



Stories of the Vikings

Mary MacGregor

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Over the centuries, the West has become fascinated by the Vikings, one of the most mysterious and interesting European civilizations. In addition to being perceived as a remarkably unique culture among its European counterparts, what's known and not known about the Vikings' accomplishments has added an intriguing aura to the historical narrative. Were they fierce and fearsome warriors? Were they the first Europeans to visit North America? It seems some of the legends are true, and some are just that, legend. The commonly used term, Viking, for the trading and raiding peoples of Scandinavia, may have originated from Viken (the large bay leading to Oslo), or it may have come from the Old Scandinavian words vikingr (sea warrior) or viking (expedition over the sea). The people from the north were known in western Europe at the time as Northmen or Danes, in England as Danes or pagans and in Ireland as Finngall for those of Norwegian origin and Dubgall for those from Denmark. In the east, in Russia and in the Byzantine Empire, the Scandinavians were called Vaeringar or Varyags (Varangians) or Rus', the latter perhaps derived from the name Roslagen, a province in Uppland in Sweden.

The ubiquitous picture of the Vikings as horn-helmeted, brutish, hairy giants that mercilessly marauded among the settlements of Northern Europe is based on a smattering of fact combined with an abundance of prejudicial historical writing by those who were on the receiving end of Viking depredations. At the same time, much of the popular picture of the Vikings is a result of the romantic imagination of novelists and artists. For example, there is neither historical nor archaeological evidence that the typically red haired, freckled Norsemen entered battle wearing a metal helmet decorated with horns. This headgear was an invention of the Swedish painter and illustrator Johan August Malmström (1829 - 1901) and his work was so widely disseminated in popular books that the image stuck. Today the imaginary Viking helmet is an almost mandatory costume accessory in productions of Wagner's opera *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, which is not about the Vikings at all. It seems the horned helmet evolved from an imaginary reinterpretation of genuine Viking images of a winged helmet that may have been worn by priests in Viking religious ceremonies. However, the Vikings' reputation for ferocious seaborne attacks along the coasts of Northern Europe is no exaggeration. It is true that the Norsemen, who traded extensively throughout Europe, often increased the profits obtained from their nautical ventures through plunder, acquiring precious metals and slaves. Of course, the Vikings were not the only ones participating in this kind of income generation; between the 8th and the 11th centuries, European tribes, clans, kingdoms and monastic communities were quite adept at fighting with each other for the purpose of obtaining booty. The Vikings were simply more consistently successful than their contemporaries and thus became suitable symbols for the iniquity of the times.

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