Nancy: It's the summer of 1906. Twenty-year-old Johannes Melhus is out working on his land when he suddenly notices a couple of weird objects sticking out of a big, shrub-covered mound just north of his farmhouse.

His land lay along the broad banks of the Namsen River in central Norway, and the sandy mound is tall enough — between two and three meters in height — that it rose above the fertile fields around it. It would have been easy to see from the river itself.

And that may help explain the nature of the objects he pulled out of the sandy soil. One was a small, intricate house-shaped box, about the size of four decks of cards stacked on top of each other. The other was a whalebone plaque, a little smaller than a piece of A4 paper.

What Johannes didn't realize, as he dusted the sand off these strange objects, was that he had just found evidence that the people who lived on his farm twelve hundred years ago were among Norway's very first Vikings.

The mound, it turned out, was a kind of time capsule.

And the time it came from was … the Viking Age.

Nancy: I'm Nancy Bazilchuk, and you're listening to *63 Degrees North*, an original podcast from NTNU, the Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

Today I'm going to tell you the story of Farmer Melhus's finds, and why archaeologists are so excited about them. It's a story of some of the earliest, daring Viking raids on Ireland, pagan rituals, a woman priestess and violent Catholic Irishmen who were constantly warring with each other, but who at the same time were no match for the heathens who came from the north.

And it's all centered around that little box, which is a… .

Aina: ….a complete reliquary shrine.

Nancy: That's Aina Heen-Petersen, a PhD candidate at NTNU who is studying the box — the reliquary — for her doctoral research.

Aina: The shrine is very small, only 8 cm high and less than 12 cm long, but such shrines were of major importance in their Irish setting because they housed relics, such as the physical remains of a saint or the personal effect of a saint or a venerated person. And it is a very rare find — it is possibly one of the most rare and special Christian objects that travelled across the North Sea.

Nancy: If you want to know how Aina sees the world, you have only to look at her bookshelves, which are full of titles like “The Sword in Early Medieval Northern Europe,” “The Story of the Drinking Horn,” and, my personal favorite, “The Past is a Foreign Country.”

Because while you and I might see that sandy mound on Farmer Melhus’s land as a kind of time capsule, for archaeologists like Aina and her colleagues, it’s more like a time machine — it brings her to the foreign country that is the past.

Nancy: In this case, the past we’re talking about happened more than 1200 years ago. Archaeologists define the Viking Age as beginning with the first recorded Nordic raid on Lindisfarne, an abbey off the northeast coast of England on the Scottish border, in 793. One description of this first raid says “Monks were killed in the abbey, thrown into the sea to drown, or carried away as slaves along with the church treasures, giving rise to the traditional (but unattested) prayer—*A furore Normannorum libera nos, Domine*, "Free us from the fury of the Northmen, Lord."

Nancy: But back to our sandy mound...

Aina: The discoveries of 1906 were not, however, the first artefacts recovered from this specific mound. A few years earlier two young boys had found several items while playing on top of the barrow. These included a spearhead, shears, a large and elaborate fibula, two oval brooches, a bronze mount, a large collection of beads, and several other objects.

Nancy: So how does an archaeologist make sense of all this?

Aina: Shortly after the discovery, the find was reported to the museum in Trondheim and the following year an excavation was undertaken by the director, Theodor Petersen. We are able to retrieve some information because we have Petersen’s old report about the condition of the objects. Without that we would not have been able to tell the story as well as we know today if we didn’t have that information.

Nancy: Theodore Petersen, the Trondheim archaeologist who investigated the burial mound in 1907, found a series of iron nails in the mound. They were placed in such a

way that he was able to see that the mound had contained a 9 meter long boat, buried parallel to the river. The boat itself had long since rotted away, but the iron nails were a ghostly shadow and told the story. And that, combined with all the objects that had been found, allowed Petersen to figure out that there were two people buried in the boat in the mound, a man and a woman.

But the key thing here was that little reliquary.

Griffin: This object is important because it was kept intact, we can identify it very clearly as what it is and what it was.

Nancy: Griffin Murray is a lecturer in the Department of Archaeology at University College Cork in Ireland. He and Aina worked together to figure out the deeper meaning of the reliquary. For one thing...

Griffin: By looking at the object in terms of its decorative style, you could see the roundels on it are in a kind of Celtic style, you might call it, late Celtic style. And also because of some of its decorative techniques, the enameling and the glasswork on the side of the reliquary, we can date it to the 7th or 8th century. And that combined with the evidence from the other objects that came out of the woman's grave, we know this was an early grave — we can say with confidence that this is evidence for one of the earliest raids by the Vikings in Ireland.

Nancy: The dating of the shrine means that Central Norwegian Vikings from the Trondheim area were bad asses! They were among the first Norwegians to voyage across the North Sea to raid England and Ireland.

Griffin: I don't want to offend the Norwegian people in saying that all their forbears were these horrible plunderers. We must appreciate at this time, medieval society was very violent, it was a very violent society. Raiding was not unique to the Vikings. We even think Ireland's national saint, St. Patrick, was taken, captured as a slave, in a raid by the Irish on Britain.

Nancy: And yet the Vikings were different somehow. First of all, even though we know they went on raids, we don't know why. We do know that they were members of a complex society: there were craftsmen, farmers, weavers and metalsmiths, in addition to the raiders themselves. But as much as the Vikings have been studied, archaeologists and historians still don't really know why they went out on their raids. Maybe they needed something to trade with so they could get access to scarce farmland? There was no money at the time, so they needed valuable trade goods.

Another hypothesis is that they were reacting to the threat of Christianity. But in Ireland, at least…

Griffin: What marks the Vikings out as different? Why are they recorded so vividly in the annals in these records there are accounts of the Vikings actually stealing reliquaries and breaking reliquaries in this period. So there's an account from the north of Ireland from a place called Bangor, which is in County Down, and in the year 824, we're told that the Vikings came to that site, they burnt the church and the shook the relics of Covcal from his shrine. Especially with these early raids, they're attacking, they're raiding from the sea, so their attacks that probably were pretty quick hit and run things, the technology of their ships was far superior to anything that was in Ireland at the time, so they could probably get in and out very quickly, so I think that was one factor. The other factor I think was that when they attacked church sites, they didn't have any qualms or reservations about hitting the churches in particular, and what the churches contained, whereas when the Irish were attacking churches in this period, they are probably more attacking the church lands and the church properties as opposed to the actual churches themselves. The Irish, as Christians, would have respected the sanctity, the sacred centres of the churches themselves. And that's what sets the Vikings apart in this period as well, because they're pagans. Not only are they coming in and attacking the churches themselves, but as pagans they would have been seen as the Other.

Nancy: So what about the reliquary itself? Why is it so interesting?

Griffin: What's really important about our object here, is that it is undeniably an item of church metalwork, because not only can we identify it, it is not unique, but it is rare in being an object that wasn't actually broken up by the Vikings. Because what they tended to do with this Irish metalwork is they tended to chop it up, they reused parts of the ornaments as brooches, or they used little mounts to decorate little lead weights that they used in trading.

Nancy: And the way the reliquary was made can also tell us about the church it came from, too.

Griffin: We can say it's probably from not a majorly wealthy church. OK, if you look at the reliquary itself, it's principally made of wood, and it's got a metal facing on it, so there was no metal on the back, which would have been the hidden part of it.

But It's made to look expensive, and this is really interesting actually. So if you see, it actually has bronze plates on the front, but they're coated in tin, so this is a trick. Polished up tin looks like silver, and so the impression is to make it look like silver, and

then the little discs on it, the little decorative discs, they were actually analysed in the museum, and found to be made of brass. This is very unusual in a pre-Viking context, because the Irish mainly worked in bronze, they didn't work in brass as the Vikings did, brass would be an unusual material. Polished up brass looks like gold. The impression there would have been gold, silver and gold, but there was no silver and gold used, so it's a trick

So we don't think this is a particularly wealthy church, but obviously it had its furnishings. And of course they would have included things like a chalice and a patten for the host, for the bread. And a reliquary would have been very important for any, any church to possess relics.

Nancy: So the reliquary was meant to seem more precious and valuable than it actually was. Yet it didn't it get broken up by the Vikings when they returned with it to Norway.

Aina: The special treatment of the shrine may be seen in association with the special religious role which may have been held by its female Norse owner, because there are several indications that the woman may have held a central position in the pre-Norse cult practice, or that she has been a so-called ritual specialist. The most important indication of this is perhaps one of the large brooches which she was buried with a so called button-on brooch. It's massive — it's 24 centimetres long.

Nancy: (to Aina) First of all, if it's 24 centimeters long, how could you wear that thing without it ripping your dress off?

Aina: Well the large size indicates that these brooches were not intended for daily use but rather only worn on special occasions in which women themselves had important role, so this was not a brooch used for every day. And several researchers have suggested that they were used as part of a priestess costume during pre-Christian rituals.

Nancy: Do we know what kind of pagan practices this woman might have participated in?

Aina: So although the specific rites and use associated with the shrine are lost for us today, it is worth highlighting that part of a leather carrying strap was still attached to the hinge of the shrine when it was discovered. It is therefore possible that it was worn around the neck of the Melhus woman as part of a ceremonial costume together with the huge fibula and her staff and the whalebone plaque.

Nancy: Those straps were also used in Ireland. Griffin Murray explains.

Griffin: The way this reliquary was made, it actually carrying straps. So it would have been actually carried around the neck and on the chest, of a person, a religious person and displayed we assume in a religious procession, and on display as well perhaps on important feast days on the altar of the church itself. And I suppose the interesting thing about it as well is that It has this tiny little key or little locking mechanism, where you can pull out the key and open it to reveal the contents inside.

Alas it no longer contains anything, which is very unfortunate, but that was obviously to display the relics that would have been kept inside to the devout.

Nancy: Whatever was in the reliquary was long gone by the time it was discovered by Farmer Melhus.

Griffin: We don't know what was in there. But Ireland didn't have martyrs, in the same way that Rome had. I supposed this tells us something about how the church was accepted into Ireland, they weren't killing Christians in Ireland so it seems to have been a peaceful transition to Christianity. So I suppose that is pretty important for understanding the church in Ireland, but unfortunately, for the Irish church, this meant a lack of relics (laughs)

Nancy: What's surprising for me is how much information archaeologists are able to extract from some artefacts found buried in a mound of sand. What I never realized before is that archaeologists really rely on how different objects are placed in graves. The idea is that if someone went to the trouble of burying valuable objects, they probably weren't just tossed in as an afterthought. Here's where Theodore Petersen did an amazing job when he excavated that burial mound in 1907.

Aina: We do try and piece together as much information as we can. In this case we are able to retrieve some information because we have Petersen's old report about the finds condition of the object and without that we would not have been able to tell the story as well as we know today if we didn't have that information. He made sure that the finds, information from the farmer was recorded so we know which finds were found together, where the man and the woman were buried in the graves, so that we know that the Melhus shrine probably belongs to the woman rather than to the man, and that is significant in our setting. Without that information, you can't say too much about the shrine itself.

If we had just found the shrine on its own we wouldn't be able to understand much of its the role in Norse society. Of course in this case, the significance of the shrine must be seen in connection with its new owner, and it means that we need to think differently about the use and meaning of the reliquary after it arrived in Norway - it was more than

just a nice object, or 'booty', or a nice present given to the wife of a returned Norse warrior.

Nancy: The Melhus reliquary gives us a different picture of the role of Viking women in preparing for Viking raids. But how do we know that all of these grave goods came from raids? Maybe there was a softer, gentler kind of Viking out there too.

Griffin: Since the 1970s there has been a move away to interpret this material as from coming from Viking raids. Other suggestions have been put forward, but nothing really as convincing. We have loads of historical accounts of these Viking raids, where they are breaking shrines, stealing shrines, and then we have this material turning up in Norway in Norse graves. So really there isn't an alternative interpretation.

It's different for some of the other metal work that we have coming out of the graves where it is more identifiable as secular metalwork. There are various ways that that could have been acquired, it could have been acquired through raiding, it could be acquired through trade or exchange, gifts, who knows, there are other interpretations there, but in the case of church metalwork, this wasn't something that was on the open market, these items were made specifically for churches. There weren't shops selling this kind of material, you know.

Nancy: But lest you think that Vikings were all bad for Ireland, I'll let Griffin Murray leave you with one last thought.

Griffin: There were no towns in Ireland in this period, so the church sites and monastery in particular were important source of wealth to be targeted by the Vikings, that is where the stuff is, that is where the booty is, we're gonna go there, because there were no urban settlements in this period.

It wasn't until the 10th century, that the Vikings themselves established towns in Ireland, such as Dublin and Cork and Waterford. And that's a different story, that's the story of the Vikings as these amazing merchants, tradesmen and traders. That is a different and very interesting period of the history of Vikings in Ireland.

Nancy: If you want to see the little reliquary that gave us this fascinating picture on the past, you can visit it at the NTNU University Museum in Trondheim. You can also view it virtually through the museum's Online Collections. There are also links to the academic papers discussed in the podcast on our show notes page.

Nancy: I'm Nancy Bazilchuk, and you've been listening to 63 Degrees North, an original podcast by the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. Sound design and editorial help from Historiebruket. Thanks for listening.