

TOM SHIPPEY

LAUGHING
SHALL I DIE

LIVES AND DEATHS
OF THE
GREAT VIKINGS

REAKTION BOOKS

*In memory of
Ernest Shippey
(1904–1962)*

Í austrvegi lét hann raiša brýr

In the east, he built bridges

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Contents

Maps 7

Preface 11

Introduction 13

PART I: Dying Hard 23

1 The Viking Mindset: Three Case Studies 24

2 Hygelac and Hrolf: False Dawn for the Vikings 38

3 Volsungs and Nibelungs: Avenging Female Furies 63

4 Ragnar and the Ragnarssons: Snakebite and Success 83

5 Egil the Ugly and King Blood-axe:

Poetry and the Psychopath 107

PART II: Moving to the Bigger Picture 133

6 Weaving the Web of War: The Road to Clontarf 136

7 Two Big Winners: The Road to Normandy 158

8 Furs and Slaves, Wealth and Death: The Road to Miklagard 184

PART III: The Tale in the North 209

9 The Jarls and the Jomsvikings: A Study in *Drengskapr* 212

10 A Tale of Two Olafs; or, The Tales People Tell 236

11 A Tale of Two Haralds: Viking Endgame 263

12 Viking Aftermath: The Nine Grins of Skarphedin Njalsson 285

APPENDIX A: On Poetry: Types, Texts, Translations 305

APPENDIX B: On Sagas: Types, Texts, Translations 309

APPENDIX C: Snorri Sturluson 311

REFERENCES 313

BIBLIOGRAPHY 339

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 353

INDEX 355

INTRODUCTION

We all know what Vikings are. We even know what they looked like. Their bearded faces, often with horned or winged helmets on top, stare out from book covers and T-shirts and sardine tins. There are movies about them, and television series. The gods of their pantheon, Odin and Thor, Balder and Loki, are well-known names. Everyone has at least heard about Ragnarok and Valhalla. Vikings have become part of the modern world's cultural wallpaper.

Of course, a good deal of what we think we know is just plain wrong, starting with those horned helmets, completely impractical in any kind of close combat. But more important than what's wrong is what's missing. There's a question that has to be asked. How did the Vikings get away with it for so long? Or, putting it another way, what gave them their edge? An edge they maintained for almost three centuries, during which they became the scourge of Europe, from Ireland to Ukraine, from Hamburg to Gibraltar, and beyond in both directions.

It certainly wasn't logistical superiority. The small and scattered populations of Scandinavia, with its short growing season and often stony soil, were far inferior in manpower and resources to the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, the Frankish empire, the Moorish realms of Spain, let alone the Byzantine Empire and the Muslim caliphate beyond it. Was it technological, then? Often put forward as an explanation are the Vikings' magnificent longships, about which we now know a lot more than we did. These certainly gave Vikings the advantages of surprise and mobility, vital for hit-and-run raids, the old habit of seaborne marauding. But Vikings soon took to marauding on land, and while they did not mind hit-and-run, they were also ready to stand and fight. And in stand-up fights they were hard to defeat. Even harder to daunt. If you beat them, they just came back again.

Nor were they opposed by mere pacifists. Especially in Western Europe, the native populations of Irish and English, Franks and Frisians

and Germans were endemically warlike, in societies controlled by warrior elites and kings whose major business had always been war. Vikings, somehow, when it came to organized violence, managed to raise the bar. Though often mentioned, the weakness and disorganization of their enemies is not a full explanation either. Vikings were surely quick to take advantage, but not notably well-organized themselves. Western kings soon learned you could always pay one set of Vikings to fight another.

No, what gave them their edge was something psychological: I call it the Viking mindset. To put it bluntly, it's a kind of death cult. Explaining that mindset is the purpose of this book.

Not just Valhalla . . .

In a way, the death cult answer just given has been obvious ever since the literature of the Old North started to be rediscovered centuries ago. As awareness of Old Norse poems, sagas and especially myths began to dawn again, what hit the learned men of Europe right between the eyes was Viking attitudes to death. People noticed immediately that this long-forgotten literature, preserved only in remote Iceland, centred far more than anything else they were used to on scenes of death, of grim defiance, on famous last stands and famous last words. The hero's death song was an artform in itself, with many examples recorded. This was so obvious that as early as 1689 someone tried to make sense of it.

He was a Dane called Thomas Bartholinus. (His real name was Bertelsen; he came from a medical family and his father, also Thomas Bartholinus, was the man who first described the human lymphatic system.) In 1689, though, the younger Bartholinus published a work, all of it in Latin, whose title translates as *Three Books, Digested from Old Books and Documents Until-now Unedited, on the Causes of the Contempt for Death among the Still Pagan Danes*. It was a kind of 'Reader's Digest' of all the big death scenes then known from Old Norse literature, and it took the learned world by storm – Walter Scott was still reading it with fascination, and using it, 150 years later.

Bartholinus's answer to the question he implied in his title was a mythological one. He thought that the 'contempt for death' so obvious in his sources was a result of the Norse belief that those who died in battle, sword in hand, would go to Odin's great hall Valhalla, the 'Halls of the Slain', there to spend their afterlife in feasting and fighting, up to the day of Ragnarok, the final combat.

The idea has been popular ever since. It dominates the action of the Kirk Douglas movie *The Vikings* (1958). But now we're not so sure. Back

in the seventeenth century, in a completely Christian Europe securely anchored in religious belief, a mythological explanation looked natural. The whole idea, however, is largely drawn from just one passage in Snorri Sturluson's thirteenth-century handbook of myth and legend,¹ and it's not likely that religious belief and practice were anything like as generally accepted or all-encompassing in the Viking Age as they were in long-Christian Europe.

Bartholinus posed a good question, but it demands more than a single-explanation answer. What's needed is a closer look at Viking psychology, as revealed in the literature they and their descendants left behind and as expressed in individual stories, sagas, legends. That is, once again, what this book is about. What is revealed is often varied, dealing with people in different places, at different times, facing different conditions. But beneath it all there is a kind of consistency, a particular attitude, which – to get ahead of myself – I do not think could have been faked.

The trouble with 'Vikings'

If you say a question has an obvious answer, it's only fair to say why the answer hasn't been given already – especially after many decades of scholarly study. It's because there's a problem with terminology, and a problem with cultural attitudes, especially in the world of modern scholarship. To put it bluntly (again), most scholarly books with 'Viking' in the title turn out not to be about Vikings, because Vikings aren't popular among scholars. This book is different: it really is about Vikings.

The fact is that in the Vikings' own language, Old Norse, *vikingr* just meant pirate, marauder. It wasn't an ethnic label, it was a job description. And what this means for us is that if you come across headlines – as these days you very often do – which say something like 'Vikings! Not just raiders and looters any more!' then the headlines are wrong. If people weren't raiding and looting (and land-grabbing, and collecting protection money), then they had stopped being Vikings. They were just Scandinavians. But while most Vikings were Scandinavians, most Scandinavians definitely weren't Vikings, not even part-time. The two groups should not be confused, not even with the aim of making 'the history of the Vikings' look nicer.

The trouble is that raiding and looting, pirating and marauding, are (and this is, for once, putting it very mildly) not congenial topics in the modern academic world. So academics make a quiet shift. The trend was started in 1970 by a book called *The Viking Achievement*, with chapters on 'Trade and Towns', 'Transport', 'Art and Ornament' and so on.² These weren't

Viking achievements at all, they were Scandinavian achievements, created by – this is a later book's more honest title – *The Norsemen in the Viking Age*.³ But Vikings make modern academics uneasy.

Sometimes uneasiness shows itself not in the titles (which publishers insist on; they know what sells) but in the subtitles. The British Museum exhibition of 2014, with its accompanying and very impressively illustrated book, was called *Vikings: Life and Legend*. 'Life' got a lot more space than 'legend', and there was some silent censorship. Jonathan Clements's *Brief History of the Vikings* (2005) asks whether they were 'The Last Pagans or the First Modern Europeans'. The latter option is preferred: Vikings, we're told, promoted European integration. Anders Winroth's *The Age of the Vikings* (2014) 'looks at Viking endeavors in commerce, politics, discovery, and colonization'.⁴ One can see the sidestep there: all those were *Scandinavian* endeavours, not Viking ones at all, but they are much more acceptable as topics than piracy and marauding. In short, many books proclaimed as being about Vikings actually *back away from* real Vikings, the pirates and marauders, retreating to the scholarly comfort-zones of exploration, trade, urban development and distanced narrative history. All of which is admittedly part of the story. Just not the only part, and very much *not* the part that has, ever since the seventeenth century, catapulted Vikings into the forefront of popular imagination.

The result is that Viking studies have long been polarized. From the start there was the romantic or what one might call the comic-book approach, full of clichés, often mistaken. The movie *Eric the Viking* of 1989 is a reliable source for most of them: berserkers, skulls, horned helmets, valkyries, Valhalla and a great deal of 'quaffing'; to which *The Vikings* added spawwives, invocations of Odin, dying sword in hand, and the popular sport of severing blonde ladies' plaits by competitive axe-throwing.

In their embarrassed flight from this – and it is certainly founded often enough on straight misunderstanding, not to mention straight invention – modern scholars have created a minimalist school of Viking studies. One can imagine the way their view might be put in the civilized surroundings of the faculty club:

Pagan marauders, permanently drunk on mead, constantly raping and massacring? Not at *all*, terribly overstated. There may have been a little trouble with the locals, as there always is with groups of young men away from home, but you can't believe what monkish chroniclers say, all their numbers must be wrong, that would be like believing people's insurance claims, and as for sagas . . .

I exaggerate the scholarly attitude, but not much.⁵ It deals with the literary evidence in particular – of which we have a great deal – by turning a blind eye and arguing about dates.

Dates are of course important and are discussed later on. Nevertheless, the ‘faculty club’ view, as I call it, misses out a great deal, including the vital question of Viking mindset, or even Viking ideology. It is at least as one-sided as the comic-book images. The evidence of English, Irish, Frankish, Greek and even Arabic sources, as well as the native Scandinavian ones, is thoroughly consistent, as some have started to concede. In recent years it has been remarked by two or three professors – and as something of a corrective to the general academic consensus – that we should not forget that Vikings were under no obligation to observe the Geneva Convention; that while Vikings were not mad, they were often bad and always dangerous to know; even that there was something ‘psychopathic’ about Viking culture.⁶

To which one need only add that twenty-first-century ‘psychopathic’ could be ninth-century ‘well-adjusted’.

Viking Age fact or medieval fiction?

What follows in this book is not quite a list of ‘top ten Vikings’. Sometimes characters come in pairs, linked by alliance, as in the case of Ganger-Hrolf of Normandy and his shadowy mentor Hastein, or by deadly enmity, like Egil Skallagrimsson the skald and King Eirik Blood-axe of York. Sometimes names and careers have to be extricated with difficulty from scattered sources. Dramatic female characters are also part of the story: not themselves Vikings by trade, but often the most determined instigators and proponents of the heroic mindset. Not only are there more than ten Vikings to consider, there are even different kinds of Viking. The ‘Viking Age’ spanned three centuries, and Vikings were nothing if not adaptable when it came to searching out new sources of profit. But whether they were raiding monasteries, organizing slave markets, grabbing land to settle or engaging in something very like a ‘game of thrones’, what they did was based on violence. That is what Vikings were good at: especially good at, spectacularly good at.

Going back to the question of why that should be, this book opens with a consideration of the ‘Viking mindset’. And it comes up with an answer that is – this is what universities these days call a ‘trigger warning’ – uncomfortable, uncongenial and probably to many unwelcome. (So it goes, to borrow a phrase from Kurt Vonnegut.)

I go on to give an overview of the death cult, as revealed in one scene after another, and in particular the ‘die laughing’ enigma. This central

literary preoccupation, so prominent in Old Norse, is surrounded and supported by historical evidence from many directions in many languages. Some of the most powerful corroboration comes from archaeology, which in recent years has repeatedly changed opinions, and just as repeatedly confirmed what sagas say – and which tender hearts again did not want to believe, such as the mechanics of organizing mass beheadings. (Though what recent archaeology has revealed is people doing this *to* Vikings, not the other way round. The Vikings and their enemies learned from each other.)

The book as a whole also takes us from prehistory, myth and heroic legend into well-documented eras where we have information coming from all sides. The general trend is from darkness into the light, but it's not a smooth progression. The earliest event mentioned, well before the Viking Age got started, is surprisingly well corroborated by several sources, one of them written down within living memory. By contrast, events that occurred hundreds of years later in Iceland were not recorded in writing until centuries after they happened. They were recorded, however, by people who believed themselves, no doubt correctly, to be the descendants of the old heroes and who knew to the inch where everything took place: not first-hand evidence, then, but very good evidence just the same. In the end, every case has to be judged for reliability on its own merits. I will forbear from trying to prejudge them collectively here.

Having been tough on the sidesteps and evasions of others, however, I have to face up to a question which those others would certainly put. How far can the kind of literary evidence used in what follows be trusted? Just to begin with, much of it is evidently fantastic. Were-bears, swan maidens, elf women, spaewives, valkyries and murderous goddesses all turn up repeatedly in sagas of all kinds. Egil Skallagrimsson, a great Viking and certainly a historical character, is alleged to have been descended from trolls – but then in modern times a rather convincing medical explanation has been given for this. Interventions by Odin are almost routine, reflecting the great contest in the north between pagan and Christian, maybe closer-run than later hindsight made out. There are hints of deeper mythic structures, too embedded in belief as well as story to be winkled out.

Fantasy, however, is easily detected and allowed for. A more serious criticism comes from the fact that much of the material used here, especially the kings' sagas, and the 'sagas of old times' or *fornaldarsögur*, was written hundreds of years after the events, by people who weren't Vikings at all, only their descendants. Isn't it naive to take them as reliable accounts of anything?

Most of them were at least *thought* to be true records. Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241), the Icelandic politician and author of many such sagas,

famously protested that his stories must be true because they were based on poems ‘that were recited before the rulers themselves or their sons’ and then memorized and passed on orally until a time came when they could be written down by people like Snorri. While skalds might be thought to flatter, he insisted, ‘no one would dare to tell [a chieftain] to his face about deeds of his which all who listened, as well as the man himself, knew were falsehoods and fictions. That would be mockery and not praise.’⁷

Snorri may have ruined himself as an authority on heroic death by his own death – and *his* death was recorded early and probably from eyewitness accounts. When his enemies caught him hiding in his own cellar on 22 September 1241, too slow to get to the secret escape tunnel only rediscovered recently, all he said was, desperately but unheroically, ‘Mustn’t strike, mustn’t strike’.⁸ He should have known this never worked with Vikings or their descendants. They just cut him down. But sometimes we have the early poems he based his sagas on, and can check him, and he comes out of such cross-checking surprisingly well. There are other sources of information as well as the poems and sagas, often coming from the Vikings’ enemies, while sometimes there is also the grim, mute, inarguable but often incomprehensible evidence of archaeology.

For all that, saga evidence is generally written off by historians as ‘not reliable’, which by modern historical standards is true: few or no dates, for one thing. Ray Page, a Cambridge professor (and this author’s tutor, though he would never have thanked anyone for reminding him), wrote repeatedly in his excellent *Chronicles of the Vikings* that ‘the rigorous historian must look at [sagas] with suspicion’, that the sagas of Icelanders in particular ‘are not commonly cited as historical sources save by those who have failed to keep up with the scholarly times’.⁹

One might remark that ‘the scholarly times’ are not infallible and are indeed very much subject to fashion. But one can certainly agree with Page’s insistence that ‘[sagas’] authenticity must be continually questioned’ – though one should also add that sometimes the questioning comes out positive, saga narrative being confirmed by archaeology.¹⁰ Moreover, even Page concedes that poems like the lays of Volund and Atli, which I discuss later on, ‘give some clues to the values [their authors and audiences] accepted’.¹¹ There is an impressive consistency, and an often underrated complexity, in just what is revealed about those values in Eddic poems, kings’ sagas, sagas of old times, sagas of Icelanders and much else, including skaldic poems and runestones.

Uncovering those values is, then, just as reasonable a goal as writing (another) ‘rigorous’ narrative history, dates and all! Though the fiction demands, of course, to be set against what we can uncover of the facts.

Evaluating 'imaginaries'

Maybe the fiction/fact dichotomy does not, in any case, represent the true situation – which, as it happens, we are rather well placed to understand. One of the useful words introduced by modern literary theory is the idea of 'an imaginary' (adjective used as noun), by which I mean 'a collective picture of an era derived from books, films, television, and so on'. The obvious example in the modern world is the 'imaginary' of 'the Wild West', made up, as we all know, of gunslingers, wagon trains, rustlers, the U.S. cavalry and, of course, cowboys and Indians.

How true to fact was this? Obviously, many of the characters in it, from Billy the Kid to Crazy Horse, were real people with real biographies. Equally obviously, many of the familiar scenarios – shoot-outs in Main Street, circled wagon trains, stagecoaches pursued by yelling braves – became clichés very much more common in fiction than in fact. One feature of the Wild West imaginary is that it has no sense of time: things had changed a lot in the 1870s from the 1830s, but this is rarely indicated in the B-movies and cheap TV series.

There is nowadays a 'Viking imaginary' as well, composed of berserkers, valkyries, horned helmets and so on; this is what modern scholars complain about and have set themselves to combat. The point they are trying to make – though they don't put it like this – is that the modern Viking imaginary is based not on reality but on an early medieval Viking imaginary. In other words, the poems and sagas (and with them the mindset this book sets itself to discuss) were all or mostly created two or three centuries later than the real Viking Age, and so they are not a good representation of it.

Before considering how true that is, we might consider further the situation of our nineteenth-, twentieth- and twenty-first-century 'Wild West', about which we have a lot more data. How good is our representation of the Wild West? The creation of this imaginary overlapped in time with the real situation – dime novels about gunfighters were being written in the East while the gunfighters themselves were still alive in the West, a situation dramatized comically in Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992). The case of the Vikings and the 'early medieval Viking imaginary' is certainly similar, but in critical respects not the same.

The Viking Age lasted much longer than the era of the Wild West: three hundred years as opposed to sixty or seventy. It ended dramatically, with the defeat and death of giant King Harald of Norway in 1066, but without the immense social, technological and political changes of the late nineteenth century. The living conditions of most Scandinavians did

not change at all, and in Iceland people probably did not even notice the ‘end of an age’.

As regards literature, skaldic verse continued to be composed for generations after 1066, as well as before, and Eddic verse continued at least to be copied, or else we wouldn’t have any. The development of saga writing is certainly post-Viking (as was writing of any kind in the early Scandinavian world, runes apart), but the legends on which some of the sagas were based were circulating by the end of the Viking Age, if not earlier: Adam of Bremen had heard about Ragnar ‘Lodbrog’ by 1070, and a hundred years later Saxo Grammaticus knew forms of many of the legends, which were already old enough for them to have got confused. It is significant that in the 1220s Snorri Sturluson wrote his account of the Norse myths in his *Prose Edda* because he thought that they were *beginning* to be forgotten, but also that they needed to be remembered, for the use of practising poets. The myths were from the pagan era, officially terminated more than two hundred years before when Iceland became by agreement Christian. But they were still known, and in a way they were still vital.

There was, then, a much longer twilight for the Viking Age in literature and a much greater continuity, in social conditions and cultural attitudes, than there was for the Wild West. Quite how great that continuity was we don’t know, it’s true. Quite how reliable are the literary representations of the Viking Age in the ‘early medieval imaginary’ of the sagas, again, we don’t know. But then we cannot be sure how reliable modern representations of ‘the Wild West imaginary’ are either. Some more than others, no doubt. It seems obvious that *Lonesome Dove*, for instance, is much truer to life than the stereotyped adventures of ‘The Lone Ranger’; where John Wayne and Clint Eastwood stand in this spectrum is not so clear.

One therefore has to decide about the poems and the sagas in much the same way as one may want to decide about *The Searchers* or *Pale Rider*: case by case, and remembering the much greater continuity of the post-Viking era. One last and important difference between the two situations is this. Much of the Wild West imaginary was created by people in close touch with each other, in Hollywood scriptwriter conferences or the dime novel mills of New York. They all copied from each other. The Viking imaginary of the early medieval period (if that is what it was) was put together – scores of sagas, hundreds of poems – by people without modern communications, scattered across the Northern world, rarely in touch with each other, and over a period of several centuries. Even a saga writer in Akureyri (say) may have had little idea of what was being written and copied elsewhere in Iceland. Yet what was produced was strikingly similar – and strikingly distinctive – when it comes to that characteristic mindset, as I keep calling it.

Was this the product of collusion, and so as phony as the Hollywood West? That is what is implied by the minimalist or 'faculty club' school of commentary. But once the question is framed, rather than assumed or hinted at, the implied answer – 'well of course it is!' – looks unlikely. How did all those scattered writers collude? And how strange it is that they managed to produce so many – and such distinctive – patterns of behaviour and speech with so few traces of deliberate copying. And then there are the cross-checks which this book continues to search out, from the accounts of the victims, from the reports of the archaeologists. I think, in brief, that the post-Viking writers understood their ancestors pretty well. They certainly thought they did.

So, step outside the faculty club! Forget the horned helmets as well! It's the mindset, pragmatic, fatalistic, egalitarian, ironic and full of (apparent) contradictions, which should take the eye. It takes working out, and it needs discrimination as well, which I hope this book will provide. But that's what made the Vikings great – in fiction, and quite likely in fact as well.

This book, then, uses all available sources, in several languages and from several disciplines, to probe what can be ascertained about the values of the Viking Age – with decent scepticism, it is hoped, and definitely with as much cross-referencing as possible. But its intention is to let the Vikings and their descendants speak for themselves. Their many voices express a spirit which is like no other on earth. They deserve not to be silenced or toned down into acceptability.

Though there's a mean streak there, as this book will show.