

TECH[NOCULTURE

Living history: Time travel to the Viking age

Episode 34

Full transcript

Guest: Heidi Carine Brimi [Heidi]

Host: Federica Bressan [Federica]

[Federica]: Welcome to a new episode of Technoculture. I'm your host, Federica Bressan, and today my guest is Heidi Carine Brimi, a viking age archaeologist, CEO and co-founder of Hands-on-history, a resource bank for cultural heritage dissemination and interpretation, based in Trondheim, Norway. Welcome Heidi. Thank you for being on Technoculture. So, today's topic is living history, a unique approach to educating people on cultural heritage. Living History was inspired by historical re-enactment, but it differs from it, because participants do not play specific roles, and they do not stage any particular historical event. They are themselves, and it's all about dressing like, for example, the Vikings, and leaving all modern technology behind - smartphones, plastic bottles, even toilet paper! - and adopting Viking technology, what they used in their daily lives: knives, cups, and so on. The idea is to live like that for a period of time, and get a direct experience of what it was like to be a Viking, how life was then. This is very interesting for Technoculture, because even if we are mostly interested in digital technology, what we are trying to do is fundamentally the same exercise: we try to understand what it means to be human today, and this requires a reflection on our technology, our habits, the things we take for granted. It's an interesting experiment to strip ourselves of today's technology and travel back in time to another era, and see if it's true that adopting a different technology changes how we think, how we act, ultimately how we see the world. Hands-on-history is specialized in Viking themed living history experiences: Heidi, can you tell us what the idea behind hence in history is?

[Heidi]: We wanted to do something that's very stripped down and real. Because when you see re-enactment groups going to medieval fairs or Viking festivals, they often bring a lot of gear with them. They have beds, they have tents, tables, and chairs, and all kinds of cutlery,

everything - not a lot of cutlery, really, for the Viking age, but nevertheless it's a lot of items, a lot of gear and... a lot of comfort. We wanted to do the opposite thing. How would people travel, if you were crossing a mountain going hunting, and going from A to B on foot? What did you do? How did they manage? What kind of equipment did they need? How did they think about their journey? A thousand years ago, there were no roads, no infrastructure of any kind like we have today in Scandinavia. So we wanted to experience the past times in the very direct way, with all the senses and the emotions, the joys and fears, the freezing at night, the joy of getting there, everything. And the journey, the whole journey, and do it the proper way. And to do that, we had to get rid of a lot of these comforts we usually have at festivals and markets. So we figured out, it's hard to travel through boggy Norwegian mountains - because they are buggy! - and the forest as well, if you have too much to carry. So we only take what we really really need with us. So, almost all the items in all the gear we have with us is multipurpose. We don't bring a bowl and a cup: we bring a bowl. We don't have a fork: we have a knife and a spoon. And we bring one axe, we don't bring one axe each, but we bring one axe for the group. And we divide the food we are going to eat between us. So we share the load. And you don't bring a tent: we only have a tarp. It's just a piece of cloth, treated with some fat and some linseed oil, to make it more sturdy against the wind and the rain. And we sleep on the ground, on a reindeer pelt, and we have one blanket each.

[Federica]: Like the one we're sitting on now. Very warm!

[Heidi]: Yes, they are wonderful aren't they.

[Federica]: So, you're trained as an archaeologist. When did you first get the idea of living history, and of giving other people the direct experience of living history, which in a way seems to share some aspects with historical re-enactment?

[Heidi]: Yes. It comes from re-enactment, this idea of recreating all this gear and try to figure out how they were using it, what was the most logical approach to what we're trying to do. And of course the archaeological material isn't that big. We don't have a lot of clothing, we don't have a lot of kitchenware. Of course we have the Oseberg find, but it's not a lot. We don't know a lot about the daily life of the Vikings. So, what we're really doing is, we're not re-creating, we are doing living history: we're putting life into the history, and trying to use whatever small finds and archeological evidence, and sometimes also historical evidence. Sometimes people are writing things and texts that we can use. The Vikings didn't write anything themselves. But other people wrote about them, and some people have written down their stories. But it's not a lot to go on. There's not much more material from the medieval times. So we call what we do, "living history." And for me personally, not for for the rest of Hands On History, but for me personally, this interest in archaeology and in the past lives started as a child. I loved Indiana Jones! And I loved walking in the forest. And I remember that my

grandfather used to tell me all these fairy tales about the fairies of the forest, and the trolls, and how people were living in the weather with no electricity... and it's this stream of the past that started it for me. This led to me study archeology, but it also led to a lot of larping. I still do larping, but I don't have a lot of time for it. Those were both fantasy larps, of course, but also historical larps. We had the Viking age larps, where we tried to recreate the society, and making a compendium for the players who were not experts in Viking Age.

[Federica]: Excuse me. Can you explain what LARP is?

[Heidi]: Larp is Live Action Role Playing. It's like, if you play cowboys and Indians, or pirates, or whatever. It is the same, but it's like you played Vikings, or elves and the bards, and whatever. If it's a fantasy setting, it could be sci-fi, it could be anything. So, it's like you're making your own fairy tale as you go. No manual, no script written down about what's going to happen, but you make the story yourself. You're playing a part and you make the story, but that's not what we're doing in Hands On History. We don't play a role, we are ourselves. We are modern people, but we are traveling back in time to experience in every kind of sense how it was a thousand years ago. And to do that, we need to get away from civilization. That's why we're hiking. You can't do this in a park, or in the city, or places where people with a lot of modern clothes, and cars, and modern housing, and things... modern noises. So we've gone to great lengths to find places that are suitable for this kind of experience. You went with us today, to one of these small places we found very close to the city, and it's so quiet up there: you can't hear traffic, you can't hear anything. It's just us, the nature, and the view of the fjords and the mountains.

[Federica]: I absolutely loved it, and I have to thank you very much for taking the time to come out here with me, and to dress me up, and to walk me into the woods, and tell me all these beautiful stories. I got a taste of what the participants have when they join one of your trips, which are normally one week long. So, living history is fun but it's not just all about having fun. This is a legitimate approach to getting some knowledge about a different lifestyle through the practical experience of changing the technology that surrounds you, including the clothes, and creating this "time bubble" detaching yourself from the modern world. How large is this phenomenon? Do other people do it around the world? And what is unique to hands on history?

[Heidi]: I don't know of other people offering the same experience as we do, because when we go on this hikes in the mountains we tell people to leave their cellphones behind, because it's a very disturbing element. You are not going to live in the Viking age if you are checking on Facebook. It doesn't make any sense. It kind of destroys the time bubble we're trying to make. So we do bring a camera, of course, one of us - the guides - does that, and we take a lot of pictures, because pictures are very important: people want to relive their experience, and they also want to look good! And people look very epic in the mountains, in Viking clothes!

And they feel epic, of course, and that's the whole point of view. And then people are kind of there almost for a week, and they came and they come back from these hikes, and they're also exhausted because it's a rough hike in the mountains, and it's cold, and it's long, and when you make camp it takes about two hours before dinner is ready, because you have to make a fire and you have to cook dinner. And we use flint and steel to make a fire. We do it the proper way. So, everything is like it should be. And these things take a lot of time and it makes a contrast to modern life. A lot of things we take for granted. You have to take your time with getting food, with moving, with walking. Setting up camp and yeah, all these things that we take for granted. You just put on the stove or the pizza in the oven, and then call your friends, or just go to bed, take a shower... and it's hot and comfy, and you have a towel, and the room is heated. It's very different to skinny dipping in an Arctic lake without the towel.

[Federica]: How important is it, in living history, to be historically accurate?

[Heidi]: For us it's very important, we try to do things as historically accurate as possible. And as I said, sometimes it's sudden, what you call an educated guess, because we don't have a lot of material on some of this. Things like what kind of backpacks do they use? They don't have a lot of backpack finds from the Viking age, it's just about 250 years period. So it's not a long time. So we have to improvise. We do that, but we tell people what kind of finds the bowls we use are from. They're made from finds from Birka in Sweden. The clothes are mostly from Skjoldehamn. It's a find from the north of Norway, about a thousand years ago, and also the food is based on the grave finds. And they also use the seasons: this time of the year it's too early for apples. We're in early August, and the apples in Norway and in this part of Norway are not ripe yet. So we had dried apples, of course, and the vegetables, everything is of the season.

[Federica]: Is there anything that has revealed itself to you, something you have learned, while hiking? About a piece of equipment, or about a habit, a custom, just because of the practical experience? And that shed light on a particular aspect of the Viking life or their technology?

[Heidi]: We're testing it. It's field testing. It's not like experimental archaeology because we don't do these scientific tests on the material, but to do the test for practical purposes we want to know if this will function. So we did quite a few test hikes with equipment, and it ended up like how little can we bring with us, because it was quite obvious that you don't want to bring anything you don't need, but you need to bring some essential things. You need to make a fire, you need the axe, you need a knife, you need a bowl, and you need some food that won't spoil. And you need something to sleep on. And the reindeer pelts are just wonderful: they are so insulating and warm.

[Federica]: But the Vikings were not nomads. So it's not all about traveling, moving. They also had settlements.

[Heidi]: No. No. They were farmers. Yes, there is a farming community and they did trade with the Sami people in Scandinavia, and they were hunter-gatherers hunting the reindeers and other animals as well. But the Vikings, so what the Europeans call the Vikings, the people living up here, were farmers and fishermen's and also traders. But sometimes there were raiders of course! But there's a lot more to that history than just raids.

[Federica]: Can you describe what we are wearing right now? For example, what did you put on me today.

[Heidi]: Yeah. You have a hood. It's made from the find in Skjoldehamn, in the north of Norway. It was a grave find. The person that was found was fully clothed, within some blankets. And the hood, this is a copy of the hood of that person, and so is the tunic. The tunic is a very simple form of tunic. You find that throughout Europe in the Viking age and also in medieval times. It's the basic tunic with some extra, it goes down to your knees. And we have the trousers: the trousers are from the Thorsberg, they are from a Danish find - a little before the Viking age, actually, I have to be honest about that. We don't have a lot of Viking Age trousers. And there also the leg wraps: they're just common leg wraps to protect your legs from the moist when you're hiking through the Norwegian forest and the mountains. There's a lot of undergrowth, so the leg wraps are quite useful when it's wet. It doesn't get your legs wet and it keeps you warm.

[Federica]: And I'm wearing a belt with some things attached. So they did not have pockets?

[Heidi]: No, they used bags and pouches. So we have our bags, and the small knife, and that's it.

[Federica]: How far back in time are we traveling today? What is the timeframe of the Viking age?

[Heidi]: Oh yes. Viking Age is normally said to have started when we have the first written record of a Viking raid, it was on Lindisfarne, at the end of the eighth century. It ends at the beginning of the 11th century. And all the Scandinavian countries, Norway, Denmark, and Sweden, also Iceland eventually, become christianized, and that marks the end of the Viking age. So it's a period of about 250 years. It's not a very long period in time in history. And after the Viking age, from about 1030-1050, you start to get the modern European Christian monarchies and countries, and that evolves into what we see today. But Norway started to take its form in the Viking Age.

[Federica]: Yes, so, the Vikings were never wiped away as a people, so their culture was never removed. They turned into what eventually became modern Norwegian society. So, there must be elements of the Viking culture that survive today. Do we know of these elements of Viking culture that are still present, in the language, or maybe in some customs of Norwegian culture?

[Heidi]: Yeah, I think it's more than we think of. A lot of things in the language of course. It's so funny because the Vikings spent a lot of time in England or in the British Islands and a lot of the English language has been influenced by the Vikings. Like the word for bag. It's "baggar." That's a Norse word. And everything connected to ships and sailing and seafaring is also based on Norse words. And of course in Norway we still use them, so it's a part of our language. And also if you're telling someone to get away from here, or you get out of my sight, you say "Dra te sjøs!", which means "go to the seas." And that's kind of get away, get out to the sea and get lost. That's what we're saying. But also in our culture, when we celebrate Christmas, we don't call it Christmas. You call "jul" and it's the midwinter feast from pagan times. So it's an old Norse word we still use in Scandinavia. And all the Scandinavian countries use the word "jul" instead of Christmas. Of course, Christmas is very close to the 21st of December. It's when the sun turns. So it's a midwinter feast and the way we celebrate it also is quite similar, with the feasting... and so we have some remnants of it. There's also an old habit or old tradition in Norway connected to Christmas: when you make a Christmas band, you take this bundle of wheat, or barley or whatever, from the fields, and you bundle it together, and you hang it out for the birds to eat. But that's an ancient pagan tradition. You had to spare the last part of the acre or the field, because the spirit of the field was hiding in it, so we had to spare the last part. And it turned into the Christmas. The thing to hang out for the birds and Christmas. So things like that, but also the Norwegian farmer, on how we look on a family's land. It's inherited. We have this tradition called "odel" and it means that you can't sell the family's farm. You have to inherit it. If you inherited the farm, you can't sell it, because there will be someone else who has the right to inherit it, and this still goes on now. And lots and lots of things. I'm thinking of the law system in Norway. The assemblies in the Viking age, the way they used to gather, to solve disputes, in the local assemblies and regional assemblies, that are called the "thing," [syn. assembly] and the parliament in Norway is called a "Storting". It means "the big thing." Not thing like an item, but a thing is an assembly. We still have this court system, with different regions having their own things, and they call it the "thing court," it's the first court in Norway, so it is the same system. It was kind of put into words in the early medieval times, but it dates back to the Viking Age and perhaps even further, we don't know. As I said, the Vikings themselves didn't write anything down. Everything was told, so there was this law man who knew the laws, and all the stories, the sagas, everything was told. The myths of the gods and everything. It was just oral.

[Federica]: Yeah. Who called them Vikings?

[Heidi]: The Vikings didn't call themselves Vikings. No. It was the Europeans who started to call them that. You see it in the early medieval texts, and the sagas, and the Norse myths written down in the medieval times mostly by monks. A lot of them. In Iceland, the monasteries wrote down a lot of the sagas. This family sagas of Scandinavians, but especially from the Icelandic, and some Icelandic big shots also paid the monks to put in words their own family sagas. And they also have some historians like Snorre Sturlason, he was also an Icelandic: he wrote on the sagas of the Kings, for instance. So he is quite a famous saga writer, Snorre.

[Federica]: Are people that join your time travels required to do some background research? Do you need prior education to enjoy or to make the most of this type of experience?

[Heidi]: You don't need anything. Not really. But of course, if you know something about it, it would be a lot easier to kind of ask questions and to get more knowledge about it. But we do require people to be in good health, because they need to hike for about 25 kilometers in the terrain, with unusual backpack and gear, they are not used to. Then there may be bad weather, it can be cold, it can be rainy. So, we need people to be fit and to handle hike, because they don't walk in paths, like level path. This is a terrain, walking it's a rough, rocky, bumpy.

[Federica]: I guess that everyone knows at least something about the Vikings, just because they're omnipresent in the popular culture. We have movies and TV series, so there must be people that come to your hikes and think (!) they know something about the Vikings. But there must be false beliefs and things that are not historically accurate. What would you say is the most common misconception?

[Heidi]: Well, there's a lot of misconceptions about the Viking Age. I think it's fairly common knowledge now that the Vikings didn't have horns on their helmets. That that myth comes from a 19th century German opera.

[Federica]: Really! So, Wagner put horns on Vikings heads!

[Heidi]: Yeah. They needed some Vikings that looked very scary. So they put horns on their helmets. It's has nothing to do with Viking Age. They didn't have horns on the helmet. I think they only found about one or two helmets from the Viking Age. Then, of course, people watch the movies and popular TV shows, and they think that, oh this is it, this is how it was. But they have to take some - what you call it, artistic freedom, to make things look nice in movies. If you have a battle, for instance, if everybody was dressed like the common people you wouldn't see who is who. And probably if you had a battle in the Viking Age, that was the case, and you have to mark people. But in the movies, then you have someone with brown

clothes and someone with black clothes, and that's a lot easier for the spectators to see the difference. But also these myths... there's an ongoing debate if the Vikings had tattoos. They have no certain source for that. We have some half sources that can be interpreted like they had tattoos, but we're not really sure. Nobody used the word tattoos on the Vikings. They did never have mohawks! I just had to say that! And the color black isn't that easy to achieve if you're going to make some color, or [dye] the leather. One source from the Viking Age, a French source, called the Vikings "peacocks," because they had a lot of color on their clothes. And there was a lot of jewelry, and they liked to brush their hair, and they bathed once a week, there were not dirty people, they kept themselves... yeah, we find a lot of personal grooming gear in the graves. Like picking out nose hairs, and then cleaning your ears, ear spoons, and combs, things like that. So they liked to look good, and they used bright colors, so they didn't mind standing out. And I repeat, they didn't have mohawks!

[Federica]: That's the take-home message from this podcast episode! But is there anything that popular culture gets right, of all the things that it shows us about the Vikings?

[Heidi]: A lot of the material culture you see in the films and at the festivals and at the markets, they are replicas. So they give a good impression of the material culture and the environment they had on the farms, for instance, what they had in the daily life. But this myth about the Vikings being these savage raiders... there's a lot more to them than that - and I will make absolutely no excuses because they were savage raiders... they did a lot of harm down in Europe, but there's a lot more to the Viking culture, and we want to experience more of the daily life and the other aspects. So you will never see Hands-on-History fighting. Other people do that, better than we would do. We want to have daily life and everyday people at our focus, to experience what it would be like for a person living in the Viking Age, not the Viking warrior, because a few persons were Viking warriors. Most people stayed at home, tended their farms, had children, and looked after the cattle, and tried to stay alive. That's what was most about. So that's what we do.

[Federica]: How powerful, educational, transformative, an experience with living history can be? What are the aspects that surprised you the most or your participant the most? Some things that people say "I didn't expect this" or "I thought this would be harder," "This is better than I thought." What are some small revelations that emerge during this experience?

[Heidi]: Yes, I think on the "go Viking" hikes we have in Hands-on-History, it's mostly about the simplicity and the lack of complicated gear. As I told you, it's just a bowl, and the spoon, and the knife, and some food. It's very very simple what we bring with us, but this works, it really really works. And it works just as well if you go hiking in modern clothes: I don't freeze more and I'm not more hungry and I am not more exhausted, if I hike in Viking Age gear than if I hike in modern gear, with Gore-Tex, and whatnot... a tent. So, there wasn't much comfort,

we think, but when you try it, it turns out, okay, there is comfort here, but it's a different kind of comfort. But you really really appreciate it. And there's also this slowness about hiking in the Viking Age manner. When you have no cellphones, nobody knows what time it is, and you're just going to go from A to B, and you're going to set up camp, and you're going to make some food, and then you're going to sleep. And nothing is there to disturb you. There's no modern technology. You don't see any houses. There's no vehicles, no cars, no nothing. Just you and nature, and the little gear, the few items you brought with you. But that's enough.

[Federica]: So, with Living History we go back in time and we learn about, for example, the Viking age. But we also learned something about ourselves, because when we “come back,” so to speak, we see things differently, so maybe participants at the end of the week have also learned something about today's lifestyle.

[Heidi]: Yeah, I think they appreciate a hot shower! A lot of them have been skinny dipping in their Arctic lakes. The temperature in the lakes is like 13 degrees [Celsius]. It's not very hot, and also all the things you take for granted, all the things you don't need at all, because when you go on this Viking hikes you need everything you bring with you. You don't have one thing you don't need. The only thing I bring that I usually don't use is the first aid kit, because we do think of safety of course. So we have means for contacting the modern world if someone breaks a leg, falls off a cliff, and we have never had an accident like that. It's good to be safe. The mountains can be a very dangerous place and during the Viking Age and also in medieval times, and right up until the nineteenth century when modern tourism started to take off, the mountains and the forests were considered a very dangerous place for good reason.

[Federica]: I would like to thank you for being on Technoculture, and most of all for the incredible experience of the hike in the beautiful Norwegian Woods. Thank you very much.

[Heidi]: You're welcome. I'm delighted to be invited to your podcast. It's been a very fun experience and I hope it has been so for you.

[Federica]: Unforgettable.

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