



The Vikings

THE VIKINGS were people who lived in what are now Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. They were a fierce, warlike people. In their swift **longships**, they raided the coastal villages of England, Scotland, Ireland, and France. They also sailed across the seas and down the rivers of Eastern Europe as far as the Middle East.

The Viking longships were long, narrow boats made of oak. The front of the ship was carved with a fierce dragon's head, often painted red and inlaid with gold. The ship used one large, square sail. The longships also had oars, so that a ship could move when there was no wind. They were swift, light, and easy to launch and land.

Those same ships took them sailing across the Atlantic, where they founded colonies in Iceland, Greenland, and Newfoundland. Many historians believe the Vikings were the first European explorers in North America.

The Vikings flourished between about 750 and 1000. This era is called "The Viking Age." Around 750, these fierce and ruthless warriors began raids on what is now England, Scotland, Ireland, and France. The Vikings, or Norseman, as they were called, could be incredibly cruel. They murdered people, destroyed buildings and churches, stole weapons, furs, precious stones, and anything of value. They captured people and made them slaves.

Norsemen also attacked and raided ships traveling from Europe to England. Others traveled the rivers of Eastern Europe, moving south through the Black Sea and Caspian Sea. They reached as far south as Baghdad, in modern-day Iraq.

What made the Vikings the fierce, feared people who plundered Europe? No one knows for sure—they didn't keep written records of their conquests. But historians think that they left their homes in search of food and land. The soil of the Scandinavian countries is not rich. So as their population grew, they needed to find food from other places. Also, the Vikings made settlements where their people could move and build their own cities and farms. Some also traded—rather than raided—with the people they encountered.

The Vikings were also among the earliest explorers of the **New World**. In around 870, Norwegian Vikings set out across the North Atlantic and reached Iceland. They became the first permanent settlers. In 986, **Erik the Red** founded the first European settlement on Greenland. His son, **Leif Erikson**, was probably the first European explorer to reach North America. He sailed to a place he called "Vinland." Historians think that Vinland was probably on Newfoundland.

What we do know about the Vikings has come down to us through their sagas. These were tales passed down from generation to generation, finally written down several hundred years after the events they celebrate happened.

Although the Viking era lasted for only about 300 years, it is an important part of the history of exploration. The Norsemen were fierce and blood-thirsty warriors; they were also cruel slaveholders. But the Vikings also left behind a legacy of fearless and heroic

seafarers who overcame great obstacles to find and colonize new lands. And as they traveled the seas, they spread Scandinavian influence across half the world, from the ancient city of Baghdad to the northeastern coast of the **New World**.

WORLD WIDE WEB SITES:

<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/vikings>

<http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/history/24/h24-1210-e.html>

<http://odin.dep.no/odin/engelsk/norway/history>

