

# The Vikings

Even during Emperor Charlemagne's lifetime, his empire was being threatened from foreign invaders. Europe itself was besieged by many roaming bands of restless marauders who brought with them great upheaval.

The Slavs occupied Eastern Europe from the Balkans of the north to Greece in the south. The nomadic horsemen called the Magyars stormed in from the East, leading raids into northern Italy and the Rhine Valley of Germany. By the 900s, they finally settled down to quiet farm living on the rich plains of Hungary.

To the south, the Moslem Arabs campaigned across the eastern Mediterranean Sea region. They invaded Italy, and in 846 sacked the city of Rome.

Despite the force and power displayed by these invaders, from the northern reaches of Europe came marauders more dreaded than any other—the Vikings.

They were a Germanic people called the Normans who had traditionally farmed the thin soil of Scandinavia for centuries. They were also a seafaring culture, adept at navigation in small, shallow boats called *drakken*, or dragon ships.

Such ships measured about 60 feet long, with a keel carved from a single tree trunk. The hull was ribbed, and the entire vessel was flexible. A single center mast boasted a great coarse woolen sail, often striped with various colors. At the bow of the *drakken*, a wooden dragon's head rose to frighten the enemies of the Vikings. The men slept on an open deck, exposed to the elements and the sea waves.

The Vikings were considered barbarians. They were coarse and rough, tall and blond-bearded, with great red cloaks thrown over their broad shoulders. They fought with ferocity and, to their victims, seemed bloodthirsty. Viking warriors believed that their chief god, Odin, would protect them in a fight and strike their opponents blind and deaf and turn their swords into harmless sticks.

The Viking technique of attacking an enemy usually began by establishing a base of operation

on a coastal island or through the taking of a walled seaside town. From there, they sailed their shallow *drakken* up a river, attacking villages along the way, stealing horses and riding into the countryside, plundering as they went.

No one was safe from the attacks of the marauding Vikings. They even invaded churches and monasteries, killing the monks and priests, taking the gold and silver artifacts and crosses, even stripping the jewels from the covers of Bibles.

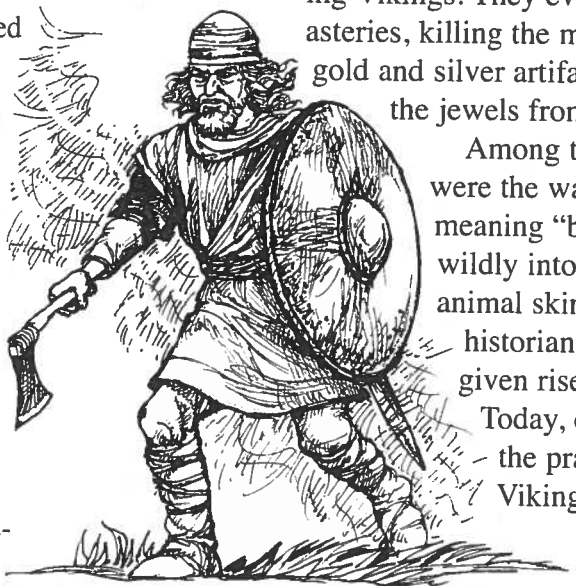
Among the Vikings, the most savage were the warriors known as the *berserkrs*, meaning "bear shirts." These men went wildly into a fight, naked except for animal skins, often that of a wolf. Some historians believe this practice may have given rise to early tales of werewolves.

Today, our word *berserk* comes from the practices of these frenzied Vikings.

So fearful were the Vikings that a prayer was developed by Western European Christians, and spoken at the first sign of an invading band of Vikings: "From the fury of the Northmen, good Lord deliver us!"

The Vikings raided all across Europe. They established colonies in Iceland and Greenland during the 800s, and in the late 900s even reached America. In England, in 853, they set up a kingdom with its capital in Dublin. In 810, they raided the whole of Charlemagne's Empire, besieging Paris four times, pillaging it three times, and burning it twice.

Over time, the Northmen settled down, often with Frankish women, and became civilized. In 911, a Viking chieftain named Rollo accepted land from the Frankish King Charles the Simple, in exchange for the conversion of the Northmen to Christianity. Today, this region of France is called Normandy, after the Norman Vikings.



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## Review and Write

What technique was used by the Vikings when raiding an enemy?