Chapter 1
Vikings then and now

Every February the schoolchildren of York dress up in traditional Viking costume and this northern English city holds its annual Jorvik Viking Festival. Sagas are retold, battles are re-enacted, and Viking longships race along the River Ouse. The rape and pillage has been toned down and York's modern traders have embraced Vikings with more enthusiasm than their 9th-century forebears: at the time of writing, shoppers at the out-of-town designer outlet can design a Viking tunic, Viking-related books are on display in Borders and Waterstones, *The Vikings* starring Kirk Douglas and Tony Curtis is being shown at the local cinema, and cafes and snack-bars offer a variety of longboat baguettes and Viking-themed sandwiches. The festival promoters claim that the event harks back to Jolablot, a midwinter festival held by 'the original Vikings', although in fact it was invented in 1985, and marks the annual downturn in visitor figures to Jorvik, the Viking-themed tourist attraction.

It is hard to escape Vikings in York. Although the city's visible heritage owes more to its Roman, Norman, and medieval builders, opening a telephone directory reveals a host of Viking enterprises – Jorvic Business Systems, Jorvik Cleaning Services, Yorvik Homes & Developments Ltd, Yorvik Shipping, Yorvik Refrigeration, and the ominous Viking School of Motoring – to name but a few. Clearly Vikings have a contemporary resonance –

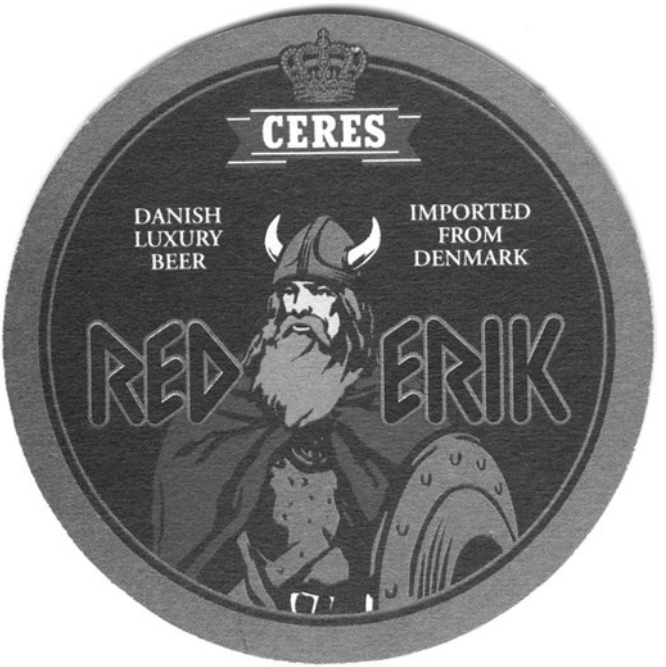
and not just in York. Similar reinventions can be found in the Isle of Man, the Northern and Western Isles, in Normandy and Brittany, across the Atlantic to North America, and in Scandinavia itself.

But 'Viking' is a nebulous concept – in different contexts Vikings have been marauders, merchants, manufacturers, poets, explorers, democrats, statesmen, or warriors. It is also a relatively recent concept – originally used to refer only to pirate activity, it came to be used as an ethnic term to refer to a whole people, and then as a chronological label, giving its name to the Viking Age. With this fluidity it did not mean the same in 10th-century Scandinavia, 15th-century Iceland, and 19th-century England. In fact, our modern usage of Viking owes more to later reinventions than any original reality.

This book will attempt to deconstruct the term, but will also seek to demonstrate why it has retained its importance. Focusing particularly on archaeological discoveries of the last 30 years, it will examine what is actually known about the peoples who lived in Scandinavia in the 9th and 10th centuries, the areas they colonized, and their relevance today.

Who, what, and when were the Vikings?

The term *viking* was first used in Old English. It occurs just three times in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle where it refers to 'robbers', apparently coastal marauders rather than land-borne armies. It was not used in other countries which suffered raids from Scandinavia, and Western observers gave the raiders many different names. In some cases it was their religion, or lack of it, that was significant, and they were referred to as pagans, heathen, or gentiles. In the Irish Annals they were often seen as just different and were called *gaill*, or 'foreigners'. In other contexts it was where they came from that was of interest, and they were *Northmanni*, or *Dani*, although such labels were often used indiscriminately, irrespective of their



1. Red Erik: Danish luxury beer

actual area of origin. Finally, it may have been their function that stood out, as *pirate* or *scipmen*.

At first, the Scandinavians thought of themselves as inhabitants of particular regions, such as men of Jutland, Vestfold, Hordaland, and so on. Their loyalty would have been to their leaders, rather than to any national identity. Their armies comprised warriors from different parts of Scandinavia, and they were the followers of Olaf, Svein, Thorkel, or Cnut. Nonetheless, they did speak the same language, which linguists have called Old Norse, and shared aspects of a common culture, including costume, art, and religion. As a sense of national identity grew so did the use of national names. In

time, Dane was used to describe southern Scandinavians whilst Norse was used to describe those from northern areas.

The specific root *viking* reappears in the 11th century in Old Norse, with a different emphasis. In the elegy *Knutsdrapa* Cnut's troops are called *víkingar* to emphasize their ferocity, and the same word appears on 11th-century rune stones to describe respectable sons raiding overseas as well as local nuisances. By the 13th century it was used in Icelandic Sagas to refer to pirates, but it was not generally used in Western European sources during the Middle Ages. In Scandinavia it only came into common usage during the rise of 19th-century nationalist movements. It is recorded in modern English for the first time in 1807–8, and was revived by Sir Walter Scott in 1828 in *The Pirate.*

The actual derivation of the term *viking* has been much debated. It has been suggested that both the Old English and Old Norse forms are parallel developments from a common Germanic verb meaning 'to withdraw, leave or depart'; that it is related to the Old Icelandic *vik*, meaning a bay or creek; that it refers to those from the area of *Vik* or *Viken* around the Oslofjord who embarked on the raiding of England to escape Danish hegemony; that it derives from *vika*, a turn on duty, or relay oarsmen; that it derives from an Old Icelandic verb *vikya*, meaning 'to turn aside', or the Old English *wic*, or armed camp.

Whatever the derivation, it is clear that the majority of Scandinavians were not Vikings; only those who went 'a viking' should really qualify for the description. It would be perverse, however, to abandon the term at this point, although this book will generally try to restrict its usage to describe those involved in raiding or other warlike activities, and to those instances where the Viking stereotype has been reused in a more recent context, either as an adjective or as a noun. At other times the less loaded term Scandinavian will be used and, following common practice, Norse will be used for those peoples of Scandinavian culture in the North

Atlantic, without necessarily assuming that they came from Norway. In other cases, the more accurate terms Hiberno-Norse, or Anglo-Scandinavian will be used, reflecting the fact that it is frequently a hybrid identity that is being described.

The chronological term 'Age of the Vikings' followed the classification of Ages of Stone, Bronze, and Iron, and was first invented in Scandinavia to label cases of artefacts in the National Museum in Copenhagen in the 1840s. It was taken up in du Chaillu's *The Age of the Vikings* (1889) and later by Peter Sawyer in *The Age of the Vikings* (1962). In the hands of some authors and coffee-table books it has turned Viking identity into a stage on an evolutionary ladder, a super-identity, and a great civilization, analogous to the Ages of Greece or Rome. However, no one can agree when it was.

The start of the Viking Age can no longer be fixed categorically at 793 with the raid on Lindisfarne because there is evidence of earlier contact, in the form of Irish and English artefacts in 8th-century Norwegian graves. Whether loot or traded goods, these indicate early North Sea crossings. The inhabitants of Sweden had also engaged in earlier expansion in the Baltic, and in southern Scandinavia many of those characteristics that have been associated with the 'Viking Age' begin to emerge during the early 8th century. They include the development of towns, the centralization of authority, a shift from exchange to market-based trade, increased production, and overseas contact. The dispute is really between those who see raiding as the key characteristic of Viking activity, and are reluctant to place that earlier than the 790s, and those who see outward-looking expansion, state formation, and other positive features taking place from the 710s.

Raiding activity intensified in Western Europe from the 830s and a Viking camp was established in Dublin in 841. There were attacks on Frankia and Spain in the 850s and raids and then settlement in Russia from the 860s. From the late 870s Vikings settled

permanently in England, and also founded colonies in the Isle of Man, the Northern and Western Isles, the Faroes, and Iceland. Greenland was settled in the 980s and around 1000 there were voyages to Vinland and North America. However, fixing a date for the end of the Viking Age is also problematic. It has often been linked with particular events in the English calendar, either when Harthacnut, the last Scandinavian king of England, died in 1042, or when Haraldr Hardrada was defeated at Stamford Bridge, in 1066. However, Scandinavian presence continued in Scotland, Ireland, and the Isle of Man beyond that, although aggressive military activity had stopped by the second half of the 11th century. Scandinavian culture also continued in the North Atlantic, and in Iceland and Greenland into the 14th and 15th centuries, and some of these areas have retained a Viking cultural identity to the present day.

Since this book is about this nebulous concept of Vikings, it will embrace all these areas and periods. It will be concerned not just with how Viking identity has been redefined in medieval and modern times, but also with how cultural identities were formed and negotiated in the 8th–12th centuries, in a variety of geographical contexts.

The approach taken has not been to present a strict chronological history of the Vikings. Instead a more geographically-based approach has been adopted, starting with Scandinavia, and working outwards, but using each chapter to develop a specific theme. Chapter 2 looks at where the Vikings originated and Chapter 3 considers their ideology and religion. Chapters 4 and 5 then present the evidence for increasing settlement complexity – both rural and urban – and the growth of the nation states. Chapter 6 examines the evidence for their sea-faring prowess and begins to consider Scandinavian expansion overseas, starting with Western Europe and Russia. Subsequent chapters then provide a series of case studies, beginning with England in Chapter 7, and then looking at the Irish Sea region in Chapter 8, the Northern and Western Isles in

Chapter 9, the North Atlantic in Chapter 10, and culminating in Greenland and North America in Chapter 11. An attempt has been made to introduce the key evidence from these areas, focusing especially on the latest archaeological discoveries. A secondary aim has been to use each case study to examine the complex relationship between colonists and colonized in a number of environments, and to consider the present-day relevance of that relationship. Chapter 12 emphasizes the ways in which our views of peoples in the past are shaped by the present by looking at the reinvention and reuse of Vikings in a variety of 19th- and 20th-century contexts.

Ethnic groups used to be regarded as cultural and biological isolates, but now we understand that cultures only exist in relation to other cultures, and that they define themselves in terms of their differences, or similarities, with other societies. People use language, costume, architecture, religion, and burial practices to create identities, and in colonial contexts they can adopt a number of strategies – of isolation, hybridity, assimiliation, or genocide – to negotiate their position in relation to indigenous societies in new environments. Was there such a thing as a contemporary Viking identity, or was it created in a variety of guises – as Anglo-Scandinavian, Hiberno-Norse, Icelander, or Rus – in response to different local situations? There are important messages for modern Europe here. To find out more, read on.