

Vikings

Ancient Europe, 8000 B.C. to A.D. 1000, 2004

Vikings

The precise origin of the word "Viking" remains a mystery. The terms "Viking" and "Viking Age" are associated with a period of almost three hundred years, from the late eighth century to the eleventh century, the last period of the Scandinavian Iron Age. Although we use the term "Viking" to describe the land and people of Scandinavia during that time period, the Northmen or Norse never used that word to describe themselves, and neither did neighboring countries. Some scholars think that the word "Viking" derives from the word vik, the Scandinavian word for "inlet" or "creek," but this interpretation is not universally accepted. Whatever its origin, the word "Viking" signifies the Scandinavian fishing-and-farming people who also undertook predatory expeditions to fuel their chiefly economy as well as expand their settlement into new lands. According to Peter Sawyer in his *Kings and Vikings*, "The age of the Vikings began when Scandinavians first attacked western Europe and it ended when those attacks ceased."

RAIDS AND EXPANSION

The Vikings conducted raids to exact tribute. During the Dark Ages, it was commonplace within Scandinavia as well as western Europe and Russia to plunder neighbors, to exact a tribute from them, and to secure their submission—to a large extent interchangeable notions. However, it was



a new experience,

and to many a shocking one, when the

Scandinavians began to extend their sphere of activity so far beyond their own borders. The superior skills in boat making and navigation made this expansion possible. The topography of the Scandinavian countries prohibited travel by land; therefore, the waterways were their highways. This aided in the development of a seafaring culture with extremely accomplished sailors whose nautical expertise was their greatest asset in exploiting new lands. The Vikings settled the previously uninhabited island of Iceland; they developed two settlements in Greenland, which survived for three hundred years before mysteriously disappearing; and they arrived in the New World before Columbus, as seen by archaeological evidence of their presence in the site of L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, Canada. They helped found many cities in Russia, such as Novgorod, Kiev, and Staraya Ladoga, and artifactual evidence points to trading with a plethora of places as diverse as Ireland and Byzantium. Their voyages were diverse in nature; the need for productive farmland along with the quest for wealth made the Vikings a mosaic of settlers composed of fighters, traders, and raiders.

DAILY LIFE

The reputation of these Nordic people as fierce warriors and raiders has obscured the more complex aspects of their everyday life for centuries. The Vikings in their homelands adapted uniquely to an arctic culture and exploited an extensive array of available resources. They were fisher-farmers because the warming effects of the Gulf Stream enabled farming much farther north than recorded previously. They fished the rich waters of the North Atlantic for the fish of the cod family, halibut, and wolfish, as well as the local lakes and rivers for freshwater fish such as salmon, trout, and char. They harvested bird colonies for meat (puffins, guillemots, and ptarmigan), eggs (duck, seagull, and cormorant), and eider duck down. They also hunted and scavenged large marine mammals, such as whales (for meat and oil, and for bone to use for structural material and for the creation of gaming pieces, fish net needles, and other implements), and walrus (primarily for their ivory). Their success as traders gave rise to a number of trading towns, such as: Gotland and Birka in Sweden, Hedeby in Schleswig-Holstein, and Kaupang in Norway. These towns became the foci of intense commercial activity and industry, and the goods traded were as diverse as the people who visited. The artifactual evidence (coins, tools, and ornaments) from excavations in these locations point to connections with Russia, Europe and North Africa, and shed light on the transition of Viking life from the farm to the town, and the beginnings of urbanization and city formation.

Archaeology has contributed greatly to the understanding of Viking lifeways. Viking houses were built with timber, stone, and turf. In this class-stratified society, large chiefly estates with good pastureland and large boathouses were the homes for local earls. Inside the houses were central fireplaces for warmth and cooking. Remains of cauldrons and steatite vessels, together with other artifacts such as whetstones for sharpening knives and loom weights from the upstanding looms that women used to weave fine woolen clothing, offer glimpses of domestic life. Implements for farming, hunting, and fishing along with animal bones from middens provide information on activities involving subsistence as well as those involving economy and trade. Charcoal pits, molds, slag, and recovered implements point to highly skilled craftsmanship in metalwork while the Viking ships and their surviving wood ornaments are a stellar example of

woodworking. At Oseberg and Gokstad in southeastern Norway, excavations of sunken Viking ships undertaken in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century revealed beautifully crafted sledges and wagons. Fine gold jewelry and inlaid silverwork from finds throughout the Viking world also show a high degree of craftsmanship. Chess games, horse fights, and wrestling were all part of Viking daily life, and finds such as the Lewis chessmen—beautifully carved figurines of walrus ivory—show the Vikings applying their talent as artisans to their entertainment as well as their livelihood.

Military settlements such as Trelleborg in Zealand, Nonnebakken at Odense in Funen, Fyrkat near Hobro, and Agersborg near Limfjorden were all situated to command important waterways that served as lines of communication. The layouts of these camps reflect influences of symmetry and precision of the Roman castra. The Vikings were organized in bands called *li*, a kind of military household familiar in western Europe. A chieftain might go abroad with just his own men in a couple of ships, but more commonly he would join forces with greater chieftains. These were often members of royal or noble families, styling themselves as kings or earls, and they frequently seem to have been exiles—for example, unsuccessful rivals for the throne—who were forced to seek their fortune abroad. Such men were often willing to stay abroad to serve Frankish or Byzantine rulers as mercenaries, to accept fiefs from them, and to become their vassals. They thereby became a factor in European politics. Vikings were frequently employed by one European prince against another or against other Vikings.

A voting assembly of freemen called *thing* was a governing institution widely used by the ancient Germanic peoples—it served as a forum to settle conflict and to cast decisions on questions relating to fencing, construction of bridges, clearance, pasture rights, worship, and even defense. At the beginning of the Viking Age, there were many *thing* assemblies throughout Scandinavia, and Norse settlers frequently established things abroad. The Icelandic Althing was unusual, however, in that it united all regions of an entire country under a common legal and judicial system, without depending upon the executive power of a monarch or regional rulers. The Althing was established around A.D. 930. Little is known about its specific organization during the earliest decades, because the only description of this exists in writing in Grágás and the sagas. These were not contemporary sources but were compiled by Christian scholars three hundred years after the end of the Viking Age and therefore generally portray the assembly as it was after the constitutional reforms of the mid-960s.

The social stratification of early Viking communities was based on wealth and property. Earls, peasants, and thralls supported the socioeconomic ladder. Women quite often achieved higher status, as evidenced through burial mounds in many parts of Norway. Vikings were intolerant of weakness and it is postulated from later literature that the elderly and infirm were regarded as a burden.

The Vikings, who were probably inspired through their contact with Europe and exposure to the Latin writing system, developed their own alphabet called futhork or otherwise known as a runic alphabet. Runes were carved primarily on stone but some have been found in wood and bone. The runes carried a multitude of meanings from the mystical to the mundane. The earliest written sources that provide information about the Vikings (sagas and eddas), were created by Icelandic scribes three centuries after the end of the Viking Age. These sources, along with direct data

from environmental and archaeological investigations, help to elucidate the complex and often misrepresented Nordic people.

See also [Viking Harbors and Trading Sites](#) ; [Viking Ships](#) ; [Viking Settlements in Iceland and Greenland](#) ; [Hofstaðir](#) ; [Viking Settlements in Orkney and Shetland](#) ; [Viking Dublin](#) ; [Viking York](#) ; [Pre-Viking and Viking Age Norway](#) ; [Pre-Viking and Viking Age Sweden](#) ; [Pre-Viking and Viking Age Denmark](#) (all vol. 2, part 7).

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