

*The Soul of the Family Tree*

Ancestors, Stories,  
and the Spirits We Inherit

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*On the west coast of Iceland, a statue honors the Norse explorer Gudrid the Far Traveler.* (PHOTO BY ECHO IMAGES / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO)

# Prologue

## *A Genealogical Golden Ticket*



I'm wandering through what was once one of the greatest churches in Christendom: Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. As a guide and I walk through its aged, echoing grandeur, he helps me imagine what it must have looked like to worshipers when it was completed in the year 537. Topped by a dome that seemed to float in the air as if suspended on strings from the heavens, its interior glittered with mosaics, icons, holy relics, and colored marble, all lit by thousands of flickering candles and lamps.

“This church was so grand, so opulent and huge, that many worshipers could hardly believe what they were seeing,” the guide says. “They didn’t know if they were on earth or in heaven.”

Climbing to its second-floor gallery, we find a vantage point overlooking the expanse below, a space now filled with hundreds of chattering tourists. The guide continues his story, explaining that Hagia Sophia—meaning “Holy Wisdom” in Greek—was built using materials brought from throughout the Byzantine Empire. For a thousand years it stood as the world’s largest cathedral, the crown jewel of a city known at the time as

Constantinople, named in honor of Constantine, the emperor who made Christianity the dominant religion in the Roman Empire. After the city became part of the Ottoman Empire in 1453, Hagia Sophia became a mosque, and to this day it shows an intertwining of the two spiritual traditions.

The guide then points to some marks on a marble parapet, etched lines that look like chicken scratches. “This graffiti was left by a Viking, probably in the ninth century,” he says. “It means something like ‘Halvdan was here.’”

I look in surprise at the marks, which I can now see are indeed Norse runes. The Vikings were here, in Constantinople? I had a flash of a tall, bearded, muscular man, a native of the pagan Northland, looking down at an elaborate liturgy on the main floor of the church. He watches as ornately dressed priests and acolytes walk in formation to the altar, chanting and singing, wreathed in clouds of incense. Then, with a grunt, the bored Viking takes out a knife and carves his name into the marble.

Honestly. What kind of person scratches his name into a church balcony, especially in this cathedral, the most beautiful in the Christian world? And then I realize I know exactly who would do such a thing—my people.

You might notice my last name is Scandinavian: Erickson, the son of Erick. For much of my adult life I considered it a relatively minor part of my identity. I was just one of a multitude of Americans whose ancestors hailed from a part of the world associated with skiing, pickled herring, and bleak Nordic noir crime dramas that belie the region’s reputation as one of the happiest places in the world. But sometime in my mid-fifties, it was as if a switch flipped on, and discovering more about my ancestors became a passion. I’d latched onto genealogy, the quintessential hobby of middle age.

As we grow older and more relatives start to disappear from the family lifeboat, many of us develop a new interest in those who’ve slipped overboard. People tend to stake out a particular focus in their genealogical searches. Some trace the medical histories of their ancestors, looking for genetically linked

diseases to explain their health deficits or give them a heads-up on what to worry about. Those wanting to join the Daughters of the American Revolution search for ancestors who aided in the fight for independence; others do research to try to verify a family story about kin who walked the Cherokee Trail of Tears. Adoptees seek clues to their biological relatives while some search for famous distant cousins, from Queen Elizabeth and Abraham Lincoln to Oprah and Dolly Parton. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints do genealogy as a religious obligation, wanting to give everyone, even the dead, the chance to become part of their faith. Others try to connect with distant cousins alive today, tracking down relatives in the places where their ancestors once lived. Each of us has a unique motivation for finding our way through the ever-proliferating thicket of facts, dates, birth certificates, death notices, immigration records, and census data, made more accessible than ever before by the Internet.

At first it was the mapping of my family tree that intrigued me the most. I gathered bits and pieces of records, traipsed through cemeteries to hunt for grave markers with familiar names, searched online to connect with other family trees (thank you, second cousin once removed, for doing research that I have happily appropriated as my own). At one point I remember leaning back in my desk chair with satisfaction, looking at the chart that filled the computer monitor in front of me. The names and dates extended back five generations, dozens of relatives who came together in a precise combination just so that I could be born. I looked at my name, there in a box at the very bottom, and felt grateful when I realized that all of human history (or at least a section of it that had settled in northern Europe) had conspired to produce the precise genetic combination that led to Glorious Me. Even one alternative choice, one great-grandmother who'd married the elder brother and not the younger one, and I'd be slightly different. But no, instead they all came together to fulfill my destiny.

Then, with a sigh, I admitted the ridiculousness of this thought, especially after I added my two sons to my genealogy

chart, spoiling the beautiful symmetry of all those boxes culminating in my name. I realized that they, too, could view themselves as the climax of human history. And I had the unsettling thought that at some point in the future I'd be just another ancestor to my descendants, a small box with birth and death dates, and maybe a link to a census record.

But as interest in my own genetic heritage faded somewhat, a larger fascination blossomed. I became increasingly intrigued by the ways in which I'm the product of forces emanating from deep in the past and lands far away. I realized that some of the traits I thought were mine alone were actually passed down to me, and that I shared much more with my ancestors than just some strands of DNA. I learned about Viking history, seeking connections between my perpetual wanderlust and the seafaring exploits of my distant forebears. Books on modern Scandinavia gave me insights into the cultural patterns that have been passed down through generations in my family, from why spices were considered suspicious substances in my mother's kitchen to why many of the men in my family hoard their words like they have to pay for them by the syllable.

I began to see, too, how the spiritual history of my family mirrored larger trends. The Vikings who once worshiped Thor and Odin converted to Christianity around the year 1000, eventually becoming not just Lutheran, but Über-Lutheran. Today, however, just a small percentage of Scandinavians attend church regularly, a reflection of a secular wave that washed across Western Europe after World War II and is now lapping at the shores of America. How did my family's history reflect this shift? And how did my personal spiritual journey fit into this larger story?

In my explorations, I've learned that what I'm really searching for is my spiritual DNA. There's not a test I can take to identify this mix, no spitting into a test tube to find my religious genealogy. But the process of learning about my heritage has taught me a great deal about the swirling patterns of my inner life, and I've come to see the ways my story reflects something larger, a shift from a pagan world to

a Christian one and then to a secular culture that nonetheless longs for transcendence.

Genealogy is one of the world's most popular hobbies. Thanks to the Internet and DNA analysis, it's never been easier to trace your family tree and tie it into an ever-expanding web of genealogical records. Once people begin to research this information, many set out to connect with physical traces of their family's past as well. They usually don't focus on the places highlighted in guidebooks—the grand palaces and sites of famous battles—but instead on the homely landmarks of ordinary lives: a farm in Ireland once tilled by a grandfather; the Japanese village that a great-grandmother left as a young woman, journeying to meet a man in San Francisco she knew only from a photograph; a parish record of baptisms and marriages in a Sicilian church; a graveyard in the Ukraine; or a plantation in Alabama where slaves once toiled. Because of curiosity about genealogy, these places of little interest to the larger world get remembered and honored.

As a writer with a lifelong interest in the intertwining of spirituality and travel, it's clear to me that many of these trips are actually pilgrimages—life-changing journeys that relate to questions of identity and meaning. People go searching for information about their ancestors but come home having discovered just as much about themselves. And even though we may not be Sicilian, or Japanese, or Ukrainian, the stories of their journeys often touch something deep within us as well. It's why Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* became a bestseller in the 1970s and why TV series like *Genealogy Roadshow* and *Finding Your Roots* attract millions of viewers. In hearing other people's stories, we see reflections of our own inner journeys.

My research on my family tree has made me realize that rather than a mere list of names and dates, genealogy can be an invitation to imagine, to ponder, and to learn not just who our ancestors were but who we are and who we might become. I think of it as a golden ticket that gives me permission to explore

obscure corners of history, meet remarkable characters, and trace my spiritual DNA, the soul material that makes me who I am.

I hope my example will send you on your own genealogical and spiritual quest. You might find that your soul has been shaped by your ancestors and that they continue to influence you. I know my climb up my family tree has affected my spiritual life in unexpected ways, including igniting a fascination for Norse mythology and metaphysics. In making these myths my own, I've gained access to a deep well of wisdom that I never would have discovered if I hadn't started poking around in my ancestral attic.

Whatever your ancestry, you may have more connections to the peoples of the North than you realized. If you get your DNA tested, some Scandinavian might show up in your results, even if the rest of your ancestors came from lands far away. The Norse influence also threads through our language and culture. Perhaps you're reading this on a Tuesday (named after the Norse god Tyr), Wednesday (named after Wodan, the Old Saxon form of Odin), Thursday (Thor's day), or Friday (which honors Odin's wife, Frigg). If you've ever played *Dungeons and Dragons*, watched *Game of Thrones*, or read one of the thousands of fantasy books influenced by Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, you've been entertained by Norse myths. Or check your phone: its Bluetooth function is named after Harald Bluetooth, a tenth-century Viking king (the  $\text{H}$  symbol blends the first letters of his name written in runes).

I've come to believe that the Norse have something to teach all of us at a deeper level as well. I think their larger-than-life story speaks to something universal in the human psyche, reminding us that we need adventure and risk and that our spirits wither when we stay cocooned in our twenty-first-century equivalent of isolated villages, relating to the world mainly through digital screens.

My search for ancestors took me from the bleak coast of Newfoundland and the stunning fjords of Norway to the deck of a modern-day Viking ship. I paid my respects to a Norse saint with highly suspect credentials and knelt to gather dirt

from the tiny plot of land my great-great-grandfather once farmed. I came to a new understanding of the Norwegian-American small town where I grew up, and I traveled to another corner of the Midwest where I learned that even a hoax can reveal truths about the past. I visited dead Vikings in the north of England, met modern-day Norse pagans in Minneapolis, and spent a weekend pretending to be a Viking woman at a reenactor festival. And I realized that I'm never going to like the flatbread *lefse*, no matter how many times I try that Norwegian-American staple.

My quest makes me think of the “Cosmic Eye” video that periodically gets passed around on Facebook, the one that begins by showing a young woman lying on a patch of grass. The camera starts to move upward, zooming ever farther into space, past the moon, past our solar system, through the Milky Way and into the farthest reaches of the galaxy. Then the journey reverses, telescoping back to earth once again; only this time the camera heads into the body of the woman, going through her skin to enter her organs and ever deeper into her cells and molecules and then down to the atomic level, which has an uncanny resemblance to outer space. Both of those journeys spin out from a young woman lying on the grass, just as each of us is poised between the past and the future, between our ancestors and our descendants, and between a too-often unexplored inner world and a dazzlingly complex outer world.

Once you start doing genealogy, you realize how many worlds are connected to you.

The idea for this book began with a bathroom break, which just goes to show that you never know when inspiration will strike. My husband, Bob, and I were traveling by car on the Ring Road of Iceland, winding our way across a landscape of jagged mountains, bleak plains, vast glaciers, and slumbering volcanoes. Driving across the Snæfellsnes Peninsula one misty, cool morning, I told Bob I needed to make a stop.

A few miles down the road, he pulled into a roadside park. Looking in vain for a restroom, I made use of the lee side of a

rock, which in Iceland is often as good as you get while traveling. After taking care of my business, I looked with interest at a statue that stood nearby. It showed a strong and confident-looking woman standing on top of a stylized representation of a Viking longboat. On her shoulder perched a child, whom she steadied with one hand as she looked off into the distance with a determined gaze. The adjacent sign identified the woman as Gudrid the Far Traveler. The name seemed appropriate, given the map that detailed her journeys. Lines led from Iceland to Greenland and then to the New World, while another set traced a route from Iceland to Norway and Denmark, and then to Rome and back.

Intrigued, I read the text below the map. Gudrid, whose story is told in the Icelandic sagas, was a sister-in-law of the famous explorer Leif Eriksson. She gave birth to the first child of European descent in the New World, living there for several years in the early eleventh century before the colony failed. After she returned to Iceland, she became a nun and later sailed to Denmark and walked to Rome on pilgrimage. Eventually she came home to Iceland, where she lived out her days renowned for her courage, wisdom, and kindness. She was likely the most well-traveled woman of the Middle Ages.

I got back in the car and turned to Bob. "That was a good stop," I told him. "I think I just found my foremother."



*A stained glass window at the Jorvik Viking Centre is based on a Viking Age illustration showing Norsemen leaving their ships to raid the east coast of England. (PHOTO BY BOB SESSIONS)*

## 2

### *Badly Behaving Relatives*



During one long, brutal week in winter, I traveled with the Vikings. My time machine was a miserable case of the flu. Laid low by the virus, I tried to distract myself by binge-watching the History Channel's series *Vikings*. The show, set in eighth-century Scandinavia, follows the adventures of Ragnar Lothbrok, a farmer who becomes a Viking raider. With my mind befuddled by fever, the series morphed into a hallucinatory dream that became increasingly real as the days passed. One episode would end, and I'd immediately start another, anxious to learn what happened next. It might have been my Scandinavian heritage, or it might have been the flu, but no matter—for that week I was a Viking.

I thrilled to the exploits of Ragnar, cheering when he defied the orders of his chieftain and made plans to go raiding in an undiscovered territory to the west. My heart leaped when I saw his new vessel sail into the fjord, a sleek longboat with an arched dragon head on its prow. I suffered with him and his crew on their long voyage into the unknown through fog, cold, and rain. ("I know how you feel," I told Ragnar from my supine position on the couch. "I'm miserable too.") I rejoiced when

they reached land, rooting for them as they sacked a monastery with brutal efficiency and then returned home with a ship full of treasure and captives. After they arrived back in their fjord, I was drawn into Ragnar's tangled web of relationships, trying to discern who was friend and who was foe. I especially admired Ragnar's fierce wife Lagertha, who could wield a weapon as powerfully as her husband. And when Ragnar faced his rival Earl Haraldson in hand-to-hand combat, I was riveted, my heart pounding with each jab and thrust of their swords.

In the midst of this Viking-induced mania, occasionally I'd resurface to find myself taken aback by my enjoyment of the carnage. I'd known the Viking Age was violent, but when viewed up close, the sheer scale of mayhem was both disconcerting and fascinating. So, for a palate cleanser, I'd occasionally switch to watching the American sitcom *The Office*, set in a paper company in Scranton, Pennsylvania. I'd laugh at the bumbling exploits of boss Michael Scott and cheer on the romance between the sweet receptionist Pam and her prank-loving boyfriend Jim.

Switching back and forth between the two series made for dizzying contrasts. First Ragnar and his crew returned to England to capture the king's brother and demand a ransom of 2,000 pounds of gold and silver; then salesman Dwight Schrute was given the responsibility for choosing the company's new health plan, leaving everyone dissatisfied because of the meagerness of its coverage. Ragnar ended up murdering his captive when the king refused to pay a ransom, while back at the office, the staff of Dunder Mifflin attended a Christmas party during which their gifts to fellow employees weren't well-received.

That schizophrenic week helped me understand why so many people are fascinated by the Vikings, even if they have no Scandinavian heritage. Most of us live in the world of *The Office*, with our days filled with petty dramas and small-scale concerns. We might worry about losing our jobs but not about losing our heads. The Vikings, however, as badly behaved as they often were, embody the thrill of a life on the edge, when making your way depended on courage, strength, and often violence.

Even after my fever ended and I returned to good health, the question remained. What do I really think about my ancestors the Vikings? And by extension, what should we all make of the less-than-savory elements of our ancestry?

I've long taken pride in being a descendant of the great explorer Leif Eriksson (his last name is spelled many ways, but I'll settle on this one). I've claimed this kinship on the basis of our shared Scandinavian ancestry, our mutual love of travel, our similar last names, and the fact that both of our first names start with an "L." In short, I'm just the sort of family-tree researcher who gives genealogy a bad name.

I've always considered Leif one of the good Vikings. No raiding and pillaging for him—instead he headed to North America around the year 1000 to found a new colony, leaving his home in Iceland to cross the stormy Atlantic at great risk. Somewhere in what is now Canada, he and his crew founded a settlement called Vinland. This was five centuries before Christopher Columbus landed in the Caribbean; a fact dwelled on at great length in my elementary-school classes in my Norwegian-American hometown. The contrast between the two explorers is stark: when Columbus encountered the native peoples, he enslaved them; when Leif faced hostility from the locals, he packed up and went back home. While Columbus carries a heavy weight of historical baggage, Leif is burdened with hardly any. His statue on the grounds of the Minnesota State Capitol shows him at his best: tall, virile, and handsome, the very model of a politically correct explorer.

My introduction to the less-reputable branches of the Viking clan came when I visited the British Isles a number of years before I started my roots quest. My husband, Bob, was the one who first noticed a disturbing pattern. We'd be touring a picturesque historic site when he'd look up from a guidebook and say, "Lori, here's *another* place that was a thriving community before your relatives attacked."

As we traveled, it became clear that my ancestors shared my attraction to holy sites, though in their case it wasn't because

they were interested in deepening their prayer life. Instead they sought the wealth of Christian churches and monasteries, particularly their easily transportable gold and silver altarpieces. An added bonus was that such places were often poorly defended. A monk was no match for a warrior wielding a sword.

As we traveled, Bob and I had fun kidding each other about my bloodthirsty ancestors, but the reality of what the Vikings did was brought home to me during our visit to Lindisfarne in Northumberland. This peaceful spot on the northeast coast of England was once the site of a thriving monastery. Then, in 793, an attack on Lindisfarne began the Viking Age (the same raid portrayed in the TV series I'd watched while sick with the flu). The invaders plundered the monastery for treasures, took some of its monks as captives, killed others, and then disappeared in their boats. The assault on a renowned spiritual community shocked the European world.

As in the eighth century, today Lindisfarne is an island linked to the mainland by a causeway, which is covered by the tide twice a day. The sea is never far away, and as we wandered through its ruins and learned about its history, we could hear the rhythmic sweep of the waves and the calls of the seagulls—sounds little different, no doubt, from those heard by the monks on the morning of that fateful June day. It was easy to imagine their apprehension as they first saw the invaders approaching from the sea, and then their fear and terror as the Vikings started their deadly raid.

Near the end of our visit, we wandered into one of the modern buildings that cater to people who come here on pilgrimage. There we saw a small, framed letter on display: it was from the Norwegian government, and it contained a formal apology for what the Vikings had done twelve centuries before.

When I think back on my visit to Lindisfarne, it's that letter that sticks in my mind. I waver between thinking it honorable and viewing it as far too little and too late. And it brings to mind the central paradox of my ancestry. The Vikings were once the most-feared warriors in Europe, yet today Norway is universally admired for its harmonious society and well-functioning

government. The country gives out the Nobel Peace Prize, for goodness sake. The Norwegians are the smiling, congenial relatives at the family reunion, the ones who talk about the weather and share homemade brownies, while in their attics they keep skeletons tucked away in ornately decorated trunks.

## WARRIORS FROM THE NORTH

“I have never seen more perfect physiques than theirs—they are like palm trees, are fair and reddish. . . . The man wears a cloak with which he covers one half of his body, leaving one of his arms uncovered. Every one of them carries an axe, a sword and a dagger.”

The above description comes from Ibn Fadlan, an Arab writer who met Vikings along the Volga River in the tenth century while on a diplomatic mission from Baghdad. He went on to marvel at how each man was covered in tattoos from his toes to his neck and how the women wore fine jewelry of gold and silver that proclaimed their social status and the wealth of their husbands. He was less impressed by their hygiene habits (“indeed they are like wayward donkeys”), but their tall stature and striking good looks left a most memorable impression.

The Vikings made an impression, for good or ill, wherever they traveled. And travel they did, from the Arctic Circle to North Africa, from Baghdad and Constantinople to North America, their journeys taking them to nearly forty countries between the eighth and eleventh centuries. If you want to know why Scandinavian DNA shows up in your ancestry test, it’s almost certainly due to the wanderlust of these people from the North.

The attack on Lindisfarne in 793 wasn’t the first Viking raid, but it’s considered the start of the Viking Age because it so galvanized the attention of Europe. At the time, Scandinavia was settled by a mix of tribal groups ruled by local chieftains. A growing population made land more valuable and prompted the adventurous, restless, and ambitious to look abroad, where

treasure stolen on raids could buy land, power, and status or fund a bride price so that a Viking warrior could marry. Gold and silver were easily transported and stored, making them much more convenient to trade than livestock or land. While the Vikings were at times brutal, it was a violent time all over Europe. The collapse of the Roman Empire had shifted the power balance between peoples and led to a breakdown of law and order in many places. Even churches sometimes engaged in warfare, with much jockeying for position between rivals.

At first the raids were small scale, consisting of just a few boats, but over the centuries they increased greatly in size. When Vikings laid siege to Paris in 845, they had a flotilla of 120 ships; when they attacked Constantinople in 907, they had two thousand. For three centuries they dominated the consciousness of Europe; even if you hadn't been attacked, the threat was always out there, particularly if you lived close to water.

The classic image of Vikings is of helmeted warriors from the mountains and fjords of Norway, setting out in dragon-headed boats to raid the coasts of England and Ireland. But there were also Vikings from the flatter lands of Sweden and Denmark (though those national boundaries would come later). They weren't just raiders, either, but also merchants, engineers, colonizers, mercenaries, and explorers. They were the consummate opportunists, constantly on the lookout for their next lucky break, whether it came through friendly or violent means. Depending on how you squint at the historical record, they were either warrior merchants or merchant warriors.

The word *Viking* comes from the Old Norse *vikingr*, meaning raider or pirate. It could also be used as a verb: to go *a-viking* meant to venture out seeking wealth. Most Scandinavians of the day were not Vikings but instead poor farmers who scraped out a precarious existence. A more accurate term for Scandinavians during this period is the Norse, though in modern-day parlance we tend to call them all Vikings, which is a disservice to the majority of people who stayed home and behaved themselves (in fact, perhaps no more than 5 or 10

percent of the Norse participated in raiding). And even those who were true Vikings often had raiding as a part-time occupation, which they did during the summer months after the crops were planted—similar to schoolteachers today who do painting jobs during the summer to make extra money, only with swords.

The Vikings went *a-viking* to different regions, depending on where their homeland was. From Denmark, they sailed primarily to England, where they made money both by raiding and from protection money, which local rulers paid in huge sums to keep them away. One indication of how successful they were is that archaeologists have found six times as many medieval English coins in Scandinavia as they have in England. The Vikings of western Norway, meanwhile, headed to Ireland and Scotland, including the Shetland and Orkney Islands, which they dominated for seven centuries. Many of the residents of the islands to this day have closer cultural ties to Norway than to Great Britain.

By the height of the Viking Age, the Norse roamed all over mainland Europe, using its rivers as their highways. Because theirs was primarily an oral culture, much of what we know about them comes from the people they raided, whose accounts of them are hardly unbiased. Appearing off the coastline without warning, they struck with brutal swiftness and then left before defenses could be mounted.

What made the raiders of the North so devastating sprang in large part from their ships. The people of Scandinavia had long been adept at ship building, but during the seventh century they developed a new style of vessel, warships that were long and sleek, with upward-thrusting prows at either end. Men scoured the forests to find trees with just the right curve and then further shaped the wood to precisely fit their needs. Using axes, they took advantage of the natural grain of the wood to give the planks optimal flexibility and strength. A single mast up to 60 feet tall stood in the center of each boat, carrying as much as 1,000 square feet of sail. The crew (who typically numbered between thirty and eighty men) could also

row as needed, their overlapping shields arranged on the sides of the boat.

Viking shipwrights made technological improvements that included a keel, a kind of backbone for the boat formed from the wood of a single tree. The boat itself was built with overlapping planks of wood, which allowed the vessel to flex in rough seas. A Viking warship could travel up to 15 knots (about 17 miles per hour) and navigate even small rivers. In the hands of skilled sailors, the Viking longboats were so maneuverable that they were said to be almost alive.

And as if all these innovations weren't enough, the Viking longboats had dragon's heads on the prows, which they believed protected them from evil spirits. The animals' coiled necks and piercing gaze could be seen from a long distance, announcing the fact that the boat was filled with equally fierce and bold warriors. It's no wonder the people who lived by the sea and along rivers were terrified by the sight of them.

As traders, however, the Norse had a less confrontational approach. Swedish Vikings crossed the Baltic Sea and then wound their way by river through dense forests to reach large trading centers such as Constantinople and Baghdad, where they sold luxury goods that included furs, walrus ivory, and amber. Some became settlers on the way, giving up their wandering ways to make new homes with wives and families they'd brought with them from Scandinavia. The Norse had such a strong influence on the lands to the east that the word *Russia* may be derived from *Rus*, the name of a tribe of Swedish Vikings. *Rus* itself is related to the Old Norse word for "rower," referring to men who rowed boats. Many Russians continue to take pride in their Viking heritage, viewing it as one of the wellsprings of strength in their history.

In Constantinople, the Vikings so impressed the Byzantine emperors that they recruited them for their elite bodyguard, the Varangian Guards. Partly it was because of their fighting prowess and impressive physical presence, but their outsider status also made them less susceptible to corruption and the political intrigues of the court. The Viking graffiti that I saw in

Hagia Sophia might well have been scratched into the marble by one of these guards, taking a break from his duties while the emperor worshiped.

## THE ENGLISH VIKINGS

The tunic-clad, bearded man who greeted me at the entrance to the Jorvik Viking Centre in the English city of York seemed oddly genial for a Viking. “Wait just a minute, luv, for these ladies to enter,” he said to me, waving through a group of white-haired pensioners in front of me.

Amused by his politeness, I wondered how a real Viking warrior would have reacted when a group of strangers tried to enter his home. It wouldn’t take much to rob the entire lot of us, though some of the women in the group ahead of me did look like they could wield an umbrella with considerable force.

Jorvik draws visitors from around the world because it’s one of the best-preserved Viking Age settlements ever found. Archaeologists discovered it under the streets of a neighborhood in York in the 1970s. Over several years they gradually uncovered houses, workshops, and backyards dating back to the tenth century. Thousands of items were recovered, from pottery shards and pieces of jewelry to organic remains, ones that typically decay quickly but which were unusually well-preserved by the moist and peaty soil of the area. Textiles, timbers, animal bones, seeds, pollen, plants, and parasite eggs gave researchers insights into the diet and health of Jorvik’s residents and the climate of the region.

Ivar the Boneless gets the credit for bringing the Vikings to this part of England. (The Norse often gave brutally honest nicknames to their leaders, and Ivar’s name refers either to a physical disability or to his lack of prowess in bed.) Beginning in 866, Ivar conquered much of northern England, leading a group of warriors that the native Anglo-Saxons called the Great Heathen Army. After years of warfare, the country was divided into a southern kingdom ruled by Anglo-Saxon kings

and a northern region called the Danelaw controlled by the Vikings. Jorvik became its capital city and an important trade hub linked to the rest of the Viking world.

After the completion of the dig, the Jorvik Viking Centre was created to tell about the remarkable discoveries made here. Its first room has a glass floor that allowed me to peer into a recreation of the building foundations of a Norse neighborhood from ten centuries ago. Seeing the modest size of the homes and how closely they were packed together, I concluded that the Vikings certainly weren't living in luxury in Jorvik, at least according to modern-day standards.

A guide dressed in Viking attire gave me a more nuanced picture. People came here from throughout the Norse world to trade, visit, and settle, he said. They spoke multiple languages and bartered goods that included walrus tusks from the Arctic, silks from Asia, and amber from the Baltics. They were craftsmen, too, creating wooden cups and bowls, metal objects such as knives and jewelry, and leather goods.

Hearing his enthusiasm for the topic, I asked about his own background. He told me that he was an actor by training and had been hired as a performer during the Jorvik Viking Festival that's held each February. That experience made him curious about the history of the Norse, sparking a fascination that led to his current job. I told him about having contracted my own version of the Viking bug, then asked him what interested him most about the Norse.

"I'm intrigued by the mysteriousness of the Viking Age and by how much we still don't know about them," he said. "And I think this site is especially interesting because of the blend of cultures here. These were pagan Vikings living among Anglo-Saxon Christians, and they traded with people all over the known world. In some ways this site is just ordinary streets and homes with nothing grand about them at all, but once you start digging into the details, an entire world comes to life."

In the next exhibit, I boarded a gondola-like car that took me right into the middle of that world: a Jorvik neighborhood that's been recreated using information gleaned from

the archaeological dig, complete with animatronic figures, thatched-roof buildings, realistic-looking mud and grime, and piped-in smells that included the unmistakable odor of manure.

Though it was a bit cheesy, a sort of Disney-theme-park-of-the-Middle-Ages, as I glided through the streets, I couldn't help but be swept up in the illusion of traveling back in time. I nodded my head in greeting when a hunter hailed a welcome in Old Norse and then observed other residents of the neighborhood at work and leisure, including an Arabic trader selling silks, a blacksmith teaching his son how to sharpen a knife, a couple of fishermen discussing their catch of the day, and a woman walking slowly with a crutch (her skeleton, I learned later, showed that she had a degenerative joint disease). If you gave these people a bath, shaved the men, and put them in modern dress, they wouldn't look much different from the people walking the streets of York today.

Stepping out of the time machine, I next toured a gallery that displayed some of the actual artifacts found at the site, which ranged from a cowrie shell from the Red Sea and skates made from horse leg bones to a piece of fossilized Viking poop displayed in a lighted case like it was a precious jewel (historians get excited about the darndest things). I can now report that while many things have changed in the past thousand years, human excrement is not one of them.

Another display, however, gave me an idea of just how different my world was from that of the Vikings. An interpreter showed me a Norse comb made of deer antler and then a modern recreation of it that had been crafted by a staff member. "It took him a hundred hours," she said. "It's no wonder combs were luxury items during the Viking Age." That explained the hairstyles of those who lived in the Jorvik neighborhood, I thought, peering at the item with interest. I would never look at a cheap plastic comb in the same way again.

But to me the most intriguing display was on the Middleton Cross, a tenth-century grave marker found about thirty miles from York. While its shape is clearly Christian, on one side it has a well-armed Viking warrior and, on the other side, a serpent

that's thought to represent the dragon Nidhogg that gnaws at the foot of the world tree Yggdrasil. Above both figures are the interlaced ribbons that are common in Scandinavian designs. The markings reflect the fact that many of the Vikings in York eventually became Christian, despite their comrades' fondness for raiding monasteries. I imagined the Viking family that had ordered the carving of the original cross. "Put something on it to honor Dad," they said. "He so loved going into battle."

The final displays in the museum completed the story of the Norse in the north of England. Around 954, Eric Bloodaxe, the last Viking king in Jorvik, was defeated by the King of Wessex from the south. The final expulsion of the Vikings from England came in 1066, when their army was defeated by the Saxons at the Battle of Stamford Bridge eight miles from York—though by that time many Vikings had intermarried with the locals and were well-integrated into the city that their ancestors had conquered. They would remain while their comrades returned to the homeland.

Just three weeks after the defeat of those Vikings, William the Conqueror (himself of Viking stock) became king of England at the Battle of Hastings, an event that is generally thought to mark the end of the Viking Age. After that, the Norse stayed home, their raiding days behind them for a variety of reasons. Most European countries now had standing armies to defend themselves. Isolated outposts invested in fortifications, and some of the oh-so-tempting-to-raid monasteries just gave up and moved inland. Some Vikings became Christian and were told by their priests that raiding wasn't an appropriate career choice anymore. And in many places they simply blended into the local scene. In France they became Normans, a word that derives from *North-men*. In the British Isles they intermarried with the native English, Irish, Welsh, and Scottish—though I suspect that when an especially tall, strapping, blond-haired lad towered over his mates, there were some who felt an instinctual raising of the hair on the back of their necks.

The Viking influence lingers to this day both in England and in the English language. The many towns in the north

of England ending in *-thorpe*, *-ness*, *-kirk*, *-keld*, and *-thwaite* bear witness to their Norse origins. And Jorvik (which is pronounced “your-vik” in Old Norse) later became York, which in turn lent its name to New York in the United States. Those who walk beneath its gleaming skyscrapers are linked by history to the smelly streets of Jorvik.

Our language bears witness to these Viking colonizers as well, because hundreds of Old Norse words became part of English. Some clearly reflect Viking predilections and preoccupations, from *berserk*, which comes from “bear shirt,” a reference to the furs that warriors often wore into battle, to *ransack*, *club*, *knife*, *slaughter*, *anger*, *die*, *rotten*, and *ugly*. But there are kinder, gentler Viking words as well, from *husband* and *skill* to *thrift*, plus indispensable ordinary words that include *skin*, *sky*, *ball*, and *leg*.

Like the Norse neighborhood that lies underneath the streets of modern-day York, the influence of the Vikings is part of our cultural heritage, waiting to be discovered if we dig deep enough.

## OUTLAW KIN

As I pondered my visit with the Vikings of York, I kept coming back to the most disturbing thing I saw in the recreated neighborhood in Jorvik: a slave woman with bound hands. Her plight made me reflect on the larger problem of what to do with badly behaving relatives in genealogy. Being related to the colorful and scandalous is one thing (think of those societies for the illegitimate offspring of British royalty or accused witches, for example), but ties to the cruel and barbarous are quite another. Unfortunately, we all have them in our family trees—the slave traders and mob bosses, the murderers and embezzlers, the ones who succeeded by violence and graft and all-around nastiness. Even relatives who belong to a political party different from ours may elicit heartburn. Linked to us by blood alone, they’re people we’d hesitate to invite in the door if they arrived on our front step.

I'm lucky in that most of my nefarious relatives lived a thousand years ago (though I must admit to being a little sorry that the wealth they'd accumulated from raiding has long since evaporated). Instead, my more immediate ancestors were poor farmers eking out a living in Norway and rural Iowa. They were quiet and circumspect, people who thought that standing out in any way was a serious breach of propriety. If my clan had a family motto, it would be *Quid Cogitant* (Latin for "What would they think?")—a far cry indeed from the wild warriors of the North.

But even though the Vikings lived many centuries ago, meaning that my own genetic connection to them is admittedly tenuous, as I began to research my family history, I realized I needed to face some hard truths. I admired much about them—their courage and strength, their sense of adventure and chameleon-like ability to adapt to whatever circumstances they found themselves in—but their darker side is undeniable.

Their participation in the slave trade, especially, is well documented. Ever the shrewd businessmen, on their raids Norsemen often captured people either for their own use or to sell. These unlucky souls became *thralls*, an Old Norse word for slave (the phrase "to be enthralled" contains an echo of this meaning). Thralls built ships, wove cloth, cared for children, tended crops and animals, and satisfied the sexual desires of their owners. Some women enjoyed a slightly better fate when they became the wives of Viking men, who would choose mates from among their captives when there was a shortage of females in their home territories. But having to marry the person who'd abducted you from your home, of course, wasn't an enviable fate either.

One of the most compelling stories about a Viking slave comes from the Arab explorer Ibn Fadlan, the man who admired the physiques of the Vikings he encountered along the Volga River. In the 920s, he observed the burial of a chieftain in what is now Russia. Ibn Fadlan's long and detailed description conveys his fascinated horror at the proceedings. He recounts that after a slave girl "volunteered" to be sacrificed, she was plied

with alcohol and forced to have sex with the chieftain's friends. Then she was led by a woman (appropriately called the Angel of Death) to a pavilion where the chieftain's body lay. After she entered the enclosure, men standing outside beat their shields so that her screams couldn't be heard as two men throttled her neck with a rope and the woman stabbed her repeatedly. Then the bodies of the girl and her master, along with a half-dozen sacrificed animals and an array of weapons, clothing, and furs, were placed inside a boat that had been pulled up on the shore. As a crowd watched, the entire lot was set ablaze.

It's sobering to realize that this is an example of Vikings on their *best* behavior at a funeral. It was a violent age, to be sure, and there were even worse cultural and religious practices in those days, but the story is still a reminder that we shouldn't romanticize the Vikings. Even after a thousand years, their actions have the power to shock us.

My uneasiness with parts of my heritage is hardly unique. Many people struggle to come to terms with the disreputable and sometimes evil doings of their ancestors. The close relatives of Adolf Hitler, for example, reportedly made a pact not to have children because they didn't want to continue the genetic inheritance of one of history's worst dictators. Others have learned that their ancestors were involved with organized crime, participated in genocide, or were mass murderers.

In the United States, many have been shocked to discover that their relatives kept slaves or participated in the transport of captives from Africa, knowledge that for too long was either ignored, denied, or minimized in genealogical research. Increasingly people are acknowledging the harsh reality of what was done by some of their forebears and are working to find ways to help atone for historical wrongs.

Genealogy, in short, makes it difficult to claim the moral high ground. If we go far enough back, all of us have many examples of both the oppressed and the oppressor in our lineages (and sometimes, of course, they were both, as people who are abused tend to abuse others when they get the chance). It's hard enough for contemporary people to keep out of ethical

quagmires, but the brutal realities of life during most of human history meant that one's survival often depended on cruelty and violence. Slavery, in particular, wound its poisonous way through many cultures, from ancient Greece and the Ottoman Empire to the Aztecs and Mayans of Central America. Even today, millions of people around the world continue to live in bondage as victims of human trafficking—and the descendants of those perpetrating this evil will one day have to come to terms with their legacy.

A tendency to smaller-scale misbehaviors can also run in families. From alcoholism to abuse, destructive patterns often pass from generation to generation. While it can be disheartening to realize you come from a long line of people who've struggled with addiction or perpetuated abuse, it can also be liberating. Knowledge, after all, is power. Multiple forms of dysfunction may have existed for generations in your family, but those destructive patterns can stop with you. And while it's nice to find ancestors who served in the French Resistance or who were part of the Underground Railroad, sometimes the best thing that can come from genealogical research is a clear view of all the crap that's accumulated in the clan over the centuries, floating like turds in the family gene pool.

If you want to climb onto a perch from which you can judge the rest of the world's iniquity, in other words, then genealogy is not the hobby for you. Research on the twists and turns of our lineages reinforces the perennial truth that within all of us is the potential for good and evil. Given the right circumstances—economic hardship, war, disease, and famine—we too may compromise, cheat, or commit violence.

“The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart,” wrote Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who, having suffered through the Soviet Gulag, knew very well the truth of which he spoke.

When we ponder our family trees, some humility is required.