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An Analysis of Viking Culture: Clichéd Views of the English Raids and Settlements through Modern Media

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ABSTRACT

The Viking culture has been one of the major influencers of the history of Europe, especially in the northern territories, such as the United Kingdom. This dissertation consists on the analysis of the historical information about this culture in Britain and its future influences. Also, it establishes a comparison between this information and the current prototypical image about Vikings. The aim of this analysis is to understand how and why a prototypical image has been developed through history. Besides, it will desmythify or confirm some of the most popular clichés that surround this culture nowadays. In order to achieve this, it has been used multimedia materials such as films or TV series, and they have been compared to the historical sources written by researchers and academics who are experts of this field.

KEYWORDS

Cliché, British history and culture, multimedia, society, Viking.

RESUMEN

La cultura vikinga ha sido una de las más influyentes en la historia de Europa, especialmente en zonas del norte del continente como el Reino Unido. Este TFG consiste en el análisis de la información histórica que se tiene sobre esta cultura y sus influencias; y en la comparación de éstas con la imagen protípica que se tiene hoy en día sobre los vikingos. Lo que se pretende con este análisis es entender cómo y por qué la concepción que se tiene sobre ellos ha ido cambiando y adaptándose al panorama histórico, a la vez que se desmitifican o confirman algunos de los clichés más famosos sobre ellos. Para ello, se ha utilizado material multimedia como películas y series de televisión y se ha comparado con fuentes históricas escritas por investigadores y académicos expertos en el tema.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Cliché, historia y cultura Británica, multimedia, sociedad, vikingo.

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1. INTRODUCTION:

The main purpose of this dissertation is to explain how and why the vision of the Viking culture has changed throughout history depending on the chronological period and the geographical location. To achieve this, the present paper will compare the information obtained in historical sources and reliable documentation to the current clichéd view about the Viking society got in the modern media. It will also try to give an explanation for these changes. In addition, it will be previously established a historical context which will provide the necessary information in order to understand the comparison.

Apart from this, it is important to bear in mind that the documentation of such ancient periods implies a possible inaccuracy concerning facts, names, dates or places. The lack of reliable documentation in some periods can provoke misunderstandings of the historical facts. The most part of the documentation in which this paper has its basis relies on Christian manuscripts written by chroniclers of the period – normally Christian monks–. So, it should be taken into account that they were the victims of the Scandinavian attacks so they did not write with objectivity. This situation and the recurrent negative vision of this culture resulted in a stereotypical view of the Viking society, since the modern culture took those Christian testimonies as a universal true. Besides, the evolution of the European culture during many centuries has progressively increased these stereotypes until the age of the modern media. But also this modern content is attached to ideological issues and adjustments that may also distortion the historical reality. However, there is some accurate and valuable information about the oldest periods of history. It comes from the modern archeology, the study of the sagas and the annals, and the research on many other different sources.

2. THE VIKINGS' ORIGIN AND THEIR PRESENCE IN ENGLAND

In the fifth century Europe suffered one of its biggest changes during its history, the Western Roman Empire fell in 476 marking the end to the classical era and the beginning of the medieval period. At the end of this century, the European territories were divided among many little Germanic kingdoms. In Central Europe, the most dominant were the Franks, who stablished their territories in the most part of where now France and Germany are; but there were others such as the Jutes, the Slavics or the Goths. Apart from this, other peoples settled down in the North of Europe. The current Great Britain was then

occupied by the Scots, the Britons, the Angles, the Saxons and the Picts; and in Scandinavia there were settled the Danes and the Northmen (Sawyer 2001: 9-12).

The Viking society has its origins in those northern Germanic kingdoms, in particular, they descend directly from those settled in the peninsulas of Scandinavia and Jutland. They received many names: The Franks called them Northmen or Danes, the British named them "heathens", and the Irish used the words "pagans", "gentiles" or "foreigners". Their territories were divided into four main groups: The Svear (mid-Sweden), the Götar (south Sweden), the Norwegian (western Norway) and the Danish (Denmark). Around the end of the fifth century, they started to develop their power, mainly thanks to the commercial relationships with the continent. Later, in the sixth and seventh centuries, larger confederations of tribes were created, causing a lower differentiation between the Norse population, which was constantly increasing. Besides, there was an important movement of the population migrating to the west and south of Norway looking for a better climate and more fertile lands. This migration meant increase the richness and power of the region. Afterwards, the main leaders of the society began to build defensive structures such as walls and moats in order to show how powerful they were. In addition, having more people also implied having more artisans and therefore, a development of the manufactured techniques. Thus, there was a great progress in boat-construction and in the production of better products. These facts, together with the obtaining of bigger amounts of goods, provoked a huge growth in the commercial relations with Europe.

The archeologist and Viking researcher Richard Hall claimed that this development and the overpopulation of the area, together with the wish for wealth, were the main causes of the expansion of their territory (Hall 2008: 67 – 68). However, there is controversy about the real reasons why the Vikings decided to raid and conquest new lands. Peter H. Sawyer, historian and expert in the Medieval Ages, stands up for other motives. He states that the beginning of the Viking raids responded to a series of political decisions, the unification of the main tribes, and the need for new fertile lands since the population was growing. Furthermore, he adds to his theory that merchants' knowledge about the richness of those foreign territories, could encourage people to go there (Sawyer 2001: 11).

Some of these factors or a combination of them, together with the improvements in boats and in navigation techniques, which made possible to travel longer distances by sea, caused that in June 793 the first Viking raid took place in England. Specifically, in the monastery of Lindisfarne, and this event was taken as a referential point of the beginning of the Viking Era. It was the first documented incursion and it came to our days thanks to a series of texts written by Alcuin of York (c. 735 – 804).[1] His testimony about the Lindisfarne attack is so relevant at the time of understanding this episode of the history: "Never before has such terror appeared in Britain. Behold the church of St Cuthbert, splattered with the blood of God's priests, robbed of its ornaments" (Alcuin: 2001).

Later, the Anglo-Saxon chronicle also recorded it:

> This year came dreadful fore-warnings over the land of the Northumbrians, terrifying the people most woefully: these were immense sheets of light rushing through the air, and whirlwinds, and fiery, dragons flying across the firmament. […] The ravages of heathen men miserably destroyed God's church on Lindisfarne, with plunder and slaughter (Britannia: The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle).

In their incursions, Norsemen focused their target on places where they knew that they will find all kind of valuable goods, not only on religious places but also on the main commercial centers along the eastern shore. They normally took all they could carry back to Scandinavia, such as clothes, jewels, gold, silver, books… even people in order to sell them as slaves or to ask for rewards. Viking's raids normally consisted in small well-organized groups and their attacks were not random but planned. In addition, their main advantage was the element of surprise and the fast speed in which they performed the sacks. Consequently, Anglo-Saxon population living in the zone were terrified about those foreigners who looted their cities and killed their neighbors. However, this sensation of fear was not just produced by Vikings themselves, but also Christian institutions played an important role there. During those times, the major part of the Anglo-Saxon population was Christian and the anger of God was very present in their beliefs. So, the Christian faith saw in the Viking raids an opportunity to spread the idea of a divine punishment due to the sin and the immoral habits of the British society. With this, they pretended people to mend their behaviors and to regret their sins. This is a fact that has had a huge repercussion during the following centuries, even it lasts until nowadays. The

[1] Northumbrian ecclesiastic and intellectual man. At the time of describing the Lindisfarne attack, he supported the idea that the raids were a manifestation of the displeasure of God with the sinner population. With this, many other churchmen and him, tried to diminish the religious crisis that England was suffering in that period. The importance of his testimony resides in that it is the only document about the event.

mythologized image about Vikings that Christian institutions crated in order to achieve their goals, has contributed to the distortional clichés that current people have about the reality of the Viking culture in the modern times.

In any case, they launched this image from the 793 onwards, when different armed groups coming from Scandinavia continuously arrived not only to the British shore, but also to continental Europe or to the Irish sea. Those groups were formed by a few men that followed their leaders looking for fame and fortune. Even sometimes, they allied to form larger groups in order to perform more difficult attacks. Viking's attitude at raiding changed around the year 850. In the first incursions, they just plundered, sacked and then, they returned to their lands with the loot; but from the mid-ninth century, they began to settle in the British coasts in order to spend winter there. Some of these first settlements were located in Thanet and Sheppey, and marked a new stage on the Viking campaign, because they began to colonize some of the territories and started to live there permanently. Therefore, in the mid-ninth century the lands of the Southern North Sea, the Channel coasts and the Eastern Britain were occupied by the Danes; while the Norwegian settled in Ireland, in the Hebrides and the Northern Isles. Vikings moved their societies to different places, but their way of life, their culture and their traditions remained the same.

During the following decades, parties of raiders continued attacking the British lands in small groups and then, in the year 865, the "Great Pagan Army" arrived. Its origin is not clear, but they probably came from Scandinavia or consisted on a combined force of smaller raiding groups. Its size is not documented, but The Annals in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* talks about "A great heathen army" but it does not specify its dimensions. It also explains the campaigns that this great army performed before: East-Anglia (865), Northumbria (866), Mercia (867), again Northumbria (868) and again Mercia and East-Anglia (869). They conquered and devastated these territories and in the year 871 they already controlled important points in Mercia and Northumbria and they fully controlled East-Anglia. From there, they launched a series of strong attacks to Wessex, forcing King Alfred the Great (c. 849-899) to capitulate and sign the *Treaty of Alfred and Guthrum* (878 – 890),[2] which stablished some agreements concerning the cohabitation of both nations and marked the boundaries of the *Danelaw*.

[2] Agreement between Alfred the Great, king of Weesex and Guthrum the Old, king of Danes.

> First concerning our boundaries: up on the Thames, and then up on the Lea, and along the Lea unto its source, then straight to Bedford, then up on the Ouse to Watling Street. […] And we all agreed on the day when the oaths were sworn, that no slaves nor freemen might go without permission into the army of the Danes, any more than any of theirs to us (Geary 2010: 228).

The term *Danelaw* means "under the law of Danes", and it marked the borders between the English lands and those controlled by Viking people in the East-Britain. The Danelaw had a huge influence in the English culture. The territory mixed the English landscape with the Danish settlements and way of life. Here began a deeper interaction between both English and Danish cultures. They socially, politically and economically depended on each other; people learnt how to communicate, there was a social, cultural and religious assimilation, intermarriages, and in general the perceptions of the collective identity changed. Furthermore, Danish language affected the conquered zones, for instance, some actual place-names derive from Old Norse words, such as those ended in *–thorp* meaning 'secondary settlement'; or those ending in *–by* meaning farm or village. This happened not only to place-names, but also to personal names, street names, pronunciation and spoken language. Besides, the English language itself benefited by acquiring several words from the Norse vocabulary, such as *window* or the third person plural pronouns. With the passing of time, their differences became mainly indistinguishable. As a matter of fact, some specialists consider that the origin of the Middle English, which would develop later into the Modern English, was a combination between both Old Norse and Old English (Embley, Terje 2014: 43 – 44).

Nowadays, thanks to the archeological remains and the documentation discovered centuries before, we can get an accurate view of how they lived, some of their costumes and the basis of their society. All the cultural situations mentioned before affected the whole Danelaw, whose territory covered the North-East and Mid-East part of England. It was formed by several *Boroughs* or *Burhs*[3] such as York, Leicester, Cambridge, Nottingham, Stamford, Derby… They were originally built by the Anglo-Saxons for the military defense against foreigner forces. However, some of them were conquered and used later by the Vikings with the same purposes. Normally, in their construction recycled materials were used, such as Roman foundations or hillforts from the Iron Age; and also natural barriers such as rivers or forests. Eventually, boroughs were also used for administrative purposes. During the Danelaw time, there were at least fourteen boroughs,

[3] From the Old English word *burh* meaning "fortified city."

but there was one of them that stood out for its importance: York or *Jórvik*. Before the Viking arrival, York had been a commercial and political fortified center since the Roman period. Romans made York one of the main capitals of their Empire together with London. Later, it became the capital of the kingdom of Northumbria with the Anglo-Saxon heptarchy. Finally, in the year 866, the Vikings took the city and made of it one of the main centers from where they leaded and managed the most part of the Danelaw. Its harbor on the Humber river played an important role in the commercial exchanges and its Roman walls made of it the principal Viking bastion of their territories (Hall 2008: 114). Besides, the city suffered a huge transformation since the Vikings settled, the population, the territorial extension and the economy increased; the urban center developed significantly, etc. Around 1066 it had 15.000 inhabitants approximately, and the most part of them lived in workshop-houses. Under the Viking leadership, York become one of the richest and populated cities of England due to the craftwork and commerce.

This situation lasted until the Viking king Cnut the Great (c. 995 – 1035) died.[4] He unified the English and the Danes in 1018 maintaining the previously stablished institutions and policies. He gained the favor of his people by making unselfish acts as donations to the Catholic Church. He was the first Viking keenly recognized by the European royalty, even he participated in the international politics of that period. After his death and his heirs', there were many troubles at the time of choosing a new king. The last of the great Viking warriors, Harald Hardrada (c. 1015 – 1066), had pretensions to the throne, but also Harold Godwinson (c. 1022 – 1066), who was the last Anglo-Saxon king of England, had them. Finally, Harold killed Harald in the Battle of Stamford Bridge (1066) near York, but a few weeks later, Harold himself died. He died fighting against the Norman troops led by William the Conqueror, duke of Normandy (c. 1028 – 1087) in the battle of Hastings (1066). By this time, most part of the Vikings had left the territory, but this did not mean the end of the Viking raids in the English lands–: some attacks took place during several years later, but without relevance. Eventually, the whole kingdom ended in Norman hands and the city of York was burnt to the ground in order to repress Anglo-Saxon revolts. So, it can be concluded that York was so relevant that its occupation in 1066 was one of the key events that marked the future of England and the end of the Viking Age.

[4] It is important to take into account that it was not a period of peace, several campaigns and conflicts took place between the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings affecting the development of the city.

3. PERCEPTIONS OF THE VIKINGS

But, the end of the Viking Age did not mean the end of the Viking culture. Their history, way of life and costumes have been constantly studied since the *Skaldic poetry.*[5] Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that the early literature is not fully reliable since there are not many written sources of some events so the information cannot be contrasted. Besides, due to this lack of documentation in some aspects of the history, authors often invented facts or re-make them, so there is a limited amount of documents that can be reliable, for instance sagas or chronicles, which are more objective and factual. In addition, some of the information was written by indirect sources or by non-objective authors, therefore sometimes the boundaries between history and legend can get confused.

So, some centuries after the disappearance of the Viking culture, the interest for them increased beginning in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Northern Europe. Scandinavian countries have suffered a period of decay due to several reasons such as the Black Death, internal wars or an economic and social crisis. So, in order to compensate their situation, people from Norway and Denmark wanted to remind the rest of the world that their culture had been always rich and outstanding, even after the Vikings. So they spread a glorious picture of their society, regarding the Viking Age as a heroic time for Scandinavia. To achieve this, during the seventeen century, Scandinavian historians began to translate Viking runes into Latin and used them as historical sources. But actually, these historians' translations should not be trusted since they wanted to portray a more noble and wiser image of their ancestors in order to prove that the origin of their civilization was superb. Sometimes, they changed the content of the runes or invented details to give their national history a more splendorous appearance. Besides, it appeared literature linked to the Viking lives in Norway and Denmark, but also in Iceland, which contributed to the development of some Viking ideals all around the world that last until nowadays (Sawyer 2001: 225).

Later, in the eighteenth century, this kind of idealized documentation disappeared and it was substituted by more pragmatic and rational researches. During this period, the Viking perception changed from the glorious to the barbaric and uncivilized. But rather

[5] A branch of the Old Norse poetry, it deals with historical topics. The 'skalds' (poets) composed during the Viking Age and the Middle Ages in Scandinavia.

than decrease the interest for this society, it made it more attractive to the public. The Enlightenment saw them as romantic barbarians, wild and surrendered to the primitive passions, and this was close related to the concept of "The Sublime." This aesthetic characteristic was mainly recovered by the British philosophy in the eighteenth century and showed admiration for the shocking things coming from nature. People from this period were astonished by the pleasant feelings that some elements caused to them. Those feelings were related to the fear and the horror but seen from a secure point of view, which made those elements beautiful (Burke 1970). So, the image of the Viking people that arrived to the eighteenth century perfectly fixed this description. Terrifying people that caused a lot of chaos and struggles during the Early Medieval period but that now could hurt no one because their civilization did not exist anymore. So people could enjoy their culture fearless. Due to this enthusiasm for the Viking sublime, at the end of the eighteenth century the "Nordic Renaissance" showed up in Europe. It was mostly noticeable in arts and literature, where this tendency broke with the traditional rules, with the harmonious compositions and the balanced forces. These characteristics of breaking with the stablished standards were related to that rebel behavior of the Vikings, who also had broken the traditional rules of staying at their lands and decided to search for new experiences. All in all, if the intellectuals wanted to feel the sublime they had to seek their primitive nature and focus on their innate passions, that is to say: to nearly behave as a Viking.

Moreover, the Nordic Renaissance recovered the Old Norse poetry and sagas with it, and introduced them in the European literary panorama of the century. However, those works were reinterpreted and modified in favor of the taste of the period, so the original Norse literature was again distorted and adapted to the trends of the time. The Viking fanaticism continued increasing in the following decades and even some intellectual clubs were created with Viking themes. Mostly in Denmark and Sweden, people met to drink ale, to perform ancient rituals, to read Old Norse poems, etc. They believed that the Viking society was the perfect society because of the proximity between kings and free workers; and also because of the lack of aristocracy. These societies lasted for more than a hundred years, and they had a deep impact in the later educational system in the north of Europe. Even, some "folk high schools" were created in the mid eighteenth century in Scandinavia, where students learnt about the Viking culture, their mythology and traditions. Also the architecture styles, the inner-house decoration, the political speeches

or the topic of social celebrations got affected by the trend, among many other things. It was the first time that the Viking image was used for commercial purposes (with an important success).

Later, in the nineteenth century, a poetic romance was written that became very relevant to the development of the image of the Vikings: *Frithiofs Saga* (1825) by Esaias Tegnér (c. 1782 – 1846). It talked about the adventures of a Viking hero, and became one of the first international best-sellers in the Swedish literary history. Its success provoked that the author's version of the Viking society became the new model of how European people saw them: as Byronic romanticized heroes. The same as the rest of the European countries, Victorian England was also affected by this Viking spirit. A lot of sagas were translated into English and sold in common libraries and besides, some Universities, for instance Oxford or Cambridge included Norse studies in their programs. The taste not only by the Viking Age, but also by the Medieval period in general, was very present in England during the nineteenth century between the elite classes. It was provoked especially by the publication of some works such as "*The Castle of Otranto*", "*Ivanhoe*" or "*Letters on Chivalry and Romance*" among others. So, in the mid-nineteenth century, there were celebrated tournaments in different points of England, for instance, in Hyde Park (London) in 1839; and also there were exhibitions based on the Middle Ages. For instance, in the Crystal Palace (London) in 1851. But it is important to take into account that people had an idealized image of the Medieval period as a time of awesome knights in shining armor rescuing pretty dames in distress, which was a Romanticized view. Apart from this, in Germany, Richard Wagner (c.1813 – 1883) composed his opera *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1848 – 1874) based on Icelandic sagas. It took the Viking image to a deeper Romanticism and it was included –together with Nietzsche's superman philosophy– as one of the main basis of the Nazi movement of the early twentieth century. That is to say that the Nazi ideology based their "Aryan culture" on the Viking heritage. They also took them as a role model since they defeated their inferiors in foreign countries, because their race was pure and superior. As a matter of fact, during the Second World War, the Nazis used the Viking image and symbols in their propaganda.

When the War ended, historians and experts began to have a deeper look to the Viking world, they began to present them more objectively than ever. That view is the one that endures nowadays: craftsmen, plunders, colonizers and mercenaries. In addition, in this after war period the Viking culture was more commercially used than ever: costumes,

jewelry, dragon and runic decorations, horned helmets, etc. However, they are no longer seen as romantic heroes, but a funny entertainment for people; they lost their intellectual halo born with the Enlightenment. As a matter of fact, people began to celebrate fairs and festivals in Scandinavia, Britain and Germany whose topic was the Viking Age. Besides, in the last sixty years there is progressively more Viking-based novels and mass-media content that include Viking adventures or characters. Nevertheless, they are not portrayed as romantic heroic figures, brave warriors or skilled travelers, but as anti-heroes or bloodthirsty villains.

As a consequence of the passing time, there has been a great evolution in how the Viking culture is perceived, from the intellectual elites to the lower culture. This changes are studied by the Medievalism, which is "the study of responses to the Middle Ages at all periods since a sense of the medieval began to develop" (Shippey *Studies in Medievalism*). Leslie J. Workman defined it in his work *Medievalism in the Modern World* as a "process of creating the Middle Ages" and as "the study not of the Medieval Ages themselves, but of the scholars, artists and writers who constructed the idea of the Middle Ages that we inherited". That is to say that the Medievalism does not study the Middle Ages themselves, but the process of the creation of what we understand to be medieval nowadays. Since the beginning of the medieval studies, experts have portrayed them from their points of view, leaving a prototypical image for the future that we have assumed to be real. With all these changes it is inevitable to ask ourselves if there is something real in the actual clichés that exist nowadays about the Vikings, their way of life, their traditions, their behavior, etc. In order to get a more realistic view, it is crucial to turn into the documentation of the period where they lived and to compare it to the prototypical model that is present nowadays.

4. VIKINGS ON FILM VS. DOCUMENTED REALITY

Cinema and TV series have a long tradition of recreation of history since their beginning. From the appearance of the first historical movies, filmmakers realized that historical topics became very attractive for the audience. Due to this fact, nowadays there are many films and TV series that represent historical periods in their plots trying to satisfy the public's expectations. By taking this into account, it could be said that the most part of the cinematographic productions presents some clichés expected by the modern society. So, in order to approach the prototypical view of Vikings and the way that contemporary people sees them, cinema and TV series may be rich sources. Moreover,

directors and producers of historical movies are more concerned with creating a successful and purchased product than with the historical accuracy so, in many cases, veracity of films remains secondary in their sets of priorities. As a result of this, in this kind of movies, there is a mixture of historical and fictional events. In order to establish a credible historical environment, those filmmakers shooting the Middle Ages normally work with adapters rather than working with interpreters.[6] Adapters are not professional historians and they are not much concerned with the veracity of the events, but to present historical facts in a way that contemporary people can make sense of them. Due to this, they usually introduce fictional elements making the production historically inaccurate (Raw, Laurence, and Defne Ersin Tutan 2012: 9). So, nowadays a film can be considered medieval just for including medieval elements, settings, characters, etc. They transmit the medieval image as a time of monks, knights, violence, ignorance, dungeons, disease, superstitions… that have increasingly settled in people's mind as true. Besides, the ideological ideas, the narrative coherence and the film montage also contribute to the distortion of the historical record, and it is important to bear in mind that during the 1950s there was a strong censorship. For instance, The PCA[7] in America, which applied censorship to the productions of the 1940s, 50s and 60s over detailed kills, cruelty to animals, sex scenes, lustful scenes, raping, suggestive gestures, etc. making more difficult to be explicit in showing historical details. Even nowadays, cinematographic productions suffer a strong censorship from the governments depending on the countries where they are presented.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, there have been filmed several movies depicting the Viking society. The first one was a short silent movie called *The Viking's Bride* under the direction of L. Fitzhamon, which was released in 1907. It shows the struggles of a Viking community in order to rescue their chief's bride who has been kidnapped by a rival tribe. This film pictures the typical costumes of the Viking society and their way of life together with some clichés such as the war-like environment, horned helmets, rough mannered people, etc. It marked the beginning of many other productions about the same topic until the present days. Most of these movies are based on medieval sources, but also in comics, in popular beliefs or in cartoons. In many ways, filmmakers have made of Vikings what they wanted them to be in order to sell their productions. In

[6] Here 'interpreters' must be understood as a professional that establishes the veracity and the accuracy of the historical events.
[7] Production Code Administration (1940s – 1960s).

most of the cases, they demonized them portraying Vikings as uneducated, brutal, violent and basing their lives in raiding, sacking and raping. This is the case, for instance, of the movie *The Vikings* (1958) by Richard Fleisher, which is one of the most famous films about Vikings. It portrays a chaotic Viking society with apparently no more rules than the natural ones. The protagonists of the movie are depicted living in a community with no social order, where no one talks about rights or laws, and where the only rule that they follow is the survival of the fittest. But, as it can be seen in the image that I have prepared to clarify this section, Vikings had a hierarchical society where the *Konung* (king) was at the highest point. He ruled the whole Viking society and was surrounded by the *Huskárls* (royal guard) and the *Stallers* (royal bearers), who performed diplomatic missions, collected taxes, etc. Then, immediately below the king, there were some men who rule the *Boroughs* in first person, the *Jarls* (earls). They ruled among the *Karls* (free men), who compose the principal nucleus of the society. They had rights and were middle-class peasants, artisans, warriors, merchants etc. Finally, the *Thralls* (slaves) were the lowest class, and they usually were war prisoners, Northmen who owe wealth to others or the children of older *Thralls*. They suffered social and economic pressures, but they were not battered, even sometimes, they could get freedom with the permission of their masters. Furthermore, *Thralls* were an important part of the society since having them meant power and they could be sold in the market (Hall 2008: 12).

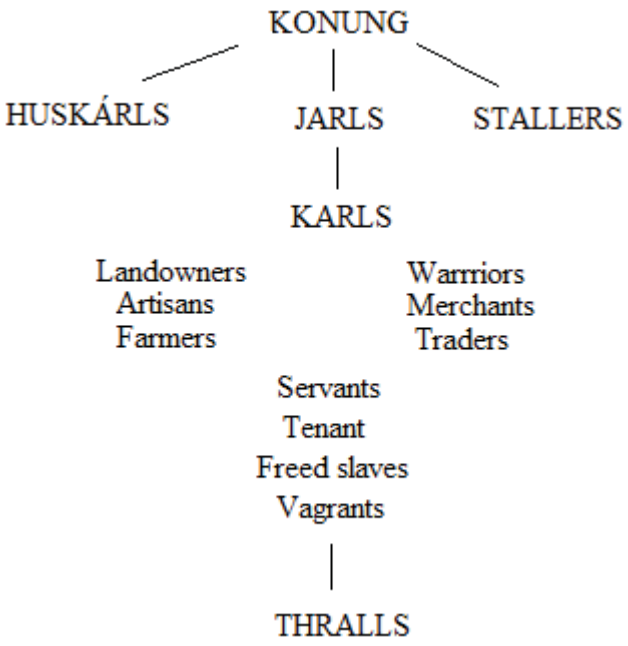

Illustration: Ana Valverde. Viking Hierarchy. Digital image.

Apart from these classes, there were Outlaws, people who had broken the law, who were considered barely animals and could be killed without a penalty. And also there were people linked to the spiritual world, usually women, such as magicians, witches, shamans, etc. They were marginalized people that did not fit in the society, but they were not repudiated. So, all this verified documentation is completely skipped in the most part

of the movies, maybe due to the economic resources of the studio, to ideological factors or simply because it was more comfortable. In any case, the mistaken image that films like *The Vikings* (1958) transmits about the structure of the Viking society, is not accurate and differs from historical truth. Besides, these productions normally succeed because of the audience's tastes This example perfectly depicts one of the main reasons about why people have such an erroneous clichéd view about Vikings. But it is not the only one, many other productions which focus on different aspects of the society are also wrong and contribute to these prototypes because people trust in their veracity.

In the TV series *Vikings* (2013) by Michael Hirst, it is shown that one of the Viking women's characteristics is that they were as brave and skilled warriors as men. It is true that it is difficult to know what were exactly their roles in society because they were less documented than men. They lived in a male society, and men were the protagonists of the history, so the documentation about women is very limited. But, experts such as Hall or Somerville claim that in Norse culture, middle-class women's roles were normally related to the housework. They raised the children, made clothes, worked with the cattle, cooked for the community, etc. and they also contributed to the economic well-being of their families. Moreover, when men were away they were the highest authority in their homes and they assumed male responsibilities. Nevertheless, some archeological evidence has confirmed that sometimes, women travelled with men's armies, normally for colonization purposes; but they were rarely soldiers or warriors (Hall 2008: 13). However, they had similar rights to men and they were respected and far more independent than those women living in Europe. Even, some aristocrat women or those from a higher status had privileges above some important men. They were called *Húsfreyjas* and were the main authority in their homes with the power to control their properties without needing the permission of a man. *Húsfreyjas* showed this dominance through their clothes' accessories, for example, they wore keys hanging from their belts, and having many keys meant having several chests with wealth at home (Somerville 2014: 275).

> Each woman has, on her breast, a small disc, tied, made of either iron, silver, copper or gold, in relation to her husband's financial and social worth. Each disc has a ring to which a dagger is attached, also lying on her breast. Around their necks they wear bands of gold and silver. […] The jewelry which they prize the most is the dark-green ceramic beads which they have aboard their boats and which they value very highly: they purchase beads […] and string them together as necklaces for their wives (Somerville 2014: 275).

Moreover, women were important religious and mythical references in Viking culture. They appear as goddess and heroines in sagas, for instance *Laxdæla saga* or *Brennu-Njáls saga*, or the goddess Freyja, Friga, the Valkyries,[8] etc. and this is hardly ever presented in audiovisual materials. When filmmakers picture Vikings, they focus on men, and if women appear they are just secondary figurants subjected to men's will. For instance, In *The Vikings* (1958) only a few women appear. One of them is the Christian king Edwin's daughter who is needed to be rescued by his father's soldiers. So, for instance, here it can be seen the issue of "the lady in distress" which was typical in art, literature, cinema, etc. but not in the real Viking Age. In that period, women did not depend exclusively on a male figure that rescued them from their problems; they were more independent and self-sufficient than that. There are also women in the Viking settlement where they lived at the beginning of the film, and they appear being forced to have sex or performing unimportant tasks. This scorn to women has no documented basis, in fact, Somerville's and Hall's researches suggest that Vikings were more likely to esteem and respect their women rather than to despise them. The reason for that probably resides in the lack of contrastable documentation available about Viking women, so the producers of the film may have used their own imagination or interpretation of what was the women's role in society. In order to fix this situation, they would have chosen to picture women from the traditional point of view that shows women as submissive and weak. But this film is not the only one, there are other examples such as *A Viking Saga: The Darkest Days* (2013) by Chris Crow where women do not appear at all – may be to avoid this issue–.

Another factor of the Viking society that is represented in very few occasions in movies is the place where they lived: communities composed by several farms surrounded by protective barriers such as wooden walls or moats. They took the structures that they had in Scandinavia as an example and built copies of them in the Anglo-Saxon territory. These communities were normally placed in the shore of rivers and lakes, so people could get protection, resources and travel through the water. Norse huts were made of stone, wood, straw and mud, and their dimensions were about 30 x 8 meters. Besides, they usually hosted both humans and animals; so that is the reason why these huts are called

[8] Freyja: goddess of love, sex and beauty.
Friga: Odin's wife and goddess of the house and the family.
The Valkyries: goddess who chose those men who died in battle.

"farms" or "long houses" (Hall 2008: 40 – 41). Communities both in Scandinavia and in Anglo-Saxon lands often developed and increased their number of inhabitants and farms needing more lands, and therefore creating bigger cities. For instance, Kaupang, which was one of the first Norwegian cities, had a great market selling jewelry, glass beads, silver… among other materials. Other examples are Ribe and Hedeby created in the eighth century in Denmark, or York, in Northumbria which were important commerce and political centers too. In movies such as *Northmen: A Viking Saga* (2014) or *A Viking Saga: The Darkest* Days (2013) there are no references to their settlements or scenes including them. Filmmakers decided to place the protagonists' adventures in natural environments, for instance, small groups of Viking soldiers landing on beaches or travelling through forests. This situation may have caused the actual image that people have about Vikings travelling in small groups, but not living together as a whole community. It could be the result of the lack of documentation of producers or the needed for more economical backgrounds in the production of films like these.

By contrast, in *The* Vikings (1958) at the beginning of the film, the Viking settlement appears on the screen showing some rudimental houses made of wood and straw, but the inside does not show a home shared with animals –which would be more historically truthful, but luxury clothes and bed sheets. This is certainly inaccurate since Vikings used to sleep on the floor surrounded by animal skins to be warm, and not in so-modern beds. Besides, this kind of representation, or avoiding to represent a rough real Viking community may have contributed to the clichéd idea of Viking as isolated people. widespread idea is that they only cared about their own family and that they only recurred to their neighbors in order to join forces to fight. Modern people never imagine big cities when thinking about a Viking community, they often reduce their prototypical view to small groups of isolated houses lost in nature. But the reality is that Viking cities, (such as Hedeby or York), did exist and they appear in chronicles such as *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.*

One of those cities was Hedeby, which was placed in the west-coast of Denmark. It was one of the biggest sources of Viking archeological remains. Experts discovered that it had its own harbor, a semicircular defensive wall and a huge graveyard where more than 12.000 corpses were buried (Sawyer 2001: 158 – 161). Indeed, Norse funerals were very important in their culture, because their beliefs were close to death and life before death. They usually burned deceased people together with some of his or her belongings,

they did it both on the ground or in the sea using boats. But it is important to bear in mind that the material heritage suggests that Christian and pagan populations soon blurred their differences while cohabitating (Boyer 2005: 201). Actually, most of the Vikings lost their pagan traditions and converted to Christianism, although some of them remained in touch with Scandinavian old rituals. Soon, Viking communities adopted Christian ideals and began to bury their people. So, both cremation and burial continued happening simultaneously: those who kept their ancestors' tradition used to cremate their deceased, while those who adapted to Christianism used to bury them. But in both situations, Vikings used to bury also food and personal objects such as weapons or tools in the case of men; and jewels and personal objects in the case of women, so they could be prepared for their afterlife. Furthermore, if the deceased person belonged to an important family, they may appear buried together with their boats and animals, among some of their wealth. The aim of those grave goods was related with Norse mythology: they believed in an afterlife in which they would meet their deceased relatives, where they may need some of those objects.

Death was one of the centers of their faith since god Odin was waiting for those who had been brave warriors in battle, in order to have a great feast in *Valhalla*.[9] For them, an honorable death was the main goal of life, and if they did not have it, Death would guide them to *Hel*.[10] Thanks to the archeological excavations, the rune stones, the sagas and epic poems such as *Beowulf*,[11] both, the funerary rituals and the Norse mythology are very well documented things about Vikings' culture. Probably, due to this fact, filmmakers normally portray very accurate images of them. For instance, in *Northmen, A Viking Saga* (2014) and in *A Viking Saga, The Darkest Days* (2013), characters make many references to *Valhalla*, to Odin or to other Gods and mythological issues. Another example is *The Vikings* (1958) where, apart from the mythological allusions, there is represented a funeral at the end of the story. Characters use a boat in order to leave the corpse and his funerary goods floating in the sea while burning, as original rituals

[9] A huge hall placed in *Asgard*, where deceased warriors travelled guided by the *Valkyries* in order to feast and celebrate.

[10] An equivalent for the Christian Hell, where they will not have a good stay. Vikings tried to dodge a not honorable death in order to avoid Hell.

[11] Epic Anglo-Saxon poem probably written between the eighth and the twelfth centuries. The original manuscript is conserved in the British Library. At the end of this poem, the protagonist fights against a dragon who seriously injures him, and he finally dies. After his death, the hero receives a funeral where he is cremated in a boat.

indicate. This specific scene remains of the epic poem *Beowulf* where the protagonist is buried in the same way, so it may have been a source of inspiration for the movie.

Then, that is one of the main reason that encouraged Vikings to become warriors. Apart from the riches and wealth obtained in raiding, they wanted the approval of the gods. Therefore, Viking warriors were brave and tough; skilled with weapons and tireless. They were experienced fighters, raised in a warlike environment; children learn how to fight at a very early age, normally trained by their practiced relatives or friends. This war-like Viking world is the most popular Viking image among modern people, and it may have been caused due to the huge exploitation of the Viking warriors in the modern media. Nowadays, it exists a huge market for the fanatics of this aspect of the Viking society. These people sell and buy weapons, typical costumes or objects, even they usually met in order to play battles. This image is normally biased by the Christian perception as victims, and also by commercial interest. So, normally it does not reflect the reality exactly as it was. In the case of the Christian testimonies, they were not objective since they were the main target of the Viking raids, they exaggerated their testimonies in order to make people fear of the pagan raiders, a consequence of the rage of God due to their sinful way of life. As a consequence, filmmakers tend to idealize Vikings as Christian depicted them: huge men, strong, with rude faces, fearless, bloodthirsty, etc. and these are characteristics that depict a concrete group inside the whole Viking army: the *Bersérkers.*[12] They were famous Viking warriors who were the most feared (even by their mates). They were reckless and ferocious, painless and strong, nearly unstoppable. They were believed to use some kind of drugs such as the *amanita muscaria*[13] or *lysergic acid*[14] which provoked them hallucinations and a not usual strength, and made them feel violent and rage (Hoffer 1967: 454). Some documents such as *Egil Skallagrimsson's Saga* (c. 1240) or the *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* (c. 1230 – 1450), whose events date to the Viking Age, show that *Bersérkers* normally did not wear protection, they were top-naked or wore animal skins from bears or wolves. The first reference about these men appeared in the *Hrafnsmál*[15] which is a Norwegian skaldic poem dated to the ninth century, and lately translated to several languages:

[12] From the Germanic words *berr* (bear) and *serkr* (shirt), that is to say, dressed as a bear. In this case, the etymology gives a good description of the wild behavior that characterized those men.
[13] White-spotted and red mushroom with hallucinogenic properties.
[14] Psychedelic drug, precursor of the modern LSD.
[15] *Harfnsmál* is an Old Norse term that means "raven song". This is a skaldic poem that was written in the ninth century and narrates a conversation between a Valkyrie and a raven.

I'll ask of the berserks, you tasters of blood,
Those intrepid heroes, how are they treated,
Those who wade out into battle?
Wolf-skinned they are called. In battle
They bear bloody shields.
Red with blood are their spears when they come to fight.
They form a closed group.
The prince in his wisdom puts trust in such men
Who hack through enemy shields (Melhorn 43).

This poem shows the current prototypical image about the Viking warriors–: brutal creatures, bloodthirsty and full of rage that killed everyone who crossed their paths. Including all the soldiers in this definition is a mistake, because *Berserkérs* used to be a reduced group within the Viking society. They were not supported by ordinary people; in fact, they scorned *Berserkérs* since they were problematic for keeping a peaceful cohabitation inside the communities. They attacked people for no reason, raped women and stole properties and goods from the nearby settlements. Nevertheless, they were useful to terrify the enemy in war times:

> […] his men rushed forwards without armour, were as mad as dogs or wolves, bit their shields, and were strong as bears or wild oxen, and killed people at a blow, but neither fire nor iron told upon them (Sturluson, Laing, and Anderson 2015: 276).

Since the image of *Berserkérs* is very striking, modern media has used it in order to sell a clichéd view of the Vikings and people seem to like it. So, this is another of the main causes of that prototypical view that defines the Vikings as savage and uncivilized people. For instance, in *A Viking Saga, the Darkest Days* (2013), all the Viking warriors that appear seem to be overwhelming, very violent and destructive. Moreover, they do not care at all about killing other people, even children. This image should be restricted to the *Berserkérs* and it should not englobe the whole army. However, the reckless and brave warriors tend to be catchier for the public, creating a clichéd and mistaken view of this part of the Viking culture.

The archeological remains and the documented sources such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* show the reality about the Viking common warriors. In fact, they used to protect themselves in battle with several levels of armor, especially they covered their chests and heads. They tended to wear harden leather vests and/or an outer leather coat, which allowed them flexibility in battle and at the same time it kept them warm. In their

heads, they usually wore helmets made of leather or some metal, or both. The helmets were normally rounded (cone-shaped), and had no horns, as popular culture makes believe. In fact, horns would have bothered the warrior since they are uncomfortable and useless (Hall 2008: 68). This vision was popularized by Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung* (c. 1848 – 1874) in which Vikings were represented wearing horned helmets – mainly as an ornamental element. This mistaken characteristic was taken as a historic reality and people began to identify Vikings with the horned helmets, which has continued mostly to our days. For instance, in children's cartoons series like *Vicky the Viking* (1975) or in the animation movie *How to Train your Dragon* (2010) the protagonists appear wearing those helmets. This characteristic may have the intention of creating a picture of Viking people that could be easily identified by young children. Maybe if the characters do not wear horned helmets, children will not identify them as Vikings. Popular culture, then, has marked this stereotype and it continues spreading through the youngest generations.

Another popular clichéd image is that the weapon most used by the Vikings was the axe. But again, the archeological remains and other historical sources such as the *Bayeux Tapestry*[16] show the reality of the acts: to perform their attacks, Vikings used several weapons such as seax[17], knives and spears. Although, it is true that the most powerful weapons were the axes and the swords, their use depended on the demanding course of the battle. Besides, in defensive tasks, they relied on their famous round-shaped shields. The shields were probably the most important tool in war, since they used them not only for defense, but also for strategy. They were made of wood and metal, with a handle in the interior part, a circular umbo in the exterior and their shape was about one meter of diameter (Hall 2008: 68). The rounded shields also have an important part in the popular culture that surrounds the Viking topic. They are very characteristic of this culture, and current people normally immediately recognize and relate them with the Viking culture. As a matter of fact, it is very hard to find modern media material related to this topic that do not include these round-shaped shields as an identity icon.

[16] Seventy-meter embroider cloth which narrates the events of the Norman conquest in England through more than fifty scenes. It was probably created after the conquest –in the eleventh century– by Queen Matilda, who was the wife of William the Conqueror.

[17] It is a kind of dagger typical of the Saxon people mostly used during the Early Middle Ages.

It is remarkable that some of the filmmakers and producers are actually concerned with the accuracy of the historical facts. For instance, the TV series *Vikings* (2013) is based on the legendary king Ragnar Lodbrok[18] and his descendants. Here, the plot focuses on their adventures as Viking raiders and conquerors. Although some of the events of the series still present some inaccuracies –such as the timeline or some aspects related to society and characters; it is very noticeable the intention of making an accurate product from the historical point of view. *Vikings* (2013) shows a detailed picture of the Vikings' life. For instance, several chapters show their troubles with the language, the struggle to understand each other during the meetings with Anglo-Saxon people. In addition, their clothing and tools are very accurate to those described by experts. Hall describes a spread use of leather, linen and wool in the production of clothes; and the manufacture of tools such as cups, combs, weapons, etc. using materials such as iron, wood, bones, tin… (Hall 2008: 14). The series perfectly portrays these details. Another example is the importance of the development of the navigation techniques and boats. The series focuses on this, especially at the beginning, when they show a boat-builder explaining some of these techniques. Also, the setting in the Norwegian fiords and later in the English coasts, together with faithful representations of the community farms and the social hierarchy are very close to the image that chronicles depict. This high accuracy within a cinematographic production is an issue that has not been considered before, just in the documentary field. But from the last decades, TV series such as *Vikings* (2013), *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* (2010), *The Tudors* (2007) or *Rome* (2005) have appeared portraying historically documented images about different periods of history. Both cinema and TV series have a huge repercussion in modern society, and as it was said before, many people take them as true. Sometimes, audiences are interested in how a specific period of history was. Then, it is very important that productions have a degree of veracity in order to allow people to correctly learn from them. So, the creation of these productions allowed to reach a wider public, since the TV series and cinema are more popular among people than documentaries. As a consequence of this, the public has started to feel more curious about history and they will be able to break with the established clichés.

[18] Semi legendary Viking king that reigned during the ninth century over the territories of Sweden and Denmark.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Keeping in mind the previous analysis, several conclusions about the present topic can be established. First of all, it is a fact that the scarcity of documentation and the limited sources are one of the main problems when it comes to research about historical events. In this case, the information that we have about the Viking Age is not as accurate as we would like it to be. As it has been mentioned above, in the case of Vikings some documents were distorted by religious issues, such as the Christian point of view; so these documents are not fully reliable since the authors wanted to show an image far from the reality in order to achieve their own goals. Nevertheless, the archeological remains and the experts' exhaustive researches have allowed a better understanding of the period. So, now we can reach a closer view of the Viking culture and value the great impact that their raids and later settlements supposed for the English society from those days.

Secondly, another important issue is the popularity that the Viking culture has had throughout history. From the Medieval times to nowadays, passing through the Viking fanaticism of the Romantic period and its influence in both World Wars, people had always been interested in one way or another in the Viking culture. This fact conditioned the apparition of many clichés and their evolution as time passed. Thanks to the cinematographic productions, those current clichés are now easily recognizable so they can be brought into question. The risk is that people might take the fictionalized events and representations for truthful history thus making the boundaries between fiction and history disappear. But, as it has been seen in this dissertation, many of the inaccurate prototypes about the Viking society can be exposed by taking a deep look into the documentation about that period. Nevertheless, from in last few years, a new tendency seems to have been blooming, as many filmmakers have become more concerned with the historical accuracy and they are creating multimedia materials that are closer to what historical and documentary evidence show. The purpose behind this new trend seems to be to get a more faithful experience when watching historical productions and to refute or confirm those clichés that exist from many years ago. I consider so important the task of these filmmakers together with the researcher's work, so in a few years people may enjoy a fully reliable historical movie or TV series where the plot would present completely true events and people could learn from them avoiding mistaken or clichéd images.

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