

# **LAUGHING SHALL I DIE: LIVES AND DEATHS OF THE GREAT VIKINGS**

(TOM SHIPPEY)

July 10, 2019

In these days where man is held to be *homo economicus*, we are told that all people are basically the same, and what they want, most of all, is ease and comfort. Real Vikings prove this false. Instead, they reflect back to us a strange combination of very bad behavior and until-the-last-dog-dies virtue. Tom Shippey wants to talk about those real Vikings, not the sanitized ones who were supposedly much like us, just colder. If you read this book, therefore, you'll get the Vikings in all their bloody, malicious glory.

Shippey (a professor of Old and Middle English literature, and one of the world's leading authorities on J. R. R. Tolkien) tells what we know about the Vikings, primarily from their own stories about themselves, the sagas. He combines this with other sources, including archaeology and the written histories of those with whom the Vikings came into contact, to create a vivid and compelling narrative. It may seem strange to treat the sagas as history, since fantasy elements, from dwarves to dragons to Valkyrie, are ubiquitous, and many were written down centuries after the events in them took place. The author takes the position, apparently not uncontroversial, that the sagas can nonetheless be used as history, though with caution and only in some instances. Either way, the sagas show the Viking mentality, not so much through the plots of the stories, but through the actions of the people in them. Most of all, it is this Viking mindset that Shippey cares about; he calls it "a kind of death cult," which does not seem an exaggeration.

Shippey is well-versed in the languages in which the sagas were written, including Old Norse; he does his own translations. Given the bowdlerization that is common in pre-modern translations, this is very helpful to the reader. The stories in the sagas are very complex, largely due to the tangled webs of kinship they portray. These are not fairy tales, with a simple story and simple moral, but Shippey does an excellent job of exposition. He emphasizes that sagas aren't meant to be beautiful or delicate; they aim instead to follow extremely strict rules of rhyme and meter, and are full of complex grammar and obscure

allusions. The creation of excellent poetry was regarded as a high virtue and accomplishment for men in their off hours, when they weren't killing other men.

Vikings are often incorrectly seen as synonymous with Scandinavians. In Old Norse, *vikigr* meant simply pirate or marauder. "It wasn't an ethnic label, it was a job description." Shippey rejects revisionist accounts that try to paint the Vikings as settlers, or traders, or nice people who just occasionally got caught up in fighting. Plenty of Scandinavians were settlers, traders, and nice people—just not the Vikings. For three hundred years, they stole and murdered across much of northern Europe, especially England, and got as far as Constantinople and southern Spain. "To the modern mind, it is amazing, almost incomprehensible, how so many thousands of men, over generations, took appalling risks in small boats and continuous hand-to-hand and face-to-face confrontations with edged weapons, for what do not seem to us to have been very great financial returns. Viking armies were often defeated, even exterminated, but there never seemed to be any difficulty recruiting another one." What made this possible was the Viking mentality.

Shippey's book is both analysis and history. The history begins where Viking histories normally begin, with the sack of the monastery of Saint Cuthbert on Lindisfarne, in A.D. 793. It ends with Harold Godwinson's defeat, in 1066 at Stamford Bridge, of the giant Norwegian king, Harold Hardrada (whose name Shippey translates, roughly, as "Hard-Line Harold"). The actual causes of the eruption of the Vikings are not completely clear, because there are almost no written records from Scandinavia of the time, but they probably have to do with upheaval and a power vacuum in Scandinavia. Intertwined with history, Shippey offers his careful and detailed parsing of sagas, combining that with evidence from archaeology. Much of this seems vaguely familiar to the reader, because Vikings have been staples of popular culture for two hundred years, but the more you read about real Vikings, the less familiar it seems (although a few works of modern fiction, such as Eric Rucker Eddison's *The Worm Ouroboros*, do manage to capture a real Viking feel).

As he moves through history, Shippey itemizes core features of the Viking mindset; then illustrates and expands on them. The single overriding feature was an absolute need to be brave. Cowardice was utterly disgraceful. Part of that was never giving in. Fighting to the last

man was a baseline Viking expectation. We can understand that; it's to some extent part of our own culture (or was, until we were pansified). Another feature, though, is harder for us to grasp—losing isn't the same as being a loser. Vikings lost all the time; there was no disgrace in that, as long as you kept the right attitude, which was not giving in. If you had to give in physically, not giving in mentally would do. And the best way to show that was to die laughing (hence the title of the book). That laughter wasn't ironic or self-referential, though. It was malicious.

If you laughed as your enemies killed you, because you knew how they were going to die soon too and you'd get your vengeance, that was admirable. The goal wasn't stoicism (which was often the goal of other martial societies, particularly the American Indians); it was getting one over on your enemies, and knowing it. Or if you bided your time as a defeated slave, forming a plan to kill and mutilate your enemies, then chuckled over their bodies, that was admirable too. (It is, as Shippey says, no coincidence that our word "gloat" comes from Old Norse.) Waiting to get back at your enemies so as to do it well is high-class behavior; it's low-class thralls that lose their tempers and strike back hastily. And if you simply can't get vengeance, you can make a dark joke, like the saga hero who, cut terribly across the face in hand-to-hand combat onboard a ship, grabs his gold, says "The Danish woman in Bornholm won't think it so pleasant to kiss me now," and jumps overboard to sink beneath the waves. Being humorously nasty is also admirable, like the man who, as he is about to be decapitated after a battle, asks for one of his enemies to hold his hair back so it doesn't get bloody—then, as the axe falls, jerks backward so the helper's hands are cut off, then dances around, laughing and shouting "Whose hands are in my hair?!"

Being comfortable with losing continued even after death. Those warriors chosen for Valhalla were not promised eternal life or eternal happiness; they were promised a good time until Ragnarok, the final battle, whereupon all of them, and all the gods, were to lose and die permanently. In the Viking ethos, this makes sense, because you can only show that you will never give in if you can be defeated. The goal isn't to avoid defeat, certainly not by switching sides to gain advantage. It's to show your worth, come what may. Many have pointed out that the gods in the *Iliad* are, in a sense, lesser than men because their

immortality makes everything they do ultimately trivial. Not so for Vikings, or their gods.

Fighting was the number one Viking activity, of course. In all the sagas, there is a definite exaltation of strongly masculine behavior, mostly fighting but wine and women as well. Vikings had a general love of constant violence, including games intended to create violent disputes among friends out of nothing. They also invariably reacted with a hair trigger to insults; and when they lost their lives, as they expected to someday, if not laughing ideally offered dying last words that were not self-pitying but were laconic, such as “bear to Silkisif and our sons my greeting; I won’t be coming.” Self-control was extremely important—showing any weak-seeming emotion or offering any reaction (other than violence or laughter) was looked down on, even if severely injured or having lost a child or wife. Vikings didn’t cry, ever. All this behavior was, collectively, *drengskapr*, basically a code of honor, the function of which Shippey analogizes to later European dueling, which served important functions tied to the core male need for validation and hierarchy. Its opposite, naturally, was dishonorable behavior, such as killing the defenseless, cowardice, or breaking an oath; such actions meant either a loss of face or expulsion from the community.

Despite the inherently masculine nature of *drengskapr*, women appear often in this book. Shippey notes that in the sagas women are “not themselves Vikings by trade, but often the most determined instigators and proponents of the heroic mindset.” The “sagas of Icelanders especially are full of dominating and aggressive women.” Numerous sagas turn on the actions of women, seeking revenge for slights or harms to them or their families, or rejecting an ambitious warrior until he achieves more fame. Old Norse even has a special verb just for women taunting men as cowards.

Beyond the sagas, as with all the peoples descended from “Germanic” barbarians, women occupied significant roles in society. This is in sharp contrast to the East, where women were kept hidden and exercised influence purely behind the scenes. Women were out and about in Viking society (and in other Germanic societies, such as the Franks, causing scandal in Outremer among Muslims during the Crusades). They ran businesses, owned property, signed contracts, and generally acted with a great degree of independence. Vikings had no harems—although

Vikings made a lot of money supplying young women to Muslim harems (and some high-status Viking men kept concubines). Slaves were the Vikings' number one cash generator, and Muslims their number one market, since Christian Europe strongly disfavored slaves, even at this point, and Scandinavia itself didn't have the money to buy a lot of slaves.

In other words, contrary to the modern propagandistic myth, there's no indication women as women were oppressed in Viking society (which is true for most, if not all, Western societies throughout history). As usual, relations between men and women were a constant negotiation where everyone was trying to muddle through together. In conflicts, women usually gave as good as they got, and exemplified similar courage as men. Voluntarily choosing to die, "[Brynhild] regards Sigurd as her real husband, her *frumverr* or 'first man'; she means to go with him. Of course, she also had him murdered, but that does not affect her real feelings or her sense of what's right."

Where women appear not a single time in this book, however, is as warriors, because Viking women warriors are a total myth. Last year widespread coverage was given to a claim that the grave of a Viking woman warrior had been uncovered. Fake news, which was quickly disproven, though that was not given any coverage at all in the popular media. Viking women warriors simply didn't exist. "Viking warrior" is a tautology; "Viking woman" is an oxymoron. Neither history nor saga mentions women as warriors. What about the famous "shieldmaidens," you ask? A thirteenth-century Danish historian, Saxo Grammaticus, created that legend out of whole cloth in imitation of myths about the Amazons. The sole mention in any actual saga of any woman warrior is in *The Saga of Hervor and Heidrek*, a thirteenth-century mashup of several earlier sagas, where part of the plot revolves around a woman, Hervor, who takes up arms after her father and brothers are killed (summoning her dead father, Angantyr, from his barrow grave to give her his sword, Tyrfing). (She was the inspiration for Tolkien's Eowyn of Rohan, depicted, like Hervor, as golden haired in golden helmet.) This is all obviously just fantasy no different than that about dwarves and dragons. Such fantasies aren't new; people have been projecting their fantasies onto Vikings for more than a thousand years. In the ninth century A.D. the Muslim ruler of Spain, Abd al Rahman II, sent an embassy to the Vikings, led by an ambassador, nicknamed al-Ghazal ("the gazelle," for his good

looks). It's not clear precisely where he went or whom he met, because in what he wrote he was less interested in writing useful detail, and more in telling us that the custom of the Vikings was "no woman refused any man," and that the queen of the Vikings was infatuated with him. Al-Ghazal's writings show, as Shippey says, "we are deep in Male Fantasy Land," and the same is true of Hervor. (Muslims, and the Byzantines, did interact quite a bit with the Vikings; more accurate than al-Ghazal was the record of the tenth-century Ahmad Ibn Fadlan's mission to the Rus, which forms a large part of the backstory to the movie *The Thirteenth Warrior* and which Shippey discusses at length, mostly to show that the Vikings were fine with sex slavery, ritual murder, and gang rape.)

Along similar lines, you often hear that the Valkyries were women warriors, a trope that shows up, for example, in modern movies based on the Marvel comic books. Shippey makes clear that they were nothing of the sort (addressing the question directly never comes up for him, any more than discussing whether the Vikings carried iPhones or used machine guns). The Valkyries were Odin's servants, acting as harvesters, or rather recruiters, who picked which warriors would die in battle, and thus join Odin in the halls of Valhalla. They often picked the strongest men, who were brought low by seeming chance, but actually by the Valkyries or Odin himself—a way for the Vikings to explain the seeming randomness of death in battle. But the Valkyries weren't warriors. At all. They were more like the Greek Fates, Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos; and overlap with the Norns, the Norse rough equivalent of the Fates. Nor were they aspirational figures for women in Viking society.

Silly claims about female Vikings are part of a larger problem with the corruption of everything by ideology—news, science, history. A claim that a Viking woman has been found is useful. It can be, and is, used to support idiot actions like allowing women into the military, and more generally to aid the ongoing massive propaganda campaign to pretend that not only are there no real differences between men and women, but that women can do anything that men can do, only better. (We have seen this on display in recent weeks in the blanket coverage given to the Women's World Cup, an unimportant event that very few Americans care about, and the winning of which is equivalent to being the world's tallest midget.) Thus, such a "discovery" is feted around the

world and the “discoverer” briefly becomes an international celebrity, before returning to a promotion and permanent job security. A claim that a male Viking burial has been found is boring and gets the claimant nothing. Along similar lines, Shippey notes several attempts to feminize Viking history, such as when in 2014 the British Museum censored the translation of a runestone inscription to change phrases such as “They fared like bold men far for gold” to “They fared far for gold.” As Shippey says drily, the word men “is not favored academically.”

Fortunately, this book is not marred by any such distortions. It’s an uncut presentation of Viking behavior, straight up, no chaser. After you read it, you’ll probably be glad you weren’t around when and where the Vikings were. Still, as you order some knickknack off Amazon to give you a brief rush of consumer enjoyment, briefly beating back your ennui, you’ll probably feel some tug toward the grandeur and glory of the Viking mindset, and wonder whether modern life, lacking any transcendence, is as hollow at its core as it seems.