

Vikings

A Reading A-Z Level W Leveled Book

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Illustrated by Maria Voris

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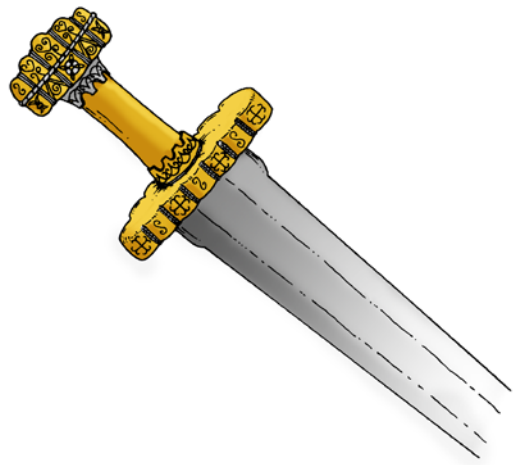
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INTRODUCTION

What do you think of when you hear the word *Vikings*? Do you think of fierce warriors or skilled explorers? Do you think of traders who traveled the world, or do you think of writers and poets? The Vikings were all of these things. They were also **shipwrights**, scientists, farmers, and fisherfolk. But often, we only think of Vikings as large and powerful raiding warriors. It's true that the Vikings were brave warriors and seldom lost a battle. They scared everyone. Yet their greatest strength may have been their love of exploration. They had the bravery to seek the edges of the unknown ocean.

The period known as the Viking Age lasted between the years of AD 793 and 1066. During that time the Vikings discovered and settled both Iceland and Greenland. They discovered North America long before Christopher Columbus. Seeking riches, they invaded many different towns and cities across Europe and Russia. They even raided the city of Jerusalem in the Middle East. **Monasteries** were frequent targets of Viking raids because they had few defenses and often housed many valuable objects.



The Vikings came from a harsh, far northern area of Europe. This area is now divided into the countries of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. Vikings sailed far from their homeland to discover new parts of the world.

People of that time called Vikings the Nordic people, or *Norsemen*—men from the north. They were as harsh and rugged as the coastal lands from which they came—lands that we now know as Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. At that early time, all Nordic people spoke one language.

It was natural for Nordic people to seek their fortune on the ocean. Many of them were trained from a young age to be skilled sailors and navigators. Some sailed away for the adventure. Others did it because they could not earn their living at home. Within each family, only the oldest son inherited the family's land. Younger sons could work for the oldest son, or leave the area. Because of this rule, many young men went to sea to find their fortunes. Some turned to fishing or trading. Others made their living by stealing.

The unguarded small towns and monasteries on the coast of Britain were easy targets. Raiding Vikings would sail in quickly and steal the year's harvest from villages. They would load their fast ships and leave immediately. After the success of these early raids, they soon began to raid larger towns and even major cities. Eventually they attacked Paris and Hamburg—two of the largest cities of Europe at that time.

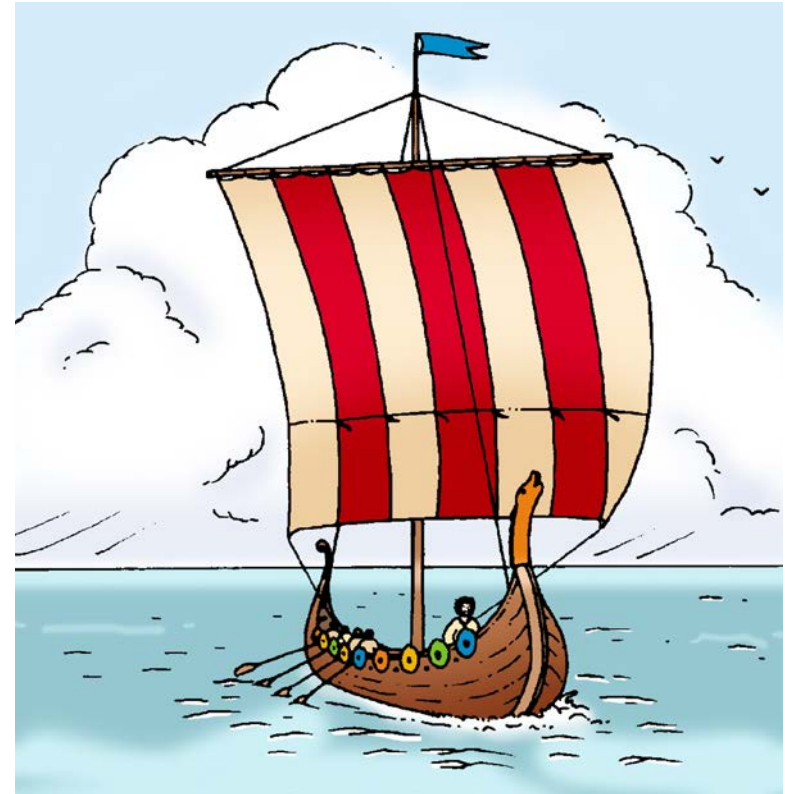


VIKING WARRIORS

Vikings are often pictured as tall, muscular people wearing helmets with horns. In fact, many Viking helmets were decorated, but they most likely did not have horns. Metal helmets were expensive, and leather caps and shields were a much more common form of defense. Some Vikings also used **chain mail** shirts for protection.

Spears and axes were the most common Viking weapons. Many warriors also used swords, knives, or bows.

Berserkers were special Viking warriors who fought without wearing any armor. They often wore the skins of bears or wolves and fought in a rage so great that they would ignore any wounds they received during battle.



VIKING SHIPS

Each type of Viking ship was built for a different use. Some were built to cross the narrow sea passages, or **fjords**. Others were used to carry cargo between towns. Larger ships were built to be coastal traders or as seagoing warships. Different woods were used to build each type of ship. Most Viking warships were made of oak in order to be strong enough for long voyages in rough seas.

Their fast ships, called *dragons*, often had a carved dragon's head high on the bow. The dragon's head warned others of the mighty warriors aboard these ships.

Viking warships had a shallow **draft**, meaning that the bottom of the ship, or **hull**, wasn't deep. Because of this feature, Viking ships were not limited to docking in ports. Viking ships could appear anywhere. They could sail right onto the shore. Warriors could leap from the ship onto the beach, ready for battle. The ability to land anywhere along the coast by surprise gave the Vikings a huge advantage in battle. People along the coasts and rivers lived in fear because no one knew where the Vikings might strike next.

Despite their **fearsome** reputation, not all Vikings remained warriors or raiders. Vikings often settled down and stayed in the lands they conquered. They put away their swords to become farmers and traders. They worked hard and lived honestly.

Do You Know?

The shallow Viking longship was built to be similar in the front, the *bow*, and the back, the *stern*. This design allowed the Vikings to jump in the ship and immediately row away from the coast.

DISCOVERING A NEW LAND

One brave Viking, Gardard Svavarsson, wanted to find new, unknown lands. He sailed far to the north and west. After many tiring days at sea, the Viking pioneer found a large uninhabited island. The weather was cold and harsh, but he found good areas to build villages. Today, the island he discovered is known as Iceland.

Years later, Iceland's good location attracted another man who was searching for a new home. His name was Folke Vilgerdsson, and he was from Norway. At the time, Norway was ruled by a strict king. Sadly, the king's rules were harsh, and many people were unhappy. The king feared being attacked by some of his subjects. He ordered Folke and others who wouldn't follow his rules to leave Norway.



Folke, along with several other **exiled** families, sailed to Iceland. They built a village on the island. Within fifty years, four hundred people lived in this new country.

The new settlers in Iceland created one of the first **democracies**. In a democratic government, people can vote on ideas, laws, and rulers. The idea or person with the most votes usually wins. Iceland continued to attract strong, brave people who wanted to have a voice in their own lives. The **settlement** was a success. Iceland eventually grew to become one of the happiest and most successful countries in the world.



ERIC THE RED

Iceland seemed like an **ideal** place to live to many people. But not everyone fit in there. Most people in Iceland wanted a peaceful life. One **reckless** man, named Eric the Red, was often in trouble with the authorities. One day he killed three men in a fight. The officials of Iceland grew tired of Eric and ordered him to leave.

Eric had heard rumors of land even farther west than Iceland. Since he had to leave the island anyway, he set sail for this unknown land, not knowing if it even existed.

Eric the Red was named for his thick red hair.

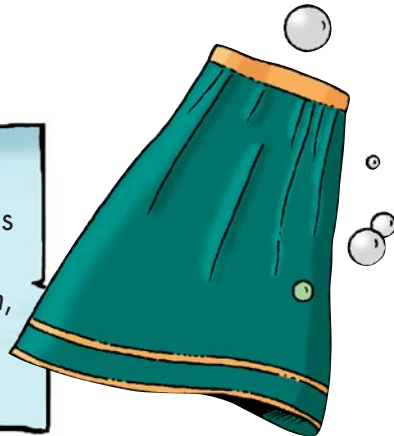


Eric the Red sailed west and found this new land after only two days. He wanted other settlers to come there to start new lives. He told them stories about how green it was. He said it had rich valleys and game animals to hunt. He named this new land he had found *Greenland*.

People believed Eric's stories. The next year, Eric returned to Greenland, leading a group of twenty-five ships filled with people. They expected an easy journey, but the sea was very rough. Only fourteen of the twenty-five ships reached Greenland safely. The people who did arrive built two new communities about 644 kilometers (400 mi) apart. They set up a democratic government like the one in Iceland. Within ten years nearly 3,000 people had come to live in Greenland. Greenland is the world's largest island. Today, about 56,000 people live there.

Do You Know?

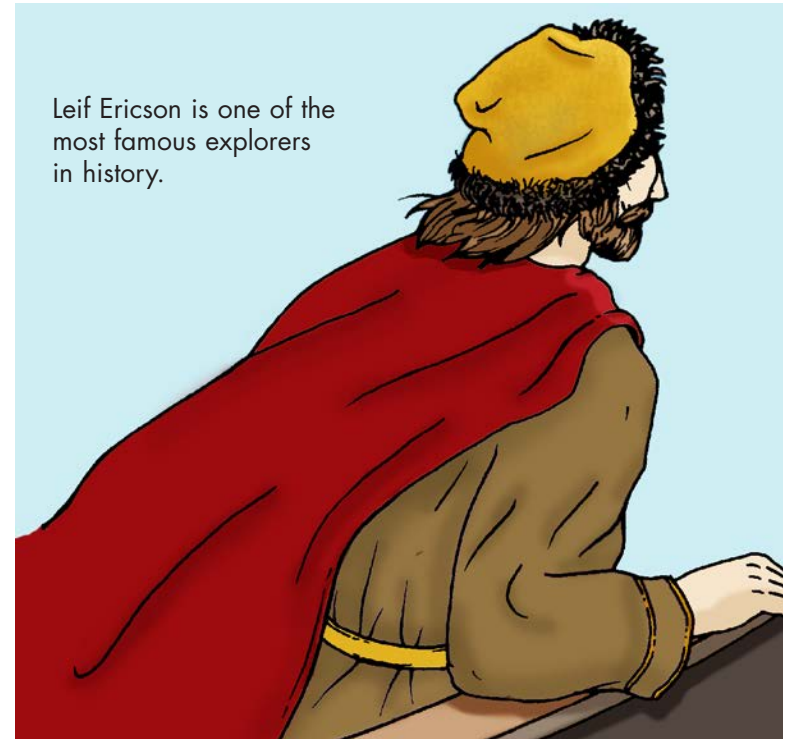
Nine hundred of the most commonly used words in English come from the Vikings (including *sky*, *skin*, *scrape*, *skirt*, *husband*, *bubble*, and *window*).



LEIF ERICSON

Perhaps the most famous Viking of all was the second son of Eric the Red. His name was Leif (pronounced *leaf*). In the Viking tradition, because he was "Eric's son," his name became Leif Ericson. Like most Vikings, Leif trained to be a warrior and sailor. Because he was the second son, he wasn't given land to farm. He wasn't sure what he wanted to do with his life. Leif decided to sail to Norway, his family's original homeland.

Leif Ericson is one of the most famous explorers in history.



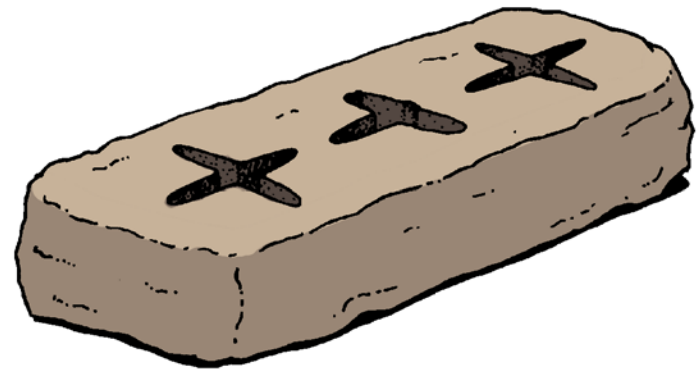
While in Norway, Leif heard a wild tale told by a trader. The trader's ship had been caught in a storm and blown far off course. While trying to find his way back home, the man had seen a coast that wasn't on his map. He didn't know where he had been when he saw this coastline. But he described it clearly.

Leif Ericson learned everything he could from the trader. He bought the man's ship. He and a small crew sailed the same route, looking for this mysterious coast. Then one day, they saw a place that looked like the land in the man's description. They found vines with fruit growing there, so they called it *Vinland*. Today, no one knows exactly where Vinland was. But **archaeologists** have discovered the remains of a small Viking outpost in Newfoundland, Canada, that was settled at about this time.



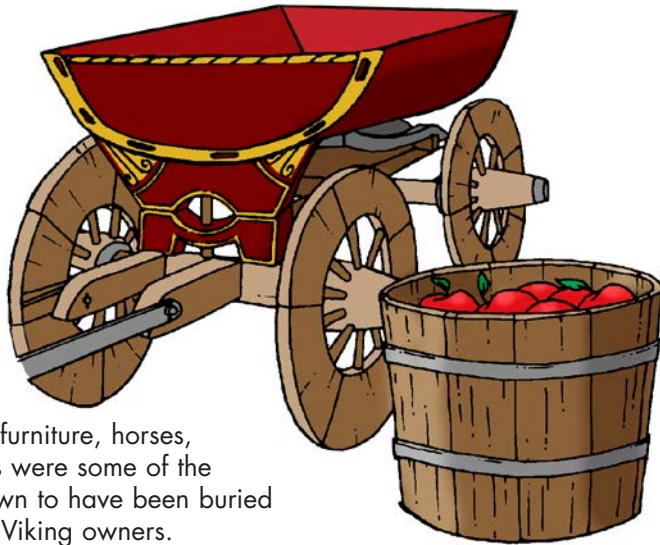
Leif and his crew built a house and spent the winter in Vinland. They sailed home to Greenland the next year. But their adventure was not over. During their return voyage, Leif found a wrecked trading ship and saved the crew. As a reward, he was given all the ship's cargo. These adventures earned him the name "Leif the Lucky." Leif never went on another voyage.

Two years later, Leif's father had died, and Leif was running the family farm. He had no thoughts of sailing. His younger brother, Thorvald, asked to borrow Leif's ship. He wanted to see for himself this land that Leif had discovered. Thorvald and a crew of thirty explored the Vinland coast for two years. They used Leif's former winter house as a base.



Serving both old and new religions, this stone was used as a mold to make both metal Christian crosses and the Hammer of Thor symbol (the center shape). Thor was a powerful Viking god.

Their explorations in Vinland brought both discovery and sadness. Their arrival frightened members of the native tribes, who had never seen Europeans. Small fights broke out. Then, men from Thorvald's crew killed several native fishermen without reason. Striking back a few days later, angry native men attacked a group of Vikings. The surprised Vikings fought hard but were chased away. Thorvald was wounded by an arrow. He died of his wound, and his body was buried in Vinland. He became the first European known to have died and been buried in North America. His crew sailed home to Greenland, but other explorers sailed to Vinland over the next three years. After those journeys, it seemed that exploring this new land was not worth the trouble it caused.



Wagons, furniture, horses, and foods were some of the items known to have been buried with their Viking owners.

OTHER VIKING CONQUESTS

For about 275 years, the Vikings swept across Europe in wave after wave. They were hungry to fight and greedy for riches. They built trade stations along European rivers all the way to the Mediterranean Sea. Viking explorers and raiders even traveled to the Middle East, Africa, and Asia.

The Vikings were skilled people. They could do many things well. They were great warriors, sailors, and explorers. Their conquests left lasting marks on world history. They will always be remembered for their bravery and strength in battle as well as for their many explorations.



TIMELINE IN VIKING HISTORY

Year	Events
790s	Viking raids in Europe, including Scotland and Ireland, begin
793	Viking raid on Lindisfarne monastery
844	Viking raids on Spain
845	Conquest of Hamburg and Paris
856–7, 861	Paris conquered by the Vikings
870–930	Norse settlement in Iceland
880s	Harold Finehair attempts to unite Norway
885–6	Siege of Paris
902	Vikings expelled from Dublin
911	Foundation of Normandy by Viking chieftain Rollo
912	Viking raiders on the Caspian Sea
917	Refoundation of Viking Dublin
930	Foundation of the Icelandic Althing
980s	Conversion of Russia
985	Eric the Red settles in Greenland
1000	Iceland converted to Christianity; voyages to Vinland
1066	Battle of Stamford Bridge, Battle of Hastings, Norman conquest of England
1066–87	William the Conqueror, king of England
1091	Norman conquest of Sicily

GLOSSARY

archaeologists (<i>n.</i>)	people who study ancient cultures (p. 15)
berserkers (<i>n.</i>)	special Viking warriors who wore animal skins and fought recklessly in battle (p. 7)
chain mail (<i>n.</i>)	flexible armor made from interlinked metal rings (p. 7)
democracies (<i>n.</i>)	governments run by the people through free and frequent elections (p. 11)
draft (<i>n.</i>)	the depth of water a ship needs to sail without touching the bottom (p. 9)
exiled (<i>adj.</i>)	banned from one's city or country (p. 11)
fearsome (<i>adj.</i>)	causing fear (p. 9)
fjords (<i>n.</i>)	a narrow sea inlet between steep slopes and cliffs (p. 8)
hull (<i>n.</i>)	the main body of a ship or sailing vessel (p. 9)
ideal (<i>adj.</i>)	perfect; couldn't be better (p. 12)
monasteries (<i>n.</i>)	groups of buildings where monks live and worship (p. 5)
reckless (<i>adj.</i>)	lacking caution; careless of consequences (p. 12)
settlement (<i>n.</i>)	a new town set up on a frontier where people make a new permanent home (p. 11)
shipwrights (<i>n.</i>)	carpenters skilled at building and repairing ships (p. 4)