

The Viking Age: A Controversial but Impactful Point in History

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## **Introduction**

The Viking Age affected Europe for 300 hundred years, from the raid of Lindisfarne in 793 C.E. to King Harold's defeat in 1066 C.E. It was an era of terror for the population of western Europe, but one of wealth and glory for Scandinavia. Peaceful monasteries and prosperous cities were sacked by viking Norsemen, their populations put to the sword or enslaved, their homes burned. These Norse tore apart the very fabric of society, impacting all. It was not just a time of destruction, however. Even more numerous than the viking Norse were the mercantile Norse. Their sleek, powerful longships made perfect vessels for quickly transporting goods as well as soldiers. Norsemen traded in the North and Baltic Seas, up and down large rivers, even in Iberia and Italia. An Indian Buddha statue found its way into Norse hands through these intricate routes<sup>1</sup>. Their ventures, both violent and amicable, brought them wealth beyond measure. This era of trade and death impacted the world in many ways, some immediate, some later on, and some that last to this day.

## **Scandinavian Politics Before the Viking Age**

Scandinavia was a lively area before its citizens looked to the outside world for new opportunities. Between 200 and 800 C.E., it consisted of hundreds of small chiefdoms, constantly warring with each other<sup>2</sup>. The tribes with ocean-access were generally the wealthiest and most powerful, as they had the ability to trade on open water. One of these tribes was the

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<sup>1</sup>See Appendix A

<sup>2</sup> Hall, Richard. *The World of the Vikings* (Thames and Hudson Inc.), 13,14

Sveas, or Swedish<sup>3</sup>. The Sveas were located in what is now called Old Uppsala, near modern Stockholm. Old Uppsala and the Sveas were positioned next to Lake Mälaren and near the Baltic Sea coast. This proximity to the sea gave them access to profitable long-distance trade. The Sveas grew to dominate their immediate area between 650 and 800 C.E., then the region of Svipjod, and, eventually, all of modern-day Sweden. They gained control of most of the trade in the Baltic Sea, greatly expanding their wealth. They traded with the Frisians in the West, the Slavs in the South and East, and the Lapps in the North.

In the western parts of Scandinavia, in the region known as Vikar, the Norwegians gained control. They were some of the first Norse to raid the British Isles. The Danes gained power in the peninsula of Jutland and the islands to its east. Both they and the Norwegians used the trading tactics perfected by the Sveas, but, because they were not in the middle of the Baltic trade hub, were not as successful.

### **“Vikings”**

The Norse Vikings were the skillful seafarers and warriors that so dominated their time and region. The word “viking” comes from Old Norse; a *vikingr* is a sea-roving pirate. The *vikar* were the bays and fjords that dotted the Norse coasts, therefore a viking, or *vikingr*, is someone from these inlets<sup>4</sup>. Vikings mainly practiced two professions: trading of goods at home and across the seas, and raiding ripe settlements rich with plunder. The viking trade with foreign

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<sup>3</sup> The Sveas were the ancient inhabitants of Old Uppsala; a Swede is a citizen of modern day Sweden

<sup>4</sup> “Origin and Meaning of Viking by Online Etymology Dictionary”, 2019, retrieved from <https://www.etymonline.com/word/viking>

cultures was kickstarted by the creation of improved ships. These boats were very wide and shallow, perfectly suited for the stormy waves of the Baltic and North Seas<sup>5</sup>. The first trade practiced by the Norse was to the coastal regions that bordered them and lay across the Baltic. These profitable routes soon spread to the large rivers of the North, such as the Dnieper and Volga. Millions of modern dollars in goods were passed across the Baltic Sea and up the rivers yearly, making the Norse the wealthiest merchants in Europe.

The Vikings raiders and warriors are the more well-known type of “viking”. Viking raiders during the apex of the Viking Age (850 C.E.) practiced seasonal raiding. They were present at their farms for the planting of the summer crops and went raiding after the fields were sown. They returned to harvest their grain and departed again to resume their raids until winter<sup>6</sup>.

These types of raids may have originated from the political revolution the Norse tribes underwent around 200 C.E. The classic Norse view of individuality of each man was challenged by the emergence of warrior kings who led great conquering armies to found larger states. These rulers placated their farmers and peasants with gifts of gold and silver, which were obtained through military expeditions, often conducted against fellow Norsemen. The Norse custom known as *Strandhugg* likely contributed to the Norse raids as well. *Strandhugg* is the act of stopping at a settlement and the resupplying for the rest of the journey<sup>7</sup>. The Norse would have stopped at the wealthy towns and churches on the British Isles, perhaps after being blown off

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix B

<sup>6</sup> William R. Short, “Hurstwic: Viking Raids”, 2019, retrieved from <http://www.hurstwic.org/history/articles/society/text/raids.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Sprague, Martina, *Norse Warfare: The Unconventional Battle Strategies of the Ancient Vikings* (Hippocrene Books, Inc.), 329

course by a storm, and resupplied their food and water. Noticing the relatively undefended treasure, the Vikings would kill the inhabitants, claim their reward, and return to Scandinavia. This would have compelled other Norsemen to do the same, as it was so easy for their fellows.

### **Norse Foreign Ventures**

The first of these raids was the sack of Lindisfarne. Lindisfarne was an island that housed a monastery built by Irish monks who desired seclusion<sup>8</sup>. The Norse arrived in their portentous Dragon Ships and wreaked havoc on the isle. Soon after this, all of the coasts of Britain were plagued by Viking raids and the mainland had to take serious action to protect itself.

One of the more serious threats at the time was Ragnarr Loðbrok and his attack on Paris. Ragnarr sailed up the river Seine and laid siege to the city with more than 5,000 men.<sup>9</sup> The King of the Western Franks, Charles the Bald, paid the Vikings 5,000 pounds of silver to leave France. He expected all Vikings to cease raiding when they accepted the payment, assuming they were one political identity that could be so easily swayed. The act of paying off individual Vikings was common in this age, as silver was worth less than the lives that could be cost<sup>10</sup>. This tribute system is seen in Viking Age texts, such as the poem of the Battle of Maldon: “Rings for ransom, royal treasure; Better with gifts ye buy us off, Ere we deal hard blows and death in battle. Why

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<sup>8</sup> “The Vikings - The attacks on the monasteries of Lindisfarne and Iona”, n.d., retrieved from [http://www.ivargault.com/vikingene/iona/klostrene\\_en.html](http://www.ivargault.com/vikingene/iona/klostrene_en.html)

<sup>9</sup> Simon Adams, n.d., “Siege of Paris”, retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/event/Siege-of-Paris-885-886>

<sup>10</sup> Oxenstierna, *Norsemen*, 75

spill we blood when the bargain is easy? Give us the pay and we grant ye peace”<sup>11</sup>. However, Charles’ bribe was, unsurprisingly, ineffective, and the raids continued.

Vikings often settled the land that they raided and traded in, in order to obtain colonies closer to the source of wealth. Settlements were founded in far away areas, including Russia and Newfoundland<sup>12</sup>. These were usually abandoned but sometimes evolved into large, self-sufficient towns and cities that were able to provide the homeland with treasure, such as the colony of Riga.

The Vikings were opportunists, meaning they traded or raided, choosing the most profitable option. Sometimes, they traded their swords as opposed to their goods, becoming mercenaries. Norse mercenaries converged upon the Byzantine capital of Constantinople, as it was the richest city in Europe, and formed the Varangian guard<sup>13</sup>. As they were skilled warriors, the emperor soon took notice of them and brought them into his service. They formed the bulk of his military retinue and are still revered today. One of the mercenaries even carved runes into the Hagia Sophia in the 9th century, spelling out “Halvdan was here”<sup>14</sup>

The Vikings’ richest trade route was through Russia. The Norse were unique in that they controlled the only direct route from northern Europe to the Middle East. Their extensive river passages also allowed them the honor of being the first peoples to “circumnavigate” Europe,

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<sup>11</sup> “Elfinspell, The Battle of Maldon”, n.d., [http://72.167.178.12/OE/texts/brun\\_me.html](http://72.167.178.12/OE/texts/brun_me.html),

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix C

<sup>13</sup> “The Varangian Guard: The Vikings in Byzantium”, n.d., retrieved from <http://www.soldiers-of-misfortune.com/history/varangian-guard.htm>

<sup>14</sup> “Viking Scripture in Hagia Sophia”, n.d., retrieved from <https://ayasofyamuzesi.gov.tr/en/int-viking-scripture-hagia-sophia>

using water and ships almost exclusively<sup>15</sup>. These routes granted them a trade monopoly on furs and slaves to and from the Arabs, augmenting their wealth and providing Europe with the precious Arab silver that dominated the era's trade.

### **The End of the Viking Age**

Europe's reliance on Arabic silver was not to last, however, and the Norse trade routes suffered. New silver mines opening in Germany, and the drying up of Arabic mines, changed the center of silver production from the Middle East to Europe<sup>16</sup>. This new silver producer in the middle of Europe made the Norse trade routes through Russia obsolete, and their owners much poorer. These Norse traders no longer held a valuable monopoly, and their Baltic neighbors started to become just as wealthy<sup>17</sup>. Even their ships stopped being used, as cogs gained popularity. Cogs were utilized and designed by emerging trade leagues in Europe. While the Dragon Ships had the advantage of speed, cogs were much larger and could carry more cargo. They were designed for the transport of many items, not loot after a swift raid<sup>18</sup>.

The Norse raids became less frequent around the same time as the trade. Norse raids were first conducted against small, undefended settlements. They were quick and effective, giving the defenders little time to receive aid. As time went on, Europe became wise to the raids and built various defenses. This meant it would be more profitable to spend the time it took to raid doing other things, like trading or farming.

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<sup>15</sup> Oxenstierna, *Norsemen*, 79

<sup>16</sup> Oxenstierna, *Norsemen*, 290

<sup>17</sup> Oxenstierna, *Norsemen*, 293

<sup>18</sup> Oxenstierna, *Norsemen*, 295

Christianity played an important part in the end of the Viking Age as well. Norse traders who worked with Christians in foreign lands would take up Christianity, if only as a guise, in order to make better deals, as Christians were more eager to do business with their fellows<sup>19</sup>. Eventually, the Norse truly forsook their old gods in favor of the new God, beginning with Harald Bluetooth, the King of Denmark<sup>20</sup>. Christianity preached peace, clashing with the violent way of life many Norse practiced, and inciting Norse converts to rethink their violent lifestyles. Thus, as it gained popularity in the North, raids occurred less and less.

The feudal government gained popularity side by side with Christianity. It challenged tribalism by giving rulers more power in fields such as land ownership, taxation, and military. Each man, town, and state lost their freedom to do whatever, whenever they wanted. Rollo Gånge-Rolf<sup>21</sup>, a prominent Norse raider, once said “We know no master. All of us are equal” in response to a request by a king to meet the ruler of the Norse<sup>22</sup>. Rollo effectively summarizes the Viking way of life: individual liberty to do anything. The type of feudalism in Scandinavia was considerably different compared to the rest of Europe, as kings were established by their popularity and prestige; not a hereditary monarchy. It was a combination of old northern tribalism and southern feudalism that calmed the reaving Vikings but was similar enough to the old ways that they did not revolt. Peasants began to spend more time farming and trading than raiding, pleasing Europe.

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<sup>19</sup> “Vikings History: An Overview of the Culture and History of the Viking Age”, n.d., retrieved from <https://www.historyonthenet.com/vikings-history-overview-culture-history-viking-age>

<sup>20</sup> Oxenstierna, *Norsemen*, 239

<sup>21</sup> Rollo was given the County of Rouen in Normandy to cease his raiding

<sup>22</sup> Oxenstierna, *Norsemen*, 164



The end of the Viking Age is defined by Rollo's great-great-great grandson, William of Normandy, or William the Conqueror. He ruled in Normandy, and after the Death of King Edward, he enforced his claim to the throne of England with military force. He won the battle for England against the sitting King Harold and the King of Norway, Harald III Hardrade, who was also fighting for the seat. William defeated them both, the final defeat the Norse suffered on the British Isles in that age, marking the end of the Vikings<sup>23</sup>.

### **Lasting Legacy of the Viking Age**

Norse culture and lifestyle have survived in the modern northern European cultures. Music has been one of the most influential and clear examples of Norse culture. The German composer Wagner created a famous work of classical music, the collection of four operas known as *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (The Ring Cycle). It is based upon a ring forged of gold collected in the Rhine river. Whoever wears the ring is granted immense power and mastery of the world. This likely inspired *The Lord of the Rings*, a popular trio of novels by J.R.R. Tolkien<sup>24</sup>. *The Lord of the Rings* also has all-powerful rings, and it includes the dwarves and elves so common in Norse myths. *The Lord of the Rings* is often considered the paramount influencer of modern fantasy novels, from *A Song of Ice and Fire* to *Harry Potter*. One of the four operas in "The Ring Cycle" is *Die Walküre* (The Valkyrie). It is based upon the classic Norse mythology of the

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<sup>23</sup> William the Conqueror Invades England", n.d., retrieved from <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/william-the-conqueror-invades-england>

<sup>24</sup> Ross, A (2003, December 22). "The Ring and the Rings". Retrieved from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/12/22/the-ring-and-the-rings>

warrior women who chose the warriors destined for Valhalla after a battle<sup>25</sup>. This piece lives on in the “Loony Toons” cartoon, where it is known as “Kill the Rabbit”. In these ways, Norse culture has found its way into the everyday lives of millions of people.

Norse mythology is another aspect of Norse culture that has touched many peoples’ lives. The comic book *Thor* is a good example of this. *Thor* has many stories based on Norse tales, with characters like Loki, Odin, and, of course, Thor. Valhalla and Asgard are two major parts of these comics, the homes of the gods and chosen warriors<sup>26</sup>. Norse mythology has continued in a different way as well: the days of the week. The days we know and use so often (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, etc.) are derived from their Norse counterparts<sup>27</sup>. Mani’s day became Monday, Tyr’s day became Tuesday, Woden’s day became Wednesday, and so on.

While the land the Vikings conquered was eventually lost (England, Russia, etc.), the legacy of their rule remains. The Isle of Man is a great example of this. It was an island off Britain colonized by the Norwegians, keeping its independence from Britain until 1405. The ancient *thing* hill, a mound 10 feet tall in the center of the main town, is still used to proclaim new laws. In fact, according to Norse tradition, no law is valid until it is read upon the *thing* hill for all to hear. Even Queen Elizabeth, Queen of Britain, had to be coronated on it in 1952 to become Mann’s legal and rightful liege. Traditions like this have stayed with the world, a

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<sup>25</sup> Gaiman, N. R. (2017). *Norse Mythology*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 292

<sup>26</sup> The warriors living in Valhalla experienced a battle each day; its inhabitants would go outside, kill each other, and return, unharmed, to feast and enjoy themselves until the next battle. This was to train for the eventual Ragnarok, where the gods would battle fiery demons and giants to the death.

<sup>27</sup> “Days of the Week”, n.d., retrieved from <https://vikings.mrdonn.org/daysoftheweek.html>

memory of the time when Vikings ruled.

## **Conclusion**

The Viking Age caused much grief among Europe; towns were plundered, women were raped, people were enslaved. Kingdoms were destroyed, displacing thousands of people across the world. The ruthless nature of its plunderings have few parallels in history. The rich and plentiful British Isles were chaotic and overrun for a hundred years. However, it was not viewed as an era of death and destruction for all. The Viking Norse gained much from this time, including silver, gold, slaves, and land; even kingdoms. This was a time of fame and prosperity among the Norse people, giving them the recognition seen today. Without this time they would not be as famous and revered as they are today. Many factors of the Viking Age, in the long run, contributed to all of human society, not just the Norse. Their culture, religion, art, language, and music enhanced our society with their depth and beauty. Despite its harmful aspects, the Viking Age added to the world in ways that overshadow its shortcomings.

## Appendix A



Figure 1: Buddha Statue of Helgö Island. Adapted from Swedish History Museum. 2011,  
retrieved from <http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/bild.asp?uid=18177>

Originally from the Indian subcontinent, this Buddha is believed to be from the 6th century C.E. The distance between its creation in India and excavation in Sweden demonstrate the advanced trade networks the Norse were involved in.

## Appendix B

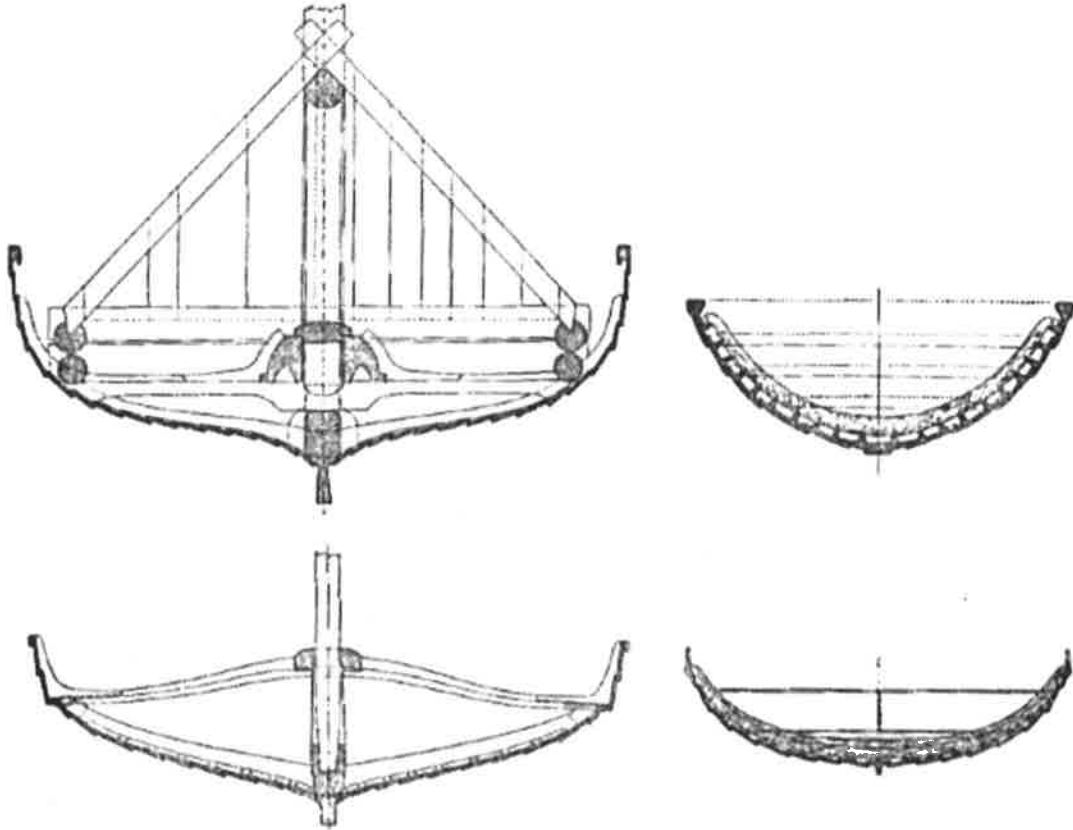


Figure 2: “Ship Cross Sections”. Adapted from *The Norsemen* by Count Eric Oxenstierna,  
page 32

This is a good representation of the progress the Norse made in shipbuilding. The early ships (right) were not at all as suited to the Baltic climate, rather, they were used for fishing and light transport. The later ships (left) were more suited to the stormy weather and waves of the Baltic, moving swiftly and efficiently.

## Appendix C

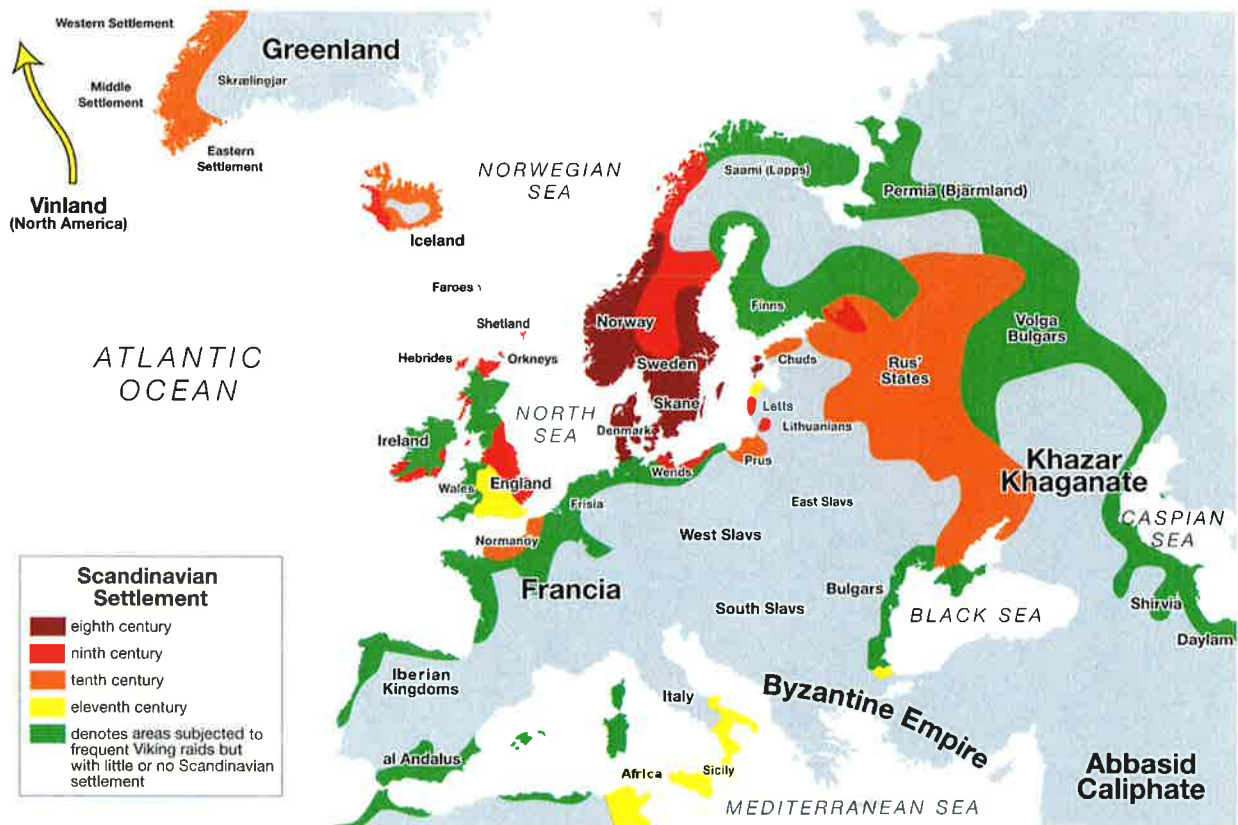


Figure 3: Scandinavian Settlement During the Viking Age, adapted from Wikipedia, retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viking\\_expansion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viking_expansion)

This map shows the far-reaching extent of Viking settlement in the Viking Age. They reached lands hundreds of miles away and made even farther and larger colonies as the centuries progressed. Perhaps most surprising was their settlement of Southern Europe, where, for the most part, there were already established governments, unlike the power vacuum in the British Isles.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources:

Anonymous, "Egil's Saga", W. C. Green, *Icelandic Saga Database*, Sveinbjorn Thordarson (ed.), retrieved from [http://www.sagadb.org/egils\\_saga.en](http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga.en)

This is one of the numerous Icelandic sagas depicting famous historical events during the Viking Age. Written in the 13th century, it is a few hundred years from their time but is written by descendants of Vikings.

Anonymous, "The Battle of Maldon" (Henry S. Pancoast and John Duncan Spaeth Trans.) *Early English Poems*, retrieved from <http://elfinspell.com/EarlyEnglishMaldon.html>

This is a poem that depicts the battle between an army of Anglo-Saxons against a group of Norse raiders (991 C.E). It describes, in great detail, the tactics and strategies deployed by each side in the battle. It ends with a Viking victory and the death of the defending Anglo-Saxon lord.

Anonymous, "The Battle of Brunanburh" (John Osborne Trans.) retrieved from [http://72.167.178.12/OE/texts/brun\\_me.html](http://72.167.178.12/OE/texts/brun_me.html)

This is a poem detailing a battle during the war that pitted England against Dyflin (Dublin), Alba, and Strathclyde (. It was a decisive English victory and gives insight into the battles of the time period.

Anonymous, "Medieval Sourcebook: The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle on Alfred the Great" (Albert Beebe White and Wallace Notestein Trans.) retrieved from <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/angsax-chron1.asp>

Contains writings originating in the early days of Anglo-Saxon dominated Britain.

Includes lines about the Norse raids on the coasts and up the rivers.

## **Secondary Sources:**

### Books

Oxenstierna, E. C. G. (1965), *The Norsemen* (C. Hutter, Trans.). Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Publishers, Ltd. (Original work published 1956).

This was the main source of information on the Norse in the writing of this essay. It describes the people, history, and events of the Viking Age very well, with many examples.

Hall, R. A. (2007). *The World of the Vikings*. New York, NY: Thames and Hudson Inc.

This book contains a good summary of the Viking Age, with many pictures of artifacts dating from the era.

Gaiman, N. R. (2017). *Norse Mythology*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company

This is a collection of original Norse Myths. It includes stories about Thor, Loki, Odin, and more. It provides good insight into the culture and religion of the North.



Sprague, M. (2007). *Norse Warfare: The Unconventional Battle Strategies of the Ancient Vikings*. New York, NY: Hippocrene Books, Inc.

This book contains the unusual and effective battle strategies of the Vikings. It was used for the definition of the Norse custom of *Strandhugg*.

### Online Articles

“Life in the Vikings Times”, n.d., Retrieved from

<http://www.thevikingmuseum.com/life-in-the-viking-times.html>

This article gives information on the daily lives of Vikings. The lifestyles of the raiders and traders are described well.

“The Vikings - The attacks on the monasteries of Lindisfarne and Iona”, n.d., retrieved from

[http://www.ivargault.com/vikingene/iona/klostrene\\_en.html](http://www.ivargault.com/vikingene/iona/klostrene_en.html)

This article details the first iconic raids the Norse conducted on Britain. The burning, looting, and killing that happened in each monastery are indicated.

“Scandinavia Before the Viking Age”, n.d., retrieved from

[http://freya.theladyofthelabyrinth.com/?page\\_id=481](http://freya.theladyofthelabyrinth.com/?page_id=481)

This article describes the political and economic atmosphere before the Viking raids outside of their borders. It covers the time between the first century and the seventh.

“Viking”, n.d., retrieved from <https://www.etymonline.com/word/viking>

This online etymology dictionary defines and explains the origin of the word “Viking”.

“Siege of Paris”, n.d., retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/event/Siege-of-Paris-885-886>

This article describes the leaders and main events during and leading up to the multiple sieges of Paris during the Viking Age.

“The Varangian Guard: The Vikings in Byzantium”, n.d., retrieved from  
<http://www.soldiers-of-misfortune.com/history/varangian-guard.htm>

This article explains the life and formation of the Varangian guards in Byzantium, and how they helped the emperor.

Short, W., n.d., “Hurstwic: What Happened to the Vikings?” retrieved from  
[http://www.hurstwic.org/history/articles/society/text/what\\_happened.htm](http://www.hurstwic.org/history/articles/society/text/what_happened.htm)

This article describes how the Vikings ceased to exist, from religion to military to political.

Short, W., n.d., “Hurstwic: Viking Raids”, retrieved from  
<http://www.hurstwic.org/history/articles/society/text/raids.htm>

This article explains how the Viking raids were conducted, when they were conducted, and why they were conducted.

“Viking History: An Overview of the Culture and History of the Viking Age”, n.d., retrieved from  
<https://www.historyonthenet.com/vikings-history-overview-culture-history-viking-age>

This article describes the culture of the Norse and their reasons for beginning the Viking Age.

William the Conqueror Invades England”, n.d., retrieved from

<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/william-the-conqueror-invades-england>

This article is a history of the war between William of Normandy, Harold II, and Harald III Hadraade over the rich lands of the Kingdom of England.

Ross, A (2003, December 22). “The Ring and the Rings”. Retrieved from

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/12/22/the-ring-and-the-rings>

This article shows the uncanny similarities between Wagner’s “The Ring Cycle” and Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*.

“Days of the Week”, n.d., retrieved from <https://vikings.mrdonn.org/daysoftheweek.html>

This article explains the Norse origins of the days of the week; how Tyr’s Day became Tuesday, etc.

2019, “Viking Expansion”, Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viking\\_expansion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viking_expansion)

This contains a thorough description of where and how the Norse peoples settles. It was used for the map pictured in Appendix B

### Museum Exhibits

“Viking Scripture in Hagia Sophia”, n.d., retrieved from

<https://ayasofyamuzesi.gov.tr/en/int-viking-scripture-hagia-sophia>

This museum exhibit is of the Varangian writings in the Hagia Sophia, dating back more than a thousand years.

“Picture 18177”, n.d., retrieved from <http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/bild.asp=?uid=18177>

This photograph is of the Helgö Island Buddha statue, a rare find so far from its Indian homeland.