

## Valhalla Rising: The Age of Vikings and Their Legacy

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Few periods in European history leave as great an impression as the Viking Age. From 793-1066 CE, much of Europe became victims of constant raids, settlement and conquest by seafaring peoples from the North. These Vikings would sack the cities of Christendom, explore the far-flung reaches of the globe, and settle in nations where their legacy lives on even today. Their subsequent success in raiding, settling and exploration can be attributed to two key factors. First, their unique pagan religion which provided strong guidelines and beliefs for their actions both home and abroad. Second, their specialized martial culture that produced infamously fierce warriors and lastly a highly advanced sense of nautical and practical ingenuity that allowed them to navigate the world and tame it. It would be these factors especially that would ensure the Viking's foothold in Europe and help them leave a long-lasting legacy that ensured their success. They opened the pathway to wealth, glory, honor and worthy life everlasting.

For the monks at Lindisfarne Abbey in CE 793, it was any other day. Prayers and hymns were sung, chores done, Christ had been worshipped, and all seemed quiet and quaint. Indeed, the Christian world of England seemed good and fair, and none suspected any sort of disruption. However, the presence of ships on the horizon would bring violent winds of change to the monastery, to England, and to the rest of Christian Europe. The men on these ships were not there to sell or trade goods, but to take and give nothing back. Their Gods were Odin and Thor and Freya, and they did not kneel before the Christ-God that had converted most of Western world. These men landed on the island, killed and enslaved the monks, and looted the entire monastery. Only leaving behind a trail of blood and burning ruins. This date would mark the beginning of the Viking age.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Thorpe (ed. and trans.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, according to the Several Original Authorities* (London: Longmans, 1861), 262.

The Vikings originated from what is now considered Scandinavia, which consists of present-day Norway, Denmark and Sweden. Though these nations shared a similar cultural heritage, the Vikings from these nations seldom acted together, and often had their own agendas. The homeland of the Vikings was relatively inhospitable, and consisted mostly of tundra and forests, with no land for large farms. Vikings played host to brutal winters. The farms that Vikings did have were small, with little variety in livestock. They were, however, excellent craftsmen; this was mainly due to specialized skills specific Vikings had and could do. For example, one woman would make the shirts, clothes and other garments for her village, while another Viking specialized in blacksmithing or wood carving. This specialization created a “quality over quantity” market whose goods were highly valued by other European nations. The trade between these nations became stifled when religion came into play; many of the now Christian European nations had a problem trading goods with a people who still practiced paganism. This hesitance towards trade put unnecessary stress on Viking markets, and as a result they settled for simply taking what they wanted as opposed to trading for it. The attack on Lindisfarne was not the first recording of the Vikings per-se, but the first account of a violent attack upon innocents by them. Indeed, Christianity may have, albeit accidentally, spurred on these attacks, it was the Viking religion that sent them forth to begin with.

“Norse” Paganism played a large part in not only the violent raids, but also helped form the martial culture that produced such incredible Viking warriors. The pantheon of the gods of the Vikings consisted of the chief God Odin and his family. These gods were warlike beings who meddled with the affairs of the mortals and sought to hinder or help when they saw fit to do so. These Gods did not possess a human code of ethics and were deemed to be beyond such “human” social constructs. They were mischievous, spiteful, cruel, and wanton in their ways, especially in regard to the treatment of mortals. Curiously enough, these gods were also not entirely immortal: they were aware of their demise at Ragnarök, the Viking equivalent to the apocalypse. This knowledge about the mortality of all things led to a sense of fatalism amongst the Vikings, an acceptance of one’s own death at some point in time. Yet, immortality was attainable for Vikings; they could ascend to “Valhalla”, a great hall of slain warriors presided over by Odin and the Valkyries who selected the worthy. To

be worthy, one must have had an honorable death, dying bravely in combat.<sup>2</sup> This one chance at glory would act as an impetus for Vikings to go forth and seek battle wherever they went. They fought as ferociously as they could, for Odin was watching them. Also, unlike their Christian neighbors, the Vikings had no concept of “sin.” While they possessed a moral compass that was catered to their lifestyles, and had laws and regulations in their own lands, they did not receive a set of ethics from a divine source. The Viking gods were not naturally ethical in what they did, and ethics was considered solely a human property.<sup>3</sup> These violent, curious, and warlike Gods helped inspire Vikings to sail elsewhere and this mentality would also form guidelines on how Vikings treated foreigners whose land they invaded, as well as the residual treatment of rulers of those kingdoms.<sup>4</sup> To the Vikings, violence was a justifiable means to an end, just as the Gods themselves did whatever it took to accomplish what they sought to do. As Robert Ferguson has noted, “this Ruthlessness in pursuit of his own ends made Odin feared and admired by his followers and, we as we shall see, Viking warriors abroad would very often take their cue from him in their dealings with the Christian kings of England and Francia.”<sup>5</sup>

With this religious mindset and their own code of ethics, the Vikings built a martial culture around fighting, raiding and combat. This culture differed significantly from those further West, whom though they had their own warriors, were not built on such a socio-political system surrounding warfare and combat as the Vikings were. One notable aspect of this Viking culture was slavery. One of the most prized spoils of a Viking raid were slaves. Vikings would enslave people from the villages they raided, and they would sell them back home, or to whomever they came across in the market. Viking society was stratified not only on political standings, but also on the concepts of “free” and “slave.” Slavery was also deemed to be hereditary; children born to any slave, regardless of whether the father was a free Viking or not, were still considered slaves.<sup>6</sup> Slavery could also be a punishment to any Viking who broke the law.<sup>7</sup> A slave’s life was not a nice one; they were used as human sacrifices to

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<sup>2</sup> Else Roesdahl, *The Vikings* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 156-166.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Ferguson, *The Vikings: A History* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 31.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-25.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-31.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-57.

the gods and were killed and buried along with their master when they died<sup>8</sup>. Another key factor of Viking society was honor. Honor was a prized trait among Vikings, and the code of honorable conduct was passed down orally through poems, as well as runic inscriptions.<sup>9</sup> One source of this code was *The Hávamál*, “The Speech of The High One.” These were poems passed down supposedly from Odin himself. They taught etiquette and conduct and stressed that honor and reputation were the only everlasting things in Viking’s life. Two such verses go like this:

Cattle die,  
kindred die,  
every man is mortal:  
but the good name  
never dies  
of one who has done well.  
Cattle die,  
kindred die,  
every man is mortal:  
but I know one thing  
that never dies,  
The glory of the great deed.<sup>10</sup>

This code of honor only pertained to Vikings, not to the people they raided. Crimes like rape and murder were permissible if they were inflicted upon non-Viking peoples, which led to particular brutality during many raids.<sup>11</sup> Though there were laws and legal ramifications for Viking criminals, the biggest impact would have been the shame upon one’s honor. In fact, a Viking’s life was usually structured around the oppositions of honor and shame, as well as living within the confines of Viking law and etiquette.<sup>12</sup> Raiding, however, was not the main job of a Viking. They were farmers and craftsmen first and foremost. Many Viking raiders actually raided out of necessity. Many of them were second born sons who, by Viking cultural standards,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 29-31.

<sup>9</sup> Roesdahl, *Vikings*, 65-68.

<sup>10</sup> Author unknown, translated by Henry Adams Bellows, *The Hávamál* (Nashville: Fateful Signs, 2016), verses 77-78.

<sup>11</sup> Roesdahl, *Vikings*, 65-68.

<sup>12</sup> Ferguson, *Vikings: A History*, 31.

inherited little from their parents. The family house and farm would go to the eldest. This practice, though common, was not set in stone.<sup>13</sup>

What was set in stone and at times quite literally, was their language, or at least its written form. The runes that the Vikings used as an alphabet of sorts consisted of sixteen different characters that were usually carved into runestones, wooden sticks or bones.<sup>14</sup> These runes had different meanings on their own and could also be pronounced differently depending on how they were used.<sup>15</sup> This has led to most runic inscriptions found to be nearly indecipherable, as we do not know what they were trying to say exactly.<sup>16</sup> The runes have been found engraved on various Viking age items, from combs to spear handles, but are abundantly found in runestones.<sup>17</sup> Thousands of runestones have been found in Scandinavia, and other smaller runic inscriptions have been found throughout the Viking colonies.<sup>18</sup> These runestones provide insight into Viking socio-political structure and cultural history. One such inscription found in Sweden reads as follows:

Runa had this memorial made to Spiallbudi and to Svein and to Andvett and to Ragnar, her sons and Helgi's, and Sigrid to Spiallbudi, and her husband. He met his death in Hólmgard in Olav's church. Öpir cut the runes.<sup>19</sup>

The runestones act as an invaluable source of archaeological information, as the Vikings were a culture who never wrote down any of their history. Most of what Vikings knew was passed down orally through poems. Most accounts of Vikings are either written by those they attacked or written hundreds of years later as sagas by poets. Poems like *The Prose Edda* provide context into Viking life and their exploits, though from a later time when Vikings as we know them no longer existed. If anything, sagas were an example of cultural remembrance and preservation from a Scandinavia that was changing in both structure and religion. By the time the *Prose Edda* was written, the Viking age had drawn to a close, and a majority of the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>14</sup> Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, 51-53.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 15.

Scandinavian peoples were now Christian. The sagas were a way of remembering an honored past, old gods of magic and nature and lineage now lost.

Viking culture was also unique in how it viewed gender relations. Women played a huge part in Viking society. While men held the upper hand in most things, women had some individual liberties and control of their lives to a degree. They controlled the house and the coin purse and could substitute in the political roles of their husbands if needed. Women had such an important role in Viking society that many runestones erected are dedicated to deceased women, whether it was a wife, a mother, or a sister. Women also were important in terms of lineage. Despite public belief, Viking lineage was not entirely patriarchal but could be based on the mother's bloodline as well. A claim of kingship or position of power based on a maternal blood line was equally valid as to that of a paternal one.<sup>20</sup>

As for combat, there is much debate on a woman's role. There are references made to "shield maidens" in poems, and Odin's Valkyries were all specifically female, which would lead to the belief that the concept of a female warrior was not far-fetched to the Vikings. The great heathen army that ravaged England in the year 890 CE. was said to contain women, but those women were most likely wives of the soldiers<sup>21</sup>. Burial sites have revealed female skeletons surrounded by weapons, indicating that these women may have known how to use them. One such gravesite is the gravesite known as "Bj 581" and was found in Birka, Sweden. This "Birka" woman as she is sometimes referred to, was found in a large grave that depicted a high social status. However, this female was buried with weapons alongside homewares. It was due to this find, that many archaeologists generally assumed the body was male, up until recently when genetic research proved otherwise<sup>22</sup>. The reasons why she was buried with weapons has not yet been resolved or agreed upon. Bj 581 differed from the norm for female Viking graves, like a rather lavish one found in Oseberg, Norway. Typical female graves contained home utensils, needlework artifacts, jewelry, household items and even in some cases the bodies of lapdogs.<sup>23</sup> Yet, since Vikings seldom, if ever, wrote anything down, there was never any clear

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 62-64.

<sup>22</sup> Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, "Grave Bj 581: the Viking Warrior that was a Woman," Paper Presented at the Archaeological Institute of America Annual Meeting, Assumption College, March 12, 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

description of what a “shield maiden” actually was, if they existed at all. Despite the growing archaeological evidence that there may have been female warriors, these women were most likely scarce around the entirety of Scandinavia. Outside of the homestead, the Viking woman had few options aside from marrying a good man and bearing children. However, marriage was considered a union of equals, and the woman was allowed to divorce her husband.<sup>24</sup> Adultery also carried a severe punishment for both parties regardless of gender.<sup>25</sup> Viking society seemed somewhat more progressive than their western neighbors, a surprising notion given the Viking’s public perception at the time. But that just alludes to how complex their society actually was.

The political culture of the Vikings was complex in itself. The Viking communities relied on a specific socio-political structure to help keep the community together, to defend it and to help organize expeditions and raids. Viking culture was headed by warlords or chieftains, known as *Jarls*, who had bands of warriors around them. In exchange for loyalty, these warlords would reward them with feasts and spoils and constant warfare. These men enjoyed violence and fought for their chief while the warlord himself fought for victory: “the Bravest, and most warlike do no work; they give over the management of the household, of the home, and of the land, to women, the old men, and the weaker members of the family.”<sup>26</sup> Profiting from this martial life, Viking raiders usually relied on raiding and violence to make a name for themselves, thinking that labor or farming was deemed beneath them or stupid. In some cases, many of these warriors would be related either to each other or to the warlord himself. Though polygamy was not culturally accepted, it seems Viking men could have multiple “wives”; though these would not have been formal marriages at all, and sired multiple children, all legitimate under Viking law.<sup>27</sup> Essentially, a raiding party could have been comprised of a warlord, his sons, and subsequent half-brothers. Ideally, this would create a lasting loyalty between the warriors and the warlord, as his men would share blood ties with him, as well as ensuring the continuation of his bloodline. The lives of children in the Viking community are relatively unknown. If they survived infancy, most likely they enjoyed a brief

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ferguson, *The Vikings: A History*, 45.

<sup>27</sup> Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, 64.

childhood before being given tasks around the house and given roles in society at large as they grew older. A young Viking man could very well have raided and fought and even probably married while still in his early teenage years. As a Viking, and as an early medieval European in general, children and young adults tended to grow up fast.

Another aspect of the Viking political culture that made them unique was the *Thing*. The thing was an assembly held for all free Viking people to attend. These assemblies were where issues of the village were discussed, fellowships and deals were made, marriages and dowries arranged, oaths made, grievances aired, and general announcements declared.<sup>28</sup> This was also where plans and strategies were announced for upcoming raids, and input was accepted by all free Vikings who attended, even women. This was sort of a community “town hall” meeting by today’s standards. While planning a raid and garnering public opinion on it was one thing, executing the raid itself was another issue. One of the biggest factors that attributed the most to the Viking’s success in raiding, exploration and settlement was not just the gods or military prowess. It was their ships.

These iconic ships are usually one of the notable associations that people have with the Vikings. With their iconic dragon figure heads and long oars, they were a foreboding site to any villager who glimpsed them on the horizon. The Vikings were expert seamen, as well as navigators. This, mixed with their martial expertise and religious beliefs, made them formidable opponents and masters on the high seas. Ships were incredibly important to Vikings. They provided means to trade, transport to villages that were ripe for raiding and access to lands that were once considered unreachable. These ships were so important, that several archaeological sites have revealed burials with entire ships inside the burial mound. One incredibly famous site was the Osberg ship in Norway. This site was absolutely massive, almost fifty meters in length.<sup>29</sup> It contained the bodies of two women.<sup>30</sup> It also contained several wagons, sledges, and even animals. The ship itself was placed under a massive mound. This burial is considered by archaeologists to perhaps denote a high status for the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>29</sup> Gareth Williams, Sue Brunning, and Jan Bill, “Anglo Saxon and Viking Ship Burial: The British Museum,” *medievalists.net* (June 2014), <https://www.medievalists.net/2014/06/anglo-saxon-viking-ship-burial-british-museum/>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.



individuals who were buried there.<sup>31</sup> Ships obviously played such a large role in the Viking's success, as well as everyday life, that it had to be included in the afterlife. The amount of hard work and dedication it must have taken to even bury such an object speaks volumes about how much the Vikings stressed the importance of their ships. It would be these ships and their unique construction that would also guarantee success on their raids and make them one of the deadliest forces on both land and sea.

The Vikings also put sails on their ships, which allowed them to catch the wind and sail on long voyages. This was unheard of at the time, as not many were able to cross great oceans and seas with their versions of ships.<sup>32</sup> This also made it easy for Vikings to escape if they wanted, as they could not be pursued on the high seas by any ships of those they attacked. These ships had oar ports as well, which allowed a mixture of rowing and sailing, making the Viking ship incredibly fast. These vessels were also designed to sail through shallow rivers, allowing Viking raiders to sail inwards from the coast if they found a river outlet.<sup>33</sup> This also meant that villages and cities inland had no greater sense of safety than their coastal countrymen. These ships also had keels, which took most of the damage from being pushed up onto shore, but also made it quicker to be pushed back out to water, making the landing and leaving of raiding parties efficient and lightning fast.<sup>34</sup> The ships could also go under bridges due to the masts being removable and allowing oarsmen to do most of the work.<sup>35</sup> In short, these were cutting edge ships, capable of great speeds, and able to penetrate the innermost rivers of Europe. This lightning nautical speed matched with ruthless brutal precision made experiencing a Viking raid a truly terrifying ordeal. As for how the Vikings found their way around the seas and rivers they sailed, the answer lay in their rather unique navigation skills. It is generally believed that the Vikings had no real navigation tools, but it is suspected that they used the stars, the waves and the sun to navigate where they were. These routes were then passed down through oral tradition.<sup>36</sup> Essentially, their routes consisted of them sailing to a shoreline, then sailing down it until they reached a city or village or inlet

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, 87-92.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 89-92.

that would take them further inland, at which point, they had the option of going by foot the rest of the way.

Using this mixture of martial culture, high-tech sailing ships, military speed and prowess, the Vikings were able to obtain vast wealth and territory, allowing them to explore new areas and settle new lands. They made settlements where they raided as well. These factors also helped them dominate their opponents, who lacked the capabilities to do little else but defend themselves from perpetual attack. It is no surprise that these sailing methods coupled with their faith and skill, brought enormous success to the Viking endeavors. It also made the Vikings see those they attacked as inferior sheep waiting to be plundered.

In 845 CE, a Viking named Ragnar Lothbrok led series of raids against Francia. These raids culminated in the sacking of Paris within the same year. According to Ragnar, “never had he seen lands so fertile, and so rich, nor a people so cowardly.”<sup>37</sup> The cowardice of the French paid off, as France succumbed to paying the Vikings 7,000 pounds of gold and silver as a ransom for France’s safety as opposed to trying to fight Ragnar and his men.<sup>38</sup> This became a custom of other nations as well; simply paying off the Vikings instead of allowing them to run rampant over the country. This created dilemmas as well, as the Vikings would frequently return expecting the ransom to be paid out again.<sup>39</sup> Gold and silver, however, were not the only goods Vikings sought. What they wanted just as badly was fertile farmland and a place to settle that was actually hospitable for agriculture. They would find that much of Western Europe would do nicely, and thus the Viking colonization of England, Ireland and other countries began.

The beginning of the English raids by Vikings began in 789 CE but continued until at least 886. However, as the raids progressed over the years, the Vikings began to slowly settle into this alien country. This culminated with Danish Vikings taking the northern territory of York and Eastern parts of England between the years of 865-866 CE.<sup>40</sup> King Alfred of England (848-899) agreed to a treaty

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<sup>37</sup> Peter Sawyer, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*. (Oxford University Press, 1997), 40.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Danielle Trynoski. “The Viking Cities of Dublin and York: Examining Scandinavian Cultural Change and Viking Urbanism,” *medievalists.net* (April 2012), accessed March 23, 2021. <https://www.medievalists.net/2012/04/the-viking-cities-of-dublin-and-york-examining-scandinavian-cultural-change-and-viking-urbanism/>

between the English and the Danes. The territory was called “The Danelaw.” It was essentially an autonomous Viking colony. Upon settlement, there began a mixture of English and Danish peoples, slowly blurring the lines between who was a Viking and who was English. Around the same time, the Vikings began to settle in Ireland. There, the Vikings found a small, swampy area that was easy to settle and defend if necessary. They named the place “Dubh-Lin”, meaning Black-Pool, in 845 CE, which would soon evolve from a few small fishing huts, into a much larger Viking settlement known now as Dublin.<sup>41</sup> The geographies of York and Dublin were similar in that both areas resided near a river.<sup>42</sup> This made trade, plus the arrival and departure of raiding ships more accessible to these settlements. The downside to acquiring these territories was that the Vikings would have to fight tooth and nail to both acquire and defend them, as the native populations were understandably hostile to the Vikings being there.<sup>43</sup>

“The wind is rough tonight/tossing the white-combed ocean;/I need not dread fierce Vikings/crossing the Irish Sea.”<sup>44</sup> This poem was written by an Irish monk fearing the seemingly endless raids by the Vikings. Official Irish cities and towns did not exist during the Viking age, and the only real structures that kept an otherwise nomadic people gathered, were the monasteries and the farms that surrounded them.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, this made the monasteries prime raiding targets for the Vikings, who would reap massive spoils of both wealth and slaves<sup>46</sup>. In one instance, sixty-eight individuals were “lost to death or slavery”<sup>47</sup> at the hands of Vikings. To escape these attacks, the Celtic Irish peoples began to move more and more inland in order to build better defenses. What transpired was a dangerous game of cat and mouse. To combat this change in their prey, the Vikings changed their own tactics. Instead of their usual smash and grab blitz they had become so infamous for, the Vikings chose instead to follow the Irish and hunker down in camps and winter in the inland area.<sup>48</sup> The results of these encampments resulted in the finding

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Trynoski, “The Viking Cities of Dublin and York: Examining Scandinavian Cultural Change and Viking Urbanism”.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

of a plethora of artifacts, indicating that several thousand Vikings may have been encamped in Dublin at a time.<sup>49</sup>

These camps, also known as *longphorts*, were originally designed for ship repair when the boats were out of the water during the winter months.<sup>50</sup> Over time, these camps began to grow into fortresses with non-military settlements inside.<sup>51</sup> This was also due to a need for defense from the Irish kings who attacked the Vikings as they wintered. According to archaeological research done in Ireland, Dublin seems to have been the largest of these forts.<sup>52</sup> Over time, these settlements and forts became larger and more permanent, with more settlers moving inland. Dwellings were put up around these forts. Eventually Dublin would evolve from simple camp to a growing urban city; a hub for Viking trade routes along the Irish coast.<sup>53</sup> The attacks on the monasteries and Irish people stopped altogether, and instead, the Vikings worked out an agreement with them. The Irish would pay taxes to the Vikings in return for protection and the cessation of any further raids.<sup>54</sup> Whether it was intentional or not, the Vikings shaped Ireland, notably Dublin, from a small swamp with fishing huts to a large urban center of commerce and trade. The Vikings brought pain and devastation to the Irish peoples, but they had also brought urbanization, commerce and economy to a nation that essentially had nothing to its name. Today, the Viking museum in Dublin pays homage to their presence, proudly displaying the trove of artifacts found therein. From the bloody seeds of conquest, prosperity bloomed.

York was a different story. Originally a Roman territory, it had since been taken over by the Christian kings of Northumbria, the strongest of all the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.<sup>55</sup> York also became the religious capital of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, as it contained the only other archbishopric and only cathedral on the island.<sup>56</sup> York also already had infrastructure as well. Archaeological research shows that the Anglo-Saxons utilized some of the remaining Roman structures.<sup>57</sup> However,

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Trynoski, "The Viking Cities of Dublin and York: Examining Scandinavian Cultural Change and Viking Urbanism."

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Trynoski, "The Viking Cities of Dublin and York: Examining Scandinavian Cultural Change and Viking Urbanism."

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

the archeological evidence also shows that the city was grossly underpopulated and was already experiencing “urban decay” by the time the Vikings arrived there.<sup>58</sup> They faced little resistance when the time came to settle. The Vikings by this time had changed their motives from simple acts with quick raids, to longer campaigns for land and resources. The Viking army marched from Kent to York in 866 CE and took the city fairly easily.<sup>59</sup> They stopped the campaign at York, declared it their new capital city of the territory, and began settling down within it. Soon, soldiers became manufacturers and farmers. Visions of war turned to visions of agriculture as York became an urban city of commerce and trade amongst the Vikings. Archaeological evidence found between 1976 and 1981, in the Coppergate area, revealed that the city did indeed expand in both industry and population once the Vikings arrived, as determined by the soil layers matching the period and the abundance of artifacts found therein.<sup>60</sup> Items included, but not limited to: iron coin dies, jewelry, leather shoes, scabbards, knives, needles, combs, wooden cups, plates, amber, jet, ceramic wine containers from the Rhineland, Byzantine silk, Chinese pottery, gaming pieces, whistles and pan pipes. All these examples point to a flourishing Viking Settlement in both cities, and that these areas were experiencing large economic and social growth.<sup>61</sup> In many ways, the Vikings forced change on these two cities, forever altering them arguably, for the better. Through them, prosperity emerged, and from muddy swamps and ruins came urban areas of great wealth and industry. This was how the legacy of the Vikings would live on, not by the sword and the axe, but by the plough and coin.

Dublin and York are but two examples of how the Vikings settled and expanded their reach, not just across Europe, but the world. In 874 CE, the Vikings discovered and settled Iceland. In 982 CE, Erik the Red discovers and began to settle Greenland. The Vikings would even try their luck, unsuccessfully, in Spain. Yet, the most famous exploit of the Vikings, one that is still important to this day, was the discovery of what the Vikings called “Vinland”, so named after the abundance of grape vines they saw. It is now known as North America. The topic of the Vinland expeditions is a rather exciting one. It points to the fact that Christopher Columbus

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Trynoski, “The Viking Cities of Dublin and York: Examining Scandinavian Cultural Change and Viking Urbanism.”

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

was in fact not the first to discover North America. Rather, it was Leif Erikson (c. 970-c.1020), son of Greenland founder Erik the Red; and he did so some centuries earlier. The *Vinland Saga* tells the story of Erikson's exploits in as true a fashion as a poetic saga possibly could. Though the saga is a story of sorts, there is sufficient concrete evidence within it regarding North American topography and natural resources that seems to paint a clear picture that the Vikings had in fact been in North America.<sup>62</sup>

Further archaeological evidence, in the form of a Viking era settlement in Newfoundland discovered by archaeologists Helge Ingstad and Anne Stine Ingstad provides irrefutable evidence of a Viking presence in North America.<sup>63</sup> There is also a famous map, now at Yale University, that seems to depict the route to, and the outline of North America as the Vikings knew it. The legitimacy of this map is debated; some believe it is genuine, some believe it is a hoax, and some think it is real but was made after the Viking era. Nevertheless, Vikings landed in North America, but the question remains as to why they did not stay. The sagas and the archaeological evidence point to a specific reason as to why the Vikings never stayed. That reason was the Skraelings.

For centuries it was debated as to whether the Vinland Sagas had any merit to them, or if they were just works of Viking fiction. Upon the discovery of the site in Canada it became clear that this was no myth. However, a specific part of the tale puzzled scholars up until then. It pertained to a battle fought in Vinland between Vikings and what the sagas referred to as "Skraelings". This name is an obscure definition, and nobody is sure why these individuals earned a name like that, and what the Vikings may have meant by calling them that has since been lost. However, it has since been determined that this is referencing early Native Americans, specifically the Beothuk tribe, now extinct.<sup>64</sup> These two groups most likely did not start out as hostile, but over time skirmishes erupted as verified by the sagas. Vikings obviously had the military advantage in terms of weapon quality. Having the ability to smelt and forge iron weapons, gave the Vikings the upper hand. It also appears that

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<sup>62</sup> *Vinland Sagas; The Norse Discovery of America*, Magnússon, Magnús, editor, translator; Hermann Pálsson, 1921-2002 (New York: New York University Press, 1966).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Brian Burfield. "Sagas, Swords and Skraelings: The Vikings in North America," *Medieval Warfare* 3, no. 1 (2013): 47-52.

the Beothuk tribe were in awe and afraid of these weapons and their lethality<sup>65</sup>. The presence of Vikings arms and armor, along with metal ornamental garnishments and trinkets most likely intimidated these people who only were using stone tipped weapons at the time<sup>66</sup>. The Beothuk, however, had the home advantage. The Vikings, at this point in time, accustomed to strange lands, were out of place in North America. They did not know the terrain, and they were far away from any sort of military backup. Indeed, even in the sagas, despite having the fighting advantage, Leif Erikson did lose men to the Beothuk. The first fight seems to have occurred after Leif Erikson's brother Thorvald and his men slew some eight Beothuk and incurred the wrath of others who engaged the Vikings in battle. Thorvald became the only casualty, but the Vikings succeeded in driving their foes away.<sup>67</sup> The second battle came some time later, when the Vikings traded the Beothuk milk for furs and pelts. The natives agreed to the trade but were upset afterwards. The natives were understandably lactose-intolerant, since they had never had milk before.<sup>68</sup> There was no way for the Vikings to have known this, but it made matters worse when the Vikings killed a native for trying to steal weapons.<sup>69</sup> Fearing reprisal, the Vikings made ready for battle. This time they had reinforcements from a recent company sent to Vinland, led by Thorfinn Karlsefni.<sup>70</sup> Still outnumbered, Torfinn plotted to trap the Beothuk warriors, using the forest to their advantage. The resulting battle ended in victory for the Vikings as the Beothuk warriors fled after being properly routed. Allegedly, Leif's sister Freydis, who was very much pregnant at the time, even managed to fight as well; grabbing a sword, exposing her breasts and screaming at the Beothuk, tapping herself with the sword to goad them into attacking<sup>71</sup>.

Overall, the source of the strife seemed to be that these were two completely different and incompatible sets of cultures. Language barriers aside, one was a stone age people, the other an iron age people. Both were aggressive towards the other and both shared a healthy level of distrust. The Vikings had ventured in to somewhere

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Burfield. "Sagas, Swords and Skraelings: The Vikings in North America." *Medieval Warfare* 3, no. 1 47-52.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Magnús Magnússon and Hermann Pálsson (Ed. and Trans.) *Vinland Sagas; The Norse Discovery of America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 100-101.

completely new and different, and this time it did not pay off. It simply became too dangerous to live under the threat of constant attack in a strange land with a foe who had superior numbers. This eventually led to the settlers moving back home and away from Vinland, despite all it offered. Vinland was a gamble for the Vikings, and it cost them more than it was worth. They would still visit Vinland for lumber and other goods, but any sort of long-term settlement had been thrown out by that time.<sup>72</sup>

Interestingly, DNA studies of certain Icelandic peoples today show traces of Native American descent, a genetic reminder that Vikings once roamed North America, and the now extinct Beothuk could still exist even if only on a genetic level.<sup>73</sup>

The Viking age lasted from 793 to 1066 CE. They changed or discovered much of the known world. From Asia and the middle East, all over Europe and North America, the Vikings established themselves as a cultural force to be reckoned with. They were lords of the seas, masters of the axe and sword, farmers and craftsmen. They literally carved their names across history as one of the greatest forces ever to put themselves upon the European map. Yet, like all empires and golden ages, it came to an end.

One of the death knells for the Viking age was Christianity. By the end of their age, most Vikings had accepted the Christ-God into their pantheon and moved on from Odin and the others, though that transition took some time. No longer were they able to land victories like they used to either. Nations had grown wise to their tactics and practices and had grown to a point where they could effectively fight back. Alfred the Great took back England and dismantled the Danelaw, though by that time most of the cultural mixing had already happened and most people had Viking blood in their veins to some extent. The Vikings had grown rich from trading and manufacturing as raiding became less and less of a glorified occupation. The political sphere had shifted as well. Scandinavia had become distinct kingdoms now. Gone were the days of the warlord; now replaced by legitimate kings like Harald Fine hair, who unified Norway as its first king. The sun was setting on the Viking story, and it would eventually end with the death of Harald Hadrada, and the invasion of England by the Normans of France. Ironically, William the Conqueror of Normandy was descended from Vikings himself.

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<sup>72</sup> Burfield, "Sagas, Swords and Skraelings," 47-52.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.



Despite them being gone, Vikings play a huge part in pop culture today, whether it be the logo of an NFL team or even the iconic, if not horribly inaccurate horned helmet. There is even a resurgent interest in the Viking's history, spurred on by recent and exciting archeological finds. Their unique religion, martial culture and technological prowess on the high seas earned them riches, combat, land, and glory. Their successes in life, and the successes of their age, were heavily influenced by these factors. Without them, the Vikings would have been little more than mere pirates. These factors would be the tools by which the Vikings would shape their world and leave a lasting impression for ages to come. In a way, this allowed the Vikings to achieve a sense of immortality, if only in legacy and cultural memory. Perhaps Valhalla is found rather in the pages of history than in some magical hall. If such is the case, then the Vikings have more than earned their place in it.