



The Vikings

Else Roesdahl

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Far from being just 'wild, barbaric, axe-wielding pirates', the Vikings created complex social institutions, oversaw the coming of Christianity to Scandinavia and made a major impact on European history through trade, travel and far-flung consolidation. This encyclopedic study brings together the latest research on Viking art, burial customs, class divisions, jewellery, kingship, poetry and family life. The result is a rich and compelling picture of an extraordinary civilisation.

The Vikings Details

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From Reader Review The Vikings for online ebook

Kati says

After watching the History Channel TV series 'Vikings' (which I really enjoyed and would highly recommend to anyone interested in Viking history and culture), I decided I wanted a bit more background to help me understand the historical references in the show.

Looking on Amazon, there were several options, many of which were either a bit outdated, too academic, or not academic enough. In the end, I settled for this one, and I have to say I have mixed thoughts (hence the 3 star review).

The first quarter and the last quarter of the book are interesting and made the book worthwhile for me. The first quarter deals with Viking culture, while the last quarter deals with the Viking's exploits in various parts of the world. The middle bit of the book was a bit dry and academic, focusing a lot on the archeological evidence (describing ships, houses and artistic styles in a bit too much detail). There were interesting bits here too, but I thought there was too many 'facts' and not enough analysis or interpretation.

The book ended quite suddenly, without (I think) giving too much credit for the extremely wide social and political influence that the Vikings had on Europe. For instance, it measures Viking influence almost solely based on how many Viking place names remain on the map, but, having lived and studied in Denmark for a year, I can tell you that the Viking influence was a lot wider than that, especially in England (another place that I have lived, so I feel safe to comment about it - I am not so sure about other countries). For instance, everyone always says that English is based on French. However, it is only about 50% French - the other 50% is Scandinavian (For instance, have you ever wondered why in English, both the plural and the possessive are marked with an 's'? It's because the plural s comes from French, while the possessive s comes from Scandinavian). This is a huge cultural influence, for which Vikings are not really given enough credit for.

Furthermore, schools always teach that in 1066 England was conquered by the French. This is partially true, but if we remember that Normandy (literally, "land of the Northmen") was ceded to Rollo (a Viking) in exchange for helping keep other Vikings out of France, and that William the Conqueror was a direct descendant of Rollo, then really, it is more accurate to say that the Vikings conquered England (which is ironic considering the reason the English king lost the battle of Hastings is because he had been busy trying to repel another group of Vikings in the north).

Additionally, the book praises (rightly) the Viking's cultural adaptability and willingness to assimilate and learn from other cultural groups (many of them readily converted to Christianity in order to gain greater political advantage). The number of Viking settlements in England was huge, which means that thousands of Vikings had settled in England by 1066, not to mention the huge wave of immigration after the conquest (most of which comprised people who had Viking ancestry). In this sense, I think the most important 'gift' that the Vikings brought to England is their culture - their sense of adventure and their cultural adaptability, both of which became influencing themes in English history, and helped build up their enormous empire (according to a recent article I read, the English successfully invaded, at one time or another, all but 22 countries in the world).

Returning to the review of the book, it was interesting to learn more about the Vikings (this was the first book I had read about them, not counting the Horrible History treatment). I would recommend to people who are interested in the archeological evidence, and the nitty-gritty of scaldic poetry and artistic motifs, but

I am sure that there are better and more current overall histories that do a better of job putting the Vikings in context.

Tim Martin says

The Vikings by Else Roesdahl was a fairly thorough if sometimes a little dry account of the Viking Age, a time that lasted about 300 years, from just before AD 800 until well into the 11th century. The Vikings were a tremendously influential people, playing a decisive role in many areas of Europe; their mark is still seen today in numerous loan-words in the English language; many place-names in Normandy and the British Isles; in Ireland, where they founded the island's major towns; and in Iceland and the Faeroe Islands, where they settled.

Roesdahl took great pains to show that the classic image of the Vikings as raiders, pirates, and plunderers was one-sided, a one-dimensional view that comes to us today from contemporary clerics in Western Europe (who may have been reacting more than anything to the pagan religion of the Vikings) and in tales that were elaborated on by medieval story tellers and historians, including among the Scandinavians themselves, such as with the Icelandic saga writers. Indeed in mainland Europe at least the author felt that the impact of the Viking raids have been exaggerated, and it generally made little difference if a community was plundered by the Vikings or by some other local faction. The Vikings were also farmers, merchants, poets, artists, authors, artisans, engineers, explorers (the first Europeans to discover Iceland, Greenland, and North America), and settlers as well as warlords and mercenaries (the latter notably in Ireland and in the Byzantine Empire).

The first half of the book dealt with the culture of the Scandinavians, going into great detail about their dress, jewelry, houses, cooking, food, language, writing, personal names, their use of slaves, the role of women, the role of children, rules of conduct, their politics, land transport, ships, monetary system, fortifications, warfare, religion (both the old faith and their conversion to Christianity), their art, and poetry. I would have liked more information about their ships and I found some of these sections a little tedious at times (basically like reading long lists), but there were a number of interesting things to be gleaned from it. There were many illustrations, photographs, and maps that were helpful in the text and in two inserts; I particularly liked the photos and drawings of Viking art and of their runes.

The second half of the book dealt with the Viking expansion, discussing the reasons for the expansion and their historical role in Normandy, Scotland, the Isle of Man, Ireland, England, the Baltic region, Russia, Byzantium, the Caliphate, and their settlement of Iceland, the Faeroe Islands, Greenland, and North America (for those interested in the Greenland settlement by the way I highly recommend Jared Diamond's _Collapse_ which had excellent, gripping coverage of that, much more thorough than what I found in _The Vikings_).

I found the coverage of Viking hoards intriguing. Many hoards had coins from often quite distant regions, with coins from the Caliphate and Byzantium not uncommon. Hoards were generally not found in areas where it was more common to pay with silver and coins than with goods.

Much as has been found to be the case with classic Greek and Roman statues, many Viking items were painted. Many rune stones have been found with traces of paint on them, the usual colors being black, white and red but other colors were used including blue and green. In addition the Vikings painted shields, furniture, tent poles, and building timbers, often to emphasize decoration that had been carved in low relief.

There was a small discussion of the many loan words from Old Norse, originating from the long Viking presence on English soil (indeed from 1018 to 1042 apart from a period of five years England and Denmark were ruled jointly by one king). Everyday words such as cast, knife, take, window, egg, ill, and die come from Old Norse. Some grammatical elements, such as the plural words they, them, and their also come from the Scandinavians. Some English dialects contained a great many more loan words but they are disappearing along with the dialects.

Scandinavian poetry was often quite demanding and intricate. Scaldic poetry for instance had a complicated form, using the "heroic meter," with the lines linked in alliterating pairs, the first line of each pair with two alliterating syllables, and each line required to have internal rhyme. In addition, skaldic poetry frequently referenced stories of the gods and heroes, often by using riddles or complex and subtle references that only a knowledgeable audience would appreciate. Scaldic poetry is of course well known for the kenning, examples of which include "the sweat of the sword" (blood), "the feeder of the raven" (the warrior), or more complex ones that could only be understood with reference to their mythology.

Much has been made elsewhere about the Viking raids on Irish monasteries and Roesdahl does cover that, though the reader also learns that it wasn't just Vikings that did the raiding. The abbots of several monasteries were often the only national figures in Ireland until well into the 800s, with most of Ireland divided into tiny kingdoms struggling with complex dynastic rules. Owing to the monasteries' important economic and political importance and close ties with many secular rulers, plundering and burning down monasteries was an integral part of Irish warfare; indeed monasteries sometimes fought each other in addition to being plundered by rival kings. Further complicating things, Vikings were often employed as mercenaries in the endless wars in Ireland (the Franks on the mainland of Europe did the same thing, often setting one Viking group against another). Further, some rulers exaggerated the depredations of the Vikings to enhance their own glory (one work portrayed the Viking chieftain Turgesius as a sort of "pagan super-Viking" who among other things tried to convert Ireland to the worship of Thor, the work aiming to glorify the great Irish king Brian Boru).

Not a bad book overall, it was a useful though not especially gripping overview.

Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

Mike Green says

Informative, but with a price. Two hundred plus pages of passionless narration and placid prose. It was a fight to the finish. Roesdahl should read Kittos "The Greeks" to see how it's done... But between dozing off I did manage to learn something, that's why I'm giving two starts instead of one.

Ernest says

Highly informative overview of the Vikings, and well categorized. Offers a good balance between different angles of doing history- social, political, even place-name geography.

Rage says

I don't disagree with the people who found this work a bit dry... it took me a long time to finish, even though I am very interested in the material. it's a broad survey, covering a lot of ground historically and geographically. I think this would be a good introduction to the history of the Vikings. oddly, I got the impression that the author was somewhat dismissive of the pre-Christian, pagan religion. that might be unfair of me, because I wanted to hear more about their beliefs than the detail this book went into (and at one point Roesdahl explains the arguments for Christianity's superiority). still, a lot of good information. I can't imagine the process of sifting through all of the research and compiling it into the semblance of a narrative.

Ashkan Pakzad says

I often read books these type of books, what I would call 'popular history' (mirroring the popular science genre). Unfortunately, like other readers, I found this book to be so dense and full information that was presented plainly.

I often found I could barely retain what I had just read due to the little emotion put across when I read it.

However, I think this book would be very useful if you're considering to go into some related Vikings research and wanted an idea and a brief synopsis of where we're at in this field of history.

Jc Er says

Excellent beginners history on the Vikings age which spanned 400 years from 700 to 1100 AD. Reading this book in tandem with watching the TV series Vikings and living in Norway all add to my excitement and fascination with the Vikings of the past that had produced the uniquely beautiful Scandinavian race of today.

While the Vikings would cover people from Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Greenland and Sweden, Else seem to have heavily favoured the Norwegian Vikings for the early forays into the neighbouring lands, like Iceland, Great Britain, France and Greenland.

While most would imagine Vikings as blood thirsty and violent with natives of land they invade, my impression of Vikings soften after learning that Vikings were also peace loving and sought harmony with the native lands they discovered. This is evidenced by they many royal matrimonies with natives , adoption of Christianity (a religion of Great Britain, Russia, France then) and adoption of local names and customs. Archeology discovered Vikings buried side by side with natives, a sign of Vikings were well integrated with the native lands they adopted.

The Vikings chief motive for their great 400 years of diaspora was to find new and better arable lands for agriculture and to support their families. As destiny would for them from their expansion, the adoption of Christianity and integration with natives of new land have shaped the beautiful Scandinavians we see today.

Darrell Benjamin says

A good amount of area history

Able to see the flow of the Vikings as traders and raiders from before 800 through 1200. Using river routes through what are Russia and Germany to the Middle East. Involvement in France, Italy, England, Ireland, Fargoes, Iceland, and Greenland. Explorers and traders of the time. Yes, they also engaged in warfare.

Jan-Maat says

A nice survey of the Vikings and Viking age society. Well illustrated both with plates and line drawings. Makes good use of archeological evidence. Rather cool and unsensational in approach, gives a good feel for the nuts and bolts of Viking ages societies.

Keili Rae says

This was a very informative book. I had expected it to be a little heavier with the history, but in fact it was a lot about the culture of Scandinavian peoples during the time of the Vikings, and only one long last chapter about the history. I don't fault it for that, but I will say it was very like reading a reference book on Vikings. I am not sure that the average reader would be interested in slight regional differences between Viking art styles, for instance. Even if you are interested in that kind of minutiae, you might not want to want to read a book cover to cover about it. But I did, and now I know a lot! I'm going to read another book more about the history of the raids and expansions. Vikings are so hot right now.

Tejas Janet says

There's an abundance of fascinating information here, unfortunately not organized or recounted to best advantage. Even so, I'd give this read between 3 and 4 stars. (True confessions: Yes, I am watching the history channel's new series about the Vikings.)

From author Else Roesdahl's book, sharing the same, plain title as the aforementioned television program, *The Vikings*, I learned that, while the Vikings were of Scandinavian origin, it was their culture rather than their location per se that gave them their cohesive identity as a distinct people. Their social organization was much more complex and "civilized" (within the context of its time and place) than I had realized, and while the t.v. show seems fairly accurate as far as it goes, I find it falling short, thus far, in fully conveying the complexity and influence of the Vikings.

They lived in an age of conquest with lords and tribute, marked by ever-shifting political alliances, predating present-day nation-states. Moreover, the Vikings had a profound impact on the formation and history of many European nation-states, including most notably Scandinavia, Iceland, England, France, and Russia. Soldiering and pirating were activities fundamental to their society and economy, and activities at which they

into Europe, Russia, and the Americas.

Billy Roper says

Else does a wonderful job encapsulating the reality of the ancient Norse world in all of its complexity. To an extent, thinking of them all as being Vikings might be like thinking of all Americans as being cowboys, because likewise, their period of exploration and conquest didn't represent a majority of their population or their culture. The rest, though, in artisanry and craft, day to day drudgery and vibrant intellectual life, is equally fascinating to any student of history.
