

# Kings at Sea: Examining a Forgotten Way of Life

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The Viking Age is one that conjures up a plethora of fantastic images for the modern observer. Vivid scenes of raiding brutality by Viking warriors are among the first of these imaginings, but they only tell part of the greater story. The Viking world was one of nuanced complexity, wherein these raids only reflected small segments of the greater tale, and where the raiders themselves more frequently self-identified as farmers or poets than warriors.<sup>1</sup> Scandinavia during this Age experienced a profusion of culture, as it witnessed the growth of numerous interconnected cultures and saw a proliferation of trade and other interactions with the continent. The Viking Age (dating from approximately 800–1100) was one with far-reaching implications and lasting effects for a multiplicity of peoples, and it deserves to be remembered as such, rather than any of the more simplistic views that have since emerged.<sup>2</sup>

The societies emerging during the Viking Age featured incredibly complex social hierarchies and systems of rule, which have often gone unnoticed by the masses. Further, these complexities have occasionally been overlooked even by the historians tasked with the study of these subjects, who have chosen instead to try to compartmentalize Viking age leaders into created constructs. These false constructs are detrimental to historic inquiry, and they defy the Scandinavian world as those leaders knew it. Rather, historians must endeavor to represent this period, as with all others, as the complicated, diverse setting it was.

Nowhere is historians' difficulty with accurately portraying the Viking Age more evident than in the case of Scandinavian kingship. Kingship in the Viking Age was far different than many other systems of monarchy with which one may have familiarity. For the people of this age, kingship was not necessarily a hereditary position; rather it was a title that could be acquired through warfare or something resembling an election at an Althing (or other similar gathering).<sup>3</sup> Rather than following a fixed precedent,

the nature of kingship was known to change from one generation to the next, as circumstance dictated. While it is certainly true that Scandinavian countries progressively grew more reliant on hereditary rule, particularly coinciding with the consolidation of these countries, the Viking Age is rife with successions by unrelated leaders.<sup>4</sup>

Yet this dynamic nature of the kingship is only one limiting factor in terms of understanding and conceptualizing leadership of this age. Rather than there being only one king for each country or kingdom, the Viking Age was littered with an abundance of kings, each of whom fell somewhere into a hierarchical system of kings, with lower kings answering to higher kings and vice versa.<sup>5</sup> This in itself is not unique, as it was systems such as these that constituted a need for terms such as "High King," but such constructs are often unfamiliar for modern audiences.

While this system is not altogether unlike other hierarchical systems that would later emerge throughout Europe, it is important to note that these respective leaders were each termed kings, or roughly so. The term *konungr* was used indiscriminately for each of these leaders, and is most closely translated into the English word king. Yet this terminology has proved maddening to many historians, who often instead change *konungr* to mean "prince," "chieftain," or even "sub-king" or "petty king" as they see fit.<sup>6</sup> While these variants can help conceptualize Viking leadership, they do misrepresent the world as the Vikings saw it, particularly the changes to "prince" and "chieftain." While "petty kings" or "sub-kings" are classifications that would not be found in Viking Age, these terms do better encapsulate the hierarchical system as it was than do other terms. Even so, this is a diminished understanding of kingship from how the Vikings themselves would have viewed it.

Further muddying the waters is the fact that modern historians are not the only people to have given these leaders different appellations. Later translators have been prone to

change the titles of Viking kings to “chieftains” as well, as they, too, found fault with Viking terminology and made changes to better reflect their own views or culture. The quest for well-represented Viking kingship is also one that is troubling, as even (nearly) contemporary sources have a tendency to disparage these leaders, calling them “king[s] only in name” or other derogatory titles.<sup>7</sup> To be certain, a good deal of the disdain in this and other contemporary accounts does come from the fact that the sources are Christian, and they recount raids upon their people. This fosters no small degree of hostility between the two sides, which tends to manifest itself within the pages of Chronicles or other Histories. Yet beyond this more immediate bias, there is also an underlying one, which is borne out of a fundamental misunderstanding of the Scandinavians and their people, which frequently led to a dismissal of their culture as overly simplistic and barbarous. It is these very same classifications that modern scholars must actively seek to avoid, as they serve as gross misrepresentations of the period.

Furthermore, the diverse nature of kingship in the Viking Age is further complicated by the existence of less conventional types of kingship also exhibited during this time, including (at times) joint kingship, a premise not foreign to medieval European rule, but one that baffles many modern audiences.<sup>8</sup> Beyond being relatively fluid in terms of the ways into which people could come to power, Viking kingship also manifested itself in other ways completely foreign to moderns; such as those who held no land and those who operated and lived at sea. While the very thought of kings operating within these parameters is astounding to the modern mind, it was very much an accepted facet of Scandinavian life in this period, “though usually the two went together, it was not always necessary to have a kingdom to be recognized as a king.”<sup>9</sup> Kings roved the land and sea, with large bands of men, their *comitatus*, in hand. While it is clear that the landless kings, sometimes known as host-kings, for the hosts they led, were not quite itinerant, there is no such clarity with the sea kings of the age.<sup>10</sup> Who were these men and how did they come to their position? What did the position entail? These questions paint a portrait that is every bit as complex as the Age into which they fell.

Unlike many other appellations for kings or leaders of the Viking Age that have since been changed to suit the views of later cultures, the term sea king is not anachronistic. Rather, it comes from the term *saekonungr*, which is directly connected to the aforementioned *konungr*.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the literal resultant translation is “sea king.” The fact that “sea king” was a concept familiar to the Viking world is critical, and of

great import to any analysis of Scandinavian sources, as it eliminates the potential for anachronistic thought that has so plagued Viking Age research. Rather, the concept, and term, are shared by both the Scandinavian *scalds* (poets) and modern researchers. This largely allows Scandinavian sources, such as the sagas or histories written by fellow Scandinavians (such as the *Heimskringla*, which is a little of both), to be examined openly within this research, as the terminology is the same for both the author and researcher. While there are admittedly inherent difficulties working with such sources, it does nonetheless provide one with a degree of familiarity from which to begin.

Unfortunately, the same ease of analysis is not afforded by contemporary Christian chronicles or annals, as these Christian chroniclers did not share a terminology with their attackers. Instead, many of these scribes chose to refer to the Scandinavians simply as “heathens,” “Northmen,” or “Danes.”<sup>12</sup> While these descriptions are colorful, and very telling of a great deal else, they offer very little insight into the specific nature of who was raiding. While this is sufficient to show they were Viking attacks, there is nothing indicating whether the raiders were sea kings or mere raiders. It is all but certain that some (if not many) of these attacks were perpetrated by sea kings, yet it is impossible to gauge who fell into either category based on the extant chronicled information. To be fair, it certainly makes sense that the people being raided were in no rush to find out by whom exactly they were being pillaged, yet this is remains an inherent difficulty in this research which must be addressed.

So what was a sea king, exactly? The sources are at odds over their definition, so it is best to begin with an examination of the oldest, nearest to contemporary works to see what the later historians were working with. For this, there is no better source than Snorri Sturluson’s work, the *Heimskringla*, which is a history of the kings of Norway. Though Norway is the focus of Sturluson’s work, there is also a great deal of interconnectivity with the rest of Scandinavia within it, and it is thus of great merit to research beyond Norway, much as many of the Icelandic Sagas are equally telling of Norway.

Unfortunately, it must be mentioned that the *Heimskringla* is frequently dated to approximately 1230, and many of Sturluson’s contemporary saga writers are also dated to the thirteenth century, leaving a considerable gap between the time of their composition (and in most cases, subsequent recording in written form) and the subject of the work.<sup>13</sup> Such a significant gap (at times spanning up to three hundred years) must be taken into consideration, and it is sometimes

difficult to tell whether the information being related is an accurate depiction of the Viking Age, as it is purported to be, or a closer indication of Scandinavia during the time of composition. This is something that must be taken into account and an issue that stands as likely the biggest difficulty with these earliest sources. Despite this, they may still prove useful in research so long as these considerations are taken into account.

Maddeningly, in Sturluson’s extensive work, there are only eight mentions of sea kings, which would seem to be a hindrance to research. Further, of the eight sea kings who are mentioned, six are only mentioned in passing, as part of kennings for something else (invariably for ships or waves). This leaves only two (somewhat) detailed accounts of the lives of sea kings, which is admittedly significantly less than ideal. With that being said, there is a great deal that can be gleaned from what has been mentioned, even the passing references to the kennings. That Sturluson can simply say, “And the steerer of storm-tossed/Steeds of Atli oft did,”<sup>14</sup> with the expectation that his audience will implicitly understand that Atli was a sea king, and he is thus referencing waves, is remarkable. Very few people even today have garnered enough fame to be considered synonymous with their profession or title, making the fact these people were so well-known in an age of oral tradition all the more astonishing. As such, these passing mentions are actually telling of the wide-spread nature of sea kings, as well as the fact that some of them garnered considerable fame, even to the point of becoming synonymous with their title.

Perhaps even more surprising is the fact that these names of sea kings were fairly commonplace amongst their contemporaries, meaning they were recognized by their peers unanimously, despite the frequency with which their names appeared in this culture.<sup>15</sup> Such acclaim and instant recognition are indicative of this being a widespread, or at the very least widely recognized, phenomena. They also indicate a wealth of knowledge on the subject that has seemingly since been lost, or perhaps never explicitly recorded at all. While such implicit messages should generally be avoided in historic inquiry, here they are necessary, if only to prove that there was a great amount of information or knowledge at one point extant on the topic, even if they have been since lost to time. Further, it should be noted that this noting of sea kings in kennings was not limited to Sturluson’s work, as the Younger Edda contains two *thula* (segments) that referenced sea kings in kennings, one twenty-four times and the other a staggering seventy-six times.<sup>16</sup>

With that being said, the two remaining accounts from the *Heimskringla* offer much more explicit information on sea kings and provide a remarkably vivid and nuanced look into the world of Viking sea kingship. The first of these accounts, that of Haki, describes his path from sea-kingship to a far greater office, that of king of Sweden. The account begins by describing Haki and his brother, Hagbarth, as being “of great fame. They were sea-kings and had a great fleet. Sometimes they joined forces, at others, they fought separately. Many men of valor followed each of them.”<sup>17</sup> This fascinating excerpt seems to indicate not only sea kingship, but also a form of joint kingship (or captaincy, at any rate) as they were described as having only one fleet between them. This concept of shared rule was certainly not foreign to medieval politics, though it certainly was something of a rarity in terms of kingship. This noted, it is impossible to definitively tell whether this truly was shared kingship or not, as their each having a war band seems to indicate otherwise.

However, for Sturluson, the only item of note between the brothers is Haki’s eventual ascension to the Swedish throne, which also belies the reason for which the *Heimskringla* does not offer more of these protracted accounts of sea-kings, as he is only truly concerned with their land-based counterparts. That sea-kings could evolve through successful warfare into kings of large portions of land, as is the case with Haki (and also Solvi, the other sea king to be extensively mentioned, who also ascends the Swedish throne) is fascinating, but likely did not happen with frequency, as evidenced by the fact that only two such instances are recorded in the *Heimskringla*.

In true Viking fashion, Haki acquires this kingdom through bloodshed, facing off against the established king Hagleik on the Fyri Plains.<sup>18</sup> Sturluson is careful to describe both kings and armies as valiant and worthy before reaching the critical moment wherein “King Haki entered the shield castle of King Hagleik and killed him and both his sons.”<sup>19</sup> Immediately after this destruction of his royal opponent, the Swedes fled, and King Haki conquered the lands and made himself king over the Swedes. He remained three years in the land, but while he remained there in peace, his champions left him and went on viking expeditions and thus amassed spoils for themselves.<sup>20</sup>

It is unclear what became of Haki after these three years, whether his peaceful reign was ended through death or skirmish, or whether, as the implication seems to be, he simply left the land, but at any rate Haki is not heard of again throughout the remainder of the *Heimskringla*. It is difficult to account for what may have caused this sudden

disappearance, whether Sturluson is expecting his audience to have previous knowledge of what became of what became of Haki, or whether he simply felt it to be irrelevant to his overall work (which was, after all, concerned primarily with the kings of Norway).

Regardless of the cause for this sudden departure from the scene, there is a great deal that may be learned from Haki's story. The foremost of these is that he was able to ascend to the throne of Sweden through violence and yet thereafter hold it quite peacefully. This is likely owed (at least in part) to the fact that he effectively eliminated all claimants to the throne by killing Hugliek's sons, but it is also indicative of the nature of Scandinavian kingship during the time, that there would be no retribution for an alien ruler who acquired their power by force. This instance also shows that there seemed to be no difficulty in adjusting from a sea king to a landholding one (or if there was, it was not deemed worth noting). The final piece of interesting information comes from the aforementioned implication that Haki may have simply left Sweden, as a departure of such magnitude would be entirely out of place with modern conceptualizations of kingship, while perhaps also illustrating an under-represented phenomena of Viking Age kingship. Such a departure would also lead to questions such as what may have catalyzed such a departure. Was it due to his desire to return to sea (for economic or other reasons) or some other motive (such as the pursuit of wealth or power elsewhere)? However, it is critical to remember that such speculations are based purely on conjecture rather than concrete information.

Also interesting to note is the fate of Haki's brother Hagbarth, who had disappeared from the scene by the time of his brother's Swedish conquest. Hagbarth provides another example of a sea king's interaction with the land dwellers, as it seems that by this time Hagbarth had become entrenched in a forbidden romance with Signy Sigarsdottir<sup>21</sup> and subsequently hanged by Signy's father.<sup>22</sup> This account was evidently widespread in the north at the time, as Sturluson is able to reference Hagbarth twice in kennings, each time referencing the gallows in some fashion.<sup>23</sup> The reasons this is noteworthy are twofold: the extended mentions of sea kings in the *Heimskringla* are so few that each demands consideration, and Hagbarth being a figure of romantic legend may indicate an issue with the source. The earlier portions of Scandinavian history remained largely shrouded in mystery and legend, leaving many earlier historians such as Sturluson to fill in the gaps, and it would make sense to do so with a romantic figure, regardless of accuracy. This may,

then, indicate that this account comes closer to the legendary "Age of Heroes," or "Fabulous Age" than the later periods, which were more grounded in fact.<sup>24</sup> Even if this is the case, there can still be information credibly gleaned from the tale, as Sturluson would have to fabricate a tale that would be considered within the realm of expectations for the age (or at least, what he believed to have been normative of the age).

In the second prolonged account of a sea king, that of Solvi, Sturluson presents an even more nuanced figure. Solvi is introduced as a "sea-king . . . who was at that time harrying in Sweden. He ruled over [a part of] Jutland."<sup>25</sup> It is perplexing that Solvi is identified as a sea king who also owns (a significant portion of) land, as this seems not to have been typical of sea kings. It is difficult to gauge whether he would have been identified as a sea king had he remained in Jutland, or whether he is only characterized as thus due to his subsequent attack on Sweden. At any rate, "he led his fleet to Sweden. King Eystein was then being entertained in the district of Lofund. King Solvi came upon him in his hall when he was least expecting it, and burned him inside his hall with all his following."<sup>26</sup> Unlike Haki, however, this did not mark the end of Solvi's conquest:

Then Solvi proceeded to Sigtuna and demanded to be proclaimed king and be received as such; but the Swedes collected an army to defend their land, and there ensued a battle so great that it was said to have lasted more than eleven days. King Solvi was victorious and ruled over Sweden for a long time, until the Swedes betrayed and slew him.<sup>27</sup>

This harrowing account shows a great deal more conflict with the stranger king, likely coinciding with the strengthening and (marginal) consolidation of Sweden, as the Swedes were able to assemble an army even without their king. The ultimate deposition of the king likely is borne out of Solvi's failure to eliminate all claimants to the throne, as it is Eystein's son who succeeds the throne following Solvi's evidently treasonous death.<sup>28</sup>

The cases of Solvi and Haki show that greed and ambition were strong motivating factors for sea kings, just as with most Vikings, as is evidenced both in these rare conquests and the more typical raiding. Solvi is also noteworthy for showing the interconnectivity of Scandinavia during the Viking Age, as he hails from Norway, has holdings in Denmark, and ultimately gains sovereignty in Sweden. Solvi and Haki are noteworthy for another reason as well, as they both are living examples of the problems that arise when historians attempt to neatly compartmentalize Viking rulers. Neither Haki nor Solvi neatly fits even the unorthodox mold of sea kingship, as Haki may well have

been a joint king with his brother for a time and Solvi is described as having held land during his tenure as a sea king. While these discrepancies will no doubt give many historians fits, they were clearly not problematic for the people of the Viking Age, who accepted the concepts of kingship and rule as highly fluid entities which were liable to change with the circumstances of the day.

While these accounts provide tremendous insight into some of the lives of the more notable sea kings, and the acclaim that several of them were able to achieve, they do not answer the most fundamental question about these people, namely what defined a sea king. It appears Sturluson, as with many of his saga writing contemporaries, is frustratingly relying on his audience's presupposed knowledge of the subject rather than explicitly stating what made a sea king a sea king. While this is certainly understandable from a practical standpoint, as nobody wants to be lectured on something they already know, it creates a real issue for historians, who do not possess the requisite knowledge to implicitly understand such nuances.

It is for this very reason that a vivid excerpt from the *Ynglinga Saga* is so telling, as it records, "There were many sea-kings who ruled over many men, and had no land. He only was only thought to fully deserve the name of sea-king, who never slept under sooty rafter and never drank at the hearth corner."<sup>29</sup> This is an telling passage, and one that seemingly speaks to a widespread practice, which corroborates Sturluson's work. This passage also clearly sets the guidelines for one to be considered a true sea king, guidelines that have noticeably been ignored by several historians, who prefer to characterize these kings in their terms rather than accept the characterization that has been attributed to them. Another interesting tenet of kingship is revealed in *St. Olaf's Saga* when it relates, "As soon as Olaf got men and ships, his warriors gave him the name of king, for it was the custom that host-kings, who went on Viking expeditions, if they were king-born, should be given the name of king, although they ruled over no lands."<sup>30</sup> It was this very cavalier attitude toward whom was given the title "king," not always on clear grounds, that has led many historians to hold a similarly dismissive view of kingship in this era, regardless of the information they have received from the age itself (or close to it, in the case of the sagas).

Such reticence to accept these guidelines has caused a great deal of dissension amongst historians concerning sea kingship, for whom the debate still rages as to what precisely quantified it. These debates are largely pointless, and have done little to nothing to advance our understanding of the

premise, at times even leading the discussion backwards. The furtherance of these debates have distracted historians from further delving into the premise of sea kingship, as is evidenced by the dearth of information on the subject.

For the few historians who have delved into the topic of sea kings, the title has all too often been relegated to simply mean "the chieftains of the raiding expeditions of the Scandinavian vikings" during the Viking Age.<sup>31</sup> Even Paul Du Chaillu, whose book includes the revelatory passage from the *Ynglinga Saga*, disappointingly precedes this passage by saying simply, "the commander of a ship was called a sea-king;" a partial classification that would seem to incorporate several of these captains who were not truly sea kings.<sup>32</sup> To be fair, Du Chaillu does go on to stipulate that:

as soon as a king's son or some other prominent man had acquired a number of war-ships, he was at once called king by his companions. These men roamed wherever they pleased, plundering every man's land; their estate was upon 'Ran's Land'-the sea; their ships were their houses.<sup>33</sup>

While this more extensive definition does rectify the leniency allowed by the earlier explanation, half definitions like the former are a key contributing factor to the continuation of this debate. Such definitions have been embraced by Paul Sinding, who misleadingly uses the term sea-king in the subtitle for one of his books. It soon becomes evident, however, that for Sinding the term is nothing more than a kenning, and not merely for captains, but for Viking raiders in general, an error regardless of how one chooses to quantify sea kingship.<sup>34</sup>

These two examples represent a few of the issues with this debate and its roots, but also the stunning lack of attention the subject has been given by scholars, particularly of late. This is truly a topic that has been largely forgotten by history, a far cry from the days of old, wherein sea kings were synonymous with their watery domain. Here is an issue that has largely eluded or gone unnoticed by historians, and thus ought to be a tantalizing prospect for future study, as there promise to be breakthroughs in the field, so long as one can navigate the nuanced terminology and embrace the entirety of the sources available, although further discoveries (particularly textual) could also prove to be illuminating. These scholars must also be skillful and wary enough to avoid being dragged into the age-old debate that has so plagued the field.

Yet this debate is by no means arbitrary, as, depending on one's definition, the term sea king either represents a

fairly large percent of the Viking Age population (particularly those whose names are known to us, such as Egil, Ragnar Lodbrok, etc) or it could be reserved for a much smaller group, those who made permanent (or at the very least, significant) residence at sea, rather than seasonal raiding. This latter definition is certainly more closely aligned with the Ynglinga Saga’s description, and seems also to correlate with the Heimskringla’s description, which has an air of importance associated with the title that seems to outweigh that of a mere captain. Even so, there are several potential points of contradiction, such as whether Haki and Solvi would have retained the title sea king after ascending to the Swedish throne, or whether they “shed their sea king skin” and became more conventional kings after that, much like Robert Ferguson’s argument concerning Harald Hardrada and the kingship.<sup>35</sup> Regardless of these several issues, the evaluation given by the Ynglinga Saga seems to be by far the most compelling and complete description available and most in line with how the people of the Viking Age would have identified the concept.

As such, it ought to be stated that the sea kings of the Viking Age were far more than merely ship captains or casual raiders. Saekonungr, actual saekonungr, were a different breed entirely, one who made their residence and earned their livelihoods aboard their ships. These men earned the title of king through their mastery of men and their prowess and comfort atop the waves. Yet these sea kings, bold and infamous as they once were, have largely been forgotten by time, rendered a historic afterthought. While there is a great deal that has been similarly lost to history, it would be a calamity if the sea kings were to suffer such an ignominious fate. Yet there is a great deal that may be learned on the topic—all one has to do is look.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Snorri Sturluson, “Egil’s Saga,” in *Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Ornlófur Thorsson, trans. Bernard Scudder (New York: Penguin, 2000), 126.
- <sup>2</sup> John Haywood, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of the Vikings* (New York: Penguin, 1995), foreword.
- <sup>3</sup> Paul C. Sinding, *The Northmen: The Sea-Kings and the Vikings* (New York: Edward O. Jenkins, 1883), 38.
- <sup>4</sup> Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson’s Heimskringla* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 130.
- <sup>5</sup> Haywood, *Penguin Historical Atlas*, 31.
- <sup>6</sup> Sinding, *The Northmen*, 52, 56.
- <sup>7</sup> Martin Bouquet, *Recueil des Historiens des Gaules et de las France* (Paris: Paris V. Palme, 1840), 4.
- <sup>8</sup> Haywood, *Penguin Historical Atlas*, 30.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.

- <sup>10</sup> Paul B. Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age, vol. 1* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1840), 499.
- <sup>11</sup> Bjorn Sigfusson, “Names of the Sea-Kings,” *Modern Philology* 36, no. 2 (Nov. 1934): 125.
- <sup>12</sup> Rev. James Ingram, trans., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (St. Petersburg, Fla.: Red and Black Publishers, 2009), 48, 49, 78.
- <sup>13</sup> Bagge, *Society and Politics*, 14.
- <sup>14</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*, trans. Lee M. Hollander (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), 136.
- <sup>15</sup> Sigfusson, “Names of the Sea-Kings,” 139.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 25.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> Sigfusson, “Names of the Sea-Kings,” 131.
- <sup>22</sup> Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 23n.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., 23n, 27.
- <sup>24</sup> Sinding, *The Northmen*, 44.
- <sup>25</sup> Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 34.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., 35.
- <sup>29</sup> Du Chaillu, *Viking Age*, 499.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> Sigfusson, “Names of the Sea-Kings,” 125.
- <sup>32</sup> Du Chaillu, *Viking Age*, 499.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> Sinding, *The Norsemen*, 84.
- <sup>35</sup> Robert Ferguson, *The Vikings: A History* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 364.

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# The Pictorial Stylings of Louis Raemaekers and David Low: A Comparison of Anti-German Cartoons from World War I to World War II

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It is early in World War I, and the verdict has come back. Louis Raemaekers has been acquitted for treason. However, that was not the outcome the Germans wanted. This led to them placing a bounty equivalent to \$3000 on Raemaekers’ head. Similarly, just after World War II ended, a list came to light detailing the people who would be the first to die at the hands of the Nazis if they had succeeded in invading England. David Low’s name was towards the top. What type of people are Raemaekers and Low that would warrant such hostility from the German government? Politicians? Generals? In these two instances, they were cartoonists. Louis Raemaekers and David Low were wanted dead by Germany in World War I and World War II respectively because of the cartoons they published in their countries and abroad, which damaged the public opinion of Germans.

Surely this fact alone speaks to the influence each cartoonist had. As arguably the most influential cartoonists of their respective world wars, Raemaekers and Low created images that were widely disseminated throughout the world, making political cartoons even more effective and capable of shaping historical change than what was previously considered possible. It is the artist’s job to take a situation and manipulate the audience’s perception towards a specific outcome. If an artist can do this well, he or she receives a certain degree of recognition if not in name, then at least in style. Raemaekers and Low shaped public perception of the Germans, initially in the countries they drew for, then eventually expanding abroad to other Allied nations. Raemaekers’s approach appealed to the Allied public’s emotional responses through his depictions of German atrocities. Low focused on political events unfolding at the time, often ridiculing Hitler, while still portraying Germany as a legitimate threat. The heated reactions each cartoonist received from Germany’s political leaders during their

respective wars show how ways of thinking about Germans could be significantly shaped by the stroke of a pen.

## Theoretical Background

Political cartoons have been a useful medium for disseminating information to the public since the seventeenth century. Their characterizations of people and events call for a critical analysis. The Political Cartoon by Charles Press lists the three main types of cartoons: comic art, social cartoons, and political cartoons. Comic art, Press explains, is designed to amuse or entertain. This can be most readily seen through the Sunday Funnies in newspapers. Social cartoons are similar in that they seek to amuse, yet they are different in that they draw on a particularly frustrating or upsetting social issue and attempt to make it more tolerable by “bring[ing] a wry smile of recognition” to the viewer. Finally, the political cartoons champion a specific political faction or point of view.<sup>1</sup> Their purpose then is to influence the viewer with “regards to specific political events of the day” or “predispose them to a particular action.”<sup>2</sup>

Samuel A. Towers alludes to the phrase “a picture is worth a thousand words” by reasoning that because a person’s primary contact with the universe is visual, “the impact of one image is a thousand times more immediate than the impact of a thousand words.”<sup>3</sup> This sense of immediacy was especially vital when less of the populace was literate. Even now, however, political cartoons still find relevance in that they make their audience confront the current debates facing their community (whether it be local or international). Thomas Milton Kemnitz argues that it is also because of this immediacy that cartoons are “an ideal media for suggesting what cannot be said by the printed word.”<sup>4</sup> What might be difficult to put into words might work better as an image. For example, writing about a leader’s weight might be