Vikings - facts and myths [1]

We all think we know the Vikings, from the stories of raiding and plundering to Norse mythology and those horned helmets. But how much of this is fact, and how much is myth? Here's a brief overview to help you brush up on your Viking knowledge!

The Viking age

The Viking age is generally accepted to have lasted from the first Viking raid on the Lindisfarne monastery in Northern England in 793 to the decisive Battle of Hastings in 1066. The Viking age had a huge impact on the medieval history of Scandinavia, Great britain, Ireland and many other countries and regions in Europe.

Who were the Vikings?

The Vikings, or "Vikingr" in Old Norse, is the collective term used to describe the Scandinavian explorers, traders and warriors who raided, traded, explored and settled across large parts of Europe, Asia and the North Atlantic islands from around the eight to the mid-eleventh centuries.

Viking beliefs

The Vikings had their own belief system prior to Christianisation. Known as Norse mythology, it centred on gods such as Odin, Thor, Loki and Frey, with some regional variations. Dying in battle was seen as the most prestigious way to depart life, as it would guarantee you a seat in Valhalla, an enormous hall ruled by Odin where fantastic banquets were held each night and preparations were made to help Odin in the apocalyptic battles preceding Ragnarok, or the end of the world. By the tenth and eleventh centuries most if not all of the Norsemen had converted to Christianity, but held on to many of their pagan beliefs until late into the medieval period.

Vikings as explorers

Vikings were feared for their famous long ships, extremely seaworthy vessels with a relatively flat bottom that allowed Vikings not only to traverse oceans but also navigate through shallow waters and even land straight on beaches. for During the Viking age, Norsemen travelled far and wide across what was then the known world. Contrary to popular belief, Vikings did not only engage in raiding and pillaging. They were also adept traders, and established many successful settlements in England, Scotland, Ireland, Normandy and Iceland.

In 845, Vikings rowed up the Seine the first time and laid siege to Paris. Demanding bribes from the city's officials, Norsemen carried out several other attacks on Paris until a final assault in 886 ended the Vikings reign of terror on the city.

In addition to terrorising the entire North Atlantic coastal line, Vikings went south to North Africa and east to Russia, Constantinople and the Middle East.

Indeed, the first Europeans to set foot in North America were Vikings, who established a short-lived settlement in present-day Canada under the leadership of Leif Eriksen.

Danegeld

Danegeld was a tax imposed by the Vikings on the countries they raided. By paying the Danegeld, rulers could ensure that their regions would not be subject to Viking attacks. English, French and other European rulers frequently paid huge sums of silver and valuables as Danegeld during the ninth to eleventh centuries.

Runes and rune stones

Vikings had their own alphabet based on the Germanic runic script, known as “futhark”. The Vikings would carve historical events into rocks using runes, now known as rune stones. The rune stones would typically detail the heroic escapades of a particular chieftain and his men or successful campaigns abroad. Much of what is known about the Vikings today stems from runic inscriptions found on stones across Scandinavia, the British isles and as far away as the Black Sea. Examples of famous runes stones can be found at the UNESCO World Heritage site at Jelling. [2]

Viking myths

Countless misconceptions of the Vikings exist and continue to be perpetuated today. Here are some of the more well-known Viking myths that have no grounding in historical fact.

Vikings did not wear horned helmets. There is no evidence to suggest that they ever did, apart from in some ritual ceremonies. Having horned helmets would seriously impede your ability to fight effectively in close combat. Viking helmets were in fact conical, made from hard leather with wood and metallic reinforcement, or made in iron with a mask and chain mail. The idea of Vikings wearing horned helmets arose during the 19th century when romanticised and nationalistic views of the Viking people became popular.

Vikings were not simply savage brutes. Images of wild-haired, wild-eyed raiders are but a myth. In fact, the Anglo-Danes occupying parts of Great Britain were described as excessively clean by their Anglo-Saxon neighbours, as they insisted on bathing at least once a week and kept their hair well-groomed.

Vikings did not play the lure.

Vikings were not typically buried in a dolmen.