

Vikings

The Middle Ages, 1996

Vikings

The term Vikings refers to the Scandinavians who sailed out of their northern homelands of Norway, Sweden, and Denmark in the 800s, 900s, and early 1000s. Propelled by a need for more land and the rapid growth of population, Vikings raided, plundered, settled, and traded from the North Atlantic in the west to Russia in the east. Their warriors made their presence felt in Europe and the Mediterranean and struck fear into the hearts of all who experienced their onslaught. The period of Viking expansion took place from about 800 to about 1050. This era is called the Viking Age.

In Scotland and Ireland

The first Viking raids were accomplished by warriors from Norway and occurred in the British Isles around 793. Sharing a North Sea location with the Norsemen (Vikings from Norway), the British Isles presented an accessible target. Setting out from the fjords (deep sea inlets) of Norway's coast, the Norse sailed south to the Orkney and Shetland Islands off Scotland's north coast. After raiding the islands and both the Irish and Scottish coasts of the Irish Sea, the Vikings settled Orkney and Shetland. Both islands remained under Scandinavian control for the rest of the Middle Ages.

In the early 800s, the Norse began raiding along the coasts of Ireland. By the 830s, they had established permanent settlements there. Some of these grew into such towns as Dublin, Limerick, Wexford, Wicklow, and Cork. During the 900s, the Norse made political connections with the Vikings at York, a town in the north of England. When Ireland's Vikings converted to Christianity and intermarried with the native Irish, their absorption into Irish culture became inevitable.

Nevertheless, the Viking destruction greatly disrupted the culture of Ireland. Viking attacks put an end to the Irish production of illustrated manuscripts, which had achieved a high level of sophistication. The production of metalwork and stonework also suffered. The anonymous Irish author of *The War Against the Foreigners* recalled the era of destruction with bitterness: "If each tongue shouted incessantly in a hundred thousand voices, they could never list the sufferings which the Irish—men and women, laity and clergy, young and old—endured from these warlike, savage people."

A Famous Forgery

A map of the world showing Vinland appeared in 1965 and was immediately hailed as the only pre-Columbian map to show North America. However, the unusually accurate depiction of

Greenland and some other features raised doubts about the map's authenticity. In 1972, analysis of the map using modern techniques revealed that the ink on the map contained a chemical compound unavailable before 1920. Even the map's strongest defenders were forced to admit that it was a forgery.

In the North Atlantic

The excellent ships and navigational skills of the Vikings allowed them to sail west into the stormy North Atlantic from Shetland. They explored and settled the Faeroe Islands, Iceland, Greenland, and eventually North America.

Iceland was the major achievement of Viking overseas settlement. With the exception of a few Irish monks, the island had no native population when the Vikings arrived. Thus, there was no need for conquest and there were no people to absorb. Once Iceland was sighted by the Vikings in the 860s, a period of intense settlement followed. Between 870 and 930, the population of the island grew to between 15,000 and 25,000. The Icelandic Vikings adopted Christianity around 1000, when two Icelandic chieftains returned from Norway, where they had been converted by King Olaf Tryggvason. They convinced the other chieftains to accept Christianity.

For the Vikings, Iceland was a stepping-stone into the North Atlantic. Eric the Red reached Greenland in the 980s and returned to Iceland to organize a colonizing party. Twenty-five ships set out for the new land, but only 14 arrived. The surviving settlers established towns on the southwestern coast. Christian missionaries soon followed, and religious communities and [dioceses*](#) were founded. By the 1400s, however, the Greenland settlements ended, probably as a result of the harsh climate.

The North American continent was within easy reach of Greenland, and the Vikings landed and settled there briefly about 1000. One of the Icelandic sagas, called Greenlanders' Saga, tells how Bjarni Herjolfsson was thrown off his course in 985. The Viking was on his way from Iceland to Greenland when a violent storm broke out. Sailing west, Herjolfsson sighted land in three different places before he returned to Greenland. Years later, Leif, son of Eric the Red, retraced Herjolfsson's route and landed in all three places. Farther south, Leif sighted another land. He called this place Vinland. Later expeditions by Leif's relatives to this site led to settlements. However, none of the settlements on Vinland lasted more than three years. The Vikings' hostile contact with native peoples, called Skraelings by the Vikings, may have been the reason for the failure of the settlements.

In the 1960s, excavations at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland uncovered the remains of a medieval Viking settlement. Archaeologists estimate that it may have been inhabited for 20 or 30 years. However, there is no evidence to link this site with Vinland.

Danes in Frankish Lands and Beyond

Vikings from the Danish peninsula made major raids on the lands of the FRANKS beginning in 834. At first, these raids were seasonal. Between spring and autumn, Viking raiding parties

attacked randomly along the French coast and up rivers. However, after 850, the Vikings spent the winter in Frankish lands as well. Monks fled their monasteries, and people living along the coasts and rivers moved inland. Some communities paid ransom (later called DANE-GELD) to avoid attack, but the Vikings simply took the silver and attacked elsewhere.

Some Vikings sailed all the way to Spain and the Mediterranean. From 859 to 862, a fleet of 60 Viking ships raided the eastern shores of Spain and the Balearic Islands, sailed up the Rhône River to Valence, and attacked Italy.

The greatest period of Viking destruction lasted from 879 to 892. During this time, a great Viking army plundered unchecked between the Seine and the Rhine Rivers, while other Vikings raided the Loire region.

In the Seine region, the Viking army spent a year besieging PARIS and pillaging the countryside. In 892, Francia was beset by famine and disease, possibly as a result of an exceptionally bad harvest. The Vikings left for more fruitful lands, many of them sailing to England.

The final phase of Viking history in Francia began after 900. At this time, the Vikings attempted to settle in the land of the Franks. King Charles the Simple and the Viking leader, Rollo, reached an agreement by which the Vikings were allowed to settle in the lower Seine in return for defending the region. The original area of Viking settlement expanded in 924 and again in 933. The Viking settlers became known to the Frankish people as NORMANS, and the land they settled became the medieval [duchy*](#) of Normandy. Soon other Viking settlers came from Denmark, northeastern England, and Ireland. They quickly adopted French customs and the Christian religion. These Normans abandoned their language and left behind few traces of their Viking past.

Danes in England

Danish Vikings settled in England in two waves. The first period of settlement took place between 835 and 954. The second one took place between 980 and 1035. Viking raids had been occurring along the southern coast of England before the arrival of a great Danish army in East Anglia in 865. As noted in an Anglo-Saxon [chronicle*](#), the Vikings took horses in East Anglia and went north to seize York. The Danes controlled East Anglia, Mercia, and Northumberland until 878, when King ALFRED THE GREAT defeated them. The Danish leader Guthrum converted to Christianity and left Wessex, and he and Alfred agreed on a boundary between their lands.

York became the center of a Viking kingdom from which the Danes exercised power as far west as Dublin. Large numbers of Danes settled in northern England during the late 900s, as evidenced by the many Scandinavian words in the English language. Some of these include happy, call, law, and ill. Danish control of York ended in 954, but Viking power in England continued.

The second wave of Danish attacks were national campaigns led by the Danish royal family and its generals. From 991 to 1009, the English king Ethelred II the Unready was forced to pay more

than 100,000 pounds of silver in danegeld to the Danish invaders. However, tribute was not enough. The Danes seized the English crown, first in 1014 and then in 1016, when CNUT THE GREAT became king of England. Cnut ruled England until 1035. He also became the Danish king in 1019 and king of Norway til 1028.

Swedes in Russia

In the early 800s, Vikings from Sweden crossed the Baltic Sea and penetrated the river systems of Russia. They settled first at NOVGOROD, then farther south. There, under the leadership of Rurik, they founded KIEVAN RUS. In the years immediately after 989, the conversion to Christianity of Vladimir I, the leader of Kievan Rus, resulted in the baptism of much of the population, as well as closer commercial ties with [Byzantium*](#) . Intermarriage between the Vikings and the native population created a new group of Slavic people—the Russians. (See also [Exploration](#) ; [Historical Writing](#) ; [Navigation](#) ; [Scandinavia](#) ; [Scandinavia, Culture of](#) ; [Ships and Shipbuilding](#) .)

Definitions

*diocese church district under a bishop's authority

*duchy territory ruled by a duke or a duchess

*chronicle record of events in the order in which they occurred

*Byzantium ancient city that became Constantinople; also refers to the Byzantine Empire

See map in [Kievan Rus](#) (vol. 3).

See color [plate 12](#) , vol. 2.

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