

CHAPTER 8: The Viking Age

WORLD GEOGRAPHY

~ Scandinavia ~

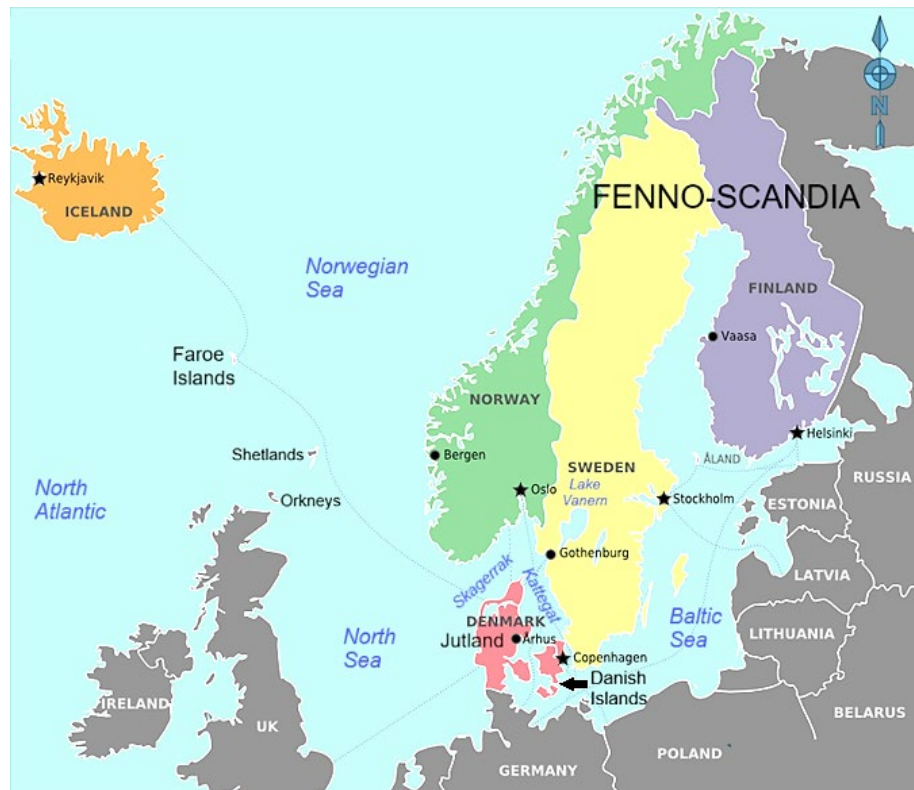
In far Northern Europe, between the North Sea and the Baltic Sea, a great peninsula called **Fenno-Scandia** juts off the mainland. The “Fenno” part of the name refers to **Finland**, which shares eastern Fenno-Scandia with its giant neighbor Russia. The “Scandia” part refers to Scandinavia, which consists of three countries: **Norway**, **Sweden** and **Denmark**. The first two share western Fenno-Scandia, with Norway taking the west side and Sweden taking the east.

The third Scandinavian country, Denmark, occupies two main bodies of land. The first is the **Jutland Peninsula**, which juts off Germany north of Hamburg. The second is the **Danish Islands**, which lie east of the Jutland between Germany and Sweden.

ILLUMINATING LISTS: The capital of Denmark, **Copenhagen**, stands on the biggest of the Danish Islands: Zealand. **Helsinki** is the capital of Finland, **Oslo** of Norway, and **Stockholm** of Sweden.

Northernmost Scandinavia lies within the Arctic Circle, the far northern region where the sun never rises for part of every year. As frigid as the Arctic Circle is, it is warm enough to host a native people called the **Sámi**—many of whom herd reindeer for a living. Most other Scandinavians prefer the coastal regions in the south, where the warmth of the **Gulf Stream** makes the climate more hospitable.

The **Gulf Stream** is a warm Atlantic current that flows from the Gulf of Mexico up to northwestern Europe.



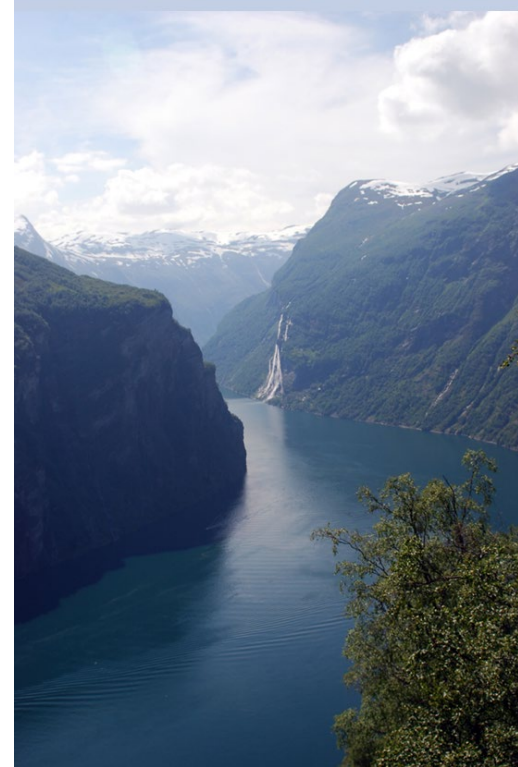
A Sámi father and child from Lapland, the northernmost part of Sweden



Much of Norway is taken up with the **Scandinavian Mountains**, which run from southwest to northeast across most of the country. The steep slopes of these mountains often run right out into the sea to the west. When they do, the valleys between them form long, narrow inlets called **fjords**. The longest of Norway's 1,000-plus fjords, the **Sognefjord**, stretches over 125 miles.

Sweden has fewer mountains and more plains, especially in the south. Most of the farming in Sweden happens in the fertile **Central Swedish Lowland**, which runs from around **Stockholm** in the east to around **Gothenburg** in the west. The largest of the many lakes in this region, **Lake Vänern**, is the third largest lake in all Europe.

For cultural reasons, most descriptions of Scandinavia also include two more lands. The first is the **Faroe Islands**, which stand about 380 miles west of westernmost Norway. The second is **Iceland**, which stands another 280 miles beyond the Faroes. The reason for their inclusion is that they were both settled by the people we're about to meet: the **Vikings**, seafaring warriors from southern Scandinavia.



A view of Geirangerfjord, a picturesque fjord in western Norway

❧ WORLD HISTORY ❧

~ The Viking Age ~

The Raid on Lindisfarne

The coastal regions of southern Scandinavia offered three main sources of food. The first source was the sea, which provided seafood when the fishing was good. The second source was inland farms, which could provide vegetables, grains, dairy, poultry and more.

This far north, though, the growing season was so short that crops often failed. When crop losses cut into food supplies, Scandinavians often turned to the third source of food: their neighbors. They sent ships full of raiders to break into neighboring settlements and steal their food, leaving them to starve.

In time, raiding became such a common way of life that many southern Scandinavians worked at nothing else. They spent the cold months of the year making the equipment they needed, mainly ships and weapons. They spent the warmer months on raids that grew ever more brutal over time. They killed any men who resisted, kidnapped everyone else to sell as slaves, and made off with as much treasure as they could carry. Such were the brutal ways of the Vikings, a.k.a. the **Northmen** or **Norse**.

EXTRA EXPLANATIONS: The scarcity of food up north was just one of several reasons for raiding one's neighbors. The list also included:

- **Multiple Wives:** Proud Viking warriors were rarely satisfied with just one wife. The richer ones kept two, four, even six or more wives at a time. With so many women going to the rich, the poor struggled to find any women at all. The solution was to go raiding for more.
- **Overpopulation:** The Vikings' numbers eventually grew beyond what their seaside settlements could comfortably hold. Rather than move inland, they sent raiders to conquer more seaside.
- **Silver and gold:** The Vikings needed precious metals to use for trade, as well as for jewelry and other luxuries; and stealing metals was easier than mining and smelting them for themselves.

"Overseas Guests" by Nicholas Roerich





The seven kingdoms of the Heptarchy: Kent, Sussex, Essex, Wessex, East Anglia, Mercia, and Northumbria

Whatever their reasons, the Vikings started slow. They could only raid as far as their ships could carry them, which wasn't very far at first. Like other early seafarers, they mostly hugged the coast so they could swim ashore in case of shipwreck. They also hopped from island to island across the Baltic Sea, especially around Denmark where islands were plentiful.

Over time, though, the Vikings' shipbuilding and navigation skills improved. As they grew more confident, they started crossing wider stretches of the Baltic Sea. By 793, they were confident enough to cross a much wider body of water: the North Sea, which led them to Great Britain for the first time. They probably scouted the coast for a while before choosing their first major target in Britain: **Lindisfarne Abbey**.

A LOOK BEHIND at the Origins of Lindisfarne Abbey (est'd 634)

Like a lot of abbeys in this part of the world, Lindisfarne owed its existence to a churchman we met in Chapter 3: Columba, the Apostle to the Picts. Columba was an Irish-born monk who founded Iona Abbey as a missionary training school around 563. One of the many missionaries who trained at Iona was **Aidan of Lindisfarne**, who founded Lindisfarne Abbey around 634. It stood on an island off the coast of Northumbria, one of the seven kingdoms of the **Heptarchy**.

The **Heptarchy** was a set of seven kingdoms that arose in Britain after the Angles and Saxons moved over from Germany (Ch. 2).

The **Venerable Bede** was a Northumbrian monk who wrote his best-known work, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, around 730 (Ch. 2).

Founding an abbey was no easy job in the mid-600s, when many Angles and Saxons were still pagans. With so few Christians to make donations, Aidan couldn't afford luxuries like stone walls and metal roofs. He had to settle for timber walls and thatched roofs, which made Lindisfarne Abbey humbler than other monasteries. It might have stayed humble if not for one of Aidan's successors: a miracle-worker called **Cuthbert of Lindisfarne**, whose story is told by the **Venerable Bede**.

The monks of Lindisfarne finding Cuthbert's body unchanged



NOTED NORTHUMBRIANS: Cuthbert of Lindisfarne (634? – 687)

One of Cuthbert's early miracles involved Aidan of Lindisfarne himself. One night around 651, the teenaged Cuthbert had a vision of "the spirit of some holy man" being "led in [to heaven] amidst an angelic company" (Venerable Bede, n.d.). He had no idea who it was until the next morning, when he learned that Aidan of Lindisfarne had died that very night. Figuring the Lord was telling him something, Cuthbert immediately resolved to become a monk.

After serving the Lord elsewhere for many years, Cuthbert finally took over as Bishop of Lindisfarne in 684. He wound up serving only three years there, until he died there in 687. By then, though, he had sealed his reputation as one of the holiest monks ever to live in Britain.

What happened next boosted Cuthbert's reputation even higher. About nine years after he died, the monks of Lindisfarne decided to build a shrine for his remains so pilgrims could come and pay their respects. After that much time, the monks expected to find nothing but bones when they opened his grave. Instead, wrote the Bede, they found his body looking exactly as it had when they laid him to rest! It looked like God was preserving Cuthbert for the resurrection, when he would leap from the grave as if he had never died at all.

The news of this miracle worked wonders for Lindisfarne Abbey. Over the hundred years that followed, pilgrims never ceased to visit Cuthbert's shrine; and many of them gave rich gifts to his abbey. It was one of the richest in Britain by 793, the year the Vikings came out of nowhere for the **Raid on Lindisfarne**.

MALIGN MASSACRES: The Raid on Lindisfarne (June 793)

The Vikings could hardly have chosen a better target for their first raid, for three reasons. First, Lindisfarne Abbey was stuffed with gold and silver treasures that they could easily carry off. The list included communion vessels, censers, candelabras, and much more. Second, the abbey had no soldiers to defend

it—only bookish monks who had never even held a weapon, much less used one. Third, any soldiers nearby would have to boat over to the island before they could even start to defend the abbey. By the time they made it, the Vikings would be long gone.



Lindisfarne Castle, built on the island hundreds of years after the raid

The **Anglo-Saxon Chronicles** are a set of annals recorded by King Alfred the Great of Wessex (r. 871 – 886) and others.

The surviving records of the Raid on Lindisfarne suffer from a common problem. Medieval historians assumed that with disasters this big, there was no need to repeat the gory details because no one would ever forget them. The **Anglo-Saxon Chronicles** devote just one sentence to the raid, reminding readers how “the harrowing inroads of heathen men made lamentable havoc in the church of God in the Holy Island [Lindisfarne], by rapine and slaughter” (Alfred_the_Great, 2022).

We learn only a little more from Charlemagne's friend Alcuin of York (Ch. 7), who mourned in a letter that “the pagans have desecrated God's sanctuary, shed the blood of saints around the altar, laid waste the house of our hope, and trampled the bodies of the saints like dung in the street” (Allott, 1974). A later monk called **Simeon of Durham** added that the Vikings “killed some of the brothers, took some away in fetters, many they insulted and drove out naked, some they drowned.” Sparse though these details are, they paint a terrifying picture of an early Viking raid.

An illustration of Christ and the four Evangelists from an illuminated manuscript made at Monkwearmouth



ANCILLARY ATTACKS: The Raid on Monkwearmouth (794)

Whatever the details of the Raid on Lindisfarne, the Vikings must have been pleased with the results; for the following year, they launched a second raid on a second monastery in Northumbria. The victim this time, **Monkwearmouth Abbey**, stood at the mouth of the River Wear about 55 miles south of Lindisfarne. Now as before, the Vikings killed many monks, kidnapped many others to sell into slavery, and made off with all the monastery's treasures.

The difference was that this time, Northumbrian troops seem to have been ready for them. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles record that “some of [the Vikings'] leaders were slain” in the Raid on Monkwearmouth Abbey. They add that “some of their ships... were shattered to pieces by the violence of the weather; many of the crew were drowned; and some, who escaped alive to the shore, were soon dispatched [killed] at the mouth of the river.”

The World Tree

Part of what made the Norse so warlike was the extreme violence of their mythological gods. Most of what we now know about Norse mythology comes from a unique set of writings called the **Eddas**.

VENERATED VERSES: The Eddas are written versions of tales that Viking poets shared orally long ago, before any of them learned to write. There are two of them:

1. The **Poetic Edda**, a set of thirty-plus long poems composed in Icelandic by anonymous authors. The oldest known written version appears in the **Codex Regius**, a precious manuscript that probably dates to the 1270s.
2. The **Prose Edda**, which was probably written by an Icelandic author called **Snorri Sturluson** around that same time. One of Snorri's goals was to clarify the tales in the Poetic Edda, which can be hard for beginners to follow.

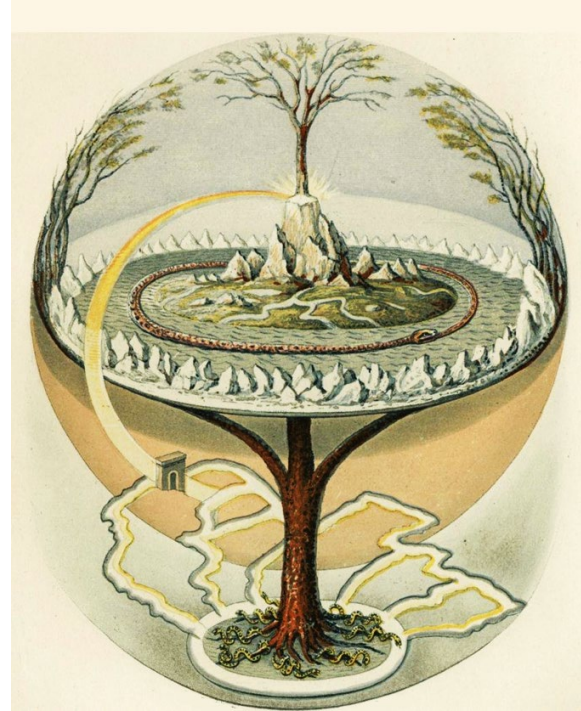
MOTIVATING MYTHS: For a people who never learned to write, the old Norse inspired a lot of later writers. Among the many artists who took inspiration from them were (1) composer Richard Wagner, who adapted tales from the Eddas for his famous Ring Cycle of operas; (2) author J.R.R. Tolkien, who pulled dwarf names for *The Lord of the Rings* from the Poetic Edda; and (3) comic book author Stan Lee, who drew on Norse mythology to build part of his Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU).

Norse mythology starts with Norse cosmology, meaning the Norse understanding of the universe. The Eddas speak of nine separate worlds in the Norse universe, all built around a mighty world tree called **Yggdrasil**. The nine worlds of Yggdrasil come in three levels:

- The heavenly level, which contains (1) **Asgard**, home to a race of gods called the **Aesir**; (2) **Vanaheim**, home to a race of gods called the **Vanir**; and (3) **Alfheim**, home to the **Light Elves**.
- The earthly level, which contains (4) **Midgard** or “Middle Earth,” home to humans; (5) **Jotunheim**, home to a complex race called the **Jotun**; (6) **Swaralfheim**, home to the **Dark Elves**; and (7) **Nidavellir**, home to **Dwarves**.
- The underworld level, which contains (8) **Helheim**, home to all who die inglorious deaths; and (9) **Muspelheim**, a realm of fire giants and demons.

BRILLIANT BRIDGES: Connecting Asgard to Midgard is the **Bifröst**, a burning bridge that appears as a rainbow. A far-sensing god called **Heimdall** keeps constant watch on the Bifröst lest any ill-meaning Jotun sneak into Asgard. According to the Prose Edda, Heimdall can see up to 100 leagues away even at night, and can hear sounds as faint as wool growing on a sheep.

The King of Asgard is **Odin the All-Father**, whom the Prose Edda calls “the highest and oldest of the gods” (Snorri Sturluson, 2005). Odin is also the wisest of the gods, thanks to a drink he once took from the **Well of Mimir**—one of the holy wells that water Yggdrasil. The price of that drink was one of Odin's eyes, which he gouged out and sacrificed to the well as payment—thus becoming a one-eyed god.



An artist's imagining of Yggdrasil

“Odin in the Guise of a Wanderer”
by Georg von Rosen



AWESOME ASSETS: Being one-eyed is no handicap when Odin sits on **Hlidskjalf**, a silver throne that allows him to see “over all the world.” Odin also receives news from two ravens called **Hugin** (“Thought”) and **Munin** (“Memory”), who sit on his shoulders telling him what they’ve seen on morning trips “throughout the whole world.” As if all these magical gifts aren’t enough, Odin is also blessed with:

- **Gungnir**, a deadly spear that (a) never misses its target, and (b) always returns to Odin’s hand.
- **Sleipnir**, an eight-legged horse that can outrun even the giant horses of the Jotun.
- **Draupnir**, a golden ring that “drips eight gold rings of equal weight every ninth night.”



Odin seated on Hlidskjalf

One surprising feature of Norse mythology is that female gods “are no less sacred, nor are they less powerful” than male ones. One powerful example is Odin’s wife **Frigg**, whose gift of prophecy is so strong that she knows “the fate of all.” Although Frigg doesn’t share her knowledge of the future, she does send underlings to watch over those she wants to protect.

Of the many children born to Odin and Frigg, two are especially noteworthy. The first, a storm god called **Thor**, is the strongest and most battle-ready of all the Aesir. Like his father Odin, Thor possesses magical objects that greatly enhance his might. The list includes:

- **Mjolnir**, a devastating war hammer that (a) never misses its target, and (b) always returns to Thor’s hand.
- **Jarngreipr**, a pair of iron gloves without which even Thor cannot grip Mjolnir.
- **Megingjard**, a battle belt that doubles Thor’s already-tremendous strength.

Thor in his chariot drawn by two goats, wielding Mjolnir against the giants

HALF-GROWN HANDLES: For such a heavy hammer, Mjolnir is a bit short-handled. The reason is that when a dwarf blacksmith was forging it, a shapeshifting trickster called **Loki** took the form of a fly and bit the bellows-turner on the eyelid—thus cutting the work short.

The second noteworthy son of Odin and Frigg, a handsome specimen called **Baldr**, combines a lovable upside with an unfortunate downside. On the upside, Baldr is “the most beautifully spoken and the most merciful” of all the gods—so full of virtue that “no impurity may be” where he lives. On the downside, Baldr is practically powerless. His gentleness prevents him from taking forceful action, which makes him vulnerable to the trickster Loki.

The story starts with a prophecy that shakes Frigg to her core. Night after night in his dreams, Baldr sees a daughter of Loki called **Hel** dragging him down to Helheim. Desperate to save her son, Frigg demands oaths of protection from every substance on Earth. Every rock, metal, and plant swears the same oath, that none of them will ever harm Baldr. Frigg rests easier after that, figuring Baldr should be invulnerable.

Baldr’s newfound invulnerability leads to a new form of amusement. His fellow Aesir love to throw rocks or shoot arrows at him, knowing they will fall harmlessly to the ground because every substance on Earth has sworn not to harm Baldr. One of the few who doesn’t enjoy the game is Loki, who thinks it would be more fun to see Baldr hurt.





Loki in the foreground, handing a mistletoe arrow to Hod, while weapons bounce harmlessly off Baldr in the background

MURDEROUS MISCHIEFS: As usual when he works mischief, Loki shifts his shape. He takes the form of a woman in hopes of gaining Frigg's trust, which he soon does. Taken in by Loki's wiles, Frigg reveals that she didn't bother getting an oath from "a shoot of wood... called mistletoe" because it "seemed too young" to do Baldr any harm. Delighted at this news, Loki immediately makes an arrow of mistletoe.

Instead of shooting the arrow himself, Loki gives it to another god who doesn't enjoy the game: Baldr's blind brother **Hod**, who feels left out because he can't see where to shoot. With Loki's help, Hod shoots his mistletoe arrow "right through Baldr"—who immediately falls "to the ground dead." The Aesir are so stricken with grief that they can do nothing but weep.

All this weeping for Baldr gives Frigg one more chance to save him. Hel promises that "if all things in the world, alive or dead, weep for him," then she will release Baldr from Helheim and let him return to the Aesir. Grasping at this last hope, Frigg sends messengers "throughout the world asking that Baldr be wept out" of Helheim. Baldr is so popular that everyone the messengers ask instantly weeps.

MURDEROUS MISCHIEFS: The messengers are on their way back to Asgard, thinking they have won, when they run into someone they missed on their way out: a lone giantess sitting in a cave. She may be no real giantess, but the shape-shifting Loki again. Whichever she is, she refuses to weep for Baldr—leaving him stuck in Helheim.

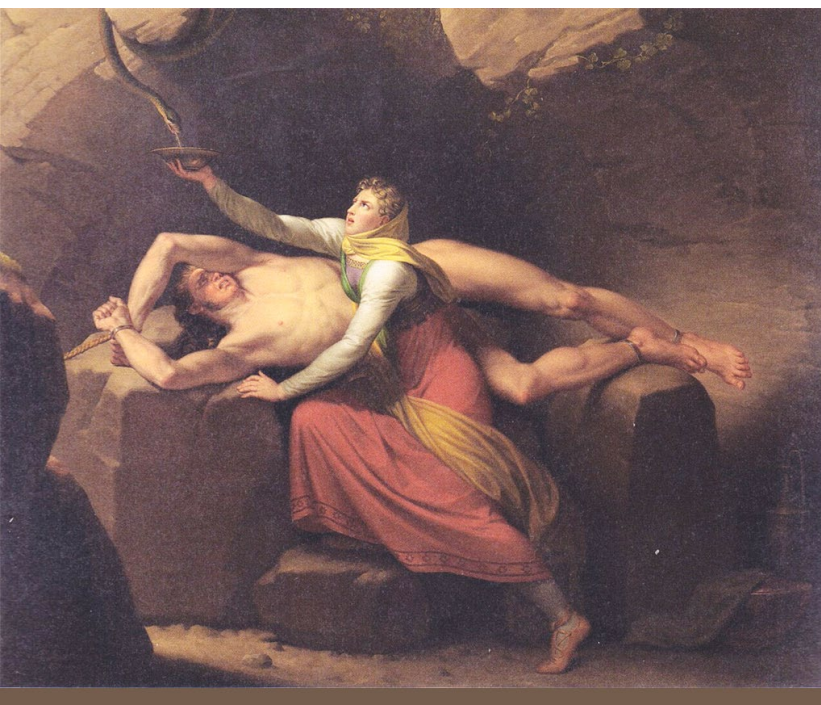
Valhalla

Now that their last hope of saving Baldr is gone, the Aesir switch from grieving Baldr to avenging him. Terrified of what they might do to him, Loki hides on a far-off mountain. But it is useless to hide from Odin, who of course sees everything from his silver throne Hlidskjalf. Loki tries to swim away in the form of a salmon, only to be nabbed by Thor just when he is about to escape into the ocean.

The punishment the Aesir devise for Loki is both terrible and long-lasting. They begin by capturing the two sons Loki has with his wife **Sigyn**: **Vali** and **Nari**. Vali they change into a wolf, which proceeds to tear Nari to

shreds before his father's very eyes. Then they bind Loki to the mountain using fetters made from Nari's guts—which immediately turn to iron. As a finishing touch, the Aesir hang a poisonous snake above Loki "so that its poison drips onto his face." Loki will remain bound that way until the **Ragnarok**, which we'll get to below.

"Loki and Sigyn" by Christopher Eckersberg



VENOMOUS VIBRATIONS: Loki's one saving grace comes from his wife Sigyn, who holds a bowl over his face to keep the venom off. When the bowl gets full, though, Sigyn must go and empty it. Each time she does, the pain from the poison sends Loki into convulsions so violent "that the whole Earth shakes"—thus causing earthquakes.



Valkyries serving Einherjar in Valhalla while Odin looks on

With Loki out of the way for now, Odin gets back to doing what he loves best: partying at **Valhalla**, his heavenly victory hall. Valhalla is a warrior's paradise with rafters made of spears, shingles made of golden shields, and an incredible 540 doors. It takes that many doors to handle Odin's army of **Einherjar**, the slain human warriors who arrive with the **Valkyries**.

FLYING FEMMES: The Valkyries are helmet-wearing, spear-wielding shieldmaidens who watch over warriors in Midgard. Whenever men go into battle, Odin sends Valkyries to "choose which men are to die and... determine who has the victory." Afterward, the

Valkyries pull the dead onto their flying horses and carry them up to Asgard, where they wind up in one of two places. One is **Fólkvangr**, a "warrior's field" ruled by a goddess called **Freyja**; and the other is Valhalla.

Feeding the many warriors of Valhalla is no small task, nor is keeping them in the **mead** they love to drink. Fortunately, Odin has two magical animals to help:

1. A giant boar called **Saehrimnir**, who is "cooked every day but is whole again in the evening."
2. A giant she-goat called **Heidrun**, whose udders give not goat's milk, but enough sweet mead to fill a huge vat every day.

Mead is an alcoholic drink made by fermenting honey.

As for Odin himself, he needs no food; for to him, "wine is both drink and food." The All-Father enjoys the privilege of drinking wine all day while he oversees the happenings at Valhalla.

The happenings at Valhalla are mostly battles. "Every day, after they dress," the Einherjar gear up to test their skills in great battles and hunts. Anyone who dies in battle revives by nightfall, when the warriors all feast and make merry. The point of all this is to keep the Einherjar in shape for the world-ending battle to come: the **Ragnarok**, Old Norse for "The Doom of the Gods."

Like most troubles in Asgard, the Ragnarok traces back to Loki. Besides his ill-fated sons Vali and Nari (above), Loki also has two monstrous sons from a Jotun wife. One is a giant wolf called **Fenrir**, the other a giant serpent called **Jormungandr**—a.k.a. the **Midgard Serpent**.

MASSIVE MONSTERS: The Aesir have their hands full with Fenrir from the day he is born. Alarmed at how huge and mighty the wolf is growing, they craft a strong fetter for him—only to watch him break it with ease. They try a second fetter twice as strong, only to watch Fenrir break that one too.

For their third try, the Aesir craft a fetter that looks weak, but is actually their strongest yet. They ask permission to test it on Fenrir, promising to release him once they are sure it works. Fearing trickery, Fenrir refuses to allow the test unless Tyr puts his hand in Fenrir's mouth—which Tyr bravely does. Sure enough, the third fetter turns out to be unbreakable; and just as Fenrir feared, the Aesir refuse to remove it. At this, the furious wolf bites Tyr's hand off—making him a one-handed god.

Seconds later, a still-furious Fenrir opens his jaws wide to swallow all the Aesir. They stop him by sticking a sword in his mouth, fixing it so that the hilt sticks in his lower gums and the blade in his upper gums. The sword holds Fenrir's mouth open over all the years that follow, making him ever more furious as he awaits the Ragnarok.

Tyr is said to be the bravest of the Norse gods.

The binding of Fenrir



MASSIVE MONSTERS: As for Jormungandr, the nickname “Midgard Serpent” comes from the fact that he is long enough to stretch all the way around Midgard and bite his own tail. Despite the serpent’s vast size, Thor manages to overpower him on one of his many adventures. The defeat makes Jormungandr as furious as Fenrir as they both await the Ragnarok.



Odin versus Fenrir in the Ragnarok

The first sign of the Ragnarok will be a winter so cold that “the sun will be of no use.” “Snow will drive in from all directions,” the Prose Edda says, “and the winds will be fierce.” As if one such winter isn’t bad enough, Midgard will get three in a row with no summers in between.

The next sign of the Ragnarok will be a string of natural disasters. One wolf will swallow the sun, another will swallow the moon, and “the stars will disappear from the heavens.” With no sun, moon or stars to steady it, “the whole earth... will start to shake so that... the mountains will fall.” As the mountains fall, they will break the fetters that bind Fenris and Loki—setting them free to attack.

The battle that follows will be a world-ending disaster. Odin will get off to a strong start, leading 800 stout Einherjar out of each of Valhalla’s 540 doors. But then he will come up against Fenrir, who will have grown so big by now that “his upper jaw reaches to the heavens and the lower one drops down to the earth.” Thor will have no time to help Odin, as he will be too busy dealing with Jormungandr. He will just manage to kill the great serpent, only to die himself moments later from “the poison it spits on him.”

With no more Thor to help, the unthinkable will happen. Odin the All-Father will be swallowed by Fenrir, “and that will be his death.” Loki and Heimdall will go down fighting each other, even as a Fire Giant called **Surt** throws “fire over the earth and burns the whole world.” The whole burning mess will sink “into the sea,” leaving nothing but steam surging up “against heaven itself.”

CHEERFUL CODAS: The good news is that all will not be lost. Amid all the fire and ruin of the Ragnarok, one man and one woman will somehow hide themselves well enough to survive. They will stay hidden until sometime later, when “the earth will shoot up from the sea, and it will be green and beautiful.” From these two will be born a whole new race of mankind.

Long Ships, Long Houses

With gods as violent as those, the Vikings couldn’t help but admire violence. The braver ones looked forward to dying in battle, figuring early deaths would give them more time with Odin in Valhalla.

Successful raids required more than just fighters, though. The Vikings also owed much of their success to their shipbuilders, who were the world’s first **clinker-built** experts.

Thor versus Jormungandr in the Ragnarok



ALTERNATE APPROACHES: Builders of wooden ships have two main ways of joining planks: by butting them together edge-to-edge, or by overlapping the edges. Hulls with butted planks are called **carvel-built**, while hulls with overlapping planks are called **clinker-built**.

“Clinker” comes from an Old German word that meant “clinch” or “fasten.” That was how Viking shipbuilders fashioned their hulls: by first lapping one plank over another, and then clinching them together with iron nails driven through the lap. Lest the nails pull out, they added **roves** over the sharp ends and bent the nails tight over them. Lest their joints leak, they added some sort of caulking between the planks—often moss or animal hair soaked in tar.

One of the great things about clinker-built ships was that they didn’t need heavy frames. Most clinker-built hulls had just three heavy pieces: a keel at the bottom, a stem at the front, and a sternpost at the back. The rest of the hull was only light planks, which provided plenty of strength so long as they were clinched together tightly.

AWESOME ADVANTAGES: That made clinker-built ships lighter than carvel-built ones, which relied on their frames for strength. Lighter ships were not only faster in the water, but also easier to **portage** on land.

PAINSTAKING PROCESSES:

- Instead of sawing lumber for their ships, Viking shipbuilders used a method called **riving**. They drove a **froe** through logs lengthwise, splitting them into long planks ready for bending and shaping.
- To get the tight bends they needed for shipbuilding, they treated their planks in **steam boxes** fed by boiling water over hot fires. A half-hour in a steam box was enough to make a thin plank pliable, while a thicker one might need an hour or more.

Once these basic processes were set, Viking shipbuilders settled down to produce two main kinds of ships: **longships** and **knarrs**.

HISTORIC HAULERS: Knarrs were mostly sail-driven cargo vessels. To maximize cargo space, the Vikings kept knarr crews as small as possible. A crew of six Vikings might be all it took to manage a 50-foot-long knarr hauling up to thirty tons.

Longships were longer, narrower, faster vessels built for Viking raids and the like. Although longships carried sails like knarrs, their larger crews allowed for more oar power. The smallest of them measured about 60 feet long, making space for crews of 25 – 30. The biggest measured up to 120 feet, and might carry crews of 100 or more. Other common features of longships included:

- Relatively flat bottoms, which gave longships three advantages over other designs. First, they could sail in the shallow waters near coasts and up rivers. Second, they helped the Vikings gain the element of surprise; for before longships came along, no one had ever seen such big ships in shallow waters. Third, they had no need for docks; for they could simply drive up on the nearest beach.
- Front-to-back symmetry or near-symmetry, which allowed longships to reverse direction quickly with no need for wide turns. When a longship ran into ice, rocks or other hazards, its oarsmen simply turned around in their seats and rowed in the opposite direction.
- Expertly carved dragon-shaped prows that were custom-designed to strike fear in the hearts of their enemies. The device was common enough that some medieval authors called longships “dragon ships.”
- Sturdy sea chests that doubled as rowing benches. For added protection, Viking warriors hung their shields over the gunwales beside them as they rowed.

A **rove** is a metal fastening plate with a hole in the center.

To **portage** a ship is to carry it around a waterfall or other obstacle.

A **froe** is a wide, stiff blade used for precision splitting of logs.



Front view of a reconstructed Viking longship





The Oseberg Ship after some reconstruction work

The Vikings didn't just use longships for raids. On rare occasions, they also used them as funeral ships like the one at Sutton Hoo.

REFRESHING REMINDERS: Back in Chapter 2, we read how archaeologists found a ship from the British Dark Age buried at Sutton Hoo, eastern England. The bad news was that the planks of the Sutton Hoo ship had all rotted away, leaving only nails and other hardware to recall its shape. Fortunately, the **Oseberg Ship** was in much better shape.

FASCINATING FINDS: The Oseberg Ship

The name "Oseberg" comes from a farm near Tonsberg, southeastern Norway, about forty-five miles south-southwest of Oslo. Around 1905, Norwegian archaeologists made an astonishing find at Oseberg Farm. Down in the blue clay under the topsoil, they uncovered a long-buried Viking longship that was almost intact. Only the upper parts of the ship had rotted away, because the air penetrated better near the surface. Farther down, where the blue clay sealed the air out, the wood looked much like it had when the Vikings buried it more than 1,000 years before!

As at Sutton Hoo, archaeologists found both human remains and grave goods buried with the Oseberg Ship. In this case, they found the remains of two women. At least one of the women must have been exceedingly rich; for the longship was not only expertly crafted, but also heavily decorated from stem to stern. The richness of the Oseberg Ship is another reminder that Viking women could command a lot of respect.

Although no one knows for sure, it may be that the second woman buried with the Oseberg Ship was a **thrall** to the first—in other words, her slave. Like some other peoples we've covered, the Vikings believed that their honored dead should have slaves to serve them in the afterlife. To get them, they sometimes sacrificed one or more slaves and buried them alongside their slaveholders.

A Viking bearded axe with a re-stored handle



ILLUMINATING LISTS: Viking Weaponry

The quality of a Viking warrior's weaponry depended upon his wealth. Only the wealthiest carried full-length swords, which required more iron and better blacksmithing than average Vikings could afford. Far more common were spears, bows and slings, along with these two Viking specialties:

1. **Seaxes:** Short swords made with wooden handles to use less iron.
2. **Bearded axes:** Battleaxes with long, curved blades to provide a longer cutting arc. When swung properly, a bearded axe sliced through the enemy like an Arab scimitar.

For defense, most Vikings relied on helmets and armor made of quilted cloth or leather. Only the wealthiest could afford luxuries like chain mail shirts or iron helmets.

Contrary to popular belief, Viking helmets almost certainly did not have horns! The idea that they did comes from the imaginations of artists, not from any archaeological evidence. The best evidence to the contrary comes from an extremely rare find called the **Gjermundbu Helmet**.

A ruined seax side-by-side with a reconstructed one



HORNLESS HATS: The name comes from a family farm near Haugsbygd, Norway, about 23 miles northwest of Oslo. One day in 1943, a farmer's son by that name uncovered a burial mound full of Viking artifacts. One of them was the Gjermundbu Helmet, which archaeologists found in nine pieces.

What made this find so rare was that the pieces were whole enough to reconstruct, making the helmet look almost as it did during the Viking Age. In almost every other case, the pieces were too fragmented to reconstruct. Fragmented or not, none of the finds so far show any evidence of horns.



The Gjermundbu Helmet

As for shields, most Vikings stuck to lightweight round shields early on. Only later did they switch to the **kite shield**, a kite-shaped longer variety that covered the legs as well as the torso.

The most feared Vikings of all were the **berserkers**, crazed warriors who fought in a violent trance called the **berserkergang**. Just how the berserkergang came over them is a matter of debate. Most Vikings traced it to the spirits of bears, which were said to give berserkers their great strength; or to wolves, which were said to give them their great speed. Berserkers reinforced those beliefs by wearing bearskins or wolfskins in place of regular clothes. It may be that the real cause of the berserkergang was no animal spirit, but some sort of hallucinogenic drug.

FRENZIED FIGHTERS: However it happened, berserkers fought like wild men—holding nothing back in their mad desire to annihilate their enemies. The idea lives on in modern English, in which people who go violently crazy are said to have “gone berserk.”

The typical Viking home was a practical kind of building called a **longhouse**. What made longhouses so practical was that they combined so many functions under one roof. One end of the longhouse served as a home for an extended family, from grandparents and parents to children and grandchildren. The other end served as a barn for livestock and their feed. Separating the two was a storehouse section for tools, weapons and so on.

FASCINATING FEATURES of Viking Longhouses:

- Structurally speaking, Viking longhouses were a lot more substantial than Celtic roundhouses. They typically had stone foundations, walls of stone or logs, and roofs of sod over heavy timber. A chimney hole in the roof allowed for the hot fire required to heat homes this far north. As for windows, they were rare to non-existent; for glass makes a poor insulator.
- The interior walls of longhouses were often lined with wooden benches covered with animal skins. Besides serving as seats by day and beds by night, these continuous benches also stiffened the walls.
- Another popular furnishing was the **Viking Chest**, a carved chest used for storage and sometimes seating. The richer the family, the more elaborate the carvings on its Viking chests. The long winter nights up north allowed ample time for carving.
- With so many generations under one roof, a single longhouse might house twenty or more people. Married couples might curtain their section off for more privacy.

A reconstructed Viking longhouse





A Viking Chest carved with dragons

Like some other peoples we've covered, the Vikings had no use for children born with any sort of disability. A board of elders inspected each new child to see whether it would strengthen or weaken the community. If they deemed that a child would weaken the community, then they might order the parents to expose it—in other words, leave it out in the elements to die.

If, however, the elders judged a child to be healthy and strong, then the father formally named the child in a ceremony that involved sprinkling with water. Once sprinkled, a child could expect to inherit a share of its father's property.

SIRE-HONORING SOBRIQUETS: Patronymics

Most Viking names came in two parts: a given name, and a **patronymic** to honor the father. For example, "Leif Eriksson" means "Leif, son of Erik." The feminine version used the suffix "-dottir," as in "Helga Eriksdottir." If the father was unknown, or if the mother was better known, then a Viking name might honor the mother instead. The proper term in such cases was not patronymic, but **matronymic**.

In countries that trace their origins back to Vikings, patronymics are still common today. One example is Russia, where a name like "Ivan Viktorovich" means "Ivan, son of Viktor," while "Natasha Vladimirovna" means "Natasha, daughter of Vladimir." In modern times, these countries add family names to avoid the confusion that comes with so many duplicate names.

Patronymic comes from two Greek words that together mean "father-name."

~ Viking Explorers in the North Atlantic ~

This next section carries us well past the Raid on Lindisfarne (above), up to the year 1000 and a bit beyond. We'll get back to the Viking Age in Chapter 9, where we'll read how some Vikings turned from raiding to conquering. For now, we'll look at some Vikings who turned from raiding to exploring. Their target area was one of the scariest places imaginable: the North Atlantic, where no Europeans before them had ever dared go.

From the Faroes to Iceland...

What made the North Atlantic so scary was how easy it was to get lost there. With no landmarks for hundreds of miles at a stretch, and without even simple magnetic compasses to point the way north, a Viking explorer might veer far off course without ever knowing it. He might even sail in circles, wandering aimlessly until he ran out of supplies and starved to death.

Exactly how the Vikings overcame these challenges, no one now knows for sure. Most modern explanations involve some combination of nature and technology. On the nature side, the Vikings might have relied on their knowledge of:

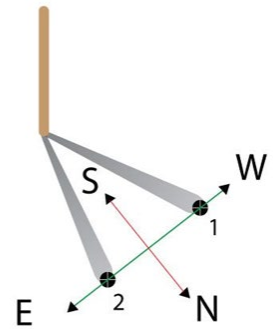
- Birds: Following flocks of birds could be useful if one knew something about their habits. For example, if the Vikings knew that a certain species of bird always stayed close to land, then its presence was a sure sign of land. One such species was the **Atlantic puffin**, which fished near shores all over the North Atlantic.
- Whales: If the Vikings knew that certain kinds of whales visited certain parts of the ocean at certain times of year, then whales could act as temporary landmarks.

An Atlantic puffin with prey in its beak





- Ocean currents: The North Atlantic has strong currents that flow in predictable directions. If the Vikings understood those currents, then they could set their course by them.
- Ocean depth: A simple tool called a **sounding weight** could tell the Vikings the ocean depth at their location. If the ocean grew shallower in a certain direction, then land might lie in that direction.



Finding north with a stick compass

On the technology side, the Vikings may have invented two clever navigation tools:

1. The sun compass, a.k.a. the Norse Compass: A mariner's sun compass works on the same principle as a stick driven into the ground on a sunny day. As the sun travels across the sky, the tip of the stick's shadow traces a line from west to east. Some historians point to a fragmentary artifact called the **Uunartoq Disc** as evidence that the Vikings invented such a tool.
2. The sunstone: On cloudy days, the Vikings may have used a crystalline rock called a **sunstone** to detect where the sun was hiding behind the clouds. If they did, though, then their method has been forgotten.

Whatever methods the Vikings used, they worked astonishingly well. It wasn't just that they discovered lonely islands across hundreds of miles of trackless sea. The real trick was going back to those same islands again and again, until they knew the way well enough to plant colonies on them. As early as the late 800s, only 100 years after the Raid on Lindisfarne, the Vikings were already traveling back and forth to new colonies on the Faroe Islands.

EMINENT EXPLORERS: According to a record called the **Faroe Saga**, a Viking called **Grimur Kamban** planted the first long-term settlement on the Faroes around 900. Grimur probably went to the Faroes not directly from Norway, but from the Shetlands—a similarly sized island group about midway between.

The Vikings' next big find, Iceland, dwarfed the Faroe Islands. With an area of around 40,000 square miles, Iceland was one of the top twenty biggest islands in the world. It was also blessed with rich farmland, luxurious hot springs, abundant fish, seals, walrus, and more. With advantages like that, no wonder **Ingolf Arnarsson** was so eager to settle on Iceland.

A LOOK BEHIND at the Origins of Ingolf Arnarsson (849? – 910?)

Ingolf Arnarsson was an ambitious young Viking from Vestland, a **jarldom** in westernmost Norway. Equally ambitious was Ingolf's best friend, a fierce fighter called **Leif Hrodmarsson**. Their story comes down to us from the **Settlement Book**, a history of Iceland written by multiple anonymous authors and assembled around 1200.

The Settlement Book tells how in the early 870s, Ingolf and Leif joined three sons of the **jarl** for a summer of raiding. The raids went so well that at summer's end, they all agreed to meet up again the following summer.

The **Faroe Saga** is a history of the Faroe Islands written by an anonymous author in the early 1200s.

A **jarldom** was the land run by a **jarl**, the Viking equivalent of an English earl.

The trouble started over the winter in between, when Ingolf and Leif threw a banquet for the jarl's sons. One of the young women invited to the banquet was Ingolf's sister, a beauty called **Helga Arnardottir**. Inviting Helga turned out to be a mistake; for by the end of the evening, one of the jarl's sons was bent on marrying her. That led to an argument with Leif, who was also bent on marrying Helga. There was a frostiness between the two men as they all said their goodbyes that night.





"The Norwegians Land in Iceland" by Oscar Wergeland

Even so, the raiding agreement was still on as far as Ingolfr and Leif knew. They knew of no problem until the following spring, when they went to meet the jarl's sons as planned—and instead were ambushed by the jarl's sons! They would have been killed for sure if not for the expert fighting skills of Leif—who not only fought off the ambush, but also killed the son who wanted Helga.

SANGUINARY SQUABBLES: Killing the son of a jarl was a serious business. Infuriated by the loss of his son, the jarl declared what the Vikings called a **blood feud** on Ingolfr and Leif—ordering all his relatives to kill them on sight.

To escape the jarl, Ingolfr and Leif went looking for a big island they had heard about recently: Iceland. They spent a winter there around 870, touring the coast to find the best spots. Then they headed back to Norway, where they were pleased to find that the jarl had cooled off a bit. By handing over some property they had seized from his dead son, plus some other loot, they convinced him to call off the blood feud.

By now, though, Ingolfr couldn't get Iceland out of his mind. He started going back every year, leaving Leif to continue his raids without him. By 874, Ingolfr was going back to Iceland to stay.

PREDICTIVE PILLARS: An occasion this big required a ceremony for remembrance, and Ingolfr knew just the thing. All Viking families of substance had **spirit pillars**, carved totems that honored their ancestors. They stood on either side of the head-of-family's special chair, adding to his air of dignity and authority. Now as Ingolfr approached Iceland in 874, he threw his spirit pillars overboard. He trusted that wherever the pillars went ashore, that would be the spot his ancestors had chosen for him to settle.

According to the Settlement Book, Ingolfr's spirit pillars eventually came ashore at what is now **Reykjavik** (map previous page). Reykjavik has been the capital of Iceland ever since.

...to Greenland and Vinland...

Fast forward about 100 years, to the time of a hot-headed Norwegian Viking called **Thorvald Asvaldsson**. Thorvald's troubles started around 970, when he got into a petty argument with his neighbors—and wound up killing some of them. Figuring the neighbors were partly to blame, the governing council decided to banish Thorvald from Norway rather than put him to death. Having nowhere else to go, he moved over to Iceland with his son **Erik Thorvaldsson**.

EMINENT EXPLORERS: Erik Thorvaldsson, a.k.a. Erik the Red (950? – 1003?)

The old saying goes that "the apple doesn't fall far from the tree," and that was certainly true in Erik's case. His own troubles started around 980, when his thralls somehow caused a landslide on the property of his neighbor **Eyjolf the Foul**. Eyjolf was angry enough to kill the thralls, which made Erik angry enough to kill Eyjolf and another neighbor. Just as a governing council banished Erik's father for neighbor-killing, so a governing council banished Erik.

Ingolfr Arnarsson planting his spirit pillars at Reykjavik



Erik's nickname **the Red** probably came from his unusual hair color. A red mane and beard would have stood out in a crowd of Vikings, who were mostly blonde.

For now, though, Erik **the Red** didn't have to leave Iceland altogether. He just had to find a new home on the far side of the island, beyond the council's area of authority. To lighten his load

while he searched, Erik left his spirit pillars with a friend called **Thorgest**.

After picking out his new home, Erik went back to get his spirit pillars—and found that Thorgest wouldn't give them up. Erik resorted to stealing back his own pillars, which led to Thorgest chasing him down, which led to a fierce fight in which two of Thorgest's sons were killed. For the second time in a short while, Erik found himself banished for neighbor-killing!

The difference was that this time, Erik was banished from Iceland altogether—not forever, but for at least three years. Having nowhere else to go, Erik sailed off in the direction of a new island he had heard about: the one we now call Greenland.

This was by far the Vikings' biggest find yet. With an area of nearly 823,000 square miles, Greenland is the biggest island in the world bar none. Alas, most of the island was so unbearably cold as to be useless to the Vikings. The only useful parts were a few green areas near the coast, as Erik discovered during his three-year banishment.

MEANINGFUL MONIKERS: Back in Iceland after his banishment, which ended around 985, Erik the Red set about recruiting Vikings for a colony on the big island. Knowing they would never come if he told the truth about its climate, Erik lied through his teeth. Even though his new island was far icier than Iceland, he dubbed it "Greenland"—figuring that "men will desire much the more to go there if the land has a good name" (Anonymous, *The Saga of Erik the Red*, n.d.).

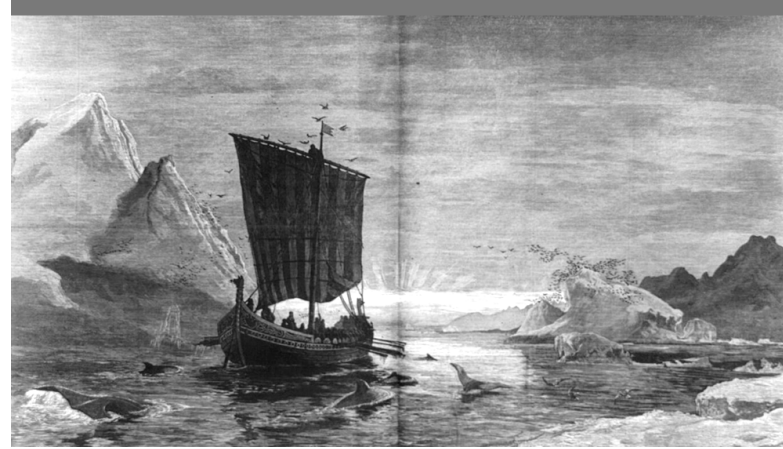
Of course, merely giving the island a good name didn't make it any easier to live there. Although Erik's colony on Greenland survived, it was hard going for him, his wife Thjodhild, and their four children: a daughter called Freydis, and three sons called Thorstein, Leif, and Thorvald.

A LOOK AHEAD: The middle son of Erik the Red, **Leif Eriksson**, would be the one to discover North America around the year 1000.

Leif Eriksson came along at an interesting time in Viking religious life. Before now, most Vikings had stuck to the Old Norse religion of their ancestors. His father Erik the Red certainly stuck to the old religion, as he showed by his choice of children's names.

"Freydis" honored the Norse goddess Freya, while "Thorstein" and "Thorvald" honored the Norse god Thor.

Olaf Trygvasson bringing Christianity to Norway



"The Discovery of Greenland"

EMINENT EXPLORERS: Leif Eriksson, a.k.a. Leif the Lucky (970? – 1020?)

Now in Leif's day, Norway suddenly got its first-ever Christian King: **Olaf Trygvasson**, who reigned from 995 – 1000. Leif met King Olaf around 999, when he went to Norway for the first time. Although no one knows for sure, the usual guess is that his father sent him to beg help for his struggling settlements in Greenland.

Leif Eriksson may have been a Christian already when he met King Olaf, or he may have converted during the summer he spent with Olaf. Either way, the king put Leif's faith to good use. He said that when Leif went back to Greenland, he must "go on my errand and preach Christianity"! When Leif tried to protest, pointing out that his father Erik was still attached to the old Norse gods, Olaf answered that "he knew no man who was better fitted for the work" of Christianizing Greenland than Leif (Anonymous, *The Saga of Erik the Red*, n.d.).

Leif's trip back to Greenland turned out to be a rough one. Bad weather "tossed [him] about a long time out at sea," blowing him so far off course that he had no idea where he was. When the weather finally cleared, he found himself sailing along the coast of "lands of which before he had no expectation." Like the good Viking explorer he was, Leif went ashore to see what these lands might be good for.

MEANINGFUL MONIKERS: Of the many plants Leif found in these unexpected lands, the one that impressed him most was "the vine-tree in full growth"—in other words, grapevines. Knowing how his fellow Vikings adored wine, Leif named the unexpected lands **Vinland**.

MAJOR MILESTONES: From a historical perspective, this was the biggest moment of Leif's life. Without meaning to, he had just become one of the first Europeans ever to set foot in North America. He made landfall there around the year 1000, nearly 500 years before Christopher Columbus landed in the Bahamas!

Leif had one more discovery to make on this eventful trip. Somewhere along the North American coast, he happened upon some "men who had been shipwrecked." Like a Viking version of the Good Samaritan, Leif "took [the men] home with him and gave them sustenance during the winter." When he finally made it home to Greenland, his example of Christian charity went a long way toward bringing "Christianity to the land." His fellow Greenlanders dubbed him **Leif the Lucky**, both for his good fortune in discovering Vinland and for his "munificence and graciousness" to the shipwrecked.

...and back to Scandinavia

The problem with the story we've just finished, which comes from a medieval source called *The Saga of Erik the Red*, is that it may not be true. According to a second source called *The Greenlanders Saga*, it was not Leif Eriksson who discovered North America. Rather, it was a friend of his called **Bjarni Herjulfsson**. In this version of the story, Leif only made it to North America because Bjarni sold him his ship and told him how to get there. Just which of these versions is true, if in fact either is true, no one will ever know for sure.

If *The Greenlanders Saga* has it right, then Leif Eriksson's first trip to Vinland was also his last. It was not Leif who commanded the Vikings' second expedition to Vinland, but his brother **Thorvald Eriksson**.

Thorvald was on his second year in Vinland when he made a typical Viking mistake. Somewhere along the North American coast, maybe in what is now Nova Scotia, Thorvald found the perfect spot for a new family farm he hoped to build. He was all set to claim it when he spotted "three skin boats" with "three men under each" (Anonymous, *The Greenlanders' Saga*,



"Leif Eriksson Discovering America" by Christian Krohg

"Summer on the Greenland Coast" by Carl Rasmussen





A page from an illuminated manuscript showing Vikings with kite shields

The **Skraelings** were probably ancestors of the Inuit people, many of whom still live in northernmost North America.

1976). Thorvald was about to have his first encounter with the natives of northeastern North America, whom the Vikings called **Skraelings**.

If Thorvald hadn't been a Viking, then he might have parlayed with the Skraelings under a flag of truce. Because Thorvald was one hundred percent Viking, he ordered his men to kill all nine Skraelings—which they almost did. Only one Skraeling escaped in his skin boat, outpacing the tired Vikings. Figuring they deserved some rest after their hard battle, Thorvald and his men settled down for a nice nap.

If they had napped one minute longer, then probably every one of them would have been killed. Fortunately, one of them was alert enough to see the danger they were in. That one escaped Skraeling had gone to summon reinforcements, who were now coming at Thorvald and his men in “hundreds of skin boats.” Enemy arrows flew thick and fast as the Vikings fled for their lives, desperate to escape in their longship.

FEARSOME FATES: After putting some distance between ship and shore, Thorvald “asked his men if they were wounded at all”—to which they all said no. It turned out that the only one wounded was

Thorvald himself, who had been hit by a Skraeling arrow that “came between the gunwale and my shield and in under my arm”! “And here is the arrow,” Thorvald went on, “and this will be my death.” His last wish was to be buried on the land he died fighting for, which his men did before heading back to Greenland to tell Leif the “heavy news.”

Perhaps if Thorvald Eriksson had survived, then the Vikings would have built family farms in Vinland as he dreamed of doing. As it happened, they never did. Although they returned to gather grapes, logs and so on, they never built a long-term colony anywhere in North America. The most they could manage were temporary way stations like the one at **L'Anse aux Meadows**.

The story goes back to *The Greenlanders Saga*, which tells of a project Leif Eriksson built during the one winter he spent in Vinland. “At a place where a river flowed out of a lake,” Leif built a “big house” and a few workshops to go with it. Long after Leif went back to Greenland, his buildings served other Vikings as a way station—a place to repair and resupply ships before pushing farther into Vinland. They called it **Leifsbudir**, Old Norse for “Leif’s Booths” or “Leif’s Workshops.”

SIGNIFICANT SITES: L'Anse aux Meadows

Fast forward to 1960, when archaeologists uncovered a slew of Viking artifacts at a site near the northern tip of Newfoundland, Canada. Later dubbed **L'Anse aux Meadows**, French for “Grassland Bay,” the site had everything one would expect to find at a Viking way station. For example, archaeologists found signs of a multi-roomed building about ninety feet long by fifty feet wide. At a respectable 4,500 square feet, this building could qualify as the “big house” mentioned in *The Greenlanders Saga*.

Archaeologists also found signs of several workshops near the big house, each devoted to a

Reconstructions of Viking buildings at L'Anse aux Meadows

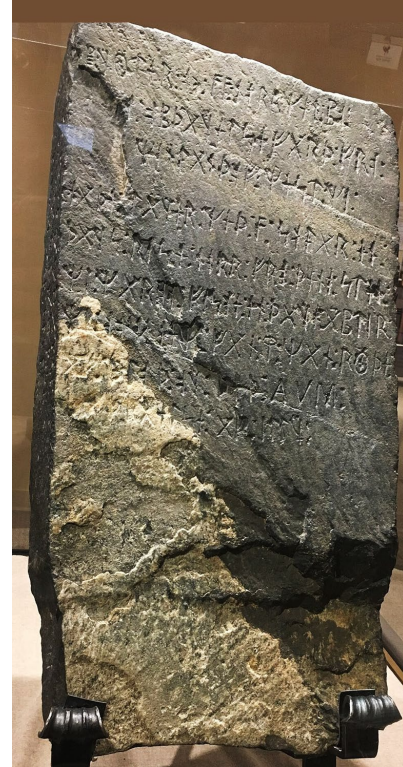


different trade, along with many other artifacts. If the Viking settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows wasn't *Leifsbudir* itself, then it was something very like it.

What makes L'Anse aux Meadows even more interesting is that as far as anyone knows, the site was as far west as the Vikings' temporary settlements ever went. If they built anything west of there, then archaeologists have yet to discover it. That explains why everyone was so surprised in 1898, when what looked like a Viking **runestone** turned up way over in western Minnesota.

A runestone is a big, flat stone carved with **runes**, the characters used to write Old Norse. Runestones are common in Sweden, where Vikings used them as grave markers or monuments to special occasions. Runestones are less common in Denmark, rare in Norway, and nonexistent in Iceland and Greenland. Nevertheless in 1898, a Swedish immigrant claimed to turn up a Viking runestone while plowing his farm in western Minnesota.

FASCINATING FAKES: The reactions to the **Kensington Runestone**, as it came to be called, were mixed. Although most analysts dismissed the stone as a hoax, some took it as evidence that the Vikings really did penetrate this far west. Hoax or not, the Kensington Runestone helps explain the name of the state's professional football team: the Minnesota Vikings.



The Kensington Runestone

A LOOK AHEAD: In the long run, the Vikings' colonies in Greenland will all fail too. Overcome by severe cold and other difficulties, Erik the Red's colonists will start heading back to Iceland and Norway. The last of them will leave Greenland in the late 1300s, about 100 years before Christopher Columbus lands in the Bahamas (Ch. 24).

The failures of Vinland and Greenland explain why Columbus got so much credit for discovering North America. If the Vikings' colonies there had survived, then historians surely would have honored their efforts. Because the Vikings' colonies failed, historians often overlooked them in their rush to honor Columbus.

CHURCH HISTORY

~ The East-West Schism ~

This last section covers a church split that was a long time in the making: the one between West and East. The main cause of this split was an idea we covered way back in Chapter 1: the primacy of the pope. Western Christians believed that all Christians everywhere must bow to the Bishop of Rome, a.k.a. the pope. Eastern Christians disagreed, preferring the patriarchs of Constantinople, Antioch or Alexandria.

The trouble between West and East worsened in the 630s, when the Islamic Empire conquered Antioch and Alexandria (Ch. 7). Now that it was just Rome versus Constantinople, it was only a matter of time before the two churches broke with one another.

The Pope versus the Patriarch

The primacy of the pope was by no means the only issue that divided East from West. There were also all these issues among others:

- **Celibate priests versus married:** In Chapter 3, we read how monks swore the Vow of Chastity under the Rule of Benedict. In Chapter 11, we'll read how Pope Gregory VII (r. 1073 – 1085) upped the ante. From Gregory's day forward, many Western churches demanded the Vow of Chastity from all churchmen—not just monks. Eastern churches made no such demand, preferring to let churchmen make their own decisions.



- Unleavened bread versus leavened: Western Christians used unleavened bread for Holy Communion, meaning yeast-free bread such as the Jews used for their Passover meals. They reasoned that because Holy Communion recalls the Last Supper of Christ, which was a Passover meal, it made sense to use the same bread the Jews used at Passover. Eastern Christians disagreed, feeling that unleavened bread looked back to the old covenant under the Law of Moses. They preferred the liveliness of leavened bread, seeing it as a sign of new life in Christ.



An altarpiece showing the Holy Spirit dove proceeding from the Father “and from the Son,” as the filioque says

- Filioque versus no filioque: Western Christians angered Eastern Christians by adding a controversial clause called the **filioque** to the all-important Nicene Creed.

As we’ve read in past chapters, the Nicene Creed was a key statement of faith that was originally written by the Council of Nicaea in 325, and amended by the Council of Constantinople in 381. The 381 version had this to say about the third Person of the Holy Trinity: “[I believe] in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified.”

CONTROVERSIAL CLAUSES: Sometime in the late 500s, Western Christians started adding *filioque*—Latin for “and from the Son”—to this section of the Nicene Creed. Instead of saying that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father,” they said that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father and from the Son.”

To Western minds, adding the filioque made perfect sense. They recalled why the Nicene Creed was originally written: to defend Christ against the Arians, who believed that the Son was lower than the Father. If the Son was really One with the Father, Western Christians argued, then why not say that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son?

Eastern Christians balked for a couple of reasons. First, they felt that adding the filioque demeaned the Holy Spirit—making Him sound lower than the Father and the Son. Second, they felt that it was bad manners to change such an important creed without a council to discuss it.

CONTINUOUS CONTROVERSIES: Taken separately, these controversies might not have been enough to split East from West. Taken together, they drove the two sides farther apart every year. They developed into two very different churches, preaching different ideas in different languages accompanied by different rituals in different settings. By the year 1000, they were so far apart that it took only a few more pushes to split them.

One powerful push came in 1014, when Pope **Benedict VIII** made the filioque official. Before now, the filioque had been optional in Western churches. Now under Benedict, it became mandatory. Anyone who refused to add the filioque was deemed a heretic, a ruling that raised a lot of eyebrows in the East.

Another big push came in 1053, when an Eastern bishop called **Leo of Ohrid** wrote a scathing letter about the use of unleavened bread in Holy Communion. Western faces hardened as they read how Leo demeaned their holy bread, calling it “a lifeless stone, an earthen brick, or a piece of ceramic compacted with earth and made with dry clay” (Ahmad, n.d.).

The final push came in 1054, when Pope **Leo IX** sent his top lieutenant—a hard-nosed cardinal called **Humbert of Silva Candida**—to set the Easterners straight. On a trip to Constantinople that summer, Cardinal Humbert gave Patriarch **Michael I Cerularius** just two options:

Pope Leo IX (r. 1049 – 1054)





Eastern Orthodox lands in blue, Roman Catholic lands in orange after the East-West Schism of 1054

submit to the pope, or face dire consequences. When the patriarch didn't give in right away, the furious cardinal strode out of their meeting with vengeance in his eyes.

CONTEMPTUOUS COMMUNIQUE: During prayers at the **Hagia Sophia** the next day, a still-furious Cardinal Humbert stopped in just long enough to lay an official order on the altar. Upon reading the order, the patriarch learned that he had just been excommunicated—which meant that he was no longer eligible to receive Holy Communion.

Naturally, Eastern churches didn't go along with excommunicating their own patriarch. On the contrary, they excommunicated Cardinal Humbert. They might have done the same to Pope Leo IX if he hadn't passed beyond their reach, having died that April.

The **Hagia Sophia** was the great domed cathedral built by the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I (Ch. 4).

With that, the split became permanent. The year 1054 marks the start of the **East-West Schism**, a long-term split between two churches: the Roman Catholic Church in the West, and the Eastern Orthodox Church in the east. In years to come, all churches that traced their roots to Constantinople would be called Eastern Orthodox—including Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, and more.