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Vikings: Life and Legend (6 March - 22 June 2014)

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No exhibition can guarantee a museum a popular success, but the Vikings must surely offer a pretty good shot at it. Where often it is a challenge to establish the identity of an historical culture or phenomenon for a potential audience, absolutely no such problem exists for the Vikings, for everyone – even those who know nothing about history – knows about the Vikings. They have become part of a common mental furniture, their character and behaviour strongly defined in the popular imagination and constantly restated and reinforced by appearances not just in the rarefied environs of academic history but in the far more accessible form of novels, films, advertisements and television programmes. Vikings, everyone knows, were sailors and warriors, robust and unruly pagans who terrorised Christian Europe and explored the north Atlantic in the west and the rivers of Russia in the east. The classic Viking behaviour is the raid: bearded warriors with axes leap ashore from their dragon-prowed longships in search of villages to burn and treasure to steal. The pop culture Viking has become a sort of superman, exceptional in all his appetites and a paragon of a violent and unfettered hyper-masculinity that is at once entirely unacceptable and entirely fascinating to a gleefully horrified modern audience.

For the curators of an exhibition this creates a challenge. How to harness the enthusiasm created by the overblown fictional Vikings of popular culture into interest in the equally spectacular but far less cartoonish achievements of early medieval Scandinavian culture? In 1980, the last time that the British Museum held a large-scale Vikings exhibition, a hugely successful answer was found as the Vikings were repackaged as bringers of trade. Some 20 years of reassessment and questioning of the scale and uniqueness of Viking activities since the publication in 1962 of Peter Sawyer's brilliant and groundbreaking book *The Age of the Vikings* needed to be brought to the attention of the public; more recently, campaigns of excavation at Wood Quay in Dublin and Coppergate in York had revealed the vitality of Viking age towns and brought forth a charismatic wealth of material culture. The result was a clear message of the Vikings as traders as well as

raiders, a message later reinforced by the opening of York's Jorvik Viking Centre in 1984, a move that helped to cement the Vikings in their position as popular favourites.

In the 34 years that have elapsed since the last exhibition, the Vikings have, if anything, increased in popularity, whilst continued research and excavation, together with the far greater availability of material from eastern Europe, have produced a wealth of new scholarship and understanding. The time is right for a new exhibition to set this before the public and to meet the continuing demand for all things Norse, and to this end the British Museum has unveiled *Vikings: Life and Legend*, displaying its confidence in the Viking 'brand' by giving it the honour of being the first to make use of the museum's major new exhibition space, The Sainsbury Gallery. Initial press reception of *Vikings: Life and Legend*, however, has proved to be at best decidedly mixed and in some cases actively hostile.

Some of the criticisms are, it must be said, wrong-headed: Mark Hudson in the [*Daily Telegraph*](#) [2] is 'baffled' by the absence from the exhibition of the British Museum's 'terrifying dragon-head boat prow', in apparent ignorance of the fact that the prow in question is a minimum of 200 years too early and has nothing whatsoever to link it with any Viking activity: it may well be late Roman. Brian Sewell in the [*Evening Standard*](#) [3] lambasts the exhibition as a 'disaster' on the frankly ridiculous grounds that it contains too many 'small things' and that all the larger objects are rusty or decaying; his principal contention appears, though, to be that the exhibition is too 'swotty' and does not sufficiently indulge schoolboy Viking fantasies. Other [more sober commentators](#) [4], however, have also felt that *Vikings: Life and Legend* lacks excitement, joy or a compelling narrative and have taken issue with the staging and presentation. Is this fair?

The exhibition is divided into a number of sections, each expanding upon particular features of early medieval Scandinavian culture and society: we have 'Viking homelands'; 'Viking World'; 'Cultures in Contact'; 'International trade'; 'Communicating power'; 'Status and display'; 'The Ship'; 'Way of the warrior'; 'Warriors to soldiers' and conclude with 'Viking belief'. The first few rooms set the scene, positioning Viking Age Scandinavia in an intellectual, cultural, economic and artistic milieu that was all its own and yet was also in direct and indirect communication with cultural giants to the south: with the kingdoms of Latin Christendom in the west and the distant but looming Abbasid Caliphate far to the southeast. The way in which Scandinavian culture married indigenous and exotic elements is gloriously illustrated by silver hoards from the Vale of York and from Lyuboyezha in southern Russia, each of which incorporates items from India, Ireland, Persia and the Frankish lands as well as Scandinavian material. Bearing the marks of Christianity, Islam and Scandinavian pantheism, these spectacular items demand close attention for their intrinsic quality, for the insight that they provide into the cultural, religious and artistic influences on the Vikings and for what they reveal of the realities of wealth and power in this world. Close attention, however, is very hard to bestow, as this part of the exhibition suffers from appalling overcrowding. To have a chance of seeing anything at all, the only viable strategy is to grab any opportunity that arises and dart from case to case whenever a break appears in the press of bodies. It seems extraordinary that the BM has failed so spectacularly to manage crowd flow in their prestigious new space, and it is a terrible pity for the exhibition, for many fine items are easily missed as a result.

The display space is far more successful when it opens out into a large hall with, as its centrepiece, Roskilde 6, the Viking ship discovered in the mud of Roskilde Fjord in Fyn, Denmark in the late 1990s; at some 37m in length, it is the largest ever found. Around a fifth of the original timbers have survived 'mostly the keel and bottom planking' but the outline of the complete ship is represented extremely effectively in a ghostly form by a steel frame. First seen from above, the physical presence of the ship dramatically dominates the second half of the exhibition and rightly places Scandinavian mastery of the sea at its heart. Around it are a set of displays that put the emphasis much more firmly upon the audience-pleasing classic 'Viking' activities: sailing, raiding and fighting. One of the most visually arresting cases in the exhibition 'and frequently reproduced in the publicity material' places a grinning jawbone with elaborately filed teeth beneath a conical helmet, and surrounds it with weaponry and the paraphernalia of battle. The skeletal Viking warrior composite is hokey, for sure, and unashamedly played for drama, but arguably in a way to which the Vikings themselves were no strangers. An even more emphatic piece of 11th-century theatre is embodied in the apparent execution burials from Ridgeway Hill, Weymouth: a large number of males,

identified by scientific means as Scandinavian, were discovered in 2009, beheaded, stripped of all items of value and with their heads tossed together. This is a curious find and much could be hypothesized as to the nature of the series of events it chronicles. The surmise is that it represents the execution of the whole crew of a raiding ship after their capture, but there do not appear to be any marks of recent combat on the skeletons and other explanations are possible. Rather than exploring this, however, the case captions instead labour the point that this shows that the Vikings were not invincible: but had any but the most rabid believers in their superhuman belligerence ever believed that they were?

Vikings: Life and Legend concludes with a small (too small) but fascinating section on belief and magic. Rightly avoiding too much emphasis on the familiar written accounts of Norse belief, which are late and show evidence of considerable neatening up under the influence of Christianity, we see in the imagery of the objects displayed here a complex, untidy and syncretic set of ideas and practices, some of which for sure involved Óðin, Þór and the rest, but others of which were animistic and concerned with evoking the spiritual power of the local natural world, as in a number of pendants from Russia and Finland depicting the teeth and claws of bears. Here we see also the grave goods of a female sorcerer, almost the first time that we have encountered women acting with any degree of independence in the exhibition.

There should be no doubt whatsoever that *Vikings: Life and Legend* contains much that is both fascinating and that must deepen our understanding of the life of northern and eastern Europe, not to mention the near East, between the 8th and 11th centuries. Perhaps what is most exciting here is how much of this stuff is new: the overwhelming majority of the objects shown were not known at the time of the last great Vikings exhibition in 1980, either because they had not yet been unearthed or because they were sequestered from western scholarship in forbidding Soviet-era eastern bloc museums. Maybe, then, one of the best ways to understand *Vikings: Life and Legend* is as a progress report and snapshot of the state of play in study of the Vikings, with hints that there may be a lot more to come, especially in the east. This may not, though, entirely absolve the exhibition from the central charge of its critics: that it lacks a narrative drive, and that the whole manages to be somewhat less than the sum of its parts. It would certainly benefit from a stronger chronology: we have only occasional hints of change, difference and development within the Viking Age and almost no discussion at all of the circumstances in which the Viking episode arose or why it ended. Equally, the curators' obvious intention that the objects should be allowed to stand for themselves without over-reliance on modern reconstructions or explication has been taken to lengths that border on the puritanical: the odd picture to show, for instance, how early medieval dress can be reconstructed on the basis of brooch remains and textile fragments would not have been so very great a self-indulgence and might have helped to breathe a little more life into Vikings who felt a little dry and academic.

For all its faults, *Vikings: Life and Legend* is a spectacular and unmissable exposition of Scandinavian early medieval culture and its impact on a much wider world, but it is constantly and unhappily troubled by an uncertainty about its audience and purpose: the layperson might well be put off by its stalwart refusal to give in to the temptations of extensive reconstructions and explanation, but the expert will equally cavil at the sensationalism of its publicity or its treatment of the Weymouth execution material. It is a victim of the hacking-and-slashing Vikings of popular culture, and that is a great shame.

Other reviews:

Guardian

<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/mar/09/vikings-life-legend-review-british-museum-tim-adams> [5]

Week

<http://www.theweek.co.uk/art/57671/vikings-life-and-legend-reviews-british-museum-show> [6]

Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/vikings-life-and-legend-at-the-british-museum-is-set-to-explode-some-myths-about-the-hordes-and-their-hoards-9160260.html> [7]

Financial Times

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/61504c6c-a3b7-11e3-aa85-00144feab7de.html> [8]

Evening Standard

<http://www.standard.co.uk/goingout/exhibitions/vikings-life-and-legend-british-museum--exhibition-review-9172707.html>

[9]

Telegraph

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/10673076/Vikings-British-Museum-review-Like-watching-The-Killing-in-Stansted-Airport.html> [2]

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/100912>

[2] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/10673076/Vikings-British-Museum-review-Like-watching-The-Killing-in-Stansted-Airport.html>

[3] <http://www.standard.co.uk/goingout/exhibitions/Vikings-life-and-legend-british-museum--exhibition-review-9172707.html>

[4] <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/mar/04/vikings-british-museum-ship-story>

[5] <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/mar/09/vikings-life-legend-review-british-museum-tim-adams>

[6] <http://www.theweek.co.uk/art/57671/vikings-life-and-legend-reviews-british-museum-show>

[7] <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/vikings-life-and-legend-at-the-british-museum-is-set-to-explode-some-myths-about-the-hordes-and-their-hoards-9160260.html>

[8] <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/61504c6c-a3b7-11e3-aa85-00144feab7de.html>

[9] <http://www.standard.co.uk/goingout/exhibitions/vikings-life-and-legend-british-museum--exhibition-review-9172707.html>