

## **Reimagining Vikings. The Evolution and Impact of Viking Imagery in Contemporary Fiction and Media**

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**Abstract:** *This paper explores the image of the Viking in contemporary fiction and cinema, a critical element of the Scandinavian cultural imaginary. While the Viking image has its roots in historical events and saga literature, its representations have significantly evolved and been shaped by various social, cultural, and artistic influences. As a symbol of strength, adventure, and resilience, the Viking has been reinterpreted and commodified within multiple genres of literature and film, often to reflect and address contemporary socio-cultural realities. The study begins with a review of the Viking image in Scandinavian literature, tracing its transformation from the Edic poems and sagas to modern-day narratives. It then expands its focus to analyse the portrayal of Vikings in international cinema. By investigating how these portrayals diverge from or align with historical facts, this paper seeks to understand the dynamics between artistic liberty and creativity, historical authenticity, and the shaping of cultural identity. Special attention is given to the implications of these representations of Scandinavian identity and the broader global imaginary of the region. It proposes that diverse depictions of Vikings reveal much about the tensions and negotiations between the historical-cultural reality of Scandinavia and the perceptions, myths, and expectations of the audience and readership, who play a significant role in shaping these representations. The contrast between the Viking's historical reality and its fictional portrayal illuminates the complexities of interpreting and exporting cultural symbols. The present paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the Scandinavian imaginary. It demonstrates how the region's history, as symbolised by the Viking's figures, continues to resonate within and shape its contemporary cultural and artistic landscapes.*

**Keywords:** *adventure; Norse mythology; saga literature; Scandinavian identity; Viking;*

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored in the interplay between cultural memory, myth-making, and media representation. It focuses on how contemporary portrayals of Vikings in fiction and media are shaped by and contribute to evolving cultural narratives. The following concepts and theories provide the foundation for this analysis.

Cultural memory refers to the way societies remember and construct their past, encompassing collective practices, narratives, and symbols that shape a group's identity over time. As theorised by Jan Assmann, cultural

memory is not a static recollection of events but a dynamic process that evolves with societal changes (Assmann 31-33). The Viking image, deeply embedded in Scandinavian cultural memory, is a touchstone for exploring how historical events and figures are reimagined to fit contemporary needs and values. The romanticisation of Vikings in Scandinavian literature and media reflects an ongoing negotiation of identity and heritage, where past glories are often invoked to address present concerns.

Myth-making involves creating and perpetuating narratives that embody a culture's values, fears, and aspirations. Roland Barthes emphasised that myths transcend historical accuracy to offer timeless archetypes and moral lessons (Barthes 9-10). The Viking myth, evolving from medieval sagas to modern media, exemplifies how myth-making processes adapt historical figures to serve as cultural symbols. This study investigates how these myths are constructed and deconstructed across different media platforms. The Vikings, as fearless warriors, explorers, and even a farmer, showcase the flexibility of myth in meeting the ideological needs of various epochs.

Media representation theory examines how media portrayals shape and reflect societal attitudes, ideologies, and power dynamics. Stuart Hall argued that media representations are not mere reflections of reality but active constructions that influence public perception (Hall 225-234). This theory is crucial for understanding the evolution of the Viking image in cinema and television. By analysing media representations, we can uncover the underlying cultural and political motivations driving the depiction of Vikings as heroic ancestors or brutal invaders. For instance, TV series like *Vikings* (2013-2020) and *The Last Kingdom* (2015-2022) reveal contemporary preoccupations with themes such as cultural conflict, identity, and resilience.

Postmodernism challenges the notion of objective historical truth, emphasising the subjective nature of historical narratives and the role of power in shaping history. Jean-François Lyotard argued that history is not a single, unified story but a collection of competing narratives (Lyotard 27-42). The varied portrayals of Vikings in contemporary media often reflect postmodernist influences, highlighting historical memory's fragmented, constructed nature. This study explores how these portrayals question traditional historical narratives and offer alternative perspectives on Viking heritage. Using anachronisms and creative liberties in media representations engages modern audiences and provokes critical reflection on the past.

The concept of commodification of heritage examines how cultural symbols and historical figures are commercialised and marketed to serve economic interests. Robert Hewison highlighted the tensions between preserving cultural authenticity and exploiting heritage for profit (Hewison 29, 56-57). The Viking image has been commodified in numerous ways, from films and TV shows to merchandise and tourism. This study considers the

impact of this commodification on the authenticity and perception of Viking heritage. While commodification can lead to oversimplified and sometimes inaccurate portrayals, it also keeps the Viking legacy alive and relevant to contemporary audiences.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this study aims to comprehensively analyse the Viking image's evolution in contemporary fiction and media. It seeks to elucidate the dynamic relationship between historical authenticity, cultural identity, and media representation. Through this lens, the Viking image is seen as a relic of the past and a vibrant, evolving symbol through which present-day societal experiences and issues can be explored. This theoretical framework underscores the importance of examining how historical figures are reimagined in modern contexts, contributing to a deeper understanding of the interplay between history, culture, and media.

### **Critical Insights**

With its deep roots within the Scandinavian cultural imaginary, the Viking image is a potent symbol of the region's historical past and contemporary socio-cultural realities. This image, shaped and moulded by a confluence of historical events, saga literature, and cultural narratives, has seen significant evolution within contemporary fiction and cinema.

The Viking image is inextricably linked to various cultural, social, and artistic influences that have directed its trajectory over time (Sondrup, Sandberg 5). As historical figures, Vikings are often depicted as robust, daring seafarers and formidable warriors, deeply ingrained in Scandinavia's cultural memory and collective consciousness. However, the Viking image is not a monolithic construct but a multifaceted symbol that encapsulates a diverse range of roles and identities that these seafaring Norsemen assumed in their time. They were fierce warriors, traders, explorers, settlers, and poets. This broad spectrum of Viking identities reflects the complexities and nuances of the Viking Age, a critical period in Scandinavian history that has left an indelible mark on the region's cultural landscape (Stalsberg 75-83; Matthews 5).

The fascination with Vikings is multifaceted and deeply entrenched in the imagination of people worldwide. Their character, shrouded in mysteries, makes them both intriguing and paradoxical. Their rich cultural heritage, as reflected in their sagas, myths, and iconography, is a testimony of a unique civilisation and feeds the curiosity and fascination of contemporary societies. The image of Vikings –accurate or idealised, brutal or romanticised – continues to be a popular theme in modern culture, literature, cinema, and even video games.

Moreover, the way various cultural and political groups, such as the ultra-nationalistic movements, have appropriated Viking imagery reflects the

enduring influence of their legacy. However, it also highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of their culture beyond stereotypes and myths.

The Vikings' historical reality was complex and shaped by diverse geographical, political, economic, and cultural contexts. The study of the Viking Age is an exploration of a dynamic, evolving civilisation that had far-reaching impacts on the history of Europe and beyond.

Mentioning Vikings instantly evokes a captivating aura intertwined with iconic symbols such as *drakkars*, the three Norns weaving destinies, Valkyries, Walhalla, and sagas. Their identity was sculptured by their majestic longships, imposing horned helmets, fierce demeanour, and unyielding thirst for adventure – a trait beautifully encapsulated by Charles Marshal Smith: “A Viking expedition was an adventure; it called upon the many resources of the Norman character, his courage, his audacity, his need for conquests, his love of fine clothes and jewels, his taste for possessing a domain to cultivate and rule. The entire history of the Vikings is based on the word: adventure” (Smith 93).

Their spirit of adventure and natural inclination towards the sea led them on numerous overseas expeditions, transforming them into formidable sea raptors. When studying the Vikings, it is essential to consider the maritime space, as for them, it was not just a medium of travel but an intrinsic part of their identity. Despite the absence of naval combat accounts in Norse sagas, their legendary sea exploits helped shape their character and fuelled their yearning for glory.

The Viking era, which lasted from the late 8th to early 11th century, represents a significant period in Scandinavian history. Seafaring expeditions, trade, and cultural exchange characterised it. The Vikings undertook numerous voyages to regions now known as Scotland, England, Ireland, Germany, France, and Russia. Their travels were not just for pillage; they also resulted in significant settlements like Normandy.

In *The Viking Diaspora* (2015), Judith Jesch discusses the various roles and identities adopted by the Vikings during their expeditions. They were not just warriors but traders, explorers, and settlers who left their mark on diverse regions from North America to the Byzantine Empire (Jesch 163-201).

This historical perspective provides a more nuanced view of the Viking image, moving beyond the stereotypical depiction of ruthless raiders to acknowledge their versatile roles. In *Vikings of the Steppe* (2022), Csete Katona explores the interactions between the Vikings, or Rus, and the Turkic world. The author argues that these interactions significantly shaped the Vikings' cultural identity, further complicating the traditional image (Katona 3-21). Their image, therefore, is not solely a product of Scandinavian culture but a result of cultural interplay and hybridity.

The saga literature, a significant element of the Viking cultural heritage, also contributes to building their image. As Lars Lönnroth noted in *The Viking World* (2008), sagas were historical chronicles and a medium for the Vikings to convey social norms, moral values, and cultural ideologies (Lönnroth 304-310). The Vikings portrayed in these sagas are complex characters, often torn between personal ambitions, societal expectations, violence, and honour.

Therefore, the Viking image, as derived from historical events and saga literature, is a complex figure reflecting the intricacy of the Viking Age. This historical overview sets the stage for a more in-depth examination of the evolution of their image in contemporary literature and cinema.

### **The Viking Image in Scandinavian Literature**

The Viking image has experienced considerable transformations in Scandinavian literature, with contemporary works often offering reinterpretations of the Viking persona. This evolution can be traced from the Edic poems and sagas to contemporary narratives, reflecting changing social norms, artistic influences, and historical consciousness. Edic poems and tales, such as those explored in *Beyond the Northlands* (2016) by Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough, offer a complex depiction of Vikings as both heroes and anti-heroes, individuals of great courage and strength, yet also capable of treachery and violence (Barraclough 23-30, 53).

The image of the Viking varies according to the time and place in which it was born. Thus, one can wonder if speaking of a single Viking myth is correct. In reality, given the evolution of the figure of the ancient Scandinavian along the European continent, we may tend to distinguish between two myths due to historical rather than thematic reasons. In the Scandinavian myth, the Viking Age is often considered a golden era of national history. This myth portrays Vikings as heroic, adventurous, and pioneering ancestors, emphasising their role as founders of the Scandinavian nations. They are celebrated for their seafaring skills, exploration, and warrior spirit, embodying a sense of national pride and identity. The image of Vikings has historically been more damaging in European mythology, formed outside of Scandinavia, particularly in the rest of Europe. This myth depicts Vikings as ruthless invaders, pirates, and barbarians who terrorised European coasts and plundered towns and monasteries. This view is shaped by the historical experiences of Viking raids and their lasting impact on medieval European societies.

In the 13th century, the Icelanders began to write down their Icelandic sagas, in which they recounted the lives of the settlers from whom they descended, those whom posterity refers to as Vikings. In 1434, at the Council of Basel, the Swedish bishop Nils Ragvaldsson (Nicholaus Ragvaldi) made a speech considered the foundation of Swedish national historiography. He

declared that the Swedes were the direct descendants of the Goths. During the 16th century, these ideas were widely reflected in historical works, and in the 17th century, historical romanticism flourished, called Gothicism. This cultural movement focuses on the Goths and all pre-Christian civilisations in Northern Europe. The gothic undercurrents of the 19th century developed a preference for the Viking ancestors, and historians and artists would henceforth shower the Viking with glory and prestige. It is worth mentioning that the Norse term *Viking* originally referred to a sea expedition and a certain seasonal way of life based on plundering and trade. We may conclude that someone was not a Viking during the whole year but became a *vikingr* when one left home for a voyage abroad. We may speak of a Viking Age that only started in the second half of the 19th century. Only in the 20th century did the term *Viking* get an ethnic sense (Brink 3).

Outside of Scandinavian borders and the regions colonised by the Vikings, a distinct Viking myth emerged in places where specific populations, particularly during the 19th and 20th centuries, developed a romanticised connection to these distant ancestors. For example, in Normandy, this myth took shape as a fantasy of filiation with the Vikings, emphasising a cultural and historical lineage that linked the local population to the legendary Norsemen. This myth is characterised by a nostalgic and often idealised view of Viking heritage, celebrating the Vikings as noble ancestors who contributed to the region's identity and legacy. It is enough to recall that the image of the ancient Scandinavian began to be shaped by contemporary witnesses of their raids, that is to say, by those who were subjected to their assaults. A few writers, such as Abbon de Fleury-sur-Loire, Robert Wace, William of Jumièges, and Orderic Vitalis, contributed to the terrible depiction of the Norse pirate. The character they portrayed represents the true *vikingr*, the Scandinavian warrior or adventurer who went Viking. The perception of this figure of the Vikings has changed considerably over the centuries. It underwent progressive rehabilitation in the 17th century, notably due to Montesquieu's theory of climates. In the 19th century, the continental Viking myth began the same evolution as the Scandinavian myth, both tending towards the blind idealisation of the Viking (Service 131-159, 178-294, 211-220).

Regarding this ancestor or plunderer who came from somewhere else, the attitudes of authors and artists in the 20th century differ significantly. We shall not adopt a chronological perspective because this approach may imply that the oldest works bear the most fantastic images of the Vikings. Thanks to archaeological contributions, among other things, historical research has indeed made considerable progress regarding the significance of Vikings in European space. Therefore, our knowledge of the ancient Scandinavian world has become much more significant than that of the 19th century. However, even today, artists and writers sometimes seem to feel the urge to depart from

historical reality to allow them to have mental representations of the Viking image. They project onto this character whether Viking has a positive or negative valence, which, in their opinion, is something eminently personal. Moreover, this is what constitutes the imagery of the Vikings.

It is well known that the cult of the ancestors can lead to dramatic drifts. During the 20th century, the figure of ancient Scandinavia fed various European nationalistic movements. If the Viking does not represent the ancestor model to whom one directly claims to belong, he at least became the ideal representative of the Aryan race in many European cultures. We are all acquainted with the various manifestations accompanying the revival of neo-Nazi currents in Scandinavia, Germany or Russia. Some of these ultranationalists wear ancient Scandinavian signs or symbols, using a false Viking identity, which they justify by referring to the relations that Vikings had with different European nations during the Middle Ages.

The Viking myth significantly fueled Icelandic patriotism, as Icelanders viewed Vikings as their ancestors. They had detailed historical records of their settlement starting in 874 A.D. when the first Norwegians arrived on the island. Iceland came under Norwegian rule in the latter half of the 13th century and then under Danish rule from 1380 until 1944. This historical context explains why Icelandic romanticism became deeply interested in the Viking figure, seeing it as a symbol of freedom and an embodiment of their independence era.

As Scandinavian societies evolved, so did their literature and representations of the Viking figure. The Viking image has been variously reinterpreted, often in response to contemporary socio-political realities and ambitions. Drawing from historical and saga literature, modern narratives usually imbue the Viking image with new meanings and complexities.

For instance, in some contemporary Scandinavian novels, the Viking is no longer just the warrior or explorer but also embodies the struggles and contradictions of modern life. These works often employ the Viking's image to explore identity, cultural memory, and social changes. This figure becomes a symbolic tool for authors to examine and criticise contemporary Scandinavian societies.

However, it is essential to note that reimagining the Viking in modern literature does not erase its historical roots. As S. Brink and N. Price suggest in *The Viking World* (2008), the saga tradition continues to influence the portrayal of Vikings in modern literature, ensuring their representations remain deeply connected to their historical origins even as they evolve (Brink, Price 304-323).

The Icelandic novelist Gunnar Gunnarsson (1889-1975) began writing a series of historical novels about Iceland, the first volume being *The Sworn Brothers* (*Edbrødre*, 1918). The author, who mainly wrote in Danish, tells the

story of two young Norwegians, Ingolf and Leif, who are banished from Norway as adults and arrive in Iceland as the first settlers. Gunnarsson based his novel on *Landnámabók* (*The Book of Settlement*), a medieval Icelandic work that describes the settlement of Iceland by the Norse during the 9th and 10th centuries A.D. This work, which did not survive in its original but in five different medieval versions, lists around four hundred men as the initial settlers of Iceland. Nevertheless, Gunnarsson was not content with rooting his novel in this literary tradition because he wanted his work to display a high degree of historical realism. Consequently, he showed interest in the archaeological discoveries made during his life. Even though the novel *The Sworn Brothers* is a relatively old work, it proved historically accurate and sober due to his interest in local history.

This sobriety does not prevent the novel from being highly marked by an exalted patriotism, the author insisting on the indestructible bond between the settlers and the Icelandic territories. The episode when Leif dies and Ingold must dig the first grave on the island is dramatic: “Ingolf’s heart was bleeding as he remembered how Hjör-Leif arrived in this country. It was he whom Iceland received with open arms. Furthermore, he was the first to dedicate his flesh and blood to this new country”<sup>1</sup> (Gunnarsson 347; my trans.).

We discover the same high-spirited tone when Gunnarsson evokes the happiness felt by Vikings during their expedition. Those characters are deeply attached to their land and have a close relationship with the sea. The sea gives them a bewildering sense of freedom and stimulates their spirit of adventure. Gunnarsson’s readers can not miss the other conventional images accompanying the Vikings’ descriptions in romantic literature: the pleasure of combat, bloody human sacrifices, and love for foreign women.

The main attraction of the volume *The Sworn Brothers* lies in the simultaneous representation of the two opposite aspects of the Viking myth that we have distinguished earlier: the tale of the ancestor and the myth of the adventurer-warrior, which represent the spirit of rootedness and the spirit of adventure. Gunnarsson was convinced that the combination of these two spirits, embodied in his novel by the reasonable Ingolf and the fearless Leif, made the settlement of Iceland possible.

*Wayward Heroes* (*Gerpla*, 1952) by Halldór Kiljan Laxness is a satirical historical novel in which the author deconstructs the Viking myth and mocks the Icelandic ancestors with his irresistible humour. However, it cannot be said that the author rejects the legacy of these ancestors, as he based his novel on an Icelandic saga – *Fóstbræðra saga* (*The Saga of the Sworn Brothers*), from which he borrows the narrative. As for Laxness’s sarcastic

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<sup>1</sup> “Ingolf blev blød om Hjertet, da han mindedes hvor nær Hjör-Leif, Island først havde taget i Favn. Hjör-Leif var den første, der med Blod og Kød havde viet det nye Lands Jord.”



tone, cynicism and irony are reminiscent of the dark humour that sometimes is to be noticed in certain sagas. However, in *Wayward Heroes*, the ancient material is rewritten, reappropriated, and entirely diverted from the original narrative intentionality of the *sagnamaðr* – the original author of the saga. The tragic story of the two young men, bound by a sworn oath of brotherhood, was told by the *sagnamaðr* who celebrated their heroism to its outbreak. By “recycling” the story of Þorgeir Havarson and Þormóður Bessason, Laxness ridicules their valiant features and their vain search for glory.

By writing the saga *Wayward Heroes*, the author attacks the old heroic ideal and the fantastic image of the ancestor is defeated. First, Laxness mocks the physical appearance of the ancient Icelanders, drawing them an unflattering portrait. They do not resemble at all the tall, blonde and robust heroes that romantic writers and Hollywood movies like to project for their audience:

At that time, most men in Iceland were short and bandy-legged, gaunt and swollen-jointed, knotted and twisted by gout, blue of complexion and shrivelled. Their plight was to toil away in that inimical land, in storm, wind, and rain, on mountainsides and at sea. Most had no fatty meat to sustain them. (Laxness 48)

Moreover, these illustrious ancestors were mediocre warriors with weak weapons. They do not hesitate to fight with stones; cutting off one’s head took a long time as their swords were so blunt: “Norsemen were greatly in the habit of using their weapons, badly forged from inferior steel, as bludgeons, being too blunt to bite” (Laxness 44-45). By making fun of the ancestral figure of the Viking, the author relativises the fixation and fondness that his figure may have triggered over the centuries. However, we have noticed that Laxness does not entirely deny the cultural and historical heritage of the Icelandic Middle Ages. If he chose to mock the Vikings, he was a peace supporter and condemned brutality and war. As he is parodying the Icelandic sagas, he denounces the blind violence of Vikings since not even women and children were spared by the Scandinavian plunderers. In his novels, Laxness often focused on describing the existence of the oppressed and suffering, who were heavily despised by the sworn brothers Þorgeir Havarson and Þormóður Bessason.

Same as Laxness, it is not uncommon for Nordic authors to distance themselves from this burdensome Viking heritage. Many historians, such as the Norwegian Yngvar Ustvedt, argue against the Viking heritage. In his work *Worse than their reputation (Verre enn sitt rykte, 2004)*, he emphasises the commercial activities of the ancient Scandinavian people. He debates the overly conciliatory image that the Vikings enjoy nowadays in Northern Europe and Scandinavia. He examines the evolution of the Viking myth from the first

raids on the British Isles and the European continent to the unrestrained idealisation in the 19th century. He notes that historians and artists of the 20th century have finally been able to look at the Vikings with more pragmatism. However, the last few decades have been marked by a revival of the fascination that the ancient Scandinavian seems to exercise. Ustvedt warns against this phantasmagorical approach, which is very luring. He reminds his readership that ancient Vikings were characterised by violence, brutality and extreme aggressiveness.

It is pretty disturbing to note how this ancestor still manages to unleash the passions of Scandinavians a thousand years after the end of the Viking era, whether it is young people in need of reference points in life who cultivate an imaginary filiation with this figure from the past, or a researcher such as Yngvar Ustvedt, who feels offended that his compatriots can claim to be proud of being descended from such illustrious ancestors.

By mentioning the novel *Wayward Heroes* by Halldór Kiljan Laxness, we have already seen that some Scandinavian authors also mock the image of the Viking ancestors. In 1941, the Swedish writer Frans Gunnar Bengtsson published the first volume of a delightful adventure novel set in the Viking era – *The Long Ships (Röde Orm)*. The second volume appeared in 1945. The narrative's tone is often humorous, and the target of this parody is, most of the time, the Scandinavian heroic ideal represented by the Vikings. However, Bengtsson proceeds with much less sarcasm than Laxness, looking at his characters with tenderness. The reader follows the misfortunes of a young boy, Orm, who accidentally embarks on a Viking expedition. This first voyage takes him to Spain, where he enters the service of the Vizier of Cordoba, to Denmark at the court of King Herald “Bluetooth” Gormsson, and then to England. After spending some time on his farm in southern Sweden, Orm sets out on an expedition to the East to recover a treasure from Bulgaria. While Orm can occasionally be seen as a civilising hero, particularly for his efforts in converting the unruly people of Småland to Christianity, the author seems more focused on depicting him as a Viking—a bold adventurer and extensive traveller.

Bengtsson explores the different facets of the Viking myth. At times, he glorifies the way of life of the ancient Scandinavians and their values: he evokes their sea voyages, freedom, the loyalty and generosity of the great chieftains, and the courage and strength they showed in battles. Sometimes, he ironises the Vikings: the Vikings vomit abundantly during their first voyage at sea. In chapter 9 of the first volume of *Röde Orm*, the hero does not want to fight a duel because he is afraid of catching a cold. Orm's choice to face his opponent in the king's hall turns out to be wise because the ending would undoubtedly have been less spectacular if the fight had occurred outside. Thus, the reader can see how the severed head of his opponent lands in a beer barrel.

Bengtsson tries to be realistic, sometimes becoming more critical, but he depicts an uncompromising portrait of his characters. Orm and his people are rude. They burp, and they have lice. Often, they are not very handsome, and the author does not hesitate to illustrate their cruelty and violence. However, Bengtsson does not place himself in the same perspective as Laxness. He does not condemn the barbarity of their ancestors, and he does not seem to feel to parody such a complex cultural and historical heritage. On the other hand, he sometimes engages in an actual exercise of rewriting fragments borrowed from the Norse sagas, which ties up his novel to *Wayward Heroes* in a particular literary tradition.

*Röde Orm* conveys moderate heroism, as Bengtsson never subscribes to a blind idealisation of the Vikings. Moreover, he gives, just like Gunnarsson, a more realistic image of the life of the old Scandinavians. Returning to his lands, he ploughs his fields, builds a farm, and starts a family to perpetuate his bloodline.

Katarina Mazetti, a successful Swedish author, mostly known for her humorous novels *The Guy in the Grave Next Door* (*Grabben i graven bredvid*, 1999) and *Family Tomb* (*Familjengraven: en fortsättning på romanen Grabben i graven bredvid*, 2005), wrote her first historical novel in 2008 – *Mixed Blood* (*Blandat blod*). The plot of this novel takes place in the province of Blekinge on the southeast coast of Sweden, near the city of Kyiv. After the raids of the Pechenegs over Kyiv, Radoslav and Milka, son and daughter of a wealthy silk merchant, decide to follow the young Viking man named Svarte to the northern lands to start a new life. Their lands and customs stand in contrast to the wealth and refinement of Kyiv. Mazetti uses a conventional literary device widely used in historical novels – the reader discovers the new place and its traditions through one or more protagonists who are strangers to the region and often come from very different backgrounds. As one might expect, a Swedish farm from the late 10th century would appear extremely poor to someone from Kyiv. Even the two young enslaved people accompanying Milka are appalled by the poverty and the dirtiness of the farm where Svarte grew up. The misery that emanates from the place is such that it gives rise to a misunderstanding. Thus, one enslaved person wonders why they are welcomed in the stables and not received directly into the farmhouse as they look alike. We are very far from the eulogistic descriptions of richly decorated Viking houses as the literature and arts of the 19th century liked to represent them. Generally speaking, Mazetti's view of the ancient Scandinavians and their world is sober, and there is no trace of the romantic glorification of their ancestors. The writer seems, above all, to have been driven by a concern for historical realism. In an afterword to the novel, she stated that she was keen to do some historical research and was therefore interested in the various sources that shed some light on the Viking period. Her

descriptions of objects and cultural phenomena related to the early medieval Scandinavian period align with historical facts. The rune stones, petroglyphs, tools and sites she mentions are historically attested. Mazetti echoes recent archaeological discoveries such as the barriers of poles erected off the Danish coast and the Blekinge province in southern Sweden, supposed to prevent pirate attacks, or the excavation of the trading centre of Kaup, also known as Wiskiauten on the shores of the Baltic Sea. Finally, in chapter 25, some traders discuss the future of Birka's Swedish trading post. Mazetti exposes the latest theories on the site's abandonment at the end of the 10th century through their reflections. Therefore, her novel is set in an authentic historical and geographical context.

Like many other Norse writers whose novels are set in the Viking era, Mazetti is interested mainly in paganism. The description of a sacrificial ritual with bloody and macabre details is a recurrent motif in this type of novel. However, she is content to mention a few sacrifices very briefly. On the other hand, she prefers to focus to some extent on the divination ceremonies organised by the old prophetess Arnlög. In her afterword, the author regrets that historians have not studied the role of Scandinavian women during the Viking era more. This serves her in rehabilitating women's role in the cult practices that the writer twice describes as spiritism sessions, traditionally considered women's prerogative.

Despite the historical disguise of the story, Mazetti's intention is clear – her novel is an ode to tolerance and cultural and sexual diversity. The author transposes the debates that animate our contemporary Western societies to the Viking era. Thus, we learn from her introduction to the story that Radoslav, the son of the silk merchant from Kyiv, is homosexual. Through Milka, Mazetti states that the Orthodox Church tolerated homosexuality and even a religious ceremony named *adelphopoiesis*, which allowed two persons of the same gender to be united. On the other hand, homosexual relationships were morally prohibited in ancient Scandinavia, and passive homosexuality (effeminacy and unmanly behaviour) was considered particularly infamous. In the eyes of the people of Kyiv, the intolerance of the Vikings regarding this matter proves how primitive they were:

However, I never understood what *ergi* means, insisted Little Dawn. She asked Milka, who walked beside her. Kåre made a face, but Milka tried to explain.

“You know that Radoslav and Buiak had intended to unite themselves by *adelphopoiia* with each other back home in Kyiv,” she said. “Our faith has allowed it since immemorial times, even if it is not encouraged, but here, such things are considered a grave sin. Men are

only allowed to love and live with women. Anything else is considered *ergi*.”

Little Dawn giggled, dissatisfied. “Pagans!” she said.<sup>2</sup> (Mazetti 128; my trans.)

For Radoslav to be respected by the Vikings, Mazetti gives him undeniable masculine traits: he is courageous and a great warrior. She proceeds similarly to advocate equality between genders and people. Missionaries argue with the pagan seer Arnlög about the status of Christian women, which allows Mazetti to denounce the sexism and hypocrisy of the Orthodox Church. The birth of Lilla Grytan’s son, the enslaved African, provides an opportunity to criticise racism. Indeed, the infant’s appearance was surprising: it had dark skin and red hair. A farmer disapproves of the miscegenation: “We Northmen,” he said, “should beware of mixing our blood with blue men and others! If this continues, we shall all look like trolls!”<sup>3</sup> (Mazetti 112; my trans.) The child’s father then argues against the narrow-minded man and defends the mixture of cultures. He points out that the Vikings did not hesitate to conceive children with foreign women. That racist farmer is the spokesman for some modern nationalist movements who are often inclined to consider the Scandinavian Middle Ages as a kind of golden age for their people. In her afterword to the novel – *Efterskrift för historiskt intresserade (Postscript for Those Interested in History)*, Mazetti aims directly at contemporary Vikings who claim the purity of the Scandinavian race.

These fictional depictions of Vikings reflect the societal changes and evolving artistic influences within Scandinavian societies. As they grow, so do their cultural symbols and narratives. The Viking image in this context is not a static symbol but a dynamic cultural construct that evolves in response to the changing realities, cultural influences and needs.

Through their creative endeavours, contemporary authors reinterpret the Viking historical image, often infusing it with contemporary themes, motifs, and narratives that resonate with modern readers. These reinterpretations usually explore recent experiences and issues, themes such as religious or sexual identity, cultural memory, and socio-political changes interplaying between tradition and modernity. While Vikings symbolise

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<sup>2</sup> Men jag förstod aldrig vad ‘arghet’ är, envisades Lilla Grytan. Hon frågade Milka som vandrade bradvid henne. Kåre gjorde en grimas men Milka försökte förklara.

“Du vet att Radoslav och Buiak hade ämnat ingå adelphopoiia med varandra hemma i Kiev”, sade hon. “Vär tro tillåter det sedan urminnes tid, även om det inte uppmuntras, men här anses sådant vara en svår synd. Män får endast älska och leva med kvinnor. Allt annat är arghet.” Lilla Grytan fnös. “Hedningar!” sade hon.

<sup>3</sup> “Vi nordmän”, sade han, “borde hålla oss för goda för att blanda vårt blod med blåmän och andra! Ska nu detta fortsätta ser vi väl snart ut som troll allihop!”

historical realities and cultural values of the Viking Age, their image also resonates with modern readers' needs and concerns.

In conclusion, the evolution of the Viking image in Scandinavian literature reflects the dynamic interplay between historical heritage and contemporary reinterpretations. Although deeply rooted in the realities and cultural values of the Viking Age, the Viking continues to evolve and resonate with modern audiences, offering a powerful symbol through which present-day societal experiences and issues can be explored.

### **The Viking Image in Cinema and Television**

In cinema and television, portraying historical figures and events often necessitates balancing historical authenticity and artistic liberty. This balance becomes particularly pronounced in the depictions of Vikings, a cultural symbol firmly established in Scandinavian history yet subject to contemporary reinterpretations.

The portrayal of Vikings in cinema and television has evolved from the traditional stereotype of ruthless warriors to a more nuanced depiction. This modern approach examines their culture, society, and myths, highlighting their roles as merchants, explorers, and missionaries.

Artistic liberty and creativity allow filmmakers the imaginative autonomy to reinterpret the Viking image in response to contemporary themes, social realities, and audiences' expectations. Filmmakers infuse the Viking's image with contemporary narratives and themes through their creative endeavours, responding to their audience's needs. They reimagine this historical figure, often embellishing it with elements of fantasy, romance, and drama to cater to the tastes and sensibilities of contemporary audiences (Refsum 117; Kurikka 239).

In historical dramas, Vikings have often been the centrepiece of many riveting tales. The TV series *Vikings* (2013-2020) is one such example that presents a semi-fictional portrayal of the legendary Viking chieftain Ragnar Lothbrok and his descendants. Despite some historical inaccuracies, it brings to life the Viking Age's socio-political landscape, emphasising their democratic political structures and nautical prowess. The show also reflects their religious beliefs, exploring the tensions between Norse paganism and Christianity. Vikings greatly emphasise the Vikings' navigational skills and eagerness to explore new lands. The show vividly depicts their longships sailing across treacherous seas, revealing their determination to venture into uncharted territories and discover new opportunities for conquest and trade. Moreover, sea voyages were instrumental in their raiding and conquest activities. The series showcases dramatic raids on coastal villages and cities, portraying the Vikings' prowess as warriors and the fear they instilled in their enemies. Similarly, *The Last Kingdom* (2015-present), based on Bernard

Cornwell's *The Saxon Stories* (2004-2020), offers a gritty depiction of Viking invasions in England, focusing on the cultural exchanges during their expeditions.

Including Vikings within the fantasy and science fiction genres has allowed for a creative reimagining of this historical symbol. Marvel's *Thor* series, rooted in Norse mythology, personifies the Viking gods as superheroes, emphasising their connection to the fantastical. Thor, Odin, and Loki, though drastically different from their mythological counterparts, resonate with contemporary audiences, embodying universal themes of heroism, wisdom, and trickery.

The accuracy of Vikings' portrayals in cinema and television is often compromised for dramatic effects. While historical dramas attempt to stay true to the facts and time frame, many fall prey to anachronisms and oversimplifications. Viking helmets, for instance, are often depicted with horns, a myth propagated by 19th-century romanticism despite no historical evidence supporting this. Also, the relentless focus on their raiding activities usually overshadows their achievements as explorers, traders, and farmers.

In international cinema, the Viking image has captured audiences' imagination and provided a lens through which historical authenticity, artistic liberty, and cultural identity can be explored. Cinematic portrayals of Vikings have ranged from sensationalist spectacles to more nuanced depictions, reflecting the intricate interplay between narrative demands, socio-political commentaries, and filmmakers' cultural perspectives. Examining these portrayals through notable international movies reveals how cinematic representations of Vikings go beyond entertainment, influencing the global perception of this historical era and its cultural significance.

Numerous films have depicted Vikings as ferocious warriors and ruthless raiders, capitalising on their reputation for violence and adventure. One prominent example is the 1958 film *The Vikings*, directed by Richard Fleischer and starring Kirk Douglas and Tony Curtis. The movie epitomises the sensationalist approach with epic battles and exaggerated personas. While it offers an engaging narrative, it strays from historical accuracy, perpetuating the perception of Vikings as mere plunderers rather than encompassing their multifaceted roles as explorers, traders, and settlers.

Cinema has also leveraged the Viking image to explore contemporary socio-political themes. An example of this approach is *The Thirteen Warriors* (1999), directed by John McTiernan. Based on Michael Crichton's novel *Eaters of the Dead*, the film introduces an outsider Arab diplomat who joins a group of Viking warriors in battling supernatural forces. The movie cleverly incorporates themes of cultural clash and cooperation. Here, the Vikings symbolise the Other and potential allies, mirroring contemporary discussions on multiculturalism and alliance-building.

Some filmmakers have committed to historical accuracy, providing more nuanced portrayals of Vikings that align with recent research. In the Norwegian film *The Last King (Birkebeinerne)*, 2016, director Nils Gaup accurately depicts Viking society during the Civil War era. The film navigates the complexities of political intrigue and loyalty while portraying Vikings as more than just marauders. Such films emphasise Vikings' roles as farmers, artisans, and political actors, challenging one-dimensional portrayals.

The filmmakers' cultural background influences Viking portrayals, as evident in Nicolas Winding Refn's 2017 *Valhalla Rising*. Set in Viking-era Scandinavia, the film juxtaposes historical events with surreal and symbolic elements. Refn's Danish background and unique artistic vision lead to a gritty and abstract portrayal, reflecting the cultural and creative fusion that shapes cinematic depictions of Vikings.

In conclusion, despite often straying from strict historical accuracy, depicting Vikings in cinema and television plays a crucial role in popularising the Viking image and Scandinavian culture worldwide. These portrayals ignite curiosity and foster a more profound interest in the rich history and heritage of the Norse people. By blending entertainment with historical and cultural significance elements, these media representations encourage audiences to seek more accurate information and engage with the complex and fascinating narratives of the Viking Age. Consequently, they are a powerful tool for cultural education and historical appreciation, bridging the gap between myth and reality.

## **Conclusions**

The robust and resilient image of the Viking has left an undeniable mark on Scandinavian identity and global perceptions of the region. As a symbol of shared heritage and cultural pride, the Viking image has become synonymous with Scandinavia, shaping the region's cultural identity and global image. However, this symbol's global resonance also challenges maintaining cultural authenticity amidst appropriation and commodification.

The Viking image's impact on Scandinavian identity is profound. As a symbol of shared heritage, it provides a sense of collective identity and cultural continuity. With their bold spirit of adventure and resilience, the Vikings embody values that resonate deeply within contemporary Scandinavian societies. They serve as a cultural touchstone, a link to a historical past that continues to shape the region's cultural landscape and societal norms (Winroth 161-8). This shared heritage, encapsulated in the Viking image, fosters a sense of cultural pride and belonging, reinforcing the collective identity of all Scandinavians.

Moreover, the Viking image is crucial in shaping global perceptions of Scandinavia. They are often associated with strength, courage, and resilience,



qualities that have to define the Scandinavian character. This perception, reinforced by depictions in literature and cinema, contributes to the region's global image as a land of fearless explorers and formidable warriors. Their image, thus, serves as a cultural ambassador, projecting a powerful image of Scandinavia onto the global stage. Nevertheless, sometimes, this process simplifies or distorts the Viking image, reducing it to a stereotypical warrior archetype or commercial symbol devoid of cultural value. This global appropriation and commodification of the historical figure of the Viking can undermine cultural authenticity, as the nuanced and multifaceted nature of the Viking identity is often “lost in translation”.

In sum, studying the Viking image in contemporary fiction and cinema offers valuable insights into the dynamics of cultural representation, the (re)interpretation of historical symbols, and the shaping of cultural identity. It underscores the enduring relevance of the Viking image in the Scandinavian cultural imaginary and its significant impact on the global perception of their region. The exploration of this topic, therefore, contributes to a deeper understanding of Norse culture and its complex interplay with history, literature, cinema, and global cultural dynamics.

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