



Photo: Wikipedia

Eldar Heide:

## **NRK should not have aired the series on Draken Harald Hårfagre**

The TV series about Draken Harald Hårfagre (DHH [The Dragon Harald Fairhair]), which is currently being broadcast on NRK [the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation], is an interesting documentary. It tells an exciting story about the construction of the ship and the challenges it faced on its long voyage.

All the way through, a good deal of solid scholarship is included on ships and sailing in the olden times, on Nordic history, Viking-Age life and culture, genetics, the Norse settlement in Vinland, and more.

Even so, NRK should not have aired this series. This is because it constructs a myth about what a Viking ship was, which is going to harass us for generations to come. And also because the series presents DHH as something completely different from what it really is.

### **Under false colours**

The presentation included in episode 1 gives the impression that the ship was constructed by “an international team consisting of archaeologists, historians and boatbuilders”. This is incorrect. The ship was developed by boatbuilders from the modern Norwegian clinker-building tradition. They are skilled in their craft, but they were at odds with the academic community. This is evident from the book about the project that Arne-Terje Sæther published in 2015; he was part of the core group.

The term “archaeologist” is mentioned six times in the book, each time in the context of scepticism towards the scholars who work with the reconstruction of Viking-Age ship finds. The term “historian” does not seem to be mentioned anywhere (nor were any experts on the Old Norse texts involved).

In episode 1, it is said that DHH is a “replica of the largest known longship from the Viking Age”. Similar wordings are used time and again throughout the series. But DHH is not a replica of anything at all. The ship is “a construction, not a reconstruction”, as Sæther very honestly puts it in the book.

We are moreover told in episode 1 that “from the sagas, we know that wealthy Viking-Age kings and chieftains could have silk sails”. The truth is that there is no source-based foundation for the silk sail that DHH was equipped with. Homespun woollen cloth (*vaðmál*) would have been the correct thing to use, but because the desired sail was so big it would have been too heavy. This is symptomatic of how something fundamental about the project does not add up.

The silk was in fact discarded for the voyage to America in favour of synthetic material, but this is not mentioned in the series.

DHH is not very authentic at all. But it is presented as a replica, and time and again we are told that everything about it is as it would have been in Viking times. So, the ship that we encounter in this series sails under false colours.

When DHH is referred to as a “Viking ship”, this entails that it may have existed in the Viking Age, defined as spanning the late 8<sup>th</sup> century until the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century. The name “Harald Hårfagre” (Harald Fairhair) points in the direction of the early part of this period. But we can say with absolute certainty that a vessel resembling Draken Harald Hårfagre did not exist at that time. Calling it a Viking ship is spurious.

“Tourist ship from Karmøy. In this case, the boatbuilders have let their imagination run wild”, says Arne Emil Christensen about DHH in his latest book (published 2022). He is the wise, old sage of Norwegian Viking-ship research and was in charge of the ships held at Oslo’s Viking Ship Museum during the period 1990-2006.

### **What defines the Viking Age?**

The Viking Age is defined by Scandinavian expansion, not least in the form of military expeditions. The core element of such activity was landing on shallow beaches. Because of this, Viking ships had to have shallow draughts in order to get as close as possible to dry land before running aground. The warriors could then jump into shallow waters and easily wade ashore.

Additionally, the sides of the ships needed to be low in order to enable the men to easily get on board from the beach while being loaded down with plunder and pursued by enemies.

DHH would be entirely unsuited for this. It has a draught of 2.5 metres (according to the website), so it would have run aground long before reaching the shore. Were the men to jump overboard out there, carrying weapons and armour, they would risk drowning.

The problem is that DHH is not based on a ship find from the Viking Age, but on saga descriptions that are 2-4 centuries younger. When Snorri wrote *Heimskringla* in the 1220s, kings were not particularly concerned with landings on shallow beaches.

Instead, they wanted floating castles, with high sides and fortified towers at both ends of the ship. The aim was to fling weapons and stones down onto the enemy during naval battles.

This means that warships were fundamentally different from what they were like in Viking times. The development towards floating castles, unsuited for landings, is clearly evident from *Sverri's saga*, which depicts the civil wars leading up to 1200.

### **What did Snorri know?**

From ancient skaldic stanzas, Snorri knew of designations for ship types from all through the Viking Age. But he did not know what those ships looked like. Because of this, he portrays the old ship types very much as similar to the ships he knew from his own contemporary time.

The Long Serpent, built just before the year 1000, is a good example of this. Snorri says that the ship was “wide and high-sided like an oceangoing vessel”, i.e. a cargo ship (which started to be developed in the 10<sup>th</sup> century). But from archaeology, we know that the dominant type of warship around the year 1000 was extremely long and slender, with a shallow draught and a low freeboard.

On the basis of these finds – and the name! – the Long Serpent must have been such a ship. This means that Snorri's representation is utterly misleading.

A contemporary poem says that, during the Battle of Hafrsfjord in the 870s, some ships were so small that the oars rested on the sides of the ships, in tholepins and thole straps. This means we are talking about boats rather than ships, and this was the occasion where Harald Fairhair obtained power. These small ships fit the fact that small groups led the first phase of the Viking raids.

Towards the end of the Viking Age, when powerful kings gathered armies for invasions, the long, narrow ships were developed to act as floating landing ramps. Towards 1200, high-sided warships emerged that were also long (and sported many other new features).

In terms of ship development, there was no static “Norse period” from the late 8<sup>th</sup> century until the 13<sup>th</sup> century, as is the impression we get from Snorri. On the contrary, there was enormous development, just as there was during the 500 years leading up to and those following that period.

### **An impossible combination**

An entire army of craftsmen have done outstanding work on DHH – within the limits they were given. Unfortunately, these limits were based on the misunderstood representations of Viking-Age ships that we encounter in the historians of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. DHH was supposed to be 1) a Viking ship, 2) the longest in the world and 3) possess excellent seaworthiness.

But these aspects cannot be combined. An option close at hand would be to build a very long, slender and low-sided ship based on ship finds from the late Viking Age. However, such a ship would not be able to cross the Atlantic and reach America, as was a central goal of the DHH project.

Therefore, the ship was made wide and high-sided in addition, and thus it landed far outside of the Viking Age. Actually, it landed in a parallel universe, because ships such as DHH hardly existed at Snorri's time, either.

Put simply, the boatbuilders took the Gokstad ship, which is from 890 (23.8 metres long), scaled it up and adjusted it so that it attained dimensions that could fit Snorri's description. Thus, DHH (35 metres long) is neither fish nor fowl.

It is not a Viking-Age war ship (small or long, slender and low-sided), nor is it a Viking-Age cargo ship (short, wide, high-sided). But it is no floating castle from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, either, featuring all the new innovations of such a vessel. Instead, it is a construction from 2012.

### **It has long been known that Snorri deceives us**

What I point out about Viking ships, as these are described in sagas from the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, has long been known and accepted amongst scholars, ever since Rikke Malmros published her article "Leding og skjaldekvad" in 1985.

She examined skaldic poetry from the Viking Age, which had survived in the oral tradition until it was written down in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. This revealed to her that Viking-Age skalds praised war ships for being light and fast – that is, shallow-draughted and small or slender. The skaldic stanzas concur with the archaeology, whereas DHH contradicts both types of sources.

Draken Harald Hårfagre is a floating anachronism, marketed worldwide by financially powerful bodies. For generations to come, a key point in scholarly transmission of knowledge will be that the Vikings did not have such ships. It is the horned helmet all over again.

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The piece was also published on 17 October 2024 at <https://www.h-avis.no/nrk-burde-ikkje-ha-sendt-serien-om-draken-harald-harfagre/o/5-62-1772820>. This version incorporates the passage about Arne Emil Christensen, not included in the version from 12 October.