That's How The Light Gets In

Books, exhibitions, films, music, places – anything that inspires. Here so I don't forget.

The Vikings: Life and Legend

A selection of the Lewis Chessmen

Men will quake with terror
Before the seventy sea-oars
Are given deserved respite
From the labours of the ocean
Norwegian arms are driving
This iron-studded dragon
In 1968, for the introduction to his new BBC TV series *Civilization*, Kenneth Clark was filmed on the banks of the Seine in Paris reflecting on a moment when, in his words, ‘civilization nearly vanished from Europe’. He encouraged viewers to consider an image that, for him, symbolised the encounter between barbarism and civilization: some time in the 9th century inhabitants of the French settlement would have seen approaching up the river the prow of a Viking ship. Looked at now, Clark said, we see the Viking ship’s prow as a powerful work of art, but to those at the time it would have appeared as an image of fear and darkness.

Clark’s perception of the Vikings as offering the clearest antithesis to the concept of civilization was soon to be challenged: since the 1970s, the balance of historical interpretations of Viking culture has shifted away from an exclusive preoccupation with with raiding and piracy towards a more nuanced picture of the Vikings as raiders who were also traders – who interacted, coexisted and influenced the societies which they encountered in many different ways.

Last week we saw the new exhibition at the British Museum, *The Vikings: Life and Legend*, which draws on a half century of archaeological discovery and historical debate since Kenneth Clark’s utterances. It presents a more nuanced understanding of who the Vikings were, the nature of their culture, and the impact which they had on the areas where they raided, traded and settled.

The exhibition presents Vikings as raiders and pirates (the probable original meaning of the word in Old Norse) who were also merchants, travelling as far as Russia and the Byzantine empire in order to trade goods, from whalebone to slaves. Their achievements were extraordinary. Between the 8th and 12th centuries (the period known as ‘the Viking age’), they became the first people to operate simultaneously in four continents and tie much of the known world together through trade and migration. They were the first Europeans to cross the Atlantic and reach North America (which they called ‘Vinland’); they settled in Iceland (permanently), Greenland (for centuries) and Newfoundland (briefly).

The opening section of the exhibition demonstrates how these people voyaged forth from an inhospitable homeland of rock and limited land for farming. An animated map illuminates the routes they followed across seas and up rivers to found the first Russian state, Rus, based in Kiev; to trade in Constantinople where a body of them made up the personal guard of the Byzantine emperors; to become the paramount power in the British Isles, establishing the first towns in Ireland, including Dublin; to penetrate as far south as the Mediterranean and the coasts of North Africa, and as far west as Greenland and Newfoundland.
Reconstruction of the excavated turf buildings of the Viking settlement at L’Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland

As you walk around the exhibition a loped tape of readings from the Norse sagas plays in the background – appropriate because the sagas speak so often of the great seafaring voyages undertaken by a maritime society that developed extraordinary shipbuilding skills that were key to their achievements. In the first room we look at a brooch from Denmark in the form of a ship with opposed dragons’ heads, while nearby there are toy boats made for children to play with - underlining how crucial maritime ascendancy was in Viking expansion. The exhibition will culminate in a breathtaking example of their seagoing skills and technology.
Brooch shaped like a ship, c800-1050, Denmark

From here we are plunged into a dazzling array of objects that illustrate how the Vikings came into contact with – and absorbed elements of – a wide variety of different cultures. There are cultural artefacts from the encounter with Anglo-Saxon England and Ireland in the same period.
The Penrith Brooch, for example, is a variant of a style that originated in Roman Britain and then developed in the post-Roman period into highly elaborate and decorative marks of status in Ireland and Scotland, made in precious metals, often decorated with gems, and worn by both men and women. When the Vikings began to raid and settle the British Isles, they took to wearing these brooches, but now in plain silver, but with ornamentation developed out of Celtic styles.
An undoubted highlight is the stunning Hunterston brooch, which is an appropriation of an older Scottish object that survived a Viking raid intact. The brooch, found in Ayrshire, is a pre-Viking Scottish brooch with Celtic decoration. But on the back, someone has scratched in Norse runes the words: ‘Maelbrigoa owns this brooch’. The name is Celtic and Christian, indicating a fusion of cultures – and an appreciation of beautiful objects.

Alongside we find this verse, attributed to Magnus ‘Barelegs’ Olaffson, King of Norway, in 1100:

*My heart is in Dublin*  
*And the women of Trondheim*  
*Won’t see me this autumn*  
*The girl Has not denied me*  
*Pleasure visits; I’m glad*  
*I love the Irish lady*  
*As well as my young self*
The Vale of York Hoard

The Vale of York Hoard demonstrates an entirely different frame of mind, being evidently treasure stolen during Viking raids. It is being shown in its entirety for the first time since it was discovered with metal detectors near Harrogate in 2007 and jointly acquired by the British Museum and York Museums Trust. It’s been described as ‘the whole Viking world in one cup’.

Consisting of a cup in which were placed some 617 coins, 6 arm rings and a quantity of bullion and hack-silver, the hoard is the largest and most important Viking hoard found since the Cuerdale Hoard was found in Lancashire in 1840, part of which is also included in the exhibition. With coins and silver from places as far removed as Ireland and Uzbekistan, these hoards reveal the true extent of the Viking global network. The silver cup in which the Vale of York Hoard was buried predates the burial by a century and was probably made for use in a Frankish church. Inside were objects from as far apart as Afghanistan in the East and Ireland in the West, as well as Russia, Scandinavia and continental Europe. Represented in the hoard are three belief systems (Islam, Christianity and the worship of Thor) and peoples who spoke at least seven languages.
The Cuerdale Hoard, c 905-910

Found at Cuerdale in Lancashire, the Cuerdale Hoard was buried sometime between 905 and 910, and is the largest Viking silver hoard found in western Europe. The enormous silver treasure was discovered by workmen repairing the bank of the River Ribble in 1840. The Hoard consists of over 8500 silver objects, weighing some 40kg in total. Most of the pieces are coins, together with ingots (silver bars) and cut-up brooches, chains, rings and other ornaments (hacksilver). It had been buried in a lead container.

Most of the coins were minted in Viking-controlled England, while the hacksilver is mainly Irish or Irish-Viking in form and decoration. Other pieces originated from further afield – Scotland, the Continent, Scandinavia, the Baltic Sea region and the Islamic lands of Central Asia and the Middle East. In this way, the Cuerdale Hoard reflects the Vikings’ extensive international connections across much of the known world.

This was extraordinary wealth – probably of many persons rather than one individual. It is likely to have been collected over time as loot, tribute and through trade. However, the reasons for the hoard’s burial are not known. It may have been hidden for safe-keeping at a time of unrest, or represents a secure method of stock-piling riches over time. The latest coins in the hoard have been dated to between about 905 and 910. This, together with the Irish origin of most of the hacksilver, has led some historians to suggest that the hoard belonged to Vikings who were expelled from Dublin in 902. The River Ribble, where the hoard was found, lay directly across the Irish Sea from Dublin, offering a convenient place for fleeing Vikings to regroup. It was also on an overland route to York – the powerbase of the Northumbrian Vikings who could be called upon for support.

By way of contrast to all this wealth, we are told that few objects of this kind have been found around the
North Atlantic settlements in Greenland, Iceland, or the Faroes. There, the communities were focussed on the gathering of raw materials – walrus ivory and whalebones – as illustrated by the exhibit of a piece of walrus skull with two tusks from a Greenland excavation.

There are, however, many objects that provide evidence of the extent of Viking contacts with the Slav world – such as a cross pin and chain from Lithuania. A remarkable survival is a letter written in runes on birch bark, from Smolensk in present-day Russia that is evidence of how settlement might follow raiding or trading. It reads: ‘Visgeiir took this plot of land’. The clear message here is that international trade – and the wealth that followed – was the main motive for the Vikings’ overseas expansion. In the words of the Arab traveller, Ibn Khurdadhbih in 830:

The Rus from the furthest parts of their land down to the Black Sea bringing beaver skins and black fox fur and swords to sell. Sometimes they transport their merchandise on camel back to Baghdad.

Furs, jet, soapstone, falcons and slaves went one way and weapons, glassware, wine, metals and large quantities of silver went home. ‘Peaceful trader or violent raider of legend – the distinction is not always clear’, as an exhibition panel puts it. On display here are collar and ankle shackles for slaves, discovered as far apart as Ireland and Germany. In 903, the Arab writer Ibn Rusta commented: ‘They [the Rus] treat their slaves well and dress them suitably, because for them they are an article of trade’

![Silver dirhams minted in Baghdad, 693-828](http://gerryco23.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/silver-dirhams-minted-in-baghdad.jpg)

Perhaps the most interesting exhibits in this section are those which reveal the extent of Viking contacts with the Islamic world, pre-eminently the quantities of Islamic dirhams that feature amongst the hoards – and in other contexts, such as jewellery.

Initially, the precious metals of the coins acquired through raiding or trade were regarded by the Vikings almost exclusively in social rather than economic terms. Gold and silver were valued for the display of personal wealth, or as gifts. There are examples here of Viking jewellery made from recycled silver Islamic dirhams. Often, though, the coins were melted down as bullion and turned into portable ingots.
The use of bullion required the measurement of weight, and to illustrate this there is a set of collapsible scales and weights of a kind found across the whole of the Viking world as far west as Ireland. But in the ninth century, the Vikings began to adopt the use of precious metals as coinage, as a means of exchange to facilitate trade. In part this reflects the importance of trading relations with the Vikings’ neighbours; but the adoption of coinage was also closely linked with the adoption of Christianity and the development of kingly authority.
In some cases melted down bullion was formed into neck rings or torques worn as weighty adornments by the wives of the wealthy. One contemporary observer noted that ‘a man as soon as he has accumulated 10,000 dirhams, has a torque made for his wife’. It was all about communicating power through the visual display of wealth and status by wearing jewellery or owning expensive ornamental weapons.
A particularly sophisticated example of this are the intricately-worked pieces of gold jewellery from the Hiddensee hoard, found on an island in the Baltic. The hoard consists of a set of gold pendants and a brooch – more than 600g of gold in total – probably manufactured in Denmark towards the end of the 10th century but evidence of intermarriage between Vikings and Slavs (the 10th-century king, Harald Bluetooth, married a Slavic wife. The delicacy of the work is breathtaking. To look at something like this you have to question Kenneth Clark’s view of Vikings as barbarians, a people that could only damage or destroy, not create.

It was around this time that the *skald*, or poet, Porbjorn Hornklofi wrote these lines:

*By their clothing, their gold armlets,*  
*You see they are the King’s friends*  
*They bear red cloaks, stained shields,*  
*Silver-clad swords, ringed mail coats*  
*Gilded sword-belts, engraved helmets*
Rings on their arms, as Harald gave them.

A further section of the exhibition is devoted to the culture of Viking royal courts, with examples of highly-decorated cups and drinking vessels, an oak feasting bucket for ale or mead, made in Denmark at some time in the 10th century, and a decorative wooden platter excavated in Berlin that dates from the same period.

A man shouldn’t clutch at his cup, but moderately drink his mead; he should be sparing of speech or shut up; no man will blame you for bad behaviour if you go to bed early.

- anon, 10th century

(http://gerryco23.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/wooden-tray-or-platter-with-scandinavian-decoration-10th-century-berlin.jpg)
Wooden tray or platter with Scandinavian decoration, 10th century, found in Berlin

These objects are fascinating not just for their artistry, but also for the insight into a way of life that they provide. There are decorated swords, jewellery, combs, a silver-inlaid-axehead, and a small scoop for removing earwax – made of gold.

![Silver inlaid axehead from Denmark, c 900](http://gerryco23.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/silver-inlaid-axehead-900-denmark1.jpg)

The curators do not shy away from the violent and bloody aspects of Viking culture; in a section entitled ‘The way of the warrior’ the warrior culture is explored, along with the meaning of the term ‘Viking’. There are displays of helmets, swords, axes and skulls, and descriptions of raiding and slaughter:

- *I went with bloody sword*
  - *(wound-grouse [raven] following me)*
  - *And a resounding spear*
- *To a hard Viking attack.*
  - *We had a raging fight,*
  - *Fire raced over houses,*
  - *I made bloody bodies*
  - *Fall within city walls*

  - Egil Skallagrimsson, Icelandic warrior and poet, 930

And there is this assessment by Ib Fadlan, an Arab diplomat, written down in 921:
They are the filthiest of God’s creatures; they do not clean themselves after urinating or defecating, nor do they wash after having sex. They do not wash their hands after meals. They are like wandering asses.

But then – you turn a final corner into the largest space of the new Sainsbury Wing and see in front of you the colossal installation that forms the centrepiece of this exhibition. At 37 metres Roskilde 6 is the longest Viking warship ever recovered – and it literally takes your breath away.

The ship, known as Roskilde 6 because it was excavated from the banks of Roskilde fjord in Denmark during the development of a Viking Ship Museum in 1997, would have been powered by 40 pairs of oars (anything over 25 pairs was unusual). Though only 20 per cent of it actually survives – mostly in the form of fragments of hull – the whole boat has been ingeniously suggested through the construction of a stainless-steel framework that suggests the elegance of the boat in its original form.

The surviving timbers have been carefully conserved and analysed by the National Museum of Denmark – and identified as being derived from trees felled in 1025 near Oslo Fjord. This was when Norway had been conquered by Cnut, who had already conquered England in 1016. The ship’s construction therefore dates from the high point of the Viking Age when England, Denmark, Norway and possibly parts of Sweden were united under the rule of Cnut. The size of the ship and the amount of resources required to build it suggest that it was almost certainly a royal warship, possibly connected with the wars fought by Cnut to assert his authority over this short-lived North Sea Empire.
The only known three-dimensional Viking representation of a Valkyrie

When first encountered by their neighbours the Vikings were pagans – it was this aspect of their culture which most struck contemporary observers in north-western Europe. The Vikings had no word for religion and do not seem to have had a structured belief system similar to Christianity or Islam. Their spiritual beliefs instead placed a great emphasis on interaction with the natural world, and with supernatural powers – gods, spirits or other creatures. There was a widespread belief in shape-shifting (the ability of humans to take on animal forms). Viking beliefs and rituals are explored in a later part of the exhibition.

Schleswig (Hedeby) is a very large town situated at the edge of the world ocean. The inhabitants worship Sirius, except for a few, who are Christians. They have a church there.

- Ibrahim ibn Yaqub al-Turtushi, Jewish traveller from Islamic Spain, c961-2

In Norse mythology, a Valkyrie is one of a host of female figures who decide which soldiers die in battle and which live. Here we can look at a small figurine of a female, possibly a Valkyrie, made of gilded silver and found recently (http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2013/mar/04/viking-valkyrie-figurine-british-museum) in Denmark. It is believed to date from around 800.

The Viking understanding of the universe involved a complex system of intersecting worlds that gave a home to humanity and all the other powers, living and dead. These worlds were held together by Yggdrasil, the great ash or ‘World Tree’, and in other ways too. Travellers could move between worlds along the roots of Yggdrasil, via sacred rivers and lakes, or across the sea.
One of the most familiar aspects of Viking belief derives from the widespread evidence of ship burials which suggests a widespread belief that the dead were destined to voyage across oceans to the afterlife. Having been cremated, the dead individual would be laid in a boat and interred, along with their worldly possessions, in a burial mound.

One example is presented in the British Museum exhibition. It is a representation of a burial from the late ninth or early 10th century in a grave in the form of a ship from Ardnamurchan on Scotland’s west coast. It was excavated in the summer of 2011, revealing the only known Viking boat burial to be discovered on the British mainland in modern times.

The vessel survived in the form of more than 200 rivets, many in their original location, and indicated a small clinker boat. It contained a sword, an axe, a spear, a ladle, an Irish bronze ring-pin and the bronze rim of a drinking horn. These items indicate that it was a remarkably rich Viking boat burial of a warrior. This is the first time this important find has been displayed in public. The Ardnamurchan boat burial represents the final journey of a Viking warrior, sailing into the afterlife.

The most dramatic example of a ritual burial from the Viking Age is that of the Oseberg ship (http://home.online.no/~joeolavl/viking/osebergskipet.htm) from eastern Norway, dated to 834 and excavated in 1904. The dig revealed an almost intact and completely equipped Viking ship with elaborate wood carvings on its stem and stern. I have seen this beautiful ship on TV documentaries, and it would certainly have been an experience to have seen it in London. But it is now on permanent display in the Viking Ship Museum in Oslo and is probably impossible to send on overseas expeditions.
A profound change in belief occurred during the Viking Age as these traditional spiritual beliefs were eroded by Christianity. As they travelled across Europe in the seventh and eighth centuries, the Vikings encountered Christians and their beliefs, and their material expression in churches and monasteries. As these travellers returned home, Christian concepts – and perhaps those of Islam, too – gradually seeped into Scandinavian culture. Formal conversion was very often top-down, the most striking example being that of King Harald Bluetooth of Denmark who, in the late tenth century, proclaimed the conversion of Denmark on his monumental rune-stone at Jelling. A replica of the Jelling rune-stone is displayed here – striking because it is painted, as it would have been originally, in vivid colours.

A replica of the Jelling stone, erected by King Harald Bluetooth in the late 10th century

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Hogback tombstone from Govan Parish Church, Glasgow, 9th-11th centuries

Another example of Viking burial forms is on display here: a hogback tombstone from Govan Parish Church in Glasgow. These carved headstones are found exclusively in areas of northern Britain settled by Vikings – southern Scotland, Cumbria and Yorkshire – and the examples from Govan churchyard are by far the largest. The bow-sided shape of the hogbacks is similar to the classic Viking house and the interlace patterns on them are also very Scandinavian in origin. Although the beasts carved into some of the hogbacks could reflect pagan Viking beliefs, the fact that all these stones were found in a church yard suggests the settlers had adopted Christianity.
The Vikings may have been tough and feared warriors, but the grisly evidence of skeletons recently excavated from a mass grave at Weymouth suggest that Viking raids were not always successful. The remains tell of a brutal encounter between Saxons and Vikings, and illustrate what happened when things went wrong for Viking warriors on British soil. The bones – displayed here – are from between 47 and 52 individual. Wounds on the hands, arms and skulls imply that the men did not die without a struggle. Every one of them was decapitated.

Wounds to necks and shoulders indicate that the process of decapitation – a deliberate act after the battle was over – was chaotic, with several blows of the sword required to remove the heads in many cases. Most of the men were between 18 and 25 years old. Chemical analysis of the teeth suggested that none of the men were from anywhere in Britain, but that they originated in the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions of Norway, Sweden, Iceland, the Baltic States, Belarus and Russia. They were not in good health: many of the individuals suffered from infections and physical impairment. This was by no means an elite group of Viking warriors.

The exhibition concludes by briefly tracing the emergence of Viking kingdoms between 950 – 1050, and the Viking legacy in Britain. In this late stage of the Viking story, Viking raiders and traders were followed by settlers who established kingdoms and earldoms in both western and eastern Europe, such as Rus – ruled by princes of Kiev, Novgorod, and other earldoms along the rivers modern Ukraine and Russia.

Eirik that mighty
maker of men
ruled the land from beneath
his helmet of terror;
In York
the king reigned,
rigid of mind,
over rainy shores

- Egil Skallagrimsson, c900 – 1000

In Britain, the Vikings settled areas of the country so densely and so permanently that their legacy is ever-present in our language and DNA. Anyone who lives somewhere with a name ending in ‘-by’, or near a headland ending in ‘-ness’, or calls their valley a ‘dale’, or the nearest hillside a ‘fell’ is living in a landscape that Vikings named, while our language is peppered with their words: ‘niggardly’, for example, is derived from the Old Norse for miser. Here, you can stand and listen to the curator of the Shetland Museum speaking in the island dialect which retains many words from Old Norse. On the other hand, the Vikings were also the people against whom the British nations initially defined themselves. The early English had developed a sense of themselves as a people, with a language and as followers of Christianity, but they were divided into different kingdoms. It took the prospect of conquest by Viking warlords to forge them into a single kingdom – one of the most intensely governed in the world. King Alfred became ‘the Great’ by organising the national resistance to the Vikings. Though the Vikings returned a century later under Cnut and triumphed, by that time England was too strongly wrought to break: the Danish conquerors took it over intact and handed it, peacefully, back to native rule when Cnut’s dynasty died out.

The exhibition ends with the most sophisticated works on display: the magnificent set of chess pieces found in 1831 on the Isle of Lewis, made sometime between 1150 and 1200. Crafted from walrus ivory, their ornamentation indicates links with Trondheim in Norway. The reverse of the King and Queen, seated on their thrones, are exquisitely decorated with a delicate foliage design.
What we call the Viking Age lasted from about 800 to 1050, a span of 250 years that was crucial for a vast area of northern Europe stretching from the north Atlantic in the west to the shores of the Baltic in the east. The Vikings left a lasting impression on a large number of nations, as this exhibition makes clear. It was the sea and the rivers that connected people and cultures across a vast area of the globe, and it was all made possible by the Viking ship, perhaps the outstanding achievement of the Viking Age.

See also

- [Vikings: Life and Legend review](http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/mar/09/vikings-life-legend-review-british-museum-tim-adams) (Guardian)
- [British Museum’s Viking show locates the original Scandinavian Noir](http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/feb/27/british-museum-vikings-show-nordic-noir-longboat): by Simon Armitage (Guardian)
- [Vikings, Seafaring and Navigation](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/galleries/p01t866l): Matthew Sweet visits the British Museum’s Vikings exhibition (BBC Radio 3, one year left to listen)
- [The Lewis Chessmen: Meet the Chessmen](http://www.nms.ac.uk/our_museums/national_museum/exhibitions/lewis_chessmen_unmasked/meet_the_chessmen.aspx) (National Museums Scotland)

This entry was posted in History and tagged Ardnamurchan burial, British Museum, Cuerdale Hoard, exhibitions, Hogback tombstone, Hunterston brooch, Jelling stone, Lewis Chessmen, Penrith Brooch, Roskilde 6, Vale of York Hoard, Vikings. Bookmark the permalink.
2 thoughts on “The Vikings: Life and Legend”

peregrinacultural says:
March 17, 2014 at 12:49
Fascinating. Thank you. This was not only informative (and I loved it because I won’t be going to England soon, therefore will miss the exhibit), but beautiful. Great choice of photos illustrating very well the points made!

Reply
Gerry says:
March 19, 2014 at 21:03
Thanks. Glad you enjoyed the post. I always try to find images that help get points across.

Reply

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