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JULY 2025

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The Icelandic Nithing Pole

Impaled Horse Heads Are Appearing More and More Around Iceland as the rise of paganism in the country is reigniting a macabre ritual from the Viking Age.

by Olivia Young October 25, 2023

On the morning of April 29, 2022, members of a new-age commune outside of Reykjavik woke to a freshly severed horse head on a wooden pole pointed at their property. Any local who saw the grisly scene, blood-caked and mouth agape, would have immediately known what it meant.

The Icelandic *níðstöng* (“nithing pole” or sometimes called a scorn pole) is a curse dating back to the Viking Age. It is believed to have been used as early as the 10th century to hex unwanted guests, and the self-described spiritual community of Sólsetrið was quite unwelcome in rural Kjalarnes. Their bohemian congregations, plus the drumming ceremonies and group

mushroom trips, just weren’t sitting well with the neighbors. It was actually Guðni Halldórsson, the avid equestrian living next door, who discovered the nithing pole that morning. He initially believed it was directed at him, due to ongoing disputes with Sólsetrið.

A day later, Halldórsson cleared it up on Facebook: “We in Skrauthólar have received an anonymous tip that [the nithing pole] erected in front of our house yesterday was not directed at us,” they wrote in Icelandic. “The action is against the activities of [Sólsetrið] and the alleged violence (mental and sexual) that the person in question claims to take place there.” Those claims have not been proven, but Halldórsson goes on to say, “We who live in Skrauthólar and are part of a civilized society are victims in this case and end up there in the firing line.”

Nithing poles such as this have been popping up in Iceland more and more over the last few decades. Anna Björg, CEO of the Museum of Icelandic Sorcery

and Witchcraft in Hólmavík, says nithing poles are “pointed against someone you want revenge on” and considered deeply personal. She explains that it’s more serious when directed at an individual as opposed to a larger entity, such as an industry or the government. Björg says, “People take it like a death threat.”

The curse of the nithing pole was born in the sagas, a series of texts narrating Iceland’s history through legends of trolls, elves, and giants. Its earliest known mention is described in Egil’s saga, written during the 13th century about the family of Egil Skallagrímsson, who lived between 850 and 1000. “Egil went up into the island. He took in his hand a hazel-pole and went to a rocky eminence that looked inward to the mainland,” the text reads. “Then he took a horse’s head and fixed it on the pole.”

Egil says in his namesake saga: “Here set I up a curse-pole, and this curse I turn on king Eric and queen Gunnhilda.” He then calls

Continued on page 11.

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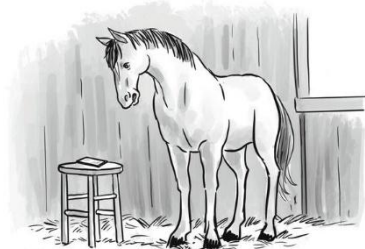
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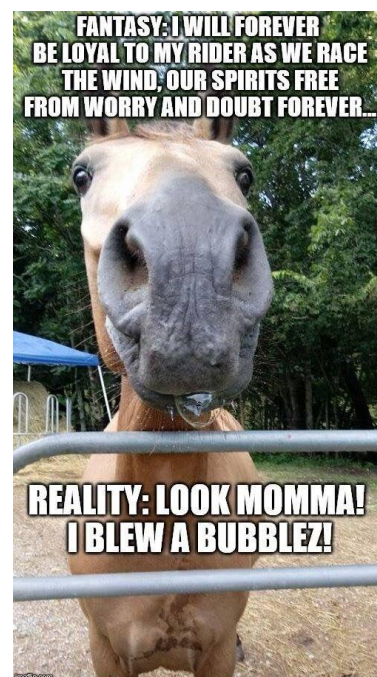
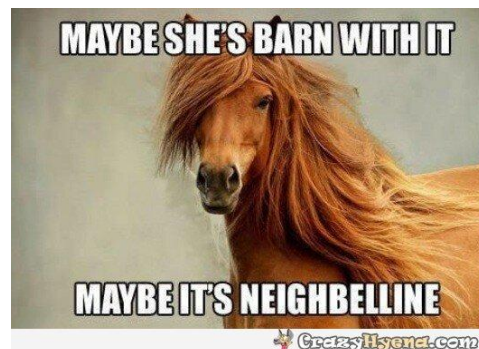
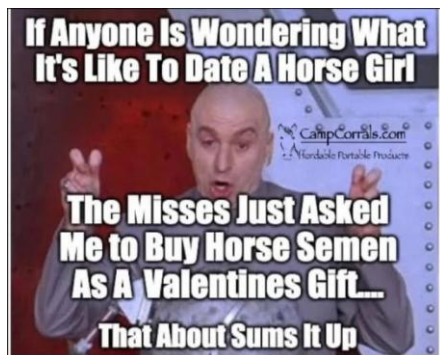
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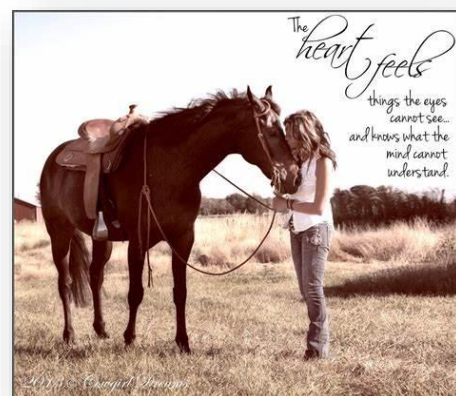
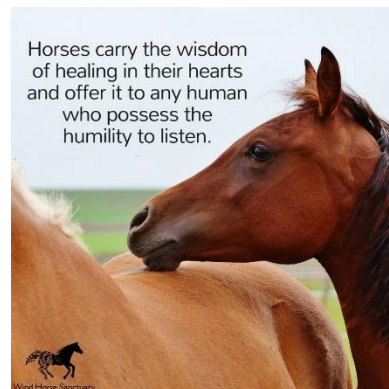
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How ‘Horse tranquilizer’ stops depression

Researchers have shown exactly how the anesthetic ketamine helps depression with images that show the orbitofrontal cortex – the part of the brain that is overactive in depression – being ‘switched off’.

Ketamine, an anesthetic that is popular with doctors on the battlefield and also with vets because it allows a degree of awareness without pain, is a new hope for the treatment of depression – but the minute-by-minute images produced by Professor Bill Deakin and his team show how the drug achieves this in an unexpected way.

The drug deactivates the orbitofrontal cortex – located above the eyes, in the center – which is thought to give rise to highly emotional thoughts such as guilt and feelings of worthlessness and causes reactions in visceral body parts such as a churning stomach and a racing heart.

Professor Deakin, of the Faculty of Medical and Human Sciences, said: “We were surprised to see it working on that part of the brain. We expected to see it work on the parts that control psychosis, at the sides of the brain. There was some activity there but more striking was the switching off of the depression center.”

The study, published in the Archives of General Psychiatry, sought to identify the sites of action of ketamine but also the release of glutamate turned out to be important in ketamine’s effects and this could point to new quick treatments to get people out of severe or long-standing depression.

In studies in the US, depressed people found that their symptoms begin to improve 24 hours after taking ketamine and continued to improve for two days after that. Professor Deakin is now funded to develop this approach to treatment in psychiatric patients in the new £30M Biomedical Research Centre awarded to Central Manchester and Manchester Children’s Hospital NHS Trust just last month. He hopes to develop a treatment within the next five years.

He said: “The study results have given us a completely novel way of treating depression and a new avenue of understanding depression.”

Professor Helen Mayberg, at Emory University in the United States, who pioneered deep brain stimulation to stop overactivity of the orbitofrontal cortex, in which electrodes are used during brain surgery, agreed: “This is a terrific finding...of extreme interest to our ongoing deep brain stimulation studies.”

Date:

May 9, 2008

Source:

University of Manchester

Nutrition Corner

Getting Ahead of Equine Weight Loss

Many horses drop weight during the winter, but proactive management can help your horse maintain optimal condition year-round. Planning ahead—before the pounds slip away—sets the stage for success.

If your horse maintains a body condition score (BCS) of 5 in the summer but drops weight in colder months, start by calculating his summer calorie intake. This number gives you a baseline to guide winter feeding adjustments.

Seasonal Forage Changes

Access to high-quality pasture during summer and hay-only diets in winter often lead to calorie discrepancies that contribute to seasonal weight loss. Even if forage type stays consistent season to season, switching to new hay introduces nutritional variables.

Hay's calorie content can shift significantly based on plant maturity and harvest conditions. This subtle change can create major weight fluctuations.

Measuring Calorie Content

Meet Ono Sandle

In April of 2005 Wildwood Farm purchased a 6-yr old Breeding Stock Paint mare named Ono Sandle. She was purchased as a project for our trainer, Cowboy Sanchez, with the goal of reselling her in 6 months.

Ono was a very sweet mare, black in color and with nice quarter horse conformation. She had very little actual training when she arrived – ground driving, lunging and wearing a saddle – and she had already had 2 foals in her short 6 years, and she threw nice color. We soon learned that she was possibly bred for a January '06 foal to a black overo stallion named Neon Spotlight.

This put a little damper on our training plans; in 6 months she would be showing and we really hated the thought of selling a mare pregnant where she would be in an unfamiliar place for foaling. We believed mares did best in a relaxed environment with other mares as their herd support.

In May it was confirmed that Ono was, indeed, pregnant and although we were actively breeding at this time, our focus was on the warmblood/TB

Testing your hay remains the most accurate way to measure caloric content; without testing, you risk feeding lower-calorie hay than intended. Each batch varies, and analysis provides critical data on energy levels. For instance, hay's caloric content can range between 1.5 and 2.5 megacalories (Mcal) per kilogram—a major difference when feeding daily rations. By tracking how many calories support a healthy body condition in your horse, you can fine-tune winter feeding strategies.

Adding Supplemental Calories

Beyond testing your hay and monitoring your horse's forage caloric intake, add extra calories before the weather turns. Horses that lose weight in winter often benefit from increased energy intake in late summer or early fall, especially if pasture forage quality begins to wane due to drought or getting colder, respectively.

Bringing a horse into winter with a BCS of 5.5—or even up to 6—can help prevent drops below a healthy 4 during colder months.

WILDWOOD FARM AND TRIPLE CROWN FEEDS.

Our partnership with Triple Crown began in 2014 through a promotion with the USEF encouraging farm members to compare their current feeding programs with Triple Crown products. We have found the TC products to be superior to other products primarily because of the EquiMix technology and the research support of a leading-edge team including independent representatives of Equine Universities, Medical clinics and top-level riders and trainers

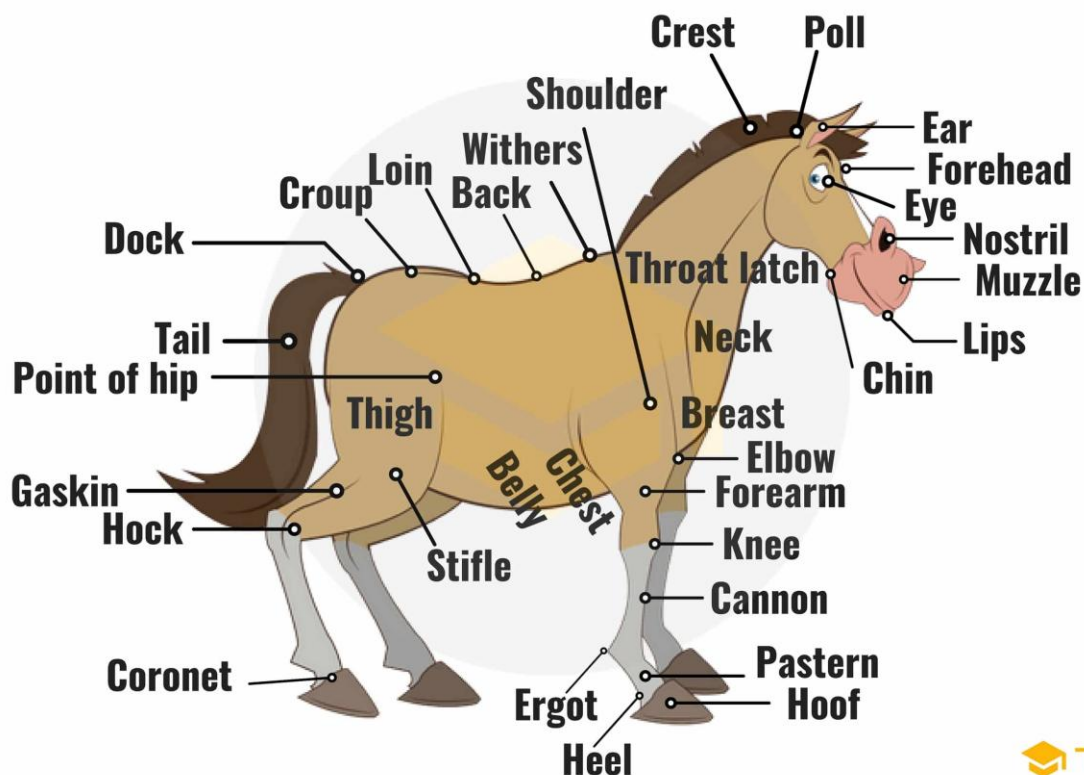


Crosses for English sport and performance, we knew very little about paints or that type of breeding, so we decided to put 90 days on her to assure she would at least have some value, and then find her a suitable home with other horses, preferably pregnant, where she could have her foal.

Her training went very well with a solid WTC within 60 days and her spooky and unsure manner all but disappeared. She was a very calm mare, and we knew she would make a great kid's horse someday; she really loved the grooming and puttering around attention.

In August of that year, we received a call out of the blue from a person who had been trying to track her down, as the stallion she was bred to had passed suddenly. They ended up buying her and taking her to their 150-acre ranch in Montana with 17 other mares also in foal. The perfect home!

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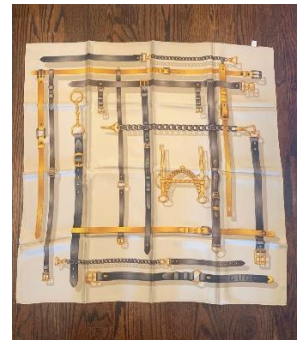
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GUCCI'S FABULOUS EQUESTRIAN SCARVES!



Næstved, Denmark

Denmark's Smallest Equestrian Statue

Honoring a local founder, this tiny tribute once vanished under mysterious circumstances.



Equestrian statues are seen worldwide, especially in places like Europe and North America, where they typically honor leaders. In Næstved, Denmark, a much smaller and more unusual version stands—*Danmarks Mindste Rytterstatue* (“Denmark’s Smallest Equestrian Statue”), a 16.5-inch (42 cm) figure that’s the country’s smallest public, permanent equestrian monument.

The modest bronze statue depicts Peder Bodilsen, a medieval nobleman and one of Næstved’s founders, on horseback. Unveiled in 1935 to mark the city’s 800th anniversary and created by sculptor Mathilius Schack Elo, the statue has become a quirky symbol of Næstved’s history. This tiny tribute, perched on a plinth, stands in stark contrast to the more grandiose equestrian statues often found in public spaces.

In 1977, the statue was dismantled and stolen by a thief. Then, on April Fool’s Day, a prankster placed an even smaller replica on the empty pedestal, leaving the town puzzled. A group of soldiers later came across the original statue and, after confirming its identity, returned it to the mayor, who thanked them with a cash reward for their efforts.

The Pryor Mountain Mustang



Pryor Mountain Mustang is a subtype of Mustang horses living in the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range that lies near Lovell, Wyoming and Billings, Montana in the US. These wild horses are preserved by the WFRHBA (Wild and Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act) while the BLM (Bureau of Land Management) has set their optimum number at 120. Some of these free-roaming horses have also been domesticated, exhibiting remarkable features such as strength, stamina, and sure-footedness.

It is believed that the herds of wild horses have lived in the Pryor Mountain range since the late 17th century. Historical references of Native American tribesmen indicate that these horses were brought to the place during the 1720s. Hundreds of wild horses were possessed by the natives and the tribal people in the mid-18th century. By the time the Pryor Mountains were inhabited by the pioneer settlers, the population of feral horses was more than a thousand.

Up until the 1930s, domesticated stallions were added to the herd and allowed to breed with the mares producing specialized cavalry horses that served the military. In 1934, the Taylor Grazing Act was approved allowing cattle to graze in the Pryor Mountain region. During the 1940s, the population of these horses was not protected by law. The loose and unbranded horses were often assembled and were either used for riding or sold to slaughter. However, the Wild Horse Annie Act prohibited the use of automobiles and motor vehicles to chase and capture wild horses.

In 1964, the BLM declared that it would remove all the Pryor Mountain wild horses and disperse them through auctions, an initiative that spurred widespread public opposition. This temporarily delayed the movement against these horses. By 1968, these animals were mostly limited to the BLM lands due to the construction of fences and earlier roundups. In the same year, the BLM again concentrated on removing the herd, but with a possibility of returning 15-35 horses to the range. Concerned with the fate of these animals, the PMWHA (Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Association) was established. It worked with other organizations including the ISPA to prevent the roundup.

The tussle around the Pryor Mountain horses continued until the enactment of the WFRHBA in 1971. This Act prevented killing or harassing of wild burros and horses on federal land, needed the Agriculture and Interior departments to protect these animals, encouraged studies of their habits and habitats, as well as authorized public land for their use. The Act was jointly administered by the US Forest Service and the BLM.

Interesting Facts

- As revealed by genetic studies, the herd of Pryor Mustangs exhibits a great degree of diversity in its genetic characteristics.
- A documentary movie called “Cloud: Wild Stallion of the Rockies” as well as its sequel named “Cloud’s Legacy: The Wild Stallion Returns” is based on the Pryor Mountain Mustang herd.

Cont'd from page 1

landwætta (land-spirits), saying, “This curse I turn also on the guardian-spirits who dwell in this land, that they may all wander astray, nor reach or find their home till they have driven out of the land king Eric and Gunnhilda.” Egil proceeds to plant the nithing pole, horse’s head turned towards the cursed, and cut a poem on the pole in runes, thus “expressing the whole form of curse.”

These stories still reverberate from the bustling capital to the sleepiest fjords, although most Icelanders don’t take the folktales about their island’s earliest settlers literally. Though the sagas are generally accepted as fiction, they are supposedly rooted in true stories.

Tómas Albertsson of Eyrarbakki is a researcher of *galdur* (Icelandic for “magic”) who collects books on sorcery, old manuscripts, and “magic things” in general, including various scorn pole memorabilia. Albertsson explains that the níðstöng is “related to *tréníð*, called poem-pole, and again to *marar-póll* (nightmare-pole), which is from Sweden. So, it has base in the oldest law books.” Of the references to the nithing pole in Egil’s saga, specifically, Björg also confirms: “I think we can say that they were true.”

Certainly one group in Iceland believes them to be true. A modern form of paganism called Ásatrúarfélagið, or “Ásatrú” for short, is more serious about Icelandic mythology. The sagas, in some ways, serve as their scripture.

Translated from the organization’s website, Ásatrú aims “to promote and respect ancient customs and ancient cultural values” and “to increase understanding and interest in folklore and old traditions.” The fellowship was founded in 1972 and officially registered as a religion a year later. In 2017, just 45 years after it was established, the National Bureau of Statistics declared Ásatrú as Iceland’s fastest-growing religion. It currently claims 5,000 followers, which is 1% of the population. After Christianity, Ásatrú is the most-followed religious organization in Iceland.

The country’s first pagan temple in 1,000 years is now under construction and nearing completion in Reykjavík. Today, the followers (who call themselves Heathens) continue to reignite the Viking spirit, once again donning their traditional tunics and tipping their drinking horns to Norse gods and goddesses.

Ásatrú members certainly believe in the curse of the nithing poles, though it’s not the easiest ritual to pull off in this day and age, according to Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson, Allsherjargoði (chief official) of the Ásatrú fellowship. And that difficulty is not just because the curse maker requires access to a freshly severed head. “Nobody has agreed upon how you do it, except that you have to have a poem, and you have to carve the poem with the runes into the pole carrying the horse head,” Hilmarsson says. “That’s what we’re told in the Icelandic saga.”

Since Ásatrú was founded, the níðstöng ritual has been attempted a few times against the Icelandic government. In the ‘70s, one was erected to oppose Union Carbide’s plans to build a ferroalloy plant on the west coast. Then in 1979 and 1985, more went up, both against the country’s NATO membership.

In 2006, when a Westfjordan man planted one against his neighbor, he was consequently charged with threatening the neighbor’s life. Then, a year later, the grassroots lobbying organization called Saving Iceland planted a pole in the hand of a prominent statue outside the parliament building. Overlooking Austurvöllur square, the bronze depiction of Iceland’s “independence hero” Jón Sigurðsson appeared to hold the stick, topped with a horse’s skull painted with runic symbols. The pole, aimed at parliament, targeted politicians who voted in favor of a hydropower project that Saving Iceland deemed “environmentally destructive.”

But these instances don’t all successfully work the dark magic they were intended for, according to Hilmarsson and Albertsson. They both agree that the nithing poles of late, including the most recent one targeting Sólsetrið, don’t include the detail needed to officially qualify as nithing poles.

“The poet/curse maker has to write the poem on the stick (pole) upside down by its own end (making eight lines),” Albertsson says. “Blood is not meant to run down the letters.” One problem, according to Hilmarsson, is that not many people know how to write in runes. Another is that the head on the pole must belong to a horse, not any other animal.

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The nithing pole erected in 2006 in the Westfjords was crowned with a calf's head, the one outside parliament in 2020 with heads of sheep. It's unclear whether either pole used was etched in runes.

Another form of scorn pole that still periodically rears its head around Iceland is the *vindgapi*, which is topped with a severed fish head. Traditionally, the fish is a ling, looking especially sinister with its sharp teeth and large, bulging eyes. This symbol is often called a nithing pole, but its purpose is not to curse an individual. It's a "weather curse," Hilmarsson says, meant to conjure storms. A replication of the *vindgapi* is on display at the Westfjords' Museum of Icelandic Sorcery and Witchcraft, which describes the curse as follows:

"Take the head of a ling and carve the stave vindgapi on it and with a raven's feather apply blood from the right foot into the stave. Put the head on a pole and raise it where land meets sea, point the mouth in the direction you want the wind to blow from and the higher the mouth is pointing the more forceful the wind you call will be."

The museum references a story from the 1800s of a man who was exiled for planting a *vindgapi* and purportedly causing a heavy storm in which two fishing boats were lost off the coast of the remote Strandir region, where the museum is. The ritual dates back to at least 1698, Albertsson says. Like the nithing pole, it is still used today—if not as a real curse, then as a threat or at least a theatrical means of protest. A *vindgapi* topped with a cod's head was discovered in the Westfjords in 2018, supposedly planted in opposition to salmon farming in the region.

Although Albertsson says some Icelanders do still believe in the curse of scorn poles, Hilmarsson calls acts such as these "publicity stunts" and says they're mostly used to "send out a message to people who either practice some sort of magic or believe in magic in a way that makes sense." Speaking on behalf of Ásatrú, he called the modern use of nithing poles "futile" and says the organization has distanced itself from rituals of animal sacrifice such as these.

Björg says she sees the ritual as a last resort. "You feel powerless but want to fight, so even if there is no special ceremony or runes, I think just the intention has power." It's now been more than a year since a bloody horse head appeared near the Sólsetrið commune, and authorities still haven't identified the culprit. The community continues to practice an alternative lifestyle at the dead end of a farm road in Kjalarnes, even inviting tourists to stay at their encampment and dance around the fire on the slopes of Mount Esjan where they live.

