

## [Transcript] The Rest Is History / 358: Viking Sorcery

I know that I hung on the windy tree, wounded with a spear for nine long nights, dedicated to Odin, myself to myself, on that tree whose roots run from a place that no man knows. No bread did they give me, nor a drink from a horn.

Down I peered.

I clutched the runes, screaming I took them, and then fell back again.

So Tom Holland, that was Odin, the poetic Edda, so compiled in the 13th century, but probably drawing on a longer tradition, although that of course is up for debate.

It's one of the best known things about Odin and the Norse myths and the world of the Vikings, the All-Father and his runes, the Raven God, all this sort of stuff.

It's tremendously exciting material, isn't it?

And Odin, of course, very much a friend of the show because he's featured in the episode we did on the Norse gods, but also he did tremendously well in our World Cup of Gods, didn't he?

Well, he reached the final and I frankly thought he was thrashed by Athena, it has to be said.

I wanted Odin to win.

I'm not going to deny that I wanted Odin to win and I feel slightly cheated even.

I mean, you know that the World Cup of Gods is a very sore spot with me, Tom.

Yes, I did.

Because of your shameful campaign against Anubis.

However, let's move on from this.

I do.

But I think, so when we talked about Odin in the World Cup of Gods, we were talking about him very much as a kind of fan favourite, the star of Marvel Comics and films and...

You are a foolish and petuous boy!

Yes, sorry, that was my answer, Nick Hopkins.

Very, very good.

I mean, all that kind of stuff.

But lurking over Odin and over the stuff that the Vikings believe and indeed over the Vikings generally is the nagging sense that it's all altogether weirder than perhaps we care to think.

Because a lot of the weirdness, it turns out, is actually quite unsettling.

And there is one scholar who I think more than any other who for me has articulated this.

And it's Neil Price, who is British but went to work as an archaeologist in Sweden.

Very, very distinguished.

He's a professor of archaeology now at Uppsala.

He wrote an excellent book called Children of Achanel, didn't he, that came out and I think was nominated by a leading historian who writes for the Sunday Times, perhaps not a million miles from where you're sitting now as the history book of the year.

Britain's top book critic, I think, is the technical description, Tom, as the Sunday Times history book of the year.

So there is no higher praise.

No higher praise indeed.

And I speak with experience of that.

Neil was also the advisor on the Northman, the brilliant recent film about Icelandic epic.

Yeah, you loved it, didn't you?

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Yeah.

However, the book that Neil wrote that really had an impact on me was a book called The Viking Way, which had kind of legendary status among anyone who was interested in the period because it was almost impossible to get hold of.

And you'd kind of go on book groups and people would say, oh, I think there might be a copy in some obscure library buried in some distant land.

And the whole thing came to take on the kind of connotations of a quest in Tolkien or something. Anyway, I finally tracked down a copy of this book and basically to sum it up, it's about how unbelievably weird the Vikings were.

And when I read it, I immediately knew that I was onto something because I just want to read what Neil wrote because when he went from England to Sweden, he's kind of sitting out looking at a forest.

And he wrote, I was disturbed by the fact that the ancestral stories of the North should seem so much more intelligible when looking out over those Swedish trees than they had done while sitting in my office in England.

So that immediate sense that perhaps an academic study in England isn't necessarily the best place to come to terms with the Vikings and with Odin and all that stuff.

But he then went all to right about the way that the kind of the models, the frameworks of explanation that academics have constructed around the Vikings.

And he says, where do we find in these serious consideration of the torch carrying man who walked backwards around a funeral pyre completely naked and with his fingers covering his anus? We've all done that, Tom.

Have we?

The herd of six-legged reindeer depicted on a wall covering the armed women who worked a loom made from human body parts, the elderly Sami man who was buried in anodic woman's clothes, the men who could understand the howling of wolves, the women with raised sores who paced beneath trees of hanging bodies, the men who had sex with a slave girl and then strangled her as a formal sign of respect for her dead master, the woman buried with silver toe rings and a bag full of narcotics.

Now, Dominic, you've written a book about the Vikings.

Have you put any of that in?

Well, it's a children's book, Tom.

So actually, do you know what the strangling of the slave girl is in that book?

Right.

So I have the funeral.

I have Ibn Fadlan, the great traveller, the great sort of Arabic travel writer, describing this funeral.

I mean, I did tone it down for child readers, but I have to say that Penguin did raise their eyebrows when I put that in.

And as always, my son said, it's the best thing in the book, more of this stuff, please.

And we had it in our episode on the Vikings going up in the East, didn't we?

In the East.

Yeah, a lot of people, if you haven't listened to that episode, I mean, that's one of the strangest episodes we did, isn't it?

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Well, I think this episode is going to be stranger because we have with us none other than the great Neil Price himself.

So, Neil, thank you so much for joining us.

Welcome to the Restless History.

Thank you.

Would you say that kind of Viking weird shit sums up what you've written about in the Viking way?

Sadly, yes, I think in your introduction, you really captured what I felt, my motivation for working on all of that.

It's not so much things that I discovered that no one knew before.

It's more things that we all knew about, but just had kind of collectively ignored.

And when I did my first degree back in the 80s in London, the Vikings I learned about were very traditional people.

And there was nothing wrong with that Viking age.

It's just that there was something missing from it.

And the more I read and the more I encountered all these weird things, I wanted to put them back into that picture.

So that's really where it started.

So do you think what happened to the Vikings?

I mean, we don't want to sort of get into a massive historiographical discussion, but is what happened to them a combination of Christianity, Wagner, Marvel Comics and so on that basically sort of tamed them and took the strangeness out, if you like?

Yeah, I think that's a good way to put it.

And I think also that their strangeness has kind of been weaponized and taken on new forms.

And the thing to remember about all of those legacies of the Vikings is that wherever they come from, whether it's Victorian imperialism or the Nazis, or whether it's reenactors or Marvel movies, a whole spectrum of different things, they say nothing whatsoever about life has actually lived in the Viking Age.

And it's that life that I'd like to try and look at.

But there's a challenge, isn't there, for an academic who has to kind of be objective, use the cool measured language of scholarly prose to deal with people for whom that is not an aspiration at all, whose kind of visions and whose understanding of the world may be profoundly impossible to articulate in that way.

I mean, do you think that's a kind of a fair summation of the problem perhaps that you face?

Yes, I do.

I think it's one that all academics face.

And I was conscious when I wrote *The Viking Way*, it came out in 2002 originally.

So it's 20 years old now.

That sort of sentiment that you quoted about me being disturbed by the fact that those ancestral stories seem so much more intelligible when looking out over Swedish trees.

There's a risk that that's a kind of romanticizing view.

There's me thinking, wow, I'm in touch with the Viking Age.

And of course, I'm not.

So you have to guard against that as well.

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But I do think that whatever you're studying about the past, it really does help to go to the places that you're talking about, to see the landscapes, to experience what a Scandinavian winter is like.

When you look at, say, reconstruction drawings, it's always summer.

You know, they're never sort of hunkered down in a sort of snowed in building.

And yet that's a very large part of the year.

So to sort of try and get that kind of experiential aspect of things, I think is quite important, but always to keep your guard up around that kind of romanticization.

And it's that romanticizing that I think the Vikings have been freighted with for centuries really.

So let's start at the very most basic sort of fundamental level, Neil.

We're talking about Scandinavia.

So what are now Denmark, Norway, and Sweden?

I mean, what sort of, I mean, do you stick to the sort of fairly traditional dates for the Viking Age?

So roughly, you know, a couple of hundred years after the fall of the Roman Empire in the West through to 1066 or so, or do you think those dates are wrong?

It's not so much that they're wrong.

I think that I'd go for a broader time span and also one that's less specific.

The traditional Viking Age was always taken to begin with the raid on the monastery of Lindisfarne in Northumbria in 793.

And then, as you said, end in 1066 with the battle of Stanford Bridge.

But I think that apart from getting away from a kind of kings and battles history, looking at it in more social terms, I think the first half of the eighth century.

So we're talking about the period, you know, 720 to 750.

I think there's a lot of different trends in society, a lot of social processes that are all coming together kind of randomly to kick something off.

And I think understanding what that something is that historians call the Viking Age, that's one of the big tasks we have ahead of us.

And then broadly speaking, I'd say about the middle of the 11th century, so 1050s, 1060s.

And just as there's no one start to the Viking Age, there's no single end to it either.

It's motors wind down in different ways, different speeds in different places.

So as long as we keep that broad vagueness in mind, I think that's where we are.

But Neil, I mean, one of the things, obviously, probably the main cultural trend that happens in is happened by the 11th century is that the Viking world is becoming Christian.

And Christianity imports a particular understanding of humanity's relationship with the supernatural and the divine.

And it's one that gives rise to what we call religion, this category that is separate from what we would call the secular kind of, we can divide them in two.

Whereas the sense I have very much to get from your book is that that would be a kind of a division that you wouldn't accept as something that the Vikings would recognize that they didn't have a category of religion, the supernatural and what we would call the kind of the everyday world were absolutely interwoven.

Would that be fair?

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Yes, absolutely.

Tom, that was one of the things I reacted against when I was first writing that book or starting the research for it, was that so many synthesis of the Viking age would have kind of chapter four religion, it was compartmentalized and packaged.

And I think it's part of their perception of reality, nothing more or less than that.

And so even the concept of supernatural, I think that's wrong because it's all natural.

It's just different kinds of nature.

And asking, I mean, today we can ask people of any faith, do you believe in God?

It's a meaningless question in the Viking age.

If you asked, do you believe in Odin?

It'd be like saying, do you believe in a mountain?

It's just part of the world.

And I suppose trying to sum up the way I look at the Viking age is to take as my starting point, it's a very difficult thing to do, but this idea of their view of the world.

And I think that's what makes them different as well to the people around them.

And it's something I think we've underestimated because most of the cultures on the European continent, certainly to the south and west of the Vikings, not so much in the East, are Christian.

And the way in which they approach everything, as you just said, Tom,

it's an utterly different starting point to that of the Viking East Scandinavians.

And I think recognizing what their starting point might have been is the place we need to start.

And that's what I've tried to do.

Can I ask a very basic question?

So you talk about the starting point.

Let's imagine I have started out in the Viking age.

In other words, I'm a child.

What do people tell me about the world and about, okay,

I can't use the word the supernatural, but what we would now call the supernatural.

So do people tell me stories of a pantheon of gods?

Do they have a sense of, as it were, the Marvel comics kind of view of Norse mythology is this idea that they've inevitable progress towards Ragnarok and all that sort of a narrative thrust.

Am I told that as a child?

Or am I told the same thing as children in other parts of Scandinavia?

Or is it localized?

You mentioned the word telling.

And I think that is the absolute key because they live inside a world of stories.

And one of the things I bore my students with is to say repeatedly that the Norse, for want of a better word, didn't know that they had the Norse myths.

That's something that we've created, the scholars have created.

When you go in a bookshop now, you can buy loads of books on the Norse myths, but that's because they've been fossilized as a sort of effectively a kind of holy book for the Vikings, but which is not real at all.

And at the time, I think that those stories were organic and they changed.

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You mentioned whether they were local or not.

We don't know exactly what they told their children in this valley, as opposed to the one over the other side of the mountains.

But the sheer sort of variety and contradiction in the mythology that we have suggests that it was a very varied world.

And in terms of what you tell your children, in the same way as you don't go in the forest because you might get eaten by a bear, or you might meet an elf and you want to be careful of them, and that kind of advice for life, I think, is something that's baked into existence, a bit from childhood onwards.

And in terms of the gods, I think they're a kind of a much more distant element of people's lives than we might think.

We tend to centralize the gods as a pantheon.

You've mentioned them as Odin and Thor and Freyja and people like Loki, the Marvel gods as well.

I don't think anybody thought they were going to encounter Odin on a Saturday night, but I think that you might well meet those elves who lived in the stone behind your house and putting some butter out for them.

And what would that mean to meet an elf?

That's a good question.

And this is one of the things that it's hard to be specific about.

This might sound like a tangent, but it kind of answers your question.

There is a remarkable sort of poetic list of the kings of central Sweden called the list of the Inglings. The Inglings is the name of their family.

And it tells you what happens to each of the Inglings kings and one of them falls into a vat of mead and drowns and another one gets kicked in the head by his horse and so on.

But the one I like best is is led into a rock by a dwarf and never seen again.

So that's what happens if you meet a dwarf or an elf.

There's this idea of nature as a force in itself, something you have to encounter, something you have to negotiate with, keep on the right side of.

And I think that idea of life as a conversation with a kind of invisible population is close to what we've later called Norse religion.

And I think the gods are kind of the highest part of that.

They're the most remote part of it.

But if you're part of the highest levels of society, if you're a king or a yaw or something like that, then you're probably rather closer to that level of the other than the average farmer.

Because there's a story, isn't there, of one of the kings of Norway who has got an English bishop with him and is supposedly converted to Christianity.

And then this Gandalf-like figure with one eye and a brimmed hat turns up and lays on a kind of enormous feast in a big cauldron and everyone tucks in and then the bishop in the morning when he learns about it has it thrown over and obviously Odin has come to visit.

So presumably for kings there is a sense that Odin might come and particularly on a battlefield that Odin might be someone who is present watching what is happening.

Yes. And one of the things that is attached to the Norse gods is that they're gods of something.

So Thor as the god of thunder or Freyja as the goddess of love usually.

And these things are not... I think they're a kind of misunderstanding because the Norse

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divinities are not necessarily gods of any one thing at all.

So there are lots of war gods, for example, but they're gods of different aspects of war.

And you mentioned Odin. He is very much the god of elites.

But he's also the god of the homeless. He's the god of wanderers.

He's the god of the mind. He's one of the gods of magic. He's certainly a war god.

But most of all, he's the god of wisdom and a kind of elevated mental faculty,

the thing that kings ought to have. And this idea of kings having a personal relationship

with someone like that is very important. And some of the early Viking monarchs,

they claim descent from the gods. They try to build themselves in to those genealogies as well.

The queen is descended from Odin, isn't she? So it's an ongoing thing.

So just on Odin, Odin in the version that has passed down to generations of British children,

his use, basically, isn't he? But I get the sense from your books that Odin is a much stranger

and more terrifying figure than Zeus. Is that fair?

I think so. I think this idea of relating the Norse gods to classical divinities certainly

has some truth to it. There are many aspects of Norse mythology that you could clearly see

have something to do with Greek and Roman stories and so on. And there's this idea

of the gods as basically a kind of large, squabbling family who are not entirely trustworthy.

And I think that lack of trust is something that particularly sort of coalesces around Odin.

He's a very contradictory figure. Like I said, he's the god of elites, but also the god of

wanderers. He's a being in whom it's very unwise to place any real faith. He can support you and

support you and support you and then stab you in the back or suddenly give victory to your enemies.

But there's also a kind of odd fairness to him. I think that there's still a kind of sort of basic

justice behind what he does. There are consistent stories of, say, warriors, human warriors who

are enemies in life, expecting to meet in Valhalla as equals. And then they'll be sitting at the

benches and drinking and so on. So there's this kind of cycle of completeness around Odin as well,

looking for one thing to really characterize what Odin is about. It's knowledge and the fact that

he will give anything at all for knowledge. So his eye, but also hanging on the tree, right?

Exactly, yes. As he read at the beginning, he sacrifices himself to himself, which is a deeply

weird thing to do. And in this delirium, he has a vision. That's where the runes come from. He

sees them in this vision and picks them up. But Neil, they're hanging on the tree. So I assumed,

maybe because I've spent too much time talking to Tom, I had assumed that that was a later

Christian

formula, that the Icelandic writers or Bards or whatever had just picked up and imposed on to

Odin. But do you think people in the 9th century, let's say, that they're hanging on the tree,

that it was there then as an idea? I think it's hard to be sure, but the influence of Christianity

on lots of different aspects of the Norse mythological stories is very clear. There is a

kind of holy tree in the Norse sort of traditional tales, this Yggdrasil. It's this great ash tree

that holds the universe together. And it's usually assumed that that's the tree that is being

talked about in that poem. But the idea of Odin sacrificing himself could have merged with the

idea of a man nailed to a cross. And he's pierced with a spear, also resonance is there.

But at the same time, Odin has a holy spear himself. So there's this sort of blending

of different stories. And it's very, very hard to pick them apart. One of the things that bugs

me most about this is, and I used it as the title of my recent book, because I was looking for a

way to describe the Vikings that wasn't the Vikings. I called it the children of ash and elm,

because the first human couple, the first man, the first woman, were fashioned from trees and ash tree and an elm tree. The Old Norse words are asgar and emla. And then there's the fact that the first human couple have names beginning with a and elm. And it's like, ah. And I don't know. Well, Neil, could we just focus in on an aspect that pretty clearly doesn't come from Christianity, because as you point out in the Viking way, the thing that's distinctive about Scandinavia, the Viking world, is absolutely has the Christian German world to the south and in England, of course.

But in the north, we have in the kind of subpolar regions, the really frozen ways of Scandinavia, we have people called Sami. And your thesis in the book is that they actually have quite an influence on the Vikings, and perhaps the way that the Vikings conceptualized the world. And focusing in on Odin, you say about him, and this idea that Odin is a god full of contradictions and paradoxes, that chief amongst his many powers is his role as the male war god, but simultaneously as master of the female sorcery of Seitha, I hope I pronounced that right, which was supposedly shameful for men to perform. So Seitha, the role, the influence of people in the far north, the sense of Odin as a god who blends warfare, but also a kind of more female practice of sorcery, what is going on there and how important is it, do you think?

To take the first part with the Sami, I think they're perceived as the kind of the people of the land of the midnight sun and the people of the northern periphery, or even now as well, actually. But in the Viking age, we know that the Sami lived over an awful large part of the Scandinavian peninsula. And I think one of the things that's been missed about the Viking age is that to a large degree, Scandinavia is a place that supports two quite distinct populations, the North and the Sami living side by side, was literally side by side in adjacent settlements and so on.

And that arena of contacts between the two is very complicated. And as you can imagine, operates at all kinds of levels, including that of the spiritual and what we later call religion.

And part of that is that Sami spirituality, their beliefs and their practices, is very much part of the kind of circumpolar belt of what anthropologists call shamanism, this idea of a world full of souls. And special people, Shaman, one of the Sami words for them is Nwaiti, special people whose job it is to get in touch with that world and act as an intermediary to communicate with it on your behalf. And to do all kinds of things, to cure illnesses, to make sure that your reindeer are okay, or to harm your enemies, get rid of your horrible neighbors, or whatever you want. And I think, and I'm not alone in this, this is quite a long tradition of researching it. There's a lot of similarities in this with this sort of magical practice called Seither, which is, I think, the central component of the Viking relationship with, for want of a better word, the supernatural. And when I said earlier that I think the gods are in some ways quite distant from ordinary people's lives, I think magic is central to them. And even if you look at the later medieval sources, the great Icelandic sagas, they're saturated with magic. They're almost in every story. There's some kind of either magical process going on or people who know a bit more than other people. It's there all the time. And at the center of this, I'm going to mix my metaphors in some grotesque way now, but the center of this sort of web is Odin. He is the supreme master of this seither magic. And in the medieval sources, it's very clearly described that this is a magic primarily for women. It's only proper for women to perform it. And in that, as in many other things, it's clear that women have a peculiarly powerful access to the supernatural. It's one of the central roles of female power in the Viking Age, this gateway to the other and control of that



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access, which is a bit surprising in Odin's case, because he's the god of kings, the god of elites. He's one of the main war gods, as you said. And he is practicing women's magic. And those kinds of contradictions, there's a lot of enormous packages of prejudices attaching to men who perform magic. They're sort of everything that's a proper Viking Age man should not be. That's often been interpreted in terms of cowardice or homophobia and things like that. But it may equally be a challenging of boundaries. It's very hard to be sure. But what's clear with Odin is that it's a very long answer to your long, complicated question. But it was a very long question, wasn't it? Yes, it was. But the thing with Odin is that he embodies those contradictions. And I do wonder sometimes, bearing in mind how hard it is to really know about this, I wonder whether what we see as, isn't that strange that this doesn't quite make sense, is actually just a way of presenting ambiguity that nobody found strange at the time. And if my kind of work with the Vikings has any kind of single takeaway mission, it's to acknowledge the complexity of the Viking Age, the diversity of it. Well, Neil, I think that sets us up perfectly for part two, where I would love to look a bit more closely at how this sorcery, this magic, this safer might have operated in the Viking world. So we'll take a break now. And then when we come back, we'll be looking at all kinds of things, including, and I'm going to give the listeners a teaser here, probably, I think one of my favorite sentences in any work of scholarship I've ever read. And you say, as we shall see, horses and their genitals had associations with sorcery in the Viking Age, and Odin Stallion may be seen in this context. Inside Tom Holland, there is a 14 year old boy struggling to get out. As we shall see in part two, all kinds of remarkable weird shit to tease out. See you in a few minutes. How did onlookers feel watching this ritual entombment and then walking away, going home, or to some continued funeral ceremony, or passing the sealed mound in the subsequent hours and days? How did they articulate their knowledge that inside that grave, a woman they knew was slowly suffocating, dying in the dark beside the rotting body of her partner, that one day, the same fate might be theirs? To us, this seems unthinkable, and yet to at least some of the people of the Viking Age, it clearly was not. Why? What does this tell us about them? And in this, how far can we trust the judgment of a thousand years of hindsight? So that was Professor Neil Bryce talking about the entombment of Viking slave girls alongside their dead masters. And Tom, we talked about a horrific Viking funeral in our episode on the Vikings in the East. And that's actually something that there's been a lot of correspondence about among our listeners, a lot of chat on our Discord channel for our Restless History Club members, because that image of the funeral and the sheer horror of it is something that really lingers in your mind. You can never forget it, can you? Yeah. And I got Neil with us talking about Viking sorcery. And that's why that passage where you talk, I mean, basically, it reads like you as a scholar are essentially throwing your hands up and saying, I cannot compute what it must have been like to live in that world. I mean, your understanding of Viking sorcery, of magic, of how they saw the world, has that enabled you to get a handle on, to answer questions that you ask in that? What is this telling us about how they saw the world? How would they have felt about knowing that a girl was starving to death next to the corpse of her owner? I'd like to think that after 30 years of studying the Vikings, I understand them better. There's a danger in that as well. And in writing the kind of passage like Dominic's just cited.

And I still do this every now and then. I write sort of things that are slightly more fictionalized and almost like little stories. And I think it's important to try to approach that experiential view of the past. And in particular, with regard to Ibn Fadlan, the Arab diplomat who described this funeral on the Volga, there have been so many earlier accounts that focus on the sex and violence as if it's something almost like some kind of spicy orgy. And it's not, it's horrific. And if anyone has the slightest tendency to see the Vikings in a heroic light, they need to read Ibn Fadlan carefully, because it's a powerful antidote to that. So that was part of what I wanted to get closer to it. I think to answer your question, Tom, I'm reminded of a remark I really liked in a review of my recent book, which is not really positive or negative. It's a comment that first I thought was a bit superficial. And then I thought it was really deep. It's one of those. And it really made me think it was the better we understand the Vikings, the more comfortable we are with how little we really know about them. And that gave me comfort. And I think that's where we are. But that attempt to understand the difference of their view of the world, like in the kind of things that you just described, particularly funerary sacrifice and not just of enslaved people, but of people's partners and even friends sometimes. It's so alien to us. And it clearly wasn't to them. And it's that kind of extremity of experience that is part of what I think we need to look at in the Viking Age. At the same time, it's not exoticizing it, because I think most people just stayed on their farms and never went anywhere or did any harm to anybody. So you've got this tremendous richness in there.

But would it be fair to say, based on something like that, the sacrifice of the girl in the Ibn Fadlan account or the example that you gave there about the ritual entombment, would it be fair to say that the Vikings in their view of the world and their view of the relationship between the sort of material and the spiritual are a crueller, more violent people than, A, we are now. I mean, I don't mean to sort of heap praise upon ourselves or B, than we have given them credit for, as it were, than we commonly think. In other words, are they more, are they more unsettling, do you think?

I'd go with the last part. I certainly think they're unsettling. They unsettle me.

I often say that the Vikings are supremely interesting, but that's not at all the same as being admirable. It's a good thing to bear in mind. As to whether they were crueller, it's not a comparison I'd make, really. Violence is a big part of the Viking stereotype, particularly with the raids. And I don't think we should minimize that. They really did do their level best to burn down half of Europe. And the cliches of them, chasing the English and finding the clergy and so on, they're real. But that's only part of their world. And it's not as if the rest of the world was wonderfully peaceful, because it certainly wasn't. I think that the violent aspects of their religion are startling, and they were clearly startling to their contemporaries, and not just to people, to their treatment of animals, the mass slaughter of horses and cattle and dogs and birds and things as part of their funerals. And that's something we really see in the archaeology, is difficult for us to imagine in some of the big boat burials, the classics of Viking ship graves. You find 13, 14 decapitated horses. The ground around those ships, sorry, this isn't probably an episode for children, the ground around those ships would be crimson. And they'd hang them from trees, wouldn't they? So at Uppsala, your home university, there's kind of great trees, weren't they? At least according to Christian sources. Yes, to Audemars Bremen, who is writing about 1070, there's a sacred grove at the temple precinct of Old Uppsala, where trees are full of hanging bodies. And there's one

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archaeological example that does seem to be something like that. It's up in the north of Sweden, where, if I remember correctly, there's five whole bears that seem to be hanging from those trees. That's very odd, isn't it? I once along, some people, I was on a committee to sort of design new museum displays for the National Museum here, and I suggested that they should stuff five bears and string them up. At this point, I was sort of quietly ushered from the room.

It would have been great. Well, Neil, you mentioned horses. And of course, before the break, we teased the listeners with a discussion of horses and their genitals. And I should say that I sent some notes about what I wanted to talk about. And I put horse penises WTF question mark. So WTF question mark. What's going on with horse penises?

This comes down to a poem that's recorded in a much later manuscript. So this is a medieval story. And its title translates to the tale of Völse, and Völse is a name. And what it's about, really, is a Christian king of Norway in the late Viking age, whose heard some room is that some of his more rural subjects are not as Christian as he'd like. So he disguises himself and with his men, he goes off to on a sort of tour. And at one point, he comes to a farmhouse and is invited in as a guest because they don't know who he is. And he finds himself a participant in a ritual where the woman of the household who seems to be in charge fishes out from a box, a preserved horses penis that's been wrapped in linen and preserved with herbs and things. And so around the dinner table, they pass this object from one person to another, as you do. And as each person takes the horses penis. And this is the thing called Völse, the penis itself. They speak a verse.

And the verse is highly sexual and explicit. It's 101 things to do with a preserved horses penis. Basically, you can let your imaginations dwell on that. And the king is appropriately horrified because this isn't really what I was in mind with the new Christianity. And he interrupts the ritual and seizes this object and throws it to the dog. And what happens is, you know, hilarity ensues and the local people of the farmhouse are not very happy about this. And the woman who's in charge, she asks the men to lift her up to look over door lintels and door hinges. So she's being lifted up to look over the door. And this makes as much sense as it sounds. It's very hard to understand what's going on. But when she looks over the door, she seems to have a vision of some other place. And she's trying to retrieve the Völse that the king has desecrated.

That's so interesting. Because that is in Ibn Fadlan's account, isn't it?

The slave girl looks over the door and she says, I see my master, isn't that right?

Yes. This is the thing that for a long time, the tale of Völse was dismissed as a kind of a kind of medieval burlesque of sort of racy goings on among the peasantry that had nothing to do with any kind of Viking age reality. There have been other studies that actually really are taking it quite seriously as a preserved poem that has something to do with an actual Viking age ritual. But the thing that really kind of charges that discussion is what you've just mentioned is that in Ibn Fadlan's account of this great ship burial, the one that's so horrific and so detailed on the Volga in 922. And just to be clear, we're talking an Arab account of a burial in Russia 100 years earlier than this totally independent account that comes out of Norway describing the 11th century. And he's actually written down much later. So there's no relationship at all between these accounts. And yet in Ibn Fadlan, as he said, he describes the enslaved woman being lifted up to look over a door, which is a very specific thing to do. And as she does so, she has a vision of another world. And I think that is really such a close link to Vilse Thatta. And bearing in mind, Ibn Fadlan's is an eyewitness account and I think we can trust it. It really does imply that whatever it is they're doing with their preserved horses

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penis might be real. Well, that sends a shiver down the spine.

If ever you go to a dinner party, Tom, and somebody passes you one of those, you know what's coming.

Well, it depends. I don't think I'd have the courage to throw it to a dog. Would you? I don't think so. But Neil, just sticking to, as it were, to horse penises, you associated also with Sleipnir, who is the eight-legged horse that Odin rides. And that's quite shamanistic, isn't it? Going back to that idea of this distinctive understanding of sorcery that you get from the far north. Yeah, in two ways. There are so many kind of crossovers between the descriptions of these Sather rituals. And there's other kinds of magic as well, but Sather is the main one. Descriptions of that magic in a whole range of Icelandic saga sources and some poems as well, that have clear links to what we know of circumpolar shamanism from much later periods. So if you bring all these sources together, you really can make a coherent case for this being part of a kind of, broadly speaking, a shamanic circumpolar ritual world. And in particular, for example, animals that have more legs than they do in nature, like Sleipnir. This is Odin's eight-legged stallion. His name means the sliding one. It can slip between the worlds. He has runes etched on his teeth. So that's one of the links there. But also this idea of sexuality as one of the big constants of Sather magic. And it may also be that part of the rituals themselves are sexual in nature. So there is the sort of multiple layers of meaning in this magic. And we know that there are sexual, let's say, restrictions to booze built into it, like, for example, that it can only be properly performed by women. And it may be that some of the sexual aspects of the magic itself and the purposes of the magic are linked to that. So this, along with this idea of war magic, broadly speaking, or shamanism and the importance of all of this in people's lives, the aspect of sexuality in that ritual world is also something that I think was ignored for a very long time. It's something that a lot of people are working on now. Are the Valkyries sexual figures, Neil, do you think? Or are they purely war figures? I think absolutely not. I think also, as with so much else to do with the Vikings, to get at anything resembling a kind of Viking age reality, which, as you know, is a very difficult thing to do, we have to unpeel layers and layers of later kind of stories and accretions. And this idea of the Valkyries is kind of beautiful handmaidens of Odin who sort of sweep warriors off the battlefield to some kind of eternal party in Valhalla. It's very much something that begins in the Middle Ages and then builds and builds, and then obviously, the sort of ultimate manifestation of it is Wagner. That's where we get our view of the Valkyries now, really. If you try and go back to a kind of primal Valkyrie, if you want to a better term, and that's very hard to do, if you look at things like the Valkyrie names. Oh, yes. So give us some of your favorite Valkyrie names. Well, I found 52 of them. There may be more. And it's clear that there are lots of others, just sort of general Valkyries that don't happen to get named in the sources, but there's a lot of Valkyries. And their names are overwhelmingly graphic descriptions of aspects of battle and war, which is not surprising because their name means choosers of the slain. Their purpose is to intervene on the battlefield and take the spirits of the best warriors to Odin's hall. So you list all these names, and you've got helmet clatter, sword noise, battle weaver, howling, chain, pricker, counsel trace, shield scraper, disorder, very violent, very cruel, victory urger, and teeth grinder. I mean, just scratching the surface there, but shield scraper is one of my favorites. But I mean, if any listeners out there, you know, they've got daughters and they need a very cruel is a great name. There's also a lot of them whose name means noise, different aspects of noise,

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that really gives you the idea of what a chaotic, loud place a medieval battlefield was. And I see those early Valkyries, not so much as a sort of hand, you know, handmaidens of Odin who kind of visit the battlefield, I think they're unleashed on it. And I think they're more like demons of carnage than anything else. There's very little to suggest that they're physically attractive, or any of those are later stereotypes. They're terrifying, basically. You quote also from this terrifying poem, the web of spears, the web of spears. So men's heads served as loom weights in testines from men as weft and warp. I mean, it's such a, I mean, one of the most unsettling poems that you could ever imagine this idea of a battle as a tapestry woven out of intestines. It's appended to a famous saga, but it's probably much older than the saga itself. And it describes a group of a group of women who are later described as Valkyries, who are weaving on a loom completely constructed of human body parts, as you say. And the fabric that they're creating is built of blood and flesh. And there's this very clear idea that as they're weaving, they are weaving the outcome of a distant battle taking place at the same time. And you get this sense of when they're moving the weaving tools sort of in and out of the fabric, this is the flight of arrows and the people throwing spears. They're actually making the battle. And this is another thing that attaches to the Valkyries. It's a kind of crossover with the Norns, these three women of fate. This idea that the Valkyries not only kind of deal with the aftermath of battle, they might shape it as well. Presumably, I mean, that's part of the appeal of Sather, if it's going on, is that you can invoke this magic to influence the course of battle and to kind of blunt the weapon of your enemy or make him freeze or something like that. Yeah, I think it's also we talked earlier about how important Odin is in this sort of web of magic. Part of his qualities to do with war are concerned with the mind. If you think about all this chaos of a medieval battlefield, as in the names of the Valkyries, the noise and the violence and so on, there's a constant emphasis in poetry of being clearheaded in battle. You really need to know who's in front of you, who's beside you, who's that over there, and they're not wearing uniforms, you know. And this idea of mental clarity or a kind of mental fog, which is lethal, that is the kind of thing that Odin brings to the battlefield. So one of the Valkyrie names means the war fetter, like the chain. And what that means in practice is that's the thing that makes you hesitate when you absolutely shouldn't. It's the thing that makes you trip or drop your weapon or whatever. And that is the form that some of this battle magic really took, I think. So does that imply, Neil, that the common, as it were, urban myth that Viking warriors are turning themselves into berserkers by swallowing mushrooms or drinking or whatever? That's incorrect, because I mean, it's always struck me that if I were in a battle, I would really want to have my wits about me. So do you think that is overstated the sort of berserker stereotype? Very much so, yes. Even in the most lurid sources, the berserkers, and there's a sort of cousins to them called Ulfetnar. Basically, berserkers are connected with bears and Ulfetnar are connected with wolves, but they're kind of the same thing. They're always in a minority, a tiny minority. There's a big debate in scholarship at the moment as to whether they were real at all, or whether they're a kind of literary motif from the Middle Ages, or alternatively whether they were real, but more a kind of a matter of ritual performance, or sort of way to psych yourself up rather than anybody actually doing this in battle. Personally, I'm more inclined to the idea that they really existed, and that they are, it's easy to make these kind of crass comparisons, but are sort of Viking special forces, basically,

they're elite soldiers. There is no suggestion whatsoever in early sources that they took mushrooms or any kind of hallucinogen, and there are plenty of other ways to sort of work yourself up into a fighting rage. I think the jury's out on the berserkers.

There are a lot of depictions in Viking-age art, or Viking-age iconography, of men and sometimes women who appear to be wearing animal skins or costumes. There are a couple of masks that have been found as part of a shipwreck, actually, in a Danish town harbor, which are made of felt and just cover the portion of the face that wouldn't be covered by chainmail, for example.

They look, it's hard to say what animals they are, but they're definitely animals.

They look to me a bit like bulls, but they could be dogs, they could be wolves.

God, I mean, imagine you're a monk. I know all these guys with masks are terrifying.

And very different.

Well, very different. I just prompted to wonder whether, for Vikings, the actual experience of battle itself is a kind of a ritual in which you experience spirits or the divine.

It's a way of, obviously, battle is a way of defeating your enemies and stealing their wealth, but is it also a way of having communion with, in a very intense form, perhaps, with spirits that you wouldn't otherwise have experience of, do you think?

I suspect that for some of them, the answer is probably yes. I don't think that's sort of a general kind of experience of everybody in the Viking Age or even every sort of proper Viking, you know, an actual sort of paratotal Viking. But we know that, for example, the kind of war cult of Odin has an element of kind of ecstatic fury, for want of a better word. And there's an element of rage and being out of yourself that very much attaches to Odin. And I think this idea of there being kind of Odinic warriors is probably real. But it's, again, it's very hard to get back to any kind of detail about it. I'm very conscious when I talk about things like this. It comes up speculation upon speculation, but that's what we've got. That's your job, I mean.

Well, Neil, you've given brilliant kind of tour de raison. Can I ask one question before you wrap up, Tom? Yeah, of course. Sorry. Yeah. The question is, how long does this mindset, this attitude towards the spiritual world endure? Because obviously, Scandinavia was Christianized.

And you gave the example of the, I mean, you said, 1050s, 1060s is the end of the Viking Age. And Christianity and the Christianization obviously plays an enormous part in that kind of dating. But presumably, this way of thinking about the natural, and I know when we're not meant to use the word, the supernatural must have endured for generations after the sort of nominal Christianization of what become the Scandinavian kingdoms. Yes, I think it did.

If you look at the kind of classic superstructure of Norse spirituality, the gods, I think they disappear rather fast. And there's clearly an attempt to introduce a kind of Christian concept of the divine that replaces the Norse one, especially obviously with one God. But all of those more everyday aspects of belief, the elves that live behind your house that we talked about, I think they stay for a very long time. You can trace them in later folklore and folk custom.

You can trace them in laws as well. I mean, medieval Christianity still had quite a lively belief in dark powers of various kinds. I mean, Neil, Alfred the Great, who's impeccably Christian, is named after an elf. So elves are clearly still part of the fabric in Christian England, as well as in Scandinavia, I would guess. And I find law codes are very useful like that, because they tend to be rather dry documents, and you don't forbid people from doing something that nobody ever does. And if there are laws that you mustn't wake up trolls and ask them things, and so I think I'll do that. Yeah, so good advice. But lots of things like that that you

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mustn't perform magic in various ways, which implies that that might succeed if you did it. And I think there's a very clear path to be traced from Sather and those things we were talking about earlier to medieval witchcraft, this idea of a different world of powers.

What changes in the Middle Ages is that this is given negative connotations, which it doesn't necessarily have in the pre-Christian period.

Brilliant. Well, thank you so much, Neil.

Thank you.

Something we've been looking forward to for ages.

Definitely.

Very, very grateful.

Such a strange and interesting story.

Absolutely fascinating story. And I gather you're off to Borneo, is that right, in a couple of days?

Yes, no Vikings there.

So have a wonderful time in Borneo, and many, many thanks, and thank you everyone for listening, and we'll be back soon with more. Bye-bye.

Bye-bye.

Bye.