

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast, I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today we're talking with Nancy Marie Brown, author of *The Real Valkyrie: The Hidden History of Viking Warrior Women* about shield maidens and women more broadly in Viking society. So let's start with the women that you have called Hervor and how you've chosen to tell her story.

NMB: When I started writing this book. I thought I was gonna write a book about bones, about archeology and how graves are sexed and how we find out things from bones that we dig up out of the ground. And I kind of got this inspiration way back in 2015. I was watching a friend of mine, Guðný Zoega, who's an archeologist excavating this medieval graveyard in Iceland. And she was telling me of all the things you can learn from bones, how they can tell you about battle wounds and diseases and how tall a person was and what she ate and where she came from and all this. Well, so I'm watching all day while Guðný is doing this excavation. And most of the time she's just sitting and looking at the bones, she's just thinking. And what I realized is that once she dug up these bones and put them in a box, no one else could ever do it. No one else could ever repeat this experiment. So archeology is a science, it uses the scientific method, but it's not reproducible. What she was doing was thinking it through, taking a lot of notes, taking a lot of pictures, making drawings, all this sort of stuff so that other people could reconstruct her thought processes and decide if they agreed with her or not.

So I wanted to write about women warriors. I wanted to write about valkyries, not just any women. So I went to an archeological conference in Florida, it turned out, because Neil Price from Uppsala was going to be there. And I scheduled an interview with him and he's written a lot about valkyries. And I said, "I want to write about valkyries, but I want to include archeology as well as literature. And I'm looking for an archeological dig that is a woman's burial, a woman warrior, if possible. And that the lead archeologist is a woman." And he gets this really funny expression on his face. This is 2015. He says, "I can't talk about that yet."

Well, this was the project that they were working on right then was the Birka grave, BJ 581, which has always been described as the ultimate Viking warrior burial. Now, the graves at Birka on this island in Sweden were excavated in 1878 and there were like 1,100 graves. Many of them, the bones had completely disintegrated and all you had was a few teeth. Well, this one, you had almost all the bones of the skeleton and you had more weapons than are any other Viking grave anywhere else in the world. So when this burial was excavated in 1878, the assumption was, this was a man. This was the ultimate Viking warrior. And there's drawings of this guy in the classical textbooks, this red bearded, hunky Viking with all of his weapons. Well, between 1878 and 2017, there were several bone specialists, osteoarchaeologists who looked at the bones and said, "you know, these are really slender. These could be female bones." And oh, no, no, no, that couldn't possibly be it, because this is the ultimate Viking warrior. So this was one of many graves that the group in Uppsala decided to do DNA testing on. And they got really good, strong DNA results. And it was clearly a female in this grave. So they published this paper in 2017, Female Viking warrior confirmed by genetics. So they were pointing out the fact that two other specialists had thought that these bones were female. But nobody believed it. I mean, this paper came out in 2017. It made the news everywhere in the world. The researchers expected to be applauded, like, "oh, look at what science has done for us. It has proved that, you know, like Lagertha in the Vikings TV series was a real person." Well,

they got so much blowback from this paper. So many negative remarks and comments, even from their colleagues, who they expected to support them, that Neil told me they pretty much had to go see shrinks, because it was hard to get their work done to be constantly told, "you did something wrong. You must have tested the wrong bones. You must have made a mistake." So they went through everything again, and they published another longer paper in 2019 that gave more context. They called it Viking warrior women: reassessing Birka chamber grave BJ 581. And I haven't been in touch with them since then, but from what I hear, it's still not a done deal. Yeah, there's been other books published since then on Viking women. And people are saying, "well, there might have been one warrior out there. But obviously, if this person really was a warrior, it's some kind of strange fluke." They're not seeing this essential point that we don't know whose bones are in any grave. We have no way of telling if the person buried is male or female until we test it. And you can test it by looking at the bones, by comparing them to bones from a similar time period and a similar state of degradation, a similar place, because of the differences of nutrition. I mean, there's no ultimate scientific standard for what's a male bones and female bones. It's all just comparative. Or you can do DNA. And DNA is really kind of clear. The bones in this grave are female.

AT: So it is fascinating to me, because what I'm hearing is that we have rational, scientific-minded people who were then shocked that other supposedly rational, scientific-minded people allowed their own biases to interfere with the science because all of this blowback that they're getting, it's not just from randos on the internet. It's also, as you were saying from their colleagues. And the thing is, DNA aside, previous osteologist aside, there are records of shieldmaidens in the literature. So it's not unheard of for there to be Viking women warriors in the conversation.

NMB: There's always been this competition or conflict between archeology and literature. Archeology is science, it is real, it is true. And literature, "well, you know, it's just poetry, it's mythology, it's interpretation." Well, you know, the more I looked into archeology, the more I realized how important interpretation is in that science. And recently, archaeologists are using literature more to understand what it is they're digging up out of the ground. There's still not this sense though that the women in literature, in the sagas or in the poems, are as real as the men in the sagas and the same poems. You have this sense that we know the warriors were men, actually had a scholar tell me that. And we know that women were confined to the house and their domain of power was inside the threshold. There's this term in Viking studies, *innan stokks* - inside the threshold. So they ruled food and clothing and they maybe kept the genealogies and decided who could get married and things like that, but men were in control of everything outside the house. So they had all the politics, all the trade, all the travel, all the exploring. And this gender definition really does not come from the literature. What it comes from is the world of 19th century Europe, the Victorian age when Viking studies began. And at that time, women were confined to the house. They were told that their job is to take care of the children, the kitchen and the church. So you get this dichotomy. You have "men are symbolized by their sword, but women are symbolized by their keys" and people are looking for keys in graves. Or when you're sexing a grave, if the grave has, they call this sexing by metal, if the grave has

weapons in it, it's got to be a male grave. And if the grave has jewelry in it, it's got to be a female grave. So this concept of how the world should be set up, this Victorian concept of what is the man's role and the woman's role has been overlaid on both the literature we have of the Viking period and the archeology. Now, there's been a group of people studying and they found out that women aren't buried with keys like ever, there's like 143 keys compared to 3000 swords. And some of those keys are in men's graves. So it's not clear cut. There's no statistics behind this. And, it's just, where do we get these ideas and why do we hang on to them?

AT: It is fascinating the degree to which some academics, which again, these are the people who are meant to be objective in theory, but in practice, everybody has their own biases and some allow those to cloud their judgment more than others. But it is fascinating how you will see like the same people who insist that Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad* were fact-based, but then will refuse to acknowledge that Amazons likely existed in some form. Because they can't explain away DNA. And I think that's why they got so mad was the osteologist saying these are slender frame, you know, that they could say, "oh, no, it's probably just a small guy." If they can't deny it, they just get mad. And there was one where someone was trying to claim that a woman buried with weapons was, "oh, well, maybe that was her son was a warrior and he was trying to honor her by burying her with his weapons." And it's just the logical hoops they have to jump through rather than just accepting that women could be warriors is baffling to me.

NMB: The argument that I heard several times and that just blows me away for how complicated, convoluted an argument this is, is that BJ 581, this woman, is buried in like a house underground. It's a chamber and she is surrounded by weapons. She has two horses with bridle and saddle. You know, she's got everything. She is the center. The sword is where she could reach it with her hand. The spear is where she could reach it with her hand. So the argument is that there were really two people in the burial. She was buried on top of the man and she was a slave that was buried just as one of his possessions. But her bones are in perfect shape and his all degraded. And I'm going like, "really? How would that work?" A slight variation on this is that this famous warrior died somewhere else. But all of his weapons were brought home and his slave was sacrificed and surrounded by his weapons. But she's not in any way posed as a sacrifice. She's posed sitting like maybe on her saddle because the way the stirrups are underneath her. So she's sitting on her saddle with her weapons right there where she would have kept them in real life.

So this idea that you have to somehow explain away the woman, not just look at the grave and say, "whoa, there are women warriors." This concept that women were symbolized by the keys and men were symbolized by the swords. Somebody went and did a study of the sagas and the poetry and the laws and found out that in all the texts we have in Old Norse that she could go through, there are three women with keys. Three women mentioned having keys. And actually, one of them is not a woman. It is the god Thor in drag. It's this really bawdy poem and it's actually dated to after 1270. So we're talking 250 years after the end of the Viking Age, but this is Thor dressed up as a bride trying to get his hammer back from the giant. Another one is a Danish marriage law, again from the 1240s. And then there's a saga recounting a feud from the 1240s that refers to the housewife's keys. So all of these are 13th century, these are medieval

texts. And we don't know if there's any relation at all to the Viking Age.

Then you look at the texts that mention women warriors. I came up with over 20 in the sagas and adding to a few that Neil Price had come up with, 53 named women warriors in the poems and the mythology. These are all women who are named and described and their exploits are described. So some of these women in the texts are clearly human. Some of them are semi-human. Some of them are supernatural, goddesses. But then you have to look at the men in these same texts. We have the berserks who cannot be killed by iron. Iron doesn't bite on them. We have the half-trolls, we have the dragons slayers. We have the shapeshifters who turn into wolves. We have, some of these are the same person. There's the saga character Kveldulf, whose name means evening wolf. And he's not only a berserker, he's probably a werewolf. He's also the father of Skalla-Grímr, who's the father of Egill Skallagrímsson, who is the ancestor of many living Icelanders. So these are all considered real people. And yet he's a werewolf and a berserk. And when you look at how the women are treated, if the woman has any, well, any warrior woman is considered to be not real, supernatural. Because of course we know women can't be warriors. You get back to that same circular argument that women can't be warriors. So we have, like I said, over 20 of them. And some of these are in historical sources. Some of them are in the family sagas, some of them are in the more legendary sagas, some of them are in poems, some of them are myths, but they're all equally realistic or unrealistic to the men in those same texts. And there's not really that big a difference except in our modern reading of it. So they're all over the place.

One of the more interesting people is this Irish girl called the Red Girl who appears in the Irish history, the war of the Irish with the foreigners. And she led her fleet against Munster in the 10th century. She or another person is also called the Red Girl in Saxo Grammaticus's history of the Danes. And we can't really say if it's the same woman or not, but Saxo also gives us a whole group of warrior women. Stikla, Hervör, Visna, Lagertha, people probably know her, Alfhild and Gudrith. Visna is described as a woman hard through and through and a highly expert warrior who was the king's standard bearer in the battle, which means she held the flag, that she could only fight with one hand. She was targeted by the Swedish champion, Starkather, but she did not drop the banner until he cut off her hand. And Starkather himself was then forced to leave the field, "with a lung protruding from his chest, his neck cut right to the middle and a hand minus one finger." So he didn't get off very easily, you know?

Saxo also describes Lagertha as a skilled female fighter with locks flowing loose over her shoulder, she would do battle in the forefront of the most valiant warriors, everyone marveled at her matchless feats. The hero Ragnar Lothbrok himself was impressed, swearing he had gained the victory by the might of one woman.

Now you also have Queen Gunnhild, Mother of Kings, of Norway, and she appears in several of the histories as well as in 11 of the Icelandic sagas. One historian of the period writing at that time calls the years 961 to 973 when she ruled Norway alongside her sons as the age of Gunnhild. And the stories make clear that she accompanied the armies and devised their war strategy. In Heimskringla, Snorri Sturluson, even hints that she might have killed her rival King Hákon. At a crucial moment in the battle, says Snorri, an arrow of an unusual kind "hit King Hákon in the arm just below the shoulder. And it is said by many that Gunnhild's servant, the one named Kisping, ran through the crowd shouting, make way for the king's slayer and

shot the arrow at King Hákon. But others say no one knows who shot it.” So there's this really sort of vague concept that Gunnhild's own servant might have been saying, “make way for the queen, she's going to shoot.” But we don't really know who actually shot it.

Snorri also tells the story of Queen Asa, who avenged her own rape and the murders of her father and brother by arranging the killing of King Gudrod. And when the king's warriors confronted her, here's this woman with a one year old baby surrounded by warriors. They confront her, Snorri writes, and “she did not deny that it was her plan.” Then she took her infant son and left, returning at once to her ancestral home where she reigned over the kingdom for 17 years. So there's a lot that Snorri leaves out of this story. Here you have this woman surrounded by Viking warriors who are loyal to her husband, who she hated because he raped her. And she wins, she somehow gets a ship, she somehow sails south, she somehow reigns over her father's kingdom. So they must have gone with her. She must have become the leader of this Viking band, which is really quite cool.

AT: I wonder if that had anything to do with the fact that I assume the one-year-old baby that she was holding was her child by the rape of their leader?

NMB: There was no primogenitor in Viking society. You elected your king from the pool of royal sons. You know, there were always more possibilities than just one. It was never just the oldest son of the king. So the fact that she had a child by him might have protected her a little bit, but might have also made her a bigger target. “We've got to get rid of that kid so that somebody else can be king without him growing up and taking over,” which he does.

You also have Queen Olga of Kiev in the Russian Primary Chronicle. And one of the things that I point out in this book is how similar the culture is from Sweden all the way through the Baltic to Kiev. It's one Viking culture there. And Queen Olga does not wield the weapons herself, but she does lead the army and devise the war strategy, including one battle that avenges the death of her husband and another one that destroys a city. And she reigned over the Rus for 10 years. When her son is killed at the Battle of the Danube in 971, there's a historian who writes in the Synopsis of Byzantine History that the victorious army “found women lying among the fallen, equipped like men; women who had fought against the Romans together with the men.” So you have another historian writing right around the year 1000 of women warriors in this Viking culture.

So in the poems, you have quite a number of them. You have the goddess Freya who rides to war in a chariot pulled by lions. Now people say they are cats, but you think, what does that word “cat” mean? I'd prefer to say they were lions, mountain lions. She claims half the dead and oversees an endless battle in which the wounded are healed overnight to resume their fighting at dawn. Then there's the giant Skadi, who when her father is killed by the god Loki's tricks “took up her helmet and ring mail, byrnie and weapons of war” and set off to avenge him. Now you might say, well, she's a giant. Yeah, and she ends up marrying a god. So, what does species mean back in the Viking age? We don't know, all the goddesses marry humans. The humans marry giants. The giants marry gods and goddesses and they're all sort of intermingled.

AT: And when we're going back to the people who will bend over backwards, trying to insist that

the *Iliad* is based in fact, there was an actual Trojan war, but if we're saying, "oh, the presence of gods and goddesses invalidates the entire story," well, I got something to tell you about Homer.

NMB: Exactly, exactly. And when you call someone a giant or a monster or a troll, is that just an insult because they are on the other side? Do you really, these people are never so big that you can't have sex with them. So it's like, what do you mean when you call somebody a troll? What do you mean when you call them a monster? Is this just a metaphor? We don't know these things. You know, we have come up with our own set of biases and ways of reading these old texts, but we don't really know how the people back then thought about it.

We have these two enslaved warriors in one of the Eddic poems, Fenja and Menja, who say, "as heroes, we were widely known. With keen spears, we cut blood from bone. Our blades were red." These are women. They're now slaves, but they were warriors. They were taken in battle. There's so many more. There's there's 51 valkyries named in the poems. And several of them are described as wearing helmets and ring mail and, "she struck another so he never got up again. She sent him to hell and her hands never shook." That is Gudrun in The Greenland Lay of Atli. So there's just a wealth of information of really strong women who fought when they had to. And again, some of these sagas are quite wild. They have dragons in them and they have flying horses and all kinds of weird things. But does that invalidate the idea that women were fighters just because there are wild things happening in the story? If you look at a lot of the sagas, there are, as I said, men turning into wolves and things like that. And that doesn't invalidate all the male warriors. That doesn't say that they couldn't have been real people.

AT: I think as well, when we're talking about the fact that myths are a reflection of the ideas and the values of the people whose culture they represent. If we have a story that is clearly not true because it's got dragons and gods and we can agree that from a historicity standpoint, this probably didn't actually happen because of the nature of the characters and their species and whatnot. Even if we say these stories probably didn't happen, at the very least, not the way it says that they did, the fact that the myths are representing women in warrior capacities. And you see women warriors in mythologies all over the world. Again, this is not an anomaly. If we say those myths represent the culture that made them and the myths have women warriors, then that says that that culture was comfortable with the idea of women warriors, certainly more comfortable than apparently a lot of academics today.

NMB: A lot of people today, yes, absolutely. There's some of the warriors in the sagas though that are really down to earth. The one that I use to name BJ 581, Hervor, there are two warrior women in the saga of Hervor with that name. And the first is the famous warrior in the poem, Hervor's Song, which is a poem in the saga. And she opens her father's grave to retrieve his heirloom sword. She's described as "strong as a man." And "as soon as she was able, she practiced more with a bow and a sword and a shield than at sewing or embroidery." Then, "taking a warrior's gear and weapons, she went alone to a place where there were some Vikings." She joined their band and "after a little while ... became the leader." I mean, that's not fantastic at all. It's just, here was this strong young girl. She practiced, she learned, she went and proved herself. She fought.

The second Hervor in this saga is the commander of the border fortress between the Huns and the Goths. And her brothers are on, one is on the Huns' side and one is on the Goth side. And of her when she dies fighting, she was said to have been happier in battle than other women were when chatting with their boyfriends. You know, she just like to go out and fight.

AT: I mean, I can think of plenty of dudes that I would rather go into battle than have a conversation with them.

NMB: Right. And there's another one called Thornbjorg who grows up practicing martial arts. And she becomes the king and a war leader. And at the end of the saga, she commands the army that rescues her husband, King Hrolf from the King of Ireland. And there's this beautifully dramatic scene on the battlefield where she comes and rescues him. And it's from his point of view. And the saga says, "before him stood a most warlike man, fully armed. The man took off his helmet and stepped back—and King Hrolf realized it was Queen Thornbjorg." So he doesn't even recognize his wife on the battlefield. She comes up and says, "here, I'm rescuing you" and she has to take off her helmet. So he's like, "oh, it's you."

I mean, it is true that there are more male warriors named in the sagas than there are women, but-

AT: But the sagas were also written by men.

NMB: Who is writing? Who is writing, yeah. And what's their purpose for writing?

AT: And what are their personal biases and-

NMB: What are their personal biases? These sagas were written, in a Christian society, hundreds of years after the Viking Age, by people who wanted to project a certain, vision of their ancestors. So they chose what to keep and what to leave out. And the fact that we have some of these women warriors does say to me that there's probably were many more of them.

AT: I mean, the fact that we have any despite all those biases, yeah.

NMB: Exactly.

AT: It's interesting when we get into the historicity. So, did this person actually exist or not? There is so much more challenge on that. And you see this in Wikipedia, for example, where, you know, it'll say this woman *may* have existed. And you see that so much more with the women. And in fact, one of your other books is called *Far Traveler: Voyages of a Viking Woman*, and it's about Gudrid the Far Traveler. And the way that I first heard about that book of yours was a Smithsonian Magazine article that was titled something like, "did a woman named Gudrid *really* do this?" And it's not the first of its kind that I've seen where the title of an article about a whole book about, "yes, this woman did the thing." The article goes on to say, "yes, she probably did the thing." And yet the first thing you see is this framing questioning the historicity.

NMB: It's everywhere. It's everywhere like that. When men do things, we assume that it's true. Everybody who knows anything about the Viking explorations of North America knows that Leif Erikson, Leifr Eiríksson, came to America, North America, 500 years before Columbus. So we all know. There is in the United States a Leif Erikson day before Columbus Day. If you read the saga, and the saga again was written down in like the 1300s or 13th century and the exploration of North America happened right around the year 1000. If you read this saga as carefully as I did to write that book, you realize that Leif Erikson ended up in the New World by accident. He was blown off course. He stayed one winter because he had to. And then he went home to Greenland and he never went back. Great explorer. He told a story of this new land and the resources that could be found there, the tall trees, the salmon.

So other people in Greenland got excited about going. One of them was his brother. His brother was married to an Icelandic woman named Gudrid. Gudrid insisted on going. They set off, they never got there. They were tossed about at sea all summer, is what the saga says.

And they barely made it back to Greenland. All the men on the voyage died. And she alone survived and took their bones from one settlement to the other to be buried in the church. So here's this woman who's practically a teenager. She's tried to go to Vinland, North America and failed. Okay, if you're thinking about, Viking women are supposed to stay at home. Viking women's power is in food and clothing and that sort of thing. There is no possible reason why she should then try again to go to Vinland. She has been widowed. So now she has inherited her husband's goods. Her father has died. So she has inherited her father's ship. She meets this Icelander who has come to Greenland with two ships with no intention of going farther. And she convinces him that the two of them, she put together an expedition with their three ships and they should go to the new world, which they do. And they stay for three years. She has a baby there. And then they get into trouble with the Native Americans. They are so completely outnumbered. There is no chance that they're going to survive. And so they take their three ships and go home. Only one ship makes it, two of them sink. And she happens to be on that ship. So is her husband, Karlsefni. And they make it back to Greenland. They go to Norway. They sell their goods there. They come back to Iceland. They're rich. They set up another farm. She has another child. And then when she's an old woman, she decides, "I need a new adventure. I'm going to go to Rome and visit the Pope."

This is all in the saga. And people have tried to say, "oh, well, she couldn't have done that because she's a woman. They never say that Leif Erikson couldn't have done it because he's a man. They never say that the people she went to Rome with, obviously there was more than just her, that they couldn't have done it. There's actually a couple of guest books in monasteries on the route between Denmark and Rome that have Icelandic names in them, Icelandic women's names. So we know that some women of this time period did actually successfully make this pilgrimage. Unfortunately, her name is not in any of these books, but there are similar ones. So, we have this story of this woman who did these amazing things who had no, she wasn't being dragged along. There was no reason she had to do this. And yet, she's dismissed and the men are given all credit. So that's why I had to write a book about it.

AT: As you should.



NMB: Yes. As writers, we always think before we start writing something, a book or an article, whatever it is, who is my audience and what is my purpose? If you're writing for children, you write in a different way than if you were writing for adults. We all know that. If you are writing for a political reason, you write in a different way than if you're writing for mere entertainment. So you look back at the sources we have on the Viking Age and you have to think, who is doing the writing? Why? What was their purpose? And who was their audience? When we look at the oldest texts, these are the poems we have, some of which were written in the Viking Age, and we know the names of the writers. We can say, okay, this person was writing this poem to get money from the king, to get reputation, for entertainment. As Snorri Sturluson says, you can't lie too obviously, or everyone will know that you're making fun of the king, rather than praising him, because you're giving him credit for stuff that he could not have done. So poetry is generally considered to be fairly accurate, but of course it's exaggerated. It's a praise song. So you can kind of figure out, okay, how much of this is true and how much isn't.

Well, then you get to the sagas. Well, who was writing down the sagas? We don't know in most cases, but we do know Snorri Sturluson himself wrote some of them, and I did a biography of Snorri and found out that he had a really bad relationship with women. He was separated from his mother when he was three years old and he was raised by men as far as we can tell. He was married off without his consent by his brother and even though his wife was rich, they probably didn't get along because he didn't stay in the marriage for very long. He had children with three other women. He might have loved one of them. We're not really sure. And he married off his daughters for political purposes and did not care if they were happy or not. When they came running home to Dad and says, "Dad, he beats me." He sent her back. Okay, here's a guy who doesn't have a good relationship with any of the women in his life, the one he loved died. And he's the one who is writing down the myths and the sagas that have told us most of what we know about how Vikings think and how kings were chosen and what the duties of a king were, what it was like to be a Viking.

So you look at, okay, and why was he doing this? He was doing this to make money, to get reputation, not to tell us a thousand years later, 800 years later, what it was like to be a Viking. So he's just an example of the sort of source problem that we have to deal with. And most of the sources we have for the Viking age, we cannot, we don't know anything about them. We don't know that much about Snorri himself, but we don't know anything about the ones called anonymous, obviously. Despite himself, I would think, Snorri gave us one example that I think really is one of the most important concepts when we're looking at gender roles in the Viking age, and that is the Norse creation myth. And he includes this in his Edda. And this is how it goes. "In the beginning, two driftwood logs, one elm and one ash, are found on the seashore by three wandering gods. The gods give the wood a human shape and bring it to life with blood, breath, and curious minds." Now, unlike the Christian creation myth where Eve is sort of an afterthought, she's fashioned from Adam's rib. In the Norse myth, Embla, the female, and Askr, the male, are equal. They are made at the same time, out of nearly the same stuff. They are as different as an ash tree and an elm tree. And they make a good team because the Vikings used ash wood for spears and oars, but they used elm wood for cart wheels and hunting bows. So both of these woods had uses in both peace and wartime. And I think the same was likely true about the men and the women of the Viking age, that they were equals. Their roles in society

were not decided by their gender, but based on other qualities among which I list ambition, ability, family ties, and wealth. So you have this window into what gender roles really could have been like in the Viking age when you look at the creation story.

AT: When we're looking at this refusal to believe that these women, at the very least, could have existed, or in specific instances, no this was a woman who was a warrior, not a... I'm sorry, the missing man theory that his bones just disintegrated for some unknown reason when hers were very well preserved. That's an incredible bending over backwards so hard he must have broke his back. Anyway, but there are so many women like this. So there was a Scythian warrior girl who was around 13, buried in Siberia, discovered in 1988, and assumed to be male for more than three decades until DNA testing was done in 2020. And there is a 2,000-year-old body found in Iran, which again, tests confirmed in 2004 that this was a woman. Several women in Cambodia with metal swords and helmets from between the 1st and 5th century. So there are so many examples of this. It's not an isolated incident, but every time you find one, they try to treat it like it is. And even within the Vikings, there was another woman discovered in Soler, Norway, that was identified as female. They said, "oh, she couldn't have been a warrior because of her gender," even though she was buried with weapons and a horse. And then in 2019, a CT scan showed that she died of a blow to the head, which of course could have been not war-related, but does seem to indicate that definitely could have been a battle injury.

NMB: If that DNA test had come out to say that the grave was male, it definitely would have been a battle injury. You can see how this bias just sort of infiltrates all of the thinking of how we interpret what we find or what we read. And I think it's really important that we confront that. When I wrote *The Real Valkyrie*, a lot of critics said, "you went too far. You are arguing farther than the data can take you. You're pushing this argument." And I said, "that's the point. I want to take this as far as I can." I am arguing the point that, okay, we have a DNA test here. Assuming the DNA test is correct, which I'm sure it is, assuming that this means she's a woman warrior, what was her life like? I wanted to figure that out. I wanted to present, okay, what could the life of a woman warrior be in around 930? And there's so much information that you can find out once you get it out of your head that only men can do this. There's so many other strong women in the Scandinavian world at that time. There's so many ways in which you can see women doing so-called "male" roles. It's just mind-boggling, when you actually start gathering the material. I had so much more material than I could use to present the female version of what it was like to be a Viking in 930, because the material's all there. It's just been overlooked. It's just been put off to the side because, well, we know warriors were men, so why should we look at it?

AT: Now, you haven't written a book about this topic as far as I know. But when we're talking about not just explorers and warriors and roles that men have supposedly traditionally filled, I'm not convinced at this point. But when we overlook the work of women in general, we lose out on huge aspects of an entire civilization. So specifically, I'm thinking of the Viking currency, vaðmál, which in 2020, an archaeologist named Michele Hayeur Smith published *The Valkyrie's Loom: The Archaeology of Cloth Production and Female Power in the North Atlantic*. She's basically

digging into the fact that the women in the society were producing this high-quality, standardized woolen cloth that served as currency in Iceland. It was the backbone of Viking trade and provided important financial support for the Viking community in England. And so because, “oh, that's just textiles, that's women's work, that's not important” being the, if they don't say the quiet part out loud, that's still what they're thinking. Because of that, they're ignoring this huge financial and economic factor underlying the whole society.

NMB: When I was writing *The Far Traveler*, one of the Viking ship experts pointed out to me that a Viking did not go anywhere without a sail. And who is weaving the cloth to make the sail? It's the women. When I spoke to some textile experts back then, they pointed out that, one of these two that I spoke to on this for her dissertation, it takes over a million feet of thread - so this is hand-spun thread - to make the cloth for one Viking ship. And it took these two women four years to make one sail. So if you have more than two women, obviously you can make your sails a little bit faster. But in order to be a Viking explorer or a warrior with your own ship, you have to have a group of textile workers working for you. And how are you going to make them do that if they don't want to? Well, there has to be some value to them. These were not all slaves. If you look in the texts, you find many examples of how the women are in charge of the textile work, and this was a particularly female craft. You find also support for this in archaeology where more women than men are buried with textile instruments, though there is some crossover. And Michele has come up with wonderful statistics of how this continued for hundreds of years in Iceland. To the extent, like you said, that there was a standard width, there was a standard weight, there was a standard weave, it became a currency. It was what, if you were a tough young Viking man wanting to go to Norway to prove yourself to the king of Norway and go out on raids, what did you take in your ship to pay your way? You took a roll of *vaðmál*, of cloth, that was something like three miles long, I think somebody calculated that once you unrolled it, you would have quite a lot of cloth in your ship. But this was provided by your mother. This was provided by your aunts. You didn't go anywhere without the support of the women who were, like you said, the economic backbone of the Viking Age, one of them at least. So it clearly was not the kind of male-oriented, male-dominated society that all of our Hollywood films so far have pretty much made it out to be. You are now getting more examples of strong women in popular culture in the Viking Age, but it's something we have to wrap our brain around, that our interpretation of this time period has been wrong for hundreds of years, that we are just not seeing the power and the importance of the women because of how we're reading the sources.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.