

## **Who were the Vikings?**

Have you ever heard of the Vikings? People have been fascinated by them for many centuries!

The Vikings were a group of strong explorers that “raided” foreign lands between 700 and 1100 CE. They sailed from what is now known as Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, and they landed in modern-day England, Ireland, Scotland, France, and even Russia and Ukraine!

The Vikings sailed in “longships,” which were sturdy boats made of wood, wool, and tar. Some could hold up to 200 people at a time.

The Vikings spoke in Old Norse and passed many of their stories from generation to generation by spoken word. They also worshipped many gods.

Their society was made up of three main groups. The classes included slaves, a middle level of farmers and craftsmen, and the nobility, or the upper-class landowners.

*Some Important Events:*

### **793 CE: The Raid on Lindisfarne**

The Vikings first appeared in history in 793 CE. In this year, the Vikings took over the island of Lindisfarne. Lindisfarne was a Holy Island in the North Sea near France. The island was home to a Christian monastery. Many monks lived in the monastery, and they used valuable silver items to worship. When the Vikings landed on the island, they took everything from inside the monastery. Then, they burned the building. Some of the people who lived on Lindisfarne before the Vikings arrived became slaves.

### **845 CE: The Vikings Sack Paris**

A lot of what we know about the Vikings comes from sagas. Do you know what a *saga* is? A saga is a legend or story that usually includes adventures and battles.

Many of these sagas talk about Ragnar Lodbrok. Ragnar was a famous Norse Viking in the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

In 845 CE, Ragnar led a group of Vikings up the Seine River in longships. They were headed toward Paris, in the center of the kingdom Frankia. Charles the Bald was the king of Frankia at the time. He organized an army to fight the Vikings, but he lost. The Vikings took over Paris for a while, but they left after Charles the Bald paid them nearly 6,000 pounds, or 2,600 kilograms, of silver and gold.

### **865-6 CE: Great Heathen Army lands and York conquered.**

Two other famous Vikings were *Halfdan* and *Ivar the Boneless*. These men led an army to attack York, which an important settlement for the Anglo-Saxons in Northumbria, or England.

The Vikings attacked the town on All Saints Day. All Saints Day was an important religious festival, so many people were in the cathedral when the Vikings landed. The Vikings won the battle, but two of the Anglo-Saxon kings survived.

The Vikings then took over more settlements in the area of Northumbria.

### **886 CE: The Establishment of Danelaw in England**

Have you ever heard of Alfred the Great? He was a very important king in Wessex, which was a kingdom of England in the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

Before 886 CE, the Danish Vikings had taken over most of the lands surrounding King Alfred's kingdom. There were many wars, and not much peace. Alfred the Great had the idea of creating a *peace treaty*, however. The peace agreement allowed the Vikings to exist in three main areas: Northumbria, East Anglia, and the Five Boroughs. These areas were called *Danelaw*.

King Alfred and his people stayed in Wessex and continued to practice Christianity. The Vikings in Danelaw continued to worship their Norse gods.

### **874 CE: Iceland Settled and Expansion Westward**

In 874 CE, another famous Viking explorer, Ingólfur Arnarson, discovered Iceland. He had left Norway with his wife Hallveig to find more territory. They saw that Iceland was beautiful and great for farming, so they invited more Vikings to come and live there. They built a settlement about 24 miles (or 40 km) outside of modern-day Reykjavik.

About a century later, Eric the Red headed west and settled Greenland.

The Vikings in Iceland also set up the world's first parliament! In 930 CE, they created the *Althing*, which was a meeting where all of the important Viking men came together to make big decisions.

### **950 CE: Rise of Denmark, Increased Attacks**

Throughout the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE, the Danish Vikings spread out more across northeast England, as well as Ireland, Normandy (which is in France), Spain, Portugal and Italy. The Danes created large trade routes between these countries. By carrying goods on their longships from place to place, they became a very wealthy empire.

The Danes also came into contact with Charlesmagne's Christian empire as early as 800 CE. Many of Danish people stopped worshipping the Norse gods at this point. Instead, they started practicing Christianity.

### **1000 CE: Vikings Reach North America**

Did you know that many people believe the Vikings actually reached America before Christopher Columbus?

While we don't know for sure if the Vikings ever tried to settle in modern-day America, we *do* know for certain that Leif Ericsson made it to Newfoundland, Canada. In 1000 CE, Leif, who was the son of Eric the Red, sailed west. He was trying to reach Greenland, but he sailed too far, and landed in Canada instead!

He and his fellow Vikings established a colony there, but life was very hard, and they left after only 10 years.

### **1013 CE: Rise of Sweyn Forkbeard, the First Viking King of England**

For many, Sweyn Forkbeard is a forgotten king. In fact, he ruled England in 1013 CE for just five weeks!

It all started when Sweyn Forkbeard attacked and removed his own father from the throne. His father was the king of Denmark at the time, and he was a Christian. Sweyn then sailed to England and fought against King Ethelred the Unready for 10 years! In 1013, Sweyn Forkbeard finally took over England, but he died just a month later.

After Sweyn's death, his son, Canute (Cnut the Great), took over after and ruled England for almost 20 years.

### **1020 CE: The Christianization of Norway**

By 1020 CE, many Norse Vikings had come into contact with Christianity. This was because they had traveled and taken over several lands where Christian people lived. Many Norse chieftains, or rulers, decided to convert to Christianity after their stay in England or Normandy.

Many Christian missionaries also traveled to Scandinavian countries to spread their faith. As a result, many Norsemen living on the coasts began practicing the religion.

However, Norway did not become an officially Christian country until Olaf Haraldsson became king. St. Olaf, as he was called, ruled from 1015-1028 CE.

St. Olaf invited Christian bishops from England, Normandy, and Germany to live in Norway. They helped King Olaf organize a church system across the country.

## **1066 CE: The Battle of Stamford Bridge**

According to Viking lore, 1066 CE was the year when Vikings lost power in England.

In 1047 CE, Harold Hardrada became the king of Norway. After ruling there for many years, he wanted to take over England as well. Harold Godwinson was king of England at the time. (King Harold Godwinson was related to King Cnut the Great – remember him? He was the King of England, Denmark, Norway before Harold Hardrada took over in Norway!)

King Harold Hardrada was sure that England would surrender. However, when he landed with his armies outside of York, Harold Godwinson was ready and waiting for him at Stamford Bridge.

Harold Hardrada died in this battle, and only about 30 of his 300 Viking ships returned to Norway. This defeat is known as the end of the Viking Era.

## **1067 CE and beyond: What Happened to the Vikings**

After Harold Hardrada died in the Battle at Stamford Bridge, the Viking raids basically stopped. The Norsemen, Danish, and Swedish Vikings no longer explored the North Atlantic in their longships. Instead, they stayed in Scandinavia and their cultures and traditions evolved there.

The descendants of the first Vikings that settled in Iceland, Greenland, England, Ireland, Scotland, France, and Russia continued living in those lands. Viking culture, war tactics, and legends had a huge influence on people throughout Europe.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, many writers and historians began uncovering more about Vikings by digging up old burial ships. We've certainly learned a lot about these interesting people since!

### Mini-chapters:

#### **Children in the Viking Age**

Although it's hard to imagine it, children in the Viking Age were very similar to children today! They liked to play with toys, participate in sports, and play musical instruments. Many of their toys represented things they saw in everyday life, like ships, wooden swords, and animal figures. Viking children also had to help around the house. They made food, kept the fire going, or looked after their siblings. Unfortunately, many Viking children did not live to adulthood. The average age for marriage was also 16 years old!

#### **Berserkers**

Have you ever heard the phrase “go berserk”? It means to go crazy, and it comes from the word *berkergang* in Old Norse!

The *Berkergang* referred to a type of fighting among Viking warriors. As you have seen, the Vikings were very ferocious in battle. Some warriors, however, were even *more* wild than the average soldier! They were called the “berserkers,” and they usually entered battle after entering a hypnotic, frenzied state. They fought at the front of the battle lines in groups of 12 people. The Berserkers wore bear and wolf skins, and they fought in honor of the Norse god of war, Odin.

## **The Viking Gods**

Do you know about Greek, Roman, or Egyptian gods? The Vikings had a complex mythology with many different gods, too! Many of them are mentioned in Old Norse sagas time and time again.

The most important gods were known as the Æsir, and they lived together in the realm of Asgard. Human beings lived in a different realm, called Midgard. There were nine realms in total, and the gods travelled between them on an “Intrasil,” or what we know as a rainbow!

The main Norse god was named *Odin*, the god of wisdom, healing, sorcery, the runic alphabet, and death. He was a one-eyed man with a long beard, and often was pictured with two ravens and wolves. Odin was married to *Frigg*, who was the goddess of agriculture.

Odin and Frigg had several children. Thor, Odin’s favorite son, was the strongest of the gods. He was the protector of humans, and always carried around a large hammer for battle. His brother, Baldr, was the most beautiful of the gods. Loki, the “trickster” god, killed Baldr, and after that became an enemy to the gods of the Æsir.

There are many other gods and mythical creatures to learn about in the Norse tradition. These stories also continue to influence Scandinavian and Germanic folklore today!

## **Norse Runes**

A lot of what we know about Vikings comes from other cultures that came into contact with them. However, archaeologists have also found large rocks inscribed in a written language called *runes*. Runes included images and an alphabet that changed depending on the message. Many runestones were made in memory of the dead, and they tell of famous battles or Viking heroes that died at war.

One well-known rune site is called the *Jelling Stone*, which has two large rocks with three different sides. It is thought that King Gorm the Old ordered this rune to be made in the late 10<sup>th</sup> century. The images honor his wife, Queen Thyre.