

The Vikings.

Vikings! The word conjures up images of wild, barbaric, sea faring men, intent on setting their mark on their less warlike neighbours with fire and sword. From the land of ice and giants, they swept across Europe like a forest-fire, raping, pillaging and destroying all in their path.

Sound familiar? It should do, it's the image that the writers of the time recorded. It is inescapable that in a bloodthirsty age they were more bloodthirsty than most, but the mask of enduring ferocity slips a little when you consider that the people that did the writing were those that stood between the Vikings and their silver - the clerical staff of churches and abbeys.

Let us look briefly at the roots and achievements of the Viking age.

Ships.

The ancestors of the Vikings were - as far as may be judged - were a nomadic people from an area with few areas of open water and certainly with no seaboard. Yet, within a few generations, they seem to have invented more or less from scratch a design of hull that would become common throughout Europe for several centuries. It is possible to follow a tenuous line of development through previous boat designs found on the European west coast, but around the beginning of the seventh century after Christ, some northern genius developed the long narrow hull that became known as the Longship.

Construction.

Long, lean and above all flexible, the hulls were usually of oak planks that had been split from felled trunks. With axe and adze, the planks were trimmed to shape then riveted together with iron nails. At the junction of the planks, a thin rope of twisted animal hair soaked in pitch (boiled pine tree sap) was trapped. This acted as a flexible waterproofing membrane.

The vessels were built from outside in, the distortion of the planks whilst fitting them against each other leading to the up-curving bow and stern. It was soon found that this type of hull was very seaworthy, and this aspect of the design was exaggerated to create the soaring curve that became such a characteristic of the shape of Northern vessels.

The ribs were tied in after the hull was finished with the thin fibrous roots of the Larch tree. At sea, the hulls were watertight and because of their flexible nature, would often twist and bend where a more solid structure might break.

Uses.

At first, even the largest vessels were only used as rowing boats, but within a hundred years, ships were being built that were obviously intended to be powered principally by sail. With their square sail and single mast, they could largely only sail down wind, but there is good evidence from ship replicas that they could also sail across the wind to some extent. Their shallow draught and keel these hulls have precious little grip on the water and all such vessels make a lot of leeway. By the time of the Viking invasions of Britain, oars were mostly used for times when the wind did not suit the purposes of the ship master and for manoeuvring in port. However, with a big crew it was quite possible to maintain a steady pace and crossing the North Sea under oars alone was not particularly unusual for raiding ships.

The great majority of books will only illustrate one or two hulls, frequently the Oseberg and Gokstad ships as they are the best known. An enormous amount of research has been done in the last thirty years or so, and many other hulls have been discovered. Almost every found Viking ship hull has now been constructed in replica.

It is important to understand that there were many different types of ship. Each was designed and built with a specific role in mind, although naturally any vessel might well be used for duties for which it was never intended.

There were small rowing boats that might be handled by a couple of men each pulling two oars. Such craft would have been used for such tasks as inshore fishing, tenders and simple transport, fulfilling the role that rowing boats and the ubiquitous out board-powered inflatable does today.

There were trading vessels which had a fixed mast and only four oar ports in their fifty foot length. Such ships could be handled by small crews of perhaps five or six men, thus leaving space for cargo. It was these heavy, rounded hulls that were the true deep sea ships and made possible the great voyages of discovery across the Northern Atlantic.

There were the great Drakkars, the Dragon ships that were over a hundred feet long and had crews of more than a hundred men. Designed for war, they were narrow and fast but not designed for weeks at sea in the open ocean.

Sea battles in the Viking age were merely land battles fought at sea, with the hulls roped together to form vast floating platforms. Size was prestigious of course, and the longest Drakkar ever built was the Ormand Laang, the Long Serpent. Measuring over one hundred and sixty feet in length, the bow and stern posts would twist out of line by six feet in a heavy sea and gave the ship its name.

There were Karvs, a sort of multi purpose ship that could trade and/or raid and it is one of these ships that was found at the end of the last century at Gokstad in Sweden. The find gave birth to many replicas, based upon this well-preserved hull. In the closing years of the nineteenth century, the first of these was sailed across the Atlantic to the World's Fair in Chicago. I understand that the hull is still to be seen by the shore of Lake Michigan and is itself one of the oldest ships on the North American continent!

The importance of the ship to the Scandinavians of a thousand years ago cannot be overstated. Truly, without them, there would have been no Viking age and Europe would be a very different place today.

Abroad.

Trading.

The mobility of their shallow draft vessels allowed the Vikings to travel far up the rivers which flow into the seas surrounding the European continent. The Swedes seem to have specialised in trading down the river systems from the Baltic into central Europe and so to Constantinople. They called the place "Miklagard", literally "The Great City". From this trade route, luxury goods like silk and spices were brought north and sold in specialist trading communities like Birka and Hedeby.

Norwegian and Danish Vikings tended to look more to the west. They traded and raided around the western seaboard of Europe and its islands. It was the

Norwegians who explored and settled Iceland, Greenland and finally North America. There is now no doubt that there was a Viking settlement in Labrador. However, this represented the limit of reach of their settlements and it is unlikely that they stayed there long, possibly only a few years. It is my opinion that when Leif Erikson went to North America, he did so knowing that it was there. It was likely that the expedition went there for wood more than from the pure spirit of exploration.

There are records of other visits to America, some of whom never returned. Sailing the North Atlantic in an open boat - however seaworthy - is a dangerous business and it is more than likely that those who never returned were simply lost at sea.

It is fun to speculate, though, on a report that Cortez brought back. He said he was initially welcomed by the inhabitants of South America as a representative of those pale-skinned seafarers who had visited that part of the world centuries before.....

Raiding.

It must have seemed like a continuing nightmare to the largely peaceful settlements around the coasts of Europe and its islands. Suddenly, in the closing years of the eighth century, the Viking raids began. They often came in on the morning sea mists, their shallow-draft vessels creeping quietly through the river reeds or sliding silently up on sandy beaches. Quickly, the raiding party would assemble and work its way inland. Their early targets were the churches and monasteries, looking for silver, gold and slaves. Soon, these were depleted and the raiders attention turned to the more mundane victims of farm and village.

As the years slipped by, so the sea raiders came more and more often. Sometimes, they would stay over-winter and gradually the raids turned into settlements. At one time, most of England was under the Viking heel and they called this part of the country the Danelaw.

The turning point came in January 878, when Alfred the Great beat Guthrum in a straight fight and forced him and his important men to become Christians. After that, every year saw first Alfred and then his kin pushing the Danish invaders further and further north. They did this steadily, setting up Burghs or fortified towns. (One example of this as place name evidence is Middlesbrough.) Eventually, in the reign of Aethelstan, the whole of Britain came under the kingship of the Royal House of Wessex, heirs to the line of Cerdic.

Around the turn of the millennium there followed a period of state-organised invasion. Hundreds of ships would turn up regularly each year with thousands of men. They were intent upon making Britain politically part of Scandinavia and they could only be bought off with ever increasing sums of Danegeld, as it became known. 20,000 pounds weight of silver was a not unusual sum and it proved a crippling load on the economy of the English state.

Eventually, in 1016, the English Witan turned to Knut, king of Denmark and asked him to become king of England. He proved to be a good king and spent much of his early reign giving law, settling the affairs of ravaged parts of the kingdom and re-settling them. For instance, there is some evidence that he spent a whole year in the Isle of Wight, setting things to rights there.

Substantially, the reign of Knut (or Canute) represented a decrease in Viking military incursions into England, although there were sporadic raids around the

coast for some time. The last great fete of Scandinavian arms in this country was in 1066, when king Harold Godwinsson, last Saxon king of the English, brought King Harald Hardrada of Norway to open battle at Stamford Bridge near York. In a decisive victory, King Harold broke the power of the Scandinavian kings to wage overseas war on a large scale. It was the last serious attempt by a Scandinavian nation to take over the English state.

At Home.

The Law.

For a people who were so careless of the rights of the folk they fought against, the Vikings were surprisingly organised and careful of their rights at home. There was a strict system of law, enforced by the people that lived under it. Regular meetings - called Things or Althings - were held at which the Law was read aloud. (This custom survives to this day in the Manx Tynwald.) At these meetings, cases were judged and punishments imposed by a council of important men who were changed from time to time.

On these occasions the law was spoken aloud by a Lawspeaker. Thus, all the folk might know the law.

Every free man or woman had the right to speak at an Althing, and women were generally held to be the equal of men under the law. Women retained their rights to manage their own money and property after marriage and could obtain a divorce with the same ease - or difficulty - as a man. Women only became second-class citizens after the imposition of Norman Law!

Eating and Drinking.

The Vikings ate a wide range of foodstuffs, but there are no real surprises. When people could afford it, beef, mutton, pork and venison were common meats, and communities close to the coast could expect to widen their diets with fish and shellfish. Under normal circumstances, most meat was killed in the closing days of autumn, removing the need to feed old and unproductive animals through the winter. Preservation of meat and fish was done by sun-drying and salting.

A heavy bread made from barley flour was common, but there is evidence that at least some people had wheaten bread available to them. It was often the custom to eat gruel - a porridge augmented by scraps of meat as a morning meal. Boiled meat was much more common than roasted, something which was normally only eaten during ceremonies. Boiled sausages (they called them "cauldron snakes") were a special delicacy. Other sought after foodstuffs were sun-dried cod, Ling and pork that had been preserved in whey, then boiled to rags in its juice. Yuk!

It is reasonable to assume that rich folk ate better than poor, but their range of foodstuffs would not have been very different.

Housing.

Their houses were constructed of wood and/or stone. They were long lived structures and - barring accidents - might last at least 150 years with normal maintenance. The traditional Longhouse would have been a dark, smoky place in which to live and work, but there is emerging evidence that the Vikings often used two storey buildings with balconies on the upper floor, much as might be seen in rural Scandinavia to this day. The roofs were thatched, turved or covered in slates or shingles, depending on available local resources.

To sum up.

The Vikings were a proud, honourable, law-abiding people who valued warfare and personal reputation (they called it "word fame") above almost anything else. In the latter years of the Viking Age, they became involved in their own myth, starting such organisations as the Jhomsvikings.

They brought the seafaring ship to Europe and, by their constant depredations, spread its use far and wide. In only 250 years, they set their mark on the law and language of many countries and forced many European communities to see themselves as a nation state for the first time.

In terms of human history, if you blinked, you would have missed them! But the image of the brave, hardy individualist, unafraid of the world in all its forms, remains with us all as an example of how a man should conduct himself in adversity.

"Wealth dies, kinsmen die. Cattle die and the wheat, too. But this thing never dies: word-fame! Word-fame never dies for him who achieves it well."

Cautionary word.

In this brief article about the Vikings, I have tried to give an overall view of the times in which they lived. It would be impossible to draw within its brief all of the many threads that went to make the fabric of the lives of these folk.

Short bibliography.

Anglo Saxon England. Sir Frank Stenton. Oxford History of England
A heavyweight, but with an excellent and detailed view of the Viking age, particularly in a British context.

I was there with the Vikings. Bodley head.
Excellent photographic work, prepared in co-operation with Regia Anglorum and others. Aimed at schools.

The Viking Achievement. Foot & Wilson. Sidgewick and Jackson.
An excellent source work with many illustrations.

The Norse Atlantic Saga. Gwyn Jones. Oxford university Press.
Narrative and descriptive work regarding Viking westerly voyages.

1066. The Year of the Conquest. David Howarth.
Probably the best work of its kind. It gives a graphic insight into life in late Anglo Saxon England and, whilst specialising in the events surrounding the title, gives a very good account of what is known about Harald Hardrada's invasion in that year.

(Many of the Sagas are available in translation in the Penguin Classics series. Egill's Saga is particularly good.

Note.

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