

# CROSS ROADS

Authors

**EDITORS**

names of editors and authors will be  
added later

 **BOOKS**

**ALLARD PIERSON**

---

# CONTENTS

Introduction

## I

---

### DIVERSITY

I.1 From Constantine to Charlemagne: Rome and its Successors 300-800

**Traveller** Abul-Abbas the elephant

I.2 The Longobards

I.3 The Byzantine Empire: the eastern Roman perspective, 400-800 century

**Traveller** Theofanu

I. 4 The Sassanid Empire and the Rise of Islam, 400-800 AD

I.5 Andalusia, Al Andalus (700-1000 AD)

**Traveller** Ibn Shaprut

I.6 Late Antique Egypt (300-1000 AD)

**Traveller** Egeria the Pilgrim

I. 7 The Irish

I. 8 The Kievan Rus

**Traveller** Ibn Fadlan

I. 9 The Merovingians

**Traveller** St Maarten

I. 10 The Slavs

I. 11 The Avar and the Migration period in the Carpatian Basin

## II

---

### CONNECTIVITY

II.1 Heritage of Rome and the rise of the Byzantine Empire

**Traveller** Helen

II.2 The Mediterranean Sea

II.3 The three monotheistic religions: Jews, Christian, Muslims. From Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages

**Traveller** Sigeric

II.4 Warfare

**Traveller** Olympiodorus van Thebe

II.5 Knowledge

**Traveller** Ohthere

II.6 Identity

## III

---

### EARLY MEDIEVAL EUROPE TODAY

III.1 New light on 'the Dark Ages'. The conception of the Middle Ages through the lens of later times

III.2 Reconstruction of Early Medieval senses

Further reading, authors' cv, credits, etc.



---

# I.8 BETWEEN NORTH ATLANTIC AND BLACK SEA: THE VIKING AGE AND KIEVAN RUS

Matthias Toplak

The Viking Age is the period from the eighth to the eleventh century AD in northern Europe, the era of Scandinavian expansion. Warlike Norsemen spread over the European world, plundering monasteries, cities and market towns and establishing a trade network that spanned almost the entire world then known in Europe. One of the first recorded and most influential early contacts between Christendom and the Nordic marauders was the raid on the monastery of Lindisfarne off the Northumbrian coast (England) on 8 June 793. This inci-

In the early 20th century an exceptional discovery was made in a grave mound at the Oslo Fjord (Norway): the Oseberg Ship. In it two high-ranking women had been buried in the first half of the 9th century; their opulent grave goods included wooden furniture with ex-

quisitely carved decorations. The longship, 22 m long and clinker-built from oak, has fine carvings on bow and stern. Judging from its slim shape and unusually shallow draft it probably was not seaworthy, but was used as a luxury yacht for trips near the coast.

sive event marks the beginning of the Viking Age and explains its name: *viking* in Old Norse means 'raid'. These eponymous looting expeditions, however, were just one aspect of the Viking Age. Relatively few men took part in each of the often lucrative but equally perilous adventures during the summer months in order to gain renown and riches with an opportunistic combination of trade, exacting tribute, and plundering. Therefore calling the Danes, Norwegians, Swedes and Icelanders of the late first millennium 'Vikings' really is an unjust generalisation. Most of these men were peasants, fishermen, merchants or craftsmen; not the cruel, wild and uncultured warriors and pirates they are often thought to have been. For want of a better word, 'Viking' nevertheless is the common name for Scandinavian culture and society from the eighth to the eleventh century.

Many everyday objects from the Viking Age testify to a highly developed sense of art. Even the simplest utensils, such as pottery or wooden tableware, often were elaborately decorated with winding patterns that had developed from a mix of Germanic animal motifs and influences from different artistic traditions: Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, and even Mediterranean.

Viking-Age art can be arranged in a loose chronological sequence of six style phases; what they all have in common is the winding decorations based on stylised vine and animal motifs that occur in metalwork, woodcarving, embroidery, and stonework. Contemporary runestones—memorial stones, often exquisitely decorated, with inscriptions in runic script—as well as the complicated skaldic poetry handed down in the Old Norse sagas of the High Middle Ages testify to the store the Vikings set by poetry and elaborate wordplay. This appreciation of art and sophisticated design is also visible in Viking-Age craft. Viking craftsmen used highly developed metallurgic techniques seen especially in gold jewellery and ship construction. From the rowing boats of the north-European Iron Age, which were already clinker-built (i.e. with overlapping boards), Viking shipbuilders created the square-rigged longship, which despite its shallow draft and open construction made it possible to cross the North Atlantic.

## THE WORLD OF THE VIKINGS

The development of the fast, easily manoeuvrable yet seaworthy longships, combined with the Scandinavians' impressive nautical skills, allowed a unique expansion of



their range of action. It reached from the east coast of modern North America over the North Atlantic islands and Scandinavia to the Eurasian steppe and the Caspian Sea. The seasonal raids by small bands on the coasts of Anglo-Saxon England and the Frankish kingdom gradually turned into large-scale undertakings in which local chiefs, often Danes, joined forces. From the mid-ninth century, a group of several thousand warriors ('a big heathen army', according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*) ransacked and conquered large parts of England; numerous Scandinavian families settled in this area called Danelag, 'where Danish law rules'. Many geographical names in north-east England still point to these Scandinavian immigrants.

The Vikings' range of action extended from the islands in the North Atlantic to the east-European plains and the Caspian Sea.

By the end of the ninth century the Anglo-Saxon king Alfred the Great (r. 871–899) succeeded in driving back the Viking army. Most of the Danish warriors crossed the Channel to raid the coasts of northern France and Flanders. Entire fleets used the domestic weakness of the Frankish kingdom to sail inland over the great rivers and

pillage the cities along Rhine, Meuse and Seine. The constant Viking threat prompted Charles the Simple (r. 898–923) to grant the county of Rouen to the Viking leader Rollo (846–931/932) in 911; in return, Rollo was to protect the coastal region, known from then on as Normandy, from further raids. At the end of the tenth century, during the reign of the Danish king Svein Forkbeard (r. 986–1014), raids on England were resumed and led to its conquest in 1013. Sveyn was succeeded by his son Canute the Great (r. 1016–1035), whose kingdom is known as the North Sea Empire and constituted the largest territory of the Viking Age, comprising Denmark, parts of south Sweden, Norway, and England. Ireland and Scotland had likewise been subjected to plundering by the Vikings from the end of the eighth century onward and were later colonised, as were the Orkneys. In Ireland several territories were established, among them the Kingdom of Dublin, which centred on the trade centre founded by the Vikings and was a force to be reckoned with in the tenth century.

Starting from Norway and the Norse settlements in Ireland, the Vikings opened up the North Atlantic in the ninth century as they took land on the Faroe and Shetland Islands and discovered and colonised Iceland. While in most of the new Viking territories monarchies were established, Iceland developed a form of parliamentary democracy, with the *alþing* in Þingvellir as the legislative and judicial assembly of all free men. Around AD 1000 it decided to convert to Christianity. For several centuries Icelandic settlements existed on Greenland as well; again around the turn of the millennium, they were the starting point for Leif Eriksson's (c.970–1020) discovery of what is now North America. Leif's father, Erik the Red (c.950–c.1003), had discovered Greenland two decades earlier and initiated settlement there. An attempt to settle in present-day Newfoundland failed in an early stage. Although the Greenland settlers incidentally sailed to the east coast of North America for resources such as timber, their discovery of what they called Vínland ('land of wine', sometimes interpreted as Vinland, 'land of pasture') was just a brief episode without consequences in the history of Viking expansion in the North Atlantic.

#### BETWEEN HAMMER AND CROSS: THE CHRISTIANISATION OF SCANDINAVIA

As their contacts with medieval Christian Europe intensified, the Vikings' society changed as well; theirs was an



The big runestone of Jelling (Denmark) was erected by King Harald Bluetooth, probably c. AD 965. The inscription states that Harald

Christianised Denmark. The stone, which has a large figure of Christ on one of its faces, is also called 'Denmark's baptismal certificate'.

age of transformation. At the end of the tenth century, supraregional kingdoms grew from the rural tribal communities of local kings: the origins of the modern states of Denmark, Sweden and Norway. Their kings were increasingly orientated to their powerful neighbours in the south, the Franks and later the Holy Roman Empire. By the end of the Viking Age in the second half of the eleventh century they had been completely integrated into the political system of Christian Europe. Christianity had already found its way north by then. Already in the early Viking Age, lone missionaries such as St Ansgar (801–865), the 'Apostle of the North' who later became the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, tried to wrest the pagan Scandinavians from their faith in Odin and Thor and bring them into the fold of the Church. But it was only in the second half of the tenth century that the Danish king Harald Bluetooth (r. c.958–986) introduced Christianity into his realm and stated on the famous runestone of Jelling (Denmark, c.965) that he 'had turned the Danes into Christians'. Harald probably had

himself baptised out of political calculation rather than deep conviction, but his baptism heralded the beginning of Scandinavia's Christianisation nonetheless. The new faith did not have much impact on most people's daily lives, but as churches and monasteries were founded, literacy and historiography arrived in their wake. Archaeological finds prove that before the Viking Age there already existed regular and intensive trade contacts between Scandinavia and central Europe. With the Vikings' expansion, however, widely ramified trade networks were established that reached even the Arab world. The big, early-urban trading centres that developed—e.g. Hedeby near Schleswig (Germany), Ribe (Denmark), and Birka in Lake Mälaren (Sweden)—served as transfer locations for goods and merchants, but also for religious and cultural ideas and created the basis for Scandinavia's urbanisation with cities such as Lund, Sig-tuna (Sweden), Bergen or Nidaros/Trondheim (Norway). Trading on the big markets of Constantinople (Turkey) and Baghdad (Iraq) was particularly lucrative for the Norsemen, who would exchange skins, fur and slaves for luxury commodities such as silk, spices, and

silver coins as a raw material for jewellery. These commercial interests led to an eastward expansion of the Viking world and to the birth of another kingdom of the Viking Age, Kievan Rus.

FROM THE VARANGIANS TO THE GREEKS:  
KIEVAN RUS

From the mid-eighth century AD there is evidence of a Scandinavian presence in what is now north-west Russia. Merchants from Denmark, the Swedish island Gotland and in particular central Sweden, who were called Rus or Varangians, used the market of the native Balto-Finnic peoples of Staraya Ladoga (Russia) as the starting point of a trading network that ran from the dense forests of north-west Russia to the Caspian Sea. Over the Volga the Rus reached the markets of Bolghar and Atil

Reconstructed Viking homestead at the Ribe Viking Centre in Denmark.



(Russia) in the territory of the Volga Bulgars and the Khazars (a semi-nomadic Turkic people) respectively, and from the Caspian Sea they travelled by land to Baghdad, the capital of the Arab Abbasid Caliphate. Toward the end of the ninth century the Rus' trade routes shifted from the Volga to the Dnieper, the route to the Black Sea with Kiev (Ukraine), the centre of Rus political power, on its banks. The Rus thus had a direct connection to the markets of Constantinople, allowing them to pass by the middlemen of the Khazar and Volga-Bulgar markets. The long journey from Birka or Staraya Ladoga over the rivers of the east European plains to the Black Sea and the lucrative markets of the Near East was a risky, but potentially high-profit undertaking. In this way fortified trading centres and settlements grew from often Slavic towns along the great rivers in

Present-day Rurikovo Gorodishche at Lake Ilmen near Novgorod was one of the earliest Viking settle-

ments in the region; it became a political and trading centre in northwest Kievan Rus.

the course of the late ninth and early tenth centuries, forming the basis of the realm of Rus, with Kiev the seat of power from the end of the ninth century. Rus consisted of separate principalities that were ruled by an elite of mostly Scandinavian origin. They were all subject to the grand princes of Kiev, a dynasty that traced its descent to merchants and warriors from central Sweden. These market towns—the administrative and military centres of the constituting principalities—gave Kievan Rus its Old Norse name *Garðaríki*, 'realm of the fortified towns'. They were the transfer hubs that also controlled



This Arabian bronze vessel was found in a wealthy woman's grave from the 10th century near Aska (Sweden). Below the neck is an Ara-

bic inscription. Together with other luxury items in the grave it shows the extent of the Vikings' trade connections.

the routes in a trade network reaching from Birka in Sweden to the Black and the Caspian Sea, from the Varangians to the Greeks. The Nordic families that had settled in the towns of Garðaríki gradually assimilated into Slavic society over the tenth century. They adopted Slavic names and the use of the name Rus in the sources changed from indicating Nordic descent to designating the inhabitants of the Kievan Rus territory. The new shared identity that developed in the Rus settlements rose over separate ethnic origins through a sense of belonging to a collective culture that was permeated with warrior ideology and in which Nordic, Slavic, Byzantine, and equestrian-nomadic influences amalgamated into a single new culture.

#### VARANGIANS IN CONSTANTINOPLE: BETWEEN THREAT AND BODYGUARD

The relationship between the young realm of Kievan Rus and the powerful Byzantine Empire was ambivalent. Constantinople's policy on Rus was shaped by political and military rather than economic interests; its aim was to integrate the new high-potential neighbours into Byzantine alliance politics, especially given the empire's problematic position between a number of warlike peoples in the north (Khazars, Pechenegs, Magyars, and Volga Bulgars) and the Arab caliphate in the south-west. The Rus, on the other hand, were primarily interested in direct access to the Byzantine and Arab markets. Nevertheless they repeatedly raided the Byzantine Black Sea coast and even attacked Constantinople itself, until several peace treaties were made between Byzantine emperors and Kievan grand princes in the mid-tenth century. The treaties included provisions on trade and under certain conditions allowed Rus merchants access to the markets of Constantinople. The Byzantine emperor also granted the Rus warriors, named Varangians here, the right to enrol as mercenaries for the empire. This combination of trade and mercenary activities as well as collecting tributes was as attractive as it was lucrative for the Rus and brought about the establishment of a warrior elite in Kievan Rus. The Nordic mercenaries' military potential secured the throne for Basil II (sole emperor 976–1025) in 988 and led to the formation of the Varangian Guard, in which the future Norwegian king Harald Hardrada (r. 1046–1066) served for some time.

In exchange for the military support, Basil II gave the hand of his sister Anna Porphyrogenita (963–1011/12) to Vladimir the Great, grand prince of Kievan Rus (r. 980–1015). For the wedding, Vladimir had himself baptised in 988, which is seen as the beginning of the Christianisation of Kievan Rus—although Vladimir, just like Harald Bluetooth in Denmark two decades earlier, embraced the Christian faith for political reasons rather than out of personal conviction. By this time at the latest, the sphere of influence of a mostly Scandinavian elite controlling the trade routes from the Baltic to the Black Sea had developed into a kingdom under Slavic influence that was an integral part of medieval Christian Europe. Although the political elite of Kievan Rus was highly Slavonised from the end of the tenth century, close political and family ties to the Scandinavian kingdoms persisted for a long time. Vladimir's son Yaroslav the

Wise (r. 1019–1054) in 1019 married the daughter of the Swedish king Olof Skötkonung (r. 995–1022), and in the eleventh century several Norwegian kings in exile stayed at Yaroslav's court in Novgorod (Russia).

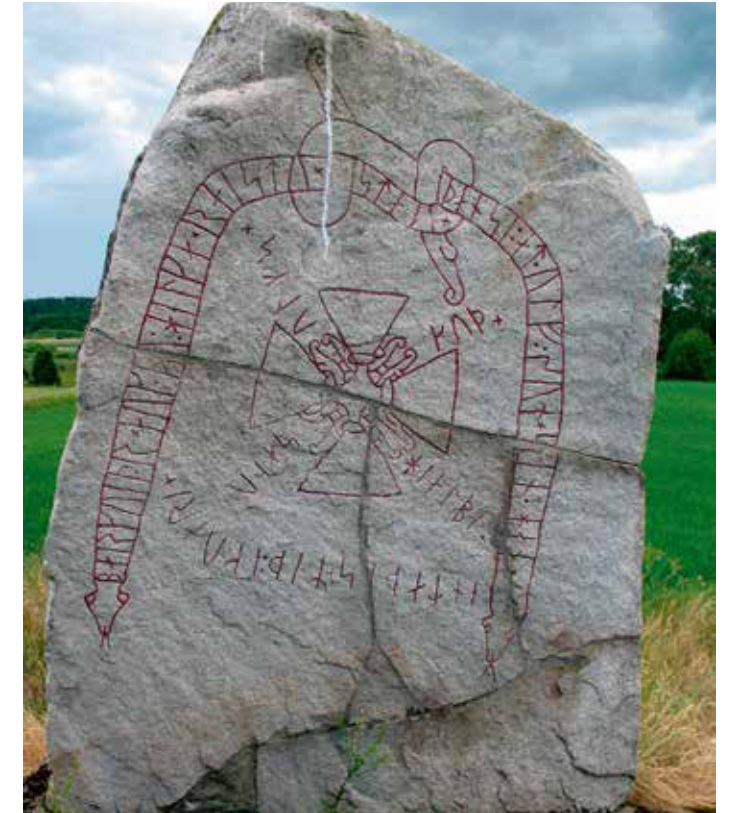
#### FROM THE PAGAN VIKING AGE TO THE CHRISTIAN MIDDLE AGES

Like its beginning with the raid on Lindisfarne, the end of the Viking Age is often identified with a specific event. With the battle of Stamford Bridge (near York, England) on 25 September 1066, where the Anglo-Saxon king Harold Godwinson (r. January–October 1066) defeated the Norwegian king Harald Hardrada, the last claim of a Scandinavian ruler to the English throne was extinguished. This battle marked the end of an era of Viking rule and expansion. As it left the Anglo-Saxon army much weakened, it indirectly led to the conquest of England by the Normans (who also had Scandinavian origins) led by William the Conqueror (duke of Normandy from 1035, king of England 1066–1087) at the Battle of Hastings in the same year. The mid-eleventh century also saw the dramatic failure of an expedition to the Caspian Sea by Vikings from central Sweden led by a certain Ingvar, which is known from numerous Swedish runestones, and the end of Viking expeditions to the east.



Graffiti on the balustrade of the imperial gallery in the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, once the state cathedral of the Byzantine Empire. Halfdan, no doubt a Varangian

who served in the imperial body guard, scratched his name into the stone. The complete text probably was 'Halfdan scratched these runes'.



More than 2,000 runestones round Lake Mälaren in east Sweden testify to the dramatic end of an expedition by Swedish Vikings to the Caspian Sea between 1036 and 1041. Led by a certain Ingvar, it

was one of the last Viking expeditions we can trace historically. The text marked clear red reads 'han x entabís + mib : ikuari x': 'He ended/died with Ingvar.'

The Christianisation of Scandinavia and the birth of the medieval Christian kingdoms of Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Kievan Rus from the late tenth century onward constituted an incisive transformation of Viking-Age society. With the establishment of bishoprics and the building of an ecclesiastical administrative structure Scandinavia had become a part of Christian European civilisation; the new Christian kingdoms were integrated into the political structure of the ruling European dynasties, often by ties of kinship as well as diplomatic relations. Christianity drove out the pagan culture of the Viking Age; Scandinavian kings such as the Norwegian Sigurd the Crusader (r. 1103–1130) took part in the crusades. The marauding pagan Viking chiefs had become Christian European kings.