

VIKINGS

THE END



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The End of the Viking Era

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Chapter One

The Legacy of Alfred the Great

The Vikings of Scandinavia had come a long way, both in terms of miles and in perception, since their first forays into England in the waning years of the eighth century. For the next two hundred years, in addition to enduring disease, poverty, and the ongoing wars between neighboring kings, the natives of Europe had to endure the raiding, and the then raiding-and-staying Vikings who attacked at will but instead of leaving, treated the plundered country as their winter home. As the Vikings built outposts in their conquered territory, they began to stay in those settlements rather than return home. By the dawn of the eleventh century, the terrors of the North who had devastated the monastery at Lindisfarne had been contained to the Danelaw, the region that was ceded to them after Anglo-Saxon Alfred the Great and Danish chieftain Guthrum signed a treaty to bring peace to the island. The Viking reign of terror, after generations of dominating a collection of weak states, was over. And yet, they were not really conquered. What did that mean for the Viking invaders who had become Scandinavian immigrants?

Peace for the Dark Ages was a relative term, but even monarchs would settle for what they could get

when it came to dealing with the Viking invaders, using whatever means were at hand. In the case of King Alfred the Great, victory meant first defining borders that would contain the Vikings and second, being able to enforce those boundaries to avoid further incursions onto home turf. Following the Anglo-Saxon victory at the Battle of Edington, the Vikings accepted terms that gave them the territory in England that would be known as the Danelaw, which included the region north of England to Bedford and Chester. The Vikings were no stranger to the geography, so the treaty was as interested in pragmatism as it was in peace. The region now called Yorkshire, or as it was known when the Vikings dwelled there, Jorvik, was dominated by the Norse from late in the ninth century through the first half of the tenth century.

York had enjoyed a diverse history, founded by the Romans and then, after the legions left, it was turned into a trading port for the Anglo-Saxons. When the Great Heathen Army invaded England in 866, Viking leader Ivar the Boneless and his forces captured the region. The kingdom of Northumbria was under Viking control and the Norsemen who ruled it would be known as the kings of Jorvik. The Viking coinage was minted at the city of York, demonstrating the economic influence which the trading Scandinavians brought to

their new home. The city's importance was both real and symbolic, and any business between the opposition forces would have to address whether Jorvik would be Danish or English.

Although the Danes had their realm and their center of power, they remained a threat to the Anglo-Saxons, alert for any sign of weakness that would allow them to once again vanquish the English monarchs. Alfred continued to face their raiding, but under Alfred these would be skirmishes rather than battles. When the Vikings attacked Rochester and besieged the city, Alfred's Anglo-Saxon troops forced the Vikings to flee. The Anglo-Saxons were, however, defeated when their ships met Vikings at the mouth of the River Stour. The tension between the two sides continued for several years, but when Alfred obstructed the River Thames to prevent the Vikings from using it to reach London, the Vikings returned home.

But in 886, Alfred reoccupied London, adding fortifications and redesigning the street layout. It was during this time that the King of Wessex became known as the King of England, ruling over the Saxons, although it was not a title he used. However, his achievements received attention from Pope Marinus in Rome. Alfred was known for his devout Christian faith and his support of education, and his achievements and

his faith were rewarded when Pope Marinus gave the Anglo-Saxon king gifts that were said to include a piece of the true cross upon which Jesus Christ had been crucified. The Viking raids had had a severe effect on the advance of education, so much so that Alfred wrote “learning had declined so thoroughly in England that there were very few men on this side of the Humber who could understand their divine services in English.” It’s true that the production of manuscripts had fallen off in the middle of the ninth century; many manuscripts had been burned by the Vikings and the manuscript copying would not resume in earnest until near the century’s end.

As long as the Vikings heeded the treaty, there was time for the educated and talented Alfred to focus on administrative issues instead of constant warfare. For a time there was peace. But the death of Guthrum in 888 changed the political landscape. In 892 or 893, a group of Danes, along with their wives and children and 330 ships, left Denmark for Kent. It was up to Alfred’s son Edward to defeat the Danish force. Northumbria, East Anglia, or even back home to Denmark.

Vignettes from the Viking Era

When the daughter of Alfred the Great married Aethelred, Lord of the Mercians, she was following in the traditional role of royal princesses. But when her husband died in 911, Aethelflaed ruled Mercia. She had inherited some of her father's abilities, proven when she built a fortress in 910 and established garrisons in Hereford and Gloucester. Her title was not honorary; she is credited with being a skilled tactician and military leader. Historian Frank Stenton makes that claim that her brother's reign as king of England was all the more successful because he was able to rely upon his sister. In order to avenge the murder of an abbot, she led an expedition to Wales and captured the wife of the Brycheiniog king. Edward failed to show gratitude, however; when his sister died and her daughter Aelfwynn succeeded her, Edward deposed his niece and took control of Mercia.

Alfred died in 899 and was succeeded by his son Edward who also ruled Mercia after his sister, who had ruled there in her own right, died in 918. In 917, he had captured East Anglia and the eastern Midlands from the Vikings. Although records of the time assert his rule over all of England, the city of York continued to mint

its own coins, indicating that the island continued to host both Anglo-Saxon and Danish realms.

The Vikings and the Anglo-Saxons might have forged wary alliances throughout their long geographical cohabitation, but they adopted a policy which was common for centuries to come, one which would use marriage as a way of cementing ties. In 926, Alfred's grandson, Aethelstan, married his sister to Sihtric, the Norse king of York. Sihtric died a year later and was succeeded by the son of his first marriage, Olaf, who was an ally of the king of Dublin, and uncle to the heir. Aethelstan saw trouble on the horizon, so he decided to be proactive by seizing York and razing its fortifications. A brief period of peace ensued, but not for long.

The landscape of the British Isles continued to incite conflict. In 934, the English King Aethelstan invaded Scotland. He may have had just cause to do so because it's possible that a peace treaty had been violated by the Scottish king Constantine II. Aethelstan brought with him a large army and if his efforts were to be repulsed, Constantine realized that he would need help. That help came from the king of Dublin, Olaf Guthfrithson, who according to one source was the father-in-law of the Scottish king, and Owen, the king of Strathclyde. The new allies were former enemies, but the need to defeat

Aethelstan was stronger than their enmity. Olaf's army, which according to the monk Simeon of Durham included 615 ships (a claim doubted by modern-day historians) joined the forces of Constantine in 937 after crossing the Irish sea. Aethelstan, his brother Edmund, and his army out of Wessex and Mercia met their foes in the daylong Battle of Brunanburh. The Anglo-Saxons cut through the shield wall and overran the alliance forces whose efforts to find refuge in trenches fortified with timber were a failure.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle trumpeted the English victory with a poem that included the line “never yet as many people killed before this with sword's edge ... since from the east Angles and Saxons came up over the broad sea.” The historian Aethelweard, writing near the end of the 10th century, evaluated the battle victory at Brunanburh in terms of its results, saying that “the fields of Britain were consolidated into one; there was peace everywhere, and abundance of all things.”

Constantine escaped back to Scotland and Olaf returned to Dublin, Aethelstan and Edmund returned in triumph to Wessex, and the fate of Owen is not recorded. The casualties were considerable: in addition to the soldiers who died, Constantine lost family members including his son; Olaf's army saw the spilling of royal blood; and two of Aethelstan's cousins, Alfric

and Aethelwin, perished. Fighting for land in those days was a family affair with the survival of the family in many cases depending upon military victory. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle lamented the royal deaths: “Five kings lay on the field of battle, in bloom of youth, pierced with swords. Soseven eke of the earls of Anlaf, and of the ship’s-crew unnumber’d crowds.”

Before the battle, England was a nation with a surplus of kings and nobles eager for power. Scotland’s two kingdoms were Alba and Strathclyde. Geography was changed with the changing tide of battle. The English victory maintained the union of England. Historians regard this battle as the greatest single battle in Anglo-Saxon history before 1066 and the Battle of Hastings. Its significance rests in its results rather than its location, because no one knows exactly where the battle took place. A plausible candidate for the site of the battle is Bromborough, a village on the Wirral, but other possibilities suggested by historians include Shropshire, South Yorkshire, Lancashire, and Northamptonshire. Wherever it took place is unimportant. Its significance ranks it with a battle which was soon to come—the Battle of Hastings—because it redefined the nations who called Britain their home. English military forces under and after Alfred were more successful at keeping the Scots to the west

and the Danes to the north. A united island nation consisting of Wessex and Mercia had staying power and was able to maintain its borders against the Scots and Welsh.

One historian describes this battle as the “moment when Englishness came of age” but for Aethelstan, the victory did not have the consequences he intended. His power declined and when he died without an heir at the age of 45, his brother Edmund became king and the watchful Olaf in Dublin saw an opportunity. He invaded York, the famed stronghold of the Vikings, and in 939, the year that Aethelstan died, was able to force Edmund to agree to a treaty that surrendered Northumbria as well as parts of Mercia. This attack re-established York and Dublin as a united kingdom under Viking control. His victory was recognized in the minting of a silver penny minted at York; its inscription is in Old Norse and depicts a raven, a bird associated with the Norse god Odin. Even the coinage, in those days, reflected the seesaw of religious loyalties which continued to show itself between Christians and pagans.

In 940, Olaf invaded Mercia and East Anglia. After mediation by the archbishops of York and Canterbury, Edmund was forced to surrender land in Lincolnshire and the southeast Midlands. In some ways, the borders and boundaries of these contested lands were

established as much by the Grim Reaper as by military might; when Olaf died in 942, Edmund reclaimed the territory south of the Humber River, driving the Vikings out of York. In 944, he took Northumbria back by driving out Kings Olaf Sihtricson and Raegnald, who were Norse. When he captured Strathclyde in 945, he allowed the Scottish King Malcolm I to rule it in exchange for Malcolm's military support.

Learning and diplomacy may have been family attributes. Edmund worked to diminish the feuding that made conflict so prevalent, and under his rule, the monasteries enjoyed a revival in England. But in 946, King Edmund I was murdered at the age of 25 in his own palace by a robber, leaving the throne to his brother Eadred because the heirs were too young, England was a united land. But as usual, trouble was on its way.

The trouble would come from Norway, when Norwegian Eric Bloodaxe ventured into Northumbria. As a youth, his courage and strength, those prized Norse traits, were impressive. He had spent years in a seafaring role, traveling along the coasts of Denmark, Germany and Frisia, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, then France. He also sailed up the Dvina River to raid the trading port at Permina. There's not a lot of historical information available about the Dane with the name

that seems designed for Viking conquest, but evidence indicates that he was also the king of Norway in addition to ruling Northumbria. He did not win the throne by inheritance, however. Somewhere along the way, Eric managed to claim the succession to the throne by disposing of his brothers. His serial fratricide is the reason given for the nickname of “Bloodaxe.”

His reign as the Norwegian king ended when his younger, surviving brother Hakon declared himself king. Hakon had been reared in England at King Aethelstan’s court; the king was known for his habit of fostering royal sons and forging alliances. Aethelstan supported Hakon’s claim, the Norwegians did not like Eric, and when Hakon sailed home to the kingship, Eric left and went to England. That seems like an unlikely response from a Viking, but through his life, Eric, more than once, ran away so that he could live to fight another day.

The English had the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the Norse had their sagas and according to the bards, Eric was welcomed in England by the king who had supported his brother’s claim to Norway’s throne. Eric, the sagas assert, was made a ruler of Northumbria with Aethelstan’s blessing and authority. But the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and other sources say that Eric became king of Northumbria after Aethelstan’s death.

During his life, Aethalstan sought alliances with his neighbors and he rewarded them for their military support. Eric became the king when the Northumbrians drove out King Olaf Guthfrithsson, but, just as had been the case in Norway, he failed to win the affection of the people. They kicked him out of the kingdom and he was later killed in battle, York and Northumbria were lost to the Norse and the Northumbrians acknowledged Eadred as king. The line of Eric Bloodaxe would not lose its lustre, however; his sons would rise to the throne of Norway. Eric's exploits would long be a favorite subject of the Norse sagas; what audience could resist learning about a man whose name and job description were so completely aligned?

Chapter Two

The Vikings Return to Power

A period of relative peace ensued during the reigns of the Anglo-Saxon kings from 955-975, but when Edgar the Peaceable died in 975, two branches of the ruling family sought the throne. Trouble in England was historically a siren call to Viking adventurers who knew how to exploit a nation in turmoil. One Anglo-Saxon claimant, Edward the Martyr, won, but was murdered not long after, when the rival Aethelred became king. Aethelred II ruled for 37 years but the reign was far from successful. His name, Aethelred the Unready refers to the lack of wise advisors who could counsel him well at a time when sage guidance could have meant the difference between a stable throne and one at risk. Because the Vikings were poised once again to invade, Aethelred needed better advice than he received.

The Viking armies of this time, led by the king of Denmark, were well trained and supported by raiding bands, also well trained, who operated under independent chieftains. The new Viking invasions presented a powerful new threat to England, which had thought itself free of the fear of the Norsemen. In 980, when the Vikings invaded, Aethelred displayed the

expected traits of a warrior king and by 988, the Viking campaign was defeated with a battle at Maldon in Essex. Aethelred signed a treaty with the Duke of Normandy in 991. Vikings had been finding shelter in Normandy for some time, but the Duke agreed that he would no longer support the Vikings who went to his duchy for aid. The Duke's sister, Emma of Normandy, was given to Aethelred in marriage as the political seal to the deal.

But in the same year a major defeat for the English was in store when Byrthnoth, leading the English, was forced to allow Olaf Tryggvason of the Vikings to leave the island where they were encamped to fight a pitched battle. Byrthnoth had few options because the Vikings had come with their fleet and the English leader, although his acquiescence doomed his forces to defeat, had no way of cutting them off from an easy retreat. His options: to fight the Vikings on equal grounds or permit them to sail away and continue their raids before he could pursue them.

Evidence indicates that the English plans were revealed to the Vikings by the ealdorman of Hampshire. Aethelstan retaliated by having the ealdorman's son blinded. Aethelred paid Danegeld, or 10,000 pounds of silver, to the Vikings as advised by Sigeric, the Archbishop of Canterbury.

All was not smooth among the Vikings. Olaf Tryggvason, who had accompanied Denmark's King Sweyn on his first English campaign in 994, had become a Christian as part of his treaty with Aethelstan and switched sides, fighting against the Danes and not with them or for them. The 994 campaign, however, was worthwhile, with the Danes accepting tribute rather than conquest. The Vikings were paid Danegeld in 1002, 1007 and 1012.

In 1011, Vikings held St. Alphege, Archbishop of Canterbury for ransom but he refused to allow a ransom to be paid by the residents of Kent because they had already paid so much in tribute. His courage was admirable but his death was inevitable, and he was subsequently murdered the next year. But Christianity had made inroads by this time among the Vikings and King Sweyn had been raised as a Christian. Thorkell the Tall, who had been the chief Viking leader after Sweyn, was revolted by the murder of the cleric and switched allegiance, bringing his 40 ships with their warriors to the service of King Aethelred, who was not only a Christian but paid well.

Sweyn was a Christian, but he was a warrior and a king. He attacked in 1013, forcing Aethelred to flee to Normandy with his family. Sweyn seized the opportunity and took the throne. According to the

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, “all England received him as king.” His reign was brief. When he died in 1014, he left two kingdoms to be ruled by his two sons. Harold became the king of Denmark and Cnut was intended to receive the English throne. But when Sweyn died, the throne was contested: the Vikings and the people of the Danelaw elected Cnut, Sweyn’s son, as king, but the English Witenagemot summoned Aethelred back from Normandy. Accompanying him was his wife, Emma of Normandy.

A regime change was not in Cnut’s plans. He assembled a large fleet of around 200 ships with 10,000 troops, and was joined by his brother-in-law Earl Erik of Lade, a man with experience in both warfare and governing. Thorkell joined Cnut’s forces, as did Eadric Streona and his 40 ships, which gave Cnut control of Wessex.

Although Aethelred returned to England, he fell ill and died. His sons by Emma would not inherit until the sons from Aethelred’s first wife, beginning with Edmund Ironside, took their place in the inheritance. Edmund Ironside sought an alliance with Earl Uhtred of Northumbria. It was a bad move for the Earl; Cnut had him murdered. The Northumbrians maintained loyalty to Cnut and accepted another candidate, Earl Erik, as their earl, just as Cnut suggested. When

Edmund Ironside became king, Eadric Streona switched sides. But Edmund was defeated by Cnut at the Battle of Ashingdon in Essex. Each side suffered greatly and the two kings accepted a division of the kingdom: Edmund remained king of Wessex, Cnut was given the territory north of the Thames.

Then mortality, always a member of the cast in the Middle Ages, struck, and Edmund died sooner than he had expected. Although murder, also no stranger to the era, was suspected, there's no evidence that Edmund Ironside's death was a homicide. Cnut was crowned king of all of England. One of his first acts was to execute the fair-weather traitor Eadred, whose switching sides at Ashingdon likely affected the battle outcome. Several important Anglo-Saxon nobles were also killed as Cnut cleaned house to strengthen his claim to the throne.

In England, a Viking was king. In Ireland, the Irish were fighting back against the Norse, who had begun raiding late in the eighth century. The Vikings had first built settlements along the coast, but by 838, they had created a fortified area in Dublin. The Annals of Ulster wrote in 841: "Pagans still on lough Neagh." Although there had been a settlement on the site where Dublin was established one thousand years before the Romans, the year 988 is recognized as the official founding date.

In the tenth century, Dublin was a kingdom and a Viking one at that. Dublin was thriving under Viking dominance and the Vikings succumbed, as did their kinsmen in England, to the local customs, creating a Norse-Gaelic society. The Irish were not docile under the dominance of the Vikings and it was at this time that the legendary Brian Boru made his appearance on behalf of the Irish.

Vignettes from the Viking Era: Battle of Clontarf

In Ireland, mythology is quite comfortable when it's placed side-by-side with history. That's the case with the Battle of Clontarf, which took place in 1014. High King of Ireland Brian Boru met the combined forces of Dublin's Norse King Sigtrygg Silkbeard, Leinster's King Mael Morda mac Murchada, and Vikings Sigurd of Orkney and Brodir of Mann. The battle, which lasted from dawn until sunset, took the lives of between 7,000 and 10,000 men, but in the end, the Irish won and the Vikings were defeated. The casualties were high and highborn; the Viking leaders, the king of Leinster, Brian Boru, his son and grandson all died. However, the battle freed the Irish from the foreign rule of the Vikings.

Chapter Three

The Viking King of England

Cnut was described as being tall and strong and handsome (except for a thin, high-set, hooked nose) with a fair complexion and a thick head of hair, and better-than-average eyesight. But until he accompanied his father on the invasion of England, his history is mainly conjecture and legend. He was crowned king of England on Christmas Day in 1016 and would rule as king over the land that his Viking ancestors had plundered for generations. His domain was a significant one, described as the North Sea Empire, that included not only the England he'd acquired but also Denmark and Norway. He was not a bad king; his laws and leadership brought peace to the country. Under his rule, the country was protected from Viking raids, and with peace came prosperity.

Sentiment had no place in the brutal world of pragmatic medieval politics. Cnut married the widow of King Aethelred. Emma of Normandy, no novice to marriage as a means of diplomatic alliance, was a person of note. She's the first of the early medieval queens to have been commemorated by a painted portrait and no one can deny that Emma of Normandy deserved this distinction. While she was a typical royal

wife during her marriage to England's Aethelred, she gained more influence as the queen of Cnut. She was also wealthy, with lands in the East Midlands and Wessex.

Emma's marrying up made the lineage one of dispute but she's credited with saving her sons' lives by her marriage to her dead husband's rival. While her marriage to Cnut was being arranged, she attempted to maintain Anglo-Saxon control of London. What was it like to be the widow of one king, the bride of another, in such a tangled political environment? After her marriage, she did not adopt a prominent role in the initial years, but around 1020, as she became a supporter of the clergy, her links to ecclesiastical people of importance strengthened Cnut's claim to the throne. The marriage with Cnut, which began for political reasons, turned into one of affection. The couple had two children, a son Harthacnut and a daughter Gunhilda.

In 1036, Emma's sons by Aethelred, Alfred Aetheling and Edward the Confessor, came to England to visit Emma, under the protection of their half-brother Harthacnut. But Alfred was captured and tortured, blinded with a hot iron held to his eyes and later dying of his wounds. Edward escaped again to Normandy. Emma blamed Harold Harefoot, Cnut's

youngest son by his first wife Aelgifu of Northampton, for her son's capture, suspecting him of planning to get rid of two rivals to the throne. Some scholars speculate that Godwin, the powerful Earl of Wessex who was traveling with the royal sons as their protector, might have been the guilty party.

Cnut continued to consolidate his kingship by executing English noblemen who had aroused his suspicions. By accounts, Cnut proved to be an effective and successful king. The kingdom was so secure that in 1018, Cnut sent his Danish army home to Denmark, paying off his fleet with 72,000 pounds of silver in Danegeld collected from the English with an additional 10,500 pounds from London. For his own defenses, Cnut retained 40 ships which also provided his bodyguard. The Danes and the English agreed to accept the laws of King Edgar as the foundation of their legal relationship, laws which were drafted into a legal code by Archbishop Wulfstan.

It may say something about Cnut that, as with Alfred, a famous story has arisen that tells us something about the nature of the king. Cnut knew his power. But he also knew his limitations. It's likely that members of his court were given to flattery and perhaps the king was wise enough to recognize the ploy. According to the story written by Henry of Huntingdon, who lived

within 60 years of Cnut's death, the king gave orders that his chair was to be carried to the shore. When he arrived, he ordered the waves not to break upon the land. The waves, of course, disregarded his command. The king declared that the power of a monarch was empty and worthless, and only God was king, and God's will was the only one that the heavens, the earth, and the sea would obey.

By the time of Cnut's death in 1035, his reign was on solid footing internationally; he'd negotiated with the Pope as a Christian and was recognized as an equal by the Holy Roman Emperor. Coin minting achieved a high level of quality, stabilizing the country economically. Under Cnut, education for the English was advanced outside of the monastic structure. England under Cnut was part of an empire that included Denmark, Norway and even part of Sweden. In some ways, he seemed to share many traits with his Anglo-Saxon predecessor, Alfred the Great. And as with Alfred, there was peace for a time.

Peace didn't last long in those years. Thanks to her fertile marriages to the two successive kings, Emma, by either line, was the mother of the potential heir. Harold I ruled England from 1035 to 1040, when Cnut's second son Harthacnut ruled for the next two years. Aethelred's son Edward the Confessor gained the

throne in 1042, making England once again an Anglo-Saxon realm.

Vignettes from the Viking Era: Encomium Emmae Reginae

Written in 1041 or 1042, the encomium is a manuscript written in honor of Queen Emma of Normandy. It's believed to have been written by a monk of St. Omer, inspired by the political situation which had arisen in England. It was commissioned by Queen Emma and is a medieval attempt at public relations, focusing on her second marriage to Cnut, and blaming Harold the son of Cnut and his first wife, Aelgifu, as the murderer of Emma's son Alfred by Aethelred. The Encomium does not pretend to be an unbiased historical account; nonetheless, it's a valuable reference for the history of England and Scandinavia in the early 11th century. The work is divided into three books: the first addresses the conquest of England by Sweyn Forkbeard, Cnut's father. The second concerns his sons' reconquest of England, his marriage to Aethelred's widow and his rule. The third book, which takes place after Cnut's death, concerns the problems Emma faced when Harold Harefoot was king, and then the accession of her sons Harthacnut by Canute, and Edward the Confessor by Aethelred, to the English throne.

The Norman Conquest

In 1066, the history of England changed dramatically. William the Conqueror, a descendant of the famed Rollo who had accepted the duchy of Normandy in exchange for becoming the vassal of the Frankish king, invaded England, defeating Harold Godwinson, the Anglo-Saxon king. The road to the Conqueror's kingship was a tangled one on the English side.

When Edward the Confessor died without an heir in 1066, there was no shortage of claimants to the throne. Harold defeated two of his rivals at the Battle of Stamford Bridge, but William landed in England on September 28, just eight days after the battle, forcing Godwinson to swiftly head to the south. The English army numbered approximately 7,000; William had 10,000. But William also had archers, those men skilled with the bow whose prowess would prove vital in future wars. The battle began in the morning and ended at dusk. The English fared well at first and the Normans were unable to break their lines. But when the Normans adopted the tactic of feigning flight and then turning on the pursuing English, the tide turned. Harold was killed and the army was defeated. It's estimated by historians that approximately 2,000 Normans were killed in battle, and around 4,000 Anglo-Saxons. Grateful for his

victory, or perhaps just a shrewd leader who knew he faced obstacles ahead, William founded a monastery on the battle site, reputed to be on the site of Harold's death.

On Christmas Day, 1066, William the Conqueror was crowned the king of England. The era of the Vikings was ended. Or was it?

Chapter Four

The Legacy of the Vikings

In 793, the Vikings were the dreaded invaders. By the time of the Norman Conquest, the Vikings were the neighbors next door. The Vikings had runes, but they didn't have recorded history, which left them without scribes who could record their incredible feats. They built the first ships that crossed the Atlantic Ocean, and were the first Europeans to land in North America. They also traveled farther inland into Western Europe than their contemporaries, thanks to their extraordinary navigational skills and intrepid exploring courage. Archeologists who are excavating Viking burial grounds are discovering more and more evidence that the Vikings, once considered the barbarians of Europe, were actually empire-builders who, for almost 300 years, dominated the European continent through expert trading and effective raiding.

Archeologist William Fitzhugh reminds us that part of the reason for the Viking reputation comes from the perspective of the people who were reporting the events. The early accounts came from the church or reports to kings. "Only in the past 20 years or so have archeological and other studies begun to provide information that fleshes out and in some cases

contradicts or even replaces the historical record. These findings are giving us a totally different view of the Vikings. We see them archeologically not as raiders and pillagers but as entrepreneurs, traders, people opening up new avenues of commerce, bringing new materials into Scandinavia, spreading Scandinavian ideas into Europe.”

In some ways, the Vikings benefit from a clearly defined timeline. The raid on Lindisfarne in 793 is accepted as the beginning of the Viking era. The year 1066 brings the Viking era to a conclusion. A lot happened in 1066, but don't fast forward to Norman rule without taking a brief look at genealogy. In 1066, Harald Hardrada, the king of Norway, was intent on conquering England, but he was defeated and killed at the Battle of Stamford Bridge by England's King Harold Godwinson. But another battle loomed for Harold Godwinson at Hastings, where Normandy's William the Conqueror, the descendant of the famed Rollo the Walker, defeated the Anglo-Saxon army and became king of England. Once again, the Vikings had extended their boundaries and their power.

The Vikings in Britain

Beginning in 900, the Vikings who had found northern Scotland to their liking were ruling the Orkney and

Shetland Islands and Hebrides islands and the Isle of Man. Dublin, Ireland, owes its founding to the Vikings. The country of Wales, however, must not have found favor with the Vikings, because few of the Norsemen settled there.

The Vikings who left home settled into their new surrounds and took root. They intermarried with the local girls. Researchers at the Universities of Leicester and Nottingham found that as much as half the DNA from men in Northwest England matches the genetic types of Scandinavian. Although a conquering power may wane, it leaves its mark, and this is true of the Vikings. Intermarriage and adoption of the customs that were absorbed by the natives all contribute to the lasting influence of the Vikings. The Vikings in Ireland married the local girls as well and adopted their traditions and religion, as did the Danes in the Danelaw.

Throughout their domination, the Vikings had not always lived as an occupying force. They had established outposts in England, they held the right to territory under the Danelaw, they had even seen one of their own as king of England. While the era of plunder and pillage may have come to an end, it maybe is more accurate to say that England and the Vikings between them created a hybrid nation which absorbed the

strengths of the other entity as part of nation building. It's fair to say that, when the Age of the Vikings ended, it did so with a bang. The reign of King Cnut in England oversaw a realm that was described as the North Sea Empire.

The conquest of England by the Normans was more an extension of Viking influence than a defeat to the Vikings. Normandy had, since Rollo in the previous century, been an enclave of assimilated Vikings. When Edward, the son of Aethelred and Emma, was in exile in Normandy in the court of his uncle Richard II, his presence encouraged Norman interest in the kingdom across the Channel. The Normans supported him and when he ruled in England, his court had a strong Norman presence in the form of clerics, soldiers, and courtiers who assumed high positions. It's believed that Edward may have encouraged William, who was his kinsman, to seek power in England after Edward's death.

The Vikings in Scotland

The Vikings settled in Scotland but an absence of written records means that the details of their assimilation are not defined. However surviving place names reveal that the Norwegians settled in the

Orkneys, Shetlands, and the mainland of Caithness and Sutherland.

But a significant result of Viking settling is the disappearance of the Picts, which in the eighth century had been a power to be reckoned with in Britain. But the end of the ninth century, they were gone, replaced by the Scots, who were the descendants of the Irish immigrants from the fifth and sixth centuries. The Scots were energetic in their efforts to make themselves the kings of the northern region of Britain, known as Alba. They linked their identity with the Picts, while at the same time trading on the fame of St. Columba, regarded by the Scots as the apostle to the people of the north.

The Vikings in Europe

It would be a mistake to assume that the main area of Viking influence was in England, Scotland and Wales. Europe knew the Vikings, who through trading and raiding made an indelible impression on the continent. The mighty Charlemagne created an empire that sought to emulate Rome; while that would have been a difficult task for any leader, the Vikings made sure that it didn't happen. As early as 834, they raided Dorestad, which was part of the empire Charlemagne created. Their conquest continued and by 911, the cities which had been part of the Carolingian Empire, including Rouen, Paris, Nantes, Bordeaux, and Hamburg as well as Dorestad, were under Viking control.

The middle of the ninth century saw the Vikings in Russia and founding Kiev and Novgorod. In 988, when the Byzantine Emperor Basil II faced the invaders, he asked for help from Vladimir of Kiev, a prince of Norse origins, for help in defending his realm. Vladimir sent 6,000 Vikings to Basil's aid and those troops became part of an elite military force for the Byzantine Empire.

When the Roman Empire fell in the west, the Eastern Empire, with Constantinople as its center of power, remained. But the city was besieged by the

Vikings in 860. There was plundering, burning, and slaughter, the standard Viking technique for success. The raids went on for 200 years.

The Vikings in North America

The masters of the nautical realm were not content to stay close to the shores of Europe. Around the year 1000, a Viking settlement was founded in North America. The settlement didn't thrive, but it demonstrated that, over four hundred years before the celebrated Christopher Columbus, the Norsemen had planted a Scandinavian footprint on the New World.

In 986, 24 ships set out for Greenland under Eric the Red's leadership but only 14 arrived because the others were lost at sea or forced to return home. But the 400 settlers who made it to shore created a community with dairy farms, churches, a monastery and a convent, as well as a cathedral. The population of the settlement may have increased to 5,000 at its peak.

Viking exploration in North America has too often been treated as a minor footnote in the saga of the New World. But the fact that they reached sites in North America when they did, well before other explorers with more celebrated legends, says much about their courage and skill. The Greenland experiment did not last, perhaps because it lacked sufficient settlers or

perhaps because it was too hard to defend, but its place in history is important. The western colony in Greenland vanished around 1350; the eastern colony lasted for 100 more years; the last record comes from 1408, with a church wedding.

An excavation in 1932 revealed the church's remains and a great hall with fire pits where the settlers cooked their meals. It was here that the people would have listened to the sagas of the bards. Archeologists digging in 1961 found a chapel that Eric the Red had built for his wife, a Christian. Eric never renounced his belief in the Norse gods of his heritage and his wife was a faithful Christian, but apparently they declared a truce in terms of religion. The church excavation uncovered three skeletons that have led to speculation. The skeletons were located near the church wall near where the eaves would have originally been. They may have been the remains of Eric and his wife and their son Leif. Medieval belief held that bodies buried closest to a church would be the first to rise on Judgment Day.

In the 1990s, archeologists returned to excavate the lost community. They found a house made of stone and turf that dated from the colonization of Greenland. The five rooms were filled with glacial sand, and the archeologists had to dig through permafrost. But when they reached the structure, they found household

possessions including whetstones, soapstones, a double-edged comb, an iron knife, fragments of looms and fabric. What the archeologists found fascinating was the weaponry that the settlers left behind, inspiring curiosity: what had driven the Greenlanders to depart so abruptly?

One theory is that the Inuit, in the year 1000, migrated down the coast and overran the community. When members of another settlement located 300 miles away assembled a military force to attack the Inuit, they found the settlement abandoned. “When they came hither, behold they found no man, neither Christian nor heathen, naught but some wild cattle and sheep,” which they brought back with them. But within another century, that community too would end.

Viking artifacts have shown up in the North American Arctic that can be dated 300 years after original voyages to Vinland. In particular, the walrus-ivory trade flourished, but Greenland’s lack of trees also inspired trading trips to what today is Labrador. Archeologist William Fitzhugh not only asserts that the Vikings were much more than their reputation indicates, but he challenges the reputation itself. “One misconception we have is that swarms of Vikings raided constantly all over the place ... For the most part, the raids were totally independent. They were not the result

of national armies or navies moving into Europe... . generally, they were much more individualistic. They had to find food, and they couldn't carry their food with them. They had to live off the land, so they drove people out and took whatever money and other valuable people had. And of course, the church centers and monasteries ... constituted the major sources of wealth at that time.”

The fact that over two million Arab coins have been discovered in Viking burial sites demonstrates the incredible maritime skills of these much-maligned seafarers. Why, then, are the Vikings stereotyped merely as raiders when, in the 300 years of their influence, they controlled parts of England, Scotland, Ireland, Spain, Italy, and Russia, as well as Scandinavia? If the Vikings had had a written, as well as an oral tradition, would they have been known as the Napoleon of the Middle Ages?

According to Yale's Anders Winroth, an expert in Viking lore, the most important legacy which the Vikings left comes not from battle victories or even their trading achievements but their language. “Norse words are so embedded in modern English that we're unaware of them, while we're more apt to notice the French and Latin-derived words in our vocabulary. As an example, he refers to a colleague in the Yale English

department who composed a sentence which, except for articles and prepositions, is entirely composed of words which originate in the Norse language: “The odd Norse loans seem an awesome window onto a gang of ungainly, rugged, angry fellows, bands of low rotten crooks winging it at the stern’s wake, sly, flawed “guests” who, craving geld, flung off their byrnie, thrusting and clipping calves and scalps with clubs.”

The Vikings who lived in the Danelaw deserve some attention for the role they played in the development of the blending Danish-English culture. Both Anglo-Saxon Old English and Viking Old Norse claim Germanic roots, and although the languages evolved differently, there were enough roots that in time the languages could merge.

Winroth also credits the Vikings with making an odd contribution to Western civilization. “I often say that the Vikings introduced the western world to death and taxes. Their raids obviously killed a lot of people, and when they attacked, Europeans realized they had to shape up to repel them. That meant kings had to raise money, and after they got what they could from the Church, they had to start taxing the people. The Norse invaders were determined to get what they wanted, and they continued to demand more and more both by threatening to strike and by kidnapping and charging

enormous ransoms. Churches became impoverished. In 994 they threatened to burn down the Canterbury Cathedral unless the archbishop paid them off with a large sum of money. The archbishop, who a few decades earlier had controlled the most wealth in England at this time, had already paid them so much that he had to borrow money from another bishop.”

Winroth attributes the Vikings, thanks to their extraordinary trading empire, with the creation of money in Europe. “The Vikings, who were as much traders as marauders ... allowed commerce to take off. Currency was not a novel idea in Western Europe, but there was as desperate lack of it since gold and silver was rare. The Norsemen introduced gold and silver from the rich Arab Caliphate. Bartering no longer needed to be the means of exchange.”

The Vikings Speak from the Ground

Approximately 150 years ago, the burial mounds of the Vikings were first being excavated. The findings were well preserved; one grave in Sweden held fragments of silk from China; in Norway, the wealthy Vikings were buried in ships which were painted in pigments that might have originated in the Middle East and India. When Dublin archeologists in the 1970s found a Viking settlement that was spread out over several acres, they

discovered over 3,000 pieces of amber that likely came from Denmark. An excavation in St. Petersburg Russia unearthed jewelry, weapons, and tools that came from houses more than a millennium old.

A common bond among burial sites so far apart is the dirham, a thin silver coin. Most of the dirham were made in Baghdad, the center of the Arab world from 750-950. The coins were stamped with the year in which they were minted. The Vikings obtained the dirhams by trading amber, ivory, furs and slaves for them. A site in Harrogate England unearthed a treasure from 927 that's worth millions of dollars; the site included 617 coins including 15 dirhams. A Viking settlement near Gdansk Poland delivered almost 800 Arabic coins dating from 780-840. Other Arab coins have been found in France, Ireland, Iceland and Greenland. "What we're seeing is the remnants of an extremely intricate network of barter trade," deduces Jonathan Shephard, a historian at St. Kliment Ohrid University in Bulgaria. "It's a weird combination of coercion and tribute side by side and intermingled with bartering."

Although the Age of the Vikings is recorded as beginning in 793, archeology has been serving as the biography of the Norsemen, and excavations continue to enlarge the world's knowledge of this era. That

knowledge is also serving to expand the period of time during which the Vikings were exploring worlds beyond their homes.

Two ships, uncovered on Saaremaa, an Estonian island, containing the remains of warriors, are filling in some of the information gaps. The ships are believed to date from between 700-750. Scholars call this the Vendel period, a time when, so they believed, long-distance voyages were not taking place. The remains were discovered in 2008 when workers who were digging trenches for electrical cables came upon the unexpected discovery. Marge Konsa, a University of Tartu archeologist, informed the workers that the remains did not come from World War II, but from a time far before then. “This is our first taste,” Dr. Konsa said, “of the Viking era.” Konsa recognized a spearhead and bone gaming pieces that alerted her that the find was from long ago. Most of the timber had rotted, but 275 of the iron rivets that held the boat together were still in place, which made it possible for the research team to reconstruct the boat’s outlines.

Konsa realized, when she noted that the boat would have been both fast and light, that it wasn’t a fishing boat, but a war boat. Until this find, historians had not known that the Vikings had sailed in the Baltic until 820, based on a boat that was unearthed in 1904. The

nails which were found were able to date the ship. That discovery reveals that Viking expertise in sailing began even earlier than first believed. As excavations continue, we continue to learn more about the Vikings.

That archeological evidence has shown that the city of York, although established under the Romans, did not become important until the Vikings ruled over it. The findings are in good condition because the moist, peaty layers were able to preserve the organic remains of items such as leather shoes, textiles, and timber buildings, which would have been dust in most archeological sites. Also preserved in York's Coppergate Dig were seeds, the remains of insects, plants, and bones, as well as pollen and the eggs from human parasites which provide information on the climate and health of the environment and the people who lived at that time.

A ship that was found in 2003 in a Yorkshire field included coins from Mercia's King Burgred, Alfred the Great of Wessex, and a piece of a silver dirham from Viking trade in Baghdad. The Arab practice of imprinting the year and location in which the coin was minted has provided valuable information for both archeologists and numismatists, tracking the journeys which the coins made from their place of origin. Viking excavations in Dublin have made it possible to view the

city from its Norse roots. Two hundred houses from the eleventh and twelfth centuries have been uncovered; along with the houses, fireplaces and bedding materials also were included among the findings. Excavations have shown how the men and women dressed and the jewelry that they adorned themselves with. It's already known that Vikings paid attention to their appearance, but Dublin was a center for making combs. The combs, both single- and double-sided, were made from deer antlers and cattle horn.

In 1997, a Viking ship dating from either the ninth or tenth century was found near Vyborg, Russia. Because sections of the hull and the keel had been preserved, researchers were able to define the structure of the ship. A repair made with a small piece of cloth placed in one of the hull boards resembles the manner in which another Viking ship, this one found in 1880 in Gokstad, Norway, was repaired, demonstrating the range of exploration of the Vikings.

Vikings grab our attention as the ground in which their bodies and treasures are buried tell us more about them. The Vikings have continued to be a popular subject in universities as well as high school classrooms. The University of the Highlands and Islands' Centre for Nordic Studies has developed a program of study which explores the manner in which the Vikings are portrayed

in various media included film, comics, and music. According to Dr. Donna Heddie, who leads the course, “The Vikings have been incredibly influential in world history and culture.” Students will visit Viking sites on Orkney as part of their studies.

Chapter Five

The Vikings in Popular Culture, Then and Now

While it's true that the Vikings neglected to provide historical records of their prowess, they were not silent on the subject of their history. But the Vikings chose to be entertained rather than instructed and their sagas supply rich detail about Norse culture and psychology. Historians and admirers of Norse culture are indebted to the sagas which were written during the 13th and 14th centuries. A saga, which is believed to mean "what is told," is a narrative written in poetry or prose which relates the story of mythological and historical subjects from the Norse and Germanic eras of history.

The headlining name among the sagas is Snorri Sturluson, a writer, historian, and political figure who was born in 1179. It was his theory that the famed gods of Asgard first came to prominence as human military leaders. After they had died, cults developed around the sites where their funerals took place. Subsequent warriors who called upon the deceased leaders before going into battle established a reverence for these heroes until the mortal man became divine in their

understanding. Battles between humans mirrored the mightier battles between the conflicting gods.

Who was this scholar and writer who made a name for himself in government as well as literature? Sturluson was the scion of an influential family. His destiny was forever altered by an incident which could have come from one of his own sagas. During a legal exchange, his father was attacked by a woman with a knife who claimed she planned to stab him so that he would emulate the one-eyed Odin. The woman's husband, a member of Norway's royal family, offered to raise Snorri and provide him with an education. The family agreed to this advantageous proposal for their son, who never returned to the family home.

Sturluson achieved renown as a lawyer, rising to the position of law speaker of the Althing in 1216, but after six years, he was invited to come to Norway, where he became a friend of the king. His political fortunes rose and fell and he was eventually assassinated in 1241. But Sturluson's poetic skills contributed to his political success, demonstrating that for the Vikings, art was actually a requisite for the acquisition of power. His works include the Prose Edda, a narrative about the Norse myths; the Heimskringla which explores Norwegian history by telling the story of the kings; the Skaldskaparmal; and the Hattatal.

Thanks to his writing, historians know much more about those valiant and much-maligned Vikings. From the legends comes a portrait of the Vikings, their beliefs and bravery, and their accomplishments. Sturluson and other writers from his era are credited with introducing concepts such as sovereignty, independence, the state and the nation to the Icelandic people. Norwegian monarchs seeking to establish the duration of their dynasties cited his works for validation. Not many societies merge poetry and politics but Iceland managed to do just that, requiring us to evaluate the Vikings in terms of their arts as well as their conquest.

Old Norse sagas may seem to be unfamiliar to modern audiences but *Beowulf*, the longest epic poem in Old English, is well known as a staple of literature classrooms. Scholars guess that the writing was done during the time that the Viking Cnut was England's king. *Beowulf* is the longest epic poem in Old English for a long time, the origins of the medieval poem *Beowulf* were in dispute until it was determined to be an authentic Anglo-Saxon work. But even though its origins are Anglo-Saxon, it identifies common traits which were shared with the Vikings.

The action takes place in sixth-century Denmark. Prince *Beowulf* rids the kingdom of the vicious monster Grendel but the danger is not over: Grendel's mother

attacks the hall, the center of Viking domesticity and society, and Beowulf must kill her as well. The hall established the power of the kings and the inclusiveness of Viking society; to threaten the hall was to imperil the entire community. “Then, as I have heard, the work of constructing a building was proclaimed to many a tribe throughout this middle earth. In time—quickly, as such things happen among men—it was all ready, the biggest of halls. He whose word was law far and wide gave it the name ‘Heorot.’ The saga was probably passed down orally from generation to generation until it was finally written down.

Vikings in Prime Time

But Viking fans aren’t required to pursue their interest academically with a reread of the classroom staple Beowulf. The film *Avengers Assemble* includes Thor as one of the superheroes. A television episode of *Doctor Who* featured an encounter with Vikings. In modern times, Vikings are fun to have around, at least for the viewers.

The previous image of the Vikings portrayed them in entertainment media as violent pagans who excelled in excess. But according to Jeffrey Richards of Lancaster University, those Hollywood over-the-top Viking films were showing up on screen just as historians were

beginning to revise that perception of the Norse, a view, Richards wrote “which sees them not as savage conquerors but as traders, explorers, shipbuilders, craftsmen and mapmakers.”

Modern entertainment owes the Vikings a debt of gratitude. The History Channel’s series *The Vikings*, features the exploits of a young Viking farmer and family man who finds the policies of his local chieftain not to his liking. So the young Viking heads west to try his luck. The young man’s name? Ragnar Lothbrok. The series, which has become a ratings success averaging 4.3 million viewers, was praised by History Channel’s executive in charge of production. “Vikings has raided the hearts of both audiences and critics, establishing itself as one of the most compelling, visually stunning dramas on television.” The History Channel representative went on to laud the series for what he called “the perfect balance of scope, smarts and bloodshed.”

Perhaps that’s a fitting description of the Vikings themselves; their legacy to Europe included the scope of their travels, the smarts of their trading empire, and certainly the bloodshed which fell on the soil of the lands they raided in a time when blood fell freely.

The Viking Queen

Modern-day England looks very different from what it did in its early history when its island kingdoms struggled to survive in a violent period of time. The British tend to celebrate their medieval past, their Elizabethan legends, swinging London of the 1960s and the stiff-upper-lip demeanor of the royal family. But contemporary traits have their roots in a more primitive, less refined ancestry.

The next time you're watching a news story about the English monarchy, pay careful attention to that elderly woman wearing the hat and carrying a purse. She may look like the stereotypical image of someone's aged grandmother, but she's descended from William the Conqueror through King Edward IV, one of the Plantagenets. William the Conqueror is Queen Elizabeth's 22nd times great grandfather. Remember that the ruler of England has Viking blood in her veins.

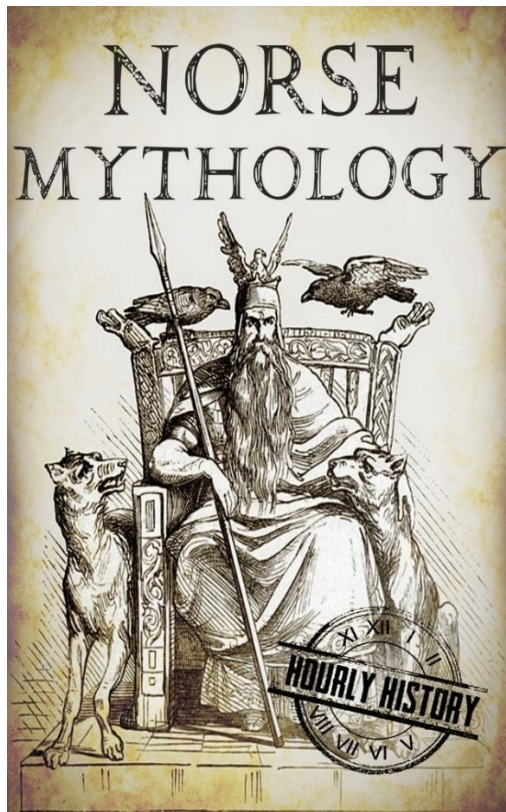
The Meaning of the Viking Legacy

What, ultimately, is the lesson of the Vikings? Is it that, perhaps, we all have a little Viking in our veins? Certainly the Norse reached heights to which any modern entrepreneur in the business world, any military leader, any legislative advocate for the public's right to a political voice, already aspires. What can we say about people whose bargaining skills in trade

equaled their bloody exploits? They made their mark upon the Middle Ages but their legend is forever colored by the written records of the peoples they conquered. Nonetheless, their historical footprint left its mark on commerce, exploration, seafaring, governing, and literature. They braved the unknown without turning away from danger, venturing to new frontiers with the same intrepid spirit that their gods displayed in stories which have lasted through the ages since the longships sailed. William Fitzhugh says, “When we look into the future now, I think we implicitly look back to the Vikings as the origin of this kind of human endeavor to find new horizons ...”

FURTHER READING

If you enjoyed this book and would like to read more about the Vikings we recommend that you check out our book on Norse Mythology. Just like all of our books it is concise, straightforward and can be read in an hour.



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