

# The Vikings and the Nordic Heroic Tradition

preliminary outline of lecture topics & basic course information

**NB:** Fulfills the General Education *Aesthetic and Interpretive Understanding and Study of the Past* requirements

MW(F) 1:00 and weekly section  
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## LECTURES TOPICS (SUBJECT TO CHANGE)

1. Introduction
2. Who or what was a viking...and does it matter?
3. The vikings at Home: People and Places of Power
4. The vikings at Home: Towns and Trade
5. The vikings Abroad: In the West
6. The vikings Abroad: In the East
7. Old Norse Mythology I: Odin, Thor, and the Vanir 1 (*The Prose Edda, The Poetic Edda*)
8. Old Norse Mythology II: Odin, Thor, and the Vanir 2 (*The Prose Edda, The Poetic Edda*)
9. Old Norse Mythology III: The minor deities (*The Prose Edda, The Poetic Edda*)
10. Old Norse Mythology IV: Formal aspects and learned interpretations of *The Prose Edda*
11. Old Norse Mythology V: Cosmology and eschatology (*The Prose Edda, The Poetic Edda*)
12. Old Norse Mythology VI: Fate, luck and the heroic life (*The Poetic Edda*)
13. Old Norse poetry & poets (*Egil's saga*)
14. Egil as Odinic hero (*Egil's saga*)
15. Medieval Authorship, Kings & Conquest (*Harald's saga*)
16. Vinland, Patronage & Social Context (*The Vinland Sagas*)
17. Outlaws, Heroes & Monsters I (*Grettir's saga*)
18. Outlaws, Heroes & Monsters II (*Grettir's saga*)
19. Tales of the Fantastic and Far-away I (*King Gautrek & Bosi and Herraud*)
20. Tales of the Fantastic and Far-away II—and Gender (*King Gautrek & Bosi and Herraud*)
21. The Dragon-Slayer I (*The Poetic Edda*)
22. The Dragon-Slayer II (*The Poetic Edda*)
23. The Post-Medieval Reception of Vikings and the Sagas I
24. The Post-Medieval Reception of Vikings and the Sagas II
25. The Post-Medieval Reception of Vikings and the Sagas III



## TEXTS

NB: The texts are all available as paperbacks and/or Kindle and other e-formats. They are also on reserve at Lamont Library. Kindle prices (rounded off, as listed in October) are provided as a guide to costs.

### Primary texts (required):

1. *The Poetic Edda*. Transl. Carolyne Larrington. Oxford World's Classics (ISBN-10: 0199538387/ ISBN-13: 978-0199538386). [Kindle price: \$9]
2. *Edda by Snorri Sturluson*. Transl. Anthony Faulkes. Everyman's Library (ISBN-10: 0460876163; ISBN-13: 978-0460876162). [Kindle price: \$3]
3. *The Sagas of Icelanders*. Various translators, introductions by Robert Kellogg & Jane Smiley. Penguin Classics Deluxe (ISBN-10: 0141000031; ISBN-13: 978-0141000039). [Kindle price: \$4]
4. *King Harald's Saga*. Transl. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Palsson. Penguin Books (ISBN 978-0140441833). [Kindle price: \$10]
5. *Grettir's Saga*. Transl. Bernard Scuttle (ISBN-10: 0140447733; ISBN-13: 978-0140447736). [Kindle price: \$10]
6. *Seven Viking Romances*. Transl. Hermann Palsson & Paul Edwards. Penguin (ISBN-10: 0140444742/ISBN-13: 978-0140444742). [Kindle price: \$10]

### Secondary texts (required):

7. Brink, Stefan, with Neil Price, eds. *The Viking World*. Routledge (ISBN-10: 0415692628; ISBN-13: 978-0415692625). [Kindle price: \$44]
8. Winroth, Anders. *The Age of the Vikings*. Princeton University Press (ISBN-10: 0691149852; ISBN-13: 978-0691149851). [Kindle price: \$16]

### Secondary texts (recommended):

9. Haywood, John. *The Penguin Historical Atlas of the Vikings*. Penguin Books (ISBN 978-0140513288). [Paperback price: \$13]

## REQUIREMENTS/GRADING:

*Undergraduates*: section 10%; take-home midterm 20%; final exam 30%; 2 x 5-7 pp. essays (20% each) 40%

*Graduates*: final exam 40%; essay 60% (please consult with me regarding topics)



## COURSE DESCRIPTION:



This course begins by introducing participants to the material legacy of the vikings, the enigmatic Scandinavians whose dramatic expansion from the eighth to eleventh centuries AD transformed not only their own society but much of the entire northern world. During this period Swedes, Danes and Norwegians raided, traded and conquered their way across Western Europe, toppling

kingdoms and founding new ones. They knew the great Classical cities of the Mediterranean, as well as the Muslim empires of Spain and North Africa. Scandinavians colonized the Russian river systems, explored the Asian steppe and walked the streets of Baghdad and Damascus. At the same time their westward expansion settled new lands in the North Atlantic, moving from Iceland and Greenland to the first European encounter with North America. With a focus on viking civilization, its customs and lifestyles, and above all the immense cultural diversity of the early Scandinavian world, the course proceeds to examine the legacy of this era in later periods.

Thus, the course continues by focusing on the narrative materials associated with the Viking Age. We study the pre-Christian mythological materials of northern Europe, and from these texts, together with selected aspects of the archaeological record, look to reconstruct and understand the pagan world-view. The course also investigates the formal aspects of the narrative material and examines the heroic legacy that results from the historical events in Europe from A.D. 800 to A.D. 1100, concentrating on the medieval Icelandic sagas, and the uses to which such histories are put. In what ways and to what ends, for example, do medieval Icelanders present their Viking Age forebears as warriors, kings, poets, outlaws and adventurers? What is the role of poetry in preserving and presenting such deeds? What is a saga, and what are its formal properties? What is the cultural value of specific heroic traditions, such as that of the Dragon-Slayer, over time? What is a hero?

We will also consider how the viking image is received and shaped in later periods, that is, its constant reinterpretation in literary works and in political life: What purposes does it serve in Renaissance Scandinavia? How is it received and reshaped in 19th-century and 20th-century Scandinavia, England, Germany, and America, and what roles did (and does) it play in nationalist movements, and within ethnic groups?