

INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION “THE VIKINGS”, BERLIN, 10.09.2014 – 04.01.2015

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On 10 September 2014, in Berlin, it was opened one of the most impressive exhibitions devoted to the inhabitants of the north of Europe, who had become famous in history under the name of Vikings. Skilled warriors and seamen, agriculturalists and farmers, but also capable craftsmen, the Vikings dominated both north of Europe and the coasts of the Baltic Sea reaching, across Russia, to the Byzantine empire in the 9th – 11th centuries. The settlements on the coasts of Greenland and of the North America made evident the Vikings' venturesome spirit.

From the Central Europe direction, the Vikings appeared as a phenomenon from the northern periphery of this geographical area. From another point of view, we find Scandinavia within the centre of a large network of commercial and diplomatic contacts that was stretching from the west, from the North America, to the Middle Orient. The Vikings conquered large areas of the British Isles, traversed the Atlantic and formed the first state on the territory of the actual states Ukraine, Belarus and Russia: Kievan Rus'.

Nowadays, the Vikings' image is associated with violence. This image is owed, to a large extent, to their numerous raids for the purpose of plunders. This exhibition reveals also aspects of the northern religion in transition to Christianity, of commerce and of formation of the Viking kingdoms.

The international exhibition, the first one of such wide-spreading in the last twenty years, was the result of a productive cooperation among the National Museum of Denmark from Copenhagen (Nationalmuseet), British Museum from London and Museum for Prehistory and Early History from Berlin (Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin). The exhibition was housed by the famous historical monument Martin-Gropius-Bau (Berlin-Kreuzberg). To

increase the interest of the large audience in the exhibition “The Vikings”, its opening was preceded by a short voyage of the warship “Sea Stallion from Glendalough”, upstream along the river Spree. The vessel, a replica of the Viking warship Skuldelev 2 (found in 1962 in the fjord Roskilde), is famous for the round journey from Roskilde-Dublin (2007–2008), which represented the culmination of 25 years of research in the domain of experimental archaeology.

The exhibition opening took place in Abgeordnetenhaus of Berlin (the State Parliament of Berlin). The guests were welcomed by a reenactors team (Pl. I/2). The first speech was held by Prof. Dr. Hermann Parzinger (the President of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation). Then, there followed the president of Germany, Mr. Joachim Gauck (Pl. I/2), and Her Majesty Margrethe II of Denmark, whose love for archaeology is emphasized also by her academical education in prehistorical archaeology. Prof. Dr. Matthias Wemhoff (the director of the Museum for Prehistory and Early History from Berlin) had the concluding remarks.

The exhibition “The Vikings” gathered over 800 items belonging to museum collections of 23 European institutions (Denmark, England, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Scotland, Ireland, Russia, Poland). These exhibits are representative for the most important aspects of Vikings' life. The museum artifacts are thematically displayed. They are grouped around the central room of the Martin-Gropius-Bau, where there was exhibited the largest Viking warship ever discovered: Roskilde 6 (Pl. II/1).

Roskilde 6 is a spectacular warship that could have transported about 100 persons. The 37-metre-long ship was built in the south of Norway after the year 1025. It was one of the warships that had been deliberately sunk so to protect the access to the fjord Roskilde. This vessel is the centrepiece of

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the exhibition from Berlin. For the Vikings, the warships played a very important role in all the domains of activity. The Viking warships served as means of transport and commerce, as weapon, as symbol of power, but also as a religious symbol.

The objects of the exhibition illustrate a part of each aspect of Vikings' every day life. They were grouped following a plan of themes, as for example "Contacts and Exchange", "War and Conquest", "Belief and Ritual" and "Power and Dominion".

In the thematic strand "Contacts and Exchange", the displayed artifacts concern navigation, that was a means through which the Vikings established not only commercial links, but also communication canals both diplomatic and of cultural ideas.

Directly connected to the centrepiece of the exhibition, the warship Roskilde 6, the exhibition strand called "War and Conquest" groups together the weaponry characteristic to the Viking Warriors (Pl. II/2). Even if the armament eloquently illustrates the reasons for which the Vikings had become famous in the early European Middle Ages, the exhibitions points out that the northern people were not always victorious in their plunder and conquest campaigns. To illustrate a dark episode of a failed plundering expedition, there was graphically recreated the famous mass grave from Ridgeway Hill (near Weymouth, Dorset) where there were discovered 54 dismembered skeletons and 51 skulls. The human remains are considered as belonging to the Vikings captured within a plundering expedition and executed by the Anglo-Saxon locals during the 10th century-beginning of the 11th century (Pl. III/1). At the same time, this strand of exhibition insists on the fact that the Viking warriors were a modest segment in the Scandinavian society because they were rather farmers, fishermen and agriculturists.

Another representative strand of the exhibition was "Power and Dominion", where the Viking kings' and rulers' language of power is distinguished. Roskilde 6 is such a symbol of power through its dimensions and quality of its construction. The warship was very likely the property of a king or of an important ruler (Pl. III/2).

Another exhibitional strand was that one related to "Faith and Ritual", where the exhibits are tightly connected with the exhibited warship. In the Viking society, the boats and the warships from the every day life are linked to the journey to the afterlife, another perspective on the spiritual life.

A last strand of the exhibition is constituted by a generous area in which a shipyard was reconstituted, its central item being the keel of a ship in construction. Visitors can follow, in real time, the process of construction of a Viking warship. The presence of the master carpenter with tools characteristic to that period of time, the sawdust and the component parts of the ship in different stages of finishing constitute a synthesis of the historical information present in the exhibition and an excellent lesson of knowledge both for pupils/students and for history amateur grown-ups.

If the ship Roskilde 6 is the central reference element of the exhibition, another liant is constituted by the wood of which was made both the Viking warship, and the exhibition scenery. Several items were exhibited in niches made of beams faceted carved and decorated to the exterior with motifs specific to the Vikings. The symbols of those peoples permanently accompany the visitor during the exhibitional tour.

The way of lighting the exhibition was an artificial one because the lamps and the light spots assured a luminosity sufficient for admiring the exhibits. The semi-darkness created in several exhibition strands were proper to its theme, interweaving with the message transmitted through the symbols present on the archaeological artifacts, but also of the scenery elements that successfully recreated part of the atmosphere of the Viking societies.

The exhibition labels were bilingual (in German and in English). This fact confirmed the international character of this exhibition designed not only for the Berlin inhabitants, but also for the tourists who do not lose any opportunity to visit such an exceptional exhibition. Beside these labels, the folders and the exhibition catalogues completed the way of transmitting cultural and scientific information from this exhibition.

The exhibition "The Vikings" rebuilds part of history of Scandinavian peoples. This page of regional history of Europe is, by means of the exhibited artifacts, an exemplary illustration of the links among different corners of Europe, apparently isolated one by the other. Also from this point of view, the exhibition "The Vikings" proves to be a reference point in the European museography based on research, collaboration and innovation. The last, but not the least, the exhibition proves the real support and involvement of the state in the cultural politics.

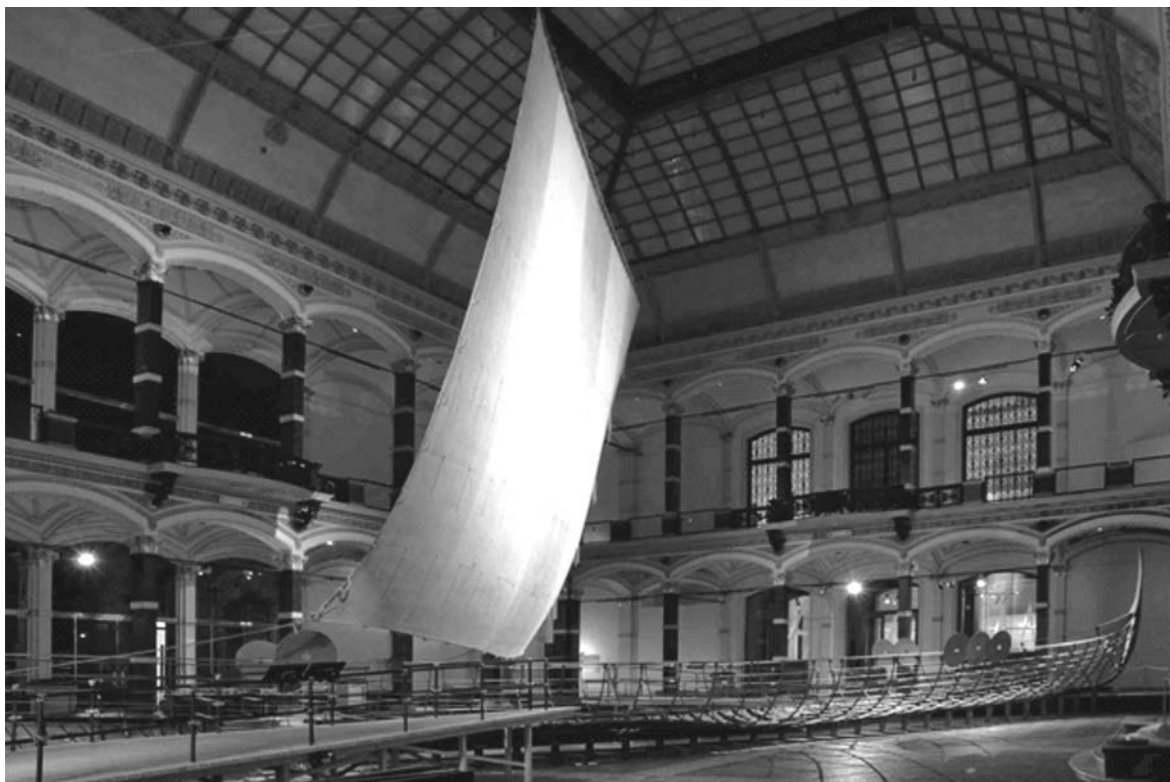


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Pl. I. 1 – Historical reenactors who do the introduction into the exhibition atmosphere; 2 – The opening speech held by the president of Germany, Joachim Gauck.



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Pl. II. 1 – The warship Roskilde 6, exhibited in the atrium of the building Martin-Groupius-Bau; 2 – Cases with swords characteristic to the Viking warriors.



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Pl. III. 1 – Vikings executed by Anglo-Saxons, discovered in the mass grave from Ridgeway Hill (Great Britain);
2 – Jewelry and artifacts that illustrate the Viking elit's power.