

6-1-2004

The Philadelphia Viking Symposium

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Recommended Citation

Johnson, Dennis L. (2004) "The Philadelphia Viking Symposium," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 24 : No. 2 , Article 13.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol24/iss2/13>

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The Philadelphia Viking Symposium 2004

In SAG 2004:1 there was a little note on p.22 about the upcoming Viking Symposium, which was arranged by *The American Swedish Historical Museum* and the *Leif Ericson Viking Ship Inc.*

The Symposium took place in late April and was a huge success.

The truth about Vikings!

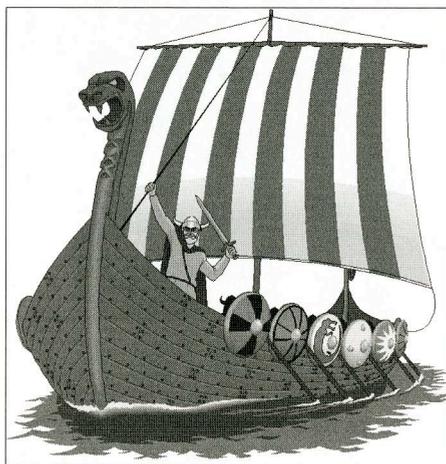
This was what over 160 people came to hear at the April 24 Viking Symposium held in Philadelphia, sponsored by the American Swedish Historical Museum and the Leif Ericson Viking ship *Norseman*. Seeking to dispel the widely held but faulty image of Vikings in the minds of many people, this event brought together some of the world's leading experts on Vikings to talk about this unique culture of over a thousand years ago.

From the rivers and trade routes of the Middle East to the northern coast of the New World, Vikings from Scandinavia extended their reach and left their influence on modern civilization. The *Viking Legacy Symposium* at the Independence Seaport Museum on Penn's Landing broadened knowledge about various aspects of the age of Vikings. New and recent discoveries in Viking seafaring, exploration, trade, story telling, systems of justice, and the place of women in Viking society, captured the attention of a diverse audience.

In the morning session, Dr. *John Hale* of the University of Louisville talked about new research in the evolution and construction of the famous Viking ships, which allowed the Vikings to travel to distant lands, spread their culture, and establish new colonies across Europe and the Atlantic. Navigation far from land, dealing with harsh weather conditions, warfare, and colonization, and engaging in trade all became

possible with the advanced technology of these remarkable sailing ships.

Without the strong, able, and independent women of the Viking age to manage their farms, produce the wool textiles for their sails and their seagoing garments, bear and raise their children, and transmit their culture, the achievements of the Vikings would have not been possible. Professor *Jenny Jochens* of Towson University explored their role in Viking society through examination of their property rights, their economic contributions, and their essential role in maintaining and advancing the knowledge and culture of the Vikings. Her research has been based heavily on runic inscriptions and on the Viking sagas.



After a hearty Viking box lunch enjoyed on the deck of the Seaport Museum overlooking the Delaware River, Professor *William Ian Miller*, University of Michigan Law School, gave the symposium's keynote address. Dr. Miller spoke animatedly of the means of obtaining justice in a society without written civil or criminal laws, jails, or law enforcement systems. Using mainly an analysis of events as recorded in the Viking sagas dating to the 12th century, he illustrated how getting justice often meant getting even, through a keen

sense of evening accounts and balancing hurts in a wise, practical way.

The afternoon session began with a presentation on The Rus, Russia, and the Black Sea by *Dan Carlsson*, of Gotland University, Visby, Sweden. Dr. Carlsson, publisher of *Viking Heritage* magazine, illustrated the travels of the Vikings, mainly from Sweden, to the rivers of Russia and beyond. Viking chiefs founded the beginnings of the Russian state, settled and developed several major cities, and ruled these eastern lands while their fellow Vikings traveled to the Black Sea, Constantinople, the Mediterranean, and lands in the Middle East. They engaged in trade, served as mercenary soldiers to eastern emperors, and even linked up with trade routes to the Far East.

Did Leif really come?

Vikings in North America was the subject of an illustrated talk by *Birgitta Linderoth Wallace*, archaeologist with Parks Canada and leading investigator of the World Historic Site discovered in Newfoundland over thirty years ago. Through her research and analysis of the Viking settlement at L'Anse Aux Meadows around the year 1000, Dr. Wallace has concluded that this site was the chief base of operations in North America for Leif Ericsson. She presented her theory that "Vinland" was the name for the coastal areas surrounding the Gulf of St. Lawrence, presently parts of Ontario and New Brunswick. These areas fit the descriptions in the two sagas describing the several voyages led by Leif Ericsson and others of his family, with their Greenland and Icelandic crews, to Vinland. The settlement did not become permanent due to the sailing distances involved, the presence of hostile natives, and the lack of an adequate number of people to be spared from the Greenland sett-



lement to sustain the colony, according to Dr. Wallace.

After these presentations, Dr. *Ruth Mazo Karras*, historian and advisor to the Symposium Committee, provided a summary and conclusion of the Symposium for the audience. Led by Dr. Karras, the panel of speakers answered many questions from listeners about the subjects of their presentations and their work.

This Symposium was made possible through the generosity of the Barbro Osher Pro Suecia Foundation, The Elis Olsson Memorial Foundation, Volvo Group of North America, Inc., and other corporate sponsors. The planning committee for the Symposium included Mr. Len Gustafsson, chair, Mr. Dennis L. Johnson, Mr. Gene Martenson, Mr. David Segermark, Mr. Richard Thornton, and Dr. Ruth Mazo Karras of the University of Minnesota, and Mr. Richard Waldron, Director

of the American Swedish Historical Museum.

One of the organizers, *Dennis L. Johnson* writes "we just finished a very busy week and weekend with the Viking Symposium, and are now unwinding and catching up on other work. The Symposium was a great success, with about 160 people in attendance. We received nothing but praise for the speakers we had, and everything worked out very well. This was the first time we had tried such a thing on Vikings here in Philadelphia and I was uneasy about what kind of attendance we would be able to attract. There really aren't that many Scandinavian Americans in this city, we don't even outnumber the Quakers.

"We hope to publish the proceedings if we can, and/or make a DVD of the presentations. We have it all on video and audio tape.

"I spent quite a bit of time with Dan Carlsson, from Visby, Gotland, who gave a wonderful presentation on the Vikings in the East and their travels. Dan is also the publisher of *Viking Heritage Magazine*, an eight year old periodical on Vikings, the

best in the world for news about Vikings, latest archeology and research, etc. He was going on to give talks in Jamestown, NY, and in Ohio before returning home to Gotland.

Sunday we took Dan Carlsson with us to the annual Forefathers' luncheon of the *Swedish Colonial Society* at the historic Old City Tavern in downtown Philadelphia. Many members are descendants of the original colonial Swedes who came in 1638, now about 9th or 10th generation. Peter Craig was there also. It was a good time with waiters in Colonial costume and a more or less Colonial menu. I also had a chance to sit next to Birgitta Wallace, chief Archeologist with Parks Canada for the L'Anse Aux Meadows site. She is Swedish born and now lives in Halifax, Nova Scotia. She has retired but does many speaking engagements, a very knowledgeable and interesting person to talk to. She also spoke at our Viking Symposium, as did Jenny Jochens on the subject of the role of women in Viking Culture."

A Cup of Coffee in Chisago

A couple of months ago I recieved an e-mail from SAG reader Paul A. *Johnson*. It was an answer to my plea in the December SAG that the SAG readers should report news from their areas that would be of interest to everyone.

So what did Paul send me? He sent a link to an article in the *Chisago County Press*, a newspaper right in Vilhelm Moberg land in Chisago County, Minnesota.

The article told about a group of men that have met at the Wagon Wheel Cafe in Chisago City for more than twenty years, for just one purpose: *att tala svenska!*

They meet every other Tuesday morning and have a nice big breakfast, and talk Swedish all the time to keep their language living. The

subjects can be anything and everything. Many of the members in the group still have contacts with their relatives in Sweden and need their Swedish to maintain the contacts. Others have been to Sweden or are planning to go in the future. One member has been there 11 times.

The number of people that meet varies, but usually around 12 or so. Not everyone lives in Chisago, but some drives there from the Twin Cities for these friendly meetings.

The emigrant ancestors of the group came along at different times from the 1860s to 1913 and from different areas of the old country, so the Swedish these men speaks is an older form, than what is used in Sweden these days, which makes the meetings interesting.

Women are also allowed to come, but their number has never been great. The article still gives a feeling that it would be worthwile to come to Chisago on the second and fourth Tuesday of the month, just to listen to all the stories from childhoods in a world long gone.

There are probably many little groups like this one, that does a grassroot type of work to preserve the Swedish heritage. I have had the privilege of visiting with the Swedish Class at the Ishpeming Evangelical Covenant Church in the Michigan Upper Peninsula, and they did a super job of keeping the Swedish alive.

Do keep me posted on these Swedish groups that works to keep the heritage alive.

Elisabeth Thorsell