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*Published in:*  
Mil Anos da Incursao

*Publication date:*  
2018

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*Citation for published version (APA):*

Brink, S. (2018). Viking Scandinavians back home and abroad in Europe : and the special case of Björn and Hásteinn. In M. J. Barroca, & A. Coelho Ferreira da Silva (Eds.), *Mil Anos da Incursao: Normanda ao Castelo de Vermoim* (pp. 13-26). CITCEM – Centro de Investigação Transdisciplinar Cultura, Espaço e Memória. <https://ler.letras.up.pt/site/default.aspx?qry=id024id1632&sum=sim>

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# MIL ANOS DA INCURSÃO NORMANDA AO CASTELO DE VERMOIM

COORD.

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CITCEM

CENTRO DE INVESTIGAÇÃO TRANSDISCIPLINAR  
CULTURA, ESPAÇO E MEMÓRIA

Título: *Mil Anos da Incursão Normanda ao Castelo de Vermoim*

Coordenação: Mário Jorge Barroca, Armando Coelho Ferreira da Silva

Design gráfico: Helena Lobo | [www.hldesign.pt](http://www.hldesign.pt)

Imagem da capa: “Tapisserie de Bayeux – XIème siècle”. Avec autorisations spéciale de la Ville de Bayeux.

Edição: CITCEM – Centro de Investigação Transdisciplinar Cultura, Espaço e Memória

Via Panorâmica, s/n | 4150-564 Porto | [www.citcem.org](http://www.citcem.org) | [citcem@letras.up.pt](mailto:citcem@letras.up.pt)

ISBN: 978-989-8351-97-5

Depósito Legal: 450318/18

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21747/9789898351975/mil>

Porto, dezembro de 2018

Paginação, impressão e acabamento: Sersilito-Empresa Gráfica, Lda. | [www.sersilito.pt](http://www.sersilito.pt)

Trabalho cofinanciado pelo Fundo Europeu de Desenvolvimento Regional (FEDER) através do COMPETE 2020 – Programa Operacional Competitividade e Internacionalização (POCI) e por fundos nacionais através da FCT, no âmbito do projeto POCI-01-0145-FEDER-007460.

# VIKING SCANDINAVIANS BACK HOME AND ABROAD IN EUROPE: AND THE SPECIAL CASE OF BJÖRN AND HÁSTEINN

STEFAN BRINK

The for European early history so famous (or notorious with a bad reputation) vikings start to make a presence of themselves around ad 800 in the written sources, i.e. the Frankish, Anglo-Saxon and Irish annals and chronicles. Today we know that the raiding and trading by these Scandinavians started much earlier. The way this kind of external appropriation was conducted by the vikings was — if we simplify — that if they could get hold of wealth and silver for free, they took it (robbed, stole and if necessary killed off the people), if they met overwhelming resistance, they traded. The precious commodity the raiding and trading vikings was looking for was silver, and the way they achieved this was mainly by taking part in a slave trade on a large scale.

The viking culture and society in Scandinavia was linked to the emergence of proto-towns (*emporía*), such as Ribe, Hedeby, Kaupang, Birka etc., and they can be dated to as early as around AD. 700<sup>1</sup>. This has of course to do with the *trading* aspects of the vikings. As for the *raiding* culture of the vikings, a fairly recent discovery of two burials on the island of Saaremaa in today's Estonia in the Baltic has revealed two buried ships into which have been thrown down 34 respectively 7 men, obviously heavily armed warriors, many with serious weapon trauma noticeable on the skeletons<sup>2</sup>. Thanks to the archaeological and osteological analyses and by analysing isotopes it has been concluded that these men originate from central Sweden, possible to be

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<sup>1</sup> FEVEILE, 2008; HILBERG, 2008; AMBROSIANI, 2008; SKRE, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> PEETS, 2013.

narrowed down to the area around Uppsala in the province of Uppland. This is hence to be identified as an unsuccessful ‘viking’ raiding party. However, the <sup>14</sup>C analyses from the excavation give us a dating to *c.* AD. 750, hence well before the traditional start of the Viking Age. The new knowledge gain from Archaeology forces us to see the start of the viking expansion to at least one hundred years or so earlier, something that has been argued for before<sup>3</sup>.

The new picture that emerges is that we perceive the period *c.* AD. 550–1050 as culturally and societally fairly homogeneous. In Sweden, we have archaeologically divided these centuries into two periods, the Vendel Period (*c.* AD. 550–800) and the Viking Age (*c.* AD. 800–1050), where the former can be understood as a preamble to what is then coming, the viking period. (The Vendel Period is in Danish archaeological tradition called Later Germanic Iron Age, *yngre germansk jernalder*, and in Norwegian archaeological tradition The Merovingian Age, *merovingertid*). After the fall of Rome and the following turbulence in Europe during the Migration Period<sup>4</sup>, a new kind of society is emerging in Scandinavia. New central places seem to emerge dispersed in the landscape, and a new power structure seems visible. If the assumed tribal society during the Roman Period and the Migration Period continues into this second half of the first millennium, this probably has a new dimension to it. From archaeology and toponymy we can intimate new social classes emerging, a differentiation of society, with a new kind of kings and chieftains, with a new warrior ‘aristocracy’, with retinues and specialised craftsmen and so on<sup>5</sup>. The emergence of a new ruling class was observed already by Patrick Wormald<sup>6</sup>:

*The Viking Age saw Scandinavian kingship grow from Volkskönigtum [tribal kingship] to Heerkönigtum [military kingship], as that of other Germanic peoples had earlier, and this growth was both cause and effect of Viking activity.*

And today we, hence, are starting to see this emergence of a new ruling class already taking place in the pre-viking period. The power base in this early period is obviously still a personal one, not based on territorial supremacy. Power was intimately linked to personal abilities, and power was conducted only where the king/chieftain and his retinue were present. It is possible to identify the centres for these chieftains and kings with the help of archaeology and place names. The central places, with names on *-tuna*, *-sal* etc., with, in some cases, identified hall buildings and with

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<sup>3</sup> MYHRE, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> For anyone interested in this turbulent period of European history, I can refer to the important collaborative project, *Transformation of the Roman world*, and the volumes produced in this project (<http://www.brill.com/publications/transformation-roman-world>).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. for example BRINK, 1999; LJUNGKVIST, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> WORMALD, 1982: 147.

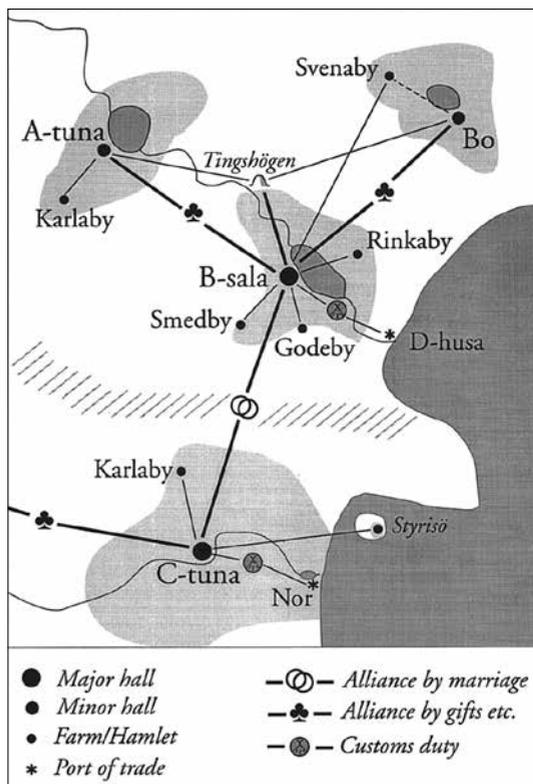


Fig. 1. A model of the Vendel Period/Early Viking Age society in Scandinavia, regarding power centres. From BRINK, 1999: 434.

often extraordinary archaeological finds and rich burials, are spread out in the landscape. According to poems such as *Beowulf*, this society was a warrior society with a kind of endemic warfare, trying to control these halls. The picture that emerges is of a society where power constantly was shifting according to the personal abilities of the chieftains and kings of making allies and building up a power base (see Fig. 1).

To build up such a power base in this early period you had to have three assets: a reputation (of a strong leader), allies (which you could rely upon) and richness (with which you could 'buy' allies). To claim a kingship, you most certainly had to come from a royal family, and we must reckon with several such families in society. There were hence many potential candidates for claiming to be a king (*konungsefni*), and there could also be several kings, not only one, in a realm. The way a young *konungsefni* prepared himself with the prospect of being a king, you had to gain wealth and reputation. Wealth you could inherit, but fame and reputation as an able and strong leader you had to prove yourself in battle as a warrior. Therefore, we find many young Scandinavians in this period going abroad and taking up a role as a mercenary in some king's army in Anglo-Saxon England, in Ireland or on the Continent. By doing so — and survive! — you were compensated handsomely and

gained reputation and fame. After such a turn to the south or west you could go back home, tie up allies by presenting them with extraordinary gifts, such as a Frankish sword, or silver or exclusive jewellery, and then claim to be accepted as a king. This was, for example, the way two of the more famous kings in the Viking Age came to power, the Norwegian kings Óláfr Tryggvason (r. 995–1000) and Óláfr Haraldsson (r. 1015–28)<sup>7</sup>.

The societal base for Scandinavian life during this period was the farm. All vikings were farmers. The first proto-towns seem to have been seasonally inhabited, and tradesmen that exclusively traded must have been extremely few. The seasonal cycle during the Viking Age seems to have been that many men left home with their ships, raiding and trading during the summer season. In a slightly later phase, we know that viking armies and war band wintered at winter camps in England and in Francia. When the man was away from the farm, the wife took responsibility of running it. At a farm for a well-to-do farmer, there were the close family, man, wife and children, with elderly and close relatives, farmhands and maids, and unfree thralls. We don't know how many thralls there were, hence what proportion the slaves made of the total population. There have been many guesses, 10, 25 or 40 percent of the total viking population in Scandinavia. The bottom line is that we don't know and it is impossible to even get a qualified guess. What we can say is that many farmers must have had thralls at their farms. We also start to intimate a regional difference, in so far as southern Scandinavia seem to have had a larger slave-population than further north. This has been suggested by Mats Roslund, after analysing pottery in different societal contexts<sup>8</sup>. It is also possible that this difference indicates that in southern Scandinavia we had large 'manorial estates'<sup>9</sup>, run by slave labour, whereas further north in Scandinavia, these did not exist and instead the family farm was the normal unit<sup>10</sup>.

Until the 10th century the viking Scandinavians had a 'religion' which they themselves called *forn siðr* (old custom)<sup>11</sup>. This is a very apt definition of that kind of 'religion', which was embedded into everyday life for people; you were confronted with higher and lower deities from the moment when you woke up in the morning until you went to bed. There were different kind of deities and supernaturals on the farm, on the land, living in rocks and trees and so on, and you had to relate to them and keep them happy or protect people, farm, crop and cattle from the malicious ones<sup>12</sup>. Then there were the gods and the goddesses, which had different functions:

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<sup>7</sup> BAGGE, 2006; RUMAR *ed.*, 1997; RØTE, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> ROSLUND, 2007; ROSLUND, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. TOLLIN, 1999; MYRDAL & TOLLIN, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> For an overview and discussion of thralls and slavery in viking Scandinavia, see BRINK, 2008 and 2012.

<sup>11</sup> HULTGÅRD, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> RAUDVERE, 2008.

*Pórr*, the god of thunder and lightning, and of war; *Óðinn*, the mighty one, god of kings and chieftains, the wise one who also gave to people the runes, and to his hall, *Valhöll*, you went to as a fallen warrior; *Freyr*, the god of fertility and prosperity, and the goddess *Freyja*, with the same functions and so on<sup>13</sup>. Around these gods and goddesses there were many myths which create the Old Norse mythology<sup>14</sup>, which we can read about in a unique collection of mythological and heroic poems, the so called *Poetic Edda*. In the most famous one, *Völuspá* (the seeress' prophecy), we get an insight into the cosmogony, cosmology and eschatology of this mythology<sup>15</sup>.

This 'religion' was thus not an intellectual one, but instead a *siðr*, a custom. The two fundamental ways you conducted and took part in this custom were with *rituals* and *cult*<sup>16</sup>. We learn about sacrificial meals (*blót*), of worshipping ancestors, of offerings of animals (and perhaps also humans) to gods at special cult sites, and so on. Still today we have place names in the Scandinavian landscape reminding of these pagan cult sites, with names including the words *vi*, *væ*, *vé*, *hof*, *hörg*, *harg*, *lund*, etc., which all can be shown having a meaning of 'pagan cult site'<sup>17</sup>.

As was intimated above, I would like to, regarding Scandinavia, divide the second half of the first millennium into three phases or periods (with 'blurred' ambits):

The first one (c. 550–700) takes place in proper Scandinavia, with the emergence of the new kind of 'aristocracy' and leadership and the changes in the societal structure. We can see this new society in the form of emerging central places during the Vendel Period, with a distinct burial custom in the form of rich chamber and ship burials. The archaeological period called the Vendel Period takes its name from a small parish in central Uppland, Sweden, where some unique and rich boat burials, dated to around AD. 700, were discovered and excavated at the end of the nineteenth century<sup>18</sup>. In the boats (7-9 m long) were buried together with the dead weaponry, glass, and jewellery, and outside of the boats horses and dogs were thrown down. The most famous objects from these burials are the Vendel helmet, which resembles in an astonishing way a helmet found in a princely boat burial in Sutton Hoo, Norfolk, England, to be dated to the same time as the Vendel helmet. Famous are also the small bronze sheet metal plates from Vendel helmets (Fig. 2), with scenes from the Old Norse mythology. Later similar rich furnished boat graves from the Vendel Period were found at i.a. Valsgärde outside the city of Uppsala, Sweden<sup>19</sup> (Fig. 3). Many of these boat burials have been excavated and dated to c. AD. 600-1000. The finds in these boats are extraordinary,

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<sup>13</sup> SCHJØDT, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> CLUNIES ROSS, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> GUNNELL & LASSEN eds., 2013.

<sup>16</sup> PRICE, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> BRINK, 1999; VIKSTRAND, 2001.

<sup>18</sup> SEILER, 2001.

<sup>19</sup> GRÄSLUND & LJUNGKVIST, 2011.



Fig. 2.  
A bronze metal sheet from a Vendel helmet perhaps depicting the god Óðinn sitting on his horse Sleipnir and with his two ravens Huginn and Muninn.



Fig. 3.  
One of the helmets from Valsgärde boat graves.  
Fonte: Wiki Commons.

with weapons, exclusive garments, cooking utensils, horses and dogs, birds of prey etc., placed in the boat together with the dead to obviously accompany him to and to be used in the next world. What we see in these burials is an accumulation of wealth and an emergence of a princely warrior class, displayed in these luxury burials. It is these princely families of this warrior class, which are the predecessors of kings and chieftains we meet in the Viking Age. From the iconography and the intended purpose of the buried objects, we understand that the Viking Age ‘religion’ and its mythology were in existence already in this period, and we also understand that the warrior mentality, which is defining the Viking Age<sup>20</sup>, originated in the Vendel Period.

The second phase (c. 700-950) is when the Scandinavians start to go abroad *en masse*, with raiding and trading to the east and west, swarming around and colonizing in the North Atlantic, raiding in England and Ireland, raiding in western Europe all down to the Iberian Peninsula (which shall be expanded upon below), raiding and trading to the east, in Russia and the Baltics. The aim with these raids and trading was obviously to get hold of richness in the form of silver, which could be brought back to Scandinavia to build up a power base, and the means of getting hold of this silver

<sup>20</sup> PRICE, 2002.

was — we believe today — primarily to engage in the slave trade. It is my belief that obtaining and selling slaves were the main commodity Viking Scandinavians were engaged with in their trading and raiding during this period<sup>21</sup>. This engagement with the polities and kingdoms in the British Isles and on the Continent together with the accumulation of wealth by Scandinavian chieftains and kings, led to the first attempts to establish larger (potentially also territorial) kingdoms in Scandinavia, something we can see takes place in Denmark in the ninth century and in Norway around c. 900. It is also during this period that a colonization takes place in Iceland, Greenland and the Faroes, and the establishment of a Scandinavian controlled Danelaw in central England, and the emergence of the first proto-towns in Ribe, Hedeby and Birka.

It is in this period when we are told in the annals and chronicles of viking war band and small armies raiding and devastating England and Francia. In British historiography, this phase is called the First Viking Age. In 865 what is called *The Great Heathen Army*, led by the brothers Ivar the Boneless, Halfdan and Ubba, sons of the legendary king Ragnar Lodbrok, and Guthrum, who was to become a Danish king in the Danelaw, landed in East Anglia and made their way up to Northumbria, captured York, and established the viking community of Jorvik. They took tributes, by i.a. Mercia, and had several battles in several kingdoms along their travels<sup>22</sup>. These kinds of raidings by war band and small armies are defining this phase, and we meet that also in Francia, which was frequently harassed in the ninth century, which finally led to the Frankish king Charles the Simple to ask one of the leaders of a notorious war band, Rollo (*Hrólfr*), to settle in northeast of Francia and gave him the title of Duke of Normandy, as a protection from other viking war bands<sup>23</sup>.

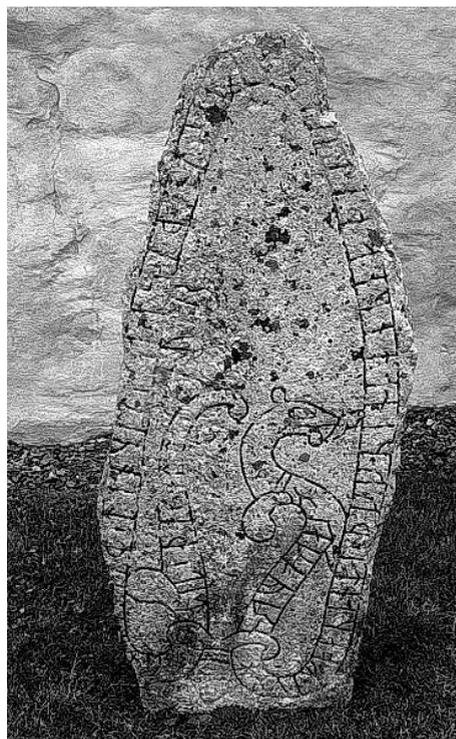
In the third phase (c. 950-1100) we enter a period where Viking Scandinavia adopts the kind of society and power structure Scandinavians have met on the Continent and on the British Isles. The old religion is slowly dismantled and replaced by the Christian religion. The first proto-towns are in most cases abandoned and new towns emerge. Territorialized ‘state’-like kingdoms emerge: Norway, Denmark and Sweden<sup>24</sup>. The small-scale raiding of war bands is replaced by larger viking armies, often organised by royal leaders, and this is the background for in British historiography calling this phase The Second Viking Age. This is the period when the Anglo-Saxons are paying huge tributes to the vikings, called *Danageld*, for leaving them alone and to go home. This episode is mentioned on one famous runestone from Yttergårde (U 334), Orkesta, in the province of Uppland, Sweden, where we are told (fig. 4): *in ulfr hafir o onklati þru kialt takat þit uas fursta þis tusti ka-t þ(a)*

<sup>21</sup> BRINK, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> SAWYER, 1962; DOWNHAM, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> RENAUD, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> BEREND *ed.*, 2007; KRAG, 2008; ROESDAHL, 2008; LINDKVIST, 2008.



**Fig. 4.**

The Runestone from Yttergårde in Orkesta, Uppland, Sweden, mentioning how Ulf took part in three raids in England taking tributes (*gæld*).

Fonte: Wiki Commons.

---- (*þ*)urktil þa kalt knutr (And Ulfr has taken three tributes in England. That was the first that Tosti took. Then Þorketill took. Then Knútr took). This Ulf had hence taken part in three raids in England and had shared some of the tribute (*gæld*). The first was under the leadership of Tosti (probably a Skoglar-Tosti around the year 1000), the second under the leadership of Thorkel the High in 1012, and finally a huge tribute that was handed over to the vikings under the leadership of the Danish king Knútr in 1018, the Knútr that later became king of the Anglo-Saxons as well as the Danes, and remembered as Canute the Great.

Slowly the Church is during this phase starting to put its stamp on these societies, implementing its institutions in the form of churches and bishops in bishop towns<sup>25</sup>. We have a steady growth of churches in the eleventh century, mainly built by kings on their royal estates, or 'aristocrats' and well-to-do farmers on their estates and farms. We call this phase the Europeanization of Scandinavia; Scandinavia is adapting the culture and societies of Europe. Around 1050 the old 'Viking' society has terminated, with its seasonally raiding and trading during the summer periods. The old 'fluid' and itinerant society becomes more static. The kings all have a bishop or some

<sup>25</sup> BRINK, 1990; BRINK, 2013; NILSSON *ed.*, 1996.

well-educated clergyman as their close councillor. And in 1103 an Archbishopric is established in Scandinavia, for Scandinavia, in Lund. From then on Scandinavia follows the societal development of the rest of Europe, where the Church becomes the prime force in society.

## THE LEGENDS OF BJÖRN AND HÁSTEINN

One story taking place in Spain, Portugal and in western Mediterranean, which has become legendary, popular and reiterated over the centuries, is the story of the Swedish brothers Björn and Hásteinn, said to be sons of the legendary Swedish (or Danish) king Ragnar Lodbrok (mentioned above), and their misadventure when sacking Rome in Italy. It is occasionally mentioned in Old Norse sagas, but the main information comes from Norman sources, backed up by Arabic sources<sup>26</sup>. In the Frankish and Norman literature Hásteinn is often known as Alstingius or Hastings, and is actually a rather dim figure in history.

According to the legend the events took place in the year 859 and the following years. In that year two brothers, Björn Ironside and Hastings (Hásteinn), sometimes said to be the 'tutor' to Björn, navigated and ravaged along the river Seine in northwest France, and then stayed for winter on the island of Oissel, just north of the city of Rouen. Charles the Bald, not daring to attack the marauding Vikings himself, hired another Viking chieftain, Weland, to attack them and chase them away. Weland was offered 300 pounds of silver, but demanded 5000, plus expenses, which was agreed upon. So the besiege of the island started. The shrewd Björn, however, topped Charles' 6000 pounds in return for safe passage from the island. Hence, instead of ravaging and making himself a nuisance in France, he came up with a bright idea: to conquer Rome. This heroic act would give him a glorious reputation back home, for certain.

Said and done; Björn and his men sailed south from northern France with 62 ships, ravaging the Spanish west (and north?) coast, fighting the Moors on the *Guadalquivir*, or to use its Arabic name, *Wadi al-Kabir* 'the big river', possibly getting as far as Seville. After passing the Strait of Gibraltar they plundered the town of Algeciras in southern Andalusia, and then turned south for the north African coast. Here they plundered, raided and took black slaves. After a short spell in Africa they turned north for Murcia and the Balearic Islands. When finished they set sails to the north and after a long journey during the summer and autumn, they decided to make a winter camp at Camargue, near the mouth of the Rhône river, on the Côte d'Azur. While in Provence they took the opportunity to raid and plunder also

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<sup>26</sup> PRICE, 2008: 465; SIMEK, 2014. The following discussion on Björn and Hásteinn relies heavily on the excellent and exhaustive presentation and discussion of the Continental written sources on this topic by Prof. Rudolf Simek (2014). For more exhaustive bibliographical notes and comments, I refer any interested to Prof. Simek's article.

Arles and Nîmes, and all the way up the Rhône river to Valance, where they met overwhelming resistance, and therefore turned south again.

When spring arrived in 860 they continued the journey, with raiding and plundering along the Côte d'Azur and into Liguria in Italy. According to the legend they then ransacked the town of Luna (Lucca today) in Liguria, just south of La Spezia, assuming it was Rome! Whether this is actually true is a question of discussion, because the Norman sources are rather quiet on this matter. In any way they obviously raided and plundered Pisa later on, and after that felt quite content of what they had achieved and therefore gave up Rome and further conquest.

Finally, according to the legend, the vikings under the leadership of Björn and Hásteinn are once again the next year, 861, involved in fighting with Moorish pirates in the Mediterranean, being able to escape into the Atlantic and on their way back plundering the city of Pamplona in the kingdom of Navarra, before they actually, with only 20 ships remaining, being able to return to the Loire in 862.

The first historical record of this famous journey is to be found in *Annales Bertiniani* (The Annals of St-Bertin), which for the year 859 describes the Björn and Hásteinn journey but omits the sacking of Luna. It is then picked up by several other historians, such as Dudo of Saint-Quentin in his History of the Normans, and is even further elaborated by William of Jumièges in his *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*. Finally, the story is picked up by Benoît de Sainte-Maure in his 12th century chronicle *Chronique des ducs de Normandie*, which seems to have been the foundation for later retelling and rewriting of this legend, also in Old Norse, Scandinavian writings, such as *Ragnars saga lodbrokar* and other sagas and *þættir*.

Hence, this legend found its way into an Icelandic *fornaldarsaga* (Legendary saga), *Ragnars saga lodbrokar*, where the Luna episode is mentioned:

*XIV. Now they held course from there until they came to the town called Lúna. By then they had broken nearly every town and every castle in all the Southern Kingdom, and they were then so famous in all that region that there was no child, however young, that did not know their name. Then they planned not to let up until they had come to Rómaborg, because that town was then both very mighty and full of men, and famous and rich<sup>27</sup>.*

So who was this Ragnar Lodbrok<sup>28</sup>?

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<sup>27</sup> «XIV. Nú halda þeir í brott þaðan, þar til er þeir koma í þá borg, er Lúna hét. Þá höfðu þeir hverja borg ok hvern kastala brotit nálíga í öllu Suðrriki, ok nú eru þeir svá frægir of allan heim, at ekki var svá lítit barn, at eigi kynni nafn þeira. Nú ætla þeir at létta eigi fyrr en þeir koma til Rómaborgar, af því at sú borg var þeim bæði sögð mikil ok fjölmenn ok ágæt ok auðig», *Ragnars saga lóðbrokar ok sona hans*, ed. Valdimir Ásmundarson, chap. 14.

<sup>28</sup> McTURK, 1991.

This legend of these two Scandinavians, Björn and Hásteinn, the sons of the Swedish, sometimes said to be a Danish king, Ragnar Lodbrok, ravaging in southern Europe, where the climax in the story is the mistake of sacking Luna instead of Rome, is testified in both Frankish and Norman contemporary annals and chronicles, and later on in Norman historiography. The story had obviously all the qualities to make it popular with the Norman rulers. Björn and Hásteinn were for them excellent prototypes for Norman dukes with a Scandinavian ancestry. But, as we have seen, the story also found its way into Scandinavia and the Icelandic literature, especially the Legendary sagas.

So what can we make of this? Are we dealing with ‘history’ or a fictitious legend? Well, the Continental contemporary sources force us, what I can see, to reckon with a historical core, around which the annalists, chroniclers and historians have used and expanded upon. That Scandinavian vikings have around 850s been raiding and harassing people in southern Europe is more than probable and an uncontroversial statement. If these vikings were led by two men, Björn and Hásteinn, is probable, but impossible to prove. Who they were, and if they were the sons of the famous Ragnarr lodbrok, is utterly uncertain, and again, impossible to prove.

So we end up, as so often, with a situation, where we can rely upon some historical facts, which have been used by authors, down in Europe as well up in Scandinavia, to fabricate legends and exiting stories, involving brave but merciless vikings.

All in all, the Björn and Hásteinn legend links Portugal, Spain, France and Italy to Scandinavia in a most dramatic way, and the story has been told and retold over centuries in the whole of Europe at the time and the following centuries, and the bold characters of these two vikings, Björn and Hásteinn, so much linked to Normandy in France, was also used as prototypes of the kind of strong, ruthless and victorious leaders the Norman dukes wanted to have as their ancestors.

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