

## The Viking Raids in Britain

The Viking raids and subsequent settlements define the period known as the Viking Age in **Britain** which had profound consequences on the development of the culture and language. The raids started in 793 A.D. when three ships docked at the shore by the abbey of Lindisfarne. The abbey's reeve believed he recognized them as those of traders and, thinking they had lost their way, went out to direct them up the coast to the estate he thought they had been aiming for. Upon approaching the ships, however, he was instantly killed by the sailors who then sacked the abbey and murdered everyone they found inside or on the grounds; this was only the beginning.

The raids continued in 794 CE when **Viking ships** sacked monasteries in Northumbria and **Scotland** and, in the same year, attacked sites in **Ireland**. Raids and military incursions continued in Britain through c. 1066 CE, ending with the invasion by the great Norwegian king Harald Hardrada, known as “the last of the **Vikings**.”

The Vikings were all from Scandinavia but the term referred to one who joined an expedition expressly for the purpose of raiding others for personal gain. It is understood as meaning something closer to **piracy** and robbery than legitimate **trade**.

Although the Vikings may have begun as little more than pirates in Britain, they would eventually arrive as great armies under skilled military leaders, establish communities, and assimilate with the population. The Viking Age is known for its legendary Norse leaders. In Britain, this was also the period of famous rulers such as **Alfred the Great**, Edward the Elder, and Queen **Aethelflaed** of the Mercians.

The primary reason given by medieval historians for the Viking raids was God's displeasure at the people's sin and selfishness. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle likewise attributes the raid to a supernatural cause. Others attributed the raids to

overpopulation in Scandinavia and the generally depraved state of the “barbarians” who were forced to find new areas to inhabit overseas. However, the clearest cause for the Viking raids was simply the acquisition of wealth. Britain, especially, was well known for its lucrative trade centers, and the Scandinavians were aware of this through their own commerce with the region.

The Vikings chose to attack religious communities for their riches. The rich gifts given to places in thanks for answered prayers were, naturally, unprotected as the monks had no weapons nor any need for them.

The Vikings believed in Odin, the god of war, battle, and military victory but also presided over thought, reason, poetry, song, and logic. Those who followed him fought fiercely in battle because of their recognition of the gifts Odin had given them in life and their belief in the rewards which awaited them after death.

Since their kinsmen had neglected the old faith in favor of the new Christianity, there were no bonds of honor to be considered when the Vikings encountered the people of Britain. It would have been considered dishonorable for a warrior to murder unarmed men but only under certain conditions. One could not kill someone who had surrendered in battle but this consideration did not apply to those outside of the faith living in other countries.

The Viking Great Army arrived in East Anglia in a massive fleet and marched across the land. It had defeated every force sent against him and was so powerful that Alfred the Great had no choice but to pay him an exorbitant amount to leave Wessex.

Alfred's payment did not mean the Vikings had to leave Britain; however, they continued exercising their power. They put down rebellions in their territories and established Danish legal practices and customs so that, by 875 CE, they had created a Viking kingdom in Britain. The leader, by that

**Module:** Civilization and the Target Language time, was Guthrum who ravaged Wessex until his defeat by Alfred the Great at the Battle of Eddington in 878 CE which resulted in the partitioning of Britain into the kingdom of Wessex under Alfred and the region of the Danelaw under Guthrum.

While other Viking armies and explorers were busy expanding Scandinavian influences throughout the rest of the world, those who had settled in Britain went about domestic tasks as they would have once done back home. The Danelaw region operated under laws familiar to the Vikings, and they continued to observe their old religion. Back home in Denmark, however, the king Harold Bluetooth had converted the Danes to Christianity. Although they began as an easy means to wealth and personal glory, the Viking raids on Britain would come to define the culture not only of that region but of the western world.

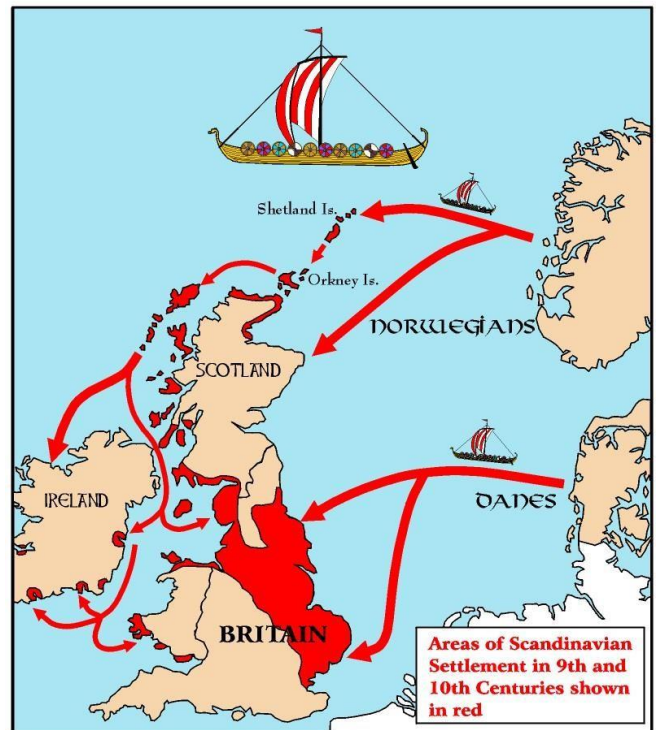
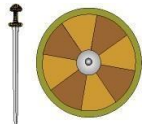
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## VIKINGS

793 - 1066 A.D.



### Sources:

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