

Dear Viking Answer Lady:

I know Vikings didn't have horns on their helmets, but what types of armor did they wear, and what types of weapons did they use?

-- Lost In A Haze Of Ignorance

Gentle Reader:

The most popular image of the Viking warrior is the unarmored berserker, gnawing a shield and wielding an axe of enormous size. While the berserker was a rarity, most Viking Age warriors used a minimum of armor, and simple weapons.



Armor

Shields

The only form of defensive equipment in common use among the Vikings was the shield. Vikings used a round shield that was made of wood (often linden-wood) and which had a central boss of metal where the grip was mounted which both protected the hand and allowed for maneuvering the shield. Some shields might be covered in

ox-hide or even reinforced with metal studs or edging. Some other sagas mention shields that appear to be early kite or heater shields, having a pointed end, covering most of the leg, and being large enough to swim under:

"Án burst into the shieling with his shield over his head, the narrow end pointing forward. Bolli struck at him with Legbiter, slicing through the tail end of the shield and cleaving his skull" (*Laxdaela Saga*).



While the Vikings did not use formal heraldic symbols such as came into use later in Europe, shields could be highly ornamented. A red shield was often a sign of war, a white shield held aloft was used as a sign of peace. Kings might have gilded shields, while others affixed ornaments that served a decorative purpose as well as reinforcing the shield. Earl Hakon was known to have given a shield as a gift which was painted with illustrations from the heroic legends (*Egils Saga Skallagrimssonar*); in *Njal's Saga* Kari bears a shield painted with a lion while Helgi carried a red shield with a hart painted on it, and *Faereyinga Saga* tells of a black-and-yellow parti-colored shield and a red shield with the figure of a man painted on it.

Body Armor

The average Viking Age man was a farmer, herder or sailor, liable to occasional military service or self-defense, and not a professional warrior, and thus did not normally own a lot of expensive war-gear. In general, if an average Viking man owned armor, it was made of leather, but most men contented themselves with their shields and with tucking the ends of their tunics into their belts to keep them from being torn or from hindering the warrior's motion while in battle.



However, men of more power, and especially of more wealth, could and did own more extensive protective gear. The most desired item was a byrnie, or shirt of chainmail. Chainmail is made of circles of metal linked through four neighboring loops. Each individual link normally had the ends riveted or forge-welded shut. Chainmail was extremely labor-intensive to make, and required constant maintenance to prevent corrosion and rust, and this made it expensive. Kings had byrnies. Wealthy jarls and the king's warband might likewise own the fabled armor. However, mail was heavy and hot, and many times warriors who were lucky enough to own a byrnie might skip wearing it, and there are records of warriors casting their mail aside IN the heat of combat as well:

"At last they threw off their coats of ring-mail, and then the Englishmen could easily lay their blows at them; and many fell from weariness, and died without a wound." and "King Magnus threw off from him his coat of ring-mail, and had a red silk shirt outside over his clothes..." (*Heimskringla*)

Most byrnies were waist length and had short sleeves, although sleeveless coats of mail are recorded as well as mailcoats with long sleeves. Harald Hardrada owned a coat of mail that "was so long that it reached almost to the middle of his leg, and so strong that no weapon ever pierced it" (*Heimskringla*).

Limb Armor

Armor for the arms and legs was fairly uncommon. When these areas were armored, splint armor was used. This consisted of long, narrow rectangles of iron/steel, horn or even wood, and these often tapered at the end nearest the extremity. The splits were usually riveted to leather straps or possibly they may have been attached to mail on occasion. As with the mailcoats, normally only a professional warrior or chieftain would have owned such armor.

Helms

The final item of armor, the helmet, has been a source of much misinformation since the Nationalist movements in the 1800's, when romantic painters pictured burly Vikings adorned with helmets graced with cow horns sprouting from either temple like some sort of upright aurochs!



Vikings DID NOT wear helms with either horns or wings

VIKINGS DID NOT EVER WEAR HORNED HELMS!!!! The only examples of Scandinavian helmets with horns come from the late Bronze Age, very much before the Viking era. One example is a bronze helmet of probable Celtic origin (c. 800-400 B.C.E.) which was found at Vikso, Denmark. This helmet has a jutting bird-beak between two round, staring eyes on the forehead, and is crowned with two S-shaped "horns" that curve up and back above the head which are bronze, not horn, and which do not resemble cow horns in any way, shape or form.



Another is a small bronze figurine of a man wearing a helmet identical to the one found at Vikso. There are also a couple of art sources that seem to depict "horned" helmets. A helmet-plate die from Oland, Sweden, shows a dancing figure wearing a helm with cheek-pieces and which is crowned with two horn-like bird's heads which arc over the top of the head so that the birds appear to be staring at one another (c. 450-500 C.E.). Similarly, the Sutton Hoo helmet, found in England but of probable Swedish manufacture, is decorated with ornamental plates depicting almost identical

figures (c. 500-600 C.E.). Note that the Viking Age is dated from 800-1100 C.E.

OK, you ask, so what kind of helmets WERE they wearing? The archaeological record boasts several variations on the same basic type of helmet. Helms, like mail, were usually the property of the wealthy, the chieftains, jarls, kings and professional warriors. It would be rare that a common Viking Age man would own a helm. The earliest Scandinavian helmets show a definite influence from Roman cavalry helmets. These are usually termed Vendel helms, after the location in Sweden where the first examples were located. The Vendel culture predated the Vikings (c. 400-600 C.E.) The Sutton Hoo helm is the most famous of this type.



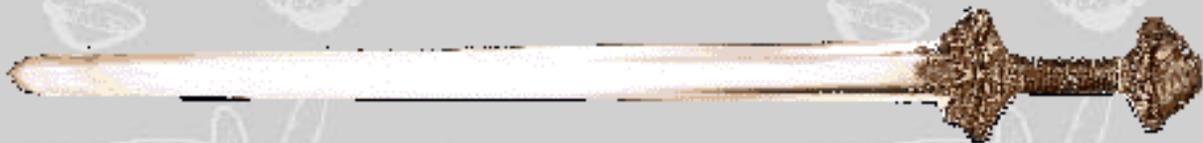
The Vendel helms have a rounded top, often made of overlapping triangular plates, cheek-flaps, a nasal, and may also feature plates covering the back of the neck or even covering the entire face. Another feature of the Vendel style helms continued in use into the Viking Age: this was the *ocularium*, a metal guard that protected the eyes and cheek-bones and which looks for all the world like a pair of glasses. Often the ocularium was reinforced with a nasal.



As the Viking Age dawned, the elaborate Vendel helmets were gradually replaced by a simpler type of helmet known today by the modern term *spangenhelm*. The spangenhelm is made of four triangular plates of metal which are curved to make the bowl of the helm. Over these a pair of criss-crossing bands were affixed, normally using rivets, and a final band circled the rim. The spangenhelm usually had a nasal, and might boast cheek plates, and the ocularium continued to be used. Instead of a rigid neckplate, some had splints in back, curved outward away from the neck at the bottom and attached with loops or welded rings so that they were flexible. Many times the spangenhelm would be worn over a chainmail coif for added protection. Some of these helmets had elaborate crests running from the center of the forehead back over the crown and down to the back rim. Literature records that chieftains wore helmets crested with the figure of a boar, and a few examples of these have survived. A less-expensive version of the spangenhelm was also in use, and used horn or leather in place of the triangular plates of metal that a chieftain's helmet would have, but which was reinforced by the rim and criss-crossing metal bands.



By the close of the Viking Age, the spangenhelm had become simpler yet, evolving into a simple conical helmet with nasal worn over a chain coif. Other types of helmets are recorded for the period. A kettle-style helmet is occasionally reported, being a round crown with a flaring brim. Hats of stiffened leather were probably used by the common warrior, although no example of such has survived: these might have incorporated plaques of bone or horn, plus quilting and padding, to provide some protection for the head.



Weapons

Spears



The most common weapons in use by the Viking Age warrior were the spear and a long knife along the pattern of a *sax*, *scramasax*, or *francesca*. The spear was the best weapons choice because it required the least amount of metal. This meant that a high-quality weapon could be had by even the common man. There were a variety of spear styles in use. The thrusting spear featured a broad, leaf-shaped blade from 3" to 18" in length: "Helgi was carrying a spear with a blade eighteen inches long and an iron-bound shaft" (*Laxdaela Saga*). Some of these had "wings" or lugs, which were short extensions on either side of the socket just below the head, presumably to keep the point from penetrating too deeply into a foeman and becoming trapped: "Snorri went back into the house and got himself a big spear with barbs" (*Fostbraedra Saga*). There is also some evidence for a throwing spear of javelin, which possessed a narrow, tapering head.

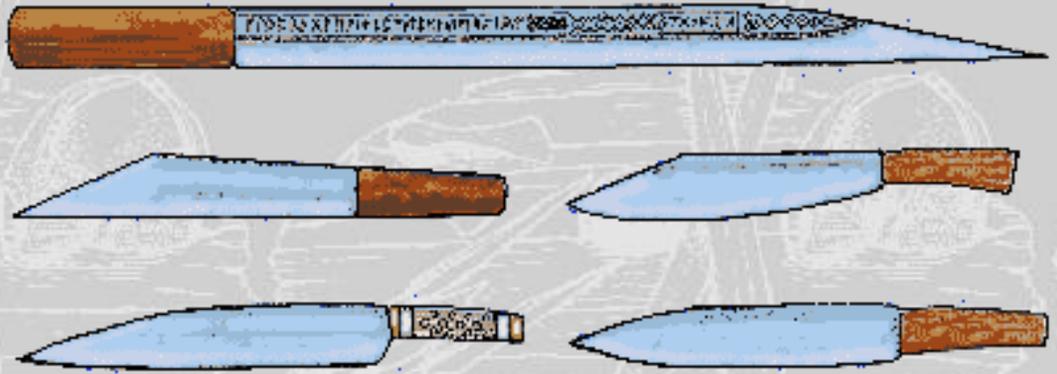
The sagas mention a few types of special spears, the *höggspjót*, *krokaspjót* and the *algeir*, which modern translators render misleadingly as "halberd." These were extremely destructive pole weapons:

"Hrut took hold of a gold-inlaid halberd which King Harald Greycloak had given him... Eldgrim now tried to get away, and spurred his horse; and when Hrut saw this he raised his halberd and drove it between Eldgrim's shoulder blades so hard that the coat of mail burst open at the impact and the halberd came out through his chest. Eldgrim fell dead from his horse, as was only to be expected.... Hrut was eighty years of age when he killed Eldgrim, and his prestige was greatly enhanced by it" (*Laxdaela Saga*).

A better term than "halberd" would be "slashing spear" or "hooking spear". In general, these were six feet in length with a metal-bound shaft and a double-edged pointed blade. Some had hooks, some had more than two cutting edges. When these polearms had hooks, they were called *krokaspjót*. If the shaft was not metal-bound, it was called a *heptisax*. A long-shafted hammer axe called a *refthi* is mentioned in *Faereyinga Saga*, and where the same scene is described in the *Olaf Sagas*, the weapon is described variously as "a stick with an axe-head on it," "an axe-stick," or "a stick-axe". Thus the *refthi* probably was something that could be accurately termed a halberd.

Long Knives

The other common weapon owned by most Viking Age warriors was a long knife or short sword. This was as much a survival tool for everyday living as a weapon, being used much in the same way as a machete or other utility knife.



Axes

Less common than spears or long knives were axes. Most axe-heads were forged of two pieces of different-grade metals: a high-quality steel cutting edge welded to a softer iron or steel head. The Danes and the Scandinavians serving in the Byzantine Varangian Guard were famous for the use of a long axe with a five foot or longer shaft and a long "bearded" edge. These were the least common axes used as weapons, but were fearsome in battle, being used two-handed to hew through a shield and kill the man behind it. As with other favorite weapons, the Vikings often named their axes, using the names of giantesses, valkyries or fierce women. Some good names for a warrior's axe would include: *Hlokk* (??), *Rándgrið* (??), *Saxa* (Saxon woman), *Skaði* (Scather), *Skeggjold* (?). Youths and old men often carried something very like a hatchet:

"Olaf [aged 12] was one day in the market-place, where there was a great number of people.... Olaf had a little axe in his hand, and with it he clove Klerkon's skull down to the brain, and ran home" (*Olafs Saga*).



A Collection of Viking Axe Blades

Swords

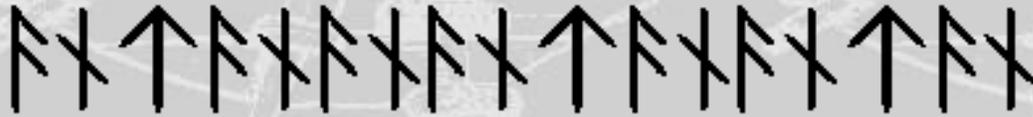
The least common, but most prized weapon of the Viking Age was the sword. Usually only a king, chieftain, or one of their favored retainers would own a sword. Others who would typically own swords would be professional warriors such as the bersarks, and traders who were both wealthy and often exposed to danger. The sagas refer to swords as "ancient heirloom" as swords were passed down, generation to generation: The sword took on a mystical role in the society, serving as the symbol of the family soul: swords were exchanged by bride and groom during weddings, with the husband's sword being carefully guarded for his son. Since swords were not common, probably the short sword or sax-knife was regarded as a sword for this purpose.

The true Viking sword was made up of five parts: a blade of pattern-welded steel; then nearest the blade a crosspiece or guard; next a flat grip which tapered away from the blade; followed by a second crosspiece or upper hilt; and finally a triangular, semi-circular or multilobed pommel which was weighted to balance the sword. The finest swords were imported into Scandinavia from the Rhineland. In fact, Charlemagne had to impose a ban on the export of swords or blades from his empire because the Vikings to the North and the Avars to the South were putting them to such disastrous use along his borders. (It is also to be noted that the Church had to be specifically prohibited from exporting the fine weapons that their communities were making, as they had initially considered themselves exempt from the ban!) The blade, once imported to Scandinavia, was fitted with crosshilts of gold or silver encrusted metal, gem-studded, or inlaid with niello in the twisting, interlocking designs typical of northern artists, and an ornate pommel affixed.



Native smiths soon were copying the designs, prompting the Arabic observer Ibn Fadlan to describe the typical Viking sword as "broad and flat, grooved and of Frankish type" (c. 900 C.E.). The Viking smith was held in extremely high esteem, as befitted the creator of such highly prized weapons. The abundance and richness of tools and materials found in smiths' graves attests to the wealth and status of such a man: "The power of the smith, the poetry of the sword and the ship, the heroism in the face of the hereafter..." were the virtues honored by the Northern warrior. The Viking-made sword blade was an amazing piece of work, created by a technique known as pattern welding. Flat strips or bundles of iron rods were wound together into cables, using a combination of high quality steel and lower carbon steel to give the blade strength, sharpness, and still retain flexibility. The cables were beaten flat, then several would be laid side-by-side and forge-welded to create the distinctive broad sword, leaving a wavy design in the metal known as watering.

Not relying on the swordsmith alone, the Vikings often inlaid runic spells along the blades of their swords. A Viking blade found in Canwich Common in England has the inscription



(ANTANANANTANANTAN) incised and inlaid along it. As befits a legendary heirloom, the Viking swords also bore names, often as harsh and graphic as their hilts were elaborate. These included *Gramr* (Fierce), *Grásíða* (Grey-sides), *Gunnlogi* (Flame of Battle), *Fotbitr* (Foot-biter), *Leggbir* (Leg-biter), *Kuernbut* (Millstone-breaker), *Skrofnung* (Gnawer), *Nadr* (Viper), and *Naegling* (Hole-maker).

The sword was normally worn scabbarded and the scabbard was suspended from a shoulder baldric. Often scabbards were lined with fleece with the natural lanolin acting to preserve the sword from rust.



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