Why Did the Vikings Invade Britain?



The Viking raids and subsequent settlements define the period known as the Viking Age in Britain, which had profound consequences on the development of the culture, law and language.

The raids started in June of 793 CE when three ships approached the shore by the abbey of Lindisfarne, off the northeast coast of England.

The abbey's reeve believed they were Norse traders and, thinking they had lost their way, went out to direct them up the coast to the estate he thought they had been aiming for.

Upon approaching the ships, however, he was instantly killed by the sailors, who then ransacked the abbey and murdered everyone they found on the island.

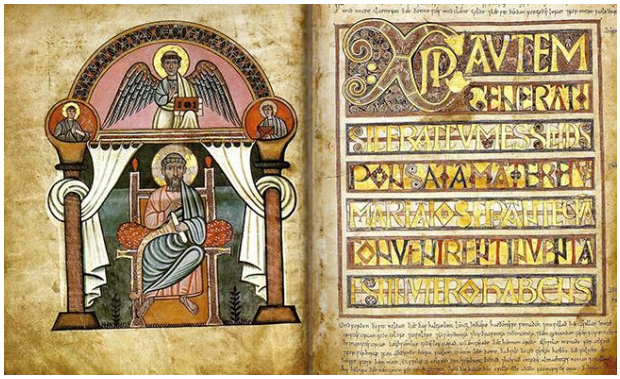
But why did the Vikings first come to British shores? What was it about their homeland that made them want to leave and risk crossing potentially deadly seas? And why did some of them eventually decide to settle in the British Isles on a permanent basis?

Anglo-Saxon England was very wealthy…

The clearest cause for the Viking raids was simply the acquisition of wealth. Britain was particularly well known for its lucrative trade centres, and the Scandinavians were aware of this through their own commerce with the region.

Far from targeting Lindisfarne for its religious association, the Vikings would have chosen it for its riches. The rich gifts given to Lindisfarne – elaborate gospel books and sculptures adorned with expensive paints for instance – were, naturally, unprotected, as the monks had no weapons.

Other religious communities were similar in this respect and so made tempting targets for Viking raiders. The following year Vikings looted the nearby Monkwearmouth-Jarrow Abbey, once the home of the Venerable Bede.



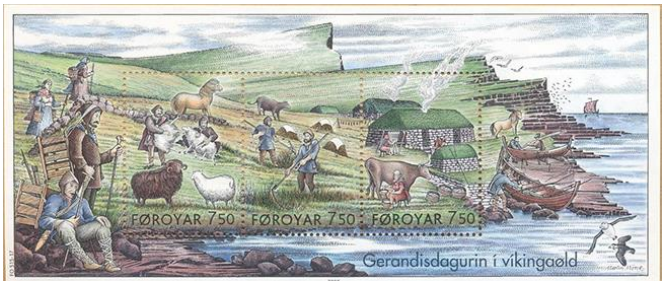
A page of the Codex Aureus (in Latin ‘Golden Book’). Its text is decorated with gold, silver and coloured ink. During the mid-9th century Vikings seized the Codex Aureus and held it for ransom.

…and this wealth was in easy reach of the sea

The first sites struck were all religious institutions, but that has more to do with convenience than consideration; the abbeys and priories which first fell to the Vikings were located near the coast.

Although the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle gives a January date for the raid on Lindisfarne, other sources make clear it was in June, and this would make sense as the seas would have been calmer and provided greater ease in travel. Lindisfarne Priory’s proximity to the sea made it both an easy and an exceptionally wealthy target.

The Vikings also discovered from their early raids that Britain offered lands that could be cultivated. Consequently, many Viking warriors travelled back to Britain with their families to settle down and cultivate the earth.



A painting of Viking daily life. Many Viking warriors returned to Britain’s shores permanently to take advantage of the island’s fertile land.

Early raids encouraged further expeditions

The early raids and the rich plunder they generated encouraged more elaborate military expeditions. In 865 CE, the Great Heathen Army under the leadership of Halfdane and Ivar the Boneless arrived in East Anglia in a massive fleet and marched across the land.

In 867 CE the city of York fell, in 868 CE Mercia was raided, and by 871 CE Halfdane had defeated every force sent against him and was so powerful that Alfred the Great had no choice but to pay him an exorbitant amount to leave Wessex. By 1018, Cnut was proclaimed King of Denmark and united it with Britain under his rule, before then claiming the thrones of Norway and Sweden.

Religion

Religion did play a part in these raids. In 2300 BCE, Germanic-speaking peoples migrated to Scandinavia, bringing with them their religious beliefs in fierce gods who rewarded brave heroes in battle.

By the time of the 2nd-3rd centuries CE, the Norse god Odin had been elevated to a position of supremacy in the pantheon of Scandinavian religion, and Odin would become “the quintessential god of the Viking Age” (Harl, 15).

Odin was the god of war, battle, military victory but also presided over thought, reason, poetry, song, and logic.

Those who followed him devoutly would come to be known as Úlfhéðnar or “berserkers” who fought fiercely in battle without any apparent fear of death. They did so because of their recognition of the gifts Odin had given them in life and their belief in the rewards which awaited them after death.



Woodcut of the image on the Vendel era helmet plate found on Öland, Sweden, depicting Odin followed by a berserker.

According to Norse mythology, these heroes lived on in Odin’s hall of Valhalla, feasting and drinking when they were not honing their martial skills, in preparation for the final cataclysmic battle of Ragnarok, the end of the known world.

It would have been considered dishonourable for a warrior to murder unarmed men – as happened at Lindisfarne – but only under certain conditions. One could not kill one’s kinsmen without sound provocation or kill someone who had surrendered in battle (although there is ample evidence of this happening) but this consideration did not apply to those outside of the faith living in other countries.

The religion of the Norse, therefore, encouraged the raids in Britain which brought not only personal wealth and possible earthly fame but also immortality, should one die in battle, and the promise of a place in Odin’s elite army for the battle at the end of the world.