

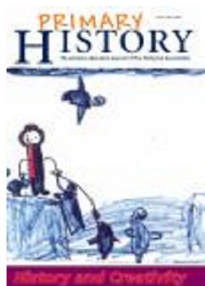
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## Vikings: a brief history



The Vikings' homeland was Scandinavia: modern Norway, Sweden and Denmark. From here they travelled great distances, mainly by sea and river - as far as North America to the west, Russia to the east, Lapland to the north and North Africa and Iraq to the south. We know about them through archaeology, poetry, sagas and proverbs, treaties, and the writings of people in Europe and Asia whom they encountered. They were skilled craftsmen and boat-builders, adventurous explorers and wide-ranging traders. See [Viking trade](#) and [Viking travel](#).

What we call the Viking Age lasted from approximately 800 to 1150 AD, although Scandinavian adventurers, merchants and mercenaries were, of course, active before and after this period. Their expansion during the Viking Age took the form of warfare, exploration, settlement and trade.

During this period, around 200,000 people left Scandinavia to settle in other lands, mainly Newfoundland (Canada), Greenland, Iceland, Ireland, England, Scotland, the islands around Britain, France (where they became the Normans), Sicily. They traded extensively with the Muslim world and fought as mercenaries for the Byzantine emperors of Constantinople (Istanbul). However, by the end of the 11th century the great days of Viking expansion were over.

Terminology: historians disagree about the origin of the word Viking. In Old Norse the word means a pirate raid, from either *vikja* (to move swiftly) or *vik* (an inlet). This captures the essence of the Vikings, fast-moving sailors who used the water as their highway to take them across the northern Atlantic, around the coasts of Europe and up its rivers to trade, raid or settle. In their poetry they call the sea the whale road.

Anglo-Saxon writers called them Danes, Norsemen, Northmen, the great army, sea rovers, sea wolves, the heathen.

They stayed, they settled, they prospered, becoming part of the mix of people who today make up the British nation. Our names for days of the week come mainly from Norse gods, and many of their words have become part of English, e.g. egg,

law, die, bread, down, fog, muck, lump, spud, scrawny.

To see questions children have asked about the Vikings, see our [Viking starter lesson](#)

### **A short history of the Vikings in Britain**

In 793 came the first recorded Viking raid, where 'on the Ides of June the harrying of the heathen destroyed God's church on Lindisfarne, bringing ruin and slaughter' (Anglo-Saxon Chronicle)

These ruthless pirates continued to make regular raids around the coasts of England, looting treasure and other goods, and capturing people as slaves. Monasteries were often targeted, for their precious silver or gold chalices, plates, bowls and crucifixes.

Gradually, the Viking raiders began to stay, first in winter camps, then settling in land they had seized, mainly in the east and north of England. See [The Vikings settle down](#)

Outside Anglo-Saxon England, to the north of Britain, the Vikings took over and settled Iceland, the Faroes and Orkney, becoming farmers and fishermen, and sometimes going on summer trading or raiding voyages. Orkney became powerful, and from there the Earls of Orkney ruled most of Scotland. To this day, especially on the north-east coast, many Scots still bear Viking names.

To the west of Britain, the Isle of Man became a Viking kingdom. The island still has its Tynwald, or thing-vollr (assembly field), a reminder of Viking rule. See [The Viking Thing](#) and [Viking burial mound](#). In Ireland, the Vikings raided around the coasts and up the rivers. They founded the cities of Dublin, Cork and Limerick as Viking strongholds.

Meanwhile, back in England, the Vikings took over Northumbria, East Anglia and parts of Mercia. In 866 they captured modern York (Viking name: Jorvik) and made it their capital. They continued to press south and west. The kings of Mercia and Wessex resisted as best they could, but with little success until the time of Alfred of Wessex, the only king of England to be called 'the Great'.

King Alfred ruled from 871-899 and after many trials and tribulations (including the famous burning of the cakes) he defeated the Vikings at the Battle of Edington in 878. After the battle the Viking leader Guthrum converted to Christianity. In 886 Alfred took London from the Vikings and fortified it. The same year he signed a treaty with Guthrum. The treaty partitioned England between Vikings and English. The Viking territory became known as the Danelaw. It comprised the north-west, the north-east and east of England. Here, people would be subject to Danish laws. Alfred became king of the rest.

Alfred's grandson, Athelstan, became the first true King of England. He led an English victory over the Vikings at the Battle of Brunaburh in 937, and his kingdom for the first time included the Danelaw. In 954, Eirik Bloodaxe, the last Viking king of York, was killed and his kingdom was taken over by English earls. See [Egils Saga](#).

However, the Viking raiding did not stop - different Viking bands made regular raiding voyages around the coasts of Britain for over 300 years after 793. For example in 991 Olaf Tryggvason's Viking raiding party was beaten off by the English (recorded in the poem The Battle of Maldon).

Nor were the Vikings permanently defeated - England was to have four Viking kings between 1013 and 1042. The greatest of these was King Cnut, who was king of Denmark as well as of England. A Christian, he did not force the English to obey Danish law; instead he recognised Anglo-Saxon law and customs. He worked to create a north Atlantic empire that united Scandinavia and Britain. Unfortunately, he died at the age of 39, and his sons had short, troubled reigns.

The final Viking invasion of England came in 1066, when Harald Hardrada sailed up the River Humber and marched to Stamford Bridge with his men. His battle banner was called Land-waster. The English king, Harold Godwinson, marched north with his army and defeated Hardrada in a long and bloody battle. The English had repelled the last invasion from Scandinavia.

However, immediately after the battle, King Harold heard that William of Normandy had landed in Kent with yet another invading army. With no time to rest, Harold's army marched swiftly back south to meet this new threat. The exhausted English army fought the Normans at the Battle of Hastings on 14th October, 1066. At the end of a long day's fighting the Normans had won, King Harold was dead, and William was the new king of England.

The irony is that William was of Viking descent: his great-great-great- grandfather, Rollo, was a Viking who in 911 invaded Normandy in northern France. His people had become French over time, but in one sense this last successful invasion of England was another Viking one.

### **Vikings: key concepts**

Viking  
Raiding  
Invasion  
Settlement  
Danelaw

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