

# Vikings

Viking towns in Scandinavia

Vikings ready to attack

The **Vikings** were [Scandinavian](#) people from Northern [Europe](#) who were known as great [seamen](#) and [warriors](#). From the 8th to the 11th centuries they travelled to Europe in their [long ships](#). They attacked and later [settled](#) in areas that are now [modern Great Britain](#), [Germany](#), [France](#), [Spain](#), and [Italy](#).<sup>[1]</sup>

## Background

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The people of the far [north](#), later called Vikings, were first noticed by the [Romans](#) around the year 100 [BC](#).<sup>[a][6]</sup> This is when the [Cimbri](#) and the [Teutons](#) moved into [southern Gaul](#).<sup>[6]</sup> The Romans believed these [war](#)-like tribes came from [Jutland](#). But the Romans suspected they were only a part of a greater [threat](#) located further north.<sup>[6]</sup> The Roman historians [Jordanes](#) described the [destructive Ostrogoths](#) and [Visigoths](#) as having come from [Gotland](#).<sup>[6]</sup>

The [Frankish Empire](#) that came after them in Gaul became more and more aware of the northern threat.<sup>[6]</sup> As the later [Carolingian Empire](#) expanded into northern [Germany](#) they came into contact with the [Danish people](#). This is when the Vikings appear in [written history](#).<sup>[6]</sup> The first recorded [raid](#) in [Britain](#) was at [Lindisfarne](#) in 793.<sup>[7]</sup> Why the Vikings began raiding is not clear. A popular [theory](#) is the [populations](#) had grown to the point there was not enough [food](#) to feed everyone.<sup>[8]</sup> The earliest raiders did not seem to want to move out of [Scandinavia](#). They turned to [looting](#), then returning home. These raids were possible because the Vikings were master [boat builders](#). They made flat bottomed boats ideal for journeys up [rivers](#). Many monasteries were on the rivers and were raided.<sup>[9]</sup> Raiding was easy. It became more and more popular among the Vikings.<sup>[8]</sup>

Three different groups of Vikings took different, sometimes [overlapping](#), routes.<sup>[8]</sup>

- **Danes** raided England and [Gaul](#). They followed the [Atlantic](#) coast of [Europe](#) south into the [Mediterranean](#) to [Italy](#).<sup>[8]</sup>
- **Swedes** went eastward into the [Baltic Sea](#). They followed the [Volga](#) and [Dnieper Rivers](#) south as far as the [Black Sea](#). One group, called the

[Rus'](#), founded the settlement of [Kiev](#). They called it Russland (later known as [Russia](#)).<sup>[8]</sup>

- **Norwegians** raided England but preferred Ireland and [Scotland](#). They also travelled to [Greenland](#). About the year 1,000 AD [Leif Erikson](#) landed at a place they called [Vinland](#) in [North America](#)).<sup>[8]</sup>

## Vikings in Europe

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A [helmet](#) that the Vikings wore

Europeans were scared of the Vikings because of their strong [weapons](#), swift [attacks](#), and cruel fighting tactics. They were known for their bad treatment of [women](#), [children](#) and [monks](#) in the places where they fought. When the Vikings came to England, the English kings paid them to leave the [country](#). The Vikings took their money and sometimes fought them anyway. These payments were called [Danegeld](#). From the [9th century](#) to [1066](#), when the [Duke of Normandy](#), who became [King William I](#) of England, [conquered](#) it, Danish and Norwegian Vikings ruled large parts of England.

Because of their [longships](#), which could float in 4 feet (1.3m) of water, the Vikings were able to make their way up [rivers](#) and land deep inside a country. They sailed up the [River Shannon](#) in Ireland and built a [harbour](#) 60 miles (100 km) from the [coast](#).

There was a difference in who led Viking raids. In the 9th century, Viking Age raids were led by men who may have been [exiles](#) in their own countries.<sup>[10]</sup> The later Viking raids in the late [10th century](#) and early [11th century](#) and were led by [Kings](#).<sup>[10]</sup> Some of the early leaders tried to become kings with the riches they plundered from Europe and Russia. Some were successful but most were not.<sup>[10]</sup>

## In Russia and the Mediterranean

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See also: [Kievan Rus'](#) and [Varangians](#)

The Vikings were called Rus' by the peoples [east](#) of the [Baltic Sea](#).<sup>[11]</sup> The Vikings who settled in [Kiev](#) formed the first Russian state.<sup>[11]</sup> The Vikings (Rus') who served the [Byzantine Emperors](#) were called [Varangians](#). They became the personal [bodyguards](#) to the Emperor and were called the [Varangian Guard](#).<sup>[12]</sup>

## Exploration

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The Vikings travelled through [Russia](#), the [Mediterranean Sea](#), southern Europe, northern [Africa](#) and south-western [Asia](#). Some Vikings sailed across the [Atlantic Ocean](#) via [Iceland](#) and [Greenland](#) and may have explored places in [North America](#). The ruins of a Viking settlement have been found at [L'Anse-aux-Meadows, Newfoundland](#).<sup>[13][14]</sup>

[Archaeologists](#) used [radiocarbon dating](#) to find out how old the settlement was. Their tests gave them a range of dates from about AD 700 to about AD 1000.<sup>[15]</sup>

## Language

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Some English words, and many place names, come from the Scandinavian and Viking language ([Norse](#)). For example, the words [skirt](#) and [shirt](#) came from the word *skyrta*, meaning a [tunic](#). As English changed, the [semantics](#) altered to give us the separate words 'skirt' and 'shirt' we know today. *Skin* came from the Norse word *skinn* (which meant to strip the meat off something). Some place-names in the areas the Vikings conquered are still in use.<sup>[16]</sup> For example, in [Yorkshire](#) places ending with *thwaite* meant a *clearing*<sup>[17]</sup> and *dale* meant a *valley*. The word *thorpe* meant *new village*, such as [Scunthorpe](#).<sup>[18]</sup>

## Religion

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See also: [List of Norse gods and goddesses](#)

Odin (also called Woden) the god of [war](#) and death. The day [Wednesday](#) is named for him

The [Anglo-Saxons](#) called the Vikings [pagans](#). They worshiped many gods. Viking gods belonged to two groups of gods in Norse [mythology](#), the [Aesir](#) and the [Vanir](#).<sup>[19]</sup>

The pagan Vikings were exposed to [Christianity](#) from the beginning of the [Viking Age](#).<sup>[20]</sup> They were surrounded by Christian countries. Early Christian [missionaries](#) were either [enslaved](#) or put to death.<sup>[21]</sup> The Vikings came into contact with Christianity when they raided other areas around them.<sup>[20]</sup> Viking raids produced many Christian slaves who were brought back to Scandinavia. They called Christians "Cross-men" because of the [cross](#) in their worship.<sup>[22]</sup> Many Vikings used [Thors](#) hammer as their religious symbol. When Vikings settled in Christian areas they [converted](#) to Christianity. There are still [headstones](#) in England with both a [cross](#) and a hammer. Perhaps they thought it was better to be safe than sorry.<sup>[20]</sup> That, or the more gods the better. As some Vikings turned from raiding to [trading](#) they found a nominal (in name only) profession of Christianity to be helpful.

[23] Scandinavia, their [homeland](#), was slower to change to the Christian religion. By the mid-[11th century](#) most of Norway and Denmark had converted. Sweden was converted by the mid-[12th century](#).<sup>[20]</sup>

The Viking's religion affected Christianity as well. The pagan celebration of [Yuletide](#) became [Christmas](#).<sup>[22]</sup> [Priests](#) blessing the fields took the place of pagan [fertility rites](#) of [spring](#) held to make sure there was a good [harvest](#).<sup>[22]</sup> Norse kept their "farm gods" well after Christianity just to make sure they were protected. [Santa Claus](#) owes much of his legend to the Norse god [Odin](#). With his snow-white beard he traveled the mid-[winter](#) sky on his eight-footed [steed Sleipnir](#) visiting his people with gifts. He became [Father Christmas](#). Blended with the Christian [Saint Nicholas](#) he became [Santa Claus](#).<sup>[22]</sup>

## In fiction and theater

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In the late [19th century](#) [Richard Wagner](#) and other artists in the [Romantic period](#) made [operas](#) and other artwork about ancient [Germanic culture](#). They liked the Vikings because they were not Greeks or Romans. They came up with the idea of Vikings wearing [fur](#) clothes and [helmets](#) with wings or horns on them and drinking out of hollowed-out animal [horns](#). Some ancient Germans wore helmets with horns on them, but real Vikings did not. Wagner and his partners dressed the [actors](#) in the opera [Ring des Nibelungen](#) so they would look like ancient Germans and so the audience would feel like modern Germans came from medieval Vikings.<sup>[24][25]</sup>

## Related pages

[[change](#) | [change source](#)]

- [Viking Age](#)
- [Kievan Rus'](#)
- [Varangians](#)

## Notes

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- <sup>[1]</sup> The Romans of the time believed the Baltic sea was a part of the ocean and lands north of the Baltic were [islands](#).<sup>[2]</sup> Early writers mentioned an island called [Thule](#).<sup>[3]</sup> It lay beyond the known world of the time but it is thought now to be [Norway](#).<sup>[4]</sup> They did not come into contact with Germanic tribes north of the [Danube](#) until the [1st century AD](#). About 98 AD, [Tacitus](#) wrote *Germania* which was an account of the German peoples.<sup>[5]</sup>

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## Other websites

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Wikimedia Commons has media related to [\*\*Vikings\*\*](#).

- [BBC: History of Vikings](#)
- [Borg Viking museum, Norway Archived 2010-08-20 at the Wayback Machine](#)
- [The Viking Network](#)
- [Ibn Fadlan and the Rusiyyah, by James E. Montgomery, with full translation of Ibn Fadlan Archived 2013-10-01 at the Wayback Machine](#)

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