

Vikings

Between 700 and 1000 A.D. there were many barbarian invaders across Western Europe but none were as fierce and dreaded as the Vikings. They came from Scandinavia, the countries today we know as Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland.

The Vikings were a Germanic Tribe who were also called Northmen or Norsemen. They were polytheistic however their gods were warlike gods. For many years the Vikings fought amongst themselves and no real king emerged to control their region. Eventually, the Vikings turned their anger toward the rest of Europe.

The Vikings were mostly a subsistence type of agricultural society but they did develop great artisans and craftsmen and their skills were put to use by building the Viking longship. When completed, these ships could carry up to 300 people but they were amazingly agile for a sailing ship that could weight over 20 tons when fully loaded.

In addition to the one main sail there were up to 72 oars, 36 on each side of the vessel that were manned by the Viking warriors. What made the Viking ship so stealthy was that it had a shallow draft, meaning that the underside of the vessel was designed so that it could sail in only three feet of water. The sail was often brightly painted in honor of their gods or a fabled monster of the sea. The front end of the Viking ship curved upward and often ended with a carved head of a sea monster. It could quietly sail and be rowed up many of the rivers and into areas that contained villages and monasteries, all targets for looting and pillaging.



A Viking ship, dragon head and oar shields

The Vikings carried out their raids quickly, fiercely and efficiently. Their weapons of choice were metal swords and heavy wooden shields and for protection they wore a helmet made of metal or reinforced animal hide and metal. Most of the men wore large, bushy beards, which also made them appear more savage. They crept up on their prey, attacked and then quickly moved back out to sea. The Vikings soon became very wealthy from their raids. At first only a few Viking ships raided Europe but as soon as the word spread of the wealth in Europe, more Viking ships were built and the raids became more and more frequent.

In one instance, the Vikings sailed up the river Seine in France and stopped just outside the city of Paris. They sent a message to the city's officials that they were going to invade. To save the city, the people of Paris gave the Vikings chests and chests of gold cups, plates, silverware and other valuable items so not to have the Vikings destroy their city. In their typical fashion, the Vikings continued to return to Paris, each time stating the same demand and each time the city gave them more tribute until the people of Paris ran out of valuables to give.



A Viking Leader leading a raid

The Vikings, after amassing this wealth, then became traders. In their search for wealth they explored down rivers into the heart of Russia, they sailed as far east as Constantinople and even across the Atlantic Ocean.

Historians believe that a Viking was the first Western European to land in North America. According to carbon dating and examination of ancient remains, it is believed that Leif Ericson started a small settlement in Canada around the year 1000 A.D., almost 500 years before Christopher Columbus. The Vikings also started settlements on Iceland and Greenland but they did not last too long as most of the original settlers returned home after not being able to make a better living for themselves. Some stayed and to this day, people of Viking descent still live in Greenland and Iceland.



A typical Viking settlement

The Vikings main source of income for trading came from the city of Kiev. It was there that they traded home grown agricultural products, unwanted items from past raids and other Viking wares such as jewelry and hides for slaves. The Vikings were the main traders of slaves, often people captured from their raids and sold in the open markets within Kiev.

Due to their trading habits, the Vikings brought back from foreign lands many different goods and ideas. One of these was Christianity and it quickly took hold within many of the Viking settlements. Once the Vikings had converted there were fewer raids made in foreign lands and more trading took place. Kings emerged within the Viking provinces that stabled their relationships with each other. The Vikings did continue to trade and believing that they could dominate the Western Europe trade routes they built the city of Christianstad (Oslo) as a center for commerce and trade.