



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

VIKING

MILITARY ORGANISATION AND FIGHTING TACTICS

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Contents

Viking – Military Tactics	4
Introduction	4
Viking raiders.....	4
Viking Britain in the 9 th and 10 th century	4
Scotland.....	5
Ireland	5
Wales.....	5
England	5
The Viking Warrior, hierarchy, equipment, religion and appearance.	5
Like all peoples they had a hierarchy.....	6

Viking – Military Tactics

Introduction

Viking, Norsemen, Danes, a fierce pagan people who in the late 8th century began to raid the British Isles, Western Europe and the Mediterranean and who terrorised both the Christian and Muslim peoples of the civilised world.

Viking raiders

Over the course of the following centuries, the people's of Scandinavia would impact greatly upon the people that they came into contact with.

The Swedish Vikings, the Rus, would enter the Slavic nations from the Baltic and they would eventually create city states that led to the foundation of Russia, the Danes invaded England and the Western coastal countries of Europe whilst the Norse, from what is today, Norway, primarily went to Ireland, Scotland and the Islands of the Shetlands, Orkneys, Hebrides and Man.

Over the centuries they fought for and against Byzantium, fought the Normans in Sicily and Italy, fought against the Moors in Spain and North Africa, fought against the Slavs and Bulgars and even inflicted several defeats on the Emperor Charlemagne.

They would also sail to Iceland, Greenland and North America.

Little is known about their incursions into North America but it appears that the inhabitants there, whom the Norse called Skrallings (screachers) made long term settlement untenable. The Inuits of Greenland along with the inhospitable terrain also appears to have forced the Norse to leave.

To the Christian peoples of Europe, the ravages of the early Viking raids were seen as a punishment from God and the predations of these Northmen caused terror throughout the lands they victimised.

To go a Viking was basically an opportunity for people to go raiding for loot and slaves. It was appealing to young men in particular and afforded the easy acquisition of instant wealth with little personal risk, as undefended villages and ecclesiastical centres were the preferred targets.

After decades of plundering, the Victims of the Vikings began to form capable militaries which could both meet and often defeat Viking war bands or armies.

Contrary to popular belief, the Vikings would endure many more defeats than victories, especially in England.

Viking Britain in the 9th and 10th century

In what is now Britain, the Vikings caused massive disruption in the 9th and 10th centuries and very nearly brought all the Kingdoms under their control because they were able to exploit the political discord and intervene in the parochial and endemic warfare that existed between the various Kingdoms of mainland Britain and Ireland.

The Vikings were very similar to the Anglo-Saxons in many ways as they were both Germanic peoples with a common heritage. The Anglo-Saxons had worshipped the same gods before their conversion to Christianity and their histories and folklore were very similar.

They looked much alike and their methods of warfare were similar too.

They did however produce several legendary leaders and adventurers such as Ragnar Lodbrok, Erik Bloodaxe, Magnus Barelegs, Harold Bluetooth, Ivar the Boneless, Harold Hardrada and Bjorn Ironsides to name just a few. Their stories and those of their compatriots are worthy of study as are their great personal names.

The Vikings had originally been seen as little more than pirates and slavers but by the mid ninth century a tactical change had come into place. Increasingly larger Viking armies began to overwinter in Britain and France. Their leaders now sought to seize lands and establish their own Kingdoms. These armies were now being accompanied by their women and children.

The scope of the Viking Wars is too vast a subject to cover in this article so I can only give a brief history of events.

Scotland

In Scotland, the Vikings were the catalyst that set in motion the downfall of the Picts but which would also lead to the merging of the Picts with another Celtic people, namely the Scots who had arrived from Ireland and who had settled on the western seaboard of Scotland and Ireland. They called their realm Dal Riata. Another Celtic people, the Britons or Welsh of Strathclyde occupied an area that spread from the western Clyde to what is now Cumbria. They called their realm Ystrad Clud (Strathclyde).

Ireland

In Ireland, the Norse would found several Kingdoms and found the modern city of Dublin, but they would face fierce opposition from several Irish warrior Kings.

Wales

Wales on the other hand, was a place where the Vikings could not gain a permanent foothold due to the hostile tribes and the difficult terrain.

England

In England, the Vikings, mostly Danes had occupied all of the seven Anglo-Saxon nations with the exception of Wessex which survived by the skin of its teeth before rising to join with Mercia and beginning the process of defeating the Vikings and unifying all the Anglo-Saxon peoples into one nation.

In an age when national identity did not exist in a modern sense, these warring peoples would fight each other, make alliances, break them and form new partnerships, which is often confusing and difficult to grasp for someone studying them today.

The Vikings would eventually be integrated with the peoples of Britain and become the modern day English, Scottish and Irish.

The Viking Warrior, hierarchy, equipment, religion and appearance.

Firstly, no horned helmets. Not a practical piece of headgear if some great brute grabs you by the horns and twists your neck. Victorian fantasy I'm afraid.

Dressing for war, for a Viking, was an expression of wealth. Many records tell that they were fond of grooming their hair and beards and that they took great pride in their personal appearances. Many were heavily tattooed and adorned themselves with arm rings and they braided their hair and beards and held it in place with silver rings. Many wore amulets such as a 'Thor's hammer' and they placed great value on silver.

The Jarls would have worn a chain mail coat, helmet, and have been armed with a sword, hand axe, fighting knife and a spear. They would have carried a shield and been protected by their retinue or body guards when in battle.

Hersirs, (explained below) and the Karls would have been similarly armed, but the individuals personal wealth was the determining factor with regards to the quality of his weapons and armour. The poorer Karls would have functioned as bowmen.

By the 10th century, the great two handed battle axes were also used, in a variety of different styles.

Another type of fighter existed as well. We do not know which social class they belonged to but they were probably full time professional warriors. These were the berserkers. It is believed that these chosen warriors were under the influence of narcotics, namely, what we call 'magic mushrooms'. These were a class of warriors devoted to Odin, so they may possibly have been part of a cult, and considered themselves a brotherhood. They wore wolf or bear skins, howled and growled like animals before battle and must have unsettled their enemies. They were unsuited to fighting in formation and were probably used as shock troops which attacked an enemy in a careless and ferocious manner. Famed for

their brutality and fearlessness their reputation spread fear and hatred across any lands that the Vikings invaded.

Christian writings tell of these berserkers ranting and raving before battle and state that they bit their shields and howled like wolves. Maybe they were in some type of hypnotic trance brought about by the hallucinogenic mushrooms or drinks that they consumed.

For a remote and isolated village to be attacked by these berserkers must have been a terrible experience and it is believed that their appearance and savagery was the cause for legends about werewolves. (WERE being man in old English and WULF being the obvious, a wolf).

A chess piece recovered from the Isle of Lewis clearly shows a berserker biting his shield. There is little doubt that a culture of violence existed in Scandinavia and it persisted well into the Middle Ages, even when the Vikings had accepted Christianity.

Like all peoples they had a hierarchy.

The king and his queen ruled over a structured society with the next most important rank being the Jarls or Earls. These were the aristocracy of Viking Society, powerful and rich Chieftains and warlords who had obtained their wealth from raiding and by waging war. As the Vikings built their own realms these Jarls would command armies, hold and protect lands on behalf of their King, act as law makers and judges and effectively implemented the King's rule. The Anglo-Saxon equivalents were the Ealdormen and Thegns.

Hersir, was the name given to small independent landowners or Chieftains from Norway. It was these men who led the first Viking raids in the late 8th century, not the Jarls or Kings.

Most Vikings belonged to a class known as Karls. These were the common people. The Ceorls were their equivalents amongst the Anglo-Saxons.

They were freemen who filled the roles of merchants, soldiers, farmers and craftsmen. They had the same protection under the law as did the Jarls.

The third class of people were the slaves, 'praelar' (pronounced Thraelar), or Thralls to the Anglo-Saxons. They had no rights and were just viewed as chattels. A slave's children automatically became slaves, as did prisoners taken in war. Bankrupts and debtors were also enslaved.

It was not unusual for slaves to be sacrificed and often, when a Chieftain died, his slaves would be killed and buried with him in order that they could serve him in the next life.

The practices and religion of the Vikings made them barbarians in the eyes of the so called civilised nations.

Their religion decreed that those who died in battle would ascend to Valhalla where they would feast with the gods and be serviced by shield maidens. Each day the warriors would fight and die only to be resurrected and start the process again. They believed that they would fight at the coming battle of Ragnarok on the side of the gods against the Frost Giants of Jotunheim in the last battle before the destruction of the cosmos.

Therefore it can be argued that their religion glorified violence and this may have been a factor as to why the Vikings initially despised religions such as Christianity, which they saw as weak and passive.

The main tactical manoeuvre of the Vikings was the shield wall(skjaldborg). It could be both an offensive and defensive tactic. The 'swine array' was a wedge shaped formation that would rush at an opponents shield wall, hoping to force a break through and a collapse of the opposing shield wall. Flags and horns were used to communicate during a battle, but this must have been difficult to adhere to in a large scale battle because of the noise.

A Viking army when invading a territory usually relied on plundering to obtain food and other necessities. Before initiating the actual invasion they would usually strike villages near to the sea. This practice was called a 'strandhogg', a coastal raid for loot and plunder. Vikings often committed 'strandhogg' for the sole purpose of seizing women when they were about to go on campaign.

What eventually paved the way for the eventual defeat of the Vikings in England was the Anglo-Saxon system of building burhs. The Vikings were notoriously poor at taking any substantial fortifications. In the more advanced Viking realms in Denmark, the burh system would later be copied, the most famous being the Trelleborg fortifications.

The Vikings would also often be hired as mercenaries by Christian rulers to fight against other Vikings. The most famous unit known is the Jomesvikings. These were a devoutly pagan mercenary band dedicated to Odin and Thor. They had a strict code and were highly disciplined. Later, Viking and Saxon warriors would serve the Byzantine Emperors in the fabled Varangian Guard.

The history of the Vikings is complex, often disputed, and vast. It is also a story of high adventure that ranged across the sea to North America and east through Russia and across the Middle East, Europe and North Africa. As a people, their impact and influence was substantial.

In Britain, the Vikings are first recorded as raiding in the 8th century with Lindisfarne Abby being the first religious centre attacked in 793.

The Vikings fought their last battle in Britain at Largs on the 2nd of October 1263.

470 years of being a problem! And in the supposedly last words of the legendary Ragnar Ladbroke(hairy breeches) " Laughing shall I die", we will know leave you to make your own studies of these fascinating people.