

THE VIKINGS

On Easter Sunday in the year 855, a Viking force attacked and plundered Paris, far from the sea, striking a blow at the very heart of Charlemagne's old empire. France was not the only target. The Vikings were everywhere. Their war parties devastated whole regions in the Low Countries (modern Netherlands and Belgium), Ireland, and England. They roamed into the Mediterranean Sea, they attacked Spain and Italy, and they sailed down the great rivers of Russia all the way to Constantinople.

The Vikings came from the north looking for plunder and glory. They travelled in swift longships that allowed them to strike without warning and disappear quickly before

local rulers could raise a force to oppose them. Their raiding forces ranged from the crew of a single ship to large fleets of a hundred ships or more. The peace of mind Europeans had gained under Charlemagne's rule was shattered.



Figure 1-15 Almost 25 metres long, 5 metres wide, and 2 metres deep, this typical ninth-century Viking ship could carry a crew of thirty-two and sail into water just over a metre deep. In 1893, a small crew sailed a replica of a Viking ship across the Atlantic Ocean.

Of Lightning and Dragons

An entry in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 793 records the Vikings' destruction of the great monastery at Lindisfarne off the coast of northeastern England. Would this account serve to calm people or to make them more fearful of the Vikings? How do you think reputation assisted the Vikings? Compare this passage with the one from Gregory of Tours's *History of the Franks* on page 23. What is similar about the two excerpts?

In this year terrible portents appeared... exceptional flashes of lightning, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air. A great famine followed soon upon these signs, and a little after on the Ides of [June] the harrying of the heathen miserably destroyed God's church in Lindisfarne by rapine and slaughter.



THE VIKING REPUTATION

The Vikings were mercilessly destructive. Especially in their early raids, before they began to settle in lands such as England and France, their common practice was to kill or enslave every man, woman, and child they found. The Vikings were so savagely cruel in their attacks that many people thought they had been sent by God to punish the world for its wickedness. To understand the fear people felt, imagine that the coastal communities in British Columbia were regularly invaded by forces that burned everything in sight

and killed everyone they found. Would you feel safe living in places such as Mission or Powell River? What might you, with your community, do to protect yourselves in that situation?

Some monarchs and church leaders were so terrified that they paid the Vikings to leave their lands. In England, the Vikings took payments called *Danegeld* from rulers such as Ethelred the Unready. Over the course of a few years, French monarchs paid the Vikings almost 300 kilograms of gold and 15 000 kilograms of silver. All these payments came from taxes collected from the common people. Only a few rulers, such as Charlemagne and Alfred the Great, could fight the Vikings effectively, but even they weren't able to stop the raids completely.



Figure 1-16 By looking at the places the Vikings usually attacked, why do you think it was so difficult to stop these raids? What geographical feature allowed the Vikings to move inland on their raids?

EVERYDAY LIFE AMONG THE VIKINGS

It is important to remember that most of our information on the Vikings comes from the people they attacked and plundered. For this reason, many of us tend to have a somewhat slanted view of their lives. Whatever the Vikings did to the Anglo-Saxons in England was probably not much different from what the Anglo-Saxons had done to the Celts many years earlier.

Viking life was not all wars and raiding parties. Most Vikings were farmers and fishers living in small villages close to the sea. They came from the region we now call Scandinavia—the modern countries of Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. They probably began their raids because the farmland available in Scandinavia could not support the growing



Figure 1-17 The Vikings made their houses of turf, stone, or clay or dung plastered onto woven sticks. The long, low houses frequently sheltered more than one family. Attached to the houses were buildings for slaves and a barn for the animals. Some farms also had saunas. Toilets were outside, often near the well.

population. People lived at the ends of **fjords** and wherever else they could find fertile land. Viking farms tended to be small, only a few hectares in size.

Men and women shared the work in Viking society, although some jobs, such as weaving, were always done by women. Free Viking women had many rights under the law. They could own property, they could divorce their spouses, and they could sue in court. Gunnhild, the “mother of kings,” was a legendary leader. Freydis Eriksdottir, the sister of Leif the Lucky, led an expedition to Newfoundland early in the eleventh century.

Life was not good for everyone in Viking society. Viking landowners almost always owned slaves, called *thralls*, who did much of the heavy work on the farms. Most thralls had either been taken captive on Viking raids or been sold into slavery because they could not pay debts or fines. Thralls had no legal rights in Viking society, and could be killed by their masters at any time. The children of

thralls automatically became slaves.

Despite their reputation as ruthless “barbarians,” the Vikings had a rich culture. They were highly skilled woodworkers and smiths, and many artworks have survived, especially from the grave sites of wealthy and powerful leaders. Viking art shows gods such as Odin, Thor, and Freya, as well as scenes from everyday life.

The keepers of Viking history and legend were called **skalds**. These poets needed to have excellent memories and be good singers. They carried whole histories in their heads, and could recite, word for word, stories that might take several days to tell. This was an important skill for a society in which most people could not read or write.

Viking Law and Government

The Vikings were great lawmakers, and they designed many laws to

fjord: a long, narrow, salt-water bay with high cliffs along its sides

skald: a Scandinavian poet who recited poems at formal gatherings

DID YOU KNOW?

Like many Canadians, the Vikings ate a varied diet of vegetables, meat, fish, bread, and porridge. Unlike Canadians, they considered beer to be a drink for everyone, even small children.

DID YOU KNOW?

The practice of using juries in the courtroom comes from the Vikings. Also, the next time (or the first time) you take a sauna, remember that you are enjoying one of the more pleasant contributions the Vikings made to later civilizations.

LINK-UP

The Value of Writing

Some civilizations have maintained an oral tradition to remember their history, but most have developed some form of writing. Writing has many advantages over oral histories, the main one being that a written document, if cared for properly, can last forever. For example, a case known as the "Franks Casket," shown at right, still survives, though it was made about a thousand years ago. The letters carved into it are **runes**, the letters of the Viking alphabet used mainly by Vikings but also by other Germanic peoples. Many Vikings

thought the runes had magical powers. Which runic letters are similar to letters in the Roman alphabet, which we use? What connection can you see between the shapes of the runic letters and the fact that the Vikings did not write with pens and paper but rather carved their letters into stone and wood?



runes: letters based on those in the Roman alphabet



LINK-UP

North America's First European Visitors

The Vikings were an incredibly adventurous people. They sailed their ships far and wide, even across the Atlantic Ocean. Newfoundland's L'Anse aux Meadows National Historic Park is the site of the earliest Viking settlement in North America. In this recent photograph, you can see sod huts reproduced to look like the ones Vikings erected here about a thousand years ago.

Who had already been in North America long before the Vikings came?



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Evidence proves that Vikings reached North America centuries before other Europeans. Why do you think Christopher Columbus was long considered the first European to reach the Americas?

protect people and their property. Usually these laws were not written down. Instead, people called Law Speakers memorized the law and recited it as needed. The Vikings usually fined criminals, but some dangerous offenders were punished more harshly. The most dreaded penalty was to be declared an outlaw, which meant that the person was to be treated under the law "as if he were dead." Anyone could kill an outlaw on sight and then be entitled to some of his or her property.

THE END OF THE VIKING AGE

The Viking age ended in the eleventh century. Gradually European monarchs grew stronger and learned how to deal with their northern enemies. English monarchs gave half of England, the Danelaw, to Viking lords who then protected their new lands from other Vikings. The king of France gave the Viking Rollo the province of Normandy to rule and protect (Normandy means "land of the Northmen"). Viking settlements in North America and Greenland were destroyed or disappeared. The

people of Norway and Denmark became Christian. By the middle of the eleventh century, dragon ships filled with warriors were no longer seen in the rivers and seas of western Europe. The Viking Age was over forever.

Thing: a parliament where free adults could give their opinions on important matters. Viking kings were not crowned; instead, they were lifted up standing on shields, at the Thing.



Figure 1–18 Free Vikings met regularly in a kind of parliament called a **Thing**. Here they made decisions on law, government, and their leaders. The Thing of Iceland is now one of the oldest parliaments in northern Europe.

ACTIVITIES

1. How did the level of population and availability of resources in Scandinavia encourage the Viking strategy of ransacking Europe?
2. Study the pictures of Viking ships on pages 3 and 31. Make four observations about Viking ships. Analyze these ships as a technology. For what purpose were they particularly suited? Why?
3. Who were the skalds? What part did skalds play in maintaining Viking culture? In a small group, brainstorm what or who serves the various purposes of the skalds in Canadian society.
4. Why do you think being declared an outlaw was the most dreaded penalty in Viking society? Consider how this declaration would affect your status in regard to the law, your community, and your identity.
5. Examine the excerpt on page 31 about the destruction of the church at Lindisfarne. Whose view does this represent? What might be the Viking view of this event? Pretend you are one of the Vikings who participated in the raid on Lindisfarne. Write a brief account of the raid in the form of a speech you will give to your friends in Denmark.

The Viking Raid

The following fictional story is based on events that really happened. Similar events were recorded by people who were either present when they happened or were told about them by reliable sources. As you read this story, write down any questions the story raises for you, and try to answer them after reading Chapter 1.



At dawn, the Viking ship approaches the monastery unheard and unseen.

Pippin threw himself into the clump of tall ferns, pressing his body against the ground. He was still bleeding from a deep gash behind one ear, and he feared that the trail of blood he was leaving would make it easy for his pursuers to track him. He could hear the hoarse voices coming closer. If he could just lie quietly, he thought, perhaps he could avoid death. As he lay hugging the ground, Pippin's thoughts drifted back to the events of the past few hours.

The Vikings had struck the **monastery** first thing in the morning, just as the monks were filing out of chapel. No

one had seen the long dragon ship as it made its way silently down the wide river, or the raiding party as it stole through the monastery's orchards and gardens.

Pippin, a **novice**, watched in horror from behind the treasury door as the monks were slaughtered in the courtyard. The first victim was beheaded with one blow from the Viking chieftain's battle-axe. Others were run through by long spears or cut down by swords. Within minutes the massacre was over—all the monks were dead—and the looting began.

First the Vikings stripped gold vessels and embroidered cloths from the altar of the

chapel and ripped the jewel-encrusted covers off the books in the library. Then, blazing torches in hand, they began to set fires. Before long the whole monastery was in flames.

The only item Pippin had time to save was the jewelled box in the treasury. The box contained the monastery's most prized possession: a finger bone from St. Sergius. **Pilgrims** came from all over the kingdom to be blessed with this **relic** and to pray to St. Sergius.

As Pippin crept out of the monastery grounds clutching the relic, he surprised a group of Vikings drinking wine from an oak cask behind the dining hall. He stared at them, too frightened to move. The men



Pippin loses the jewelled box containing the monastery's holy relic.



Pippin and Gisla are held captive in the bow of the Viking ship.

had rough beards and wore helmets of iron and leather. Their hands and faces were splattered with the blood of the murdered monks and blackened by smoke. They laughed aloud when they saw the young monk, and one threw a spear at Pippin as he turned to flee, catching him a **glancing** blow behind the ear.

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Now, hiding in the ferns with his face pressed to the ground, Pippin prayed to God for deliverance. Finally he felt sure the Vikings had gone and slowly raised his head. Pippin found himself looking directly into the hard blue eyes of the Viking chieftain. The man patted the battle-axe lying across his knee and laughed. As he rose to his feet, Pippin saw Vikings all around. One of them swung a club at Pippin's head while another ripped the

jewelled box out of his hand.

When Pippin came to, he was bound hand and foot, lying in the bow of the Viking ship. The Vikings were rowing furiously back to the mouth of the river, where the river emptied into the North Sea. From there the Vikings would raise the ship's sail and head for their home in Denmark.

Pippin groaned. The leather thongs bit into his wrists and ankles, and his head ached. A man wearing a helmet that hid most of his face laughed when he saw Pippin was awake.

"You should be happy, little priest," he said, speaking Frankish with a thick accent. "You will be my **thrall**. My name is Guthrum Bloodaxe. Now say your prayers and thank your god you are still alive."

Pippin, too stunned to pray, let his tears roll freely down his face. Everyone he loved was

gone, the life he had known for most of his fourteen years was completely ruined. This small group of thirty Vikings had killed dozens of monks, burned the monastery to the ground, and destroyed countless works of art. The precious books alone had taken years to copy out by hand. Pippin could only assume the Vikings had ravaged the nearby village as well. He wondered, was this a punishment sent by God for the sins of the people?

Then Pippin noticed he was not alone. Beside him on the wooden boards of the hull was a girl about his own age. She had been beaten and her shirt was bloody. Her arms and legs were bound with leather thongs. She stared at him with reddened eyes.

"See how fast they row," she said. Her voice was low and bitter but held a hint of hope.

"Now the hunters have become the hunted."

"What do you mean?" asked Pippin.

"They know the soldiers have been warned and are coming after us. Our people will try to cut the Northmen off at the dam the king built near the river's mouth. The Northmen will have to land there and push their boat past the dam. But if they can get back into the water before the soldiers arrive, we'll never see our people again."

Pippin examined the girl's face. "I know you. You're Gisla, from the village, aren't you? How do you know all this?"

"My father serves in the king's army," Gisla replied. "When the Vikings came to the village this morning, my

brother managed to escape. He must have raised the alarm."

Sooner than Gisla had hoped, the Viking ship reached the dam, a wall of sharpened wooden stakes built across the river at its narrowest point. By building these structures on several rivers, the emperor Charlemagne intended to discourage Viking raiders, whose savage attacks had been growing more numerous. No settlement near the sea was safe.

The Vikings brought their ship to the river bank, where they hauled the vessel onto a platform of tree trunks they had cut down the night before. Pippin and Gisla were left in the ship while the men pushed it along the ground using the logs as rollers. The Vikings heaved their ship forward with

a ferocious sense of purpose.

All at once, Pippin and Gisla heard the drumming of horses' hooves, and then a sound like hammers pounding on iron. As they huddled on the floor of the ship, they heard warlike cries and shrill screams of agony. The exhausted Vikings fought bravely but were overwhelmed by the well-organized and much larger band of Franks. The battle continued until the last Viking was dead.

Soon after, Pippin and Gisla found themselves standing in a clearing freed of their bonds and surrounded by Frankish soldiers. An older man with a thick, grey mustache and a weather-beaten face walked his horse towards them. A soldier motioned with his spear for them to kneel.



A Frankish war party attacks the fleeing invaders.

"Bow down," he commanded, "to Charles, Emperor of the Romans and King of the Franks!"

Charlemagne ordered the bodies of the Vikings to be taken to the river mouth, where they were hung from trees, in plain view of the sea, as a warning to other pirates. That night, the army camped farther down the coast. They built a bonfire on the seashore and held a feast to celebrate their victory over the raiding Northmen. Everyone seemed happy except Charlemagne himself, who walked up and down the shore staring out to sea.

Gisla and Pippin sat with Gisla's father, one of Charlemagne's commanders.

"What does the king look for in the dark sea?" Pippin asked.

"The king is an old man now," Gisla's father replied. "He has won many battles and was crowned emperor by the pope himself. But he worries about the future and what it will bring. Until now he has

been able to hold the Northmen in check. But who will stop the Northmen after death has stopped the king?"

monastery: a self-contained community for people, such as monks or nuns, who have taken religious vows

novice: a person training to become a nun or monk

pilgrim: a person who travels to a holy place for religious reasons

relic: an item associated with a saint; thought to have great powers

glancing: indirect, not solid

thrall: the Viking word for "slave"

pope: the head of the Catholic Church

technology: anything made by humans to extend our abilities



Charlemagne walks the beach, wondering what dangers the future will bring.

ACTIVITIES

1. List three reasons why Vikings would want to attack a monastery.
2. **Technology** consists of anything we make to extend our abilities. Examples include the fork, the wheelbarrow, and computer software. A defensive technology is something we make to protect ourselves. What technologies did the Franks use to defend themselves against the Vikings? Were these defences effective? Explain.
3. **a)** Do you sympathize with one character in particular in the story of the Viking raid? Which one? Why?
b) Because this story is written from Pippin's point of view, our sympathies tend to lie with him. Write a point-form version of this story from Guthrum Bloodaxe's point of view. Do you still sympathize with the same characters? Why or why not?
4. Do you know someone who has experienced armed conflict? Perhaps that person—maybe you, a family member, or another student—would share the story with the rest of the class. Where did the events take place? How has violence affected this person's life?