



What was the Viking Age?

KS3


KS2

Ages 7-14 ⌚ 5 min read

The word "Viking" conjures a fairly specific image: helmeted warriors raiding monasteries, burning villages, striking fear across Europe. The reality of the Viking Age (roughly 793–1066 AD) is considerably more interesting than the stereotype — and the stereotype itself is mostly wrong (they almost certainly didn't wear horned helmets).

Who were the Vikings?

The Vikings were Norse people from what is now Scandinavia — Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. They weren't a single unified nation but a collection of tribes and chieftains who shared a language, culture, and religion (the Norse gods: Odin, Thor, Freya, and others). The word "viking" originally referred to the act of going on a raiding voyage, not the people themselves — a Viking was someone who went a-viking, not a ethnic identity.

 The Viking longship was the technology that made their age possible — a revolutionary piece of engineering that was fast, shallow enough to sail up rivers, light enough to carry overland, and strong enough to cross the open Atlantic. It was the Viking equivalent of a Swiss Army knife: the same vessel could raid a coastline at dawn, trade at a port by midday, and navigate the open sea by evening. Without the longship, there is no Viking Age.

Raiders, traders, and settlers

The raiding that dominates the popular image was real — the attack on Lindisfarne monastery in 793 AD is traditionally taken as the start of the Viking Age, and Norse raids terrorised coastal communities across the British Isles, France, and beyond. But raiding was only part of the story. The same Norse seafarers were also sophisticated traders, with networks stretching from the British Isles to Constantinople and Baghdad. They established trading cities across Eastern Europe — Kiev, Novgorod — and founded Dublin. They settled Iceland, Greenland, and around 1000 AD, reached North America, which they called Vinland, nearly 500 years before Columbus.

What ended the Viking Age?

It didn't end so much as transform. Norse people gradually converted to Christianity, which meant fewer monasteries raided. They integrated into the kingdoms they'd settled or conquered — the Normans who conquered England in 1066 were descendants of Vikings who had settled in northern France. The political landscape of Europe consolidated into larger, more organised kingdoms that were better able to defend themselves. The last great Viking raid is generally considered the Battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066, when the English King Harold defeated the Norwegian king Harald Hardrada. Three weeks later, Harold himself was defeated at Hastings by the Normans — Vikings, once removed, in their own way completing a Viking conquest of England after all.