

Children of Ash & Elm [C1]

Neil Price, specialista di storia vichinga presso l'Università di Uppsala, mette in luce il duraturo patrimonio culturale dei Vichinghi e ci invita ad approfondire la loro cultura, al di là degli stereotipi di guerrieri violenti.

Much of what we think we know about the Vikings comes from secondary sources. For this reason, we may see them as violent , [thuggish Norsemen](#) with [horned helmets](#), [intent on](#) destruction. This image is perpetrated in popular culture — but how accurate is it? To find out, Speak Up met with Neil Price, an English professor of archaeology at Uppsala University in Sweden. Price is one of the world's leading experts on Viking history. He has been studying the Vikings for more than thirty years, and has written seven books about Vikings. His latest work, The Children of [Ash](#) & [Elm](#) – A History of the Vikings was published in 2020. We began by asking him about the enigmatic title of his book. **Neil Price (English accent):** Most works about the Vikings tend to view them from the outside. It's through the eyes of their victims, essentially, because the Vikings did not write their own histories. And I think that gives a distorted view of the Vikings. But what I tried to do is write the Vikings from the inside. [Ash](#) and [Elm](#) are the first human couple, [they're] made from pieces of [driftwood](#), literally ash tree and elm tree. And it's from them that all of humanity descends in the Viking cosmology. So I wanted to start with this perception of who the Vikings thought they were, not who other people thought they were, I wanted that to be the starting point for everything else.

DIASPORA

The British Isles were subject to numerous Viking [raids](#) and years of Viking rule, from 793 to 1066 and beyond. Viking influence in Britain was unique, as Price explains. **Neil Price:** It's also the first place that Scandinavians really start [to settle in numbers](#) outside Scandinavia. So the beginnings of a Viking diaspora, where they start to [rather haphazardly spread out](#) over the northern world. This is something that happens in Britain, in Northern

England. It's also the place where we can really try and understand what they're about because there's been this sort of two images of Viking raiding: one is a couple of boats of guys [turning up](#) at a monastery and burning it down and going away again in the afternoon; and then there are these Viking armies. And it's been quite difficult to understand what those armies really are, because one of the really critical things to understand about them is that there is no political force in Scandinavia capable of sending out armies of that size. So they're not the [Danes](#), or the Norwegians, or they're not the anybodies really. They are what they are. They're things [in their own right](#).

AN ARTIFICIAL TERM

Categorising history in terms of one age or another is useful but misleading, says Price. **Neil Price:** The word Viking is very [contentious](#). I think it's important to realise that nobody at the time would have recognised themselves by that name. The idea of the Viking Age or the time of the Vikings is something that we've invented. That's not to say that there isn't reasons for that. This is a very particular period of history when very special things happen. It's the time when not only the Scandinavians start moving out into [the wider world](#) on a scale like nothing before, they also interact with that world in lots of different ways, which again, had not been seen before. Everybody's moving at this time, it's not like the Scandinavians invented ships, or that they'd never gone anywhere before the Viking Age. The whole of Europe is on the move, but not in exactly this way. And the Vikings go further than anybody else, they come into contact with more peoples and cultures than anyone else. And they don't only go out from Scandinavia, people come in as well. And there's this constant flow [back and forth](#) of people and things and ideas, and the ideas are almost as important as everything else. So I think it's a tremendously exciting time. And I know there are some academics that sort of [despair](#) of the use of the word 'Vikings' to mean more or less everybody who lived over there in those days, but [we're stuck with it](#). And I think as long as we're clear about its artificiality... At the time it would have meant something [roughly](#) like 'pirate', though perhaps not so negatively as we might use that word. But it's a term we have to live with.

THEIR LEGACY

The Viking invaders certainly left their mark on Britain. We asked Price [to sum up](#) their legacy. **Neil Price:** I think culturally, what I point to actually is stories, the fact that how popular the Vikings are; the fact that we can go and see Marvel movies about the Norse gods. And okay, the stories are nothing to do with the Vikings, but the fact [is] that we're still talking about the Vikings. When we read [rune stones](#) in Scandinavia, these runic memorial stones, we're still remembering who they are. The Vikings were very [keen on](#) being remembered. That's really what they wanted, and the fact that we do, and for a good reason, I think that is their greatest legacy, that we're still continuing their stories. I think that is something that is really meaningful, and I think they'd have liked it too.

HISTORICAL ACCURACY

The Vikings are often [portrayed](#) in films and books in a stereotypical way. However, there is often little evidence for even the most familiar of Viking [hallmarks](#) — including that of wearing curved bull's horns on their helmets. We asked Price how important historical accuracy is in the entertainment world. **Neil Price:** I think it's very important to distinguish between entertainment and academia. And there's no point in getting [annoyed](#) at a Viking movie that is not trying to be a documentary. It's an entertainment. And I think there is a danger sometimes that academics find themselves effectively saying, "[How dare you](#) be interested in this? I'll tell you what you'll be interested in." And that is not somewhere I want to go. But accuracy is important. I'm concerned when people 'like' the Vikings because interesting is not the same as admirable. There's a difference between judging the past, which I don't think we should do — or not the distant past anyway — and questioning our attitudes to it. So that's part of this popular interface of the Vikings. But I'm pleased that other people are interested in them.

NORSE MYTH

In his book, Price describes the Vikings as “a [warlike](#) people [underpinned](#) by the supernatural empowerment of violence.” We asked Price to talk more about the influence of Norse myth in Viking culture. **Neil Price:** I think their spiritual world was quite a violent place. We know that their real world absolutely was. And this is a violent time, and not just in Scandinavia. Their gods and some of the other supernatural beings, they gave a sort of supernatural support to a violent way of life. Odin is the [embodiment](#) of this. He is, amongst many other things, a god of war. And the upper levels of Viking society are absolutely [embedded](#) in this ideology of violence. It’s how they stay where they are, actually. It’s quite a predatory society. The early kingdoms, before there was any Denmark or Sweden or Norway, they were made up of lots of little kingdoms and they sustained themselves essentially by trying to expand at the expense of their neighbours, who were trying to do the same. And this ideology of war is really central to what the Vikings are about. There’s a lot more complexity to it than that. I know it’s a cliché, but this kind of [warlike](#) nature of Viking society, I think it’s real. And I think their neighbours recognised it as well, I think they were frightened of it, with good reason.

REAL PEOPLE

[Tying in](#) with the title, the book ends with the image of children at play with simple toys: a wooden horse, and a miniature sword. It reminds us that the Vikings were real people with families, as Price explains. **Neil Price:** I’m not trying to [undermine](#) people’s perceptions of the Vikings, but part of the book is confronting a stereotype and trying to replace it with something more real. I think the lives of children are very recognisable all over the world. They’re the kind of antithesis of the Viking stereotype, and most of my favourite objects from the Viking Age are actually things for children: there’s a pair of [mittens](#) from Iceland that are really recognisable; there’s this child’s chair for a [toddler](#) with a little bar across the front so it can’t get out; and so on. I think that seeing Viking children is a very positive way to look at them. It’s a connection that I wanted to leave the reader with.

VIKING PLACE NAMES

The majority of English locations with Viking names are in the region once known as the Danelaw. This huge area covered much of modern-day East Anglia, The Midlands and Northern England. Yorkshire has the most Viking place names of anywhere in Britain. Some of the most common endings for Viking place names are: **-thorpe**: secondary settlement. **-thwaite**: originally 'thveit', [woodland clearing](#). **-toft**: site of a house or building. **-keld**: [spring](#). **-ness**: promontory or [headland](#). **-by**: [farmstead](#), village, settlement. **-kirk**: originally 'kirkja', meaning 'church'

Glossary

- **driftwood** = legname trasportato dal mare
- **to settle in numbers** = stabilirsi in numero consistente
- **rather haphazardly** = in modo piuttosto casuale
- **Danes** = danesi
- **turning up** = presentarsi
- **the wider world** = il mondo in generale
- **to sum up** = riassumere
- **embedded** = integrare
- **farmstead** = proprietà agricola
- **in their own right** = in forma indipendente
- **hallmarks** = segni caratteristici
- **annoyed** = essere seccato, infastidito
- **embodiment** = incarnazione
- **undermine** = minare, indebolire
- **woodland clearing** = radura del bosco
- **horned helmets** = elmo con corna
- **spread out** = diffondersi
- **contentious** = controversa
- **Tying in** = in accordo a, in concordanza
- **rune stones** = pietre runiche
- **mittens** = guanti a manopola
- **toddler** = bambino piccolo, lattante
- **spring** = sorgente, fonte
- **keen on** = tenere a
- **portrayed** = rappresentare
- **intent on** = determinato a
- **raids** = assalti, incursioni
- **despair** = disperarsi
- **we're stuck with it** = siamo bloccati con esso
- **headland** = promontorio
- **thuggish** = violenti, criminali
- **Norsemen** = norreni
- **back and forth** = avanti e indietro

- **underpinned** = sostenere
- **warlike** = bellicoso, battagliero
- **Ash** = frassino
- **Elm** = olmo
- **roughly** = approssimativamente
- **How dare you** = come vi permettete?