

Owen Ainslie

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Our modern word for Viking comes from old English, which had a distinct word different from the rest of Europe for the raiding parties of the Scandinavians from the 700s – 1200s. In analyzing who the Vikings were and their historiographical significance there is a few different views of the group. There is the idea that Vikings were savage warriors, or the traditional view. That they were driven by piracy and commerce, the early revisionist view. That were intruders and invaders, or the contextualized view, and finally the Nuanced contemporary view. The most convincing argument on the view of the Vikings is the traditionalist view presented by Norman Cantor and others. The traditional view of the Vikings is they were violent, primitive war tribes with very few cultural contributions. By nature, they were destructive. Viking activity ramped up during a time in Scandinavia where political tensions and struggles between Denmark and Norway led people to flee. From the traditionalist perspective we will look at how Viking raiding was driven by the violence embedded in Viking society through their religions, politics, and economic necessity.

Viking society was inherently violent. There were constant petty wars going on, people being sold into slavery, normalized murder and more apart of daily life. In trying to understand the violence of Viking daily life we can split it into two distinct aspects of Viking life. The first is the violence individuals and people faced in their day-to-day life. The second is the violence of the Vikings institutions, like religions, and politics . On analyzing the first aspect of Viking violence, we can get a taste of the violence of everyday life for Vikings with the story of Olaf Trygvason's upbringing. As a child he had to escape Norway because he was seen as a rival to

throne by Harald Greylock.¹ Crossing the Baltic Sea he was captured and sold into slavery. His anger is described in great detail, “When he was angry, he was very savaged and tortured many of his enemies. Some he burned, some he had torn to pieces by wild dogs, some he had maimed or thrown from high cliffs.”² These depictions of Olaf Tryggvason’s early life and character exemplify the violence of Viking life. Internally, Viking people were constantly under threat by their lords and superiors, as well faced dangerous and challenging obstacles in life like being kidnapped and sold into slavery. Additionally, Olaf’s character being described as savage and torturous align with the challenges of his upbringing of Viking life. From youth we see that you could be a target for murder and slavery or a threat to the political stability of Viking territories. This would have hardened individuals from childhood that these were typical aspects of life.

The second major aspect of Viking violence was the plundering, extortion, and destruction of the Viking raiding parties that terrified Western Europe for a few hundred years. In 794 the King of Mercia died. It was recorded in one Anglo Saxon chronical that heathens raided in Northumbria the same year.³ They plundered and burned a monastery, killing many people. Then in 835 a great Danish fleet arrived in Cornwall.⁴ They fought against the currently established king of the west Saxons. These events depict how the Viking arrived unannounced at wreaked havoc and violence wherever they went. They killed looted burned and raped their way across England and western Europe. Therefore, from Cantor’s traditionalist view it is easy to see that the Vikings were a violent group of people. They had no sensitivity or care for the people

¹ Doc 28 (c), P.157.

² Doc 28 (c), P. 157.

³ Doc 38, P. 207.

⁴ Doc 38, P. 207.

who they harmed. They were motivated by too many external factors, these raiders had normalized the brutality, murder, and horror of their actions and it became a means to an end.

Moving back home to Scandinavian society another major aspect of Norman Cantors argument is that the Viking activity ramped up due to struggles at home. In fighting of the Viking elite for the thrones of Denmark and Norway cause political instability in Scandinavia. This instability played a large factor in the violent nature of Viking society and pushed people away from their homes to settle elsewhere. Not only at home were Vikings lives unstable but also wherever they settled they had unique issues to deal with as well. The immigration of Vikings to Iceland and Greenland in the North Atlantic both had unique challenges to deal with. At home the unification of Norway under King Harald was a bloody period of mass armies and unstable conditions. Harald inherited the throne when he was ten years old after the death of Hafdan the black it opened an opportunity for Harald to unify Norway under one throne.⁵ Harald set out with his forces and made his way for Upland.⁶ After successful battles against the king of Upland they then went to fight King Erik. After this battle, the Battle of Hafrsfjord somewhere between 885-890, King Harald had succeeded in unifying Norway under one crown.⁷ This shows a fragmentation of politics and communities in the middle period of the Viking age at home. Stay home and you were likely to be drafted in some petty king's army. This played a role then in sending Vikings abroad as plundering and looting were better alternatives to the wars at home.

Another aspect of both the violence and political insatiability at home was the famine under the rule of Domaldi in Sweden. They had a series of poor harvests, and their heathen

⁵ Doc 94, 420.

⁶ Doc 94, 421.

⁷ Doc 94, 424.

religion guided them to making sacrifices to their gods for better harvests.⁸ First, they sacrificed oxen then men. After continuing worse harvests, the people of Uppsala gathered and decided it was their king who was the problem.⁹ So, for the third year the town got together and decided that they would sacrifice their king in hopes for better harvest.¹⁰ Famine would cause people to go elsewhere in desperate search of food and goods. Conditions like this then at home when everything you are trying isn't working, and you result in sacrificing your leader depict the traditionalist view of the Vikings perfectly. They were Unsophisticated Germanic tribes sacrificing animals and people as a solution to their crop issue. The other group who took the more practical solutions of going elsewhere and taking what you need from other people is also a perfect depiction of what we think of as Vikings. Therefore, stories like this at home of political instability and sacrifice perfectly depict the internal factors pushing Vikings to go raiding, and why they were so violent.

The Viking religion and religious figures also represent and reinforce institutions of violence. Odin's halls is an example of this glorification. From the poem about Erik Blood axe entering Odins hall, there is an excitement about the arrival of Erik at the hall.¹¹ Odin is talking to his servant because he is so excited, he says "Because in many countries he has carried and reddened his blood-crimsoned sword."¹² This belief in Odins hall as an afterlife for Vikings would have encouraged violent behavior of Vikings if their final plan was to end up here. The more violent they were the more celebrated their arrival would be upon entering the hall. This belief perfectly encapsulates the Viking obsession with violence and how their heathen religion

⁸ Doc 12 (b), 65.

⁹ Doc 12 (b), 65.

¹⁰ Doc 12 (b), 65.

¹¹ Doc 10, 58.

¹² Doc 10, 59.

guided them toward violent conquests. Erik had been celebrated for spilling blood in several countries. Many Viking warriors would have hoped they too would be celebrated for the same reasons.

The traditional view of the Vikings is the best and most accurate argument in describing their legacy. They had minimal impact on the development of Western European culture and instead were a group of Heathens that when they had eventually converted to Christianity their activities as raiders and looters died down. They were a violent group of people, at home and aboard. They dealt with constant fighting wherever they went. Their Heathen religion and gods drove them to rash political decisions and embodied the violent nature of the peoples. Therefore, we can see that the Vikings were a tribal, Heathen people who were driven to looting and plundering due to poor political and economic conditions at home.

Bibliography

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Doc 28 "Viking Warriors and Their Weapons: Olaf Tryggvason, King of Norway." PP. 156-158.

Doc 94 "Harald Fine hair and the Unification of Norway." PP.420-425.

Doc 38 "Viking Raids on England" PP. 206-208.