

The Vikings in Danish History Schoolbooks

Continuities and Changes in Narratives

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Abstract

While the past is no longer here, it has left behind both material and immaterial clues, which form the basis for interpreting narratives about the past. However, numerous factors influence the form and content of historical narratives, which is also the case for school history books. This article describes how history books designed for Danish elementary schools have depicted Vikings and the Viking Age over the last two hundred years. As this is a long period, the focus is on prominent themes, trends and patterns. The article also explains the factors that may have influenced stories about Vikings over time. The methodological approach of the study is predominantly hermeneutic as the content comprises interpretations of statements from history books, ministerial governance documents and selected texts from relevant pedagogical and (subject) didactic debates. In my textual interpretations, I have endeavoured to respect the authors' intentions and the historical and societal contexts in which the texts were made.

Keywords

Viking Age; textbook analysis; history teaching; elementary school

In Denmark, as in other Nordic countries, the use of history concerning the Vikings and the Viking Ages is visible in many contexts. Museums and sites offer visitors experiences and activities related to the Viking Ages, several Viking re-enactment groups exist aim to bring the past alive and Viking markets are organised around the country every year. Symbols and icons related to the Vikings are used commercially in, for instance, advertisements for products such as liver pate, sausages, beer and pencils. The word Viking is used as a name for various things, from ships and aeroplanes to athletic clubs. Moreover, for hundreds of adults and children, where the action really happened was the Viking Age.

The current study focuses on Vikings in Danish history textbooks designed for elementary schools. In this paper, I seek to examine and elaborate on how history textbooks and, in

recent years, digital learning portals have presented – and present – the Vikings, as well as possible reasons for changes in narratives about the Viking Age from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the present. I examine how the books describe the Vikings as pirates, warriors, seafarers and conquerors and consider how much space the books give to discussing culture, trade, crafts and other social conditions in Viking peasant society. As the study covers two hundred years, it is necessarily an overview and attempts to capture patterns and trends more than to provide an in-depth analysis of individual history books and the circumstances and conditions under which they were produced. During this period, several hundred school books for history were produced. In the article, I have chosen books that were published in several editions based on the assumption that they had some prevalence in schools.

The methodological approach of the study is predominantly hermeneutic as the content comprises interpretations of statements from history books, ministerial governance documents and selected texts from relevant pedagogical and (subject) didactic debates. In interpreting the texts, I have endeavoured to respect the authors' intentions and the historical and societal contexts in which the texts were made.

The production of schoolbooks and other teaching materials takes place in particular societal contexts and conditions. Various interests and factors contemporaneous to a book's production have an impact on how its narratives about the Viking Age are constructed, staged and used. It is relevant, therefore, to analyse the books from the perspective of memory history, including factors that influence the form and content of school textbooks – in this context, narratives about the Vikings. Today, one can expect the narratives about the Viking Age and other topics in analogue and digital teaching materials to be based on scientific research. However, this was not the case in the nineteenth century. Well into the twentieth century, little of the content of school history books was drawn from historical research. Instead, what can be described as public opinion, general cultural climate and mentality had a significant influence on how narratives about the Vikings were formed.

Needless to say, political factors, such as ministerial curricula and other governance documents, have an impact on the content of history textbooks. From the end of the eighteenth century and during the nineteenth century, most European countries introduced compulsory schooling or compulsory education. Since then, schools have had two main and coherent tasks:

first, influencing and forming pupils in a particular way (*Bildung*) and, second, providing them with useful knowledge. The educational task originally centred on turning children and youth into good Christians who lived in accordance with the teachings of the evangelical Lutheran state church in their attitudes and actions. This meant, among other things, that children and young people knew and accepted their social status and location. School was also intended to provide students with the knowledge necessary to become useful citizens for the benefit of society.

In history teaching, the most important content was narratives about the origins and evolution of the nation and the state towards the present. Such national narratives helped legitimate state power and the ruling order. The stories focused on the nation's purported origins in a distant past and described the progress of the people and the country that led to the present. As historian Allan Megill claims, "behind" the grand national narratives, "there lay a larger "grand narrative" – a secularized version of the Christian narrative of pristine origin, struggle, and ultimate salvation".¹ The aim was to create a national community of remembrance to which everyone belonged and was loyal. Those who had – and have – power are directly and indirectly able to influence the community of remembrance through the emphasis, dimming and changing of a community's narratives of the past.

Terrible "Normans"

In 1814, Denmark implemented free elementary school for all children. At that time, an absolute monarch ruled the Danish realm, which consisted of several regions – the kingdom of Denmark, the Duchies of Schleswig, Holstein and Lauenburg, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, the colonies of Greenland and three small islands in the Caribbean. Each region had its own history, culture and language, resulting in a lack of a common ground for nation building. This may have been why history was not a separate subject but was integrated into the subject of Danish (mother-tongue education). The law simply prescribed that students be given a "brief concept of the history of their fatherland".²

¹ Allan Megill, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error. A Contemporary Guide to Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 31.

² *Anordning for Almue-Skolevaesenet på Landet i Danmark af 29. juli 1814* [Ordinance for Public School in the Rural Area on July 29, 1814]. https://library.au.dk/fileadmin/lfskolelov/1814-07-29_almue-skolevaesenet-paa-landet.pdf

Likely due to the zeitgeist and political climate following the loss of Norway in 1814 and the economic crisis of the early nineteenth century, national romantic and almost patriotic currents emerged, and the history of the fatherland gained a more prominent place in peoples' consciousness outside school.³ Thus, the famous author and poet Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig's (1783-1872) rewriting of the Nordic myths,⁴ Saxo's chronicle, Snorre Sturlasson's *Heimskringla* and Bernhard Severin Ingeman's (1789-1862) historical novels were widely disseminated.⁵ School reading books recounted the history of the realm with the Danish kings as crucial players in and leaders of the development of the realm.

Only a few books directly aimed to teach history in elementary schools. One of the first was written by Hans Ancher Kofod (1877–1829), published in 1816.⁶ Kofod's book was widely distributed and appeared in several editions in the first half of the nineteenth century. At just over 75 pages, it covered the history of the realm from ancient times to its present. Instead of "Vikings", Kofod used the word "Normans" "because they came from the Nordic countries and consisted of Danish, Norwegian and Swedish" people.⁷ Kofod certainly did not describe them i.e. the Normans positively: "Often, they were led by princes who were not ashamed of piracy [...] [They persecuted the Christians] with great cruelty".⁸ Ansgar (801–865), known as the Apostle of the North, made strenuous efforts to put an end to the atrocities of the gentiles i.e. the Normans and introduce Christianity. He and the churches he built were subject to "attacks by the embittered gentiles who made every effort to stop Christianity".⁹

In elementary schools, Kofod's book was the most widely used history book in the early 1800s. However, a few other books appeared that described the Vikings in much the same way as Kofod. For example, in his slim 57-page *History of Denmark*, Peter Laurberg states that many were "disgruntled" with the kings, "emigrated to the sea" and, using the name "Normans", "plundered [...] English and French and several other coasts until they finally settled in France and

³ T. Damsholt, "De danske kongers stat – 1400–1848," in *Danmarks Historien. Samfund, livsform og politik* [The History of Denmark: Society, Way of Life and Politics], eds. G. Lind and P. Roslyng-Jensen (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 2019), 86–205.

⁴ N. F. S. Grundtvig, *Nordens Mytologi eller udsigt over Eddalæren for dannede Mænd der ei selv ere Mytologer* (Copenhagen: Schubothes Forlag, 1808).

⁵ O. Feldbæk, *Dansk identitetshistorie 2. Et yndigt land 1789–1848*. (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels Forlag, 1991)

⁶ H. A. Kofod, *Udtog af Fædrelandets Historie til Brug for Landsbyskolerne* [An Excerpt from the History of the Fatherland for Use by Elementary Schools] (Copenhagen: Goldin, 1816).

⁷ Kofod, 1816, 6.

⁸ Kofod, 1816, 7.

⁹ Kofod, 1816, 9.

Italy”.¹⁰ Thus, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, history books portrayed the Vikings as cruel pirates who ceased their atrocities only when the Danes became Christian.

Regarding the word “Viking”, Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754) used it a few times in connection with the history of Norway. However, “Viking” first gained traction in the language of national romanticism, with its fascination with the past conveyed in the popular translation of Icelandic sagas into Danish in the nineteenth century.¹¹

The Arrival of the Brave Vikings

In the 1830s and 1840s, adherence to liberal and national ideas increased, especially in the bourgeois elite in Copenhagen. This national feeling included an anti-German attitude and, particularly in the 1840s, a growing connection to the idea of a Scandinavian community.¹² Moreover, the notion of a Viking Age demonstrated that this community had deep roots and a long history. Consequently, the image of the Vikings in history books changed.

Grundtvig (1783–1872) wrote one of the textbooks of this period.¹³ He used the word “Viking” and described the people far more positively than Kofod, writing, for instance, “the famous Vikings”.¹⁴ However, he wrote nothing about Viking raids, assaults and looting and instead offered a heroic description of the particular group of Vikings known as Jomsvikinger.¹⁵

The historian Frederik Barfod (1811–1896) wrote several history books, which were heavily influenced by Grundtvig. In his popular *Tales of the History of the Fatherland*, written in 1853,¹⁶ he quoted Grundtvig’s songs and lyrics. Barfod was an ardent supporter of Scandinavianism; he expressed a clear distaste for everything German, reinforced by the Three Years’ War (1848–1851). Barfod also played an important role in the production of history lessons

¹⁰ P. Laurberg, *Kortfattet Fædrelands historie tilligemed et Anhang i Fædrelandets Geographie. Udarbejdet for Borger- og almuskolen* [Brief History of the Fatherland in the Context of the Geography of the Fatherland], (Aarhus: Aarhus Stiftstrykkerie, 1818), 5–6.

¹¹ E. Roesdahl, “Vikingerne i dansk kultur,” [Vikings in Danish culture], *Fortid og Nutid*, June, booklet 2 (1994): 158–172. <https://tidsskrift.dk/fortidognutid/article/download/74622/107800/> (accessed December 12, 2021)

¹² R. Glenthøj and M. N. Ottosen, *Union eller undergang. Kampen for et forenet Skandinavien* [Union or Doom: The Struggle for a United Scandinavia], (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 2021).

¹³ N. F. S. Grundtvig, *Mundsmag af Danmarks Kronike til Levende Skolebrug* [Mouth Taste of The Danish Chronicle for Living School Use]. (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 1844).

¹⁴ Grundtvig, 1842, 11.

¹⁵ Grundtvig, 1842, 24–15. The Jomsvikings were a legendary Danish warrior society that inhabited a fortress on the Slavic coast.

¹⁶ F. Barfod, *Fortælling af Fædrelandets Historie* [*Tales of the History of the Fatherland*], (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandling, 1853).

in other schoolbooks, such as that of J. Nissens,¹⁷ first published in 1840. The only one available is now the fourth edition from 1857, which Barfod completed.

The anti-German tone is evident in Nissen's textbook. According to him, the Danes joined the "Norman raids" because they were "displeased Charlemagne's and Louis the Pious's efforts to seize Denmark".¹⁸ A little pride may also be evident in the sentence "rumours of their [the Vikings] ferocity and violent destruction ran before them".¹⁹ The book also informed students that the Normans "discovered and thus occupied both the Faroe Islands and Iceland, as well as Greenland, from which they discovered [...] [a place in North America] they called Wineland".²⁰

Grundtvig and Barfod, therefore, established a basic pattern of what should be included in school history books. First, there were tales of legendary kings and mythical legends from a distant and non-descript past. This was followed by the narrative of Ansgar, who sought to spread Christianity in the Nordic region. Until the early 1960s, this basic structure characterised most history books used in elementary schools.

The Vikings and the Nation State

In 1864, after a short war against Prussia and Austria, Denmark lost the duchies of Schleswig, Holstein and Lauenburg, and there were serious doubts that Denmark could continue to exist as an independent state.²¹ In contrast, the ongoing processes of nation building grew stronger. Now Denmark was a genuine national state – at least if you ignore the Faroe Islands, Iceland and the colonies. For example, the Museum of National History at Frederiksborg Castle was established in 1878. The establishment of associations and folk high schools promoted the national feeling. In schools, teachers tried to strengthen students' national awareness and love for the Danish people and Denmark

National identity narratives about a nation's great past are useful when aiming to strengthen feelings of nationalism. Narratives about the Vikings suited this purpose well. In the 1870s, the historian, archaeologist and director of the Old Norse Museum, J. J. A. Worsaae (1821–

¹⁷ J. Nissen, *Danmarks Historie i Udtog* [History of Denmark in Extracts], (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandling, 1857).

¹⁸ Nissen, 1857, 15.

¹⁹ Nissen, 1857, 16.

²⁰ Nissen, 1857, 16.

²¹ J. Wendel-Hansen, "Christian 9. 1818-1907". <https://danmarkshistorien.dk/vis/materiale/christian-9-1818-1906/> (Accessed December 12, 2021).

1885),²² introduced the term “Viking Age” as a special period that followed those of the Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age – internationally recognised periods defined by his predecessor C. J. Thomsen (1788–1865). The last decades of the nineteenth century showed a growing interest in and fascination with the Viking Age. The Museum of National History at Frederiksborg Castle exhibited a photographic copy of the Bayeux tapestry together with a Viking frieze made by Lorens Frølich, which showed Svend Tveskægs and Canute the Great’s conquest of England.²³ Between 1876 and 1882, Johannes Steenstrup published four volumes about the Vikings.²⁴ Similarly, in school textbooks, narratives about the Vikings became more important and covered more pages.

C. Johannsen started his account of the Viking raids as follows: “In the ninth century, the Danes, Norwegians and Swedes, both together and separately made numerous voyages to the most European countries, especially to Bretland (England), Germany and France”.²⁵ Thus, the Scandinavian community was established. According to Johannsen’s book, the reason for the raids was the Vikings’ “desire for war”, as well as their “hatred of Christianity, which began to penetrate the North from the southern countries”. The Vikings committed “terrible atrocities” during their raids, which stopped when they settled in the kingdoms that the chiefs created all around other countries.²⁶

Nikolaj Nielsen wrote one of the most widely used history textbooks for elementary schools.²⁷ 38 editions were published – the last one in the early 1960s. In his books, the Vikings’ motifs for their raids are not explained; rather, being a Viking seems to be the natural and obvious way to be a Dane in that period. The book informed students that “pagan Vikings” destroyed Hamburg, that King “Gorm was an avid pagan who very strictly pursued Christians” and that his sons Harald and Knud “went on a Viking raid every year”.²⁸ On several pages, students could read

²² J. J. A Worsaae, *De danskes Kultur i Vikingetiden* [The Culture of the Danes in the Viking Age], (Copenhagen: G. E. C. Gads Forlag, 1873).

²³ M. Djupdræt, *Billeder af vikingen* [Images of the Viking], (Copenhagen: Skoletjenesten, 1998), 20.

²⁴ J. Steenstrup, *Normannertiden* [The Norman Time] (Kjøbenhavn: Forlagt af Rudolf Klein, 1876–1882).

²⁵ C. Johannsen. *Lærebog i Danmarks Historie for Real- og Borgerskoler, højere Folkeskoler og Almueskoler* [Textbook in The History of Denmark for Real and Citizen Schools, Higher Primary and Elementary Schools] (Copenhagen: Fr. Wøldikes Forlag, 1870), 29.

²⁶ Johannsen, 1870, 29.

²⁷ N. Nielsen, *Danmarkshistorie fortalt for Børn* [Danish History for Children], (Fyn: Eget Forlag, 1888).

²⁸ Nielsen, 1888, 24–25.

about Palnatoke and the legendary Jomsvikings: “These Jomsvikings were feared all over the North. They were so brave and fearless that almost no one could match them in battle.”²⁹

In his textbook, Niels Thorvald Hvidbjerg³⁰ gave the impression that the Vikings’ particular behaviours and values were the norm at the time. For instance, men had to solve disagreements with combat, and it was dishonourable to refuse to take part in such a solution: “If there was no opportunity to satisfy the warrior desire in the country, the Norse went on a Viking voyage to foreign countries, where they looted and robbed”.³¹ Moreover, the Vikings “seized larger or smaller stretches of land, where they settled when, for some reason, they were dissatisfied with their stay in the fatherland”.³²

The historian Johan Ottosen, a diligent textbook author, wrote history books for all types of schools, including history textbooks for elementary schools.³³ Ottosen wrote, “The Vikings robbed goods and killed people”.³⁴ However, despite this violence, his description shows clear fascination with the Vikings: “Every spring, large Viking fleets from all three Nordic kingdoms went to distant lands”, and when “they want to stay [...] in England and France, Danish Vikings founded great kingdoms”.³⁵

Glorification of the country, people and kings and the marked use of Germany and Germans as the enemy characterised nineteenth-century history books for elementary schools. In 1900, the Ministry of Culture (Ministry of Church and Education) issued the first proper curricula for school subjects, named the Sthyrian Cirkular.³⁶ For most school subjects, these innovations reflected what was relevant and important to society. Nevertheless, the guidelines in the curricula for teaching history primarily involved writing down and legalising existing practices.³⁷ Therefore,

²⁹ Nielsen, 1888, 30.

³⁰ N. T. Hvidbjerg, *Danmarks Historie til Skolebrug* [History of Denmark for Use in Schools], (Copenhagen: V. Thaning & Appels Forlag, 1889).

³¹ Hvidbjerg, 1889, 15.

³² Hvidbjerg, 1889, 15.

³³ J. Ottosen, *Børnenes Fædrelandshistorie* [Children’s History of the Fatherland], (Copenhagen and Kristiania: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1895).

³⁴ Ottosen, 1895, 7.

³⁵ Ottosen, 1895, 7–9.

³⁶ Kirke og Undervisningsministeriet, *Cirkulære fra Kirke- og Undervisningsministeriet af 6. April 1900 om undervisningsplaner for de offentlige folkeskoler* [Circular of the Ministry of Church and Education of 6 April 1900 on curricula for elementary schools] (Copenhagen: Ministry of Church and Education, 1900)

³⁷ E. Dehn, “Det sthyrske cirkulære og historiefaget” [The Sthyske Circular and the Subject History] in *Uddannelseshistorie* (1988): 81–102. <https://uddannelseshistorie.dk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/a-1988-erik-dehn.pdf> (accessed December 12, 2021)

the basic pattern of history books' stories about the Vikings remained largely unchanged, even well into the twentieth century.

In his history book, published 1901, Ejler Møller wrote about the Vikings' travels and conquests, but he also acknowledged the Vikings' reprehensible actions: "The Norse people went far away to foreign lands to plunder [...] However, the Danish were the worst Vikings. [...] Cruelly, they raged where they came, plundered churches and monasteries, murdered monks and nuns."³⁸ However, while Johansen stated that King Gorm persecuted the Christians, as mentioned above, Møller argued that although King Gorm and Queen Thyra were pagans, "they did not persecute the Christians".³⁹

Nikoline Marie Helms wrote the most widely used history textbook for elementary schools.⁴⁰ The first edition is from 1916, and the last from 1962. In total, Helm's book is printed in almost half a million copies. She defined the Viking Age as the period "from before 800 to after the year 1000"⁴¹ and began the section about the Vikings with a description of the Nordic peoples "towards the year 800" who "stayed peacefully at home in their countries".⁴² The Scandinavian community was highlighted: "The three peoples were closely related. They spoke the same language, "the Danish tongue" it was called because the Danish people were the main people".⁴³ In Helms's book, students read that the Danish people were peasants. At the beginning of the twentieth century, most students who used Helm's book lived in the countryside. Perhaps, therefore, knowing that Denmark more than a thousand years earlier had also been a farming community led students to relate to and experience cohesion with the living conditions of that time – even if peasants in the Viking period had slaves to do the hard labour.

However, Helms's book also provided factually incorrect information, as follows: "Denmark was bigger than now. In the South, we had South Jutland– Ejderen⁴⁴ is Denmark's old border – and in the east, we had the three parts of Denmark: Skåne, Halland and Blekinge."⁴⁵

³⁸ E. Møller, *Danmarks Historie* [History of Denmark], (Copenhagen: G. E. C. Gads Forlag, 1901), 15.

³⁹ Møller, 1901, 16.

⁴⁰ N. M. Helms, *Danmarkshistorie fortalt for Børn* [Danish History told to Children] (Kjøbenhavn and Kristiania: Gyldendalske Boghandel Nordisk Forlag, 1916).

⁴¹ Helms, 1916, 24.

⁴² Helms, 1916, 23.

⁴³ Helms, 1916, 23.

⁴⁴ Ejderen is a river that marks the border between Schleswig and Holstein.

⁴⁵ Helms wrote "Sønderjylland", meaning the former duchy Schleswig.

Helms almost certainly intended to convince students that Denmark had a historical right to Schleswig, which Denmark had to surrender to Prussia after defeat in the war in 1864. This was not the only aspect of the Viking Age that the students could relate to their own time and society; according to Helms, it was almost a democratic society. The peasants took part in ruling the country: “They [...] chose a new king when the old one was dead”, decided on the laws and judged people who violated them.⁴⁶

Why did the quiet peasant life end? According to Helms, the Norse “towards the year 800 [...] tired of sitting at home, and many chiefs and sons of mighty peasants set out towards foreign lands on Viking raids”.⁴⁷ Helms could not hide her fascination with these raids: “The ships are magnificent to watch. At the bow [...] a big dragonhead showing its gap. [...] The [...] strong colour and shiny metal hand protections on the shields”.⁴⁸ The Vikings made it all the way to Italy and conquered areas of England and France, where they settled. However, the book also reported that the Vikings robbed and plundered “the crosses of churches and altar decorations of gold and silver and mass cloths of scarlet and silk” without thinking “about whether it is right or wrong”.⁴⁹

From the mid-1800s to the early twentieth-century, therefore, the textbooks’ portraits of the Vikings and the Viking Ages can be described as a mixture of heroic stories and admiration with a little condemnation. The books claimed that the Vikings were free men. They liked the warrior life, longed for adventures and considered bravery as a virtue – if you were not brave, you would lose your good reputation. The Vikings came from Denmark, Norway and Sweden and had many commonalities, such as speaking the same language. According to the Danish textbooks, most Vikings spoke Danish. However, Norwegian history books of the period took a different view of the cohesion of the Nordic peoples, arguing that the Norwegians were “a distinct ethnic group, separate from the Danes, Swedes and Saami”.⁵⁰ To return to the Danish history books they mentioned that Vikings travelled as far as America and Constantinople and conquered land in England and France, where they settled.

⁴⁶ Helms, 1916, 23

⁴⁷ Helms, 1916, 24.

⁴⁸ Helms, 1916, 24.

⁴⁹ Helms, 1916, 24.

⁵⁰ K. C. Alvestad, “Here Be Vikings: Ethno-National Narratives in Late Nineteenth Century Norwegian Textbooks,” in *Exploring Textbooks and Cultural Change in Nordic Education 1536–2020*, in M. Roos, K. L. Berge, H. Edgren, P. Hiidenmaa and C. Matthiesen (Eds.) (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021), 159–173.

Narratives about a country's glorious past are an effective means of boosting nation-building processes, which strengthen national feelings and national identities. For that purpose, the stories of the Vikings and Viking Age were suitable and thus fulfilled the intentions of the Sthyrian Circular.

Too Much Nationalism in the Textbooks

After World War I and the establishment of the League of Nations, questions were asked about the form and content of history teaching in elementary schools. Many claimed that the textbooks were too nationalistic, too focused on war, which often was glorified, and depicted other nations as enemies. In the early 1930s, the government established a committee to review Danish school textbooks. The critique of the history books for elementary schools was especially harsh. The committee claimed that the books contained too many "anecdotes and heroic depictions, as well as dramatic events about the history of wars".⁵¹ The committee also criticised the anti-German tone that permeated many of the books.

The sub-committee tasked with assessing the history books wanted to phase out the expectation that the subject's main purpose was to strengthen students' patriotism and moral virtues, as outlined in the Sthyrian Circular. The subcommittee wrote a suggestion for a new curriculum, which placed focus on the dissemination of historical knowledge consistent with historical research.⁵² The historian Erik Arup was a member of the subcommittee that assessed the history books. Arup belonged to the positivist school, which advocated a material source understanding,⁵³ and regularly criticised nationalist tendencies in history writing. In the first volume of his *History of Denmark*, which covers the Viking period, there are no heroic stories or romanticised accounts of the Vikings. Rather, Arup presented the Viking Age as a predominantly peaceful time when people lived as peasants and the use of the wheel plough increased agricultural yields.⁵⁴

⁵¹ *Betænkning vedrørende Revision af Skolebøger* [Report on the Revision of School Textbooks] (Undervisningsministeriet, 1933), 74.

⁵² *Betænkning*, 1933, 102.

⁵³ S. Mørch (ed.), *Danmarks historie. Historiens historie* [History of Denmark: History of the History], (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1992) vol. 10, 290.

⁵⁴ E. Arup, *Danmarks Historie I: Land og folk til 1282* [History of Denmark I] (Copenhagen: Hagerup, 1925).

The committee's recommendations did not lead to changes in the textbooks' narratives about the Vikings in new editions of older history books. However, a new curriculum for history was implemented in 1942. The aspect of national glorification was slightly modified, but the curriculum still resembled the Sthyrian Circular more than the curriculum proposed by the subcommittee almost a decade earlier. Thus, the description of the Vikings in the twelfth edition of Helms's 1940 history book is identical to that in the first edition from 1916. However, due to the debate about the problem of potentially nationalistic content in old history books, some changes are evident in a few of the new history books published in the 1930s.

One example is a textbook written by Rigmor Claudi-Hansen and H. C. Rosted.⁵⁵ The chapter about the Viking Age indicated that the people lived as peasants and that only one of the sons took over their father's farm, with the other sons being left to "cultivate new land or become merchants or Vikings".⁵⁶ However, the book states that it was unsafe to be a merchant travelling by ship to foreign countries as one had to be prepared for attacks and plundering, which was why travelling merchants were also practiced in weapon use and sometimes also took part in plundering. From this, the Viking raids evolved, and men from the North plundered monasteries and churches in foreign countries: "No one thought it dishonest when a chief and his men became Vikings and sought prey at sea."⁵⁷ When Charlemagne's kingdom disintegrated after his death in 814, the Vikings took advantage of the situation to carry out major raids. Later, the Vikings began to conquer foreign lands where they then settled. Claudi-Hansen and Rosted's depiction of the Vikings as merchants, pirates and conquerors was sober and factual and not as dramatic and heroic as in older books.

After the Nazis had appropriated the Vikings

In the 1930s and during the German occupation of Denmark, Nazi parties used runes, Viking ships, swords, helmets and other motifs and symbols from the Viking Age. This undoubtedly affected narratives about the Vikings in post-war school textbooks, including that of F. C. Kaalund-

⁵⁵ R. Claudi-Hansen and H. C. Rosted, *Vort Folks Historie Gennem 10000 Aar. Danmarkshistorie for Børn* [The History of Our People through 10,000 Years: History of Denmark for Children], (Copenhagen: J. H. Schultz Forlag, 1936).

⁵⁶ Claudi-Hansen and Rosted, 1936, 52.

⁵⁷ Claudi-Hansen and Rosted, 1936, 52.

Jørgensen and Hans Kyrre.⁵⁸ Their book described Viking raids succinctly and without any fascination; Viking looting was called “piracy” and the Vikings “wild men from the North”.⁵⁹ The Viking mentality and brutal behaviour were illustrated by a rendition of an excerpt from the story of legendary king Ragnar Lodbrog. However, rampaging and marauding men were presented as an exception in Viking society. Rather, the chapter on the Viking Age gave the impression that most people lived as peasants, and Denmark was a farming community that had developed over time: “Settlements had become villages [...] they had learned about the wheel plough” and peasants helped each other to cultivate the fields.⁶⁰ The book showed that there were differences between people: most were free peasants, and some chiefs had slaves to carry out hard labour.⁶¹

Other textbooks also indicated that most Danes were peasants and lived in villages, such as that by B. L. Barløse.⁶² However, Barløse also stated that “outside the villages”, there were chiefs who, in the post-800 era, led the “seafaring and belligerent men called Vikings”, who attacked peaceful merchant ships and plundered foreign shores.⁶³ The Vikings had seaworthy ships that could sail across the open sea and along the Russian rivers, and the Vikings settled in foreign countries. Barløse described the Viking Age as not only a “fighting time but also a time when emigration and peaceful trade led Nordic people far and wide around the world”.⁶⁴ Barløse, together with Kaalund-Jørgensen and Kyrre, sought to create a different narrative – perhaps a counter-narrative – to the one the Nazis had aimed to launch.

Warriors or Peasants, Traders and Artisans?

Until the 1960s, the story of Ansgar and his attempts to spread Christianity in the Nordic region often filled several pages in history books’ descriptions of the Viking Age. However, gradually, Ansgar slipped away and almost entirely disappeared from the history books published after 1980. While teaching Christianity (the evangelical Lutheran doctrine) had been an important initial

⁵⁸ F. C. Kaalund-Jørgensen and H. Kyrre, *De Danskes Vej. Danmarkshistorie for Børneskolen* [The Danish Way. History of Denmark for Elementary School], (Copenhagen: Jul. Gjellerups Forlag, 1947).

⁵⁹ Kaalund-Jørgensen and Kyrre, 1947, 39.

⁶⁰ Kaalund-Jørgensen and Kyrre, 1947, 35.

⁶¹ Kaalund-Jørgensen and Kyrre, 1947, 36.

⁶² B. L. Barløse, *Folkeskolens Danmarkshistorie og Fortællinger fra Verdenshistorien* [Elementary School’s Danish history and Narratives from World History], (Copenhagen: Schulz, 1948).

⁶³ Barløse, 1948, 22.

⁶⁴ Barløse, 1948, 21.

reason for establishing elementary schools, this sentence was not included in the overall purpose of the elementary school from 1975, which may explain the decreased attention to Ansgar. The law for elementary schools⁶⁵ also reduced the amount of history teaching in elementary schools, and history was no longer a separate subject in the eighth, ninth and tenth grades.

Until 1960, a single history book had been used to cover the entire history of Denmark in elementary school teaching. During the 1960s, more and more schools purchased history books intended for certain grades. Typically, the topic of the Viking Age had more space and was included in books until the third or fourth grade.

Knud Andersen wrote several widely used textbooks for all grades, for instance, the title of the book mentioned in the footnote.⁶⁶ The book recounts the Viking Age in a drama documentary form, describing Hedeby and the importance of trade to Denmark and the Danes. This is followed by a Viking raid and an assault on a monastery: "Only a few monks in the orchard escape. [...] The rest are chopped down by the grim men from the North."⁶⁷ To make clear how unscrupulous the Vikings were, the book stated, "The entire rich monastery is emptied and plundered for all that is worth anything. Finally, the Vikings set the houses on fire. [The houses] they can't carry anyway."⁶⁸ The last part takes place in the chief's yard; seated around the fire, the Vikings told stories about the gods and their achievements.

Kristian Kolding and Peter Ussing Olsen similarly gave a rather negative impression of the Vikings: "These Vikings or Normans (as they were also called) looted and killed. [...] Gradually, however, the skilled kings of the plundered lands managed to create such a strong guard against them that their raids created too great a loss and too little yield."⁶⁹ According to this textbook, the cause of the Viking raids was overpopulation and migrations "that required belligerent feats".⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Lov om folkeskolen [Law for elementary school] (1975) https://library.au.dk/fileadmin/lfskolelov/1975-06-26_313.pdf (accessed December 12, 2021)

⁶⁶ K. Andersen, *Historiebogen for 3. klasse* [The History Book for Third Grade], (Copenhagen: P. Haase & Sønns Forlag, 1961).

⁶⁷ Andersen, 1961, 70.

⁶⁸ Andersen, 1961, 70.

⁶⁹ Kr. Kolding and P. U. Olsen, *Folkeskolens historiebog 1* (Copenhagen: Nyt Nordisk Forlag – Arnold Busck, 1962), 71–72.

⁷⁰ Kolding and Olsen, 1962, 73

Mogens Møller offered a slightly different story about the Vikings.⁷¹ He stated that the Danes “were skilled shipbuilders” and that the ship was the reason “that Danish kings with their men went on raids to foreign lands. [...] Wherever they went, they looted towns and churches and monasteries, killed people or dragged them with them to sell them like slaves”.⁷² Like the two other books, Møller’s description portrayed the Vikings as cruel warriors and pirates, but none of the books considered the social conditions and everyday lives of peasants at the time.

Fifteen years later, Nils Aage Jensen in his book *Historie for fjerde* gave a somewhat novel impression of the Vikings.⁷³ He began by stating that the people at that time were “peasants, merchants and warriors”, and most people were free peasants.⁷⁴ They owned thralls (slaves) who did hard work in the fields and stables. The peasants lived in villages, owned new tools, such as the wheel plough, and cultivated the fields together. Some people lived in towns. They were artisans and produced items with which the Vikings traded. The book mentioned some causes for the Vikings’ voyages and indicated that their ships made the voyages possible; the Vikings wanted to acquire riches, have exciting experiences and gain slaves and other goods that they could trade in. Sometimes the trade was peaceful, and other times, the Vikings attacked and plundered – or demanded gold for withholding from plundering.

Downplaying the Vikings as Pirates

In the 1980s, history was reintroduced as a subject in the eighth and ninth grades. According to the curriculum, students in the third to fifth grades were taught different historical themes. From eighth to ninth grade, students were mainly taught Danish history in chronological order with a view to world history, and the Viking Age was a distinct topic in sixth grade.⁷⁵

In the 1980s, more than half of Danish schools used Sven Skovmand’s books to teach history. The first volume for the sixth grade concerned the Viking Age.⁷⁶ Skovmand stated that the

⁷¹ M. Møller, *Vi læser historie. 3. klasse. De ældste tider* [We Read History: Third Grade. The Oldest Times], (Copenhagen: Gjøellerup, 1966)

⁷² Møller, 1966, 57–58.

⁷³ N. Aa. Jensen, *Historie i fjerde* [History in Fourth Grade], (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1981).

⁷⁴ Jensen, 1981, 4.

⁷⁵ Undervisningsministeriet, *Undervisningsvejledning for Folkeskolen. Historie 1984* [Teaching Guide for the Primary School: History] (Copenhagen: Undervisningsministeriet, 1984), 28–29.

⁷⁶ S. Skovmand, *Historie 1. Danmarks historie fra oldtiden til 1500-tallet* [History 1. History of Denmark from Ancient Times to the Sixteenth Century], (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1981).

Viking Age was perhaps "the most amazing time in the history of Denmark and the Nordic region" and that the Vikings were "better than their reputation".⁷⁷ Skovmand made little mention of the Vikings as pirates and assailants and instead focused on the Vikings' long journeys, conquests, settlements and "fantastic ships", as well as their everyday life, culture and improvements in agriculture (cultivation methods and the wheel plough). According to Skovmand, overpopulation was a major reason for the "great exodus" from Denmark and Norway, made possible by Viking ships and conquest raids.⁷⁸

In his history book, Nils Aage Jensen⁷⁹ stated that in the Viking Age, there were no significant differences between the Danes, Norwegians and Swedes; among other things, they also spoke the same language. The book informed students about peasant life in the villages and the city life of artisans and merchants, with the Vikings living as both peasants and artisans. Highlighting the Danes' skill in shipbuilding, Jensen used two pages to describe the Viking ship and how it functioned and was navigated: "From ancient times, the Danes had been used to sailing out to and doing business with other countries."⁸⁰ On trade voyages, the Vikings found that it was tempting and easy to "attack and plunder the rich monasteries [...]" and it became the Vikings' special way of life".⁸¹ However, as Jensen pointed out, only the monks wrote about the Vikings, and they may have exaggerated their descriptions of the Vikings' violence.⁸²

In the early 1990s, Claus Buttenschøn and Olaf Ries wrote a coherent series of books for history teaching, which became the most used books in elementary schools for almost twenty years. The Viking Age received extensive treatment over sixteen pages.⁸³ Only a little space was given to the Viking raids, which were described as a mixture of "trade and looting raids" and were gradually replaced by conquest raids and the Vikings' settlements in foreign countries.⁸⁴ The chapter about the Viking Ages focused on trade, crafts, towns, the lives of peasants in the villages and the Vikings' gods. The book also explained why the Vikings went on voyages, highlighting the

⁷⁷ Skovmand, 1981, 47.

⁷⁸ Skovmand, 1981, 53.

⁷⁹ N. Aa. Jensen, *Ny historie i sjette* [New History in Sixth Grade], (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1995).

⁸⁰ Jensen, 1995, 51.

⁸¹ Jensen, 1995, 51.

⁸² Jensen, 1995, 51.

⁸³ C. Buttenschøn and O. Ries, *Ind i historien. Danmark og verden 1* [Into History: Denmark and the World 1], (Copenhagen: Grafisk Forlag, 1992).

⁸⁴ Buttenschøn & Ries, 1992, 115

Viking ship as a prerequisite. The book discussed the techniques of shipbuilding and why the ships were so seaworthy. In many countries in Europe, there was internal unrest and war, and there was no united front to keep the Vikings at bay, allowing the Vikings to plunder, conquer land and settle.

Revitalisation of National History?

In 2001, bourgeois-liberal parties, supported by the national conservative and anti-immigrant Danish People's Party, gained government power. The government believed that increasing immigration from non-European countries was a threat to Danish culture and fundamental Danish values and that history education should be a safeguard against this. In 2006, the government set up a committee to propose how the curriculum could be changed so that the school subject could better achieve this goal. The government believed that "students in elementary school are not sufficiently familiar with stories from Denmark's history".⁸⁵ The teaching should, therefore, give "the students a chronological overview of events, development processes and processes of change, which are part of the Danes' common cultural base".⁸⁶ The new curriculum should also include a list of obligatory topics – a history canon – to be included in chronological order in teaching. The Ministry of Education published the list in 2006, but it was first implemented in the new curriculum in 2009.⁸⁷ One of the twenty-nine topics from the history canon was the famous runic stone "Jellingestenen".⁸⁸ After 2006, several history books were published in accordance with the new curriculum, with particular focus on the content of the canon list and the chronological principle, so the topic of the Viking Age belonged in the book for fourth grade. Because Jellingestenen was part of the history canon, the textbooks' treatment of the Viking Age placed strong emphasis on the Jelling Dynasty, the formation of the kingdom and the transition to Christianity.

Apart from the mandatory inclusion of Jellingestenen, textbooks differed in their descriptions of the period. For instance, Thomas Meloni Rønn's history book⁸⁹ started with the

⁸⁵ Undervisningsministeriet, *Rapport fra Udvalget til styrkelse af historie i folkeskolen* [Undervisningsministeriet: Report of the Committee to Strengthen History in Elementary Schools], (2006), 3.

⁸⁶ Undervisningsministeriet, 2006, 3.

⁸⁷ Undervisningsministeriet, *Fælles Mål 2009. Historie. Faghæfte 4* [Common Objective 2009: History], (2009).

⁸⁸ Undervisningsministeriet, 2009, 11.

⁸⁹ T. M. Rønn, *Indblik og udsyn. Historie for 4. klasse* [Insight and Out View: History for Fourth Grade], (Skive: Meloni, 2009).

Vikings' attack on the monastery of Lindisfarne. Although the book provided information about the Vikings as merchants, artisans and peasants, the focus was on Vikings as warriors and conquerors. By contrast, Susanne Paulsen and Jens Aage Poulsen's book for the fourth grade focused on everyday life, such as peasant life in the villages and the importance of the wheel plough for the cultivation of the fields.⁹⁰ The book also discussed commercial goods, cities, merchants, artisans, kings and Viking society as a whole and included pages about Viking vessels, Viking raids, conquests and settlements.

The Viking Age was dealt with in twenty pages (one-fifth) of Claus Buttenschøn and Olaf Ries's book, showing that the topic was still considered important.⁹¹ The authors' intention was to put an end to the perception that most Danes were "robbers who brought huge treasures to Denmark". Although the book discussed commerce, crafts, society and daily life, there was also ample room for narratives about raids and classic legends.

The Vikings in the Digital Age

Over the last ten years at least, digital learning portals have become increasingly widespread in elementary school teaching in almost all subjects, including history. Instead of textbooks, almost all teaching uses students' iPads or computers. In many schools, students must bring their own devices. The formats of the digital portals differ from analogue textbooks but do not in themselves affect the narratives about the Vikings. Where differences do occur, I assume they are motivated by popular films and TV series and perhaps the many computer games that take place in the Viking Age, which have influenced contemporary images of the Vikings.⁹² In any case, there is more drama and the Vikings are portrayed more often as travellers and warriors than peasants and artisans in new digital portal depictions of the Viking Age more than in textbooks. This focus is obvious in Alina's digital portal, which contains a topic titled "On the voyage": "When your ancestors went out, it wasn't to relax — quite the opposite. It was hard work and often cost many lives. But then, why didn't they just stay home and look after their farms in calm and peace?"⁹³

⁹⁰ S. Paulsen and J. Aa. Poulsen, *Historie 4* [History 4], (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2012).

⁹¹ C. Buttenschøn and O. Ries, *Find – ind i historien 4. klasse* [Find: Into History Fourth Grade], (Copenhagen, Alinea, 2008).

⁹² For instance, the television series *The Vikings* (2013–2020) and computer games such as *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*.

⁹³ M. Lumholtz, "På farten" [On the Voyage] (Copenhagen: Alinea) <https://historie.alinea.dk/course/AA1p-p-a-farten?portalclick=coursessection>. (Accessed December 12, 2021).

Similarly, the most widely used digital learning portal, Clio, gives little attention to everyday life. Instead, the learning portal informs the students about Viking voyages and raids, vessels, warrior life, sagas and mythology.⁹⁴

Conclusion

Since 1814, several hundred textbooks and other teaching materials about the Viking Age for use in elementary schools have been published. This article has only mentioned a few textbooks as examples. As Denmark has never had a central authority to preapprove teaching materials, differences in narratives about the Viking Age may occur in books published in the same period. These differences may be linked to the author's knowledge of history, view of history, political opinion and so forth. Despite these variations, trends and patterns can be identified in how narratives about the Vikings and Viking Age have changed in history books intended for elementary school from 1814 to the present day.

In the early 1800s, the Vikings or Normans were depicted as cruel savages and enemies of Christianity, which – personified by Ansgar – eventually won. When the Danes became Christian, the raids stopped. From the 1830s, more people endorsed the idea of the nation-state, and the anti-German mood grew. Tales of the nation's great past, including narratives about the Vikings, supported these changes. Consequently, the textbooks described the Vikings more positively, although they also mentioned that the Vikings plundered and were not Christians. After Denmark's defeat to Prussia and Austria in 1864, processes aimed at nation-building intensified. Most history books portrayed the Viking Age as a heyday in Danish history, highlighting the cohesion of the Nordic countries and conjuring up an enemy image of Germans and Germany. During the 1920s and 1930s, the glorification of the nation and the use of enemy images waned, and the books provided information about peasant society, commerce and crafts in the Viking Age. The Nazis' use of Viking Age symbols and signs influenced history books' narratives; the Viking as a warrior was toned down, and more emphasis was placed on recounting how society was built and how peasants lived at the time.

⁹⁴ A. Nielsen, Vikinger. <https://portals.clio.me/dk/historie/3-6/emner/historiske-emner/vikinger/> (Copenhagen: Clio). (Accessed December 12, 2021).

There are indications that in recent decades, the Viking as a warrior and conqueror has again become prevalent in history books. However, narratives of Vikings and the Viking Age are no longer used as factors that strengthen national feelings and love for the nation. Today, many see the Viking Age as an exciting, exotic and fascinating period used commercially and as entertainment, which is also reflected in the latest teaching resources.