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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Interview: A Journey Through Time - Rickard Åkesson, the CEO of Hands on History, a Cultural Heritage Enthusiast

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In this interview for EXARC, Rickard Åkesson converses with fellow Viking enthusiast Vicky Mikalsen. They share how Viking history became a passion, and how they have been involved with events, conferences and living history. Many of you know Rickard Åkesson as a re-enactor for the last 20+ years, but also through his role as CEO for the company Hands on History. Vicky Mikalsen is known for creating and running the Viking conference called

Midgard Talks at Midgard Viking Centre during the Midgardsblot festival. She works as a museum curator for the Vestfold museums. Both reside in Norway.



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Vicky: We have known each other for quite some time, and the first time we met was at the Heilung gig at the Danish concert house in Copenhagen back in 2018. We had lots of fellow friends in both the music industry and the re-enactment scene. We realized that we had quite different backgrounds and approaches to working with cultural heritage, but a common passion. Since then, we have ended up working in joint projects on several occasions. I have followed *Hands on History* with interest, because it is something different, a way to approach history that is neither like traditional re-

enactment activity, nor the same as Viking museums or destinations. But before we dig into that Rickard, tell me a bit about your personal and academic background.

Rickard: First of all, I'm very happy to have this conversation with you Vicky. I have a master's degree in environmental science and have been working with pollution and ecosystem effects as a consultant since 2010. That's one part of my professional life, but I have also studied archaeology, worked with dendrochronology and started the company *Hands on History* (HoH) back in 2016. My interest has in many ways been in the intersection of people and nature, how we interact with our environment and how history plays a role in that relationship. And re-enactment has been one way to explore all of that. I first got into re-enactment in 2002, which in many ways was a gamechanger.

Vicky: Already back in 2002? That was long before university studies and HoH? How did you first get involved in reenactment?

Rickard: That is a funny story, one I can thank my father for. My father found an advert in the newspaper for summer activities at the open-air museum Foteviken in Sweden, and suggested I should attend. They had a Viking village with a summer volunteer program, where you could live as a thrall (slave) and help with different practical tasks. (Rickard laughs.) At first, I was hesitant, and found it a bit corny, but my father convinced me to go there for just the weekend. The staff provided clothing and allowed us to help build Viking age houses — and it was an absolutely amazing experience. The people were incredibly kind and inclusive. I was not the only one who found a sense of belonging in that community, a space where we fit in and where we found meaning. For me it became a springboard for self-discovery, and a way of finding out of what I was capable of but also finding a sense of identity.

Vicky: Community is important, especially as a teenager. For me, it started with the metal scene and led to a master's in Viking studies. While working in museums and as a teacher, I got involved with Midgardsblot from the first year in 2015. The festival managed to

merge Viking history and metal into a global festival. To counter historical distortions and engage the public, we had talks in cooperation with the Midgard Centre from the start but launched a much bigger program named Mimir Talks in 2017. The aim was to make Viking history accessible through scholars, musicians, and artists. When I later became a curator at Midgard Viking Centre, the conference changed name to Midgard Talks and was formally taken over by the museum. It is now an important part of the museum's international dissemination, and a popular addition to the festival program. I believe history is best learned through diverse experiences: crafts, music, films, or even tattoo research. Hands-on engagement, like re-enactment, deepens interest; something you've experienced too, right, Rickard?

Rickard: My time in different re-enactment groups led to a deeper interest in history, research, crafts, experiments and fighting. I spent many years learning how to wield a sword. The fascinating thing with re-enactment is complexity and diversity. The fighting was perhaps not that interesting at a later stage, but it was possible to indulge in other fields, like historical cooking. As the years went by it also became more natural to work a bit more professionally with re-enactment, organizing festivals and getting involved in different projects with a bit of a wider impact than just the local re-enactment group. The core if it all remains the same, I would say, circling around the idea of bringing history to life in an engaging and immersive way.

Vicky: Yes, that is a central idea that we share. You did some pioneer work of your own to get Viking history out to people. Together with friends you founded the company HoH. How did that come about, and what was the vision behind it?

Rickard: HoH was founded in 2016 by Heidi Brimi, Ingrid Aune Nielsen and me. Ingrid eventually left and Niek van Eck came onboard. The initial idea was to take things to a new level. We had all been involved in different re-enactment groups and LARP (live action role play) communities for years. We had ambitious goals for what we wanted to do, but progressing within a volunteer organization was challenging. Forming a company, with only three people involved, was a gamechanger. It felt like the right decision right from the start — we could go from idea to execution in an instant. We experimented with different projects across tourism, education, destination development, academic work and productions. I don't want to make the mistake of mixing up re-enactment and experimental archaeology, but both were a part of those early days. We, for example, organized Nordic Forum for Experimental Archaeology in Trondheim in 2017. You know, we all brought our skillsets into the business. And with that I also mean our professional skills from "normal" jobs. One thing that sets HoH apart was our ability to get things done efficiently, much like in the consulting industry, where every hour needs to be productive. We also put a lot of effort into social media in the start, to create a wide reach.

Vicky: I guess that's why it is hard to put you in a box. I don't think that there is any other company like that, not that I have heard of at least. Where has this work with HoH taken you?

Rickard: It has introduced me to fascinating people and places. I've traveled quite a bit, throughout Northern Europe, and we have also worked for many years in Transylvania with a great local partner. Perhaps it sounds a bit grandiose, but it's about making a difference for people. One of my favorite experiences is the five-day Viking hike that we have designed and developed, which is a deep dive into the Viking age, the Norwegian mountains, but also into yourself. On the last night up in the mountains we hold a small ritual; after days of dried fish and simple meals, I bring out a hidden bottle of mead. We gather in a circle around the campfire, sharing thoughts about the journey, the nature around us, and the sense of community. Some people open up in ways that I would never expect after just a few days together in a group of initial strangers — it's powerful. There's something deeply human about gathering around a fire, sharing stories.

Vicky: I agree that when you work with history in this way, it really means something to people. There is also an acceptance that the past holds wisdom and skill that are relevant for us today, right? Not only to understand history.

Rickard: Yes, it's about understanding. Understanding the past, our history, ourselves and our role in a long development stretching from far back and into the future. I think that it's important to have some kind of connection to your roots to define who you are. When it comes to understanding the past, and using living history as a method, I have always believed, in the same way as you, that the more senses you engage: touch, taste, smell, sound, the deeper the experience. When you actively participate, you become a part of history instead of just an observer.

Vicky: How is HoH different in how you organize your events from regular re-enactment? Do you have any examples?

Rickard: I have always had a strong focus at what we refer to as "authenticity", meaning to do things as accurate as we can. With HoH we have aimed at organizing events and experiences where one can only bring what one can carry, and all equipment must be as historically correct as possible (with the exception of a toothbrush perhaps). Early on I identified a gap in the re-enactment community for those who want slightly more hardcore historical accuracy, even though that approach is not unproblematic. It can easily be seen as exclusive or elitist, which was never the intention. The goal was more to offer a diversity in different kinds of events and experiences, instead of just organizing yet another historical market as everyone else does. We tried to follow our passion, but also a sense of professional expertise. We also found it important with transparency in our projects. We put together project reports describing how we did our events, what choices we made, why and what the results were. In that way we hoped to contribute to a more general development of the re-enactment scene.

Vicky: Do you have any memorable successes or failures?

Rickard: Definitely! One of our biggest wins with HoH was organizing the ReConference at the National Museum in Copenhagen. The main objective was to build bridges. For a long time there was very little collaboration and understanding between the re-enactment scene and academia. The fact that professionals, re-enactors and many other stakeholders believed in and supported our project meant a lot. EXARC was also involved in that idea. And I have to say that the conference was a success. It was also mind-blowing to be nominated for an Emmy for the documentary we made together with Dash Pictures. *Vikings – the rise and fall* was the title of this six-episode documentary. On the topic of failures, the first thing that comes to my mind was an event that we organized deep in fjord only accessible by boat, where I managed to fall and break my foot on the first day. That was a nightmare as an organizer and a host, especially since we had made a deal with the captain to pick us up a week later.

Vicky: I remember your cast from the first time we met. (Laughing.) But tell me, how do people outside the re-enactment community perceive what you do?

Rickard: I think that everyone involved with living history and re-enactment has experienced the difficulty of explaining what one does. I think that it became easier once we started HoH. An official company structure and a commercial agenda made it more understandable. Some people view living history as grown-ups dressing up and playing. I have experienced that it is easier to explain if you don't go for a logical definition of what it is but just share your enthusiasm and some stories. When you explain why it is so engaging, then people start to get it.

Vicky: I have never been a re-enactor, but the past year I have been leading a project on living history here at Midgard Viking Centre. Our research partner has been Telemarksforsking, and we undertook fieldwork where we visited different museums and Viking destinations that were well known for using living history in their dissemination. Authenticity and transparency, as you brought up, was often coming up in our discussions during these visits. We wanted to explore how museums can be successful in using living history as a dissemination strategy. We have just finished the report and will make it available in English as well. We visited Foteviken, who changed your life. And we visited other inspiring places like Butser Ancient Farm in the UK, Trelleborg in Sweden, and the Danish sites Sagnlandet Lejre, Ladby and Ribe. And during Ribe's Viking festival, we ran into each other as I was drooling over some awesome jewelry. The modern Viking world is small. But before we finish, we need to talk about boats. This has been a great passion for you, right?

Rickard: Yes, traditional boats and sailing are a big source of joy for me. My first major Viking sailing expedition was in 2004, when I joined the Vittfarne expedition, where we were rowing and sailing a Viking ship in Azerbaijan. What an experience. The expedition started in Ukraine,

went through the Black Sea and then further on to the Caspian Sea through Georgia and Azerbaijan. I was 18, fresh out of high school, and paid for my own travel. I later sailed with some of the ships at the Viking ship museum in Roskilde as well as other Viking boats in Sweden. I spent one year studying traditional boatbuilding at Fosen Folkehøyskole, where I built my own 21-foot Åfjord boat, that I named *Båra*. The process was frustrating, exciting, and ultimately one of the most rewarding things I've ever done. These traditional Norwegian boats are the last step in the evolution of the Viking boats, up until the point when plastic became the prominent material for boats. It is great to contribute to and be part of a thriving sailing community. Especially taking into consideration that this boat building tradition is now protected as intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO.

Vicky: Our journey through our modern Viking times is coming to an end, but I presume your passion for history, re-enactment and events is not over?

Rickard: No, I will continue to develop and refine our projects, expanding the outreach of HoH, and hopefully inspiring more people to engage with history in meaningful, hands-on ways. The journey is far from over!

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FIG 1. RICKARD AND VICKY AT RIBE VIKING CENTER IN 2024. PHOTO BY RICKARD AKESSON



FIG 2. RICKARD CROSSING THE LENDBREEN GLACIER VIKING STYLE IN 2022. PHOTO BY REBECA FRANCO VALLE



FIG 3. VICKY GIVING A LECTURE AT THE MIDGARD VIKING CENTRE, DURING MIDGARD TALKS. PHOTO BY RICKARD AKESSON



FIG 4. A SHORT WATER BREAK HIGH UP IN THE MOUNTAINS DURING ONE OF THE FIRST GO VIKING HIKES. PHOTO BY INGRID AUNE NILSEN



FIG 5. RICKARD WITH HIS BOAT BÅRA DURING A SAILING COURSE AT A NORWEGIAN FESTIVAL. PHOTO BY JØRGEN KROKAN LEDAL



FIG 6. USING THE TRADITIONAL BOATS FOR WHAT THEY ARE MEANT FOR: FISHING. TOGETHER WITH FELLOW ENTHUSIAST EIVIND NIELSEN. PHOTO BY NAINA EIRA