

Meet the Viking merchants of the internet

The bloody battle between kings Harold and Harald at Stamford Bridge is often considered the unofficially official “end” of the Viking Age. By that benchmark, it has been approximately 956 years since the era of longships, warhammers (not that type), and wolfish drengs. So why, in 2022, are we witnessing such a vibrant resurgence of Viking craft? The answer, it seems, has to do with the not-very-Viking internet.

To gain some much-needed insight into this phenomenon, I tracked down three blacksmiths who practice the art of Viking smithing: Joe Hallisey of Metal Abyss, Phillip Anderson of West Wolf Renaissance, and Faydwynn Morningstar of The Path of Fire. All three of these modern Viking merchants predominantly focus on forging millennium-old weapons using period techniques, resurrecting and honing a skill that has been largely absent from the world for almost 1,000 years.

But why now? As it turns out, thanks to ad revenue from services like YouTube and Twitch, as well as the ability to sell specialty items via trade websites like Etsy, Viking smithing has become a legitimately viable way of earning money for the first time since the 11th century. That doesn't mean operating the bellows makes for an easy life, though – the dedication required to properly make something of this vocation is immense.

All three blacksmiths have been fascinated with Viking culture from a very young age. Hallisey was always interested in general “warrior culture,” although gradually developed a particular affinity for all things Vikings and samurai, which he notes are “both so different in culture and beliefs, yet

when boiled down very similar in ferocity and fearlessness.” Anderson, meanwhile, has Scandinavian ancestry. He grew up hearing stories of Odin, Thor, Loki, and ice giants, all of whom have directly influenced his craft since. And Morningstar states that the northern Germanic cultures have always been a part of her life. When she was a child, her father would read her the sagas as she drifted into dreams of longships and Jomsvikings.

“What makes it special to people is it harkens back to a time that is so removed from our social media and cellphone days, when our hours were focused on the basics instead of all this nonsense we deal with today,” Morningstar says. “It’s nice to mentally go back to when tools were not running off electricity [and] when our water was clean.” This sentiment is echoed by the other blacksmiths. They firmly believe that contemporary interest in Viking culture is largely driven by a desire to be transported back in time. It’s therefore somewhat ironic to see that desire being actively facilitated by the internet.

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“It all boils down to the fact there is a primal instinct in all of us, a need to go back to our true nature, our roots,” says Hallisey. “The Viking Age was not an easy time to be alive, but their closeness to nature and the gods is what I think people in this day and age are sorely lacking. We couldn’t be further away from nature. Deep down, many of us see that the fast-paced, materialistic side of modern life is doing nothing to make us happy. It’s going back to the ways of our ancestors that helps make our spirits whole.”

It is precisely because of how ubiquitous Norse mythology has become in pop culture that people have started to recognize and act on that instinct. While *Vikings* certainly catapulted interest in the era from 2013 onwards, there has also been an abundance of video games that focus on Norse culture, from

blockbusters like *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* and *God of War* to critical indie darlings like *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*. That's not to mention films like Robert Eggers' widely lauded *The Northman*.

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At the same time, this interest can be fleeting. In Morningstar's eyes, the day-to-day business of contemporary Viking smiths depends on a lot more than a random guy who decides to buy a hammer because he really liked *Thor: Ragnarok*. She reckons the temporary uptick in Spartan interest post-300 is directly comparable to how fascinated people are by Ragnar Lothbrok today – people like it now, but will they care in 10 years? It's hard to tell.

This isn't helped by the fact it's an extremely difficult gig to get into. To start, you need to brush up on your history, learning smithing techniques from as early as the 8th century. There's no point in forging a sword with modern technology and calling it a "Viking blade" just because. Without authenticity, the entire endeavor becomes worthless.

"There's always room for real dedicated people who want to learn the science – yes science – of this craft," says Morningstar. "It takes discipline. It takes hard work. Those two things right there will stop 90 percent of people. You can't Amazon Prime this. There is no shortcut. It's hard – that's why it's worthy. If it was easy it would be common and no one would care about it."

For those who do have the willpower necessary to learn a trade as revered as this, though, there will always be a niche but dedicated audience to keep them afloat. Viking smithing isn't just a trend to them, it's part of an all-encompassing way of life. Hallisey says these are the folks they really cater to: collectors, re-enactors, and people who maintain an interest in ancient Norse spirituality. People like these can

acknowledge the fact that every single piece forged by an expert smith is imbued with deep, individualistic meaning, which is reflected in the actual process of crafting them.

“Many of our weapon designs are directly based on archeological finds from around Scandinavia, Ireland, England, and so forth,” says Hallisey. “All weapons are hand-forged from quality steel, meaning that each one is unique. Just as a blacksmith from the Viking Age would forge a weapon for each individual warrior, so do we. There is a certain something that cannot be expressed in words when a weapon is forged solely for a single person – an intent, a blessing from the gods. This is what we try to do for our customers, to instill the warrior spirit into every piece in the hope they can battle their way through life with good luck and success.”

Morningstar is intrigued by the relationship between wielder and smith, too. In the stories her father read to her when she was a child, there was always a hero who, after finding their sword, discovered the power lying dormant within them: Sigurd and Gram; Arthur and Caledfwlch; Aragorn and Anduril.

“These people would be much less without their legendary blades, so I learned very early on that the great warrior is nothing without the great smith, the giver of power,” says Morningstar. “During my time making blades and other items, I have gone across many cultures, but I’ve always come home to my roots in the Germanic traditions. The migration era to the pre-Christian indoctrination of Scandinavia had the greatest collection of warrior art the world has ever seen: blades that were decorated with gold and garnets; carved sheaths of finely worked wood; handles of silver and horn; folded steel blades whose patterns reach across the ages and still inspire people to lean close to the protective glass that covers their greatness and makes the onlooker exhale with wonder. Nothing else haunts my dreams or keeps my waking thoughts more occupied than their crafts – I’ve been doing this for 20 years now and I don’t see myself changing my mind anytime soon.”

It's important to note that this is how all of the smiths I spoke to feel – this is their passion, their one true calling in life. What's more, it isn't a particularly lucrative profession, meaning that it's almost entirely driven by the love they feel for practicing it. Hallisey says that most of what he's achieved so far is attributable to luck. "I will be the first to admit I am not good at business," he says. "I'm sure I could be doubly successful if I knew what I was doing and not just taking shots in the dark – but, such is life."

Anderson agrees. While he is able to recognize that much of his success has come from his own hard work and persistence, it would be remiss to claim luck hasn't also played a part. "I started doing my thing when early eBay and internet sales were really taking off," he says. "So I recognized the rise of online sales and decided that was the perfect timing for my creative and business aspirations."

"There's always room for people to be creative and explore their interests. My business filled a unique niche in the online selling marketplace for many years. But even though there's now more people than ever before making and selling similar items, my business is continuing to grow and expand. So we need more people doing what they enjoy and following their interests. The world would be a better and much happier place."

Morningstar can speak to this idea with a wealth of experience. She's been doing this for two decades, and for most of that time, she had barely any followers. That didn't, and still doesn't, influence how likely she is to continue dedicating her life to the art of smithing.

"Most men see a woman making anything and they instantly assume she is crap," she says. "I've dealt with every horrible comment you can imagine. Once the lockdown happened in March of 2020 and people were at home, I think people found my YouTube and thought, 'Huh, a very juggy redhead forging

awesome blades and shooting cinematic videos? Count me in.' But I don't think I am any more than a novelty at the moment. Once people forget about me and this quick burst of spotlight fades, I'll still be making these items until I'm dust."

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Morningstar has also hit some bumps along the way, which further compounds her point about passion superseding all else. While she is able to earn money from her craft, her revenue streams are more limited than most. She no longer earns any income from YouTube or TikTok – her guess is that this is because of how she dresses – although still sees the platforms as valuable ways to advertise her other work streams like commercial smithing and modeling.

But as with most online endeavors these days, even existing on these platforms presents an opportunity cost of having to endure toxicity from people who resent your successes.

"Every guy who is mad that their low-level work doesn't take off just screams that I'm a sellout or I'm only a pair of boobs, but every other person I've coached on social media, I've told them they have to show their face with what they want to get seen. It's how the algorithm works."

It's pretty evident that Morningstar knows her stuff, both in terms of managing her online presence and crafting incredible Viking weapons. While the vast majority of her material performs well, her most popular video – in which she hand-forges a 750-layer sword – has raked in millions of views.

"I had all of these big strong men telling me it can't be done without a power hammer, even though there are literal pattern-welded swords in museums from times before power hammers," she explains. "I didn't want to shock them too much, so I did it with great ease. It only has four million views on YouTube."

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It's worth looking at the exact type of Viking heritage that's being celebrated, too. It's not all just replicas of Mjolnir – Hallisey once spent hours engraving custom runes into the molten fuller (the line down the middle) of a blade for a woman who wanted to propose to her boyfriend with it. He also crafted a seax that a father wanted to pass down to his son as an heirloom, which would then be integrated into the family as something that could potentially be gifted and regifted to each generation of children for centuries to come. "To many people, including me, these are far beyond just steel, leather, and wood," he explains. "They have deep spiritual meaning."

"Some of the coolest and most interesting projects I've done over the years have been custom shields for people," says Anderson. "I've painted some intricate masterpieces for individuals going through divorces and difficult times that wanted to portray their ex-husband or wife as horrific monsters out of myth and legend. I guess they wanted something epic to hang on the wall to commemorate their rough experience."

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It should be obvious from the examples above how valued the work of these smiths truly is. While they're not rolling in money for their commitment, Hallisey points out that Viking smiths from a millennium ago weren't particularly rich or esteemed either – just like their modern counterparts, they were mainly driven by a love for the craft.

Still, it is thanks to the ingenuity and dedication of the almost ancient metalworkers who first practiced the art of Viking smithing that we are where we are today. As Hallisey puts it, a profession this niche and passion-driven is rarely about money. It's about honoring where we come from as craftspeople. That, more so than anything else, is why it is the duty of people interested in the subject to offer their

support to it.

“The Etsy marketplace has become the ultimate place to do this,” Anderson says. “While we have a large number of items available in our West Wolf Renaissance shop, we’re still a small team employing just a few friends and family members. Many other makers on the Etsy platform are one-man operations. So whenever possible we should close that Amazon or Walmart tab in our browser and maybe look instead to Etsy and independent craftspeople for special gifts and unique items. It’s important to support people following their interests, whatever that may be.”

“While I do make money from the business, I would be homeless if I relied on that income,” Hallisey says. “As cliché as it sounds, I get a ton of fulfillment from making custom weapons for customers and hearing how much they like them. That makes it worth my time and is more valuable than money in the end. My favorite stanza in *Hávamál* says something like, ‘Cattle die, kinsmen die, the self must also die. One thing that does not die is the reputation of every man.’”

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