

JOANNA KATARZYNA PUCHALSKA*
(Jagiellonian University)

***Vikings* Television Series: When History and Myth¹ Intermingle**

ABSTRACT

This article concentrates on the History Channel's contemporary television series entitled *Vikings*. The author raises the issue of the popularity of the historical drama genre and the presence of Viking topics in popular culture. The text explains why it is difficult to accuse the producers of *Vikings* of incompetence when it comes to the real Vikings and their world. However, it is obvious that the creators of the series did not want to restrict their vision so at the same time the show cannot be perceived as a historical record. To substantiate such a thesis, the author devotes the main part of the article to the presentation of numerous historically doubtful or disputed traits which can be found in the *Vikings* series such as the problem of dates and personages, dubious geography and locations, anachronistic armour, description of the temple of Uppsala or the bloody-eagle rite. Viking women-warriors and ships are also discussed. The conclusion stresses the real phenomena showed in this television feature.

KEY WORDS

Vikings, history, historical fiction, popular culture

¹ In this article I would generally like to follow the narrower definition of myth as a narration or story and as the term is popularly understood – i.e. a widely held belief, a fiction or an exaggerated or idealized conception – Słownik etnologiczny – terminy ogólne, red. Z. Staszczak, Warszawa–Poznań 1987; Oxford Dictionaries, [online] <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/myth> [accessed: 30.05.2015].

* Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology
and Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations
Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland
e-mail: j.k.puchalska@gmail.com

In recent years, Western television stations such as BBC, HBO or Showtime have produced several historical series which managed to catch the attention of a wider audiences. The storylines of *Band of Brothers*, *Rome*, *The Tudors* or *The Borgias*, to name just a few, are set in historical times and in real locations. Furthermore, many characters portrayed there are historical figures and likewise the events shown in these series actually took place. Such productions required serious financial support and an enormous amount of historical research. Nevertheless these shows remain entertainment rather than documentary productions.² Thus, they are faithful to the periods depicted to a varying degree. In some fact and fiction entwine quite freely. Of course we can discuss how much we actually know about history and how much of what we think we know is in fact a more or less an appropriate construct of scientists and researchers. Views on past events and reality tend to change significantly over time and we can never be sure if in the future some spectacular archeological finds will not overturn our ideas about a certain historical fact.³ Nevertheless, in recent times historical dramas have flourished and won numerous curious viewers. Moreover, a similar phenomenon can be observed in East Asia, especially in Korea and Japan,⁴ where movies and series about historical events and characters are released regularly. Nonetheless, in this paper I would like to concentrate on one particular Western production and its connections with the realm of reality and the dimension of popular imagination.

On March 3rd, 2013 the American History Channel aired the very first episode of its new television series – a historical drama called *Vikings*. This premiere was a major event in the revival of Viking-related interest in the West and is currently⁵ in its third season. The series also received generally favourable ratings from critics and viewers. *Vikings* is an Irish-Canadian co-production and is mostly filmed in Ireland, although some background shots were taken in Western Norway. It was created by Michael Hirst. The first season of

² *Band of Brothers* might be considered an exception since it is based on the non-fiction book of historian Stephen Ambrose and interviews with veterans. *Band of Brothers* is the story of particular company of famous American 101st Airborne Division and its actions during the Second World War. In this case the temporal distance between TV production and depicted events is relatively small.

³ Even when we possess historical sources they are open to different interpretations and their value varies. Further discussion on the sources values, concerning in this case Viking warfare, might be found in: P. Line, *The Vikings and Their Enemies. Warfare in Northern Europe, 750–1100*, Barnsley 2014, pp. 1–21.

⁴ A good example might be the annual *Taiga drama* released by the Japanese NHK channel.

⁵ The first half of 2015.

the show consisted of nine episodes,⁶ while subsequent runs consisted of ten episodes each.

This, however, is not the first time that the Vikings⁷ have appear in popular culture. In fact we can trace Nordic threads back to nineteenth century novels and operas⁸ yet it is the cinema that is the medium most commonly connected with creating and implanting various powerful images in the minds of the masses. The Hollywood movies *The Viking* from 1928 or *The Vikings* from 1958 – the latter featuring Kirk Douglas as the main character – were important factors in creating the figure of the stereotypical Viking warrior. Nevertheless, they were not the only productions concerned with Scandinavian warriors. The last five decades have seen several feature films and animations (some based on novels) dealing with Viking themes – from comedies like *Erik the Viking* or more solemn *Valhalla Rising* created by Europeans to American action movies *The 13th Warrior* and *Pathfinder* which were not only financial failures but are also much more fictional than historical.⁹ On the other hand a quite recent DreamWorks animation *How to Train your Dragon* gained sympathy among a worldwide audience. Moreover, Vikings do appear in comics, manga and video games and contemporary adaptations of Marvel cartoons which include a variety of characters based on the Norse gods – namely *Thor* and *Avengers* – and which also earned popularity. Even the Lego company released a series of Viking themed sets.¹⁰ A more sophisticated view of the Norsemen is presented in various historical fiction novels. Authors such as Tim Severin or Bernard Cornwell in their series – *Viking* and *The Saxon Tales* respectively – have proven their thorough studies of the early medieval world. What has become obvious is that, whereas books tend to be appropriately set

⁶ Nine is an important number in Norse mythology therefore the number of episodes might be a reference in this case.

⁷ Nowadays the word “Vikings” is used to describe the general population of early medieval Scandinavia though in their times – roughly 800–1100 CE – it tended to be reserved for seafarers and pirates.

⁸ Especially Richard Wagner’s cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Hitler was a Wagner enthusiast and the Nazis often used Viking imaginary for their propaganda – for example in funeral speeches. Additionally SS divisions were, among others, named *Wiking* and *Nordland* and used runes as their insignia.

⁹ In recent years other productions of dubious value have emerged: *Viking: The Berserkers* in 2014 and *Viking Saga: The Darkest Day* in 2013.

¹⁰ In most cases of pop-cultural usage of the Vikings they appear in horned helmets – a stereotypical motive invented in the 19th century which is not grounded in any archaeological finds.

in a historical background, many other works present stories of little historical accuracy.¹¹ Nevertheless, the medium which is probably the most infused with Viking themes is modern music. The Norsemen and their exploits appear in shanties, which is understandable since they were the great seafarers of their time, yet it is the metal scene where the Viking theme comes into its own. Norsemen motifs appear in the works of many well-known heavy metal bands – especially Manowar, despite the fact that they were not the first to sing about the ancestors of modern Scandinavians. However, in the late twentieth century even a whole new genre – called *Viking metal* – arose. We can safely say that modern popular culture is abundant in Viking themes.

Therefore one question emerges: why is the television series *Vikings* currently enjoying such significance? In my opinion, we should consider several features of the show. Michael Hirst's creation finds a wide audience amongst a population which is not necessarily aware of the real history underlying the events presented in the series. The show is aired on History Channel which adds to the possibility that it might be perceived as a kind of documentary production. Moreover, the creators of *Vikings* spare no effort in convincing their viewers of the History Channel's commitment to reality. In fact, the station prepared numerous short documentary programmes on various aspects of Viking culture, such as Viking ships, gods or women's status among many others. They are accessible through the official site of the *Viking* series.¹² These programmes sometimes feature acknowledged scientists – like Neil Price – or famous Museums – for example, the Danish Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde. These documentaries familiarise the audience with more specific Viking traditions. This approach taken by the producers leads us to believe that the *Vikings* spectacle is something more than mere entertainment. In fact the History channel even prepared an educational guide about the Vikings for more inquisitive viewers or even academics since this four page document is called *The idea book for educators* on one of the margins. It holds propositions of essay topics and refers the reader to various sites with additional educational movies, book references and other materials.¹³

As we can see it is hard to suspect the producers of *Vikings* of incompet-

¹¹ After the release of the TV series *Vikings*, several such titles have been published in Poland by authors such as Robert Low or Snorri Kristjansson. Even before many Polish fantasy and historical fiction writers such as Jarosław Grzędowicz, Marcin Mortka or Elżbieta Cherezińska also used Nordic imaginary.

¹² Please visit: [online] <http://www.history.com/shows/vikings>.

¹³ This particular guide might be found at: [online] http://cdn.history.com/sites/2/2015/02/Vikings_EducationGuide.pdf.

ence when it comes to the real Vikings and their world. However, it is obvious that they did not want to restrict their vision so at the same time the show cannot be perceived as a historical record. In the episodes presenting many well-grounded facts about medieval Scandinavia or the European world in general, we can find materials which are more or less fictional. This fantasy is sometimes based on disputed hypotheses. On the other hand, it seems that at least some features are the products of the imagination of the series' creators. It appears that the most important factor for Michael Hirst and his crew is rather to generate a product with a specific atmosphere – something which can be called “cool” by modern audiences. And keeping this atmosphere means adapting, at least to some point, the television series to the anticipations of the scheduled viewers.

This approach is explained when we consider the producer's inspiration for *Vikings*. As the creator and writer of the series states – the main source of inspiration for the television show was the saga of Ragnar Lothbrok.¹⁴ The Icelandic sagas are one of the jewels of medieval literature although they are relatively late sources when it comes to the Viking world. The word “saga” is related to the English verb “say” – “its various meanings in Icelandic can be roughly understood as denoting something said, a narrative in prose.”¹⁵ Therefore the word “saga” might have been used for serious historical chronicles or totally fantastic tales alike.¹⁶ Nowadays sagas are divided into several types. Their contents are differentiated and while some are close to describing actual history, others contain stories of ghosts, trolls, angels and other imaginary creatures. The majority of the sagas were only written down in the thirteenth century or even later, although at least some components of their narratives existed before in the form of oral tales passed down through generations. A critical approach to the sagas might render them useful as one of the sources of the Viking Age.

When it comes to the lead character of the *Vikings* series – Ragnar Lothbrok himself – opinions on his historicity vary. However, he does not only appear in the late sagas. For example Ragnar is mentioned in Saxo Grammaticus famous work *Gesta Danorum*¹⁷ as one of the Danish kings. Saxo described him as an eloquent and intelligent youth and then a brave leader of warriors

¹⁴ [Online:] <http://www.history.com/shows/vikings/videos/secrets-of-the-vikings-the-saga-of-ragnar-lothbrok> [accessed: 25.02.2015].

¹⁵ *The Sagas of the Icelanders. A Selection*, London 2001, p. xx.

¹⁶ M. Schlauch, *Stare sagi islandzkie*, tłum. P. Niklewicz, Warszawa 1976, p. 42.

¹⁷ Which itself is doubtful as a historical account.

who conquers many lands.¹⁸ His supposed sons Ivar the Boneless, Halfdan and Ubba raided England in 865 as leaders of the so-called “great heathen army.”¹⁹ In subsequent years, the Vikings conquered a significant area of British soil, created the Danelaw territory settled by the Scandinavians, and killed a few local kings in the process²⁰. “Although his [Ragnar’s] sons are historical figures, there is no evidence that Ragnar himself ever lived, and he seems to be an amalgam of several different historical figures and pure literary invention.”²¹ One of these real people might be the leader of the Vikings who conquered and looted Paris in 845.

The legendary Ragnar was chosen to become a lead character in the *Vikings* series because of his exploits presented in the sagas – his lust for fame and participation in dozens of battles. As Michael Hirst stated – the protagonist of a television show must be an interesting person but not necessarily good in our modern moral terms.²² Similarly the historicity of the character was not of great importance. However, it is possible that something real stood behind the saga and even if the literary version of Ragnar persona is fictional possibly not all of the events described were invented by the saga teller.

As we see, the authors of *Vikings* have chosen a legendary hero for their lead character. This is fully understandable as a means of attracting viewers. However, other points remain unclear – like the usage of Ragnar’s nickname “Lothbrok” in the series. According to the passages in the known sources on his story, Ragnar was named in such a way in Sweden after an attempt to win his second wife after divorcing Lagertha. His new chosen one, Thora, a king’s daughter, was well protected by giant venomous snakes. In order to marry her Ragnar was compelled to kill these reptiles. To protect himself from their poison our brave Viking prepared a special outfit – trousers and mantle – made of fur. *Ragnars saga Lodbrokar* tells us that “he had them boiled in pitch”, put them on and afterwards “rolled in the sand.”²³ Saxo writes that Ragnar soaked his outfit in water and let the fur freeze and thus made a kind of icy shell.²⁴

¹⁸ Saxo Grammaticus, *The Danish History, books I–IX, Book IX*, [online] <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1150/1150-h/1150-h.htm> [accessed: 26.02.2015].

¹⁹ Which probably was not so great and numbered some two to three thousand men – E. Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, London 1991, p. 234.

²⁰ J. Haywood, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of the Vikings*, London 1995, pp. 62–63.

²¹ K. Holman, *The A to Z of the Vikings*, Lanham–Toronto–Plymouth 2009, p. 220.

²² [Online] <http://www.history.com/shows/vikings/videos/secrets-of-the-vikings-the-saga-of-ragnar-lothbrok> [accessed: 25.02.2015].

²³ *Ragnars saga Lodbrokar*, Denver 2003, pp. 12–13.

²⁴ Saxo Grammaticus, op. cit.

Ragnar's furry armour worked well and after a heroic struggle he managed to kill the beasts and win the princess.

After Ragnar had thus triumphed the king scanned his dress closely, and saw that he was rough and hairy; but, above all, he laughed at the shaggy lower portion of his garb, and chiefly the uncouth aspect of his breeches; so that he gave him in jest the nickname of Lodbrog.²⁵

There are a few versions of spelling for Ragnar's nickname²⁶ but in translation it is rendered as "shaggy-breeches" or "hairy breeches". This meaning was never mentioned in the *Vikings* series, nor was its background explained. From the beginning of the show, Ragnar simply just has the name.

Gesta Danorum is also the source for the story of Lagertha:

Ladgerda, a skilled amazon, who, though a maiden, had the courage of a man, and fought in front among the bravest with her hair loose over her shoulders. All-marvelled at her matchless deeds, for her locks flying down her back betrayed that she was a woman.²⁷

This character is considered completely fictional yet there are good reasons to put her in the series. Lagertha is a shield-maiden – a woman warrior. For decades there were discussions on whether women actually fought in battles during the Middle Ages. Recent archeological finds seem to confirm that they did, at least when it comes to the Viking women, although not all Viking specialists are convinced.²⁸ There are several sites in Scandinavia where axes were excavated alongside female bodies – "the axe was a favoured weapon of the Scandinavians, and from them it was adopted by various peoples."²⁹ Moreover many Viking skeletons previously thought to be male – because they were buried with different types of weapons – turned out to be females.³⁰

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ As there are many ways of spelling Scandinavian names in this paper I follow the versions used by the producers of *Vikings* unless a quotation from another source is made.

²⁷ Saxo Grammaticus, op. cit.

²⁸ Interesting archeological evidence on Viking women warriors can be found in: L. Gardela, 'Warrior-women' in *Viking Age Scandinavia? A Preliminary Archeological Study*, "Analecta Archaeologica Ressooviensia" 2013, nr 8, pp. 273–340.

²⁹ P. Line, op. cit., p. 24.

³⁰ *Viking Women: a Reinterpretation of the Bones*, [online] <https://bonesdontlie.wordpress.com/2011/07/21/viking-women-a-reinterpretation-of-the-bones/> [accessed: 27.02.2015]; *Invasion of the Viking Women Unearthed*, [online] <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/sciencefair/post/2011/07/invasion-of-the-viking-women-unearthed/1> [accessed: 27.02.2015].

It is also possible that some women's graves do not show signs of arms in them because the buried lady preferred to leave her weapons for her children. On the other hand, we cannot be sure if the weapons buried with the women (or men) were ever used by them in actual fights. However we do know that women accompanied men on their long and perilous journeys throughout the early medieval world. Icelandic sagas mention many brave women, some fairly respected by their societies, and some even fighting with sword in hand. For a long time such descriptions were taken only as literary embellishments. Correspondingly in Norse mythology, certain female characters are connected to the military sphere which might to some point reflect the actual position of women in the Scandinavian life. Valkyries – literally “choosers of the slain” – were female supernatural beings, Odin's armed envoys, who transported fallen warriors to Valhalla and served them drinks. Some believe that they were invented after real shield-maidens. Freya, the goddess of love, beauty and fertility, was considered the first among valkyries and in addition she took half of the deceased warriors to her palace.³¹ Women were also connected with magical practices and prophesying.

However, the statement that women were equal to men in the Viking Age is highly doubtful. Yet they did have certain rights and their status was higher than in other European countries of the time. They could inherit, divorce, and even advise men. They also held the keys to their family households and commanded slaves and servants. Viking widows could be quite independent. The most magnificent Viking burial unearthed so far – in Oseberg – which contained among other things an intricately decorated longship, wagon, several sledges and horses' bones – belonged to a woman.³² Yet there is no hard evidence that women wielded political power or that they were leaders of men in the time of war.³³ In this point the *Vikings* series displays the rather wishful thinking of modern Western society since the producers put many women among the ranks of Viking warriors in their show and made an earl out of Lagertha.³⁴ Still, the first wife of Ragnar is well liked by the audience and in

³¹ A. Szejter, *Mitologia germańska. Opowieści o bogach mroźnej Północy*, Gdańsk 2006, p. 204.

³² C. Batey, H. Clarke, R. I. Page, N. S. Price, *Wielkie kultury Świata. Wikingowie*, tłum. H. Turczyn-Zalewska, Warszawa 1998, p. 42.

³³ “There is no evidence that women ever led Viking armies” – P. Line, op. cit., p. 105. For more detailed information on Viking women see: J. Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, Woodbrige 1991.

³⁴ However there were some who opposed the idea of putting into the series such a strong female warrior character as Lagertha – [online] <http://www.history.com/shows/>

my opinion the History Channel made a good choice in showing that Viking society was not necessarily so patriarchal.

When it comes to the sons of Ragnar, some of whom already made an appearance in the series, they are authentic historical figures as previously mentioned. Bjorn Ironside gained fame as one of the leaders of a successful Viking raid on the Mediterranean Sea during which he visited Spain, North Africa, Southern France and Italy. This foray started in 859 and lasted three years.³⁵ Ivar the Boneless, Halfdan and Ubba were leaders of the “great heathen army” which conquered England in the second part of the ninth century. According to tradition the sons of Ragnar – together with Bjorn and Sigurd – attacked England to take revenge on the Northumbrian ruler Aelle who killed their father by throwing him into a pit filled with snakes.³⁶ Aelle was indeed a king of Northumbria but he only came to power in 866 – a year after the Vikings landed in East Anglia – and was killed in 867. In the *Vikings* series several other characters based on historical figures appear – among them the Danish king Horik I, who died in 854,³⁷ or King of Wessex Ecbert, who died in 839.³⁸ As we can see the producers of the show treated dates and personages lightly.

In the first season, the raid on Lindisfarne in 793 is depicted. This is a famous Viking exploit which won them fame in the Christian world of the time and according to custom this date is used as a marker of the beginning of the Viking Age. The television series shows this assault as the first attack of the Vikings on the English land and presents Ragnar’s contemporaries as ignoramus unaware of the countries lying on the western side of the North Sea. This picture is not true. Scandinavians knew about Christian kingdoms of the Isles for they used to visit these countries previously as traders and it is highly probable that those peaceful visits encouraged future plunder since the Norsemen realised that churches and monasteries held unprotected riches worth looting. What is more, the first raid on England noted by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* took place in 789.³⁹

Moreover, setting the action of the *Vikings* at the end of the eight century seems problematic if we consider the lives of the historical figures shown in

vikings/videos/secrets-of-the-vikings-shield-maidens [accessed: 26.02.2015].

³⁵ E. Roesdahl, op. cit., p. 200.

³⁶ R. Chartrand, K. Durham, M. Harrison, I. Heath, *The Vikings. Voyagers of Discovery and Plunder*, Oxford 2006, pp. 40–43.

³⁷ K. Holman, op. cit., p. 139.

³⁸ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, [online] <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/8581?docPos=3> [accessed: 27.02.2015].

³⁹ J. Haywood, op. cit., p. 50.

the series, although they are incoherent anyway. Furthermore, the producers used extensive materials covering the whole Viking Age – the accounts of Ibn Fadlan about Rus⁴⁰ of the tenth century or Adam of Bremen report on the pagan temple in Swedish Uppsala from the second part of the eleventh century. One of the characters in early episodes of *Vikings* mentions Russia which did not exist in the eighth century. A similar mistake was made later in the series where kings of Wessex and Northumbria meet and their people start chanting “God save England”. At the beginning of the Viking Age, England consisted of several independent kingdoms referred to as the Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy. The Vikings contributed greatly to the rising of the united England since they managed to destroy the political system of the Heptarchy leaving Wessex as a sole survivor which in time conquered the rest of the English territories. Of course there are more anachronisms in the series, for example the usage of horse collars.

The case of feasting in the Uppsala temple is another interesting feature in the *Vikings* series. It was clearly based on the Adam of Bremen account yet this source is of dubious historical value since it is not first-hand information. It is also late – the Viking lands were more or less Christian at the time – and human sacrifices are disputable. In the show the temple building resembles the High Middle Ages stave churches and is located in mountainous terrain while in reality Uppsala lies in flat-lands. Priests also look suspicious since we know that the Germans did not have a specific priestly caste and the religious offerings were made mostly by the heads of the families. However the Vikings did have seeresses⁴¹ and the seer of Ragnar’s village shown in the series might have been inspired by such people even though his look is dubious.

There is also the question of the reasons why Ragnar and his folk would at all travel to Uppsala – and on foot – if they are, most probably, Danish. In fact, geographical issues rear their head early in the series. The very beginning of the first episode takes place along the “Eastern Baltic” coast. It was mostly the terrain of Swedish expansion, while the Danes and Norwegians concentrated on Western and North-Western Europe. In the same year, Ragnar sails westwards to Northumbria. On some of his journeys he would need to travel through Oresund, being vulnerable to pirate attacks. When Ragnar becomes the earl he lives in the village of Kattegat. It seems it should be Denmark, somewhere in

⁴⁰ The Vikings who traveled to the south-east Baltic and further through Russian rivers were called Rus. They established the state of Kievan Rus’ and gave Russia its name.

⁴¹ More on pagan Scandinavian oracles and prophesying can be found in: L. P. Słupecki, *Wyrocznie i wróżby pogańskich Skandynawów*, Warszawa 1998.

the Kattegat region. Denmark is a typical lowland country⁴² even if we take into consideration that in the Viking Age the western part of Sweden and a fragment of southern Norway belonged to the Danes. Yet, in the series magnificent mountains are often showed, even in the proximity of Hedeby, which lay at the base of the Jutland peninsula. Obviously, the picturesque mountains and fjords are something which must appear in any narration which takes place in Scandinavia.

Ships are another distinctive characteristic of the Viking world. In fact, they were important factors in the Scandinavian expansion, if not the most crucial one. The Viking longships were a landmark in shipbuilding technology – they were the best sailing vessels of their times and the fastest ships until the nineteenth century. Scandinavian vessels were clinker built, light, slim and shallow-draft, which allowed the Vikings to navigate through rivers and other shallow waters and to easily beach their ships. The symmetrical hull and easily raised steering oar helped significantly in that undertaking while the fully developed keel enabled travel under sail with wind abeam and even on the wind – allowing sailors to beat. In addition, the warships' folded masts enabled seamen to sail under bridges or to remain stealthy if the need arose.⁴³ In the series in general these vessels are depicted accurately yet it should be stressed that the Viking ships were a logical step in the steady evolution of North-European crafts.⁴⁴ *Vikings* tend to show Ragnar's ship as something new and unique. Moreover, many ships shown in the series have a steering oar on the left side which is contrary to what we know about these vessels. The side rudders were located on the right side of the stern, lending the right side of the ship its sailing name – starboard. In addition in Floki's workshop we can see an unfinished boat which already has a frame partially covered with strakes. In reality, the Vikings used to build the shell out of strakes connected to the keel, stem and sternpost and only later was the frame added. Creating a full size vessel was a demanding task for numerous people over a prolonged time and not a job for one person, not to mention that the ships were extremely expensive.

There is one more aspect of sailing which should be mentioned here – navigation. Currently our knowledge of the Viking methods of navigation is rather nebulous. We do know that they had special oral instructions which stated the starting point, destination, direction of the course and time period

⁴² The highest point in Denmark measures about 170 m.

⁴³ Viking ships are discussed in more detail at: [online] http://www.hurstwic.org/history/articles/manufacturing/text/norse_ships.htm; K. Durham, *Viking Longship*, Oxford 2002.

⁴⁴ The finds from Nydam, Sutton Hoo or Kvalsund bear testimony to the development of Germanic vessels.

of the journey. The presence of sea birds and other animals could have been instructive as well. However, the navigational instruments of the Norsemen remain unclear.⁴⁵ So far only sun compasses have been excavated⁴⁶ but they date to the late Viking Era and are of limited value for ocean crossing. Not to mention, they were not needed on relatively short cruises upon the North Sea or the Baltic. The hypothesis of the Vikings usage of *sólarsteinn* – the sun stone – is highly doubtful and not grounded in any archeological finds or historical sources for early medieval Europe. The most common method of traveling over seas in the Middle Ages was still beaching the ship for the night and using coastal navigation whenever possible.

The Norsemen were feared as gifted warriors. In battle they would mostly use axes, swords, spears, knives, shields and bows. In the beginning of the era, the armour was rare since they were a costly item of equipment and only the wealthiest could afford them. In fact, we possess hundreds of remnants of various arms and only a few specimens of Viking armour and helmets. We know that they wore chainmail but leather armour was probably more common. “Dressing for war was [...] an expression of wealth and pride.”⁴⁷ Each warrior used arms and armour according to his preference and capabilities – leaders had the most elaborate equipment and decorated helmets. There was no standardization or uniforms of any kind and the same is true when it comes to other medieval European countries. In the *Vikings* Anglo-Saxons are well-equipped and use homogenous armour according to their country of origin while commanders are bareheaded and the Norsemen do not loot the arms and armours of the slain, as would surely have been the case. The actors’ clothes and armour also look too intricate for early medieval Scandinavian outfits not to mention the knitted materials which are not authenticated for the time either.⁴⁸ Moreover, in the third season, the soldiers of Wessex wear helmets resembling more the early modern burgonets than the conical headpieces of the Viking Age.⁴⁹ Another misleading feature in the series remains the “sword of kings” of King Horik which can be seen more closely in the last episode of

⁴⁵ More information on Viking navigation can be found at: [online] <http://sciencenor-dic.com/how-vikings-navigated-world>; F. Mowat, *Wyprawy wikingów. Dawni Normanowie w Grenlandii i Ameryce Północnej*, tłum. W. Niepokólczycki, Katowice 2008.

⁴⁶ The most famous in Greenland.

⁴⁷ M. Harrison, G. Embleton, *Viking hersir*, Oxford 1993, p. 32.

⁴⁸ More information on Viking clothes can be found at: [online] <http://www.cs.vassar.edu/~capriest/vikresource.html>.

⁴⁹ Viking and Saxon military equipment is presented in short in: T. Wise, G. Embleton, *Saxon, Viking and Norman*, London 1979.

the second season. It bears a runic inscription on the blade although the text is in modern English rendered in Anglo-Saxon futhorc,⁵⁰ not Old Norse in Germanic elder futhark⁵¹ as we could expect for an old Viking weapon. The inscription says “shord of kings” [*sic*].

Finally, I would like to bring up the issue of the bloody-eagle. This gory ritual has for a long time been associated with the Vikings and it was interestingly depicted in the second season when Ragnar performed it on one of his enemies. According to tradition, King Aelle was executed in this manner by the sons of Ragnar. The elaborate but rather late descriptions of bloody-eagle say that it was performed by slashing the skin of the victim’s back in the shape of wings, cutting off the ribs close to the spine and pulling the lungs out.⁵² In fact, even the earliest references to the ritual date only to twelfth century and the intensity of the luridness increases in later accounts. It is highly doubtful that such a method of execution ever existed; it could have been invented through misunderstanding of an older skaldic verse.⁵³ To this day the existence of the bloody-eagle is questioned by numerous scholars while some are convinced of its reality.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, we do not possess any hard evidence that the bloody-eagle ritual was performed by any real Vikings in their times. It seems that the producers put it in the series because of the audience’s expectation of the barbarism and brutality of the dishevelled bearded Norsemen. It is worth noting that so far the berserkers – warriors who fought in an uncontrollable rage – did not feature in the series which is quite curious considering that they seem far more grounded in actual history than the bloody-eagle rite.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Runic alphabet from the British Isles.

⁵¹ Runic alphabet.

⁵² For example a description of the bloody-eagle rite appears in the *Orkneyinga Saga* from the 13th century: “There they found Halfdan long-leg, and Einar made them carve an eagle on his back with a sword, and cut the ribs all from the backbone, and draw the lungs there out, and gave him to Odin for the victory he had won” – *The Orkneyingers’ Saga*, [online] <http://oaks.nvg.org/an6ra16.html#orsag> [accessed: 30.05.2015].

⁵³ Skalds were Scandinavian poets. Their poetry was intricate and contained numerous circumlocutions (*kennings*) as well as unusual word order.

⁵⁴ The latter party point out particular Gotland picture stone as archaeological evidence attesting to the authenticity of the ritual. The former opinion is supported by thorough study of literary sources made by Roberta Frank in her paper *Viking Atrocity and the Skaldic verse: The Rite of the Blood-Eagle*, “English Historical Review” 1984, No. 99, 1984, which can be found on: [online] <http://ehr.oxfordjournals.org/content/XCIX/CCCXCI/332.full.pdf+html> [accessed: 30.05.2015].

⁵⁵ However, Rollo, Ragnar’s brother, is repeatedly depicted as fighting without any armour – bare chested – which is connected to one of the interpretations, nowadays largely

As we can see many threads shown in the *Vikings* series might be misleading.⁵⁶ Others – like tattoos, eye make-up, wedding ceremony, Norse mythology and pursuit of fame – find justification in historical sources.⁵⁷ It seems that the creators of the television series tried to use all possible sources on the Viking Age and make *Vikings* as interesting as possible for the viewers, without necessarily paying heed to the credibility of the presented phenomena. After all, the show is entertainment, not a documentary programme, and the audience should be aware of that fact. Still the preparation of the History Channel and its willingness to convey the climate of the early medieval times deserves praise. Even though in their work history intermingles with legend, it might inspire future enthusiasts and researchers and widen our knowledge on the Viking world. I have no doubts that the *Vikings* series will be remembered as one of the milestones for the popular cultural motif of the Norsemen and that popular culture is our modern mythology.⁵⁸

abandoned, of the term *berserker*. More information on the Scandinavian mad warriors can be found in: Ł. Malinowski, *Berserkir i ulfhedhnar w historii, mitach i legendach*, Kraków 2009.

⁵⁶ This article is preliminary – numerous other issues of dubious historicity might be found in the show. Some of them are mentioned humorously at: [online] <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Series/Vikings>.

⁵⁷ Though the exact look of Viking tattoos or make-up remains unclear. Various elements of the Viking culture are explained in more detail at: [online] <http://www.vikinganswerlady.com/index.shtml>.

⁵⁸ “Film, like myth, is a vivid, story-oriented genre and our most public form of popular entertainment. Because it must make money to survive, the film industry must monitor closely what pleases its audience. As a result, movies are endlessly reflecting of our shared values, aspirations and beliefs, which make us pay to see stories again and again. In fact, although many have distanced Greek myth from modern entertainment because of myth’s religious character, its literary worth, or its explicative value as a prescientific inquiry, mythmakers in the ancient and modern worlds have always had the same fundamental task: to help a particular audience validate a particular construction of reality. It is a simplification, therefore, but nonetheless true, to say that the same psychological payoff is offered to spectators of *The Matrix* as was offered to hearers of the *Iliad*” – D. Frauenfelder, *Popular Culture and Classical Mythology*, “The Classical World” 2005, Vol. 98, No. 2, p. 210. In addition modern media have ritual structure. Further discussion on this topic might be found in: J. Majewski, *Religia, media, mitologia*, Gdańsk 2010, p. 83 – 95.

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