

# The Vikings

**Semester/Year:** Spring 2017

**3-Credit Course**

**Location:** Stockholm

**Faculty:** Madeleine Hurd

**Time:** Tuesdays & Fridays, 13:15 – 14:35 (unless otherwise noted)

**Classroom:** 1E-509

**Major Disciplines:** History, Literature, Religious Studies



Photo: Werner Karrasch; reconstructed Viking ship (Sweden).

**Faculty:**

Dr. Phil. Madeleine Hurd, Ph. D. Harvard University (European History), Adjunct at Harvard, New York and City Universities, Assistant Professor University of Pittsburgh, Associate Professor Södertörn University. With DIS since 2015.

**DIS Contacts:**

Jakob Lorentzen, [jlo@dis.dk](mailto:jlo@dis.dk)

Mark Peters, [mpe@disstockholm.se](mailto:mpe@disstockholm.se)

**Description of course:**

This course looks closely at the history, culture, and society of the Scandinavian Vikings. They were a complex people, responding to complex times: poets and pagans, merciless plunderers, home-loving farmers, givers of law and exacters of vengeance, international traders, sailors and explorers. We will begin by examining the Scandinavian Viking society, economy and mythology; the second part of the course will concentrate on Viking expansion, their colonies and conquests. We will give due attention to that glorious Viking legacy, the heroic and mythic sagas. The course will also give an idea of the *detective work* needed to know a people who left so very few records: what conclusions can we draw from epic poems and myths, archaeology, linguistic and place-name remnants, the brief or disdainful accounts of Roman historians and Iraqi diplomats, the thunderous anathemas of Christian monks? Join us on a voyage of exploration and discovery – ending, of course, with an analysis of what “Vikings” seem to symbolize to modern Europe, U.S. and Russia.

**Learning objectives:**

- Develop an understanding of Viking society, daily life, clothing and food, trade and farming
- Understand the social relations of warlord, retainers, sailors and ship-owners, tribes, traders, farmers and warriors during this unstable and dynamic period
- Understand the technologies and practices that ensured the success of Viking ships and weapons
- Use the epic sagas and myths, graves and runestones to gain an understanding of the moral and spiritual world of the Viking elite
- Use all available data to uncover the realities of Viking-age gender relations
- Chart and explain the Vikings’ plundering / tribute-exacting / settlement in Europe, Russia and (briefly, probably) the New World
- Gain an understanding of the ways in which historical evidence on the Vikings can be understood, weighed, and evaluated
- Examine the Viking legacy – both in reality, and in European/American/Russian imagination

**Course structure:**

The course will consist of lectures, students’ own-time reading and video-watching, and all-class discussions on questions raised. There will be two field studies, the first of which (the morning of Feb. 17) will be to the excellent Viking exhibit at the near-by Historiska Museum (which specializes in the Vikings); the second (on March 29) an activity/destination to be determined during the course.

**Evaluation:**

In order to receive a passing grade, you must complete all the assignments.

Engagement: 15%

Take-home Midterm: 20%

Three 2-page papers: 30%

Final take-home exam: 35%

By “engagement” is meant *not missing or coming late to class, being prepared* for well-informed discussion during class. Take notes and pictures during field trips and utilize the information in your work. In short, be ready to weigh in and do your part in advancing our knowledge and understanding of this topic.

All the assignments are written and take-home. For detailed descriptions, including study questions, on which to base both your approach to the readings and the assignments themselves, see the entry “syllabus” on Canvas. Generally, you will be expected to pick a theme or topic, and develop it in light of the readings, class lectures and discussions, and your own insights.

**Approach to teaching:**

I love history. I think there is nothing more interesting than trying to figure out what made people of other times, other places, other world-views *tick*. What did they do, and why? How did they understand the world? It's also like time-travel: one gets an idea of *what it felt like to be there*. What did they eat and wear? What were women-men relations like? Then there is experiencing the beauty of Vikings' carvings, ships, and poetry; how can one understand a people so evidently wed to weapons and warrior ethics, and yet determined to produce such art? Further, all historians love doing detective work. How do we know anything about the Vikings, anyway? After all, facts are not just there, nicely transcribed for us by some Last Viking. Quite the contrary: we have to ferret things out, evaluate different accounts, fill in gaps. And, finally, it is fascinating to see how images of the Vikings have survived over the centuries, resounding as symbols (of what? national, even racist pride? brute masculinity? pagan resistance to modern civilization? exemplars of a better life?) to this day.

It is my goal to impart as much of this enthusiasm as I can. I approach history as a collaborative process: once engaged, students always provide new insights, new ideas, new approaches. I look very much forward to a shared historical quest!

**Disability and Resource Statement**

Any student who has a need for accommodation based on the impact of a disability should immediately contact Mark Peters ([mpe@disstockholm.se](mailto:mpe@disstockholm.se)) to coordinate this. In order to receive accommodations, students should inform the instructor of approved DIS accommodations.

**Reading list**

## Books:

Else Roesdahl, *The Vikings*. Penguin Books, London  
John Haywood, *The Penguin Atlas of Viking History*, Penguin Books, 1998  
Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*. Trans. Jean Young, Univ. Calif. 1954  
*The Poetic Edda*, transl. Carolyne Larrington, Oxford Univ. Press, 1996  
H.R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, Oxford UP, 1990  
Jesse Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 1990  
Frans Bengtsson, *The Long Ships* (any edition)  
Hermann Palsson & Paul Edwards, transl. *Egil's Saga*. Penguin Books, 1960.

## Available on-line / Canvas:

Jesse Byock, "Conesensual Governance", pp. 111-136 in *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Univ. of Calif. Press, 1988). On Google Books.  
Elisabeth Arwill-Nordbladh. "A Reigning Queen or the Wife of a King – Only? Gender Politics in the Scandinavian Viking Age", in Sara M Nelson (ed), *Ancient Queens: Archeological Explorations*. Walnut Creek, Lanham & Oxford AltaMira Press, 2003, pp. 19-31. On Canvas.  
Elise Naumann et al. "Slaves as burial gifts in Viking Age Norway? Evidence from stable isotope and ancient DNA analyses." In: *Journal of Archaeological Science* 41 (2014), pp. 533-540.  
Judith Jesch, "Sexuality, wisdom and heroism: female figures in Norse myth and legend", "Women and skaldic poetry", and "The audience of Viking age poetry", in *Women and Viking Age*, pp. 124-176  
*Njal's Saga*  
James Montgomery, "Ibn Fadlan and the Rusiyyah", *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 3 (2000), pp. 1-25  
Anne Stalsberg, "Women as actors in North European Viking Age Trade", in R. Samon (ed), *Social Approaches to Viking Studies*. Glsagow: Cruithna Press, pp.75-83.  
Andrew Elliott, "Time out of joint: Why a Gaul fought the Normans in *Asterix and the Vikings* (2005)", in Kevin Harty, ed., *The Vikings on Film: Essays on Depictions of the Nordic Middle Ages*, pp. 165-17

## DETAILED SYLLABUS

### **Friday January 19: Introduction.**

Welcome to the course! What is your impression of Vikings? Why do they interest you? What do you think our sources are? A brief discussion of “how we know what we know”. Some concrete background: geography and sailing routes, climate and nature.

Assignment for next time: Watch a selection of History videos (a list will be handed out in class), as a solid and easily-digested introduction to Viking material culture. Next, three episodes of *Vikings* (the Irish-Canadian historical drama television series by Michael Hirst for the television channel History), to be found on Youtube. Historical teaser question: can you find anything in the *Vikings* series that seems *historically inaccurate* or even just *unlikely* after watching the factual documentaries?

### **Week 1: Geography and Every-Day Life**

Tuesday January 24: Geography and geopolitics: carving a living from inhospitable Scandinavia.

Readings: John Haywood, *The Penguin Atlas of Viking History*  
Introduction to the *Poetic Edda*, pp. x-xxv  
Roesdahl: Introduction

Friday January 27: Every-day life: food, clothing, transport, language, tools, weapons.

Readings: Roesdahl: pp. 9-77  
Videos: History Channel video No. 1

### **Week 2: Viking politics and society**

Tuesday January 31: Who has power, and why? The *jarl* and his *hird*; keeping friends and killing enemies

Readings: “The List of Rig”, *Poetic Edda* pp. 246-252  
“Sayings of the High One”, in *ibid.*, pp. 14-38  
Jesse Byock, “Conesensual Governance”, pp. 111-136 in *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Univ. of Calif. Press, 1988). On Google Books.

Friday February 3: Lords, farmers, slaves; the *Ting*; the nature of law and justice

Readings: **Choose one!**  
Elisabeth Arwill-Nordbladh. “A Reigning Queen or the Wife of a King – Only? Gender Politics in the Scandinavian Viking Age”, in Sara M Nelson (ed), *Ancient Queens: Archeological Explorations*. Walnut Creek, Lanham & Oxford AltaMira Press, 2003, pp. 19-31. Available on-line.  
Elise Naumann et al. “Slaves as burial gifts in Viking Age Norway? Evidence from stable isotope and ancient DNA analyses.” In: *Journal of Archaeological Science* 41 (2014), pp. 533-540. Available on-line.  
Videos: History Channel video No. 2

**Week 3: Family, Honor and Gender**

Tuesday February 14: Women as actors

Readings: Judith Jesch, "Sexuality, wisdom and heroism: female figures in Norse myth and legend", "Women and skaldic poetry", and "The audience of Viking age poetry", in *Women and Viking Age*, pp. 124-176 (on Canvas)  
John Haywood, "Women in the Viking Age", *Penguin Historical Atlas*.

Wednesday February 15, 8:30 – 12:30: Field Trip to Historiska Museet

Friday February 17: Masculinity, boasting and vengeance

Readings: Hurstwic, "Honor, Duelling and Drengskapr in the Viking Age" (website)  
Excerpt from *Njal's Saga* (on-line)  
Excerpt from Bengtsson's *Long Ships* ("Red Snake" responds to taunting)

**Week 4: Viking Religion: The Gods, the Fate of Men and Women**

Tuesday February 21: The Nordic Pantheon

Readings: Davidson, "Introduction" and "The World of the Northern Gods", pp 9-17, 23-47, 48-88 in *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*  
Roesdahl: pp. 78-107, 147-167

Friday February 24: The Beauty of Myth

Readings: Snorri Sturluson, *Prose Edda*, pp. 29-93 (in verse, so in reality much less reading)

**Week 5: The Heroes**

Tuesday March 7: What kind of world does Egil live in?

Friday March 10: What makes him a hero?

Reading: Palsson & Edwards, *Egil's Saga*, 1960 (selections)

**Week 6: History. Vikings in the West: Ireland, Iceland, Greenland and "Vineland"**

Tuesday March 14: The Terrible Attacks

Friday March 17: The Ability to Sail and Settle

Readings: Roesdahl: pp. 108-146, 187-276

**Week 7: Vikings in the East: Kiev to Constantinople**

Tuesday March 28: Trading with the East

Wednesday March 29, 13:00 – 17:00: Field Trip TBA

Friday March 31: From pirates to extortionists to mercenaries

Readings: James Montgomery, "Ibn Fadlan and the Rus" (Canvas)  
Roesdahl: pp. 277-297

**Week 8: How? Vikings' Exceptional Technology and Skills; the Viking Warrior and Shieldmaiden**

Tuesday April 3: Exploring Viking technology

View: Video "How to fight with a Viking axe"  
Video "The Viking shield"  
Video "Longships: Viking Technology in Shipbuilding"

Friday April 7 (double session, 13:15 – 16:10): Putting it all together: The Ultimate Heroes and Heroines

Reading: Jesse Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 1990

**Week 9: (No Viking) Classes:**

Reading: Finish Bentgsson, *The Long Ships*.

**Week 10: In the End, What Were They? Trade, Extortion, Settlement, Power**

Friday April 21, double session, 10:05 – 13:05. Discussion of *The Long Ships*; of final assessment of Vikings.

Readings: Anne Stalsberg, "Women as actors in North European Viking Age Trade", in R. Samon (ed), *Social Approaches to Viking Studies*. Glasgow: Cruithna Press, pp.75-83. On Canvas. Additional readings TBA.

**Week 11-12: Vikings in Popular Culture**

Friday April 28, 10:05 – 11:25

View: *Vikings*, History Channel Series. Do you react to it the same way you did in the beginning of the class?

Read: The comic book *Asterix and the Vikings*; and then Andrew Elliott, "Time out of joint: Why a Gaul fought the Normans in *Asterix and the Vikings* (2005)", in Kevin Harty, ed., *The Vikings on Film: Essays on Depictions of the Nordic Middle Ages*, pp. 165-176

Friday May 5, 10:05 – 13:00

In-class movie viewing, excerpts from *The 13<sup>th</sup> Warrior*; a Muslim commentary on the film; discussion of the History Channel series *Viking*; concluding discussion.

**Congratulations on having finished the course!**