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Think again about the pillaging Viking warriors - it wasn't just the men who raided Britain



Study of DNA shows significant numbers of Norse women were in the longboats as well

STEVE CONNOR Monday 08 December 2014

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Viking colonisations of Europe may have been more like romantic getaways than drunken stag weekends, according to a study of Norse DNA showing the importance of women in the Scandinavian subjugation of the British Isles during the Middle Ages.

Scientists have found that Viking men took significant numbers of women with them in their longboats when they sailed to places such as the Scottish mainland, Shetland, Orkney and Iceland – contradicting the stereotype of male-only raiding parties with an unhealthy appetite for rape and pillage.

Researchers who analysed the genetic material – maternally inherited mitochondrial DNA extracted from 80 Viking skeletons unearthed in Norway – found that Norse women played a central role in the Viking settlements established in Britain and other parts of the North Atlantic.

Until relatively recently, it was thought to be mainly Viking men who sailed in longboats from their homeland in Norway,

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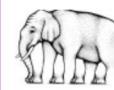
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However, the study which involved the reconstruction of 45 mitochondrial DNA sequences, showed the importance of the female Viking lineage in spreading the Norse people across the northern seas, said professor Erika Hagelberg of the University of Oslo.

“It seems to support the view that a significant number of women were involved in the settlement of the smaller isles, which overrules the idea that it just involved raping and pillaging by males going out on a rampage,” professor Hagelberg said.

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“It is true that the Vikings are thought to have taken local women [from the places they landed], but the DNA evidence in this study and the Icelandic study does indicate that Norse women were involved in the colonisation process.”

She added: “This somewhat contradicts one of the views about Viking raids, namely that they were driven by a shortage of women at home.”

The study, published in the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B, compared the ancient mitochondrial DNA of the Viking skeletons, which date back about 1,000 years, to modern mitochondrial DNA of people living today in Norway, the British Isles, Iceland and other parts of western Europe.

This gave a picture of how the maternal Norse lineage has spread throughout in this part of northern Europe, showing that Viking women as well as their men played a critical role, said professor Jan Bill, a Viking expert at the University of Oslo.

“Both males and females took part in the colonisation of the North Atlantic. It’s not that they were importing a lot of female slaves that they picked up on the way from places like Ireland,” Professor Bill said.

He admitted the Vikings were still brutal, but he added: “We know they transported cattle, sheep and other livestock, so why not take the kids as well? I think we’re looking at family groups rather than just adult men and women.”



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