

VIKINGS: THE PRETTY BOYS OF THE MIDDLE AGES?

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For the past millennium or so the Vikings have had quite a reputation. And it hasn't been for their fabulous taste in fabric textures and color palettes! But lately, much has been written exploring the softer side of the Vikings. It came as a surprise to a lot of us, but we might just say that the Vikings were more "metrosexual" than we ever imagined.

The reputation given to them by some foreigners, most often the victims of raids, has stuck with the Vikings for well over one thousand years – that they were barbarians. The stereotype of barbarians is that they are ignorant, filthy, and brutish. However, we live in an age that prides itself on breaking down stereotypes and reevaluating how we look at people. And so, as we as a society have reconsidered how we define the many different people we interact with in the contemporary world, the stereotype of the Viking has recently been given a makeover as well.

Far from being filthy brutes, we find that Vikings were actually very well groomed and perhaps even fashion conscious. Just for the sake of perspective let us consider that for the past century or so Western society has seen a homogenizing of men's fashion. The business suit as we know it is not that different than its earlier incarnation in the late Victorian Era. Mainstream men's haircuts tend to be very similar, discounting sub-culture and counter-



Norse Man and Woman by Johannes Gehrts, 1884

culture trends. And while we may sometimes make assumptions about class due to a man's hairstyle, hair itself does not represent class. In other words, the male mechanic, the school teacher, and the CEO likely all have a very similar haircut as Prince Charles. Further, many men today feel self-conscious about being overly concerned about style or fashion, and some men shave their hair clean off rather than facing the dilemma of deciding on a style.

Indeed, styling the hair at all, beyond a part and quick comb through, can be seen as not masculine but rather metrosexual in some circles. So, one might assume, based on our contemporary notions, that the Vikings, the epitome of the male archetype, wouldn't be very interested in hair. Wrong!

Hairstyle was considered important to men of the Viking age. It could denote class status, as very short hair often marked someone as a slave, or it could be an indicator of someone's profession. A man who engaged in raiding might be cautious of how his hair and beard could be a liability in battle. But, by all accounts it appears that there was much personal choice and variety in hair style and length, as well as in beard style and length.

Personal grooming habits were also expected from individuals in Norse societies during this period. Grooming tools have been unearthed which verify that Viking age men and women used tweezers, combs, and ear scoops for... erm, scooping out earwax. Ahem.

Another trend that the modern metrosexual man may embrace, while a more macho modern man often eschews, is coloring the hair. In our society it is predominantly women who dye their hair. There is a growing trend for aging men to consider covering the gray, but it is still done less often by men than women, and men tend to stay close to their original hair color. And, in our society many women of all ethnicities



Idunn and Bragi by Nils Blommer, 1846

and complexions 'go blonde' whether it looks remotely natural or not.

Well, you guessed it, so did the Vikings!

According to medieval accounts as well as archeological analysis, it is thought that the strong lye soap used by Vikings for washing was also used for bleaching hair. And it was not just the ladies going for that Marilyn Monroe aesthetic – it is recorded that many Viking men bleached their hair and beards blonde.

Celtic men, who are reading this and snickering, don't be so quick to laugh. Apparently Celtic men were caught doing the

same thing red handed (pun intended). Yes, Celtic men reddened their hair also with lye soap (I'm imagining a peroxide experiment gone bad wherein the poor teenage girl ends up with orange hair instead of blonde).

Pliny the Elder recorded: "Soap is the invention of the Gauls and this is used to redden the hair. It is made from fat and ashes. The best is beech wood ash and goat fat, the two combined, thick and clear."

Now, I can't help but wonder if the coloring of the hair was the side effect of the washing, and the observers so unaccustomed to soap may have been oblivious to the hygienic properties and simply zeroed in on the more obvious visible results on the hair; or if hair coloring was the intention and cleanliness was just a pleasant unintended result. Perhaps the lye soap could be made in various strengths, so there was one version for regular bathing and a more intense one for bleaching the hair.

Since we're aiming to break stereotypes here, it should be pointed out that not all Vikings were blonde, just as not all Celts were ginger. Both groups had a good mix of both as well as just as many brunettes. But it is true that Celtic groups tended to have slightly more redheads on average than others, just as Scandinavians had more blondes. Based on historical accounts about hair coloring, one might speculate that both groups were keenly aware of their respective hair color trends and may have considered it a mark of their tribal identity, attempting to emphasize their tribal stereotype by altering their hair color.

Incidentally, Pliny the Elder's next sentence regarding lye soap was this: "Many among the Germans use it, the men more than the women."

No comment on German women.

The Norse were so keen on weekly cleaning that their word for Saturday, *Lørdag*, means "washing day." This was quite irritating to the Anglo-Saxons because by the time of the Viking raids they had long been Christianized; a religion

which dissuaded these Germanic cousins of the Vikings from regular bathing.

John of Wallingford, an English chronicler, lamented that the Danish men's habits of washing and changing their clothes regularly was too strong a temptation for English women. Apparently many a marriage was ruined and more than one nobleman's daughter lost her virtue to a well groomed Dane.

Not only were they as sparkling fresh as the morning dew, but Viking men were evidently quite the romantics. When they weren't marauding or inflicting the blood eagle on some poor English chap, Vikings enjoyed a bit of poetry with love being a popular topic.

Professor Judith Jesch's new book, *Viking Poetry of Love and War*, was recently reviewed by Emma Rayner, on Medievalists.net. She says that, if anything, this book proves that Vikings had a sense of humor. And it seems that love and romance were just as much daily concerns in the Viking age as they are today.

Some of the poetry is just plain silly, if not bordering on the bawdy. One great example is this 10th century gem by Viking poet extraordinaire Egill Skallgrímsson entitled –

"The poet is past it":

*'I've a crick in my neck,
and tend to fall on my head,
my trouser-snake is soft,
and my hearing's gone away.'*

Too bad for Egill, but his contemporary Ingolf had much better luck. As is attributed by the poem –

"Ingolf is popular with the ladies":

*All the grown girls wanted
to go with Ingolf,
those who were of age;
the wee ones were wretched.*

*'I, too,' said the old woman,
'want to go with Ingolf,
as long as I have two teeth
still wobbling in my gums.'*



And there we have it. Vikings: neat freaks, heartthrobs, comedians. If that doesn't make us second guess our stereotypes, then I dare say nothing will.

Web bibliography and links for further reading:

“Viking Age Hairstyles, Haircare, and Personal Grooming” by The Viking Answer Lady: <http://www.vikinganswerlady.com/hairstyl.shtml>

“What Vikings Really Looked Like” by Irene Berg Petersen for ScienceNordic: <http://sciencenordic.com/what-vikings-really-looked>

“Viking History: Facts & Myths” by Ryan Goodrich for LiveScience: <http://www.livescience.com/32087-viking-history-facts-myths.html>

“Viking poetry of love and war – new book by Judith Jesch” by Emma Rayner for Medievalists: <http://www.medievalists.net/2013/03/18/viking-poetry-of-love-and-war-new-book-by-judith-jesch/>

“Vikings preferred male grooming to pillaging” by Jonathan Wynne-Jones for The Telegraph: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newsttopics/howaboutthat/3256539/Vikings-preferred-male-grooming-to-pillaging.html>

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