

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE VIKINGS?!



A CHILD'S HISTORY OF SCANDINAVIAN CONVERSION

J. Aaron Gruben

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Note: There are many spellings for the names of Vikings. Spelling was not as standardized as it is today, and different countries and cultures had their versions of a person's name. For the most part, we have used the standard modern-day spelling.



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TEACHER'S NOTE

The style and length of each section varies. The entertaining style and varied projects are designed to teach in a different but still educational and fun way. Each chapter has optional discussion questions and projects. You may want to consider breaking up some of the reading in the longer chapters for younger students.

This study is meant to be done at whatever pace you would like. The more you put into it, the more you'll get out of it. The last project will require some planning and preparation. (Please note all projects are optional. This study is intended to be fun and informative, not to cause additional stress. Modify however you choose to fit your family.)

Here are some ideas if you would like more structure or ideas on how to use the study. There are 26 chapters.

- Semester-long study. If you wish to complete the study over a semester, taking two chapters per week would work to finish in a little under a semester. In a week, you would be able to read the chapters comfortably, complete their projects, and perhaps do additional study or reading on the topics. You can take a day for each chapter alternating with a day for the chapter project. This will also allow extra time for flux days/vacation, and time at the end for the final project if you wish to complete it.
- Freestyle. Go at your own pace, read a chapter(s) a day or every other day, complete (or don't do) the projects, do additional research, read other books, etc. With younger students, you may need to split up some of the longer chapter's reading over more than one day. With a faster pace, you could complete the book in 1-2 months.
- Student-led. This would work better for older ages (10-12). Just give your student the book. They can read the chapters and write out or tell you answers to the questions. Have them write down or ask you anything they don't understand. They will need help with some of the projects if you wish to do them, but see how much they can plan/lead in completing them.

There are several appendices at the end of the book. They are:

- Answers to the study questions. This appendix contains detailed answers to the questions.
- Reading list. We have listed a few books for reading during or after the study—either independently or as read-alouds. (This is not an exhaustive list, just a few recommendations to start you out!)
- There are a few coloring pages for kids who need something to do while being read to or want more to do after.

Website extras: There is a page on my website with downloads to print, extra links, etc.



INTRODUCTION

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE VIKINGS?



Vikings. I'm sure you've heard about those wild sea wolves and the terrible raiding and pillaging they did around Europe in the Middle Ages. You may not have heard about some of the other things they did, like trading and exploring. But have you ever wondered what happened to them? Why are there no more Vikings sailing around to murder and steal people and their stuff? What made them settle down and stop being so bad?

That's the main question we will examine in this book. Be ready to meet some amazing people along the way: people who lived real lives full of adventure, people who encountered Jesus and experienced life-changing transformations. We'll talk about missionaries like Anskar and Grimketel, kings like Harald Bluetooth and Olaf Tryggvason, and adventurers like Harald Hardrada and Leif Eriksson. There will also be a fun project and challenges in every chapter!

In the following pages, we will explore the stories of men and women who braved the wrath of the Northmen in their mysterious lands. We will discover the stories of mighty sea-kings transformed from dark paganism to strive in mighty gospel works that few today remember. We will also see the power of gracious hearts who lived quiet lives through tragedy to transform entire kingdoms.

So kick your imagination into high gear, prepare for surprises, and settle down to hear an epic you'll never forget: the saga of Christ's work among the Vikings!

CHAPTER 1

PIRATES OF BLOOD AND ICE

What, exactly, is a Viking? Could you explain what that word means to a friend? The word Viking usually means someone from a Scandinavian country who sailed to other lands to fight people and take their stuff. Denmark, Norway, and Sweden were the three main Scandinavian countries in the Viking Age (today, Finland is part of Scandinavia). They are all in the northern part of Europe above Germany and have lots of ice and snow as well as dark forests filled with wolves and chilly seacoasts teeming with seals and fish. We'll learn more about each of these lands as we discuss the people who helped bring the good news of Jesus to each one. On the next page, you'll see a map of Europe. Can you find Scandinavia?

"Hwy ryð aelc folc, and hwi smeagað hi unnytt?"

"Why does every folk rage, and why do they plan useless things?"

(Psalm 2:1 from the Paris Psalter, translated into Old English by King Alfred the Great)¹

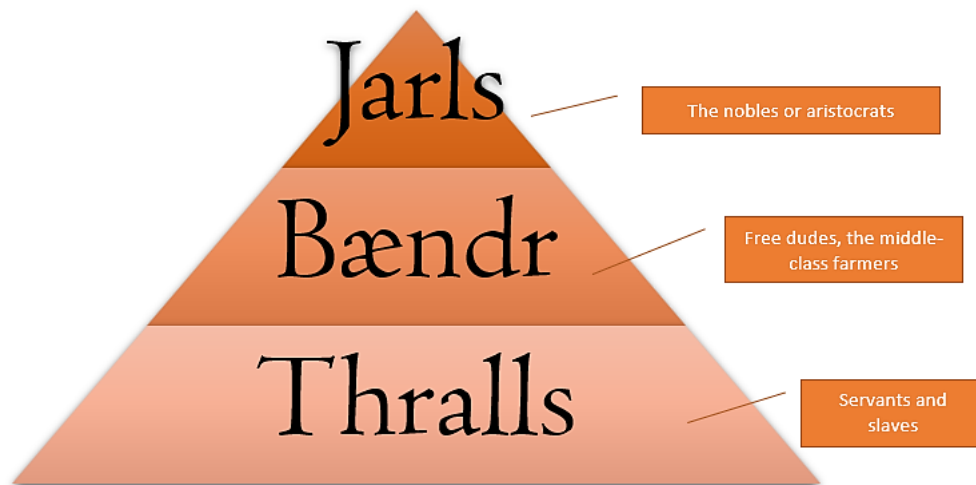




Whatever Happened to the Vikings?

During the Middle Ages, the people living in these countries would not have called themselves Vikings. We think the word “Viking” comes from their word to sail off on adventures raiding other lands. “Viking” for them would have been a description of something they did more than who they were. They would say something like, “Aha! Arinbjorn Frodosson, I hear you went *a-viking* last Tuesday and came back with a walrus-tooth comb and three golden pots!”

Most of the year, they were farmers, raising cows and sheep, planting fields, and building sheds at home. They centered their lives on family, and local bosses called chieftains organized families. Powerful chieftains called jarls (a word which eventually morphed into earls) oversaw families of Vikings. And at some point, kings came to rule over the jarls and chieftains. In a famous collection of poems called the *Poetic Edda*, Vikings (under the king) were split up into these groups:



Do you like to get or give presents? Of course! Vikings also liked, in fact, *really* liked gifts. They made giving special gifts a cornerstone of their society. Viking chieftains bought the loyalty of their warriors with personal gifts (such as axes, glass cups, or silver). Viking warriors followed the chieftain who had the best reputation as an open-handed giver and sometimes abandoned a leader who did not give well. Vikings gave many of the things they stole to their followers or melted them down to make other cool things to give. Viking leaders employed artisans (silversmiths and jewelers) and sometimes built whole towns to support their craft so they could make neat gifts.

Chieftains also held big feasts to show off their generosity. They held these feasts in a special building called a "great hall" or "mead hall," which was a long house where they ruled. Showy giving was the glue that held a Viking chieftain’s war band together. It was the basis of their power.

Whatever Happened to the Vikings?

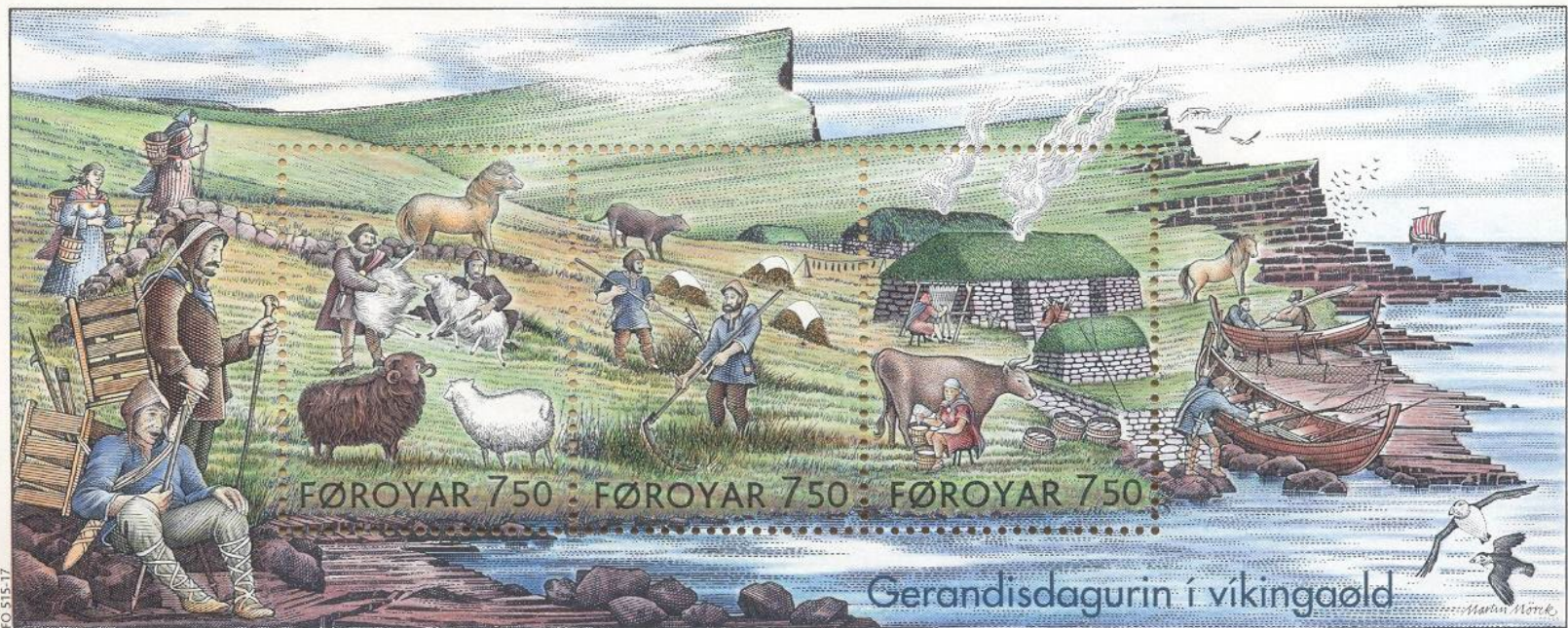


Modern reproduction of a 93 foot-long Viking Mead Hall at a fortress called Fyrkat, which was built by Harald Bluetooth in Denmark

What do you like to eat? Vikings ate breakfast (*dagmeal*), went out to work on their farm or hunt all day, then returned and ate dinner (*nattmeal*). Breakfast for a Viking was simple, generally consisting of things like eggs and berries and salted fish. Dinner was a big feast. At dinner, Vikings ate meat (beef, mutton, fish, or game meat like walrus or deer), stews, cheeses, bread and butter,

honey and berries.ⁱⁱ Vikings liked drinking ale or mead, which is a type of alcoholic drink made from fermented honey. Vikings also ate weird stuff. One of the more horrible dishes a Viking in Iceland might cook was *hakarl*, rotted and dried out meat from a special type of acidic shark, made by burying it for 6-12 weeks in the ground. Yuck!

Vikings liked clothes that were colorful and warm. But Viking clothes in different countries might have looked different. Behold, in informative splendor, the graphic laid out upon yon next page...



Postage stamp series from the Faroe Islands depicting the rural, farming lifestyle of most Viking families.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF VIKING FASHION



MATERIALS

Linen - made from flax
Wool - made from sheep
Furs - made from beasts
Hide - made from animal skins



CLOAK

Thick and warm, cloaks were often made of wool, and sometimes lined with fur. Vikings probably like bright colors, and some colors (like red made from madder root) were a symbol of wealth.



CLOAK

Warm and thick, sometimes with a handy hood, cloaks could come in many colors. There were many cuts and styles of cloaks, like this "Gaelic coat" with an attached hood.

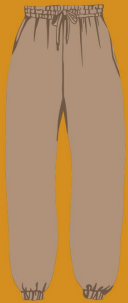
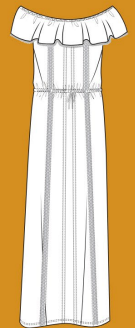
TUNIC

A thick shirt that fell down to the knees. Many probably had decorated hems and collars. Vikings liked to decorate things!



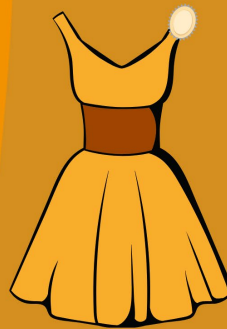
UNDERDRESS

Made of linen preferably (softer on the skin) unless you could only afford wool, this garment stretched from the shoulders to the ankles.



TROUSERS

Generally baggy with no pockets. Some fancy cuts of trousers may have been used by richer Vikings. Leather belts helped hold them up, but were just as important to hang bags and equipment on.



DRESS

A dress with colors, or perhaps patterns, was worn over the top. This often had straps over the shoulders. A metal brooch (iron or bronze, unless you could afford silver or gold) fastened the underdress to this outer one.

UNDERGARMENT

Usually made from linen as it was more comfortable on the skin than wool. They may have worn thicker forms in winter.



JEWELRY

Archaeology and writings indicate Viking women (and sometimes men) wore necklaces. Some wore pagan talismans (Thor's hammer was especially popular), but cross pendants were more common as Christianity became accepted.



HATS

Vikings in war wore steel helmets. At other times they wore woolen hats, like this "Aalsum" or "Forager Style" hat, built of four strips of wool that covered the ears and back of the neck.



SHOES

Vikings generally wore plain leather shoes that reached to the ankles. Boots were rarer. Thin soled, they were stitched by hand. Woolen socks were often worn to stay warm.

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What do you think Vikings did most of the time? Vikings spent many of their days farming. In countries like Norway, where there wasn't much suitable land to grow crops, they tended livestock like cows or sheep. In Denmark, where there are lots of land for crops, they grew cereal (meaning grain) crops. Their slaves (*thralls*) would do lots of this work for them. Some Vikings made crafts to sell or give away. Other Vikings, called skalds, made special songs and poems they would recite in the mead hall for the chieftains.

The Vikings loved games. They played board games, like *hnefatafl* ("king's table"), a game where one side tries to move its *bóndi* (*bændr*) pawns to capture the jarl pawn. Physical games that tested their muscles and made them tougher were particularly enjoyable. They would play a special type of tug-of-war, in which one dude lay upside down over another dude (who was on all fours like a horse) and tried to take a stick from another pair of dudes in the same position. They would play ball games a bit like football, only sometimes they'd get worked up and kill each other (something we read about in the story of Egil Skallagrimsson in the *Prose Edda*).

Do you have an idea how brutal Vikings might be? They were not nice neighbors to each other or other countries. Sometimes they would get their thralls and buddies and steal from other Vikings. They would fight and even kill their neighbors in quarrels. Then (nobody quite knows why) they started sailing out to raid other countries far away. "Raid" means they would attack a town, kill people, and take their stuff. They would also



Whatever Happened to the Vikings?

often take the people to keep as slaves or to sell for money in faraway lands. Nope. Vikings were not nice neighbors.

The first raid in Europe we have record of took place in 789. The most famous, though, was an attack on the church of St. Cuthbert on an island off England's northern coast called Lindisfarne in 793. Many historians use this date as the start of "The Viking Age," a time when Vikings attacked and terrorized the coasts of Europe until around 1150. J. R. R. Tolkien, who wrote *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*, was also an expert on Viking languages and writings. He called the Viking Age "a private Scandinavian heroic age."ⁱⁱⁱ He meant that, to the Vikings, this was a time of adventures, when strong heroes sailed over the seas from Denmark, Norway, and Sweden and won fortune and adventure. To the Vikings, war was a big game: their favorite game. Of course, the people they murdered and robbed and dragged away as slaves saw it quite differently.

Vikings used their ships for more than raiding and plundering. They were sailing experts and explored amazingly far parts of the ocean. They traded across the medieval world, meaning they took stuff all over the place to sell (like furs from arctic animals, walrus tusks, slaves, fish, and honey) and brought other stuff (like spices, silk, silver, glass, and jewelry) home. Vikings traded as far as the Arabian world and the Mediterranean.

They also founded settlements, which means starting a new country, all over the world. Look at the map of Viking settlements on the next page. That's a lot of new countries! Have you been to any of them?

Unfortunately, most of these places already had people living in them, and the Vikings slaughtered or enslaved them to start new towns. I'm sure you can imagine those poor people didn't like that! The people fought back in some lands with more established kingdoms (like England, France, and Ireland). Some fought back long and hard. The fierce fight in England was often called "the Viking Wars." We'll look at each of these Viking settlements and explore how the light of Christ came to change the rough people who settled them.

It was a time of fear for those threatened by Viking raids and conquest, and many thought these fierce attackers would overcome the church. But the church grew, and with Viking converts!

What an amazing God we have!

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This 9th century carving of raiding Vikings is called the "Domesday Stone," and was found at Lindisfarne Island in the 1800s

Whatever Happened to the Vikings?

Discussion Questions

(Remember, there are answers to each chapter's questions at the back of the book.)

1. Why do you think the Vikings started leaving Scandinavia during the Viking Age?
2. What types of things do you think Viking traders bought? What do you think they would sell?
3. Do you think the Vikings knew that killing, robbing, and enslaving people was wrong? What were some things that might have motivated them to do this?
4. What are some good qualities of Vikings you've learned about in this chapter?

Bible verse

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” -1 Peter 1:3



19th century painting of ruins at Lindisfarne Monastery

Project 1: Make a Viking Brooch

Vikings liked to complete their outfits with big hunks of metal, crafted into beautiful brooches (whenever they could afford them or earn them as gifts from their chieftains). Men used them to clasp their cloaks, and women used them on their cloaks, tunics, and shawls. Here are jewelry patterns you can make into Viking brooches.



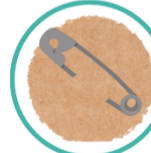
Cut it out!



Color it!



Stick it to some cardboard!



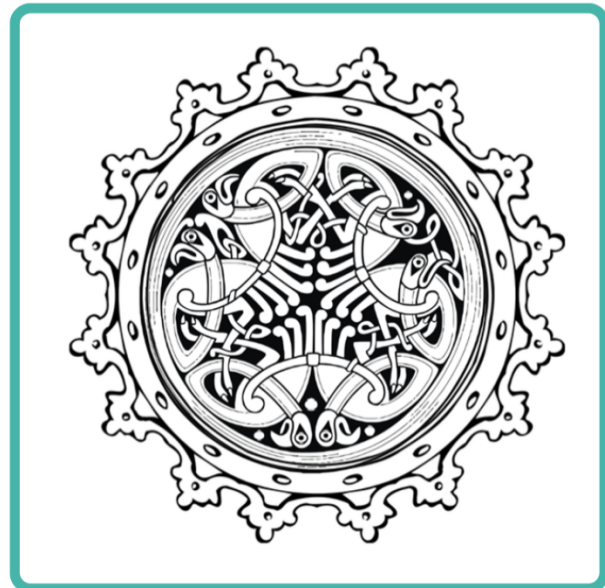
Stick a safety pin to it!



Clip it to your cloak, run about and roar!



This metal crucifix is the "Aunslev cross" found in Denmark, similar to a cross pendant found in Birka, Sweden, evidence of Christian mission work.



(Can also be downloaded from my website to print)

APPENDIX A

ALL THE ANSWERS

Chapter 1

1. *Why do you think the Vikings started leaving Scandinavia during the Viking Age?*

Many ideas have been proposed, including the following:

- For adventure and glory. This was part of the Viking ethos: nothing is greater than manly glory through conquest.
- Searching for better trade routes.
- A shortage of resources (it's hard to farm in the cold northern regions, especially in Norway)
- Trying to fill a scarcity of wives to marry, or slave labor for farms.
- Scandinavian kings started trying to protect their trade routes against pirates, so those pirates started looking for easier targets to raid.
- To fight back against Christian expansion. They were especially angry at Charlemagne's wars against the Saxons. Charlemagne forced the pagan Saxons to convert in many brutal ways, and Saxon chieftains told the Vikings all about it.

2. *What types of things do you think Viking traders bought? What do you think they would sell?*

- Vikings bought things like: silver, silk, jewelry, wine, spices, glass, pottery, weapons.
- Vikings sold things like: furs, walrus ivory, slaves, oak, iron, sheep wool, leather, honey, tin, fish.

3. *Do you think the Vikings knew that killing, robbing, and enslaving people was wrong? What were some things that might have motivated them to do this?*

Vikings had a set of morals and thought of some killings as murders. But they also thought some enemies were OK to kill, and some situations were ok to kill in. For example, there is a story in the sagas of Egill Skallagrímson and his war band when captured by a chieftain. They escaped in the night and stole some stuff, but this made Egill feel guilty. He was no thief. So he went back, woke up the chieftain and murdered him and his family and burned down their farm. Now it seemed fine to take all their stuff,

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since they'd been his enemies opposing him in glorious battle. So Vikings (though they did consider some killings murder) thought differently about murder than we do. The ethical question becomes, can a culture's different views of morality be universally bad? The Bible certainly answers this question with "Yes." God's laws apply to every man in every time and every culture. Murder is murder, whether you're killing someone on a raid or in an alley. Romans 2:15 says (about pagans who don't know God) "They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them." The Vikings did know killing people and taking their stuff was bad, even if it was on a deep subconscious level. As they came to hear the gospel, they had to learn just how bad they had been before they could learn that Christ could forgive them. I think this is one reason we see many Viking converts doing grand Christian things to prove their faith. "Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required" (Luke 12:48). Greed was the biggest motive to raid. Vikings were pirates, after all. Other motives might have included thirst for glory, anger toward ideologic enemies (Christians), a desire to further their family's position, hunger for power (more wealth let a chieftain give more gifts and get more followers), or even lust.

4. *What are some good qualities of Vikings you've learned in this chapter?*

Vikings were hard-working, tough and resilient, innovative and creative, adaptable to their surroundings and even other cultures, skilled craftsmen, admirable sailors, brave warriors, cared about honor.

ⁱ O'Neill, Patrick P. *Old English Psalms*. Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, MA. 2016.

ⁱⁱ Thompson, Ben. *Guts and Glory: the Vikings*. Little Brown Company. New York, NY. 2015. P 85

ⁱⁱⁱ Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Boston, MA. 2009. P 19