

The Ancient Mariners: Forget the horned helmets: the Vikings were traders as well as raiders, remaking Western Europe--and sailing to America

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Looting! Raiding! Marauding! Yeah, it's a kick of a way to make a living, not to mention live up a monotonous farming existence, but look at what it did to the poor, misunderstood Vikings. Some overwrought scribe writes in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* that their A.D. 793 raid on Lindisfarne monastery in northeast England (considered the start of the Viking age) "miserably afflicted the inhabitants" with "fiery dragons... flying in the air" as "the heathen" engaged in "rapine and slaughter"--and the world forgets that the Vikings spurred urban development in northern Europe. And just because the Vikings realized how much portable wealth lay around (they extorted six tons of gold and silver bullion from the Parisians in 845), is that any reason to forget that they invented sails that tack into the wind? And, OK, the Vikings held nobles and churchmen for ransom, annihilated Tours and Orleans, occupied Chartres, plundered Bayeaux (nice tapestry) and Evreux--but must the world therefore overlook the dandy little reindeer carvings they made? And did we mention Eric the Red, patron saint of all realtors who name cheap housing developments "Eden Estates"? Eric, exiled from Iceland after a murder or two, hoped to attract others to the godforsaken slab of ice he now called home. He named it Greenland.

Scholars have long labored to separate Viking reality from Viking legend, and now's their chance. This year marks the millennial anniversary of the Vikings' arrival in Newfoundland. In 1000, a band of men and women set off from Greenland, crossed Baffin Bay and hugged the coast of Baffin Island in their mighty wooden ships, escorted by Atlantic puffins and great auks. Under the command of Leif Ericson, the Norsemen sought timber for their boats and homes, pasture for their flocks and grapes for their wineries. But when they sailed into the bay on the tip of Newfoundland and encountered the Native Americans, they accomplished much more than a shopping errand: for the first time in human history, the Old World made contact with the New across the Atlantic. It was "the first step in the process by which human populations became reconnected into a single global system," says archeologist William Fitzhugh of the Smithsonian Institution. "Humanity had finally come full circle." The anniversary of that meeting is producing an outpouring of new scholarship, and a new translation (published by--really--Viking) of the Iceland sagas, the heroic tales of events from 875 to 1000. For anyone not up for 782 pages along the lines of "It's no great news that Hrafinkel kills people. He's pretty handy with a wood-axe," there is a fascinating Viking exhibit at the Smithsonian (April 20 to Sept. 4), a lavish companion book and a two-hour "Nova" special airing in May on PBS.

(Just to get one stereotype out of the way: yes, the Vikings did wear helmets. No, the helmets did not sport horns. Vikings are not Wagnerian opera.)

The Viking raids began in the late eighth century, for which you can blame those innocent-looking Danes. Danish kings expanded their hegemony into Sweden and Norway, and many local lords and landowners chose exile and a life of raiding. They first targeted the Shetlands and Orkneys, Scotland, Ireland and England--former trading partners. But as Fitzhugh says, "Why pay for it if you could steal it?" Nevertheless, farming, trading and diplomacy soon "became as common as raiding and pillaging for Vikings living abroad," he says. In other words, the Viking legacy goes beyond ruined monasteries. They "redistribute[d] the wealth that was stored in the treasuries of churches, kings and magnates," says Peter Sawyer of the University of Leeds. "They stole it, shared it out and spent it: a good example of Keynesian economics." This stimulated urban development from Kiev to Dublin, York and Normandy as the Vikings turned sleepy shires into bustling trade towns. "Contrary to the stereotype," says Lars Jorgensen of the Danish National Museum in Copenhagen, the Vikings "were experienced actors on the international political stage, and this required more talents than brute force."

Although "Viking" connotes "a brawny, psychotic, battle-crazed berserker," as Fitzhugh concedes, these Norsemen had their sensitive side, too. They had a rich artistic life, shown by silver figurines, ornate tapestries and ivory chessmen. And their pantheon put the Greeks to shame. The Vikings believed in gods and goddesses, led by Odin, Frey and Thor; giants who fought the gods; dwarfs who helped the gods; Valkyries who gathered the souls of the fallen from battlefields; elves who controlled fertility. With their tradition of polytheism, adding Jesus to the list was no problem. However, when leaders of the Icelandic settlement agreed to convert to Christianity, they cut a deal with the missionaries: we worship your God, you let us keep practicing female infanticide. The church agreed.

The Vikings' burial practices demonstrate their belief in an afterlife, none more so than the centerpiece of the Smithsonian show: a replica of a "ship burial." In 834 a noblewoman was interred in an ornately carved, 70-foot Viking ship, along with carts and slaughtered horses and servants who (willingly or not) were dispatched forthwith so "she could take her entire retinue to the next world," says Fitzhugh. Even cremation graves included sendoffs like swords and shields. When an Arab diplomat met some Vikings in Russia, he records in an account from 922, they explained the reason for cremation: "You take those you love and honor most and put them in the earth where the worms and earth devour them. We burn them in the blinking of an eye so that they go to paradise at that very moment."

Any recounting of the Vikings is duty-bound to note that theirs was an agricultural economy, and that while men "went a-viking" their extended families stayed behind to raise grain, cabbage, onions, peas, beans, cattle, sheep, goats and pigs. So consider it noted. But even Viking farmhouses seemed as if they wanted to be elsewhere: built with bowed walls and a curved roof ridge, they resembled upended ships. These were truly people of the sea, able to read the swells and winds well enough to navigate the north Atlantic without instruments. Keeping the altitude of the noon sun constant from day to day let them maintain a bearing, and the height of stars above the horizon revealed a ship's latitude. But the Vikings also navigated by learning the habits of whales, puffins and other high-sea migrants, whose paths led them first to colonize Iceland and then to Greenland. Although they rowed, rowed, rowed their boats until 700, their development of the sail transformed history, for there would have been no Viking age without it: a crew that has rowed from Norway to Paris is in no shape to pillage. But it was the discovery of

rigging, which allowed them to tack into the wind, that gave the Vikings true maritime supremacy. They could beat a hasty retreat even if the wind was blowing toward the land they had just raided. Replicas of the vessels, notes Arne Emil Christensen of the Viking Ship Museum in Oslo, "are remarkably fast and tack well."

The Vikings got around. Mercenaries served as bodyguards to the emperors of Byzantium. But did they reach North America half a millennium before Columbus? Although the Vinland sagas describe transatlantic voyages, few people believed it-- until the 1960 discovery, by Helge Instad, of the ruins of a Viking settlement dubbed l'Anse aux Meadows in northern Newfoundland. The eight buildings, including three multiroomed halls, had sturdy roofs and thick sod walls, and could house 70 to 90 people. Neutron-activation analysis of 10 flintlike pieces of jasper, used to start fires, reveal trace elements present only in jasper from western Greenland and Iceland. According to the sagas, the last Vikings to live even briefly in North America were two crews from Iceland and one from both Iceland and Greenland--including Gudrid, who gave birth to the first European born in America.

Judging by the debris, two huts at l'Anse aux Meadows served as workshops, for weaving, iron forging and carpentry. The Vikings apparently used the site as a base camp from which to explore to the south; butternuts found at the site grew no closer than the St. Lawrence River valley. Grapes grew there, too, suggesting that the "Vinland" of the sagas was no myth. "Wine was such a rarity," says archeologist Birgitta Wallace of Parks Canada. "The fancier the dinner a Viking could give, the more power and influence he could gain." And while the Vikings did not establish a permanent settlement, their odyssey may have made a lasting imprint nonetheless. As long as the Norse colony in Greenland endured (985 to 1450), so did knowledge of the land to the west. "Icelandic chroniclers spread the knowledge of these new lands to Europe," says Haraldur Olafsson of the University of Iceland. "It is likely that Columbus knew about this discovery." The Vikings abandoned l'Anse aux Meadows after only a few years, packing up their tools and torching the buildings. But the deed had been done. The Old World had reached out across the Atlantic to the New, opening the door to the age of discovery. Not bad for a bunch of looting, raiding marauders.

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