

***The Vikings* (1958), based on Edison Marshall's novel *The Viking* (1951)**

The film (& the novel on which it is based) is fictional, but some of the characters loosely recall actual Viking Age persons. On the Norse side, the character of **Ragnar** (played by Ernest Borgnine) is based on the legendary hero Ragnarr Loðbrók (“Hairy-Breeches”), supposed to have lived sometime in the 8th or 9thC (or, by some accounts, from about 740 till around 860). Ragnarr fathered many sons on numerous women; his boys had such tasteful names as Björn Ironsides, Sigurðr Snake-in-the-Eye, and Ívarr the Boneless (all arguably identifiable with known historical figures from the 9thC). When the king of Northumbria, **Ælla**, captured Ragnarr and executed him by throwing him into a snake-pit, Ívarr is said to have avenged his father by conquering all of England (and carving the blood-eagle on Ælla’s back, by the by).

Cleaving closely to Hollywood conventions, this film should not present any problems of following the action or understanding what’s going on.

In a 2002 interview (*A Tale of Norway*, available as a special feature on the DVD version of the film), Richard Fleischer, director of *The Vikings*, made the following statements:

It took a year of preparation to make this film, and Kirk Douglas (who was the producer) and I decided on something very early in production, and that was: to make this the most authentic picture about the Vikings that had ever been made, or could be made. This film had to be accurate in every detail.

And so we agreed on that and I went to work to do the research on the period, which was very, very interesting. The head of the Viking department at UCLA was one of our advisors; so was the curator of the Viking Ship Museum in Oslo, Norway. I went to them for guidance, and for sketches, designs, artefacts, anything we could get our hands on, and in the meantime I also went to England, to London, and researched this period at the British Museum Library. So I spent a lot of time working on the details, and also digging up interesting things about the Vikings, about their habits, their *mores*, their way of life. So the film is actually about as accurate as could be made. Particularly accurate, which I can get to later, is the construction of the Viking ships. I went to the museum in Norway, the Viking Ship Museum, with Harper Goff, our genius designer. He did everything, and it was great.

We went there and got the blueprints for the three Viking ships that they actually had gotten from the bottom of the sea and had restored them. So we designed and built our Viking ships to be the exact duplicates of those that were in the Viking Ship Museum in Oslo.

Part of the authenticity of the picture rested on where it was going to be shot, and Kirk and I decided that we should try our best to do it where it really happened, which would be in the fjords of Norway. [...]

I have wonderful, fond memories of making this film, but also I remember how difficult it was, how everybody was so supportive and so enthusiastic about the project. And indeed it turned out to be a very successful picture, and I don’t think there’s a film made quite like this one, with this authenticity, and its good writing, and its wonderful, star acting.