

The World of the Vikings

The Viking age has long been associated with unbridled piracy, when freebooters swarmed out of the northlands in their longships to burn and pillage their way across civilized Europe. Modern scholarship provides evidence this is a gross simplification, and that during this period much progress was achieved in terms of Scandinavian art and craftsmanship, marine technology, exploration, and the development of commerce. It seems the Vikings did as much trading as they did raiding.

The title "Viking" encompasses a wide designation of Nordic people; Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians, who lived during a period of brisk Scandinavian expansion in the middle ages, from approximately 800 to 1100 AD. This name may be derived from the old Norse vik(bay or creek). These people came from what is now Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, and had a self-sustaining, agricultural society, where farming and cattle breeding were supplemented by hunting, fishing, the extraction of iron and the quarrying of rock to make whetstones and cooking utensils; some goods, however, had to be traded; salt, for instance, which is a necessity for man and cattle alike, is an everyday item and thus would not have been imported from a greater distance than necessary, while luxury items could be brought in from farther south in Europe. Their chief export products were, iron, whetstones, and soapstone cooking pots, these were an essential contribution to a trade growth in the Viking age.

The contemporary references we have about the Vikings stem mainly from sources in western Europe who had bitter experiences with

the invaders, so we're most likely presented with the worst side of the Vikings. Archaeological excavations have shown evidence of homesteads, farms, and marketplaces, where discarded or lost articles tell of a common everyday life. As the Viking period progressed, society changed; leading Chieftain families accumulated sufficient land and power to form the basis for kingdoms, and the first towns were founded.

These market places and towns were based on craftsmanship and trade. Even though the town dwelling Vikings kept cattle, farmed, and fished to meet their household needs, the towns probably depended on agricultural supplies from outlying areas. They also unfortunately did not pay as much attention to renovation and waste disposal as they did to town planning, as evidenced by the thick layers of waste around settlements. In contemporary times the stench must have been nauseating.

Trade, however, was still plentiful, even in periods when Viking raids abounded, trade was conducted between Western Europe and the Viking homeland; an example of this being the North Norwegian chieftain, Ottar, and King Alfred of Wessex. Ottar visited King Alfred as a peaceful trader at the same time as Alfred was waging war with other Viking chieftains. The expansion of the Vikings was probably triggered by a population growth out stepping the capacities of domestic resources. Archaeological evidence shows that new farms were cleared in sparsely populated forests at the time of their expansion. The abundance of iron in their region and their ability to forge it into weapons and arm everyone setting off on raids helped give the

Vikings the upper hand in most battles.

The first recorded Viking raid occurred in 793 AD, the holy island of the Lindisfarne monastery just off the Northeast shoulder of England was pillaged, around the same time, there are recorded reports of raids elsewhere in Europe. There are narratives of raids in the Mediterranean, and as far as the Caspian Sea. Norsemen from Kiev even attempted an attack on Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire. Unfortunately, in the picture handed down to us in written accounts, the Vikings are portrayed as terrible robbers and bandits, this is strictly a single sided view; and, while the above statement is probably true, they had other traits as well. Some of their leaders were very skillful organizers, as evidenced by the fact that they were able to establish kingdoms in already-conquered territories. Some of these, such as the ones established in Dublin and York did not survive the Viking period; Iceland, however, is still a thriving nation. The Viking Kingdom in Kiev formed the basis of the Russian Empire.

The remains of fortresses dated to the end of the Viking period, have been found in Denmark; the fortresses are circular and are divided into quadrants, with square buildings in each of the four sections. The precision with which these castles were placed indicates an advanced sense of order, and a knowledge of surveying techniques and geometry in the Danish Kingdom. The farthest westward drive occurred around 1000 AD, when people from Iceland or Greenland attempted to plant roots in the North coast of Newfoundland in North America, however, conflicts arose between these colonists and the indigenous Indians or the Eskimos, and the colonists gave up.

Eventually, the Vikings plundering raids were replaced by colonization; in the north of England, place names reveal a large Viking population, farther south in Britain, an area was called The Danelaw. The French king gave Normandy as payment to a Viking chieftain so that he would keep other Vikings away. At the end of the Viking age, Christianity was widely accepted in the Nordic countries. It replaced a heathen religion, in which gods and goddesses each had power over their domain; Odin was their chieftain, Thor was the god of the warriors, the goddess Froy was responsible for the fertility of the soil and livestock; Loki was a trickster and a sorcerer and was always distrusted by the other gods. The gods had dangerous adversaries, the Jotuns, who represented the darker side of life.

Burial techniques indicate a strong belief in the afterlife; even though the dead could be buried or cremated, burial gifts were always necessary. The amount of equipment the dead took with them reflected their status in life as well as different burial traditions. A clue to the violent nature of Viking society, is the fact that nearly all the graves of males included weapons. A warrior had to have a sword, a wooden shield with an iron boss at its center to protect the hand, a spear, an ax, and a bow with 24 arrows. Helmets with horns, which are omnipresent in present day depiction's of Vikings have never been found amongst relics from the Viking period. Even in the graves with the most impressive array of weapons, there are signs of more peaceful activities; sickles, scythes, and hoes lie alongside of weapons; the blacksmith was buried with his hammer, anvil, tongs, and file. The coastal farmer has kept his fishing equipment and is

often buried in a boat. In women's graves we often find jewelry kitchen articles, and artifacts used in textile production, they were also usually buried in boats. There are also instances of burials being conducted in enormous ships, three examples of this are: ship graves from Oseberg, Tune, and Gokstad, which can be seen at the Viking ship museum at Bygdoy in Oslo. The Oseberg ship was built around 815-820 AD, was 22 meters (72 ft.) long and its burial was dated to 834 AD.

The Gokstad and Tune ships were constructed in the 890's, were 24 meters (79 ft.) and 20 meters (65 ft.) in length, respectively, and were buried right after 900 AD. In all 3 a burial chamber was constructed behind the mast, where the deceased was placed to rest in a bed, dressed in fine clothing, ample provisions were placed in the ship, dogs and horses were sacrificed, and a large burial mound was piled on top of the vessel; there are even instances in which servants, who may or may not have chosen to follow their masters in death, were sacrificed also. Some ship-graves in the Nordic countries and in Western European Viking sites were cremated, while the large graves along the Oslofjord were not. There are remnants of similar graves in other locations and it seems to have been standard practice to include sacrificed dogs and horses, fine weapons, some nautical equipment such as oars and a gangplank, balers, cooking pots for crewmembers, a tent and often fine imported bronze vessels which probably held food and drink for the dead.

Their sea-going vessels were very seaworthy, as has been demonstrated by replicas which have crossed the Atlantic in modern times. The hull design made the ships very fast, either under sail or

when oars were used. Even with a full load, the Gokstad ship drew no more than 1 meter (3.3 ft) of water, which means it could have been easily used for shore assaults. The ships were made to be light-weight and flexible, to work with the elements instead of against them; they were built on a solid keel, which together with a finely curved bow, forms the backbone of the vessel. Strafe after strafe was fitted to keel and stem and these were bolted to each other with iron rivets. This shell provided strength and flexibility, then, ribs were made from naturally curved trees were fitted and these provided additional strength. To increase flexibility, strafes and ribs were bound together. Lateral support came from cross supports at the waterline, and solid logs braced the mast.

Our main knowledge of Viking art comes from metal jewelry, the format of which is modest. The choice of motif is the same as with woodcarving. The artists were preoccupied with imaginary animals which were ornamentally carved, twisted and braided together in a tight asymmetric arabesque, their quality of work was superb. The Viking raids tapered off around the year 1000. By this time the Vikings had become Christian, which had a restrictive effect on their urge to plunder. Denmark, Sweden, and Norway had become separate kingdoms generally united under single monarchs. Wars were now steered by the shifting alliances of the kings. The age of private battles was gone. Trade relations that were established in the Viking period continued, and the Nordic countries emerged as part of a Christian Europe.