from the settlement age, excavated in 2001. I interviewed two members of staff at the museum and did one day of observations. During this time, no Icelandic visitor visited the museum, and that, I was informed, was the general rule, except on Museum Day, which is an annual event when most museums in Iceland offer free entry. While the museum was based on archaeology, the lack of Icelandic visitors was an obvious issue for the purposes of my study. Furthermore, just like the Settlement Centre, the Reykjavík exhibition is focused on the daily lives of the farming community during the Viking age, but without any distinct image of the Vikings.

Lastly, I visited Víkingaheimar in Reykjanesbær, a town close to Keflavík International Airport. The museum was built around a replica of a longboat called *Íslendingur*, meaning 'The Icelandic' built by Mr Gunnar Marel, who in 2000 with a crew of eight men sailed on it across the Atlantic, celebrating the achievements of Leifur Eiríksson, the Icelandic explorer. The museum also included an exhibition on two floors on the Viking age. Within the museum, especially during my initial visit, there was little attempt to defy the stereotype image of Vikings as pillaging warriors and heroic adventurers. Indeed, Vikings were shown much from the perspective of the Icelandic sagas: as proud warriors, pioneers, poets, settlers and travellers. While the museum did not receive many Icelandic visitors during the two days of observations, the way it displayed Viking history was fascinating and rather dramatic and so I decided to conduct a pilot study there. I interviewed three visitors and one temporary member of staff and instantly received useful information on the visitors' image of Vikings and their interpretation and interaction with the exhibition and Viking history in general. As

I will show below in the section ‘Exhibition Analysis: Víkingaheimar’, it was obvious from the first day that this was the right museum for further fieldwork.

## Fieldwork Museums: Information and Layout

A glimpse of the lay-out of the aforementioned museums (in England and Iceland) is included in the discussion below; all photographs were taken by me during my fieldwork. A detailed analysis of both museums is included in below, which is based on my own impressions and that of my participants. In Chapter 5, which is the first of two chapters which focus on the results of the interviews taken in Yorkshire Museum and Víkingaheimar, I include a section which explores responses of both employees and visitors on their general impressions on the museums as well as their interpretation of the intended messages on the Viking history within the exhibitions.

The Yorkshire Museum is managed by the York Museums Trust, an independent charitable trust which was founded in 1830. It reopened in August 2010 after an extensive refurbishment, and now has five new galleries; one on natural history and the rest on various aspects and periods of the history of Yorkshire. According to a member of staff whom I interviewed, the Vikings had been more prominent within the museum before the refurbishments, after which they became to be displayed as part of the exhibition on the Middle Ages, which is displayed in the basement. During my fieldwork, the space included an exhibition called ‘Medieval York – the Power and the Glory’ which aimed to highlight the craftsmanship, power and wealth in York during that era.<sup>342</sup> After walking down the stairs leading to the lower gallery, there was a small,

---

<sup>342</sup>For further information on that exhibition, see the Museum’s official website:  
<http://www.yorkshitemuseum.org.uk/Page/ViewSpecialExhibition.aspx?CollectionId=28>

mostly empty room, with a window on the right side, displaying the Vale of York hoard and a glimpse of the ‘Treasury’ room, storing jewellery and other ornamental objects, such as the Middleham jewel and the Ormside bowl.



**Figure 3.** This image was taken from the entrance to the main gallery in Yorkshire Museum, showing the four stone statues from the abbey. Objects on display within the two glass cases are the York helmet (dated 750-775) and the Cawood Sword (dated 1100).

The objects in the main room were displayed around the ruins of a medieval abbey (figs 3-5). The windows had ornate stained-glass windows and the first things visitors saw when walking into the space were four stone statues from the abbey and a large open window, where further ruins from the abbey in the surrounding gardens were visible (fig 3).



**Figure 4.** A photograph showing the archway and two rows of pillars in Yorkshire Museum, running through the centre of the gallery. On the right hand side is the glass case displaying the York helmet.



**Figure 5.** Close-up of the columns in Yorkshire Museum, on the right hand side and glass cases displaying objects from the Middle Ages according to theme. Note the visible grey barrier which creates a passage on the far right side (where the visitors stand).



Behind the stone statues was a row of medieval columned arches and through the main archway running through the centre of the room were two rows of pillar bases, leading up to an illuminated frame (figs 4-5). Along the pillar bases are glass cases, where objects from various eras of the Middle Ages were displayed according to themes (fig 5). On the walls were further objects, many of which were from the old abbey.



**Figure 6.** View from the entrance of the main hall of Yorkshire Museum, looking at the entrances to the side rooms, that is, the ‘Treasury’ and ‘Trade and Industry’ rooms, visible on the image is a glass case displaying pottery.

The first side-room (fig 6) was the ‘Treasury’, previously mentioned; the second one was dedicated to ‘Trade and Industry’ with information and objects representing various crafts, such as glass, pottery, wood and bone. Finally, visitors were led through from the main gallery space, through a small room to a rather empty hallway, where the lavatories and the staircase leading back to the upper level were located. In this hallway I conducted my interviews and presented questionnaires, as it gave the participants a chance to look around the entire gallery beforehand.

Víkingaheimar in Reykjanesbær was opened in 2009, nine years after the longboat *Íslendingur* ('The Iclander'. See fig 7) was sailed across the Atlantic by Gunnar Marel and his crew.



**Figure 7.** The longboat *Íslendingur* as seen from the ground floor of Víkingaheimar.

*Íslendingur* is a replica of the Gokstad longboat in Norway and the highlight of the museum. Indeed, the museum was built around the boat. *Íslendingur* is 23 metres long, 5.25 metres wide and it took Gunnar Marel two years to build it. The boat was

suspended in air in the main part of the building so that visitors could walk underneath it and admire its craftsmanship (figs 7-8). The entire wall behind the ship's stern was a glass window, in front of which there was a seating area, so that visitors could sit down and admire the ship as well as the view to the beach and the bay of Faxaflói (figs 7-8). It was in this room that I conducted the interviews with guests and presented them with questionnaires.



**Figure 8.** View from the ground floor at Víkingaheimar, showing the exhibition spaces on the right hand side and the stairwell leading to the upper level. The closed doors of the gallery no longer in use can be seen on the right.

On the right side of the main hall, on two levels, were exhibitions (some permanent, and others temporary, depending on the availability of objects) on the travels of *Íslendingur*, the settlement of Iceland and the general history of the Viking age (figs 8-10). On the lower level, on both sides of the main reception were exhibition halls, one of which (fig 8) was no longer being used for exhibitions during my second research trip.



The exhibitions changed further from the period when I did the pilot in 2010, and up to the time I visited the museum for a continued fieldwork in 2011. During the initial visit the museum had on permanent loan objects from institutions such as the Smithsonian depicting the role of Viking ships, raids and trading throughout Europe. These objects had then been replaced by the following summer with other objects, most notably a reconstruction of a pagan grave found at Hafurbjarnarstadir in South Iceland in 1868, a loan from the National Museum of Iceland.



**Figure 9.** Photograph taken on the upper floor at Víkingaheimar, looking out towards the main entrance on the front of the museum. The exhibition space is situated to the left of the image.





**Figure 10.** Upper floor exhibition space at Víkingaheimar, showing reconstructed sleeping quarters.

On the upper floor there were two rooms (figs 9-10), joined at the back by a broad, rather dark hallway with a recreation of turf-house sleeping quarters, along with mannequins and a voice reciting an Icelandic saga (fig 10). From the open hallway at the front of the upper level exhibition rooms (fig 9) there was a good view of the ship deck, which was accessible to visitors who could climb aboard it when the museum first opened. However, this was no longer permitted by the time I started my pilot work.

## Text Panels and Glass Cases: Yorkshire Museum and Víkingaheimar Introduced

The presentation of the Viking myth in modern museums is a result of a long development which has been described in Chapter 1: Constructing the Image of Vikings. It shows that history is always a political construct, and that includes how it is

represented in museums.<sup>343</sup> In other words, as Duncan writes: “To control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and its highest values and truths.”<sup>344</sup> Therefore it is important to explore how much of the stereotypical Viking image is indeed represented within the museum before exploring the image itself further.

Baxendall describes how most people visit museums expecting to encounter visually interesting objects and that museums try to cater to that expectation.<sup>345</sup> The way that museums choose to represent objects does not merely say something about the objects themselves and their cultural origin, but also on the society displaying the object.<sup>346</sup> A narrative is created and the objects and their history are first evaluated and judged as being interesting and worthy enough to be on display. This can also be an indication of which historical periods people identify as being an important part of their identity. In Iceland, the Viking age is traditionally shown in museums as the ‘Golden Age’ of Icelandic culture and history. In Víkingaheimar, there was a certain glorification of this part of Icelandic history. Vikings were shown as fierce and clever due to their conquests, unique craftsmanship and social structure. They were also shown as having lived a life very different from modern times, which in turn, made them more interesting. In the Yorkshire Museum a similar general trend was visible. Vikings were displayed as one part of a complex, national identity, but in the same positive way.

As will be discussed below, the Yorkshire Museum and Víkingaheimar both painted a picture of local social structure in the past and present, drawing out themes

---

<sup>343</sup> Bennett, pp. 89-105.

<sup>344</sup> Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 8.

<sup>345</sup> Michael Baxendall, ‘Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects’ in *Exhibiting Cultures*, ed. by Ivan Karp and Steve D. Lavine (Washington & London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), pp. 33-34.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

from the past which they considered to be relevant and interesting to their visitors. While both museums had different ways of displaying and interpreting Viking culture, and indeed, varied intended messages on the Viking age, it is clear that through leaving much unsaid, both museums enabled the visitors to read their own meaning into the exhibitions. As will be discussed in chapter 7, these display methods had various effects on the visitors at the museum. The meaning they created within the exhibition was governed by their cultural background and current national identity and collective social memory, but within the framework set by the museum's larger narrative.

## Exhibition Analysis: Yorkshire Museum

Walking into the refurbished medieval gallery of the Yorkshire Museum has an air of walking into a church. There are many objects from the monastery which was located on the present site of the museum during the Middle Ages. The gallery was clearly organised with that in mind. In general, the main gallery was rather theatrical and dramatic. It did not merely have the air of a church, but also seemed to me that it was organised in that way. Keeping with the theme were several stained glass windows with Christian iconography and pillars across the room, as was described above. Having observed the exhibition space for a few days, I also noticed that generally visitors walked quietly around, talking in hushed voices until they left the room. More than one participant of my study noted that while approving of the refurbishment, they felt the space was hard to navigate and were afraid of having missed some parts of the exhibit. It was also suggested by a few participants (such as 14.08.10.01) that the museum was not designed for families, but rather for people without children who had previous knowledge and interest in history.

Instead of displaying objects in a historically linear way, showing each culture of the time separately, these were instead arranged according to themes. Arranging the various cultures of the Middle Ages in such a way was designed to emphasise the message that they all play an equal part in the history and regional identity of York. The member of staff who I interviewed (participant 12.11.10.03) verified this and it was made clear from the general layout of the exhibition. Judging by the responses of the participants in my study, the effect of this arrangement on visitors was that they did not get a specific idea of Viking history in York, or what came before and after it, but rather an idea of the Middle Ages in general. The museum was clearly attempting to move away from the classic Viking myth within the medieval gallery. While there were swords and a hoard on display, the exhibition did not directly attempt to challenge the stereotype of the Viking warrior. Instead it was completely absent from the exhibit which focused almost exclusively on contributions the Vikings made as members of a domestic society. The aim seems to have been to give a clear statement that the Vikings should be considered as an integrated, positive part of York history and society and not as a barbaric, outside group of raiders. Exhibiting the Vikings from an exclusively historical perspective as part of the internal identity is an interesting statement. It provided an opportunity to analyse whether visitors accepted this image or rejected it as too different from their preconceived ideas of what Vikings *should* be like. Indeed, as this thesis demonstrates, most visitors did both, while some thought they had missed “the Viking bit” altogether.

Most of the objects presented in the medieval exhibition were displayed in order to verify that Vikings were part of the internal local identity and society. As mentioned before, for example, swords were mostly focused upon as demonstrating good craftsmanship rather than being presented as weapons of war often used in deadly raids

on peaceful communities. For example, the Yorkshire Museum was in possession of the Cawood sword, which is dated to approximately 1080-1120 and is one of the finest Viking swords ever found. The text panel is as follows:

The armourer who produced this blade had great skill and artistry. It is made of good quality steel and the engraving along both sides of the blade would have been very difficult to render. [...]

Unlike the text panels at Víkingaheimar, which were included in the section above, here the Viking raids were not highlighted, and the swords were not demonstrating the ‘otherness’ of Vikings, or the use of such weapons in attacks, but only their superior craftsmanship. Accompanying a different set of swords, the text panel heading reads “Pillage and Plunder”. However, no direct discussion on such events actually follows on the text below, which simply reads:

Viking swords were shorter than their later medieval counterparts. These rare examples from York are identical to those depicted on carvings of Viking warriors such as on the Westow Cross.

Interestingly, at the back of the same glass case as the one described just above, another text panel heading read “Cut and Thrust” and the text start by saying “A sword was, above all, a weapon for killing”. The implications of this message are that Vikings were indeed killers, although, it was somewhat drowned out by the numerous labels focusing on different material aspects of the swords. In the case of some of the text labels objects, such as wooden combs, swords, brooches, and ceramics represent both advanced craftsmanship, and the positive influences Vikings had on the local culture and society through trade and superior design skills. This is emphasised on the text panels, such as the following:

Craftspeople in Viking York specialised in antler, bone, wood, amber and leather. Their products, although every day, were often richly decorated and highly valued.

Lastly, the main text panel, located at the exit of the main gallery, ends in the following way:

Anglian and Viking earls followed by Norman lords ruled over the people of York. They provided protection and justice in return for military service and taxes. York developed as a European centre of art, religion and education. All this created a strong and independent city that would help shape the history of medieval England.

This last text panel demonstrates fully what was described above, namely, that the Vikings (along with Anglians and Normans), had been just rulers in their time and had positively influenced cultural, educational and religious progress in York and ultimately the whole of England. The focus then is clearly on the positive, domestic influences of the Viking warriors, shown in the text as part of the internal 'us'.

While being a very interesting exhibition with multiple beautiful objects, it seems that in some ways the medieval gallery at the Yorkshire Museum increased the distance between history and visitors. Despite some of the objects not being in glass cases, the atmosphere was still that of awe and distance. It was a very un-emotional way of displaying history and perhaps the visual distancing enabled visitors to engage with, and relate, to Viking culture the way they did when responding to my questionnaires and interviews. In other words, this distancing is not necessarily a weakness, in fact, it allowed visitors to fill in the blanks themselves and create their own narrative within the framework set by the museum. It also enabled them to identify with Vikings without

conflict (because of the raids, slave trade or other such negative things), as there were no emotions attached to the subject within the museum exhibit itself.

## Exhibition Analysis: Víkingaheimar

The first thing visitors saw when walking into the Víkingaheimar museum was the long boat *Íslendingur*, which towered over them in front of a large window, facing the ocean. The sight was visually dramatic, as the ship looked ready to sail out to sea. In fact, it had such an awe-inspiring impact on visitors, that despite walking around the whole museum, the boat was often the only thing they remembered when asked about their favourite items. It was also mentioned as the highlight of the museum experience by every single participant.

During my second fieldwork visit, some objects found in a recent archaeological excavation in Iceland had been added. Despite this addition, the exhibition narrative was still rather broad and somewhat incoherent and disorganised. This may have changed by now, as the museum has evolved since I did my fieldwork there in the summers of 2010 and 2011.

Part of the problem that the Víkingaheimar museum faced was that, despite the best intentions of its staff, it simply did not have enough interesting objects to offer a comprehensive exhibition on the settlement of Iceland. Furthermore, the objects that it had, often reinforced the stereotype Viking image rather than contesting it. As explained before, on the upper level of the exhibition, there was a recreation of ancient Icelandic sleeping quarters along with a few mannequins, one of which is an old man reciting an Icelandic saga. Other objects seemed to be there merely to fill up the space, and so were not memorable and neither reinforced or contested the Viking stereotype. The member of the museum staff who I spoke to was aware of the limitations of the exhibition and

informed me that the original plans had been for a more comprehensive exhibition area in and around the museum. Due to a low budget, those plans had not been completed at the time of my field work.

As in York, the visitors I interviewed in Víkingaheimar also complained that they were not sufficiently guided through the space. They thought it was confusing and were afraid of having overlooked a part of the exhibit. The effects of this were the same as before, it offered opportunities for the visitors to bring their own imagination and ideas to bear on the exhibition. Within Víkingaheimar, life in the Viking age was shown in many ways as having been strange and drastically different from the present and *therefore* interesting for that very reason. Examples of this are the text panels, which read for instance: “From the Fury of the Vikings, Lord Protect Us” and the subtext talked about the “legendary destruction” of the Vikings. Another reads: “Pillaging and Plundering”, and the subtext talked about Viking raids in England and in Europe. This text panel is next to a large mural decorates one wall of the museum which depicts the Viking raid on Lindisfarne in A.D. 793 (fig 11).





**Figure 11.** Large mural covering a wall on the lower level exhibition space, the tagline of the text panel accompanying this reads “Pillaging and Plundering”

In a way, the incoherence of the exhibition narrative was one of the museum’s more attractive aspects, because, even though it was unmemorable and unclear at times it enabled visitors to fill in the blanks themselves, similarly as in the Yorkshire Museum. This allowed people to identify with and enjoy Viking warrior culture without feeling conflicted about their negative image, despite the negative connotations. It is likely that this way of displaying Viking culture was also influenced by commercial reasons. Based on the responses of participants of the study, people seem interested in Vikings *because* they were violent, and so museums occasionally focus on that image in order to get more visitor response. The effect of the general exhibition arrangement in Víkingaheimar on visitors was making them feel awe-inspired by *Íslendingur* and the history of the Viking age. As will be discussed later, the participants in my research project were frequently occupied with subjects connected to sailing, adventures and such in response to the exhibition. Because the Viking age was portrayed in a

fantastical, theatrical way, it seemed to encourage visitors to engage with the exhibition through its drama. However, as will be discussed further in Chapter 7, due to the eclectic narrative, visitors engaged with the exhibition on their own terms, influenced by their preconceived ideas on history.

## Development of Fieldwork

As is customary with research such as this one, the fieldwork methods were developed and refined as my understanding and experience of information gathering and interviewing increased. In the initial stages of the fieldwork preparation, there was a certain amount of uncertainty of how individuals would respond to questions about Viking culture in museums. Therefore I started with a wide theoretical framework, which was narrowed down as the fieldwork progressed and response patterns emerged. The qualitative data collecting methods developed alongside the theoretical analysis and in response to the pilot studies conducted in Iceland. In other words, the theoretical framework and methodology were constantly re-examined and reframed in response to each other. These qualitative data collecting methods enabled me to develop a theoretical framework and fieldwork tasks thoroughly grounded in the data itself.

Qualitative research methods, as were used in developing my fieldwork questionnaires and interviews, allow for tracing individual responses to their own experiences. That is to say, qualitative methodology factors in richness and complexities

within research data and so increases the capacity of understanding the response context.<sup>347</sup> It allowed me to explore emerging patterns within my data as they arose.<sup>348</sup>

In preparation for the fieldwork I developed a three-part strategy for engaging with the visitors of the museums; questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and a word association task. The interview and questionnaire protocols are included in appendix 2 and copies of the word association sheets are included in appendix 1. Additionally, in appendix 3, I include written transcripts of two interviews, one from each museum where I conducted fieldwork. The questionnaire asked basic questions about the participants, such as age, education, city of residence, how many times they went to museums and with whom, what sort of cultural institutions they preferred and so on. The interviews were semi-structured because I was attempting to gather information on participants' personal responses to Vikings and their culture. Therefore it was important to allow for discussion of topics which came spontaneously and naturally to the participants, rather forcing any specific associations.

I also asked participants to write down words describing their immediate response to the word 'Viking' in a word association task.<sup>349</sup> The intention of the word association task was to provide further valuable insights into the image of Vikings to support the results of the semi-structured interviews. Word association or 'mind-mapping' is an open-ended method designed to gain information and understanding of participant knowledge, feelings or ideas about various subjects. It has been used, for example, by Peter Brown, the head of learning & access at the Imperial War Museum

---

<sup>347</sup> Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching* (London, Thousand Oaks, CA & New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002), p.1.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>349</sup> See Appendix 1 for scanned images of the word association sheets.

North in Manchester as a way of researching visitor responses on the 'Lindow-man'.<sup>350</sup> This method is based on a model called Personal Meaning Mapping (or PMM for short) which was developed by Falk, Moussouri and Coulson.<sup>351</sup> PMM assumes that individuals bring their own prior knowledge and experiences into new learning situations and utilises mind-maps to analyse this.<sup>352</sup> In other words, I utilized this method in order to gain insight into the immediate, deeply rooted ideas participants had on Vikings. This in turn allowed me to understand the participants' preconceived ideas and knowledge on the Viking age and their relation to the information presented within the museum. Participants were asked to complete the word association task before the interview, which enabled me to ask for clarifications on certain answers and to analyse the principle differences between the image of Vikings during the interviews and the words associated with them on the word association lists.

Originally I intended to present the questionnaire and the word association task before participants had looked through the exhibition, and then give them a chance to review the word association sheet and interview them afterwards. In this way, I hoped to understand more fully how the exhibition influenced visitor understanding and interpretation of Viking history. However, attempting to interview people beforehand proved rather problematic during the pilot. Visitors, especially those with children, were reluctant to take part before seeing the exhibits as they were impatient to enter and look around. Also, as analysed further in Chapter 7, it seemed that people were more insecure and felt less able to speak about the Vikings beforehand as they needed the exhibition to verify their views. A further problem was trying to find and stop the same

---

<sup>350</sup> Peter Brown, 'Us and Them: who benefits from experimental exhibition making?', in *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 26:2 (2010), pp. 129-148.

<sup>351</sup> John H Falk, Theano Moussouri and Douglas Coulson, 'The Effect of Visitors, Agendas on Museum Learning', *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 41: 2, (2010), pp. 107-120.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

visitors again which was rather difficult due to my location in the museums and the layout of the exhibition spaces. It also seemed to me that people might find talking to me twice took up too much time and would therefore be more likely to leave without taking part in the second half of the research even if on the whole it would not take more than 15-20 minutes. Spending the same length of time with each participant without splitting it up was a lot easier, because they had already seen everything they wanted to see. Although it would have been preferable to conduct interviews both prior and after the visit, I made the decision that, under the circumstances it would be more productive to talk to each participant only once, when they were leaving the exhibition space. Participants would then be relatively relaxed, and often eager to discuss their museum experience. As a result, the entire field work was conducted after participants had looked around and questions were modified in order to fit in with this new strategy. I would start by recording the answers to the basic questionnaire with the participants, and then they would fill out the word association task, followed by the interview. Finally, they had a chance to add to the word association sheet in case they remembered any additional words.

The updated questionnaire and interview questions included questions where I asked participants in greater detail about their expectations towards the museums, their interpretation of the museum exhibit, prior knowledge and what might have changed or been added during their visit. However, the main research aim was not to determine whether the views of visitors changed after exploring the museum exhibition, but to focus on visitor *reactions* and interpretations. Therefore, I felt that for the purpose of this research interviewing participants after they had looked around would provide with the information needed. Pilot studies, using the updated questions, then confirmed this hypothesis. The fieldwork resulted in a rich variety of discussions in connection with

the museums in general, the image of Vikings and their uses in current Icelandic and English society.

The basic questionnaire, the results of which are discussed in the next chapter, provided me with comparative data information when analysing the fieldwork and an understanding of the museum-visiting habits of the participants. That is to say, answers to such questions as to what type of audience the participants believed that museums were designed for, what themes they were interested in, what they hoped to get out of visiting museums and other cultural institutions etc. It also put participants at ease before the word association task and the interview, because the questions were easy and manageable.

Conducting semi-structured interviews allowed the participants an opportunity to explore various themes that interested them within the more broadly Viking-themed framework. It was also useful for developing the theoretical framework as it gave me an insight into what seemed most interesting to people and then changing the interview questions accordingly in order to obtain the most useful information. The aim of the interviews was to explore the image that the participants had of Vikings and their culture and where it originated from. Was it influenced by the museum narrative or was it a pre-determined image? A further comparison between English and Icelandic participants allowed me to analyse whether the image of Vikings varied according to ethnic backgrounds, genders or other factors. I also designed the questions in order to provide information about how, if at all, the participants associated the Viking past with their own various identities.

The word association task also changed slightly after the initial pilot. I found that participants were nervous when they had an empty piece of paper in front of them

and found it hard to start writing. In order to facilitate this I placed an image of the outlines of a Viking ship on the middle of the paper and asked participants to start by writing the word 'Viking'. Included in appendix 1 are copies of all word association sheets filled in by participants, where this image can be seen. This addition usually made them more comfortable and willing to write. The vast majority of participants did not add any words after their interview, both because they were eager to continue their museum visit and because most of them could not think of more things to add after a detailed discussion of their image during the interview.

The target participant group for my fieldwork were adult museum visitors, over the age of 18, from the respective countries, Iceland and England. I also interviewed a few members of staff in Víkingaheimar and one employee in the Yorkshire Museum in order to compare and contrast their responses. This comparison was aimed at gaining understanding of the different interpretations of the exhibitions and the image of Vikings in general. Note that the responses of these members of staff pertaining to the messages and intentions of the museum exhibitions do not necessarily represent the views of the museums themselves. In York I also interviewed four participants who were from outside Britain, two of whom had been living in England for various lengths of time. This offered an interesting view of how national identity and social history was understood and interpreted by both individuals who were part of it and those who stood outside it. The other two, who had not lived in England, were a mother and a daughter who were visiting York from Australia because the latter intended to study in the area in the future. The results of the interviews taken with the international visitors are included here merely as an initial indication of the different perspectives of foreign and domestic visitors. However, due to the limited number of interviews with foreign visitors these

views should be taken as interesting side-notes, which are in need of further research in order to verify their accuracy.

After only a few interviews, a clear image of Vikings and their culture emerged; therefore, the results after approximately 25 interviews at each museum were multiple strong, informative ideas on Vikings and how participants understood history and linked it to their own current society. Despite the limited number of participants at each museums, the data received from the fieldwork were quite rich, therefore some interesting discussions which were not directly relevant to my research, had to be minimised in this study.<sup>353</sup>

Finally, I would like to discuss my role as the interviewer within the framework of the fieldwork methods and the possible influences I may have had on the interview discussions. As I wrote in my introduction, my research is guided by my own experiences and upbringing as an Icelandic. Growing up I was influenced by the same social structure, ideas and media as the Icelandic participants of my research. I was aware of the fact that I was analysing my own national identity and culture and kept this in mind during my fieldwork, in particular when interviewing Icelanders. This connection allowed me to better understand the nuances of their speech, context and meaning. At the same time, I was aware of the fact that this commonality might increase the likelihood of the discourse being influenced by my own views. According to Simons it is impossible to completely separate the self from the researcher.<sup>354</sup> Rather, the aim is

---

<sup>353</sup> For example: The fascination with *Íslendingur* and the Viking warrior on display at Víkingaheimar, are mentioned in this thesis several times in connection to other discussions, however they are not theorised individually as objects. In Chapter 5 I discuss briefly the image of women in the Viking age, however, due to length limitations of this thesis, it is suggested that this topic could be the focus of future research.

<sup>354</sup> Helen Simons, *Case Study Research in Practice* (London and Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 2009), p. 90.



to identify how far the researcher should go in being him/herself during the fieldwork, before running the risk of influencing the results. In York, there was no such commonality of language and culture and so my role as an interviewer was different. There, I was an ‘outsider’ looking in and therefore my questions and discussions would influence the English participants differently than the Icelandic ones.

I attempted to address this issue by conducting semi-structured interviews. This method allowed me to ask basic pre-determined questions, phrased in a way which would not lead the participants’ views or answers in any significant way. The follow-up questions would then be guided by *their* replies and discussions, rather than my own views. This interview method maintained a focus on the participant, who supplied the information and discussions relevant to their personal interests and experiences. My role as the interviewer was then to introduce themes which guided the general framework of the interview and allowing participants to demonstrate their knowledge and views.<sup>355</sup>

The interviews were conducted within the museum space, which created a communicative event, grounded within the framework of the participants’ experiences of the exhibitions. I clarified to each participant that I was an independent researcher, not part of the museum staff, which further defined my role as the interviewer. It clarified that my aim was not to analyse the success or failures of the museums and opened up a more multi-dimensional discussion on Vikings, identity and society.

Another point to keep in mind regarding fieldwork is the fluidity of ‘identity’ as discussed in Chapter 2. Each person has multiple identities which can change and adapt. When interviewing participants about their thoughts, ideas and connections to the

---

<sup>355</sup> Charles L. Briggs, *Learning how to ask: A sociolinguistic appraisal of the role of the interview in social science research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 46-47 and p. 56.

Vikings, I enabled them to focus on, or even create (temporarily or permanently) one aspect of their identity. It is impossible to speculate on the long term effects of the interview on participants, or indeed how much of their thoughts were unconscious or non-existent before speaking to me. However, that is one of the interesting aspects of any research on identity, memory and heritage. Furthermore, I do not consider the validity of the results to be compromised by this. Rather, as the following chapters will demonstrate, the image of Vikings was held collectively by participants. Additionally, history was re-appropriated in similar ways in order to fit in with current Icelandic and British society.

As mentioned in Chapter 2 an interview might in itself affect the way in which participants discuss their identity and how they feel about themselves. It should be noticed that during the interviews participants might have been negotiating and verbalizing their identity in a new way when being asked to consciously think about and offer their opinion on the Viking parts of the exhibition. Participants would frequently say this outright, for example Icelandic participants 14.07.11.01 and 14.07.11.02 who expressed their pleasure being offered the opportunity to explore Viking history and their own personal and collective identities in a way which they did not normally do. Furthermore, the interviewee might be affected by his/her attempts at communicating their view in a specific way.<sup>356</sup> At the same time, the interviewer aims at receiving certain information and so attempts to phrase questions in a way which is most likely to result in a discussion on those topics. In other words, both parties have their own agendas, their own roles to play in the interaction. If both roles, in particular the researcher's part, are not carefully considered during the interview, the discussions

---

<sup>356</sup> Biggs, p. 46.

might be influenced in a way which skews the resulting data. Moreover, participants may have felt inclined to answer in a way in which they imagined would be the preferred by the interviewer.

According to Briggs, the different perceptions of interviewer and interviewee can significantly influence the resulting data and how it is to be read.<sup>357</sup> Both parties have a part to play in this constructed social interaction and need to negotiate their communication in order for the interview to be successful.<sup>358</sup> Therefore, it is important to keep cultural and social differences in mind when conducting interviews and allow people to communicate in a way which they are comfortable with. The person conducting the interview, has a great influence over what type of answers are given, what speech forms may be used and what sort of information is divulged.<sup>359</sup> In order to address this, it is useful to conduct pilot studies, where questions can be tested and their usefulness and the response patterns can be tested. For example, during the course of one of the first interviews I took, I asked the following question: “Are you a Viking?” The answer was so intriguing that the question became a permanent part of the interviews.

It is impossible to analyse the full extent to which the participants were influenced by the interviews and the specific focus on Vikings and their culture. A part of this problem could be resolved by conducting interviews prior to the museum visit. Certainly, the experiences and views of the museum visitors were bound to be influenced by the situation they happened to be in.<sup>360</sup> In this case, participants can be said to have been influenced when being asked to consciously consider their visit to the

---

<sup>357</sup> Biggs, p. 57.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid., pp. 21-23.

museum and their various collective and personal identities. In other words, both interviewer and interviewee are bound to be influenced by their own bias as well as by each other.<sup>361</sup> Moreover, interviewees connect to questions in very different ways. Therefore, it might perhaps be an oversimplification to expect truly objective responses.<sup>362</sup> Instead, the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee demonstrate the complexity and intricacy of human consciousness.

Needless to say, interviews are an important way of understanding what people do and how they view themselves. In order to gain full insight into someone's views, it might be beneficial to do so outside his or her 'natural' surroundings.<sup>363</sup> By doing this, a distance is created between people and their daily environment allowing them to safely consider the positive and negative elements of their daily life, their multiple collective and personal identities and views on various social matters. In the context of my research, this alien environment was twofold, i.e. the setting of the museum and the topic which participants had frequently never consciously considered before. This problem of participants being influenced by the interview moment remains to some extent unresolved. Nevertheless, identity is by nature, fluid, it can be drawn out, altered or created in the museum and during the interview as discussed in Chapter 2. In this thesis I will attempt to show how this process is clearly present in my fieldwork data.

---

<sup>361</sup> Biggs, pp. 21-23.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>363</sup> Jenny Hockey & Martin Forsey, 'Ethnography Is Not Participant Observation: Reflection on the Interview as Participatory Qualitative Research' in *The Interview: An Ethnographic Approach*, ed. by Jonathan Skinner (London & New York: Berg 2012), pp. 69-87 (p. 71).

# Icelandic Fieldwork: Translation Process and Word Explanations

My fieldwork in Iceland was conducted in Icelandic as I felt it was important for participants to be able to easily express themselves. This meant that some words proved difficult to translate, as the literal meaning does not always fully express the implied cultural connections and meanings. I therefore decided to include both Icelandic words and their rough translations within this research. Following is a list of the hard-to-translate words and their meaning:

**Harðjagl:** Its literal translation is “tough jaw”, meaning someone who is tough, brave and unyielding. Within the thesis it is translated as ‘bold’.

**Þjóðremba:** This word literally means ‘jingoism’; it describes an arrogant view towards one’s own national background. It is not connected to politics or aggressive foreign policies, but is simply describing someone who is rather *too* sure of the superiority of Icelanders as a nation, in other words, excessive nationalism or patriotism. This term is generally somewhat negative, however when it came up during my interviews, it was commonly used by the Icelandic participants to make light of their own nationalism, and Icelandic nationalism in general, yet discuss it positively at the same time. It will be translated as “extreme nationalism” when it comes up during my fieldwork.

**Útrásarvíkingur/útrásarvíkingar:** This word has two components, i.e. ‘útrás’ and ‘víkingur’, the latter meaning ‘Viking’, while the former has a martial connotation, i.e. a break-out (an assault) launched from a fortress. The word was invented during the financial bubble in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Iceland to describe

businessmen and bankers who ventured outside Iceland in their investments and search for markets. It then had a most positive connotation, i.e. the Vikings of modern times were supposed to be *breaking out* from a relatively remote Iceland into the world of international business and high finance. However, after the financial crash of 2008, the meaning of the word changed overnight. It became a derogatory term, equivalent to English words such as corporate marauder or raider and is used as such within this research.

In translating some of the key interview quotes, I felt it was important to keep as close to the original as possible, rather than translate them into idiomatic English. When participants spoke, both in Icelandic and English, they were sometimes unable to express their thoughts flawlessly. Therefore I decided to remain as true to the original quotes as possible in order to present the evidence for the theoretical discussion accurately. In case the visitor responses quoted in this thesis were unclear, I attempted to clarify their meaning by adding words to explain the sentences in square brackets. I also included the standard [sic] to indicate that incomplete sentences, grammar errors, or other such, are transcribed as it was said by participants. Finally, when talking about themselves, many Icelandic participants would use the word ‘maður’, which within this context means ‘one’ instead of saying ‘I’. Occasionally this might translate curiously, however, it is a common expression of spoken Icelandic. It could be argued, that in some cases within the fieldwork, this expression was used in order to make personal views on delicate or potentially controversial issues in an impersonal manner.

# Questionnaire Data: Statistical Information on Participants

My fieldwork data was manually coded using Nvivo software in order to explore emerging themes and patterns within the visitor responses. The results of the questionnaire data was then analysed both in Nvivo and Microsoft Excel. The following table (table 2) shows the gender, age and nationality division of the participants of my study in Víkingaheimar and the Yorkshire Museum:

	Icelandic	British English	British Scottish	Other Dutch	Other Australian	Other Italian	Grand Total
Female	<b>13</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>29</b>
18-25	2	2					4
26-35	2	1		1	1	1	6
36-45	3	2	1				6
46-55	4	1					5
56-65	1	4			1		6
66-75		1					1
over 75	1						1
Male	<b>14</b>	<b>8</b>					<b>22</b>
18-25	1						1
26-35	2	1					3
36-45	3						3
46-55	5	2					7
56-65	3	2					5
66-75		3					3
Grand Total	<b>27</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>51</b>

**Table 2.** The gender, age and nationality of participants.

As can be seen from table 2, I spoke in total to 29 females and 22 males in various age groups. In Iceland, I spoke to 13 females and 14 males in total. The largest female age group in Víkingaheimar, 4 participants, ranged from 46-55 years of age, and the largest male group, 5 participants, ranged from 56-65.

In York, I interviewed 16 females: 12 British females (one of which was Scottish), and 8 males (all English). The largest British female age group, 4 participants, was between 56-65 years of age and the male age group, 3 participants, ranged from 66-75 years of age.

Although my aim was to study exclusively the views of native museum visitors, I had the additional opportunity at the Yorkshire Museum to explore the responses of a few people from outside Iceland and Britain. It should be noted, that due to the limited number of foreign visitors interviewed, the conclusions drawn from these responses are limited. Further research and interviews need to be conducted to verify the conclusions I draw from them. However, this enabled me to get some general indications on the particularity of native participants' responses, as well as the similarities. Although the sample of foreign visitors was significantly small, it was clear that they had less personal interest in a positive interpretation of the museum exhibitions. Throughout this research I mention a few times these responses of foreign visitors in order to demonstrate the contrast to the responses of domestic visitors.

A further note on the fieldwork data, I would also like to stress, that my conclusions are based on the answers of a somewhat limited number of participants, 51 all in all. This research provides a starting point for a more detailed research on visitor responses and interpretations of the Viking image within museums. With this in mind, it was my opinion that 25 interviews in each country, demonstrated that there were strong,



interesting topics which were discussed right in the first few interviews, which continued throughout the fieldwork. However, more detailed research into specific areas of the emerging data needs to be conducted, in order to strengthen the understanding and theoretical discussions presented here.

The majority of participants, 24 in total, were visiting Víkingaheimar for the first time. In Yorkshire 12 British participants (thereof 1 from Scotland) were visiting the museum for the first time. Out of the 8 English participants who had visited before, 5 had been approximately at the museum multiple times. All participants of other nationalities were visiting the museum in York for the first time.

Following is a table showing with whom participants visited the museums (table 3). Note that some participants' visiting habits fell under more than one category because they were visiting the museums with different persons.

	Family members	Friends	On your own	Grand Total
Icelandic	<b>19</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>31</b>
female	9	3	3	15
male	10	4	2	16
British-English	<b>15</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>23</b>
female	9	5		14
male	6	2	1	9
British-Scottish	1			<b>1</b>
female	1			1
Other - Dutch			<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
female			1	1

Other nationality: Australian	<b>1</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
female	1		1	2
Other nationality: Italian			<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
female			1	1
Grand Total	<b>35</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>59</b>

**Table 3.** This table shows who accompanied the participants to the museum, based on their nationality and gender.

A clear majority of participants both in Víkingheimar and the Yorkshire Museum said they mostly visited museums with their family. This corresponded with the fact that most of the visitors had indeed come to the museums with their family when participating in my study. Many of those were interviewed in groups. This both saved time for those in a rush, but also led to interesting discussions amongst participants which enabled me to gather more detailed data. Both in York and Reykjanesbær the vast majority of participants visited museums 6-10 times per year; 18 participants in Iceland and 16 in England (including the 2 females from Australia). The most frequent type of cultural institution which participants both in Iceland and England preferred visiting was history museums with a total of 18 mentions and galleries with 15 mentions. Regional/local museums were mentioned 10 times in total while national museums were only mentioned 4 times.

## Conclusions: Research Developments and Methods Summarised

This chapter introduced the development of research methods and the general intentions of the research. The initial aim with this research was to study the Viking image as understood and interpreted by visitors in Icelandic and English museums and its impact and use within both societies. In order to accomplish this I chose two museums, one in

each country, which had different ways of displaying Viking history. This would enable me to compare both the resulting data based on these different display methods, and the different views on the Vikings within each country. In Iceland I chose Víkingaheimar, which focuses on the reconstructed longboat *Íslendingur*, the maritime explorations of the Vikings and the settlement of Iceland. The Yorkshire Museum aimed at displaying the domestic life and the high level of craftsmanship of the Viking settlers, within the wider historical framework of the Middle Ages in York.

I developed a three part survey in order to gain information on the Viking image, which was answered by museum visitors and members of staff. The study involved a basic questionnaire, a word-association task and finally a short, semi-structured interview. The participant responses showed clearly that the Viking image is still strong within Icelandic and English society. It also demonstrated the way individuals related to Vikings and Viking history, as it was presented within the museums, from their own preconceived ideas and social background. The analysis of the fieldwork responses, focused on exploring what influenced the participants' views on Vikings and analysing how that influences present Icelandic and English society and identity.

# Chapter 4

## Word Association Responses

### Introduction

As was explained in the previous chapter, during my fieldwork at the Yorkshire Museum in York and Víkingaheimar in Reykjanesbær I collected three types of data from each visitor, questionnaires, Word association sheets and semi-structured interviews. The aim of the Word association, the second task, was to provide data to explore their various immediate mental connections and ideas about Vikings and their culture. Furthermore, it got participants focused on Vikings which, in addition to their views on the museums, was the topic of the interviews, the third and final task. These various methods worked well together to provide a comprehensive image of each participant's image of Vikings, views on history in general and the museum they were visiting.

The following is an overview of the main themes from the word association sheets that emerged amongst participants in both museums. I would like to emphasise, as was discussed in the previous chapter, that in the discussions below, I include the views of the foreign visitors interviewed for comparative purposes and to emphasise the uniqueness of the responses of domestic participants.

The main word association theme groups are discussed in connection with the interviews from Víkingaheimar and the Yorkshire Museum. Often participants would write down words during the word-association task and then discuss them in more detail during the interview. This meant that most themes came up during both. However, most

participants started by writing down words describing the characteristics and outer appearance before moving onto the other various topics. Therefore, this chapter focuses on themes connected directly to the Vikings which emerged during the word association exercise. When possible, I elaborate further with a comparison of replies on the same themes within the interviews. Scanned images of the word association sheets themselves are available in Appendix 1.

A few participants did not fill out a word association sheet; these were the two members of staff at Víkingaheimar (participants 04.07.11.01 and 04.07.11.02), and the Yorkshire Museum member of staff (participant 12.11.10.03). Additionally, Icelandic male participant 08.07.11.03 requested that I write down words he dictated to me. Lastly, Icelandic male participant 20.07.11.03 was dyslexic and declined my offer to write down words he dictated for me.

The words that people wrote down were quite diverse, covering smells, noises, describing buildings, streets, objects, history and fiction. Often participants would describe how they imagined Vikings looked, their characteristics, how they dressed and what weapons they used. Below I have divided the findings into groups of themes, such as outer appearance, characteristics, society, religion and objects. I start by exploring the Vikings themselves, move into a discussion on how their society and moral standards were imagined. This is followed by a discussion on words connected to the Viking sailing expeditions, including raids, settlements and trading in various countries. Finally I discuss various objects mentioned which are connected both to the Viking image in general and specific objects within the museums.

Before exploring the emerging themes within the data, I would like to make clear that in this context I do not defend or argue any objective position on the various

and sometimes conflicting accounts of Viking history, but concern myself only with the *image* of that age as it was discussed by participants. In other words, I will not attempt to verify or deny the accuracy of people's image of Vikings and their culture, but rather explore their understanding of what they encountered during their visits to the two museums and how that compares with their pre-determined ideas.

## Appearance of Vikings

The first theme group explores the external look of Vikings. Interestingly, many of the words describing the image were similar in the Yorkshire Museum and Víkingaheimar. These words provide an indication of how Vikings are perceived in modern society. They are seen as tall, strong, bearded men with long hair (either red or blond), who wear leather and helmets of some sort. These descriptions also emerged during the interviews, where participants would explain that this was the standard Viking warrior image they had been taught since primary school. In Víkingaheimar 'horned helmets' never came up during the word association task and were only mentioned once by a member of staff who said that often visitors expected such helmets.

In the Yorkshire Museum 'horned helmets' was written three times and mentioned during the interviews by a few participants, who would admit to having thought of such helmets, despite knowing that this was erroneous. The fact is that the horned helmet is a standard Viking accessory in pop culture (such as was present in fig 1 and 2 in the introductory chapter, showing Hägar, the lovable, raiding Viking) and an international Viking symbol, despite it being fairly well known that it was a later invention. Nevertheless, the horned helmet still seems to be the global sign of someone being more than just a regular barbarian. It is a sign that he, or she, is a Viking barbarian. One participant (from Scotland) even explained that her local Viking festival,

which prides itself on historical accuracy, uses horned helmets. This participant was therefore surprised to find out during her visit to York that the Vikings had never worn such helmets.

Other things mentioned as typically belonging to Vikings were: swords, weapons and shields. These words also describe objects which participants found interesting at the museum. It is clear that the immediate external image of Vikings is that of a ferocious, bearded warrior. Furthermore, numerous attributes mentioned by participants both in Iceland and England described a warrior image, such as ‘fighters’, ‘killing’, ‘battles’ and ‘warriors’.

In Iceland, words which described the superior battle-skills of the Vikings were also written down by participants during the word-association task. Other words by the Icelandic participants describe internal fights among Vikings, such as ‘feuds’ and ‘murder’. Both words frequently occur in the Icelandic sagas which describe feuds between prominent families during the Viking age without being restricted to Vikings. The word ‘murder’ in this context is interesting. It implies a killing of a specific person, for a specific reason and is generally used in negative way while words such as ‘raids’ and ‘battles’ are connected with Viking activities and more general and distanced. However, the participants wrote down ‘murder’ next to the word ‘feuds’ and both words had a neutral, if not a positive meaning, indicating a way that one family protected itself from another. Note, that the word ‘murder’ is generally a negative word in Icelandic, however, in this context it is explained by the word, ‘feuds’ as being a necessity in the Viking age.

## External Viking Characteristics

Now that the basic physical appearance of Vikings has been established as far as the participants were concerned, it is time to explore their idea of the Viking character. The most common descriptive words in Víkingaheimar were ‘courage’, ‘heroes’ and ‘heroism’. These words were also mentioned in the interviews, mostly in connection with the Viking sailing expeditions and explorations. Icelandic participants would admire the Vikings for sailing off into the unknown and for heroically fighting for their honour and family. In particular, one Icelandic participant described them as being “giants in the eyes of others”, because they were not just tall and strong, but generally superior. These words were not used by English participants in the word association task and interviews, although they referred to Vikings having been ‘misunderstood’ and ‘different from others’.

Another word used by the Icelandic participants was ‘hardy’, i.e. because during the Viking age, people had to be hardy in order to survive the harsh weather and living conditions. This is connected to the nostalgic, romantic view of the past which many Icelandic participants discussed during their interviews. Words of the more negative kind used by Icelandic participants included ‘greediness’, ‘brutes’, ‘angry’ and ‘rude’. One male, Icelandic participant 08.07.11.03, a woodcarver travelling on his own in the area, said that the reason for the Viking raids had simply been greed:

It’s endlessly mentioned in the Icelandic sagas that they had with them an abundance of money, and they hunted and attacked each other and stole everything of value from everyone else’s [the other Vikings] ships and so on and so on. This is mentioned in various sources. And, you see, whether all this



money was of any use to them, because it was perhaps mostly gold and treasure which is completely useless unless to [sic]...because nobody eats that. Yes.

In other words, this participant believed that Vikings that set off on the longboats were so greedy that they even stole from each other. It was clear during the interview that his image of Vikings was that of audacious young men, who saw themselves as immortal heroes. But in fact, they did not fight for honour and family or showed any tendency to protect each other on the basis of brotherhood. To him, the Vikings were just a bunch of greedy brutes and mercenaries, looking out for themselves; burning each other's boats and waiting for the chance to steal and rob.

However this attitude did not necessarily reflect the attitude of participants towards the Icelandic nation as a whole, as the 'bad' Vikings were in their view a small group within Icelandic society. Interestingly, participant 27.08.11.03, a female from Italy had similar ideas about the cruelty of the Vikings as the aforementioned Iclander. On her word association sheet she wrote that the Vikings were not interested in integration, suggesting that they were invaders and traders for profit only. When asked whether she would like to be a Viking she said it would be fun to try that for a day:

GDW: What would you want to do? Go out to sea?

27.08.11.03: Yes, exploring new places, and to have the power to just take whatever I want. Scare the hell out of people. In my costumes and my hat.

As someone sharing no cultural ties with the Nordic countries, this Italian participant basically viewed the Vikings as an outside invading force which she could not really identify with. Because of the limited number of international visitors interviewed during this research, her views are not conclusive proof of how foreign visitors view Vikings. However, it was clear that she did not see any reason to somehow justify their actions in

the same way as the Icelandic or native English participants often did. It is interesting that her rather negative image of Vikings was not altered by her visiting the Yorkshire Museum which attempts to display a positive domestic image of the Vikings as mentioned earlier. She seemed to leave the museum with a completely different impression from that of the domestic participants. Indeed, in her view the Vikings were nothing but rootless wanderers who did not contribute anything positive or lasting towards English society or any civilised society for that matter. It would be informative to conduct additional fieldwork, in order to see whether this is a common view amongst foreign museum visitors.

English participants generally took the opposite view. They expressed their positive attitude in various ways. Many believed that the Viking spirit was basically admirable and had been carried on in English history, which words such as 'misunderstood' pay witness to. Participants also expressed, in various ways that Vikings were not merely ancient history; they still had relevance for current society.

The choice of words used by the participants having visited the Yorkshire Museum, reflect this positive attitude: 'misunderstood', 'clever', 'fierce', 'skilled' and 'shrewd'. Many participants expressed the view that the museum had made them understand that Vikings were far more intelligent than generally given credit for. Participants in both countries also often mentioned how skilled and what good craftsmen the Vikings must have been in order to create the objects on display, such as the long-boats, combs and the jewellery. This is further evidence of the way English participants were ready to accept a positive message from the exhibition. For them the domestic and commercial activities of the Vikings provided a direct link with English society past and present. The murderous raids seemed to have receded in the background while the main impression of the participants, as emphasised by the

museum, was that the Vikings had come to England to trade and stayed on to become a valuable part of society.

## Society and Family

The largest word association group in Yorkshire Museum is ‘society’. This is partly due to the museum’s emphasis on the Viking integration with the local Yorkshire community. Words in this category describe how participants envisioned various aspects of Viking society and everyday living and the Vikings as a whole. While some words describe the geographical locations of Viking settlements, others depict inner social structures, possible layout of the settlements, including: ‘meeting halls’, ‘markets’, ‘shops’, ‘streets’, ‘smells’, ‘round villages’ and ‘tribal organisation’. The participants, a married couple from England, fascinated with the family importance of Viking culture, who wrote ‘round villages’ and ‘tribal organisation’ believed that this type of settlement showed that the Vikings had protected each other from outside attacks. The wife said the following when asked what her image of Vikings was:

12.11.10.01: Well you imagine a Viking warrior. The long hair and the horned helmet. But also we’ve been to Viking villages and settlements, made up ones, different places we’ve visited on holiday, so that gives you the idea of the way sort of looked after each other. And culture, the way they built around the outside of their settlements. And had animals running around inside and the open fires, that kind of thing, yeah.

This participant had obviously been to open-air Viking settlement museums where the town layout was circular. There she got the impression that Viking societies were based on brotherhood and strong communal bonds, although it cannot be ascertained whether

she was thus expressing the museum's interpretation or her own pre-conceived ideas. Furthermore, because of the general layout of the towns (as presented in the open-air museums) the Vikings must have felt obligated to "look after each other" against outside threat. The interviews show that English participants in general saw Vikings as part of the internal English social structure, but at the same time as standing outside of it. This demonstrates, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 7 that the meaning of the other alters, in response to changing national social identities. In this context participants would write such words as 'family' and 'protection' along with 'warriors' and 'pillagers' and discuss it simultaneously, such as this male English participant, who was visiting York with his wife and daughter (participant 27.08.11.02) mostly to explore the Roman legacy of the city:

27.08.11.01: I think that it's a common image of the Vikings with the horned helmets on, storming in; burning monasteries. Kicking people all over the place and that's what I grew up thinking Vikings were like. That was the Viking culture. But obviously later on you find out there was quite a strong family culture. Exploration. Jewellery. Society was very important to them. And the only reason they came across to fight was to get land. They didn't really have that at home, to cultivate. So that puts a different feel to it really.

This person grew up with the stereotype Viking warrior image, just like female participant 12.11.10.01 (see previous quote). But as he grew older and picked up more information on Vikings (from various sources) his image evolved. His idea of Vikings now included family values and societal obedience. In this context the Vikings seem redeemable because the underlying attitude is that they only fought and killed people in order to get land and to establish new homes. The Vikings stuck together as a group in order to survive and that seems to excuse their violent and greedy ways. Interestingly

the aforementioned participant was actually talking about the same group of people which he described as “storming in, burning monasteries” and “kicking people all over the place”. Vikings were in his mind, the outside, invading party, fighting their way into English society, yet ultimately they became part of it and so the boundaries between good and evil get blurred.

Icelandic participants discussed a similar struggle between barbarism and civilization; however, they unquestioningly believed themselves to be of Viking descent, while English participants could not be sure of such a genetic link. In fact, Icelanders regarded Vikings both an integral part of their social structure and its origin. As a result, participants talked about Vikings and Iceland from the standpoint of the Vikings. However, at the same time the Icelandic participants also referred to internal social struggle, resulting in Icelandic families having to protect themselves against potential attacks from other members of their own society. This view mostly originates from the Icelandic sagas, which are part of school curriculum in Iceland. The following is a quote from an Icelandic male:

14.07.11.03: I feel it was [sic], those were smaller communities and they actually had to, they actually had to do this [provide protection for each other] themselves, you understand. In larger communities you have a court of law and the police and other things that does what they [the Vikings] had to do themselves, so [sic]. They had to protect their families and if someone did something to him, to her [sic – should be ‘it’] you had to do something about that yourself.<sup>364</sup>

---

<sup>364</sup> Please note: The words ‘him’ and ‘her’ in connection to Icelandic is a grammatical error; the participant was correcting as he spoke because the word ‘family’ is a feminine word in Icelandic.

According to this view, the threat to peace in Viking society arose from those outside the family structure inside Iceland, not just from groups outside society. The participant believed that because Iceland was such a small community with the commonwealth devoid of executive power, having no police force or court of law in the modern sense, people were justified in taking matters into their own hands and protect their family whatever it took.

## Farming

‘Farmers’ was the only word connected to farming which was written down by English participant in the word association task. In Iceland the participants used words such as ‘horses’, various words for farming and ‘self-sustained farming’ were written down and discussed by a few participants during the interviews. Participants would say that contrary to modern Icelandic society, the Vikings in their days were self-sufficient and able. Furthermore these participants believed that laziness did not exist in the Viking age, while it had become a widespread ailment in present-day Iceland. This demonstrates the romanticised ideals of the past when life was simpler and more natural, a time when people lived off the land, instead of enjoying the decadent lifestyle of a technologically advanced age. I find this particularly interesting, because it reflects a fundamental anxiety, shared by many Icelanders, that society has lost its bond with nature and has substituted it with a fast-paced, materialistic urban life, whereby an important part of Icelandic identity has been lost.<sup>365</sup> This attitude, as well as the ones

---

<sup>365</sup> Another example of this anxiety is how Iceland deals with folklore and superstition, such as elves. In 2006-2007 professor Terry Gunnell conducted a survey where he assessed superstitions in Iceland, the results show that 37% of participants believed that it was possible for elves to exist, only 13% denied their existence completely. For further information, see following Icelandic article: Terry Gunnell. ‘Það er til fleira á himni og jörðu, Hóras...’ in *Rannsóknir í félagsvísindum VIII*, ed. by Gunnar Þór Jóhannesson, (Reykjavík, Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2007), pp. 801-812.

discussed in the previous section, might also have been strengthened by the recent financial crisis, which has led to Icelanders reminiscing and idealizing a past without greedy bankers, debts and consumerism.

Participants in my study in the Yorkshire Museum were less obviously nostalgic. While many said that times had certainly changed, there was no mention of whether that was a change for better or worse. Participant 12.11.10.03, a permanent member of the museum's staff and a local inhabitant of York, said that in modern times people had access to more information, different cultures and influences. Participants 12.11.10.01 and 12.11.10.02 (the previously mentioned married couple) said that things had changed not only since then, but since their grandparents were alive, and even since their own youth. Rather than offering any opinion on the present being better or worse than the old times, these participants simply observed that values had changed in society.

## Folklore and Religion

One of the most interesting and unique idea on Viking religion came from an English participant, 13.11.10.05, a retired Baptist minister. On his word association sheet, he wrote on the Vikings 'eventually Christian (no compulsion)' and explained this view further during his interview:

It struck me, that many Vikings were mildly depressed in some ways and had a rather bleak view of the world, and a sad view of it. And it eventually everything would go back to chaos in Ragnarok. And I think that when there was a bit of a light in the end of the tunnel, they said "this is good, this is good". [...] it gave

them hope. I'm sure that on the long boats, on the northern seas in the winter, it was about as bleak as it could get.

The participant thus believed that Vikings were unhappy, because their version of paganism was a fundamentally a bleak and depressing religious world-view. But in his opinion, they discovered the “light in the end of the tunnel”, i.e. Christianity, and that gave them a new, positive outlook on life. This is especially interesting when compared with the views of participant 04.07.11.02, an Icelandic pagan working as a tour guide at Víkingaheimar, who took exactly the opposite view. In his interview, he said that Christianity was a depressing religion which represses people, while paganism encourages good moral conduct and a close, personal relationship with the gods. This demonstrates clearly how personal beliefs and ideals filter through national and community stories, which makes them personal and meaningful. It also enables individual interpretations of the past, which, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 7, create social unity and willingness to follow social rules and regulations.

Other words to emerge on the word association sheets on religion in Víkingaheimar were names of some of the pagan gods, the words ‘ásatrú’ and ‘heiðni’, which are both names for the Nordic paganism, ‘polytheism’ and ‘blót’ (meaning pagan rites or sacrifices). The word ‘Christianity’ only came up once in Iceland and once in England and apart from two participants, 13.11.10.05 and 04.07.11.02 (both quoted above), was only discussed in passing.

## Maritime Activities

The largest group of words from the Icelandic participants had to do with sailing and maritime activities. We can assume that this is because Víkingaheimar's main



exhibition is devoted to Viking sailing expeditions and explorations, the highlight being the reconstructed longboat *Íslendingur*. Indeed, the most common word proved to be ‘sailing’, but a few additional words emerged indicating specialised knowledge of ships. However, these were mostly used in the interviews by members of the museum staff. In the Yorkshire Museum, the words ‘ship’, ‘sailing’ and ‘boat’ were only mentioned a few times, while ‘longboat’ was the most frequent word in this category.

The longboat *Íslendingur* was by far the most frequently mentioned object in Víkingaheimar. In addition, it was frequently the only thing that participants could remember from the exhibition, reasoning that “it’s just so big”. Discussing *Íslendingur* usually led participants to talk about two things: the skill it took to build a ship of that size during the Viking age and how this skill had opened up the seas for raids, commerce and explorations by the Vikings.

In York, the participants recurrently focused on what happened after the Vikings reached their destinations overseas rather than paying much attention to the voyages. Participant 30.08.11.03, a young soldier from Oxford had a rather poetic way of describing his image of Vikings and longboats when he said:

I think this boat that you’ve got on your sheet is a really good symbol of Vikings as they’re [sic], it’s like a, I think, like a, just this very transitory and fragile, just this boat bobbing on the sea, they [Vikings] don’t seem to have any roots, it’s like they don’t make these massive impressive stone cathedrals, they just seem to kind of float and survive. And probably have adventures.

What appealed to this participant about Vikings was in other words how rootless they were and that they did not have any need or desire to leave an impressive physical legacy behind. The participant admitted to having a romanticised view of Vikings, and

that it appealed to him how undomesticated they were: Vikings were not “tied to land” but endured many physical hardships in the name of adventure and travel.

For English participant 30.08.11.06, visiting with her husband (who is participant 30.08.11.06), however, the opposite was true. She thought of the Vikings as travellers who wanted to “conquer the world. Whatever they could get they would have.” They were warriors who took what they wanted, when they wanted. This urge to “take over everything” was in her view what caused them to set roots everywhere they went. In her mind, the Yorkshire Museum was trying to convey the message that Vikings who had settled in the area were “a lot more than plundering type Viking, them ones that were Viking living here”. The participant seems to make a distinction between “plundering Vikings” and those who settled down in York, thereby proving that they were more than that, because they contributed to society in various ways. Furthermore, this demonstrates further how Vikings become redeemable when integrating into British society, the implications of which will be discussed in chapter 7.

My next question to this participant following on from this was whether she considered her view of Vikings as positive or negative. “Positive”, she promptly replied. Following on from there, she said that she liked the idea of having Viking roots, because they went and stayed wherever they wanted, rather than stuck to “where you have been put”. Her husband, who was interviewed at the same time, answered the same question in the following way: “We could be descendants from them. [...] A long time ago so, I don’t see anything bad with them really.”

## Connections with Other Societies

Participants in both York and Reykjanesbær used numerous words to describe what had happened when Vikings reached their destinations overseas or happened to discover new lands. In Iceland, the most common words were ‘land discovery’ and ‘settling’. However, numerous words used by the Icelandic participants referred to pillaging, such as ‘raiding’ and ‘raiding expeditions’; words which referred to trading only rarely emerged. Icelandic participants therefore seemed more likely to connect the Viking expeditions with the discovery of unknown lands and a subsequent, peaceful settlement. However, they were well aware of the fact that at the same time the Viking forays continued with killings, stealing and pillaging. In any case, it was to be expected that they emphasised the explorations. Iceland was not only settled by Vikings, they also used the country as a springboard for further explorations in the ocean to the West, as recorded in the Icelandic sagas. Indeed, Icelanders take pride in the fact that their countrymen were the first Europeans to discover Greenland, to give that vast and mainly ice-covered island its appealing, but misleading, name and to settle there. They are also very proud of the exploits of Leifur heppni (the lucky) Eiríksson, the son of the first Icelandic settler of Greenland, who according to the sagas, discovered Vinland, believed to be North-America, nearly five hundred years before Christopher Columbus found America.

The member of staff at Víkingaheimar, participant 04.07.11.01, said during an interview that Americans think they know their origins when they claim that Columbus was the first European to set foot in America, when in fact the continent was discovered by an Icelander, Leifur Eiríksson. This participant believed that the heritage of Leifur heppni has been forgotten in the United States and he regretted the fact that Americans

generally believe that their history only goes back to about 1500. This participant clearly considered the Viking history to be of global importance and regarded what he saw as American ignorance as a sign of social decline. He believed the same to be true in Iceland, that Icelandic youths were not properly taught the importance of the country's Viking age, which would ultimately lead to social and cultural decline.

Within the theme of 'connections with other societies', the most frequent words used by English participants on Vikings have a more negative meaning than the ones used by the Icelanders, although they generally tended to emphasise the domestic side of things during the interviews. The most common negative words were 'invaders', 'invasion' and 'conquest' while the word 'settlers' was used only by a few participants. The words 'pillage/pillagers' and 'trade/traders' also appeared a few times, but during the interviews more participants talked about the Vikings as raiders rather than traders.

Another noteworthy phrase to emerge on the English word association sheets was 'bringing culture to Britain'. This obviously offers a sharp contrast to the popular idea that English culture mainly stems from the Romans. Lastly, it is also interesting that the word 'slaves' or 'slavery' was written three times by the Icelandic participants but only once by their English counterparts. The question of slavery was not discussed much during the interviews, but clearly a small minority number of participants were aware of that side of Viking activities.

## Objects and Items

Finally, numerous objects of interest were mentioned by participants in Iceland and England. They reflected things generally considered particularly characteristic for Vikings, but also the most memorable objects from the museum exhibitions. In both

countries the word ‘swords’ was the most common one. The Yorkshire Museum exhibited a few swords which were mentioned during the interviews as particularly impressive. People focused on that object for various reasons depending upon individual interest. One English couple noticed that the swords were shorter than they had expected.<sup>366</sup> A few participants mentioned that these weapons were particularly well-crafted and one favoured them because they were well-preserved. However, many admitted that they liked the swords because they were fascinated with weapons and because, as participants said during their interviews, they were “typical Viking objects”. The swords seemed to be generally regarded as the most potent symbol of the Viking warrior stereotype. The second most common word from the Icelandic participants was ‘shield’, while amongst the participants in York it was ‘helmets’. In this category, the majority of words used by participant in both countries were in fact linked to the Viking warrior image rather than for example, to farming or craft skills.

In York, other words referring to the most memorable objects on display were ‘silver’ and ‘jewellery’. Wooden combs were also mentioned as being particularly impressive as participants respected the level of craftsmanship it took to create a fine comb before the invention of modern machines. In Víkingaheimar the name of the longboat, *Íslendingur* was written down several times and clearly had the strongest impact on visitors as mentioned earlier. The second most memorable object from the museum was the skeleton of a Viking and his dog, which participants were also fascinated by.

---

<sup>366</sup> The shortness of the Viking swords was also briefly discussed in Chapter 3, where the medieval gallery in the Yorkshire Museum was analysed.

## Conclusion: Who were the Vikings?

What we can deduce from the responses discussed above is that the stereotypical Viking warrior is still deeply rooted within English and Icelandic society. All participants of my study described the external image of Vikings in a similar way. Whether female or male, Icelandic, English, Scottish or other nationality, they saw a large, strong bearded blond/red haired warrior, wearing fur and leather holding swords, axes and shields. It was unsurprising to find that all participants, in both countries were aware of the Viking raids, pillaging and bloodshed. However, their individual responses to that image varied depending on their personal experiences and interpretations on the collective social Viking myths as well as on their nationality. Icelandic participants were inclined to interpret the violent nature of Vikings in a positive way, seeing them as heroic and brave. English participant believed that Vikings had demonstrated they were capable of more than violence once they settled down in Britain and became valuable members of society. Furthermore, in both countries local visitors made important links between the Vikings and present society, demonstrating how history is frequently used as a political and social tool identity formulation.

In this context, the four participants in Yorkshire Museum who came from abroad were less inclined to justify the unsavoury, violent actions of the Viking warriors because these were not connected to their national identity and background. Because I only had the opportunity to interview a small number of visitors from abroad, further research is needed to confirm these results. It is, however, highly indicative that their interpretation of the museum exhibition was different from participants from Iceland and England, who had a personal investment in the cultural history on display at the museum, and so responded differently.

It is worth emphasising that the Yorkshire Museum attempted to exclude almost all discussion on the Viking raids and chose to focus on their advanced craftsmanship and daily life in the Viking age. The museum was careful to exhibit Viking swords more as demonstrating craftsmanship, rather than a typical weapon of war. However, that did not stop participants from making the military connection. For their counterparts at Víkingaheimar the mental leap to the Viking raids was significantly smaller, as the largest object on display was the longboat and various aspects of the exhibition address the issue of raiding as well. However, the message that the museum was hoping to give, which was mainly to do with the settlement age in Iceland and the building skills necessary to build *Íslendingur*, was not necessarily the one that the participants interpreted it to be. This is because their pre-determined ideas about Vikings are so deeply rooted in their minds. As a result, the participants explained that while the Vikings may have looked and acted as warriors, there was a different aspect to their culture and personalities.

In Iceland participants were influenced by the sagas, which most of them were already familiar with before coming to the museum. They described their Viking forefathers at the time of the settlement as having been family-oriented, proud and honourable people who protected their own against all threat from within and outside society. English participants (and the Scottish female participant) were also eager to emphasise that family had been important to Vikings, who had raided the British Isles in order to settle down and become part of local society. In their view, the Viking maritime adventures were aimed at more than trading and raiding, these had a deeper, more important purpose and long-term consequences as a population movement.

The participants demonstrated in various ways that history was important for them personally. They evaluated the actions of the Vikings based on their own

experiences and identity, such as was evident when the retired English Baptist minister and the Icelandic pagan staff member in Víkingaheimar, discussed their views on the Vikings based on their own religious standpoints and experiences. Both participants' image of Vikings was influenced by their religious beliefs. The Baptist minister thought of paganism as an impersonal and negative religion and in turn, the Icelandic pagan believed the same to be true about Christianity. As a result, their views, although opposing, functioned in a similar way to reflect how they imagined the characteristics of Vikings.

So, who were the Vikings? According to the majority of the participants of my study they were heroic, adventurous warriors, excellent craftsmen and family men.



# Chapter 5

## Impressions of Vikings and the Museums

### Introduction

This is the first chapter of two exploring the outcome of the interviews conducted in Yorkshire Museum and Víkingaheimar. This chapter will demonstrate further the theme which started to emerge in the previous chapter, which is that despite the best intentions of the museum, individuals will make their own judgement calls on history based on their personal experiences as well as their collective social memory and national identity. Furthermore, as previously discussed in Chapters 2, 6 and 7, history is an important part of current national and personal identities.

I start by analysing responses pertaining to visitor expectations and general impressions of the exhibitions in both museums. I then continue by analysing what participants believed they had learned about the Vikings during their visit. In both museums, the majority of participants believed they had known a great deal beforehand and that if anything, the visit had served as a reminder of that. I then briefly discuss what participants wanted changed or done differently at the exhibitions and their impressions of Vikings within both museums. In general, participants were quite happy with their visit, in both museums it was mentioned that there was a lack of guidance through the galleries and that they should be more tailored for families with children.

In Víkingaheimar participants believed that the intended messages of the museum on the Vikings was to emphasise their favourable qualities, such as their craftsmanship and to promote and uphold the legacy of the Vikings. In Yorkshire

Museum, English participants also believed the museum's messages on the Viking age to be positive, showing them as craftsmen, tradesmen and active members of medieval society and an important part of English heritage and history. After discussing the image of Vikings within the museums, and the intended messages of the exhibitions, I briefly explore how participants discussed women from the Viking age, mainly from the point of view of Icelanders, because this topic was not discussed much in Yorkshire Museum. Finally I demonstrate how participants in both museums made personal and relevant links between the Viking age and current society, for example through religion, personal experiences and in Iceland, in connection with the recent financial crisis.

As in previous chapters, it should be kept in mind that the discussion is on the *image* of Vikings and I do not attempt to evaluate the accuracy of that image. Finally, the views of the members of staff I spoke to does not necessarily represent that of the institutes themselves.

## Expectations towards the Museums

Starting with visitor expectations in Víkingaheimar, many participants had a positive experience at the museum. However before their visit, many had either anticipated more from the museum, or had no expectations at all. Usually they had little or no knowledge about the history covered in the museum, except that it was the location of *Íslendingur*, or that it was simply a museum with "Viking stuff". The longboat was the highlight of the visit for all participants, however, many found the rest of the exhibit lacking in some way. They were simply expecting *more*. For example, families found the museum lacking in displays aimed at children. Other participants thought the museum looked empty and that it needed additional objects and lacked a 'wow factor'. The over-

emphasis on *Íslendingur* was also mentioned, as participants thought that overshadowed the general exhibition on the Viking age.

Participant 04.07.11.01, a male, full-time employee at Víkingaheimar said that the average time which Icelandic visitors stayed in the museum was about five minutes. If they stayed longer, he sometimes worried that there was something wrong and looked for them. He offered the following explanation for the short time that Icelanders were willing to spend at the museum:

[...] because it's exactly this, you know, they come in, see the ship, think it's idiotic to have to pay to come in and take a picture of it, but walk around the museum seeing as they have already paid, shrug and walk out. But as soon as they come home then the Viking-blood starts rushing and they want to go somewhere and do something about it. "We are Icelanders and we are Vikings and I don't care about that museum or where we come from". There lacks a little connection [sic].

In other words, he believed that Icelanders generally thought of themselves as modern-day Vikings without understanding the actual history of that connection. Therefore, when Icelanders visited the museum, they were disinterested in the Viking age history on display. They were unhappy about the entry fee, briefly looked around the exhibition and took some pictures of *Íslendingur* before leaving again. The participant did not believe that visitors linked the exhibition narrative to the Viking image they identified with and so their connection to the actual Viking age may only be superficial. Indeed, I did observe that many Icelanders left at the entrance because of the steep entry price (at that time it was approximately £6 for adults). However, in contrast with the statement of the staff member, I also observed that many Icelandic visitors who actually saw the

exhibition took their time. The question is whether they did so because they had already paid and wanted to get the most for their money or whether they were genuinely interested in the exhibit. I suspect it was a combination of the two. But according to the participant above, even during special events, such as Museum Day (which is a yearly event in Iceland), the number of Icelandic visitors is still rather low although above its average on other days.

In any case, most visitors were perfectly happy with their visit on the whole. Some were even pleasantly surprised that there was more to the museum than the renowned longboat, but in fact they were often referring to the extensive information the museum offered on the boat and its voyage to America. Objects unrelated to *Íslendingur* did not leave a major impact on the participants, most of whom could only remember the boat. As explained previously, when trying to explain why they only remembered this main exhibit, quite a few said something to the effect of, “it’s just so big”. Others enjoyed that the museum was not cluttered, but had modern displays and text panels that were “to the point”.

In the Yorkshire Museum it was much the same story. Participants had numerous positive things to say about the museum afterwards. However few of those had any expectations beforehand. Participants also often felt that the exhibition space was somewhat empty and lacked a coherent historical narrative. Yorkshire Museum has a heavier stream of visitors than Víkingaheimar, both foreign and domestic, because it is one of the major visitor attractions in York. Many of the participants told me that while they did not have any real expectations before visiting, they knew this was an essential heritage site to visit when in York. Another major difference between the two museums is that people tend to visit Yorkshire Museum repeatedly when travelling in the area, while most visitors only go once to Víkingaheimar.

The majority of the participants, who had visited the Yorkshire Museum before the restoration, were content with the changes in the medieval gallery, finding it brighter and lighter. However, some found it difficult to navigate and felt as if they were missing a part of the exhibit. Moreover, they had difficulties with isolating the Viking part from the rest of the exhibits because objects were arranged according to themes, not chronological order. One participant thought she and her family had “missed the Viking part” after looking around the exhibit. It is important to note that while all the objects are clearly labelled showing approximately when they were made and by which ethnic group, most visitors do not read all the small texts. Furthermore, the labels were overloaded with technical details, some quite confusing such as classifying objects interchangeably as ‘Scandinavian’, ‘Viking’ or ‘Nordic’.

Some of the participants were surprised to discover how good the Yorkshire Museum was, as they had neither expected such high quality objects, nor had they been aware of the rich historical heritage of York. They expected a small, old fashioned museum showing a limited historical narrative, but instead they found a rather modern, large museum with a great variety of objects.

## Learning in the Museum

This section shows what the participants believed they learned from the museum visit and how it affected their image of Vikings and their culture. This is a good indication of what participants in both countries perceived as the highlights of their visit and how they interpret and engage with the exhibition. What participants perceived as new information can also further clarify their image of Vikings and how they reconciled their preconceived ideas with the ones they encountered within the museum.

Icelandic participant 04.07.11.01, the staff member at Víkingaheimar who was mentioned above, said during the interview that his job had increased his interest in Icelandic Viking history. He admitted to not being an expert on the subject, but said that he was continuously learning more from books, the internet and interestingly enough, from visitors:

[...] and it's also a lot of fun when people are coming here from Sweden or Norway, who are deeply involved in the Viking age and are even running like a village, a little village, and these people are just [sic], it's like they have travelled back in time and [then] come [back] here with terrific information and then I become the guest. And that's a lot of fun. It's a lot of fun when the guests come and educate one about everything that's in here [...]

This comment shows that learning is not always one-directional at museums, at least not at Víkingaheimar. It might be argued that because the exhibition there did not have a strong message or coherent narrative on the Viking age, it enabled this kind of two-way, reciprocal learning process. This had the effect that sometimes visitors and staff-members were on equal grounds when it comes to the historical narrative, or even that the visitor became the specialist. They were therefore able to pass on their interpretation and understanding of it to the non-specialist staff.

According to participant 04.07.11.02, a part-time member of staff at the museum, some visitors do not agree with the information on display and accuse the museum of displaying incorrect data on the Viking age. Such complaints mainly concern the longboat used as a model for the reconstruction, *Íslendingur*. The model was originally designed as a warship, but not a ship for making long voyages as presented by the museum. When commenting on criticism on this point, the staff

member argued that Gunnar Marel, the builder of *Íslendingur* had demonstrated that it was quite possible to sail the boat all the way to North America as he had done in the year 2000 to commemorate the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Leifur Eiríksson's discovery of Vínland. History was therefore not being misrepresented by exhibiting *Íslendingur* as an ocean-going ship capable of making long voyages.

Another participant, 07.07.11.01, a temporary female staff member at the museum, noted that there was, in fact, inaccurate information on display, i.e. a misleading, one-sided image of how things might have been during the Viking age. She mentioned, for example, a poster which had been taken down, showing a Viking with a horned helmet. Additionally, there was a model reconstruction of a Viking hall (or 'skáli') on the upper level gallery space, but she had heard from archaeologists that their layout had not been fully proved by archaeology. The participant also thought that the exhibition really did not teach her anything new about the Viking age, except *Íslendingur*. That was a very impressive reconstruction of a longboat which made her appreciate the workmanship and skill of the shipbuilder Gunnar Marel (even if she had her doubts about him building it alone) and the ancient shipbuilders of the Viking age.

Many visitors I interviewed at Víkingaheimar, said that they were already familiar with most of the history covered in the exhibit. Their visit had nevertheless been a good reminder of what they had previously read and/or learned in school. This could be interpreted in two ways, i.e. that visitors read their own meaning into the exhibit or that Viking history is being presented in much the same way as in Icelandic schools.

Magnús Einarsson suggests that the romanticised view on Iceland's past as it is represented within institutions such as schools, museums and the university is

artificial.<sup>367</sup> In fact, he believes that Iceland's literary identity is not so much based on extensive reading of the sagas as it is on the *image* of the sagas within Icelandic society. This is an interesting theory, which I do not presume to refute. However, the sagas were mentioned a number of times by Icelandic visitors, some of who explained that their image of Vikings as brutal warriors was due to having recently read the sagas. While that may by no means be indicative of the nation's attitude as a whole, it might suggest that the sagas are still being read and are still considered important for Icelanders to be familiar with. Furthermore, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter, it might suggest that recent social events, that is, the financial crisis, has caused a re-evaluation and interest in Iceland's literary heritage. A heritage, which participants of my study considered of such importance as making Iceland unique. In light of the interviews which I took at Víkingaheimar, it could prove interesting for future research to focus on how the Viking age is taught in Icelandic and English primary schools and compare it to the popular Viking myth.

The great majority of Icelandic participants were of the same opinion as the staff member of Víkingaheimar who said that the longboat *Íslendingur* had been the exhibit that added most to their knowledge of Viking life and culture. It had clearly showed them the methods and skills required to build a longboat capable of crossing the oceans. The nails in the boat were mentioned a couple of times as being particularly interesting, because of their delicate and modern looking construction. However, it was the advanced technology used by the Viking ships builders that surprised and impressed visitors the most. The majority of the participants had previously considered the Vikings rather primitive. This was also the case in Yorkshire Museum, where most participants

---

<sup>367</sup> Magnús Einarsson, 'Literacy Identity and Literacy Practice', in *Images of Contemporary Iceland: Everyday Lives and Global Context* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996), pp. 191-215.



agreed that one of the main things they learned at the museum was what clever and excellent craftsmen the Vikings had been.

Like several other participants visiting with their children, Icelandic participant 08.07.11.01, a young female visiting the museum with her children and her husband (participant 08.07.11.02) was amazed by the skeleton of the warrior in Víkingaheimar, because she had not known that the Vikings were buried with objects. Female participant 09.07.11.01 was a lawyer who had seen and been on board *Íslendingur* before the museum was established. She said that while visiting the museum had not changed her image of Vikings, it had added more dimension to it, because she had learned that the Vikings had been engaged in more than just raids and pillaging:

They were also explorers and sailed a lot, and moved between countries and I think it's unbelievable how many people can travel in one ship and under the naked sky.

This also ties in with the museum's message on the Viking age, which many participants interpreted in the same way, namely, that there was a lot more to Vikings than generally believed. Indeed the female participant was clearly proud of the conquests of her Viking ancestors and considered their oceanic expeditions to have been acts of courage and bravery. This is a common view amongst Icelanders, who, as mentioned earlier, are proud of the Icelandic explorers having discovered America and Greenland and sailed to numerous faraway places.

According to participant 12.11.10.03, a member of staff at the Yorkshire Museum, the exhibition's main aim was to communicate the complexity of Vikings:

I *think* one of the messages is, one important message is [sic], that the Vikings were a very, very complex race, very intelligent and very able and capable of

doing many things. This image that we have to blame the Victorians for, mainly for, these shaggy haired, rather foul creatures, pillaging, raping and heaven knows what else, is [...] really farfetched. But of course the problem is the general public has got that within...even though they realise they maybe didn't have the horned helmets et cetera, they still think that this is a rather barbaric race, and they're not! They're really quite sophisticated.

Also, with the refurbishment of the medieval gallery, he believed that the museum had minimised Viking objects on display to leave a more comprehensive display of York's general history within the collection. He interpreted one of the messages the museum was giving about the Middle Ages as being to introduce to visitors the various cultural influences on York through the centuries, and how that was linked to the wider history and culture of England.

As in Víkingaheimar, some English participants in York said that they visited the museum with some knowledge about Vikings and their culture due to their interest in history. However, they continued by saying that the visit added another dimension to their pre-existing knowledge of that period. Moreover, these participants added that they had not realised how far and wide the Vikings had travelled around the world before they visited the museum. Their level of culture and domestic life had also been a matter of surprise to the participants:

13.11.10.02: That they settled in this country, you know, and they are part of this country and have been for years, haven't they? And ... they aren't [...] the savages that came and went, they stayed and, in particular in this part of the country.

This participant was a retired policeman, visiting the area with his wife (participant 13.11.10.03). In this quote he was obviously referring to the messages within the museum and explaining what the visit had taught him about the Viking age. It was common for English participants to say that the Vikings had been rather domestic and had settled and mixed well with the local society. It is interesting that participants who believed that Vikings heritage was, in some way, part of their national identity interpreted that part of the exhibit as teaching visitors that the gruesome acts of the Vikings was somehow redeemed by their domestic life.

Needless to say, many Icelandic participants saw the Vikings as tough heroes and adventurers in the positive sense because they had ventured into the unknown expanses of the oceans. Some even wished that they had more of that adventurous spirit of the Vikings (for example participants 07.07.11.02, 10.07.11.01, 10.07.11.02 and more). Others, such as participant 14.07.11.04, indulged in a kind of self-glorification. They believed that Icelanders were still a Viking nation because of their urge for independence and sovereignty which had led their forefathers to leave Norway and long resist any attempts by the king of Norway and other foreign potentates to dominate the country.

A young Icelandic couple, participants 13.07.11.01 (female) and 13.07.11.02 (male) were visiting Víkingaheimar for the first time, hoping it would be of interest to their children. It was evident from the interview that they had a strong image of Vikings, influenced greatly by the Icelandic sagas as they mentioned themselves. They described the Vikings as “strong insane men” in heavy clothing, with big beards and long hair. They saw them as men who were always fighting and killing, but at the same time as possessing bravery, honour, pride and wanderlust. In short, they “were great men”. At one point participant 10.07.11.01 said “[...] just imagining what sort of

animals hurried off to Viking expeditions, you understand”. The other participant responded: “they were somehow great heroes”. This is an example of the contradictory image of Vikings as mad, bloodthirsty warriors *and* honourable heroes. The participants seemed to take the view that it required courage and greatness to *be* at the same time a ferocious pillaging warrior and an adventurous seafarer and explorer. Clearly these were characteristics that the participants regarded as somehow positive when seen as a whole, i.e. two sides of the same coin.

Female participant 14.07.11.02, an elderly female, was visiting Víkingaheimar with female participant 14.07.11.01 and her husband 14.07.11.03. They were a lively group with many interesting opinions on Vikings, Víkingaheimar and Icelandic society. Their views were influenced by the sagas, which they discussed at length and 14.07.11.03 even recited ‘Það mælti mín móðir’, which is a famous poem from *Egilssaga*, during the interview. Participant 14.07.11.02 believed that pillaging and stealing from everyone showed how smart Vikings must have been, presumably because they got away with it. Participant 14.07.11.01 agreed, saying that they achieved so much because they were clever and worked well together. Participant 14.07.11.03 said the museum was accurately describing the Vikings as barbarians who had raided the British Isles extensively, as well as emphasising their great craftsmanship and knowledge of ship building.

When considering Vikings’ cruelty, participants came up with various explanations. Participant 14.07.11.01 argued for example that while the Viking raiders may have been cruel, the people who never left home were not necessarily better; they just killed local people. The few participants I interviewed who were from outside of Britain and Iceland were, however, less inclined to offer such apologies; Italian

participant 27.08.11.03 even said that her image of Vikings as raiders had, if anything, been verified within the museum.

In the Yorkshire Museum, most participants believed that if they had learned something in the museum, it was about the everyday, domestic life of regular Vikings. However, a couple of participants asked what social class of Vikings was being represented by the displays. Would it, for example, be possible that the poorer part of the Viking settlers had possessed a delicate silk cap from Iran as the one included in the exhibit? This demonstrates that the visitors were actively engaged with the museum's narrative, and were critiquing it in comparison to their own prior beliefs or common sense.

## Prior Knowledge of Vikings

When asked whether they had learned something new from their visit to the museums, many participants, in both countries, replied that they had a fair knowledge of the Vikings. Their visit had mostly confirmed things that they already knew. In Iceland, participants had a good general idea about the Viking age. Generally in Icelandic society, it is presented as the 'Golden Age' of Icelandic culture (see, for example, discussion on Jón Jónsson Aðils in Chapter 1) and was regarded rather nostalgically. Many of the Icelandic participants had a rather romantic idea about this age as a time when people had a close connection to nature, worked hard for their subsistence and were generally more self-reliant. This is somewhat contradictory to the image of Vikings as presented in the Icelandic sagas, where people wore decorative clothing, and rode around the country socializing and fighting, instead of farming themselves, which would have been something left for the slaves and farmhands. Yet it was clear, whether discussing the hard-working, self-reliant image of life in Iceland, or the glamorous life

described in the sagas, that Icelandic participants were referring to the Viking age in Iceland and held both ideas simultaneously. This adds yet another dimension to the contradictory image of Vikings.

A few general facts were known by participants in both museums about Vikings and their age. For example, they were known to have been violent raiders (although most Icelandic and English participants explained that behaviour in some positive way). It was also generally known that the Vikings had considerable craft skills, although many participants were surprised at just *how* skilled they were. Icelandic participants considered the original settlers of Iceland not to have been just farmers, but Viking warriors who sailed all over Europe to pillage cities and discover new lands. They had all read and were influenced by the Icelandic sagas and the image given of that Golden Age in those books. Generally, they considered the original settlers to have been rebels who fled from Norway due to growing royal power and taxation and settled in a new country (Iceland) to live according to their own rules. Furthermore, as is demonstrated in more detail later, a few of the Icelandic participants also mentioned women's rights being rather advanced within Viking society. They believed that the sagas proved that some women had yielded great power and strength in their days, as I have described in Chapter 1.

As mentioned before, it was still a surprise for many of participants just how much work and skill it took to build and design a longboat such as *Íslendingur*, which added to their admiration of their ancestors. The Icelandic female participant 07.07.11.02 who lived in Reykjanesbær and was visiting the temporary employee at the museums (participant 07.07.11.01), said the following on the subject:

No, it's rather similar; one has also been looking at books and such. Where one has looked at pictures of how it was in books and it's very similar. It's just cool to see it in reality. Rather than pictures in books.

This participant did not consider herself to have learned anything new because she had read up on the Viking age beforehand. However, what the museum visit did was add depth to that knowledge, making it seem more real. It verified her ideas on that historical period. Other participants would say that while they were not experts on the Viking age, the information at the museum had not surprised them because it was presented just as they imagined.

Another Icelandic female participant 09.07.11.01 (a lawyer) explained rather well how the museum influenced her image of Vikings. When asked whether it had changed or been verified after the visit she said: "Well...maybe more that, you know, the image it still remains perhaps, but I think that maybe it [the visit] adds something, that perhaps they [the Vikings] did a lot more." The participant continued by explaining what exactly they did "more" of, such as being explorers and sailing great distances. This is a further example of how participants found validation for their interest and personal connection to the Vikings and their age. The Vikings were more than raiders; they had clearly showed cleverness, and heroism, which the participant could be proud of, regarding herself as a descendant of the Viking settlers of the country. Furthermore, it shows that her image of Vikings revolves around their seafaring, and not their raiding or domestic life.

Nevertheless, at some point or another, most participants both in England and Iceland, talked about Vikings as barbaric robbers and killers. That of course, did not stop many of them from reinterpreting those aggressive characteristics in a positive

way. As a result, many of them would begin the interviews by saying that the Vikings were barbaric, power-mad pagans or warriors, but then add that this was due to their deep survival instincts, or because they would not be tyrannised by authority (such as the Norwegian king as was stated above) and/or that they simply did not want to depend on anyone but themselves and so were forced to be violent. This is evident, for example during the interview with participant 08.07.11.02, which is given in full in Appendix 3. Female participant 09.07.11.01 (a lawyer), said much the same, that her image was that of cruel warriors, however, when discussing the Viking expeditions, she concluded that they must have been quite competent heroes for braving the oceans.

In the Yorkshire Museum, quite a few participants came to the museum out of historical interest, having read up on British history in their spare time. Just as at Víkingaheimar, this meant that some participants believed that they knew quite a lot beforehand. As a result, the data provided in the exhibition had not given them basic information on the subject, but rather, added to what they already knew or deepened their knowledge. While many people knew, for example, that the Vikings had played an important role in some parts of Britain, a few participants were surprised to find out how important York had been in this context.

English participants often said that “other people” generally thought of Vikings as barbaric raiders, but they themselves knew better, and the museum visit had confirmed their view. However, on their word association sheets and during other parts of their interview many would still show a tendency to associate the Viking stereotype as being typical and accurate. This may be because participants were aware of their own misconceptions about Vikings and felt more at ease discussing that by disassociating from it in this way. It also shows that, despite an awareness of its inaccuracies,



participants felt the need to mention the image of Vikings that stems from popular culture, demonstrating how rooted it is in present society.

As was explained in Chapter 3, due to various difficulties it was impossible to conduct interviews prior to the museum visit. It is therefore quite challenging to accurately measure which part of the Viking image the participants expressed during the interviews was influenced by the museum and which they held previous to it. Further fieldwork, differently planned and executed might be able to answer these questions more clearly. However, as this chapter attempts to address, within the scope of the data obtained for this research, it does seem evident that visitors had clear, predetermined ideas about Vikings, which were not intentionally confirmed by the museums. The Yorkshire museum almost entirely discarded any mention of Viking raids, focusing on their life as settlers in medieval York. Despite this most of the participants seemed to prefer the stereotyped image of Vikings and interpreted the displays of ornamental swords as a demonstration of their war-like qualities. This means, that despite the exhibition attempting to demonstrate an alternative views, visitors maintained their principal ideas on Viking history and culture before and after the visit. More detailed information may have been added, but the fundamental image, fuelled by pop culture media such as films, books, cartoons and store-bought knick-knacks, remained virtually intact. Participants were able to maintain their image of Vikings because of a variety of factors, including the exhibition set up, which, as discussed in the exhibition analysis in Chapter 3, created a distance between visitors and objects, allowing a personal interpretation of the narrative.

In this respect, Víkingaheimar was somewhat more problematic. Visitors were able to maintain their image of Vikings as marauding, heroic barbarians because the museum did not directly oppose such ideas. As I demonstrated in the exhibition analysis

of Víkingaheimar in Chapter 3, the text panels had exciting headlines about Viking raids, and covering a whole wall was a large mural, showing Vikings storming a beach and burning down a monastery. Additionally, *Íslendingur* was displayed in a way which seemed to relay theatrical images of Viking voyages, heroism and pillaging. A further complication was that the Icelandic visitors frequently could not remember any part of the exhibit apart from *Íslendingur*, which makes it more difficult to determine how much influence the museum held over visitor views. This meant that participants simply did not take any notice of the (limited) discussions on the landscape and life in the early days of the Icelandic settlements. The main attraction was the longboat, which has a strong association with Viking raids and conquests.

There is a further point to consider when discussing views maintained by visitors despite of the intentions of museum exhibitions. When participants talked about their prior knowledge of Vikings, what they learned and expected within the museums, they would frequently say that they had known much of the information beforehand. This does not necessarily indicate that participants agreed with, or understood the intended messages of the museum. However, it demonstrates the way in which participants appropriated information they received at the museum, and adapted it to fit in with their prior held ideas on Vikings. This is a relevant point to note, because it is a demonstration of my discussion in Chapters 2 and 7, on how history is used by collective memory to serve a social function.

Furthermore, it could also be questioned how much influence the exhibition holds on visitor perspectives in the long run. Because people are surrounded by the stereotype of Vikings in their everyday lives, it seems likely that it would be a more dominant, long-term influence than the narrative of the museum exhibition.

## What Could Have Been Done Differently?

Participants in both museums had ideas on how to improve the existing exhibitions, as has been mentioned previously. In Iceland, many of the participants said that the museum needed more objects, and should try to create a longer-lasting experience for them. All of the participants who came with their children said that more interactive displays were needed, because their children got bored rather quickly. Some of the participants said that more objects relating to the daily lives of the Vikings were required. Some also mentioned that they wanted a presentation of an original longboat crew, as well as the crew that sailed *Íslendingur* to America in the year 2000.

At the Yorkshire Museum, there were fewer ideas on how to improve the exhibition. Some participants mentioned that they felt that it lacked a linear narrative. Three participants mentioned the short film, which is repeatedly playing on the ground floor of the museum, showing the highlights of the history of York, from the present to the past. None of the participants who mentioned the film liked it: a couple I interviewed thought it was confusing that the history was told in reverse, and the third, a local woman from York, thought it was inaudible and that the actors all put on “silly accents”. The lack of audio-guides was also mentioned and that the sound on the shorter films around the museum was bad. One participant in particular, the retired Baptist minister, felt that the space needed to be livelier, for example, by having a storyteller in a Viking outfit talking to visitors about life in the Viking age. This was somewhat echoed by a few other visitors who would have liked more engaging staff in the exhibit area, giving more information on the exhibit. While there was constantly a member of staff in the room, they mostly sat silently in a corner, leading visitors to believe that their role was simply to observe and guard, rather than to help and inform.

A museum can never be tailored to all types of visitors, of course, and so the modern, minimalistic exhibit at the Yorkshire Museum was both referred to in a negative as well as a positive manner. Some participants, mostly those who were there without children, liked it as they felt the museum was tailoring to a more adult crowd after the refurbishments. But others, many of which came with their families, felt lost without a clear, linear structure in this part of the museum and quickly navigated through it while spending a long time upstairs in the Roman and natural history part, which they felt to be more engaging and interactive. Also, just like in Víkingaheimar participants many would say that they would have liked more objects from the daily lives of “every day Vikings”, rather than just from the upper classes. Other simply said they would have liked more Viking objects as they did not get a sense of who they were or what happened during the Viking age, or indeed leading up to it.

## Impressions of Vikings within the Museum

According to the member of staff at Víkingaheimar, participant 04.07.11.01, his impression of the museum’s message was the following:

04.07.11.01: [...]Because the Vikings they are [sic], especially if you talk to the Americans, and [...] many Icelanders as well, [they] think that all Vikings were criminals and murderers and goons and a sort of no-good scoundrels. But only a minority of them were. Most of them were just farmers and settlers. But of course there were kings and such who intended bigger things for themselves and that hasn’t really changed [...]. So I would say that for the most part here we have [information] on how they travelled and traded and such.

GDW: Perhaps try to show a wider picture of Vikings than just as barbarians?

04.07.11.01: Yes that's done a little bit here. A little bit done. Although the beginning [that is: the opening scene]; the largest image of the museum is precisely about the first Viking attack on Lindisfarne in England, the large painting over there. That is perhaps the image people have of Vikings. This, I think, needs to be changed.

According to this member of staff, the museum is trying to change the image of Vikings as pillaging warriors and to show instead that the majority of Vikings were basically domestically-minded farmers who had no choice but obey the orders of power-mad chieftains and kings. Left on their own, these farmers would most likely have restricted their activities abroad to trading and possibly seeking better agricultural land overseas.

A part-time staff member at Víkingaheimar, Icelandic participant 04.07.11.02 emphasised a different aspect of the Viking age:

[...] they went very far and some have claimed that they didn't have a culture; but that can very well be that at some point they didn't have any more culture than cutting grass and feeding cows. But they imported culture from all over the world and made it their own, moved it back with them and made it their own and amongst those [things which they imported was] paganism.

In the opinion of this participant, one of the points the museum was to try to show how multicultural Viking society was and how Vikings brought more home with them from abroad than loot and merchandise. They also encountered foreign cultures on their voyages and were influenced by these cultures and partly adopted them. This is a modern concept, exploring the various external, global influences of Icelandic culture and was not mentioned by other participants. It is included here because it demonstrates an interesting interpretation of Víkingaheimar's messages.

For participant 07.07.11.01, a female temporary member of staff at Víkingaheimar the museum's message on the Vikings was a positive one, showing the history of their movements in a lively and colourful way. Furthermore, she thought that the Icelandic sagas were also falsely portraying the Viking age in a more favourable light than was in fact the case. Subsequently, she nevertheless described her own image of Vikings as that of outlaws who sailed across the seas to steal and kill. The Viking age had been no ideal age to live in, as it had been a time of greed and struggling for survival at all cost. Interestingly enough, the museum's positive messages on Vikings did not change the personal views of this participant on Vikings basically being barbarians. When asked why the authors of the sagas had described this age in glowing terms she replied: "It's just part of literature, there always has to be one hero in stories". Yet she also believed that the literary legacy of the sagas and the 13<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts gave Iceland an advantage over all other nations in terms of heritage. As a result Icelanders had a stronger bond with their origin than most people, even if that origin was a violent one. In fact, many of the Icelandic participants believed that the Vikings had certainly been barbaric in some way, but at the same they pointed to the museum's display of their positive sides as farmers and craftsmen.

Certainly history is often contradictory. As I have demonstrated, the Vikings are seen simultaneously as barbarians as well as heroes, destroyers as well as craftsmen, merciless raiders as well as family men of high moral standing. It can be assumed that this contradictory image described by participants in my study is by no means limited to their image of Vikings; indeed, this may be the case for their views on other historical personages as well. It simply demonstrates how certain aspects of history regarded as 'negative', can be reinterpreted and justified in order to enable people to identify even with their 'dark past' as part of their own cultural and national identity.

As regards visitor interpretation of the messages of Víkingaheimar, most of the Icelandic participants considered it to be the Viking voyages and shipbuilding craftsmanship. Participants 08.07.11.02 (male visiting with his wife participant 08.07.11.01 whose responses have been mentioned previously) and 13.07.11.03 (a female painter, exploring the museum with her two male friends, participants 13.07.11.04 and 13.07.11.04) believed the museum's aim was to uphold the memory and the legacy of the Viking culture. The museum was trying to show who the original settlers of Iceland were, i.e. the 'original Icelanders' who survived many hardships during their time. Participant 07.07.11.01 talked for example, at some length about this 'myth' of the original Icelanders. The main impression that participant 08.07.11.01 took away from the exhibit was that the Viking had been "cool" and unique because they had been very tough folk.

Most of the Icelandic participants considered the museum's message to be a positive one. Participant 14.08.10.01, a pilot exploring the museum with his children, thus interpreted the message to be that the Vikings had been broad-minded, adventurous and skilled craftsmen. Participant 14.08.10.02 (a young male working over the summer at the museum) said it was a positive, "correct" message and that the museum provided with an unbiased history lesson on the Viking age, showing how smart the Vikings were. Participants 20.07.11.01 and 20.07.11.02 (a married couple visiting with their daughter and grandchild) mentioned that the exhibit revealed both the good and the bad sides of Viking history. The museum was re-examining history in order to present a comprehensive image of the Vikings. The participants believed that the museum had basically verified their image of Vikings as resourceful people who "knew how to get things done".

Icelandic participant 09.07.11.01, the female lawyer, was among the few visitors who questioned the positive image offered by Víkingaheimar. She asked whether it might be possible that the museum minimised the cruelty that the Vikings committed by only showing an image of them as handy craftsmen and ship builders. Likewise, participant 10.07.11.03 believed that the museum chose not to mention the Irish hermit monks who had in fact preceded the Viking settlers in Iceland, but had been slaughtered or driven out of the country. He believed that this was no coincidence and that the museum simply wanted to avoid anything that might possibly damage the heroic image of the Nordic settlers.

Icelandic female participant 10.07.11.01 took the opposite view; she believed that the museum was offering an objective presentation of the Vikings. The great majority of those who participated in the study at Víkingaheimar were clearly of the same opinion, saying that the museum displayed the Viking age in the way that they had imagined. Their preconceived ideas of the Viking age had been verified and as a result they seemed to conclude that the museum was displaying the ‘truth’ about Vikings rather than an idealised image. Nevertheless, participant 10.07.11.01 and her two companions, 10.07.11.02 and 10.07.11.03 agreed that their image of Vikings had been that of crude warriors who pillaged and killed people. It was clear to them that this was not the essence of the image presented by the museum, but they still seemed convinced that on balance, Víkingaheimar had succeeded in presenting an objective display. They also agreed that modern Icelanders had inherited some of the Viking traits they considered better, such as resilience, strength and self-confidence in times of hardship.

These participants obviously have a rather complex connection to their country’s past. One reason why they might never have questioned their contradictory image of Vikings is perhaps because they had never been asked to explain it before. But when



they did, during my interview, they dealt with an apparent contradiction by trying to put a positive spin on the negative aspect of their image. They said, for example, that while the Vikings had been cruel to others, this was caused by their adventurous nature. They might have killed and pillaged, but this must be seen in the context of their ‘great survival instincts and ability to find solutions to all problems in the end’.

Icelandic participant 14.07.11.03 seemed to be of the same opinion, saying that the museum’s message on the negative sides of Viking history appeared to be balanced by pointing to their impressive navigational technology. It must also be taken into account, as was also mentioned in the previous chapter, that honour was a central feature of the Viking psyche and in order to protect their families they had to be cruel and merciless.

Let us now explore the message of the Yorkshire Museum on Vikings, as seen by museum staff and visitors. Participant 12.11.10.03, a staff member at the museum, said that he considered one of the main messages on Vikings to be that they were not the foul barbarians the Victorians made them out to be. However, this is a misunderstanding, because, as was discussed in Chapter 1, they glorified Vikings as good moral examples.<sup>368</sup> This same staff member also said that the exhibition intended to show how the Vikings fitted into society as well as wider local history, i.e. that they were one part of a complex national identity, rather than an outside invading force bent upon rape and pillage in the area. The implication of his testimony was that the Vikings were a part of the local identity and as a result they *must* have been more than dirty, raping warriors.

---

<sup>368</sup> For full quote see p. 174.

Most of the visitors interviewed had got the same general impression of the museum's message. The Vikings had become a part of English society and had left a heritage behind, either something tangible like blond hair, or intangible such as determination. One visitor thus expressed his view:

13.11.10.03: Fair haired, blue eyed children, people, you know, which we think came from them. [...] it's explaining about what they did, and I think it's when you come into museums you really find out, don't you? They dive into things more than you kind of do in schools or locally.

This participant seemed to agree with the majority views that because the Vikings became part of the local community they were not really savages. Somehow learning about the domestic life of Vikings, or just realizing that they *had* such a life appears to have made the Vikings more human, likeable and almost harmless in the eyes of these participants. This is quite important as it further demonstrates an attitude that emerged in the discussion on other interview themes: People seem to have a need to see themselves and their national identity in a positive light. Furthermore, because they look for that within the museum, this is exactly what they tend to find there. The responses of the participants seem to reflect the attitude that the bad traits and actions of the Vikings were somehow neutralised because they eventually formed a part of the internal social order in England. Participant 26.08.11.01, a female from Norwich said the following on this subject:

It's just in detail, about what they did, how they lived and [...] some things that they brought [...] because people tend to have this image of them coming and raping and pillaging, don't they [sic], it's just destruction, but actually it's more stuff about what they actually brought, [unintelligible word] how they changed a

lot, I think they've taken more away from that aspect a bit, the destructive aspect, but are kind of looking forward.

The last part of this quotation is especially revealing, i.e. that the museum obviously tried to move away from the “destructive aspect” and “look forward”. This means that the participant believed the museum chose to move away from the negative motives that brought the Vikings to England, and focus on what followed; their cultural influence and their positive impact on society.

Participant 26.08.11.03, a retired head-teacher who was visiting with his wife, participant 26.08.11.02, expressed the same opinion, saying that in school he learned that the Vikings were warriors that came to rape and pillage in England, but “when you have the opportunity to go back and reflect on what they actually did for us, they have a better appreciation so I thought that came over.” The wife of this participant, 26.08.11.02 questioned this attitude, asking herself whether the “ordinary” people actually would have had access to the objects on display.

Participant 13.11.10.05, a retired Baptist minister, interpreted the museum's message on Viking culture simply to the effect that they had done brilliant things. Participant 27.08.11.01, who was visiting with his daughter, participant 27.08.11.02, believed that the museum had shown that there was more to Vikings than “longboats, and the dragons and the swords”. His daughter, participant 27.08.11.02 said the museum was trying to educate visitors about what the Viking age was really about:

I think, it's, they settled here, they lived here for so long, it's, they created families here, they married people here, they didn't just come and leave. Of course they wouldn't have so much influence on them if they had, or, I mean, the helmet, that had been buried here, them heroes, kings had lived here, and

buried here, and shrines created and lots of relics that showed, that proved how popular they were amongst local people.

Again we discover that the museum's message is the same that the visitors expected to find, i.e. that the Vikings were more than warriors that arrived in England, pillaged, raped and left again. They stayed and mixed with the local population and because they were buried with beautiful objects (such as the museum displays) they must have been held in high regard by the local population.

While participant 27.08.11.03, the female from Italy, did not consider the Vikings to be a part of the English national identity, she believed the museum was attempting to show that Vikings were part of the local history, because they had integrated with Northern England and parts of Scotland. Female participant 27.08.11.04 was the only one who said that she did not want the museum to try getting any sort of message across, because the artefacts should be allowed to speak for themselves.

## Women in the Viking Age

In Iceland people read and learn about the Icelandic sagas in school. In those stories there are important, powerful female figures that are sometimes shown as manipulating the men around them in order to gain power or get revenge on anyone who scorned them. It was therefore rather surprising how little these women were mentioned by the Icelandic participants.

A female staff-member at Víkingaheimar, participant 04.07.11.01, briefly mentioned how skilful women in the Viking age must have been, as could be seen in the well-made clothing of that era. A part-time staff member at the museum, participant 04.07.11.02, took a different view:

[...] I would most likely take some of those women who called their men ‘king’ and other such things and spank them publicly. So when it’s being written about [...] and actually some men also who, [sic] but men just took their weapons themselves and went out and killed. The ones that didn’t want to do that, they got to hear it all right, how they were no men, from their wives, [...] and then they were killed and who was supposed to provide for them then? They were left behind, sorely disappointed and with a lot of children.

This is obviously a reference to the women in the Icelandic sagas who manipulated their men into murder by questioning their manhood, lying and filling their heads with dreams of greatness.<sup>369</sup> The participant in question was one of two males to comment on women in the Viking age, and the only one to interpret their behaviour in this negative way. As a result, there is no way to ascertain how widespread his misogynistic views on the *femmes fatales* of the sagas might be.

The other male participant (14.07.11.03) to comment on women in the Viking age was interviewed along with two females (participants 14.07.11.01 and 14.07.11.02). His comment was a response to an observation made by the female participant 14.07.11.01 who mentioned the Icelandic *Gíslasaga*. She said that when Gísli was killed, his sister had to avenge him even though they did not have a close relationship. Participant 14.07.11.03 then responded by saying that not only had it been against her will to avenge, but she had been responsible for his death in the first place. They both agreed that this showed the “schizophrenia” of blood-feuds, because of family honour the saga characters were forced to avenge wrongdoings no matter what.

---

<sup>369</sup> For a discussion on powerful women in the Viking age see for example: *The Viking Age: A Reader*, pp. 125-158. Helga Kress, *Fyrir dyrum fósturu. Konur og kynferði í íslenskum fornbókmenntum* (Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands, Rannsóknarstofa í kvennafræðum, 1996). Helga Kress, *Máttugar meyjjar: Íslensk fornbókmenntasaga* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1993).

There were three other brief mentions of women during the Viking age as they appear in the sagas during the interviews in Víkingaheimar. Following is a quote showing what another Icelandic participant had to say on the subject:

07.07.11.02: Bold/[*harðjaxl*]. The women had to take care of the children and the farming and had to be a little strong [...]. Physically strong, or that's what I can imagine at least. And they had to be a little, sort of [sic], considering all the stories one has read, they totally took care of their own and didn't allow anyone to control them and [...] were a little hardy, I can imagine. And just a tough nation.

Icelandic participant 08.07.11.01 had the same admiration for Viking women:

Just, how cool it was to be a Viking. Isn't that right? And unique and I rather like how women were a lot stronger back then, I like that, actually I saw it only mentioned in one place, but I like that it emerged that their authority was reduced by Christianity. [...]

This participant was expressing here is admiration for women who would not be ruled by men. When asked whether she considered herself to be a Viking, she connected the strength of the Viking women to herself. She also taps into a rather interesting subject, which has long been debated amongst scholars, namely how women's rights changed with Christianity. According to the Christian tradition, the man is the head of the household and women are literally created to serve him.<sup>370</sup> In Nordic paganism, however, women, especially *völvur* (seers) seem to have played a great role, they spoke

---

<sup>370</sup> For an analysis of the repression of women within Christianity see for example: Hans Küng, *Women in Christianity* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2005). Helen M. Jewell, *Women in Medieval England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996). See also references in footnote nr. 253 below showing literature on the development of women's rights in Viking society.

for example to the gods and foretold the future.<sup>371</sup> There were also many goddesses and female deities worshipped in paganism.<sup>372</sup> While Viking society was undeniably patriarchal, the women had advanced rights and power for that period. For example, they played an influential role in the workings of advocacy, contributing to the outcomes of feuds and relations between families, could own land independently, inherit and could divorce their husbands under certain circumstances.<sup>373</sup> Roesdahl has even suggested that women's role and status within society may have improved during the Viking age because the men were frequently away on long expeditions.<sup>374</sup> It is commonly believed that with the Viking adoption of Christianity, social rules and regulations were changed and women's rights were restricted.

Jochens is one of many academics to propose an alternative view on the development of women's rights in Nordic society in the Viking age.<sup>375</sup> She writes that while women certainly had some rights, derived from the pagan religion, the transformation to Christianity brought a mixture of limitations, reinforcements and advancements.<sup>376</sup> The image of women in Viking society as strong, powerful and respected members of society are not a matter of general knowledge in England, where all the participants only referred to male Vikings. This is perhaps not surprising, bearing

---

<sup>371</sup> Birgit and Peter Sawyer *Medieval Scandinavia: From Conversion to Reformation, circa 800-1500*, The Nordic Series, Volume 17 (Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 1993) p. 192-196

<sup>372</sup> See further: Roesdahl, p. 147-158.

<sup>373</sup> Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas and Power*, p. 134-135.

<sup>374</sup> Roesdahl, p. 59.

<sup>375</sup> For further literature on the rights of women in Viking society see for example: Birgit and Peter Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia: From Conversion to Reformation, circa 800-1500*, pp. 188-213. Jenny Jochens, 'The Medieval Icelandic Heroine: Fact or Fiction' in *Viator*, vol 17 (1986), pp. 35-50. Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1991), Ólafía Einarisdóttir, 'Staða kvenna á þjóðveldisöld: Hugleiðingar í ljósi samfélagsgerðar og efnahagslífs,' in *Saga*, vol 22 (1984), pp. 7-30. Additionally: Jewell.

<sup>376</sup> Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, pp. 17-54.

in mind the male image of raiders, settlers and sailors within the country, and the fact that men who raided in England sometimes decided to settle down with local women.

Female Icelandic participant 09.07.11.01 mentioned that women's rights had been set back with the introduction of Christianity in the year 1000. When asked about the life of women during the Viking age, she replied:

Yes I thought it was informative what I heard there at Eiríksstaðir [museum] that actually it had been better to be a woman at that time than later, they had more power and such to begin with, they had been listened to more at that time than later and it had been, they who I listened to maintained that it had been in [sic], [...], because of the influence of the church that women had been pushed aside.

Clearly this participant, like the ones introduced above, believed that women's rights were set back with Christianity and they were pushed aside. She heard this from a tour guide during a visit at Eiríksstaðir museum and it clearly stood out as one of the most interesting things she heard during the visit there.

Other mentions of women during the Viking age were rather short. Icelandic participant 14.08.10.04 said that he would have liked to see how women, men and children dressed at that period. Icelandic participant 13.07.11.01 mentioned a burial mound of a prominent Viking woman (discussed at the exhibit) as being particularly interesting. In England the only mention of woman was by participant 30.08.11.05 who asked if the male Viking raiders had not also brought women with them to England.



## Connections with the Present

For participant 04.07.11.01, the permanent employee, it was important to maintain the link between the past and the present so that children in modern society would know that it had not always been possible to turn on a tap, take a hot shower and browse the internet. He was also one of many Icelandic participants who connected the Viking age to the recent bank crisis in Iceland:

But then of course there were kings and such who intended bigger things for themselves and that hasn't really changed. Now they are just called directors. They have stopped using swords to beat other men down; they just have other ways to do it. Just look at the banks and such. It hasn't changed at all.

The participant explained further that while the majority of the Vikings had been good people, there had also been “twits and hotshots” amongst them. When I asked him who those were he said “*útrásarvíkingar* [corporate marauders]”, both of the Viking age and the present day. He believed that the *útrásarvíkingar* in present society are the Icelandic bankers and businessmen responsible for the financial crisis in the country even though they have not killed anyone, they made many people bankrupt:

They did the same thing, they went somewhere, stole everything that was there, then went back home or found some other, better country to live in. So these individuals haven't changed at all. Then of course there are the slaves who were [existed] back then, they worked for these hotshot men who wanted to be everywhere and own everything and many of us are in Iceland today because of that [need to be everywhere and own everything]. We have become the slaves of these men and pay their bills. So it has changed very little in that way. But generally these people and [sic]...I think they were very good people. Generally.

This quote also shows the participants' view that the general Viking populace were hardworking people, who were not to blame for the actions of a few bad raiders. Once again, a participant linked the Viking age with the present by referring to the financial crisis. He as well as some other Icelandic participants found it preposterous that Icelanders in general were being judged for the actions of a few greedy financiers. The financial crash is still a subject of anger and frustration in Iceland and because of the modern term '*útrásarvíkingar* [corporate marauders]' the subject was naturally raised a few times during interviews. Those participants who discussed this issue believed that while there were a few 'bad' Vikings, the general public was not part of that, just like today. This gave rise to the idea that the majority of Vikings had really only been pawns of their chieftains as they were simply obeying their orders when committing outrages abroad. Another apology was thus being offered for the ancestors who were thereby redeemed.

Icelandic participant 04.07.11.01 interpreted the actions of the Vikings somewhat differently. He believed that the vast majority of the Viking soldiers wanted to be at home with their families and enjoy their life and that the same could be said about soldiers in modern society. They were merely following orders of their superiors, who determined where they went and what they did and so are not responsible for their pillaging ways.

Icelandic participant 08.07.11.02 said that after the financial crash he had started thinking more about Vikings and the heritage they left behind.

08.07.11.02: [...] for the last few years [I have thought about Vikings]. Because of the financial crisis. I sort of think that [...] wasn't Ingólfur Arnarson fleeing from, weren't everyone fleeing from [sic] the Norwegian king, we didn't want to

abide by [sic], didn't want to bow down to authority and go by rules and literally, we *are* still like this. It is so rich in our national psyche. I think there are some connections between these [events and the present]. Naturally 'útrásarvíkingar [corporate marauders] you understand? They have robbed and pillaged and treated people badly.

GDW: Are those the modern Vikings perhaps?

08.07.11.02: I'd rather not say yes to that.

Again a parallel was drawn between the Viking age and the present. However, according to this participant it did not concern just the behaviour of a few financiers, but rather the whole nation who had inherited a disregard for laws and authority. Nevertheless, the participant was reluctant to say that the financiers were the Vikings of today, probably because it would cast too bad a light on his heritage.

For participant 14.08.10.01 (a pilot who has been briefly mentioned before) there was another moral to the story of the Vikings and the modern tycoon-Vikings:

While the bankers were making a profit, then everyone had a positive attitude towards them. So [as a result] you could say that a thousand years ago *they* were of course the *útrásarvíkingar* [corporate marauders]. [...] while they were making a profit this is just how society was [...] so I'm not in a position to criticise their ways from here. I cannot [...] criticise their behaviour now a thousand years later.

Clearly this participant was unable to regard the pillaging of his Viking ancestors in too harsh a light, because the same mistakes were being repeated in modern Icelandic society by financiers.

Another connection to the present which came up both in Iceland and in England was their craft skills, which have been discussed previously. Often participants would find it incredible that delicate, intricate objects like the longboats and wooden combs were being built in the Viking age, a time they imagined as primitive with no machines to help and no real education like is available in the present. Participant 04.07.11.01 also mentioned the way clothes were dyed in a “natural” way at the time with herbs and not with the help of books, washing machines and chemicals like in modern times.

During interviews in Víkingaheimar unexpected parallels were sometimes drawn between Vikings and Muslims. Participant 04.07.11.02 said for example that Vikings had shown little respect for human lives like Muslims in modern Islamic states. In the Viking age “men were killed with little cause and even none and it’s not considered an issue in these countries really, even if it’s very serious and terrible”. Participant 14.08.10.03 expressed the same view on Muslim attitude and participants 14.07.11.01 and 14.07.11.02 asserted that revenge-killings were at the root of the Muslim faith.

Participant 08.07.11.03, travelling alone in the area, saw parallels in Icelandic and German attitude towards history. In his view, Icelanders, like many other nations, were not ready to discuss certain historical facts, such as the consequences of Black Death or, more recently, the financial crash. The Germans had for years avoided facing up with their Nazi past. Such attitude created “gaps” in historical narrative.

On a more positive note, participant 14.07.11.03 believed that the great emphasis that the Vikings had laid on the family had been carried on to modern Icelandic society. In his view, Icelanders attached far more importance to the family than any other European nation.

Participant 04.07.11.02 (member of staff at the museum) said that the individualism in today's society originates from the Viking age, because Icelanders do not wish to be as poor and have as hard a life as their forefathers.

In the Yorkshire Museum participants were less likely to make connections to present society based on their visit. Participant 12.11.10.03, the staff member, said jokingly that while the Vikings may have been rowdy "a Saturday night in York is never peaceful anyway". This may imply that the Vikings could easily have intermingled and traded with the local population.

Female participant 13.11.10.04 from England said that Vikings might have been ruthless, but "no more or less than anybody else":

I mean they had some nasty little ways, same as anybody else had particular nasty little ways, we are told. So, I mean, in war, or in battle, everybody is [behaving very much in the same way], you know. We only have to look back to 1940-something, everyone has their nasty little, well [sic] Just look at what is happening now. I mean, in a 100 years' time, what are they going to say about us? Each century people have [had] their nasty little ways. [...] unfortunately that is part of human nature.

Icelandic female participant 14.08.10.01 expressed a similar view, i.e. that every nation had done something nasty at one time. As a result she felt unable to judge the Vikings for their behaviour.

English participants 27.08.11.02 (visiting with her father mostly to explore York's Roman heritage) both mentioned that fashion linked the ages together. The former said that she would be pleased to wear the Viking jewellery she saw at the museum. The latter said that she found it interesting how important fashion was even

back then in the times of the Vikings to demonstrate status, power and wealth. In a sense this was still the case in modern society.

## Conclusion: Vikings in the Museums

This chapter has demonstrated the various ways in which participants engaged with the exhibitions in the Yorkshire Museum and Víkingaheimar. All the topics above show how participants perceived the exhibitions from their own preconceived image of Vikings and their age. They interpreted the messages of the museums in a way which verified their various assumptions on history, and would reflect positively on their national identity.

Generally speaking, most participants, both in Iceland and England enjoyed their museum visit. In Iceland, participants would frequently mention, that they felt something lacking, such as a more coherent exhibition narrative, or more interesting objects, which would make for a more lasting experience. In Yorkshire Museum, it was clear, that participants did not believe the medieval gallery to be tailored for families, but rather for a more specialist crowd. Furthermore, displaying the objects according to theme, rather than in a historically linear way, received mixed reviews. Participants would mention feeling lost in the gallery space, that the walls were too bare or that they felt as if they had missed the Viking part of the exhibition.

In Víkingaheimar, the Icelandic participants were fairly certain that they had known most of the history on display beforehand, and if they had learned anything, it merely added to their pre-existing image of Vikings and their age, rather than substituted it. Yet, at the same time, they admitted to being surprised at the advanced craftsmanship the Vikings had possessed, such as was clear from the information on

how *Íslendingur* was built. Participants would declare that this demonstrated that the Vikings had not been as “barbaric” as generally considered. Moreover, they interpreted the Viking voyages as a sign of bravery and heroism, which again verified what their predetermined image of Vikings.

Participants at the Yorkshire Museum had the same general views that the museum was demonstrating that the Vikings had been productive members of society, rather than the popular stereotype as pillaging marauders who came, stole and killed, then left again. In this way, their pre-existing image of the Nordic warriors was verified, and in some ways justified within the exhibition, because they were an important part of the internal regional identity in their time.

In short, the participants in both museums seemed to maintain some views about Vikings which was not intentionally confirmed by the museum exhibitions. In Víkingaheimar participants drew their own conclusions from seeing *Íslendingur* and considered it to be proof of various ideas they had regarding the Viking age.

Women in the Viking age were mainly discussed by Icelandic participants, who thought of them as strong, fierce and heroic. The image of these women was clearly influenced greatly by the Icelandic sagas, which were mentioned in relation to this topic by several participants. Female participants frequently declared that they, as descendants of these women, had inherited these qualities. They were proud to be related to women who had been willing to work hard and sacrifice much in order to protect their family. The two male participants who mentioned women in the Viking age, interpreted the actions somewhat more negatively, describing them as manipulative and short-sighted, because when they schemed to have their husbands killed, no one would be left to take care of them.

When discussing the Vikings and their age, several links, in both museums, were made to modern society. In Iceland, participants would make personal connections, such as women linking their personality to those of their female Viking ancestors, or like participant 13.07.11.04 who believed his artistic skills derived from them. They were also frequently linked to the recent financial crisis in Iceland and those responsible for it compared to the Vikings. More general links to present Icelandic society were also made, such as romantically thinking about the Viking age as a time of self-reliant living, when people were closer to nature.

In the Yorkshire Museum, participants made fewer links to modern society. One participant explained that the Vikings may have been ruthless, but the same things had happened in every society, and were, in fact, still being done. Two female participants made links to modern fashion, one saying that she would wear the jewellery on display. The other found it fascinating that clothing demonstrated social status back then and in present society.



# Chapter 6

## Identity

### Introduction: Overview of Themes Covered within the Section

Within this chapter I introduce various discussions which emerged in connection with national, regional and personal identity. I start with a discussion on how Icelandic participants in Víkingaheimar saw the Viking myth to be linked with tourism and the external image of Iceland. The second section focuses on how the Viking myth was linked to national identity within both Víkingaheimar and Yorkshire Museum. In Iceland, the Vikings were shown to be considered the roots of the nation, the origin and the genealogical links with them were taken for granted.<sup>377</sup> Icelandic participants proudly declared themselves to be part of that culture and all of them agreed that it was important for the nation to maintain the link to that part of the social history. At Yorkshire Museum, domestic participants were aware of the long, multi-cultural history of England and so frequently explained that the Viking history was part of a ‘cultural melting pot’ and an important part of its identity. Regional identity was also important to some participants in both museums. Occasionally in Yorkshire Museum, when asked about their *personal* identity, they would mention how Vikings were linked to their region’s identity. This indicates how closely linked their personal and regional identity is. It also shows that regional identities have had a longer time to develop because

---

<sup>377</sup> For a discussion on the genealogical link of Vikings in Iceland, versus the more unclear link of Vikings to British participants, see Chapter 7, the personal links between Vikings and participants is also discussed in this chapter, in the sections titled ‘Personal identity’ and ‘Are you a Viking?’.

England has a longer history. The next section explores how participants answered the question “Are you a Viking?” which many English participants took to mean as a question of genetics, while Icelandic participants thought of the question more as relating to inherited characteristics and lifestyle choices. The last section then discusses how participants linked the Viking heritage to their personal identity.

As was said in the previous chapter, the interviews were aimed at gaining information about the *image* of Vikings, therefore, the accuracy or correctness of that image is not discussed here. Furthermore, as before, members of staff were interviewed from both museums, they spoke from their own experiences and understanding of the messages of the institutions. Therefore, their views do not necessarily represent that of the museums.

## Tourism and Identity

Icelandic female participant 08.07.11.01 who has been quoted several times before, expressed the view that she did not directly connect much to the Viking past unless in the presence of her foreign friends.<sup>378</sup> Later on she added that her image of Vikings was, at least in some way, originated from or verified by objects in tourist shops where there are numerous stereotypical Viking objects for sale. A similar sentiment was expressed by some other Icelandic participants, such as participant 08.07.11.02, the husband of the aforementioned participant (08.07.11.01) who said the following when asked whether he felt connected to the Vikings in any way:

---

<sup>378</sup> She is for example quoted in the section ‘Women in the Viking Age’ in relation to her image of life of women in the Viking age.

No, not really, it's, you know, one is automatically always connected to this by foreigners, because I have so many [foreign friends] and I have lived for a long time abroad and have so many foreign acquaintances and one is always called the Viking. It's not me who connects it [to me], its other people.

This participant claims not to personally connect or identify with the Viking past however, when in contact with foreign friends, *they* push him towards that image. An identity thus acquired is more of an external rather than internal identity; something that people are ready to accept if they find it positive, for example because it gives them a sense of importance or uniqueness. It also has its economic advantages. A national identity, as seen by foreigners, can be marketed in various ways, for example in attracting tourists and selling them merchandise supposed to be 'typical' for the local culture.<sup>379</sup> Icelandic participant 08.07.11.03, who visited the museum specifically to inspect *Íslendingur* referred to this phenomenon:

08.07.11.03: It's not so complicated that there isn't one word for all of this [sic]; all uniqueness is interesting. Whatever it is.

GDW: Interesting for Icelanders then?

08.07.11.03: For everyone. If not only so that [sic] we can claim something, it doesn't matter what it is, something unique, then it immediately becomes interesting.

This participant realised that interesting history and culture is being marketed and a provided a profitable marketing strategy. This may, in fact, be one of the reasons why

---

<sup>379</sup> There is vast literature on the tourist aspect of heritage, such as: Chris Halewood and Kevin Hannam 'Viking Heritage Tourism: Authenticity and Commodity', in *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol 28:3 (2001), pp. 565-580. See also George Hughes 'Authenticity in Tourism', in *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol 22:4 (1995), pp. 781-803.

local visitors in Icelandic museums might not identify with the version of Viking history which is being portrayed there, as the target audience are tourists. Viking history in Víkingaheimar was, for example, being displayed so as to make it exciting and memorable for tourists without actively trying to make the exhibit relevant to local visitors. An Icelandic participant 14.07.11.04 believed that the Viking festival in Hafnarfjörður probably served this same purpose. He felt that he had no connection with the Viking identity as presented in museums, festivals and tourist shops. In his daily life he just thought of himself as a citizen of a modern, western society. But this did not mean that he considered himself rootless:

GDW: Are Vikings important for you personally? Is it something you identify with or?

14.07.11.04: Yes, it's of course this *þjóðremba* [extreme nationalism] which we Icelanders always believe in. Of course we come from these people [...] but it can't be denied that one is proud of one's roots.

Indeed, the participant felt quite proud of his forefathers and their heritage was to some degree part of his identity. However, that had very little, if anything, to do with the commercialised Viking identity.

Participant 04.07.11.01, the staff member at Víkingaheimar believed that it was important to encourage Icelanders to visit the museum so that they could learn about their cultural history. He believed that Víkingaheimar provides a comprehensive insight into the lives of Vikings. While this might be true to some extent, it must be kept in mind that foreign tourists were the museum's target audience and that is bound to influence how visitors experience and interpret the exhibition.

An additional mention of the external Viking image within Iceland was broached in connection to an annual Viking festival held in Hafnarfjörður organised by hotel Viking – Fjörukráin. The hotel's building itself is Viking-style, as well as the inside decor. They also provide various other Viking-themed events, such as storytelling and performances in their bar area, all of which are aimed at tourists. Participant 14.07.11.04 lives in the area mentioned the festival as a tourist attraction and as part of an external Viking identity created for the tourist market. Understandably, he did not believe that people living in the area identified with this; however, it was a different story for people directly involved in the event. When he was considering whether he was a Viking, he replied:

I don't know, I've chatted to men who are, you know, in that group [in the Viking festival], [...] and they've travelled around, they are a very tightly knit group and they travel with women and children and it's like one big family, when one [sic], I have experienced this group of people who do this.

While the framework of the festival is reflective of an external image, unrelated to the actual regional identity, the people behind the Viking festival are sincere in their ideals and 'Viking lifestyle', so to speak. The internal image of Vikings and modern Icelanders remains as before, of a family oriented, protective group of people. Within this context however, it is a sub-culture, situated outside mainstream society.<sup>380</sup>

---

<sup>380</sup> Various literature exists on re-enactment societies in regards to questions on authenticity. For example: Elizabeth Carnegie and Scott McCabe, 'Re-enactment Events and Tourism: Meaning, Authenticity and Identity', in *Current Issues in Tourism*, vol 11:4 (2008), pp. 349-368. See also the following paper on Viking themed festivals: Kevin Hannam and Chris Halewood, 'European Viking Themed Festivals: An Expression of Identity', in *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, vol 1:1 (2006), pp. 17-31.

# National Identity

Most Icelandic participants seemed to feel much more comfortable with their nationalistic views than the English participants, even though they sometimes gently mocked their own patriotic feelings. This is unsurprising as Iceland only gained full independence in 1944. As a result, the nationalistic spirit is still strong within the national identity and collective social memory. However, when discussing national identity with English participants they would say that being English meant being “a mixture of everything”. England (and Britain on the whole) was a cultural “melting pot” which was influenced by every nation who had invaded England or been subjected to an invasion by the British. Participants 13.11.10.02 and 13.11.10.03, an English couple, said for example that having been “invaded over and over again” meant that nobody “is pure anything, we are all a bit of this and a bit of that”.

English female participant 26.08.11.01 from Norwich was visiting Yorkshire museum with her young daughter, who enthusiastically covered her mother’s word association sheet with information on Vikings. This participant thought that the Viking past was important for English identity, as was the past in general:

Everything is important [...] they ought to be because it all fits somewhere doesn’t it? You know, [identity is] like a jig-saw, pieces here and there, and a combination of all the things. You are allowed to pick out a piece here and there, [...] even Vikings.

Furthermore, the participant believed that understanding and seeing all the jig-saw pieces together would allow for a better understanding of society and the construction and evolution of English national identity.

Participant 27.08.11.04 also had an explanation for the importance of the Viking past for English identity when asked:

GDW: Do you think it's part of the English identity?

27.08.11.04: Of course it is. Everything [...] has to be part of, [sic] all your history, all parts of the past, you don't [sic], they are part of your culture, you don't know quite how it spends [sic] through do you always [sic]. Whether you know or not, it's probably there.

In other words, the Vikings played their part in English history and the past was a part of the present. In this way, the participant agreed with the great majority of his countrymen who regarded the Viking heritage as a part of British identity. When asked about this identity, male participant 13.11.10.05, a retired Baptist minister said: "Yes, I think a bit has got in, I hope the decent bit got in..." He specified what he meant by "the decent bit" during his interview, as will be shown below. This is an expression of national identity with some personal reservation. When discussing later how the Vikings fit into national identity and culture, he mentioned what conclusions he had drawn from seeing the Vale of York hoard, which had attracted him to the museum:

[...] Also, it shows that things weren't all one way, I mean, the Vikings sometimes beat the Saxons, the Saxons sometimes beat the Vikings [...]

In other words, this participant believed that the cultural influences went both ways, the Anglo-Saxons influenced the Vikings just as much as the other way around. He even specified what he believed that the Vikings contributed to English society and vice versa, which will be discussed in the next section, 'Regional Identity'.

Female participant 26.08.11.02 believed that the Viking's contribution to English society were swearwords. Her husband, participant 26.08.11.03 said the contribution had mostly consisted of folklore, legends and hearsay rather than something "tangible" like the Romans left behind.

In Iceland, all the participants thought the Viking past was important for Icelandic national identity. The Icelanders generally thought that the Viking heritage was at the root of their national identity. Therefore it was important to preserve that heritage and remember it. This is ingrained in Icelandic nationalism, as has often been demonstrated, but in addition many Icelanders believe that the Viking period makes Iceland unique in more than one sense. Female participant 07.07.11.01, the temporary staff member at Víkingaheimar gave the following answer to the question whether the Viking age was important for Iceland:

Because Iceland was colonised/settled at that time. It's [...] our history really, we aren't older than this. It's the origin of us Icelanders. These [Vikings] are our forefathers. And I think it's highly interesting that we have this literature [the unique sagas and the historical records]. You know, we have so much *more* than other nations, in connection to our origin.

This is one of the many clear examples of the strong roots of the Viking image within the internal national identity and social memory, which should not be confused with the external, stereotype image of Vikings within the tourist sector and even some museums in Iceland.

The following discussion between three Icelandic participants in my study, further illustrates the importance attached to the sagas and the medieval historical records by many Icelanders:



10.07.11.03: Like I said, if it [the history of the settlement and the saga characters] hadn't been documented, if we were just here and didn't know where we came from, [...] then the background would be so minimal that [sic], if you don't have a family behind you then you aren't [sic]

10.07.11.02: Then we wouldn't be the Icelanders we are today.

10.07.11.03: No

10.07.11.02: if we hadn't known, it's surely like that [sic].

10.07.11.01: [...] exactly, I think that perhaps for the whole nation to know this [the history of the Viking age in Iceland] and to build on something.

10.07.11.03: It's the background [the origin of the nation]

Participant 10.07.11.03 continued by saying that while he did not perhaps brag about being Icelandic publicly, “subconsciously you are an Icelandic [...] and naturally that must have come from somewhere”. Many comments of this kind confirm yet again that the national identity is to a considerable extent rooted in the importance attached to the literary tradition of the Viking age which is emphasised in Icelandic museums. But then national identity at its roots is not only shaped by literature and history: according to Icelandic participant 14.07.11.01, it actively shapes the national consciousness:

And some values, there, deep within. I think we are more connected, it's just like we were saying before, it has to be a part of the national consciousness in some way.

In other words, there are values to be learned from the Viking past, and they are still relevant in current society.

## Regional Identity

At the Yorkshire Museum a number of participants referred to regional identities. Yet, it should be made clear, that further research is needed in order to make a systematic analysis of regional identities in England and Iceland. Accepting this, the following section is mainly aimed at demonstrating the various manifestations of identity formations within museums, the links between various types of identities and the existence of collectively held regional characteristics in connection with the Viking image. Some of the participants (such as 27.08.11.03, 27.08.11.02 and 28.08.11.01) expressed a surprise at York's strong historical link to Vikings. More people, however, referred to a difference between the north and south of England in this context. They associated the north with stubborn Vikings, in contrast with the gentler population of the south of England. Participants 13.11.10.02 and his wife, 13.11.10.03 offered this opinion on a possible Viking influence in the country:

13.11.10.03: I don't think I can put my finger on it specifically, but they are part of the history of this area, which each of us [sic] which is a part of me [...]

GDW: Do you think it has affected the area in some way?

13.11.10.02: They say there is a difference between the north and the south, don't they? They are meant to be a bit more forthright up here, on this side of the country. Maybe [...] there is a difference.

Clearly, these participants consider that being born in the north of England makes people more "forthright", including participant 13.11.10.03. Leading up to this, when asking participant 13.11.10.03 how the Vikings possibly connected to her identity, she replied that because they were part of the local history, they influenced everyone in the

area. She consequently believes that history was an important part of regional as well as her own personal identity. As seen from this example, history becomes more than just past events, it governs social structures and even communal personality traits.

Participant 13.11.10.05, the retired Baptist minister, had his own particular ideas about how Vikings contributed to regional identity:

Realising there was a Viking hoard hidden against [sic] the Saxons, makes me realise that the push wasn't always one way, and that the Vikings didn't always have their own way by any means. [...] and also we don't realise how much the Vikings and the Saxons ultimately intermingled. I mean, Knut marrying Emma. And she civilised him a little bit. [...] the Mans [Isle of Man] folk they are a beautiful blend of the imagination of the Celts, the solid common sense of the Vikings. They are beautiful folk.

This is a further example on how certain characteristics perceived as typically Viking were associated with regional stereotypes. In this instance King Knut was uncivilised until Emma exercised her good influence on him, but the people of the Isle of Man inherited the common sense of their Viking ancestors.

For female participant 13.11.10.01, a Dutch woman who had lived in York for two years, the message of the exhibit at the museum was that Vikings had strongly influenced Yorkshire in the present because of their strong impact on trading, culture and arts. For this participant, the Vikings left more behind in Yorkshire and elsewhere

in Europe than swearwords and some undefinable characteristics because of this strong impact.<sup>381</sup>

Apart from York, participants also mentioned other places as having had Viking roots and history, such as Newcastle. Participant 27.08.11.01 who lives in that city, gave the following reply when asked if Vikings and their culture was a part of the town's identity:

I think it is, there are strong link between Newcastle and Norway, there are always people from Norway coming over on boats, [...] shopping, but there is definitive links between the two, and there's often these words that are common to both, like, in my dialect 'home' is 'hjem'. [...] It's funny how different words and just the way they are said have stayed in the dialect all these years.

This quote demonstrates a tangible connection to the Vikings, such as frequent tourists from Norway (presumably acting in a friendlier manner than during the Viking age) and a permanent trace in the regional dialect.

For another participant 27.08.11.02 also a female from Newcastle upon Tyne, her hometown's 'claim to fame' was a cathedral she believed was built by Vikings.<sup>382</sup> She believed this showed the direct influence of Vikings on her hometown's regional identity. When asked if it was also a part of England's identity, she replied:

Oh, I think definitively. You've got the influences everywhere, especially where we are, like the North, you can definitively tell by the people and the old

---

<sup>381</sup> Interestingly, this participant also believed she had shared the Viking experience in her own personal way. She had travelled all over the world and lived in various countries where she had tried to keep her own identity while adapting to the local society.

<sup>382</sup> This participant did not give the name of the cathedral she was referring to; however, it may have been the Cathedral Church of St. Nicholas, originally built in 1091. Its oldest features are Norman, dating from around 1175.

buildings, and the way people look. They couldn't be anything but Viking. All the different areas, that's why we all look so different, because we are all so different.

Replies such as this clearly illustrate the differences between the north and south of England, emphasising especially the diverse Viking influences in the north.

Female participant 28.08.11.01 from Scotland also connected the Vikings to the identity of her hometown and family. She originated from a town in the north of Scotland where the Vikings landed. Her mother added that when the Vikings came ashore, the inhabitants were cutting the corn from the fields, and the Vikings joined in and helped. This appears to be a pleasant myth of peaceful initial interaction of Vikings with a native population. Indeed the participant and her family had a very personal connection to local Viking identity. The family crest was influenced by their heritage and both she and her mother said that certain physical features in the family were attributed to Viking genes. She even said that one of the wax figures at the Jorvik museum (which is located in York and they had recently visited) had reminded them so much of her father that she and her mother had been a bit shocked.

Although many Icelanders like to emphasise their place of origin, this cannot be compared with regionalism in England. Iceland is, on the whole, a very homogenous society in language, culture, and mentality.<sup>383</sup> Nevertheless, Icelanders living outside the main population centre of Reykjavík and its neighbourhood sometimes make a distinction between themselves and those of the city dwellers. No doubt this is quite a common phenomenon, similar to the distinction that some participants in the Yorkshire

---

<sup>383</sup> Gunnar Karlsson, 'The Emergence of Nationalism in Iceland', in *Ethnicity and Nation Building in the Nordic World*, ed. by Sven Tägil (Southern Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), pp. 33-62 (pp. 53-58).

museum made between the south and north of England. It was therefore notable that some Icelandic participants referred to the Vikings in order to explain regional difference in Iceland. Participant 14.07.11.01 maintained for example that people who originate in the small fishing villages in Iceland probably relate more to the Vikings than the city dwellers of Reykjavík. She was specifically referring to her husband, participant 14.07.11.02 who originated from Ísafjörður, a small town on the north western coast of Iceland. They explained that the students in the local college regularly sing ‘Það mælti mín móðir’, which is a famous Viking poem which comes from the Icelandic saga called *Egilssaga*. But talk of this kind must, of course, not be taken too literally. Reykjavík only came into being as a city in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its inhabitants trace their origins to every part of the country. The term Viking used in a context like the one described above, only means tough, hardworking etc. rather than having any real racial connotation. Nevertheless, the use of the term in such contexts both in Iceland and in England is quite descriptive of the part of the national identity traced to the Viking heritage in both countries.

## Are You a Viking?

One of the main differences between the English and the Icelandic participants was that in York participants frequently considered the question ‘are you a Viking’ purely from a genetic perspective. They often mentioned that being English meant that they must be able to trace their origins to Vikings somewhere way back. On the other hand, Icelandic participants generally understood the question as relating to certain mental mind-sets and attributes which they believed was inherited from their forefathers. They took a genetic relationship with Vikings for granted (and could easily confirm that by looking at their family tree), while the English have only recently started to trace their

relationship with Vikings through DNA research.<sup>384</sup> Indeed, several English participants mentioned having noticed media coverage on such research. When a member of staff at Víkingaheimar was asked whether he was a Viking, he answered:

04.07.11.01: I don't know [...] like I said before, I could imagine myself living alone somewhere, living in autarky [self-sustainable farming] and I would definitely adjust quickly to that way of living. However [...] I really enjoy being able to turn on the tap. I think it's terrific to take a hot shower with a soap which I chose myself [...] But I *could* live off nature. I wouldn't starve to death on the heath. I would be able to manage. [...] of course I have the national pride and all that, but I don't think I can say that I think of myself as a Viking. Not completely. [...] If I would choose, if I had to choose, I'd choose the Viking-way.

I have described words on the word association sheets in the previous chapter linked to farming. The above quote fits well within the part of the idealised image of the past relating to Iceland as an agricultural idyll. Some participants thus described the Viking age as a time of self-sustainability, where people lived in harmony with nature and where hard work was necessary for survival. The aforementioned staff member of Víkingaheimar clearly did not feel that he deserved to be called a Viking because his lifestyle did not warrant that. It is still a lifestyle which appeals to him, however, because it is character-building and makes one more independent. This further confirms the conclusion on the meaning of the term Viking in modern Iceland.

---

<sup>384</sup> Interestingly, a recent article by Pallab Ghosh, on the BBC website describes the services provided by companies which are tracing ancestry through DNA as similar to astrology, in particular it is mentioned that some customers are eager to find, in particular, Viking ancestry, which almost every Briton has anyway: Pallab Ghosh, 'Some DNA ancestry services akin to 'genetic astrology'', *bbc.co.uk* (England, 7. March, 2013).

This participant also referred to the idea of self-sustainability by remarking that the Vikings did everything with their own hands. They even dyed their clothes without the aid of any sort of machines. In his view this demonstrated that Vikings were in some sense superior to people in modern society. Furthermore, he considered Vikings to have been of extraordinary calm mind, making it most desirable to have been their contemporary.

Icelandic participant 10.07.11.03 had similarly idealised ideas about the connection of Vikings to nature. When asked whether he was a Viking, he replied:

10.07.11.03: I really enjoy going up glaciers and mountains and just be there alone, I don't seek being part of a group. [...]

GDW: So you are a Viking?

10.07.11.03: Well, judging by that example, well I never go to campsites, never sleep at those places, always go somewhere else, I prefer just to be alone and by myself up on a glacier.

Participants 20.07.11.02 and 20.07.11.01 also believed that the life of Vikings had been both exciting and exemplary:

20.07.11.02: It, I just envision it, like autarky [self-sustainable farming] and just be there somewhere and sail somewhere.

20.07.11.01: Not knowing what happens tomorrow

20.07.11.02: Yes, live one day [at a time]

The idea of Viking Iceland as a self-sustaining agricultural Utopia with a strong bond to nature was only expressed by Icelandic participants. However, both participants in



Víkingaheimar and in the Yorkshire Museum often said that they would not or could not be Vikings because of the tough living conditions in the Middle Ages. An Icelandic female participant explained why she would not have wanted to live in the Viking age:

07.07.11.01: At least not in Iceland, considering how the weather is here, and how the houses were built, it would have been very cold and no shelter, because there are no trees, and especially in this area, there's nothing but storms all year around [...]

GDW: [...] where would you rather have been?

07.07.11.01: Maybe in Norway. I would have definitely been richer there.

This lady was not the only Icelandic participant to say that the 'harshness' of living applied in particular to medieval Iceland and that life had been better in other countries. Icelandic participant 13.07.11.05 said that he would have been "a lousy Viking" because he simply was not tough enough. Another male Icelandic participant, 08.07.11.02, a musician visiting with his wife, participant 08.07.11.01, was of the same opinion when she said: "I just think it was such a hard life. Tough, and [...] I just think it was a miserable life."

Icelandic participant 08.07.11.03 stated that he was not a Viking because not only was he too old, but because there were constant internal and external fights at that time. When they went out to sea, the likelihood was that they'd never return. He concluded the following:

[...] the present requires security, but the Icelandic Middle Ages, or that century did not offer any security.

For others, the harshness of the Viking period refers to the people themselves, rather than the environment. So, it is due to the Vikings' character that some participants do not wish to be part of that time (and perhaps culture). Icelandic participant 07.07.11.01 did not want to be a Viking because:

One knows very little about this, or, I know very little about this period except about those Viking-pillaging, and I'm not a robber, so, that I... I am not travelling around on ships or...no, I can't connect to that.

This is a classic example of the image of Viking warriors which this participant does not connect with and does not wish to be similar to. Icelandic participant 09.07.11.01 also had no wish being part of the Viking culture, she was unable to comprehend the fear they invoked in others because she herself was not, and did not mean to be that menacing.

In the Yorkshire Museum many participants had similar ideas about life in the Viking age. Participant 30.08.11.04 said she would not have been able to handle Viking life and when Participants 28.08.11.03 and 28.08.11.04 agreed that they would not have liked to be Vikings given the opportunity:

28.08.11.03: I don't know if I would have liked to live in their time. Not my idea, because they were very harsh, very sharp I should imagine. Very interesting to look back on, but I don't think I'd like to have lived in it.

As an interesting side-note, participant 30.08.11.01, an Australian female visiting the area with her mother, took the same view, indicating that the core image of Vikings is international, even if the reaction to parts of the stereotype varies between countries. She did not wish to be a Viking:

It's ancient and it's cold and there's no central heating and there's no cars and it's not a comfortable lifestyle, no.

She did, however, admire them at the same time:

30.08.11.01: For sailing into the nothingness when there was no navigation [was, however admirable] and no, and having to be resourceful and carrying their own food and water and [...] having to make do in areas that weren't even mapped out in those days, at that stage.

GDW: So, what does that say about them?

30.08.11.01: That they are quite courageous. And brave and resourceful. Possibly foolish.

Despite an admiration of Viking toughness and resourcefulness, these participants (the one from a society with a Viking link and the one with no such connections) showed no desire in actually being a Viking or living in the Middle Ages. Neither can imagine for themselves a life without modern comforts. While the image of Vikings remains as before, the response to it has changed. In contrast to other participants, most of whom were domestic visitors, who wanted to be more like Vikings, the harsh living conditions of the Middle Ages are not something these participants found appealing.

A further point of interest, regarding foreign was the Italian participant 27.08.11.03 who had a different view on the cruelty of Vikings. She did not consider Vikings to be part of English identity because they had been outside invaders who pillaged, stole and traded but then left and so did not leave behind a tangible heritage. None the less, she found the idea of being a ferocious warrior appealed on a personal

level and said she would have liked exploring new places, taking whatever she wanted and scaring people.<sup>385</sup>

Some participants, both from Iceland and England, considered the insecure lifestyle of Vikings as having made them adventurous and tough, which was something to strive for. Participant 30.08.11.03 a young English soldier, said the following:

30.08.11.03: I'd like to be a Viking. But I'm not a Viking.

GDW: Why would you want to be a Viking?

30.08.11.03: Like I said, they are just very cool, kind of warlike, especially as a soldier, it would be a great identity, it would be really cool and, but I'm just not a Viking.

GDW: To be a shield-biter [or berserker: fierce warriors, who were said to fight in an uncontrollable, fierce trance].

30.08.11.03: Exactly, like a berserker [as above]. That would be fantastic, but it's just not me.

For this participant, the idea of being a 'berserker' is very appealing, as it would make him a good soldier. He even informed me that there is a battalion in the army nicknamed 'the Vikings' who are from the east of England.

All of the ideas above show the same basic image of Vikings: they are seen as tough people living in tough times, doing what it takes to survive. It varies how people

---

<sup>385</sup> For full quote see p. 149. Note that here we can see the same image of Vikings as from participants from England and Iceland. However these characteristics are interpreted differently, demonstrating how individuals interpret and make sense of history from their own pre-conceived ideas and experiences. It demonstrates the personal responses to a collective narrative. In this case, the participant makes a personal link to a social historical narrative she is not part of.

connect to that image, because they have different personal outlooks on life. For some, the hardship was seen as character-building and being part of that lifestyle would make them independent. For others, modern times offer comforts that they cannot imagine being without. There are two different layers of understanding within this image of Vikings: the communal social stereotype and a personal one. It is difficult to say for certain which image is the primary one, because people do not seem to make a distinction between them. I suspect, however, that the top layer is the national myth, which exists within social memory and is subsequently re-interpreted by individuals in order to understand it and make it relevant to them personally.

## Personal Identity

The question ‘Are you a Viking?’ is connected to the issue of identity. Above, I demonstrated that most participants in both museums believed themselves to be connected to Vikings, either genealogically or psychologically. The following section explores further how participants linked the Viking myth to their personal identity. Participant 04.07.11.01, a staff member at Víkingaheimar stated on this point:

Yes, it’s not enough to stand out on the porch and scream “I’m a Viking”, you have to know why you are one. Why you have this strong Viking-blood in you.

This participant seemed to take the view that people needed to know the historical reasons for the development of personal and national identity before they could claim to be Vikings. Knowing that one has Viking ancestry is not enough. As mentioned earlier, he also expressed his anxieties that Viking heritage, the core of the Icelandic national identity, was being forgotten. Participant 04.07.11.02, another member of staff at Víkingaheimar took a similar view:

And I think of us Nordic people as one nation which has lost track a little bit of what it means to be a nation and to have each other.

According to this participant, Icelanders as a whole did not regard themselves as Vikings because they had no idea what it meant to be one, i.e. they were forgetting their heritage which he believed led to close-mindedness.

Some participants, both Icelandic and English, did not have a clear idea of how or if they identified personally with the Viking past. Often they would say that they knew that it was important because it was part of their roots, part of where they came from and how society had evolved. But often found it challenging to explain why it was important to know “your roots”.

Some participants in both museums explained that the Viking past made them unique and was therefore important for Iceland on the whole, even if it was not a conscious part of their personal identity. Icelandic participant 08.07.11.01 said, for example, that while he was not aware of the Viking heritage (unless perhaps when he was around foreign friends) it was such that it made the Icelandic people “unique”. Participant 10.07.11.03, who has been quoted several times above, took a similar view, that Iceland was a nation that “came from somewhere”:

Well, we are not Danish, and we are not Dutch, we are Nordic Vikings I find.

This is, [...] *þjóðremba* [extreme nationalism].<sup>386</sup>

According to this view, the uniqueness of the Viking past makes Iceland different from every other country in the world. It is the inheritance of all Icelanders which the

---

<sup>386</sup> For an explanation of the words ‘extreme nationalism’ within this context see Chapter 3 where I discuss the translation of some of the Icelandic interview words.

participants believe shows them where they came from and what makes them a part of society. All the participants, both from Iceland and England, thought it was important to understand where you came from and the inherited rules of society. They were not able to define this belief further, because they seemed to never have questioned it.

As mentioned earlier, most of the English participants believed that Viking heritage must be part of their own identity, because being English means being “a little bit of everything”. Participant 12.11.10.01 said, for example, that it would be interesting to know: “where your ancestors came from, way back. It’s probably some mixture don’t you think?” Participant 12.11.10.03 (a member of staff in York) had a different way of relating to Vikings and said that, contrary to popular belief, Vikings had actually been rather clean and spent a good deal of time on their appearance. Later he concluded that because his family went a long way back in Yorkshire he must have Viking ancestry:

[...] I mean, times I’ve been to Scandinavia [...] I felt very [much] at home there and I’ve always liked the people, so, that’s something isn’t it? [Laughs]

Despite the humorous undertones in these comments, it is clear that participant’s image of Vikings resonates with his personal preferences. He obviously felt the Viking heritage was in some way part of his family history and identity. English participant 28.08.11.03 shared this sentiment: “Somewhere in us there is Viking”. In fact, it was common for English participants to talk about their own personal identity in this way. That is, they frequently discussed this subject in a tangible way; for example, some believed themselves to be of Viking descent because Vikings had settled in their communities and formed a part of the English gene-pool. A few people, such as English participant 27.08.11.01 believed that the Vikings may have contributed more:

GDW: So, do you, are Vikings a part of your identity? A part of who you are?

27.08.11.01: Good question, I mean, living in the North-East there is always that sort of possibility, I mean we do have an awful lot of very fair haired people, [unintelligible], which I'm not one of them, but [...] I think it's something you grow up knowing about. Something mentally possibly, something, rather than genetically.

This participant did not share the physical characteristics of the stereotypical Viking. However, due to their historical presence in the north of England, she identified a possible mental link with them. Moreover, this participant mentioned her regional identity when asked whether Vikings were part of her own identity. This suggests that her regional and personal identities are so closely knit that she does not see a big difference between them.

For Scottish participant 28.08.11.01 the connection with Vikings is deeply personal, and an active part of her own, and her family's identity:

I don't know, it's just your roots. It's quite interesting because that's where you come from. I mean, my dad looked into it more recently, in the last few years, and with him, his story about it, from his grandfather, now I've heard it, and it sort of brings up interest and I've got a son, you know, so that will all go on.

For this participant the Viking heritage is where her roots are, and she intends to pass that knowledge on to her son so that he would understand his family legacy. A little later on she said that it was not something she was that conscious about, because "it's just in you" and shows her where she comes from. It is worth mentioning that several participants in the Yorkshire Museum said that a blond hair was a clear sign of lasting Viking influences in England. Participant 28.08.11.04 said for example that there were



blond people in his family and so he might be able to trace his ancestry back to the Vikings.

Finally, English participants 30.08.11.05 and 30.08.11.06 agreed on the following point:

I just think they [Vikings] are interesting people and I would like to be related to something like that. I would like to think we actually did originally [...] come from something that had an identity.

This comment raises the question whether these and perhaps some other participants in York somehow felt a lack of identity in current English society.

## Conclusion: Vikings and Identity

The interview topics above demonstrate the various ways in which participants discussed the Vikings in connection with their personal, regional and national identities. History is shown to be more than a record of past events, as participants made various personal links to the Viking myth within museums. Icelandic participants asserted almost without exception that Vikings had contributed greatly to their current society, mentality, personalities and general characteristics. They took their genealogic links to Vikings as granted and so did not mention their outer appearance as matching up to the stereotype Viking image. English participants on the other hand, could not be certain of being related to Vikings, so often they would focus on genealogic factors, such as hair colour as a sign of the possibility of such a relationship. But they also believed that the Viking heritage had influenced society in other ways, reflected by regional characteristics, such as hardiness and stubbornness and even in the use of certain swearwords. As a result English participants saw themselves and others as either

‘Vikings’ or ‘not Vikings’ based on their common collective image of the Viking myth. How they related and judged that warrior image was then based on their own personal experiences and social circumstances.

# Chapter 7

## Analysis of Fieldwork

### Introduction

After having established an overview of participant responses at Yorkshire Museum and Víkingaheimar, the following chapter reviews the overall themes which arose from that discussion. It should be acknowledged, that this chapter includes some repetitions and reviews of theories and fieldwork data responses. The aim is to discuss and explain the main fieldwork responses in relation to the theoretical framework set in Chapter 2. Therefore, in order to analyse the data in this manner, some repetitions proved necessary. The various topics raised here and in previous chapters will then serve as the basis for the final chapter, Conclusions: Collective Memory and Identity Development where the main research themes will be placed in a new context, illustrating their various connections and contributions.

In this chapter, I start by exploring what influences individual responses to history, in particular the history of England's and Iceland's Viking past. Theories pertaining to meaning creation within museums are explored, starting with a discussion on the influence of the museum exhibitions at Víkingaheimar and Yorkshire Museum and the part the visitors play within that process is analysed. Visitors have preconceived ideas on history and expect them to be verified within the museum. These ideas originate in their collective social memory, which is a term relating to collective ideas, rules and historical understanding of societies. In other words, individual memory and ideas are directly influenced by their social background. Leading on from this, I discuss

historical distancing, where theories pertaining to social historical understanding and distancing are explored in order to clarify how individuals reinterpret history in order to cast a positive light on their national identity. I then go on to explore theories on nationalism and otherness in order to demonstrate how the Viking past was used by participants in order to explain current social events, rules and political decisions. The aim is also to show that the Viking heritage in Iceland and England is an important part of their current national identity.

## Creating Meaning in Museums

The exhibitions of the Yorkshire Museum and Víkingaheimar were previously analysed in Chapter 3: Methodology and Case Studies. There, I discussed what the potential effect the layout and designs of the exhibition spaces were on visitors. Following on from that discussion, the ensuing section theorises the role of the museum visitor in that creation of meaning within the exhibitions in both museums.

My research confirms that museum visitors tend to make assumptions about the narrative within exhibitions based on their own preconceived ideas. The same results emerged from Watson's research into the influences and image of Horatio Nelson within the Nelson museum in Great Yarmouth,<sup>387</sup> which showed that the intended messages of the museum were not being understood by visitors.<sup>388</sup> Both of our research results demonstrate Hooper-Greenhill's assertion that visitors from different backgrounds have different perceptions of museum exhibitions.<sup>389</sup> However, my

---

<sup>387</sup> Sheila Watson, '“England Expects”: Nelson as a Symbol of Local and National Identity within the Museum', in *Museum and Society*, vol 4:3 (2006), pp. 129-151.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid., pp. 139-140.

<sup>389</sup> Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and their Visitors* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 100.

research shows how one myth or historical topic – the Vikings – was used within two nations to construct different personal and collective identities.

Considering Oakeshott's theory on the practical past as it was discussed in Chapter 2, it is evident that it is not just institutions that make judgement calls about history in relation to the present. As my research suggests, ordinary, non-specialist visitors do the same. The Yorkshire Museum and Víkingaheimar both tried to focus on certain themes in order to inform visitors about history. The visitors then drew their own conclusions about the past and the present from those themes. However, those were not necessarily the conclusions the museums intended for the visitors. Furthermore, a neutral historical past does not exist. What is generally considered an objective, accurate reflection of the past within institutions, such as the Yorkshire Museum and Víkingaheimar is in fact one possible narrative comprised of many combinations of objects and facts, decided upon by the institutions. While museums (and other cultural institutions) know that history is biased by nature and are doing their utmost to display history in a clear way, it cannot be considered impartial.

In both Yorkshire Museum and Víkingaheimar most of the participants of my study seemed generally content with their visit. However, a few participants mentioned that they felt that something they had expected to see was missing. Those who came for a family visit would often talk about the lack of interactive objects and displays. Some visitors also needed a more structured layout to navigate the exhibition spaces. More specifically, some domestic visitors (from both countries) said they would have liked more objects which showed everyday life in the Viking age: objects that explained how 'normal' people lived, people like themselves, but in a different era. Considering constructivist learning theory (Hein 1998) this shows that visitors interpret the museum exhibition on the basis of their own pre-existing knowledge. They make sense of the

objects on display by interpreting them within the framework of their own experiences. This is why the participants sought out objects which showed the lives of everyday people, just like themselves. It created a direct link between past and present.

Visitors tend to understand their museum experience from a social and national perspective, framed by their collective memory and expect to find positive interpretations of their cultural past. Showing the everyday lives of the ‘regular’ Vikings would transform them from a pillaging, invading foreign army into being a vital part of domestic social structure and history. That way their national identity remains positive and redeemable, and allows people to safely marvel at and reinterpret the fantastical, brutal part of the past to suit current social (and perhaps personal) needs. Relevant here is Oakeshott’s practical past, as well as the theories of Burke (2011), Assman (2010) and Berger (2011) and others, because, according to them, collective memory allows for the past to be reinterpreted to suit current social needs and provides a justification of present social structure and decisions.<sup>390</sup>

Icelandic female participant 07.07.11.01, a temporary staff member at Víkingaheimar, said that the museum’s message on the Viking age was positive because it exhibited that age in a colourful and cheerful way and that was a good message to send across. This is interesting because a few minutes later it emerged that her personal image of Vikings was that of greedy, selfish anti-heroes and living in harsh and merciless times. Despite her own negative attitude towards the Viking age, she believed that the museum’s positive outlook on the Viking age was important, because ultimately, that period marks the “origin” of Iceland as a nation. One possible reason for this participant being in favour of a positive display of the Viking past might be that she

---

<sup>390</sup>Oakeshott, pp. 1-48.

was aware of the museum's standing as a tourist attraction. Despite her own reservations, she might then have wanted her own community to be exhibited favourably to outsiders.

In Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, I discussed the interview results of my fieldwork. Among the themes that came up was the influence of the tourist industry on the construction and dissemination of the Viking image. It demonstrated how various Icelandic participants were aware that the Viking image was partly an external identity, created for the sake of foreign friends and tourists. It is worth remembering here that within museums, the target audience needs to be kept in mind, as it influences the narrative delivered, and therefore, all visitor experiences of the exhibitions.

English participants also talked about the way that the Viking past contributed to current society, such as participant 13.11.10.03, who explained that at Yorkshire Museum she had found out that Vikings did not merely steal; they also contributed to English society, such as their physical traits of blond hair and blue eyes.<sup>391</sup> In other words, the domestic life of Vikings after they settled meant that they became part of the local identity and had left a permanent (positive) mark on English society. Female participant 26.08.11.01 from Norwich, believed the museum showed that the Vikings did more than “rape and pillage”. In fact the museum was “looking forward” and showing what they contributed to current society.<sup>392</sup>

The answers provided above, demonstrate the evident need in current society for the link to the Viking age to be favourably preserved. These visitors clearly considered the Vikings to be an important part of their various collective and personal identities,

---

<sup>391</sup> The full quote is given in Chapter 5, p. 190.

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 190-191.

because they had left a mark on society. The Vikings' positive contribution neutralized their 'negative' actions. As a result, national identity was restored and history interpreted in a way which reflected the needs of present society.

Participants, both from Iceland and from England, expressed a desire for their national identity to be positively interpreted within the museums. Icelandic participant 04.07.11.02 believed raiding and trading expeditions of the Vikings resulted in them gaining culture which they had lacked before.<sup>393</sup> This was echoed by English participant 27.08.11.01 who said that Vikings, for whom family and social unity was important, had come to England in order to gain land. As we have seen previously, this made them part of English identity and so excused their pillaging ways. These participants are influenced by their social collective memory to reinterpret the Viking past in a positive way in order to fill a social need for unity and justification for social rules and regulations in the present. Furthermore, it *verified* the image of Vikings as it existed in collective memory.

A more specific example of how society uses the past to make sense of present issues is the fact that Icelandic participants linked the recent financial crisis to the Vikings. This also demonstrates further the way that visitors interpreted the exhibitions as serving a social purpose. The link between the ancient Viking warriors and the bankers responsible for the financial collapse was explained and interpreted in various ways. Either the bankers were seen as genetically predisposed to such behaviour or their behaviour excluded from the national identity because it was 'not typically' Icelandic. Some participants felt they were unable to judge their behaviour because it happened in the distance past. Participant 14.08.10.01 felt unwilling to criticise the Vikings for their

---

<sup>393</sup> For full quote see Chapter 5, p. 185.



pillaging, considering the fact that Icelandic bankers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century had basically behaved in the same way: robbing people.<sup>394</sup> Both had been held in high regard by society while making money. How could he have a negative view of Vikings when his own society, descended from them, had given criminal bankers a free hand? These answers demonstrate a clear way in which individuals attempt to either justify or ‘other’ the bankers’ behaviour. On the one hand, they are still members of the internal national identity of Iceland. However, on the other hand, if their behaviour is distanced from the morals and actions of the social majority, they can be safely excluded as outsiders, disconnected from national identity.

Visitors at the Yorkshire Museum had broadly the same understanding of the institution’s intended messages on Vikings as a member of staff I interviewed. Both he and the visitors would mention how the exhibition demonstrated the multi-layered, international background of local society and of England in general. Similarly, in Iceland, both staff and visitors would talk about the exhibition showing a good, objective version of the glorious, but harsh Viking age. As discussed previously, this indicates that those who have a connection to the history on display at museums seek to interpret the exhibition’s meanings and message on the past as positive. Participants of my research who were not native to Iceland and England saw the exhibition as meaning something rather different, that is, in short has having no significant impact on the English national identity. Neither of those interpretations necessarily means that one group understood the exhibition better than the other. It simply shows that because of their national backgrounds, the domestic visitors were more willing to take a positive message away from the exhibition. Furthermore, all participants had their preconceived

---

<sup>394</sup> Chapter 5, p. 199.

image of Vikings verified within the museums, regardless of their ethnic background. While some participants believed that they had learned something new from their visit, most considered their pre-knowledge of the Viking age to have been refreshed or added to, rather than altered completely.

Black's theory introduced in Chapter 2, on audience participation in meaning creation within museums suggests that the success of exhibitions depends on the visitors *wanting* to participate in this process. This is why Black writes that curators should (within bounds) seek to confirm the views of their visitors.<sup>395</sup> Certainly I agree that museum need to keep their audiences in mind, and remember that they are not empty vessels. Visitors have their own agendas and preconceived ideas which they seek to have reinforced within the museums (as my data has shown).<sup>396</sup> However, I would argue that a museum's social role is not merely to verify the views of their visitors, but to challenge them as well. As Hooper-Greenhill suggests, museums "should be seen as neutral ground, where all social and cultural groups have a right to display their history".<sup>397</sup> Moreover, just as the museum chooses how to display the past, so the visitor decides how to understand that narrative. This leaves the question of *how much* of the visitors' understanding originates in their preconceived ideas on the exhibition subject and how much is influenced by the museums' intended meaning. That is of course, hard, if not impossible, to accurately measure. However, it is suggestive that most of the

---

<sup>395</sup> Graham Black, p. 194-195.

<sup>396</sup> For further information on the much debated communal and social role of museums, see discussions in the following books: various articles in *Museum Management and Marketing* ed. by Richard Sandell and Robert R. Janes (Abingdon, Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2007) and *Museums and their Communities* ed. by Sheila Watson (Abingdon, Oxon & New York, Routledge, 2007). Kenneth Hudson, 'The Museum Refuses to Stand Still', in *Museum International*, 50:1 (2003), pp. 43-50. Janet Marstine, 'Situated Revelations: Radical Transparency in the Museum', in *New Directions in Museum Ethics*, ed. by Janet Marstine, Alexander A. Bauer and Chelsea Haines (Abingdon, Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 1-24. Jocelyn Dodd and Richard Sandell, *Including Museums: Perspectives on museums, galleries and social inclusion* (Leicester: RCMG, 2001).

<sup>397</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, p. 101.

participants, both in Iceland and England, believed that their pre-conceived ideas on the Viking age were confirmed within the museum. In York this was true both for foreign and domestic visitors, even if their own ideas and ensuing interpretations of the museum exhibition were quite different. Museums also have their own agenda when creating a historical narrative. While this is bound to set the framework for how visitors understand the exhibition, that does not change the fact that visitors have their *own* agendas and so are also active in the process of meaning creation. I would argue that this might explain why participants of my study, regardless of their ethnic background, considered their pre-conceived image of the past to be reflected within the museums.

## Collective Memory

It has been argued convincingly that there is no single historical truth.<sup>398</sup> How a historical event is described and remembered in society is dependent upon such factors as the interpretation of historians and the political circumstances surrounding the event. In turn, societies alter their collective memory of events to fit changed social values at any given time. Collective memory therefore plays an integral part in shaping how history is remembered within societies.<sup>399</sup> My fieldwork indicates that this is true to the extent of how Vikings are remembered in present Icelandic and English society. Participants had a clear image of Vikings and their age which originates in their collective social memory and they visited museums expecting to have that image verified. This expectation created a tension between the exhibition's historical narrative and the preconceived stereotypical Viking image, which originated in the visitors'

---

<sup>398</sup> Goff, p. 81, see also discussion on historical distancing in Chapter 2.

<sup>399</sup> See for example: Jeremy Black, pp. 7-8; Halbwachs, p. 38 and Chapter 2 for a summary of theories regarding collective memory.

collective memory. Ultimately, it seems that the latter held more power in the long run; judging from the results of my fieldwork, visitors were able to create their own meaning within the exhibition space because of the historical distance present within the museums.

Black, whose theories were discussed in Chapter 2, explains that history has not only served as a point of reference, but also as a way to frame policies. That is to say, it has been used to explain current crises and as a reason for political actions in the present. During my interviews in Víkingaheimar the recent financial crisis was frequently mentioned, showing that sometimes this process of rationalisation is reciprocal. As mentioned before, for example, when asking Icelandic participant 14.08.10.01 (as written previously, he was a pilot visiting with his two sons) about his view on Vikings, he answered that it was impossible for him to criticise the Vikings for what they did, considering the fact that bankers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century had basically behaved in the same way in robbing people.<sup>400</sup> This participant used current events, in this case the financial crisis, to explain and rationalise his positive attitude towards the past, more specifically towards Vikings and their age. However, his judgement of the past also reverts back to his judgement on the present, meaning that the participant finds it hard to pass judgement on Icelandic bankers because of historical events of the past. The disreputable acts of Viking raiders of the past and the Icelandic bankers of the present are neutralised and explained through this comparison. In this way, participant 14.08.10.01 felt justified in stating that his view on Vikings is a positive one, despite some negative traits. Furthermore, his national identity thus appears in a more positive light. Additionally, consider that these events were in no way mentioned within the

---

<sup>400</sup> For full quote see Chapter 5, p. 199.

exhibition, rather, it was an association frequently made by the Icelandic participants. This demonstrates the deeply rooted influence of collective social memory.

Icelandic participant 08.07.11.02 (visiting with his children and wife, participant 08.07.11.01, both of whom have been quoted previously) stated that he had started re-contemplating Iceland's Viking past as a direct consequence to the financial crisis. In his mind the old Norse Vikings and the bankers of the present were birds of a feather: "they have robbed and pillaged and treated people badly". Furthermore, there was a clear connection between those two because Vikings fled from Norway to Iceland because: "[...] we didn't want to abide by [sic], didn't want to bow down to authority and go by rules and literally, we *are* still like this. It is so rich in our national psyche."<sup>401</sup> This participant also uses the past in order to make sense of present issues and discuss his national identity. He seemed to take the view that history repeats itself, if in a different way. In other words, the financial crisis started as a result of the Icelandic habit of refusing to abide by the rules created by others. Nonetheless, the participant was reluctant to say explicitly that the bankers were modern Vikings (despite the related etymology of the term), presumably because that would cast too bad a light on his own cultural heritage, both in the past and present. Within this context, history is an agent of collective memory and an active part of national identity. It influences social views and used in connection with individual and collective memory and national identity. Individuals use history in order to make sense of the present and as a way to connect their own personal experiences to social rules and collective memory. Just as the participants above use history to come to terms with the recent financial crisis, others, both English and Icelandic participants, used social collective memory and history in

---

<sup>401</sup> See p. 199 for full quote.

order to explain regional stereotypes, such as people from the north of England being hardy and stubborn.

The Icelandic movement for independence is a classic example of how collective social memory has been used to further political goals. The leaders of that movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as Jón Sigurðsson, persistently used historical arguments in demanding independence for their country under the king of Denmark. When arguing for a national parliament Jón pointed for example to the importance of the *Alþing* as the basis of the medieval Icelandic Commonwealth founded in 930, but largely abolished as a legislature with the introduction of absolute monarchy in 1662. Under the influence of the independence movement, the idea of the Golden Age of Icelandic history developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>402</sup> The Viking age was seen as a heroic time when the country enjoyed freedom and independence and prospered culturally as well as economically.

Although it is impossible to ascertain the level of influence of such collective memory, it seems that this glorification of the past strengthened the independence movement. It encouraged the Icelandic people, one of the poorest nations of Europe in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, to demand home rule and later sovereignty and full independence from Denmark. Even though the independence movement reached its goal, the idea of the Golden Age persisted in common memory and remained an important part of the national identity.

This view clearly has not changed much in present Icelandic society. Icelandic participants often mentioned that the primary influence on their image of Vikings stemmed from the Icelandic sagas. They would describe the heroes of old as honour-

---

<sup>402</sup> See for example: Jón Jónsson Aðils, *Gullöld Íslendinga*, Chapter 1.

bound rebels, who fled from Norway to escape from King Harald the fair-haired. Iceland was seen as a country with independent, strong-minded, heroic people who would stop at nothing to protect their family. Several female Icelandic participants mentioned in particular the strength and superiority of Viking women and having read the sagas, believed that they had yielded considerable power with the advent of Christianity.

There is an additional angle to the romanticised view of Iceland's Viking past. Icelandic participants often reminisced about the Viking age as being a time when people were closer to nature and had to work hard for everything they had, which in some way could also be said to be the result of Icelanders still trying to understand and deal with the financial crisis. Some believed everything came too easily in present society because people were able to take out huge loans from banks and live beyond their means. But when the banks went bankrupt, so did these people. Participants therefore thought of the Viking age as being exactly the opposite of modern times, a Golden Age when people possessed an independent mind and had to work hard for everything. These examples show how strong this image of the Viking age is still within Icelandic society and how it seems to be strengthened by recent events. Additionally, it demonstrates further the influences of collective memory above the museum narratives, because this connection between the present and the romanticised Utopian view on the Viking age in Iceland was not a direct part of *Víkingaheimar*'s exhibition messages.

Black writes that history has contributed to collective memory, as opposed to Goff who seems, to some degree, to agree with Frances Yates who declared that "the art

of memory” died at the start of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>403</sup> However, even if Black is right that memory has disappeared from historiography, it does not change the fact that it is rooted within its foundation. In fact, history still relies on and uses memory: for example, memoirs and interviews with people who experienced past events. As regards the Viking age, the narratives in the Icelandic sagas, which are based on an oral tradition, were not written down until in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, as discussed in Chapter 1: Constructing the Image of Vikings. Although their use as an accurate source of information on the Viking age has been long debated, they are still one of the main influences on how Icelanders think about that period, as my research indicates. This shows that while modern scholars may use these sources differently (if at all), they are still part of the historical foundation.

An example of how memory is rooted in history within my research is Scottish participant 28.08.11.01, who told me that Vikings were part of her family identity and history.<sup>404</sup> She learned about Vikings not only through school, books and television, but also through her family. Her parents told her about Vikings, and similarly she would tell her son about them. Thus, the family history and the history of the local area live on through oral transmission, one generation to the next. Collective social memory was also rooted within the regional identity of her hometown, because there was an interesting legend in the area about the Vikings assisting the locals with their corn harvest when they came ashore for the first time.<sup>405</sup>

In addition to relying on collective memory, history is also influenced by various political factors and changing societies. A staff member of Yorkshire Museum said in

---

<sup>403</sup> Goff, pp. 81-82. See also further summary of Goff’s theories in Chapter 2.

<sup>404</sup> See Chapter 6 for further information on this participant.

<sup>405</sup> See full story on pp. 217.



an interview that he considered one of the main messages of the museum was to show the Vikings were a “complex race, very intelligent and very able and capable”. He also believed that the general public still thought of Vikings as “shaggy haired, rather foul creatures”, when in reality they were “really quite sophisticated”.<sup>406</sup> In other words, he considered the museum as accurately depicting an image of Vikings as farmers and craftsmen, as part of the local national identity and history, *not* as the outside invading and pillaging warriors. Domestic visitors on the other hand, saw the exhibition through the lens of their own prior knowledge and so still imagined the Vikings as raiders and warriors. However, due to their ideas being framed by their collective memory and their need for their national identity to be represented positively, they still interpreted the museum exhibition as showing that there was *more* to Vikings than just murder and thievery because they settled in England and became part of the local society. As a result, through the perceived exhibition narrative of the domestic side of the Vikings neutralised their ‘bad’ deeds.

Linking these answers to Goff’s theory on how public institutions, such as museums, came to show a government-influenced historical narrative: the Yorkshire Museum’s positive message on Vikings stems from a collective cultural consensus.<sup>407</sup> My fieldwork could suggest that domestic visitors want their social history to be presented in such a way that allows them to safely identify with it and that is reflected within collective social memory.<sup>408</sup>

When considering where the Icelandic participant 08.07.11.01 believed her image of Vikings originated, it is interesting to consider Halbwachs’ theory on

---

<sup>406</sup> For full quote see Chapter 5, p. 174.

<sup>407</sup> See Chapter 2 for a further discussion on Goff’s theories.

<sup>408</sup> Halbwachs, p. 37-40.

individual responses to a collective, historical narrative, which was introduced in Chapter 2. The participant found it very hard to explain because Vikings had been everywhere around her. She felt she had known about their existence from her birth. As a result, her personal image of Vikings was directly influenced by collective memory on how that part of history should be remembered. The same holds true with family dynamics. According to Halbwachs, each family has its own shared memories which express the general attitude of a group, its nature, qualities and weaknesses, for example like Scottish participant 28.08.11.01 and her mother showed during their interview.<sup>409</sup> When we recall our childhood, we do it within the framework of shared family memory. The same thing is true on a national scale, because each individual's ideas and images of the past are influenced by social norms.

Accepting Halbwachs, Casey and Berger's views, that collective memory cannot be isolated from personal memory, it is clear that it is impossible to separate oneself from society completely.<sup>410</sup> As a consequence, while many of my Icelandic participants were reluctant to say that Viking culture was something that influenced their personal identity, every single one of them agreed that it was important for society as a whole. Indeed, their personal image of Vikings actually originates in the social collective memory, proving that they could not separate themselves from it completely.

Smith writes that people are constantly reminded of their national identity by everyday activities and symbols.<sup>411</sup> She suggests that there exists an authorised heritage discourse (AHD), which people are surrounded by and is used to verify national identity

---

<sup>409</sup>Halbwachs, p. 59.

<sup>410</sup> See further Chapter 2, pp. 69-70.

<sup>411</sup> Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 49.

or even to de-legitimise it.<sup>412</sup> This means that heritage is a social construct, which has a collective meaning within society. As applied to my research, this theory shows that participants' image and understanding of Vikings may have been based on their personal experiences, it was still within a socially-constructed framework.

The mind reconstructs its memories because society puts pressure on it to do so (Halbwachs 1992). Society causes the mind to transform and glorify one's personal past to the point of yearning for it. We "give our memories a prestige that reality did not possess, even though it is manipulated by society".<sup>413</sup> Why? Because: "society can only survive if there is a sufficient unity of outlooks among the individuals and groups comprising it."<sup>414</sup> Society needs unity in order to function. Reflecting further on this theory, the role of museums in a Western democratic society would then be to establish an historical past which reinforces social unity and promotes multi-cultural messages. It is a place where objects and history have come to represent society's communal memories and views. Where a particular representation of history is glorified and 'us' (society) is separated from 'them' (all outsiders). The visitors interviewed as part of this study demonstrate this when they mentally integrated Vikings into local, domestic narratives, rather than continuing to see them as an external, aggressive force.

Many museums are starting to change this, and try to be and do more than that. They try to challenge social norms, show more than one view on history with outreach programs, communal involvement in exhibitions and taking an active standpoint on social issues. Consider for example the *1807 Commemorated Project* and the many

---

<sup>412</sup> Ibid., p 50.

<sup>413</sup> Halbwachs, p. 51.

<sup>414</sup> Ibid., 182.

projects conducted by the RCMG (Research Centre for Museums and Galleries).<sup>415</sup> The RCMG have collaborated on various exhibitions and projects which promote public engagements in challenging debates on various social issues and ideas. In many ways, however, this is not the case in the Yorkshire Museum and Víkingaheimar, both of which display history in a way that seems to allow for a reinforcement of the ideals of social collective memory, and provide visitors the opportunity to justify their predetermined image of Vikings, and so their national identity.

Participants of my study often had a somewhat ambiguous image of Vikings and their society. Considering, as was done in Chapter 2, Halbwachs' theory on social assimilation of difference and Pennebaker and Bansik's theory on the different methods of social modification of social memory is useful in this context. The Viking age is so far in the past that the ideas and understanding of that time has changed several times, leaving a distorted image with multiple layers which seem to be hard to reconcile. This image is a response to multiple social changes, and so is bound to be distorted in some way. Furthermore, participants would not necessarily be aware of this, simply because they had never consciously questioned their image of Vikings as influenced by collective social memory.

According to Klein, the claim of some scholars that memory and history are not necessarily opposites has become one of the clichés of the new memory discourse.<sup>416</sup> However, he believes that memory is an antonym, rather than a synonym and a replacement rather than supplement to history.<sup>417</sup> In my view it is a re-discovered (or re-admitted) part of historical practices. Historians have always relied on various forms of

---

<sup>415</sup> For articles on the social role of museums, see footnote, p. 69.

<sup>416</sup> Kerwin Lee Klein, 'On the Emergence of *Memory* in Historical Discourse', in *Representations*, 69 (2000), pp. 127-150 (Chicago & London: The University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>417</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 128-129.

memory to learn more about historical events. In today's discourse it is simply being admitted, rather than being discovered. The most obvious examples are interviews which are taken with people who experienced or lived at the time of some historically relevant event. As discussed above, museum visitors are bound to judge the actions of their Viking ancestors on the basis of their own social norms. As a result, some participants in my study said that they found the Viking age almost unbelievable and distant but others proclaimed that society had not fundamentally changed at all since then. They have an image of Vikings originating in the present social collective memory but pass judgement on that image from their personal memory and identity.

Baumeister's and Hastings' theory on the positive social distortion of collective memory fits well with Halbwachs' theory that collective memory is created by society and can be modified by it in order to suit the needs of the present. Society must adapt to changed social needs and steer them into commonly-held beliefs in order to survive. That is also why memory gets modified and even erased from the collective consciousness. This is true in the case of Icelandic and English attitudes towards the Viking age. In modern society, Vikings are generally viewed as conquering heroes, rather than as pillaging, raping thieves. Or, as is apparent from my interviews, people acknowledge (and even admire) the warrior side of the Vikings, while they reinterpret and neutralise that part of their history by explaining it away. They maintain, for example, that Vikings were brutal because they lived in brutal times or that the Vikings only raided foreign countries in order to find new lands for settlement wishing to become part of the local community.

During the interviews, the participants of my research showed signs of what Misztal defines as individual responses to standardised collective memories,

demonstrated in Chapter 2, in the discussion on collective memory. Icelandic participant 13.07.11.04 said for example:

13.07.11.04: Yes, it's fun to tell people about that as well, one often hears that they were barbarians. Then they go and research this in more detail and they aren't, weren't barbarians. They were great artisans and able at building ships and making crafts and works of art [...]

GDW: So they perhaps weren't as cruel as has been claimed?

13.07.11.04: Yes. It's good to be a descendant of these people because one is also an artist and perhaps it originates from there. In some way [sic].

This participant began with a statement which was common both in England and Iceland, to the effect that while Vikings are often by 'the general public' seen as barbaric warriors, they were in fact hardworking craftsmen and farmers. In this way, the participant reinterpreted the Viking past to suit the needs of present society. This might indicate that visitors visit history and social history museums within the narrative framework of their national identity, however, the participant above then used these socially-constructed or -influenced ideas to reflect on his own personal identity by stating that his artistic talents may have originated in his Viking ancestry. As a consequence he, like other visitors, reflected on the exhibition in connection with their own personal experiences and memory within the framework of collective memory.

Halbwachs would argue that personal memory is much more standardised than people realise. Ideas that people believe to be their own, are in fact a construct of collective memory. People remember certain events because society requires it of them. What Halbwachs does not seem to take fully into account, however, are social differences. Misztal suggests that members of society do not always share the same

views on their communal history. Each individual has a unique memory of shared events, because they are not only influenced by the collective framework, but personal experiences. As was demonstrated in Chapter 3, in museums such as the Yorkshire Museum and Víkingaheimar the exhibits create a ‘space’ or distance between visitors and the objects, for example, through their display techniques, text panels and narrative (or lack thereof). This allows the visitors to fill in the blanks themselves based on their own personal knowledge and experiences regardless of their social standing, but within the bounds of the accepted historical narrative.

The retired English Baptist minister, participant 13.11.10.05 and Icelandic pagan participant 04.07.11.02 based their personal religious identities on collective social memories of the Viking past in the way described above in Chapter 4: Word Association Responses. While writing on his word association sheet, the retired minister told me a story of how Olaf Tryggvason, the king of Norway in 995-1000 became Christian because he was a wise man who listened to sound, Christian reasoning. The way he interpreted this story, was to the effect that Vikings were wiser than generally given credit for, because they understood that Christianity was a “happier” religion” and a natural progression from the barbaric paganism.

On the other hand, the Icelandic pagan participant retold and reinterpreted the famous story of how Iceland became Christian during his interview.<sup>418</sup> The chieftain Þorgeir Ljósvetningargoði was given an authority to decide on whether Iceland should be Christian or Pagan. After 24 hours of silent meditation under a fur blanket, he decided in favour of Christianity. However, there were a few conditions for the conversion, one being that pagans were allowed to continue practice their religion in

---

<sup>418</sup> For information on the conversion of Iceland, see: *The Viking Age: A Reader*, pp. 417-419.

private. Participant 04.07.11.02 interpreted this story in favour of the pagans, showing how cunning they were. This decision had both established peace in the country and enabled pagans to still practice their religion. Both of these stories demonstrate how individuals make unique, personal connections to collective myths and narratives. They also both happened in the distant past and so allowed for personal reinterpretation within the collective framework. This reinforces national identity, but is also a highly interesting example of how individuals have a personal memory of shared social events. The differences between the museum's narrative of Viking history and the visitors' interpretations and understanding of that image are yet again highlighted. Through the unclear, dramatic exhibition set-up, the image of Vikings as it exists within collective memory is dominant and prevalent.

Even though individuals have a unique memory of socially relevant events, it does not change the fact that language and speech are two sides of the same coin in the same way that collective and personal memory are connected and can never be completely separated. We cannot remove the social context from memory; we always remember the circumstances in which it took place.<sup>419</sup> Memories are interactive, because we share and discuss our memories with each other, enact them and promote them with cultural artefacts and monuments. As Misztal shows, memory is not limited to the past but also shapes the present and provides people with beliefs and guidelines for correct social behaviour. As a result, some of my participants in both countries may have been hesitant to directly state that Vikings are important for their personal identity, but all of them made it clear that they were important for their national identity and the nation as a whole. Collective memory therefore gives a substance to a group's identity

---

<sup>419</sup> Misztal, pp. 381-382.



and is a crucial element in human relations, because both conflict and cooperation hinge upon it.<sup>420</sup> Nationalist movements and the government shape and use collective memory to create an ideal past by shaping it to create a believable future and omitting things that might threaten unity.<sup>421</sup>

Schuman and Scott did research on how age is the strongest predictor when looking at memory.<sup>422</sup> Working through the results of their questionnaires, aimed at and answered by the American public, they came to the conclusion that younger people tend to have a more positive outlook on war.<sup>423</sup> Consider in this context the previously-mentioned theories of societies modifying collective memory in order to maintain a specific view on their own social history. It shows that changed social circumstances necessitate collective mind-sets to be altered. Even if the results might be different in a European country, in addition to age not having proved a significant factor in my study, their research is very interesting. This is especially noticeable in connection with the recent financial crisis in Iceland. During my fieldwork it was evident that it had created a change in people's attitude towards the past and even within collective, social memory. As mentioned earlier, participants made an interesting link between the Viking age and the financial crisis, some even commenting that they had started thinking more about the Vikings recently because of those events. They re-evaluated the Viking age with the recent economic changes in mind and often came to the conclusion that Vikings had actually been plain, hardworking proud people which the modern, power and money hungry society should strive to be more like.

---

<sup>420</sup> Ibid., p. 383-384.

<sup>421</sup> Misztal, p. 386.

<sup>422</sup> Howard Schuman and Jacqueline Scott, 'Generations and Collective Memory' in *American Sociological Review*, 54:3 (1989), 359-381 (Washington: American Sociological Association, 1989).

<sup>423</sup> Ibid., pp. 370-374.

The answers I received from participants in York were quite similar in that they had a tendency to interpret the actions of the Viking warriors as an act of strength and an adventurous nature. Notably age did not seem to matter in connection with my research as it had done in Schuman's and Scott's study on age and memory, probably because it happened so long ago that people of all ages feel more at ease talking about it positively. Furthermore, as I have discussed before, domestic visitors have a more personal claim to the subject within history museums such as the ones I visited and are therefore more likely to justify and interpret the exhibit in a positive light. Clearly, recent events in both countries have helped to alter the national identity and collective memory of both nations in accordance with changing social needs.

## Historical Distancing

Most of the participants of my fieldwork had a complex, contradictory image of Vikings. Furthermore, the negative characteristics and actions of the Vikings which the participants identified and discussed were often exactly what they found most interesting. They would rationalise their interest and identification with the brutal Viking warriors, for example, by saying that they were "part of history" and therefore not something they needed to feel emotional about. This is an interesting rationalisation, where historical distance makes it possible for people to take pride in the 'negative' or difficult part of their ancestors and history. It also enables them to reinterpret it in a more positive, or at least neutral, way.

Previously I have shown that participants in Víkingaheimar and Yorkshire Museum both describe a similar, basic image of Vikings. On the surface, they are regarded as warriors, who raided and pillaged both within their own countries and in other parts of the world. It is the image displayed in films, books, videogames, tourist

shops, and even in museums. People are surrounded by this image, so naturally it influences how they think about Vikings. While the participants seldom repudiated this image, they would explain or rationalise *why* they were like this. This rationalization allowed them to incorporate Vikings into their own identity, in order to make the Viking past of their country into something they could be proud to be part of. This is evident from the answers I received during my fieldwork when I asked the participants whether the Viking past was important for society. Every single one of the participants said yes, even the ones that did not identify much personally with the Vikings. Because the Vikings are from a distant past, it gets whitewashed with time as the following examples of participant quotes demonstrate (first two quotes are from English participants and the last two from Icelandic ones):

13.11.10.02: You think of Eric the Bloodaxe, and he probably was very ferocious, but those days were, weren't they? Everybody, and...but now they have become a part of the country haven't they?

13.11.10.03: It's all a part of history, everybody has, things are happening now, it's part of history, things happen don't they? I mean, it all becomes part of the history as time goes on, you know.

14.08.10.03: That's just the way it was. The more we know, the more we understand. It is very hard for us to evaluate, whether this was right or wrong. We weren't there. It is easy to say *now* what was right or wrong.

14.08.10.01: So I'm not in a position to criticise their ways from here. I can't, I can't criticise their behaviour now a thousand years later.

The general theme of these quotes is that the Viking age happened so long ago, that it is now part of distant history and therefore not something the participants needed to feel emotional about. Possibly the key element here is the fact that the Viking age preceded living memory. People in present society did not experience that time in history themselves and are therefore unable to identify with it in the same personal way. The past sounds more like an interesting story, rather than actual events that influenced people's lives. As participant 13.11.10.03 said: "It all becomes part of the history as time goes on, you know". This is echoed by the Icelandic participant, 08.10.01 who said: "I can't criticise their behaviour now thousand years later." Participant 13.11.10.03 demonstrates the different meanings of history, that is, as a record of events, or in its literal meaning, as a narrative. Therefore, history, as discussed here becomes a fragmented story, in particular considering the sagas and their influences on Icelandic views on history.

The museum gallery in Víkingaheimar, is visually dramatic and the participants had a tendency to focus on maritime topics, and were less likely than the visitors in York to be aware of their attitude to Vikings being contradictory. Nationalism, however is obviously still important for Icelanders, as the Viking ancestral past was said to be of significance for the country of Iceland by the vast majority of participants. They may have described Vikings according to the classic stereotype, however, they felt that was something to be proud of. In their answers they displayed the same, historically distanced attitude as visitors from Yorkshire Museum towards the past.

If we apply Phillips' theory on constructed distancing/closeness in museums as it was presented in Chapter 2, to the views of the Icelandic participants, we can determine that the reaction must, at least partly, stem from Víkingaheimar's dramatic display of Viking culture. It is shown as being distant and not normal according to present standards, and *therefore* interesting. Examples of this are the text panels which have been mentioned previously, in Chapter 3: Methodology and Case Studies. Although well-intentioned and highly interesting panels, this type of exhibition seems to be distancing visitors from Viking culture, rather than making it more immediate. They make history sound fantastical and unreal. This allows people to identify with and enjoy Viking culture without being concerned about its perceived violent nature. Participants, for example, would then focus on the craft skills of the Vikings, the high level of technical knowledge it took to build a longboat and the bravery of those who sailed across oceans on them, rather than examining the ethics or consequences of their marauding.

Icelandic participants 14.07.11.01 and 14.07.11.03 demonstrated this behaviour particularly well. In one part of the interview they, along with Icelandic participant 14.07.11.01, talked about Vikings in the same manner as many others, as brutal warriors. Later on, however, they also compared the longboat *Íslendingur* to the Gokstad ship which it is modelled after. Participants 14.07.11.03 said that the museum emphasised the trip taken on *Íslendingur* in 2000, and the following discussion ensued:

14.07.11.03: Yes that one connected that better to reality, rather than for example in Oslo, it was more a museum-ship. You know what I mean?

14.07.11.01: [...] Like in the olden days.

14.07.11.03: Yes, in the olden days, a sort of museum-ship, it was actually one got more of a feeling for one gets more of a feeling for the sailings.

The participants also agreed that this made history more real for them. What this exchange shows is that for these visitors the reconstruction of a Viking longboat had a bigger impact on them than seeing the original one. The reconstruction was more real in one sense, as it was new and undamaged by age and wear, and displayed in such a way that it had an immediate impact on visitors. The visitors therefore thought of it as being more than a 'museum ship', perhaps also because the ship had been sailed during their own lifetime to America, rather than thousands of years ago. As a consequence, they still regarded the longboat as showing a positive image of Vikings and their skills, despite knowing that Viking expeditions often ended with raids on other countries, a historical fact they overlooked in favour of a more participatory view of an artefact. Moreover, it implies that museum objects make history more distant for the participants, while replicas seem to them as being more current and alive. It also implies that Víkingaheimar's exhibition is somewhat problematic, because it does not contest the Viking image. Rather, as was demonstrated in Chapter 3, it appears to accept the Viking stereotype more readily in order to appeal to visitors. Furthermore, the historical narrative in the museum is somewhat unclear and fragmented. Therefore, visitors are bound to fill in the gaps with their own preconceived ideas, which originate from collective memory. Because of the dramatic image of Vikings within Víkingaheimar, the process of creating a personal meaning within museums is made easier. In other words, through historical distancing, visitors renegotiate the museum's exhibition topic, the Viking age, in order to fit the views and ideas of present society.

In Yorkshire Museum, the exhibition focused more on archaeological finds. It avoided all mentions of longboats and raids and minimized discussions of swords as

weapons created to kill. Instead, it focused on the Vikings' craftsmanship, their integration and power. Yet, the differences between the historical narrative on display and the participants' image of Vikings were strikingly different. Visitors negotiated the information on display at the museum in a way which benefitted and confirmed their collectively held social ideas and memory. The museum's narrative may have been more historically accurate, but it was still fragmented and displayed in a way which did not give the visitors an idea of historical linearity. In the views of the participants, the Viking age was so different from the present that it existed within its own, distant reality; it was part of 'history' and therefore open for reinterpretation within collective memory.

As I demonstrated in Chapter 2, Fentress and Wickham argue that if people judge and understand history from a present perspective, it follows that distant history, such as the Viking age in the case of this research, is only remembered inaccurately, if at all. This inaccuracy provides a historical distance from its narrative and allows people to engage with it in their own way. Consider the following quote from the interview taken with Icelandic female participant 14.08.10.04:

Of course this has definitely been a very hard life. And one can't quite imagine what was so charming about this [sailing]. Perhaps one can't quite understand it today. And those things that one has seen in movies and read in stories, all this stealing and murders that followed these Vikings, one somehow, one finds this so distant.

This participant said repeatedly that she found the things she heard about Vikings to be "unbelievable" and the hardship they endured remarkable and almost beyond comprehension. At one point in the interview she said that even though the stories

seemed like a lie, she supposed they *had* to be true. The participant obviously acquired her vague ideas on Viking history through cultural media, allowing her later in the interview to interpret their actions (pillaging and murdering) as a positive sign of “tough, hard-working people”. Moreover, she believed that contemporary Icelanders had inherited all of these qualities from their bloodthirsty ancestors and she was proud to be their descendant.

This is a classic example of historical distancing. The participant found the past so unreal and incomprehensible that it allowed her to distance herself from the fact that Vikings impacted real human beings in a terrible way. Instead, the Vikings have somehow evolved with the passing of time and become positive because they connect the past to the present. The participant did not understand why Vikings felt the need to raid and pillage but she thought that at least it taught Icelanders to survive hardship and made them strong. This also demonstrates identity formation in museums. Surrounded by the various actions and creations of her forefathers, as well as being asked to focus on it more concisely in the interview, she felt bound to defend her nation’s historical background and national identity. Furthermore, through this museum experience, the Vikings were, at least at that moment, also a more important part of her own personal identity than before. Despite considering the Vikings thieves and murderers, she *still* felt proud of being their descendant and considered them to have contributed positive elements to her national heritage and identity.

Fentress and Wickham argue that this type of collective social memory construction is hard to change, because it is not necessarily based on factual claims about the past. It does not matter whether the events are historically true. What really



matters is the confidence that people have in their own memory, i.e. one that is dictated by collective memory.<sup>424</sup> Participant 14.08.10.04 may thus encounter facts which are contrary to her own image of Vikings within the museum, but in the long run, these hold little power over the image created by collective memory. Furthermore, by creating a historical distance between herself and the past through textual and physical narrative construction in the exhibition, the museum actually *enables* the participant to reinterpret her own cultural past in a more positive light.

Misztal maintains that museums are authoritative cultural institutions which increasingly shape collective social memory.<sup>425</sup> Up to a point this seems quite true, although museums have generally been thought of in society as institutions which hold an unbiased version of the past. However, Fentress and Wickham suggest that social memory is not necessarily based on institutionally-determined facts but rather on people's own interpretations and deeply rooted social traditions.

As Lubar suggests, individuals do not necessarily put a critical distance between themselves and their subject, whereas museums do, or at least attempt to do it. People rely on their own memory to remember history, but museums rely on material objects and texts.<sup>426</sup> Such texts and objects can, of course, be highly subjective because they are chosen to represent a specific narrative of the past. Furthermore, from the limited number of foreign visitors interviewed, it is suggested that domestic visitors have a more personal attachment than foreign ones because their own past is being displayed within the museum. They are more inclined to use the historical distance in order to justify the past on display because they have more at stake, i.e. their own national

---

<sup>424</sup> Fentress & Wickham, pp. 25-26.

<sup>425</sup> Misztal, p. 388.

<sup>426</sup> Steven Lubar, 'Exhibiting Memories', in *Museums and their Communities* ed. by Sheila Watson (London & New York: Routledge 2007), pp. 397-405 (p. 398).

identity. Participant 27.08.11.03, a woman from Italy wrote for example on her word sheet that Vikings were invaders who were not interested in integration but domination. She did not really seem to change her mind about this after visiting the Yorkshire. She did not believe that people were aware that Vikings and their culture were a part of English identity at all, although historically speaking they had clearly been in the country and were part of the historical narrative. As a result, they had not been part of the current national identity. Yet, multiple discussions from domestic visitors demonstrate that they hold the opposite view, which demonstrate how they perceive the exhibition narrative from the framework of their own national identity and collective memory.

Participant 27.08.11.03 was, of course, not the only one who regarded Vikings as barbaric warriors: various domestic visitors, both in Víkingaheimar and in Yorkshire Museum, were of the same opinion. Icelandic participant 07.07.11.01 thus complained that Víkingaheimar was portraying the Viking age falsely in a positive light. As discussed in Chapter 5, she felt that the Vikings had in fact been greedy and selfish barbarians.<sup>427</sup> The Icelandic participant believed that the Viking age had, despite everything, a positive and important link to the present. It had been the time when the Icelandic nation came into being and, as a result, there *had to be more* to the Vikings than just greed and murder.<sup>428</sup> In the same way, participants in the Yorkshire Museum reasoned that because the Vikings integrated into British society, they ceased being pillaging thieves and became part of the internal national identity and society.

---

<sup>427</sup> Chapter 5, p. 222.

<sup>428</sup> On the other hand, the Italian participant did not change her mind about Vikings, even though she interpreted the museum's message on Vikings as positive. This can be explained by her lack of cultural ties to England. She simply had less at stake when exploring the museum, because her own culture was not being represented. Therefore, she was bound to draw different conclusions on the exhibition than native visitors.

These different views demonstrate how visitors read their own meaning into exhibitions and do not passively accept the messages that museums might like to convey. It also reflects the different mentalities of the local visitor whose cultural history is on display, and that of the foreigners who do not have a personal connection to that display. The locals come to the history museums expecting to see their own culture and are therefore subconsciously more inclined to interpret the exhibition in a positive way. This in turn might also make domestic visitors more inclined to see things from the perspective of their national identity, rather than the more changeable personal identity, which would explain the similarities in answers on this subject from all the participants, both Icelandic and British, staff members and general visitors.

Misztal argues that an important part of national identity is the ability to forget those past events which can potentially threaten the unity and self-image of society.<sup>429</sup> It seems equally important for societies to be able to reinterpret a potentially difficult past into positive events, and to do so through historical distancing. In this way, the Viking age has been revaluated in contemporary society and is now thought of as a distant, far-fetched, yet interesting era which people can be proud of.

Goff also writes about collective amnesia of this sort. In his view, modern society is obsessed with conserving the past, for example, through rituals, festivals and in museums, because they are *afraid* of forgetting it.<sup>430</sup> Therefore, history is never distant, but modified to suit the needs of the present, meaning that modern Icelandic and British societies call for their Viking ancestral past to be interpreted in a positive light.

---

<sup>429</sup>Misztal, p. 386.

<sup>430</sup>Ibid., p. 95.

Outsider nations have no need to see other cultures in such a way and are therefore bound to develop different ideas and views on them.

## Nationalism

When comparing the responses of the participants at Víkingaheimar in Iceland and from Yorkshire Museum, England, there was a clear difference as to how national identity and national pride was discussed. Most Icelandic participants showed little ambiguity when stating that they were proud of Icelandic culture and heritage. However, as was discussed in Chapter 6, in England participants had a far more complex way of dealing with their cultural identity. Participants would say that being English meant being part of a cultural melting pot, which changed and evolved every time the English were subjected to an invasion or invaded other countries. However, it seemed equally as important for the English participants that the Vikings were redeemable in some way. In other words, they believed that because the Vikings were part of the national identity and history of the nation, i.e. a part of *them*, they must have redeemable features. In the same way, the founding fathers of any nation are not subjected too much criticism because they are the ‘originals’, the pioneers of society.

Before discussing theories on nationalism, it is important to clarify one major difference in how English and Icelandic participants believed themselves (and their country) to be connected to Vikings. English participants would mostly focus on the possibility of a genealogical link to the Vikings, while Icelandic participants, who took such a link as granted, talked of mental connections to their ancestors. England, however, has a longer history of various outside forces entering the country and assimilating with local communities. Therefore, they do not automatically assume to be related to Vikings. However, the English participants often found the *possibility* of

having Viking roots exciting, possibly because that made the connection to that part of the past more real. Mental attributes associated with Vikings were mostly broader and vaguer than those mentioned by Icelandic participants. Often participants would, for example, generalise by saying that people from the North were stubborn and outspoken due to Viking influence.

While participants from both countries certainly wanted to see their cultural history and identity in a positive light, the English participants were less able to directly discuss why that was. One of the major reasons for this different attitude towards cultural identity and nationalism was discussed in Chapter 1, namely because in Iceland it was used to inspire the nation to rise up and take pride in their history and culture during the independence movement, and was therefore a familiar trope.

English nationalism has developed differently, yielding to a more socially acceptable British nationalism. According to Kumar, it is popular amongst scholars to deny or ignore the existence of English nationalism completely.<sup>431</sup> There is a tendency to emphasise British identity, or alternatively, Welsh, Scottish and Irish nationalism individually, but again ignoring the English one. This is both true of academic and non-academic writing, such as within politics, journalism and literature. Therefore, what in fact makes England ‘unique’, according to the English themselves, is the *lack* of traditionally nationalistic ideology.<sup>432</sup> This, Kumar argues is simply one way of expressing a normal, narcissistic nationalism, common to every nation. He also identifies two different kinds of British nationalism. First there are ‘political nations’, which includes England and consist of political rather than ethnic communities.

---

<sup>431</sup> Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 18-21.

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Secondly, there are ‘cultural nations’, which are identified as ‘self-contained and complete’ nations and includes England.<sup>433</sup> Cultural nations do not rely on political or racial ties, but a common culture, history and a shared ethnic background. They evolve and change outside the official, governmental framework and are therefore hard to control. It is challenging for outsiders to become part of cultural nations because they are not part of the social history and collective memory.

A common trait in both types of nationalism is the use of history and collective social memory in order to change and govern societies in various ways. Just as individuals frame their individual identity and memory through collective memory and history, nationalist movements use that history to inspire and influence social groups to fight for a common cause.

When analysed on the basis of Hutchinson’s theory of two types of nationalism which was introduced in Chapter 2, the English participants of my study show similarities to cultural nationalism. The Icelandic participants lean on the other hand towards political nationalism. From the point of view of cultural nationalism, nations consist of different people, each with equal worth to the community, who as a group create a unique ‘organic being’ or society.<sup>434</sup> This was reflected by the English participants always emphasizing that English society was a cultural melting pot, where everyone is a “bit of everything”. Every group and race contributing towards the national identity had a part to play. Together they had all influenced and changed the national identity equally. English participant 28.08.11.02 offered the following reply to the question of how the Vikings contributed towards English identity:

---

<sup>433</sup>Kumar, pp 21-25.

<sup>434</sup>Hutchinson, p. 122.

28.08.11.02: Like I said, you learn from school, you know all these, you know, the different times, the different cultures, it is what shapes England really, we've taken a bit from everything. And it is just how the country has developed. You know, the different people that have moved here, the ideas that they've brought.

GDW: So it is all a part of it?

28.08.11.02: Yeah. Anytime anyone comes to a different country they bring something new don't they? Even today when people come and they open restaurants, you've got like food today it is so rich today the culture mixed societies.

Not surprisingly, the participant mentions learning about different cultural influences in school, where a broadly-accepted version of history is usually taught. According to Hutchinson, cultural nationalists are not rationalists; they are guided by nature and perceive the state as an accident, rather than a politically-constructed unit. The views of the participant mentioned above is an example of this attitude, she believes that the nation was naturally, rather than politically, constructed. Furthermore, that by cherishing the different strands of society, the state progressed, evolved and changed naturally. However, here again the history of England plays a part, because while Iceland was for a long time relatively isolated, England was repeatedly invaded and settled by outside forces and later the British invaded and settled down in other countries for various reasons. Therefore, they are bound to interpret outside cultural influences in different ways.

According to Hutchinson, cultural nationalist movements ultimately fail, as they usually consist of small, social elites. This is where the similarities between my data and Hutchinson's theories end. Regardless of my English participants' education or social

status they all replied in the same way concerning their national identity and culture, all suggesting they adhered to a cultural nationalist view of the past. While that is not conclusive due to the limited number of participants interviewed, it is certainly highly suggestive that this attitude was shared by all of them regardless of class.

On the other hand, political nationalist movements are often founded by elite urban groups.<sup>435</sup> Although there were no urban centres in Iceland in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the pioneers of the Icelandic independence movement were a few university students, mostly farmers' sons, resident in Copenhagen at the time. Copenhagen was a centre of higher education for Icelanders as there was no university in Iceland until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The man who later became the iconic leader of the movement, Jón Sigurðsson, a pastor's son, also studied and subsequently lived and worked in Copenhagen, becoming an expert on Icelandic medieval literature and history.

As has been shown previously, the medieval sagas were often mentioned by the Icelandic participants in this study as having greatly influenced their image of Vikings and Icelandic culture. Nationalism was the driving force of the independence movement and the first political parties in the country mainly concerned themselves with the issue of independence. Although a new party alignment of European lines took place after the country gained sovereignty in 1918, nationalism continued to dominate the political and the cultural sphere to a great extent and is still a potent force within the country. This is evidenced by an openly expressed pride in nationality, culture and history which would generally be considered inappropriate in British and other Western European countries in an era of globalization and multiculturalism. However, this explains why the

---

<sup>435</sup> Hutchinson, p. 125.



Icelandic participants in my study found it quite natural to state that the Viking past makes Iceland unique. This is one example of how many Icelanders tend to view the world in terms of ‘us versus the other’.

While the responses of the Icelandic participants often correlate to Hutchinson’s definition of political nationalism, the main difference is that generally, they did not wish for global citizenship. Quite the opposite: the aim of the Icelandic independence movement was to preserve the cultural heritage of Iceland in its purest form. This aim also had a racial undertone as became clear during the Second World War when the existence of the nation was, in the official view, threatened by Icelandic women fraternising and having children with Allied troops stationed in the country.

In view of Smith’s theories on ethno-nationalism and Kumar’s categorization of English nationalism as ethnic, non-politically-fuelled nationalism, the English participants of my study were clearly unable to express their nationalist ideals directly. That would have been contrary both to the official discourse and the conscious social mind-set. Instead, they emphasised England’s mixed cultural background, which is the ‘accepted’ way of responding to nationalism or patriotic pride. In other words, the participants seemed to believe that people from various racial backgrounds create the ethnic tapestry of English society. This response to nationalism may also be explained by Britain’s rejection of its former colonialism and a move towards globalization. However, only one Icelandic participant mentioned what he felt was a lack of globalization in the insular Iceland.

Öskirimli and some other scholars have criticised Smith on the basis that nationalism did not exist in the pre-modern era, rendering cultural history obsolete until becoming tools of modern nationalists. However, my data suggests that nationalistic ideals are not based on accurate historical knowledge but idealised images of the past.

When the participants of my study visited the museums in their own countries they interpreted the exhibition from the perspective of their national identity. They were therefore more inclined to see history as it was being represented in the museum in a positive way, regardless of what message these institutions were actually trying to convey. Even the basic image of Vikings was mostly based on popular culture in both countries as well as on the sagas in Iceland. This suggests that there is in fact a continuity within the collective memory and identity of social groups, regardless of the nationality of the individual members.

The different responses by Icelandic and English participants in my study can be explained by two forms of nationalism as well as the special connection of Icelanders to their Viking heritage. However, there were also striking similarities in participants' attitudes towards their national identity and cultural history. Both had a very similar image of Vikings, despite the fact that England had been subjected to raids, pillaging and plundering. The Vikings also played a relatively small part in the history of England considering its long history. Nevertheless, every single participant, both Icelandic and English, agreed that the Viking age was an important part of their country's identity. None of the participants seemed to have any doubt about this, indicating that they idea originated in social collective memory. When asking participants further on this point, they simply said that the roots of the nation lay in its historic past, which shaped the present. As a result, it was important to preserve historical memory. As Icelandic participants 10.07.11.02 and 10.07.11.03 said, "[...] if we were just here and we didn't know where we came from [...] then we wouldn't be the Icelanders we are today".

This statement demonstrates how participants thought about history and national identity and helps to explain how fear of forgetting the past can cause social anxiety. In England, one of the participants expressed a wish to belong to a group, such as the

Vikings, which had a strong identity. And in Iceland, participants would state that present society was in decline because new generations did not show proper respect towards their historical heritage, in particular as it concerned the Vikings.

Indeed, Goff wrote that the general public in any society is often obsessively frightened of losing its collective memory. So much so in fact, that memory has become a popular product to sell in present day consumer society.<sup>436</sup> The idea that collective, social memory is a product to be sold, bought and used is especially pronounced within societies having a strong tendency towards nationalism. In Iceland, where nationalism has been fostered as a matter of official government policy, this worry about social amnesia has resulted in various efforts to preserve Icelandic heritage and culture intact from outside influences. For example, in order to keep the Icelandic language as pure as possible all names must first be approved by the Personal Names Committee (*Mannanafnanefnd*) if they are not on the 'Personal Names Register'.<sup>437</sup> Furthermore, the Icelandic Language Institute (*Íslensk málstöð*) and various specialists create Icelandic terms for new technology in a further effort to maintain lingual purity. These are only two examples of many showing how Icelandic officials regulate and maintain what they judge to be acceptable forms of traditions and customs.

It is understandable that Iceland, a small nation of approximately 300,000 inhabitants is anxious to maintain its culture and independence in a modern era when every year, languages are being lost and many small nations feel culturally at bay. An example would be the Welsh, whose native language, Welsh, was only spoken by 19% of inhabitants in 2011, although attempts are being made in order to restore the

---

<sup>436</sup> Goff, p. 95.

<sup>437</sup> For further information about the 'Personal Names Act' see the homepage of the Ministry of the Interior: <http://eng.innanrikisraduneyti.is/laws-and-regulations/english/personal-names/>

language within the country.<sup>438</sup> Furthermore, according to the ‘Scotland’s Census 2001 – Gaelic Report’ Scottish Gaelic was, at the time the census was made, only spoken by approximately 2% of the population.<sup>439</sup>

The general public in Iceland is constantly aware that any social change can bring about the end of Icelandic culture, or change it beyond recognition. Some of the Icelandic participants suggested that modern times have resulted in a generation of lazy, inept Icelanders who lack the mental and physical strength of the Vikings. Some participants believed that because Icelandic youths were used to modern comforts, they were unaware of the hardships, hard-work and self-reliance which were required for people in the Viking age to survive.

Amongst the English participants this social anxiety of forgetting the past was more subtle. Rather than simply saying that English society and tradition was in danger of disappearing due to social changes and external influences, they would say it was important to remember the past, to “know ones roots.” The participants had never questioned this attitude, and as a result they found it hard to explain *why* they had taken it. Some said simply that the past certainly shaped the present, like English participant 26.08.11.01:

Once you understand what happened, you understand *why* certain things are that way now. You know, so it all fits.

Foucault, who has written on this subject, says that there is a tendency to look back at the historical roots of society and its pioneers and regard them as perfect: “it comes

---

<sup>438</sup> See the 2011 Census results on the Welsh language in Wales, published by the Office for National Statistics: <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/headlines/population2012/121211/?lang=en>

<sup>439</sup> See the results of the census on the homepage of the General Register Office for Scotland: <http://www.gro-scotland.gov.uk/press/news2005/scotlands-census-2001-gaelic-report.html>

before the body, before the world and time”.<sup>440</sup> However, the truth of the origin is lost and obscured due to endless social discourse through the ages. Yet it is important to maintain a link to the origins in order to understand the weaknesses and strengths of history.<sup>441</sup> This seems to be the attitude expressed by the participants mentioned above. He believed that only by understanding the origins do all the pieces of the modern puzzle fit, in this same way the visitor subconsciously tried to make sense of current society and life:

26.08.11.01: Everything is important [...] they ought to be because it all fits somewhere doesn't it? You know, like a jig-saw, pieces here and there, and a combination of all the things.

When English participant 28.08.11.02 had difficulties expressing her views on the Vikings and how she thought about the past I freely admitted that some of my questions were hard to answer. She replied to me in the following manner:

Yes, really. It is hard to put into words, I don't know that much about them [the Vikings] so it is not a positive or a negative. It is something you are aware of that's it is part of our history, and as is with everything that is supposed to happen, we wouldn't be the way we were if history didn't happen, so how can you have a negative view on it really? I suppose it would have to be positive. That's just my outlook on life though.

In other words, the participant felt that the only way to look at one's own cultural history was to do it in a positive way. By knowing and remembering the social

---

<sup>440</sup> Foucault, *Aesthetics: The essential works 2*, p. 372.

<sup>441</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 373.

development of England, one's understanding of current national identity and culture was deepened.

Smith writes that perceived images and reality have become so intertwined in present society that they are no longer distinguishable from each other. As a consequence, nations only exist within their imagery and their representations.<sup>442</sup> It follows that forgetting about the past would disrupt or even dissolve the social bonds that created history and collective social memory. Indeed, as the participant above noted: "we wouldn't be the way we were if history did not happen".

## Otherness

One of the main aims of research was to understand how, if at all, Icelandic and English people related to and interpreted Vikings and their age. My fieldwork quickly verified that Vikings were in fact a part of the current national identity and memory in both countries. It was also interesting that the English participants I interviewed understood and were fascinated by the idea of Vikings as an external invading force, but at the same time regarded them as part of the internal social structure. The tension between internal and external 'others', ancestors and invaders, is evident in different ways in my fieldwork, both in the interviews with Icelandic and English participants.

Foucault, introduced in Chapter 2 as a scholar fundamental to theories pertaining to social structures and power formation, writes that societies judge the outside on the basis of their own collective social memory. This proved to be true for the participants of my research. They had a tendency, in both museums, to subconsciously think of Vikings as 'the other' in some way, because the behaviour and lifestyle of these ancient

---

<sup>442</sup>Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, p 166.

warriors was so unlike their own. Often the participants would talk about social differences in their own countries and in Iceland some would mention contemporary relative otherness, namely Muslims. As there are very few Muslims in Iceland, most people only know about the religion from the media, where it is sometimes presented as so different from Western social norms that it appears threatening to a part of the public. This is an example of a rather extreme negative ‘othering’, i.e. a group is believed to threaten society in some way and must therefore be avoided and marginalised. Askari, a spokesman for the Islamic Cultural Center in Iceland wrote an article in 2011 where he discussed the prejudices that Muslims encounter in Iceland.<sup>443</sup> Amongst other things he mentions that one reason why Icelanders are often misinformed about Islam is because of the negative media coverage in the country.

A few years earlier, in 2004 Guðrún Pétursdóttir, a project manager at Inter-Cultural Iceland wrote an article discussing the growth in negative attitude in Iceland towards immigrants.<sup>444</sup> She mentions that worldwide negative media coverage of Islam greatly increased with the terrorist attack on the United States on September 11, 2001. This seems to have resulted in growing prejudice in Iceland as well as other western countries. These two articles show that because Islam is rather rare in Iceland, people’s ideas of those who adhere to the religion are mainly based on negative media coverage and hearsay rather than any direct experience.

---

<sup>443</sup> Karim Askari. ‘Múslimar og fordómar’ in *Vísir* (Iceland: 23. February 2011) Article: <http://www.visir.is/muslimar-og-fordomar/article/2011702239919>

<sup>444</sup> Guðrún Pétursdóttir ‘Fjölbreytileiki er kostur en ekki vandamál’ in *Morgunblaðið* (Iceland: 14. December 2004) Article: [http://www.mbl.is/greinasafn/grein/834642/?item\\_num=0&searchid=f727ec3e8b39a8e9835af4afffe416634cb22de5](http://www.mbl.is/greinasafn/grein/834642/?item_num=0&searchid=f727ec3e8b39a8e9835af4afffe416634cb22de5)

Moving on to the Yorkshire Museum, one English female participant 30.08.11.04 said that she did not think of Vikings as “real people”. Instead, she saw them as rather fantastical because of what she learned about them at primary school:

I kind of created this idea that they were very big, warriors who kind of not like you or me, but a completely different type of person.

Other participants, both Icelandic and English stated that the Vikings were ‘unreal’, even to the extent of one Icelandic female participant who doubted that they had ever existed. Owing to the historical distance between the participants and the Viking past, as well as the differences in social conventions and identity, Vikings are seen as ‘the other’, outside of mainstream society past and present.

Jervis uses Bougainville and Cook’s description of their trip in 1766-9 to Tahiti to show how myths are an example of how social otherness is created. This discussion, introduced more fully in Chapter 2, can also be applied to my participants’ responses to questions relating to their image of Vikings. In York and in Iceland Vikings were commonly talked about during interviews and the word association task as clever and ferocious warriors and craftsmen, who lived outside the shackles of social conventions. Male English participant 30.08.11.03, a young soldier from Oxford said for example that he saw the longboats as a “transitory and fragile” symbol of Vikings. For him, they represented the rootlessness of the ancient warriors, demonstrating that they had no other mission in life but to travel around the world and live. And probably have adventures”.<sup>445</sup> Furthermore:

---

<sup>445</sup> The full quote is included in Chapter 4, p. 157.



They endure lots of physical hardships [and] that they go to cool places. They are not so tied to the land in this kind of conception of them. You know, they are very dominant people.

Here, the Vikings are shown as rootless wanderers of the sea who “gloat and survive” and follow their natural inclinations without the restraints of social rules and norms. Therefore they have the freedom to have adventures, and go to “cool places” without the fear of repercussions due to their behaviour and actions. The participant did recognise that the Yorkshire Museum was attempting to move away from what he called “a naturistic image” to show the Vikings as domesticated traders and craftsmen. Rather than being an accurate representation of Vikings, this shows the mind-set of the participant and British society. The participant is highlighting a glorified image of Vikings as the rootless ‘other’ and admitting his own admiration of their dominant personalities and adventurous lifestyle. But at the same time, he is also establishing them as part of his national identity by talking about them as domestic tradesmen and craftsmen. They may have started out as rootless adventurers, but as soon as they settled, they became part of society and so lost their ‘otherness’. The fact that the participant believes they did not need to create lasting landmarks (i.e. stone cathedrals) is also telling of how the Vikings in his mind are ‘the other’ and ‘us’ simultaneously. They did not feel the need to build social structures in order to leave their mark on the world. Their legacy is more intangible, transitory and separate from social conventions. Jarvis explains that this type of distancing and assimilation is constantly reproduced in modern times when faced with otherness.<sup>446</sup>

---

<sup>446</sup> Jarvis, *Transgressing the Modern*, p. 58.

It was striking how the participants of my study in York rationalised and explained their social and cultural connection to Vikings. A common way of explaining how Vikings fit within society was emphasizing that while they started out as raiders, they eventually became part of society. Male English participant 13.11.10.02 said for example that the Vikings had not been “the savages that came and went”. In fact they were a part of the country’s culture because they stayed and integrated. Female English participant 13.11.10.04 said much the same:

When I was at school we didn’t really learn about Vikings, but then, when you look at them in York, and it’s totally, because it’s cultural. You think of them coming to another country and pillaging, you think of nomadic, in as much as they leave their own country, but they obviously had a culture there, but that is something I don’t know. [...] So you think about when they come here, it’s cultural, it’s trading. And it’s more of us, because it’s people who have settled in, not coming quick “hello, what can we get” and then they go away again.

This is one of many examples of the way that participants talked about Vikings as an integrated part of society. The statement clearly refers to the three stages that Vikings went through in order to become part of the British national identity. Firstly, Viking warriors left their own home country, thereby ceasing to be part of that culture and society. Secondly, during their pillaging and raiding days, they became nomads with no ties to any culture or identity, i.e. the ‘other’ to all nations that they came in touch with. Thirdly and finally, Vikings came to England in order to trade and settle, thereby becoming part of the national identity and the local ‘us’. In other words, Vikings evolved from being the unknown savage ‘other’, moving into a grey, neutral area of no identity from which they finally moved to become part of British identity and the local mainstream and positive cultural ‘us’. Vikings were thus assimilated into the social

norm. They were standardised and normalised by emphasising the similarities rather than the differences, which also explains why participants were fascinated with knowing more about ‘regular’, everyday activities of Vikings. Participants would state that Vikings were also farmers, craftsmen and ‘real people’ and so part of the internal social structure and national identity. With Foucault’s theory on otherness in mind, this shows how the process of integration works. Participants are bound to make sense of the world from their own internal selves. As a result, when participants discover and emphasise similarities between themselves and the Vikings (for example due to the needs of current national identity or influences of governing forces) Vikings cease being different. They no longer belong to ‘the other’ but become part of the internal national identity.

Turning the attention to Iceland, which has a strong nationalist influence, local participants of my study often said that Iceland was unique due to its history and culture. This is one of two types of otherness which emerged during the interviews with Icelandic participant, namely, the country against everyone else. The second, different, otherness was an internal one. As has been discussed earlier, Iceland, historically speaking, has experienced relatively few external invading forces. Therefore the Icelandic participants had a tendency to speak of the external ‘other’ as being anyone outside of the family unit. Icelandic male participant 14.07.11.03, who was interviewed with two other participants, discussed the recent financial crisis and the Viking heritage and said the following:

We were talking about this paganism, but naturally at that time families were very strong, but I think it’s that what people have talked about, that in Iceland family bonds are a lot stronger in Iceland than they are in the rest of Europe.

That still lingers a bit from the Viking age I think. Then it's also, we aren't more than 330,000, we have a smaller society.

In other words, one thing that makes Iceland unique is the strong family ties, which this participant believed have existed in Iceland since the beginning of its history. Following on from this he and the two other participants in his group talked more about the different and cruel medieval social rules about the necessity of blood revenge and how they affected society at the time. Discussing the Icelandic saga called *Gíslasaga* and how the hero Gísli was killed by his sister's plotting, who in turn had to avenge her brother's death regardless, participant 14.07.11.01 said: "So there is a bit of schizophrenia in this, that's how these families were, or these ties."

Other participants, such as the Icelandic male participant 14.07.11.03 explained that Iceland had been a small community subjected to different rules than anywhere else.<sup>447</sup> The internal struggle described here demonstrates the constant social struggles identified by Foucault and discussed in Chapter 2. The widespread internal struggles and blood feuds of Icelandic families during the Viking age are an example of a "submission struggle". Each family tried to protect its own members against having to submit to others. Because Iceland was a small, isolated country, the immediate 'enemy' in this case was, so to speak, the next door neighbour rather than any government or king, including the king of Norway. As my research shows, more recently those responsible for the recent financial crisis have become the immediate enemy. They are the 'other' whose morals and general lifestyle are so alien to the participant and presumably to Icelanders generally that they have become marginalised.<sup>448</sup> Some of the

---

<sup>447</sup> Chapter 4, p. 153.

<sup>448</sup> For a further discussion on the Icelandic bank crisis see this chapter, within the section called 'Collective Memory'.

most prominent businessmen belonging to this outcast group have in fact settled abroad. This ‘othering’ happened because Icelanders are attempting to come to terms with the financial crisis and its many devastating consequences. Through those events, the national identity became somewhat stained. In order to rebuild their national identity positively, the financiers were reinterpreted within collective memory as ‘the other’ and their behaviour and actions as abnormal and therefore not reflective on Icelandic society and identity. This comparison between the actions of the financiers and Vikings is still problematic and represent an unresolved contradiction, because the Vikings here become simultaneously interpreted as ‘the other’, yet on another level, they represent the core of Icelandic identity.

## Conclusion: Historical Interpretations within the Museum Space and Individual Responses to the Past

This chapter has explored various theoretical approaches to the fieldwork conducted at Víkingaheimar and Yorkshire Museum which explored the image of Vikings within museums and society in general. The theoretical underpinnings discussed were aimed at explaining in greater detail some of the emerging themes, exploring what influenced visitors and staff and how they negotiated the image encountered within the museum space. That is to say, it was described how they imagined and interpreted the Viking narrative within the museums and what implications that interpretation had on their national identity and collective social memory.

The results of the fieldwork suggested that individuals create their own meaning within museum exhibitions, which is based on their predetermined ideas and images of the past, which originate from their collective social memory. In the long run, the added

or altered information they were exposed to during their visit seems to hold little power, because their individual experiences, images and ideas are stronger, and have developed over a longer period of time. Their personal identity and memory is deeply rooted within social conventions, rules, ideals and myths. I started the analysis by looking at the role of visitors in the meaning creation within exhibitions and exploring how their pre-determined ideas influenced that process. Participants in both Víkingaheimar and Yorkshire Museum were generally happy with the museums, finding them informative and interesting. However, when asked further about their experience, they would add that they wished to see more objects on the daily lives of the Vikings. In Iceland many thought the museum looked empty and that the visit had lacked excitement as objects on display, apart from the longboat *Íslendingur*, were not interesting enough. In Yorkshire Museum participants also mentioned feeling confused in the downstairs medieval exhibition, because of the general layout and themed display cases. Moreover, they simply did not see any ‘Viking part’ of the exhibition and so believed they had missed it.

These responses demonstrate how the preconceived ideas of visitors influence the museum experience. Visitors have certain expectations for *what* Vikings are and when that is absent from the museum it creates a historical distance between them and the exhibition theme. In that case, either the visitors do not recognise the history on display, or they simply fill in the gap themselves, with their own interpretations. The image of Vikings within museums is therefore created both by the institutions themselves and visitors, because a message on history only has meaning if the recipient is willing and able to grasp it.

The image of Viking, existent within collective memory was significantly different from the exhibition narratives of Yorkshire Museum. Víkingaheimar’s

messages on the Vikings also altered somewhat from the myth, although it seemed to embrace the stereotype more readily. This difference created a friction which was only resolved through the use of 'historical distancing'. That is to say, participants reinterpreted the difficult, negative aspects of their cultural history as being neutral, arguing that it happened in the distant past and that there had been a significant social change since those days. This allowed them to focus on the positive aspects of their Viking forefathers and their contributions to society and national identity.

The Viking myth in modern society originates in collective memory, which sets the framework for individual interpretations of the past. Social ideals and conventions are stored within collective memory. It is used in order to justify policies and in order to affect collective social attitudes towards various issues and political decisions. Vikings in particular have through history been used in Iceland, England and elsewhere to represent idealised behaviour and lifestyle. In Iceland the Viking past was used during the independence struggle with Denmark and in Victorian England, Vikings, mixed in with a few other cultural influences, were used to represent the ideal Englishman. But history is still relevant for present society and my fieldwork clearly demonstrated the nationalistic tendencies of the participants.

While Icelandic participants were quite explicit about their nationalism, the British expressed no such direct tendency and were more discreet about their complex identity. One of the problems of the study was in fact that it was not always clear whether participants made a difference between English and British identity. It was, however, clear that in both countries Vikings are an important part of the national identity, and still provided a safe platform for participants to discuss their ideas on nationalism, history and present society. In Iceland where people generally do not question their genetic links to Vikings, they were unquestioningly part of 'us', i.e. an

ingrained part of the inner social structure. In England, which experienced both Vikings as raiders *and* settlers, they were simultaneously part of ‘us’ and ‘the other’. Through historical distancing, English participants were able to consider the Vikings both as barbaric warriors on a raid, yet finding them relatable and redeemable because they ultimately became part of society when they settled within the country. In both cases it is clear, that Vikings are indeed an important part of current Icelandic and English society.



# Conclusion: Collective Memory and Identity Development

## Introduction

This study represents my initial attempt at making a comparative analysis of the uses of the Viking image among Icelandic and English museum visitors. The research demonstrated that visitors were guided by their collective memory, social ideas and moral values when interpreting and creating meaning within exhibitions. Furthermore, the fieldwork data, supported by a theoretical framework, have shown the Viking myth to be a valuable subject for examining and analysing identity formations and the uses of historical narratives and memory within museums. This was evident, for example, by the way in which the history of Vikings and their stereotype was used by visitors in order to explain and verify various political and social issues and events in present society, such as the recent financial crisis in Iceland. Furthermore, 'historical objectivity', which is generally expected from museums, in particular those providing the basis for this research, was shown to have little influence on identity formation audiences of exhibitions. The Viking past was represented in order to show history in a manner considered appropriate by the institutions. While some visitors identified with a part of the intended messages, the great majority was mostly guided in its interpretation of the historical narrative by its own pre-existing ideas and uses of collective memory.

Both Víkingaheimar and the Yorkshire Museum therefore created, each in their own way, a distance between visitors and the historical narrative of the exhibitions. The distance was a result of the general exhibition layout, object display methods and choice of text panels. This allowed visitors a space in which they could create, change, verify

or dismiss elements of their various temporary and permanent identities and form a personal understanding of the past, within the framework of their collective memory. Given these findings, museums must recognize that their representation of the Viking past has implications for contemporary society.

This chapter is divided into three main sections. It begins with a summary and analysis of the research and its implications for museums. For the sake of clarity, the first section is divided into three subsections, starting with an analysis focusing on collective memory and historical exhibition narratives, as two different and frequently paradoxical influences upon visitor perceptions within museums. Secondly, it traces the historical development of the Viking stereotype in England and Iceland and its contemporary manifestation and connections to the responses which emerged from the fieldwork at Víkingaheimar and the Yorkshire Museum. Its role in elucidating the phenomenon of identity formation in museums is then discussed, and the various links between collective, national and personal identities are analysed. The final subsection briefly discusses the implications of the research on museum exhibitions in present society and how this identity and collective memory process can be included to benefit both visitors and museums, without sacrificing scientific and historical accuracy. This summary section is then followed by a reflection on the research methodology used in this project and finally, a discussion of possible future research developments.

# Interpretation and Representation: A Reflective Discussion of the Research

## *Memory and Motivation: The Framework and Influences on Museum Visitors*

This section focuses upon the main influences on visitors' perceptions and their understanding of museum exhibitions on Vikings. It begins with a brief discussion on how the Viking age has frequently been remembered and used in public discourse in Iceland and Britain. While the history of the Viking age, based on established historical facts and academic research, exists within cultural institutions, such as museums as well as in academic publications, it does not lay the Viking myth to rest. With this in mind, the subjectivity of history and its link to collective memory is discussed and linked with contemporary museum representations of the Viking age, in particular that of Víkingaheimar and Yorkshire Museum. Finally, the role of collective memory and uses of historical narratives as supported by a fieldwork data and a theoretical framework are analysed in order to demonstrate the major influences of visitor meaning creation and identity formation within Viking exhibitions.

The most notorious part of Viking history and the focus of the stereotypical Viking myth is their raids, which were characterized by pillage, plunder and the capture of slaves. While most of the seafaring Nordic adventurers went on such raids mainly during a few months, they spent the rest of the year on farming and other peaceful occupation. However, a minority of the Vikings were full-time mercenaries who took advantage of internal power struggles and sold their services to the highest bidder, looting and pillaging wherever they went. The Vikings also settled down abroad in territories often claimed by the sword. Iceland was an exception in this regard, as the

island was most likely uninhabited apart from the supposed isolated dwellings of Irish hermits who were driven out of the country by the settlers.

This brief overview of the Viking age shows the main highlights of what is generally considered to be the most exciting aspects of their life. Furthermore, it demonstrates, as my fieldwork verifies, how Viking history is remembered selectively within Icelandic and English collective social memory. Consider, as Goff (1992), Berger (2011), Cubitt (2007) and other scholars do, how history and memory are permanently linked. As the values and various collective identities of society change, the interpretations and representation of its history develop to reflect this. As a result of these constant changes, history is remembered incompletely and becomes fragmented (Pennebaker & Bansik 1997). This process explains how the Viking age, in all its complexity and diversity, is reduced to its most memorable and basic aspects, which are then interpreted and used within collective memory to serve various social functions in the present.

What is generally not emphasized, but is of no less importance, is the daily and more mundane part of Viking existence often stressed by British museums. As the exhibition of the Yorkshire Museum illustrates, they highlight the domestic lives of the Vikings. Most Vikings did not live by the sword alone, they had to provide for their living in the same way as most people in their time. The Yorkshire exhibition is therefore an example of attempts to correct the collective Viking myth with a historical narrative of the past in a way officially deemed more accurate or correct. Within Yorkshire museum, individuals, who had previously mainly considered the more exciting parts of the Viking age (i.e. the raids), were suddenly exposed to the more mundane side of Nordic life. This was not always received by visitors in a way anticipated by the museum. Indeed, my research demonstrates that visitors were

frequently left with the feeling that they had not seen the real “Viking part” (i.e. the warrior side of Nordic life) at all or they simply ignored the text panels. Instead, they read into the exhibition in a way more in line with their preconceived ideas and images. At the same time that the absence of ‘typical Viking’ objects was mentioned by participants at the Yorkshire Museum, they also felt that objects of ordinary people in the Viking age were missing from the exhibition. These comments suggest that visitors felt that the preconceived, collective Viking myth was more accurate than the version presented by the museum.

The Yorkshire Museum exhibition showed a fragmented, but typological and archeologically accurate version of the past completely omitting the stereotypical, Viking warriors from its narrative structure. However, participants sought out objects, such as the swords discussed in Chapter 3, which could be reinterpreted in a way which would enable the distance between past and present to be bridged. Thereby, the Viking myth, pre-existing within collective memory and social identity was verified again. Here, the friction between the official history as presented by the museum and the Viking myth created a dissonance between viewer expectations and the exhibition narrative. The visitors found a way to create a personal interpretation of history more palatable to their contemporary understanding. For example, the items of jewellery were described as acceptable accessories in the present and one participant maintained that the Vikings’ rowdy behaviour was quite similar to that taking place on a weekend night in modern York.

Thus, the historical exhibition narrative was shown to hold little power over collective memory during the meaning creation process of the exhibition. Visitors use collective memory to negotiate new information and paradoxes in order to fit these with their pre-existing ideas on history and national identity. As a consequence the visitors’

personal image of Vikings was verified yet again, although it may now have included some new elements gleaned from the exhibition. It is therefore suggested that visitors do not go to museums to learn about the past, in this case about the Vikings, but rather, in order to reflect upon and verify their own pre-existing ideas and beliefs through what they expect to be the more authoritative discourse of the museum. An exhibition which is perceived as including the Viking myth is thought as definite proof of its authenticity because it reinforces the visitors' preconceived ideas. Museums cannot erase the Viking stereotype by excluding it completely and simply present instead a more accurate historical narrative. They can only hope that visitors incorporate some aspects of the presentation in their own and established preconceptions.

Not all museums attempt to display everyday, normal life in the Viking age. At Víkingaheimar the Viking stereotype appears to be an important part of the exhibition narrative. This is evident, for example, in the chosen text panel titles, such as “Pillaging and Plundering”, accompanying a large mural (fig. 11) and “From the Fury of the Vikings, Lord Protect Us”. In addition, visitors could listen to an audio recording of an Icelandic saga being narrated. Although the Víkingaheimar exhibition also includes information on Icelandic fauna and flora in the age of the settlement, such factual exhibits were completely overshadowed by the dramatic positioning of the longboat, *Íslendingur*, which was frequently the only object participants could remember from their visit.

In this museum, the discrepancy between the historical exhibition narrative and the visitors' collective memory is somewhat less evident than in the Yorkshire Museum. The exhibition included more visual verifications of the myth enabling visitors to verify or create an exciting, entertaining reading of the past. Thus, the main texts all discussed behaviour no longer morally accepted in modern society, such as raids, pillaging and

plundering. A mural prominently covering a whole wall showed Vikings storming a beach with the intent to burn down the monastery of Lindisfarne in 793 A.D. (fig. 11). Even the exhibits on the fauna and flora of the era of the settlement of Iceland seemed to indicate the bountiful nature of Iceland as described by mediaeval sources thus reinforcing ideas of the legendary strength, glory and adventure of the settlers. The aim seems to have been to create a dramatic atmosphere, highlighting the difference between the glorious past and the more mundane present making the Viking age seem like 'golden era' in the nationalistic, mythical tradition.

The historical presentations of the Yorkshire Museum and Víkingaheimar are examples of historical distancing as theorized by Phillips (2003), Misztal (2007) and others. Within the exhibition structures and collective memory historical distance is a way of re-interpreting the past to reflect a desirable narrative. History and memory are both political constructs, used in order to create and demonstrate specific, changeable meanings in present society. Similarly, the differences and similarities between past and present are artificially created and constantly renegotiated within present society. In other words, just as historical representations in general, chronological distance and closeness are shown to be subjective tools within the present. They are used within museums and by collective social memory, in order to construct and verify present social norms and a sense of unity from the fragments of history. Furthermore, this constructed narrative promotes national and collective identity formations. In order to adapt the history of society to present nationalistic, collective ideals, its similarities or differences to social structures are highlighted and reconstructed within collective memory. This process also takes place through social 'othering' as defined by Foucault (1998), Duara (1995), Abizadeh (2005) and others. Conducted on a national level, it creates distance to certain social elements and historical events, in order to emphasise

similarities to others. It demonstrates the way in which society wishes its history to be remembered at each time and which values are held within its collective national identity.

My fieldwork demonstrates how collective memory and historical distancing in society is changeable and variable. Theories pertaining to this subject show that as societies change so does its collective memory. Verified by Halbwachs (1992), Cubitt (2007) and other scholars, memory is demonstrated to be social and interactive. Individuals will always see themselves as falling within or outside the collective memory framework. Museums provide important places of remembrance, which promote a particular collective social heritage and regenerate national, ethnic (as defined by Smith 2007, Cohen 1999 and others), personal and other identities (Karolewski & Suszycki 2011 and Casey 2000). Indeed, the participants of my study had a clear idea about who the Vikings were and what impact they had on society. Their interpretations and understanding were shaped by collective social memory, promoting a sense of social unity. Although people's views might deviate from collective memory narratives because of individual experiences, they are still firmly placed within the broader framework of collective memory. Moreover, collective memory is rearranged and modified according to changing social needs, which in turn governs individual expectations and views. Within my research, participants made personal links and comparisons to a collectively-held, socially-influenced image of Vikings. The results show that individuals were connected to collective memory through their personal memory and experiences in the same way as they related to exhibitions based on their own experiences.

My fieldwork demonstrates further how collective memory uses 'selective omissions' (Pennebaker & Basik) and distortions (Baumeister & Hasting 1997) of the



history of the Viking age in order to establish a favourable image of that period. This was evident from the way in which participants used the Viking myth in identical ways to reinforce a favourable version of the past. In this respect, despite thinking of Vikings as brutal warriors, participants would justify their positive view of them. Some emphasised that society had changed so radically since, that it was not possible to fully understand the underlying reasons for the medieval pillaging and wars. Several English participants thought that Vikings did horrible things for morally justifiable reasons allowing them to eventually make an honest living. However, whether the Anglo-Saxons saw it in this way in mediaeval times is most unlikely to judge from written sources. Nevertheless, English participants, for example, would say that the raiders had contributed blond hair to the English gene pool without considering whether that came about entirely voluntarily, and both in England and Iceland people would say that Vikings had contributed various positive things to societies all over Europe, without acknowledging that this was, at least in part, done through domination and control.

In short, collective memory, as defined by Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi & Levy (2011), Assman (2010), Karolewski & Suszycki (2011) and others, is shown in this research to be the driving force behind meaning creation in museums. It shaped visitor perceptions in identical ways both within *Víkingaheimar* and Yorkshire Museum. Moreover, because individuals are always influenced by their present society and collective memory, they did not always interpret the exhibition as intended by museum curators. The tension created between collective memory and the historical narrative created an ideal space for visitors to make personal and national links with the past and for framing various temporal and permanent, collective, national and personal identities.

## *Identity Development, Viking Stereotypes and Uses of the Past: Visitor Reactions and Meaning Creation within Museums*

The prevalence of the Viking stereotype within collective social memory is in no small part due to its exciting and dramatic nature. It consists of a mixture of historical facts and literary fabrications, and has been used within certain societies to promote social unity and strengthen a positive national identity. This patchwork of various factors makes for a highly compelling (and marketable) image of Vikings. People, who are culturally, historically or genetically linked to this image, clearly regard it quite favourably. Despite academics having disproved and discredited numerous elements of the Viking myth, it still persists within society. Indeed, the stereotypical Viking image has evolved into an entity separate from historical fact, which exists within the realms of international popular culture.

Ways in which the results of my fieldwork correspond closely to theories pertaining to collective memory, historical distancing, nationalism and othering, demonstrates that the Viking stereotype offers an excellent possibility in which to analyse identity formations within museums. Having previously established some of the ways in which visitor perceptions and understandings of museum exhibitions are created and influenced, this section aims at summarizing the manifestation of personal, national and collective identities within Víkingaheimar and the Yorkshire Museum in relation to the Viking stereotype. The section starts by tracing the origin of the Viking myth within Iceland and Britain. Its influences on the contemporary image of Vikings within pop culture are then discussed and linked to the results of the fieldwork data. Finally, the links between personal, collective and national identities are analysed and discussed in relation to the fieldwork data, within a wide theoretical framework.

How did the stereotype of Vikings, so predominant within Icelandic and English collective memory, come into being and survive all academic attempts to correct it? The historical development of the Viking image demonstrates how societies choose a way in which their past is remembered within collective memory. This is performed in a manner which serves to verify national identity, strengthen national ideas and create a unified and a socially and morally acceptable historical account keeping in line with present moral values and knowledge. The oldest surviving Nordic sources on the Vikings were all written in medieval Iceland. In Chapter 1, I demonstrated how it has been convincingly argued by Jakob Benediktsson (1968), Byock (1993) and others, that these works were motivated by economic interests and quest for power when they described, amongst other things, the settlement of Iceland and the lives and heroic acts of the original settlers and their descendants. Furthermore, this glorified image of Iceland's settlement age was further strengthened when Iceland was seeking independence from Denmark. In order to unify Icelanders for a common cause and demonstrate that Iceland had a cultural and historical right to its independence, a strong, nationalistic national identity was created with the Viking settlers and their culture at the core. Such glorified historical accounts originating in the medieval manuscripts are still the main source of the Viking image in Iceland of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

However, the origin of the current Viking image within English society can be traced back to the Victorian age. The Vikings were romantically depicted with horns and wings on their helmets, blond long hair and beards, carrying weapons as they stood proudly on the deck of their longboats and fought for honour, passion and good moral values. Here, the Icelandic sagas play an important role as well. They were translated and modernised in Britain and used within academic disciplines like archaeology and history as accurate sources on the Viking age. Moreover, they provided inspiration for

multiple theatre plays, literary fictions, poems, paintings, designs and more. Mixed together with Anglo-Saxons and Normans, the Vikings became the embodiment of a true Englishman, a man who was a genuine, heroic fighter, masculine and brave, yet strongly dedicated to his family and society. The medieval sagas and historical works preserved in their famous manuscripts played an important role as well. In Britain they were used in a somewhat similar way as in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Iceland, i.e. as political tools for strengthening national identities and justifying various political decisions and rules held in regard at the time.

Consider how remarkably consistent the Viking stereotype has remained since it was first popularized, despite the various academic reinterpretations and discoveries in relation to the Viking age, described in Chapter 1 and above. My fieldwork demonstrates this in various ways. For example, the external, physical appearance of ‘a Viking’ was described in a very similar way by participants in both countries. They were portrayed as large, strong men with long hair and scruffy beards, wearing some sort of armour and carrying swords, axes and shields. In both museums participants would admit to thinking of horned helmets, despite being aware of their fictitious origins. Most participants, especially in Iceland, said that Viking had been courageous and heroic because they fearlessly sailed the oceans braving rough weather and primitive circumstances. They were regarded as having at least partly adhered to good moral standards and values as far as emphasizing honour and family. Moreover, they were described as having kept a strong connection to nature and maintained a self-sufficient agriculture. Yet, they were also portrayed as raiders, murderers, pillaging thieves and selfish individualists by the same people who regarded them as heroic, adventurous and strong.

The image is the quintessence of masculinity. In the case of Iceland, this is somewhat surprising, because the Icelandic sagas have numerous strong female characters, who Icelandic women take pride in and identify with to a certain extent. This emerged in my fieldwork as some women referred to the strength and power of Viking women. Yet, as I will explore further later in this chapter, I had expected this topic to be more frequently discussed than it proved to be.

The descriptions of manly, rough, heroic warriors demonstrate how the stereotype Viking image transcends cultural boundaries. Even when surrounded with an alternative historical narrative, as was the case in York, participants clearly preferred the more exciting part of Viking life. Furthermore, individuals would make personal and national links and comparisons to that image. Blond hair, bone structure or personality traits and characteristics were seen as evidence for the existence or absence of a genetic link from the Vikings to the visitor, as well as inherited collective and personal characteristics. This comparison demonstrates identity formation processes within the museum, where history and the Viking myth were given personal and collective social meanings.

National identity provides a collective commonality for individual within an imagined nation (Handler 1994, Foster 1991 and Cubitt 2007). According to Halbwachs (1992), Blustein (2008) and other scholars, people will always define themselves within a collective framework. Within this research the collectively held image of Vikings is shown to represent the forefathers of Icelanders and to be one link in the complicated, ethnically diverse origins of English people. The Viking image enables visitors to see themselves as part of, or alternately, standing apart from a national identity and collective social memory.

Consider, for example, Icelandic male participant 14.08.10.03 who said that he would have made a cowardly Viking, because he was simply not a hero by nature. In other words, the Viking myth was not part of his personal identity, because he did not consider himself their equal. Yet, like so many others, he believed that the Viking image was an important part of Iceland's cultural background and national identity. Numerous similar comments were discussed in Chapter 6, where participants would contemplate their own identity and personality in accordance with the collectively held beliefs about Vikings. Thus, the Viking myth is shown to be continually relatable and important within society. The image of Vikings is constantly modified, simplified and renegotiated within culture and collective memory in order to make it more familiar. People, especially in the Nordic countries, are surrounded by imagery of stereotypical Vikings on a daily basis. Shop logos and names, food and drink products, songs, films, books and videogames all bear witness to the continuous connection with the Viking myth. As a result, even those visitors who did not consider Vikings to be part of their personal identity, were able to relate to them on a national level.

While every single one of the Icelandic and English participant said that Vikings were an important part of their national identity, most of them were hesitant in directly stating that the Viking heritage was a part of their personal identity. Yet, as demonstrated above and in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, these participants clearly made some important favourable and unfavourable comparisons between themselves and the Vikings drawing parallels between past and present. In this context, the negative aspects of Viking personalities were reinterpreted favourably, because they were seen as part of 'us', i.e. the inner national identity. Simultaneously, the same behaviour was deemed unacceptable when observed in 'outsiders'.

Identity in all its forms is subjective and political. Whether ethnic, racial, national, gender based or otherwise, it depends on distancing similarities from certain groups, while highlighting similarities with other ones. Otherness, as discussed by Duara (1995), Abizadeh (2005), Triandafyllidou (2005) and others, demonstrates how the image of the 'other' reflects on those societies creating the difference, rather than those societies judged as the 'other'. The definition of who is the 'other', much as identity and memory is changeable; it can be paradoxical and variable according to each society's needs at each time. English participants described, for example, the process that Vikings went through in order to become part of the national identity. Within their own homeland, the Vikings were part of internal Nordic identity and society. However, as soon as they left their country for a life of pillaging, plundering and seafaring, they became the 'other' to all nations, rootless wanderers with no ties. Finally, Vikings went to England, in order to trade, pillage and settle, eventually becoming useful and active members of society and part of the internal 'us'.

Alienation is demonstrated to be part of identity formations and justifications of a national character and identity within my fieldwork. Indeed, participants, especially the Icelandic ones, were influenced by nationalistic tendencies and a need for social uniqueness and unity to interpret the Viking past in a certain way. Certainly, there were some contradictory ideas about the appearance and personalities of the Vikings, which were left somewhat unresolved. Vikings were seen as murderers who held life in little regard, but simultaneously they were portrayed as brave, family-oriented men who were only brutal because living in mediaeval times made such behaviour necessary in order to survive. Consider also how the same topic could be interpreted in contradictory way, as was the case for example with a retired English, Baptist minister and an Icelandic pagan working at Víkingaheimar. As was described in Chapter 4, the pagan interpreted

Christianity as negative force in Viking culture, while the opposite was, of course, true for the retired Baptist minister. Here, both participants reflected on Paganism influenced greatly by their own personal perception and vital aspects of their personal identity. Moreover, they went on to connect their views , in a wider sense to their national identity, by saying that ultimately the Vikings had been resourceful, heroic, wise and intelligent thus contributing in a positive way to Icelandic and English society.

Individuals constantly negotiate and interpret their environment, in the same way that they dismiss, change and reinterpret aspects of their variable identities and collective social memory. In other words, when promoted by nationalistic ideals and collective memory, Vikings can be seen as outsiders, yet be regarded simultaneously as personifying the positive elements of national identity and collective social characteristics, such as courage and positive family values. This variable, paradoxical position of the Viking image within Icelandic and English society demonstrates the fluidity and changeability of identity formations within museums. Each aspect of the Viking myth can be used by the same individual in order to verify a variety of different, sometimes conflicting things.

The explicit way in which Icelandic participants discussed their nationalistic tendencies demonstrates their essentially racially-defined national identity (Gilbert 1998, Reicher & Hopkins 2001 and Day & Thompson 2004). Their political nationalism (Hutchinson 1994) was in clear contrast with the English participants' ethnic and cultural nationalistic ideas (Hutchinson 1994 and Smith 1999). Through a discussion and comparison with the Viking myth, participants were able to reflect on their nationalist ideas. In England they did this by emphasising the cultural and ethnic



diversity of their national identity, while Icelandic participants openly discussed the superior nature of their unique social background.<sup>449</sup> This is a valuable insight for museology and identity studies, because it demonstrates how museums provide individuals a safe space in which to negotiate and express their nationalistic tendencies and collective and personal identities. By understanding this process and including it in an exhibition set-up would allow museums to consciously take a more active part within present society, as will be discussed in the following section.

This section has analysed the various national, collective and personal identities formed and discussed by visitors in the Yorkshire Museum and Víkingaheimar. Indeed, there are various links between the different identities, demonstrating how individuals make personal connections to historical narratives and shared myths. Moreover, individuals establish themselves as belonging to a united group, for example, through collectively shared moral values, national background and social perceptions.

By conducting fieldwork in two museums, this research gives qualitative proof, rooted in practice, of the link between personal and collective identities by discussing Viking myths and history. Indeed, it has been demonstrated that the Viking myth has an important role within present Icelandic and English society and collective and personal identity formations in museums. Participants indicated in various ways how their personal identity is rooted and confined within a collective framework. Identity was also shown to be fluid and temporal in many ways, exaggerated and created in the interview moment and within the exhibition space. Most participants were compelled to consciously think about their museum experience and various identities by means of the

---

<sup>449</sup> Note that race does not necessarily equal racism, although, as discussed above and in Chapter 7, some unfortunate, negative comparisons were made between Muslims and Vikings.

interviews and, in addition, they were exposed to new aspects of Viking history and society. As a result, their personal and national identities may have changed in the process, some aspects being exaggerated while others were played down. Similarly, the cultural Viking stereotype was negotiated, changed and verified both in Víkingaheimar and Yorkshire Museum, particularly within the former. Furthermore, it was connected in various personal and collective ways with present society owing to various reasons such as negotiating nationalistic ideas, personal and national identities and more. As will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, these results could be further verified by conducting additional fieldwork in additional museums in England and Iceland respectively, and by deepening the pool of participants in all fieldwork locations.

### *The Museum and Contemporary Society*

Having established the major contributions made by this research to museum visitor studies, it is necessary to briefly discuss how museums might be able to react to and capitalize upon the ideas and theories provided above. In contemporary society museums have an opportunity to be an essential, active part of collective and national identity formations and alterations. The theories and brief analysis below demonstrate how this could be seen as beneficial for both museums and their audiences. In this section I hope to provide practical suggestions on how museums can react to and incorporate the results of my research, in relation to identity and the role of collective memory within exhibitions. The discussion, rooted in museology, is based on my fieldwork in Víkingaheimar and the Yorkshire Museum, and supported by the theoretical analysis on representations in museums in Chapter 2.

Related to the theory of the practical past (Oakshott 1999) and constructivist learning theory (Hein 1998), my fieldwork at Víkingaheimar and Yorkshire Museum indicates that individuals, just as institutions (such as museums) create meaning within exhibitions based on their own judgement, experiences and social background. Accepting this, museums could then include exhibition objects which connect the Viking age directly with the visitors' daily lives. This would make the past seem more immediate and relatable. My fieldwork has demonstrated how readily visitors drew a personal comparison to contemporary life from exhibition narratives which museums could use to their advantage and capitalise upon. In other words, museums should seek to acknowledge that visitors play an active part in creating meaning within exhibitions (Black 2005, Kaplan 1994, Hall 1994, McLean 2007 and others) and should therefore include a representation of the national identity within their exhibitions (Dicks 2000 and Costa & Bamossy 1995). Yet, it should be taken into account that although some museums attempt to challenge traditional readings of the past, evidence suggests that this can be resented by many visitors. In my research, this was demonstrated when participants were confused by or ignored the historical narrative within the exhibitions.

Contemporary museological theory (Blustein 2008) assumes that one of the social obligations of museums is to include and promote visitor understanding of their environment. The Viking stereotype could be actively used within exhibitions in order to challenge social norms and promote changes to national identity. Indeed, the fieldwork showed that participants in both museums felt that there was something missing in the exhibitions, such as a more linear, clear historical narrative, particular aspects of the Viking age, or simply something which would make a bigger, more lasting impact on them. Participant suggestions included a wish for more activities and objects aimed at families with children, broached the idea of dressing up a member of

staff as a Viking storyteller who would talk to visitors, answer questions, tell stories and give demonstrations of various tasks and crafts performed by the Vikings. Other individuals emphasised the need for more interactive displays and technology and visually interesting displays relating to weapons, clothing and such. In short, meaning in museum exhibitions is a collaborative task, conducted by both museum staff and visitors. Intended messages are only successfully mediated when recipients are willing to take part in the process. As my fieldwork verifies, visitors understand and relate to museum exhibitions based on their own preconceptions and experiences (Macdonald 1996 and Watson 2006). Accordingly, their responses to the museums are changeable.<sup>450</sup> Certainly each museum needs to take the costs and various other practicalities of these suggestions into account. It also demonstrates the necessity for museums to understand the needs and views of their visitors.

Individuals judge museum exhibitions based on their own experiences and personal memory, which in turn has been framed and influenced by collective social memory. The intended and actual audience therefore needs to be kept in mind when discussing how meaning is created in museums. It influences the ways that exhibitions are understood and received. By actively influencing the social perceptions of visitors, the opportunity arises to have a positive impact on their negotiation of national identity and social conventions. This can be done by contesting or verifying cultural perceptions, or by attempting to explain commonly held misconceptions about history, depending on which is appropriate for each subject.<sup>451</sup> This, of course, does not affect

---

<sup>450</sup> Sharon Macdonald, 'The Influence of Visitor's Preconceptions on Their Experience of Exhibitions', *Developing Museum Exhibitions for Lifelong Learning* ed. by Gail Durbin (London: Stationery Office, 1996) pp. 63-69.

<sup>451</sup> An extensive study has been conducted on museums' potential active role within society. Various discussion on this subject are to be found in *Museums and their Communities*, for example: Peter Davis, 'Place Exploration: Museums, Identity, Community', in *Museums and their Communities*, ed.

the standard of historical accuracy or scientific methods expected of museums, merely opens them up to a more positive and collaborative approach in delivering subject matter.

## Evaluating the Research Methodology

This research was also aimed at laying the groundwork for further study of the subject. Rather than attempting to provide all the answers, it has also raised many questions which are in need of further investigation. Reflecting back on the research methodology, it would be desirable to increase the number of participants and institutions, in order to provide a more detailed analysis of the many themes involved.

The decision to base this study on two museums with different exhibition methods relating to the Viking age was made for the purposes of a critical comparison. In Víkingaheimar, the Viking age was the sole focus of the exhibition, concentrating especially upon the longboat *Íslendingur*, the Viking sailing expeditions and the settlement of Iceland. In Yorkshire Museum, Viking history was shown as one link in a wider narrative, which aimed at demonstrating the power, craftsmanship and domestic life in medieval Yorkshire. Furthermore, the aim of this research was to explore the effects of the museums on the responses of the participants. This cross-cultural comparison demonstrated that being exposed to different approaches to history resulted in different emphases in the topics of discussion amongst the participants. However, it would prove beneficial to a further study in this field to conduct more fieldwork using the same methodology in at least two additional museums, one in each country, so that

---

by Sheila Watson (New York & London: Routledge, 2007) pp. 53-75. See also: Sheila Watson, 'History Museums, Community Identities and a Sense of Place', in *Museum Revolutions*, ed. by Simon J. Knell and others (Abingdon, Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2007) and Graham Black (2005).

both the different exhibition methods would be present within each country. This additional research would counter-balance the similarities and differences in responses, leading to a more comprehensive analysis of the museums.

While this research analysed visitor responses to museums, further research is needed where interviews are conducted both before and after the visit. This would demonstrate not only the reaction *to* exhibitions, but also how visitor views were directly *changed* by the museum exhibition. Should the research be taken forward in this way, it would be necessary to modify when each task is asked of participants and update the interview questions in order to reflect this different emphasis as well. While the written, basic questionnaire might remain relatively unchanged, the word association task would be set before and after the visit, with participants using different coloured pens in order to examine word patterns and themes. Furthermore, each participant would be interviewed both before and after their museum visit. The questions would then be updated in order to get a clearer idea of how, if at all, their discussions and understanding of Vikings and their age were changed by the museum. For example, before the visit a more structured interview would be conducted, which would focus on expectations towards the museum, historical understanding and knowledge, their image of Vikings and its possible links to collective and personal identities. Following their visit, the interview questions would aim at analysing possible changes in their views and ideas on the Vikings and their age. Here, the interview would remain semi-structured, because it allows for a more personal flow for each individual being interviewed.

Attempting to set a historical framework for the discussions of the participants on the Viking age provided a further complication. Because my research is about the *image* of Vikings, rather than focusing on actual historical events, it was impossible to

determine exactly which period and geographic location the participants considered the Vikings to be from or even *who* they imagined the Vikings had been. That is to say, the participants' knowledge of history varied and as a result this influenced their view of who the Vikings had been. The Normans, who were descendants of Vikings that had earlier settled in the north of France, were not accepted as being Viking by all participants (when it came up). Other participants believed that Vikings had not actually settled in England but had lived only in the Nordic countries, despite the museums' clear information to that effect. Confusion also emerged a few times in England, when Anglo-Saxon objects on display at the Yorkshire Museum were believed to have originated from Vikings. *Beowulf* (dated from around the 8<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> century) was also mentioned as being a Viking poem, probably because it is set in Scandinavia. Certainly, this confusion in itself might be a source of valuable insight into individual perceptions of history and understanding of exhibition narratives. Alternatively, current research methods might be developed in order to focus the participants' discussion more on the Viking age as historically defined, in order to differentiate it from popular culture understandings. This might be achieved, for example, by choosing a museum which displays its historical narrative chronologically, or asking more specific questions about certain parts of the exhibition space.

Finally, due to the word limits set for a doctoral thesis, discussion of some emergent themes which were not directly relevant to the research focus had to be restricted. In the following section, which offers suggestions for potential further research, I discuss possible ways in which these themes could be examined and explored more comprehensively.

## Possible Future Research Developments

This doctoral thesis marks my first steps toward a comparative study of two cultures by means of a shared historical link, namely the Vikings. In many ways, the Vikings transcend the different roles they play in Iceland and England as is evident from the responses of the participants of my study. The Vikings conjure up a universal stereotypical image in the minds of people from all over the world. Thus, it made no difference whether the participants in this study were Icelandic or English, the image of Vikings is that of ferocious, strong, angry warriors, storming the beach, setting monasteries on fire, dragging loot back to their dragon-headed longboats. However, as my research shows, the attitude towards that image varies depending on people's personal experiences and cultural background. This conclusion can be developed in various ways. Conducting further fieldwork in museums in Iceland and Britain which exhibit and narrate the Viking age in different ways, would allow for a more comprehensive analysis of where the Viking image originates and how it is used and interpreted in society. By interviewing visitors exposed to a variety of exhibition styles and narratives, one should be able to study further whether such differences change the way participants discuss this topic, and deepen the understanding of their image of Vikings.

During my fieldwork in Yorkshire Museum, I had the opportunity to interview a few visitors originating from countries which do not identify with the Vikings. The results of those interviews indicated that visitors whose culture is not being represented within the museum they are viewing, are less likely to attempt to interpret the exhibition narrative positively. This appeared to be caused by the fact that their national identity was not on display and so they judged it from an outsider's perspective, with no ties to



the internal, collective social memory. This implies again that visitors subconsciously view and judge museums from their own personal experiences and national identity. Whatever the intended messages within the exhibition were, in the long run the visitors were unable to override their own preconceived ideas. It would therefore be interesting to expand upon this theory both by interviewing a greater number of foreign visitors but also by conducting interviews with domestic visitors who recently immigrated to the country concerned. Such a study on multicultural societies would be particularly revealing, for example, when taking into account that Icelandic national identity is largely based upon a shared racial background, while English identity is based upon an ethnic one. There are immigrants in both countries, who have their own cultural history and separate social identities based on their original background. Studying the various aspects of these subcultural differences, taking into account the different national identities in Iceland and England could prove a worthy research topic. In this case, the research question would focus on how do people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds perceive the national Viking myth?

While my research primarily focused on national identity and the image of Vikings, a great number of participants in England discussed the image based on myths from their local area. It was therefore clear that in some parts of England, the Viking image has developed in quite unique ways, due to their extensive or particular interactions with the Vikings in the past. Yet, due to the limitations of my fieldwork research, only limited links could be made to regional identity. Further research, systematically analysing the way that various rural museums exhibit their local Viking heritage would therefore be likely to prove a complimentary addition to the research.

A great variety of themes emerged from the results of the fieldwork conducted for this study. While only a few of those could be thoroughly analysed in this study,

there are avenues of research which need to be examined more thoroughly. One of the more intriguing areas is the gender differences which emerged when participants discussed the role of women during the Viking age. In Chapter 5, I mentioned that the two males who discussed female characters in the Icelandic sagas had a rather negative view of them. This is due to the fact that these women are sometimes shown to have manipulated the men around them into vengeful acts of murder and mayhem. However, the female participants in my study interpreted these actions quite differently, i.e. as signs of strength, stubbornness and cunning. Meanwhile, the two male participants regarded the behaviour of these women characters as deceitful and an evidence of short-sightedness on their part. One participant had very strong views on this matter, saying that the women should have been “publicly spanked” for such deeds, because, who would be left to take care of these scheming women who caused their husbands to be killed? Since only two of the male participants discussed this theme, the current research can only make limited conclusions about whether there are gendered differences of the Viking image within society. Conducting further fieldwork specifically asking participants about this subject would therefore be necessary in order to conduct a thorough study of this subject. The analysis could then be expanded to include feminist and gender theory in this area. This might also provide a valuable insight for understanding how museums represent gender differences in Viking society as compared to today.

The possible implications of the different, if limited, responses to the female characters in the Icelandic sagas are various. Most significantly, it could be an indication of the attitudes in current Icelandic society towards acceptable and expected gendered behaviours. In the eyes of the male participants mentioned above, a Viking warrior who engages in killing, pillaging and plundering seems not only acceptable as a

marital hero: he also seems to be a role model of an honourable and mentally strong individual. However, some women in the Viking age who according to the sagas used their position and influence to encourage fighting, reflects badly on these same male participants. It could prove interesting to explore how these conflicting views reflect on current gender roles and gender-based identities in Iceland and elsewhere.

An investigation similar to the one discussed above in connection to gender could also be fruitfully conducted in order to explore religious differences and the influence of religion in historical interpretations and identity. This was briefly discussed by the participants of my study, such as the Icelandic pagan and an English retired Baptist minister, who were mentioned above. Their understanding of Vikings and religion was yet another example of a possible interesting focus within the research which demonstrates how individuals understand history and identity from their own personal experiences and social background.

Thus, a number of future studies using an adapted research model from this project are possible. Trans-national research on national identity and social perceptions is possible, for example, by expanding it to include other Nordic countries other than Iceland. Such a comparison could prove invaluable because while the Nordic countries may share extensive cultural similarities and historical connections, they have different ways of associating with the past, in particular with the Viking age. Consider for example, the Viking Ship Museum in Oslo, where the Viking material culture is “given religious resonance”.<sup>452</sup> In Sweden, the popularity of the Vikings has somewhat suffered, in particular because of Sweden’s controversial dealings with Nazi Germany

---

<sup>452</sup> Simon Knell, and others, *Crossing Borders: Connecting European Identities in Museums and Online*, EuNaMus Report 2. Linköping University Interdisciplinary Studies, No. 14 (Linköping: Linköping University Electronic Press, 2012), p. 52.

(such as exporting iron ore vital for German armaments to the Third Reich and allowing the German Army to transfer troops over Swedish territory to Norway), because the Vikings were used as role models in Adolf Hitler's Third Reich. Discussing the Historiska Museet (the Swedish Museum of National Antiquities) in Stockholm, Sweden, Sawyer writes that the museum seems rather ambivalent about Viking age history.<sup>453</sup> He writes further that this could be because Sweden is a country which has invested heavily in political neutrality and the Viking "founding-myth" does not fit with that image at all.<sup>454</sup> Using the same experimental set-up, results could cast an interesting light on Nordic national identities and historical perceptions.

Within the framework of Nordic culture and society, it might also prove worthwhile to conduct research on the importance of the Viking connection to Estonian national identity. Since Estonia gained independence in 1991, Estonian foreign policy-makers in particular has made several attempts to change the public image of the country by re-defining it as part of the Nordic region, rather than the Baltic.<sup>455</sup> Two recent leaders of Estonian foreign policy launched a concept describing the five Nordic countries, Britain and Estonia as the 'Yule-countries'.<sup>456</sup> It was suggested, as Lagerspetz writes, based on half-mythological linguistic relatedness, that these countries were united before Christianisation by a common word describing the darkest season of the year, as well as by a shared social mentality.<sup>457</sup> Moreover, for some years, the Nordic

---

<sup>453</sup> Andy Sawyer, 'Maritime Master Narratives in European National Museums', in *Great Narratives of the Past Traditions and Revisions in National Museums*, ed. by Dominique Poulot, and others, EuNaMus report no. 4, Linköping University Conference Proceedings, no. 78 (Linköping: Linköping University Electronic Press, 2012), pp. 467-485.

<sup>454</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 475-476.

<sup>455</sup> Mikko Lagerspetz, 'How Many Nordic Countries? Possibilities and Limits of Geopolitical Identity Construction', in *Cooperation and Conflict* 38:49 (2003), pp. 49-61.

<sup>456</sup> Lagerspetz, p. 53. See also the speech of Ilves, the Minister of Foreign Affairs: Toomas H. Ilves 'Estonia as a Nordic Country'. Speech delivered at the Swedish Institute of International Relations, Stockholm, 14 December 1999.

<sup>457</sup> Lagerspetz, p. 53 and 58.

council has operated an office in Estonia, which aims to promote Nordic culture and democratic values. On the whole, the Nordic-Baltic connection has been rather successful, because the Nordic countries adopted an active policy of cooperation with the restored Baltic States.<sup>458</sup> However, Lagerspetz points out that Estonian foreign political texts tend to stress the country's Nordic orientation much more when directed at international audiences, rather than texts aimed at domestic use.<sup>459</sup> He deduces that this could be seen as this Nordic emphasis is mainly aimed at creating an external brand, dissociated from the image of a post-Soviet country.<sup>460</sup> Taking this discussion into account, the current research could be expanded to include Estonian national identity, cultural and social connections with the Nordic countries and the image of Vikings within the country. Using the same research methods, the Viking image in Estonia and how it relates to their national identity could be analysed and compared to the Nordic countries. The benefits of this type of research are many; it would, for example enable a deeper understanding of individual national identities and the uses and changing interpretations and uses of history.

Expanding the comparative elements of my work could also help establish a greater degree of knowledge on cross-cultural relations and the development of social collective memory and national identity. In addition, the methodology could be developed to include the emotional and affective responses of participants, in order to analyse how they interact with and react to the Viking image.

---

<sup>458</sup> Toivo U. Raun, 'Estonia After 1991: Identity and Integration', in *East European Politics and Societies* 23:526 (2009), pp. 526-534, p. 530.

<sup>459</sup> Lagerspetz, p. 56.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid. In this context consider the presence of the Vikings in the Rus in Eastern Europe, demonstrating that the 'Vikings' are not exclusively a Nordic phenomenon.

A final point of possible research development is a further study into the origin of the Viking myth in popular culture. Indeed, the Viking myth has a separate existence within popular culture, which operates almost entirely outside the realm of history. It could prove highly interesting to explore the various cultural materials which surround this image, such as literature, video games, music, images, films, logos, food products, advertisements and more. I am interested in writing a book showing these various manifestations, exploring and analysing the Viking image within popular culture and its possible differences between countries. Similarly, it could prove interesting to analyse the development of academic discourse into the Viking age. In this respect, further research could focus specifically on how the image of Vikings and their age changes throughout history, eventually becoming a vital part of the cultural stereotype Viking warrior. Or, alternatively, research might investigate how Viking heritage is taught in Icelandic and English primary schools, comparing it to the popular Viking stereotype.

While my research could be developed in various ways, this thesis has provided a starting point of a discussion on how a common historical link between two countries is used variably to reflect personal and collective understanding and uses of the past. Moreover, participants in my study demonstrated how history as presented in museums is modified by collective memory in order to verify, explain or contest social norms and political events in present society as well as personal and national identities. This demonstrates that the heritage of Vikings, the ancient warriors, still has an impact and important part to play in modern English and Icelandic society. For museums, the Viking myth, which my research has shown to be relatable, marketable and adaptable, has a great potential utility. Museums have an opportunity to increase their attraction value and social importance by harnessing the continuing relevance of Vikings. This can for example be achieved by taking into account visitor reactions and individual uses

of exhibition narratives related to Viking history. Indeed, the Viking myth lives on despite all attempts to expose it. In a paradoxical way it confirms the words of the Old Norse poem *Hávamál*: “Deyr fé, deyja frændur [...] En orðstír deyr aldregi hveim er sér góðan getur”, meaning “Cattle die and kinsmen die [...] but fair fame will fade never [...] for him who wins it.”<sup>461</sup>

---

<sup>461</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, p. 25.

# Appendix 1

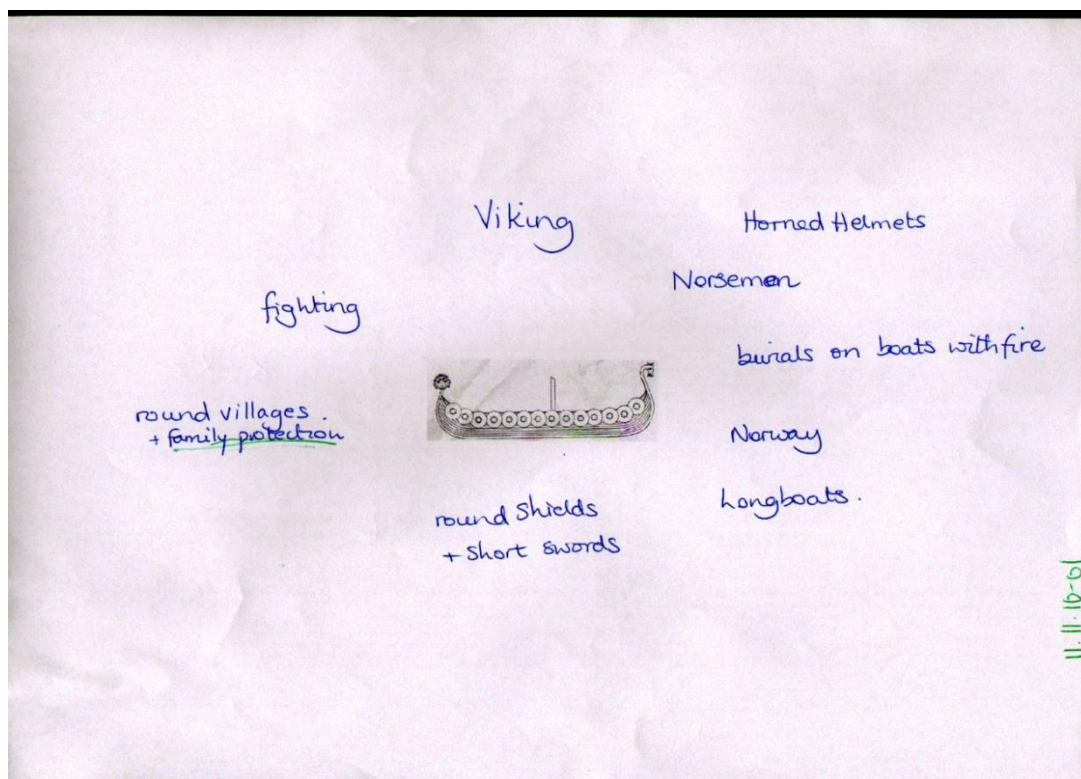
## Word Association

Please note that the permanent members of staff at both museums (participants: 04.07.11.01, 04.07.11.02 and 12.11.10.03) did not fill in word association sheets and so are not included here. Furthermore, Icelandic participant 08.07.11.03 requested me to write down the words which he dictated. Icelandic participant 20.07.11.03 was dyslexic and so unable to fill out a word association sheet, when I offered to write down for him he declined and asked to go directly to the interview. Lastly, due to restrictions of my ethical permission the word association sheet of English participant 26.08.11.01 is not included here because her young daughter filled most of it out for her. Instead I merely type out the words written down by the participant herself.

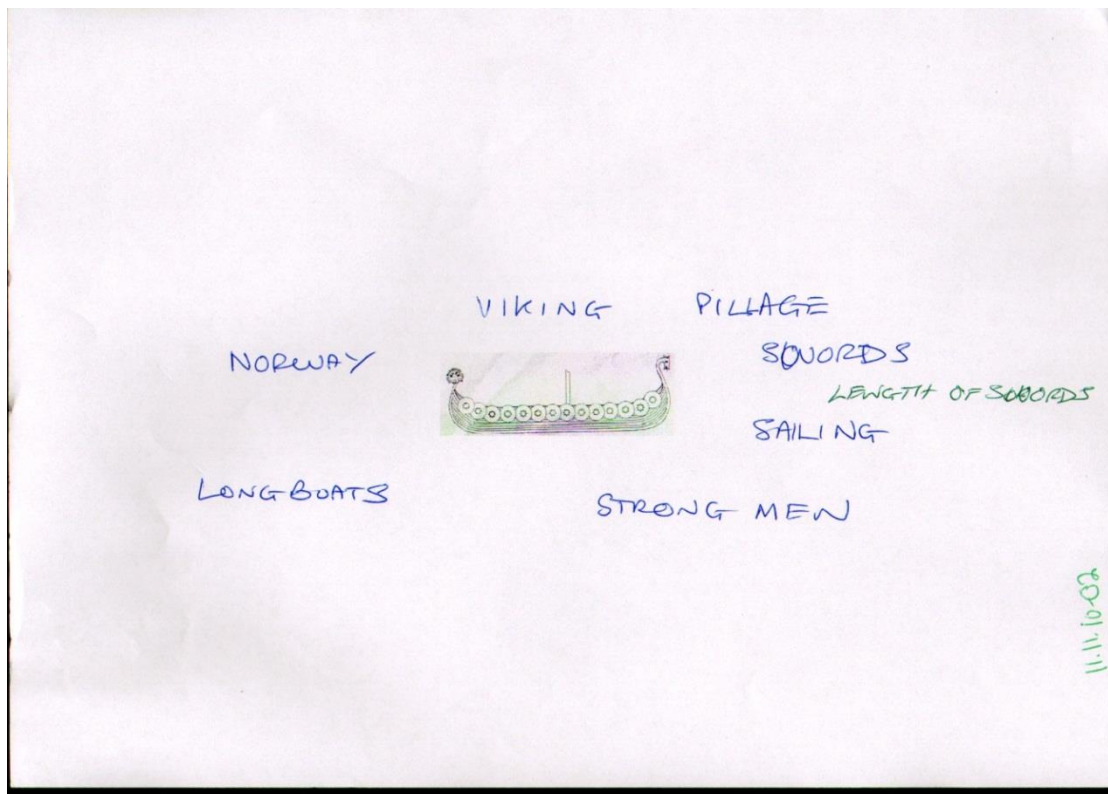


# Yorkshire Museum

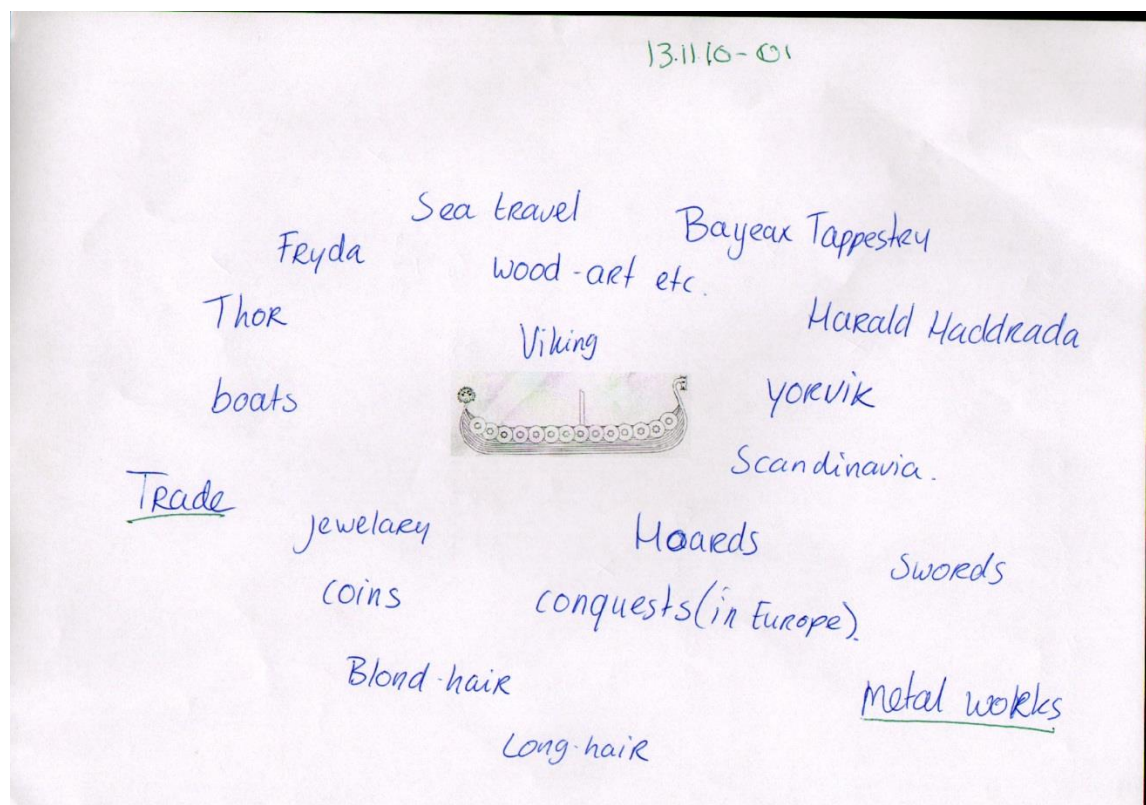
12.11.10.01



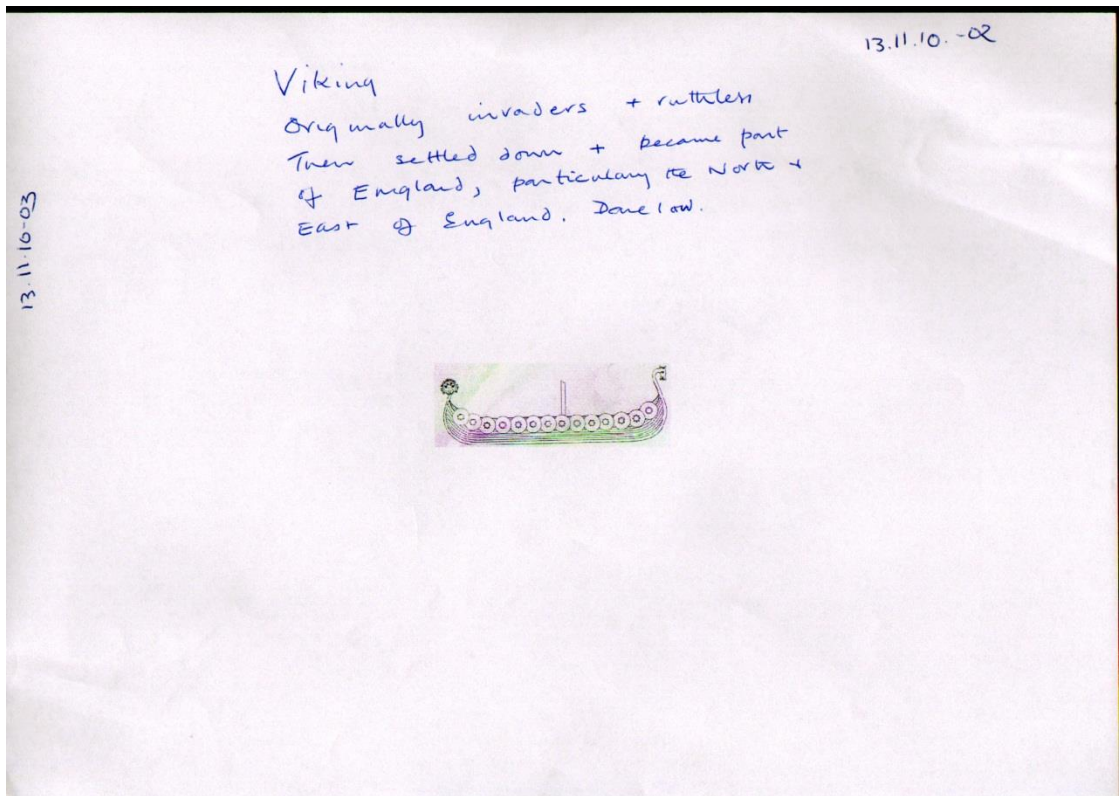
12.11.10.02



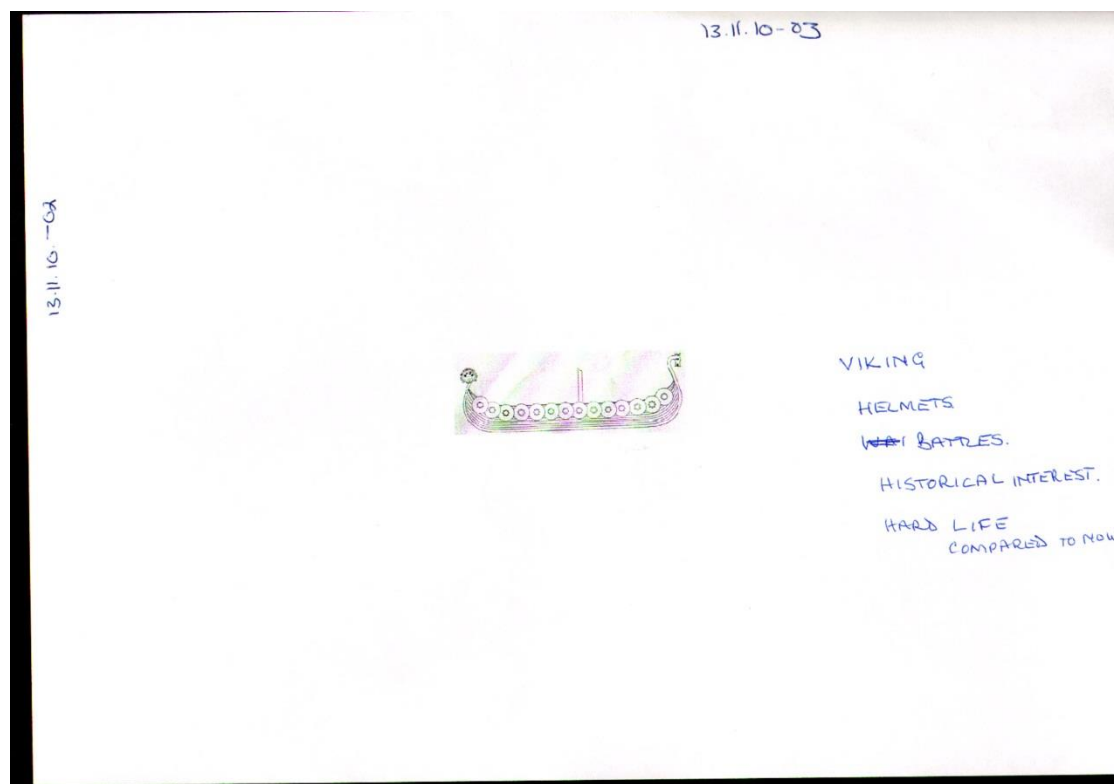
13.11.10.01



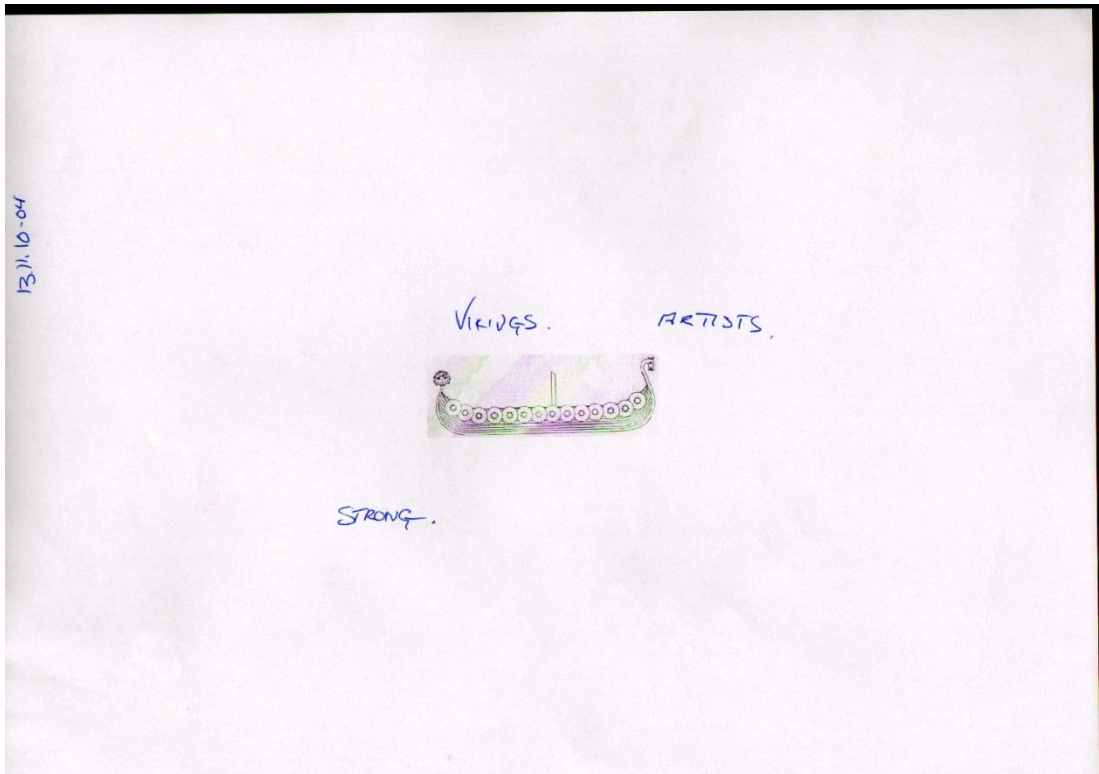
13.11.10.02



13.11.10.03



13.11.10.04



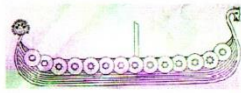
13.11.10.05

26.08.11.01:

Explorers, navigators, brave

13.11.10 05

Vikings



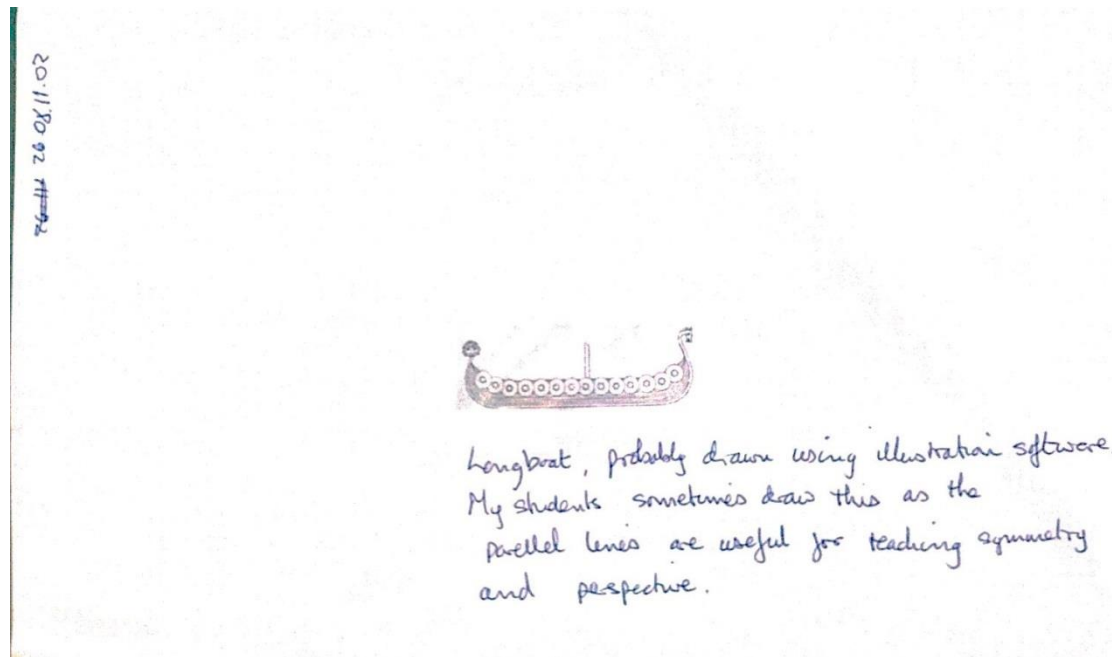
Raiders Settlers Traders

Craftsmen Shrewd

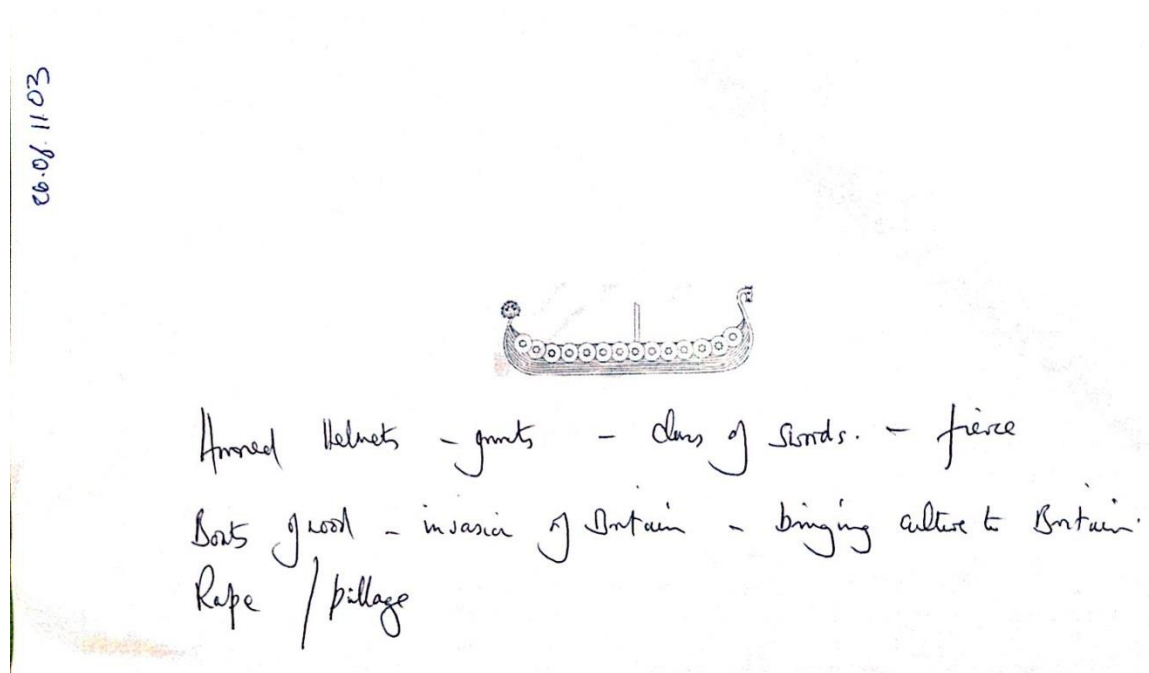
Eventually Christians (no compulsion)



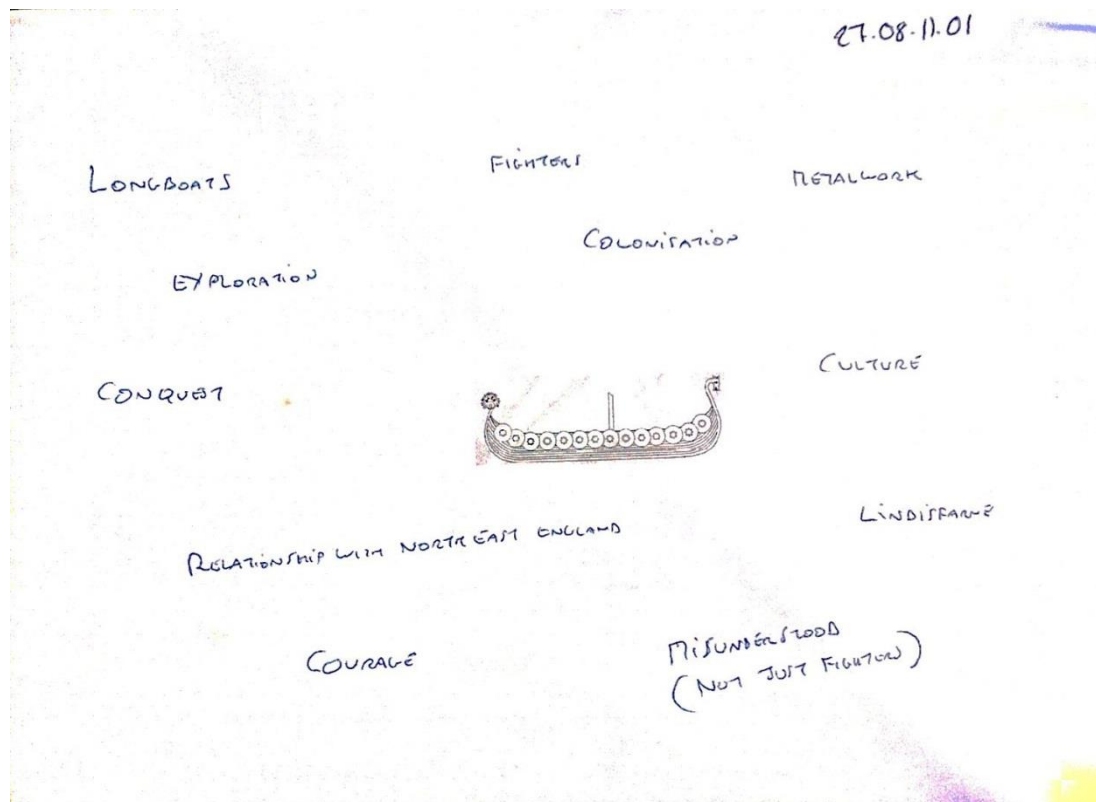
26.08.11.02



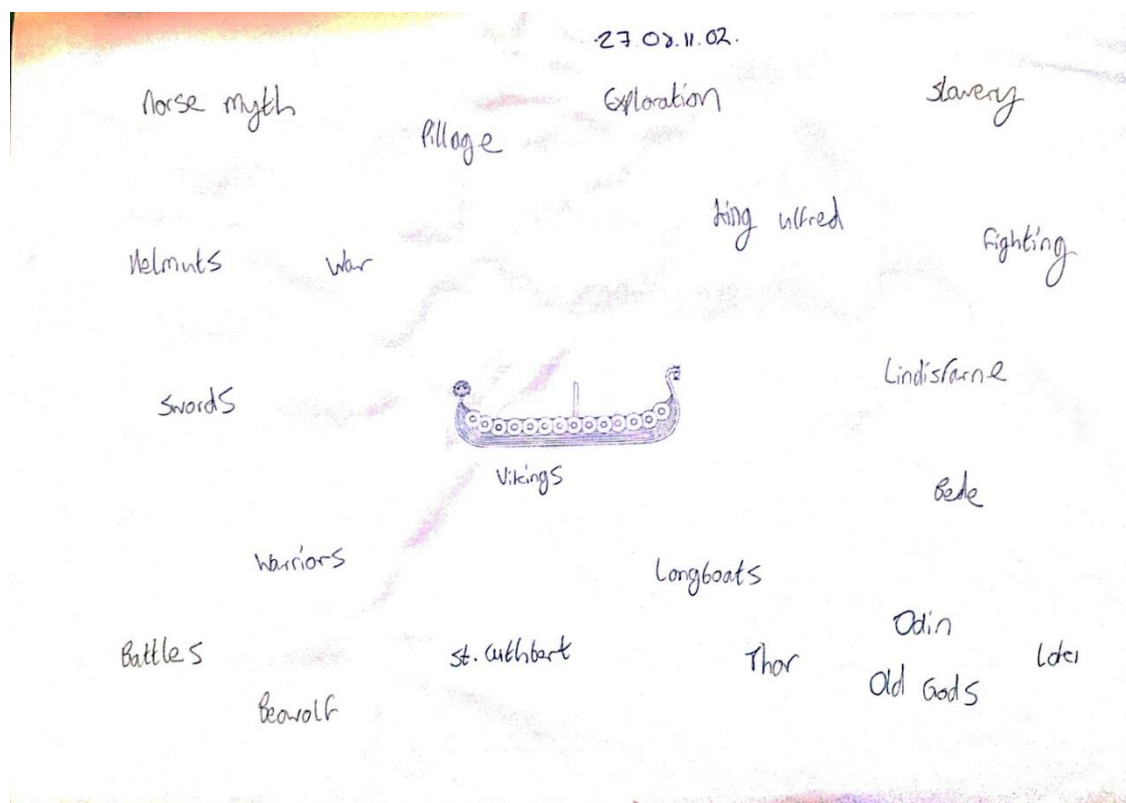
26.08.11.03



27.08.11.01



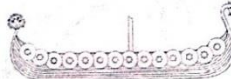
27.08.11.02



27.08.11.03

27.08.11.03.

- COMMERCE + TRADING of goods
- WAR
- INVASION of VIKING KINGS, Northern England + Scotland
- new shape of vessels
- very different culture from the others
- tribal organisation

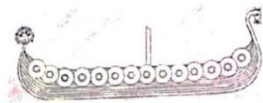


- Invasion not for integration, just ransoming not interested in staying in the place.

27.08.11.04

27.08.11.04.

Eric Bloodaxe



streets, shops and markets.

longship races  
Jorvik

bone  
combs

smells

8<sup>th</sup> century

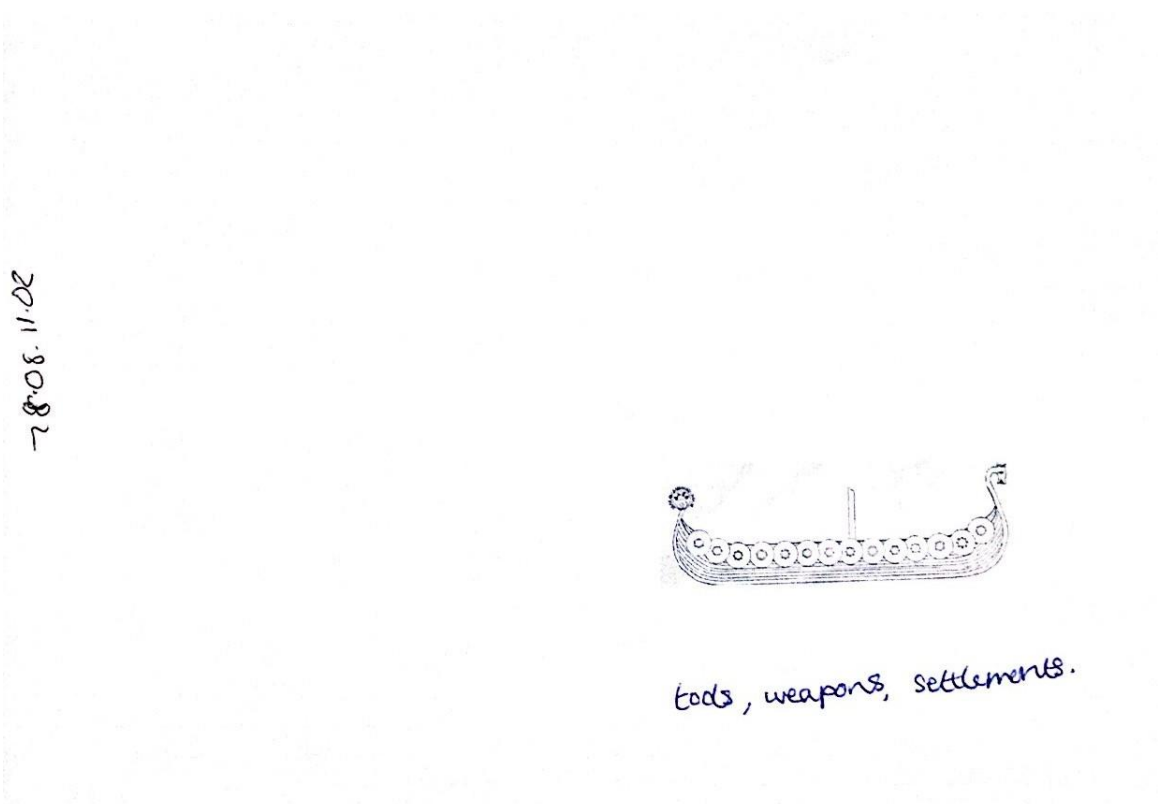
helmet found in  
Coppergate



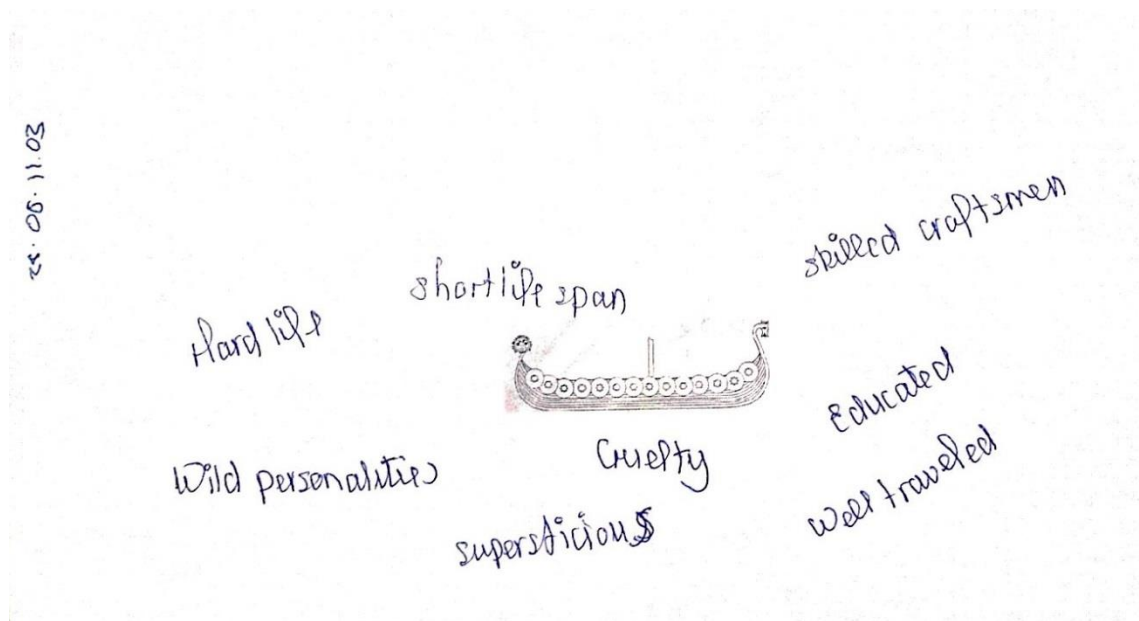
28.08.11.01



28.08.11.02



28.08.11.03



28.08.11.04



30.08.11.01

30.08.11.01

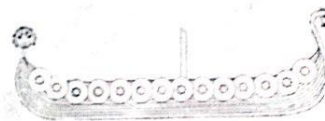


Hats with horns  
leather clothes  
sparsely dressed  
fair hair  
big boobies  
valhalla

hot/cold bathing.  
ships oars.  
communities  
meeting halls  
lots noise

30.08.11.02

30.08.11.02



ship  
treasure  
warlike  
trade

30.08.11.03

30.08.11.03

Atlantic

Sea

Fur

Beard

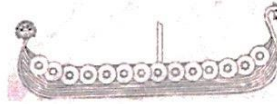
Sword

Wave

Wood

Frye

Fierce



30.08.11.04

30.08.11.04

Cold

War

Goals.

Beasts

Plaits

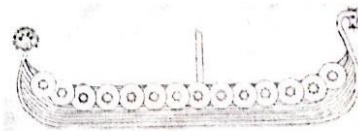
Thor

Hammer

Longboats.

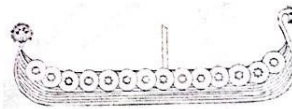
Battle

Emerals



30.08.11.05

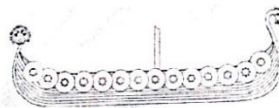
30.08.11.05



Long BOATS PLUNDED TRADE INVADE  
(KING KANUTE WINCHESTER)  
ONLY VIKING KING BURIED IN THIS COUNTRY-

30.08.11.06

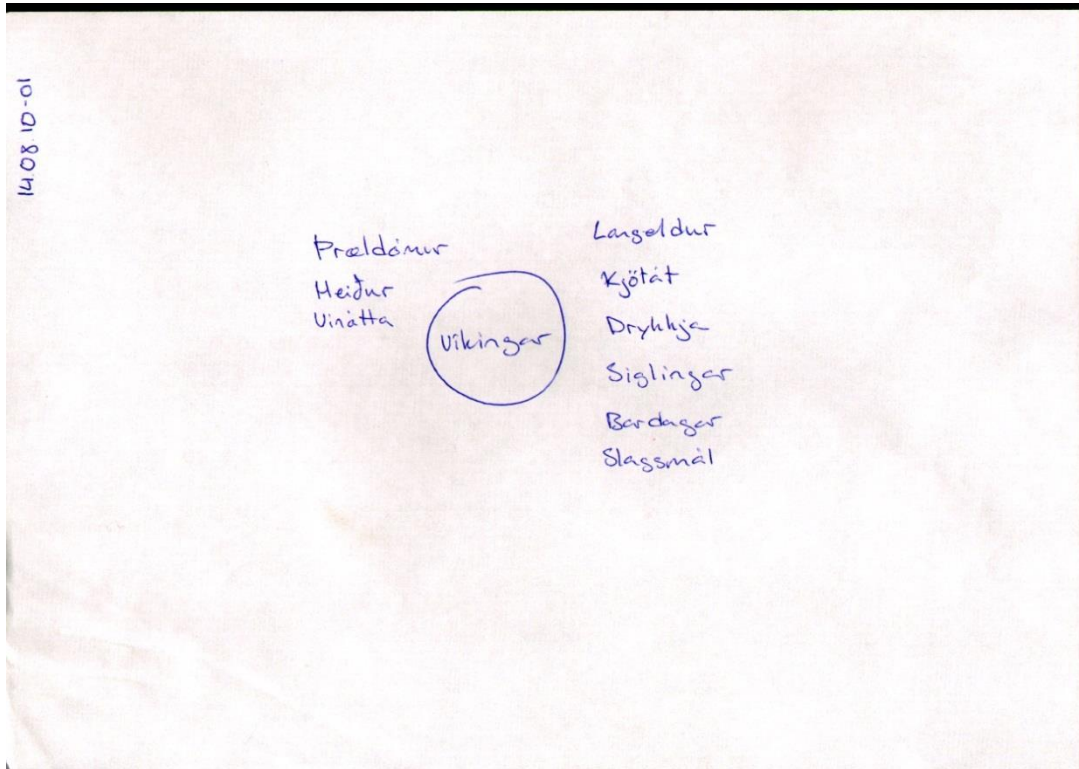
30.08.11.06



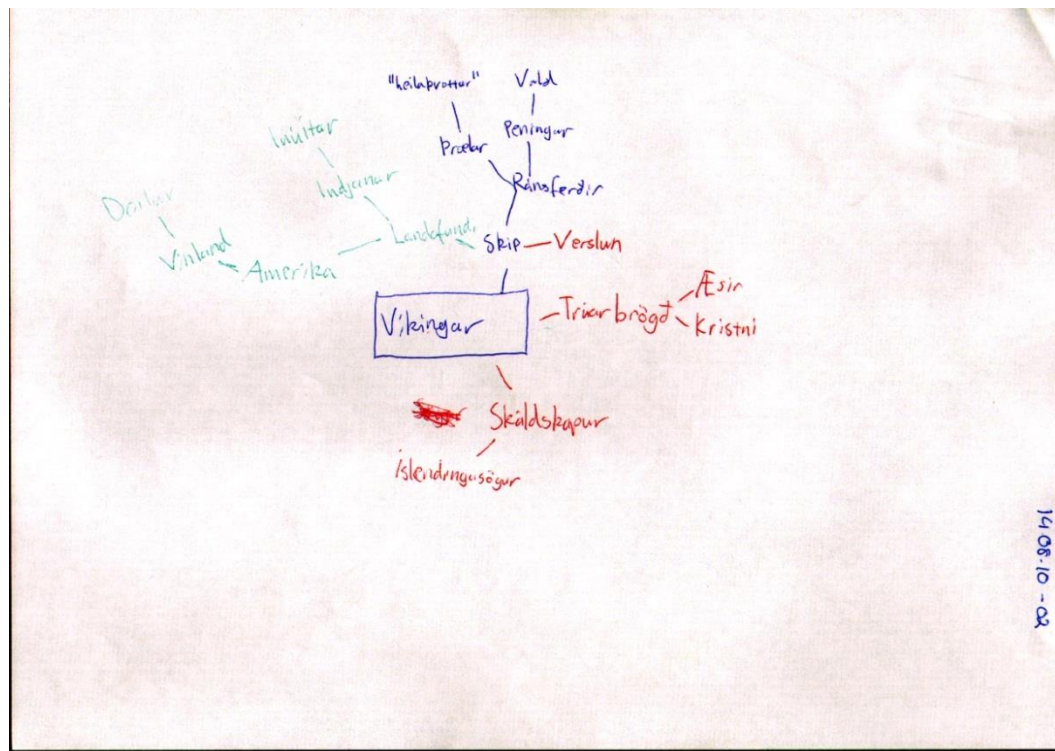
INVADERS, WEALTHY, EXPLORING, CLEVER,,  
STRONG, FIGHTERS, SAILING LONG BOATS

# Víkingaheimar

14.08.10.01

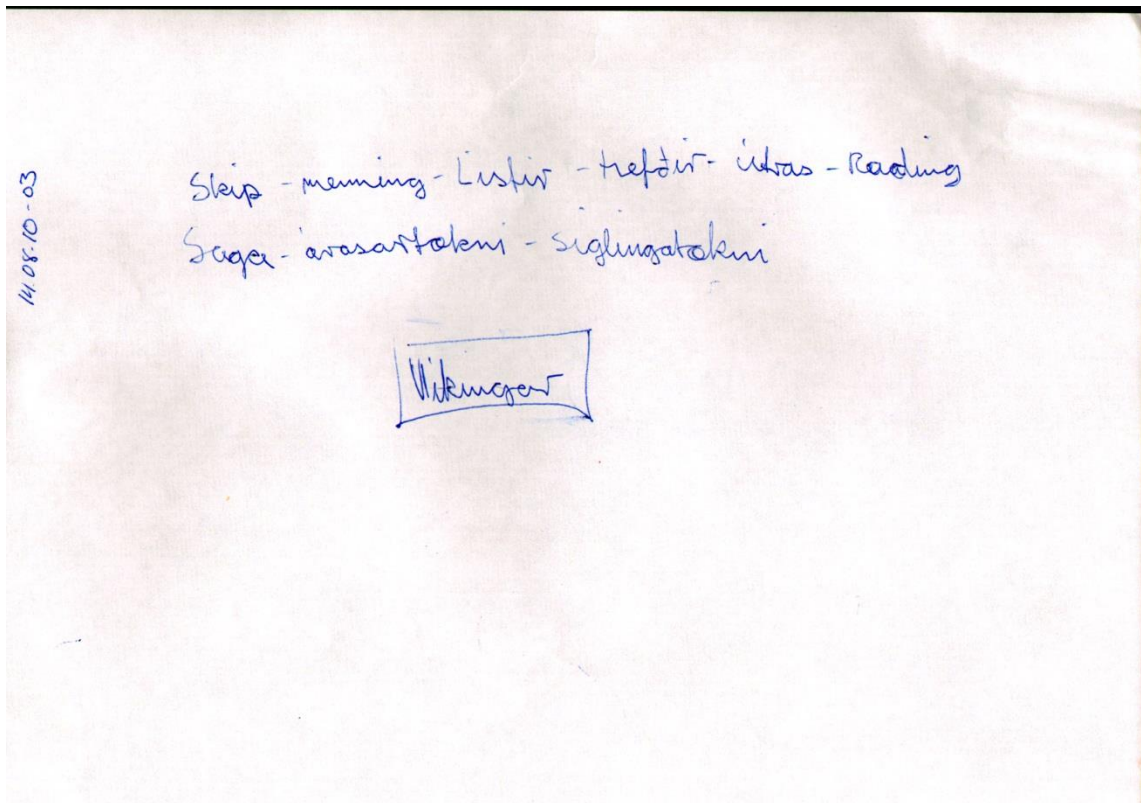


14.08.10.02

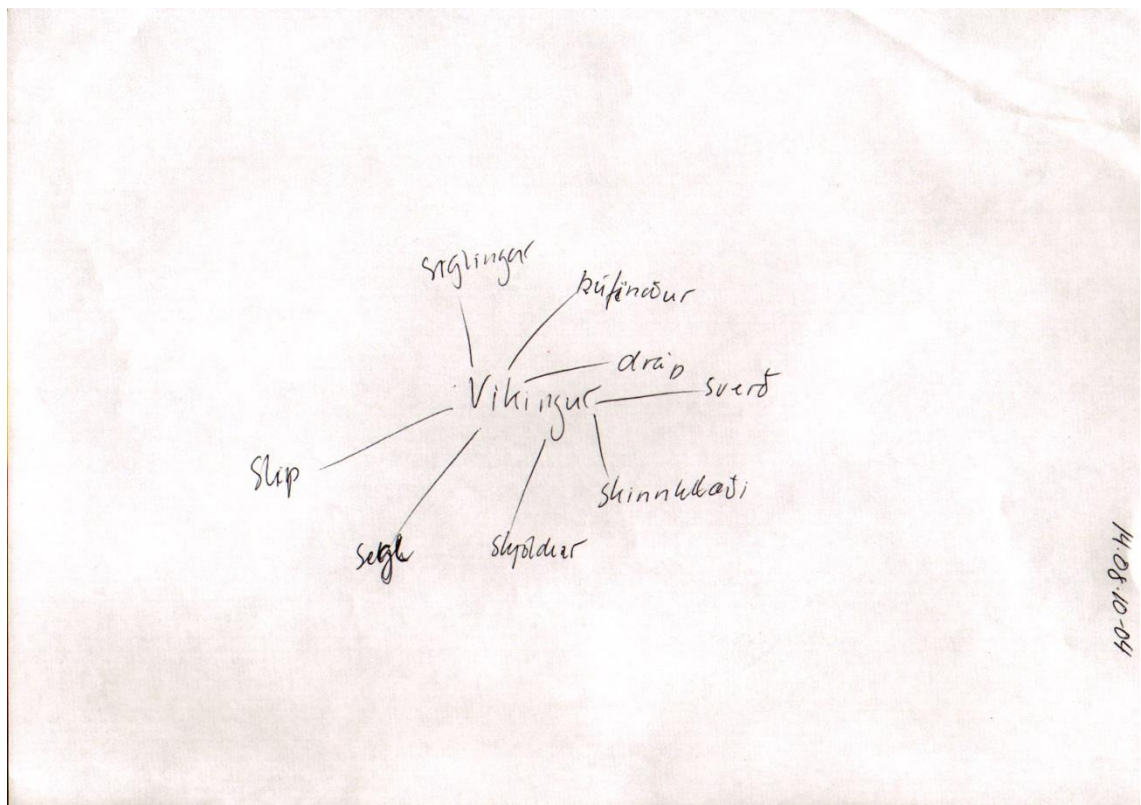




14.08.10.03



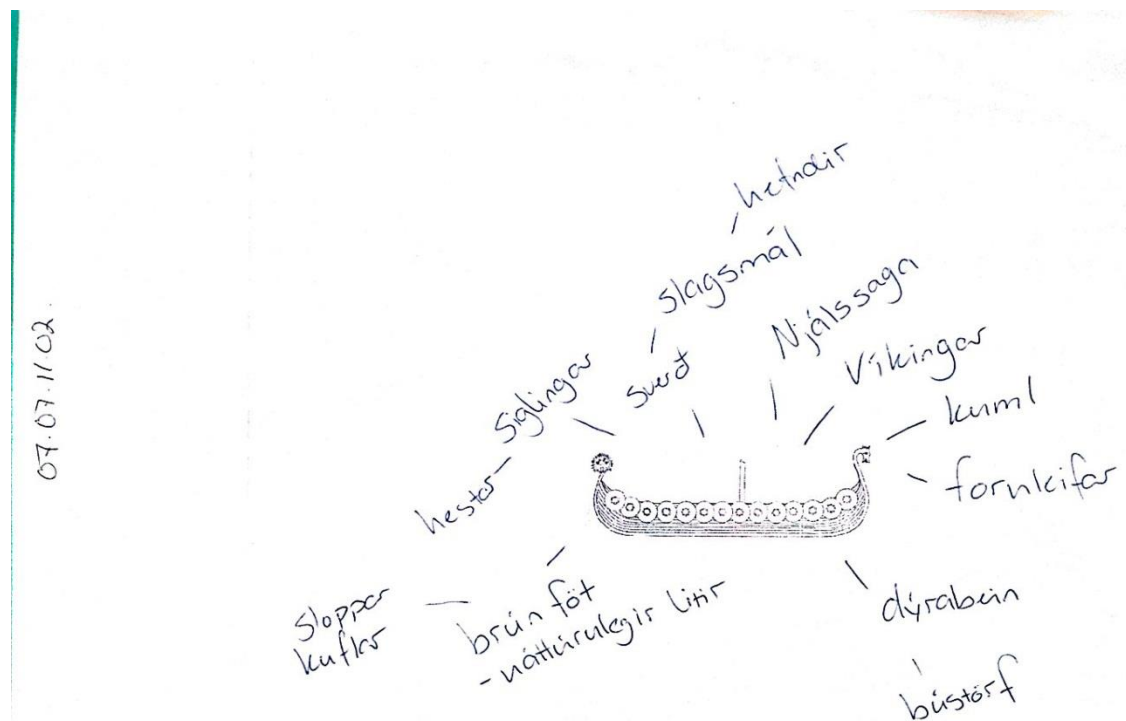
14.08.10.04



07.07.11.01



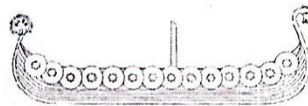
07.07.11.02





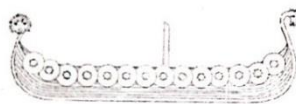
08.07.11.01

grátt  
slíp blót  
skibugur  
gröfkr  
drullugt skegg  
Vikingur  
sterkas konur



08.07.11.02

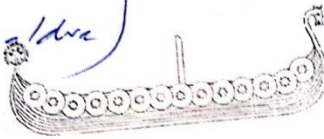
Són  
Vopni  
ofbeldi  
Dauði  
ótti  
Handgerin  
Vikningar  
Bláa  
Bandagar



08.07.11.02

08.07.11.03

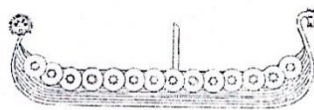
- \* Fagardgi - capitalism
- \* taka te með illu oðargöðu
- \* Ekki gjennir vintann aðan
- \* Vnið oðustu + með öföð - hāvaxni
- \* Risa i ngun annann - tei
- \* Evöð bādaga bjöð
- \* Utlingar
- \* Stenkstapa (inglingar)



09.07.11.01

09.07.11.01

Vikings



hordagur

varv

lungur

knorr

Islandingsögur

Norðurland

Skip

Siglingar

Landkonungur

hlóðr

vopn

sverð

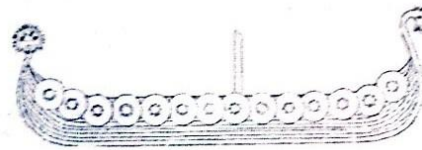
sljóður

atgeir

himpur

10.07.11.01

VÍKINGAR



SKIP, VÍRLAND, RÁN OG DRAP, LADDAFUNDIR.

10.07.11.02

10.07.11.02

Stofuskaupur

Víkingar

landnámi



Víkingaskip

Saut

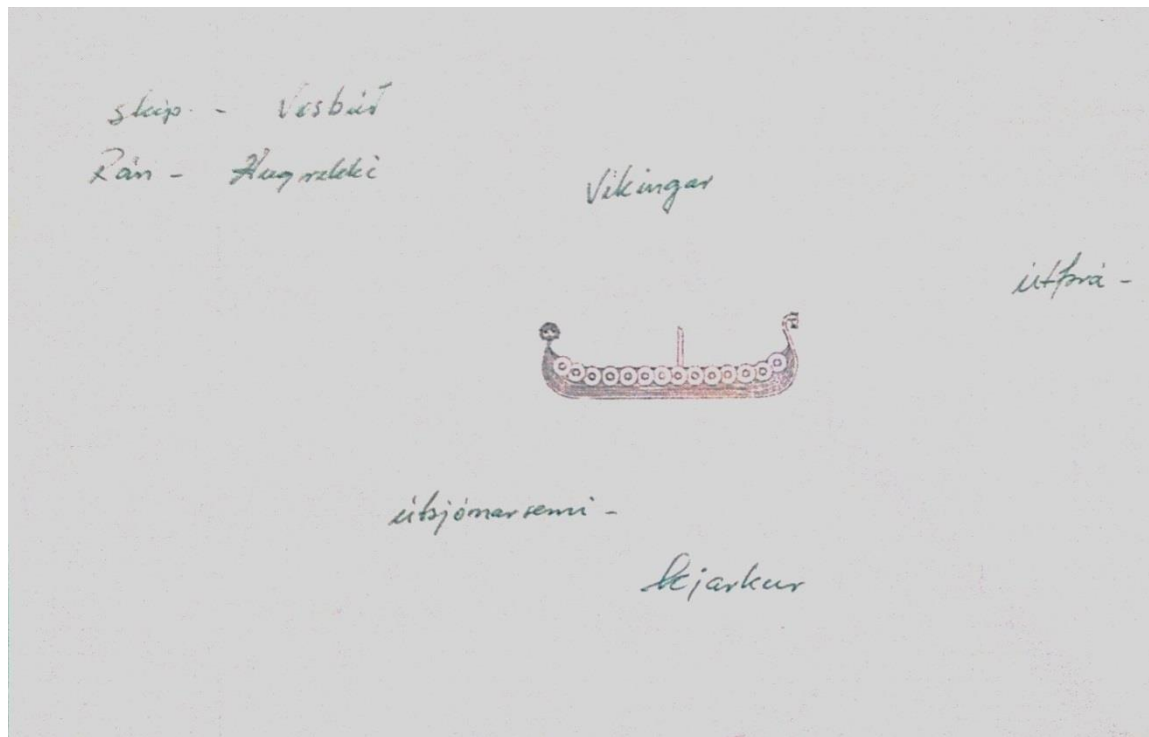
Sigling

Nótkni

Bardagi

Rana og rúpla

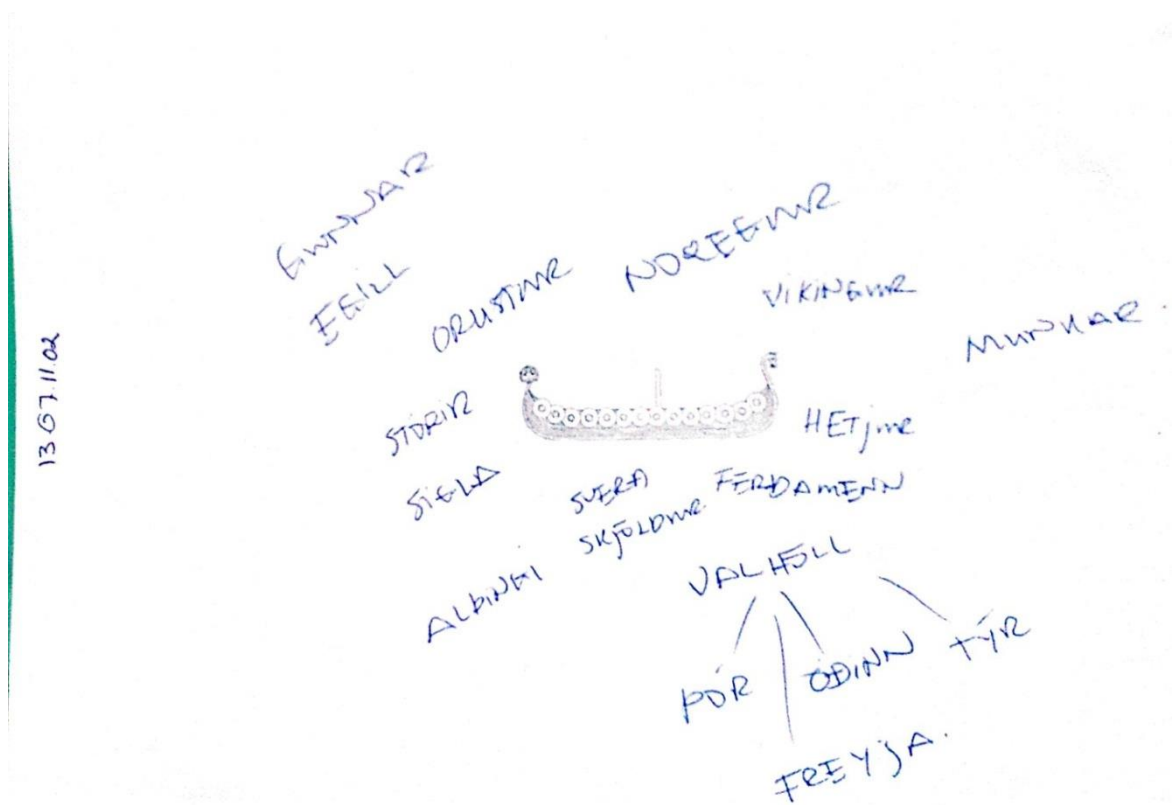
10.07.11.03



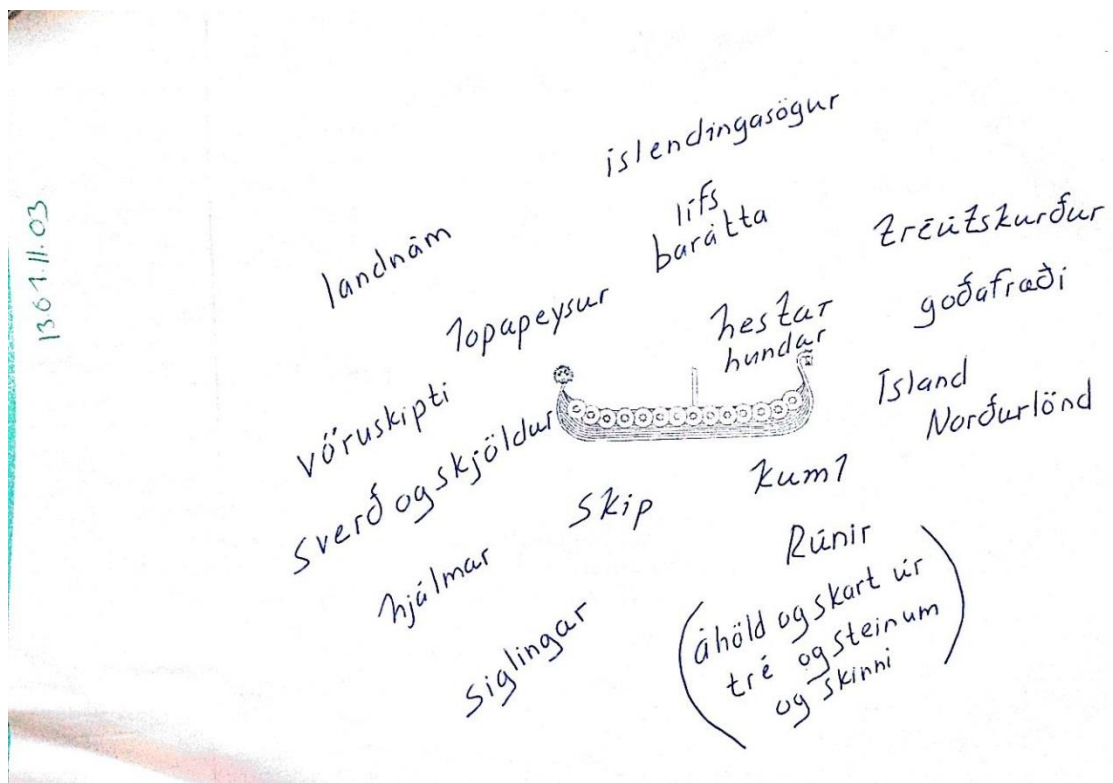
13.07.11.01



13.07.11.02

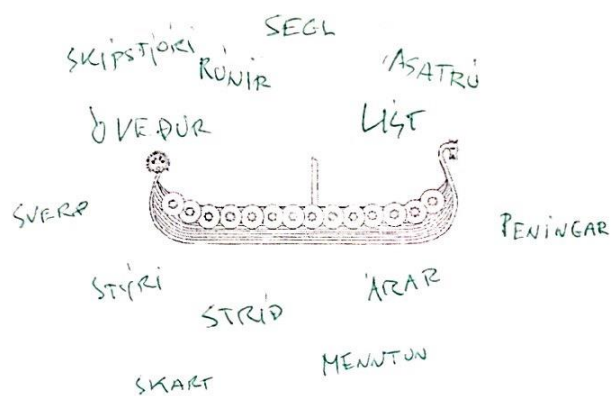


13.07.11.03



13.07.11.04

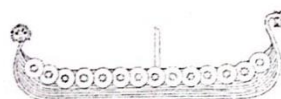
13.07.11.04



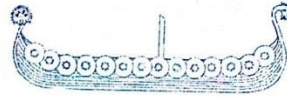
13.07.11.05

13.07.11.05

Ösatri  
Bardagar  
Reningar



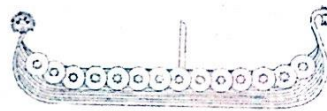
14.07.11.01



víkingur, landnáma, saminnna  
 siglingar, forþær, hugrekkir  
 víkingaskip, "fornöld"  
 nútíð v. k. bræðipóling  
 forni i handve. li

14.07.11.02

14.07.11.02



landnám  
 ötrúleg forni i siglingu  
 ötrúleg hugmyndafullur  
 siglingar  
 þekkinga leit

14.07.11.03

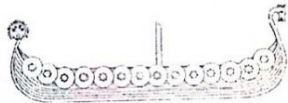
14.07.11.03



Vikingur	Landvinnu
Ríbbaldur	Ránsferðir
Hetjur	Siglingar
Verslun	Væðing (fíla)
Vínland	Víkingaskip
	Vopn

14.07.11.04

Langskip	
Knörr	
Svert	
SKjöldur	
Verslun	
Heidni	
Ran	
Qsir	
Blót	
Alþingi	
Siglingar	
Vínland	
Grœnland	





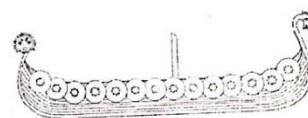
19.07.11.01



19.07.11.02

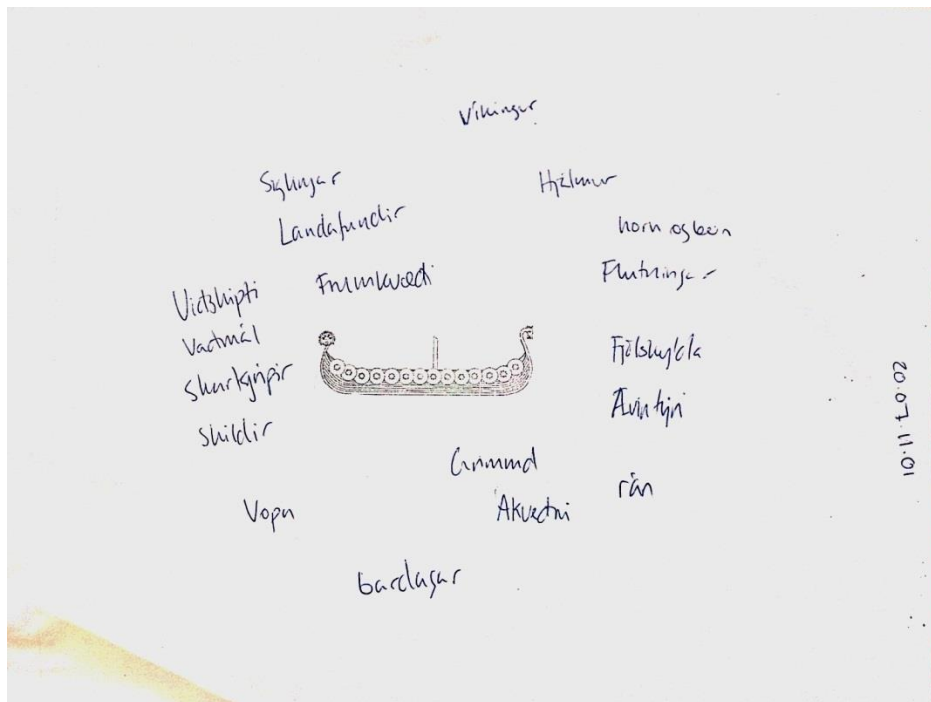
islandingur

Ruddar

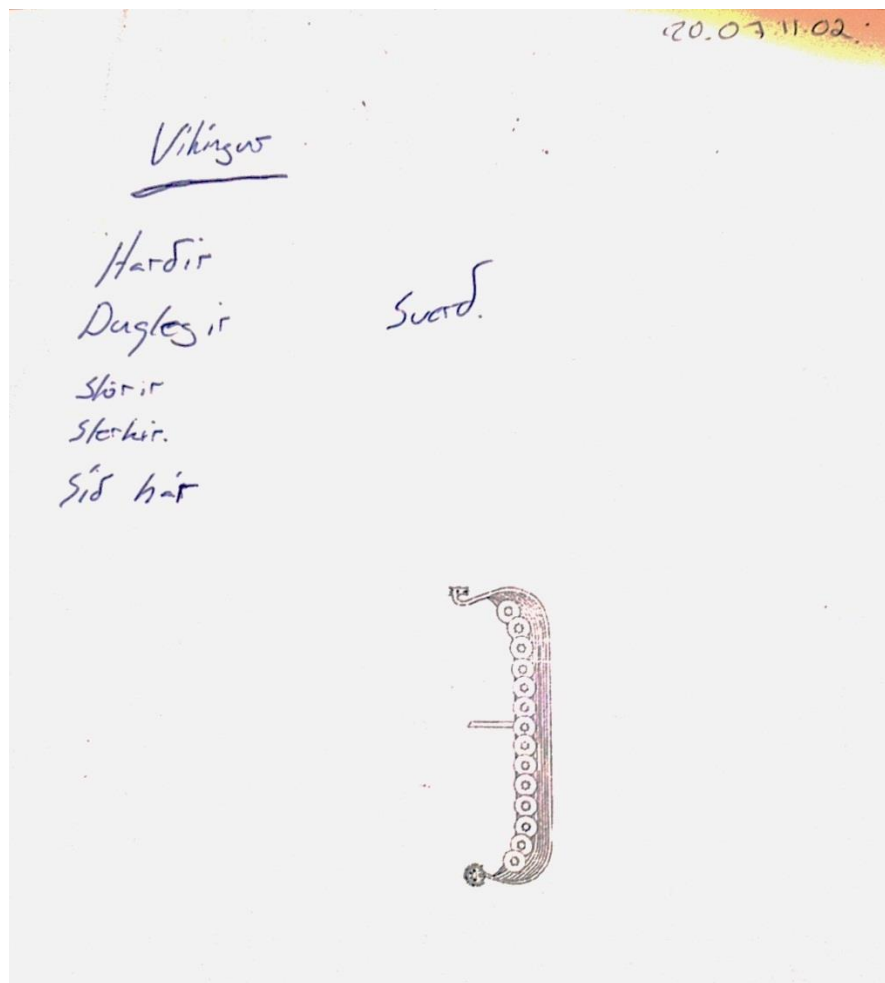


Bardaga menn

20.07.11.01



20.07.11.02



# Appendix 2

## Interview and Questionnaire Protocols

### Questionnaire Protocols

The following basic information was asked of participants:

Age

Gender

Nationality

Education

Occupation

The following questions analysed the museum visiting habits of participants:

How often do you visit museums and other cultural institutions?

Which museums and/or other cultural institutes do you mostly visit?

With whom do you usually visit these institutions?

Have you been to this museum before?

If yes approximately how often?

Why did you choose this museum in particular?

# Interview Protocols

Following are some of the basic questions participants were asked during the recorded, semi-structured interviews. When the opportunity arose, some follow up questions were asked in order to gain deeper understanding of visitor responses. As these questions were individual to each interview they are not included here.

The first few questions were aimed at gaining information about the museum visit itself, as well as starting the participants off with some basic questions that were easy to answer, in order to make them feel more secure and relaxed during the interview. And so, the first questions were:

Do you/your family come from the area?

What attracted you to this museum?

What did you think of the exhibit in general?

What did you expect from the museum before visiting?

Was there anything you would have wanted to see more of, or done differently?

Do you think something was missing?

The next set of questions were more specific to the research and were aimed at gaining information about the participants' image of Vikings, where their image originated from and how, if at all, they connected to that myth in any way. The basic questions asked were:

What messages does the museum give of Vikings and Viking culture?

What is your image of Vikings? Has it changed after the visit?

What 2-3 objects from the Viking age were most memorable for you?

What (if at all) did the visit add to your knowledge of Vikings?

Are Vikings part of your personal/regional/national identity?

Follow up question: Why/why not?

Are you a Viking?

Follow up question: Why/why not?

# Appendix 3

## Interview Samples

The following two interviews, one from each museum, are aimed at demonstrating a sample of how they were typically conducted and answered. The Icelandic interview has been translated by me for the sake of clarity.

All questions were conducted in accordance with the ethics protocols of the University of Leicester. All participants were provided an information sheet regarding the research and signed consent forms. In Iceland these forms were translated into Icelandic by me.

### Yorkshire Museum Interview

Date of interview: 27.08.2011

Participants being interviewed: 27.08.11.01: A male from Newcastle upon Tyne, in the age group 46-55.

Interviewer: Gudrun D Whitehead

GDW: 27.08.11.01. [...] How do you like the museum?

27.08.11.01: I think it's very good. It's very well laid out.

GDW: You are enjoying it?

27.08.11.01: Yes. Definitively.

GDW: So what is your favourite part?

27.08.11.01: Primarily the Roman part. [unintelligible] it's well laid out and I've always been invested in Roman antiquities and how everybody survived and it's good to see how it's laid out in that way.

GDW: So, did you have any expectations for the museum before you came or?

27.08.11.01: Only that people said it was good and worth visiting if I came to York, it was probably the one that we would be mostly interested in. That's why we came here rather than the other ones.

GDW: So you are interested in ancient history?

27.08.11.01: Yes. Primarily.

GDW: So, if we move more to the Vikings perhaps.

27.08.11.01: Yeah sure.

GDW: Which, what were your favourite objects here to do with the Vikings? Was there anything that stuck out?

27.08.11.01: The Vikings, primarily the first thing is the swords and the military side of it. But also, you know the jewellery, the other side of it. Something so often overlooked by the fighting-side, if you like. So they were probably the most interesting things to me.

GDW: Why do you think that it's overlooked?

27.08.11.01: I think that it's a common image of the Vikings with the horned helmets on, storming in, burning monasteries. Kicking people all over the place, and that's what I grew up thinking Vikings were like. That was the Viking culture. But obviously later on you find out there was quite a strong family culture. Exploration. Jewellery. Society

was very important to them. And the only reason they came across to fight was to get land. They didn't really have that at home, to cultivate. So that puts a different feel to it really.

GDW: So what was your image before you came to the museum?

27.08.11.01: To be fair my image of the Vikings was more local than for some people because I was aware of the other side of them.

GDW: Why is that?

27.08.11.01: Primarily it was looking into the history in the North East. And also there was a documentary series on BBC a few years ago about the Vikings which went into details about their jewellery, their culture and exploration. Which I hadn't known so much about until I saw that.

GDW: So that told you a lot about...

27.08.11.01: Yes it did.

GDW: about the different sides of it perhaps

27.08.11.01: Yes. Yepp. [sic] Also from the Jorvik museum of course [the one] in York and I think that's a very good depiction of probably [sic] what a Viking settlement would have been like and again it doesn't just concentrate on the warlike side of it, it's more the other side, an image which is good.

GDW: Great. So you already had a good idea

27.08.11.01: Yes, in fairness, yeah I did.

GDW: So is it something you're interested in?



27.08.11.01: Yes it is, you know, my main interest is in Roman history, also Viking history because of the relation with the North-East. So that is obviously [something I'm interested in], we grew up around [...] this sort of thing so yeah.

GDW: So, did you learn something new about the Vikings here? Or did you know it all before-hand?

27.08.11.01: Probably not, [...] in fairness, it's probably something I already knew. In fairness.

GDW: What image do you think that they are trying to give of Vikings and Viking culture?

27.08.11.01: I think they are trying to give a wide view, not just the clichéd view, there is the long-boats, and the dragons and the swords, they are trying to show the other side as well. And they are doing that, the point comes across very nicely.

GDW: I see. Good. So, do you think that your image is positive or negative of Vikings?

27.08.11.01: Positive. You know, but I think it has been for a long time. I think once you get over this initial thought of them [sic], I think they were trying to, they were explorers and they were trying to get land rather than [sic], not just for the profit of it, they were trying to get land to live in, and they were quite great people.

GDW: So it's more humane perhaps?

27.08.11.01: Oh yes, definitively, definitively. I think that was all probably totally exaggerated. You know, so, they wouldn't have been able to settle here for so long, if all they wanted to do was fight.

GDW: Of course, you are right.

[both laugh]

27.08.11.01: They wouldn't have lasted.

GDW: No. So, do you, are Vikings a part of your identity? A part of who you are?

27.08.11.01: Good question, I mean, living in the North-East there is always that sort of possibility, I mean we do have an awful lot of very fair haired people, [unintelligible], which I'm not one of them, but [...] I think it's something you grow up knowing about. Something mentally possibly [...] rather than genetically.

GDW: So it is a part of the culture in your area?

27.08.11.01: Oh yes, it's pretty [unintelligible] very much so.

GDW: Is it part of the identity there as well?

27.08.11.01: I think it is, there are strong link between Newcastle and Norway, there are always people from Norway coming over on boats, [unintelligible] shopping, but there is definitive links between the two, and there's often these words that are common to both, like, in my dialect 'home' is 'hjem'.

GDW: Oh right, that's almost the same.

27.08.11.01: 'hjem' it's 'hjem', there's other little things like 'school' 'skool'. It's funny how different words, and just the way they are said have stayed in the dialect all these years.

GDW: It sounds very similar.

27.08.11.01: Yeah, yeah, it's not exactly the same, but it is, that side to it. [...]

GDW: So what about for England? As a country, are Vikings a part of the English identity?

27.08.11.01: I think so, in the same way I would say the Romans and the Normans were, I think they came across into the country, and I think really, they are a part of the British [unintelligible], the same way other invaders were, I think it's definitely left its mark.

GDW: Yes, what sort of mark do you think it left?

27.08.11.01: I think it's, the mark of [...], the people sort of in Northern might have been frightened at the idea of them, or I think that increasingly over the last 20, 30 years, people have realized that there was more to them than that, and people have started looking for that. As before, people didn't bother looking.

GDW: Exactly.

27.08.11.01: The museum is certainly helping to see that side of things.

GDW: Great, so final question. Are you a Viking?

27.08.11.01: Yes.

[both laugh]

GDW: What makes you a Viking?

27.08.11.01: I just wish I was I think.

[both laugh]

27.08.11.01: I like exploring. So I put it down to that.

GDW: Ok, that's great. Thank you so much.

27.08.11.01: You are welcome, bye bye.

## Víkingaheimar Interview

Date of interview: 08. July 2011

Participants being interviewed: 08.07.11.02. A male from Grindavík, in the age group 46-55

Interviewer: Gudrun D Whitehead

GDW: 08.07.11.02. Well then, thank you for taking part. So, to start off with, what did you think of the exhibition here?

08.07.11.02: I think it's fine. But somehow, I feel as if something a bit more is missing in here.

GDW: Yes, in what way then?

08.07.11.02: I would have liked to see something more and perhaps get an insight into the Viking-world, rather than just... I think it's a bit, or [sic], I don't want to be ungrateful, I do think it nice, but I would have liked more [...] experience.

GDW: Do you mean more exhibition objects, or texts or?

08.07.11.02: Both.

GDW: And is it something in specific you would like to see? Something in connection with...?

08.07.11.02: Yes, perhaps something about how they resided, how they lived and even, more objects, like for example clothing, weapons, food-containers.

GDW: Yes, you usually come to museums with your family, so you are perhaps looking for something more for your children, or?

08.07.11.02: Yes, because I can see signs of them being fed up in 5 minutes, then it's like they [...] were done seeing the entertaining parts [of the exhibit].

GDW: Did you have any expectations for the museum when you came? Something you expected or?

08.07.11.02: No, not really, I was just like an open book.

GDW: Indeed [...] what message do you think the museum is trying to give on Vikings and the Viking age?

08.07.11.02: Perhaps mainly showing a bit, just, mainly how they sailed, with the ship and...and perhaps preserve, how do you say [sic]...the legacy, or well, just preserve the memory of their culture and suchlike things.

GDW: And what do you think about this culture, these ships and ship-culture and the ship?

08.07.11.02: I think the ship is phenomenal and I was staring in wonder at its construction work, how much more technical it was than one expected. Much more technology than [sic], just the curve on this, I know a little bit because I build instruments, [...] they must have been able to heat the wood to be able to curve it, so there is like, a lot of technology going on.

GDW: So you didn't expect that...?

08.07.11.02: No, not that it was so advanced; I thought it would be more primitive.

GDW: And so what was your image of Vikings before you came here really? What is it that you see?

08.07.11.02: It's just barbarians. Just robbers and plunderers and well [sic], and like riffraff that doesn't want to play by the rules.

GDW: Yes, I can see it on your answers [on the word association sheet] that there is a lot of that sort of thing, so that is really the image that you think of, battles and...?

08.07.11.02: Yes [...] I think that is just what gets through [sic], you know, what you have read, what you have seen, like in films, and then mainly in Icelandic films, like Hrafn Gunnlaugsson and the one that Ágúst Guðmundsson made about the outlaw. And [...] the ones one saw, which one started watching as a kid, 12-13 years old. So naturally you notice [those sorts of things], perhaps, especially as a boy.

GDW: Yes, yes, that of course gives a strong opinion of how the Vikings were. It must have [had] some influence [on you]. Do you think that Icelanders have inherited some of those qualities?

08.07.11.02: Yes, very much. We don't want to follow rules.

GDW: So we are still a bit...?

08.07.11.02: Yes.

GDW: Tell me, has this image changed at all since you came to the museum or have you learned something new or?

08.07.11.02: Yes, it's really like I said about the construction of the ship and that...and well these models and that, it was completely [sic], just to really see [sic], to think about how the ship was built and look at it, then ok, they were more advanced than one

expected. Just to see and read about, I didn't know that the ships had been so fast, what this is, how much of a design and work there was behind it.

GDW: And what do you think that says about these...

08.07.11.02: Naturally, that they were quite good thinkers. That is, that they had a lot of knowledge and well, they were really, not quite the ribald people, [or] like the barbarians that you thought [they were].

GDW: Would you say that these Vikings and the Viking heritage was important for you personally?

08.07.11.02: ...

GDW: Is it something you think about?

08.07.11.02: No.

GDW: [is the Viking past] something you connect to?

08.07.11.02: No, not really, it's, you know, one is automatically always connected to this by foreigners, because I have so many [foreign friends] and I have lived for a long time abroad and have so many foreign acquaintances and one is always called the Viking [by one's friends]. It's not me who connects it [to me], its other people.

GDW: Who connect you to it?

08.07.11.02: Yes.

GDW: So that you are not necessarily instigating that [is, calling you a Viking] even though you are...

08.07.11.02: No, not at all.

GDW: So this isn't anything you think about as such?

08.07.11.02: [...] for the last few years [I have thought about Vikings]. Because of the financial crisis. I sort of think that [...] wasn't Ingólfur Arnarson fleeing from, weren't everyone fleeing from [sic] the Norwegian king, we didn't want to abide by [sic], didn't want to bow down to authority and go by rules and literally, we *are* still like this. It is so rich in our national psyche. I think there are some connections between these [events and the present].

GDW: Yes, exactly, that's good question.

08.07.11.02: Naturally 'útrásarvíkingar [corporate marauders]' you understand? They have robbed and pillaged and treated people badly.

GDW: Are those the modern Vikings perhaps?

08.07.11.02: I'd rather not say yes to that.

GDW: What about for the whole country, this heritage?

08.07.11.02: Yes, I think so.

GDW: Why?

08.07.11.02: Isn't it the only heritage we have?

GDW: Yes.

08.07.11.02: It's just our history.

GDW: And why does history matter so much?

08.07.11.02: I think it's important for all nations to have, to build their culture on some sort of heritage; otherwise we [would] definitively stand in some sort of void. So that I



think that Vikings are very important in that respect. I mean, we want [sic], Icelanders have always appropriated America, you know “we found America, we did this, we did that and we were the first”. So that I think this is important for the nation as such.

GDW: Finally, do you consider yourself to be a Viking? You have really answered this before.

08.07.11.02: Yes, no, I, you know, not as such.

GDW: So you don’t think you have inherited something from them?

08.07.11.02: No I think that I inherited very little.

GDW: Would you want to be a Viking?

08.07.11.02: No, definitively not.

GDW: Why not?

08.07.11.02: I just think that this was such a tough life. Difficult and well, and well I think that it was just a miserable life.

# Bibliography

Abizadeh, Arash, 'Does Collective Identity Presuppose an Other? On the Alleged Incoherence of Global Solidarity', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 99:1 (2005), pp. 45-60

Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities* (London & New York: Verso, 2006)

Arthúr B. Bollason, *Ljóshærða villidýrið. Arfur Íslendinga í hugarheimi nasismans* (Reykjavík: Mál og Menning, 1990)

Assman, Jan, *The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1998)

Assman, Jan and Czaplicka, John 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', *New German Critique*, no. 65, Cultural History/Cultural Studies (1995), 125-133

Backer, Frederick and Thomas, Julian, eds., *Writing the Past in the Present* (Lampeter, Wales: Saint David's University College, 1990)

Barker, Chris, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* (London, Thousand Oaks, CA, New Delhi & Singapore: Sage Publication, 2008)

Bennett, Tony *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995)

Bergson, Henri, *Matter and Memory* (London: George Allen, New York: Macmillan, 1912)

Billig, Michael, *Banal Nationalism* (London, Thousand Oaks & New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995)

Black, Graham, *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement* (London & New York: Routledge, 2005)

Black, Jeremy, *Using History* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005)

Blustein, Jeffrey, *The Moral Demands of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

Bonnell, Jennifer and Simon, Roger I., 'Difficult Exhibitions and Intimate Encounters', *Museum and Society* (2007) 5:2 (2007), 65-85

Briggs, Charles L., *Learning how to ask: A sociolinguistic appraisal of the role of the interview in social science research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986)

Brink, Stefan and Price, Neil , *The Viking World* (London: Routledge, 2007)

Brown, Peter, 'Us and Them: Who Benefits from Experimental Exhibition Making?', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 26:2 (2010), 129-148

Butler, Thomas, ed., *Memory: History, Culture and the Mind* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989)

Byock, Jesse L., 'Feuding in Viking-Age Iceland's Great Village' in *Conflict in Medieval Europe: Changing Perspectives on Society and Culture*, ed. by Warren C. Brown and Piotr Gorecki (Aldershot & Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2003)

Byock, Jesse L., *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas and Power* (Enfield Lock UK: Hisarlik Press, 1993)

Calhoun, Craig, *Nations Matter: Culture, History, and the Cosmopolitan Dream* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007)

Carnegie, Elizabeth and McCabe, Scott, 'Re-enactment Events and Tourism: Meaning, Authenticity and Identity', *Current Issues in Tourism*, 11:4 (2008), 349-368

Casey, Edward, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000)

Cooper, Frederick, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 2005)

Costa, Janeen A. and Bamossy, Gary J., eds., *Marketing in a Multicultural World: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Cultural Identity* (Thousand Oaks, London & New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1995)

Cubitt, Geoffrey, *History and Memory* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2007)

Cubitt, Geoffrey, 'Bringing it Home: Making Local Meaning in 2007 Bicentenary Exhibitions', *Slavery and Abolition*, 30:2 (2009), 259-75

Day, Graham and Thompson, Andrew, *Theorizing Nationalism* (Hampshire & New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004)

Dicks, Bella, *Heritage, Place and Community* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 2000)

Dodd, Jocelyn and Sandell, Richard, *Including Museums: Perspectives on Museums, Galleries and Social Inclusion* (Leicester: RCMG, 2001)

Dodd, Jocelyn and others, eds, *Rethinking Disability Representation in Museums and Galleries* (Leicester: RCMG, 2008)

Dodd, Jocelyn, ed., *Towards a Social Purpose: Redefining the Role of Botanic Gardens* (Surrey: Botanical Gardens Conservation International, 2010)

Duara, Prasenjit, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1995)

Ducharme, Lori J. and Fine, Gary A., 'The Construction of Nonpersonhood and Demonization: Commemorating the Traitorous Reputation of Benedict Arnold', *Social Forces*, vol 73:4 (1995), 1309-1331

Duncan, Carol, *Civilizing Rituals* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995)

Durbin, Gail, ed., *Developing Museum Exhibitions for Lifelong Learning* (London: Stationary Office, 1996)

Falk, John H.; Moussouri, Theano and Coulson, Douglas, 'The Effect of Visitors, Agendas on Museum Learning', *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 41: 2 (2010), 107-120

Fentress, James and Wickham, Christ, *Social Memory* (Oxford UK & Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1992)

Foote, Peter and Wilson, David M., *The Viking Achievement: The Society and Culture of Early Medieval Scandinavia* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1970)

Foster, Robert J., 'Making National Cultures in the Global Ecumene', *Annual Reviews of Anthropology*, 20 (1991), 235-260

Foucault, Michael, *The Essential Works of Foucault*, ed. by Paul Rabinow and others, trans. by James B. Faubison and others (London: Penguin), ii: *Aesthetics* (1998), iii: *Power* (2001)

Gay, Paul du, ed., *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* (London, Thousand Oaks, CA & New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1997)

Gilbert, Paul, *Philosophy of Nationalism* (Colorado & Oxford: Westview Press, 1998)

Gillis, John R., ed., *Commemoration: The Politics of National Identity* (New Jersey & West Sussex: Princeton University Press, 1994)

Gísli Pálsson and E. Paul Durrenberge, eds., *Images of Contemporary Iceland: Everyday Lives and Global Context* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996)

Goff, Jacques le, *History and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992)

Guðrún Pétursdóttir, 'Fjölbreytileiki er kostur en ekki vandamál', *Morgunblaðið* (Reykjavík, Iceland, 14 December, 2004)

Gunnar Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years: History of a Marginal Society* (London: C. Hurst & Co Publishers, 2000)

Gunnell, Terry, 'Það er til fleira á himni og jörðu, Hóras... Kannanir á íslenskri þjóðtrú og trúarviðhorfum 2006-2007', *Rannsóknir í félagsvísindum*, ed. by Gunnar Þór Jóhannesson (Reykjavík, Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands), viii (2007), 801-812

Halbwachs, Maurice, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992)

Halewood, Chris and Hannam, Kevin, 'Viking Heritage Tourism: Authenticity and Commodity', *Annals of Tourism Research*, 28:3 (2001), 565-580

Hall, Stuart, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990)

Hall, Stuart, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London, Thousand Oaks & New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1997)

Hall, Stuart and Gay, Paul du, eds., *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London, Thousand Oaks & New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1996)

Hallberg, Peter, *Old Icelandic Poetry, Eddic Lay and Skaldic Verse*, trans. by Paul Schach (Lincoln, NE & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1976)

Hannam, Kevin and Halewood, Chris, 'European Viking Themed Festivals: An Expression of Identity', *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 1:1 (2006), 17-31

Hein, George E., *Learning in the Museum* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998)

Helga Kress, *Fyrir dyrum fóstru. Konur og kynferði í íslenskum fornbókmenntum* (Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands, Rannsóknarstofa í kvennafræðum, 1996)

Helga Kress, *Máttugar meyjar: Íslensk fornbókmenntasaga* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1993)

Hollander, Lee M., ed. and trans., *The Poetic Edda*, 11th. printing (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1962)

Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean, *Museums and their Visitors* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994)

Hudson, Kenneth, 'The Museum Refuses to Stand Still', *Museum International*, 50:1 (2003), 43-50

Hughes, George, 'Authenticity in Tourism', *Annals of Tourism Research*, 22:4 (1995), 781-803

Hutchinson, John, and Smith, Anthony, D., ed. by, *Nationalism* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1994)

Ingi Sigurðsson, *Íslensk sagnfræði frá miðri 19. öld til miðrar 20. aldar* (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1986)

Jakob Benediktsson, ed., *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók, Íslensk fornrit*, i-ii (Reykjavík:

Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1968)

Jenkins, Richard, *Foundations of Sociology* (Hampshire & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002)

Jenkins, Richard, *Rethinking Ethnicity: Arguments and Explorations*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London, Thousand Oaks & New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2008)

Jervis, John, *Transgressing the Modern: Explorations in the Western Experience of Otherness* (Oxford & Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1990)

Jesch, Judith, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1991)

Jewell, Helen M., *Women in Medieval England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996)

Jochens, Jenny, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1995)

Jochens, Jenny, 'The Medieval Icelandic Heroine: Fact or Fiction', *Viator* 17 (1986), 35-50

Jón Jónsson Aðils, *Gullöld Íslendinga*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Reykjavík: Þorleifur Gunnarsson, Steindórsprent hf, 1948)

Kaplan, Fiona E.S., *Museums and the Making of 'Ourselves': The Role of Objects in National Identity* (London & New York: Leicester University Press, 1994)

Karolewski, Ireneusz P. and Suszycki, Andrzej M., *The Nation and Nationalism in Europe: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011)

Karp, Ivan and Lavine, Steve D., eds., *Exhibiting Cultures* (Washington & London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991)

Kellas, James G., *The Politics of Nationalism and Ethnicity* (Basingstoke, Hampshire & London: Macmillan Education, 1991)

Klein, Kerwin Lee, 'On the Emergence of *Memory* in Historical Discourse', *Representations*, 69 (2000), 127-150

Knell, Simon, J. and others, eds. *Museum Revolutions* (Abington, Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2007)

Knell, Simon, and others, *Crossing Borders: Connecting European Identities in Museums and Online*, EuNaMus Report 2, Linköping University Interdisciplinary Studies 14 (Linköping: Linköping University Electronic Press, 2012)

Kumar, Krishan, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)

Küng, Hans, *Women in Christianity* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2005)

Lagerspetz, Mikko, 'How Many Nordic Countries? Possibilities and Limits of Geopolitical Identity Construction', *Cooperation and Conflict* 38:49 (2003), 49-61

Littler, Jo and Naidoo, Roshi, *The Politics of Heritage: Legacies of 'Race'* (Abington, Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2005)

Lumley, Robert, ed., *The Museum Time Machine* (London & New York: Routledge, 1988)

Lutzhöft, Hans-Jürgen, *Der Nordische Gedanke in Deutschland 1920 – 1940* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag 1971)

Macdonald, Sharon, ed., *Inside European Identities* (Providence & Oxford, Berg Publishers, 1993)

MacDonald, Sharon, ed., *The Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture*, (London & New York, Routledge, 1998)

Magnus Magnusson, *The Vikings* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing, 2003)

McLean, Fiona, 'Museums and the Construction of National Identity', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 3:4 (2007), 244-252

Marstine, Janet, 'Situated Revelations: Radical Transparency in the Museum', in *New Directions in Museum Ethics*, ed. by Janet Marstine and others (Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2013), 1-24



Mason, Jennifer, *Qualitative Researching* (London, Thousand Oaks, CA & New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002)

Misztal, Barbara A., *Theories of Social Remembering*, Theorizing Society Series (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003)

Mortimer, Edward and Fine, Robert, eds., *People, Nation & State: The Meaning of Ethnicity & Nationalism* (London & New York: I. B. Tauris, 1999)

Sandell, Richard and Janes, Robert R., eds., *Museum Management and Marketing*, (Abingdon, Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2007)

Oakeshott, Michael, *On History and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999)

Olick, Jeffrey K., Vinitzky-Seroussi, Vered and Levy, Daniel, eds., *The Collective Memory Reader* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)

O'Neill, Mark, 'Museums and Identity in Glasgow', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 12:1 (2006), 29-48

Ólafía Einarsdóttir, 'Staða kvenna á þjóðveldisöld: Hugleiðingar í ljósi samfélagsgerðar og efnahagslífs', *Saga*, 22 (1984), pp. 7-30

Pennebaker, James W.; Paez, Dario and Rimé, Bernard, *Collective Memory of Political Events: Social Psychological Perspectives* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1997)

Phillips, Mark S., 'History, Memory and Historical Distance', *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, ed. by Peter Seixas (Toronto, Buffalo & London: University of Toronto Press, 2004)

Phillips, Mark S., 'Relocating Inwardness: Historical Distance and the Transition from Enlightenment to Romantic Historiography', *Modern Language Association of America*, 118:3 (2003), 436-449

Poulot, Dominique, and others, ed. by, *Great Narratives of the Past: Tradition and Revision in National Museums*, EuNaMus Report 4, Linköping Electronic Proceedings 78, 33-48

Raun, Toivo U., 'Estonia After 1991: Identity and Integration', *East European Politics and Societies* 23:526 (2009), 526-534

Reicher, Stephen and Hopkins, Nick, *Self and Nation* (London, Thousand Oaks & New Delhi: Sage Puplicaton, 2001)

Roesdahl, Else, *The Vikings*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, trans. by Susan M. Margeson and Kirsten Williams (London: Penguin, 1998)

Rüsen, Jörn, *History: Narration, Interpretation, Orientation* (New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005)

Sandell, Richard and others, eds., *An Evaluation of sh[OUT]: The Social Justice Programme of the Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow, 2009-2010* (Leicester: RCMG, 2010)

Sawyer, Birgit and Peter, *Medieval Scandinavia: From Conversion to Reformation, circa 800-1500*, The Nordic Series,17 (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993)

Sawyer, Peter H., *The Age of the Vikings* (London: Edward Arnold, 1962)

Sawyer, Peter H., ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikinger* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1997)

Schuman, Howard and Scott, Jacqueline, 'Generations and Collective Memory', *American Sociological Review*, 54:3 (1989), 359-381

Seixas, Peter, *Narration, Identity, and Historical Consciousness* (New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005)

Seixas, Peter C., *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004)

Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, 'Réttlæting þjóðernis. Samanburður á alþýðufyrirlestrum Jóns Aðils og hugmyndum Johanns Gottlieb Fichte', *Skírnir*, 169 (1995), pp. 36-64

Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur. Þjóðerni, kóngervi og vald á Íslandi 1900 – 1930* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2004)

Simons, Helen, *Case Study Research in Practice* (London & Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2009),

Skinner, Jonathan, ed., *The Interview: An Ethnographic Approach* (London & New York: Berg 2012)

Smith, Anthony D., *The Ethnic Origins of Nation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986)

Smith, Anthony D., *National Identity* (London, New York, Victoria, Ontario, Auckland & Middlesex: Penguin Books 1991)

Smith, Anthony D., *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era* (Oxford: UK & Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1998)

Smith, Anthony D., *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1999)

Smith, Laurajane, *Uses of Heritage* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006)

Smith, Laurajane, ed., *Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums: Ambiguous Engagements* (New York & London: Routledge, 2011)

Smith, Laurajane and Waterton, Emma, 'Guest Editorial: Museums and the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the British Slave Trade', *Museums and Society* 8:3 (2010), 122-12

Somerville, Angus A. and McDonald, R. Andrew, eds., *The Viking Age: A Reader*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010)

Spencer, Philip and Wollman, Howard, *Nationalism: A Critical Introduction* (London, Thousand Oaks & New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002)

Straub, Jürgen, *Narration, Identity, and Historical Consciousness* (New York & Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2005)

Tägil, Sven, ed., *Ethnicity and Nation Building in the Nordic World* (Southern Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 33-62

Tilman, Karin, Vree, Franklin van and Winter, Jay, ed., *Performing the Past: Memory, History and Identity in modern Europe* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010)

Triandafyllidou, Anna, 'National Identity and the Other', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 21:4 (1998), pp. 593-612

Vidar Hreinsson and others, eds, *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, 5 vols (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997)

Wan, Q Edward, Fillafer, Franz L. and Iggers, Georg G., eds., *The Many Faces of Clio: Cross Cultural Approaches to Historiography, Essays in Honor of Georg G. Iggers* (Oxford & New York: Berghahn Books, 2007)

Warnock, Mary, *Memory* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987)

Watson, Sheila, 'England Expects': Nelson as a Symbol of Local and National Identity within the Museum', *Museum and Society*, 4:3 (2006), 129-151

Watson, Sheila, ed., *Museums and their Communities* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007)

Wawn, Andrew, *The Vikings and the Victorians* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000)

Wedgwood, Tamasin, 'History in Two Dimensions or Three? Working Class Responses to History', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol 15: 4 (2009), 277-297

Wertsch, James V., *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

Williams, Gareth and Ager, Barry, *The Vale of York Hoard*, Objects in Focus Series (London: British Museum Press, 2010)

Woodward, Kathryn, *Identity and Difference* (London, Thousand Oaks, CA & New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2007)

Öskirimli, Umut, *Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction* (Basingstoke, Hampshire & London: Macmillan Press, 2000)

## Other sources

Askari, Karim, ‘Múslimar og fordómar’, *visir.is* (Reykjavík, Iceland, 23 February, 2011)

Einherjar, Viking society in Iceland, homepage:  
<http://einherjar.blog.is/blog/einherjar/>

Ghosh, Pallab, ‘Some DNA ancestry services akin to ‘genetic astrology’, *bbc.co.uk* (England, 7 March, 2013).

Ilves, Toomas H., ‘Estonia as a Nordic Country’. Speech delivered at the Swedish Institute of International Relations, Stockholm, 14 December 1999

Ministry of the Interior, homepage:  
<http://eng.innanrikisraduneyti.is/laws-and-regulations/english/personal-names/>

Office for National Statistics, 2011 Census results on the Welsh language in Wales:  
<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/headlines/population2012/121211/?lang=en>

See the results of the census on the homepage of the General Register Office for Scotland: <http://www.gro-scotland.gov.uk/press/news2005/scotlands-census-2001-gaelic-report.html>

Up Helly Aa, Viking festival in the Shetlands, homepage:  
<http://www.uphellyaa.org/about-up-helly-aa/procession>

Yorkshire Museum, homepage:  
<http://www.yorkshiremuseum.org.uk/Page/ViewSpecialExhibition.aspx?CollectionId=28>