**/// Episode 01 – Sons of the Great North**

**ASSASSIN’S CREED VALHALLA AND XBOX PRESENT: ECHOS OF VALHALLA.**

**LIFE IN VIKING TIMES, THE PODCAST**

/// SEQUENCE INTRO

(Sound of icy wind, the air is crisp and clear, the caw of ravens)

(A ghostly female voice that echoes)

(Whispering)

*Listen… Listen…*

*Beware of the silence!*

*(A low roar gets louder)*

(Louder)

*Here, the fire simmers under the ice.*

*The land still echoes with battle cries.*

(Sound of horse hooves, an advancing army)

(Suddenly, she exclaims) *Listen!!!*

(Sound of an axe whirling through the air and breaking a skull)

(Shriek of pain)

(Clamour of a hoard of warriors)

(They charge) (Weapons collide) (Cries of injured warriors)

/// NARRATION

(Back to the first atmosphere, sound of icy wind)

*This is the story of my ancestors, the story of my people: the children of the Great North!*

*You may have heard it from the mouth of our enemies, or read the words written by Christian monks…*

*But before I disappear, I, the heiress, wish to tell the tale of what happened. This is our truth! The truth of the Vikings!*

(Loud horns/Oliphant to punctuate "Vikings")

**Historical focus #1: Who are the Vikings?
LUCIE MALBOS**

**Originally, to be a Viking, -LUCIE MALBOS, lecturer in Medieval History, University of Poitiers, France -**

**didn’t mean you came from a specific area or belonged to a particular ethnic group. Rather, it was a means to make a living. It was not about who you were, but what you did.**

**ALBAN GAUTIER**

**In Old Norse, viking refers to the activity of going on an expedition. An expedition by sea to find loot. - ALBAN GAUTIER, Medieval Hostory professor, University of Caen, France-**

**A Viking is simply someone who does “viking”, who goes out to sea hoping to return a rich man.**

(Transition to a calmer atmosphere)

*This is where it all began.*

*Imagine a majestic landscape: snow-capped mountains, rocky overhangs, green valleys, winding silver rivers …*

*This land was the birthplace of my ancestors.*

*Although the elite was made up warriors**and merchants, most men were farmers and fishermen, free men who were tireless workers.*

*They bred pigs and chickens and cattle.*

*They grew* ***mainly*** *oats, barley, wheat, peas, turnips and cabbages.*

*But the soil, seldom generous, bore little fruit. This made men daydream about richer lands awaiting them on faraway shores.*

*These men loved the earth like their own mother.*

*A mother sometimes strict, other times kind and giving.*

(Farming activity, sound of spades digging, farm animals)

Farmer with his son:

* *(sighing wearily*) oh, look at this soil, nothing else will grow here… The harsh winter has not been kind to us.
* Maybe when the sun returns and…
* No… Listen to me my son, if I had the choice I would have stayed here and worked the land until my last breath…But it is the will of the Gods: I have to accept Sven’s proposition and sail to greener lands.

Voiceover:

*So little is known about our people… Yet there are so many misconceptions: barbarians, looters, mercenaries and what have you…*

*While it is true that my people can be cruel on the battlefield, easily offended at the slightest insult to the clan, and quarrelsome even at home. But they also enjoy sitting by the hearth, in the peace of the Skali, the main area where the whole family gathers together.*

(Noise of domestic activity, bubbling food in a pot, a poker moving ashes…)

(Conversations – inaudible chatter)

(A baby crying in a cot)

A couple:

*- (amused)* *See how he looks at you! He’s already so proud of you…*

*- (happy)* *One day, I, too, will be proud of him. You can tell he will become a great warrior, just like his father.*

*- Not so fast! Let him learn how to walk before putting a weapon in his hands. He’s just a small child. Why don’t you rather put another log on the fire, it’ll fight off the cold.*

Voiceover:

*And disagreeing with her was out of the question! While men give orders on the battlefield, make no mistake, we women are the uncontested mistresses of the household. At home we reign supreme…*

**Historical focus #2: the household and family life
LUCIE MALBOS**
**The free married woman manages the household when her husband has gone on an expedition. The set of keys she carries on her, usually on her belt, is a symbol of her responsibilities and her position within the household.**

**She is, however, not an equal to men. She may not, for instance, take part in political and legal affairs.**

Voiceover:

*Arts and crafts play an essential part in our culture. We sculpt wood, amber, ivory and blow glass. We have gold at the tips of our fingers! We make unbelievably refined jewellery, that turns women into goddesses. And of course, we have mastered the art of weapon making. As worthy disciples Volünd, the God of forges, our blacksmiths are genuine masters in their domain.*

(Sounds of the forge, crackling fire, metallic clinking, he hits the blade with his hammer, sound of physical effort, breathing, he dips the blade into water, sound of steam, he sharpens it)

(someone knocks on the door, it opens with a creak)

Conversation between the grandfather (blacksmith) and a warrior:

- Blacksmith?

- I am here, in the back.

- Ah! I cannot hear your hammer pounding, does that mean my axe is ready?

- Yes, I have just finished working on it, it took me all night. Here it is, look…

- By Thor, what a blade! It is beautifully finished. You’ve outdone yourself, blacksmith!

- Take it and tell me how it feels.

- (the weapon whistles through the air) Ah! It is perfectly balanced and a joy to hold! Can I try it out on this log?

- *(amused)* That is what it is there for! (cry of effort and loud noise of wood splitting)

- *(impressed)* What power… I look forward to using it in combat.

- You flatter me, but I do not have the talent of the Gods!

- I cannot wait to test it in battle.

- You will soon have the chance… I hear the day of the battle is drawing closer.

- Good! I’d rather split a skull than a log!”

Voiceover:

*His joy was far from misplaced. The blacksmith was right: a great battle was brewing.*

*The day before, during the “thing”, the solemn assembly, my people had decided to ally with chief Ivar Ragnarsson, known as “Ivar the Boneless”.*

*In those days, wars between rival kingdoms were continually raging.*

*Each wished to extend their power over the vast lands to the South.*

*But Ivar was by far the most fearsome of them all… He was said to be a “berserker”, a bear warrior endowed with sacred strength, just like in the sagas. He is believed to have had uncontrollable rage and caused immeasurable destruction. But above all else, he was cunning.*

*He already ruled over a large swath of land but wanted to assert his power at all costs. Even the cost of blood!*

Ivar Ragnarsson’s speech:

“*(solemnly)* I, Ivar Ragnarsson, swear to lead you to victory! Pledge your allegiance! Bow down to my rule! You shall not be disappointed for those who follow me will make their fortune. But be warned, whoever dares to betray me will be judged by my axe!”

Voiceover:

*Ivar was a man of his word …*

*The alliance was sealed.*

**Historical focus #3 IVAR + BERSERKER**

**LUCIE MALBOS**

**Ivar Ragnarsson, as his name suggests, is the son of Ragnar. As such, he is a legendary figure whose life and deeds are difficult to retrace.**

**RYAN LAVELLE: The term Berserker describes the trance-like state Viking warriors entered. - RYAN LAVELLE, Early Medieval History Professor, University of Winchester - They would bite the edge of their shield and froth out of their mouth, tear off their clothes, or they might be wearing the fur of a bear.
This is a legend of the Late Viking Age, even of the Late Middle Ages themselves, when Icelandic storytellers were sat around the fireside.**

- Brief presentation of the Vikings in Scandinavia before the invasion of Great Britain (we are in the mid-9th century): a mosaic of fractured clans under the authority of “jarls” (local chiefs)

- Who is Ivar Ragnarsson?Son of the legendary Ragnar Lodbrock: Legend or true story?

Voiceover:

Dawn had just broken.

And men had already gathered in the early morning light.

The mist was beginning to lift over the plains.

The green lands glimmered in the morning dew.

Who could have thought that mere moments from then, this peaceful haven would welcome such carnage?

(sound of an army of footsteps, the earth trembles under their feet)

Ivar Ragnarsson’s Exhortation

“- Sons of the Great North! My brethren! Wield your weapons! Make the earth quake, and fill the skies with your cries of fury!

If we are victorious, tonight, we shall feast at the banquet with our wives. And if we fall, we shall sit in the great company of the Valkyrie, in the splendour of Valhalla! We fear not death! Let Odin lead us to victory!”

Voiceover:

*It appears that Odin had heard Ivar’s declamation,*

*And that the Valkyrie had lent wings to the warriors.*

*They descended upon their enemies… like a metal whirlwind!*

(Roar of charging warriors)

(Clash of weapons)

*The battle raged on until midday.*

*Yes, the Gods gave us victory. But a terrible victory it was…*

*The plains were drenched in blood, and scattered with lifeless bodies…*

(Cries of agonising warriors)

(fragments of a few voices, cawing of scavenging ravens)

(noise of medical instruments, as if the wounded were being tended to)

Dialogue between chief Ivar and a warrior:

“- *(in pain)* My arm, Ivar... I killed an enemy, but got hit by his spear… Look!

- I am here, my brother. You are in pain now, but without you we might never have won this battle…Show me your wounds.

- *(clenching his teeth)* why are you smiling?

- You remind me of the God Tyr, who sacrificed his arm to conquer the wolf Fenrir. I am lucky to have you by my side.

- You think I’ll lose my arm?

- No, we will tend to it and soon you will be wielding your blade, ready to strike down new enemies…

- You reassure me, I would like to be as brave as Tyr but keep my arms and legs.

- At least the pain hasn’t dulled your sense of humour! Rest now and do not forget to pray for those we have lost.

**Historical focus #4:**

**VIKINGS ARE NOT A UNIFIED PEOPLE BUT A PATCHWORK OF KINGDOMS**

**FRANÇOIS EMION**

**The Scandinavians wage intestine wars and plunder each other. - FRANÇOIS EMION, Lecturer in Northern Studies, University of Paris-Sorbonne-**

**BeforeNorway, Sweden, and Denmark were unified, there was a scattering of small principalities and kingdoms that waged war on each other or made allinces if circumstance called for it. All in all, it was a relatively unstable society.**

**Lucie Malbos**

**The mountain ranges separating these clans can be very high and covered in snow, especially in Norway, and by dense forests. Therefore, it was not easy to communicate. This in part explains why these communities have organised themselves in fragmented, separate, and distinct ways.**

Voiceover:

*For the honour of our banner, my people were ready to sacrifice both their arms!*

*But once again, the Gods had spared them.*

*Alas, this was not the fate of some companions, who had fallen on the plain.*

*That* ***same*** *night, their funeral was celebrated.****We called upon Volva, our priestess and seer.***

*Following the ancient traditions, the deceased’s eyes and mouths were shut.*

*Their bodies were washed, their hair and nails were cut.*

*They were given their weapons to* ***bear*** *on the arduous journey that would lead them to Valhalla.*

***Volva said these*** *few final words before the funeral pyre was set ablaze.*

(sound of embers)

The priest**ess Volva**:

“We honour our men who fell in combat.

May the fire cleanse their corpses.

May the earth welcome their ashes.

May the soaring raven lead them to the kingdom of the dead…”

**Historical focus #5: Funeral rites**

**FRANÇOIS EMION There are a number of sites in southern Norway of some pretty gigantic grave mounds. The ones that weren't looted are like the Egyptian pyramids. Throughout history, looting has been widespread. We have found boats, with or without cremation, holding the remains of an aristocrat, and sometimes of others, of whom we do not know if they were slaves who were sacrificed to accompany their master in death or people who were buried there later in time.**

Voiceover:

*The men and women of the village gathered to give thanks to the Gods, through offerings and sacrifices.*

*Young women formed a circle around the* ***priestess****. They chanted sacred formulas to look into the future by contacting the Norns that control our destiny.*

*Our people still adhered to the age-old precepts of Forn Siðr, our religious tradition.*

(Mystic atmosphere, sound of fire crackling, percussion and chanting)

The **priestess** Volva:

* To you Odin, king of the Gods, we sacrifice this horse!

To you Tyr, God of War, we sacrifice this bull!
May their flesh give you thanks for our victory.

May their blood be evidence of our veneration.”

(Screams of animals having their throats cut)

**Historical focus #6: Volva**

**The Volva is a seer, a witch, a somewhat marginal character in Scandinavian society. We call on her services in times of crisis, and in general to try to unveil the secret of the gods. She is feared and dreaded. Odin himself calls upon a Volva to gain insight into his destiny.**

Voiceover:

*After the ceremonies, a great banquet was held to celebrate victory.*

*The table was covered in victuals. The wine was flowing.*

*The men feasted by the blazing fire.*

*The moon was full. The sky glittered with myriad stars, as if Valhalla itself were lighting up the banquet… As if our fallen brothers were trying to feast in our company.*

(Noise of festivities, fragments of voices, laughter, musical instruments, wine flowing…)

*The skald began to sing the feats of the Gods, to echo those of our ancestors. He then started reciting the Sayings of Grímnir, one of the mythical poems of Edda. One passage in particular speaks of two ravens perched on Odin’s shoulders. One is called Huginn, which means “Thought” and the other Muninn, or “Memory”. At dawn, Odin sends them off to travel the world and they return at lunchtime to report to him.*

The skald:

* Every day Huginn and Muninn soar above immense stretches of land.

I am worried that Huginn might not return, said Odin.

 But it is for Muninn that I am most anxious.

Voiceover

*These verses deeply resonate with me.*

*For I too fear that one day, Munnin may not return!*

*It is why I speak to you today, while “memory” still lives inside of me…*

*I scrutinise the flight of the ravens, on the lookout for messages from beyond.*

*Munnin, is that you?*

(Cawing ravens)

**Historical focus #7: festivities and banquets**

**Lucie Malbos**

**A chieftain who wishes to demonstrate his strength, greatness, or wealth must do so in a visible manner, ostensibly. One of the best ways to put power and wealth on display is to throw a great banquet.**

**Thierry Noël**

**And the Vikings enjoyed playing games. - THIERRY NOEL Content Advisor at Ubi Soft**- **One of these games consisted in the famous verbal jousts called “flyting”, which are actually featured in the game.**

Voiceover

*In the middle of the celebration, Ivar demanded silence. He had great news to give.*

Ivar’s speech:

* Listen! This victory is a sign that Odin is with us! But it is just the beginning! My friends, my brethren, will you follow me in battle? Across the seas? I vow that I will lead the way and we will wage war in every part of the world!

(Cheers)

Voiceover:

*A rousing speech!*

*Cries of joy carried all the way to the coast.*

*The men were anxious to take part in this conquest, which promised to be extraordinary.*

*In the event of victory, it guaranteed fortune, titles and honours.*

*And if they were to fall in battle, then they knew they would witness the glorious, the majestic… gates of Valhalla!!* (echo on the last word)