

# THE MASK(S) AND TRANSFORMERS OF HISTORICAL RE-ENACTMENT

## MATERIAL CULTURE AND CONTEMPORARY VIKINGS

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The paper discusses the role of material culture for historical re-enactors of the Viking Age. Three issues are analysed: (a) the clothing and accessories worn by a typical contemporary warrior, craftsman and woman of the Viking times and the range of goods available for purchase at historical re-enactment markets, (b) the active and transformative aspect of material culture for present-day Vikings, (c) the paradox of how mirroring the material past by historical re-enactors is actually a deeply ahistorical category. The main conclusion of this study is that historical re-enactment of the Viking Age is essentially about material culture. The paper is based on observations made during the Viking Week that took place at the Museum of Foteviken (Sweden) on 24–30 June 2013.

*Keywords: material culture, historical re-enactment, archaeological open-air museums, popular culture*

## INTRODUCTION

It may be said that, paradoxically, the greater contemporary man's fascination with the present and the future, the deeper his interest in the past (e.g. Lowenthal 1985:chapter 1, 1996). This process has many aspects. The increasing economic value of cultural tourism is just one ex-

ample. The mysterious Egyptian pyramids, Greek ruins, etc. are visited by millions of people every year (Melotti 2011). Another example, the subject of this paper, is the historical re-enactment milieu that practises its way of life during historical re-enactment events, often at archaeological open-air museums (Goodacre & Baldwin 2002).

The popularity of both archaeological open-air museums and historical re-enactment is a quite recent phenomenon (Rentzhog 2007). Despite the fact that the first open-air museums were already being built in the late 19th century (Magelssen 2007; Paardekooper 2012:chapter 2), it is only really during the last 30 years that they have become popular and can be found in most parts of Europe. According to Paardekooper (2012:23), it is safe to say that nowadays there are almost 300 archaeological open-air museums in Europe alone, and this number is likely to increase in the near future (e.g. Petersson 2003). There are a number of definitions of the archaeological open-air museum. The one applied in this study states that an archaeological open-air museum is:

a non-profit permanent institution with outdoor true to scale architectural reconstructions primarily based on archaeological sources. It holds collections of intangible heritage resources and provides an interpretation of how people lived and acted in the past; this is accomplished according to sound scientific methods for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment of its visitors (Paardekooper 2012:289).

Similarly, the last 30 years have witnessed the development of historical re-enactment into a widespread social and cultural phenomenon (e.g. Agnew 2004, 2007). Historical re-enactment can be understood, in its broadest sense, as: any attempt to recreate a historical event of a specific historical period (Petersson 2010:5). I observed and actively participated in historical re-enactment events in Poland (e.g. Wolin, Biskupin, Kalisz Zawodzie, Gniezno) and Sweden (e.g. Birka, Öland, Trelleborg, Höllviken) in 2012–2013. Instead of discussing all of these places and the events that were held there, I have decided to focus on one case study: the Viking Week at the Museum of Foteviken. As this is quite a popular event among present-day Vikings from many countries it was assumed that the market would serve as a good example from which to approach the complexity of historical re-enactment of the Viking Age.

The Museum of Foteviken (*Fotevikens Museum*) in Höllviken is an archaeological open-air museum that is located in the south-western part of modern-day Sweden (figure 1) (Rosborn 2004, 2005). The museum was founded in 1995 and it is a reconstruction of a Viking town with many different facilities. By 2008, the museum consisted of 23 dif-



Figure 1. Map of the southern part of Sweden with the location of the Foteviken Museum in Höllviken.

ferent reconstructions of buildings from the late Viking Age and Early Middle Ages (Fotevikens Museum 2013a; Paardekooper 2012:189–201).

Since 1995 the museum has organized numerous historical re-enactment events including the Viking Market where, for a few days of the year, historical re-enactors can live as if they were *Vikings*. They wear clothes that are supposed to mirror Viking times, produce material culture as was used during the period and so on. In short, the historical re-enactors of the Viking Age try to bring the lost and dead past to life. These people are very present but at the same time they dream of living in the past. This – let me call it – contradiction is embodied in the term that is used in this paper to refer to them: contemporary Vikings. The Museum of Foteviken invites such people to participate in the diverse events it organizes. A total of 620 historical re-enactors of the Viking Age from 15 countries took part in the gathering I attended on 28–29 June 2013. The fact that 10,000 tourists visited the museum during the

Viking Week is also worth mentioning (Kobińska 2013). The event itself was very similar to other Viking historical re-enactment festivals that I had taken part in before, there were reconstructions of Viking buildings and many white linen tents. These tents had a dual purpose for they were a place to sleep at night and could be converted into a market stall by day.

Entering an archaeological open-air museum is like travelling in time into the distant past. Such time travel is – as Holtorf (2010:33) points out – “an experience and social practice in the present that evokes a past (or future) reality”. The staff of the Museum of Foteviken must be well aware of this new social way of experiencing the past. As one of the information boards in the museum declared: *Start your time travel here! (Starta din tidsvandring här!)*. This explains why contemporary items such as beer cans, mobile phones and so on were rarely visible within the Viking Reserve. Nothing could disturb contemporary man’s journey in time.

I observed and conversed with present-day Vikings from countries such as Sweden, Poland, Denmark, and the UK during the market. Most of the contemporary Vikings were craftsmen, people who came both to sell their products and simply to enjoy the time travel experience. Some of the re-enactors were warriors who had the opportunity to show off their skills during the battle re-enactments prepared by the organisers. Another group of Vikings was made up of those who had come to the Museum of Foteviken to practise their hobby, or as many openly admitted, their way of life. The organizers prepared events for tourists such as fish throwing or archery competitions. During these events the present-day Vikings tried to engage the tourists in time travel (see also Svendsen 2010).

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During the market it was easy to distinguish a historical re-enactor of the Viking Age from a tourist. In short, the historical re-enactors were created and defined *as* historical re-enactors by their peculiar material culture: clothing, weaponry, jewellery, drinking vessels etc. (Kim Sid-dorn 2000). During the first day of the research, one of the re-enactors even explained to me that “it is impossible [for him] to be a true historical re-enactor without all this ‘stuff’” (Mietek 2013; author’s translation). By “stuff”, he meant the material things which he was wearing. Therefore it was not knowledge that was relevant in re-enactment, but things, objects that looked as if they were from the Viking Age. Very similar logic was easily discernible during discussions with other historical re-enactors as well.

The worst thing that a historical re-enactor of the Viking Age can be accused of concerns material culture. It is still acceptable not to know some obscure details of Norse mythology. However, it is a serious problem when someone, and I quote a fragment of a conversation with a contemporary Viking woman from Poland – “confuses things from different historical times” (Ania 2013; author’s translation). This means that the historical re-enactor is in real trouble. So it is insufficient simply to have historical-looking things. According to historical re-enactors, the objects they have must mirror the past material culture as much as possible.

Although objects that appear to be replicas of archaeological finds from the Viking Age (which is usually not true) are an essential aspect of this kind of historical re-enactment, the issue of material culture among historical re-enactors is still poorly understood. If archaeology is the discipline of things (Olsen *et al.* 2012), then an archaeological interpretation of historical re-enactment should hinge upon things produced, used and sold by the re-enactors themselves. So far, though, this has not been a dominant perspective.

The analysis of historical re-enactment usually concerns more general trends; how it reveals something about the contemporary world and society. Such a perspective is predominant e.g. in a book *Historical Re-Enactment: From Realism to the Affective Turn* edited by McCalman and Pickering (2010), which discussed problems such as how re-enactment is an example of the affective turn, the role of realism in re-enactment, or Collingwood’s comprehension of re-enactment, among other things. Similarly, Halewood and Hannam (2001), in their analysis of what they call Viking heritage tourism, bring the discussion down to the authenticity and commodification of the past. The things used by present-day Vikings are somehow of lesser importance. This would be also a weak point in Holtorf’s (e.g. 2010) account of the time travel phenomenon. It is still material culture which is the medium of any time travel into the past, at least for the historical re-enactors themselves (see also Holtorf 2013). Historical re-enactment can also be seen through the lens of Baudrillard (1994) as simulacra (Pawleta 2011:17): as copies that do not refer to any original objects.

During the Viking Market it was possible to come across craftsmen, the majority of whom were male, such as smiths, gold and silversmiths, potters, cobblers or bone carvers, among others, producing different objects. The warriors were also predominantly male. Viking women usually sold clothing or jewellery. The historical re-enactors attempted to mirror different social classes during the event; that is why a craftsman used different objects from, say, a warrior. Of course, the clothing worn



Figure 2. A craftsman during the Viking Market. Photo: Dawid Kobialka.

by the present-day Viking women during the market was very different from that of the men (compare figure 4 below).

A craftsman can be considered a typical contemporary Viking (figure 2). He wore a woollen hat together with a linen hood as well as a long robe and trousers. His shoes were made of leather, as was his belt and the small purse in which he carried contemporary Swedish kronor. Craftsmen did not usually wear expensive silver or glass jewellery.

Contemporary Viking warriors looked quite different from the craftsmen during the event. Figure 3 presents the material culture used by one such warrior: a helmet in the fashion of an archaeological artefact as well as a sword and a wooden shield. Warriors had to wear leather lamellar armour during battles. Their clothes were linen, with leather shoes and a belt, and they also had a small knife and expensive necklaces and bangles made of silver.

Present-day Viking women, on the other hand, invariably wore long dresses (figure 4) and could often be seen with a leather belt, small belt pouch and a knife. Likewise, their shoes were made of leather too. Many women also wore a lot of jewellery. As I discovered from some historical re-enactors from Poland this has, rather ironically, been dubbed the *Christmas tree syndrome*. This describes present-day Viking women wearing all the jewellery they own at once during historical re-enactment



Figure 3. Equipment of a Viking warrior during the Viking Market. Photo: Dawid Kobińska.



Figure 4. A Viking woman during the Viking Market. Photo: Dawid Kobialka.



Figure 5. Material culture produced by a Swedish historical re-enactor. Photo: Dawid Kobialka.



events i.e., two tortoise brooches in bronze are a very typical example. Many contemporary Viking women at the market had precisely two beautiful tortoise brooches (see figure 4). Small silver and amber amulets worn on a leather thong around the neck were common and necklaces with glass beads and silver elements and pendants were also popular.

Historical re-enactment of the Viking Age is not only about bringing to life a lost past or time travel, in this case to Viking times, but equally it may be quite a successful business opportunity in the present (Halewood & Hannam 2001:566). During the Viking Week items produced by present-day Vikings were sold, some to other historical re-enactors but mostly to tourists. Historical re-enactors and tourists were usually interested in a different material culture and for this reason the craftsmen had different products on offer. Historical re-enactors were generally interested in replicas of archaeological finds or objects that only loosely mirror artefacts from the time, for example pottery, jewellery and also any other objects which are necessary in re-enactments of the Viking Age. I observed this aspect first-hand at the historical re-enactment events in Poland and Sweden, including Viking Week at the Museum of Foteviken.

Many tourists also admired the historical-looking artefacts although they rarely bought any. They were far more likely to purchase *kitsch* (see more in Binkley 2000) wooden swords, daggers, shields, bows, axes, crossbows and plastic helmets, among other things (figures 5 & 6). Almost every small child I saw during the event was the proud owner of a piece of vital Viking equipment, the price of which ranged from 40 to 130 Swedish kronor. What was surprising is that these items could be seen for sale on so many craftsmen's stalls. The wooden artefacts proved to be such a hit with the youngsters that parents could not refuse pleas for swords and other such items for their little ones.

Like every archaeologist who is interested in objects (Olsen *et al.* 2012), I was able to distinguish between the different types of artefacts and their places of origin. Figure 5 presents material culture intended for children that was produced by a Swedish craftsman in Sweden. Different types of swords and one type of axe were on sale. On the left of the image there is a type of sword with a half-round pommel, the grip bound with string. Another type, on the far right, had a black grip with a skull crossed by two shin-bones. The axes had a single blade. These types of artefacts were rarely encountered at the market.

Items intended for children which were more common at the market are illustrated in figure 6. These objects were made in Poland and sold by Polish craftsmen during the event. There are easily discernable differences in regard to those crafted by some contemporary Swedish Vikings.



Figure 6. Material culture produced in Poland. Photo: Dawid Kobialka.

On offer were crossbows, daggers, bows, double-blade axes, bows, and shields: types of artefacts which were absent in figure 5. The Polish-made swords were different, with black blades and a simple hilt. There were also obvious differences in the axes: in contrast to those produced by some Swedish Vikings, the ones from Poland had black double-blades.

This assemblage of artefacts was observed across a number of stalls. During an interview, one of the Polish craftsmen said (Adam 2013) that there is a person in Poland with a small workshop who employs seven people to make all of these wooden items. Different Polish craftsmen then try to sell them at various historical re-enactment events in Poland and abroad. This explains why it is possible to buy the same sword or shield at a historical re-enactment event in Sweden, Poland or Norway.

Staying in a Viking town is not only a way of spending spare time. For many craftsmen, especially from Poland, it also offers the chance to earn money. One example is especially worthy of mention. The bone carver (figure 2) earned approximately 23,000 Swedish kronor during last year's Viking Market. Taking the fact that the minimum wage in Poland in 2012 was 1,500 Polish zloty (approximately 2900 Swedish kronor) into account, it is clear the craftsman earned more during one event than the average Polish worker would in seven months. This is the main reason why the Viking Market attracts so many historical re-enactors

from Poland. Participating in two or three successful Viking markets in Scandinavia enables them to earn enough money for the rest of the year.

There is one more point to make concerning material culture and Polish craftsmen. Their products are of very good repute amongst other historical re-enactors. Polish craftsmen often offer very precise replicas of specific archaeological finds; furthermore, their products are much cheaper than those by craftsmen from e.g. the Scandinavian countries. No less importantly, the kitsch items for children are often bought during historical re-enactment events in Sweden and Scandinavia in general.

## TRANSFORMERS VERSUS THE MASK(S)

What defines one as a (present-day) Viking is neither knowledge of the Viking Age nor – what can be described as – a symbolic substance, e.g. the same language as used in the 9th–11th centuries or familiarity with Norse mythology. All this is important, but what truly makes a (present-day) Viking is a peculiar material culture that attempts to mirror the Viking Age. This is what transforms contemporary human beings into allegedly historical Vikings.

The recently observed popularity of historical re-enactments in Europe, and other continents too, justifies the thesis of historical re-enactment as “a popular culture phenomenon” (Agnew 2004: 329; see also e.g. Landry 2004; MacLean 2004). Such a vision of historical re-enactment is especially relevant in regard to archaeology which can also be conceived through the lens of popular culture (Holtorf 2005). Therefore, when one approaches material objects used by historical re-enactors and the nature of the transformation it causes among contemporary Vikings, popular culture is a relevant reference. Here I will use two movies as examples.

A relatively recent trilogy, one of the most successful and well-known, is Michael Bay’s *Transformers* (2007, 2009, 2011). The storyline follows two races of robots. On the one hand, there are the Autobots, led by Optimus Prime, the good guys who are always ready to save the Earth. On the other hand, there are the Decepticons and their leader Megatron, malevolent and just waiting for the chance to destroy the Earth. To put it simply, the main motif of the trilogy is typical Hollywood: the fight between good and evil. However, the interesting aspect from an archaeological point of view is the very way in which the robots are transformed from cars, tanks, planes, etc. into humanoid warriors.

At first sight, it may seem that every transformer transforms from one being e.g. a car into another e.g. a warrior. Nonetheless, the problem here is that each transformer *does not* really transform the very

substance of its own being. This change takes place at the ontic level, as Heidegger (1996:11–15) would have put it. In other words, Optimus Prime as a truck and Optimus Prime as a warrior are one and the same. It is as if, in changing his shape, Optimus simply dresses up.

This kind of relation between human beings and objects took place among historical re-enactors during the Viking Market, particularly visible in older craftsmen, many of whom were from Poland. For them, taking part in a historical re-enactment event is a way of earning money. It is not usually for the pleasure of travelling back in time to the distant past. In short, wearing Viking-looking clothes, using *historical* material culture is only a means to an end. It is one of the prerequisites at every historical re-enactment market for historical re-enactors to look like people from a different epoch (in this case, Viking times). Therefore, they produce, use and sell things which resemble material culture from the Viking Age, but this process has a very “superficial” character. Like Optimus Prime who is one and the same being as a truck and humanoid, most of the craftsmen, as contemporary men and as allegedly historical Vikings, were the same beings. It is not my intention to criticize them here, I refer to this way of using objects only to point out the opposite; the way of a *true* transformation into a Viking, how material culture works as Latour’s (1993) actants, assemblages of humans and non-humans; where the materiality of things can be a mediator between the two (see also Olsen 2003; Harrison 2011). This is precisely what my second example the movie *The Mask* presupposes.

*The Mask* (1994), directed by Chuck Russell, is the story of Stanley Ipkiss (Jim Carrey) a young, shy and unassuming clerk who works at a bank. His life is a total catastrophe. He has neither a girlfriend nor friends and is the butt of many jokes. One evening he wants to visit a nightclub, but is refused entry. On the way home he accidentally finds – or rather not because there is always some deeper *historical necessity* in such stories – a wooden mask. On initial inspection the mask is just like any other mask. This one however, when placed on the face, causes a change in the person. The shy, romantic and clumsy Stanley becomes a green-faced superhero. What needs to be clearly pointed out from an archaeological point of view is the very nature of this transformation. It is not simply that Stanley (the human being) wearing the mask (the object) is still one and the same person. The mask changes Stanley. He does not hide beneath the mask, rather an interaction with the artefact and Stanley changes them both. Something completely new is born out of this assemblage of the thing and the human being. The change takes place at the ontological level (see Heidegger 1996:3–9). The main hero is no longer the same person. This process is symmetrical (e.g. Olsen 2003;

Shanks 2007). The mask changes the hero and Stanley, by wearing the mask, changes the mask. It is not an ordinary wooden mask any more but rather a green thing, the very part of *the Mask*, the green-faced superhero – the human-thing (see also Kobiałka 2011).

The very same observation was made of the role of masks among pre-historic and non-European societies (Lévy-Bruhl 1973:106–107; Kowalski 2001:51; Back Danielsson 2007:99–169). When a shaman wore a wolf-shaped mask, it was not simply that he was still the same person who had placed an artefact on his face. For the participants of such a ritual, by wearing the mask, the shaman became a completely new person/being: an assemblage of human and non-human.

For most of the present-day Vikings I spoke to and observed during the event, historical-looking objects were not just ornaments. Rather they were something that enabled a transformation into a completely new person. Although the artefacts they wore were only rarely replicas of specific archaeological finds, it cannot be said that they were non-authentic. Such objects have their own authenticity for present-day Vikings (see also Crang 1996). A historical re-enactor during his normal everyday life is not one and the same person as when he wears the Viking-looking material culture during a historical re-enactment event. By wearing these items, historical re-enactors are in a way possessed by them; and precisely this aspect was so succinctly presented in *The Mask*. Material culture here transforms one being into a completely new one. Historical re-enactors change the things as well. For what would otherwise be an archaeological artefact kept somewhere in a museum, its better or worse imitations are actively used and modified by historical re-enactors in the present.

These transformations are definitely not fake. Many of the historical re-enactors truly believe that during historical re-enactment events they are different people in different realities (the lived Viking Age). Without any doubt, the whole context of the archaeological open-air museum with its reconstructions of houses and so on is conducive to time travel. However, the crucial aspect lies in the transformative nature of material items. This change touches the very being (ontological level) of historical re-enactors. In this sense, the historical re-enactors of the Viking Age at the Foteviken Museum were like the green hero; they were assemblages of human and non-human (Latour 1993); they were cyborgs (Shanks & Pearson 2001:chapter 2).

Material culture is thus crucial for historical re-enactors to travel in time to a different reality. However, this concentration on things causes some paradoxical situations. Although historical re-enactment of the Viking Age appears to be about history or at least some vision of it, I will

try to show in the next part of this paper that what defines historical re-enactment of the Viking Age is a very specific ahistoricity, or more precisely, to put it in paradoxical terms, ahistorical historicity.

## THE CURSE OF MATERIAL CULTURE: AHISTORICAL HISTORICITY OF HISTORICAL RE-ENACTMENT

The Museum of Foteviken, like most archaeological open-air museums that organize re-enactment events, does its best to present the past as accurately as possible (Paardekooper 2012). Historical re-enactment, as the name itself indicates, is about bringing to life a vision of the past. It does not have to be the past as it really was, but the participants of the event are nonetheless obliged to work hard to simulate, in this case, the Viking era. In accordance with this, the organizers of the historical re-enactment event at the Museum of Foteviken provide suggestions that should help guarantee the proper quality of the *past* seen and experienced during the event. As a historical re-enactor it was necessary to adjust to the following guidelines during the Viking Market:

- In The Viking Reserve of Foteviken The Viking Age always applies. The present does not exist; it is the year of our Lord 1134. You are however allowed during the early morning hours to brush your teeth, eat a modern breakfast and tidy up in a modern way.
- Mobile telephones are not allowed, with the exception for the mobile telephones used by the museum staff.
- No smoking, except in special areas.
- Drinks must be drunk in horns or beakers. All food must be served on typical Viking plates. No modern packages of any kind and no beer-can. The food should be cooked with typical Viking tools and if possible use typical Viking food in The Viking Reserve. Please no Vikings eating hamburgers should be seen. If you need to do some modern cooking, please use the kitchen in the red brick-stone building.
- No colourful awning cloths on the market stall or the tents.
- Your private tent is considered to be a free zone, as long as all modern items and equipment is well hidden, not visible and the tent is closed. Modern equipment is allowed during sleeping hours. The same rules apply for our Viking houses; no modern equipment is allowed during the day (Fotevikens Museum 2013b).

In other words, all these rules should ensure authenticity is maintained or rather the *historicity* of a historical re-enactment event (Handler & Saxton 1988). Historical re-enactors sometimes describe this as the *rule of historicity*: if you are not historical enough (authentic in mirroring the past material culture) you are not a historical re-enactor at all. However, the situation here is not so straightforward: it is my hypothesis that this alleged historicity of historical re-enactors is a deeply ahistorical category. Some of the people I spoke to during my research claimed that there is no re-enactment (of the Viking times) without Viking-looking things. They were – it can be said – even obsessed with the historicity of their “stuff”.

The problem of the historicity of historical re-enactment has already been indicated by Agnew (2004), among others. She highlights the fact that re-enactors and tourists are allowed to choose different pasts during historical re-enactment events. It might be even seen as an emancipatory gesture: there are different pasts for different people. Nonetheless, as Agnew succinctly points out:

Reenactment’s emancipatory gesture is to allow participants to select their own past in reaction to a conflicted present. Paradoxically, it is the very ahistoricity of reenactment that is the precondition for its engagement with historical subject matter (Agnew 2004:328).

The desire to maintain the *historicity* of historical re-enactment is easy to understand from a practical point of view. Archaeological open-air museums must at least try to teach people something about the past and, to put it simply, not confuse tourists by mixing things from different eras. When an event is about the Viking Age and takes place in a reconstruction of a Viking town, a call for the attendance of soldiers from World War II for example, should raise some justified objections. However, the obviousness of this perspective should be questioned. What sometimes is good enough in practice does not have to work in theory.

Certainly, for historical Vikings there was no such thing as the Viking Age. It is our modern category closely related to the emergence of archaeology as an academic discipline (see more in Thomas 2004:1–54; González-Ruibal 2013). In other words, Vikings were not aware that they lived in the Viking Age. This clear period of time usually defined as lasting from 790 to 1050 AD (Jensen 1982) is nothing more than the result of a quite modern desire to have clear-cut periods. By the same token, the desire for purification, to present the past (the Viking Age) as genuinely as possible is something very non-Viking.

During the Viking Market most of the historical re-enactors tried to mirror the past; to be *historical*, as they like to say. They wore histor-

ical-looking clothes and so on. However, there were some exceptions that are worth mentioning. What for some could be evidence of inadequacy/non-authenticity/ahistoricity in presenting the Viking Age is a sign of an interesting *historical* historicity of historical re-enactment. In other words, what most of the historical re-enactors do not see is how a failure in mirroring the past can be its own success.

Let me briefly recount the first battle between contemporary Vikings during the market. It took place on Saturday, 29 June at 2 p.m. There were two groups of present-day Vikings. There were visible differences in the weapons they used: swords, spears, long and short axes, shields, helmets etc. All this was basically in accordance with what historical re-enactment should be about: staging some vision of the past for the public.

Although it was raining during the battle, many tourists observed what material culture might have looked like in the Viking Age and how it might be used in combat. All the Vikings, with the exception of one, looked like people from a different reality. This Viking had a yellow rubber duck on his helmet which was stylized to resemble a Viking, in reference to a popular cliché about Vikings who wore helmets with two horns (figure 7). I have made similar observations at other historical re-enactment events I have studied as well. It is common to see a small detail that indicates that you are still in the present during a historical re-enactment event. Once I saw a fearless Viking with a mobile phone in his hand during a historical re-enactment event in Wolin (Poland). On another occasion I was surprised to notice how a present-day Viking was wearing no less contemporary Nike shoes during a historical re-enactment event in Trelleborg in southern Sweden. It would not be enough to simply criticize historical re-enactors of the Viking Age because of their *ahistoricity*: that they mix up things from different epochs. It is more productive to think of all these very contemporary objects used by present-day Vikings as if they were Freudian symptoms.

The initial reaction may be to dismiss the duck as a joke, as making fun of historical re-enactment and causing bewilderment among the visitors to the Museum of Foteviken. Such criticism is acceptable only from a practical point of view when the goal is to stage the past as accurately as possible; from the perspective of aiming to actually re-enact the past. Here, the role of contemporary material culture is ignored.

From another point of view, the duck can be conceived as a detail that stands in opposition to the intentions of historical re-enactors (present object versus re-enactment of the past), a symptom, an example showing how deeply the past and the present are interwoven, how they influence and constitute each other (e.g. Shanks & Tilley 1987). In the same vein, historical re-enactment of the Viking Age as a milieu which supposedly





Figure 7. A Viking duck from the Viking Age. Photo: Dawid Kobińska.

has a great respect for the past (history, the Viking Age), is at the same time one which is founded on a very ahistorical understanding of the present. The duck, the Nike shoes or the mobile phone are archaeological artefacts as are historical-looking artefacts or indeed artefacts from the Viking Age. During the battle I noticed only this one Viking wearing the very present-looking artefact (the duck). It might indicate that other modern-day Vikings lack – which I shall describe as a historical sensitivity of the present.

Historical re-enactment therefore is ahistorical in general when it desires to stage the past as accurately as possible (Agnew 2004) but still small details – like the mobile phone in the hand of some Viking, Nike shoes worn by another, or, in the case of the Viking Market, the duck on a helmet – provide an insight into the deeper complexity of historical re-enactment. This ahistoricity of historical re-enactment sometimes has its own historical dimension as well. This is how the duck can be interpreted. It embodies how the past and the present constitute each other.

Contemporary objects are, in a way, the past of the future. And this would be my only objection concerning historical re-enactment: one does not have to re-enact history (e.g. the Viking Age) simply because one lives in historical times. To put it dialectically, historical re-enactment is closest to historicity when it is – as most of the historical re-enactors

would have said – *ahistorical*; when historical re-enactors use and confuse things from different epochs just like historical Vikings who were using things which were both part of their past and present.

## CONCLUSION

The Museum of Foteviken is the result of the passion some people have for the Vikings and their culture. It is a place which, every year since 1995, has been a gathering point for contemporary Vikings (historical re-enactors) where they can practise their culture and trade with other historical re-enactors and tourists.

This paper is the result of a two-day survey and time spent camping among the present-day Vikings. Three aspects stand out. After a short introduction to the history of the Museum of Foteviken, the objects that were worn and used during the market by the present-day Vikings were presented. For an archaeologist interested in material culture, all the *kitsch* items which were made for children also deserved attention. This material culture is part of most historical re-enactment events as much as imitations of archaeological artefacts or reconstructions of historical buildings, as was the case of the Museum of Foteviken.

Two distinctive ways of using historical-looking objects among historical re-enactors of the Viking Age were then approached through the products of popular culture. On the one hand, *Transformers* were discussed to show how the problem of material culture which is supposed to *transform* one being into another (a “normal” human being into a historical re-enactor) in that it does not actually transform human beings into historical re-enactors (present-day Vikings). On the other hand, by analysing *The Mask*, the intention was to illustrate the role of material culture for those historical re-enactors for whom wearing Viking-looking clothes really does mean travelling in time; changing one’s own personality. Here, things were carefully chosen and used to create assemblages of humans and non-humans which enable the individual to become a Viking warrior, craftsman or woman from the age. It may be said that human beings and things create new beings: contemporary Vikings, or in other words, *the mask(s) and transformers of historical re-enactment of the Viking Age*. Material culture is what historical re-enactment of the Viking Age is truly about: for the present-day Vikings, without proper, that is to say, Viking-looking things there is no time travel to the Viking Age whatsoever. It all starts and ends with material culture that imitates, either well or poorly, things from the period.

The first impression was that the historical re-enactors of the Viking Age were mainly interested in staging historical reality, in other words, in historicity of their “stuff” during the market. There is no doubt that historical re-enactment is a complex phenomenon. For this I coined a paradoxical phrase (ahistorical historicity) – following the line of Agnew (2004) – that grasps the main problem of historical re-enactment, that is: the historicity (fascination with mirroring the material past) of historical re-enactors is a deeply ahistorical category.

What many historical re-enactors would regard as a failure is in reality its own success. By confusing things from different times, like the modern-day Viking with the plastic duck on his helmet (see figure 7), one can become aware of how the present is part of history as well, how history is not simply clear-cut periods but a stream where the past is an element of the present and vice-versa. This then leads to an awareness of the fact that the present will one day be the past of the future too.

So perhaps only by enacting the present is it possible to be a true historical re-enactor and be part of history?

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