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Towards a Phrasebook of Methodology in Viking Studies: A Perspective from the Study of Religion

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Abstract: This article attempts to alleviate what it identifies as an ‘issue of communication and shared understanding’ in Viking Studies: the range of methodological concepts used in different discourses within the field. It proposes a set of approximate equivalences between a range of such methodological concepts, organised into two groups, intended to allow scholars to roughly but efficiently locate scholarship from outside their own speciality within more familiar systems of meaning.

‘Viking Studies’ is booming. The Nordic Late Iron and early Middle Ages have enjoyed a period of cultural popularity in recent years, with television and video games in particular driving surges of both general interest in Vikings, and student numbers on courses dedicated to them. Of course, our field still has issues, although there is a reassuring interest in the conscious reflection over and compensation for many of them. In this article, I wish to respond to a point raised in one such reflection: in the most recent issue of *RMN Newsletter*, Frog, Joonas Ahola and Kendra Willson observed that the problems of research in a diverse field “are not simply issues of communication and shared understanding” (Frog et al. 2019: 7). I have no wish to dispute this statement, but am of the opinion that much of the confusion produced in Viking Studies does, in fact, stem from issues of communication and comprehension. As such, I hope this article will go some way to facilitating the effective communication of future research in the field.

The particular issue I wish to address here has its roots in the sheer breadth of disciplinary, national, and philosophical traditions that make up the field of Viking Studies – roughly the study of the cultures and histories of the Germanic peoples of Scandinavia and the wider Nordic cultural sphere, ca. AD 500–

1500. This breadth has led to a proliferation of specialised terminology. Jargon and technical language is, of course, a double-edged sword: it can effectively and efficiently communicate concepts, premises and biases underlying whole swathes of scholarship, allowing researchers to focus on the matter under study. On the other hand, it also raises significant barriers to those not familiar with particular discourses – a group that includes our students and colleagues in other fields, but also other Viking Studies researchers from different backgrounds.¹ In an effort to increase the accessibility of what can be frustratingly arcane discussions, this article therefore outlines a number of approximate equivalences between a series of key terms, and the concepts they represent, drawn from a range of discourses in and adjacent to Viking Studies. It is not my intention to demonstrate that these concepts are identical, or even freely interchangeable, but rather to suggest superficial ‘translations’ of how they are regarded and employed by different scholars in the field.

In this, I take my lead from travellers’ phrasebooks, which list rough translations of key terms for foreigners operating in unfamiliar linguistic and cultural environments. It is of course debatable whether *true* translation is ever possible: there are no such things as ‘true’ synonyms, as even signifiers with highly similar semantic fields carry different shades

of meaning (O’Grady et al 2005: 202). Nonetheless, phrasebooks offer some translations that are more or less exact, particularly given that many signified concepts (hotel, bus, bank) are similar across cultural boundaries in the twenty-first century. Others are looser, as might be found in an English-Danish phrasebook: *please* is a common term in English, and many native English speakers are confused by the absence of a commonly-used equivalent in Nordic languages. Some phrasebooks might offer *være sødt* [lit. ‘be sweet, kind’] or *være venlig* [lit. ‘be friendly’], which can sometimes be used in circumstances when English would employ *please*. It would be important for an English speaker learning Danish with the aim of becoming fully bilingual to distinguish between the semantic fields of *please* and *være sødt* or *være venlig*, but for the casual traveller, the phrasebook equivalence is ‘close enough’. I believe that an analogous case can be made for researchers operating in unfamiliar academic discourses: to fully participate in that discourse would require significant investment and a shift of vocabulary and academic grammar, but to reframe another debate’s premises, biases and approaches in more familiar terms requires only the drawing of equivalences that are ‘close enough’.

Inspired by the recent trend of reflexive examination of methodology in Viking Studies (e.g. Hadley & Richards 2000; Frog & Latvala 2013; Gunnell 2014a; Bek-Pedersen 2016; Glauser et al. 2018), this article therefore explores the ways in which a number of related methodological approaches and ideas can be communicated. In order to achieve this, I present a generalised survey of methodological concepts categorised into two groups: the first presents methods that work ‘bottom up’ (sometimes described as emic, inductive, *Idealtypisch*² or insider) while the second discusses approaches that move from the ‘top down’ (sometimes described as etic, deductive, *Normaltypisch* or outsider). I do not believe that the constituent concepts of these groups are identical, but rather that they share a family resemblance with one another, and that each also has a counterpart in the opposing group. I hope that the future use of such a codified set of equivalences, however approximate, will

allow researchers in Viking Studies to be able to both follow discourses outside their own speciality and communicate their own working assumptions and methodological biases.

There are two caveats to the approach proposed here. The first is that the digital categorisation I outline does not reflect the employment of methodology on the ground in day-to-day research. In reality, scholars might tend towards one pole or the other, yet still move freely along the length of a spectrum between the binarisms considered here – a point to which I will return in my conclusion. The second is that my purpose here is to establish a (deliberately polarised) overview of various methodological concepts employed in Viking Studies, not to advocate for one type of approach over another. The sheer breadth of subjects under investigation in Viking Studies necessitates the employment of different approaches for different material or when different results are sought – even if certain methodologies have historically been found wanting³ – and this article is not the place to argue for or against particular cases. To reiterate, my goal is descriptive – the facilitation of communication – not prescriptive.

Modelling

Before considering the various methodological concepts employed in the study of historical Nordic cultural phenomena, we must first establish the basis upon which such scholarship is conducted. As a form of human cognition, scholarship does not engage directly with the object of its study. Rather, humans (including academics) produce mental ‘models’ of how they conceive things to be. These models reflect our understandings, interpretations and culturally-based conceptions; as Jeppe Sinding Jensen has described: “[w]hen I think of rocks, I do not have rocks in my head, but conceptions of rocks” (2008b: 250). Indeed, it is impossible to think *directly* about an object, in that an object is only conceived of as a discrete object in the first place in the thinker’s mental model. A pile of sand in the desert has no inherent ‘pileness’, and recognising it as a pile is a mental picture – or model – formed on and in the thinker’s own terms, and at least one step removed from reality. This discrimination is the product of a fundamental process of human

thought: comparison. It is only by comparing A with B, the pile with its surroundings, that we can establish one object as sufficiently different from another (in some characteristics, if not all) so as to constitute two separate objects (Jensen 2008a; 2014: 10–12; 2016: 468–469).⁴

All models ignore or simplify some aspects of the object they portray, and therefore no model is a complete *reconstruction* of any (historical) reality (Schjødt 2012b: 270–271). Models are instead *constructions*, produced in the context of their utilisation, and none is any more real than another – that is, none are themselves inherent in reality, existing only in the mind of the model-maker. This has famously been summarised in the aphorism ‘map is not territory’ (see e.g. Smith 1978). Consider, for example, two models of pre-Christian belief in Þórr: the first argues that he was an important sky-deity associated with the weather, and the second that he was an alien whose ‘chariot’ was a flying saucer. Both are equally real in that they exist only in the minds of those who think about them. Generally speaking, humans employ models in an effort to understand the world around them. As such, we ought to prefer models that, to the best of our knowledge, best explain the data which we have available (Schjødt 2007: 7).

The philosopher Michael Strevens has argued that we should distinguish between true and correct models, with the former referring to the literal accuracy of a given model and the latter to its explanatory value: “[a]n idealizing explanation is correct if the propositions expressing its explanatory content, as opposed to its literal content, are true” (Strevens 2013: 512). As scholars of historical cultural phenomena, we therefore accept that our models may not be completely true, but hope that they are as correct as possible. We might therefore argue that the model of Þórr as a sky-deity is more correct – more useful – than the model of Þórr as an extra-terrestrial (although cf. von Däniken 1968; ‘The Viking Gods’, 2013), and must make these decisions on the basis of the context in which the model is expected to serve. For example, the differentiation of ‘Viking-Age culture’ from neighbouring social systems in both time and space (‘Anglo-Saxon’ and ‘Slavic’ cultures,

for example) is a model that has been criticised by Fredrick Svanberg as inappropriately colonial and over-generalised, the product of nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalism rather than a reflection of historical reality (2003). A study of Iron-Age culture in south-eastern Skåne would likely be more productive if it were to distinguish its theoretical object from Svanberg’s other ‘ritual systems’ in different regions of Scandinavia, rather than against an abstract whole of ‘Viking-Age culture’ (of which it is also a constituent articulation). Similarly, models of folklore traditions are more true – more accurate to reality – when they are based on coherent bodies of empirical data that are socially and temporally localized, but as such models are expanded to include more variant data from other communities, they become more abstract, depicting any one individual tradition less accurately (Frog 2016: 74–76).

Thus, which aspects of our object we consciously decide to simplify or overlook when constructing a model will depend on the purpose for which we intend to employ that model. To give an extremely basic example, if we wished to create a simple model of a Reuleaux triangle, would we generalise it as a straight-sided triangle (focusing on its three axes of rotational symmetry), or as a circle (focusing on its curved edges)? The result depends on which aspects of our initial data we deem worthy of emphasis.

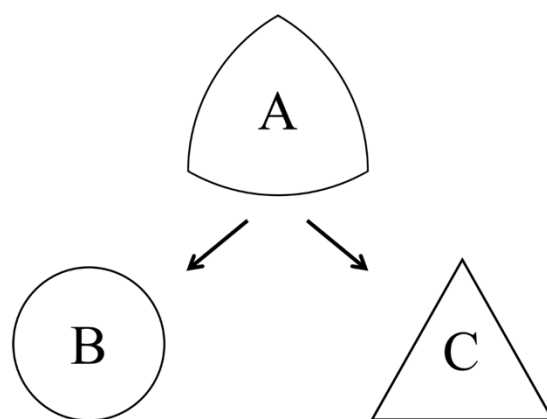


Figure 1. Variant models of a Reuleaux triangle (A) as a circle (B) and a straight-sided triangle (C).

A hypothetical Viking Studies example might concern the office of the *goði*. A study interested in religious authority in the Viking Age would, presumably, consider the *goði* alongside Christian priests, emphasising their

ritual duties. On the other hand, a study of political power might examine the *goði* alongside *þingmenn*, petty kings and war leaders, emphasising their social and judicial authority. From what we know of *goðar* (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1998; Sundqvist 2007), neither of these models is necessarily incorrect – they simply emphasise different aspects of the phenomenon under study according to the terms of the wider analysis. This selection of distinguishing characteristics based on perceived relevance is an integral part of academic model building, and forms a key difference between the two groups of methodological concepts I wish to examine in this article: all models must start somewhere, and where each tradition favours starting – the first and fundamental choices or assumptions made – have cascading effects for the resultant models. These initial starting points underlie my categorisation of various methodological concepts used in Viking Studies into opposing pairs, and the subsequent arrangement of the halves of those pairs into two family groups: bottom-up and top-down approaches.

From the Bottom Up: Emic Models and Idealtypen

The earliest work in the field of Viking Studies – even as far back as Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda* – can uncontroversially be described as philological. While Philology as a discipline no longer has a place on the organisational tables or syllabi of most universities, it is unquestionably alive and well as a pursuit, even if precisely what constitutes Philology and what Linguistics, Manuscript Studies or Literary Criticism varies from scholar to scholar (Frank 1997: 488–490). In the early nineteenth century, Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel declared that “[d]er Zweck der Philologie ist die Historie” (Schlegel 1981: 37) [‘the point of Philology is History’],⁵ an attitude reflected by contemporary scholars like Roberta Frank, who argue that a language’s vocabulary reflects the most important concepts of its speakers’ culture (1997: 498). Thus, the argument goes, the topography of lexicon mirrors the peaks and troughs between the semantic fields actively employed by cultural participants, and that by studying a

lexicon, scholars can come to understand a culture (Hall 2007: 9).

Such bottom-up approaches should not be mistaken to assume that there is a one-to-one relationship between vernacular vocabulary and cultural categories. It is entirely possible for humans to conceive of concepts, interpretations, and ideologies for which they have no single lexeme. The hexadecimal codes employed to designate certain colours for which there is no name in a given language are a clear example of how groups of humans subjectively select which aspects of reality are important enough to bear their own signifiers. This is famously exemplified in Viking Studies by the lack of clear distinction between blue and black in many Old Norse texts (Wolf 2006) – a vital distinction to modern sensibilities, but not enough to produce a clear linguistic distinction in many of our early-Medieval sources. Similarly, it is entirely possible for a culture to have a single signifier that designates a range of concepts. While the Old Norse vocabulary of supranatural beings (as persevered in extant medieval manuscripts) represents a range of temporal and cultural usages, it is clear that lexemes like *troll*, *völva* and *dis* could be used to designate different beings in different circumstances (Mitchell 2001; 2011; Ármann Jakobsson 2008; 2017; Bek-Pedersen 2011; Murphy 2013; 2022; Sävborg 2016; Frog 2019), which might have varied according to geography, time, social context or even cognitive states (Schjødt 2009). Models created from the bottom up thus attempt to represent a selected part of the perspectives and worldview of the culture they are studying, and can usefully be differentiated from studies predicated on the employment of non-native terminology and categories – what Alaric Hall regards as “positing categories and then seeking evidence for them” (2007: 9). In methodological discourse, the former are labelled ‘emic’, and the latter ‘etic’.

The emic/etic distinction was first proposed by the linguist Kenneth L. Pike in 1954 on the basis of *phonemics* and *phonetics* in linguistics – the study of the distribution of distinct sounds (phonemes) in a given language, and of the physiological acoustics of human speech, respectively. Transposing a similar relationship to cultural studies, Pike proposed that:

an etic approach to any cultural phenomenon is based on a reference system constructed by the analyst that, like the IPA [the International Phonetic Alphabet], provides a set of criteria for classifying and organizing analogous types of data from all over the world into a single system in order to compare them. (Pike 1954–1959 I: 8.)

In contrast, emic studies are those that seek to elucidate theoretical objects within a single cultural system, objects ‘discovered’ within the primary data rather than ‘constructed’ by the academic. The models created by emic and etic approaches are thus generalised pictures that emphasise different aspects of their theoretical objects: an emic approach focuses on what its creator sees as characteristically inherent in the object itself, inductively arriving at the frame of reference for the study at hand and working ‘bottom up’ from the data under study. On the other hand, an etic model concentrates on those aspects of the object that correlate with the analyst’s preselected characteristics of interest, ‘deducing’ their own framework, and working ‘top down’ from the perspective of the researcher.

— The works of Hall, Frank and countless others that draw on the cultural categories of the society they study are thus emic, seeking to reproduce ‘native’ or ‘ethnic’ cultural categories, concepts, and ideologies (Ben-Amos 1969). Such bottom-up approaches are employed in a wide range of scholarly fields beyond Germanic Philology, such as the interest of mathematicians in what they term ‘ethnomodels’ – mathematical systems “socially constructed and culturally rooted” outside of Western discourses (Rosa & Orey 2012: 877). Similarly, in her work on traditional Chinese opera, Barbara Ward rejects the imposition of English-language terms such as ‘play’ or ‘drama’ onto her data, favouring instead of close translations of Cantonese terms, as when she renders *shan kung hei* as ‘god-revere-play’ (1979: 34). Later, she declares that “if one is to interpret the native insiders’ understanding of their own culture one must try to comprehend and use their categories, not impose one’s own” (Ward 1979: 36). Ward’s terminology here touches on another key distinction drawn in many sociological and anthropological fields: that between ‘insiders’ – commonly understood as the bearers of the culture under study – and

‘outsiders’ – typically used to denote scholars, tourists, foreigners, and other non-participants looking ‘in’ at a culture from beyond its bounds.

The distinction between insider and outsider is often confused with that between emic and etic (see further Jensen 2008b; 2011; 2016; Mostowlandsky & Rota 2016; Chryssides & Greg 2019). A traditional view of cultural phenomena is that cultural insiders have privileged access to both experience and knowledge, and that only such insiders may offer comment on their areas of expertise. In the context of Viking Studies, it is of course impossible – barring the use of time machines or Ouija boards – to approach insiders directly for their take on cultural matters. This may be to the benefit of our field, given the issues of exclusivism, loyalism and normativism that can arise in disciplines like contemporary Pagan Studies when insiders attempt to act as outsiders (i.e. practitioners producing normative scholarship), or when outsiders become insiders in the pursuit of privileged information (i.e. scholars converting to the religion they study; see further Davidsen 2012). In my view, a modern Viking Studies scholar is, by definition, an outsider, although we might reasonably see them as *less* of an outsider than a non-specialist layman, what Margaret Clunies Ross called “partial insiders” (1994: 26). This should not, however, prevent us from utilising insider categories in the construction of our models. A cultural outsider can produce a bottom-up model of an emic concept, category or ideology just as well than a cultural insider can – potentially better, if the outsider were academically trained and the insider were not.

What such bottom-up models are not, however, is direct one-to-one reconstructions of ‘native’, ‘ethnic’ or ‘folk’ models. They remain, of necessity, selective generalisations: Hall, for instance, sought to understand Anglo-Saxon *ælf*e, a supranatural being related to Old Norse *álfr*. In doing so, he chose to exclude a small category of linguistically uncertain instances of *ælf*-based lexemes from his study, none of which map neatly onto his proposed model of *ælf*e as highly gendered supranatural beings (2007: 182–183). This exclusion seems sensible, but any such exclusion must be acknowledged as a selection by the researcher, not necessarily something inherent in the data.

As such, bottom up models like Hall’s are what Max Weber termed *Idealtypen* [‘ideal types’], a form of mental construction formed by the:

[...] einseitige Steigerung eines oder einiger Gesichtspunkte und durch Zusammenschluß einer Fülle von diffus und diskret, hier mehr, dort weniger, stellenweise gar nicht, vorhandenen Einzelperscheinungen, die sich jenen einseitig herausgehobenen Gesichtspunkten fügen, zu einem in sich einheitlichen Gedankenbilde. (Weber 1904: 65.)

[...] one-sided exaggeration of one or more points of view and by the combination of an abundance of diffuse and discreet extant isolated phenomena, some included more, some less, in some instances not at all. These phenomena, each individually representing singled-out perspectives, are combined into an integrated mental construct.

Hall’s model is thus *not* the reproduction of ‘the native’s point of view’ by an outsider (cf. Geertz 2000). Despite basing itself on insider, vernacular, or ‘native’ terminology or concept, a bottom-up study is still a model of reality constructed outside of the culture it studies, created “in the analyst’s language” (Jensen 2008a: 143), both figuratively and literally.

There are, of course, limits to emic methods. Often, this is due to the paucity of data with which we build models: at least half of what we commonly refer to as the Late Iron and Middle Ages predates the arrival of literacy in the Nordic region, which makes it much more difficult to establish bottom-up, emic models on the basis of evidence from Old Norse texts preserved in manuscripts from the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries. Similar concerns may sensibly be raised about the geographic origin of the overwhelmingly West-Norse/Icelandic manuscript corpus: to what extent can Old West Norse/Classical Old Icelandic vernacular terms be assumed to represent cultural phenomena in the East-Norse cultural sphere (Nordberg 2012: 122)? The runic corpus allows us to compensate for this difficulty to a certain extent, but the cultural categories, concepts, and ideologies it witnesses are limited. Even when contemporary vernacular terminology has been preserved, the data-sets that interest scholars of Viking-Age cultural phenomena may not be large enough for effective model-building. Scholars

of Anglo-Saxon elite culture, for example, cannot establish a clear typology of those structures commonly dubbed ‘halls’, as Helen Bennett has noted:

Among the multiple Old English words for ‘hall’, including *heall*, *sele*, *reced*, *ærn*, *bold*, must be distinctions in meaning beyond their usefulness within different metrical and phonological environments, distinctions we can no longer access. (Bennett 2009: 6.)

Similar concerns have been raised regarding cultural phenomena more generally, with Neil Price observing that scholars have a history of uncritically applying Early Medieval cultural categories drawn from textual sources – in Price’s example, mythological names – to excavated objects (Price 2006). While our field has come a long way from Olaf Olsen’s description of various sites as *Hørg*, *hov* og *kirke* (1966) [‘*Høgrgr*, *hof* and church’], Preben Rønne’s declaration that his intriguing finds at Ranheim (Trøndelag, Norway) “can be interpreted [as ‘horg, hov and ve’] from Norse sources without any difficulty” (2011: 80) is worrying, particularly given recent toponymic studies that a *hørg*, for example, could also designate a non-sacral rocky barrier (Heide 2014; Vikstrand 2016: 179; cf. Murphy 2016). Most recent scholarship regarding sacral architecture is reluctant to directly identify archaeological finds with terms from Early-Medieval textual sources – *høgrgr*, *hof*, *vé* – instead preferring etic terms like ‘cult house’ and ‘ritual area’ (e.g. Gräslund 2008: 251; cf. Murphy 2016). The use of such modern linguistic signifiers to designate what does appear to be a relatively coherent corpus of architectural finds is an example of what I would term top down, rather than bottom up, methodology.

Table A. Categorising cultural categories by family resemblance (columns) and as opposed pairs (rows).

Bottom Up	Top Down
<i>seiðr</i>	magic
<i>ergi</i>	queerness
<i>forn siðr</i>	religion

To sum up: scholarship that moves bottom up seeks to base itself in categories, concepts, and ideologies drawn from the culture under study. As such, the results it produces can be seen as emic models or *Idealtypen*, produced through

the application of inductive reasoning. These models seek to reproduce a cultural insider's perspective in so far as is useful and comprehensible for the model maker, and as such move from the concrete instances of a data set to a general, abstract paradigm. Examples in Viking Studies might include studies of *seiðr* as opposed to 'magic', *ergi* as opposed to 'queerness', or *forn siðr* [lit. 'ancient custom'] as opposed to 'religion'.

From the Top Down: Etic Models and Normaltypen

If bottom-up models work emically, inductively arriving at their research objects from the data they study, then top-down models are produced concomitantly by deductive, etic approaches. Top-down models focus on categories, concepts or ideologies drawn from outside the culture under study, often (but not always) from the cultural context of the researcher creating and employing them. They are thus sometimes termed 'analytical categories', as opposed to 'native', 'folk' or 'ethnic' classes (Ben-Amos 1969). Such top-down models can sometimes seem anachronistic at first glance. A particularly clear example of this can be found in Jonathan Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam* (1994), which uses the modern Western model of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder to help elucidate the lives of famous warriors in Classical literature. Given PTSD as a concept was first developed on the basis of American soldiers' trauma in Vietnam in the 20th century – displacing earlier Western models like the First World War 'shell shock' – a sceptic might argue that its application to the Bronze Age Aegean is inappropriate. What Shay demonstrates, however, is the productivity of such approaches: even if Achilles himself would have been able to make no sense of the concept of PTSD, it is nonetheless a model that enables modern researchers to make sense of otherwise puzzling episodes.

In Viking Studies, we might consider seemingly-anachronistic studies like Richard Cole's (2015) application of "racial thinking" to Old Norse literature, which, again, have proven highly productive. Thus, I believe that Till Mostowlandsky and Andrea Rota had the right of it when they observed that:

[t]he validity of these [etic] categories does not depend on their 'reality' or relevance from the participant's point of view, but rather on their recognition by a scientific community and on *their capacity to provide parsimonious and powerful theories with far-reaching explanatory potential*. (Mostowlandsky & Rota 2016: 323, emphasis added.)

It is from this perspective that models with a clearly modern, Western basis can be gainfully applied to Viking Studies. Admittedly, these two examples both reflect concepts developed in a modern Western setting, but which arguably reflect universals of the human experience grounded in psychological and social forces experienced by all members of our species. Less clear cut, but potentially still productive, might be a category developed in and for modern Western society that can only be applied to other cultures analogically, such as a hypothetical study of political parties in the Viking Age Alþing or medieval tourism.

Not all top down models are as recognisably derived from modern Western bases as 'racism' or 'PTSD', and there are serious risks involved in employing such concepts when their origin outside the culture under study is not acknowledged and dealt with. This risk is particularly elevated with categories or concepts that might seem like human universals, such as 'anger', 'honour' or 'religion'. To take just the last example, it is undoubtedly true that human cultures around the world and throughout history have upheld more or less systematised practices and beliefs regarding the supranatural. Nonetheless, we must acknowledge that, for many such systems, 'religion' is an ill-fitting moniker, originating as an emic category from Western (primarily Protestant) cultures, and as such is predicated on Christian structures (Fitzgerald 1997; Jensen 2003). Unless it is actively deconstructed and reformulated, 'religion' therefore carries implicit connotations of doctrinal texts, dedicated buildings for ritual praxis and professional ritual specialists. These features are prominent in systems as diverse as Irish Roman Catholicism, Saudi Arabian Wahhabi Islam and Japanese Shingon Buddhism – examples of what are sometimes misleadingly called 'world religions' – but not in the beliefs and ritual practices of (primarily) oral cultures outside the modern West, such as the pre-Christian Nordic region. Early

scholarship in Viking Studies did not always recognise this distinction, as can be seen in early descriptions of the *Poetic* and *Prose Eddas* as “the bible of the Old Scandinavians” (Keyser & Pennock 1854: 17). Such a description emphatically fails the test posited by Mostowlandsky and Rota (2016: 323): far from providing “explanatory potential”, referring to the *Eddas* as ‘bibles’ falsely implies they were received as orthodox texts by practitioners of pre-Christian religion, when in fact orthodoxy itself was likely a foreign concept in prehistoric Scandinavia (Bertell 2006; Brink 2007; Schjødt 2009; Nordberg 2012; Gunnell 2015; Murphy 2016; 2017; 2018).⁶

We must therefore be careful to interrogate the origins and baggage of the categories, concepts, and ideologies on which we base our models. This should not stop us employing top-down models in our research, however. Just because there is no vernacular Old Norse word for ‘religion’ – the closest counterpart might be (*forn*) *siðr* [lit. ‘(ancient) custom’], although this appears more predicated on praxis rather than belief – does not mean we cannot employ ‘religion’ as an externally-derived category to help us recognise states of reality in our data that purely emic models would overlook. On this topic, Jensen draws a useful parallel to linguistic models: “No one ever ‘saw’ a grammatical case – but without the concept one could never make sense of the declension of nouns” (Jensen 2008a: 144). This has led to the ‘eticisation’ of some emic terms, whereby categories with ‘far-reaching explanatory potential’ are applied as conscious borrowings from one culture to express a concept lacking a clear lexical signifier in others. Well-known examples applied in Viking Studies include ‘taboo’ (originally a Polynesian system of ritual cleanliness: de Vries 1970: 298–299; Ström 1942: 256–61), ‘mana’ (an Austronesian concept of personal power: Meylan 2016) and ‘shamanism’ (originally an Evenki concept generalised to designate a northern Eurasian set of practices and beliefs, now applied to ritual ecstatic practices generally: Price 2000; Tolley 2009). I therefore concur with recent scholarship in the History of Religions that problematic terms like ‘religion’ and ‘magic’ can be applied to a range of cultures without straightforward emic equivalents,

provided they are suitably deconstructed and reflected upon in the process (Jensen 2003; Sørensen 2007; 2013; but cf. Fitzgerald 1997).⁷

In employing such top-down methodological concepts, scholars cannot be said to be constructing Weber’s *Idealtypen*, which move from concrete examples to abstract models, but rather a form of mental construction described by another early German sociologist, Ferdinand Tönnies, as *Normaltypen* [‘normal types’] or *Normalbegriffe* [‘normal terms’]. Tönnies, seemingly working along the same lines as Weber, proposed that an understanding of an individual may be established by starting with:

[...] der Essentia des Menschen, nicht von einer Abstraktion, sondern von konkreten Inbegriff der gesamten Menschheit, als dem Allgemeinst-Wirklichen dieser Art, ausgegangen; und demnächst fortgeschritten, etwa durch die Essentia der Rasse, des Volkes, des Stammes und engerer Verbände, endlich zu dem einzelnen Individuo, gleichsam dem Zentrum dieser vielen konzentrischen Kreise, hinabgestiegen. Dieses ist um so vollkommener erklärt, je mehr sich verengernde Kreislinien die Brücke zu ihm hinüber schlagen. (Weber 1979: 149.)

[...] the essence of the human, not as an abstraction, but rather as a concrete embodiment of collected humanity as the most general reality of its kind. From there we proceed through the essence of the race, the people, the clan, and narrower groupings, before we finally reach the individual at the centre of these many concentric circles. The more contracting circles a bridge to such an individual crosses, the better he is understood.

Despite the somewhat confusing (and alarming) terminology he employs, it is clear that Tönnies saw his mental models as produced by a process that began with an abstract *a priori* category (the essence of the human) and progressed to the empirically concrete (the individual human) – that is, a process yielding top-down, etic models produced via deductive reasoning. This is in contrast to Weber’s *Idealtypen*, which begin with the concrete (aspects of the individual) and move to the abstract (a collective picture of the ‘average’ aspect), forming emic models, produced ‘bottom up’ via inductive reasoning.

I do not dispute that there are criticisms of top-down approaches, which seek to practice Viking Studies on our own modern, Western terms, rather than those of the Nordic Late Iron and Middle Ages. Key amongst these is the understandable concern that top-down scholarship risks reading a scholar's own concerns into their data, which might – in extreme cases – lead to circular reasoning. Similarly, by constructing models that did not exist during the Viking Age and would not be recognised by cultural insiders, there is a danger of eliding key distinctions within the data, or engendering distinctions where none existed. Nonetheless, it is my position that, as no model stands in a one-to-one relationship with the reality it represents (cf. Schjødt 2012b: 270–271), all models are therefore approximations – as is all scholarship. Indeed, despite positivist critiques like those of Svanberg noted above, most Viking Studies scholars continue to use ‘the Viking Age’ to differentiate a period of time, despite no one living in that period having been aware they were doing so (Ahola & Frog 2014: 35–44; Aalto 2014). We do this not because we believe ‘the Viking Age’ is necessarily a true, real, or even necessarily very correct model, but because it is *useful*, at least in some circumstances. I therefore see no reason to favour emic models over etic ones, and believe that the value of an academic model – like any other tool – lies in its utility, nothing more, nothing less.

To sum up: scholarship that moves top down seeks to base itself in categories, concepts, and ideologies drawn from outside the culture under study. As such, the results it produces can be seen as etic models or *Normaltypen*, produced through the application of deductive reasoning. These models do not seek to reproduce a cultural insider's perspective, and as such move from a general abstract paradigm of a data set to concrete instances. Examples in Viking Studies might include studies of magic as opposed to *seiðr*, queerness as opposed to *ergi*, and religion as opposed to *forn siðr*, beginning from the opposite side of the table above.

Methodology on the Ground: Abduction

I have thus far been at pains to emphasise that, regardless of the bases upon which we develop the simplified models we construct in our

scholarship, they do not – indeed cannot – reflect the full complexity of actual (historical) reality. Instead, they represent calculated overstatements in the service of understanding in that they exaggerate certain select aspects of our theoretical objects – be that something fundamental to the object itself in the construction of bottom-up *Idealtypen*, or something we as scholars seek to find in the making of top-down *Normaltypen*.

Notably, however, the survey I have presented here is itself also a model, albeit a model of other models. It is thus also a calculated exaggeration, one that overemphasises the discrepancies between different methodological concepts into binary extremes at the expense of reporting the responsive adaptability most scholars display in the course of their work. For all the clarificatory value of the binary model of methodological concepts I have presented here, the practicalities of academic research are far more analogue than digital. Even those scholars working at one or other extreme of the methodological spectrum employ some aspects from the opposite pole: Jens Peter Schjødt's highly abstract, top-down re-examination of Georges Dumézil's structuralist mythological system utilises emic categories such as *Æsir* and *Vanir* (Schjødt 2012a; cf. Dumézil 1973); Hall's bottom-up, evidence-led emic study of *ælf*e makes etic decisions as to the relevance of instances of his data (Hall 2007: 182–183); and Cole's study of the etic category ‘racial thinking’ is dedicated to establishing a deeper understanding of the cultural phenomena surrounding the emic signifier/signified *blámaðr* (Cole 2015; cf. Vídalín 2020). I do not believe that acknowledging this infiltration of the emic by the etic and *vice versa* negates the arguments I have made here, but rather that it reflects the ‘reality on the ground’ – that Holy Land of academics – in the conduct of scholarship in our field. Indeed, the majority of research in Viking Studies falls somewhere between the extremes of wholly-etic and wholly-emic methods, and moves freely back and forth between the poles of a methodological spectrum according to the requirements of its data and research goals.

This flexibility can, in fact, be recognised as a distinct position, and not merely as evidence of methodological insecurity: if bottom-up,

emic models are constructed inductively and top-down, etic models deductively, a deliberate employment of both methods can be seen as an employment of abductive (or ‘retroductive’) reasoning. This mode of thought is one that was first made explicit by the 19th-century polymath Charles Sanders Peirce, who saw what he called ‘Orignary Argument’ as the “only kind of argument which starts a new idea” (1958–1966 II: 53–54). In Peirce’s terms, the very selection of the object for a deductive examination as worthy of study in the first place is a form of informed guesswork, and that initial ‘guess’ that the object might have something of interest to be uncovered is where reason starts. The guess is formed into a hypothesis (i.e. etic deduction) and tested against data (i.e. emic induction), which produces results – typically in the form of refinements of the initial hypothesis, which is subjected to further rounds of inductive and deductive examination (see discussion in Seebok 1981: 17–52).

Conscious employment of this approach in Viking Studies does not always start with what Peirce termed ‘a new idea’, but frequently sets out to test models pre-existing models employed by other scholars. Rudolf Simek famously rejected *Vanir* as an emic category of pre-Christian deities, arguing that Snorri Sturluson drew on the Freyja kenning *vana brúðr* [‘bride of the Vanir’] to create an anachronistic label he applied to Freyja, Freyr, and Njǫrðr (Simek 2010). In this, Simek did not reject the existence of an emic association of these three gods in pre-Christian society, only the use of the Old Norse lexeme *vanir* to describe them collectively as representative of a category. Simek’s study may be regarded as abductive in that it tested a hypothesis – there was a pre-Christian category of gods called *Vanir* – against the available data, producing refinements of the hypothesis – *Vanir* appears to have been rationalised by Snorri (see further discussion in Tolley 2011; Frog & Roper 2011; Ślupecki 2011; Frog 2020). Similarly, I have elsewhere examined evidence for what I termed ‘Old Norse privacy’ in early Medieval textual sources, seeking to test the hypothesis that early Medieval constructions of privacy would be distinct from modern models – a hypothesis I was then able to refine when my

source material showed little interest in the restriction of access to space, and resolve still further by considering evidence for a concern with intimate interpersonal relationships (Murphy 2017: 18–52). This cyclical approach is sometimes known, particularly but not exclusively in Theology and Philosophy, as the ‘hermeneutic cycle’ (Bleicher 1980).

Less conscious hybridisation of emic and etic approaches also occurs, although it is rarely so productive. Comparable to the eticisation of terms like ‘taboo’, ‘mana’ and ‘shamanism’ noted above, issues can arise where a category designated by an emic label (particularly one consisting of a broad or poorly-witnessed phenomenon) is unconsciously eticised within its original cultural setting, becoming applied more widely than the available data would support. In a Viking Studies example, *seiðr* is at risk of becoming used as an emic label for an etic category of something like ‘Viking magic’ without due consideration for the existence of magical practices that do not seem to have been regarded as *seiðr* by cultural participants (for discussion of two such practices, see Gunnell 2014b). It is, of course, one of the jobs of scholarship to argue for likely links between related phenomena and thus to establish the boundaries of cultural categories, and there may be good reason to regard a particular practice as *seiðr* even where it is not explicitly labelled as such in our sources. We should nonetheless be on guard for the unconscious overextension of emic labels to designate etic models created on the basis of modern scholarship, however sympathetic the goals of such overeager scholarship might be.

Conclusion

It has been my goal in this article to facilitate the effective communication of research in Viking Studies by proposing a codified set of equivalences between the methodological concepts and terminologies employed within different discourses in the field. To do so, I set out an argument that all scholarly representations of reality (historical or otherwise) are somewhat-simplified ‘models’, created by and for the analyst. According to this argument, what distinguishes between the two polar groupings of methodological concepts I have presented is which aspects of analogue reality

the researcher employs as the basis of their model – aspects emergent inductively from, or features read deductively into, the data. These two poles formed the basis of the families of methodological concepts I proposed, the first of which I described as ‘bottom up’: depending on the discourses with which scholar describing them seeks to engage, these might be characterised as methodologies that employ inductive reasoning, base themselves on cultural categories drawn from the culture under study (i.e. are more interested in the insider’s perspective), move from concrete instances of data to abstract paradigms, produce emic models, or build *Idealtypen*. The second grouping of methodological concepts, which I described as ‘top down’, consists of the counterparts to the first group: depending on the context within which they are described, these might be regarded as employing deductive reasoning, basing themselves on cultural categories drawn from the outside culture under study (i.e. are more interested in the outsider’s perspective), moving from abstract paradigms to concrete instances of data, producing etic models, or building *Normaltypen*.

Table B. Categorising methodological approaches by family resemblance (columns) and as pairs of counterparts (rows).

Bottom Up	Top Down
emic models/methods inductive reasoning <i>Idealtyp</i> concrete to abstract insider’s perspective	etic models/methods deductive reasoning <i>Normaltyp</i> abstract to concrete outsider’s perspective

I must stress that the equivalences I have suggested between the concepts and terminology of different discourses are just that: approximate correlations at best. We have already discussed the distinction between the use of insider terminology and the building of emic models; and we might also draw differences between the employment of inductive reasoning (a process) and the emic model it creates (the result of that process). These discrepancies reflect the genuine differences between the approaches of employed in different discourses within Viking Studies, and I believe any attempt to further systematise such methodologies would be self-defeating, nullifying the genuine advantages brought about by the breadth of

disciplinary, national, and philosophical traditions represented in the field.

Of course, the very reason we classify our work into false-colour groupings like ‘bottom up’ and ‘top down’ is the same reason we simplify our models of historical reality: generalisation helps us understand. I believe the hugely complex nature of methodological discourse, with its profusion of similar-sounding terminology and confusing specialist jargon, can also benefit from simplification in pursuit of understanding. I therefore hope that generalised equivalences, whether those I have outlined here, or others judged more appropriate, can form the basis of an academic equivalent to a traveller’s phrasebook, allowing students and researchers to roughly – but efficiently – locate scholarship from discourses outside their own speciality within more familiar systems of meaning. It may of course prove that ‘translating’ methodological terminology and concepts from one jargon into another is not the most effective way of facilitating communication, and that what is needed is simply more explicit explanation of the premises, biases, and approaches underlying individual works of scholarship. I suspect this will be the case when different discourses employ the same signifier to designate different concepts – as was for so long the case with the use of ‘ritual’ in archaeology and the history of religion (Insoll 2004: 10–12). Nonetheless, I wish to close this essay by reiterating both my belief that much of the confusion in Viking Studies stems from issues of communication and comprehension between the constituent discourses of the field; and that many of these issues can be addressed by a concerted effort to make our scholarship more accessible.

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Notes

1. I strongly disagree with Anatoly Liberman’s claim that some areas of Viking Studies have “been studied

so well that outsiders should probably leave it to specialists” (Lieberman 2016: 218). On the contrary, I fundamentally believe we should encourage researchers from other backgrounds to engage with our material and in our debates.

2. I have retained the German for *Idealtypisch* and *Normaltypisch* (and their nominal forms) in an effort to prevent confusion with the widespread use of ‘type’ as a category marker in folkloristics and literary studies. Further discussion of the origins of these concepts in German-language sociology can be found below.
3. Methodologies that have now fallen (mostly) into disuse include, for example, the uncritical comparativism of Eliadian phenomenology (Mostowlandsky & Rota 2016) and the hypercritical New/Processual Archaeology (Gerrard 2003: 172–180).
4. All objects are thus comparable, with the potential exception of the divine in some religious ontologies.
5. All translations are my own.
6. The *Eddas* have their origins in the 13th century, and seem to have been created for audiences with an interest in poetry. Modern scholarship recognises that the texts comprising both *Prose* and *Poetic* manuscript traditions exhibit not insignificant levels of Christian influence (Nordal 1970–1973: 79–91; Gunnell 2007; Faulkes 2008).
7. In the case of ‘religion’, Jensen proposes that it be rehabilitated as a form of discursive space “where the interlocutors may meaningfully disagree [...] this occurs when there is so much congruent semantic space that they agree on certain ‘ultimate sacred postulates’. On a large scale, Jews, Christians and Muslims may agree or disagree on whether they have the ‘same god’, but to a Japanese Shintoist that is beyond the point, that is, outside the relevant semantic space of ‘meaningful disagreement’” (Jensen 2014: 9–10). Schjødt applies similar ideas to the study of pre-Christian Nordic religion(s), calling for the use of “discursive spaces” (2012b: 275–278). On ultimate sacred postulates, see Rappaport 1999: 287–290.

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