
The Viking Age: A Misunderstood Legacy

By Ziqing Jack Wang

In 793 C.E., the Vikings famously began with the brutal raid of the Holy Island of Lindisfarne, off the east coast of England. This attack, and the consequential massacre and looting, marked the beginning of a well-known bloody and legendary period of early Medieval history: the Viking Age.¹ Perhaps the Viking's characterization of marauding seafarers is well earned, but was there more to the Vikings than relentless bloodshed?

The Viking Age, from 793 until 1066, can be roughly thought of as the period when the Vikings left their homeland in Scandinavia, expanded across Europe, and established their own realms in lands abroad.² The word "Viking" itself is used to generalize all these Scandinavian peoples. Yet, "Vikings" were only a small part of the entire population, signifying precisely those warriors that decided to make a living from trading and, more famously, raiding.

Scandinavia consists of modern-day Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. These culturally distinct but also connected regions were the cradle of the Viking Age and existed in primitive forms even then. But above all, the geographic nature of these three regions also shaped their place in Viking history. Denmark, having the most favorable climate of the three, allowed it to maintain a larger population. Denmark bordered the then Holy Roman Empire and its successor states. Across the North Sea lay England with its surrounding islands, allowing for relatively swift passage to Spain and eventually the Mediterranean. Denmark's geographic position allowed for early invasions of the Holy Roman Empire, England, and even the Moorish kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula. The "Danes", as they became known, maimed Charlemagne's empire, wiped out six of the seven major kingdoms of England, established the Duchy of Normandy, and defeated other powers throughout Europe.³

Alongside invasions into Europe, the Viking Age fostered connectivity and thus trade with Europe. Most Viking traders were from Sweden. Sweden had better farmlands, and from it the eastern Volga and Dnieper river-based trade routes were easily accessible. Ever since 753 C.E., when the Vikings took over the fort of Staraya Ladoga on the edge of Lake Ladoga, near the mouth of the Volkhov River, the Viking Age began seeing flourishing trade with the Islamic world centered at Baghdad far to the southeast and with the Byzantine world centered at Constantinople more directly south. Through harnessing the trade networks connected by the Volga and Dnieper, the Kievan Rus' was founded in the ninth century. The Kievan Rus' was the founding polity from which modern Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia stem.⁴

Norway made its mark on the history of the Viking Era as well. Norway's western coastline faces outwards to the Atlantic Ocean. From Norway, journeys to the western fringes of the known world are readily possible. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, the Vikings explored, and set up colonies as far away as Iceland and Greenland. A group of Vikings, led by Leif Ericsson, even made it to today's Newfoundland in North America. All these Vikings were of Norwegian origin, and it was due to the geographic position of Norway that this most legendary feat of Viking history was accomplished.⁵

The Viking Age, especially in popular culture, is perceived as violent, marked by savage northern bloodlust. While it is undeniable that the Vikings committed much violence wherever they went, this simplification is both arbitrary and inaccurate. A close inspection of history shows that the Vikings contributed significantly to the shaping of the modern Western world in four categories.

The Vikings were catalysts for unification in England, and parts of Scandinavia. England, before the Vikings arrived, was a fractured mess of four major and three minor kingdoms. The Vikings, by destroying or absorbing six out of the seven kingdoms, indirectly paved the way for Wessex, the only surviving major kingdom, to make effective strides towards unification. Scandinavia itself, was in similar shape to England, but unified due to the empowerment of certain famous Vikings who forged their own kingdoms, such as Harald "Bluetooth".⁶

The Vikings promoted development in European political structures as well. The Vikings proved the inefficiency of old political systems, such as that of Charlemagne's Holy Roman Empire. Out of the ruins, more functioning systems developed that, by necessity, could react to crises more readily. Moreover, the Vikings experimented with novel political systems themselves. This intriguing fact is demonstrated in Iceland, where the Vikings constructed a "frontier republic" structured around direct democracy.⁷

The Vikings championed early forms of mercantilism and pushed economic development in their new territory. They promoted globalization and international trade to a hitherto unseen level with their fast ships and adventurous hearts. The Vikings established trade centers in and around Scandinavia, such as Hedeby, Birka, or Ribe. At the same time, the Vikings were also constantly discovering new trade routes to expand the area of economic activity abroad, as seen in Dublin and Kiev. These actions boosted trade which impacted the modern world more decisively than any war, due to the lasting wealth commerce generated.

Finally, the Vikings promoted far-reaching cultural interactions. During the Viking Age, the Norse culture, one of the few remaining pagan strongholds in Europe, and Christianity openly clashed. For the Vikings, as they advanced into Europe, Christianity became increasingly powerful and influential, securing its importance in the Western world and history. For the Christian Europeans, they experienced an influx of new cultural ideas and values, such as "fairness" and "equality". The interplay of culture proved to be imperative for the advancement into modernity for both sides.⁸

This paper will portray Vikings as more than a force of destruction by first offering the necessary historical background and then examining and arguing for the four previously mentioned ways in which the Vikings imposed their influence on the modern Western world.

The Viking Era

The Vikings' history can be structured around the individual histories of the Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian Vikings. During the Viking Age, from the 9th to the 11th century, spanning roughly 300 years, these three groups of Vikings raided large swathes of Europe, took voyages into, and across, the Atlantic, and conducted mercantile trade across vast distances between far-flung regions.

The Danes were the most warlike. They formed the primary raiding groups who assaulted the more southerly European realms. The Danes' first target was Charlemagne's Holy Roman Empire. These raids began in late 804, during the latter days of Charlemagne's reign, when the Danish warlord Godfred sacked Frankish towns on the border between Denmark and Charlemagne's empire.⁹ Raids continued into 805 when Godfred led two hundred longships to raid Frisia, a coastline in the north of today's Netherlands and Germany. But the most frequent incursions came during the reign of Louis the Pious, the heir to Charlemagne. To defend the northern portions of the empire, the governing body of the Holy Roman Empire bribed Viking warlords. However, one such warlord, Harald Klak, tasked with fending off Viking raids in Frisia, was severely battered by another Danish warlord, Horik. He abandoned his post and took up piracy, completely opening the northern border to the Vikings.¹⁰ The early 9th century witnessed annual raiding on some of the most important trading posts of the Holy Roman Empire, including Dorestad, and other major cities, such as Antwerp.¹¹ This, together with the incompetence of Louis the Pious to react to other issues plaguing the empire, led to Charlemagne's short-lived legacy collapsing under its own weight, giving rise to smaller, but more lasting realms.

From the 5th century C.E. to the second half of the 9th century, England was in a period of heptarchy, fractured into three major and four minor kingdoms.¹² The seven kingdoms frequently warred with each other. For example, Mercia and Wessex were trying to crush each other for almost a century, until the Battle of Ellendun ended Mercian supremacy over Wessex and the southern kingdoms.¹³

This fractured and chaotic situation came to a forceful close with the arrival of the Vikings. Viking raids started to intensify beginning in the 830s. The raids reached their apex in 865, when the Great Heathen Army headed by Ivar the Boneless and Olaf the White landed in East Anglia.¹⁴ East Anglia almost ceased resisting over night. The Vikings intimidated the locals, as documented in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*: "A great heathen army came into England and took up winter-quarters in East Anglia; and there were supplied with horses and the East Angles made peace with them."¹⁵ East Anglia became a Viking ruled domain.

The next year, Ivar and his army headed up the old Roman road to Northumbria. The Vikings' target was York, the capital, which was an important trading hub and could be used as a staging ground for future campaigns. After short battles, York was taken with little effort. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* states that "the kings of Northumbria were slain", and the Norse sagas recounted that Aella, one important Northumbrian king, was subjected by Ivar to the dreaded "blood-eagle" sacrifice to Odin.¹⁶ This brutal form of execution entailed the twisting of rib bones into "wings" in a still living victim and the subsequent tearing out of lungs, but is treated with skepticism by modern scholars.¹⁷ Mercia did not stop the Vikings either. Within a mere decade, two of the three major kingdoms were conquered, and all the minor kingdoms were subjugated.¹⁸ Wessex was all that remained.

As East Anglia played a subdued part in its own demise, the king of Wessex was Athelred, ruling with his able younger brother Alfred. In 873, Ivar died peacefully, and the leadership was handed over to his brothers Halfdan and Ubba.¹⁹ In 871, Halfdan led the Great Heathen Army into Wessex, sending ripples of fear throughout the kingdom. Athelred and Alfred mustered an army to meet the Vikings at Reading. As Alfred's biographer, Asser, later recorded, "When they had reached the gate [of Reading] by hacking and cutting down all the Vikings they had found outside, the Vikings fought no less keenly... The Vikings won the victory and were masters of the battlefield." The only silver lining for Wessex was that its army was not destroyed. An opportunity for a counter-attack came four days later, at the old town of Ashdown. This time, the English army got hold of the high ground first and fought with desperate courage. The battle eventually favored the English side for a pyrrhic victory, "...many thousands on the Viking side were slain... over the whole broad expanse of Ashdown, scattered everywhere... The Christians followed them until nightfall, cutting them down on all sides."²⁰

About two weeks after Ashdown, matters went from tough to worse for the battered Wessex army. The Viking force was replenished and doubled in size with the arrival of another Viking warlord, Guthrum. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* calls Guthrum and Halfdan's joint force "the great summer army."²¹ In March of 871, the two leaders left their base to plunder Wessex again, and they met the English army just before Easter. This encounter proved to be decisive.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle reports simply that there "was great slaughter on both sides... The Danes had possession of the battlefield."²² Athelred was killed in the fighting. The leadership, in this emergency situation, was passed down to his brother, Alfred. Alfred, knowing that his army had not been able to stop the Dane advance, sued for peace. Surprisingly, Halfdan and Guthrum agreed, as their forces had also suffered high casualties over long years of warfare. The terms were generous. Halfdan and his Vikings would receive a large bribe and a designated region in eastern Wessex – a Danish "protectorate".²³ The Vikings pulled back to their base in London, and Wessex got some much needed breathing room.

Yet this reprieve did not last long. Soon after, Guthrum and Ubba returned with an army of around 5000 warriors.²⁴ Initially, the English had trouble driving the army away from Wessex. However, gradually, Alfred developed a strategy of guerilla warfare, slowly wearing the Vikings down with skirmishes, and avoiding decisive battles. By Easter of 878, Alfred found an opportunity to go on the offensive.²⁵ Shortly before Easter, Ubba was cut down in battle by a local English force, greatly damaging Viking morale and the number of capable warriors. Alfred organized an army of 4000 strong, and marched north to Edington to confront Guthrum.²⁶ Both sides formed a shield wall and advanced against each other, trying to break the other's wall. After hours of arduous maneuvering, the Viking shield wall broke first, resulting in them losing the vital battle. Guthrum, after the loss, realized that Alfred was not going away, and it would take an enormous amount of time and men to make Wessex succumb. Three weeks later, Guthrum and 30 of his greatest warriors decided to sign more permanent terms with the English. The English paid a handsome amount of gold and recognized the Viking conquest of the other kingdoms. The Vikings retreated from Wessex, accepted Christianity, and acknowledged the sovereignty of Wessex.²⁷ Wessex, through the capable and courageous leadership of Alfred had survived the Great Heathen Army, and it was unprecedentedly united in its purpose.

As the Danes were looting and attacking the European kingdoms and empires, their Swedish cousins were focused eastwards and southwards along established but scarcely used trade routes. These early "Rus" trading posts became the basis for modern-day Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus and they were founded initially by Swedish Vikings traders.²⁸ In 753 C.E., these Scandinavian traders entered the Volga and Dnieper River systems when they took control of the stronghold at Staraya Ladoga, on Lake Ladoga, in today's northwestern Russia.²⁹ The Volga route was the easier one. It led the Viking traders into the Caspian Sea on relatively uncontested waters, connecting them with distant Baghdad and the Islamic World.³⁰ The Dnieper route was more treacherous. However, the prize was Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire, the wealthiest trading city in the known world.³¹ With the steady development of these two trading routes, the Vikings gradually built up their strength through wealth. During the mid-ninth century, a civil war broke out between two groups of native Slavs in the region. The Slavs invited Rurik, a prominent Viking, to rule over them to end the grinding civil war.³² With an economic foundation through extensive trading, Rurik founded the Kievan Rus', a federation based on two capitals, Novgorod and Kyiv, which would be the foundation for several modern Russian-speaking states.³³ After the Kievan Rus' was established, its rulers doubled down on their focus on commerce, especially with Constantinople to the south, gaining more influence and becoming economically dominant.

By establishing trade cities and states, the Swedes reshaped the European markets in northern and eastern Europe. Before the Vikings, northern and eastern Europe utilized a prestige market system, where people traded only precious items such as fur, amber, and precious metals on a limited scale.³⁴ With the advent of the Swedish Vikings, the market gradually changed from a prestige goods trading system to a mercantile one where significant amounts of goods were traded, including silver, silk,

and, more dubiously, Slavic slaves.³⁵ These “goods” made it far into Europe, beginning a limited demand for them. This change brought about by the Viking traders allowed free trading and the flow of wealth to increase massively. Together with advancements in transportation, agriculture, and other vital industries, the Vikings aided Europe in reaching a period of exponential economic growth by reorganizing the structure of its markets to affect and influence the markets in Europe they did not control.³⁶

The Norwegian Vikings, last of the three primary groups, were focused westwards. There are many reasons why some of the Norwegian Vikings longed to explore, such as the rise of the brutal Norwegian warlord Harald “Fairhair”, and the increasing trend towards overpopulation.³⁷ From the Scandinavian Peninsula, the Norwegian Vikings first reached Iceland in 861 C.E. According to the Icelandic sagas, the Viking Naddod deviated off his intended route from Norway to the Faroe Islands due to strong winds. He eventually found Iceland by accident, naming the island “Snowland”. Naddod returned to Norway and told his fellow Vikings about the discovery.³⁸ In 867, another Norwegian Viking named Floki Vilgerdason set out purposefully towards “Snowland” and became the first to set foot on the island.³⁹ Vilgerdason also gave the island its current name, “Iceland”. In 870, people from the Scandinavian Peninsula, mainly Norway, moved and settled on Iceland. The modern capital of Iceland, Reykjavik, was founded when another Norwegian chieftain, Ingolfur Arnarson, and his family settled along the southwestern coast of the island in 874 in a place he called the “Cove of Smoke”.⁴⁰ The name was likely inspired by the local hot springs a still popular attraction.

From Iceland, the Norwegian Vikings looked even further west. A belligerent yet courageous Viking, Erik the Red, was exiled from Iceland for three years in the 930s for murdering another man.⁴¹ On Iceland, the Viking “Frontier Republic” pioneered the creation of a relatively modern legal code, which illegalized unprovoked murder. Unlike others who were exiled, Erik the Red decided to sail west into the unknown, becoming the first Viking to discover Greenland, and he thoroughly explored its southwestern coast during his three years.⁴² When he was allowed to return to Iceland, he boasted about the good land he had found to the west. To attract more settlers, he gave the land the name “Greenland.”⁴³ Some of the Icelanders followed Erik the Red and settled on both the eastern and western sides of the island.⁴⁴ Although the climate was unsuitable for largescale farming, the settlers managed to make a living by raising livestock and survived until the 14th century, when climate change made the area unfit for survival.⁴⁵

A Viking trader, Bjarni Herjolfsson, was sailing to Greenland but was blown off course by strong winds.⁴⁶ Herjolfsson decided to continue sailing west, and a few days later, sighted land. He managed to get back to Greenland, and told Leif Ericsson, the son of Erik the Red, about his sightings of land to the west of Greenland.⁴⁷ Without hesitation, Leif Ericsson led a group of men to seek out this new land around 1000 C.E. Ericsson and his crew sailed over 1800 miles of open sea (unheard of for any other civilization on Earth at the time), the distance from Iceland to Newfoundland, finally sighting the land that Herjolfsson was describing.⁴⁸ The Greenland Vikings founded at least one small settlement in modern-day Newfoundland, Canada, and named it

Vinland, for the place had abundant sources of wine. But possibly due to hostile natives and other reasons, the settlement did not last.⁴⁹ The Vikings beat Columbus' (re)discovery of the continent by around 500 years. Their journey was one of bravery and intrepidity, as well as stubborn curiosity.

The Myth of the One-Dimensional Vikings

The Vikings were the greatest conquerors, traders, and explorers of their age. But understanding the Vikings should not solely be based on what and where they conquered, traded, or explored. One must also look at the impact of the Viking Age on Europe. Viking politics and economic development, and the cultural interaction fostered by the Vikings, had profound effects.

The Vikings initiated the trend of unification in England and parts of the Scandinavian Peninsula. Both regions, before the Vikings rose to power, were full of petty tribes and bickering kingdoms. There was no clear sign that unification of the regions was even possible.⁵⁰ In fact, for most of the early history of England and Scandinavia, the petty tribes and kingdoms were constantly warring, especially in England.

After decades of warfare and conquest, the Vikings eventually ended the heptarchic age of England by defeating six of the seven kingdoms. Alfred and Wessex were the only native king and kingdom withstanding. This new reality laid the foundation for creating a unified English state under the crown of Wessex.⁵¹

Economically and militarily, Alfred, to better defend against the Vikings, boosted infrastructure construction, stabilized the currency, and produced a well-trained professional army, all key to the establishment of a unified England (or any strong state for that matter). To counteract Viking mobility, towns, bridges, roads, and forts were built throughout Wessex. In a span of 15 years, Wessex's infrastructure vastly improved, and communication throughout the kingdom was facilitated.⁵² Alfred pushed currency reforms as well. His sound administration imparted more than just material value to coins – his currency became the most reliable in the region.⁵³ By developing economic power, Wessex gained both political and actual capital for unification. Perhaps most importantly, Alfred reformed the army, creating a professional, full-time force upkept by taxes rather than the unreliable peasant levies of the past.⁵⁴

Culturally, Alfred came up with long-term plans to increase literacy rates, which was a crucial factor for any kingdom to grow and expand. He issued a command that all commanders should "be able to read and write or else surrender their offices of worldly power."⁵⁵ Alfred realized that a literate force would give him an advantage both on and off the battlefield and would aid in consolidation, of which communication and permanence were key. He created a list of books that each man should read, including *The Consolation of Philosophy*, from which he chose his own epitaph.⁵⁶

By the time Alfred died in 899, aged fifty, Wessex had taken a huge step towards the creation of a single English state thanks to these reforms. Without the invasion of the Vikings, there would have been no impetus for Wessex and Alfred's dynasty to reform the politics, economics, and culture of its kingdom. In this change or die scenario, change Wessex did.

Another such case of Viking-brought-about unification occurred in Denmark. After Gorm the Old died in 958, Harald "Bluetooth" became the next king of Denmark.⁵⁷ Prior to the reign of Harald, Denmark was still filled with distinct tribes, and there was no clear sense of a "Danish nation" despite over a century of successful raiding abroad.⁵⁸ After Harald ascended to the throne, he realized the necessity of stamping his own authority onto the kingdom. "He merged the disparate tribes of the Jutland peninsula into a single people, joining them temporarily with parts of southern Norway and Sweden."⁵⁹ This action was important for centralization, as a unified ethnic group was one of the prerequisites for any medieval sovereignty to function and remain glued together.

Besides merging together tribal groups, Harald was also known for converting Denmark into a Christian kingdom. Widukind of Corvey, a medieval Saxon chronicler, recorded that Harald was converted by a "cleric by the name of Poppa."⁶⁰ Harald asked Poppa to prove his faith in Christ, and Poppa did so by carrying a "great weight" of iron heated red without being burned. Harald converted on the spot. Such legends notwithstanding, to spread the faith of Christ throughout the kingdom, Harald built wooden churches in the capital, Jelling, and in many other places.⁶¹ Additionally, he firmly overcame much of pagan resistance, and persisted successfully in converting many of his people to Christianity.⁶² Through Christianity, Harald had found the unifying glue to tie his people together, and Denmark became a unified kingdom. Harald demonstrated brilliant adaptability, showing the ability to find value in any political or cultural element that would help fulfill his ultimate unification aims. As such, while pagan sacrifices and the worship of Odin were certainly undeniable components of early Viking culture, savvy Viking leaders proved they would not shirk away from giving up old ways in favor of expedient solutions, just like Guthrum decided to convert to Christianity to ensure the long-term assimilation of the Vikings in England.

Aside from unifying large swathes of England and Scandinavia, the Vikings also reformed or experimented with political systems. Their reformation or experimentation came in two ways: either through the destruction of the older inefficient systems stifling Europe, or by trying novel systems themselves.

In England, the peace treaty with King Alfred of Wessex, the Treaty of Wedmore, in 878 allowed the Vikings to reign over a region known as the "Danelaw." By treaty, "concerning our land boundaries: Up on the Thames, and then up on the Lea, and along the Lea unto its source, then straight to Bedford, then up on the Ouse unto Watling Street."⁶³ Within the Danelaw, the Vikings kept their way of ruling and social norms. When the English kings gradually retook the Danelaw, these territories had already been strongly affected by the Vikings. For example, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle documented that people in the Danelaw created their own laws, distinctly Viking, which

were typically more equitable by modern standards than the Saxon ones.⁶⁴ The freedom of the Vikings affected this relatively liberal approach to decentralized political authority. An article in *The Economic History Review* states that the Danelaw region developed prototypical fiscal policies and tax systems.⁶⁵

In France, as the political structure of Charlemagne's old Holy Roman Empire crumbled under the blows of the Vikings and its own weight, a reformation of political power took place, as the king handed some of the centralized control down to the dukes to better prepare individual provinces and regions for Viking attacks. The classic case of this decentralization occurred with the example of the Duchy of Normandy. In 911, to counter Viking invasions more subtly, Charles III and the legendary Viking leader Rollo signed the Treaty of Saint-Clair-sur-Epte, wherein Rollo was given the land of Normandy situated in northwestern France.⁶⁶ The Duchy of Normandy held great political power and was an essential hereditary title of the then Frankian and later French feudal system. Thus, it can be argued that medieval feudalism accelerated in development due to the Vikings. A powerful nobility was rising, and less power would be concentrated in one person. Normandy itself would become the root for the formation of a kingdom and the indelible changing of a second – i.e., the Kingdom of Naples and the Kingdom of England, respectively.⁶⁷

However, the most innovative political breakthroughs occurred at the edge of the known world, in Iceland. A pioneering political experiment was only possible in Iceland, for two reasons. First, the harsh weather conditions on the island forced the society to be self-sufficient, providing the ideal soil for political experimentation. Second, most people came to Iceland searching for a freer life, and to escape being ordered what to do. Thus, few wanted to promote tyranny on this free island.⁶⁸ These two reasons made it possible for Icelandic Vikings to create a “frontier republic.” “Frontier” being particularly apt in this instance, since the government was formed on the utter fringes of the known world.

This frontier republic looked almost utopic. There were no army, taxes, or supreme ruler. The “big government” absence was especially notable, since contemporarily it existed nearly everywhere else.⁶⁹ There were only farmsteads and extended families living together. According to the Icelandic sagas, there was an essential public position called “*Gothi*.” A *Gothi* was a man respected for his reputation and deep knowledge of local traditions and law codes. His primary responsibility was to mediate between individuals when needed. But this *Gothi* was not a lord or chieftain. If they failed at their job they could get replaced.⁷⁰ Additionally, among all the *Gothar* (a plural form of *Gothi*), the people elected the Lawspeaker for a three-year term. The Lawspeaker was the closest thing the republic had to a leadership figure. At the annual *Althing* – a type of great assembly in which each farmstead would send a representative to discuss the most vital decisions – the Lawspeaker had to recite from memory one-third of the entire Icelandic laws with the other *Gothar* checking his accuracy.⁷¹ Other free men on the island could “announce the settlement of a farm, or a marriage, or [sign] a business contract” during the *Althing* as well.⁷² In the Icelandic republic, everyone was free and equal. The society depended on self-regulation and the wisdom of the entire

population. This kind of groundbreaking or innovative democratic political structure was devised by the Vikings independently and would become, ultimately, prototypical of what the principal structures ruling the Western hemisphere should be.

Beyond pure politics, the Vikings influenced the economies of Europe, meriting additional examination. During the Middle Ages, between roughly 900 and 1300 C.E., Europe experienced one of its longest, sustained periods of economic growth.⁷³ This period of economic growth during the High Middle Ages occurred partially thanks to the Vikings. They helped Europe meet the prerequisites for fueling economic progress. The Vikings were both the great raiders and cross-continental traders of their era, being agents of change in both instances. With their continuous efforts, a massive web of economic activity spanning from Baghdad in the east to Iceland in the west flourished.⁷⁴ This trading web would shape the economic structures of Western countries and markets.

The Vikings, by championing mercantilism, directly influenced the foundation of a new trade economy, and changed the importance of cities, certain states, and markets in general. They held mercantilism as crucial to their economic activities. Desiring profit through trading, the Vikings founded many trading cities and ports.⁷⁵ Additionally, the Vikings did not forget to alter some of their domestic locations and conquered towns to fit into their trading network. Great trading ports of the Viking Era, such as Hedeby, Ribe, Birka, were all founded on locations that sat at the center of trade routes. Hedeby was located where the north-south trade routes from the Scandinavian peninsula to mainland Europe and the east-west trade routes from the English islands to Eastern Europe intersected. Ribe was located where the north-south Scandinavia-Europe trade routes and the west-east trade routes from the North Sea to the Baltic Sea met. Birka was located on the island of Björkö in Lake Mälaren, Sweden, and handled goods from Scandinavia and Finland, as well as central and eastern Europe.⁷⁶ These trading towns were built for mercantile purposes and flourished economically.

Whenever the Vikings conquered a city or trading area, they prioritized turning it into a profitable trading post. Dublin is a notable example. When Dublin was subjugated by Olaf the White and Ivar the Boneless, the Vikings quickly connected it to the critical trading hotspots of England, Norway, and the Frankish kingdoms.⁷⁷ Dublin's significance grew and is regionally supreme to this day. Similarly, when the English city of York fell to the Vikings in the year 866, they moved the trading center of the city to a more fitting place near the major river systems, thus enhancing York's significance. It became a major exporter of food and metalware and "was at the western end of the great northern trade arc."⁷⁸

States were even founded thanks to the mercantilism of the Vikings. The Rus states, forming the basis for modern-day Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, were founded initially by Swedish Viking traders.⁷⁹ With the economic foundation from extensive trading, Rurik the Viking founded the Kievan Rus', a federation based in Novgorod and Kyiv.⁸⁰ After the Kievan Rus' was established, its rulers remained focused on trade. The Kievan Rus' was a state that was founded and focused primarily on extensive economic

trading and development, becoming one of the earliest states to practice a near-market economy.⁸¹ The Kievan Rus' aim to move large numbers of goods, and exchange them for large quantities of other goods, was not common in Europe at the time. But, in this way, greater amounts of goods were traded, including silver, silk, and Slavic slaves. A new demand formed in Europe, which required a greater merchant class, and the creation of an infrastructure to buy from the Vikings and sell back to them.⁸² The Vikings aided Europe in reaching a period of exponential economic growth by inspiring a reorganization of Europe's markets.

Finally, the Vikings merged and facilitated interaction between the Norse culture and the European cultures, thereby pushing cultural development. The first major cultural elements the Vikings brought to Europe were the concepts of equality and due process, most significantly in England.⁸³ There the Vikings introduced a novel trial method. The Vikings themselves had a rather complete and progressive legal system that granted relatively just verdicts. The suspected criminals would be tried during a legislative assembly. A panel presented the alleged facts of the trial, and a jury of 12, 24, or 36, depending on the seriousness of the case, would decide whether the suspect was guilty.⁸⁴ The case would be decided by majority vote, not necessarily unanimity. A "law-sayer" would inform the jury about what the written law pertaining to the crime committed and supervise the entire judicial process.⁸⁵ This legislative system was detached from the political one, and the procedures or punishments equally applied to almost all people. This relatively modern legal process sowed the seeds for judicial fairness, concepts that have been integrated into the foundations of Western culture.

Another noticeable sign of Viking influence on Western culture is the English language itself. The Old Norse language that the Vikings spoke significantly impacted the evolution of English through cultural exchange.⁸⁶ For one, hundreds of English words we use today, especially those that start with "sk" or "sc", owe their existence to the Vikings. Words like "law" directly originated from Old Norse, and so did "they," "get," "take," "fellow," etc.⁸⁷ Some English dialects, syntaxes, and diction are the products of cultural mingling with the Vikings. Tellingly, the northern dialects of English evolved faster than the southern dialects, probably because of earlier contact with the Vikings.⁸⁸

Further, the Vikings were a pragmatic people. Their practicality was rooted in their culture.⁸⁹ If today's Western cultures emphasize the same, that can be traced back to the Viking Era. Viking pragmatism led them to adapt quickly to changing surroundings or better systems. For example, when fluctuations in ecological conditions in Iceland made life on the island difficult, Viking pragmatism resulted in them adapting to the situation, choosing to give up partial sovereignty of Iceland, and placing themselves under the Norwegian crown's protection.⁹⁰ When the centralized model of governing shown in the Byzantine Empire appeared more effective to rule an area that was diverse in ethnicity and cultural values, the Vikings were not so stubborn as to cling to tradition. Instead, they pragmatically copied this model, utilizing it in Norway, Denmark, and a few other regions, to establish major kingdoms that ruled over Viking and conquered alike.⁹¹ This pragmatism, through cultural interaction, fused into European culture. It helped lead to the arrival of the Renaissance, and novel ideas focusing on

humanity instead of God. Thus, Europeans became the first to adjust to changing tides and launching the Age of Exploration. Viking curiosity for the undiscovered ushered in the rapid advancement of Western culture. It is hard to pinpoint any early force, besides the Viking invasions, that brought about as much change in early medieval European culture.

The exploratory spirit of the Vikings doubtlessly shaped and impacted Western culture at its most basic level. "Exploration" also meant discovering new fields of technology, political machinery, economic principles, and other concepts. It can hardly be a coincidence that before the Viking Age, Europeans were largely stagnant in terms of exploration, but that within a few hundred years, central and western Europeans were suddenly taking to rough seas to launch the Crusades.⁹² The Vikings at least partially contributed to igniting the flame of curiosity in their more southerly neighbors, making epic journeys to Iceland, Greenland, and beyond the stuff of legend. This curious, undaunting mindset may not have inspired Christopher Columbus, but it had become firmly engrained in Europeans of his and, earlier, Marco Polo's ilk, in stark contrast to the lords of 800, whose avarice and ambition was only so inspired as to fixate on the nearest land border.⁹³ Scientifically and technologically the Vikings developed ship-making technology. They developed the first workable keels and even thought of ingenious ways to prevent wood from rotting by smearing a layer of sticky oily substances onto the hull.⁹⁴ Today, innovators the world over have far more in common with the daring and curious Vikings, than the superstitious and sedentary Saxons or Franks. That is, perhaps, wherein lies their appeal.

However, cultural interaction meant that both sides influenced the other. On the flipside, Viking culture was strongly influenced by those they raided and settled amongst. The peoples of Christendom most significantly impacted the Vikings through Christianity. One of the first such cases of Christianity "conquering" the Vikings happened in the Kievan Rus'. After periods of intimate interaction with the Byzantine Empire to the South, one of the rulers of the Kievan Rus', Vladimir, decided to convert himself and the entire population of the federation to Orthodox Christianity.⁹⁵ He had his political reasons, but this move was representative of the growing influence of medieval European culture on the Vikings.⁹⁶ In Denmark, a similar case occurred when Harald "Bluetooth" decided to make his kingdom Christian in 965 C.E. Harald wanted a unifying force to bind his subjects together. He found this in Christianity. After conversion, Harald spent much effort on letting the world know that the Danes were Christians, destroying pagan structures and erecting churches.⁹⁷ Like in the Kievan Rus', the conversion of the Danish kingdom in the traditional heartland of Viking culture demonstrated the increasing sway of Christianity on the Vikings.

Final Thoughts

The Vikings were more than just brutal greedy warriors, pillaging relentlessly to slake their bloodlust on a peaceful Europe. In at least four ways, the Vikings imposed a progressive influence on early Christendom: by indirectly aiding England and Scandinavia to forge unity through conquest; by fueling prototypical developments or

reforms of political structures; by championing mercantilism and implementing new economic systems; and, by promoting long-lasting cultural interaction between previously disconnected groups.

It was the Vikings who paved the way for the first unified England ruled from the isle itself. The Vikings “exposed the sprawling empire of Charlemagne, revealing fundamental flaws in the organization of that would-be-Roman Empire”.⁹⁸ The Vikings also creatively experimented with new forms of direct democracy and more equitable legal systems. The Vikings doubtlessly helped shape the intrepid, innovative, pragmatic, and exploratory spirits of both Western and Russian-speaking cultures still thriving today.

The Viking influence lives on in the modern age, where it is much in vogue. Its memory can be found memorialized in the NASA probe named *Viking*, in the names of towns ending with -bec in France or -by in England, in the names of three days of the week, and even in the name of the ubiquitous wireless technology that connects people’s electronic devices – Bluetooth.⁹⁹ TV Shows covering the period are also filmed regularly. “All men are mortal”, the Vikings were fond of saying, but “only a noble name can live forever.”¹⁰⁰ Perhaps it was their legacy that was nobler than often assumed, thus meriting that immortality?

Notes

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- ³ Brownworth, *The Sea Wolves*, 15.
- ⁴ Brownworth, *The Sea Wolves*, 171.
- ⁵ Brownworth, *The Sea Wolves*, 137.
- ⁶ The Editors of Encyclopedia, "Viking", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.
- ⁷ Torgrim Titlestad, *Viking Legacy: A Cornerstone of World Civilization* (The Saga Publishing Company, 2018), 15.
- ⁸ Brownworth, *The Sea Wolves*, 264.
- ⁹ Frank Merry Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 606.
- ¹⁰ The Editors of Encyclopedia, "Viking", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*
- ¹¹ Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings*, rev. ed. (Oxford u.a.: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1984), 218.
- ¹² The Editors of Encyclopedia, "Viking", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.
- ¹³ Jones, *A History*, 355.
- ¹⁴ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 205.
- ¹⁵ Anne Savage, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, new ed. (Godalming: Barmley Books, 1997), 200.
- ¹⁶ Savage, *The Anglo-Saxon*, 202.
- ¹⁷ Luke John Murphy, Heidi Fuller, and Monte Gates, "Brutal Viking 'Blood Eagle' Ritual Execution Was Anatomically Possible," *Theconversation.com*, last modified December 17, 2021, accessed April 28, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/brutal-viking-blood-eagle-ritual-execution-was-anatomically-possible-new-research-173519>.
- ¹⁸ Brownworth, *The Sea Wolves*, 67.
- ¹⁹ Titlestad and Walker, *Viking Legacy*, 52.
- ²⁰ Savage, *The Anglo-Saxon*, 205.
- ²¹ Savage, *The Anglo-Saxon*, 206.
- ²² Savage, *The Anglo-Saxon*, 207.
- ²³ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 212.
- ²⁴ The Editors of Encyclopedia, "Viking", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.
- ²⁵ Jones, *A History*, 467.
- ²⁶ "The Vikings!," video.
- ²⁷ Nicholas Hooper and Matthew Bennett, *Cambridge Illustrated Atlas: Warfare, the Middle Ages, 768-1487* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 36.
- ²⁸ "The Vikings", *History.org.uk*.
- ²⁹ Titlestad and Walker, *Viking Legacy*, 75.
- ³⁰ Jones, *A History*, 351.
- ³¹ Roman A. Cybriwsky, *Along Ukraine's River: A Social and Environmental History of the Dnipro* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2018), 45.
- ³² Brownworth, *The Sea Wolves*, 170.
- ³³ "The Vikings!," video, 11:17, YouTube, posted by CrashCourse, February 5, 2015, accessed April 8, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wc5zUK2MKNY>.
- ³⁴ "The Vikings", *History.org.uk*
- ³⁵ The Editors of Encyclopedia, "Viking", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.
- ³⁶ Cybriwsky, *Along Ukraine's*, 47.
- ³⁷ Jones, *A History*, 400.
- ³⁸ Salem Media, "Viking Explorations and Settlements: Iceland, Greenland and Vinland," *Historyonthenet.com*, accessed April 8, 2022, <https://www.historyonthenet.com/viking-explorations-and-settlements-iceland-greenland-and-vinland>.
- ³⁹ The Editors of Encyclopedia, "Viking", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.
- ⁴⁰ Salem Media, "Viking Explorations," *Historyonthenet.com*.
- ⁴¹ "The Vikings", *History.org.uk*.

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- ⁴² Brownworth, *The Sea Wolves*, 159.
- ⁴³ Titlestad and Walker, *Viking Legacy*, 253.
- ⁴⁴ Titlestad and Walker, *Viking Legacy*, 254.
- ⁴⁵ The Editors of Encyclopedia, "Viking", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.
- ⁴⁶ Brownworth, *The Sea Wolves*, 167.
- ⁴⁷ "The Vikings!," video.
- ⁴⁸ Jones, *A History*, 461.
- ⁴⁹ Jones, *A History*, 465.
- ⁵⁰ "The Vikings", History.org.uk.
- ⁵¹ Richard Abels., *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (n.p.: Routledge, uuuu-uuuu), 57.
- ⁵² Richard Abels., *Alfred the Great*, 59.
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- ⁵⁴ Richard Abels., *Alfred the Great*, 60.
- ⁵⁵ Savage, *The Anglo-Saxon*, 217.
- ⁵⁶ Longmate, *Defending the Island*, 372.
- ⁵⁷ The Editors of Encyclopedia, "Viking", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.
- ⁵⁸ Jones, *A History*, 480.
- ⁵⁹ Titlestad and Walker, *Viking Legacy*, 280.
- ⁶⁰ Savage, *The Anglo-Saxon*, 242.
- ⁶¹ Titlestad and Walker, *Viking Legacy*, 282.
- ⁶² Brownworth, *The Sea Wolves*, 120.
- ⁶³ The Oxford Reference, "Treaty of Wedmore," Oxfordreference.com, accessed April 28, 2022, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803121600663>.
- ⁶⁴ Savage, *The Anglo-Saxon*, 225.
- ⁶⁵ Peter Kurrild-Klitgaard and Gert Tinggard Svendsen, "Rational Bandits: Plunder, Public Goods, and the Vikings," Jstor.org, last modified 2003, accessed April 28, 2022, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30025905?seq=1>.
- ⁶⁶ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Treaty of Saint-sur-Epte," Britannica.com, accessed April 28, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Treaty-of-Saint-Clair-sur-Epte>.
- ⁶⁷ Brownworth, *The Sea Wolves*, 300.
- ⁶⁸ Titlestad and Walker, *Viking Legacy*, 25.
- ⁶⁹ Ragnheidur Harpa Haraldsdottir, "All about the Vikings in Iceland," Icelandtravel.is, last modified March 2, 2020, accessed April 28, 2022, <https://www.icelandtravel.is/blog/vikings-in-iceland/>.
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- ⁷¹ Sagadb.org, "Icelandic Saga Database," Sagadb.org, accessed April 28, 2022, <https://sagadb.org>.
- ⁷² Brownworth, *The Sea Wolves*, 178.
- ⁷³ Hooper and Bennett, *Cambridge Illustrated*, 501.
- ⁷⁴ Kurrild-Klitgaard and Svendsen, "Rational Bandits," Jstor.org.
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- ⁷⁷ The Editors of Encyclopedia, "Viking", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.
- ⁷⁸ Brownworth, *The Sea Wolves*, 156.
- ⁷⁹ Joshua J. Mark, "Kievan Rus," Worldhistory.org, last modified December 3, 2018, accessed April 28, 2022, https://www.worldhistory.org/Kievan_Rus/.
- ⁸⁰ Mark, "Kievan Rus," Worldhistory.org.
- ⁸¹ Brownworth, *The Sea Wolves*, 223.
- ⁸² Kurrild-Klitgaard and Svendsen, "Rational Bandits," Jstor.org.
- ⁸³ Titlestad and Walker, *Viking Legacy*, 95.
- ⁸⁴ Salem Media, "Viking Law and Government: The Thing," Historyonthenet.com, accessed April 29, 2022, <https://www.historyonthenet.com/viking-law-and-government-the-thing>.
- ⁸⁵ Salem Media, "Viking Law and Government," Historyonthenet.com.
- ⁸⁶ Jones, *A History*, 500.
- ⁸⁷ Jones, *A History*, 502.

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- ⁹⁰ The Editors of Encyclopedia, "Viking", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.
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- ⁹² Daniel Bennett, "What Have the Vikings Ever Done for Us?," Bbc.com, last modified November 17, 2018, accessed April 29, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-46194699>.
- ⁹³ Brownworth, *The Sea Wolves*, 230.
- ⁹⁴ Bennett, "What Have," Bbc.com.
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- ⁹⁷ Brownworth, *The Sea Wolves*, 179.
- ⁹⁸ Simon Duits, "Holy Roman Empire," Worldhistory.org, last modified 2021, accessed April 29, 2022, https://www.worldhistory.org/Holy_Roman_Empire/.
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