

Transcript: Foreword, Season 1 Episode 1 “Viking Culture”

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Episode Title: Viking Culture

[Serena]

Welcome to Foreword, a new podcast from the Faculty of Humanities at Brock University. Humanities is the study of the human experience—languages, cultures, art, history, literature, philosophy, and more. In this podcast we’ll be meeting researchers from our Faculty and learning more about the Humanities and why they matter today.

Now here’s your host, Alison Innes.

[Theme music]

[Alison]

What image comes to mind when you hear the word Vikings? A violent warrior society, raiding and pillaging? A seafaring people trading and migrating across vast distances of the North Atlantic? Vikings have a hold on the popular imagination. New directions in Norse studies might just challenge our preconceptions of who and what the Vikings were. Earlier this year I spoke with professors Andrew McDonald and Angus Somerville from our Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies about their research into gender roles in Viking society.

[Theme music]

I have two special guests joining me in the studio today for our foray into the world of Vikings.

Dr. Andrew McDonald is a professor with the Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies and the Department of History. In July 2019, Professor McDonald launched his book *The Sea Kings: The Late Norse Kingdoms of Man and the Isles c. 1066-1275*, which went on to be shortlisted for Scotland’s prestigious Saltire Society Literary Awards.

Dr. Angus Somerville is a retired professor of English. He taught Old Norse, Anglo-Saxon, and Middle English language and literature while at Brock and won two awards for his teaching. Professor Somerville has published on authors Evelyn Waugh, Robert Graves, Martin Seymour-Smith, and Michael Polanyi. He has worked for almost forty years on *The Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary* (published by Oxford University Press).

Professors McDonald and Somerville co-authored the book *The Vikings and Their Age* and have recently released an updated edition of their textbook, *A Viking Age Reader*, with University of Toronto Press.

Welcome, professors.

[Angus Somerville] Thank you very much.

[Andrew McDonald] Thank you.

[Alison] You told me an interesting story of how you two came to be working together. Would you like to share that with our audience?

[AM] Sure. So I came to Brock in 2002 and at that time I was at a bit of a crossroads with my research. I had been sort of dabbling in the Viking age and doing a bit of teaching in that area and my research was moving more into that field. But I realized that if I was going to really move into that field seriously I needed some background in the language, which I didn't have. So I made some inquiries on the off chance that there might be someone here who knew Norse and would be prepared to impart that knowledge to me, and I was directed to Angus in the English department...um... managed to convince him to take me on as a student and teach me some—

[AS] —It wasn't difficult—

[AM] --Norse, enough to deal with the texts that I needed to deal with and, um, and spent a few summers doing that and out of those ...ah... tutorials in Norse came the idea for the Viking reader. Of course, the things we chatted about a lot were various texts and translations and editions of things and realized that, you know what, there really was not a good comprehensive collection of translated texts. And one day we were just sitting there and said hey, we should do it.

[AS] And we did.

[Alison] (laughs) Congratulations! Do you have any thoughts on what it is about the Vikings that we keep revisiting them every generation, we keep wanting to, for good or for ill, to come back to this imagery of these hoards of Vikings pulling up their long boats?

[AM] I've been thinking about that for a long time, and I don't have a good answer other than I think my own take on the Vikings is that one of the things that makes them so interesting is the fact that they're so multifaceted. So we think primarily of Viking warriors, Viking raiders, you know, long-haired barbarians terrorizing, you know, villages, monasteries, rape, pillage, plunder, etc, and certainly that is a facet of the Vikings and the Viking age, but there are so many other facets that tend to get overlooked or dominated by that one, so Vikings as merchants, as traders, as explorers, as settlers, colonists, innovators, in a lot of ways. So I think one of the things that leads to these different interpretations is the fact that you can pick a facet and see the Vikings in that light. One of the interesting things that happened in around about twenty years ago at the turn of the millennium was that there was a tremendous upsurge of interest in the Vikings and that happened because it coincided with the one thousandth anniversary of the short-lived voyages across the north Atlantic and the very brief settlement at the site in Newfoundland of L'anse aux meadows. So that was a period when people were really interested in Vikings as explorers, as sea farers, as, you know, the first people to cross the north Atlantic and close the circle as it were. There was contact with indigenous people in those expeditions and so again, kind of closing that circle. And so that was a facet of the Vikings twenty years ago that was quite prominent, and I think it's, it's not receded, but it's, it's faded a little bit in the interval so that's, to me that's an example of this facet that we can pick out and sort of run with. I don't know if Angus has more to say on that.

[AS] Well, we quoted from a recent book on the Viking diaspora, and the Viking spread especially across the Atlantic area, down the Russian river system, it has traditionally been seen under two headings, raping and freighting, that's, ah, dominated the scholarship but now they're beginning to think about the ways in which the overseas Vikings related to the homes that they left, how conscious they were of a centre, how important the desire to return to that centre was among Vikings, so diaspora studies, that's brand new and that's a probable direction in the fourth edition

[Alison] (laughs)

[AM] And this is one of the things that makes the study of Vikings so interesting and so challenging is the fact that of course we talked a minute ago about you pick a facet, warriors, traders, etc, but of course they're all interrelated and the facet of being a warrior or raider or merchant, it's an opposition that doesn't really exist because you can be both at more or less the same time. You could go off on an expedition and today we're going to raid this village and tomorrow we're going to take the stuff we raided and go and trade with the next community along the coast or the river. And there are instances recorded in various sagas of that exact thing happening, so today we would characterize, you know, today we're warriors and tomorrow we're merchants, and the next day we're back to raiding. So it just highlights, it's two sides of the same coin and the relationship between raiding and plundering and commerce is very closely connected, very complex, it's not a binary opposition, as we tend to think.

[AS] And the relationship of these with the oral literature of the period I think is also interesting. For example, the archetypical Viking warrior Egill Skallagrímsson, first murder committed the age of eight and never looked back. He was also one of Iceland's finest lyric poets.

[Alison] Hmm.

[AS] He was as obsessed by poetry as he was by warfare. And you can look right through the spectrum of characters, especially the male characters who come up in the sagas and many of them combine very vigorous trading or raiding life with a real gift for lyric poetry, which surprised a lot of my students when they found who had composed these things.

[Alison] So it challenges our preconceptions.

[AM] And the way that you think about these things sort of historically and otherwise.

[Alison] Vikings are very popular in modern pop culture and shows like Vikings and I'm interested in the experts' take on what those shows do to people's understandings of Vikings and Viking culture and do they help get people interested or do they present a really skewed perspective that you have to unpick?

[AM] I think yes, it's both to be honest, and one of the things I found very interesting in this journey into the Viking world that I've been on over the last almost twenty years is trying to understand the popularity and the resurgence—the popularity of the subject goes, starts earlier than the show, the History Channel show. So to answer your question, I think that it's a little bit of both. People come to my course on the Vikings and the Viking age having watched the show with an interest in the subject and one of the questions that they have is, you know, how accurate is this? So you can certainly kind of use the show as a way into the topic. Ah, and I will confess I have not watched the entire, every episodes of every season, but I've watched quite a bit of it, and my take is that, umm, you can pick it apart and say it's completely unhistorical and certainly that's commonly said, but the more I think about it and the

more I watch it, it does do some very interesting things. It plays with interesting ideas that either exist in the scholarship or that scholars are picking up on increasingly, the notion that, exactly, one of the main characters is Lagertha, a female warrior who has been a mainstay of the show, and over the last three or four years there's been a tremendous upsurge in interest in that particular topic, of whether there were women warriors. And so it's a really interesting question of, you know, does the show tap into scholarship on the subject to develop these themes, or do historians and archaeologists kind of look at the show and think oh, maybe we need to think about that. So that's one example, there's lots of others.

[AS] On television. The British Museum did its first exhibit on Vikings I think a couple of years ago, a really big exhibit. They brought material from all over the Norse world, and they used all the popular stereotyped, probably inaccurate, images of the Vikings to bring people in. And much of the décor of the exhibition emphasized something of the grimness of the Vikings, but they tried to introduce, I think, ah, a more sensitive, more subtle view of Norse civilization once they got people in.

[Alison] Hmmm.

[AS] So the show is a tremendous hook, and you know, when people started doing my Norse course, I think they got something very different from what they expected, more grammar for a start.

[Alison & AM]: [laughter]

[AS] But a much more varied range of literature, very fine lyric poetry and so was an eye opener. But the popular image is useful and not totally inaccurate. One would have to be a real grinch to disapprove of everything in the show.

[AM] And the word, the very word itself, Viking, means a sea-borne raider.

[Alison] Hmmm, okay.

[AM] And Angus can elaborate on that, but the very word itself has connotations of maritime raiding. So if you're a Viking, according, in the language of the day, that term applies to a very small portion of the population that would go off on these sea-borne raids.

[Alison] So it was a much more focussed term when they used it.

[AS] Yes, probably very few people in the Viking age would have called themselves Vikings. Most of the stayed ashore for their whole lives. But the expansion of the western world depended so much on this group of raiders and traders that they've come to dominate North Atlantic studies for that particular period. So they're not important in terms of numbers, but in terms of effect they created a huge network among islands. The sea was a road for them, and the Russian river system was a road. So we have to conceive of a dispersed political central entity, where ideas like diaspora become relevant.

[AM] And the meaning of the word changes in the early nineteenth century, it becomes, there's a complex process of transformation where it ceases to mean sea-borne raider and simply means someone of

[AS] Yeah

[AM] Scandinavian origin in this period, or culture, I guess.

[AS] So we use it to name the age, [unclear] what everyone was doing in that particular age.

[Alison] So what is the scholarly verdict on women warriors?

[AS] The archaeological evidence points more and more to the certainty that there were women warriors. One grave, for example, in Sweden, contains a skeleton with complete armour and weapons. Now, that was automatically labelled as a man's grave, a warrior's grave, because of the weapons. You identify gender, sex, by the attributes of the grave. Later studies, just a few years ago, in the nineties particularly and into the two thousands, scientific investigation proved that this was, in fact, that this was a woman. A very unusual woman, a very unusual warrior buried right next to the ceremonial entrance to the Viking fort area or temple area. And then in Denmark they found a beautiful little amulet of what some people think is a Valkyrie, but is actually likely a human female warrior. So all of Scandinavian graves, for example, will have to be reassessed. You can't automatically take the attribute and say that this is a man, where you know, sometimes men are buried with operatively female attributes, things like that. Combs and so on. And then contemporary, or nearly contemporary historians from Byzantium, Constantinople, indicate that there were female warriors among the dead at Constantinople's siege by Vikings. So I tend to think that the case no longer has to be argued quite the way it was. The door is open, there's no need to push against it anymore. The archaeology can go.

[AM] Well thanks for the opportunity, it's really interesting, kind of fascinating,

[AS] Well I enjoyed it

[Alison] No, it's great, great to

[AM] It's great to do this in a slightly different sort of medium and this is new so it is interesting.

[Alison] And we'll see where it goes.

[theme music]

[Credits]

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