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Preface

This book comes with no apology. I am not here to convince you that it is high time we put women back at the centre of history. Many have done this before me. I'm also not here to draw a dividing line between male and female, to stress the importance of each in opposition to the other. Instead, I want to show you that there are so many more ways to approach history now. Far from being 'unrecoverable',¹ developments in archaeology, advancements in technology and an openness to new angles have made medieval women ripe for rediscovery.

I am not rewriting history. I'm using the same facts, figures, events and evidence as we've always had access to, combined with recent advances and discoveries. The difference is that I'm shifting the focus. The frame is now on female rather than male characters. Both perform in the narratives, and we can only truly understand one in relation to the other. This book is about individuals, rich in their complexity and fascinating in their variety. It is also about societies – groups of individuals working together and against one another, alongside a backdrop of shifting politics, economics, beliefs and power. Approaching the past through women's lives and stories offers a unique prism through which to find new and overlooked perspectives.

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Women have always made up roughly half the global population. Why then should they not inform the way we perceive the past? We know so much about the rich and powerful few, but what about the poor and impoverished many? The very old and the very young are often ignored too. Disabilities are not a modern phenomenon, and neither are issues surrounding sexuality and gender. Yet we read so little about these areas in history books. Great progress has been made to understand the historical aspects of race and immigration recently, but there is still a long way to go. The medieval world was fluid, cosmopolitan, mobile and outward-looking. Every major city would have been full of individuals of different skin colours, ages, backgrounds, religions and heritage. Let's put them back into the history books too.

There are so many overlooked periods, groups and individuals that can enrich our relationship with the past, and it is in this spirit that I offer up this work. It is the start of a conversation, and I encourage every one of you reading to join in. There are numerous unexplored avenues and tantalising roads less trodden. History is organic and the way we engage with it grows and changes. But how individuals have written history reflects the time in which they write, as much as the time they are writing about. Repackaging the past can influence the present. In times of colonial expansion, when support for the slave trade was required, the historian fed readers tales of explorers and conquerors. When soldiers were needed, ready to die for king and country, the historian gave them heroes and warriors. When society favoured male dominance and female subservience, the historian provided male-orientated history.

What about writing history now, at a time when so many are striving for greater equality? Can looking backward impact how we look forward? Finding empowered women with agency from the medieval period is my way of shifting gear, providing new narratives for readers today. I know it carries bias, as all history is by its very nature subjective, no matter how objective we try to

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be. But through these remarkable women, I hope to show how we can effectively scrutinise historical evidence in more inclusive ways and engage with the past through fresh eyes. You cannot be what you cannot see. So, let's find ourselves in what has gone before, and reframe what we value going forward.

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Introduction

Wednesday, 4 June 1913 – Epsom Derby

Half a million people have swarmed through the gates of Epsom racecourse on this sultry summer afternoon. Derby Day has captivated the nation; normal life is suspended. Bookies scream over the noise of the vast crowd, while tipsters perched precariously on scaffolds wave their arms above a sea of bodies. The people gathered here represent every part of Edwardian society. They arrive on foot, by bike or train, in horse-drawn carriages or by motorcar. Members of the nobility stand alongside farmers, and boot cleaners rub shoulders with bankers. All have travelled to this otherwise sleepy village in Surrey for a chance to experience a few seconds of pounding hooves thundering past in a cloud of dust, sweat and noise.

The king and queen of Britain sit above them all in the royal box. King George V's horse Anmer is running but the favourite is Craganour, decked out in violet and primrose. As 3pm draws closer tensions rise. Horses and jockeys tussle along the starting line, the king's rider Herbert Jones distinguished by the red and blue of his royal shirt. A prize of more than £6,000 (equivalent to £1.5 million today), as well as a place in history, awaits the first to hurtle past the finishing post beneath the heaving stands. Most will watch the race not from the tiered seating areas but pressed up against the white barriers that run at chest height both sides of the track. Tattenham Corner is a particularly advantageous spot for a good view on the mile-and-a-half course. Here the horses curve around the sharpest part of the bend, before accelerating up the

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final stretch. Traditionally, once all the horses have passed, the crowds clamber under the barriers and flood onto the course to follow the race to the winning post.

It's not just those lining the edges who will watch this Derby. Film cameras are also situated along the track. They will burn the action onto silver nitrate so cinema audiences across the Commonwealth can soak up the atmosphere at the world's most famous horse race. Three cameras all have their lenses trained on Tattenham Corner, positioned at angles to catch every movement. As the starting pistol cracks, jockeys dig their heels hard into the horses' sides and push forward. Spittle foams at the beasts' mouths and riders lean close to their sleek bodies, whipping their flanks as they accelerate to nearly 70 kilometres an hour. Slowing to round the top of the bend, the horses have split into two groups, a gap building between those with a chance at gold and a cluster lagging behind. The king's horse, Anmer, is in the latter group.

Then the cameras pick up something unexpected. A figure has dipped under the guard rail as the first wave of storming hooves screech past and around the bend. They move a few metres further into the track with determination, then face towards the last few riders, singling out Anmer, the king's horse. It appears as though they are trying to present the jockey with an object gripped in their hand. The horse, seeing someone in its path, begins to jump, but as it lifts its hooves high the figure crashes to the ground. Beast and rider tumble too, the horses behind just narrowly avoiding a collision. After a few seconds Anmer climbs to his feet and staggers on to complete the race rider-less. Jockey Herbert Jones has concussion, and is injured but alive. The mysterious stranger lies unconscious and bleeding.

They are instantly swept up in a wave of bodies as some rush to help, while the majority charge down the track towards the finish line. Amidst the chaos a man stops to pick up something lying close to the inert figure. It is a scarf, with stripes of purple, white and green running along its length, and the words 'Votes for Women' emblazoned on each end:¹ the sash of a suffragette. News would spread quickly that a 'crazy woman' had thrown herself in

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Photograph from 1913 Epsom Derby.

front of the king's horse and disrupted the most important race of the year. As she lies in hospital fighting for life, hate mail builds up on her bedside table. One letter, signed simply 'An Englishman', is characteristic of the vitriol levelled against her: 'I hope you suffer torture til you die, you idiot. I should like the opportunity of starving and beating you to a pulp.'² But the woman will never read these words; four days after the incident she succumbs to her injuries. The jockey will recover to ride again two weeks later, but he is never able to forget what happened and eventually takes his own life. As a political gesture, the horse Anmer is exiled to Canada, scapegoated for his part in a death over which he had no control.

The woman who seared the 1913 Derby into the history books was the young activist Emily Wilding Davison. The previous evening, she had been 17 miles north of Epsom, in Kensington, preparing for the Suffragette Fair. There she stood before the huge statue of Joan of Arc that greeted visitors to the fair: the fourteenth-century hero holding her sword high above her head, the words 'Fight on and God will give the victory' emblazoned on the plinth below. Emily was supposed to be volunteering at this fair, not disrupting the Derby, the very next day. She had mentioned the

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possibility of ‘making a protest on the racecourse’, but only Alice Green, whose house Emily was staying at, knew that she was travelling to Epsom. She purchased a train ticket and pinned two flags inside her coat, their green, white and purple bands a testament to a cause she would dedicate her life to: women’s suffrage through ‘deeds not words’.³

Had she planned to die by suicide – a martyr to the cause – or simply to pin a sash to the horse? Was the incident premeditated or she was acting spontaneously? It’s impossible to know for sure – she left no note behind. But by walking in front of the king’s horse in full view of 500,000 people and three film cameras, Emily had performed the ultimate deed for her cause. As she herself wrote: ‘To lay down life for friends, that is glorious, selfless, inspiring . . . the last consummate sacrifice of the Militant.’⁴

Emily had enrolled in the Women’s Social and Political Union in November 1906, and over the seven years leading up to her death she had become increasingly militant. She was arrested nine times, went on hunger strike seven times and was force-fed 49 times; a painful, terrifying and brutal process that left many women with long-term mental and physical scars. She threw herself from a prison railing to protect another inmate and engaged in acts of vandalism, particularly the burning of postboxes. Described by Emmeline Pankhurst’s daughter Sylvia as ‘one of the most daring and reckless of the militants’, Emily was treated as a martyr after her death. Twenty thousand people attended her funeral, making it the single biggest ceremony for a non-royal in British history. Her death and her activism are what Emily Wilding Davison is remembered for. But there is another aspect of her life that underpins this book; one that is rarely mentioned in the huge body of literature on her. She was a medievalist.⁵

Medieval Women: Modern Women

A highly educated woman, Emily had achieved first-class honours in English Literature having sat her finals at St Hugh’s College,

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Oxford. She could not graduate because Oxford University degrees were closed to women until 1920.⁶ Instead she continued to undertake research and to publish, particularly on medieval literature. She produced a swathe of articles, each of which explored how the past she was fascinated by could shape her present. It's a widely held view that women's empowerment began in the twentieth century, when the 'votes for women' movement finally gave a voice to the 'second sex'. The lives of men, women and children would be improved as human tyranny and outdated traditions were finally replaced by something closer to equality. The centenary of women's suffrage in 2018 was accompanied by repeated exhortations that women had once and for all emerged from the shadows.

But Emily Wilding Davison didn't think the suffragettes were breaking new ground. For her, they were attacking a recent phenomenon of oppression. She wanted to return to an earlier time which she believed was populated by powerful women. In the medieval period she saw a model that challenged the pattern of misogyny embedded in the modern age.⁷ In fact, her view of the medieval world was one rich in diversity, with men and women as equals. In an essay published just one month before her death called 'A Militant May Day', she describes a crowd in an idealised medieval setting. It is international and multicultural, with English, Scots, French, Russians, old, young, male and female celebrating together, and a 'little Saxon' holding hands with a 'little Jewess'. Instead of 'God Save the King', she claims the May Day motto is 'God Save the People'.⁸ In the women of the medieval world, she found inspiring voices that had since been suppressed. Through this book we will similarly see that many of the modes of discrimination we vigorously challenge today are not always products of the medieval or pre-medieval periods, but of the last few centuries.

For the suffragette movement, one medieval woman in particular represented the notion of a determined female triumphing against all the odds: Joan of Arc.⁹ Her active militarism and mode of dress made her an androgenous hero who embodied the motto,

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'Deeds not Words'. Emily and the suffragettes were not alone in finding medievalism a source of inspiration for nineteenth- and early twentieth-century challenges. William Morris sought to combat the rise in industrial consumerism by embracing the handmade mediums of the medieval period. Augustus Pugin saw a national purity in Gothic architecture absent in the classical tradition, so used the medieval style as inspiration for the Houses of Parliament. John Ruskin encouraged a return to the romance of the medieval as a means of gaining 'truth to nature'. For the suffragettes, however, the women they foregrounded displayed two essential medieval attributes: they were challenging societal norms by achieving power and influence despite their sex, and they were deeply religious.

The modern leaning towards science and reason over religion and spirituality has meant the deeply devout nature of the suffragette movement is often overlooked. For many today they are seen as political rather than pious. But the majority of women who took part in militant activity saw themselves as soldiers of Christ, promoting social change framed within religious terms. A saint of the Catholic church, Joan of Arc's slogan 'Fight on and God will



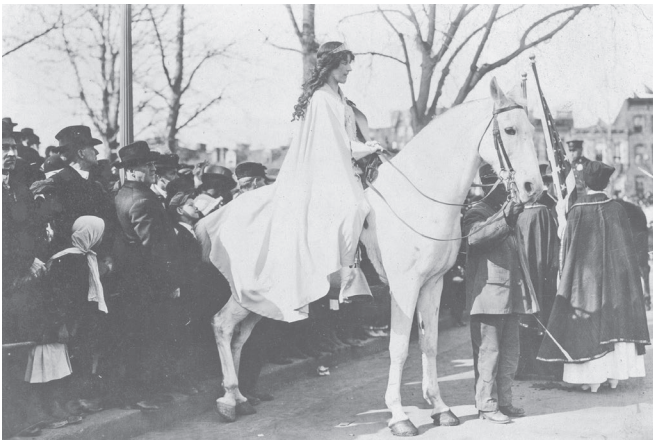
Suffragette poster with Joan of Arc figure, Hilda Dallas (left). Postcard showing statue of Joan of Arc from 1913, Suffragette Fair, Kensington (right).

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give the Victory' was emblazoned on banners alongside her medieval image. Joan was everything Emily Wilding Davison aspired to. Her inexplicable rise from teenage peasant to leader of the French army during the Hundred Years War presented an image of quasi-military female empowerment, but she was historically distant enough to appear unthreatening to early twentieth-century gender norms. While twentieth-century women would be criticised for dressing in male clothing, this warrior cloaked in the veil of the past could do so openly.¹⁰ What's more, her actions were sanctioned by God, Mary and the saints. She was a holy warrior.

As the suffragette movement spread across the ocean, women in the US also found inspiration in Joan of Arc. The image of Inez Milholland astride a huge white horse leading a pageant through the streets of Washington DC on 3 March 1913 has become iconic. Her version of Joan of Arc was dreamy and romantic, her hair long and loose and topped with a crown. Like Emily, Inez's costume design was inspired by the many years she had spent studying medieval literature. Very few scholars have discussed these suffragettes who were fascinated by the medieval period. But



Photograph of Inez Milholland at the Washington DC Suffragette pageant, 3 March 1913.

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understanding their medievalism subverts the general consensus that these twentieth-century women were fighting for agency in a vacuum, blazing a trail like never before. Rather than accept the misconstructions of the medieval period that had accrued over the intervening centuries, these suffragettes recognised a time when women had agency – and they wanted to return to it.

Emily's medievalism underlines her identity as a suffragette. A classmate recalled how Emily took the name 'Fair Emelye' after reading Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* at school:

Her chief friend at the time had no recollection of discussing women's rights with her or any public question. Far more interesting to them both was Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, which they were both studying and from which Emily derived another of her names. 'The Faire Emelye' she was always called from that time on by this friend and a few others, her hair, which was fair and very pretty, making the name appropriate.¹¹

'The Knight's Tale' is the first full story in the *Canterbury Tales*, and describes how Emelye was captured along with her sister Queen Hippolyta when Theseus laid siege to Scythia, home of the powerful Amazon women. She is taken to Athens, where she becomes the object of desire for two knights being held captive in a tower. To this end, she is idealised and objectified, but in many ways Emelye contradicts expectations of women in romance. First, the 'Amazon' women of Scythia were military-trained, and said to be able to ride horses, wield weapons and fight as equals to men.¹² Second, Emelye expresses her desire to remain dedicated to the goddess of the hunt, Diana: 'I Desire to be a maiden all my life, / Nor never would I be no lover nor wife.' She tells the goddess that she prefers hunting and woodcraft to marriage and childbirth. Emelye is eventually married off against her will, but her emboldened speech to Diana acts as a timeless rallying cry to women who want to determine their own destinies.

While Emelye may at first have appealed to the young Wilding

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Davison on account of her fair hair and beauty, her imprisonment would have only strengthened Emily's connection to her. References to Emelye are full of suggestions that her freedom is limited, and her fate governed by forces beyond her control. Signing letters as 'Emelye', the young suffragette was identifying with the female warrior, and in her essay 'The Price of Liberty' Emily suggests that the militancy of suffragettes ties them back to strong women of the past: 'The perfect Amazon is she who will sacrifice all even unto this last.'¹³ But her actions at the Epsom Derby are the strongest indicator that Emily was profoundly influenced by Emelye and 'The Knight's Tale'.

After her death, fellow suffragettes argued that Emily had not intended to be a martyr, but instead was trying to call on the king for justice. Immediately after the incident, the newspaper in her hometown of Morpeth reported that she 'offered up her life as a Petition to the King . . . Her petition will not fail, for she herself has carried it to that High Tribunal where men and women, rich and poor, stand equal.'¹⁴ By this point in 1913 the suffragette movement had felt it had exhausted routes of communication through members of parliament, and instead forged plans to appeal directly to the monarch. This idea has its roots in the medieval custom of the king as the ultimate arbiter of justice, who could be approached by his subjects as he travelled around the kingdom and asked for his intervention in their matters.

'The Knight's Tale' provided Emily with the perfect source of inspiration for how to achieve such a petition. In the opening verses, the triumphant lord Theseus arrives at the city of Thebes. Rows of ladies clothed in black kneel before him in the street, crying, wailing and lamenting. These women are widows, victims of the tyrant Creon's attack on the city, desperate for the bodies of their loved ones to be retrieved and laid to rest. Theseus, expecting a hero's welcome, is shocked by their behaviour and goes to dismiss them. But then one of the women 'caught the reigns of his bridle'. His horse subdued, Theseus is compelled to hear the women's grievances. This woman's actions changed the course of history. Theseus wages war against Creon, the bones are

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recovered, and the ruler fulfils his oath to the women. It is possible that the example of the Theban widows may have determined Emily's final act of reaching towards the king's horse, recasting herself as one of her heroines through her death. By emulating the actions of women from the past, Emily Wilding Davison carved her name onto history as a martyr for her cause.

Women Writing Women

Emily was not the only woman to find inspiration for suffrage by looking to the medieval period. The less militant but no less significant Grace Warrack drew on her passion for medieval literature to bring a lost woman's work to a huge new readership. Over a decade before Emily ran out at the Derby, this middle-aged Scottish Presbyterian arrived in London and made her way to the British Library's reading room. She had come in search of a fourteenth-century Catholic English mystic. Wading through the catalogue for the 50,000 books, manuscripts and prints left by Hans Sloane to the library in the eighteenth century, Grace found an interesting entry. Under the heading 'Magic and Witchcraft' a manuscript was labelled 'Revelations to One Who Could Not Read a Letter, 1373'.¹⁵ She had found what she was looking for – the earliest surviving copy of Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*. Over the course of one month Grace transcribed the full text and translated it from medieval to modern English. She then returned to Edinburgh and managed to persuade the publisher Methuen to print the first complete printed text of Julian's work in 1901. It has never been out of print since, and generations of scholars have discovered the medieval masterpiece thanks to Grace's translation.

Grace was determined that Julian's quiet, contemplative yet revolutionary views on spirituality should be made available to a wide audience. By publishing *Revelations of Divine Love*, Grace provided twentieth-century women with one of their most impressive medieval foremothers. Julian was born in the city of Norwich around 1343. She was 30 years old when, paralysed and resigned to death,

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she received a set of visions or ‘revelations’. She would go on to make a full recovery, but her life had been changed forever. When she returned to health, she chose to be enclosed as an anchoress, and received the last rites before being holed up in a single room for the rest of her life. She spent another three decades or more in her cell, contemplating the visions she had received and writing her remarkable book, which is the first known text by a woman in English.

Revelations of Divine Love is a sublime book; the work of a steady gaze applied to spiritual matters. Julian doesn’t tell us anything about the turbulent fourteenth-century world she inhabited: the plagues, heresy trials, wars and schisms.¹⁶ She is barely present in her text. Instead, she describes in almost cinematic detail the sufferings of Christ and repeatedly asserts that the motherly love of God for his creation lies at the core of all existence. Her famous phrase – ‘all shall be well, all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well’ – is not a trite piece of consolation, but rather a meaningful and considered statement of divine intent.¹⁷ Even so, it’s remarkable that we know of Julian today, and that her name did not go the same way as so many other medieval women.

From the Reformation onwards, libraries were scoured for controversial texts. Various shorthand terms were used in catalogues to indicate which should be considered and potentially destroyed. Books were recorded as containing ‘witchcraft’, ‘heresy’ and ‘Catholic’ subject matter; the destiny of many of these texts is unknown, with the lists the only record of their existence. The title of this book – *Femina* – was the label scribbled alongside texts known to be written by a woman, so less worthy of preservation. We can only wonder how many other texts were dismissed or destroyed as the work of ‘femina’. *Revelations of Divine Love* should have gone the same way and fallen victim to the book burnings of generations of reformers. Tracing the rare survival of Julian of Norwich’s work can shed light on why so few medieval women have been recorded down the centuries.

The sixteenth-century Reformation caused an ideological crack through the heart of England. Under Henry VIII’s son Edward, Catholics were rounded up and killed, while under his

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daughter Mary, the tables turned, and Protestants were burned. A major casualty of this embittered religious turmoil was books. Catholics destroyed Protestant books and vice versa. The burning, destruction or removal of books carries with it two purposes: to destroy the physical objects, and to remove their contents from people's memories.¹⁸ Thousands of medieval manuscripts, the repositories of generations of knowledge and art, were declared heretical and destroyed. Those that survived were either accepted as orthodox, so almost exclusively written by educated men, or were hidden away. While Julian's book wasn't heretical, it did sail close to the wind. She referred to Christ as a woman, suggested that sin was 'behovely' ('necessary'), and she saw God as entirely forgiving no matter what a person did during their lives.¹⁹ She would have kept her writings secret while inside her anchoress cell, but they eventually made their way out into the world.

The book remained hidden until the sixteenth century, when it travelled to France to be met by nine young women escaping Protestant England to set up a Catholic convent in Cambrai, France. All were aged between 17 and 22, and among them was Gertrude More, great-great-granddaughter of famous Tudor Catholic and writer Thomas More. As well as hiding priests, religious objects and medieval texts in their stately home, the More family took an unconventional attitude towards educating women. Thomas insisted his many daughters received the same classical education as his only son, with their intellectual capabilities impressing even King Henry VIII. The king was amazed to find a woman's signature at the end of an 'extremely erudite' letter written in perfect Latin by Thomas's daughter Margaret.²⁰ This educational environment permeated through the generations, and Gertrude was encouraged to enter a convent to further her studies. The nuns at Cambrai were sent a collection of medieval manuscripts to help them in their contemplative life, and among these was Julian's *Revelations*. They made multiple copies of her text and the community preserved it through times of hardship, until the French Revolution when the convent was disbanded and the nuns, fearing execution, escaped to Stanbrook Abbey in Yorkshire. They took Julian with them.

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These copies gave Julian of Norwich a platform, and from here a sequence of male scholars chose to either embrace or reject her writings. She was hijacked by writers on both sides of the religious divide in the seventeenth century. Catholic convert and Benedictine monk Serenus Crecy copied and printed her work, while his Protestant counterpart, Bishop Edward Stillingfleet, declared her ‘everything that is wrong with the Roman church’ and her writings the ‘fantastic revelations of a distempered brain’.²¹ To him, Julian’s femininity wasn’t so much a problem in itself. But it represented the ‘alien’ and ‘other’ of Catholicism, which was a threat to the unity of the Church of England.²² Stillingfleet embraced deism, the idea that empirical reason and observation of the natural world provide enough evidence of a supreme being and that, therefore, revelations cannot be divine in origin.²³ As women were excluded from universities and theological discourse, their texts were not empirical, instead dealing with spiritual matters through their lived experience of revelations. They also tended to write in the vernacular rather than in the Latin learned by male scribes. The works of medieval ‘feminae’ were the perfect target for the reformers of the later generations.

Always the Second Sex?

The Reformation impacted women significantly. As convents were closed, opportunities available to women narrowed to being a wife and being a mother. Nuns were returned to their families or made to marry, and educational opportunities were increasingly restricted throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.²⁴ The relegation of women to the role of the second sex was firmly embedded in Protestant communities, with Martin Luther stating ‘the wife should stay at home and look after the affairs of the household as one who has been deprived of the ability of administering those affairs that are outside and concern the state’, while John Calvin agreed that ‘the woman’s place is in the home’.²⁵

The situation worsened further for women as eighteenth- and

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nineteenth-century writers crafted ever more elaborate social divides between the sexes. Despite having a female monarch in Victoria, women did not have the right to vote, sue or own property if they were married, ceding all possessions to their husband.²⁶ Educational opportunities were virtually non-existent until Cheltenham Ladies College opened its doors in 1853. The divide was gender specific, with women increasingly confined to domestic activities and restrictive clothing. But there was also a class-based rift.²⁷ What was acceptable for an upper-class lady was dictated by matters of taste, while men and women suffered similar degradation through poverty in industrial Britain. There was an idea of the perfect lady, as expressed by medical doctor William Acton, who specialised in masturbation. Women were supposed to be, 'The best mothers, wives, and managers of households, know little or nothing of sexual indulgences. Love of home, children, and domestic duties are the only passions they feel.'

Acton goes on to describe a woman he interviewed who was, in his opinion, the 'perfect' English lady:

I believe this lady is a perfect ideal of an English wife and mother, kind, considerate, self-sacrificing, and sensible, so pure-hearted as to be utterly ignorant of and averse to any sensual indulgence, but so unselfishly attached to the man she loves, as to be willing to give up her own wishes and feelings for his sake.²⁸

Pseudo-scientific treatises like Acton's did not help women's emancipation, but much of the blame for the exclusion of women from eighteenth- to nineteenth-century histories lies at the feet of exponents for the so-called 'great men' theory during the height of the British Empire. As Britain competed with other European powers to expand its reach, absorbing entire cultures through the exploits of privileged Western men, so history was recorded in a way which placed them centre stage. The loudest voice among many in this movement was Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881). He wore many different hats throughout his long and successful life:

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philosopher, mathematician, historian, satirist and teacher. But he is mainly remembered for the bold statements in his work *On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History*, including, ‘the History of the World is but the biography of Great Men’.²⁹ Reading Carlyle’s text today is an unsettling experience as he disregards entire sections of society:

The great man, with his free force direct out of God’s own hand, is the lightning. His word is the wise healing word which all can believe in. All blazes round him now, when he has once struck on it, into fire like his own. The dry mouldering sticks are thought to have called him forth! Those are critics in small vision, I think, who cry: ‘See, is it not the sticks that made the fire?’ No sadder proof can be given by a man of his own littleness than disbelief in great men.³⁰

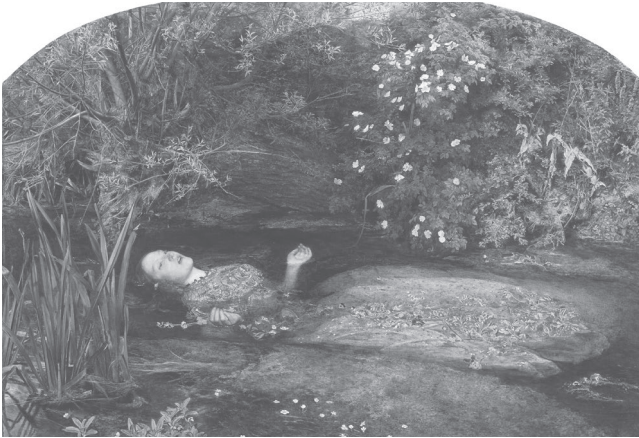
Here, everybody but a ‘great man’ suffers the indignity of being deemed insignificant. Women make up a significant portion of those dismissed of course, but also included are those Carlyle perceives as ‘little men’. This was the dominant approach of historians, and we still feel the pull of the so-called Great Man theory today. Those who didn’t fit the moral code of Victorian England, or sat outside the narrative of conquest, were repackaged or removed from the record. Individuals like Alfred the Great fared well, preserved for posterity by Victorian historians as a great military leader. But his daughter Æthelflæd was overlooked. A military strategist and social reformer of a kind that almost eclipsed her father in her lifetime, she didn’t fit with Victorian notions of a woman’s place in society. Women of the past were recast as reflections of what Victorian society wanted them to be.

While seemingly engaging with the medieval period, Pre-Raphaelite and Victorian artists created sensual representations of the few medieval women they could access, once again filtering them through Victorian sensibilities. They are cast as virgin, victim, mother, whore or hag, with the image of an unobtainable maiden trapped in a tower repeated ad nauseum. Millais’s *Ophelia*

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is the desperate, hysterical woman, who according to Shakespeare was driven mad and through her watery death forever subsumed within nature. The way Millais has painted her parted lips is a tantalising invitation to stare lasciviously upon her downfall. Other medieval women are shown looking out from towers, working on their embroideries and pining for strong knights away on exciting God-given missions. The truth is that the foundations of Victorian-era medievalism lay on shaky ground. The texts preserved and copied down the centuries had already suffered from multiple stages of editing and erasure. The versions read in the nineteenth century had been repeatedly revisited, with women cast in socially acceptable ways for ever-changing audiences.

Not all blame lies at the feet of nineteenth-century historians. There are myriad reasons why so many women have been lost to the sands of time. Some originated during the medieval period itself. While there were certainly places of education in the convents of medieval Europe, educated men outnumbered educated women, and they had fewer opportunities to learn to read and write and make their mark. Over-writing – the practice whereby male writers would take the visions, words and ideas of female



Sir John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1852, Tate Collection.

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intellectuals and rewrite them for a largely male audience – was also common throughout the period.³¹ This meant that both oral and written accounts by women were subsumed into those of later authors and remain unacknowledged. The erasure of many literate women from the records is more a case of poor referencing than deliberate exclusion. But as the centuries wore on, the lives of medieval women simply didn't interest later generations of male readers and writers. The acts of brilliant officers, bold leaders and reasoned male intellectuals were of more value.

Teaching children about 'great men' enforced a sense of a great nation, a version of history which could be distributed along the length and breadth of vast empires. Controlling access to the past controls populations in the present, and determining who writes history can affect thought and behaviour. Famously the Nazis created a version of German history which cherry-picked and repackaged information so as to benefit the regime's agenda. But historical manipulation is everywhere, and trickles through to each of us in similar ways. At the time of writing this book there is a dangerous undercurrent to medieval studies, as the period is increasingly hijacked by the far right to promote extreme ideologies on race, ethnicity and immigration.³² Among the individuals who stormed the US Capitol in January 2020, the 'Q-Shaman', as he's come to be known, was covered with Norse tattoos. The perpetrator of the Christchurch terrorist attack in 2019, who killed 51 and injured 40, had covered his weapons with medieval symbols of a crusader knight renowned for killing Muslims.³³ And the so-called 'War on Terror' has exacerbated relations between East and West, with politicians like President George W. Bush drawing parallels with the Crusades.³⁴

Misappropriation of the medieval period is rife, from comedic parodies to conspiracy theories. By casting the light back on medieval women and turning many lenses – from osteoarchaeology to art historical analysis – on the evidence, I want to illuminate a different version of the Middle Ages. All historical accounts are the products of the human concerns of their time and I freely acknowledge that I am focusing on a group I sympathise with, interpreting

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the evidence with my own interests at the fore. Yet it is ultimately an attempt to open up different ways of engaging with history. This quote by the medievalist Kolve is my concession:

We have little choice but to acknowledge our modernity, admit that our interest in the past is always (and by no means illegitimately) born of present concerns.³⁵

Whether forgotten, ignored or deliberately written out, it is a wonder that any female voices survive at all. But the discipline of history has undergone its greatest shake up in the last few decades because of developments in the connecting areas of social history, archaeology, DNA research and statistical analysis. While texts tend to favour the few, these approaches search for the many. It is in this realm of cross-disciplinary collaboration that medieval women begin to emerge. The digital revolution has made our search somewhat easier. We can now find our own histories by searching family records and accessing archives. Other types of stories are starting to emerge, populated by a new cast of characters who lived on our streets, in our homes and shared aspects of our lives.

In this book the women fight as brave warriors, physically crossing the taboo of the 'weaker sex'; they rule with the power of kings and emperors; they write their own stories and determine their histories; they reach, and sometimes exceed, the intellectual achievements of contemporary male scholars, making exceptional discoveries in the areas of the sciences and the arts; they hold the purse strings, amassing unthinkable wealth, and do all this while often performing the traditional female tasks of child-rearing and housekeeping.

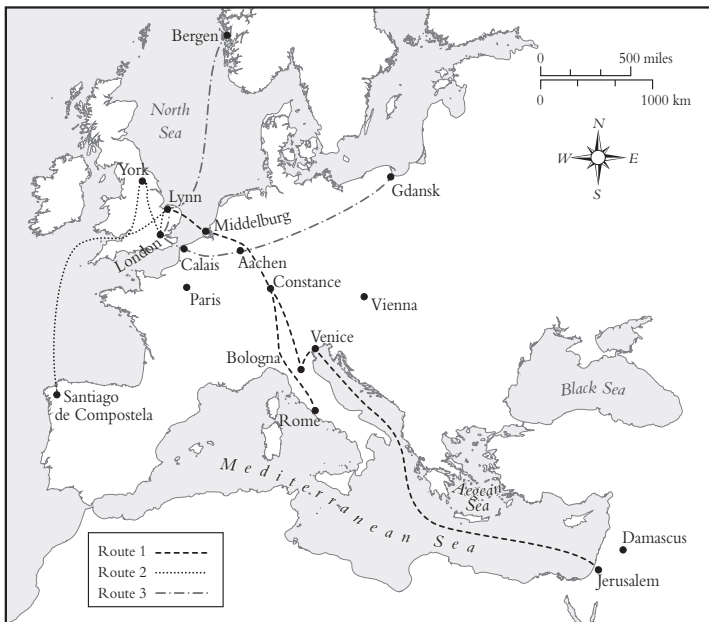
Many of the women featured in this book chose an alternative way of life – one that deliberately removed them from established female realms of the kitchen, nursery and bedchamber. They thrived in monasteries and workshops, stepping away from domestic interiors and embracing new challenges. That they could do this is testament not only to how formidable they were as individuals, but also to the fact that the medieval period was perhaps

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Introduction

more accommodating than we think. Our view of this time has been skewed by the historical writers that have come before us. It was a 'dark age', a time of 'barbarians': to be 'medieval' is shorthand for backwards, superstitious, reactionary, volatile. By digging into mistruths and truths, I want to show how the historical divide can be crossed to create as authentic a picture as possible of these women and the time in which they lived.

This journey to discover lost or ignored women starts in the very north of England, before sweeping down through the midlands and into the south. It then crosses the North Sea to Scandinavia, passes over to Normandy, across to Germany, and then to the south of France. From there it moves to the mega-state at the heart of Europe, Poland, before following the route of the Hanseatic League back to East Anglia and the cosmopolitan city of London. This



Map showing the pilgrimages of Margery Kempe from King's Lynn, 1413-33.

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scope is intentional: the medieval world was not a small, parochial one where everyone lived and died within view of their local church. Some people travelled vast distances in their lives, via boat, on foot and by horse. The route covered by this book is very similar to the journeys taken by medieval women in their own lifetimes. The English woman examined towards the end of the book – Margery Kempe – visited all these kingdoms and more.

As the book moves across a wide geographical area, so it shifts across disciplinary boundaries. The early chapters focus on archaeological discoveries, drawing in textual evidence. Later chapters shift between art historical, theological, historical and literary evidence, and throughout the approach is deliberately interdisciplinary. While I have focused on a selection of women that can be reconstructed relatively well through a combination of evidence from a range of sources, there are still so many others who remain frustratingly out of reach. But even 90 years ago Grace Warrack would have been amazed that I could include the Loftus Princess or the Birka Warrior Woman in a discussion of medieval women. Through dedicated research and further advancements, it may just be a matter of time before others appear more fully.

‘What thing is it that women most desire?’ So speaks Chaucer’s Wife of Bath. The response she gives is that women want sex, money, land, independence and fun. Emily Wilding Davison and Grace Warrack had read the Wife’s words, and they became part of a century-long fight for women to have the right to fulfil those wishes. Some parts of the world have taken positive steps towards equality. But most women across the globe can still fulfil few, if any, of those desires. Equality is a frail veneer pinned precariously over some societies, and completely ignored or deliberately suppressed in others. Yet a new thrust foregrounding the needs of women is gathering momentum. If sources are to continually reinforce an idea of a past where women haven’t contributed, women will feel they have always been invisible. We need a new relationship with the past, one which we can all feel a part of. Finding these extraordinary medieval women is a first step, but there are so many other silenced voices waiting to have their stories heard.

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Movers and Shakers

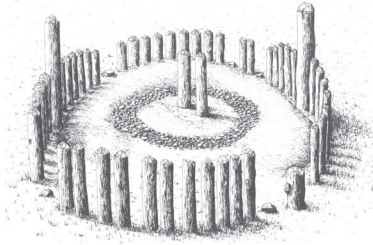
Discovery!

2006 – Loftus, Redcar and Cleveland, England

Street House Farm sits on a crossroads at the northernmost edge of the North Yorkshire Moors – a wild terrain lashed by the winds. Beyond the farm’s furthest field the sea crashes against the sheer rocks of the coast. The town of Loftus, in the borough of Redcar and Cleveland, sits just a mile or so to the south and east of the farm. We’re in the territory of Wordsworth, Dracula and the largest concentration of ancient trees in northern England.¹ If these trees could talk, they would tell countless stories of the events that have played out on this landscape. The present story concerns Steve Sherlock, an archaeological detective (his surname is a happy accident). For four decades Steve has investigated local mysteries that stretch back thousands of years.²

Steve knows this land intimately, having grown up in the nearby town of Redcar, and has spent a lifetime sifting through the soil in search of both treasures and answers. From 1979 to 1981 he was part of a team that discovered Neolithic cairns and Iron Age settlements on this unassuming crop of land surrounding Street House Farm. One discovery in particular set this site apart: a unique structure, radiocarbon-dated to around 2200 BC. While it survives as a set of post-holes – echoes in the soil of once-great wooden monuments – originally it was a circular enclosure, roughly eight metres across, composed of 56 upright roughly-cut

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Reconstruction of the Street House 'Wossit', Loftus, Late Neolithic, c. 2200 BC.

timbers with a curious D-shaped raised section in the centre.³ The spacing of the posts suggest that people moved between them in a processional or ceremonial way. In the absence of any other convincing suggestions, it was declared a 'ritual site', where unknown ancient ceremonies took place, and named the 'Wossit' (from 'what-is-it').⁴ It acts as a reminder that when we look backwards through time our investigations are tentative and we must keep asking the question 'what is it?'

What's clear is that at Loftus, the now seemingly remote and isolated hilltop farm was once an ancient hub of people, noise, movement and life. The remnants of structures going back millennia pepper the fields, including Teesside's official 'Oldest House', which predates Stonehenge. Decades after he saw the postholes of the Wossit emerge from the soil, the outline of a rectangular enclosure in a nearby field, picked up in an aerial photograph, caught Steve's attention. Inside an Iron Age ditch were the traces of buildings, including a number of roundhouses. While Steve had come here to discover a pre-Roman world, an unassuming mound near the centre suggested there was something else worth exploring.⁵

Cutting through the outlines of older Iron Age houses, yet systematically arranged within the parameters of the enclosure, were 109 graves. Each one was carefully dug into the ground to allow enough room for a body to be laid in a foetal position on its side. There were no bones – the acidic soil having claimed anything organic – but certain clues began to emerge as the team peeled

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back layers of earth. Beads, scraps of metal, parts of eroded weapons all suggested that these burials were not Iron Age, but more recent. These were early medieval, and more excitingly still, they seemed to date from a period when this part of the north of England was undergoing an ideological revolution. They dated from the time when Christianity was putting its first roots down along the Northumbrian coastline.

The most significant find, however, was hiding within the mound right in the heart of the cemetery. While other graves stretched along the parameters of the enclosure, this area of raised earth provided a focal point for the burials. Opening the central grave Steve found the mother lode; beautiful, symbolic early medieval jewellery of the very highest status. Reaching up above all the other graves, the individual in this barrow of earth was clearly important, both to those carefully burying their loved ones around them, and for the archaeological team digging them up 1,400 years later. This was the grave of a leader, someone treasured by their community, someone with power, wealth and influence. There are scant clues as to the meaning behind this burial ground. To understand it we need to insert ourselves among the people of seventh-century Loftus and take a close look at the objects they placed in the ground. Through them, a picture emerges of a northern English society rocked by change yet clinging to the past.

Welcome to Seventh-Century Loftus

The salt air bites your skin as you look out over the choppy waters of the North Sea. The waves before you connect rather than divide, linking this outcrop of northern English cliff face to Scandinavia, Germany and onwards to exotic lands in the south and east. Ships moored in the bay below are the horses of the sea, allowing international travel and promising riches. Turning your back on the water and looking inland, a strange terrain unfolds. There are lumps and bumps across the earth, the echo of great buildings many centuries old. Stones from old Roman structures

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Reconstruction of the seventh-century site at Street House, Loftus by Andrew Hutchinson; © Andrew Hutchinson and Stephen Sherlock.

are scattered around, and a couple of new wooden edifices rise up between burial mounds and raised ditches.

A ceremony is taking place. People process through a series of wide openings in the centuries-old Iron Age enclosures, then into a square area about the size of half a football pitch. Congregating, they move towards one of the new wooden buildings. It's a simple structure, just one entrance onto a small, dark space. Inside, someone is laid out on their back, dressed in luxurious robes with gold glittering on their chest. They are still and peaceful, quite clearly dead. To the left of this little building a hole has been dug in the ground, a large pile of freshly turned soil by its side. Peer down into the hole and something surprising lies inside – a beautifully carved and ornately decorated bed. It is covered in furs and sumptuous materials, and a soft pillow rests beneath a solid ash-wood headboard.

Behind the mound of earth another wooden building rises up. The doors are open and from inside comes the soft glow of candle-

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light. Standing on a raised circular platform next to the hole in the ground, leaders from the community are dressed in their finest clothes, red, green and yellow dyed wool edged with exotic fabrics like silk, imported from over the seas. Gold buttons and ornate buckles glitter among folds of material worn by the men, while the women wear beaded necklaces in layers down their chests. They observe solemnly as people move towards them, gradually filling up the enclosure. The illustrious and industrious, the great and the many, are all here to pay their respects to one person. Soon the deceased will be placed in their bed, to sleep for all eternity surrounded by ancestors from millennia ago. They will become one with the landscape. These people are here to remember them, but the burial rites are also a strong reminder of how they will all one day merge with a place whose history stretches back to the mythic past.

The Secrets of Grave 42

The early medieval burial ground at Loftus is unusual. More than 100 graves are arranged in a rectangle, forming a clear outline. They're all oriented east to west, common in Christian burials, with the head placed in the direction of the rising sun.⁶ At the heart of the site are three graves, which Steve Sherlock labelled 41, 42 and 43. Of these, one was given more elaborate treatment than the others. Grave 42 had a burial mound raised up over it so that it could be seen from a distance. Although the bone, wood and fabric had vanished, the remaining metal objects indicated how the original burial would have looked. Eroded iron cleats and scrolled headboard fittings were all that was left of a very fine wooden bed. This was by no means the only bed burial found in England, but it was the only one this far north.⁷

Inside the bed, close to where the deceased's chest would have been, a set of glittering finds emerged from the soil. Two pendants, set with highly polished cabochon red gemstones, large and exotic in design. Three beads – two of them blue and one made

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Garnet and gold pendants from grave 42, Street House, Loftus
© Stephen Sherlock.

from gold wire, which would once have been strung on a necklace – lie beside them. But the most exceptional find was the central ornament, a shield-shaped golden pendant with rows of cloisonné gemstones around a scallop-shaped garnet nearly two centimetres across. The first of its kind to have been found, it suggests that the person honoured in grave 42 was very important – most probably a member of royalty or nobility. It also suggested that she was a woman.⁸

Without bones to analyse, the gendering of the graves at Street House was based on the finds. Weapons and paired blades were considered male objects, while beads, keys and jewellery were female. This, of course, is not exact. When examining other sites with skeletal remains, the gendering of objects is sometimes reversed. For example, at the nearby cemetery of Norton, Cleveland, a man was found buried with a bead as well as weapons, and women have been interred with knives or swords.⁹ There have also been discoveries across the North Sea where the finds are gendered male, while the bones are female. However, it is generally accepted that women were more likely to be buried with jewellery.

The pendant offers fascinating insights into its owner and the

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world she was a part of. Now known as the Loftus Princess, only someone important would be buried with such honour and with such beautiful treasures. This sort of cloisonné jewellery was ubiquitous among elite burials of the time, with similar pieces found at the Sutton Hoo ship burial, the most exuberant celebration of burial with grave goods ever discovered in England. And in the same year as the Loftus Princess was discovered, metal-detectorist Terry Herbert dug up a staggering 3,500 pieces of cloisonné jewellery in the largest collection of Anglo-Saxon gold and silver metalwork ever found – the Staffordshire Hoard.¹⁰

The pieces from the Staffordshire field, however, differ from the jewel at Loftus in a striking way. They were all fittings from weapons or were associated with a male military elite. Ripped from swords and scabbards or torn from their owners' bodies, they were the treasures of men at arms who battled and died in the kingdom known as Mercia. The Loftus jewel is no such battle trophy. It was placed in the ground as part of a burial; presumably the personal possession of the Northumbrian woman who wore it. By making such a statement through her burial, she and her community have left behind insights into their world which we can finally unearth.

Sorcery of the Smith

The discovery of gold and garnet jewellery across the length and breadth of the country not only reveals that it was fashionable in the early Middle Ages, but that it had symbolic meaning too. As groups of Angles, Saxons and Jutes crossed the seas and settled across England in the centuries after the Fall of Rome, so they brought their clothes and cultures with them. The many surviving pieces of cloisonné jewellery tied their owners back to an earlier Germanic world. They were symbols of identity as well of power and wealth.

While we have very little physical evidence to help us understand how the workshops that produced these beautiful items would have operated, the skills required to make an object as intricate as the Loftus pendant opens up new windows onto

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seventh-century England. Given that workshops had no running water and jewellers had to rely on simple tools and natural light, it is quite remarkable that this kind of jewellery was made at all. One grave found in Tattershall Thorpe, Lincolnshire – the Smith's Hoard – contained tools which suggest the deceased worked with metal.¹¹ It was a lone burial, which reflects the respect in which smiths were held. He may have been an itinerant tradesman who died while travelling and was granted this honour by the community. Finds from his grave include an iron bell, which he would have rung to drum up trade, his tools – snips, hammerheads, tongs and punches – and scraps of metal, probably stored together in a bag. By placing these items in the ground, the community were revering him, laying his status symbols alongside his body and providing him with what he might need in the afterlife.

In the seventh century smiths were seen as powerful and important members of society. This was a hangover from the Germanic pagan religion practised across England before the arrival of



Image of Wayland the Smith from the front of the Franks Casket,
British Museum.

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Christian missionaries. One celebrated mythical figure was the smith Wayland. The *Poetic Edda* tells his story. Wayland was such an impressive worker of jewellery that King Niðhad wanted him enslaved so no one else could have the pieces he created. He ordered Wayland be crippled by cutting his hamstring tendons and trapped the smith on an island to produce treasures for him exclusively. But Wayland plotted his escape. He slew the king's two sons and fashioned goblets out of their skulls, a brooch from their teeth and jewels from their eyes. He then lured the king's daughter to his workshop. Here he drugged and raped her, impregnating her with his own child who would eventually succeed her cruel father as king. Wayland's vicious revenge complete, he escaped with a flying machine he'd made from birds' feathers.

Episodes from this tale were carved into the side of a whale-bone box, known as the Franks Casket, around the same time that the Loftus burial ground was in use.¹² Wayland's bent leg reveals how he was hamstrung, while he holds tongs above an anvil like those found in the Smith's Hoard. The decapitated son lies below him, while feathers are plucked from birds in preparation for his airborne get away. For a society organised around a warrior elite often on the move, small, personal, portable pieces of art – namely jewellery – were more valuable than large-scale paintings, sculpture or architecture. These jewels were the masterpieces of their time and the people who made them displayed an almost god-like ability to work metals; turning rough rocks into liquid form, then back to solid, preserved as a glittering, eternal piece of alchemical wizardry.

The Loftus jewel is a spectacular example of the smith's sorcery. But it's not just the golden jewellery itself which helps us understand early medieval England; Old English literature tells us much about the symbolism of prized possessions too.¹³ The epic poem *Beowulf* frequently mentions gold, given from lords to secure the loyalty of followers, with ancient heirlooms used to secure treaties and oaths. Hrothgar says he gained trust from Beowulf's father by sending 'old treasures to the Wylfings over the sea's spine; he swore oaths to me'. More relevant to our exploration of the Loftus Princess, gold is placed in the ground and protected by both a terrifying

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