Mediating the Vikings: Popular Culture, Character Types, and Museum Audience Experiences

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Abstract

This article explores the dynamic interplay between Viking character types in popular culture and museum audiences. We examine how pervasive mediated Viking imagery shapes expectations, conceptualizing it as 'character types' activated in museum settings. Using qualitative interviews conducted at two Danish museums, we identify six dominant 'Viking character types': The Warrior, The Monster, The Explorer/Craftsman, The Feminist, The Style Icon, and The Non-Playing Character. Our findings show that audiences negotiate the tension between popular constructions of the past and historical scholarship, often expressing embarrassment, criticism, or rejection of fictional content. This highlights the Viking as an 'open construction' – a flexible character type that audiences fill with meaning. It is crucial for museums to understand these appropriations to effectively engage a public influenced by mediated fictions and develop polyphonic exhibition strategies that bridge fantasy and history in ways that are both compelling and historically grounded.

Keywords: Viking, character types, popular culture, museum exhibitions, audience studies

Introduction

Vikings. A sharp intake of breath. The glass doors slide open with a pneumatic 'psst', and that distinctive museum air hits you. I'm walking into the exhibition, and it's all polished stone floors and hushed tones, which feels immediately… wrong. I mean, Vikings. I'm picturing those strong brute men in fur and armour. Long hair, big beards, bellowing in some guttural tongue in a misty landscape, an icy fjord? Distant, dramatic music, like they're about to storm a coastal fortress. Or, well, something suitably dramatic.

Right, so, my mind's doing that chaotic flick-through thing. Forget raiding and pillaging; I'm picturing fierce shieldmaidens and those key-carrying women, the ones with the real power in the households. It's not all battle axes and glory. I'm vaguely recalling something about, like, actual work, you know? Fields, trading, crafting. A documentary voiceover begins in my head. 'These were not just warriors…' Yeah, yeah, I know. But it's hard to shake the imagery of pointy helmets, tattoos and intricate braids. Back to the actual exhibition, the objects in glass displays, weapons, jewellery, a large longship… It's a disconnect, a jarring shift from the grand and loud narratives in my head to the quiet exhibition space…

The vignette above illustrates the immediate and often conflicting images and expectations that audiences bring to Viking exhibitions. Norse mythology and the world of the Vikings frequently appear in popular culture and mainstream media which, since the nineteenth century, have been the source of various 'Viking fantasies' (Gallay 2024): romanticised and mediated images of Vikings that have sparked fascination across widespread audiences. These images are not merely fictionalized distortions but are rooted in the eighteenth and nineteenth century construction of the 'Viking concept', which is often tied to affirmations of national sentiments in the Nordic countries (Hoffmann 2016). Indeed, as Jordan Kistler (2025) demonstrates in the context of natural history exhibitions, the very structures of a narrative ('the fictive') can

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work to obscure what is invented or untrue ('the fictions') in museum displays, thereby shaping audiences' perception of authenticity. Previous research has shown that depictions of Vikings in international popular culture across media platforms – including comics such as Marvel's *The Mighty Thor*, films like *Valhalla Rising*, TV series such as *Vikings*, and young adult fantasy novels like *The Seafarer's Kiss* and the *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* series – are fictionalized and sensationalized versions of historical scholarship (e.g., Gallay 2024; Hoffmann 2016; Walsh 2020; Whitehead 2014; Södergren 2022; Žiačková 2019). Beyond mainstream media, the 'Viking' image permeates diverse cultural spheres, from sports teams and fashion brands to heavy metal music and even right-wing groups (Žiačková 2019).

Although some attention has been given to mediated Viking images, it is unknown how they shape cultural participation in museum spaces and, more importantly, how they influence museum visitors' experiences. In this article, we propose that these Viking images often function as established 'character types' or 'cognitive schemata' that visitors activate, consciously or unconsciously, when encountering new information (Eder, Jannidis and Schneider 2010).

Museums and popular culture are often cast as opposites: the one embodying high culture, the other low (Smith 1999). Within museum studies, trends such as blockbuster exhibitions that appeal to the masses (O'Reiley and Lawson 2021) or the 'disneyfication' of museums (McLean 1995; Henning 2006) are often critically discussed in terms of popular culture invading museums. This critique is often rooted in a concern about giving preference to the amusement of the many at the expense of enlightenment and education for cultured audiences (Henning 2006). As a result, there has been a clear-cut boundary between entertainment (at theme and amusement parks) and enlightenment or education (at museums) (Smith 1999; Moore 2000). However, in recent years, the dichotomy between entertainment and enlightenment has been questioned (Christensen and Haldrup 2019). Nonetheless, little scholarly attention has been given to the imagery and expectations from popular culture that museum visitors consciously and subconsciously bring with them which impact their meaning-making experiences within an exhibition. Previous studies of museum visitors have primarily focused on visitor typologies based on motivation as well as preferences regarding learning and experience (i.e., Falk and Dierking 1992; Packer and Ballantyne 2016) but have not taken visitors prior popular culture media experiences into account. This is particularly pertinent given the ways in which museum narratives leverage 'the fictive' to create emotionally authentic experiences, thereby blurring the lines between factual information and visitor perception (Kistler 2025). Moreover, as Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis and Ralf Schneider (2010) have pointed out, fictional media representations contribute significantly to the distribution and modification of social stereotypes, thereby shaping the very frameworks through which visitors interpret and make meaning from their cultural experiences.

This article explores the interplay between visitors' images of Vikings and their museum experiences in two Danish cultural heritage museums. As sites of cultural authority, museums play a critical role in mediating historical narratives and shaping public engagement with cultural heritage. We examine how museum visitors negotiate the tension between the Viking imagery of popular culture and the historical scholarship communicated by exhibitions.

Viking Media Images

The word 'Viking' evokes a myriad of diverse notions as it has been used and reinterpreted copiously in both scholarly publications and popular culture. For some, it may conjure up images of bearded men with horned helmets; others may recall a song by their favourite metal band, while others may fondly caress the rune tattoo circling their arm. The very idea of 'Vikings' is a construct, established in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and strongly attached to nationalist affirmation in the Nordic nations (Hoffmann 2016: 95). The people living in Scandinavia in the period from the late 700s to 1050 AD did not refer to themselves as 'Vikings', and historians even question that term (Lind 2012) as well as the notion of a 'Viking age' (Svanberg 2003). However, the romanticized image of the Vikings has come to represent many things throughout the years, from fashion brands to sports teams, heavy metal bands, alternative religion and even right-wing and white supremacist groups in a glorification

of the supposed hypermasculinity of the Vikings (Žiačková 2019). This romanticized image is often reinforced by museum narratives, which create an 'emotional authenticity' where the experience feels real despite its factual inaccuracies (Kistler 2025: 39). In more everyday settings in the Nordic countries, Vikings are a part of local history and therefore appear both in history lessons throughout the primary and secondary school curricula, in the corpora of national literature, which often include the Icelandic Sagas as a precursor, as well as in children's literature and other media. In short, Vikings are very familiar figures that feed a feeling of national identity in the Nordic countries.

But how can these 'figures' be conceptualized? One precursor to our study is Gudrun Whitehead's doctoral thesis from 2014 ('Vikings, The Barbaric Heroes: Exploring the Viking Image in museums in Iceland and England and its Impact on Identity'), which examines visitor responses to museum representations of Vikings in England and finds that the Viking stereotype helps construct the collective, national, and individual identities of English visitors. Whitehead (2014: 19) observes that 'visitors understood the museums' representations of the Viking age from their own preconceived ideas about their society's past'. Although there is some overlap in interest and methodology, and her results resonate with ours in terms of identity making, her work does not systematically explore popular media culture. In addition, her focus on stereotypes highlights her interest in the ideological aspects of the Viking figure, whereas we aimed to also investigate its fictional and aesthetic dimensions.

To do this hermeneutic work, we turn to the concept of 'character type' as proposed by Eder, Jannidis and Schneider (2010). Unlike understandings of 'character' as a unique fictive person, character types are composites that include traits defined by social conventions, culture and media representations. As defined by Eder, Jannidis and Schneider (2010: 38), character types are:

> a fixed set of character traits, in the sense of a *gestalt*, which feature repeatedly in certain media products which belong to at least one specific cultural milieu and its recipients' collective knowledge. Common examples of such types include the mad scientist, the altruistic nurse who works herself to exhaustion, the femme fatale, the schemer at court, the trickster, etc.

The advantage of this concept is that it recognizes that ideas of characters are not just individual creations but are collectively produced and performed. It also bridges textual, psychological, and philosophical perspectives on character, unlike a semiotic approach, for instance, which would only be interested in textual signs (Barthes 1970), or a psychological one, which would see characters as persons (Paris 1997). The concept of character types allows us to pay attention to traits and subsequently to consider which kind of figure they produce. These figures are not innocent because they become recognizable models that have an operational force:

> The fictional media representations are part of the overall media representations of a culture, and as such they absorb social stereotypes of gender, national character or the habitus of certain professions. Due to the pressure to be innovative, the fictional representations modify the stereotypes and feed them back into the circulation of social patterns. It is therefore hard to overemphasize the contribution of fictional media to the distribution and modification of such auto- and hetero-stereotypes (Eder et. al. 2010: 40).

In fact, stereotypes and archetypes share a worldbuilding function. Carl Jung suggested that all cultures share archetypes – unconscious, preformed 'psychic structures' (Hart and Brady 2005: 412) – which serve as patterned responses, behaviour models, and expressions of common human concerns and motifs. These archetypes act as inherited schemata that shape human behaviours within predefined scripts. They are connected to myths, a collection of 'eternal stories' (Lule 2001: 3) that people have long told about themselves.

This process unfolds through our engagement with fiction, in which our preconceptions of character types function as cognitive schemata. Drawing on cognitive film theory and the philosophy of film, Murray Smith (2022: 48) explains that every time a new character appears in a film, the patterns we have learnt are activated and 'we swiftly identify the likely traits and

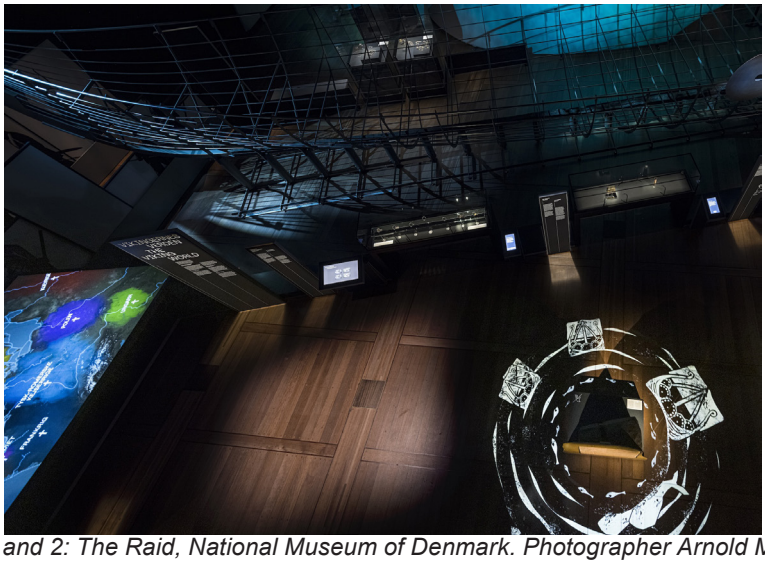
overall personality (…) on the basis of a very few features'.

It follows that the Viking character type in our heads, shaped by Viking fictions, influences our interaction with museum exhibitions. After all, imagination is a productive force. In the following section, we will outline the methodology that we employed to engage museum visitors and map the schemata they bring to museums.

Vikings at the Viking Ship Museum and the National Museum of Denmark

The Viking Age and its associated Norse mythology constitute some of the best-known cultural heritage in Denmark in terms of research objects, exhibition themes, national symbols, and religious practices. Vikings are a national attraction for international tourists in Denmark, as evidenced by, e.g. *A Travel Guide: Vikings in Denmark* (Jakobsen 2018). In addition, Vikings have played a central role in Scandinavian popular culture in literature and cartoons for both children and adults, and in recent years, they have gained international popularity through the TV series *Vikings* and the Marvel Comics and movie series (Nordfjörd 2020). In a Nordic museum context, Vikings have also become highly popular and widely debated (Sindbæk 2022; Svanberg 2022).

We conducted our study at two museums that represent distinct paradigms of Viking heritage mediation: The National Museum of Denmark (Copenhagen) and The Viking Ship Museum (Roskilde). While chosen for geographical accessibility, these sites were primarily selected for their contrasting dissemination strategies and prominent cultural authority. The National Museum of Denmark is the country's primary institution for cultural history, chronologically covering the Stone Age until the modern day. For this study, the museum represents an immersive-narrative paradigm in heritage communication. This approach was epitomised during our data collection by the large-scale exhibition, *The Raid* (2021–2023). Rather than relying solely on static displays, *The Raid* utilised cinematic scenography including dramatic lighting, atmospheric soundscapes, and a centralised fictional narrative to mediate the Viking Age. By embedding historical objects within a scripted, theatrical journey, the museum allowed visitors to physically and emotionally 'experience' the trajectory of a Viking voyage. This specific technique creates a 'fictive' framework that intentionally bridges the gap between the visitor's popular culture expectations and historical scholarship.



Figures 1 and 2: The Raid, National Museum of Denmark. Photographer Arnold Mikkelsen

The Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde is the Danish museum for ships, seafaring, and boatbuilding culture in ancient and medieval times. The Viking Ship Museum represents a material-authentic paradigm that prioritises experimental archaeology and maritime craftsmanship. In contrast to the scripted, narrative-led approach of the National Museum, this site focuses on the Skuldelev Ships, five original Viking vessels excavated in 1962. The museum's primary dissemination strategy centers on the physical reality of boatbuilding and seafaring in ancient and medieval times. While the National Museum employs cinematic scenography, this museum utilises tactile and process-oriented techniques. The exhibition of the original timber remains is supplemented by a fleet of sailing reconstructions and open-air workshops. During these activities, the public is invited to engage directly with ancient maritime craftsmanship, from woodcarving to rope-making.

Figure 3 and 4: Viking Ship Museum, Roskilde. Photographer Werner Karrasch.

Method and Data Analysis

The data used in this study comprises semi-structured qualitative in-situ museum visitor interviews (Schrøder et al. 2003) conducted between January 2022 and March 2022 at the Viking Ship Museum and the National Museum of Denmark. To ensure the findings captured the immediate impact of the exhibitions, we employed an intercept sampling technique, recruiting participants onsite. At the National Museum, participants were approached at the exit of *The Raid* to capture immediate post-experience reflections. At the Viking Ship Museum, recruitment took place within the Viking Ship Hall. A maximum variation sampling strategy was utilised to ensure a diverse range of perspectives across age, gender, and nationality. 35 interviews were conducted with a total of 71 individuals, many of whom were interviewed in pairs to encourage natural, collaborative dialogue.

- Viking Ship Museum: 23 interviews (14 female, 9 male). The sample was primarily Danish (17) with 6 international participants, covering a diverse age range from teenagers to those over 60.
- National Museum: 48 interviewees with a balanced gender distribution (25 female, 23 male). Danish participants (36) predominated, alongside 12 international participants, with strong representation in the 30–50 age demographics.

The interviews typically lasted between five and twenty minutes, a duration designed to balance depth with 'visitor pace' to avoid interview fatigue. The interview guide was designed to be exploratory to allow open and spontaneous discussions that followed the interviewees' responses and interests with the aim of capturing unexpected insights (Kvale 2007), focusing on three core areas:

- Immediate mental imagery associated with the word 'Viking'
- Specific popular culture influences (e.g., Vikings, The Last Kingdom, Marvel)
- The perceived tension or alignment between these media images and the museums' historical narratives

All the interviews were transcribed and anonymised then analysed in a coding process of three cycles. In the first cycle, all the authors of the article read the empirical material and

subsequently collectively categorized and arranged it into tentative themes through descriptive coding (Saldaña 2009: 70). In the second cycle, the data was further analysed using a focused coding scheme based on thematic and conceptual similarities to investigate the different kinds of Viking character types. In the last coding cycle, the analytical focus was on the interplay between the Viking character types and the visitors' museum experiences.

Viking Media Memories

Understanding the participants' specific 'media memories' is crucial, as these recollections directly shape the 'Viking fantasies' and 'character types' that they bring to museum exhibitions. In this section, we present the popular culture content recalled by our participants, as it is significant for understanding where their Viking images come from. These 'media memories' act as a form of collective recollection where various fictions – from TV series to comics and games – profoundly mediate individuals' understandings of the past (Neiger, Meyers, and Zandberg 2011). Considering these experiences is vital for understanding the pre-existing frameworks through which visitors interpret and make meaning from historical narratives (Halbwachs 1992).

Our participants' media memories of Vikings were fragmented but tended to cluster around widely known works. The most dominant media memories were recent historical fiction TV series such as *Vikings* (2013–2020; 2022–), *Norsemen* (2016-2020), and *The Last Kingdom* (2015–2022). These TV series have gained worldwide popularity due to streaming platforms. In particular, the series *Vikings* and the sequel series titled *Vikings: Valhalla* (2022–), produced by Netflix, inhabited most Viking media memories as *the* Viking TV show. This was the case for both younger and older groups, for viewers of the series and for non-viewers alike, as well as for the Danish and the international audiences. These series are considered unavoidable due to aggressive marketing and global popularity, though their polemic content causes ambivalent audience receptions. This is exemplified by one Danish female participant who declared: 'I've seen parts of Vikings, but I kind of checked out when it started getting too… I was like, Nah, this is just too much now, I can't do it anymore'. Another female participant, from the USA, offered a different perspective, noting that:

> …those shows mainly cater to women, right. In my opinion I don't think men watch it as much as women. So the Vikings are played by attractive male actors, and it makes you not empathize with them, but almost feels like you justify their violence because you're attracted to them.

As for comics and graphic novels, the Danish and international audiences had different preferences. The Danes often recalled *Valhalla*, a successful Danish comic series about Norse gods which was later adapted into an animated movie. International audiences, conversely, frequently referenced Marvel's Thor and his appearances in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. *Asterix* was also mentioned, despite its Gaulish origins (although one of the volumes does indeed feature Vikings), for evoking Viking stereotypes in the audience's memories through its thematic and visual elements.

Literature for children and young adults about Vikings also shaped the audience's imagery, though seemingly to a lesser extent. This may be due to the adult participants' faded reading memories from their childhood or the current dominance of visual media. However, other children's media imagery showed a different trend. The animated series *Vicky the Viking*, based on a Swedish novel, frequently appeared in children's media memories. Emphasizing wit over physical prowess, *Vicky* (and its remake *Vic*) contrasts with more brutal Viking portrayals. It premiered in Germany in 1974 and was later developed into a Japanese animated movie and series. Surprisingly, internationally recognized Viking novels such as Frans G. Bengtsson's *The Long Ships* (1945) were only mentioned in passing.

Interactive platforms, including computer and video games, also play an important role in shaping Viking perceptions, often transcending specific media boundaries. For instance, the video game *The Settlers* allows players to inhabit a Viking role, complemented by a related graphic novel. This demonstrates the multifaceted nature of Viking representations.

Importantly, the participants' Viking memories were not solely from fictional media. Many

participants had a special or professional interest and referred to non-fictional sources, including documentaries, podcasts, educational materials, books, and other museum exhibitions, which also significantly influenced their perceptions. As a female participant in her 40s explained:

> I read original sources, read Edda poems and Icelandic sagas and so on to try to find out what people really believed ... Then I also try to listen to professors, read articles and so on. I love [Jeanette] Varberg's books about Vikings, and yes, books like that.

Since they were interviewed within a museum space, it was not surprising that several participants remembered experiences at other museums, which indicates a mix of informal and formal learning. Furthermore, Danish and Nordic participants mentioned Vikings as being part of their educational background from elementary school as well as of their national identity.

Ultimately, although participants were able to identify some specific media works, the dialogue surrounding these titles was not particularly rich (they did not remember much more than a title or some characters) and often just served as a bridge. The discussions quickly shifted from recalling specific media to describing the broader 'Viking character types' favoured by our audiences, which we detail further in the next section.

Viking Character Types: Brutal Raiders or the First Feminists?

In this section, we examine the implied meanings behind the participants' explanations about Vikings – that is, the schemata that guide their understandings of what a Viking is. We shift from a media-centric perspective to interrogating the images that shaped our audience's perception. Our initial assumption was that popular media might create a single, stereotyped Viking image shared by most participants. Instead, our data revealed a wide range of Viking imaginings. We synthesised these into composite character types, named and defined by the researchers but constructed based on the participants' reflections.

The Warrior

Keywords: battle-ready, hero, cool, brave, honest
The image of the Viking as a stoic, fierce, and formidable warrior is the most prominent one in our data. Despite several historical inaccuracies, such as the helmet with horns, this image frequently appeared in the interviews: 'they are red-haired and wear helmets with horns and drink beer and mead', one Danish woman in her 70s noted. As identified by our participants, the trope of the hyper-masculine warrior clad in leather and carrying weapons, ready for sea voyages, territorial conquests, and battles, is prevalent in recent blockbuster productions and video games. Ragnar Lothbrok, the main character in the TV series *Vikings*, is the incarnation of this type. As one museum educator from the Viking Ship Museum observed: 'they were perhaps better at fighting than people from England and elsewhere'.

Their war-readiness and competence were admired (especially by Danish participants), and the Vikings' brutality was even attributed to them being more natural and direct than modern people. Exposure to Viking belief systems helps visitors understand, if not forgive, their violence. Exhibitions play a role in highlighting the motivations beyond mere brutality: 'I was never educated or taught to question what their motivation would be, outside of brutality. Which (…) was interesting in the exhibit to think about their legacy, honour, family, tradition. There's motivation beyond just brute force and violence', explained a New Zealand woman in her 20s. The participants acknowledged that the Vikings' ethical world was different from our own and made an effort to judge them by their own standards, which were centred on concepts such as honour and pleasing the gods rather than modern conscience. The participants also admired the Vikings' perceived nonchalance, their fearlessness, and their eagerness to die in battle and reach Valhalla.

The Monster

Keywords: killing machine, villain, cold, greedy, chauvinist
This character type represents the darker side of the Viking imagery and focuses on their

brutal nature. Vikings are seen as raiders, rapists, murderers and drinkers. One participant noted: 'Vikings are brutal, violent, horrible people who did horrible things and just went into villages and did whatever they wanted' (Woman, New Zealand, 20s). Despite the negative connotations, there was a fascination with this brutal image. A few male participants expressed a sense of pride even though there was also horror:

> And maybe it is a bit over the top. We just show up and raid – death, destruction, and burning everything down. (…) It's really about the idea that we're this tiny little country that was able to have such a big impact and all that. It's true, it's quite impressive – but we really were pretty brutal too (Male, Denmark, 40s).

This character type highlights that audiences also see Vikings through a lens of modern values, emphasizing their coldness, greed, disregard for human life, and toxic masculinity.

The Explorer/Craftsman

Keywords: crafty, navigator, clever, artisan, trader
This character type highlights the Viking qualities beyond their warrior image, emphasizing their roles as skilled artisans and explorers. The participants were aware that the Vikings' appreciation for beauty extended to all aspects of life, including ships, ornaments, tattoos, braids, and songs. The Vikings' ability to travel vast distances was fascinating to them. As a Danish woman in her 50s noted: 'what really stands out is how far they travelled and sailed. (...) it wasn't only Europe; it was practically half the world they reached.' The Vikings' extensive exploration was enabled by their craftsmanship and the tools they created.

> In that sense, it really is impressive what they were able to do with their ships – their incredible skill in shipbuilding. And when you look at their craftsmanship, and the craftsmanship produced at the time in general, it's remarkably beautiful, and they had some incredible techniques (Woman, Denmark, 70s).

Some participants even drew parallels between Viking jewellery and modern Danish minimalist design, suggesting a historical link to current aesthetic successes.

The Feminist

Keywords (for Viking women): warrior/seer, ruler, mother, lover, brave, free
This character type focuses on the powerful, independent roles of Viking women, often referenced from TV series, old texts, and historical reflections on women's leadership during the absence of the men. One participant found it

> fascinating how significant the role of women has been. They had to lead and govern when the men were away. And that is important for how we understand the present, where there is often a perception that women only entered the workforce in the 1970s, but no, there was actually a long historical period before that when women held major and influential roles. It is only later in history that this faded and eventually returned (Woman, Denmark, 30s).

In this account, the independent Viking women contribute to explaining the way in which contemporary Danish women see themselves. The participants admired the way that Viking women had increased agency, strength, and independence, which aligns with modern feminist ideals. This is exemplified by characters such Lagertha from *Vikings* or Frøja from *The Norsemen*. Although it is challenging to definitively determine the historical accuracy regarding the roles and status of women in Viking society, contemporary depictions often present female Viking characters as strong, capable, and assertive. The account also includes the special connection of Viking women to spirituality, nature, and the divine through the figure of the sorceress. There seems to be a shared perception of Vikings as ahead of their time in terms of gender equality because of the way sexuality and marriage are portrayed in the TV series.

The Style Icon

Keywords: beautiful bodies, muscles, tattoos, blond hairstyles, sexy, dark
This character type focuses on the aesthetic appeal and physical appearance of Vikings as mentioned by the visitors. While some noted the anachronistic portrayal of TV heroes with their muscled physiques, hipster beards, and leather clothing (resembling a metal band), a significant majority of our interviewees expressed an appreciation for these aesthetics, despite acknowledging their potential anachronism. The museum guides often try to counter this glamorous image; however, some historically accurate elements actually support it. For instance, one guide criticized the 'biker look' featured in the TV series, as it is very different from the historical findings:

> We mostly find wool clothing, not so much leather or fur. They were fond of bright colours, and then there are these English sources that describe the Vikings as very clean. Today, we might even call them metrosexual men, who made a real effort to bathe once a week and comb their hair and beards every day. We're constantly finding little tweezers, combs, and things like that. This romanticized idea of the Viking as a big, rugged wild man with a huge beard, a big axe, and lots of fur.

The participants were aware of the 'Viking trend' on social media, where people's sharing of instructions to braid their hair like the Vikings, apply Viking makeup, and get Viking tattoos reflects this fascination. Several participants had tattoos inspired by this aesthetic or tried to follow other fashionable trends. There is a clear 'new goth' vibe in this aesthetic, which extends beyond personal appearance to the atmosphere of the film adaptations.

The Non-Playing Character

Keywords: regular people, hardship, work, weather, peasants
Finally, we propose a 'peasant' or 'regular people' character type, although this is not the kind of person who becomes the main character in contemporary Viking popular culture. Peasants seem to exist only in the background, overshadowed by the more glamorous and dramatic portrayals of warriors, explorers and style icons. In modern game terms, they are NPCs, non-playing characters, who take care of the crops, the house, the family… enabling the heroes: 'I guess you don't really think about the whole lifestyle (…). The family side of it, (…) you just think that everyone's a warrior. You don't think about the children' (Woman, UK, 20s). Ordinary lives are not glamorous at all: as one participant put it,

> many of them lived completely ordinary lives and had to adapt to nature and the changing seasons. (…) There's not much glamour in watching someone spend three hours turning grain into a loaf of bread [laughs]. That's not exactly exciting television (Woman, Denmark, 30s).

Nonetheless, ordinary life often comes into focus at the exhibitions, where visitors can see the weapons, provisions, and tools that the Vikings carried in their ships, and reconstructions of their clothes or objects of daily use, including combs, tableware, or toys. It is remarkable that the visitors refer to the objects as the real thing, that which the fictions cannot show. The objects tell another story: 'in reality it was a very tough life, trying to escape from a difficult way of living and into an even more difficult way of living' (Man, Spain, 50s).

Discussion

Whose Vikings?

Maybe we should ask, who has the right to make such assumptions and characterizations? We, the research team, made them based on the empirical data, but in the same data we also found reflections regarding the relation of the participants with the Viking figures they subconsciously adhered to. The interpretation of Viking character types and the normative value

added to each of them varied significantly according to the audiences' origins. Scandinavians tended to admire the Viking Age as an era of greatness, a time when the Nordic countries had a significant impact on the world in contrast to the small role currently played by the region in the international sphere (Aronsson 2013). This admiration is evident in the pride Scandinavians and not least Danes felt about their Viking heritage: 'Denmark isn't otherwise that well-known, or rather Scandinavia, and in that regard, the Vikings are something that really drives interest in Scandinavia as a whole' (Man, Denmark, 50s). The participant implies that through the Vikings, Denmark, and the Danes, gain recognition, even if the Vikings did not have a universally good reputation. 'Yes, and they were brutal, but conversely, it's also something we're actually a little bit proud of. [...] the Viking Age is unequivocally our past. So, I also think that's what makes people stand a little taller' (Woman, Denmark, 50s). One Danish woman, married to an Englishman, shared an interesting observation at the Viking Ship Museum: her husband often points out how much the Viking Age permeates daily life for Danes. This external perspective highlights a significant cultural presence that might otherwise go unnoticed by those immersed in it.

The Viking era is seen as a mythological period that boosts the small nation's self-understanding: 'The Vikings are indeed mythology that we can use in our self-understanding. We have ruled over England!' (Man, Denmark, 50s). However, this pride can be complicated for some audiences. They explain that far-right groups have co-opted the Viking heritage, and therefore it is difficult for them to reconcile it with their own identity. People who emphasize the value of nature and the Vikings' ability to thrive in harsh climates, along with their spirituality, seem to be crafting a different national image than the image of the Vikings as conquerors. This is a modern quest for an authenticity that can be supported by the ancestors.

Perhaps not surprisingly, each Scandinavian country 'negotiates distinct national images of the typical Viking' so Danes, Norwegian, Swedes, and Icelanders are equally proud of their ancestry for different reasons (Aronsson 2013: 282). In Sweden, Vikings are presented as a craftsmen, in Norway, they are seen as seafarers, whereas Danes see the Vikings as farmers (ibid.). Participants from outside Scandinavia perceive the Vikings as the people who interrupted history: 'Vikings came and everything stopped and then Vikings left and history sort of continued to progress' (Man, USA, 20s). Conversely, for some international audiences, the connection to the Vikings is less about national identity and more about popular media. For instance, a young English couple, avid fans of the TV series *Vikings*, specifically prioritized a trip to the out-of-the-way Viking Ship Museum in their brief visit to Denmark. Their visit underscored both the powerful draw of popular culture and their limited prior knowledge of Danish history, which led to moments of uncertainty about historical details. The Viking influence extends beyond Scandinavia, connecting peoples through the routes of their travels, as far as Eastern Europe.

Ultimately, our findings suggest that visitors 'appropriate' the Vikings in one way or another, both in terms of interpretation and in explaining their own identities. This appropriation reflects the diverse ways in which the Viking heritage is perceived and valued across different cultures. This is consistent with Whitehead's (2014) English data.

The Viking is not a uniform character: rather, there are nearly as many Vikings as categories of visitor, although there are a few dominating character types. These may, however, be valued in very different ways. Indeed, our findings underscore the core argument by Eder, Jannidis and Schneider (2010) that character types possess a degree of interpretive flexibility and indeterminacy, which visitors actively fill in. The Viking character as encountered by museum visitor is not a static, unchangeable entity but an open construction that allows for various formations of meaning.

It may therefore be more productive to think of the Viking as a floating arrangement of traits, values, and aesthetics, which can be tapped into and reconfigured in different ways, even as the historical facts and artifacts remain constant. This inherent worldbuilding power of character types significantly impacts how visitors engage with and interpret historical narratives and poses unique challenges and opportunities for exhibition design.

Interplay: Navigating Popular Culture in the Museum Space

Whilst visitors arrived at the Viking exhibitions at the two museums with a rich tapestry of preconceived notions, largely woven from popular culture, the encounter between these established mental schemata and the museum's historical narratives was rarely passive. Our interviews revealed a dynamic interplay in which visitors actively navigated, and sometimes struggled with, the tension between their fictionalized understandings and the historical information presented in the museum. This navigation was often manifested in distinct attitudinal postures towards popular media, frequently accompanied by a 'normative voice-over' reflecting a desire to align with a more informed or critical perspective.

Our analysis reveals that the museum environment often seemed to trigger a self-awareness regarding the origins of their Viking knowledge, which led to some degree of embarrassment about the dominance of popular fiction in their understanding. For participants, the line between fact and fiction was fuzzy. Some expressed a vagueness about historical facts, finding it challenging to pinpoint or distinguish between scholarly information and popular media fabrications. This mirrors Kistler's (2025) observations that narrative in exhibitions can inadvertently obscure what is invented yet also implies an opportunity for museums to consciously shape narratives that bridge perceived emotional truths and historical evidence. One interviewee articulated this common sentiment: 'I just think one has read a bit on the internet and such. Continuously. It's a bit silly because you watch that series, but then there are a lot of characters you've read about' (Man, Denmark, 40s). This highlights a widespread experience: knowing about Vikings, often in vivid detail (feeding, for instance, the 'warrior' or 'feminist' character types), but struggling to attribute that knowledge accurately to its source. The authoritative setting of the museum, with its meticulously presented artifacts and historical narratives, implicitly challenged the visitors to confront this gap between entertainment and education.

A second common reaction was outright criticism of popular media's historical inaccuracies. Many declared that all Viking content in popular culture was 'always wrong' (Man, Denmark, 40s). This critique often specifically targeted the exaggerated brutality associated with the 'monster' character type or the anachronistic aesthetics of the 'style icon'. Despite this strong assertion, interviewees often struggled to articulate precisely how or why these depictions were incorrect. This suggests a general awareness that popular culture takes liberties with history, which reflects a critical engagement with media, but a lack of specific historical knowledge to fully substantiate their critique. For example, although some visitors correctly identified the absence of horned helmets, they might still hold other popular culture-derived misconceptions. This form of engagement hints at a desire to demonstrate a critical and informed perspective, even if the foundation for that critique was still evolving during their museum visit.

A smaller but significant group of predominantly female participants expressed a clear rejection of certain Viking popular culture content due to its pervasive and often glorified violence. As one female participant explained, 'I avoid it in popular culture because (…) the violence somehow becomes glorified in a way I don't like' (Woman, Denmark, 70s). This deliberate avoidance highlights a moral filter applied to media consumption, where the sensationalized 'monster' character type or the hyper-masculine aspects of the 'warrior' character type were actively disengaged with. For the segment of our participants that actively rejected the 'monster' trope found in popular media, the museum was positioned as a 'corrective space'. These participants looked to the material authenticity of the artifacts to provide a version of the Viking Age that was, free from what they perceived as the glorified violence of mainstream entertainment. This suggests that the museum has a unique role in attracting visitors who are interested in Vikings but are repelled by the dominant, violent popular culture portrayals.

Furthermore, the museum spaces provide a tangible, authentic experience that contrasts sharply with the mediated fictions. The participants often commented that seeing actual historical objects – weapons, jewellery, or the impressive longships – provided a grounding reality that the media could not replicate. These objects facilitated a shift in perception, which allowed visitors to glimpse the 'ordinary life' of the Vikings, which remains largely an 'NPC' in popular culture narratives. Whereas 'the warrior' and the 'style icon' types dominate

popular media, the museum's emphasis on daily tools, clothing, and even personal hygiene items (as noted by a museum guide critical of the 'biker look'), presented a different, often surprising, dimension of Viking life that expanded the participants' understanding beyond battle and glamour.

Our analysis also revealed a sophisticated understanding among the visitors of the broader 'Viking brand' itself – a recognition that uses of history permeate contemporary society in complex ways. One participant articulated this eloquently:

> It's use of history everywhere, isn't it? I mean, it goes all the way back to... when you can use them on liver pâté packaging, right? And there are the Danish Nazis who used the Vikings, and we sell sperm abroad that's Viking sperm... And the whole reconstruction of Denmark after 1864, so there's something that has lived in us, and people only invent the Vikings there, right? And the silly hats with the fake horns, or it's not silly hats, but those hooligans. And then there was Jim Lyngvild's exhibition a few years ago, which also made interest bloom again (Woman, Denmark, 40s).

This powerful quote illustrates the pervasive nature of the 'Viking' as a malleable cultural symbol, appropriated for everything from commercial products and nationalistic narratives to far-right ideologies. This awareness means that visitors don't simply absorb information; they critically evaluate the intent behind its presentation. For museums, this presents both a significant challenge and a unique opportunity. Although popular culture undoubtedly creates a high level of recognition and initial interest in Vikings (serving as an effective 'hook'), it also generates a complex web of expectations, misconceptions, and even moral objections, that museums must deftly navigate. The varying 'character types' and engagement modes – ranging from embarrassment and criticism to outright rejection – demonstrate that there is no such thing as a 'Viking' visitor audience, but a diverse public engaging with a multifaceted and often contentious cultural symbol. Museums, therefore, become crucial sites for negotiating these popular narratives with historical evidence, allowing visitors to actively bridge the gap between their imagined Vikings and the complexities of the past.

Conclusion

Our exploration into the various 'Viking character types' and their dynamic interplay with popular culture and museum experiences reveals a crucial challenge and opportunity for cultural heritage institutions. The vivid, often sensationalized, portrayals of Vikings in popular media – from the warrior and the monster to the feminist, the style icon, and the non-playing character – arrive with the visitors at the museum door, shaping their expectations, interpretations and even their emotional responses. This complex tapestry of preconceived notions reinforces the necessity for museums to move beyond the assumption that visitors arrive as a 'blank slate' as often implicitly assumed in the 'transmission model' of communication (Hooper-Greenhill 1992). Instead, our findings align with the concept of the 'entrance narrative' (Doering and Pekarik 1996), which describes the internal framework of ideas, experiences, and prejudices that visitors bring to an exhibition. For contemporary visitors, this entrance narrative is heavily saturated with mediated Viking imagery. When museums ignore these pre-existing cognitive schemata, they miss the opportunity to engage with the actual 'starting point' of the visitors' meaning-making process. By curating with the entrance narrative in mind, institutions can better facilitate the negotiation between popular fictions and historical facts. So, what do these findings mean for museum practice, and what steps can we take to bridge the gap between popular fantasy and historical reality?

First, our research strongly suggests that museums should avoid designing exhibitions for a single, monolithic 'Viking' archetype. As we have shown, the Viking character is an 'open construction' that allows for diverse formations of meaning. Attempting to cater to just one popular image, such as the hyper-masculine warrior, risks alienating visitors who identify with other facets of the Viking age or audiences who actively reject such portrayals. Instead, exhibitions could strive for polyphonic approaches that acknowledges the multifaceted nature of the Viking image and presents nuanced historical accounts that resonate with different

audience schemata. By 'polyphonic exhibition strategies', we refer to a dialogical approach to curation (inspired by Bakhtin 1984) where multiple perspectives including the visitors' own 'mediated fictions' and the museum's historical scholarship are allowed to coexist. Instead of a monophonic authority where the museum provides a single 'correct' truth, a polyphonic strategy treats the visitors' pre-existing character types as valid entry points for engagement.

In addition, it is vital for museums to be aware of the strong emotional appeal of these popular fictions. Although they are sometimes problematic in their historical accuracy, these narratives often serve as a powerful 'hook' that may draw visitors into the museum in the first place. Rather than simply dismissing them, museums can strategically leverage this pre-existing interest. For instance, exhibitions could overtly address popular culture myths, using them as a starting point for discussion or as a deliberate contrast to historical evidence.

Our study also highlights the diverse motivations and predispositions of the visitors themselves. It is important to recognize which kind of visitor the museums are engaging with. Some visitors actively seek to 'resist' popular fictions, explicitly stating that their primary interest lies solely in 'facts'. For these individuals, museums serve as a welcome respite from sensationalism, offering a perceived objective space for historical truth. Catering to this segment means maintaining academic rigour and clarity in the historical presentation. For others, the allure of popular culture is undeniable, and their journey into history might begin precisely from those fictionalized entry points. Museums can therefore offer multiple pathways into the Viking age, allowing visitors to navigate their own relationship with the past, whether that means directly challenging myths or slowly introducing complexity.

In conclusion, understanding the vibrant, yet often contradictory, 'Viking character types' that visitors bring to the museum is paramount for effective cultural communication. Our qualitative method, based on in-situ interviews, has proven highly effective in capturing these immediate and often subconscious interactions. Future research will build upon these insights, potentially exploring how specific exhibition design choices influence the negotiation process, and how museums can proactively shape public understanding without sacrificing historical integrity. By acknowledging the power of popular imagination while upholding scholarly standards, museums are uniquely positioned to be vital spaces where the many 'Vikings' of our collective consciousness meet the rich, complex realities of history, thereby fostering a more nuanced and engaging public discourse.

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