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**Tom Birkett/Roderick Dale** (eds.): *The Vikings Reimagined. Reception, Recovery, Engagement*. Boston/Berlin, 2019.

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This collection of fifteen essays (and an afterword) arose from a conference held in 2016 at University College, Cork, Ireland, and is edited by Tom Birkett (UCC) and Roderick Dale (University of Stavanger). The conference was part of a larger project, based on public participation in scholarly research, the World-Tree Project, an online digital platform for the teaching and study of the Vikings (<http://www.worldtreeproject.org>). Anthologies like the present tome have a tendency to be either (too) broad in their thematic, material or theoretical scope, or – at the other end of the spectrum – too focused and specific, to be of use to a more general, non-academic readership. None of these extremes pertain to *The Vikings Reimagined*, as the book offers a number of innovative and thought-provoking insights in the ways the historical legacy of the Vikings has not only evolved because of new historical and archeological findings, but has also – more or less autonomously – mutated into unexpected images and narratives, often in popular cultural contexts. Just think about the way Viking(ish) aesthetics have become widely accepted in contrasting cultural niches as the music industry (e.g. Viking Metal) and videogames (e.g. *Assassins's Creed Valhalla* and *Valheim*). A common feature of the essays in this anthology is that they offer a wide variety of case studies of how, especially, these ‘new’ popular cultural images and narratives of the Viking past, may – or may not – feed back into scholarship. Those engaged in subdisciplines as reception studies, cultural studies and tourism studies may find much of their liking in this book, while traditional scholarship will either experience a touch of alienation, or get inspired by some of the unexpected offshoots their field of research produces. Clear examples hereof are the ways in which Viking reenactors can produce concrete knowledge, which then may feed back into historical research, and how the use of Viking imagery is deployed as a branding and marketing tool and what that means for product- and consumeridentity.

Historical and archeological research refine our understanding of life in medieval Scandinavia, including the period which, for better or worse, often is labelled the Viking Age, but what does the label Viking mean in contemporary culture?

This is one of the intriguing issues that many scholars in Scandinavian studies often are confronted with, but that they often barely dare to touch upon. And it is exactly this anxiety for an alternative, non-traditional, cross-disciplinary perspective, that is the main motivation for the contributions in *The Vikings Reimagined*. It is less the history or etymology of the word Viking these essays focus on, but rather the ubiquitous presence of the word Vikings and the abundance of images related to it in contemporary culture. Viking has become such a malleable word, that it has morphed into a notion with a life and a reality of its own, or, as one of the editors, Tom Birkett puts it in his introduction: “this book is about some of the ways through which the popular image of Viking and Old Norse Culture has been channeled and disseminated in the public domain as well as the central place that reimagined Viking history plays in our cultural world.” In other words, the word ‘Viking’ has become a jack-of-all-trades, based on stereotypes, misconceptions or even fraud – as in the notorious case of the Kensington runestone – but even a hoax may give rise to interesting scholarly work and public debate. And one of the key messages of this book is that, instead of admonishing and correcting popular cultural interpretations of the Viking Age, we would be much better off by including and studying them, erroneous as they may be. Nevertheless, the political consequences of this broad-minded and rather unlimited approach could have been more prominently addressed in *The Vikings Reimagined*. Especially the so-called social media are demonstrable breeding grounds for abhorrent and fallacious appropriations of Viking heritage by political extremists and this could easily have been discussed in a chapter or two, e.g., by exposing and debunking delusive extreme right-wing ideologies and “toxic myths”, historically as well as in contemporary culture. Unfortunately, this important ambition is merely mentioned in passing in the present collection of essays. Precisely because Tom Birkett makes it clear in his introduction that, instead of putting energy in refuting the many misconceptions of Vikings mainly in the Anglo-Saxon world, he prefers to accept them as products of history and subsequently study them in a broader context, one would have expected at least some reflection on the political employment of direct and indirect Viking(ish) imagery in today’s political discourse. This would have been a welcome addition to the already abundant thematic smörgåsbord this anthology has on offer. Clearly there is still room for an additional conference with an even more comprehensive agenda.

One of the benefits of *The Vikings Reimagined* is, that it showcases a rich variety of essays that present diverse case studies dealing with the reception and appropriation of ‘Viking-stuff’ in contemporary (popular) culture. Various sub-cultures, enterprises, advertising agencies and official institutions – sometimes with absurdly distinct agendas – engender and procreate their own reimagination

of the Viking past, often without any relationship to ‘real’ history. But instead of disapproving, Tom Birkett would like this book to probe: “the fault lines [...] between the scholarly and the academic discourse”. This ambition is not least fueled by the popularity and global appeal of the Viking past through blockbuster tv-series and historical documentaries as *Game of Thrones* (2011-) and *Vikings*, as well as the Marvel studio’s superhero productions like *Thor* (2011-) and *Loki* (2021-) including additional merchandise, spinoffs, other media platforms, tourism concepts etc. By embracing popular culture in a broad sense, Birkett wants to stimulate a discussion on “the impact of the popular discourse on the study of the Viking Age and to rethink the ways in which the academy engages with the Viking past in the public domain”.

Notwithstanding the innovative purpose of the book, the first chapter, written by M.J. Driscoll, starts by investigating the appropriateness of the term ‘Viking’. The majority of the subsequent essays though, deal with a patchwork of topics more or less related to the ways in which the Viking past is employed. The thematic lineup is as follows: contemporary Viking reenactors (essays by Leszek Gardela and Klaudia Karpińska); Vikings in picture books for children (Jessica Clare Hancock) in humor and parody (Thomas Spray); presumed indirect Old Norse intertextuality in *Moby-Dick* (Heather O’Donoghue) and Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (Richard North); Viking heritage as marketing tool in general (Roderick Dale) and in the context of Irish city marketing and tourism (Rebecca Boyd) in particular; and an essay on the unique merger of a European Romantic play based on Old Norse themes and a Chinese opera tradition (Kendra Wilson). For this reviewer, the most appealing, innovative and resourceful essays are the ones on the successful tv-series *Game of Thrones* (by Carolynne Larrington), on the use of runes – and rune-like semiotic resources – in digital games (Maja Bläckvall), on the mainly fictitious – and sometimes hilarious – Viking legacy in North America (Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough) and the programmatic essay on contemporary ways to (re)use the Viking past, academically and in terms of knowledge transfer and public outreach (by Neil Price). This overview clearly demonstrates that this book is a horn of plenty with regard to subject matter, approaches and cross-disciplinarity.

The archeologist and tv-personality Price, makes an outstanding point by showing that the way(s) in which Viking culture is mediated, (re)told and (re)imagined is strongly influenced by the choice of media format and the expectations of the target audiences. He also argues in favor of a more subjective, playful – and even sensuous – engagement with the past in general, thus clearly supporting the multifarious agenda of most of the contributors to *The Vikings Reimagined*. Especially the final essays contain strong case studies that demonstrate “that the Viking brand itself is so strong it can add commercial value even

when the public knows there is no connection to a historical period or indeed to Norse culture". This observation is also the cornerstone in the well written and thoroughly documented final chapter of the book, which deals with the – mostly fake – Viking legacy in North America. The author, Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough, poses one of the most interesting and provocative questions of the entire book: "how often does historical enquiry have less to do with establishing past facts, and more to do with the establishing of present identity". This question could (and should) have been asked earlier in *The Vikings Reimagined* as it could have added more unity and substance to a number of the subsequent chapters. Furthermore, the present line up of the contributions to *The Vikings Reimagined* could have been more obviously organized e.g., by grouping essays thematically.

The overall impression of this anthology is, that it is properly edited. Nevertheless, apart from a few annoying typos, there is one editorial issue, which I hope does not appear nitpicking, namely the sometimes excessive use of endnotes, that not merely contain necessary bibliographical references but also additional content, which makes the style and appearance of the book less uniform. Still, *The Vikings Reimagined* is in many ways an innovative and intellectually rewarding book, as it opens new perspectives for future inter- and cross-disciplinary historical and cultural research concerning the appropriation of the Viking Age. It is up to many traditional Scandinavian studies programs, to find their bearings and decide what these untraditional approaches mean for their research and teaching programs. This anthology could well turn out to be an inspirational accelerant for departments of Scandinavian Studies, that are rethinking and redesigning their programs.