

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

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 Ask, 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

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



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.