

## **ROSKILDE AND VIKING SHIP CULTURE**

Tom Williams, British Museum

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*Report by Frank O'Connell*

Tom Williams gave a timely talk on the exciting find of the longest known Viking ship (an incredible 37 metres) which was recovered from the Fjord at Roskilde (site of the famous Viking Ship Museum) in 1997. Tom is the project manager for the *Vikings life and legend* Exhibition which will have the privilege of being the first exhibition to be staged in the British Museum's new multi-million pound Exhibition Centre (6 March – 22 June 2014). A setting to absorb (in safety) the intimidating scale and maritime excellence of a ship (known as *Roskilde 6*) which might well have the greatest ever impact of any Viking ship in our history. CAG has been very quick off the mark to organise a Coach trip to this headline Exhibition (9 April 2014).

In his talk Tom focused on the unique status of the Ship in Viking culture. He acknowledged straight away that the term *Viking* has become one with pejorative overtones, synonymous with violent raiding and terror. Prestige, power and a warrior culture were their driving forces. Their *Valhalla* paradise envisaged eternal fighting and drinking after a brave warrior's death.

But Tom was at pains to highlight the great maritime ability of the Vikings which, combined with their ferocious energy and daring, made them an unstoppable force. Their boats reached the four then known continents and they were able to navigate major rivers which brought them immensely lucrative trade and plunder sites. The wealth they amassed was often distributed and used to display power and status with an element of "bling" in the sheer scale and weight of some of the gold status jewellery worn by Viking leaders.

Tom told us that the British Museum Exhibition will include the entire *Vale of York Viking hoard* which is thought to have been buried in or about 927AD and which was only found as recently as 2007. We were shown slides of this hoard which included Islamic coins, Russian silver, Irish brooches and a spectacular silver vessel which was probably plundered in Northern France. Also forming part of the Exhibition will be some skeletal remains from the mass grave of 54 Vikings discovered near Weymouth, Dorset in 2009. The evidence of "disarticulated heads" (Tom's coy description) showed that the Vikings were not always invincible.

But undoubtedly the centre-piece of the Exhibition will be *Roskilde 6* which was probably a royal warship constructed around 1025 AD. It was built in 3 sections from oak sourced from South Norwegian forests (under royal control) and to a specialised design. This facilitated close and fast shoreline access. The bulk, speed and power of this ship must

have been hugely intimidating. It was the ultimate status symbol of the Viking era, both in life and in death, as *Roskilde 6* was deliberately sunk to form a Viking ship burial. Some 32 metres of oak timbers from *Roskilde 6* have been preserved, through an impressive drying treatment, and these will be displayed in place on a supporting steel framework at the Exhibition. An opportunity, therefore, to witness Viking history spectacularly recovered from the depths and from its awesome past.

Tom William's talk provided an appetiser for the Exhibition and a welcome insight into the features of Viking life that will be covered by it.