**The Vikings and the Viking Era**

The era known as the Viking age lasted for more than 300 years, from the late 8th century to the late 11th century. The history of the Vikings is closely linked to their role as masters of the sea. They were feared as fierce and ruthless pirates. However this does not complete the story of the Vikings. They were also poets, lawmakers and great artists. Their superior ships explored unknown seas and they settled new lands.

Even if the Vikings were known abroad as ruthless pirates, at home they lived in an well-ordered society, based on laws and democracy. Viking society was divided into three classes: the elite with great economic power, free-holding farmers with the right to bear arms and attend the Ting, and slaves who had no rights. The Ting, or the general assembly, was responsible for maintaining law and order, and is by many considered to be one of the first true democratic organs in history. Learned men quoted the laws, and then lawsuits were heard. In simple cases everyone present, often hundreds of people, judged, and in important cases 12 chosen men judged. This is considered the beginning of the modern jury system.

The women held a strong position in Viking society and were responsible for the farm when their men were abroad. The symbol of the powerful housewife was her keys, hung from her gown. If her husband took the keys from his wife, she could divorce him instantly, and keep their shared property. No women were forced into marriages, unlike most other cultures at that time.

The Viking age produced rich, diversified art forms and crafts. A good blacksmith and a good poet would be equally acknowledged in Viking society. Crafts were most often produced by local craftsmen, but specialized masters also traveled to markets all over Northern Europe. A craftsman was often buried with his tools; they were important symbols of his status in death as well as in life. Viking craft was widely recognized as fine art all over the known world in the Viking age. The Viking craftsmen, carvers, painters and poets were responsible for most of our current knowledge about the Vikings.



It is well-known that the Vikings were great explorers and voyagers. However, one tends to overlook the extent of their voyages. From the countries today known as Scandinavia, the Vikings traveled south to England, Ireland, France and Spain, and settled there. Names of cities and the nature of the people are obvious signs of the significant role they played in these societies for almost three centuries. They also traveled to the Arabian world in northern Africa: Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. In fact, more than two million Arabian coins have been recovered in Viking burials all over Scandinavia, proving the extent of their exploring and trading. The Vikings traveled east to Russia and settled several places there, including the Baltic states of Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia. The name "Russia" actually originates from the Swedish (Rus = Vikings).



Explorers often traveled to the Middle East trading silk, spices and jewelry with travelers from the Orient. The most common way of reaching these areas was through the big rivers of Europe, saving them weeks of effort sailing around the entire continent and through Gibraltar. They would sometimes pull their ships over dry land between the rivers. The Vikings also braved the open sea and sailed west to explore Iceland and Greenland. Historians have also proved that the Vikings were the first European settlers on the American continent.

    

The Viking explorers covered most of the known world during the Viking age. Viking settlers founded many large cities. Today, we find that Viking descendants all over Europe are proud of their heritage from these fierce and fearsome yet very culturally developed people from the North.

**Viking Warriors**

Viking warrior were highly feared across Europe for their brutal attacks and unorthodox weapon of choice, the battle axe. Well known for their close quarter fighting style and berserker’s. Most Vikings warriors were modestly armoured with only the king’s guard usually having chain mail.

The victims of the Vikings would see Dragon headed ships coming to shore, blood red sails and Snarling Grinding Viking warriors wielding heavy battle axes. This all added up to make it easy to see why the Vikings had a fearsome reputation within Europe. The Viking fighting style was based on rapid attacks, go in and attack, get the goods, and then get out before any more backup could arrive. With their home made clothing and weapons they would rely on their quick and ferocious attack style to ensure success.

[](http://www.legendsandchronicles.com/?attachment_id=243)

Viking Warriors in Battle

**Viking Warrior Armour**

The Viking warriors were most likely a mismatched looking bunch with varying degrees of armour that would cover mostly the head and the chest area. Helmets were often made from leather, metal or a combination of both, tight fitting to be suitable for use in battle. The often seen Viking horns were more fiction than fact, and would have made the helmets unwieldy to wear and rather impractical. If the metal used for the helmet was limited it would be placed in strategic positions like the bridge of the nose and above or around the eyes. The clothing worn by the Vikings would usually be a tunic covered by some leather outer coat or jacket; this would keep them warm but allow them flexibility in battle.

**Viking Warriors and their Weapons and Arms**

The battleaxe was the most well known Viking warrior weapon, with some believing they favoured the rather easier to wield sword for most of their combat. The sword would be a top quality item well made and crafted in a two tone style metal. The axe was sometimes also carried in a smaller form used for throwing, most Vikings would probably also own a spear and a knife to round off their armoury of weapons.

For defense the Viking warriors relied on shields and this was a big part of their attack and defence strategy. shields were thought to be round, but triangular shields have been found as well. For defence against arrows a Viking would need his shield and in the throes of battle, it would be used to deflect melee blows and strikes from the enemies close combat weapons.

**Viking Myths: What Vikings really looked like**

### Were Vikings really dirty savages who wore horned helmets, or did they look like we do today? Here’s what the experts say. By: [Irene Berg Petersen](http://sciencenordic.com/content/irene-berg-petersen)

There’s no shortage of myths about the appearance of our notorious Viking ancestors. Two myths are:

1. Vikings were dirty and unkempt
2. Vikings wore horned helmets

##### MYTH 1: Vikings were dirty and unkempt

Unwashed, rough warriors with froth hanging out of the corners of the mouth. Popular culture portrays the Viking as a somewhat filthy person.

But that’s unlikely to be true:

“Several archaeological finds have revealed tweezers, combs, nail cleaners, ear cleaners and toothpicks from the Viking Age," says Louise Kæmpe Henriksen, a curator at the Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde.

The finds suggest that cleanliness meant a lot to the Vikings. Written sources from medieval England also back up this view. In his chronicle from 1220 – a couple of centuries after the Vikings had ravaged England – John of Wallingford described the Vikings as well-groomed heartbreakers:

”They had also conquered, or planned to conquer, all the country’s best cities and caused many hardships for the country’s original citizens, for they were – according to their country’s customs – in the habit of combing their hair every day, to bathe every Saturday, to change their clothes frequently and to draw attention to themselves by means of many such frivolous whims. In this way, they sieged the married women’s virtue and persuaded the daughters of even noble men to become their mistresses,” wrote Wallingford.

There are, however, sources that paint a contrasting picture:

“The Arab ambassador IBN Fadlan, who met a group of Vikings on the Volga, described them as the filthiest of Allah’s creatures,” says Henriksen.

“But the Arabs were Muslims and came from a culture where people were supposed to bathe before each of their five daily prayers, whereas the Vikings may only have bathed once a week.”

It wasn’t enough just to be clean. The hair also had to be styled right.

The Vikings typically lived to be around 40-50 years old. But there are also examples of upper class Vikings who lived longer.

“From picture sources we know that the Vikings had well-groomed beards and hair. The men had long fringes and short hair on the back of the head," she says, adding that the beard could be short or long, but it was always well-groomed. Further down on the neck, the skin was shaved.

Two sources support this view:

One is a three-dimensional carved male head on a wagon in the Oseberg ship burial mound in Norway. The man’s hair is well groomed and he has an elegant long moustache and a chin beard that reaches up to his moustache, but apparently not out to the cheeks.

The second source is an anonymous Old English letter in which a man admonishes his brother to follow the Anglo-Saxon practice and not give in to ‘Danish fashion with a shaved neck and blinded eyes’. Blinded eyes probably meant a long fringe.

The women’s hair was usually long. It was probably tied into a knot on the back of the head, and the knot may have been decorated with coloured tape, which was braided into the hair. The women also wore a bonnet or a scarf around their heads.

##### MYTH 2: Vikings wore horned helmets

When you see a Viking in cartoons, games or in movies, he’s often depicted with a horned helmet on his head. But real Vikings did not wear these horned helmets.

It wasn’t until the end of the 19th century that people started drawing Vikings wearing horned helmets because the villains in a popular Wagner opera wore such helmets.

In a real combat situation the horns wouldn’t be very practical as they could easily get entangled in anything that came their way.

When in combat, real Vikings used iron helmets for protection, and they were armed either with ordinary tools or actual weapons such as swords and lances.