

## Viking Identities Network

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### Summary

The Scandinavian migrations of the Viking Age left a lasting linguistic, material and genetic mark on Britain, Ireland and their North Atlantic neighbours. The Viking Identities Network will stimulate both academic and popular discussions about the creation of 'Viking', 'Norse' and 'hybrid' identities in the Viking Age, and their 21<sup>st</sup>-century legacy. The project will explore (1) the role of women and gender in language and material culture and (2) the memorialising of Viking identities from pagan times to the present.

## Outline

### **Fit to programme priorities**

The Viking Age is traditionally seen as the aggressive, militaristic expansion of a Scandinavian seafaring and warrior culture with imperialist ambitions. The Viking Identities Network (VIN) will challenge this view and research the implications of reconfiguring the period as a diaspora, with subsequent effects on ethnic, religious, linguistic, cultural and genetic identities. The project will focus on the British-Irish archipelago and its north Atlantic neighbours, in the wider context of a diaspora emanating from Scandinavia and stretching from Russia in the east to North America in the west. The chronological focus will be c.750-1100 A.D., but incorporating an evaluation of the implications for heritage, tourism and identities in the 21st century.

### **Rationale and context**

The impact of the Vikings on Europe has been a focus of academic discussion,<sup>1</sup> but this 'impact' has not been theorised as a diaspora, a migration of both humans and cultures, nor have its particular modes, stages and forms been fully identified. The British Isles are one area where Vikings left a lasting contribution (linguistic, onomastic and material), whereas in most other areas, apart from virgin territories such as Iceland, they quickly integrated into the predominant culture. Areas such as Iceland or Orkney retained close ties with the culture of their homelands. However, within England we can see the emergence of a hybrid culture, neither Anglo-Saxon, nor Scandinavian, but containing elements of both. Questions of integration are pivotal to the current debate on multiculturalism in Britain and Europe, and similarly it is important to establish how much the regions of the Viking diaspora differed from each other and whether this encouraged integration or cultural diversity. We will investigate why and how 'Norse' identities were created, leading to the formation of the North Atlantic nations, and how the perceived 'otherness' of the Vikings in the British Isles may have cemented and maintained cultural identity. Such questions have also been a focus of non-academic discussion, in the media, among museum and heritage professionals, re-enactors, and the general public, especially in regions identified as having a 'Viking' heritage.

We have identified two major research strands, Gender and Memory, reflecting the particular circumstances of the Viking Age migrations:

- While 'vikings' as raiders and warriors were men, the diasporic communities, with their transplantations of language and culture, involved women and families. 'Viking' women in particular could be of Scandinavian origin or from the receiving societies, and this raises questions of cultural and linguistic transmission and translation, acculturation and hybridisation.

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<sup>1</sup> Hadley and Richards (eds), *Cultures in Contact: Scandinavian Settlement in England in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries* (2000); Graham-Campbell, Hall, Jesch and Parsons (eds), *Vikings and the Danelaw* (2001); Adams and Holman (eds), *Scandinavia and Europe 800-1350: Contact, Conflict and Coexistence* (2004).

- The concept of ‘memory’ is central to understanding Viking religion and identities. Both the Viking Age sculpture of the British Isles and medieval Icelandic literature represent the intercultural dialogue of the new Christian religion with the old pagan one. The 21st century is noticeably active in both remembering and reinventing the Viking past, not only in Norway, Iceland and the Northern Isles, but even in the ‘hybridised’ north and east of England.

The Viking Identities Network (VIN) will stimulate further cooperation between the neighbouring Universities of Birmingham, Leicester and Nottingham. In 2002, the Wirral and West Lancashire DNA survey (<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/~sczsteve/survey.htm>) initiated collaboration between Leicester and Nottingham. In 2005, Nottingham and Birmingham initiated the Midlands Viking Symposium, a public outreach event which will include Leicester from 2006. VIN will develop these collaborations further, while also involving the wider national and international research community.

### **Aims and objectives**

The Viking Identities Network (VIN) will bind diverse research projects in a more holistic approach, using the two major strands identified above, with two sub-strands each:

- Gender
  - Language and Viking migrations: women, loan-words, bilingualism
  - The archaeology of gender and ethnicity in the Viking Age: burials, dress, jewellery
- Memory
  - Religion and mythology: remembering and figuring the pagan past in Christian literature and sculpture
  - Vikings in the 21st century: from DNA to Erik the Red’s house – receptions, reconstructions and re-enactments

This intellectual framework will determine the activities of VIN during the funded period and will form the basis of the proposed outputs.

VIN will promote interaction between groups that are not always included in academic research projects, including:

- students;
- museum and heritage professionals;
- the interested general public.

VIN will support research by:

- bringing national and international expertise into the projects;
- creating a virtual community for Viking Studies;
- providing channels for communicating the research to both academic and non-academic audiences.

This will be achieved through:

- a Viking Identities website, which will continue beyond the life of the network;
- two Midlands Viking Symposia (outreach events), which will also continue beyond the life of the network;
- four two-day academic seminars, one for each strand of the project;
- four roundtable sessions, one for each strand of the network, at international medieval congresses at Leeds and Kalamazoo;
- one refereed publication, containing selected contributions from the academic seminars and conference sessions, published after the end of the network.