

Vikings

Are Vikings Overrated?

Advanced

The Viking era usually is defined to have lasted from 800 AD - 1050 AD. More precisely, its beginning and end are tied to special dates.

Beginning of Viking era: June 8th, 793

That is the date when Vikings destroyed the abbey (same as monastery) on the Holy Island of Lindisfarne (founded 634), a famous center of learning (and probably commerce). Monks were killed in the abbey, thrown into the sea to drown, or carried away as slaves along with the church treasures. "Never before in Britain has such a terror appeared", wrote **Alcuin of York** whom we also meet [here](#).

End of Viking era: Oct. 14th, 1066

That is the date of the battle of Hastings and thus the of Norman conquest of England by **William the Conqueror** from the Normandy. Willi was a descendant of Viking raiders; a "Norman" was simply a man from the North.

For some odd reasons the Vikings loved to invade England. William the Conqueror finally did it for good. More or less parallel to William's endeavour the Norwegian (Viking) King Harald Hardrada ("Harald the hard ruler") also invaded northern England in September 1066 and indirectly helped William because Harold, the English King, had to divide his forces.

Why these guys wanted to invade England and not Gaul is not clear to me. It couldn't have been English food, wine and wenches, one supposes. Also, in contrast to invading Gaul, you couldn't just ride over, you needed boats.

And boats they had. It stands to reason that Vikings made the "best" boats of their time and knew how to use them. The term "best" is in quotation marks because it might only apply to boats optimized for war and raids. Here is an extremely well preserved example that is on exhibition in the Oslo museum:



Viking boat

Source: Photographed in the Oslo museum by ???

The **Viking boats** - known to the English as dragonships because they often had a dragon-shaped prow - look like they evolved from the much older [Nydam-type boats](#) from (roughly) the same area. The Viking ships are considerably larger, however, and had many novel features (like a mast and sail) that made them good enough to *sail* to Greenland, North America, and back again.

We are used to see the Vikings as North-Europeans who mainly went West and South for plundering and conquest. That is not correct. Vikings also went East, terrorizing the Baltic regions and eventually large areas all the way down to Constantinople (Istanbul). In these areas Vikings were known by the local Slavs, Arabs, Greeks and Byzantines as the "Rus" or as "Varangians".

Vikings were also involved in founding the cities of Novgorod and Kiev. According to the 12th century Kievan Primary Chronicle, a group of Varangians known as the Rus' settled in Novgorod in 862 under the leadership of Rurik. Rurik's relative Oleg conquered Kiev in 882 and established the state of Kievan Rus', which was later ruled by Rurik's descendants and eventually evolved into Russia. This is hotly debated, however. That the Vikings were somehow involved in the early "Russian" cultures is not a new insight, it just was anathema and forbidden in the Soviet Union because it clashed with the dogma that the "Rus", the nucleus of the Russian empire, came into being by the heroic deeds of the local yokels.

So the Vikings were good at boating, raiding, plundering, conquering and perhaps trading. Anything else? I have just visited the big [Viking exhibition in Berlin](#) and can't remember anything else. Let's go through the list:

- **Art.** No literature, paintings or sculptures to speak of. They did make some nicely carved wood and [bone](#) things but nothing to get excited about.
- **Architecture.** Forget it. Relative primitive wooden houses ("wattle and daub"). OK - not much stones in Denmark, but no lack of such in Norway. They have seen big buildings (one Viking carved some [graffiti](#) into a marble balustrade of the Hagia Sophia, after all) but didn't care to build some of their own or, more likely, just lacked the skills and organization needed for that.
- **Metal working.** The Vikings certainly smelted iron and used it for everyday purposes. But everything good - from swords to gold jewelry - seems to have been bought or stolen from others. Their own castings of precious metals like silver and gold were derivative.
- **Pottery.** They must have had pottery. But I have not seen anything that caught my attention - in stark contrast to the very much older [Minoan pottery](#), for example.
- **Whatever else.** Nothing comes to mind.

So let's look at major *happenings* involving Vikings.

● **Major raids** with some reports from the survivors:

- 793 First recorded raid on the Lindisfarne monastery, England,
- 795 Begin of regular raids on places in Ireland.
- 799 First raids on Frankish empire.
- 830 Major raids on England start.
- 844 First raids on Spain.
- 845 Going up the river Seine; The city of Paris pays 7000 pound silver "danegeld" (= "Danish tribute") to be spared.
- 856/57 Sacking of Paris.
- 865 - 878 An "army" of several thousand Vikings moves around England; pillaging, murdering, raping, ... just having some old-fashioned fun without the urge to take over and settle.
- 881 Vikings lay waste to the heartland of the [Frankish empire](#) (whatever was left by then); pillaging many cities including [Aachen](#)
- 882 Pillaging of Cologne, Trier, Bonn and other "German" cities.
- 896 Good news: A large bunch of raiding Vikings with six ships are wiped out by an anglo-saxon fleet. Survivors were put to the sword.



Being put to the sword. This time Vikings were the puttees.

Mass grave of about 50 Vikings; found 2009 in Weymouth, Dorset, England.
Early 11th century

Source: BBC News; 6 March 2014.

● **Viking settlements** and discoveries:

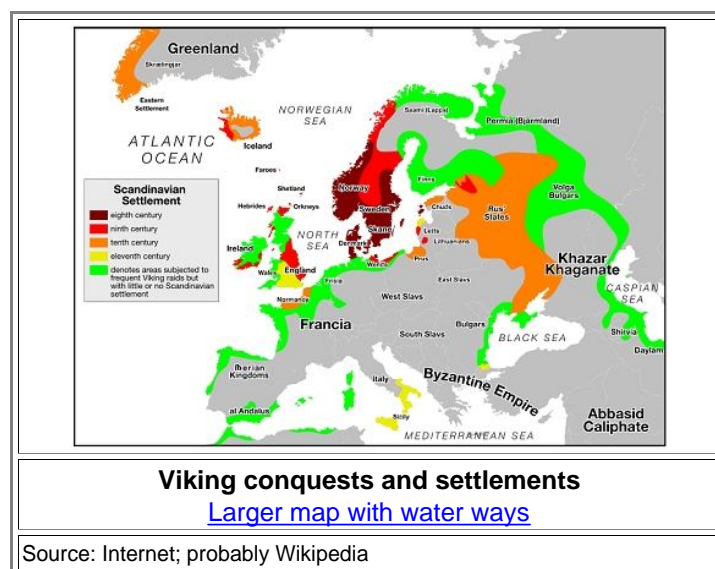
- 840 Staying through the winter in the Frankish empire.
- 841 Staying through the winter in Ireland and foundation of Dublin.
- 850 Staying through the winter in England.
- 850± Expansion to the East Baltic; raids and conquests.
-

- 855± and beyond: Vikings had a hand in the foundation of the "Rus" Khaganate, with Nowgorod and Kiev. Or maybe not; this is heatedly debated.
- 889 Harald Fairhair, first King of Norway, becomes Earl of Orkney.
- 900± Discovery of Greenland by Gunnbjörn Úlfsson.
- 911 Establishment of the Normandy as Viking principality by Rollo or (after baptizing) Robert I.
- 983 Settlement in Greenland by Erik the Red.
- 988 Varangians / Vikings are mercenaries in Constantinople, forming an elite unit known as "Varangian Guard", serving as personal bodyguards of the Byzantine Emperors
- 990 and beyond: many raids on England.
- 1000± Leif Erikson discovers America ("Vinland", probably in Newfoundland) but doesn't stay.

● Viking conquest and wars

- 860 Varangians attack unsuccessfully Constantinople.
- 866 A large Viking army disembarks in East Anglia, England.
- 892 A Viking army lost a major battle around Leuven (Belgium) and goes on to pillage Trier (again) and the area along the river Mosel.
- 914 Vikings take the Bretagne.
- 941 Attack on Constantinople ends in disaster. The Byzantines burnt the ships with "Greek fire" (look it up).
- 980 New attacks on England.
- 1016 England conquered by the Danish (Vikings). Cnut the Great founds the Northern Empire; Danish kings rule in England until 1042.
- 1066 The End. [Haithabu](#) destroyed by (slavic) Wends.

▶ The following map gives an idea of the geography involved. Another map showing the rivers used for getting to place can be found in [this link](#), and yet another one [here](#).



▶ So what is our Viking heritage? What does Europe at large owe to the Vikings? Blue eyes and red hair outside of Scandinavia is one answer. There might be more though, and I will let you know what it is as soon as I found out.

Famous Vikings

▶ Just for fun I will go through some of the more (in)famous Vikings.

▶ Harald Fairhair (c. 850 – c. 932)

- Supposedly the first King of Norway, in power from c. 872 to 930. Most of what we know about him comes from sagas written 300 years later, so everything is open to doubt. The unification of Norway by Harald (involving plenty of sword uses) was a side effect of Harald's ambition to conquer fair (we hope) Gyda, the daughter of Eirik, King of Hordalandis, wherever that is. Gyda, in time honored female fashion, refused to marry Harald "before he was king over all of Norway". Harald was pissed, took a vow neither to cut nor to comb his hair until he was sole king of Norway, went out to business, and was known as Harald "Shockhead" or "Tanglehair". Ten years later, after he had subdued whoever needed subduing and became King, he finally attended to the stuff on his head and became Harald Fairhair. It appears that he had some kids with Gyda but also with several other women. Two of his many (11 - 20) sons, *Eric Bloodaxe* and *Haakon the Good*, succeeded Harald to become kings after his death. Don't you love these names? One is entitled to wonder how the brothers got along. Well, the sagas usually

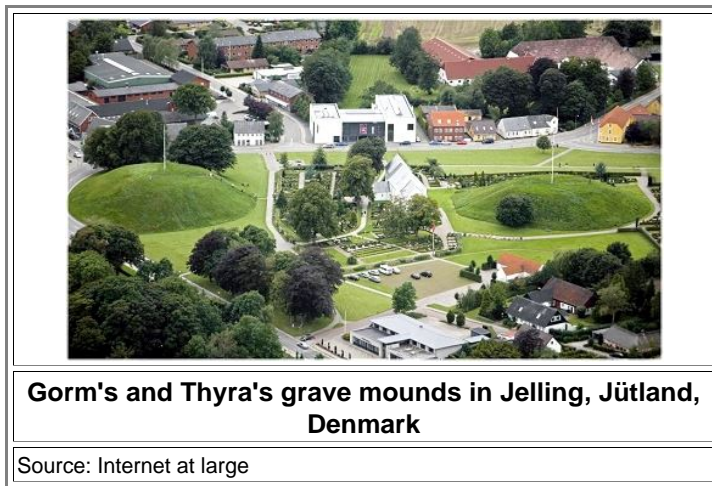
explain Eric's cute nickname as a reference to his slaying a number of his half-brothers in an attempt to monopolize his rule over Norway.

Rollo (846 - 931)

- Rollo (or Hrolf, Rolf) was the Viking from Norway who commanded the last big raid on France in 911. Obviously he stayed there for good, founding a Viking principality soon to be called "Normandy". His descendants were the Dukes of Normandy, and following the Norman conquest of England in 1066, Kings of England.

Gorm the Old (before 900 - ca. 958)

- Gorm the Old, also known as Gorm the Sleepy, was the first historically recognized King of Denmark, reigning from c. 936 to his death c. 958. The Vikings loved to give nicknames to people and "The Old" probably refers to him being seen as the traditional ancestral "head" of the Danish monarchy. It was also customary to list a characteristic that was the opposite of what was meant; witness "Little" John of Robin Hood fame. "Gorm the Sleepy" was quite likely not at all sleepy; he was watchful, Gorm ruled from [Jelling](#) where he had a kind of court. He and his wife Thyra were buried there under impressive mounds:



- Unfortunately the graves were robbed already in antiquity and not much was found on various more recent digs. However, we still have Gorm's (smaller) "**Jelling Stone**" in honor of his wife Thyra:



- The writing in Younger Futhark **runes** reads: [King Gormr made this monument in memory of Thyrvé, his wife, Denmark's adornment.. Ain't he cute?](#)

Harald Bluetooth Gormsson (c. 910 - 987)

- Harald was obviously Gorm's son and succeeded his father to the throne of Denmark. He ruled as King of Denmark from c. 958 *and* as King of Norway for a few years; probably around 970. Why he has the Nickname "Bluetooth" nobody knows. One of the many hypothesis goes in the direction that it alluded to his sword. Harald liked to invade Gaul; he went to the help Richard the Fearless of the Normandy in 945 and 963. His son conquered Samland to the East, and after the assassination of King Harald Greycloak of Norway, managed to force the people of that country into temporary subjugation to himself. However, he also lost in a big way to the "Svedes" and in particular to the "Germans" under Otto I. That induced him to become a Christian in 960 and to found a few bishoprics.

- Harald is remembered for two things:

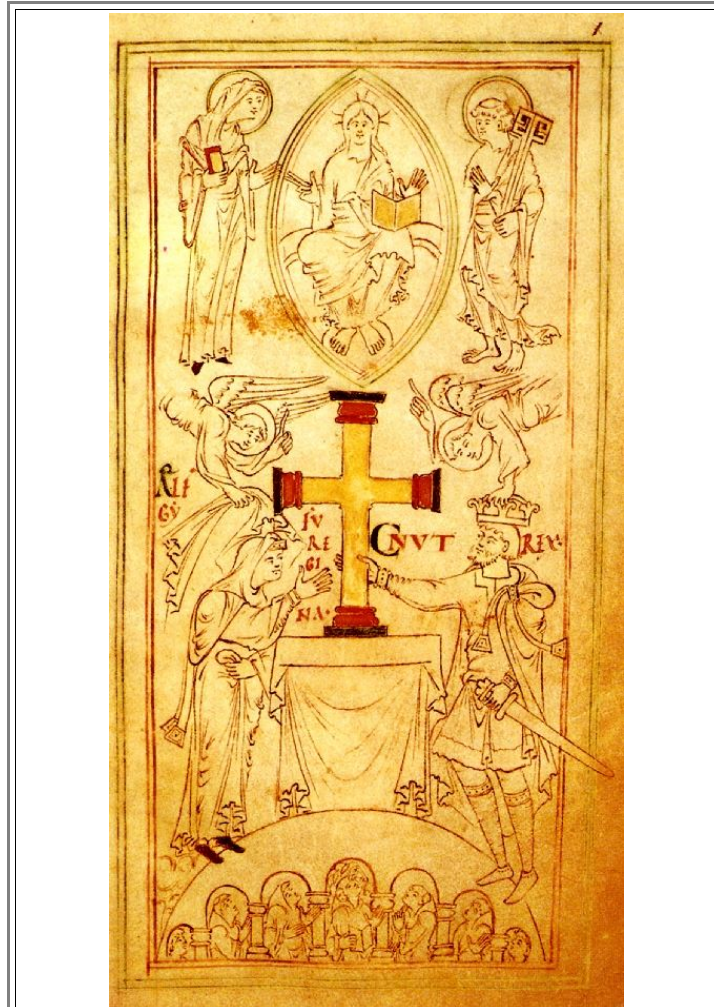
- The **Bluetooth** wireless specification design started by Ericsson, Nokia, Intel and Toshiba to enable cable-free connections between computers, mobile phones, PDAs, printers, etc. The Bluetooth communications protocol in these devices is named after this king, because he unified Denmark and Norway much like the technology whose goal was to unify computers and cellular phones. The Bluetooth logo consists of the Nordic runes for his initials. Why those nerds didn't take Bismarck or Kohl (both unified Germany) as role model is not obvious.
- The larger **Jelling stone** with inscriptions and pictures on three sides. The text says: **King Haraldr ordered this monument made in memory of Gormr, his father, and in memory of Thyrvé, his mother; that Haraldr who won for himself all of Denmark and Norway and made the Danes Christian.** Here is a replica with the artwork in its original color:



- As a consequence of Harald's army having lost to the Germans at the Danevirke in 974, he no longer had control of Norway, and Germans settled back into the border area between Scandinavia and Germany. They were driven out of Denmark in 983 by an alliance of Obodrite soldiers, a confederation of medieval West Slavic tribes within the territory of modern Mecklenburg and Holstein in northern Germany, and troops loyal to Harald. Soon after, Harald was killed fighting off a rebellion led by his son Swein. He is believed to have died in 986, although several accounts claim 985 as his year of death. The victorious son was now King of Denmark and England, as well as parts of Norway and known as *Sweyn I Forkbeard*. He was the father of Cnut the Great (see below).

▲ **Cnut the Great** (985 or 995 – 1035): also known as **Canute**

- Cnut was a son of the Sweyn Forkbeard, who was the son and heir to King Harald Bluetooth (and perhaps his murderer). He was a king of Denmark, England, Norway and parts of Sweden, a huge area also known as the Anglo-Scandinavian or North Sea Empire. After his death, the deaths of his heirs within a decade, and the Norman conquest of England in 1066, his legacy was largely lost to history - and the time of the Vikings was over. Cnut, it appears, wasn't a real Viking anymore but showed some signs of decadence. "He maintained his power by uniting Danes and Englishmen under cultural bonds of wealth and custom, rather than by sheer brutality" writes Wikipedia. He also was a good Christian, sucking up to the Pope (but only up to a point) and making large donations:



Angels crown Cnut as he and his wife Ælfgifu present a large gold cross to Hyde Abbey.

Source: Wikipedia; scanned from the book "History of the Kings and Queens of England by David Williamson", The National Portrait Gallery; original in the Illuminated manuscript "Liber Vitae" from 1031.

▲ **Erik the Red** or Erik Thorvaldsson (ca.950 - ca. 1003)

- Eric, born in Norway, is remembered in sagas as having founded the first Norse settlement in Greenland. The nickname "the Red" most likely refers to the color of his hair and beard but might also refer to his blood stained hands.

As a juvenile he had to move with his family from Norway into exile on Iceland because his father Thorvald was banished from Norway for the crime of manslaughter. Eric, a good son following his father's lead, was banished from Iceland in 982 for three years because he "slew" a considerable number of people. He sailed West, "discovering" Greenland, where he settled for a while. He actually did not discover Greenland, that happened much earlier involving one *Gunnbjörn Úlfsson*.

After the three years were over he returned to Iceland and lured a considerable number of settlers (plus his family) to go back with him to Greenland.

▲ **Leif Erikson** (c. 970 – c. 1020)

- Leif was the son of Erik the Red. He must have been born on Iceland but grew up to some extent in Greenland. In 999 he sailed to Norway, made up with King Olaf Tryggvason there, and became christianized. Then he went out to discover America, possibly by accident because he was blown of course while attempting to sail to Greenland with the aim to introduce Christianity there.

We know from archaeological evidence that some Vikings settled for a while at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, Canada. We don't know if that was Eric the Red with his crew or somebody else. There are two Icelandic documents written around 1200 that relate to that: the Saga of the Greenlanders (Grænlandinga Saga) and The Saga of Eric the Red, (Eiríks Saga Rauða). Unfortunately the sagas tell quite different versions of what had happened.

- As Wikipedia knows: [Leif's successful expedition in Vinland encouraged other Norsemen to also make the journey. The first apparent contact between the Norse and the indigenous people, so-called skrælingjar, was made by his brother Thorvald, and resulted \(*surprise!*\) in hostilities and killing. In the end there were no permanent Norse settlements in Vinland, although sporadic voyages for forages, timber and trade possibly lasted for centuries.](#)

The Vikings (and their successors) did not see America as particularly important, an attitude still found in Northern Europe. They only referred to these territories rather casually, possibly assuming that everybody knew about these lands to the far West anyway. It is quite possible that Christopher Columbus, who claimed in a letter to have visited Iceland in 1477, could have heard some stories about the "Land to West" there.