

Vikings

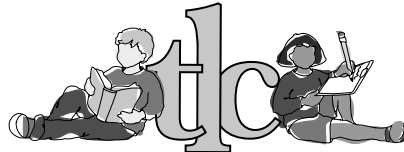
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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank a certain Viking explorer—one Leif (the Lucky) Erikson—for being the first European to discover and settle in the spectacular province of Newfoundland in my own magnificent country, Canada. I would also like to thank my own Viking: my strong-willed, determined Mom, Barb, who is my greatest strength (not to mention my indefatigable proofreader); my handyman Dad, Paul; my son Patrick who took a keen, mathematical interest in my rate of Viking completion; my other kids, Matthew and Stephanie, who relinquished their computer time for months on end; my husband, Jonathan, who gave me the opportunity to pursue my writing dreams; and my Auntie Bet, one of my biggest fans and a pinch-proofreader. I would also like to reach far back in my own personal history to thank someone who might, in the indirect way of time and circumstance, be ultimately responsible for this book, my Aunt Lorraine: the first university graduate on my family tree and the one who kept me going on this course at a time in my life when I was ready to throw in the undergraduate towel at our Alma Mater.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the hardy, hardworking/hard-living, ordinary men and women who were the Vikings. European history—and our own desire for spectacle—has awarded them a nasty and violent reputation, but most Vikings were little different from you and I. They were a simple people who did what they had to do to survive.

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Illustrations by Gary Mohrman

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Dear Teacher or Parent,

Welcome to the Viking Age: a time of trading, raiding, exploration and . . . farming? The Vikings were not the bloodthirsty, lawless barbarians that we have come to know, love and fear. Viking warriors were terrifying and even ruthless, but most Vikings were simple, unsophisticated, hardworking farmers who lived on small, isolated subsistence farms. Farms were separated from one another by natural barriers such as forest, bogs, mountains and lakes and so each homestead produced what it needed to survive. The Scandinavian homeland was harsh, inhospitable and insufficient, and it was the Vikings' constant hunger for land—and unquenchable thirst for adventure—that drove many of these seafaring folk abroad to plunder, to discover and, yes, to settle. They did not raid new lands to conquer, but to take what they wanted (albeit violently) and go home, or to establish themselves peacefully and productively among their new neighbors. Through the subjectivity of history we have come to focus on the brutality of the Vikings—to dwell on their pillaging and savagery—but in truth they were a relatively democratic people who had strong family ties and a fierce sense of loyalty, justice, independence and escapade. They were astute traders and fearless explorers, and in the course of their extensive travels they discovered North America and helped to shape the face of modern Europe.

Sincerely,



Tracey Ann Schofield

Who Were the Vikings?



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Vikings were the people who lived in the Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Norway and Sweden in the period from 780 to 1100. For 300 years, from the 8th to the 11th centuries, the Vikings made their frightening and formidable presence felt throughout the known world. In search of land and riches, these fearless raiders, traders and explorers ranged across Europe, voyaged as far as Baghdad, and even sailed to America. The speed and daring of their hit-and-run attacks quickly became legendary, and even today the word *Viking* conjures up images of bloodthirsty and uncivilized pagan warriors. Christian monks wrote with horror about the Vikings' cruel and violent raids on monasteries and towns. So much were the Vikings feared in Europe and beyond that Christians ended their prayers with the words, *From the fury of the Northmen, O Lord, deliver us.*

Much of our knowledge of the Viking Age comes from accounts written by the Vikings' enemies. The monks who wrote despairingly of the destruction, robbery and murder wrought by the Viking raiders could hardly be expected to mention the many Norsemen who stayed peacefully at home, farming, fishing and carving. And they couldn't give the Vikings credit for their incredible bravery, bold spirit of adventure and seafaring expertise since it was these very qualities that made it possible for the Vikings to ravage the rest of Europe.

Thanks to their infamous activity as murderous raiders, the Vikings developed a terrible reputation as ruthless and wrathful

savages. But this is only part of their story. And although some Vikings did lead piratical raids against the Christian countries of Europe, the Vikings were not uncivilized barbarians. They were simple farmers, superb shipbuilders, excellent sailors and navigators, shrewd traders and skilled craftsmen who lived in a relatively open and democratic society.

Fabulous Facts

Although the word "Viking" conjures up images of pillaging, plundering and piracy, no one knows its true origin. "Viking" might derive from the Norse word "vik," meaning "creek," or "vig" meaning "fight." To go "a-Viking" meant to join an overseas expedition to gain riches and honor.

The Vikings were known by different names. In the West, the Vikings were called Northmen, Norsemen or more specifically from their district of origin. The Arabs called them fire-worshippers or heathens. The Byzantines called them barbarians. In the East, they were known as Rus or Varangians.

It was a large growth in population that caused the explosion of the Norsemen from their homelands. There was not enough fertile land to go around, and the Vikings took to the sea in search of wealth, riches and sustainable places to live. Some went as traders, seeking new markets for furs, amber, ivory and other products of the North. Others sought their fortunes at sword point. Still others left to fight for new homes and a better life abroad.

Farmers



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Most Vikings were farmers, not warriors, and farming was a backbreaking family affair that was carried out in harsh conditions on poor, infertile soil. With its northerly latitude and short growing season, Scandinavia—which was mostly forest and mountain—was ill-suited to agriculture. Good land was hard to find, and many families were forced to sail away from their homelands in search of richer soils.

The Vikings who remained in Scandinavia lived on small isolated farmsteads. Some of these comprised a single building, others a cluster of dwellings, huts and outhouses. Where the land was fertile, the Vikings built larger settlements and these often wealthy communities were organized like small, self-sufficient villages. Here, large numbers of freemen lived and worked their own farms with their extended families. A few wealthy Vikings owned larger estates. With slaves to do the heavy labor and hired men and women to carry out such subsistence activities as weaving cloth and minding the flocks, rich men could take leave of their farms in the warm months to join raiding parties or trading expeditions overseas.

Fabulous Facts

A man's wealth was often measured by the number of animals he owned. A wealthy farmer might have byres (sheds where animals passed the winter) to house a hundred cattle.

Vikings sometimes established temporary, seasonal settlements in high mountain pastures for grazing flocks, fishing or digging bog-iron. (The practice of transhumance—driving herds to upland summer pastures and wintering them in lowland areas—grew with the pressure on natural resources.) Crude huts and caves were used for shelter.

The amount of land owned by a man—and his status—often changed with the weather. After a series of bad years, smaller, less prosperous farmers might have to borrow from their more fortunate neighbors. This type of obligation would bind men of lesser stature to the protection of wealthier men, whom they would have to support in return.

*Even the Scandinavians who stayed at home lived dangerous lives. They were constantly under threat from pirates, warring neighbors and family feuds. To stay alive, the Vikings tempered their bravery with caution. In *Hávamál*, the poet warns: "Let the man who opens a door be on the lookout for an enemy behind it."*

Traders



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While most Viking families lived on farms far from their neighbors, some lived in small towns established around trading posts. These were generally waterfront towns, built by the sea, on rivers or on the shores of remote, deep sea inlets called fjords, where ships could moor for loading. Some of these Viking market towns - Hedeby in Denmark, Birka in Sweden, Kaupang in Norway, Jorvik (York) in England, Dublin in Ireland and Kiev in the Ukraine - became major trading centers.

Fabulous Fact

The old market towns of Hedeby and Birka were abandoned (unlike York, which has been rebuilt many times since the Viking Age). Hedeby was never resurrected after being attacked and burnt in 1069 and Birka lost its trade when the sea level dropped and ships could no longer reach it. At both of these sites, archaeologists have found the remains of luxury goods (including glassware, silk, brocade and wine) and everyday items such as jewelry, shoes, spoons, needles and pins.

As merchants and traders, the Vikings were second to none. Their home trade was based in the towns of Hedeby, Birka and Kaupang, but trading routes were soon established in distant lands. They exchanged the riches of the North—timber, iron, furs, animal skins, amber and ivory—for exotic goods: wheat,

silver and cloth from Britain; wine from Germany; salt, pottery and gold from the Mediterranean (and later, rye from Russia and silk, jewelry and spices from China). In about 860, Vikings opened up new trade routes eastwards through the lands of the Slavs. They sailed across the Baltic Sea and upriver into Russia. Their trade turned the cities of Holmgard (Novgorod) and Könugard (Kiev) into powerful states and marked the birth of Russia as a nation. From there, they crossed the Black and Caspian Seas and continued on foot or by camel to Constantinople (now Istanbul) which they called Miklagard (the Great City), Jerusalem and the Arab city of Baghdad. (Some Vikings even made their fortunes trading slaves to Arab countries in exchange for silver.) Trade networks in the East linked up with older routes, such as the “silk road” to China.

Try This

Broker a (non-permanent) trade with a classmate. Find a trading partner. Find out what imports he or she has to offer that you need, and what exports you have to offer that he or she needs. If you don't have anything your trading partner wants, find out what he or she does want and then try to make an exchange with another trading partner who has that particular commodity. How do you assign relative values to your goods? Was your trade fair? Can you trade a good you have acquired for something even more desirable or valuable?

Raiders



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It was toward the end of the 8th century that the first Viking raiders unleashed their fury on Europe.

In 793, a band of heavily armed Vikings ran their longships ashore on the island of Lindisfarne (in northeast England), the site of a Christian monastery. The resident monks tried to hide their precious crosses, silver chalices and gold-studded Bibles, but the Vikings axed them down, set fire to their buildings and stole everything of value. This was the first recorded Viking raid, and it signaled the beginning of a period of terror unparalleled in European history.

From Scotland in the north to the Mediterranean world in the south, no one was prepared for the fury of the Norsemen. The rich, and often weak and divided kingdoms of Europe were easy prey for the Vikings. It was impossible to guard every inch of coast or every river mouth. Raiders met with little resistance, and the pickings were rich. What began as a trickle of Viking ships soon became a flood.

They came in the summer months, in small numbers at first; three or four ships sailing together. They would run their shallow-draft crafts up onto a beach and then rush wildly ashore, looting, burning and killing. They attacked rich monasteries and poor villages; priests and peasants. No life was spared, except for the pretty young women and children who could be sold into slavery and important persons who could be ransomed. If the raid was a success and there was no likelihood of retaliation, the raiders might pause long enough to celebrate, sharing out the booty and feasting on slaughtered animals and stolen wine and ale. They might even tear through the countryside for a day or two on stolen horses, looting as they went. But usually they used their famous hit-and-run tactics, launching surprise attacks and hasty retreats; a performance that was repeated several times before the raiders set sail for home with their booty, in advance of the autumn gales. Coastal towns were most vulnerable at first, but the Vikings gradually established semi-permanent bases where they wintered over and launched more frequent attacks further inland.

Some people fought the Viking raiders and lost. Others lacked the courage to face such a terrifying and apparently invincible enemy. Still others bribed the Vikings to leave, offering them vast sums of money raised from taxes, called Danegeld. King Charles the Bald of France paid the Viking leader Ragnar Hairy-Breeks 7000 pounds (3175 kg) of silver to retreat from Paris in 845. But even this did not buy immunity. The Viking raiders accepted the loot, but returned time and time again, demanding ever larger sums of money.

Opportunistic pirates as opposed to conquerors, most Vikings restricted their activities to raiding. However, some Vikings so liked the look of the rich and fertile lands they were looting that they decided to stay. They built fortified camps as bases and spread out from these, occupying the adjacent countryside. While their intention was to colonize these lands, not to rule them, the Vikings often forced the local people to flee or submit to their ways. Sometimes they came to an arrangement with a local monarch. In France in 911, for example, King Charles “the Simple” gave the Viking chief Rollo “the Ganger” and his men a province in northern France (which they already occupied) if they promised to defend it from other Viking raiders. The province became known as Northmen’s Land—Normandy—and a newly baptized Rollo became its duke. Once established, Rollo’s warriors sent for their families and went back to being farmers and traders, fighting only when necessary.

Fabulous Facts

Although a large fleet of Vikings would likely include men from all over Scandinavian, Danish, Norwegian and Swedish raiders often operated separately in specific areas: the Danes focusing on England, Wales, Ireland, France and the Mediterranean world; the Norwegians on Scotland, Iceland and farther west; and the Swedes on the lands around the eastern Baltic. (Of the 85,000 Arabic coins found in Scandinavia, 80,000 were found in Sweden.)

Some warriors went raiding for years at a time. Björn Jarnsmiða and his partner, Hasting, spent three years with 62 ships in Spain, North Africa, France and Italy, then lost most of their treasure to storms on the way home.

The pagan Viking raiders had nothing against Christians. They targeted churches and monasteries because these places were filled with incredible riches that were associated with religious rituals the Vikings did not recognize.

Many Viking raiders used their treasure to purchase land on which to settle or to buy the equipment and ships necessary to become successful merchants and traders.

Viking Hoards

On their raids, Viking men often acquired many valuable objects. There were no banks in Viking time—and no safety deposit boxes—so treasure was usually hidden away inside strong wooden lockboxes (which could only be opened with the key worn on a chain around a woman’s neck). Sometimes, however, Vikings were forced to bury their treasure—jewelry, coins, gold and silver ingots and hack silver—in a secret place for safekeeping. Many of these “hoards” were never revisited, and more than 1000 have already been unearthed. The largest Viking hoard ever found (more than four times larger than any other) was discovered in 1840 by workmen who were repairing the bank of the Ribble River in Cuerdale, England. Hidden in about 903, the Cuerdale treasure chest contained 88 pounds (40 kg) of silver, and more than 7000 coins from all over the Viking world.



Warriors



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Viking warriors were among the fiercest ever known. Their enemies described them as packs of wolves pouring out of the north, and they were feared throughout Europe for their savagery. They were violent, cruel and fearless. If the true spirit of the Viking Age was daring courage, then Viking warriors were the embodiment of the Viking spirit. They had no fear of death, and the greatest glory was to die on the battlefield. (Surrendering or being taken prisoner would have brought shame and dishonor to a Viking's family.) To the Viking warrior, honor and glory in battle were the only things that lasted forever. So says the *Hávamál*: "Cattle die, kindred die, every man is mortal: but I know one thing that never dies, The glory of the great dead."

In spite of their ferocity, most early Viking warriors were poor farmers, not trained soldiers. They turned their hand to fighting to improve their situation or to proclaim their loyalty to their local chieftain. There were no organized Viking armies, but as members of loyal bands of followers, or *liðs*, warriors could be called upon by their chieftain to do battle or join a raiding expedition at anytime. The bond between a territorial chief, his family and followers was a strong and pervasive one. A typical war band was made up of freemen (*karls*) who fearlessly and unquestioningly followed their earl (*jarl*) into battle, forming a tight guard around him when the fighting got tough. It was considered more important for a man to show loyalty to his family or lord than to any kingdom.

While the early Vikings fought for themselves and not for their country, later Vikings fought for their king and not themselves. Kings had the power to raise a fighting force (or *leiðang*) of men, ships, weapons and supplies. Kingdoms were divided into small units, and each unit was obligated to provide the king with one warrior. Groups of units pooled their resources to donate a

ship that would carry their warriors on raids to faraway lands. These war bands were more organized, and as the scale of warfare became larger and more complex, raiding parties grew to armies that often wintered away from home.

Viking war bands were not like most armies. They were small groups of fierce fighting men who relied on surprise attacks and ambushes to defeat their enemies. Fighting was a brutal, hand-to-hand affair. Warriors let loose waves of arrows and spears and then charged the enemy lines. Swords clashed, axes sliced the air (and worse), and heavy shields bashed together. There was kicking and biting, bloody wounds and cracked skulls, death and dying.

Fabulous Facts

The valor of a Viking warrior was closely linked to his religious beliefs: the harder he fought in this world, the more he would be favored by the gods in the afterlife. There was little unnecessary heroism, however. Vikings fought for gain not glory.

In Viking times, it was the personal power of the man and the support he enjoyed that held a kingdom. Power depended on prestige and the support of other, less powerful men.

Beserkirs were a special type of Viking warrior. They prepared for battle by dressing in bearskin—"beserk"—cloaks or shirts (and even bear head helmets!) and working themselves into a frenzied rage. Once in this state (which might have been drug-induced), the Beserkirs had no concern for their safety or even their lives. This is the origin of the modern term, "going beserk."

Weaponry

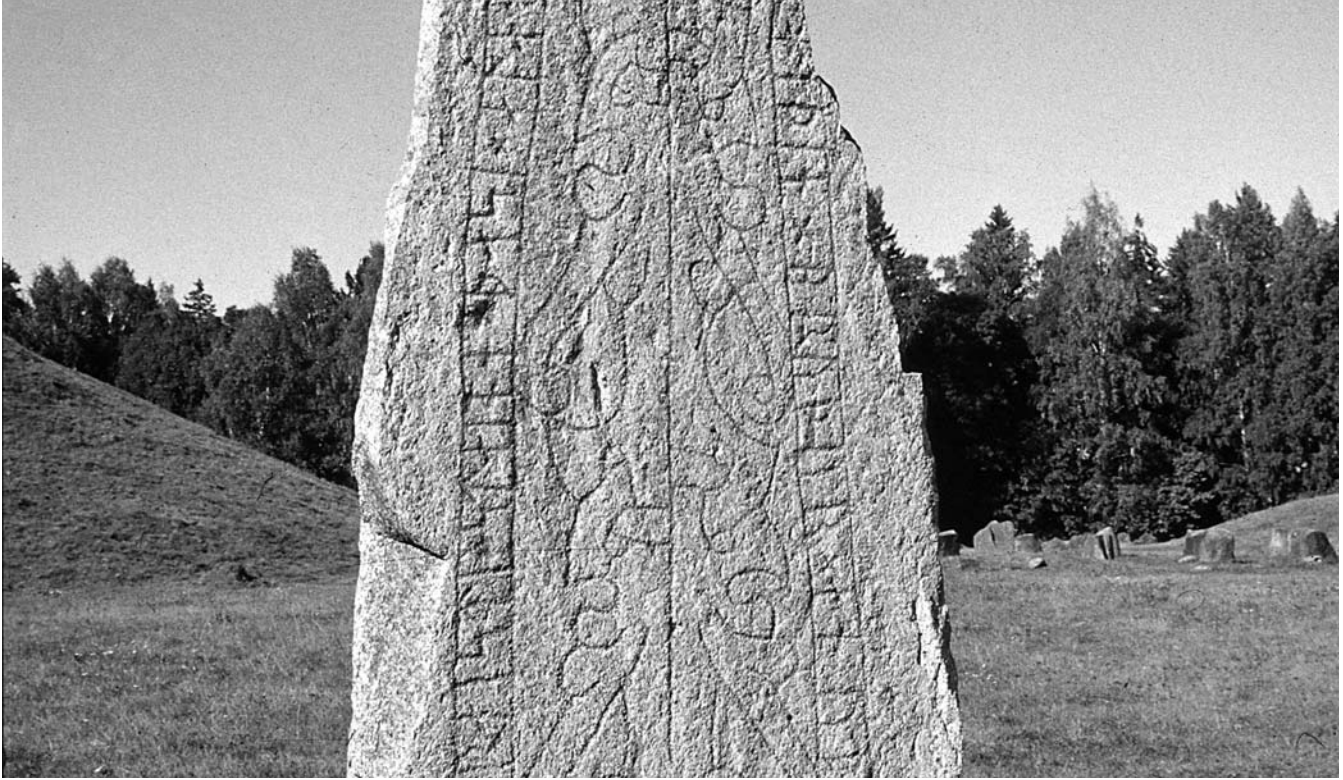


Photo Dan Carlsson www.arkeodok.com

In large part, Viking raiders owe their success to the expert craftsmen who made their mighty weapons. A warrior's bow and arrow, spear, axe, shield and especially his double-edged sword were his most prized possessions, and a weapons-smith who produced items of quality and durability could acquire considerable wealth and prestige.

Offense

Designed as single-handed slashing weapons, Viking swords were objects of devastating efficiency. The best and most reliable sword-blades were pattern-welded. The three-foot (1 m) long blades were crafted through a long, complicated process that involved twisting individual strips of heated iron and then beating these together in a particular sequence to form a composite whole. Impurities in the metal—which would have weakened a blade and caused it to snap under impact—were removed during the repeated hammering. Separate cutting edges of tough steel (made by adding carbon to heated iron) were welded to the blade afterwards. Then the blade was sharpened and polished. If the blade's finished surface was scarred in a snakeskin pattern (which was caused by the succession of hammering welds), a warrior could be confident that his sword would be both strong and flexible.

Fabulous Facts

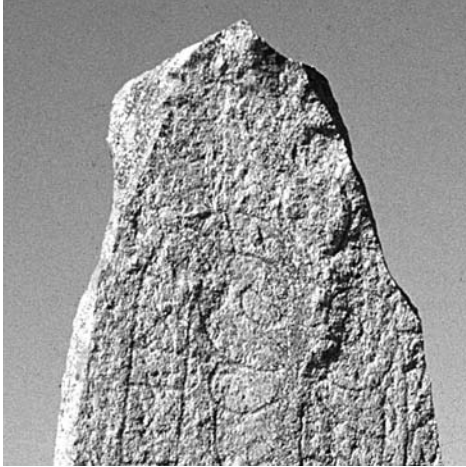
Because a Viking's position in society could be told by the quality of his weapons, and especially his sword—the more

wealthy the man, the more valuable his sword—the hilts (handles) were often lavishly decorated with inlays of brass, silver or even gold and the guards were encrusted with precious metals or carved out of ivory. The scabbard (sword case), which was slung from the belt or a baldric across the shoulder, was also finely ornamented. These magnificent weapons accompanied warriors to their graves for use in the afterlife or were passed down through a family.

In Scandinavian mythology, poetry and sagas, swords were endowed with magical powers and given highly evocative names (like, "Killer") that celebrated the strength and sharpness of the blade or the glittering decoration of its hilt. Viking warriors also named their swords.

Try This

Make your own Viking sword. Take three three-foot (1 m) long strips of tinfoil. Roll each strip lengthwise and crumple to form a compressed tube or rod. Braid or twist the rods together. Squeeze the foil to make a sword shape. Hammer the rods until they are flat and smooth the edges of your blade with the back of your fingernail to make them "sharp." Cut out two identical pieces of cardboard—which are slightly wider than your sword blade—for a hilt. Use white glue to attach the two halves of the hilt. (Make sure the end of the sword blade is inside!) Paint your "ivory" hilt white or cream and decorate with "inlays" of silver or gold marker or string. Add press-on jewels if desired. Give your sword a good fighting name, like "Shield Biter."



Less common than the sword, but more often associated with Viking warriors, was the battle-axe. Vikings used two basic types of axes, both of which had heads of iron and wooden handles: short-handled tools (such as the woodsman's ax) and long-handled weapons. The broadax used in battle was a terrifying instrument of death. When held with two hands and swung around the head it could deliver a blow of immense force.

Rounding out the Viking's arsenal of weapons was the bow and arrow and the spear. Both were used for hunting as well as for fighting. Spears came in all grades, from plain iron points to lavishly ornamented masterpieces. Light spears were made for throwing; heavier spears for thrusting.

Defense

Viking warriors were not like the uniformed, equipped soldiers of an official army: they had to dress and arm themselves. They wore their own clothes and brought their own weapons into battle. Helmets were worn to protect the head. These were usually made of leather and fitted close to the skull, like a cap. Wealthier men and jarls might wear helmets made of iron which were conical in shape with spectacle-like eye guards or a bar to protect the nose. Viking warriors wore their everyday tunics, trousers and cloaks when they went raiding. A rich jarl might own a brynja, or chain mail shirt, made of interlinking rings of iron.

Fabulous Facts

Although Vikings are often depicted wearing helmets adorned with animal horns or wings, these were never worn in battle. If they existed at all, they were worn by chieftains during special ceremonies.

It took a long time to make chain mail. Each iron ring was forged separately then linked to the last one and closed with a rivet or welded in place. It took thousands of rings to make one brynja.

A Viking warrior's shield was his main defense against piercing arrows and blows from swords and battle-axes. The heavy circular shield was about three feet (1 m) in diameter, and made from wooden planks. An iron boss (knob) was mounted in the middle of the shield-front. The boss, which was sometimes fitted with a spike for thrusting at the enemy, protected the handgrip—and the warrior's hand—at the back of the shield. The edges of the shield were bound in leather or iron, and the entire surface was often painted in bright colors.

Try This

Make your own Viking shield. Cut out a three-foot (1 m) diameter cardboard circle. Poke a hole in the middle of the circle. Knot the two ends of a 12" (30 cm) piece of twine, leaving a 2" (5 cm) tail. Push the tail through the back of your shield and knot in the front. (Make sure the knots are big enough to prevent the twine from slipping through the hole.) This is your hand grip. Glue a small plastic container to the front of your shield in the middle. (It will conceal the knot.) This is your boss. Paint the shield in a bright color or stripes. To "edge" your shield, cut a 2" (5 cm) length of brown fabric that is slightly longer than the outside edge of your cardboard circle. Staple the fabric to the front of the shield 1" (2.5 cm) in from the edge. Turn your shield over and staple the overhanging fabric to the back. Give your shield a special Viking name, such as "Sword Eater."



Transportation



Photo Dan Carlsson www.arkeodok.com

Traveling around Scandinavia was difficult at the best of times. The rugged, mountainous landscape was densely packed with forests, marshes, lakes and rivers, which made it virtually impossible to travel for more than a few consecutive miles overland. Getting around was often easiest in winter, when snow covered uneven ground and the abundant waterways turned to ice. The Vikings used wooden skis, horse-shoes, sledges and skates to traverse the frozen landscape. Viking ice skates, called “ice-legs,” were made by strapping the smoothed leg bones of cattle and horses to the bottoms of leather boots.

To improve their speed, skaters sometimes pushed themselves along using pointed iron poles. Vikings also traveled in large sleighs pulled by horses. (These were sometimes wagons that had been lifted off their wheel undercarriage and fitted with runners.) To stop the animals from slipping on the ice, smiths nailed iron crampons, or studs, to their hooves.

Fabulous Facts

The word “ski” is Norwegian. Prehistoric rock carvings in Norway show that people have been skiing there for at least 5000 years.

The Vikings also used sleds pulled by teams of dogs to get around in the winter. These sleds were quite large, about the size of a wagon, but they had two wooden runner blades instead of wheels.

In spite of the landscape, the Vikings managed to maintain a rough system of track-like roadways (which they made with sunken timbers), raised causeways over marshy ground and wooden (and occasionally stone) bridges. In the summer, Vikings rode, walked or traveled in wheeled carts and covered wagons pulled by horses or oxen.

Fabulous Facts

It was the responsibility of the local people to keep up their roadways. Fortunately, Christian Vikings believed that building roads and bridges was a pious act that would ensure their place in Heaven.

The first bridge in Scandinavia—a huge wooden trestle—was built at Ravning Enge in Denmark by King Harald Bluetooth around the year 979.

For the most part, however, Vikings preferred to travel by water.

Viking Ships

For the Vikings, the open sea was a highway and inland rivers were secondary roads. Water was central to their lives, and they were among the most skilled shipbuilders, sailors and navigators the world has ever known. Ships and boats of all shapes and sizes were used for transport. There were ships for crossing the ocean, ships for following the coast and ships for sailing in narrow inlets and rivers. There were boats for fishing and boats for

ferrying people across fjords. There were slow, broad-beamed ships for carrying cargo; sturdy, wide-bodied ships for exploring uncharted waters; long, sleek, fast ships for raiding expeditions.

Fabulous Fact

Vikings were expert navigators. Whenever possible, they sailed within sight of land, following coastlines with known landmarks and sketching out their own simple maps to use as charts on future voyages. When crossing the open ocean, however, Vikings relied on other familiar environmental indicators. They knew how to tell time (to within a quarter of an hour) and the speed they were traveling by the position of the sun and the stars; they understood winds, currents, wave formations, tides—and the relationship of these to land masses—better than any other European seafarers; and they were knowledgeable in the behaviors of seabirds, marine mammals and fish.

The Vikings relied heavily on two main types of ship. The knarr, used for fishing, trading and transporting colonists, was a sailing vessel designed for the open ocean. It was a shorter, wider ship with a covered deck at each end and a deep central hold. The extra width allowed passengers to carry adequate supplies of food and water for extended journeys, and for merchants to carry large cargoes and colonists to transport their farm animals and seeds for future crops. But the most famous vessel by far, was the terror-invoking Viking longship, or dragonship, which was used for raiding.

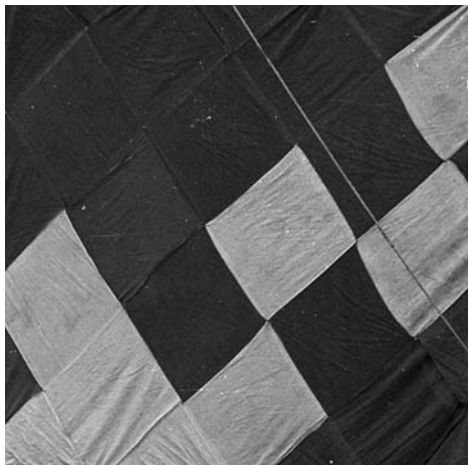
What first amazed and horrified the English was the speed with which the Vikings could launch an attack. Their ships appeared out of nowhere and ran aground on the beach, which enabled Viking warriors to leap straight into action and then leave as quickly as they had come. Their speed and stealth was made possible by the design of their ships, which were perfectly suited to both the open ocean and to inland waterways. Because of their shallow draught construction and comparatively light weight (they could be carried overland), Viking ships—unlike other vessels of the time—had no need of deep water, safe anchorages or quaysides: they could use any sloping beach as their harbor. Vikings could attack islands, coastal settlements and inland cities and monasteries with equal ease.

The Viking longship, or warship, was the longest, sleekest and quickest of all Viking vessels. It was sailed at sea and rowed in narrow inlets. Longships varied in length from about 60-90 feet (18-27 m) and from 8-17 feet (2.7-5.2 m) wide. Depending on its size, a longship had 24 to 50 oar-ports (32-40 was probably standard) and carried at least as many warriors (and sometimes even horses). The round shields of the warriors were hung from slots along the side of the ship. Longships had an open deck, without cabins or cross-seats (thwarts). When rowing, each man sat on a hide-covered chest which contained his personal possessions, clothing, weapons and food rations. An awning of sailcloth could be erected to keep off the sun or rain. Warriors usually slept onboard, but they sometimes ran the ship ashore and camped on the beach. Longships were speedy vessels, yet most voyages were long and hard, frequently interrupted by storms and battles. Supplies of fresh water and food—anything that could be easily stored, such as apples, cheese and dried meat—were carried onboard. Fish could be caught along the way. Longships often traveled in fleets. These could be large. Up to 300 of them were said to have anchored in the harbor of the Jomsberg Viking fortress in Denmark.

Fabulous Facts

When at sea, the prow of a longship was fitted with the carved head of a fierce dragon. The carving was removed in harbor because it was believed that some of the bad spirits of the land would be angered by the presence of a dragon.

When Vikings encountered river rapids, they lifted their ships out of the water and put them on wooden rollers. The ships were then pushed overland and relaunched on the other side of the rapids.



Building a Viking Ship

Built for different waters and different uses, Viking ships were all variations on the same design. Ships were built in the open air, on a beach or riverbank, out of cut, seasoned timber. Oak was the shipbuilders' first choice of wood, followed by pine, beech and ash. Ships were clinker-built: their hulls were made of overlapping planks, or strakes, which were riveted together and nailed or pegged to the ship's ribs. The gaps between the strakes were stuffed with wool or animal hair and coated with tar made from pine resin. This caulking kept the water out, and made the ship more flexible. They had a strong keel (the base or backbone of a ship) for cutting through the water and preventing the vessel from slipping sideways in the wind. This was usually cut from a single, straight oak. The ships were finely curved and symmetrical, and had a high, matching prow and stern (front and back). They were steered from the back by a rudder, or steering board (oar), on the right-hand side of the ship. (The nautical term *star-board* is thought to have derived from the Viking word, *styra*, meaning "to steer.") A tiller was attached to the steering oar, and the steersman moved the tiller fore (forward) or aft (backward) to turn the ship to the left or right. The ships could be rowed or sailed. They had oar-ports (holes) at intervals across one strake. They also had a central pine mast which was mounted in a block of wood called a kerling. The mast, which could be raised and lowered, supported a large square sail made of heavy woolen or linen cloth. This was often died in a plain, bright color (often blood red to strike fear into anyone who saw the ship coming), or striped. Ship's rigging (ropes) were made of hemp, willow boughs or sealskin.

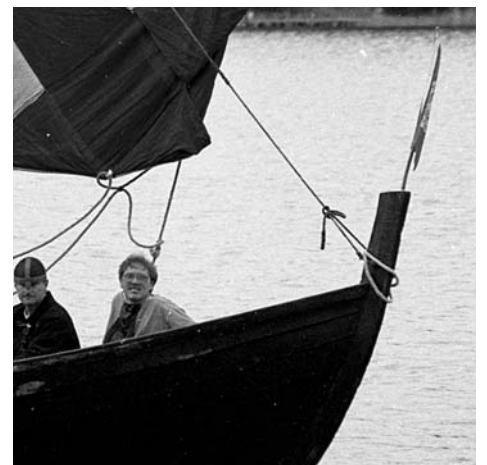
Fabulous Facts

In 1962, five Viking ships were excavated from Roskilde Fjord in Sjælland, Denmark. The ships had been filled with stones and deliberately sunk (scuttled) around the year 1000, probably to block the channel and protect the harbor from enemy ships. One, is the longest Viking ship ever found: 92 feet (28 m) from prow to stern. Another was a merchant ship, 45 feet 3 inches (13.8 m) long and 10 feet 10 inches (3.3 m) wide. A replica, called Roar Ege, was built to see how much cargo such a ship could hold and how fast she could go. In good winds and with five tons of cargo on board, Roar Ege averages 4 knots or nautical miles per hour (4.6 mph) and has reached speeds of 8 knots (9.3 mph).

Because wood rots quickly, there is little left of most Viking ships. A few have survived, however, thanks to the Viking custom of burying the rich and powerful in ships. One of the grandest was excavated at Gokstad, beside the Oslo Fjord (inlet) in Norway in 1880. The slender, elegant and surprisingly strong ship sat under a large mound and had a burial chamber on its deck. The skeleton of a man lay in the chamber, surrounded by worldly possessions: clothes, a cauldron, six wooden cups, a bucket, six beds, three boats, a sledge, tent frames and skeletons of 12 horses, six dogs and a peacock. He had been buried around 900 AD. The symmetrical Gokstad ship is 76 feet (23.2 m) long and 17 feet (5.2 m) wide. The keel is a single piece of oak, cut from a tree that was at least 82 feet (25 m) tall! There are 16 overlapping strakes (planks) and oar-ports (holes) on each side, and 32 shields painted yellow and black alternately. It has a 10 foot 10 inch (3.3 m) flat-bladed steering oar with a tiller carved in the shape of an animal head. A full-size replica of the Gokstad ship was sailed across the Atlantic Ocean from Sweden to Newfoundland in 1893. The trip took 28 days.

Try This

Re-create a Viking longship. Arrange foot-long strips of paper on the ground to mark the shape of a Viking longship recovered by archaeologists that was 57 feet (17.4 m) long and 8 feet (2.6 m) across at the widest point. Mark 12 oar-ports on each side. Have 24 "warriors" sit inside the ship and row together. How would it feel to call this ship home for a month-long voyage at sea?



Exploration

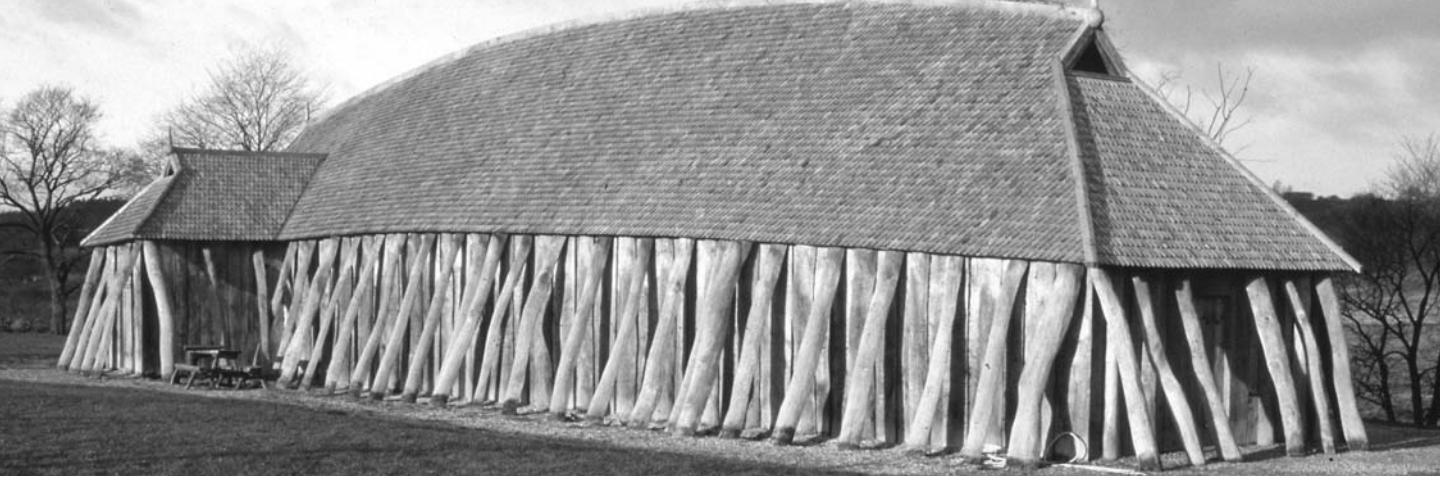


Photo Dan Carlsson www.arkeodok.com

The Vikings were great adventurers and daring explorers and, unlike most of their European contemporaries, dared to sail out of sight of land. In search of new land, they journeyed to the Faeroes, Shetlands and Orkneys; and the coasts of Scotland, England, Wales and Ireland. They sailed their ships into the frozen, uncharted waters of the North Atlantic, discovering Iceland in 870 and Greenland in 985.

Fabulous Facts

***S**hips full of eager settlers set sail for the new lands. Between 870 and 930, more than 10,000 Vikings arrived in Iceland alone.*

The first Viking settler in Iceland was Ingolf, from Sunnfjord, Norway. He built a large farm on a bay overlooking the sea, which later became Iceland's capital, Reykjavik.

Eric the Red

The most famous Viking explorations were made by Eric “the Red” Thorvaldson and his remarkable family. After being outlawed from his home in Norway for “some killings,” Eric moved his family to Iceland. Outlawed from there in 982—this time for his involvement in a feud that claimed the lives of several men—he set sail with his wife and children and a few friends for Gunnbjarnar Skerries, a great land to the west where a sailor named Gunbjørn had been driven ashore some 60 years earlier. Eric found Gunnbjarnar Skerries and gave his new home a more appealing name: Greenland.

Eric and his entourage spent three years on the southwest side of Greenland, setting off each summer to explore as far as the Arctic Circle. In 985 Eric returned to Iceland and persuaded others to emigrate. Twenty-five ships left Iceland. Fourteen completed the journey. Eric and his wife Thjodhild built their stone and turf farmhouse on the best site, which they called Brattahlid.

The other colonists built nearby. In all, 190 farms were established in the Eastern Settlement. (Ninety farms were built in the Western Settlement some 180 miles [290 km] northwest.) In all, 3000 settlers called Greenland home, and by 1030 all the available farmland had been claimed.

While life was never easy in Greenland, the climate was warm enough to support cattle and sheep. Reindeer and seals were plentiful and there was enough driftwood for fires, but the settlers had to import most of their timber and grain, and all of the metals they needed. These were purchased in exchange for hides, furs (particularly of Arctic fox and polar bear), the ivory tusks of walrus and narwhal and hunting falcons. (They even shipped live polar bears to a king for his private zoo!) When Eric died, in 1001, he left behind a thriving community.

But it was not to last. The temperature dropped by several degrees in the latter part of the 13th century. Icebergs made traveling to and from Greenland increasingly dangerous and difficult. Food became scarce and the undernourished people and animals died of cold, hunger and disease. The Vikings came into violent conflict with the native Eskimos to the north. The few settlers who survived returned to Iceland. The Western Settlement disappeared in the mid 14th century; the Eastern Settlement sometime after 1409.

Fabulous Fact

***V**iking settlers must have explored the frozen north of the island. A runestone, carved around the year 1300, was found at Kingiktorsuak, Greenland, at latitude 73° north.*

Leif the Lucky

One of Eric's sons, Leif “the Lucky,” carried on in his father's footsteps. In 1001 he set sail for a land to the west that had been glimpsed 17 years earlier by a man named Bjarni Herjolfsson, a timber merchant who was blown off-course in a gale. After sev-

eral days at sea, Leif reached a land of ice and rock, which he called Helluland, or Slab-or Rock-land. (This is thought to be Baffin Island or the northern coast of Labrador.) He set off again until he came to a low-lying coast with forests. This he called Markland, or Forest-or Wood-land (which is generally placed in southern Labrador). He set sail once more until he reached a beautiful stretch of coast. The weather was mild, there was grass for grazing their cattle and salmon filled the rivers. Leif called this place Vinland—Wine-land or Grass-land because of the grapes he found growing wild, the giant huckleberries he mistook for red grapes, or the ample pasture. (This was probably Newfoundland.) Leif and his companions built huts and wintered over, returning to Greenland in the spring with a load of timber.

Fabulous Facts

Leif got the name “Lucky” when he bravely rescued 15 shipwrecked sailors clinging to a reef. He took the sailors home to Greenland.

Leif is the first known European to set foot in North America.

Over the years, other members of the Thorvaldson family tried to establish permanent settlements in Vinland. The climate was mild and the land was fertile, but this was not enough to overcome the Vikings’ homesickness or the hostility of the natives.

With a crew of 30, Leif’s brother, Thorwald, set off to explore Vinland further. He discovered a place that was so beautiful he wanted to claim it for his home. When the men returned to their ship, however, they found three skin boats on the beach with three men hiding under each. The Norsemen killed eight of these Skraelings, or “Wretches”—assumed to be Native North Americans—but one managed to escape. He returned with reinforcements and attacked while the Vikings were asleep, killing Thorwald.

Leif’s sister-in-law, Gudrid, the widow of his brother Thorstein, went to live in Vinland with her new husband Thorfinn. The Vikings reached a trade agreement with Skraelings and Gudrid gave birth to a son, Snorri—the first recorded child of European origin to be born in America. Relations turned sour, and the homesick Vikings returned to Greenland.

Later still, Leif’s sister, Freydis, organized an expedition to Vinland. Things turned ugly and a number of men were killed, many of them by Freydis herself. With her return to Greenland, attempts to colonize North America seemed to cease.

Where Was Vinland?

While it can’t be said with certainty, the balance of opinion situates Vinland in Newfoundland or New England, although it could have been as far away as Florida. Only one Viking settlement has been found in North America. It is at L’Anse aux Meadows (originally called L’Anse aux Méduse, or Jellyfish Creek) in Newfoundland. Two handmade Norse objects (a dress pin and a spindle whorl), the remnant of a blacksmith’s forge and the stone foundations and turf walls of several buildings that date back to the 11th century were unearthed. It was a Viking settlement, but was it Leif’s? We may never know for sure. What we do know is that Vikings landed in North America almost 500 years before Columbus set sail on his famous voyage.

Try This

Slip into the mind-set of a Viking explorer. You hear an intriguing story about a faraway land. You don’t know where it is, how long it will take you to get there or what might be in store for you when you arrive—and you don’t care. The thrill of adventure is tingling in your spine. You round up your family, a few close friends, your essential belongings and supplies for the journey. You board your ship and set sail for a destination unknown. Write the beginning of an adventure story based on this scenario.



Citizenship



Photo Dan Carlsson www.arkeodok.com

Viking society was divided into three distinct classes: jarls, karls and thralls.

Jarls

The most powerful and wealthy Vikings were jarls (earls) who came under the protection of the great god Odin. Although few in number, these ruling kings, noblemen and chieftains controlled large areas of countryside.

Karls

The vast majority of Vikings were karls: free men and women who looked to the god Thor as their protector. Most karls owned their own land and worked for themselves, but the inhospitable nature of the countryside and strict inheritance laws (land was held in tenure and could not normally be sold or given away; it passed from father to eldest son and other sons had to seek their own property) meant that land was always scarce. Thus, karls could be farmers, warriors, traders, merchants, craftsmen and shipbuilders as well as tenants, landless farm workers and servants (karls who had no land could work for other karls). A karl's free status gave him the right to bear arms and he was expected to fight if necessary.

Thralls

The lowliest Vikings were thralls: slaves for whom no god was expected to take responsibility. In Viking times, people were enslaved in three different ways: they were born into slavery as the children of slaves; taken prisoner during a Viking raid and then sold in Europe or taken to Scandinavia as slaves; or reduced to slavery through debt or crime. The karls and jarls used thralls as laborers and servants on farms and in workshops. Responsible for much of the menial, heavy and dirty work—like boiling sea water for salt, digging iron ore and spreading manure—thralls had hard lives and few rights. Some were even killed to be buried with their owners.

Fabulous Fact

Viking society was quite free and liberated. Although wealth and status were generally inherited (from father to eldest son), warriors of lowly status could climb the social ladder by acquiring money and treasure on raiding expeditions. Hardworking slaves could even buy freedom for themselves and their families.

Politics

The Vikings were not as lawless as their reputation might imply. In fact, they lived in a relatively free and democratic society—one that involved ordinary men in the law- and decision-making processes. Local chieftains (nobles) ruled over small regions throughout Scandinavia, but their actions were controlled by local assemblies, called Things. Each district had its own Thing, which met once a year. All the freemen of a region had the right to voice their opinions and vote at these open-air assemblies, and they gathered together to set laws, settle disputes and pass judgments. Each year, the Law Speaker read the laws of the local Thing out loud to ensure that they were known by everyone.

Fabulous Facts

***E**ven the wives of jarls and karls were allowed to offer their opinion at the Thing, a freedom rarely enjoyed elsewhere in the world.*

Things had great power and could even decide who should be king.

Iceland's Althing

In Viking Iceland—which never had a king—there were two levels of Things. The lower level dealt with local matters. The higher level, the Althing, was a national assembly that met once each year to deal with broader issues of governance. The Althing was a cross between a court, a parliament and a festival. It met at midsummer each year for two weeks at Thingvellir (a rocky plain to the east of Reykjavik), and while only men could vote, entire families made the journey. Everyone wore their best clothes and merchants set up booths and traded goods. Juries of 12 men settled disputes that could not be settled by the local Things and an elected Law Speaker stood on Law Rock and recited the laws—passed by 39 local chieftains—that governed the people of Iceland.

Fabulous Facts

***T**he Althing is the world's oldest surviving law-making assembly. It first met at the legislative arena in Thingvellir—meaning Parliament or Assembly Plain—in AD 930 and continued to meet until 1800. The Althing commenced again in 1843 and continues to serve as Iceland's parliament.*

An observer of the Icelandic Althing once said, "Icelanders have no king, only the law."

In 1000 the Althing assembly was equally divided over an important issue. Half wanted to embrace Christianity, the other half to reject it. The decision was left to the Law Speaker. After much consideration he ruled that while Iceland would be officially Christian, people could continue to worship the old gods privately.

Crime & Punishment

When a freeman was accused of committing a crime, his accusers brought him before their local Thing and demanded justice. The members of the assembly considered the case and if they agreed that the accused was guilty, then judgment was passed. Because there were no jails, punishment had to be immediate. Sentences ranged from the payment of a fine (money or goods) to outlawry to death.

Most crimes were punishable by compensation. Under Viking law, every life was assigned a monetary value called a wergild. The amount of the wergild varied according to the person's wealth and status: the wergild for a young rich farmer was much higher than that of an old landless freeman. When a person was murdered, the murderer had to pay the wergild to the victim's family. If the guilty man or his family refused to pay the wergild, he was outlawed. Considered "outside" the protection of the law, the outlaw could be killed by the victim's family (or anyone else) without fear of punishment. As a result, most outlaws fled beyond the reach of all who knew them.

Fabulous Facts

***T**his system of justice was designed to discourage relatives from taking the law into their own hands. When a family exacted its own punishment by murdering the murderer, the result was often a generations-long, bitter and often violent feud between two families.*

Occasionally, an accused man was tried by "ordeal." Because the Vikings believed that the gods protected the innocent, the accused would try to clear his name by walking on red-hot cinders or iron or picking stones out of a cauldron of boiling water.

Sometimes disputes for heinous crimes (such as murder) were settled by mortal combat, a contest of strength in which two men fought to the death. This gruesome system of justice was taken to England by the Normans in 1066, but was made illegal in Iceland and Norway around AD 1000.

Most Vikings obeyed the laws of the Things. Those who did not were outlawed. Some people were outlawed for a specified number of years, others for life.

The Decline of the Thing

By the early 10th century, Norway, Denmark and Sweden were each ruled by a single, powerful king. (Only Iceland remained an independent republic throughout the Viking Age.) These kings began to assert their authority over their subjects, and the role of the Thing declined. For many chieftains and freemen, this was too much to bear. An independent, quarrelsome and proud people, the Vikings did not like the idea of being ruled by a distant king. Some sought time away from home and turned to raiding or trading. Others left Scandinavia altogether.

Currency



Photo Dan Carlsson www.arkeodok.com

The first Danish coins were made in the 9th century, but it wasn't until about 975 that coins were made in large numbers. Before then, goods were usually bartered (traded for items of equal value) or "purchased" with hack silver—chopped up pieces of silver jewelry that were weighed on scales, valued and used as money.

Viking Age coins were handmade by a "moneyer." This highly skilled craftsman engraved one side of the coin—in reverse—on a metal die, and then tested it on a strip of lead to make sure it was correct. When satisfied, he then placed the die on a silver strip and tapped it sharply with a hammer to make an imprint. When he had made a series of imprints on one side of the silver strip, he separated them into individual blanks. He then turned the blanks over and stamped the other side with a different die.

Fabulous Facts

Trader's scales have been found all over the Viking world. A trader had a set of five weights. Each weight was stamped with a different number of tiny circles (which probably represented their weight), from half an öre to 1, 3, 4 and 5 örtugar. One örtugar was equivalent to 3 öre or around 0.3 oz. (8 g).

While some Viking coins display highly original designs—of standards, triquetras, bows and arrows, swords and Thor's hammer, for example—many are mere imitations of Anglo-Saxon designs. They display Christian iconography (such as the equal-armed cross or the Lamb of God), and runic inscriptions are rare. Even the profiled faces of rulers are faithful copies!

Try This

Make your own Viking die and coins. Roll out a 3" (7.5 cm) cylinder of clay about the diameter of a quarter. Flatten both ends. Use a craft knife to carve different designs into each end of the cylinder. Allow your "die" to dry. (Paint with metallic silver paint, if desired.) Roll out a flat strip of self-hardening clay. The strip should be as wide as your die, 6" (15 cm) long and 1/2" (1.25 cm) thick. Press one end of your die into the clay. (If the clay sticks, coat the end of the die in vegetable oil.) Repeat along the strip. Separate your impressions and trim with a craft knife. Press the other side of your die into the blank side of each "coin." Allow your coins to dry and then paint with metallic silver paint. (As an alternative, try using carved potato or soap wedges dipped in metallic silver paint and stamped onto both sides of a paper circle "blank.")

Coins as Clues

The Vikings left few written records, but historians can use coins to help fill in a few blanks. For example, although we know little about the Viking rulers, it is possible to identify some of them through the coins they had minted. Many coins carry the name of their moneyer and the place of minting, which helps to establish when they were struck, and by figuring out when coins were buried in Viking hoards, it is possible to identify periods of unrest when people hid their wealth and could not return to claim it.

Fabulous Fact

Being made of natural materials, most Viking sails and ropes disintegrated long ago. The pictures on Viking coins, however, give clues about how Viking ships were rigged (roped) and sailed.

Religion

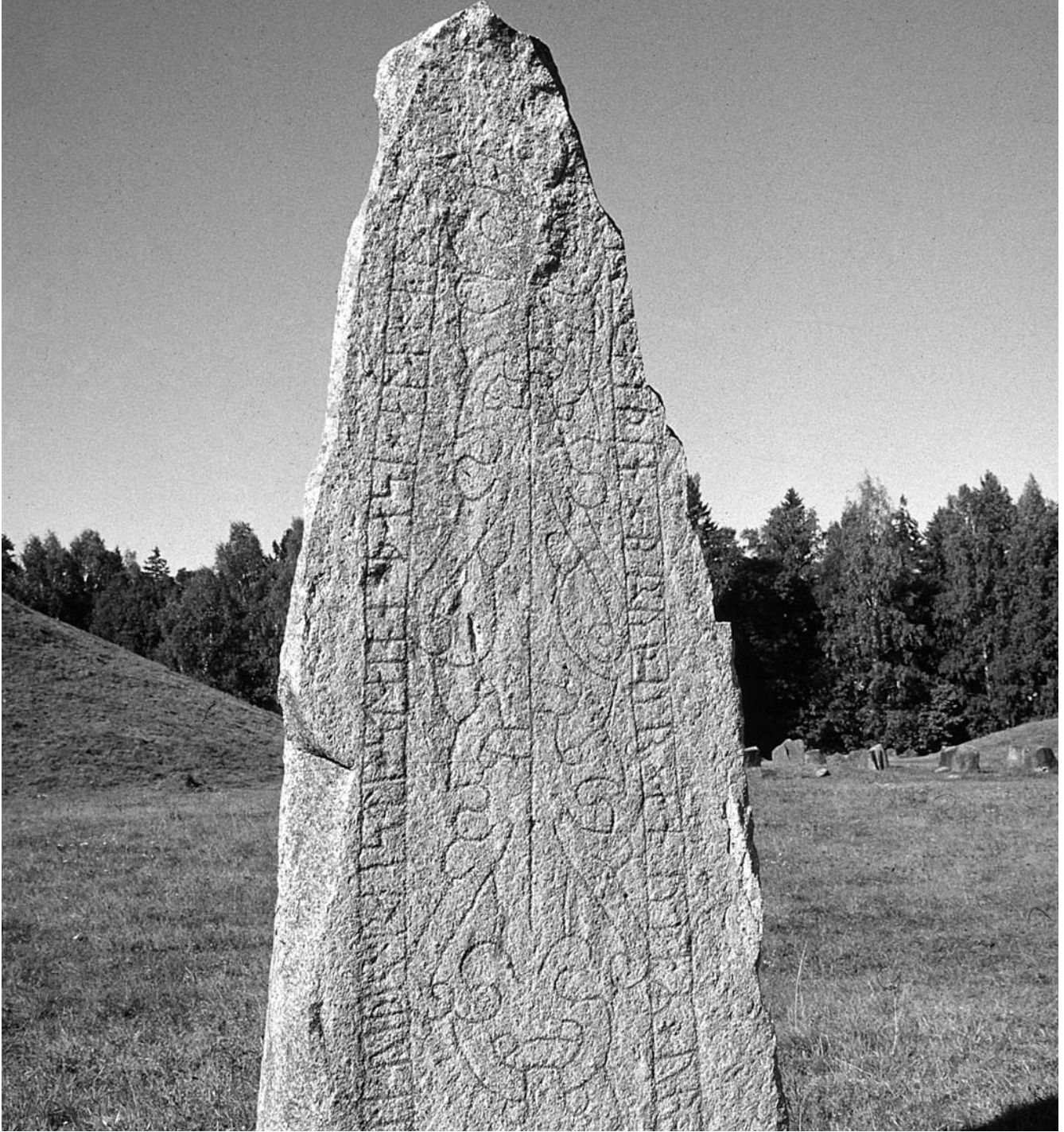


Photo Dan Carlsson www.arkeodok.com

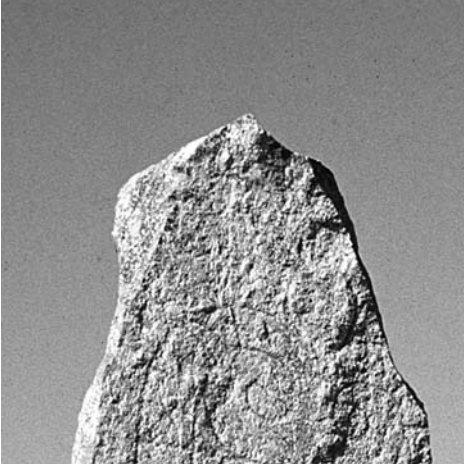
The early Vikings were pagans and believed in many gods, goddesses and spirits that cared for them in life and in death. Their religion was not organized—they had no priests or ceremonies—and they had no formal religious structure—no churches or temples. Instead, the Vikings worshipped and made sacrifices and offerings in the open—at springs and waterfalls, at the foot of mountains, in forest clearings—and regarded natural features, such as old trees and boulders, as sacred objects.

Fabulous Fact

In Iceland, Vikings worshipped at a horseshoe-shaped waterfall called Godafoss, meaning “waterfall of the gods.”

Viking Gods & Goddesses

Many Viking gods began as simple nature spirits and evolved gradually to take their place in a complex mythology. Viking gods, many of them warrior-like, had human personalities, and Norse mythology—which remained popular well into the Christian period—is richly decorated with tales of their heroic deeds. The most important gods were Odin, Thor and the twins Frey/Freya, while the most mysterious creature in the pantheon was Loki, a half-god/half-devil who was 100% troublemaker!



Odin the One-Eyed: Father of the gods, and god of war, courage, wisdom and poetry. The wisest, mightiest and most mysterious god, Odin was a rather unpleasant character with many strange supernatural powers. (He gave up one of his eyes in exchange for knowledge, and once hanged himself for nine nights on an ash tree to gain the secret of wisdom.) His two all-seeing messenger ravens, Hugin (“thought”) and Mugin (“memory”) perched on his shoulders. They flew off in the morning and returned each evening to tell their master what they had seen on their journey around the world. Odin also traveled with a pair of wolves and rode across the night sky on a swift, eight-legged gray horse named Sleipnir.



Thor: God of thunder. Thor was the god that most resembled the Vikings themselves, and he symbolized everything that was good in a Viking warrior. Much more “down-to-earth” than Odin, Thor was the most popular god and one of the greatest heroes in Viking mythology. Strong but not very smart, Thor was thought to be a huge man with a red beard who was quick to anger but loved to laugh. He kept the giants at bay with his magic hammer, Mjöllnir. The mighty silver hammer never missed its target and always came back to Thor’s hand when he threw it. (Thor also had a magic belt that made him twice as big and twice as strong when it was pulled tight.) A champion of the poor, Thor rode across the sky in a magnificent chariot pulled by goats, creating thunder and lightning as he struck his enemies with Mjöllnir. There are many stories of Thor’s battles against nasty giants and monsters—which he clubbed to death—and although he was often close to defeat, his strength always prevailed. In one story, Thor stole a cauldron of beer from the giants so the gods could have a party. In another, a giant named Thrym stole Thor’s hammer. He said he would only give it back if he was allowed to marry the goddess Freya. Thor dressed up as Freya and went to the ceremony (where he nearly gave himself away by drinking too much). As Thrym blessed his “bride” with the hammer, Thor grabbed it and killed him and all the giant wedding guests.



Frey and Freya (twins): God and goddess of fertility, farming (Frey) and love/marriage (Freya). A very generous pair, the Vikings prayed to them in the spring to bless their crops and in marriage to bless their union and grant them many children. Freya welcomed women into the next world when they died.

Loki: Part god/part devil, Loki could change his shape at will. This jealous and spiteful mischief-making god stirred up trouble among the gods. According to Viking legend, Loki once bet his head to Brokk the blacksmith dwarf that he was a superior metalworker. While the dwarf was fanning the furnace, Loki turned into a fly and stung him. The dwarf was not distracted and won the bet. Loki saved his head by pointing out that he had not wagered his neck. Enraged, the dwarf sewed Loki’s lips together—both to punish him and to keep him quiet. In another story, the wicked Loki was said to have told the blind god Hod to aim a mistletoe spear at Baldr, Odin’s son and god of the sun and light, and kill him.

Fabulous Fact

The Vikings were at once awed and inspired and fearful and intimidated by the natural world. The grey wolf that howled around their villages at night became Fenrir, the devil wolf predestined to destroy them, while a pair of circling ravens were Hugin and Mugin, sent to spy on the Vikings and report back to Odin.

Try This

Mjöllnir, Thor's famous battle hammer, was a powerful weapon in the fight against the dark powers that constantly threatened to overpower the gods. Viking men and women often wore amulets (miniature copies of the hammer fashioned from metal) around their necks to protect them from misfortune and evil. Use tinfoil to make your own Mjöllnir amulet, or lucky charm hammer. (Ask an adult to use a nail and hammer to punch a hole in your amulet. Thread a string through the hole and wear your lucky charm around your neck.)

The Viking Myth of Creation— and Destruction

The Viking universe was made up of nine distinct worlds, all held together by Yggdrasil, the World Tree, a magic ash. (The Well of Fate sat at the base of the doomed tree—a serpent gnawed at its roots and four deer ate its bark and leaves—guarded by three women called Norns who determined the destiny of all living creatures.)

Asgard: The top three worlds, Asgard, were inhabited by the gods and the light (“good”) elves. Asgard's great hall was called Valholl and Viking warriors who died bravely in battle were brought to the hall by Odin's beautiful handmaidens, the Valkyries. This was the Viking version of heaven. In Valhalla, the Viking dead spent their days honing their fighting skills and their nights feasting, waiting until called into battle by Odin to fight beside the gods at the end of the world.

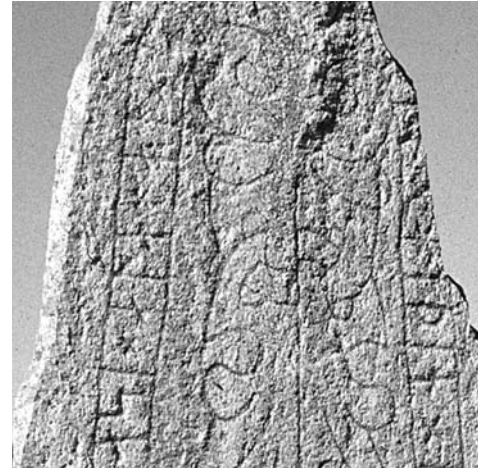
Midgard: Humans, giants, dark (“bad”) elves and dwarfs lived in the middle worlds. Humans occupied Midgard, which was linked to Asgard by a rainbow bridge and surrounded by a deep monster-filled ocean. Beyond the ocean lay Utgard, the forest home of the giants, sworn enemies of the gods. Whereas the light elves were inclined to help people who left them offerings, the dark elves (and the dwarfs, who lived underground and worked as smiths) were surly and feared by humans.

Niflheim: The frosty underworlds, Niflheim, were ruled by the goddess Hel (who was part beautiful woman, part rotting corpse) and belonged to the dead who were taken there to be punished for their crimes. This is where Vikings who died shamefully in bed, instead of gloriously in battle, came to rest.

For the Vikings, the evil giants of the middle world were constantly threatening, unseen but lurking, destined to destroy the world. Their creation myth spelled out the end of the world—Ragnarök, the “Doom of the Gods.” In this ferocious war between good and evil, the gods, aided by the Viking warriors from Valhalla, would fight against the giants and other horrible monsters. In the final battle Odin would lead the charge against the monstrous wolf Fenrir, and Fenrir, straining against a magic chain forged by the dwarfs and made from all sorts of impossible things (fish breath and mountain roots!) would manage to swallow the father of the gods in his enormous jaws. Almost everyone would die, but a handful of gods—ruled by Odin's son Balder—would survive to re-create the world. A man and a woman would also survive, the mother and father of a new human race that would live in a golden age of the new world.

Fabulous Fact

Vikings believed their gods were fighting a valiant but futile battle against the powers of evil and darkness. They believed that no matter how hard or how well the gods fought, they were doomed to failure. The end of the world—and its new beginning—was predestined. It was this belief that was at the root of Viking bravery, for only by dying a hero's death on Earth could warriors join the gods in Valhalla to engage in the final battle there.



Try This

Write your own creation myth about how the world came to be, and even how it might end.



Death & Burial

The end of a Viking's life was marked with a funeral. Because the early Vikings believed that dead people "lived" where they were buried, the early Vikings were laid to rest among the living, their bodies interred in small rural burial grounds (clusters of low mounds on poor farmland) close to their settlements. Most Vikings were buried in simple graves: a hole in the ground covered with a mound of earth. Some were buried in a coffin or a hollowed-out tree trunk. More successful Vikings were buried in wooden chambers under large burial mounds. Amazing riches have been dug out of some of these mounds. Rich and poor pre-Christian Vikings were buried with all kinds of treasures to take with them into the next world. These "grave goods" were usually the finest or favorite belongings of the dead man or woman—jewels, tools and weapons—although some were specially made, just to be buried. Food and drink for the journey was also provided.

Fabulous Facts

Grave goods give archaeologists many glimpses into everyday Viking life: how people cooked and sewed and dressed; what their furniture looked like and how it was built; and what tools and weapons they used.

The later Vikings were skilled horsemen and their horses were very important to them. They were often buried with riding equipment (saddles, stirrups, spurs, bridles and harnesses, bits and horse bells) and sometimes even with their horses.

In Scandinavia, the Vikings raised huge runestones in memory of dead friends or relatives. These stood in public places, often far from the loved one's grave. In their colonies in England, however, the Vikings adopted the native custom of erecting grave-stones.

Because seafaring was central to the Viking way of life, it played an important role in death. It was quite common for Vikings to bury a loved one in an old boat (or under part of a wrecked boat) or to mark a grave with raised stones in the shape of a ship. These ship settings are common all over Scandinavia. (There is an entire fleet of ships in a large graveyard at Lindholm Høje in Jutland, Denmark.) People might have believed that the dead would use the ship to sail to the next world or used the ship image to symbolize the idea of death as a voyage into the unknown.

The wealthiest men and women—kings, queens and very rich chieftains—were buried in splendid ships. These ships were filled with the dead person's equipment and belongings, from clothes and weapons to kitchen goods and furniture. Horses, dogs—even servants—were sacrificed and buried with the dead Viking. The burial ships were then covered with a mound of earth. Entire ships and their contents have been reasonably well preserved in the right soil conditions, and even in cases where the wood has disintegrated the outline of ships have sometimes been left in the earth.

The Oseberg Ship-Burial

The most splendid Viking burial ever excavated also happens to be the most beautiful Viking ship ever recovered. Discovered in a 144 foot (44 m) long, 20 foot (6 m) high burial mound in 1903 in Oseberg near the Oslo Fjord (inlet) in Norway, the Oseberg ship was well preserved by the soggy blue clay of the fjord. At the time of its burial in about 850, the ship was already around 50 years old. Seventy feet, six inches (21.5 m) long, the Oseberg ship had 15 oar-ports (holes) on each side to accommodate 30 oars-



men. A fragile vessel not fit for the open ocean, she was probably used for state occasions when she would be sailed up and down rivers or along the coastline. The bones of two women—as well as two oxen and at least 10 horses—were found inside. Judging by the ship’s rich furnishings, one was probably a queen; the other a slave or servant. There were three beautifully decorated sleighs, a work-sleigh, a number of wooden chests (one full of tools with which the women could repair their vehicles in the next world), many pieces of furniture, tapestries and kitchenware. (No jewelry was found because the mound had been robbed years before its 1904 excavation.) There was also a splendid wooden wagon. Because it belonged to a royal lady, it was richly carved with scenes from the legend of Sigurd the Dragon-slayer. Like most Viking wagons, it was designed so that its body could be lifted off the wheels (and possibly used as a coffin).

Fabulous Facts

Because the Oseberg ship had been filled with heavy stones, its insides were smashed to pieces. Archaeologists unearthed thousands of wooden fragments. They numbered, washed and protected each one with preservatives, then painstakingly reconstructed the ship, piece by piece.

Only fragments of the original prow were left in the mound, but these were carved with a brilliant array of animals and people. The prow ends in a curling snake’s head; the tip of the stern is the snake’s tail.

A mass of equipment was found inside the Oseberg ship, including a gangplank, bailing bucket, mast, rudder, steering oar, anchor and 15 pairs of oars.

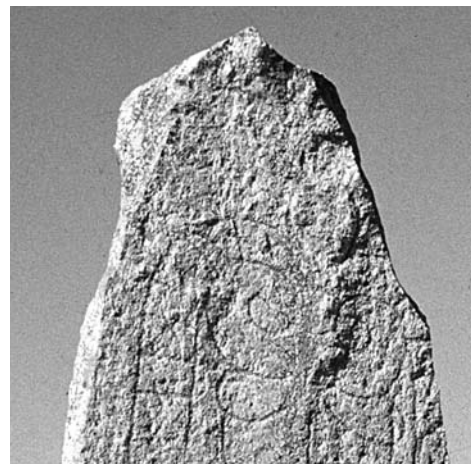
Five strange wooden posts were discovered on the Oseberg ship, each magnificently carved in a different style and all topped by a fantastic beast with snarling jaws. The wood carvers were incredibly skilled. The creatures’ heads and necks squirm with masses of tiny figures. The purpose of the posts is a mystery. Perhaps worshippers carried them at a religious procession—even the Oseberg funeral—and the fierce animals were meant to scare off evil spirits.

Not all wealthy Vikings were buried. Some were cremated—laid to rest in great ships that were set alight on a blazing funeral pyre. When the fire died down, a mound of earth was raised over the ashes as a permanent marker or the cremated remains were put in a small vessel and buried. The Arab chronicler Ibn Fadhlān witnessed a Viking chieftain’s cremation in 922 on the banks of the River Volga in Russia. According to his account, wood was piled on the riverbank and the chieftain’s ship was lifted on top. The chieftain himself was dressed in a beautiful ceremonial outfit: a silk brocade coat and hat. His body was carried on board and laid on cushions inside a tent. Two horses, two cows, a hen and a cockerel were killed and placed in the ship as food for the journey and a slave girl was sacrificed onboard to accompany him into the afterlife. Then the chieftain’s next-of-kin—naked and carrying a blazing torch—walked backwards to the ship and set fire to the wood beneath it. He was joined by other men who came forward and threw burning torches onto the ship’s deck. When the fire had burned away, the ashes were buried in a memorial mound. The Vikings told Fadhlān, “We burn him in a moment and he goes at once to paradise.”

Fabulous Facts

Up-Helly-Aa is a mid-winter festival held in the Shetland Isles every January. At the end of the festival, a model of a Viking ship is set ablaze with flaming torches.

Although there is no hard evidence to prove that it ever happened, there are stories of Viking funeral ships being pushed out to sea to burn on the waves.





After the Vikings converted to Christianity, burial practices changed. The dead were no longer buried with the living, but in churchyard cemeteries. Cremation and human sacrifice were abandoned and the burial of grave goods—a pagan ritual—died out (although some fully equipped Scandinavian graves have been discovered in Christian churchyards).

The Coming of Christianity

Scandinavia was surrounded by Christian countries and the “savage” Norsemen were exposed to Christianity from the beginning of the Viking Age. Missionaries had been traveling to Viking lands since the 8th century in an attempt to convert the heathens living there (they were usually enslaved or put to death) and Viking raids on western European towns produced many Christian prisoners who lived as slaves in Viking settlements. Some Vikings—traders who did business with Christian merchants, soldiers who hired themselves out as mercenaries to Christian armies, and Viking farmers and tradesmen who settled among Christian peoples in Europe—simply found it convenient to become Christian.

In Scandinavia, the Vikings converted to Christianity gradually. Paganism and the new faith co-existed peacefully for years, with many Vikings simply counting Christ as one among their many gods. Early converts, having accepted the new faith for practical reasons, continued to worship their old gods along with the Christian god, often turning to Thor in the heat of the battle. (Amulets of Thor’s hammer that incorporate Christian symbolism are evidence of this conflict.)



When the Scandinavian kings realized that there was great power in Christianity, they began to convert. King Harald “Bluetooth” of Denmark was baptized around 960, and Christianity spread throughout the Danish kingdom. The same thing happened in Norway in 1024 and Sweden at the end of the 11th century: the kings were baptized and their subjects followed suit. In 1000, the Vikings living in Iceland took a vote on religion. Half the population voted to become Christian; half voted to remain loyal to the old gods. The Lawspeaker chose Christianity and although all Vikings had to be baptized, they were allowed to worship the old gods in secret.

As Christianity spread, wooden churches were erected all over Scandinavia. These simple, one-story stave churches were built like Viking houses, with elaborately carved wooden staves (planks) set upright into the ground. By the 12th and 13th centuries, churches became more elaborate. They had multi-tiered wooden-tiled roofs and were decorated with carvings of dragons, Viking legends and scenes from the Bible (the Scandinavian Christ on the cross is depicted as a king with a crown on his head, a look of triumph rather than suffering on his face).



Fabulous Facts

Hakon “the Good,” the first Christian king of Norway, met with such resistance that he reverted to paganism before his death. It wasn’t until Olaf Trygvason (995-1000) and Olaf Haraldsson (1014-30) forced the issue at sword point that the conversion of Norway was complete.

Santa Claus (from Saint Nicholas, Scandinavia’s patron saint of children) might owe his very existence to Norse mythology. When the western world embraced Christianity, it adopted many pagan customs and festivals. The Vikings gave presents at the time of the winter solstice and Odin (like the Saxon god Woden) was thought to fly through the night sky in a gift-laden chariot.

Family Life



Photo Dan Carlsson www.arkeodok.com

The concepts of home and family, although different than ours, were very important in Viking society. Vikings were patriarchal—the father reigned supreme—and the head of the household had life-and-death power over everybody else. Extended families were a close-knit unit and kinship was taken very seriously. Mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents all lived together in the same small community and often in the same house.

Families were fiercely loyal. So extreme was their commitment to one another that it often led to serious trouble. It was customary that any action taken or crime committed against one member of the family was taken or committed against the family as a whole. If a man was murdered, his family would seek revenge and retaliate by murdering someone from the murderer's family. Such merciless action often triggered a bitter, violent feud (quarrel) between families that could simmer and boil for several generations and involve relations as distant as third cousins.

Fabulous Fact

While potentially deadly, the fierce loyalty of a Viking family was also gently protective. Any female family member who lost her husband in battle, at sea or to illness had her needs (and those of her children) well met by her kindred.

Women

Viking women were strong, determined, independent and influential. They ran the farms and households while the men were away trading or raiding, and even took up arms to defend their

homes and families. (Some historians believe that Viking women might have had a voice at lawmaking assemblies.) They worked hard every day, from dawn until dusk, spinning wool and flax, weaving cloth and linen, making, mending and washing clothes, preparing and cooking food, cleaning the home and supervising the children.

Fabulous Fact

Many poor women could not afford to stay at home while their husbands were away on expeditions. Instead, they joined them, packing their children and worldly possessions into longships, hiding during battles and coming out later to start new settlements in distant colonies.

Children

Although women were treated relatively well in Viking times, it was still a man's world. Sons were preferred over daughters, and it was especially important that the firstborn child be a boy (girls were often put to death). When a Viking farmer died, the eldest son inherited the farm. The rest of the family had to move away, and the younger sons had to find new lands of their own to farm.

Viking children did not attend school. Learning how to fight with a sword or swing an axe, or how to make clothing and cook, were considered to be much more important than reading and writing. Children were expected to work hard and to help around the house, and were often trained to follow in the trade of their fathers. Boys were taught to farm, row, sail, fight, smith or haggle; girls to spin, weave, milk cows, collect wild berries and prepare meals.

Fabulous Facts

Viking life was hard and there was no tolerance for weakness—not even in children. Sickly newborn babies who were likely to be a liability to their families were often exposed to the elements and left to die. A Jewish trader in Hedeby (in about AD 950) wrote that the Vikings “often throw a newborn child into the sea rather than maintain it.”

Although Viking families were very close, boys were often sent to a foster family at the age of 10 to work for their keep. Sometimes there were blood ties to the foster family. More often, however, the boy’s father and foster father were themselves foster brothers. These ties were almost as strong as family ties.

Viking boys played with wooden swords, but serious weapons training began at about age 12. By the time boys were 16 years old, they were ready to go raiding. Becoming a full-time warrior was one way to escape the trap of poverty.

Marriage & Divorce

Viking mothers and fathers often arranged the marriages of their children, but many Viking men and women chose their own spouses—or decided to remain single—with or without the consent of their parents. (Feuds broke out if one or both sets of parents disapproved of these “love matches.”) Most marriages took place in the early winter when the entire Viking community was at home. The marriage ceremony had two parts: the wedding, or “pledging” (when the two families reached an agreement regarding the bride’s “price” and the bride’s family gave the specified dowry to the groom’s family) and the gifting, or “giving-away” (when the bride’s father gave his daughter to the groom). The bride and groom exchanged vows before witnesses, and a great feast followed. Held at the home of the bride’s father—who paid for the entire celebration—the feast was attended by relatives, friends and neighbors. The merriment, which included eating, drinking and entertainment (poetry, music and dancing) could go on for several weeks!

Viking women had a number of rights, including the right to own their own land. This was particularly important in the case of a failed marriage, since Vikings were allowed to divorce (in pre-Christian days). Getting a divorce was pretty straightforward in Viking times. All that was required was for the husband or wife to make a formal speech in front of witnesses, saying why he or she no longer wanted to be married. Much like today, husbands who divorced their wives were obligated to pay compensation, and women who left with the children were entitled to half of the man’s wealth.

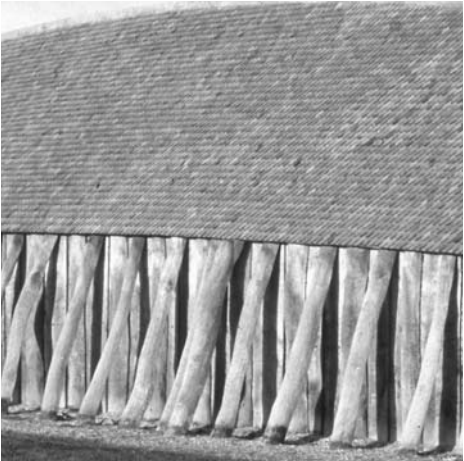
Fabulous Facts

Most Viking women who requested a divorce did so because their husbands were poor providers.

Until the advent of Christianity, bigamy—having more than one spouse—was quite common, although it was a privilege reserved for men.

Try This

Hold a modern “pledging” ceremony. Divide into groups of four with two students representing the family of the bride and two students representing the family of the groom. Work with the other set of “parents” in your group to develop a fair market-value bride-price comprising both money and goods. (In drafting your pledge, consider how much it will cost the groom to provide for the bride and how much the parents of the bride will save by giving her away.) Both sides must be happy with the agreement. Compare bride-prices among groups. Are there any similarities?



Eating & Drinking



Photo Dan Carlsson www.arkeodok.com

Vikings ate twice a day. The first meal was at eight o'clock in the morning. The second—the main meal of the day—was at around seven o'clock in the evening, or whenever darkness fell and work stopped. The head of the household sat, with his wife, in a chair called the “high seat.” The other diners arranged themselves on the edge of platforms built out from the walls. They ate off trestle tables (sometimes covered with linen cloths) which were set up specifically for mealtimes. Food was eaten from bowls, platters or wooden trenchers. There were spoons and knives (made of horn or metal) but no forks. People cut their meat with a sharp knife or dagger and then picked it up in their fingers. Wooden cups, horns and, occasionally, imported glasses, were used for drinking.

Food was prepared at the central hearth (although some rich households had separate kitchens with hot-stone baking ovens). An iron or soapstone cauldron for making porridge and soups and for stewing meat was suspended from a beam in the ceiling or from a tripod over the fire. Iron grill-pans and griddles were also used. Meat was roasted on spits or long forks or baked in holes in the ground packed with heated stones.

Food

Although they primarily lived a subsistence existence on small, family-run farms, most Vikings ate reasonably well, and their diet was varied and nourishing. The Vikings raised sheep, goats, cows, pigs, horses, poultry and geese (and in the far north, reindeer) for their milk and meat. Meat and fish—eaten raw or cooked or preserved—featured strongly in the Viking diet. Tough and stringy vegetables, such as cabbages, beans and peas were popular ingredients in stews and soups which were sweetened with honey and flavored with garlic, wild herbs (such as dill and coriander), onions and even horseradish.

Fabulous Facts

Livestock was more than a source of food and drink. The Vikings used animal skins and hides for making blankets and clothing; feathers for bedding; and bones, horns and antlers for tools, knife handles, combs, pins, needles and jewelry.

Viking farm animals were smaller and hardier than modern breeds. Some, like the Icelandic and Shetland ponies, are still in existence today. The Mans Loghtan sheep—a common farm ani-

mal in the Viking Age—is today only found on the Isle of Man. This sheep sheds its wool naturally, so it doesn't require shearing. The ram grows up to six horns simultaneously, each of which can weigh up to 12 oz. (350 g) and reach as much as 1'6" (45 cm) in length.



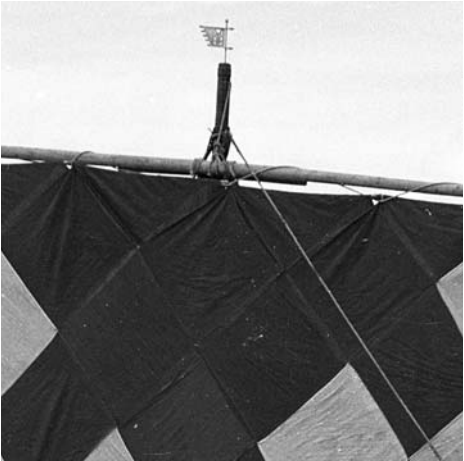
Because even sturdy Viking animals could die of cold or starvation over the long winter months—not to mention the sturdy Viking people—many animals were slaughtered in an annual cull just before the snow fell. Their meat was preserved by salting, drying or smoking.

The Vikings also raised crops—grains such as wheat, barley and oats (and flax in the warmer regions, such as Denmark)—although the quality of the plants was much poorer than it is today. The crops were planted, tended and harvested by hand, using homemade wood-and-iron hoes, picks, shovels, scythes, sickles and shears. The heaviest work, such as clearing the land, digging and threshing, was often carried out by slaves.

The Vikings ate porridge and bread made from oats, barley and rye. (Wealthy Vikings enjoyed loaves made from finer wheat flour.) The coarse, hand-ground flour was often mixed with split peas, seeds and even tree bark for extra flavor and bulk. Bread dough was mixed and kneaded in large wooden troughs and then baked in a hot-stone oven or over an open flame on stone griddles or pans that sat in the embers.

Try This

Ask for an adult's help to make your own loaf of Viking bread. In a large mixing bowl, combine 4 cups flour (any kind), 4 tsp. baking powder, 2 tsp. salt, 2 tsp. garlic powder, 2 tsp. dill, 1 tsp. coriander and 1 cup edible seeds. Add 2 cups warm water and stir until all ingredients are moistened. Oil your hands and knead the sticky mixture until it forms a stiff dough. (This is a messy job!) Pat the dough into a greased cake pan (or an oiled Teflon™ frying pan). Put the cake pan in a cold oven (the cooler temperature will help the bread rise). Heat oven to 200°F (80°C). Bake for 1 hour, or until a toothpick inserted in the center of the bread comes out clean. (If using a frying pan, heat bread on stovetop burner at low setting for 1 hour.)



Fabulous Fact

Vikings ground their grain by hand using rotary quernstones. As the heavy stones crumbled, grit became mixed with the flour and, because the Vikings did not have fine sieves, was baked into bread—which wore down the Vikings' teeth!

Fishing

In Viking times, the sea was full of fish and for Vikings who lived near the Baltic and North Seas and the North Atlantic Ocean, fish was a staple food. The bones of cod, herring and haddock have been found in the middens (garbage heaps) of many Viking settlements, as have artifacts related to fishing: stone sinkers and bark floats used with nets, fish traps, small sinkers and hooks for line fishing, spears and forks and arrows for hunting seals and walrus. Vikings also caught an abundance of eels and freshwater fish, such as trout, in many rivers and lakes that crisscross Scandinavia. Fish was available throughout the year, and was grilled, smoked, wind-dried, salted or pickled.

Fabulous Fact

To get the salt they needed to preserve their meat, the Vikings boiled sea water in flat pans. The water eventually evaporated, leaving a thin, salty deposit in the pan.



Try This

Make salt the Viking way. With an adult's help, bring a cup of water to boil in an old pot on the stove. Add salt to the water, stirring constantly, until the water is saturated and no more salt will dissolve. Leave the pot simmering on the stovetop. How long does it take for the water to evaporate? What is left behind in the pot? Scrape the pot. Taste the scrapings. What have you collected? How many pots of water do you think you would have to boil to get enough salt to preserve the meat of one deer?

Hunting & Gathering

Vikings were opportunistic gamers who hunted for pleasure as well as for food. When crops failed, there was an abundance of wildlife to be "harvested." Game (wildfowl, hare, elk, deer, reindeer, wild boar, bears, seals and whales) and fruits and berries (apples, cherries and plums) could often be gathered in quantities sufficient to see a family through hard times.

Fabulous Facts

Most Vikings lived close to the coast, where there were large colonies of sea birds, such as gulls. They roasted the birds and gathered their eggs, which were considered a great delicacy.

Vikings loved falconry, and wild falcons became a valuable export from the settlements in Greenland. They used these birds of prey - as well as hawks - to hunt hares and other small animals and birds, which were retrieved by hunting dogs.

Hunting—especially for dangerous animals such as bears—was a test of a warrior's bravery, and men would often hunt on foot to prove their courage.

Drink

Mead—an alcoholic beer made from barley, hops and honey (for fermenting)—was the most common drink of the Viking people, although wine was popular, too. True wine was imported by the rich in barrels from Germany, France and Italy, but the strongest drink available to the Vikings was homegrown wine made from the juices of fermenting fruits and berries. (Milk was an important non-alcoholic staple of the Viking diet.)

The Vikings drank their mead from wooden mugs or, more famously, from the hollowed-out horns of cattle. Because these drinking horns were tricky to put down, once filled they had to be emptied in a single gulp!

Try This

Make your own Viking drinking horn. Twist the bottom of a paper towel tube. Tape in place. Plug the small hole at the bottom of the horn with a piece of tissue soaked in white glue. Paint the drinking horn with a mixture of one part water/one part white glue. While still wet, cover with a layer of tissue. Paint the tissue with the mixture. Repeat when dry. The rich often drank from beautifully decorated horns fitted with fancy metal rims and ornate metal bands. Fold tinfoil over the lip of your horn and tape in place. Cut two strips of tinfoil 1" (2.5 cm) wide and long enough to wrap around your horn. Crimp the foil lengthways down the middle. Wrap around your horn and tape in place. Paint the horn with the water/glue mixture and cover with tissue. Make sure to cover the edges of the tinfoil, but not the decorative lip or the raised metal bands. Paint the tissue and the metal with the water/glue mixture and allow the horn to dry. Fill your drinking horn with some homemade honey-water-lemon "mead" and toast your classmates with a hearty "Ves Heill" (Be Healthy!)—the traditional Viking toast in Iceland!



Clothing

Viking men and women with money to spare dressed to show it, but most Vikings were concerned with comfort, warmth and practicality—not fashion—and clothes were functional with few concessions to decoration. In general, Viking styles were unsophisticated, and both jarls and karls wore essentially the same garments (the wealthy simply used better materials). Clothes were often loose-fitting and worn in layers to allow for the circulation of air (which keeps one warmer) to fend off the cold, and linen undergarments were worn by both sexes.

Men and boys wore a mid-thigh to below-the-knee-length woolen tunic with sleeves over an undershirt and long, snug-fitting straight or tapered woolen leggings or trousers held up by a drawstring or sash. (Men who had traveled extensively in the East sometimes wore baggy or full breeches that ballooned out from the waist to the knee!) A leather belt—with an engraved or embossed metal or bone buckle—usually completed the outfit, and from it hung personal items, tools and weapons.

Women and girls wore an ankle-length short-sleeved or sleeveless linen shift or under-dress which was closed at the neck by ribbons or a drawstring, with a shorter pinafore-style woolen over-dress on top. The shoulder straps or loops of the outer-garment were each fastened with a 4" to 5" (10-12.5 cm) convex oval brooch which was hollowed out to conceal a pin.

Fabulous Facts

Slaves often dressed in much simpler clothing: a blanket-like garment with a hole for the head and tied around the middle with a cord.

For special occasions, Viking women often smoothed or pleated their dresses on a whalebone board using a glass ball instead of an iron.

Headwear was also popular. Viking men wore woolen caps; women wore headbands, scarves or linen bonnets.

In the winter, Viking men wore fur-lined leggings for extra warmth, and both sexes wore fur-lined hats, gloves and over-shoes. Heavy cloaks were also worn. Usually tied with thongs, these thick garments were sometimes fastened with enormous brooches.

Footwear

Viking slippers, shoes and boots were made from leather and fastened with a leather thong or a small toggle or buckle. Some were homemade by farmers using the hides of animals killed on their farms. Others were crafted by cobblers in town. Shoes were formed around a last—a wooden block shaped like a foot. The flat heel and sole were made in one piece (out of hardened leather or wood) and the calfskin or goatskin upper was sewn onto it. Instead of getting a new pair of shoes, Vikings had a new sole sewn onto the old one when it wore through.

Try This

Make a Viking slipper. Trace the outline of your sneaker on a piece of brown felt. (Make the outline about 1" (2.5 cm) wider than your actual shoe.) Cut out your "sole" and set it aside. Wrap an ankle-tall strip of felt around the back of your shoe and join the two ends at the toe so that you have an oval shape. Staple the ends together. Press the two sides of the felt oval together over the top of your sneaker and trim so that you have about 1" (2.5 cm) of extra felt all the way up to your ankle. Remove your foot from your "upper." Staple the felt together, from the toe midway to the ankle. Place the upper over the sole and staple the two together. Punch two holes in the upper at ankle height. Thread a piece of twine through the holes as a lace. (Repeat to make the other slipper.)

Weaving & Spinning

Viking women—and probably some men—spent part of each day spinning wool or flax, then weaving it into cloth or linen on the vertical loom which stood against the wall in every long-house. Materials were thick and closely woven to give maximum warmth. Everyday clothes were cut from plain wool, but intricate patterns were often woven into the cloth. Checks (similar to Scottish tartans) were common as were geometric shapes. Sometimes pictures, such as animal heads, were included in the design. Brightly colored clothes were popular with both sexes. Vegetable dyes made from leaves, roots, bark and flowers were used to color fabrics, and the borders of tunics and dresses were often woven with patterns and pictures in bright colors (or for the very rich, with gold and silver threads). When it could be afforded, silk imported from far-off lands was made into hats and fancy borders for jackets, and fur trimmings on cloaks—real and imitation—added a touch of elegance.

Fabulous Fact

A wildflower called weld, or dyer's rocket, was used to make yellow dye; the root of the madder yielded red dye; and bright blue came from the leaves of woad plants.

Beauty, Fashion & Personal Hygiene



Photo Dan Carlsson www.arkeodok.com

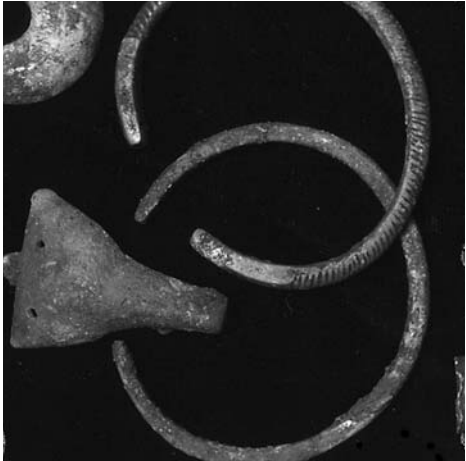
While the Vikings dressed sensibly and comfortably, they loved to accessorize lavishly. Riches were a measure of status and success, and Vikings used their personal accoutrements to proclaim their wealth.

This is how the Arab traveler and writer, Ibn Fadhlān, described a party of Viking merchants he once met:

"Each woman carries on her bosom a container made of iron, silver, copper, or gold—its size and substance depending on her man's wealth. Attached to the container is a ring carrying her knife which is also tied to her bosom. Round her neck she wears gold or silver rings; when a man amasses 10,000 dirhems (Arabic coins) he makes his wife one gold ring; when he has 20,000 he makes two; and so the woman gets a new ring for every 10,000 dirhems her husband acquires, and often a woman has many of these rings."

Jewelry

The Vikings loved bright ornaments and, depending on individual choice and family fortune, both men and women wore brooches, necklaces, neck-rings, arm-rings and finger-rings. A Viking's level of wealth and social status were indicated by his or her jewelry. Rich Vikings wore intricately designed pieces of fine gold and silver (which were often imported at great expense or stolen at great risk). The average freeman and his wife wore jewelry made of bronze—which didn't shine as brilliantly as gold but was less expensive—or pewter (a mixture of silver and other metals) which was cheaper still.



Try This

Unlike necklaces and bracelets which could flex and bend, neck-, arm- and finger-rings were relatively rigid. You can make your own rings by braiding together silver and/or gold pipe cleaners. (You might have to join two or more pipe cleaners together depending on the length of your piece.) You can braid single pipe cleaners or twist two or more pipe cleaners together before braiding.

Much of the jewelry worn by the Vikings started out as coins and other metal goods. (In fact, many Viking neck-rings were made from melted down silver Arab coins.) Religious objects were often made of precious metals and Vikings raided monasteries in search of them. Raiders even ripped out the mounts of sacred books, which were often fashioned from gold and silver, and took them away. Later, a smith would melt down the metals and turn them into pieces of jewelry. Coins, ingots and scrap-metal were melted in small crucibles on charcoal hearths, which were heated by bellows. When the metal melted, the crucibles were removed from the fire and their contents poured directly into clay, stone, soapstone or antler molds. (Molds were generally two pieces—each impressed with one half of a finished object—which were tied together and had a funnel-like opening at the top for pouring in the molten metal. More elaborate objects were cast using the *cire-perdue*, or “lost wax,” technique in which a model is made from wax and surrounded with a clay mold. The mold was then heated, and the liquid wax was poured away. Molten metal was poured into the mold, which later had to be broken to remove the cast object.) After casting, objects were filed and polished to remove casting seams and other flaws, and further decoration was applied using an engraver, punch or stamp. Some objects—such as band-shaped arm rings and the large rods used for twisting and braiding for use in rings of all sizes—were not cast but hammered out from ingots.

Viking Age metalworkers were more than just highly skilled craftsmen; they were designers and true artisans who produced breathtaking jewelry. They were clever, too, and used a number of intriguing techniques to enhance the beauty and luster of their pieces. To make gold shine brightly, for example, metalworkers cut tiny chips into their designs. The chips reflected the light and made the jewelry sparkle. To add further detail, they soldered filigree (fine gold or silver wires, either plain or worked to look like a miniature string of beads) or granulation (small balls or grains of metal used singly or in clusters and often collared with beaded filigree wire) to the surface of an ornament. And, to make intricately carved patterns stand out, they inlaid them with a pure black compound called niello (silver sulphide) which provided a perfect contrast to silver and gold. Silver was applied to the surface of base metal objects such as copper and brass by encrustation (hammered onto a hatched surface) or by inlay (wires hammered into engraved lines) to form elaborate multicolored patterns.

Try This

Use the niello and/or filigree/granulation effect(s) to make a Viking pendant. Trace a teardrop shape onto a piece of cardboard. Cut out the teardrop. Wrap the teardrop in gold or silver foil and secure the foil at the back with tape. Smooth the front of the foil with the back of your fingernail.

1. To create the niello effect: Completely cover the front of the teardrop with a coat of black crayon. Use a craft stick (or other blunt objects of varying thicknesses) to “draw” an intricate pattern in the crayon to expose the gold or silver foil beneath. Cover with a layer of white glue or lacquer.
2. To create the filigree/granulation effect: Trace your teardrop onto another piece of gold or silver foil (whichever you have already used to wrap your teardrop). Do not trim. Smooth the teardrop with the back of your fingernail. Lay the untrimmed foil on a piece of carpet (or other soft, indestructible surface). Use a sharp pencil to poke holes in the foil in an interesting pattern. Trim the teardrop and use white glue to adhere it, “volcano”-side up, to your pendant. (Be careful not to crush your “volcanoes.”) Carefully coat with a layer of white glue or varnish. (To incorporate the niello effect, cover the top surface of your second teardrop with a layer of black crayon before placing it facedown on the carpet.)
3. To mount your pendant, make a hole near the top of the teardrop by pushing a threaded needle through the side of the cardboard. (It is not necessary to pierce your design.)

Fabulous Facts

The maker of any object was known as a smith, whether a silversmith or iron-smith. To many Vikings the weapon-smith was the most important of all such craftsmen, but the rich inheritance left by their artists and jewelers is likely to place them first in our modern estimation. The skills of metal working were so important in ancient times that smiths were often seen as magical figures or gods.

The “giving of rings” was a common way for kings to reward their retainers, and after a successful raid kings often gave brave warriors a prize piece of confiscated jewelry (which could be used to buy things in place of money).

Vikings in different parts of Scandinavia wore different kinds of jewelry. Spiral arm-rings (imported from Russia) were worn only in Denmark, and Swedish women were the only Vikings to wear ear-rings (which were dangled from chains looped over the ear).

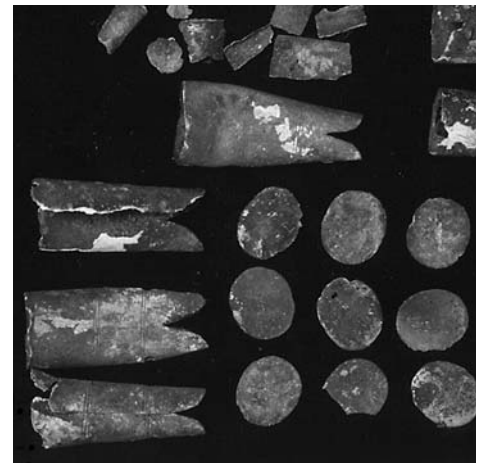
The largest and most magnificent neck-ring ever found was ploughed up in a field in Denmark in 1977. It is made of solid gold and weighs more than 4 pounds (1.8 kg). Made of four double-twisted gold rods braided together, the neck-ring is more than 12" (30 cm) wide and could only have been worn by a man with a broad chest.

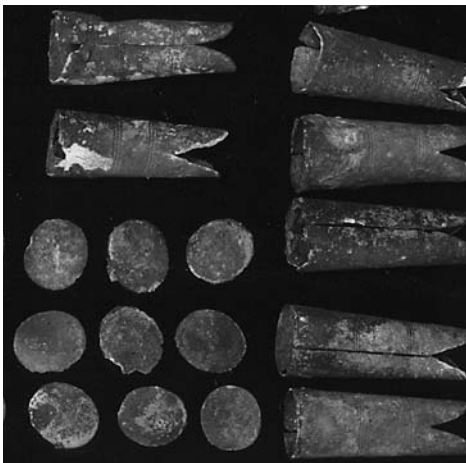
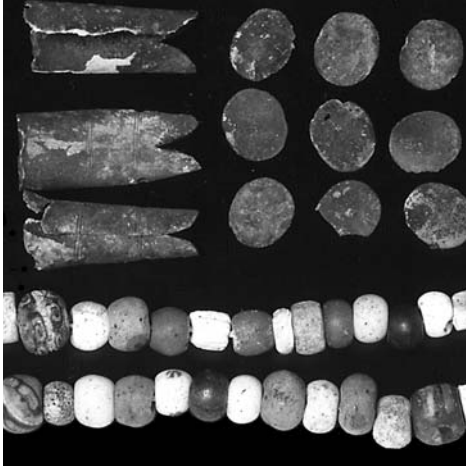


Brooches

Both men and women wore brooches to hold their clothes in place—women used two oval brooches to fasten their overdresses; men held their cloaks together with a single brooch on the right shoulder which kept the right arm (the sword arm) free—and these were often lavishly decorated. These brooches took many forms from round or oblong to the stylized shape of an animal, from plain single discs to complicated, composite creations. Certain styles such as the oval or disc-shaped brooch, the two-armed symmetrical brooch and the trefoil (three-lobed) brooch, came in all sizes and were popular all over the Viking world. Others, like the drum-shaped box brooches from Gotland, were only fashionable in certain areas. The finest and most valuable brooches, which were worn by the wealthiest Vikings, were highly elaborate: individually hand-crafted masterpieces with patterns of stylized animals carved in gold and silver. The less well-to-do wore simpler brooches that were mass-produced in bronze or pewter. To make these cheap fasteners look like the fine gold and silver brooches worn by more successful Vikings, they were sometimes covered in a layer of gilt or tin. The poorest Vikings carved their own simple pins and fasteners from animal bones left over after cooking.

Although Viking brooches were as ostentatious as the owner could afford, they were also a practical adornment. Vikings did not have zippers and they rarely used buttons, so brooches were used to hold garments together. And because Viking clothes did not have pockets and Viking women did not carry purses, personal objects—knives, keys to the family's storage chests, combs, toilet implements, small scissors, a whetstone for sharpening blades and sewing needles made out of fine bones stored in a case made from a larger, hollow bone—were often suspended on a long chain from one of the oval brooches that fastened a woman's cloak.





Try This

Make your own Viking brooch. Wash and dry the lid from a can of frozen juice concentrate. Paint one surface of the lid with a thin layer of white glue. Press a length of string into the glue to create an intricate design on the lid. (Use toothpicks to push the string around if your fingers get too sticky.) After the glue/string has hardened, apply a coat of gold or silver spray paint to the lid. Glue or tape a safety pin on the back of your “brooch” as a fastener when the spray paint has dried. (If you want to use the niello approach, paint the lid black before applying the glue and use gold or silver string, wool or pipe cleaners to make your design. Instead of a final coat of spray paint, apply a layer of white glue or lacquer to your brooch.)

Fabulous Facts

Some women wore shawl brooches made from pieces of converted loot as a means of advertising their husband’s success in overseas raiding ventures.

Rich Vikings often wore huge brooches with long pins to fasten their cloaks. Bulky and dangerous, these brooches were worn as a show of wealth. An Icelandic story tells of a poet who was rewarded for writing a patriotic poem with a 25 pound (11.5 kg) silver brooch. The ecstatic poet sold the brooch and bought a farm with the proceeds!

Bead Making

Viking craftsmen made beads from natural materials, such as jet, amber and crystal. But the brightest and most beautiful beads were made from glass. Bead-makers used imported glass (probably from northern Italy) or recycled glass made from broken fragments of drinking glasses and other glass objects. They melted the bits of glass together in small crucibles and pulled the fused, molten material into long glass sticks. The sticks were wrapped around thin metal rods (which made the hole in the bead). When the sticks hardened, the rods were removed and the glass was sliced into beads. To make multicolored mosaic beads, bead-makers added tiny dots of glass in other colors or bunched, twisted, folded and fused together sticks of different colors before wrapping these composite sticks around the metal rods.

Try This

Make your own imitation Viking beads. Roll a strip of self-hardening clay (or Fimo™) into a clay “snake.” (The thickness of your snake will determine the thickness of your bead.) Use a craft knife to slice the snake into beads of various thicknesses. While the clay is still soft, place each bead on a hard surface and use a toothpick to punch a hole through the middle. When the beads are dry, thread them on lengths of string to make necklaces, bracelets and rings. (To make multicolored, patterned or dotted beads, try one of the following techniques before rolling your clay snake: twist together different colored strips of clay; roll clay strips of different colors into thin pancakes and layer them on top of one another; lay different colored clay strips in the middle of a clay pancake; or press in different colored clay chunks and balls.)

Fabulous Fact

Viking families used strings of beads to demonstrate their wealth. Women often festooned strings of beads—silver, amber, crystal, carnelian and most often of multicolored glass—between their cloak brooches. These elaborate necklaces might be further embellished with different types of pendants.

Clean or Dirty?

It remains unclear as to whether the Vikings were a clean or dirty people. In England, men complained that the Vikings attracted women because they combed their hair, bathed and changed their clothes so often! Ibn Fadhlān, on the other hand, described the Vikings as “the filthiest of God’s creatures.” He said they did not wash nearly often enough and that when they did, they all shared the same bowl of water; rinsing their hair, blowing their noses and spitting in it before passing it on to someone else.

Combs

What is clear is that Vikings were fastidious about their hair. Long hair was fashionable (although some preferred a shorter “bare-necked” cut), and both men and women spent a great deal of time each day combing their flowing tresses. Men wore their hair loose or tied back with an ornamental band. Because married women were expected to keep their heads covered, they often tucked their hair up under a scarf. Some, however, wore their hair long: braided or gathered up in a knot at the back of the head.

With voluminous hair featuring so largely in the Viking perception of beauty, combs were a basic necessity. The long comb is a common Viking artifact and intricately carved combs of bone, horn and antler have been found all over the Viking world. These were made by cutting a long strip of bone, horn or antler and splitting it along its length into two identical pieces. These long “places” formed the back of the comb. A series of rectangular tablets were slotted between the two places and riveted in place. Fine teeth were cut into the rectangles. A design was often engraved along the top, and some combs had a hole drilled in one end so they could hang from a chain or a belt, often protected in a bone comb-case.

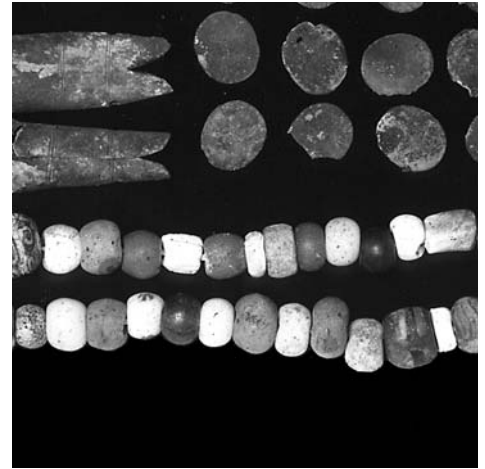
Try This

Make a Viking comb out of Bristol board. Cut two identical strips of white Bristol board 2" (5 cm) wide and 6" (15 cm) long. (These will fasten together to form the top of your comb.) Cut three identical 2" x 4" (5 x 10 cm) rectangles. (These will become the teeth of your comb.) “Carve” the teeth of your comb by cutting a row of thin 2" deep (5 cm) triangles into the short side of each rectangle. Punch a hole in the right and left corners of each rectangle, 1" (2.5 cm) from the top. Arrange the three sets of teeth between the two strips of Bristol board. Punch holes in the strips that correspond to the holes in the teeth. Use six pushpins to rivet your comb together. (If desired, punch a hole for a chain through one end of the comb.) Draw or paint a fancy design along the top of your comb. Print the following words across the top: “(your name) made a good comb”—just as a Viking carver would have done.

Fabulous Facts

Viking men kept their beards and moustaches neatly trimmed and both sexes used metal tweezers to pluck out unwanted hairs. (They also used tiny metal scoops to clean out their ears!)

Both men and women wore eye makeup to enhance their beauty.



Health, Healing & Medicine



Photo Dan Carlsson www.arkeodok.com

The Vikings were a strong and robust race of people. The Anglo-Saxons that they terrorized and terrified described them as tall, broad and muscular. And since they ate relatively well and exercised vigorously in the harsh Scandinavian terrain, they were probably healthier and hardier than many people of the time.

It was the decline of the Roman Empire—and a series of plagues and epidemics that swept across the Roman world—that allowed the Vikings to invade European strongholds. The Vikings regarded the Roman approach to medicine—which was based on a systematic and clinical approach to human anatomy—as the reason for their ruin. The Romans had neglected and offended the gods, and the gods had taken their revenge. For the Vikings, good health was intrinsically linked to religion—if the Vikings honored the gods properly, the gods would protect the Vikings from injury and illness—and much of Viking medicine remained firmly rooted in superstition and religious divination.

What little medicine was available in Scandinavia took the form of herbal remedies. Using plants that grew locally and naturally,

Vikings derived common herbal cures: red clover to purify the blood, nettles to improve circulation, stinking arrach to cure ulcers, eyebright to resolve eye infections, willow bark to treat rheumatism and viper's bugloss to counteract snake bites.

Fabulous Facts

Although the bubonic plague ravaged most European and Middle Eastern countries, the Vikings in Scandinavia were spared the worst. Rather than divine protection, this was probably due to the fact that unlike their neighbors (who lived in densely packed urban settlements), most Vikings lived in small, isolated, rural communities which were less conducive to the spread of disease.

Bloodletting, an ancient treatment for disease, was still widely practiced in Viking times. Doctors believed that many illnesses were caused by an imbalance of the four humors (blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm); the fluids they believed made up the human body. Letting out some of the blood (by incision or leech sucking) was thought to improve this imbalance.

Architecture

Building methods and materials varied throughout the Viking world, partly because Vikings who left Scandinavia tended to adopt the local building traditions of their new settlements, but mostly because the type of materials available locally determined the type of construction. In heavily wooded areas such as Denmark, Norway and Sweden, buildings were made out of timber, but in the treeless, exposed North Atlantic islands builders were forced to use boulders and turf on foundations of stone (or to dig their houses into the ground to keep them warm in winter and cool in summer). The oldest houses in Jorvik were made of wattle—interwoven twigs tightly wound around upright posts—and smeared with a layer of daub (clay or dung) for waterproofing. Roofs were covered in wooden tiles or shingles, thatch or matted reeds. Later, houses were made of upright wooden posts called staves. In rural areas, timbers or stones were often covered with thick strips of turf. These grass roofs and walls—which kept growing—acted as insulators and kept out the damp and the cold.

Fabulous Facts

In the Viking Age, brute strength—not machinery—built houses and barns. Trees had to be chopped down and their timbers shaped with an axe. Stones had to be quarried and hauled to the building site. Reeds had to be cut and gathered for thatched roofs and turf had to be dug from moorlands and bogs.

In Scandinavia, Viking halls resembled huge, upturned boats, which may have been their original source of inspiration. Inside, the forest timber roofs looked similar to the trusses of a boat; outside, the roofline follows the same gentle curve as a ship's keel. (In Greenland and Iceland, houses were often circular.)

Unfortunately, few Viking houses remain standing. One reason is that most Vikings used wood, which has long since rotted away. Another is that many farms were built on land which has been farmed continuously since Viking times. On these farms, houses have been built and rebuilt many times over the centuries.

Many Vikings lived in isolated farmhouses or small villages. A poor man's dwelling might have only one room, partitioned at the end for his animals. Wealthy Vikings, however, often established self-sufficient farmsteads in the countryside. These included clusters of small outbuildings with sunken floors dug out of the ground. They were used as byres and barns for wintering animals, workshops for making and repairing farm tools and weapons, weaving sheds and slave houses. At the center of the farming settlement was a large building called a longhouse. This long, low building was up to 30 meters in length and was usually built of whole timbers (which were more readily available and warmer than stone). The roof was supported on timber columns and open to the rafters. Early in the Viking Age these longhouses were fairly basic structures: they contained a central hall or living room, a bathroom (with pit toilets dug in the

ground) and a stable. The entire household—family and farm-workers—lived, ate and slept in the communal living room, and the layout of this room was much the same all over the Viking world. In the center of the room was a long, open fireplace made of stone. A fire burned in the hearth continuously for cooking, warmth and light. There were no windows and no chimney—the smoke from the fire drifted out through a small louvered opening in the roof—so the air inside the longhouse was sharp with smoke. The light was so poor that detailed work had to be done outside or by flickering lamplight (lamps were small soapstone bowls filled with oil and a wick). The floor was stamped earth. There were no rugs or carpets. Instead the floor was covered with sweet smelling rushes that were swept away once soiled. There was little or no furniture. People sat and slept on raised earth platforms along the walls wrapped in woolen blankets, animal skins and furs. (Only a rich farmer and his wife might sleep in a bed with a down- or straw-filled mattress.) Well-appointed longhouses might contain a few pieces of wooden furniture—a table, stools and a few portable chairs. Clothes and personal possessions were kept in chests or hung on hooks on the wall with weapons and tools. Jewelry and money were hidden away in locked strongboxes. Foodstuffs—butter, salted fish, flour and drinks, such as ale—were stored in buckets, barrels, vats and tubs.

Try This

When it gets dark outside, go into a room in your house where you can close the door and curtains. Ask a friend to stand in the middle of the room, point the beam of a flashlight at the ceiling and wiggle it around. Try to read, write, play a game, fold laundry—do anything!—in the feeble, flickering light. Now imagine your room filled with smoke and people. Welcome to life in a longhouse!

Fabulous Facts

Later in the Viking Age, longhouses often had extra rooms: a bedroom for the farmer and his wife, a room for spinning and weaving, a dairy where the women made butter and cheese; a separate kitchen, a food store and a bathhouse.

In the houses of wealthy families, the turf or timber walls were sometimes covered in wooden paneling. These panels and exposed wooden beams might be intricately carved or decorated



Photo Dan Carlsson www.arkeodok.com

Art



Photo Dan Carlsson www.arkeodok.com

The Vikings made great use of local resources, and Viking craftsmen used a variety of at-hand media for their work, including: bone, antler and horn (which were used to make a wide range of functional and decorative items, including tools, personal effects, molds for casting ornaments and dies for impressing gold or bronze foil); soapstone, or steatite (a soft and versatile material that was carved out of rocky outcrops); amber (the dark, reddish brown to a translucent straw yellow fossilized resin of ancient pine trees long submerged in the sea); the ivory tusk of the walrus (which was well suited to three-dimensional

carving); jet (a fossil deposit with a black, lustrous surface that was exposed in cliffs); and wood (which was the principal material used for crafting everyday items such as mugs, bowls, platters, ladles, scoops and spoons. Many of these materials lent themselves perfectly to the application of artistry and the entire surfaces of weapons, tools, jewelry, personal effects, wagons, buildings, ships and tombstones were often elaborately and intricately ornamented. Like so much of the Viking character, Vikings were unique in their approach to artistic expression: they did not set about to create works of art; they worked art into the functional items they created.

In an age when few people could read or write, pictures were often used to tell stories. The Vikings did not paint, but Viking craftsmen never missed an opportunity to carve elaborate designs on everyday objects, wooden walls or stone monuments. Sometimes these carvings depicted the heroic exploits of warriors, told the stories of the gods or re-created scenes from Scandinavian mythology. More commonly, however, they featured twisting, swirling, seething beasts with plants shooting from their bodies and hips ending in spirals of ribbon.

Bears, wolves, mink, foxes, deer, elk and wild boar all roamed the forests of Scandinavia and whales, otters, seals, walrus and seabirds inhabited the coastal waterways. These were the stuff of Viking legends, yet these animals did not have a place in Viking art. The beasts depicted by Viking craftsmen were fantasy creatures, pure fabrications of the artist’s imagination. It is these fantastic, acrobatic animals—a distinctly Scandinavian style that displays the artist’s love of movement and line as well as his restless spirit—that form the main motifs of Viking art.

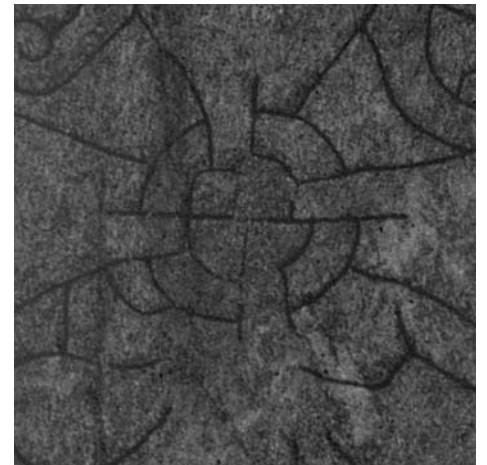
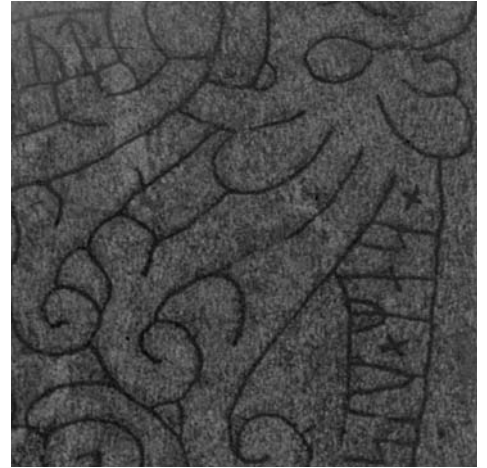
The athletic “gripping beast”—a vigorous animal that writhes and turns inside out, its ribbon-like body arranged in an arc beneath its head—is the most well known of these motifs. Gripping beasts, which became popular in Viking art in the 9th century and survived well into the 10th, were named for their most obvious characteristic—their gripping paws. They cling to the frames around or under them, grip their own legs or throats and even hold on to one another (several beasts are sometimes interlocked together in wild melees). Bold and dramatic, the initial impression is one of utter chaos. The beasts resemble nothing more than a seething pile of serpents. Yet each strand can be disentangled and each is an integral part of a balanced composition. Beneath each crowded surface lurks a carefully created and controlled artistic scheme. Vigorous and vital, intricate and complex, Viking art is a reflection of the Viking character.

Try This

Look at the pictures of gripping beasts on this page. Use your imagination and personal sense of style to draw a gripping beast of your own.

Fabulous Fact

Because Vikings did not paint portraits, images of real Vikings are very rare.



Reading & Writing



Photo Dan Carlsson www.arkeodok.com

The Vikings were great poets and storytellers. On long, cold winter evenings as they sat around the fire, the Vikings told tales about feuds, battles, kings, gods and heroes. They didn't read their stories from books. Instead, they learned the words by heart and passed their epic poems and heroic sagas down by word of mouth from one generation to the next. In fact, most Vikings couldn't read or write. For one thing, they didn't have paper—they scratched short messages on wood, stone or metal. And they didn't have an alphabet like ours. They

used the futhark, 16 straight, stick-like letters called runes. Because the futhark (named after its first six-letter symbols) was developed specifically for carving messages onto hard surfaces, each of the runes was designed with straight lines and diagonals. The stick letters were easy to form, but rune carving was time-consuming and difficult. Because there were not enough runes to represent every sound in the Viking language, spelling was difficult for rune carvers—and for the people trying to make sense of the inscriptions!

F U T H A R K H N I A S T B M L R

Fabulous Facts

According to poetic myth, it was Odin—the god of magic—who discovered the runes. Initially thought to be magic, runes brought strength to ordinary objects, like swords. Curses and secret charms were also carved in runes. Later, runes were used to record everyday or public information and were even used on coins.

In Scandinavia, the first runic inscriptions—using a 24-character alphabet—appeared around AD 200. The Vikings refined the alphabet and some 600 years later developed the 16-letter futhark.

One version of the runic alphabet was used for carving in stone, another for everyday writing in wood. As well, localized versions of the runic alphabet and variations in the number of symbols and their sound values also existed. As a result, there is some question as to the way surviving runic inscriptions should be read and interpreted.

Everyday objects were often inscribed with runes to identify their maker or owner. (“Snorri made a good comb.”) Bills, accounts—even love “letters”—were scratched in runes on sticks.

Some of the most interesting runic inscriptions are actually graffiti—messages carved onto memorial stones and statues by passing Vikings.

Although the Roman alphabet (which spread with Christianity) became popular in the late 11th century, runes were still used in Scandinavia well into the Middle Ages.



Runestones

Vikings celebrated their own accomplishments and the glory of dead relatives by raising memorial stone markers called runestones. These runestones, which have been found all over Scandinavia, were carved with pictures and inscribed with short runic messages. Runestones were usually erected in public places where many people would stop and admire them. One very proud, wealthy 11th century landowner named Jarlabanke built a road over a marsh and then raised four runestones, two at each end, to remind travelers of his good deed. “Jarlabanke had this stone raised in memory of himself in his lifetime, and made this Thing place, and alone owned the whole of this Hundred.” (The “Thing place” was the spot where the district assembly met and a “hundred” was the area governed by a Thing.) Even after embracing Christianity, the Vikings continued to raise runestones, their pagan images contrasted with Christian sentiments. One of the earliest Christian Viking monuments has the following runic inscription:

“The sons of Liknat have raised a good monument to the memory of Ailikn, good wife, mother of Aviat, Ottar and Gairvat and Liknvi. May God and God’s mother be merciful to her and to those who raised the monument the largest to be seen in Garda.”



Fabulous Facts

Many different good deeds are commemorated on runestones, but the building of bridges is most common. These bridges were generally causeways over marshland or through fjords and because they opened up access to churches and made it easier for priests to visit the sick and dying, bridge building was regarded as a suitably charitable act and beneficial to the builder’s soul or the soul of a relative.

The most famous runic monument in Scandinavia is the Jelling Stone in Jutland, Denmark. It was raised by Harald Bluetooth to commemorate his parents and to advertise his own power as king of Norway and Denmark. The memorial is a huge granite pyramid with pictograms on two sides and a lengthy runic inscription on the third side





that spills over onto the other two. One pictogram shows a snake twisting and turning around a great beast in what could represent the eternal struggle between good and evil. The other is carved with the oldest picture of Christ in Scandinavia. (He is depicted with his arms outstretched, as if being crucified, but no cross is shown.) The runes on the third side read: “King Harald commanded this memorial to be made in memory of Gorm, his father, and in memory of Thyre, his mother—that Harald who won the whole of Denmark for himself” (and below the great beast) “and Norway” (and below the figure of Christ) “and made the Danes Christian.”

Try This

Use self-hardening clay to make a pictogram runestone that celebrates one of your greatest achievements or the kind deed(s) of someone you know. Roll out a small slab of clay. Flatten the bottom of the clay slab so that your runestone will stand upright. Use a craft knife—and the Futhark!—to carve your runic message. Include a carved picture to further clarify (explain) your message.

Poets & Poetry

The Vikings loved poetry. When they had feasts, a poet—or skald—was usually invited to entertain them after the meal. These skalds traveled around the country visiting one chieftain’s hall after another and making up verses, called drapa, in praise of their various hosts. If a host (usually a king or jarl) liked the drapa he rewarded the skald generously with gifts of silver jewelry. If the skald’s poetry was not well received, he might be killed.

The skalds loved to include riddles, called kennings, in their verses. A kenning described something without actually saying what it was, leaving the audience to guess. A sword, for example, might be called a battle-adder and a spider might be described as “an incredible beast with eight feet, four eyes and knees higher than its body.”

Try This

Write your own kenning and share it with your classmates. Can anyone solve your riddle?

Fabulous Facts

Egil Skallagrimsson was the most famous Viking poet. He once saved his life by reciting a poem that praised his enemy.

One of the few Viking books ever written, the *Hávamál*, was supposed to contain Odin’s advice to the Vikings. The following are some of the *Hávamál*’s words of warning:

“Look carefully round doorways before you go in—you never know when an enemy might be there.”

“Praise no day until evening, no wife until buried, no sword until tested, no ice until crossed, no ale until drunk.”

“There is no better load a man can carry than much common sense—no worse a load than too much drink.”

What’s in a Name?

The Vikings gave many words to the English language that are still in use today, including sky, bread, egg, scrawny, snort and lump. (They also gave us “fell” for a hill, “beck” for a stream, “dale” for a valley, “toft” for a building or farm and “tarn” for a pond, all of which are still common in northern England where the Viking influence was the strongest.) The Vikings gave names in their own language to the places they colonized. These were based on topographically prominent features, or the name of the founding settler. Many British place-names still in use today originated in the Viking Age: those ending in *wick* were markets; *thorp* were villages; *haven* were harbors; *thwaite* were



meadows; *ness* were headlands; *gate* were streets; and *by* were farms. Aismunderby in Yorkshire, for example, was “Aismund’s Farm.” You can be fairly sure a place was once inhabited by Vikings if its name ends with any of these suffixes.

The Vikings gave pet names to both their heroes and their enemies and history is rich with the exotic-sounding nicknames of the greatest adventurers, raiders, chieftains and outcasts of the Viking Age. Based on the individual’s most striking quality or personality trait, here are a few Viking nicknames that have gone down in the books:

Ragnar “Hairy-Brecks”	Rollo “the Ganger”
Eric “the Red”	Leif “the Lucky”
Harald “Bluetooth”	Svein “Forkbeard”
Harald “Finehair”	Thorvald “the Far Traveled”
Magnus “the Good”	Harald “the Ruthless”
Ivar “the Boneless”	Ethelred “the Unready”

Try This

Invent your own Viking nickname. Make sure that the nickname reflects your most prominent physical feature or personality trait. Try making up nicknames for your friends. (These names should be kind and not cruel and focus on the positive rather than the negative.) Make up a name and nickname for a fictional arch enemy. (You can be cruel and negative with this one!)

In Writing at Last

After the Viking Age had come to an end, the stories that were passed down from generation to generation during the Viking years—many of them told and retold for hundreds of years—were at last gathered and written down as sagas by 13th century Christian scholars living in Iceland. Some sagas are almost certainly lost, but those that survive—historical records of the reigns of great kings; tales of contact between clever gods and the magical deeds of heroes; and the stories of real-life adventurers like Eric the Red and his family (in “Eric’s Saga” and the “Greenlanders’ Saga”)—are a literary treasure preserved for generations to come.

Fabulous Facts

One of the Vikings’ greatest legacies is the rich, compelling, complex and colorful tapestry of mythology and epic poems they left behind. Nordic stories and poems are among the finest works of literature to survive from the Dark Ages.

J.R.R. Tolkien might have been inspired by Norse mythology. Although his fantasy novel “The Hobbit” and its epic sequel “The Lord of the Rings” are works of fiction, Tolkien is said to have drawn upon his intimate knowledge of Norse mythology when he created the Hobbits and the kingdom of Middle Earth. As well, dwarfs, runes and other mythological Viking elements—including place names and magic—figure prominently in his stories.



Entertainment



Photo Dan Carlsson www.arkeodok.com

The Vikings loved life and they loved to have fun. They fought hard, worked hard and played hard, too.

Sports

During the long winter months, Vikings enjoyed a number of outdoor sports, such as skiing, sledding, skating and a version of ball hockey on ice. In the summer, Vikings played ball games (including a version of football) and fished, swam and boated in the many lakes and rivers that cut across Scandinavia. They also enjoyed combative sports, like wrestling and fencing; skill sports, like archery, swordplay and horsemanship; strength sports like weightlifting; and thrilling, dangerous spectator sports, like horse racing.

Fabulous Facts

Most Vikings were very competitive. They competed to see who could swim the furthest underwater, who could row his ship the fastest and who could walk all the way around a longship by leaping from oar to oar as it was being rowed. As well as being fun, these challenges helped to keep them fit for fighting.

Some Viking sports were cruel. These included bear baiting (where dogs attacked tethered bears) and horse fighting. Vikings liked to watch and place bets on fights between prize stallions and wild ponies. It is possible that horse fighting played a part in religious feasts and ceremonies, and that the Vikings believed the winning horse to be favored by the gods.

Games

Vikings loved board games, and because so many of them were based on war, they were especially popular with men. Some games were played on elaborate boards with beautiful pieces

carved from bone, ivory (from walrus tusks) amber or glass; others were scratched on wood or stone using broken pieces of pottery or scraps of bone as counters. Hnefatafl was a particular favorite. It was played like a game of chess or draughts, with 16 pieces of one color against eight pieces and a king of another color. One player tried to capture the king with his 16 pieces, while the other tried to protect the king with his eight.

Try This

Make your own Hnefatafl pieces and gameboard. Cut out 25 paper circles the size of quarters. Color eight of the circles red (the Guards) and one of the circles black (the King). Draw double-sided arrows on the remaining 16 pieces (the Attackers). Cut out a 12" (30 cm) square of Bristol board. Using horizontal and vertical lines, divide your playing board into 144 1" (2.5 cm) squares. Have the Prosecutor arrange his Attackers around the outside of the board, with four attackers in each row or column. The Attackers can only move in the direction indicated by their arrows. (If an attacker reaches one end of the board it can be removed and replaced in the same position at the opposite end of the board.) Have the Defender arrange his Guards and King around the board. (These pieces can move in any direction.) The Prosecutor makes the first move. A piece is captured when an opponent lands on the square it occupies. If the King is captured, the Prosecutor wins. If the Prosecutor's 16 pieces are captured, the Defendant wins. (No one really knows how Hnefatafl was played. If you don't like these rules, make up your own!)

Fabulous Facts

The best preserved gaming board is an old version of the modern game of Fox and Geese.

It is believed that Viking traders saw the Arabs playing chess and brought the game home to Scandinavia.

Viking children played with a variety of wooden toys, including dolls and soldiers.

Music

Although little is known of Viking music, instrumentation, singing and dancing featured strongly in Viking entertainment. Rich people sometimes hired professional musicians and singers to perform at their banquets, but even in ordinary households families enjoyed singing folk songs together. The lyre, the harp and the flute were all popular instruments, and the remains of a few stringed instruments, bone flutes and wooden panpipes have been found.

Fabulous Facts

The “lur,” a Danish wind instrument that is still used today in some parts of Scandinavia to call cattle, was an S-shaped trumpet made of bronze.

The Vikings made tiny whistles out of the leg bones of birds—quite possibly to keep those same birds away from their crops! They also made flutes by cutting holes in a sheep’s leg bone. The instrument was played like a recorder: the musician blew through one end of the bone and covered different combinations of holes to produce a variety of tones.

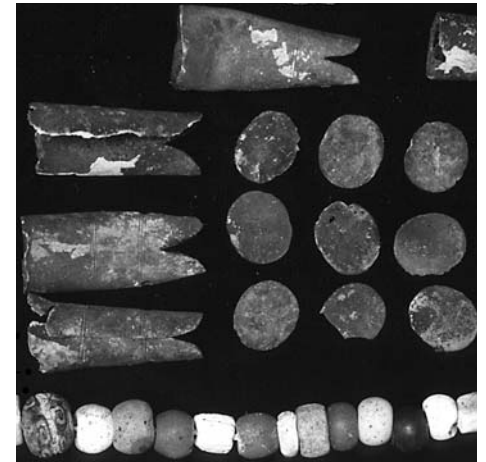


Feasting & Festivals

Festivals were a good excuse to escape the tedium of the dark, cold Scandinavian winters and a wonderful opportunity to strengthen the bonds of kinship, and feasting was an important part of life in a Viking community.

Many evenings were reserved for friendship and feasting. The sense of community was strong in the Viking world, and often an entire village would gather in the chieftain’s hall for an evening of food, drink and entertainment. After they had eaten their fill, the revelers would recite epic poems about legendary heroes, tell stories of the gods, play games and join in rousing songs and dancing. At special banquets, jesters, jugglers, musicians and professional poets called “skalds” would be hired to entertain.

The Vikings also held three religious celebrations each year—Sigrblot at the start of summer; Vetrarblot after the harvest; Jolablot just after mid-winter—feasts that could last up to two weeks. The Viking word *blot* means “sacrifice,” and at each of the three religious festivals a horse was sacrificed to the gods. This was often an old horse which was no longer fit for work, and its flesh was cooked and eaten at the feast. The Vikings were shrewd as well as practical, however, and a sacrifice did not always end in death. Sometimes the celebratory Vikings struck a bargain with their gods and agreed to share the horse between them. The sacrificial victim would remain with the Vikings while it was alive (and useful), and be given to the gods when it died.

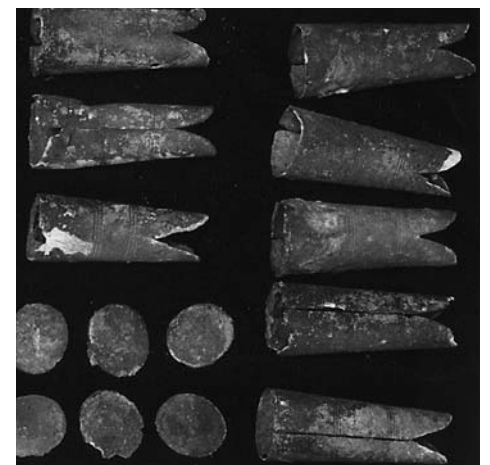


Fabulous Facts

Feasts were sometimes held to honor a great warrior, but probably originated as a celebration to mark the return of a raiding party—and an occasion to share out the spoils.

Dancing was popular at feasts, and played a role in religious ceremonies. Some dances were slow and graceful, but others were wild affairs in which participants leapt about violently. After the coming of Christianity, priests tried to force the Vikings to stop dancing.

The newly Christian Vikings were unwilling to give up the ale feasts associated with their religious festivals, and carried them over into their new religion.



The End of the Viking Age



Photo Dan Carlsson www.arkeodok.com

Although the Viking Age was over by AD 1100, there is no particular moment at which it ended. It simply faded away. Scandinavia had changed. It was the Viking Age that saw the birth of the Christian nation-states of Scandinavia. By embracing Christianity and moving towards centralized authority and the sole rule of kings, the Vikings had forced the deterioration of their spiritual and political fabric. More land was cultivated, which meant that young men were no longer forced to make their way in the world at the expense of others abroad. And the Vikings had lost the advantages of speed, stealth and surprise which had made them so successful: the European kings had built strong stone castles to defend their towns and organized large armies to defend their people. Trade patterns changed, too. As populations grew, merchants became more interested in goods such as grain and wool and the market for Viking commodities dwindled. Perhaps most tellingly, in places such as Britain, Ireland, Normandy and Russia, the Vikings had settled down, married locally and been absorbed into the native cultures of their new homes.

The Viking Age lasted only 300 years, but in that time the Vikings traveled further than Europeans had ever gone before, exploited the riches of the eastern world and explored the uncharted waters of the North Atlantic Ocean. They settled as farmers in the barren western lands of Greenland and discovered America; they ravaged kingdoms and confiscated untold riches. They colonized rich commercial centers from York in England to Kiev in Russia, and they founded settlements from the coast of Newfoundland in the west to Yaroslavl in northern Russia, and from Arctic Norway to the coasts of northern France.

The Vikings were a remarkable yet ordinary people; their unparalleled achievements as raiders, traders and explorers were made on the backs of everyday men and women of extraordinary skill, courage and endurance. As archaeologists continue to make intriguing new discoveries about this fascinating civilization, our knowledge and appreciation of the many outstanding achievements and contributions of the Vikings can only grow.