# Chapter 6
# Across the ocean: seafaring and overseas expansion

Dragon-headed longships, shields down their sides, their red-and-white striped sails catching the wind, have become an important element of the Viking cliché. What is the reality? Alcuin expressed his horror and indignation at the Viking raid on Lindisfarne in 793 and registered his surprise that it was 'possible that such an inroad from the sea could be made'. For 8th- and 9th-century monks the Vikings were pagans from the sea. In an era when travelling by sea was no doubt easier than arduous journeys by land, were their exploits really so exceptional?

The 11th-century Bayeux tapestry provides, in cartoon form, a narrative of the transport of an early medieval army, its horses and provisions by ship, similar to those believed to have carried Viking raiding parties. The Normans were, after all, direct descendants of the Norseman Rollo. The tapestry shows 'clinker', or plank-built, vessels with brightly coloured sails, which could be drawn up upon a shelving beach, and their masts 'un-stepped', or taken down.

The discovery of a boat burial at Gokstad in Norway, in 1880, provided an archaeological reality to support this picture of Norse nautical prowess. It also contributed to the image of Vikings as

adventurous explorers and seafarers skilled in building efficient sailing machines. In 1893 a replica of the Gokstad ship sailed from Bergen to Newfoundland in 28 days. When a second Norwegian ship burial was excavated at Oseberg in 1904, the ornately carved keel also demonstrated the artistic vitality of 9th-century Scandinavia. Its discovery fuelled nationalistic fervour and coincided with the last stage of Norway's struggle for independence, finally achieved in 1905. Tree ring dating has confirmed that the Oseberg ship, built *c.*820, is the oldest surviving combined sailing and rowing ship, with space for 30 oarsmen. Earlier vessels were powered by oars alone and although the keel probably evolved in the 7th century, and sails appear on picture stones from the Baltic island of Gotland at around the same time, there is no surviving mast earlier than at Oseberg. The ship was reused as the burial chamber of a Norwegian princess *c.*834 and although it must have been exceptional, even by 9th-century standards, the shortage of other finds, and the prominence of the discoveries from Oseberg in the Ship Museum in Oslo, meant that this royal barge came to stand as the 'type-vessel' for Viking ships.

All that changed in 1957 when the Danish National Museum commenced salvage of five ships from the bottom of the Roskilde fjord. It emerged that the vessels had been scuttled during the 1070s in order to block the fjord entrance at Skuldelev to protect the royal centre at Roskilde. Although stripped of their fittings, and much repaired, the vessels demonstrate that by the 11th century Scandinavian shipping had evolved into specialized forms for different functions, ranging from highly specialized slender longships for warfare, based on a combination of oars and sail; fuller and more solidly built sailing ships for carrying cargo; plus smaller vessels for fishing and ferrying.

Skuldelev 2 was a slender longship, nearly 30m in length. It was designed for speed, and the transport of 60–80 men and booty, and its mast could be unstepped, allowing it to sail upriver and under bridges. However, analysis of the tree rings has proved that this

**7. The Oseberg ship; excavation crew in the mound, 21 September 1904**

great Viking symbol was not built in Scandinavia at all. In fact it was constructed in the Dublin area *c.*1042–3 and was probably used in the Irish Sea area for at least 20 years before being repaired (again with Irish timber) and taken to Roskilde. Its planking was formed from good quality oak, and it was probably built in the Scandinavian tradition for a local chieftain as a means of taking part in the normal activities of the Norse in Dublin – slave trading and mercenary activity in Ireland, England, and Wales.

Skuldelev 5 was also a longship but was much smaller and more crudely built. It had been constructed in east Denmark *c.*1040 for a crew of 26. The bottom planking was originally made of new oak timbers, but the sides comprised a mixture of oak, ash, and pine and had been patched with planks taken from other ships. The life of

this ship had been stretched to its limits, leading to the suggestion that it was a *leidang* ship, provided as a duty by the peasants of a district who were obliged to deliver and man a ship of 26 rowers. Although by itself it does not prove that this documented 12th-century military levy had Viking Age origins, as has been argued, it does reinforce how Scandinavian sailors were just as capable of keeping old crates afloat as later mariners.

Skuldelev 1 was much broader in relation to its length, and represents the development of the ocean-going trader, or *knorr*. It had a cargo hold amidships, capable of holding up to 40–50 tons, and a deck only at bow and stern. The mast was firmly seated and it relied upon its sail for propulsion, and although it could have carried up to 12 crew, it used oars only when becalmed or for manœuvring. It was built of pine in western Norway, *c.*1040, but had been repaired twice between 1060 and 1070, latterly with oak from Skåne.



The Skuldelev finds have transformed our knowledge of Scandinavian ships, but the story does not end there. During the construction of the new Roskilde Museum extension to house the Skuldelev finds, a further nine ships from the late Viking Age and Early Middle Ages were discovered. One of them was the largest warship so far found. Roskilde 6, discovered in 1997, was *c.*36m long. It had been built sometime after 1025, probably in Denmark. The rig consisted of a single square sail, maybe nearly 200 square metres, and it may have had up to 78 rowing stations. It was built of the finest timber with excellent craftsmanship, and was a product of wealth and power found only among the highest ranking members of society.

A similar vessel was also recovered from the harbour at Hedeby. Hedeby 1 has been interpreted as a royal vessel built locally for a crew of 60. It displays exquisite quality; the oak planks are over 10m long; the rivets are exceptionally close. Its construction would have required skilled shipwrights with access to exceptionally large

trees and abundant supplies of iron. The vessel was probably only between 5 and 25 years old when it sank, having been used as a fireship, perhaps burnt out during an attack on the harbour *c.*1000. By contrast, Hedeby 2 was possibly a Slavic or Saxon vessel, built *c.*975 as a low-status working boat. It had been constructed partly from reused elements; even the frames had been taken from another boat and consequently did not fit, requiring the support of small additional blocks of wood.

In summary, archaeological discoveries of boats and parts of boats over the last 50 years have helped confirm our image of Vikings as accomplished seafarers, but they also reveal a much more complex picture. There was not just a range of types of vessel, but also a range of investment, from bodged repairs to ornate status symbols fit for the burial of a princess. Research has shown a gradual evolution from Saxon and Frisian rowing boats to the development of specialist classes of ship, amongst peoples whose livelihoods would have depended upon the sea. However, it has also shown that ships were built in what is thought of as a Scandinavian tradition throughout the Irish and North Sea regions. The Skuldelev 2 longship was built in Ireland; in the Dutch harbour of Tiel a 'Viking' ship built of English oak was burnt out and built into the harbour revetments in the early 11th century.

For many of those living in early medieval Europe knowledge of the sea would have been important, and for parts of Scandinavia it was the only way of getting around and so was essential. Norway took its very name from the navigation route, the Norvegur, along its western coast, while the nautical term starboard is derived from the right-hand side of the ship upon which a side rudder, or 'steerboard', was mounted. Over 850 pre-modern boathouses have been recognized in Norway; 250 are concentrated in south-west Norway; there is a second group of 500 in the North. Although not dated precisely to the Viking Age, approximately 250–300 are very large, and although they are too big for a fishing vessel they could have accommodated a longship. There is some evidence that they

were used for feasting too and it has been argued that their distribution suggests a military context, linked to early chiefdoms, and later developing into the military levy or *leidang* system.

Without sophisticated navigation instruments sea travel would have relied upon observations of currents, landmarks, and the stars. It has been demonstrated that use of a simple bearing dial would have allowed Viking Age sailors to travel due east or west along a line of latitude, although the method requires the sun to be visible for most of the journey, possibly a big assumption for the North Atlantic. The ability to determine one's longitude, however, only came much later, in the 18th century, with the measurement of speed and time elapsed since departure. Nonetheless, a bearing dial would allow a Norwegian ship to depart from Bergen and sail due west to Shetland, or to sail up the coast before turning west to Iceland, for example. Half of a round disc of wood marked with equidistant notches discovered in 1948 at Narsarsuaq, Greenland, has been taken as proof of the existence of such nautical aids, but sceptics have pointed to the fact that it was found in the remains of what is thought to have been a Benedictine convent and have suggested, rather prosaically, that it was a medieval confessional disc.



So what of the cliché? Viking sails have not survived but we have striped designs from Bayeux. On the Gokstad and Skuldelev 5 ships there are battens for shields to be hung along the sides of vessels. Dragon-prowed ships exist as graffiti and as literary metaphors, but the best we can do archaeologically is a beast-headed bedpost from Oseberg! Dragon ships may only exist as part of the modern Viking stereotype, but the existence of a skilled seafaring people is not in doubt. Both ships and navigational skills enabled the migration of people from Scandinavia from the late 9th to the 11th centuries.

## Expansion overseas

Historians have struggled to find a single cause for Viking expansionism, and it is likely that motives changed and evolved

through time. Competition for scarce resources against a background of population growth was the underlying factor, but competition may have begun as a search for portable wealth, and developed into the quest for new land.

It has been debated whether Vikings were primarily raiders or traders, but the distinction may not have been a meaningful one. The centralization of power in Iron Age Scandinavia was based upon a gift exchange economy in which chieftains had privileged access to imported goods. Status was based upon portable wealth that could be passed down the social hierarchy as rewards to followers. In the early Viking Age it was the shortage of portable wealth in Scandinavia that was the driving force for overseas expeditions. Scandinavian leaders took tribute from those who were in a weaker position, and in turn passed on gifts in order to acquire status and gain support. If gifts were not forthcoming then they could be extracted by force instead. In the later saga literature strong leaders were characterized as ring-givers since they gave silver arm rings to their followers to secure and reward their allegiance. Silver hoards are characteristic finds in the homelands, and in areas of Viking raids.

When the Hiberno-Norse Vikings were expelled from Dublin *c.*900 (p. 78) they took with them the 'pay chest' of their army, but in 905 they were forced to bury it in a lead-lined chest on the banks of the River Ribble at Cuerdale, and were never able to recover it. The Cuerdale hoard had been collected over several decades by an international force. It comprised *c.*7,500 coins, including *c.*5,000 contemporary Viking issues, *c.*1,000 Anglo-Saxon coins, and *c.*1,000 Frankish and Italian coins. There were also *c.*1,000 pieces of bullion silver in ingots and ornaments, including some complete Irish silver arm rings. In total there was *c.*40 kg of silver; estimates of its value in today's prices range from £300,000 to £4,000,000.

The Cuerdale hoard was probably amassed through a mixture of trading and raiding activity; slaves acquired through raiding in

Ireland might have been sold in York, for example. Scandinavians played a decisive role in trade in many of the areas where they took political control. They traded not only in luxury goods, but also increasingly in ordinary bulk commodities. They also acted as middlemen between the East and the West, and after Muslim incursions in the Mediterranean closed the traditional trade routes, they opened new ones through the Baltic and Russia. Economic expansion was fuelled by population increase, manufacturing growth, and new wealth – which was itself often derived from plunder and tribute. It was facilitated by Scandinavian political domination, with the fact that exchange was easy within an area under the same language and culture.

Scandinavian lords such as Ohthere operated in several different economic spheres. They took tribute and gifts at home, where social obligation was as important as monetary value. Hoards were part of the process of amassing wealth to be used in gift exchange. Traders regularly exchanged to gain luxury items (particularly silver), to win friends, influence the powerful, and purchase allies. However, when they came to trade their goods and slaves in the blossoming markets of Northern Europe they would meet other merchants with whom they had never previously met and whom they might never meet again. Here it was necessary for royal authority rather than social obligation to ensure fair play, and economic transactions were separated from social relations. The minting of coinage under royal control became necessary to facilitate the conduct of purely monetary transactions.

As gift exchange declined in importance, the ownership of land became more important than portable wealth. Hoarding ended not because peace finally reigned but because the basis of political power changed. Land and estates became the main source of power, not territories and followers, and the later Viking raids were directed to the acquisition of new places to settle. In the North Atlantic there were underpopulated and virgin territories, but in the British Isles land had to be seized from those already inhabiting it,

and there were various strategies to accommodate the indigenous population, dependent upon the local balance of power. Viking leaders were often simply able to seize land, from kings and abbeys whose power base they had destroyed, and redistribute it to their followers, although in England there is also documentary evidence for their involvement in cash transactions for the purchase of land. Silver was now used in buying and selling; not in competitive gift-giving.

## Vikings in Western Europe

The first recorded raids on Western Europe date from the close of the 8th century. Whether in continental Europe or the North or Irish Seas, raiding followed a similar pattern. Unprotected coastal and riverine sites, including monasteries and markets, were the first targets, normally for small bands of Vikings in two or three ships who returned home as the winter storms began. In the 790s they attacked the Northumbrian monasteries and in 799 raided the Carolingian Empire. The first Viking raid on the Irish coast took place in 795, and movement inland is first recorded *c*.830. From the 830s larger forces raided along the Frisian coast (the modern Netherlands) and devastated the south coast of England. The wealthy trading town of Dorestad was plundered for four successive years in 834–8.

The Viking armies were quick to exploit local rivalries and weakness. After the death of Louis the Pious in 840 the Carolingian Empire was divided amongst his sons. With civil war and independent warlords intent upon carving out their own territory, Viking commanders hastened further fragmentation. In 841 Vikings ravaged Rouen and in 845 an attack on Paris was only prevented by the payment of 7,000 pounds of silver. In 852 a Viking fleet wintered on the Seine and in 853 on the Loire. The fleet continued to exploit these river systems until Charles the Bald built fortified bridges and protected the towns and abbeys, forcing the Viking armies to focus their attention on England.

In 850 a Viking force over-wintered in England for the first time, signalling the beginning of a new phase of more sustained attack by highly mobile forces. In 865 reference is made for the first time to the payment of Danegeld, in return for which the people would be left in peace. The clearest evidence for this phase of Viking activity in Europe comes from Scandinavia itself, where there are thousands of Carolingian and Anglo-Saxon coins.

This extraction of wealth must also have helped weaken the Carolingian Empire, but the Scandinavian impact has otherwise left little trace in the archaeological record in Frankia. There are Scandinavian influenced place names along the line of the Lower Seine to Rouen, but almost all the artefacts are confined to Normandy and Brittany in the north-west. In Normandy, as in England, interaction between the native Franks and Scandinavians led to the rapid formation of a distinctive local Norman culture. There are also a handful of coastal burial sites, including a 10th-century ship burial on the Île de Groix in Brittany. A longship with a smaller boat inside had been dragged along a processional way of standing stones, and then filled with a rich assemblage of objects, including weapons, riding gear, gold and silver jewellery, ivory gaming pieces, smith's tools, and farming equipment. The bodies of an adult male and an adolescent – possibly a sacrifice – were placed in the ship, which was surrounded by 24 shields and set alight. This is the only known example of the burning of a ship as part of the burial rite, although it has become an essential part of the Viking stereotype. In fact it was carried out at a time when most Scandinavian warriors had been converted, and represents the reinvention of a pre-Christian identity in the face of widespread assimilation.

There are other examples of the retention and reinvention of Viking identity in the Scandinavian colonies in the British Isles and the North Atlantic and these form the subject of subsequent chapters. First, however, it is necessary to consider Scandinavian expansion eastwards.

## Expansion in the East

While Scandinavians from Denmark and Norway looked predominately westwards, those from Sweden looked eastwards, where they encountered very different cultures. The significance of a Viking presence to the development of Russia has been much debated and views have swung in time with the pendulum of internal Russian politics and the East–West relationship. It has been claimed, alternately, that Scandinavians were responsible for founding the great towns of European Russia (the so-called Normanist view), or that the Russian state was established by people of Slavonic origin (the anti-Normanist view), according to whether the dominant views of the time are pro- or anti-Western. Much depends upon the identity of a people known as the Rus who were invited to bring order to Central Russia in 860–2, and whether they were Slavic or Scandinavian.

There is no dispute that Scandinavians from the Baltic were active down the great Russian river routes such as the Don, the Dnieper, and the Volga. With overland portage to transfer boats and goods from one river to the next they could have reached the Caspian and Black Seas and gained access to the treasures of Byzantium, but did they come as traders or raiders? Over one hundred Swedish rune stones testify to men who died in the East, including many on an ill-fated expedition led by one Ingvar, but the purpose of their journeys is rarely given. Exotic Eastern objects and Byzantine silks are found throughout Scandinavia, and there are over 60,000 Arabic coins, but were these acquired as loot, protection money, tribute, or through trade?

In truth there was probably an element of all four. Tenth-century Arabic texts refer to people described as the Rus as traders in furs and slaves in the Bulghar region. The traveller Ibn Fadlan observed their alien dress styles and their strange mortuary practices, which included the sacrifice of slave girls. He also says that the king of the Rus had a personal retinue of 400 warriors.

The Eastern Emperor in Byzantium (modern Constantinople) had a Varangian bodyguard comprising Scandinavian mercenaries. In 860 there was a famous Viking raid on Byzantium, and in 910–12 a fleet of 16 ships was based in the Caspian Sea, attacking Abaskun, and killing many of the Muslim inhabitants.

How far does archaeological evidence help us understand the nature and extent of activity? The best evidence that peoples of Scandinavian origin lived in Russia is provided by their burials. Up to 26 boat graves are known, including ten from Plakun, near the early trading site at Staraja Ladoga. The burials included people of high social standing, and the presence of women suggests that they were a settled group. At Gnezdovo, near Smolensk, some 600 burials have been excavated out of a large cemetery of *c.*3,000 mounds. These show a variety of burial customs, comprising 80 per cent cremation and 20 per cent inhumation, some in chamber graves. There were also 11 boat graves, although some contained cremations, unknown in Scandinavia. Over a tenth of the burials contain weaponry, but almost as many contain weighing scales and Arabic coins. The richest burials are the chamber graves and although they often contain Scandinavian jewellery, cauldrons, swords, and drinking horns, they also have Byzantine imports. In fact it appears as if the cemetery population at Gnezdovo comprised at least three components: Scandinavians mainly of the 10th century; Slavs in unfurnished cremations, or buried with just a few objects such knives, pottery, single beads, but including females with eastern Slavonic wire rings; and lastly Balts with Moravian-style jewellery.

At Tjernigov, also near Smolensk, there are further chamber graves, many containing double male and female burials, although it has been noted that while the men had Scandinavian weapons and belt fittings, the women never had Scandinavian brooches. Elsewhere, but particularly in those cemeteries associated with important centres are further graves with Scandinavian objects, or goods


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produced locally in a Scandinavian style. Generally these do not stand out as being particularly rich, nor isolated from other burials exhibiting Finnish, Baltic, and Slavic customs. Scandinavians, therefore, appear to have formed one relatively small element in a very mixed population, and seem to have been regarded as settled members of the community. Some were mercenary warriors, others were traders, and it is not always possible to distinguish between them.

Archaeological research has also revealed considerable consistency in settlement patterns in Russia 900–1200. The cultural landscape of the medieval Rus consisted of clusters of settlements located near rivers and lakes, surrounded by extensive woodlands. Patches of man-made landscape were small compared with the area of unsettled territories, although there was rapid growth in rural settlements from between the late 9th to 11th centuries and the 13th century.

The first towns lay on or near the river routes. Staraja Ladoga was sited where the Scandinavian route into the East splits into two: the Volga and the Dnieper. It was situated not on open water where it would have been exposed to surprise attack, but 12 kilometres up the River Volkhov. The site is on a high bank by a ravine; an earth rampart, enclosing an area of *c.*650,000 square metres, gives further protection. The earliest levels, tree ring dated to 760–840, were built on undisturbed natural soil. Large timber houses were constructed, and some appear to have served as workshops for craftsmen working with glass, bronze, and antler. The buildings are not Scandinavian, however, but built of logs with notched and overlapping ends in a block-house type, familiar from earlier Finnish inhabitants of the region. Furthermore, most of the material from the earliest levels is also native, with some Slavonic imports and a few Scandinavian objects, including an early type of oval brooch. Combs were made here, apparently by itinerant craftsmen who also worked in the Baltic. The settlement was destroyed by fire *c.*860, but was soon rebuilt and fortified with a stone wall before the end of the century. The number of Scandinavian finds increases from this point, and includes a Norse rune stick. The Scandinavian-style boat burials nearby at Plakum also date to this period.

At Ryurik Gorodishche a hillfort site functioned as an administrative, trading and craft-production centre of the 9th century, and may have been a tribute collection centre for a Scandinavian chieftain. It was probably succeeded by Novgorod,

known to Scandinavians as Holmgardr. According to the Nestorian Chronicle the first Scandinavians settled there under Rurik in 862, although it had previously been occupied by Slavs. Excavations have revealed a winding timber main street, resurfaced with new planks until *c.*1600. There is not much explicitly Scandinavian material, however, apart from a few items of jewellery.

At Gnezdovo, a 4-hectare unfortified settlement of the 9th century was given sand ramparts and wooden walls *c.*900–25. By 1000 the hillfort contained a cemetery and an irregular settlement and manufacturing site. Craft activities included the working of ferrous and non-ferrous metals, and the manufacture of jewellery, including moulds for casting Scandinavian-style brooches. Iron knives were produced according to a three-fold welding technique which was unknown to the Slavs, and which disappeared with the decline of Gnezdovo, and its replacement by Smolensk. Unlike early Scandinavian trading sites, Gnezdovo was unplanned and appears to have lacked a hinterland; it did not become a town.

Kiev, on the other hand, became the centre of the medieval Russian state. The town was founded in 882 on the west bank of the Dnieper, at a point where the river narrows. The Emperor Constantine recorded that Scandinavians gathered there in early summer, leaving for the journey to Byzantium in June. The town is said to have been ruled by Scandinavian princes, although archaeological evidence suggests that the majority of the population was again mainly Slavonic.

In summary, the post-Glasnost view is that a balance between internal (mainly Slavonic) growth and external Western (Scandinavian) stimulus underpinned the development of medieval Russia. There was already economic and social development amongst the Slavs before the Swedes arrived. The Vikings stimulated and expanded trade, but were not alone in their activities. As in many other areas, they are said to have adopted many native customs and became part of a vigorous mixed group

involved in a combination of exchange and raiding which has been labelled 'aggressive trading', although it is not always clear whether this compromise term refers to haggling in the bazaar or to extortion at sword point.