

Vikings' Barbaric Bad Rap Beginning to Fade

Stefan Lovgren in Stockholm, Sweden
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"Never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we have now suffered from a pagan race. ... Behold, the church of St. Cuthbert, spattered with the blood of the priests of God, despoiled of all its ornaments; a place more venerable than all in Britain is given as a prey to pagan peoples."

So wrote religious scholar Alcuin of York in the late eighth century in a letter to Ethelred, king of Northumbria in England. He was describing a violent raid by Vikings on a monastery in present-day Scotland.

It is no wonder that the Vikings have a reputation for mindless savagery. Since the Vikings were unable to write, much of their history was recorded by British and French clergy—the very people who fell victim to the Viking raids.

But were the Vikings merely primitive plunderers?

Far from it, say scholars. Using archaeological and other evidence, researchers have in recent years been piecing together a more complex picture of the Vikings that sharply contradicts the stereotype of the Vikings as mere barbarians.

"The Norsemen were not just warriors, they were farmers, artists, shipbuilders, and innovators," said Ingmar Jansson, a professor of archaeology at Stockholm University in Sweden. "More than anything, they were excellent traders who connected peoples from Baghdad to Scandinavia to the mainland of North America."

Exaggerating Atrocities

The origin of the word "Viking" is highly disputed. Some experts say it means "pirate." Others believe it refers to people coming from the region of the Viken (the old name for Norway's Oslo Fjord).

Today, the word "Viking" is used to refer to the people who lived in Scandinavia—Sweden, Norway, and Denmark—from around A.D. 750 to 1100. However, not everyone was a Viking.

"Viking is misused as an ethnic term," Jansson said. "The Vikings belonged to the upper class. They were the sea warriors. But most people were just Scandinavians. For them, the normal life was to stay home and be a farmer."

Still, the Vikings are best known for their sea voyages. Along the coasts of Western Europe, they traveled to the Mediterranean and North Africa. By way of the Russian rivers, they reached Constantinople (present-day Istanbul) and beyond to Baghdad in Asia.

The Vikings quickly developed a fierce reputation. In letters to their bishops, Christian priests in Britain and France chronicled the violent deeds of the Vikings, which included attacking wealthy monasteries and killing

women and children. (Many churchmen believed the Viking raids were God's punishment on the Anglo-Saxons for their sins.)

But it was also in the interest of the churchmen to exaggerate the atrocities of the Vikings in their reports. Many of the Christian rulers at the time behaved equally unpleasantly, without being condemned on religious grounds.

"This was a ruthless age," said William Fitzhugh, the director of the Arctic Studies Center at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. He was the curator of a major Viking exhibit at the museum in 2000. "There were constant battles in the British Isles and mainland Europe between rival princes vying for kingship and control of local regions."

Reconnecting Humanity

Scholars say the Viking raids were about survival, not conquest, and were prompted primarily by a shortage of land. In most cases individual Viking chieftains gathered followers and set off on raids. Wherever they went, the Vikings lived off the land, often driving the locals out and taking whatever valuables they could get their hands on.

But the Vikings were also driven by a pioneering spirit. Their most spectacular trek took them across the Atlantic Ocean to Iceland, Greenland, and eventually North America. Around A.D. 1000, hundreds of years before Christopher Columbus arrived in the New World, the Vikings landed in Newfoundland, Canada, a land they reportedly named Vinland.

"The Vikings reconnected humanity and made the world a smaller place by traveling huge distances," Fitzhugh said. "We look back to the Vikings as the origin of this kind of human endeavor to find new horizons, use new technology, meet new people, and think new thoughts."

The only written monuments of the Vikings themselves are runic inscriptions. In Sweden there are some 3,500 inscriptions, mostly written on stone. They are often brief and laconic, and not very informative.

Instead, archaeological excavations have made the most important contribution to the understanding of the Viking world. Funeral sites are usually fragmentary—the Vikings followed the heathen practice of burning the dead—but some large, unburned ship burials have provided archaeologists with invaluable insight into the lives of the Vikings.

"Archaeology, not medieval texts, is beginning to set the record straight about the Viking history and achievements," said Fitzhugh, whose exhibit "Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga" highlighted the Viking discovery of North America.

Reconstructed Viking villages have become popular tourist attractions. In Birka, Sweden's first trading town, located near present-day Stockholm, large-scale models recreate a Viking harbor, life in craftsmen's quarters, and the splendor of the king's power. Birka has Scandinavia's largest Viking-age cemetery, with 3,000 graves.

Dualism

A tour of the Viking exhibition at the History Museum in Stockholm underlines the importance of trade to the Vikings.

The Viking's most important weapon was his sword. The best blades were imported from continental Europe and brought back to Scandinavia, where they were equipped with exquisitely ornamented handles, symbols of their owner's high status and wealth.

Viking art found its expression in everyday objects—in swords, belts, horse harnesses. But most Vikings probably also walked around with a pound of jewelry around their necks. The Scandinavian craftsmen borrowed motifs from continental Europe as well as Arabia, then made their artwork to fit their own traditions and needs.

"There is a dualism that prevailed in Viking art," said Kent Andersson, a senior curator at the History Museum. "We see strong influences both from the East and from the West."

Viking society was extremely unequal. Slavery was a fundamental contributor to the wealth of the upper class. Vikings participated actively in the lucrative slave trade abroad. The slaves had no rights and were owned like cattle.

But the Scandinavians also had a highly developed legal system, perhaps the most democratic in the known world. Decisions were reached by voting at open meetings where all free men had the right to speak.

Women also had substantial powers. They could own land, inherit, and get divorced. Keys have been found in graves of women, which suggest that women controlled farms and property. There are even legends that tell of women warriors.

The Viking culture was a heathen and rich in mythology. The Viking gods, all with human characteristics, directed and dominated everyday life. The supreme god was Odin, whose two ravens, Hugin (Thought) and Munin (Memory), flew everywhere and spied on everyone.

The end of the Viking age corresponded with the arrival of Christianity in Scandinavia. But scholars say Christianity probably did not finish the Vikings. At the time, many Vikings had become citizens of Europe. Well traveled, the Vikings assimilated into the new cultures, abandoning many of their own practices.