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Vikings! Vikings?

New Insights and Reflections on the Use and Misuse of the Terms ‘Viking’ and ‘Viking Age’ in Research, Education, and Society

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durch Ulf Ickerodt

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New Insights and Reflections on the Use and Misuse of the Terms ‘Viking’ and ‘Viking Age’ in Research, Education, and Society

Edited by
Thorsten Lemm, Sven Kalmring, Franziska Lichtenstein and Volker Hilberg

Papers presented at the international conference
Vikings! – Vikings? Towards a responsible use of the term “Viking”
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Vikings! – Vikings?

Towards a responsible use of the term “Viking”

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Foreword by the series' editors

The Museum of Archaeology Gottorf Castle looks back on a history spanning more than 190 years, during which research into the Viking Age long-distance trading centre of Hedeby has been a key focus for almost 130 years. This history of research also includes the archaeological excavations led by Herbert Jankuhn. Many of these findings are still valid today. At the same time, this work was situated within the context of its involvement with the SS Ahnenerbe and the ideological exploitation of historical and archaeological findings under National Socialism. This shapes the way we deal with them today.

Kurt Schietzel's excavations since the 1960s laid the groundwork for the establishment of the Viking Museum Hedeby, which opened in 1985. Between 2004 and 2010, the Museum of Archaeology was able to reconstruct several Viking Age houses on the site of these excavations within the semicircular ramparts of the site of Hedeby, based on the findings documented there. Finally, in 2018, UNESCO designated Hedeby and the Danevirke as a World Heritage Site. Today, approximately 170,000 visitors a year come to see the Viking Museum Hedeby, the reconstructed Viking houses and the archaeological site, with its semicircular rampart as the central archaeological monument. Interest in this extraordinary place and its history not only remains undiminished but seems to be growing.

It is not only the study of the Viking Age but also the way we present it as part of regional and European history that motivates us to take a responsible and reflective look at this time and at the remains that have been preserved for us in the landscape and in collections – for the public does not always distinguish between the Hedeby portrayed in films and novels and the results of archaeological research.

So what could have been more obvious than to explore the history of how the terms 'Vikings' and 'Viking Age' have been perceived in a major special exhibition, given that the findings of a research project funded by the Volkswagen Foundation on the transition from Hedeby to Schleswig provided the impetus for it? A part of the multi-year preparation for this exhibition, which was presented with great success in 2025 as a joint project of the Museum of Archaeology and the Leibniz Centre for Archaeology (LEIZA) under the title 'Twilight of the Vikings – A Turning Point in the North' (German: *Wikingerdämmerung – Zeitenwende im Norden*), was an international conference on the history of the reception of these concepts, which took place at Gottorf Castle in 2022 (see poster on the left).

This event was organised by colleagues from the Museum of Archaeology and the Centre for Baltic and Scandinavian Archaeology (ZBSA), which at the time was an independent department within the Schleswig-Holstein State Museums Foundation alongside the Museum of Archaeology and has been part of the LEIZA since January 1, 2024. Special thanks go to Volker Hilberg of the Museum of Archaeology, who served as coordinator and host and bore primary responsibility for the event, as well as to Thorsten Lemm (formerly ZBSA, now LEIZA), Sven Kalmring (formerly ZBSA, now Statens historiska museer, Stockholm), and Franziska Lichtenstein, who supported the conference as a volunteer at the museum. They put together a program that was diverse in terms of subject matter, multi-perspective, and intercontinental, and which impressed the participants with its thematic

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coherence. The conference was also made possible thanks to the support of the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the Friends of Archaeology at Gottorf Castle (Förderverein Archäologie Schloss Gottorf e. V.).

Even during the conference, there were numerous requests for the papers to be published; this volume of the supplementary series of the Museum of Archaeology now fulfils that wish as a joint publication of the Museum of Archaeology, the LEIZA, and the State Archaeology Department of Schleswig-Holstein. For further details, please see the following introduction by the editors of this volume, which also serves as a bridge to the special exhibition mentioned above. We would like to once again extend our heartfelt thanks to Thorsten Lemm for his leadership in coordinating the project, as well as to Franziska Lichtenstein, Sven Kalmring, and Volker Hilberg. Thanks to their dedication and meticulous work, this highly productive conference will now have a lasting impact.

We would also like to thank the other 17 authors, whose well-researched studies are equally compelling in written form. We would also like to thank Isabel Sonnenschein and Gundula Lidke (both LEIZA) for their academic editing, and Matthias Bolte (LEIZA) for the layout, typesetting and preparation of the graphics.

We found a professional partner in the publishing house Ludwig, Kiel, who gave this work the right feel. A big thank you therefore also goes to Dr. Steve Ludwig.

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Participants at the conference in Schleswig: John Ljungkvist, Thorsten Lemm, Matthias S. Toplak, Shirley A. Brown, Søren M. Sindbæk, Dariusz Adamczyk, Miriam Sénécheau, John H. Lind, David Neville, Austin Mason, Roland Scheel, Franziska Lichtenstein, Ulf Ickerodt, Siebo Heinken, Timothy D. Arner, Aina M. Heen Pettersen, Volker Hilberg, Sven Kalmring, and Sebastian Brather (photo Claudia Janke, Stiftung Schleswig-Holsteinische Landesmuseen Schloss Gottorf).

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‘Vikings’, the ‘Viking Age’, and Hedeby/Slesvig – an introduction

Thorsten Lemm, Sven Kalmring, Franziska Lichtenstein and Volker Hilberg

Twilight of the ‘Vikings’

The recent special exhibition ‘Twilight of the Vikings – A Turning Point in the North’ (Germ.: *Wikingerdämmerung – Zeitenwende im Norden*) proved to be very popular with visitors and was the most visited special exhibition ever at the Schleswig-Holstein State Museums at Schloss Gottorf, Schleswig, Germany. Why is this the case? On the one hand, it is certainly due to the fact that some of the visitors were interested in topics such as the ‘Viking Age’ as a period of transformation, the social, political, economic, and religious changes leading up to the Middle Ages, as well as the destruction of Hedeby/Slesvig on the south bank of the Schlei inlet in 1066 and its subsequent re-establishment on the north bank. On the other hand, however, the incorporation of the term ‘Viking’ into the exhibition title, which was not supported by all those involved, very likely played a major role in attracting visitors. The conference volume at hand discusses, from various points of origin, the more problematic parts of this popular branding.

Thanks mainly to films, TV shows, and video games, and also to the deliberate use of the term in marketing, sports and tourism, ‘Vikings’ are familiar to everyone (cf. Brather, this volume), even if each individual probably associates something different with them in detail (cf. Toplak; Lemm, this volume). The multifaceted use of the term has been discussed many times in the past. However, recent research has produced new insights on different aspects that were worth presenting in a consolidated form. This took place at the conference ‘Vikings! – Vikings? Towards a responsible use of the term “Viking”’ from 4th to 6th October 2022 in Schleswig. Another reason for the conference was to prepare for the aforementioned exhibition, which, unlike many others that address different aspects of the ‘Viking Age’, also included a detailed section on the complex reception of this period and the term *víkingr* that was equal in importance to the other topics of the exhibition. This book is a publication of almost all lectures given at the conference, supplemented by a few additional contributions.

The book’s key interest is thus to combine the insight provided by archaeological and historical sources on the activity of vikings in early medieval Europe with their subsequent use and understanding in later centuries until the present day. The contributions assess the factors that have influenced the reception of the ‘Viking Age’ and the concept of the ‘Vikings’ in different eras and discuss the development and different adaptations of the terms along with their misuse in the context of ideological orientations and political appropriation. The editors attach great importance to the fact that all authors are free to apply their different perspectives and positions in this book. However, this freedom also means that not all editors necessarily agree with all interpretations and views expressed by the individual authors.

Attentive readers will notice that, unlike usual practice, the English equivalent of the Old Norse term *víkingr* is often placed in quotation marks or even written in lower case in this book. It was left up to each author to decide whether or not to follow the editors’ suggestions. The use of ‘Viking’

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or 'Vikings' is intended to express that in these cases the term is used in the generally accepted, ambiguous manner – from pirates to Scandinavian people. The quotation marks are intended to make it clear that this broad use of the term is not actually accurate. In contrast, when pirates, raiders or plunderers are actually meant, the term viking is often written in lower case (cf. Downham 2012). This may seem unusual to native English speakers at first, but it is intended to make it clear that the term is used without any ethnic connotation. The latter, on the other hand, is conveyed by the usual capitalisation of the term in English. In his article, Søren Sindbæk recounts that the origin of this capitalisation most likely lies in the English translation of Worsaae's 1852 *An Account of the Danes and Norwegians in England, Scotland, and Ireland*. However, this might also imply that if the term viking is not to have an ethno-national connotation, then the term northmen for instance, which according to sources was often used synonymously for Danes and also generally for raiders from Scandinavia, should be written in lower case too.

The concepts of 'Vikings' and the 'Viking Age'

This publication is divided into three sections, the first of which is dedicated to the scrutinisation of basic terminology in this field, that is, the origins of the terms *víkingr*, *víking*, and – as a historical period – the 'Viking Age'. Both the terms *víkingr* and *víking* are certainly well documented in contemporary runic inscriptions and scaldic verses as well as in the later Old Icelandic literature, retrospectively manifesting and adapting an older oral tradition. In fact, as an Old English term, *wīcing* already appears in the poem *Widsith* with its roots in the 6th century, and later on and contemporary to the 'Viking Age' in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle compiled during Alfred the Great's reign around 890 (cf. Cross; Lind; Pettersen, this volume). Besides the terms *víkingr* and *wīcing*, there were other contemporary denotations for the Scandinavian seaborne raiders: while in the Frankish and Saxon sources these *pyratae* (pirates) were also addressed as *nortmanni* (northmen), *dani* (Danes), or simply *pagani* (heathens), in 10th-century eastern European contexts they appear as Rus' (originally meaning: rower) and Varangians (bodyguards) (Downham 2012, 4). Yet, while all of these names referred to Scandinavian backgrounds, at the same time they referred to very different regional and temporal contexts (cf. Brather; Lind, this volume).

In her paper, Katherine Cross emphasises that many early medieval historians and hagiographers who wrote about seaborne raiders actually did this in terms of ethnicity. Yet, their ideas about ethnicity were based on violence and conflict brought upon them by such groups and less formed by any knowledge of Scandinavia. They emphasised 'ethnic difference *for their own purposes* within those contexts'. From there, depending on the particular historical background, apparently individual developments could take place, as was the case with Normandy. While the province even owes its name to the northmen, there is hitherto hardly any archaeological evidence for a Scandinavian presence (cf. Nissen-Jaubert 2000, 165), and the process of cultural assimilation seems to have been a swift one. In the 11th century, however, the Norman ducal dynasty consciously presented itself as descendants of 'Vikings', justifying their rights by conquest. Thus, as Cross points out, a denotation as 'Vikings' was no longer exclusively applied as a hostile stereotype for political pagan enemies – by this time, it was applied to mediate identities and, even more importantly, as a term describing an ethnic group. Hence both the individual historical contexts and the backgrounds of the authors matter, when we today consider written sources referring to vikings. This becomes even more evident in the paper by John Lind, who analyses the mentions of *wīcing* in the Old English corpus and *víkingr* in the Old Norse corpus covering a very long time span, and thereby even taking into account translations of classical and biblical Latin texts. He brings up, as one of several examples, North African 'Vikings' landing on Iceland in 1627 – Muslim Barbary pirates hunting for slaves on the coasts of

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Europe referred to as *víkingar* on a flyleaf of the *Sturlunga saga*. Based on a number of cases, in all of which *wīcing* and *víkingr* are translated as robber, murderer and the like, Lind concludes that neither of the two terms was used with an explicit ethnic association with Scandinavians.

By sharp contrast, however, the problematic broad present-day usage of one and the same term – from historically narrowly defined vikings as mere pirates to 'Vikings' as some kind of overarching ethnic term exclusively for Scandinavians in the period *c.* 750–1050 (cf. Brather, this volume) – would not only suggest that they were a homogeneous group of people but basically likewise that all of them were in one way or another involved in raiding, plundering and pillaging. Nowadays, the public perception of this topic is further heavily influenced by the media, but of course even by how this latest era of the Iron Age is conveyed by scholars, in museums and exhibitions as well as in popular science. Ultimately, however, it is of paramount importance how the term 'Viking' is used by researchers, curators and heritage board administrators controlling the access to primary sources (cf. Lemm; Ickerodt, this volume).

The image of the North, shaped from antiquity onwards, had been coined as home to pagan hostile people but at the same time associated with bravery and freedom. This thought, which gained momentum in early modern times, merged seamlessly with the romanticised and glorified construction of the 'Vikings' in the late 19th century (Pettersen; Toplak, this volume). The term 'Viking Age' as a denotation for a historical period, based on Swedish preparatory works, was irrevocably popularised by the Danish archaeologist J. J. A. Worsaae in 1873 in his book *The Culture of the Danes in the Viking Age* (*De Danskes Kultur i Vikingetiden*; Sindbæk, this volume). Today, however, as it was the pronounced scope of the conference, we should re-evaluate the application of the terminology, both as an ethnic and a chronological problematic tool: chronologically, this 'Viking Age' has been defined by two historically documented events, that is to say, the raid of the Northumbrian monastery on Lindisfarne in 793 and the Battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066, even though it was later criticised for being solely focused on events in Anglo-Saxon England and neglecting the eastern Scandinavian perspective with little comparable written records (cf. Linder Welin 1974). Archaeologically, as discussed by Aina Heen Pettersen (this volume), the onset of the 'Viking Age' could even be chronologically advanced when taking the gathering of geographical knowledge and the maritime expansion during a preceding information stage *c.* 750/770 into perspective.[1] The chronological end of the 'Viking Age' may be discussed as well, since the second half of the 11th century is rather characterised by continuities of change than by sharp breaks: on the one hand one could argue for a far earlier end already by the end of the 9th century, if the run-out of the first wave of viking raids is taken into account; on the other hand one could also refer to the establishment of Norman rule in Apulia and Sicily by the late 11th and 12th centuries only (cf. Brather, this volume).

During the national romanticism of the 19th century, in a time prior to the development of archaeology as an academic discipline proper, the retrospective view of an allegedly glorious past received considerable impetus. This romantic concept of the 'Viking', with its syncretistic version of the Eddic myths, not only highlighted personal values such as loyalty, the love of freedom and death defiance but also merged these with an almost Christian canon of moral values (Pettersen, this volume). Herein, as pointed out by Roland Scheel (this volume), translations from the Eddas and the sagas – such as, for example, within the early 20th-century German *Sammlung Thule* publication series – formed key vehicles (cf. Zernack 1994). The historical concept of the 'Viking Age' as some kind of cultural-historical master narrative was also linked with a specific material culture after which the Scandinavian museums' collections soon were organised and presented in permanent exhibitions (Lichtenstein, this volume). In this, as emphasised by Shirley Ann Brown (this volume), the discovery

1 See also: https://www.uu.se/forskning/vikingafenomenet/om.

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of the Gokstad boat burial in 1880 and the claim of the Bayeux Tapestry, with its depiction of 'Viking' ships, as a reflection of Danish/Nordic culture formed major catalysts. Even the identification of the trading town of Hedeby/Slesvig by S. Müller in 1897 (Müller 1897; see below) and its parallelisation with Birka played an important role for the Danish nation-building after the Schleswig Wars. Its subsequent excavation under Prussian rule, however, had hardly any place in Prussian historical narrative and German memorial context. This is the reason that, in this context, it soon became labelled as some 'Germanic town' instead (Jahnke, this volume) – in National Socialist Germany, the term 'Viking' became synonymous with 'Germanic'. Even the *Ahnenerbe,* the SS-operated Society for the Study of Ancestral Germanic Heritage, took anew an interest in the Bayeux Tapestry: based on the perception of prehistoric Germanic tribes and the later 'Vikings' as direct ancestors of contemporary Germans, the tapestry seamlessly fitted into the National Socialist pan-Germanic racist ideology and its expansionism (Brown, this volume). Modern secular religiosity and neopagan belief in the 'Germanic', too, have their unholy roots in the *völkisch* movement (cf. Ickerodt, this volume).

The 'Viking Age' in modern reception

Looking back at how the 'Viking Age' was conceived of in the 19th century and further developed as well as misappropriated during the early 20th century, it becomes clear that its understanding relates both to northern European early history and different social contexts of the modern era – topics that are addressed by the second part of this publication. An evident example of this has been identified in the historical-archaeological works of the aforementioned Danish archaeologist and museum professional J. J. A. Worsaae against the background of the Schleswig Wars of 1848–1851 and 1864 and the subsequent loss of the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein (cf. Sindbæk; Lichtenstein, this volume). At the same time, an analogue relation between past and present can be observed in representations of the 'Viking Age' in both today's popular culture and research communication taking up topical societal interests and needs. This indicates entanglements between critical research, *zeitgeist* and institutionalised representations of history of the present age, which in turn involve tensions between new source material, scientific methods, and established narratives rooted not least in a long tradition of multidisciplinary knowledge production respectively. Finally, contemporary approaches to 'Vikings' and the 'Viking Age' are heterogeneous, as conventions in interpretation and phrasing differ between various social and professional settings.

In this regard, a history of reception of the 'Viking Age' which takes into account interdependencies between popular and institutionally authorised history can be investigated both from a descriptive and from a normative point of view. The former can be characterised as a detailed interest in the relation between past and present established in the course of the reception process: how do people in a certain cultural or social context benefit from referencing 'Vikings' or the 'Viking Age'? How is the respective context composed on an individual level? What characteristics of its idea of Scandinavian early history can be specified by a discourse or media analysis? The latter perspective takes into account the scope of tasks and functionalities that are specific to the various institutionalisations of history. Does a representation of 'Viking Age' history of culture or events meet scientific standards? Is it marketable to its target audience? And finally, but no less importantly, what kind of engagement with the historical topic does it encourage in this target audience? These considerations, although by no means exhaustive, can serve as guidelines in discussing the superordinate question of this volume concerning the implications of the term 'Viking' in its different semantics and its (mis)use in different contexts.

In both Europe and North America, the 'Viking Age' can figure as a part of general education and knowledge. This is evident in, among other things, the extensive range of teaching materials available. With the Virtual Viking Longship Project, authors Austin Mason, Tim Arner, and David Neville

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present in this volume an educational resource which is currently being developed in the American Upper Midwest by Grinnell College and Carleton College, in cooperation with the Historical and Cultural Society of Clay County as well as the Wikinger Museum Haithabu in Schleswig-Holstein, northern Germany. Using digital technology, the project's aim is to make available accurate knowledge on 'Viking Age' Scandinavia to the general public, thus countering misinformation spread by right-wing extremist groups who, as Mason, Arner and Neville point out, misconstrue 'Vikings' as an ethnically homogeneous group and archetype of an alleged white superiority. Meanwhile, Miriam Sénécheau focuses her contribution on how 'Vikings' and the 'Viking Age' are represented in materials available for German schoolteaching, most of which are designed for primary and kindergarten education. She notes how their portrayal overlaps to some extent with the one known from popular culture, along with several instances of media examples not differentiating between cultural aspects attested for the Germanic tribes of the Roman period and those specific to 'Viking Age' Scandinavia, and by that implicitly echoing an outdated idea of ethnic continuity or even identity between the two contexts. At the same time, she observes that the materials discussed generally remain rather descriptive rarely refer to primary sources and thereby miss a key element of their educational function, namely developing the ability of students to critically question historical accounts (cf. Sénécheau, this volume). In both cases, the term 'Viking' is nevertheless used within its historically acquired and ethnically connoted colloquial range of meanings, which is obviously firmly established both in everyday German and English usage.

The situation of another educational resource addressed to the general public, the public museum, is similarly complex. Usually, museum exhibitions are developed in close connection with the academic research discourse, while at the same time incorporating expertise from history didactics, design and marketing. Concerning museal representations of the 'Viking Age', this can mean taking up trends and subjects from popular culture and by that maybe even to abandon some source-critical reservations in the process. Matthias Toplak (this volume) sees this as an opportunity to connect with a non-academic audience, which in turn can help to dispel common misconceptions and convey the complexity of historical reality as it emerges from historical research. In this context, the term 'Vikings' is regularly used in the meaning of an ethnonym, thereby obscuring not only heterogeneities within early historic Scandinavia but also the intricacy of concepts such as culture, ethnicity and identity on a general level. This form of presenting 'Vikings' and the 'Viking Age', in turn, offers points of contact for an essentialist conception of community, as Franziska Lichtenstein (this volume) argues: according to its institutional definition, the museum context provides an authorised framework for the presentation of a historical subject as cultural heritage to which contemporary groups and identities relate in various ways, with the ahistorical portrayal of a one-dimensional 'Viking' ethnicity and culture thus becoming utilisable for myths of superiority and exclusivity. It is worth noting, however, that within the context of European early history the question of who can be identified with these 'Vikings' and who cannot is treated rather imprecisely. In her contribution, Brown points out how two museum exhibitions utilise the depictions on the Bayeux Tapestry as an illustration of 'Viking' equipment and customs, parallelising them with a selection of late 'Viking Age' archaeological finds from German and Danish collections. By connecting the popular topic of 'Vikings' with this unique visual record of the western European Early Middle Ages, the outdated notion of the Normans culturally equalling their 'Viking' ancestors thus finds an implicit resonance.

Moreover, there is a wide selection of non-fiction media for individual consumption that focuses on topics related to 'Vikings' or the 'Viking Age' which range from science journalism and historical documentaries to popular research publications. While these have generally received limited attention in research so far, a tendency has been observed in them to corroborate established historical narratives and sometimes misconceptions (cf. Sénécheau, this volume; Svanberg 2003, 66–77). Simultaneously, they may exhibit an imbalance favouring current topics and interests (see below).

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From 1978 to 2023, as presented by Sebastian Brather (this volume), eight places of 'Viking Age' history located between the western Atlantic coast and the Ural Mountains received recognition as World Heritage Sites by UNESCO, the cultural, scientific, and educational branch of the United Nations. As world heritage, the 'Viking Age', despite the factual imbalance in the global distribution of sites (cf. on this Harrison 2013, 56–67), can claim to be considered part of human history. Entries on the list must meet at least one of ten defined criteria relating to unique natural or cultural phenomena of the past or present. In addition to the possibility of accessing resources for their preservation, they benefit from increased prestige in both research and public perception (see below).

It is intriguing that even within the realm of world heritage discourse, the term 'Viking' is employed in a somewhat contradictory manner. On the one hand, it is applied in the description of sites without a closer connection with seaborne raiding in the true sense, such as in the case of L'Anse aux Meadows at the northern tip of present-day Newfoundland, Canada. Here, identifying the archaeological site with 'the remains of an 11th-century Viking settlement' follows the Anglo-American linguistic convention, where both the term 'Viking' and the subject of 'Viking Age' seafaring usually are more closely associated with the subjects of discovery and settlement than with raiding and plundering (cf. Mason et al., this volume). On the other hand, the hereby implied notion of the 'Vikings' being a distinct population group that can be classified culturally and/or ethnically is one of the points of criticism the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) raised regarding a transnational serial nomination for the World Heritage List in 2015: developed under the lead management of Iceland and using the title 'Viking Age Sites in Northern Europe', the proposal – after Sweden withdrew its participation – encompassed the early medieval town of Hedeby and the nearby fortification system of the Danevirke in what today is northern Germany, the settlement and burials of Grobina in Latvia, the central assembly site Þingvellir in Iceland, the Hyllestad quernstone quarries and Vestfold ship burials in Norway as well as the Jelling complex and three Trelleborg-type ring fortresses in Denmark. These sites were collectively supposed to represent the 'Viking Age', highlighting the significant political, economic, and religious transformations that occurred in northern Europe during this period, as well as the concurrent activities of Scandinavians in the broader world (cf. Maluck 2018, 8–10). ICOMOS's criticism referred to a lack of conceptual differentiation regarding 'Norse people', 'Vikings' and the 'Viking Age' as a chronological term in the proposal, questioning whether there was in fact a shared 'Viking identity' among the sites in question which could be defined in terms of a common ethnicity or culture (ICOMOS 2015, 220). Accordingly, the transnational proposal was ultimately rejected in the same year.

In 2017, the State Archaeological Department and the Ministry of Justice, Cultural and European Affairs of Schleswig-Holstein submitted a revised separate application to UNESCO to accept 'The Archaeological Border Landscape of Hedeby and the Danevirke' (Germ.: *Archäologischer Grenzkomplex Haithabu und Danewerk*) to the list of World Heritage Sites, which was approved in 2018.[2] Even though this nomination has a significantly more specific focus, addressing the strong public interest in 'Vikings' and the associated conceptions is nonetheless an integral part of managing the sites in question (see below).

Finally, one topic that has been repeatedly alluded to in the preceding sections is the portrayal of 'Vikings' in popular culture. Representations that belong to this context can be found in games, music, comics and literature, feature films, and series as well as in online media such as blogs or video formats, in product or corporate marketing in the private sector and the tourism industry, and also in the practices of smaller interest groups such as neopagan religious communities or 'Viking Age' re-enactments. Individually, they can be categorised between popular history and historical fiction,

2 https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1553/; accessed 6 February 2026.

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with the boundaries between the two often being blurred. In addition to questions concerning older research history, it is these popular cultural representations that have been a main focus of research on the history of reception of the 'Viking Age' in recent years (cf. Birkett/Dale 2019; Meylan/Rösli 2020; Ellis Nilsson/Nyzell 2024). Popular cultural formats often have a much wider reach than offers of academic history and are thus able to form and reshape the established image of early Scandinavia in an effective way. As has already been mentioned, there are furthermore instances where the latter actively seek to connect to the former's choice of topics, narratives and modes of visualisation to appeal to their target audience. In this regard, the popular cultural discourse on 'Vikings' and the 'Viking Age', along with its relevant actors and platforms, can be understood in terms of a para-institutionalisation of history.

What is repeatedly noticed with regard to representations of the 'Viking Age' in popular culture is an element of cultural criticism in them devising an idealised counter-world to modernity. In the process, they draw on an established iconography and the associations connected with it (cf. Scheel, this volume). At the same time, the image of the 'Vikings' is being adapted to various contemporary needs and interests, which are partly contradictory to each other: they are used as a reference for both egalitarian and authoritarian forms of society, for masculinist and gender-equal social structures, for economic self-sufficiency and predatory violence as well as for notions of both ethnic homogeneity and cosmopolitanism. In his contribution, Thorsten Lemm outlines how the 'Viking Age' is used as a stereotypical projection surface for various interpretive interests. This, he argues, becomes possible by an imprecise use of the term 'Viking' in research communication, which allows individually observed phenomena in the field of early Scandinavian history to be made relevant on a more general level in an undifferentiated way. Accordingly, in their popular cultural understanding 'Vikings' are also available as a point of reference for various individual and group-related identity concepts, figuring, as Toplak (this volume) phrases it, as 'almost some kind of "creative commons" for the Western world that everyone can apply according to individual needs and desires […]'. Moreover, they offer a consistent portrayal of cultural history that academic representations of 'Viking Age' topics often cannot provide due to source-critical considerations (cf. Toplak, this volume).

At the same time, identity-related references to 'Vikings' also harbour an exclusive potential, which is realised particularly in post-migrant Western societies and the globalised interaction systems of the present and the recent past. Recent research has shown how in this regard the 'Viking Age' is incorporated into the rhetoric of right-wing political parties in Sweden and Denmark (cf. Håkansson 2024, 216–217, 220–222). An especially vivid example of how this period is used in the construction of identity concepts is, however, the use of commercial DNA testing to provide evidence for a 'Viking ancestry' by customers both within and outside Scandinavia (Hirschman/Panther-Yates 2008, 53–57; Strand/Källén 2021, 521). Here, a Scandinavian ancestry is determined using reference data from the current population of northern Europe – the obvious methodological fallacy being the underlying misconception of geographically static population groups that have lived in isolation from each other throughout history, which in turn is associated with the heterogeneous imagination complex connected with 'Vikings' in modern popular culture (cf. Strand/Källén 2021, 523, 529–534). In this sense, references to the 'Viking Age' in popular culture can in some instances ideationally align with the biologist notions integral to white supremacist ideologies, which are explored in several contributions in this volume.

AD 1066 and the 'Viking Age' from a regional perspective

The special exhibition mentioned at the beginning focused on the end of the 'Viking Age' and the problems associated with its research, using the example of Hedeby/Slesvig. This regional focus is