
Article:
Vohra, Pragya orcid.org/0000-0002-2515-9398 (2025) Exotic TV 'Vikings':Reading depictions of the past through an Orientalist paradigm. Viking. 12198. ISSN: 0332-608X

https://doi.org/10.5617/vikingsv.12198

PEER REVIEWED
ARTICLE

Viking Special Volume 3:
Telling different stories: Combining perspectives on the Viking Age, 59–74
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/12198

Pragya Vohra

Exotic TV «Vikings»:

Reading depictions of the past through an Orientalist paradigm

Abstract
This article discusses the representation of the early Viking age past in the popular television show, *Vikings*. Based loosely on *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* and *Ragnars sona þáttr*, the show demonstrates an awareness of academic research into the early Viking age and pays particular attention to academic research on the material realities of the Viking age mainly through its use of archaeological evidence. While the show is not the only popular cultural product to do so, it does, however, present a version of the past that creates the Viking age as a «foreign country» by defamiliarising the familiar past. It is the contention of this article that a careful comparison with the tropes and methods of Orientalism can help illuminate the show's processes of reimagining the past.

Introduction
In 2013, a new television show called *Vikings* opened to millions of viewers across North America, the UK and Australia. Created by Michael Hirst, this Irish-Canadian co-production was one of a range of television shows set in the Viking age which appeared in the Euro-American televisual cultural sphere at the beginning of the third millennium. The show has been popular, spanning six series and finally concluding in 2021. It has spawned a spin-off series *Vikings: Valhalla* which began to air in 2022 and is currently ongoing. The show has had an impressive reception from audiences worldwide, regularly opening series to audiences in excess of 1 million viewers (TV Series Finale 2019) and carrying an overall rating of 8.5/10 on IMDb (2013–2020). It has also seen serious and sustained academic engagement in the form of academic blog posts (e.g. Williams 2015), journal articles (e.g. Gadelli 2018; Stahl 2018; Taylor 2022), and a 2019 collection titled *Vikings and the Vikings*. In its foreword, Justin Pollard, the show's historical consultant, appreciates academic attention paid to it as «a privilege» and hopes that this marks «a still closer dialectic» between filmmakers and academic historical practitioners (2019:2).

Loosely based primarily on the thirteenth-century Icelandic *fornaldasaga*, *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, and the fourteenth-century *Ragnars sona þáttr*, *Vikings* draws inspiration from a range of other historical and saga sources (Heddle 2019). The show follows the lives, adventures and misadventures of the main character Ragnar (modelled on the quasi-historical

Contact: Pragya Vohra, email: pragya.vohra@york.ac.uk
University of York

Ragnarr Loðbrók), his family and his sons. It employs both material culture as well as narratives to create a representation of the Viking age past in which its characters are situated. It is important to acknowledge here that the creators of the show have demonstrated a great deal of engagement with historical narratives as well as with several aspects of historical and archaeological research on the Viking age. Some of this engagement featured in a related documentary mini-series *The Real Vikings* in which the producer and stars of the television show spoke to experts about the archaeology and history of the period (Evans 2018). The core narratives that form the basis of the show are supplemented with historical and archaeological information from a range of other sources. However, as with many cases of medievalisms, in creating a representation of the Viking age past for a popular televisual market, the show creates an imaginary in which the Viking age is rendered both familiar as well as alien. Hirst states that his primary objective as the creator of a drama is not «whether it's accurate, because nobody knows, but you can ask whether it's plausible… whether it seems truthful» (Lawrence 2020). What is 'true', however, when the past is being recreated? Whose 'truth' is being represented? And, in the face of competing imperatives, whose 'truth' is paramount?

The purpose of this article is not to praise the show for its accuracy or criticise it for the lack thereof. It is, after all, a television drama created for entertainment and not a research project. However, I aim to show in this article that, often unconsciously, the show renders the Viking age through the kinds of hybridities and contradictions that have long been inherent in an engagement with the Medieval. The Viking age is both lauded as part of a familiar European history as a point of origin but also denigrated as being inferior to the present. As Ganim contends, «the Medieval… has always been imagined by the West as both ourselves and something other than ourselves, as unified and as anarchic, as origin and disruption, as the hyperfeminine and the hypermasculine» (2005:5). In viewing the Viking age in this manner, I argue that the show Orientalises it, creating the past as exotic and rendering it effectively as a foreign country. L. P. Hartley's statement – «The past is a foreign country.» – has by now acquired the status of a truism (1953). The statement reflects an equivalence between the perception of physical distance and temporal distance, making the past geographically remote even when it is located within the same space as the present. My contention in this article is that this equivalence between physical and temporal distance leads to perceptions and representations of the past where it is literally treated like a foreign country, as something accessible yet remote, familiar yet exotic, prosaic yet seductive. The Viking age past becomes orientalised as a foreign space on which to superimpose the anxieties and uncertainties of the present.

The -isms: Orientalism, Eurocentrism and medievalism

In his seminal work on *Orientalism*, Said uncovers and explains the discourses arising in Western thought and scholarship which result in the treatment of the geographically, culturally and politically remote East – the Orient – as different and oppositional. He calls it «a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'» (2003:2) upon which theories about the Orient were based. These fed – and were in turn fed by – imperialist impulses beginning in the late eighteenth century and continuing, in some form or another, to this day. This system

of «dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient» makes it «not a free subject of thought or action» (2003:3). He demonstrates through his discussion how «European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self» (2003:3). The Orientalising impulse then is a marriage of the desire and curiosity to understand that which is remote alongside an exercise of power over the Other, whereby the Other becomes reshaped and occasionally flattened by the process of being described not on its own terms. Said contends that «history is made by men and women, just as it can also be unmade and re-written, always with various silences and elisions, always with shapes imposed and disfigurements tolerated, so that 'our' East, 'our' Orient becomes 'ours' to possess and direct» (2003:xiv). While Said's thesis has attracted intense critique (e.g. Lewis 1982; Halliday 1993), these critiques neither fully dismantle his theory, nor propose a viable alternative; it thus remains the most useful paradigm with which to examine the construction of the Other for the purposes of this analysis. Particularly in the context of decolonising the Middle Ages, Said's *Orientalism* remains a popular theoretical framework among medieval scholars (e.g. Ganim 2000, 2005; Davis 2000) as well as informing studies of vikings on film (e.g. Ball 2023).

Turning some of these ideas to the representations of the past, and in fact, looking at the ways in which the past is often reshaped, directed, and possessed, often completely and unrecognisably, it is very much possible, I think, to argue that the past is being treated like an exotic foreign land, much in the way that the Orient was by eighteenth and nineteenth century imperialists and continues to be treated to this very day. Ganim demonstrates in his essays in *Medievalism and Orientalism* «the twinned association of medievalism and Orientalism» (2005:3) whereby the medieval past is both desired and inferior. Following Said, he demonstrates that the connection between medievalism and Orientalism was «more dynamic and pervasive than the concept of motif allows» (Ganim 2005:6). He traces the engagement of periods following the medieval with their past and demonstrates how the «otherness» of the Medieval is constructed both positively and negatively at various times, reflecting the cultural narcissism of power that comes along with a position of superiority assumed by the present. This contradiction which Ganim highlights is visible in popular cultural engagement with the vikings where they are both brutal and barbaric, but also role models for contemporary white supremacists. The «otherness» of the medieval therefore essentially makes the past *unheimlich*, somewhere the gazer is not at home (2005:4). The past as a foreign country, therefore, also becomes «an imagined emptiness on to which we may project our desires and fears» (2005:4), making the complicated and confusing dynamics between past and present parallel to those between the Occident and Orient.

In viewing the past through an Orientalising paradigm, the position of the viewer is necessarily also Eurocentric. In the influential introduction to *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, Shohat and Stam (2014:3) summarise Eurocentrism as follows:

> Eurocentrism sanitizes Western history while patronizing and even demonizing the non-West; it thinks of itself in terms of its noblest achievements… but of the non-West in terms of its deficiencies, real or imagined.

They see the media as central to «a theorized and historicized discussion of Eurocentrism» through its ability to both «otherize» but also to offer countervailing representations (2014:7). They discuss in detail the role played by stereotypes and motifs in «creating» European superiority on screen and in the media. Stereotypes and motifs make the unfamiliar recognisable and accessible; however, they also flatten and homogenise minoritized groups, removing any agency from their own representation. Refocusing the Eurocentric gaze from the geographical Other to the temporal Other for this article, there is a similar propensity towards the use of stereotypes and motifs in representing the past in contemporary televisual culture, which combines the dynamics of Orientalism, Eurocentrism and medievalism to create a sort of historical «Borealism» (Burke 2011:131). As with stereotypes in contemporary media, so too in the construction of the past, the use of stereotypes either distorts or denies a voice to the past as a whole or to large sections of the past. They «exaggerate certain features of reality and omit others» (Burke 2011:125). However, stereotypes also function as a convenient «shorthand» between creators and audiences belonging to the prevailing cultural majority (in this case, the Euro-American world) and are especially useful in the construction of an unfamiliar past. And so, despite the proliferation of racism and Eurocentrism – and problematic stereotypes steeped in both – in the media, Shohat and Stam ask «how do we critique the dominant Eurocentric media while harnessing its undeniable pleasures?» (2014:11). Likewise, the argument here is not simply to hector or critique but to highlight that these processes underpin the manner in which the past is shaped and presented in popular culture and that cognisance of this dynamic is an important part of both the creation and consumption of popular culture about the past.

There are, of course, many impulses that feed into the shaping of the past in the process of remembering and representation. The writing (and otherwise recording) of history is neither an objective nor an unpartisan enterprise. E. H. Carr called history «an unending dialogue between the present and the past» (1964:30) where the key was «what one society found of interest in another, separated from it in time» (Evans 2002:4). The vikings – and I use this label not as an ethnic term for medieval Scandinavians, but as the common catchall for the people associated with their recorded activities – have never really been very far from sparking the interests of the writers and chroniclers who followed in the centuries after the period known as the Viking age. Much work has been done by scholars on the reception of the vikings in various parts of the world and in different periods, from the late medieval chroniclers in the Low Countries (Cooijmans 2019) and those in England (Parker 2018), to the Victorians who turned to the North for identification and inspiration (Wawn 2000) to the nineteenth century Scandinavian nationalists who undertook a «colonialism of the past» (Svanberg 2003) to the appropriation of the Viking age past by the Nazis in the twentieth century to Marvel's *Thor* in the twenty-first century. In various periods in different places, people have reshaped and used the Viking age past to speak to contemporary concerns and agendas in precisely the unending dialogue that was envisioned by Carr.

Vikings in popular televisual culture

The engagement with, and reshaping of, the past is not confined to the academy, of course. There is a long history of popular books, for both children and adults, on vikings and the Viking age past, published in several languages around the world, from the antiquarian

«sagas» of W.G. Collingwood (Townend 2009) to the *Vinland Saga* manga series by Makoto Yukimura (2013–present). Vikings are present in various musical genres, but particularly, in the various sub-genres of folk and metal music (Weston and Bennett 2014). They appear in popular video games, the most recent genre of popular culture to engage with the period (Cooijmans 2023). One of the most widespread (in terms of the sheer size of audience) of these popular engagements for most of the last century has been through film and television. In his filmography *The Vikings on Film*, Harty (2011) lists 76 films set in the Viking age; more films and television shows have since aired across the world. The bulk of these films and television shows are primarily from the Euro-American cultural sphere, although this interest is by no means exclusive; the Japanese manga series *Vinland Saga* (2005–present) now has its own television series and 2013 saw the release of *Vikingdom*, a Malaysian English-speaking fantasy action film based on Norse myths. These are, however, outliers and recent ones at that. The majority of the films and television shows that engage with the Viking age emerge from the Euro-American cultural sphere.

The earliest of these film engagements with the Viking world comes from 1907 in the form of a lost, silent black and white film *The Viking's Bride* (Harty 2011). Hollywood joined the fray in 1928 with *The Viking*, a full-length feature film based on the 1902 novel *The Thrall of Leif the Lucky* by Ottilie A. Liljencrantz, itself a fictionalisation inspired by the Vínland sagas (Helgason 2017, 155). A technological pioneer, this was the first feature-length film made using Technicolor's Process 3, featuring a synchronised soundtrack and sound effects. Despite these impressive achievements, the film was not successful. Although it included all the tropes that might reasonably be expected in a film about vikings, one of the main criticisms according to Technicolor president Herbert Kalmus was that the vikings were simply too hairy: «the whole screen seemed filled with viking whiskers» which flew in the face of the expectations of American audiences which «prefer their lovers smooth shaven» (1938:573). This reaction is of course starkly different to the contemporary image of vikings as represented in and shaped by modern televisual culture where the vikings not only sport «whiskers» but heads and beards of long braided hair.

In both film and television, the late 1950s and 60s were clearly the heyday of popular cultural interest in the vikings. Out of this interest arose such memorable productions as the Kirk Douglas-Tony Curtis vehicle *The Vikings* (1958) and its special-effects competitor from Roger Corman *The Saga of the Viking Women and Their Voyage to the Waters of the Great Sea Serpent* (1958). The former, like its 1928 predecessor, was based on a novel –*The Viking* by Edison Marshall – which in turn was inspired by the tales of Ragnarr Loðbrók and his sons. The latter, however, is a completely fantastical narrative, based not on a medieval source but rather an action-adventure horror with vikingesque elements, created primarily to capitalise on the marketing of the bigger production (Weaver 2004:55). The Viking age past here does not even get a look in; it is merely Said's «imagined emptiness» populated by the fantasies of the film's creators. Through the 1960s and 70s, several other films based on medieval stories or set in the Viking age were produced in the Euro-American cultural sphere. The vikings were not only confined to film, nor to only adult audiences. *Noggin the Nog* (1959–1965), created by Oliver Postgate and Peter Firmin, appeared on the BBC, followed shortly by a series of illustrated books (published 1965–1977) by the same duo. The television series is today considered a cult classic from the golden age of British children's

television, so much so that in 1994 the central character, Noggin featured on a commemorative stamp. The series enjoyed a brief revival in 1982, followed by a DVD release in 2005.

Although there was a brief lull in interest in the vikings on film and television in the 1980s and 90s, there were nevertheless a handful of films made such as the critically acclaimed Icelandic films *Útlaginn* (1981) and *Hrafninn flýgur* (1984) which, according to their makers, self-consciously attempted to break away from the Anglo-American mould of the portrayal of the Viking age. The Viking age saw a popular culture revival in the early 21st century, when narratives about and set in the Viking age really begin to proliferate on television and film. Through all these cultural engagements with the vikings and the Viking age, the medieval past and the image of the viking has been constructed and reconstructed, shaped and reshaped, moulded and wrought anew in response to the cultural moment in which they were produced. While some aspired to «authenticity», others created the Viking age past as pure fantasy. Some stereotypes, for instance, the «barbaric» «heathen» viking build and persist through all these works. Other stereotypes, such as the «hairy» «tattooed» viking of 21st century culture are clearly different to the vikings of the 1920s or 1950s, developing out of attempts at greater fidelity to medieval sources and archaeological discoveries but also as a response to developments in the wider cultural milieu. «Our viking», to borrow from Said (2003:xiv), is thus shaped and dominated differently at different times.

Orientalising the vikings in *Vikings*

Vikings (2013–2021) is one of the most popular contemporary televisual cultural engagements with the medieval period. As mentioned above, *Vikings* takes as its basis the story of Ragnarr Loðbrók as recounted in the thirteenth-century Icelandic *fornaldasaga*, *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, and the fourteenth-century *Ragnars sona þáttr*. In addition, it draws upon other medieval narrative sources ranging from the historical works of Saxo Grammaticus (*Gesta Danorum*) and Adam of Bremen (*Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*), the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the ethnography of Ibn Fadlan and skaldic verse such as *Krákumál* (Heddle 2019). The visual spectacle of the Viking age past presented in the show draws heavily upon both narrative sources as well as archaeological discoveries and evidence.

In seeking to work with stories and narratives from the Viking age past, the filmmakers display a curiosity and desire to reach out to the past that is very much part of the process of Orientalising that which is remote. However, in dispensing with accuracy in favour of an intangible «truth», they also dominate and restructure it. This «truth» is whatever the creators decide it is. The voice of the past, albeit already mediated through contemporary and near-contemporary narrative sources, or through interpretation of the archaeological evidence, is not a free subject, but is co-opted in service to the drama in the show. This inclination towards the creation of something «true» (in opposition to «authentic») leads to some truly baffling moments in the show; for instance, when in Season 1, episode 1, an 11th-century weathervane makes an appearance for no discernible reason at all. It is not commented on, nor is its presence explained and we never see it again. It does not serve a perceptible narrative purpose; it appears to be included purely as a nod towards the filmmakers' engagement with the historicity of the wider period, which is indeed laudable but also raises the question of why such an anachronism might be introduced; what purpose does it serve other than to signal knowledge of its existence on the part of the filmmakers?

The main distortion of the past in the show is to the fabric of time itself. In seeking to incorporate key events that span all three or so centuries of the Viking age – from the raid on Lindisfarne in 793 to the landing in North America in around 1020 – the show breaks and distorts the historical timeline to squeeze all the excitement of well-known moments in Viking age history into the rather short lifetimes of its protagonists. This reshaping echoes the disfigurement of historical time that Said demonstrates as part of the Orientalising process. It flattens historical processes, removing the progressions which make events and achievements meaningful in their contexts, and invites the audience to partake in this Orientalised vision of the Viking age past. Once again, this distortion is not unique to the show, but it is nevertheless important to recognise.

The Orientalising impulse in *Vikings* is turned on the entirety of the past: on the non-European cultures depicted in the show; on non-viking European cultures, and even on the vikings themselves. There are many cases and points of discussion that can be developed on these depictions. There is, however, little to be gained by taking a shot-by-shot, episode-by-episode approach to this analysis because the purpose of this article is not to criticise what has been created but rather to highlight issues of Orientalism towards the past. Therefore, I will focus on one case study in each of the categories above.

Orientalizing past Non-European cultures

The most readily discernible Orientalisation in this show is towards the geographical Orient – the East – itself. The show's narrative includes vast swathes of the sheer geographical span of the known Viking world. Visitors from the erstwhile Orient – for instance, Ragnar's Chinese slave Yidu in Season 4; the traveller who gives Hvitserk a Buddha statue (a known Viking age artefact from Helgö, Sweden) in Season 5, episode 16 – appear in a Scandinavian milieu. But the vikings themselves also travel widely as expected. They do not travel only into Europe and the North Atlantic, but foray south to the Mediterranean and North Africa, and east into Ukraine and the Caucasus, with a mention too of the Silk Road and connections further east. These non-European parts of the world are treated with both a Eurocentric, as well as an Orientalising impulse, whereby they are othered both geographically and temporally. The episode under analysis here is the raid on Algeciras in al-Andalus, Spain in Season 4, episode 16.

While both the saga and þáttr accounts of the lives of Ragnarr Loðbrók and his sons mention their adventures in the Mediterranean and Africa, these episodes are not elaborated upon in the sources; they are blank canvases on which the creators of the show are able to paint their own vision. And this vision dials up the exoticism to 11! While geographically still very much within the boundaries of Europe, al-Andalus is presented as foreign by dint of its Arab rulers and significant Muslim population, in itself an erasure of the large Christian population of the region. On screen, we first encounter the inhabitants of Algeciras at the market as veritable clichés of the Orient familiar from the Middle East to South Asia; they are handling exotic, dangerous creatures such as scorpions and snakes; they are dancing in the streets in the late night. The city is walled but the gates are open and undefended. As the vikings march through the city unopposed, killing at will, only one guard fights back in the market and only two face them in the «great house» that they raid. The Orientalised city here is supine and pliant, posing no opposition to the power and the dominance of the vikings. It

is completely at the mercy of the incomers, lacking all agency. This supplication is further heightened by the focus of the camera primarily on the vikings and on the women of Algeciras; the men appear as either blurs in small skirmishes or with their backs turned in the mosque. In erasing the men of Algeciras so completely, the show plugs into yet another trope of Orientalism which sees the Orient as feminine or effeminate and therefore logically dominated by the Occident.

The patchy historical record of the raid on Algeciras is considerably different to the television version. In Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada's thirteenth-century *Historia Arabum*, the raid on Algeciras is rolled into other raids where the vikings «fought many battles with the Arabs and lay waste their lands with slaughter and fire and carried away much booty» (Christys 2015:44). Ibn Hayyan's *Muqtabas* gives us a little more detail stating that the vikings «occupied Algeciras… and burned the congregational mosque» but were a little later subjected to a naval attack from Algeciras itself «that destroyed fourteen of their ships» (Christys 2015:49–50). Given the volatile political situation in al-Andalus around the time of the raid on Algeciras – the vikings were not the only raiders in the Mediterranean (Christys 2015:58) – the undefended city of the television show and the lack of opposition to the invading vikings strike discordant notes. While the vikings *did* raid and also burned mosques and razed parts of the city to the ground, they did not do so unopposed. The real, historical Orient was far from supine. From a dramatic point of view, it makes sense to establish the complete success of this raid, but in so doing, the show unwittingly sets up a binary between previously seen European resistance to the vikings as opposed to the non-European supplication witnessed here. And while the show pushes back against the perceived barbarism of the vikings themselves with more anachronism – Floki refuses to let the men at the mosque be slaughtered – the people of Algeciras themselves are completely stripped of agency in this episode. They are merely props on which the viking raiders act. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Helga's «rescue» of the orphaned Tanaruz. Helga makes an emphatic statement in explanation of the girl's presence with her: «I am taking her with me.» Tanaruz has no more agency in being ripped from her land than the women shown being captured and enslaved by the vikings. In subsequent episodes, the audience witnesses Tanaruz's trauma at displacement as she remains separated from the culture in which she lives for the next few years – a curiosity from the Orient that does not or cannot integrate – until her eventual suicide.

The show characterises Algeciras much as nineteenth-century European thinkers created the Orient (Said 2003:206). It highlights «its eccentricity» through playing with scorpions and snakes. It depicts the city through «its silent indifference» showing little opposition to the viking raid. Most particularly, the show really focuses on the city's «feminine penetrability», figuratively through the invasion itself into an unsuspecting and undefended city but also literally by focusing on the incursion into the women's quarter and depicting almost no other arena of conflict. Through the submissive enslaved women at the end of the raid, arguably including the unfortunate Tanaruz, the show depicts the city's «supine malleability». This characteristic of «supine malleability» extends beyond the women to the entire city in the episode, where the story of the historical Algeciras is distorted by the Orientalising gaze of the filmmakers.

Orientalising past European cultures

The Orientalising impulse of the show is not restricted to its view of non-European cultures. The historical non-viking European cultures depicted too are subjected to an «othering» process which goes beyond depicting them as different. This is not done merely through the use of stereotypes, which of course abound in the show. Ford Burley in his essay *Ambiguous Images* explores the use of language to flatten the complexities of the different groups encountered by the show's vikings. He argues that «it signals for the audience a monoculture that glosses over a much more complex mosaic of probably multi-layered locally- and socially-derived identities» (2019:205). In more ways than just linguistically, the non-vikings in the show become rolled into a monolith, whether through a common religion – Christianity – or through a common culture – Franks, Saxons, etc. The elision of differences to create a monolithic whole is a well-known feature of Orientalist impulses (Said 2003:xix).

Other scholars have pointed to the problems with for instance, the use of crucifixion as a punishment for apostasy in Season 2, or the philandering warrior bishop Heahmund in Season 5, whom Hirst calls «an antecedent of the Knights Templar» (Franich 2017), themselves a romanticised group in modern television culture. By presenting shocking or fringe practices like crucifixion as readily practiced and outliers like Heahmund as prominent characters, the show distorts the image of non-viking European groups that are far better attested in the historical record than the vikings. In breaking with historicity here, the show presents these groups as Orientalised by making them the «surrogate and even underground self» which Said suggests are created as counterpoints to the dominant group from which this group gains in strength and identity (2003:3). In depicting the familiar Saxons, antecedents of large parts of the Anglo-American cultural milieu in which the filmmakers are immersed, through unfamiliar practices and unconventional individuals, the show Orientalises the past, thereby dominating it from a position of superiority.

Nowhere is this distortion more pronounced than in the figure of the Mercian princess, Kwenthrith, who is not only Orientalised through her overtly sexual appetites, but also through her trauma and status as a victim. The character of Kwenthrith is based – very loosely – on the historical Cwenthryth, princess of Mercia, the daughter of King Coenwulf, Abbess of Winchcombe, Minster-in-Thanet and Reculver (The Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England [PASE] 2023). According to the «much later and definitely disreputable tradition» (Kelly 2004) of William of Malmsbury, the historical Cwenthryth was greedy and treacherous, responsible for the murder of her younger brother, Cynehelm, in «the illusory hope of the throne» (Winterbottom 2007:451–452). As both princess and abbess, she was clearly a powerful woman, one able to stand up, for a time at least, even to the authority of the Archbishop of Canterbury (Kelly 2004).

The Kwenthrith of *Vikings* is differently realised. When she first appears in Season 2, she is markedly different to the other Anglo-Saxon women in the show. She is dressed more exotically and regularly appears wearing «ethnic» jewellery; she is «othered» through recognisable visual markers of the Orient. The woman whom the historical source maligns as a «witch» is presented in the show instead as damaged and a victim of child sexual abuse and forced incest. Purportedly as a consequence of her abuse, Kwenthrith's sexuality is repeatedly at the forefront of her depiction in the show, illustrating what Said refers to as the Orient's «sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire, deep generative energies» (2003:188). Even when the show deals with the highly complex politics of Anglo-

Saxon England and Kwenthrith's role in those politics, she is a sexual creature rather than a canny political operator. In Season 2, she beds King Ecbert as well as his guards, puts the moves on Æthelwulf, and makes suggestive comments about the viking mercenaries. Season 3 shows her continuing to bestow her attentions on Æthelwulf, while also engaging in political assassination and fratricide. She is depicted as being at the mercy of her passions and regularly outwitted politically by the men around her. The historical Cwenthryth, a woman from the past, is doubly Orientalised by the filmmakers. First, the show erases her powerful position as abbess, depicting her purely as a political actor manipulated by the men around her. Second, she is Orientalised through a hyper-focus on her sexuality and her inability to contain her impulses. Kwenthrith is Said's «creature of a male power-fantasy» who «express(es) unlimited sensuality», is «more or less stupid» but is above all «willing» (2003:207).

Orientalising the Viking age past

The show's vikings themselves are not entirely safe from the Orientalising process. Much has been written about the aesthetic choices made in the visual representation of the bodies and material world of the vikings in terms of their authenticity and closeness or otherwise to historical descriptions (Williams 2015; Stahl 2018). This article is not so concerned with the accuracy of these choices as it is with the way in which these choices «other» the vikings – arguably the dominant culture in the show – and how they change as the show progresses.

One striking aesthetic choice made by the filmmakers is the use of bones for display. There is a proliferation in the show of human and animal bones, especially skulls, on display in quotidian and innocuous ways. Bones form a part of the backdrop of the everyday life of the vikings as shown by the giant whale bone gate that marks the seaward entrance to the settlement of Kattegat. Not really in evidence at the beginning of the show, bones begin to appear as decoration on the walls of viking halls from Season 2 onwards in ever increasing numbers. They are also seen on staves around sacrificial paths; for example in Season 2, episode 7, during the «blood-eagle» sacrifice of Jarl Borg. And, as might be expected from a show that draws at least a little on *Krákumál* with its famous mistranslation of the kenning for horns (Shippey 1998:160), a skull is employed as a drinking vessel for warriors in Season 1, episode 6. Bones are, thus, employed as visual shorthand «to foreground impending death and the sinister violence and fatalist components of Viking society for the storyline» (Williams 2015). However, the choice to display animal and human remains, particularly skulls, as decorative objects plugs into a macabre, tribalistic exoticisation of the «other». The vikings here are being created as different through a pointed *indifference* towards human and animal remains. The Euro-American disquiet with the display of human remains (less so with animal remains) underlies a vast literature on the ethics of dealing with remains in archaeological, anthropological and museum studies (Squires et al. 2019). The Viking age past is, therefore, depicted with different sensibilities, which are not drawn from historical sources, but are rather inspired by an Orientalising gaze which sees the past as barbaric, tribalistic and backwards, reflective of the «positional superiority» (Said 2003:7) of the Eurocentric hegemony in which the filmmakers are immersed.

The second visual aesthetic employed that likewise grows in importance through the development of the show is the use of tattoos to create a visual marker for the vikings as a

group. When we first see Ragnar and his band of friends, there is almost no visible body art. Towards the end of Season 1, tattoos appear almost inexplicably and sometimes mystically (e.g. episode 6) on both Ragnar and his compatriots. Ford Burley points out that despite the proliferation of tattoos on all visible parts of the body, the process of tattooing is only shown twice, once in Season 3, episode 7 using a technique from the South Pacific and once in Season 4, episode 4, using a Japanese technique (2019:207). The makers have explained this as an attempt to make the vikings more «cool» and as an expression of their individual characters according to Tom McInerney, the chief makeup artist in a YouTube interview (2015). Not only is the visual aesthetic of the vikings being changed using methods from the erstwhile Orient, tattooing the vikings grows progressively more prominent as the show progresses through the seasons.

There is some – very limited – evidence that tattoos may have been used in the Viking age. One of the main references comes from the writings of Ahmed Ibn Fadlan who described a group of Rus (vikings) he encountered thus: «Each man, from the tip of his toes to his neck, is covered in dark-green lines, pictures and such like» (Ibn Fadlan 2012). The filmmakers of the *Vikings*, however, use tattoos liberally. Taylor argues that «tattoos reflect an investment in a modern, not historical, construction and reception of Vikings, beliefs and desires that are also shaped by the cultural effects of the television show *Vikings* (2013–2020)» (2022:145). Using tattoos, the vikings are created as different by adopting the aesthetic of a counterculture that itself has origins in the Orientalisation of non-European cultures, and has likewise seen a shift in status in Western mainstream culture over the last half of the twentieth century (Fisher 2002). A similar progression towards the use of mysticism and exoticism takes place in the use of war paint and sacrificial makeup. Ford Burley says of tattoos in the show – although I think this can apply equally to other aesthetic choices like war paint, body art and hairstyles – that «they take the invisible elements of culture – military prowess, individual strength, religious piety – and make them a marker of difference» (2019:208). These visual markers thus represent «the surrogate or underground self» (2003:3) that the show's audiences can recognise and identify with, while still seeing themselves as superior, in the manner of Orientalists looking East. Once again, the Orientalising gaze of the present is turned on the past, making it effectively a foreign place with different sensibilities and fringe practices.

Conclusions

In explaining his impulse to create a show about the vikings, creator Michael Hirst has stated why he became interested in the vikings: «They were the 'other',» he explains, «because they were the people who came and broke into your house at night and raped and pillaged.» (Evans 2018). The image of the vikings as raiders and pillagers is decidedly Euro-American in its perspective, stemming as it does, from dominant non-Scandinavian European narratives from the medieval period onwards. Despite a revisionist turn in scholarship since the publication of Peter Sawyer's *The Age of the Vikings* (1962) which argued for a more balanced view of the vikings, the popular perception of the vikings remains as Hirst says: as the «other». Hirst states that he «… wanted to tell the story from the Vikings' point of view, because their history was written by Christian monks, basically, whose job it was to exaggerate their violence» (Gilbert 2013). Despite the filmmakers' attempts at «authenticity»

and «truthfulness» (Lawrence 2020), as well as centring the vikings in the narrative, the past remains depicted as the «other», a foreign country. As shown in this article, this «otherness» extends to the vikings themselves, as well as all other inhabitants and cultures of the past. The entire historical past is shaped and created to meet the filmmakers' ends. Ford Burley's concept of «an ambiguous image» shows how the narrative can be «seen» to show varied content, simultaneously and sequentially (2019: 219).

Taking this metaphor further, I would argue that the ambiguity in the narrative of the show arises from two things. First, it arises from silences in the historical sources themselves, which the creators of the show have filled with narratives of their own, and not unproblematically. For instance, Katheryn Winnick who plays Lagertha explains why she licked the seer's hand thus: «It wasn't originally in the script and we just wanted to come up with something unique and different» (Johnson 2014). While certainly 'unique and different', if a little gross, the introduction of cultural practices such as hand-licking into the Viking age past serves to both exoticize and barbarize the past culture, much in the way that Europeans tended to do for the Orient. The silences of the past become the blank canvas on which the filmmaker's vision of it can be created, and this vision is decidedly inferior and different from the present. Even though it is a European past that is being created, it is exoticized and depicted as being remote from the present. It is therefore useful to view these depictions through the lens of Orientalism to see how the past is «othered» in the show.

The second source of ambiguity arises from the distance from the cultures being represented, temporal distances which are themselves exacerbated by silences in the sources. The impulse to bridge this distance is clearly a strong one, a desire to link with and possess the past in order to create or reinforce a contemporary identity. Hirst states that «I especially had to take liberties with Vikings because no one knows for sure what happened in the Dark Ages… Very little was written then» (Gilbert 2013). Absences in the historical and archaeological record are indeed as problematic for historians as they are for filmmakers. However, temporal distance creates additional problems in the show. As the show develops, a pattern emerges, whereby the most egregious examples of the Orientalising gaze of the filmmakers – towards the past and towards the cultures that it deals with – come from the sections of the show where it is furthest away from the medieval sources that guide and drive it. Distance from the source, which is a distorting factor in the Orientalist discourse (Said 2003:3), is very much at play here too.

Hirst justifies his vision of the Viking age past by saying that «[a] historical account of the Vikings would reach hundreds, occasionally thousands, of people. Here we've got to reach millions» (Gilbert 2013). In thus differentiating an historical account from a popular narrative depiction of the past, he appears to suggest that the contortions and distortions introduced into *Vikings* are a necessary part of making the vikings appealing; that these narratives would not be interesting to larger audiences without the exoticization of the past. Just as representations of the Orient were created in service to Western knowledge and control of the East but did not reflect «reality», similarly, the version of the past created in *Vikings* can be viewed through the Orientalist paradigm as serving to construct a version of the past that can be controlled and dominated by a superior present. In his work, Said showed how constructed «knowledge» about the «East» spawned traditions which influenced all further learning and knowledge about the Orient, thus becoming a self-sustaining myth (2003:91–94). Hirst's invocation of audience expectations can be read as just such a self-

sustaining myth. And, perhaps, he is right. However, in calling upon the expectations of the millions whom the filmmakers hope to reach, there is also an evasion here. For cultural depictions of the past are not merely shaped by audience expectations, but also by the cultural products they consume. After all, the vikings on our screens who once wore horned helmets no longer do so: a cultural shift created by the repeated and persistent adherence to historical fact by a range of creators of academic and popular culture content.

The purpose of this article is not a demand for «accuracy» – whatever that might mean in the context of reclaiming the past – but rather a request for greater awareness and interrogation of the manner in which images of the past are created for popular consumption. In viewing *Vikings* through the lens of Orientalism, it is possible to see more clearly which tropes and «othering» processes are at play in the construction of the past. Because, while some distortions of the past may be benign, others may not be so harmless. And while, not all such attitudes towards the «other» are necessarily Orientalist, a study of Orientalism may be helpful in showing some of the ways in which present cultures regard and reimagine the past. The paradigm of Orientalism rather than «othering» is used here because, as argued, *Vikings* tends to defamiliarize even the familiar past – to exoticize – through the use of the Orientalist tropes of hyper-sexuality, effeminacy, barbarism, and tribalism. The show's creators have expressed an interest in «a still closer dialectic» (Pollard 2019:2) with academics, which would be a most welcome development indeed if it serves to curb an Orientalisation of the past on our television screens and makes the past a little less of a «foreign country».

Acknowledgements
This article has benefited greatly from insights shared by Prof. Matthew Townend, Dr Nicolas Moon and the anonymous reviewer. The author is immensely grateful to them for their time and expertise.

References

TV Series Finale

2019 *Vikings: Season Five Ratings*. Electronic document, https://tvseriesfinale.com/tv-show/vikings-season-five-ratings/, accessed 15 January 2024.

IMDb

2013–2020 *Vikings*. Electronic document, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2306299/, accessed 15 January 2024.

Ball, Kimberly

2023 Orientalism meets Occidentalism in *Tarkan versus the Vikings*. *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* 13(1):7–26.

Burke, Peter

2001 *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca.

Carr, Edward Hallett

1964 *What is History?* Pelican Books, London.

Christys, Ann

2015 *Vikings in the South: Voyages to Iberia and the Mediterranean*. Bloomsbury Publishing, London.

Cooijmans, Christian

2019 An Adversary for the Ages: The Late Medieval Historiography of Viking Endeavour across the Low Countries. A Preliminary Survey. In *The North as Home. Proceedings from the Nordic Research Network 2017*, edited by Heidi Synnøve Djuve, Stefan Drechsler, Beñat Elortza, and Deniz Cem Gulen, pp.12–31. Norvik Press, Norwich.

2023 *Plunder, Pillage, and Power-ups: Four Decades of Vikings in Video Games.* Electronic document, https://www.epoch-magazine.com/post/plunder-pillage-and-power-ups-four-decades-of-vikings-in-video-games, accessed 6 January 2024.

The Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England (PASE)

2023 Cwenthryth 1. Electronic document, http://www.pase.ac.uk, accessed 19 September 2023.

Davis, Kathleen

2000 Time Behind the Veil: The Media, the Middle Ages, and Orientalism Now. In *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, pp. 105–122. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

Evans, Elinor

2018 *«Vikings» Creator Michael Hirst on the Real History Behind the Hit Drama*. Electronic document, https://www.historyextra.com/period/viking/vikings-creator-michael-hirst-on-the-real-history-behind-the-hit-drama/, accessed 19 September 2023.

Evans, Richard J.

2002 Prologue: What is History? — Now. In *What is History Now?*, edited by David Cannadine, pp. 1–18. Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Fisher, Jill A.

2002 Tattooing the Body, Marking Culture. *Body & Society* 8(4):91–107.

Ford Burley, Richard

2019 Ambiguous Images: «Vikingness», North American White Nationalism and the Threat of Appropriation. In *Vikings and the Vikings: Essays on Television's History Channel Series*, edited by Paul Hardwick and Kate Lister, pp. 201–224. McFarland, Jefferson.

Franich, Darren

2017 *Vikings Creator Talks Jonathan Rhys Meyers' New Character*. Electronic document, https://ew.com/tv/2017/01/26/vikings-jonathan-rhys-meyers-bishop-season-5/, accessed 19 September 2023.

Gadelli, Karl Erland

2018 L'usage du norrois dans la série télévisée *Vikings*. *Études Germaniques* 2(290):267–283.

Ganim, John M.

2000 Native Studies: Orientalism and Medievalism. In *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, pp. 123–134. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

2005 *Medievalism and Orientalism*. Palgrave Macmillan US, New York.
Gilbert, Tom
2013 *Vikings Come Ashore in a New Light*. Electronic document, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/24/arts/television/vikings-struggles-come-to-life-in-history-channels-series, accessed 19 September, 2023.
Halliday, Fred
1993 Orientalism and Its Critics. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 20(2):145–163.
Hardwick, Paul and Kate Lister (editors)
2019 *Vikings and the Vikings: Essays on Television's History Channel Series*. McFarland, Jefferson.
Hartley, Leslie Poles
1953 *The Go-Between*. H. Hamilton, London.
Harty, Kevin J.
2014 The Vikings on Film: A Filmography. In *The Vikings on Film: Essays on Depictions of the Nordic Middle Ages*, edited by Kevin J. Harty, pp. 193–214. McFarland, 2014.
Heddle, Donna
2019 Nordic Noir: Sagas and Sources. In *Vikings and the Vikings: Essays on Television's History Channel Series*, edited by Paul Hardwick and Kate Lister, pp. 21–35. McFarland, Jefferson.
Ibn Fadlan, Ahmad
2012 The Book of Ahmad Ibn Fadlān 921–922. In *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the Far North*, translated by Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone. Penguin Classics, London.
Johnson, Ron
2014 *The Beauty and the Beheading: Toronto Star Returns in New Season of Vikings*. Electronic document, https://streetsoftoronto.com/the-beauty-and-the-beheading-toronto-star-returns-in-new-season-of-vikings/, accessed 19 September, 2023.
Jón Karl Helgason
2017 *Echoes of Valhalla: The Afterlife of the Eddas and Sagas*. Reaktion Books, London.
2018 Popular Culture. In *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches,* edited by Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen A. Mitchell, pp. 370–379. De Gruyter, Boston.
Kalmus, Herbert T.
1938 Technicolor Adventures in Cinemaland. *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers* 31(6):564–585.
Kelly, S.
2004 *Cwenthryth (fl. 811–c. 827).,* abbess. Electronic document, https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-54441, accessed 20 September 2023.
Lawrence, Britt
2020 *Vikings Creator Addresses Historical Accuracy Concerns On History Channel Series.* Electronic document, https://www.cinemablend.com/television/2547390/vikings-creator-addresses-historical-accuracy-concerns-on-history-channel-series, accessed 19 September, 2023.
Lewis, Bernard
1982 The Questions of Orientalism. *The New York Review*:49–56.
McInerney, Tom
2015 Vikings: Viking Tattoos. *YouTube, March 25*. Electronic document, https://youtu.be/vTvgQ0bkWIw, accessed 19 September 2023.
Parker, Eleanor
2018 *Dragon Lords. The History and Legends of Viking England*. Bloomsbury Publishing, London.
Pollard, Justin
2019 Foreword. In *Vikings and the Vikings: Essays on Television's History Channel Series*, edited by Paul Hardwick and Kate Lister, pp. 1–2. McFarland, Jefferson.

Said, Edward W.
2003 *Orientalism*. Penguin Books, London.
Shippey, Tom
1998 «The Death-Song of Ragnar Lodbrog»: A Study in Sensibilities. In *Medievalism in the Modern World: Essays in Honour of Leslie Workman*, edited by Richard Utz and Tom A. Shippey, pp. 155–172. Brepols Publishers, Turnhout.
Shohat, Ella, and Stam, Robert
2014 *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. Routledge, Abingdon.
Squires, Kirsty, David Errickson, and Nicholas Márquez-Grant (editors)
2019 *Ethical Approaches to Human Remains: A Global Challenge in Bioarchaeology and Forensic Anthropology*. Springer, New York.
Stahl, Pierre-Brice
2018 La représentation du Nord dans *Vikings*. Entre exploration, imaginaire et altérité. *Études Germaniques* 2(290):285–294.
Svanberg, Fredrik
2003 *Decolonizing the Viking Age 1*. Acta Archaeologica Lundensia, vol. 43. Almqvist & Wiksell International, Stockholm.
Taylor, A. Arwen
2022 Tattoos, «Tattoos», Vikings, «Vikings», and *Vikings*. In *Tattooed Bodies: Theorizing Body Inscription Across Disciplines and Cultures*, edited by James Martell and Erik Larsen, pp. 145–162. Palgrave Macmillan, London.
Townend, Matthew
2009 *The Vikings and Victorian Lakeland: The Norse Medievalism of WG Collingwood and His Contemporaries*. Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society, Kendal.
Wawn, Andrew
2000 *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Boydell & Brewer Ltd, Martlesham.
Weaver, Tom
2004 The Saga of a Corman Stock Player. *Cult Movies* 41:52–59.
Weston, Donna, and Andy Bennett (editors)
2014 *Pop Pagans: Paganism and Popular Music*. Routledge, London and New York.
Williams, Howard
2015 *Active Skulls in «Vikings» Season 2*. Electronic document, https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2015/07/21/active-skulls-in-vikings-season-2/, accessed 19 September 2023.
Winterbottom, M. (editor)
2007 *Oxford Medieval Texts: William of Malmesbury: Gesta Pontificum Anglorum: The History of the English Bishops, Vol. 1: Text and Translation*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
Yukimura, Makoto
2013–present *Vinland Saga*. Translated by Stephen Paul. Kodansha Comics, New York.