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The Vikings: History Channel's Fact or Fictionalized View of
The Norse Expansion

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ABSTRACT: The History Channel's *The Vikings* is a fictionalized history of Ragnar Lothbrok who during the 8th and 9th Century traveled and raided the British Isles and all the way to Paris. This paper will look at the factual Ragnar and the fictionalized character as presented to the general viewing public.

Ragnar Lothbrok is getting a lot of air time recently. He and the other characters from the History Channel series *The Vikings* are on Tee shirts, posters, books, and websites. The jewelry from the series is selling quickly on the web and the actors that portray the characters are in high demand at conventions and other venues. The series is fun but as all historic series creates a history that is not necessarily accurate.

When I thought about the presentation for this paper I deliberated between starting with the fictional and leading up to the historic for dramatics or give the historic Ragnar and what we know of the people and times he lived in and then conclude with the fictional. In the end there was no easy answer so I decided to go with the time line of the series and how it does or doesn't match what we know about history. I shall go through the three current seasons as characters are introduced and discuss each of them.

The series begins in the Eastern Baltics in the year 793. It is probably early in the year since that same year Ragnar sails to Lindisfarne and sacks that monastery; capturing the monk Athelstan who becomes a key player in the series.

In the series Ragnar has a brother Rollo. Ragnar is married during the first season to a shield maiden Lagertha and they have two children; Bjorn and Gyda. One of his closest friends at the time is the boat builder Floki. The family and friends live in the village of Kattegat on the

West coast of Sweden probably somewhere between the modern towns of Mastrand in the south and Lysekil in the north.

In reality Kattegat which is Danish for Cat's Throat is a large sea area bounded by the Jutlandic peninsula in the west, the Danish islands to the south and the provinces of Västergötland, Scania, Halland and Bohuslän in Sweden in the east. The Baltic Sea drains into the Kattegat through the Danish Straits (Dundee). The town and area surrounding it is ruled by a Jarl or Earl named Haraldson. He is an older leader who is quite corrupt and jealous of his power. With his wife, who is above little to get what she wants, he rules the town and controls the boats and the men who fight for him. Throughout the first season Ragnar has Floki build a ship and with the use of a sól-skuggafjöl and a sólarsteinn sails to England numerous times, eventually enraging the Jarl and open combat results with Ragnar becoming Jarl. Once that happens Ragnar is free to travel and at the end of the first season he has met and beaten the forces of King Aella of Northumbria.

Whether or not Ragnar Lothbrok existed is still open to debate. Some scholars claim that Ragnar was like Arthur and other historic figures that became amalgamations of many people over many centuries. For the purposes of this paper I shall proposed that Ragnar did exist and this is what we know about him.

Ragnar Lothbrok was born in the 9th century as a Dane. His last name Lothbrok means in some translations 'hairy breaches' which could have meant that he wore rough leather pants or some kind of treated material since in one legend he is credited with warding off the poisonous venom of a serpent or dragon depending on which legend you read (Morris).

The other explanation is a little more crude but could also be somewhat accurate. Toward the end of Ragnar's life he contacted dysentery. The 'hairy breaches' could have been

the uncontrolled diarrhea that comes from such an ailment and in one account that is supposed (Byrock) The illness would also explain one of the two ways that Ragnar dies; dysentery or being thrown into a pit of snakes at the hands of one of his enemies King Aella of Northumbria (Broberg).

For whatever reason he rose to power and with that power took a number of wives and had eleven children that may be documented (Smith), [I use the term documented here rather freely since we are only supposing that this individual lived in the first place].

Lagertha is listed as Ragnar's first wife. From that union they had Fridlef. Aslaug married Ragnar next. She bore him Sigurd Snake in the Eye and Ivar The Boneless. Thora married Ragnar next and gave him Bjorn Ironside, Rathbarth, Dunnyat and Agnar. Finally a fourth wife Svanloga bore Regnald, Vithserk, and Erik Wind Hat. Now somewhere in there Ragnar met and impregnated Esbern's unnamed daughter who bore Ragnar Ubbi (Smith).

From these historic records the series chose to give Ragnar a few of these sons, and a daughter. From Lagertha Ragnar had Bjorn and a daughter Gyda. And from Auslag, who he meets at the very end of the first season, he fathers Halfdah, Ubbi, Sigurd, and Ivar.

The second most influential character in the series is Ragnar's brother Rollo. Ragnar is not shown a brother in history but there is a Rollo that meets these descriptions, and through the seasons of the show this individual moves closer to that historic figure. The figure is Rollo, or Robert, when he is baptized by Aella. However the actual Rollo was born in 846 and died in 932 (Thompson). This puts the 'brother' 50 to 60 years before his time in the series.

Finally the last of the central characters is Floki. As I said earlier Floki is a boat builder and is probably the representation of Hrafna Floki Vigarðarson who in the early 9th century discovered Iceland (Craigie).

When Ragnar sails to Lindisfarne he captures a number of monks as slaves. The one central monk that Ragnar keeps above all the gold is Athelstan. Athelstan in history was born in 894 and later became the King of Wessex (Beaven). Therefore he is another character that is out of time and in his case also out of place in the context of the series.

In the grand scheme of things we have Ragnar. Everyone else is placed there for creative license. And on one level that's fine but this is about accuracy, or at least as much accuracy as possible.

Next in Season one Ragnar sails to England and fights the forces of Aella. Aella was the king of Northumbria during the time of Ragnar and as previously noted is credited with the death of the Viking leader. At least this part of the story is somewhat accurate and timely.

Finally Ragnar becomes an emissary of King Horik who sends him to meet with another Jarl. Historically Horik Gudfredsson was the King of Denmark until his death in 854 (Olsen). In contradiction to the series Horik outlives Ragnar and after the death of Ragnar in 845 Horik had the followers of Ragnar killed upon their return from Paris since Horik took umbrage to the siege of the city and the successful bounty they paid the Vikings to leave.

796 Season Two

Season two begins with Rollo turning on Ragnar, but then again he does that a lot during the seasons. Since neither Jarl Borg or Rollo are historic at this time this plot development is not historically important, although it does set up much of what happens in this season.

The most important plot twist that is tied to a historical occurrence is the appearance of Aslaug carrying Ragnar's child. This is the conflict between Ragnar and Lagertha and at the end of the first episode of season two Lagertha takes Bjorn, who is at this point about fifteen, away and divorces Ragnar. Ragnar is now free to marry Aslaug and legally have more children. It

allows Lagertha to marry again, and ultimately become a Jarl in her own right and cause more problems in seasons two and three but I digress.

In history Aslaug was Ragnar's second wife. In the series she bears him four sons; Halfdah, Ubbi, Sigurd, and Ivar. In history she only has two children; Ivar and Sigurd. It is interesting that the series blends two wives children into one character since Ubbi is actually the child of Thora, Ragnar's third wife, and a name we will hear again later in the season (Smith).

In television years move quickly and by the second episode of season two it's four more years later to the year 800. Athelstan is becoming a Pagan, or at least it appears he is, Floki is healed and building boats for Ragnar after almost being killed by Rollo, Rollo is forgiven but still not fully trusted by Ragnar, and Aslaug is producing children for Ragnar.

As far as historical accuracy goes in season two there is little. Egbert and Kwentriht are introduced and even though they are both historical figures only Egbert is during the time frame of Ragnar (Fanning) [The real Queen Cynethryth died in 798, before Ragnar went to Wessex and met her as the Queen of Mercia] (Pretzel)

Athelstan is a central figure to both King Ecbert and Ragnar during season two. He is at times played off as a surrogate Jesus when he is crucified, he is used as a translator and confidant to King Ecbert when he is in Wessex, and he is the best friend of Ragnar, and eventual 'savior' when Ragnar converts to Christianity. And here is the conflict of season two. The conflict of Christian versus Pagan and who will ultimately win in the end.

In hindsight we know what happens. The Norse become Christians, not because it made sense to them but because, as Polytheists, they thought of the Christian God as just another religion to be viewed, examined, and assimilated.¹ It was too late when they realized that the monotheistic Christians were, and I choose these words carefully, 'Hell bent' on eliminating all

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other distractors. This is where Athelstan plays his greatest role in the series; as turning point in history.

Finally toward the end of season two we get to the politics of the times. Jarls come and go. Kings come and go. And people come and go. Horick is worried of Ragnar Lothbrok. Borg is being blood eagled; a process not specifically related in history although alluded to often, and most often credited to Ibn Fadlān, even though a firsthand account of such a ceremony to Odin would not have been allowed to an Arab (Montgomery)

By killing Borg Ragnar sets up the machinations that create the situation where he is to become king, and thus allowing him the power to travel, raid, and ultimately colonize; which is what we are led to believe has been the ultimate goal all along.

801 Season Two strays far from the history of Ragnar. When Ragnar's son Bjorn meets the slave girl Thora he is meeting someone with his mother's name, which is a little creepy but most don't know the Viking's history. When in the end of the season King Horick attempts to kill Ragnar and is in the end killed instead history does not repeat itself. Ragnar survives and Horick does not. However as we see in Season Three there are some plot twists that must be accomplished before the end of the show and getting Ragnar to Paris is one of them.

803 Season Three begins with King Ragnar sailing back to England to meet with Ecberg. Lagertha sails with Ragnar and loses her position to Kalth. Thora, who is now a free woman, sails with the ship as a fighter, even though she is carrying Bjorn's child. And the women that are left behind become the back story for much of the first part of the season.

The second part of the back story is going to Kwenrith. In history Cynethryth was the Queen of Mercia through her marriage to Offa of Mercia (Pretzel). She had one son, Ecgfirth,

who succeeded her as King of Mercia for 141 days, and four daughters; Eadburh, Ælfflæd, Æthelburh, and Ælfhryth.

To save time since this paper is long enough suffice it to say that much of the first half of the third season is literary license. Kwentrith never had a brother that she fought nor an uncle she had killed. The Vikings were not butchered in Wessex nor was there a rebellion in Hedeby by a young and ambitious Lord who wanted to become Jarl. All this was created to move the story to Paris.

Paris. Impregnable city on the Seine. Jewel of Francia and home to the Emperor Charles the Simple and his daughter Gisela (Bauduin). In the series Count Odo protects the city while Charles cowers and talks incessantly about how his brothers hate him and how he is not his grandfather Charlemagne. Both of these scenarios are basically true. The fact that it was almost one hundred years later that the actual Vikings, led by Rollo, not Ragnar, invaded Paris and were bought off with a piece of Normandy, is incidental.

The siege that Ragnar is responsible for is against Charles the Bald (Nelson) and in 845 Ragnar did indeed get paid to leave with 5,670 pounds of silver and gold. The series ties these two raids together to make the impressive attack on Paris but the facts do not support the script. As mentioned earlier Rollo and Ragnar, while not being brothers, were also not in the same century. The raid on Paris brings this last discrepancy home with complete clarity.

With the unsuccessful complete sacking of Paris Season Three concludes. Aethalstan is dead, Floki is known by Ragnar to be the murderer, and Rollo is once again pitted against his brother and is soon to be married to Gisla, daughter of Emperor Charles of Francia. Ragnar is spitting up blood and as a Christian, at least outwardly, is causing concern and machinations from his Jarls and followers.

So far we have looked at what the series got wrong, or at least skewed. Before I conclude I'd like to talk about what the series got right, or at least not wrong.

Weapons and Armour. The weapons of the time were hand weapons. They were sharp but they were heavy. Axes were the predominant weapon because most Nordic fighters were primarily farmers or fisherman. Many times in the series Floki is shown with what appears to be two axes but in reality one is an axe and one is an adze; which makes sense since Floki is a wood worker and boat builder and he would fight with whatever he was comfortable with (Pedersen).

The shields are thin. History has shown that the shields were no more than one half inch in thickness and were quite destructible. In the series the shields stop arrows and cross bow bolts but the heads of the projectiles extend through the shield to the holder. Also during the challenge fight in season one Ragnar and Haraldson both have their shields broken in combat, which would have been accurate.

The clothing was light leather armour if that. Lagertha has a mail and leather corset that she fights in and Ragnar has ring armour but these were rich and powerful leaders that could afford the added protection. The rank and file fighter had little more than the clothing on his or her back. And that's another point they got right. Women fought alongside the men. Close to half of the bodies found in graves throughout the Norse world have been shown, through DNA, to be women. Whether they all died in battle is open to conjecture but it is safe to say that at least many of them fought next to their men (McLaughlin).

Tactics of the shield wall have not changed since the Romans. Neither has archery. The archers were the long range weapons of the force. The shields were the primary defense. Once the two forces clashed it was strategy of mass formations until individual battles ensued and then one side either retreated or was decimated. The chaos of a pitched battle is well represented in

the series and anyone who has fought in a medieval reenactment organization can see the similarities still employed today on the battle field.

The ships and boats are another accuracy. The tools that Floki is shown using and the methods he employs are historically accurate. The boats are structurally accurate and the boxes and bales that they load and unload would have been such that would have been needed during the voyages.

Finally are the domestic scenes. In the beginning of the series Ragnar is a farmer and Lagertha and their children both fish and farm. In Season Three you see the farming in Wessex and how the English were more advanced than the Norse. The food and housing is as accurate as can be and the village of Kattegat, built as a free standing set on a small lake in Ireland, could be any Norse village of the times.

In conclusion I have shown how the Vikings television series as presented by the History Channel is both accurate and not accurate. I have given the principle characters both in their historic context and their role as action figures in a made for TV series. Further I have talked about the accuracies and inaccuracies of the props and the settings of the series.

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"Deyr fe Deyja fraendr, Deyr sjalfr et sama En orthstir Deyr aldregi Hveim er ser godan getur." "Deyr fe Deyja fraendr Deyr sjalfr et sama Eg veit ein At aldri deyr Domr um dauthan hvern!"

"Cattle die, Kinsmen die,

You yourself dies.

But the good name never dies

Of one who has done well"

"Cattle die Kinsmen die

You yourself dies.

But I know one thing which never dies;

the glory of the great dead!"