

<b>Institution:</b> University of Liverpool		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> (28) History		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Revising interpretations of viking culture through gaming, TV and radio		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2011–2018		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name:</b>  Clare Downham	<b>Role:</b>  Reader in Irish Studies	<b>Period employed by submitting HEI:</b>  2010–present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2014–2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>  <p>Vikings are a popular topic for computer games, TV and online. However, one corollary is that inaccurate views of vikings have been increasingly manipulated by the far-right to promote xenophobia and sexism. To combat these stereotypes Downham has worked with television and radio companies and contributed to a new version of the multimillion player game <i>Assassin's Creed</i>, to narrate diversity in Viking Age societies for international consumption. Media companies have benefited from Downham's input to develop research-led narratives, including productions with a self-proclaimed aim of challenging stereotypes. This in turn increases the reach and significance of more nuanced portrayals of vikings to combat the spread of dangerous misinformation.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>  <p>Downham's research on vikings has challenged assumptions about the identities of different viking groups and their interactions with other peoples. This work developed from a perspective of the Irish Sea region as a melting pot of different cultures in the Viking Age in contrast with popular discourse which present an ethnically segregated view of the medieval past (3.1, 3.2, 3.3). Taken to extremes, views of vikings as a biologically-defined group continually waging war against other cultures have been perpetuated by hate groups. In addition, far-right views of the Viking Age are male-dominated with women seen as 'stay-at-home', submissive or enslaved. Downham's research has highlighted cross-cultural interaction, co-existence as well as warfare and the role of women as political players in Viking Age politics.</p> <p>The first phase of viking activity has often been interpreted as Scandinavian 'hit-and-run' raids with vikings returning home quickly with minimal interaction with non-Scandinavian peoples. Women are excluded from this narrative, except as the victims of rape and pillage. Downham argues that early viking travels were more complex, with vikings traveling between multiple destinations and staying outside Scandinavia for prolonged periods. The standard model of hit-and-run raids was re-evaluated to demonstrate that vikings established short term camps in Britain and Ireland in the 790s-820s, and to highlight the evidence for negotiation as well as violence in this early phase, by analysing records of political alliances from the late 830s (3.4, 3.5).</p> <p>In the 'land-taking' phase of viking activity in Britain and Ireland (c. 840-880), it is often assumed that there was segregation between 'Danish' and 'Norwegian' groups in their new home, as well as between Scandinavians and non-Scandinavians. This ethnically divided view of the Viking Age is problematised by Downham's re-evaluation of the labels used to describe vikings in contemporary sources (3.1, 3.2), and her application of theories of migration to evidence for cross-cultural contact (3.3). The interactions between peoples led to the emergence of new local</p>		

identities and cultures from a fusion of Scandinavian and non-Scandinavian elements. Downham's research demonstrates that cultural hybridization occurred at an earlier stage than is often recognized. Intermarriage was key to these developments, but we also see women in this period playing major political roles (3.6). Integration was a deliberate strategy in Viking Age communities to serve practical ends and help embed new hierarchies of political power (3.3). Downham argues that vikings were less pre-occupied with policing ethnic, national and gender boundaries than people today tend to assume. By promoting a more accurate view of the Viking Age, dangerous stereotypes are eroded, and the public are engaged in a more intriguing vision of the past.

### 3. References to the research

- 3.1. Clare Downham (2011), 'Viking Identities in Ireland: it's Not All Black and White'. *Medieval Dublin*, 11: 185-201. Peer reviewed contribution. Submitted for REF2014. Available from the University on request
- 3.2. Clare Downham (2012), 'Viking Ethnicities: A Historiographic Overview'. *History Compass*, 10(1): 1-12. This was an invited contribution to History Compass. Submitted for REF2014. Available from the University on request
- 3.3. Clare Downham (2015), 'Coastal Communities and Diaspora Identities in Viking Age Ireland'. In J. Barratt, & S. J. Gibbon (Eds.), *Maritime Societies of the Viking and Medieval World* (Leeds: Maney), pp. 369-383. Peer-reviewed contribution. Available from the University on request
- 3.4. Clare Downham (2016), 'Die Wikinger in England'. In M. Helmbrecht (Ed.) *Wikinger!* (Rosenheim: Koehler), pp. 174-82. This paper was commissioned as part of a companion volume for the exhibition WIKINGER! at the Lokschuppen Exhibition Centre in Rosenheim, Bavaria in 2016. Available from the University on request.
- 3.5. Clare Downham (2017), 'The Earliest Viking Activity in England?'. *English Historical Review*, 132 (554): 1-12. doi:10.1093/ehr/cex066. Peer-reviewed 'spotlight' article for this issue. Available from the University on request
- 3.6. Clare Downham (2019), 'Von Aethelfleda bis Olga. Frauen und Kreigsfuhrung'. In M. Toplak & J. Staecker (eds), *Die Wikinger Entdercker und Eroberer* (Berlin: Ullstein Buchverlag) pp. 151-60. Invited contribution. Available from the University on request. English summary online: [Women and military power in the tenth century - Institute of Irish Studies - University of Liverpool](#)

### 4. Details of the impact

Immediate beneficiaries of Downham's research include game developers and documentary makers, who seek to develop fresh, research-led narratives for their audiences. Downham's input deliberately challenges long-held stereotypes of vikings promoted by the far right (e.g. Nordic Resistance Movement, Soldiers of Odin) which see vikings as haters of peace, living in societies where peoples of different ethnicities did not mix, where only men played important roles.

#### Creating an Inspirational Database for *Assassin's Creed*

Downham's research and expertise was sought by Ubisoft for their latest game, *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, released in November 2020. The *Assassin's Creed* franchise has massive international reach. Ubisoft holds a significant place in the global gaming market, which was valued at USD151.55 billion in 2019. Previous instalments of *Assassin's Creed* have sold over 140,000,000 copies, yet *Valhalla* exceeded the initial sales records of all previous versions of

the game, with over 3,500,000 copies sold in its launch week. It achieved UK Number 1 and US Number 2 sales chart positions in December 2020.

In June 2018, early in the development process, Ubisoft commissioned Downham to write 50 illustrated articles (over 100 pages) on topics of her choice relating to late 9th century England. While much of the game is based in fantasy, the developers sought to create an immersive historical experience. Ubisoft stated that the set of 50 illustrated articles that Downham provided formed an "inspirational database" which was used "to provide scholar-based elements of historical content and inspiration to our production teams. Dr Clare Downham's work has contributed to achieve both objectives." (5.1).

Elements of the game reflect Downham's input, complementing Ubisoft's interest in challenging negative stereotypes. Ubisoft pointed out in December 2020 that "Video games have the power to promote the values of diversity and inclusion" (5.1). Downham's database articles included the topics of *Women* and *Masculinity*. These challenge the view that only heterosexual male vikings had agency. Subsequently the main protagonist in *Valhalla* can be played as a man or a woman, and the character can have a same-sex sexual encounter. Downham's database articles also criticised simplistic portrayals of vikings as violent xenophobes, with articles on *Ethnicity*, *Towns*, *Trade*, *Crafts*, etc. Consequently, in the game the protagonist must establish a village and develop cross-cultural alliances as well as fight. As noted on Ubisoft's launch website: "Violence won't be the only tactic for getting what you want."

The historian and inspirational content designer based at Ubisoft's headquarters in Paris wrote that Downham's input "constitutes a unique resource" for the game's development and praised Downham's "broader focus on characters... which gives more diversity and complexity". In June 2020, Downham was invited to give an online lecture to the entire *Valhalla* development team in France and Canada. It was followed by a Q&A session providing research-based answers to specific developer needs. Participant comments included "Best History Class Ever" (5.1). Overall Downham's input from 2018 to 2020 has influenced *Valhalla*'s challenge to stereotypes of vikings, creating a richer and more diverse view of the past.

*Valhalla*'s impact is reflected in online reviews praising its historical content (5.2). According to *PC Gamer* the game can "prod the rigidity of Norse culture and traditions with surprising nuance" and *Valhalla* is better than earlier *Assassin's Creed* games at "telling an engaging story" of the past. *NME* praises the game for "transforming historical tales ... for the first time in years AC feels essential again". *GRYonline* reports "AC Valhalla allows us to immerse ourselves in the world of Nordic vikings on an unprecedented scale" and "shows this peaceful side of the vikings". The level of gender equality in the game has also received positive commentary. *Eurogamer* notes "female Eivor is the canon experience for all your Norway and England adventures". Downham's research has contributed to the historically informed content and helped to create storylines within the game that have garnered widespread acclaim.

### Shaping TV and radio documentaries

Downham has worked with documentary makers and other media producers as user-beneficiaries to explicitly inform the way they represent cross-cultural and gender relations in the Viking Age. As consultant on the BBC's *King Alfred and the Anglo-Saxons: Aethelflaed* (5.3) Downham appeared in the programme discussing female leadership in the Viking Age (3.6). The programme has been broadcast 12 times since 2014, most recently on 25 February 2020 (507,973 viewers). The head of the production company Michael Wood reported: "it has been the single most influential series on TV about the Anglo-Saxon/Viking era." He stated that Downham's interview "gave a different take on the whole story, getting the audience to think about a story which at that point had never been told in the popular media". As a spin-off, in 2018 Downham was interviewed for and fact-checked the top-listed BBC news item *Aethelflaed: the warrior queen who broke the glass ceiling* (5.4).

Downham was consultant and co-presenter for 1 of 4 episodes of *The Real Vikings* for History Canada, made to accompany the hugely successful *Vikings* drama series. The series, which challenged the notion that vikings were a single nation (3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.6), reached 1,800,000 viewers in the USA and 1,100,000 in the UK when it aired in 2016. It was re-aired on the History Channel in 2018. In the director's view, Downham's role "was crucial... Without Clare's participation, we would not have been able to tell the story" (5.5). An article citing Downham's interview, *Who was Viking Warrior Ivar the Boneless?* was published by howstuffworks.com on 23 September 2020.

Downham was consultant and interviewee for PBS / Channel 4's *Lost Viking Army* (USA) / *Britain's Viking Graveyard* (UK) (5.6). The director wrote, "Your expert contribution... imparts key information at a critical point in the film". Downham led the narration of the movements of viking leaders between Britain and Ireland. Released for an international audience in 2019, the documentary has since been released as an educational DVD, pitched at an adult audience.

Downham's research on cross-cultural contacts informed TG4 Ireland's documentary on a Viking Age battle, *Cluain Tarbh*, first broadcast in 2014 and rebroadcast numerous times (5.7). The producer stated by email: "I consulted a number of your publications ... which helped inform the shooting scripts and the shape of the series". Downham's interview critiqued representations of the battle as an ethnic conflict between bad pagan vikings and good Christian Irish, showing that vikings and Irish fought on both sides. It helped attract "above average viewing figures, and considerable critical acclaim". A review in *History Ireland* magazine (April 2014) noted "substance is provided by an engaging range of experts: Clare Downham ... amongst others". A spin-off was Downham's involvement in the 2014 Clontarf millennium celebrations in Ireland. The chief researcher for Trinity College Dublin's *Emperor of the Irish* exhibition in 2014, which "was seen by approximately a quarter-of-a-million people", states: "Dr Downham's published work was an important influence on my design, particularly with regard to setting the story of the exhibition within its international cultural context" (5.7).

Downham's research has helped radio producers, most recently underpinning episode one of the BBC Radio 4 (and World Service) series, "How the Irish Shaped Britain". Her interview in 2020 focused on viking interactions across the Irish Sea, and started the series at West Kirby, a site of Hiberno-Scandinavian settlement in the Wirral. The producer wrote: "Your knowledge and research have been ... extremely important ... Quite apart from the learned input you have had in our programme, it was also fascinating to ... dispel some myths about the period (and about the Vikings)" (5.8). The interview referenced the intermingling of different ethnic groups in the Viking Age (3.3).

Downham's impact on producers, directors and writers has been to shape narratives and help attract large audiences using fresh storylines that offer a striking departure from well-established but simplistic tropes of the Viking Age.

### Challenging far-right portrayals of vikings

Downham's research on viking identities and trans-national contacts has influenced public debate, especially her article *Vikings were never the pure-bred master race white supremacists like to portray* in *The Conversation* (29 September 2017, 240,000 reads, 65,800 shares on Facebook). It was based on her earlier research (3.1, 3.2, 3.3). The article was reprinted through various news outlets (e.g. *Metro Online*, *Yahoo News*, *Newsweek*) and republished in Dutch (InnerSelf) and Danish (videnskab.dk). It was critiqued in the White Supremacist publication *American Renaissance* indicating that her research is perceived as a threat to alt-right representations. Both positive and angry personal messages were sent from members of the public via Facebook and academia.edu, showing the article had importance to readers, e.g. "thank you for your well written article... keep up the good work" (Facebook messenger 17 November 2017). Downham's work was subsequently cited in publications challenging extreme right-wing views. A link to the *Conversation* article is given in *Time* magazine's *White*

*Supremacists Have Weaponized an Imaginary Viking Past. It's Time to Reclaim the Real History* (12 April 2019) to support the statement “they were not homogenous seafarers as is often imagined”. Other citations of Downham’s article include the article *White Supremacists are misappropriating Norse mythology* on the University of Alberta’s journalism site *Folio* (5.9).

Downham’s work was used in the making of the Al-Jazeera documentary *Vikings vs Neo-Nazis: Battling the Far Right in Sweden* (broadcast in March 2020, and since gaining 37,000 YouTube views). The director writes: “Your article and the other academics work really gave some solid grounding for the film and the director’s statement”. Downham’s *Conversation* article is quoted and linked in the online *Filmmaker’s View* alongside the statement “Clare ... argues that rather than the marauding smash-and-grab thugs portrayed in popular culture, Vikings sustained long-term peaceful interactions with foreign peoples, based on trade” (5.10).

Downham’s research has influenced gaming and media companies especially in Western Europe and North America. Her work has enabled producers to develop multi-faceted research-based interpretation of the past to challenge simplistic understandings of the vikings. Her work has shaped presentations of cross-cultural contacts and women in the Viking Age. Downham’s publications have also been used by writers and documentary makers specifically to develop a counter-narrative to dangerous and inaccurate stereotypes which have been peddled by far-right groups on an international stage.

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1 Ubisoft (*Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla*) – Correspondence and statements

5.2 *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla* – Reviews

5.3 *King Alfred and the Anglo-Saxons* – Correspondence from Writer/Presenter

5.4 *Aethelflaed the Warrior Queen* – Correspondence from journalist –

5.5 *Real Vikings* – Correspondence from Director

5.6 *Lost Viking Army* – Correspondence from Directors/Producers

5.7 *Cluain Tarbh* (Clontarf) – Correspondence from Director and events outreach

5.8 *How the Irish Shaped Britain* – Correspondence from Producers

5.9 Media citations of Downham, ‘Vikings were never the pure-bred master race white supremacists like to portray’ *The Conversation*

5.10 *Vikings vs Neo-Nazis* – Correspondence from Director