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Were Vikings really that bad?

Painting © Toma & Torkild Waagaard

This helmet is the authentic Gjermundbu-helmet found at Ringerike in Norway. It's been dated to approximately 970 AD and was found along several other artifacts. One of them is a beautifully decorated sword. The helmet was in poor condition and had to be reassembled from several pieces, but it is nonetheless the finest helmet ever found from this time period.

In order to understand the word «Viking», one has to know the meaning of it, but we really don't. Luckily though, we know something, but it turns out to be a little different than most of us had thought.

Viking is not an description of a people, even though this is how we know it today, but of something some people did from time to time. There is little doubt that «*doing Viking*» had to do with robbery and piracy, an act of evil done by some during the summer seasons. The act of Viking started at least 40-50 years prior to their first attacks in Europe, perhaps even earlier, but in Scandinavian home waters. The attacks overseas, however, begins with the attack on the monastery at Lindisfarne in 793 AD, at least as far as the written evidence concerns.

Alcuin of York wrote in 793 AD

«Never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we have suffered from a pagan race, nor was it thought that such an inroad from the sea could be made.»

When Alcuin, who was a clerk, speaks of inroad, surely he means the surprise in the attack coming from the sea, because England had certainly been engaged by pagan terror before this. That Vikings were terrorists is unquestionably true, but this doesn't necessarily mean terror was all they brought. Nor does it mean that the sources didn't exaggerate the information they left us. In fact, we have good reasons to believe that some sources are not reliable, but rather speaks unfavorably about the Vikings to have their own acts of evil to appear better. Either this or the information must have been handed over second-handily and therefore be inaccurate.



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The biggest contributors to the understanding of the Viking Age, is undoubtedly the Icelandic Sagas and the modern archaeology carried out during the late 150 years. However, various annals from the places they attacked also acts as important sources, of course, but they may turn out to be less objective than we had hoped for. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that even Alcuin of York must have written down his famous lines as second-hand information, cause otherwise he would have been slain.

Sir David Wilson, former director of the British Museum

«Their devastating raids in the eighth and ninth centuries gave the Vikings an enduring reputation for piracy and destructiveness - and yet their culture was in many ways as sophisticated as the cultures of the lands which they ravaged.

In Dark Age Europe they stand out for the scale of their exploits, for they conquered large areas of Britain, Normandy, Sicily and Russia; they traded with Byzantium, Persia and India; they discovered and colonized Iceland and Greenland and reached the coast of North America. And, in the end, far from destroying Western civilization, they enriched it. Parts of their legal system, their tradition of individual freedom, their zest for exploration, and the great Icelandic sagas which reflect their heroic age - these have all become part of our northern European heritage.»