

Review of: Neil Price. 2019. *The Viking Way: Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*. Oxford: Oxbow, 336 pp., £30 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-84217260-5

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The Viking Way was first published in 2002, setting a new benchmark for work on Viking magic (seiðr) and religion. It quickly went out of print but not before prompting a burgeoning scholarship. This second, revised and updated edition with a different sub-title (formerly Religion and war in Late Iron Age Scandinavia) retains the structure of the first, topped and tailed with new prefaces and acknowledgements, and an entirely new chapter on 'Magic and Mind'. The second edition also has additional images in colour including evocative reconstructions of burial evidence, and a much-needed index. At almost 400 pages long, it is a comprehensive and dense treatment (the references alone run to 40 pages), but Price's writing is highly eloquent. The Viking Way is a saga-like page-turner.

It opens by tackling previous and current thinking on Viking religion, proposing a cognitive approach which bridges the boundaries between politics, economics, religion and the social, arriving at a better understanding of the Vikings as 'others' but without 'othering', and recognising 'a lost nuance in their complexity, sophistication and variation'. For Price, there was no 'pre-Christian Viking "religion" at all – it was far more than that: a total view of the world, a complete, and very different, understanding of the nature of reality itself . . . That was what the Vikings' enemies were afraid of'. Furthermore, he argues, seiðr cannot be understood without stepping beyond Norse territory to the overlapping indigenous communities, particularly Sámi but also other practitioners of shamanism in the circumpolar region. Price goes on to consider the evidence for Norse spirituality in the mythology, sagas and other textual sources, and the many problems encountered when engaging with these; he deals with the gods themselves – Óðinn and Freyja are those most often associated with seiðr – and other members of 'the invisible population' with whom the Vikings lived, such as the valkyrjur (choosers of the slain), álfar (elves) and gandr (spirits).

The core of the book focuses on seiðr and the women (seiðkonur or vǫlva, 'staff-bearers') and men (seiðmenn) who wrought this magic, examining the textual and archaeological evidence and engaging in forensic detail with the scholarship on these sources. There are domestic, offensive and defensive aspects to seiðr, and sexual elements to seiðr rituals. Price makes a direct connection between seiðr and the Sámi equivalent, noaidevuotta, practiced by the noaidi (shamans), and compares seiðr and noaidevuotta with other shamanistic practices in the circumpolar north. Within this broader context, Price argues, the absence of shamanism among the Vikings would be 'far more remarkable than the oddities of their conventions as they appear to us'. He then considers how seiðr worked as an aggressive battle-magic, associated with Óðinn, the valkyrjur and other beings of destruction, and involving shape-shifting and the animal warriors berserkir and ulfhednar. The final, entirely new chapter considers the reception of the first edition, its impact, and more recent scholarship on the topic of Viking religion, ending with an account of Price's

current thinking. It is impossible in a short review to communicate the richness of the evidence, whether textual or archaeological, and the nuances of Price's approach. I shall dwell just briefly on one archaeological aspect, the funerary records.

Price identifies Viking Age burials of seeresses: there are eleven of these, dating from the ninth and tenth centuries, and they are often marked out by the presence of an iron or wooden staff, a key tool in the seiðr ceremonies described in the literary sources. In the cemetery by the town of Birka in Sweden, one burial included a man and woman, both on a chair, the woman sitting on the man and the two of them held in position by an iron chain. Their grave goods included a pair of harnessed draught horses and an iron staff leant against the chamber wall; a spear had been thrown over the couple and into the grave, dedicating them to Óðinn. In another highly complex deposition, the cremated remains of a man and woman were buried each with objects typically associated with the opposite sex. The woman was accompanied by yet another seeress' staff and both were wrapped in the pelts of bears. In a region of Sweden where both Norse and Sámi communities lived, a Sámi cemetery at Vivalen (in use from early medieval times to the Viking Age) included the burial of a well-built male in his fifties with male Sámi objects and female Nordic ones including a necklace, brooch, finger-ring and needle case. He was also wearing a dress of linen associated with high-status Norse female burials. Price teases out the varied ways in which these sorts of remains may point to seiðr and ties the theme of gender ambiguity to the prominence of transgressive gender and sexuality in circumpolar shamanism.

A tenth-century burial at the fort of Fyrkat in Denmark was the richest in the whole cemetery. It contained the wagon burial of a woman dressed in a distinctive blue costume with red and gold ornamentation, silver toe rings, an exotic bronze bowl from West or Central Asia, and a gilded bronze box brooch containing make-up of white lead. There were 'amulets' including silver bird's feet, probably from Russia, and a miniature silver high-seat of the sort used for seiðr, along with a sheepskin pouch containing hundreds of psychoactive henbane seeds, and, of course, a metal staff. The most elaborate seeress burial of all, dating from the late ninth century to the early tenth century and so complex that it was originally thought to be four separate features, was found at the early trading emporium of Kaupang in Norway. Many people and animals were buried in a ship, and at the stern, perhaps steering the deceased, lay a richly adorned seeress holding a bronze bowl engraved with runes. The head of a dog lay in her lap and there was an iron staff at her feet. Building on these examples and the connections between them, Price proposes that the ninth-century 'Viking Queen' in the Oseberg ship, 'the richest single burial from the Viking Age', was herself a seeress, her wagon carved with Freyja's cats, her tapestries depicting imagery associated with Óðinn and Freyja, and her grave goods including an iron staff and the seeds of psychoactive cannabis. This rich funerary evidence is bizarre by modern standards, but it does give a sense of varied and complex rituals, which Price treats with equal sensitivity and sophistication.

Never judge a book by its cover, but the change from the 2002 to the 2009 front illustration of *The Viking Way* is telling. In the first edition, this was a late tenth-century rune-stone from Aarhus with a striking face-mask in the Mammen style, the fragmentary inscription commemorating the death of a fallen comrade in battle. Such face-masks reflect the importance of masking and guising in Norse ritual drama, and ultimately refer to the

masked one himself, Oðinn. The object chosen for the cover of the second edition is the silver weapon-dancer pendant from a female inhumation at Birka, with horned helmet, a spear or staff in one hand, a sword in the other: the figure wears a belted cloak and may pertain to war, sorcery, Oðinn and gender ambiguity. The former image is suggestive of war, magic and Oðinn, but the latter complicates things further, in terms of sexuality and gender: queering Viking magic is the theme of Price's new final chapter.

The Viking Way is a landmark work in a number of respects. It remains the most comprehensive examination of the archaeological evidence for magical thought and practice in late Iron Age Scandinavia, with implications for the rest of the Viking world. And it looks through this archaeological lens at the textual sources, in a fusion of archaeology, history and philology rarely attempted and seldom successfully achieved. All this material and textual data are interpreted through the thinking of indigenous people in the circumpolar North, particularly those with whom the Vikings had the most contact, the Sámi. Granted, there were other scholars who had been here before Price, such as Thomas Dubois in his *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* (1999), but this book is certainly the most comprehensive in its treatment of the evidence, and the most nuanced in its analysis. The ground-breaking and persuasive argument of *The Viking Way* is fourfold. First, Price shows that religion (or 'intangibles') in late Iron Age Scandinavia was not cut off from other aspects of society but seamlessly woven into people's way of relating to the world; the supernatural was not something apart, but a totemistic link between the everyday natures of human beings and animals. Second, he establishes that magical practices or seiðr were central to this way of thinking, not just a curious aside, and that they were shamanistic in nature, involving galdr (chants, spells, charms), divination, shape-changing, animal transformation and sexual magic. Third, he demonstrates this magic included as one of its significant elements a form of aggressive sorcery associated with the god Oðinn and crucial to the martial, predatory way of thinking in a warrior society. And fourth, he indicates that Christianity did not eradicate this way of thinking but may have strengthened it towards the end of the Viking age.

The Viking Way was the most important work to have been published on Norse magic when I first read it in 2002. In this second, revised and expanded edition, Price sets the benchmark for research on the Viking Way for at least another twenty years. It is an exciting field and I look forward to reading his updated views some day in a third edition.

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