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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 Byzantians 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



Photo Dan Carlsson www.arkeodok.com

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



Photo Dan Carlsson www.arkeodok.com

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?