Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

VIKING CARGO SHIP H261/A

This is a model of a Viking cargo vessel or Knarr. The Viking people often settled in communities along the Scandinavian coastline and became hunters, farmers, shipbuilders, blacksmiths and traders. They developed specially designed ships to carry goods such as timber, cattle, wool, minerals and slaves, which they traded all over Europe and as far East as central Asia.

These ships were strong and able to cope in rough seas as well as being light and able to travel quickly across the water. They were wider and shorter than Viking long boats and therefore more space was available for the cargo, which was stored in the centre of the deck, sometimes under coverings. A knarr would have far fewer crew than a long ship as men were only needed to row the ship when it was setting off or landing and they would do this from the front or the back of the ship. However, those on board would be responsible for steering the ship using the rudder, which was fixed on the right side of the ship. They would also have to open out the sail and most importantly bail out any water when it came overboard. As with other Viking ships there were no sleeping quarters below deck and so the crew would spend all their time on the deck. If the weather was severe they probably took shelter inside the triangular spaces you can see at the front and the back of the ship. When there was no wind and land was near the crew would go ashore in search of food and other provisions.
The Vikings were expert shipbuilders. They carefully selected the best kind of wood for the various different parts of the ship. They would split the trunks with a broad axe instead of a saw and this enabled them to create long, thin planks. The boards would then be fixed to the keel, the lowest beam, which ran length ways along the middle, with iron nails. They would also be fixed to one another so that they overlapped, this method was known as clinker-built. The ships would have had one sail, made from wool or linen diamond shaped segments joined together with strips of leather.

This model ship is probably very similar to the vessel used by Leif Eriksson about AD 1000 to make the journey from Greenland to Newfoundland, a distance of some 1,800 miles. Can you imagine what this journey may have been like?

