



SCANDINAVIAN AMERICAN CULTURAL & HISTORICAL FOUNDATION

NORDIC SPIRIT NEWSLETTER

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From the Nordic Bronze Age to Vikings in the Mediterranean



Photo courtesy of Viking Ship Museum, Roskilde, Denmark

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Exploring the Bronze Age in the Nordic region

Before the Vikings: The extraordinary Bronze Age



Photo: Terje Birkedal

Left to right: Professors Ernst Tonsing, Heide Wrobel Nørgaard, Janne Ikäheimo, Howard Rockstad, Knut Ivar Austvol, Karin Ogala, and David Nelson gather at the Nordic Spirit symposium, “Before the Vikings: The Extraordinary Nordic Bronze Age,” held at California Lutheran University in February.

TERJE BIRKEDAL
Laguna Woods, Calif.

Once upon a time, in the middle of the Nordic Bronze Age, some 3,400 years ago, a young woman set out on a long journey from southern Germany to Denmark. On her journey, one of the things she brought along was a shiny but well-worn heirloom arm bracelet, perhaps in memory of her family and homeland. Upon her arrival in central Denmark at a great chieftain’s house, she was given a magnificent spiral bronze belt plate that shone like the sun. It had been made in one of the finest metal workshops in all of Denmark. Sadly, soon after her arrival, she died unexpectedly but was given a “royal” burial under a huge mound. How do we know this? Our knowledge is due to the meticulous archeological detective work of Professor Heide Wrobel Nørgaard, curator of archaeology at the Moesgaard Museum and

Aarhus University, Denmark, as well other Scandinavian archaeological sleuths.

Nørgaard and four other major scholars of Scandinavia’s past, assembled at California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks, Calif., in early February 2025 for Nordic Spirit’s symposium entitled “Before the Vikings: The Extraordinary Nordic Bronze Age.” This was the 26th annual public symposium on Scandinavia’s past sponsored by the Scandinavian American Cultural and Historical Foundation, California Lutheran University, the Barbro Osher Pro Suecia Foundation, and Norway House Foundation.

What is the Nordic Bronze Age? It is one of the most important and exciting periods in the history of Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland. The people of the Scandinavian Bronze Age (1700-500 BC) were the distant cultural forebears of the Vikings. These ancient ancestors of the Scandinavians built many of the political,

economic, and social foundations necessary to the emergence of the more famous Viking Age over a thousand years later. Without the Bronze Age there would have been no Viking Age.

Besides telling the story of the famous “Egtved Girl” mentioned above, Nørgaard, through the tale of the horned helmets of Viksø, Denmark, outlined the pan-European nature of trade in which Scandinavia engaged during the Bronze Age. Not only was bronze traded throughout Europe and into the north, but ideas and beliefs were widely shared on the trade routes. Thus, horned helmets became an integral part of religious rituals from the Mediterranean to the Baltic in the Bronze Age. In a second talk, Nørgaard revealed that it was now possible to identify different kinds of metal workshops in Bronze Age Europe and even trace the travel of objects and individual craftsmen from place to place by careful archaeological observation and scientific studies.

Professor Knut Ivar Austvoll of the University of Oslo, Norway, outlined the history of the Nordic Bronze Age along with the lifeways and economic and political systems that typified the period. Despite the varied geography and enormous size of southern Scandinavia, the cultures of this vast area were remarkable in their similarity and shared identity. Nonetheless, there were differences. Chieftains wielded more power along the coasts where cereal agriculture and cattle herding were central to the economy. In the upper fjords and inlands, more egalitarian collective action drove the politics, and fishing and hunting supplemented cultivation and raising domestic animals.

Austvoll also read the keynote address of Professor Johan Ling of the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, who could not attend due to other last-minute commitments. Ling stressed in his address that the economic engine of the Nordic Bronze Age was fueled by both widespread raiding and trading. Both these activities were controlled by powerful regional chieftains who sponsored the local metal workshops and warrior bands and subsidized the shipbuilding that enabled both war and trade. Ling emphasized that much of what we associate with the coming of the later Viking Age (AD 750-1050) actually had the distant beginnings in the Bronze Age; namely predatory chieftainships, sword-wielding warriors, seagoing vessels, far-reaching trading routes, great longhouses, and burial mounds.

The spectacular rock art of the Nordic Bronze Age was covered by Professor Karin Ogala of Uppsala University, Sweden. Concentrated along the shorelines of southern Norway and Sweden, this lively rock art features warriors in battle, both on land and sea; sleek, beak-

prowed warships, horse-drawn chariots of wagons, and many mysterious religious symbols and ritual scenes. In far northern Scandinavia, hunting scenes dominate the art pecked into the smooth coastal rocks.

Ogala also discussed the Bronze Age hoards of weapons, tools, and ornaments that are found in east-central Sweden. These buried items are often foreign made and bear the stamp of Russian or eastern craftsmanship, unlike similar objects from far southern or western Scandinavia. There are also numerous items that are more typical of northern Scandinavia.

Professor Janne Ikäheimo of the University of Oulu, Finland, took the audience on a tour of the Bronze Age in northern Finland. Here, there was also a strong Russian or eastern influence evident in the local metal finds. Overall, the area was a cultural crossroads in the Bronze Age where southern Scandinavian and Arctic cultural traditions also held sway. Here, the economy was based on hunting, fishing, and gathering and the sparse local population lived in small, scattered settlements. Ikäheimo stressed that he employed sophisticated aerial photography and artificial intelligence to find the elusive sites of this period in northern Finland’s prehistory.

The symposium ended with an enthusiastic lecture and musical performance by Professor Joan Paddock of both George Fox and Linfield universities in Portland, Oregon. Her topic was the great snake-shaped bronze horns of the Nordic Bronze Age. Known as “lurs” these large, impressive instruments were probably played both in war and in ritual settings during the Nordic Bronze Age. They were played in pairs and had a deep resonant sound that carried far and wide across the fjords and mountains. To the delight of the audience, Paddock actually played several tunes on a traditional Norwegian lur, a wooden descendant of the ancient bronze lur.

Terje G. Birkedal was born in Stavanger, Norway, in 1946. He immigrated to the United States as a child and grew up in Colorado. After earning a Ph.D. in anthropology, he served as an archeologist with the National Park Service for 36 years. He has conducted fieldwork in Alaska, the American Sth and Southwest, Canada, the Great Plains, Guam, and Norway. He served five years as president of Sons of Norway Bernt Balchen Lodge in Anchorage, Alaska, and he has always been passionate about Norwegian prehistory, history, and culture.

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Life before the Vikings—The Nordic Iron Age



Photo: Annette G. Øvrelid, Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger
Reconstructed longhouses at the Iron Age farmstead of Ullanhaug near Stavanger, Norway, stand on the original house footprints at one of Norway's largest archaeological excavations, offering a glimpse into daily life on a powerful chieftain's farm nearly 1,500 years ago.

TERJE BIRKEDAL
Laguna Woods, Calif.

This year, from February 6th through the 7th, the Scandinavian American Cultural and Historical Foundation held the 27th Nordic Spirit Symposium for the interested public at California Lutheran University, in Thousand Oaks, Calif. The subject of the symposium was the Nordic Iron Age.

What was the Nordic Iron Age you might ask? It was a time of legends, a time of great halls and mythic kings, a time of wondrous deeds and heroic warriors, a time of magic swords and massive tribal migrations, a time of much war, and it was the mother of the Viking Age.

The Nordic Iron Age spanned the years 500 B.C to A.D. 750. In this important time period bronze gave way

to iron as the preferred metal for both tools and weapons. Mastery over iron transformed society, for it was accessible locally, and therefore was available to the many, rather than the few. With iron came a variety of tools, from shears to ploughs. And iron ploughs allowed both more crop production and higher populations. With higher populations, competition for resources increased, as did warfare and the need for warriors.

Though most people continued to live in scattered farmsteads and hamlets made up of one or more longhouses and outbuildings, new power centers arose around the imposing halls of powerful regional chieftains and petty kings who feasted each other one day and fought each other the next. Some of these local rulers, a few of them women, became immensely wealthy from both raiding and trade and were buried in large mounds with incredible riches in silver and gold.

With the Iron Age came larger seagoing ships and eventually the sail. Also, the wealth of Rome flowed north along with knowledge of writing and the birth of runes. And many Scandinavian tribes became restless for new lands; and so began the great tribal migrations like those of the Angles, Saxons, Vandals, and Goths. In A.D. 750, or thereabouts, the Nordic Iron Age gave birth to the Viking Age and unleashed Scandinavia on the wider world.



At the Iron Age symposium are, from left, Howard Rockstad, John Heimbuch, Håkon Reiersen, Diane Jarvi, Nancy Wicker, Pauline Asingh, and Morten Ravn.

The symposium began with actor, John Heimbuch, giving a captivating, one-man performance of the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*. Though not written down until medieval times, the poem is set in 5th to 6th century Scandinavia and tells the tale of a great Swedish warrior chieftain who fights both monsters and dragons in mythic battles. Many scholars believe the poem was composed for the 7th century East Anglian king, Rædwald, who traced his line to a legendary Swedish royal dynasty, the Wulfings, and may have been buried with his ship in a huge mound at Sutton Hoo, England.

Professor Håkon Reiersen of Stavanger University and the Stavanger Archaeological Museum, Norway, told the story of the Iron Age farmstead of Ullanhaug. Planned as an outdoor museum from the start, the site was the scene of Norway's largest and most scientific excavation up until the 1960s. Consisting of two large longhouses, a smaller house, and multiple grave mounds; the site was probably once the farmstead of a powerful chieftain and as many as 25 people. The farm was abandoned in the mid 6th century along with many others in the North, when volcanic dust clouds turned summer into winter and plague stalked the land. Today, the reconstructed ancient structures, built on the footprints of the old, tell the story of life in the Nordic Iron Age.

Professor Nancy Wicker of the University of Mississippi explained how the influence of Rome inspired the art of the Nordic Iron Age. As Rome ebbed in power, skilled artisans found new patrons among the chieftains of the North who had their own rapidly shifting ideas of design and style. Sometimes the intricate and sinuous was favored, other times mind-boggling abstractions and puzzles. Whatever the mix, the art of the period was remarkable both in its creative vision and other-worldly beauty.

According to Dr. Morten Ravn of the Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde, Denmark, Scandinavia's "seaways" must be seen as "freeways". This was one of his key points in his overview of the maritime history of Northern Europe. For the past 9000 years the open ocean has been viewed as an open road by Scandinavians, one leading to both harvests of the sea as well as trade and the exploration and conquest of new lands. In the Nordic Iron Age the ships of Scandinavia first gained oars and then sails. Oars were just fine for local waters, but sails were essential for the kind of long-distance raiding and trading that was favored by the newly minted and powerful "sea kings" of the Iron Age.

The next talk was by Minneapolis singer and songwriter Diane Jarvi who introduced the audience to the history and the unique sounds of the kantele folk harp, Finland's national musical instrument. Perhaps dating back in time to well beyond the Iron Age, this ancient box-like birch wood harp has accompanied countless generations of Finnish shamans, story-tellers, and singers.

The kantele is now enjoying a revival among both Finns in the home country and in the U.S.

Last to speak was Pauline Asingh, Curator and Head of the Exhibition Department of the Moesgaard Museum, Denmark. Her talk was on the Iron Age "Grauballe Man" whose near intact body was preserved for over 2000 years in a Danish peat bog and now resides in a respectful, innovative exhibit at the Moesgaard Museum. Slit ear-to-ear in sacrifice to unknown gods around 290 B.C., he comes, after much scientific study, as a messenger from the Danish past to the present.

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UPCOMING SYMPOSIUM

Vikings in France, Spain and the Mediterranean

28th Nordic Spirit Symposium

Feb. 5 and 6, 2027

When SACHF began the Nordic Spirit Symposium series in 2000 and 2001, it began with 'Vikings West' (England, Iceland, Greenland and Newfoundland) and 'Vikings East' (Novgorod, Russia, Byzantium...). The February 2027 Nordic Spirit Symposium will treat an area of Viking activity long overlooked in our Nordic Spirit series, namely 'Vikings South' to France, Spain and the Mediterranean. Vikings were very active in France and the Iberian Peninsula with numerous trips up the Seine River. One group settled in Normandy. Others carved runes in Greece.

Speakers to follow these Viking activities are coming to Thousand Oaks in February, including:

Dr. Irene Garcia Losquino, who specializes in Viking contact in the Iberian Peninsula, will discuss modes of intercultural contact beyond raiding, like commerce, alliances and settlement.

Dr. Alban Gautier of the University of Caen, Normandy, France will retrace Viking raids on the Seine, Rollo's career, and the origins of the Norman ducal dynasty. Coincidentally, in 2027 Normandy will celebrate the 1000th anniversary of William the Conqueror's birth, and Dr. Gautier will aid in organizing events for the celebration.

Dr. Laila Kitzler Ahler, Senior Researcher and Runologist, Sweden has researched relationships between rune carvers and the Mediterranean, and will include discussion of noteworthy runic inscriptions on the 9 foot Piraeus Lion statue in Greece (now in Venice, Italy).

Dr. Gianluca Raccagni, University of Edinburgh, Scotland, will speak about 'A Viking in the Sun,' Harald Hardrada in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Please plan to attend this exciting symposium designed for a public audience.

SACHF is Seeking a New Home for the Scandinavian Center

After 40 years on the Cal Lutheran campus, beginning in the 1980s in Pearson Library and continuing in 2003 in a house at 26 Faculty St. owned by the University and shared with a university department, SACHF and the Scandinavian Center have enjoyed a close partnership with Cal Lutheran University. During 2025, our Foundation learned it was necessary to vacate 26 Faculty as the house

would be used for student housing. As a result, the Scandinavian Center's treasured holdings, including Scandinavian works of art, cultural artefacts, a large library, oral history recordings, and more are currently in commercial storage.

Initially the Scandinavian collection was transferred to a spacious classroom on campus where a student intern continued cataloging items in a common museum software system. It has been a busy year as members of the board carefully packed items in preparation for a commercial storage unit.

Leif Erickson Day Tribute and SACHF Annual Member Meeting

Saturday Oct. 10 at 2 pm in Ullman 101 on the Cal Lutheran campus, SACHF will honor Leif Erikson as the first European to set foot on North American soil and to also establish a temporary home and other buildings. After a tribute to Leif Erikson and recognition of the national proclamation naming Oct. 9 Leif Erikson Day, Dr. E. F. (Fred) Tonsing will give a presentation on Norway's stave churches to be followed by a presentation by Christine Cano, Cal Lutheran's architect, on designing the James M. Hage Stave Pavilion. A walking tour led by Ms. Cano to the pavilion site (under construction) will follow. A light reception will be served. The program will be preceded by the annual member meeting.

Saturday October 10th, 2 pm. Ullman 101

1. **Annual Member Meeting**
2. **Leif Erikson Day introduction**, Howard Rockstad
3. **Encountering Borgund Stave Church**, Dr. Fred Tonsing.
Once there were thousands of stave churches; now there are only 28 in Norway and one in Sweden. What was it like to go in a boat down a fjord and then walk up to one of these extraordinary structures built without nails and able to withstand hurricane-force winds? What would one think in going through a portal carved with snarling dragons, of entering the dark interior, and looking high up to a ceiling that resembled an overturned boat? Dr. Fred Tonsing will have us relive that experience in his talk.
4. **James M. Hage Dream of a Replica Borgund Stave Church**, Howard Rockstad
5. **Designing a Stave Church-Inspired Open-Air Pavilion**, Christine Cano, Campus Architect
 - A) Concept and Goals
 - B) Timeline and Process of Project
 - C) Key Team Members
 - D) Challenges

Directions: Ullman is located off Memorial Parkway on the north side near the campus double sidewalk, below the campus cafeteria.

James M. Hage Stave Pavilion



Artist rendering of on-campus open-air Hage Pavilion

Many readers will recall Jim Hage's (of Salinas, California) dream to fund a replica Borgund, Norway stave church on the campus of California Lutheran University, tracing back to initial contacts in 2005. Mr. Hage's trust document of 2007, written in agreement with Cal Lutheran, reflected this wish and dream.

In May, 2007, a California Lutheran University Stave Church Advisory Committee was formed comprising members of the Scandinavian American Cultural & Historical Foundation, Sons of Norway Norseman Lodge, the Thousand Oaks community and the University. This committee did much research, obtained detailed blueprints reverse-engineered from the eight-hundred fifty year old Borgund, Norway church, and ultimately a construction cost estimate from a major southern California construction company owned by Norwegian-American brothers with a personal interest in Norway's stave churches. They involved Minnesota personnel who had constructed two replica stave churches, in North Dakota and Minnesota. The resulting cost estimate was about three times Mr. Hage's approximate million dollar estate (2011 dollars).

Unable to identify total funding for a stave church replica, the University, with approval from the Hage estate trustee, embarked on a plan to build a Borgund stave church-inspired open-air pavilion on campus in a location adjacent to Pearson Library. An artist's concept of this pavilion is illustrated above. Construction is ongoing off-site at the time of this publication.



Preview of pavilion beams under construction off-site

Major Gift for Swedish Language and Culture

Our Foundation (SACHF) received a generous gift from the James and Peggy Caballaro Trust to support teaching of Swedish language and culture. This gift enabled SACHF to offer Swedish language classes taught by Maria Katinka, a professional language teacher. A 13-week class for beginners is ongoing once a week on the Cal Lutheran campus Monday evenings at 6 pm in Alumni Hall 123 (located off the main university parking lot at 60 W. Olsen Rd.). Please refer to the website scandinaviancenter.org for further information.

This gift also supports the beautiful annual Santa Lucia Pageant on campus in December.

Contact Karen Darnall for information for both the class and the pageant: karendarnall@me.com.

Calendar of SACHF Events

Weekly: **Coffee and Nordic Culture**, Wednesday Noon

Monthly: **Second Friday Nordic Spirit Classics**, a Zoom series usually based on recordings of Nordic Spirit Symposia.

Weekly: **Swedish beginner classes**, Monday evenings. 13 week semesters.

Oct. 9, 2026, 7:30 pm. Norway's Majestic and Elegant Contribution to Church Architecture – Stave Churches, a Second Friday Zoom presentation by Dr. Fred Tonsing.

Oct. 10, 2026, 2 pm. Leif Erikson Day celebration and member meeting, Ullman 101, Cal Lutheran.

Oct. 25, 2026, 6:30 pm. Scandinavian Film Series, Finnish Romantic Comedy Film, *Fallen Leaves*. Preus-Brandt Forum. Cal Lutheran

Dec. 8, 2026, 6 pm. Santa Lucia Pageant, Samuelson Chapel, Cal Lutheran.

Feb. 5 & 6, 2027. 28th Nordic Spirit Symposium: Vikings in France, Spain and the Mediterranean, Preus-Brandt Forum, Cal Lutheran.

April 24 and 25, 2027. 48th Scandinavian Festival, Kingsmen Park, Cal Lutheran

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Attention Royal Copenhagen Collectors

Complete set of Royal Copenhagen mugs seeking new home

Offering a set of Royal Copenhagen Year Mugs (large size) from the beginning of the series (1967) through the final issue (2014) – 48 mugs in all. See photos of sample mugs.



For more information and price, contact Luther Luedtke at luther_luedtke@yahoo.com.



Scandinavian American Cultural and Historical Foundation

Your membership and donations are important to the Scandinavian American Cultural and Historical Foundation (SACHF), its cultural programs, and its preservation of items of Nordic material culture.

Please enroll me (us) as SACHF members, \$40 per individual, \$60 household _____

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Alternatively payment can be made to SACHF via PayPal at scandinaviancenter.org. If payment is made through PayPal, please submit this form and indicate amount paid _____

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