

# Vikings

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# VIKINGS



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Written by William Houseman  
Illustrated by Maria Voris

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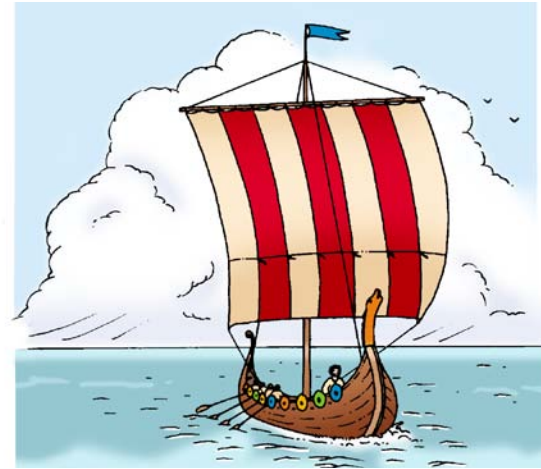
## Correlation

### LEVEL Z

Fountas & Pinnell	U-W
Reading Recovery	N/A
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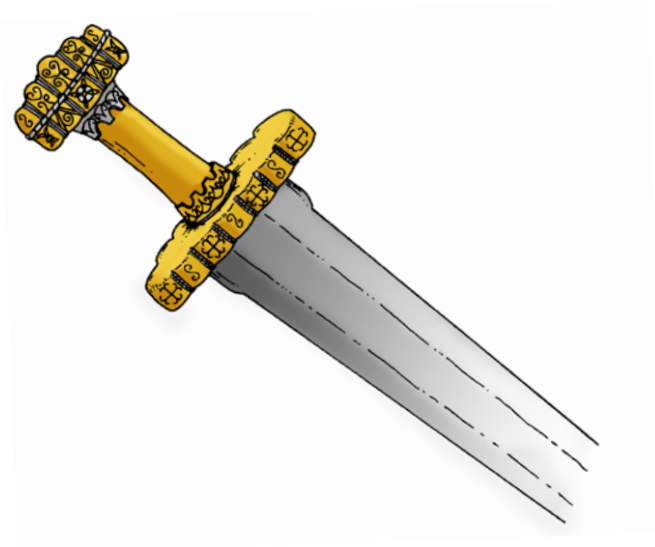
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## INTRODUCTION

What do you think of when you hear the word *Vikings*? Were Vikings fierce warriors or skilled explorers? Do you think of them as merchants who traveled the world, or do you think of them as epic poets? The Vikings **excelled** at all these roles and were also accomplished scientists, farmers, **shipwrights**, and fisherfolk.

We tend to think of Vikings as large and powerful raiders whose quick attacks from the sea struck fear and terror into the hearts of people across Europe. It is true that the Vikings were brave warriors who seldom lost a battle and that their reputation as fierce fighters scared everyone. Yet, their greatest **attributes** may have been their love of exploration and their courage to seek the edges of the vast, unknown ocean.



The great age of the Vikings spanned the years between AD 793 and 1066. In that short amount of time, the Vikings ranged far from their harsh northern homelands, sailing west to discover Iceland, Greenland, and North America, long before Christopher Columbus was even born. Seeking riches, they invaded many cities throughout Europe, Russia, North Africa, and even the Middle East.

Their ships were fast and could carry many warriors. Some of their ships even carried horses. Using their sailing skills, thirst for adventure, and bravery, the Vikings conquered many lands.



People during the Viking age 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. That language has been almost entirely **preserved** in the modern-day speech of the people of Iceland.

The Vikings of Denmark headed south. The Vikings of Sweden went into Eastern Europe. And the Vikings of Norway headed west. All of them greatly influenced the lands they invaded and changed the course of history wherever they went.



----- Viking expansion routes

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 word *Viking* comes from an Old Norse word *vik*, meaning a bay or **fjord**. A *Viking* was a person from the fjords or bays where ships would arrive and depart. To go “a-Viking” was to strike out in ships with the goal of raiding or plundering nearby lands. Many Norsemen went “a-Viking” for part of the year to supplement their families’ incomes.

The unguarded small towns and monasteries along the coasts of Britain and France were easy targets. **Monasteries** were frequent targets of Viking raids because they had few defenses and often contained many valuable objects. As **pagans**, the Vikings did not consider monasteries to be off-limits from attack.

Raiding Vikings would sail in quickly and steal the year's harvest and other valuables from villages. 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. However, Vikings were not only interested in **plunder**. They also settled peacefully in many areas and established trade routes in many parts of the world. Vikings settling in Ireland founded the city of Dublin, which eventually became the capital. Vikings traveling east founded the country of Russia.

### 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 crew to immediately row away from the coast without turning around the ship.

## 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, known as **byrnies**, 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. The sight of berserkers preparing for battle convinced many opponents to hand over their valuables without a fight. In AD 911 the Frankish king offered an invading Viking army land along the northern coast of France if they would leave the city of Paris alone. That area of France is still known today as Normandy (the “land of the North-men”).

## 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 along the trade routes between towns. Larger ships were built to be coastal traders or seagoing warships. Different woods were used in each type of ship. Most Viking warships were made of oak because oak is a very strong wood, and also because oak was sacred to their warrior god, Odin.

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. This design allowed the ships to sail in very shallow waters. Because of this feature, Viking ships were not limited to docking in ports and could appear anywhere. They could sail right onto the shore. Warriors could leap from the ship to 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?

Many English names for the days of the week come from the Vikings. "Tuesday" comes from "Tyr's day," named after the Norse god of war. "Wednesday" comes from "Woden's Day," after the Norse god Odin. "Thursday" comes from "Thor's Day," named after the Norse god of thunder. "Friday" comes from "Frigg's Day," named after the Norse goddess Frigg.

## 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 difficult days at sea, the Viking pioneer found a large uninhabited island. Today, the island he discovered is known as Iceland.

Year's 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. The king had little **tolerance** for anyone who did not follow his rules. The king's rules were very demanding, and many people were unhappy. The king feared that some of his subjects might attempt to overthrow him and end his rule. He **banished** Folke and others who wouldn't follow his rules, forcing them to leave Norway forever.



Folke, along with several other **exiled** families, sailed to Iceland. They built a village on the island and, 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, but not everyone fit in there. Most people in Iceland wanted a peaceful life. One **reckless** man, named Eric the Red, found himself in constant trouble with the authorities. He was a bold and hotheaded man who always seemed to be arguing and **brawling** with others. One day he killed three men in a fight. Eventually the officials of Iceland grew tired of dealing with Eric's lawlessness and ordered him to leave.

Eric had heard rumors of a land even farther west than Iceland. Because he was forced to leave Iceland anyway, he decided to set sail for this unknown land, not knowing if it even existed.

Eric the Red was named for his thick red hair.



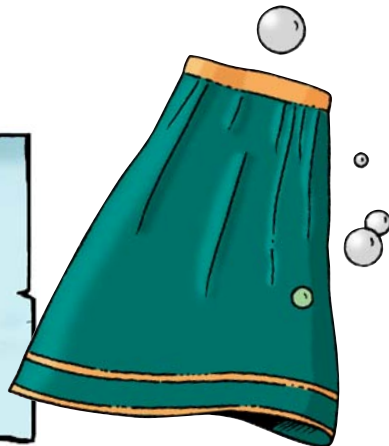


Eric the Red sailed west and found this rumored new land after only two days. He wanted other settlers to come there to start new lives. He told them stories about how green it was. He said it had rich valleys and game animals to hunt. He named this new land he had found *Greenland*.

People believed his 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 and stormy. Only fourteen of the twenty-five ships reached Greenland safely. The settlers 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 **adventurous** people had come to live in Greenland. Greenland is the world's largest island. Today, about 56,000 people live there.

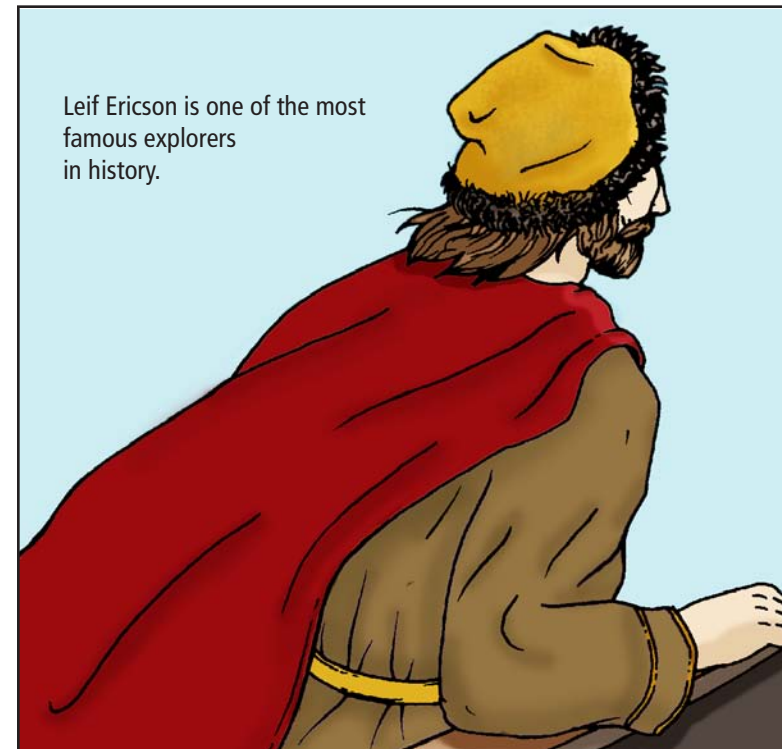
### Do-You-Know?

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 awarded land to farm by his family. He wasn't sure what he wanted to do with his life. Leif decided to sail to Norway, his family's original homeland.



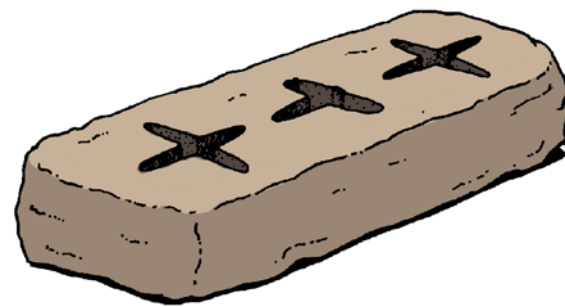
While he was in Norway, Leif heard a remarkable tale told by a trader. The trader's ship had been caught in a terrible storm and blown far off course. While trying to find his way back home, the man had seen a new coast that wasn't on his map. He didn't know exactly where he had been when he saw this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

Leif Ericson learned everything he could from the trader about this **uncharted** land. He bought the man's ship. He and a small crew retraced the trader's route, looking for this mysterious coast. Finally, they saw a place that looked like the land of 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.



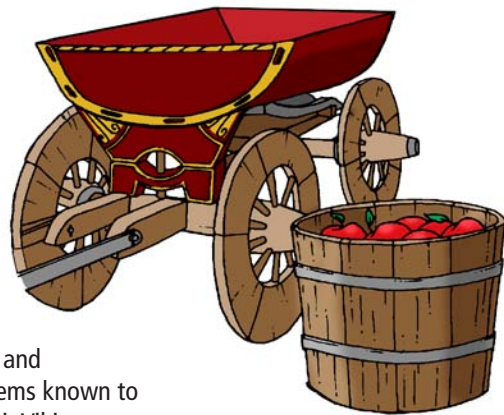
Leif and his crew built a house and spent the winter in Vinland. They sailed home to Greenland the next year. But their adventure was not over. During their return voyage, Leif found a wrecked trading ship and valiantly rescued the crew. As a reward, he was given all the ship's cargo. These adventures earned him the name "Leif the Lucky." Once he returned home, 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 again. 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 sailed along the Vinland coast for two years, exploring the new continent and using 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 pagan Hammer of Thor (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. A few days later, angry native men **retaliated** by attacking 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, including another of Leif's brothers and his sister. Eventually, the Vikings decided that exploring this new land was not worth the trouble it caused, and they **abandoned** the outpost.



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 and Asia.

The Vikings were skilled people who 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 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

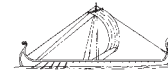
## GLOSSARY

- abandoned** (*v.*) left behind (p. 19)
- adventurous** (*adj.*) having a spirit of adventure; enjoying new challenges and experiences (p. 15)
- archaeologists** (*n.*) people who study ancient cultures (p. 17)
- attributes** (*n.*) characteristics or traits (p. 4)
- banished** (*v.*) forced to leave (p. 12)
- berserkers** (*n.*) special Viking warriors who wore animal skins and fought recklessly in battle (p. 9)
- brawling** (*v.*) fighting or arguing in a loud, disruptive way (p. 14)
- byrnies** (*n.*) shirts of chain mail worn as defensive armor (p. 9)
- chain mail** (*n.*) flexible armor made from interlinked metal rings (p. 9)
- draft** (*n.*) the depth of water a ship needs to sail without touching the bottom (p. 11)
- excelled** (*v.*) performed extremely well (p. 4)
- exiled** (*adj.*) forced to leave one's city or country by political or legal authorities (p. 13)
- fearsome** (*adj.*) causing fear (p. 11)

<b>fjord</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a narrow sea inlet between steep slopes and cliffs (p. 7)
<b>hull</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the main body of a ship or sailing vessel (p. 11)
<b>ideal</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	perfect; couldn't be better (p. 14)
<b>monasteries</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	groups of buildings where monks live and worship (p. 8)
<b>pagans</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	people who practice religions worshipping many gods or the natural world (p. 8)
<b>plunder</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	loot or valuables taken by force (p. 8)
<b>preserved</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	maintained or kept in an unchanged condition (p. 6)
<b>reckless</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	lacking caution; careless of consequences (p. 14)
<b>retaliated</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	attacked in response to having been attacked (p. 19)
<b>roles</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	functions performed as part of a larger effort (p. 4)
<b>settlement</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a new town set up on a frontier where people make a new permanent home (p. 13)
<b>shipwrights</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	carpenters skilled at building and repairing ships (p. 4)
<b>tolerance</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the willingness to let others have their own opinions, beliefs, or ways of behaving even if they are not the same as your own (p. 12)
<b>uncharted</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	unknown; not recorded on a map (p. 17)

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### Explore More

In which area of the world did the Vikings make the biggest difference?

How would history have been different if the Vikings had permanently settled in Vinland?

In what ways did the Vikings influence other countries?

### For Further Research

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