

HONORING HISTORY: A LOOK AT MODERN VIKING REENACTMENT

A CREATIVE PROJECT
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS
BY
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Honoring History is a documentary created, filmed, and edited by me, India Potter. It is a short film attempting to discover what Viking reenactment is and what attracts so many people to continue to join and grow the hobby. The purpose of this paper is to share and examine my creative process, production planning, influence, and decision-making throughout the project.

Project Development and Topic Selection

I was very close to creating a film about the history of Dungeons & Dragons and even more specifically women and minorities in that part of the tabletop roleplaying game world, but I began to worry that I might not have the level of access to that world I had hoped for, especially given the depth of information I wanted to uncover. But in Media Research and Planning with Dr. Jason Phillips, I realized a trend in my subject matter through the assignments that was easiest for me to access and that was through my own hobby of Viking reenactment groups. I had a vast connection of friends, acquaintances, and friends of friends that were a wealth of knowledge, insight, and personal experience in the subject. The hobby I had joined just a year earlier, originally just a fun way to make friends, learn sword fighting, explore ancient crafts, and go camping in costume, unexpectedly led me to the perfect subject for my project: reenactors.

Research Focus and Conceptual Framework

The Viking Age is a fascinating subject just by itself, but I want to take a creative deep dive into why people want to do experimental archeology in their free time. I'm fascinated by how much we can learn from limited sources (burials, bogs, and scattered historical accounts) and how reenactors use that knowledge to reconstruct the past. What drives someone to choose this as their primary hobby, dedicating time outside of work, home life, and other relationships to immerse themselves in history? I want to understand the motivations behind this passion and the

personal meaning it holds for those who live it. They have created a subculture of organized groups called Hird or Lags, and made up their own territory and armies. They even organize events where people travel hundreds or thousands of miles to attend and spend a significant amount of money on the event.. They become crafts masters, martial arts experts, and structures of hierarchy of members within their groups. They form strong bonds like sisterhoods and brotherhoods. With this short film, my goal is to explore what draws individuals to reenactment groups, the deeper motivations behind their passion, and what makes this immersive hobby so meaningful in their lives.

Cultural Relevance and Anthropological Meaning

I believe this subject has a lot of connections to cultural studies, anthropology, and media production. It's a fascinating look into the creation of sub-cultures in modern society. Just like people who are into cosplaying, knitting, playing Dungeons & Dragons, and a thousand other hobbies that people spend most of their free time on and create clubs based on these hobbies. From an anthropological perspective, this project serves as a documentation of a unique subculture, one rooted in a thousand-year-old past yet thriving in modern society. Simply recording the interests and practices of reenactors is an act of cultural observation. At the same time, the creation of this short film is an opportunity for me to sharpen my skills in media production, blending academic inquiry with creative expression.

Identity, Community, and Cultural Expression

Another subject I want this short film to search for is what does this specific type of reenactment say about our society? What does it show about our connection to our identities and communities? Viking reenactment in the modern era reveals how individuals construct identity

and community through historical performance. Participants often use reenactment as a means of self-expression and connection, crafting identities that blend personal values with imagined or ancestral ties to the past. For some, embodying a Viking persona serves as a link to heritage and cultural pride; for others, it represents an opportunity to explore ideals such as resilience, craftsmanship, and collective purpose. In this way, reenactment becomes not merely an act of historical imitation, but a living dialogue between past and present, one that allows participants to negotiate who they are and where they belong in a rapidly changing world.

Community and Inclusivity

Equally significant is the sense of community fostered within Viking reenactment groups. These organizations often function as modern guilds or micro-societies, emphasizing collaboration, skill-sharing, and mutual support. Through shared activities like crafting, combat training, and storytelling, members create a tangible sense of belonging that contrasts with the ~~often fragmented~~often fragmented nature of contemporary social life. At the same time, many reenactors recognize the responsibility of engaging with Viking imagery thoughtfully, given its appropriation in certain extremist or nationalist movements. By emphasizing historical accuracy, inclusivity, and education, these communities reclaim Viking culture as a diverse and interconnected historical reality. Ultimately, Viking reenactment reflects a broader cultural desire to rediscover authenticity, connection, and identity through the act of bringing history to life.

Research Methodology and Sources

Since 2021, I've been filming and interviewing individuals about this subject. What began as a way to practice filming and editing while exploring a new hobby quickly evolved into something more. As a newcomer to the reenactment community, I started sharing my discoveries

on YouTube, from my first events and club processes to crafting techniques and historical fighting styles. I hadn't decided my thesis would be this subject until 2024 in my third semester of my Digital Media Masters. In that time, I have been to about 10 reenactment events around the Midwest and connected with reenactors around the world. My process has been purely recording conversations and interviews with people involved in the hobby and discovering their personal experiences and knowledge firsthand. In the short film, I aim to briefly introduce the historical context of the Viking Age. To do so, I draw from a range of sources including historical texts, video lectures by scholars, and books focused on Viking art and culture. My research also includes several volumes on the Eddas, the practice of heathenry as a religion, and a dedicated book on Viking reenactment itself. These resources help ground the film in both historical accuracy and cultural nuance.

Research played a central role in shaping the conceptual framing, script development, and interview structure of *Honoring History: A Look at Modern Viking Reenactment*. Scholarly literature on heritage interpretation, living history, and Viking material culture informed the documentary's emphasis on identity and community, moving the narrative beyond depictions of warfare or spectacle. Studies such as Sara Ellis Nilsson's *Viking Heritage and History in Europe: Practices and Re-creation* and Jay Anderson's book *Time Machines: The World of Living History* provided a theoretical framework for understanding reenactment as a form of cultural memory, which influenced how the script juxtaposed historical context with contemporary practice. Research into Viking domestic life, craftsmanship, and trade guided the portrayal of everyday activities within reenactment groups and ensured that visual and narrative choices reflected historical nuance. Additionally, readings on authenticity and heritage performance shaped the development of interview questions, prompting participants to reflect on

their motivations, community dynamics, and the modern meanings of Viking identity. Viking reenactors often draw inspiration from historical visual references when creating clothing, tools, and decorative objects. As Markussen (2019) explains in *The Anatomy of Viking Art*, the distinct styles of Viking ornamentation—such as gripping beasts, intertwined knotwork, and flowing animal forms—reflect both artistic tradition and cultural identity, offering a framework for modern craftspeople to achieve authenticity in their recreations.

This research-driven approach grounded the film in academic inquiry while allowing for a nuanced exploration of how individuals today engage with the past through performance and collective experience.

Historical Context of the Viking Age

My first challenge is to disperse misconceptions about what the Viking Age is and what “Viking” culture was like. Because it was very different than what is being presented in popular shows like the History Channel’s show *Vikings*. I will share my research of what mostly is agreed upon for this time in history. It will be included in the first section of my project. The “Viking Age” is how historians describe a remarkable period in European history, spanning roughly three centuries — from the late 8th century until the mid-11th century. It is generally considered to begin in the year 793 C.E., when Viking raiders struck the monastery at Lindisfarne in England, a shocking attack that echoed across Europe. And it is considered to have ended in 1066 C.E., at the Battle of Stamford Bridge, when the English under King Harold Godwinson, himself a descendent of Vikings, defeated a Viking army lead by King Harald Hardrada just weeks before being defeated at the Battle of Hastings by William the Conqueror, also a descendant of Vikings.

The people of the Viking Age came from Scandinavia, the lands we now know as Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. But the word “Viking” did not mean all Scandinavians. It referred to those who went on voyages abroad, sometimes as raiders, sometimes as traders, sometimes as settlers. Most people at home were farmers, tending fields and livestock, or craftspeople, producing goods that sustained their communities.

Vikings are remembered as fierce warriors, and they were. They mastered the art of the shield wall, carried axes, swords, and spears, and wore mail armor when they could afford it. But they were more than warriors. They were also expert shipbuilders and sailors, crafting longships that could sail across the open ocean or glide up shallow rivers. This technology gave them an unmatched mobility, and it allowed them to reach far beyond Scandinavia.

They raided the coasts of Britain, Ireland, France, Spain, and even North Africa. Vikings who went East, often called Rus or Varangians, traveled the river systems of Eastern Europe, raiding and trading to Constantinople and throughout the Byzantine Empire as well as deep into modern-day Russia and Ukraine. Some Viking explorers who braved the unknown to the far West reached Iceland, Greenland, and even North America, where Leif Erikson and his crew landed around the year 1000. (Brink & Price, 2008)

But the Viking Age was not defined by violence alone. These journeys opened vast trade networks. Vikings exchanged furs, amber, and iron for silver, silk, spices, and glass. They brought back not only wealth, but also ideas, technology, and cultural influences. In many places, they settled permanently, founding towns, intermarrying with local populations, and shaping the future of nations. (Colum, P. (1920/2015).

At home, Viking society was organized into clans and communities. Chieftains held power, but the Norse were also known for assemblies called “Things,” where free men could gather to settle disputes and make decisions, an early form of proto-democracy. Their religion was rich with gods and legends: Odin, Thor, and Freyja, stories of Yggdrasil, the world tree, and the apocalypse of Ragnarok. Even after Scandinavia began to convert to Christianity in the 10th and 11th centuries, these myths continued to echo in their culture.

The Viking Age left an enduring legacy. It reshaped Europe through conquest, settlement, and trade. It gave rise to new kingdoms, including the foundations of England and Russia. It produced sagas, runestones, and artifacts that still captivate us today.

In the end, the Viking Age was an age of contrasts: of violence and exploration, of destruction and creation. It was a time when Scandinavian seafarers stepped onto the world stage and ensured that their influence would be remembered for centuries.

Creative Vision

The mood I want to accomplish in this documentary is to feel warm, reflective, and human centered. I tried capturing interviews with anyone willing to share, meeting them where they were, whether at events, in workshops, or during casual conversations. Historical camps are always drenched in green trees and grass, dotted by natural canvas tents, so I was inspired to create a color palette of natural mid tones throughout the whole film. Much of my footage was captured simply by attending as many Viking reenactment events as I could, filming whatever I could access. Now, I'm in the process of piecing together those moments and finding meaningful ways to connect them into a cohesive narrative. For the soundtrack, I hope to incorporate music that reflects what might have existed during the Viking Age. However, the historical record on

Viking music and instruments is sparse, and much of what we know comes from neighboring cultures, though it's possible the Vikings adopted some of these influences during their travels. I own a cowhide hand drum and a small tagelharpa, and I'd love to create original background music using them in a later iteration.

My goal for this project is to evoke the feel of a PBS historical episode or something you might see on the History Channel. I grew up watching documentaries and educational programs from those sources, and they deeply influenced my love for visual storytelling. Working in that kind of industry would be incredibly exciting. I find the process of weaving historical narratives into compelling visual formats to be one of the most enjoyable creative challenges. Personally, I've always found reading non-fiction to be a bit dull, but historical films and documentaries bring the past to life in a way that's engaging and accessible, not just for me, but for many others as well. I also draw inspiration from history-focused YouTubers like *TheWelshViking*, a reenactor and historian whose content makes complex topics both entertaining and informative.

Production Process

I have been filming or taking photographs at every event I have attended since 2022. Some of these events are private ritual gatherings like Whitestown Viking Festival, Rowesburg's Farm Wars event, or Indiana Pagan Pride festival. I have interviewed numerous people from the midwestern groups that I interact with the most. A lot of them are friends and mostly those interested in the fighting aspects of the hobby. At Farm Wars in upper Ohio, I had the chance to talk with a lot of crafters, from wire weaving to fine jewelry makers to a very famous blacksmith in the Viking scene. Each person was incredibly generous with their time and knowledge. The more conversations I had, the more questions emerged. I used Canon DSLRs (Digital Single-Lens Reflex) camera and my RodeGo mics. All things I personally owned and felt comfortable

taking out into the woods in the elements. I am used to using DSLRs as I often do photography and film. I have a Canon M50 that is wonderful for vlogging because of the turnaround screen. It captures great quality footage while being very small. My RodeGo Mics always work like a charm if they aren't flopping around on a loose shirt.

Acknowledgments and Collaborations

This project was made possible through the collaboration of many generous individuals, and I'm deeply grateful to everyone who contributed, whether as part of the cast, behind the scenes, or through sharing their knowledge and experiences. Their involvement was essential to shaping the content and spirit of the film. First a big thank you to Paige Waters my thesis advisor. She has made me feel relaxed about the project. She let me sit in her office for hours just so I had a place to work with no distractions. She helped me plan deadlines and when I needed more time, she made it easy to get that process taken care of. I am incredibly grateful for her support. Caitlyn Baird who is a fellow in my Digital Media program helped me capture footage at a couple of Whitestown Viking Festivals and assisted on a few interviews. She is generally just supportive and has taught me a couple things about being a camerawoman. Bryan Dunn who is my partner in life and we are founding members of our own Viking reenactment group called Grimsborg. He teaches me so much everyday about this hobby and especially on the history aspect of Vikings. He has a history degree with a minor in anthropology and a special interest in the Viking age and helped me a ton with research on the topic. Also, I need to thank the city of Whitestown for allowing me to film at their event and to Raymond and Sarah Rowe for letting me film at Farm Wars. I also need to thank Michigan Viking Alliance and The Nordic Fire Festival in Michigan for letting me attend and film at the event. Overall, everyone in the community is overwhelming welcoming, warm, and helpful.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations played a significant role throughout the creation of this project. I was careful to avoid sharing personal information about those I interviewed, respecting their privacy and boundaries. Like any hobby involving group dynamics, reenactment communities are not without interpersonal challenges. There can be moments of tension, especially in martial arts settings, and unfortunately, elements of toxic masculinity can sometimes surface. As someone actively involved in the community, I chose not to highlight internal conflicts or drama—I'm not an impartial observer, and my goal is to foster understanding and peace, not division.

Our group, Grimsborg, has a constitution that emphasizes being drama-free, includes mediation practices, and upholds anti-racist values. We are acutely aware of how certain Nordic symbols have been misappropriated by white supremacist groups, and we take care to vet members before they join. In the film, I plan to include a note on the correct historical use of these symbols and how they've been distorted by hate groups. We also avoid affiliation with any organizations that support such ideologies.

Creative and Editorial Process

Additionally, I made a conscious decision to keep current political discourse out of the film. The heart of this project is to explore the deeper question: why do people choose to participate in this hobby? That curiosity, about personal motivation, cultural connection, and historical fascination, is what drives the narrative. For this project, I wanted to focus on the personal motivations behind joining and staying involved in Viking reenactment groups—some for decades. Many participants remain deeply committed for life, often bringing their children into the community and passing down the tradition. Rather than centering the film on Viking history

or culture itself, my aim is to highlight the reenactment experience: the passion, the camaraderie, and the reasons people choose to immerse themselves in this world. I've come to realize that this could easily expand into a broader series exploring reenactors from other eras, like the Civil War, the French and Indian War, the Roman Empire, or pioneer reenactments. I suspect the core motivations would be similar, with each person drawn to a particular time period that resonates with them. I also wanted to showcase the diversity within the hobby, emphasizing that anyone who approaches it with respect is welcome. I made a conscious effort to interview people from all walks of life to capture a wide range of personal perspectives. In post-production, I've been reflecting on the journey this project has taken. Since I began by filming whoever and whatever I could at Viking reenactment events, my footage is broad and varied. I've had to carefully revisit each interview, parsing through hours of content to extract meaningful insights and organize them around the themes I want to explore. My structure includes a brief overview of Viking Age history, followed by the evolution of Viking reenactment as a modern subculture. From there, I plan to cover the core elements of reenactment: the crafts people specialize in, how events are organized, and the role of combat within the community.

Sound Design

I'm also working toward creating original music for the film. While I may not have enough time to complete it before the official deadline, I plan to include it in a later version. I have a cowhide hand drum and a tagelharpa, and I'm excited to experiment with them. I've composed original music for documentaries before—such as for the David Owsley Museum of Art—and it's one of my favorite parts of the creative process. I also subscribe to YouTube Studio and Envato for licensed music that fits the tone of the film. As mentioned earlier, I'm especially interested in finding music that's as historically accurate as possible. Some old Norse poems

have been adapted into songs, and I'd love to create my own versions to enrich the atmosphere of the film.

Post-Production and Creative Challenges

After capturing hours of interviews, reenactment footage, and behind-the-scenes material, I shaped the raw footage into a cohesive story through selective sequencing, thematic organization, and emotional pacing. I began by identifying recurring ideas and visual motifs, such as community, authenticity, craftsmanship, and identity, that emerged naturally from participant interviews. These themes guided my editing decisions, allowing me to connect modern reenactors' experiences with the historical legacy they seek to embody.

What evolved most significantly from my initial vision of the project to the completed film were the additional creative elements I had originally planned to include. My early concept incorporated animated map sequences to illustrate historical progressions and an original musical score for the final cut. Although not all these ambitions were fully realized, I remained committed to producing as many original assets as possible. This emphasis on self-produced material reflects my dedication to maintaining creative authorship and cohesion throughout the project, an aspect of the work of which I am particularly proud.

One of the main challenges I've faced has been working with limited gear and developing my technical skills. My undergraduate degree is in animation so I know the theory of lighting, framing, and sound but only in a closed computer environment. I have grown significantly from this project in its real world application. I never let weather stop me. At Nordic Fire Fest it was around 5 degrees at the time and the ground was covered in ice. I slipped and fell many times, but I got right back up and fought in the ring while having my camera going. I did have to take

great care to protect my gear throughout this all though. I went to events that hailed or thunder stormed but I pushed through and got what I needed. So far I have not encountered any technical issues. Thanks to the Aspire grant through Ball State, I was able to buy a better SD card and lights to use for my project and beyond which made things a lot easier.

Throughout the production process, I developed several creative solutions to address both technical and narrative challenges. When initial plans for animated map sequences proved too time-intensive, I adapted by using static imagery and motion graphics to convey geographic movement in a stylistically consistent way. Similarly, to unify footage shot under varied lighting conditions, I employed color grading techniques that established a cohesive earthy tone aligned with the film's historical atmosphere. In post-production, I restructured interview segments to emphasize thematic flow rather than chronological order, allowing the documentary to build emotional resonance and narrative clarity. These creative adjustments not only resolved logistical issues but also strengthened the overall cohesion and tone of the project.

The process of completing this project presented significant personal and creative challenges that deeply influenced my experience. Shortly before beginning my thesis work, I purchased a home, and the unexpected responsibilities and complications that followed created considerable stress alongside other external circumstances. When I officially began my thesis project, I was experiencing burnout and symptoms of depression, which made it difficult to sustain motivation and focus. With the support of my advisor, Paige Waters, I chose to slow the project's timeline to allow for a healthier and more deliberate creative process. In my full-time position, I routinely produce educational and instructional videos with efficiency and structure. However, the open-ended and deeply personal nature of this documentary posed a different kind of difficulty. Encountering creative roadblocks often led to frustration and perfectionism, making it

challenging to engage with a project that reflected my own vision rather than external expectations. Ultimately, these challenges forced me to develop patience, self-compassion, and adaptability in my creative practice.

Workflow and Project Structure

My workflow for this project consisted of alternating periods of rapid progress and extended pauses. The initial brainstorming phase was the most engaging and generative part of the process, as it allowed me to freely conceptualize the scope and tone of the documentary. Ideally, with a larger production team, I would have been able to realize the more ambitious, History Channel-style series I initially envisioned. In its current form, however, the project developed more organically comparable to assembling a quilt composed of distinct yet thematically connected pieces. Each segment of footage, interview, and narrative component carries its own visual and emotional character yet contributes to a unified whole. While I did not employ a formal storyboard, I did draft promotional scripts for the trailer and narration scripts for the historical segments. As I continue to review and edit my interviews, I anticipate that the thematic direction and underlying message will become clearer, allowing the project's structure to emerge naturally from the material itself.

Self-Discovery and Reflection

I identify primarily as a conceptual thinker who excels at developing and managing large-scale ideas. My strengths lie in project management and in supporting various stages of film production, where I can efficiently coordinate tasks and contribute specialized skills. However, translating my own abstract ideas into a cohesive, self-directed project has presented more challenges than I anticipated. I thrive in collaborative environments where creative exchange and

dialogue drive refinement. For example, in my music-writing process, I often share an initial composition with another collaborator, who contributes additional layers before we merge our work into a unified piece. This iterative, conversational approach to creativity allows me to refine and elevate ideas through feedback and collective input, an element I found myself missing during the more solitary phases of this project.

I have already hinted at how I have learned about myself as a creator but I want to also clarify things I discovered about myself during this whole process. I definitely thrive on collaboration and dialogue. I was excellent at interviewing and connecting with people for this project which that skill helped me on, but working solo on this thesis project was very hard and slow for me because it did not feel like engaging work. It forced me to generate feedback and motivation to myself from myself. I've realized I am stronger at envisioning scop and structure, I've learned that bringing those ideas to life requires pacing, flexibility, and detailed planning. Despite burnout and stress I eventually found ways to slow down and adjust my perfectionist expectations into just moving forward. I had to be honest with myself and take the advice of others that it doesn't need to be flawless and extremely meaningful it just needs to be honest and complete. Artists do always seem to struggle with when will this piece be finished. I also discovered that my creative projects are usually an organic process. I follow my intuition and see where one idea takes me to the next.

Creative Theory

My creative process throughout this project aligns closely with Graham Wallas's four stages of creativity: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification. During the preparation stage, I immersed myself in research on Viking history and reenactment culture, gathering material and conceptualizing the scope of the documentary. The incubation phase occurred

naturally as I navigated personal and professional challenges that required me to step back from the project. This distance allowed subconscious reflection, leading to several moments of illumination, such as renewed clarity on the film's tone and structure. The verification stage emerged during editing, where I refined the documentary's pacing, color tone, and narrative coherence. Recognizing these stages within my workflow helped me understand that creative insight often results not from continuous effort alone, but from an interplay between focused work, rest, and reflective problem-solving.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The development of *Honoring History: A Look at Modern Viking Reenactment* has been a deeply transformative creative and scholarly experience. What began as a personal curiosity about a hobby gradually evolved into a comprehensive documentary inquiry into identity, community, cultural memory, and material practice. Throughout this process, I navigated research, fieldwork, production, and post-production in ways that not only shaped the film but also reshaped my understanding of myself as a creator. By engaging critically with historical scholarship, ethnographic observation, and the lived experiences of reenactors, I sought to produce a film that reflects both the complexity of the Viking Age and the motivations of modern individuals who choose to recreate it.

The final film meets my original goal of highlighting the human dimension of reenactment—why people devote substantial time, labor, and financial resources to building historically inspired communities—and it accomplishes this in a manner that foregrounds authenticity, inclusivity, and cultural responsibility. While the project changed significantly from my initial vision, particularly in terms of technical ambition and scope, these shifts strengthened the final

work. The constraints I encountered encouraged creative problem-solving and helped me prioritize narrative coherence, emotional tone, and historical nuance.

The journey also prompted substantial personal growth. Working largely independently challenged my reliance on collaborative environments and required me to develop greater internal motivation, self-trust, and adaptability. The cyclical workflow, alternating between intense creative focus and periods of incubation, mirrored Wallas's stages of creativity and affirmed the nonlinear nature of artistic development. The project revealed that my strongest work emerges when I allow ideas to develop organically through reflection, dialogue, and the lived experiences of those I document.

Looking ahead, the insights gained from this project will guide both my professional practice and future creative endeavors. The film deepened my interest in documentary storytelling, public history, and the ways communities engage with the past to shape meaning in the present. It also underscored the importance of ethical representation, especially when working within a community to which I belong. Ultimately, *Honoring History* has not only expanded my technical and artistic skills but has affirmed my commitment to creating media that is thoughtful, culturally informed, and profoundly human-centered.

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