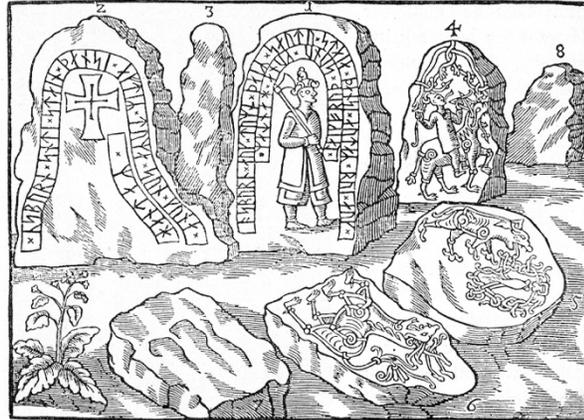


History 388
The Viking Middle Ages
Autumn term 2021
Planetary Hall 120
MW 12-1:15

Sam Collins
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Horizon Hall 3108
Office hours: MW 1:30-3 and by
appointment; virtual appointments on
zoom also available



Description

The Viking Age — roughly AD750 to 1050 — saw an unprecedented expansion of the Scandinavian peoples into the wider medieval world. As traders and raiders, explorers, colonists, and conquerors, they ranged from eastern North America to the Asian steppe, from Dublin to Baghdad, among (and against) Byzantines and Carolingians, Northumbrians and Umayyads, from the wind-swept Shetlands to the sun-washed streets of Seville. Viking activity in all these contexts and locations shaped and transformed (and sometimes swept away) key features of the political and religious landscape of much of early medieval Europe. Our task in this class is to set all this Viking activity in context and evaluate how we place the Viking Age in the wider history of the Middle Ages. Through a close reading of primary sources, we will take on a range of key topics in Viking studies to include: the Old Norse poetic and saga traditions and their difficulties as sources for the period, pre-Christian religion and Christianization, Viking Age archaeology, patterns of Viking raiding and settlement, the Volga Vikings, Vikings in North America, and the different ways the memory and idea of the Vikings have been used and misused in subsequent popular culture.

Course Goals

The course has three primary goals related to its content, its methodology, and its approach to how the past is used for present purposes. In terms of content, the class aims to introduce students to the full spectrum of the Viking experience, ranging from Scandinavia to Russia to Constantinople to the British Isles to Iceland to North America, and covering the entirety of the Viking Age chronologically, roughly from the eighth century to the thirteenth. We will explore a wide range of sources available to understand the Vikings, including their own literature and poetry, contemporary written sources composed by outsiders like the Arabs or Franks, archaeological remains and art, and new scientific techniques to analyze bones, DNA, and climate. The class will thus train students in many of the key disciplines of the humanities, particularly literature, history, and archaeology, and discuss and demonstrate the advantages of interdisciplinary research. Finally, the class will take on board how to unlearn some popular notions about the Viking Age and consider how to recognize and contest misuse of the past, which has been a frequent issue in modern attempts to appropriate Viking history.

Required books

Angus Somerville and R. Andrew Macdonald, *The Viking Age: A Reader* (Third Edition, Toronto UP, 2019) 9781487570477

The Elder Edda: A Book of Viking Lore, trans. Andy Orchard (Penguin, 2011) 978-0140435856

William Fitzhugh and Elisabeth Ward (edd.), *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga* (Smithsonian, 2000) 978-1560989950

Recommended books

I'm often asked what books I recommend for newcomers to Viking Age material, and it's not an easy question. My first suggestion is already on the syllabus: *The Elder Edda*; if one reads no other work of the period it has to be the *Elder Edda*. Beyond those cryptic stories from the Codex Regius, I recommend the following as all excellent places to begin:

Neil Price, *Children of Ash and Elm: A History of the Vikings* (Basic Books, 2020); a recent one-volume history from one of the most important scholars of the period.

The Viking Age, edd. Brink and Price (Routledge, 2008); this book, essays on key topics by many important scholars, represents a snapshot of the state of Viking studies at the date of publication. The field moves on apace of course, and while the volume is no longer quite state of the art, it puts you awfully close.

Neil Gaiman, *Norse Mythology* (Norton, 2017). *The Observer* gets it: "It's virtually impossible to read more than 10 words by Neil Gaiman and not wish he would tell you the rest of the story." Purists will grumble at Gaiman for producing a retelling rather than, I guess, a translation of Snorri's *Edda* or suchlike. The rest of us can thank him for laying down the main narrative lines of an often-difficult mythic corpus with real flair, and from which we can all learn, with maximum pleasure, to keep our Ratatosks straight from our Ragnaröks.

Frans Gunnar Bengtsson, *The Long Ships* (NYRB Classics, 2010). Originally published in Swedish in the 1940s, this is the Viking novel to end all Viking novels. A supremely enjoyable read. Again, as above, the purists will be boring about points of detail, but they're just being tedious and jealous. This is historical fiction at its delightful best. Turn off the Netflix show, yes that one, settle into some Bengtsson, and you'll have all the Viking Age anyone ever needed.



Safe return to campus for Fall 2021

GMU's safe return to campus statement: "All students taking courses with a face-to-face component are required to have completed Safe Return to Campus Training prior to visiting

campus. Training is available in Blackboard (<https://mymason.gmu.edu>). Students are required to follow the university's public health and safety precautions and procedures outlined on the university Safe Return to Campus webpage (www2.gmu.edu/safe-return-plan). Similarly, all students in face to face and hybrid courses must also complete the Mason COVID Health Check daily, seven days a week. The COVID Health Check system uses a color code system and students will receive either a Green, Yellow, or Red email response. Only students who receive a "green" notification are permitted to attend courses with a face-to-face component. If you suspect that you are sick or have been directed to self-isolate, please quarantine or get testing. Faculty are allowed to ask you to show them that you have received a Green email and are thereby permitted to be in class."

Important dates

Fall 2021 Academic Calendar for full details: https://registrar.gmu.edu/calendars/fall_2021/

Last day to add: 8/30

Last day to drop with 100% tuition refund: 9/7

Last day to drop with 50% tuition refund: 9/14

Unrestricted withdrawal period: 9/15-9/27

Selective withdrawal period: 9/28-10/27

Academic Integrity

It is expected that students adhere to the George Mason University Honor Code as it relates to integrity regarding coursework and grades. The Honor Code reads as follows: "To promote a stronger sense of mutual responsibility, respect, trust, and fairness among all members of the George Mason University community and with the desire for greater academic and personal achievement, we, the student members of the University Community have set forth this: Student members of the George Mason University community pledge not to cheat, plagiarize, steal and/or lie in matters related to academic work." More information about the Honor Code, including definitions of cheating, lying, and plagiarism, can be found at the Office of Academic Integrity website at <http://oai.gmu.edu>.

Email

Please ensure that you have access to your GMU email account. In order to conform with privacy laws, please only use your GMU email account in writing to me. Students must use their GMU email accounts to receive important University information, including communications related to this class. I will not respond to messages sent from or send messages to a non-Mason email address.

Blackboard

For better or for worse, activities and assignments in this course will regularly use the Blackboard, available at <https://mymason.gmu.edu>. Students are required to have regular, reliable access to a computer with an updated operating system (recommended: Windows 10 or Mac OSX 10.13 or higher) and a stable broadband internet connection. Please use blackboard to monitor for important announcements about this class as well as for details about our weekly assignments and graded work.

Students with disabilities

Disability Services at George Mason University is committed to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students by upholding the laws that ensure equal treatment of people with disabilities. If you are seeking accommodations for this class, please first visit

<http://ds.gmu.edu/>

for detailed information about the Disability Services registration process. Then please discuss your approved accommodations with me. Disability Services is located in Student Union Building I (SUB I), Suite 2500; ods@gmu.edu; (703) 993-2474.

Student services

I want to remind you that George Mason University has put in place several academic support services and other resources to facilitate student success. You have already paid for these: they are your tuition dollars at work. Take full advantage of them.

The Writing Center: <http://writingcenter.gmu.edu>

Office of Compliance, Diversity and Ethics: <http://diversity.gmu.edu/diversity>

Counseling and Psychological Services: <http://caps.gmu.edu>

University Career Service: <http://careers.gmu.edu>

Minor in Medieval Studies

GMU has a brand-new minor in Medieval Studies for Fall 2021. From the catalog: “The field of Medieval Studies covers the period c. 400-1600, and thus encompasses such cultural touchstones as the survival of the eastern Roman empire in Byzantium, the establishment of the Tang dynasty in China, the spread of Islam in the Middle East, the diffusion of Scandinavian peoples across Europe and western Asia, the



growth of the papacy’s political power in Europe, the rise of the Mongol influence in Asia and Europe, and the development of the Mali empire in west Africa—just to name a few. The Middle Ages has had a powerful, long-lasting effect on cultures worldwide. A medieval studies curriculum enables students to discover just how much of our modern world can be traced back to the Middle Ages. The Minor Program in Medieval Studies has been designed as an interdisciplinary minor, to reflect the inherently interdisciplinary nature of the field of Medieval Studies and to best prepare students to develop a complex understanding of the period.”

18 credits in medieval coursework (this class absolutely included) across several departments: History, Art History, English, Modern & Classical Languages

For more information:

<https://historyarthistory.gmu.edu/programs/LA-MINOR-HIST-MEST>

Assignments and grading

Participation in discussion: 10 points

Hypothesis assignments: 2 points each (max: 20)

Midterm exam: 25 points

Map project: 20 points

Final exam OR Group Project: 25 points

Grade scale

The following conversion of point scores to university letter grades will be used:

A = 93-100 A- = 90-92 B+ = 87-89

B = 83-86 B- = 80-82 C+ = 77-79

C = 73-76 C- = 70-72 D = 60-69

F = all grades 59 and lower

Participation in discussion

All aspects of Viking history are open to debate, and no set of conclusions is uncontroversial. In this spirit, in all meetings of the class we will explore possibilities and limitations for the sources under consideration through discussion of them. In order to take part, you need to be there with the reading in hand and complete. This portion of your grade is based on showing up prepared for discussions, completing in-class assignments, actively and productively contributing to class discussion, and behaving attentively and appropriately.

Hypothesis assignments

Hypothes.is is a tool incorporated into Mason's instance of Blackboard that allows students to annotate pdf documents and websites. We will use Hypothesis to annotate key primary sources. These annotation exercises are informal writing assignments designed to hone your reading and interpretation of individual primary sources. Twelve are assigned, but I will give full credit to students who complete ten or more. The Hypothesis assignments serve as the necessary building blocks for both exams as well as the Map project. Full details on blackboard.

Midterm and final exams

These are traditional in-class written exams. Through a combination of short answer and essay questions you will demonstrate your command of the material.

Group Project: You may choose this INSTEAD of the final exam. Small groups of 2-3 students will make group presentations of roughly 15 minutes in front of all the others who have chosen this option. Topics for the Group Project must be approved by me no later than November 1. Full details on blackboard.

Map project

All students will create a map of an aspect of the Viking Age chosen in consultation with me. On this map you will plot five significant places that relate to your chosen theme and defend your choices. Full details on blackboard.

The Mason Diversity Statement

This course adheres in all respects to the Mason Diversity Statement: “George Mason University promotes a living and learning environment for outstanding growth and productivity among its students, faculty and staff. Through its curriculum, programs, policies, procedures, services and resources, Mason strives to maintain a quality environment for work, study and personal growth. An emphasis upon diversity and inclusion throughout the campus community is essential to achieve these goals. Diversity is broadly defined to include such characteristics as, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, disability, and sexual orientation. Diversity also entails different viewpoints, philosophies, and perspectives. Attention to these aspects of diversity will help promote a culture of inclusion and belonging, and an environment where diverse opinions, backgrounds and practices have the opportunity to be voiced, heard and respected. The reflection of Mason’s commitment to diversity and inclusion goes beyond policies and procedures to focus on behavior at the individual, group and organizational level. The implementation of this commitment to diversity and inclusion is found in all settings, including individual work units and groups, student organizations and groups, and classroom settings; it is also found with the delivery of services and activities, including, but not limited to, curriculum, teaching, events, advising, research, service, and community outreach. Acknowledging that the attainment of diversity and inclusion are dynamic and continuous processes, and that the larger societal setting has an evolving socio-cultural understanding of diversity and inclusion, Mason seeks to continuously improve its environment. To this end, the University promotes continuous monitoring and self-assessment regarding diversity. The aim is to incorporate diversity and inclusion within the philosophies and actions of the individual, group and organization, and to make improvements as needed.”

