



YOUR ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO THE VIKINGS

Bursting forth from Scandinavia in the late 8th century, the Vikings rapidly made their presence felt across the early medieval world. To some, these often-bearded seafarers were little more than barbarians, bellicose brutes intent only on slaughter and plunder. To others they were recognised as traders, worldly travellers with coveted wares. Sometimes they were settlers, sometimes slavers. Above all, they were explorers, whose exploits took them across the Atlantic, down to Iberia

and as far as Constantinople.

Over the next 28 pages we'll explore not only the legacy of the Vikings, but some of the biggest questions surrounding them – many of which are shrouded in mystery. Did they deserve their bloodthirsty reputation, for instance, and what was Norse society like away from the battlefields? What is Valhalla, and why were Viking warriors so keen to get there? What role did the gods play in daily life? Turn the page to set sail into the Viking Age – and be sure to leave the horned helmet behind...

28 A short introduction to the Vikings

Historian Philip Parker gives us a primer on the Vikings and the Viking Age – plus, we examine four 'facts' about the Vikings that are completely wrong

34 Major milestones of the Viking Age

Did you know that Norse explorers settled Iceland in the same decade that Alfred the Great triumphed over the Great Heathen Army at Edington? Get a visual sense of the Viking Age with our timeline

36 Explorers, raiders and traders

Journey with the Vikings on their greatest adventures – from the invasion of Anglo-Saxon England to the settlement of Greenland and the 'discovery' of North America

42 Rulers of the waves

What was a Viking longship, and why was it so important to their success?

44 Warriors and warfare

What made a Viking warband so fearsome? And were berserkers real?

46 How they lived

Explore Viking law, justice, the role of slaves – and a typical home, the longhouse

48 Women and the Viking world

Dr Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir explains why we'd be wrong to think that the Viking world was solely a man's world

52 Gods, myths beliefs and rituals

The Vikings were pagan, polytheistic and had a plethora of ways to worship – insofar as we know



PHILIP PARKER is a historian, a former diplomat and the author of *The Northmen's Fury: A History of the Viking World*. His latest work is *The History of World Trade in Maps*, which will be published by HarperCollins in October.

From hit-and-run raids to full-on invasion, the Vikings made an impact on Europe still felt to this day

A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO THE VIKINGS

Philip Parker answers key questions about the Vikings – from raiding and trading, to their lasting legacy

INTERVIEW BY KEV LOCHUN

Q: Who were the Vikings and where did they come from?

A: The people we know as the Vikings hailed from modern-day Denmark, Norway and Sweden; it was from their Scandinavian homelands in the late eighth century that they stormed onto the European stage with their first forays into raiding and exploration. It was a bloody beginning to an era that would have a profound impact on society, trade and culture across the continent.

But what exactly was a Viking? The term did not actually refer to a distinct social group. Strictly speaking, it was a way of life, referring specifically to the seafaring warriors carrying out the raids on the rest of northwestern Europe. What might have been said at the time was that these warriors had gone 'a-viking', meaning they had gone on a raid. It was only later that the term would be

transferred to the entire Norse culture, political evolution, artistic styles, and everybody who lived there, including those who stayed behind and didn't go raiding.

They certainly did not call themselves Vikings, nor did they conceive of themselves as some sort of great wave or movement. Raids began as private enterprises launched by individuals. Only as they achieved greater success and riches did the ventures into Europe become more organised and, eventually, state directed.

Q: When was the Viking Age?

A: The start and end dates are a little fuzzy. The first datable Viking raid was on Lindisfarne off the northeast coast of England in AD 793. That's a useful beginning, launching the Viking Age with a big bang, although, according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a raid took place in southwest England probably a few years earlier.

The end of the Viking era is much more difficult to place. Traditionally, people in England like to think of 1066 as the downfall of the Vikings, with the defeat of Harald Hardrada and his Norwegian invasion force at the Battle of Stamford Bridge. But that did not stop all Norse campaigns nor, by any means, destroy their influence across Europe. In fact, there were still old-style Viking raids taking place in small numbers until the middle of the 13th century. I think it's safe to say this was when the Viking Age came to an end.

Q: What prompted the eruption of Viking raids, beginning with Lindisfarne in AD 793?

A: There is no single trigger or single answer. To start, living conditions in Scandinavia were tough and cold, and when something goes wrong in any such society – living close to subsistence

DID YOU KNOW?

VIKINGS GO VIRAL

News of the Lindisfarne raid of AD 793 reached the scholar Alcuin in the Frankish kingdom of Charlemagne. He wrote of his horror at the news, claiming the attackers "trampled on the bodies of saints in the temple of God, like dung in the street."

Lindisfarne holds the dubious honour of being the location of England's first recorded raid by the Vikings





The raid on Lindisfarne in AD 793 heralded the start of the Viking Age in Britain

level – its people will move on if they are able to do so. Most settlements in Scandinavia, particularly Norway, were around the coastal fringes, indented with the fjords. The inland area would not have been particularly fertile, meaning that an obvious response to any kind of food supply crisis was to take to the sea. There is some evidence of population stress in certain areas, so that may have been one precondition.

Another reason was the fact that in order to launch a series of raids, there had to be something worth attacking. At the time, northwest Europe was beginning to enter a period of relative prosperity. The long recovery from the fall of the Roman Empire, and the gradual emergence of Germanic kingdoms in France and England in particular, had reached the point where a significant level of economic activity was beginning to emerge. Great trading settlements began to appear, such as Quentovic in northern France and Hamwic (now Southampton), filled with transportable goods. They would have made for attractive targets to potential raiders.

Being seafaring folk, technological advances in shipbuilding was another probable cause for the start of the Viking raids across the North Sea. Over the course of the sixth, seventh and eighth centuries, the Viking peoples developed increasingly effective ships, which instilled confidence in them that they could set sail across open water, trusting in their sophisticated navigation skills, and return home safely.

A fourth, and perhaps clinching, factor, was that northwestern Europe, while enjoying a period of prosperity, would have been ripe for the picking due to political instability. England was balkanised between six or seven main Anglo-Saxon states, while France, although unified by Charlemagne not long into the Viking age, quickly became divided when he died in AD 814.

Put all of this together and you have a

people motivated to move, the practical means with which to reach new lands, something to aim for once there, topped by a vulnerable, divided enemy.

Q: They have a reputation as savage, bloodthirsty barbarians, but were the Vikings any more violent than others of their time?

A: The early histories of the Viking raids were written by the (surviving) victims, who clearly had a reason to portray the

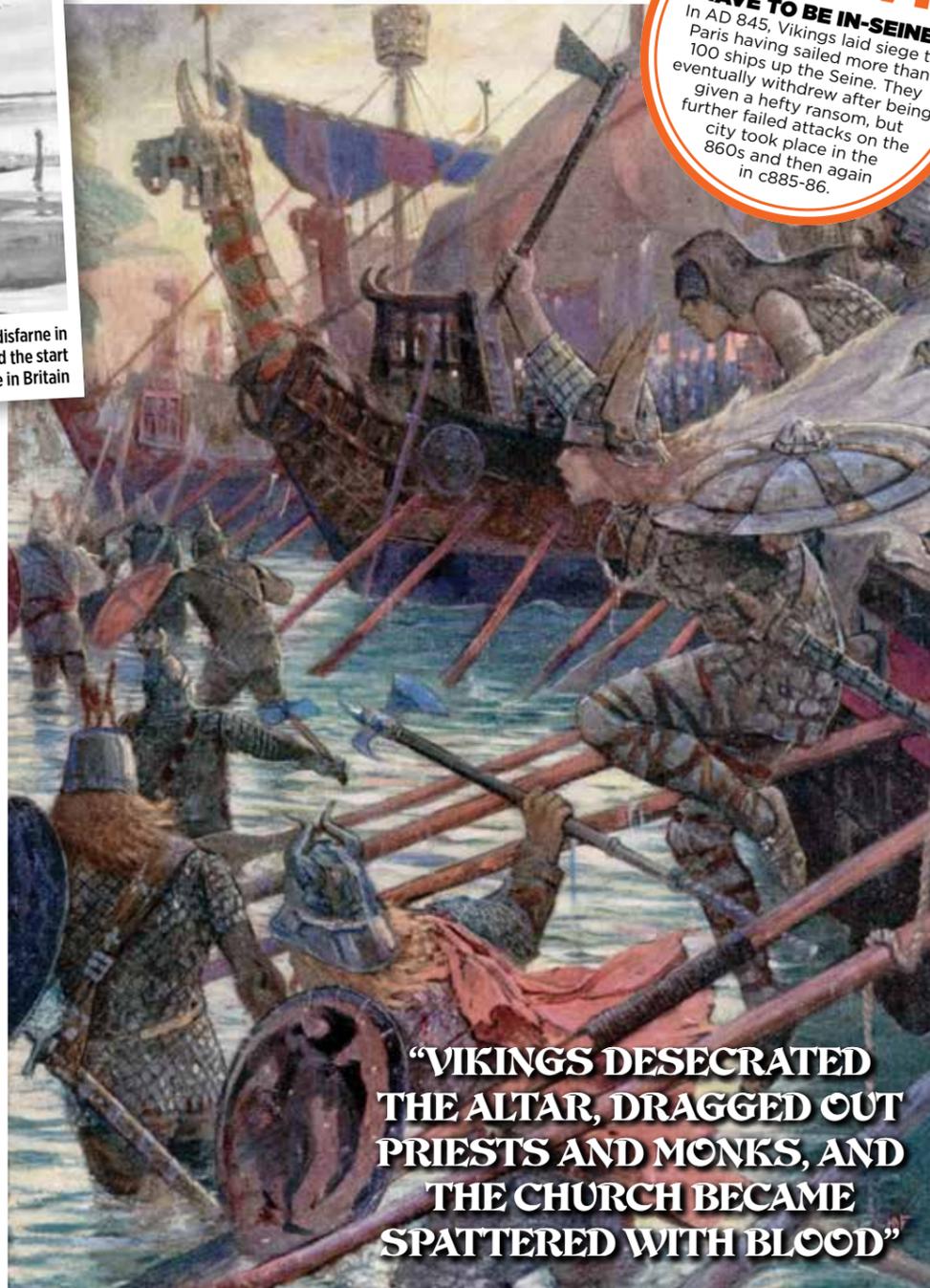
“VIKINGS DESECRATED THE ALTAR, DRAGGED OUT PRIESTS AND MONKS, AND THE CHURCH BECAME SPATTERED WITH BLOOD”

The Vikings spread fear wherever their longboats landed, although not in horned helmets like these

people attacking them as more than usually brutal. As the Vikings favoured hit-and-run raids on defenceless religious communities, this would have made them appear even more barbaric. This meant that their reputation was born almost at once. Accounts of the raid on Lindisfarne referred to the appalling way in which the Vikings desecrated the altar, dragged out priests and monks, and how the church became spattered with blood.

Whether these details were true or not, they were the kind of things that

DID YOU KNOW?
HAVE TO BE IN-SEINE
In AD 845, Vikings laid siege to Paris having sailed more than 100 ships up the Seine. They eventually withdrew after being given a hefty ransom, but further failed attacks on the city took place in the 860s and then again in c885-86.



FOUR VIKING 'FACTS' (THAT ARE COMPLETELY WRONG)

1



THEY WERE ILLITERATE

▲ Though their epic sagas did not start appearing in writing until around the 12th century, the Vikings did have a script during their heyday: runes. Runic alphabets, or *futharks*, were used on all sorts of objects. They could be inscribed on huge memorial 'runestones' – including the Jelling Stone (*above*), raised by Harald Bluetooth in memory of his parents, Gorm and Thyra, and which also gives an account of his own achievements – or on smaller items, such as weapons and even combs.

THEY WORE HORNED HELMETS

▼ There is no evidence, archaeological or otherwise, of the horned helmets – Vikings wore skullcaps, a much more effective form of protection in battle. The horned helmet notion originates from the 19th century and Richard Wagner's *The Ring Cycle* operas (*below*), when costume designer Carl Emil Doepler conjured the idea of a cow-horned helmet for the Viking characters. That was in 1876, and the trope has persisted ever since.

3



THEY WERE ONLY RAIDERS AND REIVERS

► Despite their wantonly violent reputation, the Vikings were traders, explorers and settlers as well as raiders. As a result of their forays to the British Isles, they founded the city of Dublin in AD 841, and began the transformation of York (or Jorvik, as they called it) two decades later. Elsewhere, Northmen – or Normanni – would eventually gain a permanent foothold in northern France through marriage, forming what would become Normandy. Iceland's settlement can largely be attributed to colonists led by Ingólfr Arnarson (*right*) in AD 874, while in the east, Vikings made it all the way to Constantinople (now Istanbul), where several thousand formed an elite and much-vaunted corps loyal to the emperor – the Varangian Guard.

2



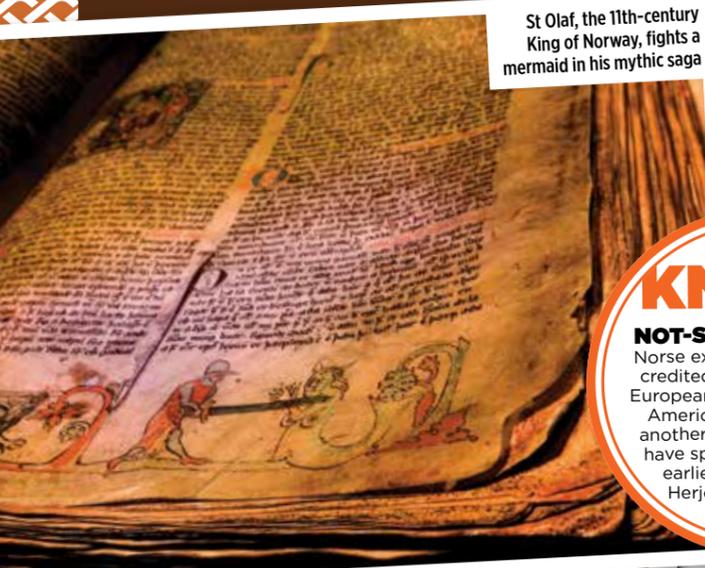
4



THEY WERE GODLESS

◀ This was true from the perspective of a Christian – especially if they witnessed Viking warriors raid churches and monasteries and butchering members of the clergy. But the reality was that Norse religion was complex, with a pantheon of gods (including Thor, seen here accidentally hooking Jormungand the world-serpent while on a fishing trip with the giant Hymir), multiple realms, and a panoply of rituals and ceremonies.

St Olaf, the 11th-century King of Norway, fights a mermaid in his mythic saga



DID YOU KNOW?

NOT-SO-NEW WORLD
Norse explorer Leif Erikson is credited with being the first European to set foot on North America, in c1000 AD, but another Viking is thought to have spotted the land even earlier than that: Bjarni Herjólfsson, in around AD 985.



EXPLORING THE SAGAS (AND WHAT THEY CAN TELL US...)

The sagas spin an epic yarn, yet they also offer a glimpse of everyday Viking life

The sagas – a name derived from the Old Norse for ‘story’, ‘tale’ or ‘history’ – were a series of epic tales describing the mythology, legends and histories of the Viking world, penned after the Viking Age. Predominantly written in Iceland in the 12th and 15th centuries in a combination of poetry and prose, the sagas recounted great feats of daring, outlandish voyages into the unknown and bloody clashes in rip-roaring narratives as gripping as any novel.

The myriad sagas can typically be classified as belonging to one of three groups: the ‘legendary sagas’ (*fornaldarsögur*) were semi-mythic tales that take place before the colonisation of Iceland; the ‘kings’ sagas’ (*konungasögur*) told of the lives and deeds of Scandinavia’s pre-Christian kings; and the ‘family’ or ‘Icelander sagas’ (*Íslendingasögur*) were almost-contemporary accounts related to the settlement of Iceland – complete with blood feuds. Adjacent to these three groups were the collections of writings called the ‘Poetic Edda’ and ‘Prose Edda’, thought to have been compiled by the 13th-century Icelandic scholar Snorri Sturluson, detailing Norse mythology.

But what value do the sagas have beyond being fantastic stories? Historian Philip Parker notes that while events described in the sagas may not adhere to literal truth, the backdrop against which many were set, both socially and geographically, is worth attention. “In the ‘family sagas’, you can trace actual places in the landscape both in Iceland and in Scandinavia where they are alleged to have taken place”, he says. “The kind of ways in which people act is real, the ways in which they live, the places they live – those are real.”

There are glimpses of historical detail in the other sagas, too, as some feature real people. “There’s one for Harold Hardrada, for example,” says Parker. “The sagas have a certain historical relevance and usefulness, but you’ve got to have an eye on the fact that they were composed for an audience, not necessarily as an accurate historical record.”

“YOU CAN NOT SAY MORE THAN A FEW SENTENCES IN ENGLISH AND NOT USE A WORD THAT WE GOT FROM THE VIKINGS”

◀ would have shocked and appalled a literate, Christian audience.

Yet it goes without saying that the Vikings were not alone in being violent in battle and not particularly kind to civilians, so they were not necessarily more deserving of such a blood-soaked reputation than anybody else. Charlemagne, whose place in the historical record is of a wise, literate, strong and Christian ruler, was not above crucifying hundreds of Saxons who he claimed rebelled against him. Yet, critically, they were pagan, which meant Charlemagne did not get recorded in the Christian accounts as a brutal barbarian.

Q: Did their contemporary reputation have any impact on the Vikings?

A: Later on, I think the Vikings were aware of their reputation to the point of exploiting it. Being known as vicious

warriors had its advantages, as their enemies came to be afraid of just the mention of them. Sometimes, half the battle was done before it even started.

In the Viking sagas and other non-saga records, it’s clear that in common with many traditional Germanic societies, the most important thing to a person, particularly a male warrior, was their reputation. In pre-literate and early literate societies, the things people are saying about you are what matters and what lives on after you. It was your afterlife, in a way. And so glory, bravery in battle and doing great deeds would have been really important. The Vikings may have been quite happy to be paid off on occasion – because they wanted loot as well – but they would have been strongly motivated to fight because they wanted to be remembered for doing great things.

Q: As well as raiders, the Vikings were traders, explorers and

settlers. Is this a transition they went through as a culture, or did it happen all at once?

A: Trading and raiding were almost interchangeable. The same boat carrying Vikings intent on raiding also carried men open to trade, too, depending on chance and circumstance. Going back to that pre-Lindisfarne raid in the southwest of England, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* described how the royal reeve, who supervised important trading, came down to meet a Viking boat as he thought they may be traders. They were not, and they killed him. But the event demonstrates that when a boat arrived off the shore, it was not always possible to know the motives of the men aboard.

To begin with, the Vikings came in the spring and returned to their homelands in late summer, before the weather became too hazardous to cross over the North Sea. But as time went on, they began to overwinter. This meant that groups of men started staying for years at a time rather than months, and they would gradually become the nucleus of Viking communities.

In AD 865, the Great Heathen Army invaded England, and stayed for decades as they faced Alfred the Great

ABOVE: Vikings and Anglo-Saxons clash in the annual Viking Festival in York; the real Vikings captured the city in AD 866

ABOVE RIGHT: Norse explorer Erik the Red sails his longboat to the shore of Greenland c982 AD

TOP RIGHT: The Great Heathen Army spent years trying to conquer the English kingdoms, until being defeated by Alfred the Great

and conquered the city of York, going a long way to establish the first Viking kingdom in England. As more men stayed in foreign lands, raiding gave way to conquest. That was the case in France and Ireland as well.

In some areas, the Vikings explored near-virgin or lightly settled territory, such as in Iceland, Greenland and as far as North America. As there wouldn’t have been much opportunity for trade or plunder, these were voyages of exploration, to see what was out there, to map out distant lands, and discover anything worth taking.

Q: How influential were the Vikings on the early medieval world?

A: They transformed the societies they encountered. In Ireland, they played a role in the simplification of what was a complex political structure, while in France they weakened the kingdom of Charlemagne, which would fall apart after his death. The Vikings were often catalysts that accelerated, or impeded, political changes.

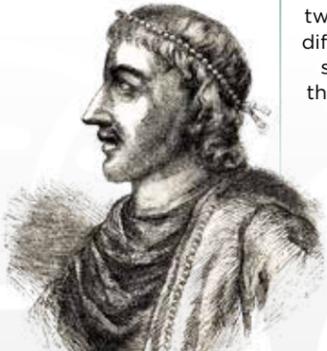
In Britain, they left an important linguistic legacy. Basic words, such as ‘sky’ and ‘window’ are derived from Old Norse. In fact, you can’t say more than a few sentences in English and not find that you use a word that we’ve inherited from the Vikings.

Q: What do you think continues to make the Vikings so fascinating to us today?

A: They have this transgressive element. By seeing the peoples of Scandinavia as ‘Viking’, it makes theirs an ambivalent culture that brings together opposites. They were violent, and yet had a sense of honour, artistic expression and political structure. They had real motives of what they did, a real code about the way went about things, and a sense of diplomacy and larger strategy. It’s a north European culture, too. In the Anglo-Saxon world writ large, there’s a fascination about these people who contributed to the roots of our politics, culture and society. And then you’ve got the Viking sagas – great stories about the Vikings that they were able to tell themselves. ◉

THE AGE OF THE VIKINGS

They came, they saw... they raided and traded, butchered and built, and explored the edges of the known world

<p>AD c787</p> <p>FIRST CONTACT Viking longships are seen for the first time, lurking with intent off the Wessex coast.</p> 	<p>AD 792</p>  <p>THREATENED COAST Merican king Offa records in a charter of the need to prepare defences in Kent against the "pagan sailors".</p>	<p>AD 793</p> <p>HORRORS ON HOLY ISLAND The tidal island monastery of Lindisfarne in Northumbria becomes the first known site of a Viking raid. News of the invaders spreads across Europe; many Christians view their arrival as a sign of the Apocalypse.</p>	<p>AD 838</p> <p>MY ENEMY'S ENEMY The Battle of Hingston Down in Cornwall sees an alliance of Vikings and Cornishmen defeated by their common enemy, the Wessex Saxons led by King Egbert.</p>	<p>AD 840-41</p> <p>ESTABLISHING ROOTS A Viking fleet overwinters on the shores of Ireland and builds a <i>longphort</i> (a type of ship harbour) on the site of modern-day Dublin. The settlement is named Dyflin.</p>	<p>AD 844</p> <p>MOVING SOUTH The cities of Lisbon and Seville - part of a Muslim kingdom on the Iberian Peninsula - are sacked by a Viking raiding party, which is then defeated by a Muslim force at Tablada near Seville.</p>	<p>AD 845</p> <p>PILLAGE IN PARIS A large Viking fleet under the leadership of Ragnar (possibly the legendary hero Ragnar Lodbrok), sails down the Seine and sacks Paris. The city would be attacked again in the 860s and 880s.</p>	<p>AD 855</p>  <p>HERE TO STAY The Isle of Sheppey in Kent, part of Wessex, becomes the first location of a Viking army overwintering on mainland Britain.</p>	<p>c862 AD</p> <p>TO RUSSIA WITH LOVE The near-mythical Viking leader, Rurik, founds the Kievan Rus state in the territory of Novgorod, western Russia, allegedly at the invitation of its Slavic inhabitants. Rurik's long lasting dynasty dominates trade across the Baltic, Black and Caspian seas.</p>	<p>AD 866</p> <p>MAKING THEIR MARK The 'Great Heathen Army' - a Viking invasion force that had landed in England the previous year - captures York. They settle there and rename it Jórviik.</p>	<p>AD 869</p> <p>A RIGHT ROYAL PROBLEM King Edmund of East Anglia is overthrown and killed by the Vikings, who take over his kingdom.</p> 	<p>AD 870</p>  <p>VIKING SIEGE Irish Vikings besiege the Strathclyde royal stronghold of Dumbarton.</p>
<p>c985 AD</p> <p>A MISSED OPPORTUNITY Explorer Bjarni Herjólfsson becomes the first Viking (and European) to see North America, but doesn't make landfall.</p>	<p>AD 982-86</p> <p>A TIME OF DISCOVERY Banished from Iceland, Erik the Red explores Greenland, creating the first successful settlement there.</p> 	<p>AD 980</p> <p>EXPANDING EMPIRE With the help of Haakon Sigurdsson, de facto ruler of Norway, Vladimir the Great consolidates the territory of the Kievan Rus, which now stretches from Ukraine to the Baltic Sea.</p>	<p>c965 AD</p> <p>WRITTEN IN STONE Harald Bluetooth orders a runestone declaring that he "won for himself all of Denmark and Norway and made the Danes Christian". The Jelling Stone is known as Denmark's birth certificate.</p>	<p>AD 954</p> <p>THE END OF ERIC BLOODAXE The King of Viking Northumbria, Eric Bloodaxe, is driven out of York and killed by his own people. His kingdom becomes part of a larger English realm.</p>	<p>AD 927</p>  <p>REPELLING THE INVADERS Alfred the Great's grandson, Æthelstan, reclaims Viking-held York and becomes the first ruler of all Anglo-Saxon England.</p>	<p>AD 921-2</p> <p>DIPLOMATIC MISSION Ahmad ibn Fadlān travels from Baghdad to meet the King of the Volga Bulgars. The record of his journey provides a colourful account of the appearance and behaviours of the Viking Rus he meets on the way.</p>	<p>AD 911</p> <p>LAND OF NORTHMEN After besieging Chartres, the Norse leader Rollo seals the Treaty of Saint-Clair-sur-Epte with the King of West Francia, making him the first Duke of Normandy.</p>	<p>899 AD</p> <p>BIRTH OF A NATION Edward 'the Elder' becomes ruler of Wessex after the death of his father, Alfred. During his reign, he conquers areas previously held by the Vikings, and extends his authority over almost all of England.</p>	<p>AD 878</p> <p>ALFRED WINS FOR WESSEX At the Battle of Edington, Alfred the Great defeats the Viking King Guthrum, who is then forced to convert to Christianity and withdraw his army to East Anglia.</p>	<p>AD 874</p> <p>THE FRONTIER MOVES WEST Norse explorer Ingólfur Arnarson founds Reykjavík, becoming Iceland's first long-term settler. The Icelandic Age of Settlement begins; it will last until AD 930.</p>	<p>AD 871</p> <p>WAR FOR WESSEX Nine battles are fought by the Vikings for control over the kingdom of Wessex. Alfred the Great ascends the throne and pays them to leave Wessex alone.</p> 
<p>AD 988</p> <p>MIGHT OF THE NORSEMEN The Varangian Guard comes into existence after Byzantine Emperor Basil II employs Norse warriors.</p> 	<p>AD 991</p> <p>HEROIC DEFEAT The English are defeated by a large Viking army at the Battle of Maldon in Essex. The victors are given the first of many 'Danegeld' payments (a tax to buy off the Viking invaders).</p>	<p>c1000</p> <p>A NEW WORLD Leif Erikson lands in North America, naming it Vinland due to the wild grapes growing there. According to the sagas, hostility from the Native Americans meant that the settlement (in modern-day Newfoundland) is abandoned after just a few years.</p>	<p>1002</p> <p>SANCTIONED MASSACRE Following military successes against Viking leaders, Brian Boru becomes the first High King of all Ireland. In England, King Æthelred the Unready gives orders for all Danish people to be slain on Saint Brice's Day.</p>	<p>1013</p> <p>REVENGE OF THE DANES Avenging the Saint Brice's Day massacre, Danish King Sweyn Forkbeard invades England. He seizes control, becoming King of Denmark and England. In 1028, his son, Cnut the Great, adds Norway to his mighty kingdom.</p>	<p>1014</p> <p>IRISH STRIFE Brian Boru's army beats a Viking-Irish alliance of Sitric Silkbeard (Nordic King of Dublin) and Máel Mórda mac Murchada (Irish King of Leinster) at the Battle of Clontarf. Brian Boru is killed.</p> 	<p>1016</p> <p>VIKING CONQUEROR Cnut is crowned King of the English.</p>	<p>1035</p> <p>CHAOS AND CONFLICT Cnut dies in Shaftesbury, Dorset, and his two sons, born of different mothers, squabble over the control of his kingdoms.</p>	<p>1066</p> <p>END OF AN ERA? The last great Viking king, Harald Hardrada of Norway, is defeated at Stamford Bridge by English King Harold Godwinson. The Battle of Hastings swiftly follows, signalling the start of the Norman Conquest.</p> 			

The Vikings pointed the monstrous figureheads of their longships towards uncharted waters and sailed the world, from Russia to North America

RAIDERS, TRADERS AND EXPLORERS

Exceptional explorers, the Vikings left their mark everywhere they went... and they went to a lot of places

WORDS: NIGE TASSELL

Masters of the waters, fearless and ambitious, and driven by a need to raid, trade and explore, the Vikings travelled huge distances in their voyages of exploration. They were pioneers, building advanced ships capable of traversing massive oceans. They were adventurers, heading off into the unknown and facing violent resistance to settle in harsh and unforgiving lands. They were savvy merchants, taking control of major trade routes and becoming rich by transporting goods from across their domains. And they were ambassadors of their culture, with Scandinavian influence spreading to civilisations far and wide.

From their first bloody appearances in the late-eighth century, the Vikings came to dominate in Europe. Their explorers came to call the British Isles and Ireland home and they manoeuvred along the coasts of Europe, from Francia to the Iberian Peninsula to the Mediterranean. They did deals with Byzantine emperors; sailed the longest river in Europe, the Volga; and established a ruling dynasty in what is now Russia – a country that is named after them.

To the west, the Vikings set sail across the Atlantic Ocean, building settlements on Iceland and Greenland, before becoming the first Europeans to set foot on North America. They were the greatest explorers of their age. ▶

ENGLAND

The Vikings stormed into the historical record in AD 793 with their shock raid on Lindisfarne, off the coast of Northumbria. It wasn't the first time they had appeared in England, but the attack certainly made an entrance. "The woeful inroads of heathen men destroyed God's church in Lindisfarne island by fierce robbery and slaughter," read the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

Hit-and-run raids of this nature continued during the ninth century and Vikings began to overwinter in England. Then, in AD 865, the Great Heathen Army landed with conquest on its mind. Led by Halfdan Raganarsson and Ivar the Boneless (who were alleged sons of the legendary Ragnar Lothbrok), the army then overran the kingdoms of Northumbria, Mercia and East Anglia, leaving just one, Wessex, still standing.

Under King Æthelred and then his brother, Alfred the Great, Wessex would unfathomably resist the Great Heathen Army and the trials that followed. A new Viking force under Guthrum surprised and defeated Alfred at Chippenham in AD 878, forcing the king to flee and take refuge in the Somerset Marshes. Their control over Wessex was short-lived, though, as Alfred rallied his forces and triumphed at the Battle of Edington later that year.

In the wake of this stunning reverse, Guthrum was forced to convert to Christianity and the Vikings withdrew. Yet around half of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms remained under Danish control, a region known as the 'Danelaw'. The struggles between Saxons and Northmen would continue, and it wouldn't be until the 920s and the reign of Alfred's grandson, Æthelstan, that 'England' was united under a single, Christian king.

Four Viking kings would be proclaimed in England during the 11th century, starting with the ruler of the Danes, Sweyn Forkbeard, in 1013. He invaded multiple times to avenge the 1002 St Brice's Day massacre, the mass slaying of Danish people in England on the command of Æthelred the Unready (a name meaning 'ill counselled' rather than actually 'unready'), before finally seizing the throne. His reign lasted only a couple of months.

The second was Æthelred's son Cnut, who came to the throne of England in 1016, following a brief second reign of Æthelred and a briefer reign of his son Edmund. Cnut – who later became known as 'the Great' and apocryphally tried to command the tide – also gained the crowns of Denmark and Norway by 1028, creating something akin to a Viking empire.

Cnut's sons Harold Harefoot (who reigned 1035–40) and Harthacnut (r1040–42) followed, before the English crown fell to Edward the Confessor and then the final Anglo-Saxon king, Harold Godwinson. The dispute over his succession brought about what's regarded as the last great Viking invasion – led by Harald Hardrada, who was defeated at Stamford Bridge – and the arrival of William of Normandy, himself the descendant of a Viking, who heralded a new dawn for England.

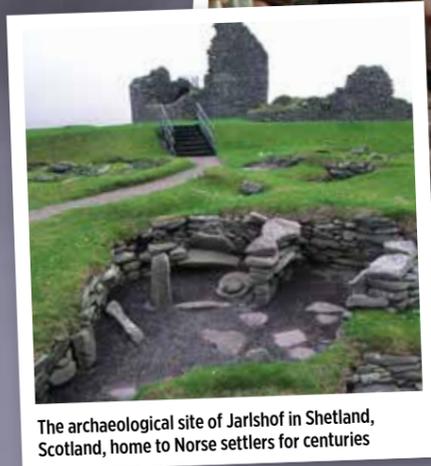
Alfred the Great (far right as a statue in his birthplace, Wantage) defeated the Vikings in AD 878, but they didn't leave England; Æthelred the Unready (this rare coin comes from his reign) invited their wrath by massacring Danes



SCOTLAND, IRELAND AND WALES

During the ninth century, around the time Vikings landed on the shores of eastern England, Norsemen were invading and colonising many of the islands off the coast of Scotland. Much of Orkney, Shetland and the Hebrides fell to Viking rule, as did Caithness and Sutherland, historic counties at the northern tip of mainland Scotland. While the overthrow of Pict leaders ensured the spread of Scandinavian influence, it also precipitated a union between the Picts and Scots, which ultimately led to the establishment of Alba by the mid-9th century, the kingdom which later became Scotland.

The presence of Vikings in Ireland, like Scotland, inspired the unification of the country in 1002 under the rule of Brian Boru. No stranger to lightning raids by the Danes, Ireland experienced two significant invasions in the ninth and early-10th centuries, but never experienced full colonisation. As they assimilated into society, Viking relations with the natives were fragile



The archaeological site of Jarlshof in Shetland, Scotland, home to Norse settlers for centuries

and, although alliances were occasionally formed between the Scandinavians and various regions, the presence of the invaders served to strengthen Ireland's unity against them.

Wales's kings similarly resisted Viking colonisation. These included Rhodri the Great who, in AD 856, as ruler of the kingdom of Gwynedd, defeated Danish

A reenactment of the Viking invasion of Anglesey, which met fierce Welsh resistance

forces who had earlier ravaged the island of Anglesey. The Scandinavians had more success in west Wales, where they set up a number of settlements on the coastline, particularly in Pembrokeshire and on the Gower peninsula. The Welsh and the Vikings did collaborate on occasion, such as the alliance that defeated an Anglo-Saxon army from Mercia in AD 878. At other times, they were in opposition, such as when they joined with Wessex Anglo-Saxons to force a Viking retreat along the River Severn and defeat them at the Battle of Buttington in AD 893.

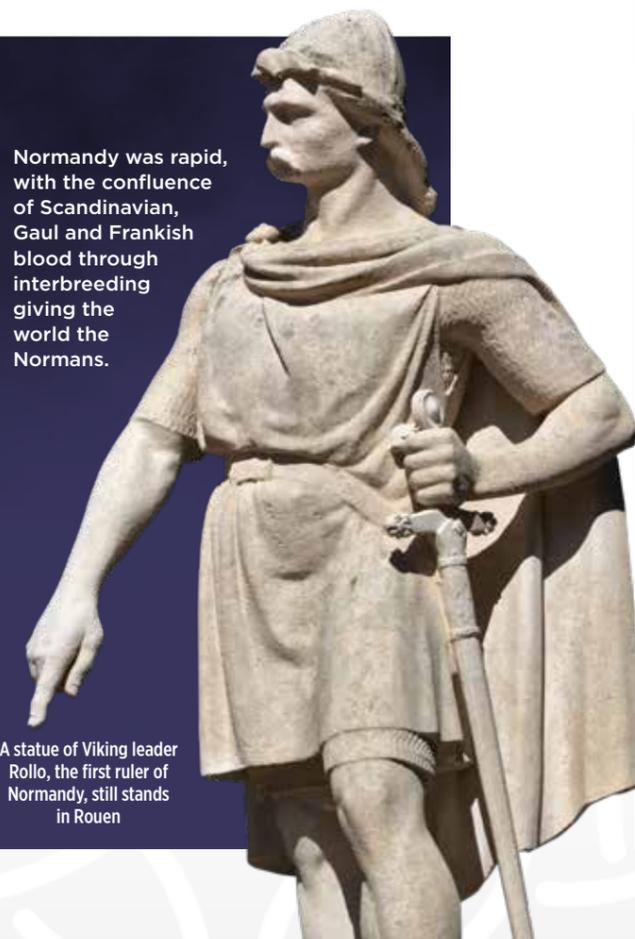


FRISIA AND FRANCIA

power could be found in Francia, the region now covered by France, Belgium and Germany. Central and western Francia were particularly affected by the Scandinavians' incursions as their attacks took full advantage of regions weakened by internal struggles and civil war. The Vikings fiercely raided and ransacked many towns and cities, while establishing significant long-term settlements all along the western coast, becoming bases from which further exploration to other lands would be possible.

To the north, Normandy still bears evidence of the Viking occupation as its name means 'Land of the Northmen'. In AD 911, a treaty negotiated between King of Francia Charles III (aka Charles the Simple) and the Viking leader Rollo, drawn up after the latter's attacks on Paris and Chartres, ceded land in Normandy to the Vikings. Rollo became ruler of Normandy, married a Francian princess, and had a son, William Longsword (most probably by his second wife, Poppa of Bayeux) – the great-great-grandfather of William the Conqueror. Viking assimilation into

Normandy was rapid, with the confluence of Scandinavian, Gaul and Frankish blood through interbreeding giving the world the Normans.



A statue of Viking leader Rollo, the first ruler of Normandy, still stands in Rouen

The Vikings (yet again) lay siege to Paris, the capital of West Francia, in AD 885

The Vikings settled in parts of Frisia – an area covering the coastal area of present-day Netherlands and the North Sea coast of Germany – from the mid-ninth century onwards, but their presence there was far from controlling. Indeed, they were gradually expelled from the region, from around AD 885, not that this brought an end to sporadic and opportunistic raids by the invaders from the north.

More long-lasting evidence of Viking

HOW THE VIKINGS DREW A NEW MAP OF THE WORLD

The Vikings never had an empire, but their reach had the ambition and success of one



DID YOU KNOW?
ACT OF LUNA-CY
 When the Vikings attacked Luna, they believed the Italian city to be Rome. Their leader Hastein pretended to be dying and asked to be converted to Christianity, but once he was let inside, he miraculously recovered and led a sack of the city.

IBERIA AND THE MEDITERRANEAN

For the Vikings to turn their attention to forays in and around the Iberian Peninsula was a natural extension of their activities in northern Europe. They were not, however, as successful when it came to long-term economic and political penetration, thanks to arguably the stiffest resistance they encountered during their entire programme of exploration.

Their first raid was in AD 844 and saw a 100-strong fleet sail from Aquitaine in southwest France to attack the cities of Gijón and La Coruña. After meeting opposition from the native Asturians, the fleet continued south and launched an extended raid on Lisbon before heading on to Andalusia, where they attacked both Cadiz and Seville. Resistance was again strong, this time from the forces of the Muslim caliphate of Abd al-Rahman II. The Vikings were forced to retreat to

France.

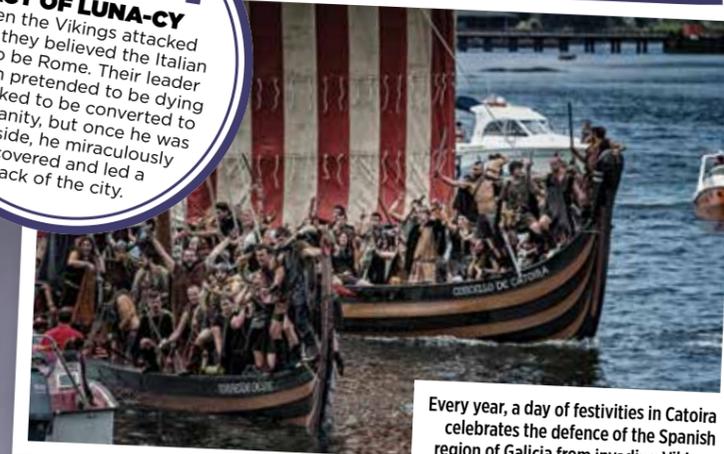
A decade and a half later, between AD 859 and 862, they launched a more sustained exploration of the Iberian Peninsula and Mediterranean.

An expedition of 62 ships led by brothers Hastein and Björn Ironside again suffered defeats to both the Asturians and the Caliphate of Córdoba, but managed to breach the heavily guarded entrance to the Mediterranean, where their raids were numerous and well rewarded.

As well as attacks on more strongholds in southern Spain, the Vikings made their presence felt right across the basin, raiding settlements on both the French

coast and its interior, as well as in North Africa, the Balearic Islands and northern Italy.

Their ships loaded with slaves from Africa – but now a third of the size of the original fleet – the Scandinavians managed to fight their way through yet more skirmishes at the mouth of the Mediterranean and headed back north to the safety of southwest France.



Every year, a day of festivities in Catoira celebrates the defence of the Spanish region of Galicia from invading Vikings

THE EAST AND BYZANTINE

There were rumours that Hastein and Björn Ironside's expeditions across the Mediterranean Basin had reached the capital of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople. Whether true or not, the Vikings would get to the city by other means, lured by its riches and trade opportunities.

Heading east from the ninth century onwards, these Vikings became known as the Rus, a moniker that lives on in the names of two countries, Russia and Belarus. They charted a course across the Baltic Sea and deep into mainland eastern Europe, via the Volga and Dnieper Rivers, taking command of local trade routes from the native population of Slavic tribes, which, in turn, fed into markets where they could deal with prosperous caliphates in the Middle East.

The Rus became both very powerful and very rich. They established a ruling dynasty under their ruler Rurik and, from AD 879, formed the Kievan Rus state, based in Kiev. This dynasty controlled a huge trade network and would go on to last seven centuries.

Constantinople, though, remained

a great prize in their eyes. The Rus launched a series of assaults, but failed to take control of this strategically vital and wealthy city. Some Rus were actually co-opted to defend Constantinople when, in AD 988, their ruler, Vladimir the Great, gave Byzantine emperor Basil II some 6,000 of his men to form a mercenary brigade, the Varangian Guard.

The assimilation of the Rus throughout



From his capital of Novgorod, Rurik (far left) established a dynasty that lasted seven centuries



The 'Sun Voyager' sculpture on Reykjavik's waterfront resembles a Viking longship

ICELAND AND GREENLAND

The settlement of Iceland was far different than the Viking activity in Britain and mainland Europe. The landmass was discovered accidentally by Naddod who, sailing from Norway to the Faroe Islands, got lost and landed on the eastern Icelandic coast. The first permanent settler is believed to have been Norwegian chieftain Ingólfr Arnarson in around AD 874. He settled in the southwest of the island, naming it Reykjavik, on account of the geothermal steam he saw there (the word means 'Bay of Smokes').

As Iceland was unsettled land, there were no locals to divide and conquer and so no bloody turmoil when the Vikings arrived. The Age of Settlement was, therefore, peaceful, lasting until around AD 930 - by which time the entire island had been claimed and an assembly, the Althing (the world's oldest surviving parliament) formed. As many as 24,000 Scandinavians are thought to have

made Iceland their new home.

Around 50 years later, in the AD 980s, Greenland was also discovered. It was first reached by an Icelander, Erik the Red, who had left Norway with his father, Thorvald, who had been exiled for manslaughter.

A modest number of settlements grew there, with the climate - in the southwest quarter, at least - just about usable for arable, cattle and sheep farming. A major export was walrus ivory. Greenland became a dependency of the King of Norway in 1261, but the early years of the Little Ice Age rendered the climate too inhospitable, leading to Viking settlements being abandoned and Greenland's links with Norway and Iceland dissolved.



Erik the Red discovered Greenland in the AD 980s

DID YOU KNOW?
SAINT VLADIMIR
 By AD 988, Vladimir the Great, a descendent of Rurik, consolidated Kievan Rus from modern-day Ukraine to the Baltic Sea after being overthrown by his own brother. He was then baptised and converted the entire region to Christianity.

eastern Europe led to widespread marriages with women from various Slavic tribes. This interbreeding led to the rise of a significant new ethnic delineation. The Russians were born.

NORTH AMERICA

Ask a group of schoolchildren who the first European to set foot in the Americas was and their answers, almost invariably, will be Christopher Columbus or just possibly Amerigo Vespucci or John Cabot. Of course, they would be wide of the mark by around 500 years as that honour belongs to a Viking, Leif Erikson, who landed in the New World around the year 1000 and established a settlement.

Exploration was clearly the family trade as Erikson's father was Erik the Red, the man who discovered Greenland. As for Erikson, he was on a mission to find territory that he already knew existed. Around 14 years earlier, an explorer named Bjarni Herjólfsson had spotted lands while on a voyage some way west of Greenland, but he hadn't gone ashore. Erikson, using Herjólfsson's boat and a three-dozen-strong crew, retraced the original journey, which would have been a distance of some 1,500 miles.

These new lands, on the eastern reaches of contemporary Canada, were far more bounteous than the terrain Erikson had left back in Greenland. The climate was more welcoming, food was plentiful in the form of native animals, there were lots of trees for building, and the soil was fertile.

Unlike Iceland and Greenland, however, the Vikings found a human population living there. The Inuit and First Nation tribes weren't all that welcoming towards the newcomers in their territory, but the Vikings were not very friendly towards them either. Erikson's brother, Thorvald, ordered an attack on an indigenous group, a decision he paid for with his life in the violent response.

Freydis Eiríksdóttir, the brothers' sister, was among around a hundred people who landed to establish a settlement a decade or so after Erikson's arrival, and who were successful in trading with the local people. But it was an uneasy peace. Continual conflicts, along with the New World's distance from the rest of the Viking world, meant the colony never bloomed.

An illustration of Thorvald's death after angering the indigenous peoples of North America



Leif Erikson - this grand statue stands in Reykjavik, Iceland - was the first European on North American soil; once there, the Vikings established a settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows (pictured)

FORESTAY

Part of the rigging of the sail, a rope – possibly made from animal skin or wool fibres – was used to connect the bow of the longship to the mast.

SAILS AND MAST

The huge square sails were hugely time-consuming to make. Made of woven wool, they could measure up to 100 square metres in size. Masts were often collapsible, to make fighting in battle easier.

DID YOU KNOW?

MONSTER OF A SHIP

It has been claimed that the largest longship ever built belonged to Olaf Tryggvason, a late-10th-century King of Norway. The *Long Serpent* supposedly had 34 rowing benches and may have been more than 45 metres long.



KEEL

This was the backbone of the longship, made of planks of oak and waterproofed with animal hair or wool and pine-tree tar.

FIGUREHEADS

The bow – the first part of a longship to be seen – was usually decorated, often as a dragon or snake, to inflict fear as the ship approached.

RULERS OF THE WAVES

Expertly designed longships carried the Vikings across the seas

WORDS: EMMA SLATTERY WILLIAMS

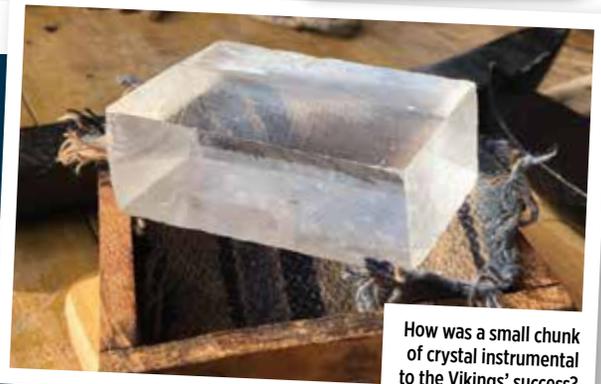
One of the secrets behind the Vikings' successful explorations, trading voyages and conquests was their skill in shipbuilding. For Norwegian Vikings, fjords were more navigable than traversing the land, so sailing became a cornerstone of life. Many Vikings were experienced fishermen, but they also relished the adventure of open water. The powerhouse of the Viking Age, taking them to locations such as Russia and North America, was the longship.

"The Vikings began with a tradition of what's called clinker-built ships, built with overlapping planks nailed together with wooden or iron nails," says historian Philip Parker. "These were flexible, strong, didn't leak and very seaworthy. Steering oars were later added for navigation and then, in the eighth century, sails. This created swift seaworthy ships, capable of

crossing significant distances."

Viking longships were the most advanced boats of the medieval period – speedy and manoeuvrable, yet sturdy and powerful. Ships were typically between 15 and 25 metres long, could hold up to 60 oarsmen and reach an average speed of 10 knots, powered by oars and the wind, which was caught by one large, square sail. What's more, their shallow draft allowed them to sail right up to the shoreline and unload raiding parties in the quickest time possible.

The cargo carried by longships depended on the type of journey it was undertaking. Exploratory missions needed food and supplies, as well as equipment to aid in the settling of an area, including livestock. Trading journeys saw ships filled with valuable goods, while raiding voyages meant loading weapons, whilst leaving space for any pilfered treasure. ◉



How was a small chunk of crystal instrumental to the Vikings' success?

SUNSTONE OF THE SAGAS

The Vikings were way ahead of their time when it came to crystal-clear navigation

As sailing was an essential part of life in the Vikings' homelands, they had to be exceptional navigators. Seas were crossed using the positions of sun or stars, as well as highly tuned senses, but not all Viking navigational techniques have always been fully understood. In a medieval Icelandic saga, there is a mention of a 'sunstone', which helped navigators find the sun in an overcast sky. Sunstones were considered mere legend until a crystal was uncovered amongst navigation equipment in a sunken Tudor shipwreck. When held up to the sky, this Iceland spar (a type of calcite), creates a solar compass through concentric rings of polarised light – even at dusk or when the sky is overcast – giving the location of the sun. It is thought that this nifty natural tool may have been the key to the Vikings' sea adventures and its use persisted long after the Viking Age.

WARRIORS AND WARFARE

Being a mighty warrior was more than just winning battles to the Vikings – it was the path to the afterlife

WORDS: EMMA SLATTERY WILLIAMS

Earning glory in battle and proving yourself as a great warrior were both highly prized goals for a Viking fighter, especially since entry to Valhalla (the great hall of slain warriors, from Norse mythology) was by dying in battle. So, although the Vikings had no professional standing armies, they grew up with weapons in their hands, trained in the ways of war and prepared to die a bloody and honourable death.

Bands of warriors owed allegiance to their local chieftain or *jarl*, who could call on them to fight or raid. Viking warbands were relatively small, and since venturing far from home meant they could not call for reinforcements the Vikings became experts at hit-and-run surprise attacks. Their shallow-draft longships allowed them to jump out where they liked and strike hard and fast against an unsuspecting enemy, often taking them by surprise. This tactic was most effective against undefended coastal villages or treasure-filled monasteries.

Relying on surprise attacks meant battles were regularly chaotic. Vikings

could use spears and bow and arrows for long-distance fighting, but preferred hand-to-hand melee-style weapons, such as daggers, axes and – the most precious of all – swords. Weapons were status symbols for Vikings, and would often be highly decorated or inlaid with precious metals. For protection, most warriors wore a bowl-shaped helmet and carried a round wooden shield, but had little else in the way of armour. Chainmail was expensive, so would only be owned by the wealthiest men.

A tactic often deployed in battle was *svinfylking*, meaning 'swine order' due to its resemblance to a boar's snout. Warriors lined up in a wedge formation, making it difficult for the enemy to penetrate without being cut down.

The shield wall was another Viking speciality. By standing shoulder to shoulder and locking shields to make one impenetrable wall, the warriors kept themselves protected whilst still thrusting with their weapons. While they did not use cavalry tactics in battle, the Vikings were skilled horsemen, so could travel quickly once inland. 📍

The berserker piece from the 12th-century Lewis Chessmen is depicted biting his shield in fury



GOING BERSERK

Berserkers were an even more terrifying version of the Viking warrior

Viking sagas and folklore contain descriptions of a group of warriors so fierce that they fought in an almost trance-like state of fury, wielding near-supernatural strength while feeling no pain. These 'berserkers' may seem a fantastical embellishment, yet they may well have existed. Berserkers were a highly skilled group of warriors associated with the god Odin. They wore little to protect themselves, but were a terrifying sight in battle. Difficult to control, they tended to act independently in battles rather than be used in formations.

Theories suggest that these bloodthirsty warriors consumed hallucinogenic substances or performed group rituals to induce a trance. Psychiatrists have proposed that this could have caused them to lose awareness of their actions, and increase their aggression and strength. Historian Philip Parker, however, believes berserkers were less prevalent than the sagas imply, but were used to feed the fearsome Viking reputation: "I think berserkers were part of Viking propaganda", he says. "The Vikings were happy to allow the idea to be propagated that not only did they have a ferocious, well-armed, motivated, unpredictable fighting force, but if things get tough, they'll just go berserk."

VIKINGS FOR HIRE

Skilled Viking warriors made formidable imperial guards

The Viking reputation for ferocity and fearlessness reached the ears of Byzantine Emperor Basil II (r976-1025). So impressed was he that, in AD 988, he began to employ warriors from Scandinavia, known as Varangians, as his personal bodyguard. Based in Constantinople, the Varangian Guard was a mercenary unit feared for its mercilessness. The Varangians' main duty was to protect the emperor, but could be unleashed at critical points in battle, to the horror of their foes.



Harald Hardrada was a Varangian Guard before becoming King of Norway

EQUIPPING A VIKING

The fighting gear that Viking warriors made sure they loaded onto the longship

HELMET

According to the handful of helmets discovered, Vikings wore simple bowl-shaped headgear (and not horned). It required a heavy blow to pierce, but may have been unwieldy, or expensive, for many warriors.

SHIELD

Shields were round and made of wood, with metal reinforcements around the rim and in the centre to protect the grip. Shields were placed along the edges of longships either as decoration or defence.

WEAPONS

Spears up to three metres long and axes were common weapons, while swords would be far more precious and so a true symbol of a Viking warrior. Expensive and difficult to make, swords would become family heirlooms.

ARMOUR

Most warriors wore leather padding to absorb enemy blows. Only the wealthiest could afford chainmail.

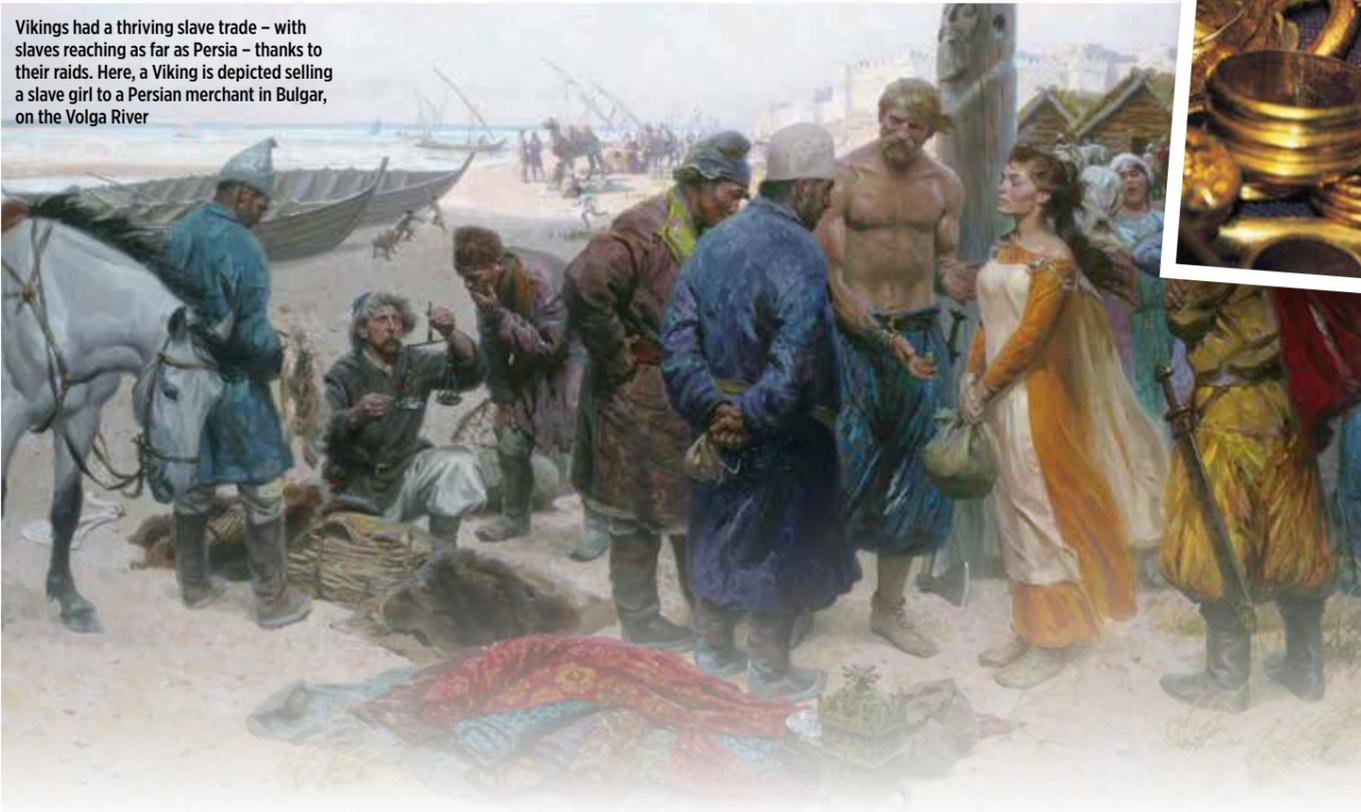
BOOTS

Offering little, if any, protection, simple leather boots were all the Vikings would wear on their feet.

DID YOU KNOW?

FIT FOR A KING
Harald Hardrada, King of Norway and contestant for the throne of England, had a chainmail coat so long that it resembled a skirt, called 'Emma'. According to the sagas, he was not wearing Emma when he was killed.

Vikings had a thriving slave trade – with slaves reaching as far as Persia – thanks to their raids. Here, a Viking is depicted selling a slave girl to a Persian merchant in Bulgar, on the Volga River



ABOVE: Coins from the Cuerdale hoard found in 1840 in Lancashire, one of the largest Viking hoards ever discovered

TOP: The Vikings were master craftsmen and created beautiful brooches, buckles and other jewellery

HOW THE VIKINGS LIVED

Viking society had a hierarchy, laws and means of seeking justice... so not as lawless as their reputation suggests

WORDS: EMMA SLATTERY WILLIAMS

Despite their fearsome reputation, the Vikings did not spend the entire year raiding and invading. In fact, only in summer did the call of the sea, and the treasures that awaited, lure them away from home. Most of the year revolved around fishing, farming and tending to the land.

Society was split into three classes: at the top was the nobility – the *jarls*, who were wealthy in property, treasure and had a loyal group of followers. They acted as local chieftains, but the more powerful among them could become a king. The vast majority of Vikings belonged to the next class, the *karls* – freemen and land owners who worked as fishermen, farmers, merchants, craftsmen and warriors. If a karl grew successful or wealthy enough, they could achieve jarl status. But they could also lose everything and end up at the bottom of society as a slave – a class known as *thralls*.

While many thralls had been captured during raids, some entered slavery voluntarily as a way of paying off a debt. If a thrall managed to accumulate property or wealth, they had the chance to buy back their freedom or could be freed by their masters. Until then, thralls worked on farms and ships, or made for a valuable trading commodity – it has been suggested that as much as 10 per cent of the population of Scandinavia were slaves. As Viking raids overseas increased, so too did the number of captives taken. Some of these men and women were then sold on elsewhere in Europe, or even as far as the Middle East and North Africa.

The Vikings shared similarities with other Germanic societies, notably in that a Viking leader was a male who had established a reputation as a warrior. Yet all freemen had the right to be heard and participated in local assemblies known as *things*, where political decisions, laws

Iceland's parliament, the *Althing*, is the oldest in the world and was first held by the Vikings in around AD 930 in a scene similar to this



and punishments would be discussed and decided. As historian Philip Parker points out, though, such gatherings often saw powerful families leading the proceedings. "It doesn't take too long for certain families to believe that they have a right to rule and that leaders should

be chosen from among them. That's the origin of royal dynasties."

LAW-ABIDERS

The Vikings may have a reputation for being lawless when it came to the invasion of other countries, but Norse society itself was governed by strict laws. Fines were usually the main form of punishment. An amount of compensation, known as *wergild* (man price) could be paid to an injured party (or their family in case of death), and fines could also be issued for crimes such as theft or killing someone else's thrall.

In many cases, more serious crimes like murder could see a Viking outlawed and ostracised from the community – such a punishment saw the condemned relinquish any protections they had under law, and meant it was lawful for someone to kill them.

When it came to questioning or insulting someone's honour, a fine was not enough. A duel, known as a *holmgang*, was used to settle arguments over land, debt and honour. These took place within a few days of their announcement, with the weapons and rules agreed beforehand. The two men fought on an animal hide or skin cloak; if one of them stepped off, they forfeited the *holmgang*. Combatants would then fight until first blood had been drawn, or death – depending on what had been agreed. Ⓞ

LIFE AND LEISURE

Where did a Viking call home, and what did they do for fun?

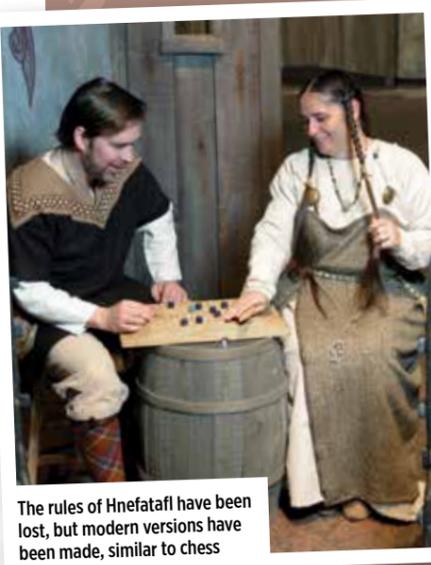
THE LONGHOUSE

► Vikings lived in long, narrow buildings made from whatever materials were available, generally wood, stone or turf as they kept out the cold, and covered with a thatched or earth roof – a layer of small tree branches laid over the main support rafter and then covered with layers of turf and birch bark. Longhouses resembled the hull of an upturned ship and tended to be between five and seven metres wide, but could be anywhere between 15 to 75 metres long. Many homes would be simple, with a central hearth for heating, cooking and gathering around in the evenings, and just one large room where the family ate and slept. There were no windows, so the only light would come from hanging lamps or the open door and smoke holes in the roof. The chieftain of the village was likely to have a large hall to show off his wealth and status.



A longhouse reconstruction at L'Anse aux Meadows archaeological site in Newfoundland

L'Anse aux Meadows is the only place in North America confirmed to have been a Norse site



The rules of Hnefatafl have been lost, but modern versions have been made, similar to chess

GAMES AND PASTIMES

◀ Aside from raiding, trading and exploring, Vikings enjoyed all manner of leisure pursuits, including feasting and music – activities that went hand-in-hand at gatherings. Another favourite pastime was drinking – and drinking games. Determining who could out-drink their opponent would often form the evening's entertainment, as would seeing who could tell the most articulate story whilst under the influence. The Vikings had a love of board games, too, including Hnefatafl. The rules are unclear, but it seems to have been a game of strategy with one player beginning with an advantage. Boards and game pieces made of amber, ivory and antler have been found at burial sites across Scandinavia and Britain. Competitive sports were also popular among them wrestling, tug-of-war and ball games.

Battle was a way of life for Vikings and women played their part – but maybe not in the fighting



ABOVE: Without women making the ropes and sails, Viking longboats may not have ever crossed the seas

BELOW: Raising children was at the centre of a married woman's life



Were shield maidens real, or embellishments of the Viking sagas?

WOMEN IN THE VIKING WORLD

Dr Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir addresses the roles, rights and reputations of women in the Viking Age

INTERVIEW BY DAVID MUSGROVE

When you think of the Viking Age, it is difficult not to see it as anything but a patriarchal society, where men ruled by the sword and axe. Yet Viking women had more options and agency than you might expect...

Q: Is it fair to say that the Viking world was a man's world?

A: I don't think it is, no. The popular cliché is that the Viking world was

masculine, but if you take women completely out of the narrative then you lose a vital aspect. Women were there, in the communities, participating in politics, being entrepreneurs, and carrying out all kinds of jobs like making the huge sails that enabled the Vikings to sail across the sea to new lands.

Women were also instilling the sort of values into their children that would help them grow up to become proper Viking men. So, we really need to incorporate women into some of the more popular narratives.

Q: Before Viking women married, were they free to travel and have adventures?

A: Well, I think that idea appeared in the sagas. There are all these stories about shield maidens who, before they got married, go off and have the life of a Viking, sailing around and basically act like the men (see box, right). The reality was probably a lot harsher as, on average, they mostly didn't have that much freedom. Young women would more or less marry the man they were

told to marry, and wouldn't have had much choice in the matter. Marriages were usually contracted to form alliances, and so the family would decide. I think there's quite an interesting juxtaposition between the saga stories of women flying around Scandinavia and the reality.

Q: What was marriage like for Viking women?

A: There certainly were not a whole lot of career options for women other than marriage. To get married was probably something that young women would have wanted to do, I think, as it was a way to gain a certain social status. A married woman would have a modicum of economic independence, for example. In the end, a bride-to-be would probably just hope to have a nice husband, but it was not up to them. The types of stories that do exist – like of a woman going

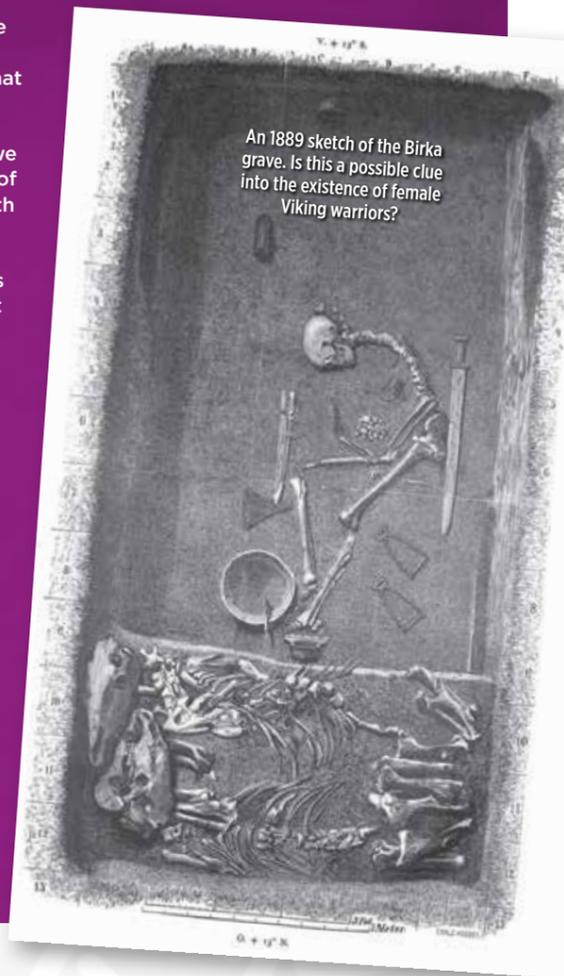
SHIELD MAIDENS: FACT OR FICTION?

Is there any evidence for female Viking warriors of the type we frequently see on our TV screens today?

"The classic interpretation of the Birka grave [a 10th-century Viking grave, excavated in 1878 in Sweden] before DNA analysis was that the remains belonged to a high-status male warrior," says Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir. "But now, after DNA study in recent years, we know that this person, buried with all kinds of weapons and tools that are gendered as both male and warrior, was a biological woman."

So was this woman a real-life shield maiden? "The bones don't have any wounds and they're not dense in the way to suggest that the person might have trained a lot for battle", continues Friðriksdóttir. "But it prompts a lot of questions about how we classify a warrior: is it just having a grave with weapons buried with the body? Does the skeleton need to have signs of having fought? We also find graves where little boys have been buried in the whole kit for a warrior and they, obviously, would not have been battle-hardened warriors at the time of their deaths. But that was the role intended for them."

"Then there are the realities of being a warrior, which meant being part of a masculine warband. Is it realistic to think that a woman would have been able to exist in this sort of space and have this sort of lifestyle? Certainly in the sagas, shield maidens exist in these more fantastical spaces. But when you get into the more realistic sagas, there's not any convincing evidence of a shield maiden fighting among the Viking armies."



An 1889 sketch of the Birka grave. Is this a possible clue into the existence of female Viking warriors?

THE SAGA OF GUDRID

Male adventurers like Erik the Red and Leif Erikson move over – it was a female Icelandic explorer who ranked among the most travelled Europeans of the 11th century

Known as the ‘far traveller’ and described as “a woman of striking appearance, and wise”, Gudrid Thorbjarnardóttir remains a lesser-known figure in Viking exploration, yet her adventures ranged from North America to Rome.

Born in late-10th-century Iceland, much of Gudrid’s story comes from two Old Norse sagas written centuries afterwards – *The Saga of Erik the Red* and *The Saga of the Greenlanders*, the so-called Vinland sagas as they chart the Viking voyages to North America. Both texts tell of how Gudrid joined her father Thorbjorn on a journey west from Iceland to the new colony in Greenland, a passage fraught with danger as, according to *The Saga of the Greenlanders*, they were shipwrecked and had to be rescued by Leif Erikson.

In Greenland, Gudrid married Leif’s brother, Thorstein, son of Erik the Red, but their relationship did not last long as he succumbed to sickness during a tough winter. According to *The Saga of the Greenlanders*, Thorstein rose from the dead to tell Gudrid of her long future, filled with many descendents.

Gudrid married again, this time an Icelander named Thorfinn Karlsefni, and together they led an expedition to North America, which the Vikings called Vinland. During their several years there, it is said that Gudrid gave birth to a son, Snorri – if true, he would be the first known baby born to a European in North America.

In *The Saga of Erik the Red*, Gudrid epitomises the transition from the Norse pagan religion to Christianity and is described as a “Christian woman”. In her later years, she continued to travel and even made a pilgrimage to Rome, before returning to Iceland and living as a nun. To many, Gudrid is the true hero of the Vinland sagas and an ancestor to a long line of Icelanders.

A statue of Gudrid and her son Snorri stands at her birthplace in Iceland



ABOVE: A 10th-century tapestry fragment

TOP: A married woman would make clothes for her household, spinning wool and woven on upright looms, or create tapestries

off to Norway to propose to a man herself – were real one-offs or not to be believed. Most of the time, the sagas depict young women when they are 14 or 15 years old, and their father often just announces that it is time for them to marry – and they do.

Q: Once they were married, did Viking women have more authority and independence, and would their status in society have improved?

A: Absolutely. An unmarried woman was, most of time, probably a servant. If they were lucky, they may have been living with a brother or male relative, which would improve their lot. In the sagas, at least, everyone who isn’t a servant gets married.

Married women, in contrast, would have had control over their own household and were legally allowed to spend a certain amount of money without having to ask their husbands. They could have a greater say in things and involve themselves in the politics of the family.

They certainly had legal rights that they would not have had otherwise, including being allowed to inherit. Being a single woman was not a concept in the same way as we understand it.



Viking women certainly lived in a man’s world, but they had more rights and freedoms than a lot of women in Europe

DID YOU KNOW?

STAYING SHIPSHAPE

While a Viking woman in her forties would have been considered old in this era, the two women discovered in the famous Oseberg Ship burial were thought to have been over 50 and 80 when they died.

“A MARRIED WOMAN HAD LEGAL RIGHTS THEY WOULD NOT HAVE HAD OTHERWISE, INCLUDING THE RIGHT TO INHERIT”

Q: On the flipside, there was divorce. Is it correct that a woman could be divorced on the spot by a man?

A: That seems to be the case, though it’s difficult to say what actually happened based on sagas and laws written down later on. That said, there are so many different versions of people getting divorced in the sagas that there must have been some cases.

There is an example in Njál’s saga, where an older man is at a wedding with his wife and starts, well, leching on a young girl of only 14. When his wife says something, he divorces her then and there and she was cast out of the wedding, never to be heard of again. It is difficult to say whether someone would have actually been divorced as abruptly as that, though. And don’t forget, Viking women had the right to request a divorce

themselves, and reclaim their dowries if their marriage ended.

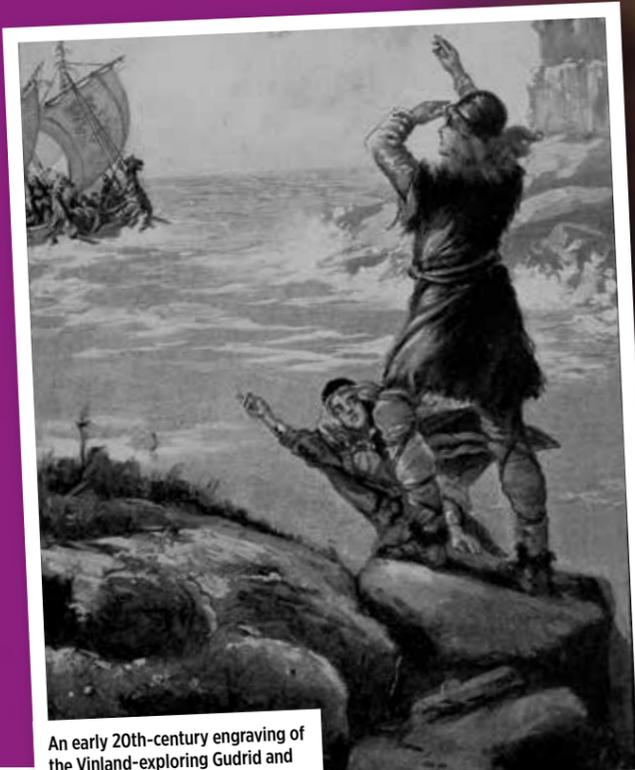
Q: Could Viking women achieve financial independence, regardless of whether they were married or not, by engaging in a craft or trade?

A: Evidence suggests that Viking women were active in the textile industry – graves have been found showing women being buried with tools of the trade – but we don’t know for sure whether those women were married. Probably a lot of married women were running cottage industries on the side, as well as having some control over their household.

I have a theory that if a woman was able to move away from a rural area and into a town, they could perhaps be a little more anonymous and get away from an interfering family. This could open up the possibility of them achieving a certain success with a trade, which would have given them more of a chance of being autonomous and independent. ☺

HistoryExtra Podcast

Listen to the full interview with Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir at [historyextra.com/viking-women](https://www.historyextra.com/viking-women)



An early 20th-century engraving of the Vinland-exploring Gudrid and her second husband, Thorfinn

GODS, MYTHS, BELIEFS AND RITUALS

The Vikings were pagan, polytheistic and had a plethora of ways to worship, as far as can be told

WORDS: JONNY WILKES

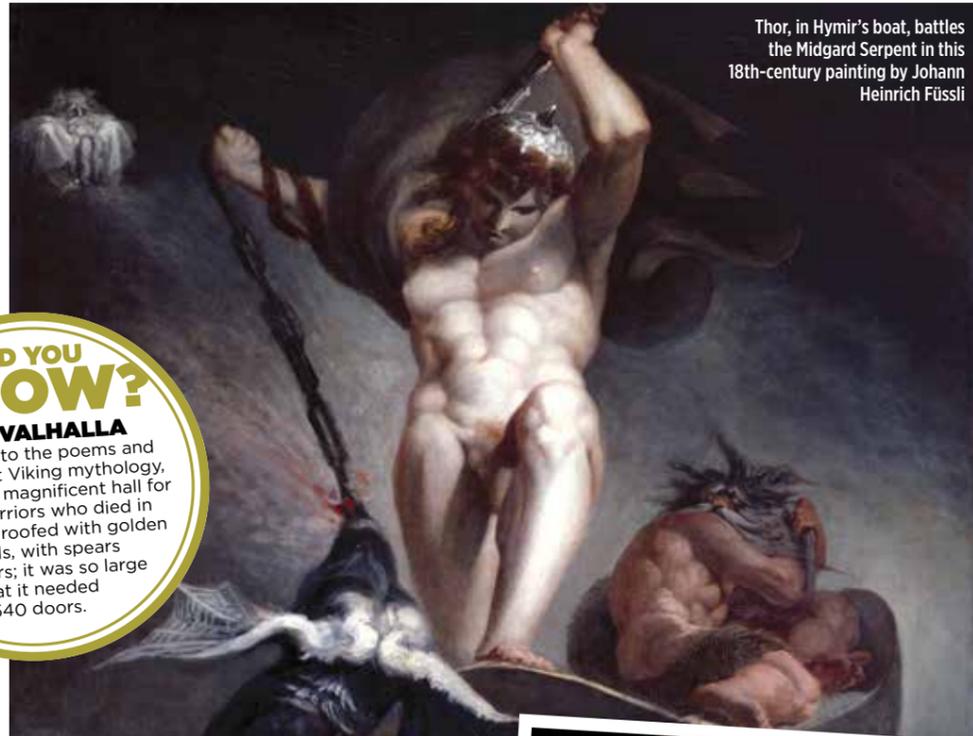
There was no single, organised and institutional religion of the Vikings. As they did not comprise a distinct social entity to begin with, it stands to reason they would not have a distinct set of beliefs and practices. The paganism seen in the Viking Age varied from region to region, so what people believed in Denmark would be different to Norway and Sweden. Each community, each family even, practiced their beliefs in their own way.

How they did so is a far trickier question to answer. Beliefs and rituals were vital to the Vikings and infused into everyday life, but very little evidence survives to suggest how this would have looked other than what can be gleaned from burials and carved figures. The sagas and narratives that provide the bulk of our understanding (about Odin, Thor, Valhalla, Ragnarok etc) come from centuries later, and were written by Christians no less.

SACRIFICE AND REWARD

The Vikings had no religious texts – as everything spread through oral tradition – and few temple-like buildings. Instead, natural features such as groves and rivers were deemed sacred and used for rituals. Chieftains and rulers mostly took charge of religious rituals and ceremonies, but evidence suggests that *völur* or seeresses also existed (women with magical and prophetic power), as well as Godar (heathen priests who functioned as cult leaders). It would have been priests who most likely carried out the major Viking ritual: sacrifice. Although, anyone could offer objects or sacrifice animals to the gods, and it seemed the Vikings were not opposed to human sacrifices, too, at certain ceremonies, such as funerals.

The Vikings had a whole pantheon of gods and goddesses who affected every



Thor, in Hymir's boat, battles the Midgard Serpent in this 18th-century painting by Johann Heinrich Füßli

DID YOU KNOW?
VAST VALHALLA
According to the poems and prose about Viking mythology, Valhalla, the magnificent hall for Viking warriors who died in battle, was roofed with golden shields, with spears for rafters; it was so large that it needed 540 doors.



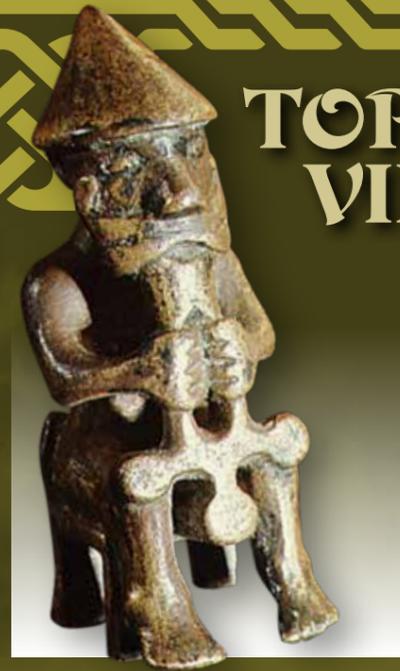
This stone is engraved with the representation of the gods Odin, Thor and Freyr at the bottom

part of their lives, and each requiring their own sacrifices. Women looked to Freya, for instance, for help with pregnancy or childbirth, while Thor, the hammer-wielding god of thunder, received sacrifices for good weather. Again, the importance of an individual god varied depending on where they were being worshipped.

And it was not only gods the Vikings believed in, but also Frost and Fire

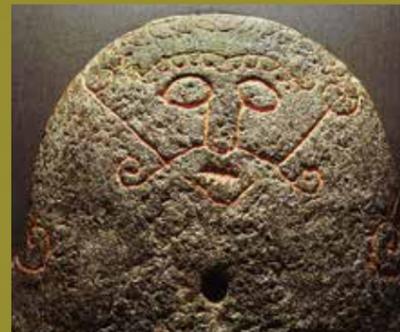
Giants and a menagerie of monsters and beasts, including the wolf Fenrir and Jörmungandr, a serpent so large that it encircled the realm of humans. That realm was called Midgard. The gods resided in Asgard, the giants in

TOP GODS OF THE VIKING WORLD (AND ASGARD)



THOR

God of thunder, lightning and storms, Thor was perhaps the most popular of the pantheon as he protected humankind and Asgard. The red-bearded son of Odin boasted such strength that he could fight giants – armed with his iron gloves, enchanted belt and, most famously, his great hammer, Mjöllnir, which could level mountains. His hammer became a ubiquitous symbol in Viking art and culture. It was from his name that we get 'Thursday' ('Thor's Day').



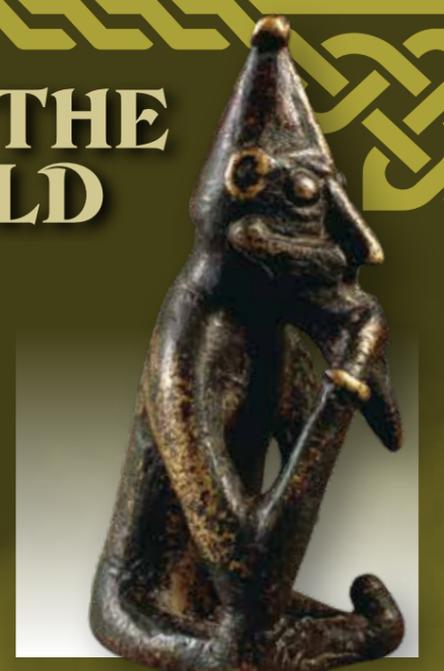
LOKI

The trickster, a god associated with mischief (and also fire), Loki was a shapeshifter, able to take on the forms of animals and people. But Loki could also be cruel with his pranks – leading to the death of a beloved god. Loki tricked Freya, mother to Balder, into revealing her son's only weakness, mistletoe, and then had the blind god Höd throw a sharpened branch of mistletoe at him. At Ragnarok, Loki sides with the giants, but is slain in the battle.



FREYJA

Goddess associated with love, sex, beauty, gold and magic, Freyja – the sister of Freyr – was pleasure-seeking and materialistic. She owned the beautiful necklace Brísingamen and a cloak of falcon feathers that let her fly. One of the few female deities in the Viking pantheon, her name means 'Lady'. While half of the warriors slain in battle were selected by the Valkyries to join Odin in Valhalla, the other half went to the field presided over by Freyja, named *Fólkvangr*.

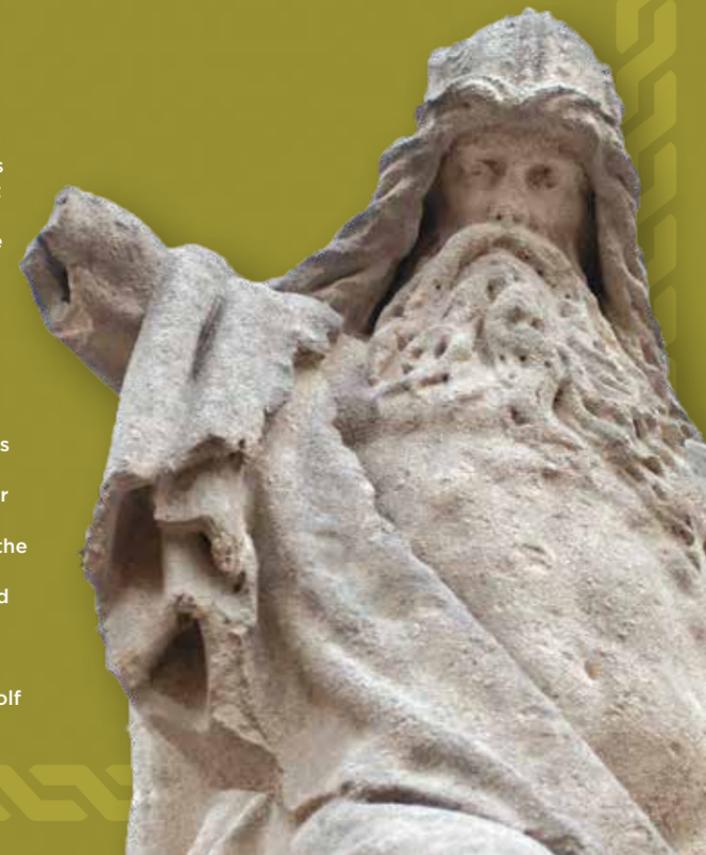


FREYR

God of fertility, but also associated with sunshine, prosperity and peace, Freyr, as son of the sea god Njörd, belonged to the Vanir – one of the two warring races of gods, the other being the Æsir. One of the most venerated of the gods, especially in Sweden, he would receive offerings for a good harvest or virility. According to the mythology, Freyr owned a ship he could fold into his pocket and a sword that battled on its own, and he rode a golden boar made by the dwarves.

ODIN

The All-Father and ruler of Asgard, Odin was linked with war, wisdom, magic and poetry, among other things. Such was his desire for knowledge that he sacrificed one of his eyes for perception of the world and cosmos, and let himself be hanged on the world tree, Yggdrasil, for nine days and nights to gain understanding of the runes. The one-eyed Odin (or Woden, which is where 'Wednesday' comes from) was often depicted in a broad-brimmed hat or cloak so he would not be recognised as he walked the human realm. He rode an eight-legged horse named Sleipnir and owned two ravens that spied for him. Odin would meet his end fighting the monstrous wolf Fenrir at Ragnarok.





ABOVE LEFT: *The Prose Edda*, a collection of Old Norse poems, tells us much about Viking mythology

ABOVE RIGHT: The entrance of the gods into Valhalla, from an illustration for *Das Rheingold*, by Richard Wagner



“THE CLASH OF PAGAN BELIEFS WITH CHRISTIANITY FOREVER CHANGED RELIGION FOR THE VIKINGS”

◀ Jotunheim, while Niflheim was the cold, dark and misty world of the dead. There were nine realms in total, connected by the branches and roots of Yggdrasil, a sacred ash tree at the centre of the cosmos. The place all good Viking warriors wanted to go, though, was Valhalla, a magnificent hall in Asgard for those who died in battle. There, it was believed, they would spend their days honing their combat skills and, wounds magically healed, their nights drinking the finest mead and feasting on the meat of an eternal boar. The god Odin welcomed these warriors, as they would fight for him at Ragnarok – the pre-ordained end of the worlds, when the Sun will darken, the stars vanish, the Earth sink into the sea, and a great battle will take place

between the gods, giants and beasts. So, with so little evidence, how do we know about this Viking mythology? On top of a number of sagas, the chief text to provide a systematic explanation was *Prose Edda* by Icelander Snorri Sturluson. It comprehensively covered the mythology from before creation to Ragnarok. Written in the 13th century, long after the Vikings were at their height – and so after Scandinavia converted to Christianity, indeed Snorri himself was a Christian – it offers fascinating insights but should not be taken as gospel, according to historian Philip Parker: “We can’t be absolutely sure it hasn’t been overlain with judicious reinvention or influenced by Christian theology to

some extent.” The clash of their pagan beliefs with Christianity would forever change the concept of religion for the Vikings. While seen as heathen and barbaric by the Christians, the Vikings’ decisions to target places like churches and monasteries were not motivated by religion, but by knowing where the undefended treasures were being kept. In fact, before the gradual move towards conversion, they quickly came to see the benefits of Christianity, according to Parker. “Sometimes they had a kind of token conversion, called *primsigning* or ‘first signing’, where they had the sign of the cross made on them. It made them acceptable to engage in trading.”

HAMMER AND CROSS

The Vikings began by killing Christians; then they joined them

With the Vikings raiding and exploring other lands, they came ever more into contact with Christianity. At first, they showed a willingness to take on the trappings of this religion to help with their trading – what’s one more god to their pantheon anyway? – but as assimilation increased and generations passed, many Vikings converted. Often, pagan beliefs could be incorporated, so that Ragnarok and Judgement Day merged. Coins found in York, for example show the name of St Peter alongside Thor’s hammer.

As for Scandinavia itself, politics helped Christianity take hold. “There were missionaries early in the ninth century, but they don’t make much headway at all,” says Philip Parker. Instead, rulers started converting – such as Harald Bluetooth of Denmark in around AD 960 – for political expediency or to foster good relations with Christian nations. By the mid-11th century, Christianity had been established in Denmark and most of Norway, thanks to King Olaf Tryggvason.

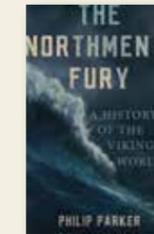


Christian priests are killed by Danish invaders in this illustration from 1857

GET HOOKED

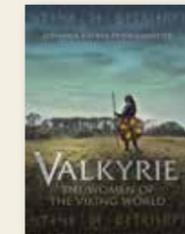
If we’ve whetted your appetite for all things Viking, you can explore them further with our pick of books, TV shows and documentaries

BOOKS



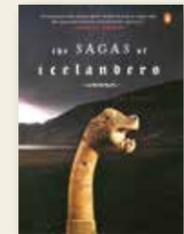
The Northman’s Fury: a History of the Viking World
By Philip Parker
(Vintage, 2015)

Philip Parker’s sweeping overview of the Vikings examines how the Northmen made themselves felt everywhere their longships took them – and how, despite a reputation of violence, theirs was a culture of beauty, literature and endurance.



Valkyrie: the Women of the Viking World
By Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir
(Bloomsbury, 2020)

The Vikings are stereotypically portrayed as bearded, bloodthirsty men – so where does that leave the women of the Viking World? Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir explores the roles of women in Viking society, and how their lives were more dynamic and diverse than we might think.



The Sagas of the Icelanders
Preface by Jane Smiley
(Penguin, 2005)

The sagas are epic yarns of the Viking world, and this collection of Icelandic sagas (also known as ‘family sagas’) serves as a wonderful introduction. It includes the fantastic Egil’s Saga (a 150-year romp) and the Vinland sagas, which offer glimpses into the Norse voyages to North America.

ONLINE AND AUDIO

► **The Volga Vikings** (*BBC Sounds*): Melvyn Bragg and guests discuss the legacy of the Vikings who headed east – crossing the Baltic and settling in modern-day Russia and the Ukraine. Listen at bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b00vrx8g

History
Extra

► For podcasts, features, quizzes, interviews and more on the Vikings, visit the Viking hub on our website: historyextra.com/period/viking

WATCH



Vikings
(History Channel, streaming on Amazon Prime)

Fantastical, mystical and slightly soapy, *Vikings* follows the exploits of the mythical saga hero Ragnar Lothbrok and his sons. Season 6 part 2 will air this autumn.



The Last Kingdom
(Netflix)

Based on Bernard Cornwell’s novel series of the same name, *The Last Kingdom* charts the struggle between Saxons and Danes in 9th-century England through the lens of the ever-conflicted Uhtred of Bebbanburg.

SHIP BURIALS

As the sea played a huge role in the lives of the Vikings, so it did in death as well

Due to their beliefs in the afterlife, Vikings were buried with all that they might need for their journey into the underworld. Craftsmen might be buried with their tools and warriors their weapons. We have little written evidence for their burial rituals, but Arab writer Ahmad Ibn Fadlan is one of the few people to have witnessed a 10th-century Viking burial. His account stated that the ritual included human sacrifice and torture.

For kings and the nobility, a ship burial was the most common

form and evidence of these have been found across Scandinavia, Britain and Russia. The dead were laid out in a ship with their possessions, and either sent out to sea and set alight or buried under a mound. Burial mounds also served a dual purpose as markers of dynastic territories.

The best-preserved ship burial to date was found in Norway and is known as the Oseberg ship. The find uncovered a complete longship, the remains of two women as well as horses, clothing, a cart and chests of goods.

RIGHT: The Oseberg ship from around AD 820 is one of the most well-preserved Viking ships ever found

BELOW: A modern-day reenactment of a Viking ship burial

