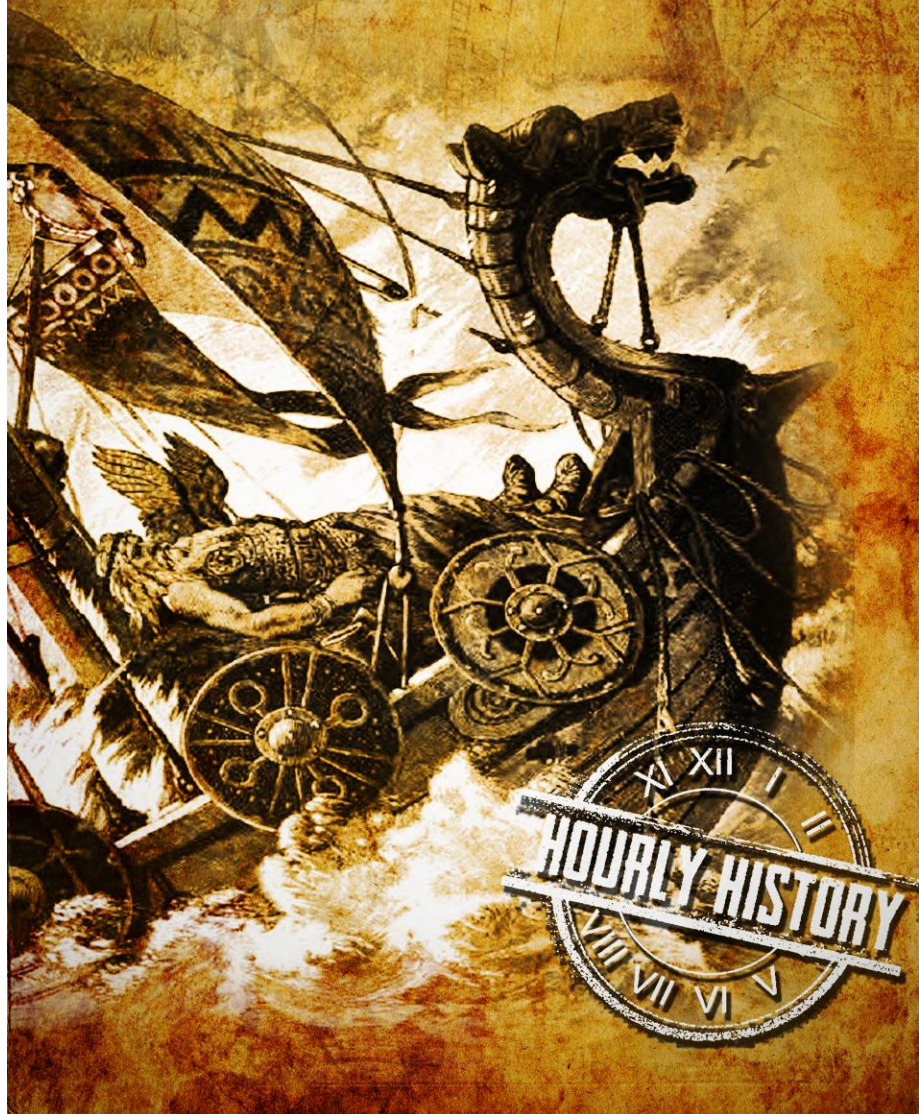


VIKINGS

THE BEGINNING



VIKINGS

The Beginning of the Viking Era

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Chapter One

The Year of Rapine and Slaughter

The Vikings may be the most influential, most misunderstood people of the Middle Ages. They're commonly regarded as the nautical terrorists of their time: a plague of men from the North who sailed in their longships to wreak destruction and fear upon the populations they victimized. But how does that mesh with the Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians who built a trading empire that did business with the merchants who were eager to exchange the furs and amber of the Vikings for silver coins and spices? The Vikings are so trapped by a false myth of their rapacious activities that their feats of commerce and exploration are often ignored or, even worse, unknown. Who were these violent, talented, fearless men who for three centuries were both the scourge of Europe and its commercial trailblazers?

The Viking Age is generally considered to be the era from the 790s, when the raids first began, until 1066 when William of Normandy conquered the island of Britain. Actually, because the tribes who traveled across the Continent in the early Middle Ages were hardly strangers to one another, in some ways the Viking relocation was a sort of homecoming. In the early 11th

century, before William the Conqueror came on the scene, the throne of England was occupied by a Viking ruler. By then, the blood had intermingled somewhat; the Normans counted Vikings among their ancestors and the last Anglo-Saxon king of England, Harold Godwinson, came from a Danish lineage. The Vikings hailed from Denmark, Norway and Sweden, but the Vikings were not just Scandinavian.

Nor did they only make their presence known in Europe; there is archeological evidence that they explored Greenland, Iceland, and Newfoundland; that they traded in Novgorod and Kiev, and that they reached Baghdad, which was the center of the Islamic Empire. Their mobility and the extent of what was a trading empire demonstrate that the violent marauders who terrorized Europe were more complicated than we'd expect of the bloodthirsty raiders who held Europe at their mercy for several hundred years.

But the entire Western world was embroiled in change as the Roman Empire weakened then fell, and local lands that were no longer included in the imperial boundaries were left to fend for themselves. Rome was gone, the legions left, but the tribes in Europe were not without resources. The presence of Rome had been instructive; now they needed to rely on their own heritage to survive. As many kings replaced single

emperors and married into the remnants of the local Roman nobility, some of the traditions of the empire had been retained, but with innovations from the barbarians which would prove to be a factor in a later millennium. There was more involvement in decision-making on the part of the invaders, who did not have any notions of the divine right of the ruler.

Kingship was a gritty, not an exalted, business of leadership. An effective king led by example, not ancestry, and a powerful king would leave his realm to his heirs but maintaining it was up to them, not tradition. The Vikings were led by men who were first among equals, and their invasions were a bloody proof that this primitive democracy was successful. Just as it's impossible to envision a Europe without the lasting legacy of the Romans, so is it inconceivable to imagine England, Scotland, France, Russia, and other lands had the Vikings not left their mark.

It's time to take a fresh look at the men from the North who transformed Europe.

After the Romans ...

As Europe labored to recreate itself in the wake of the fall of the Roman Empire, the regions which had been included within the vast boundaries of Rome were left to their own devices. The period between the fall of

Rome in 476 and the Renaissance to come later was known as the Dark Ages for a reason, although it's considered more politically correct to refer to that era in a less judgmental fashion as the Middle Ages, or the Medieval Era. It's easy to identify the culprits who contributed to the darkness of the ages: warfare was a constant source of upheaval; famine an ever-present threat; disease rife in a time when life was truly, in the words of Thomas Hobbes, "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Soon to be added to those deadly ingredients would be the invasions from the men of the North, who were not only violent and relentless but also, to add heathen insult to devout injury, pagan.

The void left by the absence of Rome was felt keenly in lands that had formerly known order. Although religion was becoming unified and England was gradually Christianized during the seventh century, the kingdoms of Europe were not as we recognize them today. Not only was England nowhere near being Great Britain, but it wasn't even England yet. That small island, so often invaded, gave no evidence that one day an adjective would be attached to its name.

Deprived of Roman identity, Europe found that Christianity was destined to become the new brand. As Christianity had begun to grow in influence and in numbers, the plural gods became one single deity. The

Christian religion, which was to become a vital force in rough-hewn lands where survival was at the mercy of the weather, the harvest, and by implication, divine wrath, was poised to become a sanctuary for people who, with little control over their lives, could at least find comfort in the clergy who provided solace and care.

Eventually, religious communities would also become centers of learning in their regions, as Christianity replaced spiritually what Rome had been politically and militarily. By the eighth century, Christianity had become so pervasive in England that churches saw no reason or need to be defended: who would dare to harm the property which was dedicated to God? Jesus the Christ spoke of peace, of turning the other cheek, of forgiving one's enemies. The church was the higher power, renowned for its spiritual influence, allied to the political forces that ruled the region. It did not occur to these earnest priests and followers of religious rule then that not everyone regarded the Christian place of worship as a sacrosanct.

In truth, even as Christianity spread after the Roman Empire under Constantine adopted the faith of its own, the far reaches of the region converted gradually from their local gods. The peoples who traveled across the Continent in search of land often

had their own gods and rites of worship. When they roamed from their borders, they brought their religions with them.

The Anglo-Saxons who occupied England in the eighth century had not originated there. According to Bede, the first Anglo-Saxons settled in England around 449. Bede, known as the Venerable, was writing in 731, but the information in his writings is confirmed by the findings of archeologists. The ethnic group known collectively as the Anglo-Saxons was known individually as the Jutes, who came from the Jutland Peninsula; likewise, the Angles and the Saxons were both Germanic tribes.

But the Saxons had been a problem for the Romans as early as the third century; their attacks along the coast forced the Romans to construct forts for protection; the area where the Saxons attacked was known as the Saxon Shore. But when the Romans left Britain in 410, the Britons were left to their own means for defense. According to the accounts of Gildas, a monk writing in the sixth century, Saxon mercenaries were paid by the Britons to fight the Pict raiders and pirates from northern Scotland. Saxon kings such as Hengest, Aelle, and Cerdic become the rulers of respectively, Kent, Sussex, and Wessex. But welcoming a foreign people can lead to dangerous complications.

The Saxons went from being hired mercenaries to being a threat to the Britons. It's at this time that history records the story of the leader and warrior who would become famous as the legendary King Arthur. In truth, there are historical references to Arthur, who fought Cerdic in 519 or 520; the tales were sung by famed bards Aneirin and Taliesin, which would be the equivalent today of having reporters on the scene.

Journalism didn't exist, but the ballads and tales sung by the bards were histories and entertainment in one hybrid rendition. In the late Middle Ages, the legends would be romanticized to suit the chivalric code of the times, but Arthur's roots are in the hardscrabble, rough-and-tumble realm of the Dark Ages, long before the Viking longships were spotted.

What we do know is that as the centuries passed, the Saxons settled to become the dominant ethnic group of the island. The Anglo-Saxon kingdoms consisted of Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Sussex, and Wessex. The small kingdoms would not begin to be united until the ninth century, when Alfred the Great, responding to the threat of the Vikings, would lead Wessex to play a dominant role in the island's future. Later, the Anglo-Saxons would meet a Norman master named William the Conqueror and the unification of England would be achieved, albeit not in a way that

would win the favor of the Anglo-Saxons. Playing an intricate role in the evolution of the nation known as Britain, the Vikings who came to conquer would eventually come to stay.

The Vikings are Coming!

In the year 789, three Viking ships landed on the shore of the kingdom of Wessex. They weren't intent on being good neighbors; when the local reeve went to greet them, he was killed. Since the reeve was appointed by the local lord and entrusted with the management of the estate, his position was one of importance in the social structure. The event made the local news, that is, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, meriting a brief mention: "These were the first ships of the Danish men that sought the land of the English nation." But those raids were destined to command much more attention before long.

The seers saw the approach of doom as the year 793 dawned. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, people in Northumbria started the New Year with a sense of terror which was about to be justified. Any time that there are sightings of sheets of light in the air and dragons flying across the firmament, followed by famine, it's clear that the New Year is up to no good. Even before the first frightening prow of a longship showed up on shore, the major Viking invasion was preceded by enough bad omens to warn the people of the island of Britain that wrath of apocalyptic proportions was about to be unleashed. The Anglo-

Saxon Chronicle, after listing the ominous portents, then noted, “These tremendous tokens were soon followed by a great famine and not long after, on the sixth day before the ides of Ianr in the same year, the harrowing inroads of heathen men made lamentable havoc in the church of God in Holy Island by rapine and slaughter.”

Lindisfarne

As the centuries passed and Roman rule became only a memory, the church was the unifying, stabilizing force in the land. Paganism became the exception rather than the rule and the growth of the monastic movement created centers where the Christian faith was integrated into the local community. The monastery of Lindisfarne had been established on a tidal island off England’s northeastern coast. It was founded in 635 by Aidan (later to become Saint Aidan) from Iona, who, along with his monks and support from King Oswald, worked as missionaries among the Northumbrian English, a pagan community.

Christianity was not unknown to the British Isles; it had first appeared during the time of the Romans and according to early church father Tertullian, Christianity was founded in Britain in the third century. But after Rome fell, the pagan English, whose ancestral roots

were German, spread into the region and Christianity faded. The Irish had been converted by St. Patrick and that conversion was more lasting. Eager to convert their heathen neighbors, the Irish took their faith and missionary zeal to the south with the goal of evangelizing the English. Columba, originally from Donegal, Ireland, had set up a religious community in Iona; Aidan was sent to Northumbria to go and do likewise.

King Oswald gave the monks their choice of land for the monastery; Aidan chose a spot near the king's palace. Rulers at that time may have been the dominant secular force but they typically functioned within the fabric of the religious order. The monasteries preached peace, but a king had to know how to fight. Although Oswald was a Christian, he was a king, which meant that it was unlikely that he would die in his bed. Kings in those days were evaluated according to their military skills. Nonetheless, Oswald, who had had to fight to take back the kingdom that had been his father's, was recognized for his piety. He and Aidan were in accord that the Christian faith was to be spread among the Northumbrians. Evangelism was no easy task in those days; for one thing, language was a barrier because Aidan's monks spoke Irish, not English. But the monks did not isolate themselves in their monastery; they went

out among the people and their evangelism became successful through service rather than linguistics.

Lindisfarne thrived and became a light of the faith in the region, with an A-list of Christian personalities who would rise through the ranks. Aidan would be named a saint, as would his successor, Cuthbert. The first known school in the area was established at Lindisfarne; reading and writing were taught, along with Latin. Literacy was a dynamic concept capable of changing a population. That meant that books were, at that time, bold inventions. Aidan's work on Lindisfarne transformed Northumbria and shortly after his death in 651, the religious authorities decided that Northumbria would no longer depend on Ireland for spiritual leadership. The Irish monks returned to Iona and a man named Cuthbert became the prior of Lindisfarne.

Cuthbert was effective in his role but after ten years as prior, he felt that God was calling him to be a hermit living a solitary life, the better to spiritually combat the forces of evil which seemed to have gained a foothold in the country. Religious leaders were very sensitive to the prevalence of evil and hermits were highly respected for their willingness to surrender their lives to God and solitude. Cuthbert lived as a hermit for ten years, but his reputation had not been forgotten, he was asked to become a bishop.

He didn't last as long in that office, and when he died in 687, his body was buried on Lindisfarne. His grave became the site of healing miracles, which proved to the monks that Cuthbert was a saint. In order to promote Lindisfarne as a place where a saint reposed, the saint's relics had to be present. It was estimated by the monks that, within 11 years, Cuthbert's body would revert to its skeletal version, so that the bones could be elevated on the anniversary of his death. But when the coffin of Cuthbert was opened, what the monks saw was a complete body with no decomposition evident. Cuthbert was not just an ordinary saint; he was clearly a very great saint, blessed by God and intended to benefit his community with the power of his holiness.

Lindisfarne prospered as news of its saint spread. Pilgrims came to be healed. It's believed that it was around this time that the illuminated manuscripts began to be produced. The Lindisfarne Gospels are among the world's most well-known illuminated books. They began with 150 psalms and eventually went on to the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Lindisfarne had its saint's relics, it had its illuminated manuscripts, it had wealth and fame. Life was good, or as good as it could be during a time known as the Dark Ages, which is popularly defined by the absence of light which characterized it. As the eighth century, taking

place during the Dark Ages, was drawing to a close, life was about to get much harder, thanks to the Vikings.

Vikings didn't initially come to scout out the neighborhood for a winter home. They came for trade and for plunder, whichever came first, and the monasteries of Christian territories were ripe for the taking. Lindisfarne, on the eastern coast near the border between England and Scotland, was the intended target of a fleet of Danish Vikings who had planned this surprise raid to catch the monks off guard before they could seek aid.

The Vikings were not geared for battle during these raids. Their longships were designed to arrive quickly and depart with equal speed, loaded down with the stolen wealth of the plundered community. If they landed and the people had had time to summon help from the community, the Vikings, believe it or not, would decide that discretion was the better part of valor and return to their ships. At this stage, their objective was not to linger, but simply to take what was worth the effort and make their getaway. They did, however, have some tactics to nullify resistance by the inhabitants. Upon coming ashore, they would steal the horses and use them so that they could move swiftly on the land.

The year 793 was not the first instance of a Viking invasion, but it is used as the starting point for the years

to follow, when the raids would become as commonplace, expected, and dreaded as any of the natural phenomena which rendered the lives of the English in a perilous state. For religious believers who saw every manifestation of the Bible and life in literal term, the Vikings were imbued with the regalia of divine punishment and churches prayed to be spared from the Viking raids. Lindisfarne was doomed.

When the monk Simeon of Durham recorded the events, his descriptive words were harrowing: "... the pagans from the northern region came with a naval force to Britain like stinging hornets and spread on all sides like fearful wolves, robbed, tore and slaughtered not only beasts of burden, sheep and oxen, but even priests and deacons, and companies of monks and nuns. And they came to Lindisfarne, laid everything waste with grievous plundering, and there they miserably ravaged and pillaged everything; they trod the holy things under their polluted feet, they dug down the altars, and plundered all the treasures of the church. Some of the brethren they slew; some they carried off with them in chains; the greater number they stripped naked, insulted, and cast out of doors, and some they drowned in the sea."

Monks and cattle fell to the Viking swords. Monks' blood spattered the altar of the church, which was

stripped of its sacred emblems and its wealth and ornaments. When the longships left, they were loaded down with gold, silver and jewels, as well as potential slaves from the younger monks and the boys who had not been killed. Monasteries made such profitable raiding sites because to the Christians of the Middle Ages, sin could be absolved by atoning with money or goods. The monasteries were the recipients of all that lucrative guilt and once the Vikings found out that gold was to be had, souls were of no consequence. If the monks desired to meet their Maker, the Vikings were willing to oblige.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was unfamiliar with Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome but the remaining members of the community may have suffered from a medieval version of it. Traumatized by the attack, they carried the body of Cuthbert, his relics and whatever treasures remained from the island to the mainland. Fearful of another attack, the community moved to Chester-le-Street, an old Roman town. Then they moved further inland to Ripon, putting more distance between themselves and the next Viking raid. A single raid had the power to make them flee from the threat of a second. They would eventually settle at Durham but that destination was 100 years away. The loss of life and riches was catastrophic, but fortunately for posterity,

the Vikings had no interest in The Lindisfarne Gospels or the coffin that contained the relics of St. Cuthbert. Those relics were safe and would eventually be kept in Durham Cathedral.

The Viking raid on Lindisfarne would cast a long shadow. In a March 8, 2013 interview on National Public Radio, Yale professor Anders Winroth discussed the Vikings and the effect of their introduction to the Europeans as a force to be reckoned with following the raid on Lindisfarne. “The 793 raid ... was the first Viking attack that was written about, and it was a big shock to all of Europe... We see the attack through the eyes of the victims, who spread the word that the Vikings were bloody and violent. In fact, they were violent, but no more than anyone else at the time . Compared to Charlemagne’s armies, the Vikings were amateurs.” As history would prove, the Vikings, if they were amateurs, were very effective.

Vignettes of the Viking Era: the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

During the reign of Alfred the Great of Wessex, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was created. The Chronicle recorded the history of events affecting the lives of the Anglo-Saxons. Multiple copies of the original were distributed to the monasteries across England and it was up to the monks to do the updating. The monks had no idea that one day their work would be studied by historians intent on learning more about a pivotal period of time shrouded in mystery, bloodshed, and piety. Objective reporting was unheard of, and while the monks were able to record the happenings of their times, their writings were imbued with their faith and their understanding of God. That meant that bad times were proof that God was angry, and sin was ever present.

The monks were diligent in their updating; there's evidence of updating going on in 1154. Although none of the originals is still in existence, nine manuscripts survive. The oldest existing manuscript was started near the end of Alfred the Great's time on the throne; the most recent one records a fire at Peterborough Abbey in 1116. The events are recorded by year with the earliest

dating from the year 60 BCE when Julius Caesar invaded Britain. Regarded as the single most important historical source for events in England from the time when the Romans left to the time after William the Conqueror became king, the manuscripts serve much as a local newspaper would, with a few allowances for the times in which they were written. They don't follow the rules of modern journalism: they're biased, one-sided; some events are omitted.

The Chronicle's original purpose was to maintain the Easter tables, which were drawn up so that Christian clergy would be able to determine the schedule of feast days in the future. As time went on, the Chronicle ceased looking like a list and the notes telling about historical events, which had formerly occupied a short space, became more significant. When the Viking invasions began in the late 700s, history became prominent and the Chronicle was there to record the events. But it's important to remember that the monks recording history were not reporters. One account relates that a raiding ship-army came from Norway, but "it is tedious to tell how it all happened." Modern readers long for detail, but it's important to be grateful for the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as it is.

The news network of eighth-century Europe did not have access to social media or 24-hour news, but that

didn't mean that word couldn't spread. When the news of the raid reached the court of Charlemagne in France, Alcuin of York wrote to King Ethelred of Northumbria and to Lindisfarne's Bishop Higbald that no horror comparable to this one had appeared in England during the 350 years that the Northumbrians had lived there. Always alert to the mystical warnings of divine displeasure, Alcuin recalled another portent from the previous Lent, when it had rained blood in York. It was clear to the devout Alcuin that the monastery needed to pursue more stringent reform in order to escape further attacks.

At a time when famine and war were indications of God's displeasure, the Christians must have wondered what evil they had committed that justified such a terrible response from God. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, that historical document which reveals so much about the Middle Ages and a time that's murky to most of us, reported the event with expected religious interpretation, considering that monks were doing the writing: "The ravages of heathen men miserably destroyed God's church on Lindisfarne."

Chapter Two

The Vikings Strike Europe

There was no European Union in the eighth century. Rome had long since fallen and with the loss of empire came the Dark Ages, an era when Christianity was the only light spreading across the lands which had been conquered by the Romans centuries before. But the invaders who broke the Western Roman Empire were merely one bookend to a lengthy period of time when seemingly disorganized groups of foreigners would attack at will. Rome was sacked in 410 by the Visigoths; by 430, the Huns of had begun their incursions into other lands and would fight their way to the Balkans, Gaul and Italy. But Rome was not the sole destination for the tribes. Britain was settled by Jutes, Angles, and Saxons; Franks, Alemanni and Burgundians found their way to northern Gaul.

The Viking invasions came at a time when the expansion of literacy meant that there were witnesses who could record the deeds and preserve them for future generations. Also, the Vikings returned to their prey again and again, and their invasions were large scale. The Vikings actually had much in common with the English that they terrorized. The English Danes had arrived at the sceptered isle in the 400s. Their gods were

similar, their warrior code resembled each other's, and their battle songs shared themes. In the lexicon of the times, that should have made them practically kin. But the centuries that intervened between the early arrivals and the later conquerors had turned them into strangers and enemies.

Lindisfarne was the most dramatic Viking incursion, a token of things to come. When the Vikings returned to England a year after the Lindisfarne raid, the villagers of Jarrow were ready. The bad weather worked to the advantage of the English. The Viking leader was captured and put to death without regard for the cruelty of the process. Chastened by defeat, the Vikings returned to Denmark and didn't return for 40 years. But when they returned, they were ready for anything the English thought they could try.

Denmark was not the only land from which Viking raiders set sail, and if the Danes were on hiatus from the raids, their Scandinavian brethren were not. The new century picked up where the previous one left off. Monasteries were easy pickings for the Vikings; many in Scotland and northern England vanish from the records. The island of Iona, which today can claim 1400 years of history, was founded before Lindisfarne. Columba landed there in 563 with 13 followers to establish a monastery. But its history was no protection

against attack; the Vikings attacked Iona in 795 and burned it in 802. When the Vikings returned in 806, they killed 78 monks. The monks who were left escaped to County Meath, Ireland, bringing with them a magnificent, illustrated gospel book that had probably been produced in Iona, but which would eventually come to be known by its new location in Kells.

Europe had been invaded before. One of the most significant battles of the era took place in 732, when Charles Martel and his Franks defeated the Moors at the Battle of Tours, near Poitiers, France. The historical significance of the battle in terms of religious conflict is that the balance of power between the Islamic-Byzantine Empire and the Western Europe which was becoming Christianized was maintained.

Following his victory, Charles Martel re-established his dominance over southern France. Charles Martel's grandson, Charlemagne, or Charles the Great, began to expand his lands by bringing northern Italy, Saxony, and modern day France under his control and unifying those territories into one kingdom. In 800, he would be crowned Holy Roman Emperor, a nostalgic reminder of both the transformation from pagan to Christian and the vestiges of imperial might that had fallen in 476.

But the unification that Charlemagne was initiating was not duplicated in the island nation of England. The

English kingdoms consisted of Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Sussex, and Wessex; the kingdoms in Wales and Scotland as they are now known were ruled by the Picts and Britons. Ireland was a collection of independent kingdoms, perhaps as many as 150. What Charlemagne accomplished would not be readily duplicated elsewhere in Europe.

Under Charlemagne, the city of Aachen became a center of culture. Literacy expanded. Alcuin of York, regarded as a scholar and teacher, was invited to come to Aachen and bring with him the program of educational instruction that was taught in Northumbrian monasteries. Alcuin, who in his time was regarded as the most learned man to be found, was a respected figure for his work at the school in York, and had a great deal of influence in Charlemagne's court. Charlemagne was a sponsor of the church and engaged in its liturgy and music, as well as the copying of the religious works. But after Charlemagne's death, his heirs were not able to hold the empire together. The Holy Roman Empire would also fall prey to the Viking raiders.

Who were these harbingers of doom, these seafaring invaders who invoked the terror of biblical plague as they raided kingdoms away from their home? And why did they leave home to a search of plunder?

“People without Boundaries”

Historians have not come up with one single reason why the Vikings left their homes for other shores. Some archeologists credit a warming trend that began around the ninth century to an increase in population in the Scandinavian lands, meaning the young men who would not inherit the family lands had to go elsewhere to seek their fortunes.

The frequency with which the Grim Reaper visited communities in the Dark Ages did serve a beneficial purpose in a grim manner: reducing the population made it easier to serve the needs of the ones who survived in a time when agriculture was, to put it mildly, an inexact science. For those who lived on the islands and peninsulas of the Scandinavian regions, farming opportunities were limited, especially considering the coldness of the climate. When the climate changed, and more land was arable, the population benefitted. However, land doesn't expand the way that population does. That meant that young men had to seek opportunity where they could take it. If not at home—and the early Vikings certainly did enough fighting among their own to keep the domestic scene lively—then elsewhere.

Going raiding wasn't really that much of a stretch from what they already did. In a manly society where adventure was a rite of passage, young men were expected to challenge their wits and abilities. To go and prove their manhood and courage to a society where battle valor meant the difference between dying a warrior's death and ending up in Valhalla with Odin, the chief Norse God, or dying dishonorably, if safely, at home of old age was a challenge they willingly accepted. Valiant young men chose valor. Nor were they expected to come home empty-handed. Bringing home stolen goods, whether it was coins, a slave, or livestock, was like bringing home a primitive form of a paycheck. There was profit to be had in those plundered countries and the Vikings were just the ones to find it.

The practice of primogeniture meant that the eldest son inherited everything that his father had, which left younger sons in need of finding a way to support themselves. Small wonder that adventurous young men, raised on the legends of courageous warriors and steeped in the adrenaline of a culture which prized bravery above all else, ventured from the home shores in search of fortune, both figurative and literal. They must have wondered why there were unprotected structures in other lands which housed costly jewels, gold, and treasures; as pagans, they didn't understand

that Christians did not protect the church because Christians would not attack holy property. The Vikings suffered no such constraints, and quickly taught those in holy orders that laying for themselves treasures on earth was bound to come to peril.

The Christians may have invited some of the Viking wrath by their exclusive trading practices, which were based upon religious beliefs and shunned trading with pagans or Muslims. Forced to find other partners, the Vikings went to new lands where religious scruples would not get in the way of honest profit.

The Vikings were opportunistic multi-taskers. When they were set out in the 790s, they were in search of trade routes that would provide a steady and lucrative source of income. As they went on their journeys, they traded their fur, amber, iron, whetstones, soapstone, and walrus tusks. When their ships brought them to a town that was well defended, they set up shop, and in exchange, they eventually accrued an impressive supply of coinage which they could use to purchase more goods. Bartering was their means for a while but the Vikings became more sophisticated merchants and the money was put to good use. But if they arrived at a monastery or church that was not well defended, the merchants were warriors, ransacking the religious establishments of their wealth and taking

slaves, which they then traded as goods when they trading instead of raiding.

The slave markets of Constantinople and Baghdad in the East made a profitable destination for the Vikings, and the Franks, Irish, British and Slavs who were unfortunate enough to have been captured found themselves far from home and in the possession of a foreign master. The Constantinople trade was a prize for the Vikings, their link to the goods of the Far East, which provided them with spices, silks, fruits, wine, and perhaps most lucrative of all, Arabic silver. The Viking trade empire was impressive and covered most of the known world by the time their era was ending.

The Scandinavian lands from which the Vikings came did not represent a united society. When Norwegian King Harald Fairhair took control of Norway, not all of the chieftains accepted his rule over them. So the discontented ones left for other shores, where they could live under their own rule and profit from the wealth that was there for the taking.

If you are young, brave, and convinced that to die in battle is the best of all possible fates, there was no real risk to raiding. You either went and returned with booty or you died and went to Odin. Win-win for a Viking warrior. It was reason enough to go raiding.

But others, including Patrick Wallace from the National Museum of Ireland, made the obvious connection. “They had the best iron in the world, trees to cut down and build ships, the best swords and edges on their blades. All the factors were there. They could do it and they did.”

Vignettes of the Viking Era: Viking Warriors

It's amazing what a helmet visor, an axe and wolfskins can do for to create a lasting impression. The Vikings wore iron helmets; some wore chain mail. Their weapons included spears, bows, axes and swords. They protected themselves with round wooden shields. When in battle, the Viking fighting strategy was to stand in rows and form a wall of their shields called a skjaldborg. When they needed a fortress, they dug a ditch and created an earth bank and then erected a wooden stockade on top.

Composed of equal parts mythology, bloodlust, and ability, the Viking warriors known as the berserkers were the ones who went into battle so possessed by the martial spirit that they were oblivious to pain, enabling them to be so consumed with power and fury that they incited terror in their opponents. The belief was that they transformed into the animal whose fur, often a wolf or a bear, they wore into battle. They frequently appear in the Nordic sagas as foils to the heroic protagonist.

However, one of the most iconic Viking symbols needs to be laid to rest. The Vikings did not wear

horned helmets in battle. According to the depictions of the Vikings in battle gear from the eighth through the eleventh centuries when they were a dominant force on the European stage, they wore helmets made of iron or leather, or they were bareheaded. Evidence supports this; a tenth-century helmet that was found in 1943 on a farm in Norway has a rounded cap of iron and a guard around the nose and eyes. The famous but fictional horned helmet comes from the 1800s when artists portrayed the Scandinavian warriors in that fashion; the myth grew stronger after the costumes for Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* was staged in the 1870s.

So why the horns? The 19th-century excavations did find horned helmets, but they came from an era preceding the Vikings. The Greeks and Romans who reported seeing northern Europeans wearing ornamented helmets may have been viewing ceremonial garb worn by Germanic and Norse priests. The Vikings were pragmatist: horns on the helmet would have been useless in battle and might have actually been an obstruction if they'd gotten caught in a tree branch.

Chapter Three

The Raiding Turns to Staying

Earlier, it had been the English from Denmark who had come as conquerors and stayed to settle. Hundreds of years later, the Vikings were returning the favor. In 835, the Vikings sent their fleets, numbering 300 and 400 ships, to England, France, and Russia. England got the worst of it, with 30 years of attack. The raids continued and intensified. The Vikings conquered the Irish harbors and even founded Dublin under their leader, Olaf. Swedish Vikings made it all the way to the center of Russia, where they took over the river towns and held trade for ransom. Norway's Vikings traveled far, reaching the Scottish islands of the Shetlands and the Faroes and settling there and also colonizing Ireland as well. They made it to Greenland and Stoneland or Labrador, and sailed up Canada's St Lawrence River. But they must not have found the pickings to their liking, because it didn't rank with their European plunder.

Initially, the Danish Vikings raided and left. They were extremely successful in their raiding, partly because of their skills but also because there was no coordinated English resistance. The small independent kingdoms were often at war with one another, a

circumstance which made it easy for the Vikings to capitalize on disunion. But as they returned to England, their summer season of plunder lengthened, and they began to build encampments. The Danish settlements at first were established as military outposts from which to launch additional attacks. As they claimed the land and kept it, choosing verdant land for themselves, they brought their families to England to stay, or, as time went on, they married with the local women.

Their bases were the towns of Stamford, Nottingham, Lincoln, Derby, and Leicester. The Vikings who left the familiar Scandinavian shores for foreign lands were not in flight from terrible conditions. Iceland, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden were no worse than any of the other places in Europe. In many ways, the Viking homeland offered as much comfort as the era provided. But as time went on, the Vikings who left their native shores were more inclined to stay where trade and plunder lured them instead of returning home.

By 850, Viking armies took to wintering in England; within a decade, they were able to amass larger, more powerful armies whose intention was conquest. East Anglia in 865 was forced to supply their army, and after their capture of York in 866, the Vikings would take over Northumbria a year later

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle noted the changing habits of the perpetual Viking menace, recording that In 851, Vikings who came to Thanet stayed there, and a force of 350 ships attacked Canterbury and London but was defeated by the West Saxons.

The Great Heathen Army of Danes first appeared in 865. With an estimated five hundred to one thousand soldiers, the Vikings began a new era that combined conquest with residence. They took Kent in 866. Despite the assistance of the Wessex king to the Mercian king in 868, Nottingham fell to the Vikings. In 867, York was conquered and renamed Jorvik, becoming the Danish capital for the Vikings in England. Deira and East Anglia fell in 870. In 871, the Viking target was Wessex. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, only one of the battles, Ashdown in Berkshire, was won by the Wessex soldiers.

By 865, when Continental Europe was beginning to find ways to resist the invaders, the Vikings needed to find weaker prey. They found it in England. England had built its defenses for protection against its neighboring enemies. When a chief or a king summoned a local noble, that man would call his tenants to serve as an army for as long as 40 days. Military service was not popular and when the conflict

was over the army returned to its civil pursuits, with no thought given to external enemies.

But the Vikings were different. The advantage of the sea was already theirs. But even on land, they showed strategic ability. They fortified their camps. They were resourceful warriors who found it easy to fool the gullible Christians. Apparently one favored tactic was to the “feigned flight” where the English thought they had won, only to find that the Vikings held the land at the day’s end. One story tells of a Viking leader besieging a town who announced that he was dying and in need of Christian burial. Eager to claim a convert, the bishop agreed. However, when the dead Viking was brought into town for Christian burial, the mourners showed up armed. The conversion experience that the Vikings inflicted was not quite what the good bishop had in mind.

Chapter Four

Ragnar Lodbrok and the First Viking War

Genealogists of Scandinavian descent must relish researching their family history because the prospect of sharing blood lineage with the descendants of Ragnar Lodbrok livens up the branches of any family tree. It's true that historians aren't entirely convinced that Ragnar Lodbrok actually existed because his resume includes the mighty deeds of other historical Vikings, but this larger-than-life character takes the Viking saga and makes it even larger than life.

He's said to have been related to the Danish King Gudfred and a son of the Swedish king Sigurd Hring. Historians trying to unravel the authenticity of Ragnar have found connections among King Horik I who died in 854, King Reginfrid who died in 814, a nameless king who ruled a portion of Denmark and fell afoul of Harald Klak; someone named Reginherus who attacked Paris in the mid-800s; Rognvald of the Irish Annals, and the father of the Vikings who invaded England at the head of the Great Heathen Army in 865.

Whoever the source and whatever the ancestry, the persistence of the tradition of a mighty Viking hero

called Ragnar who was the scourge of England and France does not die. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which is regarded as a reliable source of information for the events of that time, referred to Ragnar. Other historians deny his existence but confirm that his sons lived. The sons had a father, so there's some credence that the Viking warriors known as Ivar the Boneless, a Viking leader and berserker; Bjorn Ironside, Halfdan Ragnarson, Sigurd Snake-in-the-Eye and Ubba were sired by a man who was larger than life.

Ragnar's first wife, Lagertha, was a shieldmaiden. His second wife was Ora Borgarhjotr. Then he married Aslaugh, the daughter of Sigurd and Brynhildr the shieldmaiden. Ragnar claimed to be a descendant from the Norse god Odin, and he may have acquired his iconoclastic wardrobe from the god who ruled Asgard. Ragnar Lodbrok was also known as Hairy Breeches, a moniker he owed to his wife's tailoring, for the trousers she had made him out of animal skins. Lodbrok was a reference to the coat that he wore.

He was born to Sigurd Ring and Alfiled, but his mother died when he was young. His father wooed a Jutland princess named Alfsol for his second wife and fought her family in battle. The father was defeated and not a good loser; announcing that he would rather lose his daughter to Valhalla than to Sigurd, he gave Alfsol

poison to drink. Bereft at the thought of her death, Sigurd joined her on her funeral pyre.

Ragnar's childhood is lacking in detail but when he became a warrior, he lost no time in making a name for himself. Ragnar didn't confine his military exploits to France. He also fought civil wars against the Danes. But he wanted more and set his eyes on France, which would prove to be profitable. He raided France numerous times by sailing into the Frankish Empire. In 845, 120 of his ships carrying an estimated 5000 men sailed up the Seine.

Charlemagne was no longer alive; his grandson Charles the Bald met Ragnar and when one division was defeated, the Franks retreated, leaving Ragnar to do what Vikings did. They reached Paris by Easter, and occupied the city. When the French king paid him 7,000 French livres, Ragnar withdrew from Paris. But he didn't regard the payment as binding and continued to raid France. Small wonder; according to a contemporary, "never had Ragnar seen lands so fertile and so rich, nor ever a people so cowardly." Charlemagne's Frankish empire was a memory. The Vikings stabled their horses in the cathedral which Charles the great had built in Aix, the capital of his empire. In 200 years, the Vikings would invade the land of the Franks 50 times.

Quite the traveler, Ragnar next went to England. The English were usually on the losing end of the Viking spears but when Ragnar went a-raiding against the English, he ended up shipwrecked on the coast of Northumbria. His force didn't fare well in battle and Ragnar, with most of his men killed, was captured by Aelle, the Northumbrian king. King Aelle of Northumbria's revenge was brutal and in keeping with the times. An account of Ragnar's demise, written in the 12th century, claims that as he died, Ragnar sang his death song, confident that he would enter Valhalla and that his sons would wreak a violent revenge for his death. Ragnar was thrown into a pit of snakes to die, a fate which brought the vengeance of his sons who would lead their Great Heathen Army into an invasion of England to retaliate.

Ragnar knew the nature of his sons. Although they came from three different wives, they apparently were united in their duty to their father, or at least to the bloodlust which demanded vengeance. When Halfdan learned of the manner of his father's death, he gripped the chess piece he was holding so hard that his fingernails bled. Sigurd was using his knife to trim his nails; so absorbed was he in the tale of his father's demise that he continued trimming until he cut to the bone. Ivar wanted the detail and as he heard what had

been done to Ragnar, his face colored red, blue, and pale in turn, and swelled with anger. The details from the bards tell us that Ragnar's sons would not leave their father's death unpunished.

The sons, at the head of the Great Heathen Army, a name given to it by contemporary English sources, crossed the North Sea in 866, rode along the Roman road and were ferried across the Humber. First on their death list was the East Anglian King Edmund; Ivar the Boneless bound him to a tree and the Vikings used him for target practice, shooting arrows into him until he died. To make the point, he was then beheaded.

The vengeful sons besieged York. The Northumbrians left behind their feud between two rival kings and united to attack the Danes. Initially, their efforts were successful and drove the Vikings back to the city walls of York. But when the defenders of York showed up, there was confusion and the Vikings were able to slaughter the troops. For his execution of their father, King Aelle was sentenced to a peculiar Viking punishment known as "the Blood Eagle." The king's ribs were cut by the spine, then the lungs were pulled out via the wounds in his back. The punishment's names come from the resemblance of the ribs to blood-stained wings. Salt was sprinkled into the wounds to make the punishment even more excruciating.

However, the gruesome punishment may be no more than the mead talking; the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle says that King Aelle died in battle.

The sons also destroyed the fortress of the kings of Strathclyde at Dumbarton. Northumbria ended its existence as an independent kingdom. Northumbria had produced Bede and Alcuin, Anglian poetry, poems of Caedmon and the Vision of the Rood. After their defeat in 867, the Northumbrians reverted to primitive barbarism, leaving only the stone crosses that were masterpieces of Anglian art as a remnant of their former status.

When Simeon of Durham wrote about the battle of York 150 years later, his words were explicit: “The army raided here and there and filled every place with bloodshed and sorrow. Far and wide it destroyed the churches and monasteries with the fire and sword. When it departed from a place it left nothing standing but roofless walls. So great was the destruction that at the present day one can scarcely see anything left of those places, nor any sign of their former greatness.”

Ivan had his land-avaricious eye on Mercia, which had been England’s powerhouse for almost a century. Knowing Ivar’s designs, the Mercian king called on Wessex for help. Coming to his aid were Ethelred and Alfred, who offered their forces in battle. However, the

Mercians then decided that they'd rather negotiate. Ivar left the churches at York and Ripon untouched. A treaty ended the 868 campaign. After setting up a vassal king in Northumbria; Ivar spent the winter in York, fortifying himself in northeast England.

Ivar was a shrewd military commander who planned the campaign that conquered East Anglia, Deira in Northumbria and Mercia. Before the invasion he had been fighting in Ireland. According to the Annals of Ulster, a credible source, Ivar died in Ireland in 872 or 873; the Annals wrote that, when Ivar died, he was the King of the Northmen in the whole of Ireland and Britain. His obituary was impressive: "872. Ivar, King of the Norsemen of all Ireland and Britain, ended his life." He had conquered Mercia and East Anglia. He had captured the stronghold of the kingdom of Brythonic Strathclyde, Dumbarton. He settled in Dublin with his loot and his reputation and died peacefully two years later. According to the chroniclers, he slept in Christ. Perhaps, if he truly converted, he didn't mind missing out on Valhalla.

Ivar's brother Halfdan and his Vikings conquered in Mercia in 874. He handed out the land he and his men had taken in Northumbria in 876 and in 878, he headed south to Wessex, forcing most of the population to submit. He fought the Picts in Deira and the Welsh at

Strathclyde in order to secure his kingdom in the north. After settling down in 876, Halfdan was not mentioned again.

Avenging their father's death, the sons of Ragnar had managed to place most of the island under the control of the Vikings.

Vignettes from the Viking Era: The Great Heathen Army and Edmund the Martyr

Legends say that the Great Heathen Army came for blood, to avenge the death of Ragnar; other records dispute this but no one disputes the arrival of the military force led by Ivar the Boneless. The force was made up of Danes although according to a cleric named Asser who wrote in the 10th century, the invaders came from the Danube area. But modern scholars believe that Asser mistranslated and meant to write Dania instead of Danubia, Dania being the Latin word for Denmark.

The Army wintered in East Anglia during the winter of 865 and spent their time obtaining horses for their battle. Winter over, they were ready for battle and they invaded Northumbria, already compromised by a civil war between two rivals, each claiming his right to the royal throne. After conquering York in 866, the Vikings had a valuable foothold in Northumbria. The Northumbrian foes, realizing that their claims to the throne were meaningless if the Vikings won, joined forces, but it was too late and both kings died in battle. The Vikings named Ecgberht to rule as a king in name only, who was assigned to raise taxes from the population to outfit the Viking military.

In 869, East Anglia was next on the Viking conquest list. King Edmund of East Anglia was murdered, the legends claim, because he refused to renounce his Christian faith. He is known to history as Edmund the Martyr. As one would expect of the times, and of a military force entitled by its victims as the Great Heathen Army, Edmund suffered at the hands of the notorious Ivar the Boneless. He was, the stories say, shot with arrows and then beheaded. His head was tossed unceremoniously into the woods, but a wolf alerted his followers by repeatedly crying out “Here! Here! Here!” The saga of Edmund was celebrated in coinage and by one of the chronicling clerics, Abbo of Fleury, who told the story of the martyred king sometime around 986. Ironically, it would be a Danish king of England, Cnut, who would rebuild the abbey at Bury St. Edmunds where the remains of the sainted king were housed. For a time, Edmund was England’s patron saint and the abbey prospered over the centuries. But in the 16th century, the monasteries would face something even worse than the Vikings, when the Christian King Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries and took their wealth as he renounced the Roman Catholic faith and the Pope who refused to give him a divorce, and named himself as head of the Church of England.

Chapter Five

Who Were the Vikings?

When the Vikings began their nautical excursions in the 800s, they were building a profitable maritime empire based on trade. Their network reached as far as China and Afghanistan, and they were no strangers to the goods of Russia, Turkey and even Canada. Wladyslaw Duczko, an archeologist at Poland's Institute of Anthropology and Archology, describes them as "people without boundaries."

Historians who study the exploits of the Vikings have come to the conclusion that rather than representing what Smithsonian.com describes as "a sort of Hell's Angels of the early Middle Ages," the Viking raiders were not just particularly effective at plundering the loot of other countries. They were excellent traders, admittedly in a somewhat extreme mode, who traveled thousands of miles east and south. They were brave and skilled and they had an agenda. According to historian Simon Franklin of Cambridge University, the Vikings who would make it to Constantinople in 945 weren't there in an attempt to capture the city. "It was more terroristic—all about instilling fear and extracting concessions for trade."

So who were these valiant and violent warriors who treated the Anglo-Saxons and the Franks and in general anyone they met as if they were weaklings? The word Viking itself comes from a Norse word for pirate. Not exactly a flattering term of self-description. But the Vikings do not appear to have suffered from low self-esteem.

The Scandinavians at this time were not neatly and demographically divided into what would become Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. It was after the Viking Age came to a close that the different groups became distinct.

Norwegian Vikings came from Trondheim and went to Iceland, Greenland, England and Ireland. Leif the Lucky, one of the Vikings who's actually known by name, went from Brattahlid to the Eastern coast of the United States, reaching the New World four hundred years before Christopher Columbus. They also sailed from Norway to the Mediterranean where they did their pirating all along the coast until they were sent back by Spain's Arab kingdoms, but not before they attacked Majorca and Menorca. The Norwegians were the ones who traveled north and west, where Ireland, Scotland, Iceland and Greenland were in their path.

The Danish Vikings raided and traded down the European coast and to England and Ireland, down the

French coast by Portugal and Spain, through the Straits of Gibraltar into the Mediterranean Sea and along the Northern coast as far as Istanbul the capital of the Roman Empire in the East. For the Danes, England and France and Normandy were their destination.

The Swedes went to Russia. The Swedish Vikings sailed down the rivers that ended in the Baltic Sea, traveling down the Volga River and venturing as far as Constantinople and the Black Sea. They continued on to Russia, making a lasting impression on the country, which took as its name the term for sea pirate, or Rus. The Vikings known as the Rus also had an unexpected hair fashion: according to Ibn Fadlan, the men of the Rus bleached their beards blond or more accurately, saffron yellow, by using a strong, soft soap with lye for the bleaching agent. Pliny the Elder recalled that the men of the Germanic tribes were more likely than the females to bleach their hair. "Soap is the invention of the Gauls and this is used to redden the hair. It is made from fat and ashes ... the best is beechwood and goat fat, the two combined, thick and clear. Many among the Germans use it, the men more than the women."

The Vikings at home had neighbors of whom to beware. To the South were the Saxons in what is now northern Germany; the Saxons and the Vikings found themselves in conflict frequently, which led the Danish

Vikings to construct Danevirke as a defensive fortification. When Charlemagne conquered the Saxons during a period of war that endured for 30 years, he forced the Saxons to convert to Christianity. Slavic tribes who controlled the Baltic Sea were loyal to the Carolingian dynasty. But when Vikings defeated the Obotrites in 808 and moved their merchants and traders to Danevirke near Hedeby, the Vikings had won the supremacy of the Baltic Sea, a control which would endure throughout the age of the Vikings.

Vignettes of the Viking Era: The Viking Sailors

If you take a look at the terrain of the territory where the Vikings lived, it's easy to see that nature had not designed the Scandinavian map for easy travel. Denmark and Southern Sweden were covered with huge forests; Norway was a region of fjords and mountains. That left one means of travel open to them: the water. Vikings mapped the rivers, seas, and waterways as if they were highways; they built their towns and markets, and their fortresses, near the water so that they had swift access to the sea. In order to dominate the waters, it was necessary to master shipbuilding, and the Vikings proved their talents in this endeavor.

A longboat could be 23 meters long. The longship was built for raiding, but the seafaring Vikings also had other ships: the faering was a little row boat and a sexaering, which had six oars, and both were for fishing. The knorrs used for trade were shorter and broader.

Clinker-built ships were made with overlapping planks. Being constructed in this manner made it stout, flexible and light with a sail and room for 32 oarsmen. A warrior boat had a keel that reached just three feet

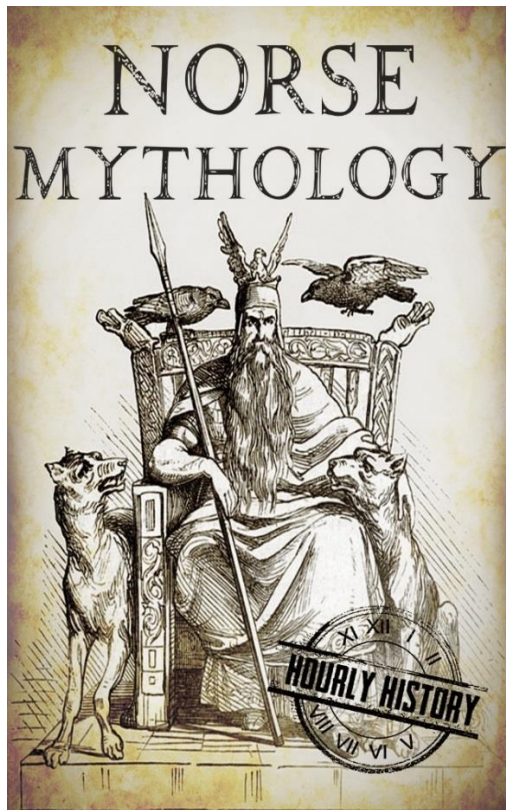
below the surface, with masts and sail that lowered so that the ship could use stealth when approaching fortifications and settlements.

Archeological findings have managed to unravel the details of the longships. In 1880, the Gokstad was dug up in Norway in almost complete conditions right down to the cooking pots. It was built of solid oak planks that were fastened with treenails and iron bolts and caulked with cord that had been made from plaited animal hair. The ship was roughly 76 feet from stem to stern with a 17-foot six-inch beam, and 16 oars ranging from 17 and 19 feet on each side. The 40-foot high mast had a long, heavy yard with a square sail. The ship carried a crew of 50 and could, if needed, carry 30 more passengers for a month.

The ship was an example of the longships that brought the Vikings to Constantinople, to Paris, Dublin, and North America. These ships were part of the Viking empire. The Viking longship, with its shallow draft, could anchor in the creeks and bays and well as sail far up rivers. It was built so that it could withstand the powerful Atlantic storms. It was the perfect vessel for trading and for raiding, as the Vikings would prove as they established their presence in lands far from home.

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