

Dictionary of history and culture of the Viking Age

Introduction

In Brazil, studies focused on Scandinavian peoples of the middle Ages, specifically the ones aiming at the Viking Age (VIII-XI), have been mainly developed by the Núcleo de Estudos Viking's e Escandinavos (*Nucleus of Vikings and Scandinavian Studies*) (NEVE). The Nucleus was founded in 2010 by Professor PhD Johnni Langer, who is its current coordinator. Since then, Professor Langer has been elaborating a series of studies, projects, extensions and postgraduate guidelines on Viking and Scandinavian themes, coming up with a large series of books, articles, scientific communications, workshops, extension courses, master's dissertations and events, such as the Colóquio de Estudos Vikings e Escandinavos (*Colloquium of Viking and Scandinavian Studies*) (CEVE), which has been conducted annually since 2012. The present *Dicionário de História e Cultura da Era Viking* (Dictionary of History and Culture of the Viking Age) comes at an opportune and promising time for the Brazilian field of Scandinavian studies. Although Brazilian historiography has been demonstrating an interest in the Viking peoples since the XIX century, the academic and historical production on them has been quite scarce in the country. Before the XXI century, the books on Vikings written in Brazil were mainly divided into two types, which are translations of academic works (generally of English and French origin) and works of popularization and entertainment, usually sold in newsstands.¹

Therefore, considering that these were the types of products regarding the Vikings and Medieval Scandinavia, we had no serious and academic-based dictionary about the history of culture of these peoples. As far as Portugal is concerned, the situation is quite similar. PhD in History, Hélio Pires (a member of the Institute of Medieval Studies), has presented a bibliographical survey in his book *Os Vikings em Portugal e na Galiza* (The Vikings in Portugal and Galicia) and pointed out the fact that studies on Vikings in Portugal date back to the XVIII century. However, Portuguese researchers interest in such a theme was merely punctual, according to what Hélio Pires showed when quoting some studies from scholars from the XIX and XX centuries. In the occasion, he has also made a comment on the lack of Lusitanian studies on the subject. This absence of studies on the Vikings is even more striking in the case of Portugal if one bears in mind that the Vikings travelled to Lusitania between the X and XI centuries, what is not, of course, the case of Brazil, which did not count on these incursions or expeditions from the Norsemen into its territory.²

Suffice to say, the fact is that in Brazil we had not previously had a dictionary about the Vikings, a situation also observed in Portugal and other Portuguese-speaking countries. However, it is possible to argue that the absence of such a study is due to an economic and commercial situation, with the editors fearing that a dictionary about such a specific subject would not be profitable (even though the Vikings have been popular around the world since the XIX century through a large number of paintings, operas, movies, novels, comic books, games, etc.). Unfortunately, such an argument has its validity. Despite this condition, taking into consideration the current historiographical needs in a Brazilian conjecture, a dictionary on the medieval Scandinavian people's history and culture was of extreme importance and obviously dearly needed. This new dictionary published by NEVE is the second produced by the academic group, the former being

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Dicionário de Mitologia Nórdica (Dictionary of Norse Mythology). This second dictionary presents a series of researches and thoughts on the Viking matter, counting with the collaboration of 33 Brazilian and foreigner researchers who deal with History, Archaeology and other Humanities, as well as the collaboration of scholars from the field of Religious Studies and Architecture. Among the foreign contributors, some are members of NEVE group, such as the previously-mentioned PhD Hélio Pires from Universidade Nova de Lisboa (UNL), currently one of the main specialists in the history of the Viking Era in the Portuguese context; PhD Teodoro Manrique Antón of the University of Castilla-La Mancha (UCLM) and PhD Mariano González Campo of the University of Valladolid (UVA), who wrote some of the entries on the Norsemen's language and literature.³

As for the Brazilian contributors, we highlight Professor PhD Johnni Langer (UFPB / NEVE), the main name in the field in Brazilian context and Latin America; PhD Álvaro Alfredo Bragança Júnior (UFRJ); PhD Guilherme Queiroz de Sousa (UFPB); PhD Luciano José Vianna (UPE); PhD Isabela Dias de Albuquerque (UFRJ) and PhD Luciana de Campos (member of Northern Women Arts Collaborative and of NEVE). Other several doctoral students, masters and master's degree students were also among the authors of the dictionary. The close work of these 33 authors resulted in the preparation of 224 entries, made available in over 765 pages. In addition, there is a preface written by PhD Neil Price, professor of Archeology at the University of Uppsala (UU), a foreign collaborator of NEVE who is one of the greatest experts in the Archeology from the Viking Age.

The introduction to the dictionary was made by Professor Johnni Langer, who demonstrated to be quite elucidative about the influences, purposes and approaches which were chosen for the composition of this book. Professor Langer comments that the inspiration for the *Dictionary of History and Culture of the Viking Age* came mainly from three English-language works, the *Encyclopedia of the Viking Age*, organized by John Haywood, the *Historical Dictionary of the Vikings*, written by Katherine Holman and the *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Philip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf. Based on these three books in particular and influenced by both traditional and contemporary Scandinavians coming mainly from the fields of History and Archaeology, Professor Johnni Langer pointed out that the writing of the dictionary was based on the guidelines coming from the New Cultural. This fact, of course, had a repercussion in the choice of the topics aiming to be covered by the dictionary. The *Dictionary of History and Culture of the Viking Age* does the same as the two encyclopedias and the abovementioned dictionaries, which

deal with different subjects including historical characters, customs, places, characteristics of the Nordic society, religious aspects, mythology, literary culture, material culture, etc. The 224 entries that comprise it are divided into the following themes: material culture, social aspects, military history, customs, literary sources, historical and legendary characters, geography, economy, neighboring peoples and Scandinavian literature. It is also possible to find entries regarding the influence of the Vikings in pop culture, what is observable in the entries about cinema, literature, plastic arts, music and comic books (comic strips). It is important to emphasize that the entries involving culture, social aspects, customs, primary sources, characters and toponymy are found in greater quantity and therefore are given more space.

The dictionary features a series of entries addressing different aspects of the culture and society of the Norsemen in the Viking Age, such as their agriculture, hunting, food, customs, hygiene and health, royalty, laws, the art of war, leisure, sports, trade, crafts, funeral rites, etc. Considering its cultural history's referential, there are entries associated with clothing, furniture, housing, sexuality, women, children, music, literature, as well as others about swords, combs, vessels, jewelry and the production of beer and mead. Even controversial and delicate topics such as the practice of rape, suicide and the question of warrior women were given space. This last topic in particular has been under broad discussions today because of recent archaeological finds during the last few years. As far as military history is concerned, it is subdivided into dealing with practices related to military customs and the addressing of its weapons and equipment, war symbolism, battles, and expeditions. It is important to recall that between the IX and XI centuries, the Vikings carried out various military campaigns not only in Scandinavia, but in England, France, Portugal, Spain and Eastern Europe as well, a fact that is complemented in the dictionary by the entry of "Nordic Expansion" and the specific entries that comment on the Nordic expeditions to Germany, England, France, Iberian Peninsula, etc. giving the reader a broad view of the nature of these peoples who engaged contact with the Norsemen.

The entries on historical and legendary characters present relevant information about notorious Vikings like Eric the Red, who discovered Greenland and his son Leif Eriksson, who founded the first Nordic settlement in the New World, specifically on Newfoundland Island in present-day Canada. Besides these famous navigators, we have several entries about kings such as Cnut the Great, Eric Bloodaxe, Harald Fairhair, Harald Bluetooth, Olav Haraldsson (Saint Olav), Rollo from Normandia, as well as legendary characters such as Ragnar Lothbrok and Lagertha. The entries on geography are also numerous, covering most of the major places the Vikings travelled to and visited during their years of expansion. One will also find comprehensive entries covering the Nordic presence in Scandinavia, the island of Gotland, the Baltic Sea, England, Ireland, Iceland, Russia, Germany, France, the Iberian Peninsula, Greenland, Lapland, North America, besides and entry about Vinland, which was named after its discovery by Leif Eriksson who settled a camp there, known today as the archaeological site of L'Anse aux Meadows which dates from the first decade of the year 1000. On the other hand, some of the geographical entries deal with specific urban areas, such as Birka, Constantinople, Dublin, Hedeby, Helgö, Sigtuna, Jorvik (now York), Kiev, Novgorod, Wolin, etc. These entries enclose the historical and economic aspects of such places, since many of these cities were economic and manufacturing centers. Thus, the entries on commerce, coins and coinage, tributes and technology also refer to some of these urban centers.

In addition to the Vikings, other peoples were also contemplated. Therefore, the dictionary provides entries linking the Vikings with the Celts, the Franks, the Goths, the Anglo-Saxons, the Inuit (Eskimos), the Saami (Lapps), the Finns and the Arabs. Although there are no specific entries about the Byzantines, Slavs and Balts, the dictionary also discusses the contact established with them by the Norsemen.

As far as literature is concerned, the dictionary covers a large amount of its main aspects, since it brings entries on several primary sources. Johnni Langer comments that the attention the dictionary given to the annals, chronicles and sagas was above all due to the intention of commenting on and explaining these documents, since they are taken as historical and primary sources. Consequently, those interested in consulting sources written during or after the Viking Age may acquire a knowledge of sources from Iceland, Norway, England, France and even Arab authors such as Ibn Fadlan, who in the X century met Vikings in southern Russia. Surprisingly, the dictionary does not provide any insight regarding the *Poetic Edda* and the *Prose Edda*, the two main literary sources on Norse mythology. The absence of these significant pieces of work is answered during the introduction to the book, in which Langer explained that he chose to remove the entries on mythology, religiousness, magic, religious symbolism, and sources for mythological studies because they had been already presented heavily and massively in his previous book, the *Dictionary of Norse Mythology*. To avoid repeating this content, the choice of leaving these entries on myths out of the book was made. Still, the *Dictionary of History and Culture of the Viking Age* brings entries on some religious aspects like funeral rites, burials, suicide, animal symbolism, magical medicine and two specific ones whose titles are "Religion" and "Conversion to Christianity". However, the encyclopedias and dictionary cited above as references, bring in their scope of entries themes on mythology and religion.

In addition elicited about the Norsemen and Nordic literature, there are entries that explore the language spoken by the Vikings, the Old Norse, embracing their writing in both prose and poetry forms, as well as their use of the Runic alphabet, which is something of great interest to many people due to the association between runes and magic, divination and even esotericism. Keeping in mind that the focus of such entries is not magic and religion themselves, readers interested in these aspects should consult the *Dictionary of Norse Mythology*. As far as a historical and conceptual debate is concerned, some entries bring light to this matter. The "Viking", "Scandinavia", and "Viking Age" entries discuss the very concepts of these words. In this case, Viking consisted of one among several terms used in the Middle Ages to refer to the Norsemen. In this entry, other nomenclatures for such peoples are brought and discussed, offering discussions on the romantic and nationalistic use given to this word during the XIX and XX centuries as well. About the word Scandinavia, this region was certainly distinct from what it is today, not possessing the same geographical boundaries. In the Viking Age entry, we read the explanation about this temporal historiographical construction, where it is properly presented as a concept developed from the XIX century until its full consolidation in the XX century. The entries "Archeology of the Viking Age" and "Heritage" present a new way of studying the Norsemen material culture besides merely the one of historical scope. Thus, methodological aspects are mentioned, pointing out what types of material sources are usually studied by archaeologists, which includes the study of forts, settlements, cities, tombs and runic stones, various daily objects, etc.

Complementing more theoretical entries the entry on "Folklore" stands out. Besides bringing the meaning and definition of the term,

the entry offers as an example of analysis the matter of German-Scandinavian folklore. This aspect have been chosen because, as one might know, during the XIX century under a Pangerman's zeal, Norse and Germanic myths were blended, functioning as if one tradition constituted a valid and complete trustful reference for the other. More relevant theoretical entries are "History" and "Pseudo-history", in which the different perceptions and ways of making Scandinavian history in medieval Europe are explained. This is of high importance as it gives some directions and tools for evaluating and approaching the literary sources from the medieval period, since at that time there was clearly dissociation between history and legend, which brings to the sagas and chronic sources this blend between myth and reality.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, we realize that the *Dictionary of History and Culture of the Viking Age* comes at an opportune time. Firstly, due to the increase in studies and researches on the subject in Portuguese-speaking universities, along with the rise of interest from a non-academic audience who is strongly motivated by the pop culture of Vikings in serials, novels, videogames and even the dissemination of Neo-pagan groups of Nordic beliefs? All these factors have led people to seek more about the Vikings, their history and culture, simultaneously making them pursue a more selective and critical

material to be consumed on the subject. Taking these factors into account, a dictionary about the Viking Age is attractive both to the professionals and the curious ones who are looking for a scientifically based reading, since all entries contain references. Thus, the *Dictionary of History and Culture of the Viking Era* proves to be another important achievement from the group NEVE.

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Conflict of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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