



# Kyngervi



Review: Neil Price. *The Viking Way: Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Oxbow Books: 2019.

Jennifer Hemphill

*Kyngervi* 2 (2020) 93-97.

Copyright © 2020 Kyngervi

Published in the United Kingdom

[www.kyngervi.org](http://www.kyngervi.org)



# **Review: Neil Price. *The Viking Way: Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Oxbow Books: 2019.**

Jennifer Hemphill<sup>1</sup>

Since the publication of the first edition of *The Viking Way* in 2002, and on some occasions as a response to the original study, the field of Viking and medieval Scandinavian studies is only seeing a rise in research focusing on the paranormal and magical practices during the Viking Age. Many scholars within the field are now utilising interdisciplinary approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of pre-Christian traditions from the Viking Age, while also focusing on the reception of these traditions throughout Scandinavian societies following the region's conversion to Christianity. In 2002, Neil Price's publication of *The Viking Way* offered academics a unique glimpse into the world of Viking spirituality. It is fair to say that the work published throughout Price's career, including the present study, has transformed the field of Iron Age Scandinavian research. Price has published a wide range of influential studies focused on the Viking period, including works on the Vikings in Brittany, the archaeology of Birka, mortuary behavior, and circumpolar shamanism.

The research from his PhD dissertation at Uppsala University, *The Viking Way*, was originally published in 2002 and is considered one of the most important contributions to late Iron Age and medieval Scandinavian studies.<sup>2</sup> In the first and second editions of *The Viking Way*, Price employs an

---

<sup>1</sup> PhD Student, Centre for Scandinavian Studies, University of Aberdeen, [j.hemphill.18@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:j.hemphill.18@abdn.ac.uk).

<sup>2</sup> Townend, Matthew. 'The Viking Way: Religion and War in the Late Iron Age Scandinavia' in *Antiquity*, Vol. 77, Iss. 296 (Cambridge 2003) 428.

interdisciplinary methodology, combining his archaeological expertise with relevant disciplines such as literature, history, religious studies, and anthropology. It is with this approach that the study aims to establish a broad understanding of what Price coins as ‘the Viking Way,’ or the ‘Viking’ mind. The release of this second edition has been highly anticipated by scholars from all disciplines who hold an interest in late Iron Age Scandinavia. Price notes that the process of revising the original publication into a second volume had been one of compromise, made in an attempt of trying balance a demand for expanding access to the original material and updating the research to include new material (xxviii). The main additions to the publication come in the form of new reconstructions of the burials discussed in the previous edition, updated maps and tables, and the reproduction of images into colour. The revised edition also offers the inclusion of an entirely new eighth chapter, which summarises relevant research that has been released following the original publication in 2002, and the impact that it has on this study of the Norse mind. The new edition has been expanded by almost 35,000 words, all while keeping the structural integrity of the first edition intact.

In the book’s opening chapter, Price introduces the notion of ‘cognitive archaeology’, or archaeology of the mind, and continues on to explain how this theoretical perspective in archaeology can be applied to the Viking Age. This section outlines the project’s intent to create ‘a cognitive exploration of the Vikings’ (15) and reveal how late Iron Age Norse culture fits into a wider Scandinavian and circumpolar context. The second chapter of this study begins with a short survey of Old Norse mythology, while also introducing the problems and paradigms of studying Viking-Age spirituality and religion. The chapter’s focus then turns to the book’s primary subject: magic within the Viking Age. However, from the time of *The Viking Way*’s initial publication, an extensive amount of further studies have been published that have advanced the field of Norse magical practice and its magical performers.<sup>3</sup> Although the

---

<sup>3</sup> For example, see the following: François-Xavier Dillman, *Les magiciens dans l’Islande ancienne: Études sur la représentation de la magie islandaise et de ses agents dans les sources littéraires norroises* (Uppsala: Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademien för svensk folkkultur, 2006); Nicholas Meylan, *Magic and*

majority of *The Viking Way*'s research surrounding magic remains the same as it was presented in the original edition, Price does address the many advances within the field of magic that were published after 2002 in his final chapter, which will be further addressed below. The study's discussion surrounding the magical concept of *seiðr* begins by defining the term as a form of sorcery that acts as an 'extension of the mind and its faculties' (34). The analysis continues by providing an overview of *seiðr* practices in context with other forms of Norse magic. The book's second chapter concludes with an expansive review of *seiðr* occurrences found within the entire Old Norse corpus, alongside the examination of the academic research carried out prior to 2002 on *seiðr* rituals in the Old Norse world. The third chapter continues the analysis of *seiðr* by examining how this particular form of magic is connected to the pre-Christian gods. The study then considers the role of individual *seiðr* performers and how this role is detailed within written source material from the medieval corpus, followed by the analysis of an extensive collection of archaeological materials which are found in graves that have been interpreted as the final resting place of *seiðr* performers. The chapter's focus then turns to a discussion on the sexual aspects associated with *seiðr* performance, and concludes with an evaluation of the role that the *seiðr* ritual plays within the 'domestic sphere' (186).

The fourth chapter of *The Viking Way* introduces the Sámi practice *noaidevuohta*, which Price describes as the nearest equivalent of *seiðr* performance. Following a discussion on the Sámi-Norse relations during the Viking Age, this chapter offers a detailed overview of Sámi religion within the same time period. The practice of *noaidevuohta* is further examined with a focus on the *noaidi*, Sámi ritual specialists, which is then followed by an exploration of *noaidi* rituals via the analysis of archaeological material. The chapter concludes by comparing the Sámi spiritual practices with the Norse performances outlined in previous

---

*Kingship in Medieval Iceland: The Construction of a Discourse of Political Resistance* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2014); Stephen Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Catharina Raudvere, 'Trolldómur in Early Medieval Scandinavia,' in *The Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in the Europe: The Middle Ages*, ed. by Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark, vol 3 (London: The Athlone Press, 2002) 73-171; Clive Tolley, *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic: Volume One* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedakatemia, 2009).

chapters. Among other studies with a similar focus towards communal cultures, Price's advocacy for a shared Sámi-Norse culture has contributed to a change in research that has altered our perception towards these relations in the Viking Age. The fifth chapter of this book addresses broader religious practices from the circumpolar region, which the Sámi are a part of. This chapter provides an introduction to the term 'shamanism' and then continues by considering each component of what is introduced as the 'shamanic world-view.'

The sixth chapter returns to a Scandinavian focus by exploring how the complex rituals and performances that are considered in previous chapters fit within the wider social structure of the Viking Age. In the next chapter, the emphasis of Price's study turns to focus on the analysis of aggression and magic on the battlefield and in the original edition, this seventh chapter concluded the dissertation. However, in the second edition, this chapter has become the penultimate segment. Here Price examines how the otherworldly concepts of aggression found in the sixth chapter were translated onto the physical battleground. In this portion of the study, the actions of lycanthropic warriors of Óðinn (324), such as the *berserkir* and *ulfhednar*, are analysed.

The eighth and final chapter is unique to the second edition. This closing section retrospectively reviews Viking Age notions of magic and the mind that were presented in the original study. In the preface to the second edition, Price explains that although his original intentions were to completely revise the entire dissertation to include updated research and ideas, colleagues from the field were more interested in having access to the original material (xxvii). It is within this concluding chapter that Price addresses the many research advances that have been made since the original work was published. Here, the study focuses on themes such as questioning Norse shamanism, the development of research surrounding *seiðr* staffs, the expansion of gender studies in the Viking Age, the social world of war, and much more. Although much of the research in this second edition was originally published almost 20 years ago and Price himself admits that he no longer entirely agrees with study's original framework, the research conducted for this publication nevertheless provides a solid foundation for understanding the late Iron Age Norse mind. This is particularly true of the

the study's overview and analysis of archaeological material relating to Norse spirituality. The scholarly information and discussion provided in the second edition, alongside the extensive amount of research published since its original release in 2002, *The Viking Way* will remain essential in understanding the culture and spirituality of Iron Age Scandinavia.

The second edition's bibliography alone can be used as a significant tool for any scholar that is interested in the Viking period. The publication of this new edition includes an extensive list of references that highlight over 500 works released after the original publication. This section includes an impressive list of primary sources and translations, several relevant pre-nineteenth century sources for early Sámi and Siberian cultures, a wide-ranging list of secondary sources on the subject matter, and a catalogue that highlights significant sources found within relevant archives. Furthermore, the updated publication includes the long-awaited addition of an index. With a wide range of topics covered and an enormous amount of material employed throughout this study, the inclusion of an index will allow scholars to focus in on specific terms or ideas with more ease.

Price's easy-to-read writing style allows the study to clearly present and explain an assortment of complicated subject matters, which in turn makes these intricate topics more accessible for a varied audience. Many studies published over the past two decades that focus on late Iron Age Scandinavia have relied on Price's original publication of *The Viking Way* as a building block. I can only imagine that the highly anticipated publication of this second edition will result in many further studies produced by a wide range of academic disciplines. Ultimately, this book remains one of the most influential studies on the Viking Age, particularly for those interested in an archaeology analysis of Norse spirituality and how it fits into to a wider circumpolar tradition.