Embers of the Hands

EMBERS OF THE HANDS

Hidden Histories of the Viking Age

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For Magnus and Wulfie


NORTHERN HUNTING GROUNDS
GREENLAND
WESTERN SETTLEMENT
EASTERN SETTLEMENT
Arctic Circle
L'Anse aux Meadows
NEWFOUNDLAND
Reykjavik
Surtshellir
ICELAND
FAROE ISLANDS
SHETLAND
ORKNEY
LEWIS
SCOTLAND
Inchmarnock
ISLE OF MAN
Dublin
York
IRELAND
WALES
ENGLAND
North Atlantic Ocean
N
0 100 200 300 400 500 miles
0 200 400 600 800 kilometres


Greenland Sea
Arctic Ocean
Barents Sea
Norwegian Sea
NORWAY
SWEDEN
Lendbreen
Bergen
Oslo
Uppsala
Birka
Novgorod
ESTONIA
Salme
Gulf of Riga
KYIVAN RUS
Volga
DENMARK
JUTLAND
ZEALAND
GOTLAND
Hedeby
Ribe
Vimose
North Sea
Baltic Sea
FUNEN
Don
Kyiv
Dnieper
Caspian Sea
Rhine
NKISH EMPIRE
Danube
Danube
Black Sea
Constantinople
BYZANTINE EMPIRE
Tigris
Baghdad
Euphrates
Mediterranean Sea

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Prologue

KINDLING

There are very few starts. Oh, some things seem *to be beginnings. The curtain goes up, the first pawn moves, the first shot is fired – but* that's *not the start. The play, the game, the war is just a little window on a ribbon of events that may extend back thousands of years. The point is, there's always something* before. *It's* always *a case of Now Read On.*

Terry Pratchett, *Lords and Ladies*

We are taught to think of history as a series of canal locks, each period neatly compartmentalised from the one before and after. Stone Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age, Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Vikings, Normans and so on. Quite often the locks are defined by the deaths of rulers, famous battles, the arbitrary ticking over of the centuries. And just as the canal waters of history flow obediently from one lock to the next, so they stay within their geographical bounds. It is neat, and, to some extent, necessary. It is also artificial. In reality, history is more like a great untamed river: a flowing entity, shifting and branching, merging again, wild and unpredictable. Its streams do not always have clear beginnings or endings. Nor do they always stay within the geographical boundaries set out for them on a map. And the ordinary humans bumped and bounced along by its currents do not always know where they are, let alone where the river is taking them.

Where, then, to start a history of the Viking Age? With the shock of fiery dragons and lightning in the skies over

Northumberland – or so the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reports for the year 793 – before Scandinavian raiders descended on the monks of Lindisfarne? Or do we head upstream, and trace the churning waters back in time?

Let's head back to the Scandinavian homelands, around two thousand years from the present day, to an unassuming Danish bog. Here, thickly squelching carpets and rounded hummocks of moss shade gradually from lime green to rusty orange. Low-lying lakes are framed by spindly birches and willows. In the warmer months, the mirrored pools are spiked with bright yellow flowers of bog asphodel and bladderwort, dotted with white feathery cotton grass. Snipe wade with their needle-long beaks and creaking-bedsprings call, amorous marsh harriers tumble together through the sky. Then the earth starts to tip away, taking with it the warmth and light. New colours appear: the dusty blues and cherry reds of bilberries and lingonberries, the tawny browns and yellows of mushrooms. And with them, creeping cold and damp. Overcast iron skies arrive, and frost-laced water.

For centuries, bogs such as these were gateways between worlds. Shifting landscapes of wet and dry, hanging mists, bubbling marsh gasses, will-o'-the-wisps. Fitting places to commune with the more-than-human forces of this world. Fitting places for sacrifice. The bogs provided sustenance for humans and livestock, black peat for fuel, lumps of bog iron for weapons and tools. But what is taken must be paid for. Clothes, pots, tools, games, weapons, animals, humans. Gifts to the gods on the other side. They all went into the dark: the airless wet spaces and the saturated soil, pickled by acid, their organic matter preserved long after those who cast them into the water. These bogs were wombs for the dead. Some humans were deliberately sacrificed, others perhaps not, but all were delivered into the safekeeping of the water spirits, who immortalised them with shining bronzed skin and coppered hair.

The particular bog we have come to is called Vimose. It is located on Funen (Fyn), the large Danish island between the peninsula of Jutland (Jylland) in the west and the island of Zealand (Sjælland) in the east. It lies roughly on the same latitude as Hadrian's Wall to the west, and the same longitude as Oslo to the north. *Mose* simply means 'bog'. The origins of *vi* are harder to pinpoint. In the Viking Age, the word *vé* or *ví* referred to a 'pagan sanctuary' or 'pagan shrine'. While it is tempting to make the connection and suggest that Vimose means 'pagan shrine bog', there are more likely, somewhat marshier possibilities: 'willow-bog', 'wood-bog' or 'lapwing-bog'.[1]

Squelching about, our fingers find pottery shards and bones, both human and animal. Ancient tools of metal and wood: hammers and tongs, knives and twist-drills, files and fire steels, even anvils. Gaming pieces and scraps of clothing. We find horse trappings and handle-grips of wood and bone and bronze. Iron shield bosses. Bows and arrows hewn from pine. Axes, swords and spear heads. A complete suit of mail armour, its rings clogged with mud. Out they come from the marshy soil, thousands upon thousands of artefacts, often bound together with cloth or string.

The offerings placed in Vimose started out modestly enough in the last century BCE – a few Iron Age pots, food and animal parts. Around the time when BCE ticked over into CE, the first few weapons arrived: a sword and a dozen spear heads. Over time, more spears, swords, shields and belts drifted down through the water, until thousands of weapons lay submerged with other offerings in the mud. This was no unique phenomenon. Around twenty Danish bogs have been found with Iron Age war gear deposits, reaching a peak in the third and fourth centuries. Often there are traces of ritual destruction – the points of weapons bent – as if they had been neutralised, or perhaps 'killed' would be a better word, so they could pass over to the other side.

In this bog, we see hints of what was to come as the centuries marched on towards the Viking Age. These offerings are evidence of the increasing militarisation of northern European societies, and the growth of far-reaching connections, alliances and tensions. In the early centuries CE, wealth, power and territory were becoming concentrated in the hands of a few powerful leaders. An elite military class emerged, capable of raising big armies and controlling resources over long distances. Especially in the case of large-scale sacrifices of war gear, it seems likely that the items belonged to unsuccessful invaders from further afield: other parts of Denmark, north from regions of what are now Norway and Sweden, south from parts of what are now Germany and Poland. Their bodies were stripped by their victorious enemies, their belongings repurposed as gifts to the spirits of the marshy waters.

Alongside Scandinavian-made weapons thrown into the bog were others that came from the Roman Empire. Vimose contains some impressive Roman finery, such as a gilded bronze gryphon head – a mythical beast half-lion, half-eagle – that might once have decorated a parade helmet. Likewise, a sword hilt made from elephant ivory must have travelled a very long way – from Africa or India – before it found its final resting place in this bog. These weapons are a reminder of a culturally fluid, interconnected world. Even though it was never part of the Roman Empire, Scandinavia was a part of this wider network. It lay far to the north of the bristling line of earth banks, ditches, palisades and watchtowers that followed the Rhine and the Danube, running for hundreds of kilometres across the Continent. From the Roman perspective, this defensive line was the hinge between their civilisation and the world of barbarism that lay beyond, in the lands they called Germania.

But the Roman Empire did not – could not – shut itself off from those who lived beyond the frontiers. North of the politically fractious borderlands, they cultivated diplomatic alliances

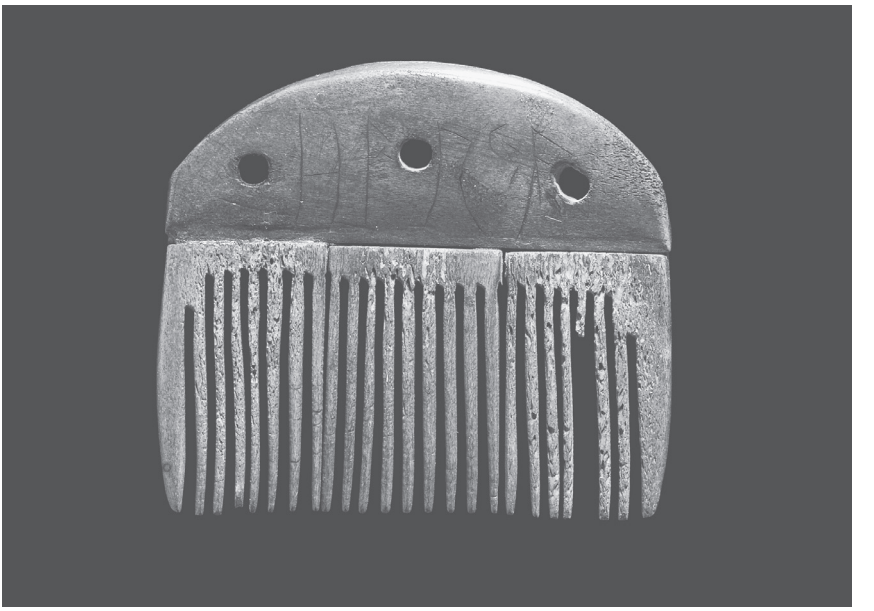
and trade links. Their Germanic enemies would have to watch their backs on two fronts. The tribes of southern Scandinavia – especially those whose territories lay in the lands of Denmark – were among the recipients of this attention. A procession of high-status imports made from materials such as gold, glass and bronze started to head north into southern Scandinavia. Luxury Scandinavian goods such as furs, feathers and amber travelled in the opposite direction, bound for the Roman Empire. In time, they were joined on their southern progress by Scandinavian warriors, looking to sign up to the Roman army as auxiliaries. And when they eventually returned home, they did so with the knowledge, experience and equipment of the most sophisticated military machine of the ancient world.

It was these links between different cultures and places that set many of the wheels in motion for the Viking Age. Alongside the weapons that found their resting places in the bogs of Denmark, other physical objects – often personal possessions that speak intimately of their owners – testify to the cultural influences and ideas about the world that travelled north from the Roman Empire. These too would come to feed into some of the most recognisable cultural features of the Viking Age, from personal hygiene habits to leisure activities, in ways that we will return to throughout this book.

Cast into the dark waters of Vimose were wooden gaming boards scored into grids, together with dice and little round counters made from coloured glass, amber and bones. They are evidence of what the vanquished warriors had got up to in their leisure time. They also tell us something about how board games spread into northern and western Europe from the Roman Empire and found their way north of the frontiers. What began as games of military strategy played by soldiers in their forts and bathhouses snowballed in popularity, until they were adopted and adapted by those whom the Romans sought to subdue. As we will see, by the time of the Viking Age, those who inhabited

the Nordic world were enthusiastic – and sometimes boastful – players of such board games, featuring them in their artwork, their poems and their riddles.

Another extraordinary artefact to find its way into Vimose is a comb made from deer antler, thrown into the bog around the year 160, its shaft arched like a cat's back with twenty-five spiky little teeth. Small enough to nestle in its owner's cupped fingers, this comb is a delicate, diminutive object: the physical remains of a highly personal, everyday ritual from almost two thousand years ago. Used to detangle, delouse, decorate, there is a powerful shared intimacy in haircare, from smoothing an infant's first soft fuzz to gently detangling the friable strands of sickness and senescence. But this comb and its owner were not destined to accompany each other into old age. If it was part of war booty thrown into the bog by the winning side, then its owner had probably not survived the encounter.



A gift to the bog gods: the comb carved with five runes that spell out the word HARJA. Vimose, Denmark, 2nd century.

The Vikings were famous – even notorious, as we will see – for their meticulous grooming habits and their distinctive hairstyles. Their beautiful combs often surface during archaeological digs, and we will meet several of them in this book. But this is hardly the only comb in the world. It is not even the only comb in this particular Danish bog. What makes it unique are the deliberate scratches across its shaft, spelling out the runic letters ᚺᚨᚱᛃᚨ, or HARJA.[2] If the Vikings are known for their raids and ship burials, they are also known for their runes: that spiky north Germanic alphabet still so familiar today. And on this Vimose comb, from hundreds of years before the word Viking was ever uttered, are the earliest decipherable runes that have ever been found. Their meaning is unclear. Perhaps the runes are a case of something doing exactly what it says on the tin, because it might be that *harja* just means 'comb'.[3] Another possibility is that the runes mean something along the lines of 'warrior', 'war' or 'army', which would be appropriate for the context in which the comb was found. Or else they may have been someone's personal name, or perhaps a military title, or a tribal name.[4]

For such a recognisable, iconic form of ancient writing, no one knows for certain where runes came from, although there are several theories. It's probably no coincidence that many of the oldest runic inscriptions discovered come from a context that shows clear evidence of contact with the Roman Empire and its own writing system. Just looking at the shape of runic letters, we can see definite similarities with many letters of the Latin alphabet, which we still use today, but with an angular shape more suited for carving into materials such as wood and stone. It's likely that knowledge of the Roman writing system travelled north with those returning from service in and contact with the empire: military warbands and craftspeople. This might also explain one possible meaning of the word 'rune' itself: something 'secret' or 'hidden', something originally reserved for a particular segment of society, an elite group.

In addition to the comb found in Vimose were several other items with runes carved on them, including a buckle, part of a scabbard and a spearhead. They were thrown into the bog during the third and fourth centuries, when the sacrifices were at their height. But the time would soon come when no more offerings drifted down through the waters to whatever spirits, powers and worlds lay waiting in the magically time-stopping bogs of the north. Change was on its way.

In the year 406, the bristling Rhine frontier was overrun by a confederation of Germanic tribes. The cities of Gaul burned. By the end of the fifth century, the Western Roman Empire had been dismembered, and new Germanic powers had emerged in its place. This was an age of migration and movement, uprooting and resettling, in which tribes found themselves on the move across Europe. It was an age of political jostling and bloodshed, but, then again, when is it not? And for those north of the former imperial frontier, those who had made diplomatic alliances with Roman governors or travelled south to fight in Roman wars, the world was also moving on.

At this point, we are still several centuries from the dawn of the Viking Age, which we can place in the eighth century. We are even further from the idea of Denmark, Norway and Sweden as three unified, distinct kingdoms. But throughout Scandinavia, the centuries that followed the end of the Western Roman Empire saw territorial units continue to coalesce, ruled by an elite class whose power was based primarily on control of economic resources, political alliances and martial strength. These rulers administered power from what are commonly called central places, where they stamped their supremacy on the landscape itself. They built huge wooden halls, intricately decorated and fabulously furnished, which served as gathering places for communal feasts, large-scale religious rituals and legal proceedings. They gathered together merchants and craftspeople under their protection and control, ensuring their own positions as the

fattest spiders at the centre of an expanding web of international trade. And they commissioned burial mounds for themselves and their kin, so that even after their deaths, their presence and power would still loom large in the minds and deeds of the living.

From here, we can start to follow the river downstream again, and see where it leads. For when the fires of the Viking Age began to burn, they fed on kindling that had been laid down at the time of the Roman Empire and in the centuries that followed.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The Viking Age is a glittering thing. It shines with tales and poems of adventurers, heroes and gods, vivid stories that continue to be reshaped and retold down to the present day. It shimmers with intricate craftwork that adorned bodies in life and death: gemstones and glass beads twinkling between twisted loops of silver and gold. It gleams with once-buried hoards packed with silver bullion, far-travelled coins and looted religious treasures. It sparkles with sunlight on water as oars dip and dig into the waves, propelling longships across deep oceans, icy fjords and shallow bays. And it glints with the sharp edges of weapons in the hands of warriors.

Such a reputation would have delighted many who lived in that time. After all, how one was remembered was vital. On this matter, the one-eyed god Odin is said to to have imparted his wisdom in an Old Norse poem called *Hávamál* ('Sayings of the High One'): 'Cattle die, kin die, the self must also die, but glory never dies for the one who is able to achieve it.'[1] And there is truth in this. This was an extraordinary, transformative period of history, during which many individuals created powerful, complex names for themselves. Their prestige was maintained and embellished in poetry and stories that had deep roots in the

Viking Age itself, flitting from mouth to mouth before eventually coming to rest on the pages of medieval manuscripts. Other facets and colours – many dark and bloody – were added to their fame through the writings of those who encountered them from other cultures. And over the centuries that followed, the many afterlives of the Vikings continued to be constructed by those who looked back and built new reputations for these people of the past. The fame and notoriety of the Vikings, in all their glittering facets, is why books such as this one are written and read.

Even so, most reputations do not last long after death. For the most part, each brief, bright flame of a life flickers, glows, then vanishes into the darkness. But that is not the same as never having lived, and it is certainly not the same as never having mattered. Behind the stars of the Viking Age were the everyday people who inhabited this world, who experienced different, varied existences. These were humans who – like most of us – lived through their own triumphs and tragedies, then disappeared from living memory within a couple of generations. They had deeply felt emotions, loves and losses, frustrations and fears. They had robust – sometimes inappropriate – senses of humour, lustful impulses, medical problems, heartbreaking backstories. They were of different ethnicities, sexualities, classes, ages and abilities. They had names, homes, and loved ones to miss them after they had gone. And yet, at the same time, they occupied a different time and a different place in the great churning river of history. They operated within different social and cultural frameworks. They had different experiences of being in the world and different expectations of life. Familiar in so many ways, perhaps, but not the same.

This isn't a history about the exceptions to the rule: the powerful players and half-historical legends whose lights burned brightly and whose names and deeds of derring-do were commemorated in epic sagas and praise poems. It's a history of the everyday humans who fell between the cracks of history, told

through the little bits and pieces that survived the vagaries of time and quirks of fate. At best, some of them might merit a metaphorical footnote in the annals and legends of history. But for the most part this is about those who were never in the stories in the first place. They may have sat round the fire telling and listening to the stories, or caught snatches of these tales as they brought in the food and cleared up afterwards. They may have missed the stories because they were outside answering the call of nature or getting up to indecorous activities under cover of darkness. Or they may have been listening to the distant laughter and chatter from beyond the warm circle of firelight because they were never invited in the first place. In other words, this is a history of the Viking Age with the ordinary humans left in.

Thanks to the geographical and chronological range, this is also a history of humans on an extraordinarily global stage. It is on this stage that people lived, died and left traces of themselves. Sometimes these traces tell us a lot about what their lives were like, at other times they give us only the briefest glimpse. Clothes, toys and gaming pieces, combs, trash and treasure, love notes and obscenities carved into slivers of wood: the sort of intimate ephemera that connect us to the people of the past. These are the 'embers of the hands' of this book title: the glowing remnants that survive when the bright flame of a life has vanished.

The phrase 'embers of the hands' comes from the Viking Age itself. It's a kenning, a little word puzzle that poets – called skalds – tucked up in their fiendishly intricate verses. A kenning describes something familiar in a roundabout, often metaphorical way. In this case, the original meaning of this kenning was 'gold', a precious metal glowing and shimmering like fire on the hand of the one who possesses it. It was part of a verse composed by an eleventh-century Icelander called Thorarin Skeggjason, who was court poet to the Norwegian king Harald *harðráði* ('hard ruler'), more commonly Anglicised as Hardrada, killed at the Battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066. Harald Hardrada

was most definitely one of those powerful players of the Viking Age, whose glittering reputation was preserved and embellished in sagas and poems long after his lifetime. In fact, as we will see, his death is often used as a marker for the end of the Viking Age itself. But the embers that I want to blow back to life in this book are rather different to the ones that kings such as Harald would have recognised and valued. Ours, no less precious, are the personal fragments and everyday detritus that remain of lives long past. They help us to uncover hidden histories and illuminate a world beyond the usual tales of raiders, traders and rulers. By uncovering some of the many and diverse experiences of the Viking Age, by capturing brief moments of past lives, we can build up a fresh understanding of what it meant to live through these times, away from the grand narrative sweep of history.

Such tiny flames, burning in the darkness, also remind us that when we think about this era, indeed any era, the reality for most people is rarely that ordered version of history with clear-cut beginnings and endings. We can fix ourselves in time by thinking of the Viking Age as a period that spanned from roughly 750 to 1100. But the embers of history come from fires that were lit long before any official dates used to define them, and continued to smoulder long afterwards.[2]

Where?

If we interpret the meaning of the 'Viking Age' literally, it starts in the last decade of the eighth century, with the first recorded Scandinavian raids abroad. This is because, at the time, the noun 'Viking' simply meant a raider, usually seaborne. Medieval Scandinavians had their versions of the word (*víkingr* for the raider, *víking* for the raid itself), as did the Anglo-Saxons in England (*wīcing*). Academics sometimes tussle over the origins of the

word and where it came from, but no one can quite agree, and the debate tends to go around in circles.[3]

Words change their meanings over time. 'Viking' disappeared for several hundred years, before being reintroduced and polished up in the 1800s. Eventually, it became shorthand for a whole cultural diaspora, a whole historical period and everyone connected to it. That's a lot of heavy lifting for a little word. The danger is that this might colour our perceptions of who these people were too much to be useful. If we referred to Ancient Greece as the 'Hoplite Age', the first thing we might think of is soldiers with round shields, long spears and faceless bronze helmets. Warfare, then, would become the dominant characteristic of the period, probably at the expense of other aspects of Greek history such as philosophy, poetry and pottery. Similarly, if we think of the 'Viking Age' as dominated by macho raiders with big beards and bigger boats, glorying in nicknames such as 'foul-fart', 'troll-burster' and 'ale-lover', then we leave almost everyone out of the picture. All the women, for a start. But at the same time, 'Viking' is a useful catch-all, which helps us define – very broadly – a fascinating cultural group and historical phenomenon.

As an alternative, 'Norse' is a useful, if broad, shorthand for the common cultural sphere of the medieval Nordic world, with its history, languages and literature.[4] It's a helpful word that takes some of the load off 'Viking' as an all-purpose adjective, and some of the historical baggage associated with it. For now, we'll stick to 'Viking', 'Viking Age' and 'Norse' until someone comes up with something better that everyone can agree on. And since, the 'Age Roughly from 750–1100 CE During Which Those Primarily of Scandinavian Origins and Heritage Took Part in Raiding, Trading and Settlement Both Within and Beyond Scandinavia' doesn't have quite the same ring to it, we might be waiting a while.

At its height, the sphere of Viking Age activity and influence stretched north to the spare wastes of the Arctic, and west across the North Atlantic. It extended east across the Baltic to the

churning waterways and wide-skied steppes of Eurasia. It ranged south to the glittering splendour of the Byzantine Empire and the sophisticated Abbasid Caliphate. The people who made up the Viking Age story lived different, varied existences. A Greenlandic walrus hunter, an imperial bodyguard in Constantinople, a nomadic reindeer herder crossing the Arctic tundra, an enslaved Briton farming the thin volcanic soils of Iceland: all such individuals might be threads in the densely woven tapestry of the Viking Age.

But the story of the Viking Age begins in the Scandinavian heartlands of Norway, Sweden and Denmark. Geographically speaking, this is an expansive and topographically varied region. Norway's vastly long coastline is deeply indented with glacier-carved fjords and peppered with islands. Inland, huge snow-capped mountains and wide moorland plateaus are broken up by deep lakes and fertile strips of valleys. Trees cluster thickly and agricultural land is scarce. To the east, Sweden too has its share of mountains, and plentiful forests and lakes. It also has gently undulating lowlands and richer agricultural land, especially in the south. Both Norway and Sweden stretch north across the Arctic Circle, where the treeline gives way to the lichens and mosses of the Arctic tundra. Here, midsummer is a riot of bright flowers and peach skies at midnight. Midwinter is a time of deep-blue light at midday, blanketing snow, and colours rippling through the sky. To the south of Norway and Sweden sit the many islands of Denmark, a place of connection by land and water, with marshy tidal flats in the west. Flanked by the North Sea and the Baltic Sea on either side, Denmark is connected to the European continent via the Jutland Peninsula. For the most part, it is a flatter, greener landscape of heaths, bogs and plains, more suited for agriculture than most of Norway or Sweden.

Despite such geographical range and breadth, the concept of this region as a distinct, culturally connected entity can be traced far back in time. In his encyclopedic *Natural History* completed in

77 CE, Pliny the Elder was the first known writer to use the name 'Scatinavia' to describe the Scandinavia Peninsula (an 'n' was added to later manuscripts, giving us the word we know today). The word comes from Proto-Germanic and may mean something like 'dangerous land on the water', the danger perhaps referring to the surrounding seas.[5]

By the time we reach the Gothic historian Jordanes, living in sixth-century Constantinople, there is a strong sense of a geographically distinct region with a social organisation based on tribal divisions. His *Getica*, which he bases largely on the work of earlier classical authors, lists the names of around thirty different peoples who inhabit the region he calls 'Scandza'. In terms of the topography, he describes a vast lake in the east of the region, and immense seas to the west and north. He notes that those living in the far north experience forty days and nights of continual light at midsummer, and the equivalent continual darkness at midwinter, which makes them as joyful in the summer as they are miserable in the winter. Meanwhile, Jordanes reports, the chill is so terrible that wolves cross over the frozen sea and are blinded by the cold, and there are no honeybees in the land.

We have to come forward in time several centuries, into the Viking Age itself, for evidence of the names that we would now recognise as the three Scandinavian countries. One of the most remarkable testimonials is that of an individual we know as Ohthere, a trader and explorer from the far north of Norway. He visited the court of King Alfred in Anglo-Saxon England in the latter part of the ninth century. There, his oral narrative of the far northern lands, resources and peoples of Scandinavia was translated and set down in Old English, the language spoken by the Anglo-Saxons. This is why he is known by the Old English version of his name, Ohthere, whereas his actual name was probably Ottar. Compared to the classical texts that came before, the topographical and ethnographical precision of Ohthere's account is of a different order of magnitude. He provides recognisable

descriptions of landmasses and the sailing distances between them, and detailed information about the different peoples who inhabit various regions. In Ohthere's account, we have some of the earliest examples of the names of all three countries that we would recognise: the embryonic realms of *Norðweg* ('Norway'), *Denemearce* ('Denmark') and *Sweoland* ('Sweden'). By the end of the Viking Age, versions of these three countries – not entirely with the same geographical borders as today – were acquiring distinctive identities as nations ruled by single monarchs. But this was a slow and ongoing process, in which Denmark took an early lead, Norway was close behind and Sweden took its time to catch up.

Despite the regional and national distinctions, those who lived at the time were aware that they were part of a cultural network linked through the language we now call Old Norse. Those who spoke the language referred to it as the *dǫnsk tunga* ('Danish tongue') or alternatively *norrœn* ('Norse').[6] As we will see, colonies were established during the Viking Age in locations such as Britain and Ireland, Iceland and Greenland. This is a pattern of migration and expansion that is sometimes referred to as a diaspora, because migrant communities maintained cultural and political contact with their ancestral homelands. Language was among its most important markers.

Ohthere's account is also important because it provides a strong sense of Scandinavia as an interconnected cultural sphere involving other indigenous peoples who inhabited the peninsula. These groups did not necessarily share the same linguistic background or cultural practices as the Norse, and yet they were notable players in the Viking Age story. The most important of these were those known as *Finnar* by their Norse-speaking neighbours. They were the ancestors of Scandinavia's modern-day Sámi population. For the most part, they were nomadic hunters and fishers with ready access to valuable Arctic furs and skins. Their primary territories ranged across the far north

of what is now Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. Hailing from Arctic Norway, Ohthere himself made much of his wealth through trading with and collecting tribute from his neighbours. But the Norse–Sámi relationship was also characterised by intermarriage and cross-cultural influences. There is also archaeological evidence that the Sámi also operated in southern areas of Scandinavia.

There are many other peoples and cultures who had their parts to play in the history of the Viking Age. To understand when and where they entered the story, we need to return to those great rivers of history for a historical overview.

The Viking Age

The Viking Age, as an especially swampy part of the vast braided waterways of history, is harder to define than many periods. This does not mean that we should ignore the challenge, which can only improve our understanding of the past in all its messiness and complexity. That challenge runs through this book. For now, it will help us to get our bearings if we keep our feet dry and take in the view from a distance.

Through the eighth century the north began to develop rapidly in new ways. Much of this had to do with money. After the economic slump that followed the fall of the Western Roman Empire, a new influx of silver coins spread into northern Europe, lubricating the wheels of trade. Already by the year 700, new trading centres had sprung up on both sides of the English Channel. There was Quentovic, near Boulogne on the French coast; Hamwic, just outside what is now Southampton; Lundenwic, an Anglo-Saxon trading port upriver of the old Roman city of Londinium, where Westminster now stands; and Dorestad near the mouth of the Rhine, in the modern Netherlands. These and similar places formed a network of hubs for seaborne

merchants who shuttled between them, exchanging goods and coins that would then penetrate further inland.

People in Scandinavia, on the edge of this slow-motion economic boom, were soon drawn into it. Their homelands, though relatively poor in agricultural land, had much to offer. The far north had the best furs in Europe, hunted and collected in cold climes and shipped south to eager traders who would pay good money for this luxury resource. In eastern Scandinavia, the shores of the Baltic Sea were a major source of amber. Skins, eiderdown and whetstones for sharpening blades would also fetch good prices. Scandinavian merchants would return home with exotic products from the south such as wine, jewellery, and high-quality swords greatly prized by the rising chieftains of the north. A few decades passed, and by the mid-eighth century the first of what would become northern trading hubs had started to appear, reflecting those in the south. These included Ribe and Hedeby in Denmark, Kaupang in Norway, Birka in Sweden, Wolin on the southern coast of the Baltic, and even Staraja Ladoga, a far-flung trading post in what is now north-west Russia. This last settlement was connected by vast waterways to the Islamic world of the Middle East, another lucrative market for northern resources, and in time also to the Byzantine Empire.

In this heady period there were fortunes to be made and power to be had. Two things were crucial: control of resources and control of how those resources changed hands. In Arctic Norway, for example, local chieftains who forced others to give them furs in tribute or taxation would quickly rise to the top of the pile. Meanwhile, Danish rulers who controlled the narrow seaways linking the Baltic to the lucrative markets of the south, or who controlled the trading centres themselves, would likewise gain power and wealth. And traders and craftspeople also brought new ideas and technologies into the lands of the north.

For those leaders who fancied themselves a step or two above the average chieftain, there were ample models of kingship

to the south. Britain was home to a patchwork of kingdoms, Ireland to a shifting constellation of quarrelsome petty rulers. On the Continent was the only superpower of western Europe, the Carolingian Empire, which by the year 800 encompassed the modern areas of France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Switzerland, as well as respectable chunks of Italy, Austria and Germany. As we have seen from the Prologue, northern rulers had long cultivated economic and diplomatic relationships with the south. In the process, they absorbed ideas of what real power could look like, and how they might achieve it. Although historical sources are lacking for this period in Scandinavia, archaeological evidence clearly shows how, in Denmark at least, this had an impact. In 737 work began on a monumental ditch and earth bank topped with a timber palisade that stretched across part of southern Denmark. In later centuries this was expanded into the defensive system known as the *Danevirke*. Scandinavia had never seen a construction on this scale, and it is a vivid sign of an ambitious local ruler with a great deal to protect and the resources to invest in protecting it.

The eighth century saw a steady build-up of wealth, power and ambition within Scandinavia. This also made it ripe for competition and conflict. For every top dog there were others vying for the position, many of whom might devise alternative routes to status and prosperity. As the arteries of trade grew fatter, they attracted the parasitic problem of piracy. And it was only a matter of time before Viking adventurers would burst out into the wider world.

From an Anglo-Saxon perspective, the first acts of violence from seaborne Scandinavian raiders are framed as bolts out of the blue. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reports that, around the year 787, three ships arrived on the Isle of Portland, off the coast of Dorset: 'There came for the first time three ships of Northmen and then the reeve rode to them and wished to force them to the king's residence, for he did not know what they were; and they

slew him. Those were the first ships of Danish men which came to the land of the English.'[7]

This entry is written retrospectively, with the knowledge that these are only the 'first ships' because worse is to come. And indeed, in the year 793 came the infamous raid on the island monastery of Lindisfarne, just off the coast of Northumberland. It is painted by the scribes of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as a cataclysmic event where the heavens themselves foretell the horror to come:

> In this year dire portents appeared over Northumbria and sorely frightened the people. They consisted of immense whirlwinds and flashes of lightning, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air. A great famine immediately followed those signs, and a little after that in the same year, on 8 June, the ravages of the heathen men miserably destroyed God's church on Lindisfarne, with plunder and slaughter.[8]

More was to follow in the coming years, as a series of alluringly vulnerable and wealthy monasteries from the Hebrides to Ireland and the French coast were brutally attacked. Rulers scrambled to build defences against these unwelcome intruders; clerics lamented the sins that had brought such punishment upon Christian folk and urged repentance. But these raids were just the beginning.

By the 830s, a new generation of Viking raiders was building on the achievements of their parents. Their ambitions were even greater, helped by the descent of the Carolingian Empire into civil war in 830. They began striking less vulnerable targets, and venturing ever farther from their boats. The Carolingian merchant centre at Dorestad – ironically, one of the engines that had helped drive the northern trading boom a century earlier – was so devastated by annual raids from 834 to 837 that it never fully recovered. In 842 Quentovic and Hamwic suffered a similar fate.

Meanwhile, in 836 Viking bands launched inland raids in Somerset and Ireland, while around the same time others began to serve as mercenaries for local rulers in Cornwall, Northumbria and Ireland. From the 840s Viking raiders were feeling confident enough not to return home after each year's expedition, as they had been doing, but to establish winter camps. This gave them the opportunity to strike more rapidly inland when spring arrived. At the same time, the scale and political impact of the raids grew. When a Viking fleet of 120 ships sailed up the Seine and threatened Paris in 845, it was bought off with 7,000 pounds of gold and silver, a fortune vast enough to set up every member of the expedition for life. In 859 another fleet even ventured as far as the Mediterranean and was plundering Carolingian territory in the Rhône valley.

To their victims, the Vikings were a relentless and lamentable plague through the middle decades of the ninth century. Had things stayed like this, the raids would likely have fizzled out as the number of potential targets dwindled and the kingdoms of western Europe strengthened their defences against seaborne attacks. But success breeds success, and by the 860s the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of those first Viking raiders began to nurse ambitions that their forebears scarcely could have imagined. In 865 a large fleet landed in England, with the aim not of hit-and-run raids, but of conquest. Within five years it had demolished the centuries-old Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of East Anglia, Northumbria and Mercia. Only the southern kingdom of Wessex remained. It was from this base that the West Saxon king, Alfred, eventually managed to fight the so-called 'Great Heathen Army' to a stalemate in 878. Thereafter England was divided between English and Scandinavian zones of control. While some of the former invaders decided to try their luck back in Carolingian territory, many chose to remain in eastern and northern England, turning their thoughts from plunder to settlement.

And so, after about a hundred years of raiding and conquering, the temper of the Viking Age began to change. This transition to settling and farming took place simultaneously elsewhere in the Viking sphere of activity. Whereas most of the initial settlers in England appear to have been of Danish extraction, the northern archipelagos of Orkney, Shetland and the Faroes were settled mainly by Norwegians in the late ninth and early tenth centuries. From here sailors ventured ever further into the North Atlantic. From the 870s waves of migrants from Norway and the British Isles put down roots in Iceland, the first permanent settlers on that island of ice and fire. Further south, a Viking called Rollo seized land at the mouth of the Seine before being formally granted it by the Frankish King Robert in 911, thus becoming the first Duke of Normandy. By the end of the tenth century, intrepid settlers had reached Greenland, and archaeological evidence proves that further expeditions even reached continental North America, establishing seasonal camps in what is now Newfoundland around the year 1000.

Meanwhile other adventurous bands of Scandinavians, this time mainly Swedes, were busily exploiting the opportunities to be had to the east of their homeland. As in the west, silver coins were the lubricant of trade. In this case, they were brought north from the Islamic world in the years leading up to around 800. The prospect of wealth drew Swedes to establish trading posts in the region of what is now north-west Russia. From there, they headed down the churning waters of the Rivers Don, Dnieper and Volga, trading highways that linked them to the other two superpowers of their world, the Abbasid Caliphate and the Byzantine Empire.

Again, as in the west, Viking activity blurred between peaceful trading, extortion and outright pillaging. A Viking assault on the Byzantine capital of Constantinople is recorded in 860, followed by another in 907 and a massive raid on the southern coast of the Caspian Sea in 912–13. Their audacity alone indicates

that the Vikings of the east – the Rus, as they became known – were no less ambitious than their western counterparts. Indeed, by the late ninth century the Rus had created a powerful state centred on Novgorod in the north and Kyiv in the south. Founded as a Scandinavian dynasty ruling over a predominantly Slavic population, it seems that within a few generations the Rus had adopted largely Slavic linguistic and cultural traditions. Yet Rus princes through the tenth century maintained close political ties to their ancestral homelands. Further south in Constantinople, the heart of the Byzantine Empire, warriors of Scandinavian heritage entered imperial service, some becoming members of the emperor's personal bodyguard. Known as Varangians, they counted among their number King Harald Hardrada, who gained his 'embers of the hands' – that poetic kenning for gold – for services rendered during his time in Constantinople.

It's ironic that we know more about Scandinavians abroad in this period than about what was happening in their homelands. Despite the murky historical sources, however, it is clear that major changes were afoot. In the late tenth century, as Norse settlers were busy building farmsteads in the inlets of Greenland and Varangians were tramping through the imperial palace of Constantinople, Denmark was being forged into a unified kingdom. Under the dynamic and powerful Harald Bluetooth, who succeeded his father as king in 958 or 959, royal power grew to an extent never before seen in Scandinavia. Harald built immense monuments at Jelling to honour his departed parents, extended the *Danevirke* against attacks from the south, ordered the construction of the first and longest bridge known from the entire Viking Age, and peppered his realm with massive circular fortresses. Most significant of all was his decision to convert himself and – according to his own propaganda, at least – the whole Danish nation to the Christian religion.

The unifications of Denmark, Norway and Sweden into embryonic medieval kingdoms was a long and complex process.

But by the year 1000 Scandinavia had emerged from the fog of prehistory and was rapidly integrating itself into the European mainstream. Part of this 'integration' involved more attacks on England. In the 990s, a new wave of large-scale Viking incursions led to heightened prejudice against the Scandinavian minority in England. This minority would have included descendants of the original Viking settlers as well as more recent immigrants, marked out by language and culture as distinct from the Anglo-Saxon population. On 13 November 1002, King Æthelred of England ordered a general uprising against them, in what became known as the St Brice's Day massacre. We will return to this event in the chapter on 'Bodies'.

In 1013, after a turbulent decade of warfare and raiding, the Danish king Svein Forkbeard, son of Harald Bluetooth, invaded England. King Æthelred was ousted, and Svein was crowned king on Christmas Day. Five weeks later he was dead, and Æthelred was back on the throne. But by the end of 1016, Svein's own son, Cnut, was king of England. In this high-stakes game of musical chairs, it was Cnut who was the real winner, and he kept the English throne until his death in 1035. In that time, he also became ruler of Norway and Denmark, establishing what is sometimes called the 'North Sea Empire'. But within a decade of his death, Cnut's nascent empire had dissolved as England and Denmark went their separate dynastic ways.

From an English point of view, at least, the Viking Age is often said to culminate in the dramatic events of 1066. Three contenders for the throne – King Harold of England, King Harald of Norway and Duke William of Normandy – fought a pair of bloody and decisive battles that ended with William's total victory and the beginning of Norman England as a tidily distinctive period of history. As we shall see at the end of this book, the reality was more complicated, especially when we look past the borders of England. The Norwegian king was still fighting for dominion over Scotland and the Western Isles

in the thirteenth century, while Orkney and Shetland remained the property of the Norwegian crown until 1472. The settlers of Iceland sustained themselves into the new millennium, although four centuries of effective independence came to an end with their grudging acceptance of Norwegian overlordship in the 1260s. Meanwhile, further west across the North Atlantic, the Norse settlement in Greenland was not destined to survive beyond the Middle Ages. Always remote and marginal, the colonists faced a cooling climate that made their agricultural way of life unsustainable. Communication across the ice-strewn North Atlantic grew ever more sporadic. By about 1500 the last farmsteads had been abandoned, and the last glowing embers of the Viking Age were snuffed out.

Society

Whatever else was happening in the world, people needed to eat. If they were lucky, they had enough to eat; if they were very lucky, they had more than enough. Farming was by far the most important occupation, the foundation upon which everything else – economics, politics, society – rested. This meant that land was the most precious resource of all, the most solid basis of wealth and prosperity, and the most obvious measure of power. It rooted people in the landscape. When Viking invaders in England decided to settle down in 876, they took plots of land in Northumbria and, according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 'proceeded to plough and to support themselves'.[9] Around the same time, the first settlers in Iceland were claiming land: the settlement itself was called the *landnám*, or 'land-taking'.

Where climatic conditions allowed, arable farming was favoured. Crops were the most efficient way of producing nutrients from the earth, and grain could be kept unspoilt for longer than meat. While this was possible in southern parts of

Scandinavia particularly, in many areas it was difficult due to the ground being rockier, the soil thinner and the growing season shorter and colder. These regions were much better suited to expansive pastoral farms of cows, sheep and goats. Pigs could be rather fussy about where they liked to live, especially in colder, more marginal landscapes. A pig rootling around in an autumnal woodland of nuts and berries, or in the muddy outfields of a farm, or in the excitingly squalid streets of a Viking Age town such as York or Dublin, was a plump, happy creature. A pig on a Greenlandic farmstead enduring a long, frozen winter was emphatically less so. Over time, Norse farmers creating new lives out on the islands of the North Atlantic adapted their mix of livestock to the specific conditions in which they found themselves. Goats and sheep emerged as the real winners. Other than keeping farm animals, hunting was common, particularly in more sparsely settled areas such as the Arctic climes of northern Scandinavia and Greenland, where animals were sought not just for meat, but for valuable tradable resources such as fur or walrus ivory. Where it existed – and it was sparse in the North Atlantic – woodland offered the chance to forage for nuts, wild fruit, roots, herbs and even edible leaves and tree bark in times of hardship. For those living near salt or fresh water – and that applied to many Viking Age communities – fish and other marine resources were often an important component of their diet.

Given the importance of food production, it is no surprise that the basic unit of Viking Age society was the farmstead. The people who lived on it tended to be largely self-sufficient. They grew, fished or hunted whatever they could, bartering with neighbours or itinerant merchants for anything else. Other necessities, such as textiles, tools and building materials, were also produced at or near home. Animals were exploited down to the last useful sinew. The majority of the population lived close to subsistence levels much of the time, although fluctuating between scarcity and abundance from season to season and

year to year. Life was tough and unrelenting, kept up through physical effort in the face of an uncompromising natural environment. Their material world was one of wood, wool, flax, bone, stone, leather and antler, hand-wrought and fashioned, with metal a precious commodity to be treasured and recycled.

If a farm produced a surplus, it would likely be exchanged for goods or animals in kind, or the services of a specialised craftsperson such as a blacksmith or carpenter. Although coins existed in the Viking world, most people lived outside any sort of monetary economy as we would understand it today. As we saw above, silver coinage was used in the long-distance trade of luxury resources, and large quantities were also acquired through the more nefarious methods of raiding or extortion. It was valued not for its monetary value, but for its intrinsic worth as a precious metal, or bullion, and accumulating it was measure of success and influence. It is no coincidence that the largest concentration of silver hoards discovered anywhere in the Viking world – more than 700 individual hoards to date – is on the island of Gotland in the middle of the Baltic Sea, since it was a turntable for merchants and raiders travelling between Sweden and the east.

Although traders were never more than a minority in the Viking Age, they have left a strong archaeological footprint in the form of their central marketplaces, such as the abovementioned Ribe and Hedeby in Denmark. They appeared around the year 700, not as fully fledged settlements, but as convenient seasonal meeting places and winter harbours for long-distance traders. After several decades, the trade routes were sufficiently secure and prosperous that some traders, perhaps encouraged by a local chieftain or petty king, chose to build permanent dwellings at specific sites, laid out in regularly spaced plots along the waterfront. These small communities, as well as providing access to regional and international trade networks, themselves

became markets for local farmers, blacksmiths, carpenters, textile workers, potters and other craftspeople, and so their populations began to grow. Hedeby, for instance, was quite densely populated at its height between 800 and 1000, with a tidy grid of streets that was home to more than a thousand people, a forest of jetties projecting out into the water.

Such 'proto-urban' trading sites, however, always meant more to the elites than to most of the population. Later in the Viking Age we see a new wave of settlements across Scandinavia, this time deliberate creations by kings and the Christian Church, including Roskilde in Denmark, Sigtuna in Sweden, and Bergen in Norway, that would endure as true urban centres. Beyond Scandinavia there were similarly thriving cities with large Norse populations, such as Dublin, York and Novgorod. Each of these has revealed remarkable evidence to archaeologists, and we shall revisit them later in this book. Nevertheless, urban dwellers were always a minority in an age dominated by scattered rural settlement and subsistence farming.

Of course, our view of farming life so far has been a generalisation, and much depended on time and place. An isolated farming family in the Western Settlement of Greenland, for whom even bread was a rare luxury, would have a very different way of life from their counterparts in the fertile and well-settled hinterland outside the Danish trading town of Hedeby. Even the size and construction methods of houses varied hugely, from the substantial timber longhouses of prosperous chieftains to hobbit-hole Arctic farmhouses with insulating walls several metres thick, while roofs could be made of thatch, shingles or turf. In southern Jutland some farms were clustered together in uniform, carefully laid-out plots that formed what we might call a village; elsewhere in Scandinavia they formed loose hamlets with no attempt at regular organisation. As the centuries came and went, customs of building and laying out the farmstead also shifted. Whereas at the start of the period it was common for

the many functions and activities of a farm to be combined in a single longhouse, to the extent that both humans and livestock slept under the same roof, over time there was a trend to separate out the different activities into individual buildings on the same plot.

We find similar variation when we look at households themselves. Generally speaking, larger farms required more labourers, and the wealthier landowners might have more hangers-on, swelling the total size of the household to several dozen. They were a minority, however. The average household was much smaller, centred on a nuclear family, with additions such as older relatives, foster-children and perhaps an enslaved labourer or two. This unit was deeply enmeshed in a wider network of kinship and alliance, formed by ties of blood as well as marriage, concubinage and fosterage, which constituted the primary identity for most people. It was certainly much more important than any identification with a kingdom or nation, which is unsurprising when we consider how weak the power of the state was in this period.

Without a professional police force, the enforcement of laws depended on the wider community itself. Hence personal security came, in the first instance at least, from the support and protection of kin. This is one reason for the prevalence of the inter-family feuds that often liven up the pages of Icelandic sagas. It also helps us understand why exile was such an extreme form of punishment. For many, being torn from the kinship network and thrown out on the mercy of a suspicious and hostile world was a sentence not far removed from death.

Not everybody enjoyed the benefits of a kinship network in the first place. This was no egalitarian society of free peasants; on the contrary, it was based on strict concepts of hierarchy. These are difficult to reconstruct and no doubt varied widely, but some basic points hold true. As we shall see in the chapter 'Unfreedom', an unknown proportion of the population was enslaved, lacking the legal rights and protections enjoyed by the

free. Above them was the free bulk of the population, formed of landholders with varying degrees of independence and wealth, and above them a much smaller group of powerful chieftains or kings. Note that both 'chieftains' and 'kings' describe males, and this tells us another truth of the period, namely that women tended to be subordinated to men by the norms of a heavily patriarchal society. Beyond these essential points it is unwise to generalise. For example, even enslaved people were not all equal. Some were enslaved after being taken prisoner in raids or battles. Others were born into the condition or perhaps entered it through financial misfortune. They also had disparate functions in the society and economy, from undertaking the most tedious and undesirable tasks on the farm (herding pigs or goats, spreading manure, digging peat and so on) to working as a household servant, exercising manual skills such as baking, textile-making or carpentry, or even acting in positions of responsibility as estate stewards.

If we consider the position of females in society (as we will throughout this book), things become even more complicated. We can start with the generalisation that women, no matter their status, were more socially constrained than most men and were granted little opportunity to play a formal role in the worlds of law and politics. But beyond that, we are faced with a galaxy of different experiences and realities. A woman could be enslaved, free or noble; she could have a range of craft skills, or none; she might bear and raise children, or not; she could be literate or illiterate. Women may have rarely joined plundering expeditions (except unwillingly en route), but they would have been indispensable both back home in Scandinavia and in the various Norse settlement areas. After all, the next generation of Vikings had to come from somewhere, even though the surviving written sources have very little to say about the topic of childbirth. As we will see in the chapter 'Love', that such a vital feature of society attracted virtually no attention from authors

itself tells us something about both the nature of the sources and the contemporary perception of gender roles. It also reminds us what we have to gain from venturing off the beaten historical track into the undergrowth of material evidence.

Religion

Anyone with a passing familiarity with the Viking Age can probably reel off the names and defining features of a few Norse gods. Thor with his hammer, Freyja with her cat-pulled chariot, the one-eyed Odin, the trickster Loki and others are virtually household names. But if we truly want to understand the Viking Age, this pop-culture familiarity might work against us. Over the years, film-makers, novelists and artists have selected, repackaged and made relatable specific bits of a world view that really *ought* to feel uncomfortably weird to a modern audience. Even before we start thinking about the Norse gods, our first task is to acknowledge this strangeness. This was a world in which the concept of 'supernatural forces' itself had no meaning, since gods and spirits were very much embedded in the physical world, as real and obvious as sunshine, wind or gravity. They might be invisible, but their power could be felt; and since they existed, perhaps they could be influenced.

When it comes to understanding the specifics, on the one hand we are very lucky. The Norse world converted to Christianity far later than most of northern Europe. This means we have far more information about their pre-Christian beliefs and practices than, say, those of Anglo-Saxon England before the conversion. But on the other hand, this can lull us into a false sense of security. We need to remember that our written descriptions of Norse pagan practices and beliefs come from outside the system. Texts from the Viking Age itself were written by Christian or Islamic writers from other parts of the medieval