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## Vikings and Nordic Film Culture

Bodil Petersson & Jes Wienberg

The Viking and the Viking Age offer everything a screenwriter or producer might be longing for, when wanting to create a great epic or powerful visualization – adventure, honour, romantics, intrigues, betrayal, revenge, individual fighting, and battles. The Icelandic sagas and the history of the Viking Age kingdoms are rich sources to scoop out from, as well as the historically well-known raiding, expansion and/or colonisation in most directions from the Nordic countries. Not least the involvement in the history of the British Isles and the short-lived settlement in North America make the Vikings relevant also for an Anglo-American audience. The Viking and the Viking Age are sufficiently close to present possibilities of recognition and of using actual historical figures in storytelling – and sufficiently far away to permit freedom in creation and a feeling of a life in a “Foreign Country”.

The theme might suggest that Viking films are Nordic by definition, but most of the films in this genre are produced internationally. Viking films produced in the Nordic countries are a minority, however the international and the Nordic are closely entangled – in the Viking representing the Nordic, in using Nordic sagas, chronicles and novels as a basis for storytelling, in the choice of Nordic countries for filming locations, and in the use of Nordic actors in films, whether they are produced internationally or in the Nordic area.

The aims of this chapter is firstly to present the Viking and the Viking Age, which is the point of departure of Viking films; secondly to present some trends and examples of Viking films, both international and Nordic productions; and thirdly to explore a number of questions that are in common to both categories – the definition of Viking film as a genre, the existence of a “long Viking Age”, the interest in errors and anachronisms, and finally the question of the use of Vikings, or in other words, why they are so popular.

A total of approximately 125 Viking films has been produced and in addition a considerable number of films have been planned, however never realized, or are still in progress. Of these 125 films around 85 are by us considered to be international and 40 Nordic. An overview was published by Kevin J. Harty in *The Vikings on Film* (2011, pp. 193–217) with a list of 76 films. A present website has a list of 122 films, some of them maybe still in progress or cancelled (The Vikings of Bjornstad: The Viking Movie List; May 2023; extensive use of [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)).

Among the 125 films most are meant to be shown in cinemas, however during the latest decades films have also been produced in the format of videotape or DVD, for TV or different streaming services, and some are short films. The early Viking films were in black and white and silent as typical for their time. The first in colour was *The Viking* (1928), and when the genre was revived in the 1950s cinema had long since transitioned to sound. There are animated films from the 1960s and since the 1990s there is an increasing extent of using digital tools in film production, which means that the creation of reconstructions for films of e.g. Viking houses, village and ships almost become superfluous. The films are made and filmed in the Nordic countries or abroad with actors from a large number of countries. And

the character of the films might be fictional, more or less based on known historical figures or hybrids close to documentaries.

## **Vikings and the Viking Age**

The word “wicing” first appeared around 700 in England and later as “vikingr” in the Nordic countries, in written sources and even on a small number of rune-stones. From the beginning it meant a pirate or sea warrior, irrespectively of origin or ethnicity – however it could also be the name of a male person in the North. The etymology of the word is contested with several rival theories – a person coming out from a bay, one from the landscapes of Viken in South-Eastern Norway, the word might come from “wic” or “vicus” meaning a settlement or camp, or one who makes a detour from his route (Lind 2012; Wienberg 2015).

The existence of a Nordic Viking Age was first mentioned by a Swedish historian in the 1830s, and in the following decades it was defined as a period between the Iron Age and the Middle Ages, established as a fact and gradually receiving popular attention by the efforts of three Nordic scholars – Jens Jacob Asmussen Worsaae in Denmark, Peter Andreas Munch in Norway and Oscar Montelius in Sweden. The Viking Age was and still normally is defined from around 800 AD to 1050 AD, or in an English context, more precisely from 793, the year of the attack on the monastery of Lindisfarne to the battle at Stamford Bridge in 1066, where the Norwegian king Harald Hardrada was killed, shortly before William, the duke of Normandy, ancestor of Nordic Viking settlers, conquered England following a victory at Hastings. In recent decades several researchers date the Viking Age back into the 8th century referring to the incipient use of sails on longships and a distinctive material culture – and some even argue for a prolongation of the period to around 1100 (Svanberg 2003, pp. 36–53; Haavardsholm 2004; Wienberg 2015; Roesdahl 2019, pp. 6–17)

Thus, from the beginning the word referred to an activity of going Viking and a functional role, with the additional possibility of becoming a personal identity. However, the Viking narrowed down to – or widened to – a person from the Nordic countries in a certain period is a creation of the romanticism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Lihammer and Hesselbom 2021).

The debate on the concept and the period implicates that there is an ambiguity built into its present meaning – narrowly Viking being a pirate or sea warrior, or broadly embracing all coming from the North during the Viking Age, as well as the duration of the period is questioned. These ambiguities can also be observed in the films.

The research into the world of the Viking Age has been comprehensive, and there are ongoing large projects about the period such as “The Viking Phenomenon” 2015–2025 at Uppsala University in Sweden (The Viking Phenomenon). Literature of all kinds on the period is also unmanageably large. There have been and are exhibitions devoted to Vikings, and museums, centres, and markets bear Viking in their name – in Aarhus, Ribe and Roskilde in Denmark, Haithabu/ Schleswig in Germany, Oslo in Norway, Stockholm in Sweden, Reykjavik on Iceland, York in England and Dublin on Ireland, to mention some examples (Pettersson 2003, pp. 399–447; Sindbæk 2022).

Vikings are common in popular culture – often, but not always as icons with their horned helmets, axes, swords, shields and longships. We meet them in pictures, screenplays, novels, films, TV-productions, games, reconstructions, re-enactment, advertising and in many other

contexts. The Viking is an icon for the Nordic countries related to adventure, expansion and the upcoming of early kingdoms, the heydays of the North (Wilson & Roesdahl 1992; Roesdahl 2004; 2019, pp. 92–100; Ellis Nilsson and Nyzell 2021; Strömberg 2021). Thus, Viking films are only a minor, however influential, part of a much broader universe of popular culture, which gets nourishment from the concepts of the Viking and the Viking Age.

### **Viking films as a genre**

The Viking film genre seems to exist where the vast field of popular culture of the Viking and Viking Age meets film as a medium. Viking film is a subdivision of historical films.

Historical films are films where the plot refers to historical circumstances. They might recall Antiquity, the Viking Age, the Middle Ages, the American or French Revolution, the Napoleon regime, the American Civil War, the Western Frontier in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the two World Wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century – or some other period or place, creating suitable conditions for film production. However, the historical films have more or often less ambition of authenticity, i.e. to a varying degree trying to visualize the past as it is known to have been (e.g. Harty 1999; Jönsson 2004; Zander 2006).

Hollywood films are famous for using Antiquity, especially Egypt or Rome, as a theme in the late 1950s and early 1960s, culminating in the expensive and scandal-ridden *Cleopatra* (1963) – spectacular productions with great stars in the main roles, large built backdrops, and mass scenes of fighting. Later came a number of so-called B-films, less ambitious and with minor budgets, “Sword and sandal film”, mainly produced in Italy in the first half of the 1960s. There were TV-series such as *I Claudius* (1976) and a revival of the genre came with the British-American *Gladiator* (2000). And fairly recently a sensational TV-series *Rome* (2005–07) has been presented (Hammar & Zander 2015).

Viking films cannot be clearly defined as a genre, meaning drawing sharp boundaries around it. One might expect Viking films to keep to this special, historically well-known character from the North in a certain period that is named the Viking Age, but that is not always the case. The Viking and the Viking Age are in common, but they only constitute a theme, which gradually transgresses into others as the character, period and geography are ambiguous – they become romantic comedies, science fiction or horror films with ghosts, vampires or zombies.

### **Vikings in international films**

The international Viking films pop up in every decade since they first appeared in 1907 – except for in the 1930s and 1940s.

Two decades after the first film was created and a decade after the first cinema had opened, the first Viking films appeared. In Great Britain it was *The Viking's Bride* (1907), where a Viking chieftain rescues a kidnapped bride. This was followed by five films from the United States of America: *The Viking's Daughter: The Story of Ancient Norsemen* (1908), where a Saxon prisoner rescues a daughter of a Viking. *The Last of The Saxons* (1910) is about king Harold Godwinson and the relation to his beloved Edith. Some years later *The Viking Queen* (1914) was released. It was about Helga of Drontheim, who had an uprising back home while

she was away raiding and now had to fight on two frontiers; eventually, she raised from the dead, again bringing happiness to her country. The same year came *The Oath of a Viking* (1914), where the exiled Olaf falls in love with the daughter of a rival clan's chieftain. Finally, *A Sleeping Memory* (1917) was let out, where Eleanore after a brain surgery and under hypnosis experiences her former lives, among other being a cruel Viking queen. Except for the last two films mentioned, the rest are considered lost, as the nitrate films of its time were easily flammable.

Only one and a half decade after the first international Viking films the seventh film appeared. It is the first Nordic film, the Swedish *En Vikingafilm (A Viking Film; 1922; fig. 1)*. Here an injured and hospitalized archaeologist in his fever dreams experience time travels to the Viking Age, however his girlfriend is more interested in visiting the local Vikings Glass and Shoe polish factory in Örebro, which by the way partly financed the film, thus being an early example of advertising film.

In each decade one large film stands out as remembered, discussed and sometimes rerun – in some cases as an example of an inferior Viking film. The “canonised” films are *The Viking* (1928) from USA, remarkably early in colour, but still silent, with a story of Leif Eriksson, who (re)discovered America; *The Vikings* (1958; **fig. 2**) a Hollywood-production loosely based on a historical figure, Ragnar Lothbrok, starring Kirk Douglas, maybe the most famous Viking film of all and followed by a TV-series *Tales of the Vikings* (1959–60) produced by Douglas and reusing props from his film; *The Long Ships* (1964) from United Kingdom and Yugoslavia based on the novel of Frans G. Bengtsson, being remembered as an example of a weak film; *The Norseman* (1978) from USA and made in Florida, where prince Thorvald the Bold wants to rescue his father Eurich from native Americans; *Berserker: The Nordic Curse* (1987) from USA, a horror film having young people terrified by a living Norwegian Viking who has become a berserk; *The 13<sup>th</sup> Warrior* (1999) from USA, known for Antonio Banderas playing Ahmed ibn Fadlan; *Beowulf* (2007) also from USA, a computer-animated film based on myth; the Canadian TV-series production *Vikings* (2013–20), also based on the story of Ragnar Lothbrok; and fairly recently, *The Northman* (2022) from USA, based on the myth of Amleth in the chronicle by Saxo, renamed as Hamlet by William Shakespeare, and a film with the ambition of being “the definitive Viking movie”.

In every decade since the 1950s several Viking films have been produced internationally, quite a few in the 1960s and then again many from the 1990s onwards demonstrating a growing tendency. Most films have been produced in Great Britain or the United States of America, however there are also films from Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Turkey/ Türkiye and Yugoslavia, just as they have been filmed in many places – the Nordic countries, England, Estonia, France, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Russia, Scotland, South Africa, Ukraine, USA and Yugoslavia.

Iceland has been perceived as a perfect backdrop for the filming in some cases. Thus, the American film *The Viking Sagas* (1995) was filmed on the island. Another example is the creation of a Viking village at Höfn in Iceland in 2009 intended for a TV-series, however it was never used, so the village is now open to visitors.

Nordic actors are casted in international Viking films – Swedish Sven Wollter as king Hrothgar in *The 13<sup>th</sup> Warrior* (1999), Swedish Stellan Skarsgård as Cedric in *King Arthur* (2004) from the United Kingdom and Ireland and as Erik Selvig in *Thor* (2011) from USA, Swedish Gustaf Skarsgård as Floki in *Vikings* (2013–20), Swedish Alexander Skarsgård as

Amleth in *The Northman* (2022; **fig. 3**), Danish Mads Mikkelsen as Tristan in *King Arthur* (2004), Danish Claes Bang as Fjölfnir the Brotherless, Swedish Gustav Lindh as Thorir the Proud and Icelandic Björk as Seeress, all three in *The Northman* (2022). However, it is quite common throughout the history of film that mainly American companies have recruited Nordic actors for their productions irrespective of genre.

Viking films as a genre seems to follow a common development in filmmaking. Thus, *The Vikings* (1958) is a typical example of a great Hollywood production reusing history. The Italian B-Viking films of the 1960s are replaced by the more famous so called Spaghetti Westerns, i.e., Western films produced in Italy. From the 1960s Vikings were also used in relatively cheap produced exploitation films, where a barbaric past is an excuse for showing lightly dressed women and violence, as in e.g. *The Viking Queen* (1967) (Finke and Shichtman 2011). Vikings and the Viking Age are generally used as a backdrop for adventure and drama. There is a clear focus on kings and queens, princes and princesses, warriors, fights, and battles, but also romantics, and a few times even on questions of religion, such as Heathens against Christians. Then there is a clear trend of dark, violent, and bloody films during later decades. Maybe the TV-series *Vikings* have had the effect of paving the way for several sequels of lesser ambition and quality, but with the same tendency that also can be seen in crime film.

### **Vikings in Nordic films**

Viking films produced in the Nordic countries are about half of the international output, and as previously we mention some examples from each decade: The first example was as mentioned *En Vikingafilm (A Viking Film; 1922)*. A documentary of Danish history called *Vikingerne, deres Forfædre og Efterkommere (The Vikings, their Ancestors and Descendants)* was made in 1937 to the World Exhibition in Paris, however we shall not go into documentaries.

Only in the 1960s were the Viking film revived as a genre. The Swedish *Jungfrukällan (The Virgin Spring; 1960)* by Ingmar Bergman received an Oscar for best foreign language film. The film has been listed as a Viking film, however it is meant to unfold in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, so it is on the fringe.

However, the decade also presents the Swedish comedy *Här kommer Bäsärkarna (Here Come the Berserks; 1965)*. It was filmed in Yugoslavia and reused backdrops left by another production. Some actors later distanced themselves from the film, which is to be honest quite silly, all about Vikings against Romans. The Vikings are presented as stupidly childish and there is an anachronistic mix of Vikings and Romans, although they lived their historical lives separated by several hundred years.

The next Nordic Viking film was *Den röda kappan (The Red Mantel; 1967)*, a co-production between Denmark, Iceland and Sweden. It was filmed in Iceland and studios in Sweden, a romantic film based on the tragic story of Hagbard and Signe in Saxo, two in love but from rival royal families. Co-productions between several countries became typical for most Nordic films in the following decades, also using actors from several Nordic countries.

The 1970s only came up with one Danish hybrid film, *Normannerne (The Normans; 1976)*, a guided tour through fictionalized stories from the sagas and chronicles. Then the 1980s and

1990s saw a number of Nordic Viking films, most famous the so-called Raven Trilogy by Icelandic Hrafn Gunnlaugsson – *Hrafninn Flýgur* (*When the Raven Flies; Revenge of the Barbarians*; 1984), *I Skugga Hrafnins* (*In the Shadow of the Raven*; 1988) and *Embla* or *Hviti vikingurinn* (*The White Viking*; 1991).

Another film from this period worth mentioning as it follows up the more humorous approach to Vikings is *Erik the Viking* (1989), a typical Monty Python-style film made by Terry Jones. It is in fact a co-production of the United Kingdom and Sweden as it was partly financed by Svensk Filmindustri (SF Studios).

The 2000s presented several Nordic Viking films, where two quite different films might be mentioned: The Danish-French animated co-production *Asterix and the Vikings* (2006) based on the comic book series. And then there is the Danish-English co-production *Valhalla Rising* (2009), loosely based on a story from the sagas. It is starring Mads Mikkelsen as the main character called One-Eye. It was filmed in Scotland, and the language is English. *Valhalla Rising* contains relatively little of dialogue, however all the more of muddy violence.

The 2010s experienced an explosion in the number of Nordic Viking films, and again they are very different in character: Some are comedies as the Swedish *Sweaty Beards* (2010) where the Vikings speak “Swenglish”; the animated *Hetjur Valhallar* (*Legends of Valhalla: Thor*; 2011) in the spirit of Monty Python, a co-production between Iceland, Germany and Ireland; the Norwegian TV-series *Vikingane* (*The Norsemen*; 2016–20), in English language, however with a heavy Norwegian accent; and finally, a Norwegian TV-series *Beforeigners* (2019–), a crime-comedy or science-fiction based on Vikings showing up in the present.

Again, some are horror films, such as the Norwegian *Gåten Ragnarok* (*Ragnarok*; 2013) about an archaeologist who finds a runic inscription, which leads him to Finnmark and awakes a monster; the Swedish *Draug* (2018); and the American-Swedish co-production of *The Huntress: Rune of the dead* (2019) with Viking zombies.

To be remarked are also two Nordic films listed as Viking films, however they are taking place outside what is conventionally known as the Viking Age: The Norwegian thriller *Flukt* (*Escape*; 2014), which tells a story from the 1360s after the Black Death, and the Norwegian *Birkebeinerne* (*The Last King*; 2016), which takes place during the civil war in the early 13th century and tells the story of the efforts to save the life of a child, later becoming the king Håkon Håkonsson.

The 2020s have until now (May 2023) presented two Vikings films, the first being a hybrid. There is a Norwegian TV-documentary in three parts, *Olav* (*The Saga of Olav the Holy*; 2021) with many re-enacted parts, as in other present-days TV-series blurring the difference between fiction and documentary. And then there is a single Nordic Viking film, the Swedish low-budget *Vikingasystrar* (*The Viking Sisters*; 2022).

To this comes some short films, where one worth mentioning is *Trace* (2016) by Markus Dahlslett. The film is part of a master’s degree from NTNU, Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, and it stands out as the actors are speaking Old Norwegian.

It seems also to have been many attempts to produce feature films, often related to local re-enactment groups or reconstructed Viking villages. Sometimes a very short film is produced to promote a suggested coming making of a long film, however this is seldom realised, mostly

for financial reasons. Thus, there have been two attempts to film *The Long Ships* again, based on the novel by Frans G. Bengtsson: In a Swedish context in the 1980s and as a Swedish-Danish co-production in the 2010s, both times with Stellan Skarsgård as the main character Orm, but both attempts were cancelled.

To summarize the trends of one hundred years of Nordic Viking filmmaking since the beginning in 1922: The Nordic production of films on the Viking theme increases during the 1980s beginning with the Icelandic films that pejoratively have been called “Cod Westerns” as a reference to the above-mentioned “Spaghetti Westerns”. The rise probably follows a general trend of film making and an expansion and diversification of media, they are not only produced for cinemas and TV but also for distribution on videotapes, DVDs, YouTube, Netflix and similar distribution platforms.

Most of the Nordic films are focusing on the Vikings as seafaring warriors, on conflicts and revenge, fighting and battles with a growing tendency of showing violence, *Valhalla Rising* (2009) being one of the most extreme. However, there is the opposite tendency with a rather large share being comedies, showing the Viking to be a funny or ridiculous figure, the Norwegian series *Vikingane (The Norsemen; 2016–20)* being a clearcut example. There are also several Nordic Viking films made for younger people, a number of short films and unfinished projects.

### **The Raven Trilogy**

The Raven Trilogy, also called The Viking Trilogy, by the Icelandic director Hrafn Gunnlaugsson is the most original Nordic contribution to the genre of Viking film. The films have derogatively been called “Cod Westerns”, however, they are indeed related to the Italian “Spaghetti Western” films from the 1960s. Gunnlaugsson was expressly inspired by the Western films made by Sergio Leone, their narrative, style and even their music.

The three films are called The Raven Trilogy as a tribute to the name of the director as the Icelandic name Hrafn means raven, but also because the raven occurs in the films. The films had mainly Icelandic actors and were filmed in Iceland with a few locations in Norway. The film was a co-production between Iceland and Sweden, with Svenska Filminstitutet (SF, The Swedish Film Institute) to begin with, and later Egmont Film as a partner.

The first film in the trilogy is *Hrafninn Flygur (When the Raven Flies; Revenge of the Barbarians; 1984; fig. 4)*. It tells the story of Gestur, who returns from Ireland to avenge the killing of his parents by Vikings, who are in Icelandic exile. He succeeds by setting two clans up against each other. The second film, *I Skugga Hrafnins (In the Shadow of the Raven; 1988)*, is a story of Trausti and Isolde, two lovers, who are caught up by a feud of two neighbouring farms on the ownership of a stranded vane. The story recalling the motif of the tragic Tristan and Isolde leaves behind a strong memory of the Swedish actor Sune Mangs as the malicious bishop, whose son has been promised to marry Isolde. The third and last film in the trilogy, *Embla or Hviti vikingurinn (The White Viking; 1991)* tells the story of Askur and Embla, who as lovers are caught by the ambition of king Olav the holy to Christianize Iceland. Ask(ur) and Embla are also names of the first humans in the Nordic mythology.

The Raven Trilogy is special in several ways – it is inspired by the Italian Western films from the 1960s, but it is also heavily influenced by the Icelandic sagas and their rather



straightforward stories of relations, violence, and revenge. The films have Nordic actors, mostly Icelandic, talking Icelandic, i.e., very close to the tone of the Vikings in the past. They are filmed in barren and rainy landscapes in Iceland and Norway, where the Vikings once lived. The talking is relatively sparse, there are no horns on helmets, violence indeed, but without exaggerating it. The films take the Vikings seriously.

In both the first and the second film of the Raven trilogy, the Viking Age children are at least partly in focus. It is obvious that it is the experience of violence in early life, such as plundering, rape and murder of family members that forms the striving for revenge and is the driving force behind how the young boy Gestur acts later in life. An abducted sister that has become a woman, wife, and mother within the framework of another culture is also a topic, and the revenge is as well moving around this theme in addition to the revenge for the killing of parents. It is obvious that the woman in question in the first Raven film, the sister of Gestur, is not interested in revenge anymore. She has now her own family in the new country with the man who once led the group that killed her parents. Back in Ireland. She has children with him and has come to terms with her new life, while the hunger for revenge is still in the mind of her brother Gestur.

It might be noticed that the Raven theme of a boy revenging his murdered parents and scarred family is also a core story in the recent international Viking film *The Northman* from 2022 with Alexander Skarsgård as the avenger as he in his childhood saw the murder of his own father. Maybe it is an inspiration between films, but it might also be that the theme of revenge is so dominant within the Icelandic Saga literature that it comes through in the Viking films, independent of when and where the films are produced. The theme is also something highly relevant in the present as many people around the world have experienced war and death and these emotions might be a shared human experience independent of if the cruelties occur in the Viking Age or if they occur today.

The depiction of Vikings and the Viking Age in the Raven Trilogy was highly appreciated in the Nordic countries. Gunnlaugsson won a Guldbagge award in 1985 as the best director for the first film in the series. However, twice the films were nominated from Iceland to an Academy Award, but they were never accepted. It might be that they did not fulfil the international expectations on Viking films. However, if nothing else, they created a popular expression, "thungur hnifur", meaning "heavy knife", which Gestur used in the first film.

### **The Image of the Viking and the Viking Age**

The Viking simply starts as a general designation of a pirate and sea warrior, becomes Nordic during Romanticism and thereafter an appellation of all living in the Viking Age in the North. The Viking films normally visualize the Viking as a warrior from the North and is as a genre defined by the Viking Age. And as such the Viking is often a stereotype reflecting present-day views on masculinity and male qualities. Interesting is however, that the Viking female, partly at least, has developed into the warrior role as well.

According to an analysis of reconstruction and re-enactment there has been a national way of presenting the Viking reflecting self-identity and history from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards – in Denmark as mainly a farmer, in Norway as an explorer in the West and in Sweden as a tradesman in the East (Petersson 2003, pp. 119, 140–158, 372–373). This tendency, however,

cannot be identified in the films. Instead, it seems to be the Nordic that is the unifying element.

In films the Viking is most of the time seriously occupied with adventures, fighting, battles, seeking for land to explore, raid or conquer, taking revenge for something which has happened or taking back a lost kingdom. This can be seen in both international and Nordic films. Then there are a number of films that are showing the Viking as a silly or comic figure. It almost stands out as its own genre and seems mostly to be a Nordic phenomenon, for example the Norwegian *Prima Veras saga om Olav den Hellige* (*Prima Veras Saga About Olav the Holy*; 1983), the co-production of the influential *Erik The Viking* (1989) by some of the Monty Python actors, the Swedish *Sweaty Beards* (2010) and the Norwegian TV-series *Vikingane* (*The Norsemen*; 2016–20). It is as if countries outside the North take Vikings quite seriously, while the Nordic countries themselves supposed to harbour the Vikings have greater distance to the phenomenon and are thereby able to laugh at them. The laugh might even be on behalf of oneself, since these films are produced within a framework, where people in general probably identify themselves, right or wrong, with a Viking past.

### **The long Viking Age**

Most Viking films keep within the boundaries of the conventional period of the Viking Age from the late 8<sup>th</sup> century up until the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. However, there are enough examples making it meaningful to speak of a long Viking Age in films, stretching at least from the first century BCE to the 13<sup>th</sup> century or even later.

Both in international and Nordic films are examples inspired by the poem of Beowulf, supposed to refer to the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, e.g. the Icelandic *Beowulf & Grendel* (2005). There are also films about the mythical king Arthur supposed to have lived around 500 CE – e.g. *King Arthur* (2004). *The Viking Queen* (1967) tells a story of the Celtic queen Boudicca around 60 CE. The Danish-French animated film *Asterix and the Vikings* (2006) confronts the brave Gauls with the Vikings, and in other contexts they meet Julius Caesar, who lived in the first century BCE.

The British film *Ironclad* (2011) focus on king John's siege 1215 of Rochester Castle. The Norwegian film *Birkebeinerne* (*The Last King*; 2016) tells a story from the early 13<sup>th</sup> century and another, *Flukt* (*Escape*; 2014) from the time after the Black Death around 1360.

There are also films visualizing time travel – either from the Viking Age to the present as in the Norwegian TV-series *Beforeigners* (2019–) – or from the present back to the Viking Age – or at least modern people meeting Vikings as in the Swedish *En vikingafilm* (*A Viking Film*; 1922) and *The Island at the Top of the World* (1974) from USA.

In many cases, in a number of low-budget Viking films focusing on fights or battles, of thriller or horror type, the period in question is quite blurry. This is similar to how fantasy films often have some kind of Medieval profile when it comes to dress, props and buildings, still these films are not set in the Middle Ages, but they are inspired by the period. *Harry Potter* (2001–11) and *Game of Thrones* (2011–19) series are explicit examples of this phenomenon.

## Errors and anachronisms

It seems to be almost a sport to find errors and anachronisms in films with a historical theme, that is, to identify mistakes in the way the past is shown in relation to what the present knows about the past (e.g. Carnes 1995). And the errors and anachronism for sure are plenty, not least in Viking films, where experts easily can go hunting (e.g. Harty 2011; [www.vikingsofbyjornstad.com/VikingMovies.shtm](http://www.vikingsofbyjornstad.com/VikingMovies.shtm) especially on clothing, weaponry, fighting-technique, and ships). But they are probably relatively fewer in Nordic Viking films, where there more often seems to have been an ambition to represent the Vikings and the Viking Age correctly in relation to what we actually know about the past.

The main focus of critique is the Viking helmets with horns. If people have horns on their helmets, they are Vikings! Since Richard Wagner's operas in Germany in the 1870s it has been a typical way of identifying Vikings, even if the evidence of horns has been totally absent (Lihammer and Hesselbom 2021, pp. 166–168; Strömberg 2021, pp. 61–78). In the beginning of the era of Viking films helmets with horns are everywhere, but gradually they have disappeared during the 20<sup>th</sup> century unless the film in question is a comedy, animated or for children, and still horns occur in less ambitious action and horror films.

However, while looking for errors and anachronisms it is also possible to examine other aspects: Weaponry, clothing, ships and wagons, houses, housewares, hairstyles, occurrence of tattoos, decoration styles in general, language and behaviour. Many errors have been found in weapons and clothes, where a kind of leather garments seems to have been reused in several films regardless of period. Ships look weird for a viewer familiar with the archaeologically excavated Viking ships of Oseberg and Gokstad in Norway.

Most of all, the hairstyle and the occurrence of tattoos dates the films within decades. Nowadays Viking warriors often have advanced and quite modern hairstyles and a lot of tattoos, even if the evidence for tattoos are based on a single questionable case and source, when the Arabic traveller Ahmad ibn Fadlan in the 920s at Volga met a group of people who are supposed to have been Vikings.

With very few exceptions Vikings in films speak modern languages, mostly English or Nordic. Closest to the original Viking Age dialects is probably modern Icelandic, which in some cases are used. Only one short film to our knowledge have tried to reconstruct the language as it might have been, namely the Norwegian film *Trace* (2016).

A new and perhaps more fundamental kind of criticism of the way Vikings are presented in films and other contexts have been made possible by evolving scientific methods. It is revealed that the Viking warrior does not have to be a male nor of Nordic origin. In some cases, the Viking might have been a woman and/or of foreign origin, e.g. the warriors of the Danish king Harald Bluetooth that seem to have been from abroad (Price et al. 2011). Much discussed is the burial of a Viking warrior in Birka, Sweden, which appears to have been a female as presented in the hybrid documentary TV-series, *Den kvinnliga vikingakrigaren* (*Viking Women Warriors*; 2019). However, Viking films have actually presented female warriors, e.g. in *The Viking Queen* (1967) from USA and also in the TV-series *Vikings* (2013–20).

To look for errors and anachronisms in Viking films which are into comedy, horror, ghosts and zombies is of course easy, however near to a meaningless pursuit. There is even

something to learn about us in the present from an anachronistic approach and on anachronism as time travel in general, where it becomes obvious which kind of material remains that we possibly might want to remember, appreciate or even be disgusted by in a future world, based on our own values and preferences today (Petersson 2017a; 2017b).

### **The (mis)use of Vikings in films**

The Viking and the Viking Age are popular in general and in films. Evidence of this is that the Viking has been attendant almost from the beginning of filming as the first Viking film appeared in 1907, as the word Viking is part of many film titles and the fact that Viking films constitutes its own genre, even if it is not clearly defined. The Viking is a beholden figure when it comes to storytelling, writing and filming.

The main point when Viking films are criticised is not inevitable errors or anachronisms, which can be used creatively in the narrative. Of greater relevance is the possible (mis)use of historical periods in films (e.g. Snickars and Trenter 2004). The main critique of the Viking and the Viking Age as we know them are, that they are a creation and expression of romanticism, nationalism, and colonialism (e.g. Mahler et al. 1983, pp. 130–143; Müller-Wille 1996, Svanberg 2003, pp. 17–121). If you criticize these three ism's, then also the Viking and the Viking Age are targets. Furthermore, many Viking films mediate a traditional image of gender roles, male and Nordic superiority, which is disputable. The opinion seems to be, that it was better when we were Vikings, living in the Viking Age, i.e., murdering, raping, and raiding. However, back in the Viking Age most of the Nordic population were farmers and many were thralls, so the period is nothing to long for.

A recent and unfortunately current example of the national political use of history in Russia today is in the Russian film *Viking* (2016). It was filmed in Crimea after the Russian takeover and has Vladimir the Great as the main character. The same year a monument of Vladimir, namesake of a president of Russia contemporary with making the film, was erected in Moscow (Bodin 2017).

The large proportion of violence in Viking films is stupendous, however not really a surprise. We modern citizens seem to have a great need to fill our lives with fictional violence, since the present is relatively peaceful to the times depicted. Maybe that was one of the reasons, why there was no need of Viking films in the 1930s and 1940s and up until the mid 1950s, as violence was visible in real life.

### **Vikings and Nordic film culture**

The Viking, more than the Viking Age as such, is a popular and selling concept. There has until the present (2023) been produced around 125 Viking films of very mixed character forming its own genre. Some of the films are large international productions, some are Nordic. The international and the Nordic Viking films are entangled through choice of theme, origin of storytelling, filming locations and use of actors. For reasons of finance and distribution there are also several co-productions between foreign and Nordic companies. Thus, the Nordic sphere of Viking films cannot be separated from the international. These film productions might in addition be seen as a mirroring of the truly international character

of the activities of the Viking warriors in the past, now transformed into the world of film production.

In a number of films, maybe meant directly for videos, DVDs or TV/ streaming, the word Viking is only used in the title as a well-known selling concept. The content has little to do with the real past, the Viking or the Viking Age for that matter. Looking for errors and possible anachronisms, however, is in our opinion a waste of time, unless the intention really is to make a trustworthy image of the past back then.

The most original Nordic contribution to the genre of Viking films is the Raven Trilogy by Hrafn Gunnlaugsson in the 1980s and early 1990s. His three films visualize and re-enact Vikings from a perspective which might correspond to a Nordic identity – the countries of a brave and tough but also strongly emotional people surviving in an austere landscape and climate, and who combines cunning and violence, at least it might correspond to a certain northern view of who we want to be. These films are about the Viking Age people in their own settings in the North while the average international as well as Nordic Viking film emphasizes the strong Viking, male or female, combat, expansion and colonization.

It is striking that the 2022 Viking film *The Northman* moves around exactly the same theme as the first film of the Raven trilogy from 1984: how a young child is traumatized by seeing the killing of a parent and how the whole life thereafter is leading up to revenge. When eventually the revenge is realized, the result is that the trauma continues to the next generation. This is certainly a modern psychological message in these films, that revenge and killing is not putting things right, it only creates trauma for coming generations to handle.

Do we have any favourites after having been looking at many Viking films? It was definitely interesting to discover that the first Nordic film was the rather early *En vikingafilm (A Viking Film; 1922)*. We would like to revisit the large productions as part of a Hollywood tradition such as *The Vikings (1958)*. And we prefer silly Vikings in the humorous *Erik the Viking (1989)* and *Vikingane (The Norsemen; 2016–20)* to hard core warriors in *Valhalla Rising (2009)*, *Vikings (2013–20)* or *The Northman (2022)*. But most of all we appreciated the Raven Trilogy.

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### **Illustrations – suggestions**

Fig. 1. *En Vikingafilm* (*A Viking Film*; 1928), the first Nordic Viking film being an advertising film.

Fig. 2. *The Vikings* (1958), a large Hollywood production.

Fig. 3. *The Northman* (2022), one of the recent international films with a Swedish actor Alexander Skarsgård in the main role as Amleth.

Fig. 4. *Hrafninn Flýgur* (*When the Raven Flies; Revenge of the Barbarians*; 1984) by the Icelandic director Hrafn Gunnlaugsson, an original Nordic contribution to the genre of Viking films.