

# THE VIKINGS



Viking man

'Viking' was the name given to the people from Norway, Denmark, Finland and Sweden. The time in history known as the Viking Age began in the late 8th-century and lasted for about 300 years. Visit our [Vikings online](#).

## How do we know about the Vikings?

Archaeologists have studied the remains of Viking farms, villages and towns and have put together a picture of how the Vikings might have lived. Graves have given us lots of information about the Viking way of life, because some important Vikings were buried with their possessions. Several buried or sunken ships have been found, and these have helped us to understand their ships.

## What sort of ships did the Vikings have?



## Viking longship

The Vikings built many different kinds of ships, from small fishing boats and ferries, up to the famous longship. Viking ships large and small were all made in the same way. Planks of timber, usually oak were overlapped and nailed together. The ships were made watertight by filling the spaces between the planks with tarred wool or animal hair. The ships were all the same long narrow shape and floated near the surface of the water. This meant that they could be used in shallow water. Vikings often used their ships on rivers and lakes. Viking shipbuilders were very proud of their work and even the smallest ships had some carving as decoration.

### **How did the Vikings ships move?**

The ships were powered by oars or by the wind. The ships had one large square sail. No sails have survived from the Viking Age so we can only make a good guess about what they were made from. The most likely suggestion is that they were made of wool. Leather strips criss-crossed the wool to help the sail keep its shape when it was wet. Viking ships also had oars. The oars were different lengths according to where they would be used on the ship. The oarsmen did not have seats, so they sat on storage chests instead.

A steering oar or 'steerboard' was used to steer the ships. It was fastened to the right-hand side of the ship at the back.

### **What was the longship or warship like?**

Longships were used by the Vikings for making raids and for carrying their warriors. These ships were very long and narrow in shape. Often, the front of the ship was decorated with a carving of an animal head – perhaps a dragon or a snake. These carvings were put up when the ship was sailing in to land – they might have been damaged if they were used when the ship was out at sea.

The warships had deck across the whole of the ship. Oarports (holes for the oars) were cut along the whole length of the ship on both sides. Some pictures of Viking warships show the ships sailing with shields tied over the oarports. This is wrong – the shields would only have been tied like this when the ships were in port. The shields were essential for protection in battle and Vikings would not want to risk dropping them overboard.

### **What was a cargo ship like?**

Cargo ships are ships that carry trade goods and possessions. They were wider than warships and travelled more slowly. The planks of the deck were only laid at the ends of the ship, so that space was left in the middle for carrying cargo. Oarsmen would have sat at the ends of the ship to row.

### **What was life like on board?**

There was no shelter on the ships. At night Vikings might pull their ships up on land. They could take the sail down and lay it across the boat to make a sort of tent which they could sleep under. They might even pitch tents on shore. The tents were made of wool. If the crew were far out to sea they would have had to sleep on the deck. They would have kept warm under blankets or two-man sleeping bags made of animal skin.

Food would have been dried or salted meat or fish. Food could only be cooked if the sailors were able to land. If they were at sea, all food would have been cold, for the Vikings did not want to risk setting the ship alight by lighting a fire. For drink, there would have been water and beer or sour milk.

The hardship of life on board, especially in rough seas, meant that Vikings did not make voyages in winter time, but waited until the spring.

### **How did the Vikings navigate?**

Vikings did not use maps. They had lots of different ways of working out where they were and which direction to travel in. They looked at the position of the sun and the stars. They looked at the colour of the sea, the way the waves were moving and the way the wind was blowing. They looked out for birds and could smell if they were near land. It is very unlikely that they had a compass, although some Vikings may have used an instrument called a sun-shadow board to help them to navigate.

When a Viking had been on a journey, he would tell another Viking who wanted to make the same journey what to look out for. Then the journey would be easier for the second traveller. In this way, important knowledge and skills were passed on from one generation to another.

### **Where did the Vikings travel to?**

Some Viking journeys were very short because it was often easier to travel by water rather than overland. One traveller tells how a journey by sea took five days although the same journey by land took a whole month. Viking traders travelled around the coast of Europe to trade. By sailing south along the lakes and rivers of Russia and Germany they were able to meet up with traders from Arab and Eastern countries. Much longer ocean voyages were made by Vikings seeking lands where they could settle. These Vikings travelled to Iceland, Greenland, even as far as Canada and North America.

### **What trade goods did Vikings ships carry?**

Products that the Vikings exported from their own lands in Scandinavia included walrus ivory, whalebone, and the furs and skins of animals such as fox, bear, beaver and otter. They also carried amber, a fossilized resin that was cut and polished to make beads, pendants and brooches. All these natural products were traded for various goods in different countries.

In Britain, the Vikings wanted to obtain wheat, wool, honey and tin. They bought salt and wine from France, and glass from Italy. This glass was often recycled and formed into beads for necklaces. By travelling along Russian rivers, merchants from the east were able to provide the Vikings with luxuries such as silk, silver and spices.