The Viking Era

It began with the sacking of the monastery at Lindisfarne in 793 and ended in 1066, at the Battle of Stamford Bridge where King Harald Hardråde was killed. These two bloody events mark the opening and closing of an era in Nordic history which featured dramatic social change. The Viking Era. When it started, paganism dominated and the countries were fragmented into countless chiefdoms and minor kingdoms. When it ended, power had been vested in the king and church. For the first time in history, we see a west European type society emerge.

HEROES OR MEN OF VIOLENCE?

Written records in western Europe describe the Vikings as robbers and pirates who burned, pillaged and raped. Laying waste monasteries and churches, they tyrannised Christian Europe.

At the same time, they were extraordinarily skilled seafarers. They crossed huge ocean tracts and discovered Iceland, Greenland and North America. Arabian sources describe them cruising along the Russian rivers to the Black and Caspian Seas, trading and pillaging as they went. Viking sorties also reached into the Mediterranean.

Danish kings succeeded in conquering England at the latter stages of the Viking Era. The Viking chieftain Rollo established his own kingdom in Normandy. Neither before, nor since in European history have the Nordic peoples exercised such political importance.

PEACEFUL ASPECTS OF THE VIKING ERA

Excavations of towns and settlements have provided new insight into daily life, crafts and trade. A powerful surge in trading took place in Europe during the 700's and the first towns where established in Scandinavia. In the period 800-900, the Vikings played a central role in the burgeoning commercial trade which was drawing Europe together. Cities like York in northern England and Dublin in Ireland were Scandinavian communities.

WIDESPREAD EMIGRATION

Compared to population size, there was a scarcity of resources in many parts of the Nordic region. Voyages to the south, east and west gave the peoples an opportunity to seek out new and better living conditions. So the Vikings emigrated in their thousands, hunting out places where they could settle and farm. With the aid of the sword, they established themselves in Normandy and England. Other places the Vikings came across were already sparsely populated, like the Hebrides, Shetlands and the Orkney Islands. The Vikings were the first settlers on Iceland, the Førøe Islands and Greenland. Archaeological excavations have shown that the Vikings also attempted to settle in Newfoundland. Their lack of success was probably due to conflicts with the Indians.

THE BEST OF SHIPS

The art of shipbuilding was well developed but in the 700's a technological breakthrough was achieved which was to affect marauding raids, commercial voyages and emigration.
KEEL BOATS APPEAR
With the discovery, the Viking ships could now be developed to carry sail. They were faster and better suited to sail than any other ship of that time. The Viking ships also had the advantage that they could navigate shallow waters. They could therefore slip easily up rivers and onto shallow shorelines.

Viking History
Viking Invasion Routes During the Age of Vikings
The Norwegian Elkhound was the companions of the Vikings. These first "sea dogs" accompanied the Vikings on their voyages throughout Europe and North America. The word Viking is derived from the Norse word for Fjord, Vik. Thus the term Viking indicates a water traveler. In western history the word Viking has become synonymous with sea pirates and plunderers of the dark ages. But there is much more to these seafaring Scandinavians. Europe during the dark ages was a hostile and violent place. The Norse people were no worse and no better than other European contemporaries. They were merely more successful than most. In that time law was established through force of arms. The Vikings had their laws and the outlanders had theirs.

The part of history know as the "Viking Age" is considered to have started in the year 793. This was the year of the first large Viking raid. It occurred at the monastery of Lindisfarne on the northeast coast of Britain. Viking movements occurred both to the east and the west of the Scandinavian countries. The Swedish Vikings went east while the Danish and Norwegian Vikings went to the west. The cause of this expansion of Viking peoples most likely was the result of two factors. One was the consolidation of power under kings in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. This new authority may have caused many of the people of these lands, who had previously enjoyed the freedom that comes with highly decentralized authority to seek independence and liberty elsewhere. The other factor may have been the necessity to colonize because of the overcrowding of the limited arable lands in Scandinavia, just as the ancient Greek city states in the millennium before the Viking age had done.

In the east the Swedish Vikings sailed their ships up the rivers of northern Russia, reaching Kiev by 825. Along the way they established settlements along the river routes. A major settlement was located at Novgorod. The Swedish Viking, Rurik became its first ruler. This area later became Moscow. At Kiev, the Varangians, as the Swedish Vikings were called, under Rurik's successor Duke Oleg, set up the first Russian state. From this base of operations the Swedish Vikings traveled south along the Dnieper river to the capital of the eastern Roman empire, Constantinople. There they tried to capture the city in 865 but were not successful. The emperor however made a deal with the Swedish Vikings to grant them special trading privileges. This was the extent of Viking expansion in the east.

The travels of the Vikings in the west were more extensive. Following the attacks on the monasteries at Lindisfarne and Jarrow in Britain the Vikings developed a taste for the riches they found in such places. With their ships they could navigate both the open sea and the shallow estuaries of Britain and Europe. This gave them the ability to place large numbers of warriors without warning at any place that bordered a river or ocean. This included most of the major cities and towns of Europe. Few places could resist the Viking onslaught. Every summer raiding parties of Vikings would visit the monasteries and towns of Britain, Ireland and France. In 841 a large Viking fleet sailed up the Seine river in France and plundered the city of Rouen. In 843 it the city of Nantes along the Loire river that was the target.
A new phase in the Viking age in the west began in 851. Viking fleets wintered at Thanet on the Thames river in Britain and at Noiremutier on the Noire river in France. Previously the Vikings had gone home following the summers raiding. Now they were staying over the winter. This allowed them to get an early start to their raids in the spring which in turn allowed them to advance further into the heart of continental Europe. In the next forty years the western Vikings raided all the major towns of western France. In 844 the Vikings attacked throughout the valley of Garonne in France as well as traveling south to Spain and sacking Seville. In France over the next few years Bordeaux, Tours, Blois, Orleans, Poitiers and Paris were attacked by the Vikings. In Spain the Vikings traveled through the straight of Gibralter and attacked southern France and northwestern Italy. By 880 western Europe had been thoroughly "visited" by Viking fleets.

A Viking fleet sailed up the Siene river to Paris in 885. The commanders of the Viking force offered not to plunder the city in exchange of free passage of their fleet past the city. The offer was refused by the local ruler of Paris so the Vikings began a two year siege of Paris. Emperor Charles the Fat, leading a strong German army raised the siege. Because of their mobility and ability to concentrate large forces rapidly the Vikings were extremely difficult to defeat. Following this attack on Paris a new strategy was formulated to stop the Vikings. This was to fight Vikings with other Vikings. In 911 Charles the Simple (king of the Franks 893-923) ceded the mouth of the Siene river to a Viking leader named Rollo. This meant that Viking forces attempting to attack Paris would have to get past their fellow Northsmen in this new Viking kingdom. Thus the Duchy of Normandy was established. This general strategy served to limit further attacks on inshore French cities and towns.

Meanwhile in Britain the Vikings had made more substantial and permanent gains. By 877 east Anglia, Northumbria and most of Mercia had come under Viking control. These were more than Viking raids. The Vikings had begun a conquest of Britain. The Anglo-Saxon king, Alfred of Wessex led the forces against the Vikings in eastern Britain. By 885, against all odds he was successful enough to make the Danish Vikings willing to negotiate a peace treaty. The result was that the Anglo-Saxons got west Merica, Wessex and the lands south of the Thames river. The Danish Vikings kept east Mercia and east Anglia (Lincolnshire and Yorshire). The treaty of Wedmore set up this Danish Viking area which became known as the Danelaw. Additionally as part of the settlement Alfred insisted that the Danish Vikings be baptized and accept Christianity.

While there was now peace in eastern Britain the Vikings were busy attacking cities and towns in the north and in Ireland. Viking settlements in Ireland were established at Dublin, Wexford and Waterford. Later, Orkney, Hebrides, Sheltands and the Isle of Mann also came under Viking control. 874 saw the first Viking settlements in Iceland. Later a settlement in Greenland was established by Erik the Red who had been exiled from Iceland. Eric the Red's father had been exiled from Norway for committing murder. This expansion in the northern Atlantic opened the way for voyages to North America. Eric the Red's son, Leif Ericsson led such an expedition to North America. The area of the landing was called Vineland. Its exact location is in some dispute. But there is evidence of a Viking settlement in Newfoundland, Canada, at L'Anse aux Meadows.

The end of the Viking age came with the Norman invasion of Britain in 1066. William, Duke of Normandy, a descendent of the Vikings who had been given land there by Charles the Simple in exchange for guarding the mouth of the Siene river from other Vikings, began a two pronged invasion of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of King Harold. In the north Harald Hardrada of Norway and Tostig (Anglo-Saxon king Harold's half brother) led a force against King Harold. They both were defeated and killed at the battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066 by King Harold. At almost the
same time William of Normandy and his forces were landing in the south of Britain. King Harold quickly marched his forces south and the two armies met at Hastings. William was victorious and Harold was killed in battle. had been given land there by Charles the Simple in exchange for guarding the mouth of the Siene river from other Vikings, began a two pronged invasion of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of King Harold. In the north Harald Hardrada of Norway and Tostig (Anglo-Saxon king Harold's half brother) led a force against King Harold. They both were defeated and killed at the battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066 by King Harold. At almost the same time William of Normandy and his forces were landing in the south of Britain. King Harold quickly marched his forces south and the two armies met at Hastings. William was victorious and Harold was killed in battle.

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As a result of this battle the direct ancestors of the Vikings now controlled most of France and Britain. In the east, members of the Viking bloodlines would control Russia until the Mongol invasions of Gengis Khan. But these were no longer the seaborne raiders who had come suddenly and ferociously from Scandinavia at the start of the Age of Vikings. They had adopted the language, customs and religion of the people they had come to conquer. The adaptability and flexibility that made the Vikings so successful during this period of history also meant that they were “civilized” by the conquered peoples and became assimilated into the course of European history.

At the beginning of the 6th century large changes took place in the Lake Molar Area of Sweden

1. Suddenly a Svea power appeared which was strong enough to wage war against the Gutar, island of Gotland in the Baltic sea. From where did those Svear come?

2. A new fashion in burying saw the light in the Lake Molar Area during the 6th century. The burials were very ritual, which indicates that religion very much directed the treatment of man for the next life.

3. The Svear used the Roman Julian calendar which is considered to have been introduced in Uppland about the year 500. Still in the 17th century the Dishingday in Uppsala was calculated according to this calendar.

4. The sir-religion which can be interpreted as the religion of the warlike masters makes its appearance whilst the Vana-belief probably was the religion of the peaceful farming people. The sir-religion can be considered a child of an Iranian religion, which after its founder, Mani, is called Manikeism. This religion gained, from the 4th century, wide acceptance outside of the Persian state of the time. The sir-religion has also borrowed ideas from early Christianity.

5. The Beowulf poem which in principle reflects the life of the Gutar and Gotland, also talks about the wars between the Gutar and Svear beginning of the 6th century.
6. In the Old Uppsala mounds the burial build-up, according to professor Sune Lindqvist, has been done in a similar way as the Roman Royal cremations.

7. The Heruls, a Scandinavian people which together with the Gutans, or Goths as the Romans called them, were, from the 3rd century, ravaging the Black Sea, Minor Asia and the Mediterranean. After having been subdued firstly by the Goths and later by the Huns, those Heruls formed in the middle of the 5th century a state in upper Hungary. There are several accounts about how the Heruls ravaged the shores of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, alone and together with the Goths, why they must have been skillful seafarers. They were in great demand as soldiers in the Roman Imperial Guards. According to Roman sources they were a more primitive people than other Germanic people. The soldiers of Odovakar who assumed power in the Western Empire in the year 476 were according to available sources mainly Heruls. A Roman coin from 476 has been found in the Ottar mound in Uppland. This state of Odovakar was, however, soon overrun by the Theoderik and his Ostrogoths.

8. The Greek-Roman author Prokopios says that about the year 505 the Herul state in upper Hungary was smashed by the Longobards. Some of the Heruls settled in Illyria under the protection of the Caesar of the Eastern Empire, but another part could not, says Prokopios, decide whether they should cross the Danube but decided instead to settle in the furthest parts of the, in that time, inhabited world. They returned to Thule (Scandinavia) and settled along the borders of a powerful tribe which is called Gautoi (Gøtar). This takes place at the same time as a powerful Svea state with powerful kings emerges in the Lake Mølar Area.

9. The helmets in the Vendel graves in Uppland are also interesting. They are identified as the helmets of the Roman Imperial guards, the model that was in use in the 5th century. They are considered to be related to the Sassanitian helmets and have been manufactured in the Ostrogothic factories at the Black Sea. We know from pictures that the Germanic mercenaries on Roman duty carried those helmets. The helmet from the grave that is called Vendel XIV is the only in Europe remaining ornated helmet of the highest rank, the Roman Imperial house and general staff. Those for Vendel XIV strange face protections of Roman model underline the closeness to the Roman army.

10. Snorri Sturluson tells in Heimskringla about the origin of the Osir (the men from Asia) and the Ynglinga dynasty. Snorre says that Odin travelled north to the country that now is called Svitjod; the king in that country was called Gylve. When he heard that the men from Asia, which were called Osir, were on their way, he travelled to meet them and offered Odin to have as much power in his country as he himself wanted. Wherever they travelled in the countries they were lucky and there were good years and peace, and everybody thought that they had power over such things, as the old people saw that they were different to other men they had seen both in appearance and in customs. Odin thought that they had found beautiful fields and good soil and he chose a place that now is called Sigtuna. And wherever they travelled through the countries, there was much praising of them and they were regarded more as gods than humans. They were dressed in Roman armour similar to that we find in the Vendel graves.

11. The cultivation of the soil was drastically changed in Fornsigtuna (Old Sigtuna) at the beginning of the 6th century. Samples show lots of horses and an intensified activity in the area.

12. It is interesting to note that at the same time as the Heruls settle next to the Gøtar, a Svea state flourishes in the Lake Mølar Area with powerful warriors and warships. Accordingly we have two names for the same people, Heruls as the Romans called them and Svear (Sviar) as we today know them.
13. Let us now look at the Baltic area during the 6th century. We have several historical sources where the relationship between Gutar and Svear are treated and by analysing those together a picture of the historical events appears. The Gutar dominated the Baltic up to the beginning of the 6th century when they met competition from the immigrating Svear with disturbances and war. Also a new religion is introduced into the area and it has its strongest following in the new main areas of the Svear where Uppsala becomes the centre. Gradually peace is negotiated and a peace- and trade-agreement is reached, according to the Guta Saga by Avair Strabain. We have no name of the Svea king, but probably he was called Adils.

As we have been able to show it is probably the Heruls mentioned by Prokopios who are the founders of the Ynglinga dynasty in the Svea state and become what we later know as Svear. Quite a few pieces now find its place in the puzzle. The wars between the Gutar and Svear in the Beowulf poem as well as the wars and the trade-treaty in the Guta Saga can now more easily be explained.

Gotland that, at least since the Bronze age, was the centre for trade and culture in the Baltic area did now obtain a peace- and trade-treaty with the Svear where they freely could trade with the inhabitants of the new Svea state and also build trading centres around the Baltic. As the Gutar were considered to be good iron smiths, iron was an important merchandise.

Scandinavian Mythology, pre-Christian religious beliefs of the Scandinavian people.

The Scandinavian legends and myths about ancient heroes, gods, and the creation and destruction of the universe developed out of the original common mythology of the Germanic peoples (Ed. note: This is a common theory among Germanic scholars, who tend to believe that the Sax invented everything. The truth is that the Nordic, both Wanr & Aesr, and the Saxon (Germanic) mythology originated in, and developed from, India and the Vedas) and constitute the primary source of knowledge about ancient German mythology. Because Scandinavian mythology was transmitted and altered by medieval Christian historians, the original pagan religious beliefs, attitudes, and practices cannot be determined with certainty. Clearly, however, Scandinavian mythology developed slowly, and the relative importance of different gods and heroes varied at different times and places. Thus, the cult of Odin, chief of the gods, may have spread from western Germany to Scandinavia not long before the myths were recorded; minor gods including Ull, the fertility god Njord1, and Heimdall may represent older deities2 who lost strength and popularity as Odin became more important. Odin, a god of war, was also associated with learning, wisdom, poetry, and magic. (ed. note: Odin associated himself with anything that made him look good.)

Most information about Scandinavian mythology is preserved in the Old Norse literature (Icelandic, Swedish, and Norwegian Literature), in the Eddas and later sagas; other material appears in commentaries by the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus and the German writer Adam of Bremen (flourished about 1075). Fragments of legends are sometimes preserved in old inscriptions and in later folklore.

Gods and Heroes

Besides Odin, the major deities of Scandinavian mythology were his wife, Frigg, goddess of the home; Valhalla. There the warriors would spend their days fighting
and nights feasting until Ragnarok, the day of the final world battle, in which
the old gods would perish and a new reign of peace and love would be instituted.
Ordinary individuals were received after death by the goddess Hel in a cheerless
underground world.
Scandinavian mythology included dwarves; elves; and the Norns, who distributed
fates to mortals. The ancient Scandinavians also believed in personal spirits,
such as the fylgja and the hammingja, which in some respects resembled the
Christian idea of the soul. The gods were originally conceived as a confederation
of two formerly warring divine tribes, the Aesir and the Vanir. Odin was
originally the leader of the Aesir, which consisted of at least 12 gods. Together
all the gods lived in Asgard.

Creation belief

The Eddic poem Völuspá (Prophecy of the Seeress) portrays a period of primeval
chaos, followed by the creation of giants and gods and, finally, of humankind.
Ginnungagap was the yawning void, Jotunheim the home of the giants, Niflheim the
region of cold, and Muspellsheim the realm of heat. The great world-tree,
Yggdrasíl, reached through all time and space, but it was perpetually under attack
from Níðhöggr, the evil serpent. The fountain of Mímir, source of hidden wisdom,
lay under one of the roots of the tree.

Religious Ritual

The Scandinavian gods were served by a class of priest-chieftains called godar.
Worship was originally conducted outdoors, under guardian trees, near sacred
wells, or within sacred arrangements of stones. Later, wooden temples were used,
with altars and with carved representations of the gods. The most important temple
was at Old Uppsala, Sweden, where animals and even human beings were sacrificed.

A Partial Aesir Pantheon:

Odin,
king of the gods. His two black ravens, Huginn (Thought) and Muninn (Memory), flew
forth daily to gather tidings of events all over the world. As god of war, Odin
held court in Valhalla, where all brave warriors went after death in battle. His
greatest treasures were his eight-footed steed, Sleipnir, his spear, Gungnir, and
his ring, Draupnir. Odin was also the god of wisdom, poetry, and magic, and he
sacrificed an eye for the privilege of drinking from Mímir, the fountain of
wisdom. Odin's three wives were earth goddesses, and his eldest son was Þórr, the
god of Thunder. Odin was worshipped under different names, throughout northern

Þórr,
the god of thunder, eldest son of Odin and Jord, the earth goddess. Þórr was the
strongest of the Aesir, whom he helped protect from their enemies, the giants.
Thunder was believed to be the sound of his rolling chariot. Also, Thursday is named for Thor (Thor's day). Named after the Germanic word for thunder, Thor wielded a hammer, called Mjollnir, which represented a powerful thunderbolt. If thrown, the hammer would return to him like a boomerang.

Loki, the handsome giant who represented evil and was possessed of great knowledge and cunning. He was indirectly responsible for the death of Balder, god of light and joy. According to the Poetic Edda, a collection of Scandinavian myths, Loki and Hel, goddess of the underworld, will lead the forces of evil against the Aesir, or gods, in the titanic struggle of Ragnarok, the end of the world.

Hel, the goddess of the dead. She dwelt beneath one of the three roots of the sacred ash tree Yggdrasil and was the daughter of Loki, the spirit of mischief or evil, and the giantess Angerbotha (Angerboda). Odin, the All-Father, hurled Hel into Niflheim, the realm of cold and darkness, itself also known as Hel, over which he gave her sovereign authority.

The Valkyries, were warrior maidens who attended Odin, ruler of the gods. The Valkyries rode through the air in brilliant armor, directed battles, distributed death lots among the warriors, and conducted the souls of slain heroes to Valhalla, the great hall of Odin. Their leader was Brunhild.

Abodes of the Aesir Gods:

Asgard, the abode of the gods. Access to Asgard was possible only by crossing the bridge Bifrost (the rainbow). Asgard was divided into 12 or more realms in which each principal god had his own luxurious mansion of gold or silver. The most important palace was Valhalla, the home of Odin, the chief of the gods.

Valhalla, the hall of slain heroes, ruled by the king of the gods, Odin, in the realm of the gods, Asgard. The hall had 540 doors, through each of which 800 heroes could walk abreast, and the roof was made of shields. The souls of heroic soldiers killed in battle were brought to Valhalla by warrior maidens called Valkyries. The heroes fought during the day, but their wounds healed before night, when they banqueted with Odin.

Trade and Trading places

Trade was all very well for yielding sporadic bursts of wealth but only trade could yield a regular income. The achievement of the Scandinavians as traders rather than raiders proved the more enduring. Trading took place in different milieux, from simple fishing camps or minor trading stations, through to seasonal markets and densely settled towns. It was only in the Viking Age that towns began to emerge in north-west, northern and eastern Europe, amongst them the famous centres like Birka (no. 8), Ribe (25), Dublin (43), Hedeby (46) and Staraja ladoga (48). Several market places were founded during the eighth century and grew into flourishing Viking Age towns. Some were eventually relocated for whatever reason, others remained on the same site and traces of the Viking Age town
can be found beneath the roads and houses in those same towns today.

Recent excavations in Viking Age towns and market places have produced a myriad of evidence for craft industries - debris from the making of everyday and luxury objects of glass, amber, bone, antler, wood, iron, bronze and precious metals, as well as for subsidiary industries such as ship repairing. The blacksmith, woodworker, bead-maker, specialist jeweller, horn- and antler-worker, leather-worker and stone carver carried out their businesses in workshops spread throughout the town. The island of Gotland (see no. 14) with its central Baltic location was prominent as a centre for trade with both the east and west Baltic areas. Naturally shelving beaches provided many landing places suitable for the shallow-draft vessels of the Vikings and allowed the development of good communications and trade routes in all directions. Gotland was an entrep6t deriving its commercial success from the handling of transit trade. Wealthy pagan graves and buried hoards of Viking treasure from all over the island suggest that native Gotlandic farmers participated in this rich trade.

The Gotlandic hoards contain large amounts of imported Arabic and European silver in the form of coins (about 40,000 Arabic, 38,000 German and 21,000 Anglo-Saxon coins), silver objects and jewellery, hacked into smaller pieces for ease of bartering or melting down. Sets of bronze weighing scales with regulated weights, used for weighing out silver and precious metals in commercial transactions, have been found in burials and towns of the Viking world.

Silver hoards are found all over Scandinavia, in the British Isles, Russia and the Baltic area. Sometimes they contain only a few items (but were probably still precious to their owners); other hoards must have been immensely valuable. Of course, only silver hoards never retrieved by their Viking owners have been found: the secret of where someone's treasure was hidden seems often to have died with its owner. The Scandinavians also traded with native urban communities along the southern and eastern Baltic coast, where craft activities similar to those of the Scandinavian towns appear to have taken place. Burials and settlements both along the coast and further inland suggest that Scandinavian traders and mercenaries established settlements within mainly indigenous communities, from a Scandinavian presence in multi-ethnic towns such as Wolin at the mouth of the Oder (no. 50), to perhaps mainly Swedish settlements, as at Grobina in western Latvia (no. 49), within an area generally settled by local Balts. As they penetrated further east and south-east, the Scandinavians became known by new names to those with whom they came into contact: as Rös and Varangians.