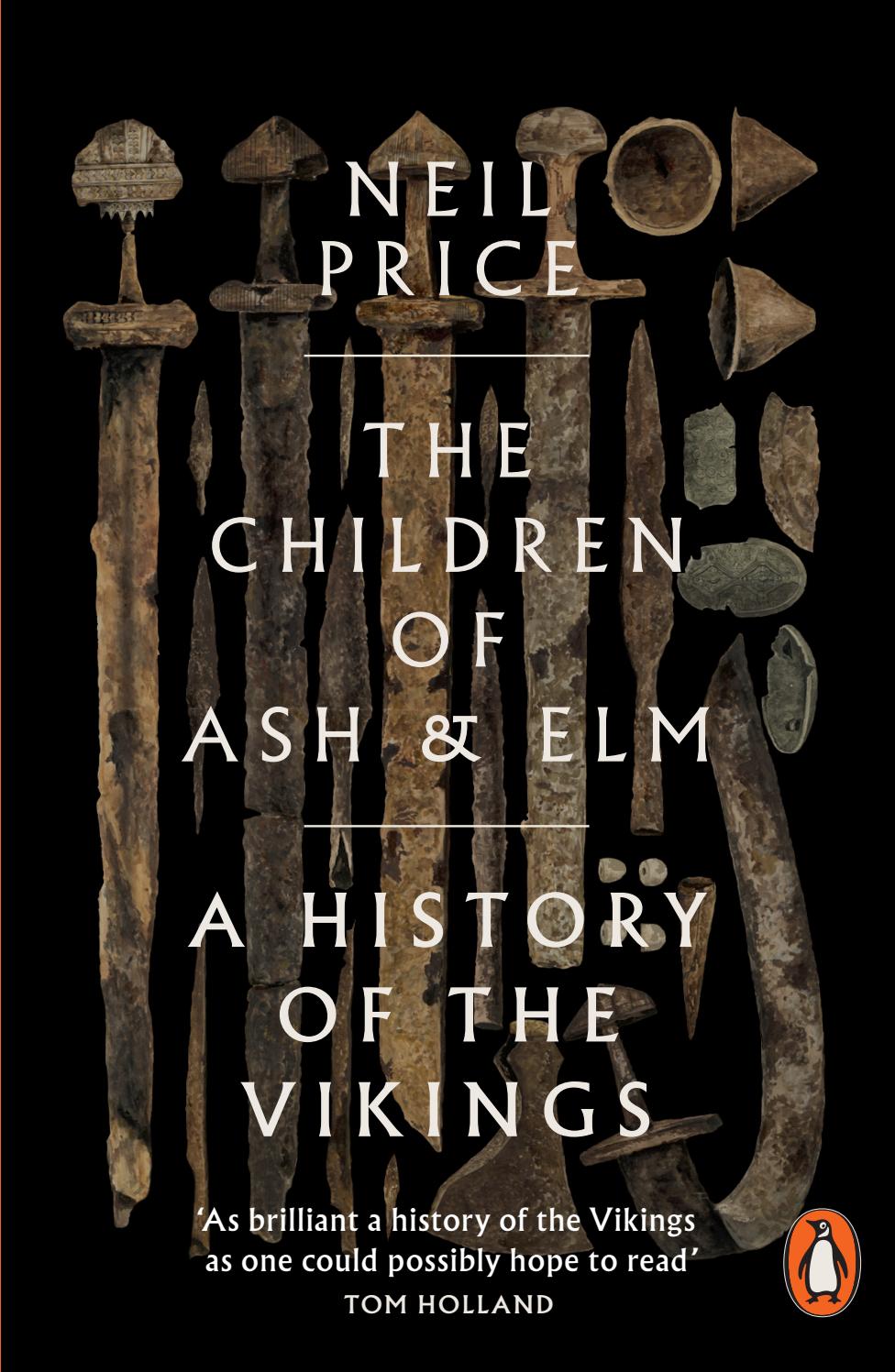


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Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

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'A wide-ranging and engaging account of the Viking Age. Never shirking from the cruelties enacted by the Vikings, Price has a knack for picking up on prosaic details to tell a bold story of a society dramatically different from our own' Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *History Today*, Books of the Year

'Price is adept at bringing this cosmopolitan and brutal world to life, interweaving many complicated strands of history with his own experience in the field along with poetic meditations on a people and time long since passed' Rhian Sasseen, *Paris Review*

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Neil Price holds the Chair of Archaeology at Uppsala University, Sweden, where he has also been appointed Distinguished Professor by the Swedish Research Council. A leading expert on the Viking Age, his fieldwork, teaching and research have taken him to more than forty countries. Neil is a Fellow of learned academies in Britain and Scandinavia, including Sweden's oldest, the Royal Society of Sciences; in 2017 it awarded him the Thuréus Prize for his lifetime achievements in Viking studies. His publications have appeared in sixteen languages, and he is a frequent consultant and contributor to television and film.

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The Children of Ash and Elm

A History of the Vikings



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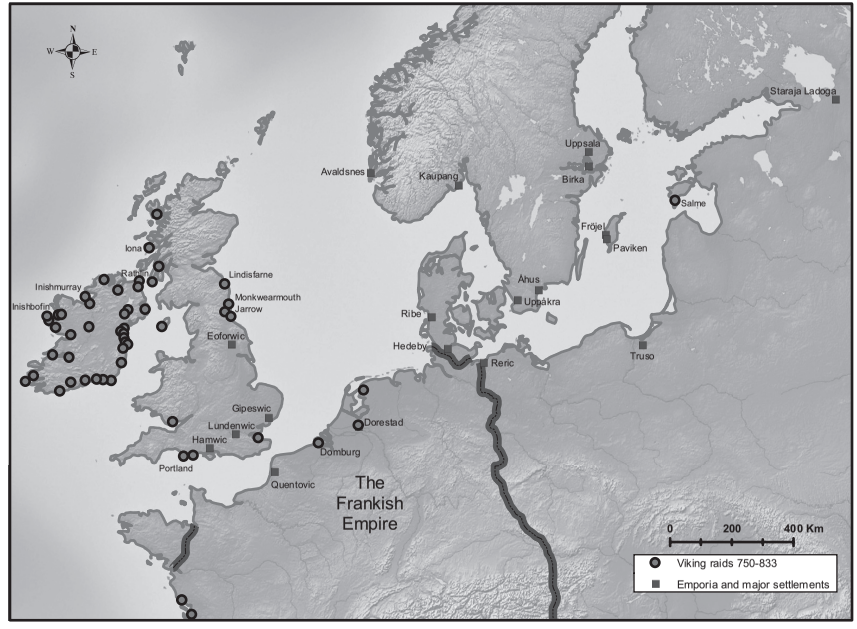


Map 1. Simplified political and ethnic geography of Europe c. 565 CE, showing the changes resulting from the preceding decades of crisis. The borders of the Eastern Roman Empire are depicted as they stood at the death of the Emperor Justinian. Map by Neil Price.



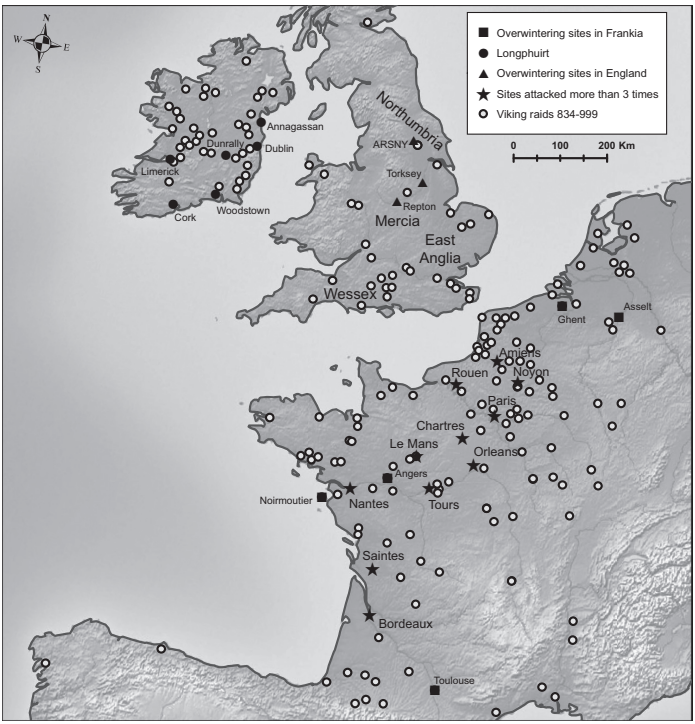
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Map 3. Places assaulted in the first phase of Viking raiding, 793–833 CE, with the European coastal emporia and the major settlements of Scandinavia. Map by Ben Raffield and Daniel Löwenborg.

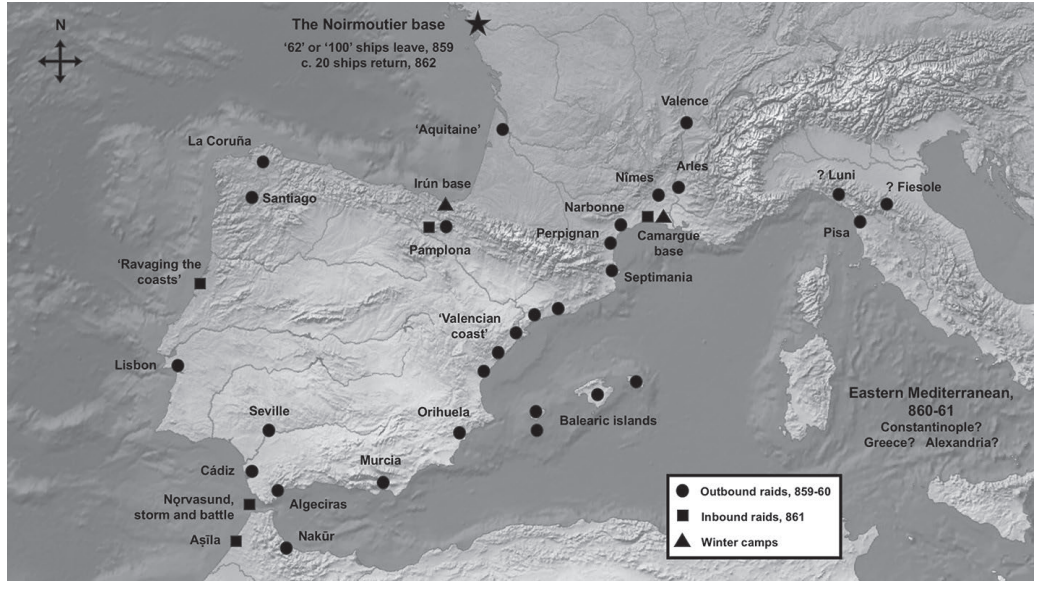
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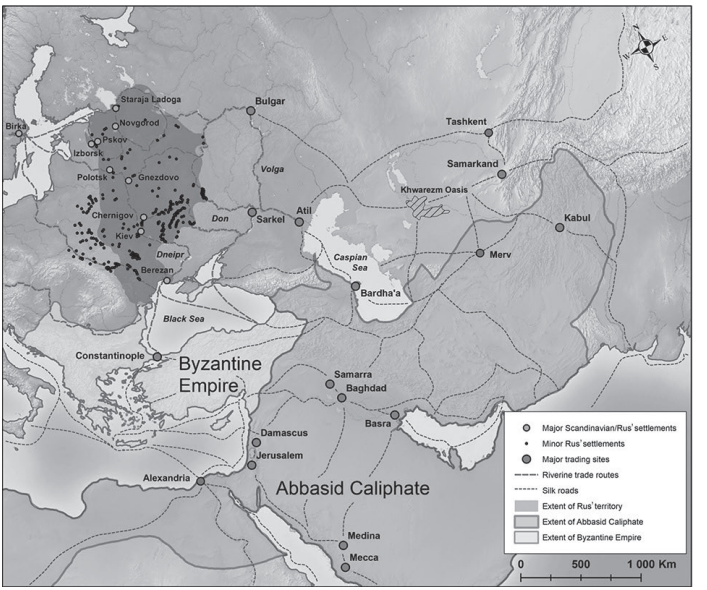
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Map 5. The great Mediterranean raid of c. 859–862, allegedly commanded by Björn Ironside and Hástein. The path of the Viking fleet can be traced southward from its base at Noirmoutier in the Loire estuary, around the coasts of Frankia and Iberia, and into the Middle Sea itself; three years later, a third of the ships made it home, having spent time somewhere in the eastern Mediterranean and fought the passage of the Gibraltar Straits (Nörvasund). Map by Neil Price.



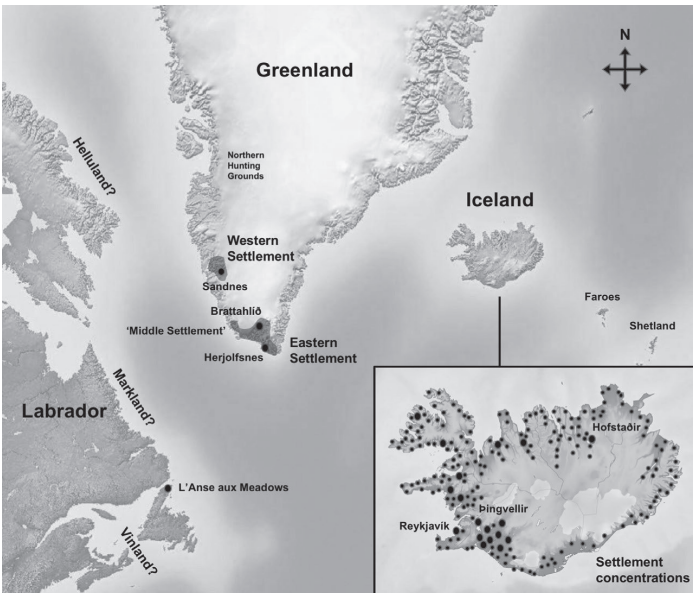
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Map 7. The later Viking Age in Scandinavia and the North Sea, from the reign of Harald Bluetooth (c. 960–987) to the 'empire' of Knut the Great (c. 1016–1035). The six known 'Trelleborg'-type circular fortresses are shown: (1) Aggersborg, (2) Fyrkat, (3) Nonnebakken, (4) Trelleborg, (5) Borgring, (6) Borgeby. Map by Ben Raffield and Daniel Löwenborg.

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Map 8. The Norse in the North Atlantic. Iceland was settled c. 870 and quickly attracted a large population. Just over a century later, Icelanders founded the Eastern and Western Settlements in Greenland, and in turn sailed to what is now eastern Canada. The precise location of the regions they named Helluland, Markland, and Vinland can only be estimated, and L'Anse aux Meadows on Newfoundland remains the only confirmed Norse settlement in North America. Map by Neil Price.

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A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

A great deal of this book concerns beings, places, and concepts whose names in use today ultimately derive either from the Old Norse language (actually a shorthand term for a complex array of dialects and linguistic branches from Iceland and Scandinavia, dating to the Middle Ages and earlier) or from the modern tongues of the Nordic countries. This can be a complex soundscape to navigate, and there is no simple way that it can be normalised in an English text while also doing justice to its original variety. I have opted for readability and convention over consistency, and the language has been simplified here in several ways.

Two Old Norse (and modern Icelandic) letters have been anglicised, except when quoting texts in the original and certain names: Þ/þ or thorn, as 'th' and pronounced as the first two letters of 'thought'; and Ð/ð or eth, spoken more softly as in 'breathe' but usually rendered as 'd'. In the same way, the Old Norse æ diphthong has been separated 'ae' and is pronounced approximately 'eye'.

Norse acute accents on the vowels have mostly been retained in names: long á is pronounced 'ow', and thus *há* (high) is spoken 'how'; é is 'ay', like the first letter in the alphabet; í is a long 'ee'; ó is a higher, more defined version of the regular sound, spoken like 'owe' and conveying emphasis; ú is long and deep, like the vowel in 'sure' said with a rolling Scots accent. In Old Norse, y is also

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a vowel, pronounced approximately like 'ew' as in the colloquial expression of disgust; the accented ý stretches it out.

In place-names and personal names, the modern Scandinavian letters å, ä/æ, and ö/ø have been used where appropriate, with the slight differences between Swedish and Danish/Norwegian. These are pronounced in English approximately as follows: å like 'oar'; ä/æ like 'air'; ö/ø like 'err'. The Swedish letter ö has been used for ǫ, the Old Norse o with ogonek.

Some academic works—including many of my own—use the Old Norse nominative for proper names, even when this is rendered grammatically problematic by the present-day English context. The most common example, also including some of the letters and accents mentioned above, is probably the name of the god Óðinn (pronounced 'Owe-thinn'). With some exceptions, this and other similar cases (such as his son Þórr) are anglicised here, thus 'Odin' and 'Thor'.

Quotations from Old Norse texts are mostly rendered in English without the original, although occasionally I have retained the medieval words as well, especially in verse. When properly recited in appropriate surroundings, Viking-Age poetry can taste like cold iron on the tongue, its complex rhyme schemes building upon one another like layers of frost—treacherous but beautiful. We gain something old and true in this language, even if only understood in translation, and for that reason I have included a selection here.

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PROLOGUE: DRIFTWOOD

The gods' footprints stretch out behind them in a meandering line, clear in the sands by the shore of the encircling ocean. Its waves crash and foam beside them, in their ears its roar. The beach is utterly unmarked by the passage of others because there are as yet no humans in this world.

It is three brothers we see walking: Odin—the most powerful and terrible of them all—and his siblings, Vili and Vé. They go by many names, which will become a common thing in their divine family of the Aesir.

Peaceful and still though it seems, everything around them has been built from blood, the earth and the heavens fashioned—literally—from the dismembered body of a murder victim. The universe as crime scene: it is an unsettling story, full of strangeness, violence, and contradictions, a tale whose truths must be felt rather than merely explained and understood. We shall explore it in time, but for now, in its aftermath, all is quiet. They are curious, these gods, always restlessly inquiring into the nature of the things they find in their shiny new creation. What is that*? And* this*? They are also lonely, in this place that as yet lacks spirit, sense, and colour.*

But now the gods are on the strand, and they have seen something by the water's edge.

Two great stumps of driftwood have washed up with the tide, the beach otherwise empty under the immensity of the sky. Odin and his

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brothers approach them, turning over the trunks in the sand with effort. And it is then that they understand what is inside, as a sculptor perceives the carving within the block of raw stone, waiting to be released. The three gods work their hands into the wood, moulding, planing, shaping it along the grain. A cloud of shavings and dust. They grin at each other, swept up by the joy of making. Slowly the things inside become visible, forming under the pressure of divine fingers. Here is an arm, and there a leg, and at last, the faces.

First, a man—the first man—and then a woman. The gods stare down at them. It is Odin who moves now, exhaling into their mouths, giving them life; they cough, start to breathe, still trapped inside the wood. It is Vé who opens their eyes and ears, sets their tongues in motion, smoothes their features; wild glances, a babble of noise. It is Vili who gifts them intelligence and movement; they shake themselves free of the stumps, flakes of bark falling.

Last of all, the gods give them names, their substance transformed into sound. The man is Askr*, the ash tree. The woman is* Embla*, the elm.*

The first people in the world look around them, astonished, listening to the silence and then filling it with speech, shouts, laughter. They point at the ocean, the sky, the forest, at more and more, naming them all, laughing again. They begin to run, away from the gods watching them, off along the sand, farther and farther into their new home until they are lost to sight. Perhaps they wave to Odin and the others, perhaps not, but they will see them again.

From this couple are descended all of humankind, down through the millennia to our own time.

The Vikings enjoy a popular recognition and interest shared by few other ancient cultures. More or less everyone has at least heard of them. Over just three centuries, from approximately 750 to 1050 CE, the peoples of Scandinavia transformed the northern world in ways that are still felt today. They changed the political and cultural map of Europe and shaped new configurations of trade, economy, settlement, and conflict that ultimately stretched from

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1. The Vikings and the Victorians, incarnate. An extraordinary drawing from 1895 by Lorenz Frølich, of the gods' feast as related in the Old Norse poem Lokasenna, 'Loki's Quarrel'. The Aesir gods appear as a cross between barbarian banqueters in the Classical mould and rather prim contemporary diners, while Loki plays drunk uncle, all in a Rococo room under what seems to be a chandelier. Image: in the public domain.

the eastern American seaboard to the Asian steppe. The Vikings are known today for a stereotype of maritime aggression—those famous longships, the plunder and pillage, the fiery drama of a 'Viking funeral'. Beyond the clichés there is some truth in this, but the Scandinavians also exported new ideas, technologies, beliefs, and practices to the lands they discovered and the peoples they encountered. In the process they were themselves altered, developing new ways of life across a vast diaspora. The many small-scale kingdoms of their homelands would eventually become the nations

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of Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, which are still with us, while the traditional beliefs of the North were gradually subordinated by Christianity. That initially alien faith would fundamentally change their view of the world, and the Scandinavian future.

In a literal sense, the Vikings are of course people of the past, dead and gone—but at the same time they inhabit a curiously haptic kind of prehistory, one that appears to return whatever pressure is applied to it. Many have been tempted to put their fingers on the scales of hindsight and imagined that the impulse to do so came not from themselves but through the revelation of hidden truths buried by time. Medieval monks and scholars reinvented their pagan ancestors either as nobly misguided forebears or as agents of the devil. In the manuscript illuminations of Romance literature, with a kind of Orientalist prejudice, they became Saracens, enemies of Christ depicted with turbans and scimitars. In Shakespeare's England, the Vikings were taken up as violent catalysts in the early story of the kingdom's greatness. Rediscovered during the Enlightenment as a sort of 'noble savage', the figure of the Viking was enthusiastically adopted by the nationalist Romantics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Searching for their own emerging identities, Victorian imperialists scoured Scandinavian literature looking for suitably assertive northern role models, expressing the manifest destiny of the Anglo-Saxons through their Nordic cousins. The logical end of that trajectory came a century later, when the Nazis appropriated the Vikings in pursuit of their racist fictions, elevating them as a spurious Aryan archetype; their modern successors still plague us today. Elements of the broad Pagan community now seek a spiritual alternative that draws inspiration from Viking religion, with Tolkienesque flavourings added to a cloudier Old Norse brew. All these and many more, including today's academics and the audiences for historical drama, have taken the fragmentary material and textual remains of the Vikings and recast them in moulds of their choosing. At times it can seem that the actual people have almost disappeared under the

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2. Where it all went wrong. A recruitment poster for the SS, advertising a rally in Nazi-occupied Norway in 1943. The political appropriation of the Vikings could not be more obvious. Image: in the public domain.

cumulative freight they have been made to bear. One recalls *Brideshead Revisited* and Anthony Blanche, "*Oh, la fatigue du Nord*".

What unites most of these perspectives is that they privilege the observer, looking in on the Vikings from the outside, and ignore how they themselves saw the world. This attitude has a long pedigree, and in fact dates back to the writings of the Vikings' victims, who can hardly be expected to be unbiased. Ironically, even the people with whom the Scandinavians came into contact (often at the point of a sword) were not always entirely sure whom they were really dealing with. To take a single example from the late ninth century, after a vicious war with an entire Viking army, King Alfred of Wessex in southern England could still entertain a

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non-combatant Norwegian merchant at his court, asking question after question: Where did they come from? What did they do? How did they live? The king was not alone in his uncertainty and curiosity.

Those same puzzles continued to be debated for the next thousand years, accelerating in the last two centuries or so with the growth of academic enquiry and scholarship. Here again, though, the focus has largely tended to be on what the Vikings did rather than on why they did it. There is a sense in which this viewpoint is looking through the wrong end of the historical telescope, defining (and often judging) a people solely by the consequences of their actions rather than the motivations behind them.

This book takes the opposite approach, working from the inside looking out. The emphasis here is very firmly on who the Vikings really were, what made them tick, how they thought and felt. Their dramatic expansion will not be ignored, of course, but its context, its origins, are at the core of what follows.

Where better to begin, then, than with the creation itself? The tale of the gods fashioning the first humans from stumps of wood, on the shores of the world ocean, has roots that extend very deeply into Norse mythology. For all the fearful confusion about their identity among those they encountered, in the Vikings' own minds there was never any doubt at all: they were the children of Ash, the children of Elm.

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INTRODUCTION: ANCESTORS AND INHERITORS

What does 'Viking' actually mean? Should it be used at all, and if so, how?

The Scandinavians of the eighth to eleventh centuries knew the word—*víkingr* in Old Norse when applied to a person—but they would not have recognised themselves or their times by that name. For them it would perhaps have meant something approximating to 'pirate', defining an occupation or an activity (and probably a relatively marginal one); it was certainly not an identity for an entire culture. Even then, the word was not necessarily negative or always associated with violence—these overtones would begin to accrete round it in the centuries after the Viking Age. Similarly, it did not refer exclusively to Scandinavians; it was also applied to Baltic raiders in general, and the word was even used in England. By the same token, the Vikings' targets were by no means only outside Scandinavia; maritime robbery with violence rarely respects such proprieties. Even as late as the eleventh century, a Swedish runestone could commemorate a man—one Assur, son of Jarl Hákan—"who kept the Viking watch", standing guard against incursions from the neighbours.

The exact derivation of the term is unknown, but the most widely accepted interpretation today builds on the Old Norse *vík*, a bay of the sea. Thus Vikings may originally have been 'bay-people',

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their ships waiting in concealment to strike at passing marine traffic. Another alternative links the term to the Viken region of south-western Norway, from which the earliest raiders were once believed to have come; this too may have some validity.

In the modern Nordic languages, *vikingar* or *vikinger* is still used only in the exact sense of seaborne raiders, while in English and other tongues it has come to serve for anyone who had, as one Cambridge scholar resignedly put it, "a nodding acquaintance with Scandinavia 'in those days'". There have been many attempts to get around the problem, with little success (such as the late historian who ranted for several pages about what he saw as his colleagues' terminological carelessness, only to content himself with 'Norsemen'—thereby excluding Swedes, Danes, and, indeed, women). Some scholars now use lowercase 'vikings' to mean the general populace, while reserving title case for their piratical acquaintances. In this book, big-V 'Vikings' is employed throughout but defined through context.

This is much more than semantic nitpicking. In speaking of a Viking Age at all, using a term that would have surprised the people supposedly labelled with it, there is a sense in which historians have created an unhelpful abstraction. Of course, the past has always been divided into conveniently manageable chunks of time, but when scholars argue about when the Viking Age 'started', this is not the same as debating, say, the origins of the Roman Empire, which was very far from a retrospective concept.

It is good to bear in mind that no other contemporary peoples ranged over the then-known Eurasian and North Atlantic world to the same degree as the Scandinavians. They travelled through the territories of some forty-odd present-day countries, in documented encounters with more than fifty cultures. Some scholars have tried to claim that in this the Vikings were in no way remarkable or significant in themselves, merely the regional manifestation of Continental mobility and general trends in the reorganisation of the post-Roman economy—essentially a kind of burgeoning

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early medieval European Union with some particularly aggressive negotiators in the north. It is true that raiding and maritime warfare undoubtedly existed around the Baltic and the North Sea for centuries (and probably millennia) before the time of the Vikings. However, there is no doubt that the flow, scale, and range of seaborne piracy gradually but dramatically increased from the 750s onwards, culminating in the full-blown military campaigns of the ninth and tenth centuries that would shatter the political structures of western Europe. At the same time, there were parallel and intertwined movements of colonisation, trade, and exploration, especially to the east. In short, the 'Viking Age', hindsight construct of researchers though it undoubtedly is, has genuine validity.

There have also been other attempts to write the Vikings out of history, ironically focussing on how they have been written into it. The idea is that this piece of the past was 'colonised' by the future and bent out of shape to suit its needs—essentially that the Vikings were creations of later peoples' imaginations. This makes little sense to me. Yes, nationalist Romanticism, Victorian imperialism, and their even darker European successors all certainly had an impact on how the Vikings were seen afterwards, but they actually say nothing at all about what really happened between the mid-eighth and eleventh centuries—only about how it was subsequently appropriated and sometimes weaponised (which, of course, should not be ignored).

With all this ambiguity and such a long background of sociopolitical abuse, it is therefore vital to be clear that the concept of the Viking Age has a testable, empirical reality that can be illuminated by close study. The three hundred years from about 750 CE onwards were above all else a period of social transformation so profound as to ultimately shape northern Europe for the next millennium—a process that in itself justifies the notion of a discrete Viking Age.

Synthesising all this is a daunting prospect. A narrative track, running chronologically, is necessary to understand the events of

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these three centuries in context, but there is no single strand to follow across the vast and varied arenas of the Viking diaspora. There have been longer books than this one written solely on Scandinavian interactions with what is now European Russia, to take just one example, and the same can be said of the rest of their world. Inevitably, something will be lost when using such a wide-angle lens. Readers seeking detailed discussion of Viking art, typologies of artefacts, ship-building methods, and much more have many well-illustrated, technical studies to choose from and can use the references at the back of this book as a point of entry. Similarly, if the Scandinavians encountered more than fifty cultures, even a thousand words on each would easily take half a book of dry description alone. While the bigger picture is always in the background as one walks with the Vikings, the most productive focus can be on simultaneities, on snapshots and brief visits in different times and places.

This approach opens up new possibilities but also acknowledges limits. In particular, the notion of Viking exceptionalism (which is not the same as difference) is problematic and, I believe, should be avoided where possible. To take an image that they would have liked, northern European folk tales often revolve around a search for someone's secret name (the fairy story of Rumpelstiltskin is an obvious example). The Vikings have left clues to theirs, the true self hidden beneath the surface. A strong sense of the numinous place courses through Norse poetry and even runic inscriptions, created by minds in tune with their environment. The same mind-set is visible in their material culture, in every available surface—including the human body—covered in interlaced designs, writhing patterns, animals, and other images that were imbued with meaning. Their world hummed with life, but its boundaries, both internal and external, were in many senses more permeable than ours, always and constantly connected by winding paths to the realms of the gods and other powers.

However, alongside the stories that unfold throughout this book, it is important not to lose sight of the absences, the things

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that are *not* known. Some of them are details; others are fundamental. The resulting gaps can seem curiously random. It is possible to fill these blank spaces but only through informed speculation (and history is nothing if not a suppositional discipline, sometimes akin to a sort of speculative fiction of the past).

Little is understood, for example, of how the Vikings measured time. Their music and songs are a mystery; here there is a potential starting point in the few surviving instruments, with tonal qualities that can be reconstructed, but what the Vikings did with them is another matter entirely. It is unclear where women were believed to go when they died. Why was so much silver buried in the ground and never recovered? These and other questions go on and on, and have vexed scholars for centuries. Some questions are more tentative, and their answers may be unknowable. But they are still worth asking. If you truly believed—in fact, *knew*—that the man living up the valley could turn into a wolf under certain circumstances, what was it like to be his neighbour? What was it like to be married to him?

We will probably never speak the Vikings' secret name, but if we are open to their voices, to their concerns and ideas—in a word, to their minds—I believe it is possible not only to truly explore these ancient lives, but to write a new story of how we became who we are. This, then, is the Viking Age of the children of Ash and Elm: a set of vantage points from which to look out over people, place, and time, inevitably finite but also in constant motion. Of course, it is also in a sense *my* Viking Age, informed by more than thirty years of research but—as with the work of any professional student of the past—equally constrained by my own biases and preconceptions.

But how to get there? In practical terms, what sources of evidence can be used to get closer to the Vikings?

Like many fields of scholarship, Viking studies is occasionally convulsed by interdisciplinary squabbles, especially between those

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who work with texts and their archaeological colleagues who approach the past through things and places—an argument that never really settles, but just keeps rumbling along like the irregular tremors on a fault line. The production of text is, of course, also a deeply material act—the cutting of signs into stone or wood, or painting them with a quill onto vellum—a process that requires direction, effort, resources, preparation, all naturally with purpose and social context beyond simple communication. Some of the very rarest sources, such as the great epic poem *Beowulf*, for example, exist in only a single manuscript; they are, quite literally, artefacts.

Students of the Vikings tend to specialise in one particular bandwidth of signals from the late first millennium, but they need to be conversant with many more, often stretching far later in time: archaeology, saga scholarship, philology, runology, the history of religions—the list goes on, now with increasing contributions from the natural and environmental sciences, including genomics. A knowledge of the modern Scandinavian languages is essential, as is at least a working familiarity with Old Norse and Latin.

As an archaeologist myself, it is hardly surprising that much of this book is based on the results of excavations and fieldwork. Whether concerned with objects, buildings, burials, or samples for scientific analysis of varying kinds, all this essentially relates to *things*—or to use the academic term, 'material culture', which captures it quite well.

Some of these things, especially the contents of graves, have survived because the people of the time made deliberate arrangements for their disposal: put simply, they have been found because they were intentionally left where they were placed. In burials it is possible to directly encounter the Vikings themselves, in the form of their skeletal or cremated remains. However, for the most part, what archaeological studies uncover are fragments, broken and badly preserved, that have survived by chance through loss, abandonment, discard, or decay. These include the occupation layers of

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settlements with all the bits and pieces that found their way into the ground over the years that people lived there: smashed pottery, food waste, things that were dropped or else left behind when it was finally time to move on. Archaeologists also find traces of the buildings themselves, preserved as dark outlines in the soil where timbers have rotted away or as the holes that once held posts supporting roofs and walls. On rare occasions there are stones from foundation sills, or the trenches where they had lain before somebody took them away for recycling.

Archaeology is a highly interpretive undertaking, a constant balancing of probabilities and alternatives. One can speculate with varying degrees of confidence, but it is not always possible to be sure. An essential prerequisite for a good researcher is the willingness to be wrong, the invitation of constructive critique. Nevertheless, while conclusions must be framed carefully, it is pointless to caveat everything to oblivion, to believe that it is impossible to really know anything about the past. In this, archaeologists are aided by an impressive theoretical apparatus, one that is always evolving and contentious and quite often impenetrable from outside, but vital nonetheless. It can be positively astonishing, and uplifting, to compare our understanding of the Viking-Age (and global) past even fifty years ago with what we know now. The Vikings I studied in college in the 1980s were quite different from the people I teach undergraduates about today, and the same will certainly be true of their students in turn. This is how it should be.

There are other issues too. Common to most archaeological sites is the question of preservation, which largely depends on the local soil types and their relative acidity. Stone is the material most impervious to damage, although it may well have become chipped or eroded if exposed to the elements over a long period of time. Metal and ceramics are both quite likely to have survived (albeit corroded or otherwise degraded), while bone is only variably preserved. Rarest of all are the organics—things made of textile, leather, wood, and the like—which have almost always disappeared

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except when the soil is waterlogged or else in other ways excludes oxygen.

This all applies to things in the ground, but archaeologists also record the visible landscape—most obviously for the Viking Age in the form of earthworks, fortifications, or burial mounds but also including standing stone monuments, field boundaries in the form of ditches or drystone walls, and so on. The topography itself may have changed, as rivers have altered course, shorelines have risen or fallen, wetlands been reclaimed, and in rare cases where natural events such as volcanic eruptions have effected more drastic impacts—but the evidence is there. As landscapes can be 'read', so can what lies hidden beneath them, using non-destructive reconnaissance techniques such as georadar and a variety of electromagnetic methods that can penetrate the soil to reveal buried features, trenches, postholes, and hearths.

As we combine excavation, field survey, and geophysical prospection, the wider arena of Viking-Age settlements can be pieced together, down to the minutiae of people's lives. This can reveal how they lived, what they wore and ate; it can show the things they made and used. Archaeologists can reconstruct what their homes and farms were like, how people made a living and sustained themselves, and can gain an idea of their economies. One can also paint a sketchy picture of family structure and social hierarchies—an approximation of political systems and the way in which power may have been manifested. Archaeology can furthermore recover ritual activities, both for the living and the dead, that can open windows into the mind and the landscapes of religion. Not least, all this can also illustrate how these peoples of the Viking Age interacted with each other, both within the huge territory of what is now Scandinavia and also far beyond.

Over the past half-century, archaeological science has dramatically altered our understanding of the past, in the Viking Age no less than for other time periods. The analysis of strontium and oxygen isotopes in human teeth and bones can locate the places where

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people spent their formative years, tell us whether they moved around, and also reveal what they ate. Materials science can identify objects and substances so badly preserved that previously their nature could only be guessed at. Scientific analysis can trace the origin of the metals, clays, and minerals used in manufacturing; the species and habitats of the animals whose fur, bones, and ivory were employed as raw materials; and exact dates from the growth rings of trees, sometimes giving the year and even season of an event. Archaeologists can excavate a sunken ship in Denmark and determine that it was built in Ireland. Analysis of ancient DNA can make reliable sex determinations of the dead, tease out their family relationships, and even reveal the colour of their eyes and hair; it also makes possible the wider tracking of migrations and larger demographic change. Environmental studies can recreate the flora of settlements and landscapes, determine whether an area was cultivated or under forest and what crops were grown, and provide a scale for alterations in land use over time.

No single specialist can master all these fields, but the combined teamwork of archaeologists in the field, laboratory, and library now has greater potential for recovering the lives of past peoples than ever before.

But the evidence for the Viking Age relies on more than this material culture and the other natural and physical traces of the time, although the data is varied and always growing. What about written sources? The cultures of Scandinavia at this time were predominantly oral in that they did not make literary or documentary records—the Vikings never wrote their own histories. This is not the same as being illiterate; the use of runic script was widespread in the North from its beginnings in Roman times to a flowering of inscriptions in the Viking Age itself. Nonetheless, this material is limited. There are thousands of brief memorials and epitaphs carved in stone, sometimes with a few lines of poetry, and also rare examples of everyday notes and labels scratched into slivers of

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wood. But there are no lengthier texts from inside the Viking-Age societies of the North.

Instead, their culture is what is called protohistoric, in that its 'history' comes from what some of their foreign contemporaries wrote about them. This, however, presents problems that are in many ways at the core of all the modern stereotypes of the Vikings, for the obvious reason that most sources of this kind were authored by people on the sharp end of their aggression. The bulk of these records take the form of court annals, usually compiled in Latin, for the ruling dynasties of western Europe. A number of different texts, often named after the monasteries where they were produced or kept, cover the Frankish and Ottonian (German) Empires on the Continent, and variant Old English manuscripts of the so-called *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* cover England. There are counterparts from the Arab world, especially the Caliphate of Córdoba in Andalucía, and from the Byzantine Empire that ruled from Constantinople, to name but a few.

To these can be added the drier legal documentation of land grants and charters, some of which preserve incidental information of the Vikings' activities, such as references to the sites of their former defensive works or camps. There is also the law itself—the early medieval regional legislation written down a century or more after the time of the Vikings but often encoding a variety of useful information that is clearly very old. The same cultural milieu also produced a smaller number of more personal texts written by monks and priests, travellers, diplomats and merchants, spies, poets, and others who encountered the Vikings at home or abroad.

All these kinds of documents will be taken up in the following chapters, but it is important to understand two of their qualities above all else. First, although they originate in contemporary and sometimes eyewitness accounts, in their present form they were almost all compiled, edited, or transcribed at a later date, and critical questions must be asked of that context. Second, while they often give the appearance of straightforward reportage, they are

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always written with a purpose—frequently outright propaganda, not only showing their authors in a favourable light that casts shade on the Vikings but also to the disadvantage of other neighbouring kingdoms or peoples. In short, they must be treated with care.

Besides the broadly contemporary written sources, there are perhaps the most famous tales of all: the extraordinary body of Icelandic texts that has given the North its own literary tradition. For many people, the Vikings are so synonymous with 'the sagas' that they are surprised to discover that, in fact, these vivid narratives date from centuries after the events they claim to describe. For anyone wanting to understand more about the Viking Age, coming to grips with these texts is a complex matter.

Saga simply means 'story', literally 'what is said', both in Old Norse and in the modern Scandinavian languages. As with any storytelling tradition, there are numerous narrative styles and genres, composed at different times and places and for a wide variety of purposes. The first Old Norse sagas were written down in Iceland during the late 1100s, more than a hundred years after the nominal end of the Viking Age. The tradition continued for centuries thereafter, although with a creative floruit in the 1200s, and new sagas were still being composed beyond the Reformation and into early modern times. The deceptively simple term thus embraces a range of texts from formal histories to bedtime stories for listeners around the hearth, with many stops along the way.

The two genres of saga-writing most often cited in connection with the Vikings are the sagas of Icelanders, also known as the family sagas, and the so-called *fornaldarsögur*—literally 'stories of ancient times' but more often referred to as the legendary sagas. Both genres are actively concerned with the Viking Age, but in different ways and with varying degrees of reliability, although the question of their 'accuracy' depends on one's approach to these medieval texts.

The sagas of Icelanders usually focus on individual families of settlers in that young North Atlantic country, and frequently on

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a smaller region such as a valley or district. The colonists' genealogical heritage is traced in detail, not only back to the settlement of Iceland but to their earlier ancestry in Scandinavia. The sagas vividly follow these people's lives and adventures, sometimes over decades, and in the process sketch a compellingly convincing picture of Iceland at the time: a unique political experiment, a republic of farmers in an age of kings. Feud and revenge are common themes, with neighbourly quarrels escalating to theft and murder, as competing lawsuits attempt to stem the tide of intergenerational violence that usually follows. These themes are interwoven with affairs of love and war, and the full range of human emotions in tightly wrapped rural communities with international contacts. Beneath the skin of most of the tales beats a steady pulse of magical contacts with the Other World, of sorcery and seers, of spirits and supernatural beings, although rarely the gods in any direct sense. From the tenth century onwards (according to the sagas' internal chronologies), such activities are increasingly contrasted, and sometimes conflicted, with the growing influence of the 'White Christ', their name for the figure of Jesus. All these events are often played out against uneasy tensions with the royal families of Norway, who were watching Iceland with territorial envy, and the ever-present backdrop of political events in a wider world.

As their name implies, the legendary sagas include elements common to tales of the fantastic—heroes battling monsters, the curses of evil witches, and so on—but often inserted into stories that nonetheless bear some connection to known history. In particular, the legendary sagas sometimes include narratives that ostensibly concern events long *before* the Viking Age, stretching back to the time of the great migrations when the post-Roman map of Europe was violently transformed. Figures such as the Hun warlord Attila appear (rather approvingly), along with fifth- and sixth-century kings and military leaders struggling for dominance. Unlike the family sagas, in these stories Iceland is not always the

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primary focus, and they span the European world with extensions far into the East.

There are other, more contemporary forms that deal with the time of the saga-writers themselves, including the *Sturlunga saga*, a collection relating the political fortunes of the eponymous family; the Bishops' sagas; several flavours of Christian morality tales; and more. Medieval Iceland was far from isolated, and there are also sagas that clearly bear influences of the European fashion for chivalric Romance, with stories of dashing knights rescuing princesses from dragons and the like. Even the popular epic of the Trojan War was recast in an Old Norse version, *Ektors saga*, which revealingly focusses on the doomed Homeric hero rather than on his assassin, Achilles—perhaps an insight into Scandinavian notions of martial honour.

There is also another important category of Old Norse text, namely poetry. This too comes in several different varieties, sometimes composed as free-standing verses but more often as commemorations of events or, most of all, as praise poems. Poetry was also used as a medium for the storage and communication of mythological lore and as a repository of heroic tales.

Unlike the prose texts of the medieval sagas, it is generally agreed that the Old Norse poetic corpus may be considerably older and could actually preserve the voices of the Viking Age. This is because of the extremely complex structure and rhyme schemes of Norse poetry, which mean that if the verses are to function at all they need to be remembered and repeated largely intact. Poetic ability was a very highly prized quality in the Viking Age, an admirable skill for a well-rounded person to master, and especially for anyone aspiring to leadership. This too has contributed to the poetry's survival. Individual memory—the legacy left by a good name after one's death—was crucial, and was deliberately fostered by the upper strata of society who either composed verses in their own honour or else acted as patrons to those who could do it for them. These professional poets were the famous skalds, and it must be

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said that they did their job: the subjects of their elegant, commissioned boasting are still being talked about a thousand years later.

There are three main sources of Old Norse poems, one of which is the saga corpus itself, which occasionally preserved them as the reported speech of the protagonists. Much of the rest has survived in two medieval Icelandic works known as *Eddas.* The word's derivation and meaning are uncertain—many explanations have been proposed—but either by definition or metaphorical allusion it seems to refer to the production of poetry.

One of them, known as the *Prose Edda*, is a discrete work by the scholar, historian, and politician Snorri Sturluson, written sometime around the second or third decade of the thirteenth century and preserved in several later manuscripts. Snorri's *Edda* is literally a handbook for poets, a manual of style divided into three sections with a prologue, the whole text covering genre and metre, with discourses on the subject matter appropriate to different occasions and purposes. Containing a huge wealth of information as prose asides, the key fact is that Snorri mainly makes his points through quoted example. The *Prose Edda* thus in a sense belies its name, in that its pages are filled with poems, cited whole or as fragments and often with the authors' names. Some of the material is known from other sources, but much of it comes only from Snorri. The text is especially rich in skaldic verse, allusions to mythology and the traditional religion, numerous fragments of tales, and lists of alternative poetic terms for a wide range of things, including supernatural entities (such as the many names of Odin, for example). Snorri's *Edda* is one of the most remarkable literary documents of the Middle Ages.

Alongside this handbook is another medieval work known as the *Poetic Edda*, although (as for Snorri's book) this is a modern title. Largely preserved in two manuscripts with variations between them, alongside later copies, this is a wide-ranging collection of anonymous verses with mythological and heroic themes. Little is known of how they came to be collated in this way, by whom, or

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why. It has even been speculated that the main manuscript (the so-called Codex Regius, kept in Reykjavík) was the work of a collector of curiosities, which might explain why it is a physically small, scrappy little book made of reused parchment—hardly the stuff of prestigious record. Who knows what made a thirteenth-century Icelandic Christian so carefully preserve the core tales of her or his pagan past, but it is fortunate that they did. The poems are ambiguous, elusive, and hard to interpret, and they speak obliquely of powerful sacred knowledge for the already initiated. They are also difficult to date, although the earliest are thought to have been composed towards the end of the Viking Age, building on more ancient models. For all its complexity and source-critical problems, the *Poetic Edda* is *the* primary foundation for what is known of Norse mythology, cosmology, the tales of the gods and goddesses, and the great heroic lays of the North. Fragments of 'Eddic' poems also appear in Snorri's writings and occasionally in sagas, making a corpus of some forty works altogether.

With the exception of runic inscriptions, all the surviving Old Norse texts date to the centuries *after* the time of the Vikings, and were written down by Christians. They are, therefore, separated from the pagan Viking Age they claim to describe by significant barriers of time, culture, and ideological perspective. Many of the sagas are also focussed on Iceland, either by narrative locale and/or production, thus introducing a geographical bias into what must originally have been a much wider, pan-Scandinavian world of stories. Furthermore, each text was unique and written for specific reasons, not all of them immediately obvious to a modern reader. Even to this, one must add the vagaries of preservation: texts have become corrupted through faulty copying over time (we almost never have the 'original' manuscripts); passages have been lost, edited and changed, or simply censored; and, of course, the matter of a work's survival at all is never assured. Sometimes the fragmentary nature of a text is obvious, as well as how and why. On occasion the names of sagas that have not survived are known,

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along with brief summaries of their contents. In many cases it is impossible to know what has been lost.

Before approaching the sagas, or indeed any other works of Old Norse prose and poetry, it is necessary to answer a deceptively simple question: what do you want to do with them? For many studying a saga text, whether from the perspective of literary or material research, there is often (as Tolkien put it with regard to *Beowulf*) "disappointment at the discovery that it was itself and not something that the scholar would have liked better". As the name implies, the sagas were stories first and foremost, meant to be told aloud, but for their intended hearers they also had a context. Viking lives were structured around relationships, not just within families but between them, and extending much further across society in webs of mutual dependence. The sagas anchored people in time and gave them a link to the past—to what Tolkien again called "that sense of perspective, of antiquity with a greater and yet darker antiquity behind".

This perception has not disappeared. Part of the family sagas' dislocating effect on a modern audience is the way they *feel* so real, as if they somehow let the reader experience what it meant to be alive in that alien world, in all its laconic drama and heightened sense of things. In Iceland, their homeland, the sagas are even now entirely living works, familiar to all. Everyone can (and should!) enjoy these tales as the true masterpieces of world literature they undoubtedly are—but it is when one wishes to go beyond that, to 'use' them in some way, that more fundamental issues arise. The most basic question of all is one of focus: are we interested in the actual, real, lived Viking Age that the sagas have as their theme, or do we want to know how this ancient experience was mediated and appropriated in the medieval environment of the sagas' composition and social context? These are utterly different questions.

A reasonable first step must be to ask whether it is even possible to perceive genuine Viking-Age lives under the medieval textual

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patina, or if they were present to begin with. It is worth considering what a fully negative answer would mean. Even the most sceptical of literary researchers, those who generally reject the Old Norse texts as viable sources (however remote) for the actual Viking Age, do not always go on to confront the question this viewpoint requires: why, in that case, would medieval Icelanders have created—over several centuries—the most remarkably detailed, comprehensive, and consistent corpus of historical fiction in the world? While some have argued for Christian allegories in the sagas—the Odinnic warrior-poet Egil Skalla-Grímsson as an avatar of St. Paul, for example—why the elaboration of such a device when the Norse were perfectly capable of assimilating the biblical stories directly? If the intention was retrospectively to link Christian virtues with ancestors who could still be admired because they could not have been expected to know better, how does this explain a genre of storytelling that at its moral core promotes a pagan view of life utterly at odds with the prevailing norms of medieval thought? Far beyond the hazy golden age of an *Iliad* or the commissioned foundation myths of an *Aeneid*, these are entire cycles of tales that deal in detail with the doomed nobility of people from whom the Church of the saga-writers' times would have recoiled.

This book rejects that viewpoint as far as the Old Norse texts are concerned, and attempts a clear-eyed but not uncritical journey along the other path—the one we hope will lead us to the world of the Vikings themselves; we will not linger very long in its later, medieval shadow. Nevertheless, the obstacles in reading the sources in this way are considerable. Broadly speaking, medieval writings of all kinds can almost *never* be read as straight-up, trustworthy, and reliable reportage of what they claim to describe. There is always an agenda of some description, although the degree to which this is true is individual to each text, and always debatable. The sagas and other textual products of the Old Norse mind are marvellous indeed but must be interpreted with an abundance of

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caution; we must always be aware of the gaps (sometimes more like chasms) in the knowledge they can impart.

The sources provide terms of reference, but before proceeding it is necessary to set down some terms and conditions—of social context, intellectual responsibility, and ethics. Just as anyone's experiences of living in the present are always subjective, the same is true for history and its study. The Vikings could easily serve as exhibit A.

Over the centuries, a great many people have eagerly pressed the Vikings into (im)moral service, and others continue to do so. However, this intensity of interest also reveals that their ancient lives still speak to us today. I strongly believe that any meaningful twenty-first-century engagement with the Vikings must acknowledge the often deeply problematic ways in which their memory is activated in the present. Viking scholars will recognise the feeling of yet another piece of fact-resistant nonsense surfacing in public or private discourse, and it is therefore important to be unequivocally clear here at the start.

The Viking world this book explores was a strongly multicultural and multi-ethnic place, with all this implies in terms of population movement, interaction (in every sense of the word, including the most intimate), and the relative tolerance required. This extended far back into Northern prehistory. There was never any such thing as a 'pure Nordic' bloodline, and the people of the time would probably have been baffled by the very notion. We use 'Vikings' as a consciously problematic label for the majority population of Scandinavia, but they also shared their immediate world with others—in particular, the semi-nomadic Sámi people. Their respective settlement histories stretch so deeply into the Stone Age past as to make any modern discussion of 'who came first' absurd. Scandinavia had also welcomed immigrants for millennia before the Viking Age, and there is no doubt that a stroll through the market centres and trading places of the time would have been a vibrantly cosmopolitan experience.

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The Vikings cannot be reduced to a template, but if abstract concepts can describe their impact upon and interactions with the world around them, then one should look to curiosity, creativity, the complexity and sophistication of their mental landscapes, and, yes, their openness to new experiences and ideas. To seriously engage with the Vikings and their time is to embrace all these, and absolutely not to flatten them with stereotypes. They were as individually varied as *every* reader of this book. At the same time, no one should look away from what we would see as their less palatable sides, particularly the aggression that, in part, fuelled their movement into the wider world—beyond the clichés of 'Viking raiders', this aspect of the early medieval Scandinavian cultures was very real. They were warlike people in conflicted times, and their ideologies were also to a marked degree underpinned by the supernatural empowerment of violence. This could take extreme forms, manifested in such horrors as ritual rape, wholesale slaughter and enslavement, and human sacrifice. We should not read the Vikings backwards from our own time, but anyone who regards them in a 'heroic' light needs to think again.

At the core of any modern relationship with the Vikings must be a commitment to clarity. To observe that these Northern peoples really did bend the arc of history is neither to approve nor condemn, but simply to acknowledge an ancient reality with legacies still perceptible today.

Conventional studies of the Vikings tend to be organised regionally, preserving the artificial notions of 'western' and 'eastern' arenas of activity that are actually just scholarly legacies of the Cold War, with its more-or-less impermeable barrier stretching across Europe. Thus one is usually guided sequentially through the British Isles, the Continent, and the North Atlantic from the first raids to the Battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066, followed by a separate chronological tour of the East over the same period. Along the way in works of that kind, one may also find discrete themes neatly packaged (such as chapter 4, "Religion").

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This book attempts something different, not only in terms of promoting the Vikings' worldview but also by emphasising that it was *the same people* traversing that great map of cultures and encounters—no Iron Curtain for them. In addition, their lives must be seen as a seamless whole, blending 'religion', politics, gender, subsistence, and all other aspects of existence into a general perception of reality itself—quite simply the way things seemed to them to be. What, for some, is 'background', building up to what the Vikings accomplished out in the world, is here the point itself.

The text is in three main sections, following an approximately chronological track but acknowledging contemporaneity as well as sequence.

The new home in which Ash and Elm awakened was called *Miðgarðr*, or Midgard, literally the 'Middle Place' (the inspiration, by the way, for Tolkien's Middle Earth). This, of course, is our world too, though the Vikings saw it rather differently. Its geographical limits do not seem to have been defined by any means other than experience and travel. The first part explores this realm through the Vikings' sense of self, and of their environment, and begins by delineating the contours of this landscape both on the ground and inside their heads. It explores their unique understandings of personhood, gender, and the place of the individual in the many dimensions of the cosmos. This also involves meeting the other beings with whom the Vikings shared these spaces.

The Scandinavian experience is traced from the wane of the Western Roman Empire and its interactions with the Germanic tribes beyond its borders, through the turbulent years of the fifth and sixth centuries to the new order that was built on the remains of the old. The social arena of the early North is described here: the material culture of everyday life, the settled landscape, and the overarching structures of politics, power, ritual, belief, law, and war. The borders between the living and the dead are explored, alongside the human relationships with the invisible population

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around them. The timeline here takes us up to the ninth century—roughly the middle of the Viking Age as conventionally reckoned.

The second part goes back to the early 700s, but follows a different path to seek the major sociopolitical developments and demographic factors that slowly combined to trigger the Viking phenomenon itself. This was the time of the raids and their gradual escalation from isolated attacks to invasions of conquest, in the ever-present context of expanding trade networks. The maritime culture of Scandinavia, the rise of the sea-kings, and the development of uniquely mobile pirate polities are the focus here. The beginnings of the diaspora can be traced in all directions: along the eastern rivers of silver to Byzantium and the Caliphate of the Arabs, creating a new identity in the warrior-traders known as the Rus'; west into the British Isles; south into the Continental empires and the Mediterranean; and through the opening up of the North Atlantic. This section follows these events to the start of the tenth century in a series of parallel, simultaneous narratives.

Part three moves the story to the mid-eleventh century, as the Viking phenomenon diversified across the northern world. Its consequences included an urban revolution in the Scandinavian economies and the reorganisation of the countryside, paralleled by the consolidation of royal power and the rising influence of a new faith. Abroad, competing Viking power bases and kingdoms were established in Frankia, England, Ireland, and the Scottish Isles. The flowering of the Icelandic republic led to westward voyages to Greenland, and the European landfall in North America. In the East, the Rus' state expanded ever further. By 1050 or so, the lines of modern Norway, Denmark, and eventually Sweden, too, were already clear, the Scandinavian peoples beginning to take their place on the stage of Christian Europe.

The Viking Age did not 'end' with particular events in specific times or places any more than it 'began' with them. Instead, it became something else with another shift in perspective, with new points of view as the Scandinavians moved into their many

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different futures. This book started with driftwood on a beach as the first human couple stepped onto the sand, the beginning of us all. At its close is the final battle and the end of the cosmos, the Nordic apocalypse—the Ragnarök. Wolves will swallow the sun and moon, the white-hot stars will sink into the sea and shroud the world in steam, the powers of the night will pour through a hole in the sky, and the gods will march to war for the last time.

But there is a long way to go before then, and the path takes many turns. It begins at the trunk of a tree.

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THE MAKING OF MIDGARD

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THE HOME OF THEIR SHAPES

Taken at face value, the world of the Vikings appeared much the same as that of everyone around them: individuals, looking roughly like you and me but in different clothes, going about their business and moving through landscapes and settlements that—albeit rustic-looking—would still be intelligible all these centuries later. But that is all it was, surface, a screen masking something very different, very old, and very odd.

Any attempt to understand the Vikings must first delve beneath that deceptive exterior to get inside their minds, even inside their bodies. What is found there, and its implications, provides the first key to truly seeing the world through their eyes.

The Vikings were not alone, but very much shared their world with a multitude of 'Others'—not just other humans, but other things altogether. The most obvious were the gods, and the plural form in itself set them apart from the monotheistic cultures of the great Continent to the south. They were also familiar with those divinities' servants (some of them utterly terrifying) and a whole host of other beings, spirits, and creatures that have survived under the comforting label of 'folklore' but at the time were very real.

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This question of reality is important because the Vikings did not *believe* in these things any more than someone today 'believes in' the sea. Instead they *knew* about them: all this was as much a natural part of the world as trees and rocks. That these beings could not be seen need not have been significant.

This shadowy population beside whom the Vikings walked also spanned more worlds than one, and here is another difference: the Scandinavians were situated at the centre of many realms of existence—far beyond the familiar binaries of 'good' and 'bad' afterlives found in many religions. In the Viking mind, these worlds were all other places for other inhabitants, but ordered and connected in a manner that made them accessible if you knew the right paths to take.

At the most fundamental level of all, inside every Viking-Age person was not just some abstract 'soul' (if that is to your spiritual taste) but several separate and even independent beings. Each one was a component of the whole individual.

Taking the Vikings 'at face value', then, would have been a big mistake, though one made by many of their contemporaries. A few, especially Christians, seem to have realised exactly who and what the Vikings were, and usually recoiled from the knowledge. But there is no need to do so today. By looking at the Vikings with open eyes and open minds, it is possible to enter their world.

There is no fully comprehensible geography of the Norse cosmos, nothing that really makes coherent sense in the poems and stories. This may be a product of the tales' long and rough journey down to us over the centuries, but equally it may reflect a lack of clarity or even concern at the time. We should not read too much into this because, after all (taking just one religious example), how many of even the most devout Christian faithful today can sketch an accurate map of the afterlife? It is also important to understand that the Norse had never heard of 'the Norse myths'. The collections

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now conveniently packaged under that name in our bookshops are the syntheses of far later times, compiled after their fossilisation as text by people who were not entirely sympathetic to what they contained. These are very different from the lively, organic world of oral stories that changed in the telling and probably also varied considerably across the valleys, plains, mountains, and waterways of Scandinavia.

The names and natures of the worlds, and their beginnings, are described in a number of mythological texts collected in the *Poetic Edda*, as well as in longer narrative form by Snorri in his prose handbook. His information is particularly difficult to assess precisely because it *is* so detailed, so rich. Why should this canny Christian politician, acutely aware of his place in the world, take such pains to record the intricacies of a dead religion that was anathema to the Church whose interests he upheld? The answer perhaps lies in the fact that the spiritual themes in the skaldic poems he cites were almost all marshalled in a single cause: the praise of kings and the recording of their deeds. If those mythological allusions and metaphors were not actively maintained, there would be no possibility of properly understanding and perpetuating the heroic royal histories. This may be why Snorri wrote his *Edda*—to activate that resource in the service of memory harnessed for political ends. Fortunately for Viking scholars, Snorri's loyalty to the idea of Scandinavian monarchy gifted us a trove of knowledge of these other worlds. Always indirectly, in the course of questions and answers or as knowledge grudgingly imparted, a fragmentary picture emerges—but it is, barely, enough.

At the centre of it all was a tree, *the* Tree, that spanned all the worlds and joined them together. A great ash, its name was Yggdrasill, literally the 'Steed of the Terrible One'. The latter was one of the many names for Odin and a hint of the tree's wider properties, for it did not just connect the realms but also served as a road between the realms for those who knew how to ride it. That the first man was made of the same substance may not have

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been coincidence, implying some subtle quality of humanity that infused the universe.

In the beginning there had been nothing but the grassless void of Ginnungagap, an emptiness that stretched forever. Though not quite empty, for deep within it lay a sleeping potential, a power and presence inside the absence, waiting to be awakened. To the north (directions are important here) *was the icy space of Niflheim, the 'dark world'. To the south lay Muspellsheim, in flames. Rivers of poison, the Élivágar, flowed from a spring in Niflheim and froze in Ginnungagap. As the sparks from Muspell's fires met this ice, it began to melt and, in the process, change—the slowly falling droplets taking shape and form. The first being in all creation was made: the frost giant, Ymir. He was soon joined by something else, something very different, and her name was Authumbla—a great hornless cow that shambled about in the vacancy. Her milk kept the giant alive.*

Just as with the first humans who would later emerge from the driftwood, the gods themselves had a similar beginning. As cattle do, Authumbla liked to lick the salty rime that formed on the blocks of ice dotting Ginnungagap, and it was under her tongue that the first of them woke to life. On the first day, his hair was revealed; on the second, his head was freed; on the third, he stepped out of the ice and into the cold. His name was Búri, the ancestor of the Aesir, the divine family. Soon more and more creatures appeared in this desolate place. Somehow more giants coalesced from the sweat beneath Ymir's arms. One of his legs mated with the other and produced a child. Among these progeny were Bölthorn and his daughter, Bestla, the ancestors of the giants.

It is hard to know how the people of the Viking Age perceived these stories, with their strangeness, contradictions, and apparent absurdities. Did they sagely nod their heads at the mysteries, at ancient wisdom imparted to the privileged? Did they laugh? Were these deep, legendary truths for the elders or yarns for the very

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young? The one certainty is that, in one form or another, the tales survived for centuries down to our own times: someone, in fact a great many people over the years, must have felt them to be very important indeed.

Búri, too, mysteriously had a son—Burr. From his union with the giantess Bestla came the first of the Aesir. Their sons were Odin and his two brothers, and it is they who began to shape the worlds. It was done through murder, carefully planned.

The three young gods lie in wait for Ymir. They ambush him, kill him, literally rip him apart. Ymir's blood rises and rises, drowning all the giants but two, Bergelmir and his wife, who float away on a raft. He and his kind, the frost giants, will make their own world; they will return, and they will remember what Odin and his brothers have done.

As the blood begins to recede, the gods drag Ymir's corpse into the centre of Ginnungagap. From the giant's torn flesh, they make the land. His hair becomes the trees, and the waters flow from his blood—all the rivers and lakes filling red. His bones are the rocks and mountains; his teeth, his molars, are the boulders and scree. Above it all is the dome of the sky made from the vault of Ymir's skull. To support its heavy weight, the gods set four dwarves at the corners of the earth: their names are Austri, Vestri, Nordri, and Sudri—the cardinal points. Then they throw clumps of the giant's brain into the heavens, forming the clouds.

Around it all the gods set a great fence made of Ymir's brows and eyelashes—a defensive boundary for the world, a mighty seawall against the encircling ocean of blood. They call this palisade Midgard, the name by which the whole earth will be known, the place of Ash and Elm.

This final component of Midgard, its boundary, is an example of a central concept in the Viking mind that is encountered throughout their view of the world. The suffix *-garðr* literally means an

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enclosed space, somewhere set about with a border. In the Scandinavian languages even today the word *gård* simply means 'farm', and this is its basic sense—a settled place, a *bounded* place, even a whole world; in the same meaning of enclosure, it is the root of the modern English 'yard'. This idea of being inside the wall, as distinct from what is beyond and therefore outside one's control, is at the core of Viking-Age concepts of settlement and order. It is an insight into their way of thinking.

As yet, Midgard was dark, but the gods brought lights snatched from the molten embers of Muspellsheim and placed them around the firmament. At first the heavenly bodies were confused; in the words of the *Seeress's Prophecy*:

> Sól [the sun] did not know
> where she had her home.
> Máni [the moon] did not know
> what strength he had.
> The stars did not know
> where their places were.

Then the gods brought order to the sky. Ymir's skull began to glow as the chariot of Day rode across its vault, illuminated by the sun; her brother Máni followed the horses of Night to complete the cycle (just in passing, as another insight into the Norse mind-set, it is worth noting the unusual sex of the heavenly bodies, the sun female and the moon male). To set the pace of sun and moon, even now, they are both chased by wolves, a hunt that will never end until the Ragnarök, the final battle and the fall of all things.

It is then that Odin and his brothers go walking along the beach, where the driftwood is waiting. Where we *are waiting.*

As Midgard and its people took form (the time frame is as ambiguous as ever), the other worlds around them were brought into

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being, the great ash in their midst. To some degree, there are at least relative locations. Up above was *Ásgarðr*, or Asgard—another bounded space—literally the 'Place of the Aesir', in other words, the home of the gods. This was a vast, rolling landscape of fields and forests, mountains and lakes, essentially a divine mirror of the human world below in which everything was appropriately scaled up in both size and grandeur, as befitting its residents.

A road, or rather a bridge, ran between the realm of the gods and the home of humans: the rainbow, arcing across the worlds. Its name was Bifröst, the 'shimmering path', and according to the poems it blazed with flame. Known too as the 'Aesir Bridge' and the 'Powers' Way', it was also a line of defence against the giants. Beneath it raged two mighty rivers, Körmt and Örmt, always in torrential flood.

Flowing water also divided Midgard from the realm of giants, Jötunheim (sometimes found in the plural, 'Giant-worlds'), that lay to the east. Somewhere on this boundary was also Járnviðr, 'Iron-Forest', where giant troll-women gave birth to the wolves that, at the end, will swallow the heavenly bodies.

Even farther east was *Útgarðr*, Utgard, 'the Place Outside', a wilderness literally beyond the worlds of humans, gods, and giants, as its name implies. There is little detail in the stories, but Utgard seems to have been a churning, dark, and formless space, the home of things that could not be relied upon—trolls, monsters, and evil powers. It was nowhere you'd want to go. In the texts, both the world of giants and the world beyond move steadily northwards as the medieval source material gets further away in time from the Viking Age, perhaps a reorientation that reflected one of the Christian locations of hell.

The Norse, too, had a special realm for the dead, although there is no contemporary suggestion that it was bad or a place of punishment. The name of this world was Hel, disconcertingly close to its negative Christian equivalent; the exact relationship between them, if any, is unknown, but Christian overtones can clearly be seen in the later sources. Some philologists have argued

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that in Old Norse the original name instead related to something underground—essentially a metaphor for the grave, which would make sense. According to Snorri, the path to Hel lay north and down. It was certainly a realm below, stretching nine leagues into the ground, through nine worlds of death, with Niflhel, 'Dark-Hel', at the bottom. It was bounded by a great fence, Nágrind, or 'Corpse-Gate', with a terrible hound at the door. To get there one had to cross a river churning with knives and swords, and clashing blocks of ice, over the golden-thatched Gjallabrú bridge, which was guarded by a giantess.

Connecting all these realms, again, was the great ash tree, Yggdrasill. There have been numerous attempts at visualising the spatial relationships of the Norse worlds, all of them speculative and some plunging into New Age fantasia with careless abandon. Were they formed as concentric discs, one inside the other, moving outwards in two dimensions like ripples from the thrown stone of the World Tree? Or were they a stack, a vertical tier of realms threaded on Yggdrasill's trunk like a spindle? Perhaps they perched on its individual branches. According to the *Grímnir's Sayings* poem, the tree had three roots that covered respectively the worlds of humans, giants, and the dead; Snorri has it slightly differently as they stretch over the gods, the giants, and Niflheim.

Yggdrasill was evergreen, unlike its earthly counterparts, and was nourished from three springs at its roots. Again, the sources differ, but it seems clear that at least two of them rose from wells. Beneath the root that led to the realm of the frost giants was the Well of Mímir, guarded by a being of the same name. Its waters contained all wisdom and could be drunk from the Gjallarhorn. The root of the gods rose into the sky (says Snorri, following the contradictory physics of the Norse cosmos), but under it was the Well of Urd, the 'spring of fate' that was also the location of the Aesir assembly. The third root went down into the dark world, feeding from the spring Hvergelmir, 'the bubbling cauldron', in which all the worlds' rivers had their source.

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Clearly, some of the Norse cosmology was based in physical nature—after all, almost everyone has seen Bifröst, the rainbow bridge, at one time or another. Similarly, the volcanic landscapes of Iceland, where most of the sources were written down, are a natural backdrop to the volatile mix of fire and ice from which the worlds were formed. The Tree may also have a manifestation in everyday perception. Relatively little is known of how the Vikings understood the night sky, the stars, and the constellations; beyond a few ambiguous references in Snorri, which some dismiss while others take seriously, there is little to go on. However, one Icelandic scholar is convinced that Yggdrasill can be read as an interpretation of the Milky Way—surely a plausible idea, especially when one escapes the nocturnal light pollution of our cities and sees its majesty rearing overhead, impossibly vast, with its cloudy arms spanning the sky like branches.

The shape of the Norse worlds can be dimly perceived across centuries of distance, the great Tree connecting them through the void. But what of their inhabitants?

The extent to which the Vikings have suffered from stereotyping is more than matched by how their gods and other supernatural beings have been perceived. In the popular imagination, the divine world of Asgard holds a single hall: Valhalla (actually a Victorian misspelling of Valhöll), home of Odin and famous worldwide today as 'Viking heaven', the destination of the worthy dead and synonymous with the Norse afterlife itself. However, the myths are clear that Valhöll was only one of many such residences, as each of the major gods lived on their own estate. These would have been understood as a main hall and surrounding huts, barns, and stables for the household and the animals—god-sized reflections of the manors of the elites in Midgard. Asgard was very much a landscape, a world in its own right.

The literal origins of the oldest gods, emerging from the primal ice, by no means account for all the Norse divinities. They came

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from two families, the Aesir—of whom Odin is the head—and the Vanir, who in some strange way seem to be the older of the two, despite the fact that they do not appear in the basic creation myth. The Vanir were gods of the earth and its riches, representing the dependent relationship between humans and the land in an agricultural society. The Aesir were distinct, with a more patriarchal family structure and a greater propensity for violence (which is not to say the Vanir were entirely peaceable). The *Seeress's Prophecy* describes how the families at first clashed in a mighty war, with fighting that shook Asgard, resolved only after complex negotiations and the giving of hostages.

It is unclear what the two divine families really signify, or even whether that is a meaningful question. Are the Vanir the remnants of the supposed earth-based religions of the Bronze Age and the early Iron Age, many centuries back in the past? Is the war of the gods a magnified image of turbulence in the real human world and (in the artificial terms of historians) a metaphor for the fifth-century transition to the 'late Iron Age'? Some scholars certainly think so, but it is far from clear what the more distantly prehistoric Scandinavians really believed. Despite extraordinary archaeological evidence amassed over the past two centuries and analysed in depth, we cannot be sure. The sun and the cycle of the celestial bodies were important, as were liminal places such as bogs and wetlands, a suggestion of chthonic powers below. All this was referenced in material culture, depicted in art, and honoured through water offerings of gold, costly metals, food, animals—and sacrificed humans. There seems to have been a clear concern for propitiation, a sort of sacred insurance policy for agricultural prosperity, individual fertility, and probably success in war. The people of the Iron Age were hardly alone in such preoccupations, but it is not difficult to fit the Vanir into this picture.

In the tales, the Vanir joined the Aesir after a truce was declared in their war, and thereafter they appear together in Asgard—an image of a society remade? The particular qualities of the older

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gods then emerge as specific skills and attributes alongside those of their new cousins, rather than differences that fundamentally separated the families.

The head of the Vanir is Njörd, a fount of wisdom and provider of abundant crops, full catches of fish, and a fair wind in the sails. As patron of farmers and sailors, he would have made an appropriate high god back in the Bronze and early Iron Ages. His hall is Nóatún, the 'ship enclosure'. Right from the start, this founding figure embodies one of the main aspects of the Vanir as they appear in the sources—a disconcerting, and disapproving, taint of sexual deviance. His children are Freyja and Freyr, and their mother was Njörd's own sister. In turn, they, too, were rumoured to be lovers as well as twin siblings. While open carnality was certainly a Vanir trait, the notion that it was a negative one may well be a Christian intervention in the sources. Freyja, in particular, was exactly the sort of sexually independent woman that terrified the Church.

Freyr appears in the texts as a lord of rain and sun, the god in the fields, rider of a golden boar, and master of a special ship that could be folded into a pocket. For some reason he is often associated with giants and can be found both fighting and courting them. His attempt to seduce the giantess Gerd, conducted by proxy, is made with violent and abusive threats. Freyr is very much a sexual being, and an eleventh-century description of what seems to be his image in a temple describes him as endowed with a gigantic erection. His hall is at Álfheim, 'Elf-home'.

His sister, Freyja, is routinely imagined as a goddess of fertility, and sometimes even love, as if she were a sort of Viking Venus. Such clichés bear little resemblance to how she emerges in the tales. Freyja is primarily an embodiment of women and every aspect of their lives, agency, and potential, including childbirth. Above all, she is a being of power, one of the greatest of the deities. Always in control, she defies the attempts of gods, dwarves, giants, and others to objectify and coerce her. She drives a wagon pulled by cats. Freyja's sexuality is at the core of her being, for her enjoyment and

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use, sometimes with affectionate overtones but also as manipulation and a means of violence. Although married to Ód, her husband is virtually absent from the mythology, and Freyja instead takes many lovers (according to Loki, she has slept with every elf in Asgard, as well as all the Aesir). She bought the necklace of Brísingamen by bedding its four dwarf smiths in turn, and was much courted by giants. She seduced kings, coaxing them to a fatal mistake; she divided her affections between rivals, driving them to mutual destruction; she exploited the lust of others for her own material gain. Some of the other gods, especially Loki, attempt to slut-shame her with accusations of promiscuity; Freyja ignores them all. It is clear that her body and favours are hers alone to command (which is probably what annoyed the gods) and also that she has little regard for the opinions of others. She is also very much a deity of the battlefield and its aftermath. Contrary to the general assumption that the Viking warrior dead went to Odin in Valhöll/Valhalla, only half of them actually found a posthumous home there; the remainder travelled to Freyja in her great hall of Sessrúmnir, 'Seat-Room'.

Similar attitude problems (both ancient and modern) tend to afflict the other goddesses, to whom connotations of 'fruitfulness' and 'fecundity' have also become so regularly attached as to constitute a sort of reflexive trope. Thus Idun, the keeper of the special apples that ensured the gods' eternal youth, is seen as a passive goddess of 'plenty' rather than as the one holding the very lives of the immortals in her power. She was not the only goddess with influence over destiny and fate. Frigg, whose husband was Odin, acted as a manager of Asgard and held sway over its disposition; others bowed to her authority, which was her own rather than an allowance bestowed by a male god. Yes, the goddesses were beautiful, just as stereotype would have it, but in a way that inspired terror as well as desire.

Among the Aesir, the leading figure is clearly Odin, although whether he really is the lord of all is often left ambiguous in

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3. A Power on the throne? This tiny cast silver chair with occupant was found by metal detector in 2009 near the royal site of Lejre in Denmark. Dating to c. 900, its details of ravens, wolves, and the fact that the figure is one-eyed (confirmed by microscopic analysis) suggest that this may be Odin on his seat of power, Hlidskjálf. The fact that the figure is wearing what would conventionally be interpreted as women's clothing only deepens its interesting ambiguity. Photo: Ole Manning, © Roskilde Museum, used by kind permission.

the written sources. He has over two hundred names: he is Mask, he is Third, the Hawk, Victory-Tree, Ghost-Lord, Ripper, Battle-Screamer, and so many more. Odin is a war god and a killer, shaking his spear, Gungnir. He is the protector of kings and outcasts, but also a consummate liar. He may grant you the beautiful gifts of poetry, or trap you with betrayal. He will probably sleep with your wife or, just possibly, your husband—a being of contradictions and seduction, unwise to trust. But wisdom is his prize, his hunger (he gave his eye for it), and there are few things he will not do to really *know*. In particular, he speaks to the dead through spells and makes bodies on the gallows talk. Odin is skilled at teasing open the seams where the worlds join, just enough

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