**Vikings**

**Introduction**

The Vikings, known by a number of different names, the most prevalent alternate name Norse or Norsemen, were related to Germanics, that is, other Germanic-speaking peoples. Grouped together as Scandinavians they are also described as Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians, depending on the part of Scandinavia in which they originated. Developing great shipbuilding and navigational skills, Vikings traveled far beyond their own shores and settled throughout Europe and beyond and became ancestral to many other European peoples, the most influential of whom were the Normans and the Rus. Norse, Norsemen, and Norman all are derived from the Old Norse words for "north" and "men." Vikings is possibly from Vik, a gathering place for raiding fleets, or a bay or harbor.

**Origins**

Most Germanic tribal societies in Denmark and southern Sweden were remarkably stable from the Neolithic period when farming first arrived in 4000 BCE until the first centuries CE and consisted largely of isolated village economies. Change began during the first half of the first millennium CE under the influence of the Roman Empire. After their wars of conquest were largely over and their empire's borders had become relatively fixed the Romans turned to trade with peoples outside occupied lands in order to supply the large number of slaves needed to keep their economy going. Probably as a result of trade in slaves and in iron, leather, and amber, a prestige-goods economy began to flourish in Denmark—with artifacts of gold and silver, for example—as attested by rich burials that began in the first century CE.

Archaeologists have determined concentric zones of differing burial types among the pre-Vikings, affected by their distance from the Roman frontier. Most of present-day Denmark lay within the zone of rich burials, where people prospered by trade with Romans. To the north in Sweden and east along the Baltic coast was a zone of warrior burials containing fewer prestige items. The warriors of this zone may have provided captive slaves to the "middlemen" of Denmark. The presence of such wealth in Denmark must have provoked raids from the more northern peoples

Danes and Swedes had begun a trade between the east and west of Europe, from as early as the first century CE, which consisted in part of acting as middlemen in a slave trade between the Balts and Slavs along the Baltic coast to the east and the Roman Empire. This was supplemented by trade in iron and finely crafted metal goods wrought by Danish and Swedish smiths. Craftspeople also worked on leather and amber.

By the third century there is evidence of the disruption of trade, probably by pirate attacks from the warrior periphery. By the fourth and fifth centuries substantial settlements of longhouses organized along street grids were being built in Denmark, the sign of centralized political power. At the same time small strongholds, many consisting of a single fortified wall, were scattered across southern Sweden, a sign of the need to defend against attacks. Votive deposits in bogs have been found from this period, many of them of elaborate weaponry, suggesting the presence of a warrior elite.

By the fifth century trading centers in southern Sweden and on the island of Gotland were engaged in a rich commerce with peoples to the east who were receiving subsidies from Byzantine Rome. Gold coins streamed to southern Scandinavia to be turned into ornaments by the increasingly sophisticated metalworkers. In the fifth century the ruling dynasty of the Svear, the dominant tribe of southern Sweden, was founded. But an independent warrior elite continued to be a factor in the sixth and seventh centuries, as indicated by elaborate burials of whole ships with richly ornamented swords and other battle gear.

**Language**

The Vikings were Germanic-speaking peoples, who had a variety of Scandinavian dialects, as were as dialects based on the languages spoken in the lands they settled.

**History**

***Causes of Viking Expansion***

The tension between increasingly centralized groups and independent warrior societies may have furnished part of the impetus behind the Viking raids and the Scandinavian migrations to other parts of Europe that began in the late eighth century, as warriors sought to expand their territorial holdings and were unable to do so in neighboring lands. Although the main bases for Scandinavian economy were farming and trade, Scandinavians had social and political organization in which warfare played a central role, similar to that of ancient Celts and to that of other Germanic peoples. The spoils of war were desired at least as much as proof of warrior prowess and bravery as for material gain. Launching raids to distant lands was a way to build political power.

Rapid population growth is thought to be another cause of Viking expansion. There is archaeological evidence of increasing populations on Scandinavian farmsteads during this period. The use of iron tools, more durable than bronze ones, led to more efficient farming and the ability to support larger communities in a given region. The favorable climate of what is known as the Medieval Warm Period probably also contributed to population growth in Scandinavia.

At the dawn of the Viking Age in the eighth century, Scandinavia, as it had been earlier, was a crossroads of trade. Scandinavian merchants were active in the eastern Baltic, collecting furs from Finno-Ugrians who had trapped them for export west to the European power of the day, the Carolingian Empire of the Franks under Charlemagne, based in what are now northern France and the lower Rhineland basin of present-day Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands. As Scandinavian merchants penetrated into Russia and beyond, they tapped into a trade network transporting vast amounts of silver from the Abbasid Empire in present day Iraq. The merchants may have acted as a pipeline to carry this silver to Charlemagne's kingdom, where it stimulated the economy and helped finance Charlemagne's church-building enterprise. Political troubles in the Abbasid Empire dried up the flow of silver in the 820s and 830s, a possible reason that Scandinavian silver traders turned to piracy and raiding. Traders' tales of the great wealth of the Carolingians, the most powerful group in Europe since the Romans, no doubt also encouraged raids for plunder. The brutal campaign the Carolingians waged against the Saxons of the Lower Elbe River region adjacent to Denmark in the latter eighth century may have also led to a call to arms against foreigners.

***The Era of Great Raids***

The period of frequent Viking raids on settlements throughout Europe began at the end of the eighth century and lasted into the 11th century. The earliest recorded Viking raids were directed against the British Isles in the 790s, with others against the Frankish kingdom on the mainland soon afterward.

But raiding may have been unrecorded long before that time; as mentioned, raids seem to have disrupted Danish trade with the Romans in the third century. As soon as lucrative trade networks appeared along the Baltic–North Sea axis in all probability raiders from among the Scandinavian warrior class sprang into action to take advantage of them. The relationship of Viking raiding to Viking trading may have been that of a power struggle to control lucrative trade routes.

***The British Isles***

On June 8, 793, a monastery on Lindisfarne, an island off the northeast coast of Britain, was sacked by the invaders, as recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, English monastic writings in the Anglo-Saxon language. Trade between England and the Continent along the English Channel and the North Sea had been expanding throughout the eighth century, a great temptation to raiders. Raids in this area became more frequent as well as more penetrating after the 830s. In 867 the Danes captured York; by about 870 the Earldom of Orkney was established. In about 880 the Viking leader Guthrum signed a treaty with King Alfred of the Anglo-Saxons, which granted Guthrum rule over a large area of East Anglia, called the Danelaw.

The territories the Vikings conquered in Ireland, first in 795, were small but strategically placed. The Viking Age, through trade, introduced great wealth to the kingdoms as well as an increased means of communication, as always an effective power of change in a society. Ireland had closer contact with Britain and the European mainland, which created new influences in the political system as well as in the church and the commercial aspects of the society. The native Irish defended themselves strenuously against the Vikings, mostly Norwegians, and in 902 temporarily expelled them from the site of present-day Dublin. But the Vikings became so well established there that they began launching raids against England. In 1014 Danes under Sweyn I conquered a large territory in England. The Vikings lost their influence when their cities fell to the Normans, who had been invited to Ireland as allies of a rival claimant to the Irish Crown in the 11th century, and they were eventually absorbed into the Anglo-Norman colony in Ireland.

***France and Germany***

The Royal Frankish Annals, or Annales regni Francorum, an anonymous account of the political and military history of the Franks from 741 to 829, record the first raid in Frankish lands as taking place in 799. The city of Rouen was attacked in 841. The first area to experience the Viking raids in all their intensity was the Seine basin, first during the attack on St. Wandrill in 841. The first attack on Paris occurred in 845. The second region to feel the impact of the Vikings was Aquitaine. The raiders went as far as Spain in 844 and Bordeaux was under Viking influence by 848. The third zone of activity was Brittany and Neustria from the 840s; Brittany was finally conquered in 914. The fourth zone of activity was the Meuse–Lower Rhine area. In 845 both Hamburg and Paris were sacked. The Vikings repeatedly sailed up French rivers, looting and burning. The raids caused severe disruption of French commerce and society, threatening to plunge the area back into a condition like that of the medieval period that followed the collapse of the Roman Empire.

The design of Viking ships—which allowed them to travel up shallow rivers, far inland—enabled them to make surprise raids on inland strongholds and settlements that had experienced only assault by slowly approaching land armies. Typically, mounting several hit-and-run style raids the Vikings would establish semipermanent staging areas near the mouth of rivers from which to launch raids further inland. These would also serve at times as camps where they could wait out the winter when the stormy Scandinavian seas became impassable. In the ninth century the war bands had begun to increase in size to the scale of armies, the result of attempts in Scandinavia of kings such as Harold I of Norway to consolidate political power. More elaborate defensive structures were being built in Scandinavia, such as the Danevirke, which protected the southern border of Denmark; the Danish king Godfred completed its second stage in 804. A new phase of attacks started in 885 on Paris and its surroundings.

The might of the Carolingian Empire prevented Viking settlement on the scale of that in the British Isles, and raids on the mainland occurred only sporadically. The exception was the area around the mouth of the river Seine, where the staging areas for attacks farther upriver became the basis for the duchy of Normandy, granted to a Norwegian Viking chief (whose followers were Danes) named Rollo in 911. He is considered the founder of Normandy.

Organized defense against the Vikings awaited the emergence of strong leaders such as Charles II in France and Alfred the Great in England, who were able to organize the fortification of towns, station fleets, and naval patrols along the coasts and to marshal more mobile military forces. Other Christian leaders could do no more than to pay ransom, called danegeld. In 845 the first danegeld was paid to Vikings by the Franks. In return for sufficient ransom, as well as in the presence of a strong army, the Vikings were often willing to declare peace and begin trading.

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