Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

READING MUSEUM SERVICE

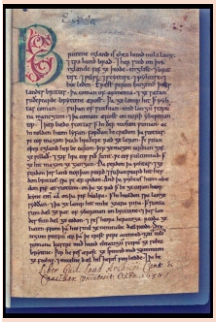
VIKINGS H1/A



The Vikings came from the Scandinavian countries we now call Denmark, Sweden and Norway (see map). They were great travellers. Evidence for Viking settlements can be found all over Europe, including Britain.

The Viking Age in Britain spans about 250 years. The first record dates from 793, when a group of Vikings sailed across the North Sea and landed at Lindesfarne, an island off the northeast coast of England. They attacked and raided the monastery, taking precious objects, manuscripts and anything else they could trade afterwards. The remains of the monastery can be seen in the photograph on the right. Many other raids followed and by the 850s Viking groups had captured land and settled here. Land had become scarce in their own countries as the population grew.





How do we know about the Vikings? The most important written source for finding out about the Vikings in England is the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a page of which is shown on the left. The chronicle was started in the late ninth century and was added to over the following three centuries. It is a fantastic source because it describes historical events year by year - but we must always keep in mind that it is a one-sided account of history. It should ideally be used alongside other sources in order to gain a better understanding of the events recorded. Some parts are copies of earlier editions and may have been changed. The passage below is taken from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and describes that first raid at Lindesfarne:

> In this year fierce, foreboding omens came over the land of Northumbria and sorely frightened the people. They consisted of whirlwinds, lightning storms, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the sky. These signs were followed by great famine, and on June 8th of the same year, the ravaging of heathen men destroyed God's church at Lindesfarne with plunder and slaughter.

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* tells us that on 4 January 871, a fierce battle took place in Reading. The Anglo-Saxon army, led by King Ethelred, attacked a Viking camp. The Anglo-Saxons were eventually defeated, despite killing many of their opposition. In fact, if you visit the Forbury Gardens in Reading today, you would be walking over the site of that Viking camp. Some days after this another battle took place at Ashdown in Berkshire. This time the Anglo-Saxons won.

Reading Borough Council

Heritage Lottery Fund

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

VIKINGS H1/A

The Vikings have a reputation for being ferocious, terrorising warriors. But most were actually farmers or fishermen. Groups of these men crossed the seas in the summer months to find new land to settle on and people to trade with. Each group followed a leader and was like a small army.

The Vikings were pagans and worshipped many gods. It is often thought that the reason they raided monasteries in Britain was because of their hatred for Christianity, but this is not true. Experts now believe that these raids had nothing to do with religion but instead were due to the monasteries being very rich and easy to attack. In fact, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that when the Vikings settled in Britain they actually converted to Christianity. The picture on the right shows the Gosforth Cross in Cumbria. It is the tallest Viking cross in the country.



The Viking's bad reputation has existed since those first raids. It wasn't until the beginning of the twentieth century that academics started to reassess the bloodthirsty and violent image and recognise that the Vikings had many other skills besides fighting.



Vikings were expert seafarers and boat builders. Their longships were lightweight, fast and designed to cut through the waves. The bottom of the longship was flat so that the men could land right on the beach, jump out and be immediately ready for any attack. They were also able to sail close to the shore in shallow water. The rune stone on the right dates from 750 and was discovered in a region of Scandinavia called Gotland. It shows a vessel with a large sail and elaborately carved end pieces. The picture on the right shows a ship that was excavated from a site in Norway. It dates from about 890 and gives us detailed information about how ships were built at that time.



The Vikings were also highly skilled craftspeople, producing beautiful artwork, textiles and jewellery. Weapons were often engraved with decorative patterns and rings or brooches were inlaid with amber or jet. Some examples are shown here:







Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

VIKINGS H1/A

This box contains replica Viking clothing. But how do we know what the Vikings looked like and how do we know what they wore?

Archaeological excavations at cemetery sites in Scandinavia and Britain have given us an idea of how tall Viking people were, what they ate, how long they lived and what diseases they may have suffered from. Remarkably, they have also provided us with clues as to what Vikings wore. This evidence can then be compared to written sources and a picture starts to emerge.

The Vikings as Warriors







Conical Helmet

The stereotypical image of a Viking warrior looks something like this:

But this is not accurate.



There is no evidence to suggest that Vikings wore horned helmets. That idea was just a romantic image created in the nineteenth century. The conical helmet in this box shows the shape of one type of helmet worn. It is pointed towards the top and has a strip at the front to protect the nose from any direct blows to the face. Experts believe that these helmets were only worn by the rich and powerful. The ordinary man wore a leather cap, which wouldn't have given much protection. Feel the weight of this helmet. Can you imagine wearing it whilst fighting?

Axehead



The axe is usually considered to be the typical Viking weapon used in battle, although Anglo-Saxons also used large axes during the same period. This iron axehead is a replica. The long wooden handle, or haft, would have been attached to the blade where you see the large lump on the end.

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

VIKINGS H1/A

The Viking Man



Viking men wore very similar clothes to Anglo-Saxon men.

The trousers with the drawstring waist are called breeks. They are very baggy, making them practical and comfortable for working in.

The green tunic was worn over the top of the breeks. It has long sleeves and is made from a thick material - very practical for the cold winter months. A woollen or fur cloak fastened with a brooch added extra warmth.



The black hood is made from wool. It protected the head and shoulders when working in the fields.



The Viking Woman



During the early Viking Period women wore long pleated dresses with short sleeves and an apron-shaped cloth over the top. A shawl kept them warm during the winter, and like the men, it was fastened with a brooch. The hair was tied back but not completely covered. The picture on the right shows the early style of dress.

The clothes in this box date from the later Viking Period.
The hair would have been covered by this time with the headrail, which allowed only the face to be seen. There is evidence for other styles of hair coverings. An excavation in York unearthed a silk cap, which has traces of stitching around the edges where ribbons were once attached - an amazing find.



The red parts at the bottom of the dress seem too bright and modern to be Viking, but actually, the Vikings loved bright colours. They used natural dyes from plants, vegetables and berries to colour their linen and wool garments.



Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

VIKINGS H1/A

Leather shoes (size 4)

These leather shoes are replicas of shoes found during excavations in York, which dated from the ninth and tenth centuries. They are made from soft leather and have a drawstring fastener. Other styles were found at the same site in York, dating from the same period, including calf-length boots and slippers. The archaeologists even found a sock!



The Viking Age in Britain ended in 1066 when William the Conqueror defeated the Anglo-Saxon King Harold, whose family were of Scandinavian descent. The Vikings have left their mark, despite their demise. This is most obvious in the names of towns across the country. The next time you see a place ending in 'holm' (meaning island), 'wick' (meaning bay) or 'by' (meaning settlement), you will know that they have their origins in the Viking Age.