

HUMAN AFTER ALL: EMOTIONS IN VIKING AGE MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS
UMANI NONOSTANTE TUTTO: RAPPRESENTAZIONE DELLE EMOZIONI IN
ESPOSIZIONI MUSEALI SULL'ERA VICHINGA

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Abstract: The characters from the Icelandic sagas have been referred to as cold, unfeeling, and lacking emotion. However, people in the Viking Age were far from emotionless. Emotion is increasingly becoming acknowledged as a concrete part of human history and experience. In recent years, interest in and acknowledgement of emotions from the past has continued to grow and become accepted in the field of academia. This article examines how emotion is portrayed in, or absent from, exhibits covering people from the Viking Age through three Icelandic case studies: The National Museum of Iceland (a principal museum), The Settlement Exhibition (an accredited museum), and The Saga Museum (a non-accredited museum). We explore textual, visual, and other sensory representations within the exhibits through the lens of emotion studies and museology. We intend to look at how emotion has been assigned to the subjects of the exhibitions, and how the lack of attending to emotions in Viking Age exhibitions has the potential to foster the dehumanization of people from the Viking Age. Our aim, through the analysis of the case studies, is to recognize and analyze the attempts to include a complex emotional spectrum that characterizes the historical, but above all human, subjects portrayed in the exhibitions.

Keywords: Emotion Studies, Museum Studies, Viking Age, Curatorship

Riassunto: I personaggi delle saghe islandesi sono frequentemente descritti come rigidi e insensibili, con limitata espressione di emozioni nel contesto letterario. Tuttavia, le persone in era vichinga, come d'altronde qualunque essere umano, erano ben lontani dall'essere privi di emozioni, presentando una notevole complessità emozionale. Negli anni recenti, crescente interesse è stato rivolto al ruolo delle emozioni nel passato e la ricerca sul soggetto è inerentemente in sviluppo nel mondo accademico. Questo articolo esamina come l'emozione è presente, o assente, dalle mostre che trattano l'era vichinga soffermandosi su tre casi di studio islandesi: il Museo Nazionale Islandese, *The Settlement Exhibition*, ed il Museo della *Saga*. Esploriamo così le rappresentazioni testuali, visive e sensoriali delle mostre trattanti l'era

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vichinga nei musei in questione, usando una prospettiva che combina teorie delle emozioni e studi museali. Con il presente articolo intendiamo focalizzare l'attenzione sui soggetti delle mostre, in questo caso i vichinghi. Discutiamo dunque in che modo la presenza, o mancanza, di emozione nella curatela delle mostre sull'era vichinga facilita la deumanizzazione dei suddetti soggetti. Il nostro scopo, attraverso l'analisi dei casi di studio, è di riconoscere i tentativi di includere uno spettro emozionale complesso che caratterizza i soggetti storici, ma soprattutto umani, dei quali ogni mostra narra la storia.

Parole Chiave: Teorie delle Emozioni, Studi Museali, Era Vichinga, Curatela

Introduction

The word “Viking” may likely conjure up an image of violence and rage, burning monasteries, raiding, pillaging, and battle. The academic world has spent the last several decades moving away from the two-dimensional view of the “Vikings” to highlight the many other varied aspects of culture, society, and life in the Viking Age, though simplified images and ideas about what a “Viking” is still permeate pop culture (Lönnroth, 1997, p. 225-249). We see emphasis placed on violence and its glorification in reference to Vikings in movies (*The Northman* (2022), *Viking Legacy* (2016), *Valhalla Rising* (2009), *Northmen: A Viking Saga* (2014), *A Viking Saga: The Darkest Day* (2013), television shows (*Vikings* (2013-2020), *Vikings: Valhalla* (2022-in progress), and video games (*Assassins Creed: Valhalla* (2020), *God of War: Ragnarök* (release date is November 2022)). The overall emphasis and glorification of violence contribute to wider misconceptions and misunderstandings about people from the Viking Age.

As museums are places where the academic world and general public meet, they have great potential for educating their visitors and correcting, to some extent, these misconceptions. This paper will examine how emotion is portrayed in, or is absent from, exhibits about people from the Viking Age at three Icelandic museums: The National Museum of Iceland (a principal museum), The Settlement Exhibition (an accredited museum), and The Saga Museum (a non-accredited museum) by applying emotion studies and museum studies.



Throughout the study, we do not individuate a specific set of viewers as some studies may do. The latter may be strict on the definition of viewers or public that visit the above-mentioned exhibitions, by for instance focusing on Icelandic and Scandinavian visitors or other peoples with a Viking heritage background. Instead, we refer to viewers and the public in a large sense, which comprehends both Icelandic visitors and those external to Iceland, such as international tourists, academics and museum professionals³.

Part of the academic development of how the Viking Age is considered includes looking at emotions in medieval Scandinavia. The sagas and their famous characters have provided inspiration for modern portrayals of so-called Vikings. Characters from the sagas have often been referred to as cold, unfeeling, and lacking emotion that we as modern viewers can relate to, especially when in the context of violence. In popular culture, the majority of these Viking heroes and anti-heroes are men of few words, violent tendencies, and little emotion. These portrayals are influenced by our modern understanding of emotion and emotional expression, not taking into account that people living in the Viking Age would have had a drastically different understanding and concept of emotions.

People living in the Viking Age were far from emotionless and had a complex range of emotions and emotional expressions that can be difficult for people to fully grasp without deeper reading and contextualization. Emotion is increasingly becoming acknowledged as a concrete part of human history and experience. In recent years, interest in and acknowledgement of emotions from the past has continued to grow and become accepted in the field of academia. In the museum sector, attention has been given to emotion in relation to visitors and visitor experience, notably in the context of historical empathy.

Historical empathy is an important part of museum work, where “...both emotional engagement with and contextual understanding of [historical events and people]” are needed

³According to the Icelandic Museum Act 2011 No. 141 (safnarad.is), Section I, Article 3 it is stated that museums “[...]shall be accessible to the public” and “[...] make their collections and archives accessible to the general public and to academics”. In Section V, Article 14 it is further elaborated that museums “[...] shall have the purpose to serve Icelandic society. They shall be open to the public and shall collect, preserve, study and communicate whatsoever bears witness to humanity, its history and culture, and the natural and physical environment on behalf of society and for its advancement”.



to increase engagement with the past and historical understanding (Savenije and de Bruijn, 2017, 832). However, little work has been done on the emotions of past peoples, specifically the subjects of museum exhibits which are dealing with what we define as “staged humanity”. Drawing from Cambridge Dictionary, the definition of the verb “to stage” in its infinitive form is “to arrange and perform a play or show”⁴. In its passive form, becoming thus an adjective, the action is “received” rather than given, denoting the implied powerlessness of historical subjects in shaping the perception and emotions that the contemporary audience associates with them.

Scholars have taken a variety of approaches to studying people living in the Viking Age. These are reflected in museums as well, as exhibitions attempt to show a fuller picture of who these people were. “The Vikings”, an exposition formed in partnership with The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the British Museum, aimed to reframe the perception of Viking culture in 1980 (Gordon, 1980, 50-53). The British Museum continued this theme in their 2014 exhibition, “Vikings: Life and Legend”, as evidenced in the introduction from historian Bettany Hughes. In the introduction, Hughes (2014) tells the audience that “the Vikings were capable of exceptional cruelty and violence, but they were also explorers and diplomats, artists, traders, and settlers.”

The tendency to move away from viewing Viking age people as two-dimensional, emotionally limited, and inherently violent Vikings can also be seen in museums in Iceland. The Saga Museum advertises their experience as a way to “Experience the Icelandic Sagas” and “History Comes Alive” (sagamuseum.is), though they also still offer the chance to “Walk Among the Vikings”⁵. The English page of the Settlement Exhibition offers visitors the opportunity to “Step into the Viking Age”, although interestingly the Icelandic version of the page advertises it as “*Lífið á landnámsöld*”⁶ suggesting that the use of the word “Viking” has greater appeal for foreign or non-Icelandic speaking visitors. The National Museum does not have a designated section of exhibition space for “The Vikings” or “The Viking Age”, but

⁴ “Stage.” STAGE | Meaning, Definition in Cambridge English Dictionary, dictionary.cambridge.org, 17 Aug. 2022, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/stage?q=to+stage>

⁵ From the Saga Museum’s premises.

⁶ “Life in the age of settlement”: reykjavikcitymuseum.is/the-settlement-exhibition



instead has a text panel in the section “The Dawn of Icelandic Society” called “Vikings in Iceland” that explains the visitor “The Icelanders were mostly farmers rather than Vikings, although they maintained certain Viking customs”⁷.

While there is room for greater nuance and explanation of the usage of “Viking” in all three museums, as we will see later in the paper, they all do work to contribute to a fuller portrayal of people in the Viking Age: a portrayal with less emphasis on violence and its negative connotations. However, the extent to which emotion is utilized in this process varies greatly between the different museums.

The lack of attending to emotions in Viking Age exhibitions has the potential to foster the dehumanization of people from the Viking Age. Our aim, through the analysis of the case studies, is to recognize the attempts to include a complex emotional spectrum that characterizes the historical, but above all human, subjects portrayed in the exhibition. We thus intend to initiate an academic development of an approach that combines emotion studies and museum studies with a focus on the subjects of the exhibition.

Lastly, if emotions are part of human history (Boddice, 2017, p. 11) then misrepresentation of the latter (consciously or subconsciously), for instance through museum exhibitions, could lead to a tweaked and, under certain aspects, unfaithful reporting of history. What we deem at stake in this study is how history and historical figures are perceived, depicted and described within museums, which are places that are able to reach a large and diverse audience. Another point we consider is the intrinsic humanity of the historical characters and how they might be dehumanized in the process of telling their story in a way that shows little care for their emotions.

Museums are already reconstructing so much of history in other ways, which is often exposed to and influenced by national and political themes (Bennett, 1990, pp. 35-55). In this paper, we discuss how the absence of the essential human experience in institutional representations of a historical culture does affect, shape and can disrupt public memory and public imagination. It is thus increasingly problematic to entirely exclude emotion from that

⁷ From The National Museum’s premises.

reconstruction and to ignore that the very subjects of those exhibits are indeed humans, after all.

Emotion Studies and Emotions in History

Emotion studies is a relatively young field, with early work on emotions taking root in the late 19th - early 20th centuries, and gaining more traction in the 21st century (Boddice, 2017, p. 11). The field of study is largely recognized as beginning with the 1985 article in the *American Historical Review* "Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards" by Peter and Carol Stearns. In the article, the Stearns' advocated for a history of emotions, understood in part by separating emotions, defined as "a set of interactions among subjective and objective factors...which give rise to feeling" from emotionology, the rules and attitudes that a community or group has towards emotions and emotional expression (Stearns, 1985, p. 813).

Since 1985 emotion studies have taken off and are now a recognized component of study in a variety of fields, including the arts, anthropology, archaeology, literature, medicine, psychology, and most notably for the purposes of this paper, history and museology. There are numerous areas in which one can study emotion, including their biological and neurological elements, an individual's emotions in relation to a societal or communal group, and the politics and gendering of emotions. We can safely assume that emotion is an intrinsic part of the human experience, and has been so throughout human history (Boddice, 2017, p. 11). Studying and acknowledging emotions throughout history has continued to evolve and develop in recent years, which in turn has the potential to impact historical museum exhibitions.

Emotions can be understood as a combination of neurological responses and cultural influences. No matter what the emotion is, how it is expressed, or how an individual or community understands it, the emotion begins in the brain (Lindenberger, 2010, p. 13). These neurological and psychological reactions to internal or external influences are then shaped by cultural and societal influences. An individual feels and expresses emotion according to their respective societal standards. The culture and society that a person grows up in have a major influence on how they experience and understand emotion. The context of emotions and

emotional expression varies across cultures and time and includes how any given emotion is understood and expressed, who is allowed to express which emotions, and what is acceptable by society. Barbara Rosenwein and William Reddy, both powerhouses in the field, have proposed several incredibly helpful methods and ways of studying and understanding emotion in history.

Rosenwein's concept of an emotional community, being "groups in which people adhere to the same norms of emotional expression and value – or devalue – the same or related emotions" (2006, p. 2), allows us to define targeted groups when analyzing emotions in history. For Viking Age emotions, central to the focus of this article, the emotional communities can be seen first as the culture and society of Old Norse-Icelandic populations in Iceland. This can be further divided into additional subgroups of emotional communities by using class, race, gender, and social position. It is possible that an individual can belong to multiple emotional communities (Rosenwein, 2003, p. 2). This umbrella of multiple emotional communities would, to a certain extent, share a set of emotional standards and guidelines that would be understood by members of the community and would set acceptable emotional reactions. The subgroups would then have additional rules or acceptable modes of expression (Rosenwein, 2006, p. 24). Emotional displays thus differ based on the setting. The guidelines do not dictate what or how a person feels, but guide who can express emotion and in what way. Reddy also has several helpful concepts and terminology that can further aid in our understanding of an individual's emotional expression.

Reddy (2001) suggests that an individual within a given group, here understood as an emotional community, must adhere to the cultural and emotional norms of their group⁸. They do so through "goal coordination" and "coordination of behavior" (Reddy, 2001, p. 118-122). An individual within an emotional community will likely experience emotions that are unacceptable to openly express or act upon. An individual has a personal goal whose success is often tied to interactions and connections within their community. In order for an individual

⁸ Reddy (2001) uses the term emotional regime, and the emotional regime is often compared to Rosenwein's emotional community (2006). While there are a few key differences, there is also a lot of overlap. For the purposes of this paper, emotional community best fits the concept, but we can understand it partially within the context of Reddy's emotional regime.



to be successful in their community, they must adhere to societal norms, including emotional expression. Personal goals, ranging in complexity and frequency, are tied to this successful process. Examples of these goals in the Viking Age could include ending a feud, increasing social status or wealth, securing a good marriage, or ensuring your family is protected from famine and violence. When an individual experiences conflict with their goals it results in “emotional suffering” (Reddy, 2001, p. 123). One way to avoid or limit emotional suffering is through emotional management, which allows a person to exhibit control over their emotional expression and ensure that they stay in line with the acceptable societal norms. Furthermore, expressed emotion may not always be in line with the actual feeling. This reasoning allows us to better understand the social and cultural implications of historical emotions within defined emotional communities, and we can therefore begin to apply emotion studies to people from the past.

There are several key issues that arise when studying emotions in history. We do not have first-hand access to how individuals and communities experienced emotion. Our own thoughts and feelings on emotion have been influenced by the cultures and times we live in. When working with literary sources, we understand that emotional comprehension comes from a combination of the audience and the emotional framework embedded in the text itself (Rikhardsdóttir, 2017, p. 75). The words that we use today to describe a certain emotion or emotional state may not have been used in the past or may have had entirely different contexts and implications. There has also been a general misconception that people in earlier time periods did not feel or experience the same level and intensity of emotions that we do today. This notion has been widely rejected by more recent scholars who argue that emotion exists across time and culture but varies widely in terms of how it has been understood, expressed, and preserved. Rosenwein, for example, states it is possible to “...recognize various emotional styles, emotional communities, emotional outlets, and emotional restraints in every period...(and) consider how and why these have changed over time.” (Rosenwein, 2002, p. 845). Notwithstanding, these difficulties and misunderstandings do not mean that we cannot study emotions from the past.

The most common way for historians to analyze historical emotions is through literature and art, but as both are created for an audience they are therefore not always an

accurate indicator of how an individual experienced emotion. They do, however, show us what emotions and forms of emotional expression were valued or discouraged by a given community. This allows us to study and analyze emotions from different communities and time periods. Emotion in medieval Scandinavia has emerged as a subsection of emotion studies, with many prominent scholars contributing to the thawing of emotions that are frozen in textual and artistic works. Our modern understanding of historical emotion and the influence of our own emotional communities affects how we view and understand people of the past, including within the museum space.

Emotions and Museum Exhibitions

Museums are and can be many things. These include physical spaces hosting cultural institutions, digital platforms for interactive formats of art, communal meeting points, places where identity is made and influenced, and material or liminal possibilities for personal growth (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, p. 1-22). Additionally, museums perform multiple functions and can be subjective depending on their purpose within the society or the motivations of each individual who visits them. As Isaac Newton would put it with the third law of thermodynamics, every action has an equal and opposite reaction (1687). In the complex case of human functioning and the development of social interaction, the reaction can be translated into emotional responses to objects, people, places and situations.

Museums are composed of all of the latter, where these elements come together and combine resulting in an infinite and unpredictable accumulation of emotional states and reactions. Rudolf Otto talks about "numinous experiences"⁹ on a religious level, while Cameron and Gatewood (2000, p. 107-127; 2003, p. 55-71; Gatewood & Cameron, 2004, p. 61-73) implemented this theory in the context of museums (Latham, 2013). According to Latham (2013, p. 3-20), "a numinous experience can inspire all kinds of emotions - joy, wonder, fear, sorrow or grief - and be triggered by many different things, from artifacts, to smells, and places."

⁹ Rudolf Otto describes it as a "non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling whose primary and immediate object is outside the self." Otto, Rudolf. 1969. *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*. Oxford: Oxford University Press



The “numen-seeking” push from museum visitors comes from the desire for a transcendental connection with the past, whether it might directly be connected to them on a heritage level or not. It could be inspired by a search for roots or identity, nostalgia or aesthetic fascination (Cameron & Gatewood, 2003, p. 55–71). The motivation of visitors can better be approached from a visitor studies perspective through the observations and empirical research of numerous scholars. Whether visitors are motivated by knowledge and learning (Falk & Gillespie, 2009, p. 112-132), identity seeking (Falk, 2016), or simply an aesthetic desire such as taking photographs (Stylianou-Lambert, 2017, p. 114-137), the emotional role of museum exhibitions is present at every point of the process, from setting up the exhibition up to after the public has concluded the visit.

Despite the obvious presence of emotions, they have been somewhat neglected in the field of museum and exhibition studies (Watson, 2015, p. 283-301). Engaging emphatically with heritage and historical narration is not often taken into consideration, which results in quite factual and dispassionate exhibitions (Watson, 2015, p. 283-301). Watson (2015, p. 283-301) refers to the emotional reactions of the museum visitors rather than emotional representation within the exhibition. It is even harder to find extensive research on the topic of emotions applied to the human subjects of museum exhibitions. The focus is often on the engagement of the audience in relation to the exhibition whilst the overall visual, textual or mixed-media representation of feelings from the past is lacking a thorough analysis within the academic community.

Pekarik (2002, p. 262-264) argues that feelings are what visitors, intentionally or unintentionally, treasure the most after an exhibition. Visitors, therefore, have an emotional response to the museum exhibition experience, and the response will vary from person to person. What do we do when the exhibition represents an experience encompassing the feelings of people from the past? The focus of this article is how Viking Age exhibitions portray the “Vikings”. This appellation has often been romanticized in various contexts (Ward, 2001, p. 6-20), but has also been applied in modern history to refer to the culture and history of a specific group of people¹⁰. Museum visitors experience emotional responses and form

¹⁰ The word ‘viking’ itself has brought about a plethora of academic discussion and debate. It is now generally accepted in the academic world that the word viking refers to something that a person did,

opinions when viewing exhibitions about other people, including the so-called Vikings. When these historical feelings and their implications within the museum space are neglected by museum professionals, a dehumanization process of the subjects of the exhibition can initiate and propagate as the norm (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008, p. 39).

Gilbert analyzes the phenomenon of being connected with historical people from the past in relation to the videogame *Assassin's Creed* (2019, p. 108-137). The qualitative study explores the effects that historical representation of events and humans have on a set of young gamers and students. The study shows how the latter sensed a deeper connection to history and perception of the past than they did before playing. The gameplay experience can be compared to the museum's experience, as a way to foster human connection and perception of the feelings of the humans of the past (Gilbert, 2019, p. 108-137). Visitors' emotional responses are influenced by multiple factors, but how has the representation of emotions been approached in exhibitions about the Viking Age?

Museums can be places for communal memories that embody emotions and beliefs (Tint, 2010). These emotions and beliefs are adapted to the contemporary interpretation of historical events narrated in an exhibition. The exhibition becomes a medium for emotions from the past to facilitate emotions in the present, but the response becomes inevitably inaccurate in its de-contextualized reception (Smith, 2007). Heritage is an emotional practice that hinders neutrality (Watson, 2016, p. 75-89), which needs to be taken into consideration when planning exhibitions that deal with heritage and community representation. During the process of creating a museum exhibition, especially a historical exhibition that encompasses people (and peoples) from the past, the various elements irrevocably lead to an almost theatrical staging of the exhibition's subjects. Enactments of "staged humanity"¹¹ occur when

not who they were. It is therefore incorrect to refer to the people living in Scandinavia in the so-called Viking Age (793-1066) Vikings, as the term more accurately refers to the (almost exclusively) men taking part in the act of taking part in piracy during raids. One could only be called a Viking when they were out actually taking part in a raid, or: "...a Viking was only a Viking when out a-Viking." (Driscoll, 2019, p. 19-27). Despite this acknowledgement, for better or worse the use of the word Vikings has made its way into pop culture and has widespread usage both within and without academia. Its usage can draw public interest to exhibits, but can also cause the visitor to arrive with preconceived notions or ideas about vikings, and must be contextualized.

¹¹ This concept is strictly original to this paper and it has been developed throughout the study considering its aims and aspirations. It has unfortunately not been revealed to us in a dream.



telling stories and depicting subjects whose sole memory, however detailed that may be, lives in a transformed present. A staging, although as accurate as possible, still functions as a transposition of something, an emulation. We claim that the emotional sphere is crucial to be taken into account in order to produce a clear-cut exhibition.

The current state of how heritage stories are approached and exhibited in museums does not consider how the language of emotions has changed throughout human history (Watson, 2016, p. 75-89; Bourke, 2003, p. 111-133). The concept of empathy through exhibition-making needs to be embraced by those responsible for conceiving the exhibition, in order to convey the most accurate possible representation of emotions to museum visitors (Savenije & De Bruijn, 2017 p. 832-845). In the next section, we are going to explore how empathy and emotions are approached and portrayed in the main source material for the Viking Age period.

Portrayal of Emotions in Old Norse Literature

As discussed previously, we are faced with many difficulties when attempting to understand emotion in historical contexts. The historical sources used to infer emotions were originally created for an entirely different audience than ourselves. Members of the original contemporary audience would have had a different understanding of not only emotion, but of how emotion fit into the fabric of their daily lives. The *íslendingasögur*, also known as the Sagas of Icelanders or family sagas, are the main source material used to discuss emotion in Viking Age Iceland. These sagas have also contributed to the modern understanding of people in Viking Age Iceland. This group of sagas, written mainly in the 13th and 14th centuries, covered events and people that took place in the 10th and 11th centuries. This presents a few obvious initial challenges: the authors being removed from the events and people they are writing about, an overarching Christian influence, and the desire to make the stories and characters larger than life in the retelling process.

Despite these difficulties, and the difficulties that come with studying emotion in history, we can still gain a wealth of information. While not considered to be entirely historically accurate, the *íslendingasögur* do depict a fairly accurate representation of culture (Mills, 2014) and have been used by scholars to study Viking Age Iceland across a wide array of subjects, including emotion. A significant amount of work has been undertaken on emotions



in medieval Iceland and Scandinavia, though there is still much work to be done. Notable contributions to emotion in saga literature and medieval Iceland and Scandinavia have been made by William Ian Miller, Sif Rikharðsdóttir, Carolyn Larrington, Kristin Wolf, and others.

The *íslendingasögur* are rather infamous for appearing to lack emotion and for being cold, unfeeling, and showing emotional reticence. Recent academic work has shown that this is a misconception, and that emotion in the sagas must be inferred by the reader (Rikharðsdóttir, 2017; Miller, 1992, p. 94-109). As Rikharðsdóttir notes, "...beneath the apparently calm surface of many saga characters there is an abundance of passion and emotional turbulence." (Rikharðsdóttir, 2017, p. 1). Our modern understanding of emotion and the influence of our own emotional communities affects how we view and understand people in the past. We may see an action or emotional response in the sagas and have an adverse reaction to it because we subconsciously apply our own set of standards. Emotion exists in the sagas through descriptive words in the narrative, through somatic reactions (swelling, color change, tears, etc.), through dialogue and action, and through the prevalent system of beliefs that the characters exist within (Miller, 1992, p. 93).

Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir's smile in *Laxdæla saga* is an excellent example of the above. In the saga, her husband is murdered and his killers come to her home to inform her of the killing. One of the men approaches her to wipe her husband's blood from his sword on her apron (*Laxdæla saga*, p. 168). Her response is a smile - there are no tears, visible grief or anger. The lack of emotion appears to be quite strange to us as modern readers, but there are many undercurrents of contextualization needed to allow us to properly understand this smile. As Sif Rikharðsdóttir suggests, the smile serves to mask Guðrún's internal emotional state and subverts expected somatic responses (Rikhardsdottir, 2017, p. 127). We see evidence of Guðrún's grief twelve years later, when she uses the blood-stained clothing to goad her sons into taking revenge for their father's killing. It has been argued that Guðrún displaces her emotional grief or sorrow in order to successfully incite revenge at a later date (Rikardsdottir, 2017, p. 129). On the surface, the smile seems cold, strange, and unexpected, but through a closer reading we can see that Guðrún was clearly affected by the death of her husband, and plenty of emotion lurks beneath the surface. The emotional community of Viking Age Iceland dictated how emotions were viewed in society, and acceptable emotions and emotional



displays were dependent on class, gender, and situation. Reading the sagas with these considerations in mind allows us to see emotion more clearly.

The Viking Age has seen waves of popularity throughout the centuries in various political, cultural, and entertainment contexts (Lönnroth, 1997, p. 225-249). The current popularity that the Viking Age and representations of Vikings enjoy in pop culture today presents itself in a variety of ways, including the aforementioned film and video game contexts. Violence, blood, and gore are key themes in the majority of these modern representations of Vikings (Dahm, 2018, p. 55). Vikings are often portrayed as the hero or anti-hero, allowing a glorification and justification for the violence while "...perpetuat(ing) age-old exaggerations regarding the Vikings" (Dahm, 2018, p. 55). Much of the inspiration for these representations comes from Old Norse mythology and Viking Age culture, of which the sagas are one of the largest bodies of sources.

As Murray Dahm states, a commonly shared trope from film representations of Vikings is "[...]the idea (again in part from the Sagas themselves) that Viking heroes (and villains) don't say much but reserve their words for pithy or laconic commentary that sums up the whole situation in single sentences." (Dahm, 2018, p. 57). These portrayals have our modern understanding of emotion and emotional expression assigned to them, not taking into account that people living in the Viking Age would have had a drastically different understanding and concept of emotions.

Representation of Vikings and the Viking Age in pop culture tends to glorify violence, and shows main characters who speak little, rarely show expressed emotion beyond the context of conflict, and exhibit stoicism. While anger and violence were a part of life in the Viking Age, it was a small piece of a larger picture full of emotion, ranging from high intensity to the mundane. They experienced emotions that we would understand today, though the expression and rationality behind them differ. These portrayals also fail to address the intricacies of the emotional communities of Viking Age people. Emotional elements from the Viking Age have clearly made their way into modern interpretations, like books, movies, tv shows, and music, albeit typically without a contextualization to properly understand the nuance of the Viking Age emotional experience.

Historically, museums have tended to shy away from a discussion of emotion in their exhibits. Emotions in history can be very hard to pin down, but excluding or limiting them means that we are missing a huge part of history. It is difficult to imagine our own experience lacking emotion when being discussed in the future. Emotion is a part of human experience, and academic work has shown that it is possible to infer emotion from Viking Age sources like the sagas. By examining the three aforementioned museums, we attempt to discover how much this acknowledgement and understanding of emotions permeate their museum exhibits about the Viking Age¹².

Case Studies: The National Museum of Iceland, The Reykjavík 871 ± 2: The Settlement Exhibition, and The Saga Museum

The display of emotions in museums can result in various interpretations, depending on the intrinsic individuality of visitors. As argued so far, the way exhibitions are designed influences the feelings and responses of visitors. In this article, we claim that, vice versa, exhibitions and displays about the Viking age are influenced by the collective imagination attributed to the subjects of these exhibitions. We investigate in what ways Viking Age museum exhibitions are conveying the emotions of the subjects (the “Vikings”) and reflect upon how emotional displays constitute the basis of collective imaginaries of humanity in Viking history. The historical period that we focus on in our case studies and consequent analysis is reflective of each one of the exhibitions on the Viking Age.

In order to verify and support our discussion, we present three Icelandic case studies: (1) the National Museum of Iceland, (2) the Settlement Exhibition and (3) the Saga Museum, all located in Iceland's capital Reykjavík. These museums were chosen in order to offer a diversified vision of the subject. The varied configuration, administrative structure and function of the three museum exhibitions allow us to produce a holistic observational analysis. The National Museum of Iceland is one of the three principal museums of the country¹³ and is therefore an accredited museum. The scope and purpose of a national museum are linked to

¹²The effect that these portrayals may have on visitors is beyond the scope of this paper, and further research is needed within the field of visitor studies.

¹³According to Museum Act 2011 No. 141. An English translation of the Act is available on safnarad.is.

identity-making processes along with heritage preservation (Bugge, 2011, p. 425-433)¹⁴. The Settlement Exhibition is a permanent museum exhibition which is part of the Reykjavik City Museums. It is also an accredited museum and has its own exhibition space in downtown Reykjavik. On the other hand, The Saga Museum is a private and therefore non-accredited museum. It does not conform to the Icelandic Museum Act 2011 No. 141 (safnarad.is).

The nature of the three case studies varies, but they all share the common theme of covering the Viking Age within their exhibitions. Through an observational analysis consequent to fieldwork in each one of the museums, we discuss the presence of emotions or lack thereof in the Viking Age displays and exhibitions within our three case studies. In this section, we provide a short history and context of the mentioned cases. In addition, we present the results of our fieldwork for each exhibition. The results will then be discussed in the Discussion section. The fieldwork consisted of visiting the three exhibitions, taking notes and photos, observing the display of emotions within the exhibitions, and talking to the museum staff if some of the visual representations and texts were unclear.

Furthermore, we realize that our fieldwork results, consisting of personal observations, reflections and analysis, cannot be uncompromisingly objective. This could be considered a shortcoming of this article, but it is also what lies at the very core of the topic we address: when it comes to emotions and subjectivity, everyone is human after all.

National Museum of Iceland

The National Museum of Iceland is recognised by the Icelandic Museum Council as one of the three principal museums in Iceland, along with The National Gallery and The Museum of Natural History. By extension and according to the Museum Act 2011 No. 141¹⁵,

¹⁴In 1918, both countries signed an Act of Union recognizing Iceland as a sovereign Kingdom in personal union with Denmark. From 1918, Iceland had its own national flag. Its foreign affairs and defence interests were represented by Denmark. The personal union was ended in 1944, when Iceland was declared a republic (Hjálmarson 1993; Ødegård 1998 in Bugge, 2011, p. 425-433).

¹⁵ See footnote 13.



the National Museum of Iceland is an accredited museum and has the duty to comply with the rules and guidelines of the Museum Act and the ICOM Code of Ethics¹⁶.

The history of the National Museum of Iceland started in 1863 and has been bound together with the development of Icelandic society (Hallgrímsdóttir, 2018, p. 140-143). The desire for independence and self-determination from the Danish kingdom has characterised the museum's foundation, but the museum's activity has been rather sporadic in the 20th Century (Hallgrímsdóttir, 2018, p. 140-143). However, with the 2004 opening of the new permanent exhibition "The Making of a Nation: Heritage and History in Iceland", the National Museum of Iceland gained international recognition beyond being a symbolic staple.

Even if the exhibition is far from being perfect, failing for example at including the varied history of Icelandic migration (Rúnarsdóttir, 2020, p. 82-95), "The Making of a Nation: Heritage and History in Iceland" gives an extensive overview of the Icelandic history from Settlement Age to the present day. There is a large variety in the type and period of the artifacts on display. From objects to photographs, there are roughly 3000 artifacts from the Settlement Age to contemporary Iceland.

The permanent exhibition focuses heavily on the relationship of Iceland and Icelanders as individuals in regard to the world; this includes the way the "external" world influences Icelanders and, to a smaller extent, vice versa. It functions as a time machine with different means of transportation. The journey starts off with a medieval wooden boat and culminates in a modern airport which represents "the Icelanders' gateway to the world" (thjodminjasafn.is).

The National Museum aims to tell the story of the nation through an archaeological-based approach, relying on hard facts as opposed to bringing literary and narrative sources into the mix for interpretation and analysis. While they have the least amount out of the three of visible emotion or emotional expression in the exhibits that cover the Viking Age, they also

¹⁶ See <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/code-of-ethics/>. "The museums promote human well-being, social development, tolerance, and respect by advocating multicultural and multilingual expression in the promotion of collections of both tangible and intangible heritage. The museums create a favourable environment for connections between the community and the museums to create a harmonious relationship between both parts".



work to show visitors that the history of the Viking Age period in Iceland cannot be simplified to a discussion on Vikings, violence, or other misconceptions that are prevalent in pop culture or elsewhere outside the museum and academic spheres (Ward, 2001, p. 6-20). This begins immediately when you walk into the museum, as the first section is not referred to as the Viking Age, but “The Dawn of Icelandic Society”, covering the years between 800-1000. This flows into the second section of the museum, called “Reign of Christian Chieftains”, covering the years 1000-1200. In this way Icelandic history is not defined by the Settlement Age or the Viking Age, but instead creates a narrative that is based on other influences and factors.

The Viking Age is mentioned, and the word Vikings used, but it is also explained that it is incorrect to equate Vikings with medieval Icelanders. In a text wall titled “Vikings in Iceland 800-1000”, the following text can be found: “The Icelanders were mostly farmers rather than Vikings, although they maintained certain Viking customs. They traded, and the men were armed” This does not effectively explain the view that is now widely accepted in the academic world, that *Viking* is not a word that can be used to describe an ethnic group of people but instead refers to the act of piracy or raiding (Driscoll, 2019, p. 19-27; Byock, 2001). It does, however, show the visitor that it is incorrect to automatically think of medieval Icelanders as Vikings, compares Vikings to an occupation like farming, and loosely connects the idea that people in Viking Age’s Iceland shared customs, beliefs, and traditions with other medieval Scandinavian or Nordic peoples.

The museum works to show visitors the complexity and variety of the lives of medieval Icelanders. The exhibits tell visitors about trade, farming practices, domestic life and work, social structure, religious beliefs, animal husbandry, burial practices, and feuds. Artifacts are displayed with accompanying texts and videos to contextualize them for the visitor. In this way, a more complex portrait of the people living in Iceland in the Viking Age is created, but the lack of emotion still has limitations. There is very little outright mention of emotion and the emphasis is placed more on hard facts than storytelling. When emotion is brought up, it most often has negative connotations. There are two primary areas where emotion can be seen or inferred: textual displays and objects.



In a wall text titled “The First Winter”, the early days of the settlers in Iceland are described to the visitor. One of the lines of the text reads: “The first winter must have been hard because they cannot have brought much food to see them through the winter”. Emotion is not outright mentioned here with specific emotion words, but the visitor can imagine and infer various emotional responses to these difficulties that are rather universal. Difficult winters and low food supply have an emotional effect on people regardless of the time period. Another text from the wall titled “Vikings in Iceland” reads: “Feuds arose between individuals or whole families, often over property or matters of the heart. Such disputes often led to armed conflict. Fighting was always carried out at close quarters, hand-to-hand, never on horseback.” The use of the words “matters of the heart” implies an emotional element within the context of feuds, disputes, and violence. These were the two most noticeable signifiers of emotion when looking at displays strictly within the Viking Age part of the exhibition, though other emotional words and cues are sprinkled throughout the museum. There was one area where the absence of emotion was noticeably lacking: the discussion of death and burials.

The sections of the exhibition that discuss death and burials in the Viking Age are titled “Woman’s Grave”, “Child’s Grave”, and “On Horseback to Valhalla”, and feature the skeletal remains of three people: a woman, a child, and a man with a horse. The skeletons are placed in rectangular glass containers on top of dirt or sand-like material, with rocks and shells around them. They are set up in a way that allows visitors to look down at them, almost as if they are looking directly into a grave or burial site. Mourning the dead is a common practice across time and culture, and this was also true in medieval Iceland. The discussion of death, burials, and grave goods at the National Museum focuses on what the objects and skeletons found can tell us in terms of where the person came from, who they traded with, and where they traveled. It sticks to an archaeological viewpoint. There are skeletons on display, but nothing is said of mourning or feelings.

Reykjavík 871 ± 2: The Settlement Exhibition¹⁷

¹⁷ Since the time of writing this paper, The Settlement Exhibition has added a new display showing an animated recreation of the settlers. The new display presents a wide range of emotions shown through reconstructed facial expressions, body language and conversations of the exhibition’s subjects. We believe that this indicates that emotion is of ever-increasing importance within the museum space. Analysis of the new addition is not included in the paper.



Reykjavík 871 ± 2: The Settlement Exhibition, as the name implies, focuses on the age of settlement in Iceland, and is supported by the archeological excavation site which is the museum's beating heart. The Settlement Exhibition is one of five exhibitions of the Reykjavík City Museum (Borgarsögusafn Reykjavíkur) complex located in different areas of the city of Reykjavík. As part of the same exhibition complex, we find the exhibitions at the Árbær Open Air Museum, the Reykjavík Museum of Photography, the Reykjavík Maritime Museum and the artworks on Viðey Island. The whole complex is an accredited set of museum exhibitions that are expected to adhere to the Museum Act 2011 No. 141 (safnarad.is) and must follow the rules and guidelines accordingly.

The Settlement Exhibition invites visitors to "step into the Viking Age" (reykjavikcitymuseum.is) referring to its immersive quality. The full name of the exhibition, Reykjavík 871 ± 2, recognises the uncertainty in placing a precise year where the settlement of Iceland started. 871 ± 2 reflects the difficulties of a more accurate date which is parallel to the current historical accounts. The archeological remains were only discovered in 2001, and the exhibition opened in 2006 (Goodhouse, 2013, p. 256-259). The museum is interactive and multisensory, it engages the audience in several ways; with sounds, smells and digital elements. The twelfth-century *Landnámabók* (The Book of Settlements) and *Íslendingabók* (The Book of Icelanders) are often mentioned in the text descriptions and support the archeological part of the exhibition.

The Settlement Exhibition takes a combined approach of archaeological evidence and storytelling. The focus is on the history of the settlement of Reykjavík and the daily life of the people who may have lived there. There is little emotion in the textual aspects of the exhibition, which give visitors information in a technical way. The emotional aspects of the exhibit come through the videos that are displayed around the room. The preserved remains of a Viking Age longhouse sit in the center of the room. The videos are on the wall surrounding the longhouse, and blend in with the background. The wall is meant to replicate what the area would have looked like at the time of the Settlement, and goes from rocky coastline to wooded forests to marshy fields.



The videos blend in with their appropriate backgrounds and visitors can watch short clips of people going through scenes of daily life. The people in the videos are animated ghostly figures, with blurred faces and silhouettes. Despite the lack of facial expressions, visitors can infer emotions and feelings through body language and setting. These videos include a group of people in a type of funeral process, a man hunting a great auk, a family milking a sheep, a blacksmith wiping his brow as he works, and two figures collecting hay laying down together to have a moment of rest.

The video with the most visible emotion is of a funerary procession. A child plays outside of a small house before several adult figures come outside carrying a body. The sound switches from bird calls to a bell tolling. Just next to this video is a wall text stating that the religious beliefs of the people who lived here are unknown, which makes the use of a bell tolling an interesting addition. A bell tolling will likely cause an emotional response from some visitors who may link their own experience with churches or religion to more firmly place the video as a ceremony of mourning. This serves to both elicit an emotional response and make these historical figures more relatable.

The Saga Museum

The Saga Museum is located in Reykjavík's *Grandi* harbor neighborhood, and unlike the National Museum of Iceland and The Settlement Exhibition it is not recognised as an accredited museum by Museum Act 2011 No. 141. It differs from the National Museum and Settlement Exhibition in that it is not recognized as an accredited museum. The Saga Museum is composed of 17 "exhibits"¹⁸ or visual dioramas depicting significant people and events set

¹⁸ Below the title of each exhibit:

1. Iceland in the making
2. Papar - The First Inhabitants
3. Hrafna-Floki - The Exodus from Norway
4. Ingólfur Arnarson - The First Icelander
5. Skalla-Grímur and Egill - True Icelanders
6. Melkorka Mýrkjartansdóttir - Celts in Iceland
7. Leifur the lucky - Vinland
8. Freydís Eiríksdóttir - Heroine or Ogress?
9. Thorbjorg litilvolva - Can she see the future?
10. Thorgeir Ljosvetningagodi - Conversion to Christianity
11. The Althingi
12. Gudmundur godi - Benefactor of the People



in the Viking Age. The dioramas contain a mix of objects made of different materials such as wood, textile and plastic as well as full-scale silicone figures of people from the Viking Age. All the details, from jewelry to silicone figures, are curated by Saga Design. The aim of Saga Design is to create a “highly evocative portrayal of past and present culture” (sagamuseum.is).

Saga Design has also contributed to creating other Viking Age exhibitions such as the exhibition at the Norwegian History Center in Avaldsnes and a Viking Exhibition in the Faroe Islands. The method used for the making of the silicone figures was developed by the owner of the Saga Museum, Ernst Backman, who is also the owner of Saga Design¹⁹. Furthermore, it is claimed that “to achieve authenticity in items of clothing, weapons, and everyday objects, they have been constructed using traditional methods passed down through the ages” (sagamuseum.is).

The Saga Museum approaches Icelandic history, including the Viking Age, with a method that favors storytelling. There is a parallel to emotions in the sagas being seen and not explicitly described with the visual elements at the Saga Museum. Their life-size figures show visible emotion on their faces and in their body language. These figures are accompanied by texts that infer or describe the emotion, and soundscapes that further contribute to a display of the emotions felt by the historical figures. The museum creates an atmosphere for the visitor to absorb their surroundings, and lighting, sound, and special effects are all used to set the tone and mood for visitors. This begins as soon as you walk into the exhibition – it is a darker contrast to the natural light in the lobby, and the lighting focus is on the different figures as you wind your way through the rooms. It’s like seeing snapshots of a timeline of Icelandic history.

The section of the exhibit dedicated to Freyðís Eiríksdóttir shows a large amount of emotion. Freyðís Eiríksdóttir is a relatively well-known saga character, appearing in

13. Snorri Sturluson - A Poet and a Politician

14. The Battle at Orlygsstadir

15. The Black Death

16. Sister Katrin - The first Icelandic martyr

17. Jon Arason - The Reformation

¹⁹ “All items are hand-crafted down to the smallest detail. Painstaking research has gone into making the lifelike historical figures as accurate as possible”. (sagamuseum.is)



Grænlendiga saga (Saga of the Greenlanders) and *Eiríks saga rauða* (Saga of Eirik the Red)²⁰. In *Grænlendiga saga* she is depicted as a cruel, cold, and calculating villain. In *Eiríks saga rauða* she is depicted as a heroine, and it is this representation of her that we see in the Saga Museum. Between the narrative text in front of her and the audio guide accompaniment, visitors get the following story: During an expedition to Vínland, Freydís and her companions are caught in a conflict with a group of natives. The men in her party flee, and she reprimands them for their cowardice, trying to goad them into staying to fight. She is eventually forced to flee as well but being pregnant she is slower and loses sight of them. She comes across the dead body of one of the men in her party and, seeing the natives preparing to attack again, she takes up the sword from her dead companion, exposes her bare breast, and holds the sword up to it. This frightens the natives and they leave, allowing her party to recover.

She is described in the audio guide as “fearless” (Saga Museum). Her figure in the museum stands with the sword to her exposed breast, an open-mouthed grimace on her face, surrounded in the background by images of natives wearing expressions that could be read by visitors as confusion, fear, or bewilderment. Freydís’ grimace could be seen as anger, frustration, determination, courage, fear, or some combination of them. Visitors may have slightly different interpretations as to the specific emotions or combination of emotions exhibited by Freydís and the native figures in the background, but the overall emotional states are recognizable to visitors. There is audio of yelling, shouts of confusion, and battle noises being played in the background. The accompanying text tells her story:

“(she) made a solitary stand against the natives after her companions had fled. Finding herself cornered beside the corpse of Þorbrandur Snorrason, she took up his sword, opened her tunic and placed the blade against her naked breasts. This strange but bold gesture put the natives to flight”

The combination of Freydís’s grimace, the figures in the background, the use of a soundscape, and the accompanying text allow the audience to infer Freydís’s emotions. In this context, her grimace can be seen as a combination of several emotions, including anger, fear, bravery, and

²⁰ See “Magnus Magnusson and Herman Palsson, translators and editors, *The Vinland Sagas, Graenlendinga Saga and Erik's Saga*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. 1966”.

determination. It is an excellent parallel to the sagas – the emotion is there for the viewer to witness, but it is done in a way that modern visitors can more fully understand.

Even characters who are not central to the story show emotion. In a scene depicting Egill helping his father Skalla-Grímur, a young Egill has a facial expression that could be read as exhaustion, boredom, or frustration while she does her work. Smoke comes from a nearby fire, leaving a slightly strange smell in the air. This background serves to immerse the visitor in the exhibition. All three museums discuss iron production, but the Saga Museum also shows it within a context that allows visitors to relate to the people doing the work. There are characters and scenes that show violence, but it is combined with stories and figures showing a more varied culture and an array of emotions. People are working, traveling, having relationships and caring for their family members. People in the Viking Age are rounded out in this way. We see the violence that the Viking Age and ‘Vikings’ are famous for, but can also understand that it was a part of a much larger picture.

Discussion

At first glance, it is noticeable that our three case studies have significantly different approaches to their respective exhibitions covering the Viking Age period. While they all follow the academic trend of attempting to humanize the Settlers and deemphasize stereotypes of violence and aggression through different methods, the use of emotion and emotional expression as a part of this humanizing attempt varies widely among the exhibitions. As emotion and empathy are invariably linked (Snow, 2000, p. 65-78; Hoffman, 2000), it can be assumed that the presence of emotion within an exhibit is therefore helpful in evoking empathy from the museum visitor. That is not to say that a visitor cannot empathize with a situation described in a museum exhibition, but leaving the emotion of historical peoples out entirely leaves them vulnerable to becoming two-dimensional. The emotional response of visitors to the three museum exhibitions presented as our Case Studies regarding their empathy and perception of people living in the Viking Age goes beyond the scope of this paper, and further study is needed. The Case Studies section of this paper inclusive of field notes and observational analysis has shown that the study and curatorship of emotions in the field of museology present critical lacks and limitations, especially regarding the discussion of the emotion of people in the past.



One interesting point from the analysis presented in the Case Studies section is that we see that the use and display of emotions appear to be inversely proportional to the institutional status of the museum. The National Museum of Iceland has a more austere approach to history and presents historical facts and archeological artifacts to tell the story of a nation. In this way, there is little consideration and space for emotional portrayals or discussion of the people themselves. The Settlement Exhibition relies heavily on an archeology-based approach with historical facts, but allows slightly more room for emotional interpretation through the use of videos. This exhibition tells the history of the people who may have lived in the area by combining archaeology, natural history, and creative storytelling elements. The Saga Museum has no archeological artifacts, but relies heavily on emotions and emotional expression within its exhibition to tell the story of the nation through the people that settled and lived here. Their form of storytelling shows the most focus on the people themselves.

The National Museum of Iceland follows the *modus operandi* of national museums in its reporting of a factualized version of history. This has been the style of such museums for quite a long time. Museums have been perceived as solemn temple-like institutions, not unlike religious spaces (Cameron, 2004, p. 61-73; Chinnery, 2012, p. 269-276). The view of the museum as a detached and elevated place has perhaps hindered curators of national museum exhibitions from including a more human depiction of history which allows for the intricacies and variables of the exhibition's emotional states to be combined with archaeology and historical facts to create a more in-depth portrayal. The priority of the national museum is to set an objective and factual meaning-making process based on historical notions rather than the anthropological aspects of the exhibition's subjects, the Settlers. As Knell (2010, p. 3-28) states, national museums' performed reality is nonetheless a performance of non-absolute truths. He argues that, as reality and performance can never be disassociated, museum visitors buy into an illusion of factual reality that is far from objective.

The immersive quality of museums makes them an ideal place to observe societal and cultural changes through time. They also have the potential to allow visitors to recognize that humans of the past are perhaps not that different from humans of the present. Empathy and relatability through emotion are key ways for this recognition to occur. While there are a few areas that hint at emotion in the Age of Settlement exhibition in the National Museum, there



are also several areas that could benefit from the acknowledgement of emotion. Emotion is loosely hinted at in texts describing events, but it is lacking in areas where one would expect emotional responses. The section of the exhibit that covers death, burials, and grave goods, for example, is noticeably lacking emotion in the discussion. We can associate a wide number of emotions with death: grief, sadness, loneliness, anger, and guilt are just some of those examples. Death and mourning are significant parts of the human experience, and leaving emotion out of it has the potential to seem cold, emotionless, and “foreign” to our modern understanding.

The National Museum has the least amount of visible emotion within the exhibitions, both in terms of conceptual historical emotions applied to the subjects of the exhibition, and in terms of fostering historical empathy among the visitors. There are cue words and phrases throughout the text walls hinting at the difficulties that early settlers to Iceland faced, including the difficult winters and “matters of the heart” mentioned in the Case Studies section. These serve to elicit historical empathy to a certain degree. On the other hand, the museum does a good job of showing that the lives of medieval Icelanders were varied and complex. The museum does not give the visitor a sense of who these people were in a way that is emotionally relatable to visitors. People in the Viking Age are left appearing rather limited emotionally, as the focus is on their tasks, customs, trade, work, and beliefs, and not how emotion is linked with their daily lives.

All three museums have interpreted their portrayals of the Viking Age differently. If the National Museum of Iceland is seen as preferring to leave out the emotional portrayal of people in the Viking Age, the Settlement Exhibitions offers a version of events that includes emotional acknowledgement of the Settlers by engaging multiple senses. The Settlement Exhibition may not be preoccupied with depicting the variety and complexity of the Settlers emotional community, but they do engage the use of emotions as an opportunity for visitors to better understand the exhibition and relate to its subjects. This serves to allow visitors the opportunity to connect with the people who may have lived in the area of the longhouse on a more personal level than at the National Museum. Their level of emotional recognition and connection will depend on their own upbringing, influences from their respective emotional community, and personal beliefs and experiences.



The Settlement Exhibition focuses on what life was like for the people living in the area during the time that the longhouse would have been in use. The videos on display and their accompanying soundscapes, where the majority of inferred emotion can be found, do not focus on one obvious class of person. There are people hunting, tending livestock, farming, working as a smithy, and carrying out a funeral process. The videos show what average life would have been like and do a good job of humanizing their subjects, making them relatable to today's audience. For example, someone who hunts will likely recognize the body language and posture of the man in the hunting video, and might assign their own emotional responses to a successful hunt to this video.

Visitors who have experience farming will relate to the work and soundscape of the video of a person milking a sheep. The blacksmith wiping his brow and the people collecting hay before laying down together to rest are relatable to people today who might be able to see some of themselves in these faceless figures. The funeral procession, sheep milking, and hay collecting videos all show social interaction between people. There is no feuding and little mention of violence, but instead regular people going about their daily lives in a variety of ways. The actions in the exhibition videos can be seen as more mundane than the feuding families, battles, and raids, but are more relatable on a personal level to people today. The emotional depiction of people in the Settlement Exhibition seems to draw more on our own ideas and interpretation of emotion, body language, and the link between sound and emotional memory.

The multisensory experience of the Settlement Exhibition draws on visual representations augmented by the use of background soundscapes. This experience thus focuses on creating an emotional response in the visitor by directly inviting the public to participate in the videos of daily activities as an observer – for example, viewing the funeral process, which is often an intensely emotionally-charged event that the majority of people can relate to on some level in their own personal lives. The video of the funerary process does not give factual information on what mourning or burial practices were actually like, but allows for room for emotional expression to be brought into the exhibition. Visitors from around the world can understand emotion in this context, and the addition of the bell tolling may serve to help modern audiences more firmly place the scene in a social and cultural context. In this

sense, The Settlement Exhibition manages to put visitors and subjects on common ground by taking the modern viewer's emotions into account more than attempting to reconstruct historical emotions.

The displays within the Settlement Exhibition work to elicit historical empathy from the viewer, both through the video displays, textual information, and sensory immersion. As discussed above, the visitor has the ability to connect on a more personal level with the information in the exhibition, largely due to the presence of emotions and emotional inferences. This approach differs from the videos in the "Age of Settlement" section of the National Museum, which provides factual context for the displays, but does so without interpreting emotion.

The use of different types of displays when dealing with emotions in museum exhibitions is an important point to consider. Archeological artifacts and remains are used in the National Museum and the Settlement Exhibition. These allow visitors to see pieces of the past to connect ideas with tangible artifacts, but there are visual limitations to the remains (or ruins, as some of them are called), and they are not necessarily able to convey emotional elements. Both the National Museum and the Settlement Exhibition also use video displays to provide additional information, but the Settlement Exhibition's videos work to compensate for the archeological objectivity by providing an opportunity for emotional connection and empathy for visitors. The Saga Museum abstains from the use of archeological artifacts, and instead uses other types of visual representation. They incorporate a creative process in putting together dioramas, which they call exhibits. The emphasis is on the facial expressions and body language of the figures in the exhibits, who are notable characters from the sagas and Icelandic history. The museum also works to create an immersive experience that allows the visitor to walk through history and feel as though they are observing snippets of history. The use of sound and scentscapes work to further pull the visitor into the experience.

The Saga Museum presents its characters in a way that has parallels with the sagas. The emotion of the characters is described to some extent in the narrative the museum provides, either textually or through the audio guide. The majority of individual emotion and emotional atmosphere comes from showing instead of telling. This is done through the facial



expressions and body language of the figures and from the accompanying soundscape. Kirsten Wolf (2014, p. 125-145) discusses the use of facial expressions in Old Norse-Icelandic literature and how facial expressions can convey emotions or emotional states that do not require language to understand²¹. As pointed out in the Case Studies, the best example from the Saga Museum is the exhibit of Freydís Eiríksdóttir. Visitors see the somatic responses of Freydís and the natives in the background through facial expressions. This is expanded upon by the body language of Freydís, the background noise of fighting, and finally the narrative elements that give a further context to the situation to the viewer. This exhibit can therefore be discussed in the context of both emotions in the Viking Age and how modern viewers may see and understand these emotions.

The exhibits presented in the Saga Museum are representations of staged humanity where the “exhibition value” adds up to the “human value” of the subject and the narrative of the diorama (Benjamin, 2002, p. 1935-1938; Musiol, 2013, p. 156-175). The museum manages to convey a complex set of emotions with a tridimensional and minutious portrayal of the subjects. Its shortcoming (or perhaps a perceived one) is the non-officiality of the museum and, by extension, its portrayal of the Vikings or Settlers. They pull heavily from the Icelandic sagas as source material, as evidenced by their name, content, and online descriptions (Saga Museum, “Overview” section). It is hard to make assumptions on the legitimacy of the stories portrayed, which might result in a whole different discussion which would leave little space for the emotion-focus of the article²². It is nonetheless worth mentioning the distinction in the way that the more credible and trustworthy the institution is, the less space for emotional portrayal seems to exist. This can be explained through the historical lens of institutions like national museums and their preference for hard facts, but now that emotions are continuing to become widely accepted as part of the historical narrative, it begs the question of why emotion continues to be left out.

²¹There is a division on the universality of facial expressions to convey emotion, but many studies suggest that human facial expressions can be understood across cultures, though with some variation in differentiating between similar emotions and their degree of intensity (see Russel and Fernández-Dols, 1997) and differences in cultural rules dictating how emotion is expressed (see Burrow, 2002).

²²For a helpful discussion on the use of sagas as source material, see Cormack (2006).



Overall, the Saga Museum has the most in terms of visible emotion, both in the construction of emotion and in fostering historical empathy. Through body language, facial expression, and soundscape, the figures in the exhibits express emotion that is a combination of reconstructed historical emotion from the source material (primarily the sagas), and through more modern conceptions of how emotion is felt and expressed. This, alongside the additional contextualized information provided through the audio guide and texts, allows for great potential for historical empathy for visitors.

As argued by Holland (2007, p. 195-209), emotions are necessary for the production of knowledge and empower the understanding, analysis and interpretation of the subject. The argument's focal point is linking emotions and research. What best element to mediate this linkage if not a museum exhibition, that is a concrete, immediate and tangible translation of the above-mentioned research? Museums hold significant power in the interpretative process and how the subjects such as the Vikings or Settlers are characterized on a global scale. Iceland has a very close and direct relation with the historical accounts of the humans of the Viking Age. Their emotional status might be better highlighted and implemented in some of the museum exhibitions we have analyzed. There is an urge for national and accredited museums worldwide to recognize the importance of emotional portrayal within their exhibitions. As we have seen, the National Museum of Iceland, the Settlement Exhibition and the Saga Museum approach the topic in different ways, with different media and different institutional or non-institutional functions.

The discussion in this article has focused on the observations and analysis undertaken during our fieldwork, and it will greatly benefit from further qualitative or quantitative research that would produce an illustrative dataset. There is a lot of space for improvement on behalf of museums when it comes to the display of emotions. It is often easy for people to fall into historical cliches such as the horned helmet portrayal of the Viking Age Settlers (Ward, 2001, p. 6-20). It is crucial that museums address and rectify these cliches and include a more human depiction of the subjects, comprehensive of the representation of emotions. The overall impression is that there is almost a "fear" or reluctance in drifting away from sterile facts. Emotions existed then and exist now, and museums would greatly benefit from including them in their exhibitions in order to bring visitors closer to the subjects and their history.

Concluding Remarks

As it has been discussed in this article, the implementation of emotions within Viking Age museum exhibitions leaves space for improvement. However, this statement is not exclusive to the exhibitions analyzed in the Case Studies from Iceland, that is The National Museum of Iceland, The Reykjavík 871 ± 2: The Settlement Exhibition, and The Saga Museum. It appears to be a constant in most museum exhibitions that deal with other periods and topics in the history of humanity.

Numerous scholars argue for a clearer and more visible presence of emotional portrayals in the exhibitions' curatorship (Pekarik, 2002; Bourke, 2003; Watson, 2015; 2016; Savenije & De Bruijn, 2017). Emotions are a vital part of history that should be reflected in those museums that deal with the history of people, communities, and civilizations in order to avoid a dehumanizing process (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008 p. 39). Empathy needs to be considered in an exhibition as a tool for better understanding the textual, visual or multi-sensory material of the display (Savenije & De Bruijn, 2017 pp. 832-845).

While it is understandable that museums have been somewhat reluctant in the staging of emotions within exhibits, emotions are already visible within many displays. As has been discussed, museums are also already reconstructing a version of history that they choose to display, and by omitting emotions (or ignoring the way that they are displayed), a large portion of human history can be left behind. The field of museum studies merged with emotion studies could uncover a whole new approach to exhibition-making and museum theory. Throughout this paper, we have argued how emotions are essential to the social sphere and can help the field of social sciences to analyze society more accurately. Just as emotions are present today, they were also present in the past. The latter could be further highlighted through the historical narratives that museums exhibit engage with. Taking into account the emotions of the people portrayed in historical exhibitions, the Vikings or the Settlers in our case studies, will only add a missing piece of the picture which brings the visitors humanly closer to the subjects of the museum exhibition.

Lastly, we acknowledge the shortcomings of the analysis and the field notes, since they certainly are from a subjective perspective with related cognitive bias (Kahneman & Slovic,



1982). However, we have strived to maintain as much objectivity as possible by consulting with each other and exchanging our views on the same artifacts, interactive components, or textual additions to the exhibitions.

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²³ Publisher.

²⁴ Developer.



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