

# VIKINGS

## THE PEAK



# VIKINGS

*The Peak of the Viking Era*

Copyright © 2016 by Hourly History Limited

All rights reserved.

# Table of Contents

[The Raiding Turns into Staying in Dublin](#)

[Alfred the Great](#)

[Rollo Rognvaldsson](#)

[The Scandinavia They Left Behind](#)

[The Vikings Reach New Frontiers](#)

## Chapter One

# The Raiding Turns into Staying in Dublin

When we consider the limited distances that the average person in the Middle Ages traveled, we have to be impressed with the Viking zeal for exploration far away from familiar landmarks. No group showed more intrepid spirit than the Vikings, whose longships took them from the wild frontier of the North American continent to the sophisticated enterprise of Constantinople. Collectively, the Vikings may have racked up more of the medieval equivalent of frequent flying miles than any other European group. In 860, they sailed as far as Iceland and left a settlement there. A Viking ship which was caught in a storm ended up on the coast of what is now known as Labrador.

The tale of adventure was intoxicating to a young Viking named as Leif the Lucky, also known as Leif Ericsson, the son of Eric the Red, who set sail in search of the land. He found a country which appeared to be profligate with wild grapes, so he named it Vinland. What Leif called Vinland would later be known as the coast of Rhode Island, one of the early colonies of the future United States. But the Vikings are more famous

for their journeys to lands which were already inhabited; to some they came as invaders, to other as business partners, but their adventures were recorded in the annals of the period. The Vikings themselves did not record their own trading achievements, invasions, or resettling, but their story has been told; English monks wrote of the Vikings in The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and the traveling Arab chronicler Ibn Fadlan also recorded his observations on the Vikings with whom he interacted. The accounts differ in tone, understandably; the English saw the Vikings as vicious predatory invaders, the Arabs were engaged in profitable trading with the Vikings. Neither would have been possible had not the Vikings been masters of the waters.

The Vikings were on the cutting edge of sailing techniques, but when it came to religion, they were out of fashion. When the Vikings went a-plundering in the late 700s, their paganism set them apart from most of Europe. But Christianity, the religion of peace, would conquer in the end. As the Vikings married Christian women and lived in communities where God, rather than Odin, was worshiped, they adopted the religious beliefs of their new home. Dying in battle was not a Christian honor. The Vikings let their battle fury wane

as they settled into farming, trading, and the Christian faith.

But the Vikings told their stories instead of writing them, and their legends faded. They had no idea that they had landed on a continent that would rival Europe. The Spanish conquest of the New World, followed by the colonization efforts of the English, French, and Dutch, would claim the imperial glory of Europe. Later, excavations by archeologists would prove that Columbus was not the first to step upon the shores of the New World. The time has come for history to recognize that the first footprints on the soil of the New World belonged to those much-maligned men of the North. The Vikings had already been there, done that.

## **Homes Away from Home**

Earlier, it had been the English from Denmark who had come as conquerors and stayed to settle. In the original days of their invasions, the Danish Vikings raided and left. But as they returned to England, their summer plundering turned into resettling; rather than returning home, they remained in the lands they were controlling. They established bases in the towns of Nottingham, Stamford, Lincoln, Derby, and Leicester. As they claimed the land and kept it, choosing fertile places that reflected their farming background, they began to treat

their conquered territory like home, either bringing their families to stay with them or marrying local girls in the community.

The Viking presence in Nottingham was first noted in 868 after they wintered in the city. It was a sufficiently important event to win notice in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: “This year the same army went into Me-rcia to Nottingham and there lived their winter-quarters; and Burhred king of the Mercians, with his council, besought Ethelred, king of the West-Saxons, and Alfred, his brother, that they would assist them in fighting against the army. And they went with the West Saxons into Mercia as far as Nottingham\*, and there meeting the army on the works, they beset them within. But there was no heavy fight; for the Mercians made peace with the army.” (\*The city was not called Nottingham at this time.) The Mercian king gave Nottingham up to the Danes in exchange for keeping the rest of Mercia. By 873, there was a Viking settlement in the city which would later be known as Nottingham. It would not be long before Nottingham would become one of the cities included in the Danelaw, after King Alfred and Guthrum established their treaty.

Although there is not a lot of recorded evidence of a Viking settlement, archeology has filled in some of the gaps. In 1851, skulls and human remains were found in

an area outside the medieval town which became Nottingham. The evidence showed that the bodies had been buried with two iron swords and a spearhead. One of the swords dated from 900-950. The presence of the sword indicated that they might have belonged to the Vikings who had been buried there. In any case, the Viking base at Nottingham lasted as a Viking stronghold until 918 when Edward the Elder captured it. The Vikings retook it, and held it until Edward the Elder took it back in 942.

But that was in the future. In the early years of the Viking Era, no one could tell how long their domination would last or how far it would extend.

## **The Vikings in Ireland**

In 795, two years after Lindisfarne, the Vikings attacked Ireland for the first, but not the last, time. Mindful of the threat of the Vikings, this period of time saw Irish clergymen resettling to Europe or to Iceland to avoid the clutches of the dreaded Vikings. But the raiders, who were mainly from Norway, focused their raids on the coast: they landed without warning, made off with the goods and people that they could—and then returned to their bases back home in Scandinavia or in Britain. These raids went on until 813; for eight years after that, the raids ceased, probably because the raiders



were busy in northern Britain, particularly with a settlement called Laithlind.

Then, in 821, there was an attack on Howth, Ireland which saw the capture of many women. This time, the raiders were more organized. Their targets had changed as well; no longer content to attack the coast, the Vikings moved inland. They began to establish encampments that allowed them to winter in Ireland rather than returning to their home base in Norway. When they launched their next raid, they did so as Vikings who had settled for good in Ireland; the base for their attack was Laithlind. By the time that Laithlind was firmly established as a kingdom in 830, the attacks on Ireland were well coordinated. In 833, the monastery at Clondalkin was attacked. Clondalkin had been founded in the late sixth or early seventh century, but its history went back into the fifth century thanks to St. Brigid's well, which Brigid used to baptize pagan converts to Christianity.

The King of Laithlind had conquest on his mind and Ireland seemed a likely source of land and power. The actual inspiration for the conquest has been credited to a Viking named Turgesius, whose actual identity remains unproven. He's been identified as the son of Norway's first king Haraldr Fairhair; as a son of the Danish king Gudfred who battled Charlemagne

between 804 and 810, and even as Ragnar Lodbrok because of a Viking raid in 831 which saw an Irish king captured. No conclusive evidence has been found that positively identifies Turgesius, but there was no anonymity when he was alive. His victims knew him well.

Whoever he might have been, there's no mystery about what he did. From 832 until 845, he's named as the Viking who plundered Christian sites in Ireland. He also established several Norse settlements, making himself the ruling power over the northern half of Ireland. At least that's how medieval historian Snorri Sturluson records the events; later accounts do not connect him with the establishment of Dublin, although Dublin was originally a Viking settlement.

Sixty Viking ships sailed up the River Liffey in 837 to raid churches, forts, and homes. When the Vikings returned to Dublin in 841, they captured an ecclesiastical settlement so that they could establish a naval encampment close by. The site was possibly where Dublin Castle is located because it overlooked the Black Pool which would have served as a harbor. The Vikings used their Dublin base to extend their raids further into inland Ireland, as far as Leinster, the Midlands, and the Slieve Bloom Mountains. The church establishments were powerless against the Viking

onslaught as Kildare, Clonenagh, Kinnitty, Killeigh, Kells, Monasterboice, Duleek, Swords and Finglas played unwilling hosts to Viking raids.

The king of Mide, Mael Sechnaill, captured Turgesius in 845 and drowned him in Loch Uair. The loss of Turgesius was a blow to Viking military fortune but a boon to the Irish, who managed to win victories against their Norse foes. Mael Sechnaill, now High King of Ireland, was able to attack Dublin and for a time, the Viking capital was destroyed. But the Vikings retaliated by allying themselves with the King of Cianachta and attacking Irish land belonging to Mael Sechnaill.

Conflicting loyalties tossed the fate of Ireland from one master to another; at one point, in 853, a Viking named Amlaib made himself king of Dublin, accepting tribute from the Irish and hostages from the Vikings. Amlaib may also be identified as Amhlaoibh Conung, or Olaf the King. Amlaib went to Britain on military ventures, returning to Ireland in 856 or 857 along with two brothers. His brother Imar has been identified by some accounts as Ivar the Boneless, the son of Ragnar Lodbrok, but evidence is inconclusive. Other accounts say that Imar and Amlaib were the sons of Ragnaill, the king of Laithlind. In 857, Imar became co-regent with his brother over Dublin.

For 15 years, the brothers made use of Dublin as a base for their campaigns, some of which were against other Vikings. They used marital means to further their martial activities, allying themselves with local Irish leaders by marrying their daughters.

After the death of Amlaib in 874 or 875, during a campaign against Scotland's King Constantine I, the Norse presence in Ireland underwent a time of uncertainty. The colonies were threatened by their battles against different Viking factions, which benefitted the Irish who united against them. Norse settlements at Dublin, Wexford, Waterford, Cork and Limerick came once again under Irish control. Fighting continued, however, but when the kings of Leinster and Brega attacked Dublin from the north and south, they were able to defeat the Vikings in 902. Although Dublin returned to Irish control and remained so for 15 years, a Viking presence stayed behind, according to the excavations by archeologists.

But evidence of the Viking mastery and presence over Dublin is sketchy. Excavations in the area have found more than 200 houses of Viking origin, indicating that Dublin was one of the most significant sites of Norse influence in all of Europe. Viking gravesites revealed the remains of two Scandinavian warriors. Many of the grave sites contained grave goods

which would have been typical of Viking burials including swords, shields, daggers, spearheads, brooches and decorative items. Other sites, excavated in the 19th century when techniques were not professionally defined, cannot provide conclusive proof of the Viking control in Dublin. Others, including the burial mounds at College Green which may have contained the remains of some of Dublin's Norse kings, were removed in the 1600s.

Despite the lack of archeological proof, the documentary evidence is ample and confirms that in the second half of the ninth century, Dublin was a successful settlement for Vikings who had come to plunder. Norse leaders made the city their base, from which they attacked enemies in both Ireland and Britain. Almost 100 years after their first attack on the monastery at Lindisfarne, they were poised to become the conquerors of Britain.

## Chapter Two

# Alfred the Great

According to tenth-century historian Aethelweard, the Great Heathen Army arrived in 865 and wintered in East Anglia. Ivar or Ivar, along with a kinsman named Halfdene Ragnarsson, was reportedly part of the army. In 869, the Army seized East Anglia from King Edmund after wintering in Thetford. Eastern Mercia fell in 873; in 875 or 876, Northumbria was divided, with Angles ruling the northern kingdom of Bernicia and the Danes ruling the southern kingdom of Deira or Jorvik. Halfdene was reportedly killed in 875.

Having seen the subjugation of East Anglia, Mercia and Northumbria, the princes of Wessex looked to the defense of their realm. But before they were tested, Ivar the Viking leader left England for good. According to the Annals of Ulster, Ivar returned to Dublin in 870 from Scotland, carrying with him captives.

The terms of engagement were changing. In 876, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle wrote that part of the Great Heathen Army had become harrowers and plowers, meaning that instead of sailing to the land to plunder and leave, the Vikings were staying, settling, and farming. The quest for land did not diminish and it

would result in a confrontation between the Danes and a Wessex prince.

The Wessex dynasty of Aethelwulf, king of the West Saxons, had five heirs who acceded to their father's wishes to succeed to kingship in turn so that the land would be ruled by an adult capable of defending the realm against the invasions rather than having a child as king. By 870, Viking prowess in conquest had proven so successful that only Wessex remained as an independent Anglo-Saxon kingdom. Alfred began to expand his military options. He created a fleet of ships after becoming King of Wessex in 871, and victories began to accrue; that is, until the Vikings caught him off guard with a surprise attack. Despite the spin from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle affirming that Alfred was pulling the puppet strings, the truth is that the Danes held the upper hand and Alfred's giving chase was ineffectual. The Danes had a pattern. They occupied a fortified town and waited for Alfred to negotiate. The peace treaty would involve paying money in exchange for the Danes agreeing to leave the kingdom right away. Things weren't looking good. Alfred's army was not trained in siege warfare and had been unable to defend Chippenham. His only option was to continue to pay them off.

The Danes were skilled at attacking fortified positions, having done so in 871 at Reading. Alfred opted to go south and prepare for battle. Guthrum was not inclined to settle down to the plow and the hearth. He returned to Cambridge in East Anglia. Beginning in 875, the Danish forces managed to get past the West into Wareham. Alfred paid the Danes off after they gave their oath that they were willing to leave the country. But instead, the Danes went to Exeter, deeper into Alfred's kingdom. Beginning in 875, Guthrum launched attacks on Wessex; Alfred was nearly captured at Chippenham, where he had his winter fortress, by Guthrum. In 877 the opposing forces established peace, the Vikings vowing to leave the kingdom and never return. The Danes spent the rest of 877 in Gloucester; Alfred was 30 miles away in Chippenham. During the night, the Danes attacked Chippenham on January 7-8 or, as the records state, "in midwinter after Twelfth Night." Alfred, eluding capture, retreated with a small force into the wilderness.

By 878, eastern and northeastern England were under Danish control; even a lone Danish defeat at the Battle of Ashdown was unable to halt the juggernaut.

Alfred, wintering before the Battle of Edington in the marsh of Athelney in Somerset, had some protection by the terrain. Legend enters the picture here



with the famous story of King Alfred and the cakes. When Alfred and his men went into hiding in the swamps in Somerset, they depended upon the local population for their provisions. Alfred, according to the story, hid in the home of a peasant woman who didn't know that her guest was the king of Wessex. She assigned him the task of keeping an eye on the cakes that she was baking on the fire. Alfred had his mind on his royal problems and not on the cakes, which burned, earning the royal hideaway a scolding from the peasant woman.

## **Battle of Edington**

Alfred, who would be given the appellation of Great for his achievements on behalf of Anglo-Saxon Wessex, defeated Guthrum's forces in May, 878 in historical combat known as the Battle of Edington. It's also known as the Battle of Ethandun and is located in present-day Edington in Wiltshire.

When spring came in 878, Alfred and his West Saxon forces marched to Edington to fight the Danes under Guthrum in battle. Around Easter, Alfred built a fortress at Athelney. Archeological evidence confirms that metalworking was taking place at the site, indicating that the men of Wessex were forging weapons to get ready for their battle. In early May,

Alfred called a levy of men at Egbert's Stone; the men from Somerset, Wiltshire and Hampshire rallied to his side. Within a week, he took the battle to the Danes. This time, victory came to the Anglo-Saxons after ferocious fighting and slaughter. The Danes fled to Chippenham, although the West Saxons had taken all the food. Hungry, the Danes last two weeks then sued for peace. They made the usual promise to vacate the kingdom but with an interesting addendum: Guthrum was to be baptized as a Christian. Alfred had more leverage this time because, instead of simply stopping the Danes, he had convincingly beaten them. Alfred served as his baptismal sponsor and Guthrum took the name of Athelstan. The treaty of Wedmore had Guthum/Athelstan leaving Wessex for East Anglia, which they did, leaving Chippenham in 879. A year later, the army settled in East Anglia.

The words of the treaty begin in the following way:

“This is the peace that King Alfred and King Guthrum, and the witan of all the English nation, and all the people that are in East Anglia, have all ordained and with oaths confirmed, for themselves and for their descendants, as well for born as for unborn, who reckon of God's mercy or of ours.”

1. Concerning our land boundaries: Up on the Thames and then up on the Lea, and along the Lea unto

its source, then straight to Bedford, then up on the House onto Watling Street.”

The land boundaries are the initial definition of the region that would become the Danelaw, which was sometimes referred to as the Five Burroughs or Seven Towns. In 886 Alfred and Guthrum outlined the boundaries of their kingdoms. Mercia was divided so that one section went to Wessex, the other to East Anglia. Danelaw was soon a flourishing region, thanks to the Danish skill as traders and craftsmen. Prior to the Danelaw, England’s currency was united due to the primary mints of Canterbury, London and Rochester. But by the tenth century, most coins were struck from the Seven Burghs and the Mercian towns of Tamworth, Stafford, and Shrewsbury. The Danelaw’s prosperity worked against them, as other Vikings who were not bound by treaties attacked them.

The treaty was able to minimize conflict between the Anglo-Saxons and Guthrum’s Vikings but at the same time, they maximized commerce and trade between Wessex and East Anglia. By the end of the ninth century, the rest of the Anglo-Danish rulers were minting coins as well, and by the tenth century, the Anglo-Saxon model of kingship became the model for the Vikings who had stayed in England.

Guthrum ruled as the king of East Anglia until his death in 890, honoring the treaty he had made with Alfred. When coins were issued, they were inscribed in the name of Aethelstan, the name he took when he was baptized a Christian. He was no longer a threat to Alfred, but that doesn't mean that there was no conflict.

Guthrum's power base had shrunk. Ragnar's sons Ivar and Ubbe no longer supported the Vikings in England. In either 876 or 877, 120 Danish ships had been wrecked in a storm off Swanage. Their lack of cohesion was what Wessex needed.

Alfred had capitalized on his victory by setting up a system of fortified cities, known as burghs. Alfred also pursued military reforms that made Viking raids less successful. In 888, Alfred ordered the building of a monastery on Athelney to give thanks for his victory. The monastery would last for centuries and when it was destroyed, the Vikings were nowhere near: King Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries in 1539 was responsible for its demise.

## **Danelaw**

By the time that Danelaw was established, Danish settlement in northeastern England was already a fact of life. The treaty between Alfred and Guthrum created what was known as the Danelaw, a territory that

included Leicester, Lincoln, Nottingham, Stamford, and Derby.

Alfred was not a man to trust to treaties to safeguard his kingdom. He built up the defenses, reorganized his army, and built settlements across southern England that were very well defended. He also created a navy to protect the coast from Danish raiders. He strengthened his internal kingdom as well by establishing a code of law that reinforced justice and order. Reforming the coinage helped to put his kingdom on a more stable economic foundation. By the 890s, his coinage referred to him not as the king of Wessex, but as the king of the English.

The treaty that established the Danelaw did not reduce the power of the Viking threat, however, although after Alfred had recaptured London, the Anglo-Saxon goal turned from defense to retaking land from the Vikings. But the borders were not secure and the new century would continue

to see them shift. Alfred's daughter Aethelflead permitted Norsemen who had been expelled from Dublin to settle in Mercia in 902, three years after the death of King Alfred. Three years later, the Vikings failed to show gratitude when they revolted and tried to take Chester. The attempt failed and Chester was refortified in 907.

The Anglo-Saxons by 918 had taken back the southern Danelaw. By 954, the Anglo-Saxons had reclaimed the country. The same pattern was repeating itself in other parts of Europe where the Vikings had been masters. As feudalism spread across Europe, kings and lords could count on a ready-to-serve source of military might from the men who had sworn fealty to them. The Vikings, lacking this available manpower, could not compete with soldiers who were battle-tested and trained. Nonetheless, the Viking presence was still undeniably a dominant one and while Alfred managed to reach an accord through victory in battle and a treaty that contained the Vikings, a powerful warrior from Norway would demonstrate his battle prowess and his bargaining skills across the Channel.

## Chapter Three

### Rollo Rognvaldsson

The end of the ninth century was a momentous one for the Vikings. One of them, Rollo, fared better in France than Guthrum did in England. The Vikings had no need for a publicist because they let their names do the talking. Rollo, known as the Walker because, it was said, he was so strong that no mere horse was able to carry him, requiring the Viking chieftain to make his way on foot. A less picturesque version simply says that Rollo was so tall that he traveled farther on foot than he would have had he been mounted on the small Norwegian steeds. This was no drawback however to Rollo's prowess.

Born a jarl around the year 860, Rollo was another well-traveled Viking. He followed the plundering and raiding route, ending up in Scotland where his marriage to a Christian woman yielded a daughter and possibly a son named William Longsword, who would be his heir when the time came that he left something worthwhile to inherit. He spent some time in Ireland, but the Norse were finding their power on the downslide in Ireland. It was time for new horizons.

Around 900, Rollo and seven hundred ships left Norway and made it their way to that favorite Viking

getaway, the lands of the Franks. They sailed up the Seine, stopping at Rouen on their way to attack Paris. The citizens were horrified to see the river dominated by Viking ships but a shrewd bishop advised them to trust to Rollo's better nature. So the citizens of Rouen opened the gates of the city; Rollo and his forces entered and took possession. However, the citizens were treated well; they may have lost control of their city but they kept their lives. In those uncharitable days, of conquest, that was as good a bargain as anyone could hope for.

Back on his way to Paris, Rollo sailed up the Seine and met with the Viking chiefs and the thirty thousand men whose presence turned the river into a Viking encampment on water. The Parisians were prepared for the Vikings, having fortified the city on the advice of Eudo, the Count of Paris. Two walls with strong sturdy gates were constructed to encircle the city.

Cities had walls for a reason; to keep the residents safe inside and to keep the enemies outside. Rollo's men built a tower on wheels which they rolled up to the walls of the city. On the other side of the walls were archers, with arrows which they fired at the Vikings. Citizens hurled rocks at the besieging Vikings, and poured pitch and boiling oil on them. Sieges take time, and the Vikings were patient as they waited for 13 months while inside the city, the Parisians had less and less to eat.



Alarmed at the looming prospect of defeat, Count Eudo furtively escaped through one of the gates to let the King of France know that the city of Paris was in grave danger of being lost to the invading Vikings. Charles, the son of Louis the Stammerer and Adelaide of Paris, was born posthumously and had not succeeded to the throne until 893 although he was not a monarch in truth until 898. There was no apprenticeship for kings in those days, and he had to take decisive action.

The king assembled an army and the Vikings, finding discretion to be the better part of valor, abandoned the siege and left Paris. The Franks also decided against battle, leaving Rollo and his forces to escape, where they went to Burgundy.

Whether he went plundering elsewhere, or loitered in Burgundy, or returned home, the annals don't say. Some histories believe that he was exiled from Norway in 900 for his lawless ways. But in 911, he emerged back in the story to once again, leave Norway to sail up the Seine with hundreds of Viking ships. The plundering and raiding commenced. King Charles II, known as Charles the Simple, sent a message to Rollo to propose terms of peace. Rollo agreed to meet the king. Each side stayed on one side of the river while messengers traveled back and forth. Rollo offered, in exchange for land, to become the vassal of the French king. As a

vassal, Rollo would be required to provide men in arms to Charles should the king command military support in case of another Viking invasion. Rollo agreed as long as he could be the leader of the troops.

Charles decided that this was feasible, so in exchange for Norse vassals, he offered the city of Rouen and the land between the Epte River and the sea. Charles was actually making a shrewd bargain. This area along the coast was a frequent target of invasion and putting it in the hands of a Viking meant that it was in his own best interests to repel the Northmen who would seek to conquer it.

Accepting the hand of a royal princess in marriage was acceptable, but the ceremonial tradition which accompanied the rites of vassalage were not. Rollo was required to kiss the boot of the king. Rollo was resistant, but tradition was tradition. So he assigned one of his men to perform the deed, although with less humility than the king expected. Rollo's substitute raised the king's booted foot and brought it to his mouth, but without bending down in subordination. The king toppled from his mount, an episode of humiliation which has been retold throughout history.

There was one other stipulation which the king made: Rollo had to become a Christian. The kiss was given, the deal was struck, and Rollo the vassal was

Rollo the lord of the land around Rouen, which was named Normandy after the north men who now ruled it. Upon baptism, Rollo took the name of Robert, but a Viking by any other name is still a Viking. By receiving the hand of Charles' daughter Gisela in marriage, Rollo successfully married up. Baptism, marriage, and a city were a profitable return on Rollo the Viking's excursion into France.

In any case, the transaction was duly recorded in 921 in one of the chronicles, but the evidence of his acquisition of Frankish land is evinced in 918 in a charter which recorded those properties given for the protection of the kingdom of the Northmen on the Seine. In short, Rollo.

The newly named Count of Rouen found Normandy to his liking and so did his men. They married the local women and to use a modern term, assimilated—with their own unique twists—into the landscape of the French.

Once in power, Rollo turned from outlaw to hanging judge. The rules governing his realm were strict; robbers and raiders were subject to hanging. The duchy of Normandy became renowned for its safety and its prosperity, although it was not noted for its adherence to ecclesiastical authority. It's unlikely that Rollo's religious conversion was shaped by any genuine

spiritual inspiration. He wanted land and by becoming a Christian, he acquired it, and proved to be an able leader. By 924 Rollo had expanded his boundaries to include Bessin and Maine. In 927, he abdicated in favor of his son, William Longsword, who would also enlarge his territory, this time by adding the lands of the Cotentin and the Avranchin to Normandy. When Rollo died in 932, he was buried in the Cathedral at Rouen. In 1066, Rollo's descendant, William, would also venture from his homeland, traveling to England which he would conquer and claim.

Rollo's aversion to the subservience which Charles required of a vassal may have come from the customs of his homeland, which claimed a sort of democracy which, although vastly different from governance as we know it today, nonetheless showed more of an egalitarian spirit than what was evolving in Gaul. In the Viking society, kingdoms were divided into districts. Within the district, meetings of the free man—the kings, nobles, wealthy, warriors, merchants, farmers—were held to discuss political decisions, criminal trials and disputes over land. An official was elected or appointed to act as the judge. A member with more money or influence was going to have more influence than the others, however. The process was not a formal one and if a decision could not settle the dispute, the

next stage was the ordeal. A man proved his innocence by walking on water without drowning or gripping hot iron without being burned because the gods were protecting him. The odds were obviously stacked against him unless phenomenal luck intervened.

However, in other aspects of their social order, the Vikings displayed a form of equality which allowed for more mobility and expression than that seen in the social structure of other Europeans.

## Chapter Four

# The Scandinavia They Left Behind

One remarkable truth about the Viking societies is that most of them were members of what today would be called the middle class. For Vikings, these were the karls who were free and owned land, and had a trade or skill which was valued by their community: they were often smiths and farmers. The farmers made up the biggest social class in Viking society. Viking artisans included blacksmiths, bronze smiths, coopers, leather tanners, saddlers, shoemakers, and makers of leather goods; there were jewelers and men who carved bowls from soapstone and bone and antler into combs, which were standard belongings of Viking men and women. There were also tenants, known as leiding, who leased farmland, paying for it by providing a designated amount of food to the owner. He might not have been at the top of the pecking order, but he was still a free man, with the rights of other free men.

The nobility among the Vikings, or jarls, from which the title of earl came, were at the top of the hierarchy in terms of status. The jarls were the upper class, noted for their wealth, treasure, estates and ships. The jarl was expected to maintain the honor of a man of status and courage, and he needed to be able to

command the respect of his supporters. Society for the Vikings had a certain trickle-down effect; as things went for the jarl, so it went for his followers. His success was also key to their prosperity and security, as well as their image. There was some fluidity between the classes so that it was within the realm of possibility for a karl to become a jarl. Viking society had structure. But an interesting social custom among the Vikings was the comparative freedom given to women.

The medieval era was not a time when women could expect to be treated as equals. Like other cultures, the Vikings lived in a male-dominated world, and a woman was forbidden from being a chieftain, a judge, or a witness; instead, she was under the authority of her husband or father. According to Icelandic law, women could not cut their hair short, carry weapons, or dress in men's attire. However, the role of the shieldmaiden was part of Viking society, which gave her a level of warrior status. Even the ordinary women, however, did have freedom, more, in fact, than women in other societies of the time. Viking daughters were married between the ages of 12 to 15 years of age, and upon her marriage, she received the keys to the household supply chests, which she wore in a belt around her waist. The females oversaw the family's finances, which meant

that, if her husband died, his widow had the potential to become a wealthy property owner.

In Icelandic society, a woman could obtain a divorce, and if she felt that her husband was shirking the traditional testosterone role of seeking vengeance, she could threaten him with divorce, which could have brought him financial hardship. For the Vikings, punishment was often handled as a matter of revenge. The Vikings were a society where honor had primacy; therefore, an insult to honor would be addressed. Unwanted male attention was forbidden; there were penalties not only for rape but also for kissing a woman who did not want to be kissed. The code of the culture disapproved of violence against its females.

If her husband was abusive or mistreated the children or failed to do his part in maintaining the farm, she had grounds for divorce. If she left her husband without grounds, the husband could keep her belongings. Obtaining a divorce was not difficult: she could call several witnesses and announce, first outside the threshold and second next to the marriage bed, that she was divorced from her husband. As a wife, she still belonged to her own family and was allowed to keep the goods (woolen and linen bedclothes, a loom and a bed) that she'd brought into the marriage. Whatever she brought as a dowry became her bequest to her children



when she died. If she was a mother of babies or very young children, they remained in her custody if she sought divorce. Older sons and daughters were divided between their parents' families depending on the family status and wealth. Poor families had less latitude; they did the work themselves, without help from slaves or servants, and shared the responsibilities of the home. But although they were poor, they could console themselves with the fact that they were at least free, which was more than could be said of the thralls.

The thralls or slaves were at the bottom of the social ladder. Slavery was an accepted part of the social structure in the Middle Ages, and the Vikings profited from selling the slaves they'd captured during their raids. The lowest class also included bondsmen or loysing. Bondsmen entered servitude because they had not been able to pay their debts and were required to work for another man until the debt was paid. In Norway, slavery was the family heritage for four generations; after that, a freed slave's children were free. Slaves could not inherit or bequeath property or goods. When a slave passed the age when he could be useful, he was put to death. However, a slave could buy his freedom if he saved sufficiently. But slaves served a purpose for the agricultural Norse society; Norwegians were said to believe that at least three slaves, along with

twelve cows and two horses, were necessary to run a farm. A slave's only permitted possession was a knife.

Norse society was not so regimented that it lacked outsiders. Magicians, outlaws, witches, beggars and tramps were on the outskirts of society and Danish law treated them accordingly.

## **Everyday Life in Viking Society**

The average Scandinavian did not have a bad life. It was a challenging era and life then was quite different from what we today would regard as endurable. But within the limitations of that society, the Vikings did reasonably well. Archeological findings have unearthed household artifacts from the burial sites that provide a glimpse into the daily routine of the Viking domestic life.

A typical Viking lived on a farm, albeit in houses which might only have one room that was divided into living quarters for the family and a stable for the livestock. They usually were built of wood, but in regions where wood was scarce, the house might be constructed of stone, earth and turf. Vikings lived together as extended families: grandparents, parents and children shared the home, and even servants, workers, and slaves would be under one roof. A typical farm might include cows, pigs, horses, sheep, goats, and

perhaps chickens. Vikings also had dogs and from the year 1000, cats as household pets. In the middle of the house was the fireplace, the chief source of heat and light, with a hole in the roof to allow the smoke to escape.

Because the lower classes had household items made of wood, they haven't lasted through time, so there's little evidence from archeology to give a good idea of what everyday items were like. If they broke down or were worn, they'd have been used for fuel and thrown into the fire.

In Greenland, where wood was hard to come by, stone was used for the building and turf for the roof. Windows were small because there wasn't glass for the panes. Shutters that were covered at night kept out the cold. The houses were dark; the only light came from oil lamps carved from soapstone.

Furniture consisted of a table and stools, not chairs, which were a luxury. Cups of the rich might be made from wood, or pottery. Hollow horns, or drinking horns, were often used for drinking. For eating, they had wooden bowls and dishes. There were no forks; they used spoons made of horn or, for the wealthy, metal. Tools, jewels, and clothing were stored in chests. The Vikings who could afford chairs might have been able to afford beds, but most slept on benches with rugs

around the side of the hut. In the average home, the beds would have been mounted on the walls. Don't envy the bedded ones; the mattresses were stuffed with straw or down. Covering was provided by wool blankets or furs. Carpeting wasn't known; the average person spread rushes on the floor. Tapestries covered the walls of the wealthy to help keep out drafts.

The Viking men worked in the fields, fished, and hunted. As was customary in that time, women tended to the domestic tasks of the household, including spinning, weaving, laundry, caring for the children. Women prepared the food, milled grain into flour, and prepared animals for meals. Wool from sheep would be woven on the loom, crocheted or sewn into clothing and other textile items.

Women were praised for their beauty and wisdom. As the family's medical authority, she used herbs to take care of her family when illness struck. The woman oversaw the feeding of the family; February was the hunger month, something that a woman would have in mind as she made butter and cheese, dried and smoked fish, and meat to meet her family's needs. Foods grown by the Vikings included wheat, barley and rye; cabbages, onions, leeks, apples and plums. They enjoyed wild berries and made bread and porridge, adding peas to the porridge to make it stretch. Cod and

herring were staples in their diet, and they raised cattle, pigs, sheep and goats, the latter two used for milk, geese and chickens. In the autumn, they slaughtered the animals and salted or smoked the meat to feed them through the winters. Meat was roasted on a spit or boiled in an iron cauldron. Mead, made from honey, yeast, and water, was of course the famous beverage of the Vikings, but they also drank beer and wine if they could afford it.

## **Vikings at Leisure**

Even in a time as demanding as the Middle Ages, there was entertainment for the Vikings. Sports included swimming, wrestling, skiing and ice skating. They were archers; they hunted and enjoyed falconry. It may be hard to imagine, but the Vikings played chess, as well as dice and a board game called Hnefatafi. Kvatrutafl was their version of backgammon and they also had an early version of draughts. Viking entertainment included songs that praised the mighty deeds of their lord; the skald or poet would sing the poems. They told riddles and stories, played the harp, horn, and wooden pipes.

## **Viking Religious Beliefs**

Maintaining the family's religious observances fell under the women's role. It may seem surprising that the Norse God Thor was the deity invoked by couples to bless their marriage, and his famous hammer was part of the blessing. In Norse lore, the gods seem to have working class roots that set them apart from the gods and goddesses of other cultures. Thor and his wife Sir were in charge of bringing a fruitful harvest of the crops.

Chief among the gods was Odin, the one-eyed god who sacrificed an eye to obtain wisdom.

Odin exemplified courage and honor to Norse society. Warriors who died in battle would be

carried off the battlefield by the Valkyrie to live in Valhalla; it was a sought honor to die in battle and a disgrace to die safely of old age. It was Odin's quest for wisdom that brought the mystery of the runes to Viking society. When he first saw the runes, he was unable to translate the carvings on the stones that foretold the destinies of the nine worlds. He obtained the hidden knowledge by hanging himself on Yggdrasil, the world tree, and after piercing his chest with a spear, hanging there for nine days, living in a limbo between life and death.

Mythology reveals more than simply the religious practices of a society. The stories of Odin confirm the

bathing habits of the Vikings. When his son Baldur was killed, the poem *Voluspa* writes. “His hands he washed not or his hair combed Till Baldur’s bane was borne to the pyre.”

Arab chronicler Ibn Fadlan provided a glimpse into the actual religious practices of the Vikings when he recorded the actions of the Rus traders that he met in his travels. After the completion of a voyage to the Volga which was successfully accomplished in 922, the Vikings prayed to their Norse gods, offering sacrifices to wooden representations of the gods and entreating them to provide buyers who would purchase their wares with silver coins. Ibn Fadlan witnessed the burial rites of the Vikings. When a chieftain died, the Vikings set the body on fire with the ship. Jewelry, food and drink and livestock accompanied the honored leader to his death, along with the body of a slave girl who volunteered to be killed so that she could be burned alongside the chieftain.

## **Viking Style and Sex Appeal**

Contemporary readers may be surprised to learn that the unkempt barbarians they expect to see in Viking garb were perhaps not quite so slovenly. English cleric John of Wallingford of the priory of St. Fridwides took exception to the hygiene of the men who lived in the

Danelaw because they paid attention to their appearance in a time when hygiene was lackluster. The cleric scolded them for these acts and wrote in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle that their purpose for combing their hair daily, bathing every Saturday and changing their garments was so that they could seduce well-born English women and seduce noblemen's daughters. His words alert us to the fact that in the Middle Ages, the Vikings were the dandies, apparently able to cut a glamorous figure for the ladies, which must give even the most ardent fan of the Anglo-Saxons pause to wonder just what they must have looked like in comparison.

Saturday was the day when Vikings bathed, performing their ablutions in a separate bath house which was common in most Viking farms. Some homes even had running water, obtained by directing the water of a river or pond into a channel running under the house. The channel was covered by rocks and when water was needed, the rocks were lifted and the water procured.

But the evidence confirms that the Vikings were mindful of their appearance. In his accounts, the Arab Ibn Fadlan wrote "Every day they must wash their faces and heads ... every morning a girl servant brings a great basin of water; she offers this to her master and he



washes his hands and face and his hair—he washes it and combs it out with a comb in the water, then he blows his nose and spits into the basin. When he has finished, the servant carries that basin to the next person who does likewise. She carries the basin thus to all the household in turn, and each blows his nose, spits, and washes his face and hair in it.” That would seem to negate the cleanliness of the act, but an observer has noted it’s likely that the basin was emptied between each use. Because devout Muslims washed in running water, Ibn Fadlan was unimpressed by ablutions in a basin. The Vikings were in general cleaner than most of their European counterparts during the Middle Ages, and actually chose to wash, whether in lakes and streams during the summer or in the bathhouses on the farms, which were heated in the winter. For those in Iceland, the natural hot springs would have been brought into the bath house.

While the average Viking would likely have worn his hair shoulder length, thralls had very short hair. A warrior would likely keep his beard and hair trimmed to avoid having his locks turned against him in battle. The men wore linen shirts and tunics, and trouser-like garments. Women wore a shift made of linen or wool underneath a dress that was open at the sides and fastened with shoulder straps, held in place by

brooches, a great ornamental favorite of the Vikings. In cold weather they wore cloaks or shawls. The women plaited their hair or put it under a headscarf. Men were bearded, and both sexes wore jewelry. According to Ibn Fadlan, the women of the Rus wore one neck ring of silver or gold for every 10,000 dirhams, or silver Arab coins, corresponding to her husband's wealth. They were also fond of colored beads, oval brooches from which hung combs, keys, and knives.

Combs were used daily, not merely for the sake of vanity and holding off a bad hair day, but also to remove lice and vermin. The Vikings washed their hair and combed it while wet. Combs were made from bone and ivory, either from a whale or imported elephant ivory.

The Vikings had other tools used for their grooming. The ear spoon, which was made from bone, ivory, silver or other metals, was used to clean ears in the days. Like many Viking items, the ear spoon was decorated, which was why many women wore theirs on a chain dangling from their brooches. Women also carried tweezers in a similar fashion, showing that women were tweezing their eyebrows as far back as the Bronze Age.

Blonde-haired women had the edge in Viking society, influencing brunettes to dye their hair with the

use of a strong soap containing lye which would turn hair blonde or red. An unmarried Viking maiden would wear her hair long and loose, or in braids. Once married, the hair was coiled on top of their heads and covered with a cap or veil, or gathered in a knot at the back of the head. Burial grounds from the ninth and tenth century have revealed headgear, indicating that the women of Dublin and Jorvik, who were Christian, may have been more inclined to cover their heads. But the Valkyries were not constrained by fashion: a carving done soon after the end of the Viking Age shows a Valkyrie with her hair either unbound and loose or contained simply in a ponytail.

To our modern eyes, the Vikings, along with most of Europe in the Dark Ages, seem rough and rude in their lifestyles, but strangely enough, the Vikings had a strong sense of esthetics. Their swords were well made and functional but the Vikings made them things of beauty by adorning them with jewelry and in scripting them with runes. Interestingly enough, according to Yale's Professor Winroth, Christianity may owe an incredible debt to Viking artistry; the pious monks who created the illuminated manuscripts that are one of the Middle Ages' most prized achievements adopted decorating motifs created by the pagan Vikings.

## Viking Government

The Scandinavian rulers in the eighth century were not national figures; chieftains were the high-ranking members of society until the monarchy. However, by the time the Viking era ended, individual kings had managed to consolidate their control over extended boundaries, giving them a more prominent role in sovereignty but also more responsibility. It's one thing to protect the borders of one's own area, but a national leader is called upon to defend borders potentially far from his own center of power. Kings, in one sense, worked for their crown. They were not royal in the sense of a birthright; they had earned their title by their abilities which would often include not only battle skills but also ruthlessness. A king did not necessarily win his title by paternity; the title could be inherited but it could also be bestowed upon him by supporters with influence.

Vikings enjoyed a structured form of government known as the Thing, which was the source of legislative and judicial powers. It was the duty of every freeman to attend the Thing common meetings unless they farmed on their own without help and could not leave their farm unattended. Women were also allowed to attend although they did not have an official responsibility to

do so. The Thing was quite an event. During these meetings, which could last several days, there would be a festival, a marketplace; and a king might be elected. Although the Vikings did not have a written code of law, the Thing opened with an oral reading of the laws which had been memorized by the lovsigemann or “law reader man.” Because the laws were memorized, no one could change them and it was the responsibility of free men to uphold and respect the law, no matter their rank. Part of that respect was shown in grooming: the poet Havamal writes, “Well groomed and washed ...wend to the Thing, though they clothes be not the best; of they shoes and breeks... be not ashamed, and still less of they steed.”

## **Vignettes of the Viking Era: Runes**

Runes served as the first systems of writing used by Germanic peoples. The Viking alphabet, the futhark, had 16 letters or runes, made of straight and diagonal lines, carved into wood or stone. In the later Viking era, people wrote on sheep or calf skin.

The runes had a mystical provenance which makes the humble alphabet seem mundane. Each rune was a symbol of a principle: to write a rune was to direct the force which represented the rune. Known as the futharks after the first six runes, the 16 character younger futhark replaced the elder alphabet around 750. The earliest runic inscription was found circa 50; it was manufactured in the north of what is today Germany. There is some uncertainty about whether this early example of runes actually owes its origins to runic roots or whether its derivation is, in fact, Roman. The earliest known carving of a full futhark dates from 400 and is found on the Kylver stone from Gotland Sweden. The ancient Norse did not regard the runes as having been invented. They pre-existed Odin, and retained the aura of power and mystery which Odin himself conveyed.

## **Chapter Five**

### **The Vikings Reach New Frontiers**

In a time when people did very little traveling, preferring the familiarity of their own land to the unknown territories beyond the horizon, the Vikings embraced the prospect of the brave new world. In 985 or 986, Iceland's Bjarni Herjulfsson was on an exploration when his ship was blown off course during his trip to Greenland; he saw the coast of North American, probably catching a glimpse of Nova Scotia, but didn't land on shore. However when he returned home to Iceland, he told his story of a forested land west of Greenland, and those tales would plant a seed in a young man named Leif Ericsson, who would himself venture away from his homeland to seek the New World.

### **Eric the Red**

Not all of the Vikings were content with Paris, York, or Kiev. Eric the Red, born around 950, was from Norway but when his father Thorvald Asvaldsson murdered a man, the family moved to Iceland. The family must have been a hot-tempered bunch because Eric mirrored his father's actions, killing two men, and was sentenced

to banishment from Iceland for three years. Eric took his punishment in a spirit of exploration and decided to sail to the islands west of Iceland that had been discovered by Gunnbjorn Olfsson. In 982, he sailed west, founded the islands which were located off eastern Greenland, and then landed on the coast of Greenland. The land was forbidding, which might explain the name Eric gave it: Midjokull, meaning middle glacier. He kept going, sailing around the southern tip of Greenland, and wintering on the southwestern coast to spend the winter. For the following two winters, he spent his time exploring the southern tip of Greenland.

When his banishment ended, he returned home to Iceland, and with a public relations flair that would have made him a natural for any modern-day advertising agency, he named his discovery Greenland, despite the fact that the newfound land was actually icier than his homeland. There was a reason for his colorful camouflage: Eric was bickering with his neighbors and was eager to settle somewhere else where he wouldn't have to deal with his foes. He must have been extremely persuasive, because in 986 he left Iceland with 14 ships carrying between 400 and 500 people willing to settle in this "green" land that Eric had praised. Things went well for a time, and perhaps Eric's choleric temperament was otherwise engaged as he



dealt with the challenges of colonizing a harsh land. Eric himself died, fittingly enough in winter, in either 1003 or 1004.

But when a season of particularly and unusually forbidding weather came, some of the settlers returned home. There's no record of what happened to the settlers who stayed in Greenland. . Historians believe they were attacked by the native Inuit or died from starvation and disease. However the settlement survived for a long time, according to the evidence, which shows that the last recorded voyage between Iceland and Greenland was in 1410. By then, the world was a very different place, but the Vikings had left a lasting imprint on the world they had dominated for centuries.

## **Leif Ericsson**

The spirit of adventure and a taste for seeing the world must have been in the family DNA. Eric's son Leif Ericsson, known as Leif the lucky, born around 980, followed his father's example, heading even farther from familiar territory. In the year 1000, he headed north from Greenland's southern tip then traveled south along the coast of Baffin Island to Labrador, landing in what he called Vinland because of an abundance of wild grapes that he saw, but what is today known as Newfoundland. Leif followed the path of

Icelandic explorer Bjarni Herjulfsson, sailing for North America in 1000 with a crew of 3 and reaching Vinland in 1001, making Leif the first European to sail to North America. In 1002, Ericsson returned to Greenland, where he succeeded his father Eric as leader of the colony after Eric's death.

## **Vikings in Russia and Arab Lands**

The Vikings who struck out for new lands were in uncharted territory. The Vikings who headed to England, Scotland, Ireland, and France to trade and plunder found easy pickings upon settled lands. But the Vikings who built trade routes to Russia and Central Asia were masters at commerce who developed a remarkable business network, not through fear but through the timeless business axiom of keeping the customer satisfied.

Baghdad was a far cry from the rustic lands to which the Vikings were accustomed. The Arabs were also expert traders. They were the ones who called the men of the North not Vikings but the Rus. It's because of the Arab accounts that the Viking influence in the East is known to us. Ibn Fadlan, writing in the ninth century, recorded his dealings with the Rus in his *Risala* or Letter. Unlike the monks of Western Europe, who regarded the Vikings as rapacious scourges sent by God

as divine punishment, the Muslim accounts were not emotional and therefore are regarded as a more reliable account of that historical period. The trade was a profitable and popular one on both sides. The Arab coin known as the dirham was lucrative because, for the Vikings, silver was a choice currency lacking in their home territory. The coinage was available in the Volga region so that Vikings simply “followed the money.”

The rivers of Russia were uncharted but that didn't impede the Vikings; they continued their travels until they reached the eastern trade centers. By the ninth century, Ibn Khurradadhbih was writing about the fair-haired Europeans who brought swords and furs to the Black Sea. The Arabs prized the furs, which they used to make caps and coats of sable, Siberian squirrel, fox, ermine, marten, weasel, and hare. But the Rus traders also had honey, goat skins, swords, acorns, armor, wax, birch bark, hazelnuts, cattle, and amber to sell. Rus swords, were highly valued, according to one contemporary account, “for their sharpness and excellence.” Another valued trading item were the slaves that the Rus sold in a commercial network that stretched from Spain all the way to Egypt.

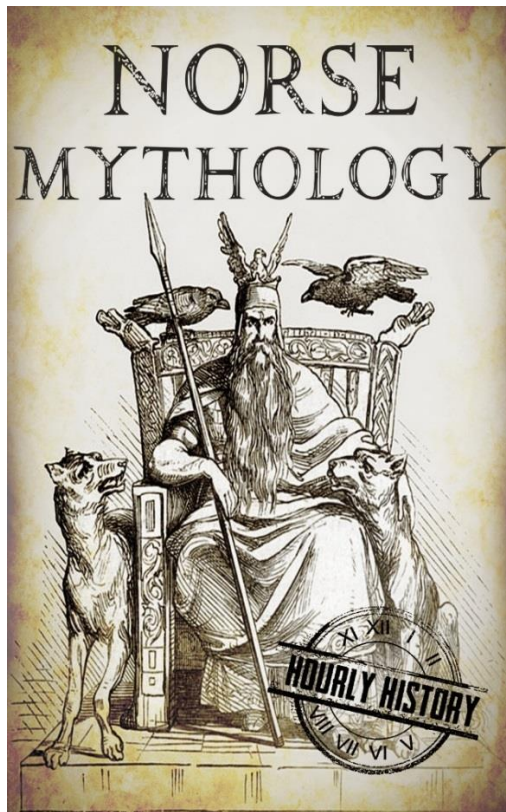
Much of what's known about the Rus comes from the secretary of a delegation that the Caliph al-Muqtadir sent to the king of the Bulgars who sought instruction

in Islam and assistance in the building of a fort and a mosque. The secretary, Ibn Fadlan and his delegation traveled 2500 miles in response to the Caliph's order, and there was much to record. Approximately one-fifth of Risala is devoted to his observations of the Rus. He wrote, "I have never seen more perfect physical specimens, tall as date palms, blond and ruddy. Each man has an axe, a sword, and a knife and keeps each by him at all times."

But the world that the Vikings knew, and to a large part, owned, was changing. England's political destiny was about to undergo a dramatic shift which would forever change the dynastic structure of the monarchy. The Vikings were facing a time when their power and their nature would be transformed as well.

## 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.



[>>> Click Here <<](#)

[>>> To Learn about Norse Mythology <<](#)