

Before 1066 and all that

Section One – Resource Two



The so-called 'Viking Age' began around AD 800 and lasted nearly three centuries. The dates are clear-cut, too: 793 to 1066. And throughout that time, war correspondents in the shape of literate monks and clerics kept their goose-quill pens sharpened with alarm, their glossy ink dyed bright with indignation. The Vikings were cast in the role of Antichrist, merciless barbarians who plundered and burned their way across the known world, heedless of their own lives or the lives of others, intent only on destruction and pillage; their emblems were Thor's Hammer and Odin's Raven, symbolising the violence and black-hearted evil of their pagan gods.

It was never quite as one-sided as that. Today there is emerging a much fuller and rounder version (*of the Viking past*), mainly through modern archaeology but with the help of other scientific and literary disciplines as well, which presents the Vikings in a less lurid and more objective light. It is as much a matter of emphasis as anything else: less emphasis on the raiding, more on the trading; less on the pillage, more on the poetry and the artistry; less on the terror, more on the technology of these determined and dynamic people from the northlands of Denmark, Norway and Sweden and the positive impact they had on the countries they affected.

Their influence was much more constructive, more pervasive and extensive than they are generally given credit for. They dominated much of northern Europe for long periods. They brought to the British Isles vigorous new art forms, and vigorous new settlers; they founded and developed great market towns, they injected new forms of administration and justice that have left their mark to this

day. (As an Icelandic-born descendant of the Vikings myself, I can never resist reminding my sceptical friends that it was these allegedly pitiless savages who introduced the very word *law* into the English language!) They crisscrossed half the world in their open boats and vastly extended its known boundaries; they voyaged further north and west than any Europeans had ever been before, founding new and lasting colonies in the Faroe Islands and Iceland, discovering and exploring and making settlements in Greenland and even in North America. They penetrated the depths of Russia, founding city-states like Novgorod and Kiev, pioneering new trade routes along formidable rivers like the Volga and the Dnieper, opening up the route to Asia to exploit the exotic markets of Persia and China. They served as hand-picked warriors in the celebrated Varangian Guard, the household troops of the Byzantine Emperor in Constantinople. They went everywhere there was to go, they dared everything there was to dare - and they did it with a robust panache and audacity that has won the grudging admiration even of those who deplore their depredations.

From Vikings by Magnus Magnusson, published 1980

