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## VIKINGS REBORN: THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY MEDIEVAL RE-ENACTMENT IN POLAND

### ABSTRACT

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The Vikings and their culture continue to fascinate thousands of people around the world and provide inexhaustible inspiration for numerous works of art, literature, music and film in which the archaeological, historical and mythological motifs from the North are reused in a creative way. Over the last 20 years the interest in the Vikings and their times has been growing at a rapid pace also in Poland where various re-enactment groups gather both young and senior enthusiasts from very diverse social backgrounds. Contemporary Vikings meet at early medieval markets, festivals and other events to trade, fight and experience a life of adventurers, merchants and warriors. The re-enactment scene has now grown so large that for some people 'being Viking' has become not only an exciting pastime, but actually their major occupation and a way of life. This paper contextualises and critically explores the fascinating history of this phenomenon and the lifestyles of contemporary Vikings in Poland.

Keywords: Early Middle Ages, living history, Poland, public archaeology, re-enactment, Vikings  
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*In memory of*  
*Philip Burthem – Jarl Ulf-Eirik*  
*(1961-2012)*

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## INTRODUCTION

The flames rose high into the cloudy sky and consumed a dragon ship furnished with precious objects of exquisite design. The warriors, craftsmen, sailors, members of the household, young and old, clad in their best garments, stood in a semi-circle, gazed into the fire and recalled their great adventures on land and sea. They all came to pay final tribute to the man whose determination, battle skills and passion has forever redefined their lives. Elaborate rituals were performed, speeches given and songs sung. In the end a magnificent runestone was raised in memory of a great chieftain and friend. A feeling of loss suffused the hearts of those who gathered there, but also that of hope for a new beginning.

Although the description above appears as if it was taken directly from textual or archaeological sources, this impressive ceremony was not one that took place a thousand years ago somewhere far in the Northern world. It was a memorial, or actually a symbolic funeral, organised in June 2013 in Wolin, Poland with the intention to celebrate the life of Philip Burthem (among his men known as Jarl Ulf-Eirik), leader of the modern re-enactment group *The Jomsvikings*. Some people say, that this was actually the first 'Viking funeral' after nearly a 1000 years, and there is probably much truth in that, at least for those who attended it and felt personally and emotionally connected to Philip Burthem and his work for the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Viking milieu (Fig. 1). Philip Burthem was certainly one of those individuals who defined, shaped and gave future direction to the re-enactment scene not only in Poland, but also elsewhere in Europe and beyond.

Today historical re-enactment is thriving in Poland, with dozens of festivals and markets taking place on a regular basis in various parts of the country. They are attended by living history enthusiasts, both young and senior, as well as numerous Polish and international tourists. The festivals and markets organised in Poland, like elsewhere in Europe, aim to recreate/re-enact life in the past through the use of full-scale replicas and/or stylised objects from early medieval times. Battles, involving from several to several hundred warriors, are a frequent part of their programme, but occasionally theatrical recreations of actual historical events, storytelling or rituals (i.e. weddings, funerals, magic ceremonies and other) are also performed. Such events are organised not only to please the growing demands of the modern public and to allow them to 'travel in time', but also (and in many cases, predominantly) for the re-enactors themselves. They provide an opportunity to create a kind of 'space' where enthusiasts of the Early Middle Ages can meet, talk, exchange ideas, learn and share various skills and experiences.

This paper explores the phenomenon of Viking re-enactment in contemporary Poland by critically reviewing the different periods of its development, commenting on its recent condition and predicting its future trajectories. In order to provide a wider historical and social context for the modern fascination with Vikings in Poland some brief remarks on the works of late 19<sup>th</sup> century artists, writers and early researchers of the Norse culture will also be made. This will be supplemented with observations on the use and misuse of early

medieval history during and after the Second World War as well as comments on the current perception of the Vikings in Polish academic milieu and popular media.

However, before we discuss the Polish Viking re-enactment scene in further detail, it is vital to present a few general remarks on the history of similar phenomena in Western Europe (on modern reception of the Vikings in art, literature and other media see, for example, Clark and Phelpstead 2007; Morrison 2000; Mjöberg 2003; Orrling 2000; Roesdahl and Meulengracht Sørensen 1996; Trafford and Pluskowski 2007; Ward 2000; Wawn 1994; 2000; Willemsen 2004, 174-186; Wilson and Roesdahl 1992; see also Radtchenko 2006 on historical re-enactment in Russia).

## VIKING RE-ENACTMENT AND ITS ORIGINS

It is difficult to provide an exact date for the origins of Viking re-enactment in Europe, since the concept of 're-enactment' can be defined in various ways (e.g. Agnew 2004; Agnew 2007; Goodacre and Baldwin 2002; Magelssen 2007; McCalman and Pickering 2010). By adopting a very broad understanding of this term, one could even argue that people attempted to re-enact the Viking past already in the Viking Age by commemorating gone-by events, stories, myths or prominent individuals at elaborate funerals and through the use of role-playing techniques, masking and so on (on related notions see, for example, Price 2010; Price and Mortimer 2014). In modern times the term 're-enactment' may occasionally be compared with what is known as 'experimental archaeology' which, broadly speaking, is a field of study that aims at recreating objects or buildings from the past with the use of authentic techniques. In reality, however, many contemporary re-enactors (at least those re-enacting the Viking Age, i.e. a period dated between the late 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) are neither engaged nor interested in performing any academic-orientated work, but they nonetheless have a strong influence on how the general public perceives the past. As such re-enactment certainly fits within the broad remit of 'public archaeology' (e.g. Holtorf 2007; on public archaeology in Poland specifically see Deskur 2008 with further references). In his seminal article on historical re-enactment in Poland, the historian Michał Bogacki (2008, 222; my translation from Polish) has argued that:

[Historical re-enactment] may be defined as a set of activities involving visual presentation of various aspects of life in the past by people dressed in costumes and using objects (...) referring to a chosen time-period, or occasionally even employing original artefacts.

While this general definition could certainly be expanded or refined, I will accept it for the purposes of this article.

In contemporary Western Europe serious attempts at re-enacting the Early Middle Ages, or the Viking Age specifically, began in the 1970s in England. The oldest group, origi-

nally known as *Norse Film and Pageant Society* and now called simply *The Vikings* ([www.vikingsonline.org.uk](http://www.vikingsonline.org.uk)), was founded in 1971. In 1988 Philip Burthem, Robert Taylor, Adrian Lulham and Robin Cowley established another group called *Jomsborgelag*. After several years some of its initial members formed the *Jomsviking Brotherhood* which later developed into an organisation today known as *The Jomsvikings* (Górewicz 2013a, 116; but see also [www.jomsvikings.com](http://www.jomsvikings.com)). From its very beginnings the major focus of the *Jomsvikings* has been to (re)create early medieval combat techniques involving the use of steel (yet blunt) weapons – predominantly swords, shields, spears and axes. All this fits well with the group's name which refers to legendary warriors who, according to several Old Norse textual accounts, lived in a stronghold located somewhere on the southern coast of the Baltic and followed a very strict code of behaviour (on *Jómsborg* and the *Jómsvíkingar* from medieval written sources see, for example, Ślupecki 2000; Morawiec 2009). Over the next 30 years or so the contemporary *Jomsvikings* have grown in numbers significantly and they now have 'allied' groups or individual members all around Europe, but also in Australia and in the United States. Together, they form what is known as *Jomsborg* whose members meet on a regular basis at shows, markets and large international festivals. It is estimated that at present the organisation has several hundred warriors, mostly men.

Today the *Jomsvikings* and their affiliates are one of many Western European re-enactment groups, but their initial role in shaping the modern Viking scene is unparalleled. As will be demonstrated further below, they were also particularly important for the development of early medieval re-enactment in Poland, especially in the 1990s.

## VIKING ENTHUSIASTS IN 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY POLAND

Although the area of Poland is rarely mentioned in academic literature in connection with the Vikings, the interest in Old Norse literature and early medieval Scandinavia among the Poles dates back to as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see latest overviews in Gardela 2014, 11-44; Morawiec 2015). Therefore, before we move on to discussing the development of Viking re-enactment in Poland, it is necessary to provide some brief remarks on the wider historical and ideological context from which these modern fascinations may have sprung.

Speaking of various recreations of early medieval past, it is worth recalling that one of the first artistic visualisations of what may be regarded as a 'Viking funeral' was painted by a Polish-Russian artist, Henryk Siemiradzki, already in 1883 (Stolot 2002, 46). The painting, truly magnificent in its artistic expression and equally impressive in size, is now held in State Historical Museum in Moscow. It perfectly demonstrates how, in the romantic and antiquarian climate of his epoch, Siemiradzki imagined the elaborate funeral of a Rus' noble. From the carefully executed details of the painting it is clear that the artist based his



**Fig. 1.** A dragon ship in flames at Philip Burthem's memorial.  
Photo and copyright by Katarzyna 'Amari' Górewicz. Used by kind permission



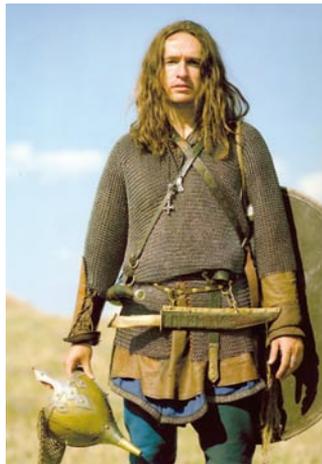
**Fig. 2.** Marcin Lutomski, leader of the Polish re-enactment group *Walhalla*.  
Photo and copyright by Monika Sankowska. Used by kind permission



**Fig. 3.** Angelika Strycka (left) and Grzegorz 'Greg' Pilarczyk (right). Angelika Strycka is a textile worker and recreates Viking and Slavic clothing. Grzegorz Pilarczyk specialises in producing high-quality replicas of early medieval jewellery.  
Photo and copyright by Angelika Strycka.  
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**Fig. 4.** Igor Górewicz, chieftain of *Drużyna Grodu Trzygłowa*. Cover image from his recent book *Mieczem Pisane. Odtwórcologia* (Eng. Written with a Sword. The Science of Re-enactment).  
Photo and copyright by Jacek Gajak.  
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**Fig. 5.** Philip Burthem (Jarl Ulf-Eirik).  
Photo from the website of *The Jomsvikings* ([www.jomsvikings.com](http://www.jomsvikings.com)).  
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work on the famous 10<sup>th</sup> century account of the Arab emissary Ibn Fadlān (on this remarkable textual record see, for example, Montgomery 2010), but the costumes and weapons with which Siemiradzki portrayed his characters are far from what the Rus' would have used in the Viking Age.

Interestingly, Viking inspirations can also be encountered in the play *Lilla Weneda* written by Juliusz Słowacki (1883), a famous Polish poet of the National Romantic period (Majewska 2013a; Majewska 2013b). In this play, set in heroic and legendary times of pre-state early medieval Poland, Słowacki effectively (re)used various motifs drawn from Slavic legends as well as Old Norse and Celtic accounts (including the motif of a snake-pit and a magic harp) to create a harmonious whole and a truly gripping storyline.

Another key figure in the history of Viking fascinations in Poland was Karol Szajnocha, a writer and amateur historian who studied in Lviv (currently in Ukraine but in his time the city was part of Galicia under the rule of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire). Szajnocha was an erudite writer and had a very impressive list of publications, but it is his monograph entitled *Lechicki początek Polski* (Eng. *Lechite Beginnings of Poland*) which had the most significant impact on the later 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century studies on the notion of Vikings in Poland. In this book Szajnocha argued that the Polish state emerged in a similar way to that of the Rus' – through active involvement of Scandinavian immigrants. From today's perspective it is clear that his arguments were based on manipulations of very problematic source material and they are now completely rejected by serious Polish and international academics. Nevertheless, some amateur historians still like to refer to these unfounded ideas and Szajnocha's work is frequently quoted to support their pseudo-academic arguments, for example about Mieszko I whom they regard as a Viking from Scandinavia (e.g. the controversial works of Skrok 2013 and Ruszczyński 2014).

In the period before the Second World War also archaeology had an important role to play in shaping the interest of Polish scholars and public in the Viking past. At the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a number of puzzling discoveries were made at early medieval cemeteries in Łubowo in the region of Greater Poland and in Ciepłe in Pomerania. The finds of unusual (for the early 20<sup>th</sup> century understanding of archaeology in Poland) military equipment from these sites gave rise to suggestions that a group of foreigners – namely Scandinavians or more specifically 'Vikings' – had been buried there. The objects from Łubowo and Ciepłe were discussed and reinterpreted numerous times in later years and became a significant point in the debates for or against Scandinavian presence in early medieval Poland (see critique in Gardela 2014; Gardela 2015).

Due to the difficult ideological and political climate in which academic studies had been conducted before and during the Second World War, the works written in this period led to numerous misconceptions concerning the presence and role of early medieval Scandinavian immigrants in Poland. German archaeologists working in Wolin, although initially sceptical about its Scandinavian nature, after the outbreak of WWII considered it to be a 'Viking town', even despite the fact that there was little archaeological evidence to support

this claim (for further discussion see Biermann 2013 with references). It should not surprise us today that one of the major inspirations to conduct excavations in Wolin on such a large scale was the assumption that it was the original location of *Jómsborg*, the seat of the heroic *Jómsvíkingar* (for a wider political and ideological context of German and Nazi interest in Wolin see Błahij 1971).

After WWII much work has been conducted on the notion of Scandinavian-Slavic relations in the early medieval period, especially in the academic milieu of Poznań University. Prominent scholars like Józef Kostrzewski, Henryk Łowmiański, Jan Żak, Gerard Labuda and Lech Leciejewicz, published a range of works intended to present these interactions in a more nuanced and source-critical way (but not completely unbiased, given their 'patriotic' concerns) than was previously done (for more details and references see Gardęła 2014; Gardęła 2015). In general, Polish academics of the post-WWII period seem to have agreed that the role of Scandinavians in Poland was marginal and that they did not play a prominent part in shaping the early Piast state. The importance of finds of undoubtedly Scandinavian-style and/or provenance was frequently played down and they were usually interpreted simply as signals of intercultural trade or exchange (e.g. Żak 1963, 1967a, 1967b).

Outside of academic circles, the Vikings have also found their way into popular culture in Poland. The 1980s saw the publication of an extremely successful comic book series entitled *Thorgal* created by the Polish illustrator Grzegorz Rosiński and Belgian script-writer Jean van Hamme (Birek 2012). The adventurous protagonist of the series, Thorgal, sparked the imagination of teenagers and adults all around Poland and beyond (especially in Belgium and France). For many re-enactors born in the 1980s these comic books were their first encounter with the Viking world and Norse mythology. Today, after over 30 years, the *Thorgal* series is still continued and sold in numerous bookshops in Poland and elsewhere in Europe.

From the 1980s onwards a number of academic books and articles on various aspects of the Viking Age have been published by Polish historians and archaeologists. It is vital to observe, that many of the latest Polish works in the field of Viking studies are widely read not only by specialist academics, but also by contemporary re-enactors who can often access them online through social networks like Academia.edu or Facebook. Moreover, it seems that the demand for similar works continues to grow particularly among this group of people.

## THE BEGINNINGS OF VIKING RE-ENACTMENT IN POLAND

Pin-pointing the true beginnings of early medieval or, more specifically, Viking re-enactment in Poland is not an easy task. According to Bogacki (2008, 254) some early attempts occurred already in the 1960s when a group of enthusiasts from the region of Masuria, including Marek Szabliński and Zygmunt Gonczarek, constructed the first 'Viking boat' from an old fishing vessel. In the same year they also built a wooden settle-

ment on the Lake Narie near Morąg (Bogacki 2008, 254) where they tried to recreate everyday life in the Early Middle Ages. In 1971 a working replica of the Oseberg ship was built in Poland (it was, however, two times smaller than the original). The ship was called 'Świętosława' (after a Slavic princess and sister of Bolesław the Brave) and in the following years it took part in numerous voyages and festivals in Poland.

Apart from these early attempts it is clear that one of the defining moments in the history of Polish re-enactment was the first Viking Festival organised in Wolin in 1993 (Bogacki 2008, 257-258; Jasina, Grzybowska and Kilariski 2006; Orłowska and Stanisławski 2004; Górewicz 2013a, 115). The festival was inspired by a travelling exhibition entitled *Wolin-Jomsborg. Emporium handlowe epoki wikingów w Polsce* (Eng. Wolin-Jomsborg. The Viking Age Emporium in Poland) curated by Professor Władysław Filipowiak, a prominent archaeologist and the main excavator of early medieval Wolin after the Second World War. It is noteworthy, however, that the 1993 event was actually organised by scholars and history enthusiasts from Denmark, but in collaboration with the local authorities from Wolin. Jasina, Grzybowska and Kilariski (2006, 6) write that as many as 500 contemporary Vikings came to this festival, especially from Denmark, Germany and England – a really impressive number even by today's standards. Among the participants were also the aforementioned *Jomsvikings*, led by Philip Burthem, and it was them who were responsible for orchestrating the battles in Wolin (Górewicz 2013a, 173). Many young aficionados of medieval history came to this memorable event from different parts of Poland. For a lot of them this first encounter with re-enactment and an opportunity to see how early medieval history (previously known only from books and movies) comes to life was a truly life-changing experience. Inspired by the Western European re-enactors encountered at the festival in Wolin, they wanted to return there in the near future with their own groups. One of their intentions was also to mark their distinctive Slavic identity within the world of Viking re-enactment. Consequently, the second Viking Festival in Wolin was organised in 1996 by the Poles – it was much smaller in scale, but nonetheless also had an international character (Jasina, Grzybowska and Kilariski 2006: 4, 9-13). Since then it became an annual event, each time growing bigger in size. In 2014 the Wolin festival (now called 'Festival of Slavs and Vikings') celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Initially, the early medieval re-enactment groups in Poland recruited mainly young men (or teenagers) interested in fighting with the use of real and metal weapons. The warrior culture and military aspects of the past were the main themes that attracted them. This was probably fuelled by the cliché understanding of the Vikings drawn not necessarily from academic sources, but from Hollywood films and comic books (especially the aforementioned *Thor*; on Vikings in Hollywood see Tveskov and Erlandson 2007). Therefore, within the first Viking re-enactment groups in Poland, particular attention was devoted to recreating swords, shields, helmets and other military equipment, while essential things such as clothing or various everyday utensils were largely disregarded or often substituted by modern items bought in shops selling Polish folk artwork which to the re-enactors

'looked medieval'. Consequently, in the early 1990s, during historical shows and festivals, a lot of re-enactors would have fairly well replicated swords or helmets, but at the same time their clothes and other details of costume (especially shoes) were not even close to any known archaeological finds. A lot of re-enactors today still remember the time when they wore sturdy army boots wrapped in animal skins (usually of deer or nutria) just to make them appear more 'authentic'. In these early days, therefore, it was the fighting and military equipment that was most important and which received most attention both from organisers of the festivals and the re-enactors themselves, but also from the public attending the events.

This situation changed significantly in later years. The surprisingly rapid development of the re-enactment scene also fuelled the need for more replicas of various types of objects, not least the weapons, but also costumes, jewellery, pottery, camping gear and so on. This was the moment when some re-enactors began to get increasingly interested and involved in producing objects not only for their own needs or those of their groups, but also for sale on a much wider scale (in their home country and abroad). Consequently, the festivals previously dominated by fight shows and battles, received another important component – a so-called 'market', where both the re-enactors and tourists could buy replicas of objects from the past.

The development of the internet and online communication in the late 1990s also played a very important role in shaping the Viking re-enactment scene – it was now possible to advertise events (shows, festivals etc.) on the web, communicate with colleagues from distant parts of the country and from abroad or to search for academic resources, photographs of archaeological finds and so on. Very soon many groups began to set up their own internet websites and demonstrate their skills and knowledge online. Parallel with these developments, internet forums strictly devoted to re-enactment were created in Poland. The first of these was a forum called FREHA (Forum Rekreacji Historycznych – Eng. Forum of Historical Re-enactment; [www.freha.pl](http://www.freha.pl)). After a while a special forum only for early medieval re-enactors called HALLA ([www.halla.mjollnir.pl](http://www.halla.mjollnir.pl)) was established. They both exist to this day and many re-enactors participate in the discussions on a whole plethora of topics – from archaeology or history to linguistics or past religions.

While the first re-enactment festivals rarely included recreated camp sites (e.g. tents and other kinds of temporary shelters), these have now become the norm and are often a major attraction for the public. The tents, craftsmen-stalls and workshops create a kind of 'alternative world' in which it is possible to experience with all senses what life may have been like in an early medieval camp, market or town. It is also noteworthy, that from the early 21<sup>st</sup> century onwards a number of permanent, early medieval villages or strongholds have been built in various parts of Poland and many of them are open for public all year round (Gardela 2006; Chowaniec 2010, 195-200; Gancarski 2012).

## TRENDS AND TRAJECTORIES IN POLISH AND INTERNATIONAL RE-ENACTMENT

There are several groups which over the years have been setting the standards. While it is not possible to list them all here and give justice to their numerous achievements, it is vital to at least mention those groups who laid the foundations for the current re-enactment milieu in Poland.

Among the earliest groups, established in the 1990s and still existing today, are *Wataha Wilcze Kły*, *Drużyna Wojów Wiślańskich Krak* and *Jomsborg Vikings Hird*. It is noteworthy, that *Jomsborg Vikings Hird* was one of the first Polish re-enactment groups to have their own working replica of a Viking ship (based on the find from Gokstad, Norway) as well as a stronghold including a Scandinavian-style longhouse.

In 1998 Igor Górewicz founded *Drużyna Grodu Trzyglowa* (also known as *Triglav* in the English-speaking world) which today is among the most active and diverse re-enactment groups in Poland. Its name refers to the Slavic god of magic and underworld known as Trzygłów, whose temple was allegedly located in Szczecin, where the group is now based. *Triglav* has always had a strong focus on the broadly understood warrior culture and pre-Christian beliefs, but in recent years they have become impressively diverse – its members do not focus only on military aspects of the past, but are also involved in craftworking, sailing or storytelling. Over the last several years Górewicz and his group have been very active in organising large-scale travelling exhibitions which seek to present the past to museum audiences in a visually attractive and interactive way. The first of these exhibitions called *Świat Słowian i wikingów* (Eng. The World of Slavs and Vikings) was held in several major cities in Poland, including Szczecin and Poznań (Górewicz 2009a). The exhibition aimed at presenting the early medieval past in a comprehensive way through the use of museum-quality replicas of archaeological finds from Poland and Scandinavia. Among other things, the visitors to the exhibition could see a full-scale reconstruction of a Slavic house and a pagan cult-site with a large idol of the Slavic god Sventovit (based on the famous stone statue discovered in 1848 in the River Zbrucz in Ukraine). The most recent exhibition organised and curated by Górewicz is called *Miecze Europy* (Eng. Swords of Europe) and presents the development of swords from prehistory to modern times (Górewicz 2015). In addition to organising exhibitions, Górewicz has also founded a publishing house called *Triglav*, which releases children's books (Górewicz 2009b), graphic novels (e.g. Kisiel 2013) and other works focusing on different aspects of early medieval past (e.g. Borowczak 2008; Górewicz 2007; Górewicz 2011; Górewicz 2013b; Górewicz 2014; Krasna-Korycińska 2010; 2011; Marturano 2011; Pierot 2013).

Another group worth mentioning is *Walhalla*, founded by Marcin Lutomski (Fig. 2). *Walhalla* originally focused only on the Early Middle Ages, but now its members recreate gladiators, crusaders, hussar cavalry, pirates, soldiers and insurgents from the Warsaw Uprising.

In addition *Walhalla* has also released two audiobooks with a retelling of Old Norse myths and a Polish translation of *Jómsvíkinga saga*. They also work very closely with various museums and film producers.

Over the years Polish re-enactors have gained considerable international renown and their replicas of early medieval objects are regarded as some of the best in the world. At present practically all types of artefacts are being recreated in Poland, including weapons, clothing, jewellery, clay and metal vessels, but also full-size boats, ships and other vehicles (e.g. wagons) and buildings. Many Polish craftsmen attend large international markets in Scandinavia and elsewhere in Western Europe and the goods they produce reach clients from Australia or North America. A number of particularly skilled craftsmen have also been actively collaborating with museums and academic institutions, both in Poland and beyond. For example, the jeweller Grzegorz 'Greg' Pilarczyk (Fig. 3) has made museum-quality replicas of Viking Age objects for several international research projects (e.g. the AHRC-funded project entitled *Languages, Myths and Finds* hosted by a consortium of three UK Universities in Nottingham, Cambridge and Oxford – Gardela and Larrington 2014).

## CRITIQUE AND SELF-REFLECTION

The phenomenon of historical re-enactment in Poland still remains largely understudied. In recent years, however, a number of academic articles have been published which seek to critically explore its different aspects (e.g. Bogacki 2008; Gancarski 2012; Gardela 2009; Górewicz 2009a; Kobiółka 2013). It is noteworthy that for a while the Polish re-enactment scene also had its own specialist magazine called *Gazeta Rycerska* (available at major newsstands and bookshops all around Poland), but it is no longer published.

In his important study of early medieval re-enactment in Poland, Bogacki (2008, 238-240) has made a number of interesting observations regarding the different kinds of people involved in such activity. On one of the two opposite extremes he placed 'professional re-enactors' who pay a lot of attention to even the finest details of their gear, frequently refer to academic literature and conduct their own research. On the other extreme he placed the 'dilettante re-enactors' who only pretend to have expert knowledge and experience, but in reality represent an appallingly poor level. The general conclusion which may be drawn from Bogacki's study (and my personal observations) is that a significant portion of Polish re-enactors still have a very selective approach to the Viking Age and often focus on recreating only some aspects of its material culture (predominantly weapons). Many of them do not demonstrate a particular desire to employ high-quality replicas in their endeavours and have a somewhat imaginative and impressionistic approach to what objects they use, wear and/or produce.

In this context the term 'historicity' (in Polish *historyczność*) is worth mentioning. The term was invented by the re-enactors themselves and basically refers to objects (or sets of

objects – e.g. the whole costume) which are good quality replicas of authentic archaeological artefacts (Bogacki 2008, 236-237; Kobińska 2013, 145). Although a lot of re-enactors theoretically strive to have only ‘historical’ gear (which is in fact the basic requirement of most re-enactment events), very few of them actually achieve this goal. In reality much of what the Viking re-enactors in Poland (and elsewhere) wear and use are not replicas *per se*, but rather objects that are ‘stylised’ to look like authentic designs from the past. In particular this refers to textiles and costumes, but also some elements of armour or camping gear, such as tents, drinking vessels, cooking equipment and so on.

In connection with the above, a significant problem of re-enactment, both in Poland and elsewhere, is a notion which could be called ‘self-referentiality’ – i.e. when re-enactors base their assumptions about the past and its material culture not on academic literature or actual archaeological finds, but on the authority of other, allegedly more experienced re-enactors and the gear they own. For example, for many years Viking re-enactors from Poland had a tendency to use African chairs consisting of two interlocking planks of wood (forming the shape of the letter ‘X’) claiming this piece of camping equipment to be ‘historical’. While some re-enactors were well aware of the fact that chairs like this had absolutely nothing to do with the Viking Age, others were convinced that they were genuine replicas of archaeological finds.

All these problems result from the fact that a lot of re-enactors in Poland have only a very basic understanding of the Viking Age and the nuances of its material culture as well as the complexities associated with aspects of identity, ethnicity and pre-Christian world-views. Very often the only archaeological site from Scandinavia they know is Birka (Uppland, Sweden) and, since the excavation results are so easily accessible and well-illustrated (especially those published by Arbman 1940; Arbman 1943), they assume that the Birka finds are the most representative of the whole Viking world. In result, the re-enactors eagerly replicate various finds from Birka claiming them to be all ‘Viking’ or ‘Scandinavian’ without any deeper attempts at understanding the wider context of their discovery, actual cultural origin or dating. As a result at Viking festivals in Poland a lot of men wear oriental belts with nomadic-type mounts believing that these were a standard ‘Viking’ (Scandinavian) piece of equipment. A similar case is also with the Thor’s hammers which are worn by numerous male re-enactors. Interestingly, the funerary evidence from Viking Age Scandinavia (which of course may not be representative of how certain objects were used in everyday life, but still gives some hints) implies that Thor’s hammers and other amulet-types were mostly associated with females (see Jensen 2010 and Gardela 2014 for further details). The frequent tendency among re-enactors to wear boar tusks around their necks is equally problematic – there is no evidence that such items were ever used as pendants among early medieval Scandinavians. The only Viking Age grave of a Scandinavian immigrant that contained a boar’s tusk is known from Repton, England. The tusk lay *between the legs* of a man who died from spear-thrusts to the face and who may have been castrated (Price 2013, 117). Given its placement in the grave, it is possible that the tusk actually

substituted the man's missing body part. The modern re-enactors should therefore think twice before suspending such items around their neck.

Continuing this critical review it must also be added that, in contrast to Western and Northern European countries, in Poland there has been a growing tendency to build wooden villages or strongholds, as these were a characteristic feature of early medieval 'infrastructure' in these lands. In reality, however, almost none of the many villages or strongholds that have been built so far are even close to their original counterparts, both with regard to their scale and accuracy of building techniques (see critique in Gardela 2006). Moreover, while many villages and strongholds are reconstructed in the areas where authentic heritage from early medieval times has been found, there are also some that are built in completely random locations with no direct link to any archaeological site from a given locality. For the general public such places might create a very misleading picture of the past and in the long run could potentially lead to serious misconceptions about Polish history. Above, I have presented just a few selected examples of how re-enactment activities can misrepresent the archaeological and historical image of the past, but many more problematic issues could be listed (see, for example, Bogacki 2008, Gardela 2009, Kobińska 2013).

On the positive side it must be mentioned that probably the most knowledgeable and critically-aware re-enactors can be found among the craftsmen (especially jewellers and blacksmiths). They often refer to academic literature (including specialist studies on e.g. archaeometallurgy) and aspire not only to make their objects as similar to the original archaeological finds as possible, but also to replicate them with the use of appropriate tools and techniques. What they do, therefore, is very close to 'experimental archaeology', but unfortunately such craftsmen very rarely publish their observations (but see a range of interesting contributions to the volume on experimental archaeology and historical re-enactment edited by Gancarski 2012; a good example of fruitful collaboration between an academic and a re-enactor is also demonstrated in Price and Mortimer 2014).

As we have seen, there are many re-enactors who despite their claims to be 'historical' are actually very ignorant about what they do. However, there are also some individuals who demonstrate a lot of awareness and are eager to openly share their views on re-enactment in a critical way. The already mentioned Igor Górewicz (2013a), for example, has recently published an interesting collection of essays and interviews which discuss his personal experiences in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century re-enactment milieu. During our conversation in Wolin in August 2014, Górewicz told me that he does not really consider himself as a 're-enactor', because what he does is not a form of pastime, game or theatrical drama, but actually his authentic way of life. He does not 'dress up' to become someone else and whether in medieval or modern clothing he always remains himself (as shown on the cover of his book – see Fig. 4). Interestingly, Górewicz has also told me that he does not really need to wear historical clothing at all, but by doing so the clothing becomes a kind of 'interface' which allows the public (i.e. tourists) to better understand who he is and what he does.

In this context it is worth recalling the earlier arguments of Kobińska (2013) who, inspired by post-processual theory and recent trends in social sciences, has distinguished two types of Viking re-enactors calling them ‘masks’ and ‘transformers’. The first type, in Kobińska’s (2013, 153) view, includes those people who *become* someone different while wearing the historical costume and who tend to separate their everyday life from what they do at re-enactment events. The second type, the so-called ‘transformers’, always remain themselves whether in costume or not. Among such re-enactors, in Kobińska’s (2013, 152) opinion, are especially ‘older craftsmen’ for whom ‘taking part in a historical re-enactment is a way of earning money. It is not usually for the pleasure of travelling back in time to the distant past’.

While there certainly is a lot of truth in Kobińska’s claims, my impression is that the world of Viking re-enactment and the identities of those involved in it are much more complicated. There are many people within this milieu today who are neither ‘masks’ nor ‘transformers’ and for whom living the life of a ‘contemporary Viking’ is not solely limited to wearing a costume, taking part in battles or earning money. Among them are individuals for whom ‘being Viking’ has a deeply emotional or even spiritual dimension, and who are bound to this way of life not only by membership to a particular group or concerns for material/economic benefits, but by strong ties of love, authentic friendship or even blood. The best example of this was the aforementioned memorial of Philip Burthem organised in Wolin in 2013. Such subtle notions slip conventional definitions and cannot be easily harnessed by academic theories. Nevertheless, they are certainly worth exploring in more depth in future studies.

## THE FUTURE OF RE-ENACTMENT IN POLAND

Over the years Polish early medieval re-enactment has become much more diverse than in the 1990s and today there seems to be place for everyone. It is no longer male-dominated and reserved to individuals fascinated by warrior culture, but also offers various opportunities for craftsmen, artists, storytellers and anyone else who expresses interest in this form of engagement with the past.

As we have seen, the particularly active re-enactors from Poland have learned how to effectively use their passion to present and promote early medieval history and archaeology in attractive ways. This is achieved through professional re-enactment events, popular and academic publications, exhibitions, TV-shows, documentary programmes and even collaboration with music bands. It is also worth highlighting that many Polish re-enactors not only participate in festivals locally in Poland, but every year travel to large international markets organised in various places in Scandinavia, Germany, England and elsewhere. This gives them an opportunity to present Slavic history and archaeology to a much wider audience and can potentially increase public understanding of the cultural and ethnic

diversity in the Early Middle Ages. Of course, not all groups present the past in a knowledgeable, critical and nuanced way and many of the old clichés still prevail. The only way to limit such ‘dilettante’ re-enactors from spreading misconceptions about the past is to create more rigorous rules of selection at large historical events. Some festivals have already introduced so-called authenticity committee’s but unfortunately many of them just accept whatever ‘looks historical’.

Finally, it is worth noting that historical re-enactment in Poland is not only restricted to the Middle Ages and there is a growing interest in later periods, including 20<sup>th</sup> century history (e.g. Dubiel and Ślesicki 2014). During the last several years the number of shows which aim at recreating events that took place during the Second World War and in the 1980s has been increasing at a rapid pace. These events, however, give rise to a lot of mixed feelings among the educated public. For example, Zbigniew Gluza (2014) has recently criticised similar activities arguing that the tragic and grim Polish past is not something to joke about and that many traumas still remain unhealed. This demonstrates that there is certainly an urgent need for more self-reflection among the re-enactors and organisers of re-enactment events, but also for a broader public discussion on the role, meaning and social impact of similar endeavours.

Nevertheless, the future of early medieval re-enactment in Poland looks quite promising. The organisers of major historical festivals are becoming more critical and aware of the impact these events may have on shaping the public perception of the past. By gradually moving away from focusing solely on battles and warrior-culture, they seek for attractive ways to demonstrate other aspects of history which have previously remained marginalised (e.g. storytelling and drama, recitals of medieval poetry, concerts, craftsworking workshops etc.). Moreover, after an initial period of heavy critique and rejection of re-enactment, there is now a growing interest in this phenomenon among Polish and international academics who seek to explore it from various theoretical and interdisciplinary angles (e.g. material culture studies, anthropology, sociology or psychology). An increasing number of scholars are also looking for ways in which the experiences of re-enactors could be used in their own studies of the past (e.g. Price and Mortimer 2014). All this demonstrates that there is willingness to collaborate and engage in an open and unprejudiced dialogue. Academics, especially archaeologists and historians, should also acknowledge the fact that a large group of their readers actually stems *not* from the scholarly milieu, but from the world of re-enactors and other non-professional history aficionados. We should, therefore, seek for new ways to better communicate with this constantly expanding audience.

In a symbolic way the untimely death of Philip Burthem (Fig. 5), the charismatic leader of the contemporary Jomsvikings, marked an end to the first era of the Viking re-enactment milieu which he so passionately helped to create. At the same time, however, his passing also became the foundation for a new story which is yet to be told by future generations of contemporary Vikings from all over the world.

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