**The Vikings**

**Introduction**

The Vikings were Norse people from Scandinavia who lived during the Viking Age (eighth century to the twelfth century). Since they spent much of their time travelling to raid, trade and settle places throughout Europe, their legacy is widespread.

**Stories and artifacts**

Through popular movies and books, the Vikings are best known as barbaric, seafaring raiders. As more archaeological evidence is excavated, however, historians are realizing that the Vikings were not as uncivilized as previously thought. It has been suggested that the original image of the Vikings as aggressive and evil killers was mostly because records of them were written by the victims of their raids. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the *Frankish Annals* are two sources which have frequent records of Viking attacks.

Information about the Vikings is also provided through sagas, stories that were written by Norse ancestors at the end of the Viking Age. The most famous of these stories are *The Saga of Olaf Tryggvason*, *Egil's Saga* and *The Saga of Erik the Red*. These stories of conquest, which referred to poems written by skalds (court poets) during the Viking Era, are often thought to be exaggerated in an attempt to preserve the Viking's heroic status. While these accounts contribute to the misleading violent stereotype of the Vikings, sagas also provide an insight into Viking royalty and gods.

Much is known about the Norse people through archaeological evidence that has been excavated in modern times. This evidence has since shown that there was more to the Viking culture than violent raids. Artefacts such as farm implements and iron-working tools provide historians with an insight into the daily life of the Norse people. The Gotland picture stones provide information on the changing Norse religious beliefs and culture. Coins from the Middle East and the Byzantine Empire, which were found in Sweden, indicate that the Norse Vikings were well-travelled traders. Remarkable Viking vessels, including the longship and the knarr, also provided archaeologists with an understanding of how the Vikings were able to travel such great distances to Greenland, North America and Constantinople. It is through a combination of these different types of physical evidence that historians are able to uncover the background to the Viking legacy.

**Language**

The Vikings frequently left their Scandinavian homelands to expand across a number of places in Western Europe. The Vikings traded with locals, raided coastal settlements and explored new lands for colonization. As a result of this contact, a number of words across Europe have Scandinavian origins.

**England**

From the Vikings' first contact with Western Europe in 793, when they raided a monastery at Lindisfarne (off the coast of England), the Vikings continued to invade the British Isles. By 878 they had managed to conquer all of England, except for the area of Wessex. In 886, King Alfred made an agreement with the Vikings which enabled them to live in the north-east third of England. That area became known as Danelaw. By 954, however, King Alfred's Anglo-Saxon successors had reclaimed England. It was not until 991 that the Danes reclaimed the English throne, but this time, they managed to hold on to it for 25 years.

This prolonged period of contact between the Vikings and the Anglo-Saxons, which lasted over several centuries, resulted in a large number of personal surnames, general words and English place names, being able to be traced to Scandinavian origins. Statistics show that, in Yorkshire, over 60 percent of personal names in early Middle English had some Scandinavian influence. It is also thought that nearly 1000 general words used in Standard English today such as give, anger and husband, all owe their modern meanings to the Viking settlers in England.

Examples of Scandinavian place names in England are also evident. They can be easily detected by suffixes. Grimsby and Thurnby are both names of places in England that use the suffix *- by*, which was the Scandinavian word for ' farm' or ' village.' This is also the case for Astonthorpe and Scunthorpe which both use the Scandinavian word ending of *-thorpe* (meaning ' village'). These place names of Scandinavian origin are particularly common in the Danelaw region which King Alfred allowed the Vikings to settle in (886).

**France**

From the second decade of the ninth century, the Vikings also raided France. In 911, however, tired of being invaded by the Vikings, Charles the Simple of West Francia made an agreement with the Viking leader, Rollo. Rollo was granted the title of Count of Rouen and received some land in the north of France (Normandy). Rollo received these gifts in exchange for converting to Christianity and agreeing to defend the shores from other Vikings.

Since Rollo and the Vikings settled in Normandy, the influence of the Norse language can be seen in a number of place names and personal names in Normandy, France. Much the same as in England, suffixes on French place names also indicate a Scandinavian influence. Two of the most popular are the French -*tot* and -*londe*which are thought to have come from the Scandinavian -*toft* (meaning farm) and -*lund*(meaning wood), respectively.

There are also a number of Scandinavian personal names which have survived as French family names, including Tostain which may have been derived from the Norse Thorstein (Thor's stone) and Quétel/ Quétil from Ketill (the sacred cauldron).

**Society**

Despite the Viking Age ending over nine centuries ago, the legacy of the Norse civilization is still visible today. Law and democracy are two ideals which were evident in Viking society. The Viking ' Althing' was thought to be the first national assembly in Europe. The Althing had the power of a parliament, which meant that it could make laws. It also had the power of a court of law in which those found guilty could be punished for their crimes. All freemen took part in this national parliament. Despite the influence of the Things declining, as the power of the kings grew, the Viking Althing set the way for a more democratic future.

Although women were not permitted to vote at the Althing, Norse women during the Viking Era did enjoy a substantial degree of equality. Women ran the households and farms while their husbands were away. They could also own land and even divorce their husbands, which was a right not all women around the world had access to even centuries after the Viking Age ended.